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# Taming the Two-Eyed Beast: Doubtful Visions in the 17th century French Academies

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## Abstract

As Krzysztof Pomian and Antoine Schnapper have shown, "curiosity" was a driving force shaping the practice of collecting in the early Modern period. But the corresponding impulse of doubt runs through numerous domains of the seventeenth century, undermining sacred authority and informing the skeptical platform of rationalist inquiry. This paper focuses on one aspect of "doubt" as an intellectual category: the inability to trust what one sees. Historical aspects of this question have been examined by a number of scholars, most notably by Martin Kemp and Barbara Stafford, whose studies have stressed the contributions of visualized forms of representation to the epistemological conditions of modernity. The argument presented in this paper is less concerned with the artistic doctrines or physiological studies used to theorize vision, though both will inevitably be engaged here. Instead, it is the insistent linking of sight to reason, which connects a physiological sense to cognitive capacity, which is questioned for its cultural implications. In other words, neither that coupling nor its exclusionary conditions are taken for granted. Instead, it is viewed as a historical construct directly informed by the emergent codes of the natural sciences, and examined as a philosophy as well as an aesthetic. In this regard, the historical conditions inhabited by the seventeenth-century French courts are particularly illuminating. Not only did the reign of Louis XIV systematically exploit the authority of representation, ranging from dance to decoration, but a similar impulse informed the academic institutions that the Sun King inaugurated, setting the conventions which would be emulated for centuries. The academies confirmed the authority of the visual even in the literary tradition, where one would expect, ut pictura poesis, that poetry would trump painting. Rather than simply confirming an entrenched grammar of power, however, the terms of pictorial representation became the focus of heightened attention precisely because the eyes were no longer trustworthy sources of information. With one swipe of the anatomist's knife, the Renaissance equivalence between the eye of God and human sight had been permanently severed, thereby introducing a 'one eye, two eye' problem that was not unlike the 'one sex, two sex problem' articulated by historian Thomas Laqueur. As this paper will demonstrate, the resulting emphasis on seeing with "one-eye" subsequently reflected the imposition of cultural will, crafting a way of seeing and a mode of representing that was self-consciously artificial, in order to distinguish the lineaments of science from the confusions of ordinary perception.

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