Articulating a New Civic Professionalism: 
Merchants and the Academy of Painting, 
Sculpture, and Civil and Naval 
Architecture of Bordeaux 

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In 1768 the time was ripe for Bordeaux to acquire an Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Civil and Naval Architecture. When the academy was founded in that year, the city's trade in wine and colonial goods was surging to new heights. Within a few years Bordeaux would be the leading colonial port in France. By 1768, artists of all kinds – architects, painters, sculptors, and engravers – were abundant in Bordeaux. The prosperous port city had by mid-century undergone a radical architectural and urban redesign program that saw the construction of monumental structures such as a place Royale, city entrances, and a royal garden. Finally, by 1768, Toulouse, Rouen, and Lyon had already established academies of art. 

Whether motivated by civic pride, competitiveness, or both, the small group of artists and citizens who came together to found an art academy in Bordeaux believed a city of such commercial stature needed its own academy of art. While keeping an eye on other provincial cities, the future academicians also assembled out of a concern over Bordeaux's cultural inferiority to Paris. Young local artists were regularly abandoning the port city for better training and more promising careers in the capital. The academy
blamed this migration on the Crown, which throughout the previous three decades had dispatched Parisian artists to Bordeaux to assert a royal aesthetic in the city. The academicians saw this policy as a snub to local artistic talent and detrimental to the training of young provincial artists.

The new academicians also believed that the arts had languished in Bordeaux because its inhabitants had become too obsessed with luxury and frivolity.¹ Visitors to the city, viewing the parties, prostitution, and gambling, remarked that while in many societies commercial success engendered industriousness and frugality, Bordeaux demonstrated how easily commerce could cause "the simplicity of Dutch morals to cede to levels of sumptuousness, vice, and bankruptcy."²

Many critics of trade and luxury correlated the increase in affluence with the deterioration of the arts in the city. Yet central to the ideology of the Academy of Painting was the claim that there was a positive association between art and commerce. The two could complement and even

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¹ Delphin de Lamothe, "Précis historique de la fondation de l'Académie de Peinture, Sculpture et Architecture de Bordeaux," 10 Jan. 1778, Bibliothèque Municipale de Bordeaux [hereafter BMB] ms. 1233. Pierre Lacour fils, "Notes et souvenirs d'un artiste octogénaire de 1778 à 1798," BMB ms. 1603, 3, p. 8. This Lacour's father was the painter Pierre Lacour, a prominent local artist in the eighteenth century. See also a 1774 speech by M Noë, in which he states that Bordeaux is the only commercial city where it was doubtful that a man could honorably refer to himself as a painter, given the mediocrity of the arts in the city: BMB ms. 1233.

² Saint-Saveur, *Voyage à Bordeaux et dans les Landes, où sont décrits les mœurs, usages et costumes du pays* (Paris: Pigoreau, 1797), 18. The subject of the pervasive immorality in Bordeaux runs through other travelers' accounts, such as those by Jacques Guibert, François de La Rouchefoucauld, and Andriaan Van der Willigen.
perpetuate the success of each other. As one academician stated, "Far from being an enemy of the fine arts, in its true spirit, commerce treats the arts with the affection of a brother from whom it expects mutual comfort and support." A fellow member went further and argued that commerce drove the development of the arts in all of western civilization. As he proclaimed, "Egypt, once the cradle of the arts, was a commercial city. . . . Athens, which was the most dignified sanctuary of the arts, built its power on commerce. . . . The Occident owes its fine arts to commerce."

Focusing on the academicians who came from mercantile circles, this paper shows that, far from distancing themselves from their commercial backgrounds, the merchant-academicians proclaimed themselves aptly positioned to serve as patrons of the arts because of their involvement in trade. Commerce and its required aptitudes, they insisted, justified and inspired their efforts to rejuvenate the arts in the city. Furthermore, in the merchants' expressions about their work, they invoked the honor of their labor and emphasized the value and public utility that, they believed, was intrinsic to their occupation.

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The Bordeaux Academy of Painting sought to create a dynamic artistic community in southwest France, but it did not have a provincial character. The academicians were intent on transforming Bordeaux into an international art forum that befit a global commercial center. The Academy

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3 Response to the reception speech of Gabriel Ferrière, Jan. 1777, Archives Muncipales de Bordeaux [hereafter AMB] ms. 555.
4 André-Daniel Laffon de Ladebat, speech upon being named Director of the Academy, 23 Jan. 1774, in Ibid.

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also sought institutional and cultural equality with Paris. At times they described their institution as the "sister" of the Royal Academy of Painting, implying equality between the two institutions, and at other times they declared their desire to break from "the iron rod rule" of the Royal Academy. Neither approach went over well with royal officials. Throughout the first ten years of its existence, the Bordeaux Academy of Painting struggled with Paris for legal recognition and the right to use the "royal" title. The Crown finally granted the Academy legal existence in 1779 on condition that it relinquish claims to the royal title and thus give up any aspirations for institutional parity with Paris.

Throughout its twenty-five years of existence, the number of academicians fluctuated between forty and fifty. There were about twenty "artist" members, roughly half of whom were natives of other French cities or came from Canada, Italy, Prussia, and Switzerland as befit an international academy. Other members were classified as "amateurs" and further split into honorary amateurs – that is, central and regional authorities who maintained ex officio membership – and associate amateurs. This last category concerns us most. The associate amateurs were not professional artists but were recognized as having "talents and a decided taste for the arts." The associate amateurs were expected to participate actively in the Academy, and aside from the fact that an amateur served as director of the Academy for most of its existence, there

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5 Letter from M Cabirol to the Academy, 9 Feb. 1782, AMB ms. 556; and Letter from Joseph-Antoine Batanchon to M Duchamel, 17 Dec. 1772, AMB ms. 555.
6 "Statuts et règlements pour l'Académie de peinture, sculpture et architecture civile et navale de la ville de Bordeaux," 25 May 1780, AMB ms. 556, article III.

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were no special privileges granted to artist or amateur members. The membership structure was quite egalitarian.

The associate amateurs were well-established urban professionals representing Bordeaux’s political, commercial, legal, and educational communities. The presence of Protestant and Jewish amateurs indicates that the art academy exercised greater religious tolerance than other intellectual and cultural societies in Bordeaux.\(^7\) Also distinguishing the associate amateurs from other academies was the high rate of mercantile membership. According to the most complete Academy rosters, of the twelve associate amateurs, half were wholesale merchants, or *négociants*\(^8\). The other associate amateurs included city councilmen, lawyers, and academics. Excepting three ennobled amateurs, none of the associate amateurs was noble.

With its almost completely non-noble membership and high numbers of merchants, the Bordeaux Academy of Painting differed markedly in sociology and sensibility from the traditional French academy. Daniel Roche has shown that of the 6,000 members of France's intellectual and cultural academies, only 160 worked in commerce and manufacturing.\(^9\) Roche described the Enlightenment in Bordeaux as an "aristocratic affair" carried out by parliamentarians and landowners.\(^10\) Indeed, the city's Royal

\(^7\) In his study of Bordeaux's wholesale merchants, Paul Butel suggests that M Perere, a Jewish wholesale merchant in the art academy, was denied admission to the Academy of Bordeaux because of his religion: *Les Négociants bordelais, l'Europe et les îles au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1974), 377.

\(^8\) "Tableau de Messieurs de l'Académie de Peinture, Sculpture et Architecture de Bordeaux," c. 1777, AMB ms. 555.


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Academy of Sciences, Literature, and Arts was made up largely of parliamentarians, the landed elite, and ecclesiastics. Only five wholesale merchants were ever admitted to the Academy.\textsuperscript{11} Once the Royal Academy of Bordeaux began to open its doors to non-nobles in the 1760s, new recruits were mainly physicians and liberal professionals. The Royal Academy's membership structure was also hierarchical, granting "regular" membership status and its attendant privileges only to nobles and parliamentarians.

Historians have attempted to explain the low representation of merchants in the academies, citing merchants' preference for separate cultural and social outlets, demanding work schedules that left little time for leisure, a lack of interest in specialized intellectual matters, and a general hostility among academicians toward the commercial classes. Roche asserts an opposition in eighteenth-century France between work and business activity – the pursuit of wealth – and the "leisure of the rich" that allowed for study and abstract thinking – the pursuit of ideas.\textsuperscript{12} Many contemporaries similarly viewed merchants as too focused on the material aspects of their work to be intellectually curious and appreciative of culture. Take, for instance, the description of merchants by a bookseller in northeastern France: "They are more avid for trade than for reading, and their children's education is

\begin{itemize}
  \item 1:197-255. See 1:249-55 for the representation of wholesale merchants in France's academies.
  \item 11 Of the fifty-six nobles in the Academy, thirty-two were parliamentarians. François-Georges Pariset, \textit{Bordeaux au XVIIIe siècle} (Bordeaux: Fédération Historique du Sud-Ouest, 1968), 79-80; and Roche, "Négoce et culture," 380.
\end{itemize}
quite neglected ... merchants prefer to teach their children that 5 and 4 make 9 minus 2 equals 7 than to encourage them to encourage them to refine their minds.\textsuperscript{13}

The participation of the merchant-amateurs in the Bordeaux art academy demonstrates that trade and the arts were not mutually exclusive. When one wholesale merchant was appointed Director of the Academy in 1774, he asked, "Are the arts really incompatible with fortune? Does the man whose financial speculations span the world lack intelligence and taste?\textsuperscript{14}" Certainly, there were advantages to Academy membership for merchants. The Academy brought together Bordeaux's professional circles and was a site where business, political, and social negotiations transpired. It would have offered an opportunity for religious minorities to become integrated into the social and cultural life of Bordeaux. The Academy's investigation of each candidate's morality and good conduct prior to admission would have vouched for a merchant's integrity, honorable standing, and creditworthiness.

The records of the Academy, however, make clear that the merchant-amateurs were also inspired to participate out of altruism and a genuine interest in the arts. They were responding to a call to serve as benefactors who could revive the arts in their opulent city and make Bordeaux an international art capital. They legitimated this role by demonstrating how their involvement in trade actually qualified them, as merchants, to be patrons of the arts. Even more than other occupational groups, they claimed,


\textsuperscript{14} Ladebat, speech upon being named Director (see n. 4 above).
wholesale traders' cultivation of the arts converged with and even mirrored their responsibilities as businessmen.

For example, the academicians emphasized the social contributions that underlay the efforts of both art amateurs and merchants. The idea that the public could benefit from the cultivation of the arts ran throughout the academicians' discourse, and the desire to contribute to public utility defined the art amateur. As one merchant stated,

The amateur who does not realize that the public good is his only objective is simply one who idolizes the gods of wood and stone and who lacks the knowledge of an intellectual. The intimate relation between the fine arts and the public good is what seizes the true amateur.¹⁵

Merchants took to heart the public mission of the academy because this objective underlay their work as businessmen as well. Referencing the economic policies of Colbert, they explained that commerce served a general utility because it multiplied the riches of the state and increased the happiness of people.¹⁶ As one academician continued,

The merchant who sees commerce as it really is seeks every means to obtain prosperity and abundance for his country. The fine arts are a sure means of doing this, for they are one of the richest forms of labor and can be considered raw materials: they increase value by tenfold, no, by one-hundred fold.¹⁷

More concretely, the merchants in the Academy – and the Academy in general – fulfilled these assertions of utility by taking an active role in the artistic and civic affairs of

¹⁵ Response to the reception speech of M Métiver, 29 Aug. 1779, AMB ms. 555.
¹⁶ Ladebat, speech upon being named Director, 23 Jan. 1774.
¹⁷ Response to the reception speech of Ferrière (see n. 3 above).
Bordeaux. For example, the Academy ran several tuition-free drawing and architecture schools. The merchant-academicians were special advocates of the establishment of a class on naval architecture, one of the few in France. One merchant explained in a meeting that the current methods of shipbuilding simply could not keep up with the pace of navigation. A theoretical study of naval architecture, he asserted, would do much to advance commerce, contribute to the nation’s wealth, and serve public utility.\(^{18}\) Indeed, six years after the founding of the course, naval construction in Bordeaux escalated, with the number of ships and the tonnage of these ships double what they had been thirty years prior.\(^{19}\) The Academy’s commitment to public service also consisted of offering professional advice on matters of art: endorsing new publications, for instance, or evaluating academic treatises on art. At a time when construction was rampant in Bordeaux, the academy provided a forum where architects presented and received feedback on their work. Finally, the architectural projects assigned to candidates to qualify for academy membership often had a civic function. Markets, public baths, fountains, and art museums were just a few examples.

Aside from this utilitarian aspect, the Academy and its wholesale merchants argued that merchants were qualified to participate in the art academy because there was a non-economic dimension to their jobs that transferred easily to the art world. They made the case that merchants appreciated esoteric activities and were not focused solely on making money. After one wholesale merchant presented a well-received speech on the arts, for example, his fellows

\(^{18}\) André-Daniel Laffon de Ladebat, speech on the need to establish a school of naval architecture, 2 Feb. 1772, AMB ms. 555.

\(^{19}\) Pariset, 278-80.
declared it only too true that "the wholesale merchant understands that there are pleasures other than those of ceaseless calculation and risking one's fortune."\(^{20}\)

Taking this line of argument further, the academicians held that while merchants certainly understood the market value of commodities, they also recognized that there was a pricelessness inherent to many objects. That is, many commercial goods – like wine – did not have solely economic value but were desirable because of other qualities such as their historical, aesthetic, or sensory value. These qualities could, of course, create value in objects, but these objects also possessed "psychic rewards" that bore no relation to market value.\(^{21}\) The academicians thus argued that merchants were able to see beyond the appraisable worth of things, including art. According to one academician:

> You cultivate the fine arts in the merchant, who can appreciate the true value in all things . . . during your voyages, you are not satisfied with visiting the counting rooms and warehouses of other merchants: you have seen all the masterpieces that the fine arts left to these commercial nations. . . . With your appreciation of the good and the beautiful, you can receive only the highest consideration of the academy."\(^{22}\)

Despite, or perhaps because of, their regular dealings in the commodities market, members of the Academy believed that merchants could see value in the aesthetic dimension of art. Not all merchants were unscrupulous art

\(^{20}\) Response to the reception speech of Ferrière, Jan. 1777.
\(^{22}\) Response to the reception speech of Ferrière, Jan. 1777.
dealers who treated art as commodities, for many had become genuine appreciators of art through their travels. As one academician asked rhetorically,

What is an amateur really? One whose superficial knowledge of painting and design enables him to mumble comments about the fine arts that have nothing to do with anything? One whose wealth allows him to assemble rich collections that show off his riches more than his taste and discernment? Or rather, is an amateur one who . . . is passionate about the progress of the arts, and one who cannot admire the arts coldly but only with affection?23

A true amateur did not regard art solely as an object that could be bought and sold; he had a deeper engagement with art. Indeed, the merchant-amateurs maintained frequently that they were unencumbered by concerns about material possessions or the social status these goods signified. They also argued that they desired no compensation for their efforts other than honor; it was public esteem that encouraged a merchant to "cherish his position" and abandon thoughts of renouncing trade.24 Because of this civic-mindedness, they reasoned, merchants like themselves turned instead to simple pleasures such as the study of art. The simplicity and morality of the merchant, they concluded, qualified him to lead the cultivation of the arts. It was because of the fine character of the merchant that "public edifices take on a character of grandeur and nobility; that private structures acquire an elegant simplicity that speaks to the wisdom and good taste of citizens."25

23 Response to the reception speech of Métivier, (see n. 15 above).
24 Ladebat, speech upon being named Director, 23 Jan. 1774.
25 Ibid.
These assertions of such humble ambitions and desires on the part of the merchants are significant in light of both contemporary and historical interpretations of commerce in the eighteenth century. As historians have shown, the increase in wealth and consumption in the second half of the century brought with it anxieties about the immorality and decadence thought to accompany commercial society. Implicated in these critiques were merchants, described as manipulative, dishonest people who acted out of a self-interested desire for wealth. Given the dishonorableness of trade, the historical argument goes, merchants renounced commerce as soon as they were financially able, sought more respectable investments in land and offices, and thus began the climb to noble status.

In putting forth a defense of commerce, however, these merchant-academicians refused to conform to characterizations of the merchant fleeing from the derogation of trade to associate with the nobility. The Academy became a forum where wholesale merchants demonstrated the positive aspects of commerce and exonerated their profession. By showing the unique and important role that wholesale merchants in particular could serve as patrons of the arts, they emphasized the honor of their occupation and redefined the utility of the commercial estate in general.

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Additionally, these wholesale traders were contributing to the redefinition of the art patron in eighteenth-century France and challenging the exclusive hold that the king, nobility, and Church had had on art patronage for centuries. As Peter Gay has pointed out, the bourgeoisie's increasing role in art patronage was novel in the eighteenth century. The spread of literary art criticism and societies for art enthusiasts, increased establishment of art markets, and greater mobility to travel to view and purchase art allowed mercantile and liberal professionals to become art patrons.28 The merchants in the Bordeaux art academy epitomized the new non-noble connoisseur-citizen who encouraged the development of art and architecture in France's cities.

One of the Academy's primary goals was to make art accessible to a wider public, thereby ending the role of privilege in the production, distribution, and consumption of art. This objective found its greatest expression in the Academy's five public salons held between 1771 and 1787. The salons announced to Europe the top artistic talents that had migrated to Bordeaux and gave evidence that a vibrant art community could exist outside of the French capital. Prefiguring the museums of the Revolution, the salons gave city inhabitants access to organized, private collections of art that they otherwise might never have had the opportunity to view. The salon catalogues noted the paintings that came from private collections, most of which belonged to wholesale merchants.29 The Academy also

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29 See the salon programs of 1776 (BMB A.4286), 1782 (BMB A.4287), and 1787 (BMB A.4288). In his almanac, Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun also listed the six most outstanding art collections in Bordeaux, four of which belonged to wholesale merchants: *Almanach historique*
expressed exasperation with those collectors who selfishly refused to loan their art to the salons.\textsuperscript{30} The academicians expected private art collectors to make their collections publicly available.

As one contemporary described in his memoirs, the academy aimed to "instill enlightened taste and a love for true beauty in the minds of all classes of Bordeaux inhabitants."\textsuperscript{31} Contemporary reports indicate that the salons were well attended by socially mixed audiences.\textsuperscript{32} The Academy encouraged public evaluation of the artistic talents on display at the salons, and critical reviews of the exhibitions appeared in local journals.\textsuperscript{33} In one salon catalogue, the Academy asked for the public's support as well as its patience during the organization's early years: "The city council . . . favorably welcomed this academy in its crib, but it is up to the public to maintain it, for to discourage the academy would be like smothering it at birth."\textsuperscript{34} While the academicians tirelessly courted local and royal officials, they insisted that, in the end, it was the

\textsuperscript{30} Explication des peintures, sculptures, gravures et plans d'architecture de MM. de l'Académie (établie sous les auspices de MM. les Jurats, et avec l'approbation de M. le Maréchal de Richelieu, Gouverneur de la Province) dont l'exposition se fait dans une des salles de l'hôtel de la Bourse, pour l'année 1774 (Bordeaux: Frères Labottière, 1774), BMB A.4285.

\textsuperscript{31} Delphin de Lamothe wrote of the "crowds" that attended the salon of 1771 in "Précis historique." While the Academy was male dominated, women were admitted to the salons.

\textsuperscript{32} For example, salon reviews were featured throughout the Aug., Sept., and Oct. 1787 issues of the Journal de Guienne, BMB H.3442.

\textsuperscript{33} Explication des peintures.
people of Bordeaux who should serve as the "public witnesses and judges" of the Academy's work and utility.\textsuperscript{35}

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Historians do not traditionally consider merchants a professional group. In the merchants' definitions of their work, however, we see indications of a new "civic professionalism" that Colin Jones has identified as accompanying the growth of capitalism and commercial society in the eighteenth century. Civic professionalism saw traditional corporatist fields abandon deep-rooted principles of privilege, esoteric knowledge, and segregation from society. In their place, they adopted an ideology that stressed civic-mindedness and civic pride, public welfare and service, social utility, and a desire for public respect and honor.\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, in her close study of one family in eighteenth-century Bordeaux, Christine Adams shows how the professional identity of the provincial bourgeois man rested on a commitment to civic welfare and public service.\textsuperscript{37} The principles of civic professionalism are important because they later formed the basis of the discourse of the young revolutionary politicians who were mostly professionals and merchants at the national and

\textsuperscript{35} Lamothe, "Précis historique."


\textsuperscript{37} Christine Adams, \textit{A Taste for Comfort and Status: A Bourgeois Family in Eighteenth-Century France} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). Ch. 6 focuses on the academies of Bordeaux, including the Academy of Painting.

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local levels respectively. In redefining their occupation around the ideal of public service and a claim to speak for the public good, the merchants were reassessing the value of their estate and transforming themselves into French citizens.

Moreover, the merchants' espousal of the values of civic professionalism, their desire to achieve honor through their work, and their satisfaction with their occupational place were not expressions of a social group hungering for noble status. Although the wholesale merchants did not possess a fully-formed "class consciousness," the social divisions between merchants and the nobility in the eighteenth century were perhaps more salient than historical interpretations have recently acknowledged.

The Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Civil and Naval Architecture continued to operate until 1793, when the revolutionary government closed its doors, as it did with other institutions deemed to be "privileged" and "corporate." Ironically, much of the Academy's work was counter-privilege and anti-corporate. The Academy of Painting was in many ways provincial or particular to a port city; in its membership and its concerns, it was more bourgeois, more commercial, and more international than other French academies. But the Bordeaux art academicians shaped their institution and its work around a belief in egalitarianism, a desire for independence from the Crown, a pursuit of public honor, a commitment to bringing expert knowledge to the public, and a sense of accountability to the public. In doing so, the academy embraced and promoted the universal ideas of the Revolution to come.

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