

CELEBRATION OF ARTS AND CRAFTS IN THE PLATES

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One of Diderot and D'Alembert's great preoccupations was to show their acknowledgment of the importance of manual trades, called at the time "the mechanical arts" and which were despised as opposed to the Beaux-Arts celebrated as noble arts. This contempt for manual trades has unfortunately not disappeared today.

In the "Encyclopaedia" article, Diderot explained that undertaking a description of trades must be collective work, conducted as quickly as possible and especially without constraint. "It would be desirable, he wrote, for the government to authorise entry into factories, to observe actual work, to question workmen, and to draw instruments, machines, and even the premises. There are few secrets we couldn't uncover by this means: all these secrets should be divulged without exception."

This call for inquiry and secrets' disclosure shows the very spirit in which this description of trades was conducted. It was about paying tribute to the humblest artisans and their innovative processes. For example, here is the homage paid to a baker: "Sieur Malisset, Parisian baker, distinguished craftsman, has just proven that one can save 80,000 livres a year on the expense hospitals spend for the bread consumed by the poor, while furnishing them with an infinitely superior quality, more nourishing, more pleasant, as white as the bread eaten every day in private houses. So, we must be grateful to the one who cares to extend his knowledge, who has had enough courage to expose himself to the annoyances one should expect when undertaking to change old usages in order to implement better ones."

To honour these artists, called artisans today, but also to collect technical knowledge and disseminate it widely. It required an investigative work in workshops that the Encyclopaedists reproached their predecessors for not having led. For example, here, the details of a wigmaker-barber's tools: combs, razors, curling irons, utensils to powder wigs, etc. Diderot strongly insisted on one point. "We have chosen, he said, the most skilful workmen of Paris and the kingdom." Here we see how the movable types are melted. "We have taken the trouble, he wrote, to go to their workshops, to question them, to write under their dictation, to develop their thought, to use their profession's own terminology, to draw up tables, to define them, to converse with those whose memoirs had been used, and an almost indispensable precaution, to rectify in long and frequent conversations with some what others had imperfectly, obscurely, sometimes unknowingly explained."

To carry out this work, the Encyclopaedists benefited from remarkable talents, like Louis-Jacques Goussier's, Diderot's main collaborator for mechanical arts, both investigator in particular on the manufacture of paper, forges, anchors, sea fishing and also fertile illustrator. You have seen and you will see the name of Goussier under many drawings. Diderot relied on him to launch surveys, questionnaires, to read specialised treatises and visit many workshops, as his correspondence shows. These survey's results and drawings in the *Encyclopaedia* took the form of very detailed descriptions, in a language as clear as possible.

The only virtue required of readers is the effort of attention, but they must not be, according to Diderot, transcendental geniuses or fools. It is in any case on this wish for recognition that he composed the arts and crafts' description, the larger portion of illustrations, which is also a celebration of work and human action. He has sometimes been ironic about workshops cleanliness or even about the elegance of the workers pictured on the plates. But we must understand that this also participates in the highlighting of manual trades in the *Encyclopaedia*. Putting the spotlight on human work doesn't need to exclude humour. See on this roofer's plate, the picture at the top depicts roofers installing tiles

on the roof on the right, and on the left, tiles falling and a passer-by running away trying to protect himself with his hat.

I would conclude by saying that the *Encyclopaedia*'s plates are an exceptional testimony to life, knowledge and work in the 18th century. For us today, they also are a universe to explore.