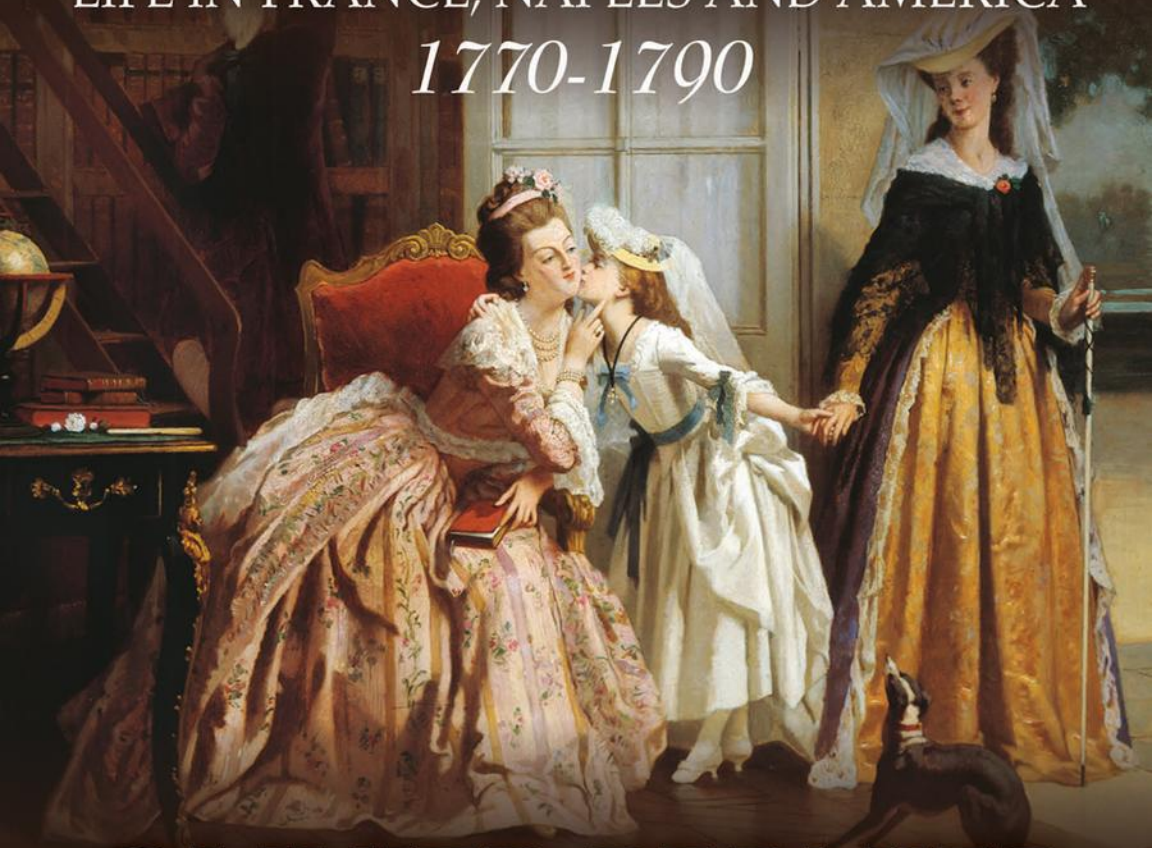


PLEASURE AND PRIVILEGE

LIFE IN FRANCE, NAPLES AND AMERICA
1770-1790



OLIVIER BERNIER

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FORWARD

The privileged French of the late eighteenth century have always seemed to me the most privileged class in history. Not only did they live in the lap of luxury - that state was available to the vulgarest eras - but they were willing to face the hard fact that the truest pleasure involves the strictest discipline. Ennui makes an easy victim of the sybarite unless he has cultivated good taste, and the sybarite of Paris in the 1770s and 1780s made good taste his god. It ruled him in everything: in decoration, in architecture, in clothes, in cooking, in decorum, in conversation, in friendship, in love. Why have I left out art? Because art was implicit in the whole thing; art was life itself, the good life. There was as much art in the making of a doorknob or a truffled *foie gras* as in a painting or a tragedy.

Today we tend to put art in a category of its own. Art belongs in museums, in concert halls, in libraries. Art is for leisure time. To look for art where it doesn't belong is to be "arty." And what is that but to be superficial - like those silly French aristocrats with powdered hair who fussed over sauces and made faces in the mirror? It's a relief, isn't it, to learn from Olivier Bernier that those people made a bloody mess of it? Taxing the poor and torturing criminals while they shed tears at sentimental comedies? If the guillotine way was a bit rough, they had certainly asked for it!

But the uneasy feeling still remains, in some of us anyway, as we face the glory of the Wrightsman eighteenth-century rooms in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (although Bernier doesn't think much of these) that we should have been all thumbs in such a chamber. And wouldn't the privileged of other eras have been all thumbs too? Wouldn't Augustus, or Lorenzo the Magnificent, or even Mrs. Astor of the Four Hundred? Isn't there something about a life where everything was exquisite that leaves us a bit awestruck?

Olivier Bernier helps us to avoid being overpowered - or even resentful - by supplying us with such a wealth of detail that we actually enjoy the illusion of being French in what Talleyrand deemed the most delicious of eras. Bernier tells us what these people ate and drank, where they shopped, what coins jangled in their pockets, how they sued each other, and how they made love; he follows them through their days and nights, at parties, in palaces, and on their travels. And he explains how every sec-

tion of their society was pitted against every other in such a complex, interwoven pattern that no force could have saved it from ultimate disaster.

Our old image of the era, a fancy engraving after Greuze or Vernet or Robert, or maybe a combination of all three, begins to shape itself into something more like a photograph. But at just this point, Bernier performs another remarkable stunt. He simply explodes our illusion of reality by following his portrait of France with contemporary pictures of Naples and of the American colonies; the first a kind of parody of what we have just seen; the second a species of idealization.

Naples was an *opera bouffe* to Paris's *comédie larmoyante*. It might have seemed to a Talleyrand as his Paris would have seemed to us: too rich, too highly colored, too artificial. Queen Marie Caroline was a crude version of her younger sister, Marie Antoinette. It was a mad world, even more bound to explode; it made Paris seem as sober as Rome of the ancient republic. It was the dream of a "bad" Frenchman.

The thirteen colonies, on the other hand, were the dream of a "good" one. They approached, at least to over-sophisticated European eyes, the rustic simplicity and democracy that Rousseau had made so fashionable to his multitudinous readers. If French society was to go any further downhill, it might go the Neapolitan way, but if it was to purge itself, might it not become America?

Of course, it became neither. Revolution in 1789 paved the way for a century that was to have little enough to do with the Paris, the Naples, or even the Philadelphia of 1788. But, having read Bernier, we have at least an idea of how massive the change was to be.