



The Age of Conversation

Benedetta Craverì , Teresa Waugh (Translator)

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Here, in the first English edition of Benedetta Craveri's recent scholarly study, "Civilt della conversazione," he describes the world of women and French salons in the 17th and 18th centuries. Salons brought together not only intellectuals (Voltaire was a frequent and much sought-after guest) and socialites, but also members of the political and military worlds. The salons allowed differences between these various powerful sectors to be resolved through the art of conversation rather than through the art of war. This book describes in nonacademic writing the women and the salons, the guests, the conversations, and the political and social environments of the ancien rigime.

The Age of Conversation Details

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From Reader Review The Age of Conversation for online ebook

Karen Renee Collins says

I've read this one twice... a fairly academic look at the the social rules and etiquette of 17th and 18th century France. Profiles all of the main women (and a couple of men) who set up the major salons... Everyone from Mme. Rambouillet to Mme. de Stael. Very informative and well-written (could have used a better editor though!)

Sherwood Smith says

This excellent book forms a companion for Elizabeth Goldsmith's *Exclusive Conversations*. Craveri sets the stage, and the tone, for the evolution of the salon, focusing in on the woman who shaped the salon, and who were the leaders in developing the art and style of conversation.

She makes a case for style and art being a way of life, an attitude infinitely seductive--and sometimes difficult to maintain. Especially when one encounters "The Other," i.e. love and attraction.

At times I wished for more detail rather than summaries (for example, in the chapter on the Grand Mademoiselle, Craveri tells us that after she fell in love with Lauzun at age 40, the Grand Mademoiselle suffered humiliation and tragedy, but doesn't detail the stormy arc of that relationship) but it's good summary, with terrific notes and a handy index with succinct reminders of who the many main players were.

She spends time on interesting discussions, such as why French became the language of diplomacy (and French cultural usage the style of diplomacy) in spite of the fact that Italian had long been considered the language of elite culture.

Reread: It also makes a case for the evolution of the modern French novel in describing the rise and fall of the remarkable taste-maker, Madame de Scudéry.

Yann says

Où l'on apprend pourquoi la noblesse s'est tournée vers la culture, comment le français s'est fixé, d'où vient cette passion pour la conversation, la littérature, la philosophie dans les salons du 17 et 18ème parisiens.

Philippe Malzieu says

Louis XIV locked up his aristocracy in a gilded prison Versailles. He named new aristocrats of the middle-class man deserving to dilute the nobility. In reaction the noble women created the conversation. This very organized ritual made it possible to be recognized as noble and to keep far away undesirable.

It is an structure of space and of time. It is necessary to be allowed. But the conversation is not innocent. The words can kill more surely than weapons.

To the XVIII, it will take a character less formal. One will discuss sciences and the Enlightenments. Mrs. Craveri makes us penetrate in these living rooms, in these rooms (they received in her "ruelles"), where women had the power. And from strong personalities release themselves, from Marquise de Rambouillet to Mme de Stael.

We can have a certain nostalgia of the raffinement and this time. And "l'esprit", this particular form of humour, so french.

Chris Garcia says

This is a great book for anyone wanting to understand the emergence and impact of 17th- and 18th-century French salon culture. Like many books on the subject, it focuses on the role of women in creating and maintaining salons. Also, the book sheds a lot of light on the drives and concerns of aristocrats of the period.

One of the things that caught my attention was the fashion for writing "portraits" of one's fellow socialites. It's hard to think of an equivalent in today's culture. I think the closest thing would be having an article written about you in a magazine.

Another thing is, a lot of people died from VD. Can you *imagine dying* from VD? The author says most women detested sex and thought of marriage as a necessary evil. I don't blame them.

The book also talks about salons bringing about the end of medieval romance -- "chivalry". Women wanted to be appreciated for their minds instead of just their beauty and "purity". Salons valued what women valued and since salons ruled, women ruled, for once (at least in salons). Men went from having to prove their physical superiority to having to prove their superior gentility and wit. It's interesting how that same transformation seems to be happening to this day.

Of course, there are a lot of anecdotes about the practical jokes and extravagant spectacles that made salons legendary and increased their attractiveness. But there is so much more, as you can see.

Colleen says

I'm just going to point out the mistakes of the summary for this book on Goodreads:

Here, in the first English edition of Benedetta Craveri's recent scholarly study, "Civilt della conversazione," he describes the world of women and French salons in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Benedetta Craveri is a woman. And as for 18th century France, that's perhaps 10% of this book. It focuses (if this book focuses at all) on the 1600s mostly. I thought it would be more expansive. Nor is it a book on salons, which is what I thought, but the title "Age of Conversation" is a clue--and it seems to be mostly this author analyzing certain words or ideals exhaustively.

Salons brought together not only intellectuals (Voltaire was a frequent and much sought-after guest) and socialites, but also members of the political and military worlds.

Also not true. She even states that Voltaire hated the salons and lived in his retreat, avoiding them whenever possible. So not that frequent. Also, she doesn't really stress the politics so much, other than incidentally, and

military almost not at all. It is almost exclusively authors that she focuses on. Mostly Rochefoucauld.

The salons allowed differences between these various powerful sectors to be resolved through the art of conversation rather than through the art of war.

The above point is made virtually nowhere in the book (if anything it seemed it started wars rather than preventing), and instead the author posits the interesting idea that they were intended, at least originally, to be idealized personal utopias. Once upon a time, Good King Henry IV, who was besides being a "man of vision and courage" per Wikipedia, also a perverted monster, and raped 3 prepubescent girls before, during or after his son's wedding feast. The timeline is not quite clear in the book, one of the many many annoying things I found within. Well one of the girls, Mme de Rambouillet, decides to have nothing to do with court or the being out at large after that and planned on making her own personal idealized world--creating as an architect one of the most original houses of her day, and painted the main room blue, which apparently no one had ever thought to do before. "She was the first to think of painting a room a color other than red or tan."

The other two girls also hung out in the Blue Room, as did many others, and this kick started popular novels/literature, letter-writing, interior design, the art of conversation, the Enlightenment if you think of it and for Rambouillet some intricate practical jokes. Pretty hilarious jokes too--teasing one acquaintance by serving a dinner of all the foods he hated most, and just as he was at his depth, reveal a new banquet of his favorites. Or another man who she "persuaded that he had eaten poisonous mushrooms and that his body had swollen monstrously because he could not fit into his clothes, which had been secretly removed and taken in." I would definitely like to read a book on Mme de Rambouillet, instead of the hot mess that this book turned out to be. Not sure if editor, or translator, or author, or mix of the three.

This book describes in nonacademic writing the women and the salons, the guests, the conversations, and the political and social environments of the ancien regime. [sic]

Also wrong--there's nothing "nonacademic" about this, with how dry this book is in parts. Names, dates, unrelated asides, MUCH literary analysis of random people's (often men and nothing to do with salons) letters, the book hops all over. There is some attempt at organizing it by the women involved, but you never hear how majority of things ended for these women, rarely are events placed in historical context, a few dates I noticed were wrong, and half the time you have to go to the footnotes to see who the quotes were from and about. She does quote and cite a lot of people--it's almost as if she took a vast trove of letters from 1650, tossed them in a blender, and lo, this book. I found her 70+ page Bibliography, with her notes on sources, at the end to be the most entertaining part of the book. And I have never seen an Index done in such a crazy way either, although I kind of liked it.

I even thought at times of giving up on this book, but soldiered on because the back cover promised me de Stael, and as I got further and further in the book and still hadn't made it to 1700 yet, I got worried. No real pay off--de Stael has a few quotes and there's a brief bit about her mom in last few pages, so I was tricked. However, as painful as this book was to get through, I'm not 100% sad I read it--it's been ages since I've read *Princesse de Cleves*, so I am going to reread that and I want to read *Voiture* now, so it's given me a good idea of where to go next.
