

Letter Paintings and the Culture of *Confiance* in Eighteenth-Century France

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In 1733, Chardin famously made the leap from still-life to figure painting with his *Lady Sealing a Letter*. The work not only marked the artist's foray into scenes of everyday life, but it also contributed to the vogue for pictures reflecting on the writing, reading, and receiving of letters. Boucher, Fragonard, and others promoted the popularity of the genre by exploiting its erotic potential. Such pictures—recalling the romantic intrigues of epistolary novels—typically feature fashionable coquettes seated amidst stacks of love letters. As Dena Goodman has observed, such works delight in uncertainty: they evidence a bestowal of trust on the part of the unseen male lover while also intimating the likelihood of betrayal. Wedding the theme of a woman's inconstancy with the problem of paper's exchangeability, letter paintings do more than emblemize the "age of epistolarity."

As this paper argues, they also meditated upon the progress of what was described at the time as "the papered century," a phrase encapsulating the eclipse of metal currency by monetary instruments—from stock-share certificates to credit and debt notes. It specifically evokes the financial chaos unleashed around 1720 by the South Sea bubble and by the Mississippi bubble, both of which involved the use of state-sponsored notes by a mass public that had been cajoled into believing in the essentially fictive value of mere paper. As I argue, French eighteenth-century epistolary painting, reflecting upon the growing power of paper as a site of imaginative investment, was mediated by the legacy of 1720. It marked the coming to grips with itself of a society consigned to belief in promissory notes: a society, that is, whose very existence was predicated upon play—upon a collective willingness to buy into fiction. Some of the richest examples of letter pictures dwell upon the imperative, for denizens of a modern world in flux, of sustaining a playful attitude. For such paintings prompted a double-sided consciousness: an awareness that the social order was mediated by increasingly dematerialized forms whose trust value was necessarily suspect, and that faith in such empirically suspect media was nonetheless inevitable.

This paper examines the role played by epistolary painting in France's evolution from a "low-trust" society into a society of *confiance*—a term denoting confidence, or trust, and, in financial discourses, "credit." The demand for letter paintings coincided with the dramatic expansion of credit—and more specifically, with the growth of social trust as the basis for economic prosperity. As Craig Muldrew and others have shown, early-modern economic exchange—not yet regulated by modern financial institutions—was an emotional affair, a form of social bonding comparable to friendship or love insofar as it rested on trust. Love letter paintings, beginning with seventeenth-century Dutch examples, employ iconography that evidences this inseparability of romantic and economic trust, the better to underscore the precariousness of both. The possibility that letter pictures served as crucial sites for the expression of economic anxiety is corroborated by the fact that prints satirizing the bubbles of 1720 themselves drew on an epistolary iconogra-

phy: typically featuring female personifications of financial folly reveling in paper, such prints—together with letter paintings—make the point that investing emotional trust through the medium of letters is akin to investing one's financial hopes in paper.