

By Ryan Tracy (BA 2006)

L'Encyclopédie

With L'Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, Denis Diderot set out to gather the breadth and diversity of human knowledge. Compiling and producing this print collection for the public took over 20 years, and in its first form, the edition comprises 17 volumes of text and 11 volumes of illustrations.

Early in the Encyclopédie, Diderot explains his organization of this collection in a schema called “Système Figuré des Connoissances Humaines,”* where he demonstrates the interrelation of all that is known. He divides knowledge along three main categories, “Mémoire, Raison, and Imagination”—categories drawn from epistemological models in philosophy, the most recent of which was that of René Descartes. In the third category, which is by far the smallest of the three, one finds the arts, including theater.

Although the schema suggests that little social or intellectual recognition was given to theater, the contents of the Encyclopédie demonstrate the contrary. In fact, there is compelling evidence of the important role of theater in French society. For example, the name “Molière” appears 134 times in the Encyclopédie under articles ranging from “Caractère,” “Comédie,” and “Rire,” to “Tactique,” “Tutoyement,” and “Vrai.” The wide range of topics in which authors of the Encyclopédie make allusion to Molière suggests several things, namely that Molière has an important place in French cultural history, and that theater, as well as literature and the other arts, illustrates and perhaps even influences a great variety of cultural phenomena.

Variety again emerges as a goal of the encyclopedic project in its authorship. This collection of knowledge was generated by many intellectuals of the day working alongside Diderot. At the end of each article, there are initials so that we may know who contributed the information. Not only did Diderot thus credit all contributors to his project, he also encouraged multiple perspectives. A brief comparison of two pieces that refer to the origins of Western culture illustrate this point. Under “Architecture,”** M. Blondel declares Greece the birthplace of good architecture and suggests that the Romans never quite achieved the same beauty. Yet in M. Jaucourt’s article on “Théâtre,”** he honors Roman Theatre, notably the spaces created under the Roman Empire for the enjoyment of this art. When he mentions Grecian architecture, already devalued here by its subordinate status to Roman design, he declares it of the “most obscure construction.”

Thus, Diderot’s Encyclopédie accomplished its goal of disseminating knowledge to the general public, while preserving a place for opinion and bias in its structure. As readers, we are forced to acknowledge and even accept the ultimately subjective nature of knowledge in this ostensibly authoritative resource. Diderot’s two-fold lesson appears to be that the generation and preservation of knowledge is one of the most important human endeavors; and yet, this knowledge will only ever be a reflection of who and what we are—nothing more, nothing less.

*Live link to schema

**Live links to ARTFL for articles