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**Nobility and Domestic Conviviality  
in the Paintings of Archduchess Maria Christine**

*Scholars have long identified Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings as central texts to the history of the family. Eighteenth-century transformations to the family concept affected all families, including those of high social status; despite being monarchs, royal families could not shield themselves from larger social changes affecting family definitions in general. This paper addresses that phenomenon by examining a social activity in which imagined identities could be explored and represented, namely art, through a discussion of the Habsburg Archduchess Maria Christine of Austria (1742-1798). Daughter of Empress Maria Theresa, Maria Christine founded with her husband Albert of Sachsen-Teschen the collection that forms the basis of the modern Graphische Sammlung Albertina in Vienna and was herself an accomplished amateur painter. By inserting her monarchical family into scenes representing bourgeois activities, Maria Christine utilized painting to explore aspects of her monarchical life that otherwise could not be represented in official art.*

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Scholars have long recognized Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings as highly influential contributions to the history of the modern family, most notable among them *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and especially *Émile* (1762). Emerging from the Enlightenment's inquiry into the ideal structure of society, Rousseau proposed rigid gender identities within the family as keys to greater societal stability, even as he likewise emphasized the importance of educational pastimes in developing morally sound mentalities. The family's nuclear character grounded Rousseau's vision of society, which gradually replaced the extended, dynastic, multigenerational family model that predominated in European culture for centuries. His ideas have become so familiar that they seem inevitable, an outcome that Rousseau himself would have loved. Much scholarship on the eighteenth-century family charts Rousseau's influence in order to examine his ideas' proliferation and to explore alterna-

tives within Enlightenment political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Mostly absent from such discussions is the question of Rousseau's appeal to the era's most visible and public family: namely, the monarchical family. European absolutism predicated itself upon a familial conception of rule, with strategic marriage alliances central to the formation of political relationships, but its exalted, dynastic character might make the monarchical family appear immune to the changes in bourgeois and peasant families that were Rousseau's focus. Yet transformations to the family concept affected those of high status just as they did those from other social sectors; despite being aristocrats, royal families could not shield themselves from larger social changes that Rousseau's thinking exemplified.

My essay addresses this influence by examining a social activity in which imagined identities could be explored and tested, namely art. Making art, I shall argue, enabled elites to negotiate family identities across class boundaries and to explore potential configurations of the family and self in unthreatening ways. My example is the Habsburg Archduchess Maria Christine of Austria (1742-1798), daughter of Empress Maria Theresa and, with her husband Albert of Sachsen-Teschen, co-founder of the world-famous art collection that became Vienna's Graphische Sammlung Albertina.<sup>2</sup> In addition to her activities as a collector, Maria Christine also was an accomplished amateur painter. Free from the pressures of both academy and marketplace, Maria Christine explored her self-image and family in paintings that are highly unconventional and utterly unlike official state portraiture. In them she conceives of her immediate family – her parents, her younger siblings, and herself – in bourgeois guise, partaking in middle-class activities in modest settings. By inserting a monarchical family into scenes representing bourgeois life, Maria Christine utilized painting to explore the similarities and differences between her elite family and those of the merchant classes, a process that renders her paintings into a kind of artistic masquerade designed to connect her with a changing social conception of the family.

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<sup>1</sup> From the enormous literature on the eighteenth-century family, see especially Philippe ARIÈS, *L'enfant et la vie filiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris 1960; Lawrence STONE, *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, New York 1977; Lynn HUNT, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, Berkeley 1992; *Only Connect: Family Values in the Age of Sentiment*, special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30 (Spring 1997); and for developments in the representation of domesticity in art *Intimate Encounters: Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century France*, Princeton 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For Maria Christine's biography, with attention to the formation of the Albertina, see Adam WOLF, *Maria Christine, Erzherzogin von Österreich*. 2 vols., Wien 1863; *200 Jahre Albertina. Herzog Albert von Sachsen-Teschen und seine Kunstsammlung*, Wien 1969; Walter KOSCHATZKY – Selma KRASA, *Herzog Albert von Sachsen-Teschen 1738-1822*, Wien 1982; and Barbara DOSSI, *Albertina: The History of the Collection and its Masterpieces*, Munich 1999.

Maria Christine is the kind of painter whose work falls within the cracks of eighteenth-century art historical study. She was not a professional artist and her paintings seem unsuited to critical methodologies designed for explaining “high” art. Her work is likewise free from the market-driven concerns of contract portraiture, moralizing genre, or still life that drove many eighteenth-century artistic careers. But she also painted with greater perceptiveness and sophistication than the typical hobby painter, displaying skill and imagination well beyond that of the dilettante. It is therefore tempting to see her art as an aberration, as idiosyncratic doodling, or as pure biography, but the better interpretative angle is rather more complicated. In her art, Maria Christine exposed a space in which she could imagine possibilities for herself and her family that extended beyond those accorded them in the protocol-determined spheres of court culture.

This was possible due to a unique set of circumstances that determined both her unusual position within the imperial family and her access to the arts. The fourth of Empress Maria Theresa’s sixteen children, Maria Christine was trained in basic drawing and sketching as were all of her brothers and sisters.<sup>3</sup> Art formed a subsidiary but standard component of the strictly educational program that Maria Theresa promoted in consultation with her pedagogical advisor, the Jesuit Ignaz Parhammer. This education was essentially religious in conception, with a strong catechetical basis that allowed little room for creativity or individual expression. Education differed according to the child’s sex and presumed future social role. Attitudes toward children’s education in German-speaking Europe lagged behind more progressive developments in France and England, and in general imperial sons like Maria Christine’s brothers were educated to be princes, while the daughters’ education served the institution of marriage.<sup>4</sup> The young Austrian archdukes learned theology, writing, reading, mathematics, and geography, as well as trained in a musical instrument, a handicraft, and physical exercises, all of which developed in them the physical, moral, and intellectual strength required for leadership. The daughters’ curriculum tended to be more lax, with less emphasis on subjects like mathematics and rhetoric and more on biblical teachings, languages, and what in other European contexts would be termed “ladies’ accomplishments” like music and drawing. Such gendered curricular distinctions took as a grounding assumption women’s essentially sinful and corruptible nature, a vulnerability that youth and underdeveloped morality exacerbated, as well as an unequal division of social power in the adult world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Friederike WACHTER, *Die Erziehung der Kinder Maria Theresias*, Dissertation, Universität Wien 1969, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.



**Figure 1:** Studio of Martin van Meytens, *Portrait of Archduchess Maria Christine*, c. 1760. (Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest)

Although both the male and female children were encouraged to draw as part of their studies, it is important to note that art functioned differently within the curriculum of each sex. Within male elite education, art served to equip boys with an aesthetic and spatial sensibility to aid future military endeavors and to encourage the visual expression of grandeur. A painting by Pietro Rotari of Maria Christine's future husband Albert demonstrates how art functioned to edify a prince (before 1763; Gemäldegalerie, Dresden). Albert holds a drawing of a military fortification presumably by his own hand, and his drawing ability signals less artistic skill or good taste but rather military cunning and princeliness. Drawing held a fundamentally different purpose in the education of royal daughters like Maria Christine. As Ann Bermingham has observed, drawing could be co-opted to form part of a socialization process for girls that condemned them to servitude by encouraging self-reflection, submissiveness, and fear.<sup>6</sup> Accomplishments likewise defined the female student as a potential spouse and, according to Bermingham, could function "...to mitigate and divert brazen gazing onto the woman as a marriageable commodity. Men could look while seeming to listen, or look while ostensibly viewing a work of art." A painting like this portrait of the young Maria Christine, produced in Martin van Meytens's studio and now in Budapest, displays such a conception of noble female art making. (Figure 1) Maria Christine sits at a desk, where she holds a *porte-crayon* in her hand. She draws a landscape or *fête galante*, perhaps copying the large painting positioned behind her. Further proof of her accomplishments appears in the sheet music tucked in at her side. Her aristocratic status is conveyed through a set of crowns, swags of cloth, and above all the sumptuous lace-covered court costume she wears. This painting presents a tension common to images of women artists in that it confuses the idea of the woman as maker and the woman as art, but that tension is refined through the court culture within which this image bore meaning. Maria Christine appears here as an elite commodity and her eagerness to engage potential suitors is conveyed through her frontal gaze. Her skill at art, as Bermingham would indicate, is presented here less as proof of her real talents than as decoration of her social identity. She makes art, but the ultimate work of art is the archduchess herself.

But if this painting indicates that Maria Christine was an accomplished young woman, it does not pave the way for the kind of imagery she later made, which emerged directly from the atypical status she held within the imperial family. Maria Christine was Maria Theresa's acknowledged favorite child and the Empress privileged and pampered her above all the rest.<sup>7</sup> This favoritism developed because Maria Christine was born on her mother's birthday. The Empress's affection for her fourth child was blatant and conspicuous and she decided at an

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<sup>6</sup> Ann BERMINGHAM, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*, New Haven 2000, p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> F. WACHTER, o. c. in note 4, p. 75. Maria Theresa's favoritism was such that Maria Christine's special status was widely recognized at court and accounted for in official protocol.

early age that her daughter would be raised in a manner fundamentally opposed to that of her other children. This was nowhere clearer than in the most important imperial duty the children were expected to meet: strategic political marriage. All the children, particularly the daughters, were expected to marry to enhance the dynasty's political ambitions. Daughters who did not marry or who married but did not produce children earned Maria Theresa's open disapproval. Maria Christine was the sole child excused from this requirement and permitted to marry out of love, which she did when she wedded Albert in 1766. Adding to this concession, Maria Theresa expedited a choice political career for the couple, which including the much-coveted governorships of Hungary and later the Austrian Netherlands.

It is impossible to overstate how much freedom her mother's favoritism enabled Maria Christine to enjoy within the potentialities available to an eighteenth-century noblewoman. But mother's love cut two ways. Certainly it enabled Maria Christine to experience a nuptial harmony that eluded many of her siblings. It also however fomented deep-seated and often vicious jealousy among her brothers and sisters, a situation Maria Christine seems to have exacerbated by playing them off of her mother for personal gain. There is an oft-reprinted diary entry by her brother Leopold, Grand Duke of Tuscany, dating from 1776, in which he rants for pages about his sister's deceitfulness and arrogance. "*She lives for herself and refuses to associate with any of her sisters...She has a lot of talents and knows how to take advantage of the Empress's weak spots. She commiserates with her, agrees with her, is with her at all hours and all the time, writes her notes constantly, and in this way she has won her over fully and does with her what she wishes, answering and often talking back to her, demanding a lot, and the Empress gives her what asks for so as not to agitate her, because then she shows her worst side and because she doesn't want to lose her...She treats everyone with great haughtiness, and in the course of things, despite some occasional courtesies, she is hated and feared by everyone, because she has a sharp tongue and repeats everything to the Empress...*"<sup>8</sup>

And on and on he goes. Animosity among the Habsburg children were so great that most of them refused to associate with Maria Christine in adulthood. When she visited Versailles in 1786, her younger sister Marie-Antoinette received her coolly, offering no special welcome, and she steadfastly refused to invite her into the private retreat of the Petit Trianon.

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<sup>8</sup> "*Die Marie lebt für sich und verkehrt mit keiner ihrer Schwestern. Sie, die sehr viel Talent hat, weiß und wußte die Kaiserin bei ihren Schwächen zu nehmen. Immer bedauert sie sie, gibt ihr recht, ist immer bei ihr zu allen Stunden und zu allen Zeiten, immer schreibt sie ihr, und auf diese Weise hat sie sie völlig gewonnen und macht mit ihr, was sie will, und antwortet ihr und widerspricht ihr auch oft, verlangt viel, und die Kaiserin, um sie nicht zu ärgern, weil sie ihr dann ein böses Gesicht zeigt, und um sie nicht zu verlieren, macht sie alles, was sie will.*" Quoted in Friedrich WEISSENSTEINER, *Die Töchter Maria Theresias*, Wien 1994, p. 60.



**Figure 2:** Archduchess Maria Christine, *The Feast of St. Nicholas*, c. 1762.  
(Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien)

Given this uneasy position, it perhaps is not surprising that Maria Christine's art frequently engages with representations of ideal families. Two such paintings, made around 1762 and therefore at the height of Rousseau's popularity among the European readership, are based upon Dutch genre painting, specifically two prints by the artist Cornelis Troost (c. 1697-1750) entitled *The Feast of St. Nicholas* and *Dutch Childbirth*. In Maria Christine's versions of these works, she has added the faces of herself and family members to update the scenes. In *The Feast of St. Nicholas* (Figure 2), her father the Emperor and mother the Empress assume the positions of the Dutch parents in Troost's original, while the children are portraits of her brother Ferdinand, Marie-Antoinette, and the youngest son Maximilian. Maria Christine herself appears in a self-portrait at the painting's left; she directs her brother Ferdinand out of the room in a proto-maternal gesture, presumably to punish him for a breach of manners. A similar transformation has occurred in second work, which has become *The Childbirth of Isabella of Parma* (Figure 3); the new parents represented at the painting's center right are the Archduke Joseph and his bride Isabella, and although the female figures attending to the baby archduchess are not clearly identifiable, at least one of them is certainly Maria Christine herself, while the other probably depicts one of her unmarried sisters, perhaps Maria Elisabeth.

That a noblewoman, and indeed a member of the ruling imperial family, would transfer herself to the visual world of middle-class domestic life has struck modern viewers as highly unusual. Interpretations of these paintings diverge widely as a result, with a surprisingly large contingency insisting that they literally document Habsburg family life, an argument that misses the obvious link between them and their Dutch predecessors.<sup>9</sup> More recently, scholars have analyzed them from the perspective of class; Ilsebill Barta has noted that in them the imperial family found an outlet for understanding or approaching sectors of society normally distant to their ways.<sup>10</sup> In this formulation, these images become a kind of social transgression designed to foster knowledge. While this perspective offers much of value, it too leaves out the possibility they are really about self-understanding within a changing historical and social climate. Indeed, one can detect here diverse kinds of transgressions and allegiances – class among them, but including gender and family role – that assert this archduchess's desire to reconfigure her family in a new form. We can also detect here how the modern notions of the family that Rousseau illuminated in his writings passed into a monarchical setting through, ironically, a disavowal of monarchy's outward signs and trappings.

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew WHEATCROFT, *The Habsburgs: Embodying Empire*, Harmondsworth 1995, plate 6 with caption; and Heinz-Dieter HEIMANN, *Die Habsburger: Dynastie und Kaiserreiche*, München 2001, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Ilsebill BARTA, *Familienporträts der Habsburger. Dynastische Repräsentation im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, Wien 2001, pp. 131-137.





**Figure 3:** Archduchess Maria Christine, *The Childbirth of Isabella of Parma*, c. 1762.  
(Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien)

Those Rousseauian concepts are locatable here because Maria Christine modeled her family images on an artistic tradition that, in the eyes of eighteenth-century connoisseurs, represented the sharpest break with court portraiture: namely, Dutch art. Collectors and connoisseurs with forward-leaning tastes valued Dutch art above all other national schools, and the inspiration for much rococo art in Europe, however different its ultimate tone and palette, was the seemingly liberated, bourgeois-inspired arts of seventeenth-century Holland.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Dutch predilection for moralizing genre scenes appealed to eighteenth-century audiences intrigued by the didactic potential of art. It could be that for the eighteenth-century Catholic elite of which Maria Christine was a part, Dutch art suggested a newer, enlightened sense of self through its depiction of everyday life among a Protestant middle class. Dutch art also allowed Maria Christine's art to be humorous. Much Dutch genre painting uses humor to impart moral messages, and something of Troost's original wit is preserved in Maria Christine's copies, which convey the conviviality of her family's communal life lightheartedly.

Yet these paintings should not be interpreted as straightforward copies, but rather as translations. Maria Christine manipulated Troost's compositions significantly, from altering the decorative patterns used for the bed canopy in *Childbirth* to transposing details in the originals to new locations. In some instances, her changes indicate the way in which a noblewoman might imagine a middle class life unfamiliar to her from her own everyday experience. In *The Feast of St. Nicholas*, for example, she alters the room's interior decoration to reduce its ornamentation, making it slightly austere, which possibly reflects her projection of lesser means into a fictional middle-class setting. Likewise, the restrained classical frieze above Troost's fireplace transforms in Maria Christine's painting into a rococo one featuring stylized arabesques, an artisanal ornamental language perhaps more fitting, from her perspective, to those of non-noble birth. In other respects, however, Maria Christine has added visual elements to places where Troost had none, and in so doing conveys her desire to transform his settings into something closer to Viennese palatial architecture. Notable here is the way the archduchess has erased much of the facial expression found in the originals; whereas Troost gives us smiles, grimaces, and smirks, Maria Christine neutralizes her family's faces in a manner not too distant from state portraiture, which has the result of preserving courtly demeanor in their visages. A similar tendency arises in *Childbirth*, where to the Troost's unadorned wall panels behind the bed Maria Christine has added large-scale images depicting versions of Dutch genre scenes. One knows this because of the humble dress and bourgeois settings conveyed in these paintings-within-a-painting, which resemble the sorts of subjects prevalent in works by prominent artists like Steen and ter Borch. Likewise, their large scale and position on the walls between decorative woodwork suggests the painting found in the halls of

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<sup>11</sup> Mary D. SHERIFF, *The Mystique of Antoine Watteau*, in: Mary D. Sheriff (ed.), *Antoine Watteau: Perspectives on the Artist and the Culture of his Time*, Newark 2006, p. 21.

Habsburg palaces more than it does Dutch cabinet pictures. Of course, the Dutch bourgeois did not display paintings in exactly this manner and the change indicates that Maria Christine has transformed the Dutch interior into one harmonious with her imperial experiences.

Despite these equivocations, Troost's images allowed Maria Christine to cast herself and her family in new guises totally unlike the official ones that found representation in most Habsburg art. In *The Feast of St. Nicholas*, her parents assume a domestic, quasi-bourgeois character in which Franz Stephan reads letters while Maria Theresa attends to him. The children are here allowed to play, be mischievous, and roughhouse in a manner that likewise would never be represented in official imagery. Yet such casual engagement and behaviors probably did occur at court behind the scenes, outside of the royal family's ceremonial duties and removed from the demands of protocol, that is, in spaces outside of the public eye. One senses here as well a new kind of symbolic order, one based on morals and not status, that Marie Christine wishes to imagine, since it is she and not Maria Theresa who disciplines the young Ferdinand. Therefore it is her proto-maternal position within the scene that differs most strikingly from the official images; she assumes the role of guardian caretaker and thereby assigns herself a greater measure of responsibility than was typically the case for noblewomen of her rank. Furthermore, if she is indeed one of the two sisters represented in *Childbirth*, then she assumes there the active role of aiding the new mother during her convalescence and also in ensuring the newborn baby's health. Through art, then, Maria Christine devised a new family structure in which she occupied a more effective family role, and furthermore where she exerted greater influence on her younger siblings than officially possible. These paintings, then, are at least partly a rescripting of the family drama to make Maria Christine its protagonist.

It could be that Dutch art, in addition to its aesthetic appeal, was attractive to the archduchess because of its relaxed depiction of family interaction. It is here that I would argue the best context for interpreting these images lies. Unlike many European royal families, the Habsburgs insisted on substantial privacy and separation from court ceremony in their daily lives; they participated in ceremony as required, but outside of it of lived in relative informality and independence, not least when compared to monarchical counterparts in France. Official imagery, which concentrated on representing the family in a manner correlative with its public persona, could never fully capture its members' identities in totality, and it could be that during the eighteenth century that gap became increasingly wider. Maria Christine found in Troost's images an opportunity to represent elements of her family life impossible to show in other kinds of portraits. This is not to say that Troost's paintings resembled exactly how the family behaved, since the paintings function on a more metaphorical level than that. They are perhaps representative of an alternative set of myths and stories the family wished to tell about itself and to itself, artificial and metaphorical just like official portraiture but operating within a different sphere and offering an alternative set of concepts and associations. Sup-

porting this reading is the tacit demand that the family's personalities and communal conviviality somehow demanded representation, that it needed to be shown, however unconventional the format and restricted the audience.

And it is here that Rousseau enters the discussion. Maria Christine's imagery resonated with increasingly popular Rousseauian ideas about the family accepted among many Europeans with Enlightenment leanings. To Rousseau, the family consisted of individuals and his viewpoint posited for children a unique and distinctly non-adult nature. One can detect variations of these ideas Maria Christine's art, particularly her adaptation of *The Feast of St. Nicholas*: the figures of Ferdinand, Marie-Antoinette, and Maximilian all display the Rousseauian child, as does Maria Christine's removal of her brother from the room, which is her attempt to steer him toward a higher moral path by correcting his errant behavior. In painting this, however, Maria Christine embraced ideas about the family that strongly opposed those held by her mother Empress Maria Theresa. In a letter dating from near the end of her life, the Empress openly challenged the Rousseauian model of education to Count Mercy d'Argenteau, the Habsburg representative in Paris, who reported to the Empress on the activities of Marie-Antoinette soon after the birth of her first child. Maria Theresa claimed: "*I absolutely do not agree that one should avoid traditional etiquette in our children's educational plan, but of course all luxury, cowardice, and excessive attention [should not be allowed]. The current fashion after Rousseau, which renders children like peasants, doesn't appeal to me, and I see no advantages to it, rather the opposite. Without encouraging pride, children should be acquainted early to a life of courtly demeanor, and by doing so one avoids the many inevitable infelicities that arise when a monarch and his family can't distinguish between their actions and those appropriate for private individuals.*"<sup>12</sup>

Maria Theresa's specific complaint is that Rousseau's notion of the child equalizes all children, with little regard to the class status of the individual and their future social role. For her, Rousseau reduces children to the lowest rungs of the social ladder and permits them not to grow but rather devolve, becoming peasants in the process. Embedded in this claim is a fear that encouraging a child's individuality prevents him from achieving proper cultivation. *Amour-propre* arms children with the self-importance required for noble life, but it is of course pre-

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<sup>12</sup> "*Je ne conviens aucunement qu'on doit rayer les étiquettes dans le plan d'éducation des enfants de notre naissance (mais tout luxe, mollesse, et service chargé. La mode d'à cette heure selon Rousseau, où on les rend paysans à force de liberté, ne me plaît pas, et je ne vois aucun avantage jusqu'à cette heure, mais bien le contraire.) Sans les pousser jusqu'au point de nourrir leur orgueil, il faut les accoutumer dès leur enfance à la représentation, pour obvier à tant d'inconvénients inévitables lorsque le souverain et sa famille ne se distinguent pas par la représentation de l'ordre des particuliers. C'est un point essentiel, surtout à l'égard de la nation française, aussi vive que légère.*" Maria Theresa to Count Mercy-Argenteau, 13 January 1779, in Alfred Ritter von ARNETH and M. A. GEFROY (ed.), *Marie Antoinette: Correspondance secrète entre Marie-Thérèse et le Comte de Mercy-Argenteau avec les lettres de Marie-Thérèse et de Marie-Antoinette*, Paris 1874, III, p. 283.

cisely this acculturation process that Rousseau criticized as damaging to the child's "natural" self.

Elsewhere Maria Theresa openly linked the slackening of manners to incipient social unrest: "*This spirit of insurrection is the consequence of our enlightened century. I sigh about it often. But the deterioration of manners, this indifference to everything that our holy religion holds dear, and this endless dissipation is the cause of all our troubles.*"<sup>13</sup>

Here manners, religious identity, and social unrest are woven into a single concept, with the acculturation process emphasized for its special role in potentially solving society's ills. At issue in such passages is the Empress's belief in the nobility's exceptionality, their claim to being a special race of people with traits that render them ideal for rule, a status that Rousseau's theories seemed to threaten. Perhaps it is precisely because these ideas circulated in the eighteenth century well before Rousseau that Habsburg official portraiture remains so unchanging in its insistence upon a courtly family ideal.

Maria Christine's imagery responds additionally to something more personal than these philosophical ideas. Even in a context in which status, representation, and the external display of authority were central, beneath that surface may have lain an awareness of the artificiality or inadequacy of trusted myths about the monarchical self. Maria Christine's paintings conceive of the imperial family as essentially similar to the middle classes, as precisely not exceptional or special. Can we then read these paintings as an acknowledgment, at least to the archduchess herself, that its official monarchical personae only insufficiently captured their true selves, and that on some level, that they differed but minimally from the masses they ruled? Her images hint at an erosion of the traditional conception of monarchy that allows for the monarch and her family to be conceived not as illustrious nobles but rather as typical people; or in short, she transforms the imperial dynasty into a nuclear family. She furthermore uses these images to play out an idealized family interaction that eluded her in real life, particularly if we recall her uneasy relationship with her siblings. The privilege of marital love denied Maria Christine family intimacy, which is precisely what these images celebrate. Conviviality becomes in them a symbol, a sign of family character and thereby a marker of a perceived lack in the archduchess's familial network. This is also not to say that conviviality did not itself exist in court familial circles, since it certainly did, but that its representation here is a symbolic artistic choice. These images are therefore projections of Maria Christine's sense of self into the realm of art. They enable a realization of unfulfilled family roles as they likewise reveal its essentially unimposing inner character.

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<sup>13</sup> "*En général cet esprit de mutinerie commence à devenir familier partout, c'est donc la suite de notre siècle éclairé; j'en gémiss souvent; mais la dépravation des mœurs, cette indifférence sur tout ce qui a rapport à notre sainte religion, cette dissipation continuelle sont cause de tous ces maux.*" Letter of 2 June 1775, Alfred Ritter von ARNETH (Hg.), *Maria Theresia und Marie-Antoinette. Ihr Briefwechsel während der Jahre 1770-1780*, Paris – Wien 1865, p. 135.



**Figure 4:** Archduchess Maria Christine, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1765.  
(Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien)

Maria Christine's paintings after Troost pale, however, when compared to a more all-encompassing statement about her archducal self that she produced several years later in the form of a self-portrait (Figure 4). In this painting we view Maria Christine seated in a painting-filled *cabinet* engaged in the act of spinning wool. In its presentation of a monarchical personage in the guise of a merchant-class interior, this self-portrait mirrors the general strategy of the genre scenes after Troost, and like them it has usually been interpreted as a literal reflection of her actual leisure activities. In the wake of recent scholarship that views eighteenth-century self-portraits as complex ruminations on the nature of art and the identity of the artist, it may be better to view this image as something more than true life.<sup>14</sup> In it Maria Christine creates a coded visual fiction about a new interrelationship between nobility, femininity, and art, and does so by focusing on herself.

The room in which the central figure sits is filled with the trappings of middle-class existence, yet there are telling slippages comparable to those found in her earlier paintings. Note the fireplace, with a fire screen in front from which hangs a purselike bag, perhaps holding sewing materials. Likewise Maria Christine sits on a chair with a ribboned back cushion of the kind that still symbolizes "hobby needlework" two hundred years later. The jug and bowl resting on a table and a group of porcelain objects – a covered vase and a cup with saucer – also position this scene within a domestic arena of middle-class consumption. But Maria Christine's oversized jeweled earrings and choker, which if real would be massively heavy, affirms her status as woman of wealth, as does the swag of cloth behind her that resembles the billowing velvets of Habsburg imperial imagery. The result is a curious mix of noble and bourgeois that parallels the admixture found in her genre scenes, but as with them her connection to monarchy is here never overtly expressed. Bourgeois activity filters through the lens of elite experience while the monarchical subject remains unacknowledged.

For a noblewoman like Maria Christine, this kind of setting and activity would have been essentially foreign, a fact that should point toward the inclusion of the spinning wheel as more than a veristic display of domestic pastime. Artists and writers had long associated spinning with idealized femininity; the distaff alone had long served as the ultimate symbol of the female sex and its inclusion here links this painting with discussions about women's social roles. Rousseau himself in *Émile* mentioned work with cloth, yarn, and needles as central components of female education, and Dutch art of the kind Maria Christine admired often depicted needlework in contexts celebrating exemplary female virtue.<sup>15</sup> With her mind focused on intricate needlework, a woman could both affirm her social utility and illustrate her moral steadfastness. And it was possible for monarchical women

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<sup>14</sup> See especially Mary D. SHERIFF, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art*, Chicago 1996, ch. 6; and Angela ROSENTHAL, *Angelica Kauffman: Art and Sensibility*, New Haven 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Jacques ROUSSEAU, *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York 1979, pp. 368-369.

to illustrate their political importance through visual references to working with needle and thread. One celebrated example, François-Hubert Drouais's *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour at her Tambour Frame* (1763-4; National Gallery, London), depicts the French *maîtresse en titre* in her study at work on a tapestry, which functions both as a literal representation of her preferred leisuretime activity – she was admired at court for the skill of her needlework – but also a metaphor for artistic productivity and relevance.

Maria Christine's evocation of these ideas indicates awareness of these concepts; representing herself spinning suggests her need to associate herself with an exemplary conception of womanly activity. That ideal femininity is referenced here is striking; as the daughter who married for love, her importance to the imperial family's political plan, her dynastic utility, was erased, and therefore she could never become the "ideal daughter" as defined in imperial mythology. Within a dynastic sense, therefore, she had no utility, and I would surmise that this freedom was as discomfiting as liberating. By representing herself spinning, Maria Christine makes visible a productive woman's work that is constructive to a fictive social order. The purposelessness of love is replaced with an ideal version of female social duty, and it seems critical to me that absent from this domestic scene is any sense of Maria Christine's impending marriage or spouse. Although this is a representation of a woman at work, it removes its subject somewhat from real labor into an idealized, refined fantasy. Note how the painting emphasizes Maria Christine's hands through compositional and light effects; she pulls the thread with her right hand while operating the spindle's crank with her left, choices that draw attention her manual activity. Her gestures, however, have little of the strain and tension associated with work, but rather demonstrate the delicate movements of leisured practices like playing cards or taking coffee. She is an active woman, but one at a distance from exertion, and her activity is presented here as untiring and effortless. Work becomes another kind of elite play, a role like the one of the many she could assume in a masquerade.

The notion that spinning could serve as a point of meditation on the social role of women has a deep artistic pedigree, and paintings depicting similar scenes appear repeatedly in eighteenth-century art. One particularly instructive comparandum is Jean-Siméon Chardin's *Les amusements de la vie privée* (Figure 5), produced in 1745-1746 at the request of another European female monarch, Queen Lovisa Ulrika of Sweden.<sup>16</sup> Chardin represents a woman sitting in an overstuffed chair, pausing from reading a book that rests in her lap. The painting displays a moment of reflection, a double distraction from the recently abandoned concentration of reading and from the household tasks represented by the spinning wheel and di

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<sup>16</sup> For which see Pierre ROSENBERG, *Chardin 1699-1779*, Cleveland 1979, pp. 279-281. For Chardin's interaction with Lovisa Ulrika, see Paula Rea RADISICH, *Lovisa Ulrike of Sweden, Chardin, and Enlightened Despotism*, in: Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam (ed.), *Women, Art, and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Aldershot 2003, pp. 46-63.





**Figure 5:** Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Les amusements de la vie privée*, 1745-1746.  
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staff behind her. This is therefore a woman once engaged in productive activities – spinning and reading – who is now lost in reverie. The exact inflection Chardin gives this subject remains deliciously unclear. Typically for his art, narrativity and

painterly ambiguities encourage a sense of semantic open-endedness and mystery. Whether we are to see lady's idling as imprudent sloth and therefore detrimental to the social order, or as a right of the bourgeois who had earned it through mercantilist labors, the artist leaves unanswered. The critic La Font de Saint-Yenne referred to it in his *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France* as "...a piece which represents a pleasant-looking idler in the form of a woman carelessly and stylishly dressed", a description that emphasizes the sitter's lack of activity, her boredom, and her wealth.<sup>17</sup> The painting engages at the very least the concepts of leisure and the life of privacy that wealth enables. Chardin's painting therefore encourages reflection on the relationship between femininity, class, and the bourgeois interior, and it seems noteworthy that two otherwise unconnected monarchical women, Lovisa Ulrika and Maria Christine, found this subject compelling.

Like Chardin's painting, Maria Christine's self-portrait is a statement on bourgeois femininity, but ultimately her painting recasts it in line with her elite context. Whereas Chardin shows needlework set aside, Maria Christine represents herself at work. Chardin represents idleness, while Maria Christine emphasizes diligence and industry. Chardin's image of leisure is framed through merchant class experience; although the eighteenth-century moneyed industrial classes gained their social status through commerce, Chardin displays this lifestyle as one free of work. Maria Christine in contrast represents the apparent paradox of aristocratic work. Her class maintained their status through legacy and history and was by definition exempted from labor, but Maria Christine transforms avoidance into an illusionary fiction of productivity. Both paintings illustrate transgressions: Chardin's shows the merchant wealthy adopting aristocratic leisure, while Maria Christine's imagines an aristocratic woman becoming a worker. Chardin explores idleness as a female quality; Maria Christine concentrates on linking femininity with industry. The same subject is therefore put to polarized purposes in two paintings that rely upon the same set of discursive signposts for quite different ends.

At this point one might ask why an amateur artist like Maria Christine does not represent herself in the act of painting, which is after all the art she practices and the labor that makes this image possible at all. Choosing spinning positions Maria Christine at a remove from the notion of "woman artist" that would have been more accurate, but that would have echoed closely with the portrait type of the "accomplished woman" promoted in official imagery, as we have seen in Meytens's portrait. Her paintings steadfastly avoid such associations, bypassing them in favor of a collective female identity applicable to a larger segment of the population and associated with bourgeois industry, not noble idleness. Spinning, therefore, enables a kind of democratization even as it alludes to its sitters' exceptional status. She imagines that spinning could translate the bourgeois experience

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in P. ROSENBERG, o. c. in note 16, p. 280.

of family life increasingly recognized as “natural” into something applicable to all women, even those of high birth.

Yet although the painting represents Maria Christine at the spinning wheel, it somehow still emphasizes that she is a painter, a point that is clear from the many works of art depicted on the walls of the cabinet in which she sits. These paintings-within-the painting signal her manual productivity even as they remove it from the compositional center and iconographical scheme. In them one finds various subjects reminiscent of Dutch and French origin, but once again they are not exact copies of works, but modified translations that are in themselves new works of art. Among the scenes chosen are two portraits – one of a man, the other of a woman – whose dress and poses suggest bourgeois sitters. Two scenes derive clearly from the French *fête galante* tradition; these frame Maria Christine’s head and therefore associate particularly closely with her. One shows a woman lifting the hem of her skirt and holding her hand to her face as she walks away from two seated female friends; the second shows a male figure walking away from a woman seated at the base of a herm sculpture next to a basket of apples. These scenes represent the kinds of elite amorous interactions common to paintings by Watteau and Boucher. By including them here Maria Christine positions herself as both an elite consumer of fashionable art, as someone familiar with their lifestyle, and also as their maker.

Further possibilities emerge in the other paintings included, with those at the image’s top edge perhaps the most unusual. Two scenes depict male figures, one shown with a jumping dog, while the other represents an older bearded man, seated and holding a pewter beer stein. Between them is the largest painting of the group; it represents a scene of schooling, with a crowd of children reading, writing, and holding books and sheets of paper. A man stands behind a desk and gestures to an open book into which a group of children look. That this is a school for children of modest means is conveyed through the painting’s subdued, dark palette and its subjects’ humble dress. That education seems foregrounded here recalls that art and education were, for a Habsburg noblewoman, closely intertwined. Maria Christine’s inclusion of an educational theme here suggests not only its affect on her process of self-understanding, but also her freedom to redefine education to a new intent and purpose, namely the exploration of her recalculated purpose as a monarchical woman.

Perhaps looking for a single underlying theme in these choices leads down a false path, since their individual subjects are diverse enough to hinder obvious summarization. But they bind together a series of concepts pertaining to childhood, leisure, social comportment, education, and romance, all associated pictorially with Maria Christine in the image’s foreground. In their subjects one finds artful equivalencies to her interests, fragmentary reflections of an identity otherwise not depictable within established noble culture. There is intellect embedded in them, since to be able to make different kinds of art requires manifold knowledge and experience. And all are new compositions that could in themselves stand as individual paintings, but Maria Christine paints them two illusionistic degrees away

from reality. They are not just pictures, but pictures of art. It could be that her creativity was such that although it had been acknowledged, it had somehow not been viewed as truly creative and more as copying or amusement, a criticism commonly leveled against talented eighteenth-century women artists. By insisting that these scenes are art, and in fact representing them as art around her likeness, Maria Christine draws attention to their fictive nature and to her creative skills. There also seems to be a distinction between the more “authentic” scenes along the painting’s top and those that celebrate elite artificiality, namely the Boucher- and Watteau-like scenes flanking Maria Christine’s face, a dichotomy that itself cut across the painting and is likewise exemplary of Maria Christine’s crossing of elite and bourgeois boundaries. Ironically, a bourgeois setting was precisely what enabled this representation of the “true” noblewoman, or put differently, representing an aristocratic woman was possible only through imagining the self outside of aristocratic settings. The transformational character of her elite social position enabled that knowledge even as it obviated it.

In conclusion, I would encourage us not to characterize Maria Christine’s paintings as another version of Marie-Antoinette playing milkmaid, as insensitive upper-class egotism. My argument has suggested that they are more than that. They position Maria Christine and her family within discursive spaces that in the eighteenth century were increasingly disrupted and poorly differentiated due to changing political and historical conditions that impacted all families. Maria Christine’s unusually flexible aristocratic status perhaps made her more aware of those changes than many of her peers. In her paintings she rearranges the Rousseauian conception of modest womanhood to construct an aristocratic female ideal. There is a contradiction inherent in them, namely in that it was precisely her elite upbringing that enabled Maria Christine the education, dexterity, and agency to imagine social transformations beyond monarchy. These images demonstrate how art – both as practice and as representation – could embolden a noblewoman to imagine a self somewhere outside of common frameworks and established social norms for her class. And in them, I would like to think, Maria Christine began to imagine a new kind of court art, a future visual encyclopedia that would begin to capture the complexity and humanity of those who ruled.