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## MEETING THE NEEDS OF MANUFACTURERS: THE EDUCATION OF SILK DESIGNERS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY LYONS<sup>1</sup>

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Theories about the best education for craftsmen and designers preoccupied a number of French thinkers during the Enlightenment: they included several notable inhabitants of Lyons, a city which depended for its reputation on the manufacturing of patterned silks. After several years of debate, the initiatives of these individuals led, in 1756, to the founding of a school of drawing (*école gratuite de dessin*), which received Royal approval the following year, and direct central government funding from 1780. The founders and administrators of the school claimed that they were targeting future silk designers to whom they offered tuition in drawing, free of charge, under the direction of eminent artists. Seen as an alternative to apprenticeship with a Lyonnais or Parisian flower-painter, or apprenticeship at the Gobelins tapestry works in Paris, this education allegedly provided a service that allowed Lyons independence from the capital and also assured poorer students of the possibility of following a career in silk design. Whilst historians of the school of drawing in Lyons have charted its establishment, related its philosophy and curriculum to similar institutions in other French cities, and noted the emergence of a fine school of flower-painters in early 19th century Lyons (the product of its liberal education), there seems to be little attention devoted to the irksome question of whether the plans for the school suited local manufacturers and catered for their needs in the second half of the 18th century.<sup>2</sup> It is the aim of this essay to fill this gap in current histories, by evaluating to what extent the school of drawing responded to and represented the requirements of manufacturers of patterned silks - those manufacturers who relied on design for the success of their products and therefore employed designers in one capacity or another.<sup>3</sup>

As the documentary evidence for such an evaluation is fragmentary, I will firstly establish the manufacturing context for Lyons in the period during which early discussions about and observations on a school of drawing flourished - towards the end of the 1740s up until the 1760s.<sup>4</sup> The formulation of this context involves the study of the nature of Lyonnais textiles, the evolution of their design, and the training that existed prior to the setting up of the school. Each of these areas offers some insight into the likely needs of manufacturers, without recourse to the views expressed directly by those manufacturers in their petitions. The second section of the essay deals with the views expressed directly by a group of Lyonnais manufacturers, delineating what they thought constituted an ideal education for their future employees and partners. Finally, against the backdrop of these ideals, the third section will briefly present the school as it took shape after 1756 through its accommodation and equipment, curriculum and staff, and it will assess the relationship between manufacturers' needs and demands, and the solution presented by the school.

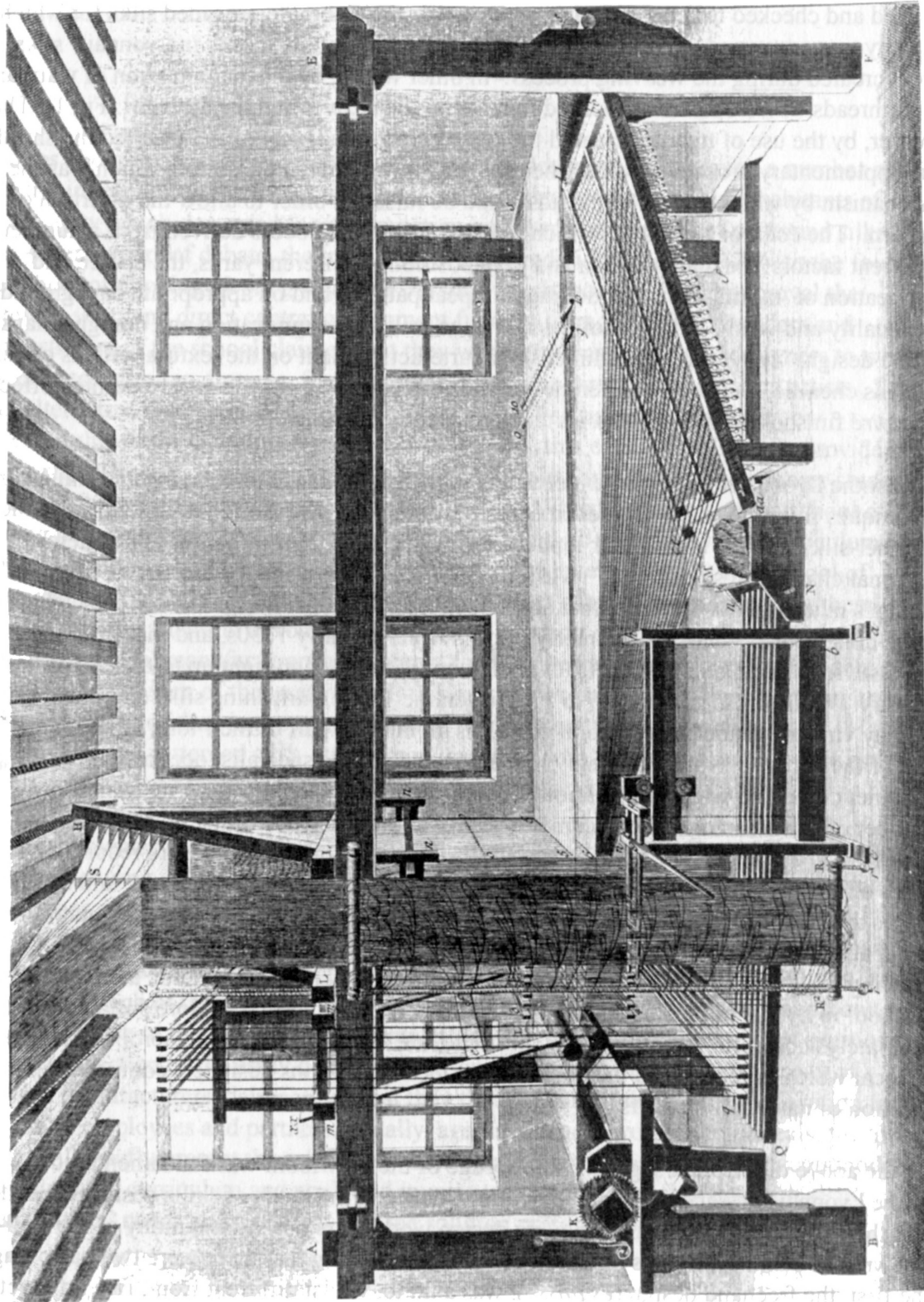
### **Manufacturing context - products, evolution of design, and existing training**

In the eighteenth century, manufacturers in Lyons produced a range of simple fabrics (plain, striped and checked taffetas and satins), as well as the elaborate brocaded silks for which the city was renowned. Woven on the drawloom, the complex motifs in Lyonnais silks were created during the weaving process - in other words, by the manipulation of warp and weft threads. Two operatives worked in tandem: the weaver and the drawgirl. (Fig.1) The former, by the use of treadles created the basic background weave, and inserted the shuttles of supplementary brocading wefts when the drawboy operated the simple which was the mechanism by which groups of threads could be raised in order to allow the insertion of a pattern. The *éclat* of the fabrics which resulted from this process derived from a number of different factors: the manipulation and juxtaposition of different yarns, the choice and delineation of motifs, their positioning in repeat patterns and on appropriate backgrounds, the quality and weave structure of the fabric, as well as the innovation and draughtsmanship of the design. They were three dimensional artefacts, reliant on the textural effects of yarns such as chenille, *cordonnet*, different qualities of silver and gold, on warp-painted effects, or *moiré* finishes, as well as on a variety of carefully draughted motifs.

Whilst the Lyonnais developed expertise in an increasing range of weaving and finishing techniques from the end of the seventeenth onwards, borrowing and imitating the products of other silk-weaving areas, their reputation lay largely in their initiation of a system of seasonal changes in silk design.<sup>5</sup> Various documents reveal that by the 1670s, seasonal changes in design was in place, that abstract two-dimensional designs were replaced by three dimensional, realistic, 'painterly' motifs from the early 1730s, and that from the 1740s the taste for naturalistic flowers triumphed, dominating design right up to the end of the century. While dress silks began to simplify in the 1760s, furnishing silks continued to display virtuoso renderings of floral motifs as an integral part of their long repeats until the end of the century. Not surprisingly, the emergence of the specialist occupation of silk designer coincided with the initiation of this system of seasonal change in design - by 1700 a number of private and public documents testify to the existence of the trade of designer (*dessinateur* or *dessineur*), by the early 1730s the names of designers were recorded beside those of manufacturers in the orders for silks made for the Royal Household, and by the late 1750s the status of freelance designers was second to that of merchants in the hierarchy of occupations within the industry.<sup>6</sup> Discussions about the setting up of a school of drawing/design fit within this general scenario. Initially, in 1676 Letters Patent established a school in Lyons, but by the early 18th century it had disappeared. More sustained and ultimately successful initiatives took off in the late 1740s, as the abbé Lacroix and a group of local worthies recognised the need to train locally in Lyons designers competent in the creation of naturalistic motifs.

As the above description suggests, knowledge of the drawloom was fundamental to the work of the Lyonnais designers and manufacturers, defining the kinds of skills designers needed, and the work they produced. Surviving design work bears out the testimony of the well-known mid-century treatises on designers' work, revealing that there were two basic stages: the first, the freehand design (*esquisse*), was akin to, whilst different from, fine art practice,

Figure 1: Velvet drawloom, D. Diderot & J. le Rond d'Alembert, *Recueil de planches sur les sciences, les arts libéraux, et les arts mécaniques, avec leur explication* (Paris, 1772), vol. 11, pl.XCI.



the second stage, the point paper plan (*mise-en-carte*), was a technical drawing specific to woven design.<sup>7</sup> (Fig.2) All freehand designs reveal skilful handling of water colours or coloured chalks. They show a conjunction of motifs which would form the pattern on a silk, their intended size, their proposed colours and the pattern repeat. In some cases they were annotated in order to make clear the types of thread to be used, the fabric construction, the precise range of colours, including that of the ground. In so doing they underline the difference between the fine artist's and the silk designer's trade. The designer had to have an understanding of the fabrics to which the drawings applied, as they gave the manufacturer his impression of what a proposed textile might look like. If a design were selected for manufacture, the designer then transferred his drawing on to point paper - the stage which explained exactly how to translate the design on to the loom. Painting point papers was a different skill from freehand design. The original design had to be magnified four to six times on to point paper, the shades of the same colour clearly differentiated from each other, and the actual grouping of the threads on the loom denoted so that the lashes could be tied on the simple. The counts of threads at the bottom of the sheet of point paper explained the sett of the weave and the back of the point paper detailed the colour and yarn coding. According to Diderot's *Encyclopédie* in 1765, as many as 50 sheets of point paper could be needed to produce one complete design.<sup>8</sup>

Given that these requirements had existed since silk design had become a serious part of Lyonnais manufacturing, it is not surprising to discover that a perfectly adequate training for designers existed prior to (and continued after) the founding of the school of drawing in 1756. Most designers combined the best of two worlds, following at least part of a weaving apprenticeship whilst undertaking private classes in drawing and painting. There already existed, however, by the 1750s, an awareness in Lyons that the fresh and innovative floral representation had emerged from the work of several designers who had trained in Paris, rather than in Lyons.<sup>9</sup> These men had undertaken apprenticeships either as decorative painters in Parisian workshops or as pupils in the drawing tuition offered at the tapestry works at the Gobelins.<sup>10</sup> In both types of training in Paris, designers would have learned to render flowers as near to nature as possible, without the impediment of the drawloom.

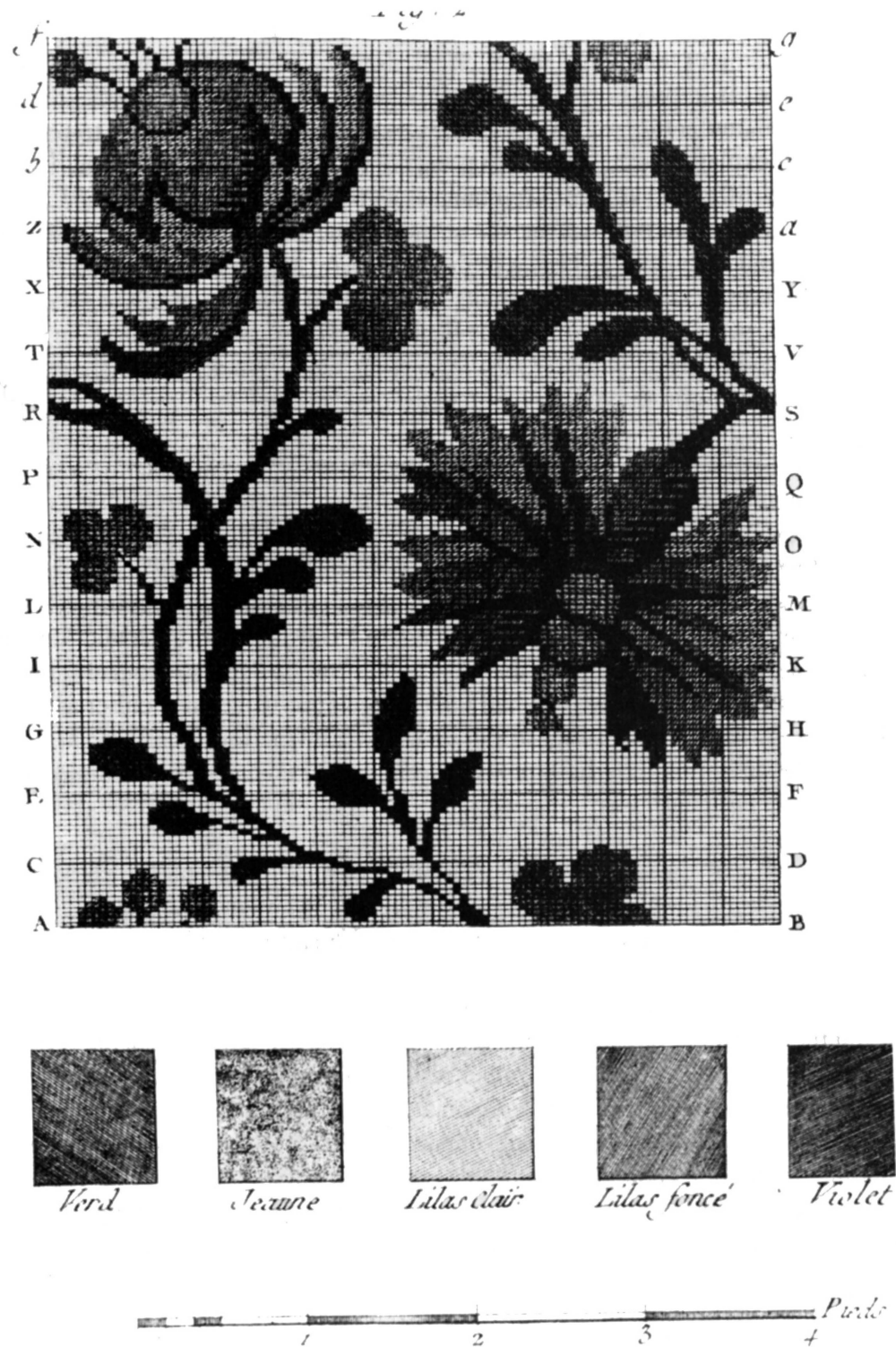
Thus, in Lyons, by the late 1740s, there already existed a demand for trained designers, an awareness that much innovation had recently come from Paris, and the notion that a school of drawing might improve Lyonnais provision of drawing skills.

### **Manufacturers' views of their own needs**

During the course of the eighteenth century, despite their stake in encouraging good design, manufacturers seem to have been rather reticent about discussing their thoughts on the most appropriate training for their future associates in design, and it was only in response to a plan put forward by other individuals outside manufacturing that some twenty designer manufacturers (*fabriquants dessinateurs*) voiced their concerns.<sup>11</sup> The plan against which they reacted was for a school based on academic models, and they countered this plan with proposals of their own that echoed rather than altered the existing system of locally run apprenticeships. The twenty designer manufacturers who spoke out evidently 'formed



Figure 2: Engraving of a *mise-en-carte*, D. Diderot & J. le Rond d'Alembert, *Recueil de planches sur les sciences, les arts libéraux, et les arts mécaniques, avec leur explication* (Paris, 1772), vol. 11, pl. LXII.



together the main firms in the Lyons manufactures'.<sup>12</sup> Based on their own practical experience, the pioneering work of Courtois, the Lyonnais who had introduced three dimensional flowers into design, and on the authoritative comments of Jean-Baptiste-Edmé Douet, a Parisian flower-painter who had trained many designers, they made the point that a perfectly adequate system already existed and formalised it in their suggestions for a different kind of school.

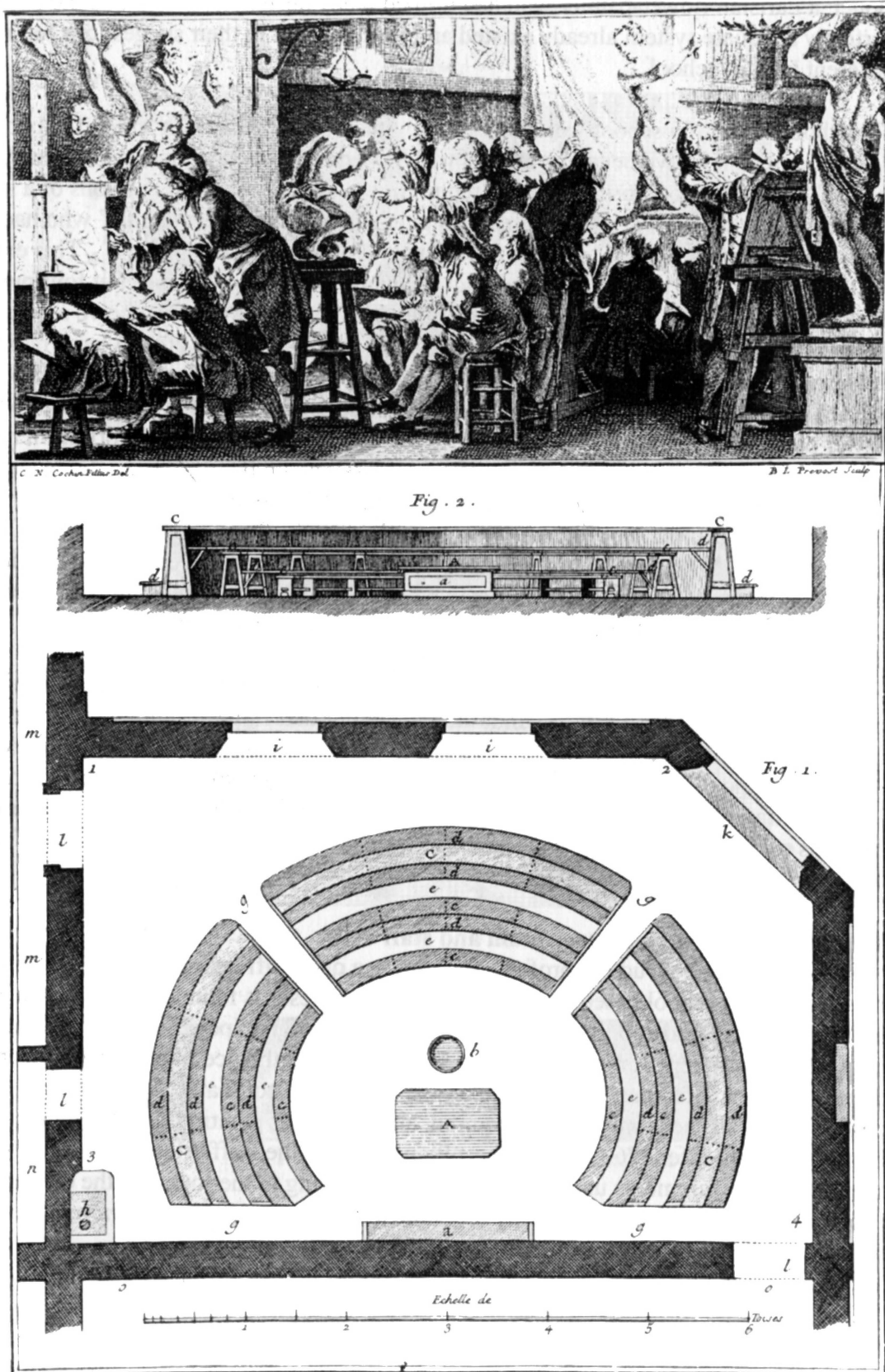
They thought that if a school were to be set up, 'the object of its work should only be for flowers, since they have been and always will be necessary and indispensable ornaments for fabrics'.<sup>13</sup> For that purpose, what was required was the appointment in Lyons of a skilled specialist in flowers (*fleuriste*), 'a great designer rather than a great painter' who had some knowledge of fabric design 'in order to lead young people into designing'.<sup>14</sup> This expert would run an establishment that would not be public (ie non fee-paying) but four pupils would be able to follow courses free of charge, and the teacher would receive a pension from the city, and lodgings where he had a garden so that he could grow a large number of flowers and plants of his choice to provide beautiful shapes. This garden would also be open to practising designers, and some of the best designers would give guidance to the flower painter in the course of his work. Thus, pupils would be able to work from nature and would derive benefit from contact with professionals in their future trade. A period of two years was deemed adequate for an initial training. In conclusion, the designer manufacturers recommended that Douet be considered for this position, because of his nine years of service to the industry, during which time he had provided designs for the industry and taught many pupils 'un contour gracieux'.<sup>15</sup> They hoped to keep him permanently in Lyons - in fact, they thought that it might be dangerous to let him go.

Whilst this suggestion had not been drawn up with due attention to the practicalities of creating such an institution, it did underline the belief that flower painting was a skill distinct from figure drawing and more suited to the situation in Lyons.<sup>16</sup> The Intendant in Paris called upon Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Director of the Beauvais tapestry manufactory, to act as arbitrator on the conflicting proposals. He supported the designer manufacturers, on the basis of the relevance of their plan to silk designers and also on the grounds of its low cost.

### **The school, its changing curriculum and staff base**

Nonetheless, despite Oudry's professional views, a quite different school opened on 10th January 1757, a school based on the academic principles. Its founders and subsequent administrators included only one manufacturer with design experience. Initially, neither the physical environment nor the curriculum bore any resemblance to those recommended by the designer manufacturers - in particular, the garden did not feature in the initial description of the accommodation required, and no flower painting figured in the curriculum until after 1760 when Robert Pignon joined the staff briefly. The descriptions of the school's requirements underline this fact. According to the founders the equipment and accommodation needed were exactly the same as those depicted in the *Encyclopaedia* (Fig.3):

Figure 3: School of drawing (Ecole de dessin), Diderot et d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers. Recueil de Planches*, Paris, tome 3, 1763, 'Dessin', pl.I.





The room for gatherings, and the lodgings of the teacher will be easy to find; the model will soon be chosen, by buying a stove, a big lamp, some plaster casts that can be brought from Paris, and by building steps in the form of an amphitheatre. This academy will be furnished like all others.<sup>17</sup>

Twenty years later, however, the school needed more space (presumably a sign of its popularity and success). There was still no request for a garden, although by that time flower drawing was taught and some teaching tools were evident in the request for 'a room for storing the bas reliefs, casts, sculptures, 'models of flowers and ornament.'<sup>18</sup>

Implicit in the provision of tools and a teacher for flower drawing some three years after the founding of the school is the place of this activity in the plans of the school. No pupil was to aspire to drawing flowers or ornaments until he had mastered drawing the human figure, firstly from engravings, then from plaster casts, and finally from life. In other words, prospective silk designers had to follow three years of tuition before they could take up the kind of drawing necessary for their trade, and recommended by the designer manufacturers. On a brighter note, those flower painters who taught part-time at the school after 1760, Robert Pignon and Jean Gonichon, did have some experience of designing for silks. In addition, Gonichon did not run his classes in the main school premises, but chose to work from his home in the quai St Clair, one of the new streets in Lyons, that offered views of the river and of the natural life on the river bank.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, given that the school of drawing was established in Lyons with prospective silk designers and the good of the manufactures in mind, its founders seem to have paid little attention to the needs and requests of designer manufacturers, and rather more to the artistic aspirations of the city's worthies. Whilst flower drawing was on offer at the school from 1760, there is no reference to the technical needs of point paper design, and circumstantial evidence suggests that these skills were still taught in-house by the manufacturers.<sup>19</sup> Only one silk designer of note emerged from the 18th century school (Antoine Berjon), but a school of flower painting took off at the beginning of the 19th century. This emphasis on fine art tuition and its outcome may well be evidence that the fears of the designer manufacturers were not unfounded when they suggested that an academic training would encourage would-be designers to aspire to the *beaux-arts*. Nonetheless, even if from the point of view of manufacturers there were certain lacunae in the school's curriculum, it probably still fulfilled a very valuable function as it was the first institution in the city to provide free education in drawing for those of modest means. It no doubt supplied some reasonably competent draughtsmen to the silk industry - although these individuals have proved impossible to trace.

It is perhaps important to note that even in the eighteenth century, the creation of a school of drawing appropriate to the needs of the silk manufactures was a far from uncontentious affair, one deeply embroiled in local politics, an echo of conflict experienced at a later date

when reforms in design education were proposed.<sup>20</sup> The different proponents of different types of school were deeply divided in their views, wishing on one hand to release Lyons from dependence on the liberal education of Paris, but on the other seeking the advice of Parisian experts - advice that they then rejected. At the end of the day, the liberal and therefore prestigious form of education espoused, relied on the influence of a few city worthies, who were not actually involved in the day to day running of silk manufacturing firms.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper represents a small element of the book I am currently preparing on silk design and designers in 18th century Lyons. It derives from work initiated during research for my PhD, 'Designers in the Lyons Silk Industry, 1712-1787', Brighton Polytechnic, 1988, Chapter 4. A slightly different approach has been utilised in my contribution to *Disentangling Textiles*, eds. C. Boydell & M. Schoeser, forthcoming Middlesex University Press.

<sup>2</sup> R. Benhamou, *Public and private art education in France 1648-1793, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, Offprint no.308, The Voltaire Foundation, 1993; M.F. Perez, 'Soufflot et la création de l'école de dessin' in *Soufflot et l'Architecture des Lumières*, CNRS, 1980, pp.109-113..

<sup>3</sup> Freelance, as salaried employees, or as business partners.

<sup>4</sup> Letters Patent were granted for the founding of a school in 1676, but no trace of this establishment has survived. To all intents and purposes, the first serious initiatives that bore fruit resulted from the abbé Lacroix's efforts on his return from the Grand Tour after 1748.

<sup>5</sup> P.K. Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks*, Faber and Faber, 1965; L.E. Miller, 'Designers in the Lyons Silk Industry'; C. Poni, 'Fashion as flexible production: the strategies of the Lyons silk merchants in the eighteenth century' in *World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Civilisation*, eds. C. Sabel & J. Zeitlin, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp.37-74.

<sup>6</sup> J. Coural & C. Gastinel-Coural, 'La Fabrique lyonnaise au XVIII siècle. La commande royale de 1730', *Revue de l'Art*, 1983, no.62, pp.49-63; Archives Municipales de Lyon (hereafter AML) CC178 *Rolle de capitation*, 1758-9.

<sup>7</sup> N. Joubert de l'Hiberderie, *Le dessinateur pour les étoffes d'or, d'argent et de soie*, Paris, 1765; J. Paulet, *L'art du fabricant des étoffes de soie*, seconde partie, septième section, chapitre III, 'Des Dessins et du papier', Paris, 1789, pp.884-903.

<sup>8</sup> D. Diderot, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, Paris, Tome 15, 1765, 'Soie', p.286.

<sup>9</sup> See J-C. Dutillieu, *Livre de raison* (ed. Breghot de Lut), Lyons, 1886, pp.24, 40, 46. For an analysis of Dutillieu's views, see L.E. Miller, 'Manufactures and the Man: A Reassessment of the Place of Jacques-Charles Dutillieu in the Silk Industry of Eighteenth-Century Lyon', *Textile History*, 29 (1), 1998, pp.19-40. The observations of the designer manufacturers also drew attention to the input of Douet, the Parisian, although in every other way they were promoting the notion that native Lyonnais had been important in the development of silk

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design in Lyons. AML GG157, *Observations sur le memoire qui veut prouver que l'etablissement d'une academie publique de figure dans Lyon seroit util et avantageux a la ville servant de reponse a la lettre de M. de Gournay Intendant du Commerce en datte du vingt cinq septembre dernier*, 30.03.1752. The designers or flower-painters who were considered good models often came from Paris, for example, Jean Revel (1684-1751) and Jean-Baptiste-Edme-Douet. Evidence also comes through of the arrival in Lyons in the early 1740s of other Parisian trained men, such as Jean-César Guichot (1719-85) and Pierre-Michel Huilliot (1712-1750). Even in the 1760s, Joubert was mentioning the input of Paris in his own training. N. Joubert de l'Hiberderie, *Le dessinateur pour les étoffes d'or, d'argent et de soie*, Paris, 1765, p.xix.

<sup>10</sup> A. Perneti, *Lyon et les lyonnais dignes de mémoire*, Lyon, 1757. See also L.E. Miller, 'Manufactures...'.  
<sup>11</sup> Although it should be noted that in a less formal context the designer manufacturer, Jacques-Charles Dutilleul voiced his views (Miller, op.cit), in his published treatise on silk design, Joubert de l'Hiberderie preferred a mixed training, and J. Paulet remarked on the existence of a school in Lyons. (*L'art du fabriquant...*)

<sup>12</sup> AML GG157 *Observations...*  
<sup>13</sup> Ibid., f.10.  
<sup>14</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid., f.12.  
<sup>16</sup> Ibid., f.2.

<sup>17</sup> AML GG157, no.1230, *Mémoire sur la nécessité de l'établissement d'une école publique de dessein dans Lyon*, 28.12.1751, ff.13-14.  
<sup>18</sup> AN F12 1440, no.5508 *Demande par les administrateurs de l'école gratuite de dessin*, 1780.  
<sup>19</sup> Joubert, op.cit.

<sup>20</sup> See Florence Charpigny's contribution to the present volume.