

The Expression of the Passions: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's "Conference sur l'expression generale et particuliere"

By Dr. Jennifer Montagu

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In 1688, Charles Le Brun, a French academician, delivered a lecture on expression that was so popular it was published in sixty-three separate editions and influenced all on of the subject throughout Europe for over a century. This book reconstructs and translates the text of the lecture, explores the context in which it was conceived, delivered, received, and finally rejected, and reproduces the images that accompanied the lecture. Jennifer Montagu shows that Le Brun's theory of expression covered more than just the facial expression of the passions. It was, in fact, based on the psycho-physiological theories of Descartes and included both a recognition of the expressive potential of colour and landscape setting and also a highly sophisticated physiognomic system. Montagu examines Le Brun's detailed instructions on how to evoke expression in the light of modern psychological investigations of our ability to recognize facial expressions and the particular problems posed by static images of what is essentially, a movement of the muscles. She compares Le Brun's lecture to earlier writings on expression, from Socrates through Igonardo, and to theories of expression elaborated for other arts, such as rhetoric, music, drama, and the dance. She also explores the popularity of the lecture until the 19th century, when anatomists and naturalists began to look anew at the problem of expression. Appendices examine such questions as the exact date of the lecture and list all known editions.

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