

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Encyclopedie

Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

The full title of our text is *Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Arts, des Sciences et des Metiers*. and the dates of composition, of this multi authored work, were 1745-1772. In fact the subsequent history of the work's amendments, illustrative appendices, and additional editions kept the text as a whole in the center of French cultural life for many decades. The work fell squarely into the heart of the French enlightenment. What does that mean? In historical terms, it means that as we peruse the Encyclopedia we are mentally living in a time of intense transition, when the pomp and strictures of monarchy were beginning to yield their power to dictate trends and intellectual directions in society. It was a time-pocket full of extraordinary texts and discoveries--Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, which undertook large scale surveys of the main areas of the natural world, (1749), Condillac's *Treatise on sensations* (1761), a pioneering opening of the relations between intellect and the senses; or D'Holbach's *Systeme de la Nature*, which aspires to reconcile materialism with new directions in evolutionary biology. Meanwhile, in the sciences, we were being introduced to a gamut of innovations, from Rousseau's fresh directions in pedagogy to the internal combustion touring car. The kinds of intellectual self-gathering and self-generating, that made of the European 18th century such a colossal step forward for the sciences in general, naturally proliferated out into new worlds.

Esthetician, novelist, and literary wit, Diderot was himself leading figure in the freeing of thought which was to become his century. By the end of that century, we find ourselves looking into the face of the full blown Romantic movement. It is no wonder that a vast text like the Encyclopedia came into being as a reply *led Diderot to the creation* such an encyclopedic undertaking? to a century on fire with new knowledge that had appeared, attracting. The answer is that, already in 1728, in London. Ephraim Chambers' *Encyclopedia* much attention as a prototype for its wide and up to date coverage of contemporary affairs. To an age appropriate organ of self-presentation was welcome. Any conscious of its own progress, the advent of an Diderot, number of prominent French intellectuals gathered around the prospect of a French Chambers and d'Alembert were at their head. By assuming that position, the two men advanced themselves to wide public attention. The editorial role undertaken by Diderot in particular was arduous and unrelenting, and manager and "Ad man" for what was underway to becoming a seriously enlarged by the role of general heavy job of promotion. (Ad man is of course a facetious expression for Diderot's high level effort to widen the reading and broaden the intellectual horizons of a new middle class.) The success of the project can be judged by the widespread commercial as well as academic success of the encyclopedia. The cultural setting of the Encyclopedie? The same love of intellectual urbane and instructive conversation, which animated social and intellectual discourse in the French Renaissance, spilled vividly over into the thinkers throughout a collective project like the Encyclopedie. Ladies of distinction, fashion and intellect were culture centers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in France. The formation of national academies, like the Academie francaise, was a hallmark of the French growth in modernity. The best writing in the Encyclopedie represented the best writing going on in the entire culture. One can see a classic sample in Diderot's long entry on 'genius,' 'genie,' a term central to European thinking of the 18th century. ('Rameau's Nephew' of Diderot, is a living portrait drawn by Diderot, capturing the volatile brilliant insights of an eighteenth century child of nature, a brilliant hippy.) The nephew is the genius type, unusual fresh pre model of the Werther type, who will be characterized by unusual fresh sensitivities--great susceptibility to women--and intelligibility far beyond what appearances would seem to indicate. The 'genius' of Diderot's Encyclopedie entry is precisely of a lead-in to the flamboyant Byronic figure, who will later capture the attention of post Napoleonic Europe. The genius of this type is replicated in another figure who plays fruitfully into Diderot's mythography. We think, here, of Diderot's cunning essay, 'Le Paradox sur le comedien.' 'The paradox of the actor.' The actor is of course the prototype of the personality who has no personality, but who assumes the diverse and multiple roles of the characters he enacts. The paradox is that the brilliant actor emerges restored and whole from his adventures in otherness. This paradox, of

wholeness in dispersion, is another way in which Diderot is able to substantiate his central definition of the genius.