Introduction

Collection, Recollection, Revolution

In 1867 the Petit Trianon at Versailles played host to a display of the personal possessions of Marie-Antoinette. The show was organised as part of the Universal Exhibition but also expressed Empress Eugénie’s cult for the martyred queen.\(^1\) The commission charged with tracking down items that had once belonged to the royal family was overwhelmed by the hundreds of donations that came flooding in ‘as if by magic from palaces and houses, from shops and cottages’ all over France. Fine art appeared alongside a medley of personal, perishable souvenirs: a toy cannon used by the dauphin; a book of fabric samples from the queen’s dresses; an ivory cane used by Louis XVI during his imprisonment; a snuffbox snatched from the murdered body of the duc de Brissac. The committee exclaimed that the peregrinations of these wayward objects could have furnished the plots for ‘the most exciting, most curious, most poignant, most touching, most comic novels of reality’. For the past seven decades, the pomp and trappings of royalty had been hawked on the open road or hidden away in private storerooms. The coronation robes worn by Louis XVI were tracked down in Rouen, where a shocked Gustave Flaubert learned that they had been unwittingly used by a theatre troupe to lend glamour to their proceedings.\(^2\) The finely embroidered bedspread in which the terrified queen had wrapped her son during the assault on the Tuileries eventually came to adorn the closet of a landlady in the Palais-Royal.\(^3\)

The final exhibition united 144 objects with different provenances and chequered trajectories. Eleven were gifts from the empress herself, eager


to offer her subjects a lesson in historical piety. But the majority came from private lenders, whether specialist collectors of eighteenth-century objects, like Léopold Double, or keepers of sentimental heirlooms. A black satin slipper that had been plucked from the Tuileries by an army officer on 10 August 1792 was offered by a family of horse breeders. The secretary for the commission, Mathurin de Lescure, marvelled at the centrifugal forces that had scattered relics from the Bourbons right over France. The spiral of upheaval spanned from the October Days in 1789 to the February Revolution of 1848, encompassing ‘the fall of dynasties, exiles following on from exiles, the necessities of emigration, the vicissitudes in fortunes, the chance auctions which cast to the winds the vestiges of the old regime, ever since the great auction of ’94’. All these factors had precipitated a startling circulation of historic objects, multiplying ‘the owners of these fragments, these portions of royalty, even in the obscurest places’. The cycle of insurrections that punctuated French politics, exacerbated by urban redevelopment and a booming art market, had furnished a diverse mix of collectors with new opportunities for acquiring, and new ways of accessing, pieces of the past.

Reuniting and exhibiting royal objects in Versailles in 1867 was a deliberate negation of the earlier, cataclysmic, process of dispersal. The liquidation sales of 1793 and 1794 formed a black legend for nineteenth-century collectors, appalled by the loss of French masterpieces abroad. In 1870, baron Charles Davillier recalled the desultory scene:

What a lamentable history – we will endeavour to write it one day – is that of artworks during the period of the Terror. How many masterpieces were destroyed by vandalism; how many were sold for a crust of bread! On 10th August, at the time of the sack of the Tuileries, the royal furniture, the clocks, the most precious art objects were hurled out of the windows. The sumptuous furniture of the château of Versailles, publicly put on sale, was at low prices swapped in exchange for assignats, and became the prey of hawkers, scrap-iron merchants and coppersmiths.

4 Other loans included a little marble bust of the queen, a scrapbook of fabric cuttings from her wardrobe, a ring given by Louis XVI to his confessor on the scaffold and a portrait of the Dauphin. A. McQueen, Empress Eugénie and the arts: politics and visual culture in the nineteenth century (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 193; C. Granger, L’Empereur et les arts: la liste civile de Napoléon III (Paris: Ecole des Chartes, 2005), p. 128.
6 Lescure, Les palais, p. 245.
The Versailles sales were symbolic terminus of the old regime, and art lovers deplored and documented these events with equal energy: a poster advertising the auction at the Petit Trianon in August 1793 now hangs in the Wallace Collection a few steps away from the sécretaire by Jean-Henri Riesener sold that day. Despite his animus towards Jacobin politics, exhibition organiser Lescure recognised that the Revolution was not simply traumatic, acting to erase monarchical society, but also generative, multiplying the material traces of this society and permitting its imaginative reconstruction. The cultural cleansing carried out by the Jacobins had furnished scavengers with extraordinary opportunities – so much so that Lescure jested that ‘the principles of 1789 must be dear to anyone who possesses a collection’. A passionate devotee of autographs, Lescure knew well that no sooner had the Bastille fallen in July 1789 than trophy hunters were picking over the site, fishing out charred documents from the fortress’s archives. Simultaneously a critic of 1789 and its indirect beneficiary, Lescure embodied the ambivalence of many nineteenth-century collectors, who idolised the refinement of the old regime and yet who were inescapably children of the Revolution.

The dialectic between political upheaval (revolution), material recuperation (collection) and the development of historical consciousness (recollection) has never been directly addressed, although it was commonplace in nineteenth-century commentary. In 1861 painter and critic Horsin Déon recognised how far the whole nineteenth-century art market was built on a founding act of dispossession:

By ruining families, toppling mansions and châteaux, the excesses of '93 dispersed into our towns and countryside a multitude of artistic treasures, which were like so many springs which for a long time watered and nurtured this business [in antiques]. Minor amateurs, dealers, second-hand vendors, tireless looked for wandering objects; they formed collections of them that they came to sell in Paris, either informally, or in public sale. ... Among these objects, almost always in a bad condition, the knowledgeable investor occasionally made some discoveries which secured his fortune.

Just as explicit was radical journalist, Henri Rochefort, who the following year insisted on the fertility of post-revolutionary conditions. ‘From 1810 to 1825’, he reflected, ‘not a day passed which was not marked by the discovery of some new abandoned or buried masterpiece.’ Thanks to the ‘artistic upheaval triggered by the revolution’, which scattered paintings and precious objects in all directions, individual collectors had been able to construct galleries that were now of an ‘almost inestimable value’. Such quotations, which could be easily multiplied, stage but also simplify the connections between the French Revolution and historical consciousness, between the Jacobins’ proscription of the past and the private reclamation of its value. Most seriously, they fail to problematise the figure of the collector, whose opportunities and agenda were transformed in the post-revolutionary period. In this new material context, what should be collected, how it should be acquired and by whom remained intensely controversial. To better understand the triangular relationship between collecting, historical consciousness and the revolutionary politics of heritage, each of these core concepts must be discussed in turn.

Collection

Whether in the formation of state institutions, the construction of national pasts or the origins of academic disciplines, collecting was fundamental to the post-Enlightenment project of ordering the world. In the nineteenth century, collecting was pursued on an unmatched scale and with unprecedented and systematic ambition. Through its encyclopaedic mission, it summoned up and miniaturised distant times and places; in a time of disturbing instability, it offered a dream of fixity and rootedness; it encouraged forms of individual expression and gave physical shape to dreams of communal belonging. Its taxonomies of peoples and things remain among the most influential and contentious legacies of the nineteenth century, just as its physical embodiment in the museum, the archive and the gallery continue to structure and constrain research today. Contemporaries frequently affirmed that the expansion in both public and private collections was a defining characteristic of the era. To tackle the history of collecting in the nineteenth century is, to a

13 For the best general survey of the topic, see A. MacGregor, Curiosity and enlightenment: collectors and collections from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
14 According to the Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle by Larousse: ‘La collection est un des goûts qui sont appelés à caractériser plus spécialement ce siècle’. See E. Bielecki,
considerable extent, to engage with the conceptual grammar of the century itself.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet it remains striking that the potential and significance of collecting as a practice has been far more readily acknowledged by scholars of the early modern period. From the art galleries of princely patrons to the formation of botanic gardens and cabinets of curiosities, collecting has been revealed as a critical aspect of the courts and academies of Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe.\textsuperscript{16} Historians of science have underlined the indispensable role of specimens and artefacts in the production of knowledge, just as they have underscored how the acquisition and circulation of objects created remarkable networks of savants from across the globe.\textsuperscript{17} As Paula Findlen has demonstrated for Italy, the quality of collections was integral to scholarly self-fashioning and patronage networks, and soon the possession of rare or beautiful objects came to heighten the lustre of patricians and aristocrats too.\textsuperscript{18} The very conception of mind, of cognition and of selfhood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was worked out through the analogy with the properties of material things.\textsuperscript{19} Beyond the importance of collecting in forging communal and personal identities, the repositories of objects created in the early modern period exercise an enduring influence on how these eras have been historicised and remembered.\textsuperscript{20}

The excitement of these insights has been only partially extended into the nineteenth century, owing to the impasse of 1789. Drawing on the schema laid down by Foucault, many historians have posited a conjoined political and epistemic break at the close of the eighteenth century, a rupture in which the relations between power, objects and knowledge


\textsuperscript{17} On this expanding topic, see recently P. N. Miller, \textit{Pereisc’s Mediterranean world} (Harvard University Press, 2015); A. Craciun and S. Schaffer (eds.), \textit{The material cultures of Enlightenment arts and sciences} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).


were radically redrawn.\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Naturalia} and \textit{artificialia}, once studied as a continuum, were increasingly sundered into distinct fields of inquiry; at the same time, the task of conserving the cultural assets of the people was increasingly entrusted to the state.\textsuperscript{22} The presumed contrast between corrupt private cabinets and enlightened civic institutions was a central theme in Jacobin discourse: ‘the Museum is not supposed to be a vain assemblage of frivolous luxury objects that serve only to satisfy idle curiosity’, thundered Jacques-Louis David in 1794. ‘What it must be is an imposing school.’\textsuperscript{23} For Krzysztof Pomian, private collecting became decoupled from the operations of power after 1789, and as national institutions increasingly took over the function of educating the public, private collectors retreated into a closed domain of pleasure and idiosyncrasy.\textsuperscript{24} In Dominique Poulot’s formulation, the transformation of the Louvre from palace to museum resulted in the ‘symbolic depersonalisation of collection’: by cleaning artworks of their feudal past, and subjecting them to rational classification, the revolutionaries proclaimed the redundancy of individual proprietors compared to the impersonal history of things. Liberated from their royal, aristocratic or clerical owners, objects could now, with the aid of science, speak for themselves.\textsuperscript{25} Whilst private collecting of course persisted into the nineteenth century, it was necessarily a residual practice, whose agents lacked intellectual credibility or a coherent public agenda.

This chasm in the historiography has been reinforced theoretically through the writings of Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, the nineteenth-century collector was imagined as a rebel against nineteenth-century commodity culture and utilitarianism. He associated the collector with the rise of bourgeois domesticity and sealed his transgressions within the bounds of the domestic interior, ‘the place of the refuge of Art’.\textsuperscript{26} This characterisation was itself derived from nineteenth-century fiction, and literary scholars have perceptively interrogated the characters whose

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\item Cited in A. McClellan, ‘The musée du Louvre as revolutionary metaphor during the Terror’, \textit{The Art Bulletin}, 70.2 (1988), 308.
\end{enumerate}
eccentricities and compulsions became synonymous with collecting as a whole: the pitiable hero of Honoré de Balzac’s Cousin Pons (1847), who tried in vain to protect his private museum from the rapacity of his family; the delusional duo of Bouvard and Pécuchet, whose crackpot morass of odd and ends were brilliantly skewered by Flaubert; or the sybaritic Des Esseintes from A Rebours (1884), depicted by Joris-Karl Huysmans as a degenerate who spurned society to wallow in a domestic oasis of sensations. The cumulative impression left by such authors is that collecting represents a narcissistic and self-referential hobby, unable to communicate anything beyond personal whims or to transcend the four walls of the gentleman’s cabinet.  

27 Literary scholarship has tended to reproduce the pathology of collectors in the nineteenth-century imaginary and interrogated collecting via representations, rather than social practice.  

This is unfortunate when we consider that these novelists happily indulged in the mania they diagnosed and exoticised in others. Balzac was an incurable collector of historical curios, just as Gautier’s novel about collecting, Le Roi Candaule (1844), carried echoes of his prefaces written for sales catalogues.  

29 The finest study of the literature of collecting in France, and perhaps of nineteenth-century collecting in general, Dominique Pety’s monograph on the Goncourts, succeeds precisely because it entwines, rather than segments, the brothers’ textual, visual and material preoccupations.  

30 Since collecting is assumed to be a private affair in the nineteenth century, it follows that it has been equated with individualism. Due to this biographical focus, present-day scholarship has fragmented into a mosaic of distinct and often disconnected case studies.  

31 Most agree that the attempt to find holistic psychological or psychoanalytic explanations for collecting have proved a dead end.  

32 The focus on collectors’ temperament, however, has proved enduring, as it resonates with the


28 See J. Watson, Literature and material culture from Balzac to Proust; the collection and consumption of curiosities (Cambridge University Press, 1999); A. Green, Changing France: literature and material culture in the Second Empire (London: Anthem Press, 2011).  


enormous affective weight that nineteenth-century collectors invested in their possessions. Objects were frequently anthropomorphised as trusted companions within collectors’ autobiographies. The ex libris of playwright and bibliophile Guilbert de Pixérécourt affirmed that a good book was ‘a friend that never changes’ (‘un ami qui ne change jamais’).  

33 The son of medievalist Paulin Paris described his father’s books as ‘friends in the midst of which was spent my childhood’, each volume containing a ‘precious memory, that of the first reading, the charm of initiation, of unexpected finds, of long strides to the discovery of a new world’.  

34 The intimate ties between the owner and his objects account for the poignant, sometimes lachrymose, scenes of separation that came with the end of a life or, just as tragically, the end of a collection.  

35 Describing the distressing dispersal of the cabinet of Eugène Piot, Charles Baudelaire commented that for a true art lover, an ensemble of objects ‘must appear like a family, and a family of one’s choosing’.  

36 Cherished possessions were an extension of personhood, with owners and their collections bound together in what Pascal Griener has described as a single ‘symbolic body’: ‘a transcendent, irrational, but all powerful self, presiding mysteriously over the gathering of objects’.  

37 Ludic versions of this myth imputed an animistic energy, even a mysterious volition, to material culture. A staple plot line in Romantic contes fantastiques, the belief in the secret agency of things was a truism among nineteenth-century collectors, who liked to speculate that they did not just choose their favourite objects so much as their objects chose them.  

38 However, a strictly biographical approach risks naively repeating collectors’ own sentimental narratives, rather than interrogating them critically; it prevents recognising the commonalities between cohorts of collectors, or the contextual constraints upon their activities; and it fails to consider collecting strategies that transcended the individual (for instance, corporate collecting, or dynastic collecting across generations of the same family). The purely biographical approach prioritises the

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33 P. Lacroix, ‘Guilbert de Pixérécourt’, Le bibliophile français, 2 (1868), vol. IV, 205.  
35 These farewells replicated the description given in the memoirs of comte Loménie de Brienne of the dying cardinal Mazarin revisiting his artworks for the last time, muttering, ‘Il faut donc quitter tout cela!’  
intentions of the creator of a collection at the expense of subsidiary actors (such as dealers, critics, advisers and competitors), as well as its social functions. In a remarkable study of collecting in nineteenth-century Spain, Oscar Vázquez has insisted that the visibility of the collector as an autonomous subject was inseparable from the proliferation of new legal instruments, bureaucratic documents and institutional spaces within the liberal state. In this anti-subjectivist reading, the individualism of the collector was generated by structural factors. In common with other accounts indebted to Pierre Bourdieu, Vázquez understands art primarily as a tool of legitimation. Pushed to extremes, this ahistorical presumption can flatten out the differences between types of collecting and struggle to explain why certain kinds of objects conferred social prestige at specific moments in time. Nonetheless, Vasquez’s view is an important corrective and calls for us to ask what social and cultural work collections performed for their owners and wider audiences. Far from hidden assets, the collectors’ ‘refuge’ was regularly breached by tourists and photographers, curators and connoisseurs, painters and politicians. The societal significance of individual collections is thrown into relief by reconstructing the political, moral and aesthetic environment in which they were embedded. Sven Kuhrau’s ‘social topography’ of collectors in Wilhelmine Berlin exemplifies the explanatory potential of uncovering such metropolitan networks.

This book will contest the reigning assumption that the French Revolution spelled the eclipse of the private collecting and evacuated it of scholarly or national significance. It will explore instead an alternative periodisation, one that views the Revolution as opening an era in which collecting was reimagined, problematised, mobilised and contested until the end of the nineteenth century. Doing so calls for reuniting the ‘poetics’ of collecting with a study of it as a material practice, testing the mythic personality of the collector against market conditions, political regimes, institutional formations and the evidence from object-based criticism. Only in this way can the politics of post-revolutionary

collecting be reinstated, revealing how the appropriation, exhibition, interpretation and transmission of material culture permitted a clutch of private individuals to make a decisive intervention in French national life. By stressing the public implications of private collecting, this study suggests not only that collecting was differentiated from other (gendered) acts of consumption but that it was embraced as a kind of high-minded cultural work, with important claims upon France’s past and its posterity. Far from being privatised actors adrift in the nineteenth century, collectors were in the front line of ideological struggles over the shaping of collective memory, the administration of the national heritage, the reform of canons of taste, the morality of the market and public access to, and ownership of, ‘symbolic goods’. All these interventions stemmed directly from the close link between collecting and the dissemination of historical consciousness. To that extent, the modernity of this seemingly outmoded practice was directly correlated to its task of apprehending and re-ordering the effluvia of the past.

**Recollection**

The age of revolutions, it has been argued, heralded a new conception of historical time, disrupting and reframing the relationships between past, present and future. Put crudely, the past was displaced and exoticised, the future yawned open as an unlimited ‘horizon of expectation’ and an intense consciousness of the uniqueness of the present epoch was born. For Richard Terdiman, 1789 plunged the nineteenth century into a profoundly debilitating ‘memory crisis’, as ‘people experienced the insecurity of their culture’s involvement with its past, the perturbation of the link of their own inheritance’. Drawing on counter-revolutionary gloom, Peter Fritzsche has depicted early nineteenth-century thinkers struggling to accept the empty present, split between the rival pull of

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regressive, therapeutic nostalgia and the acceleration towards a radiant future. Material culture offers a vital check on and testing ground for these conceptual arguments, since it was the pre-eminent domain in which questions of what to preserve, what to reject and what to transmit were confronted and practically negotiated. The revival of historicist styles in nineteenth-century furniture, for example, offers striking proof of how a loyalty to the national past was proclaimed within the domestic interior. Rather than dwelling on the sense of ‘loss’ and ‘absence’ occasioned by the revolutionary crisis, this project’s focus is on the stubborn ‘presence’ of historical traces, the abundant residues of a past that refused to pass on. The French Revolution was a tabula rasa in mental, not in material, terms, and it was precisely by engaging with the physical artefacts that weathered the storm that contemporaries looked for signs of continuity and renewal.

The reorientation in temporal attitudes after 1800 was a pan-European and transatlantic phenomenon. Billie Melman has uncovered the ‘culture of history’ that thrived in early nineteenth-century Britain, enchanted by the glamour of the ‘olden times’ and the gothic thrills of the Tudors and the Jacobins; Susan Crane has described how early nineteenth-century Germans were jolted awake from their slumbers to seize on the richness of their national patrimony. This ‘historicisation of the worldview’ was an infectious popular movement, carried along by the primacy of the common man and woman in matters such as war, protest, electioneering and print culture (what Lukács called the ‘massification’ of national life). As ordinary citizens affirmed their place within history, they also penned memoirs and collected tangible traces of their experiences, now vindicated through their placement within a common discursive frame. In her brilliant study of relic collecting in

47 P. Fritzsche, Stranded in the present: modern time and the melancholy of history (Harvard University Press, 2004).
49 See C. Steedman, Dust (Manchester University Press, 2001).
the early American Republic, Teresa Barnett asserts that the booming market for clumps of Plymouth Rock or locks of George Washington’s hair sheds light on ‘an alternative genealogy of the historical – one that occurs in relation to the material world, that admits impulses other than the need to generate conceptual structures, and that may involve emotional connections, the relationship between the living and the dead, and the processing of mortality and loss.’\(^53\) In other words, Barnett foregrounds the allure of artefacts as deposits of historical experience – what she has called elsewhere ‘bits of congealed time’ – and points to how nineteenth-century collections were treasured mediators between the vanished past and the uncertain present.\(^54\)

Within a French context, these perspectives are especially pertinent, for it was in France that the dislocation between a repudiated ancien régime and its disorientating, radical sequel dominated national debate.\(^55\) If we view collecting as a mode for bridging between the ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ realms, according to Pomian’s typology, then this kind of relay activity defied the violent schisms within French history.\(^56\) Through the acquisition and display of historic objects, eras that had been proscribed or condemned to oubli – including the revolutionary era itself after 1815 – were rediscovered and rendered visible, presenting simultaneously rival origins for, or critical alternatives to, nineteenth-century society. Demotic and amateur collecting eagerly took part in the work of retrieval, although its contours have only begun to be mapped.\(^57\) The sheer scale of this phenomenon has been obscured by a tendency to focus on distinct genres, especially the fine arts (as in Francis Haskell’s 1976 landmark Rediscoveries in Art).\(^58\) Yet the changing status of painting can be enriched by considering how the status of rare books, autographs, coins, armour, dress or pieces of furniture equally underwent an interpretive overhaul in

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this period. Whole new markets of collecting were invented for those on smaller budgets, including pastiche objects, ephemera and sentimental trinkets, bibelots and knick-knacks (brimborions). In Manuel Charpy’s analysis, even these trifles were cherished by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie hungry for imagined roots and historical reverie.  

What is needed is a deeper sense of the historicity of nineteenth-century collecting, by which I mean an awareness of both the volatile historical conditions in which it was conducted and the historical mindedness of its participants. In contrast to the spatial approach derived from Foucault’s *epistèmes*, thinking about collections made in, across and out of time emphasises their mutability and discontinuities, as well as the ‘choreography of hands’ that assembled and instrumentalised their contents at different moments.  

The temporal meaning of a collection was unstable and aleatory, not reducible to any one definitive form. The appeal of antiques in the nineteenth century resided in their ability to embody historical change, gaining fresh meanings and associations as they moved forwards through time. The philosopher Leon Rosenstein has theorised that antiques combined an ‘aboutness’ – namely, they pointed to an absent past – with an ‘untimeliness’, a quality of being there and not there. Rosenstein has called this the ‘translucency’ of antiques: thanks to their ‘enduring corporeality’, they allow the viewer to see through them to their lost era of origin. The virtue of Rosenstein’s reflections stem not just from his insistence that historical sensibility is an indissociable component of aesthetic judgement but also from his focus on the cognitive dissonance provoked by objects that were seen to inhabit two worlds, typically viewed by the Victorians as ‘survivors from another era with their own stories to tell’.  

The burgeoning trade in antiques, especially from the 1850s onwards, made the marketplace a motor in producing new types of historical sensibility. By 1861, the *Annaire des artistes et des amateurs* listed in

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its directory for Paris 134 ‘editors and sellers of prints,’ 147 ‘dealers in curiosity, art, coins’ and 32 ‘antiques dealers (antiquaires)’. To participate and prevail in this market meant mastering a series of commercial conventions and artistic terminology but also investing in the stories with which antiques were freighted. It was a short step from owning historical materials to professing expertise in matters of their interpretation; in an unfinished sketch, Baudelaire grumbled about the vanity of those amateurs who exclaimed, ‘Je possède! donc je comprends!!!’

Balzac loved to endow his collectibles with an illustrious provenance, and he regaled guests to the rue de Fortunée with the ‘genealogy’ of the pictures hanging on his walls. Having bought the former hôtel Beaujon, Balzac decked out his new home in the 1840s with a Bohemian glass chandelier purported to derive from Madame du Barry at Louveciennes, a Burgundian chest from the duchesse de Berry at Rosny and even the chamber pot of Madame de Pompadour. He boasted excitedly to his bride Madame Hanska that she would soon enjoy a Greuze owned by the king of Poland and two Canalettos from the collection of Pope Clement XII. The peripatetic prehistory of his treasures was a source of pride and wonder: ‘Such is the destiny of paintings, always to be traveling, coming and going, like the brushes that produce them!’

The mobility of works of art established connections that spanned centuries and spawned imaginative affinities but also provoked confusion as the semantic tether between objects, makers, owners and contexts was loosened. Balzac’s novels abound in surreal descriptions of random assemblages of objects, as the ‘new century was quite literally washed over by isolated things, by fragmented bits and pieces, and by bibelots cut off from their original setting’.

Collectors privileged different ‘memories’ in the existence of their objects: some were fascinated by their original makers, some were intrigued by their early owners, whilst others studied them as specimens of artistic styles. Pioneers in writing the ‘cultural biography of things’,

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64 Annuaire des artistes et des amateurs, 2 (1861), pp. 60–2.
collectors sought to make the trajectories of their objects materially legible. By affixing a stamp on drawings, reframing and restoring paintings, adding heraldic crests to furniture, rebinding books or inserting ex libris plates, an owner could record his place within a continuum of previous collectors. In this way the collector paid homage to the past but also customised his purchases and advertised his own contribution to their survival. The game of acquisition was also played out according to historical rhythms: attending sales, making finds and passing them on to new purchasers formed part of the life cycle of an art lover. ‘These libraries are born and die in a day’, noted Paul Lacroix in 1860: ‘they hasten, so to speak, to arrive at their standard and definitive condition, only to fall just as quickly into dissolution and disappear like a will-o-the-wisp. They do not grow old in the hands of their owners, and their sumptuous remains ceaselessly go drifting off and straying into new hands.’ Nineteenth-century collectors felt intimately connected to their predecessors, whose tastes and whose possessions they inherited and safeguarded until inevitably handing them over to the next generation. A perpetual cycle of growth, death, dispersal and renewal structured the collector’s calendar.

This market, I argue, was crucial in fostering a strong sense of genealogical transmission, which in turn reinforced the self-consciousness of collectors as belonging to a singular tribe. Whilst each collector pursued their own field of predilection, the shared geography and growing literature of collecting forced buyers to frame their activities in comparative and generational terms. This esprit de corps was palpable despite the lack of any unifying institutional space or locus of activity. Philippe de Chennevières described the confraternity of amateurs as mobile and intrepid, bound together through the common passion for the hunt (furetage and vagabondage). This was an imagined community constructed through amateur sociability, specialist periodicals and extravagant erudition, with the first concerted efforts to write a history of

collecting gaining traction from the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The editor of the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, founded in 1859, Charles Blanc, surveyed the riches enumerated within sale catalogues stretching back to that of the Comtesse Verrue in 1737.\(^{74}\) Reaching further back still, Edmond Bonnaffé in 1884 urged scholars to tell ‘the history of those men, obscure for the most part’, who ever since the seventeenth century had come from all corners of France and all backgrounds to ‘organise the salvage and gather up the fragments’. They had inaugurated a ‘permanent crusade’ to recuperate the vestiges of the past, although as yet their efforts had passed un-chronicled and ‘unrecognised’.\(^{75}\)

Posing as heritage crusaders, two central tensions cut across collectors’ credentials as stewards of French culture. The first was the changing complexion of the market itself, which grew from its improvised beginnings in the wake of the Revolution to become increasingly organised, inventoried and stratified by mid-century. Collectors expressed profound ambivalence about the mounting prices, intensifying speed and theatrical spectacle associated with the opening of the Hôtel Drouot auction house under the Second Empire. ‘Where are the relics that we piously passed on as heritage?’ asked Armand Silvestre in 1882, bemoaning how French inheritance laws and the lure of easy profit combined to accelerate the tempo of dispersals. ‘Where are these pieces of furniture that the religion of memory inhabited? We have changed all that. … Every object having an artistic value must thus pass to the auction house, not once, but many times.’\(^{76}\) The second tension concerned the relationship between collectors and the proliferating public museums. Nearly two-fifths of the 592 museums created before 1914 in France began as a donation from a single individual or a society of amateurs.\(^{77}\) We cannot presume collectors simply accommodated themselves to the needs and wishes of public institutions, however. Through the act of donation, collectors often bid to remake these institutions in their own image and wrestled to maintain control. In the provocative argument of Chantal Georgel, it was the choices of collectors that forced French museums in an eclectic direction across the nineteenth century, as donors imposed their tastes via a


muddle of discordant canvases and an invasion of historical bric-a-brac. Even within long-established institutions, like the Cabinet des médailles et antiques at the Bibliothèque nationale, the interests of the donors dictated the character of the department, thwarting the curators’ modernising objectives. Collectors were often unwilling to be cast as mere auxiliaries to the state but rather saw themselves as equal partners, at the very least, in the conservation of France’s heritage. This duplication of competence created enduring strife between the nation’s public and private custodians.

**Revolution**

Reclaiming the role of private collecting fruitfully redraws the current debate on the concept and governance of *le patrimoine* in France. At present, the historiography is split along both ideological and methodological lines. Building on the path-breaking work of Dominique Poulot, a consensus has emerged that the Jacobins pioneered the modern definition and legislative defence of national heritage in 1793. For the Jacobins, the protection of historic monuments required their liberation from the repudiated *ancien régime*, and reclamation as the property of all French citizens or the intellectual birthright of humanity. Such a redefinition was predicated on creating rational and scientific instruments for the identification and classification of outstanding monuments, which in turn required the creation of specific agencies and supervisory officials. Hence the campaign of abbé Grégoire in the 1790s found its fulfilment in the 1830s when, under a less universalist conception of heritage, François Guizot ordered a fresh taxonomy of French heritage and created the Commission des monuments historiques. By contrast, Jean-Michel Leniaud is the most vocal advocate of an alternative genealogy for the concept of an inviolable heritage, stressing its roots in Roman law (*patrimonium*) and close affinity with religious and mythical

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narratives. In this reading, the notion of *le patrimoine* long preceded the French Revolution since it was integral to the transmission of property across and between generations. The Jacobins did not so much invent heritage consciousness, then, as confiscate and secularise it, annexing it to the needs of central government and smothering the scope for local initiative.\(^{83}\)

Although they draw differing political conclusions, both Poulot and Leniaud agree that the administrative state, for good or for ill, became the primary guardian of the national heritage, and by extension the national memory, at the dawn of the nineteenth century.\(^{84}\) To that extent, both conform to the idea that due to the rupture of 1789, France followed a special path towards the democratic stewardship of historic monuments – what Leniaud mockingly dubbed ‘l’utopie française’.\(^{85}\)

The primacy of the state, however, needs to be balanced against the evidence of the dynamism of other brokers of heritage politics across the nineteenth century. Recent work has emphasised the energy with which the nobility managed and opened their ancestral estates, as well as the vibrancy of provincial *sociétés savantes* and religious groups, who sometimes took a different line from the officials dispatched by the Commission des monuments historiques.\(^{86}\) In the same spirit, the recent trend to study heritage within a transnational paradigm has further undercut the primacy of statist perspectives. Adopting a wider lens has revealed the collaboration between French and non-French communities in the creation of museums and the preservation of artworks, whether in Europe under Napoleonic occupation or the colonial administration in Algeria after 1830.\(^{87}\) In Astrid Swenson’s superb comparative study, any belief in an exceptional French, Jacobin model has been eroded by revealing the reciprocal borrowings between French, British and Prussian heritage reformers. In this story of international expertise exchanged across

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borders, the growth of heritage consciousness and legislation could not be contained within the cadre of any one nation-state. 88

Putting collectors back in this narrative is central for understanding both the limits of state action and the vital contribution made by amateur groups to the formation of le patrimoine. Despite the emergence of new bureaucratic instruments, most French monuments remained outside the remit of preservation until the laws of 1887 and especially 1913 – and this is doubly true of smaller, portable artworks. In these circumstances, despite the nominal competence of the state, the actual work of preservation normally devolved to the initiative of amateur societies, social groups or enterprising individuals. There was nothing peculiarly French about this division of labour: in nineteenth-century Britain, museum acquisitions and the promotion of art often hinged on precisely on this kind of public–private partnership, typically led by influential donors or gentlemanly associations. 89 But in the French context, there has been little reflection on how such partnerships functioned and evolved across different regimes, nor on how conceptions of French heritage were referenced and revised by groups within civil society. Compared to the lag observed in state institutions, amateurs led the way in collecting certain chapters of the nation’s past, especially those closest to the present. Private collectors were the first to rediscover the ‘delicious decadence’ of French eighteenth-century art and furniture, for instance. 90 They also played a pivotal role in conserving the ‘homeless heritage’ of the French Revolution, which only slowly filtered into museums and libraries after nearly a century circulating underground or on the open market. 91

A rich school of historiography has grown up around how the nation-state within the revolutionary era ‘invented’ the art museum, both within

France and across Europe. Another, smaller cluster of scholarship has focused on the centrifugal effects of the French Revolution in scattering the collections of the nobility, the church and the corporations and invigorating the European art market. The turmoil in France was quickly exported across the continent by the revolutionary armies, whose conquests in the Low Countries, along the Rhine and in northern Italy, unleashed new cycles of taxation, bankruptcy, emigration and expropriation. 1789 produced two radically divergent outcomes for heritage: the first that sought to strip art of its old regime associations and immobilise it within national institutions; the second that capitalised on an artwork’s history and propelled it into commercial circulation, sometimes far beyond French borders. During the Revolution, cultural property was simultaneously ‘nationalised’ and ‘privatised’, and this book explores the tensions inherent to this twofold revaluation. The fascination of the Musée des monuments français opened by Alexandre Lenoir in 1795 in the premises of the former Petits-Augustins convent stemmed in part from its hybridity as both a private stockpile and a public collection of medieval and Renaissance art, constituted by both political will and individual opportunism. Its ultimate dispersal in 1816 inspired many later institutions and individuals to recuperate the debris and continue its example – whether the Galerie d’Angoulême in the Louvre, the Musée de l’histoire de France at Versailles, the École des Beaux-Arts, the Musée Cluny or the Musée-Condé at Chantilly – demonstrating how the Revolution’s profound impact on material culture continued to ramify far beyond Thermidor and Waterloo.

The ideological struggle over patrimony in the 1790s permanently politicised many different types of acquisition. To conserve the vestiges of the ancien régime could be construed as a patriotic act, helping French

society rebuild in the wake of iconoclasm and division. But collectors were also suspected of reactionary nostalgia, or mercenary profiteering. In the late 1840s, the esteemed mathematician and inspector of French libraries Guglielmo Libri was exposed as a thief who had pilfered manuscripts, books and autographs from French institutions, which he sold on to bibliophiles like Lord Ashburnham in Britain. The scandal was aggravated by the sympathy shown towards Libri by numerous collectors in France. The archives of French museums abound with less sensational correspondence regarding objects subtracted from national ownership. In November 1851, Léon de Laborde alerted the director of French museums, Alfred-Émilien O’Hara, comte de Nieuwerkerke, about the existence of a large sixteenth-century enamel depicting Henri II and Diane de Poitiers, which was currently in the hands of James de Rothschild. Its early history had become confused during that ‘time of disorders, amidst the pillage of churches and the collections of émigrés, when precious objects were sold at a base price’. Alleging that it was originally ‘the property of the state’, since it appeared on an inventory of the Musée des monuments français, Laborde was confident that the unwitting, ‘illegal owner’ would happily return the enamel on perusing the evidence. Indeed, Laborde hoped that the case could set ‘a favourable precedent for other reclamations of the same nature’ and took care to mention the suspected provenance in his catalogue of Louvre enamels. This reclamation bid was unsuccessful (perhaps thanks to the friendly relations between Rothschild and Nieuwerkerke). But it encapsulates how the 1790s introduced troubling uncertainty about the legality of certain past transactions along with claims and counterclaims for restitution that rumbled on for decades.

Considered in a constructive light, the Revolution created the concepts, instruments and institutions that defined the national heritage; conversely, when viewed in a destructive light, it shattered many of the existing cultural repositories and scattered their contents across Europe.

100 Vielcastel to Nieuwerkerke, 4 August 1859. MS-2, AMN.
It inspired collectors to fight against the ravages of the era, as they brought disdained and neglected periods into the glare of publicity and exhibition; but the Revolution also complicated their relationship to national institutions, by casting doubts on the morality of private luxury or the legality of their purchases. Out of these contradictions arose the complex relationship between the French state and those collectors who could variously appear as partners, competitors or saboteurs in the construction of a national heritage. No mere supplement to the latter, private collections often represented spaces of dissent from present-day politics, and together they formed an alternative heritage constellation, a ‘private patrimony’, physically built out of but conceptually pitted against the earthquake of 1789. In the chronic instability in nineteenth-century politics, each episode of regime change – in 1814–15, 1830, 1848 and 1870–1 – brought with it a fresh assault on cultural property, a renewed effort at recuperation, a new bid for legitimate ownership as well as counter-accusations of ignorance, neglect, even vandalism. Despite repeated efforts to lay this past to rest, nineteenth-century historical consciousness continued to feed on the intellectual and material by-products of political crises, not just in France but also across Europe, in an epoch of civil wars, liberal nationalism, secularisation and Risorgimento.\footnote{See, for instance, J. Anderson, ‘The political power of connoisseurship in nineteenth-century Europe: Wilhelm von Bode versus Giovanni Morelli’, Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen, 38 (1996), 107–19; On the interplay of national contexts and international art markets, see J. D. Baetens and D. Lyna (eds.), The internationalisation of the art market in the age of nation states, 1750–1914 (Leiden: Brill, 2019).}

Outline

This study examines the destabilising effects of the French Revolution in the material world over the longue durée, as well as the afterlife of terminology and controversies first born in the 1790s. Since a comprehensive account of nineteenth-century private collecting would be impossible and unreadable, the solution attempted here has been to focus on select individuals, reconstruct their social networks and intellectual horizons and embed them in an unfolding chronological canvas. These sometimes eccentric figures have not been chosen for their representativeness so much as for the richness of the archival documentation, their influence in shaping discourses around collecting and their distillation of some of its fundamental controversies. Sampling different genres of artefact (paintings, prints, books) and the arts of different historical periods (the Renaissance, the French eighteenth century), the range of evidence...
surveys how different tastes evolved across the nineteenth century. The principle of selection has meant certain vibrant sectors of nineteenth-century collecting have been omitted, including archaeology, antiquities, folklore, numismatics, contemporary paintings, Oriental artworks and especially natural history: this is a study concerned with the meanings attached to man-made artefacts. The boundaries between genres of collecting proved porous, however, as most individuals pursued several passions across the course of a lifetime. By and large, this was a very male world, with implications for the machismo of the hunt and the erotics of possession, although the obscured, often informal contribution of women has been noted wherever possible. The relative absence of women from this study reflects the systemic denigration of their pretensions to be collectors outside of gendered parameters; Constance d’Ennery’s remarkable domestic museum of Chinese and Japanese figurines, for example, was typically (and erroneously) ascribed to her husband, or written off by 1900 as a feminine, Orientalist ‘bazaar’.

The chronology runs from the final decades of the eighteenth century to the opulence and sensationalism of the fin de siècle. The narrative thus cuts across multiple regimes, monarchical and republican, and registers the evolution of the institutional environment in roughly four phases. The first phase saw the dismantling of the aristocratic cabinets of the old regime and a crop of new collections, rhetorical justifications and commercial networks, which emerged out of the ruins (1789–1820); the second phase brought the ascendancy of Romantic curiosity during the Restoration and July Monarchy, which viewed material culture as a means of revisiting and resurrecting the vanished, pre-revolutionary world (c.1820–50); the third phase witnessed the consecration of


collecting as a fashionable and luxurious activity under the Second Empire, thanks to the patronage of the court, learned societies and the mobilisation of resources behind landmark exhibitions (c. 1850–70); in the fourth phase, an important auxiliary role was accorded to the collecting elite within the Third Republic, enlivened by political scandals, modern art movements and rancorous international rivalries (1870–90). Whilst the chapters are cumulative, the structure of the book hinges less on linear progression than on certain recursive logic, since it consistently traces the development of social practices and political scandals back to the maelstrom of the 1790s, exposing how the first revolution continued to inform the meanings and the fates of many collections for decades to come. In this recursive structure, the influence of the Revolution is treated as both persistent and polyvalent, its implications mutating across different contexts: at some moments it was a direct and immediate cause of collecting; at others, it surfaced more obliquely as a discourse of justification, a basis for accusation or a painful memory of loss.

The geographical focus of this study will be Paris. Ever since the eighteenth century, the unmatched richness of the city’s public and private collections carried an ideological significance, consecrating Paris as both a ‘capitale muséale’ and ‘capitale culturelle’.106 The French metropolis was also the centre of artists’ studios and commercial infrastructures, including salerooms and dealerships, which were able to draw in merchandise from all over the continent. Exciting recent scholarship has underlined that the regions had their own peculiar collecting and museum histories, which are central for understanding the formation of civic identities and the interplay with metropolitan authority.107 But the large presence of rich, resident foreigners and international buyers made Paris a cosmopolitan entrepôt; developments in the collecting scene there almost immediately had international repercussions and attracted extensive comment in the Parisian-based newspapers and periodicals. The market for curiosity had been incubated within the city’s neighbourhoods, and it evolved in accord with transformations in urban space. To apprehend the stakes of collecting in a post-revolutionary society,

a metropolitan approach is uniquely revealing. By drawing on the untapped papers of scholars, curators and collectors conserved in the archives and specialist libraries in Paris – including the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris, the Arsenal, the Sorbonne, the Institut, the Louvre, the École des Beaux-Arts, the Médiathèque de l’architecture et du patrimoine and the Institut national d’histoire de l’art – we can enter into the spaces and eavesdrop on the conversations of this murky Parisian economy.

The first chapter explores the shifting terminology of the *amateur* and *collectionneur* across the revolutionary period. Drawing on the writings of Pierre Gault de Saint-Germain, it traces the breaking and remaking of the *amateur* with the collapse of the old regime, as well as the changing spaces and justifications of picture collecting into the Restoration. It highlights the mix of nostalgia and zeal that informed the idealised conception of the true *amateur*, whose aesthetic refinement was contrasted with the decadence of post-revolutionary society. The second chapter examines how Jean-Louis Soulavie archived the revolutionary present. Focusing particularly on Soulavie’s extraordinary collection of prints and drawings, the chapter asks what kind of ‘witness’ was provided by visual sources and their relationship to changing modes of historical consciousness. Book collecting in the post-revolutionary period constitutes Chapter 3; French public and private libraries were transformed across the 1790s, and the dramatic glut in rare editions available on the open market reshaped the book trade, its geographies and conceptions of the bibliophile and bibliomaniac. The chapter evaluates bibliophiles’ attempt to moralise and taxonomise this bewildering marketplace and the rise of a community predicated on the exclusive ownership of the literary past.

Chapter 4 widens the focus to consider the collecting by Charles Sauvageot of so-called *antiquités nationales*, artworks from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as part of a broader salvage crusade in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Interrogating the relationship between collectors and museums – in this case, a foundational donation to the Louvre – the chapter demonstrates the uneasy interplay between private and public collecting in the mid nineteenth century. Chapter 5 begins with the fires of the Paris Commune, an event that appalled collectors Jérôme Pichon and Léopold Double and raised the spectre once again of revolutionary vandalism. It explores both the appeal to French eighteenth-century decorative arts as part of a royalist vision of the national heritage, noting its presence within exhibitions and cultural institutions, even as the stewardship of the conservative elites was challenged by new market dynamics. Developing this point further, the final sixth chapter analyses the monumental sale of Frédéric Spitzer’s
collection of Gothic and Renaissance art in 1893, widely hailed as the sale of the century. It emblematised the new alignment between collector and state in the Third Republic and the discussion of the international art market within the popular and anti-Semitic press. The varied and often vitriolic newspaper coverage of the Spitzer affair functioned like a referendum on the purpose of private collecting in a democratic age, shining a light on salesrooms as arenas of intense ideological struggle.

Taken together, the chapters trace how successive collectors profited from the disarray of 1789 to amass artworks, antiques and cultural property within their own ‘private patrimony’. By 1901, one repertoire listed no less than 2,500 different private collections in the capital, ranging from miniatures to prehistoric objects. The conclusion revisits the central arguments and questions how far one era of private collecting was winding up in the fin de siècle through a mix of commercial, political and intellectual pressures. Whilst these shifts in the 1890s altered the frameworks for collecting, the practical achievements of the picturesque, post-revolutionary generation should not be underestimated. For not only did collectors’ engagement with material culture represent a highly imaginative mode of historical consciousness and reconstruction; understanding their extensive, and often occluded, role in building up heritage institutions can expose enduring hierarchies within museums and modern art worlds.

Private collecting simultaneously catalysed and constrained the process of cultural democratisation across the long nineteenth century. The purchase of the past refers to the manifold investments – financial, intellectual and emotional – that collectors made in historic artefacts and, by extension, the obsessive hold that history exerted over them and, through their advocacy, over nineteenth-century French society more broadly. If, as Goran Blix argues, nineteenth-century historicism amounted to a ‘modern secular theology’, which combatted the experience of fragmentation by proclaiming the ‘imperishability of memories’, then collectors were the apostles and ministers of this cult.

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