

LITERATURE AND
MATERIAL CULTURE
FROM BALZAC TO PROUST

The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities

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CHAPTER I

The bibelot

A nineteenth-century object

By the 1880s, the medieval French word *bibelot* (knick-knack), which in the fifteenth century designated miscellaneous household items of little value, is revived by the most elite among Parisian collectors to designate the objects most precious to them, even though the term is also used to refer to the cheapest industrial kitsch. The term is not only revived and reinvented during the nineteenth century, it is also associated with the century. In Proust this association manifests itself as a break with the twentieth century since, in implicit contrast to the narrator's modernist sensibility, it is only among those characters who reach adulthood before the 1880s that one finds *bibeloteurs*: Swann, Odette, Charlus, and Madame Verdurin. The term's uses, connotations, and associations, as well as the goods that it designates, evolve along with "the nineteenth century," as conceptualized by those writers who speak in its name. If this culture embraces the bibelot with enthusiasm, it is because it creates the bibelot in its own image.

The objects designated by the term *bibelot*, along with the practices designated by its variants, *bibeloter* [to collect], *bibeloteur*, and *bibeloteuse* [masculine and feminine forms for both the noun "collector" and the adjective "bibelot-like"], are invested with a variety of often contradictory significations – not only "meanings" but also "significance" in the sense of perceived importance or value (aesthetic, monetary, sentimental, psychic, or other). Even though many are very consciously aware of these significations, these are not assigned in a fully conscious way by any individual or group, but rather evolve out of shared practices of objects, practices which are historically and culturally specific. This chapter provides a synchronic and diachronic overview of the uses, connotations, and associations of the word *bibelot* in nineteenth-century literary and extra-literary texts.

Synchronically, the bibelot must be understood as a category which cuts across several domains of the world of goods: the household, the

marketplace, the collection, and the museum. Each of these four cultural spaces operates according to its own logic. Each is organized on three levels: physical, economic, and cognitive. The cognitive level, which includes meaning production, is inseparable from the other two levels, the physical arrangement of goods in space and the economic structures of exchange. Following the bibelot through these four spaces (the household, the marketplace, the collection, and the museum), while taking into account their individual logics and their shared multi-level organizational structures (physical, economic, and cognitive), allows for an examination of the configuration and reconfiguration of nineteenth-century material culture. Diachronically, the evolution of the term's use must be recounted in terms of history, or better, histories, including revolutionary history, intellectual history, and literary history.

THE MULTIPLICATION OF OBJECTS

Why, at this particular time and place, nineteenth-century Paris, does it become necessary to create a category of goods which unites valuable art objects, industrial reproductions, and worthless junk, a group of disparate items gathered together under the auspices of superfluousness, gratuitousness, heterogeneity, and accumulation? The industrial and consumer revolutions provide the obvious context for this question. Rosalind Williams describes the radical transformation of the world of goods, as material things begin to multiply during the middle decades of the century:

The quantity of goods available to most people had been drastically limited: a few kitchen utensils . . . , several well-worn pieces of furniture . . . , bedding, shoes or clogs, a shirt and trousers or a dress (and sometimes one outfit for special occasions), some essential tools. That was all. . .

In the past century these ancient and universal patterns have been shattered by the advent of mass consumption. . . The merchandise itself was by no means available to all, but the *vision* of a seemingly unlimited profusion of commodities is available, is, indeed, nearly unavoidable.¹

This multiplication of objects, their "seemingly unlimited profusion" at once "real" and imagined, necessitates a radical reconfiguration of the world of material things, a physical, economic, and cognitive reorganization.² However, the statement that "ancient and universal patterns" of people's relations to objects were "shattered" by this onslaught of goods needs to be nuanced. It would be more accurate to say that these ancient patterns, which are historical rather than universal, are not destroyed, but rather modified, adapted, and supplemented in order to accommo-

date new types of goods, and their (at least hypothetical) availability to new groups of people. The reconfiguration of ancient patterns for dealing with goods is of primary concern here.

The historically determined patterns by which people confront goods can be thought of in terms of the constantly evolving social structure of the world of objects. The very concept of “material culture” carries with it the assumption that, like language, the world of goods is fundamentally social in nature. Like words, things are created and given meaning collectively (Saussure’s dimension of *langue*), though used individually (the dimension of *parole*).³ Furthermore, as Marx insists in his theory of the commodity, relationships among things are inseparable from relationships among people, implying that the world of things is a social world, with a social structure which includes not only class relations and social positioning (the stuff of “distinction”), but also gender relations, written and unwritten rules of exchange, usages of objects in daily life, and the significance accorded to objects, implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously.

The world of objects is directly structured by institutions and spheres of practice which are formalized to varying degrees; for nineteenth-century Paris these include the marketplace, the household economy, collecting, and the museum. The nineteenth century witnesses the expansion and further specialization of these institutions, especially with the creation of the *magasin de nouveautés* [novelty shop], the *grand magasin* [department store], and many new public museums. In the sphere of the household economy, it is worth noting that the term *décoration intérieure* appears in print for the first time in France in 1801.⁴ Also significant are the many new publications destined for female homemakers.

Though the marketplace, the household, collecting, and the museum seem to be quite separate, governed by very different concerns and objectives, their mutual involvement in the world of goods makes for some striking similarities among them. One activity critical to all four domains is the creation and maintenance of spaces in which goods are accumulated, displayed, classified, and valorized. Practices of display and valuation depend on acts of classification. The category *bibelot* represents such a classification, one which is frequently used in the marketplace, in the household, and in private collecting, but which is not altogether unrelated to the public museum. The creation of the category *bibelot* signals the interconnectedness of these four domains, since it belongs to all of them but is contained by none of them, juxtaposing the museum-worthy heirloom against the mass-produced trinket.

FROM THE HOUSEHOLD TO THE COLLECTION AND BACK

The heterogeneity and disparity in value of the objects designated by the term *bibelot* can be traced to the evolution of its usage, as given in Ernest Bosc's *Dictionnaire de l'art, de la curiosité et du bibelot*:

BIBELOT. Ce terme, qui à son origine ne servait qu'à désigner des outils, des ustensiles et des objets très divers et de peu de valeur, est aujourd'hui [1883] employé par les amateurs et les antiquaires pour désigner principalement des objets d'art et de curiosité.⁵

[BIBELOT. – This term originally designated only tools, utensils and a wide variety of objects of little value. Today {1883}, collectors and antiquarians use it principally to designate *objets d'art* and curiosities.]

Bosc defines the category *bibelot* in terms of its changing relationship to other categories of things: *outils, ustensiles, objets très divers et de peu de valeur, objets d'art, and objets de curiosité*. He directly ties the contemporary usage of the term to collecting by assigning it to the vocabulary of “les amateurs et les antiquaires” [in this context, *amateur*, or enthusiast, is synonymous with “collector,” with overtones of “connoisseur”]. The category *bibelot* thus shifts drastically in meaning between “son origine,” the Middle Ages, and Bosc's “aujourd'hui,” the 1880s, its designation drifting from simple articles of daily domestic life to *objets d'art* and rare collectors' curiosities. The domains of collecting and of household goods become even more entangled as more and more articles of daily life become recognized as collectors' objects, such as soup tureens of Sèvres porcelain, shaving bowls of Rouen pottery, silver snuff boxes, or even ornate antique bedwarmers, spittoons, and chamber pots.⁶

While in 1883 Bosc assigns the term *bibelot* to the vocabulary of antique collecting, by the century's end the term is more commonly assigned to the vocabulary of home furnishings, as is evident in a 1907 treatise on interior decor co-authored by Edith Wharton:

It is perhaps not uninformative to note that we have no English word to describe the class of household ornaments which French speech has provided with at least three designations, each indicating a delicate and almost imperceptible gradation of quality. In place of bric-à-brac, bibelots, objets d'art, we have only knick-knacks – defined by Stormonth as “articles of small value.”⁷

Like Bosc, Wharton too defines the *bibelot* in relation to other categories of things. Though French does have the advantage of numerous terms, their meanings shift over the course of the nineteenth century, making it difficult to discern the “delicate and almost imperceptible

gradation of quality” which they supposedly designate. Whereas for Wharton in 1907 the term “bibelots” clearly belongs between “bric-à-brac” and “*objets d’art*,” texts dating from the preceding century reveal more ambiguity.

From roughly the 1840s to 1900, the “gradation in quality” represented by these terms was not only “almost imperceptible,” but also ambiguous, particularly in the case of the central term, since a bibelot was sometimes an *objet d’art*, sometimes merely bric-à-brac, while at other times all three terms were used to describe the same object. Furthermore, two key terms are missing from Wharton’s list: *curiosité* and *antiquité*, which French shares with English. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in France *curiosité* was the word commonly used to designate collectors’ objects, while *antiquité* designated Greek and Roman art and artifacts. *Bric-à-brac* refers to “objets très divers et de peu de valeur” [“a wide variety of objects of little value”], to borrow Bosc’s phrasing. A neighboring term, *bimbelot*, generally refers to toys, but also to toiletry items and trinkets.⁸ When the word *bibelot* is revived in the middle of the nineteenth century, it is used as a synonym of *curiosité*, but still carries the connotation of its original meaning, “objets très divers et de peu de valeur,” a pejorative overtone which the word still carries. *Antiquité* came to include French and European collectibles from the Gallic period, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, this entire lexical chain is used more or less interchangeably to designate virtually the same objects, though each term carries slightly different connotations. These terms, as used during this period, can be arranged in a rough order of least to most flattering: *bric-à-brac*, *curiosité*, *antiquité*, *bibelot*, *objet d’art*. By this time the term *bibelot* refers strictly to decorative or collectors’ objects, no longer designating any tool or utensil other than antiques which no longer have use-value. There is always some degree of irony involved in using terms with pejorative connotations, namely *bibelot* and *bric-à-brac*, to designate valuable collectors’ objects, raising questions about the collector’s attachment to what for many seem to be useless trifles.

REVOLUTIONIZING THE MARKETPLACE

How does the same word come to designate inexpensive household goods, decorative items, and rare collectibles? Changes in the meaning, use, and connotation of the term *bibelot* correspond closely to changes in

the post-revolutionary collectors' market. Immediately following the 1789 political revolution, a revolution in the world of objects fuels the association of collectors' curiosities with the pejorative terms *bric-à-brac* and *bibelot*. Thanks to the sudden dispossession of the nobility, royalty, and clergy, many precious decorative art objects, luxurious household goods, and religious cult objects find themselves on the market at very low prices. "Une moitié de Paris vend l'autre!" ["One half of Paris sells the other"], exclaim the Goncourt brothers in their history of daily life under the *Directoire* (1795–7). Their image of this huge fire sale is gruesome: "C'est la liquidation de la guillotine" ["It's the guillotine's liquidation sale"].⁹

Louis Clément de Ris sums up the state of the post-revolutionary collectors' market in a biographical sketch of Charles Sauvageot, a "real-life" model for Balzac's cousin Pons:

C'était le bon temps [1797]! La tempête révolutionnaire avait dispersé aux quatre vents du hasard et jeté au coin de la borne des myriades d'objets – de *bibelots*, pour me servir de cet ignoble néologisme – amassés pendant des siècles dans les palais des princes, les communautés religieuses, les corporations laïques, les hôtels et les maisons des riches particuliers.¹⁰

[Times were good! The storm of revolution had dispersed to the four winds and thrown out on the side of the road a myriad of objects – *bibelots*, to use that vulgar neologism – which, over the centuries, had been amassed in princely palaces, religious communities, secular corporations, and the mansions and homes of rich individuals.]

The revolution disperses an impressive quantity ("des myriades") of objects into the marketplace, objects which have been confiscated from spaces designated according to *ancien régime* social categories ("les palais des *princes*, les communautés *religieuses*, les *corporations* laïques"). The goods of the former cultural elite are sold not only at the state auction house where art is normally exchanged, but also in shops selling antiques alongside other second-hand goods – the *magasin de bric-à-brac*. Precious relics find themselves displaced and put in circulation by the merchants of *bric-à-brac* and by the auctioneer. Collectors delight in the possibility of buying these objects cheaply, even as many of them nostalgically bemoan the demise of a more aristocratic era.

The old treasures of the dispossessed nobility and the Church go unnoticed by all but the most ardent collectors during the first decades of the century, when Greek and Roman antiques dominate French decor. Hence for a number of years the terms *curiosité* and *bric-à-brac*

remain equivalent to the term *bibelot*. Such is the case in Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons* (1847), in which the three terms are used interchangeably to describe the fictitious collection of master paintings, miniatures, porcelain, and snuff boxes which Pons has amassed in large part from among the junk in countless dusty Parisian *magasins de bric-à-brac* between 1810 and 1844, the golden age of collecting when European antiques are undervalued. Pons seeks out *objets d'art* amidst collectors' *curiosités*, *bibelots*, and *bric-à-brac*. The linguistic conflation of these three terms follows the intermingling of junk with precious decorative objects in the marketplace. The meanings of the terms become muddled by the physical contiguity of their referents.

Sifting through the post-revolutionary rubble becomes a game of recognition and misrecognition ruled by the elusive mechanisms of market value and fashion. The collector seeks to acquire exquisite objects at affordable prices by discovering them before they attain a high market value. By the 1830s many "curiosités" have become very expensive, though collectors interested in the more minor decorative arts – namely, "tous les petits monuments de la vie usuelle"¹¹ ["all the little monuments of daily life"] of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – are still discovering bargains. Such is the case of Edmond de Goncourt's foresighted aunt, with whom he discovers collecting on Sunday afternoons:

Ma tante se trouvait être, à cette époque [around 1836], une des quatre ou cinq personnes de Paris, enamourées de vieilleries, du *beau* des siècles passés, des verres de Venise, des ivoires sculptés, des meubles de marqueterie, des velours de Gênes, des points d'Alençon, des porcelaines de Saxe.¹²

[At this time, it so happened that my aunt was among the four or five Parisians who were enamored of the old-fashioned, of the Beauty of centuries past, of Venetian glass, of carved ivory, of marquetry furniture, of Genoa velvet, of Alençon lace, of Saxe porcelain.]

These household ornaments do eventually become highly valued collector's objects. Goncourt's aunt recognizes their value ahead of the market. It is in the context of recognizing misrecognized value that Balzac presents Pons as a figure ridiculed by those around him, until the importance – and value – of his collection is generally understood. Likewise, Clément de Ris describes the growing public recognition of the above-mentioned model for Balzac's Pons:

En 1805, M. Sauvageot était un fou; en 1815, il n'était plus qu'un maniaque. Original en 1820, il devint une célébrité en 1830.¹³

[In 1805 Monsieur Sauvageot was a crazy fool; in 1815 he was but a maniac. Eccentric in 1820, he became a celebrity in 1830.]

The public opinion of the collector changes along with an evolution in mainstream tastes, which begin to favor the medieval, Renaissance, and Oriental objects in which Sauvageot specializes. As demonstrated by the examples of Edmond's aunt, Pons, and Sauvageot, negotiating the antique market involves a dialectic of recognition and misrecognition when it comes to apprehending a *biblot's* aesthetic, historical, or monetary value. The collector dreams of cheaply obtaining items he or she recognizes as priceless, taking advantage of a seller's underpricing based on a misrecognition of their value. The collector's dream is not fulfilled until the full value of the cheaply acquired items is finally recognized by the market, and thus by society at large. When used by serious nineteenth-century collectors to designate objects they recognize as precious, in its ambiguity the term *biblot* points to the shifts in market value which underpin this dialectic.

By mid-century, mainstream taste appropriates the beautiful objects of France's *ancien régime* once sought after only by a few eccentrics. As one nineteenth-century commentator on collecting puts it, "La mode se met de la partie, on s'arrache les miettes du passé; livres, médailles, estampes, meubles antiques, menue curiosité, on veut tout avoir" ["Fashion joins in, people fight over the crumbs of the past; books, medals, prints, antique furniture, minor curiosities, people want everything?"].¹⁴ Fashion trends favoring the use of antique and exotic collectors' items in home decor drive up their market value. The fashionability of Greek and Roman antiques gives way to a preference for French medieval and Renaissance antiques, later supplemented by a taste for the eighteenth-century decorative arts.¹⁵ Colonial trade adds to the body of objects which the Revolution placed on the collector's market, as Turkish, Moorish, and other "Oriental" styles become common. The Goncourts, among others, display decorative objects from Japan in the company of French and European antiques. By the end of the century, some antique collectors begin to include objects from French Art Nouveau and the English Arts and Crafts Movement in their eclectic interiors.

The growing fashionability of collecting gradually transforms its venues of distribution. While the Parisian department store has received much scholarly attention of late, the trajectory of the *biblot* requires taking into consideration the more archaic market forms which coexist with the department store, forms which are not wiped out as quickly as

Zola implies in his novel of feminine consumption, *Au bonheur des dames*.¹⁶ Because the antique market deals in second-hand goods, even today it stands on the periphery of mass consumption. The market for second-hand goods was much more important during the nineteenth century, since the clothing and household goods of the lower classes often consisted of the cast-offs of the wealthier classes.¹⁷ These were sold by the lowest classes of merchants in the most marginal commercial spaces. The *colporteurs* were nomads; these merchants are to household goods (and books) what Benjamin's *chiffonnier* [ragpicker] is to clothing. Fairs and bazaars furnished a setting for temporary stalls; the terms *brocante*, *brocarter*, and *brocanteur* [second-hand trade, to trade in, and trader in second-hand goods] often refer to exchange activities in such liminal retail spaces. *Ferrailleurs* and *quincailliers* [scrap-metal dealers and iron mongers] sometimes maintained small shops. The next step up on the retail hierarchy would be the *magasin de bric-à-brac* [junk shop or second-hand shop]. The dusty shop of the *antiquaire* [antique dealer] is accorded mythical status in fictive representations such as Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* (1831) and Gautier's fantastic short story "Le Pied de momie" (1840).

As the bibelot becomes more popular, it moves into more fashionable retail space. By the 1880s, it is found not only in the *magasin de bric-à-brac*, but also in the more modern and more affluent *magasins de nouveautés* [novelty shops selling cloth and what are called "articles de Paris," mostly toiletry implements and trinkets].¹⁸ Thus the bibelot comes to be associated not only with used goods, but also with the new goods of modernized production. In addition, the *magasins de nouveautés* are more modern in that they cater to consumer desire,¹⁹ as opposed to the junk shop whose inventory depends on the randomness of available cast-offs. The bibelot does make its way into that most modern of retail spaces, the *grand magasin* [department store]: though Zola's fictitious retail palace *Au Bonheur des Dames* specializes in clothing and accessories, its visionary owner Mouret does eventually add a display of exotic decorative goods, including bibelots.

At the same time, elegant boutiques featuring *objets d'art* begin to appear in fashionable shopping areas. As Clément de Ris explains, at the turn of the nineteenth century, "le bon temps" ["the golden age"] of bargains for the pioneering collectors, "le marchand d'objets d'art tel que nous le voyons en 1860 n'existait pas, et rien ne pouvait faire prévoir les hautes destinées auxquelles était appelé ce genre d'industrie" ["the dealer in *objets d'art* as we see him in 1860 did not yet exist, and the great destiny of this sort of industry could not then have been foreseen"].²⁰

Arnoux of Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869) is the literary incarnation of the new type of "marchand d'art" which evolves with the growing fashionability of the bibelot. His shop *l'Art Industriel* looks more like a "salon" than a "boutique."²¹ Edmond de Goncourt, in an 1875 journal entry, describes a gentrification of antique dealers:

L'étonnement est extrême chez moi, en voyant la révolution qui s'est faite tout d'un coup dans les habitudes de la génération nouvelle des marchands de bric-à-brac. Hier, c'étaient des ferrailleurs, des Auvergnats . . . Aujourd'hui, ce sont des messieurs habillés par nos tailleurs, achetant et lisant des livres et ayant des femmes aussi distinguées que les femmes de notre société; des messieurs donnant des dîners servis par des domestiques en cravates blanches.²²

[I am extremely surprised to see the sudden revolution in the habits of the new generation of dealers in second-hand goods. Before, it was scrap-metal dealers from Auvergne . . . Today, it is gentlemen outfitted by our own tailors, gentlemen who buy and read books and whose wives are as distinguished as those of high society; gentlemen whose dinner guests are served by waiters in white tie.]

This gentlemanly dealer is a far cry from Rémonencq in *Le Cousin Pons*, the Auvergnat *ferrailleur* turned *marchand de curiosité*, who dreams of opening an elegant boutique for true *amateurs*. As a result of these changes, by the 1880s valuable objects are rarely found in junk shops, though at times they are still playfully referred to as *bric-à-brac*, even among elitist collectors.

Meanwhile, at yet another venue of distribution, the public auctions, these goods begin to circulate more rapidly and in greater numbers, among a growing number of buyers:

De 1840 à 1850, les ventes se succèdent rapidement. . . Tableaux, estampes, émaux, livres, faïences, médailles, l'antiquité, le moyen âge et le temps moderne, la grande et la petite curiosité arrivent pêle-mêle et *inondent* la place. Le *torrent* est irrésistible, il entraîne la *mode* et la *foule*; les ventes engendrent l'amateur, l'amateur engendre les ventes, l'un pousse l'autre, et, le marchand aidant à tous les deux, le commerce de la curiosité prend des proportions inouïes.²³

[From 1840 to 1850, auction follows auction in rapid succession . . . Paintings, engravings, enamels, books, pottery, medals, antiquity, the Middle Ages and modern times, major and minor curiosities arrive pell-mell and *inundate* the place. The *torrent* is irresistible, it drives *fashion* and the *crowd*. Sales engender the collector, the collector engenders sales, the one pushes the other, and, the dealer helping both, trade in curiosities has reached unheard of proportions.]

The succession of terms in the second sentence is instructive. First, there is a list of categories of "curiosité" which shows the variety of forms on

the market (*tableaux, estampes, émaux, livres, faïences, médailles*). Second, a list of historical periods (*l'antiquité, le moyen âge et le temps moderne*) underlines a different type of variety within the category “curiosité,” that of temporal origin. Third, a disparity in genre is emphasized by adding to the list “la grande et la petite curiosité.” The adverb “pêle-mêle” which follows underscores the list’s heterogeneity. The verb “inondent” along with the noun “torrent” in the following sentence hyperbolize the ever increasing proliferation and circulation of these objects. The motivating force behind this acceleration of circulation is the goods themselves, arriving in ever greater quantity. Market and buyer enter into a procreative relationship, the one (re)producing the other under the mediation of the dealer.

By the 1860s, it is not only collectors and investors who attend the auctions at the Hôtel Drouot (the state-controlled auction house located in Paris), but also high-society women who are beginning to find the bibelot chic. “Tiens, il faudra que nous allions aux Commissaires-Priseurs . . . Nous irons *rococoter* . . . C’est très amusant” [“Well then, we must go to the auctioneer’s . . . We’ll go rococo hunting . . . It’s great fun”], proclaims an elegant female character in the Goncourts’ 1863 novel of the bourgeoisie, *Renée Mauperin*.²⁴ “Rococoter” is a neologism, no doubt a play on *bibloter*, and meaning “to seek out and collect rococo objects.”

Clément de Ris’s description of a mid-century auction demonstrates a negative connotation of the word bibelot by its association with the market: that of art tainted by money. In deploying the vocabulary of collecting, the following passage first uses the non-pejorative terms “curieux” and “amateurs,” not using the term “bibelot” until the question of money arises:

Cette vente restera pour les curieux la grande fête de l’année [1856] . . . Tout le monde en a pris suivant ses moyens: les curieux pauvres, ceux qui sont forcés d’admettre comme une vérité l’aphorisme *voir c’est avoir*, en réjouissant leurs regards de la vue de tant de belles choses amassées par un homme d’un goût délicat et fin; les amateurs riches, en se les disputant au milieu du feu croisé des enchères et sous les coups du marteau de Me Pouchet; les hommes d’argent, enfin, en plaçant en *bibelots* – qu’on me pardonne cet horrible vocable, il est consacré – leur argent d’une manière au moins aussi profitable qu’en reports ou en primes.²⁵

[For curiosity collectors, this sale will remain the grand event of the year [1856] . . . Everyone took part according to his means: the poor curiosity lovers, those who are forced to accept as true the aphorism *to see is to have*, taking great pleasure in gazing on so many beautiful things brought together by a man of

refined and delicate taste; wealthy collectors, competing for them in the midst of the crossfire of bidding, under the blows of Monsieur Pouchet's gavel; men of money, finally, placing their money in *bibelots* (pardon me for using this horrible word, but it is fitting), which prove to be at least as profitable as stocks or bonds.]

The linguistic progression of collecting terminology is arranged in order of wealth, “curieux” – “amateurs” – “bibelot,” an order which mirrors the chronological progression of terms for the collector: “curieux” (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) – “amateur” (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) – “bibeloteur” (1880s through the Belle Epoque).

The term *bibelot* retains pejorative overtones even as the most elite aesthetes begin to refer to themselves as *bibeloteurs*. Whereas in the quotations above, from 1858 and 1860, Clément de Ris excuses himself when he uses the word *bibelot* – “cet horrible vocable,” “cet ignoble néologisme” – , throughout the 1870s and up to his death in 1896, Edmond de Goncourt freely uses *bibelots* and *bibeloteur* to describe his collection, himself, and his collecting activities.²⁶ The flamboyant fin-de-siècle aesthete and poet, the count Robert de Montesquiou, likewise employs *bibelots* several times in describing his famous apartments in his memoirs.²⁷ Similarly, the word is frequently used non-pejoratively in publications of decorating professionals such as the *Revue des arts décoratifs*, founded in 1880, or in the title of Bosc's 1883 dictionary (*Dictionnaire de l'art, de la curiosité et du bibelot*). However, at the same time the term is still used to designate the cheapest mass-produced trinkets and souvenirs. For example, in Zola's *L'Oeuvre* (1886), “bibelot” denotes the antiques collected by the writer Sandoz and his wife, the extravagantly fashionable decor of the high-society artist Fagerolles, and the cheap glass and porcelain carnival prizes in a game booth at a popular fair.²⁸

The apparent logical contradiction inherent in using one term to designate a heterogeneous group of things highlights that it is the quality of superfluity that unifies those objects referred to as *bibelots*. The generally negative perceptions of the qualities of heterogeneity and superfluity would seem to marginalize those things designated as *bibelots*, whereas it is this very marginality which valorizes the *bibelot* in the eyes of aesthetes such as the Goncourts and Montesquiou. Indeed, the rise of aestheticism contributes directly to the revalorization of the *bibelot* during the latter part of the century.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AESTHETICS

The qualities most closely associated with the phenomenon of the bibelot – heterogeneity, accumulation, and superfluosity – can be seen as values espoused by a series of nineteenth-century “-isms,” such as dilettantism, decadence, and aestheticism; as opposed to another series of “-isms” generally hostile to these qualities, such as rationalism, utilitarianism, scientific positivism, and progressivism. Embracing the first group of “-isms” and rejecting the latter, a certain nineteenth-century French cultural elite comes to embrace the bibelot, appropriating it as a part of a modern artistic sensibility.

The modernity of the bibelot lies precisely in its association with superfluous aesthetic qualities such as the ornamental, the merely pretty (as opposed to the Beautiful), the domestic, the feminine, and the minor arts. Hence the bibelot occupies a subordinate position within the hierarchies espoused by classical aesthetics and by the Academy of Beaux-Arts, making it an appropriate vehicle for anti-classical and anti-Academy sentiments. Intermingled with the more widely studied debates among painters and art critics, there is a neglected but equally influential alternative branch of aesthetics, an art of daily life in which the bibelot plays an essential role. This art of daily life grows out of the advancements in interior decor and comfort developed during the eighteenth century in France, and is further elaborated by the nineteenth century’s democratized cultural elite within the framework of those aesthetic movements which extend beyond literary and artistic genres to become ways of thinking, ways of seeing, and even lifestyles: Romanticism, Art for Art’s Sake, Dandyism, and Decadence. The more general attitude of aestheticism links the latter three of these movements.

In spite of Romanticism’s revalorization of medieval art and its fascination for archaeological ruins, its literary texts do not depict collectors, as Walter Benjamin remarks with surprise.²⁹ However, in realist and naturalist texts collecting is often associated with vestiges of Romanticism. In *L’Oeuvre*, Zola presents the collection of bibelots in the new home of writer Sandoz and his wife as such a remnant:

Le salon, qu’ils achevaient d’installer, s’encombraient de vieux meubles, de vieilles tapisseries, de *bibelots* de tous les peuples et de tous les siècles, un flot montant, débordant à cette heure, qui avait commencé aux Batignolles par le vieux pot de Rouen, qu’elle lui avait donné un jour de fête. Ils couraient ensemble les brocanteurs, ils avaient une rage joyeuse d’acheter; et lui contenait là d’anciens désirs de jeunesse, des ambitions *romantiques*, nées jadis de ses

premières lectures; si bien que cet écrivain, si farouchement moderne, se logeait dans le Moyen Age vermoulu qu'il rêvait d'habiter à quinze ans.³⁰

[Their newly furnished salon was filled with old furniture, old tapestries, and *bibelots* of all peoples and all centuries, a rising tide, at present overflowing, one which had begun at Batignolles with the old Rouen pot which she had given him on a special occasion. Together they made the rounds of the second-hand dealers and bought with joyful fury. He thus satisfied old desires of his youth, *romantic* ambitions born long ago of his early reading, so much so that this writer, so fiercely modern, lived in the worm-eaten Middle Ages which he dreamed of inhabiting at the age of fifteen.]

Sandoz's romantic "premières lectures" include Hugo and Musset (pp. 39–40). The writer of modern life living in a medieval-inspired interior represents an anachronism common to many authors of the period, including Zola himself, whose own interior was Gothic.³¹ A similar anachronism can be seen in the Sandoz's "rage joyeuse d'acheter" characteristic of the modern consumer, brought to the archaic retail spaces of the *brocanteurs* – spaces which still exist today. The passage also underlines the objects' heterogeneity ("de tous les peuples et de tous les siècles") and proliferation ("un flot montant, débordant"), echoing many of the passages cited above. However, given the signification of the Sandoz household within the novel's social structure, namely the contrast between the bourgeois lifestyle of the married writer as opposed to that of his Bohemian artist friends, on a narrative level the referent of these *bibelots* is not merely historicism, exoticism, or abundance, but also and especially a bourgeois domesticity which incorporates all three of these qualities.

Romanticism inspires not only a nostalgia for the remains of the past, but also a veneration of the artist and of the arts. During the early decades of the nineteenth century the cachet "artiste" serves as a "signal romantique," explains Alain Rey in his linguistic study of the term.³² Balzac builds links among art appreciation, collecting, and Romanticism in the portrait of the heroine of *La Muse du département*:

Une fois posée en femme supérieure, Dinah voulut donner des gages visibles de son amour pour les créations les plus remarquables de l'Art; elle s'associa vivement aux idées de l'école *romantique* en comprenant dans l'Art, la poésie et la peinture, la page et la statue, le meuble et l'opéra. Aussi devint-elle moyen âgiste. Elle s'enquit aussi des *curiosités* qui pouvaient dater de la Renaissance, et fit de ses fidèles autant de commissionnaires dévoués.³³

[Once established as a superior woman, Dinah wished to put forth some visible tokens of her love for the most remarkable creations of Art. She enthusiastically

associated herself with the *romantic* school by understanding Art to include poetry and painting, the written word and the statue, furniture and opera. She also became a medievalist. She also took an interest in *curiosities* which might date from the Renaissance, and commissioned her followers to become devoted intermediaries in this quest.]

Dinah's collection of medieval and Renaissance bibelots materializes (as "gages visibles") her romantic admiration not only for the decorative arts, but for all of the arts – including writing. As fragments of Art which stand for Art in general, these bibelots thus function as synecdoche. The synecdoche is doubled in that the appreciation of art in turn becomes a sign of Dinah's status as a "femme supérieure." The narrative thus assigns these bibelots a referential function of "distinction." Contrast this use of bibelots against that Zola assigned the Sandoz, whose collectibles signified not social ambition, but a cozy domesticity.

The notion of "Art for Art's Sake" further valorizes the bibelot. Gautier illustrates his famous declaration in response to utilitarianism, "je suis de ceux pour qui le superflu est nécessaire" ["I am someone for whom the superfluous is necessary"] by means of a bibelot: "Je préfère à certain vase qui me sert un vase chinois, semé de dragons et de mandarins, qui ne me sert pas du tout" ["I prefer to a useful vase a Chinese vase covered with dragons and mandarins, which is not useful at all"].³⁴ The bibelot embodies perfectly the values of superfluity and anti-utilitarianism, all the more so when it is a fantastically decorated *chinoiserie*. The fin-de-siècle aesthete inherits this anti-utilitarian appreciation of bizarre ornamental objects. The historical and exotic eclecticism which becomes incorporated into the aesthetics of collecting in many ways defies both conservative bourgeois values and the (neo)classical aesthetic. This would seem to help explain the reluctance of the French cultural elite to embrace the functionalism advocated by the English decorative arts reformers, since functionalism could be perceived as too closely related to Philistine utilitarianism. Yet the bibelot quickly becomes a stereotypical component of bourgeois decor. This necessitates a reappropriation of the bibelot from bourgeois domesticity, a process which relies on the plays of distinction embraced by Dandyism.

The figure of the Dandy helps to reconcile the paradoxical position of the bibelot, at once caught up in the system of fashion yet with claims to membership in the sphere of art, since the Dandy is not just a leader in matters of fashion and an arbiter of taste, but also a connoisseur of the arts. Furthermore, the anti-bourgeois Dandy, who is almost by definition a bachelor in lifestyle if not in fact, also rescues the bibelot from its

ties to banal bourgeois domesticity. As the abundant analyses of the Dandy insist, Dandyism goes beyond clothing to embrace an art of daily life, which becomes “une manière d’être, entièrement composée de nuances” [“a way of being composed entirely of nuances”].³⁵ The capacity to recognize the rare bibelot among the mass of ornamental objects on the market relies on an eye for nuances, becoming a mark not only of erudition, but especially of a certain inbred cultural mastery. Because he is known for the minimalism of his dress, in that his clothing is understated yet superior by means of almost imperceptible nuances, the Dandy is seen by art historian Linda Nochlin as “prophetic of avant-gardism” in his feeling that in art and taste “less is *truly* more.”³⁶ There is, however, an accompanying tendency towards accumulation which is not entirely “modernist” in Nochlin’s sense of the term: first there is the closet filled with clothing and accessories. More importantly for us, “real” and fictitious dandies accumulate in the form of the collection: the “original” English dandy Beau Brummell,³⁷ the count de Montesquiou, Huysmans’s des Esseintes, Jean Lorrain’s M. de Phocas, Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray, and Proust’s le baron Charlus are all *bibeloteurs*.

Decadence embraces the bibelot for its rarity, luxury, and artificiality. The interior of Huysmans’s des Esseintes (*A rebours*) comes immediately to mind. Bibelots with historical, mythical, or religious significations are first secularized then perverted in the exotic erotic decor of the decadent text. Collectors abound in the fin-de-siècle novels of Rachilde and Jean Lorrain, their carefully enumerated bibelots setting the stage for orgies, thinly disguised homosexual encounters, acts of sadism, drug abuse, and even murder.

Several referents for the (literary) bibelot have been identified thus far: domesticity, distinction, dandyism, anti-utilitarianism, and perversion. Such a range of possible significations allows the bibelot to proliferate in the full gamut of nineteenth-century literary forms, including realism, naturalism, “l’écriture artiste” of the Goncourts, symbolist poetry, and decadence. A common thread among these forms is a propensity for extra-literary erudition in various domains, such as documentation from the “real world” (the Goncourts, Flaubert, Zola), scholarship in art history (the Goncourts, Huysmans, Lorrain), and the seeking out of rare words (Huysmans, Mallarmé).³⁸ Writing in 1889, Auguste Chevré suggests that though his century has produced no period style of its own, it certainly has its own character:

Ce caractère est l'érudition.

Tant que l'influence du romantisme, et par conséquent du réalisme, se fera sentir, tant que nous serons dans cette période d'études, il n'y aura pas de style spécial possible.³⁹

[This character is erudition.

As long as the influence of romanticism, and consequently realism, makes itself felt, as long as we remain in this period of studies, no special style will be possible.]

The recycling of past styles in the decorative arts and in architecture requires the antiquarian's love of erudition. According to Proust, the spirit of erudition common to nineteenth-century writers, collectors, architects, and decorative artists is also shared by fashion-conscious women of fin-de-siècle high-society. In his early novel *Jean Santeuil*, written in the 1890s, the narrator explains that in creating her *appartement artistique*, "une femme qui n'a jamais appris l'histoire, travaille son hôtel pendant deux ans au Cabinet des Estampes" ["a woman who never learned history spends two years in the {national library's} Department of Engravings 'working on' her mansion"]. Erudition thus becomes fashionable.

"DES HOMMES DE MUSÉE"

What Chevré identifies as erudition could be compared to the spirit of dilettantism which characterizes the century for Paul Bourget. This characterization is brought to bear in the most substantial nineteenth-century analysis of the bibelot I have found, Bourget's 1885 newspaper commentary, republished in his well-known collection, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine: Etudes littéraires*. In it, Bourget draws an analogy between the bibelot, the dilettante's general intellectual attitude, and the Goncourt brothers' writing. In what appears to be a digression, this piece of literary criticism presents a para-literary representation of late nineteenth-century culture, from which can be deduced an intriguing configuration of persons, things, literary production, and material space. The intent here is not to read Bourget for an accurate portrayal of some kind of world view, but rather to examine how frivolous material goods fit into what he calls "psychologie contemporaine," which he understands as both individual and collective. The bibelot's capacity to carry such a heavy referential charge, as well as the nature of this referential charge, reveals a great deal about the social significance accorded material culture in the nineteenth century.

Writing in the medium of journalistic literary criticism targeted at the more culturally sophisticated newspaper reader, but nonetheless obliged to entertain, Bourget uses an almost obligatory tone of witty irony:

Les frères Goncourt ont été des hommes de musée, et en cela des modernes, dans toute la force du mot, car cet esprit de dilettantisme et de critique s'est développé chez nous à ce point qu'il a étendu le musée bien au delà des collections publiques et privées, en l'introduisant dans le moindre détail de l'ameublement et en créant le bibelot. Le bibelot, – ce minuscule fragment de l'oeuvre d'art, qui met sur un angle d'une table de salon quelque chose de l'extrême Orient et quelque chose de la Renaissance, un peu du moyen âge français et un peu du XVIII^e siècle!⁴⁰

[The Goncourt brothers were men of the museum and were therefore moderns in the strongest sense of the word, for our spirit of dilettantism and of criticism has developed to the point that it has extended the museum beyond public and private collections by introducing it into the smallest detail of furnishing and creating the bibelot. The bibelot – that minuscule fragment of the work of art which brings to the corner of a table something of the Far East and something of the Renaissance, a bit of the French Middle Ages and a bit of the eighteenth century.]

In one sentence Bourget shifts his focus from the Goncourt brothers to the bibelot, making the transition by evoking first the museum, then the spirit of dilettantism and criticism with which he defines his age. To be men of the museum is to embrace this spirit, therefore to be moderns. This spirit of dilettantism and criticism is credited with the creation of the bibelot. The meandering connections made in this sentence will require some unraveling.

For Bourget, in this and other essays in the collection (especially the article on Renan), dilettantism results from an “esprit d'analyse” which considers in turn a multiplicity of often contradictory cultural forms (art works, ideas, philosophies, religions, etc.) from various countries (pp. 36–44). It is the resulting incertitude in the face of diversity that defines the dilettante. Unlike the situation of contemplating a single work of art in its original spatial and cultural context, such as a Christian church or Greek temple, the museum presents numerous art works which have been detached, uprooted, and isolated from the context for which they were designed, presenting the visitor with an overwhelming number of contradictory influences. The museum, then, is not “le domaine du génie et de la création, c'est celui du dilettantisme et de la critique” [“the domain of genius and creation, it is the domain of dilettantism and criticism”] (p. 318). Dilettantism and criticism are opposed to genius and

creation. The opposition criticism/creation is used to describe the Goncourts' writing, which belongs to "le domaine de l'observation pure," thus requiring "des facultés de critique beaucoup plus que de créateur" ["the domain of pure observation" / "the capabilities of the critic more than those of the creator"] (p. 325). In this spirit, the brothers assemble and document facts to produce a "peinture" of the "moeurs de notre âge," reducing the novel, which should be "un art d'imagination," to "une tentative de science exacte" (p. 324). Such a project is well suited to its time: "le roman de constatation, d'analyse minutieuse, de nomenclature et de petits faits, est aussi celui qui convient le mieux à notre âge d'universel recensement" ["the novel of observation, of minute analysis, of nomenclature and of little facts, is also the novel which best suits our era of universal census"] (p. 325). And yet, paradoxically, the Goncourts are known for their self-described *écriture artiste*. This quasi-scientific census or inventory ("recensement") of minute facts is presented by means of "une rhétorique de l'image" drawn from painting and sculpture (pp. 339–40). Their writing, then, partakes at once in erudite documentation and the visual arts.

Summing up Bourget's scattered remarks, what dilettantism, criticism, the museum, and the Goncourts' writing have in common is a tendency to assemble and to analyze, juxtaposing things or ideas without hierarchizing or concluding. In other words, philosophical eclecticism meets decorative eclecticism, as the multiplication of objects converges with the multiplication of knowledge.⁴¹ But what ultimately underpin the creation of the bibelot as Bourget describes it – the extension of the museum into the bourgeois salon – are the twin nineteenth-century grand intellectual obsessions: the cult of Science and the cult of Art. More than mere markers of distinction, material things are at once a source of knowledge, hence their documentary value, and a source of aesthetic pleasure. The museum as interior becomes a private shrine of the cult of Art, rationalized by the doctrines of the cult of Science.

These issues converge in the bibelot, which is created by the extension of the museum beyond the space of the collection into the space of the living room ("cet esprit de dilettantisme et de critique . . . a étendu le musée bien au delà des collections publiques et privées, en l'introduisant dans . . . l'ameublement et en créant le bibelot"). The bibelot is born not only of the displacement of art (from museum to living room), but also by its fragmentation, as art is physically reformatted in miniature ("minuscule fragment"), suitable for display on a living room table. Moving

the artifact from the museum to the living room represents a secondary displacement, since the artifacts of the museum collection have already been displaced from cultures distant in time and/or space (the Orient, the Renaissance, the French Middle Ages, the eighteenth century, etc.). The growing body of criticism on collecting and the museum discusses the phenomenon of displacement at length. Bourget describes the movement of the *bibelot* through the material spaces of modernity, from the museum to the bourgeois interior, then follows its passage through the marketplace by noting its presence “aux devantures des grands magasins de nouveautés” and “dans la boutique du papetier,” then mentions the “magasin de bric-à-brac” (p. 319). In the sentences that I have cited, though, what is perhaps more significant than the displacement of the objects themselves, from museum to living room via the marketplace, is the displacement of agency from persons – in this case the Goncourt brothers – to a prevailing cultural attitude, as embodied in a cultural institution – the museum. To be “des hommes de musée” is to be subjects constructed in and by a world of objects.

Bourget credits the *bibelot* with a transformation of the nineteenth-century interior, and with the absence of a properly nineteenth-century decorative style, echoing the remarks of Chevré (cited above):

Le *bibelot*, – qui a transformé la décoration de tous les intérieurs et leur a donné une physionomie d’archaïsme si continûment curieuse et si docilement soumise que notre XIX^e siècle, à force de colliger et de vérifier tous les styles, aura oublié de s’en fabriquer un! (p. 319)

[The *bibelot*, which transformed the decor of all interiors and gave them an archaic physiognomy so utterly curious and so docilely submissive that, as a result of collating and affirming all styles, our nineteenth century has forgotten to make one for itself.]

In other words, the cultural phenomenon of the *bibelot* leads to a spirit of passive submission (“si docilement soumise”) in the face of a disparate array of past styles, a situation which in the end circumvents the creation of a new nineteenth-century style.

Finally, in a sentence hidden in the middle of this tirade, it is revealed that the *bibelot* corresponds to the period’s psychology:

Le *bibelot*, – manie raffinée d’une époque inquiète où les lassitudes de l’ennui et les maladies de la sensibilité nerveuse ont conduit l’homme à s’inventer des passions factices de collectionneur, tandis que sa complication interne le rendait incapable de supporter la large et saine simplicité des choses autour de lui! (p. 319)

[The bibelot, refined mania of an anxious era in which the weariness of ennui and the illnesses of nervous sensitivity have led man to invent for himself the artificial passions of the collector, while his internal complexity renders him unable to tolerate the broad and healthy simplicity of the things around him.]

The connection between mental illness, artificiality, and psychological complication corresponds to the familiar themes of decadence, which Bourget theorizes in his famous essay on Baudelaire.⁴²

Bourget concludes his discussion of the bibelot by proclaiming its fundamental importance to the comprehension of much of the literature of his time:

Le bibelot . . . C'est une mode, et qui s'en ira comme une autre; mais l'analyste de notre société contemporaine ne peut pas plus la négliger que l'historien du grand siècle ne saurait laisser sous silence le paysage taillé du parc de Versailles. La noble poésie de Racine est en rapport étroit avec l'horizon qui se voit de la terrasse du vieux palais, et une grande portion de notre littérature actuelle demeure inintelligible sans l'aspect de magasin de bric-à-brac habituel à nos installations. (p. 319)

[The bibelot . . . It is a fashion which will disappear like any other, but the analyst of our contemporary society can no more ignore it than the historian of the great century can silently pass over the manicured landscape of the Versailles gardens. The noble poetry of Racine is closely tied to the horizon visible from the terrace of the old palace, and a large part of our current literature remains unintelligible without the presence of the curiosity shop so common to our scenery.]

Had the “magasin de bric-à-brac” actually usurped the cultural place of the Versailles gardens, Le Nôtre’s royal monument of landscape architecture? What are the implications of claiming such a substitution? The Versailles park represents a grandiose rationalization of nature which submits an entire horizon to seventeenth-century monarchical power.⁴³ In contrast, the *magasins de bric-à-brac* which populate the nineteenth-century urban cityscape represent displays of cultural debris which circulate in the marketplace, propelled by fashion (“C’est une mode”). Under the Third Republic, fashion has replaced the monarch as arbiter of style.⁴⁴ Urban daily life has replaced court life as the locus of culture. Le Nôtre’s rationalization of nature gives way to a pervasive commodification of culture – at least as conceptualized in Bourget’s spatialization of the literary imaginary.

The intimate relationship which ties material space, such as the Versailles park and the antique/junk shop, to the literary works for which they provide a visual field, would seem to suggest that material

culture provides the backdrop for the staging of literary production. However, it is important to be wary of the shiftiness inherent in the foreground/background distinction, especially in nineteenth-century narrative forms, where the things in space traditionally relegated to the background suddenly move to the foreground, first in the realist description, then even more dramatically in the heavily descriptive narratives of naturalism and decadence. As material objects multiply during the nineteenth century, material culture is accorded more and more space in the literary text. Balzac establishes ample space for material culture in the novel, but positions it in the background. In certain of their novels, Flaubert, the Goncourts, and Huysmans move material culture into the foreground. A sense of instability is created by the foregrounding of elements ordinarily considered as background, such as bibelots, resulting in the sort of imbalance which characterizes what Naomi Schor has called the "ornamental text." The destabilizing effects of foregrounding the background mirrors the cultural effects of the replacement of the monarch by the amorphous forces of the market. The bibelot affords a unique perspective on material culture precisely because it is a moving vantage point, shifting from background to foreground, through the spaces of art, commerce, and private life, through material space and literary space. The bibelot creates and is created by this movement, forms and is formed by the subjects which manipulate it, whether these subjects be writers or their characters, explicitly fictive or purportedly non-fiction.