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0521661560 - Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities

Janell Watson

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book began as a study of the *bibilot*, the modern French term for knick-knack or curiosity, but quickly grew to encompass the larger questions of collecting, consuming, classifying, and describing. For the sake of working within a coherent historical context, the primary locus of the book remains nineteenth-century France, though analogous cultural phenomena can be found throughout Europe, North America, and many former European colonies. Because the topic does transcend national borders, I do include several critical texts from outside France.

Bibelots – knick-knacks, curiosities, collectibles, antiques, *objets d'art* – proliferate in French literary texts during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The bibilot makes its first major canonical appearance in Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons* (1847). Its golden age is marked by Huysmans's *A rebours*, Edmond de Goncourt's *La Maison d'un artiste*, and Mallarmé's famous line "Aboli bibilot d'inanité sonore" (1881, 1884, and 1887 respectively). By this point in literary prose, one more intellectual than chronological, material objects have ceased to function as mere vehicles of information about their user and the world of people, as authors begin to provide more and more information about objects themselves, and the world of objects to which these belong. Plot begins to deteriorate, overrun by description. Signifiers multiply then begin to float free. By the end of the century, the presence of objects in texts no longer needs to be justified by their connections either to people or to the "real." The literary object becomes gratuitous, yet authors continue to be drawn toward it. It multiplies and proliferates in the text, just as objects without use-value – bibelots – multiply and proliferate in the marketplace and in the nineteenth-century interior. We could call this phenomenon the bibilot-effect, the sudden invasion of culture by gratuitousness, which amounts to a way of describing modernization and decadence in terms of a literary history of material culture. The late

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nineteenth-century writer and critic Paul Bourget declares an understanding of the bibelot indispensable to the literary and cultural analysis of his time. Several decades later, however, Proust celebrates the bibelot's last moments of glory in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–22). Why does the bibelot flourish in and then fade from French literature at this particular time and place?

The literary history of the bibelot coincides with the history of European material culture. As detailed in chapter one, by the 1840s a new category of objects has come into being, the category designated by the word “bibelot,” whose meaning has evolved to encompass a disparate array of goods, ranging from mass-produced trinkets to priceless collectors' items. Examples include exquisite porcelain vases, finely crafted snuff boxes, oriental figurines, master paintings, factory glassware, and cheap souvenirs. Superfluosity, or the absence of use-value, is the sole unifying criterion for the seemingly heterogeneous list of items belonging to this category. The confusing nature of the category expresses the inadequacy of existing organizational frameworks for dealing with the onslaught of material goods associated with industrial production and mass consumption. The prominence of the term in nineteenth-century French literature, in fiction as well as in criticism and commentary, signals a massive semantic and spatial reorganization of the world of goods.

Defined within the context of the consumer and industrial revolutions, the bibelot can be seen as the quintessential object of modern material culture. Its widespread presence signals that luxury goods have become available, at least hypothetically, to the middle and even the working classes. However, the emergence of this category of gratuitous luxury goods cannot be explained solely by the economic history of modern industrial production and mass consumption. The history of older cultural practices such as collecting and interior decorating, as well as non-monetary forms of exchange (barter, the gift, the recuperation of debris, the archaeological dig), must also be taken into account. Telling the story of the bibelot involves telling stories of collecting, displaying, decorating, selling, shopping, classifying, and cataloguing.

That the bibelot becomes a literary object is a significant part of its material history. Writing, in forms as diverse as novels, newspapers, and interior decorating manuals, plays an integral part in the modernizing reconfiguration of material culture which takes place throughout the nineteenth century. Throughout this study, literary and para-literary writing is juxtaposed against resolutely non-literary writing. Novels,

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short stories, and lines of poetry are considered alongside journalism, diaries by literary figures, literary criticism, art criticism, museum catalogues, how-to manuals on collecting and interior decorating, industry reports by arts administrators and decorative arts professionals, social commentary, and sociology. The purpose of including commercial and social scientific writing is to broaden the discursive field, thus allowing for a better understanding of the world of goods, which far exceeds the bounds of the literary realm. The relationship between the bibelot and this writing is more than a question of rhetorical style. The bibelot calls forth a concrete practice of objects, a logic of material things, an aesthetics, an epistemology. To be a *bibeloteur*, a collector of bibelots, is to contemplate, comprehend, and organize objects in certain ways, whether these be the objects in a living room or the objects in a novel. The presence of the bibelot transforms literature and living rooms alike. The bibelot-filled novel is not a “representation” of the bibelot-filled living room, nor is the literary bibelot some sort of self-reflexive signifier cut off from its material referent by means of the transcendental powers sometimes imputed to language. Rather, the heavily descriptive novel is as much a product of nineteenth-century material culture as is the bourgeois living room.

The onslaught of material goods associated with industrialization and consumer society poses several sorts of problems. First and foremost, there is the matter of organization, classification, and order. From the perspective of the bibelot, an object born of domestic daily life, existing notions of order tend to be overly formalistic, based as they are on analyses of taxonomy, collecting, and the museum. I have therefore found it necessary to rethink the logic(s) of classification in terms of the logic of daily life. Second, there arise issues of evaluation, of determining the relative worth of things in terms of money, aesthetics, scholarly interest, and/or prestige. Third, accumulations of goods present problems of representation, whether one’s purpose is accounting, inventorying, or describing. Fourth, and this stems directly from the third problem, there arise issues of balance between persons and things, and between narration and description. Classic poetics presumes that persons and events should be privileged over things and descriptions, whereas many fin-de-siècle texts challenge this formulation. Finally, there is the matter of interpretation, of finding meaning in superfluous material things, of reading things for information about people, or for historical or anthropological knowledge.

These concerns continuously surface and resurface throughout the

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chapters which follow, though each chapter brings one set of issues to the forefront. Following the historical overview provided in the opening chapter, chapter two makes use of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "practical logic" to examine the less-than-coherent reasoning by which the objects of material culture are classified, described, evaluated, and judged. In chapter three, I move from organization to meaning, tracing a genealogy of the encoding of domestic furnishings with the vocabulary of art, showing how distinctions of class and gender are mapped onto a distinction between art and fashion. Chapter four shifts the focus from meaning to knowledge, through a reading of the collecting episode in Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Taking issue with previous criticism, I argue that what seems to be an epistemology of the museum coincides with and overlaps other epistemologies, those of domestic daily life, of social class, and of consumption. Chapter five asks why modernist literary critics have been harsh on inventory-like descriptions, while poststructuralist and postmodern literary critics have embraced the catalogue form. Chapter six examines descriptions of domestic interiors by novelists, social commentators, and sociologists, all of whom use similar strategies to elicit information from ordinary household objects, in effect rendering the bibelot "readable." Chapter seven charts a trend that evolves in fantastic and decadent narrative: alterations in classic plot structure correlate closely to alterations in traditional configurations of household furnishings. Present in all chapters is the question of order (and disorder), of the intertwined organizational logic(s) (and illogic) of the material, the social, and the textual.

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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

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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-

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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.

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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

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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

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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*