The Purchase of the Past

Offering a broad and vivid survey of the culture of collecting from the French Revolution to the belle époque, The Purchase of the Past explores how material things became a central means of accessing and imagining the past in nineteenth-century France. By subverting the monarchical establishment, the French Revolution not only heralded the dawn of the museum age; it also threw an unprecedented quantity of artworks into commercial circulation, allowing private individuals to pose as custodians and saviours of the endangered cultural inheritance. Through their common itineraries, erudition and sociability, an early generation of scavengers established their own form of ‘private patrimony’, independent from state control. Over a century of Parisian history, Tom Stammers explores collectors’ investments – not just financial but also emotional and imaginative – in historical artefacts, as well as their uncomfortable relationship with public institutions. In so doing, he argues that private collections were a critical site for salvaging and interpreting the past in a post-revolutionary society, accelerating but also complicating the development of a shared national heritage.

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Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary Paris c.1790–1890

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Dans quelle capitale trouverait-on, ainsi qu’à Paris, ces collections nombreuses et variées, formées avec tant de soins et d’amour par des amateurs les mettant à la disposition des curieux, des artistes, des étrangers? – Que de trésors sont renfermés dans ces collections! Que de choses, connues dans l’histoire des arts, mais dont on a perdu la trace, s’y retrouvent!

P. Hedouin, ‘Cabinets d’amateurs-collection de M. Horsin Deon’, L’Artiste (1848)

À l’âge des révolutions, au moment où les hommes font l’expérience de la destruction radicale sur le plan social, et ressentent la temporalité comme un écoulement linéaire et irréversible, les objets préservés, hérités d’un passé parfois reculé, sont les derniers dépositaires d’une permanence à laquelle il a fallu renoncer.

## Contents

**List of Illustrations**  page viii  
**Acknowledgements**  x  

Introduction: Collection, Recollection, Revolution  1  

1 *Amateurs* and the Art Market in Transition (c.1780–1830)  27  

2 Archiving and Envisioning the French Revolution (c.1780–1830)  69  

3 Book Hunting, Bibliophilia and a Textual Restoration (c.1790–1840)  116  

4 Salvaging the Gothic in Private and Public Spaces (c.1820–1870)  159  

5 Royalists versus Vandals, and the Cult of the Old Regime (c.1860–1880)  203  

6 Allies of the Republic? Inside the Sale of the Century (c.1870–1895)  243  

Conclusion: The Resilience and Eclipse of *Curiosité*  286  

**Bibliography**  301  
**Index**  346
Illustrations

1 Anon., ‘L’Antiquaire’, chez Martinet

2 Julien-Léopold Boilly, ‘Le Connaisseur. C’est un Raphael, ou je ne m’y connais pas’

3 Pierre Gault de Saint-Germain, ‘L’amateur des tableaux en extase’ (1817)

4 Anon., ‘La marchande de tableaux, ou les amateurs en plein vent’

5 Anon., ‘Incendie des pavillons situés dans la place du Carrousel.’ (Soulavie collection)

6 Anon., ‘Au Représentant du Peuple Cambacérès’ (Soulavie collection)

7 Anon., ‘À Alexandre Lenoir, conservateur des monuments de la monarchie’ (Soulavie collection)

8 Anon., ‘Premier repas de Louis XVI & de sa famille dans sa prison du Temple’ (Soulavie collection)

9 (Joseph Boze), ‘M. Magon. Décapité à l’âge de 81 ans. Le 1 Thermid. An 2.’ (Soulavie collection)

10 Anon., ‘Agnus Dei’ (Soulavie collection)

11 ‘Dessin de la présidence de Barère et du roi à la barre

12 Anon., ‘Consommatum est.’ (Soulavie collection)

13 ‘Quel héros peut avoir été annoncé en 1782 après Louis XVI sinon l’empereur?’ Frontispiece to Jean-Louis Soulavie, Tableaux de l’histoire de la décadence de la monarchie française (1803)

14 ‘Explication des figures places vis-à-vis les frontispieces de chaque volume’. Jean-Louis Soulavie, Tableaux de l’histoire de la décadence de la monarchie française (1803)

15 Émile Dufey fils, ‘Le bouquiniste de la quai Voltaire’, Marlet and Duféy, Nouveaux tableaux de Paris (1820)

16 Pierre Gault de Saint-Germain, ‘M. Nid-aux-rats’

17 Pierre Gault de Saint-Germain, ‘Le Bouquiniste en jouissance’
List of Illustrations ix

18 Honoré Daumier, ‘Un bouquiniste dans l’ivresse’. Les beaux jours de la vie, no. 28 (1844) 156
19 Arthur Roberts, ‘Intérieur du cabinet de M. Sauvageot’ (1856) 161
20 John Frederick Lewis, ‘A Room in the Apartment of the Collector Charles Sauvageot’ (1833–8) 177
21 Jules-Joseph Bourdet, ‘Dieux, que je suis heureux depuis que j’ai ma chambre gothique!’ in Béotisme parisien (1835–7) 178
22 Jules-Joseph Bourdet, ‘Mon musée’ in Béotisme parisien (1835–7) 179
23 Louis Henriquel-Dupont, ‘Al.dre Ch.les Sauvageot de l’Académie royale de musique’ (1833) 182
24 (Émile Planat) Marcelin, ‘Les curiosités à la mode’ in L’Illustration: journal universel, no. 954 (1861) 201
25 Adolphe Varin, ‘Ex-libris du Baron Jérôme Pichon’ in Dominique Pineau, Livre de pieds de table (1756) 209
27 ‘La grande salle à manger’ in Lucien Double, Promenades à travers deux siècles et quatorze salons (1878) 230
28 ‘Pl. VI: Orfèvrerie religieuse’ in La collection Spitzer: Antiquité – Moyen Âge – Renaissance, 6 vols. (1890–2) 246
29 ‘La collection Spitzer’, L’art pour tous (July 1890) 269
30 Gustav-Adolf Mossa, Israël (1893/1903) 279
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