

## 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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# The Purchase of the Past

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

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Tom Stammers

*University of Durham*



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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.

Dominique Pety, *Poétique de la collection au XIX siècle: du document de l'historien au bibelot de l'esthète* (2010)

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