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## Rethinking Revolutionary Culture: Introduction

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In this panel of essays for H-France Salon, four historians reflect on what the French Revolution means today, thirty years on from the 1989 Bicentennial and in light of a new scholarly interest in collecting and the material culture of the French Revolution.

Philippe Bordes writes from a unique perspective as the founding director of Musée de la Révolution Française at Vizille, in south-east France, tasked with forming a long-term vision for the collection and display of revolutionary patrimony for modern French audiences. Richard Taws is a historian of visual art at University College London. He is author of the 2013 book, *The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France*, co-edited *Art and Technology in Early Modern Europe* (2016) and is co-author of the recent *Interacting with Print: Elements of Reading in the Era of Print Saturation* (2018). Tom Stammers is a cultural historian at the University of Durham and author of many recent articles about collecting and the afterlife of French Revolutionary material culture in nineteenth-century France. His forthcoming book, *The Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary France* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) explores the politics of collecting, the art market and cultural heritage in post-revolutionary France. The editor of this *Salon* and author of the introductory essay, Sophie Matthiesson is curator of European art at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of a forthcoming study on artists in prison in the French Revolution and a chapter on prison-made portraits in a forthcoming book, *Life in Revolutionary France*, edited by Jennifer Heuer and Mette Harder (Bloomsbury, 2020).

### INTRODUCTION

#### Other Criteria: Thinking about the French Revolution through material culture<sup>1</sup>

In 1822 the eminent French aesthete Antoine Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy looked back upon the French Revolution, and damned it as ‘a sort of lacuna, a deserted and sterile space for the history of art’.<sup>2</sup> While few would deny that public art suffered at times from the uncertainties of successive regime changes in the decade after 1789, Quatremère’s wholly negative view was the fiction of an embittered political reactionary, contrived in part to

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Marisa Linton and Ian Collier for proposing this forum and to Philippe Bordes, David Garrioch, Tom Stammers and Richard Taws for comments on earlier drafts of this introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Quatremère de Quincy, *Éloge historique de M. Van Spaendonck: Séance publique de l’Académie Royale des Beaux-arts du 5 octobre 1822* (Paris: L’Imprimerie de Firmin Didot, 1822).

negate his own substantial early role in the aesthetic program of the new Republic.<sup>3</sup> It a view that was nevertheless readily echoed by others over the course of the nineteenth century, especially those who feared Jacobin ideology and the spectre of popular will, and who wished – in the words of Carolina Armenteros – to bring “the age of ‘the great crisis’ to a close.”<sup>4</sup> The narrative of sterility, implying the icy extermination of individual creativity by the ideological overreach of the state, offered an alternative to narratives of the Revolution which portrayed it as one of frenzied acts of unbridled destruction and cultural vandalism.

Greater forces than the turning tides of taste and fashion were, therefore, behind the century-long eclipse of the Revolution’s rich artistic legacy. Since then it has fallen to republican governments at important anniversaries to recover lost ground and restore the prestige of revolutionary culture. The Centenary celebration in 1889, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 1939 and the Bicentenary of 1989 each provided the impetus for new museums, exhibitions and publications that aimed to neutralise some of the received prejudice around the art of this politically-charged decade through the process of celebrating it. But positions continue to be viscerally entrenched over the cultural legacy of the Revolution, as exemplified in recent decades by one aristocratic patron of the Musée Carnavalet, an authority on Marie-Antoinette, who was said to have kept the palette of the Jacobin painter Jacques-Louis David under glass at the foot of her staircase, and to have made a spitting gesture each time she passed it.

In 1988 the French art historians Philippe Bordes and Régis Michel introduced their book *Aux Armes et Aux Arts!* – a landmark survey of art and its institutions in the revolutionary decade – with a question: ‘Why is there so much lasting hostility to one of the richest periods in French art?’<sup>5</sup> Since then, new insights about the dynamic role of material culture (such as symbols, objects, prints, furniture and dress) in the formation of revolutionary consciousness only confirm and highlight the extent to which the cultural legacy of the Revolution, with the exception of elite academic painting and sculpture, has gone neglected.<sup>6</sup> Much of the key material attesting to such cultural vitality is readily designated ‘ephemera’. This term is rarely found applied to the surviving cultural fragments of the ancien regime, or indeed earlier periods in European history. The British art historian Richard Taws tackled this problematic head-on in 2013, when he opened his remarkable book on French revolutionary material culture with Quatremère’s remarks, and proceeded to show how a denial of value

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<sup>3</sup> In a 1997 article, Annie Jourdan traced the origins of such critiques further back, to the Thermidorian and Directorial periods. See ‘Politique artistique et Révolution française (1789-1800): La régénération des arts, un échec?’ in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, n°309, 1997, 401–421.

<sup>4</sup> Carolina Armenteros, ‘Revolutionary Violence and the End of History: The Divided Self in Francophone Thought, 1762–1914’, in Carolina Armenteros, Tim Blanning, Isabel Di Vanna and Dawn Dodds (eds), *Historicising the French Revolution* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 2.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Pourquoi tant d’hostilité perdurable à l’une des périodes les plus riches de l’art français?’ Introduction, ‘Un art révolutionnaire’, in *Aux Armes et Aux Arts: les Arts de la Révolution, 1789–1799* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1988) 5.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the essays by Dena Goodman, Carolyn Sargentson, Mimi Hellman and Kathryn Norberg, in Dena Goodman, Kathryn Norberg, eds., *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture can tell us about the European and American Past* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2010) and Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: The Politics of Everyday Life in Britain, North America and France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009).

has been built into the very categories through which we think about, collect and preserve revolutionary material culture.<sup>7</sup> As Taws points out in the present essay, the term ‘ephemera’ risks refusing lasting value and specificity to a vast range of cultural objects that were part of people’s daily lives, especially those items that fell outside the category of fine art.

### **The Bicentenary in focus**

When Quatremère looked back upon the French Revolution in 1822 and denied its cultural value, over three decades had elapsed since the Fall of the Bastille, during which time he witnessed the rise of the revolutionary museum (the conversion of the royal collection at the Louvre into a public museum in August 1793), and the Musée des Monuments français in 1795, both of which he vehemently rejected.<sup>8</sup> A similar interval has now passed since the Bicentenary of 1989, a point at which to evaluate some of its key achievements from the perspective of art history. In raw terms of bricks and mortar, the Bicentenary under François Mitterrand saw the inauguration of the first dedicated Musée de la Révolution Française, situated in the symbolically-charged building of the Château de Vizille, home of the Estates-General in 1788, department of Isère in south-east France. The premises itself thus comprised a key piece of material culture through which to contextualise a nascent collection. In his essay ‘The Emotive Artefacts of the French Revolution’, its founding director Philippe Bordes refers to the challenges of forming a national collection from scratch. He also reflects on the opportunity the project provided to re-set how revolutionary culture might be interpreted and displayed for future audiences. As the Bicentenary approached Bordes sought a contrast to what he perceived as the excessive materiality of the Parisian Musée Carnavalet, founded a century earlier, with its accretion of artefacts, the anecdotal interest of which took precedence over rigorous analysis and pandered to royalist nostalgia.

The interpretative push by revisionist historians François Furet, Mona Ozouf and Lynn Hunt towards political and cultural explanations for the revolution, which had been building for some time, gained traction in these years surrounding the anniversary.<sup>9</sup> Their rejection of class and economic causes, represented by Marxist Albert Soboul and his followers, did not always forsake the Marxist interest in the lives of ordinary people. Rather, it propelled a new interest in language, symbolism, rituals and rhetoric and how they were reclaimed in everyday politics. It also propelled new attention to forms of mass and participatory culture, such as revolutionary festivals, popular music and the printed word and image. This new focus on a distinct revolutionary culture shaped many of the exhibitions and scholarly projects engendered by the Bicentenary, under the stewardship of the pluralistic successor to Soboul, Michel Vovelle.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional, Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (PA: Penn State University Press, 2013) 8.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Haskell, ‘Les musées et leurs ennemis’, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 49, septembre 1983, 39 and 103–106. For the evolution of the revolutionary museum see Andrew McClellan, *Inventing The Louvre : Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See Lynn Hunt, ‘The French Revolution in Culture: New Approaches and Perspectives’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22: 3, Spring 1989, 293–301.

<sup>10</sup> On the background to this see David Jordan, ‘Economics versus Culture: Two views of the French Revolution’, *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 28: 1, Winter 1987, 83–90.

With hindsight the Bicentenary might be viewed as a struggle over how far any particular professor or set of university professionals could provide an authorized history, often in terms of specific rivalries, like those between Vovelle at the Sorbonne and Furet, the outsider at EHESS, or more generally, historians in Paris versus those in the provinces. The net gains and achievements of the Bicentenary for the visual arts have been weighed elsewhere by art historians who played a part in the great jamboree.<sup>11</sup> Less known is how the Bicentenary has been seen by later generations of art historians of the French Revolution whose careers were forged in its wake. In Taws' view, the intense focus upon the painter Jacques-Louis David in the exhibition at the Louvre curated by Antoine Schnapper, and the follow-up symposium *David Contre David* in 1989, emphasised grand subjects and modes, in particular neoclassical history painting to the detriment of what he terms 'the small stuff'.<sup>12</sup> From a slightly different angle, cultural historian Tom Stammers perceives the Bicentenary as having been overly dominated by discourse. Stammers is part of a growing number of scholars attending to the Revolution's material outputs as 'tangible products and embodied practices' where symbolic and social realms intersect.

In their reservations, Taws and Stammers represent a generational shift away from the priorities of art historians such as Schnapper and Bordes, who in the 1980s chose to privilege academic (neoclassical) painting and sculpture as the most significant spheres of cultural activity, and a concurrent shift away from the emphasis of American and British counterparts, such as Thomas Crow and Richard Wrigley, upon the Paris Salon as a site of discursive production.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars in this post-1989 generation include German art historian Gerrit Walczak, who considers revolutionary artists displaced from Paris or operating outside an academic framework and Richard Clay, whose work on iconoclasm explores objects as vehicles of changing political meanings, independent of their aesthetic or material status.<sup>14</sup> My own research considers works of art made and commissioned by suspects in the makeshift political prisons of 1793-1795, and which are therefore well outside the normative material, critical and commercial frameworks of the studio, Salon and art

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, Adrian Rifkin, 'Bi-Centennial Literature on Art and the French Revolution', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1990, 113–117 and Philippe Bordes, 'La recherche sur l'art de la Révolution française. Le tournant du bicentenaire', in Jean-Clément Martin (ed.), *La Révolution à l'œuvre. Perspectives actuelles dans l'histoire de la Révolution française* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005) 257–268.

<sup>12</sup> Antoine Schnapper et al, *Jacques-Louis David 1748–1825*, Musée du Louvre, Paris and Musée national du Château de Versailles, 26 October 1989–12 February 1990, and Régis Michel (dir.), *David Contre David. Actes du colloque organisé au Musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 6 au 10 décembre 1989* (Paris: Documentation française, 1993). See Taws essay in this salon. 'In such a climate, which threw up in turn a whirlwind of commemorative objects, a return to the small stuff, to the *ephemeral*, offered one way of retrieving from the period a sense of detail that had been lost in the historiographical debates of the previous decade, while also putting pressure on dominant accounts of the era's art that had concentrated on neoclassical painting and sculpture.'

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Gerrit Walczak, 'Low Art, Popular Imagery and Civic Commitment in the French Revolution', *Art History*, 3: 2, April 2007, 247–77 and Richard Clay, *Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Paris: The Transformation of Signs* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012).

market.<sup>15</sup> A significant number of these prison-made works are now preserved in the Musée Carnavalet. Some of the participants in the formidable *David Contre David* colloquium have since turned their attention to material culture and ‘the small stuff’ of the Revolution, such as Wrigley, whose 2002 examination of revolutionary dress included its transformation into politically-charged relics.<sup>16</sup> Material culture is also a lens through which David himself has been examined, most recently by Katie Scott and Hannah Williams, whose forthcoming study interrogates objects owned by artists in eighteenth-century France.<sup>17</sup> Somewhat ironically, it is as a result of new sets of questions being generated by current scholars – including Taws, who interrogates ideas of the ephemeral, and Stammers, who looks at the roles of collectors and their relationship to the Revolution through material things – that the kinds of objects that have long languished in cluttered displays, such as those at the Musée Carnavalet, are now undergoing something of a reappraisal.

### Recent revolutions: Information sans frontières

Art historians who ‘came to the party too late’, to borrow Taws’ phrase, and experienced the Bicentenary only through the many scholarly publications left in its wake, soon became the beneficiaries of another kind of information bonanza. In an eventful year that was also punctuated by the Tiananmen Square massacre and the fall of the Berlin wall, the birth of the ‘World Wide Web’ went relatively unnoticed.<sup>18</sup> The silent breakthrough, which enabled information sharing between computer networks, took place, appropriately enough, in Geneva, a city that had also played a noted role in the history of the Enlightenment, as one of the locations from which the *Encyclopédie* or ‘*Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*’ was printed in the 1770s and disseminated to over four thousand subscribers throughout Europe.<sup>19</sup>

In its time the *Encyclopédie* also aided the revolution of knowledge through an ingenious system of cross-referencing, designed to link entries and generate unexpected juxtapositions. Chief among its editors’ stated intentions was to ‘restore to artists the justice that is their due’, by dissolving once and for all of the snobbish distinctions between the ‘liberal’ and ‘manual’ crafts, which they achieved structurally by paying equal attention to the entries for the ‘*Artes Mechanicae*’ and the more prestigious arts of painting sculpture.<sup>20</sup> Their quest to disrupt hierarchies of received knowledge through a simple mechanism of equivalence had

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<sup>15</sup> Sophie Matthiesson, ‘The Fine Art of Surviving: Prison-Made Art in Revolutionary France 1793–1795’ (provisional title).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearance: Representations of Dress in Revolutionary France* (Oxford: New York: Berg, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Katie Scott and Hannah Williams, *Artists’ Things: Lost Property from 18th-Century France* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> For the history of Tim Berners-Lee and CERN World Wide Web see <https://webfoundation.org/about/vision/history-of-the-web/>

<sup>19</sup> Robert Darnton, ‘Hidden Editions of the Encyclopédie’ in *Cinq siècles d'imprimerie genevoise: Actes du Colloque international sur l'histoire de l'imprimerie et du livre à Genève, 27–30 avril 1978* (Genève: Société d'histoire et d'archéologie, 1980–1981) 73–75. The much cheaper quarto edition was printed in Geneva by Jean-Léonard Pellet in 1777 and was within reach of the professional classes. See John Lough, *The Encyclopédie* (Genève: Slatkine, 1989) 60.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 152–5.

epistemological implications which they claimed extended beyond any particular skilled occupation (such as porcelain or silk manufacturing,) to change, as Denis Diderot put it, ‘the general way of thinking’.<sup>21</sup>

The electronic diffusion of French Revolutionary visual culture in the institutional, private and commercial spheres after 1989 was not immediate, but it was steady. The first museum websites were launched in 1993, the first blogs in 1994, and Ebay in 1995. Two years later, in 1997, the Bibliothèque Nationale uploaded Gallica, its collection of digitised texts, which now includes well over one million images. In the early 2000s, the first university-driven websites emerged with illustrative teaching resources for the French Revolution alongside essays, such as *Imaging the French Revolution*, edited by Jack Censer and Lynn Hunt through the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History & New Media at George Mason University.<sup>22</sup> More recently the French Revolution Digital Archive, created between 2006 and 2013 by Dan Edelstein and the Bibliothèque Nationale through Stanford University, includes over 14,000 revolutionary images no longer protected by intellectual property rights. This disseminative trend has since diversified, to include more specialized projects that foreground the visual arts, such as *Artists in Paris, Mapping the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Art World*, created by Hannah Williams and Chris Sparks, and funded by The Leverhulme Trust at Queen Mary University, London, which spatially and diachronically traces artist communities across eighteenth-century Paris.<sup>23</sup>

### **The good, the bad and the ugly: Art sans hiérarchie**

The initial impact of the internet was not unlike that of the first democratic art salons held at the Louvre in 1791 and 1793, when the public was confronted with the vertiginous spectacle of over two thousand submissions by complete newcomers as well as established figures, jostling on the walls for attention with no discernible hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> ‘I saw the sublime, beautiful, good, mediocre, bad and rubbish’, wrote the German engraver Georg Johann Wille: ‘in short the contest is prodigious’.<sup>25</sup> Two years later no signs of order were discernible to conservative critics who complained of the ‘*fatras de production ineptes*’ (‘a jumble of feckless productions’), that they saw in the 1793 Salon.<sup>26</sup> Today’s students of the French Revolution encounter objects and images of all kinds via the web, drawn from commercial, museum and private sources and presented on an equal footing. A simple search of French revolutionary art generates a *fatras* of such diversity and quantity that it might beggar belief to these young ‘digital natives’, that the years 1789–1799 had once been damned as ‘a deserted and sterile space for the history of art’.

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<sup>21</sup> Angelica Gooden, ‘Diderot, Rousseau and the art of craft’, in James Fowler (ed.), *New Essays on Diderot*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 55–6; 59–73.

<sup>22</sup> See <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/imaging/about.html>

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.artistsinparis.org/>

<sup>24</sup> For the breakdown of works in each of the revolutionary salons see Udolpho van de Sandt, ‘Les salons parisiens sous la Révolution’, in Michel Vovelle (ed.), *Les Images de la Révolution française*, Actes du Colloque (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1988) 39–44.

<sup>25</sup> ‘J’y vis du sublime, du beau et bon, du médiocre, du mauvais et de la croûterie; enfin le concours est prodigieux’, Johann Georg Wille, *Memoires et Journal de Wille*, II (Paris: Renouard, 1857) 323.

<sup>26</sup> See *Le Courrier français*, 19 vendémiaire an IV [11 October 1795]. Quoted in van de Sandt (1988), 40. It should be noted however that such critics only dared to publish these views retrospectively.

## Museological exclusion

The systematic disavowal by museums of large swathes of cultural production has not helped when it comes to challenging Quatremère's dubious conclusions. Quite aside from the conservative objections to preserving revolutionary cultural material in France during the nineteenth century, the post-Enlightenment art museum has been, in the words of art historian Carol Duncan, predicated upon the presentation of works of art as 'paragons of aesthetic beauty (and not, for example, as material elements of social histories).'<sup>27</sup> Surviving cultural artefacts from the revolutionary era, such as printed materials, clothing and quotidian utensils, and imagery by amateurs and non-academic artists, have failed (and continue to fail) to meet the collecting criteria of the typical publicly-funded art institution, although they may find their way into other types of cultural repository. Their exclusion has long been justifiable in light of public art museums' assumed charter to preserve and display the canon – that is to say, academic paintings, sculptures and luxury decorative arts judged to have exemplary aesthetic or material value. But there are many other grounds upon which individual revolutionary objects might be rejected without explicitly invoking such elitist priorities. These include concerns over their compromised condition; perceived aesthetic mediocrity, ephemerality, eccentricity, or commonness; the obscure or lowly background of their makers or the broken provenance or anecdotal nature of their accompanying information. Institutional exclusions of this kind routinely occur, despite evidence that objects evoking lived experience from all historical periods are perennially popular with audiences. It is by no means clear however, that distinctions between material art forms long upheld by art museums mean much to current generations of students who come to French Revolutionary art through their electronic devices. With the internet's now-established primacy as a source of imagery over the art-historical book or the museum visit, it is not self-evident to such students why they should care more about an example of high art – for example *La Mort de Marat* by David – than a painting of the same subject by the National Guardsman Jean-Jacques Hauer, or a miniature, cockade, assignat, clock, caricature, decorated coffee cup or wall paper fragment, all of which may have been made in year II, and which now enjoy equivalence through the equalising window of the computer screen.

In the first decade of the internet age historian David J. Staley observed how the dynamic presentation of the web environment, in which images and their contexts are continually reconfigured by algorithm, intrinsically favours visual skill and associative thought over written skill and linear thought'.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, this kaleidoscopic mode of exposure can potentially stimulate new ways of thinking about the visual culture of the French Revolution, but it also has risks, especially when it comes to verifying the status of images and their contextual information. In the earliest projects led by Lynn Hunt et al to digitise primary revolutionary sources for students, the Musée de la Révolution française through the offices of Philippe Bordes provided images whose status in terms of dating, authorship, subject matter and medium had been established. In those projects, students were also provided with interpretative guides to themes and iconography in order to enable a properly historical

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<sup>27</sup> Carol Duncan, 'The art museum as ritual', in Gerard Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 78.

<sup>28</sup> David J. Staley, "From Writing to Associative Assemblages: 'History' in an Electronic Culture" in Dennis A. Trinkle, ed., *Writing, Teaching and Researching History in the Electronic Age* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998 quoted in Gregory S. Brown, 'The Coming of the French Revolution in Multi-Media', *The History Teacher*, 34: 2 (Feb. 2001), 193–208; 205.

encounter with the source material.<sup>29</sup> Outside that controlled environment though, there is little to guide students in how to differentiate between the sources for the imagery that they encounter. There is nothing, for example, to indicate that they ought to attend more closely to examples of revolutionary culture found on museum websites, where the integrity of the objects and their particulars are respected, over those they find on the websites of Ebay dealers and auction houses, commercial picture libraries, anonymous bloggers or Pinterest, where cropping, colour enhancement, flipping, and image modification are normal.<sup>30</sup>

### Declining authority

As the boundaries between categories of visual culture are dissolving for the student of French Revolutionary art, so too are the boundaries between the autodidact and the institutional expert. It is unknown for how long museums and compilers of conventional catalogues raisonnés, with their budget and time constraints, can outpace the avid researcher, who has access to the same ever-growing stream of archival, bibliographic and provenance resources. As Philippe Bordes has noted, traditional institutional repositories were already struggling to absorb and reflect new findings about objects in their care long before the advent of the Internet and the information explosion that it unleashed. Many institutions no longer recruit specialists, or seek to create them. Some no longer regard matters of dating, attribution and sources as central to their role. The activities of ‘research’ and ‘interpretation’ have often vanished from art museum mission statements, leaving ‘collecting’, ‘preserving’ and ‘presenting’ as their goals. Outsourcing label writing has become common and some museums have dispensed with physical labels altogether on the basis that such information is either intrusive or deleterious to the visitor experience.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, as the future of museum expertise grows uncertain, resources used by auction houses and museums are becoming available to all, and research processes are being increasingly demystified for the public, which raises the question of how long institutional custodians can retain their authority as ultimate arbiters over such matters. This shift is echoed in the structuring of two British popular television programmes based around art connoisseurship. The model of *Antiques Roadshow*, which first aired in 1977, involves the lay public bringing their works of art to experts for explication. By contrast, the more recent BBC television series *Fake or Fortune*, created in 2011 and headed by London art dealer, Philip Mould and his personable team of ‘art detectives’, makes a veritable sport of regularly challenging once-unquestionable

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<sup>29</sup> For example Philippe Bordes’ guide to iconography, "How to Read Images," for the CD ROM and website *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, launched in 1998. See Brown *ibid*, 197.

<sup>30</sup> These latter electronic image compilations, curated by amateur enthusiasts and organised by subjective criteria, are fascinating as modern-day equivalents of the nineteenth-century practices of scrapbooking or grangerising.

<sup>31</sup> The successful, privately-owned Tasmanian Museum of Old and New Art displays art without chronology or labels, and offers instead free headphones and an iPod-like device called the 'O', which has an in-built GPS that senses where its holder is located and displays information about artworks nearby. According to the gallery’s website ‘You can ignore the O and wander around in a state of pleasant reverie /moderate anxiety. Or else use it to read and listen to stories, essays, music and interviews, as well as other bits and pieces, that are 70–80 per cent art-wank free at any given moment’. The Worcester Art Museum dispensed with labels in the re-display of its Old Masters collection in order “to create a deeper museum experience’ its director explained; ‘We want our visitors to slow down and experience the art on their own terms.’ See David Wallis, ‘Labels, Digital Included, Assume New Importance at Museums’, *New York Times*, 17 March 2015.



authorities with impertinent theories shored up by evidence gleaned from often publicly available sources. The latter programme suggests to amateur viewers that they can find answers for themselves with basic research skills and a computer, and this writer can attest that they regularly do.

### The mystique of the archive

Certain types of original textual sources continue to hover beyond the reach of most students outside France, though not necessarily for much longer. Navigating the extensive network of archives throughout France demands funds, skill and tenacity. Even expert researchers have found themselves thwarted by the innumerable obstacles and inefficiencies involved in primary archive research. Since the 1890s some scholars have heroically toiled to deliver transcriptions of manuscript records to wider publics, most notably the colossal publishing projects directed by historians and archivists such as Alphonse Aulard and Alexandre Tuetey.<sup>32</sup> Technology has always been central. In the 1950s the American historian David L. Dowd pinned hopes on the microfilming of handwritten and departmental archival inventories as a way to expedite the research process.<sup>33</sup>

For the researcher working outside France, one of the benefits of wide-scale digitisation of France's archival resources is its potential to encourage greater engagement with departmental and municipal archives. Anglophone art historians have not had a figure like Richard Cobb, who led generations of fellow historians to regional topics, although in recent years Philippe Bordes and Alain Chevalier have been effective in luring revolutionary specialists beyond Paris, to the extraordinary resources at Musée de la Révolution française at Vizille. Yet for many the history of artists and artisans in the French Revolution understandably continues to be the history of artists and artisans in Paris and Versailles. This is obviously linked to Paris's historical importance as the centre of the luxury art market and its proximity to the court at Versailles. The many detailed studies published on the sans-culotte movement and the artisan-rich faubourgs offer endless scope for future micro-histories on specialised aspects of the decorative arts, building and printing industries.<sup>34</sup> The concentration, furthermore, of specialist museums, libraries and archives in and around Paris which preserve caches of documentary material constitutes a perennial 'pull factor' towards

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<sup>32</sup>Alphonse Aulard, *Recueil des actes du Comité de salut public* (27 vols. 1889–1923) (Paris: Impr. nationale 1889) and *Paris pendant la Réaction thermidorienne et sous la Directoire* (Paris: Cerf, 1898) and Alexandre Tuetey, *Répertoire général des sources manuscrites de l'histoire de Paris pendant la Révolution française*, 11 vols (Paris: Impr. nouvelle, 1890–1914).

<sup>33</sup> David L. Dowd, 'The French Departmental Archives and the Fulbright Microfilm Project', *The American Archivist*, 16:3, July 1953, 241–249. The implications of computing for quantitative historical approaches were also recognised early by historians of the French Revolution. See for example François Furet and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *L'historien et l'ordinateur: Compte-rendu provisoire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études* (Moscow: NAUKA, 1970).

<sup>34</sup> Such as the prosopographical study by Albert Soboul and Raymonde Monnier, *Répertoire du personnel sectionnaire parisien en l'an II* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985) or Haim Burstin, *Une Révolution à l'oeuvre: Le faubourg Saint-Marcel, 1789–1794* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2005). A notable recent example of fine-grained research making good use of such sources is Gerrit Walczak's, *Bürgerkünstler: Künstler, Staat und Öffentlichkeit im Paris der Aufklärung und Revolution* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2015).

the capital. Meanwhile the experience of cultural workers outside the capital, which was often more affected by regional economic and religious factors, remains the preserve of local researchers, who have since the nineteenth century been producing microhistories and substantial works of reference that rarely, if ever, inflect the Paris-centric artistic histories of the period.<sup>35</sup>

Researching French revolutionary art at a distance is a regrettable reality for many specialists, who are contending with ever diminishing funds and time frames for undertaking primary research in the current university and museum climate. Few would deny that the archival researcher, who has acquired familiarity with original sources in all their material singularity and local context acquires a relationship with his or her subject that cannot be replicated from afar, not to mention valuable connections to fellow researchers. Also, for the many of us interested in lived experience and the history emotions, documents – like works of art – are tangible artefacts with evocative power often beyond the words or images that they bear. In my field, examples of such documents include the books and letters kept by suspects in the prisons of the Revolution. Such items sometimes contained incriminating sentiments or signatures. Some enclosed locks of hair or portraits, or embroidered Chouan or royalist symbols, and were worn on the body or kept hidden. Who, in the presence of such fragments, can forget Arlette Farge's declaration, that 'An archival manuscript is a living document', whereas a 'microfilm reproduction, while sometimes unavoidable, can drain the life out of it'?<sup>36</sup>

Championing the materiality of the singular archive, and the gratifications of its use, does not however, invalidate arguments for digitisation and open access. And one must guard against the 'Farge defense' as a means to preserve the exclusivity of valuable resources. When the brick-vaulted Witt and Conway picture libraries at London's Courtauld Institute, tucked deep inside Somerset House, were threatened with closure in 2009, the prospect of their digitisation was no consolation to the author of the London-based *Burlington Magazine's* editorial. The libraries, which hold over three million photographs of works of art and architecture, including records of French eighteenth-century art, have long been cherished as

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<sup>35</sup> Important early regional reference works include Paul Brune's, *Dictionnaire des artistes et ouvriers d'art de la Franche-Comté* (Paris: Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie, 1912), Marius Audin and Eugène Vial's, *Dictionnaire des artistes et ouvriers d'art du Lyonnais* (Paris: Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie, 1918) and Charles Portal's, *Dictionnaire des artistes et ouvriers d'art du Tarn du XIII aux XX siècle* (Albi, chez l'auteur, 1925). More recent resources include Pierre Sanchez, *Les Salons de Dijon 1771–1950* (Dijon: L'Echelle Jacob, 2002), Gaetan Maës, *Les Salons de Lille de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration 1773–1820* (Dijon: L'Echelle, Jacob, 2004), Dominique Dumas, *Les Salons et Expositions à Lyon (1786–1918)* (Dijon: L'Echelle Jacob, 2007) and Serge Fernandez et Pierre Sanchez, *Salons et Expositions – Bordeaux 1771–1950* (Bordeaux: L'Echelle Jacob 2017).

<sup>36</sup> 'L'archive manuscrite est un matériau vivant, sa reproduction microfilmée est un peu lettre morte, quand bien même elle d'avère nécessaire.' Arlette Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive* (Paris: Seuil, 1989) 23.

the arcana of the London art trade, described as the ‘holy grail’ by one Mayfair dealer.<sup>37</sup> In a plea to the journal’s readers, the writer lamented that ‘comparisons and deductions readily made from image-by-image spreads across a table top, vital to the understanding of individual artists, schools and techniques, could no longer occur.’<sup>38</sup> This was a curious case to make, given that digitised images are ideally suited to alignment or zooming for comparative purposes. At the same time it is a reminder that even reproductions pasted to card have their own materiality and that there is true pleasure to discovery in a deliciously congenial setting.<sup>39</sup> Even so, it might be asked if the art trade’s insistence on the retention of the physical archive is also about retaining privileged access to a traditionally unique information source intimately associated with London’s unrivalled position as the centre of the Old Masters art market.<sup>40</sup>

### The role of the amateur

During the decades when the material legacy of the Revolution was outlawed or shunned by public institutions, amateurs played a crucial role in its preservation. Since then they have repeatedly come to the aid of those same institutions at key junctures. Richard Wrigley has noted how, in the lead-up to the 1889 centenary, it was unclear that sufficient material had survived to make a planned commemorative display at the Musée Carnavalet viable, but this situation was rescued by private loans.<sup>41</sup> Hence, presumably, the warmth with which Maurice Tourneux, in his preface to the catalogue, thanked individual collectors for coming forward with items that ‘would have been hidden thirty years ago.’<sup>42</sup>

What this preservation revealed is the fact that identity politics, which had played a part in the effective suppression of revolutionary art and artefacts by the right for much of the nineteenth century, also underpinned the effective concealment and protection of those same objects by the left. Each side had its commemorative material culture and a history of proscribing the other side’s iconography, and being forced to defend their own. Small

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<sup>37</sup> According to London art market columnist Colin Gleadell, together the libraries ‘provide the best research facility of its kind in the world for establishing provenance or previous ownership history, making attributions when an artist has not been identified, dating a picture through comparisons or revealing how a painting may have changed over the years through restoration and repainting.’ Colin Gleadell, ‘Art Sales: Dealers decry Courtauld cuts’, *The Telegraph*, 1 September 2009.

<sup>38</sup> See ‘The Photographic Libraries at the Courtauld’, *Burlington Magazine*, 151:1279, October 2009, 655.

<sup>39</sup> The campaign may have been influenced by the 1999 BBC television drama *Shooting the Past*, written by Stephen Poliakoff which dramatized the rescue of another threatened photographic archive, the Hulton Picture Collection.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Together they provide the best research facility of its kind in the world for establishing provenance or previous ownership history, making attributions when an artist has not been identified, dating a picture through comparisons or revealing how a painting may have changed over the years through restoration and repainting.’ Colin Gleadell, ‘Dealers decry Courtauld cuts: Photo Libraries’, *Art Sales, The Telegraph*, 1 September 2009, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Etienne Charavay, *Le centenaire de 1789 et le musée de la Révolution* (Paris: Charavay frères, 1886), discussed by Richard Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in Revolutionary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2002) 43, n. 8.

<sup>42</sup> ‘L’Exposition historique de la Révolution française’, *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 1889, vol. 30, 405–6, quoted in Wrigley, *ibid.*, 15.

personal objects and portraits in particular, which had been owned by or represented people who lived through the seismic events of the Revolution, offered a particularly charismatic material focus around which to organise family narratives, memories and partisan identities in the fragmented aftermath of those events. Since it now seems clear that both left and right had an interest in the preservation of the material culture of the Revolutionary era the question arises of how much was ever actually destroyed or permanently lost.

For all their importance in the conservation of French cultural patrimony, the respect accorded to amateurs by museums and art historians has been intermittent at best. Krzysztof Pomian has suggested that ambivalence towards them in France was because their collections could never rival the royal collections that the French state museums absorbed after the Revolution.<sup>43</sup> Tom Stammers' research indicates that the downplaying of the contribution and status of amateurs correlates with the rise and professionalization of art history as a discipline.<sup>44</sup> But if collectors perceived any condescension from the new breed of curators, it does not seem to have seriously dented their munificence on the occasion of anniversaries. In 1939 the Musée Carnavalet was once again able to rely overwhelmingly on private collections for its exhibition marking the Revolution's one hundred and fiftieth birthday, and in 1989, when so many exhibitions were being staged, Bordes noted the emergence of 'entire specialized collections' emerging from private hands.

The activities of private collectors of French revolutionary material as a broader social phenomenon is at last coming more fully in to view through the work of a growing number of scholars.<sup>45</sup> Two small monographs that appeared at the time of the Bicentenary on the royalist Raymond Jeanvrot and the former Jacobin, Jean-Louis Soulavie, have recently been superseded by more detailed studies.<sup>46</sup> Other collectors await study, such as Charles Vatel, a Versailles lawyer and Charlotte Corday enthusiast, whose collection, donated to the Musée Lambinet in 1883 at the encouragement of Georges Lenôtre (pen name of Louis Léon Théodore Gosselin, 1855-1935), includes a small group of remarkable paintings made in the Luxembourg and Saint Lazare prisons during the Terror.

As Stammers and Wrigley have both indicated, the vague disdain directed to amateurs has preserved a distinction between the professional and the non-professional at the cost of ignoring the types of expertise acquired by the autodidact in the process of collecting. With

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<sup>43</sup> Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800*, transl. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) 1.

<sup>44</sup> Tom Stammers, 'The Bric-a-Brac of the Old Regime. Collecting and Cultural History in Post-Revolutionary France', *French History*, 22:3, 2008, 295–315; 298.

<sup>45</sup> Gilles Bertrand et al., *Collectionner la Révolution française*, Actes du colloque 23 au 25 septembre 2015 à Grenoble (Domaine universitaire – Maison des sciences de l'Homme Alpes) et à Vizille (Musée de la Révolution française-Domaine de Vizille), Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 2016 and the workshop initiated by Valerie Mainz, 'The Pencheon Collection in Context: Collecting and Recollecting the French Revolution', held at the University of Leeds in March 2017 which examined the formation of French revolutionary collections in Britain.

<sup>46</sup> Jacqueline du Pasquier, *Raymond Jeanvrot, une passion royaliste: naissance d'une collection bordelaise*, Paris : Somogy; Bordeaux : Musée des arts décoratifs, 2007, and Stammers, 'Jean-Louis Soulavie: une collection de l'histoire immédiate', in Gilles Bertrand, Alain Chevalier, Martial Poirson and Pierre Serna (ed), *Collectionner la Révolution française*, Paris : Société des études robespierristes, 2016, 81–93.

the unprecedented scope that the internet now provides for those interested in researching and acquiring revolutionary artefacts, the rise of a new type of amateur seems inevitable – private citizens who may not have had the income or leisure of the nineteenth-century gentlemen studied by Stammers, but whose ‘treatment of primary evidence, material condition and personal experience’ has similar potential to become ‘anything but amateurish.’<sup>47</sup> This is possibly already happening: one Viennese dealer of French revolutionary miniatures welcomes the democratisation of access to this art form enabled by the internet. Miniature paintings, which were once the domain of the gentleman scholar and flaneur, are now being acquired over the internet, he claims, by a new market of collectors, who feel excluded from the established market and ‘are almost frightened to step into renowned galleries or auction houses.’<sup>48</sup> Perhaps this is not surprising. Miniature painting, with its hard, brilliant surfaces, luminous colouration and minute brushwork, is the eighteenth-century art form that has probably benefited most from reproduction on the web, whereas the same art form is notoriously difficult to present well in a museum conditions, being tiny, theft-prone and light-sensitive. The capacity to magnify a glinting miniature on a computer screen, moreover, allows a sense of physical intimacy that can otherwise only be acquired through close handling and scrutiny.

### **Ephemerality**

It is only belatedly that the prescience of certain nineteenth-century amateurs is becoming better appreciated, as historians have started looking at a wider range of revolutionary artefacts with a more nuanced interpretive eye. Many of these figures were, as it turns out, collecting according to other criteria. It is probably amateurs, rather than traditional collecting institutions, that we should thank for preserving the types of objects and images that Richard Taws suggests embody the quintessential character of Revolutionary cultural production, which manifest ‘a fleeting, or makeshift materiality’, that are ‘transitional, provisional, ephemeral and half-made.’<sup>49</sup> In their attentive to qualities of affect and the capacity of images and documents to evoke lived experience, amateur collectors have also unerringly preserved much material germane to today’s interpretative approaches, in particular the history of emotions.

In my own area of special interest, the role of such collectors has been crucial in preserving what was the most typical type of prison-made work of art – the ‘avant-décès’ or ‘before-death’ portrait. In the last weeks of the Terror, as the revolutionary government sought to empty the crowded prisons of Paris, suspects who had been brought to the capital from all over the nation began to be summoned in batches to the Tribunal. With each passing day suspects prepared to hear their names called, and to be allowed only minutes to entrust some personal items to companions to pass on to a loved one. Of all the personal tokens to be transferred, portraits and letters had highest priority. Many suspects across the improvised prison system of spring and summer 1794 became anxious to locate and secure the services

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<sup>47</sup>See Thomas Stammers, ‘The Refuse of the Revolution: Autograph hunting in France, 1789-1860’, in Carolina Armenteros, Tim Blanning, Isabel DiVanna and Dawn Dodds, (eds), *Historicising the French Revolution* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008) 39–63; 40 and 59.

<sup>48</sup> See Boris Wilnitsky, Fine Arts Vienna, website: <https://www.wilnitsky.com/aboutus.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Taws (2014), 1.

of an artist, however mediocre.<sup>50</sup> The resulting portraits, made in makeshift studios, often in conditions of little privacy, were typically small and drawn quickly on paper using pencil or chalk (a highly ephemeral material unless a fixative is used). Given the circumstances, few artists ever signed the portraits they hastily supplied, nor were the identities of the sitters always recorded. These sought-after likenesses were thus compromised in many ways when judged according to museological criteria, yet their aesthetic merit and material value mattered little to their owner or to the persons for whom they were ultimately destined.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Terray,\\_intendant\\_de\\_Lyon.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Terray,_intendant_de_Lyon.jpg)

CAPTION: Suggested attribution to Joseph Boze (1746-1826). Antoine Jean Terray, vicomte de Rozières (1750-1794). Black and red chalk, heightened with pastel, 19.2 x 15.6 cm. Inscribed: *A. Terray, ancien intendant de Lyon décapité le 9 Floréal an II*. Prov.: Former collection of J. L. Soulavie, now in Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 3815 DR.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Items of material value had been stripped from suspects by April and May 1794. See Jean-Claude Vimont, *La Prison politique en France: Genèse d'un mode d'incarcération spécifique XVIIIe –XXe siècle* (Paris: Anthropos-Economica, 1993) 40–41.

<sup>51</sup> The sitter, Antoine-Jean Terray was detained first at Port-Libre prison and transferred to the Conciergerie on 8 Floréal year II [27 April 1794]. He was sentenced to death, aged 44, on 28 April 1794 accused of being a counter-revolutionary who had facilitated his children's emigration in order to bear arms against the Republic. Terray spent less than a day at the Conciergerie before facing the guillotine. The author of this portrait was formerly unknown, but it is proposed here to be an example of Boze's rapid prison sketches made at the Conciergerie. Terray's wife, Marie Nicole Pernet, was sentenced to death on the same charges as her spouse. It is conceivable that Boze sketched a portrait of her also, as paired husband and wife studies were often made in prison as 'last portraits'.

To secure a portrait of this kind in the last weeks of the Terror was something of a triumph and a profound relief to suspects. Their significance was overwhelmingly private, as is evidenced in the note sent by Jean Valery Harelle, a cotton manufacturer from Alençon in Normandy to his wife from the Conciergerie prison in late March 1794:

My sister-in-law Houdouard, to whom this paper is addressed, will hand you my portrait, taken here. It is not very good, because I had to start for trial just when the painter was taking it. This testimony of my remembrance will be a sure guarantee to you of that affection which I have ever cherished for thee, and which will not end, but which I shall gladly carry away with me.<sup>52</sup>

Given the fragility of such items and the difficulties of them ever reaching their rightful recipients, it seems improbable that any examples should have survived, and yet many did. Examples from the collections of Charles Vatel and Jean-Louis Soulavie are proof that this poignant genre of objects, alienated from their intended recipients, were later recognised for the personal experience that they represented by collectors, who in some cases knew neither the names of the sitters nor their makers, but who nevertheless preserved them for posterity.

It should therefore come as no surprise to hear that it was yet another amateur, the publisher and manuscript collector Maurice Dreyfous, who in 1906 flagged a need for research on this extraordinary category of objects produced in the Terror. Dreyfous observed that ‘a monograph of these “before-death portraits” executed in the prisons by professionals or more often by amateurs, would without doubt be very curious to establish, if however the *necessary elements* could be gathered’ which, he added, seemed ‘highly improbable.’<sup>53</sup> Contrary to Dreyfous’s warning, these necessary elements did eventually prove findable. That they did testifies to Taws’ observation, that ephemera – despite its reputation for vulnerability – tends to ‘stick around’. It testifies to the acumen of amateurs who, as Stammers notes, were anything but amateur in their approach to ‘primary evidence, material condition and personal [lived] experience’, and it testifies to the new possibilities of gathering evidence of French revolutionary material culture (however ephemeral,) through the research tools newly available in a post-Bicentennial era.

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<sup>52</sup> 9 Germinal year II [29 March 1794]. See John Goldworth Alger, *Paris in 1789–94: Farewell Letters of Victims of the Guillotine* (London, G. Allen, 1902, repr. AMS Press, 1970) 425.

<sup>53</sup> ‘La monographie de ... portraits avant décès exécutés dans les prisons par des professionnels ou le plus souvent par des amateurs, serait, sans doute, bien curieuse à établir, si toutefois les éléments nécessaires pouvaient être rassemblés, ce qui est fort improbable’. Maurice Dreyfous, *Les Arts et les artistes pendant la période révolutionnaire (1789–1795)* (Paris: Paul Paclot, 1906) 229.