
H-France Salon

Volume 11, Issue 18, #2

The emotive artifacts of the French Revolution

Philippe Bordes

Musée de la Révolution Française, Domaine de Vizille

For over a century and a half, the destructive forces unleashed during the French Revolution, whether interpreted as basely stupid vandalism or as politically motivated iconoclasm, made it impossible to fathom that these troubled times might have stimulated artistic creativity. Such an art historical perspective relied on summary knowledge of the subject and on the entrenched idealism that prevailed in the discipline. This justified dismissive attitudes toward the visual traces of the Revolutionary period, a corpus of artifacts perceived as rudimentary and an embarrassment for the artisan trades, vulgar caricatures whose meaning had become obscure and irrelevant, and lifeless paintings and sculpture that slavishly imitated classical models. This negative view was particularly strong in France among scholars during the 19th century as the history of art established itself as a staid university discipline. Among unprejudiced *amateurs* a slot in the modernist canon was found for Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, though praise for this grim icon did not prevent incrimination of almost everything else produced during the Revolution as artistically negligible. The Goncourt brothers redeemed only the art of Pierre-Paul Prud'hon because for them its fundamental inspiration was impervious to the Revolution. While Charles Baudelaire waxed eloquent on the *Death of Marat*, some fervent republicans like Jules Renouvier did their best to salvage the circumstantial images of the period, essentially as visual documents to be taken at face value rather than as creative responses to the Revolution with a formal language and layered meaning that called for critical understanding.

The constant drama during the Revolutionary years, the brisk pace of events hurried on by an unruly press, the social unrest and political instability responsible for daily frustrations, especially the lack of work that several artists and artisans evoke in their correspondence, are the familiar tropes invoked to argue that the period was not the best of times for them. Then, how is it that so many painters, sculptors, engravers, and architects figure in the archives as participants in the political life of the times and as members of the professional societies founded during these years? How is it that in collections and on the art market, one comes across so many works in all media that date from the most troubled years, 1789 to 1794, and that so many prints, ceramics, and objects of all sorts were produced and are today preserved? Despite the lamentations voiced, the creative impulse of the makers who considered themselves *artistes-citoyens* was undeniably real. The breadth of the phenomenon cannot be explained blithely as the manifestation of a strategy of caution, survival or opportunism.

In the last thirty years, access to the Revolutionary corpus, especially works on paper, has been greatly facilitated by some monumental publications and the development of online resources.¹ But since they often are quagmired in micro-history, the artworks and artifacts

¹ I am thinking specifically of the five-volume of *La Révolution française: Images et récit 1789–1799*, edited by Michel Vovelle (Paris: Messidor/Livre Club Diderot, 1986–1987),

produced during the period can still be dismissed as artistically limited and crudely conceived, especially in quarters that cling to such exclusive notions as “high art” and “great master”. These are the familiar terms of a ranking operation meant to uphold conservative leadership in matters of taste. Though establishing the relative importance of works of art will always be an open issue, the adoption of more critical and empathetic attitudes over the last few decades has modified the perception of a politically charged corpus that was long devalued. The exploratory spirit of visual studies, unencumbered by restrictions implicit in art history, has allowed for the significance of neglected images and objects to emerge, first as background elements for canonical works, then as a primary focus of interest. In parallel, material culture studies and the concerns of cultural anthropology have given them new life by recovering processes of fabrication and appropriation.

Overturning the art historical narrative

Innovations in historical inquiry since the 1960’s have created the conditions for a re-evaluation. An initial turn was a more contextual approach to art history in general and a focused interest in those artists whose practice appeared to have embraced the social and political concerns of their time. That artists might be inspired to address contemporary situations was, of course, especially the case during periods of unrest and crisis, as witnesses testifying privately for posterity or as party to public action of some sort. Left-leaning art historians coming out of *mai 68* sought to elaborate a political profile for canonical artists, not too contrived a proposition for people like Jacques-Louis David and Gustave Courbet who were prominent public figures. Less expected was the sustained research to politicize the impressionists, whose anodyne landscapes, garden views, and still lifes were promoted by museums and dealers after World War II as democratically accessible and commercially bankable, the perfect exemplum for the modernist credo that enduring art should transcend its historical conditions. Produced under the banner of the “social history of art” and strengthened by feminist studies, the unraveling of a great deal of idealist and masculinist hoodwinking was a highly influential front, yet it did not immediately modify the notion of a disciplinary canon that continued to prescribe the art historical research deemed legitimate and suited for students at the outset of their careers. When he first published on nineteenth-century academic art, Albert Boime felt it necessary to adopt a somewhat apologetic tone to justify his transgressive curiosity. Under the umbrella term of visual studies, scholars began to explore images outside of the purview of art history, such as political caricature, advertising and scientific illustration.

During the 1970’s, the unwieldy visual corpus of the French Revolution continued to serve primarily as historical illustration, as it had since the Third Republic when reproductions of actual prints and objects from the period came to be preferred over the commissioned compositions that had illustrated earlier historical accounts. The development of this approach can be seen in the Musée Carnavalet, which opened in 1880 after decades of debate over the need for a historical museum in Paris. The following year, several rooms filled with

basically an album of reproductions, and the three-volume *Lexikon der Revolutions-Ikonographie in der europäischen Druckgraphik (1789–1889)*, edited by Rolf Reichardt (Munster: Rhema, 2017), that offers 112 essay-length entries entrusted to some 60 scholars, a decade-long project that began with the creation of a database of about 11,000 images (http://prometheus.uni-koeln.de/pandora/source/show/giessen_lri) mined by the authors of the different entries.

the recently gifted collection of Alfred de Liesville, signaled public support for the collection, conservation, and appreciation of the artifacts of the French Revolution.² Up to that time, these operations had depended on the dedication of some motivated private collectors.³ As an institution devoted to the history of Paris, the Musée Carnavalet has never been exclusively focused on the Revolutionary period, yet as it expanded its holdings it became widely recognized as the first repository of historical artifacts and works of art from the period. The cluttered display offered an experience of total immersion in the visual and material culture of the period. Until today, the museum has clung to the spirit of its founders. The order imposed on the collection has remained fundamentally iconographic and chronological: the works of art and historical objects serve to illustrate a narrative whose schematism allows it to go mostly unquestioned. No more critical than this detached use of history is the patent indifference for the status of the objects on exhibit: five decades of published research by specialists that revise details of attribution, dating, iconography and interpretation of certain works in the Revolutionary collection have only marginally modified the information on the object labels provided by the museum. Perhaps because the outdated feel of the presentation had become glaring and its republican edge blunted by ostensible commiseration for the royal family, about five years ago the museum decided to intersperse the visit with video monitors that screen exposés by historians, including several young specialists. These notably update the account of the origins of the Revolution, the role of women, the Terror, and the Directory. However, the images that punctuate these four-minute talks are mute illustrations, with no attempt to link the oral information to what is on show.⁴ [The museum has been closed since 2016 for a renovation with an officially declared aim to give more equal representation to the successive spans of Parisian history, a perspective that no doubt will attenuate the institution's focus on the Revolution.⁵]

² Philippe Bordes, "Die Französische Revolution im Musée Carnavalet (1866-1903): von der historischen Erinnerung zur Kunst", Gudrun Gersmann and Hubertus Kohle (ed.), *Frankreich 1871-1914. Die Dritte Republik und die Französische Revolution* (Stuttgart : Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002), 92-99 (the original French version can be consulted on *academia.edu*). Jean-Marie Bruson, "Le comte Alfred de Liesville, collectionneur", *Collectionner la Révolution française*, Gilles Bertrand, Michel Biard, Alain Chevalier, Martial Poirson et Pierre Serna (dir.) (Paris : Société des études robespierristes, 2016), 111-124.

³ Alain Chevalier, « Collectionner les collectionneurs de la Révolution française », *Collectionner la Révolution française* (note 2), 15-34. In this same volume of essays, the motivations of the earliest collectors who lived through the Revolution are well outlined by Tom Stammers, « Jean-Louis Soulavie : un collectionneur de l'histoire immédiate », 81-93.

⁴ The Carnavalet videos are online: Les Débuts de la Révolution française (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2y2bvb>); La Démolition de la Bastille et la construction d'un symbole (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2xfc7d>); Les Femmes dans la Révolution française (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2y2bnd>); 1793 : La première Constitution républicaine de la France (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2y2ca4>); La Dictature de Salut public et le Projet révolutionnaire de la Convention (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2y2cls>); Le Directoire ou la première République libérale (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2y2cgp>); La Donation Liesville, Histoire des Collections révolutionnaires du Musée Carnavalet (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2y2bxm>).

⁵ See the press release dated September 2018:

www.carnavalet.paris.fr/sites/default/files/carnavalet-dp_renovation_final.pdf. This document unequivocally plays down the Revolutionary collections.

The election of a socialist to the French presidency in 1981 provoked a scramble among politicians, historians, and museum professionals to find some adequate manner of commemorating the bicentennial of the Revolution of 1789, whose intellectual and sentimental heritage lay at the foundation of the socialist-communist coalition in power. This political context stimulated renewed interest in the material legacy of the period. While the old school godfathers of French art history looked the other way, historians took up the challenge by encouraging research, especially the study of prints. The first step was to break down the corpus into meaningful categories and themes, and to proceed by documenting their production, commerce, and reception. Progressively, the paper imagery of the Revolution, a vast ocean of portraits, allegories, contemporary scenes, caricatures, and hybrid composition of all sorts, became a navigable area of research.

Other parallel developments contributed to transforming the visibility of Revolutionary patrimony. The horizon of the bicentennial brought to light and onto the market hitherto unknown artworks, objects, and even entire specialized collections. The project of a new museum of the French Revolution in the decommissioned château de Vizille near Grenoble found regional and national backing. The prominent historians who steered it did not believe that much of importance might still be found to form a collection and were ready to rely on the new interactive technologies to fill the rooms of the château with screen images, sound environments and panels of information. They were soon proven wrong. The museum managed to open its doors to the public in 1984, with a historically-minded exhibition devoted to the family that had owned the château during the Revolution, but with very few things to show dating from the period. Shortly after, the new museum was able to make some significant acquisitions, both artistically and historically: Guillaume Guillon-Lethière's *La Patrie en danger* [*The Fatherland in Danger*] (1799) in 1985, and Claude-André Deseine's terracotta bust of *Maximilien Robespierre* (1791) the following year.⁶

Another development in the 1970's was the change in attitude toward the classicizing art of the 18th century ("neo-classicism"), to the point of becoming for a time a fashionable taste among museum curators and academics.⁷ This stimulated scholarly interest in a great number of painters and sculptors who had lived and worked through the Revolutionary decade (1789–1799). By piecing together numerous individual experiences, involving established *chefs d'atelier* and ambitious newcomers, some who remained disapproving sideliners, others who were enthusiastic players, it was possible to construct a much fuller panorama of the art of this eventful period. Though many of the older artists were shaken up by all the changes they witnessed and several never fully recovered their creative drive, those who were younger were generally responsive to the patriotic incitements of the government and after Thermidor to the opportunities offered by the open system of supply and demand.⁸

⁶ Philippe Bordes and Alain Chevalier, *Catalogue des peintures, sculptures et dessins. Musée de la Révolution française* (Vizille: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1996). See my introduction, "Sur l'histoire et l'avenir de la collection", 9–38. On the two works mentioned, see the entries pp. 90–93 (Lethière) and pp. 169–171 (Deseine).

⁷ See the historiographic essay: Philippe Bordes, "Buying Against the Grain: American Collections and French Neoclassical Paintings", Yuriko Jackall (ed.), *America Collects Eighteenth-Century French Painting* (Washington: National Gallery of Art; London: Lund Humphries, 2017), 101–119.

⁸ Philippe Bordes, "David's Contemporaries: A Generation of Artists Against the Revolution?", George Levitine (ed.), *Culture and Revolution: Cultural ramifications of the*

As is well known, Revolutionary studies were further impacted in the 1980's by the work of those revisionist historians who put forward political and cultural arguments to account for the turn of events, rather than the social and economic factors favored by the previous generation.⁹ This boosted the study of the "representations" of the Revolution, the political culture and the social imaginary of the protagonists, as well as its visual and material expressions.¹⁰ This distancing from the tenets preached by traditional Marxism had a consequence, however: historians developed an unprecedented detachment from their subject. In 1965, few would have disagreed with Eric Hobsbawm when he wrote: "The scientific study of revolutions does not mean dispassionate study. It is fairly certain that the major achievements in this field will be 'committed' – generally with sympathy to revolutions, if the historiography of the French is any guide."¹¹ Twenty years later, the French Revolution was still a polemical field in academic circles, but interpretation, explanation and understanding rather than commitment were the primary characteristics of research. For most specialists, the topic had lost its contemporary urgency.¹²

Historicizing printed images

Michel Vovelle gave a decisive impetus to the critical study of the images of the French Revolution when he organized the eponymous conference at the Sorbonne in 1985. In his introduction to the papers published three years later, he stated the critical shift that had fueled his initiative: "*ce que l'on demande aux images a profondément changé [...]. L'image n'est plus conçue aujourd'hui uniquement comme illustration mais bien comme une source d'une exceptionnelle richesse qu'il convient de valoriser dans toutes les dimensions de ce qu'elle peut nous apporter. [...] Et la séquence révolutionnaire, par l'ampleur même des bouleversements qu'elle entraîne tant dans les sensibilités et les représentations collectives, que dans les modes d'expression, notamment graphiques, accroît encore cet intérêt.*"¹³ Though he had foremost in mind the marshaling of images for the *histoire des mentalités* he championed at the time, he was open to a broad diversity of disciplinary interests. Since this inaugural gathering, the print culture of the Revolution, like that of the Empire, has become a thriving area of scholarly research and publication, particularly the genres of caricature,

French Revolution (College Park, Md.: Dept. of Art History, University of Maryland at College Park, 1989), 1989, 60–68.

⁹ For an enlightening analysis of this historiographic change and its consequences and a full bibliography, see R. Spang, "Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern Is the French Revolution?", *The American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 1 [February 2003], 119–147.

¹⁰ Good examples of the diverse facets of this trend are the conference papers in James A. W. Heffernan (ed.), *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography, and Art* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College: University Press of New England, 1992).

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Hannah Arendt on Revolution" [1965], *Revolutionaries* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 235.

¹² Several of the participants in this H-France Salon have pleaded for a return to committed research, in particular Sophie Wahnich (*Les émotions, la Révolution française et le présent: Exercices pratiques de conscience historique* (Paris : CNRS, 2009)). She defends the benefits of an empathetic and intuitive relation to the French Revolution and engaging contemporary issues when questioning the past.

¹³ Michel Vovelle, "Introduction", Vovelle (ed.), *Les Images de la Révolution française* (Université de Paris I: Panthéon-Sorbonne. Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française, 1988), 8.

portraiture, and historical events. Yet despite all the progress, in many respects the corpus remains elusive. The monumental *Lexikon der Revolutions-Ikonographie* (see note 1) catches in its interpretative net an impressively rich selection of prints and furnishes a wealth of information that charts the transformation of motifs and themes over a century. But to exploit fully the light each image sheds on the moment it was produced, all those involved in its making still need to be socially and politically individualized as more than just names. Of course, because information is very often lacking, it is not always possible to factor in these details of production when decoding the iconography.¹⁴

To fill such gaps in the documentation, some scholars have pleaded in favor of heightened attention to the visual and material qualities of the prints. Our overall understanding would benefit from more comprehensive analyses of single sheets, like those by Antoine de Baecque of an anonymous caricature the reptilian monster *Le Géant Iscariotte, aristocrate*, (1789-1790), and by Richard Taws of Philibert-Louis Debucourt's *Almanach national*, the elaborate *mise-en-scène* of an imaginary monument in homage to the National Assembly (1790).¹⁵ The two authors adopt complementary modes of approach to recover the meaning of the print: the first envelops the image in a web of contemporary texts to suggest how it was perceived, whereas the second starts with the constitutive parts of the image and shows how they resonate within the visual culture of the period. The first searches for meaning in the political context, the second in the image. Both studies move from an analysis of the representation to an understanding of how and where an individual image-maker – an etcher who remains unknown in the case of *Le Géant Iscariotte* – intervened publicly during a precise phase of the Revolution. The meticulous work of documenting, contextualizing, decoding, and interpreting the print gives access to both personal and shared experiences of the Revolution. In a corpus rife with repetitions and variations, prints like these two stand out for their capacity to encapsulate the temper of a specific moment or situation. This does not mean that the visual solutions proposed are unbiased, on the contrary. One further example might be *Les Formes*

¹⁴ In a review essay, with reference to Joan Landes (*Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France*, Ithaca and London, 2001), Rebecca Spang regrets that “we get no sense of individual historical actors be they artists or engravers, print sellers or print buyers” (“Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern Is the French Revolution?” 141, n. 9). She adds (141, n. 100): “Landes asserts that the difficult-to-determine ‘empirical fact’ of how these images were produced, purchased, and used is less important than the ‘conventions surrounding the representation of the body in Western art’; *Visualizing the Nation*, 16. Two notes are in order. First, this is exactly the methodological position that Hesse effectively challenges [this refers to Hesse's *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, Princeton, 2001]. Second, something like viewer response to images is *not* impossible to recover; for especially relevant examples, see Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn., 1985).” Crow's corpus, however, is canonical and comfortably exclusive: from the art of Watteau, profusely scripted by his wealthy backers, to late-century Salon paintings that elicited a great number of published responses.

¹⁵ A. de Baecque, “Iscariotte, géant aristocrate ou l'image monstre de la Révolution”, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 289, 1992, 323–332; and *Le Corps de l'histoire: Métaphores et politique, 1770–1800* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1993), 195–205. Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional. Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 119–141.

acerbes (1795) based on a program by the lawyer Louis-Eugène Poirier, composed by Louis Lafitte and engraved by Charles-Pierre-Joseph Normand, a horrific indictment of Joseph Lebon, on trial at the time for the repression in Arras and Cambrai. Along with David's apologetic *Triomphe du Peuple français*, it is one of the most powerful images of the period that aims to translate in visual terms the government designated after Thermidor as the Terror.¹⁶

The mixed statuses of the producers of these images attest to the Revolutionary breakdown of conventional hierarchies and categories that had sectorized the artistic professions during the *ancien régime*. The Goncourt brothers were horrified by “*les peintres, réduits à tracer pour les tapissiers les dessins grecs du mobilier régénéré, les sculpteurs à menuiser des bois de fusil*”.¹⁷ It became indeed much more natural for artists from widely different backgrounds to mingle socially and share their aspirations, modes of visual expression, and source materials. Lafitte, a history painter, winner in 1791 of the *Grand prix*, (known also as the Rome Prize), furnished a politically-charged caricature of Lebon, whereas Debucourt, a genre painter, felt empowered to invent a classicizing allegory. Whether trained to produce subjects from ancient history, keen to depict fashionable urban scenes, or used to working for the print market, artists found in their support of the Revolution a common ground of professional identification and bonding. The *artistes-citoyens* were opposed to the co-optative process of professional recognition set up by the academy, yet they did not welcome in their patriotic clubs just anyone who practiced one of the fine arts. Outspoken hostility among club members for blatant faults in drawing or for attempts at colored sculpture with *trompe-l'œil* effect and made of base materials such as papier-mâché indicates an attachment to artistic values concomitant with a degree of professional training.¹⁸

Dealing with the untrained

In 1789, no one came forward to claim authorship of *Le Géant Iscariotte* despite its apparent popularity, perhaps because the grotesque image and facile technique seemed ill-suited to sustain an artistic reputation. The figure advances menacingly with a drawn knife and its features are repulsive, yet it is well-proportioned and effectively monumental, an indication that the etcher probably possessed some studio training. Recognition of these artistic qualities may have been part of the reason for its success, since a contemporary viewer whose taste was formed by visits to the Salon or from seeing reproductive prints, would have considered a crudely-drawn figure, however sincere, as unworthy of attention. When Félicité de Genlis visited Voltaire's château at Ferney in 1776, she was struck by an allegorical painting in the main salon: “*Un cadre superbe et l'honneur d'être placé dans un salon annonçait quelque chose de beau. Nous y accourons, et, à notre grande surprise, nous découvrons une enseigne*

¹⁶ On the composition by Lafitte and more generally the imaging of the Terror, see Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David After the Terror* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1999), 25–30. On David's *Triumph of the French People*, see also Philippe Bordes, “ ‘Brissotin enragé, ennemi de Robespierre’: David, conventionnel et terroriste”, Régis Michel (ed.), *David contre David* (Paris : Documentation française, 1993), I, 319–347.

¹⁷ Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Histoire de la société française pendant la Révolution*, Paris, 1854; quoted from the 3rd ed. (Paris : A. Lacroix Verboeckhoven et Cte, 1867), 331.

¹⁸ Philippe Bordes, “Destruction, conservation et création sous la Révolution française. Une question de style”, Emmanuel Fureix (ed.), *Iconoclasme et révolutions, de 1789 à nos jours*, (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2014), 94–110.

de bière, une peinture ridicule représentant M. de Voltaire dans une gloire, tout entouré de rayons comme un saint, ayant à ses genoux les Calas, et foulant aux pieds ses ennemis : Fréron, Pompignan, etc., qui expriment leur humiliation en ouvrant des bouches énormes et en faisant des grimaces effroyables."¹⁹ The picture she found ridiculous was *The Triumph of Voltaire* by A. (Alexandre or Antoine) Duplessis, a scantily documented painter and engraver who also produced a print after the composition and continued to edit ambitious political subjects during the Revolution, likewise crammed with figures and evocative of some twentieth-century outsider art. Because Duplessis, presumably self-taught, did not care to conform to the visual conventions of the art world of his day, his work was disqualified as art and dismissed by a woman of taste as a low-life shop sign.

During the last years of the *ancien régime*, when the Salon brought particularly large crowds, the line drawn subjectively between socially-acceptable artworks and incompetent commercial imagery for the uneducated was an unproblematic matter of good taste sanctioned by academic principles. Among those who had the opportunity to interact with artworks, only the court aristocracy broke ranks in this respect. Uncomfortable with their perceived inferiority in such matters over which academicians held authority, they preferred to enroll less able and even relatively mediocre painters who were readily more respectful of their ignorance and social status.²⁰ The democratic aspirations of the Revolution, put into practice most clearly by the government decree in 1791 to open the Salon to all artists, made it far more difficult to agree where to draw the line. The measure allowed previously unrecorded *artistes-citoyens* to come out of the dark. Their number increased especially by the time of the Salon mounted in 1793, when the submissions were overwhelmingly mediocre by academic standards, if one is to believe the slew of comments made by critics after Thermidor to plead for the institution of a selection committee.

During these years, the stimulation felt by poorly trained artists and amateur artisans who aspired to some form of public recognition, was enacted at the level of national policy, but also locally by way of their neighborhood club, *section*, and militia, often in need of visual matter and utilitarian objects bearing the emblems of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Collectors of memorabilia during the 19th century, it seems, were particularly attracted to such modest productions that in one way or another, through image, text or form, had been fabricated and decorated to convey and reinforce a political attachment to the Revolution and its values. In the eyes of these avid collectors, the objects retained across time a capacity to defend these values, a sentiment that explains the prevalent reprise of Revolutionary motifs in the republican iconography of their day. Many of these modest items, such as club membership cards and official insignias, are characterized by refinement and technical mastery. Some even bear the signature of reputed artists. Others are less accomplished, indicating that the makers grappled with the difficulty of mastering the formal conventions of

¹⁹ The passage from the journal of Félicité de Genlis is often quoted: see for example Garry Apgar, "L'image caricaturale de Fréron; Voltaire s'en est chargé", André Cariou, Sophie Barthélemy, Jean Balcou (dir.), *Élie Fréron: Polémiste et critique d'art* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2001), 140, 146, n. 15.

²⁰ Philippe Bordes, "Portraiture in the Mode of Genre: A Social Interpretation", Philip Conisbee (ed.), *French Genre Painting in the Eighteenth Century* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, 2003): *Studies in the History of Art*, 72, Washington D.C., 2007, 257–273.

Revolutionary iconography and overcoming the resistance of the materials with which they worked.

Henri Lavedan, a former anti-dreyfusard and an establishment figure of his day, published an article in 1909 on a collection of Revolutionary artifacts that included a wooden clog, a club, sabers, pikes, snuff boxes, a lantern, drums, rifles, *carmagnoles*, tricolor ribbons, emblems, insignias, jewelry, *affiches*, a liberty cap, games, and shop signs, objects that he called “*les oripeaux du grand orage*”. The owner was an antique dealer and occasional illustrator named Alfred Forgeron, who according to Lavedan was keen to acquire anything Revolutionary that had “*une marque et un intérêt populaire...populacrier même*”.²¹ Lavedan’s condescending epithet – like calling the Duplessis painting at Ferney a shop sign – articulates a fantasized belief among the elite, even today, that artifacts by and for the lower ranks of society are naturally unrefined and vulgar. As I have argued elsewhere, among the *sans-culottes* were many *faubourg* artisans employed in the luxury trades who mastered sophisticated techniques of fabrication and were able to appreciate the objects they made for the wealthy.²² The enumeration of the objects in Forgeron’s collection, a capharnaum to which one can add decorated fans, ceramics, timepieces, printed textiles, leather portfolios, bookbindings, and of course tricolor cockades, indicates the range of objects actually produced that referred in one way or another to the Revolution. Objects of topical interest had always existed, especially in a religious context, but the demand and market response during the Revolutionary period was unprecedented, as Richard Taws underlines in his contribution. Even after one puts aside the self-consciously crude fakes produced for collectors during the nineteenth century, there survives a seemingly unlimited production of what Linda Nochlin, the eminent specialist of Courbet and realism, has described as “an odd assortment of second-rate portraits, [...] historiated toby jugs and indecipherable coarse-grained prints”.²³ The sheer abundance of these artifacts is a daunting phenomenon that reaches into the realm of the “commercial and sociable, emotional and practical”, where private and public are intertwined as Amy Freund and Richard Taws have recently shown.²⁴

²¹ Information and quotes are from Alain Chevalier, « Collectionner les collectionneurs de la Révolution française », *Collectionner la Révolution française* (n. 2), 21.

²² Philippe Bordes, “Les discours sur l’objet d’art de 1789 à 1804”, Marc Favreau and Patrick Michel (ed.), *L’objet d’art en France du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle: de la création à l’imaginaire* (Bordeaux: Université Michel de Montaigne-Bordeaux 3, 2007), 219–229.

²³ Quoted from Nochlin’s review of bicentennial celebrations, by R. Taws, *Politics of the Provisional* (n. 15), 4.

²⁴ Amy Freund, *Portraiture and Politics in Revolutionary France*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); R. Taws, *Politics of the Provisional* (n. 15). The quote is from the description of the project by Hannah Williams, in collaboration with Katie Scott, *Lost Property*, “a book about ‘things’ that once belonged to artists in 18th-century France. Through short essays recounting the lives of individual objects (Fragonard’s Colour Box, Boucher’s Shells, David’s Table, Coypel’s Watch...), this book relates unfamiliar stories about some of the most important figures of the period, offering an alternative guide to the art world of early modern Paris. Engaging with fundamental historical debates about consumption and sociability, this book proposes a ‘material’ investigation that sheds new light on the role of objects in the lives of their owners, and in turn navigates through complex social networks and the overlapping territories in 18th-century France between commercial and sociable, emotional and practical.” (<http://www.hannahwilliams.me.uk/current-research/>, accessed 21/03/2019). The objects are

Finding room in the museum

A reasonably complete visual coverage of the French Revolution can be wrought from the massive number and sheer variety of prints. However, as works on paper sensitive to discoloring from exposure to light, they cannot constitute a permanent display in a museum context. On the contrary, the many categories of objects enumerated above are far less fragile, except for fans fabricated from prints and textiles that also fade over time. These material remnants of the Revolution include a few masterpieces of the decorative arts, but most merit to be exhibited mainly on account of the inscription or emblem they bear. Yet however modest, these objects stimulate an emotional sense of proximity to a dramatic past for anyone stirred by the period. Outside the museum, the effect is similar to that produced by the distinctive lettering of republican mottos that one comes across on public buildings in villages spared by modern renovation.

At first glance then, the artistic dimension of most of the artifacts is secondary. Any specific documentation that clears up its history makes it more interesting, as does information on how it was made and how it compares with other objects of the same kind. This contextualization can always be enriched by further research, but it cannot do away with the artifact's perceived commonness. Acutely attentive to this character, Champfleury, the critic close to Courbet, remarked in 1867 with regard to the Revolutionary objects that he loved: "*La maladresse du dessin s'efface devant la conviction du sentiment populaire.*"²⁵ Most nineteenth-century collectors of Revolutionary memorabilia were manifestly indifferent to the cultural prestige of the *beaux-arts*. The nature of their passion is revealed by the republican reliquaries they composed to present the objects they owned.²⁶ They may even have felt that the dominating presence of artistic qualities in an object induced an aesthetic attitude, some would say of Kantian detachment, ill-suited to an appreciation of popular culture, and a distraction from an essential meaning determined by history. In the context of the French Revolution, too refined an artwork suggested a choice to remain more artist than *citoyen*. The preference among collectors of Revolutionary memorabilia for the *arts populaires* over works sent to the Revolutionary Salons connected with the thread of suspicion toward the fine arts that ran from Calvin to Rousseau and Robespierre, down to the populist strand of communism during the twentieth century.

studied for a more intimate understanding of the life and practice of well-known artists; some Revolutionary artifacts are closely connected to their makers, but most have a primary significance that reaches beyond the confines of the art world.

²⁵ Champfleury, *Histoire des faïences patriotiques sous la Révolution*, 1st edition (Paris : E. Dentu, 1867). The quote is from the 3rd edition (Paris, 1875, xii); it includes a new *Avertissement* before the preface of 1867 that celebrates the surge of interest in Revolutionary artifacts since that date: "*Une période d'une dizaine d'années avait suffi pour faire comprendre aux gens empoisonnés par le factice, le charme de manifestations naïves*" (p. v).

²⁶ See the illustrations of such assemblages in *Collectionner la Révolution française* (n. 2), 32–34. The view of artifacts as relics was shared concurrently by the proponents of the rococo revival. See Tom Stammers, "Scavenging Rococo: *Trouvailles*, Bibelots and Counter-Revolution", Melissa Hyde and Katie Scott (ed.), *Rococo Echo: Art, History and Historiography from Cochin to Coppola* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014) 72; he notes the "theological flavour" of their collecting practices (p. 83).

In 1984, when hired to pilot the museum project in Vizille, I esteemed that the best way to ensure the survival of the institution beyond the support afforded by the bicentennial context was to constitute a permanent collection. It needed to be built from scratch through acquisitions, long-term loans from other museums, and gifts. But rather than the memorabilia that continued to appeal to private collectors, I felt that the prestige of the fine arts was the key to securing respect and legitimacy for the new institution. How works of art might be pertinent to the museum's focus was defined in the most inclusive terms possible. Revolutionary iconography was important but not a requisite, for even a portrait, a landscape or a still life simply dating from the period was judged significant. No less than artworks with Revolutionary themes, these expressed the *Zeitgeist* of the period and further proved that well-trained artists and artisans went about their business despite violence and repression. Much to the discomfort of the historians who backed the project and had envisioned an institution tailored to serve their Marxist reading of the period, the museum quality of the artworks necessarily foregrounded a biased narrative filtered by the taste of a narrow social elite, bourgeois and *ci-devant*.²⁷

Notwithstanding the priority granted to the fine arts, with the help of private collectors the museum was also able to acquire numerous ceramics, swords with emblematic guards custom-made for officers of the National Guard, and all sorts of things from small buttons and medals to a monumental stone chimneypiece. These were distinctively popular in spirit and relatively inexpensive, but despite the huge number of acquisitions, the museum's institutional strategy prevented them from receiving the attention given to the accomplished paintings and sculpture on exhibit. They continue to fill an introductory gallery of ceramics, with hundreds of decorated plates that create, as Champfleury had observed, a positive, simplified and accessible narrative of the Revolution, whose function here is to prepare the museum visitor for the challenge of more complex artworks in the rooms that follow. The diverse objects abound in a thematic display devoted to the fall of the Bastille and the National Guard, but otherwise they are grouped together in some secondary salons of the château.

Several factors account for the decision to thus segregate the historical artifacts from the fine arts, above all the desire to distinguish the bicentennial institution from the Paris museum identified with the Centenary of 1789. Also came into play a personal disinclination for the clutter and somewhat mystifying experience of the collector's cabinet. There is no definitive stalemate in the museum's organization however, for there remains a large room in the château planned for the decorative arts, waiting to be renovated, that might be the place where the *arts populaires* and the fine arts can be brought together. Such was Champfleury's vision: "*Il y a deux arts distincts sous la Révolution: l'un, quotidien, affecté à conserver le souvenir des événements du jour; l'autre, symbolique. Tous deux se donnent la main.*"²⁸ Confronting the artifacts of the French Revolution with this comprehensive vision remains a challenge. A small emblematic button once attached to a military uniform, can resonate with the material history of the period in myriad ways. The prescribed lines of conduct and abstract ideals of the period can easily be grasped from the mottos and symbols it bears, but more deeply, the

²⁷ For a discussion of these polemical issues, see my introduction to the *Catalogue des peintures, sculptures et dessins* (n. 6) ; and also, "Quelle Révolution à Vizille ?", *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française*, 1992, no. 3, 299–312. My remarks on the museum in Vizille relate to the years 1984 to 1996.

²⁸ Champfleury, *Histoire des faïences patriotiques* (n. 25), xii.

social and economic conditions of manufacture of the object, the concerted program of production, also need to be recovered.²⁹ Like the designer who provided the model, the worker who manipulated the machine that mass-produced the small button, the person who sewed the button on the uniform, and the soldier who wore it should all figure in the museum's narrative construction.

Among the paintings proposed to the museum for acquisition, some were visibly by untrained practitioners who paid no heed to the conventions that their more professional colleagues had internalized during their studies. Like the compositions by Duplessis, their awkwardness and naïveté were emotionally attractive for their unmediated sincerity and close interaction with the moment, characteristics that learned artistic conventions tend to cover up. The iconography tended to be highly personal and singular. Several such paintings were acquired, but it was never easy to find the right spot to hang them. Placing one next to a work by a more highly trained artist was a disservice for both: the one tended to appear clumsy and the other contrived. Though the categories that distinguish them are not clear-cut, it was decided to exhibit the two sorts of paintings apart, an operative hierarchy that also inspired the catalogue of the paintings, drawings and sculpture published in 1996.

As should be clear, from the day the museum opened in Vizille, the presentation of the highly disparate artifacts of the Revolution raised issues that were difficult to arbitrate and whose resolution will probably never cease to fluctuate. In the eyes of some museum visitors, the topicality and commonness of the objects will continue to belittle them. For others, it is an essential factor of the fascination they exert. Nonetheless, over the last decade the artifacts of the Revolution have come into greater historical focus by elaborating ways to not impose on them the terms and conditions determined by the fine arts. No doubt there are still other blind spots that need to be discovered and addressed.

Philippe Bordes
Musée de la Révolution Française, Domaine de Vizille

H-France Salon

ISSN 2150-4873

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²⁹ See the brief but suggestive remarks by Thomas Le Roux, « La chimie, support du développement de l'industrie perfectionnée sous la Révolution et l'Empire », Natacha Coquery, Jörg Ebeling, Annw Perrin Khelissa, Philippe Sénéchal (eds.), *Les progrès de l'industrie perfectionnée. Luxe, arts décoratifs et innovation de la Révolution française au Premier Empire* (Toulouse: Université de Toulouse, Jean Jaurès, 2016), 30.



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<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6947483s.r=Le%20G%C3%A9ant%20Iscariotte?rk=21459;2>

CAPTION : Anon, *Le Géant Iscariotte Aristocrate*, coloured etching, 29.0 x 21.0 cm.
Collection De Vinck, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.



CAPTION : Louis Lafitte, Poirier de Dunckerque (inv.) and Charles-Pierre Normand (engr.), *Les Formes acerbes*, 1795. Coloured etching, 34.0 x 38.0 cm. Collection Michel Hennin. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.



CAPTION: A. Duplessis, *Le Triomphe de Voltaire*, 1775. Oil on canvas, 114.0 x 157.0 cm. Château de Voltaire, Ferney, Centre des Monuments nationaux, inv. FER 19999000007