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## Against Ephemera

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Located near a busy road junction in Aix-en-Provence, the Monument Joseph Sec is easily missed. This strange confection was commissioned by Sec, a Jacobin-sympathising Aixois master carpenter and wealthy wood merchant, shortly before his death. Completed in 1792, the structure also comprises Sec's tomb. These days, although the monument is in a rather shabby state – several sculptures in the adjoining garden are broken or worn, with bits of wire protruding from their shattered limbs – it remains a rare surviving example of revolutionary architecture. The monument is certainly eclectic: alongside statuary on diverse biblical, masonic, natural, and revolutionary themes – the iconography of which was comprehensively charted by Michel Vovelle – the structure also includes rebuses, inscriptions, representations of the Saints and Old Testament figures, busts of Lafayette and Rousseau, and allegorical sculptures of Africa, Europe, and the Law (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

Realized monuments of this kind were unusual during the Revolution, for they were expensive, slow to produce, and liable to become politically outmoded before they were finished. Sec's project had been many years in the planning, which may explain its completion, although perhaps too its slightly crazed accumulation of heterogenous elements. More often, printed images were better suited than monuments or grand manner paintings for the expression of complex and changeable political views and for the performance of an ideal of permanence that was hard to achieve elsewhere. Yet there were occasions when, rather than reproducing sculpture or standing in for it, print became the matter of sculpture. Sometimes, instead of printed stone, one encountered stony print, and this a few years before the technical innovation of lithography literalized such a thing as part of its process. The Monument Joseph Sec is one such instance. On the front of the monument, beneath a sculpture of Moses, above normal lines of sight and partly obscured by tree branches, sculpted representations of two *assignats* – 2000 *livres* and 100 *livres* respectively – are inlaid into the frieze (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> By bringing together diverse emblems drawn from history with these fragments of modern life, the entire monument appears in its own right as something close to what Walter Benjamin called a “dialectical image.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Vovelle and Pierre Donaint, *Le mystérieux monument Joseph Sec à Aix-en-Provence* (Avignon: Éditions A. Barthélemy, 2009). On Sec, see too Vovelle, *L'Irresistible Ascension de Joseph Sec bourgeois d'Aix suivi de quelques clefs pour la lecture des "Naifs"* (Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> On the *assignat*, see especially Rebecca L. Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015). I am grateful to Allison Goudie for first drawing this aspect of the monument to my attention.

<sup>3</sup> For Benjamin, the unique configuration of past and present found in the dialectical image was, in the decades after the Revolution, best discerned in contingent works of fashion or ephemeral print, for “just as in the seventeenth century it is allegory that becomes the canon of dialectical images, in the nineteenth century it is novelty. Newspapers flourish.” Walter

This idiosyncratic representation of precarious and materially fragile money in monumental form speaks to the ambivalence with which material things were received during the French Revolution. For the years after 1789 presented an intractable conflict in the status of the object. On the one hand, the Revolution brought about a proliferation of new or transformed commodities, especially, but not only, printed images of various kinds.<sup>4</sup> Liberated from the rigid censorship of the Ancien Régime, cheap etchings, broadsides, high quality engravings, and their accompanying texts appeared in large quantities, many with political themes.<sup>5</sup> As Louis-Sébastien Mercier observed, in *Le Nouveau Paris*, “Il n’y a pas de maison à Paris, pour ainsi dire, où il n’y ait aujourd’hui une presse, soit à la cave, soit au grenier; et dans les mansardes, deux ou trois journalistes.”<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, following the democratization of the biennial Salon exhibitions from 1791, a greater number of artists practicing in genres other than academic history painting – portraits, still lifes, and landscapes for instance – were able to exhibit work in a space traditionally reserved for academicians.<sup>7</sup> This provided new opportunities for artists excluded from the hierarchies that governed artistic training and display, a number of whom were women, and in ensuing years this meant a more wholesale engagement with emergent markets in contemporary art. Meanwhile, a wide variety of different kinds of object, both everyday and elite – from porcelain to furniture, playing cards to medals, clothing to money – were repurposed with the prerogatives of revolutionary “regeneration” in mind.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, however, the Revolution signalled a profound erasure, not only in terms of the iconoclastic destruction of objects or the loss of established systems of patronage and display, but perhaps more significantly as regards the conceptual framing of the systems of value that underpinned them.<sup>9</sup> We might say that this dialectic, between relatively consistent

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Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century (Exposé of 1935)” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>4</sup> On “proliferation” as a key dynamic of post-revolutionary image-making, see Susan Siegfried, “Alternative Narratives,” *Art History* 36, no. 1 (February 2013): 100-127.

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see, among others, *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775-1800*, ed. Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989); *French Caricature and the French Revolution, 1789-1799* (Los Angeles: Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988); Rolf Reichardt and Hubertus Kohle, *Visualizing the Revolution: Politics and Pictorial Arts in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Reaktion, 2008); *Lexikon der Revolutions-Ikonographie in der europäischen Druckgraphik (1789-1889)*, ed. Rolf Reichardt et. al. (Munster: Rhema Verlag, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), 5:690.

<sup>7</sup> For an essential overview of these changes see *Aux armes et aux arts! Les arts de la Révolution française*, eds. Philippe Bordes and Régis Michel (Paris: Adam Biro, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> See, among others, Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Richard Wrigley, *The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Berg, 2002). Also the essays forthcoming in *Time, Media, and Visuality in Post-Revolutionary France*, ed. Iris Moon and Richard Taws (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> On this topic see Richard Clay, *Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Paris: The Transformation of Signs* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013); *Iconoclasme et Révolutions, XIIIe-XXIe siècles*,

auratic objects, and the vanished thing, is constitutive of a certain model of modernity. Perhaps nothing signals this more eloquently than the modern museum, itself a revolutionary invention, or the culture of collecting that developed apace in the nineteenth century, and which frequently made recourse to the dusty remnants of the revolutionary past as a means to either royalist recollection or national patrimony.<sup>10</sup> Perversely, those things that seemed so fragile and ephemeral during the Revolution were also those most amenable to preservation, in private museums and national archives. This, indeed, is one of the defining paradoxes of the materials we class as “ephemera”: despite their vaunted transience, they tend to stick around (and as our current climate crisis has made abundantly clear, disposability does not equate to disappearance). The Monument Joseph Sec appears as one such collection, narrating histories both personal and political through its representation of objects that, unlike Moses or the Saints, were strikingly contemporary in both their meaning and materiality, but which acquired a historicizing function through their incorporation into a commemorative structure.

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In thinking about what the French Revolution might mean after 230 years we are, inevitably, thinking of prior commemorations. These repetitions are, of course, immanent to our object of study, rather than peripheral to it, as historical actors in 1830, 1848, or 1871 self-consciously re-enacted aspects of their revolutionary inheritance. Yet for most of us contributing to and reading this volume, I expect the commemoration we have in mind is the bicentennial of 1989. I’ve no desire to exhume the historiographical debates of that time here, and I’m not the person to do so. In fact, for those, like me, who began to study the period in the decade following the bicentennial, it was hard to escape a feeling of belatedness, of coming to the party slightly too late. At that point too, a certain sense of exhaustion seemed to be the order of the day: despite the flood of publications and exhibitions that appeared around 1989, many of them excellent, some less so, a few years later the French Revolution, and its visual culture, seemed to have been squeezed for meaning.<sup>11</sup> 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. Equally, such an attitude – which coincided with a broader and ongoing material

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ed. Emmanuel Fureix (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2014); Erika Naginski, “The Object of Contempt,” *Yale French Studies* 101 (2001): 32-53; Anne M. Wagner, “Outrages: Sculpture and Kingship in France after 1789” in *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. John Brewer and Ann Bermingham (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 294-318; Richard Wrigley, “Breaking the Code: Interpreting French Revolutionary Iconoclasm,” in *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism*, ed. Alison Yarrington and Kelvin Everest (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 182-195.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Stammers, “The Bric-a-Brac of the Old Regime: Collecting and Cultural History in Post-Revolutionary France,” *French History* 22, no. 3 (September 2008): 295-315.

<sup>11</sup> It may be that a similar feeling persists and is in fact symptomatic of wider tendencies. Writing ten years ago, on the 220<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution, Lynn Hunt offered a series of insightful suggestions for future directions the study of the Revolution might take, against a background of “a general state of ‘paradigmlessness’ in the humanities.” Lynn Hunt, “The Experience of Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 671-678.

turn in literature and historical studies writ large, and the not necessarily complementary advent of visual culture – was a product of the bicentennial and the years either side of it.<sup>12</sup> Prompted in part by a desire to wring from the moment as many micro-commemorations as possible, printed images, in particular, were a notable component of several important exhibitions and books; although it aligned with existing tendencies in scholarship, this also served the practical function of allowing many displays to take place simultaneously. There are only so many Davids to go around.

My own engagement with the subject was profoundly shaped by that scholarship. But important disciplinary distinctions still held sway. Seen from art history, rather than history, things appeared slightly differently, and continue to do so. The fraught historiographical dramas of the period were not quite the same as those taking place in art history, which had, and has, its own to contend with. Art historians of the period are consequently always required to be in two places at once. Reviewing the bicentennial literature on art and the French Revolution in a 1990 issue of *Oxford Art Journal*, Adrian Rifkin observed how 1989 had not been “the occasion of a revolution in art history, or even of any major methodological development,” with gender in particular a notable blindspot at that time.<sup>13</sup> Addressing now-foundational interventions by scholars including Thomas Crow, Antoine de Baecque, Lynn Hunt, and Claude Langlois, alongside diverse other cultural forms, from exhibitions to music, digital collections to books for teenagers, Rifkin noted the implausibility of even trying to talk about such a thing as “bicentennial literature.” Most of what qualified as such, he observed, was not exactly at the forefront of critical thought, for “the shelves at the FNAC were groaning under comic strips that, at a superficial glance, seemed to get everywhere from the most lurid of adventure stories to a well-meaning moralism that could have come straight out of a primary school in the 1880s.”<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Rifkin swiftly rebuffed hyperbolic claims for certain bicentennial works being the “best thing ever” written on the topic. “Ever,” he noted drily, “is really quite a long time in revolutionary historiography.”<sup>15</sup>

While these words ring true, it is harder to define what exactly has changed in this protean historiography when successive commemorations force us to return to past disciplinary manoeuvres, with potentially ever-diminishing returns. Yet considering the meaning of the French Revolution now – *right now* – is a useful task, and one that presses us to recognise our own situation as historical subjects writing about it at this fraught point in time. As I write, living in the UK as I do, the chaos of Brexit pollutes any attempt to think about what “now” might mean. Loath as I am to even bring the subject up, or to amplify voices that already receive too much airtime, virulent ethno-nationalism bracketed to a nostalgic embrace of a past that never was – the historical amnesia David Andress has recently described as “cultural dementia” – provides a complex kind of background to these thoughts.<sup>16</sup> In April 2019, Nigel Farage announced the launch of his new Brexit Party with the brash claim that “my ambition is to cause a revolution in British politics.” Previously, Farage has called for a “democratic

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<sup>12</sup> For a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between art history, visual culture, and material culture, see Michael Yonan, “Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies,” *West 86<sup>th</sup>* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 232–248.

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Rifkin, “Bi-centennial Literature on Art and the French Revolution,” *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 113–117.

<sup>14</sup> Rifkin, “Bi-centennial Literature,” 113.

<sup>15</sup> Rifkin, “Bi-centennial Literature,” 114.

<sup>16</sup> David Andress, *Cultural Dementia: How the West has Lost its History and Risks Losing Everything Else* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018).

revolution” while simultaneously decrying, in the context of the Eurozone, “the prospect of mass civil unrest, possibly even revolution in some countries that are being driven to total and utter desperation.” Revolution talk is extremely cheap, right now. And it is Britain’s nearest neighbour that again provides the language with which to invoke such things, while remaining the phobic site of a revolutionary spectre to be defended against. With the past so easily forgotten the condition of ephemerality – which entails forms of objecthood bound to expediency and the politics of memory – cannot but feel a charged one.

Consequently, in thinking through the French Revolution’s meaning now, we would do well to put to one side the narratives of modernity that have dogged our understanding of the Revolution’s causes and effects, with all the baggage they carry, and engage instead with an equally vexed term: “contemporary.”<sup>17</sup> In art history, contemporary art now dominates the discipline in a way it certainly did not thirty years ago, which means that those of us who work on more distant historical periods – even those, such as the French Revolution, whose place in the present is continually made and remade, not least via constant commemoration – have to work harder to justify our work’s relevance. I raise this not to moan grumpily at this turn of events, for the study of contemporaneity is the forefront of much of the most important critical thinking on the visual right now, even if the contemporary is at the same time the repository of a number of desires it is almost impossible to fulfil. Rather, thinking about the contemporaneity of the French Revolution prompts me to return to a subject – ephemera – which not only took on renewed critical force with the Revolution, but whose unique ability to mediate our understanding of, and fantasies about, the present makes it particularly relevant here. Despite my frequent use of the term (and acknowledging that I may well be biting the hand that feeds), ephemera is, I confess, a word I don’t much care for. The value judgments it carries – of inconsequence, hobbyism, or nostalgia – the way it fails to differentiate between quite different categories of object, and its masking of the true temporal complexity it contains, cloud attempts to use it critically. But still, the category of ephemerality seems to me to offer useful possibilities for the analysis of French revolutionary visual culture’s contemporary meaning, and perhaps too for that of contemporaneity itself.

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The French term *éphémère* was initially used primarily in the entomological sense, referring to the mayfly, a creature that is born and dies in a single day. The term was linked closely to a specific genre, the *éphémérides*, a day-by-day account of an individual life, but could also signify material objects such as charts used for celestial navigation, or, later, calendars with sheets that could be torn off as each day passed. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, *éphémère* broadened in use to encompass the similarly transient lives of flowers, illnesses, persons, and regimes. Elsewhere in *Le Nouveau Paris*, Mercier bemoaned the excess of paper that the Revolution had let loose: philosophical and political treatises; plans and maps; libels and pamphlets; posters in all colours; bills, receipts and legal documents relating to the sale of national properties; the ever-expanding paperwork of the state and political clubs; death sentences and taxation forms; newspapers, letters, passports, citizenship cards, paper money... the list was endless.<sup>18</sup> Ever one for the pithy quote, Mercier suggested

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<sup>17</sup> On the question of the Revolution’s modernity and its legacies, in light of (then) recent literature, see Rebecca L. Spang, “Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern is the French Revolution?” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 1 (February 2003): 119-147.

<sup>18</sup> Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, 4:531-535.

that “Le mal que produisit le papier dans les différentes phases de la révolution, est tel qu’on pourroit souhaiter qu’il n’eût jamais été inventé.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet notwithstanding Mercier’s inventory of revolutionary paper (to which he himself contributed substantially), and despite its close association with the products of print culture, ephemera was ultimately a rather mutable category that was regularly defined by the supposed “nature” of its subject – its contingency and immediacy – not the attributes of its materials as such.<sup>20</sup> There was, as Mercier was well aware, a political dimension to this, for the short life of the ephemeral object could, in a revolutionary context, signify the limited lifespan or flimsiness of a particular political constituency, and it could equally point to its vitality, immediacy, or responsiveness to a volatile situation. Neither ephemera itself, nor the ambivalent character of ephemerality were, of course, unique to the French Revolution, but the Revolution called into question the preservability of things in new, politically loaded ways, that in due course were annexed to longer-term processes of industrialisation, commodification, and the appearance of an incipient mass culture.

As philosopher Rebecca Comay has argued recently, the crucial revolutionary tension between hyperactive productivity and the absence of an object was central to the reception of the French Revolution in German-speaking lands, particularly in the writing of Kant and, especially, Hegel. As she suggests, “Revolution is at once the principle of reversibility – total overturning or catastrophe – and the principle of irreversible fixation. It introduces the twin specters of irrecoverable transience and incontrovertible, monumental persistence.”<sup>21</sup> Equally, the revolutionary preoccupation with regeneration was responsible for a swift turnover in revolutionary objecthood, for: “If there is no limit to what can and must be renovated – the calendar will be reset, cities will be renamed, ‘everything must be republicanized’ – this is because in order to sustain its own generativity, the revolution must keep destroying whatever it generates, calling into question even its own most prodigious powers of self-invention.”<sup>22</sup> For Hegel, this eradication of enduring objects was integral to the epistemology of the Terror, which operated as pure abstraction, eliminating the alterity that materiality, in all its forms, engendered.<sup>23</sup> I’ve argued elsewhere that in France at this time the revolutionary inability to secure for itself monuments to its own history was perhaps less overwhelmingly negative, as the provisionality of much cultural production during the 1790s enabled diverse new ways of processing the transformations in temporal order, the radical breach with the past as well as the continuities from the previous regime, initiated by the Revolution.<sup>24</sup> Yet however, one looks at it, it is clear that materiality was one of the key terrains upon which the Revolution exercised itself, from the destruction of the Bastille to Napoleon’s preoccupation with the eclectic emblems of antiquity and the French past.

As well as standing as a symptom of this investment in the political power of everyday, transient things, a complex object such as the Monument Joseph Sec might also provoke

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<sup>19</sup> Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, 4:532.

<sup>20</sup> See “Ephemerality” in Multigraph Collective, *Interacting with Print: Elements of Reading in an Era of Print Saturation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 126–141.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 30.

<sup>22</sup> Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2013).

some broader questions regarding the precise character of the materials we consider relevant or summon as evidence. Attention to such materials is thrown into sharper relief by their precarious nature and does not come without risks. A recent special issue of the journal *Representations*, based on a conference of musicologists at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2014, has identified a tendency in humanities scholarship of recent decades to valorize the overlooked, ephemeral, or anomalous. The editors term this tendency “quirk historicism,” which is defined by one of the contributors as marking the “critical investment of New Historicism in the marginal or eccentric object as part of its political project.”<sup>25</sup> Editors Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart give as examples Vaucanson’s famous defecating duck, or the case of the Ceylonese elephants Hanz and Marguerite, who in 1798 were subjects of an experiment at the Paris Jardin des Plantes to assess the effects of music on animals (they responded particularly amorously to the revolutionary song *Ça Ira*).<sup>26</sup> Ephemeral objects, precisely because they purport to be short-lived, are particularly suited to the seductive potential of quirkiness’s hidden ideology. As theatre historian Aoife Monks puts it, “the invocation by scholars of apparently marginal artifacts, events, or ephemeral fragments [...] works to turn ‘bad art’ into good modernism through the estrangement and wonder that historical difference affords.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the difference and strangeness of the quirky example or object is in fact only achieved over time, for such quirks were often largely invisible in their day; only later do they return as the base materials of modernist practices, albeit in mediated ways that potentially diffuse the real historical conditions of their production and display. Furthermore, as Monks continues: “At the same time, however, quirky objects are encouraged to remain mysterious, guarding the ineffable secrets of their historical difference, resisting complete explanation, remaining as things-in-themselves. The quirky is at once a means to knowledge and a mechanism that sets in motion the rapturous fantasy of the unknowable.”<sup>28</sup>

In this model, whereby historians invest in cultural forms, species of evidence, and so on, that, while anomalous – ephemeral, even – come to take on a defining narrative function, the implication is that they might provide a somehow more immediate, accurate, or more troublingly, morally superior access to the past. This is a deeply uncomfortable thing to face up to, particularly if, like me, much of one’s work attends to exactly such tangential practices. Here, the broad political agenda that underlies numerous, radically divergent approaches to cultural history that aim to read larger tendencies in microanalysis – from the Annales school to memory studies, or from the sociological perspective of Pierre Bourdieu (whereby the “elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food”) to the “excavation” of failed or discontinued technologies prioritised by more recent moves in media archaeology – threatens to appear as a kind of fetishism, however carefully obscured or repressed.<sup>29</sup> Closer to home, art history has always flirted with

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<sup>25</sup> Aoife Monks, “Bad Art, Quirky Modernism,” *Representations* 132 (Fall 2015): 111.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism,” *Representations* 132 (Fall 2015): 61-78.

<sup>27</sup> Monks, “Bad Art, Quirky Modernism,” 105.

<sup>28</sup> Monks, “Bad Art, Quirky Modernism,” 105. Some similar issues have been taken up recently in Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), which treats seriously aesthetic categories (the zany, cute, and interesting) frequently marginalized or debased in studies of aesthetics, but which Ngai argues are central to the affective experience of late capitalism.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 1; Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka

such fetishism – one might even say that it underpins the foundations of the discipline, from Winckelmann onwards, although it has sometimes integrated it into sophisticated iterations of formalism (from Riegl or Warburg to T.J. Clark) in ways that promise to retrieve its radical potential. Despite these reservations, it's also worth remembering that a concentration on the seemingly obscure or anomalous, while it carries risks of methodological erroneousness or self-satisfaction, also retains power as a means to retrieve the voices of those who have themselves been remaindered by history: women, people of colour, and other disenfranchised subjects or groups. There are powerful historiographical reasons to attend closely to “minor” materials of the past that may have been excluded from the canon, even if they themselves soon end up comprising a canon of their own.

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I have called forth Joseph Sec's monument precisely for these reasons – and deliberately invoked its strangeness, its “quirkiness.” Yet it is a work that is also in many ways representative of the visual culture of its time. The striking focus on the interrelation of allegorical motifs in the structure, its self-conscious meditation on the variable contingencies of stone, paper, and bodies, were features of the work whose purpose would have been noticed and understood by many contemporary viewers, in their broader framing of revolutionary shifts in time, if not in their details. Distinction and ubiquity often overlap more than we are willing to recognise. However, there remains a stumbling block, for this approach – using a seemingly anomalous work to ventriloquize its historical situation – still depends on a retrieval of the singular instance, on a work of art or other example that operates, functionally, according to the logic of the unique utterance, event, or object. Viewed over the longer term, this is an attitude that is ultimately at odds with a serious consideration of the ephemeral mass products of the nineteenth century, which were in many ways given their cue by the transformations of the Revolution. As the century progressed, ephemerality increasingly threatened to become a general condition of all made things, and it certainly transcended the French context. Innovations such as machine-made paper or the steam press meant that there were far more documents of all kinds in circulation than ever before, which gave rise to new anxieties about how to distinguish products of aesthetic or historical value.<sup>30</sup> The challenge, here, for us as much as for their contemporary consumers, is how to deal with a broad category of objects that transcend the singular, to think about structures and formats while not renouncing that which is most material in material culture: the close attention to individual, perhaps fleeting, objects retrieved from an ever-increasing flow of made things.

Moreover, what are we to do when the same objects – the quirks of the past – are returned to us, in what we might consider debased forms? We might here consider the many reproductions of artworks that appeared as fine art engravings or in the illustrated weekly press in the second half of the nineteenth century, which variously affirmed and challenged the status of singular artworks through reproduction by novel technological means.<sup>31</sup> But, to

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eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Relevant here are revolutionary transformations in copyright laws regarding the commercialization of works of art through reproduction, most significantly the law of July 19, 1793. Katie Scott, *Becoming Property: Art, Theory and Law in Early Modern France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 281-304.

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen Bann, *Distinguished Images: Prints and the Visual Economy in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013); Tom Gretton, “Un



stay with the Revolution, I would like to conclude with a trade card, issued by the Bognard company around 1889 to commemorate the centenary of the French Revolution (Fig. 3). These chromolithographic cards (known as “chromos”) were used to advertise an array of commodities, such as coffee or chocolate, and were distributed free with the product at point of purchase. This series of cards represent key figures of the French Revolution – Robespierre, Danton, Desmoulins, Mme Roland, Marat – situated next to oversized representations of *assignats*, hovering next to the revolutionaries in colossal, phantasmagoric form. As Sec’s monument also recognized, what could embody more fully the tension implicit in “ephemera” between transience and value than paper money of this kind? Furthermore, what could be *less* anomalous than the *assignat*, which circulated in ever-larger quantities during the 1790s, until its withdrawal in 1796, and whose use was a near-universal experience rather than a quirk or eccentricity? Yet this card, which reproduced – in fact, remediated – the printed ephemera of the Revolution as the stuff of historical evidence, but also of commemoration, enabled an understanding of revolutionary paper culture and its political ramifications via a format, approximately the same size and shape as the money it represented, that offered a commercially savvy means to reflection on the passage of mechanically reproduced images across time. We might suggest that Sec’s monument attempted a similar trick, albeit within a markedly different geographical and historical context.

To return to my theme, although “ephemera” offers us a useful set of objects through which to interrogate the belatedness of both our experience of the French Revolution, and its commemorations, perhaps it is time we set it aside, or at least consider with scepticism its apparent neutrality. On the one hand, the term foregrounds the transient aspects of a group of objects which evidence shows us are often far from such, sequestering them in the past rather than emphasizing their contemporary vitality. On the other hand, many invocations of ephemera do not, in fact, take seriously the time-bound qualities of either the content of objects or their material supports, viewing them as somehow out of history. The term also serves to artificially taxonomize a group of diverse objects whose real purchase lies not in their difference from institutionally valorized forms of artistic production and display, but in their complex interaction with such artworks and practices. Might we better approach these issues by thinking in a more focused way about the temporality of “media” – itself admittedly a troublingly capacious term – and more specifically about “intermediality”? In other words, by considering how productive relations across media and between the institutions that shape them might form one of the crucial sites where the radical visual and material culture of the French Revolution its paintings, sculpture, and architecture, but also its prints, drawings, texts, ceramics, textiles, fashions, furniture, documents, lantern slides, medals, buttons, or souvenirs – operated in historically dynamic ways. Extending well beyond the immediate period of the 1790s, this would necessarily take account of the varied forms of reproduction, collecting, and display that have mediated these objects for us over time. The Bognard chromos, viewed alongside Sec’s monument in Aix – both of them commemorations of the distance between the Revolution and “now,” by way of their representation of its paper signs of value – are but one example of such a process in action. These objects do not operate entirely on their own terms, for they were of course bound to the lives of the people who lived with, made, and used them, most of whom they have survived. All the same, as these works show, while histories of seemingly anomalous things might be one way to reassert

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moyen puissant de vulgarisation artistique’. Reproducing Salon Pictures in Parisian Illustrated Weekly Magazines c.1860-c.1895: From Wood Engraving to the Half Tone Screen (and Back),” *Oxford Art Journal* 39, no. 2 (June 2016): 1-26.

human agency where it has been lost or denied, sometimes images and objects are their own best historians.

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Fig. 1. *Monument Joseph Sec*, detail, 1792, Aix-en-Provence (Photo: author).



Fig. 2. *Monument Joseph Sec*, detail of ‘assignats’, 1792, Aix-en-Provence (Photo: author).



Fig. 3. Imprimerie Bognard, “Robespierre” advertising card, c. 1889, 8 x 11 cm., chromolithograph.