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Tom Stammers, *The Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary Paris c. 1790-1890*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xii + 361 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9781108478847; \$96.00 (eb). ISBN: 9781108802888.

Review by Denise Z. Davidson, Georgia State University.

Tom Stammers's imaginative and engaging study of the culture of collecting in nineteenth-century France provides a new perspective on private collecting and its relationship to memory, taste, historical consciousness, and state-run cultural institutions. Focused on the world of private collectors in Paris from the 1780s to 1900, the book makes clear that these men and their collections had more significance than has previously been assumed. Though often portrayed as selfish, egotistical, and driven by commercial motives, these collectors played important, if contradictory, roles in salvaging and promoting French national heritage in the decades following the French Revolution.

Stammers seeks to revise the standard narrative that the French Revolution, in creating national institutions to collect and display objects that would educate the public and thus create a shared sense of the nation's cultural heritage, caused private collectors to "retreat into a closed domain of pleasure and idiosyncrasy" (p. 6). Through deep research in a huge number of archives and libraries and careful examination of a wide range of archival and published sources (visible in the book's forty-five page bibliography) into the views and practices of collectors over the course of the nineteenth century, Stammers builds a convincing case for his main argument: that private collecting had a public component and these collections shaped understandings of the meaning and value of French national heritage. Collectors' relationships with state-run institutions were often marked by tension, particularly as the growing international art market meant that the state could not successfully compete in sales. In addition, many of the most famous late nineteenth-century collections turned out to include heavily "restored" and even falsified objects, causing national institutions such as the Louvre embarrassment when it emerged that state funds had been spent on them. Despite these tensions, museum administrators cultivated close relationships with private collectors whose knowledge, cultural capital, and influence they valued.

The book takes a mostly chronological and biographical approach to its subject. Each chapter focuses on one or two collectors who epitomize the approach to collecting that dominated the particular moment. Throughout, Stammers goes beyond the collectors' memoirs and other personal accounts of their passions and reflects on depictions of them in the press to reveal

evolving attitudes toward collecting, not just among collectors themselves but also among the broader public. The structure of the book thus underlines change over time, from amateur antiquarians to more acquisitive, market-oriented approaches. After a substantive introduction focused on three themes that reappear throughout the book—collection, recollection, and revolution—Stammers turns, in chapter one, to the figure of the *amateur* and particularly the work of Gault de Saint-Germain, author of several influential guides to collecting that were published in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Reacting to depictions of the *amateur* as selfish and driven by purely commercial motives, Gault sought to resurrect the image of *amateurs*, depicting their efforts to study and conserve the past as tools to regulate French taste in the absence of institutional and aristocratic control over the nation's heritage. In focusing on these depictions and the significance of the term “amateur,” this opening chapter sets the stage for those that follow.

The remaining chapters cover examples of particular collectors, moving forward in time through the century and culminating with the “sale of the century,” auctions held in 1893 and 1895 to sell Frédéric Spitzer's collection, which included “all the finest Gothic and Renaissance objects disgorged in the century of revolution” (p. 247). Chapter two, “Archiving and Envisioning the French Revolution,” focuses primarily on Jean-Louis Soulavie, whose collecting and cataloging efforts focused on documenting and analyzing the logic behind the events of the French Revolution. Though his collection was dispersed following his death in 1813, much of it ended up in state-run museums and libraries after being purchased by other private collectors. Chapter three, on Bibliophilia from 1790-1840, similarly argues that “the formation of state and private libraries need to be seen as parallel and co-dependent processes” (118). In bringing to life an “exclusive and self-mythologizing Parisian community” (p. 121) that brought together male pleasure seekers, the chapter depicts bibliophiles as a “cousin of the flaneur” (p. 131). This is one instance where Stammers incorporates gender analysis into his argumentation as he emphasizes how the collectors' desire to possess urban spaces functioned in tandem with their preservationist motives.

Chapter four, “Salvaging the Gothic,” focuses on Alexandre-Charles Sauvageot, a renowned collector of Gothic and Renaissance art who bequeathed his entire collection to the Louvre in 1856, a gift that illustrates the collaborations and tensions that emerged between private collectors and the state. Sauvageot insisted that he be allowed to supervise the installation of his collection and even to live in apartments at the Louvre so as to “die alongside it” (p. 190). Stammers argues that the Louvre acquiesced to his demands because of a desire to keep the collection out of “unworthy hands” (p. 194), foreshadowing lengthier discussions of anti-Semitism that appear later in the book. Chapter five, “Royalists versus Vandals, the Cult of the Old Regime,” focuses on Jérôme Pichon, president of the Société des bibliophiles français, which comprised mostly noble members who met in his home for over fifty years, starting in 1841. This chapter explores how collectors responded to the destruction caused by the Commune and in the process provides strong evidence for the book's overall argument. In one instance, Stammers draws attention to verbal slippages that treated individual collectors' losses as “collective, national tragedy” (p. 214). The final chapter brings anti-Semitism to center stage along with concerns about the loss of France's cultural heritage as international buyers succeeded in obtaining countless precious objects and even entire collections, causing conservative critics to complain that “authentic vestiges of ancestral France were being ripped up and shipped off” (p. 284).

Aside from telling fascinating stories in engaging prose, the book contains thirty captivating images from the period, which Stammers puts to effective use not just as illustrations but as evidence for the points he develops. One such image is an oil painting by Arthur Roberts called *Intérieur du cabinet de M. Sauvageot* that was featured at the Salon of 1857 (p. 161). The painting depicts Sauvageot standing in his home surrounded by his cherished objects, which crowd every possible horizontal and vertical surface of the room. Stammers argues that the press coverage and artistic attention given to this “celebrity” collector, reflect “growing public interest in collecting as a cultural practice” (p. 161). Another illuminating image appears near the end of the book, in the closing chapter on Spitzer and in the context of a Stammers’s discussion of anti-Semitic depictions of the opulence and garish taste of Jewish collectors. The painting by Gustav-Adolf Mossa, *Israël* (1893/1903), portrays a Jewish capitalist and his daughter pawing ornate medieval religious objects with blackened ruins in the background. In analyzing the image, Stammers draws attention to the painting’s reference to a dual defilement: that of the Christian patrimony and one of biology, “as the Jew’s daughter conjured up the threat of marrying into an aristocratic family” (p. 278). Such images, along with the countless other primary sources Stammers has uncovered, make it clear that collectors featured prominently in public perceptions of French cultural heritage as well as debates over who had the right to possess the objects that reflected that heritage.

Scholars of nineteenth-century France will appreciate this book for shedding light on evolving ideas about the nation’s cultural heritage and who should be able to possess, display, and interpret it. Stammers builds a convincing case that private collectors had enormous influence on the evolution of taste, and on memory and historical consciousness in the century following the French Revolution. Collectors’ relationships with state-run institutions like the Louvre meant that they also contributed to and shaped those public collections, even if they often played the role of competitors rather than collaborators. At end of the introduction, Stammers raises an interesting point about the excessive hold that history held over nineteenth-century society, building on literary scholar Göran Blix’s argument that historicism amounted to a “modern secular theology” (p. 26).<sup>[1]</sup> Without doubt, Stammers demonstrates that collectors were “the apostles and ministers of this cult” (p. 26) and thus deserve our attention if we seek to understand this essential component of nineteenth-century understandings of the nation and its past, and of French culture more generally.

## NOTES

[1] Göran Blix, *From Paris to Pompeii: French Romanticism and the Cultural Politics of Archeology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

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