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Salvaging and Archiving the Revolution

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Private collectors played a significant and overlooked role in the complex process by which the French Revolution became history. Their desire to stockpile pamphlets, books, autographs and prints, sometimes at considerable risk to themselves, reflected a faith in the historical import of the contemporary moment. Ephemeral and unique sources such as autographs were avidly collected as authentic relics of a momentous age; antiquarian sciences, like numismatics and bibliography, were stretched in order to accommodate the shock of these new materials. In selecting, sorting through and classifying the print culture of the 1790s, private collectors were the first to confront those vexing questions of periodization, of continuity and change, which still dominate the historiography. Thanks to the systematic nature of their purchases, and the sheer size of their stockpiles, it is clear that several pioneers - such as Delisle de Sales, Portiez de l'Oise or Mathieu Guillaume Villenave - were more than trophy-hunters: they

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were self-conscious archivists of the Revolution for whom collecting the present was inseparable from interpreting it.

Collectors' activities have been marginalized in a scholarship fixated with the birth of the museum and the creation of a truly national heritage. Yet despite the satire hurled their way, these men were not monomaniacs and misfits but described their activities in highly moralized terms. Arthur-Henri Boulard amassed an extraordinary library of 550,000 volumes over the course of the Revolution and the Empire – a haul second only to the Bibliothèque Nationale. A pious royalist, he claimed to be moved by pity to save books that had been thrown out in the street at the time of the dispersion of the academic, corporate and clerical libraries. His bulk purchases were portrayed as a kind of Christian charity, and his private residence in the faubourg Saint-Germain was viewed as analogous to Alexandre Lenoir's Musée des Monuments Français. Ironically it was conservatives like Boulard who took a key role in preserving Revolutionary print culture – all the while blaming the Revolution for drowning out older and wiser voices.

Early collectors were fascinated by the historical echoes and antecedents to 1789. The Wars of Religion and the Fronde were constant points of reference, since in those crises too the collapse in royal authority had unleashed a wave of heretical opinions and scurrilous cartoons. The vogue for customizing books or print folios by appending other extraneous sources only facilitated trans-historical comparisons. This wider chronological perspective was seen as crucial to decoding many of the oblique references and puzzling allegories found in Revolutionary print culture. Conservative commentators – such as Boyer de Nîmes, the first historian of Revolutionary caricature, beginning in 1792 – discerned a conspiratorial logic latent in popular imagery: only the study of a large corpus of sources in different media might expose these secret affinities.

The most striking example of such tendencies was the abbé Soulavie, a geologist, historian, repentant Jacobin and owner of over 22,500 prints and drawings that chronologically traced the history of France. Soulavie was obsessed with authenticity and commissioned many unknown participants in the key events of the French Revolution to draw what they had seen, no matter how brutal. The aim was to try and establish an objective depiction of the nation's recent troubles, with Soulavie convinced that the brush and the burin were far more reliable

witnesses than the pen. Yet the indexical function of the visual sources was undercut by Soulavie's much more occult and mystical notion of time, covering his prints with retrospective marginalia, and constantly pointing out unexpected epochal correspondences. Most intriguingly, Soulavie had a dedicated sub-section of prophetic prints: images whose full meaning would only be disclosed in hindsight. So certain was Soulavie of their predictive powers that he insisted these prints should never be sold abroad or be allowed to fall into enemy hands should his cabinet be dispersed.

In fact, very few of these collections outlived their owners, or were even adequately catalogued. Those that did were stripped of their idiosyncratic labels when they were eventually swallowed up by larger, public institutions. Yet recovering these micro-practices sheds light on how pioneering amateurs thought about, and thought through, the artefacts of the Revolutionary decade. Their cabinets were the storehouses of truths which would otherwise be lost amidst the flurry of censorship, accusation and self-exculpation. Collectors protested that even the crudest or most rudimentary document could be a clue in deciphering the Revolution's bloody trajectory – what Soulavie called the underlying 'revolutionary mechanism'. This quest for objectivity helps explain why it remained the ideological foes of the Revolution – men like the comte de la Bédoyère and the baron de Vinck – who did most to conserve and transmit its textual and material heritage in the nineteenth century.

RELEVANT WORKS

Jean-Richard, Pierette and Gilbert Mondin eds, *Un collectionneur pendant la Révolution: Jean-Louis Soulavie, 1752-1813: gravures et dessins* (Paris, 1989)

Jensen, Kristian, *Revolution and the Antiquarian Book: Reshaping the Past, 1780-1815* (Cambridge, 2011)

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