In memory of Julie Jones (1935-2021)

Esteemed scholar of pre-Columbian art and dedicated editorial board member of the journal
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MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES
FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

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ABBREVIATIONS
MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.
Pink ribbons crisscross around the curved bellies of two porcelain vases, each crowned with a pair of bejeweled white elephant heads. Their curled tusks flank a large potpourri vase in the form of an extravagant ship. This ensemble has held pride of place in the Wrightsman Galleries for the French Decorative Arts at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, demonstrating the exceptional craftsmanship of the Sèvres royal porcelain manufactory in executing Rococo flights of fantasy for royal and aristocratic patrons in mid-eighteenth-century France (fig. 1). The garniture exemplified the French court’s predilection for Sèvres porcelain, which was exchanged as diplomatic gifts and prominently displayed on the mantels and tables of wealthy European residences. In subsequent centuries, Sèvres royal porcelain...
maintained strong associations with the ancien régime, as the period was mythologized by aesthetes such as the Goncourt brothers. By the mid-twentieth century, Sèvres could be found in the homes of U.S. collectors, where Americans claimed it as a symbol of elite taste. To this day, French royal porcelain retains its mystique as a sign of exclusivity, enshrined in elegant displays and roped-off period rooms of museums such as The Met. Yet porcelain was not always an unquestioned symbol of prestige and power. For in 1789, as the ancien régime world came to an abrupt end with the French Revolution, the status of royal porcelain, along with other forms of material finery that had trenchant cultural associations with the royal past, was challenged, as rarefied objects of curiosity and prestige acquired ambiguous political meanings.

This article traces the afterlife of the Sèvres elephant garniture in the context of the French Revolution in order to explore how the politics of dispersal opened up new and contested meanings for luxury. Like many examples of French porcelain, the garniture began as a work intended for delectation within the confines of a private collection. Purchased by the prince de Condé, a favored and devoted courtier of Louis XV and the French crown, in 1758, the garniture was originally displayed within the apartments of the Palais Bourbon. The symbolic power of porcelain drew upon a discourse of the exotic and the rare, while simultaneously forming an element of a tightly orchestrated interior decoration and architectural schemes of convenance, a theory of building that dictated that an individual’s residence had to convey one’s place in the social order. With the French Revolution, the porcelain garniture joined the vast number of possessions that had been loosened from these sealed architectural envelopes and seized by the revolutionary government from the collections of royals, émigrés, and the clergy. Claimed as part of a new national patrimony on behalf of France’s citizens, such objects were dispersed at auction or placed in the newly established public museum. Recognized by the opportunistic art dealer Jean-Baptiste Pierre Le Brun in 1793 and initially reserved for inclusion in the new national museum at the Louvre by the Commission temporaire des arts, the elephant garniture was exchanged for a natural history cabinet before once more arriving on the auction block. Removed from its setting within the Palais Bourbon, where it was initially placed, the garniture participated in broader debates about the place of the decorative arts and luxury in educating the public, and the problematic language of fantasy and the exotic within the patriotic discourse of the Revolution.

Choosing to read the Sèvres elephant garniture in this unsettling historical context allows us to grasp the
ways in which the politics of dispossession, in other words, an object’s point of departure, rather than provenance alone, can reorient its meanings and generate new historical contexts. Sèvres scholarship has typically—and rightly—positioned The Met’s garniture as an example of the highest achievements of the royal manufactory, and the rare and ambitious forms it produced under the patronage of the French crown. Archival documents attest to the many painters, mold makers, gilders, and decorators who contributed to creating some of the finest examples of French porcelain in the eighteenth century, and the discerning individuals who purchased them in recognizing the artistry of each piece made by the manufactory. Yet for the most part, scholarly approaches have unduly emphasized porcelain as a reflection of personal tastes on the part of those who purchased the objects. Reading the Sèvres garniture against the grain, what meanings accrued when it became an instrument of bartering, exchange, and uncertain value, no longer anchored in the private collection of a singular patron? In short, what happens when private porcelain becomes a matter of charged public debate?

**A ROSE-COLORED PAST, PRINCELY AND MONSTROUS**

When the Bastille, the fortified prison on the banks of the Seine that had become a symbol of French despotism, was demolished on July 14, 1789, Louis Joseph de Bourbon, prince de Condé, was one of the few members of the royalty who recognized that its fall portended the end of the ancien régime and the French crown. Anxiously processing news of the events taking place from his family seat at Chantilly, he wrote in his journal, “On Tuesday July 14 in the evening at Chantilly we learned that the rebels had taken the Bastille; we had difficulty grasping it, but finally it was clear: I believed that I could no longer avoid going the next day with my children to the side of the king, whose crown at the very least was in danger.” Quickly grasping the gravity of the situation, the prince de Condé and his family left Paris on July 17, a mere three days after the demolition of the Bastille. Traveling to the court of Turin, then ruled by his cousin Victor Amadeus III, king of Sardinia, he sought to organize a royalist army. In haste, the prince left behind the family’s celebrated estate at Chantilly and the official residence at the Palais Bourbon, as well as the many lavish paintings, sculptures, and furnishings that had filled them.

The elephant garniture, located in the official apartments of the Palais Bourbon, had been purchased thirty years earlier, long before anyone could have foreseen the events of 1789. Louis Joseph de Bourbon, prince de Condé, was the great-great-grandson of Louis XIV and a descendant of the military general known as the Grand Condé. Though shy in his youth, the prince distinguished himself through his military prowess during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), and was one of the few French generals who saw successes on the battlefield against the Prussians. However, his main preoccupation, like that of his princely forebears, consisted, in the words of Marcellé Brunet, of “building, embellishing his residences, and furnishing them with objets d’art in the taste of the day, which included examples of Sèvres porcelain, despite the fact that his own father had founded a celebrated soft-paste manufactory at Chantilly in 1725. Like the many wealthy French patrons of the day, the prince purchased porcelain at the shop of the marchand-mercier Lazare Duvaux on the rue Saint-Honoré, where he and his wife, Charlotte Godefride Elisabeth de Rohan, had bought several pieces of “porcelaine de France” colored in a bleu-céleste ground.

During a hiatus from the Seven Years’ War, the prince acquired five vases at the 1758 Christmas sale of Sèvres porcelain held in the king’s apartments at Versailles. Courtiers were expected to buy pieces in a demonstration of support for the king’s favored porcelain manufactory. Then a youthful twenty-two years old, Louis Joseph bought a set of five pieces described in the manufactory’s official registry as “1 Pot-pourry a vaisseau Roze enfants 1.200, 2 Vazes a Oreilles 1er Id 720 1440, 2 Id a Elephant 1er, Id 840 1680.” The pair of vases à oreilles today in the Musée du Louvre are believed to have originally been displayed together with the vases at The Met as a set of five, indicated by the inventory records of the Palais Bourbon (fig. 2). He thus spent the exorbitant sum of 4,320 livres on the five vases, among the most expensive purchases of Sèvres at the time. For comparison, the economist François Quesnay estimated the annual wage of an average laborer to amount to 500 livres in the mid-eighteenth century. It was the first time Sèvres offered works colored in pink, attesting to the prince’s predilection for the newest inventions of the manufactory.

The prince’s extravagant purchase indicates the important role that porcelain continued to play in a European court politics that depended upon material forms of princely magnificence as signs of fealty. As early as the sixteenth century, European monarchs coveted high-fired blue and white porcelain from China. Praised for its translucency, whiteness, and durability, there was nothing quite like it in Europe at the time.
Goldsmiths often mounted pieces of blue and white porcelain, attesting to their preciousness, as with the Burghley porcelain in The Met’s British Galleries. Though Renaissance princes like Francesco de’ Medici set up secret workshops in an attempt to re-create the recipe for true porcelain, Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony, was the first to develop a true hard-paste porcelain body at Meissen in 1710. The Prussian defeat of Saxony halted porcelain production at Meissen, allowing Sèvres to reach new ascendancy as a producer of prized diplomatic gifts. Sèvres emerged out of a smaller factory at Vincennes established in 1740, favored by Louis XV and his mistress, Madame de Pompadour. It was moved to a larger site at Sèvres in 1756, and the king purchased the manufactory three years later, thus officially tying it to the crown. Many different specialists—whether it was the modeler, mold maker, gilder, or chaser—contributed to the completion of a single piece of porcelain. The highest-paid artisans were the figure painters, including Pompadour’s favorite, Charles-Nicolas Dodin. Science also played a key role in Sèvres’s development. Jean Hellot, member of the Royal Academy of Sciences, discovered new recipes for porcelain bodies, glazes, enamels, and gilding, allowing Sèvres to develop novel jewel-toned colors such as “bleu céleste,” “fond vert,” and of course its pink, known as “fond rose.”

The elephant garniture reflected the prevailing taste for novelty at a French court that abhorred boredom. The manufactory rapidly expanded its repertoire of shapes, decoration, and colors. The model for the elephant vase was first recorded in 1756 and combines molded and thrown sections. The pair of white elephant heads flank the profiles of each bottle-shaped vase, with the raised gilded trunks supported beneath by small handles that appear to be a variant of the initial design supplied by Jean-Claude Duplessis. Bunches of flowers have been painted into garlands that connect behind the latticework of ribbons with pinked edges tipped in gold. The eyelids of each elephant are painted a delicate pink shade. Tiny golden hairs create a downy effect inside each pachyderm’s ear, visible upon close inspection. The curved trunks, originally intended to hold candles, echo the four pillowy scrolled feet of the
base, decorated with curled acanthus leaves, and the gentle curve of double bead strands that part at the neck of each vase. The model for the equally inventive shape of the potpourri vase, or pot pourri à vaisseau, also designed by Duplessis, was recorded in 1757, its ship form perhaps intended to create an associative effect that would transport those who inhaled the perfumes contained within the vessel. Intricate cutouts on the openwork lid served the functional purpose of allowing the scent of dried flowers to escape, enhanced by pink and gilding to create an arresting pattern of circles and crescents resembling peacock feathers. The plunging décolletage of the lid is echoed by the cartouche-shaped central reserve, which features dancing putti in the clouds on one side and a bouquet of flowers on the other side of the potpourri.

At the Palais Bourbon, the prince de Condé’s official residence in Paris, the pink-colored garniture formed part of an elaborately coordinated interior, updated to suit the tastes of its inhabitants. Originally built on the banks of the Seine for Louise Françoise, duchesse de Bourbon and daughter of Louis XIV, the palace combined three residences of the main palace, the adjoining Hôtel de Lassay, and the newly constructed Pavillon des Petits Appartements; work continued in the second half of the eighteenth century, but it remained incomplete in 1789. The prince de Condé originally intended the porcelain vases as a gift to his wife, Charlotte Godefride Elisabeth de Rohan, who occupied the formal apartments in the main palace before her death at the age of twenty-three. An inventory of her apartments in 1760, less than two years after her husband had purchased the vases, lists the set in her bedroom. When the prince’s son, the duc d’Enghien, married Bathilde d’Orléans in 1770, the prince gave the formal suite of rooms to his daughter-in-law. In the winter, a set of pink Gobelins tapestries decorated the alcove of the formal bedchamber. It was based on the designs of François Boucher and Maurice Jacques, and the latter also designed the matching bed (fig. 3). Placed opposite the chimney, the Sévres garniture was displayed on the commode designed by Jean-François Leleu, forming part of a harmonious pink ensemble of contrasting textures that demonstrated what Mimi Hellman has described as the French interior’s “joy of sets.”

The prominent elephant heads found on the bottle vases expressed the powerful hold that a discourse of the exotic and the rare exerted over elite consumers, even as Enlightenment philosophers increasingly sought to dispel the language of wonder in favor of rational, empirical knowledge. Though the exact source of inspiration for Duplessis’s highly unusual, double-headed design is unclear, it is possible that he was influenced by Japanese models and the examples made after them at Meissen. French naturalists were already familiar with elephants in the seventeenth century, and it is possible that Duplessis knew of the legendary elephant given to Louis XIV in 1668 by the king of Portugal. Originally from the Kongo region, the diplomatic gift lived at the royal menagerie, where it was sketched by the Flemish painter Pieter Boel. At its death in 1681, the king’s elephant was transported to Paris, where members of the Royal Academy of Sciences carefully dissected the fresh corpse for research. When Louis XIV arrived to view the spectacle, he promptly asked the whereabouts of the anatomist in charge of the dissection, at which point “M. du Verney immediately arose from the flanks of the animal by which he was, so to speak, engulfed.” Even during the reign of Louis XV, architects saw the colossal proportions of the elephant as a potential expression of sovereignty in built form. In 1758, the same year the prince de Condé purchased the garniture, the architect-engineer Charles François Ribart de Chamoust proposed building a monument to Louis XV in the form of an elephant on the Etoile hill, then on the rural outskirts of Paris (fig. 4). Replete with an interior garden and a ballroom, the monument took the most fantastic aspects of Rococo planning and transformed them into

fig 3 Manufacture des Gobelins (French, established 1662). Aurora and Cephalus, from the sixth weaving of the Loves of the Gods, ca. 1775. Silk and wool, 14 ft. 6¾ in. × 11 ft. 9¾ in. (443 × 360.5 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris (OAS121)
Profils de l’Edifice sur la longueur.
an architecture of pure folly, with the language of pink Sévres reconfigured in Ribart’s section drawing to express the poché flesh of the walls. Reaction to the monument was, in the words of Baron Grimm, only somewhat admirable: “There is something of the gigantesque and Egyptian in this idea that excuses in some manner the absurdity and extravagance.”

Flagrantly anticlassical in color and shape, both the Sévres elephant garniture and the proposed colossal monument can together be seen as instances of a Rococo aesthetics of monstrosity, a term, as Chi-Ming Yang observes, that tended to be reserved for objects made in the goût chinois, or “Chinese taste.” It is well known that Madame de Pompadour was a fervent consumer of Sévres vessels designed in the “Chinese taste” with decorative paintings invented by Dodin. One pair of elephant-head vases she purchased in 1760 coupled the model with painted chinoiserie figures of the sense of smell and hearing, based on prints after François Boucher. On the one hand, such decorations suggested the tenacious aesthetic associations between porcelain and the mysterious origins of the precious material in China (fig. 5). On the other hand, Yang argues that luxury objects such as the Sévres elephant vases helped to propel the seemingly innocuous and frivolous fantasies about the Other upon which subsequent orientalist ideologies of race and culture were built. The dissemination of these fantasies of the Other through polite and fragile decorative arts forms was by no means incidental. The “monstrous beauty” displayed in the Sévres elephant vases—both attracting and repulsing the viewer with their intertwined bizarreness and technical perfection—provided the very means by which the decorative arts figured, in the words of Yang, an “embodied aesthetic experience of delight and horror at the possibilities and inequities of global trade.” Porcelain put the inchoate and vast complexities of global trade in the eighteenth century, rife with exploitation, expropriation, profits, and speculation, into a material form ripe for polite consumption in the European domestic setting. While it is uncertain how much time the prince de Condé dedicated to contemplating the fraught meanings of the porcelain garniture he had purchased at the king’s sale as a dutiful courtier, such porcelain bizarreries had become objects of contempt by the French Revolution.
PORCELAIN AND MUSEUM POLITICS

Vandalism, described by Louis Réau as “the destruction or the barbarous mutilation of works of art created over the course of centuries by human genius,” was first deployed in 1794, in the midst of the most radical phase of the French Revolution known as the Terror. The abbé Grégoire, a former clergyman and political tactician, had first coined the word while addressing the National Convention on 14 Fructidor year III (August 31, 1794) on the need to protect monuments amid the impassioned attempts to destroy the traces of feudalism. According to Réau, the term captured the revolutionaries’ desire to effect nothing short of “the abolition of the past, as if the past, always alive in each of us, could be erased with the stroke of the pen.” The Terror tends to send erstwhile dry historians, even an homme d’archive like Réau, into apoplectic fits, in recounting the many monuments desecrated and destroyed as part of the official state policies of the revolutionary government that sanctioned violence. The forced dispersal of seized collections, and the liquidation of the royal collections after the guillotining of Louis XVI on January 21, 1793, was particularly egregious for the nineteenth-century historian and connoisseur Jean-Charles Davillier, who equated the sales to vandalism:

How many masterpieces were destroyed by vandalism; how many were sold for a crust of bread! On 10th August, at the time of the sack of the Tuileries, the royal furniture, the clocks, the most precious art objects were hurled out of the windows. The sumptuous furniture of the château of Versailles, publicly put on sale, was dispersed at low prices in exchange for assignats and became the prey of hawkers, scrap-iron merchants and junk dealers (chaudronniers). Yet just as many objects persisted during the Revolution as were destroyed, thus providing rare opportunities for acquisition. Even as politically conservative historians like Davillier mourned the loss of such objects, they personally profited from the dispersal of royal collections. And while individuals in the immediate context of the Revolution such as Alexandre Lenoir have been praised by curators today for helping to save and safeguard monuments and precious objects from destruction, it is an acknowledged fact that the modern museum that emerged in the revolutionary context and the related principles of conservation would not have been possible without the same violent politics of revolution (fig. 6). Were we to trace an alternative history of revolutionary vandalism through the spaces of The Met, for example, the itinerary would ignore the arbitrary division of departments and blaze a path from the stone fragments of the medieval galleries, such as the head of King David that once decorated the portal of Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris (fig. 7), into the spaces of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, where the stained glass of Saint Etienne de Troyes, hung in the French Renaissance galleries, is all that remains of the now disappeared church (fig. 8). While we might mourn the loss of such structures or condemn the barbarism of the perpetrators of violence, the politics of the past has undeniably created different constellations of meaning across the Museum, attesting to the stories of loss that have shaped its collection.

Objets de luxe, as suggested by Davillier’s evocative description, posed particularly vexing problems for the revolutionaries, who sought to select works of art worthy of educating the newly liberated citizens of the French Republic. What they did not want were reminders of a corrupt and repudiated past. Though porcelain was not high on the list of artistic treasures, the new meanings that the elephant porcelain garniture acquired were conditioned by its radically changed physical context. Removed from the Palais Bourbon, the set entered the realm of the public sphere. A host of bric-a-brac characters right out of a Balzac novel, such as the crafty dealer Le Brun and the printseller Suzanne Marguerite Denoor and her ex-husband, the naturalist and adventurer François Levaillant, whom she divorced during the Revolution, came to replace the elite patrons who
had enjoyed the bizarre fantasies of Sèvres garnitures during the ancien régime in the privacy of their well-appointed homes.

The prince de Condé’s departure in 1789 and his organization of a royalist army made his property and possessions visible political targets of the radical government in France. In 1793, Chantilly and the Palais Bourbon were placed under sequestration and seized by the government. The Parisian residence was used as a prison, then as a warehouse for military convoys, and later as a polytechnical school, before it was converted in 1795 into a national palace for the Council of Five Hundred, the legislative body that, along with the Council of Ancients, replaced the National Convention during the Directory period. The perpetually cash-strapped government seized the possessions left behind by exiles, stockpiling them at the Dépôt de Nesle, in order to sell them at auction, trade, or keep them for the new museum. Removed from their elegant settings, porcelain, jewelry, textiles, books, and busts reappeared at the year-long government auctions that began on August 25, 1793, at the Palace of Versailles, held to finance the mounting cost of military campaigns. Objects that had once stood as treasured possessions and exceptional works of art were sold for a handful of worthless assignats, the paper currency newly issued by a French government that not only was bankrupt, but also had no credit to speak of among the crowned heads of Europe. The Commission temporaire des arts, a body of experts formed under the influence of the painter Jacques-Louis David and tasked with dispersing the seized possessions of émigrés, divided the prince de Condé’s possessions into two groups: those that would be sold at auction, and those that would be saved for the benefit of the nation. The auctions took place over the course of 1793 and 1794, with the most important, according to Christian Baulez, occurring in the midst of the Terror beginning on 21 Germinal year II (April 10, 1794). Held in situ at the palace renamed the “Maison de la Révolution,” the auctions saw the departure of the Gobelins tapestries and matching en suite furniture that had once been in the duchess’s bedroom, along with Savonnerie carpets, velvet bed curtains, marble consoles, crystal chandeliers, and mirrors. Not everything was sold off, however. As Baulez notes, the members of the Commission reserved the best furnishings and works of art, including the Sèvres elephant garniture, for the use of government officials and the newly established museum at the former palace of the Louvre.

In spite of the great tumult of liquidations, seizures, and sales, the connoisseurial precision of Le Brun allowed him to recognize the worth of the porcelains amid the prince de Condé’s treasures, and reserve them for the museum. Cunning and self-serving, the most famous paintings dealer of the ancien régime had begun his career as an artist, studying under Boucher and Fragonard, before eventually settling on a career as a connoisseur, dealer, and restorer. Le Brun meticulously catalogued the works that passed through his hôtel at the rue Cléry, illuminated by zenithal lighting before the comte d’Angiviller had considered it for the king’s royal gallery. Notwithstanding his expertise, Le Brun’s commercial interests as a dealer tarnished any hopes at a grander role in the Royal Academy, which the royal administration prided as an institution of “pure art” unsullied by commercial dealings. Le Brun’s reputation evidently cast a shadow over his wife, the celebrated portrait painter Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, favored by Marie Antoinette. After the painter left France with their daughter in 1789, her name was added to the list of condemned émigrés. Le Brun

**fig. 7** Head of King David from Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris, ca. 1145. Limestone, H. 11 11/16 × W. 8 5/16 × D. 8 3/8 in. (29.7 × 21.1 × 21.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1938 (38.180)
published several public defenses of his wife to no avail; the couple divorced in 1793.\textsuperscript{43} Though it is unclear whether Le Brun truly espoused the ideals of the Revolution or merely sought to escape political censure, he joined the many egalitarian arts organizations that had been spearheaded by his ally David, including the Commission temporaire des arts. Regardless of his true motivations, the Revolution provided the dealer with an opportunity at public reinvention, evidenced by the opinionated pamphlets he published during the period, alongside his more “serious” work on paintings collections. Given his expertise as a connoisseur, he remained bitter that Jean-Marie Roland, the Girondin minister of the interior, had not invited him to become a member of the committee that oversaw the opening of the museum.

The fiercely contested model for the modern public museum as we know it, according to Andrew McClellan, emerged out of the revolutionary atmosphere of 1789. The comte d’Angiviller first conceived the idea of opening the royal collections to the public at the Louvre palace at the end of the ancien régime. The Musée Central des Arts only officially opened its doors on August 10, 1793, the same day as the Festival of National Unity. Together, these events were to inaugurate the first anniversary of the storming of the Tuileries, a day marked in republican calendars as the first day of Year One and the last day of despotism.\textsuperscript{44} Though the king’s collection formed the backbone of the new museum, it was supplemented by spoils from the revolutionary wars, royal confiscations, and émigré seizures, along with the remnants of vandalized monuments. The tombs, architectural fragments, and objects preserved by Lenoir at the convent of the Petits Augustins had originally been held there temporarily, the location serving as a depot, a kind of off-site storage for the official museum at the Louvre. A dialectic of destruction and preservation, one intimately tied to the revolutionary politics of the time, shaped the collections of the museum from the outset. This complex inheritance is one that museums like The Met must grapple with to this day.

At the center of the cultural maelstrom over the inaugural display of the Louvre—of what to include and how to arrange it—stood Le Brun and the minister Roland, locked in a fierce battle. Less than two months after the storming of the Tuileries, the Girondin minister of the interior had reignited plans to establish a public museum at the Louvre. In October 1792, he chose a six-member commission in charge of organizing the works of art, in a display that would instruct the public and artists, all the while “becoming the central attraction of enlightened amateurs and men of pure hearts who in savoring the delights of nature, still find the charms in its most beautiful imitations.”\textsuperscript{45} Such a display, however, did not entail hanging paintings by school, artist, or chronology in a scientific system championed by Le Brun, but in a picturesque arrangement that would please the senses of the viewers. Though the details of the debate between Le Brun and Roland are beyond the scope of this article, Edouard Pommier has argued that Roland essentially viewed the museum not as “a history book,” but as “a beautiful book of images, which is enough to leaf through for pleasure.”\textsuperscript{46} Such a view put him in direct contrast to Le Brun, and by extension David, the latter declaring: “The Museum is not supposed to be a vain assemblage of frivolous luxury objects that serve only to satisfy idle curiosity. What it must be is an imposing school.”\textsuperscript{47} Following such criticism, the Louvre was rearranged again to suit more radical tastes. Yet the political purifications that took place under the Jacobin faction paradoxically transformed the museum into a space of neutrality. The museum functioned as the only alternative location for works of art that had been saved from
destruction but displaced, and its power, writes McClellan, “to elide original meanings and to substitute for them new aesthetic and art historical significances . . . is an attribute of museums first recognized and exploited during the Revolution.” Such neutralization may have saved many religious paintings and those containing the traces of the monarchy that arrived at the Louvre. However, the expulsion of luxury rendered it a volatile and still active symbol of the past; this included the Sèvres vases that had appeared in an earlier iteration of the museum that were removed when the Louvre was reorganized during the Terror.

In an imposing school of art that sought to provide a patriotic education, what could France’s new citizens possibly learn from porcelain, and what one critic described as “the luxurious apartments of satraps and the great, the voluptuous boudoirs of courtesans, the cabinets of self-styled amateurs?” Scholarship on the early days of the Louvre has tended to neglect the ambiguous place of luxury in the didactic context of the museum. The assumption, based on statements like David’s, is that such rarities, which had operated as private but nonetheless visible forms of cultural power in the ancien régime, had been expelled tout court from the didactic and moralizing discourse of the museum. Nonetheless, a brief glimpse at a publication by Le Brun criticizing the Louvre reveals that alternative visions mapped out a place for luxury.

In 1795, or year III, after Le Brun had been removed from the temporary commission for squabbling with another member, he published Ideas on the Disposition, Arrangement, and Decoration of the National Museum. The pamphlet built upon earlier ideas that had been published in January 1793 for building a “Museum, composed of all the rare and precious objects belonging to the former king and emigres. This Museum must efface all the other establishments of its kind; moreover, I say that it must honor the Republic, it must enrich it.” While the earlier publication was more polemical in nature, Le Brun clearly viewed the second text as important, suggested by its appearance in his self-portrait displayed the same year at the Salon of 1795 (fig. 9). Arguing that the museum’s works should be classified according to school, he divided works into nine sections. These sections would unfurl in a sequence that began with an antechamber, a space for Egyptian monuments, Greek and Italian paintings organized by school, Greek and Roman sculpture, and Northern old master paintings, divided chronologically and by artist. The ensuing five sections included a space for Gothic monuments, early French painting, ornaments and furniture, modern sculpture, then painting. Most surprising was the ninth and final section, in the pavilion of the national museum. This would be “decorated with all the curiosities and products of the arts of Japan, China, the Indies, our own Sèvres porcelain, works in ivory, agate, and all the other objects that are precious by their materials, forms, colors, or rarity.” Le Brun ends by adding that the room would be the wonder of the enlightened nations of Europe: “And what an annual treasure this priceless depot would be worth to the republic!”

Certainly, Le Brun’s spatial divisions depended upon prevailing conceptions of culture and history, divided according to a Eurocentric vision of Enlightenment progress (one not entirely different from our own museological spaces today). Beginning with ancient Egyptian culture and moving through Greece and Rome, the galleries terminate in a chronological
Le Rullier à long brins d’Afrique, mâle. n° 25.
progression with the later work of modern artists. Which raises the question: why does porcelain arrive last? The place he reserves for rarities like “our own Sévres” is ambiguous. For he describes the works as “decorating” the museum, rather than being hung ceremoniously like paintings, or installed like sculptures. While this last section indicates the inferior status of the decorative arts compared to the antiquities and old masters of the museum, it is also the one location where objects from multiple cultural origins commingle and collide, in a pavilion shaped by rarity and material effects, rather than disciplined by the rigor of curatorial expertise or connoisseurial science. Here, stern republican pedagogy dissolves into wonder. And even as revolutionaries sought to expel the language of the foreign and strange, which had once been used to celebrate and consume sensual delights in the ancien régime, from the museum, it persisted in the final room of Le Brun’s ideal version. In contrast to David’s imposing school, the site reserved for the decorative arts and porcelain is undisciplined by disorderly curiosity.

**A NATURAL HISTORY OF DISPERSALS**

Two opposing visions of culture stood at the center of the debate on the museums, one organized by pleasure and the other by a more didactic mission. Pommier writes: “The Museum of Le Brun and the museum of Roland. A museum for the history of art, and a museum for a beautiful panorama. One is tempted to add: a museum of the future and a museum of the past, a museum that inaugurates our own time of museums, and the museum that closes the circle of delectation.” Ultimately, the elephant garniture did not have a place in either the museum of Roland or that of Le Brun: it appeared in neither the first version of the public museum, which opened in the summer of 1793, nor the later purified version orchestrated by David. In spite of Le Brun’s efforts to keep the garniture for the Louvre, the government had decided to give it to citoyenne Denoor, a Dutch seller of prints and curiosities, in 1794 in exchange for her ex-husband François Levaillant’s natural history cabinet, which was valued at 28,442 livres.

Levaillant’s work as an explorer in southern Africa contributed to the new scientific discourses that emerged during the Revolution, notably anthropology. At first glance, there appears little of scientific interest in Levaillant’s adventurous, first-person accounts of encountering rare specimens of birds, mammals, and plants, as well as members of African tribes such as the Gonaqua, Xhosa, and Houzouana bushmen, whom he portrayed sympathetically (though nonetheless problematically) as “noble savages.” In one of the most well-known passages of Levaillant’s writing, he described a flirtatious meeting with Narina, a woman of the Gonaqua tribe, to whom he offered gifts and exchanged words, before abruptly terminating the relationship. Beyond his popular travel writings, Levaillant had offered a monumental map of southern Africa to Louis XVI, who had a penchant for cartography (fig. 11). Unusually, cartographic precision was coupled with sixty-six painted vignettes and five tableaux of the scenes that Levaillant had encountered, from rare birds and plants to tribes. And toward the lower right quadrant, near the part of the map marked “Comnassia Berg,” one can find an elephant, returned to its native habitat. Offered to the sovereign of France, the map intimates that Levaillant’s aims were far from
innocuous, momentary encounters with the Other. They served instead as the starting point for colonial reconnaissance missions, of combing the continent for potential riches even after harvesting the bodies of the enslaved. As a member of the Société des Observateurs de l’homme, Levaillant sought to use his encounters with the African tribes to establish the foundations of the science of man, a science that would increasingly depend upon racial hierarchies of difference.59 The explorer’s commercial interests also became clear when he sought to return to Africa as part of the Société d’Afrique Intérieure, a rival enterprise to British attempts to explore the interior of Africa.60

While some scholars have pointed out that Levaillant offered much more sympathetic, “humanitarian” portrayals of the people he encountered during his travels, it is also worth recalling the grisléier aspects of his campaign: hunting and eating elephants. It is plausible that some of the elements of the natural history collection acquired by the revolutionary government may have even been the remnants of Levaillant’s hunting campaigns. These gruesome aspects of his adventuring in Africa lends particular irony to the bartering of his natural history collection for the Sèvres elephant vases. Though his collection was acquired in the hope of educating and elevating the French nation in the natural sciences, the specimens were also the remnants of a darker campaign of extermination, brutality, and extinction, waged by one of the founding members of the “science of man” during the Revolution.

Was the porcelain garniture really worth the treasures discovered and collected by Levaillant? Evidently his ex-wife did not view the porcelain as so important, selling off the two elephant porcelain vases and matching ship potpourri at an April 1797 auction, purchased by who else but Le Brun.61 The garniture was only briefly in the hands of Denoor before it was sold once more, and their sale in the post-revolutionary period seems but a sordid prelude to a later, more distinguished provenance that included the wealthy nineteenth-century banker Sir Charles Mills and Samuel H. Kress, before their ultimate arrival at The Met.62 Nonetheless, the unusual bartering between a newly formed government rich with porcelain yet strapped for cash and the divorced printseller reveals the ways in which the political circumstances of the Revolution opened up porcelain to
broader systems of value and meaning. No longer the possession of elegant princes or a part of elegant ensembles, the garniture, once valued for its sensual pleasures and artificial delights, became the monetary equivalent of a natural history collection prized by revolutionaries for its didactic possibilities. And while elephants may have symbolized the rare and exotic delights of the menagerie available only to royalty in the ancien régime, they came to acquire different meanings in the revolutionary period. For just a year after Le Brun had purchased the elephant garniture, France saw the arrival of two live elephants, Hans and Parkie, taken, or “liberated,” from the collection of the Dutch stadtholder William V. They became symbols of France’s imperial ambitions and military conquest. After Napoleon crowned himself emperor, the elephant was chosen as a symbol of imperial France, in the form of a colossal fountain proposed on the site of the Bastille beginning in 1808 (fig. 12). The many iterations of the unbuilt monument became an avatar of the Napoleonic regime’s orientalist fantasies and colonial ambitions, and ultimately a sign of its monstrous military failures, haunting successive generations with what has been described as an “éléphantasmagorie.”

Studying the Sèvres porcelain garniture in the revolutionary context reveals the ways that the politics of dispersal and dispossession played a key role in transforming porcelain from a luxury of elite regard and possession into an object of contestation. The language of rarity and curiosity that had helped fuel the desire for Sèvres porcelain under the reign of Louis XV was replaced by a political agenda that emphasized the moral and didactic uses of art to educate the new public. The aim of the present study of the elephant garniture is to initiate an honest conversation on the urgent need for museums to stage critical interventions of the collection through different frameworks, forms of historical research, and institutional histories that move beyond connoisseurship or provenance, opening onto deeper engagements with the politics of collecting. The work of decolonization depends not only on bringing outside voices or examination of geographies uncharted, but also on a rigorous practice of questioning the scholarly assumptions upon which the nature of the encyclopedic museum collection and its claims to cultural authority have been based. Thinking about objects from their historical points of departure will, to borrow an expression from Lisa Lowe, allow us to “reconstellate” worlds and moments of connection, rather than simply reconstruct the past as a foregone conclusion.

IRIS MOON
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NOTES

1 On the history of the French decorative arts collection at The Met, see Kisluk-Grosheide and Munger 2010.
2 For the now classic work on the sociology of taste, see Bourdieu 1987.
3 On the Bastille, see Lüsebrink and Reichardt 1997.
4 “Nous apprîmes le mardi 14 juillet au soir à Chantilly que les révoltés s’étaient emparés de la Bastille; nous eûmes de la peine à le comprendre, mais enfin cela était: je crus alors ne pouvoir me dispenser de me rendre le lendemain avec mes enfants auprès du Roi, dont au moins la couronne était en danger.” Quoted in Garnier-Pelle 2016, 29.
5 Ibid., 22.
6 Brunet 1972, 1.
7 Ibid., 2.
8 Rochebrunne 2003, 135.
9 Ibid., 134–36.
10 Munger 2018, 191.
11 See Milanovic 2010, 8.
12 Rochebrunne 2003, 137.
14 For a history of the factory, see Brunet and Préaud 1978.
15 Ibid., 32.
16 Munger 2018, 190. For the plaster mold, see Savill 1988, 1:155.
17 Savill 1988, 1:192.
18 Droguet 2016, 31.
19 Rochebrunne 2003, 135; Garnier-Pelle 2016, 22.
20 Verlet 1953, 244. For a similar example made for the British market, see the Tapestry Room from Croome Court now at The Met (58.75.1–.22), which arrived like the Sèvres elephant vases from the Samuel H. Kress Collection. See Bryant 2020.
22 Munger 2018, 190. On the Japanese birdcage example that inspired elephant vases at Meissen, see Cassidy-Geiger 2003.
23 On the menagerie and theories of governance, see Sahlins 2017.
24 Schmitt 2010, 117.
25 Ibid. The elephant skeleton is located today in the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle in Paris.
26 Quoted in Beauhaire, Béjanin, and Naudeix 2014, 61. See also Martin 2019.
27 Rochebrunne 2002, 450.
28 Yang 2021.
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