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Facets of French Heritage: Selling the Crown Jewels in the Early Third Republic*

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Facets of French Heritage: Selling the Crown Jewels in the Early Third Republic*

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The construction of a national heritage in France has often been described in heroic tones. It was built around a series of critical legislative milestones, from the campaign against vandalism launched by Abbé Grégoire in the 1790s, through the work of the Commission des Monuments Historiques from the 1830s, and culminating in the protection of urban ensembles provided under the loi Malraux (named after the minister who did so much to popularize the noun *patrimoine* in the 1960s).¹ According to this story of progressive enlightenment, France became the laboratory for heritage initiatives in response to the shock of 1789. In its desire to smash outworn institutions and relocate authority not in historic precedent but in the immutable laws of nature and human reason, the French Revolution succeeded in making the preservation of the past an urgent political conundrum. Just as the creation of the Louvre has been hailed as the birth of modern museology, so too the bureaucratic instruments devised for sifting and inventorying objects reappropriated from the crown, the church, and the émigrés have been acclaimed for placing the postrevolutionary heritage on a scientific footing.² During “le moment Guizot” in the 1830s, the task of conservation was increasingly professionalized, awarded to bourgeois *capacités*, such as scholars and architects,

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¹ André Chastel and Jean-Pierre Babelon, “La notion de patrimoine,” *Revue de l’Art* 49 (1980): 5–32; Françoise Choay, “Le patrimoine en questions,” *Esprit* 359 (2009): 194–222.

² Dominique Poulot, *Musée, nation, patrimoine: 1789–1815* (Paris, 1997); Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics and the Origin of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley, 1994).



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