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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,

* Earlier versions of this article were presented to the nineteenth-century history seminar in Oxford, the Crises research group at Montpellier, the annual conference of the Society for the Study of French History, and the seminar on the history of collecting at the Wallace Collection. I am grateful to the organizers and audiences at these events for their encouragement and helpful feedback. The piece was written while I was the Deakin Fellow affiliated with the Maison Française and the European Studies Centre in Oxford, and I deeply appreciate the support of both institutions. I have also benefited from the comments of Fatema Ahmed, Philippa Plock, Zoe Strimpel, and especially the *JMH*'s two anonymous peer reviewers.

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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