**The Naturalist Collecting Community in Paris, 1760—1789:**

**A Preliminary Survey**

**E. C. Spary**

**University of Cambridge, United Kingdom[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Summary:

Historical studies have usually separated collecting in the fine arts, where the focus is upon connoisseurs, amateurs and the art market, from that in the sciences, where instruments, cabinets and classificatory schemes have been of central importance. For the Renaissance, it has long been established that collectors of natural history were a subset of fine art collectors. But narratives of the later eighteenth century are dominated by the rise of the scientific institution, and few studies of natural history collecting outside institutions exist. What did the community of natural history collectors in late Old Regime France in fact collect? Who were these collectors? How did they understand the purpose of collecting itself? These questions, which can be explored using a range of sources including auction catalogues, guidebooks, travel accounts and inventories, take on added significance towards the end of the Old Regime within debates over the role of nature as the source of lasting and virtuous social order. In this essay, I will argue that an object-based approach to the history of collecting offers new possibilities for understanding natural history collecting as a way of connecting orderly minds and households to new concerns with governance and the nation. At the same time, this approach breaks down anachronistic divisions between ‘scientific’ and ‘amateur’ collecting in natural history, affording a new perspective upon the priorities, practices and approaches of institutional naturalists.

1: Introduction

This article offers some preliminary findings from a project in its initial stages. The history of French natural history in the late eighteenth century has been dominated by an institutional emphasis, which has led to a rather artificial division within the community of collectors. Whereas extensive attention was paid in earlier writings to ‘properly scientific’ institutional practitioners of the discipline, such as Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1707-1788) and Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton (1716-1799), the majority of eighteenth-century natural history collectors have received minimal scholarly attention. Historians have defined who counted as a ‘properly scientific’ naturalist on the basis of polemical statements produced by institutional naturalists themselves, as they sought to weaken the authority of elite tasteful collectors in favour of the institution. Only recently have some studies begun to question this divide, by taking seriously, for example, the close relationship between collecting in the fine arts and natural history; most of these authors refer back to the work of Pomian 1987, which compared the agendas governing collecting during the period around 1700 for the cases of Paris and Venice.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The world of public scientific practice and the market for scientific commodities in Paris have received ample attention for the case of natural philosophy, its instruments and demonstrations.[[3]](#footnote-3) By contrast, the natural history market remains poorly studied. The extensive digitisation of printed materials, especially auction catalogues, offers an opportunity to develop the brief analysis that follows into a comprehensive study of the community of natural history collectors in France between 1760 and 1815. By following specimens through cycles of displacement, exchange and sale within European collections, we can see that considerations of taste and value connected collectors, intermediaries and traders, and underpinned the ways in which scientific truth-claims were received within the cabinet. In this overview, I will outline the main questions of the larger proposed study by following three different types of bodies around: collections, collectors and objects. Tentative conclusions are as follows. Firstly, historians need to take seriously the domestic location of the late eighteenth-century collection, and explore not only the spatial relations within it, but also its role as a mobile financial asset. Secondly, in addition to the collection’s role in displaying the collector’s taste and politeness, the persistent theme of order corresponded to collectors’ self-presentations as defenders of natural truth before a public, meaning that collections became increasingly politicised in the years before the French Revolution. Finally, a material culture approach to collecting practices prompts an examination of the kinds of objects specifically targeted for attention by guidebook authors and auctioneers. These objects can found to fall into specific categories, including rarities, boundary objects and fusion objects, each of which performed specific work within the collection.

2: *Collections*

Auctions were a common way to acquire specimens from the 1730s onwards, when the merchant Edme-François Gersaint (1694-1750) introduced the practice in Paris from his experience in Amsterdam.[[4]](#footnote-4) As long ago as 1986, the French historian Yves Laissus (b. 1930) flagged the importance of auction catalogues as sources for researching the history of eighteenth-century natural history, but only with the extensive digitisation of catalogues has the prospect of analysing this genre systematically as opposed to individually become practicable.[[5]](#footnote-5) Catalogues were advertised by many booksellers. A single auction catalogue might come in editions of different sizes, from a short octavo notice to duodecimo volumes of a hundred pages or more. Catalogues were bought by prospective buyers, but probably also by those who did not buy specimens at all.[[6]](#footnote-6) Individual catalogues vary considerably in the amount of information they include about the collector, the collection and the individual lots. Some contain detailed essays upon the practice of collecting. Manuscript annotations upon individual copies often reveal key information that is unavailable from any other type of source, such as the price at which individual specimens sold, the ownership of the collection as a whole, illustrations of specimens, or the names of buyers. The catalogues, as a genre, underscore that commerce was a form of sociability in its own right, linking individual collectors as much as visiting or corresponding with other collectors. Above all, what catalogues highlight is the interpenetration of collecting between natural history and the fine arts.

The extensive digitisation of catalogues will allow these sources to be used more systematically in the future to draw some macroscopic conclusions about collecting practices. In the meantime we can turn to a breakdown of all collections sold at public auction during this period, published by the Belgian art collector Frederik Johannes (Frits) Lugt (1884-1970).[[7]](#footnote-7) Although Lugt’s main concern was works of art, he also mentioned other kinds of collectables included in sales catalogues. His study covers 1089 collections sold in Paris for the period from 1730 to 1800. It allows a certain level of macroscopic analysis for the case of natural history, although Lugt provided relatively minimal information about content. A second key source is a work on natural history, emphasising shell collecting: *La Conchyliologie*, originally written by Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d’Argenville (1680-1765). In the third edition, posthumously published by the shell collectors Jacques de Favanne (1716-1770) and Jacques-Guillaume de Favanne de Moncervelle (?-?), father and son, approximately 202 French natural history collections were identified.[[8]](#footnote-8) Both of these sources have limitations for the historian, by virtue of their authors’ priorities: the Favannes were most familiar with shell collectors, while Lugt’s prime concern was with issues affecting the art market, such as provenance, and natural history had a low profile. For these reasons, the results that follow must be taken as preliminary. In further research, I plan to analyse the entire corpus of printed auction catalogues mentioning natural history specimens systematically, in order to ascertain the types and categories of natural history specimens recorded within them, and to investigate their changing relationship with other kinds of collected objects.

2.1: *Catalogues*

To date I have identified 71 catalogues which mention natural history specimens. The figures and graphs that follow are provisional, pending the completion of more detailed research on these sources; some examples of how and where they fall short will follow below.

Lugt’s repertory of auction catalogues gives an indication of the major categories of object collected.

Table I: Collected objects by category. © the author.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| From Lugt 1938 | **COLLECTED OBJECTS BY CATEGORY****(1780-1800)** |
| Type of object | Percentage of collections containing |
| Paintings | 70.5% |
| Prints | 59.6% |
| other (furniture, clocks etc) | 56.8% |
| Drawings | 55.4% |
| sculpture, bronzes, marbles | 41.4% |
| Porcelain | 21.9% |
| engraved stones/gems | 8.9% |
| natural history + minerals | 7.1% |
| Books | 5.9% |
| Coins | 4.5% |
| Antiquities | <1% |
| “savage” artefacts | <1% |

Chart I: percentage of French collections containing different categories of collectable between 1780 and 1800. © the author.

Fine arts far outweighed collecting of other categories of object, but items like naturalia and books, which might point to more scholarly preoccupations, nonetheless had a significant presence. Naturalia always remained a minor part of collecting as a whole, but in a total of around 1,090 collections sold at auction in Paris between 1730 and 1800, approximately 10% contained naturalia, although in-depth study of catalogues will certainly revise this figure.[[9]](#footnote-9) Striking in this data is the very low presence of ‘savage’ artefacts (clothing, weapons, tools, canoes), in collections, something which conflicts with historians’ tendency to presume an innate connection between the collection of naturalia and interest in the history of man during the eighteenth century. This may have been a peculiarly French state of affairs.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Using Lugt 1938, we can also track changes in the numbers of collections containing three categories of object, paintings, prints and natural history specimens, sold at auction during the period from 1730 to 1800.

Chart II: percentage of collections containing paintings, prints, and natural history specimens between 1730 and 1800. Based on Lugt 1938. © the author.

Where Dance 1936 suggested that the market for shells in particular was in decline in the 1760s, this is not reflected in overall sales of collections containing natural history items.[[11]](#footnote-11) Insofar as there was a boom in the collecting of naturalia, it occurred during the 1770s and 1780s. However, the increase in the number of collections containing paintings and prints over that same period dwarfs the increase in the number containing naturalia. The proportionate importance of naturalia as collected items was indeed therefore in decline after the 1760s. Further research will allow these figures to be broken down further, and the changing relationships between categories of naturalia to be analysed over time.

Using Dezallier d’Argenville 1780, some tentative conclusions may also be drawn about the proportions of collections containing particular categories of specimen. The prime concern of the editors, as of the original author, was with shells, which may well explain the status of these as the most common category of collected naturalia. In constructing this table, actors’ names for the different categories of naturalia were utilised, both because of the comparative persistence of these category names across a wide range of textual genres and because the aim of the project is to identify the priorities shared within the naturalist community, rather than imposing retrospective distinctions *a priori*.

Table II: Composition of natural history collections. © the author.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| From Dezallier d’Argenville 1780 | **NATURALIA BY CATEGORY**  |
| **Type of object** | **Percentage of collections containing** |
| Shells | 65% |
| Minerals | 44% (ores (25%); crystals (21%); marbles (20%)—thus, more collections contained crystals than insects or quadrupeds) |
| Marine (corals, madrepores, lithophytes) | 40% |
| Petrifactions | 36% |
| Fossils | 33% |
| Birds | 23% |
| Fish (mostly dried) | 21% |
| Figured stones | 21% |
| Gems  | 21% (A category of minerals, but with overlap into engraved and mounted stones) |
| Insects | 17% |
| Library | 15% |
| Reptiles | 14% |
| Coins | 11% |
| Paintings | 10% |
| Prints | 10% |
| ‘Savage’ artefacts | 10% |
| Quadrupeds | 10% |
| Butterflies | 10% |
| Herbarium | 9% |
| Crustaceans | 9% |
| Scientific instruments | 9% |
| Anatomical preparations | 9% |
| Antiquities | 8% |
| Statuary, bronzes | 6% |

Chart III: Objects in over 10% of natural history collections. From Dezallier d’Argenville 1780. © the author.

The priority placed upon shell collecting in this culture has been the subject of several studies.[[12]](#footnote-12) Less historical attention has been paid to minerals, which clearly constituted a significant category of collecting activity in France by 1780.[[13]](#footnote-13) The prevalence of marine specimens, fossils and gems is also noteworthy. This cannot be fully accounted for by considerations of preservation, since insects and hard parts of quadrupeds were relatively easy to prepare and store, while shells might be comparatively fragile. Even coins, according to Pomian the category of collectable that fell into decline with the replacement of erudition by curiosity, were more common in these collections than, for example, quadrupeds. Each of these categories will require further investigation in its own right, but evidence from other sources also supports the claim that that mineral collecting was overtaking shell collecting during the later eighteenth century: by the 1830s, the author of a handbook on mineral collecting noted that polite collections contained almost no shells, but plenty of minerals. ‘There were formerly a large number of collections in which amateurs had brought together shells and series of mineral specimens; there are few shell collections nowadays, but those containing minerals are at once more numerous, more complete and better arranged for study.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

2.2: *Value*

Figure 1: Comte de Caylus, after François Boucher, À la Pagode, 1740, engraving. © National Trust.

The identification of Gersaint as a jeweller by trade points to an important aspect of collections which challenges Pomian’s view of them as a space where economic signification was absent.[[15]](#footnote-15) Naturalia were sold by numerous merchants, among them jewellers. This reflects a more general phenomenon not noted by many historians of the collection, namely that naturalia possessed a social and aesthetic status akin to that of jewels. Collections formed part of a fashionable interior décor and in financial terms were treated as mobile assets. They were luxury possessions and financial assets which could be ranked, valued and sold alongside other major household effects, as contemporary advertisements show. In one typical extract from the newspaper *Les Affiches de Paris* for 15 December 1749, a cabinet of natural history was advertised alongside a range of high-status household goods, such as furniture, jewellery, porcelain, curtains, paintings and women’s clothes.[[16]](#footnote-16) During the period 1746—1750, the *Affiches de Paris* carried no less than twenty-two advertisements for auctions of domestic chattels which, like this one, included naturalia. When we compare this source with Lugt’s repertory of published auction catalogues for the same five-year period, only fifteen sales are listed. This suggests that reliance on published auction catalogues alone may lead historians to underestimate the total number of collections being sold by as much as one-third. The lack of catalogues or inventories for minor collections means that it will be harder to include these in the planned study. However, what newspaper advertising of this sort does reveal is the extent to which natural history collections and specimens were explicitly treated as commodities by their owners. This conclusion that the collection was first and foremost understood as a part of the household and a financial investment is one that studies of natural history from the standpoint of taxonomy or collecting practices cannot disclose; in what follows I will develop the significance of this point further.

3: *Collectors*

Viewing the collections as mobile property raises questions about their place within the élite household. Collections were important within an urban culture of tourism developing towards the end of the century. They were mentioned in guidebooks and almanacs published to aid travellers and foreigners in seeing the sights of cities and provinces.[[17]](#footnote-17) As spaces, they were located in individual *hôtels* and communal buildings such as religious orders, churches and scientific institutions. As Dietz 2006 has emphasised, these eighteenth-century collections constitute an autonomous category. They do not fit the Renaissance *Wunderkammer* model with its emphasis on the surprising and shocking, nor do they map onto later distinctions between scientific and non-scientific collecting. Rather, the route into the study of nature in these spaces was through tasteful appreciation, hence the continuity and often contiguity between naturalia and works of art. ‘*Curiosité*,’ Dietz argues, ‘was shaped by an aesthetic code whose aim was to create a subtle aesthetic pleasure (*plaisir*) by which the spectrum of objects contained by the collections, such as paintings, porcelain and lacquer-work, shells and other natural objects (especially insects and birds) or scientific instruments, would be combined into a unit and merged with the interior of the exhibition rooms to form a decorative whole.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

Specimens, décor, architecture and artworks collectively produced the cabinet as a space where knowledge, visuality and material culture combined. In turn, this compositional whole attested to the taste, intellect and moral, social and financial standing of the collector as an individual. If we use a guidebook to scrutinise the collection of René-Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur (1683-1757), now held up as an example of the experimental method, we find that his priorities linked him, rather, to a wider, pan-European collecting community.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Italian teacher Annibale Antonini (1702-1755), resident in Paris, emphasised choice, rarity and order—not scientific value or experimentation—in describing Réaumur’s collection in 1749:

Here you will find something abundantly satisfying in all kingdoms from among the singular productions of nature, whether from the animal or the vegetable kingdom. The admirable choice of all these rarities, & the order in which they are arranged, leave nothing to be desired by those who are most particular on these matters.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Appearing polite was far more important for membership of the international community of collectors than being affiliated to a scientific institution. The strong emphasis on tastefulness meant that some collectors, even when specifically mentioned in guidebooks and in Dezallier d’Argenville 1780 as eminent natural history collectors, appear in Lugt’s repertoire as collectors of works of art, with little mention of their natural historical interests. An example here is the artist François Boucher (1703-1770), who collected in his own right and was mentioned in Dezallier d’Argenville 1780. Boucher’s artistic and natural historical interests were entirely congruent and both served his trade. He was commissioned to produce the frontispiece used in several auction catalogues by Gersaint.

Figure 3: Gersaint 1736, frontispiece. François Boucher, engraved by Claude-Augustin-Pierre Duflos (1700-1786). © Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Réserve des livres rares, RES-S-1127.

Although Boucher’s frontispiece, shown in Figure 3, has featured in the secondary literature as an exemplary rococo image celebrating the pleasing irregularity of natural forms, at the same time, typical of images of natural history collections, it also frames that irregularity against a background of orderly jars containing what appear to be snakes and other reptiles preserved in liqueur, and this may in fact be a representation of some part of the artist’s own cabinet.[[21]](#footnote-21) Dezallier d’Argenville 1780 makes clear that Boucher collected in multiple categories, including shells, marine specimens and minerals.[[22]](#footnote-22) As Priebe 2016 has recently shown, he socialized intensively with dealers and natural history collectors, and was close to both Gersaint and Dezallier d’Argenville. Yet the auction catalogue for Boucher’s own collection, published in 1771, only listed the following lots: 129 paintings, 193 prints, 367 drawings and 57 sculptures. Natural history specimens were hardly mentioned, and only at the end.[[23]](#footnote-23) As a result, this collection was recorded by Lugt principally as an art collection. Artists were, in fact, less well represented in natural history collecting than in other areas of collecting (see below), so Boucher was slightly unusual. Nevertheless, his case points up the importance of avoiding *a priori* categorisations of collectors as ‘scientific’ or ‘unscientific’.

The social condition of all collectors listed in Lugt 1938 can be compared with that of the natural history collectors identified in Dezallier d’Argenville 1780.

Chart IV: Social composition of natural history collectors compared to all collectors. From Dezallier d’Argenville 1780 and Lugt 1938. © the author.

 

KEY:

Royal: rulers, including members of the Royal family and rulers of other provinces whose collections were sold at auction in Paris, plus their direct employees (curators etc.)

Clergy, nobility: the First and Second Estates

Finance: tax farmers, bankers, financiers

Professions: law (prosecutors, *avocats*); medicine (doctors, apothecaries, surgeons)

University: professors, administrators and curators of university-based collections

Fine and mechanical arts: artisans, artists, architects, printers, etc.

Commerce: merchants (shopkeepers and wholesalers)

Dezallier d’Argenville 1780included all collections known to the Favannes from the early part of the century up to the date of publication. Future detailed study of the auction catalogues will eventually allow changes in the social composition of the community of collectors to be mapped over time. Nevertheless, some broad conclusions are clear for the period before 1789. The first of these is unsurprising: collecting was overweeningly an elite preserve at the end of the eighteenth century. Both for all collections and for natural history collections, princes, nobles, the clergy and financiers, the Old Regime élite of wealth and power, account for over half the collections: 52.6% in the former case and 62.5% in the latter.

Were there any marked differences between collectors of natural history and collectors in general? Artisans and artists were much more heavily represented in collecting overall than in natural history collecting in particular. Artists (both fine and mechanical arts) accounted for 26% of all collectors, but just 3.4% of natural history collectors. This might be attributable to the fact that painters, sculptors, engravers, furniture-makers, jewellers and so on sold and accumulated objects in the course of practising their trade, as well as constituting a significant group of collectors in their own right. By contrast, members of the liberal professions—clergy, lawyers and medical men—were about four times more common in natural history collecting than in collecting in general.[[24]](#footnote-24) Physicians and lawyers accounted for 22.7% of the natural history collectors, but just 4.3% of all collectors. Clergymen accounted for 17% of the natural history collectors, but just 5.2% of all collectors (it should be noted that these were not clergymen low in the ranks of the church such as *curés*, but frequently the heads of, or prominent figures in, religious orders, high-ranking postholders and canons of large churches). Together, individuals from the learned professions, universities and clergymen accounted for 42% of natural history collectors, but just 9.5% of all collectors. This is a significance which cannot be explained at this stage in the research, but it is worth remarking that what links all these categories, but excludes the merchants and artisans, is the possession of a university education.

Many notable collectors, whose collections made it into the guidebooks, used a whole room or suite of rooms for housing their naturalia. Smaller collections probably housed naturalia alongside other objects. An example here is the 1778 catalogue of the collection belonging to Henri-Jean-Baptiste de Fabry de Moncault, comte d’Autrey (1723-1777): the naturalia were grouped together in a couple of lots at the end, lot 28, consisting of ‘Several birds with insects, under glass cages’, and lot 29, ‘Various items of Natural History, to be divided’.[[25]](#footnote-25) If we are to construct a full picture of what ‘natural history collecting’ involved, then we need to pay attention both to famous collectors and to these minor collectors, without whose collections it is impossible to say what constituted a typical category of collectible, or what counted as a more specialist kind of item.

The *conte* ‘Le Connoisseur’ of 1765, by Jean-François Marmontel (1723-1799), attests to low-level ‘mixed collecting’ of this sort. This collector’s natural history specimens were shown in an accompanying engraving jumbled with other items—maps, busts, urns—on the tops of bookcases bearing well-thumbed volumes, arranged higgledy-piggledy on the shelves. But such an image should not foster a view of late eighteenth-century collecting as akin to the practices characterising the older *Wunderkammer*. In fact this particular tale described a *bad* fictional collector, who (unconvincingly) argued to his visitor: ‘do not believe that the same disorder reigns in my head [as in my cabinet]: everything is in its place there; the variety and even the number [of objects] cast no confusion.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Marmontel’s message was that a disorderly cabinet betokened a disorderly mind. The suggestion that orderliness and good taste were prized in collections more than specialisation or breadth of collecting is supported by one Madame de Gauthier (?-?), who left an account of her visit to the spa of Barèges in the mid-1780s. Stopping on the way at Bordeaux, she and her companion admired the architecture and amenities of the city, comparing it to Paris. They also dropped in at the cabinet belonging to Bernard Journu-Auber (1745-1815). According to the traveller, de Journu’s collection was ‘more curious for the elegance that reigns there than for the quantity of rare things it contains. Nevertheless, it brings together all the genera in miniature. Madrepores and corals predominate. There are also some very fine paintings, several originals by [Claude-Joseph] Vernet (1714-1789), plenty of engravings, [and] a few Bronzes.’[[27]](#footnote-27) Elegance and choice superseded rarity or profusion as a criterion of evaluation of the collection. It should be noted that *order*, in this sense, was not the same as *systematics*.

This theme of the cabinet as the space for constituting order above all—beyond systematics, beauty or taste—was an important one in the late eighteenth century, linking its role of representing the collector’s personal character to its role as a liminal space between outside and inside, public and private. In fiction and non-fiction alike, a cabinet was the ultimate space for retreat or distance from worldly concerns. It was the generic term, in domestic architecture, for spaces used for private worship, bodily function, dressing (i.e. preparing one’s public appearance). It was the space of politics behind closed doors, escape from importunate lovers, novel-reading, letter-writing: the space where imagination could expand, as in Figure 4, the headpiece to a poem in praise of the collector Barbe-Louise Lefranc de Lagoille de Courtagnon (1705-1765), published in 1763. As in Marmontel’s *conte*, the central theme is the virtue of order. The collector is the gatekeeper between pastoral nature outside, and rational order inside, the home—a theme in collecting literature from the very early eighteenth century onwards.[[28]](#footnote-28) Within the cabinet, she daydreams of external nature, but also operates upon it mentally, to sort and arrange its constituent objects into the space of the home.

Figure 4: Charles-Nicolas Varin, headpiece. From Dieudonné 1763, p. 11. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France. YE-2580

The headpiece captures the sense in which the cabinet was a liminal space between public and private, society and nature, and above all the space for transitioning between these domains, at a time when new models of a political public and ‘public opinion’ were being developed in France.[[29]](#footnote-29) As a private space, the cabinet could, however, also connote losing touch with reality: not just in natural history but also in politics, the knowledge produced in the cabinet is a knowledge that can be erroneous, if untempered by contact with external social or natural reality. The scorn poured upon the ‘naturaliste du cabinet’ as the producer of artificial and erroneous knowledge was echoed in attacks against the secret cabinets of political leaders where corrupt decisions were made.[[30]](#footnote-30) This theme of the cabinet as a liminal space, standing between private and public ownership, is developed in the guidebook literature. Collecting was closely linked to reputation, and even writing about collections had to contend with this, as a guidebook for travellers to Provence published in 1780 makes clear:

Perhaps we will be reproached with not indicating the cabinets of books, paintings, prints & natural History to be found in private households in Marseille, Arles or Aix; but these cabinets often change their master: we might have forgotten one; besides, they would need to be talked about with the distinction that the merit of choice would have to establish between them: even to leave one out might have passed as a voluntary omission; so we felt we should neglect an article which can easily be supplemented on arrival at a town by information available from the nearest bookshop.[[31]](#footnote-31)

It should be emphasised that the cabinet was not necessarily a *non-public* space, but rather a *policed* space. There are references to visiting collections in the owner’s absence, or to fixed opening hours. In a 1767 novel, *Lettres du colonel Talbert*, by Françoise-Albine Puzin de La Martinière Benoist (1724-1808/9), the fictional collector, Madame d’Osinville, while a caricature, attests to the intensity of effort that went into visiting as well as collecting: she spent every Monday and Saturday for six months of the year visiting collections, and she visited them not once but repeatedly: ‘There’s not one cabinet belonging to a Curioso that I haven’t already seen twenty times.’[[32]](#footnote-32) Collection tourism gave rise to an industry of guidebooks and information points such as bookshops where travellers could enquire about what and when to visit. It was this semi-private, semi-public character which made collections relevant for the new revolutionary Nation. In a description of the Jardin du Roi in 1791, shortly before it was reformed into the new national Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, Mathurin Roze de Chantoiseau (?-1806) explained that the specimens in the Royal cabinet had been collected by Buffon in person, but then donated to the King.

It is to the comte de Buffon that the Jardin du Roi owes the creation of the cabinet; before him there were only gums, resins & medicaments enclosed in five or six hundred jars which together did not fill one of the cupboards of the cabinet. This great man, through his activity and the great consideration he enjoyed in the whole of Europe, was able to procure productions from all climates & at no cost to the Government. It was in around 1740 that he began to collect natural History objects, & from then up until the time of his death, for the duration of his administration at the Jardin du Roi, which lasted around fifty years, he never stopped collecting. The Empress of Russia [Catherine II (1729-1796)], the Emperor [Peter III (1728-1762)], the Kings of Sweden [Adolf Fredrik (1710-1771) or Gustav III (1746-1792)] & Denmark [(Frederick II (1723-1766) or Christian VII (1749-1808)], the Prince Henn. [illeg.] & several other Powers with whom M. de Buffon was in correspondence, contributed infinitely to the completeness of the cabinet’s mineralogy. Savants & Travellers of all Nations have hastened to procure all the rare & curious objects that are within their reach for him, with pleasure; it is a tribute offered by them to the genius of natural history, & not to the establishment he administered; & M. de Buffon has hastened to abandon their possession to the King & the enjoyment to the public.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Private collecting could successfully be reworked into acts of public altruism precisely by virtue of the liminal status of the collection.[[34]](#footnote-34) The reorganisation of collections at the end of the Old Regime reflected contemporary moves to make the self more transparent and infuse the private domain with public visibility.[[35]](#footnote-35) Collectors themselves understood their relationship to the public as one of responsibility for contributing to the progress of reason by making their collections available for (at least polite) visitors. Again, this aspect of the collection is something that will require extensive further research. But if collections were indeed becoming more open, this process was taking place in conjunction with, and perhaps in response to, a growing critique of natural historical dilettantism, set against a broader backdrop of concerns with frivolity and superficiality as inherent evils of absolute monarchy and the emergent consumer society.[[36]](#footnote-36) Such critiques were articulated in a variety of settings, from natural history institutions to novels. In a short story by Napoleon’s future mother-in-law, Marie-Anne-Françoise Mouchard de Chaban (Fanny) de Beauharnais (1737-1813), published in 1786, collecting is one of a series of fleeting distractions that the hero tries out in pursuit of lasting happiness. When gentlemen’s clubs, sexual promiscuity, horse-racing, animal magnetism, travel, chemistry, physics, and even collecting—first paintings and then natural history—all fail to prevent him from becoming bored, he resolves to marry.[[37]](#footnote-37)

We can see this concern to supersede superficial appreciation of collections, in the literal sense of fascination with—and deception by—surfaces and exteriors, appearing as a persistent theme in guidebooks. During the decades between the 1750s and the 1800s, such publications can be seen as prescriptive, not merely descriptive, texts, directing readers how to view collections. Detailed descriptions of individual specimens in private collections show what *kind* of information was supposed to develop and deepen both scientific and aesthetic appreciation, and to direct the gaze of the viewer towards what was most important about a particular collection.

Always hovering in the background was an alternative: the displays of naturalia on offer in the streets and fairs of Paris, where money was spent not to acquire learning but for thrills. These spectacles were deemed by élite authors to occupy a different order of curiosity, censoriously represented as unworthy and superficial. The Turin hack, pornographer and physician François-Amédée Doppet (1753-1799), in a guide to Paris published in 1788, noted:

One must be curious in order to be able to learn; but curiosity ought to have its limits. In Paris, small advertisements whose style is as purple as can beare daily dropped into the streets; the words *rare*, *superb*, *extraordinary* are never left out: you’ll be shown a rabbit for a monster, or a monkey for a savage.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Doppet’s main complaint about these mailshots advertising the city’s trade in the extraordinary was that the Parisian public was offered little proof of the authenticity of the objects contained within such collections. Even more seriously, the public adopted an uncritical approach to this sort of display, appearing uncaring about the possibility of fraudulence or the difference between nature and lies. ‘I believe that the whole town could be got to run and see the moon chained in a flask.’[[39]](#footnote-39) Such concerns with policing the spectacle of the collection, of the trustworthiness of objects within it, touched upon wider worries about whether collections could produce an enlightened critical public, capable of making accurate judgements based upon unmediated Rousseauian access to nature. The fraudulent naturalium, by leading viewers away from ‘true’ nature, jeopardised that project, which became increasingly politicized in the context of the French Revolution: how could a new polity be secured if the public was incapable, for whatever reason, of discriminating between authentic and dissimulating legislators? Collectors were thus also watchdogs of Enlightenment, whose probity was bound up with their willingness to adhere as closely as possible to standards of naturalness and authenticity in their collections.

4: *Objects*

So it is useful to attend to the items to which visitors to late eighteenth-century cabinets were specifically directed as examples of *good* collecting. I will address three main categories of naturalia singled out for attention in this literature.

4.1: *Boundary breaching*

Amid the concern with classifying and order, there was a particular interest in items which breached the boundaries that collectors sought to establish. Accounts of collections lingered upon objects that slipped *between* forms—figured stones; carved gems; fossilised plants—things which had transformed between one category and another. Here a good example might be rock crystals. Crystal formations were among the most widely collected items in Old Regime cabinets overall, and this cannot be fully explained by pointing to the growing number of people involved in the exploitation of mines in France. Dezallier d’Argenville 1780 mentions their presence in 20% of collections, which merely means that 20% of cabinets contained specimens worthy of note; we may presume that a higher percentage contained crystals that the Favannes did not deem worthy of particular discussion. Within the category of crystals, the most highly-prized specimens were crystals with inclusions. Louis-Alexandre, duc de La Rochefoucauld (1743-1792), for example, was cited for his mineral collection in a guidebookwritten by Luc-Vincent Thiéry (b. 1734). One specimen particularly remarked upon was:

A needle of rock crystal, two inches long, internally herborised in a very distinctive manner. This unique & superb specimen, described by M. Daubenton, has been drawn & engraved for insertion into the Memoirs of the Academy of Sciences.[[40]](#footnote-40)

**Figure 5:** Yves-Marie le Gouaz after Fossier, rock crystal specimen with insertions from the collection of Louis-Alexandre, duc de La Rochefoucauld. From Daubenton 1785, Plate III, Figure 1.

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Why was this particular specimen singled out for attention, not only by the collector, but also by the guidebook author and the academician? Precisely because it represented a boundary-breaching object, at once mineral and plant in character. It was a troublesome object in orderly collections, where the whole point was to assign a fundamental category or order of existence to each item. Daubenton’s article in the memoirs of the Académie Royale des Sciences concerning this same rock crystal specimen was part of an extended discussion of similar kinds of boundary objects, such as dendritic agates or Florence stone. All straddled the same border between the mineral and plant realms, so naturalistic and above all non-intentionalist explanations had to be generated to keep them in their correct place within the collection. A specimen like this was of interest precisely because it represented an ongoing attempt within the collecting community to police the boundaries between animal, plant and mineral. Such objects also presented a very material and immediate problem to collectors, in that their positioning within the collection was a matter of doubt. Until it was resolved, they existed outwith order, outside the compartments of cabinets and cupboards, part of the unruly world beyond the collection’s walls.

Historians have treated well-known contemporary debates over, for example, corals or fossils as individual scientific controversies. Approaching these questions from the standpoint of a history of material culture flags up the extent to which boundary breaching was a generalised concern within collections—it was not confined to just one area of collecting or specific controversies, but was a widespread preoccupation.[[41]](#footnote-41) These boundary objects provoked reflection on the ordering process itself and the ways that ordering as a practice stabilised categories, overcame fraud and corrected error. The inclusion of these items was therefore part of the rhetorical positioning of collecting as an Enlightened act that took place in, and through the description of, cabinets. In describing the famous collection of Marie-Anne-Catherine, présidente de Bandeville (d. 1797), Thiéry specifically engaged with this issue to give a mechanistic account of the formation of dendrites, quoting Jacques-Christophe Valmont de Bomare (1731-1787), author of a widely-read *Dictionnaire d’histoire naturelle*. ‘*Dendrite* is the name given to stones which bear the image of plants & animals. Often these jokes of nature are as accurate as if traced by the paintbrush of the most skilful Artist. It is to be presumed that their formation is a result of fluids charged with differently coloured minerals, compressed between two surfaces’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Such boundary specimens were present in collections as witnesses to enlightened collectors’ prowess in abolishing confusion through scientific enquiry and rational order. While Thiéry appeals to the Renaissance notion of the playfulness of Nature, he immediately dispatches the soupçon of intentionality in favour of a narrowly mechanistic, reductionist interpretation based upon capillary action.

Daubenton’s application of the magnifying glass and microscope to dendrites, however, once more redrew the boundaries of the Protean category. Out of a single set of boundary-breaching objects, he generated two new ones, with still less porous walls: dendrites of plant and dendrites of mineral origin. It is to be noted, however, that Daubenton’s access to this set of rare objects was entirely dependent upon his ability to form and sustain relations with their owners, high-profile not only among the collecting but also within the social world of late old Regime France. His own status as a polite and tasteful collector could not have been in doubt, if he was able to gain such close contact with these specimens as to be allowed to handle and experiment upon them. This shows that membership of the collecting community was more important in the making of natural historical knowledge than either institutional position or access to special technical expertise or instrumentation.

4.2: *Fusion objects*

Naturalia were explicitly admired for their ability to meet exacting standards of beauty and taste, deemed by some to be universal and timeless, reigning among the collecting community. The rock crystal specimen owned by La Rochefoucauld exemplified this approach: it was admired for the quality of its decoration by Nature. Many collections contained objects which urged comparison between the artistic powers of Nature and those of Man. Adjacent to the rock crystal specimen in La Rochefoucauld’s collection stood a second item made of the same material, ‘a cup of rock crystal, between eight and nine inches long.’[[43]](#footnote-43) This object was typical of numerous items in collections which combined rare natural materials and human artistic skill. Such objects were collected both for the material of which they were made, such as dendritic agate, jasper or other precious or semi-precious materials, and for their workmanship. Jewellers like Pierre-François Drais (1726-c.1788) specialised in the skilled manufacture of such boxes and cups, but there was also an import industry from the Far East, as the prevalence in French collections of carved Chinese cups made of a single piece of amber, dating to around 1700, attests. It was also common for specimens to be decorated or adorned in some way so as better to serve their purpose of contributing to a beautiful whole. Highly valued therefore was a sort of ‘fusion object’ in which art and nature converged. Its provenance made the rock crystal cup in the collection of La Rochefoucauld valuable beyond similar items in other collections:

This slightly smoked crystal cup was given by Sultan Galga III, the eldest son of the Cham of the Crimean Tartars, to King Stanisław Leszczyński (1677-1766) on his release from the prison of Choczin … in 1713. This cup was then given to the deceased Queen of France [Maria Karolina Zofia Felicja Leszczyńska, wife of Louis XV (1703-1768)] by her father, King Stanislas… From the hands of this Queen it passed to those of Madame Regnier, her then governess, then at the death of that lady to those of Mr. Lazonski, father and son, and the latter gave it as a present to the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, who preserves it with care.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The almost impossibly involved history of the cup united exoticism, royalty, death, imprisonment and adventure, and what was more, it tied the collector personally to all of these. Auctioneers and visitors were alike alert to questions of provenance, for the prestige of ownership related in part to tales of former or current collectors who had possessed a particular item. Individual specimens can thus be traced from hand to hand, from collection to collection, sometimes over several generations, so that the value of the object was bound up with knowledge of the history of the collecting community itself.

4.3: *Exceptionalism*

A third key theme which is prominent in the literature describing collected objects is exceptionalism. Being very large or small, very rare or fragile, or monstrous added hugely to the value of an individual specimen, as it had done in the much older *Wunderkammer* genre. Work on ‘object biographies’ can help us to understand these sorts of specimens as mobile parts of the whole, which had their own lifespan and story.[[45]](#footnote-45) In 1775, a wealthy collector of the eminent house of La Tour d’Auvergne, probably Jacques-Léopold-Charles Godefroy, comte de La Tour d’Auvergne (1746-1802), was forced for financial reasons to sell his natural history collection at auction. He commissioned the shell collector Guillaume Favanne de Moncervelle to draw up a detailed catalogue, complete with illustrations and detailed biographies of each rare object. Individual specimens were picked out for attention for exceptional colouring or shine, completeness of fragile specimens (such as those with spines), unusually large size, scarcity in collections generally, and features such as healed breaks, or lævorotation instead of the normal dextrorotation in spiral shells. By signalling and singling out the exceptional and rare, guidebooks and auction catalogues set up a competition between cabinets. What made people visit certain collections in particular is something that catalogues and classificatory systems cannot disclose. However, collecting was identified with rarity to such a degree that, in literary genres, it frequently figuratively extended to humans in the collector’s household. In *L’orpheline léguée* (1765), the hero, Damis, has insinuated himself into the good graces of the collector Éraste, on the pretext of being an English teacher but really to get close to his niece:

*Éraste*: …Do me, Sir, the grace of telling me

What motive draws you to my house?

*Damis*: I could allege curiosity:

France has nothing more rare in her bosom

Than you, to attract the visit

Of a Foreigner curious of merit.[[46]](#footnote-46)

In telling passages, attractive women in a collector’s household were sometimes figured as particularly choice specimens. For example, in Marmontel’s ‘Le Connoisseur’, discussed above, the collector’s niece is given the name of ‘Agathe’, both a girl’s name and a coveted category of mineral, mentioned in 19% of collections named in Dezallier d’Argenville 1780. In Benoist’s *Lettres du colonel Talbert*, collecting permits a similar *double-entendre* when the eponymous hero is trying to flirt with the niece of the female collector in whose house he is a guest: ‘I’ve no trouble in persuading myself, Madam, I said to [the aunt], tenderly fixing my gaze upon Hélène, that you possess everything in the world that is most fine & rare.’[[47]](#footnote-47)

How should we understand these emphases? Not perhaps in the novels, but certainly in the journals of visitors, in guidebooks and in auction catalogues, a display of connoisseurial expertise about exceptionalism marked the viewer out as tasteful. Amid the proliferating specimens in every shape and colour, knowledge of what was *rare* required a detailed familiarity with the contents of other collections and the frequency of occurrence of particular kinds of specimens in them. It required membership, therefore, of the collecting community.

Favanne remarked of lot 234 in La Tour d’Auvergne’s catalogue, the Giant’s Ear (*Oreille de Géant*), that it was otherwise only known in Paris from the collections of Germain-Edme Poisallolle de Nanteuil de Norville (?-1792), a financier, and Charles Alexandre, vicomte de Calonne (1734-1802), the *intendant* of L’Isle in Flanders—soon to become a Royal minister. Lot 234 was a shell with a ‘red coat of brick-orange marbled in white’, some six inches long by four and a half inches wide.[[48]](#footnote-48) Unfortunately, when the time came to pay for his lavish catalogue, it seems La Tour d’Auvergne could no longer meet his obligations. A manuscript note on one copy indicates that Favanne had taken out a lawsuit against the comte to obtain the sum of 30,000 *livres* which he claimed had been promised.[[49]](#footnote-49) La Tour d’Auvergne was probably the model for another short story by Fanny de Beauharnais, in which the young chevalier de l’Étoile had ‘such a taste for the sciences, that he preferred the title of philosophe to that of colonel’, devoting his time to studying modern languages and the sciences. ‘He collected a very fine cabinet of natural history; he even decorated his boudoir with it, and it was not the cheapest thing in the room. These fine natural productions having infinitely upset his fortune, the chevalier ceded part of his cabinet to his friends, and sold the rest at around a quarter of its value.’ Upon this the chevalier left on a ship bound for the East Indies, to visit the Brahmins.[[50]](#footnote-50)

5: *Conclusion*

Collections in this élite culture of late eighteenth-century Paris were spaces for telling stories about order and its place in society. They were realms where the relationships between objects, and the place of things within the natural world, could be established or redefined by a community. Individual collectors could raise their own status not only by collecting but also by telling new (kinds of) stories which linked up collectors and objects in new ways. Printed presentations of cabinets and curiosities explicitly addressed the ways in which learning, order and hierarchy could be produced and manifested through *space* and *materials*. Rarity and prestige dominated the choice of specimens, yet the presence of boundary and fusion objects shows that the significance of collections was greater: they focused attention upon the links between materials, spatiality, order and virtue.

In a critical way, collections served as instruments for producing new orders, responding to new cultural agendas and priorities with new justifications *for* order and new principles *of* order. To limit ourselves as historians to writing about classificatory systems alone is to provide a reductionist account of the collection, which fails to engage with its role as domestic adornment, demonstration of order and financial asset. Specimens moved in circuits into and out of collections, and auction catalogues and guidebooks helped to craft their significance. Collections were webs, with threads stretching both through time, as specimens changed hands as gifts or purchases, and across space, reaching out towards the limits of the European map of the world and beyond, but also tying together the movement of experts between European cabinets.

The case of the duc de La Rochefoucauld may serve as a final reminder that collections were neither fixed nor immutable, nor were they neutral zones empty of either political significance or commercial value. As discussed above, La Rochefoucauld’s natural history collection featured in several guidebooks in the late eighteenth century. Politically speaking, he supported the nationalisation of cabinets: as president of the Comité d’Aliénation of the Assemblée Nationale in 1790, he published an instruction on how to preserve the objects confiscated by the government from the houses of émigrés and dissolved religious orders.[[51]](#footnote-51) But as the Revolution radicalised, he himself was arrested, and the seals were placed on his own collection. It would be inventorised after his execution in 1792, and assimilated into the new national teaching collections.[[52]](#footnote-52) If collections were increasingly coming to be seen as national property, therefore, this change did not confer political immunity upon the collectors themselves. Political virtue, it transpired, resided in the space, rather than the individual.

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E. C. Spary

Corpus Christi College

Cambridge

CB4 3DJ

United Kingdom

ecs12@cam.ac.uk

+44 1223 338013

1. All translations are the author’s own, except where stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dietz 2006; Dietz and Nutz 2005, p. 47; Lacour 2014; Lipkowitz 2014; Pomian 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See especially Lynn 2006; Bensaude-Vincent and Blondel eds. 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Plax 1991-1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Laissus 1986, p. 669. Among the reasons for the neglect of catalogues is that they were held to be of little bibliographical value, and therefore their entries in library catalogues were frequently truncated, making them hard to locate. Dietz 2006 and Dietz and Nutz 2005 have highlighted the value of catalogues for the history of natural history; see also Michel 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is an issue requiring further investigation, but catalogues often featured in inventories of personal libraries. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lugt 1938. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dezallier D’Argenville 1780, I, Chapter 10. On the *Conchyliologie,* see Pinault-Sørensen 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Some significant sources of error in the study as a whole include the fact that some collectors had more than one social condition; some objects were halfway between naturalia and artificialia; many collections were sold anonymously; and Paris was a clearing house for collections from abroad, which are not easily distinguished from French collecting proper without detailed research. In addition, the different priorities in Lugt 1938 and in Dezaller d’Argenville 1780 produced selective reporting of the contents of collections, so the comparison is difficult. Only later, intensive research will resolve these issues to some extent. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Daugeron 2011, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dance 1986; see however Dietz 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dance 1986; Spary 2004; Dietz 2006; Bleichmar 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Although see Napolitani’s essay in this collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Pujoulx 1835, p. 37n: ‘Il y avait autrefois un grand nombre de cabinets somptueux, dans lesquels les amateurs avaient réuni des collections de coquilles et des suites d’échantillons de minéraux; il y a peu de collections de coquilles aujourd’hui, mais celles de minéraux sont à-la-fois plus nombreuses, plus complètes et mieux disposées pour l’étude.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On this card, which was initially for circulation among Gersaint’s friends, see Guichard 2012, p. 534; Guichard 2008, Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On the spread of luxury goods in French society, see Coquery 1998; Pardailhé-Galabrun 1988; Scott 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dietz and Nutz 2005, pp. 60-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dietz 2006, p. 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Most recently in Terrall 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. [Antonini]1749, I, p. 211: ‘On y trouvera de quoi se satisfaire abondamment dans tous les genres des productions singulieres de la nature, soit dans le regne animal, ou dans le végétal. Le choix admirable de toutes ces raretés, & l’ordre avec lequel elles sont arrangées, ne laissent rien à désirer aux plus difficiles sur ces matieres.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Scott 1995, p. 293n; Laing 1983, pp. 114-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Dezallier d’Argenville 1780, p. 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Catalogue* 1771. On Dezallier d’Argenville, Boucher and art collecting, see especially Michel 2007, Guichard 2012, pp. 536-538; Guichard 2008; Bleichmar 2012; Fuhring 2003; Scott 2006; Dietz and Nutz 2005, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. These results can be usefully compared with the analysis in Brockliss 2002, Chapter 2 of the smaller network of the Avignon collector Esprit Calvet (1728-1810), and with the findings of Sturdy 1995, who has studied the social background of members of the Académie des Sciences. On the teaching of sciences in France, see Brockliss 1987; Lacoarret and Ter-Menassian 1986; in general, the French universities have been seen as sites where teaching in the natural sciences was either scarce or entirely lacking, so this finding demands further investigation. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Vente* 1778, p. 3: ‘Plusieurs oiseaux insectés, dessous des cages de verres’ and ‘Divers morceaux d’Histoire Naturelle, qui seront divisés’. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Marmontel 1765, II, p. 335: ‘Ne croyez pas que le même désordre règne dans ma tête: chaque chose y est à sa place; la variété, le nombre même n’y jette point de confusion.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gauthier 1787, pp. 72-73: ‘plus curieux par l’élégance qui y regne, que par la quantité de choses rares qu’il renferme. Il réunit cependant en petit, tous les genres. Les madrépores & les coraux y dominent. Il a aussi quelques tableaux fort beaux, plusieurs originaux de Vernet, beaucoup de gravures, quelques Bronzes.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Spary 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Crow 1985; Ozouf 1988; Baker 1990, Chapter 8; Bell 1992; Chisick 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Outram 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. P. D. L. 1780, pp. xiii-xiv: ‘On nous reprochera peut-être de n’avoir point indiqué les cabinets de livres, de tableaux, d’estampes & d’Histoire-naturelle, qui se trouvent chez des particuliers, soit à Marseille, soit à Arles, soit à Aix: mais ces cabinets changent souvent de maître: nous aurions pu en oublier quelqu’un; il falloit d’ailleurs en parler avec la distinction que le mérite du choix doit y faire mettre: l’oubli même auroit pu passer pour une omission volontaire; ainsi nous avons cru devoir négliger un article auquel il est aisé de suppléer en arrivant dans une ville par les renseignemens qu’on peut se procurer chez le premier Libraire.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Benoist 1767, p. 77: ‘Il n’y a pas un cabinet de Curieux que je n’aye déja vû vingt fois’. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Roze de Chantoiseau 1791, unpaginated, section ‘Sciences et arts libéraux’: ‘Jardin du Roi’: ‘C’est à M. le Comte de Buffon que la Jardin du Roi doit la création du cabinet; avant lui il n’existoit que des gommes, des resines & des médicamens renfermés dans cinq ou six cens bocaux qui n’occupoient pas ensemble une des armoires du cabinet. Ce grand homme, par son activité & par la haute considération dont il jouissoit dans toute l’Europe, sçut se procurer des productions de tous les climats, & sans dépense pour le Gouvernement. C’est vers l’année 1740 qu’il commença à rassembler les objets d’Histoire naturelle, & depuis cette époque jusqu’à celle de sa mort, pendant un laps d’environ cinquante ans qu’a duré son administration au Jardin du Roi, il n’a cesse de colliger. L’Impératrice de Russie, l’Empereur, les Rois de Suede & de Danemarck, le Prince Henn.[illeg.] & plusieurs autres Puissances avec lesquelles M. de Buffon étoit en correspondance ré[ciproqu?]ée, ont contribués infiniment au complement de la minéralogie du cabinet. Les Sçavans & les Voyageurs de toutes les Nations se sont empressés à l’envi de lui procurer tous les objets rares & curieux qui se trouvoient à leur portée; c’est un tribut qu’ils offroient au génie de l’histoire naturelle, & non à l’établissement dont il étoit l’administrateur; & M. de Buffon s’est empressé d’en abandonner la possession au Roi & la jouissance au public. Ainsi non-seulement il a été le créateur du cabinet d’histoire naturelle, mais encore le donateur de la plus grande partie des objets qui le composent.’ See, similarly, Napolitani (this issue) on Sage’s collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. On the collection as property and the complex relations between private and public, see Lipowitz 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Starobinski 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Spary 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Beauharnais 1786(a), p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. [Doppet] 1788, p. 63: ‘Il faut être curieux pour pouvoir s’instruire; mais la curiosité doit avoir ses bornes. À Paris on jete journellement dans les rues des petites affiches dont le style est le plus empoulé; les mots de *rare*, de *superbe*, d’*extraordinaire* n’y sont jamais oubliés: on vous montre un lapin pour un monstre, ou un singe pour un sauvage.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. [Doppet] 1788, p. 64: ‘Je crois qu’on feroit courir toute la ville pour voir la lune enchaînée dans un flacon.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Thiéry 1787, II, p. 489: ‘Une aiguille de crystal de roche, de deux pouces de longueur, herborisée intérieurement d’une manière très-distincte. Cet unique & superbe morceau, décrit par M. d’Aubenton, a été dessiné & gravé pour être inséré dans les Mémoires de l’Académie des Sciences.’ The paper, presented to the academy on 10 April 1782, was published as Daubenton 1785. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Vartanian 1950; Dawson 1987; Delaporte 1982; Gibson 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Thiéry 1787, II, pp. 501-502: ‘*Dendrite* est le nom que l’on donne à des pierres qui portent l’image des végétaux & des animaux. Souvent ces jeux de la nature sont aussi corrects, que si c’étoit le pinceau du plus habile Artiste qui les eut tracés. Il est à présumer que leur formation est due à des fluides chargés de minéraux différemment colorés & comprimés entre deux surfaces.’ On Mme de Bandeville, see Gargam 2009, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Thiéry 1787, II, p. 489: ‘Une coupe de crystal de roche, de huit à neuf pouces de long.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Thiéry 1787, II, p. 489: ‘Cette coupe de crystal un peu enfumé, a été donnée par le Sultan Galga III, fils aîné du Kan des Tartares de Crimée, au Roi Stanislas Leczinsky, au sortir de sa prison de Choczin … en 1713. Cette coupe a été donnée ensuite à la Reine de France défunte, par le Roi Stanislas son père ... Des mains de cette Reine elle a passé dans celles de Madame Regnier, alors sa Gouvernante, puis à la mort de cette dame dans celles de M. Lazonski pere & fils, & ce dernier en a fait présent à M. le Duc de la Rochefoucault, qui la conserve avec soin.’ The Crimean Khanate made regular incursions into Poland to capture slaves for sale in the Ottoman Empire. Stanislas’s presence, however, was connected with his involvement in the war between Russia and Sweden in the 1710s. In 1713, the date of his imprisonment, the Crimean Khan was Devlet I Giray and his eldest son, the Galga, was Selim II Giray (Haiworonski 2007; Sutton 1953, p. 179: letter from Sir Robert Sutton to William Legge, 2nd Baron Dartmouth, 10 August 1713). ‘Madame Regnier’ was possibly Marianne Calignon, Madame Reynier de Jarjayes (?-?), a court lady-in-waiting. The ‘Lazonskis’ were probably Jean-Baptiste Lazowski (1714-1804) and his son Maximilien-Catherine Lazowski (b. 1748), the latter of whom was connected to the La Rochefoucauld family (Scher-Zembitska 2001, p. 188). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Daston (Ed.) 1999; Alberti 2005; Hill ed. 2012; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Findlen (Ed.) 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Saurin 1765, p.18:

‘Éraste:…Faites-moi, Monsieur, la grace de me dire

Quel motif, chez moi, vous attire?

Damis: Je pourrois alléguer la curiosité:

La France, dans son sein, n’a point de rareté,

Qui doive, plus que vous, attirer la visite

D’un Étranger curieux de mérite.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Benoist 1767, pp. 78-79: ‘Je n’ai pas de peine à me persuader, Madame, lui dis-je, en fixant tendrement Héléne, que vous possédez tout ce qu’il y a de plus beau & de plus rare dans le monde.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. [Favanne and Favanne de Moncervelle] 1784, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. [Favanne and Favanne de Moncervelle] 1784, manuscript annotation opposite titlepage. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Beauharnais 1786(b),pp. 49-50: ‘tant de goût pour les sciences, qu’il préfera le titre de philosophe à celui de colonel’; ‘il réunit un très-beau cabinet d’histoire naturelle; il en orna même son boudoir, et ce n’étoit pas ce qu’il y avoit de moins cher. Ces belles productions de la nature ayant infiniment dérangé sa fortune, le chevalier ceda une partie de son cabinet à ses amis, et vendit le reste à peu près au quart de sa valeur’. In fact it was d’Auvergne’s cousin, Henri-Louis-Marie, prince de Guéméné (1745-1809), who would declare bankruptcy in 1783 (Levantal 1996, p. 771). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. La Rochefoucauld and Dionis 1791. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The inventory is in Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, F17 1336. It is undated but postdates 22 September 1793 (Tuetey 1912-1917, I, p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)