



## **Collections Curieuses: The Aesthetics of Curiosity and Elite Lifestyle in Eighteenth-Century Paris**

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In a suite of four rooms on the first floor of his hôtel on the present-day Boulevard Saint-Germain, Louis-Pierre-Maximilien de Béthune, Duc de Sully, had arranged his “belle collection de bronze et autres curiosités égyptiennes, étrusques, indiennes & chinoises; figures, bustes & bas-relief de bronze, d’albâtre & de marbre, antiques & modernes; pierres gravées, montées en bague; monnoies & médailles d’or, d’argent, de billon & de bronze; desseins, estampes, coquilles, & autres objets qui ont rapport à l’histoire naturelle; ouvrage de lacqs, habillemens indiens & chinois, armes anciennes, tant des pays étrangers que de France. . . . &c.” In the largest of the rooms, the objects were stored in Chinese lacquerwork cabinets, above and below which were grouped arrangements of crystal vases, porcelain containers, and Chinese figures; on the mantelpiece were boxes containing corals, ivory objects, and mounted shells; on tables with inlaid surfaces stood small marble and terracotta sculptures, as well as further porcelain objects.<sup>1</sup>

In eighteenth-century Paris there existed a network of more than 450 private collections of this sort, “collections de diverses curiosités” in contemporary terminology, whose strangely heterogeneous spectrum of objects is reminiscent of the Borges-Foucaultian “Chinese encyclopedia.”<sup>2</sup> Over-

shadowed by the “Kunst- und Wunderkammern” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the one hand, and the nineteenth-century museums on the other, the eighteenth-century culture of collecting has so far attracted relatively little attention.<sup>3</sup> Barbara Stafford, Paula Findlen, and Tony Bennett, whose macro-perspectival interpretations present the history of collections as a linear development, see eighteenth-century collections *curieuses* only as a transitional phenomenon or an obsolete model.<sup>4</sup> They argue that in the second half of the eighteenth century an aging model of collecting was replaced by a new one: the Kunst- und Wunderkammern with their universal spectrum of objects, lack of a systematic choreography of collecting, and private ownership disappeared and were replaced by specialized and state-financed museums open to the public, whose scientific mission was reflected in the systematic presentation of their exhibits. Barbara Stafford draws a distinction between “aggregate and system,” between a “rationally ordered repository of knowledge and a free-form entertaining spectacle”; this echoes a well-known and simplified dichotomy and places collecting “between an Enlightenment classifying culture, or rational systematics, and a waning baroque oral-visual polymathy.”<sup>5</sup>

The specific nature of other eighteenth-century constellations of collecting that do not conform to these models—those of the collections *curieuses*, for example—cannot be grasped with this sort of typology. Remarkably, despite the abundance of objects gathered in the collections *curieuses*, they seem to elude categorization. Historians of art, such as Krzysztof Pomian and Antoine Schnapper, have focused on the art collecting, while historians of natural history and science such as Yves Laisus, Peter Dance, and Paula Findlen have concentrated on the collecting of natural objects.<sup>6</sup> As a result the collections *curieuses* are fragmented as they come to the attention of present-day academic disciplines that include only what falls into their respective categories and discard the rest.

This essay, by contrast, aims to understand the phenomenon of *curiosité*, with its entire spectrum of objects and its social practices, as a historical unit whose specific nature differs from the Kunst- und Wunderkammern. In this essay the Parisian collections *curieuses* will be anchored within a framework that, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the “cultural field,” we will call the “field of *curiosité*.”<sup>7</sup> Its specific *habitus*, its showplaces, its protagonists, and the roles they assumed, its competitive dynamic, and its values will be described. What emerges is a historical

configuration that does not fit into the usual dualisms of art/science, scientific/nonscientific, or professional/amateur. Rather, its characteristic quality rests on a set of intellectual dispositions, criteria of perception, values, and social practices that were obligatory for the protagonists involved. It will become clear that the field of *curiosité* was shaped by an aesthetic code whose criteria constituted the spectrum of objects in the collections *curieuses*, their presentation in the home, usually an *hôtel*, of their owner, and the social practices localized in the collection as a unit. The setting up of collections de *curiosités* proves to have been a distinctive prestige-generating practice that presupposed the possession of a considerable fortune. With the exception of a few artists, clergy, and merchants who were collectors, until well into the last third of the eighteenth century the milieu of the *curieux* was drawn mainly from the court aristocracy, the aristocracy of office, and the circles of upwardly mobile financiers. They presented themselves to and for their equals in an elaborate performance of style within the framework of a competitive social spectacle.



The starting point of our essay is the well-documented inventory of objects in Parisian private collections in the many catalogues that were produced, as a rule after the owner's death, by professional dealers for the auction of the collection. The terminology used in these catalogues describes the constellation as a whole as *curiosité*, its protagonists as *curieux* or *monde de la curiosité*, its objects as *curiosités* or *objets curieux*, and their totality as *collections curieuses*. As they cannot be reduced to the aspects of the history of science, collections *curieuses* have been largely ignored by the "grand narrative" of the early modern transformation of curiosity, which describes the unstoppable rise of a curiosity directed towards the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

It is striking how dictionaries between 1690 and 1790 treat the word family *curiosité*, *curieux* (as nouns), and *curieux*, *curieuse* (as adjectives). One of the first in this sense is Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel*, dating from 1690, which notes the following under the entry for *curieux*: "CURIEUX is also the name given to a person who has brought together the rarest, most beautiful and unusual objects to be found in the realm of both art and nature. One says, for example, it's a *curieux* of books, coins, engravings, paintings, flowers, shells, antiquities, and natural objects."<sup>9</sup> Over the next

hundred years, the semantic field polarized around three aspects: “knowing and learning about,” “seeing,” and “possessing” specific objects, as the entry for *curieux* in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (1798) demonstrates:

Curieux, euse. adj. Someone who lavishes a great deal of care and attention on seeing and possessing new, rare, excellent things. . . . The term “curieux” is also used for things; it is applied to things that are rare, new, extraordinary, and excellent of their sort. . . . Curiosité. n.f. The passion, desire, drive to see, to experience, and to possess things that are rare, unique, and new.<sup>10</sup>

These and other contemporary dictionary definitions correlate *curiosité* with its objects, whether *curiosité* is directed towards them as a desire triggered by sight of them, or whether the specific quality of the objects attracts the possessive, curious gaze.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* attempted to express an opposing program, to separate *curiosité*, the drive for knowledge, from the curious object, to dematerialize it and to confine it to the purely intellectual realm as a theoretical curiosity. The *curieux*’s curiosity is shown as being directed towards the objects accumulated in eighteenth-century collections *curieuses* (Kenny, 73–81). This “Enlightenment propaganda” directed against *curiosité*, as Simon Schaffer calls it, was continued by the natural historians of the late eighteenth century whose rhetoric of progress and innovation degraded the collections *curieuses* into a symptom of an amateurism that contrasted against collections dedicated to gaining natural historical knowledge and tied to the institution of the *Jardin du Roi*.<sup>12</sup> Characterizing amateur collectors of nature, Buffon remarked that “most of those who, without any prior study of natural history, wish to have collections of this sort are people of leisure with little to occupy their time otherwise, who are looking for amusement and regard being placed in the ranks of the curious as an achievement.”<sup>13</sup> However, the borderline between science and nonscience was by no means as clear cut as this rhetoric suggests.<sup>14</sup> Buffon himself acquired numerous objects for the *Jardin du Roi*—both decorative furniture and natural objects—at the very auctions selling the inventory of the collections *curieuses* that he stigmatized.<sup>15</sup>

*Curiosité* refers not only to the intellectual disposition of collectors, but also to their specific practice in the contemporary sociocultural arena. The collecting *curieux* saw himself as upholding a common code of values; he collected not for himself alone, but in public. The aesthetic pleasure taken

in the precious objects acquired was experienced in the company of a circle of knowledgeable visitors. The idealizing eulogies for collectors, which have a fixed place in the forewords of auction catalogues, praise three cardinal virtues: goût, choix, and the ability, acquired and honed in the course of a collector's life, to select the correct objects with an expert's eye. There is also the skill of opening a collection to like-minded people and turning shared viewing into an aesthetic and social experience of the first rank.<sup>16</sup> In this sense Gersaint's eulogy for the great curieux and connoisseur Angran Vicomte de Fonspertuis outlines the ideal type of a collector:

The various *curiosités* that Monsieur de Fonspertuis possessed are so well known that it is not necessary to explain their value at length here. His affable character, the cultivated sociability with which he received everyone whose love of beautiful things led them to him, the joy which he conveyed to those who shared his pleasures, the benefits of the select company that one could be sure of meeting at his place, . . . all of this meant that he attracted so many guests . . . that there were few people of taste who did not have several opportunities to see the rare things whose possession gave him so much pleasure.<sup>17</sup>

French *curiosité* of the eighteenth century was based on an aesthetically shaped code that trained its protagonists to look at objects in terms of specific qualities, to recognize those that fulfilled these particular conditions, and, on the basis of this selective view, to configure the spectrum of objects in the collections *curieuses*. Objects were selected for their ability to convey a subtle visual pleasure ("plaisir") which fulfilled the criteria of the pleasant ("agréable"), the rare ("rare"), the valuable ("précieux"), and the beautiful ("beau"). The accumulation of these attributes in the countless descriptions of objects in the Parisian catalogues of the eighteenth century indicates a change. While the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Kunst- und Wunderkammern, which contained some of the same objects, sought in them the qualities of being unusual, disconcerting, shocking, and unique, the *curieuse* gaze saw them differently: in a different physical setting, in the vicinity of other objects, and in other arrangements. What it sought, what it clung to, and what characteristic impressions it conveyed will be discussed in the following overview of the inventory of objects in the collections *curieuses*.

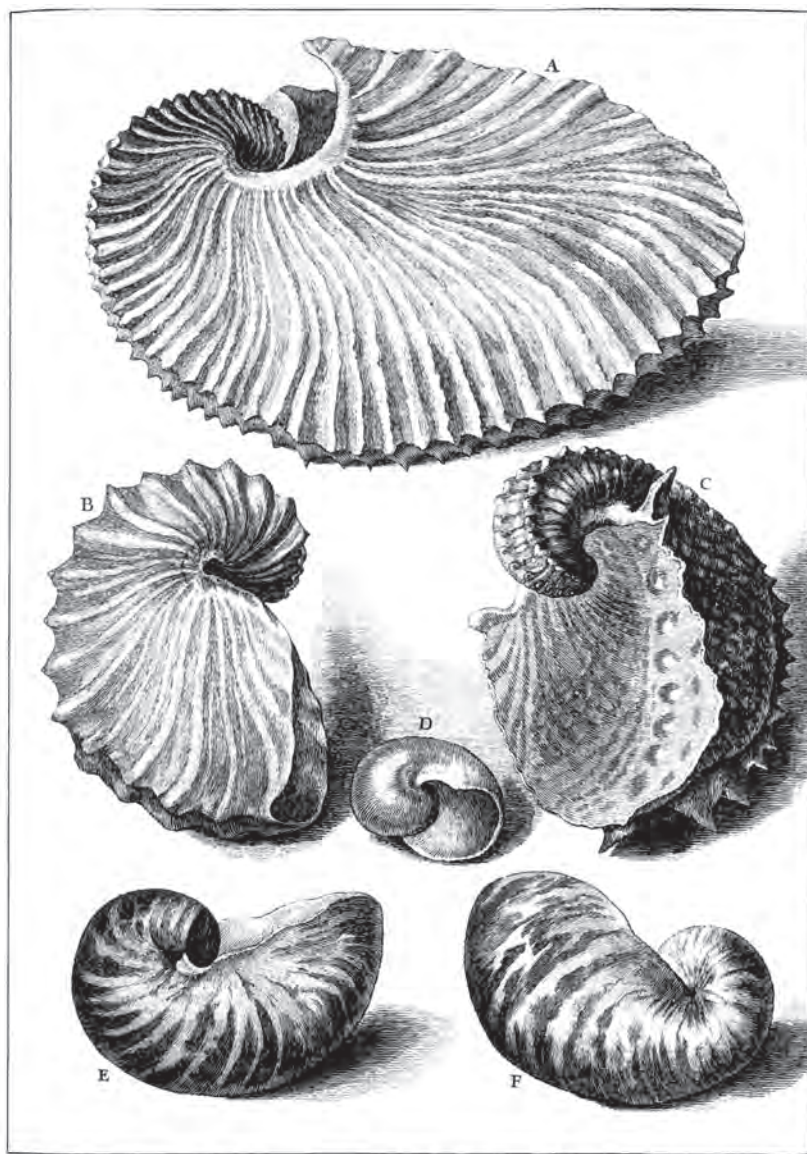
The auction catalogues that inventoried a collection, as a rule after the owner's death, reveal the categories into which the curieux put these objects: paintings and drawings by Italian, Dutch, and French artists, copperplate engravings, and sculptures; porcelain, coins, and medals, jewels and fine furniture; and specimens of natural history, scientific and mathematical instruments, machines and models.<sup>18</sup> Paintings were the most highly valued, and there were few collectors of any reputation in eighteenth-century Paris who did not possess at least one. Most in demand were the works of famous masters. By the beginning of the century, Italian painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Correggio, Parmigianino, Michelangelo, Titian, and Veronese had already become so expensive that only the wealthiest collectors could afford them (Schnapper, *Curieux du grand siècle*, 22). As a reaction, around the middle of the century Dutch and Flemish masters like Rubens, Van Dyck, Wouwerman, Berchem, and Backhuysen became desirable, followed by the French painters Poussin, Watteau, and Boucher.<sup>19</sup> Big collectors, like the financier Augustin Blondel de Gagny, could possess several hundred masterpieces, while the collection of the receiver ("receveur général") Louis-Antoine Crozat, Baron de Thiers, numbered almost 400 paintings. Considered to be "one of the collections richest in paintings by Old Masters in the whole of Europe," it was sold to St. Petersburg where it forms the core of the collection of the present-day Hermitage.<sup>20</sup> The rapid price inflation of paintings forced many collectors to switch their attention to more affordable drawings and copperplate engravings, which, in turn, were also affected by huge price increases from the 1770s.<sup>21</sup>

As well as paintings, French curieux considered sculptures an obligatory part of their collections. In his instructions on setting up a cabinet curieux, the naturalist and engraver Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville recommended "a wealth of excellent examples of sculptures, busts, and bas-reliefs, as well as copies in marble, porphyry, granite, and alabaster," which could range from works of classical antiquity to the work of French artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Dézallier d'Argenville, "Lettre," 1328). Art in all its forms lay at the heart of the interests of the curieux. Paintings, drawings, engravings, sculptures, and luxury craft products were their most prestigious collectors' objects, in both the material and the ideal sense. By looking at art works, the curieux acquired his most important attributes: "goût" and "choix", that is, taste and discrimination in selecting the objects that deserved to be included in his collection.

In addition, natural objects were extremely popular, especially those that were exotic and appealing: birds, insects, and especially shells from the animal kingdom, plus stones, gemstones, ores, fossils, and madrepores (marine animals in the form of plants).<sup>22</sup> In the auction catalogues the objects are explicitly described in terms of aesthetic criteria, such as shape, color, pattern, quality of material, and surface structure. Thus in the *Catalogue systématique et raisonné des curiosités de la nature et de l'art, qui composent le cabinet de M. Davila* we read the following description of an oyster shell: "A thorny oyster from the Indies, rare and in very good condition; the upper shell is white on top speckled with lilac, the rest is lilac. . . . The lower shell has thick, lemon-yellow thorns in the middle." Another catalogue dated 1785 describes the zoophytes collected by a certain Abbé Aubry in terms of their formal beauty: "This cabinet, which counts as one of the most significant in Paris, contains natural history *curiosités* of various sorts, . . . a large collection of zoophytes including corals, madrepores, lithophytes, and fungipores; these objects are of the greatest beauty and perfection. A number of these pieces are even unique" (figures 1, 2, and 3).<sup>23</sup>

The frequent presence of experimental apparatus and models in these collections points to the connection, so characteristic of curiosity, between science and aesthetics, one that could combine instruction and amusement. "The mechanical-physical cabinet," we read in the 1744 catalogue of Joseph Bonnier de La Mosson's collection, "is the one that best entertains the intellect and the eye, as it contains only objects that both instruct and delight."<sup>24</sup> As a rule, a mechanical-physical cabinet contained, in addition to astronomical and nautical instruments, telescopes and microscopes, and various measuring instruments, including the apparatus for a series of spectacular chemical, physical, and mechanical experiments that the owner could demonstrate for his guests.<sup>25</sup> The highly popular mechanical models provided the maximum demonstration and entertainment value. Through a mechanism that was hidden from observers, they executed natural movements and sequences, often achieving a high degree of verisimilitude. Vaucanson's famous mechanical duck, which could flap its wings and quack, pick up corn and digest it while standing on its pedestal, functioned both as an amusing spectacle and as a practical demonstration of a controversial theory of digestion that was being discussed at the time.<sup>26</sup>

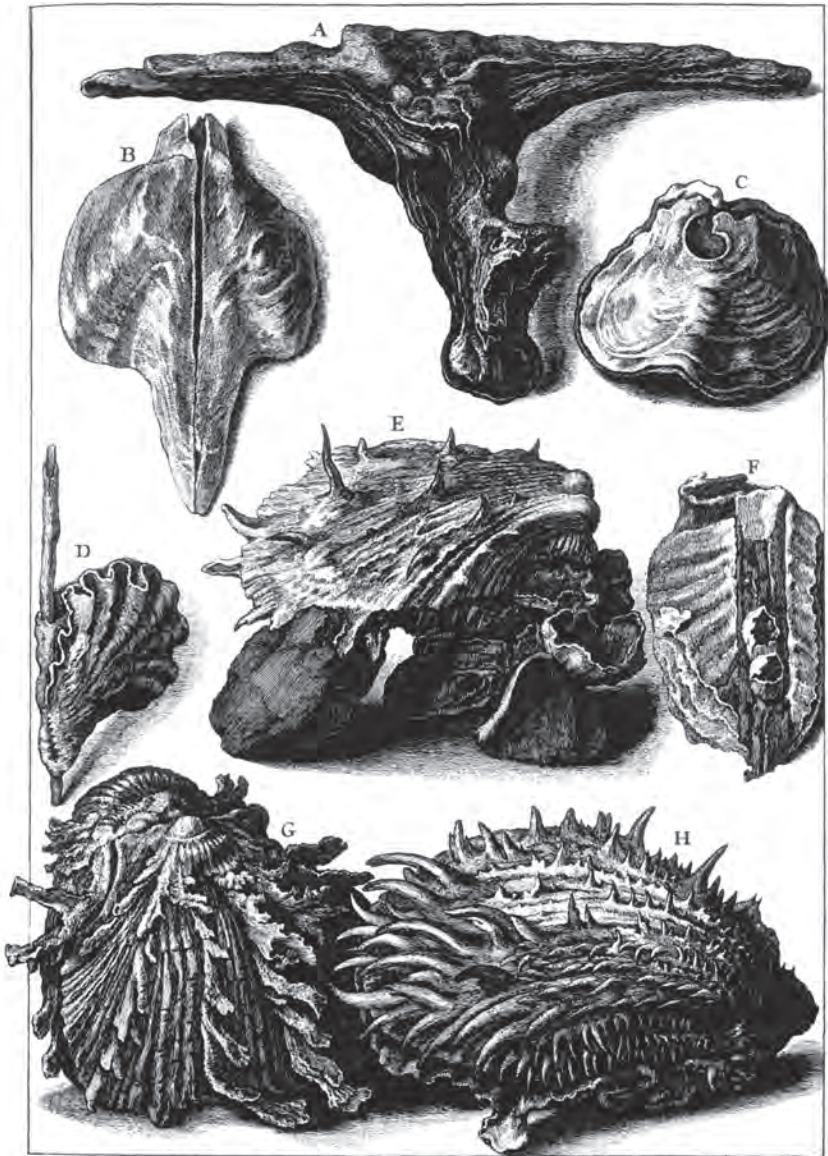
Among the standard items found in princely and aristocratic collections since the seventeenth century were Chinese and Japanese vases, jugs, urns, and porcelain figures, valued because of their aesthetic qualities and



*aux dépens de M. Bonnier de La Mosson.*

Figure 1. *Nautilus*, aux dépens de Bonnier de La Mosson, engraving published in Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville, *L'Histoire naturelle éclaircie dans deux de ses parties principales. La lithologie et la conchyliologie* (Paris: de Bure aîné, 1742), 23.2 × 16 cm, plate 8. The nautilus shells in this illustration are from the collection of Bonnier de La Mosson, who also paid for the engraving in d'Argenville's reference book on the natural history of shells. By permission of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.





*aux dépens de M<sup>r</sup> Monflambert Com.<sup>de</sup> un Bataillon du Reg.<sup>t</sup> de Champagne*

Figure 2. Huitres, aux dépens de Mr. Monflambert, Commandant d'un Bataillon du Regiment de Champagne, engraving published in Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville, *L'Histoire naturelle éclaircie dans deux de ses parties principales: La lithologie et la conchyliologie* (Paris: de Bure ainé, 1742), 23.2 × 16 cm, plate 22. This plate shows various oyster shells from the collection of Monflambert. Among them are two thorny oysters (E and H) as they are also described in the catalogue of Davila's collection. By permission of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

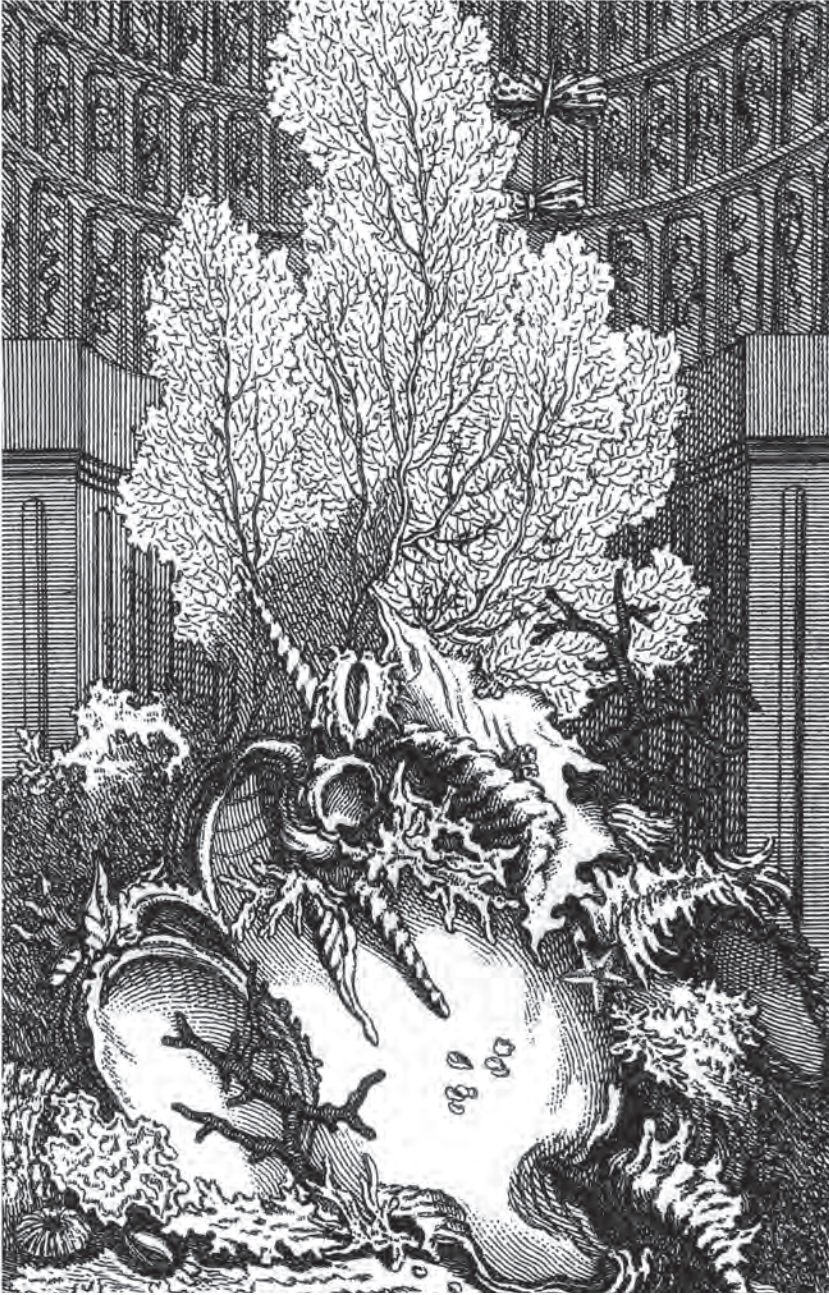
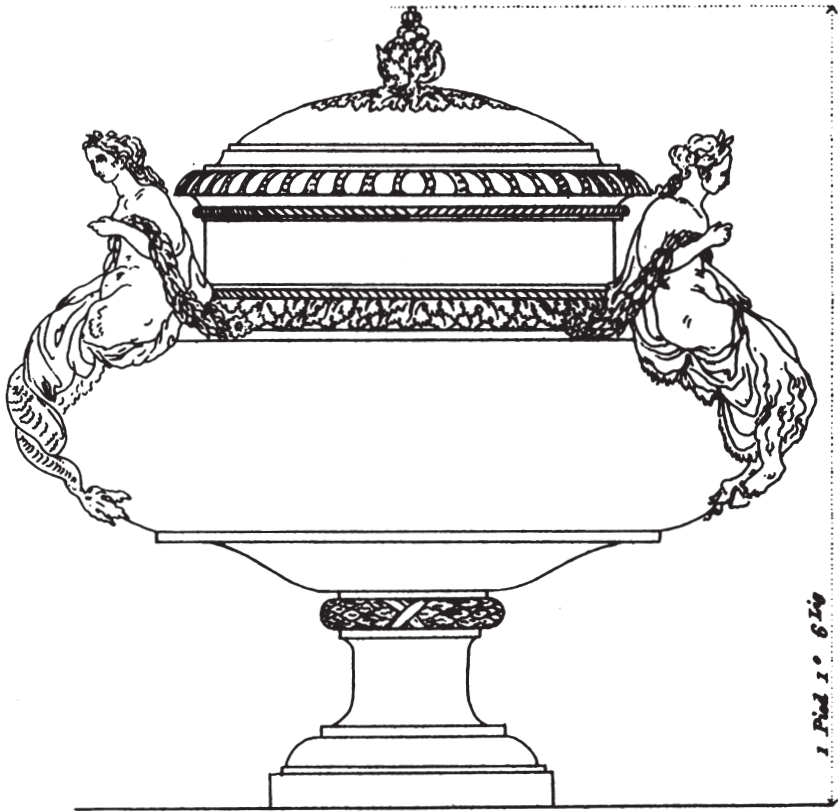


Figure 3. *Composition of Shells and Madrepores*, frontispiece to Edme François Gersaint's *Catalogue d'une collection considérable de curiosités de différens genres* (Paris: Prault fils, 1737), engraving by Claude-Augustin-Pierre Duflos after François Boucher, 13.3 × 7.3 cm (1736). By permission of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

the fascinating materials of which they were made. Initially, only pieces produced for the upper end of the Japanese and Chinese markets were collectable, but after the middle of the century, the best quality porcelain manufactured in Europe became increasingly acceptable. Porcelain placed high demands on the connoisseur's discerning eye, which had to avoid being misled by garish bright colors and worthless decoration.<sup>27</sup>

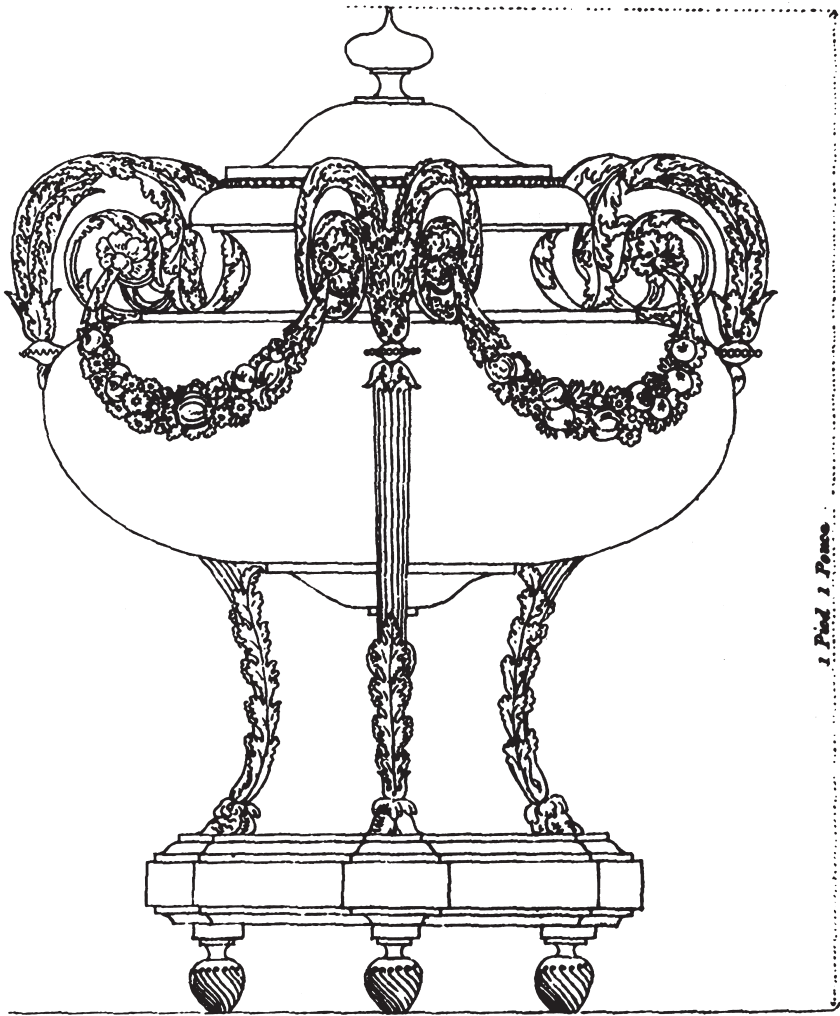
Most porcelain objects were mounted in gilt bronze in order to emphasize their qualities as aesthetic objects and to match the decorative scheme of the collection (figures 4 and 5). A similar aesthetic strategy was followed in the case of Chinese and Japanese lacquer work. Small cabinets and chests were mounted on preciously decorated and gilded stands so that they could be used in the same way as contemporary French commodes.<sup>28</sup> Other objects were cut up and the lacquer panels thus obtained were used to decorate luxury European furniture, in particular, cabinets and tables. The catalogues mostly subsume the luxury furniture prized by collectors under the general heading of "meubles de Boule." This referred to the precious furniture from the workshop of the cabinetmaker ("ébéniste") André-Charles Boulle (or his imitators), who specialized in marquetry executed in exotic woods or mother-of-pearl.<sup>29</sup>

A wealth of picturesque detail could be quoted to demonstrate that auction catalogues primarily emphasized the visual qualities of things in order to stimulate interest. Eighteenth-century *curieux* took the greatest pleasure in possessing and looking at objects that were rare, refined, and visually appealing. Frequently the *curieux* not only acquired the objects of his desire, but also gradually gained knowledge in diverse fields, from art history, by way of painting, sculpture and prints, medals, worked gemstones, and porcelain, to natural history, including shells, butterflies, and birds. This desire for knowledge inspired by the sight of beautiful objects elevated the *curieux* into the status of a connoisseur, who occupied an exclusive position in the internal hierarchy of the field and beyond. Of a certain Madame Dubois-Jourdain, for example, it was said that as a connoisseur of the natural objects, she filled her cabinet with French and international visitors, setting in motion a process of giving and receiving gifts between her and her guests, and initiating numerous correspondences on natural history subjects.<sup>30</sup>



*Vase de Serpentin antique avec les  
Ornements de Bronze doré d'or mat.*

Figure 4. *Antique Stone Vase Mounted in Gilt Bronze*, engraving from the sale catalogue of the collection of Louis-Marie-Augustin Duc d'Aumont, 16.2 × 12.4 cm, plate 11, from P. F. Julliot fils and A. J. Paillet, *Catalogue des Vases, Colonnes, Tables de Marbres rares, Figures de bronze, Porcelaines de choix . . . qui composent le Cabinet de feu M. le duc d'Aumont* (Paris, 1782). Illustrated catalogues were an extreme rarity at the time. The catalogue of d'Aumont contains an appendix of thirty engravings illustrating selected items of the auction held in 1782. The above vase (lot 11) was bought for Louis XVI for the exceptional sum of 5000 livres. Photograph by the author.



J. Poul. J. Ponce.

*Deux Carsolettes de Porphire vert avec  
les Ornaments de Bronze doré d'or mat.*

Figure 5. *Porphyry Jug Mounted in Gilt Bronze*, engraving from the sale catalogue of the collection of Louis-Marie-Augustin Duc d'Aumont, 16.2 × 12.4 cm, plate 6, from P. F. Julliot fils and A. J. Paillet, *Catalogue des Vases, Colonnes, Tables de Marbres rares, Figures de bronze, Porcelaines de choix . . . qui composent le Cabinet de feu M. le duc d'Aumont* (Paris, 1782). The jug mounted on a triangular stand of jasper and decorated with gilt-bronze garlands was purchased for the queen. Photograph by the author.

How were the various categories of objects in the collections of eighteenth-century Paris arranged, combined with each other, and displayed? What series or groups were formed? The adjectives connoisseurs used to describe collections ranged from “pretty” and “pleasant” to “refined,” “artistic,” “astounding,” and “unique.” When displaying their collections, the curieux were most concerned for things that belonged together by aesthetic criteria to be placed in spectacular, decorative ensembles. It was not only the individual parts that were important; a harmonious arrangement was equally significant. A vivid example of how objects were grouped to form a “Gesamtkunstwerk” (a total work of art) is provided by the cabinet of the financier Augustin Blondel de Gagny who distributed his extensive collection of paintings, classical sculptures of bronze and marble, various pieces of furniture by Boulle, clocks, crystal chandeliers, and porcelain throughout eleven rooms in his hôtel on the Place Vendôme.<sup>31</sup> On average, each room contained thirty paintings, nine sculptures, forty pieces of porcelain, and ten pieces of luxury furniture: “All these beautiful things, arranged in a knowledgeable and by no means confused way, produce such a surprising effect that the observer is completely riveted and can hardly bear to leave this place, this sanctuary of so much beauty, without wanting to see it again.”<sup>32</sup> The paintings were hung in a number of rows above each other on the walls. In the first room, for example,

Adam and Eve by Santerre hung above the fireplace. . . . On the panel opposite the fireplace there was a masterly painting by Rembrandt, depicting an old woman. . . . Below that a very beautiful landscape by Paul Bril. Below that, in the middle, Wouverman’s deer hunt. . . . On the two panels opposite the painting of Adam, two landscapes by Courtois. Below that . . . a storm by Vernet. (Hébert, 1:38–39)

Tables with marble inlays and various pieces of lacquer furniture provided surfaces on which classical and modern sculptures, bronzes, objects made of semiprecious stones and porcelain were displayed. Following the rules governing a successful arrangement, all available space was filled: “On one marquetry table by Boulle with an alabaster-colored marble surface stood a green granite vase mounted on a base with gilt bronze decorations. Under this table was a vase of antique Chinese porcelain, also mounted. On both sides of this same table two lacquer cabinets and four bronzes, two of which, by Michel Anguier, represented Bacchae, the other

two Apollo and a faun" (Hébert, 1:42). Taste dictated that certain types of objects complemented each other particularly well, so that they were regarded as necessary decorative units. Of Pierre-Louis-Paul Randon de Boisset it was said that "he felt that the extraordinary quality of his collection of paintings and marble vases demanded a number of porcelain objects of the highest quality" (Remy, *Catalogue Randon de Boisset*, 32).

Not only artworks and craftworks were subjected to the demands of decorative arrangement, but also natural objects. An eighteenth-century shell cabinet, for example, consisted of several towers of flat drawers, in which the shells, often grouped to form a picture, were stored. In order to separate background and foreground, the drawers might be lined with colored satin, which provided a contrast with the shells. The optical impact could be enhanced even further by building small boxes out of wooden slats on the base of the drawer. Each ornamental partition would then contain a shell that, as was the case in Bonnier de La Mosson's shell cabinet, might lie on satin of a color contrasting with that of the drawer lining. For viewing, the drawer was pulled out, or taken right out and placed on a table, so that the observer could look down on the contents as on a parterre, as the description puts it.<sup>33</sup> Seven drawings by Jean-Baptiste Courtonne, dating from 1739 and 1740, provide a detailed picture of the arrangement of Bonnier de La Mosson's collection.<sup>34</sup> Five glass cases standing next to each other, their doors edged with carved, intertwined snakes, housed dried animals, large butterflies arranged ornamentally on white cardboard, brilliantly colored small birds sitting on tree branches, and madrepores fastened to stands. Underneath, rare minerals, starfish, shells, and fossils were displayed. In places, the aesthetic presentation blurred the distinction between a collected object and an ornament, for example, where real and carved antlers were brought together in a decorative group (figure 6).<sup>35</sup>

It is revealing that eighteenth-century surveys of the most important and worthwhile cabinets of "histoire naturelle" mention both collections curieuses and the collections of famous natural historians without making any reference to qualitative differences. Thus, for example, the third edition of Dézallier d'Argenville's *Conchyliologie*, a widely available reference book on the natural history of shells, features the shell collection of the rococo painter François Boucher, which was presented on a table with a mirror surface, next to the shells, corals, and minerals that the natural historian Michel Adanson had collected on his expedition to Senegal.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 6. *Collection of Bonnier de La Mosson, Cabinet of Dried Animals*, detail, drawing by Jean Courtonne, 36 × 168 cm, in *Recueil des dessins des cabinets de curiosités de Bonnier de la Mosson* (1739/1740). One of seven drawings showing the decorative arrangements of Bonnier de La Mosson's collections. In the glass case on the left ornamental partitions of butterflies and other insects are displayed. Photograph © Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris, Département de la bibliothèque et de la documentation, collections Jacques Doucet.

“Scientific” collections and purely “amateur” collections were both shaped by aesthetic concerns. As late as 1791, in his *Dictionnaire raisonné d'histoire naturelle*, Jacques-Christophe Valmont de Bomare recommended taking recourse to the inventory of objects and the decorative techniques of the collection curieuses when setting up a collection of natural objects:

In order to decorate a cabinet in the most advantageous manner, and to create an uninterrupted ensemble, the full height of the walls must be furnished. Also, it is usual to decorate the projections of closets with very large shells, . . . a rhinoceros horn, the tooth or tusk of an elephant or a



unicorn, urns and busts of alabaster, jasper, marble, porphyry. . . . Bronze statues from Classical Antiquity are also placed there. . . . The variety and the uniqueness of the objects always captivate the attention of viewers.<sup>37</sup>

The arrangements of objects in the Paris collections of the eighteenth century reflected the general principles that authors of contemporary aesthetic treatises worked out in the search for a general definition of beauty, and for the ordering of individual parts within a total artistic composition.<sup>38</sup> In works on architecture and the fine arts, in particular, disposition (“art de disposer”) was identified as the most subtle of the artistic qualities, as it allowed the elements of an artwork to be grouped in such a way that the senses and the spirit of the observer perceived a unity.<sup>39</sup> Jacques-François Blondel stressed the correspondence and interdependence of all individual elements as a condition necessary to create the total impression of a beautiful, architectonic whole—a central point of view for the aesthetics of eighteenth-century architectural theory.<sup>40</sup> Yves M. André saw a symmetrical arrangement of all elements around a center as the formal principle of beauty. In his *Essai sur le beau* (1741), which went through a number of editions, he wrote:

If one is composing a whole out of different elements, similar or dissimilar ones, odd or even in number, then these elements must be arranged in such a way that their profusion does not create confusion; that elements which occur only once are placed between those which occur a number of times; that similar elements are represented with the same frequency and are at the same distance from each other; that the elements that are different from each other are also represented with the same frequency, and observe a sort of hierarchy among themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Montesquieu’s argument that only something that can be grasped with a certain ease can be perceived as beautiful also referred to the “pleasures of symmetry,” which, he suggested, are the result of the clear internal structure of an object.<sup>42</sup>



These conglomerates of objects had their place in the houses of the collectors, and in the case of the monumental collections described above, this was an hôtel. While the size and architectural design of an hôtel expressed its owner’s social rank and separated him from the rest of the city, during

the eighteenth century the “intérieur” increasingly became the stage on which the hôtel inhabitant played out the subtle rituals of distinction to establish his place within the social hierarchy. Eighteenth-century French architects and theorists of architecture saw the arrangement of the interior, the ordering and decoration of rooms, as a strength if not an invention of their time. To the display of splendor on the facade was added the decorative refinement of the interior, which, as well as expressing style and status, also had to fulfill a new requirement: it had to be comfortable. In his *Monuments érigés en France à la gloire de Louis XV* (1767), Pierre Patte traces the following line of development:

Before this time, the only thing that counted was the outside and how magnificent it was. . . . The interiors were huge and lacked all comfort. . . . People lived solely in order to represent, and were unaware of the art of furnishing one’s home comfortably, for oneself. All the comfortable arrangements to be seen in our modern palais today, . . . all these sophisticated conveniences, . . . which make living in our houses so attractive and magical, were invented in our time. (6)

The rooms of an aristocratic hôtel, some generously proportioned, others of a more intimate nature, had to be arranged and decorated according to the dictates of a decorative canon: with carved and painted wood paneling, extravagant chimneys, chandeliers and candelabra, marble, ebony and upholstered furniture, Gobelins tapestries and curtains, with tables, occasional tables, and commodes on which decorative objects of the most varied sort could be displayed. All sent distinctive signals in the constant competition for status and prestige in which the court and the urban aristocracy were permanently engaged.<sup>43</sup>

Its proximity to the court and the concentration of offices and functions in the city made Paris a magnet. It held out the promise of a brilliant career to members of the aristocracy, allowing upwardly striving individuals to be ennobled and confirming the status of recently ennobled families. The flight of the French aristocracy from the provinces drove up the number of nobles who lived temporarily or permanently in Paris. The *Almanach de Paris contenant la demeure les noms et qualités des personnes de condition* puts the figure at about 11,300 in 1788, comprising military aristocracy (“noblesse d’épée”), officeholders in the king’s and the city’s institutions, and the group of financiers who had been elevated to the nobility via the lucrative administration of the state’s finances.<sup>44</sup> Norbert Elias has pointed

out that within this milieu the visible representation of rank by conspicuous expenditure was absolutely necessary. The opulent and spectacular lifestyle, which contemporaries and modern interpreters condemned as wasteful luxury, was a necessity for creating and maintaining status:

The differentiated development of the exterior as an instrument of social differentiation, the representation of rank through form, is characteristic not only of houses, but of the whole of the courtly way of life. The sensitivity of these people to the connections between social rank and the arrangement of everything visible within their sphere of activity, including their own movements, are both products and expressions of their social position.<sup>45</sup>

In this sense, the creation of precious collections of aesthetically pleasing objects can also be seen as one of the distinctive practices that the possession of any considerable wealth presupposed. Until the last third of the eighteenth century, collectors, apart from a few merchants, artists, and clergy, were essentially drawn from the court aristocracy, the aristocracy of office and upwardly mobile financiers. They displayed themselves in front of and for the benefit of their equals in the setting of a competitive, predominantly aristocratic public sphere. The collection was a status symbol. The various displays that were presented on the stage of the *hôtel*—architecture, interior decoration, dress, table decorations—required the presence of a public. This performance of style had to be constantly seen and assessed by social equals in order to fulfil its function. Prestige was created as a momentary triumph in the eye of the visitor. For visits, as Katie Scott emphasizes, were a daily routine that “filled noble houses with the constant comings-and-goings of a wide range of individuals” and “consisted in part of an exchange of recognition and respect. Individuals visited each other in order to be present at the splendid rituals through which status was partly expressed” (84).



Contemporary travel guides, travel accounts, and memoirs show that visiting private collections was one of the primary motives for traveling in the eighteenth century, and often the main purpose of a journey. Travel guides often mention the collections in a town first among the sights to be seen. They provide information about opening hours, applying to visit a collection, and sometimes also about the personality of the owner, a fac-

tor that was vitally important in the age of private collections. Hébert's *Dictionnaire pittoresque et historique* and Dézallier d'Argenville's *Conchyliologie* informed interested visitors from home and abroad about who was collecting in Paris, and what was special about particular collections. This "muséographie" mapped the field of curiosité, its internal social structure, and its competitive dynamic.<sup>46</sup>

Several members of the royal family and princes of the blood were well known curieux. The Grand Dauphin, Louis XIV's oldest son, for example, possessed one of the most exclusive collections of Oriental porcelain, which contained some presents given by the Siamese legation in 1684 and 1686.<sup>47</sup> Louis Duc d'Orléans had set up a gallery of exquisite paintings in the Palais Royal, and Louis XV acquired items at auction when famous collections of art and luxury furniture were dissolved. Some members of the old military aristocracy also cut brilliant figures in the field. They included Etienne-François, Duc de Choiseul, Pair de France, one of the most famous collectors of paintings and copperplate engravings, Louis-Marie-Augustin, Duc d'Aumont, Pair de France, one of the most knowledgeable experts on Oriental porcelain of his time, of whom it was said that he had acquired "a more famous name in *curiosité* than in politics," and Louis-François de Bourbon, Duc de Conti, who had a cultivated collection of paintings and copperplate engravings by almost all of the artists canonized by the curieux, and who bought paintings and engravings on a daily basis.<sup>48</sup> In addition, financiers, who had amassed considerable fortunes as administrators of the state's finances, stood out as collectors. The distinctive potential of collecting offered them the opportunity to transform their economic clout into social and cultural capital.<sup>49</sup> The curieux with the biggest and most exclusive collections in the eighteenth century were members of this group; they were able to cultivate curiosité without being inhibited by cost. The collection of the "receveur général des finances" Pierre-Louis Randon de Boisset was auctioned in 1777, achieving a total price of 1,260,775 livres.<sup>50</sup> He had no financial limits when it was a matter of indulging his passion. Numerous trips to Italy and the Netherlands with the art dealer and expert Pierre Remy, whom he consulted on all his acquisitions, his friendship with the painter François Boucher, and a devotion, lasting for decades, to all areas of curiosité had finally brought him the reputation of one of the "premiers connoisseurs."<sup>51</sup> The fact that Hébert's *Dictionnaire* devoted a detailed, forty-five-page description to Blondel de Gagny's collection indicates also that this group was very interested in publicizing its activities (1:36–81).

Although most auction catalogues are of collections belonging to men, neither collecting nor the social rituals associated with it were exclusively male activities. Contemporary engravings of visitors to collections, specialist shops, and auctions depict groups of elegant men and women examining the objects on offer, generally while conversing. Remy, one of the leading contemporary dealers in art and curiosities, prefaced his 1763 catalogue of the natural history collection of Madame de B\*\*\* with comments about the new, but obviously no longer very rare, phenomenon of female collectors, in this case, of natural objects.<sup>52</sup>

“The most complete, extensive, and artistic cabinet of natural history in Paris, and perhaps anywhere in the world” belonged to a woman, Madame Dubois-Jourdain. (Courajod, 1:30). She had accompanied her husband, a collector of books and engravings on historical themes, to auctions and specialist shops, and thus discovered a taste for *curiosité* herself. She apparently attended courses in physics, chemistry, and natural history so that she could expertly order her collection of rare natural specimens. High-ranking and scholarly visitors from home and abroad were frequent callers at her home. They exchanged duplicates from their collections and maintained a lively correspondence. As Remy’s catalogue of her collection shows, in addition to natural objects, she owned various other *curiosités*: a large number of engraved gemstones, sculptures of marble, bronze, and ivory, and items that today would be classified as *ethnographica*, such as Chinese clothing, weapons, and the everyday objects used by foreign peoples.<sup>53</sup>

Although collectors mainly came from the court, the financial community, and the high clergy, members from other milieus could also enter the ranks. A few notaries, advocates, merchants, and scholars had amassed collections that lacked neither “*goût*” nor “*choix*,” and which could stand up to the scrutiny of experienced *connoisseurs*.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the “*commerce de la curiosité*,” the field in which dealers, collectors, researchers, and artists met and interacted, also produced a number of figures who, on the basis of their professional and commercial interests and their daily contact with customers from this particular milieu, gradually adopted their codes of behavior, acquired the necessary abilities to perfection, and became collectors themselves.<sup>55</sup> These figures included dealers who dominated the market such as Gersaint, Pierre-Jean Mariette, and Remy, the authors of catalogues, and auctioneers, who advised individual collectors on their purchases, and who, as professionals in *curiosité*, had themselves achieved the

status of expert.<sup>56</sup> Artists who moved in this milieu—painters, sculptors, and engravers—could also feature as collectors.

The most prominent example was François Boucher, Premier Peintre du Roi, who specialized in portraits and interiors. A eulogy to the collector, published in the 1771 catalogue that announced the auction of his collection, emphasized one specific quality: an inherent “goût” for the pleasant (“agréable”), which was reflected both in his artistic work and in his selection of objects as a collector:

Hence this extensive, overwhelming, and above all else pleasant collection, which he left at his death; paintings, drawings, bronzes, valuable furniture, rare porcelain, minerals, shells, *madrepores*, etc. Ultimately, everything that could please the eye was an object worthy of his interest, . . . and from every genre he selected only the things that were pleasing because of their form or color.<sup>57</sup>

Boucher embodies the aesthetic ambition with which eighteenth-century curieux put together and arranged their collections. Each object as well as its combination with others in a spectacular and decorative arrangement had to appeal to the observer. The purchases Boucher made, for example, at the auction of Madame Dubois-Jourdain’s monumental collection, are revealing in this respect. He bought only those objects that were striking or pleasing. Among other things, he purchased “two Bucins [shells]. . . . They are exquisite because of their color,” “one beautiful, prettily-shaped bowl mounted on a base; all of green jasper with red flecks, edged with gold,” and “clothing, furniture, weapons, and everyday objects used by Indians, savages, and Chinese.”<sup>58</sup> Boucher revealed a brilliant inventiveness in displaying his treasures with the visual attractiveness that the curieux were seeking. His shells, for example, were displayed on glass used for making mirrors, so that the effect for the observer was that of a “parterre émaillé.”<sup>59</sup>



By locating the Parisian collections curieuses within the setting that we have called the “field of curiosité,” we have been able to profile the collector as a type, the inventory of objects and the presentation and function of the collection as a specific historical unit. The field of curiosité was structured

by an aesthetic code that ordered the objects in the collection—encompassing paintings, engravings, drawings, sculpture, porcelain, lacquerwork, “meubles de Boule,” natural objects, scientific instruments, and mechanical models—according to the criteria of agreeableness, pleasantness, and rarity. The collection, together with the interior of the spaces in which it was exhibited, formed a decorative whole. To possess and visit collections curieuses, whose aim was to achieve sophisticated visual effects both through their individual parts and as a whole, was part of an elitist performance of style and thus one of the competitive, status-generating rituals that were performed on the stage of the hôtel.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, various factors led to an erosion of the field of curiosité, depriving the collections curieuses of their semantic, aesthetic, and social matrix.<sup>60</sup> The characteristic coupling of collection, interior space, and lifestyle was dissolved aesthetically by the rise of classicism, politically by the impact of the French Revolution on the protagonists of curiosité, and commercially by a general shift of taste among purchasers of luxury goods. The disintegration of the universal spectrum of objects in the collections was also closely connected with the differentiation of fields of knowledge, in particular, the triumphal rise of natural history and the emergence of art history and criticism.<sup>61</sup> Specialist collections came to the fore, in both private and state ownership. The establishment of state museums equipped with research institutions and a staff of professional scientists and academics—in France the *Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle* and the *Louvre* (both founded in 1793)—expressed the national aspiration for collections as laboratories of knowledge and showplaces of science. However, the era of private collections was by no means over. Until well into the nineteenth century they continued to function as an archive and laboratory of a differentiating natural history—we need only point to the collections of crania maintained by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in Göttingen and Samuel George Morton in Philadelphia.<sup>62</sup>

## Notes

For the convenience of the reader, we have provided our own translations of all French and German texts.

1. P. -C. -A. Helle and Pierre Remy, *Catalogue d'une très belle collection de Bronze et autres Curiosités . . . du cabinet de feu M. le Duc de Sully, Pair de France, & Chevalier de la Toison d'Or* (Paris: Didot l'aîné, 1762); Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville, *L'Histoire naturelle éclaircie dans deux de ses parties principales: La lithologie et la conchyliologie* (Paris: de Bure aîné, 1742), 201.

2. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 7.

3. On the Kunst- und Wunderkammern, cf. the following representative works: Julius Schlosser, *Die "Kunst- und Wunderkammer" der Spätrenaissance: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens*, 2nd edn. (Braunschweig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1978); Barbara J. Balsiger, "The 'Kunst- und Wunderkammern': A Catalogue Raisonné of Collecting in Germany, France and England, 1565–1750" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1970); Adalgisa Lugli, *Naturalia et Mirabilia: Il collezionismo enciclopedico nelle Wunderkammern d'Europa* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1983); *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Antoine Schnapper, *Le géant, la licorne, la tulipe: Histoire et histoire naturelle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988); Giuseppe Olmi, *L'inventario del mondo: Catalogazione della natura e luoghi del sapere nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992); Horst Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben: Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1993); Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1994); Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998); and *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen (New York: Routledge, 2002). On nineteenth-century museums, see Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992); Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origin of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1994); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); Carla Yanni, *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1999); James J. Sheehan, *Museums in the German Art World from the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism* (New York: Oxford Univ., 2000); and H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina, 2002). On eighteenth-century collections, see Barbara M. Benedict, "The 'Curious Attitude' in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Observing and Owning," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 14.1 (1990): 59–98; *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and Representations of Nature*, ed. David P. Miller and Peter Hanns Reill (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1996); Christoph Becker, *Vom Raritäten-Kabinett zur Sammlung als Institution: Sammeln und Ordnen*



im Zeitalter der Aufklärung (Egelsbach: Hänsel-Hohenhausen, 1996); *Art Markets in Europe, 1400–1800*, ed. Michael North and David Ormord (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); and Arthur MacGregor, “The Ashmolean as a Museum of Natural History, 1683–1860,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 13 (2001): 125–44. In particular, the Paris collections curieuses of the eighteenth century have largely fallen through the net of historical research. For French collections, see *Le Muséum au premier siècle de son histoire*, ed. Claude Blanckaert and Claudine Cohen (Paris: Editions du Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, 1993), and Emma C. Spary, *Utopia’s Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2000). See also *Macrocosmos in Microcosmo: Die Welt in der Stube: Zur Geschichte des Sammeln, 1450–1800*, ed. Andreas Grote (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1994), and Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001).

4. Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 3; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 395–96.

5. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment, Education and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (Cambridge: MIT, 1994), 221, 264, 218. Stafford’s theses on “Exhibitionism,” which relate to the history of collecting in the eighteenth century as a whole, are essentially based on only three sources, one German and two French, all dating from 1751. Her account in *Devices of Wonder* dispenses with any outline of distinct historical constellations; she regards the inventory of objects, the semantics of objects, and types of collections as constant over a period of three centuries (6).

6. Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux: Paris, Venise, XVIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); Antoine Schnapper, *Curieux du grand siècle: Œuvres d’art* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994); Patrick Michel, “Quelques aspects du marché de l’art à Paris dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle: Collectionneurs, ventes publiques et marchands,” in *Kunstsammeln und Geschmack im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Michael North (Berlin: Berlin, 2002), 25–46; Peter Dance, *A History of Shell Collecting* (Leiden: Brill, 1986); Yves Laissus, “Les cabinets d’histoire naturelle,” in *Enseignement et diffusion des sciences en France au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. René Taton (Paris: Hermann 1986), 659–712; and Findlen, *Possessing Nature*.

7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992); Bourdieu, “Le champ littéraire: Préalables critiques et principes de méthode,” *Lendemains* 36 (1984): 5–20; Alain Viala, “Effets de champ, effets de prisme,” *Littérature* 70 (1988): 64–72; Joseph Jurt, *Das literarische Feld: Das Konzept Pierre Bourdieus in Theorie und Praxis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 69–107; Alan Swingewood, *Cultural Theory and the Problem of Modernity* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 86–107; and *Penser l’art et la culture avec les sciences sociales: En l’honneur de Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Eveline Pinto (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002).

8. Neil Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), 44–49, 123–28. See also Hans Blumenberg, *Der Prozeß der theoretischen Neugierde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); Lorraine Daston, “Neugierde als Empfindung und Epistemologie in der frühmodernen Wissenschaft,” in Grote, *Macrocosmos in Microcosmo*, 35–60; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the*

*Order of Nature*, 303–10; Peter Harrison, “Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge, and the Reformation of Natural Philosophy in Early Modern England,” *Isis* 92 (2001): 265–90; and Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2001).

9. “Curieux,” in Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (Den Hag: A. et R. Leers, 1690).

10. “Curieux” in *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 5th edn., 2 vols. (Paris: J. J. Smits, 1798), 1:359.

11. “Curieux” in *Dictionnaire universel français et latin, vulgairement appelé Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, 8 vols. (Paris: Compagnie des libraires associés, 1771), 3:67.

12. Simon Schaffer, “Visions of Empire: Afterword,” in *Visions of Empire*, 335–52.

13. Georges-Louis LeClerk, Comte de Buffon, and Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roy*, 15 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1749–67), 1:23.

14. On the typology of roles taken by the eighteenth-century men of science, see Steven Shapin, “The Image of the Man of Science,” in *Eighteenth-Century Science*, ed. Roy Porter, vol. 4 of *The Cambridge History of Science*, ed. Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2003), 159–83.

15. On Buffon as a buyer at auctions of collections curieuses, see Guillaume Glorieux, *A l’enseigne de Gersaint: Edme-François Gersaint, marchand d’art sur le Pont Notre-Dame (1694–1750)* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2002), 314–15, 320.

16. This is what Edme-François Gersaint, in his *Catalogue raisonné des diverses curiosités du cabinet de M. Quentin de Lorangère* (Paris: J. Barrois, 1744), expresses when he praises the collector Jean de Julienne: “Indeed, such fine judgement can only be achieved with experience, taste, and expertise” (préface).

17. Edme-François Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné des bijoux, porcelaines, bronzes, . . . de M. Angran, Vicomte de Fonspertuis* (Paris: P. Prault, 1747), Avertissement. Similar descriptions can be found for a number of collectors: the Duc de Tallard, described by Pierre Remy and Glomy, in *Catalogue raisonné des tableaux, sculptures . . . et autres effets qui composent le cabinet de feu Monsieur le Duc de Tallard* (Paris: Didot, 1756), Avant-propos; a certain M. Sevin, described by Louis Courajod, in *Livre-journal de Lazare Duveaux, marchand-bijoutier ordinaire du Roy, 1748–1758, précédé d’une étude sur le goût et le commerce des objets d’art au milieu du XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Société des Bibliophiles Français, 1873), 2:49; Dézallier d’Argenville, describing himself in “Lettre sur le choix & l’arrangement d’un Cabinet curieux, écrite par M. Des-Allier d’Argenville, Secrétaire du Roy en la Grande Chancellerie, à M. de Fougereux, Trésorier-Payeur des Rentes de l’Hôtel de Ville,” *Mercure de France* (June 1727): 1295–1330, 1294; and Blondel de Gagny, described in an anonymous article in *Mercure de France* (November 1776): 183.

18. See the following representative titles: Pierre Remy, *Catalogue de tableaux précieux; miniatures & gouaches; figures, bustes & vases de marbre & de bronze; armoires, commodes & effets précieux du célèbre Boule; un magnifique lustre de crystal de roche, & plusieurs autres de bronze doré; des porcelaines anciennes & modernes du plus grand*

choix; des pendules, feux & bras de cheminée de bronze doré, & autres objets curieux & rares qui composent le cabinet de feu M. Blondel de Gagny, Trésorier-Général de la Caisse des Amortissements (Paris: Musier, 1776); Pierre Remy and C. F. Julliot, *Catalogue des tableaux & desseins précieux des maîtres célèbres des trois écoles, figures de marbres, de bronze & de terre cuite, estampes en feuilles & autres objets du cabinet de feu M. Randon de Boisset, Receveur Général des Finances, par Pierre Remy. On a joint à ce catalogue celui des vases, colonnes de marbres, porcelaines, des laques, des meubles de Boule & autres effets précieux, par C. F. Julliot* (Paris: Musier, 1777).

19. C. F. Joullain, *Réflexions sur la peinture et la gravure, accompagnées d'une courte dissertation sur le commerce de la curiosité, et les ventes en général* (Metz: C. Lamort, 1786), 105. On eighteenth-century French collectors' preference for Dutch and Flemish painting, see Michel, "Quelques aspects," 29–38.

20. Hébert, *Dictionnaire pittoresque et historique ou description d'architecture, peinture, gravure, histoire naturelle, antiquités et dates des établissemens et monumens de Paris*, 2 vols. (Paris: C. Herissant, 1766), 1:86. The Duc de Tallard owned 194 paintings, Ange-Laurent de La Live de Jully owned more than 128, and Louis-Jean Gaignat more than 60. See the relevant auction catalogues: *Catalogue des tableaux du cabinet de M. de Crozat, baron de Thiers* (Paris: De Bure l'aîné, 1755); Remy, *Catalogue Blondel de Gagny*; Remy and Glomy, *Catalogue Duc de Tallard*; Pierre Remy, *Catalogue de tableaux, figures & bustes de marbre, terre cuite & ivoire; desseins, estampes, meubles précieux de Boule & de Philippe Cassieri; des coquilles choisies, & autres objets, du cabinet de M. de la Live de Jully, ancien Introduceur des Ambassadeurs* (Paris, 1770); Remy and Julliot, *Catalogue Randon de Boisset*; Remy and S. Ph. Poirier, *Catalogue raisonné des tableaux, groupes et figures de bronze qui composent le cabinet de feu Monsieur Gaignat, ancien Secrétaire du Roi* (Paris, 1768).

21. See the treatise on the market for copperplate engravings in Joullain, *Réflexions*, 134–54.

22. On shells as a significant component of the spectrum of objects, see Dance, *History of Shell Collecting*, 143–48, and Bettina Dietz, "Exotische Naturalien als Statussymbol: Zur Inszenierung von Prestige und Wissen in Pariser Sammlungen des 18. Jahrhunderts," in *Exotica: Konsum und Inzenierung des Fremden, 1750–1900*, ed. Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer and Eckhart Hellmuth (Münster: LIT, 2003), 25–43.

23. The first quotation is from *Catalogue systématique et raisonné des curiosités de la nature et de l'art, qui composent le cabinet de M. Davila*, 3 vols. (Paris: Briasson, 1767), 2:298 (lot 635); the second is from *Catalogue des principaux objets composant le cabinet d'histoire naturelle de feu M. l'abbé Aubry, curé de Saint-Louis* (Paris, 1785), 3.

24. Edme-François Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné d'une collection considérable de diverses curiosités en tous genres, contenuës dans les cabinets de feu Monsieur Bonnier de la Mosson* (Paris: J. Barois, 1744), 83.

25. See Dézallier d'Argenville, "Lettre," 1328–30. On the Paris "cabinets de physique," see Maurice Daumas, *Les instruments scientifiques aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Presses univ. de France, 1953), 191–96; and G. L. E. Turner, "Eighteenth-Century Scientific Instruments and Their Makers," in Porter, *Eighteenth-Century Science*, 511–35.

26. Jacques Vaucanson, *Le mécanisme du flûteur automate, présenté à Messieurs de l'Académie Royale des Sciences . . . avec la description d'un canard artificiel, mangeant, beuvant, digérant & se vidant* (Paris: J. Guérin, 1738), 19–22. On automata as a component of Kunst- und Wunderkammern, see Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben*; on automata as Learning Machines see Stafford, *Artful Science*, 190–95.

27. Thomas Nutz, “ . . . & autres curiosités’: Exotische Artefakte als Objekte des Elitenkonsums im 18. Jahrhundert,” *Exotica*, 1–24.

28. On porcelain objects, see Francis J. Watson, *Mounted Oriental Porcelain* (Washington, D.C.: International Exhibitions Foundation, 1986), and J. Ayers, Oliver Impey, and J. V. G. Mallet, *Porcelain for Palaces: The Fashion for Japan in Europe, 1650–1750* (London: Oriental Ceramic Society, 1990); for Asian laquerwork, see Carolyn Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), 82.

29. Cf. the titles of the following catalogues: A. J. Paillet and P. F. Julliot fils, *Catalogue des tableaux qui composent le cabinet de M. le Comte de Merle, par A. J. Paillet. Celui des vases, figures de marbre, bronzes, porcelaines anciennes, tables de marbre, meubles de Boule, bijoux & autres effets précieux, par Ph. F. Julliot fils* (Paris: A. J. Paillet, P. F. Julliot fils, Prault, 1784), and Pierre Remy, *Catalogue de tableaux, figures & bustes de marbre, terre cuite & ivoire; desseins, estampes, meubles précieux de Boule & de Philippe Cassieri; des coquilles choisies, & autres objets, du cabinet de M. de la Live de Jully, ancien Introduceur des Ambassadeurs* (Paris, 1770).

30. Pierre Remy, *Catalogue raisonné des tableaux, estampes, coquilles . . . de feu M. Dézallier d'Argenville* (Paris: Didot l'aîné, 1766), vii–viii.

31. Blondel de Gagny's collection was auctioned from 10 to 24 December 1776 and from 8 to 22 January 1777; there was a total of 1,141 lots, including 368 paintings, 96 sculptures, 457 porcelain objects, and 125 pieces of furniture. See Remy, *Catalogue Blondel de Gagny* and Hébert, *Dictionnaire pittoresque*, 1:36–81.

32. Annibale Antonini, *Mémorial de Paris et de ses environs: Nouvelle édition considérablement augmentée*, ed. G. T. Raynal, 2 vols. (Paris: Bauche fils, 1749), 210.

33. Gersaint, *Catalogue Bonnier de La Mosson*, 173–74. Gersaint developed the comparison between shell arrangements and ornamental flower beds in one of his first catalogues; see Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné de coquilles, insectes, plantes marines, et autres curiosités naturelles* (Paris: Flahault, 1736), 7.

34. Jean Courtonne, *Recueil des dessins des cabinets de curiosités de M. Bonnier de la Mosson*, conserved by Institut national d'histoire de l'art Paris, collections Jacques Doucet. On Bonnier de La Mosson's collection, see Frank Bourdier, “Le cabinet des curiosités de Bonnier de La Mosson,” *Connaissance des Arts* 90 (1959): 52–59; Délégation à l'Action Artistique de la Ville de Paris, *Le Faubourg Saint-Germain, la Rue Saint-Dominique, hôtels et amateurs: Musée Rodin, October 11–December 20, 1984* (Paris: Délégation à l'Action Artistique, 1984), 150–63; and Christopher Hill, “The Cabinet of Bonnier de La Mosson (1702–1744),” *Annals of Science* 43 (1986): 147–74 (containing reproductions of Courtonne's drawings).

35. In 1745 Buffon bought the five cases at auction, paying 3,000 livres, for the "Jardin du Roi." See Bourdier, "Cabinet," 57–58.

36. Dézallier d'Argenville, *La Conchyliologie, ou Histoire naturelle des coquilles de mer, d'eau douce, terrestres et fossiles, avec un traité de la zoomorphose, ou représentation des animaux qui les habitent*, ed. Jacques Favanne de Montcervelle and Guillaume Favanne de Montcervelle, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (Paris: Guillaume Deburé, 1780), 1:236, 266. The third edition is considerably enlarged over the first edition of 1767.

37. Jacques-Christophe Valmont de Bomare, *Dictionnaire raisonné universel d'histoire naturelle*, 15 vols., 4th edn. (Lyon: Bruyssonnet frères, 1791), 6:634.

38. See the following: Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Mariette, 1719); Jean-Pierre de Crousaz: *Traité du beau* (Amsterdam: F. L'Honoré, 1715); Charles Batteux, *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris: Durand, 1747); Denis Diderot, article on "beau" in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (Paris: Briasson, 1751), 2:169–81; Charles-Étienne, *Traité du beau essentiel dans les arts appliqué particulièrement à l'architecture*, 2 vols. (Paris: Chereau, 1752); and Francis X. J. Coleman, *The Aesthetic Thought of the French Enlightenment* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1971).

39. Jacques Lacombe, *Le spectacle des beaux arts ou considérations touchant leur nature, leurs objets, leurs effets & leurs règles principales* (Paris: Hardy, 1758), 17–18.

40. Jacques-François Blondel, *De la distribution des maisons de plaisance et de la décoration des édifices en général* (Paris: C. A. Jaubert, 1737), 103. See also Pierre Patte, *Monuments érigés en France à la gloire de Louis XV* (Paris: Rozet, 1767), 5–6; Charles-Etienne Briseux, *L'Art de bâtir des maisons de campagne*, 2 vols. (Paris: Prault père, 1743); Louis Hautecoeur, *Première moitié du XVIIIe siècle: Le style Louis XV*, vol. 3 of *Histoire de l'architecture classique en France* (Paris: Editions A. et J. Picard, 1950), 230–314; Louis Hautecoeur, *Seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle: Le style Louis XVI, 1750–1792*, vol. 4 of *Histoire de l'architecture classique en France* (Paris: Editions A. et J. Picard, 1952), 455–528; Philippe Minguet, *Esthétique du rococo* (Paris: Vrin, 1966); Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, *Histoire de l'architecture française: De la Renaissance à la Révolution* (Paris: Mengès, 1989), 327–52; and *Rocaille, Rococo*, ed. Roland Mortier (Bruxelles: Ed. de l'Univ. de Bruxelles, 1992).

41. Yves M. André, *Essai sur le beau ou l'on examine en quoi consiste précisément le beau dans le physique, dans le moral, dans les ouvrages d'esprit et dans la musique* (Paris: H. L. Guérin, 1741), 14.

42. Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Essai sur le goût* [1757], ed. Charles-Jacques Beyer (Genève: Droz, 1967), 75. See also Werner Szambien, *Symétrie, goût, caractère: Théorie et terminologie de l'architecture à l'âge classique, 1550–1800* (Paris: Picard, 1986).

43. Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1995); Richard A. Ettl, *Symbolic Space: French Enlightenment Architecture and its Legacy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1994), 128–35; Pierre Verlet, *Les bronzes dorés français du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Picard, 1987); John Whitehead, *The French Interior in the Eighteenth Century* (New York:

Penguin, 1993); Jean Feray, *Architecture intérieure et décoration en France des origines à 1875*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1997); and *Luxury Trades and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris: Studies in the History of the Skilled Workforce*, ed. Robert Fox and Anthony Turner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

44. Matthieu Marraud, in *La noblesse de Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), provides a detailed analysis of the aristocracy resident in Paris in the last third of the 18th century (31).

45. Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft*, 6th edn. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 98. When Elias speaks of a “courtly way of life” (“höfische Lebensgestaltung”) here, he refers not only to the court in a specific sense, but, as the preceding discussion makes clear, to the whole milieu of the high aristocracy and the aristocracy of office, which was shaped by life at court.

46. See the chapter “Muséographie” in Dézallier d’Argenville, *Histoire naturelle éclaircie*, 2nd edn. (Paris, 1757), and esp. in the third edition, Dézallier d’Argenville, *Conchyliologie* (1780), chapter 10.

47. Francis J. Watson and J. Whitehead, “An Inventory Dated 1689 of the Chinese Porcelain in the Collection of the Grand Dauphin, Son of Louis XIV, at Versailles,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 3 (1991): 13–52. On the Grand Dauphin, see also Schnapper, *Curieux du grand siècle*, 354–58.

48. On Choiseul, see F. Basan, *Recueil d’estampes gravées d’après les tableaux du cabinet de Monseigneur le duc de Choiseul, par les soins du sieur Basan* (Paris: chez l’auteur, 1771), annotated copy held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Cabinet des Estampes; J. F. Boileau, *Catalogue des tableaux qui composent le cabinet de Mgr le duc de Choiseul* (Paris, 1772). On d’Aumont, see Courajod, *Livre-journal*, 1:40; P. F. Julliot fils and A. J. Paillet, *Catalogue des vases, colonnes, tables de marbres rares . . . de feu M. le duc d’Aumont* (Paris: Julliot fils, 1782); Baron Charles Davillier, *Le cabinet du duc d’Aumont et les amateurs de son temps. Catalogue de sa vente avec les prix, les noms des acquéreurs* (Paris: A. Aubry, 1870). On Conti, see Courajod, *Livre-journal*, 1:267. According to Helle and Remy, in *Catalogue Duc de Sully*, the case of Louis-Pierre-Maximilien de Béthune, Duc de Sully, Pair de France, was similar; the number of sculptures (225 lots) stands out in his extensive collection.

49. On the financiers as patrons and collectors, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Gens de finance au XVIIIe siècle*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1993), 141–46, and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les financiers de Languedoc au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1970), 275–81.

50. Remy and Juillot, *Catalogue Randon de Boisset* (annotated copy held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Cabinet des Estampes), 159.

51. Remy and Juillot, *Catalogue Randon de Boisset* (annotated copy), 9–10. See also Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Financiers*, 278–80.

52. Pierre Remy, *Catalogue d’une collection de très belles coquilles, madrepores, stalactites . . . de feu Madame de B\*\*\** (Paris: Didot, 1763), Avertissement.

53. Pierre Remy, *Catalogue raisonné des curiosités qui composoient le cabinet de feu Madame Dubois-Jourdain* (Paris: Didot l’aîné, 1766), 11–12.

54. On *parlementaires*, see Olivier Bonfait, “Les collections des parlementaires parisiens du XVIIIe siècle,” *Revue de l’art* 73 (1986): 28–42. On the *marchand-bonnetier* Nau, who had a significant collection of paintings and engravings, see Courajod, *Livre-journal*, 1:55–56. On Dézallier d’Argenville, see Remy, *Catalogue Dézallier d’Argenville*. On the scholar Claude-Joseph Geoffroy, member of the Académie royale des sciences and the Royal Society, see *Catalogue raisonné des minéraux, coquilles, et autres curiosités naturelles, contenues dans le cabinet de feu M. Geoffroy de l’Académie royale des sciences* (Paris: H. L. Guérin & Fr. Delatour, 1753).

55. On objects from nature and exotic artifacts as examples of “commerce de la curiosité,” see Dietz, “Exotische Naturalien” and Nutz, “Exotische Artefakte.” On the consumption of cultural goods in general as an element of the consumption of luxury, see Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979); *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London: Routledge, 1995); *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993); John Brewer, “Was können wir aus der Geschichte der frühen Neuzeit für die moderne Konsumgeschichte lernen?,” in *Europäische Konsumgeschichte: Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums (18. bis 20. Jahrhundert)*, ed. Hannes Siegrist (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1997), 51–74; Sargentson, *Merchants*; Fox and Turner, *Luxury Trades, Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650–1850*, ed. Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester: Manchester Univ., 1999); and *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

56. On Gersaint, see Glorieux, *A l’enseigne de Gersaint*; on Mariette, see *Almanach des beaux-arts, peinture, sculpture, architecture et gravure pour 1762* (Paris, 1762), 211. The *Almanach* for 1776 names Remy as the owner of an important cabinet of drawings (206); Pierre Michel, “Pierre Rémy: ‘Peintre et négociant en tableaux, et autres curiosités: Bon connaisseur’: Esquisse d’un portrait,” in *Mélanges en hommage à Pierre Rosenberg: Peintures et dessins en France et en Italie, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2001), 328–36.

57. Pierre Remy, *Catalogue raisonné des tableaux, desseins, estampes, bronzes, terres cuites, laques, porcelaines de différentes sortes, montées & non montées; meubles curieux, bijoux, minéraux, cristallisations, madrepores, coquilles & autres curiosités, qui composent le cabinet de feu M. Boucher, premier peintre du Roi* (Paris: Musier, 1771), preface.

58. Remy, *Catalogue Dubois-Jourdain* (annotated copy of the 1766 edition is held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Cabinet des Estampes), 7, lot 48; 113, lot 927; 136, lot 1162.

59. Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d’Argenville, *Conchyliologie nouvelle et portative ou collection de coquilles propres à orner les cabinets des curieux de cette partie de l’histoire naturelle mises par ordre alphabétique avec les notes des endroits d’où elles se tirent et des cabinets qui renferment les plus rares* (Paris: Regnard, 1767), 312–13.

60. On taste and urban consumer markets, see Matthew Craske, *Art in Europe, 1700–1830: A History of the Visual Arts in an Era of Unprecedented Urban Economic Growth* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1997).

61. On natural history museums in the nineteenth century, see Sally G. Kohlstedt, "Museums: Revisiting Sites in the History of the Natural Sciences," *Journal of the History of Biology* 28 (1995): 151–66; Yanni, *Nature's Museums*; Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2001); Blanckaert and Cohen, *Muséum*. On art museums, see Deborah J. Meijers, *Kunst als Natur: Die Habsburger Gemäldegalerie in Wien um 1780* (Wien: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1995); Sheehan, *Museums*; McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre*.

62. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *De generis humani varietate nativa*, 3rd edn. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1795); Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana: Or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839), and George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

