Meubles: The Ever Mobile Middle Ages

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MEUBLES: THE EVER MOBILE
MIDDLE AGES

ELIZABETH EMERY

MEUBLE, THE FRENCH word for furniture, stems from the Latin mobilis, movability being the defining characteristic of these domestic items. Relocated from castle to castle and transferred from one family member to another after the Middle Ages, furniture took on new life after the French Revolution as former family heirlooms and ecclesiastical furnishings—many of them from the medieval period—flooded the marketplace as collectibles. In this essay, I examine examples of the preservation, recycling, and repurposing of medieval meubles within a nineteenth-century French context in order to raise broader questions about the temporal and geo-spatial valence of the “Middle Ages.” Filtered through the taxonomies of reuse proposed by archaeologist Michael Schiffer, a first section focuses on new “conservatory processes” such as the “collecting behavior” that prompted figures such as Alexandre Du Sommerard, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, and Albert Jacquemart to preserve medieval furnishings while transforming their use value through display. A second section engages with what Schiffer calls “recycling”: the “remanufacture” of medieval furniture for new purposes, a process enacted by figures including Victor Hugo, Pierre Loti, and Frédéric Spitzer. A final section considers the secondary reuses of medieval furniture as emblematic of modern attitudes to the “Middle Ages” itself.

Conservatory Processes: Sacrilege and Worship

J.-K. Huysmans’ 1884 novel À rebours contains one of the best-known and most scandalous examples of nineteenth-century creative reuse of medieval furniture: his protagonist, Des Esseintes, subverts the original function of the ecclesiastical “relics” he has salvaged from Parisian and provincial antique stores and flea markets, repurposing medieval choir stalls and a pulpit to preach

sermons about style.\textsuperscript{2} Readers found Des Esseintes’ practices sacrilegious and slipped the book into Britain in a yellow cover. They promoted it as the “breviary of the Decadence.”\textsuperscript{3} As fictional as the installation may seem, Des Esseintes’ reappropriation of medieval ecclesiastical furniture derives from the real-life “cathedral corner” of Baron Robert de Montesquiou de Fezensac, composed of seventeenth and eighteenth-century pieces (Figure 6.1). The nobleman later recalled having dismantled the blasphemous ensemble, donating individual pieces to a devout female friend.\textsuperscript{4}

How should one account for readers’ outrage over Des Esseintes’ repurposing of medieval ecclesiastical furniture when so many other contemporaries were engaged in similar activities, from transforming choir stalls into coat racks and umbrella stands, altarpiece panels into secular wall decorations, and chasubles into ladies’ coats?\textsuperscript{5} It testifies, above all, to the esteem medieval artifacts enjoyed in France by 1884. Appreciation of the Middle Ages had developed markedly since the first years of the nineteenth century when the “Gothic” was still used as a synonym for “barbaric” and the “Middle Ages” as a disparaging term to validate the “Renaissance” and neo-classical aesthetics.\textsuperscript{6}

After the French Revolution, however, writers and artists from Romantic, Catholic, and nationalist movements claimed the Middle Ages in support of their own varied agendas, finding common ground in elevating French medieval artworks above those of other nations (notably after the discovery that the Gothic style was French and not German).\textsuperscript{7} By 1884, the French considered

\textsuperscript{2} Huysmans, \textit{À rebours}, 15. Tom Stammers evokes the widespread circulation of Old Regime artefacts during the post-Revolutionary period in “Bric-A-Brac.”

\textsuperscript{3} Symons, \textit{Colour Studies}, 255, 265.

\textsuperscript{4} See Emery, “Misunderstood,” for an analysis of Montesquiou’s home decorating practices and legends about them passed from Mallarmé to Huysmans and then to the public. What Montesquiou himself presents in his memoirs (\textit{Les Pas Effacés}) as a Louis XV sculpted oak pulpit, three or four choir stalls of indeterminate date, and six sculpted angel heads purchased in Munich (possibly by Caspar Pfaff), become, in Huysmans’ retelling, “medieval.” Montesquiou recounts having gifted his “coin de cathédrale” to a “dévote que j’aimais” (2:119–20).

\textsuperscript{5} These examples of reuse of ecclesiastical items are those cited by Proust in his 1904 “Mort des cathédrales.”

\textsuperscript{6} Matthews, \textit{Medievalism}, provides a careful reading of the evolving terminology used to define the medieval period.

\textsuperscript{7} Emery, \textit{Romancing the Cathedral}, and Emery and Morowitz, \textit{Consuming the Past}, show how raging post-Revolutionary cultural competition to claim different aspects of medieval art and history paradoxically enhanced the value of the French Middle Ages as a whole.
medieval remnants so worthy of preservation that Des Esseintes’ secular appropriation of choir stalls shocked readers less as religious sacrilege than as a lack of respect for architectural heritage.

Viollet-le-Duc captures this shift in appreciation of French national patrimony as he attempts to define “Restoration” in 1866 for his *Dictionnaire raisonné de*
_l’architecture du XIe au XVIe siècle_ (a handbook of architectural principles). He stresses the fact that cultural sensitivity to collection, preservation, and restoration are resolutely “modern” values:

It is only since the first quarter of the present century that the idea of restoring buildings of another age has been entertained [...] We have said that both the word and the thing [restoration] itself are modern; and, in fact, no civilization, no people of bygone ages, has conceived the idea of making restorations in the sense in which we comprehend them.⁸

While Viollet-le-Duc begins by speaking specifically of architecture—of how builders in Asia (all time periods), ancient Rome, and medieval Europe modified defective or crumbling buildings using the style of their own day—he also addresses attitudes to the preservation and repair of other objects from the past, like furniture. He notes that objects from what we now consider the medieval period (fifth to the fifteenth century) were considered raw materials to be reused and repurposed. Today, scholars study the ways in which furniture was transformed into firewood and illuminated manuscripts used to stuff rifles, decorate walls, serve as children’s craft books, or stiffen clothing. Even in the fifteenth century, builders reused structures such the pre-existing Gallo-Roman bath complex into which the Musée de Cluny was constructed.⁹ Such practices conform to what Schiffer terms “recycling”—transforming or reusing original materials to create new items for new purposes—and “secondary reuse”—when “an unmodified item is employed in a different activity.”¹⁰

The development of a new mentality that preserves material artifacts rather than recycling them has, Viollet-le-Duc notes, occurred during his own lifetime:

Our age has adopted an attitude towards the past in which it stands quite alone among historical ages. It has undertaken to analyze the past, to compare and classify its phenomena, and to construct its veritable history, by

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⁹ The Getty museum explored the reuse of medieval manuscripts in an exhibit entitled “Untold Stories: Collecting and Transforming Medieval Manuscripts” (February 26 to May 12, 2013: www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/untold_stories/) while the use of recycled liturgical texts in fabrics has been explored in Klack-Eitzen, Haase, and Weißgraf, _Heilige Röcke_. Nora Wilkinson reproduces a number of images from this volume in a blog post for the Bodleian Library (“Text and Textiles”). The concept of _spolia_—more closely associated with conquest and competition—is explored in the introduction to this special issue.

¹⁰ Schiffer, “Toward a Unified Science,” 68.
following step by step the march, the progress, the successive phases of humanity.\textsuperscript{11}

In essence, he posits that his contemporaries’ relationship to the material culture of the past has moved from a praxis of recycling and new construction and toward an appreciation of antique structures as historical documents that record shifting human taste. As such, French society now considers the material culture of the past worth preserving in the form it originally took. This “collecting behavior” (Schiffer) or “conservation mentality,” as Françoise Choay has termed it, prompted debates about how best to preserve architectural structures that, unlike moveable furniture, could not easily be placed in a museum context even when it was possible to identify a single “original” style.\textsuperscript{12} The concept of “restoration” was so new that Viollet-le-Duc wanted to resolve some of its “ambiguity” by defining it in his dictionary. He does so in the sentence that has subsequently clouded his reputation as a restorer of medieval monuments: “To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which could never have existed at any given time.”\textsuperscript{13} With this sentence, he is, in fact, reflecting on the fact that most structures have no “original” complete form to “restore” because of the centuries of additions that have taken place; he acknowledges the inherent paradoxes in any attempt at “restoration” (the return to a past state). “Preservation,” “repair,” and “rebuilding” are different because they all privilege modern techniques.

I will not linger on the much-debated issue of Viollet-le-Duc and his work as restorer, which has come to dominate discussion of the “Restoration” article to the detriment of other important points he makes. In “Restoration,” he provides valuable examples of the tensions between what Schiffer terms “recycling” and “collecting behavior,” notably through discussion of Alexandre Lenoir, who saved medieval statuary, sculpture, and furniture from destruction during the French Revolution by displaying them in Le Musée des Monuments français (1795–1816). Viollet-le-Duc admires Lenoir for preserving these elements, and especially for

\textsuperscript{11} Viollet-le-Duc, “Restoration,” 11.

\textsuperscript{12} Viollet-le-Duc, “Restoration,” 9–13. Françoise Choay has described this process as the development of a “conservation mentality” and evokes its spread in nineteenth-century France in The Invention of the Historical Monument. Schiffer considers “collecting behavior” as a specialized subset of secondary use marked by the preservation of the object’s form, but not its original use: such “conservatory processes” often take place in museums.

\textsuperscript{13} Divested of his discussion of historical practices, this sentence reads as if a restorer could simply use his imagination, which was not Viollet-le-Duc’s intent. For cogent discussions of Viollet-le-Duc’s actual beliefs and practices of renovation see Murphy, Memory and Modernity, and Bressani, Architecture and the Historical Imagination.
creating a display that convinced government administrators to value the historical and artistic merit of medieval sculpture. He nonetheless condemns his predecessor’s techniques, which he characterizes as guided by “imagination.” He takes particular issue with Lenoir’s construction of a tomb (now in Père Lachaise) for the famed medieval lovers Abelard and Heloise. Like Lenoir’s later tomb for Blanche of Castile, it was an independent work of art (“bricolage” as Mary Shepard calls it) made up of medieval fragments from various eras assembled from disparate religious structures including the churches of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain. They were set alongside elements Lenoir himself had invented.\(^\text{14}\)

Viollet-le-Duc similarly criticizes Lenoir’s mixing of furnishing and statuary from different historical periods within the Musée des Monuments historiques:

> It was thus that the statues of Charles V and Jeanne de Bourbon from the tomb of St. Denis [that is, from the church of Saint-Denis] were placed on wainscoting of the sixteenth century, taken from the chapel of the Château de Gaillon and surmounted by a canopy of the close of the thirteenth century; in the so-called hall of the fourteenth century was decorated with arcading from the rood-screen of the Sainte Chapelle and the thirteenth-century.\(^\text{15}\)

Viollet-le-Duc continues his diatribe against these historical “mixtures” [mêlanges] in order to reinforce his earlier point about the damage done by older practices of salvage and reconstruction. In spite of a turn toward “collecting behavior,” Lenoir significantly complicated subsequent understanding and preservation of the basilica of Saint-Denis. He had replaced or removed so many pieces without documentation that he unintentionally confused those tasked with restoring the church, including Viollet-le-Duc.\(^\text{16}\)

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\(^{14}\) Mary Shepard has published pendant articles describing Lenoir’s process, goals, sources, and *bricolage* in “A Tomb for Abelard and Heloise” and “Alexander Lenoir’s Tomb for Blanche of Castile.”

\(^{15}\) Viollet-le-Duc, “Restoration,” 32–35.

\(^{16}\) He poignantly describes Saint-Denis as an “anatomical subject on which artists who first entered on the path of restoration made their first essays in restoration.” Viollet-le-Duc, “Restoration,” 34–37.
Ten years later, Albert Jacquemart’s *Histoire du mobilier* demonstrates that the trend toward preservation, study, and classification advocated by Viollet-le-Duc had become the norm. He highlights the precarious situation of medieval meubles in the introductory pages of his 1876 text, one of the first histories of furniture. He laments the disappearance of examples of medieval furnishings from most periods other than the fifteenth century, particularly those crafted in less durable materials than oak. He considers them the “remnants” or “wreckage” of the past (les épaves du passé), precious “relics” to be preserved in museum galleries. He goes farther than Viollet-le-Duc as he lashes out at the “barbarity” of contemporaries who have committed the aesthetic “sacrilege” of disfiguring medieval furniture by altering it for modern purposes (as had the fictional Des Esseintes or the real-life Lenoir).

Jacquemart similarly laments those who create modern imitations to fill gaps in chronological collections, explaining that his contemporaries are unable to tell the difference between original and imitation. Composite “new” constructions made from medieval fragments—like Lenoir’s—were frequent, and they took their place in the nineteenth-century market alongside antiques, composite works created from bits of medieval furniture, “neo-Gothic” inventions, modern replicas, and fake antiques whose patina was purposefully modified to convince treasure seekers of their authenticity.\(^{17}\) Jacquemart also admits that the dearth of true medieval furnishings in nineteenth-century Paris stems not just from the difficult economic conditions and forced emigration that accompanied the French Revolution (during which many of the oldest French furnishings were acquired by British antiquarians), but also and especially from a long time lack of historical appreciation by the French themselves. As if to confirm Viollet-le-Duc’s points about the conservation of national heritage as a concept recently imported from Britain and Germany, he reminds readers that those who collected antique furnishings in France before the 1850s had been mocked as madmen.\(^{18}\) It was the 1858 publication of the first volume of Viollet-le-Duc’s *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français*—dedicated to medieval furniture and directed to a broad

\(^{17}\) “Quelques personnes ont songé, il est vrai, à transformer les meubles anciens pour les adapter aux exigences actuelles; c’est là une barbarie contre laquelle protesteront tous les hommes de sens. Respectons les épaves des temps passés et gardons-nous d’y porter une main sacrilège. C’est à ce prix que des reliques précieuses peuvent conserver leur prestige et rehausser les galeries des heureux qui les possèdent.” Jacquemart, *Histoire*, 8. Art historians such as Anne Dion-Tenenbaum and especially Manuel Charpy have discussed some of the nineteenth-century strategies used to recuperate, reinvent, or falsify “medieval” furniture. See, for example, Alcouffe, Dion-Tenenbaum, and Lefébure, *Le mobilier du musée du Louvre*, 158–61, and a remarkable chapter of Charpy’s “Le théâtre des objets” that assesses different techniques employed to make new objects look old (545–69).

popular readership including set designers and artists—that had spawned new interest in the preservation of medieval antiques. Even so, notes Jacquemart, in 1876 the French appreciation of medieval furniture was still considered a recent phenomenon, linked to the rise of nationalism.¹⁹

Like Viollet-le-Duc, Jacquemart praises Alexandre Du Sommerard (1779–1842) as one of the earliest French collectors to inscribe medieval furnishings into a historical and nationalist context that reified them as important cultural relics. Les Arts au Moyen Âge, begun in 1832 and completed by his son, Edmond, was lauded as the “school” at which subsequent collectors such as Jacquemart learned to be collectors and to respect medieval and Renaissance furniture for their historical value, as “relics” of the past.²⁰ Explicitly acknowledging the influence of the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, Du Sommerard acquired rooms in the fifteenth-century hôtel de ville formerly owned by the abbots of Cluny in 1832 and installed his collections in them as a way of educating the French public about its medieval history and culture.²¹ His attention to evocative historical display—to arranging utilitarian and decorative objects in period rooms associated with renowned figures of French history—brought the Middle Ages to life for viewers, much as had Lenoir’s chronologically themed Musée des monuments français.²²

The primary difference between the two, as Stephen Bann has noted, is that Du Sommerard’s insistence on including representative home furnishings and details from everyday life (like the knights playing chess at right in Figure 6.2), seemed to fix the room at a specific time and place rather than loosely assembling sculptural objects from an entire century, as had Lenoir.²³

Although Du Sommerard had attempted to keep ecclesiastical objects within rooms—notably a chapel—mirroring their use value, the emerging interest in French heritage created a new secular cult of history that conferred sacred resonance even to objects as functional as furniture. This is why Jacquemart writes so reverently about the necessity of preserving “precious relics,” these “ruins” of “past times” and why Des Esseintes’ repurposing of medieval choir stalls and pulpits in a

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¹⁹ The anonymous author (in reality Hugo’s son, Charles) of a book dedicated to Victor Hugo’s home decorating on the island of Guernsey makes a similar point: it was only in the 1830s that medieval art began to be considered seriously rather than as “vulgar” or “barbaric” (vulgaire ou barbare). Chez Victor Hugo, 23–24.

²⁰ Jacquemart, Histoire, 1.

²¹ Du Sommerard, Les Arts au Moyen Âge, l.iii.

²² Du Sommerard’s choices have been the subject of many scholarly works, among them Francis Haskell’s History and its Images and Stephen Bann’s The Clothing of Clio, which focus primarily on the historical inspiration behind Du Sommerard’s furniture arrangements.

commercial context—to “preach sermons about style” to his suppliers—seemed so blasphemous to contemporaries. By 1884, the notion of “sacrilege” had extended from religion to history and aesthetics.

Du Sommerard’s accompanying text further created the illusion of temporal specificity by associating rooms with historical figures. Mary Tudor (“la reine blanche”), sister of Henry VIII, had lived in the “bedroom” of the Hôtel de Cluny (visible in Figures 6.2 and 6.3) after the death of her husband, King Louis XII, in 1515. Although initially linked to the English-born queen in his text, as Du Sommerard filled the room with sixteenth-century furniture he changed its name (as in captions such as Figure 6.3) to acknowledge a French monarch: François Ier. This example reveals both the increased interest in a particularly French history and the often arbitrary nature of the French medieval

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25 “La première de ces deux vues de la chambre de la reine Blanche ou de François Ier, donne en même temps l’ameublement tel qu’il est aujourd’hui, cette salle étant devenue dans la collection de l’auteur celle affectée aux objets mobiliers et autres du temps de François Ier; c’était dans cette chambre que s’était retirée Marie d’Angleterre, sœur de Henri VIII, veuve de Louis XII (1515).” Du Sommerard, *Les Arts*, 5:10.
Renaissance divide. The sixteenth century is now generally considered to belong to the Renaissance (it is not insignificant that Leonardo da Vinci spent his last years at the French court), yet many furnishings created at this time still signified "medieval" for nineteenth-century audiences. At a time where museal periodization was still developing, what was presented as “medieval” to the public was as often as not an atmospheric theatrical assemblage of “antiquities”; the many suits of armour and gisant tomb visible in Figure 6.3, for example, were hardly the accoutrements of a bedroom, much as the “medieval” interiors of troubadour paintings by Pierre-Henri Révoil or François Fleury-Richard consisted of amalgams of elements from different historical periods. In short, during the Romantic period, the concept of the “medieval” tended to carry aesthetic rather than historical resonance. Elements from the thirteenth, sixteenth, or fourteenth centuries could be mixed and matched indiscriminately to produce a “medieval effect” as in Lenoir’s museum or his tombs for Abelard and Heloise and Blanche of Castile. Furthermore, Du Sommerard himself identified a collection that ranged from the tenth to the seventeenth century—consisting of armour, sculpted oak furniture, tapestries, enamels, and reliquaries—as “the art of the Middle Ages” in the title of his five-volume catalogue.

Viollet-le-Duc, who designed medievalizing theatrical sets early in his career, responded visually to the densely packed interiors of Du Sommerard’s installations in his own illustrated study of medieval furniture, published in the first volume (1858) of his *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français* (dedicated to “Meubles”). In his imagined sketches of the private life of medieval nobles from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, Viollet-le-Duc justifies his choices by citing specific historical and literary texts from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries (Figures 6.4 and 6.5). The particularity of bedrooms from the twelfth century onward, he notes, was the flexibility of their “provisional dispositions.” Lighter and more luxurious materials and fabrics inspired by trips to the Orient during the Crusades invited the creation of infinitely variable small “encampments,” comfortable smaller spaces arranged within cavernous castle rooms in order

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26 See Bann, *The Clothing of Clio*, for more about such creative interpretations of the “medieval.”

27 See, for example, an anonymous book review (“Les Arts du Moyen Âge”) of the first volume of Du Sommerard’s eponymous work published in *La Revue française* in 1838. Here, the term “medieval” is repeated *ad nauseum* to evoke a museum whose catalogue shows that it featured objects made from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries. For more about Du Sommerard’s Romantic ethos see Bann, *The Clothing*.

28 Martin Bressani (*Architecture*) has shown the importance of Viollet-le-Duc’s formative work as creator of theatrical sets and as a draftsman working for Prosper Mérimée and for Baron Taylor (notably the *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l’ancienne France* series).
to respond to shifting needs such as the arrival of unexpected guests, changes in temperature, or receptions. Each of his five plates envisions representative furnishings from a particular century based on the texts, drawings, and remnants he had encountered during his restoration projects. He thus illustrates a shift from relatively straightforward collapsible and transportable accommodations of the twelfth century (Figure 6.4)—bedroom nooks furnished with beds, benches with cushions, carpets and tapestries, candelabras inspired by Middle

29 “Ce qui donnait alors aux appartements un aspect particulier, c’étaient ces dispositions provisoires, ces sortes de campements que l’on établissait au milieu des pièces immenses, pour les distribuer suivant les besoins du moment; puis ce mélange de services domestiques et d’habitudes de luxe.” Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire*, 1:356. On the influence of travels to the Orient on the luxurious nature of furnishings see 1:359. He acknowledges that he begins with the twelfth century largely because he lacks access to solid information about the practices of earlier periods.
Eastern models—to the sculpturally dense decorative schemes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when castles began to introduce private chambers and “immoveable” pieces (Figure 6.5). The frequently varied textiles that had covered the simple furniture of the earlier centuries gave way to permanent decorative elements sculpted directly into the heavy oak furniture, which explains the disappearance of the more fragile textile elements.

Like Jacquemart, Viollet-le-Duc emphasizes his contemporaries’ interest in sculpted oak; those pieces that survived into the nineteenth century did so not only because of the durability of their component materials (oak could withstand the constant moving from one royal residence to the next), but also and especially because sculpture (unlike weaving and embroidery) was a valued nineteenth-century

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30 Viollet-le-Duc, Dictionnaire, 1:351–52. He also provides a historical and architectural rational and describes the colour schemes not visible in the black-and-white illustrations reproduced in the volume (1:364–65).

31 There were so few remaining fabric elements that Viollet-le-Duc created workshops to train nineteenth-century workers to make up for gaps in conservation. They produced facsimiles of missing or damaged stained glass, sculpture, wall coverings, and furniture. For examples of the strategies employed by Viollet-le-Duc in establishing these workshops and sourcing materials that complemented the originals see Timbert, Matériaux.
artistic medium. In 1882, Edmond Bonnaffé proclaimed French woodworking a “national art,” thus exemplifying this section’s overview of the growing French appreciation of medieval artifacts not just as materials to be recycled, but as objects meriting respect for their historical and aesthetical importance.

“Furniture Worthy of an Enchanter’s Palace”: Restoration, Renovation, or Recycling?

Victor Hugo, who knew both the Musée des monuments français and the Musée de Cluny, served as a founding member (1835) of the Comité historique des arts et monuments (alongside Prosper Mérimée, Lenoir, and Du Sommerard). Known for defending Notre-Dame de Paris in his eponymous 1831 novel, he promoted a

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32 “La plupart étaient en chêne; il ne fallait rien moins que cette matière résistante unie par les robustes assemblages des charpentiers, pour affronter les transports continuels et les chocs sans nombre [...] C’est au moment où l’art se manifeste que l’intérêt commence.” Jacquemart, Histoire, 54.

33 Bonnaffé, “Meubles,” 247. Although Du Sommerard collected a variety of everyday items from shoes to playing cards, enamels to ironwork, very few of the richly coloured fabrics described by Viollet-le-Duc had survived.
“medieval” aesthetic even in his private life. During his political exile from France (1851–1870), Hugo embarked upon the creation of elaborate “Gothic” rooms in the home he decorated on the island of Guernsey. “Hauteville House,” now a museum, can be visited today; it is preserved largely as it was at Hugo’s death in 1885. An anonymous 1864 text entitled Victor Hugo chez lui (“Victor Hugo at Home,” in reality penned by his son, Charles), publicized the faraway house for Hugo’s readers in France and abroad. It proclaimed Hugo a leader of the conservation movement (through works such as Notre-Dame de Paris and Voyages sur les bords du Rhin) and a modern-day Du Sommerard who “surrounds himself with, seeks out, and purchases antique furniture; he wants to live in the past.” A translation of this text published in the American Art Journal in 1866 proclaimed the house as containing “furniture worthy of an enchanter’s palace.”

Closer examination of the “medieval” sections of Hugo’s house (which also combined Dutch, Japanese, and Chinese elements) reveals that his “conservation” methods differed dramatically from the preservation and cataloging practices of Du Sommerard or Viollet-le-Duc; they were, in fact, closer in practice to the imaginative repurposing of Alexandre Lenoir. Because the Hugo family had to auction their Paris belongings in 1852 in order to avoid government confiscation, they sought new “inexpensive” furniture for their Guernsey home. Hugo welcomed

34 The windows of one of Hugo’s childhood apartments looked onto the courtyard of the Musée des monuments historiques. See Savy, “Victor Hugo,” 15–18. Hugo’s penchant for old chests, tapestries, and swords was well-documented by visitors to his home at the rue Royale, now the Maison Victor Hugo on the Place des Vosges, whose website documents the décor of the apartment before 1852: www.maisonsvictorhugo.paris.fr/en/museum-collections/place-des-vozges-paris/visit-place-des-vozges-apartment-it-was-victor-hugos-time.

35 The website “La Maison de Victor Hugo à Guernesey” (http://hautevillehouse.com/) provides a remarkable guided virtual tour (lavishly illustrated and commented) of the house as it stands today. The decorative scheme of Hauteville Fairy, which Hugo decorated for his mistress, Juliette Drouet, exists only in the panels now on display at the Maison Victor Hugo in Paris. For an illustrated analysis of both houses see Charles, Visions.

36 “Il se complaît au milieu des meubles anciens, il les recherche, il en achète toujours; il veut vivre dans le passé ... On ne déjeune pas chez Lucullus, mais chez Du Sommerard.” Chez Victor Hugo, 25, 38.

37 “The Home of Victor Hugo,” 90. This translation was published anonymously under this title and with no information linking it to the French original. I will use this translation unless otherwise noted.

38 For a reading of Hugo’s techniques in Guernsey as bricolage see Chu, “Victor Hugo.”

39 Poet Théophile Gautier commemorated the Paris apartment at 37 Rue de la Tour d’Auvergne in an article for La Presse, lamenting the dispersion of Hugo’s “poème domestique,” and encouraging the public to buy pieces of it not as “meubles,” but as “relics.” Reprinted in Escholier, Victor Hugo, 275–80. Hovasse describes the conditions surrounding the auction, its overwhelming popular interest, Madame Hugo’s recriminations against her husband’s
the opportunity to embark upon “treasure hunts” that he chronicled in notebooks, roaming the island in search of pirate’s booty: the abundant sculpted oak pieces from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries allegedly brought from the mainland by Channel Island smugglers. He, family, and friends assembled choir stalls, wood panels, and some sixty oak chests, to which he gave descriptive names such as “the trunk with apostles” (coffre aux apôtres) or “trunk with blue painted Gothic panels” (coffre à panneaux gothiques peint en bleu). 40 Those who collaborated with him, such as woodworker Thomas Gore, recollected that “Whenever the opportunity presented itself he would purchase antique [oak] chests … He acquired many specimens in the country parishes of Guernsey, rescuing some from barns, stables, and cowsheds at the cost of a few francs. These chests he afterwards carefully renovated.” 41

Gore’s choice of the word “renovation” rather than “restoration” to describe the “perfect forest of sculpted oak” (une véritable forêt de chêne sculpté) 12 in the “Oak Gallery” on the second floor of Hauteville House (Figures 6.6 and 6.7) reflects Viollet-le-Duc’s characterization of the new tendency to differentiate historically motivated “restoration” (respecting the stylistic vernacular of a past moment) from “renovation” (rebuilding or updating using modern techniques). 43 Quite unlike Du Sommerard, who saved, catalogued, and purchased space in a fifteenth-century mansion in which to display surviving medieval furnishings, Hugo salvaged them as raw materials to be disassembled and rebuilt as new objects (chairs, buffets, armoires, or decorative pillars) according to designs of his own fantastic invention. “Furniture worthy of an enchanter” aptly describes the result. 44

Corinne Charles, a specialist of medieval furniture, has described and documented the ways in which Hugo maintained sculptural elements of the original chests of drawers, sideboards, and wall panels; he reassembled them into new creations: the enormous mantelpieces, ceiling-length cabinets, benches, chairs, armoires, and bedframes visible in Figures 6.6 and 6.7. In addition, he sketched love of old decorative objects rather than “real” furniture, and Hugo’s own sorrow about losing these furnishings, which he called “the visible form of one’s souvenirs” (la forme visible de vos souvenirs) (Victor Hugo, 49–53).

40 The nine agendas from Guernsey have been published in Victor Hugo’s Oeuvres complètes edited by Jean Massin (Paris: Club français du livre, 1967–70), vols. 10, 12, 13, and 14.

41 Wack, Romance, 41.

42 “The Home,” 107; Chez Victor Hugo, 58.

43 “Rebuilding, in the style then prevailing,” Viollet-le-Duc, “Restoration,” 11.

44 Corinne Charles, a specialist of medieval furniture, has carefully analyzed the ways in which Hugo interacted with these salvaged materials to create new artistic products of his own design.
new sculptural motifs to surround the older ones, hiring local woodworkers to execute them from his drawings (he occasionally sculpted elements himself).\textsuperscript{45} The forest effect in the “Oak Gallery” is produced by the Renaissance columns and elaborate oak candelabra made to Hugo’s specifications. Despite his son’s claims of an interest in conservation and a desire to live in the past, it is clear that Hugo did not practice “collecting behavior” (he did not wish to surround himself with authentic, unadulterated medieval furniture as did Du Sommerard). Instead, he wanted to live in the “medieval” past of his imagination, a fictional projection rationalized as “authentic” and in which, like Lenoir’s “medieval” tombs, disparate elements were mixed and matched, pieces of sculpted furniture whittled down and incorporated into an aestheticized personal ensemble. Hugo’s Hauteville House is not a museum but a new artistic installation. The entire house is, as Charles Hugo put it, “a work of art whose very materials are works of art.”\textsuperscript{46}


\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Chez Victor Hugo}, 22. Hugo’s bricolage, although seemingly iconoclastic, is not far removed from the practices of Alexandre Lenoir who, as Mary Shepard has shown, often made similar artistic assemblages from medieval fragments as in the case of his “Tomb for Abelard and Heloise.”
While Schiffer would classify such nineteenth-century modifications as recycling ("remanufacture" of the object for use in another product), their myth-making function brings them closer to the concept of *bricolage* as defined by Claude
Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1962). Hugo imbued his new creations with legendary resonance by linking them to evocative Biblical or Latinate inscriptions reinforced by the visual motifs employed in the original sculptures. A prime example is the “seat of the ancestors” (*le fauteuil des ancêtres*) in the dining room, a high-backed canopied chair resembling a fifteenth-century choir stall (“la stalle des pères,” as Hugo called it in his agenda), which bears the words “*Absentes adsunt*” (the absent are here). A golden plaque figures Christ, the Good Samaritan, and underneath it a black Virgin followed by the coat of arms of the Hugos of Lorraine and the writer’s motto, “Ego Hugo.” Placed in the shadows under the words “*CELLA PATRUM DEFUNCTORUM*” (the sanctuary of fathers), a chain prevented living visitors from sitting on it. A further inscription, “*Hic nihil alias aliquid*” (Here nothing, elsewhere something), fuses past with present, honoring the dead among the living.

In dismantling pieces from different eras without documenting the state in which he found them, Hugo destroyed the scientific value they would have held for archaeologists and art historians such as Viollet-le-Duc and Jacquemart. Paradoxically, however, Hugo’s recycling did respect some aspects of “collecting behavior”; he preserved antique sculpted furniture that would otherwise have been recycled as firewood. He thus “restored” aspects of these pieces by embedding their original sculptural motifs within new functional works of art described as “medieval” by Hugo’s family and visitors. It is important to remember, as Norman Cantor has noted, that nineteenth-century people knew much less about the historical period from the fifth to the fifteenth century than we know today. As a result, Hugo’s confections looked “medieval” to his readers, whose major reference point for the Middle Ages was the theatrical brand of Gothic

47 Schiffer varies term depending on whether the original material has changed shape.

48 Petra Chu has provided just such a reading of his reuse of Chinese elements in “Victor Hugo.”

49 Charles described this seat in detail, linking its inscriptions (particularly the “Ego Hugo”) to his need to leave his mark. A colour photograph of this seat is accessible here: https://www.maisonsvictorhugo.paris.fr/fr/oeuvre/stalle-des-peres/fauteuil-des-ancetres [consulted January 25, 2019]. Chantal Brière discusses at length Hugo’s fascination with the past’s manifestation in the present and provides a rich mythological reading of the different motifs he included in this work (508–9).

50 Greenhalgh discusses many similar provincial stories of salvage and repurposing in *Destruction*. The recycling of old materials into new creations is precisely what angers Viollet-le-Duc in Lenoir’s *Musée des monuments historiques*: it created additional challenges for his restoration work at Saint-Denis.

51 Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 11.
medievalism publicized in his 1831 novel Notre-Dame de Paris (The Hunchback of Notre-Dame). Set in 1482, the text, illustrations, and staged performances were full of references to late medieval furnishings. The Notre-Dame de Paris portal of Hauteville House (Figure 6.8), for example, is modelled upon Célestin Nanteuil’s frontispice to the novel and it creates, as Charles notes, a “meandering path through Hugolian thought.”

Although the Notre-Dame de Paris portal—like Du Sommerard’s book title (Les Arts du Moyen Âge)—overtly places such creative experimentation under the aegis of the medieval, the artistic motifs visible in Hauteville House cross the globe and reveal the extent to which the concept of the “medieval” has always absorbed a range of exotic and temporal elements signifying “old” or “exotic.” Before it was proven that the Gothic style developed in France, the “medieval” was closely linked to the “Oriental” (the Levant). Figures like Lenoir widely diffused the idea that Crusaders had imported the Gothic style from Syria. Hugo’s Notre-Dame de Paris similarly links Europe to Andalusia and the Middle East. Although set in Paris, it introduces characters who have travelled the world, from the former Saracen-descended gypsies who kidnapped Esmeralda in Reims as a baby (they are said to have travelled from Algeria, Egypt, and Spain to Poland, Germany, and France) to Esmeralda herself, described alternatively as “Andalusian,” “Roman,” and “Egyptian.” She sings a medieval Spanish romance about a richly decorated treasure chest discovered in Hercules’ forbidden temple by Don Rodrigo, the last of the Gothic kings—“Un confre de gran riqueza/ [...] Alarabes de cavallo/Sin poderse menear”—while accompanied by gypsies playing African instruments. Similarly, at Hauteville House, Hugo’s medieval and Renaissance furniture did not stand alone in period rooms. Pieces were situated within a display featuring items from around the

52 See, for example, chap. 5, “Le Retrait où se dit ses heures Monsieur Louis de France,” with its dense ekphrasis. Ségalène Le Men has productively explored the numerous illustrated versions of the novel (La Cathédrale illustrée).


54 The Arab Court of the Musée des monuments historiques constitutes just one example. See Shepard, “L’Oeuf sacré.”

55 See, for example, the chapters of Notre-Dame de Paris entitled “Besos para Golpes” where Gringoire first describes her in detail and “Histoire d’une galette” where readers learn of her kidnapping. The choice of Esmeralda’s Spanish song, with its emphasis on Don Rodrigo’s discovery of an ornate chest featuring Arabic soldiers on horseback was not incidental; Hugo’s older brother Abel had translated the Romanceros into French in 1822: Romances historiques traduites de l’espagnol.

world: eighteenth-century French and Dutch tapestries, furniture, and Delft china; Indian, Japanese, and Chinese tapestries, screens, and ceramics; and Hugo’s own painted and sculpted wall panels inspired by the pieces he had
Despite his son’s claim that he liked to live in the past, the use of the word “medieval” to characterize his home in Guernsey served less as a temporal reference than as a global marker of alterity.

Ironically, at the very moment Hugo deployed his expansive Romantic vision upon the decoration of Hauteville House (1857–1862), colleagues in Paris were arguing that contemporaries should emulate the Germans in applying scientific methods to collecting and display, and that they should classify extant objects by “school” or artist, time period, and regional provenance. In the inaugural issue of *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1859), founder Charles Blanc appealed to nationalism in developing more rational French curatorial strategies than simply “pleasing the eye” (Lenoir’s and Hugo’s aesthetic). Contributors to this publication regularly praised Du Sommerard for the prescience of his efforts at conservation, which had allowed the next generation of scholars to perform systematic studies of the objects displayed in what became, after his death in 1842, a national museum. In an 1882 article about sculpted wooden furniture, for example, Bonnaffé praises the collection of Frédéric Spitzer (1815–1890), a Vienna-born art dealer and collector living in Paris since 1852, as having continued and perfected Du Sommerard’s initial collecting practices by forming complete “series” of representative samples from different periods, schools, and geographical regions. He displayed them to friends and colleagues in a specially constructed mansion near the Bois de Boulogne (Figure 6.9).

Spitzer’s collection, while not open to the general public, was the subject of many illustrated articles during his lifetime, including Bonnaffé’s essay for the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, in which he relied on the “completeness” of Spitzer’s collection to propose that it was possible to establish a medieval “geography of furniture.” Bonnaffé traces the passage of itinerant Flemish woodcarvers as they moved through France, Venice, and on to Spain, drawing conclusions about the regional practices of different artisans, the teaching of their “schools,” and the

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56 Most scholars focus on the medieval elements of Hauteville House, as does Charles (“Moyen Age et Romantisme”). Petra Chu has recently expanded studies of the house to examine the intersection between the Chinese and the Gothic in Hugo’s design scheme for Hauteville House and Hauteville-Fairy. Colour photographs at the Hauteville House website give a sense of the striking visual dimension of this juxtaposition of oak furniture with Chinese ceramics. [http://hautevillehouse.com/category/iii-4-deuxieme-etage/#](http://hautevillehouse.com/category/iii-4-deuxieme-etage/#).

57 Bonnaffé, “Meubles,” 247–50. At his death in 1890, Spitzer’s collection contained some 4,000 objects organized in forty “series” of objects (from ivories, tapestries, and enamel to stained glass, bronze, and sculpted wood), most from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. When no single international organization could amass the vast sums necessary to acquire the collection as a whole (described as “the eighth wonder of the world”), it was dispersed at auction in 1893. See Stammers, *The Purchase of the Past*, chap. 6.
recognizable national features of the work they produced, with special emphasis on the excellence of French woodcarving of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Such information, marshaled in support of cultural supremacy, inflamed transnational debates about the origin of the Gothic (French), the superiority of certain types of medieval art (like French wooden furniture of the fifteenth and sixteenth century), and the national affiliation of medieval artists (the Primitifs as French rather than Flemish or Italian). Such disputes retrospectively imposed nineteenth-century notions of nation-states on a period whose allegiances and borders fluctuated dramatically over the thousand years of medieval history.

Hugo, despite his early commitment to preservationism through articles such as “Guerre aux démolisseurs,” and his long service on the Comité historique des arts et monuments, did not, as we have seen, share Spitzer’s or Bonnaffé’s interest in classification by material, school, dates, or function. He could have dedicated a room to the sixty oak chests he collected, transforming them into scientific specimens, but he did not. Instead, he chose to preserve their artistic interest by

58 For an overview of the international competition to “claim” painters such as Van Eyck, see Passini, “Pour une histoire,” and Emery and Morowitz, Consuming the Past.
involving the most interesting sculptural motifs into new functional objects serving the needs of his family and his own mythological constructions: whimsical beds inscribed Nox et Lux, mantelpieces, armoires, and chandeliers.

The desire to recycle medieval and Renaissance furnishings in order to experience a temporally flexible and exotic “Middle Ages” of one’s own design was shared by fellow novelist Pierre Loti (pseudonym of naval officer Julien Viaud) in his house in Rochefort (on the Atlantic coast of France).59 Although well-known for his Oriental-themed rooms (a Turkish salon, a mosque, and Japanese pagoda), he also created adjoining “Gothic” and “Renaissance” rooms in which he could lounge in modern attire (Figure 6.10) or recreate medieval feasts, replete with period food, utensils, and costumes, in which characters representing North Africans, Middle Easterners, and French nationals consorted.60 Like Hugo, Loti salvaged and repurposed (“recycled”) materials from construction sites: the “Gothic dining room” visible in Figure 6.10, for example, incorporated five flamboyant bays taken from a demolished bell tower and milled to fit the dimensions of the room. The monumental fireplace was assembled from stones from a fifteenth-century church and fifteenth- and sixteenth-century wood panels.61 Visitors described every bit of the room as “purely fifteenth century” and evoked the illusion of having been transported back five hundred years.62 Others, like those who visited Hugo’s Hauteville House, likened the experience to “enchantment,” particularly during the costumed reenactments Loti organized in these rooms: “the effect comes from magic and dream, giving the illusion of a marvelous palace where one enters an astounding and never-before-witnessed feast.”63

59 The Maison de Pierre Loti has created an application offering a virtual 3D visit while the museum is under renovation: https://www.maisondepierreloti.fr/visite-virtuelle. The history of these rooms and their design can be consulted in Liot, Maison, a richly illustrated text that also includes images of the costumes and tableware that Loti created for his 1888 Gothic dinner.

60 One of the first scenes during the dinner was the pardon granted a “Sarrasin” captive. See Emery, “Pierre Loti’s ‘Memories.’”

61 Loti claimed that the bays for his “salle à manger gothique” came from Marennes, but others, notably Marie-Pascale Bault, have disagreed, proposing Saint-Just as the correct location. See Liot, Maison, 49. A journal entry by Loti from January 6, 1887 indicates a transfer of sculpted stones from the Marennes belltower to Rochefort. Loti, Journal, 40.


63 “Et tout cela tient déjà de la féeerie et du rêve, donne l’illusion d’un palais merveilleux où l’on entre, préparé à quelque fête étonnante, jamais vue [...].” Sémézies, 214.
Figure 6.10. Dornac, *Nos Contemporains chez eux.* Right side of the “Medieval dining room” in Loti’s Rochefort home. *La Revue Illustrée,* 1 March 1893.
In positioning themselves as collectors, set designers, and interior decorators, Hugo and Loti claimed to transport visitors to the past through contact with historical “relics”: objects having truly existed in the medieval period. The rooms they created are at once “medieval” (because some of the furniture is in part authentic, even if heavily transformed in form and function) and “enchanted” (because of the sensation they produce of travelling through time and space). They mixed objects synchronically and diachronically, and yet these rooms nonetheless fostered public enthusiasm for what had come to be understood as “medieval,” whether historically accurate or not. In both homes, rooms furnished with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century meubles became stand-ins for the thousand-year medieval period: infinitely flexible in the ways in which its component parts could be arranged or manipulated.

The Ever Mobile Middle Ages

The nineteenth-century admiration of the constructed “medieval” rooms of Du Sommerard, Hugo, Spitzer, and Loti returns to the condemnation of Des Esseintes’ use of medieval choir stalls for preaching sermons about style. Why were Hugo and Loti praised for their “preservation” and “renovations” (and compared to Du Sommerard) when, as we have seen, they were just as cavalier (if not more so) as Des Esseintes in recycling and repurposing these materials? One cannot simply blame Des Esseintes’ secular reuse of ecclesiastical architecture since both Hugo and Loti incorporated choir stalls into the fabric of their interiors (Du Sommerard had tried to separate the two by keeping his Salle François Ier for largely secular objects and dedicating a chapel to ecclesiastical remnants). In looking more closely, such condemnations appear to stem not from their actual treatment of medieval furniture, but from rhetorical framing: the ways the “renovators” spoke of their work. Those who voiced no respect for the archaeological or historical value of the medieval materials they repurposed were described as sacrilegious “barbarians” for treating these “relics” as decorative elements within purely modern installations.64 Those like Lenoir, Jacquemart, Du Sommerard, Hugo, and Loti, on the other hand, overwhelmingly repeated words like “treasure,” “relic,” “restoration,” “preservation,” “resurrection” with regard to the objects from the past they manipulated. They displayed a reverent approach to collection and display even when dramatically altering the original pieces in the service of new artistic agendas. Their explicit historical appreciation and their goal of creating

64 See Jacquemart quoted above. These examples of reuse of ecclesiastical items are those cited by Proust in his 1904 “Mort des cathédrales.”
an atmosphere calculated to further visitors’ positive impression of medieval culture thus allowed Hugo and Loti to take their place in contemporaries’ eyes as latter-day Du Sommerards. Their “period” rooms were no less fanciful than Des Esseintes’, but the veneer of historian use value conferred by descriptions of their creative reuse made such modifications conceptually palatable during a period actively engaged in building French history into a secular cult.  

Although Hugo’s and Loti’s houses initially survived because of the perceived historical and aesthetic interest of the objects they collected, their “medieval rooms” exist today as creative extensions of their literary work: formerly mobile furnishings now serve as fixed material reflections of their multivalent artistic imaginations. Furthermore, the value that they—as celebrities—placed on the artistic potential of medieval furniture reinforced its value for contemporaries, encouraging new acts of conservation by fans, like those who purchased objects from the Hugo sale of 1852 not because of a historical value they did not necessarily know how to gauge, but as “relics” of the great author. In spite of recycling activities diametrically incompatible with conservational processes as we know them today, Hugo and Loti ultimately ensured—through their celebrity—the preservation of medieval remnants that might otherwise have disappeared. Specialists now inventorying and restoring the Loti museum, for example, continue to make surprising discoveries, such as rare early modern Ottoman textiles imported by Loti to France for his Turkish salon. Petra Chu has recently surmised that some of the Chinese textiles in Hauteville House may well be antique silks purchased by Hugo from the looting of Yuanming Yuan (often called the “Summer Palace”) in 1860. Du Sommerard’s atmospheric curation, on the other hand, has largely vanished from the present-day Musée national du Moyen Âge (though his nationalist focus has not). The most valuable of the objects he collected continue to be presented and rearranged in new exhibits, much as objects from the Spitzer collection, dispersed by auction after his death, are now displayed in collections around the world.

A rereading of Hugo’s and Loti’s reuse of medieval materials as bricolage—user-based tactics cobbled together to circumvent the inflexibility of institutional

65 The distance of Guernsey and Rochefort from Paris no doubt also helped reinforce the legend of their homes’ “enchantments”; they were known primarily through visitors’ admiring prose. The development of a nineteenth-century cult of history is traced by the majority of authors who contributed to Pierre Nora’s edited collection, Lieux de mémoire (“Realms of Memory”).

66 Hovasse, Victor Hugo, 51.

67 www.maisondepierreloti.fr/les-collections.

68 See Chu, Victor Hugo, 164.
structures and strategies (De Certeau)—casts the two writers’ personal choices in a more complex light.\textsuperscript{69} Their emphasis on reactivating or “resurrecting” antique objects in the modern world, on transforming furniture into magical vehicles permitting travel to a medieval past where cross-cultural sharing was the norm, may well have constituted an attempt to circumvent the increasing rigidity of science-driven and nationalist-inspired classificatory systems that led some to compare museums to morgues.\textsuperscript{70}

Spitzer, after all, was known primarily for having constructed the rooms of his home to emphasize differences in national cultural production: a “French room” displayed a variety of works in different media, while the room dedicated to silver and gold works served as the “theater of great battles between the knights of French art and the burghers of German art.”\textsuperscript{71} The six-volume catalogue of the 4,000 items Spitzer had collected by his death, classified by material and national “schools,” made visible for contemporaries the remarkable cultural production of France during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Hugo and Loti, in contrast, consciously blurred temporal and national distinctions in their more cosmopolitan and emotionally appealing decorative installations where antique Chinese or Japanese sculptures mixed with medieval sculpted wood (Figure 6.7) or where French nationals reenacted a medieval event at which North Africans, French, and Italians shared a feast.\textsuperscript{72} Their spaces of “enchantment” presented a flexible and more inclusive alternative to the nationalist classifications increasingly advocated by scholars, a configuration still all-too-frequent in the public’s tendency to consider the Middle Ages as Eurocentric.

The French art establishment and collectors such as Bonnaffé were devastated when the French government could not raise the funds to acquire the Spitzer collection as a whole: they considered it a “national treasure” because it had been painstakingly assembled from so many individual collections from all over Europe and Russia.\textsuperscript{73} The high-profile auction, which took place over a three-month period, re-dispersed the medieval and Renaissance objects throughout the world.

\textsuperscript{69} De Certeau, \textit{The Practice}, xviii–xix.

\textsuperscript{70} Carrier provides many examples in \textit{Museum Skepticism}.

\textsuperscript{71} “La salle de l’orfévrerie est le théâtre des grandes batailles entre les chevaliers de l’art français et les burgraves de l’art allemand … Chacun défend ses théories favorises.” Bonnaffé, \textit{Le Musée Spitzer}, 15.

\textsuperscript{72} Their claim to a more global Middle Ages seems prescient in the light of Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande’s \textit{Cosmpolitan Europe}, which argues for the importance of moving beyond the now traditional, yet rigid definitions of nation-states and to establish more porous definitions of borders and identities.

\textsuperscript{73} Others such as Arsène Alexandre and Alphonse de Calonne felt, as Tom Stammers has pointed out, that its “industrial” and largely pedagogical nature made it less worthy of preservation than more creative works of art. Stammers, \textit{The Purchase of the Past}, chap. 6.
Today, the allegedly perfect group of “series” collected by Spitzer and so revered by contemporaries like Bonnafe has been exposed as an illusion: Spitzer occasionally worked with talented modern artisans to create and disseminate historical fakes to “complete” his collection. Unlike Viollet-le-Duc, who acknowledged putting teams together to replicate missing medieval elements he needed for restoration projects, Spitzer presented his “discoveries” as perfectly preserved since the Middle Ages.

The creative “restoration” of damaged articles from the fourteenth century or outright new production of “medieval relics” exposes the self-referentiality of seemingly sound “scientific” theories such as Bonnafe’s “geography of furniture.” Motivated by a nationalist desire for French primacy, he based his study on objects in a collection established precisely to create the illusion of distinct national traditions. The organization and interpretation of medieval furniture as a reflection of personal and institutional objectives was not, then, so very far removed from Hugo’s and Loti’s creative reuse of medieval remnants, which they placed in the service of a less nationalistic and more globally inclusive vision of the Middle Ages.

In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai emphasizes the importance of the societies in which things circulate, insisting that we must follow “the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” and it is these “things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.” Although Appadurai explicitly refers to the exchange of “things,” such exchanges rely upon humans to set them into the motion that ultimately illuminates their context. This is an activity common to all the figures I have examined in this essay: they reused, recycled, and relocated medieval objects for use in their own particular context and for their own purposes. Blatant creative reuse such as Hugo’s and Loti’s invites questions about original value, about what medieval furniture might have been when it was built and how its use shifted over the years. Flagrantly inauthentic popular culture manifestations of interest in the Middle Ages—from the use of everyday medieval objects in Renaissance Faires

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74 Cordera, *La Fabricca*, traces the afterlife of many objects acquired at auction, especially on 135–45.


77 Corinne Charles’ work on Hauteville House is particularly interesting in this regard because she juxtaposes photographs of Hugo’s creations with medieval furniture on display in European museums.
and movies—generate similar questions about the “real” Middle Ages. They often draw the uninitiated to medieval studies in ways that scholarly works—presented as “complete” and impermeable, like Spitzer’s collection—do not.  

And yet, even such institutionally approved and complete series may prove—with the passage of time and better knowledge—to be instances of creative scholarly reuse. This is as much the case for Spitzer’s “perfect” collection and Bonnaffé’s erroneous theory of the “geography of furniture” as it is for Gaston Paris’ invention of “courtly love.”

The Middle Ages is, in reality, a concept-in-motion, the organization, placement, and interpretation of its component pieces very much like the assembly of the period rooms I have discussed here. Speaking of the “medieval” at any given time involves choosing and piecing together fragments of a thousand-year history as one might arrange furniture in the rooms of a house. There is no single “Middle Ages,” but rather a series of elements from specific periods that move among a broad range of cultural associations related to memory, aesthetics, economics, religion, and cultural heritage, constantly recycled or renovated and fixed in new configurations to serve the argument of the person assembling them. The organization of different parts in particular ways—like the rearrangement of meubles—exposes, above all, the presentist preoccupations of those who reuse and reinterpret aspects of the period known as the Middle Ages.

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78 See Cramer, “Reenactment.”

79 Matthews discusses this tendency of medieval studies to be received as medievalism with the passage of time (Medievalism: A History, 176–78), as do the contributors to Emery and Utz (Medievalism: Key Critical Terms).
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Abstract Medieval furnishings preserved in aristocratic estates and ecclesiastical institutions took on new life in the nineteenth century as the turmoil of the French Revolution reactivated their use value, transforming them into collectibles, fuel, or raw materials for new building projects. This essay relies on the taxonomies of reuse proposed by archaeologist Michael Schiffer to evaluate the preservation, recycling, and repurposing of objects such as medieval choir stalls, chests, and beds by conservators, architects, artists, and collectors Alexandre Du Sommerard, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Albert Jacquemart, Victor Hugo, Pierre Loti, and Frédéric Spitzer. These prominent figures’ repurposing of antique furniture mirrors nineteenth-century constructions of the medieval period itself.

Keywords bricolage, cultural preservation, interior decoration, medievalism, monuments, multicultural Middle Ages, museum display, nationalism, patrimony, restoration, vandalism