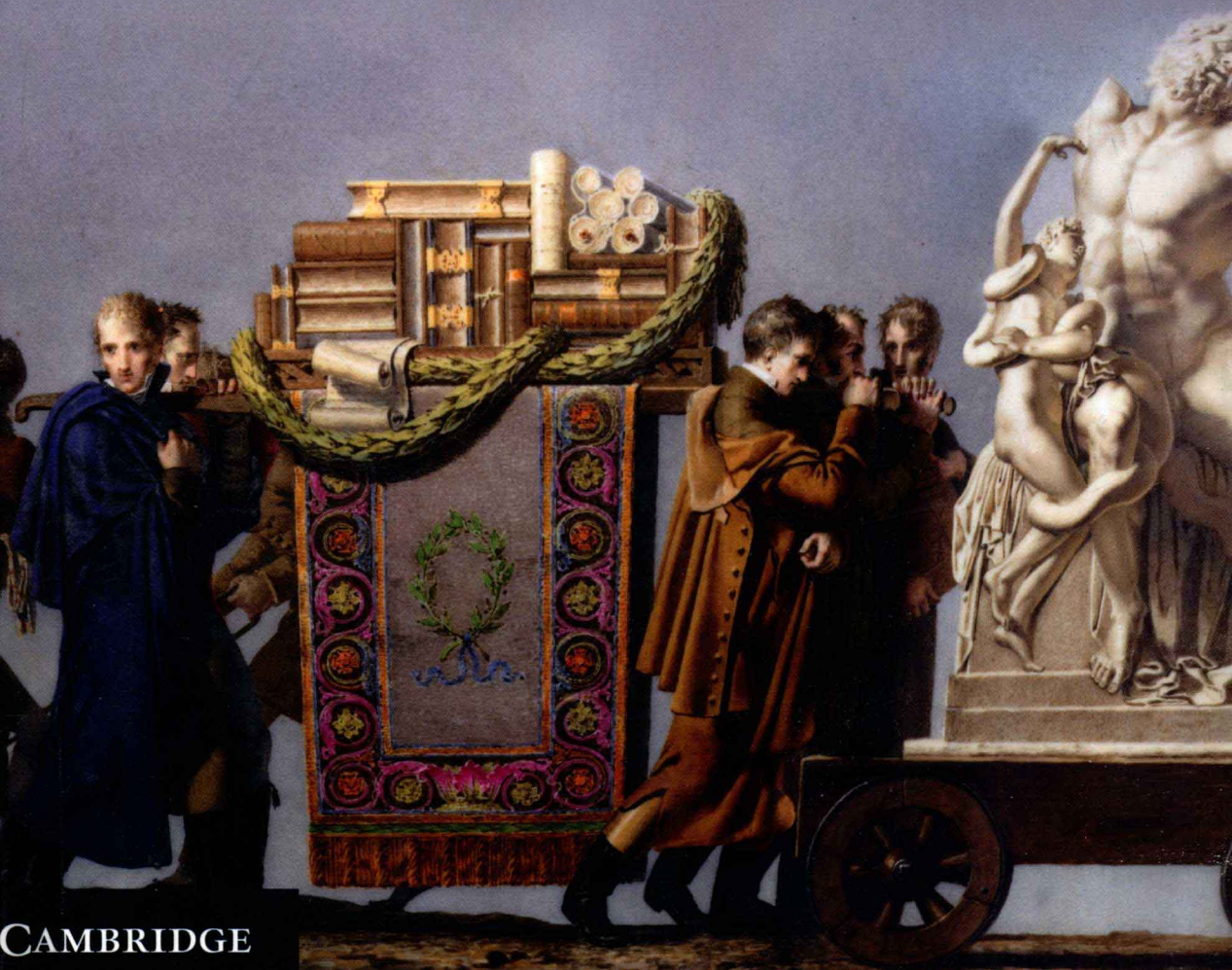


KRISTIAN JENSEN

Revolution and the Antiquarian Book

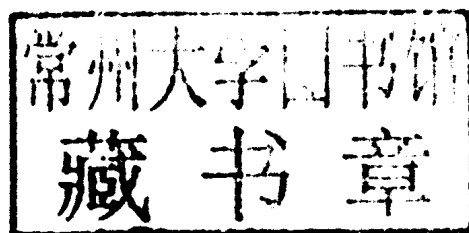
Reshaping the Past, 1780–1815



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KRISTIAN JENSEN



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Introduction

During the eighteenth century the past was radically reassessed in order to understand and to influence changing political and social structures. The remaking of the past was often expressed through a physical remaking of the most treasured historical art objects but it also required a remaking of the physical environment in which the past was presented. Much excellent work has been undertaken on the development of museums emerging as institutions which were not only public but owned and funded by the state. A new model for museums expressing the state's cultural ambitions for the nation was firmly established during and after the French Revolution, presenting newly acquired art in a way which ensured that its interpretation was consistent with the intellectual, political, and aesthetic requirements of their new owners, while their original functions were marginalised or even deliberately obscured.

Historic books and their meanings underwent a similar transformation in the eighteenth century and in the years leading up to the formation of public and national institutions in the early nineteenth century: in the process this too had a physical, visible impact on the books. There are many similarities with the development of the way in which art was understood and used, but books have characteristics of their own so their role in the transformation of the past was specific to them, as were the ways in which they were collected and treated. Many of the issues which relate to the use of historic books can be associated with a conflict between the understanding of books as merchandise, as physical objects, and as conveyors of textual meaning that can be detached from the object which carries it, which in turn becomes a trivial manifestation of the independently existing text.

The invention of printing was often celebrated as the liberation of the text from the manuscript form, where it had been private and object specific. Much of the discussion of the function of the book as an expression of the past can therefore be found articulated through interpretations of the invention of printing and through the collecting of the earliest printed books. The late eighteenth century is one of the very few moments in history when incunabula and the invention of printing achieved a prominence

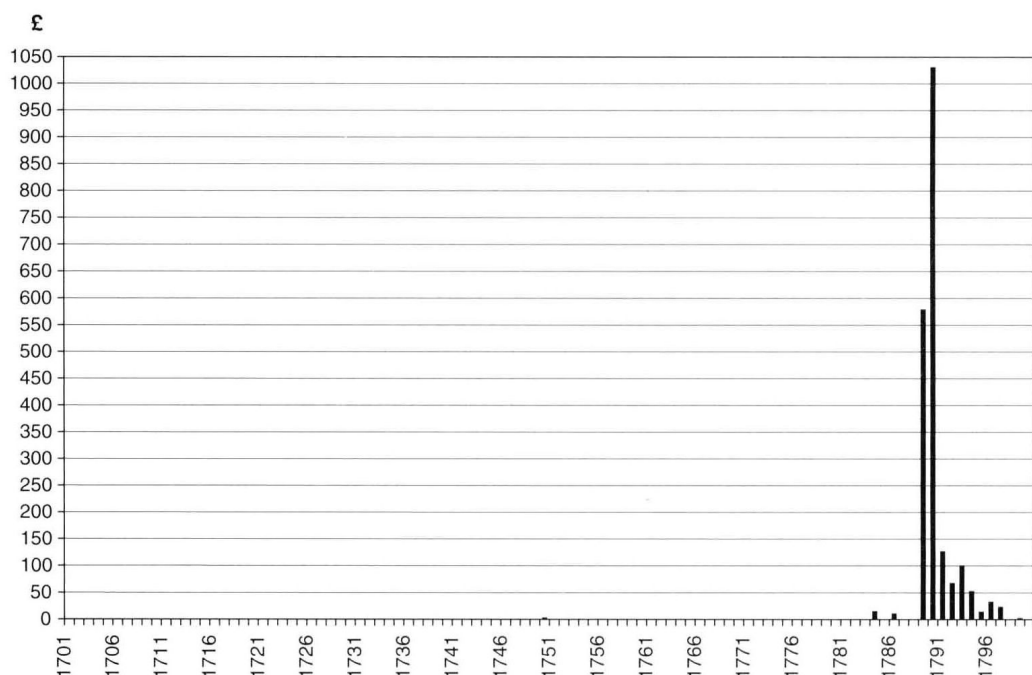


Figure I.1 Bodleian expenditure on incunabula 1700–1801.

which took the discourse about them far beyond the world of collectors, historians, and dealers.

Incunabula are books printed in the fifteenth century, but very often this is well hidden. Many of them look, and not only from the outside, like eighteenth-century books, for the simple reason that prominent parts of the surviving physical structure are from the eighteenth century. One may deplore the loss of fifteenth-century evidence, but the material which we actually have is also historical evidence in its own right. Incunabula were eighteenth-century books in the sense that they were sold, bought, confiscated, and transformed in the eighteenth century. Through these books we can explore how people approached their past and their present, how books were part of the reshaping of their world, and part of their rewriting of the past.

The scale of reassessment of fifteenth-century books in the last decades of the eighteenth century is made evident by the acquisitions made by the Bodleian Library in Oxford, which has the largest collection held by any European university library, a collection formed as a result of deliberate decisions about what to buy, unlike most other university collections which often acquired their historic books largely as a result of external circumstances.¹

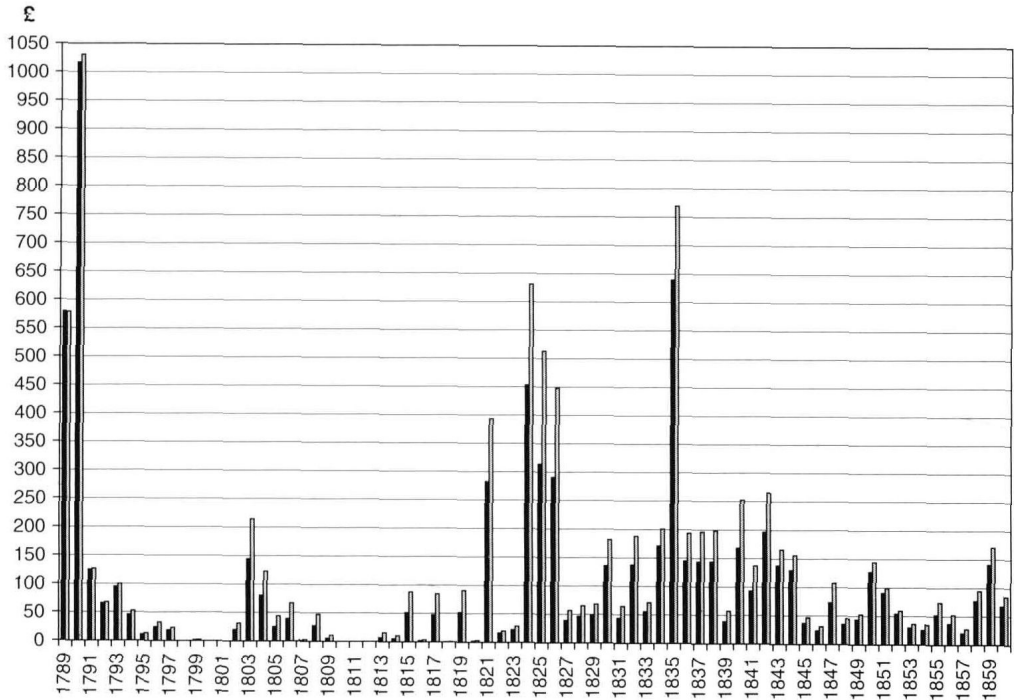


Figure I.2 Bodleian expenditure on incunabula, 1789–1861. Grey columns are adjusted for inflation, baseline 1789.

The Bodleian Library did not buy any incunabula until the last eleven years of the century,² but then began to spend significant sums, the level of expenditure of 1789–90 never to be surpassed, especially when figures are adjusted for inflation.³

The same is true in terms of the expenditure on incunabula as a percentage of the entire Bodleian purchasing budget. Yet, at the same time, these graphs show that the acquisitions of the late eighteenth century did not constitute an isolated phenomenon, but a ‘big bang’ at the beginning of a new and lasting approach to collecting.

At first the Bodleian Library set out to buy the first and best editions of the classical authors, the intention being to provide a working tool for the preparation of classical texts to be published by the University Press.⁴ They were not acquired because they were incunabula. Yet one of the most expensive acquisitions was Duranti on the divine office, printed in 1459, a medieval text of no classical significance, bought in 1790 for £80 10s.⁵ That is a substantial amount of money, for instance the equivalent of over twenty years’ rent for a room off the Tottenham Court Road, or dinner for four and a half years, at the rates paid by Chateaubriand when he was a poor refugee

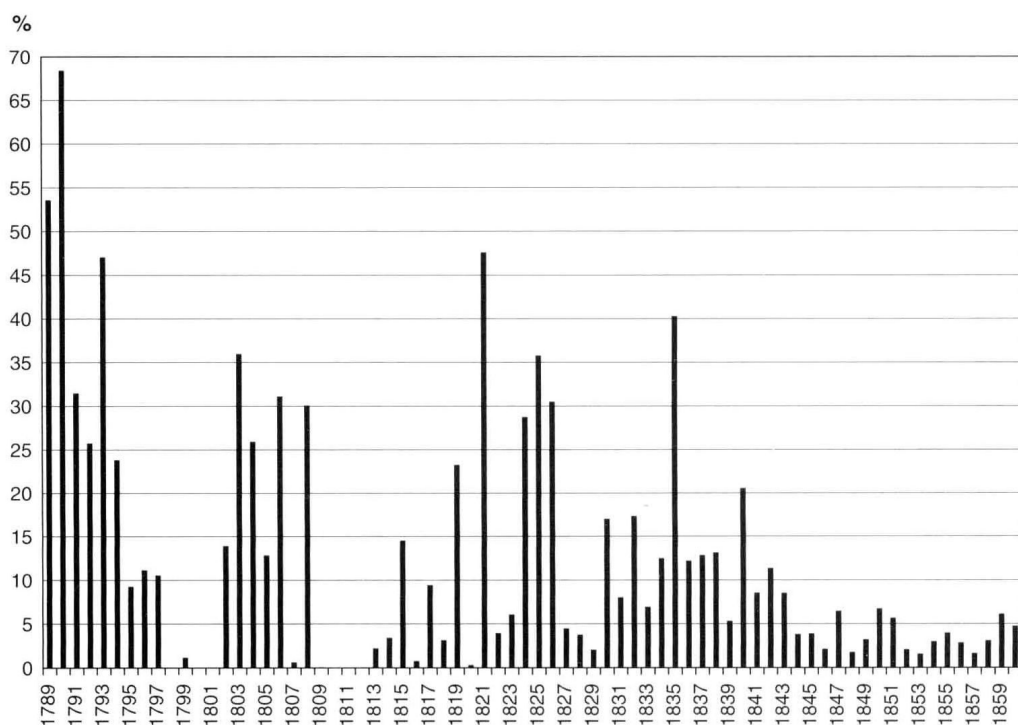


Figure I.3 Expenditure on incunabula as a percentage of the Bodleian book budget 1789–1861.

in London in 1793.⁶ The price paid for Duranti no longer makes sense when measured against the prices of books; it now belonged among objects which were priced for their cultural importance.

The acquisition of such medieval books grew more frequent during the 1790s and by about 1810 it was no longer an exception. A similar pattern is suggested by the purchases of the second Earl Spencer, owner of the most outstanding collection of rare printed books ever created by a private person in Britain. In 1789 he bought a large collection of classical texts from Count Reviczky, envoy of the Holy Roman Emperor to the Court of St James. Although at first insisting on only wanting first editions of the classics, a few years later Spencer spent significant amounts of money on books printed in the fifteenth century which were anything but classical.

The transformation was rapid and the impact on the distribution of early printed books in Europe was profound. The fate of the Gutenberg Bible is symptomatic. In 1790 there was half a copy of the Gutenberg Bible in Britain, in Lambeth Palace, unidentified and unnoticed. In 1815, by the end of the Napoleonic wars, there were at least nine and possibly more. The first copy to make the move was bought by Spencer some time before June 1792;⁷ the

second was acquired by the Bodleian Library in 1793 for £100.⁸ Similarly, in 1792 all but two of the surviving ten copies of the 1457 Psalter, the first printed book to contain a date of imprint, were still in the possession of religious institutions.⁹ By the end of the Napoleonic wars none was; two had made their way to Britain by 1802, followed by one more by 1824. We are witnessing a reclassification of objects and see the importance of the newly found cultural property expressed in their prices and in their concomitant redistribution. The cultural and financial value of a class of objects had been comprehensively reassessed.

And England was far from alone. In Paris in the spring of 1792 the Bibliothèque royale, as it was still called, spent 39,615 livres and 6 sols on 550 incunabula, the equivalent of about £1,584, its largest ever acquisition of incunabula, despite the deep financial troubles of the period.¹⁰

Like the history of the book, the history of collecting has often been approached from a perspective defined by nationality. Without losing sight of different cultural, economic, and political circumstances, this book seeks to explore a shared international marketplace where the aspirations of collectors, dealers, and scholars met, competed, were formed and reformed. The Paris and London markets for books were intimately linked, as were French and English collectors; they were also connected with markets and collectors throughout Europe, where the interest of collectors from the two great centres for luxury trade and consumption in turn had a dramatic impact. This wider European environment, not least the German-speaking lands, is crucial for the understanding which this study seeks to achieve of the relations between the different participants in this cultural and economic activity. The relation of agents throughout Europe, from Copenhagen to Vienna to Rome, is central to my analysis.

This Europe-wide interest continued into the twentieth century which saw the creation, but not quite the completion, of two ambitious state-funded projects to describe incunabula, each with their distinct ideological backgrounds: the Prussian *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* and the catalogue of incunabula in the library of the British Museum, now the British Library, major monuments to twentieth-century scholarship. These projects, remarkable both for their quality and for their ability to survive and retain financial support through a turbulent century, have so dominated the twentieth-century engagement with books from the fifteenth century that it can be difficult to achieve a different view from the analysis which they imply. A third project, the French national union catalogue, was privately funded, had yet a third ideological hinterland, and was discontinued at the death of its author and sponsor. The Bodleian Library's catalogue of

incunabula, which I initiated and edited, set out to use the achievements of these catalogues to construct a fundamentally different approach. Similarly, this book does not seek to contribute to the history of these and other related projects: it seeks to understand the intensive eighteenth-century engagement with fifteenth-century book production in its own right. However, it inevitably contributes, simultaneously, to our understanding of the formation and the function of the collections which constituted the working material for those grand twentieth-century projects, and, as we shall see, also used methodologies which were reformulated but based on fundamental intellectual and social assumptions which were articulated during the eighteenth century.

The first chapter explores the way in which the invention of printing was used by philosophers and politicians to explain significant changes which were seen to be taking place in eighteenth-century society, whether these changes were applauded or deplored. It focuses on thoughts about books, and less on individual historic books. This chapter sets a wider scene for the explanation of why discussions of incunabula became part of a modern and modernising discourse in the late eighteenth century.

The second chapter takes Earl Spencer and the French Bibliothèque nationale as its two focal points, the two most significant collectors of this type of book in the late eighteenth century. It investigates the implications of a national institution of revolutionary France and of a rich British aristocrat, who led the naval war effort against France, competing for the same books in a shared market. It seeks to understand to what extent their motives were perceived to be different or were in fact different, and to what extent they had different impacts on the market. Institutions and individuals, across Europe, who supplied the books, through confiscations or sale, emerge as often playing a sophisticated role in a complex market.

The third chapter sees the events of the second half of the century in a broader historical perspective. It explores the emergence of a new category of collectables – incunabula – as an intellectual construct. It outlines a process where different intellectual and economic currents gradually came together over quite a long period of time, simultaneously defining a new type of commodity and a new discipline which, largely created outside established institutions, was able to engage with objects as historical evidence. The financial and intellectual values of the markets for luxury in Paris and London are central, but they are again set in a wider European context.

Chapter 4 examines the often fierce polemic about who had the right to make judgements about books. This debate developed between the various

social groups who encountered each other in the same market, over the same merchandise. The centre of this discussion was often incunabula: they provided a shared environment which exposed the confrontation between the behaviour required in a marketplace and the behaviour appropriate to different social classes. This permits a fuller articulation of a theme which runs through the previous chapters, the increasing differentiation between the perceived functions of private and public collections, the emergence of the truly public and national library, in parallel to the emergence of public, national museums, as private knowledge increasingly cannot be construed, without challenge, as an unproblematic social benefit.

Chapter 5 examines how eighteenth-century collectors' perceptions of the texts from the past were expressed through the historical objects which they collected. It seeks to understand how they made them conform to expectations of the past which were formed by eighteenth-century political, intellectual, and aesthetic concerns, as part of a process which both commemorated the past and suppressed it. While ancient art was restored to look ancient and placed in architectural environments which aspired to classical forms, early books were effectively modernised, expressing their relevance in the modern world. The themes of the first chapter recur, but now firmly rooted in the examination of books, reflecting an often contradictory but shared approach to fifteenth-century books as one single type of merchandise.

As a conclusion Chapter 6 briefly explores how this resolutely modernising discourse about incunabula was modified as the past was yet again reassessed in the early nineteenth century. Yet an analysis of prices and of collecting patterns indicates that while the modernising discourse was challenged, the reinvention of the Middle Ages did not have a comprehensive effect on the market. This was the point at which some of the world's greatest public collections of incunabula were built. The conclusion explores the crucial role which the eighteenth-century reformulation of the importance of historic books played for the establishment of a new function for national institutions now accessible to a new audience, which sought for itself the same control of the use of history as the wealthiest private collectors of the past.

1 | Enlightenment ideas and revolutionary practice: incunabula and freedom

In the late summer of 1792 the young Republic of France was fighting for its survival. Enemy troops had reached as far as Verdun. The fight-back had begun, but the situation remained perilous. At this moment of supreme national danger, the keeper of printed books at the newly renamed Bibliothèque nationale wrote to his minister:

Citizen Minister. Allow me to bring myself to your recollection, and to ask you to have the kindness to inform general Custine,¹ who is marching on Mainz, that there is in the Metropolitan Chapter Library a copy of the earliest dated printed book, of which I add the title. It is the famous Psalter of Mainz, from 1457, in folio. May it be convenient for him to procure it or to have it presented to him. In the Bibliothèque nationale, it would complete our collection of the early editions from the city of Mainz, the cradle of printing. Please, accept my request with your accustomed kindness to me. Desaulnays, keeper at the Bibliothèque nationale. 22 October, year one of the French Republic.²

Desaulnays's letter was timely: Custine had taken Mainz the previous day. Written a month after the Republic had been declared, the letter preceded by nearly two years the establishment of the formal bureaucratic structures facilitating the systematic spoliation of cultural property outside France, which began after the fall of the Jacobin republic in the summer of 1794. It is, I believe, the earliest written evidence of the formation of a policy which, going far beyond Desaulnays's suggestion, was to transform the distribution throughout Europe of cultural objects, paintings, and sculpture, as well as of books, dislocating them from earlier contexts, and leading to their radical reinterpretation.³

Leaving aside any larger discussion of the intellectual or cultural causes of the French revolution, Desaulnays's letter shows that the Bibliothèque nationale was not the passive beneficiary of a policy formulated elsewhere but that, very early on, the institution actively sought a policy of cultural spoliation.⁴ It draws attention to how strands of thinking about the past which had developed during the earlier decades of the century were at the root of decisions about the treatment of historic objects during the years of revolutionary upheaval and how these decisions were carried out by men