



B nedicte Savoy. *Patrimoine annex : Les siasies de bien culturels pratiqu s par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800.* Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2003. EUR 94.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-2-7351-0988-3.



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Artistic Looting and “Cultural Appropriations” in Napoleonic Germany

The looting of artworks was a common practice during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and occurred wherever the French armies went.[1] In their wake, *commissaires* usually followed, sometimes in groups, sometimes alone, and sometimes with a list of works they were to take back with them to Paris. This is not to mention the unofficial plundering that went on. In this study, the author, B nedicte Savoy, focuses on Germany because it was the only “European cultural space” to have suffered every wave of confiscation from 1794, when the French armies first marched into Central Europe, through the campaign of 1809. Between 1794 and 1796, for example, the left bank of the Rhine suffered two waves of confiscations, well before the secularization of the ecclesiastical states in 1802 that was to see another hefty seizure. From the start, these confiscations were organized and carried out by men that were generally well qualified to choose the artworks, and Germany was particularly rich in collections. Not only did the political capitals (Vienna, Berlin, Munich, and Dresden) contain galleries and museums, but so too did many of the smaller urban centers, such as the galleries of the Palatinate Electors at D sseldorf, considered capable of rivaling museums in Paris (p. 26), not to mention many of the collections of books held in various ecclesiastical libraries throughout Germany.

Based on a doctoral thesis, and therefore thoroughly grounded in French and German archival and secondary material, this work examines the requisitions that took place in Germany, the methods used by the *commissaires*, as well as some of the principal actors behind the confiscations. Part 1 looks at the biographies of three *commissaires* in particular: Fran ois-Marie Neveu, sent on mission to the south of Germany in 1800; Jean-Baptiste Maug rard, a former Benedictine monk sent on mission to the annexed departments in 1802, who focused exclusively on confiscating manuscripts and books for the Biblioth que nationale; and Vivant Denon, sent on mission to Germany after the defeat of Prussia in 1806. Denon, for example, harvested several thousand artworks during an eight-month period from November, 1806 to June, 1807, during which time more than 250 cases of paintings, statues, and other objects were pillaged from the galleries of northern Germany, especially Berlin, Danzig, and Warsaw. (Denon was later sent to Spain where he filled the same role, as well as following the Grande Arm e during the 1809 campaign against Austria.) Unlike Italy, where many of the artworks taken by the French formed part of a treaty concluded between Napoleon and the defeated state in question, in Germany the French, even though they sometimes attempted to give their pillaging legal overtones, pretty much took

whatever they could lay their hands on, regardless of its inherent value or utility. The people in charge of pillaging the collections sometimes received direct instructions from curators in Paris, remarkably well informed about the state of certain collections.

A number of chapters are devoted to the public debate these “cultural appropriations” (the author’s expression) caused in Germany and its consequences (the subject of part 2).[2] This should have been the most interesting material in this study; two of the three chapters are supposed to deal with this topic, especially chapter 6, or so I thought so, subtitled “L’opinion publique allemande et les ‘conquêtes artistiques’ de la France en Europe, 1794-1807.” But this is not the case. Instead, more space is devoted to the debate in Germany surrounding the question of the transfer of Italian artworks to Paris—and even then the debate was limited to the manner in which these works were treated (pp. 217-220)—than there is to the discussions specifically touching on German artworks.

This is not necessarily a choice dictated by the author. In the opening years of the revolutionary wars, educated Germans seem to have been more concerned about what was going on in Italy than in Belgium or the Rhineland. But even when it came to later French depredations, it is still difficult to find a public debate in Germany before 1814-15. This may have been because of French propaganda, censorship, and the auto-censorship that existed in many German states between 1800-1809 (pp. 230-233). But there were also, argues Savoy, more profound reasons, namely, enlightened German circles were not yet in their “identité ‘germanique’” when the confiscations were taking place (p. 203). On the contrary, many educated Germans accepted the French confiscations by adopting a cosmopolitan attitude. The Berlin composer, Karl Friedrich Zelter, for example, went so far, in a letter to his friend Goethe, to say that they, that is, Germans, were not worthy of such beautiful objects (“Nous n’âtions pas dignes de ces belles choses,” p. 233).

The fact that it took so long for educated Germans to make an issue of the French confiscations raises all sorts of questions about what was happening in enlightened circles between 1796 and 1815, especially where questions of national identity are concerned, which are not really raised and certainly not answered in this book. It is a shame. One of the themes that could have been teased out, and a much more important one to my mind than detailing the mechanisms behind the French pillage of Germany (the subject of much of part 1), would have been the relationship between the seizure of artworks

and an emerging German nationalism. Instead, the politicization of this debate (Savoy’s expression) is either only briefly, tantalizingly mentioned (pp. 203-204), or limited to a few pages (pp. 256-259, 262-266).

It is possible that it was too early for German enlightened circles to draw a relationship between art and national identity (or cultural heritage). Even the debate about the seizure of Italian artworks in the German press (pp. 244-247) was not enough to have galvanized a polemic about stolen German artworks, something that is underlined by Savoy. However, French propaganda and censorship are not convincing enough explanations for the lack of debate. It did not stop a nationalist rhetoric from developing in post-Tilsit Prussia, for example.[3] Certainly, between 1806 and 1814, the question of French artistic conquests had lost some of its urgency; the French were busy in Spain and Austria. It was only once the French were defeated that newspaper articles appeared calling for the retrocession of artworks to be built into the treaties negotiated with France, thus laying the foundations of a national definition of cultural heritage (pp. 238, 248).

Interestingly, Savoy argues that the epicenter of this debate shifted from Weimar during the seizures that had taken place in Italy in 1796-97, to the Rhine, although it would probably be more accurate to say that the debate about French retrocessions originated in the Rhineland (p. 241). It is no coincidence that the most energetic calls for restitutions came from this region: occupied by the French and then the Prussians, Rhinelanders had to make more of an effort to be heard (pp. 242-243). As Savoy herself points out, the question of confiscated artworks is coupled with a political renaissance in the Rhineland, but here too we are left hanging for more (p. 246). One interesting detail that comes out of all this though is that by the time German newspapers like the *Rheinischer Merkur* were rousing public opinion in 1815 with a series of articles on the stolen art works, what once belonged in the private collections of princes was now considered to belong to the German people and the nation (p. 261). Savoy gives as an example of this the celebrations that took place in several German towns when “re-conquered” paintings were returned in the autumn of 1815 and which included speeches, Te Deums, firework displays, and balls. In fact, the connection between national identity and the stolen artworks seems to have been born in the Rhenish press of 1815.

Indeed, there is ample evidence of a kind of delayed reaction among the German elite to French depredations.

Savoy thus looks at the historiography of the confiscations and the impact three wars with France (1870, 1914, 1940) had on it (chapter 8). This is where the study moves beyond its initial chronological limits. For the Germans, it was often a question of getting their own back against a France suspected, rightly so, of having kept most of the stolen artworks, although the press and public opinion does not seem to have mobilized behind the issue, despite the atmosphere of “revanchisme” that existed after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 in particular. It was not until the First World War that the debate over the issue became public, and the rhetoric violent. Numerous articles appeared in which nationalist animosities were mixed with scholarly insights to produce work with evident military and political undertones. As far as the Germans were concerned, and in the light of what seemed like an inevitable victory over France at the beginning of the war, it was a question of taking back what had been kept from them since 1815. The projects elaborated did not, for obvious reasons, come to anything.

Finally, the third part of the book, loosely categorized under the title “Objets,” is devoted to the impact these forced acquisitions, and their later return, had on the artworks themselves. That is, to what extent did these works benefit or were harmed by the French appropriations? The French were keen to be seen in the best light, and thus often undertook restoration projects in an attempt to repair some of the works damaged by supposedly bad restoration attempts done previously, but which in effect aimed to repair the damage often caused by the transport of these works to France. Chapter 9, which deals with this issue, will no doubt be of interest to museologists or those interested in the history of restoration techniques. The restorations moreover served to ideologically justify the seizures in the first place (p. 329).

More interesting perhaps, at least from an historian’s point of view, is an analysis of the doctrine elaborated by the French to justify their seizures from the very start—that is, the promise that they would be taken away from the dishonorable gaze of the despots that owned them and that, back in Paris, they would be displayed in public. The debate, and the practicality of this assertion, is the object of chapter 10. Between 1798 and 1801, several exhibitions of Italian painters were organized in the Louvre, culminating in the exhibition of 1807 on the occasion of the first anniversary of the defeat of Prussia at Jena. More than one thousand works were exhibited (all taken from Germany) between October, 1807, and March, 1808. (The three hundred paintings exhibited, however, only represented about one third of the seizures from north-

ern Germany.) The political undertones of the exhibition did not go unnoticed (either to Savoy or contemporaries for that matter). In one gallery, between two statues of Victory taken from the gardens of Sans-Souci in Berlin, was a huge bronze bust of Napoleon, over which hung a painting by Rubens—Mars being crowned by Victory. The exhibition was largely about enhancing Napoleon’s heroic image. Afterwards, many of the paintings were sent to museums in the provinces—especially Lyons, Dijon, Grenoble, Caen, Toulouse, and Brussels—never to be returned at the end of the wars (p. 368). Volume 2 of this study is in effect a catalogue of works taken by the French and displayed in the exhibition. Two centuries after the event, the author has given us an inventory of the objects displayed (now found on both sides of the Rhine), naming the collections from which they originated, where they are now housed and the date the object was returned to Germany (if at all), as well as assessing whether they benefited from the transfer to Paris.

On the whole, this is a thoroughly researched, beautifully produced piece of work, although it may be more of interest to museologists than to historians of the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. This does not mean to say that they too cannot glean a good deal of information from it, especially parts 1 and 2. From an historian’s perspective, however, it is a shame that more space was not devoted to an analysis of the contemporary debates in Germany, and the belated nationalist response from the German elites. Moreover, I cannot help but feel a little uneasy about what Savoy calls “cultural appropriations.” This is nothing less than a euphemism for looting and plundering. Is this part of a peculiarly French reticence to see the period for what it was—namely, one of French military domination and occupation with all the horrors that that entailed? I do not know. But when it came to plundering, the French during this period were in a unique position, and did so so thoroughly that it should make us reflect on just how beneficial French ascendancy over Europe was to the arts.

Notes

[1]. A general work worth referring to is Paul Wescher, *Kunstraub unter Napoleon* (Berlin: Mann, 1977). For Italy see, Marie-Louise Blumer, “La Commission pour la recherche des objets d’arts,” *Révolution française* 87 (1934): pp. 62-88, 124-150, 222-259; Ferdinand Boyer, “Les responsabilités de Napoléon dans le transfert à Paris des oeuvres d’art de l’étranger,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 11 (1964), pp. 241-262. A more detailed bibliography for Italy can be found in Carlo

Zaghi, *L'Italia di Napoleone dalla Cisalpina al Regno* (Turin: UTET, 1986), pp. 735-737. 1991).

[2]. On the debates that took place in France see Edouard Pommier, *L'art de la liberté. Doctrines et débats de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Gallimard,

[3]. See Karen Hagemann, "Männlicher Muth und Deutsche Ehre". *Nation, Militär und Geschlecht zur Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preußens* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002).

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