

The Sommerard Museum

Capturing the Essence of French National Identity

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During the nineteenth century, Europe saw a tremendous fascination in the Renaissance and, to a greater extent, the Middle Ages. In post-revolutionary France, historical artefacts from these periods became increasingly important to the formation of national identity and historical consciousness. While in the early 1790s the destruction of monuments was demanded by decree, the first decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by a veritable mania among private collectors for remnants of this forgotten period, which had significantly shaped France's cultural identity. Hence, growing interest in this period evolved as a reaction to the revolutionary era.¹

Among numerous bourgeois private collectors, the antiquarian Alexandre Du Sommerard (1779–1842) stands out.² In 1833, he rented a vacant part of the *Hôtel de Cluny* to house his medieval and Renaissance art collection.³ Built around 1500 in the heart of Paris's *Quartier Latin* next to the ruins of the Gallo-Roman thermal baths, the former residence of the abbots of Cluny provided an ideal architectural framework for his growing collection. Promoted by the national and international press, including Parisian travel guides, the *Musée Du Sommerard* (Sommerard Museum)⁴ immediately became a magnet for the public.⁵ After the collector died in 1842, the French state acquired the famous col-

- 1 For the emerging interest in the French Middle Ages, see Voss 1972; Grodecki 1979; Recht 2016, 295–318; Pomian 2021. With a specific view to collections of medieval and Renaissance art in nineteenth-century Paris, see Letellier 2015; Stammers 2020.
- 2 The paper uses the most common spelling: Alexandre Du Sommerard. Less common are Dusommerard and Sommerard.
- 3 Robert 2008. Older research refers to the year 1832.
- 4 The private collection of Alexandre Du Sommerard was known as *Musée Du Sommerard* by the press and contemporaries. It was located in the *Hôtel de Cluny* from 1833 until 1842. In 1844, following the collector's death, the medieval building and the adjacent ancient baths officially reopened as the *Musée de Cluny* (Cluny Museum). However, the collection was completely rearranged and no longer reflected its original character, losing the intimate charm of its exhibition galleries. This paper will use the name 'Sommerard Museum' to distinguish it from the Cluny Museum.
- 5 Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 402–403 and 417, complains about the growing number (30,000–40,000) of national and international tourists per year. Plato 2001 calls this number into question. For the national press, see, for example, Deschamps 1833; Jubinal 1834;

lection to create, together with the adjoining thermal baths, a new museum of national antiquities.⁶ The success of this private collection resulted in the foundation of the only national museum for medieval art in France, today the *Musée de Cluny – musée national du Moyen Âge* (Cluny Museum – National Museum of the Middle Ages).⁷

During Alexandre Du Sommerard's lifetime, his museum became a focal point for national history. Here, French culture, language, art, religion, historical events, forgotten traditions, and customs could be visualized, encountered, and relived. Du Sommerard had an immense impact on subsequent collectors and museums, both in the selection of objects and their display. Indeed, his characteristic atmospheric mode of presentation finds a firm place in the development of the period room and of cultural history museums more broadly.⁸

Although research has illuminated some aspects of Du Sommerard's display strategies, no study to date has examined the entire collection. Instead, research has repeatedly focused on a small sample of rooms (the chapel and the chamber of Francis I).⁹ It is undeniable that these rooms are, from a museological perspective, the most elaborated exhibition spaces in the museum. Nevertheless, without clarifying the extent and display of the collection objects, any analysis remains fragmentary. This paper aims to shed light on the entire display of the Sommerard Museum. Its leading question is, to what extent were French history, culture, and identity expressed in the presentation? What staging strategies and what particular objects shaped visitors' experience of the French nation – linguistically and culturally, as well as historically and art historically? And more generally, what impression did the collection leave on them? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to shed light on the collector himself and the cultural-political circumstances under which his collection arose.

Alexandre Du Sommerard and the Emerging Interest in the Middle Ages

Simon-Nicolas-Alexandre Du Sommerard, born in Bar-sur-Aube in 1779, first pursued a military career in the army of Napoleon and later, in 1807, joined the *Cours des comptes* (Chamber of Accounts) as master-advisor. His political involvement reflects the upheavals and tensions of the post-revolutionary era. During the fall of Napoleon (r. 1799

Anonymous 1836 (*Journal des débats* 4 June 1836); Janin 1842. The international press, especially that of Britain, followed with attention the establishment of a private museum of medieval art, e.g. Anonymous 1835a (*Albion and the Star* 11 July 1835); Anonymous 1835b (*Court Journal* 3 October 1835); Anonymous 1835c (*Drogheda Journal* 6 October 1835); Anonymous 1835d (*Court Journal* 10 October 1835). Waagen 1839 discussed the collection in a Parisian travel guide.

6 The report on the acquisition of the Du Sommerard Collection before the Chamber of Peers (*Sur l'acquisition du Musée Du Sommerard. Rapport à la Chambre des pairs, le 15 juillet 1843*) is reprinted in de Barante 1858. For a more detailed discussion, see Brière 1922; Marot 1968; Taburet-Delahaye 2021.

7 Erlande-Brandenburg 1977; Erlande-Brandenburg 1979b; Sandron 1993; Huchard 2001; Le Pogam 2006.

8 Bann 2001; Joachimides 2012; Costa, Poulot, and Volait 2016, 7–17.

9 Bann 1978; Bann 1984; Poulot 1997a; Plato 2001; Huchard 2001; Le Pogam 2006; Bann 2012.

First Consul–1815 Emperor of the French), he emerged as a moderate royalist and supporter of the Restorative Monarchy under Louis XVIII (r. 1814–1824). Hence, in 1816, he received the *croix de la Fidélité* for his loyal service to the state and was appointed *chevalier* of the Legion of Honour in the same year; barely twenty-five years later, he was even elevated to the rank of *officier* in the order.¹⁰

In addition to his career in the civil service, Du Sommerard was also a passionate art collector, antiquarian, scholar, historian, and museum founder. He counts among the founding members of the re-established *Société des Amis des Arts* (1816, Society of Friends of the Art) and the *Société de l'Histoire de France* (1834, Society for the History of France), joined the *Société Royale des Bonnes-Lettres* (1821, Royal Society of Literature), and was elected as vice president of the *Comité historique des arts et monuments* (1841, Historical Committee for Arts and Monuments) set up by the statesman François Guizot.¹¹ Du Sommerard was a respected member of society and maintained private and public relations with intellectuals, historians, and politicians. Even before he reached his prime as a collector, Du Sommerard had run a salon on the *rue Ménars* frequented by artists and Parisian society. Although the beginnings of his collection remain unclear, it must have already grown in size and stature by the 1820s, as the *Manuel de l'amateur des arts* reported in 1824: "since the suppression of the *Musée des monuments français*, a similar reunion of this type can be found nowhere".¹²

The comparison with the *Musée des monuments français* (Museum of French Monuments)¹³ attests to the early quality of the collection. Moreover, it expresses the desire to re-establish an institution equal to this famous predecessor, which had functioned as a safeguard for vandalized monuments in the aftermath of the French Revolution. At that time, the possessions of the nobility and the Church became national assets (*biens nationaux*), and the destruction of historical sites and monuments from the previous regime was even encouraged by law.¹⁴ One point of contention in the years following the French Revolution was the symbolic value of the material remains and whether they should be destroyed as testimonies of the *ancien régime* or preserved as the basis of France's national identity. Thanks to the efforts of the archaeologist Alexandre Lenoir, numerous testimonies of French patrimony were safely guarded in the *Couvent des Petits-Augustins*, which opened in 1795 as the Museum of French Monuments. Despite its immense popularity, the museum closed again as early as 1816 by order of Louis XVIII, leaving a significant void. Contemporaries considered the private collection of the archaeologist

10 Anonymous 1845; Marot 1968, 283; Huchard 2009. For detailed information on his political career, see Mérimée 1843; "Dictionnaire historique, généalogique et biographique" (1807–1947).

11 Du Sommerard served, among Victor Hugo, Léon de Laborde, Prosper Mérimée, and others, on the committee as vice president until his unexpected death in 1842. "Le comité historique des arts et monuments" 1843.

12 "depuis la suppression du '*Musée des monuments français*', il ne se trouve nulle part une pareille réunion de ce genre"; Harmand 1824, 168.

13 The museum has been the subject of intense discussion. For a concise summary, see Stara 2013; Bresc-Bautier and Chancel-Bardelot 2016; Pomian 2021, 109–134.

14 On the vandalism of the Revolutionary Era and the debate on the preservation of material remains, see Pommier 1991; Poulot 1995; Bergeron 1996; Baczkó 1996.

and antiquarian Alexandre Du Sommerard to be the direct and natural successor. Moreover, the Sommerard Museum sparked an urge to compensate for the loss of the Museum of French Monuments and to keep the memory of the national history of France alive.¹⁵ However, this development also raised the question of which aspects of history to focus on and how to present them.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the idea of a new, genuine French history was at the centre of political and historical discourses. In the early 1820s, modern historians such as Augustin Thierry and François Guizot aimed to write a “true national history” by shedding light on sources and testimonies ranging from annals and chronicles to monuments and customs.¹⁶ One must bear in mind that such textual sources did not serve the same purpose as historical monuments: as Roland Recht points out, the monuments served as visible memorial signs that were meant to be accessible to the entire nation and “to plunge the eye into the buried strata of national history”.¹⁷ The focus of national historiography shifted gradually from Greco-Roman antiquity to the French Middle Ages, as the period in which foundational ideas, feelings, and customs were believed to have their roots. The long-overlooked Middle Ages rose in public perception, coming to be regarded as, to quote Guizot, “the cradle of modern civilization”.¹⁸ In other words, the ‘invention’ of the Middle Ages became central to understandings of the nation’s origin.¹⁹ Hence, within this historical-political discussion, the collection of French antiquities by Du Sommerard gained prompt attention.

The Sommerard Museum

Built around 1500, the *Hôtel de Cluny* is one of the last remaining buildings of medieval Paris. In 1833, Du Sommerard rented part of the building both to live there with his family and to display his collection. The resulting Sommerard Museum was open several days per month to interested visitors who registered in advance.²⁰ The floor plan (fig. 1) indicates the exhibition rooms on the first floor, including two bedrooms dedicated to the French kings Francis I (11) and Henry IV (12), a living room or salon (17), a dining room (16), a gallery (13/15), and the late Gothic chapel (10). The upcoming section of this essay

15 De Barante 1858 summed it up in the much-quoted notation: “*L’hôtel de Cluny remplacera pour elle ce musée des Petits-Augustins qu’on a eu le tort de détruire*”. For a more detailed discussion, see Erlande-Brandenburg 1977; Bann 1984; Poulot 1997a; Bann 2012.

16 “*La vraie histoire nationale, celle qui mériterait de devenir populaire, est encore ensevelie dans la poussière des chroniques contemporaines*”; Thierry 1827, 3–4. See also Poulot 1988.

17 “*Des signes bien visibles qui plongent le regard jusqu’aux strates enfouies de l’histoire nationale*”; Recht 2016, 7.

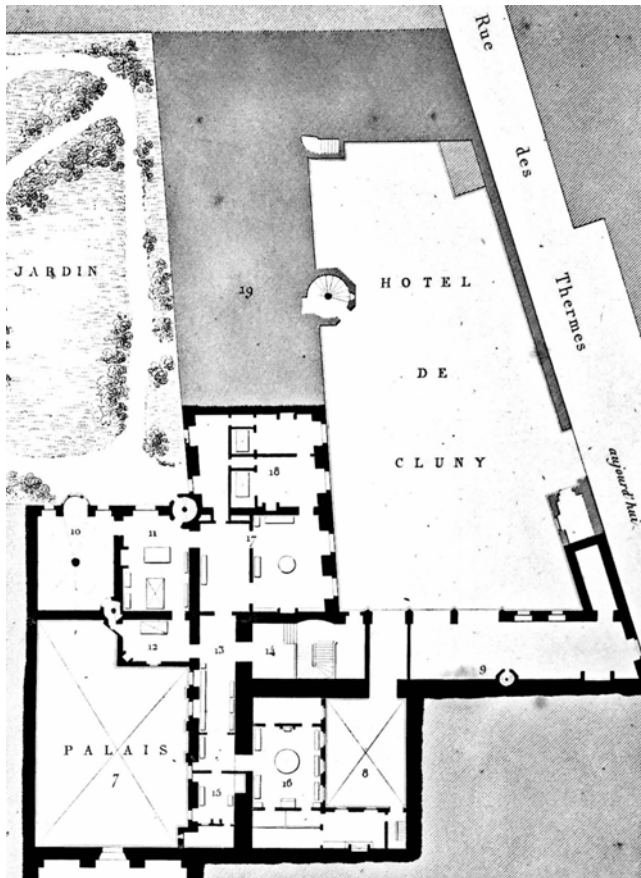
18 “*Ceci prouve clairement que le moyen âge est encore pour nous tout autre chose que matière de science; qu’il correspond à des intérêts plus actuels, plus directs que ceux de l’érudition et de la critique historique, à des sentiments plus généraux, plus vifs que celui de la pure curiosité. [...] D’une part, il est impossible de méconnaître que c’est là le berceau des sociétés et des mœurs modernes*”; Guizot 1840, III, première leçon, 227.

19 Koselleck 1987, 178; Recht 2016, 7, 314.

20 In the course of time, the opening hours extended from twice a month to every week. Du Sommerard 1834, 113; Janin 1842, col. 10.

will shed light on the individual rooms. Based on contemporary sources, I examine the display and mediation strategies that produced an atmosphere reminiscent of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – and, from a broader perspective, of the national history of France.

Fig. 1: Albert Lenoir, *Ground Floor of the Hôtel de Cluny*, lithograph.



Sources

Among the sources allowing us to reconstruct the original character of the Sommerard Museum are two publications written by Du Sommerard himself – a museum guide called *Notice sur l'Hôtel de Cluny* (1834) and the history of medieval art *Les Arts au Moyen-Âge* (1838–1846) – as well as numerous contemporary exhibition reviews and an inventory of the collection written in 1843 in the wake of Du Sommerard's death.²¹ The inventory

21 Du Sommerard 1834; Du Sommerard 1838–1846; Roussel and Sauvageot 1843. I thank Jean-Christophe Ton-That from the Documentation Centre of the Cluny Museum, who drew my attention to the inventory and provided me access.

lists all 1,432 objects according to genre/material and room, and it provides detailed information on the display strategies within the museum.²² The collection included late antique, medieval, and early modern art spanning the fourth to the seventeenth century. The inventory reveals Du Sommerard's preferences as a collector. Besides paintings and sculptures, one should note the significantly high number (175 pieces) of furniture items, which were explicitly understood as art objects in their own right and predominantly came from French castles. Of great importance to the collector were examples of decorative art and everyday objects such as Renaissance furniture (175 pieces), historical weapons (131), sophisticated faience (118), and antique enamels (53 *émaux de Limoges*; 70 *émaux de Bysantinons*).

In addition to collecting, Du Sommerard devoted himself to art-historical research. Inspired by his collection, he wrote a five-volume history of French art from the fifth to the seventeenth century, *Les Arts au Moyen-Âge*, published between 1838 and 1846. The first volume leads the reader on a fictional visit through the museum, portraying in detail the exhibition rooms.²³ The text was accompanied by eleven albums in large folio format with over 500 illustrations, including objects and rooms of the museum. Contemporary artists – such as Achille Devéria, Nicolas Chapuy, Godefroy Engelmann, and Charles-Caius Renoux – executed the predominantly colour lithographs.

The museum attracted some famous visitors – among them Émile Deschamps (*Journal des anecdotes* 1833), Achille Jubinal (*L'artiste* 1834), Michelet in 1835, Rosa de Saint-Surin (*L'Hôtel de Cluny au Moyen-Age* 1835), Jules Janin (*Journal des débats* 1842), and Prosper Mérimée (*Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* 1843) – whose testimonies give a personal account of their visit as well as information about the founder. Deschamps, Jubinal, and de Saint-Surin promised their readers that the contents of the galleries would allow them to 'time travel' to the Middle Ages. Overall, these primary sources bear witness to the original presentation, didactic mediation, and effect on visitors.

The Introduction Room

A visit to the Sommerard Museum began in the first-floor salon.²⁴ Here, the presentation enabled the visitor to become familiar with the museum's historical scope and elaborated narrative. As Lenoir had done at the Museum of French Monuments four decades earlier, Du Sommerard used the first room to reflect on the museum's content in a condensed manner.²⁵ The critic Jules Janin later recalled, in an obituary for the collector, "in the large

22 The objects were distributed among the rooms as follows: salon 91, gallery 261, dining room 241, Henry IV 84, Francis I 376, chapel 284, courtyard and staircase 95. A detailed analysis of the inventory is provided in Gottlob-Linke 2018.

23 Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 402–436. Due to the author's death in 1842, his son, Edmond Du Sommerard, finished the last volume.

24 There have been many controversial discussions about the sequence of the rooms, as summarized by Gottlob-Linke 2018. For the most likely one, see Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 402–436.

25 For the entrance hall at the Museum of French Monuments, see Erlande-Brandenburg 1979a, 80; Chancel-Bardelot 2016, 122–125.

living room, you met the entire collection".²⁶ Hence, this was a programmatic exhibition room: an eye-opener!

The inventory of this first room indicates artefacts spanning the fourth to the seventeenth century – from late antiquity to the beginning of the reign of the Bourbon house. Du Sommerard guided his visitors through the collection and aimed for a highly regulated visitor experience by drawing attention to select objects.²⁷ Among the oldest artefacts in the collection were two fourth-century lion heads carved from rock crystal as well as a sophisticated and particularly eye-catching ivory statuette, *La Panthée*. Furthermore, a Florentine cabinet from around 1600 – decorated with inlays of precious materials like mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, semi-precious stones, and gold – took pride of place within the installation. According to Du Sommerard, this precious piece of furniture was a "jewel to which we have found nothing comparable in France".²⁸ It had belonged to Maria de Medici (1575–1642), the second wife of King Henry IV (r. 1598–1610). Attesting to the beginning of Bourbon rule under Henry IV, the cabinet signals the end-point of the historical account presented at the museum.

From today's perspective, it seems surprising that the museum would characterize the medieval era as encompassing the fourth to the early seventeenth century. Yet, already in 1817, the statesman and historian Pierre Daunou had criticized the term *moyen âge* (Middle Ages), noting that it corresponded to a long, imprecise period whose beginning and end have never been precisely determined.²⁹ Numerous historians prior to Du Sommerard had extended their studies about the Middle Ages equally to the rise of the Bourbon.³⁰ Indeed, it would take until the 1860s to establish a distinction between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as epochs.

The historical time-space of the display also took on importance at a cultural-political level, as the Middle Ages became key to notions of national history. After the upheavals of the revolutions – most recently the July Revolution and the proclamation of Louis-Philippe (r. 1830–1848) as 'King of the French' – the consolidation of a divided France through a shared identity became the most pivotal cause. In this context, increasing importance was assigned both to the Middle Ages and to the historical 'good kings' of France. From the nation's Gallo-Roman beginnings to the rise of Bourbon rule, the Sommerard Museum spanned a period that seemed particularly conducive to re-establishing common roots in order to consolidate the divided nation in the first half of the nineteenth century.

26 "dans le grand salon vous rencontriez la collection complétée"; Janin 1842, col. 11.

27 Du Sommerard 1834, 84; Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 404–405.

28 "Ici, par exemple, le meuble florentin, bijou auquel nous n'avons jusque'ici rien trouvé de comparable, en France"; Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 404.

29 Daunou 1817, 133.

30 E.g. Bernard de Montfaucon's "Les monumens de la monarchie françoise (1729–1733)" or Seroux d'Agincourt's "Histoire de l'art par les monumens: depuis sa décadence au IV^e siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XVI^e" (1823). See Voss 1972; Chaudonneret 1994; Letellier 2015.

Court Life and the 'Good Kings'

The opulent bedroom of King Francis I (r. 1515–1547) was a highlight of the museum, being “filled with his memories and with objects for his personal use”.³¹ The display sought to recreate an atmosphere of the past, suggesting that the spectator had entered the king's chamber. Two lithographs from *Les Arts au Moyen Âge* illustrate the character of the room from different angles. The first (fig. 2) shows a baldachin bed on which armour is arranged, as if the king himself has just laid down to rest. Standing on either side of the bed, two knights watch over the ‘resting king’.

Fig. 2: Isidore Deroy, *The So-Called Chamber of Francis I*, lithograph.



The second lithograph (fig. 3) shows the room from an alternative angle, with the knights seated on either side of a game of chess. Du Sommerard notes that this marvellous rock-crystal chess set had belonged to King Louis IX (r. 1226–1270).³² As Stephen Bann has convincingly argued – and as these two scenes underline – Du Sommerard staged the objects in such a way as to stimulate a vivid image of the past.³³

31 “Elle est remplie d'ailleurs de ses souvenirs et d'objets à son usage personnel”; Du Sommerard 1834, 59.

32 The chess game formed part of the crown jewels until 1791, when Louis XVIII handed it over to a servant, from whom Du Sommerard later acquired it. Du Sommerard 1834, 62; Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 409–410.

33 Bann 1978; Bann 2012.

Fig. 3: Charles Bachelier, *Second View of the So-Called Chamber of Francis I*, lithograph.



Research has nevertheless disregarded the strategic installation of two paintings: a work by the court artist Francesco Primaticcio (1503–1570) and a portrait of Emperor Charles V (r. 1520–1556). The former, then attributed to the Italian painter Primaticcio (fig. 4), shows two young ladies of the court at their toilette.³⁴ The collector guarantees through it the authenticity of the display: “The first overdoor near the bed, a picture by Primaticcio, offers us the complete and necessarily exact appearance of a grand lady’s bedroom at the court of Francis I”.³⁵ The depicted décor, furniture, and period bore stylistic analogies with the room as arranged by Du Sommerard. This painting was of further significance to the installation in that the subject of a woman’s chamber introduced the spectator to life at the French court in the sixteenth century, specifically that of Francis I, for whom Primaticcio worked as a court artist. Du Sommerard thus enhances the atmosphere and authenticity of the scene by presenting a work of art by this painter near the ‘resting king’.

34 The inventory lists the painting as “dans le Style du Primatice” Roussel and Sauvageot 1843, fol. 133, Cl. 853. In 1896, the painting was transferred to the Louvre Museum (inv. no. R.F.994); since 1985 it has been attributed to Toussaint Dubreuils and titled “Hyante et Climène à leur toilette”.

35 “Le premier dessus de porte près du lit, Tableau du Primatice, nous offre l’aspect entier et nécessairement exact d’une chambre à coucher de grande dame de la cour de François I”; Du Sommerard 1834, 66. Du Sommerard 1838–1846, V, 120–121 and Atlas, Cap. VI. Pl. 7.

Fig. 4: After Primaticcio, *Ladies of the Court of Francis I at their Toilette*, lithograph.



The second painting, a half-length portrait of Emperor Charles V in magnificent armour, hung over the doorway on the opposite side of the room (see fig. 3). Du Sommerard sees in the strategically placed painting of the opponent of the French king a renewed confrontation between these two rivals.³⁶ The engagement between the Kingdom of France and the Habsburg Empire of Charles V culminated dramatically in the Battle of Pavia, in which the French king was defeated and captured. Du Sommerard draws

36 "un portrait de Charles -Quint armé de toutes pièces, comme si, dans une seconde visite à son rival"; Du Sommerard 1834, 67. Du Sommerard 1838–1846, V, 120–121. Roussel and Sauvageot 1843, fol. 133, Cl. 854 list the painting as a portrait of Emperor Charles V. Bann 1984, 80, mistakes it as a portrait of the French king.

attention to the armour of the defeated Francis I, displayed to the left of the emperor's portrait, noting:

As for these memories, they are here almost alive, or at least *palpable*. Because a few inches from this portrait of the victor of Pavia are the spoils of the vanquished, the harnesses and swords he wore in this battle and kept, no doubt, as a token of his feat of arms, by the count of Lannoy, vice-king of Naples, to whom our great king returned everything but *his honour*.³⁷

Here, Du Sommerard emphasizes the vivid effect evoked by this juxtaposed arrangement. The objects served the collector in several ways in terms of elaborating famous provenances, introducing the visitor to court life and customs, and – as in the case of the 131 swords, daggers, pistols, and pieces of armour – commemorating battles and their famous protagonists.

When Rosa de Saint-Surin published a description of her visit to the museum, she titled it, ambiguously, *L'Hôtel de Cluny au Moyen-Age* (The Hôtel de Cluny in the Middle Ages). Therein, she notes her inclination to perceive what she sees as reality:

one passes into the room of Francis I. His bed is there!!! [...] it looks like the hero is resting! Two knights standing at the bedside, spears in hand and visors lowered, seem to be still guarding their master. [...] At the glance of these episodic pictures, the imagination is tempted to take the illusion for reality.³⁸

Overwhelmed by the vivid display, de Saint-Surin herself recognizes the armour as staffage. Her gaze glimpses the beauty of precious objects: she is particularly fond of a small manuscript of poems written by André de la Vigne in the sixteenth century for Louise of Savoy, the mother of Francis I, which Du Sommerard placed on a table next to the 'resting king'. De Saint-Surin would ultimately republish these forgotten examples of French literature, enabling the visitor to experience them not only within Du Sommerard's arranged environment but also outside the museum walls.³⁹

Du Sommerard established similar presentation strategies in the room dedicated to Henry IV, called the Good King, by staging furniture items alongside genre paintings. As already pointed out, under the restorative monarchy of Louis XVIII, a 'cult' emerged that

37 "A propos de ces souvenirs, ils sont ici presque vivants, ou du moins palpables, car, à quelques pouces de ce portrait du vainqueur de Pavie, se trouve la dépouille du vaincu, les Étriers et Éperons qu'il portait à cette bataille et que conserva, sans doute, comme gage de son fait d'armes, le comte de Lannoy, vice-roi de Naples, à qui notre grand roi rendit tout, fors l'honneur. Ces trophées, demeurés à Madrid dans la famille de l'ancien général de Charles-Quint, où la nullité de leur valeur matérielle en assura sans doute seule la conservation, ont été recueillies avec empressement par le propriétaire de la collection"; Du Sommerard 1834, 67, emphasis in original.

38 "on passe dans la chambre de François I. Son lit est là!!! [...] on dirait le héros qui repose! Deux chevaliers debout au chevet du lit, la lance en main et la visière baissée, semblent garder encore leur maître. [...] A la vue de ces tableaux épisodiques, l'imagination frappée est tentée de prendre le prestige pour la réalité"; de Saint-Surin 1835, 24.

39 De Saint-Surin 1835 published the *rondeaux* along with other historical texts concerning etiquette, including table manners.

recognized in Henry IV an ideal figure of monarchy. However, with the July Revolution of 1830 and the election of Louis-Philippe as citizen-king, Henry IV's cultural-political currency ended abruptly.⁴⁰ Still, for Du Sommerard, the memories of Henry IV remained inviolable: "Great and good, Henry! A model of bravery and clemency, your physiognomy and your appearance, at once energetic, witty and gallant, [...] heralded the high destinies France would have attained under your reign".⁴¹ According to the inventory, while the chamber of Francis I contained 375 items, the room dedicated to Henry IV seems to have been sparsely equipped, with 84 objects. This unequal distribution across the rooms underlines a thematic focus. Furthermore, it is remarkable that no contemporary visitor refers to an installation space dedicated to the Bourbon king. It remains an open question whether this silence is due to an uninspiring installation or whether the contents were considered too politicized.

Medieval Treasuries

The heart of the *Hôtel de Cluny* is the magnificent late Gothic chapel, with its filigreed stellar vault (figs. 5, 6). Du Sommerard reserved this room for medieval sacred objects and church treasures, including those previously in the holdings of the French clergy and nobility. The spectator could see objects from the ninth to the fifteenth century such as illuminated manuscripts, enamels, ecclesiastical furniture, and altarpieces, as well as monstrances, crosiers, mitres, and precious-metal reliquaries. To preserve the atmosphere of a medieval chapel, the collector featured a large, neo-Gothic sacristy cabinet, incorporating it into a sophisticated narrative.⁴² Central to this display were the preservation of an almost mythical atmosphere and the creation of harmony between the architectural framework and the objects on view.

With the acquisition of the collections of Edme Durand (1824) and Pierre Révoli (1828), medieval objects had recently entered the *Musée du Louvre* (Louvre Museum), thereby becoming part of a state museum policy that was oriented towards fashioning a broader perspective on history.⁴³ However, the museological presentation of Christian artefacts detached from their historical-functional context has met much criticism.⁴⁴

40 Stierle 1987, 466–470.

41 "Grand et bon Henri! Modèle de bravoure et de clémence, ta physionomie et ton allure, à la fois énergiques, spirituelles et galantes, [...] annonçaient seules les hautes destinées que la France eût atteintes sous ton règne"; Du Sommerard 1834, 110.

42 The sacristy cabinet served as a presentation area for smaller objects and enhanced the authentic impression of the location. According to the collector, it originated from the abbey of *Saint-Pol-de-Léon* and dates to the thirteenth century. The later director Alfred Darcel doubted the authenticity of the piece and had it removed. Joubert 1979; Huchard 2009; Fouché 2013.

43 Chaudonneret 1999, 45–49; Bresc-Bautier and Fonkenell 2016, II, 9–103, 243–244; Pomian 2021, 268–307.

44 Poulot 1997b; Brückle, Mariaux, and Mondini 2015.

Fig. 5 (left): Nicolas Chapuy, *Chapel of the Hôtel de Cluny (First View)*, lithograph; Fig. 6 (right): Nicolas Chapuy, *Chapel of the Hôtel de Cluny (Second View)*, lithograph.



The case at the Sommerard Museum was a different one: the installation in the chapel of the former residence of the abbots of Cluny represented a unique opportunity to recreate the atmosphere of a medieval church within a sacred space.⁴⁵ And the museum did so with success. Indeed, contemporary voices underline the convincingness of the presentation: “You found yourself in the Middle Ages”.⁴⁶ The author Émile Deschamps found himself overwhelmed by the abundance of precious objects and expressed admiration for Du Sommerard’s achievement in bringing back to life the opulence of the royal abbey:

The present owner, or rather the creator of this unique museum in France and perhaps in Europe, has reserved this chapel for all the research of taste, all the splendours of luxury. [...] and I do not know where one could find all these [objects] which, under their used magnificence, still attest the opulence of the royal abbeys.⁴⁷

This passage amplifies Du Sommerard’s vision to create an aesthetically convincing space characteristic of medieval taste and luxury. Yet, it also indicates a change in purpose for the objects on view, as compared to their past ritual functionality: they become collectable objects. The reliquaries in particular emphasize this transformation in a crucial way. Du Sommerard summarizes them as a group of objects of varying sizes and dating from the

45 Fouché 2013.

46 “vous vous trouviez en plein Moyen-Age”; Janin 1842.

47 “Le possesseur actuel, ou plutôt le créateur de ce musée unique en France et peut-être en Europe, a réservé pour cette chapelle toutes les recherches du goût, toutes les splendeurs du luxe. [...] et je ne sais où l’on a pu retrouver tous ces [objets] qui, sous leur magnificence usée, attestent encore l’opulence des royales abbayes”; Deschamps 1833, 166–167.

ninth to the twelfth century.⁴⁸ He gives no further explanation about their former use or dedication; rather, their beauty, materiality, strangeness, and historical value are emphasized. Although the ecclesiastical objects have returned to a sacred setting, they have lost their original function. They take on a new meaning, one no longer related to cult practice but to historiography. The artefacts handed down from the churches, monasteries, and abbeys exchange their religious function for the memory of the past.⁴⁹ At the Sommerard Museum, medieval church treasures could be seen, explored, understood, and admired in a historicizing architectural framework, thus allowing the spectator to discover this aspect of the (Christian) history of France.

The Glory of (French) Art

After a glimpse into court life and the former opulence of church treasures, the visitor entered the gallery – a corridor off which the individual rooms radiated – which was dedicated to Renaissance art. The display assembled paintings, sculptures, and furniture, along with spolia from historic French monuments. Du Sommerard juxtaposed artworks from the Italian school of Sebastiano del Piombo, Luca della Robbia, and Benvenuto Cellini with the German and Flemish schools represented by the van Eyck brothers, Albrecht Dürer, Lucas van Leyden, and Hans Memling. Over the years, Du Sommerard's peculiar attributions have lost much of their validity. Nevertheless, his observations on the materiality and light effects of these Northern masters, in contrast to the compositions of the Italian school, offered guidance to the attentive spectator.⁵⁰

The main focus of the gallery lies in the representation of French art, monuments, and artists. The inventory of the gallery counts at least fifty pieces of furniture, foremost furnishings and spolia from historic French monuments. The collector points to pieces selected from medieval and Renaissance castles and elaborates on the history of these magnificent monuments of French history. A wooden door from the *Château d'Anet*, which belonged to Diane de Poitiers, a courtier and the mistress of King Henry II (r. 1547–1559), is repeatedly referenced as a masterpiece of the sixteenth century.⁵¹ Artefacts like this one served the collector as signifiers of the architectural buildings from which they originated as well as of their prominent inhabitants. Certain precious pieces were based on designs by the sixteenth-century French sculptor Jean Goujon, whom Lenoir had crowned the 'French Phidias' only a few years earlier.⁵²

The gallery left a strong impression on contemporary visitors. Rosa de Saint-Surin noted her delight in being surrounded by these magnificent objects, which had adorned the palaces of the kings and nobility:

48 "pour ne pas faire un catalogue in-folio, nous citerons d'abord, par droit de primogéniture, quelques figures et coffres en cuivre et en ivoire, travail des 9, 10 et 11 siècles. Une belle Croix portable à deux faces, du 12 siècle, et bon nombre de reliquaires, grands, moyens et petits"; Du Sommerard 1834, 48.

49 Brückle 2015. See Pomian 1988, who established the term 'semiophore' for similar cycles of transformation.

50 Du Sommerard 1834, 89–101; Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 422–425.

51 Du Sommerard 1834, 59; Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 416.

52 For Lenoir's appreciation of Jean Goujon, see Poulot 1997a, 1524; Montalbetti 2016.

[Du Sommerard] lived there, surrounded by the furniture, bas-reliefs, paintings and stained glass, which in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries adorned the palaces of our kings and the more modest mansions of the great ones of the kingdom. France, Italy, Brabant, the German Reich, and the whole of ancient Europe were all put to contribution by him. One would think being next to Maximilian of Austria, Francis I, and Leo X; one is witnessing the Renaissance!!!⁵³

For her, the display conjured medieval and Renaissance Europe. Later, in an obituary for the collector published in the *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de France*, the author recalled the gallery as a neutral terrain:⁵⁴ indeed, in contrast to the other rooms, which invoked French history, the gallery opened up a broader perspective, shedding light on the glory of French art as well as that of its neighbouring countries.

French Cuisine and Domestic Customs

A visit to the Sommerard Museum ended in the dining room, which engaged French cuisine and domestic culture. In this space, Du Sommerard discussed historical recipes, table manners, and related customs. A laid table and Gothic-style sideboards displayed objects ranging from goblets (*cupa magistra*), ceramic tableware, cutlery, and Venetian glasses, as well as ancient cups recently discovered during excavations in the *Quartier Latin*. To enhance the atmosphere of a medieval bourgeois setting, Du Sommerard refers to forgotten customs, to medieval and Renaissance toasts, and to the history of viticulture and of certain French dishes.⁵⁵

The collector is particularly fond of his 118 pieces of faience, all arrayed in the dining room. He draws attention to numerous rustic wares by the French potter Bernard Palissy, who became famous for his large, oval platters decorated with animals, insects, and vegetation. The works by Palissy are described as “productions so original and varied by the genius creator for France”.⁵⁶ By discussing national customs and traditions, including everyday matters such as nourishment, conviviality, and table manners, Du Sommerard sought to present visitors with a historical setting in which they could learn about the roots of their own culture.

53 “[Du Sommerard] y vit, entouré des meubles, des bas-reliefs, des peintures et des vitraux, qui aux quinzième et seizième siècles ornaient les palais de nos rois et les hôtels plus modestes des grands du royaume. La France, l'Italie, le Brabant, l'Allemagne, toute l'ancienne Europe, ont été par lui mis à contribution. On se croirait auprès de Maximilien d'Autriche, de François I et de Léon X; on assiste à la Renaissance!!!”; de Saint-Surin 1835, 22–23.

54 Anonymous 1842, 296.

55 Du Sommerard 1834, 102–110; Du Sommerard 1838–1846, I, 425–433.

56 “productions si originales et si variées dues au génie, créateur pour la France”; Du Sommerard 1834, 105–106.

Conclusions

National museums are “manifestations of cultural and political desires”.⁵⁷ The Sommerard Museum was neither a national gallery nor a national museum, however. Rather, it was a private collection that contemporaries regarded as a museum and praised as the most precious collection of national antiquities.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Du Sommerard’s holdings became an expression of and an answer to the cultural and political desires of the time, and they fulfilled the expectations of a national museum. The didactic presentation of the collection captured a broad picture of French history and introduced the spectator to royal, ecclesiastic, and domestic costumes, mores, and traditions. Du Sommerard’s goal was to create, in a medieval building, a harmonious ensemble of architectural framing and historical objects in order to visualize national history. The combination of architecture, art, and domestic objects sought to offer an authentic image of the past.

The key to the success of the concept was the collector himself. His much-frequented guided tours resembled history lectures, oscillating between facts and fiction. He staged the spaces like a dramaturge to elaborate both key narratives (e.g. Francis I) and ancillary ones (e.g. Henry IV). Whether general explanations or fascinating anecdotes about individual objects, his comments aspired to educate and enchant the visitor at the same time. Each room introduced the spectator to different aspects of French history, ranging from court life, historic battles, and poems and literature, to the medieval treasures of Christian art, to customs of domestic life. The atmosphere and narrative were thereby assigned greater importance than historical truth or consistency. Nevertheless, contemporary visitors emphasized the convincingness of the arrangement, describing an impressive experience of immersing themselves in a vanished civilization, for example, in the ‘good old days’ of chivalry.⁵⁹ A visit to the Sommerard Museum seems to have been a journey into a vivid image of France’s past.

In 1843, Prosper de Barante argued before the Chamber of Peers in favour of the benefits of this remarkable collection as a place for young students to plunge into history and witness the old centuries, which at the *Hôtel de Cluny* seemed to still be alive.⁶⁰ He articulated his conviction that the museum would be a place of research and study – a place to educate oneself and to be educated, all by encountering memories of French national history.

In May 2022, the Cluny Museum reopened after extensive renovation. The event received media attention via Instagram, Twitter, and advertising and promised a modern, hip, and lively ‘Middle Ages of the New Generation’ (fig. 6). Whether in short videos, posters, or memes, various stars from the Christian Middle Ages gathered to celebrate: a preacher serves as a DJ, setting the beat; nuns and putti wave, wearing sunglasses; Adam sips a Coke; and a knight plays a guitar. As in the days of Du Sommerard, the new museum aims to present the Middle Ages in a colourful, cheerful, and vivid way. Likewise,

57 Aronsson and Elgenius 2015, 2.

58 Anonymous 1836.

59 “vous marchez au milieu d’une civilisation disparue; vous êtes comme enveloppés des bons vieux temps chevaleresques”; Deschamps 1833, 165.

60 Reprinted in de Barante 1858, 420–422.

today's voices seem equally enchanted by the reopened museum, describing a sensitively reimagined display that breathes new life into medieval masterpieces.⁶¹ As a result, "the Middle Ages are probably nowhere as lively and modern as at the Cluny Museum".⁶² Obviously, the conservative, dusty Middle Ages needed a spring cleaning. And Du Sommerard's basic idea lives on: educating through a vivid image of the past.

Fig. 7: Musée de Cluny. *Le Moyen Âge – Nouvelle Génération*; campaign poster for the reopening of the Cluny Museum.



61 Wellesley 2022.

62 "Die Besucher dort sind begeistert über die neue Präsentation, denn so lebendig und modern, wie im Musée de Cluny ist das Mittelalter wohl nirgends"; Markert 2022, min. 6:34.

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