The storming of the Bastille on the 14 of July 1789 is celebrated as the birthdate of the French Republic. The 14th century fortress had been used as a prison and was seen as a symbol of the monarch’s abuses of power. Demolition began immediately by order of the new Committee of the Hôtel de Ville, and pieces of the building were sent across France and the world as icons of the overthrow of absolutism—the key to the Bastille still hangs today in Mount Vernon, George Washington’s home. The Bastille is the most famous example in a slew of monuments that were completely or partially destroyed sometimes by revolutionary zeal. Henri Grégoire valiantly denounced the tide of destruction, coining the word “vandalism,” in reference to the Germanic tribe that sacked Rome in 455, to describe the pecuniary motivations behind much of the damage. Amidst food riots and the first purges of the Reign of Terror, Grégoire cast vandalism as stealing from the Republic, which now owned the very monarchical properties that were being looted. Grégoire attempted to de-politicize heritage in order to save it. The fact that a work was commissioned or owned by a tyrant was an external circumstance. What mattered was the artistic and intellectual content expressed by the original artist, which he argued was valuable knowledge as a testament to the French genius. At a time when things that had always appeared to belong together were being separated, like church and state, Grégoire pioneered the theoretical argument about the autonomy of art, a distinction that continues to be debated. Grégoire was born in 1750 in Veho, in Lorraine, France. Educated in Nancy, he became a priest, and after gaining fame for his writings, was elected in 1789 as a representative of the clergy to the Estates-General. A republican, he supported the rights of Jews and racial minorities, the abolition of slavery and freedom of worship. He also promoted public libraries and botanical gardens. He became a bishop in the nationalized Catholic Church, and, while supporting the abolition of the monarchy, remained steadfast in his clerical role during de-Christianizing campaigns of the Revolution. He was a member of the Senate under Napoleon Bonaparte, opposing Napoleon's reconciliation with the Vatican—resigning his episcopal see in 1801—and the proclamation of the French Empire. After the Bourbon restoration, Abbé Grégoire, still an antimonarchist, was elected to the lower house of the assembly but was prevented from taking his seat. Grégoire died in Paris in 1831.

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