The belongings of the Nation have suffered vast dilapidations, because the looters, who always have a logic all their own, have said: we are the nation. Despite the ill will that is generally cast upon anyone who has grown rich in the revolution, several have not been clever enough to hide the colossal fortunes they have suddenly amassed. Once, these men barely lived off the products of their labor. But for some time now, they have stopped working and are drowning in abundance.

It is in the domain of the arts that the greatest embezzlements have been committed. Do not think it is an exaggeration when you hear that the record alone of all the objects that have been taken, destroyed or degraded would fill several volumes. The Commission temporaire des arts [Temporary Arts Commission], with its indefatigable zeal, regards as a prized conquest any monument that it has wrested from the ignorance, greed, and counter-revolutionary spirit that seem to have banded together to impoverish and dishonor the Nation.

While flames are devouring one of the most beautiful libraries of the Republic, while warehouses full of combustibles seem to threaten other libraries still, vandalism is intensifying its efforts. Not a single day goes by without reports of some new and grievous destruction. And since the laws for the conservation of monuments are either ineffectual or unimplemented, we thought we ought to present for your solicitude a detailed report on the matter. The National Convention will doubtless hasten to issue a resounding cry of indignation throughout all France, calling for good citizens to keep a watchful eye: over monuments of art so as to conserve them, and over the counter-revolutionary authors and instigators of these offenses, so as to bring them under the sword of the law.

The pillaging started five years ago with the libraries, where many monks made a profitable selection. It is certainly they who removed from Senones the only manuscript of the Chronicle of Richerius, just as years ago they had torn out of the Chronicle of Geoffroy de Vendôme the famous letter to Robese d’Arbissel.

Libraries, whose interest rarely goes dormant, profited from this circumstance. In 1791, many of the books stolen in the aforementioned monasteries of Saint-Jean de Laon and Saint-Faron de Meant, were sold to the hotel de Bullion, according to the catalog of the Abbé *** (a title invented to evade suspicion).
Several laws and instructions issued by the three national assemblies were intended for the conservation of literary treasures. Neither the letter nor the spirit of these decrees was ever meant to authorize a sale. The one from 23 October 1790 orders that seals be affixed, and that inventories be made and sent to the Comité d’instruction publique [Committee for Public Instruction]. Yet books and pictures have been sold in whole or in part in the districts of Charleville, Langres, Joigny, Auxerre, Montivilliers, Gournay, Carentan, Neufchâtel, Gisors, l’Aigle, Lisieux, Saint-Agnan, Romorentin, Châtillon-sur-Indre, Château-Renaud, Thonon, la Marche, Vihiers, Riom, Tarascoa et Montflanquin.

Legislators thought they put a stop to this disorderliness with the law of 10 October 1792. But despite this law, sales took place in the district of Lute, Cullet and Saint-Maixent. Of the administrations that did not sell, most left their bibliographic riches prey to insects, dust and rain. We just learned that in Arnay books were stored in barrels. Books in barrels!

On 22 Germinal, the Comité d’instruction publique gave you an account of its work on the bibliography, the first such report ever made. The National Convention directed administrations to send these catalogs more quickly, and to report on their accomplishments from the past decade. Through our most active and most fraternal correspondence, we have ceaselessly tried to illuminate and stimulate this endeavor. We owe praise to several administrative bodies, which have sent new dispatches amounting to around twelve hundred thousand cards, or about three million volumes. But others did not even bother to write. A new circular letter is underway, announcing that, should it remain unanswered, their conduct would be denounced to the National Convention.

But even among those who have responded, some still harbor, I would not say a mania but a furor for destroying and burning, despite explicit decrees and the most formal instructions. As you can imagine, this process is more expedient than making an inventory. So it was done in Narbonne, where many books have been sent to the armory, and in Fontaine lès-Dijon, where the library of the Feuillans monastery has been put to waste and thrown into a room for old papers.

Others propose to make a choice, that would put aside licentious, absurd or counter-revolutionary books. There will come a day when we will consider whether these illegitimate and poisonous productions must be kept, to complete the picture of human aberrations. The Convention will then provide a starting point for determining which works will be conserved to make up our libraries. But if individual pronouncements on this matter are permitted, then each person will enact the limitation in his own way. Some individuals, who may have false taste, or may be only narrowly enlightened, could form a revolutionary tribunal that would arbitrarily prohibit certain writers, and pronounce death warrants against their writings. Not only would Horatio and Virgil be tried for having supported a tyrant, but also for having often published under the imprint of another tyrant.

How can we not be indignant, when burning is justified by saying that books are poorly bound? Must we again repeat that the attributes of typographical luxury were lavished upon writings that incite vice and tyranny, whereas those works precious for their purity of principle, and containing also some revolutionary powder, were condemned to the obscurity of attics?
Many of the libraries of the mendicant orders, to which some people attach very little importance, contain editions from the first age of printing. (Such is the case with the aforementioned cloister of the Recollets, in Saverne.)

These editions are exceedingly dear, and the exemplars we speak of are perfectly conserved, since they have never been on the market. These are the kinds of books that make up the library of a Mr. Paris, which was unfortunately allowed to leave France, after the British printed its catalog. Any of these books valued here to a few écus, was sold in London for 125 guineas.

Let us make clear to the burners and the new Iconoclasts, who are more fiery than the last, that certain works derive great value from their accessories. The missal of the Capet Chapel in Versailles was going to be used to make gunpowder cartridges, until the national library got a hold of it. The material, workmanship, vignettes and illuminations of this book are masterpieces.

Besides, even poorly executed miniatures, poorly designed lamp stands, and volumes filled with formless figures, have often served to illuminate the facts of history, by fixing dates, and by reproducing musical instruments, war machines and costumes which are only very imperfectly described in writing.[…]

You have proscribed any object that recalls the enslavement of peoples, and with good reason. But as a result, one sought to destroy the pictures of a woman painter, because she was supposedly an émigrée.iv

To destroy the pictures by Carraci in our colleague Bourquier’s shop, because they appear to be cult objects.

To destroy the works of Lesueur because they feature Carthusian monks, and to obliterate once and for all these masterpieces which were already damaged by envy a century ago.

In Praslin, a district of Melun, statues of the pagan gods have been smashed as if they were feudal monuments.

In Ecouen, there were two bas-reliefs representing winged women raising the weapons of Montmorency. The coat of arms could have been scratched off without damaging the figures. It was even proposed that republican emblems be engraved instead, embossed in the manner of Egyptian hieroglyphs. But the opposite was done. The heads of the women were wrecked, and the arms of Montmorency were conserved. Just recently a beautiful white marble statue was also shattered there; its debris lie in the courtyard.

Worse has been done: men armed with sticks and preceded by terror went to the homes of citizens, and the shops of printmakers. A binding, a vignette, became pretexts for destroying books, geographic maps, engravings, and pictures. Even the print that retraces the martyrdom of Charles the First was torn up, because it had a coat of arms. Well! If only, God willing, the engraving could lead us on a real-life path to the head of every monarch, at the risk of finding them next to some ridiculous crest.

For sure, everything must be made to speak to the eyes in a republican tongue. But we would slander liberty if we supposed that her triumph depends upon the conservation or the destruction of an image that bears the mark of despotism. And when monuments provide works of great beauty, their conservation (as ordered by the law of 3 Frimaire) will simultaneously nourish genius and boost hatred against tyrants, by condemning them to a sort of perpetual pillory. This is the case of the mausoleum of Richelieu, one of Giradon’s masterpieces.
Such was the frenzy of the barbarians that they proposed to take all armored books and tear off all dedications, all imprints—in other words, to destroy everything.

You can be sure that this new genre of fanaticism appeals strongly to the taste of the British. They will pay high prices for all your beautiful editions ad usum delphini [in their censored state], and, if they cannot have them, they will gladly pay for their destruction. […]

To annihilate all the monuments that honor the French genius and all the men who could widen the horizon of our knowledge; to provoke these crimes, then to put the revolution on trial by attributing them to us; in a word, to barbarize us, and then to cry to other nations that we were barbarians worse than those Muslims who trample with disdain over the remnants of our majestic antiquity- this was one of the sectors of the anti-revolutionary system.

To unmask this conspiracy is to defeat it. Citizens will be aware of these traps that have been set for their loyalty, and they will report these foreign emissaries, who must be crushed by the course of the revolutionary chariot. A horde of thieves has emigrated, but the arts will not emigrate. Like us, the arts are children of liberty; like us, they have a homeland, and we will leave this double heritage to posterity.[…]

Citizens, what a woeful picture indeed we have drawn before your eyes, by speaking to you of monuments destroyed.

But this new set of crimes should be added to all the crimes of our enemies: by entrusting this material to history we compound the contempt and execration that will weigh on them forever. To prove that they wanted to dissolve our political society through the extinction of morals and enlightenment is only to render morals and enlightenment dearer to us. […]

The scientific objects of which we have spoken almost all come from the castles and gardens of the tyrant, from ecclesiastical and academic corporations, and from émigrés. The storehouse of the émigré Castries alone contains more than twenty thousand interesting manuscript pieces. Such acquisitions were often made in blind opulence, and with no knowledge of their richness. So it is said that Law (author of the Law system) having learned that good custom commanded him to have a library, asked a bookshop owner to give him a price for books by the foot. These repositories, which could once only be seen by special favor, and whose exclusive enjoyment flattered the pride and fed the ambition of a few individuals, will henceforth be enjoyable by all. The sweat of the people has transformed into books, statues, and pictures; the people have recovered their property. […]

To fulfill the task of this report, we will propose some means for suppressing these dilapidations. They are caused by ignorance, which must be enlightened; negligence, which must be stimulated; ill-will and aristocracy, which must be contained. What! In the span of a century, barely a few great men emerge from nature’s miserly breast. Thirty years of preliminary studies and of continuous work are needed to produce a profound book, a painting, a statue that has great style. And the torch of a stupid man, or the hatchet of a barbaric one, destroys them in an instant! Yet such are the deeds that, repeated daily, force us to moan at the loss of a host of masterpieces.

A precious monument is generally known as such. In Moulins, nobody is unaware that there exists a highly prized mausoleum; in Strasbourg, everyone knows the Tomb of Maurice de Saxe by Pigalle; and if by lack of knowledge or taste one may not know to
appreciate these objects, where is the risk in asking? Nothing is wiser than this philosopher’s maxim: when in doubt, abstain. Besides, there are monuments that do not bear the mark of genius but are still precious for the history of art.[…]

Let an incessant golden ray of light be seen emanating from France, illuminating all peoples and inflaming all thrones. That tyrants fear enlightenment provides incontestable proof that enlightenment is necessary to republicans. Liberty is the daughter of cultivated reason, and nothing is more counter-revolutionary than ignorance; it deserves the same hatred as royalty.

Let us then, as much as possible, inscribe on all monuments and engrave in our hearts this maxim: “Barbarians and slaves hate science and destroy monuments of art. Free men love and conserve them.”

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i Grégoire uses the term mobilier, refers to moveable property, in opposition to immobilier, which refers to immoveable property.

ii Fripons, a common revolutionary term designating the bands of thieves that pillaged through France.

iii The Commission temporaire des arts was a group of artists and scholars created in 1793 to succeed the Commission des monuments (created in 1790) and take up its mission: inventorying the immense artistic and historic heritage which once belonged to the Crown, to the Church, and to aristocrats, and decide what could be sold, what may be destroyed, and what should be kept as part of the newly constituted national patrimony, les biens nationaux. The Commission operated by sending and receiving letters and decrees, called instructions, to local representatives nation-wide.

iv Émigré was a revolutionary term designating an aristocrat who had fled France.

v John Law was a Scottish economist who advocated an economic system, known in France as the Système de Law, based on paper money rather than metal coins.