The Imagery of Interior Spaces

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Artful Arrangements: Interior Space in Edmond de Goncourt’s *La maison d’un artiste*

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Edmond de Goncourt’s *La maison d’un artiste* (1881) is a difficult work to classify within the large body of Goncourt non-fiction, primarily because it seems to sit astride generic boundaries, incorporating elements of some of the brothers’ better-known projects, notably art historical works like *L’art du XVIIIe siècle* and their voluminous journals.¹ It is a catalogue, characterized by long lists of objects and possessions, but it is nonetheless stylized, not only because long narrative passages recounting key episodes related to the collections under discussion accompany the lists, but also because the lists themselves only rarely read as such. What the reader finds in the pages of its two volumes is not only documentary text, but also paragraphs of prose that serve as a record while maintaining a readability that is lacking in most other contemporary catalogues, including those prepared to accompany the eventual sales of the Goncourt collections.

At its most superficial level, the text is defined by multiple boundaries. Indeed, the work’s several chapters represent not only textual divisions, but physical divisions as well, since they divide the home in the same way that its walls do, so that the text becomes a kind of hyper-detailed schematic. That the chapter divisions function as delimiters of physical as well as textual space is likewise made apparent by the fact that the two volumes that make up the work progress logically through the space as if the reader were actually touring the home, with volume one beginning in the vestibule and volume two taking the reader through the home’s private spaces, concluding in the garden. The very purpose of this text, it would seem, is to grant a larger audience access to the home, allowing them to cross its threshold and disappear into a fabricated environment as far removed as possible from the banality and the unpleasantness of typical, everyday life.

Speaking purely in terms of its basic organization into chapters, the text is both taxonomical and hierarchical; while certain spaces, notably the salons and the library (which doubles as a workspace), are described in lengthy chapters, and others, like the vestibule, receive shorter descriptions, every space is addressed in order. If on the surface the text seems to follow a very straightforward order, though, upon closer inspection its internal boundaries reveal themselves to be as permeable as the spaces it facsimiles, and equally as subject to disruption. This is true on several levels: first, some of the Goncourt collections are large enough to require space in more than one room and, therefore, in more than one chapter; this is the case, for instance, of the collection of French works on paper, which occupies both salons and the stairwell. Second, episodes related to collections displayed in one space sometimes take place in another part of the house, subtly challenging the authority of the chapter headings; one such episode, to which I will return in what follows, is a key narrative passage that functions as a perfect microcosm of this already claustrophobic work. Third, multiple collections sometimes intermingle within individual spaces, as in the dining room where an heirloom serving-board is foiled by an im-
ported folding screen decorated with a floral motif. This kind of juxtaposition is a key feature of this and other Goncourt works, and one that Pamela Warner has explored in more detail; significantly, she notes that Edmond’s practice of pairing French and Far Eastern objects is linked with his overall tendency to “[see] Japanese art through eyes deeply familiar with eighteenth-century France,” a tendency that “caused [him] to find connections in surprising places.”

According to noted collector Samuel Bing, writing in the introduction to the catalogue for the sale of the Goncourt collections in 1897, “the honor of having affirmed the solidarity of all the arts, and the fact that they ought to be grouped, not according to their local origins, but rather according to the affinities between them, belongs to the Goncourts.”

The Literary within the Documentary

Given the grand scale and exceptional quality of the brothers’ collections, and the work’s title, where the term artiste clearly references their écriture artiste while simultaneously emphasizing its links with the plastic arts tradition precisely via its erasure of the term écriture, it is not particularly difficult to think of the home as a museum space. Indeed, Edmond himself makes the comparison fairly explicit with his continual insistence upon the quality of his objects and upon his own skill in arranging them. We might just as easily imagine the artist’s home as a gallery of his work, or else as a work in its own right. Juliet Simpson has called attention to the way in which the title designates La maison d’un artiste “as a work of singular artistry” as well as noting “a growing interest in the art-work potential of the domestic

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home.” Considering the space from this perspective suggests a fourth boundary that is disrupted by the work, namely, that between institutionalized display spaces and private domestic space.

All of these disruptions owe in some sense to the work’s identity as a catalogue, that is to say, as a realistic representation of the home’s contents. If we take the text at face value, we might say that artistic intentionality is lacking in it, since a catalogue may be categorized as a purely documentary text. Immediately, though, we are confronted again with the title and its incontrovertible designation of its author’s profession. To begin to appreciate the work as something more than a detailed, prosaic exegesis of fin-de-siècle aesthetics, then, it becomes necessary to consider the breakdown of boundaries not only within the home’s rooms and within the text’s chapters, but also between genres. La maison d’un artiste is a hybrid: like most of the many hundreds of catalogues published in the second half of the nineteenth century to accompany high-profile art auctions, it is comprehensive, offering all the detail another enthusiast could desire; unlike these texts, it includes narrative passages.

These passages and the anecdotes they recount are easily justified from a literary perspective. As would such passages in an extended work of fiction, they punctuate the text, adding variety and interest beyond that provided by the objects themselves. This uneven weighting of description and action in La maison d’un artiste is complementary to the novelistic aesthetic that developed over the course of the nineteenth century in which descriptions of objects balance narrative. Edmond’s stories, like the collections that run the gamut from centuries-old Chinese and Japanese porcelain to custom-bound editions of contemporary literature, vary widely and include tales reproduced from books in the library, as well as intimate stories about the life he shared with his brother (for whom Malin Zimm has called the work “a kind of epitaph”) and his own solitary life following

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Jules’s death. Importantly, they are equally characterized by an instability between past and present, and memory and reality.5

Indeed, although its narrative is sparser, *La maison d’un artiste* is easily grouped with paradigmatic novels of collecting. The collection of works on paper, which includes works by Old Masters like Fragonard and Boucher, recalls the art collection in Balzac’s *Le cousin Pons*, for example, and the links between Edmond’s catalogue and Huysmans’s *À rebours* are undeniable.6 The misfit collection amassed by Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, too, is worth mentioning, since *La maison d’un artiste* is essentially a record of the same kind of project, but undertaken by two discerning collectors rather than two clueless, bourgeois retirees. This darkly funny novel has more to do with Edmond’s catalogue than might at first be evident, for if we can agree that Edmond and Jules had a good eye for works of art and other objects that would appreciate in value, we cannot say that they benefitted from extraordinary means in the purchasing of their collections. However, the key aspect of Flaubert’s unfinished novel that finds an echo in Goncourt’s exactly contemporary narrative catalogue is the notion of collecting as a social rather than a solitary endeavor.

Turning first to the work’s identity as a reminiscence on the good times he shared with Jules, then, I cite a remark Goncourt makes early in the text as he enumerates the dining room’s contents, recalling fond memories of the dinner parties they used to give. He writes: “At that time, we were two: practically a married couple entertaining. Today the dining room is nothing more than the dining room of a lonely old man.” 7 This remark not

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6 See Bertrand Bourgeois, “*La maison d’un artiste* et *À rebours*: Du livre comme objet de collection à la maison-œuvre d’art,” *Voix Plurielles* 5, no. 1 (2008), for a detailed comparative analysis of the two works.

7 “Dans ce temps […] nous étions deux: c’était presque un ménage qui recevait […] Aujourd’hui la salle à manger […] n’est plus que la salle à manger d’un vieil homme seul” (Edmond de Goncourt, *La maison d’un artiste* [Paris: Charpentier, 1881], 1:21. *Hereafter cited as MA*). All translations are my own.
only suggests the closeness the two brothers shared in life, but also casts Edmond in the role of the widower who preserves, or conserves, the domestic space following the death of his spouse. Indeed, Claire O’Mahony has noted that Goncourt’s constant engagement with the house following Jules’s death seems to have functioned as a coping mechanism for that loss.\(^8\) If his sentimentality is hard to overlook, this is hardly a case where a death is the only catalyst for conservation. While this is made clear enough by the fact that Goncourt mentions any number of cherished objects purchased after Jules’s death, it is also significant that he considers, at some length, his own passion for collecting, in the chapter devoted to the *Cabinet de travail* where he traces the development of his identity as an *amateur* back to his childhood.

Goncourt begins with a pathologizing reflection on his collecting practice, musing, “I have often wondered about my passion for trinkets, which has made me miserable and happy all my life. Finding in my memory those manic days of unreasonable purchases, I have wondered if this disease was an accident or whether it was hereditary.”\(^9\) His introduction of the notion of heredity here lacks the connotations of decline it so often carried in the nineteenth century. Rather than acknowledge himself and Jules as the termini of their family tree, Goncourt instead positions himself at the pinnacle of his family’s line of collectors; he passes over his father, who took a greater interest in practical objects, naming his mother and aunt, who were themselves collectors and with whom he experienced “the first and expansive happiness of acquisition,” as his key role models.\(^10\)


\(^9\) “souvent je me suis interrogé sur cette passion de bibelot qui m’a fait misérable et heureux toute ma vie […] retrouvant dans ma mémoire ces journées maladives d’achats déraisonnables […] je me demandais si cette maladie était un accident […] ou si ce n’était plutôt une maladie héréditaire” (*MA*, 2:354).

\(^10\) “le premier et expansif bonheur de l’acquisition” (*MA*, 1:357).
their shopping trips, he deduces that it was these women “who made me the collector that I was, that I am, and that I will be all my life.”¹¹ These reflections suggest that Goncourt’s transcription of the home makes it both a monument to himself and to his legacy in the same way that certain objects in the home, like the serving board mentioned above, function as surrogates for the late Jules while others recall relatives more distant in time. The urge to monumentalize, common to artists of all stripes, is straightforwardly set out in his journal entry for July 7, 1883 — which Brigitte Koyama-Richard has already connected with *La maison d’un artiste* — where he writes: “It is an ongoing preoccupation of mine to survive myself, to leave behind me images of my person and of my house.”¹²

Certainly, the home Goncourt created and catalogued excels the stereotypically overdone literary nineteenth-century interior, but it does so in a counterintuitively (though perhaps insincerely) unpretentious way. For example, he asserts that the collection of works on paper demonstrates “what a poor devil can amass by spending a little money on one thing.”¹³ Obviously anyone who is consistently spending money on art and collectibles cannot properly be said to be lacking means, yet Goncourt points to certain works that he was genuinely unable to purchase that still haunt him; one striking example is a Boucher drawing of Madame de Pompadour that he likens to “a woman that something stupid [money] kept you from possessing.”¹⁴ He equally mentions works he did purchase at a discount that he wishes he could have paid full price for, like a Jean-Michel

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¹¹ “qui ont fait de moi le bibeloteur que j’ai été, que je suis, et que je serai toute ma vie” (*MA*, 1:357).


¹³ “ce qu’un pauvre diable […] en massant un rien d’argent sur une seule chose, peut faire” (*MA*, 1:28).

¹⁴ “une femme qu’un rien stupide vous a empêché de posséder” (*MA*, 1:51–3).
Moreau that he purchased for 400 francs after its owner was unable to get her asking price of 1,000, and notes his regret over not having had the money to spend.15

If the collections were assembled according to bourgeois financial considerations (indeed, the house itself, purchased for 100,000 francs, is characterized as an “unreasonable purchase for the bourgeois reason [again, money]” in their journal), they nonetheless evince the aristocratic attitudes of their owners.16 It is clear, for instance, that the brothers had no particular intention of selling what they purchased at a profit, despite selling off part of their collection in 1856 to refine it, even if Edmond sometimes lists auction prices for comparable items. To be sure, the collection included many objectively valuable objects and works of art whose value only appreciated, particularly as the years passed and ancien régime collectibles again became desirable and, importantly, as the vogue for all things “Oriental” gained momentum. However, to continue with the comparison between this private home and the public museum, a space whose primary aim is to broaden a given collection’s audience, it is worth noting the slippage between Goncourt’s eagerness in the role of interior decorator and his comparable passion in the role of curator; he genuinely loves these objects, but he also understands them as belonging to an important collection, and he is by no means blind to their significant market value.

In this sense, aesthetic and affective attachment seem to be on almost equal footing in the text. As I noted above, Goncourt’s sentimentality is in evidence in many spaces throughout the home; in his bedroom, there is another family heirloom, a small chest that belonged to his grandmother and housed her cachemires, where he stores sentimental objects that evoke her and other departed family members, such as a bank register dating from the Directory, his mother’s wedding ring, his

15 MA, 1:118–19.
16 Koyama-Richard emphasizes how the house itself is instrumental in the acquisition of the collections (Koyama-Richard, “La maison d’un artiste,” ii). See also Edmond de Goncourt, Journal des Goncourt, 3:234: “achat […] déraisonnable pour la raison bourgeois.”
father’s military cross, and a lock of his sister Lili’s hair. Yet, interestingly given the very personal nature of this object, the most significant element of this particular décor, and the focus of the narrative text describing it, are the tapestries that line its walls and to which Goncourt seems equally attached. It is these works that truly succeed in transporting him away from the nineteenth-century present and into the past, and that make “this bedroom a bedroom of the last century.” He describes at length the ways in which these embroidered works interact with the light in the room at various times of the day noting that they are particularly suggestive (and lifelike) in the semi-lucid moment between dreaming and waking. He wonders why tapestry, which he likens to painting throughout this passage, does not seem to inspire children’s curiosity when “an exchange of curiosity, of faith, and of affection with the tapestry’s characters” might be possible. In addition to his personal longing for a time before his brother’s death, then, Goncourt experiences a kind of aesthetic longing to step from his already rarified reality into the even more beautiful worlds represented in the various works of art that fill his home.

This need to exchange reality for beauty, in the absence of any real human companionship, can only be satisfied via interaction with the collections as is made evident in descriptions offered in several chapters over the course of the work. Indeed, as the bedroom is enjoyable because of its pleasingly diverting tapestries, the Cabinet de l’Extrême Orient and the boudoir are equally prized for their capacity to inspire; as Goncourt puts it, “even now when I prepare to write a bit of text that does not contain the slightest knickknack, I need to spend an hour in this Oriental [sic] cabinet and boudoir.”

17 MA, 2:199.
18 “cette chambre une chambre du siècle passé” (MA, 2:200).
19 MA, 2:203.
20 “un commerce de curiosité, de foi, d'affection avec les personnages de tapisserie” (MA, 2:202).
21 “À l’heure présente […] quand je me prépare à écrire […] un morceau où il n’entre pas le moindre bric-à-brac […] j’ai besoin de passer une heure dans
clusion within the interlocking universes of his collections and his writing, in *La maison d’un artiste* he nevertheless recounts the odd encounter with the outside world.

**A Bibelot Unlike Any Other**

However, when external reality forces its way into the house, as it did during the siege of Paris in the winter of 1870–1871, Goncourt is still compelled to aestheticize the experience. Although decidedly less cheerful than the animate tapestries of his bedchamber, Goncourt’s reminiscence on the lack of food that accompanied the siege is one of the most memorable narrative passages in the entire text, and one of the most overtly literary. The episode opens the chapter devoted to the *Petit Salon*, although it partially occurs in the garden. In addition to blurring the literal spatial boundary between the two spaces, as well as those separating documentary from literary prose and reality from art, it also destabilizes what is perhaps the key dichotomy of the work by rendering a precious *bibelot*, by definition a useless object, utilitarian.

A significant narrative passage both in terms of length and content, the account of the siege is dominated by a rare description of Goncourt’s interactions with another living being, his pet hen Blanche. Focusing on the two-month period from December 1870 to January 1871 (mere months after Jules’s death on June 30, 1870), Goncourt evokes the severity of the situation by describing how he took refuge in the *Petit Salon*, the room that, after the siege, would house his most prized collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works on paper and of which a detailed catalogue follows. He remembers the time he spent in this room where “the shock of cannons made the picture frames fall,” recalling, in particular, the dire lack of food that plagued the city and hinting at the lengths to which Parisians and their suburban counterparts had to go to eat at all.22 He mentions his

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meager provisions, six fowl, which, in the end, were insufficient to his needs, but with which he nevertheless had to make do for primarily aesthetic reasons.\(^{23}\)

Blanche is the last of these six birds. Unsurprisingly enough, she has managed to survive up to this point because she is beautiful, and it seems that her looks even make up for some of her many less desirable personality traits. I use the term consciously following Goncourt, who highlights her “girlish charms” and notes how “she gave such a human expression to her clucks and cackles.”\(^{24}\) It is worth quoting at length from the text in order to emphasize the ways in which her pleasing appearance foils her disagreeable demeanor:

This hen or, to be more precise, this pullet, all white, prettily spotted, and coquettishly crested, was the most impudent little beast that I ever met. Jumping on the table as my lunch was served, she cleared half of the meager plate with two pecks as quick as lightning. And what an amusing spectacle she made when we got to the bread, which looked for all the world like a poultice larded with toothpicks. First, she began to juggle the little pieces we threw to her, at once disdainful and angry, pouting all day until she finally decided to eat the bread that night.\(^{25}\)

This combination of aesthetic beauty, which of course is heavily feminized in Goncourt’s account by way of such adverbs as “pret-

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23 MA, 1:22.
24 “allures si gamines” & “elle donnait à ses gloussements, à son caquetage un langage si humain” (MA, 1:23).
25 “Cette poule ou, pour mieux dire, cette poulette, toute blanche, et joliment cailloutée, et coquettement huppée, était bien la plus impudente petite bête que j’aie jamais rencontrée, sautant sur la table, au moment où on me servait à déjeuner […] et de deux coups de bec rapides comme des éclairs, nettoyant la moitié du maigre plat. […] Et l’amusant spectacle qu’elle me donna, quand nous arrivâmes à ce pain qui ressemblait à un cataplasme lardé de cure-dents. Elle commençait à jongler avec les petits morceaux qu’on lui jetait, à la fois dédaigneuse et colère […] demeurait rognonnante toute la journée, et ne se décidait à manger le pain du siège que le soir” (MA, 1:22–3).
tily” and “coquettishly,” with the “amusing spectacle” of Blanche’s behavior is a rare one within this carefully curated environment. The majority of the objects that make up the collections, even if they are sometimes anthropomorphized within Goncourt’s narratives, are appealing to him precisely because they are inanimate; their lifelessness complements his own solitude. The peculiar relationship he forms with Blanche, then, is a reflection not only of his real and unsatisfied need for companionship, but also of his inability to relate to anyone, or anything, unless it equally stimulates his capacity for aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, immediately following this long enumeration of Blanche’s peculiar attributes and faults, he summarizes his attitude toward his pet in an unexpected way, writing: “in short, I became attached to her.”26 In the midst of this life-or-death situation, which saw many Parisians eating street animals and other things far less savory than the salt cod and substandard bread on which Goncourt and his one remaining domestic were expected to subsist, Blanche’s counterintuitive survival depends equally on her attractiveness and on the uniqueness of her manners.27 Her curious attachment to Goncourt elicits the same attachment from him; he even combs her “with a fine comb every morning.”28 Apart from the kindness Blanche seems to show him, it is clear that Goncourt’s reaction is motivated in no small part by what he perceives as her vanity. While Blanche’s behavior is quite typical of any domesticated bird, it is easily interpreted as contrasting with the behavior of the non-domesticated ones that have already left Paris and as being a confirmation of the affection he has attributed to her.29 If Goncourt is certainly aware that a hen is rather less capable of escape than wild birds with the capacity to fly, he is nevertheless swayed by her antics and continues to enjoy the company of Blanche the pet (a creature

26 “somme toute, je m’y étais attaché” (MA, 1:23).  
27 MA, 1:23.  
28 “tous les matins […] au peigne fin” (MA, 1:23).  
29 MA, 1:23.
who fits in nicely with the other beautiful objects that populate the home) instead of making the most of Blanche the provision.

His executioner’s hand, however, is only stayed temporarily. As the situation grows increasingly desperate, Goncourt realizes that he has no choice and, having eaten everything in the house down to his goldfish, he asks his domestic to kill Blanche but, unfortunately, she does not know how.\textsuperscript{30} Goncourt himself is no better equipped for the task but, knowing that it will have to be accomplished somehow, he begins to seek a method to “effec-
tuate the creature’s passing without making her suffer.”\textsuperscript{31} While this would seem to be an exceedingly simple task (after all, the domestic must know where a sharp knife is kept), Goncourt instead gives careful thought to the matter. Luckily, he remembers that he possesses “a Japanese sabre whose blade rivals the scimi-
tar with which Saladin used to cut feather pillows in half.”\textsuperscript{32}

Once again, the object selected, clearly a precious \textit{bibelot}, highlights the tension between the literal conflict (and its attendant hunger), and the sentimental/aesthetic one surrounding Blanche. Although the exact nature of his feelings about his pet become muddled as the passage draws to a close, Goncourt explicitly establishes the parallel between the two conflicts im-
mEDIATELY after deciding on the sabre by alluding to the “tem-
pest of Prussian shells” that occupied the sky at that moment.\textsuperscript{33} Certainly what follows constitutes a kind of microcosmic repro-
duction of the ongoing battle as Goncourt confronts his curious adversary but, unlike the war itself, he casts his personal conflict in unmistakably aestheticizing terms.

The next few lines of the passage, which set up the execu-
tion that follows, are much more literary than documentary in tone. Goncourt first equates Blanche with more exotic animals, noting how she “questioned the sky with the mistrustful look of

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{MA}, 1:23.
\textsuperscript{31} “faire passer de vie à trépas la bestiole sans la faire souffrir” (\textit{MA}, 1:23).
\textsuperscript{32} “un sabre japonais, dont la trempe, m’avait-on dit, valait la trempe des cime-
terres avec lesquels le sultan Saladin coupait en deux un coussin de plumes” (\textit{MA}, 1:24).
\textsuperscript{33} “ouragan d’obus prussiens” (\textit{MA}, 1:24).
the animals in the Jardin des Plantes at that time, who seemed to ask from the depths of their cages if the storm that had been raging overhead for two months would ever end.”34 This remark, another instance in which Goncourt projects his own fear of and disillusionment with the war onto his pet, humanizing her, leads into a second description of Blanche’s unique personality. As Goncourt summons her into the garden, she hesitates, not only because of the frightening sounds of the shells flying overhead, but also because she has become used to the lifestyle of a cherished pet; “sensitive to the cold, she hesitated to step outside.”35 However, it is a characteristic exacerbated by her domesticity that is ultimately her undoing as “gluttony triumphs” and Blanche follows the trail of crumbs Goncourt has left to lure her out of the house.36

What has been, up to this point, an account of Goncourt’s atypical domestic life subtended by the action of the war quickly shifts focus, foregrounding the physical conflict that his coddling of his last real provision had concealed. Indeed, the fatal moment is related in quasi-epic terms: “I moved carefully and, at the exact moment she raised her neck to swallow a morsel a little larger than the others, I cut off her head with my Japanese sabre every bit as skillfully as an executioner of that land.”37 In spite of his admission, only paragraphs earlier, that he had never before slaughtered an animal, Goncourt seems to relish the act that he had thus far avoided. Importantly, though, it is not bloodlust, nor even his increasing hunger, that drives him but, seemingly, his delight at using and successfully manipulating the beautiful

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34 “interrogeait le ciel avec le regard défiant des bêtes du Jardin des Plantes d’alors, — et qui avaient l’air, du fond de leurs cabanes, de demander si l’orage qui tonnait là-haut depuis deux mois n’allait pas finir” (MA, 1:24).
35 “la frileuse hésitait à se risquer dehors” (MA, 1:24).
36 “la gourmandise [triomphe]” (MA, 1:24).
37 “Je prenais bien mes mesures, et au moment où elle relevait le cou pour la déglutition d’un morceau un peu plus gros que les autres, avec mon sabre japonais, je lui détachait la tête aussi bien qu’aurait pu le faire un bourreau du pays du sabre” (MA, 1:24).
weapon. Of course, the presumed authenticity of his stroke is only one more literary cliché aggrandizing the scene.

Of these, Goncourt includes many more in the final lines of the passage, which ultimately aestheticize the grim event so fully that its farcical tone re-emerges. The aftermath of the execution is, of course, predictable, the chicken runs around with her head cut off, but the description of this macabre commonplace softens the line between the ridiculous and the sublime as its register rapidly shifts. Upon delivering the fatal blow, Goncourt is unsurprised when “the decapitated hen begins to run.” In fact, he seems to be extending his portrait of the willful hen from whom he would expect nothing less.

However, what begins as an expression of subtle annoyance continues into a vivid image of the scene as the bird’s erratic movements “leave a red trail behind her on the snow in the alley and across the garden to the crystalized shrubs.” The blood spilling out onto the white snow is an image that aligns itself at once with the conflict in progress within the much larger, bleak landscape of the city, and references the poetic fascination with the pairing of white and red that is evident, for example, in Hugo’s overtly epic “Le parricide.” If red blood spilling on pristine white snow explicitly evokes battle, though, it is nonetheless linked with the classical trope of feminine beauty in which vermillion lips contrast with porcelain skin that is easily applied to Blanche in this instance.

The description goes on to reference the appropriately inhospitable weather that backgrounds Blanche’s continued animation and to offer more details related to the manner of her movements; “she kept stumbling around, frenetically flapping her wings, a plume of blood spurting out of her neck in place of her head.” Already verging on a return to the wry humor that

38 “la poulette décapitée se met à courir” (MA, 1:24).
40 “elle allait toujours sur ses pattes titubantes, battant frénétiquement des ailes, — une aigrette de gouttelettes de sang, au-dessus de son col coupé, à la place de tête” (MA, 1:24).
had characterized the passage up until the execution, the wordiness of the description, which covers, at most, a few moments, renders it strangely hyperbolic. Even so, Goncourt’s last word on Blanche underlines his original, sardonic attitude toward her. Although he first expresses regret at having killed the only sympathetic being in his life, he glibly dismisses the episode in the next clause, writing “all the more so because, I must admit, she was horribly tough,” and then abruptly transitioning to the period following the conflict and into an introduction to the catalogue proper.41

In addition to getting a laugh out of the mot that concludes the passage, though, we also ought to note how Goncourt’s actions subtly, and counterintuitively, undermine the whole project of collecting. I mentioned above that the sabre he selects is a valuable bibelot, but it bears repeating that the essential quality of such an object, indeed, the source of its value, is its very uselessness and impracticality. A collected object’s worth is more directly proportional to its formal beauty than to its possible functional beauty, even in cases like this one where its form clearly evokes a specific function. To employ a collectible for its intended purpose, as any collector knows, can only decrease its value over the long term and, as such, it is not only Goncourt’s instrumentalization of his sabre that is provocative, but also the fact that he keeps a record of the unorthodox use he makes of it. It is even fair to say that Goncourt glorifies his use, or misuse, of the sabre by boasting of his prowess with the blade. At the very least, the passage does not conform to the expectations of the catalogue genre narrowly defined. This is one episode where narrative asserts itself over description and an object becomes important because of what it allows Goncourt to do rather than because of how it looks in his home.

Equally significant is the way in which this episode re-emphasizes Goncourt’s isolation from the rest of the world and presents the home as a kind of self-sufficient microcosm. Certainly,

41 “d’autant plus que, je dois l’avouer, elle était horriblement dure, Blanche” (MA, 1:25).
under the circumstances, a literal siege, such isolation is to be expected, but what is unexpected here is the fact that Goncourt is not forced to eat, as many Parisians were, cats and rats, but rather subsists on food that is, if not much more appetizing, a great deal more elegant. Indeed, not only does he eat a hen that he formerly combed each morning as she interacted with her reflection in the mirror, but he is also able to do so only by killing one lovely thing with another. It is worth noting again that, in his long search for the perfect instrument for this task, it never enters his mind to simply retrieve a cleaver from the kitchen, a room that, like other practical spaces, is not described in the otherwise exhaustive text.

A final justification for understanding this particular narrative passage as the work’s most literary is to be found in its literal and metaphorical proximity to the jewel in the Goncourt crown, the collection of French works on paper. This story is, tellingly, the textual stepping stone that links Goncourt’s survival to the survival of the works on paper that are the home’s central collection. A minimal visual break in the text separates this story from the passage leading up to the more formally organized catalogue of works on paper, which begins with his assertion that it was the war that gave him incentive to “create a sort of museum of the drawings from the French School collected by he and his brother over many years.” Goncourt is alone and, at times, obviously lonely, but the house and its collections offer him much needed comfort.

Conclusion

Although he does it in his préambule, and therefore outside the textual version of the house proper, Goncourt is forced to admit, in spite of his melancholy, that the nineteenth century has brought about one positive change with regard to décor: “Existence is no longer external as it was in the eighteenth century; the

42 “faire une espèce de musée des dessins de l’école française recueillis par [son frère et lui] depuis longues années” (MA, 1:25).
human organism has come to want the four walls of his home to be agreeable, pleasing, amusing to the eye.” Goncourt’s artistry in the creation of his own charming interiors finally remains subordinated to his primary artistic endeavor, recording them textually. As he puts it in a journal entry roughly contemporary with the text’s publication, “Literature is my sacred mistress; trinkets are my whores. Never will the sacred mistress suffer for the upkeep of the whores” (February 25, 1880).

Ultimately, if the collections served the affective function of preserving the past and transporting Goncourt back to happier, less lonely days, or else to other times and places altogether, the text is equally forward-looking and fulfills as well the aesthetic function of monumentalizing the house and its curator/cataloguer. Not only does it pay tribute to Jules’s legacy and the brothers’ past exploits, but it also fulfills Edmond’s goal of projecting his identity as an individual and as an amateur into the future. Because the property was designated to become the headquarters of the Académie Goncourt, the Goncourt collections were eventually sold off as part of its funding scheme, and the text is now the only place where it can still be accessed in its integrity. Indeed, while the several series of photographs that were made of the home offer an alternative representation of it in its heyday, they do not present as complete an account as Goncourt’s narrative catalogue. Although his desire to offer access to this private space might seem unusual given that the home very

43 “L’existence n’est plus extérieure comme au XVIIIe siècle […] la créature humaine […] a été poussée à vouloir les quatre murs de son home agréables, plaisants, amusants aux yeux” (MA, 1:2).
44 Koyama-Richard, “La maison d’un artiste,” iii. See also Edmond de Goncourt, Journal des Goncourt, 6:107–8: “La littérature, c’est ma sainte maîtresse, les bibelots, c’est ma putain; pour entretenir cette dernière, jamais la sainte maîtresse n’en souffrira.”
45 As per Goncourt’s will, each of the elected members of the academy is entitled to “an annual pension of 6000 francs” (une rente annuelle de 6000 francs) (Hugh Chisholm, ed., Encyclopedia Brittanica, 11th edn., vol. 12 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911], 231, s.v. “Goncourt, De, Edmond”). The funds for these pensions, and indeed for the Prix Goncourt itself, initially derived from the sale of the collections.
clearly served as a sanctuary from the increasing grittiness of modern life, it is fitting that, in hindsight, the textual facsimile of his home, which because of its textuality takes on the role of the “sacred mistress,” is the most faithful representation of Edmond’s personal chef-d’oeuvre, while the bibelots, his whores, have all been sold off. In a sense, then, Edmond’s narrative catalogue, or “catalogue novel,” amounts to a reasonably successful attempt to resolve the paradox of material possessions. You cannot take them with you, but you can write them into your own history in such a way that they come to sustain both your individual memory and, quite literally, your artistic legacy.

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