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THE CABINET DES MÉDAILLES OF THE FRENCH NATIONAL LIBRARY THE RENOVATION OF THE CENTURY

A multi-centenary institution, the Cabinet des médailles – today the département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques of the French national Library (BnF) – has undergone numerous changes and renovations during its history. In 1917, the architect Jean-Louis Pascal installed it in a new wing of the National Library, between rue de Richelieu and rue Vivienne, in central Paris. For the first time, presentation to the public was separated from other Cabinet functions. In 2017, the museum closed for a complete renovation of the Richelieu site, reopening to the public in September 2022. This is an opportunity to discuss the changes brought about by this renovation and to briefly recall the history of this institution.¹

1. The Cabinet des médailles

The Cabinet des médailles has its origins in the royal cabinet from the Middle Ages, a private cabinet of the king which contained cash but also precious objects kept for pleasure and for their value. They could in fact be sold, given or exchanged on different occasions. From the Renaissance onwards, this cabinet grew considerably under François I, then was squandered during the wars of religion. In the 17th century, Henri IV and especially Louis XIV made it a heritage collection. From this point on, this private collection of the king was passed on to his successor. From 1666, at the request of Colbert, the Cabinet des médailles was associated with the Royal Library. Kept in Versailles from 1684, it was moved to Paris in 1740, to new premises specially designed to accommodate it on rue Vivienne where the Royal Library was located. During the Revolution, this collection became national and received the proceeds of revolutionary spoliation in France and abroad. From then until today, the collection continues to be enriched through acquisitions and donations.

The nature of these collections is diverse, as it was, originally, dependent on the king's tastes. Coins are very numerous, as are engraved gems – cameos and intaglios – particularly prized in the 17th century. Greek and Etruscan ceramics are well represented, as are objects inscribed in various languages and writing systems. At the end of the 19th century, it underwent severe rationalization: only the collections of coins, medals and engraved

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¹ On the history of the Cabinet of Medals, see Richard-Bazire 2014, Bodenstein 2015, Sarment 1994 and 2003.

gems, as well as the core of the 18th century royal collection and Greek ceramics, were preserved. All other collections are deposited, depending on their nature, in other museums in Paris and in the provinces. In 2024, the collection included approximately 600,000 coins and medals (Fig. 1), some 42,000 objects and 100,000 prints, manuscripts and archives.

Collection	Period / Section	Total
Greek coins (including Roman Provincial)		121,342
Celtic coins		12,469 (including around 2000 Marseille)
Roman coins (103,000)	Republic	22,752
	Empire	80,000
Byzantine coins		7,534
Coins of the Latin East		3,144
French coins (41,000)	Merovingians	3,913
	Carolingians	2,764
	Feudal	9,457
	Royal	20,000
	19th-20th centuries	3,800
	Colonials	516
	Seige-money	456
Foreign coins	European	55,000
	Eastern	55,000
Tokens		43,200
Medals		150,000
Total		591,000

Fig. 1 – Collections of coins and medals of the BnF.

In the 20th century, the Cabinet des médailles took the name of ‘département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques’. Around twenty staff currently work there, who are divided between curating of coins and medals (six curators), curating archaeological objects and objets d’art (two curators), administration of the library (eight library staff) and a restoration workshop specializing in metal and enamels (two conservators). The management consists of three people.

2. The Museum of the Cabinet des médailles since the 18th century

At the end of the 18th century, the collection, previously open to scholars at Versailles, became accessible to the general public on certain days of the week and in the presence of curators. On the occasion of the relocation to Paris in 1740, a new space was created to house the collections.

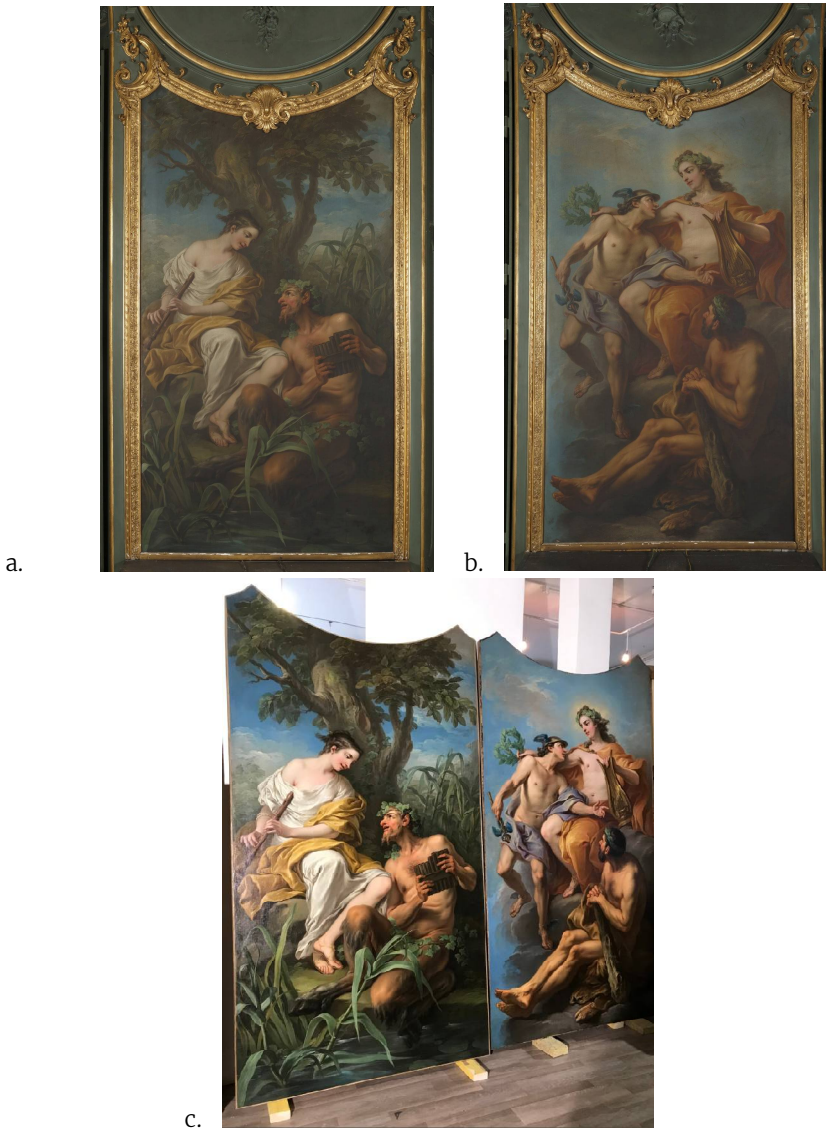


Fig. 2 – Paintings by Carl Van Loo, west side of the Salon Louis XV, before and after restoration. a. Euterpe or Music © Alexis Komenda, BnF.

b. The Protectors of the Muses. © Alexis Komenda, BnF.

c. These two paintings in the restoration workshop.



Fig. 3 – Clio by François Boucher, 1742,
Photo © Jean-Christophe Ballot / BnF / Oppic

The decor, designed by the architect Jules-Robert de Cotte, was entrusted to the best artists (Fig. 4–5). Twelve large-format paintings represent the Muses and their protectors. The four door tops were painted by François Boucher, three paintings of the long sides were entrusted to Charles-Joseph Natoire, the other three to Carl Van Loo (Fig. 2). Of the four overdoors by Boucher, the most original is certainly the one representing Clio, muse of History (Fig. 3).² The artist has in fact freed himself from conventions. The goddess is often represented facing the bust of an illustrious character from whom she draws her inspiration, but Boucher preferred to make her a numismatist who wrote the ‘History of Louis (XV)’ from a large gold coin with the portrait of Louis XV. The monetary type of this *louis d’or* is not trivial. It represents the king without a wig, bare headed, his hair held back by a headband. This ancient representation refers to the hairstyle of Hel-

² Duyrat, Jambu 2018a and 2018b.

lenistic kings who were distinguished by this diadem tied around the head. The muse draws her inspiration from a coin whose design and legend are the product of the choices of the Petite Académie or Academy of Inscriptions and Medals, responsible for choosing the subjects, legends and design of the medals glorifying the king. This Clio is leaning on the wings of Time and surrounded by numismatist cupids: two of them present her with the *louis d'or*, a third, seated in the folds of the nymph's dress, studies a pile of gold coins. The room of which this painting is the decoration was precisely devoted to the study of coins and medals and the painting therefore represents a *mise en abyme* of the activities which took place there.



Fig. 4 – Salon Louis XV before restoration, 2015.
© Alexis Komenda, BnF.



Fig. 5 – Salon Louis XV after restoration, 2022.
© Jean-Christophe Ballot / BnF / Oppic.

At each end of the room, a large portrait represents Louis XV to the north and Louis XIV to the south, based on official portraits painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud. It was indeed customary to have copies of the official portrait produced by the workshops of Versailles before sending them to institutions in Paris and the provinces. These copies were reputed to have been destroyed during the Revolution, as were all the royal insignia on the decor. The two portraits of kings in the Cabinet des médailles were therefore supposed to be copies of copies dating from the Restoration of monarchy in France (1815–1830). Although the portrait of Louis XIV does indeed date from this period, an in-depth study (stylistic study, X-ray, analysis of the pigments) revealed that the portrait of Louis XV, which was very damaged, is in fact the 18th century painting. The regular breaks in horizontal bands observed on the painted layer reveal that it was in fact undoubtedly rolled up and hidden during the Revolution before being restored and reinstalled, probably during the restoration led by Jean-Louis Pascal at the beginning of the 20th century.

The eight coin-cabinets placed around the room as well as the large central table are probably the work of the Verberckt workshops. The Louis XV style chairs and armchairs are signed by Cresson. The whole was therefore designed from the beginning to store the collections, to study them but also to show them. Indeed, old descriptions of the Cabinet des médailles indicate that vases and sculptures were presented above the coin-cabinets or under the rocaille-style gilded wood consoles.

The characteristic of a cabinet is to have no storeroom. A cabinet is in fact used to store, study and show collections in the same place. The extension of the collection during the Revolution and the 19th century led, from the 1850s, to the need to store parts of the collection under the coin-cabinet and in the corridors of the library. Henri Labrousse, the architect in charge of the major renovation of the Bibliothèque nationale during the second half of the 19th century, decided to demolish the arcade of the Hotel de Nevers rue which housed the Cabinet des médailles above what is now Colbert. In the 1860s, the Cabinet des Médailles was moved to temporary premises. Its decor, initially threatened with destruction, was finally dismantled and stored in different spaces. The sculpted paneling from the 18th century was, however, sold or destroyed, as well as the large staircase which led to the Cabinet. Its banister, a masterpiece of 18th century ironwork decorated with cornucopias from which flow coins, is today visible at the Wallace Collection in London.

Henri Labrousse's successor, Jean-Louis Pascal, designed the new wing along rue Vivienne for the Cabinet des médailles in a completely new spirit. For the first time in its history, museum rooms separate from conservation and workspaces were created. The collection was then kept in storerooms that were, however, not entirely separated from the workspaces: the cura-

tors in fact kept their offices in the two large rooms dedicated to storing coins and medals.

The decor of the demolished 18th-century Cabinet du Roi was reassembled in a new room slightly longer than the original dimensions, in order to install two new central medallions copied from the Louis XV ones (Fig. 4-5). To compensate for the greater length, four paintings representing cupids minting coins or unearthing hoards were ordered from Hector d’Espouy (Fig. 6). Sculpted paneling and stucco adorning the top of the walls were copied from those which survive at the Hôtel de Nevers after the destruction of its arcade, or from the documentary elements collected by Jean-Louis Pascal after a long and patient study.



Fig. 6 – Cupids minting coins and unearthing hoards
by Hector d’Espouy, 1917

The colour of the paneling chosen by Pascal and revealed by the 2021 restoration was a fairly deep shade of orange-pink. The original color is not known, the woodwork having been destroyed and the furniture stripped down to the wood in the early 20th century. However, we know that this shade of pink was so displeasing that a patron of the library financed a colour change in the 1920s. The cabinet was then sky blue. The varnish covering this colour weathered over time, taking on a yellow color which explains the deep green tone of the paneling until its recent restoration (Fig. 3). This question of color sparked numerous debates within the scientific council assembled for the restoration of this space, the final choice falling on an ivory shade common to the royal salons and enhancing the furniture and paintings (Fig. 4).

The Cabinet des médailles underwent new transformations in the 1970s and 1980s, under the leadership of Georges Le Rider. At this time, a mezzanine was built in the museum rooms to double their area. At the same time, the courtyards which brought light to the Salle de Luynes and the Salon Louis XV (the name now given to the room with the 18th-century decor) were roofed and made into storerooms to house the collections of medals and Eastern coins. An additional reserve was created on the lower level for the collection of Greek coins. Roman, Celtic and French coins remained in the Salle Barthélemy (Fig. 7) created by Jean-Louis Pascal, which also served as a study room for visitors.

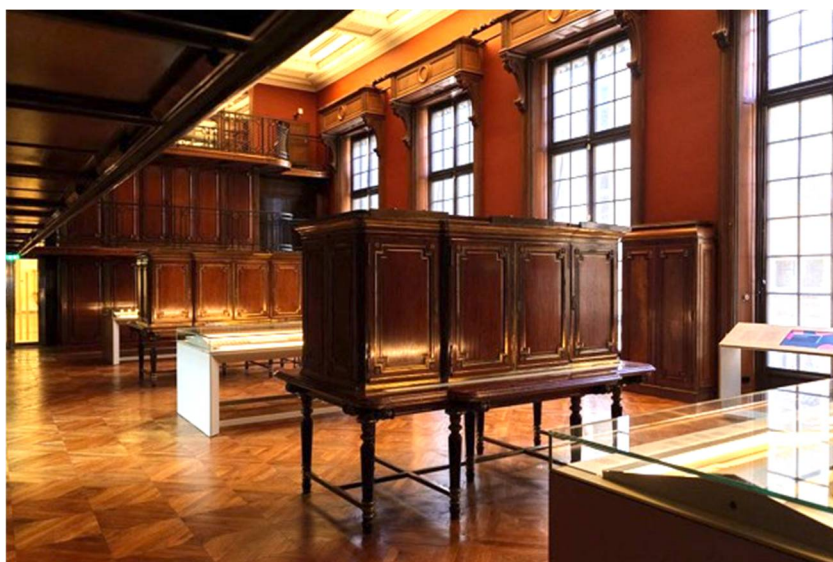


Fig. 7. Salle Barthélemy © Élie Ludwig / BnF

3. The BnF museum, 2017–2022

The museum inaugurated in 1981 had reinforced windows, very protective, but which had become unsuitable and were aging (Fig. 8). For this reason, the renovation of the Richelieu site of the BnF undertaken from 2010 resulted in a complete restructuring of these exhibition spaces. The museum, closed in 2017, was entirely reorganised. The mezzanines were demolished, restoring their full height to the exhibition spaces. The Salle de Luynes, a workspace for decades, once again became an exhibition room, as did the Salle Barthélemy. The current museum therefore extends over 1,200 square meters which also includes the Salon Louis XV, the Galerie Mazarin and a rotunda dedicated to the Performance Arts. The extension of the museum allowed it to house not only the collections of the Cabinet des médailles but also other departments of the library.



Fig. 8. The museum mezzanine showcases before restoration, 2015

The purpose of the museum revolves around the main characteristics of the collection of the Cabinet des médailles by bringing together works of such different natures as vases, bronze or stone sculpture, coins and medals, engraved gems, etc. A first room is devoted to the passion for Antiquity which is at the origin of the accumulation of works exceptional in their art and their historical importance. It also highlights the scientific role of the Cabinet des médailles in the decipherment of forgotten writings by Abbé Barthélemy in the 18th century. The second room, the 'Cabinet précieux', shows in majesty the treasures accumulated by the kings of France and by

the République, spectacular in their materials, their style, their history. Accordingly, the ceiling of this room is decorated with large stucco golden medallions (Fig. 9). The following room was designed by Jean-Louis Pascal to accommodate the generous donation of the Duc de Luynes' collection of antiquities in 1862. The old study room, surrounded on three sides by mahogany and gilded bronze coin cabinet spread over three levels, is today a room dedicated to coins and medals. At the entrance to the Galerie Mazarin, which runs chronologically from the Middle Ages to the present day, the parts of the treasures of Saint-Denis and Sainte-Chapelle that entered the library's collections during the Revolution are brought together. Two show-cases are dedicated to works of transition between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The rest of the museum is dedicated to collections from other departments.



Fig. 9. Ceiling of the Cabinet précieux: La Semeuse, “The Sower,” designed by Oscar Roty (1846–1911). It has been the design of different franc denominations since its creation in 1897 and is now one of the three French reverse types of the euro.

4. A numismatic research and public education centre

Coins and medals are present in all the rooms of the museum, put into context thanks to the presence of other objects, except in the Salle Barthélemy, which is exclusively dedicated to coins and medals. Alongside the renovation of the museum, the Cabinet des médailles continued its scientific activities throughout the twelve years of renovation work. At the heart of its mission, the enrichment of the collections was marked by the acquisition at public auction in 2017 of an exceptional gold medal of Louis XIV

with its chain (Fig. 10). The medal is known as 'à la devise' ('with a motto') because the reverse bears the legend *NEC PLVRIBVS IMPAR*, frequently repeated during the reign. The creation of this medal is attributed to Jean Warin (1607-1672) and would be his last work, in the year of his death. The Cabinet des médailles held medals intended for the royal collection but until this acquisition, no chain. This one, with a length of 135 cm, could be worn across the chest of the recipient and belongs to the category of diplomatic gifts.³ It was put up for sale at Christie's by the descendants of the man who, according to tradition passed down within the family, received it from Louis XIV: Jean-Théobald, Baron de Reinach de Hirtzbach (1625-1678), an estate located in Alsace. It represents a very rare case of a medal whose history is known from its creation to the present day, apart of course from the collections of medals kept since their manufacture at the Cabinet des médailles and at the Monnaie de Paris. It is symbolic of the quality of the acquisitions that have characterized recent years.



Fig. 10. Medal of Louis XIV 'à la devise' and chain, 1672 (acq. 2017.29)

Beyond acquisitions, the department has increased its research projects, despite preparations for moves and the unusual conditions created by the renovation work. Among them, *Trouvailles Monétaires*, the oldest program in the department, dedicated to monetary finds made on French soil, stands out for its dynamism. Since 2014, the program has led to the publication of thematic volumes dedicated to groups of coherent hoards accompanied by summary articles offering a complete view of the available material. Giant monetary hoards from the 3rd century, hoards from Northern France in the 3rd century, Gallic coins hoarded in the 'Zone du denier', hoards from Fran-

³ Jones 2016, p. 65.

cia from the 10th–12th centuries, hoards of Spanish coins in France in the 16th–18th centuries have been published in volumes issued on average every two years since 2013.⁴ An online database is currently being created and should open up public access to the thousands of data on the hoards buried on French territory that the Cabinet des médailles has collected for decades.

The complete reopening of the Richelieu site of the BnF was also an opportunity to reconnect with the public educational courses on the collections initiated during the Revolution. These courses, taught by the Library's curators or by specialists from other institutions, are open to all and are held in the presence of the collections, as was already the case in 1798. Following the revolutionary ideal of education and the opening of national collections to all, the Cabinet des médailles is a place for presenting artworks and archaeological artefacts to the public. The first teaching chair of archaeology in France was created there in 1798, and it contributed to the popularity of the institution and its collections. The public flocked in large numbers to these lessons which continued throughout most of the 19th century. They are an opportunity to present the collections to the public through ambitious scientific teaching. The reopening of the Richelieu site of the BnF in 2022 was an opportunity to relaunch these lessons. As at the time of the Revolution, the principle is to allow the public to approach the objects more closely. Enriched by the work of researchers, scientific analyses or recent restorations, these courses are all opportunities to reveal new subjects or to rediscover an object. Coins and medals have pride of place. These broadcast lessons are then available for streaming.⁵

Conclusion

Throughout these years of an ambitious renovation programme, the Cabinet des médailles, in addition to all the work mentioned above, has built an online offering, to provide better access to its collections: *Les essentiels de la numismatique* provide access to digitized reference works⁶; more than half of the coin and token collections are accessible online⁷; the collections of objects, largely digitized, benefit from a dedicated site⁸; the blog *L'Antiquité à la BnF* delivers a rich harvest of short, well-researched articles, written by specialists and frequently devoted to coins.⁹ In total, the major renovation completed in 2022 is marked by much greater accessibility for the scientific and non-scientific public.

⁴ Respectively Drost 2020, Duyrat 2015, Guihard 2023, Duyrat 2017, Jambu 2019. Amandry 2013 is the latest 'old style' volume which brings together articles on finds from different periods.

⁵ <https://www.bnf.fr/fr/agenda/histoire-de-la-coin-en-20-objets>

⁶ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/html/und/histoire/numismatique>

⁷ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/html/und/objets/entreprises>

⁸ <https://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr>

⁹ <https://antiquitebnf.hypotheses.org/>

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