

James McAuley, *The House of Fragile Things: Jewish Art Collectors and the Fall of France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 320.

by *Katharina Hüls-Valenti*

In *The House of Fragile Things* Historian James McAuley portrays the milieu of the Jewish elite in the French Third Republic through the lens of art collecting. Spanning a timeframe from the Dreyfus affair until the German occupation and formation of the Vichy government, the author reconstructs the lived experiences of four intermarried families which were considered the custodians of French Jewish community at that time: The Camondos, the Reinachs, the Cahen d’Anvers and the Rothschilds.

McAuley’s choice of protagonists is not just motivated by the fact that they were prominent members of French society but also because these families shared a common passion of collecting and bequeathed parts of their legacies to the French state. By portraying one member of each family and their respective art collections, the author foregrounds both the private and public significance those collections assumed in the decades after the Dreyfus affair, when the post-revolution idea of French universalism and the growingly aggressive antisemitism in France became an unescapable predicament. Their collections, therefore, did not just reflect their individual understanding of collecting art, but were also expressions of an evolving French Jewish identity which, despite the growing hostile environment towards Jewish life in France, aimed at cultural assimilation.

The reader is introduced into this milieu through the lead character Béatrice de Camondo (1894-1945), daughter of Moïse de Camondo (1860-1935), head of a long-standing bankers’ family from Constantinople, and Irène Cahen d’Anvers (1872-1963), a wealthy and sophisticated Parisian, who had been portrayed by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) when she was a child. McAuley offers the reader an intimate and touching portrait of Béatrice, unleashing her personality and beliefs with the help of two handwritten letters that Béatrice had written to a childhood friend in 1917 and 1942 respectively, only a few months before her arrest by the Vichy regime and her following deportation to Auschwitz, where she died on 4 January 1945. The story of her life, from a childhood in one of the most renowned,

yet troubled families in Paris, her marriage with Leon Reinach (1893-1944), exponent of another extremely influential family in fin de siècle France, their troublesome divorce, her convinced conversion to Catholicism and the fate of her entire family as victims of the Holocaust, instantly absorbs the reader and gives an idea of the book's quintessence: the acknowledgement that these figures should not just be remembered as victims, but as multifaced individuals with complex life stories in a certain moment in time.

Although the topic of antisemitism in fin de siècle France has already been studied profoundly, McAuley evokes a new perspective by depicting the lived experience with French antisemitism through the means of art collecting. This approach reveals itself as particularly pertinent for the discussed period, for antisemitic sentiments were often expressed through the language of objects and things, which the author explains strikingly in his second chapter by introducing the term "material antisemitism."

This kind of antisemitism, McAuley argues, evolved towards the end of the nineteenth century in French literature and media and in response to a society in which material objects were given national significance, representing traces of French history and patrimony. This identification particularly applied to those items and artefacts which had started circulating on the market after the French Revolution, originating from clerical and aristocratic patrimonies. In the material culture of the fin de siècle, these objects found their way into a new generation of collectors, who aimed to acquire prestige and a certain Frenchness with these pieces. Although this ancient régime style was popular amongst all collectors in France, virulent antisemites like Édouard Drumont (1844-1917), with his publication *La France juive* (1886), and the Goncourt brothers imbued it with exclusive nationalistic significance and used it to attack the material existence of the Jewish elite. Fueled by a number of financial scandals, which involved leading Jewish-owned banks and therefore collectors such as the Rothschilds and Camondos, the hatred expressed in aesthetic and material terms became a particularly effective antisemitic rhetoric in the French public.

Regardless of the public attacks, Jewish collectors eagerly pursued their passion for collecting, identifying themselves precisely with the ancient régime style as means of personal solace as well as a gateway to assimilation. In reference to Susan Stewart's book *On Longing* (1992) the author illustrates how the comprehensive

collecting zeal of his figures reflects their longing towards French identity and the compatibility of Jewishness and Frenchness.

In the third chapter, McAuley connects this vision to the experience of World War I where many French Jews felt obliged to contribute to the war, such as, for example, Nissim de Camondo (1892-1917) who joined the French army and fell on the battlefield. That those, who had lost a son or had converted their exclusive homes into military hospitals (e.g., the Château de Champs owned by the Cahen d'Anvers), bequeathed their art collections or homes to the nation was yet another affirmation of their sense of belonging to France and strengthened once again the aim to inscribe these families in the long *durée* of French history.

The main body of the book substantiates this theory by presenting the reader with the biographies of Moïse de Camondo, Théodore Reinach (1860-1928) and Béatrice Ephrussi de Rothschild (1864-1934). Whilst the author depicts their individual visions and products of material self-expression—from Camondo's petite Versailles mansion in Rue de Monceau 61 to Reinach's to de Rothschild's uniquely designed Villas along the Cote d'Azur—the reader also learns about the tragic end of these life's work, to which McAuley devotes the last chapters: the Fall of France during World War II and the ultimate betrayal these families experienced under Nazi occupation, seeing their homes sacked, their collections seized and lastly, becoming in parts themselves victims of the Holocaust.

One could argue that, by merely considering and focusing on the wealthy Jewish French elite, McAuley does not catch the entire phenomenon of French antisemitism. His approach, however, does work in the sense that he exclusively discusses a particular immigrant minority and their relationship to the concept of French universalism. And by doing so—although antisemitism is much different today than it was back then—he ultimately enables the reader to draw parallels to today's situation in France and the still existing conflict between the sense of foreignness and assimilation of minority communities.

Advised by several renowned international scholars such as Alice Kaplan, the author not only took a notable amount of secondary literature into consideration, but also delved into a number of public and private archives to investigate meticulously each of his main characters. One can tell from the appendix of notes that this book was born as a PhD thesis and therefore meets the academic standard

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of a historical study. At the same time, McAuley's vivid and suspenseful writing make it very enjoyable to read.

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