

Plaques de cheminée, the French Revolution, and the Politics of Iconoclasm

by David Bennett

As anyone with a passing interest in heraldry knows, coats of arms originated in the thick of medieval battle, when it was crucial to be able tell at a glance — and at a distance — who was with you, who against you.¹ Hence the bold, brightly coloured markings on shields, buckles, helmets, and surcoats (the ‘coats’ of arms) that instantly identified a fighter’s allegiance, to whom or to which cause he belonged. But if coats of arms remain to this day badges of belonging — whether of allegiance, alliance, or property-ownership — their connotations have proliferated and their media of composition and display become multiple and disparate. The heraldic medium of concern in this paper is the relatively arcane one of firebacks — more specifically, French cast-iron firebacks, or *plaques de cheminée* — a seemingly *recherché* subject but one capable of fascinating anyone with an interest in the history and restoration of ancient French buildings. While the scant published scholarship on the topic has documented the diversity of the designs to which iron foundries lent their artistry in creating these often imposing, symbolically rich centrepieces for the hearths of both aristocratic and artisanal homes, there has been less written about their cultural history. This essay, then, offers an overview of the history, politics, and semiotics of French heraldic firebacks before, during, and after the notoriously iconoclastic 1789 Revolution.

In the early Middle Ages, only high-status buildings had chimneys. Fires were typically located in the centre of an open hall, with the smoke escaping through a hole in the ceiling. During the fifteenth century, the increased availability of stone and brick as building materials meant that chimneys became more commonplace; fireplaces could be moved from the centre of the room to a side wall; and buildings could be multi-storey, as the smoke could be channelled up chimneys traversing several storeys.² But the wall against which the fire burned needed protection: hence the fireback. Initially ceramic, rarely copper or bronze, and, from around 1540 in France, typically cast-iron,³ firebacks served to protect the fabric of the wall from the destructive effects of the fire and to radiate heat — which would otherwise have been lost up the chimney — into the room.

Firebacks were cast by pouring molten iron into open sand moulds formed by pressing a wooden pattern into the damp sand bed to define the size and outline of the fireback, and then by pressing found objects or purpose-made stamps into the sand to add ornament or symbolism.⁴ The whole composition was thus a mirror-image of the intended design (an aspect of the production process that could cause confusion for less literate foundrymen when it came to arranging numbers and letters).⁵ Twisted rope was a favourite ‘found object’ for pressing into the sand to form decorative borders or motifs for firebacks, and domestic utensils, pieces of furniture moulding, and food stamps — originally intended to ornament butter, cheese or pastry — were used as decorative stamps in creating moulds. The two seminal studies of firebacks, Henri Carpentier’s *Plaques de cheminées* (1912) and Jeremy Hodgkinson’s *British Cast-Iron Firebacks of the 16th to mid-18th Centuries* (2010),⁶ include numerous illustrations of how such

¹ See Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 1–3.

² Jeremy Hodgkinson, *British Cast-Iron Firebacks of the 16th to mid-18th Centuries* (Crawley: Hodgers Books, 2010), p. 41.

³ Henri Carpentier, *Histoire des plaques de cheminées* (Paris: J. Florange, 1912), pp. 1–2.

⁴ Hodgkinson, pp. 39–40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁶ Since this essay was written, a third major publication on firebacks has appeared, mainly comprising an illustrated catalogue of 665 heraldic examples: Philippe Palasi’s *Plaques de Cheminées Héraldiques: Histoire d’un support métallique des armoires — fin XVe–XXe siècle*, Préface de Michel Pastoureau (Paris: Éditions Gourcuff-Gradenigo, 2014).

'found objects' were used in mould-making. Examples include a mid- to late-sixteenth-century fireback probably commissioned by a cutler, showing his tools of trade (**Fig. 1**); a design made with a dagger and wooden dowl (**Fig. 2**); and a sixteenth-century design made by pressing a firedog and a *fleur-de-lys* stamp repeatedly into the sand (**Fig. 3**).⁷

Purpose-made stamps were also used by mould-makers: every blast furnace that cast firebacks would accumulate a stock of purpose-made, carved wooden stamps — of numerals, letters and pictorial motifs such as *fleurs-de-lys*, roses, and heraldic animals (**Fig. 4**) — for use in different combinations to suit the needs of different customers; to vary or personalize an original design with new elements; to add the customer's name or initials and the year of casting;



Fig. 1: Mid- to late sixteenth-century fireback moulded with rope and cutler's tools, Anne of Cleves House, Lewes, Sussex, courtesy of Jeremy Hodgkinson.

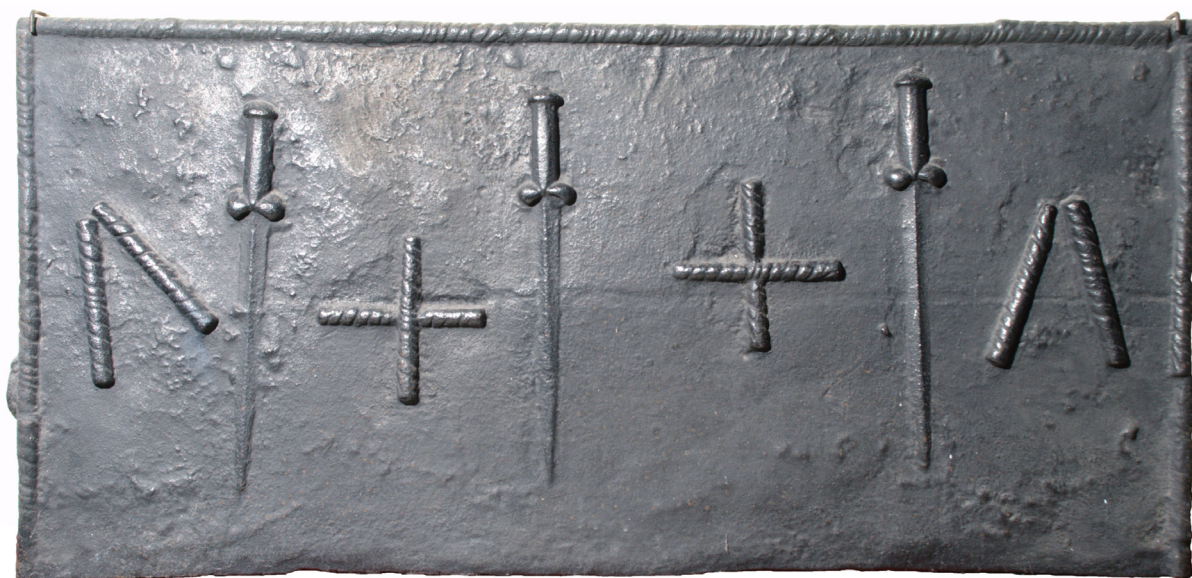


Fig. 2: Fireback moulded with dagger and wooden dowl, courtesy of Jeremy Hodgkinson.

⁷ These illustrations were generously provided to the author by Jeremy Hodgkinson, who reproduces them in his book *British Cast-Iron Firebacks*.



Fig. 3: Late sixteenth-century Wealden fireback moulded with firedog and fleur-de-lys stamp.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Reproduced in Hodgkinson, p. 69.



Fig. 4. French Gothic heraldic design from the earliest days of fireback moulding (early- to mid-sixteenth century), with an octogram star or mullet (symbolizing regeneration) moulded with rope, and trireschs (symbolizing the Holy Trinity, probable precursor of the fleur-de-lys) and two arms of the French Dauphin (crowned dolphins), moulded with single stamps. Private collection.

to commemorate a marriage (such as by combining the couple's initials and the numerals of the year), and so on. The practice of selecting and combining different stamps to create designs tailored to specific clients suggests that the cast-iron fireback was a medium for the composition or creation, and not just the display, of heraldic arms and crests.

The casting process would be simplified, and the risk of illiterate foundrymen inverting numerals and letters or misspelling words would be avoided, by the later use of one-piece, fully carved patterns, pressed face down into the sand, ready for the molten iron to be poured into the mould. Increasingly common from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, many of these single-pattern moulds were purpose-made, but many others were carved, painted armorial panels intended for display in their own right as decorations of mantelpieces, roofbeams, lintels, or

panelling, and only secondarily used as fireback patterns — with the result that family mottoes painted directly onto the flat surface of the armorial pattern would not appear in the fireback mould. One method of mould-making — whether employing found objects, combining purpose-made stamps, or using fully-carved single patterns — did not supersede another: they coexisted through the centuries.

There are numerous genres of fireback decoration and many ways of classifying them, but we can distinguish eight main types:

royal heraldic firebacks, bearing the armorial achievements of royalty, often cast in different sizes to suit different rooms or fireplaces, commissioned or displayed as statements of allegiance to the crown, as assertions of royal ownership of the buildings in which they were installed, or as tokens of the ghostly presiding presence of the monarch.

personal firebacks. While the earliest heraldic firebacks cast from whole patterns bore royal arms, similar firebacks with arms of the aristocracy and gentry began to appear during the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth centuries and continued to be produced until well into the eighteenth. Personal firebacks might display the initials or names of their purchasers, their tools of trade, their family crests, and so on, and were either made from patterns carved specifically to decorate cast-iron firebacks and graveslabs or from moulds designed for multiple purposes, such as stamping lead cisterns and other elements of the house with the family arms.

civic firebacks, bearing the arms of cities and typically commissioned for use in government premises.

trade association/corporate/livery company firebacks. The establishment of company halls created an opportunity to display corporate arms (granted to a trade association under authority of the crown) on a plaque in the hall fireplace, while members of the companies could advertise their membership in their own home fireplaces (the Blacksmiths Company in England was a case in point).

commemorative firebacks, memorializing a family event, such as a marriage, or a significant public event, such as the monarch's visit to a particular town in a given year. One such fireback commemorates an 'adieu' between the kings of France and Spain — Louis XIV and



Fig. 5: Fireback commemorating Louis XIV's farewell to his grandson, the Duc d'Anjou, recently crowned King Philip V of Spain, on 4 December 1700 when Louis pronounced the celebrated phrase: 'Mon fils, il n'y a plus de Pyrénées'; cast in 1940. Courtesy of Marc Maison, <<http://www.marcmaison.com/>> (Ref. 9756).



Fig. 6: Eighteenth-century cast-iron fireback in Louis XV style depicting Apollo with lyre.



Fig. 7: 'Ancienne plaque de cheminée en fer', depicting a swain courting a maid on a mule, advertised for auction on <www.eBay.fr>.

his grandson, the Duc d'Anjou, recently crowned Philip V of Spain — on 4 December, 1700, when Louis XIV made his famous pronouncement 'Mon fils, il n'y a plus de Pyrénées' (**Fig. 5**).

religious firebacks. Many of the oldest surviving plaques from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries display Biblical figures: Adam and Eve, Virgin and Child, angels, the saints Anne, Catherine, and Barbara, and so on.

allegorical and mythological firebacks, depicting personifications of Hope, Charity, or Fortune; allegorical depictions of planets or continents; mythical creatures such as the phoenix or griffins; figures from Greek mythology, such as Zeus or Hercules, Diana or Apollo (**Fig. 6**).

secularpictorial firebacks, often depicting scenes of everyday life — and many of them unmistakably kitsch (e.g., **Fig. 7**) — became increasingly common from the late seventeenth century onwards, especially on the firebacks of the smaller, coal-burning fireplaces that became popular during the eighteenth century. As the traditional fireback themes of heraldry and mythology began to give way to a freer choice of themes, designs with humorous, satirical, and even scurrilous subjects (commissioned for brothel fireplaces) appeared.

Armorial Firebacks

Notwithstanding this generic variety, by far the largest proportion of carved stamps made for firebacks are of heraldic subjects, ranging from simple charges — such as beasts, crowns, *fleurs-de-lys*, and roses — to supporters, shields, and portcullises.⁸ Of these motifs, the most common are *fleurs-de-lys*, widely used as a purely decorative device but also, of course, a key feature of French regal arms as well as part of the arms of England until 1800. Since 1376, the arms of France have included three *fleurs-de-lys* and an open crown, as in the fireback shown in Fig. 8, cast during Louis XIV's reign, in 1690, and in which the regal emblems are garlanded



Fig. 8: Cast-iron fireback dated 1690, displaying royal arms and olive branches. Private collection.

⁸ Ibid., Hodgkinson, p. 80.



Fig. 9: Seventeenth-century cast-iron fireback depicting the 'Sun King' (Louis XIV) garlanded with victory laurels. Private collection.



Fig. 10: 'Armada' Wealden fireback of 1588. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

with olive branches, projecting the monarch as bringer or guarantor of peace. In contrast, the heavily eroded fireback shown in Fig. 9, cast earlier in the seventeenth century, depicts a chubby-cheeked Roi-soleil (Louis XIV) garlanded with victory laurels, implicitly triumphant in battle. The contrast between the two plaques illustrates well the propagandistic function of armorial firebacks. The oldest known cast-iron fireback appears to be one carrying the arms of King René d'Anjou (1431–53), now in the Lorraine Museum at Nancy.⁹ (Some firebacks are 'signed' with the name of the pattern-maker or the foundry. The fireback shown in Fig. 8 is stamped 'DECOUSANCES', indicating it was made by the Cousances foundry, formed in 1553 and still manufacturing cookware under the Cousances brand into the 1980s.)

Symbolic Functions

Coats of arms advertise lineage, alliance, and allegiance. They can assert aristocratic pedigree; commemorate alliances between noble families through marriage and hence fusion of property (estates) between families; signal their owner's allegiance to a given crown or stake out the territory of a kingdom; and identify buildings as the property of a given estate or family. Some royal heraldic firebacks are said to have been given by monarchs to loyal subjects as tokens of gratitude for their support: the 'Armada' fireback shown in Fig. 10, for example, is alleged to have been given by Elizabeth I to John Knight of Chawton House in Hampshire in gratitude for his £50 donation to the fund for defending England against the Spanish Armada.¹⁰ The fireback itself would only have cost a few shillings at the time (the earliest documented production of firebacks in England is from 1547, priced at 3s 4d each,¹¹ equivalent to £836 in labour cost today, or £2,448 in 'prestige value' in terms of today's average income or wealth).¹²

Revolution and Censorship

Fireback decorations come in numerous genres and styles, then, but only one genre fell foul of the Republican authorities during the first French Revolution: namely, *plaques de cheminée* displaying the armorial achievements of royalty and the aristocracy. In October, 1793 — Year 2 of the *tabula-rasa* French republican calendar — the National Convention devoted part of

⁹ Carpentier, p. 11.

¹⁰ Hodgkinson, p. 132.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹² Measuring Worth Calculator, <http://www.measuringworth.com/>.

a session to discussing the humble fireback and issued a decree that all *plaques* bearing ‘des signes de féodalité’ (signs or emblems of feudalism and royalty) be destroyed within eight days.¹³ Such decrees were intended to bring the Revolution directly into French homes and hearths. Nonetheless, firebacks had use-value as well as symbolic value and many were very large, heavy, and firmly embedded in chimney walls, so their instant destruction and replacement *en masse* was out of the question, revolutionary zeal notwithstanding. Hence, four days later, the Convention returned to the subject, with one member arguing that the decree that ‘*plaques de cheminées* on which the former badge of France is imprinted [...] must be destroyed [...] is inexecutable within so short a period’, and proposing extending the eight-day period.¹⁴ The outcome of the debate, however, was a second decree (Fig. 11) that, within one month, all ‘plaques that carry the shield of France or feudal figures on their face’ must be ‘*retournées*’ (turned around) to hide their heraldic emblems and, as soon as possible thereafter, melted down and re-cast by the Republican forges in designs more attuned to democratic revolutionary ideals. The decree reads:

The National Convention decrees that home owners and, in their absence, tenants or farmers, at the expense of those owners, will be obliged, within one month maximum, under the penalties provided by law, to turn around all firebacks or fire-guards that bear emblems of feudalism or the ancient shield of France, whether they have three *fleurs-de-lys* or more; this being temporary only and until smelters have been established in sufficient numbers throughout the republic.¹⁵

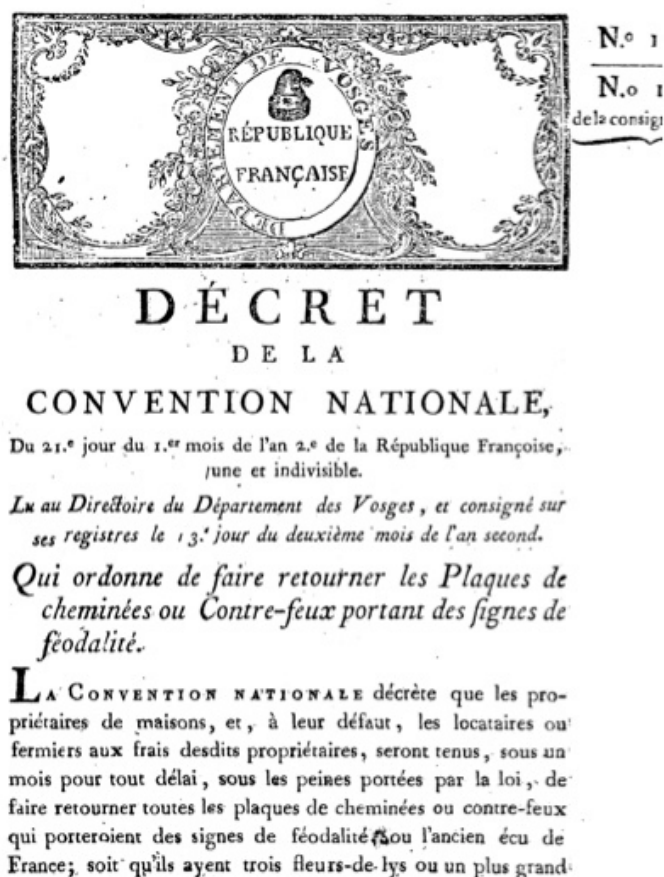


Fig. 11: Title page of Republican decree of 12 October 1793 requiring that all firebacks bearing signs of royalty or feudalism be inverted to hide those offending signs.

¹³ Carpentier, p. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵ *Décret de la Convention nationale, du 21.º jour du 1.ºr mois de l'an 2.º* [i.e. October 12, 1793] *de la République française*, No. 1710. No. 1537 de la consigne, Signed by François-Louis-Michel Deforgues (Paris: Haener, 1793), p. 1 (author's translation).

This second decree spawned a new minor industry in France: that of fireback-turning, often performed by stonemasons, often following police-prefecture tours of buildings suspected of containing such firebacks, and often prompted by informants keen to demonstrate their revolutionary zeal and collect their rewards by reporting on fellow citizens known or thought to own such plaques. After 9 October 1793 the mere fact of possessing a plaque carrying a coat of arms was sufficient to class one as ‘suspect’, send one to prison, and thence, too often, to the scaffold. Extant police records from the period record forced entries to ordinary citizens’ homes (a carpenter’s home, a musician’s home) to enforce the decree — one such record, ironically, written on paper watermarked with a large crown of a marquis.¹⁶



Fig. 12: Eighteenth-century cast-iron fireback whose three central fleurs-de-lys were effaced during the Revolution.



Fig. 13: Republican fireback (1940s reproduction) displaying Phrygian bonnet and initials of the slogan ‘Vive La Révolution’. Courtesy of Marc Maison, <<http://www.marcmaison.com/>> (Ref. 9754).

¹⁶ See Carpentier, *Histoire des plaques de cheminées*, pp. 7–8.

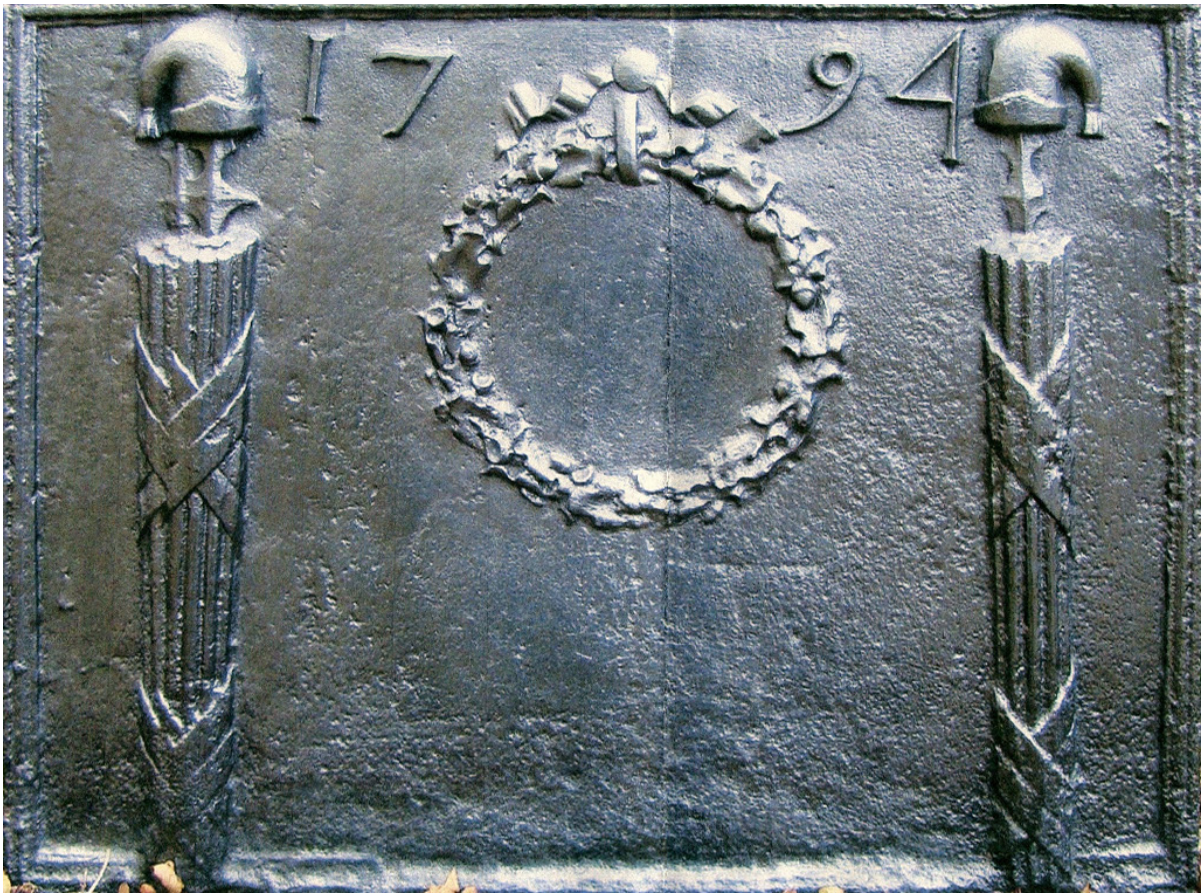


Fig. 14: Revolutionary fireback dated 1794, displaying 'Liberty bonnet' and fasces. Courtesy of Nicolas Vernot.



Fig. 15: Fireback reputedly cast in Year 2 of the French Republic and depicting a sans-culottes brandishing makeshift weapons. Private collection.

Many armorial firebacks were destroyed and others partially defaced to comply with the decrees — Fig. 12 shows a fireback from which the central three *fleurs-de-lys* of the royal arms have been chipped away. But many other firebacks were simply reinstalled back-to-front to conceal their offending heraldry, or laid face down on a kitchen or workshop floor. Meanwhile, the revolutionary blast-furnaces were at work re-casting firebacks in republican moulds. The fireback shown in Fig. 13 (a twentieth-century reproduction) incorporates a medallion of bayonets surmounted by a Phrygian cap — the Roman Republican and French Revolutionary symbol of democratic liberty — together with the initials of the motto 'Vive La Révolution'. Another example of the revolutionary genre is the fireback in Fig. 14 bearing the French Revolutionary symbols of the fasces and liberty bonnet, together with a victory laurel, and dated 1794, the year after the fireback decrees were issued. A freer design is evident in the fireback shown in Fig. 15, reputedly cast during the second year of the Republican



Fig. 16: Title page of 1793 comedy, *La Plaque Retournée*.

calendar and depicting a *sans-culottes* wearing a Phrygian cap and brandishing makeshift weapons indicative of the *sans-culottes*' bravery in the face of royalist guns. (The *sans-culottes* — literally, without *culottes*, or the silk knee-breeches fashionable among bourgeois moderates — were the radical left-wing partisans of the lower classes who, though ill-clad and ill-equipped, made up the bulk of the Revolutionary army during the early years of the French Revolutionary Wars and were the mainstay of the far-left factions of the successive revolutionary governments.)

Soon after the fireback decrees were issued in 1793, Paris's Vaudeville Theatre staged a 'patriotic comedy, in one act, mixed with songs,' entitled *La Plaque Retournée* (Fig. 16), which includes much talk of zealous commitment to the Revolution and disparagement of half-hearted commitment, and in which a young stone mason, charged with reversing an armorial *plaque* in a bourgeois home, discovers a sack of gold and silver hidden behind the *plaque*. The mason concludes that the home-owner must be no patriot, hands in the sack to the authorities, and

selflessly donates his reward to an orphanage, thereby winning the hand of his sweetheart whose fiercely patriotic republican father had previously doubted the boy's whole-hearted commitment to the revolutionary cause.¹⁷

The stage-set of the play is divided into two rooms — the patriot's modest living room decorated with symbols of liberty, and a richly furnished bourgeois salon — the rooms being separated by a central wall and a two-sided fireplace with a rotating *plaque de cheminée*. The play provides a neat trope for the 'rotating' fate of heraldic plaques during and after the Revolution. As has been noted, the 1793 decree gave birth to a new minor industry in France, that of



Fig. 17: A 'turned' heraldic fireback.

¹⁷ L.-T. Lambert, *La Plaque retournée, Comédie patriotique, En un Acte, mêlée de Vaudeville* (Paris: Libraire au Théâtre de Vaudeville, 1793).

armorial fireback-turning. This industry, in its turn, would give rise to another, lasting into the twentieth century and beyond: that of *re*-turning the inverted firebacks and discovering pots of bourgeois gold behind them, in the form of the elaborate heraldic reliefs that had remained hidden and unsuspected, for decades or centuries, on the backsides of what appeared to be just plain, undecorated plaques — reliefs that now fetch small fortunes in the bourgeois art-market (**Fig. 17**). They are reportedly still being discovered — the return of the repressed continues to this day — while a cottage industry in contemporary reproductions of old firebacks continues to supply households possessed of heraldic pretensions and large-enough fireplaces. (Reproductions are detectable by being slightly larger than the originals, which were themselves used to form the moulds for reproductions, and by their smooth backs, resulting from modern, two-sided moulds, in contrast to the rough backs of older casts that were often pockmarked by the practice of sprinkling sand on the molten iron to cool it.)

Of course, much revolutionary iconoclasm was irreversible. The iconoclastic defacement or destruction of feudal arms carved in stone or wood on mantlepieces, lintels, keystones, gravestones, and churches was irrevocable — leaving only blank escutcheons from which the armorial relief was cleanly chiselled-off, or the traces of more roughly defaced arms, as on the handsome gothic sandstone fireplace shown in Fig. 18, on which the traces of three partially erased *fleurs-de-lys* are still visible. Unlike such defaced stone carvings, however, the rotated armorial firebacks could eventually be re-turned to their former 'glory' and traded as valuable commodities. But how did this reinvention of politically suppressed feudal firebacks — morally stigmatized for being the material signs of aristocratic power and privilege — as objects of aesthetic and commercial value, or collectable commodities, come about?

The revolutionary iconoclasts sought a *tabula rasa*: the eradication from everyday republican life (including from its language, its dress, its domestic and public buildings) of all traces of an *ancien regime* of hereditary class privilege and exploitation, in order to establish an entirely new society based on democratic rights and reason, not tradition and inherited wealth. The smashing of feudal emblems — above all, of *fleurs de lys* — functioned propagandistically



Fig. 18: Fifteenth-century sandstone fireplace (c. 1480) from the Lorraine region of N.E. France, whose *fleurs-de-lys* on the crest below the carved head were partially defaced during the Revolution. Courtesy of Julien Cambier, Cheminées Antiquités.

to foster the Revolutionary process, to incite conviction or fear, and to make change appear, and become, irreversible. But it did not go unchallenged, even within the republican government itself. In 1794, a Constitutional Catholic bishop, Abbé Grégoire, wrote three reports for the National Convention, on what he called revolutionary 'vandalisme' (he would later claim, misleadingly: 'I coined the word, to kill the thing'),¹⁸ condemning the destruction of monuments and other objects 'necessary for completing the chronological history of the arts' and which 'the historian, the antiquarian and the artist would have come to visit endlessly. Are we a civilised nation,' the Abbé asked, 'or a horde of savages?'¹⁹ His language echoed that of the government committees on monuments and arts set up to assess the commercial value of objects in churches that had been sold or closed as a result of the nationalization of Church property or de-Christianizing policies — objects whose sale could now help defray the republican national debt.

What would emerge from this revaluation of sacred icons as commodities and from the protests of critics such as the Abbé Grégoire was a discourse that would transform the notion of monument from an instrument of ideological domination into one of historical instruction, and the armorial fireback from a proclamation of lineage, allegiance, or ownership into a work of art. For this to happen, objects bearing 'signs of feudalism' had to be redefined as the property of the French people or *nation*, not of the Bourbon dynasty or noble families, and as the skilled handiwork of French artists and artisans (stone and wood carvers, iron founders, metal-smiths, painters, potters), not as signifiers of hereditary title and wealth. This discourse of re-evaluation, laced with Burkean and Kantian theories of autonomous art (as an object of disinterested enjoyment) and good taste, represented the Enlightenment turning-point, in

Republican France, when the armorial fireback could be turned back around and transformed from an instrument of propaganda for feudalism into a bearer of aesthetic and pedagogical value, a source of historical knowledge — knowledge of the national culture, from which *vandalistes*, by definition, had to be excluded as civilization's barbaric Other.

A member of the National Convention, Gilbert Romme, pointed out that while the *fleur-de-lys* had certainly been 'a token of pride for the kings', it had also been 'a national stamp for the arts', and that the work of French artists should not be attacked or destroyed because of its other function.²⁰ The *fleur-de-lys*, of course, survived multiple abolitions of the French monarchy and came to signify Frenchness as such, rather than the Bourbon family dynasty — it became an emblem of the republican nation, as on contemporary French postage stamps (Fig. 19) as well as in the coats of arms of many French cities, although it has never been officially adopted by any of the republics. As Dario Gamboni notes, in the Enlightened backlash



Fig. 19: 1960s French postage stamp bearing the 'unofficial' Republican symbol of the fleur-de-lys.

¹⁸ This claim is still widely cited and credited, including by Dario Gamboni in *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 18; however, Bernard Deloche and Jean-Michel Leniaud have corrected the misconception that Abbé Grégoire coined the term 'vandalism', pointing out that its first recorded usage was by Joseph Lakanal in his report on the preservation of the nation's patrimony to the National Convention on June 4, 1793. See Bernard Deloche, Jean-Michel Leniaud (eds), *La Culture des sans-culottes: le premier dossier du patrimoine 1789–1798* (Paris: Les Éditions De Paris, 1989), p. 34, n. 15.

¹⁹ Desbois de Rochefort, H. Grégoire, J. B. Royer, G. Mauviel, 'Annales de la Religion, ou mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire du dix-huitième siècle; par une Société d'Amis de la Religion et de la Patrie' (Paris, 1795), p. 113, cited in Richard Simon Clay, 'Signs of Power: Iconoclasm in Paris, 1789–1795' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University College London, 1999), p. 218.

²⁰ S. Settis, 'La colonne Trajane: l'empereur et son public,' *Revue Archéologique* n.s., I (1991), 186–98, cited in Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, p. 35.

against revolutionary vandalism, 'iconoclasts were accused of destroying public wealth, of defaming the image of Revolutionary France, and of working for its enemies.'²¹ With the fall of Robespierre, vandalism was associated with the Terror and condemned as such.

In fact, of course, 'signs of feudalism' underwent a triple — perhaps even a quadruple — recoding, or transformation of meaning, during the Revolution. Decrees such as the two fireback decrees instantly redefined coats of arms — those badges of breeding, pride, and privilege — as signifiers of tyranny and exploitation, symbols of an oppressive class system (feudalism) that capital-h History, in the form of the Revolution, had already rendered obsolete, as a benighted precursor of enlightened modernity. The iconoclastic defacing of the icons of the feudal nobility and Roman Church produced another set of signifiers: that of emblems of revolutionary iconoclasm itself. To see pre-revolutionary stone fireplaces with defaced escutcheons, today, is to be vividly reminded of the history of French class war, democratic revolutionary idealism, and political utopianism. In other words, damaged, defaced icons become iconic of iconoclasm itself — no less powerful symbols and touristic magnets of political radicalism and idealism than the fractured remains of the Berlin Wall or vandalized statues of Lenin.

But these icons of republican iconoclasm could be turned around, yet again, by the discourse of an Abbé Grégoire and re-coded as tokens of barbarism, of mindless savagery or ignorant destructiveness — signifiers of the Terror, not signifiers of utopian politics. On the face of it, the second fireback decree (that armorial plaques be '*retournées*', so that only their plain backs were visible) displaced their symbolic value with pure use-value, reasserting the fireback's functionality as protector of walls and radiator of heat; but, of course, the inverted armorial fireback instantly assumed a new symbolic meaning, signalling the household's commitment (or submission) to the republican cause, the project of the democratic nation as such.

Turned back around again, during the thaw that would follow the period of *tabula-rasa* revolutionary idealism, iconoclasm, and censorship — the thaw that began with the Restoration and Empire — the armorial fireback came to signify national cultural heritage, history, and artistic achievement, enabling owners and manufacturers of such firebacks to argue for their aesthetic and historical value to the *nation* as distinct from the feudal family.

The history of *plaques de cheminées*, then, participates in a broader, often-repeated historical process by which a society or class moves from venerating to stigmatizing and breaking images, then to protecting and preserving them, and in which their 'proper' home (as bearers of history and aesthetic value) becomes the Enlightenment museum or gallery — that institution which protects cultural heritage from vandals — or, alternatively, the private collection of the educated amateur, with no claims to arms or nobility but simply to good taste and the means to trade such objects as 'autonomous' commodities in the auction rooms of the art market.

The legacy of the Enlightenment's reinvention of coats of arms as works of art is starkly evident in the verdict that Henri Carpentier passed on the history of French firebacks in his 1912 book, *L'Histoire des plaques de cheminées*. With characteristic Gallic modesty, Carpentier informed his readers that 'The most superior artists in this medium are incontestably the French.'²² While it was 'certainly in Belgium, in Germany, in Luxembourg and in the Trier region that the greatest numbers of plaques were cast [...] their design was in general very heavy, crowded, overloaded, confused, and the relief is often almost nil' — whereas French-made plaques 'are in general of a correct design, elegant, of skilful composition, of a clear and noble style, the reliefs are strong, and many of these plaques can be considered as true works of art.'²³ Carpentier went on to explain that 'these beautiful compositions' (by far the majority of them armorial) emerged in the Renaissance and attained the height of perfection under Louis XV (1715–74):

Then, suddenly, this special art seems in full decline [*décadence*]. Apart from some very rare, pretty pieces, the plaques cast under Louis XVI [whose reign ended, with the monarchy itself, during the Revolution, in 1792] are thin, mean, cramped [*grêles, sèches, étriquées*].

²¹ Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, p. 36.

²² Carpentier, *Histoire des plaques de cheminées*, p. 4 (author's translation).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4 (author's translation).

Those, rarer still, cast during the Revolution, are stiff, flat, extremely cold or barren, as if suddenly France had lost all its decorators, all its designers.

Under the First Empire, nothing.

During the Restoration, some rare and poor pieces, bearing the mark of that époque so feeble from the artistic point of view.²⁴

Carpentier reports that, under the Second Empire, a few graceful compositions were cast for the châteaux of Compiègne or Pierrfonds: 'And that's all. The Third Republic, until the present [i.e., 1912], has only produced some instantly recognisable pastiches.'²⁵

For Carpentier's intellectual tradition, 'revolutionary art' is an oxymoron: revolutionary politics and aesthetic value are profoundly antipathetic. Carpentier suggests bitterly that his documentation of the history of French firebacks (consisting mainly of photographic illustrations) might have 'been of more value' if it had stopped at Louis XV and not shown 'the absolute decadence of this branch of French art' in subsequent periods. However, he also tells of his own efforts to *re-turn* the '*retournées*' plaques that were outlawed/stigmatized in the Revolution: he tells us that in the past fifteen years he has 'found very pretty examples serving as floors of workshops, or rusting away in wet backyards. Great quantities of these plaques have been broken up as old iron for returning to the foundry. Many pieces of the greatest interest have been destroyed in this stupid fashion.'²⁶

Complaining that the Revolution produced no art itself, Carpentier mocks the Republican Convention for not having 'judged it beneath itself to devote part of two sessions to order the destruction of these lovely souvenirs of a past regime of which they were in horror'. Today (1912), however, everything has changed, he tells us:

At the same time as our decorators and our designers, our master glassmakers, our ceramicists show the flowering of a new art, we seek with passion any survivors of the beautiful things that our fathers created with passion.

Everything ancient takes on an unexpected, almost insane value.

And the few pieces that are found are bid for at excessive prices.²⁷

As a consequence, it is now possible for the average *citoyen*, with no pretensions to nobility and every sympathy for the democratic idealism that drove the ideology of the Revolutionary iconoclasts, to bid for armorial *plaques de cheminée* as commodities at antique auctions, admire them unashamedly as 'autonomous' works of art in the Kantian mould, and study them as the material traces of History, while deploring the feudalism for which they so often functioned as a propaganda medium.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 4–5 (author's translation).

²⁵ Ibid., p. 5 (author's translation).

²⁶ Ibid., p. 5 (author's translation).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 5 (author's translation).