

Nobility and Possession: Objects in the French Renaissance

Château

Sophia Pickford (University of Cambridge)

21 November 2005

Sophia Pickford drew upon research she is undertaking for a PhD to discuss book collection and display in a number of châteaux. She first outlined how the principal collectors associated with the court of François Ier took their lead from the king himself. His collection at Fontainebleau incorporated the royal library originally at Blois and became the foundation of the Bibliothèque Nationale. Courtier-ministers like Anne de Montmorency and Antoine Duprat had substantial and diverse collections of printed books and manuscripts covering a wide range of subjects, from chivalric romances to mathematical, linguistic and architectural treatises. The collections were acquired or enhanced by inheritance, purchase and receipt of gifts. The king was only the most prominent of a number of assiduous collectors. Books were appreciated as much as *objets d'art* as for their contents. They were usually shown, alongside items of curiosity or scientific interest, to important visitors to the château. According to their inventories, these collections were housed in rooms identified as *librairies*, *galeries*, *chambres* and *cabinet.s* Located in the more private areas of the residence, these rooms were usually richly decorated with ornate wood panelling, cupboards, shelves, coffer and reading desks. Frescoes, paintings and busts often depicted figures of classical learning and legend, especially of the Muses and the seven Liberal Arts. The decorative schemes thus

linked the purpose of the room with the ancestry, noble status, taste and attainments of the owner. Book collection, storage and display therefore functioned as an important way for the owner to fashion himself or herself in the context of the present, the past and the future.

Discussion focused on the types of items that were collected, the proportion of manuscripts to printed books, the way in which they were stored and the spaces in which they were displayed. Another theme was the extent to which practice in France mirrored or influenced that elsewhere in Europe. Comparisons were made with royal palaces in England and with the Italian tradition of the princely *studiolo*. This was seen as probably the main, but certainly not the only, model for the *librairie* of a French Renaissance château.

Glenn Richardson