Pierre Eugène Du Simitière and the Beginnings of the American Historical Museum

In our days scholars have taken a somewhat disdainful attitude towards the old-fashioned antiquarians, who not only embraced with equal love several such widely divergent fields as history, ethnography and science, but also claimed authority in these pursuits. Though certainly not all such men were scholars, their genuine enthusiasm often made good their lack of thorough knowledge. In his Praise of Antiquarians, Isham has amply shown how much we are indebted to these men who saved and stored historical objects at a time when they were generally neglected, and in all likelihood would have been lost had it not been for the antiquarians’ loving care.

One of the most distinguished representatives of this type of amateur scholar was Pierre Eugène Du Simitière (1736-1784), a native of Geneva who settled in Philadelphia between 1769-1774. Not that Du Simitière has been forgotten. In fact a fairly extensive biographical article with some excerpts from the Du Simitière papers in the Library of Congress was published in 1889. A short account of his life has also appeared in the Dictionary of American Biography; and because of his artistic merit he was listed in the Kuenstler Lexicon by Thieme-Becker. Still, there are a number of facts about this man’s life which have hitherto remained unrelated and which are important enough to call for some clarification.

How much Du Simitière had become a true antiquarian, in love with the town in which he lived and which he was unable to leave, is

1 Norman M. Isham, In Praise of Antiquarians (Boston, 1931).
revealed by a letter in answer to an invitation to go out to the country:

. . . your rural retreat, I make no doubt is very pleasing and I would like well enough to see it, but I have not the best inclination for a country life in North America, besides I object to the waggon with five horses as much as I do to stride a single one . . . if I was to lose sight of Christ Church steeple I would think myself bewildered, it is now near ten years that I have constantly resided in this city and never slept one night out of it during the whole time; when our Philadelphia philosophers have brought the air balloons to that degree of perfection as to enable us to navigate in the air perhaps I might venture in that vehicle.\(^3\)

Before definitely settling down like this, Du Simitière had been roaming around the West Indies, studying wildlife, painting and collecting. In 1766 he came to Philadelphia for the first time, then left for Boston and New York and finally returned to Philadelphia to stay. Here he soon became a member of the American Philosophical Society (1768). Assuming also the special activity of a curator,\(^4\) he quickly obtained access to the circles of the leading men of his time. For a many-sided man like Du Simitière, living at Philadelphia in those years offered a remarkable range of opportunities.

Du Simitière's many acquaintances as well as his manifold interests made it quite natural for him to start collecting curios. As early as 1775 we hear of the first visitor to his collections. This was Richard Smith, a member of the Continental Congress, who states in his diary that he amused himself "all the morning in Du Simitière's museum."\(^5\) The date places this collection very close to the "first" opened to the public in this country, namely, the Charleston Museum which was founded in 1773. In collecting, Du Simitière followed the old European custom of setting up a "Curio Cabinet" containing relics of many types. These might be such objects as Indian artifacts


procured from General Sullivan's expedition in 1778, a stone adze from Otaheite given by Dr. Franklin, an old smoking pipe of lead found near Trenton, a gothic print, a Hessian brass grenadier cap, and any number of pamphlets or maps concerning the Colonies. Even the Meschianza was represented, curiously enough by the shield, sword, and lance which Major André had used on that occasion. Portions of the notebooks, in which Du Simitière entered the curios as they steadily flowed in, were published by Potts in 1889.

It would be unfair to judge Du Simitière as an amateur in all matters concerning the objects he had on display. That he was as competent a museum director as could be found in his time there is no doubt. This is proved by the requests for advice which poured in upon him from far and near. Thus it was Du Simitière who in 1779 advised Colonel Isaac Zane, the ironmaster of the Marlborough Ironworks in Frederick County, Virginia, to buy the silver medal of the "Queen of Pamunkey," which had been unearthed at that time, and is now owned by the Virginia Historical Society. Jeremy Belknap wished to have Du Simitière tell him about a certain species of New Hampshire birds; while Dr. Nathaniel Scudder of New Jersey received information that the picture he had sent Du Simitière was done by

some dauber formerly in New York, many of the same kind I have seen in old Dutch houses in that state, that seemed to decorate the apartments for want of better ornaments and long before the fine prints, framed and glazed came into use. But among them there were also some to be found that were painted in Holland by good

6 Du Simitière had known Major André before coming to this country. The two met while André was at school in Geneva (Switzerland). André studied under the same drawing master as Du Simitière did later. This master might have been one of the two brothers Liotard, of whom Jean Etienne had world-wide fame. Du Simitière further states that André's "talents for painting being very great, he gave me a few drawings." Du Simitière also saw André's "most curious journals of his travels, which were drawn in the most lively and picturesque manner, the dresses, customs and amusements of the Canadians, Americans and Indians, the curious animals, birds in nests, all in their proper colours with landscape prospects and plans of places." (Du Simitière's Letterbook, 1780, in the Library of Congress. Hereafter cited as L.B.)

As a large part of André's papers was supposedly destroyed at Halifax (See Thomas A. Emmet, Incidents of My Life (New York, 1911), 217), there seems little hope that these drawings will ever be recovered.

7 The Du Simitière papers in the Library of Congress as well as the Scrapbook in the Library Company of Philadelphia contain much unpublished material concerning items which made up the museum, especially those pertaining to Indian ethnology.

8 Harrold E. Gillingham, "Early American Indian Medals," Antiques, VI (1924), 312.
masters, but they being generally in the same kind of frame and looking old, are commonly unnoticed, such are always very acceptable for a collection like mine.9

With his collections growing and his museum gradually becoming “greatly celebrated in America, where it is unrivalled,”10 Du Simitière opened his museum to the public in 1782. This, as he wrote to his friend Governor Clinton, he did “under some restrictions . . . after having consulted some of my most judicious friends on the subject, I found they were unanimous in the propriety of the measure.” By receiving a number of visitors, he would be “opening new channels of information concerning curiosities found in various places.” Du Simitière also thought of printing handbills to have distributed far and wide all over the country, “to give some account, of what my collections consist and to encourage people to discoveries of the curious productions of nature.”11 In 1783 the museum was moved to a convenient house on Arch Street, more fit to accommodate its growth and the increasing number of visitors.

At this time peace came to the country. Enjoying the favorable turn of events, Du Simitière has left us a colorful description of the busy life in Philadelphia:

now the Paris and the Hague of America, where brilliancy of our beau monde and the sumptuousity and elegancy of their entertainments rivals those of the old world . . . we see the river crowded with ships from various nations displaying the flags of their respective sovereigns, except that of England, add to that the great concours of Strangers that resorts here from all parts, and the immense quantity and variety of goods which fills our stores, new buildings erecting in every part of the town, and then you have a light sketch of what’s Philadelphia’s present appearance. Our friends in Ireland fully informed of the horrid devastation made by the enemy over the hens and chickens of the United States, have very providently sent us over by the first vessels that arrive here from Dublin under continental colours, two hundred cegs of eggs, well packed up in salt, that we once more be able to regal our shelves with custard, after so long and so severe a famine, they also knowing that we had worn out during the war our clothes to the very last rag, have sent us ready made clothes, wiggs and other useful articles of wearing apparel, also bread, a very large assortment of course woolen stuffs for the present season, it is in contemplation to send them in return for the above mentioned articles a very considerable cargo of American potatoes.12

9 L.B. 1780.
10 François Jean, Marquis de Chastellux, Travels in North America (New York, 1828), I, 111. Chastellux saw the collection in 1782.
11 L.B. 1782.
12 L.B. 1783.
Had Du Simitière merely established the usual sort of Curio Cabinet it would scarcely have been worth drawing attention to the matter. What made his collection different and showed that he was planning far ahead of his time was the section which he devoted to the history of his adopted country. He was the first man to realize that the events of the war for liberty deserved recording for posterity. Further, Du Simitière realized that if this were not done while current material was still available, important documentary evidence would be lost forever. Printed or written source materials were to be supplemented in his museum by historical objects pertaining to particular subjects, such as seals, medals, representations of monuments, views and prints. Du Simitière recognized the necessity of classifying his written and printed materials as to political and religious affairs, as well as to trade, manufactures and the progress of the arts and sciences. The factual matter, he reported, needed to be coordinated by observations, descriptions, memoirs, remarks, chronolgie, extracts, plans and drawings according to specific needs.\textsuperscript{13}

Unfortunately no catalogues or descriptions of Du Simitière’s museum are extant, so that we cannot make out an exact picture of his collections. It is fairly safe to assume, however, that the historical material was designed to represent certain ideas and that, consequently, it was arranged logically and in a definite order. If this was so it can be claimed that Du Simitière’s idea of presenting historical material was a most progressive one, closely related to the modern conception of the historical museum.

Such a novel plan involved putting history on exhibit; and to prepare this exhibit it was necessary to make inquiries into the history of the country. This in turn involved Du Simitière in another task. Feeling that earlier historical accounts were “false and erroneous,” he attempted “a design of rectifying these accounts.”\textsuperscript{14} This enterprise must have seemed strange to his contemporaries. Even John Adams could not help wondering where it would lead, when he gave Mrs. Adams a description of this “very curious man. He has begun a collection of materials for a history of the revolution. He begins with the first advices of the teaships. He cuts out of newspapers every

\textsuperscript{13} L.B., and various other Du Simitiere papers in the Library of Congress.
scrap of intelligence, and every piece of speculation, and pastes it on clean paper, arranging them under the head of that state to which they belong, and intends to bind them up in volumes. He has a list of every speculation and pamphlet concerning independence and another of those concerning forms of government.”

Collecting material for interpretation of the history of the Revolution quite naturally induced Du Simitière to plan a written account of the events of which he had been a witness. He therefore sent a memorial to Congress asking for a grant to publish “at some future period a work containing memoirs and observations upon the origin and present state of the different parts of the country,” having, as he said, for this purpose at his disposal a collection not exceeded by any in either public or private hands.

Though the Committee to which this plea was referred voted in favor of it, there were many objections to Du Simitière’s plan. Some members doubted if he could speak English well enough; while others felt that if a history of America was to be written, it should be done by an American. Furthermore, it ought to be done in competition, the best history receiving a premium. The plan being defeated in July, 1780, Du Simitière was so much disgusted that he wrote a “naughty” letter to Congress. Although he withdrew this, he felt deeply “sorry that all his work will be buried in oblivion and the materials of my most valuable collections (the only one of its kind in private hands) in a short time perhaps be scattered and lost.” Yet though he had done with Congress and considered its action on his plan an “insultury slur,” Du Simitière still intended to remain what he always had been, “a Republican born and bred, a volunteer which yet will pursue his plan and hopes that all friends will help.” The next step was an application to the Assembly of Pennsylvania. This proved successful, and in 1781 an act was passed awarding Du Simitière two hundred pounds state money to “prosecute the intended history of the Middle States of North America.” Unfortunately this help was worthless, “the circulation of that money being at present entirely stopped.”

15 Letters C. C., II, 49.
18 L.B., 1780.
19 Minutes of the Session of Legislation of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1781), 492.
While we now can see that Du Simitière's plan to write a history of the Revolution was premature, it has on the other hand proved a real loss that his collections and source materials were not preserved. John Adams, when he wrote to Elbridge Gerry in 1814 discussing a motion Gerry had probably introduced at the time of Du Simitière's proposals, remarked: "Had your motion to Congress been adopted, and a man of sense and letters appointed in each State to collect memorials of the rise and progress and termination of the revolution: we should now possess a monument of more inestimable value then all the histories and orations that have been written."

When Du Simitière died in October, 1784, Mathew Clarkson, later Mayor of Philadelphia, and Ebenezer Hazard, the collector of the Pennsylvania state papers, were made administrators of his estate. Though Hazard told Jeremy Belknap that he did this "with a view to prevent his museum . . . from being scattered," the collections were dispersed by auction. A number of scrapbooks and some other items went to the Library Company of Philadelphia, others were bought by Clarkson and again sold after his death in 1800. A major part probably went to Charles Willson Peale as a nucleus for the museum he opened in 1785. The collections of the several Peales were later bought by Phineas T. Barnum for his American Museum. Such items which might have come from Du Simitière were destroyed when Barnum's first collection was burned completely in 1865.

Having examined Du Simitière's outstanding qualities as a collector and museum director, it remains to consider him as an artist. While he does not seem to have painted in oil, he is known to have painted miniatures, none of which appear to be extant, however. Of the great number of pencil and chalk portraits he drew of well-known personalities of his time, a small number has been preserved. As a draughtsman he also drew maps, frontispieces, and technical illustrations for magazines, and designed seals for the Continental Congress, and several of the states.

Du Simitière's special ability in designing heraldic items like seals was closely related to his antiquarian interests. Being considered an

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20 John Hall, Memoirs of Mathew Clarkson (Philadelphia, 1890).
21 Some of this material and also some of Du Simitière's designs were published by Stokes, op. cit.
expert in such matters, he was asked for his advice when the committee commissioned to prepare a device for a seal of the United States was convening in 1776. Like the three members, Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams, Du Simitiere was invited to submit his version. A rough sketch of his design is now in the Jefferson papers. Neither Du Simitiere's nor any other device proposed by this committee was ever adopted. Just one feature, the “eye of providence” was taken over from Du Simitiere's design for the reverse of the seal approved in 1782.

At the same time Congress commissioned Du Simitiere to make a design for a gold medal to commemorate the surrender of Boston to Washington in 1776. Though Du Simitiere was paid for the sketch it was never used. When the medal eventually was struck in Paris (about 1787), it was designed by the French medalist Duvivier, who used Houdon's likeness of Washington for the legend.

Du Simitiere also received orders to design the state seals of Virginia, New Jersey, Georgia and Delaware. Though all these designs were executed, as the artist states in his notebook, only those for New Jersey and Delaware were finally adopted.

The present design of the seal of Virginia showing “Virtue with her foot on a prostrated tyrant” was adopted by the Virginia convention on July 5, 1776. The commission preparing the necessary resolution had been advised by Franklin, Du Simitiere and others. The device which Du Simitiere presented was entirely of his own creation. An abbreviated version of this design is now among the Jefferson papers in the Library of Congress, with the inscription “Coat of arms of Virginia as devised by M. Du Simitiere.” It shows in the field the cross of St. George (as a remnant of the ancient Virginia coat of arms) with a knife in the center as an allusion to the

23 For this design Du Simitiere received $32. from Congress (Cont. Congr., VI, 991). It is described by John Adams in his letter quoted above. See note 15.
name the Indians gave to this state. In the first quarter there is a
tobacco plant, in the second two wheat sheaves, in the third a stalk
of Indian corn, in the fourth four fasces alluding to the four great
rivers of the state. There follows in these papers a description which
probably accompanied the original drawing. Supporting the escut-
cheon on the right was "a figure as in the time of Queen Elizabeth, rep-
resenting Sir Walter Raleigh, planting with his right hand the stand-
ard of liberty, with the words of the Magna Charta written on it."
On the left there was to be seen "a Virginia rifleman of the present
times completely accoutred." Certainly this design was much more
suitable for its heraldic purpose than the one finally adopted.

Du Simitière was more successful with the New Jersey state seal. It
was accepted as designed, though he had taken quite a number of
liberties in deviating from the device prescribed in the resolutions of
the Assembly. In its basic form the present seal of New Jersey still
shows his original design.

The Assembly of the State of Delaware resolved to have a seal
showing Britannia on the right side and Liberty on the left, with a
label proceeding from Britannia to Liberty showing the words:
"Go to America." This interesting device was rejected as being too
complicated and Du Simitière was commissioned to design a device
according to his own ideas. His version was accepted in February,
1777. Like all his other designs for seals, the one for Delaware shows
an escutcheon with sheaves of wheat in the upper half and an ox in
the lower half, and also two supporters, a husbandman with a hoe
and an American soldier.

What became of Du Simitière's design for the State of Georgia is
unknown, but apparently it was not accepted. The present seal still
shows the device adopted in 1777, supposedly designed by Button
Gwinnett.

Though Du Simitière's name has been most generally remembered
for his portraits of heroes of the American Revolution as engraved
by various artists, there is much confusion about the sequence in
which the various editions of these engravings were published. After

27 Evans, op. cit., 32.
29 George E. Shankle, State Names, Flags, Seals, . . . (New York, 1938).
30 Charles F. Jenkins, Button Gwinnett (New York, 1926), 110.
1777 Du Simitière drew portraits of many prominent personalities. Those which he intended to publish, he sent to Conrad Alexandre Gérard, who had been French Ambassador in America and was then living in Versailles. This friend arranged to have them engraved by Benoît Louis Prévost in Paris.\textsuperscript{31} The first set of twelve portraits was ready in 1781 and was advertised in the \textit{Mercure de France} (February 24, 1781). These were of George Washington, Baron Steuben, Silas Deane, Joseph Reed, Gouverneur Morris, Horatio Gates, John Jay, William Drayton, Henry Lawrence, Charles Thomson, Samuel Huntingdon, and John Dickinson. The portrait of Benedict Arnold was sold as a supplement to this series. As this print and some of the others were difficult to sell, a new edition with some change of portraits was planned. The drawings for these substitutes were sent to France, but evidently were not executed, for no engravings after Du Simitière's portraits of John Sullivan, Benjamin Lincoln, Robert Morris, Arthur St. Clair, Thomas Mifflin, William Whipple, and Robert Livingston have ever turned up.

The first edition of the published series was issued without the names of those represented because it was thought that titling the portraits would have endangered their transmittal to America during the war. As this danger was over by the end of 1782 a second edition was printed giving "names and titles under each head for the easiest information of the subscribers."\textsuperscript{32} As a matter of fact some of the early engravings did fall into the hands of the British, and early reprints made in Spain may owe their existence to this circumstance.\textsuperscript{33} Beside these Spanish prints, several series of reprints in stipple engraving were made in England after 1783.\textsuperscript{34} These English prints are better known than the original French set, and in many listings of the portraits the English reprints are set down as representing the first issue of Du Simitière's drawings. While the English series

\textsuperscript{31} One pastel out of two in the Charles de Mun Collection reproduced in Theodor Bolton, \textit{Early American Portrait Draughtsmen in Crayons} (New York, 1933), 26. The fact that the Paris set of Du Simitière drawings engraved by Prévost was published before the London series was first recognized by Edna Donnell, "Portraits of Eminent Americans," \textit{Antiques}, XXIV (1933), 17–21.

\textsuperscript{32} L.B., 1782.

\textsuperscript{33} By "Mariano Brandi en Madrid, 1781."

\textsuperscript{34} The first English engravings were marked "B.B.E." These initials do not stand for B[est] B[ritish] E[ngravers] as Donnell (note 32) suggests quite seriously, but rather for Benjamin Bearne Ellis (+1824).
naturally contains Benedict Arnold’s likeness, Du Simitière tried to suppress the Prévost print of Arnold, after he had received the engravings from France. On this account this Prévost print ought to be a rarer item than the other portraits of the first series.

Although Du Simitière sold his prints for but ten shillings each, they received a lukewarm reception. After leaving a set with Charles Thomson, the artist reported himself to be thoroughly disappointed: “no notice being taken of them except soiling and tearing off half of the paper, I took them back again.”

In 1782 the artist dedicated one series to George Washington. It is not known if Washington acknowledged the dedication; but two years later when Du Simitière had died and his collections had already been scattered, Washington received a letter from the Reverend William Gordon, asking the President about available portraits of the military leaders of the war. As it happened, Gordon and not Du Simitière was then preparing the first history of the Revolution. In answer to this request Washington wrote from Mount Vernon, March 8, 1785, “If Mr. Du’ Simitire is living, and at Philad[elphi]a, it is possible he may have miniature engravings of most, if not all the military characters you want, and in their proper dresses: he drew many good likenesses from the life, and got them engraved at Paris for sale; among these I have seen Gen[era]l Gates, Baron de Steuben etc., as also that of your h[um]ble serv[an]t. . . .”

It was a strange coincidence that Du Simitière’s drawings were recommended to be used for a book the antiquarian himself had planned, above all it was the hero of this very same book that made the recommendation.

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