

From Ashes to Ashes

Lifecycles of Manufacturing in the Marais

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“Société des Joailliers, Bijoutiers, Orfèvres”: The elegantly carved letters immediately grab my attention. I can’t help but want to make inquiries about the grand nineteenth century façade we have come across in Paris’s Marais neighborhood. We are on our way to the Musée Carnavalet, the museum of the history of the city, but my friend tells me she believes that there is some kind of museum inside this building too. We return on the way home, after sunset, and in the darkness, it is the UNIQLO signs glowing in the building’s large windows that now draw the eye. Inside, bright lights illuminate racks of brightly colored cottons, sitting inside a gutted nineteenth-century factory, whose insides have been made to gleam with glass, steel, and glossy paint.



Fig. 1: Interior view of the UNIQLO store in the Marais, Paris. The store opened in 2014 in the renovated factory of the Société des Cendres, a cooperative of metalworkers founded in the mid-nineteenth century to refine precious metals from workshop waste. The factory's central chimney dominates the shop floor. Image by GFreihalter, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

This building too, it turns out, is a museum of the history of the city of Paris. It is the “[last factory in the Marais](#),” once a neighborhood teeming with a wide range of small manufacturers of watches, jewelry, and fashionable “articles de Paris.”¹

Operational until 2002, it is a testament to the once-thriving jewelry industry of the neighborhood. A decade after closing its doors and gathering dust, its dignified façade and impressive interior were restored through a partnership with Japanese clothing brand UNIQLO, under an agreement with the still-active *Société des cendres* that the restoration of the building would preserve its architecture and industrial history. The factory reopened as a UNIQLO store in 2014.



Fig. 2: The façade of the store preserves the *Société des Cendres*'s original signage. Metallic workshop waste was brought to the factory, burned and crushed into ashes (*cendres*) and then smelted to produce gold and silver ingots. The factory also had a laboratory to analyze the metallic content of workshop waste. Image by Mbzt via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

There is more continuity to this story than first appears. The nineteenth century alliance of jewelers and goldsmiths named themselves the *Société des cendres* or Society of Ashes: this space, since it has existed, has been dedicated to recovering the gleam of dusty waste. The area's jewelry trades founded the cooperative in 1859 to collect metallic waste from the workshops of its 500 members. Metalworkers would collect dust of their shop floors and bring it to the factory to recover the traces of precious metals that remained. The building included a laboratory for assaying samples, so that the *Société* could prove to their clients that they were receiving an accurate proportion of precious metals. But most of the space was devoted to the heating and grinding of waste into ashes, from which metal could then be refined.



Fig. 3: The factory remained in operation into the early twenty-first century. Many of the tools and equipment used in the refining process are on display in glass vitrines in the store's lowest floor. Image by GFreihalter via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Glass vitrines in the UNIQLO store's basement contains instruments, machinery, and furnaces once used in the processing of the metallic ashes. The display is presented as a history of technology, along with video monitors showing reconstructions of the miraculous process of recovering molten metal and casting ingots of gold. It is a story of redemption, one that feels like a parable for the factory's alchemical transformation.



Fig. 4: A small book documenting the history of the building and its renovation shows signs of its life on the shelves. Image by the author.

Next to the exhibits, there is a rack of guidebooks, available in English, French and Japanese editions. Every copy is dirty and creased around the edges, marked by the touch of the many customers who have picked up one of these guides, and perhaps indifferently, or perhaps with their curiosity satisfied, put it down again. I ask one of the employees if she can give me a fresh copy, which I want to purchase as a souvenir. She has to check but she's not sure if they have any more.

Given the material evidence in front of me, it seems clear that sales of these small art books do not keep pace with the turnover of denim and linen. It turns out that there are no clean copies, and I decide that a worn edition is in fact more fitting, as it bears the material traces of customers' decisions *not to buy*, in spite of the setting engineered to encourage casual acquisition. The book is mostly an account of the renovation and design process for the refurbishment. Except for reproductions of evocative nineteenth century watercolors of factory scenes, it does not reveal much more about the lives the workers within the *Société*, or the Parisian goldsmith industry that once thrived here. It does however acknowledge the "hundreds of members of trade guilds – masons, carpenters, plumbers, locksmiths, painters, glass artisans –, who worked for a whole year to achieve the superb results."²

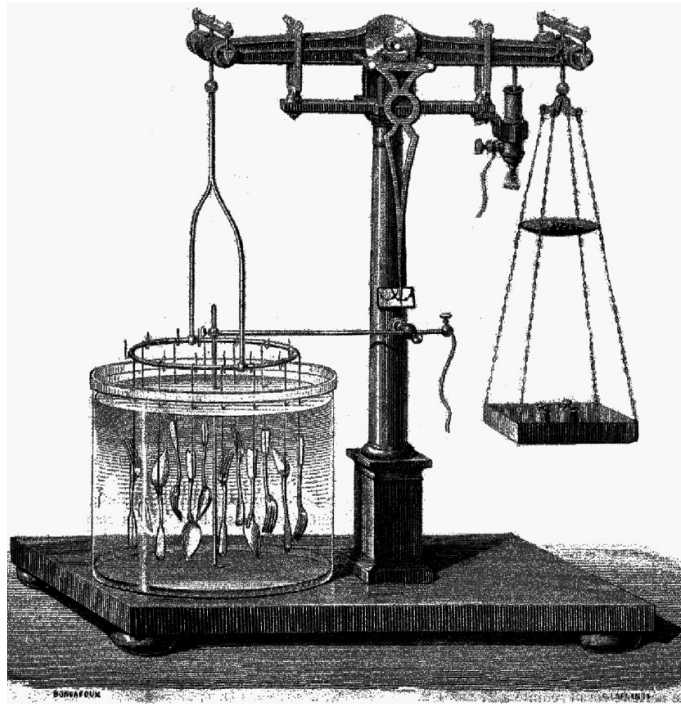


Fig. 5: This kind of plating balance was used to measure metal for l'argenteur galvanique, or silver electroplating. This technique allowed objects of baser metals to be quickly coated with silver plate, and required a significantly smaller volume to be applied than could be done by hand. Silverware was one of the nineteenth century's most popular plated items. Printed in *La Nature: Revue des Sciences et de leurs applications aux arts et à l'industrie* (1874), p. 29, via [Wikimedia](#).

I am struck by the very local history of manufacturing inserted amongst the wares of a global corporation, which owns none of its own factories, instead dispersing teams of Japanese textile experts to oversee subcontracted production.³ I wonder how much of the clothing on the shop floor is destined to be reduced to ashes. Even though France has attempted to outlaw the destruction of unsold textiles, clothing remains notoriously difficult to recycle, and the vast majority of purchased clothes are either [buried in landfills or incinerated](#). I thought about the irony of housing a brand premised on the cheapness of globally sourced nature and labor, in a cooperative institution dedicated to recycling. But when the metalworkers of the Marais founded the *Société*, it was during a period of unprecedented industrialization of precious metal manufacture. During the Second Empire, Parisian gold- and silversmiths eagerly embraced the new technology of electroplating, making precious metal objects newly affordable to the expanding bourgeoisie.⁴ The fact that the Marais's jewelers and goldsmiths could generate *tons* of waste for the *Société des cendres* suggests the dramatic rise in metallic production and consumption. Simultaneously, global goldrushes were pulling unprecedented volumes of precious metals out of the ground with stunning environmental and human costs.⁵

Consumers' desire for fashionable jewelry and precious metal objects had been growing since the late eighteenth century, as a burgeoning European middle class, and especially bourgeois women, sought to acquire luxuries previously only affordable by the nobility.⁶



Fig. 6: This ewer, part of a larger coffee set, is typical of the French “empire” style popular in the early nineteenth century. The goldsmith, Claude-Nicholas Odiot, came from a distinguished family firm founded in the late seventeenth century, and was an early adopter of electroplating techniques, even as he continued to supply royalty and nobility with lavish commissions. Ewer, c. 1826–1838, Paris, 29 cm high, 16 cm wide, silver-gilt, mark of Claude-Nicholas Odiot. London, Victoria & Albert Museum, M.4 to B-1973, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O124411/ewer-odiot-charles-nicholas/> [07.09.2022].

Artisans responded with increasingly efficient production: they developed stamps to reproduce designs, and rolling mills to flatten metal, tools which subsequently lent themselves to steam-power machines.⁷ The same patterns of increasingly specialized and serialized handwork, the fast-changing urban fashions and growing disposable incomes also saw the emergence of “confection” in mid-nineteenth century Paris. Clothing had once been made for a particular customer; now ready-made, ready-to-wear clothing for anonymous, standardized customers displaced an older practice of re-selling second-hand, refurbished garments, or “friperie.”⁸ Tailors increasingly sub-divided labor between less-specialized garment workers, to fabricate pre-made clothing for anonymous, standardized customers. The introduction of the sewing machine in the middle decades of the nineteenth century only accelerated these trends.⁹



Fig. 7: The ready-to-wear of the nineteenth century was still far from the fast-casual fashion of today. «*Confection de Mt Lecourt*» from the fashion magazine, *Les Modes Parisiennes*, No. 897, Paris 1860. Rijksmuseum, loan from the Collectie M. A. Ghering-van Ierlant, via [Wikimedia](#).

The *Société des Cendres* was thus part of a rapidly industrializing landscape of artisanal manufacturing. It served to consolidate an existing practice of salvaging precious metal – which had long been a particular preoccupation of artisans working with these materials.

As eighteenth-century Dutch goldsmith Willem van Laer wrote in his handbook for metalsmiths in 1721, “it is a known fact, that no Mintmaster, nor Gold- or Silversmith, could work without losing any Gold or Silver, however cautiously a Master attends to his work. ... To recover all that is lost (as much as that is possible), matters very much to a Master, that is why I will share with the Reader, everything that I have found out about that.”¹⁰ He describes the frequency with which the shop should be swept to gather up the dirt from the floor, and the debris from polishing and filing collected, in order to be refined into useable metals.

Apparently the *Société* maintains detailed archives, which might prove interesting for the study of the changing economic landscape of nineteenth century Parisian metalwork, when guilds were still outlawed and efforts to organize labor remained contentious.¹¹ The building raises many fascinating questions about cooperation was achieved between rival trades within the jewelry industry. There had been long-lasting tension between those

who worked with gems (*joailliers*), and those who made gold and silver jewelry without (*bijoutiers*) and those who worked in gold and silver objects (*orfèverie*). Michael Bycroft has shown that rivalry was particularly contentious between lapidaries and goldsmiths in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France.¹² French Revolutionaries had banned guilds in 1791, leading to the end of the goldsmith guild (*Communauté des orfèvres de Paris*). However the Revolution also precipitated an exodus of aristocrats from the Marais, creating space for the subsequent blossoming of trades and new forms of organization in the nineteenth century.



Fig. 8: New forms of production and consumption saw the rise of the department store in Paris. Le Bon Marché was among the most celebrated. Its impact on the built environment can be seen in this pamphlet from the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where the store sponsored exhibits on furniture and clothing. Engraving c. 1900, 11.7 x 17.5 cm, Brown University collections, via [Wikimedia](#).

What little discussion I can find concerning the *Société des Cendres* in scholarly literature is written by geographers concerned with what UNIQLO's arrival symbolizes for the gentrification of the Marais and the commodification of its authenticity.¹³ But what exactly is the industrial heritage that is being preserved and interpreted in this space? Neither the limited wall-text nor the accompanying guide make reference to the fact that the *Société des Cendres* evolved into a [supplier for the dentistry and orthodontics industry](#). Already by the 1930s, the *Société* included “vente de metal appreté pour Dentists” among its services, though today it offers a range of synthetic materials and dental tools.¹⁴ This field also formed in the crucible of 18th century French innovations – though French innovation in orthodontics, unlike *orfèverie*, seems to have died with the Ancien Regime.¹⁵

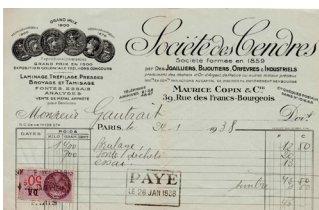


Fig. 9: An invoice from the *Société des Cendres* (January 1938) includes the sale of metal for dentists among their services. Coll. J.J. Richard, via [La fabrique de Paris](#).

The neighborhood of the Marais represents a recycling of material culture more than many parts of the city of Paris because it was largely spared the ravages of Hausmannization – the modernizing building program that transformed the city between 1853 and 1870.¹⁶ Though closely associated with its twentieth century history as

the heart of Parisian Jewish life, and then a center of the city's gay scene, it is also the home of noted early modern architecture. The Musée Carnavalet is housed in a 16th century aristocratic hôtel, purchased by the city of Paris in the late nineteenth century for the purposes of preserving the history of the city, even as centuries of the city's architecture were being dismantled to fashion the boulevards and façades that characterize the city today. In 1962–3 the Musée Carnavalet hosted an exhibition on the bygone glory of the Marais. The following year, it would be slated as a conservation area amidst debates about how to both salvage and preserve its working-class heritage, as the last affordable neighborhood in central Paris. The preservation strategy of the 1960s involved substantial demolition of nineteenth and twentieth century buildings to renew the neighborhood's "historic" character. These demolitions ultimately displaced majority of the Marais' remaining workers and craftspeople. Only in 2013 was the vision of worthy heritage substantially expanded to include nineteenth and twentieth century history – by which point the Marais had become both one of the most gentrified and most tourist-trafficked neighborhoods in Paris.¹⁷



Fig. 10: The Musée Carnavalet, the museum of the history of Paris, is housed in a sixteenth century hôtel. Photo by Sorin Craciun via [Wikimedia](#).

I was reminded of my visit to the *Société des Cendres/* UNIQLO in the interdisciplinary crucible of the Lorentz Center at the University of Leiden, where earlier this summer, I took part in a group convened to discuss the [intertwined histories of and environmental costs of gold and mercury](#); the latter material has been known since ancient times as a tool for refining gold, and is still widely in use today. Participants' research ranged from contemporary artisanal gold mining in Colombia and Peru, environmental history of nineteenth century gold-rushes, early modern and ancient alchemy, to the contemporary presentation of gold's industrial heritage.

We spent the week discussing the many histories and geographies of gold production, and the problem of choosing salient temporal and spatial scales to determine responsibility for resulting environmental degradation. Mercury has long been used in the process of gold extraction because it easily forms an amalgam with the metal. It is then combusted to leave behind pure gold.

Recapturing this vaporized mercury, to prevent environmental contamination, is a major concern of both miners and environmental authorities. However, attempts to regulate contemporary artisanal gold-mining tend to vilify the most precarious miners, disregarding the continuity of the historical contexts in which they operate.

These conversations reinforced the point that histories of material culture are not only histories of manufacture and consumption – they are also histories of sourcing, storage, use, repair, destruction, and recycling. This applies as much to the lifecycles of objects and the dust they leave behind, as to the lifecycles of the techniques and social forms used to work them, and the architecture that houses the people who make them. Each act of preservation and display preserves certain histories as it silences others.¹⁸

The superposition of two very different manufacturing histories in the former factory of *Société des Cendres*, beautifully presented, fashionably integrated, and ostensibly made visible through the preservation and interpretation of a consumer experience, conceals much more than it reveals about shifting patterns of salvaging and reclaiming, shopping and working. Although the historical link between nineteenth and twenty-first century fashion was sustained by shopping, the history books remained unbought.



Empfohlene Zitierweise/Suggested citation

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Abstract

In 2014, the last working nineteenth century factory in the Marais was reborn as a UNIQLO store. The factory belongs to the *Société des cendres* (Society of Ashes), a French jewelers' cooperative founded in 1859, when the Marais was home to many workshops and craftspeople of fashionable and luxurious goods. The renovation involved a joint commitment between these two firms to preserve the site's industrial heritage. What might seem like an odd juxtaposition of a small history of metallurgy museum in the retail outlet of a major global chain in fact makes much more sense when contextualized within the birth of mass consumption and the industrialization of manufacturing in the nineteenth century – history that is noticeably absent from the strikingly rendered museum displays.



- 1 Claire Lemercier: Looking for “Industrial Confraternity” Small-Scale Industries and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century Paris, in: *Enterprise & Society* 10/2 (2009), pp. 304–34.
- 2 La Société des Cendres. Paris 2014, p. 9.
- 3 Tetsuya Usui, Masaaki Kotabe, et al., A Dynamic Process of Building Global Supply Chain Competence by New Ventures: The Case of Uniqlo, in: *Journal of International Marketing* 25/3 (2017), pp. 1–20.
- 4 Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley, 1992, Ch. 5.
- 5 Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State California’s Native American Genocide, 1846–1873*. Lincoln 2012.
- 6 Marcia R. Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery*. New Haven 2009.
- 7 Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace* (fn. 4), p. 150.
- 8 Roger Magraw, *Producing, Retailing, Consuming: France 1830–1870*, in: Brian Rigby (ed.), *French Literature, Thought, and Culture in the Nineteenth Century*. Basingstoke 1993, pp. 86–104; on ready-made clothing see p. 61, p. 74.
- 9 Nancy L. Green, *Art and Industry: The Language of Modernization in the Production of Fashion*, in: *French Historical Studies* 18/3 (1994), pp. 722–48, on ready-made clothing see pp. 729–30.
- 10 Willem van Laer, *Weg-wyzer voor aankoomend goud en zilversmeeden* (Amsterdam 1721), trans. Thijs Hagendijk et al. A critical edition and translation of this work is being prepared by an interdisciplinary team at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/research/our-research/conservation-science/metals/van-laers-wegwyzer>.
- 11 Claire Lemercier, Looking for “Industrial Confraternity” (fn. 1).
- 12 Keith Reader, *The Marais*, Liverpool 2020, pp. 44–45.
- 13 Maria Gravari-Barbas, *Super-Gentrification and Hyper-Tourism in Le Marais, Paris* in *Tourism and Gentrification in Contemporary Metropolises*. New York 2017, pp. 299–328.
- 14 Denis Cosnard, *Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, de l’or dans les cendres, Des usines à Paris: Un blog pour explorer le Paris industriel*, 24 September, 2011, <http://lafabriquedeparis.blogspot.com/2011/09/rue-des-francs-bourgeois-de-lor-dans.html> [30/08/22].
- 15 Colin Jones, *The Smile Revolution: In Eighteenth Century Paris*. Oxford 2017, on dentistry see ch. 3–4, 6.
- 16 Reader, *The Marais* (fn. 12), pp. 69–70.
- 17 Gravari-Barbas (fn. 13), pp. 300–305.
- 18 I am inspired in this point by the 100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object Project: <https://100histories100worlds.org/>.