



# Collection 22: Pastimes in Early Modern France

Covering materials from the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, this collection presents a selection focused on pastimes and pursuits in early modern France. Past collections often emphasised the broader narratives of early modern European history. However, this particular collection brings to the forefront details of the everyday. Featuring over 550 items and more than 290,000 pages of material, it touches on all manner of commonplace activities, practices and beliefs, from religion to hunting.

While the early modern period in Europe can sometimes be depicted as a bitter pageant of bloodshed and strife, of religious division and protracted warfare and plague, it also marked a gradual improvement – for some, if not all – on the meagre living conditions of the Middle Ages. Diet became more diverse thanks to the introduction of exotic foods like potatoes, tomatoes and chocolate, which was brought about by the rise of overseas trade to the European marketplace. In addition, the rise of a well-to-do mercantile class helped encourage wider education and greater opportunity. The literacy and numeracy rate across large parts of Europe was raised significantly.

Central to the instruction of the best educated was classical learning, especially Latin. Collection 22 reflects this reality through a wealth of texts primarily intended for schooling. Handy editions of Xenophon and Cicero would have served as textbooks as well as models of rhetoric. Euclid also features prominently as the “father of geometry” in multiple editions, both in Latin and French translations. Versions in French of Julius Caesar’s account of the Gallic Wars underscore a topic of likely interest to the general reader. Alongside French medieval chronicles are several histories of the ancient world, as well as studies suggesting a growing antiquarian interest in Roman coins and Roman remains. Meanwhile, multiple editions of the *Deipnosophistae* betray a widespread curiosity for the lost stories of the classical world and the lost secrets of classical cuisine.

Side-by-side with classical texts, this collection contains items indicative of a more informal and practical approach to learning, including a fascinating selection of self-study guides to mathematics and assorted items on economics and accounting. Works of specialised scientific interest jostle with commonplace books aimed at a broader audience and cover the widest range of topics, often freely mixing fact with superstition and surmise. Authors of these compendia include Pierre Grégoire, Lawrence Beyerlinck, and Simeone Maiolo.

Part of this collection focuses more squarely on early modern societal customs, conventions, and beliefs, some of which have since become strange to us. It features several items on the duel, penned mainly

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Source: *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF)

Approx. 300,000 pages, 600 works

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from a legal perspective. France was the first to formalise a national code of duelling. Contests continued in France as a means of settling points of honour long after Louis XIII outlawed them in 1626. A far more disquieting convention of the period was the witch trial. Surviving documentation of specific trials is more scarce in France than in other countries, but noted proceedings across the country resulted in multiple executions. Editions of the notorious treatise on witchcraft, *Malleus Maleficarum*, are included, but also featured are items by luminaries of the French legal community. These include a study by Pierre de L'Ancre, the zealous presiding official at the famous Labourd witch-hunt of 1609, and Jean Bodin's *La Démonomanie des sorciers* which swiftly ran through ten editions following its first printing in 1580.

Collection 22 provides fascinating insights into French everyday life through sacred texts, memoirs, legal documents, political tracts, and much more.

#### Among the highlights:

- *Formulaire des esleuz, auquel sont contenuës et déclarées les fonctions et devoirs desdits officiers* (Rouen, 1627) by René Laurent de La Barre (d.1628). Ostensibly a summary of the functions and duties of Normandy officials written by a regional president of Rouen, this capacious volume is also an unexpected treasure-trove of stories and information, including an entire section on the history and culture of wine-drinking.
- *Les sirènes, ou Discours sur leur forme et figure* (Paris, 1691) by Claude Nicaise (d.1701). This item was the first monograph on mermaids to be published in France. Written by a Dijon cleric, the idea of mermaids raised theological questions since these monstrous creatures belong partly to the animal world but are also identified as partly human.
- *Dictionnaire universel contenant généralement tous les mots françois tant vieux que modernes et les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts* (The Hague and Rotterdam, 1690) by Antoine Furetière (d.1688). A member of the *Académie française*, Furetière contributed to the project to compile an official dictionary of the French language but became frustrated by the slow pace of the collaborative effort. He decided to embark on his own dictionary, but when his work was discovered Furetière was ejected from the academy and barred from publishing his dictionary in France. The result is this item posthumously published in the Netherlands. More wide-ranging in its vocabulary than the official dictionary eventually issued by the *Académie française* in 1694, it proved a commercial success and went through multiple editions during the early 18th century.
- *Le vray et ancien usage des duels, confirmé par l'exemple des plus illustres combats et deffys qui se soient faits en la chrestienté* (Paris, 1617). The work of soldier-poet Vital d'Audiguier (d.1624), this item is a monograph on fencing and the duel. Also a translator into French of Cervantes, the author's life was cut short when he was murdered, supposedly during a brawl over a gambling debt.



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