

Numismatics and the Fortsas Library Sale of 1840

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Introduction

Few library sales catalogues have generated as much interest at the time or subsequently as that printed for the sale of the library of Mr le Comte J.-N.-A. de Fortsas on the 10 August 1840. The auction report appeared in a local newspaper, describing the strong bidding, along with some of the prices realised and names of the buyers. Original copies of the catalogue were selling at a significant premium shortly after the date of the sale and it has been reprinted and translated several times. Chapters of books have also been written describing the build-up to the sale, the day of the sale and its aftermath. The event even makes an appearance on a Wikipedia page. An original copy of the catalogue was auctioned recently by Sotheby's and made £3,250 against an estimate of £2,000-£3,000 and was subsequently seen offered for sale at £8,500.

The following sections will present details of the sale and then three numismatic and bibliophilic connections that came to light whilst looking into this auction.

The Auction Catalogue

The front page of the catalogue is reproduced in Figure 1 and gives some hint as to what is inside.



Fig.1. Front page of the Fortsas Auction catalogue, 1840.

This was a very select library built by the late Comte de Fortsas, for which the only criterion for inclusion was that the book was the only known example. Rare and valuable books had been disposed of during the Comte's lifetime when he learned of another specimen. Thus, the numbering in the catalogue ranged from 3 to 222, but included just 52 books.

The auction was to take place at 11 o'clock on 10 August 1840, at the office of the notary Maître Moulon, 9 Rue de l'Église, Binche. Binche was a small town 10 km east of Mons and 60 km south of Brussels.

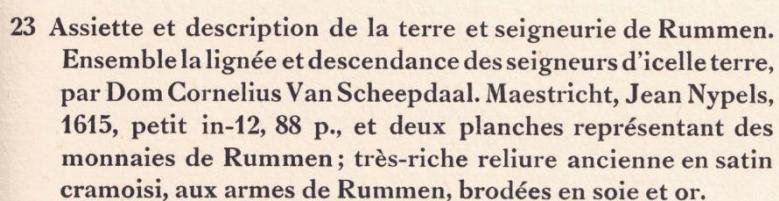
The catalogue was sent to booksellers, librarians, and collectors of rare books throughout Europe along with the message 'Jean Nepomucene Auguste Pichauld, Comte de Fortsas', had been a collector of unique books — books of which only one copy was known to exist. 'When he had died, on September 1, 1839, he had possessed 52 such books. His heirs, not interested in collecting books, had decided to auction the collection.'

A report of the auction was written up by M.L. Polain (keeper of the archives of the Province of Liège) and published on the evening of 10 August 1840 in *La Politique* of Liège.

Having worked through a facsimile copy and a few books and articles that describe the events surrounding the auction; as well as the obvious bibliophilic interest, there were a few hidden numismatic connections that have not been highlighted before. These will be described in the sections below.

Numismatic and Bibliophilic Connections (i)

Lot 23 in the catalogue appears as follows:



23 Assiette et description de la terre et seigneurie de Rummen. Ensemble la lignée et descendance des seigneurs d'icelle terre, par Dom Cornelius Van Scheepdaal. Maastricht, Jean Nypels, 1615, petit in-12, 88 p., et deux planches représentant des monnaies de Rummen; très-riche reliure ancienne en satin cramoisi, aux armes de Rummen, brodées en soie et or.

Fig. 2. Description of Lot 23 from the Fortsas catalogue.

Which roughly translates: 'Plate and description of the land and lordship of Rummen. Together the lineage and descendants of the lords of this land, by Dom. Cornelius Van Scheepdaal. Maastricht, Jean Nypels, 1615. A small 12mo, 88 pages, and two plates depicting the coins of Rummen, a very rare old binding in crimson satin with the arms of Rummen embroidered in silk and gold.' Rummen is a municipality in the province of Brabant.

The auction report for this lot went as follows: 'No. 23 – M. Serrure, who occupies himself with numismatic researches concerning the Lords of Rummen, did not fail to come to purchase this work. He had for a competitor M. Chalon, his rival in this kind of serious and conscientious studies. The book was briskly disputed, and the 88 pages in 12mo were finally knocked down to M. Serrure at the enormous sum of 825 francs.'

At the time, a silver Franc was the equivalent of about an English silver shilling, so lot 23 sold for about £41 5s.

The winner of lot 23 is likely Constant Philippe Serrure (1805-72), the son of a diamond merchant from Antwerp. He was a professor at the university of Ghent and one of the outstanding Belgian scholars of the century. He had perhaps the best private coin collection in Belgium. He was prolific in many areas and a pioneer of numismatic studies in Belgium and the Low Countries. He was the father of Constant-Antoine Serrure (1835-1898), who wrote about the Cuerdale hoard in *Les Monnaies de Canute et de Sifroid, rois pirates normands et fondateurs de comit  de guines* (928-965), Paris 1858. His collection of ancient and Continental monnaies, medailes, jetons, et livres numismatiques, were sold in 22 sales, 1869-1877, by the obscure notary / auction house of Ed. Macau, Tournai. The grandson of C.P. Serrure was Raymond Serrure (1862-1899), member of the RNS 1891-1899, who was a coin dealer based in Paris.

The underbidder was Renier Hubert Ghislain Chalon (1802-89), born in Mons, he was the author of standard works on the coinages of Hainault and Namur. He was a civil servant, working first in the taxation office at Cuesmes in Hainault and later at Brussels, retiring in 1867. Interested in all branches of archaeology and especially numismatics, Chalon was also a noted bibliophile.

Numismatic and Bibliophilic Connections (ii)

The connection made in this section was the motivation for writing this note. A BNJ paper published in 2001, illustrating Coin tickets in the British hammered series, included a name that was unfamiliar - Weber de Vore.

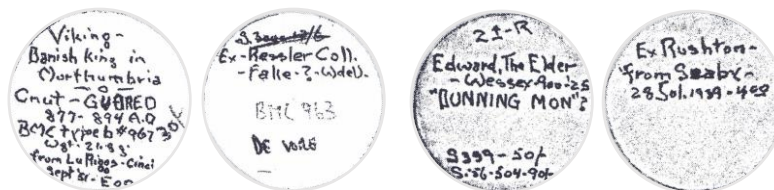


Fig. 3. Coin tickets by Weber de Vore.

At the time his occupation and dates were not known, but he lived at various addresses in Philadelphia, USA. He was a member of the BNS 1949-1962 and FRNS 1955-62. He was a collector of English hammered and later coins, making extensive purchases through Seaby at the L.A. Lawrence sales. His collection was purchased by Baldwin c.1960 and his numismatic books sold through Glendining's, 27 November 1963, lots 398-441.

Further searching reveals that Weber de Vore donated a group of 480 small silver hammered coins (298 of Elizabeth I) to the ANA in 1961. This was published by Michael Dolley as a hoard in the Numismatic Chronicle in 1953, p153. He was also ANA member 12295 and Secretary of the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Pennsylvania.

In 1950 he authored a twenty-six-page article in the Numismatist, 'About Maundy Money in England' and finally, the reason he is here is that he wrote a section 'Bibliographical Notes & Comment' first appearing in the 1942 edition of Walter Klinefelter's book about the Fortsas auction.

Weber de Vore also had a very modernistic house built in 1954 in Montgomery Avenue, Springfield, PA, designed by architect Lois Isidore Kahn (1901-1974). The design was known as the 'Weber de Vore House Project' and appears in several architectural publications.

Also in 1954 Mr Weber de Vore, 'manager of the Ordnance Division of Heintz Manufacturing Co.', gave a lecture on the cold extrusion of steel to the engineering students at the Drexel Institute of Technology. This is now Drexel University, just a few miles from Springfield and the Heintz factories that made military and civilian heavy goods vehicles.

A final search located the grave of Weber de Vore and his wife (née Brooks from New Jersey) in Pennsylvania (Figure 4.), allowing his dates 1897-1992 to be added to the record.

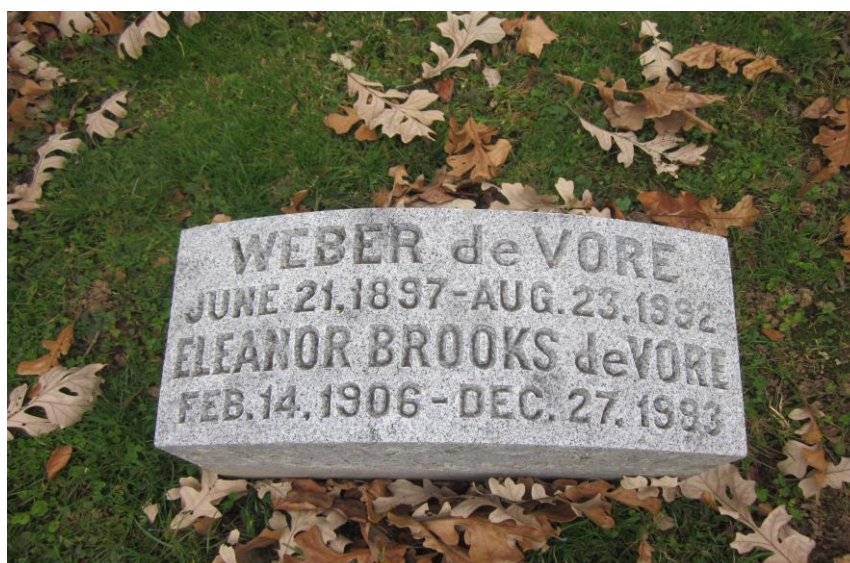


Fig. 4. Weber de Vore's gravestone in Laurel Hill Cemetery, Pennsylvania © www.findagrave.com.

Numismatic and Bibliophilic connections (iii)

As mentioned above, this auction has been written about extensively over the years, though typically in the USA and one book includes a chapter on the topic. The book cover includes a woodcut taken from Alexander Barclay's translation of Sebastien Brandt's ship of Fools. Combined with two lines from the poem 'Still am I busy books assembling, for to have plenty it is a pleasant thing', this also forms the bookplate of the present author!



Fig. 5. Wood cut and text from Barclay's Ship of Fools in the author's book plate.

I am not sure whether I fit the definition of a bibliophile yet, but am showing some early symptoms, I do measure my numismatic literature in yards!

Conclusions and an Apology

As the levity of the previous section hints, all is not what it seems with the Fortsas auction. The catalogue was indeed printed and has been reprinted many times along with discussions of the event^(1,2) and original copies do change hands for large sums of money^(3,4).

But, and I should probably have mentioned earlier - the whole event was a hoax, an elaborate prank played by Renier Chalon who enjoyed playing tricks on intellectuals. The printer Hoyois also knew beforehand and to minimise trouble on the day, a notice had been printed and sent to recipients of the catalogue as well as inserted in local newspapers (Figure 6). This stated that the auction would not take place as the books had been bought by the town of Binche and would be kept in the town library.

A few of the recipients of the catalogue, including C.P. Serrure, had seen through the hoax, however, many missed the notice and did arrive on the day. As neither existed, their search for the address and the Notary was in vain. When more notices of the cancellation appeared, some went in search of the town library, but again without success, as the town had no library.

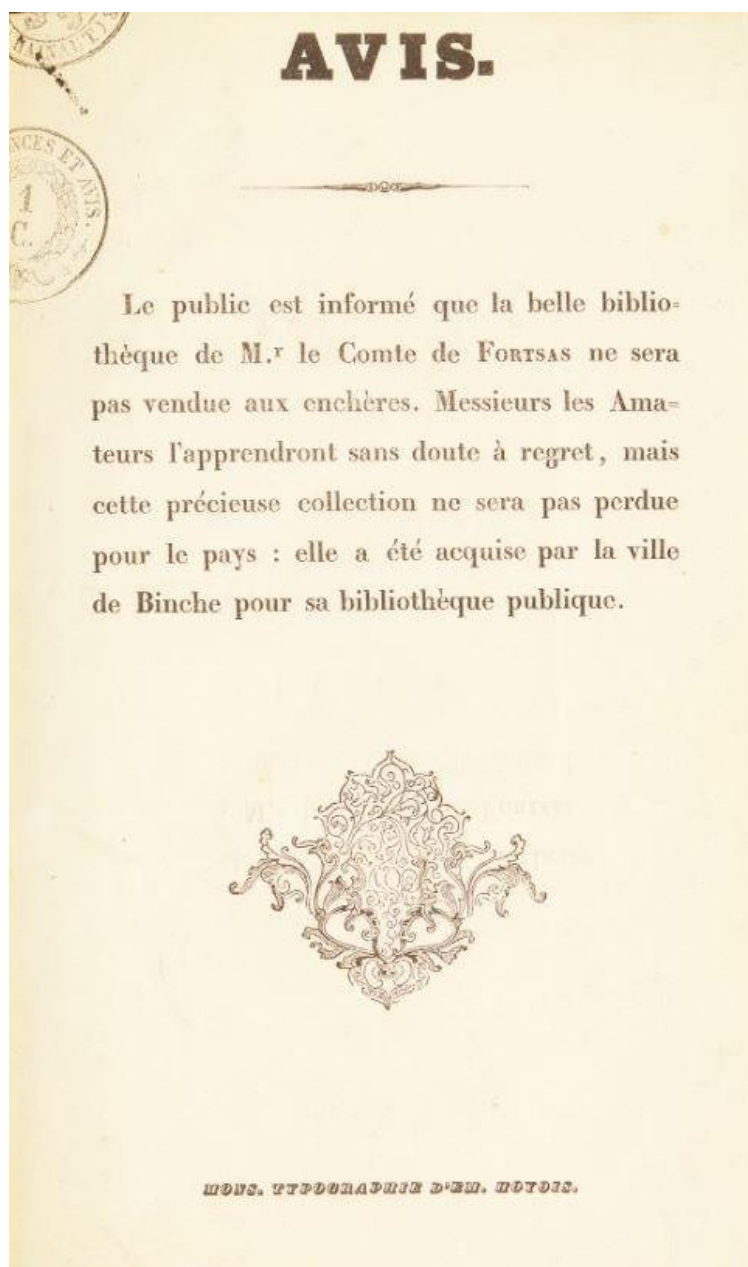


Fig. 6. Announcement of the cancellation of the auction, 10 August 1840.

Whilst the Comte de Fortsas was imaginary, the other names such as Serrure and Chalon are all well-known in their numismatic and antiquarian fields^(5,6). I was completely unaware of this story until I was looking into the coin tickets and background of Weber de Vore⁽⁷⁾. Having found his 1950 article in the *Numismatist*⁽⁸⁾, I then stumbled into his 'Bibliographical notes & Comments' in Walter Kleinfelter's excellent short book – *The Fortsas Bibliohoax*⁽⁹⁾.

Once I had found Weber de Vore in Pennsylvania (a very rare name indeed); his job⁽¹⁰⁾, family, house⁽¹¹⁾ and final resting place also fell into place.

Further searching then turned up Nicholas Basbanes' *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*⁽¹²⁾. This has a whole chapter on the Fortsas Hoax, though the title of the book really does sum up the topic and a story worth retelling.

References

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Having uncovered much about the life of Weber de Vore, the one thing I have not been able to find is a photograph or portrait of the man himself. If any readers can help, it would be much appreciated.

