

READING GUIDE

“The Great Plunder”

Volume 1 — The Birth of the System

Robert Casanovas — 3rd revised and corrected edition (2026)
Choral historical novel — art plunder in Flanders and Italy, 1794-1798

1. Fact sheet

Title: The Great Plunder, Volume 1: The Birth of the System

Author: Robert Casanovas

Genre: Choral historical novel, told through multiple voices (commissioners, scholars, soldiers, curators)

Structure: Foreword + Table of Contents + Prologue + 4 chapters (32 numbered sections) — first volume of a four-volume saga

Edition: 3rd revised and corrected edition, legal deposit April 2026 (ebook and print edition)

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Period(s) covered: June 1794 – 19 May 1798, from the Flemish seizures to the fleet's departure from Toulon for Egypt

Main settings: Paris; Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels, Mechelen (Flanders); Milan, Parma, Modena, Bologna, Rome, Venice (Italy); Toulon

Supplementary resource: First volume of a four-volume saga continued by the Egyptian campaign; the works cited (the Ghent Altarpiece, the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoön, the Horses of Saint Mark, Raphael's Transfiguration) were indeed seized between 1794 and 1798

Associate publisher: International Restitutions (an NGO chaired by the author)

2. General presentation

Through a gallery of commissioners, scholars and soldiers, The Great Plunder traces the methodical birth of the French system for seizing works of art between 1794 and 1798. The novel opens on a hushed deliberation of the Committee on Public Instruction in Paris, where the Abbé Grégoire drafts the founding report, then follows two successive campaigns of seizure: that of conquered Flanders (Chapter I), carried out with improvisation and brutality by the painter David, and that of northern Italy and Rome (Chapters II and III), rationalized and intensified under the rising authority of General Bonaparte. The volume closes on the preparations for the Egyptian expedition (Chapter IV), just as the system, by now well honed on Europe's painted fields, prepares to change scale and continent.

The novel follows no single hero: it shifts its center from one chapter to the next among several teams of commissioners — Grégoire, David, Lebrun, Hassenfratz, Thouin, Faujas de Saint-Fond and Levesque in Flanders; then Monge, Berthollet, Denon and Lakanal in Italy, under Bonaparte's growing tutelage. Facing them, a series of curators and custodians — Canon De Vos in Ghent, the archaeologist Ennio Quirino Visconti at the Vatican, Cardinal Borgia at the Vatican Library — embody, each in turn, the powerless resistance of despoiled heritage. The narrative attends as closely to legal deliberations and

technical inventories as to the scenes of seizure themselves, in a constant blend of administrative language and material description of the works.

3. Chapter-by-chapter summary

Foreword

The author situates the novel between reconstruction and fiction: all the works mentioned were indeed seized between 1794 and 1813, most of the characters actually existed, but certain scenes and dialogues have been imagined for the needs of the narrative.

Prologue — Paris, June 1794

At the Committee on Public Instruction, the Abbé Grégoire drafts the report that founds French doctrine: works of art from conquered territories must be transferred to Paris and centralized in a national museum. This text, a mere recommendation among others, will nonetheless trigger everything that follows.

Chapter I — The Flemish Seizures (1794)

A commission of seven members — Grégoire, Lebrun, David, Hassenfratz, Faujas de Saint-Fond, Thouin, Levesque — divides up conquered Flanders among themselves. In Ghent, Grégoire's team wrenches the central panels from the Ghent Altarpiece despite the protests of Canon De Vos, whom David has arrested. In Antwerp, the cathedral's Rubens paintings are in turn taken down. In Brussels, Hassenfratz and Levesque negotiate with Commissioner Pottier over the inventory of the Coudenberg Palace and the Van Reyn collection; in Mechelen, a Crucifixion is seized. The chapter then follows the convoy across Flanders' battered roads to its arrival and unloading in Paris, then the installation of the works at the Museum under the Committee's watchful eye — before a final interlude hints at the scale of what is beginning.

Chapter II — The Rush on Italy (1796)

A new team forms in Paris — Denon, Monge, Berthollet, under the chairmanship of Lakanal — to prepare, map of Italy unfolded before them, the seizures to come: the Codex Atlanticus and the Brueghels of Milan, the Correggios of Parma, the Bolognese school, and already the question of Rome. Bonaparte then takes command of the Italian campaign and imposes his pace: in Milan, inventories are made under pressure of speed; a convoy crosses the Alps; in Parma, the Correggios are packed despite the heat; in Modena and Bologna, the librarian Affò and the curator Oretti try, in vain, to slow the seizures.

Chapter III — Rome and Venice (1797)

Monge and Berthollet enter Rome and, with the archaeologist Visconti's coerced cooperation, inventory and then dismantle the Vatican collections: the Apollo Belvedere is lowered from its pedestal, the Laocoön taken apart into seven crates, Raphael's Transfiguration removed despite warnings about its fragility, five hundred manuscripts — including the Codex Vaticanus — seized from the Vatican Library amid Cardinal Borgia's protests. At the same time, Bonaparte brings about the fall of Venice: the Venetian Senate votes its own dissolution, the last doge, Lodovico Manin, abdicates,

and the bronze Horses of Saint Mark, Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* from San Giorgio Maggiore, and works from Venice's churches and confraternities (the Frari, San Sebastiano, the Scuola Grande di San Marco) are in turn shipped off toward the Alps.

Chapter IV — The Egyptian Project (1797-1798)

Back in Paris, Bonaparte is already turning away from Europe: plans for an expedition to Egypt take shape, a commission of scholars is recruited, the fleet assembles at Toulon. The chapter follows the final preparations aboard the *Orient*, the tense eve of departure, and Bonaparte's own hesitation, in the early hours of 19 May 1798, before the order that launches forty thousand men and three hundred and forty-seven ships toward Egypt — closing the volume on the threshold of a new continent.

4. Main characters

Abbé Henri Grégoire (1750-1831), *member of the Convention*

Author of the founding report on the fate of the conquered works; the moral conscience of the Flemish commission, he nonetheless carries out what he himself set in motion.

Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), *painter, member of the Committee of General Security*

The most zealous voice of the seizures in Flanders, unscrupulous about the means employed — going so far as to have an elderly canon arrested to speed up operations.

Lebrun *art dealer and inventory-maker*

Author of the seizure lists, first in Flanders and then in Italy; embodies the methodical rationalization of the system even before Bonaparte imposes his pace on him.

Hassenfratz *chemist and engineer*

Logistics officer for transporting the works; his constant concern for their material preservation contrasts with the commissioners' political urgency.

Gaspard Monge (1746-1818), *mathematician*

Charged, together with Berthollet, with the inventory of the Roman collections; the most ambivalent character in the novel, beset by doubts he never sets down on his lists.

Claude-Louis Berthollet (1748-1822), *chemist*

Monge's pragmatic partner in Rome, whose administrative coldness stands systematically opposed to the protests of Visconti and Borgia.

Dominique Vivant Denon *future director of the Louvre*

A traveler who knew Italy before the Revolution; his knowledge of the terrain illuminates, from Chapter II onward, the strategy of the coming seizures.

General Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)

Absent at first, then omnipresent: his assumption of command in Italy transforms the amateurish early seizures into a centralized, methodical system, right up to the order to embark for Egypt that closes the volume.

Ennio Quirino Visconti *archaeologist, curator of the Vatican*

Forced to collaborate in the inventory and dismemberment of the Vatican collections, he records every lost work in a private register — the only form of resistance left to him.

Canon De Vos *of Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent*

The novel's first opponent of the logic of seizure; his arrest, as early as Chapter I, sets the tone for everything that follows.

5. Main themes

Theft dressed as procedure

Armistices, treaties, decrees and legal sophistries (“principal” works versus “secondary” ones) methodically transform plunder into an administrative act, without it ever ceasing, in the protests it provokes, to be called theft.

Centralization as ideology

“Paris deserves to be the capital of the arts”: the novel probes the conviction, carried first by Grégoire and then by David, that gathering works together disperses less than it illuminates — against the recurring objection of curators, for whom the coherence of a collection never replaces a work's place and history.

The powerless curator, guardian of memory

De Vos in Ghent, Visconti and Borgia in Rome, Affò and Oretti in Modena and Bologna: the same figure returns at every stage of the novel — the guardian who cannot prevent the seizure but records every detail of it, for the sake of memory.

The materiality of the work of art

Dimensions, weight, the species of wood, the thickness of the padding: the novel lingers with almost technical precision on the physical fragility of the masterpieces, down to the dismantling of the Laocoön into seven crates, as if the true violence lay in these details of packing more than in the discourse that accompanies it.

Bonaparte's rise and the system's turning point

From the improvised chaos of Flanders to the feared efficiency of the Italian campaign, the novel makes Bonaparte's seizure of power the moment when the taking of art ceases to be a contested practice and becomes a system of state, ready, by the end of the volume, to be exported beyond Europe.

6. Documented fact and invention

What is historically established: the Abbé Grégoire's report to the Committee on Public Instruction; the seizure of the Ghent Altarpiece and of the Antwerp Rubens paintings in 1794; the Italian campaign and the Treaty of Tolentino (1797); the methodical plundering of the Vatican — the Apollo Belvedere, the dismantled Laocoön, Raphael's Transfiguration, manuscripts from the Vatican Library —; the fall of Venice and the dissolution of the Venetian Senate on 12 May 1797 under pressure from Bonaparte; the abdication of Doge Lodovico Manin; the seizure of the Horses of Saint Mark and of Veronese's Wedding at Cana; and the departure of the French fleet from Toulon for Egypt on 19 May 1798.

What remains in the realm of invention are the dialogues and private thoughts lent to historical figures (Grégoire, David, Monge, Berthollet, Denon, Bonaparte, Visconti), as well as several secondary characters — Canon De Vos, Commissioner Pottier — who embody, without being a literal transcription of them, the forms of resistance attested to in the archives of the period. In keeping with the author's foreword, all the works cited and the circumstances of their seizure are grounded in verified historical research.

7. Narrative construction and style

- A division into four ample chapters, themselves subdivided into numerous sections (eight to nine per chapter), each following a different commission or team rather than a single protagonist.
- A construction built by relay rather than around a central character: Flanders belongs to Grégoire and David, Italy to Monge, Berthollet and Denon, under Bonaparte's growing authority — he does not appear in person until Chapter II.
- A recurring figure of the curator-as-witness (De Vos, Visconti, Borgia, Affò, Oretti), taken up again at each geographical stage of the seizures, which gives the novel its single thematic thread in the absence of a single narrative one.
- A deliberately inventory-like style of writing — dimensions, weights, materials, itineraries — which treats the material description of the works with the same exactitude as the diplomatic negotiations.
- A progression organized around Bonaparte's seizure of power: the system, improvised and brutal in Chapter I, grows methodical and relentless as the narrative advances, up to the opening toward Egypt that closes the volume.

8. Notable quotations

The admission despite the word — Chapter I

"You call that culture? It's plunder! Plain and simple theft!"

The sentence Grégoire repeats to himself — Chapter I

"The churches will commission new works," Grégoire went on in a calm voice. "That is what we tell ourselves so that it becomes bearable."

The curator and the commissioner — Chapter III

“And you, you reduce them to their sheer materiality. Who is right? The curator who loves the works, or the plunderer who sees them as spoils?”

The last doge of Venice — Chapter III

“I shall no longer need it.”

Visconti's warning — Chapter III

“You are victorious today. You will be defeated tomorrow.”

Bonaparte's order — Chapter IV

“Captain Casabianca, you may hoist the sails. We are bound for Egypt.”

9. Critical analysis

Strengths

- The recurring figure of the powerless curator (De Vos, Visconti, Borgia, Affò, Oretti) gives the novel a strong thematic backbone, despite the absence of a character running through the entire narrative.
- The contrast, never commented upon yet constant, between the legal vocabulary of the armistices and the physical description of the seizures (weight, cracks, dismantling) spares the novel any heavy-handed moralizing tone.
- The construction in two movements — the brutal improvisation of Flanders, then the methodical efficiency imposed by Bonaparte in Italy — gives real dramatic progression to a subject that is nonetheless repetitive by nature (seizure after seizure).
- The attention paid to the technical details of conservation (crating, padding, wood species) grounds the novel in a material reality rare in historical fiction devoted to art.

Limitations and points of caution

- No character runs through the entire volume: Grégoire and David disappear after Chapter I, Monge and Berthollet after Chapter III, which may dilute the reader's attachment over the course of the novel.
- The density of the inventories and technical data (dimensions, weights, itineraries), while it serves documentary plausibility, at times slows the pace of reading, particularly in Chapter III.
- Female characters are almost entirely absent from this first volume — only Joséphine is mentioned, faintly, in Bonaparte's thoughts.
- Chapter IV, devoted to the preparations for the Egyptian expedition, drifts away from the subject of art seizure to refocus the narrative on Bonaparte himself, which makes it more of a transition than a self-contained chapter — a logical choice for an opening volume, but one that leaves the reader on a threshold rather than at a conclusion.

10. Conclusion

The *Great Plunder* reconstructs, with rare documentary precision, the birth of a system: the methodical seizure of works of art as an instrument of national power, from conquered Flanders in 1794 to the threshold of the Egyptian expedition in 1798. Its strength lies in the controlled repetition of a single scene — the inventory, the protest, the dismantling, the convoy — replayed from one country to the next with an ever-renewed cast, and in the constancy of a figure of resistance, the curator-as-witness, who gives moral unity to a novel with no single hero. By closing this first volume on Bonaparte's hesitation before the order to set sail, the novel announces that this system, now honed on European art, is about to change scale — opening the way to the next volume, devoted to the Egyptian campaign.

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

“THE GREAT PLUNDER”

A novel by Robert Casanovas — Volume 1 The Birth of the System

A study of language, narrative construction and rhetorical effects

By Pierre Collonges

*A system rather than a hero — Two languages, law and matter — The curator-as-witness —
Inventory as style — The Bonaparte turning point*

Methodological introduction

This study examines Volume 1 of *The Great Plunder* by Robert Casanovas in its entirety (foreword, prologue, four chapters). Rather than impose a preset analytical grid on the text, it starts from what makes this particular novel distinctive: a construction organized around successive commissions rather than characters; a style of writing that juxtaposes, without blending them, the vocabulary of law and that of matter; a curator figure who recurs at each geographical stage; and a narrative progression modeled on Bonaparte's rise, from artisanal seizure to centralized system.

1. A montage built by commissions, not by characters

The novel is not organized around a protagonist who runs through the entire narrative, but around successive teams, formed and dissolved as the chapters unfold: the Grégoire-David commission in Flanders in Chapter I, the Monge-Berthollet-Denon team in Italy in Chapters II and III, Bonaparte's entourage in Chapter IV. Each chapter thus entirely shifts its human center of gravity, with no relay figure to ensure continuity.

This structural choice has a direct consequence: the reader does not become attached to an individual destiny, but to a process — that of seizure — which is refined from one chapter to the next, independently of the men who carry it out. It is this constant displacement, more than any suspenseful plot, that carries the novel.

2. Two languages that never mix: the law of the spoils and the matter of the work

The novel constantly juxtaposes two registers. On one side, the language of law and administration — “commission,” “armistice,” “Treaty of Tolentino,” “stipulated works,” “article” — which dresses the seizure up as legal procedure. On the other, a technical, sensory language for describing the works themselves: dimensions to the nearest centimeter, wood species, weight in kilograms, the state of hinges and cracks. The text never comments on the gap between the two: it simply lets them alternate, sentence after sentence.

"We are not dispersing. We are concentrating. — A coherent collection? Is that what you call coherence — tearing works from their millennial context to pile them up in a modern museum?"

Chapter III — Berthollet and Visconti, in which the two linguistic registers collide within a single exchange.

A third register appears whenever the curators are given voice: the vocabulary of conservation and restoration, a slower temporality, an insistence on fragility — as if the language itself changed texture according to who speaks it.

3. The recurring figure of the curator-as-witness

To each geographical stage of the novel corresponds a character who embodies powerless resistance to despoliation: Canon De Vos in Ghent, the librarian Affò and the curator Oretti in Modena and Bologna, the archaeologist Visconti and Cardinal Borgia in Rome. None of these characters appears in more than one chapter, but their narrative function is identical from one end of the volume to the other: to protest, to be ignored, and then to record.

Visconti's gesture, taking up his register as soon as the Roman convoy departs in order to note "every work that has left, its exact provenance, its history," is the most fully realized instance of this series: writing there becomes, as it does for his counterpart Borgia, the sole space in which loss can be named without consequence.

"And he began to write. He noted every work that had left. Its exact provenance. Its history. The circumstances of its seizure. [...] The precision of the gesture made up for nothing, but he went on."

Chapter III — Visconti, alone, after the convoy's departure for Paris.

4. A writing of the inventory: precision as style

The novel multiplies numerical data — meters, kilograms, wood species, packing durations, escort headcounts — with a regularity that ultimately constitutes a style in its own right. This precision is never gratuitous: it serves to measure, table after table, the material cost of the seizures, at the very moment when political discourse minimizes it.

"Five hundred manuscripts. Five hundred witnesses to two thousand years of written culture. Five hundred irreplaceable pieces about to leave Rome for Paris."

Chapter III — the inventory of the Vatican Library, paced by the recurrence of the number.

5. Bonaparte in the background, then in full light — the system's turning point

Absent from the prologue and Chapter I, merely mentioned at the start of Chapter II, Bonaparte does not appear in person until he assumes command of the Italian campaign — and from that point on dominates the rest of the novel, up to the final order to set sail for Egypt. This delayed entrance turns his arrival into a structural turning point: David's improvised, brutal seizures in Flanders give way,

under Bonaparte's authority, to a methodical system, faster and more efficient — and therefore, the novel suggests without ever saying so explicitly, more dangerous still for the works themselves.

“Bonaparte is not David,” said Monge. “No. Bonaparte is more efficient. That is what makes him dangerous for the works.”

Chapter II — the diagnosis is set down even before Bonaparte's arrival in the narrative.

6. Legal sophistry as a structuring motif

From one chapter to the next, the same rhetorical mechanism recurs: a legal category (“principal works,” “stipulated seizures,” “division of spoils”) is redefined after the fact to cover what the treaty did not provide for. This sophistry, never denounced head-on by the narrator, is left for the reader to notice, watching it repeat itself from Ghent to Rome with an almost mechanical constancy.

“If His Holiness is not satisfied with the terms we are applying, we can renegotiate the entire treaty. On terms even less favorable to the Holy See.”

Chapter III — Bonaparte's reply to Cardinal Doria, who had protested against the number of works seized.

7. Pace: from the technical list to the dialogued scene

The novel's tempo varies sharply according to what it is recounting. Passages of inventory and logistics proceed through nominal sentences and numerical enumerations, which slow the reading and impose an almost documentary attention. Scenes of confrontation, by contrast — De Vos facing David, Visconti facing Berthollet, Bonaparte facing Casabianca on the night of departure — recover a livelier, dialogued rhythm, in which the novel's moral tension is concentrated.

Chapter IV, built almost entirely around Bonaparte's waiting and hesitation before the order to depart, pushes this contrast to its limit: after three chapters paced by the accumulation of seized works, the novel comes to rest on a handful of suspended seconds, before the final sentence sets everything moving again.

8. Stylistic strengths and limitations

Strengths

- A construction built through a relay of characters which, far from weakening the novel, makes it a choral portrait of a system rather than the journey of an individual.
- A writing of the inventory raised to the level of style, which gives the seizures a material reality that political discourse alone could never convey.
- A motif-figure — the curator-as-witness — taken up under different names at each geographical stage, which gives the novel a visible moral architecture despite the absence of a recurring character.
- A delayed entrance for Bonaparte that transforms his seizure of power into a genuine stylistic turning point rather than a mere historical event being reported.

Limitations and points of caution

- The density of the technical data, while it serves plausibility, can at times slow the pace of reading at the expense of dramatic tension, particularly in the long inventory sequences of Chapter III.
- The absence of a character running through the entire volume, consistent with the choral design, also deprives the reader of an emotional anchor over the course of the narrative.
- Chapter IV, devoted to the preparations for the Egyptian expedition, departs from the motif of art seizure that structured the first three chapters, making it more a transition toward the next volume than a chapter stylistically homogeneous with the rest of the volume.

Conclusion

The style of *The Great Plunder* owes less to a palette of rhetorical figures than to a construction device: a montage built by relay that makes the system, and not an individual, the novel's true subject; two languages that never translate one into the other, that of law and that of matter; a curator figure taken up from one country to the next as the sole moral continuity; a delayed entrance for Bonaparte that tips the narrative from improvisation toward method. It is this architecture, more than any single isolated device, that makes this first volume the coherent chronicle of a system taking shape — and preparing, on its final page, to change continents.

"The precision of the gesture made up for nothing, but he went on."

Chapter III — the sentence that, on its own, sums up the position of every curator in the novel.