

Biographical/Historical note

Pierre Eugène Du Simitière, collector, artist, and historian, was born in Geneva, Switzerland on September 18, 1737 to Jean-Henri and Judith-Ulrique Cunegonde Delorme Ducimitiere. “Du Simitière was a restless man, forever traveling, forever collecting, forever projecting grand schemes in solitude,” (Library Company of Philadelphia, Introduction).

In 1757, Du Simitière sailed from the port of Amsterdam and arrived on St. Eustasius, a Dutch island. It was during this trip that his collecting began. According to the Library Company of Philadelphia, Du Simitière’s collecting, the main purpose of his travels, “cast a very wide net: books, newspapers, manuscripts, broadsides, prints, fossils, coins, medals, Indian artifacts, rocks, plants, and some animals—mostly dried insects and reptiles preserved in alcohol.” Paul Sifton’s research indicates that Du Simitière may have served in the military and that he probably had some training in art prior to his travels. He sketched specimens and scenery during his travels. He became a naturalized citizen of New York in 1769 and settled in Philadelphia in 1774.

Early in his collecting career, Du Simitière gathered materials regarding the natural and civil history of the West Indies and North America, however, after approximately 1770, he appears to have narrowed his focus to North America’s political history. Indeed, his collection particularly focuses on “relations with the Indians in the settlement of the West; and popular, democratic uprisings, including the Leisler Rebellion in New York in 1688, the Zenger freedom of the press trial, the Paxton Rebellion, the Stamp Act crisis, and finally the American Revolution,” (Library Company of Philadelphia, introduction). His attention to collecting ephemeral documents during the American Revolution was extraordinary and he “gathered every pamphlet, broadside, and newspaper he could get his hand on which related to the conflict,” (Library Company of Philadelphia, introduction).

Du Simitière attempted to publish “Memoirs and Observations on the Origin and Present State of North America,” which was based upon his gathered material, however, the United States Congress did not provide either approval or financial support. According to the Library Company of Philadelphia, this “rejection was ... a psychological and financial blow from which Du Simitière never recovered.” Painting, instead of serving as a hobby, became his means for supporting himself and he submitted designs for seals for the United States, New Jersey, Delaware, and two other states; painted miniatures; taught drawing; painted portraits; and served as a translator for Congress as he spoke fluent English and several other languages.

Opening the first public museum in Philadelphia, Du Simitière presented his collected gatherings in the form of the American Museum in May 1782 at his home near Arch and Forth Streets. Unfortunately, the cost of upkeep exceeded the proceeds from tickets costing fifty cents. Du Simitiere died in October 1784 at the age of 47. Following his death, the contents of the American Museum were auctioned and the Library Company of Philadelphia purchased the bulk of the manuscript materials in 1785 for 104 pounds.

Du Simitière was “respected and occasionally even honored (Member and Curator of the American Philosophical Society, an honorary Master of Arts from Princeton), but he was never really embraced by his adopted country,” (Library Company of Philadelphia, introduction).