
PRESS RELEASE

THE 18TH AUX SOURCES DU DESIGN FURNITURE MASTERPIECES FROM 1650 TO 1790

28 OCTOBER 2014 – 22 FEBRUARY 2015, SALLE D'AFRIQUE AND SALLE DE CRIMÉE



THE PALACE OF VERSAILLES IS PROUD TO PRESENT ITS EXHIBITION OF FURNITURE MASTERPIECES FROM 1650 TO 1789, with representative examples of the rich creativity of the period. The exhibition offers a glimpse of the ingenuity of a bygone era viewed through the lens of the present day and showcases the innovative and avant-garde nature of the shapes, techniques, ornamentation and materials used in 18th century furniture. This is the first exhibition of its kind since 1955.

THE EXHIBITION INCLUDES A HUNDRED OR SO WORKS OWNED BY SOME OF THE WEALTHIEST ART-LOVERS OF THE TIME, including the royal family and its entourage, aristocrats and financiers, and illustrates the revolution in furniture-making that took place in the 18th century. Works from all the great masters will be on display, including those by André-Charles Boulle, Antoine-Robert Gaudreaux, Charles Cressent, Bernard van Risenburgh II, Jean-François Oeben, Jean-Henri Riesener and Georges Jacob.

EXHIBITION CURATORS

Daniel Alcouffe
Honorary curator

Yves Carlier
Head Curator at the Musée
National des Châteaux de Versailles
et de Trianon

Patrick Hourcade
Photographer and designer

Patrick Lemasson
Head Curator, head of ancient art at
the Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux
Arts in Paris

Gérard Mabille
Honorary curator

ALONGSIDE MAJOR WORKS FROM COLLECTIONS AT THE PALACE OF VERSAILLES, the Musée du Louvre, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the Château de Fontainebleau and the Getty Museum, previously-unknown works from private collections will be shown to the public for the first time.

AS VISITORS MAKE THEIR WAY AROUND THE EXHIBITION, they will come to understand how furniture shapes and forms evolved over time, from the expansiveness of mid-17th century cabinets to the playful curves of the Louis XV style to the straight lines of the late 18th century.

THE ABUNDANT CREATIVITY AND EXCEPTIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THESE ANCIEN RÉGIME ARTISTS WILL BE UNVEILED AGAINST A CLEAN, CONTEMPORARY BACKDROP. Unlike paintings, furniture must be more than just admired, they must be interpreted and explained. Each piece is presented not as part of a homogeneous décor but as a singular work of art. Explanations are enhanced using various visual tools, such as digital magnifying glasses, to bring each piece's architecture, pattern, finish and uniqueness to the fore.

2

THE ÉCOLE BOULLE SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN will host special presentations for visitors, even young ones, to elucidate the connection between the culture heritage of yesteryear and today's living tradition of artisanry and to explain, for instance, how a cabinet-maker builds a desk or a woodworker constructs a chair.

AN 18TH-CENTURY DESIGN

IN 1712, SHAFTESBURY INTRODUCED THE TERM AND CONCEPT OF "DESIGN" TO ART THEORY. It contains the dual meaning of "plan" and "intention" and unifies the processes of conceiving and shaping a work. For the first time furniture was planned with forethought, created with specific intention and shaped for both functionality and comfort. 18th-century furniture was produced according to design sources, aux sources du design in French, both in its overall conception and its quest for harmony between form and function.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF FURNITURE-MAKING WAS PARALLELED BY CHANGES IN 18TH-CENTURY SOCIETY. Commissioners of major furniture pieces showed an increasing desire for comfort and luxury. The close cooperation between planners, architects, ornamentalists (precursors of designers) and highly skilled artisans formed the basis of our modern philosophy of artisanal, anti-industrial design. Decorative-arts purveyors took up a new role similar to that of decorators today and invented new applications for cabinetry.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF FURNISHINGS

THE QUEST FOR THE IDEAL SHAPE AND FORM HIT ITS PEAK IN THE 18TH CENTURY, when the silhouette of furnishings began to change. Inventiveness and creativity abounded and new outlines began to take shape, from console tables to commodes to secretary and armoire desks. Rigid outlines began to soften, then morphed into rounded curves, then gave way to curved legs—sometimes four, six or even eight of them. Furniture became multipurpose and featured mechanisms that allowed it to transform into something else.

BREAKTHROUGHS IN THE USE OF MATERIALS AND COLOURS

THE SAME QUEST WAS UNDERTAKEN IN THE USE OF MATERIALS, with the rise of exotic woods, lacquers, varnishes, tortoiseshell, mother of pearl, bronze, brass, lead, porcelain, straw, steel and stone marquetry. Cloth, bulrush and copper began to be used in chairs. Long before the garish colours afforded by plastic in the 20th and 21st centuries, the 18th century saw the birth of furniture in red, daffodil yellow, turquoise blue and apple green, sometimes splashed with gold and silver. At the same time, other colour palettes were limited to the black and gold of lacquer and bronze, and patterns were reduced to natural ones made out of quality materials such as mahogany.

FOREWORD

THROUGH ITS DISPLAYS, presentations and explanations of lines and designs and the reasons for the transformation of the decorative arts, this exhibition reveals the driving force of invention in the age of enlightenment, when furniture-making first became an art. Architects, artists, merchants and simple artisans came together to give new form to wood creations, to shape furniture into something the world had never seen.

NOTHING WOULD EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN. The three daily acts of sitting on a chair, sitting at a table and organizing the home would, in the 18th century, morph into art. Where tidying clutter once meant secreting things away, it now meant putting them on display. Straight-backed chairs gave way to more comfortable seating. Severe, throne-like armchairs stretched into chaises longues. Tables with drawers turned into desks and commodes. At the same time, straight lines were replaced by curves before regaining their place of favour. Décor, originally the realm of textiles and wall ornamentation, spread to corners, expanded to ridges and hinges, taking on shapes and colours along the way thanks to manifold techniques and effects, some experimental.

FURNITURE RECEIVED NEW FINISHES AND TOOK ON NEW SILHOUETTES, exploring new materials and seeking new contours for the first time. Cabinet-makers threw off of the shackles of architecture while simultaneously playing with it and mimicking its styles. Furniture became lighter in tone, frillier, and comfort and luxury took on a larger role.

DAILY ACTIVITIES BECAME CLOSELY TIED TO FURNITURE, which came into its own during this time. The relationship between the individual and furniture became starker and an art in its own right. Owing to their structure and ingeniousness and the incomparable quality of their artisanry, 18th-century furnishings became a mainstay of daily life and fashion, with all of the era's trends and styles. Along the way, furniture-making acquired new status and recognition, known forever after as an intellectual design process. Today, 21st-century technology helps us focus on these inventive creations from the past, inviting exhibition visitors to trace their history and gain a better understanding of the origins of furniture as we know it today.

PATRICK HOURCADE
PHOTOGRAPHER AND DESIGNER, CO-CURATOR OF THE EXHIBITION

PART ONE: CABINET-MAKING

THE MOST IMPORTANT INNOVATION IN FRENCH FURNITURE-MAKING IN THE 17TH CENTURY WAS THE DEVELOPMENT OF CABINETRY. IN THE EARLY 17TH CENTURY FLEMISH AND GERMAN ARTISANS INVENTED INLAYING USING TECHNIQUES ORIGINALLY USED TO APPLY VENEERS, A THIN SHEET OF WOOD LAID OVER THE WOOD OF FURNITURE. THE FIRST MATERIAL USED IN CABINET-MAKING WAS EBONY, GIVING RISE TO THE FRENCH NAME FOR THE ART, "ÉBÉNISTERIE." NEW TECHNIQUES LIKE MARQUETRY CAME SOON AFTER, FOLLOWED BY THE USE OF NEW MATERIALS SUCH AS MARBLE, MOSAICS OF HARD STONE OR GILT BRONZE, EXPANDING THE RANGE OF ORNAMENTATION.

CABINETS, OR THE FIRST GRAND CEREMONIAL FURNITURE

ARCHITECTURAL AND THEATRICAL, a cabinet's ornamentation is the natural starting point when seeking new ways to vary its appearance.



Cabinet

Paris, ca. 1675 (whole piece); Florence, 1664-1672 (stone inlaid panels)

Restored by Charles Hempel, cabinet-maker in Strasbourg, 1862-1865

Cabinet: made of partially polychrome oak and resinous wood, ebony and jacaranda veneer, tin, stained horn, hard stone inlay, gilt bronze, painted glass and stained glass in the body. Base: partially sculpted gilt polychrome oak. H. 2.58; L: 1.91; W: 0.60 m. Strasbourg, Musée des Arts Décoratifs

This cabinet evokes the splendour and luxury of grand ceremonial furniture that became popular during the reign of Louis XIV. Though quite different in style from the highly Italianate cabinets made by Domenico Cucci at the famed Gobelins visual arts school in Paris during the same period, this Strasbourg piece is an eloquent illustration of the French blend of style used in Parisian cabinetry in the 1670s.

5

ANDRÉ-CHARLES BOULLE, OR THE QUEST FOR ORGANIZATION: THE CREATION OF THE DESK AND COMMODE

BOTH DESIGNER AND CRAFTSMAN, ANDRÉ-CHARLES BOULLE LENT HIS NAME TO THE BOULLE TECHNIQUE, which consists of stacking two materials together, usually tortoiseshell and bronze, and cutting out an inlay pattern.

UNTIL THE 17TH CENTURY, ARMOIRES AND CHESTS WERE PRIMARILY USED TO HOLD OBJECTS. Writing tables, which were traditionally covered with monk's cloth, a heavy woollen fabric, gave way to desks with drawers and tops inlaid with copper.

TOWARD THE END OF LOUIS XIV'S REIGN, cabinet-makers were mostly producing commodes and flat-top desks. Commodes themselves were derived from eight-legged desks to which drawers had been added all along one side.



André-Charles Boulle, commode.

Paris, 1708. Ebony veneer, tortoiseshell and bronze inlay, gilt bronze, griotte marble. Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.

This commode from the chambers of Louis XIV at Trianon is the earliest known commode. The piece's construction bears signs of the trial and error that occurred before it was finally completed. It appears to be a hybrid of two pieces of furniture built from two independent elements: a table placed over a bureau with its own set of legs. The entire work

is an example of the era's taste for rich materials and contrasting colours, with the gold of gilt bronze, the red of the griotte marble top and the dark brown of the tortoiseshell veneers inlaid with bronze. The profile of the drawers—one convex, the other concave—is a testimony to the artisan's mastery of veneering techniques and hints at the rococo style that would make great use of the play between curves and countercurves.

GRAND FURNITURE

BEGINNING IN THE 18TH CENTURY, GRAND FURNITURE began developing outwards instead of upwards.

A RECENT INVENTION, the commode became a ceremonial furnishing that occupied an important place first in the bedroom, then in salons and studies.



DOUBLE COMMODE WITH DRAWERS AND DOORS.

Paris, ca. 1730. Made of oak and conifer, rosewood veneer, curly walnut, red marble from Rance, gilt bronze. H. 0.840; L. 2.820; W. 0.825 m. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

The silhouette of this commode, as well as its patterned veneer and gilt bronze ornamentation is characteristic of furnishings from the 1730s. The piece itself stands out for its exceptional size: nearly three metres long instead of the traditional one and a half for a commode. It stands on four legs capped with bronze bearclaw sabots and features powerful lines that enhance its lively form. The crossbow-shaped façade extends beyond the front legs, and the body contains corner cupboards with doors that open out. The entire piece is covered with rectangular, diamond-patterned rosewood veneer panels accented by rich gilt-bronze embellishments arranged symmetrically. Its acanthus leaves, mirrors, bases, shells, scalloped borders and beaded chutes are also typical of the classic Regency style. Only the bearclaw sabots offer a glimpse of originality that is nevertheless particularly suited to the furniture's unusual size.

6

ORIENTAL LACQUER

WESTERN ARTISANS WERE FASCINATED by rare and precious lacquers of China and Japan and by Oriental storage chests and folding screens. Working under art purveyors, cabinet-makers were able to adapt Eastern lacquers to Western silhouettes, which were usually curvy during the Louis XV era.



Bernard van Risenburgh II (BVRB)
Commode of Marie Leszczinska.

Paris, 1737. Made of oak, fruitwood veneer, Japanese lacquer, vernis Martin, gilt bronze, marble from Antin (or Sarrancolin). H. 0.850; L. 1.275; W. 0.610 m.
Paris, Musée du Louvre.

This commode owned by Marie Leszczinska was delivered to her by art merchant Thomas-Joachim Hébert in 1737 for her cabinet de retraite at the Chateau de Fontainebleau. It is without a doubt one of the most

innovative pieces of furniture to be made during the transition to lacquer in the 18th century. It is the first known, well documented furnishing to feature panels coated with Japanese lacquer, rightfully reputed to be much more complicated to reuse than Chinese lacquer. In this piece, BVRB transcended all technical and aesthetic difficulties and arrived at a solution that was brilliant to say the least and would not be improved upon in the 18th century. In the second half of the century, using such lacquers on non-flat surfaces was a risky proposition, not only because of the popularity of patterns in relief but also due to the hardness of the panels.

ENSEMBLES BY CHARLES CRESSENT

A SCULPTOR BY TRAINING, Charles Cressent, much like André-Charles Boulle, created furniture from his own designs. He also supplied models of his bronzes, which were occasionally veritable sculptures themselves, and created ensembles such as a bureau and file cabinet.



Charles Cressent

Medallion cabinet. Paris, ca. 1750.

Body and drawer made of oak, amaranth veneer variegated with horizontal thread lines and satin-finish wood pattern accented with double threads of boxwood and ebony. H. 1.91; L. 1.10; W. 0.43 m.

Lisbon, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian.

The inside contains sixty-eight medallion drawer pulls. One of Cressent's later works (the work includes a 1747 dauphin medallion), this medallion cabinet is one of his greatest masterpieces. It uses several of his best sculpted motifs (for example, busts of ancient generals and scenes of children minting coins) with refined veneer patterns that evoke the upholstery (contrasting matte backgrounds with shiny strips of satin finish). Medallion cabinets at the time typically took the form of small boxes, but with this piece Cressent chose to create an original form that combined a last-century cabinet and base with a ceremonial cupboard much like Boulle produced circa 1700. Mr. De Selle, one of Cressent's most important

customers, owned an identical medallion cabinet in his home matched with two massive armoires also embellished with ornate bas-reliefs of children from artistic allegories. Today, both armoires are on display at the Musée du Louvre.

7

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CURVE

THE SKILLED USE OF CURVES AND COUNTERCURVES in both body and décor is the very definition of the refined, supple and fluid style typical of Louis XV.



Bernard van Risenburgh II (BVRB)

File cabinet owned by Machault d'Arnouville.

Paris, ca. 1745-1749.

Made of oak, rosewood veneer and floral marquetry, centre leaf opens to reveal seven solid-rosewood drawers, two doors on the side; gilt-bronze ornamentation: panel frames decorated with rococo and leafy embellishments; Brèche d'Alep marble

H. 1.05; L. 1.65; W. 0.49 m

Private collection

Until recently, this bas d'armoire ("low armoire") was in the possession of Machault's descendants at the Chateau de Thoiry. One inventory describes it as "a low rosewood armoire with one door on the front, furnished with drawers on the inside, decorated with veneer flowers and ormolu copper frames and mouldings over Brèche d'Alep marble, valued at 400 livres." Fine porcelain designs were laid over its marble top, both made of Japanese porcelain: a spray of flowers on a white background and two white embossed vases. The armoire was kept in Machault's library, which was located between his study and his bedroom. In the library, three windows looked out into the garden. The purpose of the armoire is not clear. One theory is that it may have been used to store shells or minerals, although the 1795 inventory made no mention of any collections of shells, natural science objects or minerals in the library. Another theory is that the most valuable of the 161 folios in the inventory—out of the thousand volumes or so listed—may have been kept in the side compartments of the armoire.

WRITING

CRAFTSMEN DEVELOPED DIVERSE, SOMETIMES HIGHLY COMPLEX MECHANISMS to allow writers to write standing up, seated on a chair, armchair or sofa, or even lying down, and to expand desks' functionality to include other purposes such as storage and reading.

AT THE TIME, WRITING REQUIRED NOT ONLY PAPER, but a place to keep ink, a pen and sand to quickly absorb fresh ink.



Bernard van Risenburgh II (BVRB)

Secretary desk of Louis XV at Trianon

Paris, ca. 1755. Made of oak, rosewood, violet wood, gilt bronze, white marble and blue satin.

H. 2.290; L. 1.120; W. 0.530 m.

Le Mans, Musée de Tessé.

This uniquely designed piece was sold directly to the king by art purveyor Lazard Duvaux. His logbook records it thus: "His Majesty the King: one secretary desk composed of cupboards with doors veneered with flowers and fronted with glass, decorated with ormolu gilt bronze, and with a marble slab and three silver horns." With elegantly sinuous lines beautifully accenting its fine bronze ornamentation and floral marquetry made of endgrain violet wood and rosewood, this piece bears all the hallmarks of Bernard van Risenburgh II. In 1990, the discovery of his stamp on the piece confirmed its origin.

8

THE KING'S STUDY

AT TIMES, THE KING NEEDED TO WRITE LETTERS IN PRIVATE and keep his own letters hidden away from others. The roll-top desk was created for this purpose. A complex mechanism allowed the king to open the roll top, unlock the drawers and access hidden compartments, all with a single key. Along the sides, separate drawers contained inkwells that could be refilled without opening the desk. A two-faced clock whose inner workings were independent from the roll top was inset at the top of the entire piece. The desk is a masterful example of polychrome marquetry from the period.



Jean-François Eben and Jean-Henri Riesener

King's desk Paris, 1760-1769

Made of oak, satin-finish, amaranth and rosewood (mainly) veneer, gilt bronze, porcelain.

H. 1.473; L. 1.925; W. 1.050 m

Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon

Crafted by Jean-François Eben and Jean-Henri Riesener, Louis XV's secretary desk is considered the most iconic piece of furniture of the 18th century. Remarkable for its grandeur and for the beauty of its marquetry tableaux and bronzes, the desk is highly complex and beautifully made. Started in 1760 by Eben, a master marquetry artisan renowned for his creations of small mechanized furniture, the desk was finally delivered nine years later in 1769 by his student Jean-Henri Riesener.

Every detail required a great deal of skill. A marvel of mechanics, the desk contained a complex system of springs and counterweights that opened the roll-top lid and all of the drawers with a simple quarter turn of the key. The oval roll top was composed of seven articulated slats veneered with violet wood, sycamore and mahogany. Craftsmen from fourteen disciplines, including cabinetry, bronze-working, carving, gilding and clock-making, were required to create the final product. The bronze figures were cast and carved by Louis-Barthélémy Hervieu based on models by Jean-Claude Duplessis.

9

COLOUR

BY NOW, MARQUETRY PERFORMED IN THE 18TH CENTURY has lost most of its original colour (which may have been blue, green, pink, grey or another colour), dulling into shades of amber. But thanks to the use of other materials such as porcelain, lacquer and varnishes, we are occasionally afforded glimpses into the intensity of those faded colours and refined harmonies—proof of hues used by 18th-century furniture-makers.



Matthieu Criaerd

Commode of madame de Mailly. Paris, 1742.

Made of oak, fruitwood veneer, vernis Martin, silvered bronze, Turkey Blue Marble. H. 0.850; L. 1.320; W. 0.635 m.
Paris, Musée du Louvre.

A one-of-a-kind piece, this commode stands on curved legs and is coated with blue and white vernis Martin designed to mimic Oriental lacquer. The “Chinese-style” rococo décor introduces an air of refinement. With its multiple colours and Asian-inspired motifs applied using Oriental techniques, the bureau demonstrates the popularity of exoticism and European décor at the time. The silvered bronze ornamentation, consisting of chutes along the ridges of the legs and openwork sabots, are characteristic of Criaerd’s work.

MATERIALS

SHAPES AND VENEERING ALSO SAW NEW INNOVATIONS thanks to the rise of manufactured products (for example, porcelain, hard stone, coated sheet metal) and the use of unusual materials (such as straw, lead or steel).



Pierre Macret

Varnished sheet metal commode. Paris, ca. 1770

Made of oak and pine, sheet metal, gilt bronze, white veined marble. H. 0.895; L. 1.363; W. 0.623 m.
Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.

This two-door sheet metal commode is composed of four panels of varnished sheet metal painted with four medallions in the Oriental style. Pierre Macret holds a special place among 18th-century Parisian cabinet-makers. Appointed cabinet-maker to the king in 1757, he crafted his pieces in his

workshop on Rue Saint-Nicolas. In 1764, he began supplying the royal household’s Menus-Plaisirs department, which was responsible for the “lesser pleasures” of King Louis XV. His reputation attracted commissions from some of the most important art lovers and purveyors of the time. He himself also acted as an art purveyor, working from Rue Saint-Honoré.

GREEK-STYLE

AS TIME WENT ON, TASTES CHANGED and what was once curvy became straight again. The “Greek” style of furniture was discovered in Italy by the Marquis of Marigny while on an educational journey arranged by his sister, the Marquise of Pompadour. Jean-François created an interim commode integrating the new forms. Furniture bodies became straight, though the legs maintained their curvature.



Jean-François Eben

Greek commode. Paris, ca. 1760-1763

Made of oak, front made of solid mahogany, thick mahogany veneer, red marble (from Mayenne). H. 0.84; L. 1.32; W. 0.56 m. Private collection.

This type of commode, called a “Greek commode,” was listed in the posthumous inventory of Madame de Pompadour in 1764, including an inventory taken at the Chateau de Ménars. Another inventory taken at Ménars upon the death in 1782 of the Marquis de Marigny, her brother and heir, shows that the

term was used for commodes with central doors flanked by doors, with or without a row of frieze drawers. The commodes, which numbered 19, were mostly made of mahogany, a relatively new wood at the time.

GRAPHICS AND ORNAMENTATION, OR THE BIRTH OF THE LOUIS XVI STYLE

PREFERENCES FOR SILHOUETTES AND THEIR FRAMES ALSO SHIFTED. As shapes and forms evolved, so did the gilt bronze ornamentation—sometimes subtly and other times more dramatically.



Guillaume Benneman under the direction of Jean Hauré. Commode for Marie-Antoinette's grand cabinet at the Chateau de Fontainebleau.

Paris, 1786. Mahogany, porcelain, gilt bronze, white marble. H. 0.96; L. 1.82; W. 0.75 m. Fontainebleau, Musée National du Château.

This commode was one of a pair famous for residing in Marie-Antoinette's grand cabinet at

the Chateau de Fontainebleau and for the number of copies it inspired. The Royal Furniture Treasury had purchased four commodes originally intended for the Count of Provence, brother of Louis XVI. The commode shown here was based on one of those four. It is veneered with ebony and has a similar shape, scroll bronzes and three porcelain medallions from Paris—two depicting bouquets of flowers and the third, a portrait medallion, showing a love scene. Restored under the direction of Jean Hauré for the queen's chambers at the Chateau de Compiègne, the commode was widened slightly. Its marble was replaced, its bronze gilded and its ebony veneer changed to mahogany. The portrait medallion was substituted with a biscuit medallion purchased from the porcelain factory in Sèvres.

Construction of a larger copy of the commode (about 21 cm wider) began, for which Hauré purchased three more medallions in Sèvres: two depicting bouquets of flowers and one biscuit medallion. Part way through the process, it was finally decided that the two commodes would be placed in the queen's grand cabinet at Fontainebleau, requiring a resizing of the commodes. The unfinished copy was reduced by two inches (about five centimetres), but the same could not be done to the original commode. Instead, a new body was built with the correct dimensions, and as many decorations as possible were reused from the first commode, including the porcelain medallions and the bronzes.

GRANDEUR

EXCEPTIONALLY LARGE COMMODOES sometimes required input from architects. Such pieces drew upon knowledge from the field of architecture to create furniture often intended for a specific space.

MÉCANISMES

THE DEMAND FOR NEW FUNCTIONS and for multipurpose furniture led to the creation of some ingenious, complex and precise mechanisms and the rise of multipurpose tables, roll-top desks and furniture with hidden compartments.



David Roentgen

Mechanical roll-top desk. Ca. 1781.

Made of oak, mahogany veneer, gilt bronze, steel.

H. 1.48; L. 1.49; W. 0.83 m.

Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.

This roll-top desk is entirely veneered with mahogany and decorated with gilt bronze in a purely classical style. It stands on eight tapered legs. Impeccable cabinetwork is combined with precise and complex mechanisms. The desk is a veritable

strongbox: opening the rigid roll top and the many drawers and compartments requires a complete knowledge of the varied secrets embedded into the piece by the desk's maker. Opening the roll top unlocks three differently sized compartments flanked by Doric gilt-bronze columns and sitting atop a triglyph frieze. Above, the main side of the central compartment now features a bronze medallion with a profile of Louis XVI. The medallion was replaced by the bronzier Denière in 1835, suggesting a royal provenance. Little is known about the previous medallion, which depicted a profile from antiquity. The entirety of the gilt-bronze décor was found to be the work of Parisian bronzier François Remond (ca. 1745-1812).

PURITY OF LINES

LINEAR SILHOUETTES CAME INTO VOGUE IN THE 1780S, combining styles borrowed from antiquity with beautiful designs and resulting in furniture with very pure lines.



Table,

Paris, ca. 1780. Made of oak, reinforcements made of walnut, varnished metal, gilt bronze, antique green marble.

H. 0.790; L. 0.970; W. 0.515 m.

Paris, Musée du Petit Palais.

A new style arose in the mid-to-late 1770s in which tables and consoles were built using a slab of ancient or valuable marble fitted over a base made of marble, wood crafted by a cabinet-maker or entirely of metal, as seen in this table.

PART TWO: WOODWORKING

WOODWORKERS TRADITIONALLY MADE CHAIRS, BEDS AND CONSOLES OUT OF PAINTED OR GILDED WOOD. THESE PIECES OF FURNITURE WERE NOT VENEERED WITH OTHER TYPES OF WOOD BUT WERE INSTEAD SCULPTED OR MOULDING WAS SIMPLY ADDED. THEN IT WAS THE UPHOLSTERER'S DUTY TO FINISH THE PIECES BY EMBELLISHING THEM AND COVERING THEM WITH MATERIALS THAT RANGED FROM SILK TO UPHOLSTERY TO LEATHER TO CANE.

CHAIRS

WHETHER STRAIGHT OR CURVED, the first changes made to chairs were to the position of armrests and their supports, which varied depending on the period.



Armchair owned by Pierre Crozat.

Paris, ca. 1710-1720.

Gilded walnut, red and tan Morocco leather, red and white reps lines.

Paris, Musée du Louvre

Shown in its original condition, this armchair illustrates the transition from the linear Louis XIV chair to the Louis XV chair. The armrests are arranged directly in line with the legs, and the embellishments—which include acanthus, shells, gadrooning, ova and latticework—are still in the Louis XIV style. However, the lines are rounder, the bracing has disappeared, and the piece as a whole is much more decorative, with an abundance of masterful sculpturing that features motifs depicting various scenes, beautiful gilding and recutting in gesso. The two-tone red and tan Morocco leather garniture, separated by a red and white stripe, plays an important role. The chair is significant in being one of the few surviving examples of ornamentation on antique leather.

CURVE AND COMFORT: LOUIS XV STYLE

CHANGES TO OVERALL CURVE OF CHAIRS went hand-in-hand with greater comfort. This took the form of lower and deeper seats, wider armrests and steep corbelling of the back rest.



Attributed to Louis Cresson

Armchair

Paris, ca. 1735. Beech and walnut, modern velvet.

H. 1.00; L. 0.83; W. 0.96 m

Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

In the first half the 18th century, woodworkers were particularly inventive when it came to chairs, creating pieces suitable for multiple purposes, transforming shapes and adopting the new trend of sculpted décor on wood panels through the use of highly skilled sculpted ornamentation. This voluminous armchair stands on beautifully curved squat legs and features a deep, broad seat with cushion and high back, elements that contributed to the comfort so sought after at the time without

quite turning it into a bergère or duchesse chair. The chair's proportions are large but balanced, and likewise its embellishments find equilibrium between rococo and naturalist styles, neither ostentatious nor excessive. This low-seated chair is a prime example of early rococo-style productions.

GRAND CHAIRS

IN THE GRANDEST CHAIRS, QUALITY CONSTRUCTION AND VIRTUOSIC SCULPTURE WORK are combined with skilful architecture, then further enhanced by the work of painters, gilders and upholsterers.



Nicolas-Quinibert Foliot, probably to a design by Pierre Contant d'Ivry

Fauteuil à la reine, fauteuil à chassis and "regular" chair from the Palazzo della Pilotta

Paris, ca. 1749. Gilt oak. H. 1.10; L. 0.75; W. 0.67 m.

St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum

A masterpiece of composition and sculpture, this chair is also an example of the Parisian style created for export, an over-the-top demonstration of French skill and ingenuity.

PERFECTION AND THE RISE OF NEW TRENDS

REFINEMENTS TO CHAIR FRAMES allowed ornamentation to change with the seasons and chairs to be given a whole new look at little expense.



Jean Boucault

Fauteuil à la reine and fauteuil à chassis (one of a pair)

Paris, ca. 1758. Gilt beech. H. 1.07; L. 0.68; W. 0.59 m

Private collection

Jean Boucault was one of the great chair-makers of the 18th century. An example of his work is shown here. In keeping with the “symmetrical rococo” style of the 1750s, these two chairs stand out immediately for their fragmented form and “broken” sinuous lines. Working from a lively base structure, Boucault reined in its energy with playful clashing mouldings and by cutting projections into the wood. This desire to break up the chair’s lines can be compared with contemporary works by master chair-maker Nicolas Heurtaut. The famous spiral scrolls characteristic of Heurtaut’s works can be seen here on the connector piece between the seat and backrest.

Also notable is the particularly unusual nery, staccato form of the arm support, the supple lines of the front legs, the trompe-l’oeil flower placed on one bar above the legs, and the extraordinary, impetuous moulding of the connector piece between the arm support and crossbar.

GRAND ENSEMBLES

SOFAS, CONFIDANTES, ARMCHAIRS, SEATING CHAIRS, STOOLS AND FOLDING CHAIRS were all created to form stylistically coherent ensembles.



Nicolas Heurtaut, probably designed by Pierre Contant d’Ivry

Pair of fauteuils à la reine (out of a set of six), a canapé à la reine and a furnishing with two moveable confidentes

Paris, ca. 1757. Beech painted in blue-green

Armchair: H. 0.96; L. 0.66; W. 0.59 m, Sofa: H. 1.14;

L. 1.95; W. 0.70 m, Confidante: H. 1.06; L. 0.63; W.

0.70 m, Canapé and confidentes: L. 3.30 m.

Private collection

This confidante canapé is arguably one of the most beautiful masterpieces of chair-making. Two types of confidante canapés were built in the 18th century: canapés with fixed confidentes and those with moveable confidentes. The latter were rarer since the sculpting of the confidentes had to perfectly match that of the canapé with which they interlocked. It can be observed that the end legs of the canapé are only half sculpted, as are those of the confidentes. When the two legs come together, they form the complete design. Similarly, the coup de fouet armrests and arm supports are also divided in half.

THE RETURN OF STRAIGHT LINES

TOWARDS THE END OF LOUIS XV'S REIGN, a backlash against the excesses of curvy styles resulted in a return to straighter lines, heralding the Louis XVI style.



Georges Jacob

Gameroom armchair of Louis XVI at the Chateau de Saint-Cloud

Paris, 1788. Gilt wood. H. 1.00; L. 0.69; W. 0.60 m.

Paris, Musée du Louvre.

This armchair features the most classical ornamentation of the Louis XVI style, judiciously apportioned among various components of the chair and accentuating its structure. It is an exemplary representation of a Louis XVI chair and does justice to its creator, Georges Jacob, one of the greatest woodworkers of his time.

COMFORT AND REFINEMENT IN THE NEW STYLE

THE DESIRE FOR BOTH COMFORT AND LUXURY led to the use of expensive practices to please customers commissioning furniture. Mock-ups for pieces for Marie-Antoinette for the Belvedere Pavilion at the Chateau du Petit Trianon illustrate the extent to which refinement was sought, which can be seen in the multitude of propositions of backrests, aprons, legs and upholstery.



Gille-François Martin (attributed to), designed by Jacques Gondoin
Mock-up of a bergère armchair.

Paris, 1780. Colored wax on a wood, cardboard and paper base.

H. 0.14; L. 0.90; W. 0.90 m

Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon

This 1/7 size mock-up (the real thing stood 0.92 m tall) was created by Gilles-François Martin, a sculptor and pattern-maker to the Royal Furniture Treasury, in 1780 under the direction of Jacques Gondoin, the Treasury's designer. The piece was one of a prestigious set of eight chairs and eight bergères commissioned by Marie-Antoinette for the Belvedere Pavilion at the Chateau du Petit Trianon (on the grounds of the Chateau de Versailles). This mock-up was one of many phases in the complex process of forming a piece of furniture. After drafting large-scale drawings of the bergère and chair and receiving approval from Marie-Antoinette, architect Richard Mique and Pierre-Élisabeth

de Fontanieu, Treasury overseer, Gondoin asked Martin to create a three-dimensional, "small-scale model of the armchair [bergère] and chair" out of wax, a malleable and modifiable material. It can be observed that multiple design options were given in the model: arm supports in the shape of a mermaid or lion's head and shepherd's hook, legs resembling a quiver of arrows or a ribbed or smooth torso, and even animal claws for feet (after all, it was still only 1780!).



François-Toussaint Foliot, designed by Jacques Gondoin
Light cabriolet "regular" chair, chassis chair (for the seat)

Paris, ca. 1780-1781

Regilded beech. H. 0.89; L. 0.56; W. 0.56 m

Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.

Under the direction of Fontanieu and Mique, the Royal Furniture Treasury took charge of the order by asking Jacques Gondoin, the royal furniture-designer, to come up with a new chair design. Large-scale drawings of the bergère and armchair were made, a 1/7 scale mock-up was created out of wax by the sculptor Martin, and finally a life-size model was made of clay for Marie-Antoinette's approval. The clay model was made using a plaster mould, itself created using the hollow lost-wax casting method. The model was then adorned with wax embellishments and even painted with various types of fabric. In all, Gondoin's modelling process took four and a half months and cost 3,200 livres, an extravagant sum at the time. In November 1780, once

Gondoin had finished the mock-up he handed the project over to artisans to create the real-life version of the approved piece. François-Toussaint Foliot, chair-maker to the Royal Furniture Treasury, was chosen to perform the woodwork. The eight bergères and eight chairs were delivered to Marie-Antoinette in July 1781. They were described as having "Roman-style wood" and were garnished with cushions. They also featured heavy cloth draping from the seat (see mock-up) and silk painted by Gondoin himself with extraordinary floral motifs and arabesques.

Alas, though the ensemble was some of the most expensive furniture ever created for Marie-Antoinette, it was the swansong of the Foliot family. Nevertheless, when unveiled the new-fashioned chairs would come to influence an entire generation of chair-makers and wood-sculptors

GRAND CLASSICISM, EXOTICISM AND MODERNITY

THE LOUIS XVI STYLE was also remarkable for its quest for exoticism and purity of lines.



Georges Jacob. Brisée cabriolet-style chaise longue

Paris, ca. 1780-1785. Gilt beech and walnut. Bergère: H. 1.00;

L. 0.74; W. 0.71 m. Legs: H. 0.705 ; L. 0.655 ; W. 0.925 m.

Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André

Also called a duchess chair in the 18th century, this chaise longue is made up of two independent parts that join together: a bergère armchair with a high cabriolet (concave) back with a convex front seat rail, and a footstool with a concave front seat rail and, at the other end, a smaller version of the armchair's backrest.

Besides the masterful craftsmanship characteristic of Georges Jacob, immediately apparent on the chaise longue are the highly original arm supports on the footstool section, which depict two bare-breasted mermaids (one on the right, one on the left) with one arm hiding their chests, seated on tasselled cushions and balancing another cushion on their heads. The armrest itself sits atop the head cushions. The mermaids' legs do not end in fishtails but rather in arabesque scrolls.

A HISTORY IN THREE CONSOLES

WHEN DISPLAYED TOGETHER, THESE THREE CONSOLES ENCOMPASS THE ENTIRE EXHIBITION by illustrating and juxtaposing evolutions of style and decorative trends that characterized the 18th century.

CONSOLE TABLES FELL UNDER THE WOODWORKING CATEGORY and were above all else architectural furnishings in which gilt wood played a particularly prominent role. Originating in the late 17th century around the same time as trumeau mirrors, they were a mainstay of interior décor throughout the 18th century. They began as permanent wainscoting fixtures custom-made for a specific location, usually spaces between windows or hanging above a fireplace with matching marble. Viewed outside of their native habitat today, they serve as a testament to the creative energy of sculptor-decorators in furniture-making. Their creation required the knowledge of architects, decorative woodworkers and sculptors.

**Large console table**

Paris, ca. 1720. Sculpted, gilt oak, red marble from Rance. H. 0.96; L. 1.69; W. 0.80 m (including the marble)
Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs

This console was clearly designed to be displayed against a wall and viewed from the front. Its sculpted décor appears on only three of the four sides and comprises a mosaic background superimposed with palm

leaves, scrolls and flowery branches. At the centre of the front side is a satyr mask in a cartouche; matching satyr heads in shells appear on the short sides of the table. The four supporting table legs end in goat's hooves. They are accented by jagged compartments sculpted with acanthus flowers. The upper part of the legs feature an openwork design and powerful winged dragons whose tails encircle the base of the legs and whose necks and heads reach out towards the table's apron. The dragon motif is also found on the stretcher that connects the four legs. The wood is curved and sculpted once more, and open-mouthed dragons appear to be attacking the centre of the stretcher, composed of a round moulded base bordered by ova and gadroons in counter-relief. The base was likely meant to hold a porcelain or hard-stone vase.

**Nicolas Heurtaut****Wainscoting console**

Paris, ca. 1758. Repainted oak, yellow Brèche marble from Seriny. H. 0.95; L. 1.73; W. 0.85 m.
Collection from the département of Val-d'Oise

This console was built very much in this style and is a stellar representative of the symmetrical rococo style of the 1750s. It has a lively structure and an asymmetrical "walnut" stretcher reinforced by a robust openwork

shell in the centre of the apron and other shells, also symmetrical, at the tops of the legs. At the top of the walnut is an outlined heart-shaped cartel iconic of the post-rococo years. These features were typical of Heurtaut, as were the piece's expansive shapes, broad wood pieces and deep, nervy sculpture work. Notably, this is the only known console stamped by the chair-maker. The making of console tables was usually the realm of building woodworkers, who differed from chair woodworkers in that they worked primarily on wall-related construction projects—including console tables displayed against walls. In creating this piece Heurtaut took on the role of a building woodworker, which was unusual but not illegal in the trade.

**Console.**

Paris, ca. 1785. Sculpted gilt oak, white marble.
H. 0.980; L. 2.275; W. 0.890 m

Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon

This console stands on six legs carved into bundles of rods topped with a helmet decorated with laurel branches. The stretcher features ornate panels with sculptures of

plants (laurel, lilies, olive trees and ivy), and its “walnut” takes the shape of a rich cluster of antique weapons. The centre of the apron is carved with a military scene, while the sides depict winding palmette patterns interrupted at the rounded ends of the table by a head of Hercules wearing the remains of the Nemean lion. Flanking Hercules are arrays of oak leaves. Thick garlands of oak leaves drape from the front apron and connect the tops of the legs.

MARIE-ANTOINETTE’S JEWELLERY CASE

RETURNING TO THE TRADITIONAL CABINETRY STYLES OF THE 1640S, the ornamentation of this jewellery case owned by Marie-Antoinette heralds the Directoire style and the subsequent decades.

**Ferdinand Scherzfeiger.**

Jewellery case owned by Marie-Antoinette.

Paris, 1787.

Made of oak, mahogany, mother of pearl, reverse glass painting, ivory, hard-paste porcelain from Sèvres, gilt and silvered bronze, iron, green sea marble. H. 2.630; L. 2.072; W. 0.650 m

Château de Versailles

Exceptionally ornate, this jewellery case uses a wide range of materials, including decorative reverse glass paintings in the Pompeian style by Jean-Jacques Lagrenée the younger, cameos painted by Jacques-Joseph Degault that were partially replaced the following year with new cameos painted by Joseph Sauvage and gilt bronzes designed by Louis-Simon Boizot, cast by Étienne Martincourt, chiselled by Pierre-Philippe Thomire and gilded by Jean-Baptiste Godegrand Mellet. The porcelain

factory in Sèvres supplied the blue and white medallion displayed in the centre of the apron, as well as the two beautiful blue vases that once sat on the stretchers of the base and which disappeared in 1830. The great round gilt-bronze bas-relief adorning the centre door represents the Arts. The four imposing bronze caryatids spaced out along the façade symbolize the Seasons. On the top of the entire piece Strength, Wisdom and Abundance once wore a royal crown that has since been lost.

This “diamond chest” stands on eight legs carved into the shape of quivers. It has three doors and numerous drawers. It is a picture-perfect revival of cabinet styles popular long before in the 17th century but abandoned since the reign of Louis XIV.