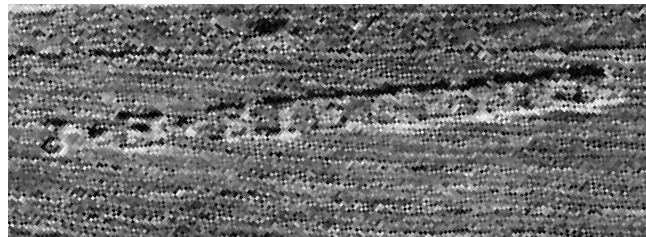


Production of French Decorative Arts in the 1700s

Comfort and convenience were hallmarks of good taste in eighteenth-century Europe. To meet these fashionable demands, designers developed a wide variety of specialized, multipurpose furniture. For instance, at her combined desk and dresser, a lady could keep household accounts, write letters, serve refreshments, play cards, sew or embroider, groom hair, or freshen cosmetics—all without leaving her chair.

Strict legal regulations governed the production of such expensive furniture in France. Major pieces, for example, are often struck or indented with their makers' marks as proof that the works met guild standards. Exceptions, or unsigned pieces, include the work of craftsmen appointed to the royal court, who could ignore guild inspections, and furniture made in shops located in the privileged, tax-free neighborhoods of Paris.



Mark of J. H. Riesener stamped underneath the rolltop desk in gallery Ground North 14 A; actual width: 64 mm (2 1/2 in.).

Menuisiers (carpenters) worked primarily on chairs, beds, picture frames, and other carved furnishings, including the carcasses or bodies inside veneered pieces. *Ebénistes* (cabinetmakers) created veneered furniture such as desks, tables, and dressers. Their name derives from an old association with ebony, an expensive, imported wood.

The veneered work consists of a structural carcass—almost always oak—encased by mar-

quetry. The thin sheets of fine woods in marquetry are cut and arranged in “jigsaw puzzle” fashion, glued down, and sanded to an even, flat surface before final varnishing. *Ebénistes* used about forty trees native to France, and customs officials recorded another fifty-seven exotic inlay woods, many imported from French colonies in the East and West Indies.

Fondeurs (founders) created metal fittings and furnishings. *Doré d'or moulu*, or ormolu, which translates as “pulverized or ground gold,” is the finest gilt metal. The sculptural design was modeled in wax, cast in bronze, and finished by engraving or chasing the details. The surface was gilded by applying an amalgam of gold and mercury. After the mercury was driven off as a vapor by kiln heating, the gold deposit remained as an integral part of the bronze. Ormolu is practical as well as decorative because the metal creates a protective sheath around furniture feet, legs, and top edges, where marquetry or lacquer might snag or chip.

In 1662, Louis XIV had founded a royal factory in the Paris suburb of Gobelins to create the furnishings, mirrors, and tapestries for Versailles and his other palaces. Because Gobelins could work only on orders from the court, another factory was sanctioned in 1664 at the northern French city of Beauvais to supply the nobility, bourgeoisie, and foreigners. Gobelins and Beauvais shared many of the same designers and weavers, causing their tapestries to be virtually indistinguishable.



Eighteenth-Century French Craftsmen Oak Wall Paneling (*boiseries*)

Gift of George D. Widener and Eleanor Dixon Widener
1957.7.7

The Louis XV wall panels and doors, carved of oak, employ seashells and foliage in the early rococo style of the architect Nicolas Pineau (1694–1754). Recent research identifies them with an interior created by Pineau around 1737/1740, the salon of the Château de la Norville, just south of Paris. The present gilding and painting of these panels, although in eighteenth-century taste, are modern.

Six oil paintings on canvas are mounted into the paneling over the doors and wall mirrors—*The Picnic*, *The Concert*, *The Sculptor*, *The Painter*, *The Fisherman*, and *The Dance*. The canvases have been attributed to Christophe Huet (1700–1759), an artist celebrated for ornamental animal paintings, who was paid in 1739 for work at the Château de la Norville. The set satirizes or literally “apes” certain professions and activities by casting monkeys and other animals in human roles.

The impressive chandelier with its curvilinear, rococo frame is a rare survival with a number of original pendants and ornaments of hand-cut crystal. After generations of use, though, much of its decoration is now replaced with press-molded glass. All twelve of its silvered arms carry Paris tax marks that date it to 1745–1749.

Matching armchairs and sofas are upholstered in floral tapestries woven at Gobelins to designs by the flower painter Maurice Jacques (1712–1784). The gilded beech wood frames, probably carved about 1830/1850, were specifically made to hold these Gobelins textiles.



Attributed to Jacques Caffiéri

French, born 1678, master 1715, died 1755

Pair of Firedogs (*feux or chenets*): Hounds Attacking a Boar and a Wolf

probably 1750/1755

Extreme height 0.489 m (18 1/2 in.)

Gift of George D. Widener and Eleanor Widener Dixon
1957.7.11–12

The subjects of these gilt-bronze andirons create visual puns on the English synonym firedogs and its French equivalent, *chenets*. Presumably made for a hunting lodge, these firedogs depict hounds fighting a boar and a wolf who both have already killed one dog. The lively sculpture groups appear to be the work of Jacques Caffiéri, a prominent Paris *fondeur* (founder) of Italian descent. The rococo stands, holding hunting horns and quivers of arrows, swirl in abstract shapes.

Fantasy marks the marble chimneypiece (*cheminée*), carved about 1750. Its motifs of seashells are so extravagantly scalloped that they dissolve into curves purely for the sake of curves.

The relief sculpture of the cast-iron fireback is cleverly chosen from classical mythology. In the cavern of Hades, Pluto carries his two-pronged poker for brimstone. Entertaining him, the musician Orpheus plays bagpipes in an attempt to reclaim his wife Eurydice from the realm of the dead. Behind blazing logs, this scene would take place, appropriately, in hellfire.

Atop the mantel is a charming marble statuette, *The Punishment of Cupid*, a highly popular design by Etienne-Maurice Falconet (1716–1791). Venus, the goddess of love, spanks her mischievous son with a bouquet of thornless roses.

Chinese porcelains, imported to France, flank the statuette. Representing grotesque fish monsters, the inner pair was mounted about 1730/1755 in French gilt bronzes of cattails and seaweed, scrolling amid shells and rocks, the epitome of rococo ornament. The outer pair bears neoclassical gilt-bronze mounts made about 1780/1785. Despite their mermaid handles and masks of Bacchus, the god of wine, these vases are purely decorative and were never intended to hold water or wine.



Jean-Mathieu Chevallier, known as Chevallier L'Aîné (the Elder)

French, born 1696, master 1743, died 1768

Chest of Drawers (commode)

mid-1700s, possibly 1743/1744

0.850 x 1.392 x 0.646 m (33 1/2 x 57 3/4 x 25 3/8 in.)

Widener Collection 1942.9.414

This two-drawer commode, with its sides undulating in *bombé* swellings, defines the rococo style at its most opulent. Like the Chinese porcelains and the furniture with Japanese lacquer in these rooms, it is an escapist fantasy based on exotic cultures. As trade with the Far East increased, importing Oriental materials and customs such as wearing silk and drinking tea became fads in eighteenth-century Europe.

In the commode's veneer, peonies, which are Oriental blossoms, emerge from horns of plenty to create large oval shapes. This bold, spotted effect continues in the choice of a splotchy marble, called breccia, for the top. Jean-Mathieu Chevallier, who stamped this piece, was a furniture dealer as well as a cabinetmaker specializing in complex, colored veneers. Although very faded now, the pinks and greens of the peonies and leaves were stained into the woods with dyes.

The lively gilt-bronze mounts include cattails as well as Chinese men holding dragons, parrots, and parasols. Two fighting dragons guard the lower keyhole. Two more dragons, with serpentine tails and arrowhead tongues, fly upside-down across the bottom edge near the front legs. In a rococo whimsy, they are contrasted to each other. The one at the left has feathered bird wings, but the dragon on the right flies on membraned bat wings.



Joseph Baumhauer, known as Joseph

French (German-born), active 1745/1749, master 1767, died 1772

Two Chests of Drawers (commodes)

probably between 1767 and 1772 but possibly a decade earlier (dark legs) 0.855 x 1.317 x 0.604 m (33 3/4 x 51 7/8 x 23 5/8 in.), (pale legs) 0.840 x 1.245 x 0.570 m (33 1/8 x 48 3/4 x 22 3/8 in.) Widener Collection 1942.9.411–412

Below the wall mirrors are two chests of drawers with *bombé* (convex) surfaces veneered in floral sprays. Gilt-bronze mounts of fanciful foliage cunningly disguise the upper and lower drawer handles.

The oak bodies of both are stamped with the name "Joseph," the mark of a cabinetmaker of German birth, Joseph Baumhauer. He may have used his first name to escape prejudices in Paris against foreign-born craftsmen. Joseph was among the most prolific and versatile of rococo cabinetmakers. The neighboring room, for instance, contains three black lacquered pieces that may be among his earliest works.

At first sight, these two commodes appear alike, but their veneered designs differ considerably. The legs of one, for example, have centers inlaid with pale tulip-wood, while only dark purple-wood is used on the other's legs. Variations in dimension and construction also indicate that separate craftsmen executed them under Joseph's supervision. His studio held eight workbenches, suggesting he employed at least that many assistants.

After 1789, the French revolutionary government conducted innumerable auctions of property confiscated from the crown and aristocrats. Confusion inevitably occurred, and by 1800 these commodes had been sold together incorrectly as a pair. Of several similar chests of drawers made by Joseph Baumhauer, the actual mate to the National Gallery's piece with pale legs is one now in the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio.



Johann Joachim Kändler

German, born about 1706, active 1731, died 1775

Pair of Candelabra (girandoles): Swans of Meissen Porcelain in Nests of French Gilt Bronze

about 1750

Extreme height 0.692 m (27 1/4 in.)

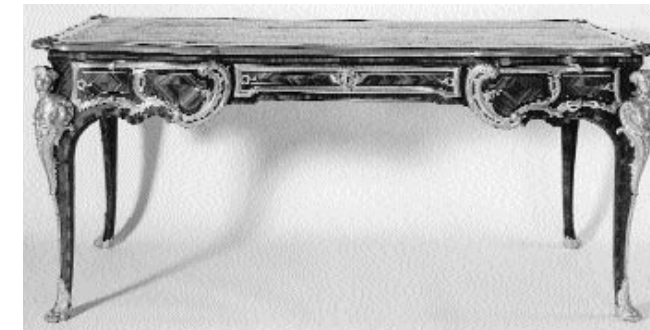
Gift of George D. Widener 1972.20.1 a & b and 1972.20.2 a & b

A large, glittering pair of candelabra are placed directly in front of wall mirrors. This functional position was frequently used in the eighteenth century to double the intensity of the light. The costly materials—gleaming white porcelain and shiny gilt bronze—also enhanced reflections from candles.

The porcelain swans were produced about 1750 from models attributed to Johann Joachim Kändler, the remarkably inventive and skillful artist who was chief sculptor at the celebrated Meissen factory in southeastern Germany. (Europe's earliest true porcelain had been invented at Meissen in 1709.) Kändler animated the large-scale swans with flapping wings, coiling necks, and parted beaks.

Creating a rococo caprice, each bird nests in a marsh of gilt-bronze reeds. These five-branched candelabra were made in Paris to hold the recently imported German swans.

The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.



Charles Cressent

French, born 1685, master sculptor 1719, died 1768

Writing Table (bureau plat)

about 1735/1745

1.942 x 0.898 x 0.838 m (76 3/8 x 39 3/4 x 33 in.)

Widener Collection 1942.9.423

A magnificent writing table can be seen two rooms away, dominating the center of Ground North 13, a sculpture gallery. Its maker, Charles Cressent, was one of the greatest French *ébénistes* of the eighteenth century. Trained in sculpture by his father, he became a master in the sculptors' guild in 1719. After his father's death in 1746, Cressent succeeded him as the court sculptor to Louis XV. By then, Cressent had long since been working mainly as a cabinetmaker, which had been his grandfather's profession.

As cabinetmaker to the young king's regent, the duc d'Orleans, and later to the king himself, Cressent may have grown arrogant. He was fined three times by tribunals for casting or gilding his own bronze mounts, which, by law, should have been done by specialists in metalwork.

The overall silhouettes of Cressent's furniture flow in fluid, sculptural masses. The gilt-bronze mounts, such as the four female busts emerging gracefully from this table's corners, reveal the finest modeling and hand-finishing. Details of the women's faces and lace caps were engraved or chased with stippled, shimmering textures.

A similar, large writing table occupies the middle of this room. A later, less-ornate variation on Cressent's style, it may have been constructed by Edward Holmes Baldock, an early nineteenth-century London craftsman who repaired and imitated French furniture.

