

Neoclassical Decorative Arts of the Late 1700s

The smaller pieces of furniture are moved, on an alternating schedule, to alcoves in the nearby gallery, Ground North 14 D. There they are opened to reveal the inner fittings meant for the private appreciation of the original owners.

During the reign of Louis XVI (1774–1792), many French intellectuals called for a moral austerity and social dignity that they associated with ancient Greece and republican Rome. Neoclassicism, adapting ideals from classical civilizations, replaced the pastel frivolity of the earlier rococo mode with a clear-cut sobriety. (Compare the furnishings of this neoclassical room with the rococo works in galleries Ground North 14 B and C.) Eighteenth-century excavations at the ruined cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, buried by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79, provided archeological artifacts to inspire this new, classifying style.

Flat surfaces and straight edges reflect the architectural sources for Louis XVI design. Elements of ancient Roman moldings, friezes, and columns became important motifs. Neoclassical furniture employed geometrical forms—squares, circles, and triangles—for decorative patterns as well as overall silhouettes. The late eighteenth-century glass and gilt-bronze chandelier in this room, for example, is perfectly cylindrical and divided into quadrants.

Tastes had changed gradually from the time of Louis XV to that of his grandson Louis XVI. Therefore, the furniture of the 1760s and 1770s is sometimes called transitional because it incorporates both graceful rococo curves and the geometrical severity of the later neoclassical mode.

Gobelins Tapestries

The Four Seasons

dated 1781
Wool and silk,
heights from 3.190
to 3.174 m (10 ft. 5
1/2 in. to 10 ft. 5 in.),
widths from 2.148
to 1.870 m (7 ft. 1/2
in. to 6 ft. 2 in.)
Widener Collection
1942.9.453–456



Autumn 1942.9.455

These four tapestries, three of which are signed and dated 1781 in the lower right corners, are the creations of Gobelins' master weaver François Cozette (1714–1801). Cozette derived his mythological subjects from earlier paintings attributed to Claude III Audran (1658–1734), who is mainly remembered as a teacher of the rococo artist Antoine Watteau (1684–1721).

The sprightly figures and curling foliage are thoroughly rococo in their intricacy. For this late eighteenth-century weaving, however, neoclassical borders were added. These geometrical, architectural bands serve as illusions of carved picture frames.

Commissioned by Francis Charles, the prince-bishop of Liège (in modern-day Belgium), the tapestries bear his coat of arms—two lions flanking crowned shields—in their upper corners. The widths differ considerably, suggesting that the suite was woven to fit into the wall paneling of an existing room. A color scheme of rose, aqua, and cream unifies this set of *The Four Seasons*.

Spring is personified by the goddess Flora with a basket of flowers. In the medallion above her, cupids cavort among floral garlands. Below are a mallard and a stork, which migrate in the spring.

Ceres, goddess of agriculture with a sheaf of wheat, represents *Summer*. She holds a torch that recalls the sun's heat, while in the medallion, cupids bask in the sunshine.

Symbolizing *Autumn* is Bacchus, god of wine, framed by harvest garlands of grapes, melons, and other fruits. A pheasant and partridges, favorite fall game birds, perch below.

Boreas, the old god of the north wind who warms himself at a brazier, represents *Winter*. The cupids huddle for warmth, and the shivering busts in the inner frame are hooded against the cold.

Manner of Jean-François Oeben and Jean- François Leleu

Writing Table with Mechanical Fittings (table à transformations)

about 1760/1770, extensively altered in first half of 1800s
0.751 x 0.968 x 0.450 m (29 1/2 x 38 1/8 x 17 6/8 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.421

Fluted triglyph panels from Greek Doric temples mark the corners of this geometrical desk, while Greek key motifs and laurel swags frame flaming urns. These massive gilt-bronze mounts suggest the bold designs of French empire and British regency styles from the early nineteenth century. The intricate woodwork, though, is in delicate, eighteenth-century modes.

The construction of this piece suggests it was radically rebuilt about a half century after its original creation. The veneer on the lower drawer consists of overlapping circles that form four-point stars. Such designs characterize the work of Jean-François Oeben. The upper drawer's interlacing bands surrounding rosettes were a favorite device of Oeben's apprentice, Jean-François Leleu; the design also appears in these rooms on a table signed by Leleu. Therefore, parts of two separate, earlier pieces may have been combined to make this table. Luxury furniture is frequently revamped when tastes change.



Jean-François Leleu

French, born 1729, master 1764, died 1807

Combined Toilet and Writing Table (toilette à transformations)

about 1764/1775
0.705 x 0.558 x 0.393 m
(27 1/2 x 21 7/8 x 15 1/2 in.)
Widener Collection
1942.9.422



A ribboned, floral bouquet executed in wood marquetry fills the top of this table. The yellow of the daffodils has faded, but traces remain of the green and red dyes used to stain the leaves and roses. Otherwise, this lady's desk is extraordinarily well preserved.

When the key is inserted, springs move the top back halfway while a writing compartment glides forward, doubling the work area. Deep drawers on both sides are simultaneously unlocked and then can be pulled out manually. The owner, when finished with her correspondence or household accounts, could lift the hinged writing surface to reveal the mirror on its back and compartments for cosmetics below.

Jean-François Leleu, who signed this work, also supplied furniture for the pleasure pavilion built in 1770–1771 at Louveciennes for Madame du Barry, the last mistress of Louis XV. The decoration at Louveciennes presented neoclassicism as the approved court style. The straight lines and perfect circles of this early, transitional-style table are imposed on a curving, rococo silhouette.

Leleu gained his expertise in pictorial veneer from his teacher, Jean-François Oeben. For a man who could invent such refined designs, Leleu had a violent temper. When a fellow apprentice, Jean-Henri Riesener, inherited the studio of their master Oeben, Leleu was outraged and spent the rest of his career suing Riesener in vain.



Jean-Henri Riesener

French (German-born), born 1743, master 1768, died 1806

Rolltop Desk (*bureau à cylindre*)

about 1775/1785

1.213 x 1.282 x 0.782 m (47 5/8 x 50 1/2 x 30 7/8 in.)

Widener Collection 1942.9.410

This rolltop desk is stamped underneath by Jean-Henri Riesener, one of the greatest Parisian cabinetmakers. After his master Jean-François Oeben died in 1763, Riesener inherited the studio and, five years later, married Oeben's widow.

The rolltop desk was introduced about 1760 by Oeben. The top of this one includes a tilting, adjustable easel, so that a gentleman could stand to read or write. Wide writing slides and long drawers with inkwells are concealed on both sides, providing work space for two male secretaries.

Mountings with neoclassical motifs of circular laurel wreaths and symmetrical sprays of acanthus foliage enhance Riesener's desk. These geometrical plants and straight edges contrast with the subtle curve of the legs, a transitional reminder of the rococo style.

In the center of the front drawer and in the corresponding position on the back, intertwined ribbons of gilt bronze form the letters *LB*. This monogram could refer to any number of men named Louis in the Bourbon-Condé royal family. Since the initials are a different color metal, however, they may be later additions.

Jean-Henri Riesener

Writing Table (*table à écrire*)

about 1780

0.789 x 0.819 x 0.495 m

(29 7/8 x 32 1/4 x 19 1/2 in.)

Widener Collection
1942.9.409

At a quick glance, this lady's



writing table appears identical to another one in this room, which was originally owned by Queen Marie Antoinette. Both neoclassical desks are the work of Jean-Henri Riesener, who was appointed cabinetmaker to King Louis XVI in 1774. This one is signed underneath with Riesener's stamp.

Each table has a wide writing slide on the front and a single deep drawer on one side. The gilt-bronze spiral ribbings, which cause both tables' legs to shimmer in the light, are so much alike that they must have been cast from the same molds.

Distinction, however, is gained in several ways. Whereas all four sides of the queen's table bear gilded plaques representing cupids, this table is ornamented with scrolling panels of classical acanthus foliage centered on sunflowers. Gilded metal covers all fronts of the queen's table, while here, much of each front is veneer that repeats the diamond or trellis pattern created on the tabletop by parallel, triple stripes of wood.

Jean-Henri Riesener

Writing Table (*table à écrire*)

datable 1784

0.760 x 0.818 x 0.491 m

(29 7/8 x 32 5/8 x 19 1/2 in.)

Widener Collection 1942.9.407

According to Jean-Henri Riesener's account ledger for 28 May 1784, this table was ordered for Queen Marie Antoinette's private apartments in the Tuileries Palace, Paris. Detailed descriptions and measurements, as well as a court inventory number inked underneath the tabletop, confirm its identity. After the French Revolution erupted in 1789, the royal family was held for three years in the Tuileries. Marie Antoinette must have used this piece during that imprisonment before she was guillotined in 1793.

Besides its historical interest, the single-drawer table is a superb example of Riesener's artistry. With great perception, he emphasized the delicate taper of the legs by inlaying panels of darker wood that interrupt the paler surrounding veneer. Flanked by Roman flutings alternating with openwork palmettes, gilded central plaques depict cupids frolicking among clouds while playing musical instruments.



It may not be coincidental that Riesener, the official cabinetmaker to Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, came from Essen, Germany. The French queen, born in Austria, also spoke German. Ironically, the French Revolution did not destroy Riesener's career; he was employed to remove the royal emblems from his own court furniture!



Martin Carlin

French (German-born),
master 1766, died 1785

Work and Writing Table (*table en chiffonnière*)

about 1770

0.738 x 0.796 x 0.461 m

(29 x 31 1/4 x 18 3/8

in.) Widener Collection

1942.9.425

When the writing surface of this lady's table is pulled forward, the top automatically slides back. The gilt-bronze corner ornaments consist of crossed torches and quivers of arrows. These ancient military motifs act here as emblems of love—burning passions and Cupid's darts.

The top is veneered with a neoclassical pattern of checkered squares punctuated by rosettes. Fluted legs taper to a daring slenderness, and the center panels of all four sides drop below the main silhouette. These deep falls appear to defy gravity, adding to the piece's apparent weightlessness.

Martin Carlin, who signed this table, was noted for such elegant proportions. He specialized in ladies' small-scale furniture, which he usually sold ready-made through dealers instead of working on commissions from patrons. Carlin's popularity is indicated in purchases made by Madame du Barry, Marie Antoinette, and the great-aunts of Louis XVI.

Born in Baden, Germany, Carlin had moved to Paris by 1759, when he married a sister of the cabinetmaker Jean-François Oeben. Along with Oeben's other pupils, including Leleu and Riesener, Carlin was among the most fashionable of neoclassical designers.

David Roentgen and/or his Workshop, and Anonymous Nineteenth-Century Craftsmen

German, born 1743, master 1780, died 1807

Writing Table with Mechanical Fittings (*table mécanique or schreibtisch*)

about 1779, rebuilt probably in first half of 1800s

0.767 x 1.430 x 0.755 m (30 1/4 x 56 1/2 x 29 3/8 in.)

Widener Collection 1942.9.416



Detail of top

David Roentgen worked near Frankfurt in his native Germany. Through extensive travels and his showrooms in Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, he supplied furniture to most of Europe's royal courts. Roentgen was famed for pictorial veneer like the *Music Party* on top of this large neoclassical piece. Copying a design by the painter Januarius Ziek (1730–1796), Roentgen reproduced the picture in such detail that the musical scores are legible enough to be performed!

Roentgen's passion for intricate woodwork was matched by his zeal for complicated mechanisms. This desk's drawers automatically unfold into complex storage areas with many secret compartments.

The flat top's *Music Party* may once have been a slanted fall-front panel. In the picture's upper center, a wood plug fills what may have been an original keyhole. The drawer units also have been reinstalled in the present table, whose legs and body are early nineteenth-century substitutions for lost elements of an entirely different piece of furniture.

In 1779, Roentgen had sold to Louis XVI a huge, upright secretary-bookcase, including a clock and musical organ, for the highest price paid by the French crown for furniture during the eighteenth century. King Frederick the Great of Prussia and the duke of Lorraine both commissioned simpler variations of that fantastic piece. The National Gallery's table probably incorporates fragments of yet another version.

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