

Rococo Decorative Arts of the Mid-1700s

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

Reacting against the rigid court etiquette under the seventeenth century's "Sun King," Louis XIV, eighteenth-century French art patrons sought greater informality. A new, more intimate style emerged under Louis XV, great-grandson of the old king. The early phase of the Louis XV style is called the *régence* because from 1715 to 1723 Philippe, duc d'Orléans, ruled as regent for the young king, who was only five years old when he came to the throne.

During the reign of Louis XV (1723–1774), the arts were marked by an intricate grace. Later named rococo, after *rocaille* (shells and pebbles encrusted on garden grottoes), this style used iridescent pastel tints and natural motifs such as flowers, vines, and seashells.

Sinuous, asymmetrical curves pervade the overall shapes of rococo decorative arts. Termed *bombé*, literally meaning "blown out," the forms seem to swell as though gentle gusts of wind have billowed the furniture like airborne sails. Even heavy chests of drawers seem to waft in a breeze.

In an age devoted to gaiety and comfort, the rococo style reached its height of elegance under Madame de Pompadour. A highly educated and brilliant woman, Pompadour dictated fashionable taste from her accession as Louis XV's mistress in 1745 until her death in 1764.



Beauvais Tapestry
The Dream of Rinaldo

dated 1751
Wool and silk, 2.813 x 4.724 m (9 ft. 2 3/4 in. x 15 ft. 6 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.452

Court painter to Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour, François Boucher (1703–1770) supplied a full-scale design or "cartoon" for Beauvais' weavers to follow in creating this large tapestry. Boucher's signature and the date 1751 appear reversed in the lower right corner.

The cartoon was woven three times at Beauvais. Boucher derived the scene from *Armida*, an opera that premiered in 1686 with music by Jean-Baptiste Lully and libretto by Philippe Quinault. The composer and playwright, in turn, based their story on *Jerusalem Delivered*, an epic poem about the Crusades that the Italian author Torquato Tasso had published in 1581.

Rinaldo, a Christian hero, sleeps in the enchanted garden of the sorceress Armida, who sided with the Saracens. Nymphs and cupids—companions of Venus, the classical goddess of love—play amid fluffy rococo foliage watered by a dolphin-shaped fountain, itself a symbol of Venus' birth from the sea. As an indication that the dreaming Rinaldo will awaken from Armida's seductive spell and lead the crusaders to victory, he holds his plumed helmet. (Two Renaissance helmets, lacking their padded linings, are usually on view nearby in gallery Ground North 9.)

(Other tapestries of similar date may sometimes replace this one. To preserve their quality, textiles are periodically removed to rest from the stresses of light and gravity.)



Jean Desforges
French, master before 1739, active until about 1765
Chest of Drawers (commode)

probably 1745/1749
0.837 x 1.470 x 0.610 m (32 3/4 x 57 3/4 x 24 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.408

Panels of black-and-gold lacquer sprinkled with metallic powders (*togidashi*) were removed from Japanese screens or cabinets and applied to this Parisian chest of drawers, the body of which is stained a matching ebony. The Japanese lacquer panels depict gardens and lakes with ladies and fishermen.

Eighteenth-century Europeans used the French term *lachine* to describe their fascination with all things Oriental, including the Chinese porcelains they collected so avidly. Today's word for imported or imitated Japanese and Chinese objects, *chinoiserie*, did not appear in print until 1848.

The commode bears the initial C surmounted by a crown on all its gilt-bronze mounts. This legal mark on metals with a copper content was used only from 1745 to 1749. The oak body is stamped DF, which has been traditionally identified as the mark of Jean Desforges. A recent proposal, now being studied, attributes this chest and the nearby corner cupboards to Joseph Baumhauer, who signed two commodes in the adjacent room. The anonymous DF might then be a dealer or cabinet-maker who sold or repaired the works.



Jean Desforges
*Pair of Corner Cupboards (encoignures):
Scenes of Warriors and Scholars*

probably 1745–1749.
(warriors) 0.972 x 0.813 x 0.600 m (38 3/8 x 31 7/8 x 23 3/8 in.),
(scholars) 0.970 x 0.810 x 0.583 m (38 1/8 x 31 3/4 x 23 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.417–418

French imitations of Oriental lacquer, regardless of which craftsmen made them, are called *vernis Martin* after the Martin brothers, who perfected and patented a varnishing technique in 1730. On this pair of corner cupboards with interior shelves, the rich black luster may have required as many as forty coats of hand-rubbed varnish.

The landscapes contrast the themes of war and peace. On the right-hand cabinet, mounted Chinese soldiers attack a building with a closed gate. On the cabinet to the left, philosophers converse in an open pavilion while hunters return with their quarry.

The paired cabinets were not made as a set with the chest of drawers displayed between them, even though all three pieces bear identical marks on their gilt-bronze mounts and oak bodies. The corner cupboards are taller than the commode, implying that they were designed for a room with wall moldings of a different height. Also, the pair of cupboards have black marble tops that match their French varnish, but the commode's tan marble top contrasts with its dark Japanese lacquer.

Attributed to
Pierre II Migeon
French, born 1701, died 1758

***Lean-to Writing Desk
(table à abattant)***

about 1750
0.767 x 0.717 x 0.433 m
(30 1/4 x 28 1/4 x 17 in.)
Widener Collection
1942.9.424

Arabesques of curling lobes and cusps characterized earlier rococo design. For variety here, the pale tulip-wood veneer of the background is arranged in fan shapes within the dark scrolls of purple-wood. Later, in the mid-eighteenth century, floral patterns would become fashionable.

Somewhat larger than most ladies' desks, this one has steel rods that, when pulled out, support its opened lid as a writing surface. The interior has two tiers of drawers; the lower set, hidden beneath a sliding, false bottom, protected valuables and private papers.

Trained by his father, Pierre II Migeon apparently never officially became a master craftsman, presumably because he was a Calvinist, and guild regulations in Paris prohibited membership by Protestants. Even so, he was a favorite of Madame de Pompadour.

Migeon was a *marchand-ébéniste* (merchant-cabinetmaker), meaning he not only made his own furniture but also acted as a dealer for other artisans. His stamp on this writing desk, therefore, proves only that he sold it and is not conclusive evidence that it is his own work.



Bernard II van
Risamburgh, known as
B.V.R.B.

French, master before 1730, died
1765/1766

***Lean-to Writing Desk
(secrétaire en pente)***

about 1750
0.800 x 0.533 x 0.358 m
(31 1/2 x 21 x 14 1/10 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.419

This lady's diminutive desk has bulging, *bombé* surfaces. Its slanted top folds out on hinged struts that support its writing surface. Below three drawers, a false bottom pushes back, revealing three more tiny drawers. The flowers and vines that ripple across the exterior are repeated on the interior. These patterns are made of dark woods that were end-cut to create a stippled effect and silhouetted against the diagonal grain of pale tulip-wood.

Such floral veneer, making the most of natural wood tones, characterizes the style of Bernard II van Risamburgh, who stenciled his initials, B.V.R.B., underneath this piece. He often used ink stencils on his smaller works, which were too delicate to withstand blows from metal stamp punches.

Specializing in small-scale luxury furniture, Bernard was exceptionally versatile in technique. He used wood marquetry and Oriental lacquer, and is likely to have been the first cabinetmaker to decorate his pieces with plaques of Sèvres porcelain. The second of three generations of Parisian furniture makers of Dutch origin, Bernard II van Risamburgh was among the finest eighteenth-century craftsmen.



Bernard II van Risamburgh,
known as B.V.R.B.

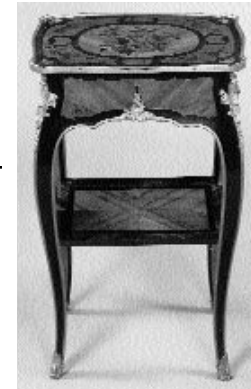
***Work and Writing Table
(table en chiffonnière)***

about 1750/1760
0.668 x 0.420 x 0.320 m
(26 5/16 x 16 1/2 x 12 9/16 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.420

Bernard II van Risamburgh inked his initials on this tiny work table. Maintaining exceptionally high standards, he ran a small studio with only three workbenches. He also perfected the technique of using an end-cut wood that produced the vibrant whorls and textures seen on the floral top here. Louis XV was among the purchasers of his luxury pieces, and a table similar to this one appears in several portraits by François Boucher of the king's mistress, Madame de Pompadour.

This table has been modified. Although the veneer is intact, the interior now holds a deep well for sewing materials. Some of the gilt-bronze mounts may be nineteenth-century replacements, and the tray that stabilizes the slender legs may also be a later addition.

(The foreign names of many craftsmen active in France can be explained, in part, by the country's religious history. In 1598, the Edict of Nantes had protected the French Protestants, or Huguenots, who were mostly merchants and artisans. When Louis XIV revoked the edict in 1685, however, many Huguenots fled. To make up for the shortage of native-born craftsmen, foreigners immigrated to France. These rooms display work by the Dutch-descended van Risamburgh, the Caffiéri of Italian origin, and the German-born Baumhauer, Oeben, Carlin, and Riesener. Conversely, many of the best craftsmen outside France came from refugee Huguenot families, including the colonial Boston silversmith Paul Revere.)



Attributed to Jean-
François Oeben

French (German-born), born
1721, master 1761, died 1763

***Writing and Toilet Table
(table mécanique)***

about 1750/1755
0.726 x 0.777 x 0.440 m
(28 1/2 x 30 3/5 x 17 3/10 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.413

Jean-François Oeben enjoyed phenomenal success in his forty-one-year life. The German-born artist became a protégé of Madame de Pompadour and, through her influence, was appointed court cabinetmaker to Louis XV in 1754. Because of Oeben's royal privileges, he did not even bother to enter a Paris guild until two years before his death.

A highly original and influential master with a large shop of twelve workbenches, Oeben taught Martin

Carlin, Jean-François Leleu, and Jean-Henri Riesener—all of whom are represented by neoclassical works in a nearby gallery (Ground North 14 A). Oeben's daughter, incidentally, was the mother of the romantic painter Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863).

Oeben excelled in figurative veneer such as the still life of musical instruments, berries, and palm fronds on the top of this lady's mechanical table. For such a dainty piece, it contains an astonishing variety of fittings. The front center drawer, for example, is false, but aging has warped the veneer enough to disclose a smaller secret compartment once hidden by the floral patterns. When the table is opened, a pivoting work surface swivels around, with a toilet mirror on one side and a leather writing pad on the other.

Oeben made at least eleven other tables of this type, with differing interior arrangements and rococo motifs. One table bears his stamp along with that of his former pupil Riesener, and two others place Oeben's mark beside that of his brother-in-law Roger Vandercruse (called Lacroix).



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