The Museum has recently received as gifts from Dr. Leopold Heinemann a delightful silhouette of the cabinetmaker David Roentgen and his patron Baron Grimm in the Roentgen establishment at Neuwied and a group of documents relating to Roentgen.

The silhouette was made by Johann Friedrich Anthing, one of the most delicate and distinguished of the German silhouette portraitists, who was born at Gotha in 1753. He studied to become a minister like his father, but at the age of thirty he set forth on his lifelong travels across the length and breadth of northern Europe, cutting silhouettes wherever he went. He lived in Russia from 1784 to 1786 and again from 1791 until his death at St. Petersburg in 1805. In Russia he attached himself to Field Marshal Count Suvarov, whose biography he wrote and whose fall from power he shared in 1797. In 1791 he published at Gotha a rare volume entitled Collection de cent silhouettes de personnes illustres et célébres dessinées d’après les originaux, a copy of which was received by the Museum as part of the bequest of Mary Martin in 1938.

ABOVE: Silhouette of David Roentgen (with pipe) talking to Baron Grimm, by Johann Friedrich Anthing (1733-1805). The figures at the left are Michael Rummer, assistant to Roentgen, and the painter Januarius Zick, who supplied designs for some of the Roentgen furniture. At the right is Grimm’s Russian servant. Gift of Leopold Heinemann, 1948.
The purpose of these pieces with many drawers is made clear in a letter written by Catherine to Baron Grimm about his protégé: “Pour Mr. Roentgen et ses deux cent tiroirs il sont arrivés à bon port et fort à propos pour renfermer la gloutonnerie.” According to Denis Roche this last expression refers to the cameos and intaglios with which she had indulged herself “by armfuls,” absorbing the collections of the Baron de Thiers, the Duke de Choiseul, the Baron de Breteuil, and others.

The second document is a letter of recommendation written for Roentgen by Count Rumiantzeff, the Russian ambassador, and dated Frankfort on the Main, August 28, 1785. It is addressed to Count Ostermann, but, since it remained in the Roentgen family, it was apparently never presented to the count. The letter reads:

Six Mille Roubles. Fait à St. Petersbourg, ce 22 Juin 1789. D:Roentgen”

“The documents were collected in Germany, having come from descendants of the WenckRoentgen family of Herrnhut, referred to in Hans Huth’s biography,¹ and three of them concern Roentgen’s relations with the court of Russia.

During the period 1783 to 1791 Roentgen went almost every year to St. Petersburg with a shipment of furniture for Catherine II and her court. Huth gives the following notes from Roentgen’s bill for Catherine’s order of December 1787: “Deux grands cabinets chacun avec cent tiroirs, dont le prix de chaque pièce . . . dans ma manufacture à Neuwied évalués en Roubles, 8600. . . . Frais de transport assurance, 1400. . . . Les pièces trop précieuses tant par le fini des ornements que par le choix du bois fait exprès pour Sa Majesté Impériale. L’artiste se soumet donc au prix qu’Elle jugera à propos d’y fixer.” One of the Museum’s documents is Roentgen’s receipt acknowledging payment for this order but mentioning three cabinets instead of two:

¹ Abraham und David Roentgen und ihre Neuwieder Möbelwerkstatt (Berlin, 1928).
Marquetry desk inlaid with Chinese subjects, made by David Roentgen between 1775 and 1780, a characteristic example of his fine workmanship and mechanical perfection. Rogers Fund, 1941

parle de l'Imperatrice avec admiration et enthousiasme, qu'il vante Sa générosité, Sa munificence, et ce degré de bonté et de simplicité qu'Elle Seule sait allier avec la véritable grandeur et le génie.

Admirateur zélé de Son Auguste Personne, il l'est encore de Son Empire; et quoiqu'il ne fasse en tout cela que ceder à sa conviction, il me paroit meriter que nous Lui en sçachions quel-que gré, Monsieur le Comte, et c'est pour Lui en témoigner le mien que j'en rend compte a Votre Excellence, et que je recommande Sa personne
à vos bontés et Vôtre protection.
J'ai l'honneur d'être avec respect Monsieur le Comte,
de Vôtre Excellence,
Le très humble et très obéissant Serviteur
Le Comte de Romanzef

The date of the letter places it between Roentgen's first two visits to St. Petersburg, in the spring of 1784 and 1786. Another visit in 1785 is possible but not certain, according to Huth. Roentgen had already made progress in the capital since his first introduction to the empress by Grimm in 1783. But he had need of other protectors, for Catherine could not abide the personality of this Moravian dissenter—this "jesuite de Neuwied," as she called him. "Il m'a déplu de plus d'une côté," she wrote to Grimm. But Roentgen saved himself after all by resorting to flattery. His remark that Russia was "le monde et les autres parties du globe des faubourgs," reported by Grimm, pleased the empress enormously.

Catherine was not always just in her antipathy. After Roentgen's departure in 1784 she wrote to Grimm: "Les gens de l'hermitage ont été délivrés de l'ennui de l'ennui." Among the Museum's documents, however, is a very friendly letter to Roentgen, dated February 5, 1797, from one of these "gens de l'hermitage," Baron von Nicolay, who says: "It is impossible to walk through the Hermitage without being reminded of you at every step."

Roentgen was, however, well paid for his services. Mr. Hans Huth, now Associate Curator of Paintings at the Art Institute in Chicago, has put at our disposal copies of court accounts referring to Catherine's "verbal orders for various furniture," which further attest her generosity. These copies were obtained from the Leningrad authorities in 1926. Later accounts also show that under Catherine's economical successor Paul I much less was paid for furniture made in St. Petersburg. For instance, in 1798 Christian Meyer was ordered to supply a dozen chests of drawers and a dozen card tables for only 4,175 rubles.

Roentgen's monogram on the Museum's desk