LOUIS XVI GILT-BRONZE ORNAMENT

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In the exquisitely worked gilt-bronze furniture mounts of the eighteenth century French sculptors and craftsmen have left behind them incidental evidences of their times, punctuation marks from the book of art and custom. The technical skill and adroitness of the French workman was applied to the making of these fittings, which sometimes served as hinges, drawer pulls, or keyholes but were for the most part pure ornament, essences of trivial adornment. The point of greatest fineness in the creation of these decorations was reached in the reign of Louis XVI. A secretary and commode reputed to be by Jean Henri Riesener, with mounts attributed to Pierre Gouthière, are splendid relics of this period. They show the effect of a complete design, of gilt-bronze superimposed on wood, a composite of prized materials. These two pieces of furniture were made for Marie Antoinette’s château of Saint Cloud and came to the Museum in 1920 as a bequest from William K. Vanderbilt. The Museum also owns a large collection of detached furniture mounts.

The survival of so much gilt-bronze apart from the furniture which it was designed to adorn can be explained in several ways. Perhaps the mounts were salvaged when the furniture was irreparably damaged or destroyed, or they might have been part of a furnisher’s stock which was never used. One survival which it is difficult to explain is the ormolu image of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, possibly intended for the center of a large

Secretary made of ebony, with gilt-bronze mounts attributed to Pierre Gouthière and panels of black and gold lacquer. This secretary and its companion piece, a commode, were probably made by Jean Henri Riesener and were the property of Marie Antoinette, whose cipher is on both. Height 4 feet, 9 inches. French, xvIII century. Bequest of William K. Vanderbilt, 1920
Emblems of royalty fell under a ban at the time of the Revolution, and some of the effects of the Old Regime were withdrawn from the year-long sale at Versailles so that the reminders of the hated royalty could be obliterated. Bureaucratic rigor, uplift, and the new "civisme" entered into a circular regarding the removal of the remaining symbols of tyranny from Paris architecture. It is dated February 17, 1794, from Paré, Minister of the Interior, to the Ministers of Public Works: "... Since you have brought to my attention the observations of an agent of the Inspection Division concerning the survival at different locations on the former palace of the Louvre and elsewhere of such despotic symbols as scepters, hands of justice, fleurs-de-lis, and initial letters that recall the late kings, their wives, and their mistresses, I hasten, citizen administrators, to convey this intelligence to the Temporary Commission of Arts, so that it may give orders for the prompt destruction of the last vestige of this shameful slavery and for the annihilation of any allusion in architectural ornament that could offend republican pride."

Permitting ourselves to break this ordinance, we can admire a gilt-bronze representation of the king and queen with fleurs-de-lis and crown.

The violence of the people's reaction against their former masters could be measured in a thousand ways—by the indignities heaped on the heads of the aristocrats, while they still had heads, by the smashing, burning, and pillaging of their properties, and even by the "vils prix" fetched by their furniture on the market. The trend of depreciation was sharply reversed, however, after the New Order had reduced the skills which had created this gilded cabinetwork. The arts of decoration then suffered a loss from which the art of the ormolu-maker never recovered. As the republican ideal dimmed, the furniture masterpieces of the old monarchy regained value. Irreplaceable as they were, and unique in associations, they became collectors' rarities.

Not all the associations were happy. Louis
Sébastien Mercier, a chronicler with a nascent social conscience, writes of the “ostentation puérile” and the “magnificence surabondante” of the late eighteenth-century décor. When a house is built, so he writes, less than a quarter of the expense has been met; the cabinet-maker, the tapestry-weaver, the painter, the gilder, the sculptor, and so forth, arrive, and the work of this crew goes on “à l’infini.” The ultimate cachet for the establishment is the “Suisse,” a braided lackey, imported evidently from Switzerland, posted at the doors “qui repousse ceux qui ne sont ni dorés ni veloutés” and “ceux dont le mérite fait tout le patrimoine.” Hospitals, public baths, reservoirs must all wait for the embellishment of “six cent hôtels, dont le dedans semble l’ouvrage des Fées.” Honest worth and the public weal are eclipsed and hindered by the pretension of the patrons. That the splendor was not crude seems only slightly to console Mercier for the discrimination and bias of the age.

Just as the trimming of houses absorbed much time and accounted for a good deal of the expense, so gilt-bronze manufacture was a heavy charge in the accounts of furniture-making. Ormolu was the product of a long and meticulous effort in which different categories of workmen participated. The cabinet-maker indicated to the sculptor where the gilt-bronze was to be applied, while reserving to himself the carving and finishing of the wood. The sculptor then produced a model in wax or wood, the founder cast it in metal, and the gilder gilded and finished it. The final process was different if the mount was not to be gilded. In that case it was treated with acid and varnish to resemble gold. Such a shift, occasionally resorted to, saved money, time, and the health of the workmen, for gilding
was often dangerous owing to the gases given off by mercury. This danger is touched upon in Diderot's *Grande Encyclopédie* under *Doreur*: "L'usage du Mercure dans l'or moulu fait que les doreurs sont sujets à être perclus de tous leurs membres ou du moins à éprouver des tremblements causés par l'irritation mercurielle."

In spite of the hazards and demands of this trade, information about the sculptors and makers of ormolu is very scarce. Only rarely was a piece signed before being applied to furniture with invisible nails or screws. In the absence of such marks and of published documentary evidence, it is not possible to assign the greater part to specific makers.

Sometimes when a model was preserved it was possible to duplicate a mount. The same motive is occasionally found on different pieces of furniture. If another version of a detached mount occurs on an existing piece of furniture, the setting of the applied mount may indicate how the other was originally set. One motive illustrated, the lady's hat and the pipes, occurs again on a clock base in the Petit Trianon. It is possible that the Museum's version also came from a clock base.

The formal neoclassic influence on Louis XVI furniture curtailed the area over which rococo gilt-bronze had twined. As the texture of the gilding became finer, motives became more compact and regular. Wreaths and lyres were translated into metal with a classic restraint. Symbols of the seasons and amusements were rendered with a precise grace. These motives and patterns were derived more or less indirectly from collections of ornament prints like Sallember's Cahiers d'Ornemens, Lalonde's *Oeuvres Diverses*, or Delafosse's *Nouvelle Iconologie Historique*.

The *Nouvelle Iconologie* has the following information on the title page: "The New Historic Iconology or Hieroglyphic Attributes having for Subject the Four Seasons, the Four Quarters of the Globe, and the Different Complexions of Men. These Same Attributes Also Depict the Different Nations, their Religions, the Chronological Epochs of History, Ancient as well as Modern; the Virtues, Glories, Fames, the Divers Kinds of Poesies, the Passions, the Different Governments, the Arts and Talents. These Hieroglyphs are composed and arranged in such a manner that they can serve for all kinds of Decoration, and can be applied to Fountains, Frontispieces, Pyramids, Cartouches, Overdoors, Borders, Medallions, Trophies, Vases, Friezes, Lecterns, Tombs, Clocks, etc. Dedicated to the Artists by Jean Charles Delafosse, Architect, Decorator, and Professor of Design." A complete theory of symbols therefore existed and could be applied to architecture, printing, sculpture, and the decorative arts. Many themes, like the lady's hat and musical instruments shown, elude the system and seem mere images of sensory pleasure.

Cherub motives, like monkeys and chinoiserie, were pets in the Louis XV *rocaille* style. These babies are now brought to order and given the attributes of a respectable profession; they are artists, chemists, astrologers, or philosophers. They still frisk, but they frisk with crucibles, sketch pads, and clerical bands. This startling amalgam of frivolity and science is illustrated by the plate in Roubo's *Art du menuisier* showing an infantine crew at work in a furniture-maker's shop.

Flowers are another favorite motive—no longer the luxuriant blooms of Louis XIV or the twining stems of Louis XV but neat, lapi- dary clusters. The bands of flowers illustrated may have been samples or fragments of a garland; the fragility of the flowers is rendered without distortion, with a sensibility as great as that displayed on the Saint Cloud furniture.

The brilliance of the court is reflected in small on the surface of these trimmings. Mercier gives us his observations on Versailles, the life of courts, the popular attitude, and the deportment of courtiers. He drifts among the populace availning itself of the opportunity to view the palace sights. Louis XVI is seen almost as an immortal by his subjects; when the host is raised in the chapel all looks are fixed on the king and no one kneels beside the altar. The uninstructed public babble to each other, "As-tu vu le roi? Oui, il a ri. C'est vrai;
il a ri. Il paraît content. Dame! c'est qu'il a de quoi.” The philosopher critic, taking a turn among the spectacle-loving crowds, regales himself. “Il voit trotter les altesses, les grandes et les eminences pêle-mêle avec les pages et les valets de pied.” He has nothing to ask of the ministers and only knows them by sight. He is tickled by the flourishes, bows, the conspiracy of ritual. The king’s bodyguard, another “Suisse,” arouses him to saturnine interior amusement:


“Tout le monde le salue, personne ne le contredit; sa voix chasse dans la galerie des nuées de comtes, de marquis et de ducs qui fuient devant sa parole. Il renvoie les princes et princesses et ne leur parle que de monosyllables. . . . Ses étrennes montent à cinq cent louis d’or; car on n’oserait offrir a cette main un métal aussi vil que l’argent.”

This was a venal master of formalities, a lobbyist of ceremonies. Ceremony was the idea and reality of French politics. Poms were the preservatives of the stiffly graded hierarchical society which produced them. Efficient administration suffered from them, as democratic governmental procedure today is slowed by the necessity for consulting and representing sections of public opinion. The approach to egalitarianism, the democracy to which Mercier aspired, has brought other art forms, personal, expressive, at best not pompous. The art of the French monarchy before the Revolution was, in spite of the cherubs and flowers, not intimate, nor did it try to be expressive; it was spirituel and highly finished, it was a codification of a formal, graceful, leisurely, and privileged life.

Cupids working in a furniture-maker’s shop, engraving from L’Art du menuisier, by M. Roubo, 1769 (pl. 50)