The Porcelain Furniture

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Among the foremost French eighteenth century art dealers were Simon-Philippe Poirier and his successor Dominique Daguerre, who managed a shop in the Rue Saint-Honoré called À la Couronne d’or. This shop was stocked with the finest objects that French artisans of the period could produce, among them ormolu, porcelains, and furniture. The notion of combining the three elements in porcelain furniture seems to have come from these high-ranking shopkeepers. Poirier first envisaged the use of porcelain plaques for furniture in the mid-1750s.

His discovery did not materially change the shapes of furniture: porcelain plaques were used in place of marquetry, lacquer, or painted panels. Porcelain had the capacity for a wider range of color and finer detail than other surfaces, as well as the unifying quality of a brilliant white ground. It could be shaped into plaques about a quarter of an inch in thickness and with any contour required. The history and nature of Sèvres porcelains are discussed in the article immediately following, but it might be noted here that there existed at the manufactory a large corps of flower painters, whose work is more frequently represented on the furniture plaques than any other category of subject matter. Unlike marquetry woods, these plaques have lost none of

Fig. 1. Bonheur-du-jour, signed by Martin Carlin, about 1775. The green-bordered plaques were decorated by Pierre jeune. Height 31 ¼ inches
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1958

Fig. 2. Green vernis Martin table en chiffonnière by B.V.R.B., about 1765. Height 26 ¾ inches
Section of shop front from 3 Quai Bourbon, Paris, showing porcelain from the gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. Height 13 feet 1 inch  Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1920

ON THE COVER: Rose Pompadour elephant candelabrum vase  Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1958
their brilliant colors, and porcelain furniture has come to us very much as it existed in the eighteenth century.

Among the forty-odd lots of furniture in the sale of the artist François Boucher, which took place in 1771 in the studio he had occupied in the Louvre, there was a single cherry-wood tripod table with a roundel of porcelaine de France, or Sèvres, in the top. This was a modest showing of porcelain-ornamented furniture, but Boucher’s collection was modest, and betrayed the artist’s means and tastes. Porcelain furniture was however always a singular and costly collectors’ item.

The alliance of furniture and porcelain made a strong appeal to women in the eighteenth century. The Duchesse de Mazarin was accessible to its charms and furnished her hôtel on the Quai Malaquais with a sprinkling of small tables and coffers ornamented with Sèvres plaques, five pieces of which appeared in her sale in 1781.

Fig. 3. Pencil, ink, and water-color sketch from a portfolio made for Albert, duke of Sachsen Teschen and later owned by Charles, prince de Ligne. French, about 1785. Height 14 3/4 inches
Gift of Raphael Esmerian, 1959

Fig. 4. Coffer on stand, about 1775. The plaques are attributed to Commelin. Height 37 3/4 inches

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The Duchesse, described in the Mémoires Secrets as “one of the most beautiful of the court ladies, whose love of pleasure hastened her end at an early age,” shared a talent for enjoyment with Marie-Joséphine Laguerre, an artiste who interpreted roles in Gluck’s operas. Mlle Laguerre was protected by the Duc de Bouillon, so infatuated, according to gossip, that he was oblivious of a rival who was his own lackey. Furniture ornamented with Sèvres plaques was part of the opulent nest Mlle Laguerre feathered.

The Comtesse du Barry carried the taste for such furniture to the highest spheres. The inventory for her apartment at Versailles details an incredible assortment of porcelain furniture, including a table, commode, several desks, a clock, barometer, and thermometer.

In reaction, perhaps, Marie-Antoinette seems not to have preferred porcelain furniture above other sorts. The only pieces which indisputably belonged to her were the two commodes delivered for her card room at Fontainebleau in 1786. The single bisquit Sèvres plaques on the fronts and the painted plaques on the sides of each are only incidental to the massive mahogany and gilt bronze decoration of these commodes, now in the Louvre.

The Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna picked up some pieces of porcelain-inlaid furniture when she and her husband, the future Emperor Paul I, paid a visit to Paris in 1782 under the assumed names of the Comte and Comtesse du Nord. While they traveled, the Palace of Pavlovsk was building near Saint Petersburg, and upon returning Maria Feodorovna installed the purchases of porcelain furniture in her own apartment there.

Possibly the most distinguished surviving piece of porcelain furniture is a commode signed by B.V.R.B. in a private collection in Paris. This commode is surfaced with ninety small green-bordered Sévres plaques, framed by curving fillets of gilt bronze. The plaques, most of them bearing the date-letter for 1758, were ordered by Poirier and paid for in 1760. Poirier then sent them to the workshop of Bernard van Risen Burgh, the cabinetmaker concealed behind the mysterious initials B.V.R.B. An inventory drawn in 1779 of the Paris residence of the Condé, the Palais Bourbon, lists “Une commode en porcelaine de Seve vert . . . lesd. mosaïques encadrées en cuivre doré d’or moulu.” Louis-Joseph de Bourbon, prince de Condé, probably visited Poirier in his shop, À la Couronne d’or, and bought the commode which had been constructed of porcelain plaques in Van Risen Burgh’s workshop.

Many of the seventeen pieces of porcelain furniture given to the Museum by the Kress Foundation must have been sold from Poirier’s shop on the Rue Saint-Honoré. At the Museum, they are shown behind a late eighteenth century shop front from the Quai Bourbon, the gift of J. Pierpont Morgan in 1920. The windows of this shop front, which is in the Museum’s galleries of French decorative arts, formerly held Rouen pottery, and more recently part of the Museum’s collection of painted fans. They now display superb decorative Sèvres pieces from the
Kress gift. Passing through the entrance doors, the visitor sees the collection of porcelain furniture exactly as it might have been displayed at the Couronne d’or.

Among the earliest datable pieces are two small tables in vernis Martin (Figure 2), one signed by B.V.R.B., and each provided with two Sèvres plaques, one of which bears the date-letter “K” for 1763, which coincides with a Sèvres factory record of the same year accounting for the sale of 2 plateaux de chiffonier 332/664. Vernis Martin was a term for a complicated varnishing technique sometimes calling for as many as fifteen coats of varnish applied over several coats of pure color, which in turn were laid over as many as twenty coats of white primer. The rubbing down of each layer after application made a final mirrorlike surface much in demand for paneled woodwork as well as furniture. The surface of the two tables has been darkened by a relatively modern coat of varnish. Other examples of green vernis Martin are the cartonnier and table signed by Dubois in the Wallace Collection in London. The Louvre and the J. Paul Getty Museum own similar vernis Martin tables by B.V.R.B., and a marquetry table by this maker bearing a Sèvres plaque with the date-letter for 1760 is in the collection of Sidney J. Lamon, New York.

In the course of two centuries the words bonheur-du-jour have come to designate a lady’s desk with raised partition at the back. Though discovered in a 1770 inventory, this term was not common in the eighteenth century, and the accepted nomenclature for such a desk at the time of its origin was table à gradins or petit bureau de dame à gradins. With the Kress gift came two of these desks (Figure 1), almost a pair, one signed by Martin Carlin. Carlin, who was born in Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany, came to Paris at an early age, where he formed connections with other immigrant cabinetmakers and married the sister of one of the most famous of them, Jean-François Oeben. He was admitted to the guild of master cabinetmakers in 1766, and thenceforth was allowed to sign his works. He lived and worked in the Grande Rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine, in the cabinetmakers’ quarter of Paris, until his death in 1785. His patrons were the great dealers Poirier, Daguerre, and the brothers

Darnault, who bought the creations of his workshop and sold them to the Queen, the Comte de Provence, and Mesdames de France, Louis XV’s daughters, for their Château de Bellevue.

The Museum’s two bonheurs-du-jour are veneered with tulipwood and trimmed with gilt bronze, their backs marquetry with walnut floral sprays on harewood. The low gradin or superstructure contains three small drawers, while the long drawer opens to reveal a green velvet-covered writing panel and a gilded metal container with three partitions for the usual writing equipment: ink bottle, sponge, and sand or powder. Each of these desks is inlaid with seventeen Sèvres plaques. Those on one desk, datemarked for 1768, are signed largely by the flower painter Levé; those on the other bear the date-letter for 1774 and represent the work of Pierre jeune.

Fig. 6. Table en chiffonnière, signed by Martin Carlin, about 1780. Height 29 3/4 inches
A similar desk was in Mme du Barry's apartments at Versailles: "On y voyait aussi une très jolie table à gradins, en porcelaine de France fond vert et cartouches à fleurs, très richement ornée de bronze dorés d'or moulu, le dessus du tiroir couvert d'un velours vert, et les pièces d'écritoire dorées." Item number 30 in the G. Watson Taylor sale at Christie's in 1825 was "A singularly elegant writing table of Tulip Wood, covered with square compartments of the rare old Seve Porcelain, painted with Fruits and Flowers: three small drawers, elevated at the back of the Table, are covered and fronted with the same, a writing slider is covered with green velvet, the stand is pannelled with Seve Porcelain, and the legs are richly mounted with ormoulu." This may have been Mme du Barry's desk, since the preamble to the sale claimed that many of the pieces included "Formerly Adorned the Palace of Versailles and Other Royal Residences in France."

It is unfortunately impossible to determine the provenance of the Museum's desks. As with most pieces in the Kress gift, the château marks and inventory numbers, if there were any, have been obliterated. The two bonheurs-du-jour are not the only ones in existence, however. There are other examples in the Musée Nissim de Camondo, Paris, in the collection of the Duke of Buccleuch, and at Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire.

In the sale of the Duchesse de Mazarin in 1781, appeared "un petit coffre en chiffonnière de bois de placage, composé de treize morceaux de porcelaine de Seve; elle est garnie de bronze et posée sur une table à tiroir à quatre consoles avec sabots; hauteur 36 pouces, largeur 21 pouces." The 1779 inventory of the Palais Bourbon describes another coffer on stand in the Salon de Musique: "Une petite table à écrire avec une caisse à coffrefort au-dessus, le tout de bois de rose satiné, richement fourni de bronze très bien ciselé et doré avec des petits panneaux de porcelaine de Sèvres à fond blanc et bouquets peints en miniature." These two

Fig. 7. Cabinet, signed by Martin Carlin, with plaques decorated by Tandart and Choisy, 1775-1785. Height 36½ inches
Fig. 8. Writing table, signed by Joseph Baumhauer (master cabinetmaker 1767-1772), about 1770. Height 29 3/4 inches.

Pieces are matched by two in the Museum's collection, each of which is set with thirteen Sévres plaques and veneered with tulipwood. Though not signed, they can be attributed to Carlin on stylistic grounds. Their drawers, like those of the bonheurs-du-jour, are equipped with hinged velvet-covered writing panels and gilded metal containers for writing utensils. Jewels or medals were probably originally kept in the coffers above. The backs are not set with porcelain plaques but are marquetried in a latticework design of tulip and harewood. There are fine gilt bronze masks at the knees, and a fringe or lambrequin on the front. A wax impression of an actual piece of trimming may have been taken to make the mold for this mount, duplicates of which appear on other pieces of French eighteenth century furniture. Maria Feodorovna bought a similar coffer on stand which was formerly in the Palace of Pavlovsk. Two other coffers from the Alfred de Rothschild Collection were recently at Versailles; another belongs to Mr. and Mrs. Charles B. Wrightsman of New York. The coffer on stand which features a trophy on its central lambrequin panel merits first mention because it bears eight plaques having the mark of Pierre jeune, along with the date-letters for 1768 and 1770. Four of the remaining five plaques are unsigned, but so clearly reiterate the style of Pierre as to leave no doubt as to their authorship. The single plaque at variance is that on the left side of the drawer. Being dated somewhat later, in 1775, it presumably was added separately to replace a broken original. It carries the mark of the artist Commelin.

The second coffer (Figure 4) has no marks on the porcelain, but by happy coincidence the two came to the Museum together. They were examined jointly and the flower painting of the second resembled in style the single Commelin plaque of the preceding example. Among the peculiarities of Commelin's compositions are a
Fig. 9. Upright secretary, thuya veneer, decorated with Sévres plaque and fifteen Wedgwood medallions, about 1790. Height 51 inches.
general softness of definition; "muddy" leaves, at times edged with spicules; and the tendency to use "flying" rosebuds and scrolling vines to emphasize a clockwise movement in the composition.

Dominique Daguerre, who succeeded Simon-Philippe Poirier at the Couronne d'or in 1778, carried the business on in the manner of his predecessor. He continued to commission porcelain plaques from the Sèvres manufactory which he distributed to the cabinetmakers who worked for him, including Carlin. As part of his sales campaign he apparently sent water-color drawings of his wares to customers who lived too far away to visit his shop. Ten such drawings dating in the 1780s have recently been given to the Museum by Raphael Esmerian, part of a large portfolio of drawings made for Albert, Duke of Sachsen Teschen, and his consort Maria-Christina, a sister of Marie-Antoinette, who were joint governors of the Low Countries from 1780 to 1792. One of the ten drawings (Figure 3) is of a coffer on stand which corresponds in outline almost exactly with the two coffers in the Kress gift. The most plausible explanation for such a close correspondence is that Martin Carlin executed several repetitions of the same piece of furniture which Daguerre bought and offered for sale in his shop. In order to promote sales, the shopkeeper then commissioned an unknown artist to sketch selected pieces, and sent the sketches to prospective clients abroad. If such is the case, the ten drawings may represent actual pieces of furniture that Albert ordered by mail for the palace of Laeken near Brussels.

After their defeat by the French in the battle of Jemappes in 1792, Duke Albert and Maria-Christina were driven from the Low Countries. They took refuge in Germany, and their belongings followed by ship. Not all of them arrived safely, and the fate of the Duke's pretty French furniture can perhaps be read in the somber notes on some of the drawings in the portfolio: "Ces Vases ont péris avec le Vaisseau qui devait les porter en 1792 à Hambourg" and "Une bonne partie de ces Pièces ont péré en Mer Dans le Trajet Hollande Hambourg en 1792."

An upright secretary with four oval green-bordered Sèvres plaques (Figure 5) is a masterpiece of Martin Carlin and bears his mark, faintly discernible under the left rail. The marvelous gilt bronze sheathing of this secretary recalls Duke Albert's furniture drawings and recurs on other furniture signed by Carlin.

The plaques on this piece present a straightforward picture, since they all bear the date-letter "U" for 1773, a year in which the Sèvres records mention plaques sold to Poirier and Daguerre. Three decorators prepared these porcelains: Xhrouet and Bulidon were responsible for the large ovals on the doors and sides, respectively, and Noël for the lesser ones on the skirting. That Noël specialized in painting the smaller tiles may be inferred from this cabinet and several other articles of furniture in this Museum and elsewhere.

Fig. 10. Detail of a furniture drawing made for
Albert of Sachsen Teschen
Gift of Raphael Esmerian, 1959

The most prominent tiles on our piece were executed by Mlle Xhrouet. Her outstanding ability was evidently recognized during the first or second year of her employment at Sèvres, which began in 1772.

A word of explanation is necessary in order to claim this work and, along with it, the mark (which resembles a moline cross) for her. Our example falls within the last three years of her father's service with the factory (he worked from 1750 until 1775); she was employed there until 1788. The checklists of marks, however, while crediting the cross mark to the father, do not record any mark for the daughter. It is therefore encouraging to note that among the Sèvres archives, in Registres des Peintres for 1777-1780 (page 281), there is a listing of the work completed by "Mlle. Xhouet," with the mark of the cross at the top of the page. The undisputed work of M. Xhouet, found on examples predating the
career of his daughter, is by comparison harsh in coloration and coarse in texture. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that “Mlle. Xhrouet” adopted his mark and continued its use during her span at Sèvres.

The over-all correspondence between this secrétaire and one in the Grey Drawing Room of Waddesdon Manor is extraordinary. The porcelain plaque on the left door of our cabinet is so close to the corresponding one at Waddesdon as to leave no doubt that the latter is also by Mlle Xhrouet. These two plaques afford the nearest approach to identical floral compositions that we have seen in the course of several hundred comparisons. Nor would it be surprising if the same hand were to be confirmed by finding the Xhrouet mark on the back of a large round flower-basket plaque on the black lacquer cabinet in the White Drawing Room of Windsor Castle.

Another piece signed by Carlin is a charming straight-legged table en chiffonière (Figure 6), or small writing table, alleged to have come from the Petit Trianon. The legend states that Napoleon subsequently gave it to the Maréchale Lannes, Duchesse de Montebello. Its unmarked oblong Sèvres top painted with a basket of flowers framed by a green oeil-de-perdix border is reminiscent of the work of the flower painter Pierre jeune.

The last piece signed by Carlin is a cabinet with a single large circular plaque (Figure 7), its three shelves backed with mirrors which might have reflected small collections of jades, shells, porcelains, or lacquers. Its central gilt bronze mount of a female mask coiffed with matted leaves and winged with laurel garlands is a marvel of the ciseleur-doreur’s art.

The principal plaque, a grand floral medallion, has what appear to be two decorators’ marks: three dots “…”, and a capital letter “B.” The first of these is assigned in most reference books to Charles Tandart, who worked at Sèvres from 1756 to 1760. These dates are too early to accommodate the style of either the plaque or the furniture. Several objects in the Museum bear this mark in association with later dates; for

Fig. 11. Barometer-thermometer, signed by Claude-Siméon Passement, 1765-1770. Height 40 3/4 inches
example, a *cache-pot* and mustard pot of 1780 and a dinner plate of 1787. While all these pieces agree stylistically with the plaque in question, there is a very special corroboration in the floral detail of the *cache-pot*, where certain blossoms are colored in gradations from green to white to pink, exactly as on the plaque. The original records at Sèvres lead us onto firm ground. In the books of accounts with individual artists, under “Tandart” we find:

(1777) 2 plaques carrées, 1ère Bouquet

Noué d’un Ruban

(1781-83) 1 Plaque Ronde 1ere fleurs

In the second instance, the Tandart name was accompanied by the mark “...”, heretofore credited to Charles Tandart. Mlle Brunet, archivist at Sèvres, very graciously investigated the records taken by Chavagnac from the pay sheets, but could find no indication that Charles Tandart was employed in those years. Therefore we are encouraged to credit this mark to another Tandart, Jean-Baptiste, painter of flowers, who worked there from 1754 until 1803.

The only datemark on any of the porcelains installed here occurs on the two triangular span-drel pieces above the central medallion. It is an “X” for 1775, accompanied by the ermine mark of the painter Choisy. Considering this in connection with the only other fixed date available—the terminal year of Carlin’s life—we find every reason to accept the decade 1775-1785 as the period in which this cabinet was made.

Joseph Baumhauer, another German-born cabinetmaker, signed the writing table with leather top and eight unmarked green-bordered Sèvres plaques (Figure 8). The middle drawer opens by means of a hidden spring, and a key unlocks the side panels, which reveal nests of drawers. After many years in the workshop, Baumhauer was appointed a master cabinetmaker by royal brevet in 1767 with the privilege of affixing a fleur-de-lis before and after the signature of Joseph, a good French name he had chosen. The Museum’s table must date shortly thereafter.

An upright secretary of about 1790 (Figure 9) is perhaps the most sparkling single piece of furniture in the Kress gift. The principal wood is thuya in simple veneer on oak, providing a dark neutral background for a superb Sèvres plaque with pale turquoise *œil-de-perdrix* border, Wedgwood blue and white jasper ware medallions, three blue enameled metal panels, and gilt bronze mounts of unexampled elaboration. In contrast the fitted interior is of exquisitely plain banded satinwood veneer. The shape of the supports, the gilt bronze terminal figures at the sides, and the undulating motif of the front are reminiscent of the work of Adam Weisweiler, another German member of the cabinetmakers’ guild. Weisweiler and Carlin both worked for
the dealer Dominique Daguerre, and the cat's-cradle stretcher of the upright secretary in Weisweiler's style strikingly resembles a stretcher in one of the drawings probably supplied by Daguerre to Albert of Sachsen Teschen. If, indeed, the Museum's desk was produced in Weisweiler's workshop, he had little share in its creation, for the actual cabinetwork is transcended by the decoration of plaques and ormolu which Daguerre must have commissioned. Charles Mills thought so well of this desk that he lent it to the first of the great loan exhibitions, the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857, which has been called "a turning point in the history of art appreciation."

Of the Wedgwood plaques, it was possible to remove only five for study. The remaining ten represent documented subjects after Flaxman, Lady Templeton, and antique gems. The large ovals at the sides with scenes from Domestic Employment bear the factory mark and are from a series first advertised in the Wedgwood catalogue of 1787. They thus impose a terminus post quem for the secrétaire. The painstaking efforts involved in removing the central panel were rewarded by the discovery of painted crossed "L"s, a "Y," and a "B" together with an original price sticker printed with the royal cipher and inscribed "3368." It was especially gratifying to reveal this sticker, as it was the only one to come to light among the Kress porcelains. The painted "Y" seemed to represent the flower painter Bouillat fils, the "B" a collaborating painter or gilder. Although the dates of Bouillat's association with the factory (1785 to 1793) appear to coincide with the age of the piece, a careful search of the Sèvres records did not disclose any plaques painted by him! Instead, Bouillat père, whose mark has not been recorded, emerges in the 1790 accounts as the decorator of large oblong plaques. Herein we have a third instance of a mark being shared by two artists bearing the same surname. One or two entries in the sales accounts seem to point in the direction of our plaque, although none was found with the corroborative price of 336 livres.

A handsome gilt bronze and porcelain clock decorated with military themes (Figure 12) dates from about 1775. A scene of camp life with soldiers drinking from wine barrels appears on one of the unmarked plaques, while the crest consists of a panoply of armor, flags with imaginary bearings, fasces, a quiver with arrows, and a laurel wreath. The clock is provided with a quantième movement: besides the hour hands, one finely worked steel hand points to the day of the week and another indicates the day of the month.

The gilt bronze wall clock and its matching barometer (Figure 11) each set with three Sèvres plaques showing children in the guise of meteorologists, are signed by "Passement OpieN A PArE." Claude-Siméon Passement, or Passemant, was a highly skilled clockmaker, whose fame rested on an astronomical clock at Versailles which he designed, seen by Pierre Patte and described in Monuments Erigés en France à la Gloire de Louis XV, Paris, 1765. This clock was surmounted by an armillary sphere exactly reproducing the Copernican system of the universe. According to Passement's calculations, the planets of this sphere would continue to revolve in their orbits with perfect precision for two or three thousand years. Although the fame due to its accuracy has long since been forgotten, the clock is still to be seen at Versailles.

Other works by Passement at Versailles were a barometer and thermometer in Mme du Barry's apartments: "Enfin, on remarquait encore dans ce cabinet un baromètre et un thermomètre de Passemant, montés très richement en bronzes dorés d'or moulu, et ornés de trois plaques de porcelaine de France, à enfants en miniatures." It is tempting to conclude that the Comtesse's sitting room was furnished with a barometer and thermometer closely resembling the pieces given to the Museum by the Kress Foundation.