New Light on the De Tessé Room

by Jack R. McGregor

The Grand Salon from the Hôtel de Tessé at 1 Quai Voltaire, Paris, was given to the Museum in 1942 by Mrs. Herbert N. Straus. Since its installation in 1954 it has become a favorite of Museum visitors—and justly, for the room is a splendid example of the Louis Seize style. It combines extreme delicacy of carving with a restraint in the use of ornament that gives it a rare quality of composure and grace. Several months ago the room was relighted and repainted, then furnished anew.

The Hôtel, which still stands at the corner of the Rue des Saints-Pères and Quai Voltaire, was completed in 1768 for Marie Charlotte de Béthune-Charost, Comtesse de Tessé, widow of René de Froullai, Comte de Tessé, who had been First Equerry to the King. Upon the death of the Comtesse in 1783 (we know the date because M. Bachaumont in his memoirs speaks of her on September 22 of that year as having died shortly before) it passed into the hands of Abbé Bory, a member of parliament. The Abbé received a life interest in the property—a short one, as it proved, for he died on May 18, 1785. The Hôtel then reverted to the Comte de Tessé, son of the old Comtesse; he sold it on March 31, 1786 to François Gaspard Philippe Petit de Petival for the sum of 265,000 livres—230,000 for the building and 35,000 for the fittings, which included the boiseries.

To ensure that the reinstallation of the De Tessé room would be in keeping with its original appearance it was necessary to make every effort to date it. There was a four-year lapse between 1768 when the building was completed and 1772 when the bill was paid, and this may be accounted for by the time necessary to finish the interior. The possibility is borne out by Louis Sebastian Mercier, who wrote: “When a house is built, less than a quarter of the expense has been met; the carpenters, the tapestry weavers, the painters, the gilders, and so forth, arrive, and the work of this crew goes on à l'infini.” The most logical conclusion, then, would be that the room now in the Museum was originally installed about 1772.

Stylistically, however, certain elements tend to indicate a later date. The putti supporting the central medallions in two of the overdoors of the Grand Salon are derived directly from putti on the overdoors of the Salon du Reception in the Garde Meuble (now Ministère de la Marine) on the Place de la Concorde. This building, though begun in 1755, was not finished till 1775. Pierre Verlet has published accounts paid to the various firms employed there, and these show that those legions of carpenters and gilders to which Mercier refers were much in evidence during the last two years of construction. Since the overdoors in the royal building would almost certainly be the model for ours, the De Tessé reliefs cannot date
much before 1775. Hautecoeur, in *Architecture classique en France*, points out that such a correspondence in overdoors is fairly common; he cites for example the identical overdoors in the houses at 11 and 13 Rue Royale, both dated 1787 and both built by the Letellier firm. (The room from No. 13 is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.)

Adjacent to the Grand Salon in the De Tessé house was a small room called the Seconde Antichambre. Here the plaster reliefs over the doors represent the four seasons, with numerous pudgy putti frolicking among their attributes. The reliefs are identical with a set in the Hôtel Mas- serano, which was not started until 1787.

The room that most resembles ours was formerly in the Hôtel d’Humière in Paris and was recently given to the Museum of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco by Richard S. Rheem. It is smaller than the De Tessé room and depends upon a high concentration of ornament to create an impression of splendor, with Corinthian pilasters giving it an effect of great height, suggesting the grandeur of the era of Louis XIV. The carving of its mirror frames and doors is similar to that of the De Tessé room, and the overdoors are identical with ours. We do not know the exact date of the d’Humière room, but the Hôtel was built originally in 1726 by the architect Claude Mollet and was destroyed in the 1860s when the city planner Haussmann redesigned Paris for Napoleon III. The salon that so strikingly resembles ours was obviously built later than 1726 and must have come into existence during a modernization of the house. There are apparently no records of such a remodeling, but we know

*The Grand Salon from the Hôtel de Tessé*  Gift of Mrs. Herbert N. Straus, 1942
that the Montmorency family acquired the house in 1788, and that would have been a logical time to undertake a renovation.

We may suppose, then, that the De Tessé room was built sometime between 1772 and 1788.

The present lighting of the salon was achieved by installing outside its windows large curved plaster reflectors that extend from floor to ceiling. These replace a flat wall which was a good general reflector but failed to concentrate enough of the concealed artificial light through the windows. Alternate daylight and incandescent bulbs provide a color-balanced light, and spotlights are directed from a high angle through the windows to simulate sunlight streaming in.

A central problem in the reinstallation of the De Tessé room was to select a color similar to what must have been used originally. Colors are very difficult to assess after they have been in existence for nearly two hundred years, especially since water paints not unlike whitewash were used in the eighteenth century. It is also possible that the original colors were fugitive, or that the room may have been scraped or washed down to a clean surface after many repaintings; this happened at Versailles during the time of Louis Philippe, when many rooms were “scraped to the quick” and repainted a gray stone color. (The case is considerably easier with eighteenth-century English rooms, for a vast number of colored drawings by the brothers Adam and others still exist and can always give the key to the general color thinking of the period if not indeed the answer to the specific problem at hand.)

Our physical examination revealed a clear mat white as the earliest coat now on the De Tessé woodwork. It may be argued that this white was merely the ground coat for a later color, but its use is in direct agreement with recent discoveries about the King’s private chambers at Versailles. Henry Racinais in Un Versailles Inconnu, published in 1952, which describes the restoration done since the First World War, reports that many of the rooms were painted a flat white called blanc du Roi over the layer of gesso that covered the carved wood paneling. When color was used it was in the form of vernis Martin, a varnish with color that resembled a present-day enameled surface.

Detail of the boiseries framing a mirror
One of the overdoors in the De Tessé room

Racinais has also published documents, preserved in the Archives Nationales, concerning various specific projects undertaken at Versailles in 1780. One example of many reads: “Appartements du Roy, La Chambre à parquer. The ceiling of this particular room to be repaired [leaking roofs seem to have plagued the King’s private quarters] and the whole room to be repainted.
white, the edges of the paneling to be pulled into line and the kitchen and offices of the Petits Appartements to be repainted. 5,450 livres." More detailed descriptions which read like daily entries and are marked "done" contain such phrases as "la dite galerie peint en blanc," "le tout peint en blanc," "la pièce peint en blanc."

A painter's recipe book published in Paris in 1772 (Watin, *L'Art de faire et d'employer le vernis au l'art du vernisseur*) discusses the use of white in rooms: "The Blanc du roi is so named because it has often been chosen for the King's apartments and it is the most usual where varnish is not wanted. It is very beautiful in its freshness . . . . This Blanc du roi is very lovely, and fine for rooms which are rarely used, but it is quite subject to damage. It is chiefly employed in rooms that have gilding, where the gilded carving and boiseries are emphasized by a background of this beautiful white. This white is the friend of the gold, as the workmen say; that is, it makes the gold brilliant and brings it forward."

Though the matter of taste enters so much into choosing color and endless discussions may take place on the basis of personal preference, it seemed best to follow evidence like that above in repainting the De Tessé room. Consequently, a water-soluble white casein paint was finally chosen. The work was painstakingly done so that none of the gilding would be damaged, and the color is an almost perfect match to that used in the recent restoration at Versailles. The beautifully preserved warm gold of the carving provides, as Watin said it would, perfect highlights for the white.

Eighteenth-century views and inventories indicate that the most fashionable rooms of the time looked rather crowded. A description of a room created for Mme du Barry in 1771 in Louveciennes shows that it contained a clock on the mantel, a table set with porcelains in the middle, a black lacquer commode with a white top, a commode set with Sèvres plaques (both of these with bronze groups on their tops), and an English piano—all this without counting such basic pieces as chairs and sofas. Inventories like this, along with paintings and prints of the period, serve as a starting point in furnishing period rooms.

The size of the De Tessé room calls for a set of furniture large both in scale and number of pieces. Recently the Museum acquired an ideal one: one sofa, two bergères, and four fauteuils. The chairs are by Louis Delanois, whose stamp

*Detail of the boiseries above one of the mirrors*
Detail from a door of the De Tessé room

appears on the underside of the seat rails. Delanois was born in 1730, became a master in his guild in 1761, and died in 1792. He and Jacob, a fellow employee at the Lerouge establishment, along with Séné, were leaders in establishing the Louis Seize style with its characteristic right angles and the classical motifs and details that developed in reaction to the flowering curves and natural detail of the rococo. Delanois was both a notable innovator and a fashionable manufacturer of furniture in the new style; his daybooks in the Archives de la Seine show that he may have made as many as a thousand pieces a year. Although he seldom worked for Louis XVI, his clients included the King of Poland, the Duke of Chartres, Cardinal Rochechouart, and above all Mme du Barry. It was her commission for Louveciennes that established him as one of the masters of the new style. A Moreau drawing of a fete she gave at Louveciennes for the King on December 27, 1771 shows chairs (seen from the back) which are quite close to a set now in the Berlin Museum and dated 1771. The Berlin chairs, like our own in the De Tessé room, have large oval backs, upright and straight, and unbending legs. Delanois's trademark, so to speak, appears in the large-scale ornament that decorates our chairs. It is ornament of great power yet, despite its scale, never crude nor underdeveloped. The two bergères are slightly different in their ornamentation but are of the same general design in the legs and arms.

The sofa of our set is stamped "S. Brizard," the mark of Sulpice Brizard, who was born in 1735, became a master in his guild in 1762, and died after 1798. (He was probably the father of Pierre Brizard, who is represented in our collections by a chair that shows the influence of Jacob.) The sofa has the same ornamentation as the fauteuils and is indistinguishable from them in...
The chandelier in the De Tessé room
Purchase, Morris Loeb Bequest, 1954

detail; its likeness to one stamped “Jacob,” illustrated in Seymour de Ricci’s Le Style Louis XVI, is further proof of the similarity in the designs of different contemporary masters.

It is not unusual for eighteenth-century sets of furniture to include pieces by different makers, and although we have no positive proof that this set was conceived as a whole, its scale and especially the matching and distinctive arms would indicate that it was.

All the upholstered parts of our furniture are easily removable (au chassis). Inventories for certain royal establishments show that the fabrics were often changed for each season of the year; these removable pieces were obviously made to facilitate such changes. The set is now covered with a cream-colored silk of modern French manufacture embroidered with floral motifs from French eighteenth-century designs. As was customary at the time, each design is worked out for a specific piece of furniture and is complete for that piece. We are much indebted to Mr. and Mrs. Charles B. Wrightsman for their help in obtaining such appropriate material and for their generosity in donating it to the Museum. They have also provided new curtains for the De Tessé room, with magnificent borders woven after a design by the Lyon designer Philippe de Lasalle, for the Trianon. Mr. and Mrs. Wrightsman have loaned two important pieces of furniture to enhance the room. The first is a large writing desk by the cabinetmaker J. F. Leleu, whose use of large plain surfaces and uncluttered ornament harmonizes with the decoration of the room. A delicately carved fire screen completes the Wrightsman loan. The screen was made for the royal château of Saint Cloud and bears the Saint Cloud stamp as well as that of its maker, G. Jacob. The fabric on the sliding panel in the screen is an eighteenth-century silk also after

LEFT: A door of the De Tessé room

One of the fauteuils in the De Tessé room
Fletcher Fund, 1957
designs by Philippe de Lasalle. A large chest of drawers, transitional between the Louis Quinze and the Louis Seize styles, made by L. Moreau and a gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, is also displayed in the room; it will be discussed in a future Bulletin article.

The final item of our new furnishings is a set of six wall brackets in the manner of Delafosse, ornamented chiefly with garlands. While the maker is unknown, there can be no doubt of his skill as a worker in bronze nor of his imagination in combining elements in the classical calm of the Louis Seize style. In the Musée Nissim de Camondo in Paris there is a set of four wall brackets very like ours, which bear the stamp of the Garde Meuble as evidence of their royal lineage. The new brackets in the De Tessé room are in perfect harmony with the two fine console tables that were part of Mrs. Straus’s original gift of the room.

Additional information about the Grand Salon of the Hôtel de Tessé may be found in an article by the late Preston Remington, in the Bulletin for February 1943.

*The sofa in the De Tessé room* Fletcher Fund, 1957