A New Attribution of Three Sèvres Vases

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This essay examines anew three eighteenth-century Sèvres vases in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figures 1, 2), tracing the history of their forms and, more significant, reattributing their primary decoration to one of the Sèvres factory’s most important but least documented painters. The vases were part of an important group of eighteenth-century French artworks given to the Museum by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation in 1958. This collection includes seventeen pieces of Sèvres porcelain-mounted furniture and fifty-three other Sèvres objects, mostly vases, all from the collection of Charles Henry Mills, the first lord Hillingdon, who had inherited at least some of them from his father, Charles Mills. The Hillingdon family had sold these pieces in 1936 to an American dealer, who in turn sold them to the Kress Foundation in 1947.1

All three vases are decorated with military scenes of a type found on a number of other vases and wares produced at Sèvres from the 1760s on. Specifically, they are encampment scenes, which appear to have been the specialty of Jean-Baptiste-Étienne Genest, head of the painters’ workshop at Vincennes-Sèvres from 1752 to 1789, and Jean-Louis Morin, active at the factory from 1754 until his death in 1787.2 Although the decoration of the Metropolitan’s vases previously has been ascribed to Morin,3 it is more likely by Genest. As head painter Genest was not required to sign his work, and little documentation survives that clearly defines his production. Nevertheless we can begin to reconstruct Genest’s body of work, and thus differentiate it from that of his colleague Morin, by comparing stylistic characteristics shared by several of the former’s unsigned pieces.

The three vases under consideration all have a bleu nouveau ground. Two form a pair and are of the shape known by the Sèvres factory as either vases à perles or vases à panneaux.4 The vase à perles is characterized by an oval body set on a short stem, a ribbed and cross-handed foot, a stepped shoulder, a tapering neck, and a projecting rim studded with pearls. The main body has gadrooning at the bottom and framed central panels with incurved corners at the top. A framed panel, with a pearl in a roundel above, also defines the neck. The pearl-studded strap handles reach from neck rim to stem, and laurel swags adorn the sides. The cover is decorated with alternating lines of pearls and gadroons and has a plain knob.

Variants of the vase à perles model exist with the same cover topped by a pearled and gadrooned oval knob, as well as a simpler, fluted cover with either the plain or the pearled knob.5 An example in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, lacks the laurel garlands and the pearls on the strap handles,6 and other examples, including the pair discussed here, have an additional square plinth under the foot. The model was made in three sizes.7 The Metropolitan’s vases measure 16 inches in height, which corresponds to the second size. They bear the Sèvres factory’s interlaced Ls in blue but no painter’s marks or date letters.

We may surmise from a pair of dated vases à perles of the third, smallest size at the Wallace Collection, London, that the model probably was introduced in 1766.8 Two vases à perles, probably of the third size, were listed in the January 1767 inventory of the Sèvres factory as having been biscuit-fired.9 Among the new models of 1767 was a first-size vase à perles, the mold and model of which were each valued at 84 livres.10 As of January 1768, two vases of the first size and three of the second size were biscuit-fired and ready to be glazed.11 A new mold and model of the second size appeared among new work for 1768,12 while four vases à perles of the third size were listed as biscuit-fired.13 The term vase à panneaux does not appear in the factory’s inventory; it is known from an 1814 inventory of plaster models14 as well as from inscriptions on two surviving vases.15 Two drawings of the shape also survive, both showing the simple outline of the vase and cover but no handles, gadroons, or pearls. One is inscribed vase panneaux and the other à panneaux.16
The encampment scenes on the fronts of the Metropolitan’s pair of vases à perles depict mid-eighteenth-century French soldiers. The left-hand vase (Figure 3) shows a grenadier in a pale yellow uniform with red trim and a tall bearskin-and-plate helmet. He is toasting a vivandière (a sutler, or civilian provisioner to an army post) dressed in a yellow skirt, white bodice, and blue sleeves, her little girl at her knee. Behind the grenadier an infantryman sleeps at a table. The right-hand vase (Figure 4) depicts a different soldier, perhaps, judging from his circular, crested helmet, a chevau-léger (light cavalryman). He is dressed in a pale yellow uniform with a green jacket and stands talking to another vivandière (dressed in a blue skirt with a puce bodice and pale yellow sleeves), while another infantryman, seated at a table, raises his glass in a toast. The seated infantryman holds a large ceramic tankard or jug in his right hand; on the ground, a little boy plays with a sword. Both scenes take place in front of a sutler’s tent, with other tents and soldiers depicted in the background. They are contained within oval reserves surrounded by two gilded borders. The larger, interior border is tooled to create an alternating pattern of pounced squares against a matte ground, while the narrower, outer gilded border is given a rope-molding pattern. The reserves on the back are decorated with complementary groups of three interlocking wreaths—of roses, cornflowers, and laurel, hanging from lavender bows—of the type perfected by Jean-Baptiste Tandart, who likely painted the reserves on the Metropolitan’s
Figure 4. Detail of vase à perles in Figure 1, right

vases. Gilded rope-molding borders surround the reserves, but the tooling is alternately burnished and striated.

The third of the Metropolitan's vases discussed here (Figure 2) has been identified as a vase à bâtons rompus, the bâtons rompus (broken sticks) referring to the zigzag decoration and complementary handles that characterize the shape. The body is egg-shaped with a fluted shoulder divided by four triglyphs and a beaded neck; the lower portion is cupped by gadrooning, above which is an applied pattern of zigzags and diamonds. A guilloche-pattern pearl collar separates the body from a fluted stem. The handles are attached at the neck rim and just above the gadrooning, their upper portions forming an elongated S-curve. Oak-leaf garlands drape over the middle of the handles and are attached to rings at the bottom of each triglyph. The cover, domed and fluted, is topped with an oak knob. In a slightly later version of the model the zigzag-and-diamond pattern is removed, and a third, even later simplification of the design eliminates the triglyphs and garlands and replaces the complex handles with smaller C-shaped ones.

The vase à bâtons rompus, introduced in 1763, was made in two sizes. Two first-size examples in biscuit were recorded in January 1764 as ready to be glazed and were valued at 72 livres each. In the 1774 inventory
of old stock there was a “vase à Bâtons rompus
Guir[landes] de chêne beau bleu Pers[onnages]” valued
at 600 livres, probably an example of the second
size. The sales ledgers designate this vase only once,
in 1773, when the maréchal de Soubise bought a pair
with blue ground for 600 livres, also probably of the
second size. The Metropolitan’s vase is of the first
size. Like the vases à perles, the vase à bâtons rompus has
neither date letters nor painter’s marks.

The primary reserve of the Metropolitan’s vase à
bâtons rompus is painted with a scene of French
infantrymen, swords drawn after a dispute over cards
(Figure 5). They face off in front of a tent belonging
to a vivandière, at left in a blue skirt and crimson
bodice, who restrains one of the dueling soldiers. He
is dressed in a beige waistcoat and breeches and
cream jacket with orange facings. On the right, a third
soldier, dressed in beige breeches and a blue waistcoat
with a cream jacket and blue facings, restrains the sec-
ond duelist (dressed in pale yellow breeches, cream
waistcoat and jacket, and blue cuffs). A fourth soldier,
in blue breeches, beige leggings and waistcoat, and a
cream jacket with blue collar and cuffs, stands
between the duelists, beseeching them to settle the
dispute. A large blue drum, probably used as a
makeshift table, as well as a wooden bench, playing
cards, and an earthenware jug, seem to have been
upset in a scuffle moments before.

Framing the reserve are two gilded borders, a thin
inner band with zigzag tooling and a larger exterior
band with a pattern of alternating Ts on a pounced
ground. The bottom of the reserve is punctured by
the applied zigzag that features prominently on the
lower portion of the vase. On the back of the vase, a
gilded border with zigzag tooling surrounds a sumptu-
ous bouquet of flowers in a circular reserve. The
gilded flutes and gadroons on the stem and under-
belly are tooled alternately with horizontal hatching
and pouncing.

Close study of the primary decoration on the pair of
vases à perles and on the vase à bâtons rompus leads
toward their reattribution to Genest. The argument
for this new ascription is more convincing for the vases
à perles than for the vase à bâtons rompus, but a strong
case may be made for all three. First, the vases à perles
should be compared stylistically with two unsigned
plaques, both by the same hand: one is at Rosenborg
Castle, Copenhagen (Figure 6), and the other in the
Collection Dragesco-Cramoisan in Paris (Figure 7). The
plaques in Denmark, decorated with soldiers and
children, was presented to Christian VII in 1768, the
same year Genest earned 288 livres in overtime for
painting a plaque representing a military canteen. Factory records indicate that he was also paid
 overtime for painting plaques with soldiers in 1764 (192
livres), 1766 (192 livres), and 1767 (240 livres). Stylistic similarities between the Copenhagen and
Paris plaques suggest that the latter would have gar-
nered its painter a similar price; thus it is likely that
the Paris plaque was painted in 1767.

How do the Copenhagen and Paris plaques com-
pare with the Metropolitan’s vases à perles? The
plaques are characterized by well-executed figures,
carefully drawn with thin, brown outlines, and the use
of stippling and cross-hatching to suggest three-dimensionality. They share a palette of clear, fresh colors, including pale yellow and lilac for clouds. Tree trunks are painted in great detail with a combination of pale washes and thin brushstrokes used to differentiate the textures of the bark. Both plaque compositions show encampments in the near background. These same characteristics appear on the vases à perles: thin outlining and stippling of the figures, faces with the same features, the distinctive painting of the tree bark and leaves, the palette, and well-drawn and developed backgrounds. The styles of painting are so similar, it is likely that Genest painted the vases at about the same time he painted the plaques, in 1767 or 1768. In fact, Genest probably painted a number of such works during this period, including a garniture of two vases étrusques à cartels and a vase à bâtons rompus at the Louvre (Figures 8, 9), a vase étrusque à cartels in the British Royal Collection, and another vase à bâtons rompus at Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire, England.

The front reserve on the Metropolitan’s vase à bâtons rompus (Figure 5) presents a compelling but slightly less evident case for attribution to Genest. The figures are rendered in a freer, sketchier manner than on the plaques and vases à perles, but they are nevertheless well drawn using thin, brown outlining, stippling for shading, and clear, fresh colors. The background figures, too, are of a scale akin to those on the plaques and vases à perles.

One could suggest that these vases are simply unsigned examples of Morin’s work, but close scrutiny of Morin’s signed pieces with similar subject matter...
reveals such a markedly lower level of proficiency than in the works described above that they could not be by the same hand. Take, for example, a *vase à bâtons rompus* at Waddesdon Manor, dated 1766 and marked by Morin. It shows a group of soldiers sitting around a table, one of them pulling or being pulled by a *vivandière* on the right (Figure 10). The type of encampment scene points to source material similar to that used by Genest, but here the figures are considerably less well drawn; one is struck by the awkward way the head of the standing soldier sits on his body, the cursory rendering of the *vivandière*, the pudgy facial types, the poorly drawn hands, and the lack of stippling and subtle shading. These same execution problems are found on a pair of *vases ferrés* in the Wallace Collection, London, marked Morin and dated 1767 (Figure 11). The most telling comparison, however, may be with a *vase à bâtons rompus* in the British Royal Collection, dated 1764 and decorated with the same scene as on the Metropolitan’s vase. The qualities and styles of painting are distinct, indicating a different hand at work. The overall execution of the Royal Collection piece lacks the subtlety of the Metropolitan’s vase: the brown outlining is pronounced but only hints at facial features, the hands are clumsily rendered, and the distant background is barely indicated. Geoffrey de Bellaigue has attributed this vase to Morin based on comparison with companion *vases ferrés* in the Royal Collection that were marked by the artist.
We know of other examples of Sèvres porcelain that are comparable in style of painting to the Metropolitan's *vase à bâtons rompus*, including another plaque depicting soldiers (Figure 12). This plaque, mounted on a 1780s *bonheur-du-jour*, was auctioned by Christie's, in New York, in 1997. The scale of its figures is close to that of the Metropolitan’s vase, making the comparison particularly useful. What is truly striking is the similarity of facial types, especially the ruddy complexions and the triangular-shaped faces of the soldiers. Although they are a bit sketchier, the faces of the soldiers trying to mediate the fight on the Metropolitan’s vase also resemble that of the soldier leaning on the fence in the background of the Paris plaque (Figure 13).

The painted reserve of the Metropolitan’s *vase à bâtons rompus* bears a striking resemblance to those on a *vase Boileau* dated 1758 and its two companion *vases à oreilles* in the Wallace Collection (Figures 14, 15).
Again, there is a marked similarity in the soldiers' faces and in the manner in which stippling is used to create three-dimensionality. As on the Christie's plaque and the Metropolitan's *vase à bâtons rompus*, the figures are well drawn, though not as finely rendered as those on the later Copenhagen and Paris plaques. Rosalind Savid attributes the three Wallace Collection vases to Morin; however, they are certainly more competently painted than two *vases hollandais nouveaux ovales* in the British Museum, dated only one year later and marked Morin. Are these, too, by the unacknowledged hand of Genest?

A *vase Hebert* in the Wallace Collection and its companion *vase à tête d'éléphant*, now at Waddesdon Manor, may also have been painted by Genest, about 1760. The painting on the *vase Hebert* is of fine quality and is perhaps just slightly more carefully rendered than the earlier *vase Boileau*: the stippling is clear and careful, and the facial types are very close to those on the *vase Boileau*, though not quite as sketchily painted. If in fact Genest also painted the Wallace Collection *vase Boileau* and *vases à oreilles* in 1758 (ten years earlier than the Copenhagen and Paris plaques), followed by the *vase Hebert* and *vase à tête d'éléphant* a couple of years later, he did so at different moments during the evolution of his personal style. Using this proposed chronology, we can suggest that the Metropolitan’s *vase à bâtons rompus* was painted by Genest about 1764, the same year the model of the vase was first produced. We can then date the Christie's plaque to about the same time and, taking our proposition one step further, link it to the payment of 192 livres to Genest in 1764 for *Un tableau du S. Genest en Soldats*. The painting on the vase Hebert is of fine quality and is well drawn, though not as finely rendered as those on the later Copenhagen and Paris plaques. Rosalind Sav-ill attributes the three Wallace Collection vases to Morin; however, they are certainly more competently painted than two *vases hollandais nouveaux ovales* in the British Museum, dated only one year later and marked Morin. Are these, too, by the unacknowledged hand of Genest?

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NOTES


2. For information on Genest, see Rosalind Savill, The Wallace Collection Catalogue of Sevres Porcelain (London, 1988), vol. 3, pp. 1035–37; for Morin, see ibid., pp. 1051–52. Charles-Nicolas Dodin is known to have painted encampment scenes as well. See a goblet litron et soucoupe in the Wallace Collection, London (C352); Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 2, pp. 512–15.


4. For a full examination of this model, see Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 1, pp. 316–33, from which the discussion here is derived. Vase à perles is the primary name used by the factory for this model and thus will be employed in this essay.

5. Ibid., p. 316.

6. Ibid., p. 332 n. 31.

7. According to Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 1, p. 316, the sizes are as follows: first size h. without plinth, 18⅜–18⅜ in. (47.3–47.6 cm), with plinth, 19–20⅛ in. (48.2–51.4 cm); second size h. without plinth but with a gilt-bronze stand 17⅜ in. (44 cm), with plinth 16–17⅜ in. (40.6–45 cm); third size h. 11–13¾ in. (28.3–33.3 cm).


9. Manufacture Nationale de Sévres, Archives (hereafter AMNS), I.7, January 1, 1767, pièces en biscuits prêtes à être mises en couverte, valued at 48 livres. This is the same value placed on biscuit-fired vases of the third size in 1769 (see note 13 below), suggesting that these, too, were of the third size. The third, or smallest, size was the first to be introduced, in 1766 (see Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 1, p. 316). That the surviving dated pair from 1766 is of the third size lends credence to this suggestion.

10. Ibid., January 1, 1768, travail de l'année 1767, moules et modèles.

11. AMNS, pièces en biscuits prêtes à être mises en couverte, 84 livres for the first size and 54 livres for the second size.

12. Ibid., January 1, 1769, travail de l'année 1768, moules et modèles, each 72 livres.

13. Ibid., pièces en biscuit, 48 livres each, the same value for the third size as listed in the 1767 inventory. It is unclear why a new mold and model were introduced this year.

14. Ibid., 1814 Inventaire de Brongnart, vol. 1, 1749–80, no. 135, vase Panneau i re 2me 3me gr (see Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 1, p. 316; Albert Troude, Choix de modèles de la Manufacture Nationale de porcelaines de Sévres appartenant au Musée céramique [Paris, 1897], pl. 111).


17. The identification of the soldiers is based on Metropolitan Museum, Kress, p. 215, and on correspondence with Peter Harrington, curator of the Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University, Providence, who commented that many regiments of infantrymen wore red or blue facings, thus making a specific identification impossible. Similarly, virtually all French dragoon regiments of the period wore green tunics with either red or buff facings, making an identification of the soldier on the second vase equally impossible.

18. The reserve on the left vase has roses on the left, cornflowers on the right, and laurel at the bottom; on the right vase the cornflowers are on the left and the roses on the right. This arrangement underscores the fact that the vases were meant to be paired. For a biography of Tandart, see Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 3, pp. 1070–71.

19. Dauterman’s attribution of the wreaths to Tandart is based on a comparison of the artist’s marked pieces (Metropolitan Museum, Kress, p. 215).

20. Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 1, p. 245. See Geoffrey de Belbaigue, Sévres Porcelain from the Royal Collection, exh. cat., The Queen’s Gallery, London (London, 1979), pp. 109–10, no. 114, for the initial identification of the model. For a fuller discussion, see Savill, Wallace Collection Sévres, vol. 1, pp. 245–53. In the following discussion I am indebted to the work of both of these authors.


22. Ibid. First size, h. 17 ⅜–18 ⅝ in. (45.3–48 cm); second size, h. 14 ⅜–15⅜ in. (37.9–39.3 cm). See AMNS, I.7, January 1, 1764, travail de l’année 1763, moules et modèles, first size 60 livres, second size 48 livres.


25. The zigzag-and-diamond bands here illustrate the standard way in which the zigzag intersects the reserved on most vases à bâtons rompus. However, on an example in the British Royal Collection (Guy Francis Laking, Sévres Porcelain of Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle [London, 1907], vol. 1, no. 51), the reserve seems to be dented by the zigzag instead of pierced by it. In an unpublished catalogue entry kindly provided to the author, Geoffrey de Belbaigue postulates that, because this vase dates from 1764, the first year of the model’s production, it reflects the factory’s initial attempt to reconcile the zigzag with the shape of the painted reserve. Eventually the factory decided it was easier to eliminate this relief pattern altogether, allowing the reserve to take center stage.


27. AMNS, Vv’ 4, fol. 158, Tableau de Soldats, 960 livres. See also F10, overtime for Genest, Tableau représentant une Cantine.


30. Savill, Sévres Porcelain, vol. 1, pl. 21, no. 61-A.

32. Ibid., no. 69, pp. 190–93.
35. Correspondence with the author. See Bellaigue, Sèvres Porcelain from the Royal Collection, pp. 67–68, no. 62. Bellaigue notes that the same scenes appear on several other sets of vases. These vases are not in Laking.
36. Christie’s, New York, Arts of France (October 21, 1997), lot 238; formerly in the Dodge Collection, sold Christie’s, London (June 24, 1971), lot 78; Christie’s house sale (September 27–29, 1971), lot 112.
37. The scale of the figures on the vases à perles is somewhat larger than on the plaque because of the vertical format of the vases’ reserves and because there are fewer figures. This difference also allows for a greater level of detail.
39. The wispy bark characteristic of Genest is found on one of the vases à oreilles (see Figure 15).
41. C255. See Savill, Wallace Collection Sèvres, vol. 1, pp. 187–90; Erik-sen, Waddesdon Manor, pp. 126–27, no. 143. These were probably part of a garniture of five vases and pots-pourris bought by Louis XV in December 1760 (AMNS, V’y 3, fol. 43v).
42. AMNS, F 7, travaux aux pièces hors de la mfr.
43. See Savill, Wallace Collection Sèvres, vol. 3, pp. 1035–37, for Genest’s biography and his activity at Sèvres.
44. A survey of the Sèvres literature reveals no engraved sources have yet been cited for this type of encampment scene. In correspondence with the author, Geoffrey de Bellaigue has commented that he doubts there are engraved sources. Peter Harrington has also noted in correspondence that he knows of no matching military engravings for the scenes on the Metropolitan’s vases.
46. For Morin, see Savill, Wallace Collection Sèvres, vol. 3, pp. 1051–52.
50. See note 31 above.
51. See note 34 above; Charles Davis, A Description of the Works of Art Forming the Collection of Alfred de Rothschild (London, 1884), vol. 2, no. 87. In correspondence with the author, Geoffrey de Bellaigue notes the same scene on a pot-pourri myrte in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.
52. See note 31 above.