

# The Impact of German Cabinetmakers on the Evolution of French Furniture Design in the 18th Century

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## ABSTRACT:

In the mid-18th century, a large number of German cabinetmakers immigrated to Paris, fleeing poor political, economic, and social conditions in Germany, and settled in the European metropolis of art. Few historical studies have examined the particular role that these German cabinetmakers played in furniture design at the time. Therefore, our research aims to investigate the influence of German cabinetmakers on the spirit of French furniture design, focusing on the innovations of the protagonist Jean-François Oeben and analyzing his mechanical furniture masterpieces. Our methodology is based on a historical approach that deals with the migration and integration of German cabinetmakers into the Parisian luxury market, the French court's infatuation, and the perception of society's elite for small, mechanical, and transformable furniture with the highlighting of Oeben's bibliography and career. The methodology is also based on the detailed analytical description of Oeben's furniture with ingenious mechanisms, which were his specialty. The research shows that some of the German cabinetmakers active in Paris in the middle of the century, through their experience and qualifications, influenced the world of furniture on several levels: new types of furniture demanded by a wealthy clientele, the intrusion of new rare and luxurious materials in decoration as well as the invention of sophisticated mechanisms, The German cabinetmaker Jean-François or (Johann Franz) Oeben is a key figure in French cabinetmaking in the 18th century and is the creator of mechanical furniture in France : multiple, convertible, and multifunctional. Oeben's mechanical furniture reveals symbolic meanings: intimacy, individualism, and luxury. Oeben furniture is a combination of beauty and function.

## Introduction

In the 18th century, Paris was the artistic metropolis of Europe as well as the commercial center of luxury goods. The patronage of art, the promotion of manufactures, and the import of foreign know-how ensured its supremacy as a center of artistic creation and fashion (Schefzyk, 2018). The remarkable prosperity of the kingdom, its internal tranquility, its monetary stability, its well-organized social classes, and the organization of the crafts, with its guilds favor the realization of works of great quality. (Mouquin, 2003). A center of attraction for artists from all over Europe and especially from neighboring countries, a large number of German cabinetmakers settled in Paris. Through their skill, quality, and desire to succeed, they developed a professional activity that profoundly influenced the design of Parisian furniture in the 18th century (Hans, 2013). German cabinetmakers were always privileged by the king. They had a paramount impact in the world of cabinetmaking at that time, through the creation of ingenious types of furniture, the use of new materials, and the invention of complex mechanisms. (Kjellberg, 2011) Because of the abundance of these cabinetmakers in Paris and their enormous production, the research focuses on the mechanical furniture of the only protagonist Jean-François or (Johann Franz) Oeben. Born and trained in Germany, the cabinetmaker Oeben was in Paris between 1742-1745. With his skilled workmanship, extraordinary aesthetics, mechanical skills, and technical ingenuity, Oeben was one of the immortal cabinetmakers of the 18th century (Stratmann-Döhler, 2002). He received the title of cabinetmaker-mechanic of the King for his inventions in 1760. Oeben has designed a typology of furniture with complex mechanisms decorated with magnificent marquetry. His influence is unlimited on his students and contemporary collaborators (Ramond, 2000).

The research, therefore, aims to study the impact of the migration of German cabinetmakers on the spirit of furniture design and its market in Paris in the eighteenth century, to focus on the impact of the German cabinetmaker Jean-François Oeben on the

evolution of furniture design in France in the 18th century , to analyze some masterpieces of his mechanical furniture Provide a general view of other German and cabinetmakers from different professional perspectives influencing the Parisian furniture market. Our objectives limits will be Some masterpieces of the German cabinetmaker Jean-François Oeben. The research methodology is based on a historical approach: dealing with the role of the city of Paris as a European artistic metropolis. The reasons for the migration of German cabinetmakers to Paris and their integration into the Parisian craft society. The needs of the royal court and the aristocracy formed the taste of the time in the 18th century. And also a descriptive-analytical approach: through a detailed description and in-depth analysis of the main mechanical furniture creations of Jean-François Oeben.

## 1. Historical context

### 1.1. The art and supremacy of Paris in the 18th century

Paris was a pole of attraction for European cabinetmakers in the 18th century, thanks to its cultural, social, and economic conditions. It offered a huge furniture market for the court, the aristocracy, and the new rich, ready to spend their fortune on luxury furniture, ready to spend their fortune on luxury furniture. The change in fashion and the trend for intimate rooms in small apartments favored the growing production of furniture. The Marquise de Pompadour was in the center of the circle, protecting the geniuses of German cabinetmakers.

### 1.2. The reasons for the migration of German cabinetmakers and their integration into Paris

In Germany, the craftsmen lived in small cantons which did not have a prosperous economy and few customers were wealthy. There were fewer job opportunities for cabinetmakers. The power of the craft guilds prevented even skilled craftsmen from working freely for the princes. Migration to set up in Paris, an important luxury market, was the ideal choice for German cabinetmakers. They fled from the wars and the terrible economic conditions. They, therefore, settled in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the production center of Parisian furniture. It was a center of craftsmanship that attracted both French and foreigners. It thus offered German cabinetmakers the opportunity to work outside the guild, frequent the royal construction sites, concentrate on cabinetmaking production in the 18th century, develop the Parisian market, and embody French taste. (Schefzyk, 2018)

### 1.3. The rise of German cabinetmakers to the title of "king's cabinetmaker"

Through the intermediary of German cabinetmakers, some of the German cabinetmaking traditions were certainly transferred to Paris, as these migrants had brought with them their crafts, experiences, and skills. Consequently, German cabinetmakers were among the king's favored craftsmen during the second half of the Enlightenment century. Three-quarters of the foreign cabinetmakers, who received the title of "King's cabinetmaker", were German: Oeben (1721-1763), Riesener (1734-1806) et Beneman (†1811).

## 2. The main cabinetmakers active in the 18th century in Paris

Three professional perspectives were presented to the German cabinetmakers in Paris: working in royal yards like Jean-François or (Johann Franz) Oeben, or for *marchands-merciers* like Martin Carlin, or working on their account like Mathieu-Guillaume Cramer. Due to the exceptional quality of their furniture, these three cabinetmakers have made a notable evolution in the spirit of furniture design in 18th century Paris.

**2.1 The first case: Jean-François Oeben:** from a simple immigrant laborer, Oeben's skilled work allowed him to ascend to the title of cabinetmaker-mechanic to the king. He designed admirable mechanical furniture, nowadays kept in the most famous museums of the world. Fig (1). (Getty Museum Collection)



Fig (1) Jean-François Oeben, Mechanical Table, ca. 1755. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**2.2. The second case: Martin Carlin:** Most German cabinetmakers started their trade as free workers but did not have the privilege to work in the royal workshops afterward. Also, they no longer had the sales rights, so they continued their trade to produce furniture in the faubourg-Sainte-Antoine in subcontracting for a *marchand-ébéniste* or a *marchand-mercier*, even after obtaining their mastery. This was the case with Martin Carlin. (Pradere,1997) The *marchands-merciers* provided him with luxurious inlay materials, inaccessible to an ordinary cabinetmaker, of which Sèvres porcelain was an essential element, with oriental lacquer and hard stone mosaic. (Kjellberg,2008) Thereafter, these *marchands-merciers* sold his furniture to a prestigious clientele: Madame du Barry, Madame de Pompadour, or other Mesdames of France. Carlin produced mainly small feminine furniture, light, structured and rich: small tables, *bonheurs-du-jour*, pedestal tables, desks, or jewelry boxes with ebony, amaranth, and rosewood finishes in a transitional style. His furniture was very successful, especially his jewelry boxes. Fig (2) shows an example of a writing table topped with a jewelry box. (Meyer,2002) The merchant Poirier supplied the cabinetmaker Carlin with thirteen porcelain plates that underline the structure - on the top and three sides, the fourth having a simple marquetry decoration of latticework. The legs are arched and each element of the furniture is highlighted with gilded bronzes including the fringe pattern. This type of furniture reflects the social needs of the wealthy class in the 18th century. His furniture of reduced size aims to achieve the intimacy and comfort sought by the elite. After twenty years of work, Carlin left a successful workshop, which was taken over by Schneider, his former collaborator, and he is considered one of the most



Fig (2) Martin Carlin. A jewelry box of Marie Antoinette with Sèvres porcelain plates, decorated with bouquets in a green and gold border with pearls and sticks. 1770. Palace of Versailles.

emblematic cabinetmakers of the 18th century. (Baulez, 2002)

**2.3. The third case: Mathieu-Guillaume Cramer:** He was an ideal member of the German community in Paris, but unlike Carlin or Oeben, Cramer had a very different career. At first, he worked as a subcontractor for other cabinetmakers. After a few years, he worked on his own as a cabinetmaker and sold his furniture himself. He had the chance to get close to the wealthy customers of Paris. He managed to have a store and to choose his customers. Having close relations with Oeben and Carlin, his production was less luxurious than theirs. Most of the

furniture was simple inlaid work decorated with bronzes and adorned with marble. Fig(3 ) a transitional cylinder desk by the cabinetmaker Cramer with very clever lines, partially curved, and a more neoclassical look. The cylindrical lid is made of slats that are folded on a belt with a box and stacked side drawers marked with bronze bars. The laurel and rose ornaments are characteristic of the Louis XVI style. On the other hand, the slightly arched foot which ends with a hoof decorated with acanthus retains without exaggeration the impact of Louis XV. (Les ébénistes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,2020)

In our research, we will focus our attention on the Parisian career of the famous cabinetmaker Jean-François Oeben, since he worked for the royal court, with great freedom enjoying all the means that allowed him to improve. (Camer Mathieu-Guillaume n.d)



Fig (3) Cramer. Cylinder desk of the "king of Sardinia". 1775. Oak frame, rosewood and amaranth veneer, gilt bronze. Museum of the Louvre. Paris.

### 3. The value of Jean-François Oeben in the world of French cabinetmaking

He is a major figure who changed the typology of furniture and its appearance during the second half of the 18th century. Appreciated by Madame de Pompadour, Jean-François Oeben obtained the title of cabinetmaker to the king. (Jean François Oeben,2021)

#### 3.1. Bibliography of Jean-François Oeben (1721-1763)

This German cabinetmaker had a particular reputation in the 18th century. He arrived in Paris after versatile studies in the field of cabinetmaking, wood carving, locksmithing, and also mechanics. Privileged by the court and the elite of society, he frequented the greatest royal sites: the Louvre, the Manufacture des Gobelins, and the pavilion of the Arsenal. Head of a large workshop, he executed multiple orders for the nobility, the royal court, the king, and his favorite Mme de Pompadour. After his death, Jean-Henri Riesener, his pupil, completed the King's desk and took over his workshop by adopting the "Louis XVI" style. (Une table mécanique par Jean-François Oeben,2015)

#### 3.2. The Style of Oeben and his major contributions to cabinet making

Oeben's versatility as a designer of forms, drawings, and talented mechanic explains his

exceptional career. His masterpieces begin with the late Louis XV style. Different from the Rocaille, they passed from the Transition style and the early neo-classicism that inspired a whole generation of cabinetmakers. His talent as a cabinetmaker was coupled with technical ingenuity: he created furniture with sophisticated mechanisms to secretly hide drawers.

## 4. General view on Oeben furniture

### 4.1. General characteristics

- Main representative of the evolution of furniture at the time, Oeben's furniture was the most remarkable, quite simple but of great elegance.
- His works created a vogue not only for the perfection of his technique but for their originality.
- He was able to change the layout of the furniture, conceal them in new forms and also adapt them to use. In their design, he multiplied the drawers and the mobile parts to guarantee secret places. Skilled in forging, he handcrafted the locks and springs.
- The bronze ornaments are reduced to a minimum, highlighting the elegant colored marquetry with checkerboard or cubes. (Jean\_francois\_oeben,nd)

### 4.2. The manner of Jean-François Oeben

Two elements mark the furniture of the cabinetmaker: the mechanical furniture, called "furniture of complication" and his marquetry. (Brière,2019)

#### 4.2.1. Oeben and the ingenuity of his mechanical furniture

Remarkable for his qualified works, he shaped the cogs. Knowing that the mechanical part was a German specialty, Oeben was the creator of many mechanical furniture. A true furniture magician, Oeben has developed mechanisms that can slide a shelf, open drawers, and reveal secret niches. These pieces of furniture with transformation, "with surprise", occupy a capital place in his work. It is about reading tables, table "à la Bourgogne", shaving tables, the famous "Bureau du Roi" or the cylinder desk of Louis XV, and finally furniture with multiple uses. (Kjelleberg,1980)

#### 4.2.2. Oeben and marquetry

For their technical perfection, decorative qualities, virtuosity, and precision, his marquetry works were very distinguished in the 18th century. At first, he preferred floral marquetry inspired by Boullé on late Louis XV

furniture, but later he moved on to geometric motifs that appear on his furniture: cubes and circles that intertwine and define his style.

**Floral marquetry:** Floral compositions are one of the distinctive features of the cabinetmaker and he kept this style of decoration up to date. Arranged in large bouquets, baskets, or twigs, they stand out in light tones designed of luxurious wood with a dark background of satinwood. His designs were precise, supple and legible. Framed by amaranth leaves, they are sinuous on the Louis XV style furniture and are linear or intertwined in Greek” *à la grecque* “on the Transition style furniture. They are surrounded by a pair of ebony and boxwood fillets. By its beauty and great finesse, Oeben’s marqueterie competes with painting, which will be imitated by his successors of the Louis XVI reign as Riesener and Roentgen.

**Marquetry with geometric patterns:** Stricter, more adapted to neoclassical tendencies, geometric patterns are frequently used. Sometimes they coexist with floral marquetry, which adorned the furniture of the Transition style. The network of interlaced circles is the most characteristic of Oeben's style. (Kjellberg, 2008)

## 5. Oeben and the creation of mechanical furniture: motives and consequences

### 5.1. The European craze for mechanical furniture in the 18th century

Mechanical furniture was born in Germany. The French 18th century was characterized by a strong passion for science and major advances in clock-making and automatons, which favored the appearance of mechanical furniture. This century marked the beginning of the history of convertible furniture and these mechanisms were very ingenious at the time. (Mobilier Mécanique Du XVIII<sup>e</sup>siècle,2019)

### 5.2 Oeben and the invention of the first mechanical furniture

Thanks to his ingenuity, Oeben was the king's cabinetmaker. He benefited enjoyed the privileged working conditions that allowed him to excel and work with great freedom: whether it was the wood used in the frame of the furniture or the metals essential to realize the mechanisms. He presented for the first time at the court of Paris, during the years 1750-1760, a very original type of furniture: mechanical furniture. Mechanical tables were the first to appear. As he progressed, he invented other more

complex furniture. The table” *à la Bourgogne*” was his great invention for the grandson of King Louis XV who suffered from a motor handicap. Oeben deserved the title of "cabinetmaker-mechanic" which he received thanks to his inventions. Throughout the history of cabinetmaking in France, the title of "cabinetmaker-mechanic" has been awarded to two cabinetmakers: Oeben and his successor David Röntgen.

### 5.3. The criteria of mechanical furniture in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

- Meets many requirements: ergonomics, space-saving, versatility, and practical functionality. (Le meuble convertible et son histoire,nd )
- To ensure the privacy of the owner.
- To carry out its transformation without external assistance. (Mobilier mécanique du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, 2019)

### 5.4. Conditions favoring the success of the creation of small mechanical furniture

- The reign of King Louis XV is that of specialization and fantasy, these tendencies concern particularly the small pieces of furniture.
- The writing, the toilet, or the play constitute three essential occupations of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which favored the appearance of furniture of a type if not entirely new, at least largely renewed.
- Innumerable, light, elegant, lightly loaded bronze, they are sometimes designed for specific uses but but very often serve many others. (Kjellberg, 2011)

- Small flying furniture, used to furnish private apartments, is multiplying. The cabinetmakers compete with ingenuity to have mechanisms that make their works always more useful and convenient, without removing anything with their beauty or with their elegance. (Mouquin ,2003)

### 5.5. Oeben Mechanical Tables and Taste of the Time

- The mechanical tables which make him famous, are multifunctional, both writing- and reading-tables and toilet tables

- The writing tables, reduction of the flat desk, decorate all the interiors, even the simplest.

- Oeben is the inventor of this piece of furniture that appeared in the years 1750-1755 with supple and elegant lines with rigorously designed marquetry, very characteristic of his manner.

- This type of table was adopted by other cabinetmakers, but it is to Jean-François Oeben that we owe the most beautiful examples (Kjelleberg ,1978) This piece of furniture was in fashion: Mme de Pompadour is often credited

with having made the fashion of this small table known under the name of table Pompadour. It fully represents the taste of the time. It is the perfect example of furniture designed for wealthy women, reflecting the art and trends of the 18th century. (Bourdeaux, 2019)

## 6. analytical study of Oeben's masterpieces

### 6.1. Oeben's "Mechanical Reading Writing and Toilette Table": Analysis

#### 6.1.1. Description

Date of creation: 1755. **Dimensions:** Height: 68.3 cm, Length: 79.7 cm and Depth: 47 cm. Fig (4) **Materials:** Oak veneered with amaranth, burl wood, bloodwood, kingwood, and mahogany; polychrome wood for the marquetry and green-tinted ivory; Japanese lacquer; gilt-bronze supports. **Location :** Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Fig (4): 1. The reading table made by Oeben at the end of Louis XV, sumptuously inlaid with flowers and squares in sycamore, Louvre Museum, Paris. 2. The release of the mechanism of the table

#### 6.1.2. Form and style

Small mechanical table resting on 4 cabriole legs with triangular cut. By its marquetry, it is characteristic of the late Louis XV style, and by its form, it marks the Transition style. (Une table mécanique par Jean-François Oeben, 2015)

#### 6.1.3. Function

Piece of furniture designed for the use of wealthy women. It is transformable and multifunctional: for writing, reading, or toilet.

#### 6.1.4. Marquetry and decoration

- The marquetry completely hides the carcass of the furniture. It is composed of precious woods: mahogany, amaranth, kingwood, satinwood, and green-stained ivory. (Bourdeaux, 2019)
- Two kinds of marquetry designs are used: floral compositions and geometric patterns.
- Bordered by a bronze astragal, the tabletop is a marquetry painting, richly inlaid with flowers,

foliage, and a flowered basket. Oeben has mastered and played with the tones and depth of the wood. The center of the curved tabletop is decorated with a flowering basket, which rests on a base, itself decorated with a giant shell and framed by ivory latticework. The whole composition of the tabletop is framed by a cartouche whose upper part is decorated with a flower garland. The four elements of nature are arranged in the corners of the tabletop in allegorical form and logical order: we start from the air symbolized by the dove in the upper left corner, and we reach the fire symbolized by the salamander in the upper right corner, we go down to the lion, allegory of the earth, to go to the water represented by the swan. This symbolized the role of Paris at the time and its domination in Europe. Fig(5), (Ollivier, 2012).



Fig (5): 1. The polychromy of the wood in the marquetry of the table top and the 4 elements of nature arranged in logical order. 2. The Salamander allegory of the Fire. 3. The bird allegory of the air. 4. Cigne allegory of water. 5. The lion allegory of the Earth.

- Oeben took advantage of the veins, contrasts, and vivid colors of various woods. (Bourdeaux, 2019)

- The belt is decorated with a trellis marquetry; this geometric form is very characteristic of Oeben. In the front, a large lockable drawer without a crossbar has two identical inlaid flaps giving access to a locker and in the center a reversible desk (lectern), one side lacquered with Japanese lacquer, the other dressed in silk, with a small drawer underneath (Ferment, 2003)

- A mosaic marquetry with a central flower decorated with diamonds covers the sides of the table and the top of the drawers.

-The bronze covering, less exuberant than the rocaille of very good quality, including keyhole, falls, foliage rods, and sabots, does not overload the whole but decorates and protects the edges of the tabletop. A bearded and mustachioed Chinese head (mascaron) enhanced by a leaf decorates the upper part of the foot, and above the head, acanthus leaves are intersecting. A thin bronze rod on the inner edge of the foot extends along the belt and joins the other foot. Fig(6)(7)

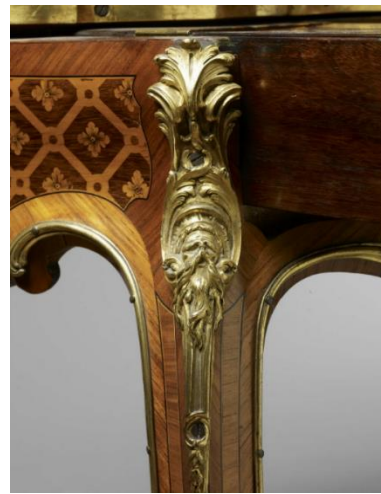


Fig (6) The bronze protects the contour of the furniture



Fig (7) the lock is located on the right side. The small key unlocks and opens the table





Fig (8) Multiple views of the "kidney" shaped reading table show the mechanism that moves the tray back and the desk drawer forward. ca. 1755. Museum of the Louvre

### 6.1.5. Mechanism and Functioning

-This small table is equipped with a sophisticated mechanism, controlled by the lock located on the right side. With a small turn of the key on the right side, a mechanism is triggered that reveals all the secrets of the cabinet, and also all the secrets that are hidden inside. Then, at the same time, the top is slid backward, and the large drawer is moved forward with its lectern in the center. The drawer will open with 3 lids. Fig (8)

- Another mechanism with a secret button allows the lectern to be raised. Turning, the lectern is upholstered with green silk on the writing side and with Japanese lacquer on the reading side, so that it can go up by a rack and then return.

- At the same level as the table's belt, a small drawer opens with a small lever hidden under the large one. On each side of the lectern, there is a locker closed by a hinged lid.

-The mechanism employed by Oeben allows the surface of the table to be doubled and a desk to be made with all the necessary items. Oeben has shown great ingenuity in developing complex systems driven by what are ultimately very simple mechanisms. This mechanical table model has always been executed with extreme care. By creating and developing this type of furniture with undeniable technical and decorative refinement, Jean-François Oeben produced a whole series of furniture, stamped or not (Sothebys, 2012)

-Oeben used a metal rod system to push and restrain the movement of the set because the keystroke should not cause the click-clack with a wild opening, but it is a civilized piece of furniture that must operate smoothly. Also, we have a rail system with teeth that can control the desired level of opening. It tried to make appropriate use for the users of the furniture. (Bordeaux, 2019) Fig(9)(10)



Fig (9) The interior of the right frieze has the engine assembly in the middle and the guide rails at the top and bottom.



Fig (10) Spring release mechanism of the table

### 6.1.6. Oeben's reading table in its social aspect

Oeben's specialty for tables with complex mechanisms, convertible, with multiple functions, and secret drawers was much appreciated by the Mesdames of France. This clientele was passionate about technology, mechanical equipment, and small furniture for comfort and intimacy. The Japanese lacquer used in the table reflects the taste of Mme de Pompadour's time for collecting this kind of furniture. (Sothebys, 2012) These mechanical tables, which met with Oeben's greatest success and contributed to his reputation, reflect the

intimacy, individualism, and luxury sought by their owners.

## 6.2. Mechanical Burgundy “à la Bourgogne” table

### 6.2.1. Description

**Date of creation:** 1760

**Dimensions:** Height: 91,9 cm, Width: 70,5 cm, Depth: 51,5 cm and Total height: 143 cm

**Materials:** Oak frame, satin veneer, kingwood, sycamore, and amaranth.

**Location :** Musée du Louvre, Paris. Fig. 10.

### 6.2.2. Form and style

It is presented as a half-chest of drawers with a

locker and drawers, a marble snack table, and a secretary with a flap. Straight body, curved legs in the Transition style. Fig(11)

### 6.2.3. Function

Made and named in honor of the Duke of Burgundy, Louis XV's handicapped grandson. Composed of a glass bookcase, a flap, two drawers, a bed table, and a footboard in *prie-dieu*.

### 6.2.4. Marquetry and decoration

Greek decoration, geometric marquetry on the front and sides individualism, and luxury sought by their owners. (Nouvel,2015)

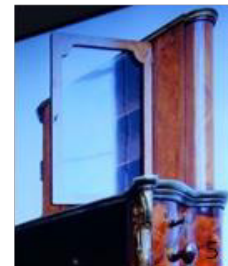


Fig (11): 1. the front of the table at Burgundy closed.2. the table seen above is closed. 3. The open Burgundy table: the flap open, the bookcase - the prie-Dieu out, and the writing-table on 4 folding legs .4. Detail of the closed bookcase. 5. Detail of the bookcase (glass door open). Jean - François Oeben. 1760. Louvre Museum.

### 6.2.5. Mechanism and functioning

Oeben invented this piece of furniture for the little handicapped prince, and thanks to a clever mechanism, he will be able to use it during his

convalescence. When closed, the table looks like a chest of drawers with 5 drawers. The crank is used to raise the bookcase (the upper part of the furniture).

The two upper drawers form a small flap, while the lower drawer becomes a prie-Dieu. The top one serves as a bedside table; it is removable and can be placed on the folding legs.

#### 6.2.6. The Burgundy table in its social aspect

Very effective for the handicap of the little prince, having an ingenious mechanism and a luxurious decoration, this very characteristic table which pays tribute to the Duke of Burgundy is considered one of the most famous. Thanks to this kind of furniture, the Duke of Burgundy remains in the memory of the art of cabinetmaking. (Hanz, 2013, Warlop 2019)

### 6.3. The Bureau du Roi (King's desk):

#### 6.3.1. Description

**Date of creation:** 1760 to 1769

**Dimensions:** Height: 1.47m, Width: 1.92m and Depth: 1.05m.

**Materials:** adorned with marquetry, made of different essences of precious woods, with allegorical drawings representing the King, the letters, and the sciences.

**Location:** Palace of Versailles. (Alcouffe,2014)



Fig (12): 1. the front of the King's desk 2. The back of king's desk. 3. The left side of the king's desk with a drawer with a spring latch that opens on each side outside the secretary.4. The attributes of the Scripture on the flat top. 4.The lock with the profile of fleur de Lys.

**Importance of the desk:** realized in great part by Oeben and completed by Riesener in 1769 by executing the floral marquetry with attributes. A complicated piece of furniture that required 9 years of reflection and the intervention of 14 different trades for its completion. (Gouazé, 2022) Considered as the emblem of the French furniture of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the most famous and the most expensive of the style Louis XV. Exceptional furniture with rich bronzes and a very elaborate mechanical system. It is so unique that it is called the "king's desk". Prestigious by its owner and the hands of the craftsmen who made it. Fig (12) Unusual piece of work in its decoration and its innovative mechanisms. (Pasdelou, 2019)

### 6.3.2. Form and style

Secretary with cylinder, with a clock with two dials, one for the king, the other for his visitor, but only one balance, it is a very opulent piece of furniture in two elements, curved all faces, resting on four cambered feet, of Louis XV style and perfected form probably rocaille (Fernand, Claude) There are 4 external drawers, 6 internal drawers, 3 sliding compartments, 3 secret drawers under the tray, 2 hidden drawers for the inkwells.

### 6.3.3. Function

This piece of furniture was used as a working desk by Louis XV to keep the king's papers and letters confidential. A piece of the ceremonial, emblem of the Monarchy, but also a representative and symbolic piece of the French power in Europe, Fig (13), (Marc-André ,1999)



Fig (13). 1 and 2 Two views of the desk and the opening of the cylinder that reveals the drawers, shelves, and secret hiding places inside. 3 and 4. The movable central part with the 3 drawers inside. 5. One of the 2 small hatches is hidden on both sides of the desk without the need to open it and the lid is up.

### 6.3.4. Marquetry and decoration

Desk in various Indian woods with veneers. The cylinder can close all the drawers in flap. The top is flat and decorated with balustrades with oive pattern. The attributes of Scripture are in the middle of the entablature flanked by 2 bouquets of flower.

- 3 cartouches with attributes decorate the cylinder itself: those symbolizing the Royalty are in the middle although the attributes of the dramatic poetry are on the left and those of the lyric poetry are on the right.

- 4 drawers with flower bouquets are on the front of the desk. Astronomy and Mathematics

are in the back. The attributes of each of the Navy and War are on the side L and R of the desk. Interior of our desk is inlaid with various Indian woods.

-The table is covered in the middle with velvet laced with gold. The central part is mobile to form a desk with a 3-drawer box. The arabesque taste decorates the interior of both sides of the desk. 4 bronze sheaths surmounted by children's heads divide the interior of the facade into 3 compartments. (Mabille,n.d)

-The central compartment is a paper holder with 3 sliding shelves. The right and left compartment have 3 drawers and are equipped with a cedar writing case with all the necessary instruments for writing.



-To clean these writing boxes, there are 2 drawers with spring-loaded latches that open on each side outside the secretary.

-Mosaics in Amaranth and yellow rosettes on a satin background decorate the front of the six drawers and the sides of the secretary inside.

-A vase decorates the 4 corners of the balustrade. A clock marks the hours in front and behind. Human motifs contribute to the chosen iconography: The Arts and the Cardinal Virtues are represented by children, although Apollo and Calliope are the two figures on the cylinder's arches, carrying stems and branches that serve as girandoles. The motifs of animal origin are presented in the skins and the lion's heads that adorn the feet. Fig(13) (Meyer & Arizzoli-Clémentel,2002)



Fig (14) The opening mechanism of the rebuilt desk. Toothed poles are inserted on both sides of the desk and connected by a central axis

### 6.3.5. Mechanism and functioning

A prodigal of totally new mechanics has been created for this piece of furniture. The secretary opens with a single turn of the key. A single lock, with a rotating barrel in the profile of a fleur-de-lys, ensures the locking of the cylinder and the drawers, allowing the king to open his desk, automatically, unlock all the drawers, access the secret lockers, and also to close the entire desktop.(Alcouffe et al,2014)

In terms of high-quality workmanship, the cylinder is composed of 7 invisible articulated blades. The decorations are framed with gilded bronzes, inside, the master makers have hidden the mechanical gears that operate the cylinder as well as the hidden drawers. A mechanism that can be reassembled by a crank ensures that when

the lock is unlocked, the cylinder retracts and the shelf moves forward; to close the desk, all you have to do is push the shelf back, the cylinder lowers, and the entire piece of furniture is locked.

Only the king was the one who had the key to the clover that made the whole mechanism of the cabinet work. By sticking his hand under the desk, he could activate a mechanism that would lift the top and reveal a compartment containing 3 secret drawers. This system allowed the king's papers to be kept secret. The king's servants filled the desk with ink and paper through two small hatches hidden on either side of the desk without the need to open it and the lid raised. (Ferland ,2003) The king has gained more than an office, he has gained a personal safe. Fig (14)

### **The king's office in its social aspect**

This type of furniture is very suitable for the place and allows to hide the secret papers of the king in all confidentiality. Three essential elements characterize Oeben's work: the capacity for invention; he was the one who discovered this type of furniture, this piece of furniture was a masterpiece of mechanical parts which was a German specialty, and his marquetry is exceptionally careful in terms of design and composition, his floral marquetry framed by ribbons characterizes his works. (Martineau, n,d) In the history of French furniture, the cylinder desk of Louis XV is so unique that it is simply called "the king's desk". This desk testifies to the ingenuity of the craftsmen in the service of political affairs, the king worried about being the target of spies, so he orders an inviolable desk to Oeben.

### **7. The symbolic dimension in the mechanical furniture of Oeben**

The mechanical furniture of Oeben makes a symbol of:

#### **Privacy:**

The design of Oeben furniture emphasizes the sense of privacy, a desire pursued by the elite at this time in the 18th century. This era encourages furniture with secrets and surprises. It fits with the trend of private apartments and the reduction of interior spaces and furniture sizes. Secrets hidden inside the furniture through complex mechanisms make privacy a secret.

#### **Individualism:**

The design spirit of Oeben furniture places a strong emphasis on the individual. Furniture is a very personal place to express ideas, representing freedom of thought and expression. It is the guarantee of free-thinking.

#### **Luxury**

Oeben's furniture expresses the refined taste of the client, an air of elegance combined with versatile functionality and personal comfort. Luxurious materials blend with gilded bronze. (Oeben's mechanical table,2016)

### **Results**

1. The skilled German cabinetmakers who immigrated to Paris in the mid-18th century had a major influence on the evolution of the spirit of French furniture design at the time through the invention of a new typology of furniture, the use of new, rare and precious materials and the invention of complex mechanisms.

2. The German cabinetmaker Jean-François or (Johann Franz) Oeben is a key figure in French cabinetmaking in the 18th century and is the creator of mechanical furniture in France.

3. The main characteristics of Oeben's mechanical furniture: It is multiple, convertible, and multifunctional. It shows the ingenuity of complex mechanisms, the presence of hiding places and secret drawers, the use of Louis XV, Transitional and early Neo-classical styles, the perfection of floral marquetry competing with painting, the use of exotic woods, ornamentation, gilded bronze sculptures and the use of iconography.

4. Oeben's mechanical furniture reveals symbolic meanings: intimacy, individualism, and luxury.

5. The innovative spirit of Oeben's designs adapted to particular uses, suited women's tastes, and excited the royal court and wealthy clientele, which ensured his reputation and success.

6. Oeben furniture is a combination of beauty and function.

For future studies we recommend encouraging researchers to conduct in-depth studies of the history of European furniture to reveal and study its secrets, take inspiration from the mechanical furniture designed in the 18th century to create furniture adapted to contemporary architecture. We recommend that major publishers support the publication of books on the history of interior design and to create a database of rare furniture in the history of French furniture, essential for researchers and students interested in the history of furniture design.

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