

# BOOKS



## Antiquity

Sicily was at the centre, not the periphery, of the ancient world

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## Baroque art

Paul Troger, a little known, but powerful, Austrian decorator

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## Impact

Pliny the Elder's lasting influence on the course of art history

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# Fine finishes for French furniture history

An overview of the Rijksmuseum collections and the complete works of the 18th- and 19th-century cabinet-makers, Bellangé

## DECORATIVE ART

“T is certain the French are the most Polite Nation in the World”: thus wrote the physician, Dr

Martin Lister, prefacing his account of a trip to Paris in 1698. This recognised primacy, especially in the decorative arts, is the theme of Reinier Baarsen's massive book on the Rijksmuseum's collection of luxurious Parisian objects. That there should be such an important Parisian accumulation in Amsterdam, in a national museum focused on Dutch history and Dutch artistic achievement, may surprise.

### Banker

It is even more remarkable that the collection of the banker, Fritz Mannheimer (1890-1939), which transformed the Rijksmuseum's Parisian holdings from the modestly respectable if a little scrappy to the internationally important, should have arrived as recently as 1952 (being previously destined for Hitler's Führer-Museum in Linz). Mannheimer's collections were of Rothschildesque scope and opulence, including, for instance, an extraordinary Romanesque carved antler, recently revealed in the *Burlington Magazine* as genuine, as well as masterpieces by the Nuremberg goldsmith, Wenzel Jamnitzer, and the Moravian cabinet-maker, Abraham Roentgen, and a superb gathering of Meissen porcelain. Of the 159 entries in *Paris 1650-1900*, comprising a dozen for objects made before 1700, a hundred for the 18th century, more than

30 for the 19th century, and a final five overlapping into the 20th, Mannheimer's collection supplies only two 17th-century entries and five for the early 19th century, but more than 60, a dominant ingredient, for the 18th century. Important objects certainly entered the museum at other times but it is also notable that several significant late 17th-century pieces, including a monumental pair of Boulle coffers from Wrotham Park, have been acquired in recent decades under Baarsen's aegis, along with virtually all the later 19th-century objects. These acquisitions have “rounded out” the collection, together with some judicious “infilling”, to such effect that *Paris 1650-1900* was as feasible as well as a worthwhile project.

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But what sort of book is this? A catalogue? Each of the 149 entries, many covering more than one object, has details of materials, dimensions, marks and provenances, and references to earlier literature, followed by clear and elegantly written analytical descriptions. An anthology? Most of the pieces are the stars of the collection and the superb illustrations constitute as glamorous a parade of their beauties as could be wished for. A cumulative history? The entries are broadly in chronological order, and split into 17 thematic groupings, some large – “Rococo” comprises 20 entries and “Neo-Classicism in furniture & furnishings” 23, some small –

“Silver for the courts of Russia and Spain” and “Nostalgia for the ancien régime” have three entries each. *Paris 1650-1900* spans all these categories. Thus, while the selection of objects reflects the strengths of the Rijksmuseum's collection, Baarsen provides a stylistic scaffolding of “pure” design by ingeniously intermingling the three-dimensional with printed designs. These include all eight plates of André-Charles Boulle's *Nouveaux Dessins*, four from Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier's *Oeuvre*, and further groups of four by Jean-Charles Delafosse, and from Percier and Fontaine's *Recueil de Décorations Intérieures*. The drawings include two superb sheets with a wall-light and a clock case by Gilles-Marie Oppenord, four fizzing Chinese fantasies by Jean-

Baptiste Pillement, a spectacular chandelier and a complex panel of ornament by Jean-Démosthène Dugoure, and a dour but powerful record of an antique marble chair at the Villa Negroni (built for Sixtus V, not VI) by Jacques-Louis David. But his entries are the heart of the enterprise. They constitute a sequence of revelatory essays, some a single page, others several, supported by comprehensive illustrations, including details, marks and comparative or contextual images. The details deserve special mention: many are over life-size, to which the odd purist might object, but with a dramatic

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Jean-Démosthène Dugoure, design for a decorative panel, 1787-1808

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## THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE OCTOBER 2013



## Discoveries

Recently rediscovered and reattributed works by Titian, Ribera, Remi, David, Ingres and Van Gogh

Acquisitions at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

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THE ART NEWSPAPER

## BOOKS

## Reviews

## Fine finishes for French furniture history

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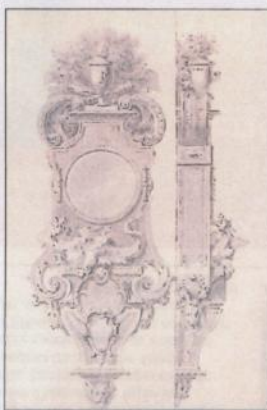
impact, making the spectator look and see. Close observation is indeed the essence of the essays themselves, which pinpoint innumerable niceties and refinements, the fictive shadow cast by a fictive ornamental scroll in a Gobelins tapestry, say, or Boulle's use of lapis lazuli for a dragonfly's body (dragonflies crop up over two centuries later, enamelled, on a distinctly unsettling diadem by Lucien Gaillard), but which are by no means anodyne: thus the chasing on a bracket clock with Bouille marquetry is "expressive but not particularly fine" and among other strictures ("The cabinet-making is of poor quality") the mounts on a "pagoda" commode are "rather coarsely modelled and not particularly well chased", and "notable technical flaws" are discerned on a Sèvres porcelain vase.

**Connoisseurship**

This display of connoisseurship, which extends to clear explications of questions of attribution, is rendered lively by repeated changes of focus. Close-ups on significant minutiae complement more panoramic discussions of the broader contexts of objects, incorporating succinct but authoritative accounts of such matters as floral marquetry, the mounting of oriental porcelain and the taste for Japanese lacquer (including a revealing anecdote about the profit to be gained by transporting such lacquer from Amsterdam to Paris), and the roles of *marchands-merciers* such as Dominique Daguerrre and Martin-Eloi Lignereux. Unusually, different materials are not treated as watertight compartments: hence, for example, a nice comparison between the latest fashions in marquetry and in gold boxes. The Dutch taste for Parisian objects constitutes a minor theme: as in other countries gilt-bronze clocks were imported in quantity. Occasionally a further thought comes to mind: an extra advantage of the



Jean-Baptiste Pillement, *Four ornamental compositions with Chinese figures*, 1770 (detail, left); Gilles-Marie Oppenord, design for a clock-case, around 1720-30



Gobelins tapestries incorporating fictive pictures fashionable, particularly in England, from 1763, was that they were cheaper to design, containing fewer figures, and cheaper to weave, much of their surface being repeat patterns with a limited colour palette. And the cryptic "ME[M]OI/100/CC" on an enamelled case can surely be interpreted as "Mémoire sans cesser", a token of everlasting remembrance.

**Intelligent, accessible**

However full Baarsen's 149 entries, they cannot give a wholly comprehensive picture of Parisian decorative arts over two-and-a-half centuries. Nonetheless such a highly intelligent and accessible survey, deriving its authority from the Parisian works of art themselves, can be warmly recommended: to serious scholars, who will learn much that is new and revel in the bibliography and index; to neophytes, who could not find a better or more seductive introduction to this territory; and even to sceptics unable

to understand the appeal of Parisian luxury products – it would be surprising if it did not make converts.

The second entry in *Paris 1650-1900* describes an ebony cabinet of about 1650, already famous in the early 19th century when first noticed in the collection of the multi-millionaire tax collector Jean-Joseph Lapeyrière (1779-1831), at whose 1825 sale it was purchased for 3,000 francs by the bronze-caster Lucien-François Feuchère. This information comes from the second book noticed here, another door-stopper, Sylvain Cordier's *Bellangé ébénistes*, in which Feuchère's name crops up repeatedly as an associate of Louis-François Bellangé (1759-1827), the younger of two brothers involved in furniture manufacture. Correcting earlier confusions Cordier distinguishes the firm of the elder brother, Pierre-Antoine (1757-1827), and his son, Louis-Alexandre (1797-1861), from that of Louis-François, who was succeeded by his son, Alexandre-Louis (1799-

1861). Pierre-Antoine emerged from sub-contracting to become a major supplier during the Empire period and a little beyond. When commissioned to supply gilt furniture for President Monroe's White House in 1817 he was described as "the first ébéniste in Paris", but by his death in a hospice in 1827 he was retired and ruined. His son, Louis-Alexandre, also enjoyed success, but a rocky career, which included the sale of a bed intended for, but rejected by, Charles X in 1827, to the Marquesa de Santos, the mistress of the Emperor Pedro I of Brazil, bankruptcy in 1831, revival in 1832 and an escape to Mexico in 1844 to join a silver-mining brother, Pierre-Alexandre. Louis-François was more successful, retiring and dying at about the same time as his elder brother, but in a comfortable house in the Marais, not a hospice. His son, Alexandre-Louis, had to sell his father's properties, but struggled on to show at the London 1851 and Paris 1855 exhibitions.

The senior Bellangé firm continued to work in the Empire style: in 1838, for instance, Louis-Alexandre supplied consoles to the Grand Trianon based on those delivered by Marcion in 1811, although he had also worked in a historicist mode since the late 1820s. The junior firm under Louis-François was much more adventurous: he collaborated closely with dealers such as Rieul Rocheux, "marchand de bronzes, meubles de Boulle, porcelaine de Sèvres et objets de curiosité", who started as a cook (recalling Anne-François Benois, George IV's confectioner turned art

**Episodes worthy of Balzac are a window onto a Paris in flux**

agent), and with Philippe-Claude Maëron and Alexis Delahante, to create furniture which was often hybrid in style and physical composition, incorporating lacquer, *pietre dure* and Sèvres plaques, old and new. This mode appealed to English taste and Windsor Castle is its locus classicus.

Alexandre-Louis continued in that vein, describing himself on his card as "Ébéniste en Curiosités", but by the 1850s his Boulle cabinets had become tired and formulaic, albeit well made. The main text of *Bellangé ébénistes* explores every aspect of the two family firms, their trade connections and official commissions, their participation in exhibitions, and broader questions of collecting, patronage and style. It is complemented by a massive catalogue of all the works attributable to the four Bellangés, with 264 entries, many of multiple objects. Both parts are lavishly illustrated. The narrative covers a period of massive political and social upheavals and the family's vicissitudes, including episodes worthy of Balzac, constitute a fascinating window onto a Paris in flux, thanks to Cordier's energetic and wide-ranging investigations. The literature of the decorative arts in Paris is indeed enriched by both these two very different books.

Simon Swynfen Jervis

Paris 1650-1900, *Decorative Arts in the Rijksmuseum*  
**Reinier Baarsen**

The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, in association with Yale University Press, 607pp, £75 (hb)

Bellangé ébénistes. Une histoire du goût au XVIIIe siècle  
**Sylvain Cordier**

Éditions Mare et Martin Arts, 672pp, €111 (hb) in French only

## Seals with approval

A catalogue certain to become an essential reference book

**SPECIALIST COLLECTING**

This beautifully illustrated volume is a partial catalogue of the collection of seals of all sorts and of all dates formed over the past 25 years or so by David Morris, who is well known to many for his single-minded determination to collect what is either historically interesting or of conspicuous aesthetic appeal. To do the collection justice he has drawn upon the services of John Cherry, formerly keeper of the Mediaeval and Later Antiquities Department at the British Museum, and of Julia Clarke and John Culme, both of Sotheby's.

John Cherry provides a delightful and personal overview on the subject, although it is clear that he also advised on some of the earlier seals in the collection such as those of the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly that made for William de Lawgrave during the first half of the 14th century.

The main catalogue and the introduction are the work of the redoubtable Julia Clarke. In each of the 145 entries the seals are elegantly described, their inscriptions quoted in full, and translated where necessary, and any iconography explained. Here are seals of the British royal family, of the government, of innumerable members of the aristocracy, of various



An Ivory-handled, silver seal (top), around 1628, with arms acquired by Sir Thomas Smythe of Osenhanger and Ashford, when he was created Viscount Strangford; a gold and amethyst royal seal, around 1821, with the royal arms of England as used by George III (from 1816), George IV and William IV

members of the clergy, of civil institutions such as counties, towns, and ports, and of towns or individuals in such far flung colonies or dominions as the British Virgin Islands, Canada or Australia. As a result the seals are constructed from gold, semi-precious stones, silver, ivory, wood, steel or brass, largely depending on the wealth or rank of the original user.

One silver seal marked by Thomas Wimbush, London 1845, gives John Culme the opportunity of exploring the career of this little known silversmith. Culme traces his life from that of a successful silversmith in Red Lion Square and, later, Regent Street, London, to the House of Correction in Clerkenwell following his conviction for theft, and finally transportation to Tasmania for pick-pocketing. There he set up as a tinsmith and jam-maker, before apparently committing suicide in 1869.

Any collector in the field would be well advised to have this catalogue on their shelves. Not only is it visually appealing, the text is full of fascinating pieces of information that are hard to find elsewhere.

Charles Truman

Matrix: A Collection of British Seals  
**David Morris**

Whyteleaf, 288pp, £95 (hb)

## Our reviewers this month

• **Alexander Adams** is a British writer and art critic, based in Berlin. His most recent book of poems and drawings, *The Crows of Berlin*, was published this year by Pig Ear Press.

• **Leonard Barkan** teaches comparative literature at Princeton University. His most recent books are Michelangelo: *a Life on Paper* (2011) and *Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures* (2013; see *The Art Newspaper*, September 2013, p.61), both published by Princeton University Press.

• **David Bellingham** is the programme director for the MA in art business at Sotheby's Institute of Art, London.

• **Stephen Clarke** is an artist, writer, and lecturer.

• **Andreas Gamerith** is the director of the art collection and library of the Stift Zwettl in Lower Austria. He has written extensively about Paul Troger and Viennese painting around 1750 and curated the exhibition, "Troger, Blau ist keine Kunst" (Troger, Blue is not art) at the Stift Altenburg, Lower Austria, in 2012.

• **Peter Howell** taught for 35 years in the Department of Classics, Bedford and Royal Holloway Colleges and was the chairman of the Victorian Society from 1987 to 1993. His most recent book was *Martial. Ancients in Action* (Duckworth, 2009) and he is currently writing a book on the triumphal arch.

• **Simon Swynfen Jervis** is an independent scholar.

• **Amélie Kuhrt** is a professor emerita of University College London. Her areas of expertise lie in the social, cultural and political history of the ancient Middle East (3000-100 BC), especially the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Seleucid empires. Her most recent book is *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (2007, Routledge).

• **Ermanno Rivetti** is an assistant editor of *The Art Newspaper*. He has written for the *Observer* and has worked on cultural programmes for BBC Four.

• **Bernhard Schulz** is the art critic of *Der Tagesspiegel*. He is interested in the politics of art and culture in the first half of 20th century, especially in Germany and the Soviet Union. In September, for the tenth anniversary of the Forschungsstelle "Entartete Kunst" ("Degenerate Art" research institute) at Berlin's Free University, he gave the keynote lecture on the perception of "Degenerate Art" in post-war Germany.

• **Peter Stewart** is the director of the Classical Art Research Centre and University Lecturer in Classical Art and Archaeology at the University of Oxford. His publications deal with many aspects of classical art, particularly sculpture, and include *The Social History of Roman Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

• **Charles Truman** is an independent scholar and one of the world's leading experts on gold boxes. He has catalogued the boxes in the Waddesdon, Thyssen-Bornemisza, Gilbert and Wallace Collections. He was a keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the director of the silver and objets de vertu department at Christie's.