
The Bellangé Album and New Discoveries in French Nineteenth-Century Decorative Arts

SYLVAIN CORDIER

Independent Scholar

Among the various approaches to the history of decorative arts, the study of furniture sketches, drawings, and designs constitutes a rich method of expanding our understanding of workshop practices and the stylistic development of particular pieces. In the field of nineteenth-century French furniture design, this avenue of research was opened in the 1970s by Jean-Pierre Samoyault.¹ The Department of Drawing and Prints at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is notably abundant in this type of material, especially from the Neoclassical period. Among these works, the intriguing Bellangé album of drawings for furniture designs warrants close attention.²

The album, a bound volume covered in green-stained calfskin and embossed paper, contains seventy-three drawings and watercolors pasted on the first thirty-one folios, which are followed by twenty-eight blank pages (Figure 1). The paper was made by hand, most likely in France. The album appears to have been ordered so that sheets could be pasted on its pages, some of which have been cut to allow for the integration of these drawings. This operation seems to have been carefully carried out by the bookbinder himself during the manufacture of the volume.

Among the seventy-three drawings and watercolors, two bear the signature “Bellangé à Paris” (Folios 5a,b). These markings constitute the primary evidence for a general attribution of the miscellaneous collection to the Parisian workshop of Pierre-Antoine Bellangé (1757–1827) and his son, Louis-Alexandre (1797–1861). Other sheets, unsigned, can also be linked to the production of this important firm of cabinetmakers from the first half of the nineteenth century.

Fortuitously, the bound volume used for the Bellangé album has a manufacture markedly similar to that of another album in the Museum’s Department of Drawings and Prints.

The latter contains a series of watercolors by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) dating from 1824 to 1828, indicating that the bound volume was probably purchased by the painter in 1824 (Figure 2).³ It is likely that the Bellangé family also acquired their album about 1824, the last year of Pierre-Antoine’s activity before Louis-Alexandre took over the workshop, and thus a significant point in the firm’s history. Unlike the Bellangé album, the Delacroix volume bears a paper label with the name and address of the maker: “se vend à [P]aris, chez Chavant rue/de Cléry, n. 19.” Information about the craftsman Chavant is scarce, but according to the catalogue of the 1834 French industrial exhibition, in which Chavant participated, the business was a “fabricant de papier réglé et de couleurs” (maker of graph and colored papers) used for textile designs.⁴

The Bellangé album is a singular work in the history of French decorative arts. Indeed, the nature and the variety of the drawings distinguish it from the traditional *recueils d’ornements*, which were publications conceived to express the taste and aesthetic sensibilities of a specific architect or *ornemaniste*, at a time when those professions also included a role in interior design. The *recueils* are helpful in identifying the influence of architects on craftsmen, and they were disseminated throughout the Parisian furniture community. The most famous and successful were undoubtedly the *Recueil de décorations intérieures* (1801 and 1812), by Charles Percier (1764–1838) and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine (1762–1853),⁵ the *Choix des costumes civils et militaires des peuples de l’Antiquité, leurs instrumens de musique, leurs meubles, et les décorations intérieures de leurs maisons, d’après les monumens antiques, avec un texte tiré des anciens auteurs* (1798–1801), by Nicolas-Xavier Willemin, and the *Fragmens d’architecture, sculpture et peinture dans le style antique* (1804), by Charles-Pierre-Joseph Normand and Pierre-Nicolas Beauvallet. The documents demonstrate the impact of outside influences on a workshop’s production. Unlike the *recueils*, however, the