

CHAPTER 6

Duveen Brothers: Dealers in Eighteenth-Century French Furniture and Objets d'Art

The trade in eighteenth-century French furniture and objets d'art played a critical role at Duveen Brothers. This was the result of several factors, the main one being that the Duveens became interested in this field very early on, almost at the same time as they took up Chinese porcelain, and they never abandoned it. Also, it was the domain in which the firm initially gained fame, defined its identity, and began to flourish. Finally, this field was the one most closely tied to the firm's interior decorating work.

It is no surprise that Joel and Henry Duveen began trading in these objects in the late 1870s. In England, where the two Duveens got their start, devotees had been plentiful since the eighteenth century. The Prince of Wales, later George IV, had a passion for French furniture rivaling that of Marie-Antoinette.⁵⁴⁸ The interest in eighteenth-century French decorative arts cultivated by Robert Henry Herbert, twelfth Earl of Pembroke, Alexander Hamilton, tenth Duke of Hamilton, and Richard Seymour-Conway, fourth Marquess of Hertford, assured the survival of this aesthetic in England into the mid-nineteenth century. When the Duveens launched their enterprise, the period styles associated with Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI had conquered much of English society, including the old aristocracy, the *nouveaux riches*, and the upper middle class. The phenomenon quickly spread to the rest of Europe, as well as to the United States. Indeed, after 1860, the taste for eighteenth-century French furniture and objets d'art held sway over the wealthy aristocracy throughout the western world.⁵⁴⁹ Ferdinand de Rothschild, a great lover of eighteenth-century French culture, explained:

[Eighteenth-century French art] is not classical, it is not heroic, but does it not combine, as no previous art did, artistic quality with practical usefulness? ... French 18th-century art became popular and sought for, because of that adaptability which more ancient art lacks... Fashion will fluctuate, but French 18th-century art seems destined to maintain its spell on society, and tighten its grip on the affection of the collector, so long as the present social, economic, and political conditions prevail.⁵⁵⁰

Entering the trade in eighteenth-century French furniture and objets d'art was therefore a safe bet for the Duveens. This market was already thriving, with dealers in every European capital. What the Duveens did was to import and establish this taste in the United States. They were the first dealers, and for a time the only ones, to sell on American soil Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI secretaires, commodes, bergères, marquises, candelabra, porcelains, and tapestries. When Henry Duveen arrived in New York in 1877–8, very few Americans were interested in these relics of the French aristocracy, and no other art and antique dealers offered their American clientele authentic French furniture and works of art from the ancien régime. It is easy to understand the success of this style in the United States, however. The young nation had an unquenchable thirst for luxury and refinement, culture, and knowledge—at the time all associated with Europe. Eighteenth-century style conquered the United States as it had conquered Europe. The epitome of both opulence and comfort, it symbolized aristocratic sophistication and a certain *art de vivre*. The Vanderbilts understood this well.⁵⁵¹ It was for this powerful family that Jules Allard created, in the 1880s, the first “Louis” interiors in the United States. This success prompted him to open an interior decorating office in New York in 1885. While he imported many old pieces of furniture to the United States, however, he did not establish a business comparable to that of the Duveens. Allard was content to sell his clients whatever furnishings were necessary to create the look of “old Europe” in their interiors. His activity as a dealer in furniture and objects was strictly limited to his clientele, and he sold them as many reproductions as he did originals.

The American taste for French eighteenth-century styles increased in the years around 1900 and peaked between 1915 and 1925, a decade that saw a vogue for eighteenth-century French furniture and objets d'art that declined with the Wall Street crash of 1929. As Ferdinand de Rothschild had predicted, the appeal of these artifacts lasted as long as “the present social, economic, and political conditions” prevailed.

Building an Inventory of Eighteenth-Century French Furniture and Objets d'Art

Antique dealers in Paris, and especially in London, were Joel and Henry Duveen's main suppliers. Beginning in the 1870s, Joel Duveen had frequented the Paris gallery of the Lowengards, something he continued to do in the 1890s and after, particularly since in 1891 his eldest daughter, Esther, married Jules Lowengard.⁵⁵² In 1897, for example, the Duveens acquired at the Lowengards a spectacular *lit à la duchesse en impériale*, or tester bed with a suspended domed canopy (fig. 62). This

Fig. 62

Tester Bed (*lit à la duchesse en impériale*), by Georges Jacob, France, Paris, ca. 1782–83. Carved, painted and gilded wood; wool and silk tapestry woven at the Beauvais manufactory; modern silk damask. The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Gift of Kingdon Gould, in memory of his mother, Edith Kingdon Gould, 1923 (23.235a)



extraordinary bed is likely the one listed in the 1791 estate inventory of Renaud-César-Louis de Choiseul, second duc de Praslin.⁵⁵³ Purchased in 1830 by Alexander Hamilton, tenth Duke of Hamilton, it remained at Hamilton Palace in Scotland for more than half a century before being sold at auction in 1882, for £1,512 (or about \$7,360 at the time), to Edward Radley, an upholsterer, cabinetmaker, and “importer of objets d’art” whose establishment was at 16 Old Bond Street in London. The Lowengards acquired it at an unknown date and then sold it to the Duveens in 1897, whereupon the American railroad titan George Jay Gould purchased it for the exceptional sum of £3,300 (or \$16,000).⁵⁵⁴ The two Duveen brothers also paid regular visits to the galleries of Hamburger Brothers, Durlacher Brothers,⁵⁵⁵ and William Boore, as well as those of Frederick and Charles Davis, Edwin Marriott Hodgkins, Frederick Litchfield, Frank Partridge, F. E. Wilkinson, and, above all, Asher and Charles Wertheimer.⁵⁵⁶ At Hodgkins’s, for instance, they found, at the beginning of the century, a large, white marble vase clock surmounted by a gray marble dove that they bought for £2,400 (or \$11,700).⁵⁵⁷

During their early years, Joel and Henry Duveen also acquired less important furniture and objets d’art described as “Louis XIV,” “Louis XV,” or “Louis XVI” from D. L. Isaacs, Lilienfeld, Philpot, and Edward Radley.⁵⁵⁸ At the end of the nineteenth century, the initials of Carlhian & Beaumetz also appeared next to the inventory entries for many items in the Duveen stock. A few of these entries probably corresponded to antique pieces, which this French interior decorating firm sold on occasion, but most of them, judging from their modest prices, must have been for copies commissioned by the Duveens.⁵⁵⁹

Joseph Duveen, too, acquired most of his inventory from other dealers. At the end of the summer of 1909, for example, he bought from Charles Wertheimer, for the extraordinary sum of £15,000 (or \$73,100), “a set of 3 Fine Old Turquoise [Sèvres] Vases [with] painted subjects” from the collection of the Sheremetevs (Chérémèteffs), a prominent family belonging to Russian nobility.⁵⁶⁰ In April 1910, he bought, again from Charles Wertheimer, a “Louis XVI Marqueterie Bonheur du Jour with Old Sèvres plaques” for an astonishing £10,000 (or \$48,600).⁵⁶¹ From Henry and Charles Durlacher in August 1909, he purchased two important silver soup tureens, with lids and trays bearing the inscription “fait par F. T. Germain,” that had belonged to the Marquis of Foz, then to the comte de Castellane (Boni de Castellane).⁵⁶² In June 1910, from Charles Davis, he bought a set of furniture consisting of eight armchairs and a sofa with tapestry covers for the substantial sum of £24,000 (or \$117,000).⁵⁶³ In the summer of 1919, Duveen acquired in Paris two ewers and a vase made of Sèvres porcelain with floral decoration from the French dealer Édouard Larcade for 50,000 francs (or \$7,080), as well as, from his Parisian colleague Arthur Tuck for 550,000 francs (or \$77,880), five tapestry panels from the *Months of Lucas* series, woven at the Gobelins manufactory in the 1730s.⁵⁶⁴ In

October 1919, in partnership with Frank Partridge and Arnold Seligmann, he purchased an important chest of drawers attributed to the cabinetmaker and sculptor Charles Cressent for £11,420 (or \$50,500), a phenomenal sum at the time.⁵⁶⁵ From Arnold Seligmann, he bought, also in October 1919, a pair of large gilt-bronze candelabra, supported by a faun and a bacchante carrying cornucopias, for 90,000 francs (roughly \$12,300 at the time), and, in January 1920, an “18th Century ebony Cabinet enriched with chased and gilt mounts, on each side an ormolu female caryatide; the front with a panel of gilt lacquer, Japanese landscapes,” for the extraordinary price of 135,000 francs (or \$9,500).⁵⁶⁶ From the Parisian dealers Oscar and Louis Stettiner, he purchased, in January 1920, “1 Beauvais Tapestry Set—1 canape + 6 fauteuils, cream ground after Salembier, baskets of flowers and doves, birds’ nests on the fauteuils” for 500,000 francs (or \$35,200), and, in April 1921, for the extravagant sum of 2 million francs (\$145,000), four tapestries from the “second Chinese series, woven at the Beauvais manufactory after cartoons by François Boucher” (see fig. 28).⁵⁶⁷ Despite the unfavorable economic conditions of the 1930s, Duveen could not resist acquiring from Frank Partridge in New York in 1936, for just over \$2,000, Marie-Antoinette’s writing desk with mother-of-pearl marquetry made by Jean-Henri Riesener for the queen’s boudoir at the Château de Fontainebleau. This piece later belonged to Sir Alfred Rothschild and then to a Mrs. Drury, who probably sold it to Partridge. A few years later, Edulji F. Dinshaw bought it at Duveen Brothers for his New York residence on Fifth Avenue. This important piece of French royal furniture was returned to Fontainebleau during the mid-1950s, one of the rare examples of an artwork that was repatriated after having been imported to the United States.⁵⁶⁸

Joel and Henry, and later Joseph Duveen, also frequently visited the auction houses in Paris and London. In the early days, the two brothers did not regularly acquire the kinds of celebrated works that they would purchase in the years after 1900, but they bought enough to belong to the small group of dealers—including Davis, Durlacher Brothers, Hodgkins, Partridge, Wertheimer, Lowengard, Stettiner, and Hamburger Brothers—who participated in the dispersal sales of the most important collections auctioned in France and England. At the sale of the Hollingworth Magniac collection, held in London in July 1892, the Duveens purchased a dozen pieces of case furniture, at prices between £12 and £355 (or about \$58 and \$1,230 at the time), as well as ten chairs described as “Louis XIV,” “Louis XV,” or “Louis XVI,” for between £13 and £75 (or \$63 and \$365).⁵⁶⁹ They also bought two beautiful folding screens, several clocks and small bronzes, many pieces of silverwork (for at most a few pounds sterling each), and a few porcelains, including notably for 200 guineas (or about \$1,000) “a pair of Old Sèvres Seaux, painted with flowers, on white ground, and with blue and gold lines, mounted with borders and feet of chased or-molu [*sic*], and fitted with branches of three lights

each, mounted with numerous coloured porcelain flowers.”⁵⁷⁰ The same day, they acquired seven tapestries, including, for 475 guineas (about \$2,430), “an oblong panel of Aubusson Tapestry, representing a garden scene, with a boy gathering cherries, and a boy on a swing, a boy on a goat, and children with poultry and animals.”⁵⁷¹ Three years later, at the London sale of the Stephens collection (May 9–11, and 13–17, 1895), they bought many eighteenth-century French art objects and pieces of furniture. Significant among these were a “Boulle Cabinet, with three doors, the center door richly mounted with an allegorical male and female figure,” purchased for £149 (or \$728), and a Sèvres porcelain “Cabaret, dark blue and gold key-pattern ground, painted with exotic birds and trees in medallions, consisting of [an] oval plateau, tea-pot, sucrier and covers, milk-jug, and cup and saucer,” acquired for £194 (or \$948).⁵⁷² A few days later the Duveens bid at the sale of the collection of Viscount Clifden, coming away, for £750 (or \$3,670), with a “magnificent old French Louis Quatorze black *Boule* [sic] arched-top square-shaped CASKET with bold masks, mounts and handles, exquisitely chased and gilt-metal bands and corners, with female head escutcheons to keyholes, on castors.”⁵⁷³ In 1898, at Christie’s in London, they bought a commode and two encoignures made by Riesener for just over £1,000 (or \$4,850).⁵⁷⁴

About 1900, the name Duveen began to be associated with high auction prices paid for such items as Louis XV armchairs, pieces of Sèvres porcelain, and gold snuffboxes.⁵⁷⁵ In December 1905, for example, the brothers paid £7,000 (or \$34,100) at the Ernest Cronier sale for three Gobelins tapestry panels depicting the story of Don Quixote on a yellow background.⁵⁷⁶ At the sale of the Baron Schröder collection, held in London in early July 1910, they purchased several important Sèvres pieces, including a pair of vases from the eminent Russian aristocratic Sheremetev (Chérémèteff) family, for £1,785 (or \$8,680), and a green-ground garniture consisting of a pot-pourri vase in the form of a ship (fig. 63) and two vases à oreilles for £9,450 (or \$46,000), a price that occasioned much commentary in the press.⁵⁷⁷

Joseph Duveen continued the practice, begun by his father and his uncle, of regularly buying important pieces at auction. In July 1919, at the sale of the Earl of Home collection, he obtained for £2,047 (or \$9,000), a pair of Sèvres porcelain fan vases with floral decoration painted by Thévenet the elder in 1758.⁵⁷⁸ At a July 1919 auction in Paris, he bought fifteen exceptional tapestries, including a large *Bacchus and Ariadne* from the Beauvais manufactory that sold for the high price of 511,125 francs (roughly \$70,000 at the time).⁵⁷⁹ In 1922, at the King collection sale at Christie’s London, he paid \$3,000 for a pair of Empire candelabra.⁵⁸⁰

Eager to quickly acquire important old master paintings, Joseph Duveen began to buy significant collections en bloc from the heirs of famous art collectors about 1905. Two of these collections, those of the Parisian bankers, and brothers,

Fig. 63

Pot-pourri "à Vaisseau," France, Sèvres manufactory, ca. 1759. Soft-paste porcelain, with later addition of a gilt-bronze base. The Frick Collection; Henry Clay Frick Bequest (1916.9.07)



Rodolphe Kann and Maurice Kann, included eighteenth-century French furniture and objets d'art.

In early August 1907, Duveen purchased the collection of Rodolphe Kann, made famous from its reproduction in a number of sumptuous volumes published by Wilhelm von Bode and Jules Mannheim.⁵⁸¹ The transaction was facilitated by the dealer Nathan Wildenstein, who knew the Kann family but lacked the capital to buy the entire collection, which the heirs wanted to sell in its entirety. Duveen and Wildenstein joined forces to pay the substantial asking price of 21 million francs (approximately \$4 million at the time). The Duveens contributed three-quarters of this amount, with the understanding that they would receive a proportionate share of the profit from all ensuing sales.⁵⁸²

What Duveen and Wildenstein had purchased was essentially the contents of the catalogue raisonné of the Rodolphe Kann collection as published in 1907 by Bode and Mannheim in two books of two volumes each.⁵⁸³ Joseph Duveen was more interested in the old master paintings described in the Bode publication, which included no fewer than eleven Rembrandts, four portraits by Frans Hals, and many works by Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob van Ruisdael, Aelbert Cuyp, Meindert Hobbema, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, François Boucher, Antoine Watteau, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Nicolas Lancret, and Jean-Marc Nattier, as well as several important Italian and Flemish primitives, notably the collection's masterpiece, Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*. He also agreed, however, to buy the works catalogued in the Mannheim publication, which was devoted to furniture and objets d'art from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (volume 1) and from eighteenth-century France (volume 2). This second volume featured 157 entries on marble and bronze sculptures, numerous clocks, chandeliers, sconces, and several cabinets and examples of seating, as well as tapestries from the Beauvais manufactory.

Nathan Wildenstein also played an important role in negotiating the sale of the collection assembled by Maurice Kann, Rodolphe's brother, who died in May 1906, but for this he did not partner with the Duveens, preferring to receive an immediate payment of £20,000 (or \$97,000) for his services.⁵⁸⁴ As was typical, Joseph Duveen began to try to resell the Maurice Kann collection even before his own transaction had been concluded. Baron Edmond de Rothschild, no doubt informed by Wildenstein of the pending dispersal of the collection and its likely purchase by Duveen, visited the place Vendôme gallery in July 1909 to make known his interest in several paintings and snuffboxes. Duveen then asked Wildenstein to show Rothschild the collection in the utmost secrecy without even informing Édouard Kann, Rodolphe's son and his uncle's heir.⁵⁸⁵ The baron expressed interest in several pictures, a large Aelbert Cuyp (*Horsemen Crossing a Bridge*), a Rembrandt, and the eight paintings of *The Arts and Sciences*, then attributed to François Boucher,⁵⁸⁶ as