PIERRE GOUTHIERE
Virtuoso Gilder at the French Court
PIERRE GOUTHIÈRE

Virtuoso Gilder at the French Court

CHARLOTTE VIGNON AND CHRISTIAN BAULEZ

With contributions by Anne Forray-Carlier, Joseph Godla, Helen Jacobsen, Luisa Penalva, Anna Saratowicz-Dudzinska, and Emmanuel Sarmeto

The Frick Collection, New York
In association with D’Giles Limited, London
The Life and Work of Pierre Gouthière

CHRISTIAN BAULEZ

Pierre Gouthière is as celebrated by some as he is little known by most. Many of the facts of his life and work were set out in a 1932 monograph by Jacques Robiquet that was groundbreaking in its documentary research but unreliable in terms of the catalogue raisonné of his work. As is too often the case with artists and craftsmen who do not sign their works, many pieces by Gouthière’s contemporaries or later imitators were attributed to him, and some by him were attributed to others. Gouthière had mastered the art of chasing and gilding on metal to a level previously unseen in France; however, in the second half of the eighteenth century there were several Parisian craftsmen capable of finely chasing bronze, and a few could imitate Gouthière’s technique of matte gilding, giving their work the soft luster that enchanted a refined and frivolous clientele delighted to depart from the severe and cold goût grec (Greek taste) prevalent in the years 1755 to 1765.

Gouthière’s clientele comprised first and foremost those wealthy members of the royal court with lavish lifestyles. He also worked for the Menus-Plaisirs et Affaires de la Chambre du Roi, an administrative body of the Maison du Roi (the king’s household) that managed the king’s personal effects and organized his entertainment, creating sets for theatrical productions and significant occasions such as marriages and funerals. The artists employed by the Menus-Plaisirs were free to develop new ideas without constraint, and their workshops were the focus for the forging of new fashions. A 1769 commission from the Menus-Plaisirs was among Gouthière’s first documented works (cat. 41). The Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre, who headed the Menus-Plaisirs, were powerful members of the nobility whose luxurious and eccentric lives were well documented by the press. The best known among them, Louis-Marie-Augustin, the Duke of Aumont (1709–1782), was Gouthière’s best client, not only commissioning works for himself but also encouraging members of his family—his brother-in-law, Emmanuel-Félicité de Durfort, the Duke of Duras (1715–1789); his daughter Jeanne-Louise-Constance d’Aumont, the Duchess of Villeroy (1731–1816); and his daughter-in-law, Louise-Jeanne de Durfort de Duras, the Duchess of Mazarin (1735–1781)—to do so as well.
Pierre Gouthière is as celebrated by some as he is little known by most. Many of the facts of his life and work were set out in a 1912 monograph by Jacques Robiquet that was groundbreaking in its documentary research but unreliable in terms of the catalogue raisonné of his work. As is too often the case with artists and craftsmen who do not sign their works, many pieces by Gouthière’s contemporaries or later imitators were attributed to him, and some by him were attributed to others. Gouthière had mastered the art of chasing and gilding on metal to a level previously unseen in France; however, in the second half of the eighteenth century there were several Parisian craftsmen capable of finely chasing bronze, and a few could imitate Gouthière’s technique of matte gilding, giving their work the soft luster that enchanted a refined and frivolous clientele delighted to depart from the severe and cold goût grec (Greek taste) prevalent in the years 1755 to 1765.

Gouthière’s clientele comprised first and foremost those wealthy members of the royal court with lavish lifestyles. He also worked for the Menus-Plaisirs et Affaires de la Chambre du Roi, an administrative body of the Maison du Roi (the king’s household) that managed the king’s personal effects and organized his entertainment, creating sets for theatrical productions and significant occasions such as marriages and funerals. The artists employed by the Menus-Plaisirs were free to develop new ideas without constraint, and their workshops were the focus for the forging of new fashions. A 1769 commission from the Menus-Plaisirs was among Gouthière’s first documented works (cat. 41). The Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre, who headed the Menus-Plaisirs, were powerful members of the nobility whose luxurious and eccentric lives were well documented by the press. The best known among them, Louis-Marie-Augustin, the Duke of Aumont (1709–1782), was Gouthière’s best client, not only commissioning works for himself but also encouraging members of his family—his brother-in-law, Emmanuel-Félicité de Durfort, the Duke of Duras (1715–1789); his daughter Jeanne-Louise-Constance d’Aumont, the Duchess of Villeroy (1731–1816); and his daughter-in-law, Louise-Jeanne de Durfort de Duras, the Duchess of Mazarin (1735–1781)—to do so as well.
The Life and Work of Pierre Gouthière

We have no birth date for Pierre-Joseph-Désiré Gouthière; his baptism, however, was celebrated in the church of Saint-Pierre at Bar-sur-Aube on January 19, 1732. His father, Claude, who had eleven children, was a master saddler there, and one of his sons would follow in his footsteps. Jacques Robiquet suggests that Pierre may have come to the attention of the Duke of Aumont during one of his stays on the land he owned in the Champagne region. A similarly fragile hypothesis posits that Denis-Pierre-Jean Papillon de la Ferté (1727–1794), steward of the Menus-Plaisirs—who, though born at Châlons-sur-Marne, had made the province of Champagne his home and was associated with a gilt-bronze business from 1755—took Gouthière under his wing.

Almost nothing is known of Gouthière’s initial training, which may have begun in Troyes but mostly took place in the Paris workshop of François Ceriset, a gilder based on the sixth floor of a building on the Quai Pelletier that bore the sign of the Soleil d’Or (Golden Sun) (fig. 1). Ceriset died in 1756, two years after his first wife, Marguerite Vast. Their inventories testify to a comfortable lifestyle made possible by an impressive clientele of merchants of luxury goods, jewelers, clockmakers, and silversmiths, including François-Thomas Germain (1726–1791), the sculptor and silversmith to the king. Among Ceriset’s employees was a young woman called Henriette, possibly the same Marie-Madeleine Henriet who became his second wife in 1754 and Jeanne Bécu, the Countess Du Barry (1743–1793), can also be viewed as a charming creation of the Menus-Plaisirs: the tributes paid to her by the Duke of Duras and Louis-François-Armand de Vignerod, the Duke of Richelieu (1696–1788), both Premiers Gentilhommnes de la Chambre, helped launch her brilliant career as Louis XV’s mistress. The legend surrounding Gouthière has Du Barry as the principal cause of both his success and his downfall, but this is inaccurate on both counts. Gouthière was employed by the Menus-Plaisirs long before he ever worked for Louis XV’s favorite, and he secured important commissions long after those he received from the countess, which became less frequent after the king’s death in 1774. More significant for Gouthière were the deaths, in quick succession, of his primary patrons, the Duchess of Mazarin (1781) and the Duke of Aumont (1782). The lengthy process of settling their estates would deprive him of the capital he needed for his own business.

All of Paris knew of the memorable sales that followed the deaths of the Duchess of Mazarin and the Duke of Aumont and the high prices the extraordinary objets d’art executed by Gouthière had fetched. The sale of the duchess’s collections served as a sort of general rehearsal for the sale of those of the dukes. Organized with a modern sense of marketing, the Aumont sale included an illustrated catalogue produced as a tribute to Gouthière (whose name was indicated by the initial G). Louis XVI paid high prices for the finest pieces, which were destined for the Musée du Louvre (the future Musée du Louvre), and Marie Antoinette did likewise to furnish her private apartments. The sale covered Gouthière in glory but his fall from grace was not far off. He had to borrow more money to finish the bronzes that were included in the sale. He did, however, take advantage of the opportunity to gain some publicity for himself prior to the sale. “This week at the premises of Mr. Gouthière, Chaser-Gilder to the King, Rue du Faubourg St-Martin, near the Guardhouse, can be seen Tables, Vases, and Wall lights, in gilt bronze, with arabesques in relief, the execution of which is a great credit to this Artist and will surely arouse Connoisseurs’ curiosity.”

Mme Du Barry’s tragic end marked a new phase in the creation of Gouthière’s legend. Shortly before the French Revolution, Louis XV’s former favorite had ordered several pieces from Gouthière, but her imprisonment, the confiscation of her belongings by the Republic, and her subsequent sentencing to death in 1793 suspended their production and payment. In a lengthy dispute between Gouthière and the French state, Gouthière contested the amount of the debt, which came to 756,000 francs in devalued paper money. In 1829, during the period of the Bourbon Restoration, Gouthière’s son took the Countess Du Barry’s heirs to court to recover the full amount of this debt. The case, which was heard in 1836 under the July Monarchy, was followed with interest in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where the cult of the ancien régime flourished; eighteenth-century style was coming back into fashion, and a number of foreign collectors, including the fourth Marquess of Hertford (1800–1870), were assembling the finest pieces. A new vogue was emerging for gilt bronzes from the time of Louis XVI, and the best of these were too freely attributed to Gouthière. They remain so today.
The Life and Work of Pierre Gouthière

We have no birth date for Pierre-Joseph-Désiré Gouthière; his baptism, however, was celebrated in the church of Saint-Pierre at Bar-sur-Aube on January 19, 1732. His father, Claude, who had eleven children, was a master saddler there, and one of his sons would follow in his footsteps. Jacques Robiquet suggests that Pierre may have come to the attention of the Duke of Aumont during one of his stays on the land he owned in the Champagne region. A similarly fragile hypothesis posits that Denis-Pierre-Jean Papillon de la Ferté (1727–1794), steward of the Menus-Plaisirs—who, though born at Châlons-sur-Marne, had made the province of Champagne his home and was associated with a gilt-bronze business from 1755—took Gouthière under his wing.

Almost nothing is known of Gouthière’s initial training, which may have begun in Troyes but mostly took place in the Paris workshop of François Ceriset, a gilder based on the sixth floor of a building on the Quai Pelletier that bore the sign of the Soleil d’Or (fig. 1). Ceriset died in 1756, two years after his first wife, Marguerite Vast. Their inventories testify to a comfortable lifestyle made possible by an impressive clientele of merchants of luxury goods, jewelers, clockmakers, and silversmiths, including François-Thomas Germain (1726–1791), the sculptor and silversmith to the king. Among Ceriset’s employees was a young woman called Marie-Madeleine Henriet who became his second wife in 1754 and Jeanne Bécu, the Countess Du Barry (1743–1793), can also be viewed as a charming creation of the Menus-Plaisirs: the tributes paid to her by the Duke of Duras and Louis-François-Armand de Vignerod, the Duke of Richelieu (1696–1788), both Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre, helped launch her brilliant career as Louis XV’s mistress. The legend surrounding Gouthière has Du Barry as the principal cause of both his success and his downfall, but this is inaccurate on both counts. Gouthière was employed by the Menus-Plaisirs long before he ever worked for Louis XV’s favorite, and he secured important commissions long after those he received from the countess, which became less frequent after the king’s death in 1774. More significant for Gouthière were the deaths, in quick succession, of his primary patrons, the Duchess of Mazarin (1781) and the Duke of Aumont (1782). The lengthy process of settling their estates would deprive him of the capital he needed for his own business.

All of Paris knew of the memorable sales that followed the deaths of the Duchess of Mazarin and the Duke of Aumont and the high prices the extraordinary objets d’art executed by Gouthière had fetched. The sale of the duchess’s collections served as a sort of general rehearsal for the sale of those of the duke. Organized with a modern sense of marketing the Aumont sale included an illustrated catalogue produced as a tribute to Gouthière (whose name was indicated by the initial G). Louis XVI paid high prices for the finest pieces, which were destined for the Musée du Louvre (the future Musée du Louvre), and Marie Antoinette did likewise to furnish her private apartments. The sale covered Gouthière in glory but his fall from grace was not far off. He had to borrow more money to finish the bronzes that were included in the sale. He did, however, take advantage of the opportunity to gain some publicity for himself prior to the sale: “This week at the premises of Mr. Gouthière, Chaser-Gilder to the King, Rue du Faubourg St-Martin, near the Guardhouse, can be seen Tables, Vases, and Wall lights, in gilt bronze, with arabesques in reliefs, the execution of which is a great credit to this Artist and will surely arouse Connoisseurs’ curiosity.”

Mme Du Barry’s tragic end marked a new phase in the creation of Gouthière’s legend. Shortly before the French Revolution, Louis XV’s former favorite had ordered several pieces from Gouthière, but her imprisonment, the confiscation of her belongings by the Republic, and her subsequent sentencing to death in 1793 suspended their production and payment. In a lengthy dispute between Gouthière and the French state, Gouthière contested the amount of the debt, which came to 756,000 francs in devalued paper money. In 1829, during the period of the Bourbon Restoration, Gouthière’s son took the Countess Du Barry’s heirs to court to recover the full amount of this debt. The case, which was heard in 1836 under the July Monarchy, was followed with interest in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where the cult of the ancien régime flourished; eighteenth-century style was coming back into fashion, and a number of foreign collectors, including the fourth Marquess of Hertford (1800–1870), were assembling the finest pieces. A new vogue was emerging for gilt bronzes from the time of Louis XVI, and the best of these were too freely attributed to Gouthière. They remain so today.

APPRENTICESHIP AND EARLY CAREER

We have no birth date for Pierre-Joseph-Désiré Gouthière, his baptism, however, was celebrated in the church of Saint-Pierre at Bar-sur-Aube on January 19, 1732. His father, Claude, who had eleven children, was a master saddler there, and one of his sons would follow in his footsteps. Jacques Robiquet suggests that Pierre may have come to the attention of the Duke of Aumont during one of his stays on the land he owned in the Champagne region. A similarly fragile hypothesis posits that Denis-Pierre-Jean Papillon de la Ferté (1727–1794), steward of the Menus-Plaisirs—who, though born at Châlons-sur-Marne, had made the province of Champagne his home and was associated with a gilt-bronze business from 1755—took Gouthière under his wing.

Almost nothing is known of Gouthière’s initial training, which may have begun in Troyes but mostly took place in the Paris workshop of François Ceriset, a gilder based on the sixth floor of a building on the Quai Pelletier that bore the sign of the Soleil d’Or (Golden Sun) (fig. 1). Ceriset died in 1756, two years after his first wife, Marguerite Vast. Their inventories testify to a comfortable lifestyle made possible by an impressive clientele of merchants of luxury goods, jewelers, clockmakers, and silversmiths, including François-Thomas Germain (1726–1791), the sculptor and silversmith to the king. Among Ceriset’s employees was a young woman called Henriette, possibly the same Marie-Madeleine Henriet who became his second wife in 1754 and Jeanne Bécu, the Countess Du Barry (1743–1793), can also be viewed as a charming creation of the Menus-Plaisirs: the tributes paid to her by the Duke of Duras and Louis-François-Armand de Vignerod, the Duke of Richelieu (1696–1788), both Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre, helped launch her brilliant career as Louis XV’s mistress. The legend surrounding Gouthière has Du Barry as the principal cause of both his success and his downfall, but this is inaccurate on both counts. Gouthière was employed by the Menus-Plaisirs long before he ever worked for Louis XV’s favorite, and he secured important commissions long after those he received from the countess, which became less frequent after the king’s death in 1774. More significant for Gouthière were the deaths, in quick succession, of his primary patrons, the Duchess of Mazarin (1781) and the Duke of Aumont (1782). The lengthy process of settling their estates would deprive him of the capital he needed for his own business.

All of Paris knew of the memorable sales that followed the deaths of the Duchess of Mazarin and the Duke of Aumont and the high prices the extraordinary objets d’art executed by Gouthière had fetched. The sale of the duchess’s collections served as a sort of general rehearsal for the sale of those of the duke. Organized with a modern sense of marketing the Aumont sale included an illustrated catalogue produced as a tribute to Gouthière (whose name was indicated by the initial G). Louis XVI paid high prices for the finest pieces, which were destined for the Musée du Louvre (the future Musée du Louvre), and Marie Antoinette did likewise to furnish her private apartments. The sale covered Gouthière in glory but his fall from grace was not far off. He had to borrow more money to finish the bronzes that were included in the sale. He did, however, take advantage of the opportunity to gain some publicity for himself prior to the sale: “This week at the premises of Mr. Gouthière, Chaser-Gilder to the King, Rue du Faubourg St-Martin, near the Guardhouse, can be seen Tables, Vases, and Wall lights, in gilt bronze, with arabesques in reliefs, the execution of which is a great credit to this Artist and will surely arouse Connoisseurs’ curiosity.”

Mme Du Barry’s tragic end marked a new phase in the creation of Gouthière’s legend. Shortly before the French Revolution, Louis XV’s former favorite had ordered several pieces from Gouthière, but her imprisonment, the confiscation of her belongings by the Republic, and her subsequent sentencing to death in 1793 suspended their production and payment. In a lengthy dispute between Gouthière and the French state, Gouthière contested the amount of the debt, which came to 756,000 francs in devalued paper money. In 1829, during the period of the Bourbon Restoration, Gouthière’s son took the Countess Du Barry’s heirs to court to recover the full amount of this debt. The case, which was heard in 1836 under the July Monarchy, was followed with interest in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where the cult of the ancien régime flourished; eighteenth-century style was coming back into fashion, and a number of foreign collectors, including the fourth Marquess of Hertford (1800–1870), were assembling the finest pieces. A new vogue was emerging for gilt bronzes from the time of Louis XVI, and the best of these were too freely attributed to Gouthière. They remain so today.
The seventh entry in the catalogues of the sale of the Duke of Aumont’s collections consisted of two large, handsome columns of secrétoire marble dis-
covered in 1856 near the Temple of Vesta in Rome (cat. 43). On top, each had an alabaster vase that the
catalogue authors Philippe-François Julliot and
Alexandre-Joseph Paillet judged “interesting” and
with ornamentation “of an excellent type … perfectly
carved out.”100

Paillet acquired the full set of vases for 1,802 livres on behalf of Louis XVI. While the columns were
stored in the Salle des Antiques at the Louvre, the vases
were left at Julliot’s premises for more than twenty
years.101 In 1793, they were transferred to the Muséum
du Louvre, but they clearly fell out of favor: in October
1797—on orders from the Ministry of Finance and to
cover the costs of establishing the new museum—
these “two vases in oriental alabaster, of mediocre
quality, or vases, on verde antico socle, ornamented
with lauzel foliage in chased and matte-gilded bronzes”
were put up for sale, estimated at 120 livres, and sold
for 140 livres.102 This judgment clearly applied essen-
tially to the alabasters, which were defective, and not
to Gouthière’s mounts, the originality and execution
of which are almost without equal.

These vases subsequently reappeared in the London
residence of Auguste-Charles-Joseph, Count of Flahaut
de la Billarderie, and his wife, Margaret, Baroness Keith
and Nairne.106 The Countess of Flahaut thus noted, in
June 1863, in her “List of Things at Coventry House,”
these “two vases in oriental alabaster, of mediocre
quality but difficult to date. There are several other
differences between these vases and the ones repro-
duced in the Aumont catalogues. The vases end to marble plinth mentioned in the catalogue descrip-
tion does not appear in the reproduction, perhaps
because it was considered an integral part of the column,
which was also reproduced (cat. 43). The greatest
difference, however, lies in the treatment of the
laurel leaves that form the vases’ handles; those in the
catalogue are rigid and uninspired, lacking the
brio of Gouthière’s mounts in which each leaf seems
to have been cast from nature, so realistically do they
capture the density and variety of a branch of blo-
oming laurel.

C.V.

104

104
The seventh entry in the catalogue of the sale of the Duke of Aumont’s collections consisted of two large, handsome columns of sese antico marble dis-
covered in 1805 near the Temple of Vesta in Rome (cat. 43). On top, each had an alabaster vase that the
catalogue authors Philippe-François Julliot and Alexandre-Joseph Paillet judged “uninteresting” and
with ornamentation “of an excellent type . . . perfectly
carved out.”104

Paillet acquired the full set of items for 1,840 livres on behalf of Louis XVI. While the columns were
stored in the Salle des Antiques at the Louvre, the vases were left at Julliot’s premises for more than twenty
years.105 In 1793, they were transferred to the Museum du Louvre, 1797, purchased probably in Paris
by the Count and Countess of Flahaut de la Billarderie, and his wife, Margaret, Baroness Keith Beverley
(before his death in 1812). From his London residence, Coventry House, in June 1812, in their London
residence, Coventry House, in June 1812—1813, upon the death of the Count and Countess of Flahaut de la Billarderie, and his wife, Margaret, Baroness Keith Beverley (who became Marquess of Lansdowne in 1813). They were then sent to Medlesker, in Perthshire, Scotland, which was a Lansdowne family property.

When the vases reappeared at an auction in 1863, they were standing on gilt-bronze feet of a very dif-
ferent type from the example reproduced in the cata-
logue of the Duke of Aumont sale (fig. 99). The original
feet, which were probably of alabaster (although the catalogue description says nothing on this sub-
ject), must have been damaged or broken sometime after the sale and replaced by these, which are of fine
quality but difficult to date. There are several other differenc
es between these vases and the ones repro-
duced in the Aumont catalogue. The verd antique marble plinth mentioned in the catalogue descricption
does not appear in the reproduction, perhaps because it was considered an integral part of the column,
which was also reproduced (cat. 43). The greatest difference, however, lies in the treatment of the laurel leaves that form the vases’ handles; those in the catalogue are rigid and uninspired, lacking the brio of Gouthière’s mounts in which each leaf seems to have been cast from nature, so realistically do they
capture the density and variety of a branch of blos-
oming laurel.
C.V.