

PIERRE
GOUTHIÈRE

Virtuoso Gilder
at the
French Court





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CHARLOTTE VIGNON AND CHRISTIAN BAULEZ

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

The Frick Collection, New York
In association with D Giles Limited, London



This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition *Pierre Gouthière: Virtuoso Gilder at the French Court*, organized by The Frick Collection and on view at the Frick from November 16, 2016, to February 19, 2017, and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, from March 15 to June 25, 2017. The exhibition is supported by the Michel David-Weill Foundation, Barbara and Brad Evans, the Selz Foundation, and an anonymous gift in memory of Melvin R. Seiden, with additional contributions from Alfredo Reyes of Röbbig Munich and Edward Lee Cave.

Published by The Frick Collection
In association with
D Giles Limited

ISBN 978-1-907804-61-8

For The Frick Collection:
Michaelyn Mitchell,
Editor in Chief
Hilary Becker, Assistant Editor

For D Giles Limited:
Copy-edited and proofread
by Sarah Kane
Translated from the French
by Abigail Grater
Translated from the English
by Jean-François Allain

Designed by Alfonso Iacurci
Typeset in Archer and
DTLFleischmann

Printed and bound in China

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Baulez, Christian, author. | Vignon, Charlotte, author. | Gouthière, Pierre, 1732-1813. Works. | Frick Collection, issuing body, host institution. | Musée des arts Décoratifs (France), host institution.

Title: Pierre Gouthière : virtuoso gilder at the French court / Christian Baulez and Charlotte Vignon ; with contributions by Anne Forray-Carlier, Joseph Godla, Helen Jacobsen, Luisa Penalva, Emmanuel Sarneo, and Anna Saratowicz-Dudyńska.

Description: New York : The Frick Collection ; London: In association with D Giles Limited, [2016] | Published in conjunction with an exhibition organized by The Frick Collection and held at The Frick Collection, New York, November 16, 2016-February 19, 2017 and at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, March 15-June 25, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index. Identifiers: LCCN 2016020922 | ISBN 9781907804618

Subjects: LCSH: Gouthière, Pierre, 1732-1813--Catalogues raisonnés. | Gouthière, Pierre, 1732-1813--Exhibitions. | Gilt bronzes, French--18th century--Exhibitions. | Gilt bronzes, French--19th century--Exhibitions.

Classification: LCC NB553.G73 A4 2016 | DDC 745.7/5092--dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016020922>

Front cover: detail of cat. 11
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Page 326: detail of cat. 42
Page 388: detail of cat. 21
Page 402: detail of cat. 13

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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 1912 monograph by Jacques Robiquet that was groundbreaking in its documentary research but unreliable in terms of the catalogue raisonné of his work.¹ 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 locus 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.

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 *Muséum 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."²

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,³ 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.



Fig. 1
Sheet 41 from M. Rittmann
and Jean Junié, *Atlas de
la censive de l'Archevêché
dans Paris*, 1786 (Brette
1906). Getty Research
Institute, Los Angeles. The
arrow points to the location
of the Soleil d'Or.

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, 1732.⁴ His father, Claude, who had eleven children, was a master saddler there, and one of his sons would follow in his footsteps.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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).⁸ 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.⁹ Among Ceriset's employees was a young woman called Henriette, possibly the same Marie-Madeleine Henriette who became his second wife in 1754¹⁰ and

Pair of Vases

Alabaster probably carved by Augustin Bocciardi or Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Delaplanche
 Gilt bronze by Pierre Gouthière
 After a design by François-Joseph Bélanger
 Ca. 1770-75
 Alabaster, green marble, and gilt bronze
 Each, 16⅜ × 16½ in. (41 × 42 cm)
 Private collection

Provenance:

Commissioned by Louis-Marie-Augustin, Duke of Aumont, ca. 1770-75; in the sale of his collections, December 12-21, 1782, lot 7; purchased for Louis XVI; transferred to the Muséum du Louvre, 1793; sold with other objects from the Muséum du Louvre, 1797; purchased probably in Paris by the Count and Countess of Flahaut de la Billarderie, ca. 1830; in their London residence, Coventry House, in June 1863; in 1870, upon the death of the Count of Flahaut (countess died in 1867), inherited by their eldest daughter, Emilie Jane Mercer Elphinstone de Flahaut, wife of the Marquess of Lansdowne; at the home of Lady Lansdowne at 15a Grosvenor Square, London, in 1875; sent to Meikleour, in Perthshire, Scotland, a property belonging to the Lansdowne family, at an unknown date; sold by the Trustees of the Meikleour Estate Trust, Christie's, London, June 11, 1992, lot 60; French & Company; Christie's, New York, November 24, 1998, lot 15; private collection.

Literature:

Davillier 1870, 14-15; Verlet 1980, 207; Wannenes and Wannenes 2004, 347.

The seventh entry in the catalogue of the sale of the Duke of Aumont's collections consisted of two large, handsome columns of *verde antico* marble discovered in 1766 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 carried out."¹⁰³

Paillet acquired the full set of items for 13,801 *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.¹⁰⁴ 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 laurel foliage in chased and matte-gilded bronze" were put up for sale, estimated at 120 *livres*, and sold for 180 *livres*.¹⁰⁵ This judgment clearly applied essentially 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 reappear 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," in the small drawing room, "2 very fine vases, Oriental alabaster, mounted 'or mat.'" There is no reference to Gouthière, but matte gilding, which was his specialty, is specifically mentioned by the countess, who in all other instances describes her gilt bronzes with the anglicized term "ormolu."

The count and countess's eldest daughter, Emilie Jane Mercer Elphinstone de Flahaut, who probably inherited the vases upon her father's death in 1870 (her mother died in 1867), mentions them in an undated list: "2 Algerian Onyx Vases with lids, ormolu mounted *verde antiquo* [*sic*] bases." They are described again around 1867, at Coventry House, as a pair of "Algerian onyx vases with lids, ormolu mounted."

Believed to have been made of oriental alabaster in the Duke of Aumont catalogue and by the Countess of Flahaut, these vases were henceforth said to be of Algerian onyx. Both these designations re-

fer to calcite alabaster, also known as oriental alabaster, since many objects fashioned from this material came from the East. In fact, they are most likely not antique stones but rather gypsum alabaster, which is more fragile than calcite alabaster, possibly from Tuscany in Italy. It is difficult to know whether it was François-Joseph Bélanger, Augustin Bocciardi, or Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Delaplanche—all three worked for the Duke of Aumont—who gave them their form or whether they were designed and carved elsewhere, possibly in Italy.

In 1875, the vases were in London at 15a Grosvenor Square, the residence of Emilie Jane, who, in 1843, married Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, Earl of Shelburne (who became Marquess of Lansdowne in 1863). They were then sent to Meikleour, in Perthshire, Scotland, which was a Lansdowne family property.

When the vases reappeared at an auction in 1992, they were standing on gilt-bronze feet of a very different type from the example reproduced in the catalogue of the Duke of Aumont sale (fig. 99). The original feet, which were probably of alabaster (although the catalogue description says nothing on this subject), 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 differences between these vases and the ones reproduced in the Aumont catalogue. The *verde antico* marble plinth mentioned in the catalogue description 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 blossoming laurel.

C.V.







Fig. 99
Pierre-Adrien Pâris, *Drawing for the Engraving, Representing a Vase from the Duke of Aumont, 1782*. Pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper, 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (20 × 13 cm). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (RES V 2586, pl. 7)