A Japanned Secretary
in the Linsky Collection with Decorations
After Boucher and Pillement

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Among the pieces of French furniture in the Jack and Belle Linsky Collection at the Metropolitan Museum is a painted and gilded drop-front secretaire in the Chinese style (Figures 1–3). Partly Neoclassical in outline, it is surmounted by an open fretwork pagoda superstructure with a scalloped roof of gilded metal. The fall front opens to reveal a gold-tooled leather writing surface, shelves, and four small drawers with bell-shaped pulls. The lower section is set with two doors enclosing red painted shelves. On the secretaire’s front and side panels are Oriental figures engaged in various pastimes in a garden setting. Partly in low relief, these scenes are depicted in brownish and golden tonalities with a few spots highlighted in red and green against a black background. Pseudo-Chinese mounts of gilt bronze decorate front and sides. On the basis of its style and of the stamp on the back—1 DUBOIS JME—the secretaire has been attributed to the maître-ébéniste René Dubois (1737–98) and dated about 1770–75. The sources of the designs with which it is decorated, however, have so far not been explored.

The form of the secretaire’s pierced pagoda top is exceptional for French furniture produced during the second half of the eighteenth century. Although furniture in the Chinese taste was designed and executed in England at that time, in France chinoiserie was almost always limited to the surface decoration. Dubois may have favored this particular type of furniture, because he completed at least one other, almost identical piece.

The panels of the Linsky drop-front secretaire—in imitation lacquer, or japanning—are less unusual. After all, attempts to imitate imported Oriental lacquer goods had been made since the early seventeenth century, although no examples of early French japanning have been preserved. About 1730 it became fashionable for ébénistes to mount furniture with either Oriental or japanned panels, and a number of such pieces are extant. Jean-Félix Watin’s L’Art de faire et d’employer le vernis of 1772 sheds light on the ingredients of varnishes used and on japanning techniques. Unfortunately, the identity of most lacquer

2. Thomas Chippendale’s The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director (London, 1754) included several designs for Chinese furniture with bamboolike fretwork and pagoda roofs.
3. Parke-Bernet Galleries, sale cat. (New York, Oct. 9, 1971) lot 232, ill. The present location of this piece is unknown.
4. Marie de’ Medici employed a certain Etienne Sager who specialized in the imitation of Chinese lacquer work early in the 17th century (H. Huth, Lacquer of the West [Chicago/London, 1971] p. 12). In 1672 the Ouvrages de la Chine were established at the Gobelins as part of the Manufacture Royale des Meubles de la Couronne, and they existed until 1761 (O. Impey, Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration [London, 1977] p. 115). For information about lacquer and japanning see Huth, Lacquer of the West, chap. II.

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masters—including that of the artist responsible for the japanning on the Linsky secretaire—remains unknown.5

It is, however, possible to trace the origin of most of the secretaire's Oriental scenes. The images on the front panels are a medley based on prints executed by the French engraver Pierre Aveline in 1740 after drawings by François Boucher, notably L’Air, Le Feu, and La Terre from a set representing the four elements, and Le Toucher from a series depicting the five senses. It is interesting to see how closely the engraved examples have been transferred, in spite of such minor variations as occur in the pattern of the garments, for instance, or in the way the figures are grouped. The scenes on the secretaire correspond in size with their engraved counterparts. Only the backgrounds in the japanned panels vary from those in the prints.

On the secretaire's fall front (Figure 4), the lady leaning on a bird cage, and the parrot on a stand behind her, are derived from L’Air (Figure 5).6 The seated man facing her, with a steaming cup of tea in one hand, is a figure from Le Feu, apparently the only engraving of the Four Elements set for which Boucher's original drawing is still in existence (Figures 6, 7).7 The third figure on the fall front, a woman wearing a triangular headdress and leaning against a plant stand, with a tree growing in a container behind her, is a reversed image from La Terre (Figure 8).

In decorating the lower front of the secretaire (Figure 9), the lacquer artist turned to the same series for the left door. Here both figures in Le Feu have been reproduced: the man seated next to a stove with a cup in his hand, and the man pouring

5. The best-known French artists working in this field were the four Martin brothers, who were granted patents for making imitations "en relief dans le goût du Japon et de la Chine" in 1730 and 1744. Their varnish, consisting mainly of copal and patented in 1753, was called vernis Martin. Although many 18th-century French japanned objects are described as vernis Martin, only a few can be attributed with certainty to the Martin family (Huth, Lacquer of the West, pp. 95–96).

6. The case of a Swedish longcase clock, dated ca. 1765, shows the same chinoiserie scene against a white ground (Sotheby's, sale cat. [London, May 24, 1985] lot 98).

4. Secreteraire, fall front


9. Secrétaire, lower front

    The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 53.600.1003

...
11. Secrétaire, upper left side

12. Secrétaire, upper right side

mention, can be recognized on the upper right side of the secrétai re (Figure 12). The man with a spade in a winter landscape comes from a series of engravings representing the twelve months of the year, executed by Pierre Canot in 1759 after Pillement's designs (Figure 13). As none of the engravings bears an inscription, it is not clear which winter month this particular figure symbolizes. The panel depicting a guitar player on the lower right side can be compared to a print belonging to the same set after Pillement, but here the differences are considerable (Figures 14, 15). One wonders whether the same artist

13. Pierre Canot after Jean Pillement, engraving from a set representing the twelve months of the year, 1759. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 21.91.110
14. Secrétaire, lower right side

15. Canot after Pillement, engraving from a set representing the twelve months of the year, 1759. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 21.91.109
who so accurately followed the engravings for the scenes on the other panels would have changed a design to this extent. The woman holding a round object on the lower left side of the secretaire (Figure 16) is much smaller than the figures in the other panels and does not seem to have been derived from any chinoiserie design by Boucher or Pillement.

It is hardly surprising that the artist who supplied Dubois with the japanned panels of the Linsky secretaire chose to use images from decorative prints after two outstanding artists of the period. Designs by Boucher and Pillement provided patterns not only for weavers of silks and tapestries, cotton printers, and decorators of porcelains, but also for cabinet-makers. Marquetry panels in furniture pieces by Abraham and David Roentgen and other ébénistes are known to have been based on Boucher’s work. A chest of drawers in Paris, made by Christophe Wolff, incorporates marquetry scenes that are faithfully copied from Boucher’s Four Elements and Five Senses. An English writing cabinet in the Metropolitan Museum displays marquetry derived from Pillement’s series of the twelve months. Moreover, between 1758 and 1762 a number of Pillement prints appeared in The Ladies Amusement; or, Whole Art of Japanning Made Easy, published in London by Robert Sayer. That this manual was successful in offering suitable ornament for japanners is illustrated by several objects with chinoiserie based on Pillement’s designs. Future research will undoubtedly yield additional examples of the influence of Boucher and Pillement on the decoration of eighteenth-century European furniture.

8. G. de Bellaigue, “Engravings and the French Eighteenth Century Marqueteur—1,” Burlington Magazine 107 (1965) p. 249, fig. 42; this chest of drawers, dated ca. 1775, is in the collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. For work by Abraham and David Roentgen see H. Huth, Roentgen Furniture: Abraham and David Roentgen, European Cabinet-makers (London/New York, 1974) figs. 88–90, 135, 212; only fig. 212 is identified as based on designs by Boucher.