

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

DANIELLE O. KISLUK-GROSHEIDE

*Assistant Curator, Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

AMONG THE PIECES of French furniture in the Jack and Belle Linsky Collection at the Metropolitan Museum is a painted and gilded drop-front secrétaire 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 secrétaire'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—I DUBOIS JME—the secrétaire has been attributed to the *maître-ébéniste* René Dubois (1737–98) and dated about 1770–75.¹ The sources of the designs with which it is decorated, however, have so far not been explored.

The form of the secrétaire'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,² in France chinoiserie were 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.³

The panels of the Linsky drop-front secrétaire—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.⁴ 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

1. Both the cabinetmaker Jacques Dubois (1693–1763) and his son René, who became *maître-ébéniste* in 1755, used this stamp. F. B. J. Watson, *Louis XVI Furniture* (London, 1960) p. 122, no. 90, attributed this secrétaire to René. See also W. Rieder's detailed account of the piece in *The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1984) pp. 216–217, no. 132.

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.

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

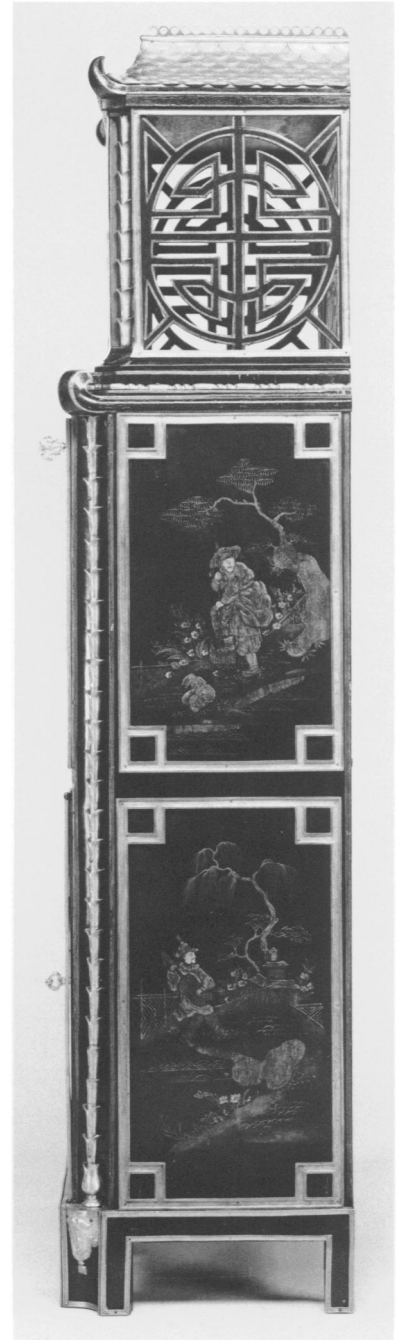
- 1–3. René Dubois, drop-front secretaire, French, ca. 1770–75, stamped on the back on the upper right side: 1 DUBOIS JME. Painted and varnished oak; interior veneered with mahogany and purplewood; gilt-bronze mounts, 60 × 26¾ × 13⅜ in. (152.5 × 68 × 34 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982.60.57



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 *verniss Martin*. Although many 18th-century French japanned objects are described as *verniss 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 (Sothby's, sale cat. [London, May 24, 1985] lot 98).

7. J. Bean with the assistance of L. Turčić, *15th–18th Century French Drawings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1986) p. 35, no. 26.





4. Secrétaire, fall front

5. Pierre Aveline after François Boucher, *L'Air*, 1740. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 49.108.2(33)

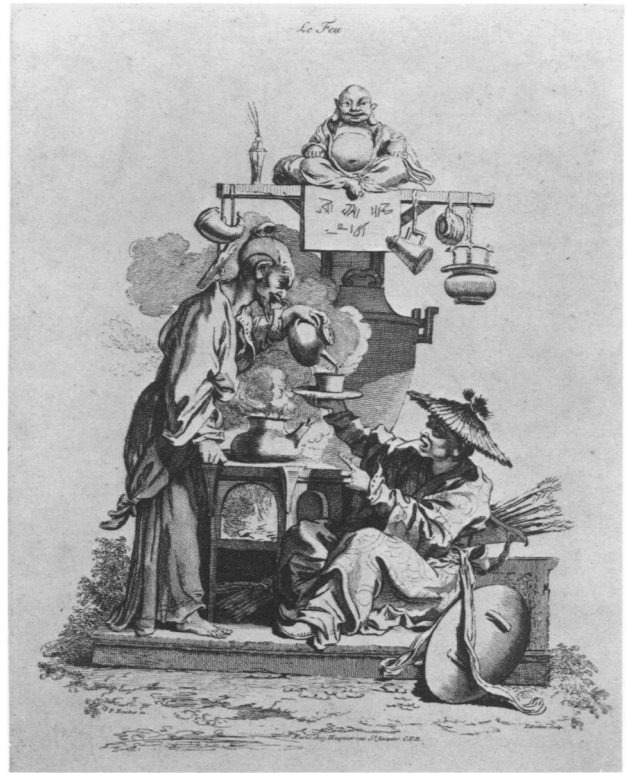
6. Aveline after Boucher, *Le Feu*, 1740. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 49.108.2(35)

7. Boucher, *The Element of Fire*. Red chalk, $13\frac{3}{4} \times 11\frac{1}{8}$ in. (35 × 28.8 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Van Day Truex Fund, 1984.51.1

8. Aveline after Boucher, *La Terre*, 1740. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 49.108.2(36)



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9. Secrétaire, lower front

10. Aveline after Boucher, *Le Toucher*, 1740. Engraving.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane
Dick Fund, 53.600.1003

tea (Figure 6). The pair on the right door, a seated Oriental with a cat and at his side a girl holding up a second small animal, are taken from *Le Toucher* (Figure 10), in the *Five Senses* series.

The sides of the secretaire also have japanned panels with chinoiserie designs, one of which may be after Boucher. The man stirring a bowl on the upper left side (Figure 11) is possibly adapted from the Chinaman serving tea in *Le Feu* (Figure 6). Except for the raised arm with the teapot, the overall pose of both figures is basically the same, and the bowl in the panel is set on a structure reminiscent of the stove in *Le Feu*. A composition by Jean Pillement (1728–1808), the well-known designer of chinoiserie orna-





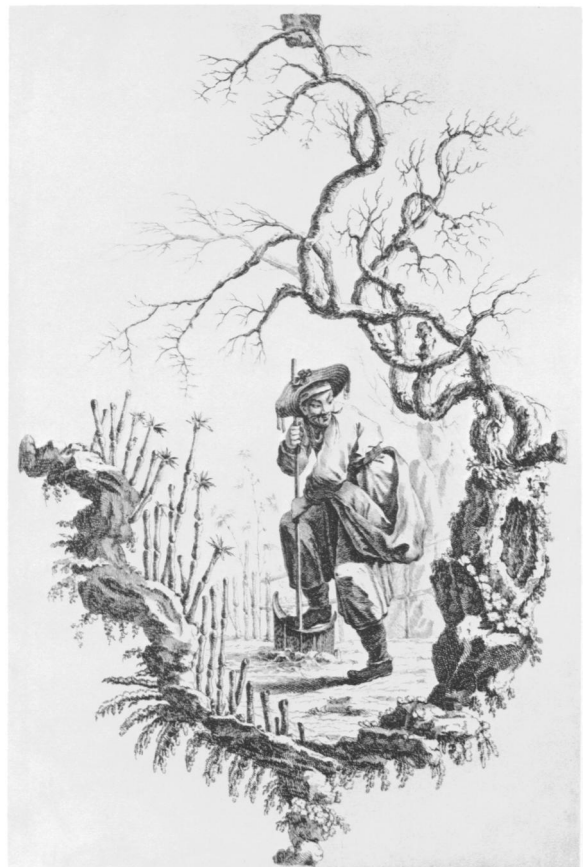
11. Secretaire, upper left side

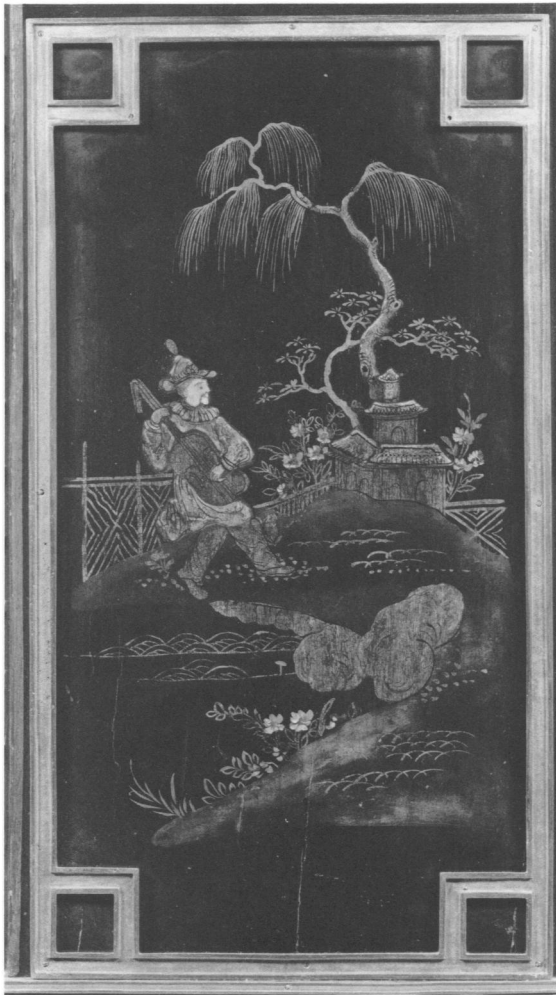


12. Secretaire, upper right side

ment, can be recognized on the upper right side of the secretaire (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. Secretaire, 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



16. Secrétaire, lower left side

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*.⁸ An English writing cabinet in the Metropolitan Museum displays marquetry derived from Pillement's series of the twelve months.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 Marqueter—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.

9. Acc. no. 64.101.1127, ca. 1770–75. See *Highlights of the Untermyer Collection of English and Continental Decorative Arts*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977) pp. 94–95, no. 172, ill.

10. See, for example, D. Kisluk-Grosheide, "A Japanned Cabinet in The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *MMJ* 19/20 (1984–85) pp. 85–95.