European Furniture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Highlights of the Collection

EUROPEAN FURNITURE
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Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide · Wolfram Koeppe · William Rieder

Photography by Joseph Coscia, Jr.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of James Parker

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Jacket illustration: French secretary on stand, ca. 1790 (no. 89)
Frontispiece: Detail of an early-seventeenth-century South German cupboard (no. 8)
Endpapers: Detail of the top of a French writing desk, ca. 1685 (no. 17)

European Furniture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Foreword

Visitors to the European Sculpture and Decorative Arts galleries and period rooms at The Metropolitan Museum of Art enjoy one of the finest collections of European furniture in the world. The curatorial staff of the department as well as outside specialists research and regularly write about these objects in essays for scholarly journals and exhibition catalogues, and the new information reaches the general public by way of wall labels, websites, and audio tours. Yet neither the collection as a whole nor a selection of its most interesting pieces has ever been the subject of a significant publication.

This eagerly awaited volume presents 103 superb pieces of furniture. Every aspect of these Museum objects is examined, from their craftsmanship to their collection history. The works are of many types and styles, but all were chosen for their exceptionally high level of quality. Most are of French, English, German, or Italian origin, reflecting major areas of departmental strength, but there are more than a few outstanding examples from other countries as well. They range in date from the Renaissance, through the collection's high point in the eighteenth century, to the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The three authors of this volume—Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, Wolfram Koeppe, and William Rieder—have long experience of this collection, as their numerous publications listed in the bibliography attest. All three began their careers at the Museum during the time when James Parker, who died in 2001 and to whom this volume is dedicated, was the principal curator of furniture in the department.

It is a pleasure to recognize the role played in the genesis of this book by my predecessor, Olga Raggio. She supervised the acquisition of many of the objects discussed here, and her expertise was a valuable resource for the authors. In the field of decorative arts, curators work closely with conservators and scientists. The contributions of members of the Departments of Objects Conservation and Scientific Research are gratefully acknowledged. New photography is an important element of this book. Joseph Coscia, Jr.'s images reveal to the reader not only the beauty of the furniture but also the intricacies of each piece's fabrication. Multiple views and details are an invaluable aid to comprehending furniture's many aspects. Accordingly, a CD-ROM of supplementary images has been added to this volume—for the first time in a Museum publication. None of this would have been possible without the approval of Director Philippe de Montebello, whose insistence on excellence set the standard for this as for all projects in the Museum.

As the introductory chapter documents, the Metropolitan's European furniture collection reflects the taste and generosity of a number of private collectors, beginning a century ago. One of the guiding lights of its formation and enrichment, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, remains an inspiration to and active supporter of the department. Through the Friends of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, under the presidency of Frank R. Richardson, she and a number of other collectors generously subsidized some expenses of this publication. Another "Friend," Andrew Augenblick, made an additional gift. The authors and the department are grateful to all of these supporters for making possible the publication of this splendid and timely book, which we hope will be the first in a series on the departmental collections.

Ian Wardropper
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Chairman,
European Sculpture and Decorative Arts

Acknowledgments

The authors are most grateful to Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum, for his enthusiastic support of this publication from its inception. Special thanks are due to Ian Wardropper, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Chairman of the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, for his unfailing encouragement.

We express our appreciation to Shirley Allison, Elizabeth Lee Berszinn, Roger Haapala, Marva Harvey, Robert Kaufmann, Jeffrey Munger, Marina Nudel, Erin E. Pick, Olga Raggio, Melissa Smith, Clare Vincent, Melinda Watt, and all the other members of our department for their assistance in various ways. In particular we thank Rose Whitehill for compiling the glossary. We wish to acknowledge the efforts of former and current departmental technicians William Kopp, Eric Peluso, and Bedel Tiscareño, who safely transported pieces of furniture for examination, treatment, and photography, and Denny Stone, Collections Manager, who coordinated many of these moves. We are grateful to Charlotte Vignon and Florian Knothe, Annette Kade Art History Fellows, for their contributions.

Every art book must have good illustrations. Thanks to Joseph Coscia, Jr., Associate Chief Photographer at the Metropolitan, this book has the very best. We appreciate the kind assistance of Barbara Bridgers, General Manager for Imaging and Photography, The Photograph Studio, and her staff, especially that of Robert Goldman and Thomas Ling. We are much indebted to Lawrence Becker, Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge, Objects Conservation Department, and to conservators Linda Borsch, Nancy C. Britton, Marijn Manuels, Pascale Patris, and Richard E. Stone. We are especially grateful to conservator Mechthild Baumeister for her willingness to share her time and expertise helping us to analyze various woods and explaining technical aspects of furniture construction.

In the Editorial Department, we thank John P. O'Neill, Editor in Chief, for supervising every aspect of the book's editorial preparation and production and for allowing us to miss several deadlines. Special thanks go to our unsurpassed editor, Ellyn Allison, who, in her very kind and self-effacing manner, smoothed out the manuscripts of three authors who sometimes contradicted each other. Without the painstaking efforts of Jayne Kuchna, the references in the endnotes and the bibliography would have been filled with errors and omissions. Minjee Cho carefully directed the setting, layout, and revisions of the type. Our warm thanks go to Douglas J. Malicki, who oversaw the production of the book and the CD-ROM, and to Peter Antony, Chief Production Manager. Bruce Campbell was responsible for the elegant design. We are grateful to Catarina Tsang and David Weinstock for their fine work on the CD-ROM and to Elaine Luthy for her meticulously prepared index.

Kenneth Soehner, Arthur K. Watson Chief Librarian, and the staff of the Thomas J. Watson Library made it possible for us to carry out the necessary research by ordering new publications for the project and accommodating countless requests for interlibrary loans. We owe many thanks as well to archivist Jeanie M. James for carefully checking crucial facts.

Family, friends, and colleagues in other institutions have read our manuscripts, shared information, and offered useful advice. We are particularly indebted to Janice Barnard, Christian Baulez, Renate Eikelmann, C. Willemijn Fock, John Hardy, Eugene J. Kisluk, Jörn Lohmann, Michelangelo Lupo, Edmée Reit, Bertrand Rondot, Achim Stiegel, and Lucy Wood.

Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, Wolfram Koeppe, and William Rieder
Curators, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts

Notes to the Reader

The Book

One hundred and three pieces of furniture in the Museum's collection are featured in this book. Each is shown in a large color illustration that bears the number of the object and its entry. All other illustrations in the entries are numbered consecutively, from Figure 1 in the first entry to Figure 138 in the last. The illustrations in the introductory chapter are not numbered.

In the entry headings, information about each object is always given in the same sequence; the omission of any line of information, such as the name of the maker, indicates that the information is not available or that the line is not applicable. The name of each object is given in English, followed by the name in the original language if that name is also in common use. Birth and death dates of makers, designers, and others who worked on the furniture are given in the heading when they are known. Life dates for other significant persons are given in the text. Measurements are given to the nearest eighth of an inch, with the height preceding the width, preceding the depth.

The author's initials follow the text of each entry. Translations of quoted material are by the authors unless otherwise stated in the notes. When "left" and "right" are used in descriptions of furniture, the viewpoint is always the observer's.

Bibliographical references are cited in the notes in abbreviated form. The corresponding full citations are given in the bibliography.

The symbol CD is used in the entries to indicate that a pertinent image may be found on the CD-ROM (see below). These references are to images that illustrate a point in the text or enrich a description of the furniture in a way that the book illustrations do not do. There are many more images on the CD-ROM than are referred to in the entries; the reader is encouraged to use the disk whenever possible to enhance enjoyment and appreciation of the book.

The CD-ROM

Additional images are accessible on a CD-ROM disk in a sleeve at the back of the book. They include full views, zooms, and details of the featured pieces and some additional images of matching furniture. Warranty, license-agreement, and permitted and prohibited use information is given on the last screen of the CD-ROM. The sequence of objects in the book is the same as that on the CD-ROM. Go to "Contents" (the second screen) to find a link to the object you want to study in greater detail.

Following are instructions for installing and running the CD-ROM:

Minimum System Requirements (Mac): 660MHz G3 running Mac OS x 10.2 with 256 MB memory and a CD-ROM drive. **To open**: double click the MET file located on the CD-ROM.

Minimum System Requirements (PC): Windows 2000/XP. 1.2 GHz (2 GHz recommended) with 256 MB of memory (512 MB recommended) and a CD-ROM drive. **To open**: The file should auto-run. If it does not, double-click the MET.exe file located on the CD-ROM.

Contents

European Furniture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A Brief History of the Collection

DANIËLLE O. KISLUK-GROSHEIDE

The collection of postmedieval European furniture at The Metropolitan Museum of Art bears witness to the sophisticated taste of several generations of generous donors and committed trustees, as well as to the foresight and connoisseurship of astute Museum curators. Its range and depth are impressive, and as this book attests, it boasts a wealth of objects that are not only exemplary in their beauty and craftsmanship but also of great historical and cultural interest. Most of the pieces discussed in this volume are currently on display and are enjoyed by thousands of visitors each year in a series of permanent galleries and in European period-room settings for which the Museum is equally renowned.

In a statement issued to the public on 3 March 1871, the founders of the Metropolitan declared that the institution should have among its holdings representative examples not only of painting and sculpture but also of the decorative arts. It was their intention and special wish "to begin at an early day the formation of a collection of industrial art, of objects of utility to which decorative art has been applied, ornamental metal-work, carving in wood, ivory and stone, painted glass, glass vessels, pottery, enamel, and all other materials." The Museum officers further observed that the political and social changes then taking place in Europe made that time a particularly favorable one for purchasing decorative items and that the need to form such a collection as tasteful models for "our mechanics and students" was most pressing. The collection would clarify for the design student "what can be done in art, and where the limits are set[,] to overpass which is excess and consequent failure."

Although European furniture was not specifically mentioned in the statement, it must certainly have been the founders' intention to acquire in this area as well. Gifts and purchases of European furniture during the first three decades of the Museum's existence were neither numerous nor exceptionally memorable, but that situation began to change after the turn of the century, when several significant German pieces were acquired. In 1903 an ivory collector's cabinet (no. 13) made in Augsburg between 1655 and 1659, but initially thought to be eighteenth-century Italian, was bought at the estate sale of Henry G. Marquand (1819–1902). A discriminating collector and patron (see also the entry for no. 103), Marquand was one of the founding trustees and benefactors of the Museum and had served as its president from 1889 to 1902. Two years later, an imposing Nuremberg *Fassadenschrank* (cupboard with an architectural facade) was added to the collections (no. 8). Both of these purchases, and many others over the years, were made possible through a generous endowment fund established by Jacob S. Rogers (d. 1901), a manufacturer of locomotives in Paterson, New Jersey, for the purpose of acquiring art objects and books. With other funds, such as those received in 1917 from Isaac D. Fletcher (ca. 1845–1917), a director of coal companies, the Museum made additional acquisitions of furniture.

A number of exceptional gifts and bequests have made the Metropolitan's collection one of the most important in the world. Its initial strength in French furniture was the result of a gift in 1906 from the financier and philanthropist J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), who was elected the Museum's president in 1904. Earlier in 1906, Morgan had purchased, for four million French francs, the collections of French eighteenth-century and medieval art assembled by the Parisian architect, decorator, and ceramist Georges Hoentschel (1855–1915). Both collections were housed in a special gallery built for that purpose on the boulevard Flandrin in Paris (see illustration below). Whereas the medieval works of art were merely a loan, Morgan presented the French decorative artworks to the Museum outright. By May 1907, 364 packing cases containing the Hoentschel collections were stored in the Museum's basement. The eighteenth-century portion, comprising more than 1,600 objects, included furniture, several pieces of which had a royal provenance (see no. 46); a study collection of woodwork; and some 750 gilt-bronze mounts. This unrivaled gift led not only to the establishment of a Department of Decorative Arts, with Rembrandt scholar William R. Valentiner as curator, but also to the creation of a new wing designed by the architects McKim, Mead and White, which opened to the public on 15 March, 1910 (see illustration on page 3). Over the years, the department underwent many changes. In 1935 its present scope

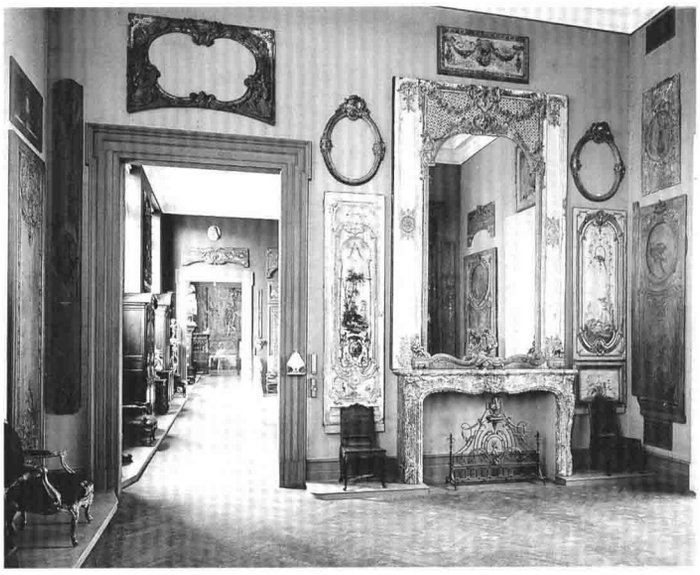
Photograph from an undated album showing some of the French objects in the Georges Hoentschel collection at 58, boulevard Flandrin, Paris.

was determined, and in 1977 it assumed its current title, Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts—ESDA, for short.

Significant pieces of European furniture entered the Museum through the generosity of other New York donors, such as William K. Vanderbilt (1848–1920). In his bequest, Vanderbilt left the Metropolitan a famous black-lacquer and gilt-bronze secretary and matching commode made by the French cabinetmaker Jean-Henri Riesener for Queen Marie Antoinette (nos. 82, 83). Today they are possibly the best-known pieces of royal furniture outside France. Subsequent benefactors presented outstanding objects that had also been commissioned for the use of the unfortunate queen. In 1941 Ann Payne Blumenthal (d. 1973), the second wife of George Blumenthal (1858–1941), a trustee of the Museum and for seven years its president, donated a daybed, armchair, and fire screen by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené for Marie Antoinette's Cabinet de Toilette at the Château de Saint-Cloud (nos. 86–88). Three years later, Susan Dwight Bliss (d. 1966) enriched the collections with an armchair from Versailles by François Foliot II (no. 74), and at the end of the decade the Museum received a mechanical table (no. 77) from the estate of the stockbroker and well-known collector of old master paintings Jules S. Bache (1861–1944). This last piece was the second table by Riesener with a Versailles provenance to enter the Museum. An earlier table by the queen's favorite cabinetmaker (no. 73) had been an astute purchase at the 1932 sale that dispersed the contents of the Blumenthal residence in Paris.

The cultural foundation established in 1929 by the chain-store magnate, art collector, and philanthropist Samuel H. Kress (1863–1955) made an unprecedented gift to the Metropolitan in 1958. Consisting mostly of French decorative artworks, it included many delightful pieces of Sèvres porcelain and no fewer than seventeen porcelain-mounted objects, a large number of which had been amassed by a banker to the British royal family, Sir Charles Mills (1792–1872). The generosity of the Kress Foundation has made the Museum the foremost repository in the world of porcelain-mounted furniture and the envy of many another institution (see nos. 63, 67).

Meanwhile, the fledgling Department of Decorative Arts was augmenting the Museum's holdings of English furniture. The pace was slow at first but quickened markedly in 1914 with a bequest from former assistant secretary of state John L. Cadwalader (d. 1914). A member of the Museum's board of trustees from 1901 until his death, Cadwalader left the Metropolitan thirty-three pieces of British eighteenth-century furniture and twice that many examples of Chelsea porcelain. Growth in this field continued with the 1918 purchase of twenty-three English objects, mostly chairs (for example, no. 19), from the collection of George S. Palmer (1855–1934), a textiles manufacturer in New London, Connecticut. Palmer's outstanding collection of American furniture was acquired by the Museum as well. In 1924 three permanent galleries were installed to house the Museum's by then considerable holdings of English furniture, which ranged in style from Elizabethan to Sheraton. They formed a modest complement to the American Wing, which had opened on the north side of the Museum the same year. The spacious new galleries (see illustration on page 4, above) were quickly filled with additional purchases, among them—in 1926—a striking Palladian side table attributed to the carver Matthias Lock (no. 43). Also in 1926 the Museum acquired the so-called Backgammon Players Cabinet (no. 99). Decorated with a painting by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, it had been made by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company for the London International Exhibition of 1862. Appreciation of nineteenth-century exhibition pieces was still in its infancy—there was, in fact, a general contempt for furniture from the Victorian era—thus, this acquisition showed remarkable foresight.



The French decorative-arts galleries in the Morgan Wing at the Metropolitan Museum shortly after they opened, in 1910.

During the Depression the Museum obtained two outstanding mid-eighteenth-century rooms: the Dining Room from Kirtlington Park, Oxfordshire, and the Dining Room from Lansdowne House, in London. They were kept in storage until the 1950s, when a third example, the Tapestry Room from Croome Court, Worcestershire, was given by the Kress Foundation (see fig. 93). The installation of all three period rooms prompted additional purchases and donations of English furniture, such as the marquetry-decorated cabinet on stand from the Marion E. and Leonard A. Cohn collection (no. 24). None, however, shaped the Museum's holdings of English art so markedly as did the many gifts and large bequest of Irwin Untermyer (1886–1973). A justice of the appellate court in New York and for many years a Museum trustee, Untermyer collected voraciously in the fields of European bronzes and English silver, needlepoint, and porcelain, but his great passion was clearly English furniture. Numerous pieces made

One of the galleries of English furniture at the Metropolitan Museum in 1924.

of oak, walnut, and mahogany—all of very high quality—that once furnished Judge Untermyer's Fifth Avenue apartment (see illustration below) now line the walls of the Museum's Annie Laurie Aitken Galleries. A selection is included in this publication. One of the most distinguished is a beautiful mahogany china table in the style of Thomas Chippendale (no. 55).

In 1973 the news of an unexpected bequest reached the Museum. The gift included not only Impressionist and Postimpressionist paintings and a choice group of German silver and porcelain pieces that would bring depth to an area already well represented in the Museum but also a splendid assemblage of Rococo furniture from southern Germany and France. A warm regard for the Metropolitan, fostered by furniture curator James Parker, had convinced Emma Alexander Sheafer (1891–1973), the widow of stockbroker Lesley G. Sheafer (d. 1956), to make this princely gift. Although their initial interest had been in contemporary American paintings and furniture, Mr. and Mrs. Sheafer shifted their attention after World War II to French and German art. They made purchases in Hamburg and Munich at a time when the German decorative arts were generally not fashionable in America. Mrs. Sheafer's bequest included a unique set of garden-room seat furniture from Schloss Seehof near Bamberg (see no. 61). It had graced the Sheafers' apartment in Manhattan for many years (see illustration on page 5, above).

Quite early in its history, the Museum bought some magnificent Italian Renaissance pieces. One of them, a Florentine marriage chest, or *cassone*, with a painted battle scene inset on the front, was a particularly fortunate purchase in 1916 (no. 2). Dating to the 1460s, it is one of a very few *cassoni* that have been preserved with their painted decoration intact. Other notable Italian acquisitions were, in 1930, a late-fifteenth-century *sgabello* chair and, in 1958, a magnificent inlaid marble and *pietre dure* table (nos. 5, 7). A rare example of a practical form invested with humanistic meaning, the former is illustrated in many books on furniture. The latter was designed to fill a focal position in the state rooms of the Farnese Palace in Rome. Important Italian objects from the Baroque and Rococo periods made their way into the Museum during the late 1960s and early 1970s through the generosity of Lilliana Teruzzi (1899–1987), a former opera singer. While living in Italy before World War II, she purchased such outstanding pieces of Roman furniture as a highly sculptural display case and a pair of striking fourteen-foot-high bookcases from the Palazzo Rospigliosi (nos. 15, 33). An Italian table reflecting the late-eighteenth-century fashion for ancient Egyptian art (no. 70) was a gift of the investment banker and art collector Robert Lehman (1892–1969) in 1941, the year he became a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum. It was the only Lehman object to enter the European decorative-arts department. The collection assembled by Robert and his father, Philip Lehman, known for its strength in Italian Renaissance and early Northern Renaissance paintings, old master drawings, and works in majolica and Venetian glass,

The entrance hall of Judge Irwin Untermyer's apartment at 960 Fifth Avenue, New York, in 1974.

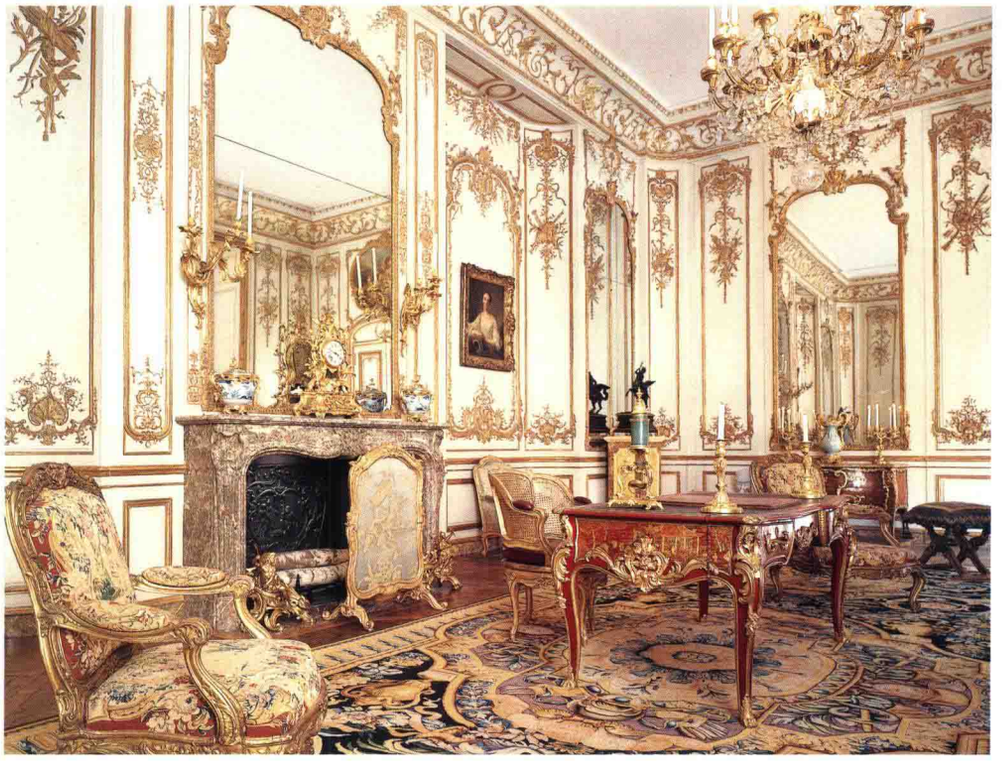
The dining room in Mrs. Emma Sheafer's apartment at 45 East Sixty-sixth Street, New York, in 1974.

was to be housed in a special wing at the Museum named for the donor that opened in 1975.

Old master paintings, Renaissance bronzes, porcelain figures from various European manufactories, and furniture came in 1982 as a gift from Belle Linsky (d. 1987). She and her husband, Jack Linsky (1897–1980), who had developed a modest stationery business into a large and successful corporation, amassed their diverse and exemplary collection largely in New York. Outstanding pieces of French furniture—several by makers whose work was not yet displayed in the Museum, such as a commode by the French *ébéniste* Charles Cressent (no. 44) and a mechanical table ordered from Jean-François Oeben by Madame de Pompadour (no. 60)—further fleshed out the Museum's holdings of French art (see illustration at right).

By far the most important donors to the Museum in the area of French furniture and decorative arts have been Mr. and Mrs. Wrightsman. The discerning taste, specialized interest, and unsurpassed generosity of the oil executive Charles B. Wrightsman (1895–1986) and his wife, Jayne, have made the Museum's collection of French furniture and furnishings world-renowned. Splendid pieces, frequently with a royal association (see nos. 57, 84, 89), are on view in the period rooms and permanent galleries that fittingly bear the Wrightsmans' name (see illustration on page 6). Many objects were gifts from their private collection, one of the finest in the country, which they began to assemble in 1952. Others were acquired with the Museum in mind and paid for by the Wrightsman Fund. Widowed in 1986, Mrs.Wrightsman, who is a trustee of the Museum and was for many years the chairman of the Acquisitions Committee, has continued her support of and interest in the institution, as the marvelous additions of the past two decades illustrate. For instance, the installation in 1987 of a state bedchamber—a room devoted to the arts of the French Baroque—led to the purchase not only of an exquisite marquetry table by Pierre Gole (no. 14) but also of a unique writing desk by Alexandre-Jean Oppenordt, one of the few surviving pieces of furniture executed for Louis XIV (no. 17). More recent acquisitions that were made possible by Mrs. Wrightsman have not been restricted to French works of art. They include a rare English gilt-wood chandelier and an exquisite table made almost entirely of Berlin porcelain (nos. 30, 96).

The Jack and Belle Linsky salon at the Metropolitan Museum in 1984. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982.



The Varengeville Room, from the Hôtel Varengeville, 217, boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris, part of the Wrightsman Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum about 1995. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, 1963 (63.228.1).

Despite rising prices and strong competition among institutions worldwide for major pieces of furniture, the Museum has been able to secure objects of exceptional beauty and historical interest for its collections during the past two decades. The purchase in 1995 of a floral-marquetry cabinet on stand attributed to Jan van Mekeren (no. 27), a welcome addition to the small group of Dutch objects already in the Museum, reflects a departmental determination to expand in areas that are less well represented. In 2002 the successful pursuit of a cut-steel center table made at the Tula armory and formerly at Pavlosk Palace (no. 79), for instance, brought the first piece of what is hoped will be a representative collection of Russian furniture to the Museum. Efforts to improve the nineteenth-century holdings, stimulated by the planning of the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Galleries for nineteenth-century sculpture and decorative arts, which opened in 1991, are gradually beginning to pay dividends. Through gifts and purchases, several important examples have enriched the department. One of the most notable of these is an extraordinary Merovingian-style armoire made by Charles-Guillaume Diehl, Emmanuel Frémiet, and Jean Brandely (no. 101). Future acquisitions will undoubtedly fill other gaps and further augment the superior collection of European furniture that is among the glories of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Over the years, various curators and their colleagues in other institutions have written about aspects of the furniture holdings in the Museum's *Bulletin* and *Journal*, in other periodicals, and in exhibition catalogues, many of which are listed in the bibliography of this book. Between 1958 and 1973 Yvonne Hackenbroch and Sir Francis J. B. Watson compiled comprehensive multivolume catalogues of the Untermyer and Wrightsman collections, respectively. In 1964 the furniture donated to the Museum by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation was published with the rest of the gift in a volume written by James Parker, Edith Appleton Standen, and Carl Christian Dauterman. And, celebrating the opening of the Linsky Galleries, *The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, a catalogue of both the fine and the decorative arts, was issued in 1984. Though these are all important scholarly works, they are specialized. Given the importance of the European furniture assembled at the Metropolitan, it is surprising that no publication has yet been devoted to the collection as a whole or even to a selection of some of the choicest objects. We are therefore pleased to present this volume to the public and hope that the glorious furnishings discussed and illustrated on its pages and in the accompanying CD-ROM will receive the widespread recognition that they deserve.

Highlights of the Collection

1.

Cupboard (*credenza* or *armadio*)

Italian (Florence or Siena), ca. 1450–80
Poplar wood and walnut inlaid with various woods; iron locks, handles, and key
H. 45½ in. (115.6 cm), w. 86 in. (218.4 cm), d. 25 in. (63.5 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1945
45.39

Like many of his contemporaries, the historian Benedetto Dei (1418–1492) admired the illusionistic effects that the Florentine artisans who specialized in wood inlay, or intarsia, were achieving. In his *Memorie* (1470) he remarked that he had been in Florence at the time when these craftsmen began making "intarsia perspectives and figures in [such] a way that they seemed [to be] painted."[1] By this he meant that, like the Florentine painters, they had learned to construct scenes, objects, and three-dimensional patterns according to the rules of perspective.

The intarsia cutters worked with a "palette" of small pieces of wood of many different types and colors, inserting and gluing them into cutout hollows of a wooden matrix, such as the walnut carcase of this cupboard. The woods used for intarsia were generally available locally from timber merchants, or they might be supplied by the patron—perhaps a wealthy individual who had ordered a chest inlaid with scrolls in the Moorish style, or a religious body or communal institution that required doors, cabinets, or choir stalls inlaid with pictorial scenes.[2] Federigo da Montefeltro (1422–1482), the duke of Urbino, had the walls of his small study, or *studiolo*, at Gubbio covered entirely with intarsiated paneling, which is today one of the glories of the Metropolitan's collection.[3]

Several of the decorative motifs seen in the intarsia of the Museum's cupboard are executed in a form of inlay called *tarsia a toppo* (see fig. 1). For this type of work the craftsman would assemble hundreds of tiny pieces of wood of different species and various geometric shapes, glue them together to form a solid block, and cut them into slices, which he then inserted in geometric patterns into a solid wooden matrix.[4] That the work of manipulating the minute pieces required intense concentration and extraordinary dexterity is evident when one looks below the doors of this cupboard at the base, whose pattern recalls water- or wind-driven machinery or bridges. The perspectival and mechanical studies of Leonardo da Vinci, Piero della Francesca, and Francesco di Giorgio come inevitably to mind.[5] The equally intricate *tarsia a toppo* inlay on the doors is in the abstract Moorish interlace style, reflecting influence from the Islamic world.[6]

If the *tarsia a toppo* decoration on the cupboard attests to the skill of the human hand, the large, finely grained walnut panels in the center of the doors may be said to represent the simple beauty of natural materials. Like the slabs of alabaster on top of the Farnese table (see the entry for no. 7) they center and balance the whirl of ornament around them.

Credenze (sideboards or cupboards) are frequently mentioned in Italian inventories of the fifteenth century, and there is pictorial evidence that the form with two doors was fully developed by this time.[7] For example, a painting of 1482 by Filippino Lippi (ca. 1457–1504) shows the Virgin Mary kneeling in a contemporary bedroom setting beside a cupboard much like the Museum's example.[8] The type developed from simple trestle tables that were set against a wall and often covered with sumptuous textiles.[9] The undecorated top of the Museum's cupboard may once have been covered by an Arabian or Coptic carpet with colorful interlace border designs like those that are imitated in the door inlay.[10] Such textiles would have made an appropriate backdrop for the display of choice objects and fine plate. A similar "credenza of cupboard form" appears in a Venetian woodcut of 1517 showing a room for dining and living.[11] The doors of the cupboard are ajar, suggesting that precious and practical objects like metal candlesticks or the large basin standing on top could be stored within.

Rather than furnishing a domestic interior such as the two just mentioned, the Museum's cupboard may have been made for a church or monastery, where it would have been used to secure embroidered vestments or liturgical vessels. Neither the wrought-iron handles on the doors nor the design of the inlay nor any other detailing, however, identify the piece as a "sacristy cabinet," as it was classified when the Museum acquired it.[12] The ornamental vocabulary of the intarsia cutters tended to be much the same for ecclesiastical and secular furniture.

In whatever setting it found a place, undoubtedly the cupboard's role was to affirm the prestige of the owner through the beauty of its craftsmanship and to protect the contents committed to it from thievish fingers. By good fortune, it is still accompanied by a contemporary, finely crafted key that fits the iron locks perfectly.[CD] WK

1. Quoted in Wilmering 1999, p. 3. See also C. E. Gilbert 1988, pp. 202–3.
2. Wilmering 1999, p. 3.
3. Acc. no. 39.153. On its acquisition by the Museum, see Raggio 1999, pp. 3–11.
4. Wilmering 1999, p. 64; see also pp. 68–73.
5. Toni 1987; Raggio 1999, p. 125, fig. 5-82, p. 155, fig. 5-131.
6. Patterns similar to those in the *toppo* borders of the Museum's cupboard doors appear on the paneling in the sacristy of Santa Croce in Florence.
7. P. Thornton 1991, pp. 205–29.
8. Filippino Lippi, *Annunciation*, Museo Civico, San Gimignano; ibid., p. 182, pl. 200.
9. Frick Collection 2003, p. 470 (entry by Wolfram Koeppe).
10. Gruber 1994, pp. 54–57, 70, 110; and Paolini 2002, pp. 70–72, no. 10, detail photograph on p. 71.
11. The term was used by Peter Thornton in a discussion of the many forms and uses of these cabinets; see P. Thornton 1991, p. 196 (the woodcut is illustrated as pl. 220).
12. On "sacristy cabinets," see Massinelli 1993, pl. XV; Paolini 2002, pp. 57–61, nos. 4, 5. See also a related "sacristy" cabinet in the Detroit Institute of Arts (acc. no. 35.60).