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Self-Fashioning, Nation, and History in Marie-Antoinette's Bergère
from the Château de Saint-Cloud

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

Marie Antoinette, as the last queen of France, is arguably the most overdetermined personality of the eighteenth-century French aristocracy. Ample scholarly attention has recently been paid to understanding how queendom was both inscribed and subverted in her personal appearance and comportment. Less studied is the manner in which her furniture and personal spaces negotiated her relationship to the absolute French monarchy, especially those commissioned in the final years of the *ancien régime*. Analyzing an embroidered *bergère à la reine* designed by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené for Marie Antoinette's toilette at the Château de Saint Cloud as a case study—both in its original context and in the restaged Crillon Room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—this thesis argues that furniture played an integral role in aristocratic self-fashioning and continues to both create and convey malleable historical meanings today.

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Self-Fashioning, Nation, and History in Marie-Antoinette's *Bergère* from the Château de Saint-Cloud

Introduction

The late Karl Lagerfeld, figurehead of an international luxury goods empire and a modern embodiment of Rococo sensibility, suggested in 1989 that “[n]othing so well represents the soul of a whole century as the carved wooden chair of eighteenth-century France.”¹ If one is to take Lagerfeld seriously—and I think one should—to engage intellectually with seating furniture is to reveal the internal tension underlying the heavily mythologized and arguably overdetermined histories and personalities of the French aristocracy. Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793), as the last queen of France, is subject to a disproportionate amount of this imaginative conjecture. Ample scholarly attention has recently been paid to understanding how queenship was both inscribed and subverted in her personal appearance and comportment. Less studied is the manner in which her furniture and personal spaces negotiated her relationship to the absolute French monarchy, especially those commissioned in the final years of the *ancien régime*.

There is theoretical precedent for approaching eighteenth-century French furniture both as an index of cultural conventions and as social actors in the scholarship of Mimi Hellman. Her theory of the work of leisure posits that “elite social personae” were produced, delimited by, and replicated through the use of luxury furniture.² Objects in this system of social relations were not owned, but performed. Taking a 1788 *bergère a la reine*—a carved wooden chair—commissioned by Marie-Antoinette and produced by the royal *menuisier* Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (1748-1803) for the Château de Saint-Cloud as a case study provides an opportunity to isolate and denaturalize the work of leisure and its relationship to extravagant expressions of aristocratic

¹ Karl Lagerfeld, foreword to *The Art of the Chair in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Bill G.B. Pallot (Paris: ACR-Gismondi, 1989), 10.

² Mimi Hellman, “Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 4 (1999): 416.

luxury and self-fashioning across time. By analyzing the visual, material, and relational significance of Marie-Antoinette's *bergère à la reine* both in its original context at Saint-Cloud and in the restaged Boudoir from the Hotel de Crillon at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this thesis argues that furniture played a role in aristocratic self-fashioning and continues to both create and convey malleable historical meanings today [Figure 1].

The *cabinet de toilette*, a highly specialized room where aristocrats were expected to engage in a public dressing ritual, is where the work of leisure most clearly manifests. Hellman and others have pointed out the *table de toilette* was the central object of this ritual space.³ Most of these tables featured a variety of hidden compartments, drawers, and mirrors that could be moved in several sequences and variously adjusted to accommodate activities that ranged from eating to applying makeup. A practitioner could demonstrate both their “ease and grace” and the mutability of the aristocratic self through physical manipulation of the object.⁴ Due to focus on the *table de toilette*, it seems seating furniture in this context is often taken for granted. How then do chairs, which Hellman suggests require their own conventions of use balanced between transitional dexterity and arranged comfort, come to support the work of a self-fashioning monarch like Marie-Antoinette?⁵

The singular *bergère à la reine*, made by Sené as part of a larger suite of *toilette* furniture for Saint-Cloud, is notable beyond its mere inclusion in the *toilette* space. Grounded in the historic significance of the *bergère* form, meaning is derived from its relation to Marie-Antoinette's intentions for the château alongside the visual density and material variety of its ornamentation. This includes intricately carved and gilded woodworking accompanied by

³ Hellman, “Work of Leisure,” 425-28.

⁴ Harold Koda and Anthony Bolton, *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 36.

⁵ Hellman, “Work of Leisure,” 429.

delicately embroidered upholstery, thought to be stitched by the queen herself. At stake in the *bergère* is the construction and performance of queenship fundamental to the daily repetition of the *toilette* ritual. Marie-Antoinette had her first French *toilette* ceremony, as Mary Sheriff puts it, “performed on her” in a portable tent on an island in the Rhine during her transfer between the Austrian and French courts in the spring of 1770.⁶ Though queens of France are necessarily foreign, it was through the *toilette* that a degree of ‘Frenchness’ could be continuously approximated. A close analysis of the *bergère* offered by the first portion of this thesis therefore considers how the chair may have contributed to and is reflective of Marie-Antoinette’s self-fashioning as a monarch in Enlightenment-era France.

The latter portion of this thesis addresses how the historic practice of aristocratic self-fashioning as it concerns Marie-Antoinette’s life and legacy is translated into the present day. Currently included in the Boudoir from the Hôtel de Crillon, a period room in the Wrightsman Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the *bergère* continues to shape the public perception of Marie-Antoinette while further embodying what Lagerfeld identifies as the “soul” of the era in which it was produced. Known colloquially as the Crillon Room, this period room is not only a fundamentally different space than that of the royal *toilette*, it necessarily obfuscates the historical complexities of the objects within it to construct a standardized interpretation of French cultural heritage for the American museum context. The display of Marie-Antoinette’s *bergère a la reine* in the space of the period room ultimately provides insight into the intricate mechanisms through which history itself is visually and materially fashioned and re-fashioned.

⁶ Mary Sheriff, “The Portrait of the Queen: Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s *Marie-Antoinette en Chemise*,” In *Reclaiming the Female Agency: Feminist Art History in the Postmodern Era*, eds. Mary Garrard and Norma Broude (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 136.

Literature Review

Though aspects of Marie-Antoinette's life are well known, particularly the details surrounding her execution, there have been several attempts to renegotiate her cultural legacy since the early 2000s. The most prominent example is Antonia Fraser's 2002 biography *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, which provides a comprehensive and sympathetic chronicle of the monarch's life.⁷ Fraser's biography also served as the historical basis for Sofia Coppola's flamboyant 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*, which has shaped the popular perception of its titular character in the contemporary era.⁸ This type of 'balanced' biographical investigation into Marie-Antoinette's life began with Stefan Zweig's 1932 biography *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman*.⁹ Zweig's book sought to mediate politically-motivated retellings of the monarch's life that oscillated between martyrdom and condemnation on the basis of social and sexual impropriety.¹⁰ Retellings of Marie-Antoinette's life have consistently attempted to shape popular notions of her legacy in the more than two hundred years since her death.

While these mass-market examples exhibit a general interest in the historical narrative ascribed to the last queen of France, the previous two decades have demonstrated a concurrent increase in scholarly literature concerned with her personal appearance and behavior that attempt to transcend the limitations of the biographical form. Implicitly shaping this discourse is a growing investment in the concept of self-fashioning—the creation of a public person according to social conventions—first introduced to literary criticism in Stephen Greenblatt's 1980 book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*.¹¹ Important entries concerning

⁷ Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, (New York, NY: First Anchor Books, 2002).

⁸ *Marie Antoinette*, directed by Sofia Coppola, (2006; Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures).

⁹ Stefan Zweig, *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, (New York: The Viking Press, 1933).

¹⁰ Terry Castle, "Marie-Antoinette Obsession," in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, ed. Dena Goodman, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 214-15.

¹¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For a contemporary application of this theory to the visual and material culture of early

Marie-Antoinette's self-fashioning include Dena Goodman's 2003 *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* and Caroline Weber's 2006 *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*, both of which attempt to generate novel interpretations of her self-presentation.¹² Goodman's edited volume in particular grapples with her status as a contested public figure caught between traditional court convention and constant public criticism disseminated through quickly developing print media technologies.¹³ This book imparts a framework through which to consider the discourse around Marie-Antoinette within her lifetime as well as her now-mythological status in various cultural imaginaries. The layered symbolism around the queen's own body both within her contemporary moment and in the present day establishes a way to approach the meaning and significance her personal spaces take on across spatial and temporal boundaries.

Marie-Antoinette's personal spaces and furniture have long attracted aesthetic admiration, though her relationship to and involvement in the decoration of her many private interiors remains understudied. While some of these sites and objects have been re-evaluated as part of the popular resurgence of interest around the queen—analyses which reveal her complex relationship to the French monarchy in the last decades of the *ancien régime*—the interiors and decor designed for the Château de Saint-Cloud have yet to be fully re-evaluated.¹⁴ Scholarship concerning the Petit Trianon, Marie-Antoinette's private estate at Versailles, offers a particularly important point of comparison for understanding the purpose of Saint-Cloud. Susan Taylor-Leduc's 2022 book

modern European nobility see Greenblatt's review of the Met's 2022 exhibition "The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England": Stephen Greenblatt, "Competitive Consumption," *The New York Review*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/12/22/competitive-consumption-the-tudors-exhibition-greenblatt/>.

¹² Dena Goodman, *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003); Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*, 1st ed., (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).

¹³ Goodman, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁴ For examples of this type of recent study see: Meredith Martin, "Marie-Antoinette and the Hameau Effect" and "Regenerating Monarchy: The Queen's Dairy at Rambouillet," in *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 158-257.

Marie-Antoinette's Legacy: The Politics of French Garden Patronage and Picturesque Design, 1775-1867 includes a thorough analysis of Marie-Antoinette's expression of personal agency through the design of gardens at the Petit Trianon.¹⁵ Martin Chapman's *Marie-Antoinette and the Petit Trianon at Versailles* provides a comprehensive historical background on the palace as well as an essential introduction to the queen's approach to commissioning furniture and other elements of her sprawling decorative schemes throughout the 1770s and 1780s.¹⁶ Not only was this site important to Marie-Antoinette in her lifetime, but it "also became the first museum to be devoted to objects of the Louis XVI style" in the 1860s.¹⁷ This makes the Petit Trianon an essential point of reference in the development of contemporary understandings of Marie-Antoinette's relationship to furniture and the decorative arts.

As functional objects of luxury rather than fine arts, furniture is often marginalized in traditional art historical discourse which privileges works of a singular medium and singular author made for visual apprehension. In her introduction to *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the European and American Past*, Goodman argues that the study of furniture fills the undertheorized gap in the networked relationship between architecture, dress, and body.¹⁸ The scholarship of Jean-Marcel Humbert, Pierre Verlet, and Bill Pallot provides important context for the complex social and technological network necessary for the design, production, and use of furniture in aristocratic settings in the latter half of the eighteenth century.¹⁹ Their respective work contextualizes the origins and evolution of stylistic trends

¹⁵ Susan Taylor-Leduc, *Marie-Antoinette's Legacy: The Politics of French Garden Patronage and Picturesque Design, 1775-1867*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

¹⁶ Martin Chapman, *Marie-Antoinette and the Petit Trianon at Versailles*, (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums, Legion of Honor, 2007).

¹⁷ Chapman, *Marie-Antoinette*, 11.

¹⁸ Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the European and American Past*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁹ Jean-Marcel Humbert, Michael Pantazzi, and Christiane Ziegler, *Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art, 1730-1930*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1994); Bill G.B. Pallot, *The Art of the Chair in Eighteenth-Century France*,

throughout the eighteenth century and pays particular attention to the development of specific furniture types, including the form of the *bergère*. Mimi Hellman's articles "Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France" and "The Joy of Sets: The Uses of Seriality in the French Interior" outline a theoretical framework for approaching the study of furniture and interiors in this period while evidencing the centrality of various chair forms within the interior environment.²⁰

Though there is a growing body of scholarship concerning eighteenth-century furniture in its original context, Trevor Keeble points out that there remains "no cohesive body of writing on the subject of the period room."²¹ Period rooms are one of the primary—and perhaps most iconic—representational devices for the display of European decorative arts in contemporary museums and are imbued with assumptions about the presentation of history and museological methods. They implicitly rely on a practice of art history that presumes the existence of a unified and authentic period style. Daniel Brewer's 2010 essay "(Re)constructing an Eighteenth-Century Interior: The Value of Interiority on Display" yields a comparative method for approaching these issues within French period rooms.²² This method, which balances the historical development of a specific French interior with its reconstruction in a contemporary American art museum context, underlies the structure of this thesis though my analysis centers on the development and display of luxury furniture.

(Paris: ACR-Gismondi, 1989); Pierre Verlet, *French Furniture and Interior Decoration of the 18th Century* (London: Barrie & Rockliffe, 1967).

²⁰ Hellman, "Work of Leisure," 415–45; Mimi Hellman, "The Joy of Sets: The Uses of Seriality in the French Interior," in *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture can Tell Us about the European and American Past*, eds. Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 129-153.

²¹ Trevor Keeble, "Introduction," in *The Modern Period Room: The construction of the exhibited interior 1870 to 1950*, ed. Penny Sparke et al, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 3.

²² Daniel Brewer, "(Re)Constructing an Eighteenth-Century Interior: The Value of Interiority on Display," in *Architectural Space in Eighteenth-Century Europe: Constructing Identities and Interiors*, eds. Denise Baxter and Meredith Martin, (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 215-232.

Where the Wrightsman Galleries and their associated period rooms are concerned, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has produced several catalogs dedicated to compiling information both on the museum's eighteenth-century decorative arts and their history of display in the museum.²³ The most recent, published in 2010, entitled *The Wrightsman Galleries for French Decorative Arts*, contains the majority of information available on Marie-Antoinette's furniture from Saint-Cloud, the Crillon Room, and recent conservation efforts.²⁴ Ruth Osborne's 2012 master's thesis "Breathing Life Back into the *Ancien Régime*: The Origins, Reappropriation, and Modern Museum Installation of Furniture from the Château de Saint-Cloud" partially considers the presence of the Sené set within the Crillon Room and compiles useful archival documentation regarding the set's whereabouts in the years between the French Revolution and its acquisition into the Met collection.²⁵ Specific exhibition catalogs are also critical literature on the Wrightsman Galleries, especially the catalog for *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, a 2004 exhibition in which faceless mannequins dressed in period attire were posed in elaborate scenes of aristocratic debauchery.²⁶ Since the Crillon Room became the setting of illicit seduction entitled "The Late Supper: The Memento," records of the exhibition and supporting scholarship provide a mechanism to analyze the imaginative dimension of these spaces and consider their varied association with narrative.

Additional insight into the development of period rooms can be found in literature concerned with historic house museums. Though their physical circumstances are distinct from

²³ Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide and Jeffrey H. Munger, *The Wrightsman Galleries for French Decorative Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010).

²⁴ For a comprehensive overview of the development of period rooms at the Met prior to the Wrightsman Galleries see: Kathleen Curran, "Kulturgeschichte as Display: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Its Cognates," in *The Invention of the American Art Museum: From Craft to Kulturgeschichte*, (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 80-109.

²⁵ Ruth Osborne, "Breathing Life Back into the *Ancien Régime*: The Origins, Reappropriation, and Modern Museum Installation of Furniture from the Château de Saint-Cloud," Thesis, Bard Graduate Center, 2012.

²⁶ Koda, *Dangerous Liaisons*, 2006.

period rooms, the *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* by Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan establishes a common language between different types of spaces dedicated to the display of historic interiors and furniture.²⁷ Their discussion of “period of interpretation” is crucial to understanding how period rooms are organized and intended to engage viewers.²⁸ Denise Maior-Barron’s 2019 book *Marie Antoinette at Petit Trianon: Heritage Interpretation and Visitor Perceptions* considers these issues as they specifically relate to the cultural and material legacy of Marie-Antoinette.²⁹ Since the Petit Trianon now functions as a historic house museum dedicated to the queen, the site provides an institutional cognate to the ideas contained within the Crillon Room and exemplifies how cultural heritage is produced, appropriated, and commodified in such settings. Maior-Barron further engages with the interpretation of Marie-Antoinette’s life and legacy in both popular culture and dedicated heritage sites such as the Petit Trianon. She contends directly with what she terms the “alchemical historical dissonance” that shapes the “fiction-reality relationship” ascribed to Marie-Antoinette’s historical character.³⁰ Such interpretive conditions revealed by analyses of historic house museums open space for a new understanding of how furniture more specifically contributes to the construction of meaning within contexts of contemporary display.

Situating the *Bergère*

Changing court conventions and ideas about authority dictated how the aristocracy was expected to occupy interior environments. This translated directly into the types of furnishings and decorative schemes in which aristocratic spaces were adorned. Within the theater of the

²⁷ Franklin D. Vagnone, Deborah E. Ryan, and Olivia B. Cothren, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2015).

²⁸ Vagnone, *Anarchist's Guide*, 175-179

²⁹ Maior-Barron, Denise. *Marie Antoinette at Petit Trianon: Heritage Interpretation and Visitor Perceptions*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

³⁰ Maior-Barron, *Marie Antoinette at Petit Trianon*, 156.

toilette, the *bergère* contributed to the queen's self-fashioning beyond the *table de toilette*, the de facto focal point of this type of space. *Bergères* had an established connection to expressions of power in France prior to the eighteenth century. The strict social hierarchy of Louis XIV's (1638-1715) court at Versailles equated seating and the comfort afforded to sitters with status; the chair most similar to the later *bergère* ranked at the top of this system [Figure 2]. A courtier's rank or favor with the king determined if they were permitted to sit, what type of chair they were allowed to occupy, and if those chairs were equipped with backs or armrests.³¹ With the death of Louis XIV in 1715, court convention relaxed and by the 1720s the form of the *bergère* was integrated into the luxury furniture market.³² As Hellman points out, *bergères*, like many other kinds of French furniture, are named after a social type, in this case the humble shepherdess.³³ This name does not refer to the way the chair cradles its sitter, but rather to the idealized bucolic landscapes of *Régence*-era *pittoresque* fabrics used to upholster early examples.³⁴

A *bergère*, in its simplest form, is a deep-seated, generously padded armchair with upholstered armrests and a detachable seat cushion. The two most common *bergère* subtypes, the *bergère à la reine* and the *bergère en cabriolet* have flat and curved backs, respectively [Figure 3]. The *bergère* is best understood in comparison to other forms of mobile, single-occupancy seating furniture. *Fauteuils* have a very similar structure though tend to feature a less padded, shallower seat with open armrests [Figure 4]. A simpler *chaise* has no armrests at all [Figure 5]. Not only is the *bergère* more comfortable than most other available chair types, it provides relative privacy. The chair can only accommodate one person and the upholstered sides have the potential to block the lower torso, lap, and hands from view depending on the sitter's position.

³¹ Gülen Çevik, "Boudoirs and Harems: The Seductive Power of Sofas," *Journal of Interior Design* 43, no. 3 (September 2018): 26.

³² Alec Moore, "Sitting in Style," Getty.edu, 18 August 2021, <https://www.getty.edu/news/sitting-in-style/#content>.

³³ Hellman, "Work of Leisure," 436.

³⁴ Verlet, *French Furniture*, 45, 49. The *Régence* period was the time between Louis XIV's death in 1715 and 1723, when Louis XV came of age to take the French throne.

Most surviving *bergères* were created in the latter half of the eighteenth century when they were ubiquitous in elite domestic space.³⁵ Aesthetic theories and innovations during this period resulted in increasingly specialized and compartmentalized noble dwellings on both physical and conceptual levels.³⁶ This process extended into furniture design as various seating types were developed alongside more traditional forms such as the *bergère* to meet the individual and social needs of the interior environment. The majority of furniture inventories available from this period include *bergères* in spaces ranging from bedchambers to *salons*. Their presence in smaller cabinet spaces was more variable. As the largest type of mobile seating furniture, the *bergère* could be moved from room to room depending on the activity being performed and was therefore not always room-specific.

Curiously, *bergères* were still kept in small numbers at this time. Large rooms such as *salons* could have upwards of twenty standard *fauteuils* and several sofas yet there would be no more than four *bergères*.³⁷ Their limited number could imply that the *bergère* was a more expensive chair to produce, considering they required more raw materials and time than other single-occupancy chair forms. The *bergère* also seems to have retained, to some extent, a sense of historic exclusivity, whether this translated to an enforced hierarchy or not.

This is true of Marie-Antoinette's *toilette* at Saint-Cloud: the extant components of the suite inventoried in 1789 records a Jean-Henri Riesener (1734-1806) *table de toilette*, four *fauteuils*, a *sultane*, a firescreen, and a *bergère à la reine* [Figures 6 and 7]. It has been suggested that the *bergère* is uniquely suited to the *cabinet de toilette* for its mobility, width, and depth which could better accommodate the large dresses of the 1780s.³⁸ Not only could one splay their

³⁵ Verlet, *French Furniture*, 177-178.

³⁶ Verlet, 58.

³⁷ Verlet, 257. This example is borrowed from a 1775 inventory of the *grand salon* at the Château de Montgeoffroy.

³⁸ Verlet, *French Furniture*, 177-178.

voluminous skirts over the armrests, but the *bergère* provided the sitter an opportunity to display the physical mastery of both the fashionable dress of the moment and the control necessary to delicately navigate its ample cushion. The singularity of the *bergère* indicates that this more ‘native’ French chair form—as opposed to the ottoman-origin *sultane*—retained its symbolic relationship to previous royal custom while appealing to contemporary etiquette standards.

The form of the *bergère*, as a historically charged chair type within the French court that became common to aristocratic interiors, contributes its significance to the *toilette* space. Despite its relative ubiquity as a standard chair adaptable to a variety of settings, the inclusion of a *bergère à la reine* in Marie-Antoinette’s *toilette* at Saint-Cloud merits closer examination. Considering the *bergère*’s relation to queen’s intentions for and activities at the château provides an essential context for understanding her relationship to the institution of the absolute French monarchy by the mid-1780s. Saint-Cloud’s alterity as it relates to other royal properties and conceptions of sovereignty offers a frame through which to interpret the dense ornamentation of the *bergère*’s woodworking and upholstery. Ultimately, engagement with the *bergère*’s material and visual qualities demonstrates the centrality of furniture in Marie-Antoinette’s self-fashioning practices which balanced personal symbolism with conventions of aesthetic acceptability.

The Château: A New Summer Refuge

Marie-Antoinette likely pursued the acquisition of the château to create a space away from already established royal properties that could better resemble her matrilineal upbringing. The property that came to be known as the Château de Saint-Cloud was originally intended to support those adjacent to court business, though it was not initially conceived as a space for royalty and its associated rituals. It was constructed as the Hôtel d’Auney in the 1570s for the Gondi banking family who was gifted the property by Catherine de’ Medici (1519-1589).

Though the property was sold at various points to other bankers and nobility, the château was primarily passed down through the Gondi family until 1658 when it was acquired by Phillippe I, duc d'Orléans (1640-1701), the younger brother of Louis XIV, under the direction of Cardinal Mazarin (1602-1661).³⁹ Phillippe I led a major reconstruction of the château adding two wings to the east and north to create a U-shaped footprint that oriented the building east toward the Seine instead of south.⁴⁰ Upon his death in 1701, the château was maintained by the House of Orléans until Louis Philippe d'Orléans (1725-1785) sold the property to Louis XVI (1754-1793), purchased on the behalf of Marie-Antoinette, in February 1785, for six million *livres*.

Marie-Antoinette requested the property after falling pregnant with her third child because she wanted a larger summer home than the Château de la Muette which the family maintained in the nearby Bois de Boulogne.⁴¹ She likely selected Saint-Cloud for its advantageous location seven miles northeast of Versailles and seven miles southwest of the Palais des Tuileries in central Paris, a place that was convenient for travel though clearly separate from other royal estates. The purchase was subject to criticism, not only because some considered it an exposed locale for its intended purpose, but the queen's insistence that the title be put in her name. Saint-Cloud ultimately contributed to a "groundswell of unpopularity," and her unprecedented ownership of it was considered "immoral and impolitic" by members of Parlement.⁴²

Due to this uncommon arrangement of ownership, the Château de Saint-Cloud may be considered a site in which Marie-Antoinette endeavored, whether intentionally or not, to subvert

³⁹ "The Château de Saint-Cloud: an eventful history" Domaine de Saint-Cloud, Centre des Monuments Nationaux, Accessed January 2024, <https://www.domaine-saint-cloud.fr/en/discover/the-chateau-de-saint-cloud-an-eventful-history>.

⁴⁰ Centre des Monuments Nationaux, "The Château de Saint-Cloud."

⁴¹ Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 229.

⁴² Fraser, 232. Parlement was the *ancien régime's* judicial organization administered by aristocrats independent of the king.

France's patriarchal regime in favor of establishing her own matrilineal line. While French noblewomen were unlikely to own property in the eighteenth century, the queen of France both as a foreigner and the body through which French sovereignty materialized in the form of the future king was effectively barred from the practice. As Sheriff outlines: "The queen...did not share community property with the king...the fundamental laws of France conceptualized the king's domain as an attribute of sovereignty, and sovereignty could not be subdivided or alienated."⁴³ Marie-Antoinette's ownership of Saint-Cloud thus violated one of the basic gendered tenants under which French royalty typically operated. The extent to which the acquisition of Saint-Cloud was her idea, or that of a close advisor, and how cognizant she was of its controversy is debatable.⁴⁴ Regardless, she enthusiastically threw ample time and resources into preparing the château to her liking. This included hiring her favorite architect, Richard Mique (1728-1794)—with whom she collaborated on the Petit Trianon at Versailles—to expand the domestic quarters and the royal *menuisier*, Sené, to provide several suites of furniture [Figure 8].

Saint-Cloud was not the first site Marie-Antoinette attempted to establish autonomous space away from the highly public nature of the French court. The Petit Trianon was a smaller residence on the grounds of Versailles gifted to Marie-Antoinette by Louis XVI when he ascended the throne in 1774.⁴⁵ It became known as a private escape for the queen away from the strict customs of court life. Mique oversaw the refurbishment and augmentation of the Trianon complex through the 1770s and into the mid-1780s.⁴⁶ Part of this project included the development of the Hameau de la Reine from 1783 to 1786, a rustic model farm where the queen and her associates could enjoy an imagined peasant life.⁴⁷ At this point in Marie-Antoinette's life,

⁴³ Sheriff, "The Portrait of the Queen," 127.

⁴⁴ Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 230.

⁴⁵ Chapman, *Marie-Antoinette and the Petit Trianon*, 15.

⁴⁶ Chapman, 19.

⁴⁷ Chapman, 160.

it appears she was focused on tailoring spaces of leisure to her specifications, perhaps to support the activities of a growing family or at least provide more places to occupy outside of the royal court. Therefore the acquisition of the Château de Saint-Cloud occurred in the context of other building activity across several royal properties.

To renovate Saint-Cloud into a proper summer residence, Marie-Antoinette directed Mique to enlarge the rear and south wings of the building to accommodate the royal *appartements* [Figure 8].⁴⁸ While many of the interior spaces added by the duc d'Orleans remained intact, the south wing of the château was adapted so the separate *appartements*, or living quarters, of the king and queen ran parallel down its length. The king's quarters were oriented to overlook the gardens outside of the château while the queen's chambers had a view of its central square, the *coeur d'honneur*.⁴⁹ Marie-Antoinette's *cabinet de toilette* was located toward the far eastern end of this succession of rooms, separating it from the other spaces of her daily activities.

The furniture created for Saint-Cloud constituted one of the last major commissions of the *ancien régime*. When the château was initially acquired, furniture from the Garde Meuble storage was quickly procured to temporarily outfit the interior. By 1786 the *Intendant General du Garde Meuble*, Thierry de Ville d'Avray (1732-1792), was assigned to oversee the creation and installation of the newly renovated spaces with particular attention to the royal *appartements*.⁵⁰ The primary *ébénistes* engaged in the project were Georges Jacob (1739-1814) and Sené. While the interiors were considered complete by 1788, records demonstrate that furniture was

⁴⁸ Osborne, "Breathing Life Back into the *Ancien Régime*," 5-6.

⁴⁹ Osborne, 5-6.

⁵⁰ "A highly important Louis XVI painted and parcel-gilt walnut fauteuil en cabriolet circa 1788, stamped I.B. Sené, and with the label of the gilder Chatard," Important French & Continental Furniture, Decorations & Ceramics, Sotheby's, 2005, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2005/important-french-continental-furniture-decorations-ceramics-n08120/lot.78.html>.

frequently moved around the château. This included the Sené suite that would come to be known as Marie-Antoinette's *toilette* furniture.

Inventories show that the Sené suite was initially placed in the queen's *cabinet particulier* upon delivery in 1788, though was moved into her *cabinet de toilette* by 1789. It remains unclear what furniture initially occupied the *toilette* space, if Sené's suite was reupholstered in this time, or if the suite was designed to eventually occupy the *toilette*. Despite this uncertainty, the suite's later incorporation into the *toilette* setting suggests it was a more appropriate fit in terms of either size or aesthetic unity with the rest of the room. The presence of the Reisener *table de toilette*, initially produced in 1781 for the queen's *grand cabinet intérieur* at Versailles, to complete the *toilette* suite suggests that these sets were somewhat permeable in their conception and arrangement as long as they supported the intended use of the space they occupied.⁵¹

Despite its popular associations with the immorality and material excesses of Louis XVI's court, Marie-Antoinette's ownership of Saint-Cloud was perhaps more personal. As the youngest daughter of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria (1717-1780), she was raised in an aristocratic environment where women could both wield power and actively shape the physical space and related rituals in which it manifested. Throughout Marie-Antoinette's childhood, her mother continually made and remade the Schönbrunn Palace, the family's summer residence outside of Vienna, according to her personal and political needs.⁵² The Petit Trianon was often derided as a "little Vienna" or "little Schönbrunn" as it provided an immediate escape from court life at Versailles.⁵³ In obtaining and renovating Saint-Cloud as her family was growing, perhaps Marie-Antoinette was creating a separate refuge on her own terms.

⁵¹ Hellman, "Joy of Sets," 131. Hellman suggests this iterative interchangeability of furniture sets was a fundamental component of elite domestic space in the eighteenth century.

⁵² Michael Yonan. "Modesty and Monarchy: Rethinking Empress Maria Theresa at Schönbrunn," *Austrian History Yearbook* 35 (2004): 26-27.

⁵³ Sheriff, "The Portrait of the Queen," 136.

Saint-Cloud's distance from Versailles, and her apparent control over it, further created the conditions for a matrilineal line of succession. Since the birth of Louis Joseph (1781-1789), her second child, resulted in a male heir, she had fulfilled the requirements of Salic law and found several ways to undermine the rigorous performance of queenship without jeopardizing her access to the luxuries it provided.⁵⁴ Marie-Antoinette seems to have been adamant about keeping her eldest daughter Marie-Thérèse (1778-1851) and unborn children in France. This desire was in clear opposition to their status as *enfants de France* who could be used to form political alliances with other European powers through arranged marriage.⁵⁵ Raised to be a political pawn herself, the queen was somewhat disenfranchised by her childhood, which ended abruptly upon her betrothal to the French *dauphin* in 1770 at age fourteen, preventing her from ever returning to Austria. Having an estate like Saint-Cloud to herself meant she could potentially bequeath it to one of her children which was perceived to disrupt the way royal succession, property ownership, and alliance-making traditionally operated within the French court.

Though Marie-Antoinette seems to have maintained great aspirations for the Château de Saint-Cloud, she and her family were only able to occupy it briefly. It appears they spent some time on the property in the summers of 1787 through 1789, though their lives were disrupted by the onset of the French Revolution in July of 1789.⁵⁶ The family was able to travel between Paris and Saint-Cloud in 1790 where the queen negotiated a strategic alliance with the Comte de Mirabeau (1749-1791) who helped the king regain some power before Mirabeau's death in April 1791.⁵⁷ Also in April 1791 a popular uprising prevented the royal family from traveling to

⁵⁴ Sheriff, 124, 133. Salic law was considered the fundamental tenet of the French monarchy under which women were excluded from the line of royal succession.

⁵⁵ Sheriff, 128.

⁵⁶ Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 267-68.

⁵⁷ Fraser, 290.

Saint-Cloud for Easter, an event that spurred their decision to attempt an escape in June of that year.⁵⁸ The failure of this plan, known as the *fuite à Varennes*, turned most public favor against the family. From that point, they were exclusively confined to Paris and by the end of 1792 the majority of royal property, including Saint-Cloud, became *biens nationaux*, or national goods.

It was under this designation that a great amount of royal furniture was dispersed to museums, state offices, and sold to the public at auctions through the mid to late 1790s. It is unclear when the Sené *toilette* suite left Saint-Cloud. Due to a gap in records, it is possible that this set remained at the château after Napoleon and his wife Josephine took up residence there in 1801.⁵⁹ It is clear they kept a large amount of Louis XVI-era furniture, especially those with Egyptian motifs like those that appear on the *bergère*, before the château was completely redecorated in 1810 to reflect the increasingly popular Empire style.⁶⁰ Since Saint-Cloud and the furniture within it were not owned by Marie-Antoinette for long, understandings about the actual use of the space prior to the French Revolution remain quite limited.

Such limitations render analysis of the chair's woodworking and embroidery all the more important for clarifying Marie-Antoinette's intentions at the chateau. As an alternative to other royal properties, Saint-Cloud allowed the queen to carve out her own space in the French court, following a precedent of family leadership set by her mother. Since the footprint of the château was redesigned to better accommodate the customs of daily royal life like the *toilette* ceremony, the furniture within both supported these rituals and allowed Marie-Antoinette to experiment with the symbolic orientation of the space. The closest cognate to a royal throne, the *bergère*'s inclusion in *toilette* allowed the queen to reaffirm her position among French royalty while

⁵⁸ Fraser, 302-3.

⁵⁹ Osborne, "Breathing Life Back into the *Ancien Régime*," 12.

⁶⁰ Osborne, 12.

simultaneously fashioning an autonomous identity for herself, offering a microcosm of the political dynamics that influenced her acquisition of Saint-Cloud.

Woodworking: Classicizing Queenship

Considered in the context of Saint-Cloud, the density and variation of the *bergère's* wood carving compounds the chair's performative purpose within this *cabinet de toilette* and establishes the queen's engagement with a highly personal set of symbols. The wooden elements of the *bergère*, and those of the entire suite, reflect a preference for neoclassical design which gained popularity by the mid-1770s and marked the transition between late Louis XV and Louis XVI styles. Though just as elaborately decorated as furniture traditionally associated with the flamboyant Rococo style, the term 'neoclassical' in this context indicates a more explicit reliance on visual forms attributed to classical antiquity, particularly those architectural in nature. This is immediately evident in both the ornament and the general rigidity and linearity of the chair frame. The frame itself is made of walnut wood that was commonly stocked by French joiners as it was cultivated in, though not native to the country. While more expensive than the alternative beech, walnut was considered easier to carve and was thought to have a superior surface regardless of gilding.⁶¹

Beginning at the bottom of the chair, the legs are turned and carved to appear as highly detailed tapered ionic columns with three registers of fluting that meet the floor wrapped in acanthus and rope-twist molding.⁶² The front legs are directly in line with the arm supports while the back legs are splayed and raked for added stability. Above each scrolled capital of the columnar legs is a block that intersects with the seat rail. The front two blocks feature bundles of acanthus while the back have *patera*, bas-relief discs that often ornamented Roman architecture,

⁶¹ Pallot, *The Art of the Chair*, 262-68.

⁶² The adjective "turned" refers to a piece of wood that had been carved in the round on a spinning lathe.

which in this case appear as stylized flowers.⁶³ The seat rail is also broken into three registers. The bottom section is carved into a berried laurel or myrtle mirrored at the midpoint of the chair. The middle section features a meandering vine of ivy or grape leaves, also peppered with berries. The top section is a finely carved band of waterleaf molding.

The stiles are carved as doric columns, which the Victoria and Albert Museum describe as “rising from a *patera*-faced [plinth] through a fluted base and a succession of moldings to the swollen, acanthus-carved lower section of the shaft, which is fluted above and ends in a flower-studded collar and egg-and-dart ovolo capital. These are surmounted by two further *patera*-faced [blocks], topped by leaf-carved and ribbed finials.”⁶⁴ The blocks intersect with each end of the chair’s top rail which features a frieze of flower heads interlaced with vegetation.

A medallion carved with Marie-Antoinette’s monogram—which matches that found on the firescreen panel—sits above the frieze [Figure 9]. The medallion features a beaded border that is encircled with laurel leaves. It rests on sprigs of cabbage roses strewn across the rail, held together by a loosely wound ribbon. Pink cabbage roses were another flower Marie-Antoinette associated with herself and they often accompanied her in portraits [Figure 10]. The prefix “Maria” was given to all female children in the Habsburg imperial family to venerate the Virgin Mary.⁶⁵ The pink rose, an emblem of the Virgin, thus became incorporated into Marie-Antoinette’s personal symbolism to indicate her Austrian heritage, piety, and fecundity.

The middle portion of the columnar stiles are each overlaid with a large acanthus leaf extending toward the stuffed pad of the armrest. In front of this pad, the arm-ends have been carved into a finial-topped basket flanked by leafy volutes, the scroll-like motif found at the

⁶³ “Armchair | Sené, Jean-Baptiste-Claude,” Collections, Victoria & Albert Museum, 12 September 2015, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O52864/armchair-sen%C3%A9-jean-baptiste/armchair-sen%C3%A9-jean-baptiste/>

⁶⁴ Victoria & Albert Museum, “Armchair.”

⁶⁵ Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 21.

capital of ionic columns. The basket rests upon a female term in an Egyptian *nemes*, a striped headdress associated with the power of the ancient pharaohs [Figure 11].⁶⁶ A term is a sculptural form in which a bust is carved into the top of a pillar that tapers into a quadrangular base. The front of the pillar is decorated with a pine cone tipped *thyrsus*, a type of bacchic ceremonial spear, bound in laurel leaves.

Art historians like Jean-Marcel Humbert consider Marie-Antoinette an early and key proponent of *egyptomanie*, a renewed interest in the cultural legacy of ancient Egypt. It is known that she added Egyptian ornament to her residences at Versailles and Fontainebleau, and ordered at least two more suites of furniture similar to that of Saint-Cloud.⁶⁷ For Marie-Antoinette, among other members of the aristocracy who took an interest in Egypt as early as the 1770s, allusion to the ancient society may have referenced its cultural permanence, architectural grandeur, and aesthetic simplicity. Some also drew parallels between the dynasties of ancient Egypt and the structure of the absolute French monarchy.⁶⁸

Only the *sultane* features the same Egyptian terms as the *bergère*. The firescreen has four female figures in reclined philosopher poses and one reclined female figure at its top cradling a cornucopia, which may be an allegory for abundance or an allusion to Tyche, the Greek goddess of chance [Figures 12 and 13]. The *fauteuils* alternatively feature busts of Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, on their terms [Figure 14]. The suite's woodwork as a whole seems to lack thematic continuity outside of a sweeping gesture toward the aesthetic conventions of late eighteenth-century neoclassicism. The variation within the set could indicate these figures were conceived as part of an independent pantheon of classical female archetypes whose associated qualities the queen could identify herself with. In conjunction with the personal symbolism

⁶⁶ Humbert, *Egyptomania*, 127.

⁶⁷ Humbert, 127.

⁶⁸ Humbert, 158.

Marie-Antoinette had carved into the *bergère*—namely her initials and the cabbage roses that grace its top rail—the Egyptian terms and the wider set of female classical referents come to support, decorate, and legitimize the layered labors of a self-styled monarch.

Embroidery: A Floral Expression of Self

Beyond the types of furnishings commissioned for the suite, their upholstery also offered a site upon which Marie-Antoinette experimented with her symbolic orientation within the French monarchical system. This suite of furniture was specifically adapted to be upholstered with the queen’s own embroidery.⁶⁹ Though it appears that she did this for certain individual furniture items prior, the Saint-Cloud suite is unique in that she embroidered upholstery for the full set. The intermingling of labor and decor suggests Marie-Antoinette was deeply invested in the fashioning of Saint-Cloud, going as far as stitching herself the ornamental minutiae of the *toilette* space.

The only intact original embroidery from the suite is a cotton panel of the firescreen that features Marie-Antoinette’s monogram of an overlapping “M” and “A” at the center bordered by flower-specked vines, all stitched with silk thread [Figure 15]. The 1789 inventory of the *toilette* simply lists the upholstery as being made of white cotton twill embroidered with a small floral ornament.⁷⁰ The Met—which houses the *bergère*, *sultane*, firescreen and embroidery panel—in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum—which collected one of the the *fauteuils*—has reupholstered the entire suite to reflect the queen’s embroidery style, derived from the firescreen panel and remnants of the original upholstery.

⁶⁹ Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 234.

⁷⁰ Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, “French Royal Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 63, no. 3 (2006): 36-37.

Analyzing the replicated embroidery is useful to think through its symbolic resonances with the *bergère* form. The back seat cushion of the *bergère* features an alternating point-grid pattern that switches between rows of delicate blue and yellow flowers. This grid is framed by twice alternating rectangles of diagonally oriented stitches oscillating between four shades of pink and vines of more yellow flowers nestled between spindly leaves. Marie-Antoinette embroidered in a satin stitch, reflected in the replica, which means the stitches lay flat on the background surface, filling the desired shape with the color of the thread that often results in a stylized effect.

Since the flowers appear so stylized, neither the Met or the Victoria and Albert provide any positive identification for them. Flowers have been called Marie-Antoinette’s “expression of freedom,” making it important to consider the potential relationship of those represented in embroidery to the queen’s extensive gardens at sites like the Petit Trianon.⁷¹ The three-pronged double spike of the blue flower indicates it may be a cornflower, which was a personal favorite of the queen, known to carpet meadows at the Trianon in the early summer. Beyond describing her own eyes as cornflower blue, Marie-Antoinette incorporated the flower and its distinct hue into much of her interior decor, going as far as ordering a “295-piece Sèvres porcelain service decorated with [pearls] and cornflowers” for her dining room at Trianon [Figure 16].⁷² In the face of the lavish French court, the queen equated herself with the perceived humility and modesty of the cornflower’s small, angular bloom, which she felt conveyed a sense of “rustic charm.”⁷³

The yellow flower, which looks most like a lily, is more difficult to pinpoint.

Marie-Antoinette was particularly fond of the dainty lily of the valley, sprigs of which she was

⁷¹ Élisabeth de Feydeau, *From Marie Antoinette’s Garden: An Eighteenth Century Horticultural Album*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 9.

⁷² Feydeau, *Marie Antoinette’s Garden*, 173.

⁷³ Feydeau, 173.

known to pass off to her closest friends and confidants at Trianon.⁷⁴ Lily of the valley, though dear to the queen and similar in shape to the embroidery, does not have a yellow varietal. Some of the lily-type flowers on the original firescreen seem to have a pinkish hue which would align them more with this identification. The yellow flower could also be playing off gold *fleur-de-lys*, the unequivocal symbol of the French monarchy. Since the Louis XIV period, a floral motif with a similar profile has been incorporated into designs alongside the more traditional *fleur-de-lys* [Figure 17]. Perhaps the most apt identification is the grass lily, a native white wildflower known colloquially as *la dame-d'onze heures*, or the eleven o'clock lady, because the flowers open at eleven in the morning on sunny days. Élisabeth de Feydeau notes that in the queen's daily schedule, eleven o'clock was the hour reserved in between her bath and toilette for personal activities—typically reading or embroidery.⁷⁵ The indeterminacy of the lily-type embroidery detail suggests that Marie-Antoinette had constructed a highly personal, polysemic symbol that both referred to her daily activities and her adoption into the French monarchical system.

This embroidery's self-referential qualities fundamentally alter the leisure work typically ascribed to objects in the *cabinet de toilette*. By having a literal hand in the creation of the furniture that populates the space designated for self-fashioning at Saint-Cloud, Marie-Antoinette implicitly advocates for her centrality within French royal affairs. Though the queens of France were conceived as vessels through which the political power of the French monarchy was passed, the requirement that they take on French attributes through rituals like the toilette meant they wield great cultural power. The queen's embroidery demonstrates a high level of awareness for this cultural power through the mastery and manipulation of its fundamental symbology.

⁷⁴ Feydeau, 148.

⁷⁵ Feydeau, 159. Marie Antoinette was also Maria-Theresa's eleventh daughter.

Marie-Antoinette was not the first queen of France to orient her position at court through decorative schemes. Marie Leszczyńska, wife of Louis XV, incorporated portraits of her father and children into her bedchamber at Versailles, which according to Jennifer G. Germann imposed a “matrilineal” quality onto the space.⁷⁶ Embroidery, considered a virtuous manifestation of feminine labor in the eighteenth century, had a similarly matrilineal significance for Marie-Antoinette. As a child, she would have learned various embroidery techniques. Under Maria Theresa, several rooms at the Schönbrunn Palace were decorated with the family’s embroidery, such as the breakfast cabinet that features needlework by Marie-Antoinette’s grandmother, Empress Elisabeth Christine [Figure 12].⁷⁷

To embroider the upholstery for the toilette furniture at Saint-Cloud was thus a deeply nostalgic and self-actualizing endeavor for the queen. Through the physical crafting and repetition of a personal symbolic lexicon, Marie-Antoinette was rendered materially involved within her own ‘making-up,’ in a manner that both maintained and quietly subverted the standards of French court culture. The *bergère*, with regard to its embroidered and carved features in conjunction with its location at Saint-Cloud, is both a component and representative of Marie-Antoinette’s self-fashioning practices in the years just prior to the French Revolution.

Periodizing History

Though this historically oriented interpretation of the *bergère* offers a nuanced understanding of how Marie-Antoinette negotiated property, personal space, and self-expression toward the end of the *ancien régime*, its ‘work’ is not exclusive to the eighteenth century.

⁷⁶ Jennifer G. Germann, “Sexing Sovereignty: The Material Culture and Sexual Politics of Queen Marie Leszczyńska’s Bed,” in *Materializing Gender in Eighteenth Century Europe*, eds. Jennifer G. Germann and Heidi A. Strobel, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 131.

⁷⁷ “Breakfast Cabinet,” Imperial Living, Schloss Schönbrunn, Accessed May 2023, <https://www.schoenbrunn.at/en/about-schoenbrunn/the-palace/tour-of-the-palace/breakfast-cabinet>.

Marie-Antoinette's toilette furniture from Saint-Cloud, including the *bergère* now resides in a period room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City [Figure 19]. Period rooms are elaborately restaged historic interiors often associated with the Euro-American upper classes or royalty. They involve a partial reconstruction of an actual historic room through an assemblage of woodwork (*boiserie*), wall treatments, furniture (*meuble*), and decorative objects (*garniture*) within a museum setting. Most require a substantial amount of curatorial intervention to create the appearance of a complete interior. Designed to track historic developments in and the influence of eighteenth-century French decorative arts, these galleries implicitly rely on the work of leisure to educate visitors and encourage speculation regarding the activities and livelihoods of the aristocrats they pertain to. Ultimately these rooms fashion a particular conception of history that mimics the practice of aristocratic self-fashioning while simultaneously obfuscating the complexities of the objects that occupy them.

The need to establish internal historic coherence is a particular point of conflict for French period rooms concerning the eighteenth century or earlier. The desire to reconstruct the aesthetic conditions created by the aristocracy during the *ancien régime* must confront the wide-scale destruction and dispersion of luxury objects that occurred in the wake of the French Revolution.⁷⁸ Since royal properties and their contents became *biens nationaux*, many objects owned by the abolished aristocracy and monarchy were put on the open market creating a secondary economy for their authentication, appraisal, and collection that persists into the present day. This fact renders the relative completeness of the Saint-Cloud *toilette* set a minor miracle. Three objects of this set within the Met's collection are displayed in the Boudoir from the Hôtel de Crillon, a small interior designed by the architect Pierre-Adrian Paris around 1780.

⁷⁸ See: Iris Moon, *Luxury After the Terror*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2022).

The Crillon Room is part of the Wrightsman Galleries, a series of twelve galleries—eight of which are paneled period rooms—dedicated to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French decorative arts.⁷⁹ The galleries are named for the philanthropists Jayne and Charles Wrightsman who donated several interiors to the museum starting in the early 1960s and in 1983 endowed their maintenance in perpetuity.⁸⁰ Though the Crillon Room and much of the furniture now contained within it was acquired in the 1940s, well before the Wrightsman’s involvement, its absorption into this donor-driven interior ecosystem has implications for its contributions to the construction of historical narratives about eighteenth-century France.

Period rooms, as indicated by the temporal implication of their title, require a “period of interpretation” to function.⁸¹ A period of interpretation is an imposed interval of time upon which the appearance and evaluation of a historic interior is dictated. In the Crillon Room, the period of interpretation is the 1780s, ostensibly accounting for the decorative trends associated with that decade in and around Paris. One of the initial objectives of the Wrightmans, in collaboration with Met curatorial staff, was to “coordinate a series of existing rooms and connecting galleries to elucidate changes in style” through the final century of the *ancien régime*.⁸² Therefore the Crillon Room and its furnishing become representative of a general type of interior which is simultaneously expected to be apprehended holistically and understood as a circumstantial assemblage of individually important objects.

The significance of those individual objects and what remains of the sets they belong to, such as the Saint-Cloud *toilette* furniture, are effectively subsumed within the fiction created through the form of the period room. Described as an “intimate polyhedral boudoir,” the Crillon

⁷⁹ Kisluk-Grosheide, *The Wrightsman Galleries*, 3.

⁸⁰ Kisluk-Grosheide, 13.

⁸¹ Vagnone, *Anarchist’s Guide*, 175-179.

⁸² Kisluk-Grosheide, *The Wrightsman Galleries*, ix.

Room is the smallest paneled interior featured in the Wrightsman Galleries.⁸³ The room itself was purchased from the Hôtel de Crillon in 1905 by Jeanette Dwight Bliss for her Upper East Side apartment.⁸⁴ The room was gifted to the museum by her daughter, Susan Dwight Bliss, in 1944, around the same time the Saint-Cloud furniture was donated to the museum by the estate of George Blumenthal, though the suite was not initially placed in the Crillon Room.

The Crillon Room, as of January 2024, features a narrow central space nearly filled with a five-by-eight foot Beauvais rug widened by two alcoves at its left and right walls. The left alcove has a decoy window at which the Reisner *table de toilette* from Saint-Cloud is situated with a Louis XVI *fauteuil*. The drawer of the table is open with the inset mirror propped up as if the occupant of the room is about to return to begin their *toilette* ritual. The right alcove has a large mirror that directly reflects the window opposite to it. Underneath this mirror, the Sené *sultane* from Saint-Cloud is nestled into the space with two bolster and three square pillows. All the pillows have embroidery coordinated with the upholstery of the furniture, save for the central one that features Marie-Antoinette's embroidered monogram stylized in the manner it appears on the embroidered firescreen.⁸⁵ Both of these alcoves are buttressed by angled walls with long mirrors mounted above wainscoting. The Saint-Cloud *bergère* is positioned in the back of the room against the left angled wall. A small round sewing table with an inlaid porcelain top is displayed opposite the *bergère* at the right angled wall. Both front angled walls adjacent to the door feature 1784 Georges Jacob *chaises à la reine* commissioned for Marie-Antoinette's boudoir at the Château de Tuileries. A Martin Carlin writing table with inlaid porcelain is positioned between the *chaise* at the right angled wall and the *sultane*.

⁸³ Kisluk-Grosheide, *The Wrightsman Galleries*, 40.

⁸⁴ Kisluk-Grosheide, 9.

⁸⁵ The firescreen is also displayed in the Wrightsman Galleries at the Met in the Lauzun Room.

Aside from the furniture, the walls of the Crillon Room themselves are richly ornamented with swirling arabesques on pastel blue ground. Much like the furniture, many of the painted details take up classical references, in line with the aesthetic trends of the late-1770s when the room was created. This includes features like the Caduceus on the center of the back door as well as the repetitive use of imagery related to grape leaves, patera, putti, and lyres. Pierre-Adrien Paris, the architect and designer of the room, studied in Rome at the partial expense of his patron Louis-Marie-Augustin, fifth duc d'Aumont, and seems to have taken inspiration from Raphael's early sixteenth-century grotesque paintings in the Vatican loggias.⁸⁶ Parts of these paintings, all the wainscoting frames, and the cornices are gilded. Combined with the inward-facing mirrors and the newly engineered false window that emits a low, diffuse light, the density of ornament is reflected and repeated through their interplay.

The furniture and interior feature a harmonious color palette—especially following the re-upholstery of the Saint-Cloud set to reflect Marie-Antoinette's original embroidery—and both aspects of the room appeal to a 1780s-era preference for structural linearity and varied neoclassical references. Despite this, there remains an obvious contextual discordance between the Crillon boudoir and the Saint-Cloud *toilette* suite.⁸⁷ While the duc d'Aumont was a high-ranking member of the nobility with very close ties to the monarchy, the arrangement of the boudoir as a period room implicitly attempts to place Marie-Antoinette's practice of self-fashioning at its center.⁸⁸

All the furniture is labeled in a small plan of the interior provided behind the waist-height acrylic panel one must stand at to view the room. Upon reading through this list, it is

⁸⁶ Kisluk-Grosheide, *The Wrightsman Galleries*, 40.

⁸⁷ This does not account for the differences in the types of spaces designated as 'boudoir' and 'toilette.' For a discussion of the development of the boudoir see: Diana Cheng, "The History of the Boudoir in the Eighteenth Century," Unpublished PhD Diss., McGill University, 2011.

⁸⁸ Kisluk-Grosheide, *The Wrightsman Galleries*, 40.

immediately clear that the room is assigned Marie-Antoinette's identity, since the majority of objects within it were commissioned and owned by her. The 2006 renovation of the room, including the conservation and re-upholstery of the furniture inside of it, emphasizes this identification. The reupholstery further provides a legible point of reference for a viewer to recognize when apprehending the space with details such as the overlapping "MA" monogram pillow on the *sultane*. Since museum-goers cannot physically enter the space, the Crillon Room must be perceived in its entirety, making it difficult to separate the objects and ornamented interior in this setting. The intricate detail found on a singular object such as the *bergère* are lost within the complex ornamentation of the period room environment.

Keeble suggests that while "a museum object may be presented in isolation as simply a chair, [when] grouped to form a period room these objects assume a 'relative' authenticity that relies on the coherence of the display as an authentic whole."⁸⁹ This attempt to create relative authenticity exemplified by the assemblage of objects in the Crillon Room therefore privileges aesthetic unity over historical accuracy and specificity. In the Crillon Room, Marie-Antoinette's toilette ritual is rendered a superficial and placid component of aristocratic life, ignoring how the toilette at Saint-Cloud may have been perceived by the queen as a site of personal self-determination. Maior-Barron argues that at sites such as the Petit Trianon nuanced interpretations of Marie-Antoinette's life that proliferate in scholarly literature are rarely translated into the display of her material legacy. This is due to what she terms "alchemical dissonant heritage" that has reduced "the historical character of Marie-Antoinette to a range of symbols which can be appropriated comfortably by different identities."⁹⁰ She attributes this reduction to the ubiquity of the queen in collective memory, especially resulting from the

⁸⁹ Keeble, *The Modern Period Room*, 3.

⁹⁰ Maior-Baron, *Marie Antoinette at Petit Trianon*, 156.

proliferation of her image and the tragic narrative of her life through popular media. Collective memory in the case of Marie-Antoinette is incongruous, then, with the “minority expertise” derived from the study of her objects and interiors, such as that demonstrated through the extended analysis of her *bergère*.⁹¹

Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, the current curator of the Wrightsman Galleries, has admitted that the furniture featured within the Crillon Room is perhaps too ornate for the Crillon *boiserie*.⁹² Discord is fundamental in the space of the period room, both in terms of the incongruity of their decorative assemblage and the discrepancy between the inherently immersive nature of interiors and the lack of access afforded to museum visitors. Rather than embodied engagement with the space, a viewer of the Crillon Room is implicitly expected to imagine a use of the space, likely without a clear point of reference for the purpose either the *toilette* or boudoir in the contemporary era.

The Crillon Room exploits the “temporal exoticism” often associated with the eighteenth century—a clear expression of the otherness of the past—by condensing its aesthetic and material qualities into an anesthetized depiction of the period’s most iconic figure.⁹³ The primacy and singularity of Marie-Antoinette as the tragic heroine of the *ancien régime* is left unquestioned, and her furniture is integrated into the diverse symbols related to her life without regard for their actual significance for her. In a ‘periodized’ space like the Crillon Room, the personality attached is what enables legibility, despite the historical complexities close study of the objects within it conveys.

⁹¹ Maior-Barron, 156.

⁹² Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. “The Wrightsman Rooms at The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Salon Doré Symposium.” Youtube video, 00:45:15, 11 April 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIsSX-BANIY&t=2421s>

⁹³ Brewer, “(Re)Constructing an Eighteenth-Century Interior,” 215.

Brewer asks: “to what extent can one depart from a standard of original and untouchable authenticity in reconfiguring a room display that is designed to ensure its legibility for museum visitors?”⁹⁴ The 2006 redesign of the Crillon Room—hinging on the reupholstery of the *Sené bergère* and *sultane*—therefore appropriates furniture as an authentic symbol for Marie-Antoinette due to its own lavishness, rather than its ability to transmit information about the contested state of queenship in France at the end of the *ancien régime*. Despite coinciding with a renewed interest in renegotiating the queen’s legacy in both popular culture and academic contexts, the interpretive material supporting the display of the room does not engage with the importance of the woodworking or her embroidery. The period room as a mode of representation therefore appropriates its contents. According to Carol Duncan, period rooms, like all types of museum display, convert “what were once displays of material wealth and social status into displays of spiritual wealth.”⁹⁵ This spiritual wealth made available to the public by municipal museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as Duncan describes, is predicated on an understanding of art objects as products of genius that could be classified according to an art historical narrative of stylistic and social progress.

What then of the remnants of the *ancien régime*, attached by provenance and visual cues to the era’s most iconic figure and casually arranged in a cramped boudoir as if its occupant has left for only a moment? The specificity of Marie-Antoinette’s involvement at Saint-Cloud is lost within this imaginative space. The form of the period room performs nostalgia through historic stasis—both in terms of the ubiquity of this display technique in American museums over the past century and the aesthetic endurance of the spatial conditions attached to the French aristocracy. In this context, spiritual wealth is intended to be derived from some level of identification with

⁹⁴ Brewer, 228.

⁹⁵ Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine, (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute, 1991), 95.

the interior. Whether that is an aspiration to affluence or awe at the density of detail and sheer excess of the decorative scheme it appears that Marie-Antoinette, as much as she can be accessed through objects like her embroidered *bergère à la reine*, is situated as the recognizable protagonist through which this identification (or inversely, alienation and lack of recognition) occurs.

Conclusion

Close material and relational analysis of Marie-Antoinette's embroidered *bergère* with consideration for both its intended use in the toilette at the Château de Saint-Cloud and its current display in the Boudoir from the Hôtel de Crillon at the Metropolitan Museum of Art demonstrates how seating furniture can construct, convey, and even elide historical meaning across time. Examined in terms of its eighteenth-century context, assessment of the *bergère* demonstrates Marie-Antoinette's active involvement in the development of a distinct network of cultural meaning. The acquisition of Saint-Cloud undermined the traditional French conception of royal property to create the potential of a matrilineal line of succession that could tie her non-*dauphin* children to France and ultimately to Marie-Antoinette herself—a privilege she was not afforded by her own mother. This alongside her activities at the Petit Trianon shows an attempt by the queen to carve a niche for herself that both relied on and maintained distance from the hegemony of the French patriarchal state.

When scrutinized in the contemporary museological context it is clear that her mere ownership of this furniture is privileged over her investment in its symbolic meaning and her physical contribution to its production. The inclusion of the Saint-Cloud furniture in the Crillon room, among several other decorative objects dating to the 1780s, contributes to the creation of what is essentially a Marie-Antoinette themed or branded space, exemplified by the presence of

her embroidered monogram. Making the room ‘legible’ in this manner encourages imaginative engagement with the space that strays from a basic level of historical accuracy and simultaneously obfuscates ongoing debates pertinent to the interpretation of Marie-Antoinette’s cultural legacy.

The average visitor to the Met, the ostensible recipient of the “spiritual wealth” stewarded by such a large municipal museum, likely has little point of reference for the ontological excess of aristocratic life in the *ancien régime* outside of its outlandish representation in popular media. This has implications for the perception of French cultural heritage and its apprehension in the American context. The Château of Saint-Cloud has been left in ruins since its destruction in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War. The Hôtel de Crillon, while structurally intact, has been a luxury hotel for more than a century; its *grands appartements* were lavishly renovated in 2017 by Lagerfeld himself.⁹⁶ Since the architectural contexts the constituent elements of the Crillon Room were intended for are fundamentally altered, this period room is one of the primary mechanisms through which the history of those sites is materially reflected and encountered. The display of an object such as Marie-Antoinette’s embroidered *bergère*, when considered as a sort of soul for the period, demonstrates how history is malleable, continuously fashioned and re-fashioned much like conceptions of the queen herself.

⁹⁶ Cecilia Pelloux, “Explore Hotel De Crillon And ‘Les Grands Appartements’ By Karl Lagerfeld,” Forbes, December 30, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ceciliapelloux/2021/12/30/explore-hotel-de-crillon-and-les-grands-appartements-by-karl-lagerfeld/?sh=2f2e3451703f>.

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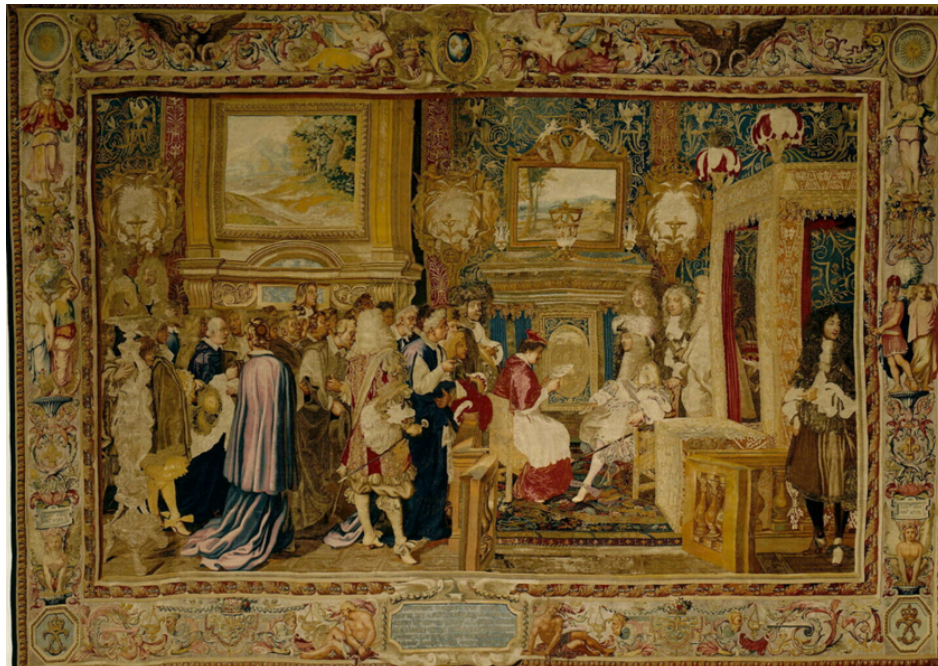
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Image Appendix

[Figure 1] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Bergère à la reine. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 2] Manufacture de Gobelins. L'audience du légat : le cardinal Chigi reçu à Fontainebleau par Louis XIV, de la tenture de *l'Histoire du roi*. c. 1672. Tapestry in wool, silk, silver, and gold. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



[Figure 3] Claude-Louis Burgat (joiner). Bergère en cabriolet. c. 1760-70. Carved and gilded beechwood, upholstered in modern red strié faille. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 4] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Fauteuil à la Reine. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



[Figure 5] Georges Jacob (joiner), Jules-Hugues Rousseau (carver), and Presle (gilder). Chais à la Reine. c. 1784. Carved and gilded walnut; pink silk moiré damask (not original). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



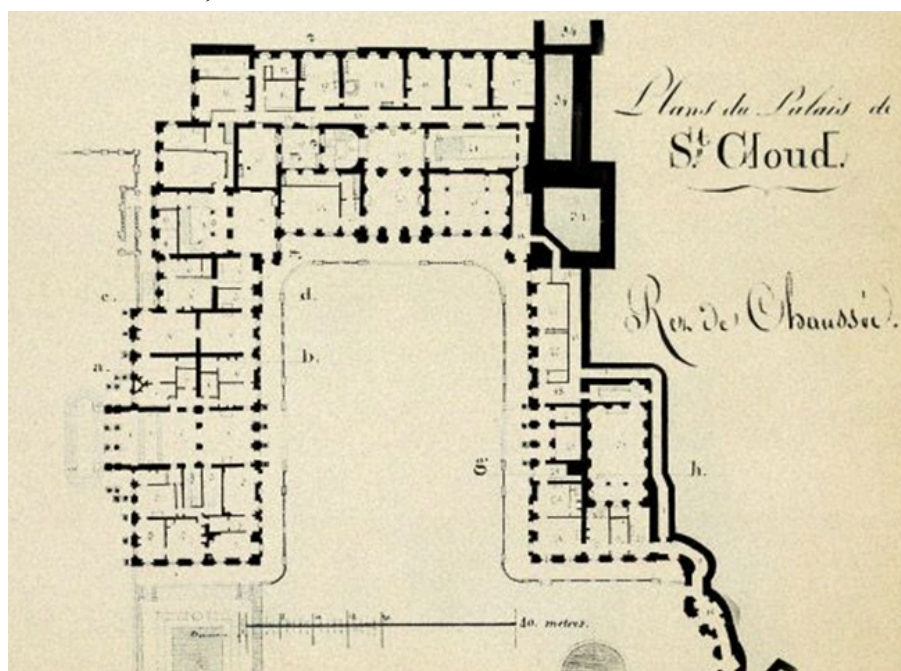
[Figure 6] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Sultane. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk.



[Figure 7] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Firescreen. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 8] Richard Mique. *Plans du Palais de St Cloud, Rez de Chaussée.* c. 1787. Association Reconstructions Saint-Cloud, Paris.



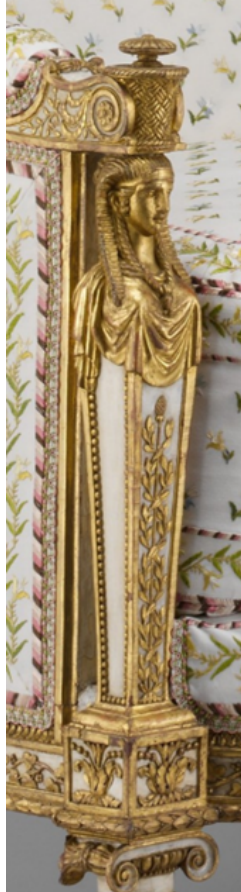
[Figure 9] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Detail of top rail, bergère à la reine. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 10] Élisabeth Vigée Lebrun. Marie-Antoinette en Chemise. 1783. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 11] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Detail of term, Bergère à la Reine. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 12] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Detail of feet, Firescreen. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 13] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Detail of top rail, Firescreen. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 14] Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené (joiner) and Louis-François Chatard (painter/gilder). Detail of term, Fauteuil à la Reine. c. 1788. Carved, painted and gilded walnut; modern cotton twill embroidered in silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 15] Marie-Antoinette. Firescreen Panel. c. 1788. Silk thread on cotton. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 16] Manufacture Royale de Sèvres. Pearls and Cornflower Plate. c. 1781. Soft paste porcelain. Château de Versailles.



[Figure 17] Alexandre-Jean Oppenordt (inlayer) and Jean Berain (designer). Detail of top, Bureau Brisé. 1785. Oak, pine, and walnut veneered with tortoiseshell and engraved brass, ebony and pewter; Brazilian rosewood; Gilt bronze and steel. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Figure 18] Alexander Eugen Koller. Breakfast Cabinet. Photograph. Schönbrunn Palace, Vienna.



[Figure 19] Pierre-Adrien Paris (designer). Boudoir from the Hôtel de Crillon. c. 1777-80. Painted and gilded oak wall paneling, furniture. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

