

ROLLTOP DESK

Abraham and David Roentgen, ca. 1770–74
Oak, cherry, and other woods, veneered with sycamore, tulipwood, rosewood, and maple; mother-of-pearl and ivory, mirror glass; leather, gilt bronze and steel
45¾ × 42 × 25 in (116.2 × 106.7 × 63.5 cm)
Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, Washington, D.C., Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 1973 (33.222)

PROVENANCE

Lady Ela Russell (sold Christie's, London, May 20, 1909, lot 87); Charles Wertheimer collection, London; [E. M. Hodgkins, Paris, 1909]; [Symons Inc., New York, 1927].

The curvilinear silhouette of this rolltop desk and its surface embellished with eight bold marquetry trophies conceal a wealth of mechanical surprises and hidden compartments. The trophies, suspended by ribbons in the marquetry, invite the viewer to explore their subjects. On the sides, scientific instruments, such as a compass and an astrolabe, illustrate geography and geometry. The front continues the program of aristocratic pleasures and pastimes, with objects representing grammar and poetry on the left; painting in the center; and musical composition on the right. Three trophies on the lower section of the front further celebrate music with suspended bundles of instruments and, in the center, an open score. In the inlay, the notation is musically literate, apart from a few minor flaws, but so far it has not been identified.¹ Roentgen's sources for these trophies have been traced to rearrangements of equally bold trophies in ornamental prints published about 1750 in Paris by Gilles Demarteau (1722–1776).²

The inside of the desk is a spectacular arrangement of compartments and fold-out devices. Four candleholders, all with snuffers and with shades to protect against taint from the flame and to diffuse the light, can be released, two on the top of the desk and two at the level of the writing surface. At the

back edge of the desk, a mirror can be raised from the top by a crank. A concealed keyhole gives access to the cylinder; when it is lifted a writing surface slides out. Secret buttons in the lower part reveal further compartments and two lockable boxes, finished on all sides, that can be detached. A possibly unique decoration on the top is a metal insert with an ornamentally etched surface. It is not known whether this was intended to imitate heavy marble, but an analysis of the alloy could help to clarify this mystery.

The complex desk could be used as a *poudreuse* and for writing and reading while its owner stood or sat, but above all it was meant to impress the owner's guests. When compared with some dated objects from the Neuwied workshop, such as the dressing table of 1769 (cat. 16), the ensemble of 1770–71 in Wörlitz (fig. 11, p. 12), and the two fully documented rolltop desks of 1773 at the Munich Residenz,³ the Hillwood rolltop surpasses them all in its refinement, quality of craftsmanship, and attention to detail. It is fashioned in the transitional style, with cabriole legs, shaped aprons, and a slightly retreating and protruding surface and frame, but the prototype for this piece was clearly the renowned Walderdorff desk (cat. 12), made at least a decade earlier. The similarity can be seen, for example, in the fluted stubs on the front of the writing surfaces of both desks.⁴



FIG. 60. Anton Raphael Mengs. Maria Antonia Walpurgis, Princess of Bavaria and Electress of Saxony. 1752. Oil on canvas, 45½ × 44¼ in. (115.5 × 112.5 cm) Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden (Inv. no. 2163)

Koeppke, W. (2012).
catalogue entry 18
(pp. 94–97) in
Extravagant Inventions:
The Pricey Furniture
of the Roentgens.
New Haven and London:
Yale University Press.





The monogram beneath an electoral crown can be read several ways. As MA, it could have stood for Marie Antoinette, but the desk is too late to have been made for her wedding in 1770 to the future King Louis XVI of France (see fig. 72, p. 142). Further, the crown with its orb and cross are not suitable symbols for either a French queen or a Habsburg archduchess. The letters MA were widely used: they were a common abbreviation for the Virgin Mary and are found in countless references to ecclesiastical furnishings. Among the significant details on the desk is an ornamental band defined by mother-of-pearl inlay that follows the shape of the apron and the sides and decorates some interior compartments. Repeated within the band is the motif of a stylized cross with arms of equal length.⁵ Might this represent or allude to the Order of the Starry Cross, an order of the Habsburg dynasty given only to women of high nobility, which was founded by Eleonora Gonzaga in 1668?

The proposal from various scholars that a south German princess was the patron of this desk seems plausible. The monogram MA could also be interpreted as MAW or MAC.⁶ An acceptable

candidate is Maria Antonia Walpurgis (1724–1780), known as Maria Antonia, electress of Saxony. In a portrait by Anton Raphael Mengs, she proudly wears the Order of the Starry Cross, bestowed on her in 1737, suspended from a black ribbon (fig. 60).⁷ In 1747, she married Frederick Christian, who was elector of Saxony briefly in 1763, and after his death she continued as regent for her son, or dowager electress (*Churfürstin*, hence her connection with the monogram MAC), until 1768. She was well respected as a composer of two operas and other musical works, a singer, a harpsichordist, and a patron of the arts. The desk's iconographic program fits her character perfectly, and she was assuredly familiar with furniture from the Roentgen workshop, which she knew not only through the *poudreuse* her daughter-in-law received in 1769 (cat. 16) but certainly also through her brother-in-law Clemens Wenzeslaus August von Sachsen, who in 1768 became the last elector and archbishop of Trier after the death of Johann Philipp von Walderdorff. Documentation shows that Wenzeslaus also owned pieces by Roentgen.⁸

WK

