

Jean-Henri Riesener (1735–1806), the finest cabinet-maker of the period of Louis XVI, was known and recognized as the undisputed master of his era. By virtue of his superb craftsmanship and the geniality of his designs, Riesener acquired a prominence unknown to most other cabinetmakers. His portrait

Mrs. Post purchased the earlier commode in 1963; little is known about its history.³

Like most cabinetmakers working in 18th-century France, Riesener was not a native. Born in Gladbeck, Germany, he moved to Paris when he was about 20 years old and entered the workshop of a fellow German, Jean-

Hillwood Studies

TWO COMMODES ATTRIBUTED TO JEAN-HENRI RIESENER

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by Vestier testifies to his stature. He is shown with pencil in hand, as an artist rather than an artisan (fig. 1, page 8).

Two monumental commodes, or chests of drawers, flank the entrance to the library from Hillwood's main hall. These commodes are ascribed to Jean-Henri Riesener on the basis of their style, construction and fine execution. Marjorie Merriweather Post purchased the pieces some 35 years apart from Duveen Brothers of New York. She must have acquired the later commode before 1931, the year in which it was included in a catalogue of her collection, which was never published.¹ Research confirms that it was part of the Parisian holdings of Lord Hertford, member of a well-known family of collectors, and his illegitimate son Sir Richard Wallace, founder of the Wallace Collection in London.²

François Oeben, as an apprentice.

Oeben owned a large cabinetmaking workshop that operated under royal auspices, with headquarters in the Arsenal. Working in this privileged enclave for court artisans, Oeben was free from the constrictions of guild regulations. His workshop earned a reputation for its skillful combination of refined cabinetmaking techniques and ingenious mechanical devices.

During his years as an apprentice with Oeben, Riesener learned and mastered the techniques for crafting pictorial marquetry—such as the depiction of naturalistic flowers—as well as the sophisticated use of geometric marquetry and the intricacies of complex mechanical devices. His style matured and evolved, culminating in the highly personal, distinctive style that is impeccably executed and eloquently illustrated in the

Fig. 5

Detail of the mount featured on the apron of the two commodes at Hillwood. Hillwood Collection 31.10



Fig. 1

Detail. Antoine Vestier,
Jean-Henri Riesener,
Ébéniste, 1785. Musée
de Versailles. c Photo
R.M.N.

two commodes at Hillwood.

Oeben died in 1763, shortly after he had taken the most important commission of his life: a desk for Louis XV. Oeben's widow put Riesener in charge of the business. Riesener completed, delivered, and signed the *bureau du roi* in 1769.⁴ A year earlier, in 1768, he had received the title of master cabinetmaker, which entitled him to own a workshop in Paris and stamp his furniture with his own mark. He later married Oeben's widow and became the owner of Oeben's shop.

After Louis XV died in 1774, Riesener was appointed *ébéniste du roi* (king's cabinetmaker) to Louis XVI, replacing the elderly Gilles Joubert.⁵ For the next 10 years he enjoyed the full favor of the court, supplying many pieces of furniture for extravagant sums.⁶ In addition to the king and his family, many of the great nobles of the court employed Riesener.

Around 1774, Riesener must have made the first of the two commodes at Hillwood (fig. 2, page 9).⁷ Its massive proportions, curved outline, boldly modeled bronzes, and pictorial marquetry belong to his first style, typical of the time when he obtained his master's patent. After 1775, his style became airier. This commode is rectangular in shape, and its proportions are monumental. The front has a bulging center with two drawers, flanked by two concave panels concealing cupboard doors. The gilt bronze ornaments hide the three upper drawers. One turn of the key simultaneously unlocks the two large drawers, and springs open the side doors. This ingenious locking mechanism illustrates the taste for mechanical devices Riesener inherited from Oeben.

The peculiar design of the front of this piece is characteristic of Riesener's early commodes. It is arranged as a facade, divided into panels with pictorial marquetry surrounded by bronze frames. The

central panel seems to have been superimposed on the piece. Similarly, the Hercules mask mounted at the center of the top frieze appears to overlap the frieze of scrolled acanthus leaves on both sides. This visual device of seemingly superimposed decorative elements is also typical of Riesener's productions.

The marquetry reveals all the refinements and naturalism expected of a cabinetmaker trained in Oeben's workshop. The center panel has an elaborate marquetry of exotic woods on a ground of sycamore. It depicts a pastoral still life of a basket of flowers, a sheaf of wheat with a sickle, a straw hat, a tambourine, and a pair of turtle doves. The cupboard doors are inlaid with two vases in burl wood to imitate jasper, with flowers on pedestal urns. Oeben had formulated many elements of this vocabulary of floral and pastoral motifs in the *bureau du roi*. The recurrence of these motifs in Hillwood's commode presents an unequivocal testimony to Oeben's creations in marquetry.

An almost identical commode, now at Windsor Castle, was delivered to Louis XVI's bed chamber at Versailles in August 1774.⁸ When he ascended the throne, the king commissioned a monumental commode from Riesener that took more than a year to make and cost 25,000 livres. In the meantime, the commode now at Windsor was placed in the king's bedchamber as a temporary substitute.⁹

In outline and decoration, Hillwood's commode closely resembles the Windsor piece. The most noticeable differences are in the bronzes. Similarities are not unusual among Riesener's productions: several of them closely repeat motifs found in others.¹⁰ One possible explanation for the shared elements in these two pieces is that Riesener could have been working on two similar commodes when he received the commission for the *chambre du*

roi. Because of the short notice, and in view of how quickly he completed the order, Riesener may have decided to rework one of the pieces in progress in order to serve the king's demand promptly. Hillwood's commode is unsigned and bears no catalogue number, so it cannot be traced in the royal inventories.¹¹ It was not likely part of the royal household furniture. Its grandeur and the quality of its design and execution indicate, however, that it must have been an important commission, perhaps even of royal origin.

The highly sculptural bronzes, so heavily gilded that they retain their brilliance, recur in other Riesener works. Mounts of this period are bold in character, recalling the solemn classicism of the Louis XIV era. In contrast, Riesener's later mounts are much lighter and minutely conceived, almost jewel-like. The corner mounts in the shape of vestal busts belong to the stock of Joubert, Riesener's predecessor as *ébéniste du roi*.¹² But the rest of the mounts are of Oeben-Riesener's stock. The Hercules mask flanked by two winged children had been used in the *bureau du roi*; the mask of a bearded man on the apron and the lion's feet are also present in other early Riesener pieces. A red marble slab bordered with a gilded bronze filet, both of which are later

replacements, tops the commode.¹³

The second commode at Hillwood, which dates from the second half of the 1770s, is more neoclassical in style (fig. 3, page 10). It develops the features of the first commode one step further. The rectangular front retains a timid projection of the central panel. The taste for large-scale, ample forms and bold, vigorous decorative elements is present, though more restrained. The inlaid central marquetry panel consists of a realistically rendered basket of flowers, of the type Oeben created, flanked by two panels of jasper vases with naturalistic flowers in marquetry, similar to those in the other Hillwood commode.

This piece belongs to a group of commodes and, more numerous, secretaries that use naturalistic flower vases in marquetry and similar bronze mounts.¹⁴ The classical busts appear with subtle variations in these pieces, chiefly among the bronze mounts. The busts vary slightly, an indication that they were not cast from the same mold. This small detail is of great importance, for it speaks to the individualized nature of each and every piece that came out of Riesener's shop. Casting, chasing, and gilding mounts was a painstaking, expensive process. Bronze founders, members of a



Fig. 2
Commode, attributed
to Jean-Henri
Riesener, Paris, ca.
1774. H. 28½ in., w.
67½ in., d. 27 in.
Hillwood Collection
31.11

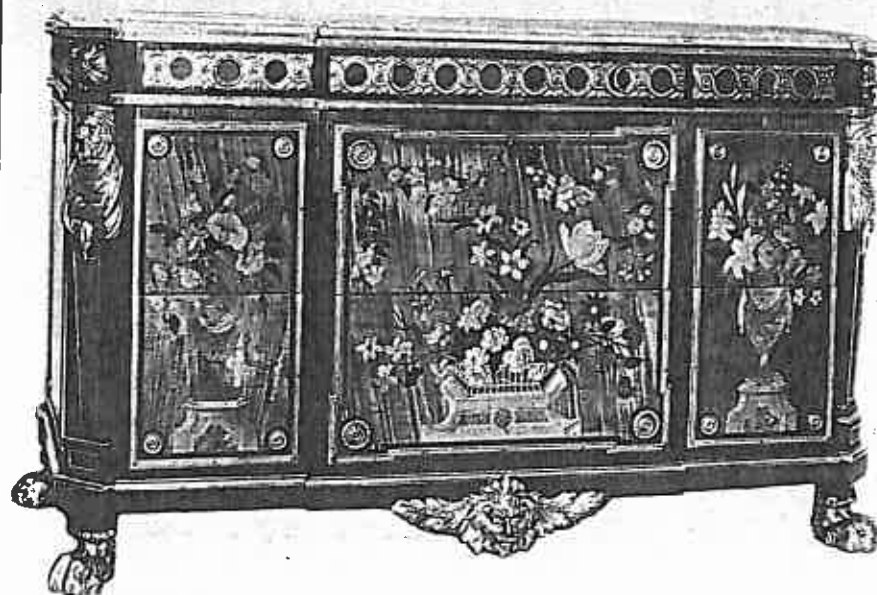


Fig. 3
Commode, attributed
to Jean-Henri
Riesener, Paris, ca.
1775-80. H. 36 in.,
w. 56½ in., d. 23 in.
Hillwood Collection
~~61-2348~~ 31.10

guild independent from the cabinetmakers' guild, often delivered the same mounts to different *ébénistes*. However, Riesener's privileged situation as cabinet-maker to the king allowed him to impose his own style on the bronzers who worked for him. This individualized approach sets Riesener's furniture apart from the more mainstream production of certain workshops operating in 18th-century Paris.

The construction of both commodes is consistent with other documented pieces by Riesener. In both examples, the skeleton, or carcass, was constructed with the utmost care using the finest close-grain oak of an impeccable finish, which is uncommon on most ordinary pieces of French furniture. The backs typically are mounted with three hollow-chamfered panels. The drawer constructions are of an extremely sophisticated type known to have been used only by Riesener.¹⁵ Inside, the pieces are carefully finished. The two cupboards on the earlier commode are lined with tulip wood with a fine banding of amaranth and ebony along the sides, an indication of the high standards of Riesener's workshop.

The sides of both pieces are veneered with finely executed trellis marquetry enclosing a

rosette (fig. 4, page 11). Each diamond shape is banded with strips of amaranth edged with extremely fine filets of lighter wood. The refined treatment of the marquetry once more evidences Oeben's teachings.¹⁶ Geometric marquetry displaced the pictorial type in Riesener's works of the late 1770s. With slight variations, it is present on these pieces.

Mounts identical in design to the Hillwood commodes consistently appear on other Riesener pieces (fig. 5, page 1). He also reproduced the essential features of the marquetry motifs and panels elsewhere. As Geoffrey de Bellaigue has observed, this constant repetition of bronze, marquetry motifs, and construction elements is expected in a disciplined and active workshop.¹⁷ To complete his orders on time, Riesener must have introduced some mass production techniques and employed specialized craftsmen (including bronze founders and chasers) who worked from established patterns for drawings and moldings.

The two Hillwood commodes have the characteristic style, quality of execution, and construction found in Riesener's documented works from his early production, and thus both can be confidently



attributed to him. They exemplify, respectively, early and later stages of the master's first style, which was deliberately solid, masculine, and somewhat ponderous. His first transitional style bridges the debt to Oeben and an affirmation of his own character, free from the remaining ties to the era of Louis XV. In its next phase, under the influence of queen Marie Antoinette, his style would abandon the monumental character for a more capricious, lighter, feminine taste with a fully neo-classical flavor.

In 1785 Riesener's fortune was shaken. The king, alarmed by the precarious state of the Treasury, drastically reduced the expenditure for furniture. Riesener, nevertheless, retained the queen's favor, for whom he worked until 1791. But the advent of the Revolution caused the definitive decline of his workshop. The lack of new commissions along with the unpaid bills of the Crown and the nobles who fled the country in big numbers, caused Riesener's ruin. In a last desperate effort to cover his losses, Riesener bought back pieces of his own make—which were sold for ridiculously low prices—at the Revolutionary sales. He hoped to resale them later, once the market conditions improved. But with the changes brought about by the Revolution there was no longer a demand for the taste of the old regime. Riesener finally closed his workshop in 1801, and died a poor man five years later.

That Mrs. Post was able to acquire these two outstanding commodes at such a late date is quite extraordinary. When she moved to Hillwood she placed the commode she had purchased before 1931 in the entrance hall. By 1963, with her characteristic determination and inquisitive mind, she managed to buy a second commode, even more monumental than the first. In the past, these pieces must have

invested the rooms where they stood with regal solemnity. In their present context, as Mrs. Post conceived it, they similarly contribute to the grandeur of the front hall at Hillwood, leaving a lasting impression on visitors who enter the house.

Notes

1. This piece was included in the 1931 preparation of a catalogue of the Marjorie Post Hutton collection which was to be privately published.

Hillwood Museum's archives hold four volumes in draft and numerous papers relating to this unfinished project.

2. The provenance of this commode can be traced without interruption to the beginning of the 19th century, when it is mentioned in the Parisian collection of Lord Hertford (1800–70), the fourth marquis of Hertford and of Sir Richard Wallace, his illegitimate son (1818–90). On Sir Richard's death, the commode was inherited by his wife Lady Wallace and then by her residuary legatee Sir John Murray Scott in 1897. In the inventory of her rue Laffitte apartment, taken at her death, the commode is listed as "*commode L. XVI, bois de placage et marqueterie (corbeille et vase de fleurs) orné de bronze avec dessus marbre blanc—prisé vingt mille francs....20.000.*" When Murray Scott died in 1912, he bequeathed the rue Laffitte apartment and its contents to Lady Sackville, who sold the collection *en bloc* to Jacques Seligmann, a Paris art dealer. Seligmann must have sold the commode to Mrs. F. Gould, who in turn sold it to Duveen, who then sold it to Mrs. Post before 1931. I am indebted to Peter Hughes from the Wallace Collection for checking the Hertford inventories and finding this commode listed there.

3. The Duveen correspondence in Hillwood's files mentions that this commode had been at Syon House, home of the Duke of Northumberland. The author has not been able to verify this assumption. Inventories up to 1847 have been checked, but no piece resembling Hillwood's commode is described. The commode reputedly

Fig. 4
Side view of commode
in fig. 2, showing
trellis marquetry.





Suggested Readings

Salverte, comte
François de *Les*
Ebénistes du XVIIIe
Siècle (Paris: Les
Editions d'Art et
d'Histoire 1922,
7th ed., F. de
Nobele, 1985)

Verlet, Pierre *French*
Royal Furniture (New
York: Clarkson N.
Potter, 1963)

Pradère, Alexandre
French Furniture
Makers (Malibu: J.
Paul Getty Museum,
1989)

was purchased in the late 1920s by Edouard Jonas, French art expert, from Syon House. Although there is no documentary evidence to support the Syon provenance, there is proof that the piece was in Jonas's possession (Henry Clouzot, *The Finest Work of Jean-Henri Riesener* [Paris: Edouard Jonas, 1926]). Duveen purchased it from Jonas and sold it to Mrs. Post in 1963.

4. The *bureau du roi* at Versailles is recognized as the most important example of French 18th-century cabinetmaking.

5. Gilles Joubert was a major supplier of furniture to the crown during the reign of Louis XV. From 1763 until Riesener took over in 1774, he held the title of *ébéniste du roi*. During his active years, he supplied 4,000 pieces of furniture. This volume obliged him to subcontract much of the work, so very few pieces with his signature are known.

6. Pierre Verlet calculated that during the decade 1774–84, Riesener supplied the Royal Garde Meuble with more than 700 pieces of furniture at a cost of approximately 500,000 livres.

7. This commode was also published in André Theunissen *Meubles et Sièges du XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Henri Lefebvre, 1939), plate L1, p. 153.

8. See Sir Guy Francis Laking, *The Furniture of Windsor Castle* (London: Bradbury and Agnew Co., 1905), pl. 34, pp. 133–34. See also Pierre Verlet *French Royal Furniture*, vol. 3 (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1963), pp. 123–26.

9. For a full account of the order and delivery of the two Riesener commodes to the *chambre du roi* at Versailles and their whereabouts, see Pierre Verlet, "A Commode and a Pair of Encoignures at Windsor Castle," *Burlington Magazine* (October 1936): 186–88. See also Verlet, "Les Trois Commodes de la Nouvelle Chambre du Roi à Versailles," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art Français*, 1937 (1er fascicule), and Verlet, *French Royal Furniture*, cat. no. 13.

10. Among the earlier examples of Riesener's repetition of models for different clients are the derivations from the *bureau du roi*, including the cylin-

der desk for the comte d'Orsay in the Wallace Collection, London; the desk made for the dauphine in Buckingham Palace, London; and a desk for the comte de Provence in the Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire.

11. Many pieces with royal inventory numbers and branded marks have been traced to their original locations and the year they were commissioned.

12. The same mounts can be seen in a commode that Joubert supplied for the bedroom of Madame Louise at Versailles in 1769, now at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California. The corner mounts on Hillwood's commode have been taken apart for examination. The area underneath them retains the original brilliance of the green stain. The green color, however, has been completely lost in the burl wood area below the mount due to exposure to light and varnishes.

13. When the commode was published in Clouzot, *Finest Work*, it was described as having a white marble top.

14. Among other related pieces are a commode in the Art Institute of Chicago and three secretaries à *abbatant*: one at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, one in the Rothschild Collection; Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire; and one in the Wallace Collection, London.

15. Sir Geoffrey de Bellaigue has observed that Riesener's bottom drawers invariably have beveled front and side edges that slot into grooves and are secured at the back with handmade steel screws. For further details about drawer construction, see Bellaigue, *The James A. de Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor* (Fribourg: Office du Livre, 1974), p. 885.

16. This type of marquetry, of exceptional quality, originated with Oeben. It can be seen in a table by Oeben at the Louvre illustrated in *Le Mobilier du Musée du Louvre*, vol. 1 (Dijon: Editions Faton, 1993), cat. no. 53. Also illustrated is a commode by Leleu (another of Oeben's pupils) that repeats the same marquetry motif (cat. no. 63).

17. Bellaigue, *Waddesdon Manor*, p. 306.