

HILLWOOD'S MYSTERY ELEPHANT HEAD VASES NEWLY CONSERVED AND ON DISPLAY

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In 1961, Marjorie Merriweather Post acquired a three-piece green-ground porcelain garniture, comprising a pair of iconic vases with elephant heads, known as '*vase à tête d'éléphant*,' and a boat-shaped pot-pourri vase, known as '*vase à gondole*,' from the New York dealer and interior design firm French & Company (founded 1907).¹ (Fig. 1) At the time of the purchase, the set was believed to have been made around 1820 by the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory (founded 1756).² Post displayed each vase on a pair of late eighteenth-century gilt bronze wall brackets on either side of Winterhalter's portrait of Empress Eugenie in the French drawing room at Hillwood. (Fig. 2) Unfortunately, no photographic record of the pot-pourri vase displayed in the mansion survives and it is no longer in the collection today.

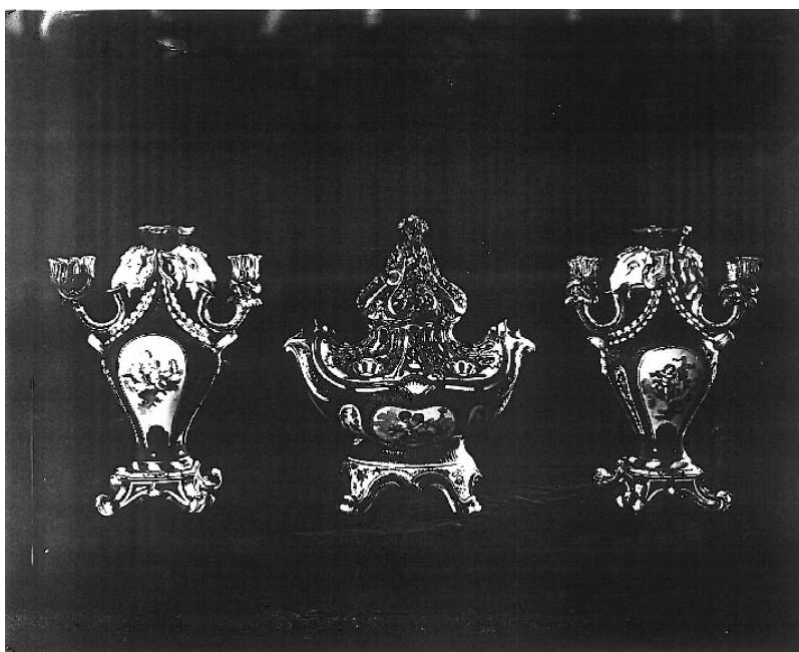


Figure 1. Marjorie Post's garniture comprising a pair of elephant vases and pot-pourri vase. French & Company archives, Getty Center

The original model of the '*vase à tête d'éléphant*' was designed by designer Jean-Claude Duplessis (c. 1695-1774) and produced at Sèvres between 1756-1763 in two slightly different versions and only in soft-paste

¹ Post's close relationship with French & Company began in 1927 with the purchase of a number of pieces of antique furniture for her New York apartment, followed by the firm's completion in 1928 of the woodwork and paneling for the French drawing room, library, and dining room. They also supplied works of art for Hillwood Long Island, Camp Topridge, Mar-a-Lago, and the Sea Cloud, and sourced and installed the antique paneling for the French drawing room and dining room at Hillwood. Some of Post's most important acquisitions of French porcelain came from the firm, notably the Vincennes tureen and platter (24.1.1-3) and thirty Sèvres plates (24.65.1-30) and twelve ice cups (24.66.1-12) made for Prince Louis de Rohan, all decorated in the bleu-celeste enamel ground.

² French & Company archives, curatorial files 24.160.1-2, Archives and Special Collections, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens. Prior to French and Company's acquisition of the three-piece garniture in 1950, the set was in the collection of James W. Barney (d. 1948), a connoisseur of Chinese porcelain and former curator of drawings at the Yale Gallery of Fine Arts, when it was attributed to the English firm Coalport Porcelain Manufactory (founded 1795) around 1820. Had the set indeed been of English manufacture, its composition would have been made of bone china, a different composition than porcelain, incorporating bone ash. See "Notable French Furniture, Objects of Art, Tapestries, English Furniture, Paintings & Decorations Belonging to the Estate of the Late James W. Barney," Parke-Bernet Galleries, Inc., New York, May 8, 1948, lot 93.

porcelain. One version (shape A) was made without the small handles underneath the elephant's trunks, while shape B (like Hillwood's vases) includes handles and beading on the elephant heads that loops through the handles. Elephant-head vases of both designs were made in three sizes; Hillwood's vases are similar in size to the *première grandeur*, or first size. Some vases also incorporate single or double candleholders extending from the elephant's trunk for lighting, while other versions excluded candleholders and were only used for the display of flowers. Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764), mistress of King Louis XV and patron of the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, ordered two pairs of such vases in the second and third sizes.³ Likely due to the sculptural complexity of the model and the high cost, relatively few vases were made and only twenty-one eighteenth century examples are known to survive today.⁴ An original plaster mold of one version of the elephant head vase from 1757 still survives at the Sèvres factory and was used to produce later versions. (Fig. 3)



Figure 2. Hillwood's French drawing room, 1960s. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Sèvres factory authorized a number of *bronziers* and *porcelainiers* to purchase plaster over-moldings of models from its collection. According to the Sèvres archives, only two companies purchased over-moldings of the Duplessis elephant head vase: the Gien factory (that produced mostly earthenware) in June 1875 and Samson, Edmé et Cie (1845-1969, commonly known as Samson Ceramics) in January 1903.⁵ However, the plaster over-moldings continued to circulate

³ For more information, see Rosalind Savill, *The Wallace Collection Catalogue of Sèvres Porcelain*, vol. I (London, 1988), p. 154. The inventories of Madame de Pompadour's apartments at Versailles and the Hôtel de Pompadour also list a set of three vases, likely two *vases à tête d'éléphant* and a *vase à gondole*, possibly purchased in 1759 and then displayed in different houses. See

[https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultListView/result.t1.collection_list.\\$TspTitleImageLink.link&sp=10&sp=Scollection&sp=SfieldValue&sp=0&sp=1&sp=2&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=F&sp=T&sp=0](https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultListView/result.t1.collection_list.$TspTitleImageLink.link&sp=10&sp=Scollection&sp=SfieldValue&sp=0&sp=1&sp=2&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=F&sp=T&sp=0)

⁴ French eighteenth-century examples of the same design are conserved at the Walters Art Museum (48.1796-97); the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1976.155.61, 1983.185.9, 58.75.90-91a,b); and the Wallace Collection, London (C246-7, C248-50).

⁵ Sèvres, manufacture et musée nationaux, service des collections documentaires, archives de la manufacture, carton U 36, correspondance et carnet de commandes. A complete list of the purchases of over-moldings will be published in Hillwood's Mystery Elephant Head Vases | 2

and a number of other factories, including Saint-Amand-les-Eaux, that produced both earthenware and porcelain (founded 1718) and the Herend Porcelain Manufactory (founded 1826) from Hungary, continued to make molds of objects.⁶ The model was also replicated by English porcelain factories in the late nineteenth century, including Minton.⁷



Figure 3. Sèvres plaster model, 1757. Cité de la céramique, Sèvres

Hillwood's pair of elephant vases have always posed somewhat of a mystery and have remained in storage due to their condition. One of the vases had two broken candleholders, a broken trunk fragment, and flower petals, and there were several discolored repairs from previous damage. All four candleholders were made of a composite material (not ceramic), suggesting they were later replacements or repairs. (Figs. 4A and 4B) In addition, the underside of the vases are marked with suspicious interlaced L's (copying Sèvres) and the date letter "E" for 1757-58 in over-glaze blue (thus after firing).⁸ Each is numbered "47471" in red, representing French & Company's stock number. (Fig. 4C)

This past fall, Hillwood's elephant head vases underwent scientific examination and conservation in order to determine their precise ceramic material and return them to exhibitable shape for display. (Fig. 5) Two ceramic fragments were tested and analyzed by Raman spectroscopy and Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) that concluded they are made of high-fired, or hard-paste, porcelain. While dating analysis of the enamel colors was not conducted, it is likely that the vases were made around the turn of the twentieth

the upcoming issue of *Bulletins de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art Français*. I would like to thank Tamara Préaud for this information. A single green ground vase à tête d'éléphant reproduction was made by Samson in shape A, not the same model as Hillwood's vases. See Florence Slitine, *Samson, génie de l'imitation* (Paris: Editions Charles Massin), p. 90.

⁶ Florence Slitine, *Samson, génie de l'imitation*, p. 91.

⁷ A pair of turquoise ground-color elephant vases made by Minton in 1880 (with a scene of drinking men after Teniers) is currently in the collection of the Royal Collection Trust and displayed in Frogmore House (RCIN 54011e). An important pair of Minton 'Elephant Vases' dated 1876 were sold at Bonham's London, "Masterpieces of Minton, Selected Items from the Minton Museum Collection, lot 10, Oct 5, 2004.

⁸ Another elephant vase (with a dubious Sèvres mark) in pink ground enamel was made around 1890 was recently sold at auction. See "Property from Aristocratic Estates and Important Provenance," Palais Dorotheum, Vienna, January 28, 2019, lot 112. The mark on Hillwood's vases and this pink example are both similar to Samson's 'Sèvres' mark.

century in Western Europe, possibly in France.⁹ The vases are now on view in the French drawing room where they will remain throughout the duration of *Luxury of Clay: Porcelain Past and Present*.



Fig. 4A. Hillwood's vases before treatment



Fig. 4B. Broken candleholders, trunk fragment, and flower petals before treatment



Fig. 4C. Underside of one of the vases

Hillwood's vases (including the missing pot-pourri vase) are nearly identical to the green ground garniture conserved in the Wallace Collection in London made at Sèvres in 1758. (Fig. 6) Since Hillwood's candleholders were removed during treatment, a three dimensional scan of the candleholders at the Wallace Collection could be taken in the future in order to replicate a more faithful version. Coincidentally, the pot-pourri vase previously owned by Marjorie Post was recently offered for sale at Sotheby's in London and was identifiable as belonging to Hillwood's garniture due to the same French and Company stock numbers in red on the underside.¹⁰ (Fig. 7) Copies of this vase were also made in the late nineteenth century by Minton and Coalport.¹¹ Regardless of whether these mid-eighteenth-century Sèvres vases were copied

⁹ It is possible that Hillwood's vases could possibly be Hungarian as the Herend Porcelain Manufactory also produced the elephant head vase in the Sèvres style.

¹⁰ See Sotheby's London, Gold Boxes, Ceramics & Silver, May 26, 2021, lot 124.

¹¹ See [Sèvres porcelain factory - Pot-pourri gondole \(rct.uk\)](https://www.rct.uk/objects/s%C3%A8vres-porcelain-factory-pot-pourri-gondole). A pot-pourri vase gondole (of unknown European maker) from 1890 made of hard-paste is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (inv. no. 1939-41-37a,b). The underside is also marked with interlaced L's and the date letter "E."

over a century later with the intent to deceive, such fanciful rococo designs remained popular among nineteenth and twentieth century collectors.



Fig. 5. Hillwood's vases after treatment



Fig. 6. Garniture of three vases, vase 'pot-pourri gondole' and vase 'à tête d'éléphant' of the first size, Sèvres Porcelain Factory, design attributed to Jean-Claude Chambellan Duplessis, the Elder (1695-1774), probably painted by Charles-Nicolas Dodin (1734-1803), France, 1758, soft-paste porcelain, painted and gilded. The Wallace Collection, London (Inv. C248-250)



Fig. 7. Pot-pourri vase and cover (after a 'pot-pourri gondole'), after Sèvres Porcelain Factory, probably France, late 1800s, hard-paste porcelain. Photo courtesy of Sotheby'