

2026 Mansion Docent Training

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

French Furniture and Textiles Notes Using SFP Framework

Some Main Ideas about French Furniture and Textiles

The 1700s is the golden age of French furniture – it is the height of its exceptional craftsmanship and coveted by Europe's royal courts and beyond.

France's social and economic policies help spread the influence of their luxury goods. The crown supports royal workshops, and the king and queen make it a social obligation to buy French luxury goods.

With the death of Louis 14th, noblemen are no longer trapped at Versailles and they flock to their Paris townhomes.

This move to Parisian townhomes brings about changes to home layout, the activities of daily life, and furniture.

The rococo and neoclassical styles, especially in marquetry, show what topics the wealthy were thinking/reading/discussing about in the 1700s.

Style

What do these objects' appearance reveal about the people who made and used them?

The 1700s is "The French Century" – richest in Europe, Paris center of luxury goods (nobles began under Louis 14th having to buy luxury goods as social responsibility and became an economic driver); its decorative arts are coveted by Europe.

Form and Decoration

- First Type – Rococo (approx. 1720-1750s) – curvilinear, sculptural decorations cover surfaces (elaborate marquetry, veneer work, bronze decorations), "shells, dragons, reeds, plants"
- Second Type – Neoclassical (approx. 1750s-1800) – no curves, straight lines, right angles; decorations from classical Greek and Roman times, excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1784, like acanthus leaves and strings of pearls; also pastoral decorations – straw hats, gardening tools, flowers; was the artistic expression of the Age of Reason or Enlightenment (reason/individualism/scientific method over tradition/faith; late 1600s-1700s)
- Third Type – Transitional – traits from both rococo and neoclassical. Most of Hillwood's pieces are transitional.

Subject Matter and Rationales

- Designs in marquetry – reflect what was in people's heads. They were thinking about:
 - Enlightenment ideals (musical, artistic, scientific instruments)
 - Recent excavations (mythological scenes/ruins)
 - Country life, idealized (pastoral images)
 - Scenes from life, activities (what did people do)
- This style ends up influencing Russia, e.g. Catherine the Great

Function

What purpose did it serve? Literally? Figuratively? Who used it?

For Marjorie Post

- First as furnishings for her homes as she came into NY high society, following the decorative trend of her time, moving away from Victorian heavy clutter to lighter, harmonious interiors; she insisted on period paneling to create ensembles for the furniture...influence of NYC Burden mansion's French decoration and Duveen
- Then as furnishings/settings in a home intended as museum (Hillwood)

In France in 1700s – Literal Function:

- Furniture is what it is: chest, table, chair...a household purchase or a diplomatic gift
- Wood paneling is preferred way to cover a wall (vs. today – paint, wallpaper) and provided thermal insulation, muted acoustics, surface for decoration
- Furniture shows societal changes in 1700s
 - Aristocrats and high-ranking officials moved from Sun King's (Louis 14th r. 1643-1715) Versailles to private Parisian homes, after king's death (Versailles closed for 9 years after)
 - Made first for official, state rooms
 - Monumental, more architectural furniture that matched the shape of the room, chairs, tables (console) on perimeter
 - Then smaller, private rooms...privacy more important, furniture became smaller, and more mobile, comfortable, multifunctional and in more varied shapes. "The art of living with comfort."

Symbolic Functions:

- Those who moved to Paris engaged in self-presentation through lavish homes with furniture. For instance: commodes were functional (chest of drawers) but marquetry on front is for "show"/beauty.
- Furniture as status symbol...that one had resources to own
- The decorative themes spoke to the owner's access to information, worldliness; that pieces displayed their personal/political beliefs, awareness of trends
- Importance of novelty, related to status...They also craved the "new" (sound familiar?) so changing furniture frequently was done to show they were "keeping up with the Jones's"....
- Influence of women as consumers: dressing table, bedside table, women's writing desks, chiffonier (tables with drawers for sewing/embroidery tools) – speak to women's experience
- New household conveniences and comfort...commode, set-back arms on chairs/sofas, upholstered, portable
- Private activities take on importance, Enlightenment and the individual...
 - Some furniture speaks to ritual of dressing and toilette...swivel chair, desks
 - Letter-writing as a favorite pastime
- Spoke to rank and political intrigue – who sits where on what (arm chairs, chairs without arms, stools, no chair but standing), or novelty of roll-top desk that is first made for Louis 15th
- As diplomatic gifts to show/influence France's power...exporting French taste

Who used it?

- Paris high society, which was now less homogenous, included aristocrats, financiers, newly wealthy entrepreneurs, and women (had become style-makers), and servants
- Foreign rulers, elite...French goods coveted by royal courts from Berlin to London to St. Petersburg

Production

How was it made? Who made it?

- Collaborative process of many artisans
- Two main types...menuisiers [carpenters who were carvers and makers of solid wood furniture, like chairs/sofas (their main output), beds, console tables, mirrors, wood paneling] and ebenistes (applied veneers to solid core of wood, examples: dressing tables, commodes, writing desks)
- Others too: bronze mount makers and upholsters (worked under 2 above), painters/gilders, designers, architects, tapestry weavers
- Guild system (dating back to Middle Ages) regulates and protected the artisans...apprenticeship as child, then journeyman, finally master. Some producers worked outside guild.
- Some producers only worked for the crown...Gobelins
- Marchand-mercier – another part of the system, linking artisans to customer...traders in decorative arts..."sellers of everything, makers of nothing", taste-makers
- French furniture made by both France-born and foreign-born
 - Ebenistes – often German/Low country; menuisiers – often French, some from a family dynasty of furniture makers
- Golden age of French furniture ends with the Revolution (storming of Bastille 1789; Louis 16th executed 1793)
- But some manufactures still exist today...Gobelins