

Louis XV:
A Style That Still
Holds Sway



Consisting of what some say is the finest craftsmanship the world has ever seen, furniture produced under the reign of Louis XV was sumptuous, elegant and strongly influenced by Madame de Pompadour.

by Bruce B. Blackburn III Photos/Top Kat Photography

Look at the flowing lines of almost any piece of Louis XV furniture—the sinuous cabriole legs, the serpentine, variegated marble tops, the lyrical bombé commodes and the sensuously undulating veneered surfaces.

Note the gorgeous marquetry and inlay work on exotic materials such as kingwood, amaranth, satinwood, purpleheart, rosewood and tulipwood; the popular flower motif, bronze ormolu mounts, gilding and Chinoiserie; the canopy beds; the smaller, more delicate pieces and the low, armless chairs designed to accommodate the ladies' voluminous skirts popular at the time.

Behold all these features and more—ornamentation drawn from garden rockwork, shells, musical instruments and baskets—and you readily conclude that furniture produced during the reign of Louis XV (1723–1774) speaks a vocabulary articulated in a distinctly feminine voice. Fortunately for the king, a handsome but relatively unimaginative man who was easily bored, that voice belonged at least in part to the vivacious Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764), a fascinating woman in her own right and mistress to His Majesty.

Brilliant and Beautiful

In mid-18th century France, it was so common, even expected, for a king to have a mistress that it was almost like filling a cabinet post. The woman even had an official title: *maitresse en titre*—the recognized royal mistress. Born Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson to middle-class parents, the spirited Jeanne-Antoinette was just twenty-four when she was presented at court and ennobled by King Louis XV as the Marquise de Pompadour.

Madame de Pompadour knew how to keep her king entertained. She had a small theatre built at Versailles and staged plays just for him, plays in which she often held leading roles. Famous artists were commissioned to create the scenery and François Boucher, who painted some of the finest portraits of Madame de Pompadour, designed elaborate costumes for the actors. Because of her extraordinary authority in the court, she was able to arrange for the appointment of her friend Voltaire to the post of royal historiographer, and he wrote

Louis XV green onyx and bronze pedestal with matching urn; urn has French enamel band; c. 1890



of his patron: “Born sincere, she loved the king for himself; she had righteousness in her soul and justice in her heart; all this is not to be met with every day.”

As if she were the queen, Madame de Pompadour so imposed her taste on furniture, fashion and the arts that in many ways she defined the age. By her patronage, she encouraged the ornate Rococo style of furniture, vases, clocks, frames and other decorative arts that are now the best-known French antiques, including the objects made by the porcelain factory at Sèvres, which at the time produced France’s finest china.

Everybody Buys It

Loren Gardner, of Gardner Antiques in New Hope, PA, goes to France every two months but says Louis XV antiques may be found “in America, Switzerland, Germany, Mexico—all over the world. There’s no particular place you can find them because they are loved and appreciated worldwide. Everybody buys the style.

“There are two kinds of Louis XV furniture styles: informal, also known as Country French, and formal, the kind you’ll see in a castle like Versailles.” Loren cites Jean-François Oeben as a leading *ébéniste* (cabinetmaker) of the time, whose style is characterized by the use of decorative gilt-bronze mounts and features elaborate C- and S-scrolls, curling tendril forms, boldly modeled birds, flowers and shells, cabriole legs and elaborate geometric parquetry and marquetry.

Motifs of the Louis XV style were organic rather than classical. Shells, *rocaille* (resembling clefts in a rocky grotto or sparkling splashes of water), scrolling arabesques, leafy tendrils and creepers and sprigs of frothy flowers abound. The look exudes a grand yet delicate grace.

“Some of the painted furniture had Oriental themes, which were popular,” Loren notes. “Pieces were sent to Japan and China where they underwent a special lacquering process. There was also a very important group of brothers, the Martin

brothers, who painted scenes on furniture.” The Martin brothers, Guillaume Étienne-Simon, Julien and Robert, refined and perfected an imitation lacquer they called *verniss Martin*—a treatment that became synonymous with all French japanning in the Rococo style. The imitation Oriental lacquering technique became favored among the nobility.

“What’s most spectacular about Louis XV furniture is the gracefulness of its lines,” says Loren. “The quality of craftsmanship and the graceful execution are what make it special to me.”

Common Interests

Interior design worked its influence on the furniture of the period. In addition to a shared love of animals (Louis had a large white angora cat and Madame de Pompadour had a small dog that was always by her side), the King and Madame

Loren Gardner in his New Hope, PA, gallery—to his right are a pair of French Sèvres covered urns, signed by Petit; c. 1870. Behind him is a Louis XV rustic cherrywood armoire, c. 1790.

