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PARIS - Ten newly restored pieces of the Swan collection of 18th-century French royal furniture were recently unveiled in the Evans wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, making the MFA one of the most important hubs for furniture of this kind in the United States.

Created for the French musketeer Marc-Antoine Thierry de Ville d'Avray in the late 1700s, the set of furniture later crossed the Atlantic, bound for Dorchester on the boat of a swashbuckling opportunist named James Swan.

The restoration - a four-year process that saw the furniture leave Boston on cargo planes bound for the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles for regilding, then to France to be worked on by three expert firms - has been marked by important discoveries about 18th-century French furniture as a whole.

Tracey Albainy, MFA project coordinator and curator in the museum's Art of Europe department, says, "This will be one of the premier collections of 18th-century French furniture in the country. This project ... sets a new standard for upholstery conservation."



Restored Sene bergere at MFA, mate to the one belonging to the Sargent House Museum in Gloucester, MA

The story begins in 1787, when the pieces (a bed, two armchairs, four side chairs, a bergere armchair, a kneeling chair, and a fire screen) were commissioned by Thierry de Ville d'Avray, a musketeer who became the general administrator of the crown furniture for Louis XVI. The Parisian apartment of such an official had to be decorated with the finest furnishings of the day.

Unfortunately for Thierry de Ville d'Avray, he took office just before the French Revolution, and once the monarchy was abolished, he, Louis XVI, and many other members of the French royal court were jailed, put to trial, and sentenced to death.

The cash-strapped new French government then used independent firms to sell or barter royal treasures for food and war supplies from countries such as the United States.

Enter Swan.

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Scottish-born and raised in the United States, Swan had his fingers in many pies in America and France. In Massachusetts, he was a Son of Liberty at the Boston Tea Party, a captain who fought at Bunker Hill, and later a member of the Massachusetts Legislature.

After a series of real estate deals gone sour, however, Swan set sail for France and finagled his way into a partnership in the firm of Dallarde, Swan et Compagnie, one of the firms specializing in furnishing supplies to the new French government.

Through his dealings, Swan became a very rich man, and he built a French-style pavilion for his family in Dorchester that became the new home for the furniture set.

When a French business partner filed a small suit against him in 1808, Swan, ever the eccentric, chose to go to a high-class debtor's prison instead of settling the claim. He stayed there for 22 years and died in 1831, just one year after his release.

Swan's furniture was passed down to his descendants, and between 1921 and 1953, the entire set - in various states of repair - came into the possession of the MFA. Pieces were reupholstered with different fabrics and occasionally displayed at the MFA or lent out to other museums.

The idea of regilding, reupholstering, and reuniting all of the pieces started percolating in the early 1970s with the support of Ellen Jaffe. A member of the museum's board of overseers, Jaffe provided much of the financial support for the restoration.

For the gilding work, the MFA chose Cynthia Moyer, a Los Angeles specialist who had worked on gilding French objects for the 1997 opening of the Getty. Moyer took on the 11/2-year project as a private conservator.

The pieces were also worked on by three French firms with 465 years of experience between them: fabric maker Tassinari & Chatel, founded in 1680; trimming specialists Declercq Passementiers, founded in 1818; and upholsterers Jacques Brazet, founded in 1943. The reputation for quality at each firm brings them together again and again on such restoration projects. Their combined client list reads like a who's who in the worlds of museums, chateaus, and monarchs.

Using original fabric samples sent to Paris by the MFA, experts Xavier Bonnet and Remy Brazet, an upholsterer with the firm of Jacques Brazet, made important finds about 18th-century French furniture.

"What we've found changes our understanding of 18th-century techniques," says Brazet.

Looking at original fabric pieces and examining the stitching allowed Brazet and Bonnet to recreate the padding more accurately, rendering, for example, non-traditional rounded corners instead of a sharper corner on the chairs. “You can actually be comfortable in these,” jokes Brazet.

Brazet and Bonnet also discovered that the fabric on the chair seats (not just the backs) depicted human figures, something that experts had previously thought was taboo in that day.

Tassinari & Chatel took on the re-creation of a complex woven fabric called lampas for the project. The company is perhaps best known in the United States because of John F. Kennedy’s order of fabrics for the Blue Room and the Yellow Room in the White House.

Originally designed in 1785 for Napoleon’s gaming room at Fontainebleau, a pale turquoise, cream, and taupe “Cyclops Forger” lampas was re-created by Tassinari & Chatel using more than 27,000 new loom cards - akin to early computer punch cards - to create the patterns for its motifs: forgers, river gods, sea horses, and dogs. The lampas has a density not normally associated with fabric and a textured smoothness like sculpted marble. The daily output when creating this lampas was measured in centimeters, and the entire weaving took about nine months.

Such work-in-centimeters style is also familiar to the firm of Declercq Passementiers, which needed almost a year to create the furniture trim. The company is run by Claude Declercq, his son Jerome, and his daughter Elisa. Their factory is filled with scores of ancient looms whirring away, pulling at racks of loom cards or guided by experts enveloped by the machines.

To find a color match to make rope for the bed fringe, Elisa demonstrates Jerome’s maxim: “We buy only thread, then we create.” As if blending colors on a palette, she grabs an armful of spools with similar colored threads and tries different combinations to match the lampas color.

By spinning several lengths around her hand, she creates one consistent color. “There’s an osmosis between the fibers that creates the colors and makes them come out more supple and stronger,” she says.

Most impressive at the factory are the hand looms used to make trim for the chairs. Operators climb into the looms and sit on a saddle seat that leaves them tipped so far forward that their upper bodies are suspended by wide leather straps. Spiderlike, they pass shuttles back and forth between their hands and operate pedals with their feet, constantly changing configurations and adding twists, turns, or different colors to incredibly complex patterns.

They aren't reading from a notebook, however, and there are no loom cards hanging over the machine. When asked where their pattern is, Jerome grins and points to his head.

"To learn the trade," says Elisa, "it takes one year to train, then three to four to really become a good worker, but a lifetime to know it all."

She continues, speaking of the craftspeople involved: "We are the only people left in the world who know how to do this type of work."

The newly restored Swan collection is on display in the MFA's Evans Wing. The furniture is accompanied by a pair of Sevres vases, eight 1770 gilded boiseries panels designed by C. N. Ledoux, and portraits of Swan and his wife, Hepzibah, painted by Gilbert Stuart.

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