

DAVID ROENTGEN'S MARQUETRY TECHNIQUE

by Benoît Jenn, restorer, head of the Arts Décoratifs Furniture Restoration Service

As well as the quality and finesse of his marquetry compositions, David Roentgen developed a new technique enabling him to obtain modelling effects using monochrome gradations of colour, without recourse to hot sand shading. This technique, one of the 'trademarks' of his manufactory's production, involved three procedures.

Dyeing

Holly (a white wood) was used for the floral motifs, which when cut were tinted in three shades of blue. The pigment Roentgen used has been identified as indigo carmine, the acidic form of the indigo blue formulated in the 18th century. Soluble in water, its tonal value can be varied by dilution.

Cutting

Probably pre-tinted with iron nitrate to obtain the grey-brown hue then widely used, the plain maple ground was then veneered to the oak. The floral motif was transferred to a sheet of holly veneer, cut out with a fretsaw, and the pieces dyed in the required hues. Although the cutting was extremely precise, the joints between pieces had to be tightened during the motif's assembly. The floral elements were then assembled with paper.

Inlaying

The floral motifs were positioned on the ground, the outline incised with a marquetry knife and the inlay cavity hollowed out. The decoration was then inserted and glued to the ground. Certain details – in this case the thorns of the roses – were incised and inlaid in the marquetry motif itself. The ensemble was then smoothed, polished and varnished.

⁷ A pupil in the restoration department of the Institut National du Patrimoine on an internship at Les Arts Décoratifs.



Reverse of the marquetry on the lid
Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée Nissim de Camondo, inv. CAM 75

THE RESTORATION OF THE JEWELLERY BOX

by Maximilien Durand, head of the Arts Décoratifs Restoration and Conservation Service

Treatment of the distortions resulting from the box's complex assembly and composite materials necessitated the removal of the marquetry on the lid. The aim of the restoration undertaken by Rémi Catillon⁷ and Benoît Jenn in 2010 was to consolidate the structure (gluing and filling cracks, adding balsawood elements to stabilise warped elements and fill in gaps, replacement of faulty screws, consolidation of assemblages re-installation of the mechanical elements), and also refix chipped parts and reglue raised veneer. Corroded parts were treated using micro-abrasion then protected with a coating of micro-crystalline wax.

The box was dedusted cleaned with demineralised water, solvents and gum. The marquetry on the lid was then repositioned on the oak veneer and glued to the lid. Any gaps between the reassembled elements were filled with resin wax.

After several tests (fibreglass, triammonium citrate), we used gum mounted on a micro-motor to clean the mouldings on the lid and base, composed of strips of wood sheathed with brass decoration. The mouldings were then remounted on the box (gluing, creation of missing pins and balsawood fillings to compensate for the contraction of the wood).

But a missing piece of moulding on the lid's top right corner still had to be replaced. We decided against a modern brass replacement since it would have been too close to the original material and caused confusion. A visually satisfying solution had to be found, but one clearly identifiable by specialists, in a stable, tried and tested restoration material. After several tests, we chose a resin moulded on the original wooden strips, coloured with mica powder and tinted on the surface with brass powder. The incorporation of pigments (yellow ochre) enabled us to vary the tone to imitate the effect of the metal. The length of moulding was then glued to the box. This original solution has opened up new and interesting possibilities for the restoration of furniture with metallic elements.

Gum lacquer was then applied to the marquetry to give the box its final appearance.



Resin moulding after fitting on the lid

A RARE JEWELLERY BOX ATTRIBUTED TO DAVID ROENTGEN CIRCA 1775–1780

> MUSÉE NISSIM DE CAMONDO

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Oak and mahogany structure with yew drawers; mahogany, holly, maple and burled bloodwood veneer; oak interior screen veneered with holly and box; chased and gilt bronze; polished and varnished brass mouldings.
Circa 1775–1780
H. 22 cm, L. 34 cm, W. 24 cm
Acquired by Moïse de Camondo before 1909
Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée Nissim de Camondo, inv. CAM 75

The lessons drawn from its restoration

1 December 2010 – 27 March 2011

A HISTORY YET TO BE WRITTEN

by Sylvie Legrand-Rossi, head curator, Musée Nissim de Camondo

The jewellery box has a marquetry decoration of roses and ribbons, contained within a ring on the lid and passing through eyelets on the sides, in holly, originally tinted in three shades of blue, on a curly maple ground tinted grey-brown and framed with burled bloodwood. A quarter turn of the key opens the lid, then another quarter turn releases a spring mechanism that raises an interior casket with a sliding screen, which when rolled completely back releases a concealed drawer. A button concealed on the lock releases a bolt opening the spring-operated drawer in the base.

The box originally had a handle on the lid, whose two fixation holes have been filled. The gilt bronze base has a gallery of toothed plaques and twinned cabriole legs.

Comparison of the form, construction, precision of the mechanism, choice of woods and marquetry decoration with similar pieces produced around 1775–1780 enable the attribution of this unsigned jewellery box to David Roentgen.

¹ Dutasta auction, Paris, 3–4 June 1926, item no. 182, pl. LVIII. '[...]. Above the piece there is a burnt mark representing the crowned monogram of Marie-Antoinette in the middle of the inscription: Garde-meuble de la Reine. Height, 80 cent. Width of the box, 30 cent.'

² Court purchases of Roentgen's furniture are difficult to establish since they were paid from private purses and never listed in official inventories.

³ Dietrich Fabian, Roentgen Möbel aus Neuwied, Bad Neustadt, Internationale Akademie für Kulturwissenschaften, 1986, fig. 667–668.

⁴ dem, 1986, fig. 672–673.

⁵ Ibidem, 1986, fig. 676 and fig. 677.

⁶ 'Estimative and descriptive state of the objets d'art [...] in the mansion at no. 19 rue Hamelin, Paris', H. Baudoin, 20 July 1909, no. 145 (Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée Nissim de Camondo Archives). The estimated value of 2,000 francs in 1909 corresponds to approximately 7,200 euros today.

David Roentgen's workshop

David Roentgen's workshop at Neuwied, near Coblenz, specialised in the production of small series of boxes, tables, writing desks, cabinets, etc.), all different in details of their construction, mechanisms, marquetry and bronze fittings. Very few of these works were signed.

In the late 18th century, David Roentgen (1743–1807) increased his production to cater for an international clientele, employing a hundred craftsmen, including fifteen specialised in marquetry, a draughtsman, Janvier Zick, and a clockmaker, Pierre Kintzing. He supplied several pieces to Versailles and was appointed 'Mechanical Cabinetmaker to the King and Queen'. He became a master in 1780, yet despite this official recognition he was never allowed to work in Paris, where he had only a showroom.

As early as 1754, Abraham Roentgen (1711–1792), David's father, was making boxes with metal handles and small compartments for various uses (document cases, tea and coffee caddies, etc.).

Similar boxes

A jewellery box very similar to ours, but with an apparently modern base (the piece has since disappeared), is mentioned as having belonged to Queen Marie-Antoinette¹. The decoration of the front, marquetry with enribboned roses, is the same except for a few details, and the mechanism is identical, but the lid is decorated with a row of pearls not on our version. Although its royal provenance is not attested², its attribution to the Queen indicates that she could have owned one similar to ours.

Another box made around 1780, in the Stadtmuseum in Cologne³, has marquetry decoration identical to ours, but with the front and rear sides inverted. It is signed 'D. Roentgen at Neuwied' in black ink. Its exterior form is very similar, but it has three small compartments inside. The mechanism opening the drawer in the base also seems to be similar.

A third box⁴, in the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin, with a mahogany veneer decoration of cherubs and mathematical attributes in gilt bronze, is similar to ours in dimensions and interior mechanism, with only a few differences. Like the boxes in the Louvre and the Hermitage, it is in Roentgen's neoclassical style of the 1780s and 90s⁵.

Of unknown provenance

When it was acquired by Moïse de Camondo before 1909, our jewellery box was valued at 2,000 francs⁶, possibly due to its mediocre state of conservation but also due to the lack of knowledge of David Roentgen's work in the early 20th century. The collector does not seem to have restored it during his lifetime.

Moïse de Camondo displayed the box on the Tronchin desk attributed to David Roentgen (CAM 56), formerly placed in front of the last window in the Large Study, not far from the oval table in the Large Drawing Room also attributed to the cabinetmaker (CAM 130), bought from Séligmans for 20,000 francs in 1901, whose top has the same marquetry decoration as the jewellery box. We do not know whether this similarity was instrumental in its acquisition, but this type of rapprochement was one on the collector's forte.



The jewellery box after restoration, open
Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée Nissim de Camondo, inv. CAM 75



Jewellery box attributed to David Roentgen, Dutasta auction, Paris, 3–4 June 1926, item no. 182, pl. LVII (Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée Nissim de Camondo, documentation department)



Top of an oval table attributed to David Roentgen, in the Large Drawing Room
Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée Nissim de Camondo, inv. CAM 130