Une journée au XVIIIe siècle

Chronique d'un hôtel particulier

Press release



The Bad News. Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre (1713–1789). France, 18th century. Oil on canvas; carved and gilded wooden frame. © Les Arts Décoratifs / Jean Tholance

18 Feb — 5 July, 2026

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
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The restoration and display of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs fashion collection ensembles is provided by Christine and Stephen A. Schwarzman.

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MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS

Une journée au XVIIIe siècle
Chronique d'un hôtel particulier

From 18 February to 5 July 2026, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs invites visitors to step inside the intimate world of an eighteenth-century aristocratic residence and its inhabitants – masters, servants, and household animals. Featuring more than 550 original objects, drawn from the museum's collections and for most of them, rarely exhibited, *A Day in the Eighteenth Century: Chronicle of a Parisian Townhouse* gather all fields of expression of the decorative arts – wood panelling and wallpapers, furniture, ceramics, silverware, clothing and fashion accessories, toys, and jewellery – to recreate the life of a Parisian *hôtel particulier* in the 1780s. In a cinematic, sound-filled and scented atmosphere provided by Givaudan and perfumer Daniela Andrier, the visitors wander from room to room as if they were close acquaintances, friends, or privileged guests of the family. The exhibition is curated by Ariane James-Sarazin, Chief Heritage Curator responsible for the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century collections and the Nissim de Camondo collection, together with Sophie Motsch, Assistant Curator.
The exhibition is designed by FREAKS Architecture.



2.

1. Ottoman — France, circa 1775–1780 Carved walnut, painted gray and gilded © Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

2. Robe à l'anglaise — France, 1780–1785 White-ground silk Pékin with pink stripes and fine green zigzag stripes, embroidered with floral bouquets in silk threads © Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière



1.

"Anyone who did not live through the years around 1789 cannot know the pleasure of living."
Talleyrand

How did the French art of living reach its most accomplished form in the eighteenth century? Certainly, it remains primarily the privilege of an elite, by birth, wealth, or talent – and cannot be taken as a reflection of the living conditions of the entire population. Nevertheless, it perfectly embodied the fashions, tastes, values, and social practices toward which all eyes in Europe, and beyond, like the young United States. In the eighteenth century, Paris established itself as the capital of luxury, always in search of innovation, an environment that fostered the flourishing of the arts, driven by a pursuit of refinement and comfort, what one might call beauty in service of utility, the very motto of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

PRESS RELEASE



3.

3. Sedan Chair —
Paris, circa 1740–1750
Wood, copper, glass, painted canvas
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

4. Pug on a Cushion —
Berlin Manufactory, Germany, circa 1760
Hard-paste porcelain, polychrome, gilding
Mark under the base: blue sceptre
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

The townhouse facing the street, between courtyard and garden

The exhibition opens on the architectural evolution of the *hôtel particulier* in the eighteenth century. At once an architectural statement and an embodiment of the art of living, urban residence of an important figure and their household, heir to a long tradition and subject to all trends. The *hôtel particulier* presents, often contrasting forms, constantly negotiating the balance between convention and exception. But before entering the residence, one's must first make their way through the Parisian street: cobblestones cluttered with carriages, walls plastered with posters, and the air filled with the yells of street vendors. Visitors are then led beneath the grand porch, a display of the owners' power meant to impress passersby while keeping urban bustle at bay. After crossing the courtyard – where a fine sedan chair and a detachable carriage table await their next journey – visitors discover the charming flowerbeds of porcelain flowers, trellis, and potted plants in the garden, at the center of which stands the elegant figure of a gardener, wearing a wide straw hat.

From morning toilette to evening games in refined company, from the splendour of a French-style dinner to the gentle harmonies of a salon concert or the spirited pleasures of conversation during a stroll in the garden, the exhibition investigates – almost like a detective story – the daily activities of the inhabitants of a *hôtel particulier,* from dawn to dusk. Each room is reimagined and associated with a specific moment in their daily schedule. Particular attention is given to the improvements that transformed the period: lighting, heating, indoor water supply, and their impact on interior decoration, furnishings, household service, and social etiquette. Through an anthropological, cultural, and sensory approach, the exhibition unveils the practices and rituals of eighteenth-century life.



4.

5. Design for
a “Polonaise” Bed —
Jean-Démosthène
Dugourc (1749–1825)
Paris, circa 1784–1790
Pen, black ink, watercolor
on paper
Inscription at lower left:
J.D. Dugourc, inv. Del
(date erased)
Collection mark at
lower right: Lugt 103b
[Richard Wallace]
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière

6. Clock —
Ladouceur in Paris,
Chantilly manufactory
Circa 1745
Soft-paste porcelain,
chased and gilded bronze
© Les Arts Décoratifs /
Christophe Dellière

The Household, Its Hours and Days

The exhibition then turns to a typical day in the life of a French aristocratic family of the Age of Enlightenment. Boilly’s portrait of the Gohin family introduces visitors to the heart of the household. Visitors are invited to meet *Monsieur* and *Madame,* a court sword at his side and for her jewellery, as well as their children, presented through their clothing, the care devoted to their education, and their daily games. The exhibition also introduces the extensive and specialised household staff, from whom we see going about their duties: polishing silverware, preparing meals, drawing water from the copper fountain, washing and ironing linens, and more. Finally, it enlightens the family’s cherished pets – dogs, cats, and birds – witnesses to a new form of emotional attachment.



6.



5.

The exhibition immerses visitors in a day divided in three parts – morning, afternoon, and evening, each made realistic by shifting treatment of light. Scientific and technical advances in time measurements are illustrated through a significant selection of clocks, wall clocks, and watches, as well as *semainiers* and pocket almanacs bound in luxurious covers. A new relation to time, perceived with increasing accuracy, begins to take hold. Days grow longer, with bedtime pushed ever later.

The pleasures of the morning toilette

The day begins upon waking in the bedchamber, where a *lit à la duchesse* stands perpendicular to the wall, its canopy and draped fabric providing warmth and intimacy for the sleeper. Around seven in the morning, the masters – each living in their own suite of rooms – are awakened by their servants, who themselves have been active since four o’clock. Before breakfast, the first meal of the day, and before getting dressed, one performs one’s devotions. Afterwards is served a broth of meat and vegetables served in a porcelain two-handled bowl set on its tray.



7.



8.

7. Folded Fan — Attributed to Mariaval the Younger for the mount Attributed to Brallet for the leaf
France, circa 1735–1740
Ivory, paper, gouache
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

8. Cavagnole Game Set — Aux Trois Frères, merchant
France, circa 1780
Mahogany, iron, boxwood, cardboard, bone, silk, ivory
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

9. Knight at His Desk Writing a Love Letter — Meissen Manufactory, after a model by Johann Joachim Kändler (1706–1775)
Saxony, 1740–1748
Hard-paste porcelain, polychrome, gilding
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

In the eighteenth century, waking remained a social moment, when one could, if desired, receive friends, suppliers, secretaries, or spiritual advisers to discuss personal, professional, or household matters. Dressing and hairstyling – often performed under the gaze of a small circle – provided an opportunity to display a wide range of objects related to personal grooming. The bath chamber was the privilege of the wealthiest, particularly because preparing the bathtub required a copper water heater, as running water did not exist. Ordinarily, personal care was therefore "dry," with washing limited to the use of a ewer and basin, soap and sponge boxes, an eye bath, and a bidet. A chamber pot, *bourdaloue,* completed the essentials of intimate hygiene. Men, women, and children wore wigs made of natural hair that were powdered. Reflecting one's social standing, personal adornment and clothing had to be meticulously maintained to present oneself properly to the world, an expectation that the exhibition vividly illustrates. Perfumes, face powders, and beauty patches, all kept in richly decorated bottles and boxes, played a fundamental role in one's morning preparations.

A love of letters, science, the arts… and one's soulmate

Before or after dinner (the equivalent of our lunchtime), a visit to the library is essential. Here, gentlemen cultivated their interest in science, philosophy, the arts, and their curiosity about far-off places, namely China and Japan. Reconstructed in the heart of the exhibition, this room also served as a workspace, furnished with a desk or a secretary on which to attend to his official duties or to the management of his estates. Ordinarily reserved for men, the library was less formal than the rest of the *hôtel particulier,* making it a place of intimacy. One might therefore be dressed simply in a dressing gown, indoor cap, and slippers, their colourful silks and fine embroidery exemplifying great refinement. The tour continues into the counterpart to the library: Madame's boudoir. This is where she might devote herself to reading, seated on an ottoman, to her writing having as a support her desk, qualified as *bonheur-du-jour,* to drawing, or to needlework. She would create small woven-bead pieces known as *sablés,* or amuse herself making knots and silk-thread cords with luxurious shuttle-like tools as precious as jewellery.



9.

The pleasures of the table and French-style service

The exhibition's narrative continues with the moment of dinner (served between two and four o'clock in the afternoon). The dining room, as a specialized space, appears in aristocratic homes. Visitors can explore a permanent arrangement of furniture composed by a wall-mounted fountain for handwashing, often caned chairs, side consoles, *rafraîchissoirs* where glasses and bottles were kept cool but never placed on the table, and a large table – supported by simple trestles until the end of the century, when fixed tables made a tentative appearance – set around a sumptuous centerpiece in spun glass designed to entertain guests and stimulate conversation. While plates, cutlery, and dishes were laid out for dinner, glasses were brought upon request. The *service à la française,* practiced throughout the century, involved presenting all the prepared dishes simultaneously on the table.



11.

10. Fauteuil à la Reine — Jean-Baptiste Claude Sené (1747–1803)
Paris, circa 1770–1780
Carved and gilded walnut and beech
Stamp on the back rail: I.B. SENE
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

11. Harp — Sébastien Renault (?-after 1804) and François Chatelain (?-after 1800), makers
Paris, 1786
Maple case with seven ribs, Vernis Martin, hook-action mechanism, seven pedals
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière



10.

In the afternoon, the ritual of the *collation* – taken in the bedroom, boudoir, a small cabinet, or the salon with friends, gains particular importance. From now on people eat chocolate, tea, and coffee, luxury imports from distant lands and reserved for the elite that are served in specially designed silverware and porcelain. Sugar, used to soften the bitterness of these fashionable drinks, consumed for their invigorating, even aphrodisiac qualities, was itself considered a luxury product. To avoid burning oneself, the beverage was poured from the cup into the saucer before sipping.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the *souper* (our dinner) was taken increasingly late, between 8:30 and 11:00 p.m. This meal was generally intimate, with only a few guests, and attended by a small number of servants who provided service but did not remain in the dining room. This new practice led to the creation of a new type of furniture: "lightweight" mobile pieces on wheels, easily moveable. You just have to reach out and serve yourself.



12.

12. *Sommeil* —
Attributed to Hugues Taraval (1729–1785)
Paris, circa 1779
Oil on canvas
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Jean Tholance

13. "Heart-shaped" Dressing Table —
Charles Topino (circa 1742–1803)
Paris, circa 1775
Oak structure, veneered with rosewood, violetwood, amaranth, holly, and lemonwood, chased and gilded bronze
Stamp under the back rail, right side: C. TOPINO; guild mark under the back rail, right side: JME
© Les Arts Décoratifs / Christophe Dellière

The pleasures of tobacco, music, and games

One of the spare activities highlighted in the exhibition is the consumption of tobacco, with all the social practices it entailed. Snuffing tobacco was highly fashionable in the eighteenth century and offering it to others was considered a mark of honor and distinction. Tobacco was kept in snuffboxes made from rare and precious materials, which became indispensable accessories, coordinated with one's attire according to the season and time of day.
Many of the objects on display also illustrate the practice of games among the aristocracy, typically in the evening. A whole range of specialized furniture gradually emerged for this purpose: tables for *tric-trac, hombre,* and *quadrille,* as well as for *brelan* and *bouillotte,* designed respectively in rectangular, square, triangular, and circular shapes.

To follow the track with the evening games, cabinetmakers invented special chairs known as *voyeuses* and *ponteuses,* designed to be sat on kneeling or astride, with elbows resting on the high back. Music and dance could also enliven the evening, notably with the rise of chamber music – a new genre emphasizing simplicity in execution and performance. Small musical forms flourished: the French cantata, the sonata, and arrangements of popular opera arias for two or three instruments. Harp, harpsichord, guitar, transverse flute, and violin were particularly prized by amateurs performing for a small circle of intimate friends.

In the arms of Morpheus

The exhibition concludes with the final moment of the day: bedtime. Men and women put on white nightshirts after washing their faces. *Monsieur* covered his head with a nightcap, while *Madame* protected her hair, carefully brushed, beneath a "sleeping" cap. A small snack might be left on the bedside table for midnight hunger. A nightlight spread its pale glow... After an evening of socializing and entertainment, sometimes concluded with a *medianoche,* it was time to surrender to Morpheus – midnight long past.



13.

PRESS RELEASE

Useful information

— Press contacts
Isabelle Mendoza
Guillaume Del Rio
+ 33 (0) 1 44 55 58 78
presse@madparis.fr

— Curatorship
Ariane James-Sarazin, General Curator of Heritage in charge of 17th–18th century collections and Nissim de Camondo

Sophie Motsch, Curatorial Assistant, 17th–18th century collections and Nissim de Camondo

→ Assisted by:
Léo Thune, Assistant for the exhibition and catalogue, 17th - 18th century collections and Nissim de Camondo

Joséphа Caumont-Carpentier, Production Manager for the exhibition, Production and International Development Department

Violette Lafond-Grellety, Assistant for Cultural Programming, 17th - 18th century collections and Nissim de Camondo

Aurélien Mathé, Exhibition Assistant, 17th - 18th century collections and Nissim de Camondo

Marion Ortiz, Documentalist, Historical Collections, Library-Archives-Documentation Department

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— Les Arts Décoratifs
The not-for-profit organization Les Arts Décoratifs brings together the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the Musée Nissim de Camondo, the Camondo School, the Ateliers du Carrousel, and the Library.
Lionel Sauvage, President
Sophie-Justine Lieber, Chief Executive Officer
Camille Herody, Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Bénédicte Gady, Museum Director, Deputy Chief Executive Officer

— Musée des Arts Décoratifs
107 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris
+33 (0) 1 44 55 57 50
Métro: Palais-Royal, Pyramides, Tuileries
Opening hours
→ Tuesday to Friday, 11 am – 6 pm
→ Open late in temporary exhibition on Thursdays until 9 pm
Admission
→ General admission: € 15
→ Concession: € 10
→ Free for under 26

— Musée Nissim de Camondo
63 rue de Monceau, 75008 Paris
+33 (0) 1 53 89 06 40
Opening hours
Closed from August 4, 2024 through 2027

— Library
111 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris
+33 (0) 1 44 55 59 36
Open Monday to Friday 10 am – 6 pm

— Publications and images
107 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris
+33 (0) 1 44 55 57 68

— Visitor engagement
Activities for individuals
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Activities for groups
reservation@madparis.fr
+33 (0) 1 44 55 57 66
Conferences, round tables and colloquiums
Reservation *via* the online ticketing
conference@madparis.fr
+33 (0) 1 44 55 59 26

— École Camondo
266 boulevard Raspail, 75014 Paris
+33 (0) 1 43 35 44 28

— Ateliers du Carrousel
107 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris
266 boulevard Raspail, 75014 Paris
63 rue de Monceau, 75008 Paris
+33 (0) 1 44 55 59 02

— Bookshop & Gift Store
105 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris
+33 (0) 1 42 60 64 94
Open 11 am – 18:30 pm
Open late on Thursdays until 9 pm
Closed Monday

— Loulou Restaurant
107 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris
or access via the Carrousel gardens
Open daily 12 pm – 2:30 pm
and 7 pm – 11 pm
+33 (0) 1 42 60 41 96

— Le Camondo Restaurant
61 bis rue de Monceau, 75008 Paris
Open Tuesday to Saturday from noon to midnight and Sunday during the day
+33 (0) 1 45 63 40 40

— Internet and social media
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instagram.com/madparis