

PIERRE IV MIGEON

(1696-1758, MASTER BEFORE 1729)

AN EXCEPTIONAL SLANT TOP DESK WITH EUROPEAN VARNISH



PARIS, LOUIS XV PERIOD, CIRCA 1735

STAMPED: MIGEON

PROVENANCE:

MR. RENE WEILLER, PARIS

DIMENSIONS :

H. 33.4 IN - L. 24.8 IN - D. 16.7 IN

27, Quai Voltaire, 75007 Paris

The 18th century in France was an extraordinary period for the European decorative arts. Indeed, never again will a city such as Paris be focused on by sovereigns, princes and collectors, as envious as excited by the artistic effervescence enjoyed by Parisian art-lovers of the day. In the specific field of cabinet-making and fine joinery, thanks to the powerful guild of furniture-making craftsmen, Paris became the capital of cabinet-making as well for the perfection of the works produced as for the outstanding originality of certain pieces, nothing less than masterpieces of harmony and balance. Throughout the century, the creation of luxury furniture was dominated by the great “marchands-merciers” read: dealers in luxury items. It was undoubtedly because of their energy that there appeared in about 1725 a new type of furniture, which would usher in quite a craze over the following three decades.

The model came from an old-fashioned composition consisting of a writing box with lectern, often in Japanese lacquer, set on a stand specially created by European craftsmen; subsequently, these two separated parts would be matched to forming a single piece of furniture (see, in particular, a model of this type illustrated in O. Impey and C. Jörg, *Japanese Export Lacquer 1580-1850*, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 204, fig. 494).

The piece of furniture we are offering here was designed by Pierre Migeon in this specific context. Although the date of its making is early, around 1735, as confirms Thibaut Wolvesperges in his book *Le meuble français en laque au XVIIIe siècle*, 2000, page 295, it stands apart from most of the other known models on account of the cabinet-maker's especially elegant hand, and the desk's extremely refined decoration, which caused André Boutémy to say, when he examined it: “...here we already find several of the features of the most developed “dos d’âne” bureau” (“*The slant top desks of Pierre II Migeon*”, in *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, July 1965, p. 81). An important detail impinges here: it is “à toutes faces” (i.e. the back is as finished as the front), suggesting its original placing in the middle of a room, undoubtedly a reception room of one of the great figures of the time. Its general composition is organized around two main sections, a lower part acting as a base, and an upper part forming the lectern, both with a round curved outline form. The first is made up of an upper element with two side drawers at the belt, surmounted by hinges set at the end of the flap, placed on either side of a central part whose section is made following two opposing S forms, which make two elongated festoons and thus elegantly underscore the sinuous movement of the front. The legs, which are elongated with rounded edges, contribute to the lightness of the whole and lend it a slender shape. The upper part has a flap, set against the back of a fawn-coloured leather top, which opens by way of its original lock and reveals an interior in satinwood veneer with a parquetry pattern, consisting of a secret compartment, two small cubby-holes, and two

drawers, all surmounted by a wide compartment. The gilt bronze décor is restricted to the lock holes and the finely and delicately feet with light foliage. Migeon deliberately made this minimalist decision in the bronze ornamentation to, quite rightly, avoid an aesthetic overload. The cabinet-maker even sacrificed the usual metal falls at the top of each legs, replacing them with sumptuous gilded motifs with a diamond-patterned trellis with flowers and lambrequins ending in bottom, nothing less than trompe-l'oeil features made in bronze imitation.

The entire exterior of the piece of the cabinet is fully enhanced with a sumptuous décor of European varnish, called “verniss Martin” (Martin varnish), with a cyan blue-coloured ground on which gilded motifs stand out in festooned borders, undoubtedly made with gold leaf and bronzine, depicting landscapes filled with figures, bushes, foliage, bridges, fences, rocks, rivers, wading birds and butterflies, all made in an extraordinarily skilful way in the Chinese style. This outstanding décor, whose quality and rarity mean that it can be attributed to the Martin brothers, may be regarded as the perfect culmination of the aesthetic research resulting from one of the most original techniques invented by 18th century French craftsmen: “verniss Martin”. Probably inspired by certain Italian varnishes, this technique became a way of overcoming the rarefaction and high cost of oriental lacquers, essentially with a black base, used in veneering by cabinet-makers on some of their furniture. Nevertheless, let us note that if, in its early days, “verniss martin” was included in cabinet-making essentially for financial reasons, “marchands-merciers” and craftsmen swiftly recognized that it offered possibilities of shades of colour completely missing from oriental works, which tallied perfectly with the expectations of art-lovers of the day. Thus it was that certain items of luxury furniture were given décors: so-called “jonquil” yellow, green in the spirit of celadon porcelain and blue wavering between “turquin” blue and deep lapis lazuli.

In the 18th century, references to and descriptions of furniture in blue varnish in documents of the day were unusual and often shed light on the social rank of those commissioning the pieces, grand aristocrats, wealthy financiers and enlightened art-lovers. Thus it was that the great “marchand-mercier” of the time, Lazare Duvaux, delivered in December 1748: “A desk of blue varnish, painted in the style of India”, invoiced for 216 livres to Mr. Brochant the elder, probably one of the members of the family of the extremely rich Parisian notary; it would also seem that the duchess of Orleans had one such secretary desk at the castle of Saint-Cloud, mentioned before 1759: “a ‘verniss de Martin’ writing desk hard blue ground, ornaments of bronze gilded with moulded gold 160 livres”; on the death of the Louis XV’s powerful minister, Machault d’Arnouville, another was valued in his castle of Arnouville: “a small writing desk of lacquer blue ground 48 livres”; while in 1773, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges owned “a

secretary desk with a wooden lectern painted blue and white garnished inside its drawers". Lastly, let us make special mention of a last writing desk, perhaps the most famous, which was part of the collections of the Marquise de Pompadour at the castle of Bellevue prior to 1763, and is nowadays held in the collections of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris (illustrated in the catalogue for the exhibition *Madame de Pompadour et les arts*, Paris, Versailles, 2002, p.327).



Slant top desk

Attributed to Adrien Faizelot Delorme (1691-1768), cabinetmaker

Attributed to Étienne-Simon Martin (1703-1770), varnisher
Paris, around 1749-1750

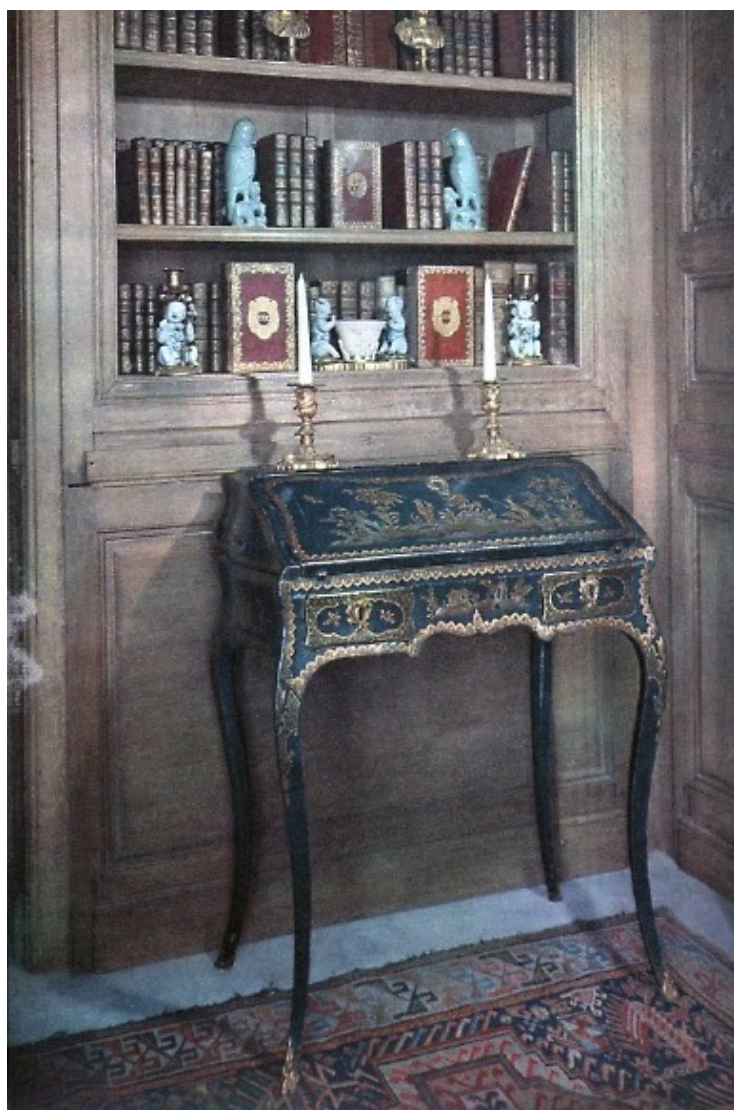
Fire mark: BV under a closed crown; ink inscription: No. 3. / 2703; inscription in graphite on the back of the drawers: 1, 2, 3, and M. Victoire; painted number: D.-W. 1404
H. 88; l. 69; pr. 43 cm

Collections of Madame de Pompadour

Paris Museum of Decorative Arts,
Don David and Flora David-Weill, 1937
Inv. 32636

Furniture in blue varnish appears only in exceptional cases in ancient documents, and specimens that have come down to us are just as rare. So we are familiar in particular with a chest-of-drawers and an “encoignure” in blue and white varnish stamped Criaerd and delivered by the “marchand-mercier” Thomas-Joachim Hébert to the “Garde-Meuble Royal” (royal furniture depository) in 1742 and 1743 to be used in the bedchamber of the countess of Mailly at the castle of Choisy (see S. Alcouffe, A. Dion-Tenebaum and A. Lefébure, *Le mobilier du musée du Louvre*, vol. 1, 1993, pp. 144-149).

However it was above all the slant top desk which was given this precious pattern. In fact, apart from the piece of furniture in the old collections of the marquise de Pompadour which is attributed to Adrien Faizelot-Delorme, we know of a model stamped by BVRB, reproduced in A. Pradère, *French Furniture Makers, The Art of the Ebeniste from Louis XIV to the Revolution*, 1989, p. 192, fig. 178, and above all two other desks by Migeon who was thus confirmed as the great specialist of these elegant blue- varnished desks: the first has a decoration made after Jean Pillement and a general design particularly close to the one we are offering (illustrated in T. Wolvesperges, *Le meuble français en laque au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 2000, p. 296, fig. 161); while the second offers a lapis-coloured ground with décor in the Japanese style (see S. Mouquin, *Pierre IV Migeon 1696-1758, Au Coeur d'une dynastie d'ébénistes parisiens*, Paris, *Les Editions de l'Amateur*, 2001, p. 97, fig. 40).



Our slant top desk by Pierre IV Migeon from the collection of Mr. René Weiller is illustrated page 94 in the book by Claude Frégnac,

Collection *Connaissance des Arts* « Grands Artisans d'Autrefois », *Les ébénistes du XVIIIe siècle français*, Hachette, 1963.

THE MARTIN BROTHERS

Among the six children sired by the Parisian tailor Etienne Martin, five were master painters and varnishers to the King, and four of those were painters at the prestigious Academy of Saint-Luc. The two most important, Guillaume (1689-1749) and Etienne-Simon (1703-1770) became associated in 1727, then some years later two of their other brothers, Robert and Julien, opened a new studio on Rue Magloire, in the Quartier du Faubourg Saint-Martin. Yet little is known about the activities in their studios, though they had to have had special relations with the great “marchands-merciers” of the day, the only people to have a sufficiently well-off clientele to afford such varnished furniture, which was as refined as it was costly. Towards the middle of the 18th century, the Martins’ renown was so great that Louis XV turned the brothers’ businesses into a Manufacture Royale in 1748.

PIERRE IV MIGEON (1696–1758)

This famous cabinet-maker features among the most important Parisian furniture-making craftsmen in the first half of the 18th century. After he gained his qualifications he set up a workshop on Rue de Charenton, swiftly acquiring great renown among the great art-lovers of the day, who included, notably: the son of the Regent, the duchess of Rohan, the Marshal of Noailles, and the Cardinal de Rohan. In the 1740s, he received commissions from the Garde-meuble royal, in particular for a rare sextuor table in mahogany held in the Musée national du château de Fontainebleau (illustrated in the catalogue for the exhibition *Grands ébénistes et menuisiers parisiens du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Musée des Arts décoratifs, December 1955-February 1956). Above all, however, Migeon was a master when it came to slant top desks, in veneer or European varnish, which he delivered to his wealthy customers. This is confirmed by a reference taken from his Livre-Journal (Diary-Book) in which the cabinet-maker wrote in September 1731: “From 2 March 1726 to 2 September 1731, delivery for 30,833 livres of writing desks to several persons”. This was a considerable sum of money, which reflected the significant share of this sort of furniture in his work.

Let us also note that he was probably the author of the famous so-called “de Vergennes” desk which features in the Musée du Louvre collections (reproduced in D. Alcouffe, A. Dion-Tenenbaum and A. Lefébure, op.cit., Dijon, 1993, p. 150), and also that many international museums hold some of his works, in particular the Petit Palais Museum and the Carnavalet Museum in Paris, the Musée national du château de Versailles, the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC (USA), and the Residenz, in Munich.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Our piece of furniture is reproduced in the first three books and is quoted in the fourth :

- Connaissance des Arts, 15th of June 1952, n°4, page 29, our slant top desk comes from the collection of Mr. René Weiller and is illustrated in this periodical.
- Claude FREGNAC, Collection Connaissance des Arts « Grands Artisans d'Autrefois », Les ébénistes du XVIIIe siècle français, Hachette, 1963, page 94, our slant top desk comes from the collection of Mr. René Weiller and is illustrated below in Figure 1.
- Sophie MOUQUIN, Pierre IV Migeon, 1696-1758: Au cœur d'une dynastie d'ébénistes parisiens, Perrin et Fils Antiquaires, Les Editions de l'Amateur, Paris, 2001, p.95, our slant top desk comes from the collection of Mr. René Weiller and is illustrated in this book.
- Thibaut WOLVESPERGES, Le meuble français en laque au XVIIIe siècle, les Editions de l'Amateur, Editions Racine, Paris, Bruxelles, 2000, page 295, our slant top desk is quoted in this book.