

# The king's desk

Derek Jones meets up with Yannick Chastang as he puts the finishing touches to a Linke masterpiece that has been 70 years in the making



PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY ANTHONY BAILEY



PHOTOGRAPHS BY YANNICK CHASTANG, UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY ANTHONY BAILEY

We left you last month having revealed some of the incredible mechanisms that were incorporated into the Bureau de Roi. As impressive as they were, these technical achievements were eclipsed by the lavish ornamentation used to decorate every inch of its surface both inside and out. Floral marquetry and geometric parquetry combine with gilt bronze castings full of classical references to create a vision of epic proportions.

The mastermind behind the design was Jean-Francois Oeben. The desk featured a tambour lid that raised automatically with a quarter turn of a single key and returned closed by the same method; an enigma that still confounds experts today as the original mechanism no longer exists.

An unrivalled innovator of mechanical furniture, Oeben's work was in demand not only from the King of France but also for the rest of top flight aristocracy. At the time of his death in 1763 aged 42, 10 items commissioned in 1761 by Louis' mistress, the Marquise de Pompadour, had yet to be delivered. However,

these weren't the only unfinished pieces at the time of Oeben's death. It would be a further six years before the Bureau du Roi was complete.

#### A new man for the job

The task of finishing the project fell to a German born artisan Johann Heinrich Riesener. Riesener relocated to Paris and, acquiring the name Jean Henri, was apprenticed to Oeben in 1754. After Oeben's death Riesener married his widow and set about completing the vast body of Oeben's unfinished work, including the Bureau de Roi and signing it in his own name. It is widely accepted that Oeben was in fact responsible for the design, including the complicated mechanism within.

Riesener achieved master ebeniste status in 1768, a year before delivering the desk, finally being recognised as the ebeniste ordinaire du Roi in 1774. He was responsible for producing some of the most flamboyant furniture of the Louis XV period receiving, on average, commissions of 100,000 livres a year between 1174-1784. The Court gravy train eventually ran out of steam and with France verging on



A geometric marquetry pattern covers all the exposed faces inside the desk



A reading slope is supported by a complicated ratchet...

► bankruptcy, this once rich seam of royal patronage began to cut their cloth to suit their means. A move towards less expensive suppliers of furniture and a more restrained use of gilt bronze became the order of the day.

### La Revolution

With the French Revolution in full swing, Riesener was called to Versailles to remove the 'insignia of feudality' from furniture he had recently made, replacing royal ciphers and fleur-de-lys with less contentious motifs. The Bureau du Roi was relieved of its status in the king's apartments and relegated to a series of lower ranking offices and ultimately a string of different buildings.

His trademark masterpieces were to become an emblematic albatross as he sought to buy back some of his work at reduced prices during the French revolutionary sales. When the time came to resell his stock he found that tastes had changed and along with them the market for his work. Riesener retired in 1801 and died in relative poverty in Paris; still faring better than some of his clients falling victim to the guillotine.

The violent social upheaval of the French dynasty did little to quell a desire for the French style in other



... that works in the opposite direction to reveal more secret drawers

parts of Europe, and in the early 19th century significant numbers of French royal furniture were bought to furnish the stately homes and palaces of England. Today the UK still holds the largest collection of Riesener's work outside of Paris.

### A new benchmark

The Bureau de Roi has consistently been regarded as the holy grail for cabinetmakers and purveyors of extravagant taste for almost a quarter of a century and the fascination for this iconic piece remains today. ►



The Bureau du Roi without the gilded casting as it appeared in auction in 2007

Yannick Chastang wishes to thank Mr Adrian Alan for giving him the unique opportunity to finish the desk and GMC Publications for allowing him to publish this story

### Unfinished symphony

The desk featured in a sale of Linke's work totalling \$11m at Sotheby's, New York in 2007. A condition of the sale stipulated that the buyer could have free access to the existing bronze patterns to duplicate the missing castings.

The auction catalogue photograph shows a desk that could be regarded as finished and nobody would think any less of the new owner if they decided not to take the vendors up on their offer. However, this desk has a habit of motivating those that come into contact with it to do the most extraordinary things and an incomplete Bureau du Roi is inconceivable.



After making latex moulds from the existing masters wax castings were produced



The services of a foundry were used to cast the bronze pieces



Every square centimetre of the bronze castings has to be finished by hand



The tools used for chasing. The components are bedded into a block of pitch to hold them while the chasing is done

▶ Lord Hertford commissioned a faithful copy from the cabinetmaker Dreschler in the 1850s with more examples being produced throughout the remainder of the 19th century. But it is with the Paris-based furniture maker Francois Linke (1855-1946) that the Oeben legacy lives on.

Linke completed three Bureau du Roi in 1901, 1910 and 1922, with a fourth started in 1940. By 1943 the incomplete work remained in the Linke family along with other valuable archival material. Records exist showing the value of work in progress for cabinetwork to be 116,000 French Francs with timber costs running to a further 1,000. The company's day books list the amount of time spent on individual tasks – who the craftsman

was and on what day of the week work was carried out. Even the cost of engraving the 'Linke' signature was accounted for. Linke's obsession with order extended to his foreman, acclaimed cabinetmaker Jean Bieder to whom Linke had agreed to sell the business after his death in 1946. Bieder continued to run the company and maintain a body of reference material through the post war years up until 1959 where its closure signalled the end of line for furniture from the Belle Epoque, with one very important exception.

### Chasing

In keeping with tradition, this replica has also taken thousands of hours to complete as the challenge of producing metalwork to tolerances more akin to jewellery making have been observed. The method used to produce the initial castings is the lost wax process. This crude technique becomes excruciatingly complicated when the components are required to fit to an existing framework. Linke's craftsmen were permitted a gap of one cigarette paper between the casting and the carcass frame and Yannick's team had allowed themselves the same luxury.

The raw castings have to be made oversize to allow for shrinkage as the molten metal cools. Some distortion is inevitable so it's not an exact science. To complicate things further the



Some components have been hand-stitched with copper wire



Copper has a higher melting point than the bronze so remains intact throughout the assembly

bronze has to be worked by hand to add surface texture through a process called 'chasing'. The technique is used to develop contrast between the separate details by creating bright shiny areas against matt ones with a more faceted surface.

### Perfect fit

Chasing is done using a metal punch that is repeatedly struck with

a hammer to produce indents of different shapes on the surface of the bronze. By altering the size of the punch and the density of the pattern, various textures can be achieved. Continuity of stroke and hammer blows is crucial to maintaining a uniform appearance. There might be as many as 100 blows to chase a 1cm<sup>2</sup> area. The work introduces more stresses on the castings, often

causing them to change shape again and require refitting. With this complete, the castings have to be prepared for gilding which can also cause them to twist. Anything other than a perfect fit will introduce stresses to the carcass work when they are fixed into position causing a whole host of other problems that are only too familiar to the cabinetmaker.



The raw castings are often damaged and in need of repair



Another figure relaxing in a bath as part of the cleaning process before gilding



## The original Bureau du Roi...

The Bureau du Roi was probably the most expensive piece of furniture ever commissioned. Riesener's bill to the king came to 62,985 livres, around £2m in today's money.

Oeben/Riesener's desk on display at Versailles

The marquetry alone accounted for a third of the cost of the cabinetwork and a sixth of the overall cost. More than eight separate crafts contributed to the ensemble over a period of nine years.

With an average yearly wage of between 400 and 600 livres for a qualified gilder it's not hard to see where the lion's share of the money was actually spent; gold accounted for a considerable sum.

The desk was delivered to Versailles in 1769, the same year that France invaded Corsica and Napoléon Bonaparte, Emperor of France from 1804-15, was born on the island.

Whilst the French court were spending their livres on fancy works of art in 1760, Yorkshireman John Harrison was busy perfecting the first marine chronometer used to calculate latitude.

A carpenter by trade he made some of the most accurate timepieces of the period using oak (*Quercus robur*) and lignum vitae (*Guaiacum officinale*) for some of the moving parts.

After successfully completing two voyages to the Caribbean to demonstrate their efficacy, Parliament reluctantly awarded him a final payment of £8,750 of a £20,000 award but only after King George III threatened to intervene.



Johann Heinrich Riesener

**MAKER'S MAKER:  
Yannick Chastang on Jean-Francois Oeben**

**B**orn Johann Franz Oeben in Germany, Oeben moved to Paris in around 1740. He married the daughter of an established ebeniste, Roger Vandercruze Lacroix and by 1751 was already renting a mezzanine from Charles-Joseph Boullé in the Louvre workshops. Under Boullé's influence he excelled at marquetry and propelled the technique to the status of an art form. His floral designs are often botanically identifiable and the details in some cases show more than just a resemblance to the real thing.

**Innovator**

An excellent cabinetmaker Oeben was also involved with the metalworking aspects of furniture making, especially mechanical devices. His intricate designs gave a charm and sophistication to his work and led to the creation of many unique pieces. In 1760 Oeben made a wheelchair for the older brother of the future Louis XVI. It featured ingenious devices for adjusting the position of reading and eating trays that earned him the admiration of his contemporaries. In the same year he began work on his unique cylinder desk for King Louis XV of France. His rise to such a prominent position was meteoric by any standards and testament to his skill as a master craftsman.

**Wise move**

In 1761 he moved his workshop to the arsenal where weapons were



A side elevation of the desk with the bronze castings in place. Note the hole for the secret drawer

made. He couldn't have been better situated to draw influence from the associated skills. As far as we know Oeben was the inventor of the tambour desk and set new standards for precision and beauty in functional art.

His style of furniture and that of the French style incorporates the skills of several craftsmen to achieve a single piece of art. It is important to recognise this approach to making furniture to understand the original works and perhaps introduce this quality to contemporary thinking.

**Complementary skills**

For me, the lack of integration is a disturbing aspect of modern furniture design. Personally I am not that excited

by today's obsession with modernist clean lines. Although they often display a clear understanding of the techniques associated with cabinetmaking the excitement stops there. With so many other materials available it strikes me as a missed opportunity to bring the full range of complementary skills and disciplines to the fore.

**Strength in numbers**

In pieces like the Bureau du Roi there are draughtsmen, carvers, metal workers, marqueteurs, clock makers, porcelain makers, locksmiths and cabinetmakers in a collaboration that would only be possible with each one contributing something unique to the project.

By today's standards this might just be through the use of different materials as these skills are not so easy to come by, but by introducing them we learn a little more about the processes behind them and gain an appreciation for the craft. *F&C*



One of the figures before any cleaning and gilding has taken place



A marquetry panel on the back of the desk shows a globe and the implement used for navigation