

# Reimagining Eighteenth-Century France: An Examination of a Secrétaire by Martin Carlin

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### Abstract:

In the 18th century, a large number of new furniture forms appeared in France. Furniture is inseparable from people's lives. It forms a part of people's property, projects their identity, and marks people's real or imagined social status. This article uses a secrétaire made in 1776 by Martin Carlon as a case study to explore the historical reasons and social symbolism behind the flourishing of this French furniture form in the 18th century. By analyzing the source of raw materials, functional design, and meaning of this secrétaire, this article concludes that the French colonial history, the nobility's fascination with Oriental art, and the emergence of innovative technology all contributed significantly to the advancement of furniture. In addition, the secrétaire, as a writing instrument, symbolized gender and class and later evolved into a symbol of female literacy, taste, and social status. The case of Marie-Josephine Laguerre, the first owner of this secrétaire, reflects this intersection between furniture, gender, and social class.

**Keywords:** Eighteenth century; French furniture; secrétaire.

## 1. Introduction

France started a wave of colonial expansion in the 16th century, founding colonies in Asia and America, which created new trade and economic routes. French artisans had access to a plethora of exotic materials to create luxurious furniture thanks to the flood of colonial goods. A desk or bookcase with a folding countertop that has both useful drawers and ornamental accents is referred to as a secrétaire. One notable example is the secrétaire à abattant or secrétaire en cabinet (drop-front desk), crafted by Martin Carlin in 1776, shown in figure 1. This piece is predominantly

made from rare woods sourced from overseas colonies, adorned with exquisite porcelain plaques, intricate gilding, and fine carving techniques. The natural oxidation of the different woods gives the secrétaire a rich variety of tones, further enhancing its exotic allure.

The centerpiece of the secrétaire is a porcelain plaque made by the world-famous Sèvres Manufactory, which was founded in 1740 to meet the needs of the French aristocracy and royal family for porcelain with Oriental influences. The flower designs on the plaque complement the entire design, which reflects

a mix of Chinese and Western aesthetics, and embody the Rococo style. To finish this masterpiece, elite craftsmen worked with talented artisans, overseen and indirectly assisted by marchands merciers. These components work together to produce the secrétaire an extremely costly and noticeable emblem of riches that attests to the owner's plenty.

The first owner, Marie-Josephine Laguerre (1755–1783),

a celebrated soprano, lived a life of luxury and excess, made possible by the patronage of her wealthy lovers [1]. The veneer of the secrétaire, the arrangement of objects upon it, and the value of these items all speak to the refined taste and considerable wealth of its owner, further reinforcing its role as a symbol of status and social standing.



**Fig. 1 Close front and open front. Martin Carlin, Drop-front desk (secrétaire à abattant or secrétaire en cabinet), 1776, oak veneered with tulipwood, amaranth, holly, and sycamore; six Sèvres soft-paste porcelain plaques and two painted tin plaques; gilt-bronze mounts; marble shelves; moiré silk, The Met Fifth Avenue, New York [1].**

## 2. Colonial Influence on Furniture Craftsmanship

In the early years of France's colonial development, the acquisition of raw resources was crucial, with the hunt for lumber being especially important. By the 1600s, a lack of lumber had affected most of Europe, thus countries there were turning more and more to their colonies for supplies. Along with its other desirable qualities, colonists found wood that appealed to French cabinetmakers because of its unique hue and resilience [2]. Thus, the flood of vividly colored tropical hardwoods from Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean contributed to the significant change in the shape and functionality of French furniture throughout the 17th century [2]. These exotic woods, with their rich hues, not only expanded the available palette of materials but also prompted furniture makers to experiment with new shapes and techniques.

By the 1720s, French furniture production underwent sig-

nificant technological advancements. Craftsmen moved away from traditional techniques such as mosaic and embraced innovations like “painting in the wood”, in which natural differences in color are used to execute geometric or figurative.” [2]. The availability of a broader range of woods, combined with these evolving woodworking techniques, led to notable changes in the design and decorative style of French furniture. During this time, the Americas emerged as the second largest timber supplier after Holland, providing woods like tulipwood and amaranth. These woods were often employed using sophisticated veneer techniques, further contributing to the evolving artistry of French furniture [2].

## 3. Technological Shifts and the Symbolism of Status in Furniture

In the 16th century, under the influence of colonial expansion, France became increasingly interested in porcelain

after encountering Eastern cultures. By the 1600s, European travelers had discovered the refined material culture of China and Japan, sparking a surge in the importation and imitation of decorative objects such as porcelain ware and lacquered panels, which were used to embellish furniture as cabinets and screens [2]. As the popularity of Oriental objects grew, French craftsmen sought more cost-effective alternatives. Instead of using the expensive hard porcelain from the East, they began to develop French soft porcelain, leading to significant technological innovations in local production.

The Sèvres factory, established in 1740, became a leading producer of this high-quality French soft porcelain. Known for its meticulous designs, vibrant decorative colors, and advanced gilding techniques, Sèvres porcelain set the standard for craftsmanship. Sèvres was in tight ties with the French royal family because of its superior quality and the factory's strategic location. Sèvres porcelain had come to represent aristocratic and royal status by 1756. France was demonstrated to be a nation rich in successful assembly line workers, culture, and aesthetics by its exquisite workmanship and sophisticated aesthetic [3]. The 1770s saw the introduction of imitations in the French market, sparking a shift in the approach to craftsmanship. Shop owners and customers grow to link fixation and imitation with adaptability and creativity [4]. French craftsmen moved beyond simple replication and began imitating the intricate techniques behind luxury production, such as the gilding process. This technological progress was not only a response to consumer demand but also a way for craftsmen to showcase their ingenuity and creativity. Despite the rigid social hierarchy of the time, both aristocrats and commoners alike sought to acquire fashionable items, fueling further innovation in furniture production and driving demand for new goods [4].

Beyond its technological significance, furniture—especially high-end pieces like Sèvres porcelain—became potent symbols of social status. The elite favored Sèvres porcelain because it conveyed power, wealth, and taste. Ownership of such items allowed them to display their connection to the French court and its cultural refinement. However, as these luxury goods became more widely available through technological innovation, they also contributed to a blurring of social distinctions. Semi-luxury items allowed the middle classes to adopt the symbols of the aristocracy, creating a “confusion of signs” that destabilized traditional markers of social rank [4]. The production and consumption of luxury goods became intertwined with identity, wealth, and social mobility, in this way, the development of furniture technology in 18th-century France not only advanced the quality and artistry of decorative items but also played a pivotal role in shaping the

social situation.

#### 4. The Influence of Marchands Merciers on Furniture Design and Trade

The French royal elite had a soft spot for Dominique Daguerre, a well-known and powerful marchand mercier from the 18th century. Even though marchands merciers were only allowed to sell products manufactured by others according to a French rule passed in 1558, they nevertheless significantly impacted the design and production process. The shape of a piece of furniture's carcass was determined by the proportions of the panels the marchands merciers provided to the cabinet constructors, indicating that marchands merciers were actively involved in molding furniture design [5].

The 18th century saw a boom in the desire for luxury imports into Paris, especially from the East. These exotic objects had evolved into status symbols for the nobility and upper class by the middle of the 18th century. Since Marchand merciers could not own factories and relied on the import and export of goods, they focused on offering highly sought-after items to both local and foreign clients. To keep up with consumer demand, they demonstrated great creativity by combining Oriental elements—such as lacquer, porcelain, and other materials—with gilded bronze or by merging these materials with different design components. As a result, marchands merciers had the unique ability to assemble goods according to their specifications, giving clients considerable freedom in customizing the final product [5].

Acting as intermediaries between various craftsmen, marchands merciers oversaw the production and assembly process, ensuring that the finished pieces were cohesive in both style and detail. This partnership continued until the 1750s, when porcelain plaques provided by the Sèvres factory, where a number of marchands merciers were acknowledged for having influenced the designs of the plaques as well as the types of furniture that they were integrated into [5].

Daguerre, in particular, became a key figure in this collaborative process. By 1770, he had become the primary purchaser of Sèvres porcelain, specializing in setting the porcelain into furniture alongside other materials. Many plaques produced by Sèvres during this period were specifically designed for Daguerre, and his trade card, discovered beneath a piece by Martin Carlin, attests to the strong, mutually beneficial relationship between the two craftsmen.

## 5. Women Objectified on *Secrétaire*

The *secrétaire* symbolizes the intersection of wealth, power, gender, and culture in 18th-century French society. Initially, such luxury furniture—with its porcelain inlays, imported exotic wood, and the handiwork of renowned craftsmen—was exclusive to the upper class, signaling their refined taste and immense wealth. Its presence in aristocratic homes is a tangible marker of class distinction. However, the narrative of this particular *secrétaire* reveals a complex entanglement of class and gender. It was owned by a lower middle-class woman, an opera singer, through the patronage of a wealthy lover. The singer, as a woman in the lower middle class, would never have been able to afford such a luxurious piece on her own. The transition of luxury furniture to those of mistresses or lower-class women indicates not only the blurring of class lines but also how gender played a pivotal role in these transactions.

In this context, the *secrétaire* becomes a gendered object, a symbol of how women were positioned within a patriarchal society. Opera singers, though admired for their talent, were often mistresses to wealthy men. They were simultaneously elevated and objectified, seen as status symbols for the men who pursued them. For the wealthy elite, having a popular singer as a mistress was not only a display of personal power and affluence but also a form of competition among their peers [6]. They showcased their wealth through the lavish decoration of their mistresses with fine clothing, jewels, and furniture. The woman herself, much like the *secrétaire*, became an object of display—a testament to male dominance and wealth. The *secrétaire*, therefore, also embodies the objectification of women in 18th-century France.

As luxury furniture moved into the more private, intimate spaces of lower-class women, it also reflected the growing commodification of relationships. The *secrétaire*, like other luxury goods, was part of a transactional relationship in which women became instruments of social and financial exchange [6]. Moreover, this interplay between furniture and women reflects broader societal expectations about gender roles. A woman's ability to possess valuable things was seen not as a reflection of her agency but rather of the male figure supporting her. Because it is a positive indicator of masculine prosperity and authority when a woman is able to purchase expensive items for her spouse, their family, or herself [7].

In addition, luxury furniture in 18th-century France became the cultural capital. Possessing a *secrétaire* of fine craftsmanship indicated one's access to the world of elite taste and refinement. Furniture, in this sense, was imbued with cultural meaning, serving as a material extension of

one's social identity [8].

## 6. Intersections of Gender, Class, and Furniture

Gender differences are symbolized by separate styles in furniture design, which perpetuates the binary opposition between men and women. Classical geometry was more closely linked to males, while its wavy and irregular counterparts were more closely linked to women [9]. Furniture connected to writing, like the bureau, was traditionally made with males in mind, although the *secrétaire* was initially intended for use by both sexes. Writing tables continued to be produced for both sexes by the 1760s, and there was no clear correlation between the *secrétaire* and women in particular [9]. The structural, decorative, and functional differences between masculine and feminine furniture were subtle, mainly varying in scale [9]. The larger bureau was deemed unnecessary and undesirable for women, as it was thought to detract from their delicate charm. Instead, the more compact *secrétaire* was considered better suited for women [10].

Furniture design at the time reflected societal perceptions of gender roles. Women's writing was a refined expression of their artistic talents, while men's business had greater significance and authority [9]. Women could write elegantly in front of a petite *secrétaire*, even in a bulky hemline. This not only demonstrated their refinement but was also regarded as an embodiment of French disposition and exemplary upbringing [9]. When finished in the latest veneer styles, the *secrétaire* fit perfectly with the fashionable accessories of a lady's room, and selecting the right one became a statement of her style. Owning a *secrétaire* signified that a woman was both literate and had the leisure to engage in correspondence, a hallmark of status and sophistication [10].

Writing itself is a fusion of thought and action, and the physical act of writing was seen as an expression of personality. Initially, only men were permitted to engage in the intellectual labor of writing professionally, while women were generally excluded [10]. However, as social expectations evolved, women were increasingly encouraged to think independently. Society began to measure women's education and social engagement through their writing, revealing their intellectual capabilities [10]. In this context, the *secrétaire* was more than just a functional item; it became a symbol of class. A woman's ownership of exemplified her education, taste, income, and social status, therefore expressing her position in a refined and literate milieu.

## 7. Conclusion

This article provides a detailed exploration of the secrétaire by Martin Carlin, arguing the technological innovations and social implications of furniture production in 18th-century France. By examining the use of colonial materials, the craftsmanship of Sèvres porcelain, and the role of marchands merciers, the article highlights the secrétaire not only as a functional piece but also as a symbol of status, gender, and social mobility, while revealing the intersection of gender and social power. The article shows how material culture reflected and influenced societal dynamics by combining furniture history, colonial studies, and gender analysis, which challenged traditional views of secrétaire as functional objects and posited it within the complex fabric of social history. By linking furniture to broader themes of colonialism, aristocratic taste, and gender roles, the article offers a new perspective on the interconnectedness of art, technology, and society in French history.

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