

**FRENCH LEAN-
TO SECRETAIRE BY
JACQUES DUBOIS**

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Jacques Dubois, maître-ébéniste
(1742-63)
French lean-to secretaire
About 1750
Stamped (right-hand rail): DUBOIS,
JME (fig. 1)
Oak, pine, tulipwood, kingwood,
purplewood, mahogany, Japanese lac-
quer, gilt bronze, white metal, green
Morocco leather
88.5 × 52.4 × 40 cm
Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire
(no. 2435)

PROVENANCE

Probably purchased by Lord Charles Stuart de Rothesay (1779-1845), for his collection at Highcliffe Castle, which was constructed between 1830 and 1834; inherited by his wife Lady Elizabeth Stuart de Rothesay (1789-1867); inherited by their daughter Lady Louisa Waterford (1818-1891); acquired by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild (1839-1898) for Waddesdon Manor possibly in 1890; inherited by Alice de Rothschild (1847-1922); inherited by James de Rothschild (1878-1957); bequeathed by James de Rothschild to the National Trust in 1957.

ESSENTIAL LITERATURE

Geoffrey de Bellaigue, 'French Lean-to Secrétaire', *The James A. de Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor: Furniture, Clocks and Gilt Bronzes*, 2 vols (Office du Livre, 1974), I, pp. 282-5, no. 62; Arlen Higinbotham et al., 'Secrétaire', in Gillian Wilson and Arlen Heginbotham (eds), *French Rococo Ébenisterie in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (J. Paul Getty Trust, 2021), pp. 178-88, no. 13.

AN EXPANDED PROVENANCE OF THE FRENCH LEAN-TO SECRETAIRE:

- 1750 – The secretaire was made by Jacques Dubois (1694-1763), *maître-ébéniste* (cabinetmaker), in about 1750. There are a number of other secretaires stamped in the same way and decorated with Asian lacquer panels made during this period by Dubois.¹
- 1828-1831(?) – The secretaire was acquired by Charles, Lord Stuart de Rothesay (1779-1845), a diplomat and avid collector of his time, probably when he was in post as ambassador in Paris during his second placement between 1828 and 1831.² On his return to England, he and his family lived at number 4 Carlton House Terrace, London, whilst Highcliffe Castle – his country residence in Dorset built in Gothic Revival style – was under construction.³ Sarah Medlam's research suggests that Charles Stuart transferred his furnishings and other possessions to England using an agent called George Gunn (fl.1830-31).⁴ Gunn was also an antiques dealer and supplied architectural salvage for Highcliffe Castle; this



makes it very probable that Gunn supplied Charles Stuart with the secretaire.⁵ It is not known if the secretaire was temporarily at the London address or if it was brought directly to Highcliffe Castle.

- **1845-1867** – The secretaire was part of the Highcliffe Castle collection. On the underside of the secretaire there is a label which states ‘Stuart Collection, Highcliffe’ (fig. 2). Highcliffe Castle was completed in 1834.⁶ Although it is not known which room the secretaire was placed in, Highcliffe Castle contained ‘two Chinese Rooms and a Chinese Dressing-Room’, making it likely that the secretaire was displayed in one of these spaces.⁷ After Charles Stuart’s death in 1845, the house and its contents remained in the family, inherited by his wife Elizabeth, Lady Stuart de Rothesay (1789-1867) and subsequently at her death by their surviving youngest daughter Louisa, Lady Waterford (1818-91).⁸
- **1890 (?)** – Alice de Rothschild (1847-1922) drew up a list of the collections at Waddesdon Manor in 1906: *Catalogue of The Principal Pictures, Old Furniture, China and Other Works of Art at Waddesdon Manor, 1906*, where she notes the provenance of the pieces when known. In this case: ‘Louis XV small Lacque Bureau. From the possession of Louisa, Lady Waterford’.⁹ Geoffrey de Bellaigue proposes that the secretaire was purchased by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild (1839-1898) from Lady Waterford in 1890.¹⁰ Ellis Waterhouse notes that in 1890 Baron Ferdinand bought *The Honourable Lady Stuart* (1780) by George Romney (1734-1802) from her, and it is very likely that the Savonnerie Folding Screen, catalogued here by Phoebe Sowten, was also acquired in the same year.¹¹ In a personal

communication, Highcliffe Castle and their archive team has conjectured that they believe that Lady Waterford ‘sold a number of items from the castle during her residency to fund essential repairs’, adding ‘sadly, the records from this period are quite limited, so it is difficult to confirm specific details’.¹² Medlam makes the point that Lady Waterford spent the last year of her life focusing on sorting out her affairs at Highcliffe Castle, in order to identify a suitable heir.¹³ It is possible that as part of this process she made sales of this kind.

- **1898** – The secretaire is listed in the inventory of Waddesdon Manor made after the death of Baron Ferdinand in 1898 when it was located in the small library, and it is still in this room to the present day.¹⁴ Alice de Rothschild inherited Waddesdon Manor after her brother Baron Ferdinand’s death.
- **1922** – James de Rothschild (1878-1957) was Alice de Rothschild’s great-nephew and he inherited Waddesdon Manor in 1922.
- **1957** – Bequeathed by James de Rothschild to the National Trust in 1957.¹⁵



CATALOGUE ENTRY

The lean-to secretaire can be attributed to a specific mid eighteenth-century Parisian workshop because it has two stamps added to its body: one identifies Jacques Dubois as the *maître-ébéniste* (cabinetmaker) and the other, JME, stands for *jurande des menuisiers-ébénistes* (jury of cabinetmakers and carpenters) indicating that this committee had approved the quality of his workshop's output (fig. 1).¹⁶ This type of furniture is a slant-front desk generally intended for a woman's use.¹⁷ It is a product of the French guild system, which organised craftsmen, minimised competition within the system, oversaw production standards and maintained France's reputation as a global leader in luxury goods.¹⁸

Whilst Dubois is the named maker, the secretaire was made by more than one pair of hands. Dubois, possibly in conjunction with the unidentified client, will have developed the design. Once the design was approved, it is likely that a *menuisier* (carpenter) would make the body of the piece and a *bronzier* (bronze maker) would cast the bronzes.¹⁹ In addition, the use of imported Asian lacquer panels brings in another set of social actors into the elaboration of this piece, the entrepreneurs known as *marchands merciers* (merchants of luxury objects), one of whom will have supplied Dubois with the lacquer panels.²⁰ It is crucial to note that the artisans who worked on the original Japanese lacquer panels are unknown to us, their contribution to this secretaire and other pieces by Dubois that incorporate their work can but be acknowledged. So we need to look beyond Dubois and understand that the completed secretaire is a collective achievement that represents more than just how a piece was made, but also how taste and style were being expressed during the reign of Louis XV (r. 1715-1774).

Dubois had developed an eye for surface design linked to the contemporary fashion for Asian lacquer. This fashion persisted for a long period. Oliver Impey notes that lacquer became popular in Europe in the first decade of the seventeenth century.²¹ It is not unusual for older pieces of furniture to have been dismantled later in the eighteenth century and the lacquer panels re-used to create newer and more up-to-date shapes and forms.²² European makers adapted lacquer panels from existing East Asian furniture, such as screens, cabinets and boxes into fashionable European shapes; they also reused lacquer panels on updated shapes to suit European fashions. The reclaiming of lacquer panels is not the only material in the eighteenth century to be recycled. *Marchands merciers* also reused hardstone panels and Boulle marquetry from older pieces: furniture 'that they could not pass on intact they dismantled to harvest their costly materials for reuse'.²³ The panels used in this secretaire conform to what is called 'pictorial style' and were in vogue from 1630 onwards.²⁴ They represent idealised scenes by lakeside or mountain settings.

There are a number of well documented pieces of writing furniture incorporating Asian lacquer stamped by Dubois still in existence, for example, the secretaire that belonged to Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764) and was sold by Christie's on behalf of Baroness Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza (1943-) in 2019.²⁵

It is not known who commissioned the secretaire in the first place, which is not uncommon for items involving *marchands merciers*, many of whom owned shops. However, the first known owner is Lord Charles Stuart de Rothesay. He had a long diplomatic career and served as ambassador in France for two terms, 1816-24 and 1828-31.²⁶ He was also well known as a collector



in his lifetime, and was an early participant in the enthusiasm for French furniture and decorative arts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that lead Britain, in the nineteenth century, to become the richest repository of *ancien régime* objects and furniture, much of it concentrated in the hands of a small and influential circle of collectors.²⁷ Charles Stuart aimed to furnish two properties in England, one in London, 4 Carlton House Terrace, and the other at the Highcliffe Estate in Dorset.²⁸ According to Medlam, it is the latter project that held his interest and where this secretaire would come to reside.²⁹ It can be argued that Highcliffe engaged with the eclectic spirit of revivals of the time, embracing the Renaissance and the Gothic as well as being decorated in the heady mix of ‘Old French’ pre-Revolutionary styles.³⁰ Adriana Turpin notes that during the long nineteenth century in Britain ‘the taste for the furnishing and decoration of the houses of aristocrats and *nouveaux riches* was resolutely French’ and this was known as ‘Old French style’.³¹ It is not known in which room the secretaire resided whilst in the possession of the Stuart family, but it is noted that Lady Louisa Waterford, who inherited Highcliffe Castle, made discreet sales to Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild in about 1890.³² Another item sold at the same time to Baron Ferdinand is the portrait of Lady Louisa’s grandmother, *The Honourable Lady Stuart* (1780) by George Romney (1734-1802).³³

To understand Baron Ferdinand as a collector, one who placed himself in a continuum of collectors within the Rothschild family and the practice of collecting in the nineteenth century, it is vital to consult his private memoir, *Reminiscences* (1897), in particular chapter III: ‘Bric-a-Brac’.³⁴ He notes that ‘old works of art are not, however, desirable only for their rarity or

beauty, but for their associations, for the memories they evoke, the trains of thought to which they lead’.³⁵ He values the aura of the originals and rejects the copy: ‘a copy, at its best, is but an excellent imitation or a clever forgery’.³⁶ It becomes clear how the extended Rothschild family was, in his view, a trailblazer in reviving the eighteenth century in its so-called ‘purity’ through the salvage of interiors and the curation of furniture and decorative arts, all whilst adapting the revival to ‘modern requirements’.³⁷ He places the Rothschilds in the context of other collectors, who also admire ‘the graceful compositions of the French eighteenth century’, such as Lord Hertford (1800-1870), Sir Richard Wallace (1818-1890) and Henri, Duc d’Aumale (1822-1897).³⁸ Why would this secretaire in particular interest Ferdinand de Rothschild? To purchase, contemplate or to use this secretaire is to own, admire and touch the past shattered by the French Revolution.³⁹ It had a captivating provenance as it had the stamped marks of a known workshop and the committee which oversaw quality and it had been acquired by a known Francophile collector. It is also known today to be comparable to the one once owned by Madame de Pompadour, whose collection Ferdinand de Rothschild ranked second to the one built up by Cardinal Mazarin (1602-1661).⁴⁰

He placed the secretaire in the small library to the right of the marble fireplace. The library is sumptuous, a small-scale room meant for his working library to prepare for lectures that he gave locally.⁴¹ It is not the only eighteenth-century piece of furniture in the room made for the art of writing, and it found its home within this private sanctum among similarly evocative pieces.⁴²





Fig. 1: Jacques Dubois, *maître-ébéniste* (1742-63), French lean-to secretaire, about 1750, Waddesdon Manor (no. 2435): Stamped (right-hand rail): DUBOIS, JME



Fig. 2: Jacques Dubois, *maître-ébéniste* (1742-63), French lean-to secretaire, about 1750, Waddesdon Manor (no. 2435). There are two labels beneath, one is the original Highcliffe label, and the other is the additional Waddesdon label which indicates where it is placed: 'small library, right of fireplace' (photograph by the author).

NOTES

- 1 Geoffrey de Bellaigue, 'French Lean-to Secrétaire', *The James A. de Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor: Furniture, Clocks and Gilt Bronzes*, 2 vols (Office du Livre, 1974), I, pp. 282-5, no. 62.
- 2 Sarah Medlam, *The Bettine, Lady Abingdon Collection. The Bequest of Mrs T. R. P. Hole. A Handbook* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), pp. 26-8.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 4 For more information on Gunn see 'Nixon, James (1816-1839)', on the *British and Irish Furniture Makers Online Database of The Furniture History Society*, <<https://bifmo.furniturehistorysociety.org/entry/nixon-james-1816-39>> [accessed 05-02-2026].
- 5 Medlam, *The Bettine*, pp. 30-4.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 9 The Waddesdon Archive at Windmill Hill, Acc. no. 926, Alice de Rothschild, *The Catalogue of the Principal Pictures, Old Furniture, China and Other Works of Art at Waddesdon Manor, 1906*, 1906, p. 35.
- 10 Bellaigue, *The James A. de Rothschild*, p. 285. There is no evidence in the catalogue to support this purchase date.
- 11 Ellis Waterhouse, *The James A. de Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor: Paintings* (Office du Livre, 1967), p. 102. There is no evidence in the catalogue to support this purchase date.
- 12 Email communication shared by Phoebe Sowten on 18 April 2025. Further email communication by Sowten on 14 May 2025 states that 'unfortunately, we don't have any specific sources confirming that Lady Waterford sold items from the castle to fund repairs'.
- 13 Medlam, *The Bettine*, p. 11.
- 14 The Waddesdon Archive at Windmill Hill, Acc. no. 157.1997.3, *Inventory of Waddesdon Manor, Bucks, vol. III, Reception Rooms*, p. 67.
- 15 Michael Hall, 'Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire. A property of The National Trust', *Country life*, 192.23 (1998), pp. 63-7.
- 16 Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, 'Side-Table (commode en console)', in Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, Wolfram Koepppe, William Rieder (eds), *European Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Highlights of the Collection* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008) p. 142, no. 56; Alexandre Pradère, *French Furniture Makers: The Art of the Ébeniste from Louis XIV to the Revolution* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 1989), pp. 168-75; François de Salverte, *Les Ébénistes du XVIIIème siècle, leurs oeuvres et leurs marques* (Gérard van Oest et Cie, 1923), pp. 95-6.
- 17 'Bureaux en pente', *Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online*, J. Paul Getty Trust, <<http://vocab.getty.edu/page/aat/300077310>> [accessed 05-02-2026].
- 18 Cissie Fairchilds, 'The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris', in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 228-48.
- 19 Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (University of California Press, 1996), pp. 75-89.
- 20 Carolyn Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris* (V&A Publications, 1996).
- 21 Oliver Impey, 'Japanese Export Art of the Edo Period and its Influence on European Art', *Modern Asian Studies*, 18.4 (1984), pp. 685-97 (p. 687).
- 22 Oliver Impey, Christiaan Jörg and Cynthia Viallé (eds), *Japanese Export Lacquer 1580-1850* (Hotei, 2005), p. 11.
- 23 Wolfram Koepppe and Florian Knothe, 'An Enduring Seductiveness: The Reclaiming of Pietre Dure in the Eighteenth Century', in Wolfram Koepppe, Anna Maria Giusti, and Cristina Acidini Luchinat (eds), *Art of the Royal Court: Treasures from Pietre Dure from the Palaces of Europe* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), p. 88.
- 24 Impey, Jörg and Viallé, *Japanese Export Lacquer*, p. 84.
- 25 Christie's London, *The Collector: European and English Furniture, Ceramics, Portrait Miniatures & Works of Art*, 13 November 2019, lot 110 <<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6235072>> [accessed 05-02-2026].
- 26 Robert Franklin, *Lord Stuart de Rothesay: The Life and Times of Lord Stuart de Rothesay of Highcliffe Castle, 1775-1845* (Images, 1993); Violet Hunter Guthrie-Montague-Stuart-Wortley, *Highcliffe and the Stuarts* (J. Murray, 1927).
- 27 Sarah Medlam, *The Bettine*, pp. 21-24; see also, Diana Davis, *The Tastemakers: British Dealers and the Anglo-Gallic Interior, 1785-1865* (Getty Research Institute, 2020); Tom Stammers, *The*



- Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary Paris, c. 1790-1890* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 28 Medlam, *The Bettine*, p. 28.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 40.
- 31 Adriana Turpin, 'Appropriation as a Form of Nationalism? Collecting French Furniture in the Nineteenth Century', in Jan Dirk Baetens and Dries Lyna (eds), *Art Crossing Borders: The Internationalisation of the Art Market in the Age of Nation States, 1750-1914* (Brill, 2019), pp. 220-55 (pp. 220-1).
- 32 Bellaigue, *The James A. de Rothschild*, p. 285.
- 33 Waterhouse, *The James A. de Rothschild*, p. 102.
- 34 The Waddesdon Archive at Windmill Hill, Acc. no. 177.1997, Ferdinand de Rothschild, *Reminiscences*, 1897.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 102-111, and p. 115.
- 39 See Stammers, *The Purchase of the Past*.
- 40 Ferdinand de Rothschild, *Reminiscences*, p. 86: 'Madame de Pompadour's collection came next in importance'.
- 41 See <<https://waddesdon.or.uk/the-collection/virtual-tours/>> [accessed 05-02-2026].
- 42 See Waddesdon Manor, nos 2434, 2442, 2460.



LACQUER LUXE: EAST- WEST SURFACE

Jessamy Harvey

Lacquer luxe, as a composite word, combines the reference to material goods, lacquerware, and a decorative craft method, lacquering, with a term related to luxury. I have adopted this term from the contemporary beauty industry which often combines both these words to refer to products that provide intense colour, glossy finish and are aimed at the high end of the market.¹ The term is apt in relation to antique lacquerware which can range in scale from small decorative pieces, such as bowls, to larger pieces of furniture, such as folding screens.

Japan House in Los Angeles held an exhibition between July 2023 to January 2024: 'Pokémon X Kogei. Playful Encounters of Pokémon and Japanese Craft'. The exhibition brought together two aspects of Japanese culture: one admired for centuries, *Kogei* (traditional arts and crafts) – in lacquer, ceramics, textiles, and other media – and their more recent successful export, the globally popular Pokémon brand in the form of video games and apps, trading cards, animated television shows, and other merchandise.² One of the items that encapsulated the theme of the exhibition was a lacquer tea caddy, *Call Spring*, by

contemporary lacquer master Yoshiaki Taguchi, featuring Moltres, the legendary bird Pokémon which controls fire and heralds Spring (fig. 1). In my twenties I was captivated by Pokémon trading cards. Collecting them filled me with wonder, particularly those illustrated with fantastic creatures that bore a vague resemblance to the natural world of plants, animals and minerals. In due course, I stopped collecting but passed on my collector folders to my nephew and, whilst I can still identify the early Pokémon species, such as my favourite Pikachu, I rely on him for updates on the current franchise. We have both, in our own ways, been entranced by an expression of Japanese aesthetics and, in this way, we join a long line of Japanophiles.

To understand the influence of Asia on Western decorative arts, two terms are often used: *Chinoiserie*, a style which emerged in the late seventeenth century but, it could be argued, had its zenith in the eighteenth century and has been long-lived, and *Japonaiserie*, a term coined by the brothers Jules de Goncourt (1830-1879) and Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896)



to describe a similar phenomenon in the nineteenth century.³ The first style did not distinguish between the Asian nations and combined motifs from India, China and Japan to create an exotic fantasy realm that was far away, whereas the second emerged when Japan reopened in 1853 for trade with the West after centuries of seclusion. A third term used is *Japonisme* which describes European borrowings from Japanese aesthetics.⁴

From the seventeenth century, Europeans started to respond to the importation of Asian luxuries, such as porcelain, lacquerware and textiles, by learning from these decorative objects and imitating them to stimulate local production. Asia was ahead in the technologies involved in making these luxury products, but the Europeans could not bring back this knowledge so the desire to make substitute Asian luxuries in Europe can be seen as generating the discovery of new materials locally, developing manufacturing skills and growing the consumer market for luxury goods.⁵

Asian lacquer is known as *urushi*. It is a natural plastic, like turtle shell, that is extracted from the sap of the *Rhus vernicifera*, or Lacquer tree, in Japan. Various surface techniques are used in the manufacture of *urushi* ware, either singly or combined: carved, incised, inlaid, sprinkled, painted, dry, moulded and gilt.⁶ Layers of *urushi* are applied, and they polymerise in reaction to the environment, hardening and becoming water proof. In between applications, the upper layer is polished to create an even and reflective surface. Towards the final stages, outlines of designs are transferred and these are filled with metallic powders, gold and silver, and sometimes mother-of-pearl in the sprinkled or *Makie* type.⁷ This particular type is a millennia-old decorative lacquer art that is still made in contemporary Japan.⁸ It was the importation of

Makie objects, with their opulent beauty of shiny black and gold, that dominated the French court taste. The reception at Versailles of the ambassadors of Siam in 1686 during the reign of Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715) can be argued to mark the beginning of the French court's interest in the Far East. One of the hundreds of Siamese diplomatic gifts was a Japanese *Makie* lacquer cabinet that the monarch gifted to the Grand Dauphin. As Elizabeth Benjamin notes, 'these gifts were only occasionally products of Siam, but instead reflected the kingdom's well-established trade networks with India, Persia, Japan, and China'.⁹ This desire for *Makie* lacquer continued though the eighteenth century; Queen Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) inherited the collection of Japanese lacquer from her mother, the Hapsburg Empress Maria Theresa (1717–1780). Marie Antoinette had one of her private rooms in the Palace of Versailles, the *cabinet doré* (gilt room), redecorated in 1784 to showcase this precious collection.¹⁰

Europeans who sought to replicate the surface aesthetics of Asian lacquer experimented with a wide range of plant resins and oils. In England this imitative approach was known as 'japanning'. This term does not only mean the art of varnishing as a technique, it also carries an association with exoticism typical of *chinoiserie* which, we will see, provides a fantasy of the East, be it India, China or Japan, packaged for consumption in the West.¹¹ In this quest to produce European imitation lacquer, many different formulations were developed, but one of the most superior oil-resin varnishes was created by the Martin brothers, Parisian *vernisseurs* (varnishers) for two generations (1730–1770).¹² Due to their success in creating a high-quality lacquer finish, the term *vernis Martin* (Martin varnish) is used in France to describe the



technique whether the brothers' workshop was involved or not in crafting the piece of furniture.¹³ Whereas the dominant aesthetic in *Makie* lacquer is a reflective black surface predominantly decorated with gold, *vernis Martin* objects play with a much broader colour palette (figs. 2-3). Two notable examples are displayed in Parisian museums: the panels that once decorated the Chinese cabinet in the Paris townhouse of Louis-François-Armand du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu (1696-1788) – a rare survival of green japanning – at the Musée Carnavalet (fig. 3), and the chest of drawers delivered by Mathieu Criaerd (1689-1776) to Madame de Mailly (1717-1744), inspired by the blue and white of imported Asian porcelain, now at the Musée du Louvre (fig. 4).

Both Japanese and European lacquer help us to understand the appeal of two lean-to secretaires, or writing desks, that are in the Small Library at Waddesdon Manor. They were both made in the mid-eighteenth century. Ferdinand de Rothschild acquired the one made in the workshop of Jacques Dubois (1694-1763) in the late nineteenth century when the fascination for Asian aesthetic still held visual appeal (see the catalogue entry). It incorporates seventeenth-century Japanese lacquer panels.¹⁴ James de Rothschild (1878-1957), who inherited Waddesdon Manor in 1922, received the one attributed to Adrien Faizelot-Delorme (1722-1791) from the estate of Edmond James de Rothschild (1845-1934), his father (fig. 2). It is a fine example of European lacquer imitating the sumptuous surface of Asian lacquer but expressing classical themes from the Western canon.¹⁵

They are similar in shape, both having cabriole legs, both decorated with bronze mounts, and in each the lean-to panel opens to provide a writing surface and reveal multiple drawers to hold writing materials,

paper and correspondence. Whilst they both come from named and known workshops, both are the product of more than one pair of hands. Many craftsmen with their guild-regulated specialties such as cabinet-makers and bronze makers, in addition to the original Japanese lacquer artisans, contributed to make these pieces of furniture. However, these details aside, what does each piece of furniture tell us about lacquer luxe and the surfaces that are produced out of encounters between East and West?

The secretaire from the workshop of Dubois incorporates older Japanese lacquer panels with scenes representing nature: geese amid bamboo, water plants and rocks in a lake; domestic dwellings at the foot of mountains, and more houses on the margins of a lake. These panels would initially have formed part of a different piece of furniture, possibly a screen or a box, procured by the French *marchand mercier*, dismantled at some stage and recycled into a piece that was more in keeping with eighteenth-century French taste and use. Contemporary Western admirers of this secretaire would have enjoyed the luxuriousness of the gold decoration, with motifs such as the geese and the dwellings built up in moulded relief upon the black background to create an exotic rural landscape. However, they likely would have missed the original references to Japanese literary traditions. Barbara Brennan Ford observes that lacquer pieces of the period had links to 'the poetic imagery of the *Konshisū*', the earliest Imperial anthology of poetry, reflecting 'a literary tradition in which intimately observed seasonal manifestations of nature are used as metaphors for human emotion'.¹⁶ In Europe, Japanese culture remained an enigma at that time, and the depth of Japanese upper-class learning would have been lost on European admirers of the surface decoration.



Although the secretaire from the workshop of Faizelot-Delorme owes a debt to the importation of Asian lacquerware due to its imitation of the sumptuous polished surface, the subjects depicted belong to the European tradition (fig. 2). Upon the gold ground, there are polychrome coloured scenes: framed with garlands, four show children playing; one is an allegorical group that may have links to the writings of Plutarch (about AD 40–120s); and one presents a bouquet of poppies.¹⁷ The polychromatic range of colours – red, blue, green, yellow, pink, purple – although commonly used in *vernis Martin* are absent from the imported Asian pieces.¹⁸ It has been speculated that the children at play derive from engravings by Claudine Bouzonnet Stella (1636–1697).¹⁹ Contemporary European viewers of the piece, well-versed in classical mythology, would have understood the symbolism of the female figure pressing a ring to the mouth of the winged putto holding an open letter as asking him to keep the secrets held in this writing desk. Unlike the Dubois secretaire, this one was fully legible to those who, given their European classical education, could appreciate the playful visual references.

To conclude, both these secretaires located in the Small Library at Waddesdon Manor are the result of a passion for lacquer luxe which emerged in the seventeenth century from the encounters between East and West. The storm of the French Revolution dispersed a myriad of objects, including many examples of Asian and European lacquer, and these secretaires came to be placed in the Small Library at Waddesdon Manor after passing through other collectors' homes: the Dubois secretaire left France at some point in the early nineteenth century to join the collection at Highcliffe Castle until its arrival at Waddesdon Manor in about 1890.²⁰ The

provenance of the *vernis Martin* secretaire is less clear-cut, although we do know that before it joined James de Rothschild's collection at Waddesdon, it was in the Salon des Boucher in his parents' chateau in Boulogne. Whilst there are many pieces at Waddesdon Manor that can be understood to be linked to the Western obsession for Asian-inspired goods and the wide-spread fashion for *Chinoiserie* – in the porcelain collections for example – Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild acquired the lacquer luxe secretaire by Dubois as part of the revival of the taste for French eighteenth-century decorative arts and their associations with the vanished courtly society of Versailles.²¹





Figure 1. Yoshiaki Taguchi (1958-), *Call Spring* (Tea Caddy), 2022, Urushi lacquer, Makie, 8.1 cm × 7.2 cm, Private Collection.



Figure 2. Adrien Faizelot-Delorme (1691-1768) (attr.), French Lean-to Secretaire, about 1750, oak, walnut, pine, kingwood, purplewood, vernis Martin, gilt bronze, brass, 87.8 × 58.8 × 43 cm, Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire (no. 2434).



Figure 3. One of the panels that once decorated the Chinese cabinet in the Paris townhouse of Louis-François-Armand du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu (1696-1788) – a rare survival of green japaning, Musée Carnavalet, Paris (no. BO102/5).



Figure 4. Mathieu Criaerd (1689-1776), *Commode en vernis Martin*, 1742, oak, fruit tree wood, bronze (silvered), marble, vernis Martin, 85 × 132 × 63.8 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris (no. 11292).

NOTES

- 1 See for example Tom Ford Beauty's product Lip Lacquer Luxe and Sassy Cow Co's Luxe Lacquer nail gel polish.
- 2 *Pokémon X Kogei. Playful Encounters of Pokémon and Japanese Craft* (exhibition held at Japan House, Los Angeles, 25 July 2023 – 7 January 2024).
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- 4 See 'Chinoiserie – an introduction', V&A Museum website: <<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/chinoiserie-an-introduction>> [Accessed 05-02-2026]; 'Japonisme', *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: <<https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/japonisme>>> [Accessed 05-02-2026]; Richard Hayman, *Chinoiserie* (Bloomsbury, 2021); Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2014); Elizabeth Emery, *Reframing Japonisme: Women and the Asian Art Market in Nineteenth-Century France, 1853-1914* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).
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