



# JEAN-HENRI RIESENER



WADDESDON



*Cabinet-maker to Louis XVI  
& Marie-Antoinette*



## JEAN-HENRI RIESENER: Cabinet-maker to Louis XVI & Marie-Antoinette

Waddesdon Manor houses a magnificent collection of furniture by the eighteenth-century artisan Jean-Henri Riesener, who became cabinet-maker to the French crown, furnishing the Palace of Versailles and other royal palaces with over 700 pieces of furniture throughout the 1770s. His work is characterised by its meticulous pictorial marquetry and fine gilt-bronze mounts. The dispersal of the French royal and aristocratic collections at the French Revolution made these pieces of furniture available to international collectors including George IV. Not only prized for their craftsmanship, the objects were also imbued with the melancholy memory of the doomed French court and its grisly end.

Baron Ferdinand and Alice de Rothschild were part of a new generation of collectors in the late nineteenth century who were particularly interested in the authenticity and provenance of their Riesener furniture. They used maker's marks, cyphers and official stamps such as those for the royal *Garde-Meuble* (furniture administration) to help identify it and often recorded object histories in notes and other writings. Between them, they assembled no fewer than 11 pieces of furniture by Riesener, one of the finest collections in the world. This trail takes you through the house and introduces you to the furniture.





## RIESENER: A CHRONOLOGY

Like many 18th-century Parisian furniture makers, Riesener came from Germany. He had spectacular success, becoming official cabinet-maker to the king in 1774.

4 July 1734	Born in Gladbeck in the Rhineland near Cologne, Germany
Around 1748	Probably apprenticed to a workshop in Germany
1754	Moves to Paris and finds work as a journeyman with another cabinet-maker from the Rhineland, Jean-François Oeben (1721-1763), a favourite supplier of furniture to Madame de Pompadour, the official mistress of Louis XV. Oeben's workshop, in the Royal Arsenal, was free from many of the guild restrictions of most craftsmen in France
1763	Oeben dies and his widow chooses Riesener to take charge of the workshop
August 1767	Riesener marries Oeben's widow
23 January 1768	Admitted as a master of the guild of <i>ébénistes</i> (cabinet-makers)
1769	Begins to supply the <i>Garde-Meuble de la Couronne</i> (the furnishing administration of the royal household) and completes Oeben's commissions, among them the <i>bureau du roi</i> of Louis XV

10 May 1774

Death of Louis XV, accession of Louis XVI

July 1774

Receives the official title of *Ébéniste du Roi*, (Cabinet-maker to the King) after buying up the stock of the previous holder of the post, Gilles Joubert (1689-1775)

1774-1784

Huge success as the foremost supplier of furniture to the French court and distinguished private clients; paid 938,000 *livres* for furniture delivered to the *Garde-Meuble* (the salary of a skilled cabinet-maker averaged 600 *livres*)

1784

Begins to fall from official favour, due in part to the scaling back of the *Garde-Meuble* under the new director, Marc-Antoine Thierry de Ville d'Avray (1732-92), but remains the favourite cabinet-maker of Marie-Antoinette, who continues to order furniture from him until the French Revolution

1789

Reversal of fortunes with the fall of the Old Regime in the French Revolution. Buys back some of his most famous pieces in the hope of selling them on, but taste and buyers had changed

1794

Carries out the removal of royal insignia from his own works, which had been retained by the State under the First Republic, including the *bureau du roi*

1795-9

Continues to produce some furniture under the Directoire but it is undistinguished and no longer in keeping with French taste

1801

Retires

January 1806

Dies in Paris aged 71

Some pieces of furniture can be found in the rooms on the Ground Floor in their usual locations, and a group of desks and writing tables has been gathered together in the Morning Room so that you can look at them in detail.

## Red Drawing Room

### Chest of drawers, 1776

This chest of drawers was ordered on 8 February 1776 from Riesener by the comtesse de Provence (wife of the eldest brother of Louis XVI) for her bedroom in her apartments at Versailles. It was the most expensive chest of drawers supplied that year by the *Garde-Meuble*, perhaps because it was delivered in a mere six weeks. Riesener visited the comtesse at Versailles to discuss the commission of the piece, take measurements of the space she wanted to put it in, and show her a drawing.

It was bought by Alice de Rothschild from the Hamilton Palace Sale (lot 528, £2,310), one of the greatest house sales of the nineteenth century, and at which a number of exceptional pieces of eighteenth-century French furniture were bought by Alice, her brother Baron Ferdinand and their French cousin Baron Edmond. She displayed it in her first floor sitting room at the Manor, along with the other chest of drawers in this room.

Accession number: 2251



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### Chest of drawers, 1778

This chest of drawers was supplied to Madame Élisabeth (youngest sister of Louis XVI) when, at the age of 14, she was granted her own suite of apartments at Versailles. It was delivered to her bedroom on 29 September 1778, along with two other chests of drawers of the same model, and two corner cupboards for her *Grand Cabinet* (which are now lost or reveneered).

The same marquetry composition, of a pastoral trophy with a simulated marble vase mounted with handles in the form of twisted snakes, was used on a number of chests of drawers, including that delivered to the *cabinet de retraite* of Louis XVI at Fontainebleau, which was later moved to the library at Versailles (where it is today). It was recorded as still at Versailles by the revolutionary government in 1792, but its location between then and its purchase by Alice is unknown.

Accession number: 2252



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## West Gallery

### Writing table and filing cabinet; c 1780; French

This desk, or an identical one, is described in a post-mortem inventory of Elizabeth Chudleigh, Duchess of Kingston-upon-Hull, (1720-1788) at the Château de Sainte-Assise, near Paris, in 1788. The château had been given as a gift in 1773 to the marquise de Montesson (1738-1806) on the occasion of her secret marriage to Louis-Philippe, duc d'Orléans (1725-1785). The clock is signed by Jacques Debon (d. 1788), clock-maker to the duc d'Orléans, giving credence to the possibility that the desk was made for him, and was acquired with the château.

It is a remarkably sophisticated piece of furniture, with an integral reading stand, a leaf extension, a filing cabinet and a clock that shows the phases of the sun and the moon, as well as the time. Its gilt-bronze mounts are attributed to Etienne Martincourt, who collaborated with Riesener on a number of important pieces of furniture.



Alice wrote in her Catalogue of Works of Art at the Manor (1906) that her brother Baron Ferdinand acquired it from the politician and statesman Edmé-Armand-Gaston, duc d'Audiffret-Pasquier, but this claim is not substantiated. The desk must have been acquired by Baron Ferdinand before it was photographed in 1897 in the West Gallery at Waddesdon Manor.

Accession number: 2400



## Baron's Room

### Chest of drawers; 1774-1780

It is not definitely known for whom this chest of drawers was made, but the cipher on the lock plate - P S E J - may indicate a commission from Madame Sophie, daughter of Louis XV, whose full name was Sophie Philippine Élisabeth Justine. She and her sisters, known collectively as Mesdames de France, retained apartments at Versailles when Louis XVI came to the throne in 1774. The marquetry trophy representing Strength and Abundance was used on several pieces of furniture for the royal family and would have been vividly coloured - a similar trophy is described as having a red and yellow ribbon in Riesener's memoranda. It was acquired by Baron Ferdinand's agent, Wertheimer, from the sale of the collector James Whatman in 1882 for £1,575. After Alice wrote her Catalogue, she noted that the chest of drawers was 'probably by Riesener'

Accession number: 2477



## Baron's Room

Fall-front desk; 1777



This desk was delivered for the use of King Louis XVI in his private study at the Petit Trianon, in the grounds of Versailles, in August 1777. It is recorded both in the *Journal du Garde-Meuble* and Riesener's own memorandum also survives. It cost 8,120 livres and was delivered along with a 'beautiful marquetry writing table', (now also at Waddesdon, and currently on display in the Morning Room), a larger writing-table, now owned by the Getty but on loan to the Petit Trianon and a chest of drawers in the collections at Versailles. Its ownership by Louis XVI had been forgotten by the time of its sale in 1882, but it retained an association with him, as its key was said to have been made by him. Desks in this form had the advantage of being able to be locked, and their contents could remain private.

Baron Ferdinand displayed this desk here in his private sitting room at the Manor, where he gathered some of his greatest treasures.

Accession number: 2476



## Morning Room

Henri-François Riesener (1767-1828), *Portrait of Jean-Henri Riesener (1734-1806)*, Oil on canvas, 1800



This portrait of Jean-Henri Riesener was painted by his son, Henri-François Riesener. Henri-François trained at the Académie Royale before the French Revolution and exhibited for the first time at the Salon in 1793. He fought in the Revolutionary wars but left the army to resume painting, exhibiting again at the Salon of 1799. This painting depicts the cabinet-maker near the end of his life, after the family fortune had disappeared with the Old Regime. The plain background focuses attention on the face, scrutinised in moving detail and on the frank, penetrating gaze. The open-necked shirt and unkempt appearance hint at the intimacy of this particular sitting, but is also a conventional way of depicting an artist.

Accession number: 5.2016

## Desks and Writing Tables

The furniture at Waddesdon by Riesener includes eight desks. As the Morning Room was built by Baron Ferdinand for his guests to use in the morning to read and write their correspondence, we have moved five desks and tables into this room, to join the roll-top desk that is usually in here, so that you can look at them in greater detail and compare them with one another.

Some are lockable, and include storage space, such as the two roll-top desks and the drop-front desk in the Baron's Room. They would usually stay in the same position in a room. Small writing tables were easily portable so that they could be used wherever the writer wanted to sit. Riesener's writing tables are highly decorative, with marquetry tops. This means that they are usually fitted with a separate writing slide, originally covered with velvet or silk, which provides a less vulnerable surface on which to write. All desks were usually delivered with silvered metal containers for writing materials - a pounce pot (which contained pounce, a fine powder sprinkled on wet ink to dry it), a sponge container (for cleaning your pen or quill), and a small glass ink pot. Some also include a reading stand.

Also in this room is a desk made for Louis XVI by Guillaume Beneman, which reprises the lower section of the celebrated desk made for Louis XV by Jean-François Oeben and completed by Riesener, which was delivered to Versailles in 1769. The Beneman desk was designed for the same room as Riesener and Oeben's masterpiece.

## Morning Room

### Rolltop desk; 1774

This remarkable and lavish desk was supplied to the Comte de Provence, younger brother of Louis XVI and future Louis XVIII in March 1774 for his use in his private study below the *Galerie des Glaces* at the Palace of Versailles. It was inventoried in his study in the south wing of the palace after the location of his apartments moved, according to the strict rules of precedence at the court. It was seized and sold in the Revolutionary sales, after which it was acquired by a pair of Strasbourg businessmen and publishers, Jean-Georges Treuttel and Jean Godefroy Würtz, who published long and detailed descriptions of it. It had been earmarked to be part of the collections of the new national museum (later the Louvre), but it was judged to be too similar to Oeben and Riesener's masterpiece, the desk made for Louis XV (now returned to Versailles). Treuttel and Würtz advertised it for sale in 1794 at 12,000 livres, but were unable to sell it. They later attempted to sell it back to its original owner, by then Louis XVIII, for 4,8000 francs, but he was not willing to pay for what he likely regarded as his own property. It bears inscriptions that aid in tracking its location in the nineteenth century (it was in London in 1816, and Brussels in 1861), but we do not know from where Baron Ferdinand acquired it. It appears in an 1897 photograph of the Morning Room at Waddesdon Manor, in the location where it is displayed today.

Accession number: 2576



### Rolltop desk; c 1775

Pierre Verlet debunked the myth that the 'MA' cipher on this roll-top desk referred to Queen Marie-Antoinette, in a letter to James de Rothschild in 1938. Hitherto, its supposed illustrious provenance had led to it being valued at £7,500 in Alice's probate inventory of 1922, the highest valuation for any of the pieces at Waddesdon by Riesener. Verlet noted that the arms in marquetry on the side were those 'of a Daughter of France', and concluded the obvious candidate was Madame Adélaïde (Marie-Adélaïde), daughter of Louis XV. Her Sèvres porcelain inkstand in the Wallace Collection had been subject to the same confusion, the 'MA' cipher acquiring a romantic and fervently desired link with the ill-fated queen. It is not certainly known where Baron Ferdinand acquired this table, but Alice records in her 1906 Catalogue that he bought it 'from the Collection of Sir Henry Hoare at Stourhead, - Sir Henry stated that it had been bought by his great-uncle in the streets of Paris after the Revolution of 1793'. It does not appear in any nineteenth-century inventories or sale catalogues from Stourhead, but may well have been acquired by Ferdinand by private treaty, at some point before 1885, when it was illustrated in a book on the history of furniture by Alfred de Champeaux, and listed as belonging to Ferdinand.

Accession number: 2544



## Morning Room

### Writing table; 1777

This is the writing table that was delivered with the fall front desk for the use of Louis XVI in his private study at the Petit Trianon. The trophy representing Poetry and Literature is a composition often used by Riesener on a variety of furniture, and is appropriate for a writing desk. It is not certainly known where Baron Ferdinand acquired this table, but Alice records in her 1906 Catalogue that he 'acquired this from an octogenarian French Marquis who resided in the neighbourhood of Orléans. His mother was one of the Ladies-in-Waiting to Marie-Antoinette, who presented her with this table'. This kind of romantic provenance appealed to nineteenth-century collectors, and it is unlikely that Ferdinand knew that he had in fact separately acquired pieces that were delivered to King Louis XVI together. However, his preference for pieces bearing the marks of the Queen's *Garde-Meuble* guaranteed their quality and made this type of happy coincidence likely.



Accession number: 2528



### Writing table; 1778-1787

The great French furniture historian Pierre Verlet identified this table (using its *Garde-Meuble* inventory numbers) as having been delivered to Madame Élisabeth (youngest sister of Louis XVI) at Versailles but questioned whether the marquetry top matched the one described in the 1778 entry in the *Journal du Garde Meuble*. Geoffrey de Bellaigue subsequently discovered that repairs had been carried out to the table in 1787, and its top had been replaced by the furniture-maker Pierre-Roger Lacroix. Perhaps the fact it was in use in a bathroom meant that it quickly became damaged. It was bought by Alice and inventoried in her first-floor sitting room at Waddesdon in 1922, after her death.

Accession number: 2537



## Morning Room

### Writing table; 1780-1785

This small and elegant writing table is difficult to identify in eighteenth-century accounts and inventories, as its inventory numbers have been partially erased.



However, it can be definitely identified in 1826 at the Pavillon de Flore at the Tuileries Palace in Paris, for which it does bear the marks, where it was in the bedroom of the 'Major of the King's Bodyguard'. If indeed it was made for either Queen Marie-Antoinette or Madame Élisabeth, they were both held captive in the Tuileries during the Reign of Terror, with Madame

Élisabeth inhabiting a suite of rooms in Pavillon de Flore. It has been altered at some point, with floral gilt-bronze mounts added to its legs and its dustboard repurposed as the base of its drawer. It was acquired by Baron Ferdinand at some point before 1897, when it is shown in the Small Library at Waddesdon Manor in a photograph in 'The Red Book', an album he privately published in 1897 to record the architecture, interiors and collection at Waddesdon.

Accession number: 2460



### Writing table; c 1781



The most celebrated work by Riesener in Waddesdon's collection, this writing table was supplied to Queen Marie-Antoinette for the Petit Trianon, the small palace she used as a retreat from the court at Versailles. Although Riesener made a number of small writing tables for Marie-Antoinette and other ladies at court, the extremely fine modelling of the gilt-bronze mounts by François Rémond sets this table apart from the others. Composed of incredibly realistic flowers carefully chased, gilded and burnished so that they

shimmer in the light, the mounts can be compared to the fineness of jewellery. The central oval reserve of the table-top and the panels on the sides are decorated with intricate marquetry trophies of love and music, while geometric 'fretwork' marquetry fills the remaining table-top and lower shelf. The front frieze pulls out to reveal a writing slide, which can be adjusted to the preferred angle, beneath which is a drawer. A subsidiary drawer contains silvered compartments for writing implements and can be pulled out to the right when the writing slide is in use.

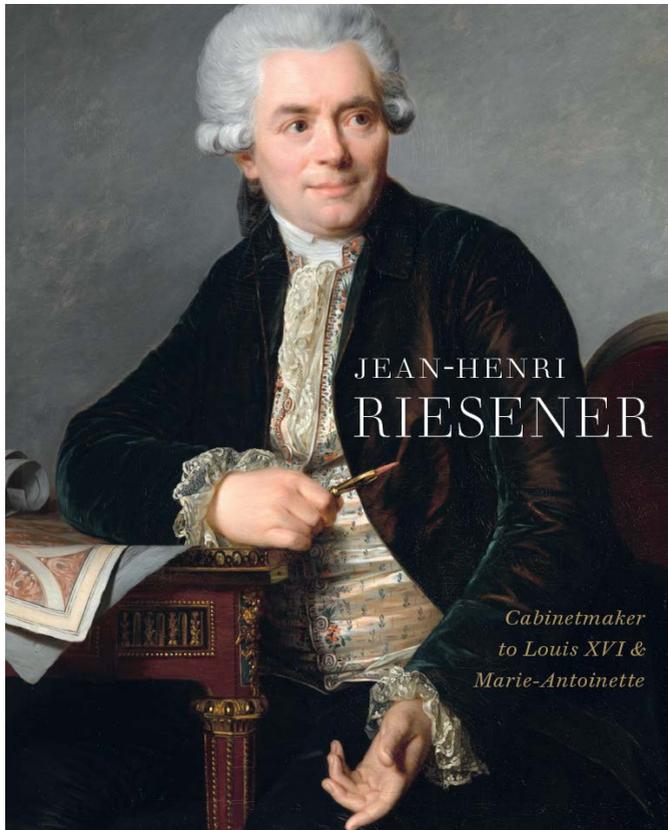


Ferdinand paid the then vast sum of £6000 for the table in 1882, which provoked

comment and even ridicule in the press. Ferdinand, like many of his contemporaries, was fascinated by Marie-Antoinette. As a personal effect of the Queen, the table must have held a special appeal as well as representing the epitome of the style developed for her by Riesener in the early 1780s. This was demonstrated when Ferdinand chose to illustrate the table as a work of art in 'The Red Book'.

Accession number: 2546





## THE RIESENER PROJECT

Waddesdon Manor has recently completed a five year research project with the Wallace Collection and the Royal Collection on the furniture of Jean-Henri Riesener (1734-1806), which has resulted in a new book, the first ever devoted to him, edited by the curators of the three collections, and an extensive online exploration of his furniture. The book is available to buy in the Manor shop.

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