



Ill. 1 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: Studio Sébert

Claude-Charles Saunier (Paris, 1735 - Paris, 1807)

*Cylinder desk*

Circa 1780-1790

Frame made of oak, fir and maple, veneer of rosewood, amaranth, lemon tree, ebony and shaded holly, Vernis Martin and gilded bronzes

110 x 86 x 51 cm

Stamp: "C.-C.-SAUNIER" under drawer unit, on either side

Guild hallmark "JME" (Guild of the Master Joiners-Cabinetmakers)

FGA-AD-MOBI-0030

### **Provenance**

Collection Samy Chalom

Galerie René Weiler, Paris

Collection of Mr and Mrs Luigi Anton Laura

Sotheby's, Paris, 27 June 2001, lot no. 83

Private collection, Great Britain

Sotheby's, London, 6 July 2010, lot no. 45



### Claude-Charles Saunier and the cylinder desk: technique and variations

With its tapered legs with feigned ribbed grooves and confident orthogonal volumes, underlined by its discreet gilded bronze belts, this small so-called “cylinder desk” boasts the elegant sobriety of the furniture of Claude-Charles Saunier, a renowned master cabinetmaker during the reign of Louis XVI. Coming from a family established in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine district and working in furniture from the start of the 18th century, Saunier directed his father’s workshop from 1758 onwards, following the departure of his two brothers, Jean-Baptiste and Mathieu-Charles. He officially took over in 1765, when he became a master craftsman.<sup>1</sup>



Ill. 2 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

In a style completely in line with the increasingly growing taste for a simplicity far removed from Rococo fantasy, Saunier created furniture of a classical design, characterized by balanced proportions and the valorisation of veneers. A commode from the 1780s, conserved by the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, which has three drawers flanked by grooves imitating pilasters, provides a good example of this (ill. 2). The gilded bronze ornamentation is relatively modest here, just as on the small cylinder desk.

On the latter, highlighting the fine edging of the decorative panels in Vernis Martin, the bronze ornamentation structures the desk’s entire facade according to a tripartite rhythm and a rigorous axial symmetry, which is softened by the central medallion and circular arc formed by the quarter cylinder of the flap. Although Saunier’s clientele included some well-known figures associated with the reign of Louis XVI, like the Duc d’Harcourt, lieutenant general of the King’s armies or the Comte de Narbonne, Minister of War, his production essentially comprised high-quality items, of which his two specialties—the sideboard and the cylinder desk<sup>2</sup>—are the embodiment.

The cylinder desk of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art is also in line with the ingenious and prestigious model crafted around 1760 by Jean-François Oeben for Louis XV (Paris, Musée du Louvre [inv. OA 5444](#)), of which Saunier produced large numbers of a very similar model, like the cylinder secretary desk housed by the Musée Nissim de Camondo (Paris, [inv. CM 55](#)).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fontana, Clotilde. “Claude-Charles Saunier, un ébéniste du siècle des Lumières”, *L’Estampille / L’Objet d’art*, no. 373, 2002, p. 72-80.

<sup>2</sup> Legrand Rossi, Sylvie. *Le mobilier du musée Nissim de Camondo*. Dijon: Éditions Faton, 2012, p. 109.



This item of furniture consists of a writing table, which is pulled out by means of two handles, and a tier formed by a double row of drawers. This can be closed in thanks to a system of counterweights and grooves, via a semi-cylindrical roller which guarantees the confidentiality of the papers housed within (ill. 3). Of more modest proportions than the desk at the Musée Nissim de Camondo, the type of desk belonging to the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art may have been a variant intended for a female clientele, as also suggested by the refined and elegant decor.

Ill. 3 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: Studio Sébert



This furniture item seems to find its place in a series of desks with similar dimensions, embellished with a decoration of panels in Vernis Martin, in imitation of Far-Eastern lacquers, of which two other examples are known. The first was sold by Georges Petit on 11 May 1898 during the dispersion of the Paul Eudel Collection;<sup>3</sup> it joined the Vagliano Collection, and later that of the Maharanee of Boroda (ill. 4). The second was part of the collections assembled by the Earl of Rosebery at Mentmore Towers Castle in north-western London. It was loaned in 1933 for the *Three French Reigns* exhibition organized for the benefit of the Royal Northern Hospital, held in the London residence of Sir Philip Sassoon, at 25 Park Lane<sup>4</sup> (ill. 5). Each has a similarly inspired decor, but the composition is unique every time. The desk from the Paul Eudel Collection, with its very airy panels, may be distinguished in particular by the presence of a dragon with outstretched wings on the panel to the right of the central medallion; whereas that of the Rosebery Collection is remarkable for its presence of a palm tree on the left panel. The piece belonging to the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, for its part, presents a decor that is both less airy and contrasting, thereby giving greater space to the figures and vegetation.

<sup>3</sup> *Catalogue des tableaux, pastels, aquarelles, dessins... composant la collection de M. Paul Eudel*, sales catalogue, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 11 May 1898, cited p. 55, b&w repr. lot no. 288. This item is also reproduced in: Pradère, Alexandre. *Les ébénistes français de Louis XIV à la Révolution*. Paris: Chêne 1989, p. 369, ill. 445.

<sup>4</sup> *Three French Reigns (Louis XIV, XV & XVI)*, exhibition catalogue [London, 25 Park Lane], 1933, b&w repr. p. 8. This item is also reproduced in: Watson Francis J. B. *Le meuble Louis XVI*. Paris: Les Beaux-Arts, éditions d'études et de documents, 1963, p. 112, b&w repr. no. 67.



III. 4



III. 5



III. 1(b)

### French-style “chinoiserie”: fascination and appropriation

The cylinder presents several scenes taking place in rocky landscapes (III. 6). Clinging to the rocks, are various trees with a light foliage, amongst which certain exotic plant species are more or less recognizable, including the palm tree, on the central medallion, and the weeping willow, on the left panel. There are some architectural constructions visible. The shape of the roofs evokes the structure of pagodas, while certain effects of raised perspective imitate, in the centre in particular, albeit in a clumsy and unsystematic way, the principles of Far-Eastern representation. Figures with faces and clothes of Asian inspiration, as well as giant butterflies complete these compositions which are organized asymmetrically, like their Chinese and Japanese models.



III. 6 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Studio Sébert



The ample panels adorning the back of the cabinet feature large birds with an impressive plumage (ill. 7). Their presence adds to this pseudo-Asian repertoire, typical of the Vernis Martin decorations applied to this series of Saunier desks, but also, more generally, to the broad ensemble of furniture made in Parisian workshops during the 18th century.

Ill. 7 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: Studio Sébert

“Chinoiseries” of French production, this type of decoration found its origins in the interest for Far-Eastern objects—mainly lacquers and porcelain<sup>5</sup>—demonstrated by Parisian aristocrats since the beginning of the 17th century and primarily encouraged by the influx of goods, brought first by the Dutch East India Company, and then by the French East India Company (created in 1664 by Colbert) through the ports of Nantes and Lorient. Existing since the 17th century, this penchant soon developed into a veritable “fascination”<sup>6</sup> in the 18th century, in line with the Rococo taste for fantasy and the renewal of traditional forms.



Ill. 8 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: André Longchamp

The taste for such objects was accompanied by an interest in their motifs, whether decorative, picturesque, or superficial, and this all the more so since China also produced items specially intended for the European market.



Ill. 9 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Castelluccio, Stéphane. *Le goût pour les porcelaines de Chine et du Japon à Paris aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Saint-Rémy-en-l'Eau: Éditions Monelle Hayot, 2013 & Castelluccio, Stéphane. *Le goût pour les laques d'Orient en France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Saint-Rémy-en-l'Eau: Éditions Monelle Hayot, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Mouquin, Sophie. “Le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle” in Mouquin, S. (ed.), *Les arts décoratifs en Europe. De la Renaissance à l'Art déco*. Paris: Citadelles & Mazenod, 2020, p. 237.



Ornamental vocabulary inspired by the Far-Eastern universe flooded Rococo art, from art objects (andirons [ill. 8](#) or clocks [ill. 9](#), for example) to painting, with François Boucher as a prime example<sup>7</sup>. Embodying the elsewhere, because of the geographical distance, these objects adorned with a certain strangeness, which would remain a curiosity for a long time, also aroused a technical interest on two counts.

As early as the 17th century, the first attempts were made to imitate not only porcelain, but also Chinese and Japanese lacquers, which were excessively rare and expensive. The craze for the latter, which occurred on an unprecedented scale in the second quarter of the 18th century under the impulse of *marchands-merciers*,<sup>8</sup> resulted in renewed attempts. The success of furniture embellished with lacquered panels encouraged imitation, using a technique that reproduced the motifs and shiny appearance, if not the original manufacturing process: the varnish used was called “European varnish” or “Vernis Martin”. While several varnishers were active in the French capital in the 17th century,<sup>9</sup> it was nevertheless a dynasty, established in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in the 1710s, which gave its name to this technique by spreading its success.<sup>10</sup> Directly inspired by the lacquer panels offered by *marchands-merciers* or, more rarely, engravings, notably those illustrating travelogues through China,<sup>11</sup> the Martins developed a whole range of decorations, initially intended to adorn furniture in the manner of lacquered panels, then various objects and wall fixtures, before reserving their efforts for the ornamentation of carriages and vehicles.

If the composition of the decorations initially remained close to Far-Eastern models, it soon freed itself in order to develop its own repertoires, both chromatic and iconographic. This can be seen with the famous commode made by Matthieu Criaerd for the bedroom of the Comtesse de Mailly in Choisy (Paris, Musée du Louvre [OA 11292](#)), but also, on another register, the panels decorating Saunier’s desks. Indeed, the white background of the latter was anything but common. It constitutes a true reinterpretation of Japanese and Chinese lacquer decorations, mostly executed on a black background, or red for certain Chinese decorations. This reinterpretation—devoid of meaning from a Far-Eastern artistic perspective—is also symbolic of the desire for appropriation, inseparable from this fascination with the elsewhere, which fostered as many dreams of evasion as it did ownership.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *La Chine rêvée de François Boucher. Une des provinces du rococo*, exhibition catalogue [Musée des beaux-arts et d’archéologie de Besançon, 8 November 2019-2 March 2020], in Fine éditions d’art, Paris 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Glorieux, Guillaume. *À l’enseigne de Gersaint. Edme-François Gersaint, marchand d’art sur le pont Notre-Dame (1694-1750)*, Seyssel, Champ-Vallon, 2002; *La fabrique du luxe. Les marchands-merciers au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* exhibition catalogue [Paris, Musée Cognac-Jay, 29 September 2018 – 27 January 2019], Paris, Paris Musées, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Wolvesperges, Thibaut. *Le meuble français en laque au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: Les éditions de l’Amateur / éditions Racine, 2000, p. 89-95.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Forray-Carliet, Anne & Kopplin, Monika (ed.), *Les secrets de la laque française. Le vernis Martin*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Les Arts décoratifs, 13 February – 8 June 2014], Paris, Les Arts décoratifs, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Wolvesperges, Thibaut. *Le meuble français en laque au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 27-28.



Ill. 10 – © Artcurial, Paris



Ill. 11 – © Detroit Institute of Art

These decorations with a white background, which can be found on a few other rare pieces of furniture – a writing table attributed to Saunier<sup>12</sup> (ill. 10), whose iconography is very similar to these desks, and a games table housed at the Detroit Institute of Art (ill. 11), adorned with a frieze of scrollwork typical of the neo-classical repertoire – cement the singularity of this series. The very late nature of their execution, which occurred almost forty years after the vogue for Vernis-Martin furniture during the Rococo period, may explain this particularity, removed from the more mainstream production.

This liberty taken with Far-Eastern models is also echoed in another variant of this cylinder desk, adorned with panels of painted sheet metal depicting grotesques and bouquets of flowers, which tend more towards the imitation of Sèvres porcelain, especially in the interior of the desk itself.<sup>13</sup> Gold-painted sheet metal, produced mainly by two manufactures between 1760 and 1770,<sup>14</sup> also had the initial vocation of simulating lacquers at a lower cost, before focusing instead on the imitation of porcelain. The existence of this desk also provides information on the organization of production within Claude-Charles Saunier's workshop: it implies the probable recourse to subcontractors, in exterior workshops or manufactures, specializing in Vernis Martin decorations or painted sheet metal, to ensure variations of a successful model.

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<sup>12</sup> *Furniture & Decorative Objects*, Artcurial sale, Paris, 12 December 2012, lot no. 73 (former Barbe Collection).

<sup>13</sup> *Collection des ducs de Mortemart, château de Réveillon*, Sotheby's sale, Paris, 11 February 2015.

<sup>14</sup> The so-called Petite Pologne Manufacture, established in the Plaine Monceau until 1772 and that of the "Widow Gosse" founded in 1771.



### Writing: an exercise at the heart of daily life

While undoubtedly due to its technical mastery, the fine and elegant proportions, and the variations proposed, the success of this small cylinder desk by Saunier fits more broadly into a context which, over the century, afforded the exercise of writing a growing place in the life of the French and European elites.

The practice of written correspondence, for official or private use, became a social norm in its own right, as evidenced by a number of pictorial or engraved representations (ill. 12), but also and above all, through the literary genre of the epistolary novel, of which Choderlos de Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* or Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* are the best-known examples. The epistolary practice also sparked a number of relationships, both worldly and friendly, and even romantic, between writers, philosophers, and men and women of letters, becoming the "favourite exercise ground for a thought in progress"<sup>15</sup> for Voltaire, Diderot, Madame du Deffand, and Julie de Lespinasse, to name just a few.



Ill. 12 – © Musée des beaux-arts de Quimper. Photographer : Bernard Galéron

This craze was accompanied by a proliferation of manuals determining a set of rules concerning wording and calligraphy, and, on a more practical level, how best to hold the pen or the posture to adopt when writing.<sup>16</sup>

The interiors of homes were also arranged to accommodate this activity. The emergence of rooms and living spaces dedicated to writing in the private apartments of mansions, such as offices, libraries, studies, and boudoirs saw the development of a whole new range of furniture devoted to the activity of writing. Along with the imposing flat desks, often reserved for business, was an entire panoply of furniture of varying proportions, on the principle of the secretary or writing table. The secretary, intended to store documents, as much as to lend itself to writing, became available in "cabinet" form (ill. 13), "sloping" (ill. 14) or as a

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<sup>15</sup> Lepape, Isabelle. "Amitiés épistolaires dans les arts au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Le Blog Gallica*, 11 June 2020 [online:] <https://gallica.bnf.fr/blog/11062020/amitiés-epistolaires-dans-les-arts-au-xviii-e-siècle?mode=desktop> (consulted 1 November 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Lepape, Isabelle. "Amitiés épistolaires dans les arts au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle".





“cylinder”, fitted with a flap that could be locked with a key. The writing table, lighter and more mobile, was most often integrated into a design forming a desk, and, potentially, compartments intended to accommodate writing materials (e.g., [ill. 15](#)). Convenience presided over these specifications, with each piece of furniture being designed for a particular need, depending on whether it was a public, official, or more intimate act.



Ill. 13 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Studio Sébert



Ill. 14 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Studio Sébert



Ill. 15 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

The vogue and proliferation of small writing desks, to which Saunier's cylinder desk is similar, despite its substantial weight, can thus be explained by the strong link that writing, whether epistolary or in diaries, maintained with the increasing importance given to the private sphere, to one's personal or inner life, and to introspection in general.<sup>17</sup> In addition to furniture, this importance given to writing, in particular by oneself, was reflected within the material culture by a profusion of objects that contributed to making this practice a true “art of living”.

Examples of this can be seen in the Louis XV period writing desk with straw marquetry ([ill. 16](#)), conserved by the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, or its ebony-plated inkwell ([ill. 17](#)), more contemporary than Saunier's cylinder desk.



Ill. 16 & 17 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Studio Sébert

**Fabienne Fravalo**  
**Curator of the Decorative Arts Collection**  
**1 December 2022**

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Simonet-Tenant, Françoise. “À la recherche des prémices d'une culture de l'intime”, *Itinéraires* [online:], 2009-4 | 2009, [online:] <http://journals.openedition.org/itineraires/1466>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/itineraires.1466> (consulted 1 November 2022).



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## Legends

III. 1 – Claude-Charles Saunier, *Cylinder desk*, circa 1780-1790, frame made from oak, fir, and maple, veneer of rosewood, amaranth, lemon tree, ebony, and shaded holly, Vernis Martin, and gilded bronzes, 110 x 86 x 51 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0030

III. 2 – Claude-Charles Saunier, *Commode*, circa 1780-1788, frame made from oak and fir, veneer of mahogany and ebony, gilded bronze and grey-veined white marble, 106.5 x 144.5 x 63.5 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0061

III. 3 – Claude-Charles Saunier, *Cylinder desk* (open), frame made from oak, fir, and maple, veneer of rosewood, amaranth, lemon tree, ebony, and shaded holly, Vernis Martin and gilded bronzes, 110 x 86 x 51 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0030

III. 4 – Claude-Charles Saunier, “Small cylinder desk with veneer decoration on the cylinder, the drawers of the belt, the drawers of the upper section, and ends of the lacquer panels with a white background decorated with Chinese characters and in colour. The panels are surrounded with gilded bronze waterleaves. Louis XVI period”, 81.5 x 1.09 x 59 cm, (stamped), location unknown.

III. 5 – Claude-Charles Saunier (attr.), *Cylinder desk*, frame made from oak, rosewood, and violet wood veneer, Vernis Martin, and gilded bronze, 80 x 92 x 28 cm, location unknown.

III. 6 – Claude-Charles Saunier, *Cylinder desk* (flap detail), circa 1780-1790, frame made from oak, fir, and maple, veneer of rosewood, amaranth, lemon tree, ebony, and shaded holly, Vernis Martin and gilded bronzes, 110 x 86 x 51 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0030

III. 7 – Claude-Charles Saunier, *Cylinder desk* (back), circa 1780-1790, frame made from oak, fir, and maple, veneer of rosewood, amaranth, lemon tree, ebony, and shaded holly, Vernis Martin and gilded bronzes, 110 x 86 x 51 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0030

III. 8 – *Pair of “Chinese-style” andirons*, circa 1730-1760, gilded bronze, 7 x 37.5 x 22 cm, FGA-AD-OBJ-0028a+b

III. 9 – Jean-Joseph de Saint-Germain, bronze worker (attr. to) and Alexandre Le Faucheur, watchmaker, *Chinese-style decorative clock*, circa 1745-1749, gilded bronze, brass, enamel, glass, steel, and brass, 67 x 31 x 18 cm, FGA-AD-HORLO-0038

III. 10 – Claude-Charles Saunier (attr.), *Mechanical writing table*, Louis XV era, mahogany veneer, blond mahogany, amaranth, sycamore, Vernis Martin, gilded bronze, and veined white marble, 79 x 75 x 56 cm, former Barbe Collection, location unknown.

III. 11 – Claude-Charles Saunier, *Games and writing table*, tulipwood and kingwood veneer, leather, felt, and gilded bronze, 71.1 x 113.3 x 59.5 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, inv. 71.197.



III. 12 – Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Portrait of a woman*, circa 1787, oil on canvas, 100.6 x 81.4 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper, inv. 873-1-787.

III. 13 – Nicolas Petit, *Secretary desk with flap*, circa 1775-1790, oak and fir frame, rosewood, amaranth, tobacco wood and coloured wood veneer, chiselled bronze, grey breccia marble top. 120 x 72 x 36.5 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0046

III. 14 – Adrien Delorme, *Slope desk*, circa 1748-1760, frame of oak and fir, satin veneer, rosewood, amaranth and polychrome wood, chiselled and gilded bronzes, 92 x 117.5 x 56 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0008

III. 15 – Roger Vandercruse (known as Lacroix or RVLC), *Writing table*, circa 1750-1760, oak frame, rosewood veneer, amaranth, rosewood, boxwood, ebony, maple, gilded bronze, brass, leather, and iron, 69 x 79.5 x 46 cm, FGA-AD-MOBI-0095

III. 16 – *Escritoire*, circa 1730-1770, straw marquetry, tinted horn, and gilded bronze, 14.3 x 32.5 x 26 cm, FGA-AD-OBJ-0100

III. 17 – *Inkwell*, circa 1775-1790, oak and beech frame, ebony and brass veneer, gilded bronze, 10 x 38 x 26.5 cm, FGA-AD-OBJ-0012