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## Restoring Gilded Age in Drawings

By WENDY MOONAN

**I**t is a bit like the Neiman Marcus Christmas catalog, though this particular folio was created in Paris in the 1820's.

Like department stores today, French merchants used to publish ravishingly beautiful life-size drawings of expensive luxury goods in the latest style that customers could order.

Shepherd & Derom, a gallery at 58 East 79th Street in Manhattan, is selling a series of such early-19th-century neo-Classical design drawings, all of which depict gilt bronzes.

"They were intended to wow the audience and seduce them into buying the object," said Charles Plante, a London dealer who organized the show. "This was stuff for a very selective group."

The objects the drawings depict are like couture for the home. They include stylish gilt bronze clocks with literary portrait busts, candelabra with allegorical figures and crystal chandeliers.

The drawings were made to appeal to French nobles, wealthy European patrons, even Francophile Americans.

In 1817, while refurbishing the White House after the British burned it in the War of 1812, President James Monroe ordered a suite of neo-Classical French furniture and a group of similar gilt bronze objects, some of which still survive in the White House.

There are 56 images at the gallery, some original drawings, the others hand-colored lithographs.

"There has never been a collection like this on one subject," said Mr. Plante, who is showing it in New York through Jan. 25. "Ornamental design drawings for objects are extremely rare outside of public institutions; even rarer are complete collections."

Mr. Plante, who specializes in the neo-Classical period from 1760 to 1840, showed the collection earlier in London and has published a 146-page catalog on it with essays by the British architectural historian John Harris and Richard Garnier, a British expert on antique clocks. "I brought the show to New York to revive interest in design drawings on the market," Mr. Plante said.

He found the folio in a remote country auction in England two years ago.

"The drawings were in bad shape," he recalled. "I had them cleaned and pressed."

Almost none were signed, but the lithographs were marked Motte, after a famous Paris printer, draftsman, etcher and publisher named Charles Étienne Pierre Motte. Presumably Paris bronziers of the time, like Choiselat-Gallien and Gérard-Jean Galle, commissioned such drawings to update their stock.

The designs are elaborate. The clocks are encased in cut crystal or rare colored marble. Candelabra stand on alabaster bases. With goddesses and floral wreaths aplenty, the pieces look to modern eyes almost excessively opulent.

For example, No. 33 is a cupid playing a lyre atop a clock, his bow and quiver by his side. Behind him is a flambeau adorned with his laurel crown. The plinth has a frieze adorned with swans, urns, cornucopias and flowers.

"There's a whole symphony going on here," Mr. Plante said. "It's almost camp."

Such designs are variations of the bronzes created under Napoleon, but they emphasize peaceful themes instead of military ones.

The drawings date from the Restoration period, when Louis XVIII was brought back as king of France (1814-24) after the French Revolution, the Republic and the Empire.

"Returning to a France torn asunder by 25 years of internal strife, civil war, terror, repression and lastly militaristic despotism under Napoleon, Louis's first and main task was to reunify the nation," Mr. Garnier writes. "Extraordinary as it might seem, the collective populace, despite its disparate political inclinations, was ready in 1814 for the return of the Bourbons."

He observes that Louis XVIII on his return to Paris from England in 1814 was hailed as "le desire" by the crowds along the route.

In Paris bronziers naturally chose new designs to reflect the new political realities. There is a drawing of a four-light candelabrum that has the figure of a "Winged Victory" as its central support. Her arms are raised to hold a circlet of four cornucopias. She is a messenger of the gods who has descended to earth to

bring nature's bounty.

"The Restored Louis XVIII undoubtedly was a man with a mission who had a point to prove: his political legitimacy," Mr. Garnier writes. Louis XVIII cleverly equated himself with Henri IV, the founder of the Bourbon dynasty, who reigned from 1589 to 1610. "He went down in history as France's most popular king, a true friend of his people, positions that Louis wanted to emulate," he continues.

Evidently the Paris bronziers took their cue from the king. One lithograph embellished with watercolor and gouache is of a clock with a large bust of Henri IV, complete with the French chivalric Order of St. Michael. Henri IV has a kindly mien.

"As the Bourbons' founding father, he was a natural symbol of legitimacy for the restoration of the Bourbons after the defeat of Napoleon in 1814-15, and his cult was rekindled," Mr. Plante writes. "Additionally, St. Michael with his imagery of vanquishing the Devil could serve as a useful allegory for the then recent expulsion of the English from France."

In addition to the drawings Mr. Plante sought out the bronzes they inspired.

"Many are in the Spanish royal collection, so they were easy to identify," he said.

He also searched museums, galleries and auction houses for other examples. He found one at Sotheby's.

As he writes, "A clock exactly modeled on this design, and of the same height, executed completely in patinated bronze except for the order of St. Michael in gilt bronze, the dial signed Blanc Fils, Palais Royal, sold at Sotheby's Amsterdam, February 21, 1995."

He borrowed a few antique bronzes from dealers to display alongside the drawings.

The best match is probably the handsome gilt bronze inkstand, circa 1820, on loan from the Hoffman-Gampetro Gallery, at 1050 Second Avenue, at 55th Street, in Manhattan. It is cylindrical with the sides etched in a trellis pattern, and it has a separate top adorned with a kneeling cupid.

Ronald Hoffman, the owner, said that not only the decoration but also the cavities for ink, sand and quills are identical to those on the drawing. "Even the candle holder behind the cupid is the same," he added.

Prices for the drawings range from \$4,000 to \$18,000. The prints are less.

Designers, take note: while the iconography of such drawings is fascinating, they are also wonderfully decorative, and most are in period frames.