

RÖBBIG · MÜNCHEN

Frühe Porzellane · Kunsthandel



TABLE DE TOILETTE OR “COIFFEUSE”

DAVID ROENTGEN (HERRENHAG I.D. WETTERAU 11.8.1743 - WIESBADEN
12.2.1807)

Circa: 1770/1775

Roentgen manufactory, Neuwied, 1770/75

Stained maple (“bois de tabac”) and other light veneer woods, rosewood, carcasse in oak and pine, cedar, cherry,
brass, iron, ormolu mounts, silver

H. 77 cm, W. 91 cm, D. 63.5 cm

A “Coiffeuse” from Roentgen: The Epitome of Luxury Production

Christine Cornet

The piece of furniture known as a table de toilette or “coiffeuse” came into being around the middle of the eighteenth century and was used for the seconde toilette, the purpose of which was the care and beautification of body and face after the première toilette, the purpose of which was simply washing. The word toilette derives from the little “toile” or cloth that was customarily laid on the table, providing a surface on which the necessary utensils could be laid out and waste powder and hair could be allowed to fall. After use it was shaken out and cleared away. In addition to the tables laid out with cloths, there soon also developed multi-purpose tables such as this one, which were usually embellished with fine veneers.

The present table de toilette is extensively veneered with maple that was once stained grey. This shade is now known as “bois de tabac,” in an allusion to the cool light brown to which the grey turns with age. The top, front, and sides of the table are decorated with floral marquetry executed in blue monochrome.

The present table de toilette displays the arrangement of table top and inner compartments typical of pieces of its kind. The central section of the top can be raised backwards to serve as a mirror, while each side flaps open up to reveal the green-and-grey striped textile blinds typical of Roentgen furniture, each of which conceals a compartment beneath.

The table also conceals a number of further surprises. Under the three compartments accessible when the top is opened are three drawers, in the middle a broad drawer fitted with a sloped writing surface and on each of the sides a narrower drawer with an automatic opening mechanism. The central drawer is also fitted with a small drawer that swings open at the side and contains silver writing implements.

The Roentgen manufactory: Abraham and David Roentgen at the head of a staff of highly specialised artists and craftsmen

The Roentgen works at Neuwied was one of the earliest furniture manufactories to operate independently of a princely court. If a works was to produce only furniture of very high quality, it had to have a comparatively large number of employees, because it was only with a large staff that the individual craftsmen and artists could specialise at a high level in the various tasks such as drawing designs, staining woods, inlay, or mechanisms. The net result of the very much higher levels of knowledge and skill brought about by this extensive division of labour was an enormous rise in the quality of the furniture produced. In addition, this manner of operating made it possible for the range to include a greater number of different furniture models, which were produced in small series.

At this time manufactories were not oriented towards characterless mass production but, on the contrary, offered the ideal conditions for the development of precisely the kind of unique designs and distinctive tradition of cabinet-making for which the Roentgen manufactory became famous. Its conspicuous success in bringing forth such a range of exceptional pieces of furniture was also due to the work of a number of inventive and innovative individuals who had been brought together under the prudent and far-sighted direction of David Roentgen.

A new marquetry technique: The principle of innovation and the artists involved

The first mention of a new marquetry technique appears in David Roentgen’s proposition to Hamburg City Council concerning the lottery held in 1768 in order to put his firm onto a sound financial footing. In the plan for the lottery it is stated that the item to be offered as first prize was to be “... inlaid à la Mosaique with the greatest artistry, in such a manner that I would gladly subject its draughtsmanship, shading and colours even to an artist’s honest critical opinion. What is more, the most wonderful and unusual thing is that all the motifs are made in nothing but wood, or to be more precise, in such carefully selected and choice woods that they give the same impression as a perfect painting and in addition can be planed without losing anything of their beauty.”

With these words Roentgen was describing an innovation that differed greatly from the traditional eighteenth-century techniques. The à la Mosaique technique rendered superfluous the customary contemporary procedures for structuring surfaces, such as engraving.

Marquetry of this kind required the combined skills of several different specialists. In preparatory drawings the motifs had to be divided up into clearly outlined areas with different degrees of light and shade and intensity of colour. The smaller these areas were, the gentler and more gradual were the transitions from light to dark—and the greater was the marquetry's approximation to the impression of a painting. For the designs the manufactory employed artists such as the famous Januarius Zick or Johannes Juncker, who also painted the portraits of Abraham and Susanna Maria Roentgen. Further artists included Elie Gervais and his journeyman Raillard, both of whom are known to have done design drawings for floral marquetry. We may assume that it was these two and Johannes Juncker who were responsible for the preparatory drawings for the marquetry on the present dressing table.

The marqueteur Michael Rummer: An extremely specialised artist and high-precision craftsman

The marqueteur was one of the most important of all the specialists. Not only did the sawing or cutting out require particular skill but the "administration" of a large number of in some cases tiny pieces of wood also called for a special talent for systematic procedures. The sources indicate that the man responsible for these tasks, and even for the actual invention of the à la mosaique technique was Michael Rummer (1747–1821). Rummer executed some of the manufactory's most important pieces, such as the large marquetry panels for Prince Karl von Lothringen and the inlaid pictorial panels of the three large cabinets-on-stands of which one went to the French king, one to the Prussian king, and one to Prince Karl Alexander von Lothringen, Governor of the Austrian Netherlands in Brussels.

Evidence that Rummer was responsible for the marquetry on the table presently under consideration is provided by an identical table de toilette with the same marquetry motifs, which is signed twice, as follows: "Michael Rummer von Handschuhshheim fecit à Neuwied 1772."

The present table provides a good demonstration of the extremely refined way in which the marquetry was composed of numerous tiny pieces, which were stained with various tones in order to bring out the various sections of light and shade.

While features such as these can be seen with the naked eye, others can only be appreciated with a magnifying glass, as even the tiniest of details are also executed by means of inlay, for example the dots on the rake in the garden trophy on the tabletop. For these, however, the wood was not inlaid in long-cut wood but, rather, the dot was inserted by hammering in a cross-cut pin. Although this technique was by no means new, it takes an unusually sophisticated form on the present table, on which not just one but two pins, stained in different colours, are inserted next to one another and have an exactly straight joint line.

This unique technique of inlaying marquetry was one of the Roentgen trademarks and contributed in no small measure to the manufactory's international fame.

Coloured woods: A valuable trade secret

The woods to be used in the marquetry had to be stained in eye-catching shades of blue and in silver-grey. This task was the responsibility of another manufactory specialist, Christian Krause (1748–1792), who according to the records was both the inventor of the mechanical functions and also the discoverer of the "secret of using only European woods to imitate, in both colour and appearance, foreign woods that otherwise have to be brought at great cost from the East and from the West." Krause not only succeeded in staining the wood on the surface but also through and through, which was what enabled David Roentgen to claim that his marquetry would not be impaired if any further work such as planing was done upon it. As no records of Krause's method of staining have yet come to light, the exact technique he used remains a matter for speculation.

The colour scheme consisting of grey and shades of blue that is seen on this table appears less frequently than

the multi-coloured combinations customarily found on the manufactory's other furniture; and as far as we know, it only appears on pieces with floral marquetry. A famous example of this monochrome blue inlay is the casket depicted in Johannes Juncker's portrait of Abraham Roentgen's wife Susanna Maria.

The original colour scheme of the table can only be reconstructed by means of a digitally modified photograph created on the basis of the casket in the portrait. This kind of "virtual restoration" is the only means available to us of gaining an impression of the original appearance, which in reality has been irreversibly transformed by the effect of light upon the colours.

The table's construction: Partially automated and the epitome of sound cabinet-making

Closer inspection of the details of the table reveals what great store was set on precision at the manufactory, not to mention a number of further special features that are in fact typical of Roentgen furniture. One of these is the set of screw-on legs made to make transport easier and less hazardous. On these parts the nut and bolt fit so precisely that even after more than two hundred years the legs, the position of which has to be correct down to a fraction of a millimetre, still end up in exactly the right position once they have been given their final turn.

A further special feature of this table are the side drawers, which open automatically. The built-in spring mechanism is one of the great variety of "secrets" that are a feature of almost every piece of Roentgen furniture and indeed constitute one of their most notable general characteristics.

Another point that should be noted about the general construction is that the inner compartments and drawers are also made in fine hardwoods, another indication of the extent to which Roentgen furniture was in a quality category far above the mainstream furniture of its time.

The table de toilette as an example of the Roentgen manufactory's simultaneous pursuit of serial production and variety

We know of three further tables that have the same outer form as the present example and are from the same period, differing only in their outer decoration. Two of these are inlaid with chinoiserie; one was lost in the war and the other, formerly in the hands of Röbbig Munich, is now privately owned. The third example is the one most similar to the present dressing table as it has the same marquetry motifs, though in full colours, and is, as mentioned above, signed by Michael Rummer and dated 1772; it is also now privately owned (for illustrations of the three tables see Fabian 1996, nos. 32–34; Fabian 1986, nos. 77 and 78; and Greber 1980, vol. 2, nos. 307 and 308).

The marquetry motifs on the present table do appear on other pieces, just as the various furniture types and forms were also repeated. The garden trophy appears in different variants on a number of items of Roentgen furniture, usually in combination with floral arrangements and the typical ribbons and loops.

The monochrome blue floral marquetry is also found on a number of other ensembles and pieces such as the suite in the Gotha palace Schloss Friedenstein; a roll-top desk and an early Neoclassical small table both privately owned (see exh. cat. Neuwied 2011, pp. 110–11, figs. 20, 23, 24, and no. 18, p. 257); and a writing cabinet in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Résumé

As a typical Roentgen product the present dressing table is a Gesamtkunstwerk generated by the combined abilities of the artists and specialist craftsmen active at the manufactory and as such an important testimony to their exceptional skills and gifts. In it one can see clearly the advantages of manufactory production, which in the period in question brought about an enormous rise in quality levels.

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