Jean-Pierre Latz (1691–1754)

Research and exhibition project of the Museum of Decorative Arts (Kunstgewerbemuseum) Dresden
The stories behind museum collections, and their individual objects, are often surprising and sometimes as exciting as a thriller. Eventually, despite intensive research, it turns out to be impossible to unearth the secrets of the past. On the other hand, one finds almost continuous documentation which reads like an open book. Yet for various reasons many objects nevertheless spend decades hidden away in storerooms.

The story behind the collection of works by Jean-Pierre Latz is also a history of Saxony. It testifies not only to the exceptional connoisseurship of the Electors and Kings, as well as the Saxon Prime Minister Count Brühl, but also to their aspiration to rival the greatest rulers in Europe, and their endeavour to demonstrate this aspiration through every detail of courtly display. But also Saxony’s more recent history has left its traces on this furniture, for example through the damage incurred when the objects were removed for safekeeping during the Second World War. The subsequent period of isolation in GDR times, and the lack of financial resources, meant that most of the furniture remained in the storerooms, carefully preserved in its almost original condition.

Since its purchase in the mid-18th century, this collection has never left Saxony, and after the difficult period of the war, the furniture and clocks underwent little or no further treatment. They contain all the information about their production within themselves. That is probably what is most exciting about these objects; they bear witness to a time that has long passed, when the art of Boulle marquetry was mastered to supreme perfection by the ébénistes. Only very rarely does one have the opportunity to do research on such furniture in an almost authentic condition and thus gain such a close-up appreciation of the skills of these master craftsmen.

It is an incomparable group of works, in terms of both quality and quantity.

We are currently in the process of unveiling this treasure – a treasure such as no other museum possesses on this scale and in this condition. The reconstruction of the State Apartment as part of the restoration of Dresden Royal Palace (Residenzschloss) is enabling us to restore some of the objects with the support of the German federal government and the Free State of Saxony. Unfortunately, not all the Latz-objects can be restored. However, in order to be able to present the collection as a whole, both to experts and the general public, we have decided to collaborate with researchers from the spheres of restoration and art history in order to undertake intensive investigation, research and restoration, and to present this unique group in an exhibition about the ébéniste Jean-Pierre Latz in the spring of 2019. We hope to be able to arouse your enthusiasm and to inspire you to lend your support to this project.

Tulga Beyerle, director
The Museum of Decorative Arts (Kunstgewerbemuseum), a member of the Dresden State Art Collections (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden), holds around 20 ensembles comprising 30 individual objects attributed to the Parisian ébéniste Jean-Pierre Latz (c.1691–1754), one of the most distinguished cabinetmakers in the Louis XV style – the largest collection of furniture by this notable ébéniste worldwide. His furniture, which is among the most outstanding produced by Parisian cabinetmakers during the second quarter of the 18th century in Paris, is characterised by technically and artistically complex marquetry as well as by opulently formed and almost sculptural gilt-bronze mounts.

The Dresden collection is dominated by pendulum clocks and their high pedestals, decorated with precious tortoiseshell and brass marquetry (Boulle marquetry). Their particular significance and value for furniture research lies in their object history, that is unbroken since the 18th century. These precious items are recorded as having been in the Dresden Royal Palace, in Moritzburg castle and the Taschenbergpalais in Dresden from 1768 onwards. Furthermore, many items can also be traced to the collection of the famous Prime Minister of Saxony, Count Heinrich von Brühl (1700–1763), a respected connoisseur and passionate collector of art. However, it is not only the excellent documentation and the size of the collection that are its unique characteristics: initial investigations have already shown that two items of furniture bear handwritten signatures of Jean-Pierre Latz. The Dresden collection therefore offers a unique opportunity for furniture researchers to observe, by examining the objects, the cabinetmaker “at work” and make it an inestimably important reference collection for research on Latz and on French Louis XV style furniture in general. This is further aided by the fact that many items were not subjected to the often very extensive restoration measures that were common in the 20th century, but have retained their highly authentic, almost original, condition.
Despite his great importance, Latz has so far attracted little scholarly attention. The essay "Jean-Pierre Latz. Cabinetmaker", published as long ago as 1970(!) by the US American art historian Henry Hawley, is still the standard work on Latz. The desideratum of a well-founded and interdisciplinary investigation of his works, and also of his biography, must therefore be clearly highlighted. This is where the “Jean-Pierre Latz” research project of the Museum of Decorative Arts comes in. In addition to detailed art historical research, the objects in the holdings of the museum, as well as reference pieces in other collections, are – for the first time – to be made the subject of comprehensive scientific investigation by an interdisciplinary team of experts, consisting of art historians as well as restorers and natural scientists. The aim is to determine the characteristics of Latz and his workshop in order to allow critical assessment of works attributed to Latz. Building upon the findings obtained during the comprehensive investigation, the restoration of the objects will be carried out in the second phase of the project. The restoration work, which will enable the objects to be looked at in detail from various thematic perspectives, will not only provide further important information about the typical production techniques employed by Latz and his workshop, but will also make it possible to present the entire collection of furniture by Latz to the public for the first time since the Second World War. Thus, the research project will contribute significantly to the objective of enabling public access to works of art that were of key importance for 18th-century courtly representation, thus enhancing the profile of the Dresden State Art Collections. Work on the research project will be accompanied by intensive communication with renowned experts in the field of furniture research. As well as studying important reference pieces in other collections, this will also involve convening a committee of experts with whom the findings will be critically considered and discussed.

paper label with handwritten signature by Jean-Pierre Latz / attached to inner surface of pedestal; Inv.No. 37616-2
detail of a long-case clock attributed to Latz / clockwork: Stollenwerck A Paris, Paris, ca. 1750; Inv.No. 37335
The Special Exhibition

»Fait à Paris – The Cabinetmaker Jean-Pierre Latz«

The exhibition “Fait à Paris – The Cabinetmaker Jean-Pierre Latz” [working title] will be the first exhibition to focus on the cabinetmaker Jean-Pierre Latz, who was active in Paris from 1719 onwards and was highly acclaimed throughout Europe. On the basis of the findings generated through the preceding research project, the exhibition will aim to place Jean-Pierre Latz and his works more precisely within their historical context and present a more differentiated view of this important phase in the history of European furniture art, when furniture types and their design and decor vocabulary were rapidly developing.

For the first time, the unique Dresden collection of Latz furniture will be able to be seen, and indeed experienced, as a united ensemble. Since the Second World War, the vast majority of the objects could no longer be displayed owing to damages caused during and in the aftermath of the war, so that they were known only to a few experts. After comprehensive restoration and conservation, these masterpieces will be brought back into the public after having been in the storerooms for more than 75 years. They will also add extremely important facets to our knowledge of arts and crafts at the Saxon court during the 18th century. As carefully selected complements to the Dresden furniture, loans from other public and private collections will complete the overall picture of Latz which the exhibition seeks to create.

In the spring/summer of 2019 – ahead of the opening of the State Apartment – there will be the exclusive and regarding the Dresden Latz-objects unique opportunity to hold the first monographic exhibition about Jean-Pierre Latz. After the opening of the State Apartments it will no longer be possible to remove the important pendulum clocks personally signed by Latz, since that would have a significantly adverse impact on the ensemble of rooms, which constitutes a Gesamtkunstwerk.

A catalogue in German and English will be published to accompany the exhibition. This will include a section presenting the findings of the preceding research project in short essays focusing on specific problems, as well as a catalogue section in which the collection will be published for the first time in its entirety.

pendulum clock / case: Jean-Pierre Latz (attributed), clockwork: Gille L’aïne A Paris, Paris ca. 1745-49; Inv.No. 37780-1
The Museum of Decorative Arts Dresden, which is located in Pillnitz Palace, holds a collection of more than 60,000 objects, including textiles, glass, ceramics and metal ware, as well as furniture ranging from the Gothic period to contemporary design. The museum was founded in 1876 together with the School of Applied Arts (Kunstgewerbeschule) and added a completely new type of museum to the Dresden museum landscape: this was not a collection intended to enhance the prestige of the royal court, but rather a consciously assembled collection for the purpose of raising awareness of design and to help boosting the quality of crafts and industry.

After the end of the Second World War, its function as a collection of models for study gradually declined, since the character of the collection had fundamentally changed. The museum was separated from the School of Applied Arts and in 1947 it became part of the museum alliance of the Dresden State Art Collections. Moreover, a large number of craft objects from the courtly collections, such as the furniture from Dresden Royal Palace and Moritzburg castle, came to be allocated to the Museum of Decorative Arts. Having lost its original function, and motivated by the high-quality new additions to the collection, the focus of the museum then shifted towards art historical research, accompanied by a corresponding shift in its own image of its role.

The current Director of the Museum, Tulga Beyerle, who has been in office since 2014, aims to cultivate both – tradition and experiment, to enhance the profile of the Museum. By establishing new exhibitions and event formats, it is intended that the Museum of Decorative Arts will again acquire the character of a stimulating study collection with which the general public, producers and designers can all interact in equal measure. At the same time, however, scientific research on the collections is to be promoted, since this creates the foundation for all work with the collection. The research and exhibition project concerning Jean-Pierre Latz is one of the major initiatives to attain this objectives.

Further information, including on current exhibition projects, is to be found on the website: www.skd.museum/kunstgewerbemuseum

detail of a mount / Jean-Pierre Latz, Paris, 1739; Inv.No. 37627-2
pendulum clock / clock case: Jean-Pierre Latz;
clock work: Gault A Paris, Paris ca. 1739; Inv.No. 37680-1
pendulum clock / clock case: Jean-Pierre Latz; clock work: Gault A Paris; Paris ca. 1739; Inv.No. 37680-1