

Fluent in French

Taillardat's reproductions of 18th-century furniture are the genuine article.

IN THE ORLÉANS APARTMENT of Micheline Taillardat sits a rectangular Louis XV lamp table adorned with a certificate from Christian Sorriano, an antiques specialist in France's customs office. The certificate dates the piece at more than 100 years old and explains that French law prohibits the exportation of such historical treasures. The document is a source of both amusement and pride for Taillardat, who knows for certain that the government's antiques specialist was mistaken. Taillardat's company, which specializes in reproductions of 18th-century French furniture, built the piece in 1991 for a Canadian client.

"I had an order for probably 20 pieces for this client," Taillardat says. "And I don't know why, but for some reason only this one table was not allowed to leave the country because customs said it was a true antique." Rather than argue the point, Taillardat kept the piece as a testament to the quality of her company's reproductions.

Taillardat builds its furniture using most of the same methods applied by 18th-century craftsmen. It limits machine work to the processing of raw woods and the making of dovetails, mortises, and tenons. Everything else is done by hand, including fine marquetry and the fitting of chestnut and oak backings. Rather than spray on cellulose varnish, a commonly used finishing material, Taillardat

says, "We use French lacquer with a little alcohol and apply it by hand to keep the spirit of the antique finish, which should be warm and somewhat irregular."

Eighteenth-century furniture, including Regency, Louis XVI, and Directoire styles, has long fascinated Taillardat. She spent 14 years designing at Mailfert, the now-defunct firm that specialized in making reproduction furniture from this period, before establishing her own company in 1987. She set up shop in Orléans, about 90 miles south of Paris, because the area is home to generations of craftsmen schooled in the fanciful French design styles. And she opened a showroom in Paris that can feature as many as 200 examples from the company's continuously evolving inventory. The showroom recently housed a new Mennecy *dos d'ane* sloping walnut desk inspired by the work of the well-known 18th-century cabinetmaker Hache, and a table with arched legs, leaf-shaped ferrules, and sculpted bronze ornaments similar to those seen in the pieces by another 18th-century master cabinetmaker, Charles Topino.

Although a reproduction may never hold the same cachet as the real thing, going faux does have its advantages, notes Taillardat, whose reproductions are available to designers in the United States through Christopher Norman. "With antiques it's not always possible to find 10 chairs exactly the same," she says, "or a pair of consoles sized for a particular space." And, she adds, most people would be more inclined to retrofit a reproduction, rather than an antique, to hold a bathroom basin, plasma TV, jewelry safe, or computer equipment—all modern conveniences that Taillardat routinely is asked to accommodate.

—WILLIAM KISSEL

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