

Meissonnier, Juste-Aurèle

Turin 1695 – 1750 Paris

Oeuvre de Juste Aurele Meissonnier Peintre Sculpteur Architecte &c. Dessinateur de la chambre et Cabinet du Roy. Premiere partie [no more published]. Executé sous la conduite de l'auteur.

Paris, Gabriel Huquier [undated; circa 1748]

FOLIO (560 × 405 mm), suite of engraved title, portrait of Meissonnier (engraved after a lost self-portrait by N.D. de Beauvais), and 118 numbered etchings and engravings of which three are double-page, thirty-six full-page, and the rest printed two, three, or four or more to a sheet (prints 27 and 118 omitted from the numeration and two unnumbered etchings added to series *A*, as usual).

PROVENANCE H.D. Lyon, London

Old abrasions along top and bottom edges of the large plate no.100 (now folded into the book); trifling repairs to the joints; otherwise a very fresh and well-preserved copy.

BINDING contemporary French red morocco, frame on covers formed by triple gilt fillet, back divided into seven compartments by raised bands and decorated in gilt by cornflower and acorn tools, gilt dentelles, all edges gilt.

A SUPERB COPY of Meissonnier's *Oeuvre*, a collection of one hundred and eighteen engraved designs for silverware, interior decoration and furniture, memorial sculpture, illusionistic ceiling paintings, and architectural projects, including those for festivals. It is the 'Bible of the Rococo' style it represents and an immensely important historical document since few of Meissonnier's drawings for it have survived.¹

Born in Turin of Provençal parents, Meissonnier went to Paris around 1715 and by 1725 was well-enough known as a silversmith to be appointed *orfèvre du roi* at the factories at Gobelins. He was still working in metal as late as 1735, but by then was also *déssinateur de la chambre et cabinet du roi* (designer of court festivals) in succession to Jean I Berain, and *décorateur du roi*, internationally renowned as an architect and decorator.

¹ For related drawings, including preparatory drawings credited to Meissonnier's printmakers, see Peter Fuhring, *Un Génie du Rococò: Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier* (Turin 1999), especially pp.53–64 relating publication history; and Alastair Laing, in *Drawings for architecture design and ornament*, James A. de Rothschild bequest at Waddesdon Manor, [vol. 12] (Aylesbury 2006), pp.310–321.



Fig. 1: Decoration featuring a painting of 'Zéphire et Flore', designed by Meissonnier in 1734 for the palace of Count Franciszek Bielinski in Warsaw (engraving by Gabriel Huquier, reduced from 513 × 348 mm platemark)



Fig. 2: Silver centerpiece and tureen designed by Meissonnier. The tureen depicted (once in mirror image) is in the Cleveland Museum of Art; its pendant (with a variant lid) was sold by Sotheby's in 1998 for \$5.7m (engraving by Gabriel Huquier, reduced from 380 × 645 mm platemark)



Fig. 3: Project for the main façade of the Church of Saint Sulpice in Paris, designed by Meissonnier in 1726 (engraving by Claude Charles Riolet, reduced from 410 × 273 mm platemark)

Like Thomas Chippendale, Meissonnier's reputation rests on his published designs rather than on actual work executed, of which only a small fraction survives. The most celebrated of the objects certifiably executed after his designs are a pair of silver tureens (illustrated on plate 115 of the *Oeuvre*; see Fig. 2) designed in 1735–1739 and executed by Pierre-François Bonnestrenne and Henri Guillaume Adnet for Evelyn Pierrepont, 2nd Duke of Kingston (one is now in Cleveland Museum of Art, the other was sold by Sotheby's, 13 May 1998).

The 118 prints comprising the *Oeuvre* were published originally in *cahiers* or gatherings of a few plates each, beginning in the late 1720s, and by 1734 nearly fifty prints were available for sale by their publisher, Marguerite Chéreau, widow of the publisher François 1 Chéreau, (1680–1729). Shortly thereafter her relative Gabriel Huquier (1695–1772) acquired her business. Huquier substituted his name as publisher on the old plates and continued to issue new *cahiers*, designating each by a letter of the alphabet, numbering the plates sequentially. Documentary evidence together with information provided in the captions on the plates has enabled scholars to order the designs chronologically, however the dates of publication of the separate *cahiers* are not definitely known, and even the date of the *Oeuvre*, the only issue of the plates described in the bibliographies, is uncertain.

The watermark in the paper of the *Oeuvre* is dated 1742. Owing to slipshod draughtsmanship in the edict governing the manufacture of paper, all paper issued in France after 1742 bears that date, no matter in what year it was actually made. Thus 1742 is only a *terminus post quem* for the publication of the *Oeuvre* itself. The address 'rue St. Jacques au coin de celle des Mathurins' engraved on the title and on several plates was occupied by Gabriel Huquier from 1742 until 1751. A likely date of publication is *circa* 1748, since a copy of the book is cited in the probate of the silversmith Thomas Germain in that year (evaluated at the high price of sixty *livres*). It is probable that Meissonnier himself selected the works to be presented in the *Oeuvre* and organised the prints in sets.

In all copies the smaller prints are imposed two, three, or more to the sheet, combined in different directions, without regard to the original constitution of the *cahiers*. There are slight variations between copies in the arrangement of the engravings on the sheets, but no copy is known which includes plates numbered 27 or 117.² Two unnumbered plates are included in cahier *A*, illustrating the house of Léon de Brethous in Bayonne (1734–1735).

² *Triumph of the Baroque, Architecture in Europe 1600–1750*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the Palazzina di Caccia di Stupinigi, July–November 1999, edited by Henry A. Millon (Milan 1999), p.515 no. 301. A few copies include in addition two plates of buildings in different styles (one with thirty-one illustrations, the other with fifteen), evidently intended for an unpublished treatise on architecture;

The engravers of Meissonnier's designs were Benoît II Audran (1698–1772), Pierre II Aveline (1702–1760), Pierre-Edmé Babel (*fl.* 1725–1765), Jean-Joseph Balechou (1719–1764), Maurice Baquoy (*circa* 1680–1747), Nicolas Dauphin de Beauvais (1687–1763), Pierre-Quentin Chedel (1705–1763), Pierre Chenu (1718–after 1767), Louis Desplaces (1682–1737), Antoine Herisset (1685–1769), John Ingram (b. 1721), and obscure printmakers (or possibly chasers in Meissonnier's employ) named Dubreuiliié, Laureolli, Obelle, and Riolet, among others. Some prints presumably exist in states bearing the Widow Chéreau's address, but no one has recorded them. A proof impression of the etching of the 'Surtout de Table' (plate 115) is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.³

Appreciation of the mature Rococo style in which Meissonnier worked was never widespread in France. Although he was *décorateur du roi*, there seems to be no record of Meissonnier's work for the crown. Most of his identified patrons were foreigners, not Frenchmen. When he died in 1750, extraordinary attacks on Meissonnier's artistry and derogatory appraisals of the Rococo quickly appeared in France. Considered as a relic of a fading taste, it is perhaps not surprising that few contemporary purchasers of the *Oeuvre* afforded it a fine binding. Neither Brunet nor Cohen-De Ricci, who comment on the exceptional rarity of this book, cite a copy bound in contemporary morocco. Apart from our own, elegantly bound copy, we are able to trace only the one in contemporary German red morocco, formerly in the libraries of Sir Robert Abdy and Edmund L. Lincoln (see below).

A general interest in ornament for its own sake arose in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and the apogee of collecting of ornamental prints probably was reached in the 1860s, when the celebrated collections in Vienna and Berlin were both founded. The rarity of Meissonnier's *Oeuvre* was soon apparent⁴ and the book began to realise high prices when the libraries of the pioneer collectors of ornament were dispersed.⁵ During the twentieth century, taste moved away, the value of Meissonnier's *Oeuvre* declined, and has

see Robin Middleton, in *Avery's choice: Five centuries of great architectural books*, edited by Adolf Placzek (New York 1997), pp.67–68 no. 98.

³ *Regency to Empire: French printmaking 1715–1814*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 10 November 1984–6 January 1985 (Minneapolis & Baltimore 1984), no. 19; see also Fuhring, *op. cit.*, p.371 no. 118 (locating a second impression in Paris). An impression of the title-print (with the publication line and printmaker's signature, but before other lettering) was loosely inserted in a copy of Meissonnier's *Oeuvre* offered by B. Weinreb Limited, 'Catalogue 21: Engraved ornament', London 1967, item 68, and is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, Department of Prints and drawings, Q.15; for other states of this print, see Fuhring, *op. cit.*, p.313 no. 1.

⁴ Pierre François Defer, *Catalogue général des ventes publiques de tableaux et estampes depuis 1737 jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris 1863), I, p.225: 'Ce volume est très-recherché aujourd'hui'; Désiré Guilmar, *Les Maîtres Ornemanistes* (Paris 1880–1881), pp.155–157: 'Son œuvre est excessivement rare', etc.

⁵ See Fuhring, *op. cit.*, p.383 notes 1–2, providing the early provenance of several copies.



Fig. 4: Centre Candlestick designed by Meissonnier in 1728 (engraving by Louis Desplaces, reduced from 266 × 213 mm platemark)

only recently revived:

• Sotheby's, London, 5–7 February 1912, lot 474 ('half-morocco, worn', £91 to Parsons) • Sotheby's, London, 22 March 1912, lot 627 ('bound in calf gilt, fine copy', from Matthew Boulton's library, £135 to Quaritch) • André Desvougues and Albert Besombes, Paris, 3–6 June 1914, lot 273 (recent red morocco binding by Petit, the Edmond Foucl copy, FF5000) • Sotheby's, London, 29 July 1925, lot 79 ('boards', £38 to Quaritch) • Hodgson & Company, London, 22 February 1939, lot 261 ('contemporary calf', £50 to Rimell) • Hôtel Drouot, 'Livres d'architecture, de décoration et d'ornements', Paris, 2–3 February 1961, lot 155 ('dos de bas., orne de fleurons; Rel. Anc.') • Sotheby's, London, 30 October 1967, lot 188 (the Anatole Demidoff — William Railton copy, £240 to Berès)⁶ • Ader Picard Tajan, Paris, 10–11 June 1975, lot 228 (in a red morocco binding, the Sir Robert Abdy copy, FF12,800 to F. de Nobèle; afterwards in the Edmond L. Lincoln collection)⁷ • B. Weinreb Ltd., 'Catalogue 44: Architecture of the Continent of Europe', London 1981, item 308 (bound in green vellum, the Charles-Frédéric Mewes copy, £6500)⁸ • Christie's, London, 25 June 1986, lot 100 (bound by Chambolle-Duru, the Sir David Lionel Goldsmid-Stern-Salomons copy, £29,000 to Weinreb)⁹ • Christie's, London, 28–29 September 1988, lot 250 (bound in modern morocco, £6000 to Sourget)¹⁰ • Sotheby's, Paris, 24 May 2006, lot 54 (the Baron Alain de Rothschild copy, in a 19th century half-morocco binding, estimated €15,000–20,000 and left unsold; returned to the market in Sotheby's, Paris, 25 June 2015, lot 41) • Pierre Bergé & associés, 'Livres d'architecture et d'ornementation', Paris, 23 November 2010, lot 24 (the Sir Robert Abdy — Edmond L. Lincoln copy, €42,143).

REFERENCES Hippolyte Destailleur, *Notices sur quelques artistes français, architectes, dessinateurs, graveurs du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris 1863), pp.226–233 (list of prints); Henri Cohen, *Guide de l'amateur de livres à gravures du XVIIIe siècle*, edited by Seymour de Ricci (Paris 1912), cols. 696–697; *Katalog der Ornamentstichsammlung der Staatlichen Kunstbibliothek, Berlin* (1939), no. 378 (destroyed 1939–1945); Dorothea Nyberg, 'Meissonnier: an eighteenth-century maverick', preface to a facsimile reproduction of the *Oeuvre* (New York 1969); *Rococo: the continuing curve, 1730–2008*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York, 7 March–16 July 2008 (New York 2008), *passim* (seventeen reproductions from the book)

⁶ This copy was resold by Tajan, Paris, 14 November 1997, lot 83 ('Reliure défraîchie basane marbrée', FF70,000 to Librairie Lardanchet); offered by Lardanchet, 'Beaux livres anciens et modernes', Paris 1998, item 26 (FF 120,000); now Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Research Library, RP-P-1998-242/359. 'Manquent les planches 112 et 116' (Fuhring, *op. cit.*, p.383 note 2).

⁷ *Patterns of Style, Designs for Ornament & the Decorative Arts 1675–1850*, exhibition handlist [Edmund L. Lincoln collection], Grolier Club (New York 1993), p.2.

⁸ Now National Gallery of Art, *The Mark J. Millard Architectural Collection, I: French books* (Washington, DC 1993), no. 119.

⁹ Now Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 87–B3998. Apparently the Octave de Béhague copy (sold Paris, 8 March 1880, lot 377, FF1700), with the (unrelated) drawings by Meissonnier inserted by Goldsmid-Stern-Salomons (cf. Fuhring, *op. cit.*, pp.298–299 nos. D146–187).

¹⁰ Formerly B. Weinreb Limited, 'Catalogue 57: Fine Architectural Books', London 1987, item 194; subsequently Librairie Sourget, 'Catalogue 6: Manuscrits enluminés et livres précieux', Chartres 1989, item 129 (FF175,000).

