Cat. No. 21, Gillian Wilson

title: Commode

place\_date: French (Paris), ca. 1850–1900

attribution: Maker unknown

materials: White\* and red oak\*, poplar\* and fir\* veneered with tulipwood\* and kingwood\*; gilt bronze mounts; iron lock hardware; Rance limestone top

dimensions: H: 2 ft. 11 1/2 in., W: 4 ft. 9 in., D: 2 ft. 2 1/4 in. (90.1 x 144.8 x 66.6 cm)

accession\_number: 70.DA.79

## ***Description***

This commode is of approximately the same size and form as the Museum’s commode attributed to Joseph Baumhauer ([cat. no. 14](14)). The gilt bronze mounts are of similar model. The front and the sides are veneered with tulipwood arranged in four quadrants. The framing mounts are backed and outlined with kingwood, which is also used as a veneer for the remaining surface areas. The commode is topped by a slab of Rance limestone, cut to conforming shape.

## ***Marks***

The top surface of the front left stile is stamped “JME,” for *jurande des menuisiers-ébénistes*, “N. PETIT,” and “DELORME” ([fig. 21-1](#fig-21-1)).

## ***Commentary***

The evidence given in the “Technical Description” below suggests that the commode was made in the second half of the nineteenth century using new bronze mounts and pieces of an eighteenth-century commode stamped “DELORME,” for Adrien Faizelot Delorme (died after 1783, master 1748), and “N. PETIT,” for Nicolas Petit (1732–1791, master 1761), along with other pieces of old wood.[[1]](#endnote-1) It was bought by J. Paul Getty from the London dealer J. M. Botibol in 1938 for £1,110.94.[[2]](#endnote-2) In various lists of Getty’s possessions, especially those made during the move of his belongings to America in 1939, the commode is habitually referred to as “the French tulipwood *commode*.” It seems that neither Getty nor Botibol knew of the existence of the cabinetmakers’ names struck on the surface of the top.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The mounts are close copies of those found on the commode attributed to Joseph Baumhauer, which was acquired by Getty in 1955 ([cat. no. 14](14)), and of all the commodes of this model made by this master (see [cat. no. 14](14), “Commentary”). Most of the differences are small, ranging from the shape of leaves and flowers to the angle of a stem from a branch. Larger and more easily visible additions and variations are the fanlike form in the center of the upper framing mount at the side of the commode and the very clear difference between the form and placement of the flowers and leaves clustered at the center of the concave upper part of the corner mounts ([fig. 21-2](#fig-21-2)).

Such differences in form and placement make it impossible that the mounts were cast from Joseph Baumhauer models; the maker of the mounts must therefore have been removed from the presence of the original commode. It appears that one of the methods that could have been employed to make mounts so closely comparable would be by the use of photographs. This would place its production in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, another possible method could have been the use of drawings. Whoever constructed the piece must have been aware of the stamps of Petit and Delorme. They are genuine stamps, and it is not simply fortuitous that they are present. Whoever made the commode knew of their significance and included the piece of wood that carried the names.[[4]](#endnote-4) Thus the commode is an intentional fake, made in France, where the existence and meaning of such marks were well established by the turn of the century.

In the Museum’s registrar’s files is the statement that the commode came from the collection of Cécile Sorel, comtesse de Ségur, from which it was sold by Germain Seligman to Julia Atterbury Thorne of New York in 1933.[[5]](#endnote-5) The Sorel Collection was sold in Paris in 1928. The catalogue reveals that only one commode was in the collection, and it was one of a few pieces that was illustrated ([fig. 21-3](#fig-21-3)).[[6]](#endnote-6) Surprisingly, it bears corner and feet mounts of the same model, but in all other respects it is dissimilar to the Museum’s example. It is possible that the body itself was cannibalized and changed to form the present piece, but from an inadequate photograph it is impossible to make more than a tentative suggestion.

This commode (70.DA.79) compares closely to one in the Victoria and Albert Museum, bequeathed in 1882 by John Jones together with the rest of his collection ([fig. 21-4](#fig-21-4)).[[7]](#endnote-7) In 1883 an article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* announced that the new Jones galleries were open and that Parisian craftsmen were welcome to visit them and copy the pieces.[[8]](#endnote-8) But no copies of the Baumhauer commode ([cat. no. 14](14)) have yet come to light, and subtle differences in the design of the mounts and the greater width of the piece make this an unlikely candidate. A copy would, in all certainty, have been made entirely from scratch and would not have been assembled from old pieces of wood taken from some other piece of furniture, like the present example. Therefore, the precise date and the origin of the commode remain uncertain.

## ***Provenance***

Possibly Cécile Sorel, comtesse de Ségur, French, 1873–1966 (Paris, France), sold to Jacques Seligmann et Fils;[[9]](#endnote-9) –1933: Jacques Seligmann et Fils (Paris, France), sold to Julia Atterbury Thorne, 1933;[[10]](#endnote-10) 1933– : Julia Atterbury Thorne, American, 1891–1974 (New York, NY);[[11]](#endnote-11) –1938: J. M. Botibol (London, England), sold to J. Paul Getty, 1938;[[12]](#endnote-12) 1938–70: J. Paul Getty, American, 1892–1976, donated to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1970.

## ***Exhibition History***

*Loan to the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute*, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, MA), May 20, 1998–February 27, 2009.

## ***Bibliography***

{{Getty and LeVane 1955}}, ill. facing p. 209; {{Wescher 1955}}, 118, 124, fig. 8; {{Boutemy 1965}}, 84, fig. 3; {{Wilson 1975}}, 106, ill.; {{Sassoon and Wilson 1986}}, 13–14, no. 30; {{Augarde 1987}}, 32; {{Kjellberg 1989}}, 246; {{Pradère 1989b}}, 110; {{Bremer‑David et al. 1993}}, 28, no. 30; {{Wilson and Hess 2001}}, 17, no. 30; {{Genestie 2006}}, 56, ill.; {{Heginbotham 2014}}, 152, fig. 2.

## ***Technical Description***

There is reason to believe that this commode is, at best, heavily restored and, at worst, a fraudulent pastiche made up from pieces of an old commode, other salvaged wood, and early twentieth-century gilt bronzes.

The carcass of this commode is made of white oak, red oak, fir, and poplar. The four corner posts are each made of single blocks of oak, running from the top of the case to the floor. The case side panels are each made of eight or nine narrow fir boards laminated together with the grain running from front to back; this wood has been shaped on the outside to form the curved surface but is smooth and finished on the inside surface. The side panels are attached to the front and rear posts with tongue-and-groove joints.

The case back is made of white oak using tripartite frame-and-panel construction ([fig. 21-5](#fig-21-5)). The horizontal rails attach directly to the rear legs with mortise-and-tenon joints that are secured with single pins. Similarly, the two vertical stiles of the back are joined to the horizontal rails with single-pinned mortise and tenons. The three equally sized panels of the back are each made of two boards, butt joined and chamfered on the interior edges, with the grain of the wood running vertically.

The case top, dustboard, and case bottom are all made as bipartite frame-and-panel assemblies in white oak with equally sized panels, each made from two boards glued together with the grain running from side to side ([fig. 21-6](#fig-21-6)). The edges of these panels have been thinned on one face to fit in the surrounding grooves. This has been done with two different tools; some edges are roughly chamfered with a straight-bladed plane, while others have square shoulders cut with a rabbet plane. Some edges have been thinned using both techniques. In the top and dustboard assemblies, the flat, unshaped side of the panels faces up, while in the case bottom, the flat side faces down.

The side and front rails of the case top are joined to the top of the corner posts with single open-faced dovetail joints. For both the case top and bottom, the rear framing rail is formed by the corresponding rail of the case back. These rails are grooved along their lengths to house the rear edges of the panels. The rear rail of the dustboard assembly is a separate, narrow piece of wood that is set into dadoes in the corner posts at each end. The front rails of the dustboard and case bottom are attached to the corner posts with vertical mortise and tenons. The side rails for the dustboard and case bottom rest in square-shouldered dadoes in the front and rear posts. All of the side rails extend slightly to the inside of the front posts, allowing them to act as both drawer supports and as “kickers” for the drawer below. For drawer guides, roughly triangular blocks of poplar are fitted above and glued to the side rails of the dustboard and case bottom. These guides butt up against the case sides, posts, and case back and are glued in place without joinery. The medial rails at all three levels appear to be fixed to the front and rear rails, not with mortise-and-tenon joints as usual, but with only tongues that fit the grooves cut for the panels.

The drawer fronts are constructed of stacked and laminated blocks of fir and oak. The exact configuration is obscured by veneer on the inside, outside, top, and sides of the drawer fronts. X-radiography shows clearly that above the level of the drawer bottoms, four layers of wood (fir) are stacked one atop the other. The curvature of the fronts is made up by further laminations of fir blocks, glued to the back of the center section at either end. The inside surfaces of the drawer fronts are veneered in oak, with the grain direction running vertically; the top and side edges are veneered in cross-grain kingwood. Below the drawer bottoms, the pendant portion of the drawer fronts are cut from single boards of oak.

The sides of the drawers are each made of two white oak boards and have shouldered, or “quirked,” bead moldings on their top edges; they are assembled using standard through-dovetails at the rear and half-blind dovetails at the front, though the latter are obscured by kingwood veneer and curved extension blocks; the front legs have been rebated along their front edges to accommodate these drawer front extensions. The drawer backs are made of red oak and are about half the thickness of the sides. The drawer bottoms are each made of six thin boards, butt joined, with the grain running front to back. They are set into rebates in the bottom of the drawer sides, and the joints are covered with a thin strip of oak that serves as the drawer’s runner. At the rear, the drawer bottoms overlap the drawer back to which they are affixed with small modern wire nails.

A single lock in the upper drawer serves to lock both drawers. The lock is a “single-throw” type, made entirely of iron, and is face mounted; that is, it is not set into a mortise in the drawer front but mounted directly onto the rear surface of the front. The lock has bolts that throw both upward and downward; the latter passes through a pierced iron plate attached to the front edge of the drawer divider and then down into an iron strike plate mounted on the lower drawer.

The corner posts of the commode may well be eighteenth century, if for no other reason than that they bear the Delorme and Petit stamps, which would have been of little interest or value before 1938, when the commode was acquired by J. Paul Getty. The fir side panels, on the other hand, appear to have been made from reused old wood. There are exposed insect tunnels on the inside surfaces that imply that the panels were cut or planed after infestation was significantly advanced. In addition, X-radiography shows old screw holes in the top edge of one board, a surface that is now a concealed glue joint in the middle of the larger panel. A general inspection of the case interior reveals considerable variation in the color and degree of oxidation of the wood (see [fig. 21-6](#fig-21-6)). The back panels, for instance, were apparently made from wood that was already heavily weathered to a gray color prior to shaping; where a plane was used to chamfer the edges and to flatten the panel, the weathering layer has been removed. Staining around the pins of the mortise-and-tenon joints in the case back suggests that the back has been disassembled and that measures were taken to obscure the fresh colored wood of new pins. The use of poplar for drawer guides appears almost unprecedented in eighteenth-century French furniture and is thus an indicator that these elements may date to the period of major restoration. Likewise, the use of square-shouldered rabbets on panel edges is unusual in Parisian work of the mid-eighteenth century, except in instances where one surface of the panel is designed to be flush with the surrounding rails. The use of chamfering *in combination* *with* rabbeting appears to be unprecedented, suggesting that the horizontal panels, though possibly old, have been reworked to fit in their current locations.

As with the case, it appears that the drawers have been greatly altered. The drawer backs are made of red oak, which is endemic to the Americas and extremely unlikely to have been used by cabinetmakers in eighteenth-century Paris. There are saw kerfs in the drawer sides adjacent to the dovetails that are not aligned with the current joints, indicating that they have been recut. The practice of veneering the inside of drawer fronts with oak is apparently entirely without precedent in eighteenth-century France. X-rays show that some of the stacked blocks that form the core of the drawer fronts are riddled with insect tunnels, while adjacent blocks are untouched; no exit holes are visible on the inside or outside surfaces ([fig. 21-7](#fig-21-7)). This suggests strongly that the drawer fronts were made up from reworked pieces of old wood. Furthermore, the drawer fronts have a much more pronounced curve than the horizontal rails of the case behind them, leaving a gap when the drawers are closed of about 1.5 cm between the center of the drawer fronts and the rails. This lack of conformity also supports the idea that the drawer fronts are rebuilt. The drawer bottoms also appear to be made of reused wood. The six boards of each drawer bottom may be divided into three symmetrically arranged pairs; each pair is slightly different in thickness, patina, and tool markings. One of the three board types has repetitive but slightly irregular curved tool marks that were probably formed by an early rotary woodworking tool of the type developed in the mid-nineteenth century ([fig. 21-8](#fig-21-8)).

The flat-headed wire nails that currently affix the drawer bottoms to the drawer backs are relatively modern and were likely added around the same time that splits in the drawer bottoms were repaired with added strips of oak. On both drawers, the old, and apparently original, nail holes are still visible. These holes are perfectly round, with impressions of round, flat nail heads in evidence, suggesting that the original nails were also wire nails. Iron wire nails were available in eighteenth-century France and were first patented and produced industrially on a small scale in France in the early part of the nineteenth century;[[13]](#endnote-13) however, wire nails do not seem to have been widely adopted until the later nineteenth century, suggesting that the drawers were fabricated in their current state since that time.

The two woods used as decorative veneers on the commode have been identified microscopically as kingwood and tulipwood (both *Dalbergia* sp.). In most of the central fields tulipwood veneer has been carefully selected so that the center band of each quadrant is cut from wood that has been sawn at an angle to the grain, resulting in a hyperbolic shape radiating outward; on either side of the central band of diagonally cut veneer, straight-grain pieces of wood fill out the quadrant. The seams between the tulipwood and the kingwood surrounds are rather large and irregular, reflecting poor craftsmanship. Careful examination of the seams under magnification reveals tool marks from both a fine saw and a knife, suggesting that a combination of techniques was used to cut the marquetry. The fact that the marquetry is applied to reworked and reused wood on the sides and drawer fronts suggests that little if any of the veneer dates to the eighteenth century.

As mentioned in “Commentary” above, the gilt bronze mounts closely copy the design of mounts found on the Joseph commode 55.DA.2 ([cat. no. 14](14)) and on other commodes by Joseph. The differences are substantial enough, however, to make it clear that they are neither from the same models nor after-casts of Joseph mounts. The chasing on the mounts is competently and consistently executed, though in a rather mechanical fashion, with little variation, whether over foliage or flowers. This stands in contrast to the mounts of the Joseph commode, where there is a more complex interplay between matte and burnished passages ([figs. 21-9](#fig-21-9), [21-10](#fig-21-10); and see [fig. 21-2](#fig-21-2)). Although the mounts are not as elegantly chased as the Joseph mounts, they are extremely well fitted to the cabinet and to each other. The overlaps between sections are very precisely shaped and filed to give a convincing appearance of single large mounts.

The gilt bronze mounts on this commode appear quite consistent in their chasing and condition and in the texture and color on their back surfaces, suggesting that they are all the product of one production campaign. Six representative gilded bronze mounts were removed from the commode and analyzed for alloy composition by X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF). The mounts were found to have consistent compositions that appear to be atypical of mid-eighteenth-century castings. They have higher zinc content, lower tin content, and lower levels of impurities than original mounts of the period. An estimated date of manufacture for the mounts was generated using machine learning techniques to compare their compositions to a database of securely dated gilded bronzes produced from 1685 to 2008.[[14]](#endnote-14) The results of the analysis suggest that the likeliest date of manufacture for the mounts is 1937, one year before the purchase of the commode by J. Paul Getty. This is, of course, only an estimate, with a fairly large margin of error of ±36 years. Still, since no restorations have been recorded since Getty’s purchase, the analysis suggests that the mounts were most likely produced between about 1900 and 1938.

Additional evidence that the mounts are not eighteenth century can be found by an examination of threaded fasteners used to secure the mounts and locks. Each drawer handle has, in addition to several screws, one large threaded rod made of iron attaching it to the drawer. The rod threads into tapped holes in the handles themselves and are secured from the reverse with round, brass nuts. There is no indication that this is not the original arrangement, yet the rods are exactly 5 mm in diameter and the threads are spaced exactly 1.5 mm apart. The precise conformity to metric dimensions suggests that these fixtures probably date well after about 1800 when the metric system was adopted in France. The thread spacing and the angle of the threads (approximately 68°) do not conform to any known metric standard. European thread standards were largely unified in 1898 and generally adopted a 60° thread angle, suggesting that the tools used to make the threads of these rods were made prior to this date.[[15]](#endnote-15) The screws used to attach the lock offer further clues to the date of this commode’s fabrication. The four identical current screws appear to be the only ones ever to have been present in the drawer. Their holes are clean and unmolested, and X-radiography, which often reveals evidence of multiple screw holes, shows none. The screws are machine made and round headed and have conical, or “gimlet,” points of the sort that first came into mass production around 1850.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of prolific production of reproductions of very high quality ancien régime French furniture.[[17]](#endnote-17) It seems likely, then, that the makers of the Delorme commode mounts must have had sufficient access to the Joseph commode (or another extremely similar piece) to make drawings or take photographs of the mounts that were then used to create new master models. However, it would seem that this access did not allow for removing the mounts and making molds of the originals, which would have been a much more economical way to reproduce the pattern.

The marble top has previously been described as *lumachella pavonazza*,[[18]](#endnote-18) a fossiliferous limestone from the Austrian Alps with a deep red-brown matrix, purple streaks, white patches, and numerous marine fossil inclusions. However, the fossil organisms contained in *lumachella pavonazza* are mainly crinoid columnals.[[19]](#endnote-19) The top of this commode contains primarily branchiated corals and bryozoans, with few if any crinoid columnals. This suggests that the stone is more likely to come from Rance, a source in Belgium near a town of the same name. The “marble” (technically a Devonian limestone) quarried in the area of Rance is said to have been used in furniture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the commercial quarry is now closed.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In summary, the weight of evidence suggests that this commode was made in the second half of the nineteenth century or early twentieth century using pieces of an eighteenth-century commode stamped by Delorme and Petit along with other pieces of old wood.

1. On the basis of these stamps, the commode has been previously published as a work by Adrien Faizelot Delorme, subsequently sold by Nicolas Petit. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. J. Paul Getty Papers, 1909–89: Art collecting and collections, 1934–74, 1977, 1982, undated: J. M. Botibol 1939–40; in the files of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, J. Paul Getty Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The commode was published as being attributed to Joseph Baumhauer in {{Wescher 1955}}, 118, 124, fig. 8; and {{Boutemy 1965}}, 84, fig. 3. It seems that the stamps were first noticed in 1971; see documents in the files of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, J. Paul Getty Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For more on Adrien Faizelot Delorme, see {{Genestie 2006}}; and on Nicolas Petit, see {{Droguet 2001}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Documents from Jacques Seligmann et Fils in the files of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, J. Paul Getty Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Galerie Georges Petit, *Objets d’art et très bel ameublement du XVIIIe siècle et autres, December 6–7, 1928* (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1928). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Acc. no. 1013-1882; {{Kjellberg 1989}}, 453. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. {{Champeaux 1883}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Documents from Jacques Seligmann et Fils in the files of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, J. Paul Getty Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Documents from Jacques Seligmann et Fils in the files of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, J. Paul Getty Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Documents from Jacques Seligmann et Fils in the files of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, J. Paul Getty Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. J. Paul Getty Papers, 1909–89: Art collecting and collections, 1934–74, 1977, 1982, undated: J. M. Botibol 1939–40; in the files of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, J. Paul Getty Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. {{Priess 1973}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For details of the methods used, see {{Heginbotham, Erdmann, and Hayek 2018}} [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. {{Roe 1916}}, 247. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. {{Jenkinson 1999}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. {{Payne and Linke 2003}}; {{Mestdagh and Lécoules 2010}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. {{Margolis 1987}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. {{Borghini 1989}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. {{Dubarry de Lassale, Barco, and Bresc-Bautier 2000}}. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)