

THE RAGLEY HALL COMMODES



A MAGNIFICENT PAIR OF GEORGE III PERIOD ORMOLU-MOUNTED
COROMANDEL LACQUER AND BLACK GILT-JAPANNED SERPENTINE
COMMODES

ATTRIBUTED TO PIERRE LANGLOIS

English, circa 1770

Each veneered overall with panels of Chinese incised "Coromandel" lacquer, bordered with japanned foliate trails, the shaped top with serpentine front and sides divided into six panels of rocks, birds and flowers above a gadrooned band, one side decorated with birds and flowers in a rocky landscape, the other side with scenes of palace life, the front with a pair of serpentine-fronted doors each with a panel showing palace life with figures surrounded by a simulated trellis-pattern with rosettes, the doors enclosing two interior shelves, between keeled angles applied with gilt bronze foliate mounts, above a serpentine apron and supported by splayed feet.

Height: 31 3/4 in. (81cm) Width: 55 in. (140 cm) Depth: 24 in. (61cm)

PROVENANCE :

Supplied to Francis Seymour, 1st Marquess of Hertford (d. 1794) for Ragley Hall, Warwickshire, thence by descent to the Trustees of the 5th Marquess of Hertford. Acquired by Capt. the Hon. Francis Cecil Brownlow (d. 1932). Thence by descent to his son Lt. Col. John Desmond Cavendish Brownlow, 5th Baron Lurgan (d. 1991), thence by descent.

LITERATURE :

1. P. Macquoid and R. Edwards, *The Dictionary of English Furniture*, London, 1924, vol. II, p. 134, fig. 10P.
2. Macquoid and R. Edwards, *The Dictionary of English Furniture*, London, rev. ed.

1954, vol. II, p. 115, fig. 13.

3. R. Edwards, *The Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture*, London, 1964, p. 248, fig. 10
4. Lucy Wood, *The Lady Lever Art Gallery, Catalogue of Commodes*, London, 1994, p. 77, note 4.

These magnificent commodes were commissioned by Francis Seymour, 1st Marquess of Hertford (1718 – 1794) for Ragley Hall in Warwickshire, after James Gibbs, the architect was called in to fit out various state rooms in the French taste of the 1750's and this, of course, necessitated the purchase of furniture and other works of art. They descended to the 5th Marquess and were sold at Christie's after his death, where they were bought by Frank Partridge and then entered the collection of the Brownlow family. They were illustrated by Macquoid and Edwards three years after their sale in their *Dictionary of English Furniture*. Their importance was thus recognized at an early date. Perhaps they formed part of the furnishings of a "Chinese Apartment" at Ragley Hall and the Chinese lacquer with which they were veneered was doubtless taken from a Chinese screen. Viscount Conway, an ancestor of the Marquess who began to build the house in 1679, almost certainly would have had such a screen in his collection. The doors and sides of the commodes are veneered with panels of Chinese polychrome Coromandel lacquer which are framed with strips of English black and gold japanned ornament ; the tops, are each veneered with six screen tablets with japanned divisions. Great skill must have been required to lay these lacquer veneers onto the shaped, bowed and curved carcasses of the commodes. The lacquer would have been under great stress when it was laid ; whoever undertook this delicate task was a master craftsman indeed and time and atmospheric change have been kind to the lacquer. Finally the shaped borders to the Cupid's bow tops are mounted with ormolu gadrooned edges. The French names commodes with two doors *commodes à Vantaux* and the Ragley commodes are designed in the French 'picturesque' manner which first appeared in Paris in about 1745. This form would have been very novel to even a sophisticated English eye. English cabinet-makers at this time were making fine furniture veneered with Oriental lacquer and English japanning but it was, in the main, of rectilinear rather than of curved and serpentine form.

Who then can we attribute this pair of commodes to ? The French connection is obviously strong and we must examine this. However a prior call was a search of the Hertford family papers in the Warwick Records office. In the *Expenditure Accounts for Ragley* for the years 1757-1762 the only entries relating to London cabinet-makers which are apparent are four to Mr. Vile (presumably William Vile, George III's cabinet-maker) for a total of £653 (to the nearest pound), dated between 1758 and 1762. This was a serious sum of money but it does not tell us much, as William Vile and John Cobb, his partner, are not recorded, as far as I know, as making lacquer furniture. They could have made them ; Chippendale and the Linnells also made lacquer furniture but some sort of documentary evidence would be extant to support such a conjecture.

We are left with the "French Connection" and the leading exponent of this at the time was the emigrant French cabinet-maker, or *ébéniste* Pierre Langlois. The little that is known of his career is recorded by Peter Thornton and William Rieder in four articles in *The Connoisseur* between December 1971 and April 1972 and by Helena Hayward in her subsequent researches at Woburn Abbey. His trade-card tells us, in both English and French, that "he makes all Sorts of Fine Cabinets and Commodes, made and inlaid

in the Politest manner with Brass and Tortoiseshell..." The French text underlines his specialty in commodes by emphasizing "toutes Sortes de Commodes". Further support to this specialization is found in Thomas Mortimer's *Universal Director* of 1763 where it is stated "Langlois performs all sorts of curious inlaid work, particularly commodes in the foreign taste, inlaid with tortoiseshell, brass etc." Finally, Matthew Boulton in his diary for 1769 refers to Mons. Langlois' sign of *Commode tables* at his Tottenham Court Road premises – even his shop sign had a commode sign painted on it.

Pierre Langlois was obviously celebrated for his commodes inlaid in marquetry and mounted in ormolu and the two best documented of these are the commode for which the duke of Bedford paid £78-8-0 in 1760 and another for which the 6th Earl of Coventry paid £55-0-0 in 1764. The former may be seen at Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire and the latter in the Metropolitan Museum, New York – they were expensive pieces of furniture and it is interesting to compare their prices with the £86 paid to Chippendale by Edwin Lascelles in 1773 for the celebrated 'Diana and Minerva' commode at Harewood House, Yorkshire.

Thornton and Rieder illustrate thirteen marquetry commodes in their articles on Langlois and three decorated with lacquer. The first of the latter was at Kenure Park, Co. Dublin, and is now at Alscot Park in Warwickshire : the second, one of a pair, is at Powis Castle, Montgomeryshire, and the third, one from a pair, is in the M. H. de Yong Memorial Museum, San Francisco. These commodes are all veneered with Chinese lacquer panels, mounted in ormolu and surmounted by marble slabs. However the two pairs of commodes which were probably ordered by Sir Matthew Fetherstonhaugh, Bt., in about 1760 for Uppark in Sussex can be compared much more closely to the Ragley commodes. One pair remains in the house and the other was offered at Christie's in May 1971, and was sold for £42,000 after the sale – a colossal price at the time. The Uppark and Ragley commodes are of similar bowed and serpentine shape, have concave sides and shaped aprons and are veneered with Chinese lacquer panels framed by English japanned surrounds. However the most striking of their shared similarities are the tablets of Chinese lacquer that are veneered in a highly unusual trellised design to their tops. Of course the Ragley commodes have Coromandel lacquer panels whilst the Uppark commodes have black and gold lacquer panels to the doors and sides and the latter, most unusually, have carved giltwood rather than ormolu enrichments. The Uppark commodes have now been attributed to Pierre Langlois. The Ragley commodes, with their close similarities, can also very reasonably be attributed to Langlois.

However, the case for both of these attributions would be immensely strengthened if it can be demonstrated that Pierre Langlois specialized in working in lacquer as well as selling '*Fine Cabinets and Commodes made and inlaid in the Politest manner*'. Thus it is recorded in the *Strawberry Hill Accounts* for 1763 that Horace Walpole 'pd. Langlois for the two Commodes and the two coins in the gallery' the sum of £73-10-0. In *A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole* published in 1774, it becomes apparent that these pieces were lacquered, for it records that in the gallery were "two commodes of old japan with marble slabs and two coins (corner cupboard) of old japan...". Three years later, in March 1766, we find George Montagu writing to Walpole thus "I will take my corporal oath that three parts of the japan that you gave to Langlois to make into commodes is still there." Horace Walpole was not alone in patronizing Langlois for his lacquered furniture and thus, in 1759, the earliest date reference to him in England, we

fine the Duke of Bedford paying Langlois “two pounds two shillings for a Japan’d Fire Screen.” Langlois was indeed a lacquer specialist and a japanner. Christie’s made no attributions in the 1921 catalogue as to who may have supplied the lacquer furniture to Badminton and Ragley which they were offering in the sale. Seventy-five years later we know that the Linnels were responsible for the Badminton furniture but we are still not entirely certain who supplied the Ragley commodes to Francis Seymour, first Marquess of Hertford. I am of the opinion, however, that the field has now been very considerably narrowed down and, the most likely candidate being Pierre Langlois.

The commode tops, with “Cupid’s bow” front, rounded corners and serpentine sides, are ormolu-banded with reed gadroons in the antique manner. Each top is veneered with richly-polychromed mosaics of six black lacquer tablets incised with birds among flowering shrubs, and adapted from the upper border of a twelve-fold 17th Century Chinese screen (a related screen is illustrated in M. Harris, *Catalogue of Antique Furniture*, c. 1930, no. D4716). The tablets are wreathed or bordered by golden foliage flowered with peonies on a black-japanned ribbon-band. The commodes’ serpentine frames, likewise ormolu- bordered and originally with foliate scrolls of Roman acanthus to the angle, are similarly japanned with flowered foliage in the Chinoiserie manner. The doors are veneered with two adjoining molded panels, no doubt from the same Chinese screen. One depicts Chinese women watching children at play in a stately pavilioned pleasure-garden, while the other depicts women watching two peacocks. Their reeded ormolu frames are banded by Chinese dragon tablets and flowered mosaics. Their corresponding side panels, which are simply banded with lacquer fillets, portray entrance gates, including a circular “Moongate”. The “Harris” screen noted above featured related pleasure-garden scenes banded by a similar flowered mosaic border, while its outer border corresponds with the fillets banding the commodes’ side panels.

This elegant pair of small commodes, with their serpentine form and ormolu mounts, is designed in the George III French “picturesque” manner of the 1760s and exotically decorated in the Oriental fashion created by Parisian *marchands-merciers* such as Simon-Philippe Poirier (d. 1785). The technique of serpentine lacquer panels appears to have been introduced to London in the early 1760s by Pierre Langlois (d. 1765), cabinet-maker of Tottenham Court Road, while the fashion for colorful lacquer screens reflects that introduced by East India Trading Companies in the late 17th Century and named “Bantam” work after the Javanese trading post or “Coromandel” after the Indian counterparts. The whimsical nature of this ornament, which had been extolled in Messrs. Stalker and Parker’s *Treatise of the Art of Japanning* of 1688, was considered particularly appropriate for the enlivening of bedroom apartments. This pair of commodes would no doubt have formed part of the furnishings commissioned in the 1760s by Francis Seymour, 1st Marquess of Hertford (d. 1794) for a ‘Chinese’ bedroom apartment at Ragley Hall, Warwickshire, whose rooms might have been hung with Oriental papers decorated with exotic birds and flowering shrubs. It is also possible that the lacquer originally came from a screen that formed part of the collections formed by the marquess’ ancestor Lord Conway, who built Ragley in the late 17th Century. Two other commodes of similar form, formerly at Ragley, also featured mosaic-paneled tops but their japanned and ormolu-mounted frames were decorated on one with golden lakeside pavilions, while the other incorporated polychrome lacquer panels with birds perched among flowering shrubs. These commodes were purchased with this pair in the 1921 sale.

The commodes also relate to a japanned and lacquer-veneered fallfront secretaire with ormolu-gadrooned edge that was formerly in the collection of the Earls of Shrewsbury and Talbot, at Alton Towers, Staffordshire (Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 356, no. F9327). A japanned commode, of related form with reed-gadrooned top, was acquired by the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1931 (D. FitzGerald, *Georgian Furniture*, London).

The following is a translation taken from André-Jacob Roubo's *L'Art du Menuisier Ebéniste*, Paris, 1772, p.1020-1021, describing the use of Oriental lacquer as a veneer. Roubo (d.1791) was a *menuisier-ébéniste* and writer working in Paris in the latter half of the 18th Century.

The lacquer panels ordinarily used by French *ébénistes* are taken from Chinese or Japanese cabinets or screens, whose panels or leaves are generally decorated on both sides, and separated through the middle in order to be suitably thin- (by being reduced with a plane) for use as veneer or general cabinet-work. Precautions have to be taken both while cutting the leaves and reducing the depth to prevent splitting or cracking the varnish ; so they must be protected by cushions or woolen blankets while cutting in the vice. And the same care must be taken while planning the back ; which requires placing them on the work-surface in a doubled over blanket, so that the irregular surface of the lacquer caused by the floral pattern or other ornaments is protected.

While reducing the thickness of the wood behind the Chinese lacquer or varnish, it is necessary to retain a certain thickness to prevent cracking ; and when placing the lacquer veneer on the ground, it is necessary to heat both the lacquer and the ground, and protect the lacquer with blankets on which one places cushions or wooden wedges with "*goberges*" or gluing - clamps as necessary; but never use '*valets*', in case while fixing them by hitting the varnish would be damaged or split.

As far as possible, the joints of the lacquered works are to be surrounded by brass mounts or borders because, even with the precautions taken in cutting the lacquer leaves, it is almost impossible not to cause certain splits - which causes the joints to appear and looks unattractive.

In addition, even when one cuts the lacquer as cleanly as possible, the unmounted edges will soon get damaged, which always look bad.

The French imitation of Chinese varnish - as far as it has been possible until the present time - produces a more stable work than those veneered with lacquer. In the latter case, in other words when varnishing (japanning) furniture, it is necessary to construct the ground work with good quality and well-seasoned timber and with as much strength as possible.