Making a luxury clock in late eighteenth-century Paris

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A clock sold at auction in 2020, made in the later 1780s, was the product of four leading craftsmen: founder Jean-Baptiste Osmond, clockmaker Jean-Antoine Lépine, enameller Joseph Coteau and cabinet-maker Balthazar Lieutaud.

That eighteenth-century clockmaking was a collaborative enterprise has been well-established by recent scholarship,[1] but exact details of how this occurred are seldom available. An exceptional clock that recently appeared on the Paris art market offers some insight.

The clock in question is shown in Figs 1–4. It was sold by the auction house Chayette & Cheval/Charlotte Van Gaver on 14 December 2020 in a general sale of furniture, paintings and *objets d'art*.[2] A description of it was prepared on this occasion by Patrick de Buttet and Anthony Turner and the following notes are largely derived from this.

The large and heavy clock has passing half hour strike and is of fifteen-day duration. There are four signatures

- On the case, 'OSMOND' (Fig. 5).
- On the dial, 'Lépine H[orlog]er [space] PLACE DES VICTOIRES (Fig. 2).
- The enamel of the dial, 'Coteau' (Fig. 2).
- On the underside of the wood and gilt brass base, 'B. LIEUTAUD' (twice), followed by a cross within a triangle (Fig. 6).

The case is based on a design by the sculptor Robert Osmond (1711–1789), and the white enamel dial shows the hours, minutes, seconds, the date and the day of the week with its tutelary governor indicated by the appropriate planetary symbol. Of the five hands, two are gilt for the hours and minutes, the centre seconds hand is in blued steel and beats a half second, a serpentine blued steel hand indicates the date, and a double-ended blued steel hand the week day and its governor. The dial carries both the name of the clockmaker, Lépine and of the dial painter, Coteau, who employed the mixture of arabic and roman numerals typically found on clocks and watches by Lépine in the later 1780s.[3] The round movement has two going barrels, a pin-wheel escapement mounted on the outside of the back plate, spring suspension for the short, simple pendulum (which is a replacement), and strikes on a bell.

Osmond's original design for the clock case (Fig. 7) on which the present example is based was made in 1775.[4] It was a basic design from which at least four variants were derived:

1 A version without the putti but with an amortizement representing the 'crowning of science'. An example of this was delivered by Lépine for the apartment of Madame Royale at Versailles on 28 December 1778.
2 A version with only the two putti: one such is incorporated in the plan-chest of Joseph Baumhauer now in the Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris.[5]

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1. Jean-Dominique Augarde, *Les ouvriers du temps, la pendule à Paris de Louis XIV à Napoléon Ier* (Geneva, 1996), especially chapters 2 and 3.

2. Chayette-Cheval, *'Important tableaux, meubles et objets d'art …'*, 14 December 2020, lot 56 (http://www.chayette-cheval.com/catalogue/110306); Charlotte van Gaver and Anthony Turner, *40 Ans de Mécanismes du Temps* (Paris, 2021), pp. 12–13.

3. Adolphe Chapiro, *Jean-Antoine Lépine, horloger (1720-1814)* (Paris, 1988), p. 226; Adolphe Chapiro, *L'Œuvre de Jean-Antoine Lépine horloger (1720-1814)* (Association Nationale des Collectionneurs et Amateurs de l'horlogerie ancienne et de l'art : Publication hors série, May 2001), p. 29.

4. Bibliothèque Doucet, Paris VIE 15 Rês, N° 110.

5. Inv. M1176. See Bill G. B. Pallot and Nicolas Sainte Fare Gonart, *Le mobilier français du Musée Jacquemard-André* (Dijon, 2006), pp. 144–47.

Fig. 1. The clock weighs 35 kilos, dimensions: height 55 cm - width 56,3 cm - depth of the base 15,7 cm.

3 Either of the previous two versions with or without a plinth but with a counter-plinth in white marble
4 The fullest version (as here), with putti, amortizement, plinth and counter-plinth in veneer and gilt brass.[6]

From a single design therefore — and this particular one of Osmond's was very popular as the number of surviving examples based on it attests — several variants were possible. Customer choice would here be decisive, as it would also be for the choice of the craftsman to execute the work. Here is a conundrum. Did the customer commissioning the work approach the four artisans here named individually or was the work orchestrated by one of them, sub-contracting to the others? In the latter case it is likely to have been either Osmond, the case-maker, or Lépine, the clockmaker, who organised the whole, but the presence of the signatures of all four on this prestigious piece implies equality between them.

6. For examples of these see Elke Niehüser, *French bronze clocks* (Atglen, 1999), pp. 205–6, Nos 209–213 ; Tardy, *Les plus belles pendules françaises (*Paris, 1994), pp. 115–16.

Fig. 2. In Lépine's address, note the space after 'H.ER' (horloger) from which 'du Roi' (of the King) has been effaced. The name of the enameller Coteau is seen beneath the 6 o'clock numeral.

Fig. 3. Back view showing the movement.

Osmond's original design dates from 1775. The spring of the going train of the movement however is dated October 1774. It must therefore have been in Lépine's stock for some time before the present clock was ordered. That it was already associated with the movement that he eventually used cannot be known. There is no reason to assume it. Lieutaud, the cabinet-maker of the stand, died in 1780, although his widow continued the business until *c.* 1785. An order date for the clock could therefore be postulated between 1775 and 1780, even if the execution of it may have taken place later. In the same year as Osmond produced this design, he also retired from active business, leaving this to his nephew, Jean-Baptiste. It was therefore the latter who executed the case. The clockmaker, Jean-Antoine Lépine, had taken his son-in-law Raguet into partnership in 1783 and ceded the business to him in its entirety the following year. In this new form, the business moved to the Place des Victoires in 1786 and it was thence that commission was passed to Coteau to produce the dial.

A possible chronology begins to emerge.

Fig. 4. Backplate with bell removed to show the escapement.

On the basis of a design first drawn in 1775, an order for the fullest version of such a clock was placed possibly before the death of Lieutaud in 1780, but more probably a little before 1785, if not J.-B. Osmond could hardly have been able to order his counter-plinth from Lieutaud's widow. In the following year, at earliest, Raguet, always using his father-in-law's name for trading, began to prepare a movement, using a spring that had been in stock since 1774, and ordered a dial from Coteau using mixed arabic and roman numerals. These are typical of the last years of the 1780s. The clock was therefore probably under construction from 1785/6 to be completed and delivered between 1788 and 1790. Shortly afterwards, as the Revolution gathered pace, an essential modification was made to it. As can been seen in Fig. 2, there is a bizarre space between the words 'horloger' and 'Place' in Lépine's signature. Originally this would have carried his title of 'horloger du Roi', now become a dangerous association, and therefore effaced.

Four leading craftsmen shared the making of this imposing, luxurious clock between them:

1 The founder Jean-Baptiste Osmond (1744–post 1790), who was freed in 1766. He worked closely with his uncle, Robert Osmond (1711–1789) whose case design he here followed, until the latter retired in 1775.

2 Jean-Antoine Lépine (1720–1814) was named a royal clockmaker in 1762. Jean Claude Raguet (1753–1810) worked for him and married his daughter Pauline. Lépine and Raguet formed a partnership in 1783, but Lépine ceded the entire business to Raguet the following year. In 1786 the business was moved from the Fossés Saint Germain l'Auxerrois to the Place des Victoires. The clock was thus amongst the earliest products of Lépine-Raguet from their new premises.

3 Joseph Coteau (1740–1812) was born in Geneva where he became an enameller

Fig. 5. Signature of Osmond.

in the Academy of St Luke in 1766. He migrated to Paris in 1778, working in the Rue Poupée.

4 Balthazar Lieutaud (1720–1780) became a free cabinet-maker 20 March 1749. He specialised in clock-case making.

From order to completion seems to have required a minimum of two years, perhaps more.

Fig. 6. Signature of Lieutaud.

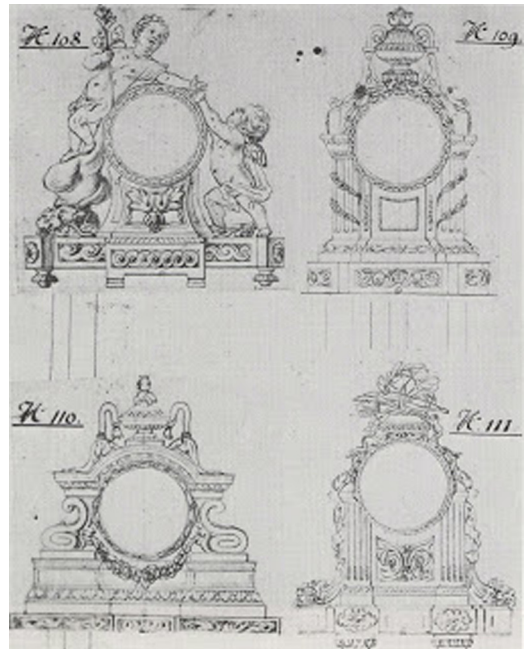

Fig. 7. Page from Robert Osmond's design book showing bottom left the basic model, N° 110.