

**LITTLE ILLUSTRATED BOOKS  
ON OLD FRENCH FURNITURE  
IV; FRENCH FURNITURE UNDER  
LOUIS XVI AND THE EMPIRE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649077557

Little illustrated books on old french furniture IV; French furniture under Louis XVI and the empire by Roger de Félice & F. M. Atkinson

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**ROGER DE FÉLICE & F. M. ATKINSON**

**LITTLE ILLUSTRATED BOOKS  
ON OLD FRENCH FURNITURE  
IV; FRENCH FURNITURE UNDER  
LOUIS XVI AND THE EMPIRE**





FOUR-POSTER BED, MAHOGANY AND  
BRASS, WITH SATIN HANGINGS

LITTLE ILLUSTRATED BOOKS ON  
OLD FRENCH FURNITURE IV

FRENCH FURNITURE  
UNDER LOUIS XVI  
AND THE EMPIRE

BY ROGER DE FÉLICE

TRANSLATED BY  
F. M. ATKINSON



LONDON MCMXX  
WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1031

53

## INTRODUCTION

IN this volume Empire furniture will occupy much less space than Louis Seize. It may perhaps be enough to say that, in our opinion, this inequality is amply justified by the differences in merit, comfort, and adaptableness to the needs of ordinary life that exist between the two styles; but there is one more solid and positive reason. The aim of this handbook, like its predecessors, is to impart a better knowledge of the furniture of past times, but most of all the furniture that was simple and practical, the good, honest pieces with no pretensions to sham luxuriousness, belonging to the modest middle classes or even the country folk of old France. Now, the Empire Style never had time to make its way into the depths of the provinces, where everything is so slow to change. In any case, how could that style, so learned and archæological, which had sprung finished and complete from the brain of a few fanatical devotees of antiquity, as once Minerva sprang in full panoply from out of the head of Jupiter—how could that style, so lacking in tradition, ever have found favour with the country people of France? How could they have understood it? And accordingly we find it left no trace in the output of the workshops of Provence or Normandy or Brittany. During the Revolution and the Empire, and still later, the country cabinet-makers, and those in the



small towns, went on quietly with Louis XVI styles, which were often simply Louis XV hardly modified at all, and they continued this up to the moment when industrial production on a large scale, centralised and carried out by machinery, shut, one by one for ever, the little workshops from which throughout two centuries so much simple beauty had issued to spread its boon among the dwellings of the unpretentious.

The Empire Style undoubtedly has its own beauty; it is simple, severe, not very cordial, but sometimes imposing in grandeur, and superb in its air; but it is almost always only the most costly and luxurious pieces that have these qualities; their material must be supremely fine, as it is displayed in large masses with little decoration. The bronzes must be excellent in sculpture, since they often make the whole of the rich effect, and because being isolated, as they usually are, in the middle of large panels of bare wood, they assume an extreme importance, and necessarily hold the eye. The actual composition of these metal appliques can the less permit of mediocrity, inasmuch as it often has to make up for poverty in their invention and design. An Empire piece made on the cheap, with too much veneering, too little bronze or bronzes inferiorly chased or not at all, gives the impression of rubbish made expressly for catch-penny bargain sales; indeed, was it not precisely under the Empire, perhaps during the Revolution, that cheap-jack furniture first came into being? In a

word, the ordinary product of this epoch has nothing to call for any infatuated devotion. A very wide-awake collector may still, from time to time, pick up in the heart of Paris, and for a mere song, authentic Jacobs unrecognised by the seller who has them tucked away in his shop, but they are becoming rare, and by the side of these lovely things, pure in line, sometimes with exquisite curves and of superior craftsmanship, how many dull flat horrors there are that have not even the excuse of being unpretentious!

It has doubtless been observed that the Directoire Style has no place in the title of this volume nor even in the table of chapters. Many styles are badly named, but none so badly as this—if it even exists at all. The government of the Directors endured four years altogether. Did anyone ever see a style spring up and establish itself in so short a time? It would be more correct to say *Revolution Style*, for chairs with shovel backs,\*<sup>1</sup> or roll backs,\* made of plain wood, either pierced or carved in weak relief, furniture decorated with lozenges, daisies and stars; beds with triangular pediments; all these were being made from 1790; we even find models in collections before the Revolution, such as that of Aubert (1788).

This transition period recalls the Regency by the double character of the furniture it produced. Certain pieces carry on the direct tradition of Louis XVI, while little by little modifying the

<sup>1</sup> The asterisk refers to the index at the end.

lines to which cabinet-makers had been faithful during thirty years ; others displaying that excess in novelty which three quarters of a century earlier had characterised *Rocaille*, repudiate all the past like the *sans-culottes*, and are more or less exact copies of Greco-Roman models ; of this kind are the celebrated pieces from David's workshop, which were speedily copied on every hand. When the imperial era arrives, it will drop all the exaggeration and retain the essence of these novelties, give them more restraint, more uniformity too, in a word, more style, precisely as the epoch of Louis XV had done for the somewhat disordered imagination of the Regency. And so the Directoire style is Louis XVI ending and also the birth of the Empire ; but it is not an independent and finished style in itself.

Without any further preamble, and after expressing our profound gratitude to the owners of antique pieces, and to the keepers of museums in Paris and throughout the country,<sup>1</sup> to whose

<sup>1</sup> Mlle. M. de Félice, Mesdames de Flandreysy and Kahn, Mlle. Mouttet, Messieurs Marius Bernard, Brunschvicg, Cérésolle and Briquet, Duchêne, Ladan-Bockairy, La Mazière, Mezzara and Touzain, of Paris ; M. André Clamageran, of Rouen ; Madame Broquisse, Messieurs Abel and Louis Jay, of Bordeaux ; Madame Meyniac, of Saint Médard (Gironde) ; Mlle. Marie Jay, Madame Larégnère, Messieurs Guillet-Dauban, Loreilhe and Pascaud, of Sainte-Foy-la-Grande (Gironde) ; Mesdames Colin and Roudier, of La Rivière-de-Prat (Gironde) ; M. Ducros of Simondie (Dordogne) ; and the Directors of the Museum of the Union centrale des Arts décoratifs, of the Carnavalet Museum, of the Departmental Museum of Antiquities of Rouen and of the Museon Arlaten.