

# ROCOOCO & CO

FROM  
NICOLAS  
PINEAU  
TO CINDY  
SHERMAN



12 MARCH  
18 MAY 2025

EN

MAM

MUSÉE DES ARTS  
DÉCORATIFS



NICOLAS PINEAU

Capstone of a wood stud

Graphite, red chalk and red chalk wash on laid paper

Circa 1728-1754. Donation, 1908

Welcome to the  
Musée des Arts Décoratifs  
and the exhibition

ROCOCO & CO.  
FROM NICOLAS PINEAU  
TO CINDY SHERMAN

Enjoy your visit!

“Everything is made into an S.” This is how Charles Nicolas Cochin described the art of his time in 1755. From the outset, the Rococo challenged “good taste.” It was singular, asymmetrical, bizarre, sinuous, swollen, and capricious. Drawing from the exuberance of the Baroque, it found new possibilities for creating fantastical forms. Rocaille art was the aesthetic of an aristocracy that, after the long decline of Louis XIV, sought to live far from the pomp of Versailles. In its spread across Europe, it took on the name Rococo.

Though not its inventor, Nicolas Pineau (1684–1754) was one of the most important propagators of this new art of living. Rediscovered at the end of the 19th century, the drawings from his workshop reveal a surprising inventiveness in architecture, façade sculpture, wood paneling, furniture, goldsmithing and printmaking. The Musée

des Arts Décoratifs holds the majority of these works—nearly five hundred sheets, which have recently undergone conservation and are the object of a publication.

Beyond individual or regional differences, the Rococo is characterized by the play of curves and spontaneity, a love of contrast and asymmetry, the dominance of nature and hybridization, and a fascination with distant realms.

After a period of stylistic and moral reproof, the Rococo reemerged under the Second Empire and found echoes in Art Nouveau, psychedelic art, contemporary fashion, and design. The juxtaposition of neo- or post-Rococo objects with the work of Nicolas Pineau raises the question of the persistence and success of a “taste” that seems far from fading away.

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RECYCLE ME!

If you leave your brochure at the end of the exhibition, it can be recycled or reused

For the comfort and accessibility of all, folding seats, wheelchairs, magnetic induction loops, baby carriers, and changing tables are available on level -1 near the cloakrooms.

# A FIGURE OF THE ROCOCO. NICOLAS PINEAU, FROM PARIS TO SAINT PETERSBURG AND BACK

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A major figure of the Rococo movement, the wood sculptor Nicolas Pineau was active from the early 18th century until his death in 1754. He was one of the most renowned ornamental sculptors of his time. Though he did not invent it, he steered French rocaille art in a highly distinctive direction. The first half of his career, was shaped by the spirit of Louis XIV-era decor, dense, structured, and symmetrical. Upon his return to Paris around 1728, he worked primarily for private patrons. During this period, he developed an aesthetic of contrast, playing with fullness and emptiness, as well as asymmetry.

Disseminated through prints, his work had a profound impact on European decorative arts. However, as the Rococo fell out of favor with the rise of Neoclassicism, Pineau was forgotten until the rediscovery of his collection of drawings in the late 19th century.

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## FROM KING TO TSAR

Settled in the Gobelins district, where he worked for the King among others, Nicolas Pineau was called to the service of Peter I of Russia in 1716. The son of a sculptor, he was not yet a master sculptor himself but had already published his first collections of prints with the publisher Jean Mariette. His growing reputation and network of friendships earned him the title of “first sculptor” to the Tsar, allowing him to take part in the grand projects Peter the Great envisioned for his new capital, Saint Petersburg, and for his palace at Peterhof.

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## THE TSAR'S INTERIORS

As the head of a workshop established in Saint Petersburg, alongside those of many other expatriate artists, Nicolas Pineau was sought after for numerous sculpture projects, while at the same time responsible for training Russian craftsmen. He produced designs across all fields of the decorative

arts and his collection of drawings preserves the memory of these formal explorations.

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## PINEAU THE ARCHITECT

After the death of Jean-Baptiste Le Blond (1679–1719), the French architect recruited by Peter I to oversee his major projects, Nicolas Pineau became the Tsar’s “first architect.” In this role, he developed numerous plans for Saint Petersburg, though none appear to have been realized. These designs demonstrate the sculptor’s deep understanding of architecture, a field he embraced with ease. Upon his return to France, he participated in a competition for the design of a Church for the royal Order of the Holy Spirit, but failed to establish himself among Parisian architects.

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## FURNITURE

Throughout his career, Nicolas Pineau created designs for furniture. His earliest prints, dating to around 1708, focused on types such as beds, pier tables, and coin cabinets. His innovations extended beyond carved wood to include cabinetmaking, bronze work, and textiles. His mastery of drawing allowed him to develop models in all these domains, making him a true designer rather than a mere craftsman.

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## WOOD PANELING

Pineau quickly gained an excellent reputation in interior decoration, particularly in wood paneling. Initially working in a style that carried on the traditions of the 17th century, he gradually developed a highly original and innovative aesthetic. While technical constraints kept the vertical supports of paneling straight, the horizontal elements became sinuous, giving rise to complex, swirling, sometimes abstract, ornamentation.

# THE MAKING OF A DECOR

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Both an inventor and a craftsman, Nicolas Pineau had to go through several stages of drawing before he could begin sculpting. His workshop archives preserve traces of this process, from preliminary sketches to full-scale execution drawings. Some designs were even pricked in order to transfer them onto the material being carved.

While these surviving sheets reveal Pineau's meticulous attention to technical details,

they remain silent as to the actual process of creating the decor once the design was transferred. The centuries-old techniques of ornamental sculpture, still practiced today with the same chisels, have been passed down through generations. Through the archaeology of gesture, we can reconstruct what an 18th-century sculptor's workshop would have been like.

Find out more about the sculpture work in this video! ©François Gilles.



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## FORMS OF THE ROCOCO

Infiltrating interiors and exteriors alike, flamboyant shapes, strange motifs, and flowing curves and counter-curves spread across all surfaces in endless variations. The Rococo also unfolds through themes that transcend object typologies. Flights of imagination take form in drawings before being translated into diverse materials: stone, metal, wood, lacquer, ceramics... Artisans achieved astonishing technical feats, sometimes purely as demonstrations of skill. Even 18th-century critics acknowledged this creative frenzy, believing that artisans had freed themselves from the authority of architects, the traditional guardians of classical taste. In reality, within three decades, the Rococo wave had swept everything away, including architects, and spread across Europe. The circulation of models and artisans fueled this artistic fervor.

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### ASYMMETRY OR ALTERNATIVE?

The Rococo is often seen as the triumph of asymmetry. Yet, drawings can sometimes be misleading: they may appear asymmet-

rical when, in fact, they simply present multiple alternative designs on a single sheet. This long-standing compositional practice saved time and space, allowing clients to compare different options at a glance. If the elements do not connect well, the approach is obvious; but when they do, it becomes difficult to determine the artist's true intention: was it asymmetry or merely an alternative proposal?

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### DREAMS OF DISTANT LANDS

Fascination with the Far East was not unique to the Rococo, but it became one of its defining traits. Imported objects were set into elaborate mounts to enhance their value, inspiring artisans to create works in the manner of Asian art. For instance, a commode's façade might be made of imported lacquer, while its sides were finished in European japanning. Similarly, European imitations of Chinese porcelain were mounted in gilt bronze, treated as if they were authentic. The beauty of these objects ended up outweighing any ambiguity regarding their origins.

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### ANIMAL IMAGERY

One of the Rococo's key sources of creativity was the hybridization of forms. Whether symbolic, heraldic, or purely ornamental, animal motifs lent themselves particularly well to whimsical designs. Thus, dragons that evoked the Far East coexisted with chimeras and other hybrid creatures with little regard for realism. Monkeys, often depicted as humorous reflections of humanity, held a special place in this zoological fantasy.

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### SINUOSITIES

From the 18th century onward, one of the main criticisms of the Rococo was that it "tortured" lines. Unlike classical curves, which followed predictable circular arcs, Rococo lines were unpredictable and free-flowing. Behind this rejection of geometric rigidity lay extraordinary technical challenges. Sinuosity was a deliberate choice, one that disrupted traditional forms, embracing fluidity and movement to establish a new sense of balance within undulating lines.

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## ECHOES OF THE ROCOCO

By the mid 18th century, condemnation of the Rococo was absolute, its style deemed irrational and decadent. Yet, fascination for the period's unparalleled creativity persisted. The 19th century, nostalgic for the Ancien Régime, eagerly drew inspiration from Rococo models, sometimes even replicating or reissuing them. However, these references were not always explicit or conscious. The exuberance, curves, asymmetry, contrasts, and free-flowing botanical forms infused the very essence of Art Nouveau, which paradoxically claimed to break from the past. The love of curves and nature has continued to inspire creators. In the late-20th century, postmodernism embraced the parody and reinvention of historical styles. Through references, reinterpretations, and revivals, the ever-renewed vitality of the Rococo fuels an ongoing dialogue between past and present.

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### "DÉBILLARDEZ-MOI"

From neo-Rococo to post-Rococo, this gallery of armchairs reveals a clear evolution in aesthetics, all sharing a common reference to the Rococo, whether subtle or overt. A particular design feature stands out: "débillardement", the seamless transition of a panel from profile to frontal view as it pivots on itself. This newfound fluidity in lines, which adapts to the shape of the seated body, was a true innovation in Rococo chair-making and remains a remarkable technical achievement in woodworking.

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### A GAME OF CURVES AND CHANCE

The unruly curves of the Rococo are constantly revisited. During the Second Empire, new types of seating emerged in the sinuous Neo-Louis XV style, such as the confident, a double armchair with seamlessly flowing backrests and armrests forming a single, continuous line. With Art Nouveau, this aesthetic of the curve took on dynamic arabesques, while contemporary and graphic design play with serpentine lines, creating compositions that either embrace the Rococo's exuberance or distill its essence into pure, refined silhouettes.

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### BOTANICAL FORMS

Certain contemporary designers have celebrated the unpredictable growth of plants, echoing the Rococo's fascination with nature's curiosities. Decorator Jean Royère created furniture with organic shapes, such as the *Liane* wall light, which unfurls like a climbing vine. Advocates of biodesign, Gavin and Alice Munro work with living materials to shape chairs, tables, and sculptures. They plant and cultivate trees, gently guiding their branches to grow into the desired forms, merging nature and design. Neoclassicism once reemerged, one might think modernity had swept this aesthetic aside. Yet Postmodernism, breaking with modernist ideals after World War II, sought to reconnect with history, whether reverently, ironically, playfully, or provocatively.



# CONTINUE YOUR VISIT TO THE MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS COLLECTIONS

**Your ticket gives you access to the entire museum,  
so make the most of it! Discover the new Drawings, Wallpaper,  
and Photographs Department on the 5th floor of the museum.**

Through special exhibitions, seminars, and individual consultations, you can explore a selection of works from our extensive collection of 200,000 drawings, 400,000 wallpaper samples, and 350,000 photographs at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

Since the institution's founding in 1864, works on paper have been collected to serve as models for workers, craftsmen, and artists. These collections, which span from the 15th to the 21st century, continue to grow, showcasing creativity within the decorative arts. From simple documents to masterpieces, they illustrate art objects, architecture, interior decor, botany, jewelry, fashion, and publishing.

This department was inaugurated in March 2025, made possible by the generous support of Sakurako and William Fisher, in honor of H el ene David-Weill and Maggie Bult.

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## Exhibition RUHLMANN D ECORATEUR from 12 March to 1 June 2025 at the Drawings, Wallpaper, and Photographs Department

History has established Jacques- mile Ruhlmann as the true champion of the 1925 exhibition. From March 12 to June 1, 2025, the Musée des Arts D ecoratifs will open the centennial celebration of the 1925 event with a tribute to this exceptional decorator, through drawings, wallpapers and photographs from its collections.



JACQUES- MILE RUHLMANN  
for the Soci t  fran aise des papiers peints,  
album page,  ditions d'art 1928-1930  
  Les Arts D ecoratifs



JACQUES- MILE RUHLMANN  
for the Desfoss  & Karth factory  
Wallpaper sample, 1917, continuous mechanical  
paper, hand-brushed blue background,  
2-colour cylinder print  
  Les Arts D ecoratifs

## INDIVIDUALS

### Guided tour

The presentation of drawings by Nicolas Pineau offers an insight into the creation of Rocaille art in the 18th century and its echoes down to the present day. From the drawing to the object, the tour traces the design and production stages of selected works from the Musée des Arts Décoratifs collections.

Fridays 11:30 AM - 1:00 PM

Saturdays 2:00 - 3:30 PM

### Lecture

LE GOÛT « BIZARRE » DE NICOLAS PINEAU (1684-1754), UN SCULPTEUR ROCAILLE ENTRE PARIS ET SAINT-PÉTERSBOURG

By Bénédicte Gady, Turner Edwards, François Gilles.

Thursday 27 March from 6:30 PM to 8 PM (in French only).

### GROUPS

Guided tour - in French or in English - are available for adults as well as youths, according to profile (student groups, recreation centers, higher education, associations, companies), at the day and time of their choice.

To book a guided tour:

reservation@madparis.fr / +33 (0) 1 44 55 57 66.

Scan to find all the information about the exhibition and to book activities:



### PUBLICATION

NICOLAS PINEAU, 1684-1754. UN SCULPTEUR ROCAILLE ENTRE PARIS ET SAINT-PÉTERSBOURG.

Edited by Bénédicte Gady, Turner Edwards et François Gilles

Available from the museum bookshop.

Co-published by Le Passage and Les Arts décoratifs. 504 pages, 700 illustrations, 26 × 32 cm, €85

Discover the collections and exhibitions of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs with our digital guide, available on the free app Bloomberg Connects



CURATORS: Bénédicte Gady, Turner Edwards, François Gilles

GRAPHISM: Lacasta Design

Les Arts Décoratifs is a non-profit association that brings together the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the Musée Nissim de Camondo and the Camondo School, the Ateliers du Carrousel and the library.

### MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS

107 rue de Rivoli - 75001 Paris

Open Tuesday to Sunday from 11 AM to 6.30 PM

Tickets on madparis.fr

### SUPPORT LES ARTS DÉCORATIFS!

Become a Friend of Les Arts Décoratifs or join one of the Circles of Patrons who support and actively participate in the life of the institution.

For further information please contact us at + 33 (0)1 44 55 59 78

or at [mecenat@madparis.fr](mailto:mecenat@madparis.fr)

### SOLO / DUO CARD

The SOLO or DUO pass is valid for one year and gives you unlimited priority access to the temporary exhibitions and permanent collections for one or two people. For more information, visit [madparis.fr](http://madparis.fr).



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