

# MANUFACTURING LUXURY

Parisian *marchands merciers* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

MUSÉE  
COGNACQ-JAY

EXHIBITION  
FROM 29 SEPTEMBER  
2018 TO 27 JANUARY 2019

INFORMATION  
[museecognacqjay.paris.fr](http://museecognacqjay.paris.fr)

**PRESS VIEWING: FRIDAY, 28 SEPTEMBER, 10.00 – 13.00**

Despite being famously and rather disdainfully defined as “sellers of everything, makers of nothing” by Diderot in his *Encyclopédie*, *marchands merciers* constituted one of the most important Parisian corporations of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

From 29 September 2018 to 27 January 2019, the musée Cognacq-Jay will present the very first exhibition dedicated to this highly codified corporation, known to have played a key role in the promotion of French art and luxury.

Through the study of the destinies of merchants like Gersaint or Duvaux, the museum will present a selection of some hundred works of art, documents and archives that illustrate the origins of luxury *à la parisienne*.

At once traders, importers, designers and interior decorators, *marchands merciers* played a major part in the rise of the industry of luxury items in their time. They were atypical characters who maintained ties with high society and built their trade on an international network of artists that all excelled at a variety of technical and artistic specialties, whether from Lyon or all the way from China.

*Marchands merciers* were at the heart of a three-headed network: the patron, the artisan or artist, and a new and increasingly powerful force – “fashion”. In order to earn a reputation and build a customer base, they began to develop advertising mechanisms with the help of anonymous designers or well-known artists like Boucher and Watteau.

Although the corporation was dissolved during the Revolutionary period, it still remains of great interest to art historians and academics in their research to this day. The exhibition explores how the context at the time led to the flourishing of their trade and gave them the keys to success and innovation, while also painting the portraits of some of its most famed representatives.



↑ Anonymous, *Pair of two-armed candelabra decorated with a bird and flowers, gilded bronze and porcelain, circa 1715-1774, Paris, musée Cognacq-Jay (inv. J328)* © Musée Cognacq-Jay / Roger-Viollet

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## The *marchands merciers*: a unique corporation

The name “marchand mercier” is derived from the term “mercerie”. While the latter now describes clothing and haberdashery items, it was synonymous with “merchandise” in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The regulations of the corporation were codified in 1613 and allowed the merchants to sell second-hand items or objects they had embellished or assembled themselves. As a consequence, *marchands merciers* became instrumental in the diffusion of arts and luxury outside royal circles. They acquired items from porcelain manufacturers and large transportation companies which they then turned into novel decorative objects with the help of goldsmiths, bronzesmiths and cabinetmakers.

## A map of Parisian luxury

Paris offered perfect conditions for the booming luxury industry: the financial resources, a vast clientele, highly qualified suppliers, and proximity to the court... We can now identify where the trade chose to congregate: rue Saint-Honoré, of course, but also near the Palais de Justice and rue Saint-Martin and Saint-Denis, where the merchants set up shop.

## The birth of advertising strategies

The very competitive nature of the trade led merchants to develop constant advertising strategies. To do so, they created signs or “brands” based on novel marketing resources: exclusive rights and monopolies, mentioning of prestigious clients in the ads, and the creation of easily recognisable visual identities for their signboards and business cards.

## The example of Gersaint: an emblematic *marchand mercier*

In 1720, it took Antoine Watteau only “eight mornings” to paint a remarkable sign for his friend Gersaint’s shop. This publicity stunt caused a sensation in the Parisian elites and made Gersaint one of the first *marchands merciers* to develop a well-curated advertising image. The musée Cognacq-Jay holds a preparatory sketch of the piece and features a large-scale reconstitution of the original painting.



↑ Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Sketch for Gersaint's signboard*, red and white chalk on paper, 1720, Paris, musée Cognacq-Jay (inv. J195)  
© Musée Cognacq-Jay / Roger-Viollet



↑ Nicolas Raguenet, *The Bargemen's Joust between the Pont Notre-Dame and Pont au Change*, oil on canvas, 1751, Paris, musée Cognacq-Jay (inv. P272) © Musée Carnavalet / Roger-Viollet

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### CURATOR

Rose-Marie Herda-Mousseaux, Head curator of the heritage department, director of the musée Cognacq-Jay

### EXPERT COMMITTEE

Vincent Bastien, Doctor of Art History

Stéphane Castelluccio, research associate at the CNRS

Natacha Coquery, University professor emerita, Lyon University

Carolyn Sargentson, Doctor of Art History and consultant

Sylvia Vríz, Art historian

Guillaume Glorieux, University lecturer, Head of research at the École des Arts Joailliers, with the support of Van Cleef & Arpels

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### MUSÉE COGNACQ-JAY

8, rue Elzévir - 75003 Paris

Open every day 10.00 – 18.00,  
except Mondays and some public holidays

Full price: 8 € / Reduced rate: 6 €

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