





CASTING A SPELL

Boiserie, or decorative wood panels, have adorned the walls of stately French homes for more than 400 years. Jérôme Coignard visits the Parisian atelier of Féau & Cie, where antique carvings are lovingly recreated and restored for a new, discerning clientele

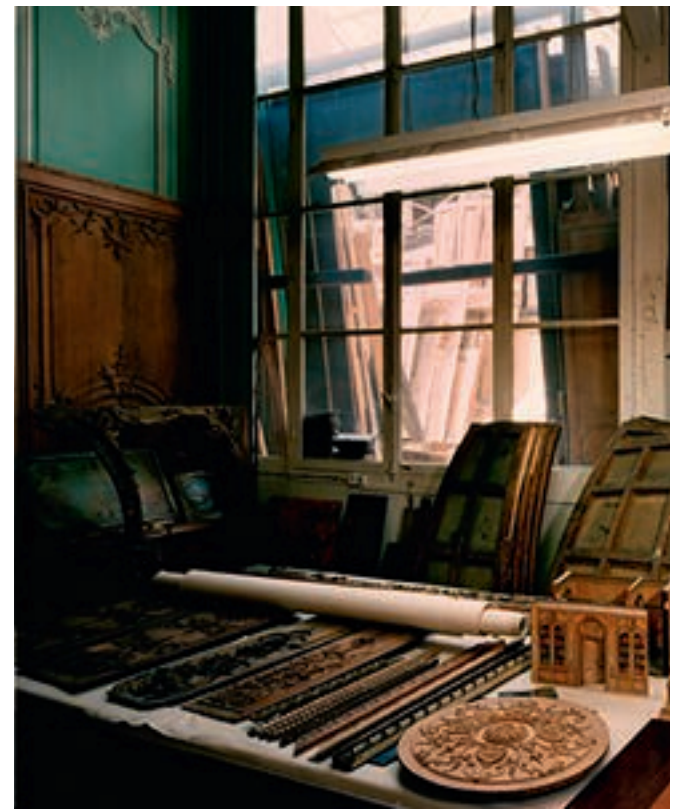
Tucked away in a quiet street of the seventeenth arrondissement of Paris is a small shop with a green front, discreet and old-fashioned in its elegance. Visitors who open the glass door have no idea of the spectacle awaiting within. Like Alice passing through the looking glass, they suddenly enter a world where flowers talk and animals from La Fontaine's *Fables* frolic in the shadow of caryatids and frowning masks. Carved in wood, painted, or gilded, these creatures all tell a story, the history of French grand décor since the seventeenth century. Along the walls, occupying over 10,700 square feet, decorative paneling stands in overlapping layers, sometimes so deep that you can only squeeze between. The word "showroom" hardly begins to do justice to the magic of this world that exists outside time. Welcome to Féau & Cie!

Guillaume Féau, the director here for 15 years and counting, explains: "Under this high glass roof built in 1885 were the workshops of the decorator Charles Fournier, who specialized in antique woodwork and copies of furniture." In fact, not much has changed here since the late nineteenth century, except that the mallets and chisels have fallen silent and the heady smell of varnish no longer fills the nostrils. A world renowned specialist of antique woodwork and reproduction paneling, or *boiserie*, Féau & Cie has more spacious workshops outside Paris – in Champigny-sur-Marne and in Moussy-le-Neuf, and a third site, dedicated to sculpture and finishing, farther south in Charente.

The company has some 40 permanent employees. "But that figure can quickly rise to over two hundred," adds Guillaume, "depending on the projects we're working on. Sometimes we find ourselves hiring 15 sculptors for three years on the trot, and then, all of a

sudden, no one. This flexibility is vital to our company's work, as you have to take on big projects at a moment's notice. We have about 30 on the go at the moment, and three of those exceed 215,000 square feet." Continuity is ensured by the workshop managers: the head gilder, for example, has been with Féau for 25 years. Not surprisingly, many of them are elite craftsmen who have completed the traditional training to become a Compagnon du Tour de France.

It was Guillaume's grandfather who bought the business in the 1960s. (After its creation by Fournier, the company was first taken over in 1916 by Raymond Grelleou.) Guillaume's father, Joël, who trained with the renowned interior design house Jansen, also worked for the firm. As a boy Guillaume was fascinated by this world and used to spend his time "organizing" the archives – a task akin to filling the Danaides' barrel. "It would take generations to finish the task," he recognizes today. When he was 16, his family offered him shares in the company. After business school and an attempt to set up a company in San Francisco, he came back to his childhood love and took up the reins at Féau, where he even managed to buy the premises. Under his guidance, the house took a new direction. Moving from general "decoration," which extended to upholstery and drapes, it refocused on the conception and production of large-scale décor schemes and the trade in antique woodwork, as in Charles Fournier's day.



Behind the unassuming doors of Féau & Cie, in an elegant, 19th-century Paris townhouse, intricately carved panels, mirrors, and doors fill a labyrinth of tiny rooms. This period room once graced a château in the Île-de-France and was faithfully recreated at Féau & Cie (previous pages); a collection of decorative moldings, both antique and reproduction, spanning four centuries of interior design (above); this huge skylight, with its interlaced metalwork, illuminates the showroom's atrium, once the workshop of the master panelist and company founder, Charles Fournier (right); one of the firm's specialist craftsmen at work, sculpting a new oak panel for the interior of Café Pouchkine in Paris (left)

Many of the 250-odd sets of panels waiting patiently here for an enthusiast to fall in love with them are truly exceptional. One recently acquired piece decorated with masks and musical instruments could well have adorned the apartments of Mme. de Pompadour at Versailles. Resting a little farther along the wall, a series of panels carved with animals symbolizing the four continents are attributed to the great architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. They were purchased by a Portuguese collector and once belonged to the house of Jansen. "They are slightly later than [Ledoux's] décor for the Café militaire," Féau points out. "They form one



of the finest ensembles from the eighteenth century.” In another room, paneling by Percier and Fontaine, the architects who designed Napoleon’s palaces, triumphantly displays the rigor and elegance of French neoclassicism. This set is thought to have come from the Hôtel de Beauharnais, the then residence of the emperor’s stepson (today it is the German embassy).

Running one’s fingers over these vast sculpted panels is a little like leafing through a giant book. The most spectacular of these treasures is without contest the interior conceived by the designer Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann in 1925 for Lord Rothermere, the owner of the *Daily Mirror*. These stylish bas-reliefs, these monumental columns, this paneling in mahogany and rosewood, have been cleaned and regained their honey-blond color. The panels adorned the large drawing room of the quintessentially art deco apartment at 154, avenue des Champs-Élysées, which was comprehensively furnished and decorated by Ruhlmann.

Guillaume Féau could not believe his luck when he seized this “top prize” from under the nose of the other bidders at the sale held by Christie’s Paris in 2009. But, far from rejoicing to see such a set being taken apart, he was amazed that it had not been listed as a *monument historique*. “It’s hard to imagine the number of decorative panels that quite simply disappear. I recently bought a big Louis XVI set of panels that was in a dumpster. Repainted over six or seven times, the carvings had lost their vivacity under the thick coats, so they looked more like a nineteenth-century pastiche, when in reality this was a very fine example of the art of the 1780s.”

The Ruhlmann ensemble should soon be entering



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the collection of a major museum. Its name must remain a secret for a little while longer, but we do know that Féau’s clients have included the new Louvre in Abu Dhabi and a host of wealthy art lovers such as Bernard Arnault, Martin Bouygues, François Pinault, and the brother of the Emir of Qatar, who owns one of the great jewels of seventeenth-century Parisian architecture, the Hôtel Lambert. Among the firm’s most spectacular productions are the interiors of the Villa Primavesi in Vienna, a masterpiece by the architect Josef Hoffmann. There they recreated a sumptuous series of eighteenth-century rooms and even a Turkish boudoir, inspired by the one at the Hôtel de Beauharnais.

At Féau, antique carvings are restored and, if necessary, completed, then reassembled using traditional techniques with turning pins. However, for 25 years now, this noble craft inherited from the eighteenth century, the golden age of decorative panels, has been complemented by the use of casting to reproduce wooden paneling. Originally, this process was carried out in collaboration with the Aligon family, which also handled all the casting for the artists Niki de Saint Phalle, Arman, César, and others of the Nouveau Réalisme movement. Today, molding is done in-house, in the Moussy workshops. The resin used there offers a density and hardness that is comparable to that of oak, as well as allowing for extraordinary detail.

Guillaume Féau is always ready to experiment. He has tried translating the exquisite delicacy of *ancien régime* ornamental carving into concrete, and his success in the medium can be admired at the Café Pouchkine, which opened in Paris’s Le Printemps department store three years ago. “We are always ready to adapt the creations of the eighteenth century. Working with Michael Smith, who redecorated the White House for the Obamas, we did a large-scale, classical décor in an apartment overlooking Central Park and painted it all in white. This harmonizes with a parquet floor overlaid with German silver. The furniture is by top designers such as André Dubreuil.”

A champion and fervent advocate of the decorative art of the eighteenth century, Guillaume Féau is also a man of his time; a discerning enthusiast for contemporary design and architecture. For proof, you need look no farther than his current efforts to persuade a client to bring in a leading architect for an ambitious new project – the visionary Frank Gehry.✦

Translated by Charles Penwarden

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Left: a magnificent Napoleon-era panel undergoing restoration before being reinstalled in the Düsseldorf home of a private collector. **Right:** the lavish interior of a dressing room created for a private client in Vienna. The made-to-measure Regency-style wardrobe panels feature decorative Chinese lacquer work

PHOTOGRAPHS: DIDIER HERMAN ROBERT POUDORI

