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JACQUES NÈVE
Horloger d'Art

+ 32 477 27 19 08 - jneve@horloger.net - www.horloger.net

**ATTRIBUTED TO ANDRÉ ANTOINE RAVRIO (1759 - 1814)
EXCEPTIONAL EMPIRE PERIOD MANTEL CLOCK:
“THE CHARIOT OF VENUS”**



Paris, circa 1805

H. 18" (45 cm), W. 25" (63 cm), D. 7 ½" (19 cm)

Chased and gilded bronze

Vert de mer marble plinth, on eight lion-paw feet

Dial by Coteau, signed *Leroy à Paris*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: E. Dumonthier, *Les bronzes du mobilier national, Pendules et Cartels*, Paris Ch. Massin ed., pl. 39; Jean-Dominique Augarde, *Les Ouvriers du Temps*, 1996, p.144, pl. 109; Maison Leroy, *Presentation Leaflet*.



The partially draped Venus, seated in her chariot, a dove on her knee, seems to be conversing with the handsome Adonis, an ardent hunter with whom she has fallen in love; she is assisted by Cupid, who, balancing his weight on one foot, holds the reins of the swan-drawn chariot. Dressed as a simple shepherd, Adonis is accompanied by his dog and carries a horn and hunting spear.

The plinth is cast with a chased-bronze frieze decorated with the attributes of love: two doves in flight hold a flower garland centred by a crowned double-heart trophy and are flanked on each side with a cupid forging love weaponry. Executed by Coteau, the ring-shaped dial features Roman hour numerals centred within small gilt-trimmed medallions and a very delicate floral and palmette décor on a light-blue enamel ground. Blued steel Breguet hands indicate the hours and minutes. The dial is set within the chariot's wheel, its six spokes creating open-work intervals that allow the "skeleton" movement and all its interior elements to be viewed from all sides.

Countwheel strike for the hours and the half hours on a silvered bell, silk suspension, anchor recoil escapement on 4 ½ teeth, two-weeks autonomy.



This scene is based on the tragic love story of Venus and Adonis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the account, Venus falls in love with the handsome hunter Adonis and has to share her love for him with the goddess Proserpina. Fearing for his life, Venus begs her lover not to hunt wild beasts. Adonis, ignoring her plea, is slain by one of the wild boars he pursues. From his blood springs an anemone, a short-lived flower symbolic of his early death.

Regarded in its time as a standard decorative arts subject, the theme of Venus and her chariot was appreciated more for its ornamental value than for its functional qualities: the dial set within the wheel made it difficult to read the time. Under Napoleon I pleasant genre scenes evoking the charms of the art of Louis XVI can be found decorating the palaces. In the domain of clockmaking, the chariot became an increasingly feminine motif. Love, nudity and seduction in a variety of metaphorical terms made gradual inroads in a society dominated by military art. Triggered by popular demand, the swan, mythic symbol of Apollo in love, reappeared in parks – we know that in 1803 Josephine was the first to introduce the black swan to her park at Malmaison; native to western Australia, the black swan was alien to Europe at the time. The swan's gracefully curved neck became the image of sensuality, replacing the coiled serpent and dolphin so characteristic of the arts of the previous century.



The swan first came into fashion as a decorative motif in 1798, when the architect Louis-Martin Berthault (1770-1823) used it to embellish Mme de Récamier's bed. Berthault went on to use the same swan motif when designing Empress Josephine's bedchamber at Malmaison, which was executed by Jacob-Desmalter in 1812 (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Empress Josephine's bed.
Rueil-Malmaison, châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau

Indeed, it is in this same bedchamber, where Josephine died on 29 May 1814, that an identical example of our mantel clock can be found (fig. 2).¹ Designed with a blend of grandeur and sensuality, the clock bears witness to Josephine's taste for beautiful works of art.

¹ This Chariot of Venus mantel clock came from the Hôtel de Brienne, where Madame Mère, the mother of Napoleon I, resided.



Fig. 2. “Chariot of Venus” Mantel Clock
Rueil-Malmaison, châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau
(Inv. no. MM.40.47.7209)

Another example attributed to Antoine-André Ravrio (fig. 3), originally from the collection of Prince Murat at the Elysée Palace, is housed today in the *Mobilier national* (inv. GML 7264), a repository which preserves the former royal collection. In 1809 the clock decorated Emperor Napoleon’s study on the palace’s ground floor. Caroline Murat, Napoleon’s youngest sister chose it to embellish her apartment’s “silver boudoir”. Still in place at the Elysée today, the boudoir features armchairs with armrests in the shape of the same signature swan-neck motif (fig. 4). Besides these two examples of reference, there exists another identical model, which belonged to maréchal Ney (1769-1815) and once embellished his quarters at the Tuileries Palace.

The taste for the so-called “chariot clock” reached its peak during the Empire period and gave rise to a multitude of variations on the theme of the horse and carriage, which took on a variety of animal forms; some chariot models were pulled by steer, lions, leopards, deer or even greyhounds.



PALAIS DE L'ÉLYSÉE
 Pendule représentant « LE CHAR DE VÉNUS ». Composition attribuée à BAVINO.
 En 1809, cette pendule décorait le cabinet de travail de l'Empereur Napoléon I^{er}, au Palais de l'Élysée.
 Hauteur 0 m. 44. Largeur du socle 0 m. 61. Profondeur 0 m. 17. Diamètre du cadran 0 m. 11 1/2.

Museo, Berlino - Paris.

Fig. 3 “Chariot of Venus” Mantel Clock
H. 44 cm W. 61 cm D. 17 cm
Collection of the *Mobilier national* (Inv. no. GML 7264)



Fig. 4. The Silver Boudoir at the Elysée Palace.



After a close study of the model presented here, its original composition can be attributed, like the other existing examples, to the work of **Antoine-André Ravrio (1759 – 1814)**, one of the most important Parisian *bronziers* of the Empire period. His father, a skilled bronze caster, was respected for his principles and talent, and his mother was related to Riesener, cabinetmaker to the French royal family. Ravrio became master founder in 1777 and figured among the most important Parisian *bronziers* of late eighteenth-century and Empire period, establishing himself at 93 rue de Richelieu under the name Ravrio et Cie.

Official supplier to the *Garde-meuble impérial* (Imperial Furniture Warehouse), Ravrio participated, alongside the *bronziers* Thomire and Galle, in the refurnishing of Napoleon's principal residences and supplied bronze furniture mounts to prominent figures of the period, notably certain marshals of the Empire.

He also had commissions to supply the palaces of Fontainebleau, Compiègne, Meudon, Stuppines and Monte-Cavallo with bronze objects, which included candelabra, chandeliers, candlesticks, lanterns, wall lamps and andirons. The *Mobilier national* in Paris still houses some of Ravrio's pieces.



The origins of the Leroy firm can be traced back to the eighteenth century, and more precisely to 1747, when Basile Le Roy (1731-1803) began his apprenticeship with Sr. Joseph Quélin, a master clockmaker established in Paris. A few years later, after becoming a master clockmaker himself, Basile, together with his father, opened up his first shop under the covered arcades of the Palais Royal – where it remained for over a century.

After the French Revolution, Basile Le Roy established his reputation by selling high-quality traditional and decimal timepieces with or without striking mechanisms. In 1805 he was named ‘Clockmaker to her Imperial and Royal Highness, Madame, the Mother of His Majesty the Emperor’, and by 1810 was producing clocks for officers in Napoleon’s army. In 1828, his son Charles-Louis Le Roy took over the family business, which at the time counted at least fifty employees.

Accumulating the titles of Clockmaker to the Dukes of Chartres and Bourbon, Clockmaker to the King and the Duke of Orleans, as well as Clockmaker to the Ministry of the Navy, the firm of Le Roy & Fils continued to pursue its expansion. Casimir Halley Desfontaines, a businessman of great talent and foresight, acquired the firm in 1845. He gave the firm renewed prominence by opening a first shop in London in 1854 at 211 Regent Street, which was followed quickly by another location on New Bond Street.