

French *Beaucaire* Gilt Wood Mirror

Dimensions: 90 cm x 67 cm

Materials and technique: carved and gilt, silvered and painted wood frame, mirror glass

Style: French Régence

Period: middle of the 18th century

Origin: Southern France, possibly Provence region



Description of the artefact

The mirror frame is made of carved and gilt wood, with some silvered and possibly green painted elements. The elaborated decoration of the frame is made in a low relief carving. The gilding is executed by the traditional gold-plating technique. As is often the case with carved and gilt furniture, the mirror frame is made of a softwood species such as lime wood, since it was suitable for detailed carving. The process of gilding is performed in a number of stages which required a high skill from a craftsman. Bologna chalk powder (*gesso di Bologna*), rabbit glue (collagen-based glue from rabbit skin) and a special type of clay known as Armenian bolus (*bolo*

armeno) were traditionally used for preparing a ground for applying thin leaves of real gold on wooden surface. Armenian bolus has a characteristic reddish-brownish colour, and on this mirror frame, a warm brown tone could be seen on the parts where the gold leaves were rubbed off. In addition to gold some elements of the frame were covered with thin leaves of silver and possibly tinted in green.

The back side of the mirror is covered with pinewood panels.

The mirror of this proportions usually would be placed over the mantel in a room.

The mirror is composed of a rectangular body which is topped by an arch. The lower rectangular body has carved gilt wood frame with double borders. Between the borders perforated decoration is carved backed by mirror glass, too. The sides of this frame are formed of "C" scrolls and foliage entwined with grapevine leaves. The grapevine leaves are silvered and they show traces of greenish colour. The upper side of the frame is centered by two small scrolls and foliage ornament, while the centre of the lower side is carved with an arrangement of fruits and leaves. The rectangular body is surmounted by a large carved gilt wood arch composed of scalloped volutes with mirrored back. In the middle of the arch the motive of a basket with a profusion of fruits and leaves is carved. The leaves are silvered and they show traces of greenish colour. A basket full of fruits, leaves and flowers is a reference to a cornucopia or a horn of plenty, and as such it is a symbol of abundance and wealth.

The overall effect of the mirror with sinuous outlines and elaborated decoration is opulent indeed. The design of the mirror owns some features of the grand Louis XIV style, but the composition is lighter and more playful announcing the graceful Louis XV style. So the style of the mirror actually represents the transition between those two styles, which is known as French Régence style, which will be discussed below.

Analysis of the style and the story about the provenance of the mirror

This mirror should be analysed in a context of merging styles and adopting fashions dictated by the highest aristocracy in the 18th century France. The style of the mirror could be identified as Régence, the place of production southern France (possibly Provence), and the date the third quarter of the 18th century. But by that date in the French capital Régence style was by far outdated by the more fluid and playful Louis XV style. Still the mirror is an authentic product of its time. How is that possible?

From the late the 17th and during the 18th century French royal residences were the ultimate arbiters of fashion, so even the various styles of that epoch were named after the ruling kings. The age of great grandeur during the rule of Louis XIV - *the Sun King* (1643 - 1715) gave rise to the splendid **Louis XIV style**. From 1715 to 1723 France was ruled by Philip II, Duke of Orléans, who acted as a regent in a name of a still minor heir to the throne. This period is known as regency, and the style of this decade is defined as **Régence style**. From 1730's to 1760's graceful **Louis XV style** flourished, named after the beloved King Louis XV (ruled 1723-1774). It could be noted that the Louis XIV style was a French classicist variant of the Baroque style, while the term "Louis XV style" can be considered as a synonym for European Rococo. Régence was a transitional style between Louis XIV and Louis XV styles.

The fashion was always meant to be followed. So current trends established by kings passed from the royal palaces to the residences of aristocracy and nobility. Gradually even the upper middle class was able to adopt the new styles. But at every stage of this process new fashion trends were adapting to the status and material wealth of a specific social class. And inevitably there has been a delay in acceptance of all new trends by lower social classes, notably in the areas distant from the capital – Paris.

So this particular mirror, fashioned after a Régence style model, was made for a high bourgeoisie home in the second half of the 18th century. What is more interesting is that this type of mirror was actually very popular in the 18th century France. Many workshops making luxurious goods by special order for nobility and clergy, produced this variant of mirror design in series, for their bourgeoisie clientele. Those mirrors could have been of various sizes, but they were always of a substantially identical forms, and they were intended to be sold at the famous Beaucaire fair. Hence this type of mirror is known as “*Beaucaire mirror*”.

Beaucaire is a small town that lies along the Rhône River, not far from the Mediterranean Sea coast, in the south-eastern France. In the past it was in the former Languedoc province, historical and cultural region of the distinctive civilization. Now Beaucaire is in the modern-day Occitanie region in Southern France. The political independence of Languedoc lasted until the middle of the 13th century when it was annexed by the French crown. Before that it was ruled by the counts of Toulouse. Town of Beaucaire used to be an important river port, and in 1217 the Count Raymond VI of Toulouse founded the Beaucaire Fair, held annually in July ever since. The fair was by far the most important commercial event in France, and it was very well known throughout whole Europe, too. It attracted from 120,000 to 300,000 visitors a year. In his “*Treatise on Commerce in France before 1789*” historian Pierre Émile Levasseur (1828 – 1911) noted: “*Placed at the outlet of the Rhone, it (the Beaucaire Fair) attracted oriental merchants from Tunis, Alexandria, Syria and Constantinople, Greeks, Italians from Venice and Genoa; the Aragonese and the Catalans of Barcelona; the Portuguese, the English, even the Germans and the merchants of France, who came from all parts of the territory.*” Most goods were brought to Beaucaire by boats, so with the advent of railway in the 19th century, the prominence and the scope of this market dramatically declined. But the memories of its former glory did not fade.



View of the Beaucaire fair from the period when “*Beaucaire mirrors*” were sold, coloured engraving, 18th century

The so called "*Beaucaire mirrors*" were usually made in province workshops of southern France, during the 18th century, and they were brought for sale to the Beaucaire fairs. They were intended for the upper middle class costumers, and by all means they were not an easy affordable goods. For example a small "*Beaucaire mirror*" costed nearly a year salary of a French army soldier. Since they were a kind of luxurious items and in that sense status symbols, there was a custom of presenting a "*Beaucaire mirror*" to a bride by a groom's family, so sometimes they were referred to as "*marriage mirrors*" too. A basket full of fruits as a main decorative motive on this type of mirror, and a symbol of abundance and wealth, and therefore of happiness too, should be a reminder of this particular purpose of "*Beaucaire mirrors*".



For „Antique Art“

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