

Thomas Compigné, tabletier to King Louis XV

A new analysis of the work and career of the little-known but highly accomplished *tabletier* Thomas Compigné, who worked in Paris in the second half of the eighteenth century, clarifies our understanding of his life, techniques and achievement.

by ORANE CONAN

THE PAINTINGS OF THE French *tabletier* Thomas Compigné (doc. 1750–78) are some of the most original examples of the intriguing genre that he invented in the second half of the eighteenth century. Largely ignored by art historians, they were only studied by a handful of scholars in the twentieth century. Anita Semail's 1975 article remains one of the leading references on the subject.¹ In 1991 the exhibition *Compigné, Peintre et tabletier du Roy*, organised by the Villa Musée Fragonard, Grasse, brought together for the first time a large number of works by Compigné from private collections. Its catalogue put forward new hypotheses about Compigné, but also contains a great deal of erroneous information.² The present article aims to establish the truth about Compigné by providing previously unpublished information on his life and art.

As a *tabletier*, Compigné was part of a large and flourishing guild of artists who produced a wide variety of objects. The *Livre des métiers* by Étienne Boileau, written around 1268, states that *tabletiers* were makers of writing tablets – small notebooks made of wood or ivory coated with wax, on which a few words could be traced with a stylus. Over the centuries, this guild gradually merged with other trades: first comb-makers, then cutlers, handle-makers, dice-makers and finally, in 1776, with fan-makers and *luthiers*. The guild's statutes were renewed in 1741.³ In eighteenth-century Paris, *tabletiers* were primarily established on the Right Bank, to the east of Les Halles. There was even a rue de la Tabletterie, beginning at rue Saint-Denis and later absorbed into rue des Halles when the latter was opened up under the Second Empire. Rue Greneta, where Compigné resided, also brought together several *tabletiers* in the second half of the century, while others were established in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine.⁴ They produced numerous objects for everyday life: gaming pieces,

1. Snuffbox with inserted medallion showing *View of Marseilles*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1750–1800. Wood, tortoiseshell, pewter and gold, diameter 12 cm. (Private collection).

devotional objects, combs, candlesticks, writing sets, cases, caskets and snuffboxes, as well as walking sticks. These items catered to elite taste for precious and useful things – prized objects of daily life – which were then grouped under the term *bijoux* (jewels).

The objects produced by *tabletiers* were considered luxurious as much for the virtuosity of their production techniques – wood or mother-of-pearl marquetry, ivory carving, lathe-turning and metal chasing – as for the value of the materials from which they were made. Gold and silver were commonly used, as well as imported materials such as inlaid or moulded tortoiseshell or piqué with gold, ivory and exotic woods. *Tabletiers* also worked in collaboration with other trades. They worked alongside goldsmiths to create elaborate boxes and snuffboxes and supplied cabinetmakers with marquetry work or helped to construct original pieces of furniture. Compigné, a Parisian *tabletier* established at least from 1750 at the Temple, distinguished himself through his unprecedented production method. In addition to the snuffboxes (Fig.1) and other cases that could be found in his shop, he created original paintings 'made on the lathe', a privileged tool of his guild. It is this unique production that will be examined here.

To date, little is known about the origin and life of Compigné. The catalogue of the 1991 Grasse exhibition was the first to suggest that he was Italian in origin.⁵ This hypothesis, based on the spelling of his name in contemporary documents as 'Compigni', appears to be erroneous and it can instead be proposed that his origins should be sought in Normandy.⁶ There are many instances of the name in Dieppe and Rouen in the eighteenth century and several factors suggest that he was related to a Rouen family. There were many *tabletiers* in the city at that time as it was a major hub

1 A. Semail: 'Les Compignés et leurs créateurs', *Plaisir de France* 427 (1975), pp.25–31. See also *L'Estampille, l'Objet d'Art* 227 (1989), pp.25–31.

2 A. Martin, ed.: exh. cat. *Compigné: Peintre et tabletier du Roy*, Grasse (Villa Musée Fragonard) 1991.

3 D. Alcouffe: 'Les Tabletiers parisiens

au XVIIIe siècle', *Métiers d'Art* 54–55 (1994–95), pp.22–26.

4 N. Coquery: 'La boutique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle', unpublished PhD thesis (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2006), for example, cites Louis Vadon, *tabletier* on Rue Greneta, in 1761. She also refers to

M. Roze de Chantoiseau: *Essai sur l'almanach général d'indication d'adresse personnelle et domicile fixe*, Paris 1769, which lists four *tabletiers* on that street. *Annonces, affiches et avis divers* (28th February 1774) likewise mention 'Sieur Dumur, *tabletier*, Rue Greneta'.

5 Martin, *op. cit.* (note 2).

6 See, for example, *Annonces, affiches, nouvelles et avis divers de l'Orléanois* 48 (1764), p.190. However, Compigné sometimes spelled his own name 'Compignié' on some *Views of Marseilles*, see for example Fig.11.





for the importation of exotic materials needed to make *tabletterie* objects, including ivory, tortoiseshell and exotic woods. Throughout the entirety of the eighteenth century, *tabletiers* and other merchants with the Compigné name are recorded in Rouen.⁷ Some occupied particularly influential positions: the *Almanach royal* and then the *Almanach national de France* listed Compigné as Danish consuls in Rouen from 1749 to 1793.⁸ On 4th January 1766 Marie Victoire Compigné, the daughter of Abraham François Compigné, son of the second consul, was baptised and the godfather mentioned in the register was ‘Thomas Compigné, merchant in Paris.’⁹

Whatever his origins may have been, the first confirmed mention of Thomas Compigné is in Paris in 1750. Archive documents and numerous

advertisements published on his behalf in periodicals such as *L'Avant-Coureur*, the *Mercure de France*, the *Annonces, affiches et avis divers*, the *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* and *L'Année littéraire* provide evidence of his career. The aim of these advertisement articles was to promote the work of the *tabletier*; however, they also provide valuable insights into the development of his career and diversity of his work. Using them, the chronology of Compigné’s life can be summarised as follows. The earliest mention of Thomas Compigné is to be found in a lease recorded on 2nd March 1750, when he rented two houses in the Temple enclosure for nine years.¹⁰ Adjoining and situated in front of the main entrance, each comprised a shop on the ground floor, a room on the first floor and an

7 One of these *tabletiers* is Jacques Campigny (b.1701), the son of Jacques Campigny, another *tabletier*, and Judith Le Cointre. It seems that two spellings of his name were used: although the register of his baptism in 1701 mentions the name ‘Campigny’, his father’s signature on the register is ‘Compigné’. Parish registers of Saint-Pierre-du-Châtel, Rouen, 1701, Archives départemental de la Seine-Maritime, Rouen (01/01/1701 - 31/12/1710), 3E1.
8 The *Almanachs royaux* of 1749, 1752, 1754, 1756, 1759, 1760, 1762, 1763, 1764, 1765, 1769 and 1773 mention a Compigné as Danish consul, as does the

Almanach national de France of 1793.
9 Parish registers of Sainte-Croix-des-Pelletiers de Rouen, Seine-Maritime departmental archive, 4 E 1999, 1759–69, ‘Thomas Compigné, marchand à Paris’.
10 Archives nationales, Paris (hereafter AN), Minutes et répertoire du notaire François Jean Roger, MC/ET/XCII/564.
11 *Mercure de France* 1 (January 1756), p.230.
12 ‘Fabriques’, *ibid.*
13 See, for example, *L'Année littéraire* VIII (24th December 1768), pp.286–88.
14 ‘Il ne fait même aucune difficulté

de montrer aux Curieux honnêtes sa manufacture & ses procédés’, E. Fréron: *L'Année littéraire* VI (6th November 1773), pp.350–52.
15 The number of appearances in periodicals gives us an idea of the *tabletier*’s level of activity. We have been able to find two mentions of his name in the press in 1770 and 1771; his activity then appears to intensify between 1772 and 1774, years in which we have identified between nine and fourteen articles describing his shop. In 1775, only two articles mention him; none in 1776; then again two in 1777 and three in 1778.

16 *Gazette de France* 103 (23rd December 1776), p.466: ‘Le sieur Compigné, *Tabletier, pensionné breveté de Sa Majesté, n’a pas quitté, comme l’on l’a dit, son Magasin, qui est toujours rue Greneta, au Roi David*’
17 The last mention of his name in periodicals that we have found is in the *Annonces, affiches et avis divers* 56 (20th July 1778), p.1067; and C. Baulez: *Revue du Louvre* 4 (October 1993). The source for this information is not cited and research is still undergoing to identify it.
18 E. Fréron: *L'Année littéraire* VIII (24th December 1768), pp.286–88.

attic, the whole completed by a cellar. The houses were interconnected and would have been ideal for the establishment of a business. The lease described Compigné as a 'manufacturer of turned tortoiseshell snuffboxes', who was to offer his 'wares' in the shops of the houses. Compigné thus set up on his own account and appeared to have been at the head of a workshop and a shop. He undertook to pay an annual rent of 450 livres. He was not yet married, as the lease specified that any future wife would also be required to ratify the document. Finally, his large, calligraphic signature suggests that he was a literate man. On 22nd October 1754 an amendment to this lease was made. Compigné declared then that he was leaving the two houses for premises 'more suitable for his trade', the location of which is not specified. He nevertheless most likely remained at the Temple until 1756, when he moved to Rue Greneta.

In January 1756 the *Mercure de France* announced that Compigné had set up shop in rue Greneta, under the *Roi David* sign.¹¹ Compigné had there, as in the Temple, a workshop and a shop. The announcement mentioned the transfer of his 'workshops'¹² and his richly stocked shop is described several times in periodicals.¹³ He even invited the curious

to come and see his manufactory and techniques in 1773.¹⁴ Compigné's activity seemed to decline from 1775 onwards.¹⁵ In 1776 he even felt obliged to remind the Parisian public that he was still in business.¹⁶ No further mention of his work as a *tabletier* has been found after July 1778 and he was recorded as bankrupt in October 1778.¹⁷ By that time he had been in business for at least twenty-eight years.

In 1768 the columnist Fréron wrote a laudatory description of Compigné's shop in *L'Année littéraire*.¹⁸ Among the many goods available at the *Roi David*, he described paintings made using a lathe:

One essential point, which I must not omit, is that the same artist will show you a great number of paintings on tortoiseshell, some imitating various landscapes and seaports, others

3. *View of Utrecht surroundings*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1770–80. Pewter, gold and gouache, 19 by 23 cm. (Private collection).

4. *View of Utrecht surroundings*, by James Mason after Aert van der Neer. c.1750–83. Engraving, 31.2 by 42.8 cm. (British Museum, London). inv. 1861,1109.184





decorated with interesting busts, such as those of Francis I, Henry IV, Sully, Louis XV, etc. These paintings, intended to adorn cabinets, are charming and produce a very pleasing effect. There are also snuffboxes featuring the same busts, painted in relief on tortoiseshell.¹⁹

It seems that Compigné originally developed this process in the late 1750s to decorate his snuffboxes and then began to use it to produce independent paintings from the late 1760s onwards. He worked every day to perfect the decoration of his objects with ‘designs of his own composition, which he executes on tortoiseshell & cardboard’.²⁰ Snuffboxes had formed the greater part of his stock at this period and Fréron noted that his shop was supplied with ‘four or five thousand snuffboxes’. These small boxes were very fashionable and therefore in high demand; consequently, the decoration of them was a subject of considerable interest to *tabletiers*.

The first mention of ‘drawings executed on the lathe’, a description which Compigné later used extensively to designate his paintings, and which can be found inscribed on many of them, was made in the *Avant-Coureur* of 28th December 1767:

He also has all sorts of snuffboxes, both tortoiseshell and cardboard, decorated with drawings executed on the lathe, in tortoiseshell and gold, as well as various miniature objects; tortoiseshell bas-reliefs, and various subjects suitable for decorating cabinets.²¹

This expanded list of items that Compigné could produce, which now included independent pictures ‘suitable for decorating cabinets’, demonstrates that these paintings were no longer conceived solely as box decorations but had evolved into works of art in their own right. The scenes created with the lathe are particularly interesting as they result from an unprecedented use of this tool. Traditionally, a lathe is used to make simple chevron or wave patterns; Compigné combined and adapted these simple forms to create complex, textured compositions (Fig.2). In this way, he invented a new technique and a new type of object far removed from the objects usually produced by his guild. Although a few decorated snuffboxes survive today, these detached paintings are more commonly seen.

Compigné’s innovative works are made of pewter or of tortoiseshell that has been stamped, painted and gilded. Four principal types of paintings can be identified: small medallions measuring approximately 9 centimetres in diameter; larger medallions of about 17 centimetres in diameter; rectangular pictures measuring approximately 13.5 by 17.5 centimetres; and finally large rectangular pictures measuring 24 by

32 centimetres. Tortoiseshell appears to have been used only for the small medallions, judging from the surviving examples.²² To create his paintings, Compigné used a *tabletier*’s lathe or *guilloche* lathe to incise a motif on a metal matrix.²³ A sheet of pewter was then pressed onto the matrix, taking the imprint. More than one sheet could be stamped in this way, and there are several Compigné paintings made using the same matrix. The pewter was then painted with gouache and gilded with a mixture of powdered gold and gum arabic applied with a brush. The technique used to fix the paint to the metal differs, and various materials can be employed – ox gall appears to have been an ideal solution in the case of the Compigné workshop. Finally, the ancillary elements of the historiated scenes, such as the figures in the views of towns and monuments, were often painted rather than stamped, creating variations between each painting. Tortoiseshell paintings were made by pressing a sheet of tortoiseshell, previously softened in a mixture of hot water and oil, onto the matrix. Scenes on tortoiseshell were usually only gilded.

Until now, only a few subjects of Compigné’s paintings – mostly city views – have been securely identified. However, research in eighteenth-century periodicals, conducted by the present author, has revealed the titles, dates and sources of a substantial number of his works. This has

Opposite

6. *Particular view of Paris, from the Pont Royal towards the Pont Neuf*, by Jacques Rigaud. 1729–52. Engraving, 24 by 48 cm. (Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles). inv. GR 150.5

5. *View of Paris from the Pont Royal*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1772. Pewter, gold and gouache, diameter 9 cm. (Private collection).

2. *Detail of View of the canal from Ypres to Veurne*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1770–80. Pewter, gold and gouache. (Private collection).



19 'Une chose essentielle, que je ne dois pas omettre, c'est que le même Artiste vous fera voir un grand nombre de tableaux en écaïlle, les uns imitant différens paisages & ports de mer, les autres décorés de bustes intéressans, tels que ceux de François Ier, de Henri IV, de Sulli, de Louis XV, &c. Ces tableaux, destinés à orner des cabinets, sont charmans, & font un effet très-agréable. Il y a des tabatières avec ces même bustes, peints en relief sur l'écaïlle', *ibid.*

20 *Mercure de France* I (January 1756), p.230.

21 'on trouve aussi chez lui toutes sortes de Tabatières, tant en écaïlle qu'en carton, ornées de dessins exécutés au Tour, en écaïlle & en

or, outre différens objets de miniatures; des bas-reliefs en écaïlle, & divers sujets propres à orner des Cabinets', *L'Avant-Coureur* 52 (28th December 1767), p.820.

22 The large medallions delivered for the king in December 1772 are said to have been made of tortoiseshell, and their exceptional size for this material is explicitly described, see *Le Mercure de France* I (January 1773), p.198.

These paintings have not been traced to date, although they were thought to have appeared in sale, Christie's London, *Old Masters Evening Sale*, 6th July 2017, lot 24.

23 The present author thanks the painter and restorer Pierre Relkin for the technical information in this section.



demonstrated how Compigné drew his inspiration from current events and fashionable subjects, but also made paintings according to special requests from his customers:

People who would want to obtain in this way plans and elevations of their châteaux, views of their parks, gardens, etc., or any other subjects they indicated to Sr Compigné, simply have to give him their orders; they will be satisfied in a very short time.²⁴

Among the nearly 350 paintings currently known, it is possible to identify about one hundred different subjects. Some are rather rare and sometimes even experimental, while others were produced in large numbers and were widely appreciated.²⁵ Compigné mentioned the subjects of his first paintings in 1768, which he continued to develop until 1770, when

24 'Les personnes qui voudront se procurer de cette manière les plans & les élévations de leurs châteaux, les vues de leurs parcs, jardins, &c, ou tels sujets qu'elles indiqueront au Sr Compigné, n'auront qu'à lui donner leurs ordres; elles seront satisfaites

en très peu de temps', E. Fréron: *L'Année littéraire* 1770 IV (30th October 1770), p.216.

25 For example, we have been able to identify at least fifteen Views of the environs of Frankfurt, but only three Views of the port of Bordeaux.

26 *Annonces, affiches et avis*

Opposite

7. *View of Rome surroundings*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1770–80. Pewter, gold and gouache, diameter 9.5 cm. (Private collection).

8. *View of Rome surroundings*, by R.F. Taunay after Widenhaver. Second half of the 18th century. Engraving, 43.2 by 58.5 cm. (Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva). inv. E 2017-1668.

9. *View of the surroundings of Frankfurt am Mein*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1770–80. Pewter, gold and gouache, 13.5 by 17.5 cm. (Private collection).

10. *Surroundings of Frankfurt am Mein*, by Jean-Jacques Leveau after Franz Edmund Weirrotter. Second half of the 18th century. Engraving, 28.5 by 35 cm. (Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva). inv. E 2012-0064.

he proposed no fewer than forty-four new subjects.²⁶ In 1772 he added around fifteen additional themes.²⁷

Engravings were a particularly important source of Compigné's inspiration. These include French prints based on works by such artists as Claude Joseph Vernet (1714–89) and Pierre-Antoine Baudouin (1723–69), as well as a number of foreign sources based on Canaletto (1697–1768) and Aert van der Neer (1603–77; Figs.3 and 4). He also employed several views from the *Maisons royales de France* (1730–54) by Jacques Rigaud (1681–1754), notably those of the *Palais des Tuileries*, the *Palais du Luxembourg* and the *View of Paris from the Pont Royal* (Figs.5 and 6). Compigné represented subjects from across Europe, such as *Views of the surroundings of Florence* or *Views of the surroundings of Rome* (Figs.7 and 8), the *Great Alley of Vauxhall Gardens in London* and the *View of the surroundings of Frankfurt am Mein* (Figs.9 and 10). These themes reveal a cultivated clientele, familiar with extensive travel.

Some sources remain to be identified, which raises the question of how many of Compigné's subjects were his own invention.²⁸ Other scenes were interpretations of engravings rather than exact copies, made either by modifying certain details or by combining several elements taken from different engravings to create a new, composite scene. This is the case with the views inspired by Vernet, in particular the *View of the Fountain of St John in Marseilles* (Fig.11), the foreground of which uses the eponymous subject of the painter to the king (Fig.12) and the background of which uses elements from his *First view of Marseilles* (Fig.13).

The nature of the clientele who acquired Compigné's works can be inferred from various sources. His connections with the court were demonstrated in particular by his presentation to the king of a *View of Paris from the Pont Royal*, which is mentioned in an inscription on all of Compigné's paintings depicting the subject. Contemporary periodicals record that he had the opportunity to present his works to the royal family four times and that he skilfully used this honour to enrich his reputation.

The *guilloché* lathe was an instrument that was particularly appreciated by the eighteenth-century European elite – Louis XV himself was regarded as a talented turner, the lathe being one of his preferred tools. At any given time between 1722 and 1744, there was an average of thirteen *cabinets du Tour* at Versailles.²⁹ The king also maintained *cabinets du Tour* at Marly, Compiègne and Fontainebleau, within which were displayed 'portrait lathes', 'perpendicular lathes' and *guilloché* lathes.³⁰ An enlightened monarch ever curious about scientific innovation, he wished to be presented with the latest inventions and their inventors. It therefore seems natural that he should have received Compigné's innovation with favour.

divers 99 (22nd December 1768), p.1038; and Fréron, *op. cit.* (note 24), pp.212–16.

27 *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* 47 (18th November 1772), p.188.

28 Certain subjects mentioned in periodicals have not yet been matched with surviving Compigné paintings, and

it has not been possible to assign a title to some of the preserved pictures.

29 H. Delalex: 'Louis XV dans son particulier: les Tours du Roi', in Y. Carlier, ed.: *exh. cat. Louis XV: Passions d'un roi*, Paris (Château de Versailles) 2022, pp.264–72.

30 *Ibid.*





On 3rd August 1772 Compigné presented the king and the royal family with two of his paintings during their stay in Compiègne castle: a *View of the Château of Versailles* and a *View of Paris from the Pont Royal*. The periodicals of the second half of 1772 reported this event extensively.³¹ For example:

Among the considerable number of paintings done on the lathe, of which the Sieur Compigné has increased his brilliant and rich collection, you will see with pleasure, Sir, the view of the Château de Versailles from the gardens, & that of Paris, taken from the Pont Royal, which he has just recently executed. He had the honour of presenting these two charming paintings to the King and the Royal Family at Compiègne, which His Majesty deigned to accept and which he honoured with his approval. These two pieces are indeed worthy of a place in a Cabinet among the most curious works of Art.³²

This honour was quickly repeated: a few months later, on 14th December 1772, Compigné presented the king at Versailles with two new paintings on tortoiseshell, a *View of the Château de Saint-Hubert from the entrance* and a *View*

11. *View of the fountain of St John in Marseilles*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1770. Tortoiseshell and gold, diameter 8.5 cm. (Private collection).

Opposite

12. *View of the fountain of St John in Marseilles*, Pierre François Laurent after Joseph Vernet. c.1750–1800. Engraving, 31.6 by 35.5 cm. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

13. *First view of Marseilles*, by Jacques Aliamet after Joseph Vernet. 1776. Engraving, 35.8 by 45 cm. (Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva).

of the Château de Saint-Hubert from the pond. This led to Louis XV, just over a fortnight later, granting him a brevet as *tabletier* to the king:

Today, the first of January 1773, the King being at Versailles and wishing to make known the benevolence that His Majesty grants to those who seek to distinguish themselves in their art, and being well informed of the experience that Sieur Compigné has acquired in the profession of tabletier and of the integrity with which he practices it, to this end His Majesty has permitted and does permit him to take the title and designation of His tabletier in all the deeds he shall execute, to use it both in court and out of court, and to have it inscribed on his painting, without, for this reason,

31 See, for example, *L'Avant-Coureur* (24th August 1772); *Annonces, affiches et avis divers* (24th August 1772); *L'Année littéraire* (28th August 1772); *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* (9th September 1772); and *Mercur de France* (September 1772). The

advertisement in *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* 37 (9th September 1772), p.147, stated that these are 'deux tableaux d'écaille blonde'.

32 'Dans le nombre considérable de tableaux faits sur le tour, dont le sieur Compigné a augmenté sa brillante &

riche collection, vous verrez avec plaisir, Monsieur, la vue du Château de Versailles du côté des jardins, & celle de Paris, prise au Pont Royal, qu'il vient d'exécuter tout nouvellement. Il a eu l'honneur de présenter au Roi & à la Famille Royale, à Compiègne, ces deux

tableaux charmants, que Sa Majesté a daigné accepter, & qu'elle a honoré de son suffrage. Ces deux morceaux sont dignes, en effet, de figurer dans un Cabinet parmi les ouvrages les plus curieux de l'Art', E. Fréron: *L'Année littéraire* V (28th August 1772), p.48.

Thomas Compigné, tabletier to King Louis XV

being disturbed or troubled by the masters and wardens of the guild under any pretext or for any cause whatsoever.³³

A year later, on 19th December 1773, Compigné once again showed his work to the court, in commemoration of a tragic accident that had occurred at Achères, which had affected the whole of Paris in the autumn of that year. During a royal hunt, a stag being chased by the dogs had entered a farmer's enclosure and seriously injured him. The young Dauphine Marie-Antoinette then came to the aid of the injured man's wife, who had come out to meet her, and of the man himself. Marie-Antoinette received a large tortoiseshell medallion painting depicting the event, titled *Misfortunes repaired by Charity*.³⁴ Compigné presented two of his works to a member of the royal family for the fourth time on 9th October 1774, when Louis XVI had just ascended to the throne. Their subjects were appropriate: *The happy accession of Louis XVI to the throne* and *The shadow of Henry IV showing the king the way to glory*. Queen Marie-Antoinette received him at Fontainebleau for the occasion.³⁵ These repeated introductions to the royal family would have enhanced Compigné's reputation. For example,

his name appears in the archives of Madame du Barry, the favourite of Louis XV from 1768 until his death in May 1774. With considerable financial resources at her disposal and a robust interest in the arts, she bought from the best craftsmen in Paris, including Compigné.³⁶

Compigné's success in the 1770s was due not only to the beauty and originality of his work, but also to his business acumen. During this period, he enjoyed great popularity and a varied clientele. He knew how to respond to their demands and the requirements of fashion, and he offered his clients a seemingly infinite choice of works.³⁷ As he owned both the factories and the shop, he controlled all elements of production and was able to invent new subjects as soon as he felt the need. In this way, he kept abreast of changing tastes and therefore nurtured his popularity. The *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* of June 1774 described Compigné, *tabletier* to the king, as 'one of the most famous of his kind';³⁸ the previous year, it was said that he 'attracts foreigners by presenting them with pleasant novelties'.³⁹ As well as informing the public of his presentations to the

15. *View of the Palais Bourbon*, by Thomas Compigné. c.1770–80. Pewter, gouache and gold, 23.5 by 30.5 cm. (Private collection).





14. Detail of Fig.5, showing the inscription in the cartouche.

royal family in periodicals, he mentioned them directly on the paintings he sold. As previously mentioned, all versions of the *View of Paris from the Pont Royal* have a cartouche (Fig.14) on which is written: 'Vue de Paris prise du Pont-Royal. Exécutee sur le Tour, et présentée au Roy. Par Compigné. Son Tabletier le 3 août 1772' ('View of Paris from the Pont-Royal. Executed on the lathe, and presented to the King. By Compigné. His Tabletier on 3rd August 1772'). Compigné also chose to sign the works that he considered to be the most successful or important (Fig.15), a practice that was otherwise rare among eighteenth-century *tabletliers*. As well as giving his name, these inscriptions also generally indicate the subject represented as well as the technique. Such signatures are an extension of the various advertisements he published in periodicals.

At the end of his career, Compigné continued to develop his activity further and extended his merchandise to furniture. In 1775, after listing the usual snuffboxes, candy boxes, caskets, portraits and paintings made 'on the lathe', the columnist Élie Fréron noted that: 'one also finds at his shop lunch tables and *chiffonniers* decorated with these same paintings'.⁴⁰ 'An Englishwoman in Paris' who visited his shop in 1777 reported that there were 'small tables for breakfasts enriched with various pictures, even including castles, country houses and landscapes engraved on the lathe with a correctness of drawing, a purity of taste and an accuracy of effect that I would have thought achievable only by the brush alone'.⁴¹

33 'Aujourd'hui premier Janvier 1773, le Roi étant à Versailles voulant faire connaître la bienveillance que sa Majesté accorde à ceux qui cherchent à se distinguer dans leur art et bien informée de l'expérience que le Sr Compigné a acquise dans la profession de *tabletier* et de la probité avec laquelle il l'exerce, à cet effet sa Majesté lui a permis et permet de prendre le titre et qualité de son *tabletier* dans tous les actes qu'il passera, des s'en servir tant en jugement que dehors et de la faire inscrire sur son tableau sans que pour raison de ce il puisse être troublé ni inquiété par les maîtres et jurés de la communauté sous quelque prétexte et pour quelque cause que ce soit', AN, Maison du roi, O/1/120, fol.2, 1st January 1773.

34 *L'Avant-Coureur* 52 (27th December 1773), pp.814-15.

35 *Gazette de France* 83 (17th

October 1774), p.365.

36 'Compigni, marchand de boîtes..... 846 pounds', transcribed in C. Vatel: *Histoire de Madame Du Barry d'après ses papiers personnels et les documents des archives publiques*, Versailles 1883, p.548.

37 E. Fréron: *L'Année littéraire* VIII (24th December 1768), p.288.

38 *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* 22 (1st June 1774), p.88.

39 *Affiches, annonces et avis divers, pour les Trois-Évêchés et la Lorraine* 2 (9th January 1773), p.6.

40 'On trouve encore chez lui des tables à déjeuner & des *chiffonniers* ornées de ces mêmes tableaux', E. Fréron: *L'Année littéraire* (12th November 1775), p.139.

41 'Petites tables pour les déjeûners enrichies de divers tableaux & jusqu'à des châteaux, des maisons de plaisance, des paysages gravés sur le tour avec une correction de dessin, une pureté de

Only two pieces of furniture decorated by Compigné are known today: a table from the collection of Félix Doistau, now in the Villa Éphrussi; and a table formerly in the collection of Jacques Doucet, sold on 8th June 1912.⁴²

Compigné's career, acclaimed by a distinguished clientele, was fuelled by entrepreneurial strategies unusual among contemporary *tabletliers*. To what extent was he assisted in his work and its promotion by pupils and assistants? Semail referred to Louis Claude Chevalier as a pupil of Compigné and attributed some of his work to him. Several Compigné paintings are also attributed to Chevalier in later auction catalogues and some museum collections.⁴³ Awarded the title of Master *tabletier* on 8th November 1776, Chevalier worked in the Faubourg Saint-Martin.⁴⁴ However, there appear to be no documents that establish a link between the two *tabletliers* in the eighteenth century. Joseph Defrance, Chevalier and the *tabletier* Belland have been cited as employees or pupils of Compigné and the latter is said to have taken over Compigné's shop after his bankruptcy in October 1778.⁴⁵ The identity of his followers and any potential collaborators remain to be explored. A few Compigné paintings, produced after 1778, seem to indicate a continuation of production after the disappearance of Compigné's name from the periodicals and his bankruptcy.⁴⁶

It is to be hoped that this study, which has provided new information about Compigné's origins, the course of his career, his clientele and the subjects of his works, sheds light on a remarkable eighteenth-century craftsman and his refined work, increases his visibility and will inspire more research.

goût, une justesse d'effet, dont je n'aurais cru capable que le seul pinceau', An English woman: *Courier de l'Europe*, (30th December 1777), p.489.

42 R. Vian des Rives, ed.: *La Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild*, Paris 2002; and sale, Maîtres Mannheim, Paulme et Lasquin, Paris, *Collection Jacques Doucet. 3e partie. Catalogue des meubles et objets d'art du XVIIIe siècle*, 1912, lot 332.

43 Sale, Henri Boucherez collection, *Monnaies antiques, Monnaies et médailles françaises et étrangères jetons, livres de numismatique objets de vitrine*, 10th-17th October 1912, lot 1513. Attributions in museum collections include *View of the Palais Bourbon* (c.1770-80; Musée Carnavalet, Paris; inv. no.OM 691); *View of the Château de Choisy, Seine side* (second half of the 18th century; Château de Sceaux; Sceaux; inv. no.37.3.3); and *View of the*

Palais-Bourbon (18th century; Musée Condé, Chantilly; inv. no.OA 1777).

44 Châtelet de Paris, Y/9306/A-Y/9334, *Registres des jurandes et maîtrises des métiers de la ville de Paris (1585-1790)*, fol.139: 'Tablier L^e [...] Louis Claude Chevalier'; and Maîtres Mannheim, Paulme et Lasquin: *Collection Jacques Doucet. 3e partie. Catalogue des meubles et objets d'art du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1912, p.83.

45 C. Baulez: *Revue du Louvre* 4 (October 1993). The source for this information is not cited and research is still undergoing to identify it.

46 For example, there is a view of the Obelisk of Port-Vendres (private collection), executed around 1780, as well as views of the Ascension of Jacques Charles and Nicolas Robert's hot-air balloon (private collection and Paris, Musée Carnavalet; inv. OM1325), made around 1783.