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MAJOR GETTY EXHIBITION RECREATES A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FASHIONABLE
18th-CENTURY PARISIAN TOWNHOUSE IN THE CULTURAL EPICENTER OF EUROPE

Paris: Life & Luxury



Four Times of the Day, 1739-41. Nicolas Lancret (French, 1690-1743). Oil paintings on copper. © The National Gallery, London.
(Clockwise from top left: *Morning*, *Mid Day*, *Afternoon*, and *Evening*)

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

April 26—August 7, 2011

At the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

September 18—December 10, 2011

LOS ANGELES—The nation of France, and its capital city of Paris in particular, held a special status in European culture during the 18th century. The upper echelons of societies throughout Europe were predominantly Francophiles— imitating French fashions of dress and furniture in their daily lives. On view in the Exhibitions Pavilion at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, April 26 through August 7, 2011, *Paris: Life & Luxury* re-imagines, through art and material culture, the complex and nuanced lifestyle of elite 18th-century Parisians who made their city the fashionable and cultural epicenter of Europe.

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Inspired by the Getty Museum's extensive French decorative arts collection and the correspondingly strong holdings of French illustrated books in the Getty Research Institute, *Paris: Life & Luxury* will provide a rich cultural and historical experience that closely mirrors daily life in 18th-century France. Bringing together approximately 160 objects, roughly half of which will be on loan from twenty-six museums and private collections around the world, the exhibition will include a wide range of paintings, sculpture, applied arts, drawings, metalwork, furniture, architectural fittings, lighting and hearth fixtures, scientific and musical instruments, clocks and watches, textiles and dress, books, and maps.

David Bomford, acting director of the J. Paul Getty Museum said, "*Paris: Life & Luxury* will transport visitors back to Paris in the mid-1700s. More than celebrating the period or perpetuating the mythology of its charm and gallantry, this exhibition re-imagines the varied and complex range of values and practices of the city's elite within a rich material context."

Charissa Bremer-David, curator of sculpture and decorative arts at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the exhibition's co-curator added, "The exhibition will be a rich and deep sensory experience, engaging the viewer's initial attention with the compelling visual appeal of superlative and virtuoso works of art. From this breadth and diversity, visitors will learn generally about the contributions of the French, and in particular the Parisian, to the visual and performing arts, language, literature, history, science, and even culinary arts during this time period—in short, about their major contribution to the humanities at large."

Following a structure based on the traditional visual allegories of the *Four Times of Day*, the objects in the exhibition are grouped according to their associations with common activities as pursued in the chronology of a single day, from morning to night. As such, objects of diverse mediums are juxtaposed, as they would have been within an 18th-century Parisian domestic setting, regardless of modern museological or academic categories. Through constellations of art and related artifacts, the exhibition follows the conventional activities in the cycle of a Parisian day, such as dressing, writing, collecting, eating, and evening entertainment—allowing visitors to envision the activities and accessories of quotidian life, in order to find resonances with their own daily lives.

The notional day begins with the act of rising from bed and is exemplified in this installation with an exceptionally rare survivor, a bed with side curtains and a "flying" canopy suspended from the ceiling, a form known as the *lit à la duchesse* (or "duchess style bed"). Traditionally, this type of bed was reserved for the most formal, prestigious bedroom in the house and was used by important members of the family to receive visitors. In this exhibition,

the impressive set of embroidered yellow silk-satin hangings, which measure fourteen feet tall when assembled, is displayed for the first time since arriving at the Getty Museum in 1979.

The pursuit of daily correspondence and business affairs follows in the next section, with furniture and accessories related to writing, record keeping, and document filing. Financiers and merchants often worked in offices, called *bureaux*, located within the home (forerunners to the modern “home office”) but typically set apart from the domestic sphere, as portrayed in Maurice-Quentin de la Tour’s pastel portrait of *Gabriel Bernard de Rieux* (1687–1745), a prominent member of the Paris Parliament. The interior depicted in the almost life-size portrait of *Président de Rieux* is evoked in all its detail by the adjacent display of many similar objects, arranged in comparable positions so that their artistic and physical characteristics, as well as their scale, can be conveyed.

The activity of collecting—particularly art—will be explored in a section of the exhibition, which evokes a private Parisian *galerie*. Erudition and refined taste were visually expressed through the assembly and accumulation, in accordance with one’s means, of choice works which, when arranged and displayed in a dedicated room, could provide occasion for private enjoyment by the single visitor or convivial appreciation by a group of interested guests. The assembled works often reflected the knowledge of the collector and his chosen models of virtue, drawn from the classical canon of books he read, especially the sacred scriptures, or the epic and mythological stories of ancient Greece and Rome.

In mid-18th-century Paris, the main meal was customarily consumed at midday and a section of the exhibition considers the portrayal of the ingredients of the meal made under the vastly prolific and intensely versatile direction of the artist Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755). These include: still life paintings of *The Four Elements* painted by Oudry (which show game, fish, poultry, and vegetables); a pair of wool and silk tapestries portraying picnickers and hunters; his engraved illustration, featuring a lavishly set table, for the tale of *The City Rat and the Country Rat*, in the 1755 edition of Jean de La Fontaine’s famous animal fables; and the *Machine d’Argent*, a still life sculpture in silver, by François-Thomas Germain, under Oudry’s intervention, which features a rabbit, two game birds, several types of mushrooms, and a variety of vegetables.

A section devoted to scientific pursuits examines the Enlightenment’s interest in the natural world, as experienced and observed empirically, and reveals how its proponents, the *philosophes*, were committed to the wide dissemination of knowledge. This is demonstrated by several volumes of the *philosophes’* key publications, namely the *Encyclopédie* (text 1751–

1762 and plates 1762–1772) by Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783) and the *Histoire Naturelle* (1749–1803) by the Comte de Buffon (1707–1788), opened to illustrated pages. A lesser known aspect of the Enlightenment era will be introduced through objects associated with a small Parisian circle of knowledgeable and proficient “amateurs,” or independent men of science, individuals whose private activities benefitted society at large.

In order to better understand “life after sunset” (before the age of electric lighting), the penultimate gallery of the exhibition focuses on two types of leisure occupations: music-making and game-playing. In order to recreate an era when night-time gatherings were dependent upon the illumination cast by firelight and candlelight, the overall light-levels in the final gallery are lowered. A five-legged card table is installed in its open, extended position, with candles and candlesticks placed in the recesses, to suggest how the objects might have been used together. The installation also includes an actual Parisian harpsichord of 1754 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which survives with both its original sound box and its original lacquered surface decoration of *chinoiserie* motifs. The harpsichord is complemented by ambient audio recording of Excerpts from the Suite in G major, *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin* (1726–27) by Jean-Philippe Rameau (French, 1683–1764).

The exhibition and the notional day culminate with a section devoted to private prayer in which a marquetry-veneered *prie-dieu*, or kneeler, a crucifix, and a hand-illuminated missal of 1720–30 are featured to demonstrate the significant role of religion in this predominantly Catholic city. Communal observance of faithful practices and private piety were an integral part of daily life, particularly quiet meditation, study of the scriptures, and self-reflection. This was facilitated in the domestic sphere by specially designed furniture such as the *prie-dieu*, by cabinetmaker Jean-Baptiste Tuart (master 1741), which also functioned as a writing desk and storage cabinet (Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris). This combined functionality illustrates how Parisian design and craft responded creatively to the multilayered needs of clients.

Paris: Life & Luxury is organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and curated by Charissa Bremer-David, curator of sculpture and decorative arts, with Peter Björn Kerber, assistant curator of paintings. Contributors to the exhibition's accompanying publication are Charissa Bremer-David, Peter Björn Kerber, Mimi Hellman, Joan DeJean, and Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell. The exhibition is on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center, Los Angeles from April 26 through August 7, 2011 before traveling to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where it will be on view from September 18 through December 10, 2011.

The Los Angeles installation of ***Paris: Life & Luxury*** is sponsored by **Breguet**, the premier luxury watch brand founded in 1775 by Abraham Louis Breguet.

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