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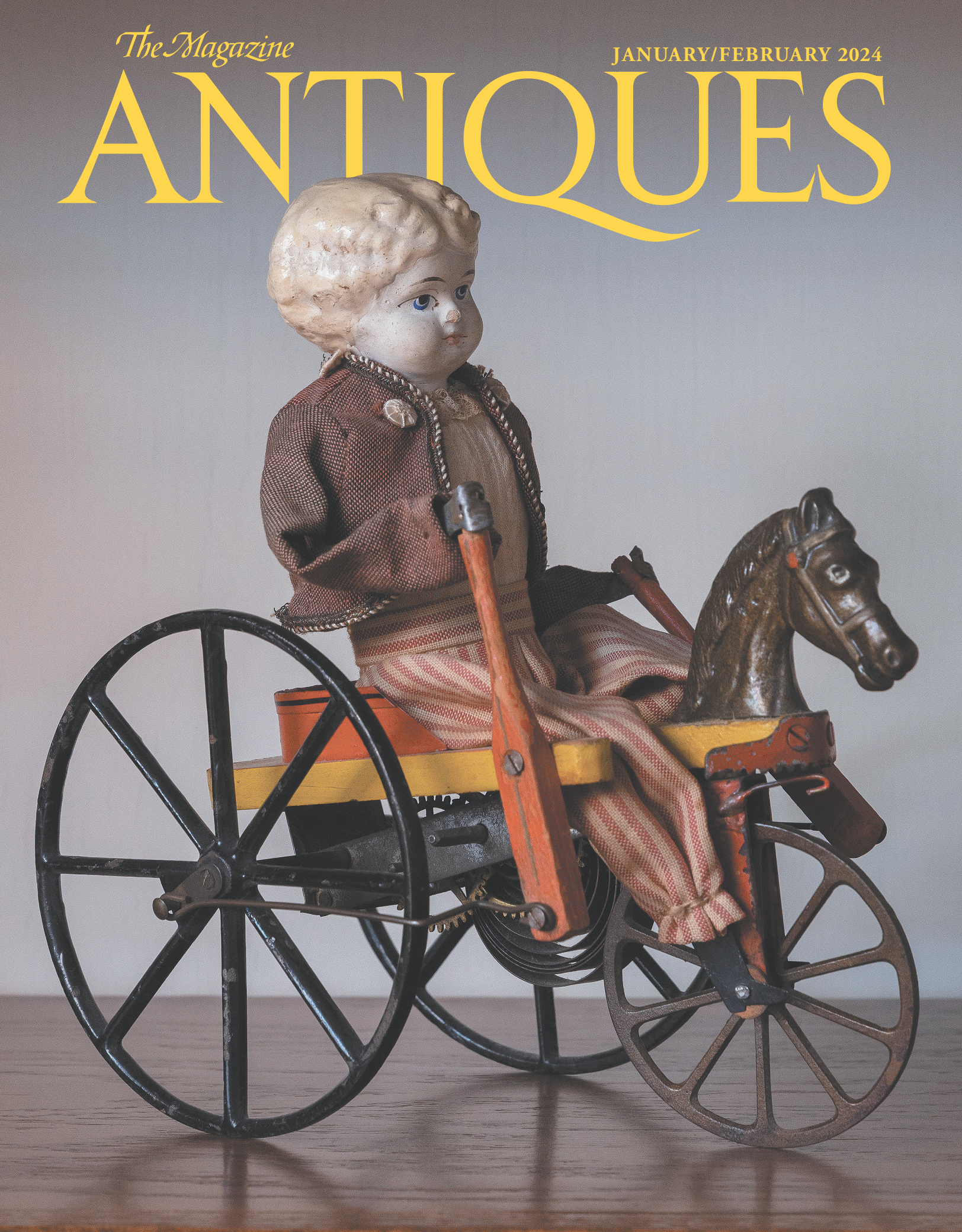

By Benjamin Davidson and Pippa Biddle

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NOW NEARLY FORGOTTEN, NEW YORK FURNITURE MAKER AND FRENCH EXPATRIATE LÉON MARCOTTE WAS THE TOAST OF TYCOONS IN THE GILDED AGE

When Léon Marcotte was invited to bid to redecorate Cyrus Hall McCormick's house at 675 Rush Street in Chicago following the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, he didn't hold back. His proposal of $60,597 for furniture and interior details for the mansion far exceeded the bids of other furniture-making firms, such as Herter Brothers and Pottier and Stymus, his closest competitors in New York. Despite this, historian Nina Gray wrote in her definitive 1994 paper on Marcotte, he received the contract. His taste was so well-respected and his work so revered that the additional cost was deemed acceptable. By this time, Marcotte had spent almost thirty years building a reputation worthy of the heftiest of hefty price tags.

Born in the town of Valognes in Normandy, France in 1824, he studied architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he trained in the studio of architect Henri Labrouste, before moving to New York in 1848. His arrival coincided with that of a wave of talented Europeans setting up shop to appeal to the "old-world" tastes of the upper crust. Marcotte was joined in this move by his brother-in-law, Auguste-Emile Ringuet-Leprince, who had already been running a highly successful design firm in Paris. The two went into business together under the name Ringuet-Leprince and L. Marcotte. "The taste for all things French extended beyond furniture design," says Elizabeth McGoey, the curator of art of the Americas at the Art Institute of Chicago; "from architecture, painting, and tapestries to ceramics and cuisine, [the phrase] 'à la française' symbolized quality, opulence, and luxury."

Medill Higgins Harvey, a curator of American decorative arts and manager of the Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, points to this moment in the middle of the nineteenth century as particularly electric for design in New York. The creativity resulting from the influx of highly skilled European craftspeople "created this really dynamic moment in furniture-making, particularly in New York City." It was the waning of the Jacksonian era, and the American Republic appeared to have found firm footing. Industrialization was expanding and massive fortunes were being made. Ringuet-LePrince was the firm's public face. He offered the voraciously consumptive rich not just a taste of France, but a whole meal. He was, Harvey says, "French in the most established, elite sense of the word." Marcotte brought a talent for furniture

Armchair from the suite of Louis XVI–style pieces made for John Taylor Johnston (1820–1893) by Léon Marcotte (1824–1887), c. 1860. ***All objects illustrated are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.***

of a puzzle. Marcotte was an early adopter of the title "decorator," and his architectural training drove him toward "thinking in whole spaces," Harvey says. He was intent on perfecting proportions and the small details were important, but it was the overall picture Marcotte was able to paint that may have given clients warrant to overlook, or at least swallow, the substantial price tag.

It's quite possible none of this would have materialized for Marcotte if not for the air of aristocracy Ringuet-Leprince lent the New York company, but it's also true that Marcotte furniture ballooned in popularity only after Ringuet-Leprince's retirement in 1860. From then to 1880, the firm, now called L. Marcotte and Company,

Sofa from the furniture suite made for Johnston by Marcotte, c. 1860.

Side chair with classical lyre backsplat from the furniture suite made for Johnston by Marcotte, c. 1860–1870.

design, especially in the Louis XV and XVI styles, to the relationship, and an eye for decor that treated the room as an installation to be experienced as a whole.

It is in his furniture suites that Marcotte's work truly shines. Marcotte's firm not only produced elaborate furniture, but also sourced rugs, lighting, drapery, and more in France for clients' grand homes, including the McCormick mansion and Samuel Colt's Armsmear in Hartford, Connecticut. A room featuring a suite of ebonized Louis XV pieces by Marcotte for Newport's Chateau-sur-Mer was published in the December 1980 issue of this magazine, and Marcotte made a collection of seating pieces and a table for the music room of businessman and founding president of the Met John Taylor Johnston. His daughter, Emily Johnston de Forest, owned a table in the classical French style attributed to Marcotte with amboyna veneers, stained hornbeam banding, and small amboyna-veneered tablets to create repetitive geometric patterns. That table and Johnston's music room suite are now in the Met collection. (Other Marcotte pieces are held at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Brooklyn Museum, among other institutions.) The Johnston pieces are not shown together, but Harvey encourages those interested in the design of the time to try to visualize them as pieces

more than doubled in size, and Marcotte traveled regularly between New York and Paris sourcing and developing products and servicing clients.

Marcotte drove American demand for French styles forward, McGuey says, but it was his "interpretations of Louis XV and Louis XVI styles, which walked a fine line between the sinuous, curvilinear forms of rococo to the more orderly, straight-lined, simple forms of neoclassicism," for which he was best known. After Marcotte passed away in 1887 in Paris at the age of sixty-two, Adrian Herzog, who had joined the firm as a partner in 1868, continued its operation with Edmond Leprince Ringuet.

In 1902 Léon Marcotte and Company was hired to produce furnishings for the East and Blue Rooms of the White House. The pieces for the East Room included elaborate window cornices, silk velour–covered benches, and marble-topped console tables, and were inspired by the Château de Compiegne north of Paris, translated through the vision of architectural firm McKim, Mead and White and undertaken at the request of President Theodore Roosevelt and First Lady Edith Roosevelt. In the Blue Room, the firm copied a Napoleonic suite and dressed the walls in blue silk with a gold Greek-key border as specified by McKim. This wall finish no longer exists, but can still be seen in the background of the 1911 portrait of President William Howard Taft by Anders Leonard Zorn.

This project wasn't quite the firm's last gasp, but it was close to it. The Paris operation closed in 1911, and the New York branch followed in 1922. And, while Marcotte's work remains in major collections, curiosity around him has waned. After Nina Gray published "Leon Marcotte, Cabinet-Maker and Interior Decorator" in *American Furniture* in 1994, some may even have asked: what is there left to say? Today, we owe some gratitude to the HBO show *The Gilded Age* for reviving interest in a period when, as Harvey puts it, design coalesced into "the beginnings of what we would see as more familiar as far as how people live and think about their homes." She has noticed that visitors are engaging more actively with the decorative arts from the period the show covers, including Marcotte's work.

For the curious buyer, pieces attributed to Marcotte can be yours—for a price, or for the price of patience. A Federal rosewood roll-top secretary on offer from the New York gallery Newel is listed at $28,500, while other pieces have been passed at auction. Offerings do not pop up frequently, and pieces are typically unsigned and best attributed through style, craftsmanship, and provenance.

Table for Emily Johnston de Forest (1851–1942) featuring walnut, amboyna, maple, poplar, ash, cherry, and hornbeam, made by Marcotte, 1860–1872.

Table from the furniture suite made for Johnston by Marcotte, c. 1860.