

DISCOVERY: Georgia State Honors College Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 1 *DISCOVERY - Georgia State University*
Honors College Undergraduate Research Journal

Article 3

2012

Framing a Political Position: How the Duc de Choiseul Snuffbox Uses Changing Aesthetic Trends to Illustrate Choiseul's Sociopolitical Agenda

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Recommended Citation

Stankus, Catherine (2012) "Framing a Political Position: How the Duc de Choiseul Snuffbox Uses Changing Aesthetic Trends to Illustrate Choiseul's Sociopolitical Agenda," *DISCOVERY: Georgia State Honors College Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31922/disc1.3>


Available at: <https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/discovery/vol1/iss1/3>

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Government officials often commission artwork as an extension of their political agendas, with the creation and exhibition of such works serving some self-promoting function. The snuffbox, commissioned in 1770 by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Duc de Choiseul, shows a residence whose decorative focus lied in Choiseul's impressive collection of moveable framed artwork (see Figure 1). Offsetting this collection is an interior style that blends the lingering Rococo opulence with a classically influenced style. This snuffbox is a prime example of using art to enhance one's public image. Were the snuffbox paintings true to life, or was the appearance of the residence altered through artistic license? Are Neoclassical frames and furnishings in the snuffbox paintings falsely overrepresented to enhance the Duc's reputation as a temperate official? This paper will examine the Choiseul snuffbox paintings as a vital primary source for understanding the Transitional style of interior decoration, with an analytical emphasis on the representation of framed artwork in the interior scenes. In addition, looking at how Choiseul sought to have the snuffbox enhance his professional image by showing more Neoclassical frames and furnishings than were actually present in his residence in 1770.

As a prominent figure in French politics between 1748 and 1770, it was important for Choiseul to be at the apex of popular taste to uphold the appearance of political and professional currency, and the Rococo style was quickly falling out of favor with the people, but not the king (Bailey, Conisbee and Gaehtgens, 2003, p. 86). The severe shift in the 1760's and 1770's from the superfluous Rococo ornamentation and frames to a more austere Neoclassical style lagged slightly behind the similar shift seen in painting (see Figures 2 and 3) (Mitchell and Roberts, 1996, p. 44). Choiseul's interest in the classical focused on architecture and interior design, and stemmed from his role as the French ambassador to Rome in the 1750's. His exposure to classical forms while in Rome influenced his design




decisions when he partially renovated his Paris hôtel in 1761 (Erikson, 1974, p. 166; “Choiseul, Etienne-Francois,” n.d.; Kalnein and Levey, 1974, p. 381).

Neoclassical design reflected his personal taste and was not just a ploy for public appeal, though it is possible that Choiseul made a conscientious effort to embrace the Neoclassical style as it became publicly popular (“Choiseul, Etienne-Francois,” n.d.). With the help social connections, perhaps most importantly with Madame de Pompadour, whose portrait hangs alongside Louis XV’s in the Study, Choiseul ascended to the position of de-facto prime minister, strategically aligning with popular tastes to enhance his career (see Figure 4) (Perkins, 1897, p. 189; Watson, 1966, p. 153). French scholar James Breck Perkins described Choiseul as, “a man who changed his policy with rapidity: the quickness of his mind made him susceptible to new impressions and mobile in his views” (Perkins, 1897, p. 144). Perkins’ statement applies to Choiseul’s views on art and design and explains his quick adoption of the Neoclassical aesthetic.

Choiseul wanted his residence to possess a classical tone favored by the public while preserving elements of the popularly fading Rococo style. Retaining existing Rococo elements was due in part to the high cost of redecorating; though there are additional reasons that also had an influence on Choiseul’s decisions (Dietz and Nutz, 2005, p. 61). Completely abandoning the Rococo style, which is synonymous with Louis XV, would appear resolutely anti-monarchical.¹ In this sense, the presence of these two opposing aesthetics reflects the necessary consideration of styles preferred by both the monarchy and his constituents, thus helping to bolster his political power.

In the eighteenth century the cost of frames rivaled the price of the paintings themselves, and it was a huge financial undertaking to reframe a collection as large as Choiseul’s (Mitchell and Roberts, 1996, p. 43). His inability to fund a complete reframing resulted in many examples of Rococo style frames

¹ Rococo is often defined as covering a relatively long period. Some scholars use the term Louis XV Style, considering many of




in the snuffbox miniatures (see Figure 5). For new purchases, Choiseul preferred Neoclassical frames, though likely not just for aesthetic purposes (see Figure 6). The cost of a frame was contingent on its size and amount of ornamentation, so a less decorative Neoclassical frame was the fiscally responsible choice for a man already in debt because of his need to portray a certain level of financial comfort in his domestic space (Butler, 1980, p. 799). The sheer volume of Choiseul's collection means that the Rococo aesthetic in frames is still rather apparent in the overall design scheme despite his efforts to classicize his surroundings.

The painting of Choiseul's Office, located on the top of the box, alludes to his work as the center of his life and shows a conscientious effort by Choiseul to project an image of himself as a dutiful civil servant (see Figure 7). The Office is also one of the more intriguing examples of the Transitional style because it displays an amalgamation of paintings, furniture and design motifs from the Rococo and Neoclassical periods ("Choiseul, Etienne-Francois," n.d.). The decision to put a Neoclassical frame above the door on the left makes it stand out as noticeably different from the elaborately carved and gilt inlaid overdoors popular in the early eighteenth century (see Figure 8). It is as though Choiseul is explicitly taking a stance on the growing importance of fiscal responsibility by taking an area of the interior commonly excessive in its ornamentation and restricting it to a small moveable easel painting in a Neoclassical frame (Gruber, 1992, p. 363).²

Rococo and Transitional frames are seen in abundance in the Octagon Room (see Figure 9). The great prevalence of these fanciful frames balances the rectilinear simplicity of the interior design. This room is where Choiseul kept his most prized paintings, a logical choice given the room's glass domed ceiling that provided ample overhead light for viewing (Gruber, 1992, p. 79). The arrangement of the

² Other overdoors, like that in the Boudoir, appear to have a stronger Rococo influence, but are still disengaged and comparatively demure-looking paintings.




paintings, as well as the reflection in the mirror that allows the viewer to see the wall behind the viewer, contradicts accounts of Choiseul's collection being one of quality over quantity. In a letter to a colleague regarding his art collection, Choiseul said, "my taste is not for the mediocre... I should prefer one beautiful picture to ten ordinary ones" (Butler, 1980, p. 797).³ Given that this letter was dated 1749, one can presume that the course of Choiseul's political career as a foreign minister exposed him to many excellent paintings at home and abroad that proved too tempting, and led him to amass an extensive collection.

It is highly likely that the miniatures on the snuffbox are not photo-accurate representations of the residence, as inconsistencies across the miniatures point toward the use of artistic license. A careful look at the Octagon and Reception Rooms reveals that some paintings appear more than once. For example, the cow painting is presented at the top center of the back wall in the Reception Room and again in the upper left side of the Octagon Room. A second example is a genre painting by contemporary French painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze seen on the left wall of the Reception Room and above the door in the Octagon Room (figures 10-14) (Watson, 1966, p. 151). Paintings were likely rearranged on a regular basis, as Choiseul acquired new works. No proof exists that the rearrangement of paintings occurred during the period of the snuffbox's production, so I can only speculate that some degree of artistic license was taken in the rendering of Choiseul's residence given these repeated images. However, Choiseul emphasized that the Octagon Room contained his most prized paintings; therefore, the repetition of these images in the miniatures on the snuffbox is likely to have been a deliberate choice.

The commission of the snuffbox itself is a sign of Choiseul's extravagance and pride in his collection, and the inclusion of identifiable political figures in the miniature paintings further promotes his political status and social hospitality to the viewer (Watson, 1966, p. 148-149). However, this

³ In a letter to Duke de Nivernais, September 21-22, 1749.



snuffbox would soon become a sad reminder of the past, as Choiseul was dismissed from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and exiled to his chateau in Chanteloup in 1770, the year the snuffbox was completed (“Choiseul, Etienne-Francois,” n.d.).⁴ The timing of the snuffbox’s commission leads to speculation about Choiseul’s motives for having the paintings depict of the interior of his residence. Some historians believe that Choiseul knew he would not maintain his affluent status and wealth for much longer, leading Choiseul to detail his art collection and highlight his political power by condensing both into one small, portable object (Perkins, 1897, p. 252 and 179; Waston, 1966, p. 155).⁵ Did Choiseul decide to commemorate the high point in his life with a snuffbox that he could keep even after his painting collection was gone? Choiseul knew he was living beyond his means, but he was surprised at his dismissal from office and subsequent exile (“Choiseul, Etienne-Francois,” n.d.).

The snuffbox paintings beautifully immortalize the Duc de Choiseul’s extravagant residence and art collection just prior to the disintegration of the estate. The changing aesthetic in late eighteenth-century France is exquisitely rendered in the snuffbox paintings, as interiors, paintings and their frames depict the transition from Rococo to Neoclassicism. The snuffbox paintings serve as an amazing account of the ways in which works of art were displayed in private residences. However, detailed research revealing the snuffbox’s repeated images and obvious self-promotional slant has weakened its former reputation as a venerable primary source. Despite the questionable degree of artistic license at the patron’s behest, and whether that license taken was to better his public image, the Choiseul snuffbox affords a unique glimpse into the eighteenth-century and its Transitional aesthetic, showing the many ways in which art factored into the life and legacy of this prominent political figure and art collector.

⁴ Choiseul had a known dislike for Madame du Barry, Louis XV’s premier mistress in his final years and proponent of neoclassicism. It is speculated that du Barry influenced Louis XV to dismiss Choiseul (Watson, 1966, p. 155).

⁵ Watson suspects the snuffbox could have been a memento and Choiseul knew he was on the brink of losing everything.



Figure 1: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, *Choiseul Snuff Box*, 1770.
3-1/8 inches x 2-3/8 inches x 1-7/16 inches.



Figure 2: Germain Boffrand, *Salon de la Princesse*, circa 1735-1740.
Hôtel de Soubise (now the French National Archives), Paris, France.



Figure 3: Richard Mique, *Le Cabinet Doré*, circa 1783.
Château de Versailles, Versailles, France.

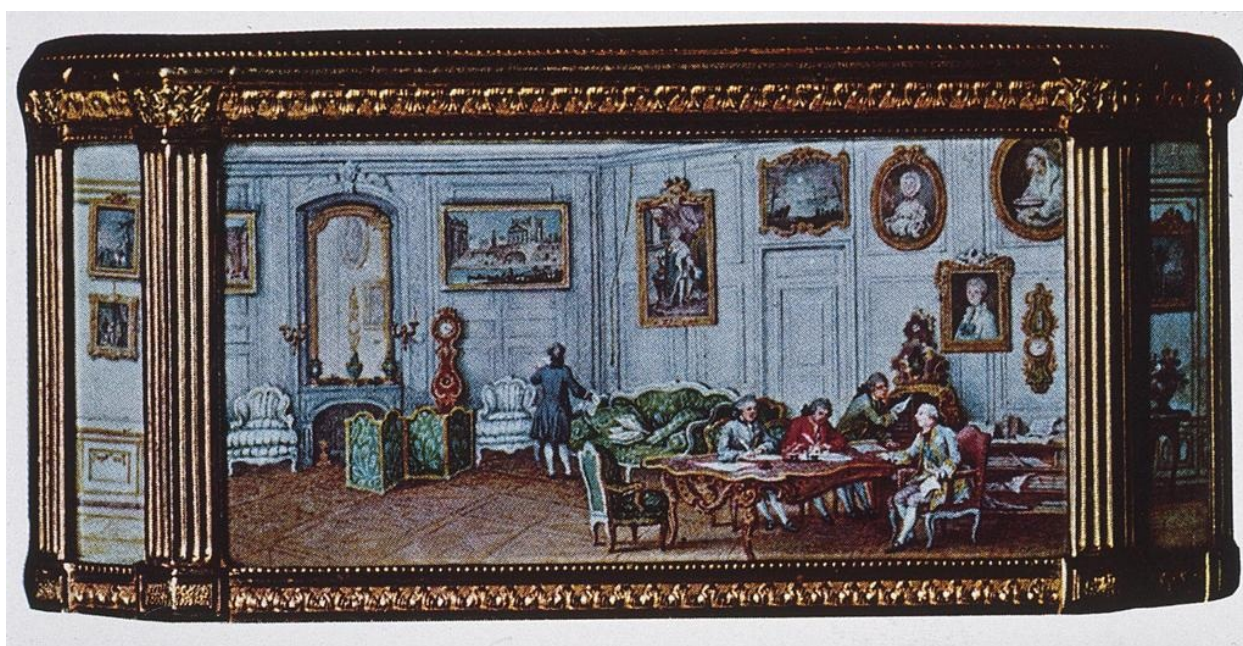


Figure 4: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe,
Choiseul Snuff Box: Side: Study, 1770.



Figure 5: François Boucher, *The Marquise de Pompadour*, nd.
Louis XV Swept Side Frame



Figure 6: Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-LeBrun,
Madame Rousseau and Daughter, 1789.
Neoclassical Festoon Frame.



Figure 7: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, *Choiseul Snuff Box: Top: Office*, 1770.

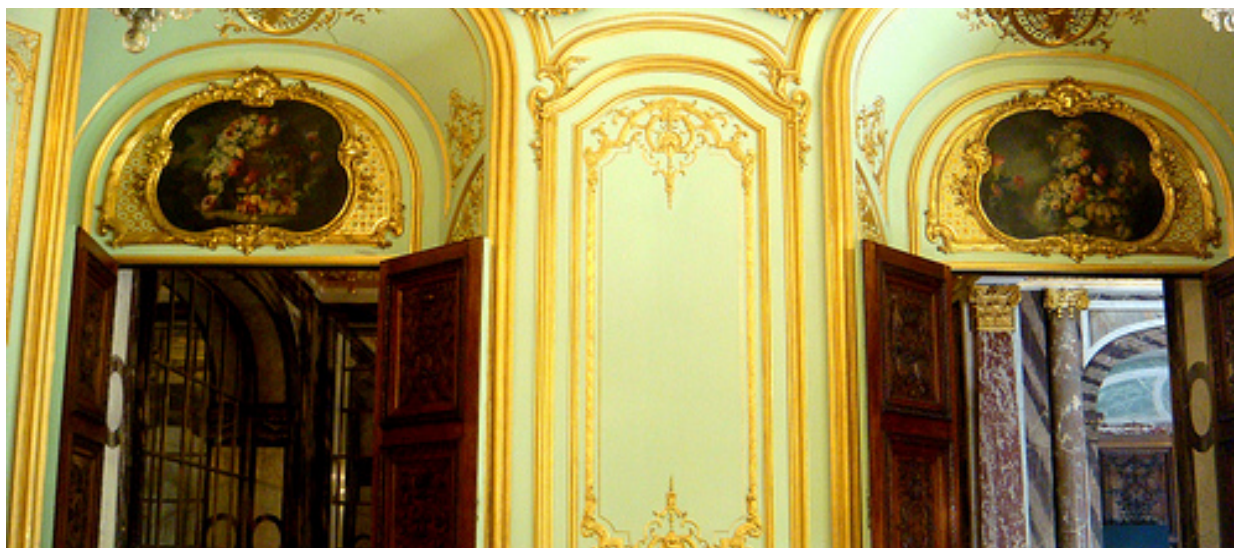


Figure 8: Germain Boffrand, *Chambre de Parade de la princesse*, circa 1735-1740. Hôtel de Soubise (now the French National Archives), Paris, France.



Figure 9: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, *Choiseul Snuff Box: Side: Octagon Room*, 1770.

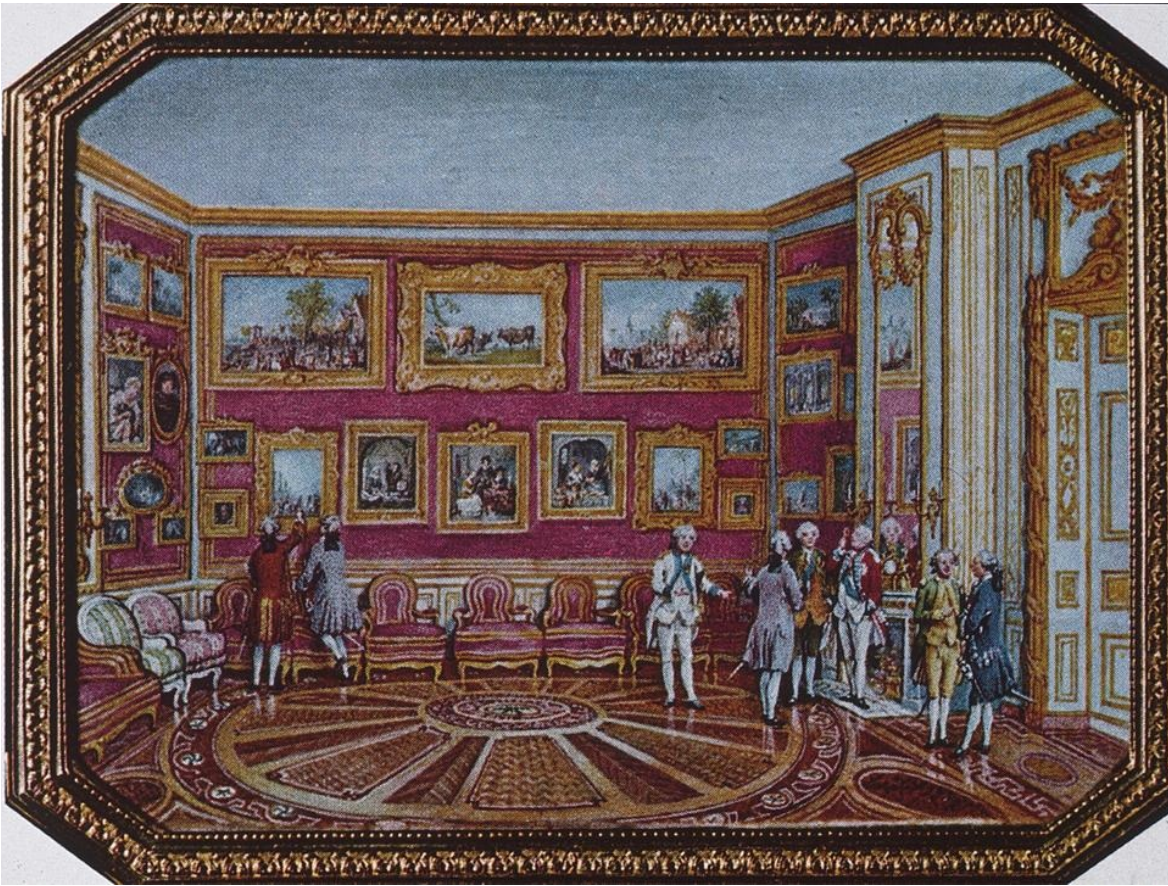


Figure 10: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe,
Choiseul Snuff Box: Lid: Reception Room, 1770.



Figure 11: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, *Choiseul Snuff Box: Lid: Reception Room (detail)*, 1770



Figure 12: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, *Choiseul Snuff Box: Side: Octagon Room (detail)*, 1770.



Figure 13: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, *Choiseul Snuff Box: Lid: Reception Room (detail)*, 1770.



Figure 14: Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberghe, *Choiseul Snuff Box: Side: Octagon Room (detail)*, 1770

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