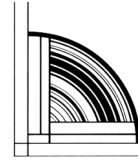


Lady's Writing Desk



The design for the *Lady's writing desk* displays many of Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann's characteristic design features. Ruhlmann was not a trained cabinet-maker, yet he designed some of the most beautiful and modern furniture of the 1920s and 1930s.

He was described as a traditionalist, influenced by Neoclassical and Louis XVI furniture styles, but he had the capacity to use this influence in an innovative and modern way.

Known for his sleek and elegant designs, his furniture pieces are unencumbered by unnecessary detail. He described his furniture in terms of 'rationalism, comfort and progress'¹ that retains a timeless style.

Ruhlmann is recognised for his use of rare and exotic materials and his attention to detail. He was often described as a perfectionist and would critically inspect the progress of furniture pieces. His cabinet-makers would remake aspects that did not meet his high standards. As a result, Ruhlmann never really made a profit from many of his furniture pieces. Although they sold for high prices, they were also extremely expensive to make.

The *Lady's writing desk* employs his unique invention of the fuseau leg that is formed outside the width of the body of the desk. This creates the illusion of the desk being effortlessly supported, giving it a sense of lightness and increased height. Stylistically, this may give the impression of fragility, yet this innovation is in fact quite solid and sturdy.

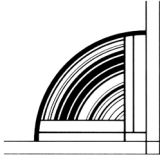
Ruhlmann favoured cabinet-making techniques that integrated ornamentation and veneering. The *Lady's writing desk* demonstrates his love of ebony veneer and inlays of silver and ivory that created a jewel-like quality, while still emphasising subtle curves of the legs and the overall shape of the desk.

His attention to detail can be noted inside the drawers and also on the underside of the desk. Whereas many other furniture designers would have used cheaper materials and not finished the insides with great attention, the *Lady's writing desk* includes a walnut finish in all the inside cupboards and drawers. The underside is finished with the same ebony used elsewhere.

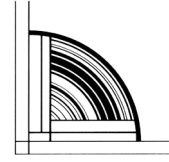
Ruhlmann created his pieces so they could be admired as a whole. He also understood that his objects were practical furniture pieces that would be used on a daily basis and admired for their intricate details and craftsmanship.

Many of Ruhlmann's designs challenged conventional furniture-making techniques and often stretched the limitations of the materials he used. Unlike other furniture designers of his time who were creating pieces to be used as 'machines for living' – appealing to the newly emerging ideal of mass-produced furniture – Ruhlmann created unique, handcrafted objects that met the needs of individual clients.

1. Florence Camard, Ruhlmann-Master of Art Deco, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, New York, 1984, p.54.



Lady's Writing Desk



Materials and Technology

There are a number of pieces of Ruhlmann furniture within the *Art Deco* exhibition. They include the *Spider table*, the *Chariot sideboard* and the *Lotus dressing table*.

Identify four similar materials used to construct these pieces.

1.
2.
3.
4.

Research these materials and fill out the table below by analysing the characteristics of these materials.

	Name of material	Where is this material found?	What are some of the environmental factors needed when working with this material?	What does this material look like? (Draw a detail of its visual characteristics.)	For what other uses in our daily lives can we see this material being used?
Material 1					
Material 2					
Material 3					
Material 4					

What is a veneer?

Describe how Ruhlmann uses veneers as design features.

Research the following websites to learn about different ways veneers are made.

Explain why you think veneers are so popular with furniture designers.

Where do we see veneer finishes used today?

For further information, visit these websites:

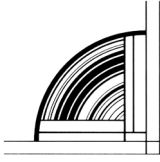
<http://www.keidel.com/design/select/cabinets-mat-veneer.htm>

<http://www.oakwoodveneer.com/tips/cuts.html>

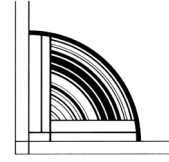
<http://home.howstuffworks.com/how-to-repair-wooden-furniture-veneer.htm>

<http://www.oakwoodveneer.com/movie/how-veneer-is-made.html>

<http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/freepubs/pdfs/uh155.pdf>



Lady's Writing Desk



Influences

Research and collect images of furniture described as Neoclassical and Louis XVI in style. Explain and analyse aspects of Ruhlmann's designs that may have been influenced by these two styles.

Design Principles

'In furniture design, achieving simplicity is the most difficult art of all. It takes uncommon skill and an incomparable sureness of taste to mould these almost imperceptible curves, to choose the one curve that will give the piece 'character' and its supreme elegance.'

Quoted in Florence Camard, *Ruhlmann—Master of Art Deco*, Abrams, New York, 1984, p. 37.

Discuss this quote by Ruhlmann. In your analysis you should identify two different design features within the Lady's writing desk and evaluate how effectively they have been used.

Processes/construction

One of Ruhlmann's craftsmen, Raymond Lautelin, recalled:

'We could spend days or even weeks on a single study or a single detail. We had to start over and over again until we had achieved the desired effect. And then suddenly he would say, "Don't change anything! That's perfect!" He had an infallible eye and decisions were final.'

Quoted in Camard, p. 25.

Describe possible manufacturing techniques that would have been used by the craftsmen that made the Lady's writing desk. Your explanation should demonstrate an understanding of the types of tools and techniques used in the 1920s and 1930s.

Aesthetics and Functionality

Identify some aesthetic qualities of the *Lady's writing desk* by describing its form, shape and overall appearance.

Describe the materials and process that would be used to achieve the same style if this object were created today.

Compare and Contrast

The architect Le Corbusier was also a major furniture designer in the 1920s and 1930s. He wished to design furniture that functioned as 'beautiful equipment'. They were models, or units, suitable for mass-production techniques using new materials like aluminium rather than luxurious, precious finishes.

Compare and contrast this approach with Ruhlmann's design philosophy.

Practical Activities

Download images of the Lady's writing desk within the Art Deco online resource. Create a two-point perspective drawing of the desk. Render the drawing to emphasise the different materials used. Annotate the drawing indicating possible joins and processes used in the production of this furniture piece.

Design a chair that would suit the Lady's writing desk using a Paraline drawing system. Identify possible materials and processes that would be appropriate for your design. Your design should consider the Ruhlmann style as well as Art Deco characteristics you see throughout the exhibition.

The ideal Art Deco woman had a particular look and style. Read about Jeanne Paquin's *Chimère* evening dress within this online resource.

From your research, design stationery for the woman who would own this desk.

Stationery items could include

- writing paper
- envelopes
- blotting paper
- personal calling card
- note paper
- seal
- ink bottle
- other appropriate accessories.

Your design should consider some of the design characteristics that you see within the exhibition.

Bibliography

Camard, Florence. *Ruhlmann – Master of Art Deco*, Abrams Pub, New York, 1984

Please note: These websites have been gathered from various sources and the listing of them does not mean an endorsement by the National Gallery of Victoria.

Teachers: Although we check each site before listing, please ensure you have thoroughly checked any site before distributing to your students.