Writing table

Place of origin: Paris (made)
Date: ca. 1760 (made)
Artist/Maker: Leleu, Jean-François, born 1729 - died 1764 (maker)
Materials and Techniques: Case and large drawer of oak; nest and three internal drawers of poplar, marquetry of various woods; gilt brass mounts; green leather, green velvet; brass locking hardware, steel key.

Credit Line: Bequeathed by John Jones
Museum number: 1017:1 to 3-1882

Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 2a, case CA2

Public access description
This small writing-table is not stamped with the maker's mark, as most furniture made in Paris between about 1751 and 1792 was supposed to be. None the less, it is possible to attribute it to Jean-François Leleu (1729-1807), because the table is of exactly the same form as a small group of writing tables that are stamped by that maker. Although we know very little about Leleu's apprenticeship, we know that as a journeyman (a newly-qualified cabinet-maker) he worked in the workshop of Jean-François Oeben. Oeben was cabinet-maker to the king and was particularly known for the clever gadgetry of his furniture. This table has a neat sliding mechanism that allows the top drawer to be drawn forward to create a writing surface that can also be raised to provide a reading stand. Leleu must have learned such tricks from his master, before he set up his own workshop in 1764. In the Oeben workshop, Leleu would also have seen fine examples of the sort of highly naturalistic flower marquetry that decorates the top of this table.

Descriptive line
Table with drawers and sliding top, veneered oak, attributed to Jean-François Leleu, Paris, ca.1760.

Physical description
A small writing table with sliding writing compartment containing an adjustable reading stand, the oak carcase veneered in a marquetry of several woods, with a panel of flower marquetry on the top; mounts of gilt bronze.

The top is joined to the side with two brass-lipped runners, each of which is screwed front to back on the underside. Each runner locates in a brass-lined groove in the inside faces of the upper case sides and stiles. The top now slides back independently of the forward movement of the drawer unit, but may originally have been designed with a sprung mechanism, or one that linked the two movements (see 1098-1882 for an example of the latter mechanical system).

The function of a now unused groove beneath the brass-lined groove in each upper case side would presumably have been part of such an arrangement. It seems most likely that it housed a tongue, metal or wood, that ran along the outside face of each drawer case side, supporting the movement of the drawer unit. However, the outside faces of the drawer unit sides are now veneered with purplewood that conceal the arrangement underneath. This may also be a later addition, to cover the alteration.

Dimensions
Height: 705 mm, Width: 565 mm, Depth: 405 mm

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Object history note
When this table was owned by John Jones, it was displayed in the dining-room of his house at 95 Piccadilly. Describing the room as it appeared just after Jones's death in 1882, the writer William Maskell wrote in the Handbook of the Jones Collection, p. 15: 'Among other furniture in this room which may especially be mentioned . . . two beautiful tables (Nos. 1017, 1018)'. In an engraving after a drawing by H. W. Hogg published in the Handbook (p. 13, fig. 3) this table (1017-1882) appears to be one of those - probably the left-hand one - which flanks the large writing table (1018-1882) standing between the windows.

In the 1882 Museum Inventory, the table was described as a writing table made by 'Riesener . . . Period of Louis XVI'. In his Catalogue of the Jones Collection. Part I - Furniture (London, 1930), Oliver Brackett did not attribute the table to a particular maker, describing it as a 'small secrétaire . . . Period of Louis XV.' Brackett also noted: 'A similar writing-cabinet was sold at the sale of the Michelham Collection (Lot 186), in London on November 23rd, 1926.' This is a reference to the collection of Herbert Stern, 1st Baron Michelham (1851-1919). Other comparable tables are a combined toilet and writing table (toilette à transformations) in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington (1942.9.422), made by Leleu ca.1764-1775; a table in the Wallace Collection, London, signed Leleu; and one in the Widener Collection. The V&amp;A table was first attributed to Leleu ca. 1968.

In 1968 a nineteenth-century reproduction of the table taken to the V&amp;A by its owner, when it was described in the Departmental Catalogue as: 'an extremely fine 19th century copy . . . The marquetry and mounts were exactly similar, and one would assume that our piece had been readily available to the cabinet-maker, presumably before the piece was in the possession of Mr. Jones. The same woods had been
used for the marquetry, and although there was not such fine engraving on the top, the woods had of course retained more colour than our piece. the copy did not have the mechanical top, and the drawer beneath the top did not have a writing slide and fitments. The handles on the three drawers behind the tambour front were of knob form, not rings as on the Jones piece. The construction underneath was much heavier, the apron piece was nearly twice as thick as that on the Jones piece*. The reproduction table was sold the following year at Sotheby's London, 24 January, lot 26 (£1,000). It is possible that it may have been made with the help of W. G. Paulson Townsend's Measured drawings of French furniture in the South Kensington Museum (London, 1899) which included illustrations of the original (plates 52-55).

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O109118/writing-table-leleu-jean-francois/