

House of Puiforcat

“Most of them remind us that it is not necessary to reject history or tradition in order to be contemporary, that indeed one of the most effective ways to be modern is to build on the solid foundation of what has come before.”¹ This was what Thomas P. Campbell (1962-), former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had to say on the Art Deco movement. This sentiment is exemplified in the generations-long story of Puiforcat, a renowned French luxury silverware brand. Puiforcat's contributions to the Art Deco period is demonstrated through the spirit of innovation; and artisanal tradition that runs through Puiforcat's bloodline.



Figure 1. Trademark of Puiforcat, combining the font in Art Deco streamlined geometric style and silhouette of the Anne of Austria beaker, a masterpiece from the lifelong collection of silverworks assembled by Louis-Victor Puiforcat.

History

French silverware house Puiforcat was founded in Paris in 1820, by brothers Émile (d. 1883) and Joseph-Marie Puiforcat (n.d.) and their cousin, Jean-Baptiste Fuchs (n.d.), as a cutlery shop located on 14 rue Chapon in the 3rd arrondissement of Paris.²

In the 1920s, when the house was under the direction of the third generation, Puiforcat underwent a remarkable transformation under the stewardship of Louis Victor (1867-1965), husband of Laure Puiforcat (1873-1960). He successfully rebranded the house as a luxury silversmith brand that became the talk of Parisian high society. A connoisseur of beauty, Louis Victor also indulged in the pursuit of classic works of *Haute Orfèvrerie*, which means French gold and silversmith masterpieces, during his leisure time; And helped to revive this dying art form by reproducing the finest works in his workshop. His attempt in preserving French silversmithing classic techniques and maintaining within the Puiforcat workshop the different expertise in the field of *Haute Orfèvrerie* successfully rekindled the Parisians' appreciation for traditional craftsmanship, that was progressively impacted by industrialisation. And to perpetuate the Puiforcat tradition, Louis made another rare move - he adopted his wife's maiden

¹ Goss, *French Art Deco*, vi.

² Puiforcat, "Heritage."

name and became known as Louis Victor Tabouret-Puiforcat. His collection of silverwork was considered among the finest in the world, and is now part of the collection in the Louvre Museum.³



Figure 2. The silversmith workshop of Louis Victor Tabouret-Puiforcat.⁴

Jean Elysée Puiforcat (1897-1945), son of Louis-Victor and Laure, pursued his interest in silversmithing and designing in Paris after being deployed during the First World War. In 1925, Jean E. Puiforcat revealed himself as a goldsmith at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts. And to further practice his belief on rebelling against the lavish and extravagant decorative styles⁵, Jean E. Puiforcat became a co-founder of the Union des Artistes Modernes.⁶

In 1927, he relocated to Saint-Jean-de-Luz and briefly worked in Havana, Cuba for two years. In 1941, he moved to Mexico and began exhibiting his work in the United States.

³ Puiforcat, "Heritage."

⁴ Puiforcat, *Catalogue 2021*, 3.

⁵ Hiller, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*.

⁶ Ross, "Art Deco Revisited."



Figure 3. A portrait of Jean E. Puiforcat. ⁹



Figure 4. A photograph of Puiforcat boutique located on Boulevard Haussmann, 1918. ¹⁰

Jean E. Puiforcat scaled new heights of the house and became known for the Art Deco style, which featured smooth surfaces and geometric series. He experimented with diverse materials

⁹ Reinhard Krause, “Jean Puiforcat, el genio francés que creó las cuberterías más bonitas del mundo.”

¹⁰ Reinhard Krause, “Jean Puiforcat, el genio francés que creó las cuberterías más bonitas del mundo.”

including ivory, onyx, lapis lazuli, rosewood and gilding into his designs.¹¹ He once confessed his design ideas to the Count of Fleury in 1933. "I plunged into mathematics and came across the name of Plato[...] From him, I learned about arithmetic, harmonious and geometric measures, and the five famous Platonic bodies illustrated by Leonardo later on[...]"¹² and claimed his incomplete understanding of the golden ratio is the "weakness" of some of his own creations.¹³ Jean E. Puiforcat thus began his countless trials into attaining the "divine proportion", and gained renown for his elegant geometric forms and the innovative combination of metalwork with precious materials, cementing his name as a synonym for Art Deco glamour.

The inspiring works of Jean E. Puiforcat have been revered by numerous artists throughout the years. Notably, Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol were among Puiforcat's admirers, expressing their appreciation through proposals of collaboration and acquisition of his art pieces.

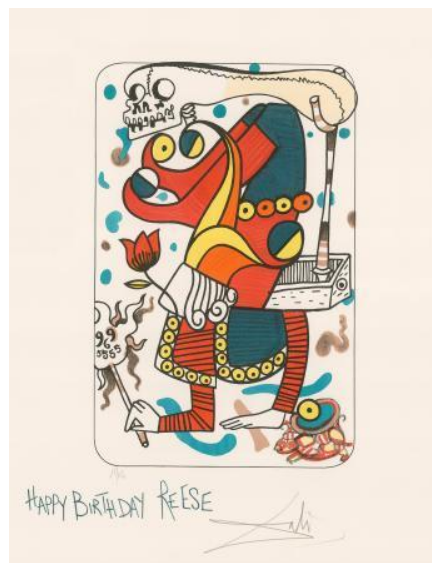


Figure 5. One of the cards designed by Salvador Dali for Puiforcat.

¹¹ Campbell, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts: Two-volume Set*, 240.

¹² Hiller, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*.

« *J'ai plongé dans les mathématiques et je suis tombé sur Platon [...] de lui j'ai appris l'arithmétique, les mesures harmonieuses et géométriques, les fameux cinq corps platoniciens illustrés plus tard par Léonard [...]* »
[original text]

¹³ Puiforcat, "Golden Ratio."



Figure 6. Andy Warhol's collection. A tureen with fluorite decoration, designed by Jean E. Puiforcat, 1925.¹⁴



Figure 7. Andy Warhol's collection. A silver coupe, designed by Jean E. Puiforcat, c. 1925.¹⁵

In the Collection

With a rich heritage of over 10,000 sculpted pieces; 100 varieties of cutlery; and 5,000 mandrels for shaping metal, Puiforcat is one of the few houses in France that preserves its legacy and employs a team of master craftsmen in its workshop. The expertise of its craftsmen allows Puiforcat to reproduce masterpieces from Louis-Victor Puiforcat's silverwork collection and draw inspiration from the sketches of Jean É. Puiforcat.¹⁶ The pieces in the Liang Yi

¹⁴ Sotheby's, "Tureen."

¹⁵ Sotheby's, "Coupe."

¹⁶ Puiforcat, *Catalogue 2021*, 6-10.

Collection are prime examples showcasing the excellent execution and various styles of the house.



Figure 8. French silver double salt cellars. Right: Biennais, c. 1809-1819, silver and silver-gilt, 13 x 10.5 x 7 cm, Liang Yi Museum; Left; Puiforcat, 19th century, silver, 13 x 10.5 x 7 cm, Liang Yi Museum.



Figure 9 and 10. Close up of the salt cellars.

Our collection comprises a pair of double salt cellars, which could be a perfect example of the reproducing works of Louis Victor Puifocat. One in silver and silver-gilt crafted by Biennais, Paris between 1809 and 1819; And the other in silver of similar design by Puiforcat, Paris. The oval-shaped first cellar has a gadrooned terrace, swan-shaped supports and gilded interior; and is stamped with "Biennais" beneath the terrace. The second cellar has a chiseled edge with leaf motifs, stamped "Puiforcat" and "925" beneath the terrace, and has a slight difference in the

ring grip compared to the first cellar. ¹⁷ There is a similar pair of salt cellars from the collection of Victor Puiforcat, later owned by Stavros Niarchos and now housed at the Louvre Museum. It is noteworthy that the Louvre salt cellars have a terrace similar to that of Puiforcat's, rather than the Biennais salt cellar presented here. ¹⁸

The silverware from the house of Puiforcat during the 20th century also demonstrates the Regency style, another house signature. One of their most famous Regency models is the Élysée collection. French President Vincent Auriol (1884-1966) appointed the use of the Élysée cutlery for official dinners at the Élysée Palace in 1947. The set of cutlery is characterised by finely chiselled handles featuring fretwork motifs and stamped with the initials "RF" for République Française. ¹⁹



Figure 11. Close up of the cutlery used at state dinners.

Our Museum also houses two silverware objects crafted by Emil Puiforcat. The first object is a silver-gilt écuelle, designed in the Régence style with Rococo motifs. The silverware is circular with oval borders, and its engraving is distinguished by its intricate and embellished attributes, demonstrating the Rococo artistic style that accentuates fanciful and organic elements, including motifs like shells and floral patterns. Like the spatulate side handles are cast with portrait medallions surrounded by foliage and shell terminals and the domed cover is spirally flat-chased and engraved with flutes and shells. The Régence style often integrated a sculptural form in the shape of a female bust, known as an "espagnolette," as a decorative element. The circular handle and spatulate side handles that feature portrait medallions serve as an example of this stylistic convention. ²⁰

¹⁷ Sotheby's, "Orfèvrerie Européenne, Boîtes en Or et Objets de Vitrine."

¹⁸ Tenenbaum, *l'orfèvre de napoleon: Martin-Guillaume Biennais*, 77.

¹⁹ Puiforcat, "Élysée."

²⁰ Sotheby's, "Écuelle couverte et son presentoir en vermeil de style Regence par Puiforcat, Paris, XXeme siecle."



Figure 12. A French silver-gilt écuëlle, cover and stand, Emile Puiforcat, 20th century, silver-gilt, D 29 x H 2.8cm, Liang Yi Museum.

The second object is a set of silver-gilt ewer and beakers in the Régence style, reflecting the tradition of guilds being represented through specific types of vessels and was finely crafted with incredible details. The ewer has a helmet-shaped structure, a hexagonal foot, and a scroll handle. Its lower body is adorned with cut-card work and the mid-rib is engraved with foliage, diapering, and lambrequins. The tapering cylindrical beakers have slightly flared rims and cast circular feet engraved with foliate bands.²¹



Figure 13. A French silver-gilt ewer and six beakers, Emile Puiforcat, 20th century, silver-gilt, ewer: D 23 x H 27cm, cup: D 8 x H 9.5cm, Liang Yi Museum.

As an art style that emerged from the Belle Époque artistic movements, Art Deco is characterised by the geometric simplicity of its forms. Although its precursors began to emerge in 1912, it was not until the First World War that Art Deco truly came into being. The style

²¹ Christies', "A French silver-gilt ewer and six beakers."

continued to develop and reached its peak during the 1920s.²² In 1927, Jean Puiforcat expressed that practical objects should not have excessive decorations disguised as something else. Without unnecessary ornaments does not mean works cannot be refined and highly valuable. As a devotee of the Art Deco movement, he emphasised that the purpose of an object should dictate its form, and the desire to make it a means of expression gives it a constantly changing character.²³ The French silver set of tea service and tray shown below manifests the idea of Jean Puiforcat, avant-garde and yet functional.



Figure 14. A French silver Art Deco four-piece tea service and tray, Jean E. Puiforcat, c. 1925, silver and bentwood, Liang Yi Museum.



Figure 15. Close up of the tea pot and the coffee pot.

²² Puiforcat, “Art Deco.”

²³ Authenticite Partnership, “Jean Puiforcat (1897-1945), orfèvre sculpteur moderne.”

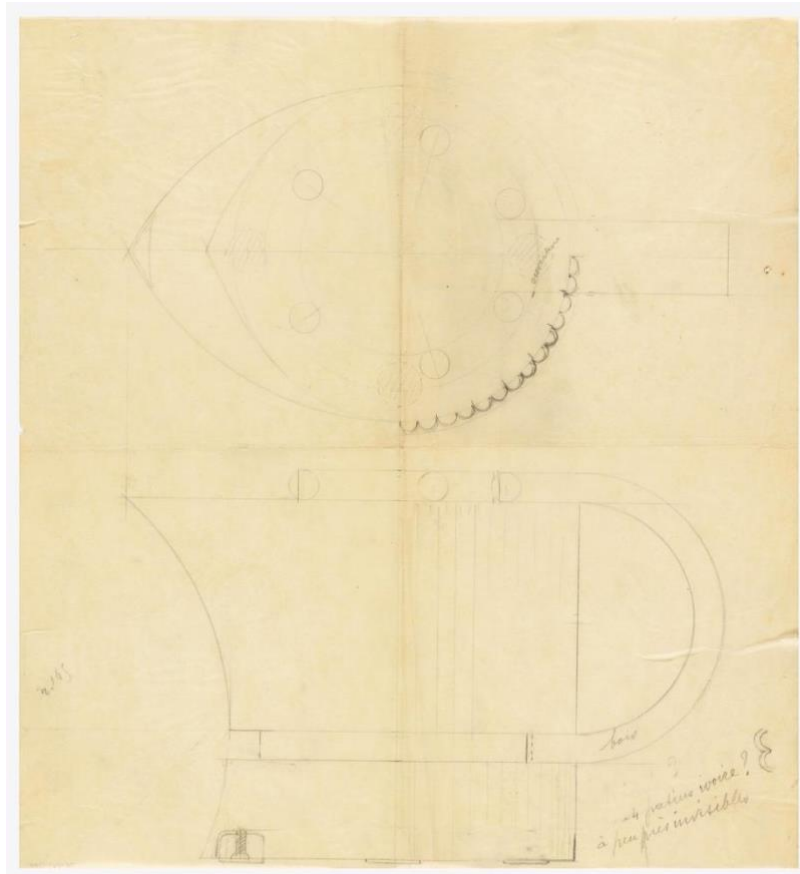


Figure 16. Design drawing for the kettle in the same series.²⁴

This set of teapot, coffeepot, sugar bowl and cream jug is an example of the work of Jean Puiforcat. His Art Deco style often featured smooth surfaces and geometric shapes, as well as his experimentation with a variety of materials. In this set, the cylindrical parts of each piece are fluted, and the handles are made of bentwood. The covers and side handles are decorated with silver beads.²⁵ The set is not only functional, but also aesthetically pleasing, with the unique combination of materials and the attention to detail in the silverwork. The use of bentwood handles is a technique that has been used in furniture design for many years, and it adds an element of visual interest to the set.

Conclusion

From the company's humble beginnings as a cutlery shop in Paris to its transformation into a luxury silversmith brand, Puiforcat has always been committed to preserving traditional craftsmanship while also pushing the boundaries of design. The work of Jean E. Puiforcat, in particular, has left an indelible mark on the art world, with his elegant geometric forms and innovative use of materials. In the 1990s, The House of Puiforcat was acquired by Maison Hermès.²⁶ The enduring appeal of Puiforcat's creations and innovative designs continue to inspire the new generation of artists, ensuring that the brand's legacy will be cherished for generations to come.

²⁴ Cooper Hewitt. "Drawing, design for a hot water kettle."

²⁵ De Bonneville, *Jean Puiforcat*, 135.

²⁶ Puiforcat, "Heritage."

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