



## Pair Of Red And Gold Lacquered Toilet Boxes

12 000 EUR



Period : 18th century

Condition : Etat d'usage

Material : Lacquer

Width : 30 cm

Height : 10 cm

Depth : 23 cm

### Description

A very rare pair of red and gold lacquered toilet boxes, known as "boîtes carrées" (square boxes), with locks. The decoration in the center, within cartouches, depicts Psyche, Eros (Cupid), and Venus. Surrounding the central scenes is a rich ornamentation of acanthus leaves, fruit baskets, and scrolls.

Possibly the work of Guillaume Martin.

Louis XIV period (1710-1720).

Restorations consistent with use, a minor restoration (side molding), and slight wear to the decoration (mainly on one of the boxes).

H. 10 x L. 30 x D. 23 cm.

The pair of boxes under our study is extremely rare and belongs to the realm of intimacy: they are mobile objects, witnesses to the luxury of the

### Dealer

**Galerie Pellat de Villedon**

French furnitures of the 17th & 18th centuries

Mobile : 06 07 57 01 20

2 bis rue Carnot

Versailles 78000

time. These are toilet boxes, called "squares" in 18th-century descriptions, but are often mistakenly called "wig boxes." At the very beginning of the 18th century, such boxes were either tomb-shaped or, as in the case of our pair, rectangular with a domed lid. They were used to store brushes, combs, "scented water bottles," jewelry, or adornments. They were initially made in pairs but are now often found individually. They were placed on either side of a toilet mirror (the mirror was placed on a table reserved for this purpose). These boxes mirrored the shapes of silver toiletry objects. They did not replace these silver objects but coexisted with them after their creation. The painting preserved at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art after Jean-François de Troy clearly shows how they were arranged.

What makes them rare is not only that the set is complete, but also their dating. The enchanting red background is characteristic of production from the 1710s-1720s. Indeed, these are the beginnings of the production of European lacquered boxes. This is why the two boxes in our study are historical objects. We can compare them to a similar piece from the same period, preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum. This lacquer technique allowed for highly detailed decorations. One only has to examine the two main cartouches with a magnifying glass to appreciate the detailed background landscapes, as the drawings are incredibly intricate. The technique was as follows: the object's structure received colored layers, the miniature painter or engraver created the ornamentation, which was then covered with a mordant; gold leaf, powder, or mixture was applied, and finally, the entire piece was coated with translucent lacquer. This was a "new material," and related trades were emerging. In this unprecedented production, the "engravers on lacquer" were authorized to work on the ornamentation (as conventions did not allow other trades to experiment with this

expertise). Thus, the profession and technique developed. By the 1730s, the trend moved toward imitating Asian lacquers. French decorations, like those presented on our pair of boxes, were abandoned in favor of designs evoking the Far East. These boxes, however, enjoyed widespread popularity throughout the 18th century.

Guillaume Martin and his workshop likely created these rare early 18th-century pieces. Indeed, this artisan, who founded a renowned dynasty of lacquerers, innovated and left a lasting mark on lacquer history. He became "lacquerer to the king" in 1725. Historians agree that Guillaume and his brothers established themselves in this field between 1710 and 1730, outpacing their competitors. In contemporary documents, we find the title "Guillaume Martin, lacquerer in Chinese lacquer on wood, well, ivory, and others, for women's toilets and other works." We know that at this time, toiletry objects, especially square boxes, were a significant part of his work.

These items were costly. As Anne Forray-Carlier explains in her book "The Secrets of French Lacquer" (Les Arts Décoratifs editions), the more complex the decoration, the higher the price. The client had numerous options to choose from by selecting specific borders or details. Amusingly, the Duke of Bouillon owed the Martins 200 livres (a considerable sum).

We can observe that the works in our study feature a hand-done decoration, as there are some differences in the engraving between the two boxes (for example, a different number of crosshatches in the corners). The cartouches depict the myth of Psyche and Eros (Cupid). Venus, the mother of Eros, represented as a small winged putto armed with his arrows, is jealous of Psyche's beauty and instructs him to shoot Psyche with an arrow so she would fall in love with the ugliest mortal. Cupid, mesmerized by Psyche's

beauty, accidentally pricks himself and falls in love with her. Psyche, sometimes depicted as a child, as in this case, is shown with butterfly wings. The theme of Love referenced in these boxes suggests they may have been a wedding gift.