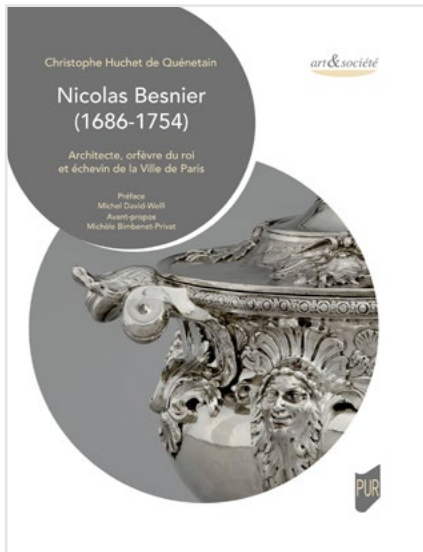


## NICOLAS BESNIER (16867-1754). ARCHITECTE, ORFEVRE DU ROI ET ECHEVIN DE LA VILLE DE PARIS

Author: Christophe Huchet de Quénétain

Published by the Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2024, 348 pp, ISBN 978-2-7535-9475-3



This richly illustrated monograph is an important milestone in the study of eighteenth-century French goldsmithing and originated from the author's doctoral thesis which he defended at the Sorbonne. Until now the life and work of Nicolas Besnier has remained largely unresearched; but Christophe Huchet de Quénétain has undertaken considerable archival research to present a full picture of a versatile artist, and certainly one of the most gifted goldsmiths of his generation, whose output exemplifies what is known in the history of French decorative arts as the Régence style.

By means of a well constructed and highly readable text, we follow the trajectory of the career of this artist from his training, through to the recognition he enjoyed in his lifetime, and on to the point when he became a goldsmith, favoured by Louis XV, working for the king and some of the most eminent figures at the French court as well as at certain European courts. His brilliant career in the service of the powerful led to him to become a shrewd and successful businessman. Born into a highly fertile artistic milieu on both his father's and mother's sides, he was orphaned, and placed under the guardianship of his uncle, the great goldsmith Nicolas Delaunay (1646–1727), who notably worked on the silver furniture for Versailles made for Louis XIV. A very useful genealogical tree at the end of the book helps to clarify the extensive family network which connected Nicolas Besnier to important artists such as the sculptor Corneille van Clève, the architect Gabriel, and the Ballin family of goldsmiths.

The year 1709 was the turning point in the young Besnier's formation, it is when he was granted the privilege of being accepted, for three years, as a pupil at the Académie de France in Rome, where he enrolled in the architecture classes. Benefiting from a solid education in mathematics and drawing, Besnier won the approbation of his professors through his diligence and precocious talent. Huchet de Quénétain gives a particularly good account of these student years, during which artists were fostered and encouraged by the Académie's administration, to become perfect servants worthy of the crown's ambitions.

Returning to Paris in 1712 Besnier decided, probably influenced by his family's circumstances, to abandon architecture in favour of goldsmithing. After an accelerated apprenticeship he registered his master's mark on 1 February 1714: his initials NB surmounted by a five pointed star, a fleur de lis and a crown. In the same year he entered into a partnership with his uncle Nicolas Delaunay, who enjoyed the privileged status of *orfèvre du roi* (goldsmith to the king). The author reveals especially interesting information concerning those privileged artists, such as André Charles Boulle, but also notably Delaunay, who enjoyed, thanks to royal favour, a lodging and workshop made available to them in the *Galleries du Louvre*. This accommodation allowed them to avoid the strict rules of their respective guilds and enabled them to attain the position of becoming a master without the necessity of presenting a masterpiece or paying the usual fees. In Besnier's

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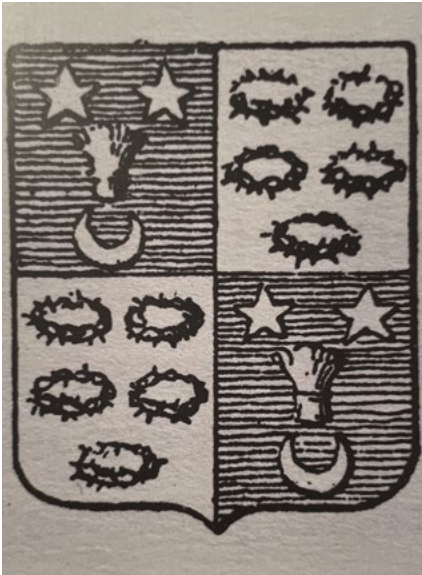


FIG 1 — Charles René d'Hozier, engraving, the coat of arms of Nicolas Besnier



FIG 2 — Ferrière [perfume flask], silver-gilt, charge mark for 1717–1722, master's mark of Nicolas Besnier, from the toilet service supplied to the duchesse de Modène (RFML.OA.2019.46.4©2020 Musée du Louvre, Dist.GrandPalaisRMN/Hervée Lewandowski)

case, such privileges were adversely regarded by most members of the Parisian goldsmiths' guild, which at the time comprised some 300 registered member.

From 1715 Besnier himself enjoyed the privilege of obtaining a place in the *Galerie du Louvre*. By 1723, as Delaunay aged and then retired, he obtained consent that his brother-in-law Claude Ballin and his nephew Nicolas Besnier should succeed him as *orfèvres du roi*. By this means these two privileged goldsmiths joined Thomas Germain in sharing this coveted status which obliged them to serve the King in rotation, for one year in three. Thereafter Besnier's career accelerated: in 1726 and 1728 he was elected to the prestigious office of *garde des orfèvres* [warden of the goldsmiths' guild] an important role which gave him supervisory powers over his peers and also enabled him to gain access to the patronage of the lower nobility. In 1726 he was also elected *Conseiller de Ville* [City Councillor], and in 1729 he became an *échevin* [alderman]. Later he would also be appointed *Directeur de la Manufacture royale de tapisseries de Beauvais* [Director of the royal tapestry manufactory at Beauvais]. All these offices, and the success of his workshop, allowed him to amass considerable wealth and to become the proprietor of extensive properties and an artistic patrimony, as he was also a collector.

Besnier's private life, he was married three times, has left abundant traces in the archives, which the author has expertly exploited. It is worth noting that in 1734 his eldest daughter married his most promising apprentice, Jacques Roëttiers de la Tour, a goldsmith destined for a brilliant future who became his associate from the late 1720s and bought his father in law's workshop in 1732.

In the section devoted to Besnier's output, the author gives an intelligent inside view of how a commission was executed, retracing the different stages of manufacture from the preparatory drawing to the finished piece, its cost, and the client's mode of payment, which in the vast majority of cases was in kind: by depositing obsolete plate with the goldsmith, who would then melt it down. This practice helps to explain the disappearance of the bulk of eighteenth century French royal silverware. Two years after obtaining his master's mark, Besnier was already receiving his first royal commissions from Louis XV. Among these is one of the most important: the "*double service de vermeil et d'argent blanc*" [double service in silver-gilt and white silver], delivered to the King in 1737 after eight years of work. The nef alone cost 34,000 *livres*. Royal commissions multiplied with the frequent movements of the king who liked to stay at Fontainebleau, Marly, Choisy and the *château de la Muette*. Sadly, many of these commissions were ephemeral: between 1740 and 1763 the Wars of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War forced Louis XV to part with much of Nicolas Besnier's production; for example a large melting down was ordered in 1759.

Besnier was goldsmith not only to the king, but also to the wider court, as attested by his works for the Infanta Queen; Charlotte Aglaé d'Orléans; Marie Françoise de Bourbon; the Comte de Charolais, and for the numerous *enfants de France* [French royal children], for whom he was regularly ordered to supply the layette, which included functional silver items. Pieces of his extensive output were also acquired by those beyond the court, the *noblesse de robe ou d'épée* [nobility of the robe or the sword] of the kingdom and occasionally foreign patrons, whether through diplomatic

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FIG 3 —  
*Pot à oille* [tureen] and stand, charge mark for 1726–32, date letter for 1726–27, master's mark of Nicholas Besnier only on the cover over struck with an unknown English mark, engraved with the arms of George I of Britain and of Horace Walpole  
(OA 12534 B© 2017 GrandPalaisRmn (Musée du Louvre) / Stéphane Maréchalle)

gifts commissioned by the *département des affaires étrangères* [department of foreign affairs] or through direct commissions such as those from the wife of the Emperor Charles VII or the Bateman family in England. Horatio Walpole, British Ambassador to France from 1723–29, commissioned from him a silver-gilt service weighing 19,290 oz [30 kg] and 107,383 oz (167kg) of white silver. The extraordinary pair of *pots à oille* [tureens] and stands, now in the Musée du Louvre, are from the latter service. For this commission it is noteworthy that Besnier, doubtless to meet the delivery deadline, subcontracted part of the work to his colleague Pierre Hannier. The author illustrates how such commissions influenced some English goldsmiths, often of Huguenot origin, such as David Willaume I.

We can also gain a precise sense of Besnier's technical quality from the sumptuous toilet service made for Charlotte Aglaé d'Orléans, Duchess of Modena, a rare ensemble which survived the meltings: the commission comprised forty-one pieces, representing 23,791 oz (37kg) of silver, and is now partially conserved in the Musée du Louvre. It testifies to Besnier's perfect technical mastery and, while he did not hesitate on occasion to

subcontract to fellow goldsmiths, his virtuosity shows his full command of the ornamental canon of the Régence style, whose variations sometimes foreshadow the arrival of the Rococo. This group of pieces have already been studied in admirable details by Dr Paul Micio in his work on the collections of Monsieur, brother of Louis XIV.

In the final part of his study the author catalogues both the works that can be attributed with certainty to Nicolas Besnier, and other pieces, either unmarked or with incomplete hallmarks, that may be attributed to him and so the corpus of his oeuvre has been inventoried. He rightly emphasises that before Besnier's pieces entered the collections of the Metropolitan Museum, the Getty or the Louvre, Besnier's talent had already been recognised by great collectors such as the David Weil, Helft, Patiño and Niarchos families. A major goldsmith in the history of eighteenth century French decorative arts, Besnier's life and work deserves this remarkable and lavishly illustrated study, which, both in substance and in form, invites very few criticisms. At most one may regret the absence of photographic reproductions of the masters marks for the objects selected in the book.

**Philippe d'Arschot**