

FURNITURE ABC'S: ABATTANT

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A is for Abattant

A term used to describe the fall-front mechanism seen in French style writing desks, called *secrétaire à abattant*. The resulting panel can be used as a writing surface. These *secrétaires*—as well as writing bureaus and bookcases—became increasingly popular in the homes of the 18th-century French aristocracy.



Ref. 8664, A Fine Pair of Secrétaires à Abattant, firmly attributed to Bernard-Marie Cagnard, 1823. Previously with Butchoff Antiques, London.

Not only were they a symbol of wisdom and knowledge for the educated classes, secretaires were also used for the safekeeping of important correspondence and documents as they conceal drawers and shelves within. The extraordinary secretaire below (ref. 8114) has a lockable front panel à abattant, and it also contains a multitude of secret compartments as well as a strong box for extremely sensitive material.



[Ref. 8114. A Truly Magnificent Secrétaire à Abattant, by Maison Rogié of Paris, circa 1880. Butchoff Antiques, London.](#)

A recent exhibition at the Musée National du château de Malmaison (17 November 2018- 10 March 2019) is devoted to these enigmatic pieces of writing furniture and the secrets they housed within, highlighting several examples made for the emperor Napoleon I and his wife.



Secrétaire à abattant de Biennais. Musée national du château de Malmaison.

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