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## Title of Object

Clock with Vestals

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Pierre-Phillippe Thomire

**Culture:** French

**Date of Object:** c. 1790

**Country:** France

**Accession Number:** 82.25

**File Created:** 11/1/2016

**Material/Medium:** Bronze, gilt bronze, enameled dial, marble

**Author of File:** Mary Ann Wark

**Department:** Decorative Arts, Textiles and Sculpture

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 8/1/2017

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## Tour Topics

Symbolism-art, symbolism-in-art, Group 6 tour, Highlights 1600 to 1850, Neoclassical, Neoclassicism, women, ancient Roman, vestal virgin, time, stories/storytelling, mythology, technology, status, animals, panthers, cats, Classical antiquity

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Unwinding the layers of symbols of this clock:

1. When you first look at this French mantel clock, what impresses you?
2. There are many ancient symbols making up the images here. Which ones seem the most important? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. In French society at the time, the society was going between images of pleasure and images of morality. What symbols of this clock show pleasure? Morality?
4. The influential French philosopher Diderot thought art's proper function was to "inspire virtue and purify manners." What personal or civic virtues or manners do you think this artist was trying to inspire? What do you see that makes you say that? What would have been the message to women viewers? To male viewers?

5. (Discuss or explain what a “vestal virgin” was in ancient Rome.) Knowing about the ideas of the Vestal Virgins, what do you think the artist wanted the viewer/owner to do with his/her time? What do you see that makes you say that?

6. (Discuss or explain the salient characteristics of French society in the late 1780s/early 1790s.) Based on those characteristics of French society and the idea of the vestal virgins, what was the artist and the patrons of this clock preaching about the individual’s responsibility to the government?

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### **Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)**

1. Material: Elaborate, refined metal casting and finishing. Gold/gilt finishes. Tiny vessels, figurines, relief panels on the base, draped “cloth” under the altar, decorations on the altar and trims on the marble base are gilded bronze. The two Vestal Virgins, the sphinxes, the base and the feet of the base and the altar under the cloth are black marble.

2. Color: The two Vestal Virgins, the base and the feet of the base and the altar itself are black marble. The decorations of the altar, the carrying poles, and the relief sculptures are gold. The clock face is white with gold minute marks and hands, and black numerals. The black marble is set on white marble.

3. Many symbols from Classical antiquity (Greek and Roman).

4. Composition: very symmetrical; pyramidal; triangular peak is the fire. Clock central (12 numbers) and carried by 2 Vestal Virgins holding poles on which are mounted an altar, with the clock on the garlanded cloth underneath the table. There are two vessels, one a bowl and one a pitcher/vase on either side of the hearth/oven. The Vestals stand on a platform. On the band of the platform are 3 gilded reliefs: one of the muse of history (Clio) on the left, and the muse of astronomy on the right (Urania) and a long one of putti in the middle. The feet of the altar are winged sphinxes: female busts with lion bodies. Panthers are the feet of the platform. Rams’ heads on the top corners of the altar. On the bowl, there is a possible satyr with horns. On the pitcher, there is a female winged nude figurine. There are birds and grapes on the altar. The birds and grapes/vines on the front of the altar are symmetrical.

5. Neoclassical style (referents to many Classical symbols throughout)

#### ***Gilt Materials/process information***

6. Gilt bronzes in the French Interior: A rigid guild system maintained high standards of craftsmanship and regulate the process of gilt-bronze manufactory.

Two guilds involved: caster and chaser/ chaser and gilder. When the guild system was reformed in 1776, both casters and gilders were part of the same guild. Lost wax technique for casting. Chasing: burnishing, abrasion of surfaces. Gilding: mercury gilding would add a lot of cost. Bronze surface would be coated with a mixture of ground gold and mercury. While the gold adhered to the metal, the mercury would evaporate (poisonous fumes). The process was repeated several times until there was a thick enough layer of gold for shiny (burnished with a heliotrope stone) or matte. Survival rate of gilt bronze good because the bronze wasn’t worth much. (Metropolitan Museum, Gilt Bronze)

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### **Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

#### ***French history:***

7. France as a major world power and cultural center. Paris was a center of great cultural achievement and artistic creativity during the reign of Louis XV, from 1723–1774... [with] virtuoso inventiveness and superlative craftsmanship [in art and design]. (Paris, Getty Museum)

The Enlightenment flourishes in France from the mid-18th century. The movement is centered in Paris and asserts the importance of human reason as well as the existence of natural law. It is promulgated by writers, scientists, philosophers and theorists: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778); Voltaire (1694-1778); Montesquieu (1689-1755); Denis Diderot (1713-1784). Diderot believed it was art's proper function to "inspire virtue and purify manners," a function that the Rococo was not designed to fulfill. (Stokstad)

In 1790, Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, are ruling France, but are overthrown during the Revolution, which starts in 1789. This clock dates to circa 1790. By 1792, the Revolutionary legislature abolishes the monarchy and king is executed for treason in 1793. The 1789 French Revolution is instigated by numerous factors, including the country's unstable finances (worsened by participation in the American Revolution and war with Austria from 1792), and the mounting dissatisfaction of peasants, whose heavy taxes are used to pay the debts accrued by a court known for its decadence and splendor. The philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment: especially the belief in the authority of the individual also stir unrest as social and economic reforms fail to keep pace with intellectual progress. There are many laws involving the Dechristianization of France during the Revolution. (Wikipedia)

#### ***Clocks as decorative objects:***

8. Use: Mantel clock. Meant to be seen from front. Common in wealthy homes.

9. Design of the clock is taken from an engraving by the painter Hubert Robert, published in 1771-73. This collection was dedicated to the queen of France, Marie-Antoinette. An almost identical clock by Thomire was made for the queen's bathroom in the Tuilleries in Paris, now in the collection of the National Gallery, Washington DC (see photo in the Sources).

10. "French clockmakers...took full advantage of the luxury trade that flourished in Paris, providing domestic clocks in splendid cases, ranging from products of cabinetmakers such as Boulle in the early part of the period to the cooperative efforts of bronze founders, porcelain makers, and marble cutters, which began to predominate before the middle of the eighteenth century. The cases were often closely related to the sculpture and smaller decorative objects of the period. French clockmakers also contributed to the advancement of precision timekeeping in the eighteenth century." (Clocks, Metmuseum)

#### ***Artists***

11. Hubert Robert (1733-1808) was a French painter. He spent 11 years in Rome. His success on his return to Paris in 1765 was rapid: the following year he was received by the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. His first exhibition in 1767 was greeted in print by Diderot. He was imprisoned during the French Revolution. Someone else was sent to the guillotine instead of him by mistake. (Wikipedia)

12. Pierre-Phillippe Thomire (1751-1843) was a French sculptor, trained by master sculptors Pajou and Houdin. He was the most prominent producer of ornamental patinated and gilt bronze objects and furniture mounts during the First French Empire. A finisher. He could model in wax, cast, matte gilt,

and mount on Sevres porcelain. At the height of his business, he employed 600-700 workers. (Wikipedia) In Mia's collections, there is also a model for a bronze mount for case furniture, a Classical chariot scene, signed by Thomire, 2007.4.

***Classical symbols: why?***

13. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rococo was the popular style: flamboyant and fun, curvaceous and asymmetrical, lightened with pastel colors and luxurious reflective materials—particularly gold—that came alive in the candle-lit evenings. By the 1730s, Rococo had spread throughout Europe. By the 1750s, however, the tide began to turn. The excavation of the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum—buried in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE—ignited a renewed passion for classical civilization. Artists of the Neoclassical (“New Classical”) style emphasized restraint, symmetry, rich colors, and overtly Greek and Roman motifs. Gradually, their designs entered the Rococo homes of the wealthy and countered the short-lived style with a sense of stateliness. (artsmia.org)

14. “Neo-classicism was a style that emerged in Britain and France in the 1750s. Artists and architects sought to create an eternally valid 'true style' that could be expressed across all areas of the visual arts. The style was based on the designs of Classical Greece and Rome. A major source of inspiration came from archaeological discoveries such as those made at Herculaneum and Pompeii which brought the ancient world to life.” The clock has standard decorative elements used in Neoclassical art: Vases, swags and festoons, Classical figures, real and fantastic creatures (like the sphinx), and beading (around the face of the clock). (Neo-classicism, V&A)

15. The discovery of a “House of Vestals” in Pompeii made the Vestals a popular subject in the 18th and 19th centuries. Mary Beard says it was a “fanciful eighteenth century notion that it was the residence of a group of virgin priestesses, the ‘Vestal Virgins’” p. 38. The main Temple of the Vestals was near the Roman Forum.

16. Enlightenment ideas, as espoused by Diderot: art's proper function to “inspire virtue and purify manners”; and the gathering storm clouds of revolution, French art moved increasingly toward neoclassicism.

***What is the possible meaning of the many symbols? Classical with Christian overlay.***

17. Vestal Virgin: six priestesses of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth and bakers. “Vesta was a powerful goddess of fire. Romans believed that as long as Vesta's sacred flame was kept burning then the city and its civilization would endure. Vestals...became brides of the city itself. With Rome as their guardian, any sexual relationship with a citizen was considered an act of incest which amounted to treason, a crime punishable by death.... Religion gave women a vital position in ancient society. Denied a meaningful role in everyday life, the Vestals acted as handmaids to the goddess, giving them power and status as well as religious and political influence, avenues blocked to most secular women. Ultimately they were confined by their responsibilities to the sacred fire and their vows of chastity. They may have carried the fate of Rome in their hands, but their lives were still determined by men.” (BBC, Ancient Rome's Maidens)

“Chosen between the ages of 6 and 10 by the pontifex maximus (“chief priest”), Vestal Virgins served for 30 years, during which time they had to remain virgins. Afterward they could marry, but few did. Those chosen as Vestal Virgins had to be of the required age, be freeborn of freeborn and respectable parents (though later the daughters of freedmen were eligible), have both parents alive, and be free from physical and mental defects. They lived in the House of the Vestal Virgins on the Roman Forum, near the

Temple of Vesta. Their duties included tending the perpetual fire in the Temple of Vesta, keeping their vow of chastity, fetching water from a sacred spring (Vesta would have no water from the city water-supply system), preparing ritual food, caring for objects in the temple's inner sanctuary, and officiating at the Vestalia (June 7–15), the period of public worship of Vesta. Failure to attend to their duties was punished by a beating; violation of the vow of chastity, by burial alive (the blood of a Vestal Virgin could not be spilled). But the Vestal Virgins also enjoyed many honours and privileges not open to married or single women of equivalent social status, including emancipation from their fathers' rule and the ability to handle their own property." (Britannica)

In Western art, the vestals were used as models of female virtue. In the libertine environment of 18th c France, portraits of women as Vestals seem intended as fantasies of virtue infused with ironic eroticism. Later Vestals became an image of republican virtue. Only beautiful/chaste a short time. (Nicholson)

18. Winged sphinx: Female monster with the body of a lion, the head and breast of a woman, eagles' wings and, according to some, a serpent's tail. She was sent by the gods to plague the town of Thebes for some ancient crime, preying on its youths and devouring all who failed to solve her riddle. The regent of Thebes, King Creon offered the throne to the one who would destroy her. Oedipus took up the challenge, and when he solved the Sphinx's riddle, she cast herself off the mountainside in despair. Re: her stay in Thebes and her connection with the fate of the house of Laius. The riddle which she proposed she is said to have learnt from the Muses! The most famous riddle in history: "Which creature has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" She strangled and devoured anyone who answered incorrectly. Oedipus solved the riddle by answering: Man—who crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as an adult, and then uses a walking stick in old age. By some accounts, there was a second riddle: "There are two sisters: one gives birth to the other and she, in turn, gives birth to the first. Who are the two sisters?" The answer is "day and night." (Wikipedia)

19. Panthers: A creature out of ancient legend that resembles a big cat with a multicolored hide. Ancient Greeks thought panther was one of the favored mounts of the god Dionysus. In Greek the word panther could be interpreted as "every wild beast," thus supporting the idea of a composite beast. (Wikipedia)

20. Putti: secular; chubby male child, usually naked and sometimes winged. In the Baroque period, putti came to represent the omnipresence of God. In ancient classical art: believed to influence human lives. Some other associations: with Aphrodite and so with romantic or erotic love, with Heaven, with peace, prosperity, mirth and leisure. (Wikipedia)

21. Clio, muse of history, "made famous" or "to make famous". In some accounts, the muse of lyre playing. Daughter of Zeus and the Titaness Mnemosyne. Often represented with an open parchment scroll or set of tablets. (Wikipedia)

22. Urania, muse of astronomy: Her name means "heavenly" or "heaven". Urania was in Greek mythology the muse of astronomy and a daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne a great granddaughter of Uranus. Some accounts list her as the mother of the musician Linus by Apollo. Often associated with Universal Love and the Holy Spirit.. During the Renaissance, she began to be considered the Muse for Christian poets. She dresses in a cloak embroidered with stars and keeps her eyes and attention focused on the Heavens. She is usually represented with a celestial globe to which she points with a little staff. She is able to foretell the future by the arrangement of the stars. (Wikipedia)

23. Goat: In Classical art, the goat is associated with Bacchus or Pan. A goat was also found on a street sign in Pompeii. In Christian art, it is associated with St. Anthony, typically, as symbol of the Devil. (The Art Journal)

24. Ram's heads with garlands: In "Hellenistic-Roman funerary iconography...(rams' heads on the column capitals, framing garland of sacred ribbons and laurel leaves) marks the passage from life to death." (Rams have also been a traditional sacrificial animal, so may connect to the sacred fire carried by the Vestal Virgins.) (The Worlds of Roman Women)

For story of the Golden Fleece: Aries is Latin for ram. Aries is constellation. Aries came to represent specifically the ram whose fleece became the Golden Fleece of Ancient Greek mythology that rescued Phrixos and Helle on orders from Hermes, taking him to the land of Colchis. Phrixos and Helle were the son + daughter of King Athamas and his first wife. The king's second wife was jealous and wished to kill his children. To accomplish this, she induced a famine in Boeotia, then falsified a message from the Oracle of Delphi that said Phrixos must be sacrificed to end the famine. Athamas was about to sacrifice his son when Aries, sent by the first wife, arrived. Helle fell off Aries' back in flight and drowned in the Dardanelles, also called the Hellespont in her honor. After arriving, Phrixos sacrificed the ram to Zeus and gave the Fleece to Aetes of Colchis, who rewarded him with an engagement to his daughter. Aetes hung its skin in a sacred place where it became known as the Golden Fleece and was guarded by a dragon. In a later myth, the Golden Fleece was stolen by Jason and the Argonauts. Symbolized by rams horns. The fleece was a symbol of authority and kingship. (Wikipedia)

25. Birds: The dove is a symbol of purity and peace. In the Old Testament story of the Flood, a dove returns to Noah's ark with an olive branch to show that the waters were going down and that God had made peace with the world. When shown with a halo, a dove is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit. (Wikipedia)

26. Grapes: in Greek mythology, grape harvest is abundance. Dionysus (Roman god Bacchus) god of grape harvest, winemaking and wine, of ritual madness and ecstasy. In Christian texts, connected to sacrifice. Grapes symbolize the blood of Christ and the wine taken during the service of Holy Communion. During the Last Supper, the last meal that Christ shared with his followers before his death, he gave wine to his companions and told them to drink it in remembrance of him. In the Roman Catholic tradition worshippers accept the wine as the blood of Christ, while for many Protestants, Holy Communion is a symbolic commemoration of the Last Supper. A vine and its branches also represent Christ and his followers. (Grapes and Vines, V&A)

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### **Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

The form of this clock depicts two vestal virgins, with costumes and hairstyles inspired by classical antiquity, carrying an altar with the sacred fire. The base, supported by panthers, is decorated with a frieze of putti playing and two plaques depicting Clio, muse of history, and Urania, muse of astronomy.

The design of the clock is taken from an engraving by the painter Hubert Robert, published in 1771-73. The collection of Robert's engravings was dedicated to the queen of France, Marie-Antoinette, and an almost identical clock, made by Pierre-Philippe Thomire, was made for the queen's bathroom in the Tuileries in Paris.

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## Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

As a great connection to the Classical world or comparison to this clock, check out our Roman Cinerary Box with cover, from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, with the rams' heads and other symbols:



Here is the other Thomire clock, first owned by Marie Antoinette, and now in the collection of the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. "The connection to Marie Antoinette is described in this record as "said to have belonged to" her, and, in later label copy, as certainly to have belonged to her and to have been in the queen's boudoir, or private sitting room, in the Tuileries Palace in Paris. The French royal family was forced to move from the palace at Versailles to the Tuileries in October 1789." (NGA)



Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothorn, *Art History*, p. 934

The Art, Form, and Function of Gilt Bronze in the French Interior, Metropolitan Museum of Art:  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gilt/hd\\_gilt.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gilt/hd_gilt.htm)

European Clocks in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, Metropolitan Museum of Art:  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clck/hd\\_clck.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clck/hd_clck.htm)

Mary Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found*, 2008.

Kathleen Nicholson, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 1997, Manchester University Press: Chapter “The Ideology of Feminine Virtue: The Vestal Virgin in French Eighteenth –Century Allegorical Portraiture”, pp 52-69.

Style Guide: Neoclassicism, Victoria & Albert Museum: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/style-guide-neo-classicism/>

Grapes and vines: Christian Symbolism: The Natural World  
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/christian-symbolism-the-natural-world>

Vestal Virgins, Roman Religion: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vestal-Virgins>

Ancient Rome's maidens – who were the Vestal Virgins? By Jayne Lutwyche, BBC Religion and Ethics:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/0/18490233>

Use of Animal Forms in Ornamental Art, by F. Edward Hulme, *Art Journal*, Volume XVI, 1877 (on google books), page 30.

Symbolism of rams’ heads, at *The Worlds of Roman Women*:  
[https://www2.cnr.edu/home/sas/araia/allidia\\_hymnis.html](https://www2.cnr.edu/home/sas/araia/allidia_hymnis.html)

*Paris: Life and Luxury*, Getty Museum: [http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/paris\\_lifeluxury/](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/paris_lifeluxury/)

Wikipedia.org: Vestal Virgin; Putto; Urania; Clio; Hubert Robert; Pierre-Phillippe Thomire; Satyr; Panther (legendary creature); Golden Fleece; Aries (constellation); Dionysus; doves as symbols; sphinxes; Dechristianization of France during the Revolution.