

Royal Flooring in Appalachia

BY DON WILLIAMS

Paris parquet finds a new home in a rural Virginia woodshop.

The convergent threads of life are sometimes amazing, coincidental things.

My earliest and most important mentors in the restoration arts were Pop and Fred Schindler, the remarkable father and son of an eponymous shop, who first introduced me to Monsieur André Roubo nearly 40 years ago. Their roles in shaping me as an artisan cannot be overstated.

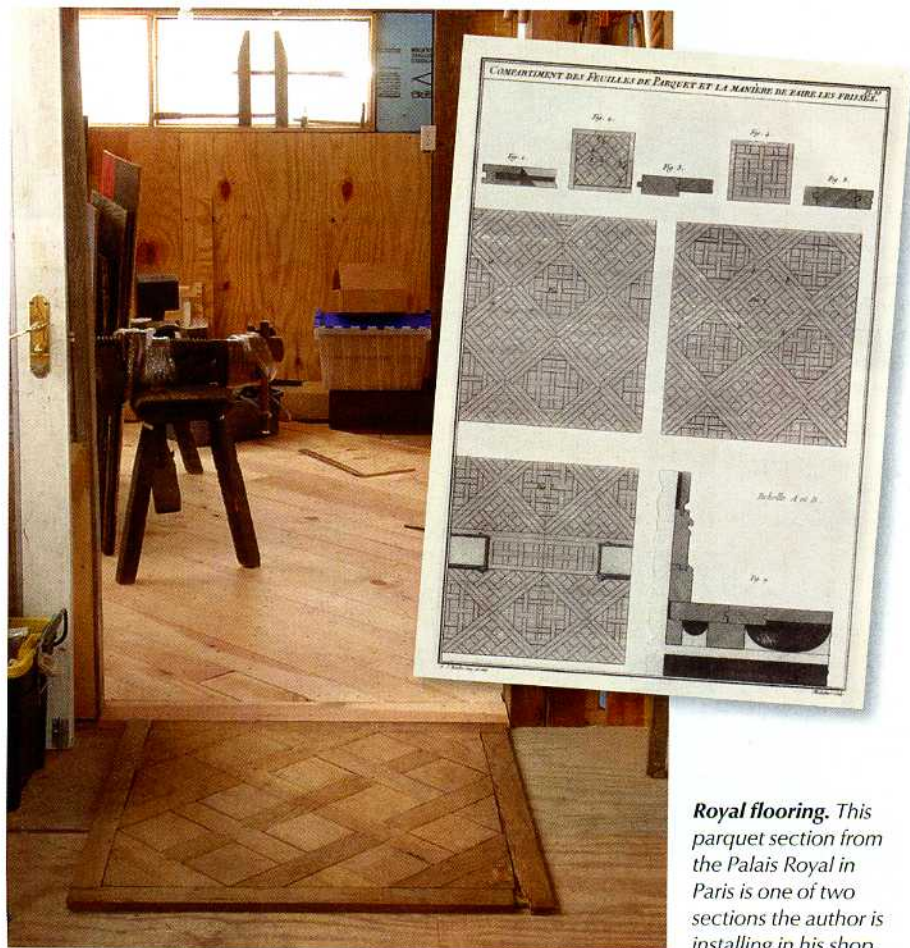
Pop died many years ago; I saw him last when I went to introduce my new bride to him almost three decades ago. But I kept in touch with Fred for many years, until the sad occurrence about five years back when our annual Christmas letter was returned, “addressee unknown,” indicating to me that he had died. That was that. With my own father having died the previous March and my master in the foundry pattern shop having died a couple years before that, the last of the men who mentored me into adulthood were now gone.

A Welcome Surprise

As my Roubo translation project was building a head of steam, I thought of

“It is to be hoped that perfection results from the care and zeal with which I created these volumes.”

— André Roubo (1739–1790)
author of *L’Art du Menuisier*



Royal flooring. This parquet section from the Palais Royal in Paris is one of two sections the author is installing in his shop.

these men often. At one point last winter I felt compelled to contact anyone in Pop and Fred’s families to tell them about the project, and how their loved ones had been such a source of encouragement and learning. After searching assiduously on the Internet, I found a tax record in a nearby town that sounded promising. I wrote a note, thinking I was sending it to Fred’s widow.

Imagine my astonishment when a couple weeks later my phone rang and a familiar voice reached out across the miles and years, and for a moment, I thought it was across the dimensions. It was Fred. I think he and his wife had moved early in that particular year and the “Mail Forwarding” had expired by the time Christmas came around. What a happy day that was, to catch

up with my dear friend, who had been dead to me for those many years. Our correspondence and communications continue to this day.

So a few months ago we were on the phone and Fred asked, “Do you remember those old floors from the mansion?”

“Sure.”

“Well, Pop left a couple of sections with me before he died and I never did get around to using them. You want ‘em?”

“Uh-h-h-h-h ...”

Rewind the tape.

A Storied Past

When I worked for Pop and Fred almost 40 years ago, their main client was a renowned patron of the arts who spe-

ialized in classical French art and decorative arts. As I understand the story, after World War II they had obtained a large quantity of antique flooring from Paris. Pop and Fred spent months, maybe years, installing it in their mansion.

These sections of dense white oak parquet were from the Palais Royal, the king's city crib, and were probably installed in the 1670s at about the same time Versailles, the king's modest country getaway, was being fashioned with acres of the same flooring. In fact, the parquet is known as the "Versailles pattern" and I'm guessing the city and country floors were made by the same shops. By the time Roubo featured the parquet in his section on residential carpentry, most notably in Plate 53, it was a flooring pattern more than a century old.

Wind the tape forward a little. In the late 1700s, monumental figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson called on the French royal court at the Palais Royal, seeking support for the new American Republic. I can almost hear the creaking of the floor underfoot as they paced back and forth awaiting their audience with the king or some other moneybags. (It creaks a little more loudly under Franklin.)

Then suddenly, a crate with two one-meter-square sections of parquet floor from that place and that time showed up on my doorstep, deposited by a delivery man struggling under the weight.



From palace to barn. The barn into which the royal flooring is being incorporated is a late 19th-century timber frame barn I bought on eBay; it was in the middle of a field near Quincy Ill., and was probably built as a kit in the Deep South (it's all Southern yellow pine heartwood), then shipped up the river. It was disassembled and arrived on the back of a giant flatbed truck six months later. I began re-erecting it on Thanksgiving in 2006.

A New Resting Place

The flooring needs a little TLC, then it should last another 350 years.

For now I mostly just admire them, but I have decided that one section will be a fitting entrance to my shop and the other to the classroom at my rural Virginia retreat, a reconstructed late 19th-century barn I bought cheap on eBay from a broker in Quincy, Ill. It may be the only workshop for many miles with flooring documented by Roubo and built for the king of France.

One square will be named the Benjamin Franklin Memorial Floor and the other the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Floor, because in my own mind these two men might have trod on them. On closer reflection, not "might," but "probably." In fact, now that I think about it, I am absolutely certain some dust from their shoes is embedded in the crevices of the parquetry. No doubt about it.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it. **PWM**

Don is a leading expert on furniture conservation, with a world-renowned specialty in historic coatings.



Fancy. The palace parquet won't look out of place, because the rest of the barn's flooring is fancy, too. Here, I'm installing madrone flooring with an oak surround (all salvaged stock, of course).

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BLOG: Editor Christopher Schwarz has written a lot about the Roubo workbench – find all the entries on his blog.

WEB SITE: "L'Art du Menuisier" is available in the original 18th-century French on Google Books.

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