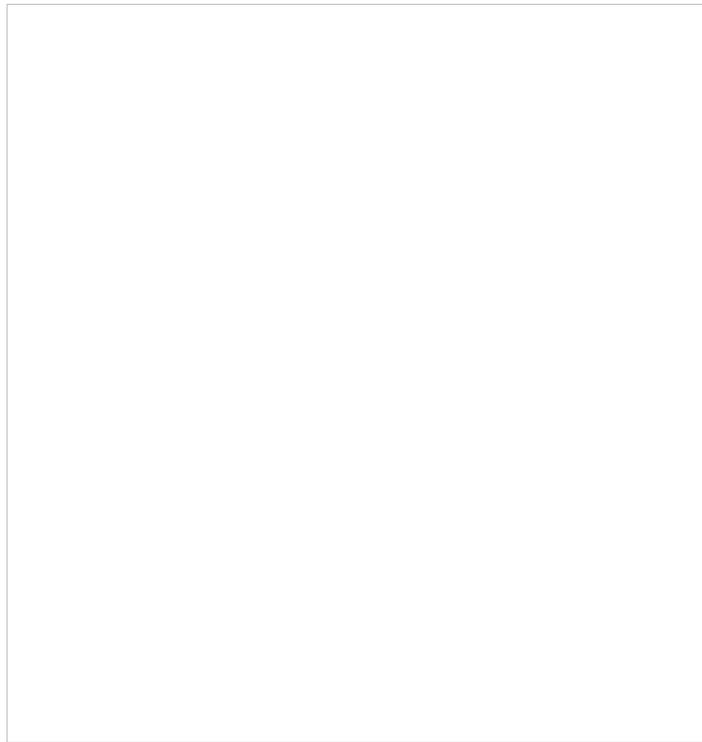


THE PRESTIGE MARKS AND THE LEGACY OF FRENCH JEWELERS IN GERMANY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

PUBLISHED 11/02/2026



How the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) and the French Revolution (1789) shaped French jewelry excellence outside of France... In the 18th century, while France shone with its art of jewelry and goldsmithing under the Ancien Régime, a historical paradox emerged: the finest works sometimes came from workshops in Hanau, Berlin, or Dresden in Germany, carried out by... French masters. Behind this transfer of know-how lie several historical factors.

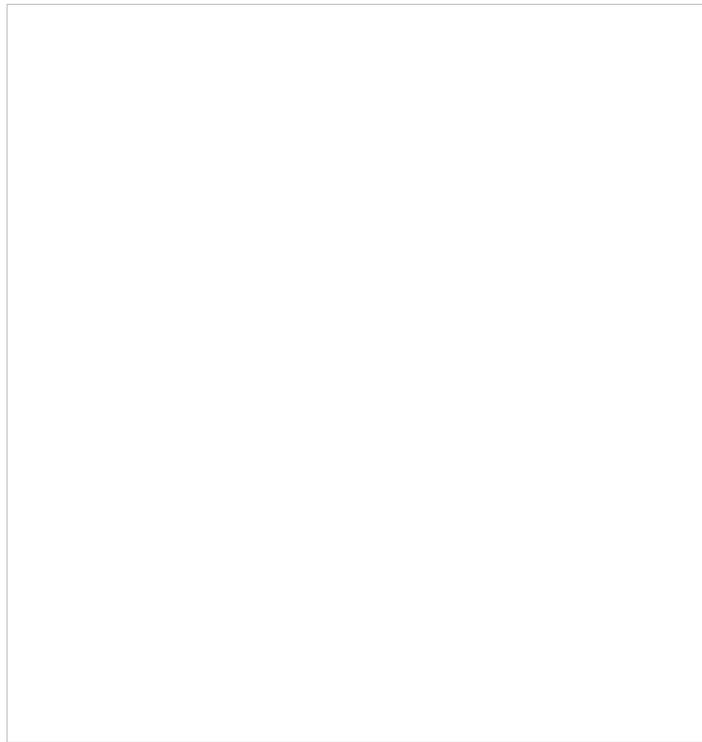


Mid-19th century box, Jacques Charles Colin goldsmith

- **The progressive exodus of Huguenots** following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, which pushed many Huguenots, including hundreds of goldsmiths, to leave France.
- **The French Revolution in 1789**, which destabilized the French luxury economy.
- **The strategy of German courts**, which welcomed these French artisans to compete with Paris and attract an aristocratic clientele eager for luxury.

Among the most tangible traces of this migration are prestige marks, inspired by French systems but adapted to local norms. Thanks to recent work by Julia Clarke and Lorenz Seelig, it is now possible to trace the paths of these "borderless goldsmiths" and decipher their mysterious signatures.

1. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) and the Progressive Exodus of Huguenot Goldsmiths to Germany in the 17th Century



Gold and Enamel Snuff box for the Persian Market, Probably Hanau (Germany) or Switzerland for persian market.

The Shock of the Revocation

In 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, ending 87 years of religious tolerance for Protestants. The result:

- 200,000 to 300,000 Huguenots left France, including highly skilled artisans (clockmakers, weavers, goldsmiths).
- Berlin, Hanau, and Dresden became centers of refuge, thanks to edicts like that of the Great Elector of Brandenburg (1685), which offered tax exemptions and workshops to refugees.

Why Germany?

- **Geographical proximity** (ease of crossing the Rhine).
- **Economic dynamism**: the courts of Saxony and Prussia wanted to modernize their manufactures.
- **Established Huguenot networks**.

Names That Made History

Among the exiled French jewelers:

- **Pierre Germain** (a family of the king's goldsmiths): his son François-Thomas Germain worked for Frederick II of Prussia in Berlin.
- **Jean-Valentin Morel**: settled in Dresden, he created gold and gemstone boxes for Augustus III of Saxony.
- **The Roettiers brothers** (engravers for the Paris Mint): they introduced new chasing techniques in Germany.

2. International Fairs in the 18th Century: From a Showcase of French Know-How to Its Decline



18th century oval gold snuff-box, probably Hanau

Before the Revolution, international fairs, such as the Saint-Germain Fair (Paris, France) or the Leipzig Fair (Germany), were crossroads of luxury. They allowed jewelers to:

- **Showcase their creations** to a European clientele (nobility, bourgeoisie, diplomats).
- **Exchange techniques** with German, Italian, or Flemish artisans.
- **Obtain prestigious commissions**, such as adornments for the courts of Saxony or Prussia.

A notable example: at the Leipzig Fair, where French goldsmiths like Jean-Valentin Morel presented gold and enamel pieces (highly prized for their finesse), German princes came to scout talent for their manufactures.

However, these fairs gradually declined with the French Revolution in 1789, which destabilized the luxury economy:

- Flight of clients (the aristocracy was persecuted or emigrated).
- Looting of Parisian workshops (precious metals were requisitioned for war).

German centers of jewelry and goldsmithing, like Hanau, Berlin, and Dresden, then became refuges for French jewelers.

3. Strategy of the German Courts: Competing with Paris German rulers leveraged the Huguenot exodus to:

1- Create royal manufactories:

- Dresden: Augustus the Strong founded the "Grüne Gewölbe" (Green Vault), a treasure chamber displaying the works of French goldsmiths.
- Berlin: Frederick II attracted medal engravers for his royal mint.

2- Attract the European aristocracy:

- Princes published catalogs of their collections to show they could rival Versailles.
- Example: the gold service of the Saxon court (1730), made by Huguenots, was offered to the King of Poland to seal an alliance.

They also established local standards: German marks incorporated regional symbols (e.g., the bear for Berlin, the lion for Hanau). However, Huguenots sometimes bypassed these rules by using Franco-German hybrid marks (which later helped identify them).

4. Prestige Marks: The French Legacy in Foreign Lands

What is a Prestige Mark?

A mark is a stamp placed on a precious metal object to guarantee its authenticity (metal quality, origin, master goldsmith). Prestige marks are imitations or adaptations of French marks, used by exiled jewelers to:

- Capitalize on Paris's reputation (synonymous with luxury).
- Circumvent local regulations (some German workshops did not have as strict a hallmarking system).

Thanks to the research of Julia Clarke ("French Goldsmiths Abroad," 2018) and Lorenz Seelig ("Die Hugenotten in Hanau," 2020), some marks can now be attributed. But 30% of the marks recorded in German museums (like Dresden's Grünes Gewölbe) remain unidentified. Some may be 19th-century fakes when the "Huguenot" style became fashionable.

Why Are These Marks So Important?

- **Proof of know-how transfer:** French techniques (such as rose-cut diamonds) spread to Germany.
- **Political stake:** the courts of Saxony and Prussia subsidized these workshops to weaken Paris, then the world capital of jewelry.
- **Heritage value:** these objects are now sought after by collectors (e.g., a snuffbox signed "Delon" sold for €120,000 at Sotheby's in 2021).



End-18th century Swiss enamelled Gold snuff-box by Guidon, Rémond and Gide

Conclusion: A Story of Gold and Exile

The history of prestige marks and Huguenot jewelers in Germany is one of artistic renaissance in exile. While France lost part of its creative genius, Germany benefited by becoming a new center of European luxury.

Today, these objects testify to a borderless Europe for art, where know-how travels despite wars and persecutions. And while mysterious marks have not yet revealed all their secrets, one thing is certain: the gold of the Huguenots still shines, from Paris to Dresden.