

Pair of Pierre DeSainte Holster Pistols Converted from Flintlock to Percussion

By Tim Prince and Marc Gorelick

Photographs by Tim Prince, College Hill Arsenal



Pierre DeSainte (c1719-c1803) was the son of noted French gunsmith Orléans DeSainte who worked in Loiret and Paris circa 1720 to 1750. Pierre most likely initially studied under his father, although in France apprenticeships were often served under the watchful eye of another master gunsmith who was not a close family member. According to Stockel, by 1747 DeSainte was a “*Master Gunmaker, Crossbow Maker and Fireworker*” and by 1763 he had relocated to Versailles from Paris and was appointed Gunmaker to the Court of French King Louis XVI (*Arquebusier du Roi*). In 1769 he became mater of the Paris Gunmaker’s Guild and in 1788 he was appointed to be Master of the *Manufacture d’Armes de Versailles*. In fact, he was the first of the Master Gunmakers to run the Versailles manufactory.



That same year, Nicolas Noël Boutet, who would become one of the most famous gunmakers in the world, married DeSainte’s daughter, Leonie-Emilie DeSainte. With this marriage, Boutet signed a contract to assume his father-in-law’s title and become by extension *Gunmaker to the King and Dauphin*. In 1791 DeSainte was granted “*Logement*” (accommodations) in the Louvre, which was officially made a public

museum that year by declaration of the National Constituent Assembly, making it a “*place for bringing together monuments of all the sciences and arts.*”



Both DeSainte and Boutet survived the French Revolution of 1792, while many other court appointees and supporters of the court did not. DeSainte remained in charge of the Versailles arms manufactory until his death, after which Boutet ascended to the position. Boutet would also go on to take over the Manufacture de Liege in 1804 in the name of his son Pierre Nicolas Boutet, who was no doubt named for his grandfather Pierre DeSainte.



During his working career DeSainte produced many very high-grade arms for both the Royal Court of King Louis XVI as well as for courtiers and ranking military commanders. Some of the arms were presentation grade, sometimes referred to as “arms of reward”. The quality of DeSainte’s high grade engraved and gilt decorated arms likely provided inspiration to the younger Boutet who would go on to become one of the premier gunmakers in the world. DeSainte himself is ranked among the top tier of French gunsmiths of the 18th century, such as Jean-Baptiste La Roche, and his son, who both had a *logement* in the *Galleries du Louvre*, Pierre Puiforcat, Court Gunmaker to King Louis XV, the Parisian gunmaker Armand who was active around 1780 and well-known provincial gunsmiths, like as Cassaignard (or Cassagnard) of Nantes (1708-1786) who produced arms for French naval officers. DeSainte was also active at a time when firearms style and decoration were changing, the old styles and conventions being swept away by the French Revolution and the introduction of the Empire style during the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte. For example,

pistol stocks were redesigned, sometimes almost to a right angle to the barrel and the pommel was also cut off at a right angle to the axis of the grip. These pistols exhibit both these features.



This pair of Pierre DeSainte holster pistols can be considered very high-grade officer's pistols or possibly even "*Pistols of Reward*." They likely date from the very late 1780s or 1790s, as DeSainte would not utilize the "*a Versailles*" mark until circa 1788, when he was appointed to be Master of the *Manufacture d'Armes de Versailles*. The pistols were originally manufactured in flint and were expertly altered to percussion during their working life, perhaps in the 1830s or 1840s. The form of the pistols is one that would eventually be recognized as an official officer's pistol pattern during first quarter of the 19th century, but at the time of their manufacture there was no official pattern for French officer's holster pistols. Like the officers of most European countries, as well as England and the United States, French officers had to provide their own uniforms and small arms. These were typically based upon specified patterns, with embellishments limited only by the officer's budget. If these pistols were purchased by an officer, they certainly went to one that had both rank and wealth. Otherwise, they were almost certainly produced for presentation as a reward to a particularly appreciated officer.

The guns measure nominally 16" in overall length and are nominally about .63 caliber (16mm). The guns are steel mounted with lightly engraved steel triggerguards, butt caps, and side plates. The stocks are of European hardwood, likely walnut, with some reasonable figure and the curved grips are neatly checkered with flowing scalloped borders. The fore-ends are full length and the original brass tipped wooden ramrods

are retained by a single steel thimble and an entry pipe. One of the ramrods has a steel worm on the reverse end.



They have pinned three-stage slightly swamped blued barrels that go from octagonal at the breech to hexadecagon (16 sides) to round, with baluster turned rings at the transition to round. The blued barrels are profusely decorated with gilt highlighted engraved patterns on the eight and sixteen sided portions of the breech and lesser decorations just forward of the baluster turned ring transition and around the front sight blades on the round portions of the barrels. The breeches feature panoplies and trophies of arms along with foliate themes and patterns as well as dots and geometric decorations. The top flats of the breeches are marked **DESAINTE** with the top flat of the hexadecagonal section marked **A VERSAILLES**. The decorations on the round portion of the barrels consist of foliate wreaths and frames.





The flat faceted stepped locks were likely originally color casehardened and have pointed tails. They are lightly engraved with simple foliate motifs at their fronts and rears. The locks are otherwise unmarked and measure 4 3/8" in length.



The pistols were originally produced in flint and were expertly altered to percussion in a classic French style with brazed bolsters over the original flintlock touchholes, all external flint battery parts removed, the accompanying holes filled, and new percussion hammers added. The hammer necks are lightly engraved with simple foliate decorations ensuite with the locks. They are equipped with fixed notch rear sights at the rear of the breeches and simple blade front sights about 1 3/4" from the muzzles.



Both pistols are in fine condition and retain much of their original finish on their barrels. Both of the barrels retain between 30% and 40% of their original bright blue, which has flaked and faded leaving the balance of the barrels with an attractive plum brown patina. The pistols retain much of their gold gilt decorations as well, with one gun retaining noticeably more gold than the other. The barrels show scattered freckles of surface oxidation and some scattered small areas of minor surface roughness, but are free of any real pitting, although some scattered pinpricking is present here and there. As noted, the locks were likely color casehardened and now both have lightly oxidized and slightly mottled pewter gray patinas with some scattered minor age discoloration. The steel furniture has the same lightly mottled and oxidized pewter gray patina as found on the locks. Both locks remain mechanically fine and are crisp and tight, operating as they should. The bores of the pistols are very good and are bright with some scattered light to moderate oxidation as well as some lightly scattered pitting. The pistols' stocks are in good condition. They retain sharp edges and lines, and the checkering of the grip remains well defined. The stocks are both full-length, solid and free of any breaks, cracks or repairs.

These guns almost certainly date from right around the period of the French Revolution. The demand for luxury arms and arms of reward was increasing during the Directoire, Consulate and First Empire these pistols could very well fit into those categories. They also exhibit some of the stylistic changes that were becoming more common at that time. They are original, complete and correct in every way and are a truly gorgeous set of French 1790s guns by a master gunsmith that remained in use long enough to be altered to percussion during the second quarter of the 19th century.