

Trick of the light

Benoît Rolland examines a c.1840 bow by Etienne Pajeot, which employs mother-of-pearl to stunning effect

Etienne Pajeot was born in 1791 and worked in Mirecourt for much of his life. Yet his bows were popular in Paris and he won an award at the city's industrial exhibition in the 1830s. Kaleidoscopes were still a craze around 1840 when he created this bow, a sumptuous optical illusion with mother-of-pearl. The apparently solid frog is actually ebony wrapped with Green Haliotid or *Oreille de mer*, as the French fishermen call it. The material was often used in Mirecourt, for underslides and buttons, but never to such an extent as this.

The golden wood is dense enough to allow Pajeot to give the elegant, round head a delicate throat – a design that Mirecourt adopted. He had a natural ability to profile a responsive stick and it is easy to play, with a sensual feel and perfect balance.

Despite the beauty of the stick, our eyes keep returning to the frog: was it a technical challenge, the whim of a client or merely the next endeavour in an industrial era that developed wallpaper and veneer in the quest for what French historian and statesman Louis-Adolphe Thiers described as a 'happy combination of high quality and low price'? Whatever the answer, Pajeot's vivid imagination was not always bound by practicality – human sweat ruins mother-of-pearl and a substitute frog was later made to preserve the original.

The bow passed through the hands of Isaac Stern, Etienne Vatelot and René Morel before finally 'lending a sea ear', as the French would say, to a Boston Symphony Orchestra musician. ■



DIMENSIONS

Length without button	737mm
Height of head	23.5mm
Length of head	23mm
Weight	62g

