A State Partizan by Jean Bérain for a Royal Wedding

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The description of the marriage of Marie-Louise d’Orléans in 1679, given in the Mercure galant for October of that year, includes the information that the “Hoquetons” of the Brigadiers and Sous-brigadiers of the Garde du Corps du Roy and their partizans were specially designed for the ceremony by “Mr. Berrin.” Given his position as principal designer to the king, it is hardly surprising that Jean Bérain (1640–1711) was entrusted with redesigning the State Dress surcoats and the ceremonial spears of the Royal Guard for such an important occasion. These partizans would have been carried by the Garde de la Manche, the guard closest to the French kings. It consisted of about twenty men chosen from the First Company of the Gardes du Corps, originally raised as a bodyguard of archers by Charles VII of France in 1445, long known as the Garde Écossais, was for many years recruited only from Scotsmen (Figure 1).

What is perhaps much more surprising is that the design for these partizans is actually reproduced as a gatefold plate in the Mercure galant and is fully described in its text (Figure 2). This fact was first pointed out by Roger-Armand Weigart, the cataloguer of Bérain’s engraved works, although he did not reproduce the plate. The main part of the design consists of a young hero seated in a chariot drawn by four horses in front of a trophy of arms and flags. One might expect the charioteer to be the Sun God, Apollo, patron of the Roi Soleil, but in the text he is specifically called Mars. Above his head flies a winged figure, symbolizing Fame, who is crowning him with a laurel wreath. The two horses at the right are trampling a fallen lion, and the two at the left are trampling an eagle. Above all this, within an oval cartouche flanked by sprays of laurels, is the Sun in Splendor, the personal device of Louis XIV. On top of this cartouche is a scroll inscribed NEC PLVRIBVS IMPAR, the motto adopted by Louis. The motto was first recorded on a medal of the king dated 1662, which was illustrated by Claude-François Menestrier in La devise du Roy justifiée (Paris, 1679, p. 30). No actual medal of this type and date appears to have survived, but a medal of the same design in the British Museum is dated 1663 and others are known dated 1664. The blade of the partizan springs from a spherical knob representing, according to the Mercure galant, the world, over which the chariot of Mars is flying. The image of the world is charged with the fleur-de-lis of France, and its lower half is clasped by a calyx of lily petals. Although it is nowhere stated, Mars surely must represent Louis himself dominating the world in his chariot and overthrowing his mortal enemies, England and Austria, represented respectively by the lion and the eagle.

Figure 1. An engraving after Le Sacre de Louis XV... (Paris, 1722), showing the costume of the Garde de la Manche and their partizans

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Among the many surviving richly decorated partizans bearing French royal devices, two patterns stand out particularly, because of the complexity of their designs and because they are pierced and chiseled in relief and encrusted with gold instead of being merely engraved, heat-blued, and fire-gilded. In one type, represented by an example in the Wallace Collection, London (Figure 3), the centerpiece of the design is the figure of Hercules with a pair of captives at his feet. This design has been attributed to Jean le
that this partizan must have been made before the new badge was adopted. Judging from what is said in the Mercure galant about the ancient designs of both the hoquetons and the partizans being changed for the Spanish wedding, it is just possible that this was the occasion on which the new badge of the corps was adopted.

The second type of pattern is that for which the design was illustrated in the Mercure galant. In 1937 Weigart was able to point out two surviving examples: one in the Musée de l'Armée, Paris, and another then in the church of Saint-Vigor at Marly-le-Roi. The second is now in the Musée Promenade in Marly. Three other examples are now known: one formerly in the church of Notre-Dame at Versailles is now in the Musée Lambinet in the same town, another from the Czartoryski collection is in the National Museum, Cracow; and the last, the subject of this note (Figure 4), is in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1834 what was probably a partizan of this type was sold with the collection of Bernard Brocas of Wokefield Park, Berkshire, England, but it is not known whether it is the one now in the Metropolitan Museum.

The main part of the design of these weapons follows very closely the engraving in the Mercure galant. It is only above the figure symbolizing Fame that any major differences are to be seen. The Sun in Splendor has its rays pierced, rather than simply engraved, and is within a kidney-shaped compartment surrounded by a border inscribed with the royal motto. From the lower edge of this compartment hang two swags of fruit and foliage, and above it is a trifoliate ornament shaped like a calyx. The central rib of the blade above this point is wavy. The outline of the blade is identical to that shown in the engraving except near the point, where the edges are convex instead of concave. The Metropolitan's partizan differs from the other examples in having its edges encrusted with gold fleurs-de-lis and laurel branches.

In spite of Bérain's fame, only a very few objects survive today that can be identified with certainty as having been designed by him. The Mercure galant says that these parade partizans "passent tous les Ouvrages que ont esté travailler en acier."

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NOTES


6. Aries, Armes blanches, X, caption for pl. x.

7. Mariaux, Le Musée de l’Armée: Armes et armures anciennes et souvenirs historiques les plus précieux (Paris 1937) II, cat. no. K.496; pl. LXVI; ill. in Ariès, Armes blanches, II, figs. 2a, 2b.


9. Ibid.

10. Inv. no. XIV-362; see Zdzisław Zyguński, Stara Bron w Polskich zbiorach (Warsaw, 1982) p. 169, no. 172.

11. Acc. no. 14.25454; I am very grateful to Stuart Pyhr, curator of the Department of Arms and Armor, MMA, for pointing out that this example was formerly in the collection of the Parisian dealer Frédéric Spitzer and is illustrated in vol. VI in the catalogue of his collection by E. Mollinier (Paris 1892) cat. no. 258, pl. XLI). It was bought by William H. Riggs at the Spitzer sale, held by Petit in Paris on June 10–14, 1895, lot 125, ill., and passed to the MMA with his collection in 1913.

12. The sale was held by George Robins at the Queen’s Bazaar, Oxford Street, London, beginning March 19, 1834, lot 162.