

Some Elements of Armor Attributed to Niccolò Silva

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THE MILANESE ARMORER Niccolò Silva (recorded 1511–49) is one of the few sixteenth-century Italian armorers known through both documents and signed works.¹ All of Silva's recognized armors, each bearing a variant of his personal mark, are now preserved in the Musée de l'Armée, Paris. This small group includes: G.7 (Figure 1) and G.9, two armors for field (i.e., battle) and tilt; G.178 (Figure 2), a unique Italian armor constructed and decorated in the German fashion (*alla tedesca*) for use in foot combat; and G.Po.555, a field armor traditionally believed to have been made for King Manuel I of Portugal (reigned 1495–1521). All four harnesses are datable to the period around 1510–15, relatively early in Silva's documented career. One of the salient features of these armors is the remarkably high quality of the etched and gilded decoration. This decoration can be distinguished from most contemporary Milanese armor etching—which tends to be light and very sketchy in character—by an elegance and precision of draughtsmanship, and possibly also by the use of certain ornamental motifs that seem to be found only on armors by Silva. The purpose of this note is to discuss the attribution to Silva of several unmarked pieces of armor, now in the Metropolitan Museum and in the Museo Stibbert, Florence, in an effort to expand and refine the oeuvre of this distinguished armorer.

The first piece is a pauldron for the left shoulder in the Metropolitan Museum (Figures 3–6).² It is composed of four plates, a broad main plate with two upward-overlapping plates above it, and one downward-overlapping plate below. The upper edges of the main plate are bent outward at the front to form an

upright neck guard known as a haute-piece. The main plate is pierced at the front (see Figure 3) by a large circular hole; slightly below it, there is a large flat rivet head of circular shape. The function of this hole and rivet is not clear, though presumably they served to secure a reinforcing plate.

The pauldron is etched along its principal edges and across the surfaces of the main plate with narrow bands of floral scrolls and zigzag, braided, and "threaded-button" ornament. Each band is framed by

1. The identity of Niccolò Silva, extrapolated from the evidence of his workshop marks (a crowned compass and the letters NI, NS, or SILVA) etched (or engraved) on the armors, was proposed by B. Thomas and O. Gamber, "L'arte milanese dell'armatura," *Storia di Milano* 11 (1958) p. 735, and, independently, by C. Blair, "The Silvered Armour of Henry VIII in the Tower of London," *Archaeologia* 99 (1965) pp. 22–24. Blair was also responsible for locating in the notarial archives of the Archivio di Stato, Milan, a series of thirty-three documents dating between Mar. 10, 1511, and Nov. 14, 1549, in which "Nicolaus de Silva" is mentioned. I have followed L. G. Boccia and E. T. Coelho, *L'arte milanese dell'armatura* (Milan, 1967) pp. 232–233, 235–236, in using the Italian version of Silva's Christian name. For the most recent discussion of the Silva group see Jean-Pierre Reverseau, *Musée de l'Armée, Paris: Les Armes et la vie* (Paris, 1982) pp. 118–121. A. V. B. Norman and L. G. Boccia are currently preparing detailed studies of Silva's armor, including the interrelationship of armors G.7, G.10, and G.178.

2. As this pauldron has not previously been published, it may be useful to give here some notes on its construction. The uppermost plate has an angular inward-turned edge and is pierced with a series of four (three large and one small) circular holes through which the pauldron was laced to the arming jacket. The uppermost edge of the haute-piece also has a narrow inward turn. The four plates are connected by rivets (all modern) at the sides, with a sliding rivet in the center of the lowermost plate. The pauldron has lost the lower plates that would have

a double line bordered by a cusped line; at the bottom edge of the haute-piece the cusped line sprouts three-petaled flowers (see Figure 3). The entire surface of the haute-piece is etched with a scene showing three pairs of armored knights on horseback jousting at one another with lances (see Figures 5, 6). The figures are set in a low, sparsely delineated landscape of hillocks with little tufts of grass, with a turreted castle at the right and puffy clouds above. The background of the etching is crosshatched and, in spite of the badly corroded surface, retains traces of the original gilding.

It is the presence of figural decoration on the haute-piece that clearly links this pauldron to the signed works of Niccolò Silva. Similar equestrian figures dressed in a characteristic form of light cavalry armor, including open burgonet-type helmets with pivoted peaks and separate chin defenses (bevors), also decorate the haute-piece on the left pauldron of armor G.7 (Figures 1, 7) and the haute-piece on the right pauldron of armor G.178 (Figures 2, 8) in the Musée de l'Armée. The figural scene on the Metropolitan Museum's haute-piece is particularly close to that of G.178, which represents two pairs of similarly dressed combatants within a stylized landscape of the very same type. Figural compositions of this kind are not found on any Milanese armors of the period other than those bearing Silva's marks, and may thus be considered a hallmark of his workshop. The general form and construction of the Museum's pauldron, as well as its decoration, also compare closely to those of the pauldron on armor G.7 in Paris, and can be assigned a similar date of about 1510–15.

The Museum's pauldron may also be compared to a left pauldron for field use in the Museo Stibbert, Florence (Figures 9, 10),³ which, though also unsigned, has been attributed to Silva.⁴ The entire surface of the Stibbert pauldron is etched and gilded, with parallel bands of trophies and floral ornament covering the main surfaces, and a densely populated infantry battle between two groups of pikemen on the haute-piece. The costumes of the soldiers (slashed or striped in the German fashion), and in particular the form of helmet and bevor, are very similar to those on the Metropolitan Museum's pauldron and on the Paris armors G.7 and G.178. These pieces were almost certainly etched by the same craftsman. The extensive decoration of the Stibbert pauldron suggests that it was once part of an extraordinarily rich har-

ness. If so, it would have been one of the earliest known armors etched and gilded overall and perhaps Silva's masterpiece.

A second piece in the Metropolitan Museum, a breastplate (Figures 11, 12), is also related by decoration to the group of Silva armors.⁵ The breast is

covered the upper arm (compare this to the complete pauldron illustrated in Figure 9). The interior of each plate bears two notches, which may have been added in the armorer's workshop to distinguish this pauldron from another belonging to a different armor.

The pauldron has been traced to the collection of John Beardmore and is illustrated in his *Catalogue with Illustrations of the Collection of Ancient Arms and Armor, at Uplands, near Fareham, Hampshire* (London, 1844) pl. III, no. 55. Later owned by Seymour Lucas, R.A., it was sold with his collection at Christie's, London, on May 27, 1903, no. 80, ill. (Beardmore provenance given); see also F. H. Cripps-Day, *A Record of Armour Sales, 1881–1924* (London, 1925) p. 133, fig. 67, no. 80. The pauldron subsequently passed into the Frank G. Macomber collection in Boston, which was purchased en bloc by John L. Severance for the Cleveland Museum of Art. It was acquired by Bashford Dean from that museum by exchange in 1916, and was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum from Dean's estate in 1929.

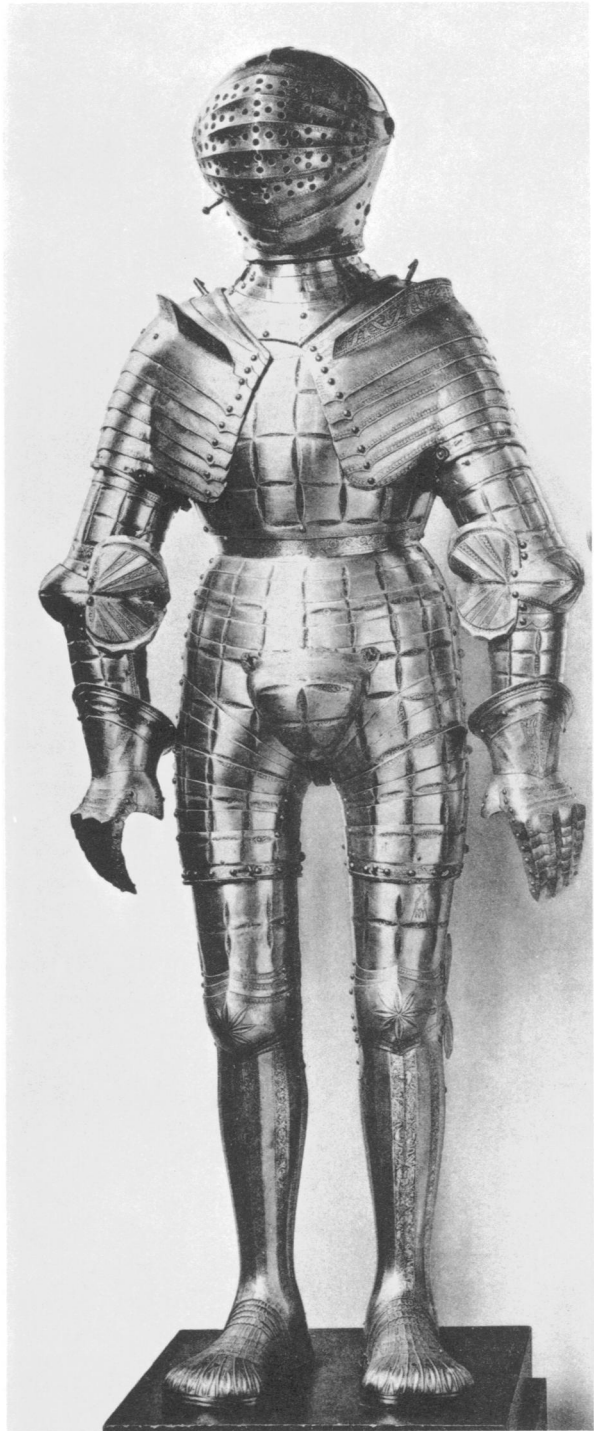
3. Alfredo Lensi, *Il Museo Stibbert: Catalogo delle sale delle armi europee* (Florence, 1917–18) II, pp. 495–496, inv. nos. 3122, 3127, pl. cxxii. Figure 9 shows the three upper plates of the pauldron (inv. no. 3122) reunited with the three lower plates (inv. no. 3127). The pauldron of six lames was still complete when catalogued at the sale of the earl of Londesborough's collection (Christie's, London, July 4, 1888, no. 132), but the two halves appear to have become separated after they entered Frederick Stibbert's collection. Lensi apparently did not recognize their association and as a result catalogued them separately (erroneously describing no. 3127 as five plates rather than three). This pauldron may be the one described in the sale catalogue published by Oxenham and Son, London, of July 21, 1842, no. 52: "A magnificent passe guard pauldron, finely engraved with battles, figures in costume, etc. This very fine specimen is of Spanish workmanship and of the date of Henry VIII." This description might also refer to the Metropolitan Museum's pauldron, but the Stibbert example is the one more likely to be described as "magnificent."

4. By L. G. Boccia, in *Il Museo Stibbert a Firenze: III. L'armaria europea* (Milan, 1975) I, p. 78, no. 120, II, figs. 107, 110; and also L. G. Boccia, F. Rossi, and M. Morin, *Armi e armature lombarde* (Milan, 1980) pp. 102–103, pl. 95.

5. See C. O. v. Kienbusch and S. V. Grancsay, *The Bashford Dean Collection of Arms and Armor in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Portland, 1933) pp. 144–145, no. 64, pl. xxxvi, where Grancsay correctly observed the stylistic links between this breastplate and the pauldron 29.158.81 (Figures 3–6), and the similarity of the etched decoration of both pieces to the Silva armors G.7 and G.178 in Paris. Prior to the discovery of Silva's identity, the marks on his armors were considered to be those of the Negroli workshop of Milan, an attribution repeated by Grancsay in 1933.



1. Armor by Niccolò Silva (recorded 1511-49), ca. 1510-15. Paris, Musée de l'Armée, inv. no. G.7 (photo: after Boccia et al., *Armi e armature lombarda*, pl. 94)



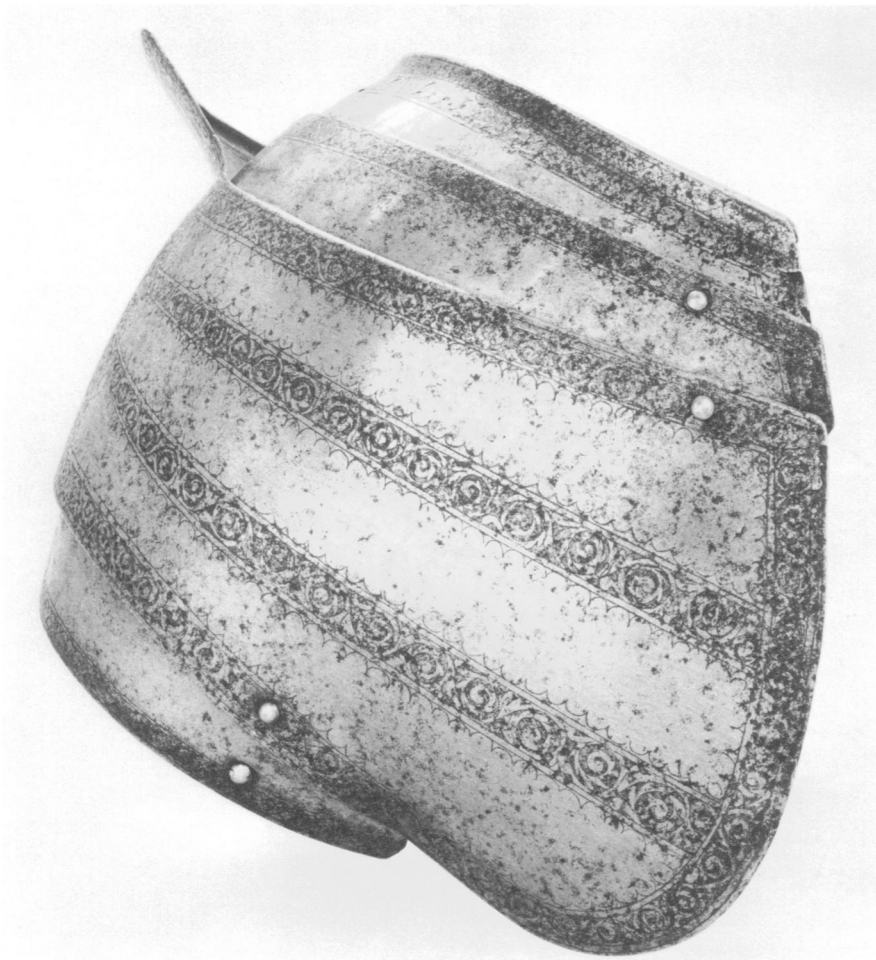
2. Foot-combat armor by Silva, ca. 1510-15. Paris, Musée de l'Armée, inv. no. G.178 (photo: copyright Musée de l'Armée, Paris)

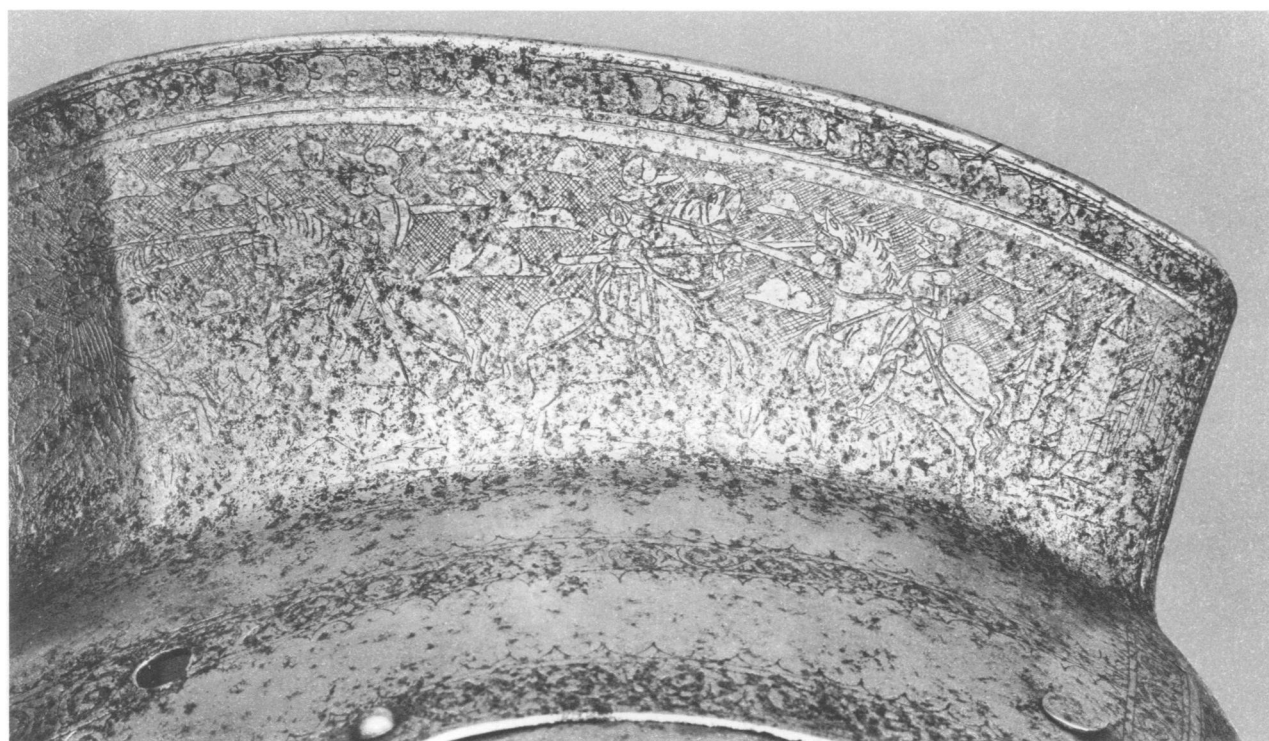
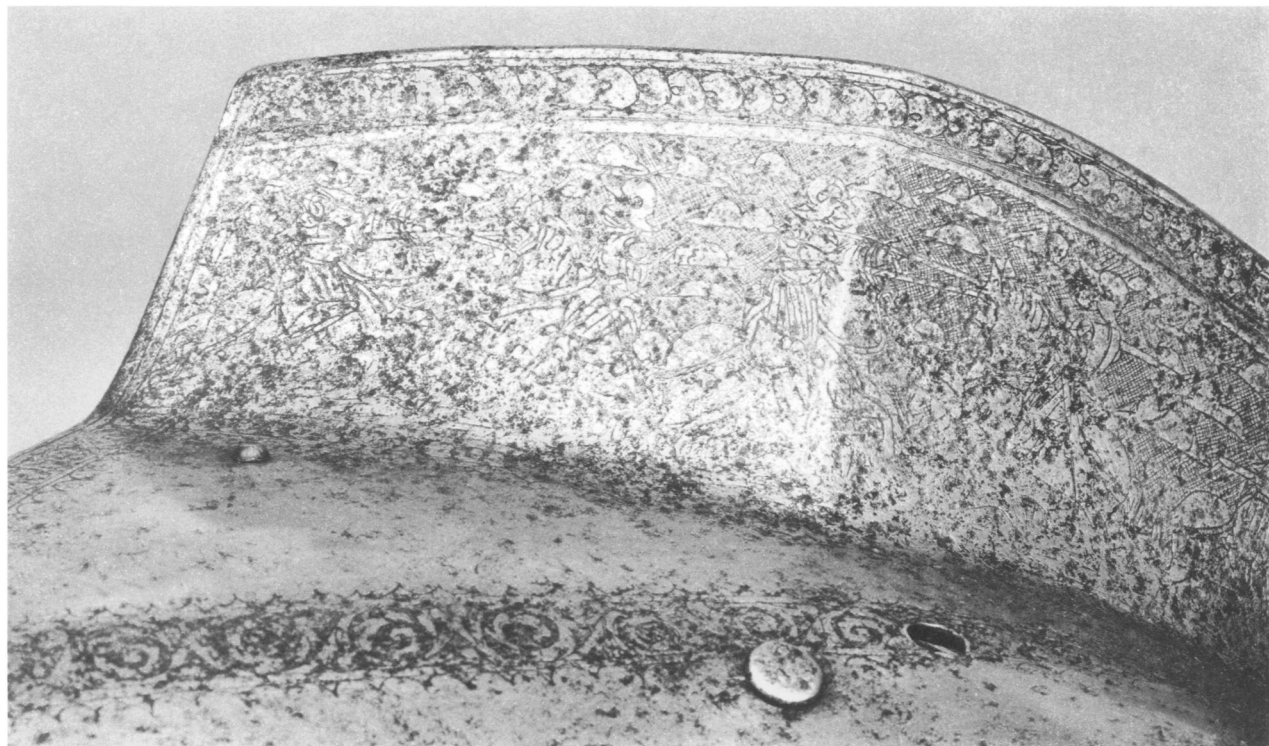


3, 4. Left pauldron attributed to Silva, ca. 1510–15. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Funds from various donors, 29.158.81

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5, 6. Details of Figure 3, showing the etched decoration on the haute-piece

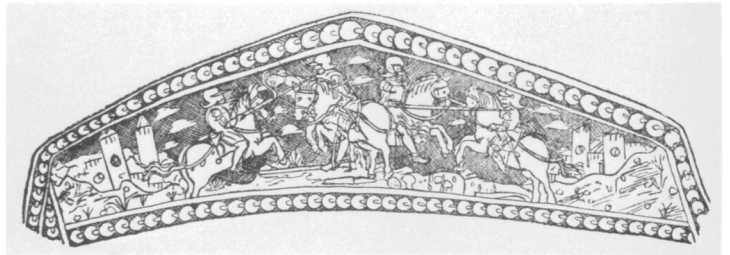






7. Detail of Figure 1, showing the haute-piece of the left pauldron of armor G.7 (photo: copyright Musée de l'Armée, Paris)

8. Haute-piece of the right pauldron of armor G.178 illustrated in Figure 2 (drawing: after G.-L. Niox, *Le Musée de l'Armée: Armes et armures anciennes . . .*, Paris, 1917, p. 12)



9. Left pauldron attributed to Silva, ca. 1510–15. Florence, Museo Stibbert, inv. nos. 3122, 3127 (photo: Museo Stibbert)



forged from a single plate of steel, with a pronounced medial ridge down the center and with large angular outward turns at the neck and armholes. The four vertically arranged holes at the right side of the breast originally held pierced staples by which the lance rest was attached. The presence of a lance rest indicates that the breastplate served for field use, and possibly for the tilt as well.⁶ A single waist plate (originally there would have been two or three, to which the tassets would have been attached) with medial ridge is attached to the flange of the breastplate by turning pins. The form of the breastplate is comparable to that on G.7 and is probably of contemporary date. The breastplate is etched near the top with a frieze formed of three compartments enclosing figures (see Figure 12). In the center compartment is a naked Christ Child as *Salvator Mundi*, with an orb and cross in his left hand, his right hand raised in blessing; he is encircled by a wreath and fluttering

ribbon. The compartment on the viewer's left contains St. John the Baptist,⁷ that on the right St. Sebastian. Both saints stand in front of hilly landscapes with

6. The purpose of the three holes across the top of the breastplate is not clear, though perhaps they served to attach some form of reinforcing breastplate for the tilt. Their placement, however, is highly unusual, and it is likely that the large center hole, crudely pierced from behind, is modern. Other modifications may be noted. The waist lame, now held by modern turning pins, originally may have been held rigid to the flange of the breastplate by rivets; the crudely cut guide slots at each side of the breastplate interrupt the decoration and may also be later alterations.

7. Not St. Christopher, as identified by Grancsay in *The Bashford Dean Collection*, p. 144, and subsequently by Boccia, in Boccia et al., *Armi e armature lombarde*, p. 97. The figure possesses many of the traditional attributes of John the Baptist: he is a tall, bearded man who wears what appears to be a hair tunic, carries a reed cross, and holds in his left hand the Lamb of God, to which he points with his right index finger. The motto *Ecce Agnus Dei* sometimes accompanies such a figure and may have been intended for the unscripted banderole behind the figure on the breastplate. For the costume and attributes of St. John the Baptist, see, e.g., L. Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien* (Paris, 1956) II, pt. 1, p. 439.

10. Detail of Figure 9, showing the etched decoration on the haute-piece (photo: Museo Stibbert)





11. Breastplate, ca. 1510–15. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Bequest of Bashford Dean, 29.150.78

turreted buildings and clouds. The irregularly shaped areas above the frieze are filled with circular medallions enclosing classical profile heads, the interstices filled with foliage. The area below is decorated down the center with a vertical band filled with trophies of classical arms and armor suspended from a ribbon and, on either side, with diagonal bands of floral scrolls converging toward the center. The framing elements of the frieze and the turns at the neck and armholes are etched with bands of zigzag and threaded-button ornament. The waist plate is decorated to match. The ground of the etching is crosshatched and blackened, and bears no traces of gilding.

This breastplate has been attributed to Silva by L. G. Boccia, presumably on the evidence of its etched decoration.⁸ A frieze of saints across the top of the breast, the profile medallions, and the floral, trophy, and geometric ornament are common features of Milanese armor decoration in the early sixteenth century. The inclusion, however, of a grand basinet among the trophies of arms at the center of the breastplate is a detail that is usually—if not exclusively—found on Silva armors. The same grand basinet with rounded visor, cusped brow reinforce, and straps crossing at the back of the helmet is found in several places on

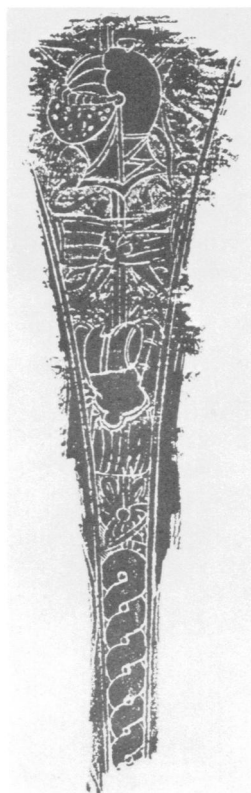
8. Boccia et al., *Armi e armature lombarde*, p. 97, pl. 86, where the breastplate is dated to ca. 1500–10, before Silva's documented period.



12. Detail of Figure 11, showing the etched decoration on the upper half of the breastplate

the foot-combat armor G.178 (Figure 13), and on the Stibbert pauldron attributed to Silva. There are also similarities between the forms of the landscape and clouds behind the saints on the Metropolitan Museum's breastplate and those already seen on the haute-pieces of Silva's signed armors.

Yet the sketchiness—one might almost say carelessness—of the etching on the Metropolitan Museum's breastplate, so unlike the clear and precise drawing that characterizes the etching on Silva's armors in Paris, makes the attribution to Silva a rather tenuous one. Though the etching may have been executed by a less skilled craftsman in Silva's shop, it may also have been done in a different armorer's shop



13. Etched decoration on the backplate of armor G.178 illustrated in Figure 2 (rubbing: after Boccia and Coelho, *L'arte milanese dell'armatura*, p. 235)



14. Close helmet, Italian, ca. 1510–15. The Art Institute of Chicago, George F. Harding Collection, inv. no. 90 (photo: Art Institute)

making use of similar ornamental designs. Evidence in favor of this conclusion—that the breastplate originates in a workshop other than Silva’s—is found in the form of a fragmentary Italian close helmet, of about 1510–15, in the George F. Harding Collection (Figure 14).⁹ This helmet, which is badly preserved and lacks its visor, lames at the back of the neck, and collar lames, is etched with bands of foliate and trophy ornament very similar in style to those on the Metropolitan Museum’s breastplate. Like the breastplate, too, the decoration of the helmet is blackened for contrast and seems never to have been gilded. The trophies of arms, including a grand basinet (in Figure 14, above the hook securing the bevor to the skull), are drawn in a loose, sloppy manner reminiscent more of the etching on the breastplate than on Silva’s armors in Paris. On either side of the comb at the back of the helmet is an armorer’s mark in the form of two crossed keys, the bits downward, be-

neath a crown.¹⁰ This mark is generally attributed to the workshop of the Milanese armorer Domenico dei Barini, called Negroli, recorded between 1492 and 1516. The existence of this helmet, with its peculiarly Silva-like decoration, but with marks of a different armorer, serves as a caution against the attribution of unmarked armors on the basis of their decoration alone.

Another detached element of armor, a reinforcing plate for a right pauldron (Figure 15), now in the Museo Stibbert, can be attributed to Silva with greater certainty.¹¹ Formed of a single plate, it is etched and gilded with eight narrow bands of the now familiar floral scrolls edged by cusped lines also found on Silva’s Paris armors and the Metropolitan Museum’s pauldron. On the Stibbert reinforce the bands converge toward a circular medallion at the center that encloses a bearded and helmeted profile head of a classical warrior. Identical medallions with profile heads are also found on G.178 and the Museum’s breastplate. The Stibbert reinforce can, in fact, be shown actually to belong to the Silva foot-combat armor G.178. The engraving of this armor made by J.-B.-L. Carré in 1783, when it was still part of the *cabinet d’armes* at the château of Chantilly, shows in a poor rendering what appears to be this plate mounted on the right pauldron.¹² Following the Revolution, Chantilly was seized by the French government, and in 1793 the collection of arms was transferred to Paris, first to the Louvre and subsequently to the Musée d’Artillerie (since 1905 the Musée de l’Armée), which

9. Inv. no. 90; purchased by Harding in 1925 from the Paris dealer Louis Bachereau.

10. The marks are etched rather than stamped with a punch as was usual. Etched (or engraved) armorers’ marks are rare, though most are found on Italian armors dating around 1500, e.g., on three Milanese armors for the tilt, one in the Waffensammlung, Vienna, inv. no. B.2, and two others in the armory of the Palazzo Ducale, Venice, inv. nos. C.5, C.6; see Boccia and Coelho, *L’arte dell’armatura in Italia*, figs. 145–152. Silva’s marks are, of course, also etched. For the identification of the crossed-keys marks as those of Domenico Negroli, see Thomas and Gamber, “L’arte milanese dell’armatura,” pp. 734–735, and especially L. G. Boccia, *Le armature di S. Maria delle Grazie di Curatone di Mantova e l’armatura lombarda del ’400* (Milan, 1982) p. 291, mark 140.

11. Lensi, *Il Museo Stibbert*, I, p. 188, no. 1031; Boccia, *Il Museo Stibbert a Firenze*, I, p. 80, no. 128, II, pl. 123; Boccia et al., *Armi e armature lombarde*, p. 96, pl. 85.

12. Published posthumously in J.-B.-L. Carré, *La Panoplie* (Paris, 1795) pl. xxxi.

was then housed in the former convent of St.-Thomas-d'Aquin.¹³ Shortly after entering the museum, the armor was engraved on two different occasions, one engraving published in the French periodical *Athenaeum* in June 1806, the other by Dubois and Marchais in 1807 (Figure 16).¹⁴ These engravings are more accurate than that of Carré, and clearly show the reinforcing plate mounted on the right pauldron. At some later date, perhaps on July 28, 1830 (during the so-called July Revolution), when the Musée d'Artillerie was pillaged, the plate disappeared. Its rediscovery serves to complete our understanding of the original appearance of this armor by Niccolò Silva, the only armor for foot combat by an Italian armorer that has been preserved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank L. G. Boccia, Superintendent of the Museo Stibbert, Florence, J.-P. Reverseau, Curator in the Musée de l'Armée, Paris, and Dr. Leonid Tarassuk, Consulting Curator for the George F. Harding Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago, for allowing me to examine the armor in their respective museums and for providing photographs of the same. A. V. B. Norman and I have independently recognized the connection of the Stibbert reinforcing plate no. 1031 to Silva's armor G.178 in Paris, and I am most grateful for his permission to mention it here prior to his forthcoming study of Silva's armors.

13. For the history of the *cabinet d'armes* at Chantilly, see my forthcoming study based upon an unpublished inventory made of that collection in 1793.

14. Dubois and Marchais, *Dessins des armures complètes, casques, cuirasses, boucliers, armes offensives et défensives de divers pays et de différents siècles, qui composent le Musée Impérial de l'Artillerie de France, et les plus beaux cabinets particuliers* (Paris, 1807) pl. iv. The two engravings were published by Charles Buttin in connection with his study of armor G.178, "Une Prétendue Armure de Jeanne d'Arc," *Mémoires de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France* 72 (1913) pp. 1–56. On the evidence of the engravings Buttin recognized that a reinforcing plate for the right pauldron had indeed once belonged to armor G.178, and he made an unsuccessful search for it in the Musée de l'Armée.



15. Reinforcing plate for a right pauldron, by Silva, ca. 1510–15. Florence, Museo Stibbert, inv. no. 1031 (photo: Museo Stibbert)

16. Foot-combat armor G.178 (see Figure 2) with the reinforcing plate illustrated in Figure 15 mounted on the right pauldron (engraving: after Dubois and Marchais, *Dessins des armures complètes . . .*, 1807)

