The sculptor François Girardon (1628–1715) will be familiar to Metropolitan Museum Journal readers with long memories, thanks to Dean Walker’s admirable article of 1980 reconstituting the tomb of the Princesse de Conti. The tomb’s principal decoration, a marble relief (Figure 1), is one of the treasures of the Metropolitan Museum. It is at least two decades earlier than the pair of bronze busts that are the subject of the present study (Figures 2, 3). The busts’ provenance is unknown before their bequest to the Museum by the discerning collector Colonel Michael Friedsam. They seem not to have been published apart from the catalogue of an exhibition formed by the Museum for Athens in 1979. I then called their style “that of the Louis XIV school of sculptors, which included François Girardon and Martin Desjardins.” Room was found for them in the Museum’s venue of the great exhibition devoted to French bronze sculpture in 2009, “Cast in Bronze: French Sculpture from Renaissance to Revolution,” but they were not addressed in the catalogue. Through a series of observations, it can now be established that the author of their compositions was in fact Girardon.

Girardon, born in Troyes in 1628, was the youngest member of the triumvirate that dominated artistic creation in the France of Louis XIV, joining the landscape architect of Versailles, André Le Nôtre (1613–1700), and the premier peintre Charles Lebrun (1619–1690). Girardon’s grandest projects include the marble group Apollo and the Nymphs in the Grotto of Thetis at Versailles (1666), the marble tomb of Cardinal Richelieu in the chapel of the Sorbonne in Paris (1675–77, toward the end of his work on the tomb of the Princesse de Conti), the mostly destroyed bronze equestrian Louis XIV that once surveyed the Place Vendôme in Paris
and the marble group *The Rape of Proserpina* now in the Orangerie at Versailles (1699). All the while, he ascended in the ranks of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture as professor (1659), rector (1674), and finally chancellor (1695). Having earned every right to slow down, he gradually gave up marble carving, and his dwindling strength in his later years was devoted to supervising bronze reductions of his own compositions and to amassing a collection of sculptures from antiquity and reductions after the compositions of Michelangelo and Duquesnoy as well as works by his contemporaries. These were housed in his quarters in the Palais du Louvre. He had René Charpentier draw the best pieces of his collection, arranged with Baroque pomp in imaginary settings designed by the architect Oppenord. Charpentier’s designs were engraved before 1709 by Nicolas Chevallier as a set of thirteen plates.

Girardon owned two ancient marble figures of Bacchus, but for our bronze bust he seems to have consulted one that

had been in the Louvre since 1604 and is now shown in the Galerie des Glaces at Versailles (Figure 4). The bronze head has been adjusted so that it no longer dips woozily to the wine god’s left, and the neck is now drawn back in a manlier, more assertive fashion. The contrapposto of a whole figure is implied by the god’s raised left shoulder, and the muscular undulations are more rhythmic and forceful. The bronze bust retains the band across the brow, but the contours of the vine leaves stand forth better without the over-hanging arm of the marble. The lion skin is switched to the god’s right, covering that side of his chest. The fine almond eyes and exceptionally long locks of hair of the marble at Versailles are the traits our modeler has valued most, all the rest being adjusted in keeping with the refined gusto characteristic of Girardon’s resolutely classical Baroque style.

For the pair of busts I had first proposed as subjects Bacchus and Ariadne, then Bacchus and “Flora or Pomona,” imagining them as perhaps members of a group of busts

couple with their fine, regular brows, straight noses, and gently waving hair.

In style, the two are more concentrated and streamlined than the heads of Girardon’s marble grotto figures at Versailles. In terms of both style and approach to metal, they are quite like sizable bronze statuettes after Girardon’s Apollo (see Figure 7), which embody a further condensation of the classicism found in the grotto figures. The satiny chasing and lustrous dark brown varnish also find close matches. Like the Philadelphia bronze, the Museum’s busts are surprisingly weighty (at fifty and forty pounds) and top-heavy, having great concentrations of metal in the heads. Despite their excellence, Girardon probably had little to do with the casting or, probably, even the chasing, of these lesser bronzes. He probably turned rather to jobbers who respected his high standards, but we are insufficiently
informed about their interactions. The major works provide clues here and there. In a feat that astonished everyone, the Swiss-born founder Balthasar Keller cast Girardon’s Place Vendôme equestrian Louis XIV in a single pour. Visitors to “Cast in Bronze” will remember the extraordinarily thick mass of the royal foot, the monument’s only surviving element. Just as the equestrian used up tons of metal, liberality with the material clearly extended to the smaller bronzes to which Girardon gave his attention.

NOTES

5. La Galerie de Girardon n.d. (before 1709).
9. Souchal 1973, p. 23 pl. 7: “La muse Erato figure antique de Paros de 5 pi 2 po.”
11. Souchal 1973, p. 23, ill. 90, inventory of 1715, p. 90, no. 245: “Une figure antique de marbre blanc, dont la teste est moderne, de cinq pieds ou environ de haut, sur son pied de bois peint,” valued at 600 livres.
13. Walker 1981; Françoise de la Moureyre in Bresc-Bautier et al. 2009, pp. 73–74, no. 73. The example in the Galerie de Girardon was of “terre bronzée.” Another cast was formerly with Cyril Humphris in London. A third, in the Residenz, Munich, was destroyed.
14. Both backs retain two strong, square iron attachments through which they would have been slotted onto their supports.

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