A Chimneypiece from Saintonge

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After the New Louis XIV bedchamber at the Metropolitan Museum was opened in 1987 (Figure 1), some criticism was voiced concerning the chimneypiece that decorates it. This criticism involved the very nature of the object as well as its period, which some considered anachronistic. Further, its provenance was unknown. False leads were given by analyses of the stone of which it is made, which was thought to be limestone from Tonnerre.1

First, to examine its origin. When this chimneypiece was purchased on the art market in 1956, with a gift from the Hearst Foundation, its earlier provenance could only be conjectured. As it happened, a reader of an article on the Louis XIV room that appeared in L’Objet d’Art2 wrote to the editor in chief of that magazine, Jean-Louis Gaillemain, to ask if a relationship could be established between the Museum’s chimneypiece and one represented on a postcard in his possession. The caption on his card read: “Charente-Inférieure-Chérac—Ancienne Cheminée (époque François Ier)” (Figure 2). The period indicated was incorrect, as we shall see when we consider its style. On the other hand, the similarity between the Chérac chimneypiece and the one in New York was quite real, for they were in fact one and the same. Here is the information that I have been able to obtain or infer about its provenance.

Until 1910, the chimneypiece was at the Château du Chay in Chérac, in the department of Charente-Maritime;3 this château, actually a large house, dated from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The historian Augustin Fellmann gave this description of the chimneypiece in a paper dated July 29, 1880:

It is not just an example of these remarkable works, true masterpieces of sculpture [the chimneypieces of the great châteaux mentioned above] that I submit to the Commission for study in informing it about the chimneypiece in the Chérac... It seems interesting to me for the purity of its forms, the elegance and unity of its overall design, and it deserves to be taken out of the oblivion that has been its lot until now. The house that it decorates is a seventeenth-century dwelling and is supposed to have belonged to the Ferrari [sic]. Today it belongs to M. Grenon. This stone chimneypiece, which fills the entire height of a large room, is three meters high and two meters wide. It is composed of two parts.4

Together with a drawing by Fellmann himself (Figure 3), a detailed description follows, with this curious observation: “In the middle of the upper part, an oval medallion of flowers and fruit frames the bust of a woman with feathers arranged like a diadem in her hair. This headpiece recalls the egret adornments that were at the height of fashion in the eighteenth century.” His remarks about the bust lead one to believe that the portrait represents the Marquise de Ferrari—or De Ferray du Chay—who owned the château in 1752.5 She would have had her portrait sculpted, Fellmann explains, “for at the time, according to one author, portraits of the head of the family were the principal motifs for the decoration of chimneys.” This statement needs to be proved, however. Furthermore, why could this bust not just as well represent a member of the family of Nicolas de la Barrière, the owner of the Château du Chay in 1719? This contention supposes that the chimneypiece, which is obviously from the seventeenth century, featured a bust carved later; this seems somewhat surprising, given the unity in the style of the sculptures and in the stone used—limestone from Saintonge.

Fellmann concludes: “Le Magasin Pittoresque of the year 1849, page 121, published the drawing of a chimneypiece designed by Jean Leplaultra [sic], architect and engraver during the reign of Louis XIV.

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2. The chimney piece in Figure 1, at the Château de Chérac, before 1910 (from a contemporary postcard)

3. The chimney piece in Figure 1, drawn by Augustin Fellmann. Note the damaged cupid on the right (see note 4)

4. Jean Le Pautre, Design for a chimney piece, engraving from his Cheminées à la Romaine (Paris, ca. 1665). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1933, 33.84[1], leaf 104
5. Simon Vouet (1590–1649), Plate 9 of *Livre des grotesques*, engraved by Michel Dorigny in 1657 (see note 6)

6. Simon Vouet, Plate 11 of *Livre des grotesques*

The chimney piece of Chérac presents analogies with the drawing in certain details. Could it have been designed by this famous seventeenth-century artist? The curators of the Metropolitan Museum have also noted the similarity to a print by Jean Le Pautre (Figure 4), and the attribution is attractive enough, but no more reliable than the attribution of all *jardins à la française* to Lenôtre. The consoles topped by fauns that frame the opening of the chimney piece are indeed very similar, as are the cupids holding olive branches around the medallion. But do all these details permit any more than a dating of the Chérac chimney piece? One wonders, too, whether Le Pautre, in his plates of ornaments, did not just assemble a number of ideal examples on which architects and sculptors could base their work, a sort of catalogue of models, as was the practice at the time. A certain naive quality in the use of decorative elements in the Chérac chimney piece speaks more in favor of a local sculptor.

Moreover, the figures and garlands in the Saint-

7. Chimney piece in Louis XIV's state bedchamber at the Louvre, 1654 (from Louis Hautecoeur, *Histoire du Louvre*, fig. 62)
the alcove. That is, if the payment of 300 livres made by the Bâtiments du Roi to Testelin in 1679 for “a picture to be used for embroidered portières representing the figure of Jupiter seated on an eagle” indeed refers to one of the embroideries in the Metropolitan Museum.7

We now come to the question of the use of a monumental chimneypiece in a Louis XIV bedchamber. If we consider the example set by the king at the beginning of his reign, we see that this type of decor existed at the Louvre: during the works directed by Le Vau, a monumental chimneypiece of this kind (Figure 7), more luxurious but of comparable size, was made for the palace by Pierre Bourdon.8 One would like to pursue this comparison with the chimneypiece in the king’s bedchamber at Fontainebleau (Figure 8). Unfortunately, it seems that Lebrun, both in the preparatory sketch and in the tapestry of the Histoire du Roi series that depicts the audience given by Louis XIV to the papal nuncio Chigi on July 28, 1664, represented an ideal room and not the king’s actual bedchamber.9 In any case, the type of chimneypiece chosen by the artist was monumental, very impressive, and probably close to those that could be seen in the various royal residences.

The reconstitution made by the Metropolitan Museum is of a typical rather than a particular room, but it gives American visitors a plausible image of what state chambers in France looked like during the reign of the Sun King, at a time when unity of style was not necessarily always observed.10

8. Charles Lebrun (1619–90), Audience of the Nuncio Chigi, Nephew of Pope Alexander VII, by Louis XIV in His Bedchamber at Fontainebleau, July 28, 1664. Black pencil and India ink wash on paper, 49.1 × 75 cm. Château de Fontainebleau, inv. no. F3201c (photo: Musée de Versailles)
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NOTES

1. Town in Burgundy (administrative seat of the canton of Yonne, in the arrondissement of Avallon).


3. The department was then called Charente-Inferieure.

4. Published in the Recueil de la Commission des Arts, 1886, p. 167; Figure 3 is a drawing of the chimneypiece by Fellmann. In 1880, the arms and legs of one of the cupids were broken; they have since been restored (Figure 1).

5. Cf. Robert Collé, Châteaux, manoirs et forteresses d’Aunis et Saintonge (La Rochelle, 1984) I, p. 180. M. Collé confirmed the information in his book, that the inhabitants of the town of Chéréac thought the chimneypiece had been exported in 1910 to Belgium for the museum of Liège, after which it was lost track of. M. Collé agrees with Fellmann in dating the chimneypiece to the 18th century, which, to my thinking, is stylistically impossible.


7. Comptes de Bâtiments du Roi sous Louis XIV, Jules Guiffrey, ed. (Paris, 1881) I, p. 1230. This reference was brought to my attention by Mme Saule, curator at Versailles; it had already been published by Edith Standen in “The Roi Soleil and Some of His Children,” MMAB (Jan. 1951) pp. 133–141.

