Children of the Sun King: Some Reconsiderations

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Among the most colorful works of decorative art in the Metropolitan Museum are the four large embroidered hangings with representations of Louis XIV and three of his children, now hung on either side of a state bed in a gallery devoted to the art of his reign. Daniel Meyer's article "A Lost Opportunity for the Musée de Versailles, 1852," in Volume 26 of the *Metropolitan Museum Journal,* is a welcome contribution to the study of these embroideries, which are as interesting as they are unusual and beautiful.[1] His identification of the young boy in armor on the panel symbolizing Fire as the duc du Maine, son of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan (Figure 1), instead of his younger brother the comte de Vexin, is convincing. The entry that refers to these embroideries and the two other panels in King Louis Philippe's collection, discovered by M. Meyer in the inventory of 1821 taken after the death of the duchesse d'Orléans (widow of Philippe Égalité), is an important addition to the history of the hangings; it confirms the previous supposition that they were owned by the comte de Toulouse (another son of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan) in 1718.[2] The duchesse was the granddaughter of the comte and the mother of King Louis Philippe; it was the sale of the king's wall hangings, mostly tapestries, in 1852 that afforded the Musée de Versailles the lost opportunity regretted by M. Meyer.

As M. Meyer mentions, Louis Philippe had four other large embroideries of the same type, but with their grounds not filled in. He suggests that one representing Louis XIV may well be a piece sold at Christie's in 1978; it is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The design is almost identical with that of the hanging in the Metropolitan Museum, except that the ground is embroidered in pink wool instead of metal thread. Could this be the "Louis-XIV in needlework" seen by Horace Walpole at Sceaux, the château of the duc du Maine, in 1767?[3]

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The *Bacchus* named in the second group of Louis Philippe's embroideries may be identical with the hanging that was on the Paris art market in 1970 (Figure 2). The zodiacal signs for September, October, and November are placed like those of the appropriate months on the *Spring/Mademoiselle de Nantes* and *Summer/Mademoiselle de Blois* panels in the Metropolitan Museum. Bacchus in the central medallion holds a thyrsus and bunches of grapes, and he is accompanied by one of the leopards that draw his chariot. But the conspicuous sunflower beside him is more properly associated with Apollo; the plant was thought to turn continually to face the sun. Could it be here to suggest a connection between the boy and the Sun King? He might be another of Madame de Montespan's children, the comte du Vexin or the comte de Toulouse.

A set of similar embroideries was made for a member of the Créquy (or Créqui) family; eight pieces are in the museum of the Collegium Maius of the Jagiellon University, Krakow, and one is in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Marshal's batons, coronets, and the Créquy arms appear on each piece; there is no metal thread and the grounds are embroidered in yellow silk. Two of the Krakow pieces have trophies (neither resembling that of the Versailles hanging), one has the Créquy arms in the center, four represent the elements, and one has a seated Bacchus (without a sunflower) as the central figure; he presumably represents Autumn (Figure 3).[4] Of the *Elements, Earth* with Cybele (Figure 4) has the same surrounding design (*alentour*) as the hanging panel in the Banque de France illustrated in M. Meyer's article, but *Air* with Juno (Figure 5) does not have that of the same subject (with Louis XIV as Jupiter) in the embroideries in the Metropolitan and Victoria and Albert museums. Jupiter in Krakow is a seated, bearded figure, quite unlike the king, and represents *Fire* (Figure 6); the *alentour* includes some of the same motifs as the same subject in the Metropolitan Museum. *Water,* with Neptune on a sea horse, is known only from the Krakow example (Figure 7). He is flanked by swans and his

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Figure 1. *Fire/The duc du Maine,* embroidered hanging, detail. French, 17th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1946 (46.43.3)

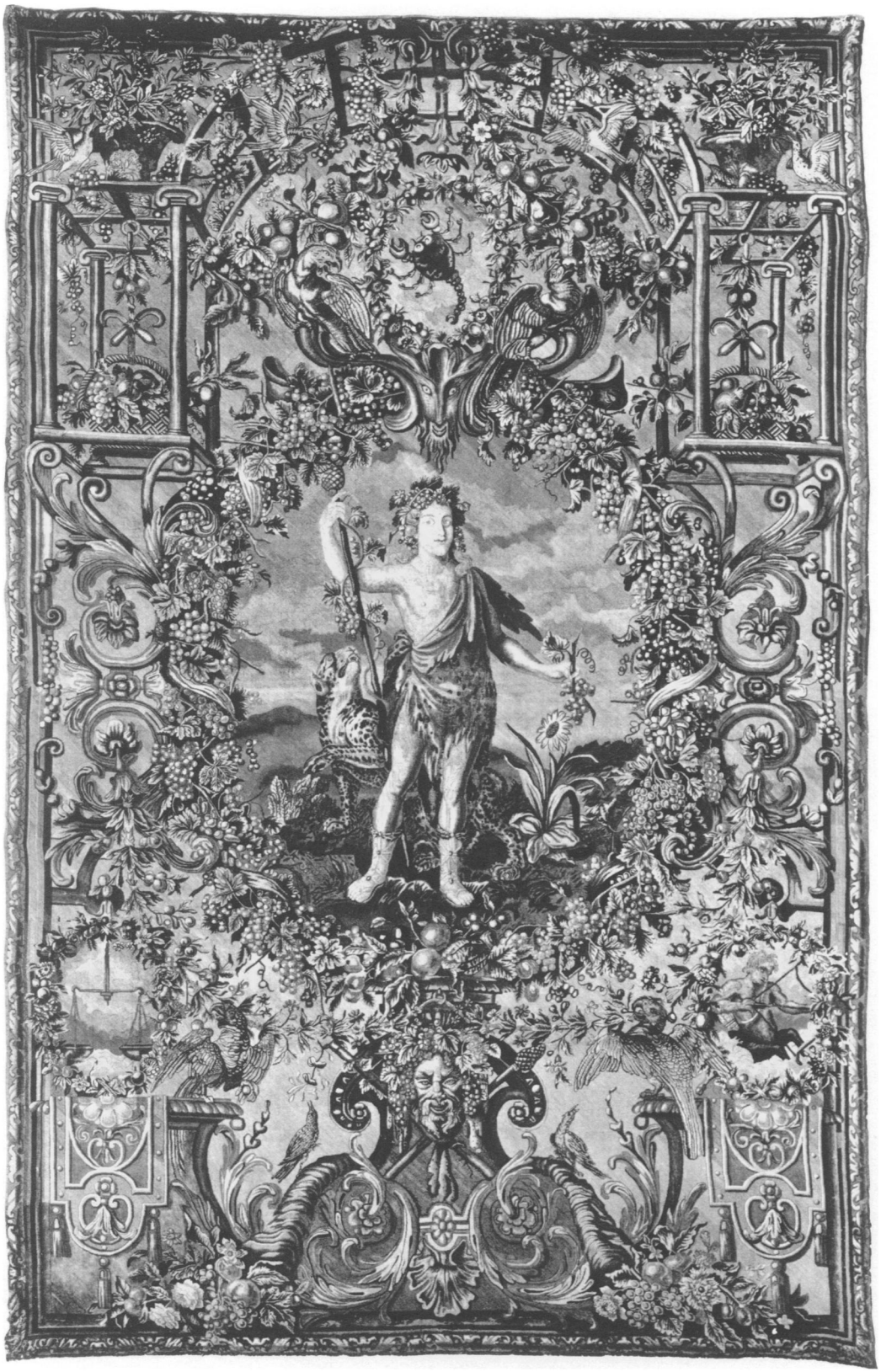

Figure 2. *Bacchus/Autumn,* embroidered hanging. French, 17th century. Location unknown

wreath is made of coral, shells, and seaweed. *Spring* in Minneapolis has the *alentour* of the Metropolitan Museum version, but the central medallion contains Primavera and a winged zephyr, with the Créquy coat of arms above, replacing those of a legitimized *enfant de France*. There is no reason to suppose that the figures of the Créquy set represent individuals.

The designs of the central figures in several of the embroideries can be connected with other works of art. The resemblance of Louis XIV to his representation in Charles Le Brun's ceiling of the Galerie des Glaces at Versailles has long been noticed. *Bacchus* in Krakow and *Primavera* in Minneapolis are very close to figures in the Gobelins tapestries of *Autumn* and *Spring* in the *Seasons* series; *Neptune* is similarly related to the main figure in the tapestry of *Water* of the *Elements*. Both series were designed by Le Brun.[5] As M. Meyer states, the upper part of Mademoiselle de Nantes's body is close to a portrait of her at Versailles; her legs, however, are found in a painting by Pierre Mignard of her half sister (the first Mademoiselle de Blois) in the Louvre.[6] The two figures in the Banque de France embroidery are close reproductions of a painted overdoor formerly in the château de Fontenay, Normandy.[7] The young woman also resembles a portrait of Mademoiselle de Nantes in the château de Chantilly.[8]

M. Meyer agrees with earlier writers that the embroideries were produced at the convent of St. Joseph in Paris, but he suggests that they were made after 1690, when the workshops began to fill commissions for Madame de Montespan's children. The duc du Maine, however, was twenty in 1690 and surely could not have been shown as the small boy of *Fire* (Figure 1). It seems more probable that Madame de Montespan ordered the four pieces in the Metropolitan Museum and the *Earth* in the Banque de France, with representations of *Autumn, Winter,* and *Water* that were already separated from the set by 1821. A date in the mid-1680s seems likely; the designs of the *alentours,* in any case, must be earlier than 1687, when the maréchal de Créquy died.

Perhaps the commission was given about the time of Mademoiselle de Nantes's marriage at the age of twelve in 1685. She was associated with the season of spring in that year at a party the king gave for her and her husband at Marly. According to Voltaire, four *boutiques* representing the seasons were set up in the central salon of the palace. They were filled with "ce que l'industrie des ouvriers de Paris avait produit de plus rare et de plus recherché." Madame de Montespan and the dauphin presided

Figure 3. *Bacchus/Autumn,* embroidered hanging. French, 17th century. Krakow, Muzeum, Collegium Maius, Jagiellon University (photo: Collegium Maius)

Figure 4. *Cybele/Earth,* embroidered hanging. French, 17th century. Krakow, Muzeum, Collegium Maius, Jagiellon University (photo: Collegium Maius)

Figure 5. *Juno/Air,* embroidered hanging. French, 17th century. Krakow, Muzeum, Collegium Maius, Jagiellon University (photo: Collegium Maius)

Figure 6. *Jupiter/Fire,* embroidered hanging. French, 17th century. Krakow, Muzeum, Collegium Maius, Jagiellon University (photo: Collegium Maius)

Figure 7. *Neptune/Water,* embroidered hanging. French, 17th century. Krakow, Muzeum, Collegium Maius, Jagiellon University (photo: Collegium Maius)

over the shop of *Autumn,* Madame de Maintenon and the duc du Maine had *Winter,* the bridegroom (the duc de Bourbon) had *Summer,* with Madame de Maintenon's sister, and the youthful bride, with another duchess, had *Spring.* After a lottery, the rare things in the shops were divided among the small and select Marly company, the king paying for everything, "d'une manière digne d'un roi."[9]

Rather than the somewhat gauche central figures, however, it is the abundance of appropriate and pleasing details in the *alentours* that is the greatest delight of the hangings. A drawing in the Louvre from the workshop of Charles Le Brun supplies the basic structure of the *alentour* for *Spring,* specifically for the example in Minneapolis, as it includes the Créquy arms at the top.[10] The appropriate signs of the zodiac and such tokens of the season as two birds' nests (one with the bird sitting on her eggs, the other showing her feeding her chicks) have been added in the embroidery. Other springlike details are butterflies and garden tools, such as watering cans. *Summer* recalls the harvest with pitchforks and flails, sheaves of wheat and marauding birds. *Air* has birds, hawkers' lures, and wind instruments, such as horns, panpipes, and recorders, also castanets and bells. *Fire,* as well as weapons of war, has salamanders in the flames, braziers, and smoking censers. *Earth* shows animals and agricultural produce, monkeys and fruit above, lions and vegetables below. *Water,* instead of the floral wreaths of the other panels, has reeds and seaweed, shells and fish, with an overflowing fountain below the god. Only *Winter*'s appurtenances, perhaps icicles and skates, are not yet known to us. Some anonymous worker in Le Brun's studio put a great deal of imagination and skill into these fantasies, for which we can be eternally grateful.

NOTES

1. *MMJ* 26 (1991) pp. 183–191. M. Meyer has not been well served by his translator, who is unfamiliar with precise English textile terms. The French "tapisserie au petit point" and similar phrases should have been translated as "embroideries," not "embroidered tapestries" or "petit-point tapestries"; correct English usage confines the word "tapestry" to a loom-woven fabric, "petit-point" meaning an embroidery in tent or cross-stitch on canvas. M. Meyer's original sentence describing bed curtains as made of "gros de Naples broché or fleur de lysé bordés d'un ruban et de franges à torsades en or" has been cut down to the nonsensical "white Gros de Naples brocaded with gold fringe." Other solecisms could be cited, and the Versailles conservateur mentioned in note 25 is Béatrix Saule, not Daule.

2. Edith Appleton Standen, *European Post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1985) II, pp. 665–676, with earlier references. An error in this account (p. 674) should be corrected: the shield in the MMA with the head of Medusa is not now believed to have been owned by Louis XIV and is thought to date from ca. 1760. The statue of the king by Jean Warin holding such a shield shows him in Roman armor, presumably fanciful (Pierre Lemoine, *Le Château de Versailles* [Paris, 1981] p. 44, illus.).

3. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence with Madame du Deffand and Wiart,* W. S. Lewis, ed. (New Haven, 1939) V, p. 322. Sceaux was inherited in 1767 by the duc du Maine's son the comte d'Eu, who died childless in 1775. The château then went to his cousin the duc de Penthièvre, son of the comte de Toulouse, and father of the duchesse d'Orléans already mentioned.

4. Adam Bochnak, *Makaty, Marszalka Francji Franciszka de Créqui, Ksiecia de Lesdiguières* (Krakow, 1923) pp. 15, 16 (French summary), figs. 1–8. The original owner is identified as François de Blanchefort de Créqui (1629–87), maréchal de France. Neither of the trophies of arms resembles that in the Versailles hanging illustrated by M. Meyer. The upper and lower borders of all the pieces were slanted, presumably so that they could hang in a stairwell; all have since been altered to form rectangles. Rema Neumann Coen, "The Duc de Créquy's *Primavera,*" *Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* 53 (1964) pp. 17–25. The original owner is identified as the maréchal's brother, Charles, duc de Créquy (1624–87), but the marshal's batons, so conspicuously displayed with the arms and coronet, render this identification unlikely. One of the Krakow armorials is reproduced in Heinrich Göbel, *Wandteppiche 1. Teil. Die Niederlande* (Leipzig, 1923) II, pl. 463; erroneously identified as a Brussels tapestry ca. 1635 in a Polish private collection.

5. Bochnak, *Makaty,* p. 16.

6. Georges de Lastic, "Contributions à l'oeuvre de Pierre Mignard, portraitiste," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art français, 1980* (1982) p. 171, fig. 8. A workshop replica with bare legs is mentioned, which would be even closer to the embroidery. This resemblance was noted by Béatrix Saule, conservateur, Musée National du Châteaux de Versailles, in a letter of 1984.

7. Henry Solange-Bodin, *Châteaux de Normandie* (Paris, 1928) pl. LXXII; the château was destroyed in World War II. This resemblance was noted by Alfred E. M. Mare in a communication to the MMA in 1946.

8. Chantilly, Musée Condé, *Peintures de l'École Française* (Paris, 1970) no. 126. Attributed by tradition to Marc Nattier and dated ca. 1690.

9. *Oeuvres de Voltaire* (Paris, 1836) IV, p. 204, in chap. 17, "Suites des particularités et anecdotes" of the *Siècle de Louis XIV.*

10. Coen, "The Duc de Créquy's *Primavera,*" fig. 5.