A MONUMENT HONORING THE INVENTION OF THE BALLOON

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Now that the conquest of the air is so well under way and the airplane such a familiar sight in the skies, it is difficult to imagine the excitement and incredulity which surrounded the early attempts to fly. To be sure, they were abortive, and the flyers themselves preordained to the role of Icarus. But even so, these would-be aeronauts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were pioneers, and the crowds who gathered to watch them could not conceal their fascination, even though they anticipated failure and were quick to reward it with ridicule.

It was not until 1783 that man finally rose from the earth and, with a certain degree of security, floated through space. On June 5 of that year the brothers Joseph and Étienne Montgolfier, having previously experimented in private, gave their first public demonstration of a hot-air balloon at their native village of Annonay, about forty miles south of Lyon. Nearly three months later, on August 27, the physicist Jacques Charles, in collaboration with the brothers Robert, sent up the first hydrogen balloon from the Champ de Mars, near where the Eiffel Tower now stands. A vast throng of spectators, said to have numbered 300,000, braved a violent rain to see the ascension. The balloon rose to a height of some 3,000 feet and came to earth about ten miles away at a point near the village of Gonesse, where the inhabitants thought it was part of some monstrous animal and attacked it with pitchforks and all manner of improvised weapons. On neither of these occasions did the balloons carry human freight. As a result of the two methods used in inflating them, the term montgolfière came to be applied to hot-air balloons in general and that of charlière to those filled with hydrogen gas.

At the invitation of the Royal Academy of Sciences, the brothers Montgolfier renewed their experiment a little later, on September 12, in the presence of a deputation from that august body. The site was the garden adjoining the famous Réveillon wallpaper manufactory in the rue de Montreuil, Paris. The balloon was, in fact, made by Réveillon and to the fires of straw, by means of which it was inflated, were added quantities of finely cut wool of the sort used in the making of flock wallpapers. However, owing to bad weather on the day appointed for the test, the balloon barely left the ground and suffered considerable damage. Réveillon therefore replaced the damaged balloon with another which ascended on September 19 from the great paved courtyard in front of the Château de Versailles. The king and the royal family were among the crowd of spectators, estimated at more than 100,000. The balloon carried a cage with an amusing assortment of passengers, a sheep, a cock, and a duck, all of whom landed unharmed some eight minutes later in the neighboring Bois de Vaucresson.

A young physicist, J. F. Pilâtre de Rozier, now came forward and offered, at the risk of his life, which, indeed, he lost on a similar attempt some two years later, to make an ascension. This first took place on October 19 in a captive balloon in the Réveillon garden. Some 2,000 people watched as Pilâtre was lifted about 217 feet and remained at this height over six minutes. This ascension was followed immediately on the same day by two others, in which Pilâtre was joined in the gallery by a young Réveillon official, A. G. de Villette, and a major in the infantry, the Marquis d’Arlandes.

Thus was the public prepared for the spectacular ascension of November 21 in which Pilâtre and d’Arlandes became the first human
beings to ascend in a free balloon. The site was the park of the royal Château de la Muette in the Bois de Boulogne. The balloon, the identical one in which the two passengers had made their previous captive ascent, remained in the air for about half an hour and landed nearly five miles away, near the present Place d’Italie. Among the countless watchers were the dauphin, members of the Royal Academy of Sciences, and our own Benjamin Franklin, then American minister to France. A contemporary engraving (p. 243, left) shows the balloon, “seen from Mr. Franklin’s terrace in Passy,” floating over the Seine and the Champ de Mars with the dome of the Invalides visible at the left. That very evening the Marquis d’Arlandes, accompanied by one of the Montgolfier brothers, visited Franklin to tell him of his experience.

Franklin himself gives a lucid account of the event in his well-known letter to Sir Joseph Banks, the President of the Royal Society. He describes the method by which the balloon was inflated:

“Its bottom was open, and in the middle of the Opening was fixed a kind of Basket Grate in which Faggots and Sheaves of Straw were burnt. The Air rarified in passing thro’ this Flame rose in the Balloon, swell’d out its sides and fill’d it.

“The persons who were plac’d in the Gallery made of Wicker, and attached to the Outside near the Bottom, had each of them a Port thro’ which they could pass Sheaves of Straw into the Grate to keep up the Flame, & thereby keep the Balloon full. When it went over our Heads, we could see the Fire which was very considerable. As the Flame slackens, the rarified Air cools and condenses, the Bulk of the Balloon diminishes and it begins to descend. If those in the Gallery see it likely to descend in an improper Place, they can by throwing on more Straw, & renewing the Flame, make it rise again, and the Wind carries it further. . . . It was well that in the hurry of so hazardous an Experiment, the Flame did not happen by any accidental Management to lay hold of this Straw; tho’ each had a Bucket of Water by him, by way of Precaution.” Franklin then discusses the alternative (hydrogen gas) method of inflation and, having commented on its expensiveness, says: “Yet we are to have one of that kind sent up in a few Days.”

This ascension took place on December 1 from the circular basin directly in front of the Tuileries Palace (p. 243, right). The passengers were Charles and one of the Robert brothers. They remained in the air for about two hours and came to earth about twenty miles to the northwest, near the village of Nesles. The balloon, according to Franklin, was “. . . a Globe of 26 feet [in] diameter.” “The Gores that compose it,” he goes on to say, “are red and white silk so that it makes a beautiful appearance. A very handsome triumphal Car will be suspended to it. . . . There is room in this Car for a little Table to be placed between them [the passengers] on which they can write and keep their Journal, that is, take Notes of every thing they observe, the State of their Thermometer, Barometer, Hygrometer, &c. which they will have more leisure to do than the others, having no fire to take Care of.”

The amazing Franklin is at his most prophetic a month or so later when, in a letter to Dr. Ingenhauss in Vienna, he says in part:

“It appears as you observe, to be a Discovery of great Importance, and what may possibly give a new Turn to human Affairs. Convincing Sovereigns of the Folly of Wars, may perhaps be one Effect of it: since it will be impracticable for the most potent of them to guard his Dominions. Five Thousand Balloons capable of raising two Men each, would not cost more than Five Ships of the Line: And where is the Prince who can afford so to cover his Country with Troops for its Defense, as that Ten Thousand Men descending from the Clouds, might not in many Places do an infinite deal of Mischief, before a Force could be brought together to repel them?”

Thus, in a brief space of six months, mankind had for the first time become air-minded. Books were written to explain the discovery, and artists took advantage of the opportunity to commemorate the ascensions in numerous engravings. The new passion was seized upon
Two early ascensions. LEFT: a hot-air balloon carrying Pilâtre and d’Arlanès (Nov. 21, 1783). RIGHT: a hydrogen-gas balloon carrying Charles and Robert (Dec. 1, 1783). Engravings from “La Description des expériences aérostatique de MM. de Montgolfier” by Faujas de Saint-Fond (Paris, 1784)
by the faddists and exploited in every possible way. Balloons appeared in the decoration of dishes, boxes, clocks, furniture, wallpapers, fabrics, fans, and jewelry, to mention only a few of the aspects of the decorative arts that were affected. And of course the caricaturists found ample material for satire in the mad aeronautical vogue that was sweeping from France across Europe.

As a result of this great wave of popular interest and enthusiasm, Louis XVI, towards the end of the year, decided to erect a monument to commemorate the discovery. The site chosen was the circular basin in the Tuileries Gardens directly in front of the façade of the palace: the spot from which, as we have just seen, the Charles and Robert ascension had recently taken place. The monument, however, appears not to have been intended to commemorate this particular ascension, but rather the discovery of the principle of lighter-than-air flying in general. There has since been considerable confusion in writers’ minds on this point.

The king instructed the Comte d'Angiviller, the Director of the Royal Buildings, to acquaint the Academy of Painting and Sculpture with his intention. On December 24 d'Angiviller addressed the following letter to the Director of the Academy:

"The discovery, sir, of the aerostatic machine being one which bestows the greatest honor on this century and on the country which gave it birth, His Majesty is moved, of his own accord, with a desire to hand down to posterity a memorial of the discovery in the form of a public monument. The Tuileries seems to him, for many reasons, the most suitable place for this project and, furthermore, it is his intention that the monument shall be of sufficient size both to enhance his palace and to proclaim the rank that this discovery will probably hold among the achievements of the human mind."
Terracotta model by Clodion (Claude Michel, 1738-1814). Made in 1784 for a monument to be set up in the Tuileries Gardens in commemoration of the invention of the balloon. Height of model 44 inches.
“The King has consequently given me his orders with which I hasten to acquaint you the more readily in that it is a splendid opportunity to employ some one of the sculptors of the Academy and, thus, to encourage French sculpture. Will you be so good, therefore, as to read my letter to the Royal Academy of Painting [and Sculpture] and invite, on my behalf, such of the sculptors of this organization as may wish to participate, to make designs for the monument. I will then bring these designs to His Majesty’s attention in order that he may choose among them, and I am convinced that the artists will work on the project all the more zealously in the realization that by so doing they will put me in a position to make known more intimately to the King their worth and their ability.”

The letter was read to the Academicians at their meeting on January 10, 1784, and the competition got under way forthwith. The sculptors Gois, Mouchy, Pajou, Julien, Hou don, Berruer, Lecomte, d’Huez, and Clodion are all known to have entered. The first four were singled out officially for the contest and eventually awarded compensation for their work; the others, however, decided to submit their ideas also. A little less than two months later Pajou gave notice that he had completed his design and model for the monument. The remaining competitors gave similar notification not long afterwards.

Unfortunately, the spectacular newness of the discovery wore off as balloon ascensions multiplied all over Europe. The king’s initial ardor cooled correspondingly, and the idea of erecting the monument was abandoned. A number of letters preserved in the French national archives throw light on the post-mortem aspects of the contest. The Director of the Academy sought to find out whether the various models were to be paid for and whether they should be shown in the next Salon. To this d’Angiviller replied that “they had not been found handsome enough to be submitted to public judgment” and that the matter of payment would be discussed later. Pajou, especially, seems to have pressed for settlement, saying that he had paid “600 livres to the carpenter who constructed the architecture.” Finally, in 1786, he was awarded 1,600 livres for his work, but a year later was still holding out for 3,000. He was directed by d’Angiviller to deposit his model “as well as the three others” (presumably those of Gois, Mouchy, and Julien) in the “hôtel des antiques,” which can be almost certainly identified with the Salle des Antiques in the Louvre. This room, in addition to holding many classical sculptures imported a century earlier by Louis XIV, was used as a temporary repository for sculptures ordered by the Crown pending their eventual disposition elsewhere. Pajou, as Treasurer of the Academy, was keeper of this collection.

In an inventory, made by Pajou in 1792, of the sculptures in the Salle des Antiques, seven of the models submitted in the contest are listed: two by Clodion, two by Mouchy, one each by Houdon, Julien, and Lecomte. The writer who cites this inventory (Marc Furcy-Raynaud, Les Sculptures exécutées au XVIIIe siècle pour la Direction des Bâtiments du Roi [Paris, 1927], pp. 417 f.) also says that none of these models were retained in the National Collections and suggests that they were probably sent back to the sculptors when the contents of the Salle des Antiques were dispersed. This was presumably in the days of the Revolution. The models by Houdon, Lecomte, Mouchy, and Pajou have now been lost sight of. Berruer’s model was shown in the Salon of 1793 (cat. no. 97) and has since likewise disappeared. Nothing is recorded of the models made by d’Huez and Gois, although a drawing in the Bibliothèque Nationale, signed by the latter, shows a monumental scheme for the project. Julien’s model is last recorded in the inventory made of the sculptor’s effects after his death in 1804. This brings us to Clodion, both of whose models are known. One of these (pp. 244, 245) it has been the good fortune of the Metropolitan Museum to acquire. The other (p. 247) was during recent years the property of Paul Tissandier of the noted French aeronautical family. It was inherited by him from his father, Gaston Tissandier, whose collection of aeronautical
memorabilia included many rare books on the subject which are now in the Library of Congress in Washington.

The model acquired by the Metropolitan Museum is partly the gift of an anonymous friend of the Museum and partly a purchase from the Rogers Fund. It is made in two shades of terracotta in two parts, both inscribed Clodion. The lower part consists of a column-shaped pedestal enriched at the base with laurel leaves, at the top with the classical egg and dart. Around this pedestal, in every conceivable playful pose, is a riotous throng of winged children, more than thirty in all, who busy themselves building fires of straw from which great clouds of smoke and hot air billow up and over the top of the column. In the upper part of the model, which rests on the pedestal, the clouds continue curling and pushing their way upward, aided by still other cherubic children (ill. p. 244), until finally the balloon is inflated and floats into space. Nor is all this sufficient to explain the invention, for on one side Aeolus, with cheeks puffed out, blows the balloon onward, while on the other, Fame trumpets the event to the astonished world. Both the design and the modeling have all the vitality and spontaneity that a brilliant sketch should have. This unusual example of Clodion’s work shows him at his most interesting.

It would be difficult to imagine a composition at the same time less serious and yet more to the point. But in these respects it merely reflects the atmosphere in which the early ascensions took place. The immense crowds of onlookers were as much amused as they were amazed. The prevailing mood was one of exhilaration. One of the engravings commemorating the Charles and Robert ascension from the Tuileries Gardens is entitled “Le Moment d’hilarité universelle.” Few of the observers had Franklin’s foresight to envisage the destructive as well as the constructive possibilities that the invention had opened up. Gaiety was the keynote. What, indeed, could have been gayer than the ornate, bright-colored balloons themselves! The Montgolfier balloon, in which Pilâtre de Rozier and the Marquis d’Arlandes made their famous flight from La Muette (ill. p. 243), had a ground of azure blue against which were strikingly contrasted in gold the cipher of Louis XVI, blazing Apollo heads, the signs of the zodiac, eagles with spread wings, and richly tasseled lambrequins. Around the bottom lion masks held swags of crimson drapery, and still more drapery encircled the gallery in which the passengers rode. It was this balloon that served Clodion as a prototype, and in the light of such enchanting theatrical nonsense he certainly cannot be taken to task for enveloping his model with an aura of frivolity. He should, rather, be complimented on his sense of the appropriate. One cannot help but feel that his alternative scheme, while competently designed according to the standard dignified hommage formula, is in comparison lacking in interest and originality as well as in the spirit of the occasion.

If Clodion’s models were returned to him when the contents of the Salle des Antiques were dispersed, they were not in his possession when he died in 1814, for the inventory
of his effects makes no mention of them. The Tissandier group belonged in 1825 to Lucien Tibon, who gave it to a Dr. Bellemain d’Epogny. The latter’s son-in-law, Baron Pon-sard, presented it in the early 1880’s to Gaston Tissandier for his aeronautical collection. The Museum’s model was first noted by Edmond de Goncourt, who saw it shortly after 1840 and later, in 1880, recorded his impression of it with irresistible enthusiasm in La Maison d’un artiste:

“I was just leaving college. I had 1,200 francs for clothing and all my other expenses. Fifty francs for a work of art was for me the equivalent of a million for Mr. de Rothschild. At this time I happened to stop one day at the auction room in the rue des Jeûneurs. They were about to put up for sale a large round object on which I saw, as I drew nearer, on one side a figure of Fame blowing her trumpet, on the other Aeolus with his cheeks puffed out. Encircling the sphere, underneath these figures, were children, children, children, in all manner of poses, suspended in the air, upside down, tumbling about, showing their little bare bottoms and winged backs; children drawing a band round a balloon, beneath which others were feeding a fire with bundles of straw. It was the most extraordinary Clodion that I have ever seen, a work in which the sculptor, bursting with talent, had unstintingly let fall from his chisel a multitude of little children. The terracotta was bid to 200 francs. I raised the bid, with the emotions of a man who did not know how he would pay for it, to 500 francs. It was a cautious sale, and I realized that for 520 francs the terracotta would be mine. But what do you think? The buyer of 50 franc works of art took fright and avoided the auctioneer’s eye. This terracotta I saw next at the Exposition of 1867. It belonged to Mr. Beurdeley who, they say, was asking 25,000 francs for it. For these times that is not an exorbitant price.”

The model was already in Beurdeley’s possession in 1862, for in that year F. de Villars (Revue universelle, vol. xv, p. 298) noted that he had seen it in “the fine show-rooms of Mr. Beurdeley.” In 1885 Clodion’s biographer, Thirion (Les Adam et Clodion, pp. 333-336), discussed it and illustrated a drawing of it. Of its whereabouts he merely says that, a few years previously, it could have been seen in a private collection. In 1911 Lami (Dictionnaire des sculpteurs de l’école française au dix-huitième siècle vol. ii, p. 150) noted that he had seen it several years earlier at Mr. Seligmann’s, the Paris antiquary. It next appears in the collection of George A. Kessler, an American long resident in Paris, from whose estate it was acquired about 1921 by François Coty. After the sale of the Coty collection in Paris in 1936 the model was brought to America, where it was exhibited for a while in 1939 in the French Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair.

No doubt opinion will vary as to the propriety of Clodion’s design. There will be those who will hold that it is fortunate that interest waned and that the scheme for the memorial was abandoned. They will claim that Clodion’s idea is unworthy of the dignity and far-reaching significance of the discovery. They will object to the subordination in his design of the balloon itself to symbolic figures and a veritable cascade of irrelevant children. They will be the purists, and, perhaps, they may be right. But there will be many others, who, appreciative of the buoyant, rococo spirit of eighteenth-century France, will perceive the essence of that spirit in Clodion’s idea. They will visualize the model enlarged to many times its present size and carried out in limestone or marble. They will see it rising from the middle of the circular basin in the Tuileries Gardens, the starting point of the famous ascension of December 1, 1783. Jets of water will doubtless sparkle about its base as the monument casts its playful shadow over the pool and onto the surrounding parterre. On one side will rise the long since destroyed façade of the Tuileries Palace, on the other the great arched allée of trees leading to the Place Louis XV and Bouchardon’s equestrian statue of the king. For these visionaries Clodion’s monument will evoke many a nostalgic memory at a time when such memories are especially cherished.