THE ROI SOLEIL AND SOME OF HIS CHILDREN

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“Louis the Great, the Invincible, the Wise, the Victorious, the Marvel of his Age, the Terror of his Enemies, the Beloved of his People, the Arbiter of Peace and War, the Advertisement of the Universe and worthy to be its Master.” So reads a contemporary dedication to Louis XIV, and the subject of this hyperbole is easily recognized as the imposing central figure of an embroidery in the Metropolitan Museum. It is a panel fourteen feet high and nine feet wide, worked in tent stitch (petit point) in silk and wool on a ground of silver-gilt thread couched in herringbone and spiral patterns. The colors are vivid and rather dark, red and blue predominating; the gilt has worn off the background, so that instead of a glittering gold it is now a somber silver.

The monarch sits with majestic ease on an eagle; he holds a thunderbolt nonchalantly raised in his right hand, the aegis in his left. His costume is classical, and he is posing as Jupiter. Above him is his favorite symbol, the sun in its glory. But the other objects in the panel, apart from the purely decorative flowers and architectural elements, all show that the piece as a whole represents one of the Four Elements, Air. Here are all the winged creatures of the heavens. The top corners hold birds of paradise, derived eventually, as is shown by their posture and colorlessness, from stuffed specimens, (it was these which, because their legs had been removed, gave birth to the legend that the birds had none and spent their lives on the wing); parrots and macaws are shown in more realistic colors and poses; a hooded falcon and a gerfalcon perch on hunting horns, from which dangle pairs of wings, or lures, used in hawking; lower down are two pheasants, not the modern Chinese variety but the type first brought to Europe; parrots appear again at the bottom of the panel with a peacock, Juno’s bird, queening it in the center. Butterflies and dragonflies abound and, of winged creatures, only the ill-omened bat is absent. Airy soap bubbles rise in the breeze, and the central garland alternates flowers with red ostrich feathers. The dangling musical trophies are of wind instruments, the musette, or French bagpipes, transverse flute, oboe, pipes of Pan, and recorders. At the summit two trumpets stand ready to sound forth the praises of the king.

There are three companion pieces to this hanging. One clearly represents another Element, Fire. Here the central figure is a young boy, also in Roman military costume, wearing an artillery officer’s sword and holding the blue velvet baton with gold fleurs-de-lis of a marshal of France. Braziers with flaming coals, smoking censers, flaring torches, and salamanders indicate the subject of the panel, which is also thick with all the pre-atomic horrors of gunpowder war, blazing cannon with the implements for loading and cleaning them, ladles for priming, bandoliers, chain shot, rockets, and that now purely metaphorical weapon the bombshell. The young man packing this armament, enough to make any Hopalong Cassidy kid pale with envy, can also be identified; the peaceful landscape behind him shows the abbey of St. Denis on the outskirts of Paris as it appears in an engraving of the mid-seventeenth century, and the martial lad is its abbot, Louis César de Bourbon, Count du Vexin, third child of Louis XIV and Mme de Montespan. He was born in 1672, declared legitimate the following year, and died in 1683. The embroidery shows him as he must have looked not long before his death, and his features correspond as closely as could be expected to the two extant portraits, in which he is about four years old.

The other two panels represent Seasons instead of Elements, as is shown by the three
Embroidered hanging representing Fire, with the young Count du Vexin, wearing Roman costume. The abbey of St. Denis, near Paris, is seen in the background.
garlanded signs of the zodiac seen on each:
“The Ram, the Bull, the Heavenly Twins,
And next the Crab, the Lion shines,
The Virgin—”
—the rhyme must remain incomplete. Spring is
a young girl, Flora evidently, from the flowers
with which she is surrounded. Prominent
among the gardening tools below her are gush-
ing watering pots, and on a shell above are the
royal French arms with a difference (a baston),
the coat borne by the legitimized children of
Louis XIV, blazoned in French as “De France
au bâton peri en barre de gueules.” A close ex-
amination, however, shows that these arms are
a later addition, and they are thus evidence
only for possible ownership, not for the iden-
tity of the girl posing as the young goddess.

In the same way, the main figure of the Sum-
mer panel is characterized as Ceres; the pre-
dominant colors are red and a golden yellow,
and even her attendant birds are those of the
corn fields, magpies above and a family of quail
at the base, pecking at the grain that falls from
the heavy wheat ears. Here the tools are agri-
cultural ones, the scythe and sickle, pitchfork,
rake and flail. The sheaf carried by the goddess
is studded with poppies and cornflowers, and
grasshoppers squat on the rinceaux of the
decorative borders.

Neither of these young ladies has as conven-
ient a mark of identification as the Count du
Vexin, but it seems very probable that they are
two of his full sisters, Mlle de Blois and Mlle
de Nantes. The first was born in 1677 and thus
was six when her brother was ten; she was de-
clared legitimate in 1681 and married a true-
born royal prince, her cousin the Duke of Or-
léans, in 1692, becoming thus the ancestress of
King Louis Philippe and the present-day pre-
tenders to the throne of France. Portraits of
this princess show a likeness to the figure in the
Spring panel. Saint-Simon describes her, when
grown, as large and majestic, with chestnut
hair, proud to a fault, “Fille de France jusque
sur sa chaise perçée”; her husband’s name for
her was Mme Lucifer. Mlle de Nantes, on the
other hand, was one of the rare people in that
catty and cruel court who could be called nice;
even Saint-Simon has only good words for her.

She was born in 1673 and is thus a year younger
than the Count du Vexin; she was declared
legitimate in the year of her birth and married
in the year 1685 to the Duke of Bourbon
d’Enghien. Gracious, lovable, pretty, charming,
amusing, perhaps the king’s favorite child, Mlle
de Nantes at the age of eight was applauded in
the role of Youth in the court ballet called
“The Triumph of Love”; five years later, after
her marriage, she could still be cast as Spring
in a fete which her mother gave at Marly. The
Montespan took the congenial part of Autumn
and, doubtless with pleasure, gave Winter to
her rival, Mme de Maintenon, already the
king’s secret wife.

Here, then, are two pairs of hangings from
what must have been two sets of four, one
showing the Elements, the other the Seasons.
Where are the others, and who figured in them?
It seems very probable that the one depicting
Earth showed Mme de Montespan as Juno. The
border of this piece does indeed exist in the
collection of the Maharajah Adalji Dinsha; it
shows beasts—lions, monkeys, and rabbits—rich
fruits and vegetables, a globe, and the tools of
the tillers of the soil, spades, mattocks, and
forks. Unfortunately the central medallion has
been replaced with a later substitution—per-
haps by a descendant who was not proud of his
ancestress? But Mme de Montespan may have
had reason to dislike an identification with
Juno; the name had been fastened on her when,
in 1677, Quinault’s tragedy Isis showed Jupiter
(always Louis XIV in his amorous aspect)
changing Io (immediately identified with the
current rival, Mme de Ludres) into a cow to
hide her from his jealous wife. The reigning
favorite, indeed, won this battle, and it was on
this occasion that Mme de Sévigné referred to
her as “Junon tonante et triomphante.” But
she had had other nicknames; in 1668, when the
liaison was only a year old, M. de Montespan,
that by no means complacent husband, had
come back to Paris from his exile in time to
hear Molière’s lines, “un partage avec Jupiter
n’a rien de tout qui deshonore,” with all Paris
recognizing his wife as the Alcmène of Amphi-
tryon. Less happily, in 1680, when Mlle de Fon-
tanges was a temporary danger, the court saw
Embroidered hanging representing Spring, with Mademoiselle de Blois (?) as Flora
Mme de Montespan in the Ceres of Quinault’s *Prosperpine*; to her complaints of Jupiter's inconstancy, Mercury smugly replies:

“Mais un amant chargé d’un grand empire
N’a pas toujours le temps de bien aimer.”

And in 1689 malicious tongues gave her the bitterest role of all, the discarded Vashti in Racine’s *Esther*.

We have thus Louis XIV as Air, Mme de Montespan as Earth, and the Count du Vexin as Fire in the series of the Elements; in that of the Seasons, Spring and Summer only remain, represented by Mlles de Blois and de Nantes. On the other three hangings of the two sets, Water, Autumn, and Winter, it would seem likely that three more children were shown, the Duke of Maine (1670-1736), Mlle de Tours (1676-1681), and the Count of Toulouse (1678-1737). These identifications are admittedly tentative, except for Louis XIV, but the near certainty of the Count du Vexin and his two sisters was determined by Alfred E. M. Marie of Paris, whose extensive archival research has also brought to light the history of the panels before 1887, which will be considered later.

Here, then, is a set of very rich hangings, made about 1683, showing Louis XIV, Mme de Montespan, and six of their children (another daughter, born in 1669, had died in 1672, too long before to be remembered; maternal affection was not a marked characteristic of the marquise). Where and when were they made? The first indication is the technique; tent stitch, *petit point*, “la broderie en tapisserie,” was not considered worthy of a professional embroiderer. Gabriel de Saint-Aubin says, in *L’Art du Brodeur*, 1770, that it was much used in religious communities, “c’est un travail facile.” Now there was one religious community with which Mme de Montespan was very closely connected, that of Saint-Joseph-de-la-Providence. This charitable institution trained poor girls between the ages of nine or ten and eighteen to earn their living. The Paris house was established in 1641; in 1645 it had 686 girls, and about 1670 Mme de Montespan adopted it as her favorite charity. In 1681 she was supporting over a hundred girls. She tore down the old buildings and built new and in return was given the privileges of a founder and named the director. As her amorous star fell and Mme de Maintenon’s rose, she spent more and more time at the convent, where she had her own room (still to be seen in the present-day Ministry of War, which the building now houses) and by 1691 she was definitely established there.

Thanks to her, the community became famous for its needlework, and contemporary records contain many references to it. In 1686, for instance, Mme de Montespan gave the dauphin a set of furniture in blue velvet embroidered in gold which she had had made at Saint-Joseph; it included a bed (and a seventeenth-century bed in full fig involved an amount of stitchery to make the stoutest Guild of Needlewomen blench), two mattresses, four pillows, four armchairs, and four folding chairs. Another set, also for the dauphin, in “tapisserie de petit point,” had two large armchairs, twelve stools, and a bench. Another is noted as being “façon de marbre,” which recalls the marble pedestals in the Fire and Spring panels. Certainly Saint-Joseph work were the “four magnificent beds” which Mme de Sévigné says Mme de Montespan gave her son, the Duke of Maine in 1691. It is, indeed, to the highest degree unlikely that any important piece of embroidery connected with Mme de Montespan would have been made anywhere else. A little detail perhaps reflects religious preoccupation on the part of the makers of our hangings; Virgo, representing August, on the panel of Summer, carries a martyr’s palm, a symbol appropriate to the virgins of the church triumphant but scarcely suited to a sign of the Zodiac—unless, indeed, we agree with the remark of an early Aldous Huxley character that virgins must all have been martyrs if they lived long enough.

But the industrious young protegées would certainly not have made their own designs, and two drawings exist which link the panels to the king’s master painter, Charles Le Brun. Among the drawings seized by the crown after his death and now in the Louvre are one of Louis XIV in the nude, in the exact pose he takes in the panel, and one of a decorative border, very close to that of the panel Spring. The first was not made for the embroidery but to be used on
Embroidered hanging representing Summer, with Mademoiselle de Nantes (?) as Ceres
the ceiling of the Galerie des Glaces at Versailles, where, indeed, Louis XIV appears in the scene, the Capture of Ghent, exactly (except for a differently colored cloak) as he does in the hanging. The decorative drawing may also not have been made for the embroidery, as it includes part of a coat of arms of the Créquy family, surmounted by a ducal crown which indicates a duke de Lesdiguières, and the measurements, written in “pieds” and “pouces,” do not correspond with those of the hanging. Mme de Montespan had her own painter, Jean de la Haye, of whom practically nothing is known; and a certain Tételin (identified as Henry Testelin, 1616-1695) received payment from the royal treasury in 1679 for a “tableau pour servir de patron aux portières de broderies représentant la figure de Jupiter assis sur un aigle,” which might very well refer to our hanging. But the extant drawings do suffice to indicate some connection with the Le Brun workshop, which is known to have been concerned with embroideries occasionally. Le Brun furnished the designs from which the embroiderer Rivet made the decorations on the king’s throne, the Destruction of the Titans and Jupiter Consigned to the Corybantes, and Mme de Montespan’s close connection with artistic undertakings at the court makes a similar origin for her designs not impossible.

The drawing for Louis XIV does, however, suggest a date, for the Galerie des Glaces was painted between 1681 and 1684 and The Capture of Ghent probably in 1683 or 1684. As has been previously mentioned, a similar date for the embroideries is suggested by the apparent ages of the children. This was no happy period in the life of Mme de Montespan. The affair of the poisons, indeed, was over, but one of her attendants had been implicated and she herself had been accused of monstrous and fantastic crimes, including the use of her own body as the altar for a Black Mass. The scandal had arisen and had been hushed up in 1680, but from this year also dates the king’s transfer of his affections from the courtesan to the governess. In 1683 the queen died and Louis was probably secretly married to Mme de Maintenon the following year.

The history of the panels can be traced from 1852. In this year they were sold at auction at Monceaux with other effects of the late king, Louis Philippe d’Orléans. There were then six associated pieces, the four in the Metropolitan Museum, Earth, and a copy of Fire with a dif-

*Drawing from the workshop of Charles Le Brun with framework similar to that in the hanging representing Flora, or Spring. In the Louvre*
different center. Nothing is said in the sale catalogue of their history and only Louis XIV is correctly identified. In 1887 they appear again at the sale of M. Sée in Paris, when they were bought by Bradley Martin of New York. In this sale catalogue it is said that the hanging Earth carried two labels on the back, one referring to the eight pieces of the set, the other marked “Palais Royal.” But there is no mention of the set in the inventories of the Palais Royal between 1814 and 1830, that is, from the restoration of the Bourbons to the accession of Louis Philippe, so it would seem that the label must have been placed there during the reign of the latter king. They were acquired by the Metropolitan in 1946.

It seems possible that Mme de Montespan gave or bequeathed the hangings to one of her children by the king. Louis Philippe was descended, through his father, from Mlle de Blois, later the Duchess of Orléans, but the fact that the hangings do not appear in the eighteenth-century inventories of the house of Orléans makes it unlikely that he obtained them from this source. Also the coat of arms on the Flora panel was not used by the Orléans family. His mother, however, was descended from the Count of Toulouse, the youngest of the bastards, and the only one, apparently, who, because he was never placed in the charge of Mme de Maintenon, loved his mother. She would seem to have returned his affection, for, alone among her children, numerous portraits of him, “en Amour endormi,” “en Phaeton,” “en Neptune,” were listed among her effects after her death. Here, too, was the drawing for a bed she gave him, which must have been one of the many which are mentioned in the descriptions of his house. All through the eighteenth century the Paris guidebooks repeat the accounts of the “riche lit de parade en broderie d’or sur un velours cramoisi” and the other, “un ouvrage en tableaux de tapisserie à petits points, compartie par une broderie d’or.” For the Hôtel de Toulouse, now the Bank of France, was one of the show places of the city, and its owner one of the richest men. In this mansion were hung the tapestries of the Months of Lucas, ten of which were given to the Metropolitan in 1944 by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. They show the arms of the legitimized son of Louis XIV that appear on the Flora panel and are also found in the 1852 sale catalogue of Louis Philippe. It is interesting that they are once again under one roof with their former housemates, four of the most unusual embroideries made in the reign of the Roi Soleil.