Royal Armorers: Antwerp or Paris?

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For almost a century, students of armor have tried to identify the makers and the place of origin of a type of parade armor, elaborately embossed and frequently damascened and gilded as well, that became fashionable in Europe in the sixteenth century. It is often referred to as “Louvre school” armor: the term derives from the fact that much of it bears the insignia of kings of France and that Henry IV in 1608 issued letters patent authorizing lodging in the apartments of the Louvre for state artists in his employ. Because the armor in question antedates the specific “brevet de logement,” however, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of the French royal armory than of the “Louvre school.”

The Museum’s collection of embossed armor is impressive: we have a complete embossed armor and a parade shield which were made in the royal armory for Henry II of France, and a splendidly embossed and gilded helmet associated with the royal armory. (The Henry II harness includes among its motifs the winged stag, a device of several French kings.) We also have the principal elements of two embossed half-armors which apparently came from the same workshop. Pierre Verlet, Conservateur en Chef of the Louvre Museum, has given us invaluable aid in our studies. In 1932 he arranged to send us for exhibition and study the Louvre’s magnificent embossed armor of Henry II. This year, taking advantage of the presence of the Louvre’s Henry II shield in the Exhibition of Decorative Arts of the Italian Renaissance held at the Detroit Institute of Arts, he generously forwarded the shield to New York for a brief exhibition and for comparison with our related armor.

Our studies have led to certain new information about the work of the French royal armory, and in order to make clear its implications I would like to review briefly several publications of recent years.

In 1945 there was published, under the authorship of Rudolf Cederström and Karl Erik Steneberg, a monograph on an embossed shield from Skokloster Castle in Sweden. This monograph claimed that the shield, as well as the armor of Erik XIV from the royal armory in Stockholm and an armor for man and horse that belonged to the Elector Christian II of Saxony, was made by Eliseus Libaerts, a goldsmith armorer of Antwerp. All three had formerly been attributed to the “Louvre school.” In 1948 an exhibition of works of art from the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Waffensammlung in Vienna was held in Stockholm. The exhibition afforded an unusual opportunity for comparison of embossed armors and as a result of the studies thus made possible Dr. Bruno Thomas, Director of the Waffensammlung, made additional attributions of French historical armor to Libaerts, including some Metropolitan Museum pieces.

There seems to be general agreement that the armor in question has a common origin, but whether it was made in Paris or in Antwerp remains in dispute. My own opinion is that it was made in the French royal armory in Paris, and in support of my theory I published in the

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ON THE COVER: The Museum's embossed parade shield of Henry II of France (Dick Fund, 1934) and a similar shield of Henry II in the Louvre. A detail of the Museum's shield is shown below.
October 1952 issue of this Bulletin an article on the Louvre’s Henry II armor which was then on loan to the Museum. My arguments in favor of French provenance remain the same, and I have in the meantime found new evidence to support them.

I pointed out at that time the close connection between the Munich drawings, designs from which enrich nearly all the armors that have been attributed to the “Louvre school,” and the decorative motifs used at Fontainebleau when it was converted under Francis I and Henry II from a medieval fortress to a royal residence. With reference to the possible connection of Etienne Delaune with the Munich drawings, it should be mentioned that both the Louvre Henry II armor and the round shield in the Wallace Collection in London, the original designs for which are among the Munich drawings, include prominently among their motifs the crab, one of the symbols of Diana (and probably, therefore, a reference to Henry’s mistress Diane de Poitiers). The crab also appears in Delaune’s engraving of Luna (another name for Diana), goddess of the moon. Many of Delaune’s motifs were derived from the engraved plates of Enea Vico, who used figures from the Column of Trajan as his inspiration. Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau, like Delaune one of the great ornament designers of the early French school, used Vico’s designs to the extreme extent of publishing them as his own in 1566. Pierre Lescot, royal architect to both Francis I and Henry II, used many of the same motifs—the winged figures, the bound captives, and the Vico trophies that appear on French royal armor—in his architectural designs. Similar ones appear among Jean Bullant’s decorations for Anne de Montmorency’s château at Écouen, in whose courtyard two of Michelangelo’s slave figures were placed.

The fact that motifs used in the Munich drawings and on French royal armor were also much used by French artists and on French royal buildings does not, of course, prove that the armor in question was made in Paris rather than in Antwerp. Nevertheless it seems to me to reinforce the case for a French lineage. Even the Italian origin of many of the designs may serve the same purpose, for it must be remembered that French kings from Louis XI on exhibited a predilection for Milanese armor, and that the French royal family throughout much of the sixteenth century were associated by marriage with the Medici. An equestrian portrait of Henry II in the collection of Viscount Bearstead, for example, shows the king wearing the suit of Milanese embossed armor that is today at Hever Castle in England. Another portrait of Henry II, engraved by Nicolò della Casa
after a painting by Bandinelli, shows numerous motifs that appear on French royal armor. Bandinelli, a versatile artist and rival of the great Michelangelo, was a favorite artist of the Medici family; he was especially knowledgeable about armor, for his father, Michelangelo di Viviano, executed with subtle craftsmanship all the ornaments of helmets, crests, and devices for the famous tourney held by Giuliano de' Medici on the Piazza di Santa Croce. A Vico engraving of Bandinelli’s portrait of Cosimo the Great in armor shows details similar in many respects to those on this Museum’s Henry II-Medici helmet.

The actual design for the Louvre Henry II shield, we have found, is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It shows so marked a resemblance in style to the rest of the Munich drawings that it must have belonged to the original set. We have also found that similar motifs appear on the Louvre shield and on the armor of Erik XIV in Stockholm; the workmanship indicates a common origin for the two pieces. The details shown here from the Erik XIV saddle and the Louvre shield reveal their similarity (see pages 4 and 5).

There can be no question of the existence of an established French royal armory in the sixteenth century. In my earlier article I published the names of some of the craftsmen and artists known to have been employed in it, mainly in the middle decades of the century. The Catalogue des Actes de François I, however, provides further evidence, for it contains numerous references to armormers, native and foreign, in the service of the king—mainly at Tours, whence the court moved to Paris about 1530. We need only mention René de Champ d’Amour, “natif de Bruxelles, armurier du roi et du dauphin”; Bénédict Clesze, “armurier du roi, originaire d’Allemagne”; Hans de Pontgrah, “sommelier d’armes ordinaires du roi, natif de Nuremberg”; and Louis de Lacque,
“dit Merveille, natif de Milan.” The son of the last, Loys Merveille, was one of the four armorers who in 1536 made three harnesses which Francis I presented to the cardinals of Lorraine and Guise and to Anne de Montmorency, Constable of France. A Venetian damascener, Dominique de Rota, “ouvrier en mauresque,” was in the service of Francis I from 1531 to 1533 at an annual salary of 600 livres. In 1542, in the midst of war with Charles V, Francis I issued an edict ordering all foreigners to leave France. Cellini, however, and the royal armorer Clésze (surnamed Tudesquin, or Tusquin, which indicates that he was a German) were exempted, with their helpers, from the decree. There was also a Spaniard, Diego de Çaias,

Original design for the Louvre Henry II shield
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Detail from the saddle of Erik XIV, showing the mask
Royal armory, Stockholm

who signed the damascened mace of Henry II which is now in the Metropolitan Museum. Judging by style, De Çaias may also have worked on the armor of Henry II in the Musée de l’Armée in Paris, which is damascened in silver—perhaps because white was the color of Diana. The armor of Maximilian II in the Waffensammlung, which has been attributed both to the “Louvre school” and to Libaerts, has a prominent damascened border in the neck region which also suggests the workmanship of De Çaias. Compare, for example, the detail of an eared dagger in this Museum, bearing his signature, with the detail of Maximilian’s armor shown here. The Maximilian armor has as one of its motifs a mule—a point in favor of the Spanish influence. Its early pedigree is not known, but Charles IX of France, who married Maximilian’s daughter Elizabeth in 1570, could well have presented it to his father-in-law. The gift notion is pure conjecture; what is certain is that the harness is similar in design and workmanship to our Henry II armor and is generally admitted to be of the same origin.

The French royal armory continued even beyond the time of Henry II, for our shield and that of the Louvre, the similarity of which is quite apparent from the illustrations on our
cover, both resemble in composition the solid gold and enamel shield in the Louvre that was made for Charles IX of France, who ascended the throne in 1560. The Louvre possesses a helmet en suite with the gold shield, and Verlet has found a document indicating that payment for both was made to the widow of a Paris goldsmith. He was apparently continuing the work of his predecessors who were employed by Henry II, and it seems unlikely that he would have gone to Antwerp for his inspiration.

The Libaerts attributions rest mainly on certain documents in the royal armory of Sweden. An inventory record of 1560 describes the Erik XIV Stockholm harness as "gjordt udi Andorpen medh dreffnet wârk nogett fôrgyllt" (made in Antwerp with embossed work somewhat gilded), and the accounts show that in 1562 "Elitzeus Liberth" received in payment for it 1,300 taler on account. Correspondence also exists which indicates that in 1563 Erik ordered from Libaerts a complete armor for man and horse. The rest of the Libaerts attributions are made on the ground that the pieces in question resemble the Erik XIV harness. Aside from these documents I know of no record of Libaerts' activities as an armorer.

As to the Stockholm harness, it is easy to believe that the clerk who noted that it was made in Antwerp might have done so only be-
cause he knew that Libaerts had brought it from there. The Stockholm archives indicate that in 1556 Duke Erik wanted to acquire a harness from France. Professor Steneberg has kindly sent me a copy of the record in the Röntekammarboken for the year 1556, now in the Kammararkivet in Stockholm. The notice in question says that Duke Erik gave his French page Claudius 100 daler "till at köpha hans nåde ett köritz före I francheriche" (to buy His Grace a harness in France). The Duke apparently wanted some special equipment that would become his rank. Why could Erik not have ultimately commissioned a Paris armorer goldsmith to make a harness to specifications—the one that was delivered by Libaerts? It would be mere speculation to try to determine under what circumstances Erik's armor was actually made, but the evidence seems to me to point to a French origin.

Cederström and Steneberg have identified the armor for man and horse ordered by Erik in 1563 as one of the two embossed harnesses that Heinrich Cnoep, the Nuremberg goldsmith, sold in 1604 and 1606 to the Elector Christian II of Saxony, and that were in the royal armory in Dresden until World War II. Both harnesses admittedly bear a close relationship to French royal armor, though the equestrian one has an etched ground which was apparently executed after the armor left France. It is claimed that the chanfron of this armor was originally chased with the chain of Erik XIV's Salvator Order and that this is now hidden by a modern plate; there is nothing else to associate the armor with Erik. It would have been an easy matter, and not at all unusual, to take a harness already in existence and ornament so prominent an element as the chanfron with an emblem of the patron. I believe that Libaerts did not make this armor but only acted as a middleman. (The same sort of middleman claim, incidentally, is made by the students who attribute the armor to Libaerts. They say that Heinrich Cnoep, who sold and delivered the armor to Christian II, did not himself make it.)
If Libaerts was in fact a goldsmith armorer, then in my opinion he must have had contacts with the French royal armory. The same possibility exists, I believe, with respect to the Flemish master armorer Lochorst, maker of a half-armor in this Museum whose backplate bears his signature. The resemblance between the breastplate of this harness and that of the Erik XIV armor is striking, particularly in composition. We do not know the original provenance of the Lochorst armor, but what evidence we have been able to find leads to France rather than to Flanders. Perhaps both Libaerts and Lochorst, though Flemish themselves, were employed in the French royal armory.

The Museum's splendid embossed Henry II-Medici helmet is among the pieces attributed to Libaerts. Yet, as I noted in my previous article, its resemblance to the Louvre Henry II armor is so close that it is thought by some authorities to have been made as part of that armor. The harness is known to have been among the crown treasures of France since the time of Louis XIV, and its unfinished state makes it highly unlikely that it would have been delivered from abroad; this seems conclusive evidence against its having been made in Antwerp. As to the helmet the evidence is less clear, but still weighted against the Libaerts attribution. In my opinion it was made by an Italian, and one who had an amazing ability to put life and action into sculptured figures. It may well be that it was sent to France as a gift from the Medici, or as a model by a master armorer goldsmith in their service. For one thing, it is an open burgonet with a removable falling buffe, or chinpiece, while all the other embossed helmets associated with the French royal armory are close helmets. It is the most remarkable element of the French royal pieces—in design, in execution, and in its practically mint condition. The nude figures sculptured on either side of the bowl were apparently inspired by the engraving of the Battle of the Nudes by the Florentine painter and goldsmith Antonio Pollaiuolo.

Since we have no evidence of the existence in Antwerp of the complex type of workshop required to produce elaborate embossed armor, and abundant evidence of such an organization in France, it remains my belief that the harnesses traditionally attributed to the "Louvre school" and recently to Libaerts are in fact creations of the French royal armory.

*Detail from the Louvre's embossed parade shield of Henry II*