A Royal French Clock

by JAMES PARKER  Assistant Curator of Post-Renaissance Art

The essence of eighteenth-century art collecting in France is conveyed in the title pages of sale catalogues of that time. Although these title pages list categories of art objects offered for sale, with an occasional notation of a rarity, the wording differs from the succinct prose of today's auction catalogue, while the collections described, the "cabinets d'amateurs" differ widely from any we know today. Configurations of art and household objects emerge from the French titles, giving imagination scope to enter the collector's rooms and reason a chance to assess current standards of taste.

For an anonymous sale in Paris on February 22, 1779, the title reads: "Catalogue d'une Belle Collection de Tableaux Originaux de grands Maîtres des différentes Ecoles; Dessins montés & en feuilles, aussi originaux, & la plus grande partie de l'Ecole Française; Figures de Marbre, Terres cuites, Bronzes, beaux Vases de Porphire, Serpentins, Etrusques & autres. Meubles de Boule; plusieurs Coquillers a pieds dorés, avec leurs Corps de Tiroir; Tables en console & autres, aussi sculptées & dorées. Collection choisie & agréable d'Histoire naturelle: comme Madrepores, Minéraux, Cristallisations, Coquilles, Agathes arborisées & autres. Armes, Utensiles & Habilements Indiens, Chinois & autres. Echantillons de divers Marbres; Bijoux, & autres Objets curieux; Qui composoient le Cabinet de M***."

Such a register unrolls the scene of collecting before our astonished eyes. The eccentric range of M***'s hoard did not divide it from other collections put up at auction galleries in the last half of the eighteenth century. Most of them were many-sided, as if attempting to include all the elements. Marble slabs, pedestals, and vases figure richly in the catalogues, shedding a mineral glow over Oriental lacquer, porcelains, and Boulle furniture. The briefer preamble to the sale of M. de Vieux Viller, February 18, 1788, repeats the theme: "Catalogue de Tableaux des Ecoles d'Italie, de Flandres, de Hollande et de France; Gouaches; Dessins montés & non-montés, des trois Ecoles; Estampes montées & en volumes; Terres cuites; Figures de bronzes & Bronzes dorés; Marbres précieux en vases; Fûts de colonnes & Tables; Porcelaines du Japon, de la Chine & de France; Meubles de Boule; Pierre gravées & autres Objets. . ."

Boulle furniture, conspicuously displayed in both these sales, paraded in others of that time as "meubles précieux par Boul," "ouvrages du célèbre Boule," or "genre de Boule," "goût de Boule." These were the several spellings current in the eighteenth century of the name of André-Charles Boulle, 1642-1732, the principal cabinet-maker of Louis XIV. The term Boulle designated a special technique: veneering the carcass of a piece of furniture with matching shapes of tortoise shell and metal, usually brass, cut out by saw and fitted together, forming panels that were often bounded by broad strips of ebony. Boulle did not originate this technique, which came to France with the workmen brought from Italy by Marie de Médicis, nor did he work solely with tortoise shell and brass veneers, for some of his furniture was veneered with conventional woods, but his reputation was established by the technique that bears his name.

The eighth edition of Nouvelle Description de la Ville de Paris by Germain Brice, published in 1725, names the artisans who worked for the crown and were lodged under the Grande Galerie of the Louvre. Among them, in lodging number 15, was "Boul Ebeniste, dont les ouvrages de marqueterie sont fort recherchés." He...
had been in this privileged location since 1672, the year of his appointment as royal cabinet-maker. The King’s protection dispensed Boulle from conforming to guild regulations which would have parcelled out the processes of furniture making among several guilds. His lodging was an autonomous workshop, where all stages in the manufacture of furniture were carried out by about twenty assistants under his direction.

André-Charles Boulle’s high capacities as director of this workshop are implied by the pronouncements of his contemporaries. An author of eighteenth-century essays on art, Pierre-Jean Mariette, who must have known Boulle, gave him two great qualities: he was hard-working and he collected art. Orlandi, writing in 1719, described Boulle’s collection of drawings and prints: “La grande unione cumulata di tutte le sorta di disegni d’antichi, e moderni Pittori.” Boulle’s claim for damages, presented after a fire in 1720 had largely destroyed his workshop with its contents, conveys the incredible result of his collecting. Lost in the fire were an album of forty-eight drawings by Raphael, a sketchbook that Rubens had made of his travels, an Italian manuscript of the warrior arts with drawings by Jacques Callot, two hundred and seventy-five colored drawings by Stefano della Bella, a huge lot of French drawings and Italian prints kept in an armoire nine feet high by six feet, another cabinet full of prints and drawings relating to the history of French kings, three portfolios of architectural designs by François and Jules-Hardouin Mansard, sheets of drawings of ships by Pierre Puget, eight woodcuts and prints by Albrecht Dürer, two portfolios of Carracci drawings, and other extraordinary series of graphic arts. The mind, forever disappointed of these delights and discoveries, turns in desolation from reading Boulle’s claim.

Boulle neglected his business interest and incurred debts in order to add to his stocks of drawings and prints. Mariette describes his compulsive collecting: “C’est qu’on ne faisoit aucune vente d’estampes, de desseins, etc., où il ne fut

*Boulle clock and pedestal, French, early 18th century. Height 7 feet 3¼ inches. From the collection of Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Duc de Dino
Rogers Fund, 1958*
et où il n’acheta, souvent sans avoir de quoi payer; il fallait emprunter, presque toujours à gros intérêt. Une nouvelle vente arrivait, nouvelle occasion pour recourir aux expédients. Le cabinet devenait nombreux et les dettes encore davantage; et, pendant ce temps-là, le travail languissait.”

His unregenerate collecting in the face of business gave André-Charles a new dimension in the ethos of his time. He was not a business-manager-bookkeeper, nor a “bourgeois gentilhomme,” but the director of an artistic enterprise for whom matters of art came first.

Seventy-five clockcases of different sizes and of varying stages of execution were among the products of Boulle’s own workshop consumed in the fire of 1720. It is known that Boulle and a clockmaker called Jacques Thuret were related. Thuret became clockmaker to Louis XIV in 1694 and had his workshop under the same roof with Boulle, in lodging 12 under the Grande Galerie. The natural assumption is that there were business connections as well as blood ties between the two men, that Boulle, Louis XIV’s cabinetmaker, produced cases for clocks made by Jacques Thuret, the king’s clockmaker. A pedestal clock recently acquired by the Museum—it is now on display in the Recent Accessions Room—is signed “J. Thuret à Paris” on the beautifully engraved dial and the back plate. The case for the clock and the pedestal are of oak overlaid with Boulle marquetry of tortoise shell, brass, and engraved pewter, with ebony veneer on the base of the pedestal, and finely finished and gilded bronze mounts. The tortoise shell is applied over a layer of red pigment that gives it a reddish cast. Boulle never signed his furniture, so that proof of his authorship of the case and pedestal resides in the high quality of the marquetry, the virtuosity of the bronze casting and gilding which he would have overseen, and the conjunction of Jacques Thuret’s name with Boulle technique.

The mount of Apollo’s head in a sunburst on the cresting of the clock confirms its royal provenance, though no inventory mark or other evidence indicates for which of the royal chateaux it was made. Louis XIV’s far-reaching fancy of identifying himself with the sun and Apollo is treated by Félibien in a 1689 description of the Château of Versailles: “Il est bon de remarquer d’abord, que comme le Soleil est la Devise du Roy, & que les Poètes confondent le Soleil & Apollon; il n’y a rien dans cette superbe Maison qui n’ait rapport à cette Divinité; aussi toutes les figures & les ornemens qu’on y voit, n’estant point placez au hazard, ils ont relation ou au Soleil, ou aux lieux particuliers où ils sont mis.”

The rigid contours and dazzlingly redundant
Jean Berain's designs
from Desseins de cheminées, Paris, undated
Rogers Fund, 1915

The decoration of this royal clock gives it a date in the first years of the eighteenth century, and ally it with the published designs of still a third inhabitant of the artists' quarters under the Grande Galerie, Jean Bérain. Bérain occupied lodging number 2 from 1691 till 1711 in his capacity of chief designer to the king. He became Jacques Thuret's father-in-law in 1703, and thus related to Boulle by marriage. The repertory of ornamental motifs in his designs was drawn upon by a diversity of artists, and enriched the whole fabric of ornament. Reflections of these designs on the Boulle clock are the strings of husks on the pedestal, the acanthus flowers and scrolls, the female mask with rinceaux below it, the four sphinx supporters, the lambrequin between them, and the four flaming urns above.

Figures of female sphinxes, often with elaborately dressed hair or frilled and feathered head coverings, were standard apparitions in eighteenth-century parks and drawing rooms. The staircase of the sphinxes was at Fontainebleau, and the parterre of the dauphine with its sphinxes at Versailles. Jacques-François Blondel gives a plate of sphinx designs for terrace sculpture in *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance et de la Décoration des Édifices en Général*, 1738. The Museum recently acquired a handsome pair of gilded and painted wood sphinxes and pedestals of the Régence period, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles C. Paterson. These leonine young women would have posed their riddles in some wonderful eighteenth-century interior setting.

The tortoise-shell and metal sheathing of the Museum's pedestal clock provokes a further examination into the Boulle technique. The materials were magnificent, and the work of assembling and finishing them was painstaking, but the cutting of veneer entailed a saving of labor, for if only two materials were to be used two complete sets of veneer could be produced at the same time; a layer of tortoise shell could be placed on a layer of metal and the two cut so that the metal might serve as a ground to the tortoise shell and the tortoise shell to the metal. This incongruous package deal favored pairs of objects with the same fitted patterns and grounds, of different materials. The preferred aspect for a piece of furniture, called première-partie or first part, was composed of cutout metal pattern on a
Antiquity knew the use of tortoise shell, for Ovid wrote of beds decorated with ivory and tortoise shell, Juvenal of a cradle and Vergil of doors encrusted with tortoise shell. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the best shell for various artistic employments—for inlaying, combs, snuffboxes, et cetera—was provided by the hawksbill tortoise, found in tropical and subtropical seas. Incidents of gathering shell from the hawksbill are recorded in *Chambers’s Encyclopedia* of 1738: “It is the under shell alone is used: to separate it from the upper, they make a little fire beneath it, and as soon as ever it is warm, the under shell becomes easily separable from the upper with the point of a knife, and is taken off in laminae or leaves without killing the animal, which, it is said, being turned to sea again, gets a new shell. The whole spoils of the caret (hawksbill) consist in 13 leaves, eight of them flat and five a little bent: of the flat ones, there are four large ones, about a foot long and 7 inches broad.” In the workshop these leaves, softened by heat, were formed into panels of the size required, and shaped to the surface of the wood to which they were glued.

The extraordinary combination of tortoise shell, metal, and wood has often not stood the proof of time. The animal, mineral, and vegetable elements, never well adjusted to each other, played, contracted, and buckled, so that few pieces of Boulle have survived without repair or alteration. The pedestal of the Museum’s clock might originally have held a barometer. There are small patches of restoration on the clock, and
the movement is a replacement. A similar clock with a later movement by the English clock-maker Vulliamy stands in the state apartments at Windsor Castle. It was probably a part of the acquisition of French decorative art made by George IV when Prince Regent. A few differences of detail and the apparent absence of a barometer face distinguish it from the Museum’s clock.

Because his veneers scaled and his furniture decayed quickly, works from the hand of André-Charles Boulle are very rare. The accounts of the royal household contain a record of 3,000 livres paid to him in 1708-1709 for a pair of commodes to be delivered to the Grand Trianon. These are now at Versailles. Other works by him are in the Louvre, the Wallace collection, and elsewhere. In 1959 this Museum acquired a magnificent black Boulle armoire which is exhibited with the clock in the Recent Accessions Room. It is illustrated on page 174 of last month’s Bulletin.

Apart from the small number of pieces which can be given to Boulle on the strength of drawings or documents, the bulk of extant Boulle furniture can be put down as the work of his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century successors. Furniture in the technique of André-Charles Boulle continued in production one hundred and fifty years after his death, meeting an apparently inexhaustible demand.

Boulle’s immediate successors in the genre, the cabinetmakers signing Delairé and Dubois in the reign of Louis XV, and, later in the century, Delorme, Weisweiler, Montigny, and Levasseur, sometimes closely approximated forms originated by Boulle; at other times rococo and Louis XVI forms were simply surfaced with brass and tortoise shell. The century’s foible for this furniture is made evident by the sale catalogues already mentioned.

In Le Cousin Pons, published in 1847, Honoré de Balzac took note of the renewed interest in Boulle. His afflicted hero-collector Sylvain Pons had a Boulle clock, writing desk, and pedestals

*Detail of a design for garden sphinxes from De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance et de la Décoration des Édifices en Général, Paris, 1738*
among his motley treasures, and Balzac is known to have collected Boulle for himself.

In English nineteenth-century usage the term was corrupted to Buhl. Thomas Carlyle did not buy Buhl, but used the word in his description of the Dandiacal Household in Sartor Resartus: “A Dressing-room splendidly furnished; violet coloured curtains, chairs and ottomans of the same hue. . . . Several Bottles of Perfumes, arranged in a particular fashion, stand upon a smaller table of mother-of-pearl; opposite to these are placed the appurtenances of Lavation richly wrought in frosted silver. A wardrobe of Buhl is on the left; the doors of which being partly open, discover a profusion of Clothes.”

At the time Carlyle wrote, English and French furniture industries had begun to fabricate nineteenth-century Boulle or Buhl, imitating the splendors of Louis XIV’s court furniture, bringing machine technology to the task. The result was often a pastiche of nineteenth-century construction and misconceived eighteenth-century design. Many mid-century collectors were brazenly indifferent to authenticity in furniture they owned. They cared for the grand French styles, but an outright reproduction or a hybrid often did as well as an original. In this atmosphere of indiscriminate patronage Buhl manufactures flourished. Only in the 1870s and 1880s, when critical appreciation of French eighteenth-century furniture increased, did the business of counterfeit Boulle fail and the long line of André-Charles’s successors come to an end.

Pedestal of the clock, showing barometer dial and female mask probably made in the workshop of André-Charles Boulle

The Boulle clock, its original movement by Jacques Thuret, royal clockmaker 1694-1738