Arms for Aeneas: 
A Group Reattributed to Jean Cornu

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Michael Friedsam is one of those collectors to whom the Metropolitan Museum has the greatest number of reasons to be grateful. The 1932 bequest of Colonel Friedsam, best known for its Northern European paintings, also included some exceptionally fine medieval and later works of art, such as an impressive array of Limoges enamels and several sculptures. One of the choicest objects in the bequest, a Late Baroque terracotta three-figure group, is unexpectedly flamboyant for a Friedsam property (Figure 1). In this group the participants swell above an oaken base, which is painted to match the clay and rests on squashed ball feet as typical of the Louis XIV period as the grandiloquent gestures of the actors. The sculpture derives uncommon energy from the organization of its diagonal elements, as it reenacts Virgil's story of Venus descending from the skies to endow an enraptured Aeneas with her spectacular gift of armor. This retelling closely follows Virgil except for the addition of Cupid, who struggles under the weight of a shield on which the Flight from Troy is shown in relief (Figure 2): Aeneas bearing his father, Anchises, accompanied by his son, Ascanius, and followed by his wife, Creusa.

The Friedsam bequest was unveiled to the public in 1932. In the Museum's Bulletin, Joseph Breck, Curator of Decorative Arts, found somehow that Venus Giving Arms to Aeneas evoked "memories of preposterous palaces and of formal parks where white marbles gleam against the green charmilles." Shortly afterward, John Goldsmith Phillips, Jr., joined the curatorial staff and gave the terracotta his more considered attention, attributing it to the little-known French sculptor Jean Cornu (1650–1710). Phillips recognized in it one of two models exhibited by Cornu in the Salon of 1704 and described in the Salon livret as follows:

Entre les deux croisées, qui sont au dessous du trumeau VII. au milieu de la Gallerie, Deux Groupes de Sculpture, l'un de Venus qui donne des armes à Enée, l'autre d'Enée qui emporte son père Anchise, où sont aussi Creuse & Ascanius, par M. Cornu, Adjoint Professeur.

Both episodes from the story of Aeneas center on his rapport with his parents, Venus in one and the Trojan Anchises in the other.

Although details about Cornu were sketchy at best forty years ago, Phillips's wish to associate model with document was natural enough. The subject, Venus Giving Arms to Aeneas, is rare in sculpture, and the group displays in abundance a theatrical, pictorial strain found in much French sculpture around 1700 but manifested especially in bronze sculpture. In 1940, however, a letter, superb in its condescension, from the doyen of French sculpture studies, Paul Vitry, dampened Phillips's speculation. The Cornu idea seems to have been dropped, or rather to have gone underground. The group was retired from exhibition for several decades, although memoranda in the department's archive folder written by Phillips's younger colleagues—James Parker, Clare Le Corbeiller, and Clare Vincent—suggest that Phillips continued to explore the work of Cornu, nursing the hope that something might turn up to support his authorship of the piece. Students subsequently investigated other possibilities, Italian as well as French, but without result. In fairness to Vitry, it may be said that books would not have yielded much on Cornu

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Before François Souchal’s dictionary of sculptors was published, beginning in 1977,9 now, Souchal’s pages offer enough comparisons to vindicate the old attribution. The newly cleaned terracotta10 at last occupies its rightful place on view in the Louis XIV galleries as one of the Museum’s most engaging works of French sculpture.

Jean Cornu, born in Paris in 1650, was apprenticed to an ivory carver of Dieppe.11 In 1673 he won second prize in sculpture at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. In Rome from 1675 to 1679, Cornu produced a terracotta relief, *The Rape of the Sabines*, and copies after the antique. Returning home, he supervised the uncrating of Louis XIV’s Italian purchases of sculpture on their arrival at Le Havre. His *morceau de réception* for the Académie in 1681 was a marble relief, *The Roman Charity*, which has been rather ill-used (Figure 3).12 Cornu rose steadily in the ranks of the Académie and, like so many of his generation, he found most of his employment at the royal residences. The bulk of his work is at Versailles—grand marble vases and an *Africa* of 1682 (Figure 4) for the gardens. Also his is the full-scale copy in the park of the Farnese Hercules.13 Cornu and Joseph Rayol collaborated on at least

2. Detail of shield in Figure 1

thirty-two statues for the palace's north wing: personifications of the Sciences and the Arts, the Seasons, the Four Genres of Poetry and the Muses, all done in a great rush in 1687–88 (Figures 5, 6).14

Cornu's six stone angels for the Invalides cupola were subsequently destroyed, as were stucco decorations for Saint-Cloud and reliefs at Meudon, the latter made in association with Simon Mazière.15 But some of Cornu's bronze decoration on the high altar of Narbonne Cathedral, made in 1694, survives to hint at its original splendor.16 By 1698 Germain Brice had seen small bronzes after the antique in Cornu's studio.17 The inventory taken after his death in 1710 names copies of the Farnese Bull and the Laocoön as well as bronzes of a river god and a naiad and a gilt three-figure Rape of the Sabines,18 no doubt after Giovanni Bologna. Cornu's interest in the grand multifigural groups of antiquity and the more recent past is therefore a matter of record. He also produced figural bronze mountings for clock cases, which were highly regarded.19

Most relevant to the terracotta group, because of its date and the wealth of ornamental comparisons it offers, is Cornu's spandrel relief in the Chapelle Royale at Versailles. Representing the Penitence of St. Peter in allegorical fashion, the relief dates from 1709 (Figure 7). It rises above a pilaster of the same stone richly decorated with an ecclesiastical trophy, carved the same year (Figure 8). Cornu's authorship of these Chapelle Royale reliefs is guaranteed by his carefully minuted drawing,20 as well as by financial records.


9. Detail of Figure 1
Without the Salon entry, it is unlikely that anyone would have attributed the Museum's terracotta to Cornu. The group was almost certainly modeled with a view toward casting it in bronze, as will be made clearer below, but that and the fact that Cornu was an accomplished bronzier are not sufficient evidence for an attribution. Enough specific traits exist in the terracotta, however, to establish a link to Cornu's style, although they are neither obvious nor glimpsed without effort. The amplitude of Venus's drapery, for example, is a convention widespread in French classical Baroque statuary, but the way the folds cling and eddy seems to be consistent with Cornu from the time of his Roman Charity and Africa (Figures 3, 4). The head of Aeneas (Figures 9, 10) is at once long and idealized, with a scooped-out profile, much like those of the façade figures at Versailles, visible even in badly eroded fragments (Figure 6).21 The angel embodying St. Peter's penitence is even more closely akin to Aeneas in face and physiognomy; in both Aeneas and the angel, the long limbs are as finely tapered and flexed as those of tennis players. Venus conforms to the noble feminine type established in The Roman Charity and in the Versailles Muses (Figures 1, 3, 5, 6)—adumbrations of the features of the Medici Venus. The spandrel's junior angels and the group's Cupid (Figure 11) could pass for brothers. The clouds in the spandrel and those at the back of the group (Figure 20) are similarly swirled.
In fact, the relief is the most linear and least three-dimensional sculpture in the chapel, where the contributions of other sculptors show far greater ease of movement, looking toward the style of the Régence. Apart from individual traits, however, it would be difficult to prove that the relief and the group were carved by the same hand, because the group occupies space with some authority, while Cornu’s pilaster relief (Figure 8) is relatively timid, symmetrical, and flat in the overall context of the chapel sculptures. But its array of pure ornament easily recalls the command of detail shown in the shaping of Aeneas’s armor (Figures 2, 21).

The controlling vision of Charles Le Brun, Louis XIV’s Premier Peintre, who directed the efforts of teams of highly skilled artists, placed certain constraints on sculptural initiative. To be sure, the personality of a first-rate sculptor such as François Girardon or that of a titan such as Pierre Puget was bound to rise to the surface, but this was hardly the case with the majority involved in chopping out rows of garden figures based on the designs of Le Brun. One convention that resulted was an insistent emphasis on the corners of a composition, which arose from the general desire for sculptures to be apprehended from various axes in formally laid-out gardens. This stress, evident in Cornu’s Africa (Figure 4), recurs in the Aeneas group, where views of the
depart from grandiose norms, and to expand their range began to open up after Le Brun's death in 1690, as projects more intimate in nature gained favor. One new direction was pointed by the theatrical bronze group, a form that came into fashion around 1700, partially as a revival of Florentine grand-ducal taste of a century earlier. The species of pictorial bronze groups had originated in Florence, and the balletic lifts that are so much a feature of the French derivations are often recapitulations of Giovanni Bologna's Rape of the Sabines. Figure 16 reproduces one

15. After Cornu, Venus Giving Arms to Aeneas. Plaster, H. 115 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting)

corners (Figures 12, 13) offer almost as much interest as the front and side views (Figures 1, 14). The shield-bearing Cupid accentuates the right corner by leaning diagonally into the composition. The Cupid is lacking in a plaster replica of the group in Amsterdam, and the overall expression is a bit blank (Figure 15). It does not help that the plaster hero's gesticulating arms have been rearranged, making the subject less than clear. Fingers in the terracotta group have also been altered as damages have occurred, but Aeneas's left arm is clearly positioned to hold a missing spear (part of Venus's gift). His left arm in the plaster has no apparent function.

Opportunities for sculptors to relax somewhat, to
of the two-figure groups after Giovanni Bologna; the gilt reduction owned by Cornu was of the three-figure type. The Gallic assimilations often appear more earthbound than the Florentine groups, as if filtered through a second source, this time a French one: Pierre Le Pautre's much-admired *Aeneas Carrying Anchises* in the Tuileries gardens. The format of the bronze group afforded the sculptor an opportunity to orchestrate a close-up display of movement and musculature and a rhetorical description of contrasts, such as that between old and young or male and female. The ability to state these qualities with eloquence was one of the ends advanced most conspicuously in French academic training.

Thomas Regnaudin exhibited several groups in the Salon of 1699. One was a marble and three were possibly terracottas for compositions he hoped to see realized in bronze: *Time Discovering Truth, Aeneas Car-*


rying Anchises, and Adam and Eve. The first was a reduction of his marble Saturn Abducting Cybele, now in the Louvre. In 1700 Philippe Bertrand received a royal commission for a Rape of Helen, which he cast and presented to the Académie the following year (Figure 17), and whose psychological interplay and diagonal thrusts continue to reverberate in the Museum’s terracotta. Commissions from the crown had unquestionably dwindled by this time, owing to the disastrous price of warfare during the later reign of Louis XIV. It was perhaps as an economic consequence that artists courted the private sector by showing bronzes, or the models for them, at the Salon.

Models for bronzes figured importantly at the Salon of 1704; the Grande Galerie was virtually peppered with groups. The Salon livrets do not always specify materials, and it is likely that many terracottas were displayed in the hope they might be cast if orders were forthcoming. Regnaudin repeated his Aeneas Carrying Anchises and Bertrand his Rape of Helen, adding The Rape of Psyche, Lucretia, and Prometheus. In addition to Cornu’s two Aeneas subjects, Corneille van Clève showed a Diana and Endymion and a Bacchus and Ariadne, René Frémin a Rape of Pandora and his model for Hercules and Deianira, Robert Le Lorrain bronzes of Vertumnus and Pomona and a Bacchante, and Jean-Louis Le Moyn e a Cephalus and Procris. Jean Poultier entered Adam and Eve, Apollo and Daphne, and Susannah and the Elders, as well as lesser bronzes. Surviving bronzes that correspond to these Salon entries have more or less the same sizable format as the Museum’s terracotta, which is scrupulously finished and thus unlikely to have served as a study for a work of greater size.

During the short period when bronze groups were so swiftly promoted, there was no Premier Peintre to channel taste, and the Salon was not yet held on a regular basis. The prominence of sculptural groups at the 1704 Salon cannot have been a matter of spontaneous choice. The exhibiting sculptors were probably acting in concert to enforce a decorative unity along the trumeaux of the Grande Galerie. Afterward, the popularity of these groups suffered something of a decline, surfacing only rarely in the Régence. Four bronzes at Windsor Castle may illustrate an exceptional resurgence of the species. These airy assemblies, in which mythological pairings represent the Seasons, are conventionally ascribed to Jacques Des-

18. By or after Bertrand, Venus at the Forge of Vulcan, ca. 1720. Bronze. Windsor Castle, Royal Collection (photo: Courtauld Institute)

jardins. However, Desjardins, the nephew of the better-known sculptor Martin Desjardins, is documented in the role of founder more than that of modeler, and there are clear signs that Philippe Bertrand was involved in this project. The Windsor Zephyr and Flora (for Spring) restates the model for a marble group begun in 1713 and finished after Bertrand’s death. At Windsor the subject of Winter is realized in the form of Venus commissioning Aeneas’s arms from Vulcan (Figure 18), the episode preceding Cornu’s in Virgilian chronology. Bertrand’s authorship of the model for this bronze is suggested not only by its resemblance to The Rape of Helen (Figure 17), but also by the fact that he was named as the author of a terracotta of this subject in the sale of Jean de Julienne in 1767. Bertrand emerges as a likely motivating force in the history of these bronze picturings of abduction and apparition.
The question of bronze statuettes aside, another arena for the display of unfettered talent proved to be the Chapelle Royale enterprise. As noted above, Cornu's reliefs of 1709 (Figures 7, 8) contrast with those of the other chapel sculptors in their linearity and symmetry. This may indicate a sort of vitiation in Cornu's late work, or he may have attempted deliberately to resist the general trend toward less formal configurations. In either case, Cornu was less in step stylistically with the times than he had been in the terracotta group.

More than likely, *Venus Giving Arms to Aeneas* was conceived from the beginning as a pendant for the four-figure *Aeneas Carrying Anchises* shown in the same Salon of 1704—in which case the weight of the latter would have shifted complementarily to the right. It has been suggested that the subject of *Aeneas Bearing Anchises*, or the Flight from Troy, had special relevance for the French monarchy, as it is a theme telling of succession and tradition transmitted through the male line. Venus's gift of armor to her son Aeneas can be interpreted in terms no less
royal, as the leader is being given divine succor and enhanced authority in the form of these arms. The relief on the shield, showing the Flight from Troy (Figure 2), was doubtless meant to mirror Cornu's now-lost companion group. The embellishment of the shield, a departure from Virgil, is otherwise inexplicable. Rather than this episode, Virgil describes a fantastical summation of the history of Rome worked into the shield's design.4

The putto who struggles so gamely with this shield is an interpolation intended from the start, as can be judged by the Rijksmuseum’s plaster (Figure 15), where his absence leaves a gap, both compositionally and psychologically. He is to be taken for a Cupid; it would be only natural for an artist to suppose that Cupid might assist his mother in the arming of his older half brother. If the spiral of the main group harks back to the figura serpentina of Giovanni Bologna (Figure 16), the added figure of the love god derives from pictorial sources. Poussin includes amorini in his two versions of the tale.42 The source Cornu followed most closely is an engraving by Pietro Testa (Figure 19), in which several erotes lend their aid.43 Cornu’s single Cupid is more cogent and is not, strictly speaking, traceable to Testa’s print, but the print definitely prompted Venus’s position canted to the left and also influenced the form of Aeneas’s helmet and the intimation of gratified surprise in his outstretched right arm.

The delight Aeneas takes in his armor comes straight from Virgil. The poet’s hero, “rejoicing in the divine gift and in honour thus signal, cannot be sated as he rolls his eyes from piece to piece” of the battle gear.44 Cornu adheres to the text in supplying the goddess with a bank of clouds as she draws nigh (Figure 20); and at the back of the group is the oak beneath which Venus spread out “the arms all radiant.”45 Aeneas will now exchange the arms he wears—impressive ones at that—for this exciting new set. He is already testing the new spear (now missing). Through the perfection with which he has fashioned this Baroque panoply, Cornu does not let us forget its divine origin. One might find the sword more stage-worthy than “death-dealing” but the helmet is certainly “terrific with plumes” (Figure 21) and the shield’s “ineffable fabric” cannot fail to impress (Figure 2).46 Cornu’s powers are most in evidence in these details, as if he were actively, consciously striving to equal the workmanship of Vulcan’s shop.

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NOTES

1. See notes of Katharine Baejer in “Pleasures and Problems of Early French Painting,” Apollo 106 (1977) pp. 340–349. Friedsam was the cousin and heir of Benjamin Altman, another important Metropolitan Museum benefactor.

2. The sculpture earlier passed through a sale of the Florentine dealer Elia Volpi, at American Art Galleries, New York, Dec. 17–19, 1917, no. 429, as by Pierre Puget. The museum's marked copy of the catalogue indicates it was knocked down to Joseph Dabissi for $425, but the sale apparently did not go through. Kleinberger Galleries, acting on behalf of Colonel Friedsam, bought it from Volpi in 1920.


7. “En ce qui concerne votre terre cuite et son attribution à Cornu, je suis encore moins disposé à adopter sans hésitation votre identification. L'origine de la pièce est vague et semble plutôt vers l'Italie. Le sculpteur Cornu est encore moins célèbre et moins particulier comme manière. Enfin le sujet peut avoir aussi été traité à plusieurs reprises. Or cette identité de sujet est le seul argument que vous puissiez invoquer: car le style compliqué et un peu confus du groupe ne fait même pas penser forcément à une œuvre française. Il s'agirait d'une œuvre italienne ou originaire de l'Allemagne du Sud ou de l'Autriche du début du XVIIIe siècle que je n'en serais pas entièrement étonné. Donc ici double point d'interrogation? En [illégal] y peut être un peu d'hypocrisme pour des attributions vraisemblables peut-être et devant lesquelles on n'hésiterait pas dans le domaine de la pure curiosité” (letter of May 1, 1940, in the department's archive).

8. Thus the resemblance to Bertrand's Rape of Helen (Figure 17) was observed by Olga Raggio in a penciled note of 1964. In a letter of 1961, in the department's archive, Hugh Honour recommended investigating Piedmontese comparisons. In the late 1960s, around the time I joined the department, Roman followers of Domenico Guidi were being discussed as possibilities.


10. Cleaned by conservator Jack Soutanian in the winter of 1988. Consistent with Baroque models on this large scale, the group is an assembly of many separately cast pieces, which had discolored considerably at the joins. I am grateful to Mr. Soutanian for information shared during our many consultations.

11. These and the following notices are from Souchal, French Sculptors, I, pp. 112–123.

12. Frédéric Chappey, conservateur chargé des sculptures at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, has kindly signified the existence of a bronze relief of this composition in a collection at Maubeuge, apparently bearing a stamp indicating royal ownership.


16. Ibid., p. 120. The heads of the cherubim hark back to François Duquesnoy.


18. Souchal, French Sculptors, I, pp. 121, 123. The river god and naiad were perhaps the fleuve et reine esclave that Cornu contributed to a monument to Louis XIV executed by students at the French Academy in Rome, 1675–79 (ibid., p. 112).

19. Ibid., p. 121.

20. Illustrated in Souchal, French Sculptors, I, p. 122, and translated p. 123. Cornu analyzes each element in the pilaster relief, whose overall signification is “the mystical symbol of Jesus Christ.”

21. This Clio is one of the figures replaced on the façade by modern copies; the original fragments have been retired to storage.

22. Inv. no. RBK 1957–25, acquired in Paris, catalogued as school of Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, and believed to represent Rinaldo and Armida. Because of doubts about its authenticity, the piece was not included in Jaap Leeuwenberg and Willy Halsema-Kubes, Beeldhouwkunst in het Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam, 1973).

23. The Florentine derivation holds true whether one has in mind Giovanni Bologna’s three-figure marble group in the Loggia dei Lanzi or the two- and three-figure groups that emanated from his workshop. The inventory of works found in Cornu’s studio after his death, taken on Oct. 13, 1710, is characterized by Souchal, French Sculptors, I, p. 129. The Rape of the Sabinas did not appear in the inventory of Cornu’s widow in 1715. The popularity of French bronze groups around 1700 was of course paralleled in contemporary grand-ducal Florence by the groups of Massimiliano Soldani and Giovanni Battista Poggini.


25. Livret of the Salon of 1699, pp. 6, 16.

26. Souchal, French Sculptors, III, pp. 250–251. The Aeneas and Anchises appears to survive in two bronze versions: the earlier one in the Hermitage, Leningrad (ill. in Rosasco, "A Terracotta Aeneas and Anchises," fig. 22), the later one a more strictly frontal group, in 1989, with Agnew's, London. Neither is a true compositional pendant to the Saturn and Cybele group, although one was paired decoratively with it at the Salon.

27. Ibid., I, p. 51.


33. Livret, p. 32, no further trace.


35. Courtauld Institute neg. nos. B69/517–520 for images of all four. Besides the two discussed, Summer is represented by Ceres and Triptolemus, Autumn by Bacchus and Ariadne.


37. Bertrand and Frémin were commissioned jointly for this marble, now in a private collection. After Frémin departed for Spain (1721) and Bertrand had fallen ill, the marble was completed by Jacques Bousseau in 1726. Souchal, French Sculptors, I, pp. 59–60.

38. Pierre Rémy, Catalogue raisonné des tableaux, desseins et estampes, et autres effets curieux, après le décès de M. de Julienne (Paris, 1767) no. 1296: "Vulcan assis, forgeant un casque, à la prière de Vénus, qui est debout derrière lui, & un Amour qui tient une épée. Cinq figures, pour donner l'idée du massacre des Innocents. Ces deux groupes sont de Philippe Bertrand; sur des piédestaux en marquerie d'écaille, avec des bronzes dorés." The bronze Venus does not exactly stand but is airborne in an upright position. It is easy to see that the Cupid could have raised a sword horizontally. Bertrand's composition is in several respects a reworking of Antoine Coypel's scene in the Galerie d'Énée of the Palais Royal. See Guy de Tervarent, Présence de Virgile dans l'art, Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Beaux-Arts, Mémoires XII, fasc. 2 (1967) pl. viii.

39. See the plates in Pierre de Nolhac, La Chapelle Royale de Versailles (Versailles/Paris, 1913), and Souchal, French Sculptors, starting with Bertrand in I, pp. 56–59.


41. Aeneid VIII, 608–625.


43. Elizabeth Cropper, Pietro Testa 1612–1650, Prints and Drawings, exh. cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art (1988) no. 59. In turning to this source, Cornu bypassed French examples, not just Poussin but also the painting by Jean Cotelle le jeune for the "Cabinet des bijoux" of the duc d'Orléans at Saint-Cloud. Scenes from the Aeneid decorated that room as well as the Galerie d'Énée at the Palais Royal, and thus were found to have significance for the Orléans branch quite apart from the royalist application just mentioned. See Tervarent, Présence de Virgile dans l'art, pl. xvi.


45. Ibid., 616, Fairclough trans., p. 103.

46. Ibid., 620–625, Fairclough trans., p. 109. Virgil also mentions the spear that is missing here, the corselet, and the jambs.