

## New Glimpses of Louis XIV's Court Spectacles

by  
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For historians and critics of seventeenth-century French spectacle arts few documents are as rare and precious as the working drawings of Louis XIV's designers. While some are preserved in the archives of his reign, others are scattered among museums and libraries around the world. Most undoubtedly are forever lost, the victims of their own fragility, their lack of status as works of art, and the indifference of bureaucrats. Whatever has been preserved deserves to be studied and treasured. The recent efforts of certain specialists highlight the preeminence of Jean I. Berain (1640-1711), *Dessinateur du Cabinet du Roi* and the artist with principal responsibility for the decorations required by Louis's *Menus Plaisirs*. A principal source of their evidence is the treasures of the royal collection of Sweden.

From the 1670s on until long after Louis XIV's death, the kings of Sweden chose to emulate the French monarchy's achievements in the conception and style of court like and in the grandeur of its royal settings. Their representatives in Paris amassed a formidable documentation for them, covering the designs of Louis's artists, notably Le Vau, d'Orbay, de Launay, Hardouin-Mansart, Le Brun, Le Nôtre, Girardon, Claude III Audran, and Berain. These documents are preserved in the Nationalmuseum of Stockholm, not only the engravings which publicized the official French style throughout Europe but also original drawings, studies, and projects. Their presence in Stockholm and the high level of their quality reflect the tact and judgment of Nicodemus Tessin the Younger (1654-1728), and Daniel Cronström (1655-1719), his correspondent in Paris from 1693 to 1718. Their task was made all the more rewarding by Louis XIV's desire to maintain cordial relations by every means with Sweden and its kings, Charles XI and Charles XII. Besides, their emulation flattered him. In

their own way, these documents remind us of the military and political prestige that France's Swedish allies enjoyed--Gustavus Adolphus' favor, for instance, with Louis XIII and Richelieu, and Queen Christina's during Louis XIV's early reign.

In the 1630s, like other European states, Sweden strove to establish commercial outposts in the New World. 1988 is the 350th anniversary of the founding of New Sweden, a settlement near today's Wilmington, Delaware. As part of the "New Sweden '88" festivities, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of New York, the Nationalmuseum, the Royal Palace, and the Wasasamlingen in Stockholm have mounted "Versailles: The View from Sweden," exhibiting these French materials for the first time in the United States. The catalogue was edited by Nancy Aakre and Joanna Ekman for the Cooper-Hewitt, which functions as the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design. These documents feature gardens, fountains, facades, interiors, tapestries, wall paintings, and furnishings of every sort. Most were intended for Versailles, but some recall projects for its satellites, Marly, the Grand Trianon, the Trianon de Porcelaine, and the Ménageries, and also for the Palace of Saint-Germain. Several even allow us to visualize Tessin's proposed Apollo Pavillion for the end of the canal at Versailles, a sort of museum temple to the Arts and Sciences. Here we also see him tackling the difficulties of remodeling the Louvre. These ambitious concepts tell us a lot about Tessin's confidence in himself as an architect and as an interpreter of French style and also about his status at the French court.

Tessin enjoyed close personal relations with Berain, and Cronström cultivated that friendship in turn. In various negotiations they were able to acquire drawings, the originals or copies, of many of his royal projects. Among those chosen for the Cooper-Hewitt show are commissions for table silver, clock cases, tapestries, carpets and state coaches (with notes about Louis's choice in some matters) Among the documents related to court spectacles is a drawing of the carrousel

of 1685, one of many Tessin acquired from that event and the carrousel of 1686. It appears here with its engraving, produced for popular distribution, presumably by the Parisian print dealer du Rondray. The exhibit also includes a costume sketch by Berain, perhaps for Lully's *Alys* (1676), and costumes for dancers representing architecture (1700). Among Tessin's own projects here is Charles XII's royal stables, with an arena for carrousels; the drawing displayed illustrates a cross-section of the building, from attic to the ground, during the carrousel of 1713.

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Jérôme de La Gorce has chosen to base his study of Berain's career on such drawings as these, instead of on the well-known engravings, an act of courage and determination (*Berain: Dessinateur du Roi Soleil*). Pages 156-57 of this new book list a selection of drawings for operas, mascarades, and carrousels covering a career in the theater that lasted from 1674 to 1706.<sup>1</sup>

La Gorce presents this theater material in the larger context of all of Berain's activities as "Dessinateur du Cabinet du Roi". In passing, he mentions Berain's costume designs for a puppet troupe (pp. 16-17), and for a private production of Racine's *Athalie* at sceaux in 1714 (142-43). His two chapters, "L'Opéra" and "Les Fêtes et les Cérémonies" are of particular interest to theater historians and summarize Berain's court ballet and opera career in more or less these terms. Regarding the former, court ballets were as appreciated in Louis XIV's reign as they had been in the first half of the century. Thus La Gorce records examples of Berain designs for them from 1679 until 1700 at least, as Louis's children and grandchildren reached an age when they could perform. Visual documentation is apparently rare; engravings were no longer produced after 1689 (20). Fortunately what remains is of high quality, especially for *Le Triomphe de l'Amour* (1681), illustrated on pp. 80-81. These costumes, in La Gorce's opinion, are Berain's supreme achievement in

court spectacle (82, 86) and honor his collaboration with the librettist Quinault, the architect Vigarani, Lully, and presumably Beauchamps, Louis XIV's dancing master. Dance historians remember that professional women dancers appeared for the first time in this production. In many ways Berain continued the traditions of the *Ballets de cour* of earlier generations. Throughout his career exoticism continued to please (88, 106, 109) and Berain is credited with reintroducing Chinese motifs, which had not been seen in fifty years (108). Rustic life, old-fashioned provincial ways (110-111), and the streets of Paris (112) could still be exploited for comic effect. His trembling inhabitant of a cold climate in *Isis* (1677) appears on p. 75. Most surprising of all, however, is the persistence of the monstrous and the grotesque, so often a key-note of Carnival festivities throughout the century. In 1683 the Dauphin performed as a giant pair of pants with four masks on his head instead of one, and a hat (112, 116). Berain sketched Harlequin in a similar pair (113), on roller-skates so that the wind, caught in a sail, would move him. A Daniel Rabel could have drawn the bespectacled Polichinelle with the terrestrial globe for a body (113). Even dancing china pots and bowling pins are recorded (116). Thus, on the eve of the Enlightenment, the Lord of Misrule could still assert his dominion occasionally.

La Gorce gives primary attention to Berain's work in the professional theater of opera, which in Louis XIV's France meant the Académie Royale de Musique, over which Lully established his control in 1672. From 1674, when Berain collaborated with Lully for the first time on *Alceste* until the 1682 production of *Persée*, he contributed costume and stage machinery designs for Vigarani's decors. *Phaéton* (1683) is the first opera for which a decor sketch of his own has survived (84). From then on until 1706, he was in charge of all aspects of design production with sometimes two major works to mount a year. La Gorce characterizes Berain's theatrical career thus: From 1682 until 1696, even after Lully's death in 1687, Berain is a conservative, as long as the world of French opera

remains faithful to its origins as a court spectacle. In 1695, after showing signs of creative exhaustion, he discovers new sources of inspiration in works by Colasse and Campra, close to the carnival in spirit. In his final years he reveals a talent for costumes of local color, and for new more fluid illusionist spaces in his decors. The creation of the first *Comédie-lyrique*, *La Carnaval et la Folie* (1703), opens the way for his final experiments with the fantastic.

Here again it is possible to link the *ballets de cour* of Louis XIII's time with Berains's art. To be sure, the creators of those early ballets seldom chose their subjects from the repertory of such tragic subjects as *Alceste*, *Thésée*, *Atys*, *Isis*, *Bellérophon*, *Proserpine*, *Persée*, *Phaëton*, *Médée*, *Circé*, while opera composers did. However, the opera theater was still expected to delight the audience with the settings used in the ballets, namely a heavenly glory, the palace of the gods, a seashore grotto, an enchanted garden, a royal city, and the infernal kingdom of death and black magic. (The history of seventeenth-century literary theory in France cannot neglect this tolerance for a lack of unity of place or character; a unity of style and tone, however, was Berain's supreme achievement.) In fact, La Gorce's evidence suggests that while France borrowed the concept of opera from Italy, early Bourbon court ballets determined its look and to some degree its character. Jupiter, Apollo, Cybele and Venus and other gods appear, sometimes in a glory on a heavenly setting (68, 74, 75, 79, 83, 99). From the mysterious kingdom of the sea come seashore decors (p. 84, 101), giant shell floats (68, 93), Neptune's palace (p. 100), and a naiad (81). Several woodland spirits and river gods appear here (74, 75, 79, 89). The regal settings of heroic myths are an opportunity for ceremonial dress and ideal civil architecture inspired by Palladio and Vigarani that invite comparison with Inigo Jones (70, 72-73, 77, 90, 91). *Amadis* (1684) represents a unique effort to provide this romance of chivalry with authentic Renaissance styles (85, 87). Most appealing of all are Berain's hellish visions of a devil (67), a fury (74), a witch (77), a magician (77),

Pluto (78), Circe and Medea transported in stage machinery (pp. 66 and 98), a marvelous three-headed beast (71), and the palaces of the enchantresses Medea and Armide (89, 91, cf. 12). An unidentified inferno unexpectedly features the gaping maw of hell (95). Its origin, which La Gorce calls Christian, is more specifically Apocalyptic and reminds us that that iconography was probably the source for many of these irrationalities, the three-headed dog in particular. Regarding a sheet of drawings in the Archives Nationales (103), La Gorce speculates that they were conceived for a revival of *Amadis* in 1701, but they are an inheritance from the early 1600s: a mobile dragon, a giant snail (cf. the ballet *La Délivrance de Renaud*, 1617), and an enormous head that can change into a nymph.

Finally it is important to consider, as La Gorce has done, these theater designs in the context of Berain's decorative art. Familiar with a multitude of crafts, he set high standards for the production of his costumes. He favored the use of gold and silver moiré on which dark-colored cloth cut-outs, call "*pretintailles*," could be appliquéd and ornamented with embroidery and paste jewels. A favorite combination, apparently, was silver, orange-pink, and red on black velvet. Tessin reports that he demanded that metal should never be applied on metal, or color on color, and that colors separate gold from silver, and vice versa (86). This information concentrates attention on the prominent use of such panels in these drawings, both in repeated patterns across a skirt or hanging free from beneath a breastplate, cut into points or scallops, and edged with tassels and braiding. We can only speculate on the importance of movement in his concepts, but the use of lace, metallic gauze and ribbon at strategic places such as knee, elbow and wrist, and feathers and *mantes* or "veils" on headpieces, suggests an understanding of the dancer's desire to achieve the magic of weightlessness and suppleness. (Fashion had dressed Louis's court in lace and ribbons in just this way already and La Gorce is right to stress Berain's concession to taste in these costumes.)

Yet another way of looking at the question of Berain's life's work is to consider how the theater designs enriched his other work; there La Gorce's evidence is a revelation. The 1696 tapestries he designed to honor the Grand Admiral of France, Louis XIV's illegitimate son, preserve the splendor of earlier sea fantasies, with their wave-born triumphs, dolphins and hippocamps, floating palaces with shell-incrusted surfaces and wall fountains pouring into the sea (46-47; cf. p. 43, the *Attributs de la Marine* panel, 1689-1692). Moreover, the introduction of theater motifs is Berain's innovation in the arabesques or surface ornaments that have become synonymous with *le style Berain* (34). Engraved examples appear on pp. 32-33. In one arches are supported by four pairs of caryatids, male and female, representing the four parts of the globe, the familiar subject of court ballets. On another, from a series of the four seasons, winter is symbolized by its three zodiac signs and Saturn but also, in this carnival time, by a female dancer and a fool, by musician caryatids, and trophies of character and comic masks, castanets, triangles, pan pipes, bagpipes, horns, cymbals and drumsticks, and love's torch and arrows. By means of this sort of document France exported the decorative arts of Berain to the rest of Europe, establishing a cultural hegemony for the next century. Given Louis XIV's love of theater, it seems appropriate that the achievements of his age be thus perpetuated, and in Berain's particularly spirited style that captured the madness of it all so well.

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Thanks to this letter study, the pre-eminence of Berain during a major period of seventeenth-century French spectacle has been established. Much remains to be done, however, for the period of roughly 1640 to 1674, i.e. Louis XIV's infancy, adolescence and early manhood, a period that enjoyed spectacular machine plays, the first operas in France, the revival of royal carrousels, the finest Versailles fetes, and Molière and Lully's *comédie-ballets*. Henri Gissey (1621-1673) was the foremost designer of that time and preceded Berain

in the post of Dessinateur du Cabinet du Roi. North Americans discovered the beauty of his costumes in the 1984-85 exhibit "Louis XIV and the New World", which included commemorative drawings of the *Noces de Pélée et Thétis* (1654) and of the Carrousel of 1662. But the last full-length study of Gissey was published in 1854! La Gorce's book offers intriguing glimpses of his links with Berain. La Gorce compared a Gissey drawing and a Berain costume for Theseus (1675) on p. 73. The pose is identical; the structure of the costume is the same; only the decorative elements and the headdress are different. La Gorce only identifies the location of the Gissey as the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, but one can speculate that this is one of the Gissey drawings for *Psyché* (1671) he discovered there and most of which he published in *La Revue de l'Art* (#66, 1984, pp. 39-52). The *Psyché* material provides sources for other Berain costumes as well: a blacksmith and a Momus, not to mention a harvest god/gardener, of whom an engraving has always been attributed to Berain (p. 43). A more sour note sounds when La Gorce reveals that Gissey models exist in Stockholm for engravings to which Berain lent his name, namely the celebrated *Cris de Paris*, p. 112. Here is yet another reason for historians to be grateful for the efforts of Nicodemus Tessin the Younger and his emulators and their fascination with the role of the arts in the celebration of absolutism.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup>Promising something even more substantial, La Gorce is preparing to publish a study of lyric spectacles under Louis XIV. This inventory, from which he chooses examples to discuss in the text, covers collections in Berlin, Copenhagen, Cologne, London, New York and Stockholm, to mention only those outside France. Reproduced for the first time in many cases, most appear here in color.



Jean I Berain (1640-1711)

France

*Silver Pitcher*

Pen and black ink, grey wash; 40.2 x 26.7 cm.

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, THC 790

Jérôme de La Gorce has recently identified this sheet as the work of Jean Berain and suggests a date of 1702.



Jean I Berain (1640-1711)

France

*Two Designs for Architects' Costumes*

Sanguine, pen and black ink; grey wash;

22.7 x 15.2 cm., silhouette.

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 17a:81/

1874 and 82b:80/1874



Jean I Berain (1640-1711)

France

*Water Spirit*

Line engraving, watercolor; height 20.5  
cm, silhouetted.

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, THC 3376



Workshop of Nicodemus Tessin the  
Younger (1654-1728)

Sweden

*Carrousel for Charles XII*

Pen and black ink, grey wash; 36 x 51.5  
cm.

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, THC 5320

*Projet de la Pavillon d'Apollon  
à Versailles*



Nicodemus Tessin the Younger (1654-1728)

Sweden

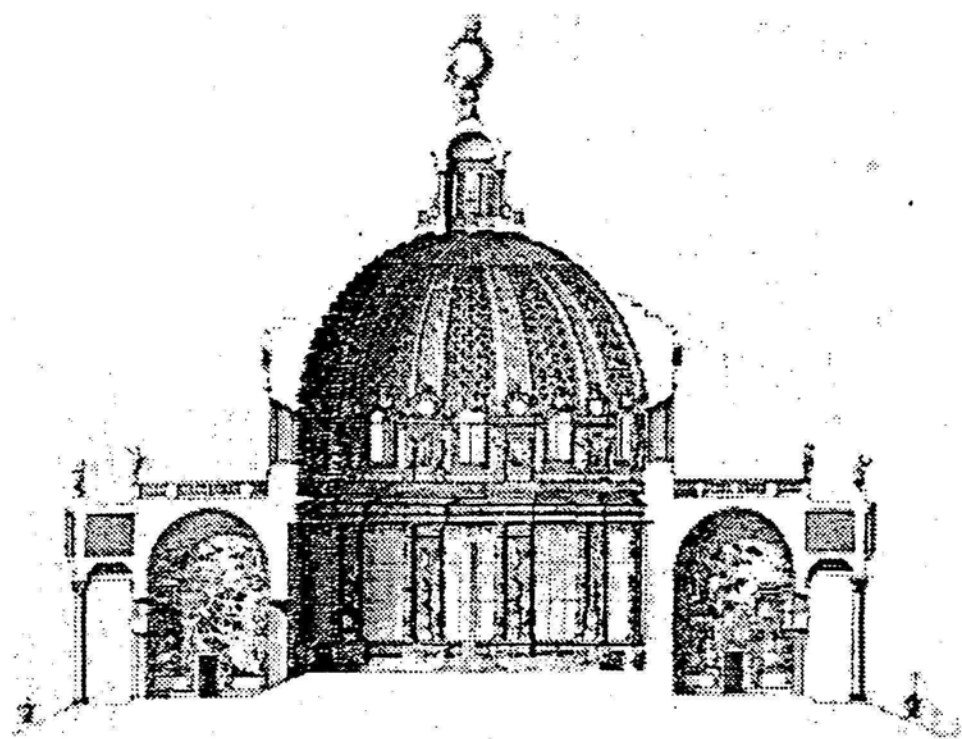
*Versailles: Apollo Pavillion, Project for Façade*

Pen and brown ink; 21.5 x 20.5 cm.

Inscribed: *Project of his Exce Graf N.*

*Tessin till le Sallon/D'Apollon Versailles*

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Celsing 122



Carl Palmcrantz (1694-1715) after Ni-  
codemus Tessin the Younger (1654-1728)

Sweden

*Versailles: Apollo Pavilion, Section*

Pen and black ink, gray wash: 35.4 x 51,3  
cm.

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, THC 1200

Works Cited or Consulted

La Gorce, Jérôme de. *Berain: dessinateur du Roi-Soleil* (Paris: Herscher, 1986).

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