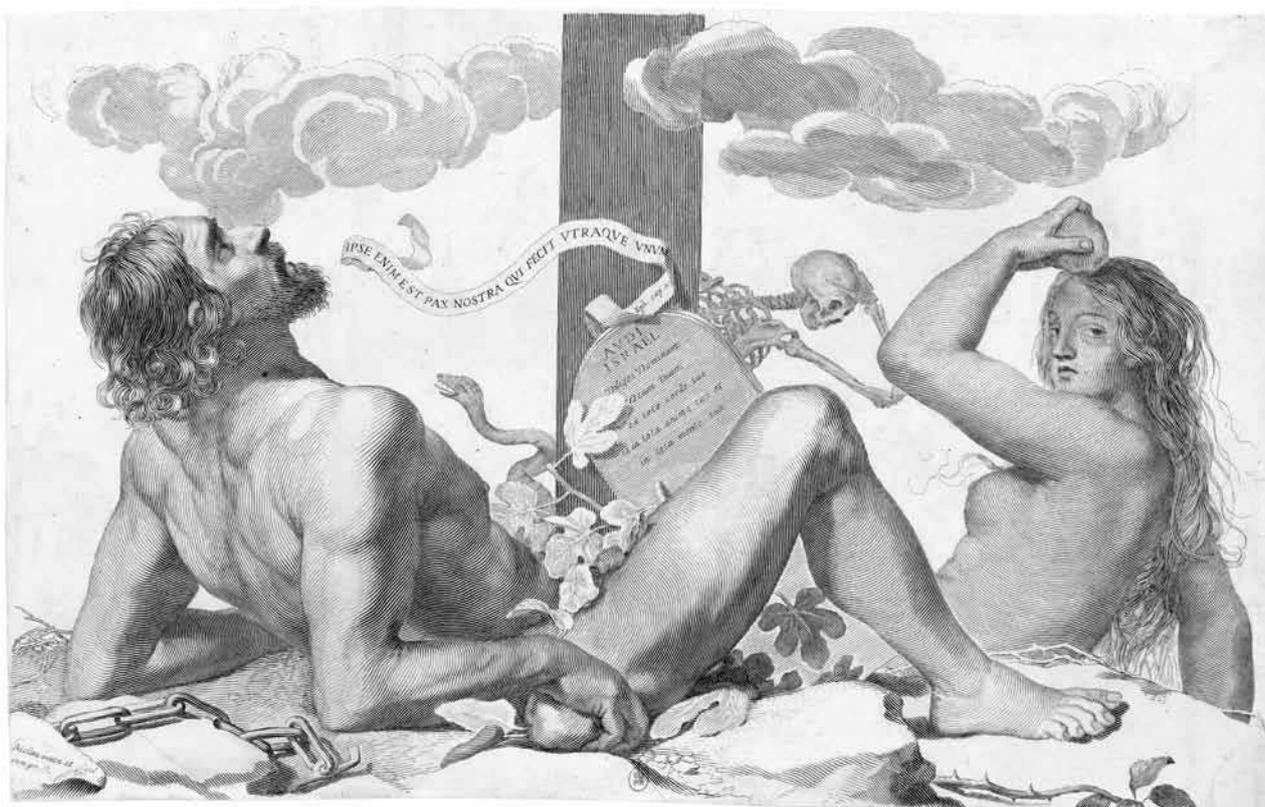


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CHARLES LE BRUN'S CONSTANTINE PRINTS FOR LOUIS XIV AND JEAN-BAPTISTE COLBERT

BY

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In 1666, Louis XIV's first painter Charles Le Brun published two large prints, *The Battle at the Milvian Bridge* and *The Triumph of Constantine*¹ (ill. 1 and 2). The pendants appear twenty years later in the *Quatrième suite de l'histoire des estampes*, a catalog in the *Mercure galant* devoted entirely to prints after Le Brun's original designs for paintings, tapestries, architecture, and sculpture. No doubt written in collaboration with Le Brun, this fascinating history describes in a few sentences the *Battle* printed from three plates and the *Triumph* from four plates « etched and retouched with the burin » by Girard Audran². A few years later, after Le Brun's death in 1690, the images appear again, this time among the 107 copperplates listed in the painter's post-mortem inventory, which

* For her comments on a draft of this paper, my sincere thanks to Dr. Barbara Gaehtgens. I am also grateful to Christina Aube for her assistance and comments.

1. For the bibliography on the two prints, see my catalog entries in Louis MARCHESANO and Christian MICHEL, *Printing the Grand Manner: Charles Le Brun and Monumental Prints in the Age of Louis XIV*, exhibition cat., Los Angeles, 2010, n° 1-2 ; C. MICHEL, « Charles Le Brun and the diffusion of his œuvre through prints », in *ibid.*, p. 42 ; Lydia BEAUVAIS, *Charles Le Brun, 1619-1690*, inventaire général des dessins du musée du Louvre, Paris, 2000, n° 1652-1666 ; IFF XVII, t. I, n° 69-70 ; and Véronique MEYER, « Le Brun éditeur : étude d'après les inventaires du peintre et de sa veuve », in *Curiosité. Études d'histoire de l'art en l'honneur d'Antoine Schnapper*, dir. Olivier Bonfait, Gerard Powell and Philippe Sénéchal, Paris, 1998, p. 103-114.

2. « Quatrième suite de l'histoire des estampes, contenant toutes celles qui ont été gravées d'après les ouvrages de Mr. Le Brun », in *Mercure galant*, November 1686, p. 116-121. Readers of this history would be reminded of Le Brun's privilege and the *raison d'être* of the catalog. « Le peu d'exactitude qu'il a eu à faire valoir les Priveleges que le Roy luy a accordez, de faire luy seul graver ses Ouvrages, avec dessenses à toutes personnes de l'entreprendre sans son consentement, est cause qu'il se trouve encore plusieurs Estampes d'après lui & sous son nom, dont il auroit lieu de desavoüer une partie, à cause du peu de soin que ceux qui les ont executées ont apporté à leur donner quelque conformité avec les Originaux » (p. 95). In addition to describing reproductions approved by Le Brun, the *Mercure galant* article buttressed Le Brun's reputation against the attacks led by Pierre Mignard and supported by the surintendant des Bâtiments, the marquis de Louvois. On the importance and reception of Audran's mixed technique and the French academic printmaking tradition in general, see Louis MARCHESANO, « The *Impostures Innocentes* : Bernard Picart's defense of the professional engraver », in *Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion*, ed. Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob and Wijnand Mijnhardt, Los Angeles, 2010, p. 105-135. On Le Brun's privilege, granted in 1656, see Peter FUHRING, « The market for prints under Louis XIV : Charles Le Brun », in *Print Quarterly*, t. 19, 2002, p. 3-11.



III. 1

Girard Audran after Charles Le Brun, *Battle at the Milvian Bridge*, 1666, etching and engraving.
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.



III. 2

Girard Audran after Charles Le Brun, *Triumph of Constantine*, 1666, etching and engraving.
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

reveals him to have been an ambitious publisher of his own designs³. Within this printed œuvre, the Constantine pendants occupy a noteworthy place, for they are not only amongst the largest reproductions issued after Le Brun's work by him, or for that matter any other print publisher, they are also the first prints with the imprimatur – C. *Le Brun ex. cum priuilegio regis*.

The Constantine prints were executed by the twenty-six-year-old Audran, who would later secure his fame with his famous *Battles of Alexander* (1672-1678), four monumental prints after Le Brun's enormous canvases in the musée du Louvre. Pulled from thirteen copperplates, the *Battles* were published under Le Brun's supervision by the Crown. In all likelihood, Audran would never have been commissioned to reproduce the large paintings had he not proven his potential as a *graveur d'histoire* with the earlier Constantine prints from which, however, his signature is conspicuously absent⁴.

The only names Le Brun permitted to appear beside his own are those of his patrons, Louis XIV and the superintendent of the Bâtiments du roi, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), to whom the *Battle* and *Triumph* are dedicated respectively. What I posit in this paper is that Le Brun's artistic self promotion, expressed by the images's grand scale and references to Rubens and Raphael (which I have written about elsewhere), is cleverly articulated by the two dedications. One dedication Le Brun addresses to the king on account of « the restoration of the age » (*saeculum reparatum*). The other he gives to his greatest ally and protector Colbert, the powerful, bureaucratic overseer of the Crown's patronage, because of « the restoration of all the arts of peace » (*Pacis artes omnes restitutas*). In the final analysis, the pendants present Louis - Colbert - Le Brun as the indissoluble triad by which the fine arts flourish in the new Rome that is now the Gallic empire.

The context of Le Brun's dedications was set with the Crown's efforts to coordinate the training of artists and the production of art under the *Bâtiments du roi*, which officially became Colbert's responsibility on 1 January 1664. Colbert had already anticipated his extraordinary role when he managed the first stage of the massive integration of the arts with the purchase in 1662 of the Hôtel des Gobelins, the site of the future Manufacture royale des meubles de la couronne. No doubt he had a hand in the appointment of Le Brun as its director on 8 March 1663, which officially launched this painter's successful leadership of the army of artisans that served the Crown's desire for splendor and magnificence. It is true, as Bénédicte Gady has recently pointed out, the Gobelins was not the only location of intense artistic production in and around Paris⁵ ; but the numerous workshops consolidated at the Gobelins must have represented for Le Brun and the Crown the flourishing of the arts like no other studio or factory in France.

3. For his publishing activities see V. MEYER, « Le Brun éditeur... » and P. FUHRING, « The market for prints... ». See also Daniel WILDENSTEIN, « Les œuvres de Charles Le Brun d'après les gravures de son temps », in *Gazette des beaux-arts*, July-August 1965, p. 1-58. Wildenstein's list is not a complete catalog, nor does it distinguish between those works published by Le Brun, the Crown, or other print publishers (with or without his permission).

4. For another example of prints published Le Brun without the engraver's name, see P. FUHRING, « The market for prints... ».

5. Bénédicte GADY, « Charles Le Brun directeur des Gobelins », in *La Galerie des Glaces. Charles Le Brun maître d'œuvre*, dir. Nicolas Milovanovic and Alexandre Maral, Paris, 2007, p. 59-64.

The content of Le Brun's dedications is neither entirely new nor entirely surprising. However, the rhetorical strategy by which he, or an advisor, employed the two interconnected texts is rather ingenious. Read together, the inscriptions recall the traditional panegyric about a virtuous ruler who wins a just war and then establishes peace and prosperity. Upon such fertile ground, the story continues, the enlightened hero who mastered the art of war presides over a renaissance of painting, sculpture, architecture, prose, and poetry. The innumerable permutations of this story in panegyrics, dedications, poems, histories, and pictures all rely upon an ancient trope, one used by the late third-century panegyrist Eumenius, who reminds his reader that the « divinities presiding over each of these arts [of war and peace] issue incompatible advice », but when the extraordinary virtue of a military hero reveals itself along with his desire for the liberal arts « not only Roman power but even Roman eloquence flourishes again »⁶.

In 1666, these ideas were presented in the Constantine pendants as well as in Nicolas Loir's reception piece *Allegory of the Progress of the Arts under Louis XIV*, here shown in the form of the reproductive print by Alexis I Loir⁷ (ill. 3). In this allegory, Saturn or Time lifts a curtain, unveiling the reinvigorated sister arts of Sculpture and Painting as they sit before a ruined marble sculpture, representing the return to ancient models in an idyllic French landscape. The young monarch himself appears within a portrait medallion held aloft by Minerva, the patron of the arts and the symbol of wisdom whose gestures clearly present the king as both the protector of the fine arts and their principal subject.

Two years later, these ideas appear again in Charles Perrault's poem on painting, which declaims how « par les beaux arts non moins que par la guerre / La France deviendra l'ornement de la terre »⁸. In this world, France absorbs the lessons of Greece and Rome and surpasses them through Le Brun's activities as both an artist and a manager of artists in the royal workshops at the Gobelins. The flourishing of the arts, however, is only possible because of the king's active participation in domestic and foreign affairs. It follows then, the actions of the king that bring glory to France also provide Le Brun with the kind of subject matter worthy of his talents. According to Perrault, secretary of Colbert's Petite académie, which promoted official iconographic programmes, the most impressive pictures in the history of art are Le Brun's designs for the tapestry set known as *The History of the King*, in which Louis appears in present day reality meeting with diplomats, taking possession of conquered territories, and negotiating peace with the king of Spain. The series of actual tapestries would also include a spectacular view of the king visiting the Gobelins. Presented as an affair of state, Louis enters a large room filled with new treasures, most of which appear to have been designed by Le Brun himself⁹.

6. EUMENIUS, « For the Restoration of the Schools », 19 : 2-4 in *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors. The Panegyrici Latini*, ed. C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1994, p. 170-171.

7. For Loir's reception piece (Versailles, musée national du château) and the related reproductive print, see Philippe LE LEYZOUR and Alain DAGUERRE DE HUREAUX, *Les peintres du roi, 1648-1793*, exhibition cat., Paris, 2000, n° 6 ; and Emmanuel COQUERY, Olivier BONFAIT, Dominique BRÈME et al., *Visages du Grand Siècle. Le portrait français sous le règne de Louis XIV, 1660-1715*, exhibition cat., Nantes/Toulouse, 1997, n° 50. For Nicolas Guerin's description, see *Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, dir. Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel, 2 t. in 4 vol. to date, Paris, 2006-, t. II, vol. I, p. 237.

8. Charles PERRAULT, *La peinture*, ed. Jean-Luc Gautier-Gentès, Geneva, 1992, vers. 209-210, p. 99.

9. For a description of the set see *Tapestry in the Baroque. Threads of Splendor*, ed. Thomas Campbell, exhibition cat., New York, 2007, n° 41-47.



III. 3

Alexis I Loir after Nicolas Loir, *Allegory of the Progress of the Arts under Louis XIV*, c. 1666, etching and engraving. BNF, Estampes.

The notion that Louis is both protector and subject of the fine arts is expressed in more traditional terms by *The Battle at the Milvian Bridge* and *The Triumph of Constantine* where the feats and virtues of this king are inflected through the typological figure of the first Christian emperor Constantine : as was Constantine, so is Louis¹⁰. Such direct parallels between Louis and ancient paragons of kingly virtues were common enough, especially early in the king's reign¹¹. But with both text and image at play, Le Brun deviates from

10. Parallels between Constantine and the French monarchy had to be handled carefully given the Roman Church's historical claim that Constantine had transferred his secular authority to the See of Rome. The French nationalist view, which represented the French Crown as legitimate heir of Roman *imperium*, was advanced in Jean MORIN, *Histoire de la délivrance de l'Église chrestienne par l'empereur Constantin*, Paris, 1630. For a discussion of Morin in the context of Rubens's tapestry designs for the Life of Constantine, commissioned by Louis XIII, see Marc FUMAROLI, « Cross, crown, and tiara : the constantine myth between Paris and Rome, 1590-1690 », in *Piero della Francesca and His Legacy*, ed. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Washington (DC), 1995, p. 88-102.

11. For the shift favoring the direct representation of Louis XIV, rather than the approach of the *exemplum virtutis* through figures such as Constantine and Alexander the Great, see L. MARCHESANO, « Charles

the traditional typological device and does something remarkably unorthodox. While his pictures maintain the primacy of Constantine/Louis, the dedications celebrate not one heroic actor but two, Louis and Colbert, who with their adjacent coats of appear as pendants much like the prints themselves.

To grasp the way these prints elevate Colbert, and by extension Le Brun, is to see Colbert's own meteoric rise as it began shortly before Louis took personal control of his government on 10 March 1661. Colbert's remarkable service to the king in the areas of the judiciary, the treasury, and the fine arts was predicated on the downfall of his rival Nicolas Fouquet, the incomparably wealthy superintendant of finance, whose château at Vaux-le-Vicomte, decorated by his own tapestry manufactory at Maincy, proved him to be the greatest patron of the arts until his arrest on 5 September 1661¹². Fouquet's ignominious defeat was managed by Colbert, who wanted more than simply to eliminate a rival accused of robbing the state coffers and affronting Louis with an extraordinary display of wealth. Colbert demonstrated his utility to the Crown by obliterating the idea that anyone other than Louis might possess the kind of magnificence rightly ascribed to kings and emperors. As such, it was Colbert as the superintendent of all the arts of France who would thereafter assure the celebration of Louis in a manner that echoed the spectacle of Constantine's glorious march into the capital of the Roman Empire.

The Constantine pendants are a reminder of these events because it was Fouquet who had originally commissioned Le Brun to produce a tapestry set depicting the history of Constantine at the very end of the 1650s, that is a few years before Le Brun devoted himself almost exclusively to royal service under Colbert. The story of how *The Triumph of Constantine* and *The Battle at the Milvian Bridge* came to be dedicated to Fouquet's adversary, Colbert, and the king is a story as much about the king consolidating his authority, as it is about the triumph of Colbert and his right-hand man, Le Brun, the manufacturer of the Crown's magnificence as first painter, leader of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, overseer of all the fine and decorative arts, and now, evidently, a publisher of prints.

I. — FROM ORIGINALS TO REPRODUCTIONS

In A. D. 312, Constantine the Great (306-37) established himself as the sole ruler over the western Roman Empire when he and his army defeated the so-called breakaway emperor, Maxentius (306-12). Here, followed by a small crucifix, Constantine bears a javelin and charges across the summit of the Milvian Bridge just outside of Rome toward terrified enemies who have become prey to the trap they had set for the soon-to-be

Le Brun and monumental prints in the Grand Manner » in L. MARCHESANO and C. MICHEL, *Printing the Grand Manner...*, p. 26-35 ; and Édouard POMMIER, « Versailles. The image of the sovereign », in *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past*, dir. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, New York, 1998, t. III, p. 293-323.

12. For a brilliant, if controversial, view of Colbert's career, see Daniel DESSERT, *Le Royaume de monsieur Colbert. 1661-1683*, Paris, 2007. According to Dessert, as Louis relied on Colbert to free himself and his government from Fouquet, Colbert presented himself as the epitome of reason and order against the financial disorder with which the finances were ostensibly misappropriated.

victorious Christian emperor. In the end, Maxentius is the unintended victim of his own treachery. Framed by the bridge's ruined timbers, he grasps the neck of his terrified horse as he plunges backward toward his demise.

In a splendid description of the *Battle*, Le Brun's biographer and longtime assistant, Claude Nivelon, evokes the bloody cruelty of « this combat that turns into a massacre »¹³. Having worked with the painter, Nivelon was as ideally suited to describe the pictures in this manner as he was to convey Le Brun's intentions¹⁴. Thus, in the course of describing the *Triumph*, Nivelon must have been repeating Le Brun when he reminded his readers that soldiers from Rome and other civilizations sometimes received a fee for each head of an enemy they presented to their leaders. On the bridge, in a scene recalling one from the Column of Trajan, a proud rider eagerly holds out to Constantine the head from one of the bodies sprawled beneath them. Another rider, galloping in the center of the picture, cradles his prize inside his shield. And just above the royal coat of arms the most terrifying episode foreshadows what will soon become of Maxentius. In a moment of grotesque efficiency, a soldier clenches between his teeth the hair of a severed head and uses both hands to decapitate his next victim, a weakened cavalryman who lies pinned beneath his fallen horse (ill. 4). Turning to the *Triumph*, Constantine sits soberly in strict profile atop his chariot ; directly in his line of sight, according to Nivelon, is the most remarkable trophy of the war, the severed head of Maxentius¹⁵ (ill. 5).

Historical sources clearly indicate that Constantine marched into Rome with the head of Maxentius on the day after the fateful battle, but in Le Brun's picture the emperor has just crossed



Ill. 4

Battle at the Milvian Bridge, detail.

13. Claude NIVELON, *Vie de Charles Le Brun et description détaillée de ses ouvrages*, ed. Lorenzo Pericolo, Geneva, 2004, p. 271.

14. Nivelon was responsible for preparing some of the intermediary drawings of Le Brun's original designs for printmakers. See Jules GUIFFREY, « Charles Le Brun, premier peintre du roi », in *Scellés et inventaires d'artistes français du XVII^e et du XVIII^e siècle. Documents inédits tirés des Archives nationales*, Paris, 1884, t. I, p. 118, 132-133 and 145.

15. C. NIVELON, *Vie de Charles Le Brun...*, p. 268.



III. 5

Triumph of Constantine, detail.

through his triumphal arch which was dedicated in A. D. 315, about three years after the entry. This anachronism might be explained by a kind of poetic license, which in rare moments Le Brun defended against the need for absolute historical accuracy if the artist's aim was to convey a higher truth¹⁶. In this case, the symbolic function of the Arch of Constantine telegraphs the outcome of the battle and the honor due the emperor as surely as the trophies carried through the streets of Rome.

There is of course another sense of truth embedded in this composition. Le Brun's profound knowledge of antiquity from his studies in Rome in the 1640s and, presumably, from antiquarian books presents itself in the way he faithfully represented the arch's three barrel-vaulted passageways and articulated its face with four fluted columns, each of which rests on a base decorated with reliefs. As if to make his erudition that much more evident and the textures and details of his historical reconstruction

that much more believable, Le Brun also demonstrates to us the method by which he experienced and absorbed the art of the antique. After accurately copying a small section of the large bas-relief within the arch's central passageway, which is partially visible between the two central columns, he used the « carved » standard bearer at the edge of this relief as a model for a « real » soldier who stands to the right of the horses pulling Constantine's chariot¹⁷ (ill. 6 and 7). Le Brun's transposition of this

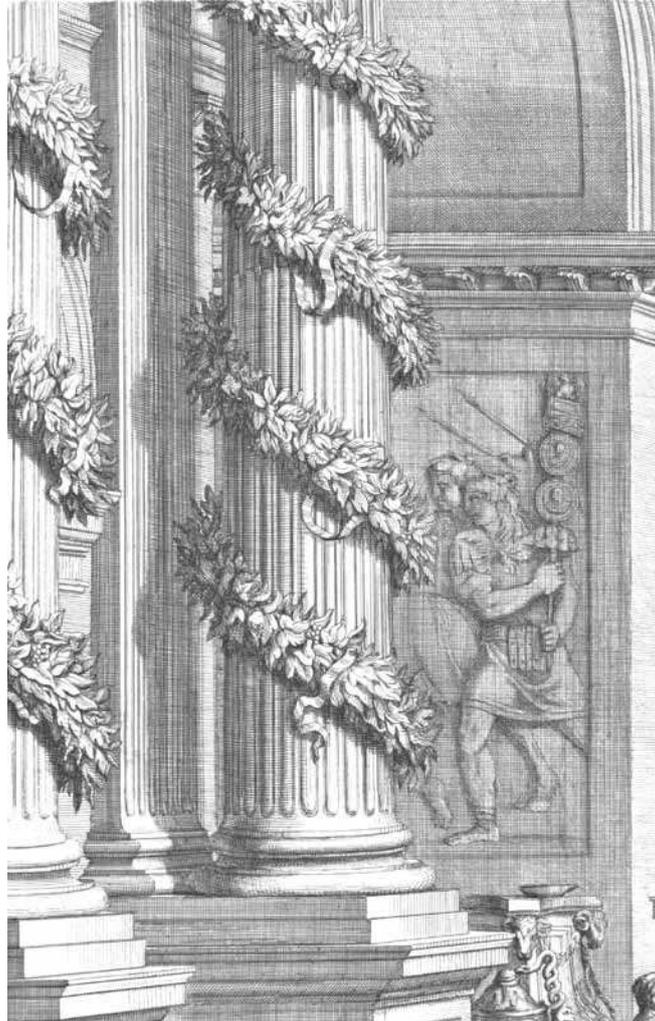
16. On Le Brun's ideas about historical accuracy, verisimilitude, and decorum see his comments regarding Philippe de Champaigne's lecture on Nicolas Poussin's *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* (7 January 1668), in J. LICHTENSTEIN and C. MICHEL, *Conférences de l'Académie royale...*, t. I, vol. I, p. 203-205.

17. The standard bearer in the arch's passageway in the print is in reverse orientation from the figure of the actual relief ; see *Arco di Costantino*, ed. Antonio Giuliano, Milan, 1955, fig. 7. On Le Brun's Roman drawings, see Stéphane LOIRE, « Charles Le Brun à Rome (1642-1645). Les dessins d'après l'antique », in *Gazette des beaux-arts*, Sept.2000, p. 73-102.



III. 6

Triumph of Constantine, detail.



III. 7

Triumph of Constantine, detail.

model points to his concern for a range of theoretical and practical issues including verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*), copying, and imitation, basic components of a classical aesthetics that he defended in theory and practice¹⁸.

When planning the translation of the *Triumph* into printed form, Le Brun took the opportunity to revise one small, potentially embarrassing historical error from the original

18. See for example Le Brun's defensive response to Philippe de Champaigne's criticism that Poussin relied too heavily on the antique; J. LICHTENSTEIN and C. MICHEL, *Conférences de l'Académie royale...*, t. I, vol. I, p. 203-205. A similar criticism was levelled at the *Battle at the Milvian Bridge*; see C. NIVELON, *Vie de Charles Le Brun...*, p. 272.

design, which concerns the oval shield hanging from a pole and facing Constantine and the Chi-Rho, the sign of his Christian faith. In the tapestry, the shield bears the words *Veni, Vidi, Vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered), but in the print it is without text. The woven inscription must have caused Le Brun some distress after the abbé Jacques de Cassanges, a member of the Petite académie, alerted Colbert to the error : « as everyone knows », he wrote condescendingly, the motto in the tapestry was Julius Caesar's and had nothing to do with Constantine. The adviser suggested replacing it with *In Hoc Signo Vincas* (By This Sign, Conquer), from Constantine's vision of the Chi-Rho¹⁹. But Le Brun evidently did not risk drawing more attention to his error for when he commissioned the print, he simply eliminated the motto.

The initial idea for a cycle of Constantine pictures was given to Le Brun at Vaux-le-Vicomte by Fouquet, the superintendent of state finances, who, before his disgrace at the hands of the king and Colbert in 1661, had ordered his painter to create cartoons for an ambitious tapestry set based upon the frescoes designed by Raphael and executed by Giulio Romano and others as fictive tapestries in the Sala di Costantino in the early 1520s. Three of the four fresco compositions were included in the tapestry commission : *The Vision of the Cross*, *The Baptism of Constantine*, and *The Battle at the Milvian Bridge*. The subject of the fourth fresco, *The Donation of Constantine*, which shows the transfer of imperial authority to the Pontiff, was understandably jettisoned by the minister of the French king²⁰. Instead, « Fouquet wishing to have this history complete » ordered Le Brun to expand the subjects from Constantine's life²¹. Hence the designs for this ambitious tapestry set included the *Triumph of Constantine* and the *Marriage of Constantine*, two compositions Le Brun quite sensibly treated in the manner of the Italian frescoes in order to visually unify the pictures²².

While Le Brun's *Triumph* was meant both to complement the frescoes in the Sala di Costantino and to demonstrate that he had fully absorbed the lessons of Raphael, as Raphael himself had absorbed and emulated the antique, Fouquet's original commission evolved into yet another commission that impelled Le Brun to design a battle surpassing Raphael's version. Of the four early sources describing this directive, the most important may be the description published during Le Brun's lifetime in 1686 in the *Mercure galant* and the account found in the memoir of the deceased painter by Guillet de Saint-Georges, the historiographer of the Académie royale who delivered the following words to the academy on 2 May 1693 :

[Le Brun] avait aussi préparé pour Vaux-le-Vicomte le dessein de l'Entrée triomphante de Constantin dans la ville de Rome après la bataille que cet empereur gagna sur Maxence, auprès du pont Milvius, qui est aujourd'hui nommé Pont-Molle. Cette entrée n'a pas été peinte et,

19. Maurice FENAILLE and Fernand CALMETTES, *État général des tapisseries de la manufacture des Gobelins depuis son origine jusqu'à nos jours. 1600-1900*, Paris, 1903-1923, t. II, p. 29, n. 2.

20. On Rubens's representations of Constantine, see M. FUMAROLI, « Cross, crown, and tiara... ».

21. C. NIVELON, *Vie de Charles Le Brun...*, p. 267.

22. « Quatrième suite de l'histoire des estampes... », p. 117. The *Triumph* was made after « un dessein fait pour une Tapisserie qui devoit accompagner la Bataille de Constantin contre Maxence qui est du dessein de Raphaël peinte par Jules Romain, & c'est pour cela que M^r le Brun y a donné des airs de teste, & des sortes de vestemens qui ont rapport aux manières de Jules Romain ; elle est dédiée à M^r Colbert ».

comme M. Le Brun en finissait le dessein, M. le cardinal Mazarin, étant venu se promener à Vaux, fit l'honneur à M. Le Brun de s'entretenir familièrement avec lui sur le grand nombre des excellents ouvrages qu'on voit à Rome, et là-dessus M. Le Brun lui parla de quelques copies qu'il y avait faites et entre autres, il lui montra la Bataille de Constantin contre Maxence qu'il y avait copiée d'après Raphaël. M. le Cardinal résolut alors de faire une épreuve du génie des peintres et voulut que M. Le Brun représentât la même bataille sur ses idées particulières, afin qu'elle accompagnât le sujet du Triomphe dont M. Le Brun se disposait à peindre le modèle. Le respect pour les ouvrages de Raphaël obligea M. Le Brun à s'en vouloir excuser, mais Son Éminence l'ayant ainsi déterminé, il fallut qu'il fit un nouveau dessein de cette bataille, en y changeant quelque circonstance qu'il emprunta des plus fameux historiens qui en ont parlé. La Bataille ni le Triomphe n'ont pas été peints, mais M. Audran en a gravé les desseins²³.

By the time of Mazarin's death in 1661, Le Brun had made some preparatory studies, including a large oil sketch corresponding to the right side of the print, which he would



III. 8

Charles Le Brun, *Battle at the Milvian Bridge*, 1660-61, oil on canvas.
Château-Gontier, musée municipal.

23. Guillet DE SAINT-GEORGES, « Mémoire historique sur les principaux ouvrages de Charles Le Brun » (July 4, 1693), in J. LICHTENSTEIN and C. MICHEL, *Conférences de l'Académie royale...* t. II, vol. II, p. 528-529. For the other three descriptions see « Quatrième suite de l'histoire des estampes... », p. 119 ; Florent LE COMTE, *Cabinet des Singularitez d'Architecture, Peinture, Sculpture et Graveure. Ou, Introduction à la Connoissance des plus beaux Arts, figurés sous les Tableaux, les Statuës, et les Estampes*, 3 t., Paris, 1699-1700, t. III, part 1, p. 160-163 ; and C. NIVELON, *Vie de Charles Le Brun...*, p. 269.

publish five years later²⁴ (ill. 8). Unlike Raphael who followed the account of Eusebius (*Vita Constantini*, 1 : 38) and placed the moment of victory on the shore of the Tiber near the Milvian Bridge, Le Brun adhered to the tradition of the great church historian Carlo Baronio whose research posited a compellingly dramatic version of events in which Maxentius falls victim to his own rigged bridge²⁵.

Because of the format of Audran's *Battle at the Milvian Bridge*, it has been assumed that Le Brun's sketch is a partial study for a larger composition. But did Le Brun from the onset of Mazarin's challenge plan to execute a large horizontal painting that matched the format of the Raphaellesque compositions he designed for Fouquet's tapestry set? Given the few preparatory drawings, as well as a large drawing that in many respects differs from the print and the oil sketch, the evolution of Le Brun's composition is open to question and therefore the evidence



III. 9

François Ragot after Peter Paul Rubens, *Battle of the Amazons*, c. 1662, etching and engraving. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

24. C. NIVELON, *Vie de Charles Le Brun...*, p. 272.

25. For Cesare Baronio and Rubens's oil sketch of the battle see Julius HELD, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens. A Critical Catalogue*, Princeton (NJ), 1980, 1 : 74, (cat. 42). According to M. FUMAROLI, « Cross, crown, and tiara... », Baronio's views were tempered by the French nationalist perspective in J. MORIN, *Histoire de la délivrance de l'Église...*

concerning his original intentions is far from clear²⁶. I want to suggest another possibility : Le Brun's sketch might not be a fragment or portion²⁶ of a horizontal composition, but the better part of a largely complete picture whose verticality distinguishes it from its Italian « rival ». Thus, if the painted sketch is a discrete composition, Le Brun added the landscape and army at the left only after he decided to publish it as a pendant to the completed *Triumph*.

The essential difference between Le Brun's invention of the battle and Raphael's version might be due to Le Brun's historical acuity, as asserted by Guillet de Saint-Georges. But it is well known that our painter turned to Rubens for inspiration when he responded to Mazarin's challenge to measure himself against Raphael. The Flemish master's own version of the *Battle at the Milvian Bridge*, following Baronio's account, was shipped first as an oil sketch (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) to Paris in the early 1620s for a tapestry set that Louis XIII commissioned on the Life of Constantine (Philadelphia Museum of Art). If this vertiginous composition of dramatically falling timbers and bodies inspired Le Brun's invention, it was actually Rubens's *Battle of the Amazons* that presented Le Brun with the forms and textures that make Audran's translation so compelling (ill. 9). Certainly, Le Brun was influenced by the composition of the stone bridge, the rider across the summit (modeled after Raphael), and the tumbling horses and warriors swept by the turbulent waters. And with a little classical restraint, he also appropriated the baroque violence of the Flemish master's gruesome details, including the decapitated body on the bridge and the nearby warrior who protects a severed head within her shield (ill. 10).

Le Brun knew Rubens's *Battle of the Amazons*, having painted his own copy of it, most likely after Lucas Vorsterman's reproductive print of 1623²⁷. It is likely Le Brun also knew of the impressive, monumental copy of Vorsterman's work printed on six sheets and published around 1662 by François Ragot, the printmaker-publisher who fulfilled the insatiable



Ill. 10

Battle of the Amazons, detail, upper right.

26. For the preparatory drawings, see L. BEAUVAIS, *Charles Le Brun...*, n° 1652-1666.

27. Jacques THUILLIER, « Le Brun et Rubens », dans *Bulletin des musées royaux des beaux-arts de Belgique*, 1967, p. 247-268. Hollstein Dutch, t. XXXXIII, Lucas I Vorsterman, n° 100.

demands of French collectors by reproducing prints after Rubens²⁸. Indeed, we might imagine how Ragot's greatest print, along with Rubens's reputation as painter, print publisher, and tapestry designer, fueled Le Brun's print-publishing ambitions and the impressive inaugural publication of the *Battle* after a design for a painting and the *Triumph* after a tapestry cartoon.

In possession of a unique royal privilege that in 1656 granted him control over the copying of his inventions, Le Brun's long-term goal to disseminate the reproduction of his work probably included a plan to publish in the manner of Rubens early on. While Le Brun, of course, would never have the same kind of print workshop as Rubens, he would not need one given that his future positions at the Manufacture royale and the Académie royale afforded him opportunities to work with promising printmakers, many of whom enjoyed advantages under his authority. It seems unlikely, however, that Le Brun's engagement with prints and printmakers was driven only by the example of Rubens, or other artists such as his onetime master Simon Vouet, a great publisher of his own designs. With the evolution of the Manufacture royale as a centralized factory serving the Crown in the 1660s, Colbert, his advisors, and Le Brun must have entered earnest discussions about the significance of prints and their utility as disseminators of the king's possessions. These discussions would culminate in 1670 when Colbert sought to standardize the prints published by the Crown for the suites that would be known as the *Cabinet du roi*²⁹. Thus, with the Constantine pictures thematizing the restoration of the French state and the visual arts, Le Brun as the director of the Manufacture royale presents himself as a producer of magnificent printed *histoires* in monumental format, showing himself to be the instrument by which paintings, tapestries, and now prints flourish.

II. — THE ARTS OF PEACE

In Book X of his late fourth-century history of Rome, the historian Eutropius gives a largely positive summary of the life and character of Constantine the Great³⁰. He begins by stating Constantine « was a man to be compared to the best of Princes » and then accounts for the stability and prosperity of Rome during Constantine's reign in the following way :

Innumerable excellencies of mind and body shone out in him ; he was most greedy of military glory, and had good fortune in his wars ; but so that he did not exceed his activity. For after the civil war [with Maxentius] he overthrew the Goths two [sic] several times, granting them a peace at last ; and fixed in the barbarous nations a strong remembrance of his kindness. He was given to the arts of peace, and the liberal studies. (X, 7)

In addition to praising Constantine's interest in the arts of peace, Eutropius comments on the Emperor's generosity and some of the laws passed by him, delivering a largely

28. The Getty Research Institute's impression, from the collections of the Princes of Liechtenstein, was cut into eight sheets and mounted on two boards. On Ragot, see Alexis MERLE DU BOURG, *Rubens au Grand Siècle : sa réception en France, 1640-1715*, Rennes, 2004, p. 316-322, and Marianne GRIVEL, *Le commerce de l'estampe à Paris au XVII^e siècle*, Geneva, 1986, p. 368-369, 411-412 et 420.

29. On the *Cabinet du Roi*, see the references cited in L. MARCHESANO, « Charles Le Brun... », p. 35, n. 21.

30. EUTROPIUS, *Historiae Romanae Breviarium... or Eutropius's Compendious History of Rome*, trans. John Clark, London, 1774.

positive historical assessment that corresponds in most respects with the earlier panegyric (after A.D. 337) of the Church historian and apologist Eusebius of Caesarea³¹. However, Eusebius's account was at the time less traditional in that it did not simply represent Constantine's victory as a product of virtue and good fortune. For Eusebius, the goddess Fortune was replaced by Faith and the steady hand of the Christian god.

Except for references to the arts of peace, the themes in these early accounts regarding the temporal and spiritual basis of the king's power are echoed in the dedication of the *Battle at the Milvian Bridge* :

To Louis XIV, most mighty king of France, on account of the defeat of impiety through the holiness of his judgments and the force of arms, of the perpetuity founded on the authority of His Majesty, of the renewal of the vigor of our laws, of the establishment of the security of the public welfare, of the restoration of the age, [Le Brun] offers and consecrates the victory over Maxentius happily gained by Flavius [Valerius] Constantinus Caesar, as an everlasting trophy to his virtue and good fortune³².

The commonplace « restoration of the age » follows the panegyric tradition that imposes upon the ruler a framework within which he can legitimize *imperium*, meaning the authority to command in war on one hand and to interpret and execute laws on the other hand. In the final analysis, it is by means of both arms and laws that the warrior hero assures public security and general prosperity.

A full analysis of the dedication to Louis XIV would examine it in light of the king's greed for military glory. Such an analysis would also survey the iconographic responses to the constant concern for security from internal and external threats which Louis addressed by arms and the reform of the judiciary and legal codes. It is enough, however, to say here that the dedication appears in the context of the ancient civil war by which Constantine defeated the breakaway emperor and according to his apologists established a new golden age under the auspices of a Christian deity. As Constantine is a type by which Louis is inflected, so the civil war with Maxentius appears to resonate with the memory of the civil upheavals witnessed in the previous decade, not only the Fronde of the *parlementaires* and the Fronde of the princes (1650-54) but also the so-called « divine rebellion » of the Parisian parish priests (1652-1662). Certainly, the Constantine subject is marked with the imprint of these struggles and counts among the many iconographic examples through which Louis's virtue defeats vice-ridden enemies³³.

31. EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall, Oxford, 1999.

32. *Ludouico XIII Francorum Regi Potentissimo / Ob profligatam judiciorum suorum sanctitate, et armorum vi impietatem, aeternitatem imperij majestatis autoritate fundatam restitutam vim legibus, publicae fortunae assertam Securitatem, et saeculum reparatum, victoriam Flauij Constantini Caesaris de Maxentio feliciter reportatam, in perpetuum ejus Virtuti et fortunae trophaeum offert et consecrat.* John R. T. Holland provided the translation of the inscription.

33. Of the numerous examples regarding Louis's virtues against the vices of the Frondeurs see for example ISAAC DE BENSERADE, *Ballet des Noces de Pélée et de Thétis* (1654). Le Brun's dedication can be read in light of the analysis of Louis's absolutism given by Lucien BÉLY, *La France au XVII^e siècle. Puissance de l'État, contrôle de la société*, Paris, 2009, p. 551-664 ; see also Moshe SLUHOVSKY, « La mobilisation des saints dans la Fronde parisienne d'après les mazarinades », in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, t. 54, 1999, p. 353-374. Richard M. GOLDEN, « The mentality of opposition. The jansenism of the Parisian *Curés* during the religious *Fronde* », in *The Catholic Historical Review*, t. 64, 1978, p. 565-580.

If Louis is another type of Constantine, then what of the arts of peace that are central to the panegyric tradition? The equation in which the arts of war support the arts of peace is only fully established in the *Triumph's* dedication to Colbert :

To that most distinguished man, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, general councillor to the king, controller of the treasury, chief overseer of the royal buildings, and treasurer of the ecclesiastical orders, on account of the king's buildings that have been restored in all places by the aforementioned minister, of the honor done to learning and virtue by royal largess, of the punishing of public brigandage by legal action, of the curbing of immoderate extravagance in the state, of the restoration of all the arts of peace, [Le Brun] consecrates and dedicates the triumph over Maxentius by Flavius [Valerius] Constantinus Caesar, who pacified the entire world, as a pledge of gratitude and an everlasting memorial of obedience³⁴.

This dedication is a striking reminder of Colbert's meteoric rise and his prodigious accomplishments in all matters of state and culture between 1661 and 1666. In effect, he becomes an extension of Louis through the numerous appointments that allowed him to control the finances and the treasury, the judiciary and legal codes, the navy, commerce and industry, academies of arts, letters, and science, and the construction, maintenance, and decoration of the Crown's buildings.

At the beginning of the 1660s, Colbert proved himself to be Louis's trusted collaborator in the investigation, arrest, and trial of Fouquet, who until his disgrace was a paradigmatic patron of the fine and literary arts. Fouquet's supposed misappropriation of state funds and the manner by which the splendor of Vaux-le-Vicomte affronted Louis are recalled in the *Triumph's* dedication in two ways. First, the « public brigandage » must refer to the charges of financial malfeasance against Fouquet, something that Colbert addressed through « legal action » and the establishment of an accounting system during his oversight of the « Treasury ». Second, the « immodest extravagance », curbed by Colbert was epitomized by the splendor of Vaux-le-Vicomte, and would thereafter be monopolized by the legitimate proprietor of splendor and magnificence, Louis XIV³⁵.

In 1662, Colbert acquired the Hôtel des Gobelins in anticipation of his post heading the Bâtiments. At the Gobelins, Colbert not only consolidated the Parisian tapestry workshops, he also brought in the cartoons, paintings, and weavers sequestered from Fouquet's workshop at Maincy. Before the Crown relocated the Maincy workshops in the middle of 1662, only two of the five Constantine compositions had been woven there, the *Vision of the True Cross* and the *Baptism of Constantine*, both after designs by Raphael. The other three cartoons, including the *Triumph* by Le Brun, would have been woven only after the establishment of the new Manufacture royale, where a total of three *Life of Constantine*

34. *Illustrissimo Viro Joan. Bap Colberto Regi ab omnibus Consilijs, aerarij Moderatori, Summo Regiorum aedificiorum Praefecto, et Sacrorum ordinum quaestori / Ob aedificia Principis per ejus ministerum, Ubique locorum reparata, honoratam largitionibus Regijs doctrinam et virtutem, latrocinia publica legibus vindicata, licentiam luxus in ciuitate coercitam, Pacis artes omnes restitutas, / Flauij Constantini Caesaris, orbis terrarum pacatoris triumphum de Maxentio, in grati animi pignus et aeternum obsequij monumentum consecrat et de vouet [devouet].* John R. T. Holland provided the translation of the inscription.

35. For a critical discussion of Colbert's responsibilities and authority over most affairs of state, see D. DESSERT, *Le Royaume de monsieur Colbert...*, p. 169-200.

tapestry sets were completed between 1662 and 1673³⁶. As the first set was begun at Maincy and then finished at the Gobelins it counted amongst the earliest tapestry suites produced during Colbert's ascendancy in royal service, a scenario that allows us to imagine how Le Brun's printed *Triumph* resonates with the entire history of the Constantine commission as the tapestries, the Maincy workshop, and Le Brun moved from the domain of Fouquet to that of Bâtiments and the Manufacture royale.

After having engineered for Louis XIV the arrest of Fouquet in 1661, Colbert's appropriation of the Maincy workshops evolved into a plan that he set for himself « since the end of the year 1662 ». The king's new right-hand man envisioned « erecting many monuments to the glory of the king, such as triumphal arches, obelisks, pyramids, mausoleums ; for there is nothing grand or magnificent that he did not propose to execute »³⁷. In what better way to celebrate the undertaking of Colbert's dream and the flourishing of the arts of peace than with a triumphal entry in which appear a magnificent arch, a public celebration, and a vista of the Capitoline in Rome ? Thus, as a print Le Brun's *Triumph* must have reminded Colbert of his own triumph over Fouquet and his great efforts to transform Paris into a cultural center that vied with the accomplishments of the ancient Romans.

Colbert's role as overseer of the arts had already been eloquently expressed by Pierre-Louis van Schuppen's allegorical print which honors the sitter after his appointment as superintendent of the Bâtiments at the beginning of 1664³⁸ (ill. 11). Colbert's bust, after Philippe de Champaigne, is surrounded by a design of Le Brun's making. Here, the portrait appears to have been woven in the kind of fabric produced at the Gobelins while the symbols of Colbert's virtues are embroidered into the borders by none other than Minerva, the same goddess who in Loir's picture reminds Painting and Sculpture that the king is the protector and the subject of the fine arts. If in the portrait Colbert is somehow brought within the proximity of the king, it is only because of the service and fidelity expressed in later portraits by the eight-pointed cross of the Order of the Holy Spirit, a sign not only of the highest nobility, but also, ostensibly, of unequivocal loyalty to the Crown.

As head of the Bâtiments, Colbert had oversight of the Manufacture royale, but that institution's organizational structure was not officially set until an edict was delivered to Louis in November 1667. It officially conferred upon Colbert what he already possessed de facto, his bureaucratic authority over the institution. And it confirmed Le Brun's 1663 appointment as director. In addition, Le Brun's privileges and responsibilities were clearly laid out. Working under Colbert, he had oversight of all its activities, including the design and production of paintings, decorative arts, and prints. According to the edict, one of his principal responsibilities in conjunction with Colbert was to keep...

[...] la manufacture remplie de bons peintres, maistres tapissiers de haute lisse, orphèvres, fondeurs, graveurs, lapidaires, menuisiers en ébène et en bois, teinturiers et autres bons ouvriers en toutes sortes d'arts et métiers qui sont établis, et que le surintendant de nos bastimens estimera nécessaire d'y établir³⁹.

36. M. FENAILLE and F. CALMETTES, *État général des tapisseries...*, t. II, p. 27.

37. Charles PERRAULT, *Mémoires de ma vie*, intro. by Paul Bonnefon, Paris, 1909, p. 34-35.

38. E. COQUERY, O. BONFAIT, D. BRÊME et al., *Visages du Grand Siècle...*, p. 282.

39. Antoine Louis LACORDAIRE, *Notice historique sur les manufactures impériales de tapisseries des Gobelins...*, Paris, 1861, p. 55 (article IV).



III. 11

Pierre-Louis van Schuppen after Philippe de Champaigne and Charles Le Brun, *Allegorical Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Colbert*, 1664, engraving. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

Although difficult to prove, it is possible that Le Brun intended to celebrate the delivery of this edict and all it implied about the flourishing of the arts with the Constantine pendants of 1666. In fact, there appears to have been a kind of official expectation that the edict would be delivered sometime in that year, instead of 1667. This possibility is raised by the royal almanac of 1666, which clearly shows the king receiving the edict from the chancellor Pierre Séguier while Colbert stands behind him, second from the right⁴⁰ (ill. 12 et XVI, p. 608). The bottom section is filled with symbols of the arts and objects such as the panel, or perhaps copper plate, with an image of Minerva. The most conspicuous work, however, is a product of the Gobelins. At the bottom right, we are shown a section of a tapestry designed after the first painting Le Brun made at the request of Louis XIV

40. Maxime PRÉAUD, *Les effets du soleil. Almanachs du règne de Louis XIV*, Paris, 1995, n° 5 ; what appears to be a unique impression dated 1667 is cited by Préaud.



III. 12

The Establishment of the Manufactures royales, 1666, etching and engraving. BNF, Estampes.

in 1661 (and then immortalized by Andre Félibien as a paradigmatic *histoire* in his essay of 1663), *The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander*⁴¹.

Was it a coincidence that the Constantine pendants celebrating the arts of war and the arts of peace, the first published by Le Brun and amongst the largest after his designs, were issued in the same year the royal almanac (prematurely) commemorated the official establishment of the Manufacture royale ? The ever ingenious Le Brun must have recognized an impending opportunity, especially if he had a hand in planning the almanac in which his work appears so prominently. With the edict for the Manufacture royale on the horizon in 1666, Le Brun appears to have redeployed two designs whose traditional iconography he invested with meaning both old and new, and whose function calls attention to the very real flourishing of the arts under the artistic reign of Louis, Colbert, and Le Brun.

41. On the painting's date see L. MARCHESANO, « Charles Le Brun... », p. 35, n. 13 ; and for my proposal that Gérard Edelinck's reproductive print of the *Queens of Persia* should be dated to about 1675, rather than the customary 1671, see L. MARCHESANO and C. MICHEL, *Printing the Grand Manner...*, p. 58. On the *Battles of Alexander* tapestry set see *La tenture de l'Histoire d'Alexandre le Grand*, dir. Jean Vittet, Philippe Beausant, Pascal-François Bertrand et al., exhibition cat., Paris, 2008.

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