

A HIGHLY IMPORTANT LOUIS XIV CARVED GILTWOOD SIDE TABLE SUPPORTING A MASSIVE LANGUEDOC MARBLE TOP ALMOST CERTAINLY OF ROYAL PROVENANCE, CIRCA 1710.

BASED ON COMPOSITE DESIGNS BY CHARLES LEBRUN AND ANDRÉ-CHARLES BOULLE.

DESCRIPTION

The massive rectangular marble top supported on a giltwood table base of eight legs, *un pied de table à huit pieds*, which is how these tables were very simply described during the reign of Louis XIV. Each corner is formed of winged sphinxes heads heading an 'S' scroll leg terminating in lion's paw feet. Subsidiary turned tapering legs, carved with acanthus and gadrooning, are united by an 'H' shaped stretcher carved with reeding and sunflower heads. The frieze carved with fielded diamond diaper pattern panels below egg and dart moulding and sunflower heads heading the tapering legs and side panels.

MEASUREMENTS:

95¼" long x 38¼" deep x 33" high.

242cms. x 97cms. x 84cms.



COMMENTARY

The very elegant lines of this table belie the extraordinary weight of the top which it is supporting. Its construction is undoubtedly one of considerable technical merit in being able to do so. The fact that it has made it intact to the present day is testament to this.ⁱ

Very few tables of this size have survived. Louis XIV had commissioned, from his early days as an adult King, hundreds of large ceremonial giltwood side tables. At Versailles this became even more important as he had been forced to sell off the silver furniture to pay for his costly foreign wars. The King was constantly updating his palaces and Châteaux. One of the last, the Grand Trianon, known as the *Trianon de Marbre*ⁱⁱ was begun by his architect, Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1642-1708) in 1687. By 1688, he became gravely ill and the later stages were handed over to his brother-in-law Robert de Cotte (1656-1735). The Grand Trianon is distinctive for its wonderful use of stone and Languedoc marble, which came from the quarries in the Southwest of France. It is famous for its colonnade of double Languedoc marble columns designed by the King himself and Robert de Cotte. The King took an interest in every aspect of his buildings and worked closely with his Surintendant des Batiments du Roi, the 2nd Marquis de Louvoisⁱⁱⁱ and his architects.

Virtually none of the furniture in the Grand Trianon survives, with the exception of the famous commodes by André Charles Boulle, delivered twenty years later in 1708 and discussed below. The original furniture from the 1667-8 building will most probably have been similar in design to the series of tables delivered to the Chateau de Marly in 1683. Although completely different in design to the above table, they are worth looking at in so far as they give considerable insight into the processes involved in their supply to the Garde Meuble du Roi for use at Marly. Fifteen tables of various sizes were supplied in all, each with alabaster tops *Albatre de Montahu*. Of these, five were of a very large size 7'6" and, by 1770 the measurements had increased to 7'6". This shows how inaccurate measurements could be in the 18th. Century in the various Inventories compiled during the 18th. Century. The one surviving table, now at Versailles, is actually 8'8"; the green marble top is a 19th. Century replacement.



The Marly table sent to the new *Museum de Paris* (The Louvre) in December 1793 but only arrived at Versailles in 2009 (GME C 239)

In 1770 the four extant tables are described as being old fashioned, *démodée*, and in several pieces^{iv}; so much so that, in order to repair two, it was necessary to sacrifice the other two for parts.^v

In 1683, the King ordered six tables of different sizes for Versailles, the two largest being 7'9" long, costing a total of 3,140 livres^{vi} Here the *menuisiers* (frame makers) are mentioned: Fraissinet, Mathelin, the widow Barbé along with Charmenton. These were paid from 120 livres to 160 livres for each table while the gilder, Dupré was paid 1,620 livres. No mention is made as to the type of top supplied and they are not shown in the *Garde Meuble de la Couronne*. Jules Guiffrey (1886) mentions another twelve tables of different sizes and that they had Italian marble tops for the most part.^{vii} Frédéric Dassas has indicated that this would have cost ten times the whole cost of the table base.^{viii}

This lack of listing in the 1718 Inventories is very strange and may indicate that, after the death of Louis XIV in 1715, a lot of furniture was discharged elsewhere. An example of one long table with a white marble top is painted in the large group portrait by Nicolas de Largillière of the six generations of the Bourbon dynasty painted in 1709^{ix}. Louis XIII and Henri IV are represented in bronze busts while the King sits in an armchair at the front, the Grand Dauphin at his right shoulder and his son the Duc de Bourgogne to the right of the picture while to the left, his eldest son, the Duc de Bretagne with his governess the Duchesse de Ventadour. His younger brother, not yet born, would become Louis XV^x. The table is mostly obscured by the figures in front of it but it is of a transitional style and, what would later be described, as in the Régence taste. In fact it firmly belongs to the end of the reign of Louis XIV and is carved with a similar shell carved out of the solid frieze. It and the panelling above display a lightness of design with which the Grand Dauphin was very much associated. A quiet taciturn man, he was a great patron of the arts and music and a passionate rider to hounds. He had his apartments at Versailles, of course, and a wing at the Grand Trianon. But his greatest building achievement was the new Château de Meudon right next to the old one bought for him from the Marquis de Louvois by the King.^{xi}



While there is no specific design yet discovered for our table, a significantly close description of a very similar table is to be found in the Inventaire de Fontanieu/Tourelle of 1718. This Inventory had been begun by the father of the Marquis de Fontanieu and completed by his son when he became the Controleur Général de Meubles de la Couronne . He held the post from 1718 until his death in 1767. Charles Tourelle was the Garde Général de Meubles. There are eight volumes in all dealing with everything from the Batterie de Cuisine to the jewels and hard stone treasures of the Maison Royale. Vol. III contains the furniture. In the second section are 1,625 pieces of furniture.^{xii}

Vol. III, ; no 721

'Une table de marbre de Montahut, longue de cinq pied sur trois pieds une pouce de large portée sur un pied de bois sculpté doré représentant quatre termes d'Harpies et une coquille au milieu du devans.'

'A table of Montahut marble, length five feet three inches by three feet one inch on a base of gilded carved wood representing four harpy terms with a shell in the middle of the front.'

A Harpy was another word for a sphinx. Peter Hughes has suggested that, rather than harpies,

'sphinx heads would be more flattering to the monarch by suggesting that the possession of arcane knowledge on his part. They would also link up, mythologically, with the lion paw feet below.'^{xiii}

Of course this is not the same table, as it has an alabaster top of the same type as on the large series of tables delivered to Marly in 1683 It is also considerably smaller. But, the design is very specific. The problem with the *Inventaire* is that it is incomplete and there may well have been a series of tables of the same design.^{xiv}

There is another table : Vol III, No. 901 :

Une table de marbre de Languedoc rouge et blanc portée sur un pied de grands consoles ailés et termine en pathes de lions. Longueur quatre pieds dix pouces, largeur de deux pieds, hauteur de deux pieds six pouces.

'A table of Languedoc marble red and white supported on a base of large consoles angled and terminating in lions paws. Length four feet ten inches, height two feet six inches.'

Yet another table, no. 70, has a Languedoc top and a base with *Griffons ailés* (set at an angle).

While no single design for our table has yet been found, the closest in form is that of a carved giltwood table in the Metropolitan Museum in New York . The catalogue entry describes it as being after a design by Charles Lebrun (1619-1690), circa 1685^{xv}. It is an altogether heavier table and the original was probably executed in silver for the Galerie des Glaces at Versailles.



Giltwood Table with Double Harpies. C. 1700
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Our table, stylistically, belongs to the very end of the reign of Louis XIV, when lighter designs, free from the previous heavier forms, were giving way to much more curvature. Among the earliest pieces of furniture made like this are the two famous commodes delivered to the King at the Grand Trianon in 1708. The very distinctive features of them are the four ormolu female winged sphinxes', or harpies', heads which adorn the corners and terminate in lion's paw feet. Here the design of the corners is followed almost exactly on our table, although carved wood limits the fluidity provided by gilt bronze.

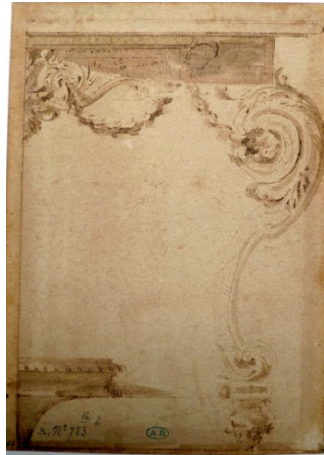
'aux coins sont quatre sphinx ailés aussi de bronze doré terminés d'une patte de lion avec feuillages'.



The weight of the carcasse and drawers of the commodes is born on four spirally fluted feet. Here the design echoes that on the Metropolitan table where the weight needs to be born on straight rather than curved supports, which have an inherent weakness. The commodes are listed in the Inventaire de Fontanieu/Tourelle de 1718 as Nos. 665 & 666.^{xvi} and in the Garde Meuble records for 1708 and 1709 when payments were made for them.^{xvii}



Although these commodes are made of tortoiseshell and brass with bronze mounts, the influence of A.C.Boulle is clearly visible in our giltwood table. Indeed, Calin Demetrescu^{xviii} has stated that, in the case of carved giltwood tables, it is the mounts which influence the carved elements to a considerable degree. Another table design by him of a cabriole leg for a centre table might appear to have been made in carved wood. In fact, the acanthus leaves and garlands were made of ormolu.^{xix}



These commodes are the only known surviving pieces of furniture from the Grand Trianon, simply because, at the Revolution, almost everything was dispersed in a series of sales. Some exceptional pieces were sent to the Louvre for its new 'Musée Public', including these commodes. The 1718 Inventory is frustrating in that it does not indicate where anything was. The newly appointed Surintendant des Batiments du Roi, the Duc d'Antin (1664-1736) describes them on a visit to the Grand Trianon^{xx}

A design by Boulle, which combines both marquetry and carved elements, bears out the possibility that he was doing both. Nevertheless, it is very unlikely that he was doing the work of the carvers and gilders in his own workshop as virtually nothing of that kind appears in the inventory after his death in 1735.^{xxi} He did, however, publish a number of his own designs in *Nouveaux Dessins de Meubles et Ouvrages de Bronzes et de Marqueterie*, 1700-1720.^{xxii}



It is clear from this drawing by Boulle that this could not have been entirely made of marquetry with gilt bronze mounts, as some of the elements appear to be carved wood.

Another table, closer in design to our table, was in the René Fribourg Collection until sold in 1963.^{xxiii}



Although Boulle was the *ébéniste du Roi*, with his workshops in the Louvre, he was still bound, in part, to the strict ordinances of the Guild system. He certainly made his bronze mounts, but he did not stray into the territory of the *Menuisiers*, the carvers of frame furniture such as seat furniture, though he must have had a close relationship with them.

This table considered by Calin Demetrescu as having been made in André-Charles Boulle's workshops is shown below^{xxiv}.



THE USE OF MARBLE DURING THE REIGN OF LOUIS XIV

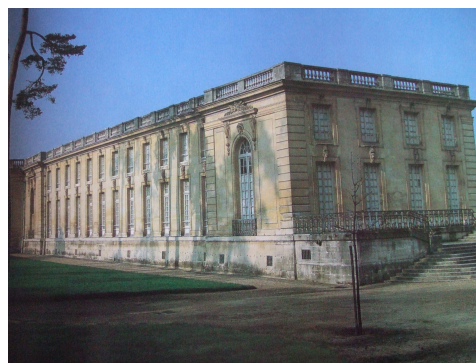
Most visitors to the Château de Versailles scarcely notice the immense amount of marble displayed throughout the building in the forms of panelling, columns, chimneypieces and table tops. Yet, this is by far and away the greatest expense incurred throughout the course of its building during the reign of Louis XIV. Indeed, after the Pope, the King was the greatest consumer of marble in the world. Until recently, little had been written on the subject^{xxv}. This has been amply rectified by Dr. Sophie Mouquin in her recent magisterial publication, *Versailles en ses Marbres*.(2018).^{xxvi}

In the use of marble, Louis XIV expressed a political statement of power and prestige; literally, *une politique royale en marbre*. The King brought marble from all parts of his Kingdom, some from the *Pays-Bas méridionaux* (modern Belgium) and some from Italy. But, by preference, most marble was sourced from French quarries which were the property of the monarch. There were, extraordinarily, no Italian carvers. The only carver not born in France but in the Low Countries was Jérôme Derbais (1644-1712). It is a measure of the sheer cost of marble in the late 17th. and 18th. Centuries that, at his death he left a fortune of 600,000 livres^{xxvii} Sophie Mouquin estimates that between 1661 and 1745 the Royal Household spent more than 12 million livres^{xxviii} on marble and that was in block, column and sliced (*tranche*) form, even before the carver got to working on it. The principal carvers, often going from father to son, were Le Grue, Misson, Cuvillier, Derbais, Tarlé and Trouard.

From the beginning of his reign the provision of marble for his buildings was somewhat disorganised and mostly concentrated in the hands of various merchants with leases (*brevets*) from the Crown. But, from 1660, Banker/merchants such as Jacques Beuf and, far more importantly, Pierre Formont took over. This latter figure was able to provide a ready supply of marble to the King under a virtual monopoly controlled by the *Surintendant des Batiments du Roi*, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683). He was an extremely able administrator and the King had the added benefit of extended lines of credit. The Languedoc quarries which produced the famous red and white marble. and also Griotte, presented a considerable financial risk to Formont. The logistical difficulty in transporting the marbles to Paris was immense; overland was virtually impossible. Fortunately the newly built *Canal aux Deux Mers* (Canal du Midi), a remarkable feat of engineering, enabled the marble to be got to the Atlantic coast to be shipped up France's western sea board, down the Seine and thence to Paris. There was, of course, the risk of wreck and, in some cases, theft by Barbary pirates^{xxix}. But there appeared to be plenty of marble in the *magasins* in Paris to satisfy the large amounts required for that quintessential Languedoc marble building, the Palais de Trianon.^{xxx}

When Colbert died in 1683, Formont's fall was swift^{xxxi}. The 2nd. Marquis de Louvois took over as Surintendant des Batiments du Roi. Louvois detested Protestants, such as Formont, and was largely responsible for the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685^{xxxii}. While Louvois was a consummate Minister of War, he was not particularly interested in the administration of quarries. There then follows control by a number of *marchands marbriers* appointed by Louvois who constantly bickered among themselves. This, together with obstruction by the Directors of the Canal du Midi meant that marble from the Languedoc quarries was just not getting to the Paris workshops. This may well account for the very different style of the wing, known as the *Trianon sous Bois*, which is entirely in stone. Hailed as a precursor to the neo-classical style of the next century, it was probably more likely to have been born out of

expediency rather than original intent. There was just not enough Languedoc marble freely available.



The Trianon sous Bois

The Grand Trianon by Pierre-Denis Martin.
Note the stone wing to the far right

After Louvois' sudden death in 1691, the Marquis de Villecerf nominally served as joint Surintendant and things were no better. In 1700 Jules Hardoin Mansart, the King's principal architect took over as Surintendant^{xxxiii}. He was forced to implement proper regulation of the commerce in marble and, in particular, the marbles of Languedoc from the quarry known as the Grand Incarnat. The marble masons, Marc François de Lassus and Claude Félix Tarlé were dispatched to carry out inspections. This continued with the next Surintendant, the duc d'Antin. Madame Mouquin speaks also of the difficulties, despite the abundant quantity of marble available, to send sufficient quantities for the needs of the King in his buildings^{xxxiv}. It was vital that marble of the best quality be sent to the '*magasins de marbres*'. The quarry of the 'Grand Incarnat de Caunes' became known as '*La Carrière du Roi*', 'The King's Quarry' and therefore, from 1700, this beautiful marble was for the exclusive use of the King.



CONCLUSION

It is this exclusivity in its marble top, which is undoubtedly original, that allows a Royal attribution, in addition to the close design comparison with the table mentioned in the 1718 Inventory:

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'Une table de marbre de Montahut, longue de cinq pied sur trois pieds une pouce de large portée sur un pied de bois sculpté doré représentant quatre termes d'Harpies et une coquille au milieu du devans.'

a base of gilded carved wood representing four harpy terms with a shell in the middle of the front.'

Further research in the actual records of the *Garde Meuble du Roi* for the period may yet reveal all the crafts people involved in the making of this superb table^{xxxv}.

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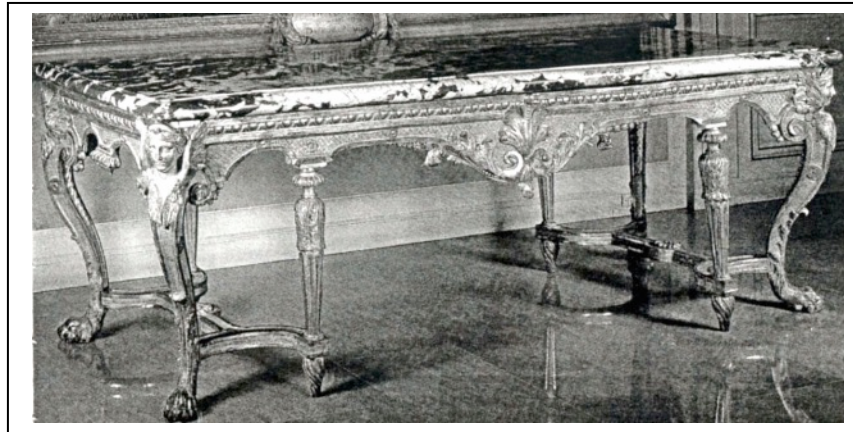
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ⁱ The table was with the dealer, Maurice Ségoura, some thirty years ago and is illustrated in a contemporary catalogue. No previous provenance is indicated other than 'private collection'. With thanks to Calin Demetrescu for this image..



ⁱⁱ This replaced the Trianon de Porcelaine which the King had built in 1670 and covered in Dutch Delft. Not only had this exquisite little palace proved too small, but the blue and white facings could not stand up to the severe winters of the time. The structure of the building was retained and the rest of the building constructed on the foundations of other pavilions. This accounts for the rather eccentric shape of the Grand Trianon.

ⁱⁱⁱ Francois-Michel le Tellier. 2nd. Marquis de Louvois (1641-1691) He was Surintendant from 1683 to 1691.

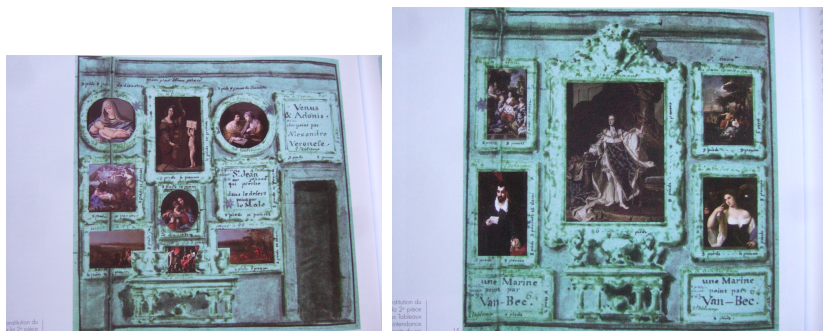
^{iv} See : *Château de Versailles raconte Le Mobilier National*, ESFP, Paris 2011, p. 52

^v Archives Nationales O1 3622

^{vi} Archives Nationales O1 2984

^{vii} It is possible that, by 1784, these had been moved to the Cabinets des Tableaux at Versailles. These were a part of the Surintendance des Bâtiments du Roi located to the left of the main Château.

See: Stéphane Castellucio, 'Le Cabinet de la Surintendance des Bâtiments du Roi à Versailles', *Versalia*, No. 12, 2009.



^{viii} Private discussion with Frédéric Dassas, Current Curator in Chief of Decorative Arts at the Louvre

^{ix} Wallace Collection, London

^x In 1709, the succession seemed well assured in three generations. But 1712 proved to be a terrible year; for three Dauphins died within the space of 11 months of smallpox, measles and a hunting accident, in the case of the Duc de Bourgogne. The Duc d'Anjou, the future Louis XV, then a year old, was saved by his governess who hid him away.

^{xi} Apart from the central section and the basement story, nothing remains. See: Fig. 47, Mouquin op.cit. Hubert Robert: *La Démolition du Château de Meudon, 1806*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

^{xii} The first section has 377 mirrors ; the second : 257 chandeliers and girandoles ; the fourth section 108 lacquer pieces.

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- ^{xiii} Peter Hughes: 'The Grand Trianon Commodes by André-Charles Boulle and Their Influence', *The Furniture History Society*, Vol. XLIII (2007), pp. 195-203. Peter Hughes is a former Director of the Wallace Collection, London.
- ^{xiv} Albastro a Tartaruga (tortoise) comes from Iano, Montaione, Tuscany. See: Monica Price: *Decorative Stone, The Complete Sourcebook*, Thames & Hudson, London 2007; p.52
- ^{xv} This is probably based on the design in the Louvre illustrated in: Jules Guiffrey, *Comptes des Batiments du Roi sous le Règne de Louis XIV*, (Paris, 1881-1901.
- ^{xvi} Payment for them is to be found in the Archives Nationales, Paris in the Garde Meuble records O¹ 3336, fo.196.
- ^{xvii} P. Verlet, 'Notes sur l'Ancien mobilier du Château de Versailles,' *Revue de l'Histoire de Versailles*, (1937), pp.170-173.
- ^{xviii} Private discussion with M. Demetrescu, former Curator in Chief of Decorative Arts at the Louvre. See: three articles by him published in the *Dossier de l'Art*, December 2014, No. 224, pp 4-59.
- ^{xix} Jean Nérée Ronfort : *André-Charles Boulle, Un Nouveau Style pour l'Europe*, Exhibition Catalogue, Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt 2009, pub. Éditions Samogy ; Catalogue no.53
- ^{xx} See : J.J. Guiffrey, *Le Duc d'Antin et Louis XIV*, (Paris, 1869), p.18.
- ^{xxi} See Jean-Pierre Samoyault : *André-Charles Boulle et Sa Famille*, (pub. Librairie Droz, 1979). This published a full inventory of the contents of Boullés' house and workshop after his death in 1732.
- ^{xxii} See; Mia Jackson, current Curator at Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire: 'Boulle Auteur, Éditeur et Revendeur d'Estampes, *Dossier de l'Art*, December 2014, No. 224, pp. 82-104.
- ^{xxiii} Sotheby's New York, René Fribourg Collection VII, 17th. & 18th. October 1963, Part 2, Lot 666.
- ^{xxiv} Calin Demetrescu: 'Les Meubles Boulle, entre Innovation et Conservatisme', *Le Dossier de l'Art*, No. 24, pp.20-29 ; p.22.
- ^{xxv} See Bibliography: Bruno Pons, Pierre de Nolhac, Alfred Marie, Fiske Kimball, Pascal Julien, Geneviève Bresc-Boutrier and Christian Boulez.
- ^{xxvi} Sophie Mouquin: *Versailles en Ses Marbres*, Pub : Arthena, Paris 2018
- ^{xxvii} There were 24 livres to the English pound during the 18th. Century which makes £25,000. This is the equivalent of £7.5 million in today's spending terms.
- ^{xxviii} Between 150 and 200 million pounds in today's money.
- ^{xxix} Mouquin : op. cit. (pp. 84-93).
- ^{xxx} The *vert de Campan* also came from close to that area in the Pyrenees.
- ^{xxxi} He probably also died in that year.
- ^{xxxii} Perhaps the most famous of the Protestant émigrés was Danile Marot who went first to Holland and then to England with William III. A great many silversmiths went to England, which accounts for the French styles.
- ^{xxxiii} The Marquis de Villecerf served Surintendant from 1691 to 1699 when he died. Mansart served from 1699 until 1708, the first non aristocrat to do so.
- ^{xxxiv} Mouquin : op.cit. pp.66-71.
- ^{xxxv} They are virtually impenetrable, with everything mixed up all together. Wages and accounts for the various buildings of the King occupy a huge part.