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Sébastien Leclerc's Preparatory Drawing for the View of the Hall of Mirrors (1684): A Reassessment

Antoine Gallay

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Sébastien Leclerc's Preparatory Drawing for the *View of the Hall of Mirrors* (1684): A Reassessment

Antoine Gally

The *View of the Hall of Mirrors*, initially published as the frontispiece for Madeleine de Scudéry's *Conversations nouvelles sur divers sujets* (Paris, 1684), is now among the most famous prints by Sébastien Leclerc (1637–1714; fig. 194). While it was without doubt a minor work within the engraver's rich career, its documentary value has been widely emphasized since the beginning of the twentieth century: the print is regarded as one of the first known representations of the Versailles gallery, completed shortly after publication of the print. It thus offers a view of Charles Le Brun's (1619–90) early design for the ceiling on the theme of Apollo and provides information regarding the original furniture – especially the silver pieces that were entirely melted down in the Royal Mint in the early 1690s.¹

In the second volume of his *Histoire du château de Versailles sous Louis XIV* published in 1911, Pierre de Nolhac reproduced, as a frontispiece of his own book, a drawing supposedly made by Leclerc in preparation for the print.² A century later, in 2008, the very same drawing was acquired by the Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, and its 'exceptional interest' was immediately stressed (fig. 195).³ Since then, it has been reproduced in several publications; it has also been displayed in New York in 2018 and three times in Versailles, most recently during the 2021 exhibition 'Dessins pour Versailles, vingt ans d'acquisitions'.⁴ On all these occasions, the attribution to Leclerc was repeated without ever being questioned, although it was eventually noticed that the drawing is similar to the third or fourth

state of the print.⁵ The latter observation leads me to suggest a quite different conclusion: the drawing is in fact most certainly a later copy of the print.

There are four known states of the print.⁶ The first one is before lettering. The second one is the version with the legend *CONVERSATIONS*, published in the *Conversations nouvelles* (fig. 194). For the third one, Leclerc erased the legend and made three other minor changes on the plate: he added a figure behind the man with a large cloak, and, under the arch near the entrance of the gallery, another highly shadowed figure behind the man holding his hat; he also enlarged the wig of the pointing man in the foreground (fig. 196). Finally, for the last state, many parts of the print were reworked in order to be darkened, and a new legend was added, reading *LA GRANDE GALLERIE DE VERSAILLES*. The Versailles drawing includes all three details later added by Leclerc in the third state. Hence, if it were a preparatory drawing, it would mean that the printmaker engraved a faithful reproduction of the drawing, except for these details. Then, after the print was published in the *Conversations nouvelles*, he would have added the details to the plate that he had suppressed earlier, in such a way that the print would have looked exactly like the drawing he initially made. This would be very unusual. What is much more likely is that Leclerc made a first version of the print, and then later decided to make some minor improvements on the plate, maybe with the intention to publish it again, as is suggested by the change in the lettering. Hence, the Versailles drawing was completed after Leclerc's changes on the print,

1. For early references to the print as evidence of Louis XIV's silver furniture, R. Schneider, *L'art français: XVII^e siècle (1610–1690)*, Paris, 1925, p. 169, fig. 93; P. de Nolhac, *Versailles et la cour de France: Versailles, résidence de Louis XIV*, Paris, 1925, fig. p. 225 and p. 273, note 1; C. Hermarck, 'Claude Ballin et quelques dessins de pièces d'argenterie du Musée national de Stockholm', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, xli, 1953, p. 115, fig. 9.
2. P. de Nolhac, *Histoire du château de Versailles: Versailles sous Louis XIV*, Paris, 1911, unpaginated, without mention of the drawing's whereabouts.
3. P. Arizzou-Clémentel, 'Musée national du château de Versailles et des Trianons. Enrichissements et acquisitions de l'année

2008', *Versalia*, xiii, 2010, p. 22.

4. *Dessins pour Versailles: vingt ans d'acquisitions*, edited by E. Maisonnier, Ghent, 2021, pp. 202–05, no. 64, with bibliography. See also *La Revue des musées de France*, lxi, no. 2, 2009, p. 68, no. 25; Arizzou-Clémentel, op. cit., pp. 22–23, fig. 29; *Visiteurs de Versailles: voyageurs, princes, ambassadeurs, 1682–1789*, edited by D. Kisluk-Grosheide and B. Rondot, Versailles, 2017, p. 26, no. 6; *Visitors to Versailles from Louis XIV to the French Revolution*, edited by D. Kisluk-Grosheide and B. Rondot, New York 2018, p. 262, no. 136.
5. *Dessins pour Versailles*, op. cit., p. 205.
6. M. Préaud, *Inventaire du fonds français: graveurs du XVII^e siècle, Sébastien Leclerc*, Paris, 1980, II, p. 279, no. 3061.



194. Sébastien Leclerc, *View of the Hall of Mirrors*, from *Conversations nouvelles sur divers sujets* (Paris, 1684), state II/IV, etching and engraving, printed borderline 143 x 90 mm (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

which means that it can only be a copy.

The drawing is not the only known copy of the *View of the Hall of Mirrors*: there is another one in a private collection, which, in contrast to the Versailles drawing, differs from the print in several details.⁷ It is definitely

a copy – although a quite fanciful one – because the dry handling of the pen and highly finished manner are absolutely dissimilar from Leclerc's style. In comparison, the case of the Versailles drawing is more ambiguous: the lively and precise manner

7. *Quand Versailles était meublé d'argent*, edited by C. Arminjon, Paris,

2007, p. 51, fig. 38 and p. 233, no. 2.



195. Anonymous artist after Sébastien Leclerc, *View of the Hall of Mirrors*, brown ink on paper, 136 x 91 mm (Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon).

is indeed not so far from Leclerc's own. There are two arguments, however, against an attribution to Leclerc. First, the drawing entirely lacks the general effect of the print. In the latter, the distribution of the shadows on the various groups of people produces

small masses that offer a visual rhythm, a technique that Leclerc was exceedingly skilful at, in his prints as well as his drawings.⁸ Second, it is very unlikely that the printmaker made such a faithful copy of his own work. For example, when he had to engrave a new

8. A. Gallay, 'Sébastien Le Clerc (1637–1714). Entre arts et sciences: les ambitions d'un graveur au siècle de Louis XIV',

unpublished PhD thesis, University of Geneva, University Paris Nanterre, 2021, pp. 332–34.



196. Sébastien Leclerc, *View of the Hall of Mirrors*, state III/IV, etching and engraving, printed borderline 143 x 90 mm (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

version of his *St Augustine Preaching* because the first one was highly sought-after by collectors and had become exceedingly rare, he chose to produce an entirely different composition.⁹ It can therefore be assumed

that the Versailles drawing is not Leclerc's own work but that of another artist who remains unknown.

The only genuine preparatory drawing for the *View of the Hall of Mirrors* is in the collection of the

9. Compare Préaud, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 38–39, no. 13 and II, p. 12–13, no. 1358. Leclerc's son explains the reason for this new version; Paris, Archives du Séminaire Saint-Sulpice, MS. 854, L.-J.

Leclerc, 'Catalogue chronologique de tous les ouvrages de Sébastien Le Clerc', unpaginated [1705, no. 2].



197. Here attributed to Sébastien Leclerc, *View of the Hall of Mirrors*, before 1684, black ink on paper, 119 x 75 mm (Nancy, Musée Lorrain).

Musée Lorrain in Nancy (fig. 197). It was initially part of the collection of Édouard Meaume (1812–86), a scholar who assembled a huge group of works by Leclerc. This passed to Paul Chenut (1871–1947), a distinguished amateur who in turn bequeathed

his collection to the Musée Lorrain.¹⁰ At this time, the drawing's attribution was beyond doubt: it was displayed as one of Leclerc's original drawings during the 1937 monographic exhibition at the Musée de Metz, and it was reproduced in the catalogue

10. P. Marot, 'Collections et catalogues de gravures de Sébastien Le Clerc, à propos de l'œuvre conservé au Musée historique

lorrain', in *Mélanges d'histoire du livre et des bibliothèques offerts à Monsieur Frantz Calot*, Paris, 1960, pp. 310–11 and p. 313, no. 3.

published the same year.¹¹ Since Chenut's collection in the Musée Lorrain was widely ignored by scholars, however, only the photographic reproduction was known to later commentators, who dismissed the traditional attribution and considered the drawing to be a copy.¹² Yet the study is fully consistent with Leclerc's technique: the very dark shadowing of the foreground elements, also used in other drawings of this period, is similar to the effect produced by the print.¹³ The important differences between the drawing and the print are easily explained by the way in which Leclerc generally worked, that is by constantly adding new elements, even in more advanced drawings or directly on the plate.¹⁴ It is very likely that Leclerc thus chose to reduce the number of arched spans in order to be able to show statues in the niches, and that he also added several figures and the large curtain on the top left corner in order to improve the effect of the print.

Interestingly, a comparison between the Nancy drawing and the print reveals notable differences in the architecture and furniture of the hall. Neither of them reproduces the rhythm of the spans correctly, but the drawing still proves more accurate than the print. In the former there is only a single visible statue in a niche, as would be the case when seen from this point of view because statues are only gathered around the two central groups of arches and not distributed along the entire wall; the two statues at the end of the gallery are in front of the wall, contrary to the print which represents them in a niche; and finally, beyond the arch, a large window was drawn instead of what appears to be in the print Bernini's equestrian statue of Louis XIV.¹⁵ All the changes Leclerc made on the plate thus increased the differences between the picture and its model.

The case of the furniture is more ambiguous since its disposition when the gallery was completed is largely unknown. The low tables seen in the Nancy

drawing were most probably the ones in gilded wood commissioned in 1683, while the tall ornamental stands next to them might be the 'gueridons' supporting 'girandoles' mentioned in a 1682 description of the gallery in the *Mercure galant*.¹⁶ In the print, one can also recognize some known elements, such as the silver vases for the orange trees – also described in the *Mercure galant* – or the sumptuous silver table by Claude Ballin (1615–78) in the bottom right corner, although we do not know if the latter was really planned for that spot.¹⁷ The remaining pieces are more difficult to identify, and they might have been either drawn after real models or invented by the printmaker.

It thus seems that Leclerc had a fragmentary yet fairly precise idea of what the Hall of Mirrors would have looked like once finished. He probably relied on different kinds of drawings he could easily have obtained in the Gobelins manufactory, where Charles Le Brun and his fellow artists designed most of the decorative elements of the gallery, and he might even have seen the room shortly before its construction was completed.¹⁸ The changes he made can thus be explained by his desire to enhance the magnificence of the room, but the liberty he took could also have been a means to assert his own capacity for invention, as he later did in the highly fanciful view of the gallery in *The Celebration of the Taking of the Montmelian Fortress*.¹⁹ Such behaviour was notably acknowledged by one of his contemporaries, the Swedish architect Daniel Cronström (1655–1719), who told his compatriot Nicodemus Tessin the Younger (1654–1728) that 'it is almost impossible to make him copy something literally', because 'he always wants to have the liberty of organizing elements in such a way that no one could say that he followed the original in all its different aspects'.²⁰ Hence the Nancy drawing not only offers information about the possible appearance of the early Hall of Mirrors but also provides deeper insight into Leclerc's artistic conception and practice.

11. Sébastien Le Clerc (1637–1714): *guide et catalogue de l'exposition organisée à l'occasion du III^e centenaire de sa naissance*, Nancy, 1937, ill. p. 21.

12. See *Dessins pour Versailles*, op. cit., p. 205.

13. See for example Leclerc's preparatory drawing for the twelfth plate of the series dedicated to Jacques-Louis de Beringhen, in the Albertina, Vienna, inv. 8180; H. Widauer, *Die französischen Zeichnungen der Albertina vom Barock bis zum beginnenden Rokoko*, Vienna, 2004, p. 128, no. 755.

14. C. Sibertin-Blanc, 'Remarques sur les dessins de Sébastien I^{er} Le Clerc exposés à Metz, pour le tricentenaire de sa naissance (été 1937)', *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art Français*, 1938, pp. 43–54.

15. Gian Lorenzo Bernini and François Girardon, *Equestrian Statue of Louis XIV*, marble, 1671–88, Versailles, Musée National des

Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.

16. *Mercure galant*, December 1682, pp. 10–11. See *Dessins pour Versailles*, op. cit., p. 205; C. Baulez, 'L'ameublement de la Grande Galerie de Louis XIV à nos jours', in *La Galerie des Glaces: histoire et restauration*, edited by C. Albanel, Dijon, 2007, pp. 86–87.

17. G. Mabile, 'Les tables d'argent de Louis XIV', *Versalia*, 1, 1998, pp. 60–64.

18. For Leclerc's work in the Gobelins manufactory, Gallay, op. cit., pp. 134–200 and 274–301.

19. Préaud, op. cit., 1, pp. 159–60, no. 616.

20. Cronström to Tessin, 9 May/29 April 1698, in *Les relations artistiques entre la France et la Suède, 1693–1718: extraits d'une correspondance entre l'architecte Nicodème Tessin le jeune et Daniel Cronström*, edited by R.-A. Weigert and C. Hernmarck, Stockholm, 1964, p. 194.

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