THE SWORD OF AMBROGIO DI SPINOLA

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In 1885 the talented aquarellist Édouard de Beaumont published a de luxe folio volume entitled Fleur des belles épées. In the absence of an introduction the title leads us to believe that the author considered the nine swords he described and illustrated on parchment the finest swords with which he was personally familiar. Beaumont was a keen student of the sword. His own fine collection is now in the Cluny Museum, and his book The Sword and Woman-kind—in which he maintains that feminine wiles have caused man to degenerate in physique and have thus brought about the “humiliation” and diminution of the sword—is, in spite of its curious argument, a hoplogological classic. His selection, therefore, merits serious consideration.

It is surprising that none of the swords in Beaumont’s book are French, for there were in Paris in his day a number of swords of French origin that were the peers of his nine. Among these is the sword of Henry IV of France in the Musée de l’Armée in Paris, a sword which is intimately linked with a masterpiece in our Museum collection—the Spinola sword.

The Spinola sword, which is also of French workmanship, would certainly merit Beaumont’s highest esteem. It is the prime sword of its type in this Museum; and its pedigree is as distinguished as its workmanship, for there is good reason to believe that it was presented to the Spanish generalissimo Ambrogio di Spinola (1569-1630) by Henry IV of France.

Spinola’s sword is a rapier with a magnificent swept hilt of blued iron. The blade, over thirty-nine inches long, including the ricasso, is a good example of the tendency to greater length and lightness that went hand in hand with the developing skill of the swordsman. The mounted sword weighs two and a half pounds.

The late-sixteenth-century swept hilt, with its gracefully branching guards, was the culmination of a hundred years of gradual development. The simple quillons of the typical fifteenth-century sword were straight or only slightly curved, forming a cross with the blade. (The cross is still remembered in the custom of bringing the hilt to the lips when the sword is drawn.) With the earlier sword steel gauntlets were worn to protect the hands. As armor was gradually dispensed with, however, and greater skill was developed in the use of the sword, the hilt was made to protect the sword hand by various combinations of curved and connecting bars.

In the Spinola sword one branch of the earlier straight quillon is curved up toward the pomme1 to form a knuckle guard, or knuckle bow, and the other is curved down in a graceful serif, to balance it. The countershields include two small anneaux, each enclosing a pierced and finely chiseled plaque (ill. p. 239). The plaques are not mere ornament, for they too serve to protect the hand.

When the sword came to the Museum it was mounted with a shorter grip. This was probably the innovation of a fencer, for it was customary in fencing to hold the grip near the blade and curve two fingers around the ricasso. The longer grip restored by the Museum is known to be of the original length because the terminal of the knuckle bow now fits into a groove made for it in the base of the pomme1.

Even more impressive than the elaborate form of the sword is the ornamentation on its
hilt. There are in the Museum many fine examples of the difficult art of cutting images and ornaments out of cold iron and steel. The Spinola sword, in immaculate preservation, ranks with the best of them, rivaling the finest goldsmith's work in technical achievement. This is not surprising, for the artist who fashioned the Spinola hilt was both a goldsmith and an armorer—a not unusual combination of skills in a day of versatile artists. In fact, goldsmiths sometimes varied their scale as well as their material, even planning military fortifications when necessary.

The renaissance armorer was especially skillful in executing wrought ironwork that was masterful in design and ingenious in technique. The iron for our hilt was carefully smelted in a charcoal furnace and then, by long hammering, was brought to a state of such highly flexible toughness that the artist was able to model on it figures of the minutest delicacy. By its strength, elasticity, malleability, ductility, and plasticity, iron so treated is admirably suited for ornamental sword hilts.

The whole of the pommel of the Spinola sword and the outer faces of the other mounts are divided into cartouches chiseled in relief with scenes from the Old Testament. The characters they portray include David, Abraham, Esau, Tamar, Amnon, Elijah, Jonathan, Michal, Saul, Solomon, Goliath, Samuel, Absalom, and the Queen of Sheba. In addition to the biblical scenes there are symbolical figures of the virtues and two pagan figures, Juno and Venus.

In order to expedite this time-consuming work the master probably allowed assistants to work on the hilt under his guidance. It is estimated that he would have needed at least a year to complete the hilt alone, for chiseling and undercutting iron are slow and painstaking techniques. The metal was worked cold with chisels, chasing tools, punches, and gravers, and the smallest possible pump-drill points, of the thickness of a hair, which had to be made especially for the purpose. In this work the hand guided the chisel just as in stone sculpture. Though our hilt is, of course, on a smaller scale and of more detailed workmanship than figures in marble and bronze, there is no essential difference in the degree of skill required to carve a statue and to chisel a design in iron.

The identity of the artist who executed the Spinola hilt will probably remain forever a mystery. The only information concerning him is on the hilt itself, which bears the initials M.L.F. three times: on opposite faces of the pommel and between the rings at the junction of the counter-guard. The first two initials apparently stand for the given name and the sur-

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Details of pommel. Left: Venus. Center: cartouche, Saul plagued by the devil and soothed by David's harp; above, Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, who brings wood to the altar; below, Abraham's servant with the asses. Right: Juno and a peacock.
Sword of Henry IV of France, a companion to Spinola’s sword. In the Musée de l’Armée, Paris (J. 379). The hilt is chiseled with New Testament scenes. On the anneau plaque is the king’s portrait and the date 1599. Drawing reproduced from Willemin’s Monumens français, plate 264.
name of the artist, the letter f for fecit.

The sword of Henry IV in the Musée de l'Armée in Paris helps us to trace the historical background of the Spinola sword. The two swords are clearly related; their hilts are similar in contour, and they are apparently the work of the same artist. In both hilts the scenes are framed in cartouches with Latin inscriptions. The Spinola sword has inscriptions in French as well, an important clue to the origin of the two swords. The Paris sword complements the Old Testament scenes on our hilt with scenes from the New Testament. Henry's portrait is also chiseled on its hilt, as well as his initial, which appears twice, and the date 1599. The blade is signed PETER MNSTEN.

Chiseled and chased ironwork of the best quality is usually associated with Brescia, in Italy, and both swords have been said to be Brescian. The belief that they were made for a pope was apparently inspired by their biblical ornamentation and by the tradition that the Henry IV sword was a papal gift on the occasion of the king's marriage to Marie de' Medici. The French inscriptions on the Spinola sword, however, suggest that the two swords were made in France, not Italy, and the portrait which gave the Henry IV sword its title implies that they were made in the royal armoury. The Paris sword can in no way be connected with the marriage of the king, for the hilt is dated 1599, and the king's second marriage did not take place until December, 1600.

An Italian influence is nevertheless evident in both swords, and understandably so. The triumphs and reverses of Charles VIII, Louis XII, and Francis I on Italian soil brought the French royalty and nobility in close contact with Italian art, then at its zenith. Francis I, determined that his countrymen should have the benefit of the great masters of other lands, invited to the French court eminent painters and sculptors from Italy and the Low Countries, among them the goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini, and the style of the cinquecento was introduced and developed in France by these artists.

According to Baron Percy, chief surgeon of the armies of Napoleon I, who brought it from Vienna, the Henry IV sword was presented by the king to an august personage, and the fact that it bears a portrait of the French king gives support to the tradition. François Buttin, who published an account of the sword, shows convincingly that the original recipient was Ferdinand I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who was largely responsible for placing Henry on the French throne, and whose niece, Marie de' Medici, married the French king in 1600.

Was the Spinola sword also a presentation
piece from the king? It seems likely that it was, especially since both swords were apparently made in the royal armory. It is not impossible that the sword was presented to Spinola in 1605, when he was passing through Paris on his return to the Low Countries from Valladolid, the seat of the Spanish king. On this occasion he was given a flattering welcome by the French king, who hoped to obtain information on the campaign which the Spanish armies were about to undertake against his ally, Maurice of Nassau. The inscription on the reverse of the knuckle bow, AMBR SPINOLA EXERC IMPER (Ambrogio Spinola [Commander in Chief of the] Imperial Army), would have been especially appropriate on this occasion, for while at Valladolid Spinola, on his own insistence, had been appointed commander in chief in Flanders. Certainly our sword would have made a kingly gift.

For the next three hundred years the history of the sword is obscure. The duc de Luynes, who sold it to the Paris dealer V. R. Bachereau in 1911, believed it was an ancestral treasure which had passed from Spinola to Louis III de Lorraine, Cardinal de Guise (died 1621), and thus into his own family. Although this could be true it is more likely that the sword was purchased by the eighth duc de Luynes (1802-1867), who was a collector. A photograph of part of his collection in the château de Dampierre shows, besides Spinola’s sword, several objects of considerable importance, including the Negroli helmet and an embossed helmet belonging to Philip II of Spain, both now in the Museum, which are known to have been in other hands at the beginning of the century. Whatever its specific route into the Museum may have been, the Spinola sword has a place of honor in the Armor Gallery as one of the finest triumphs of metal craftsmanship that have been handed down to us.

Below: Anneaux. Upper plaque, Joab stabs Absalom as he hangs by his hair in an oak. Lower plaque, Peace; Elijah and the angel: Hope