



COMMODE MAZARINE AU JASMIN

Circa: 1715

Attributed to the Workshop of Renaud Gaudron († 1727, since 1686 cabinet-maker to the French crown)
Paris, Louis XIV period, ca. 1710

Oak, veneered with stained pear, various fruitwoods, ash, burl wood, tropical woods; bone inlay; fire-gilt bronze mounts

H. 86 cm, W. 132 cm, D. 70 cm

In the second half of the seventeenth century the marquetry technique known as „à quatre couleur“ was brought to unequalled heights when it came to the art of working with wood veneers by French cabinet-makers. In order to achieve the illusionistic depiction of floral bouquets and grotesque ornamentation, various woods were coloured or even scorched with hot sand to create subtle gradations of shadow. The cutting process was executed with such skill that the individual ornaments and floral leaves appear to overlap - an effect which is enhanced by the contrasting black wood of the background. Today the original colours have faded, but the pictorial quality of the marquetry is still impressive. In its time, this technique was called „peinture en bois“, as the ébénistes were inspired by the works of the great flower- and still-life painters, such as Jean Baptiste Monnoyer (1636-1699).

This exquisite floral marquetry commode, which has been restored, finely demonstrates the outstandingly high craftsmanship of the late Louis XIV period. This type of early eighteenth-century commode with a compact body of straight lines on short feet has been referred to as Commode Mazarine since the nineteenth century. Of

reverse breakfront form, known as *en arbalète*, the present commode is fitted with three long drawers and rests on four gilt bronze sabots in the shape of goats' legs. Due to the curved shape of the angles the commode receives its Baroque silhouette. On the front the drawers are separated by three crosspieces which are decorated with a marquetry band of foliage. Above the apron, the central section is inlaid with gilt bronze escutcheons in the shape of cartouches issuing sprouting floral marquetry. Towards both sides a rectangular panel with axially symmetrical tendrils in exquisite marquetry incorporates the gilt bronze handles. The sides of the commode are inlaid with a flower-filled bouquet issuing from scrolling acanthus. The rich marquetry tableau on the top, which combines ornament, figural and floral elements, is surrounded by a band of brass. In the centre of the composition is a vase in the antique manner filled with flowers including roses, carnations, daffodils and jasmine. Crowned by a parasol-shaped canopy, the vase is standing on an illusionistic pedestal in ash, the grain of which imitates the structure of marble. This is borne by two grand volutes which are part of a sinuous cartouche framing the floral bouquet. This cartouche in light burl wood on a black fond inlaid with fine floral ornament is visually arresting. The costliness of the flowers is combined with a taste for the curious and the artistic. Several grotesque masks in red wood decorate the frame of the cartouche, which is a braid of elaborate acanthus and foliate arabesque scrolls; the overlapping motives highlight the skill of the marqueteur. The depiction of the flower arrangements in the two upper corners is of an astounding virtuosity. In the left corner, the maker shines by having invented a difficulty which tests his powers of observation: he has succeeded in the depiction of withered tulips. The right corner, on the other hand, features a butterfly which has been resting on several flowers, but has now flown away. The use of white bone for the jasmine blossoms spread over the entire surface of the commode is eye catching.

The floral marquetry reflects the sensibilities of an era which greatly admired, studied and collected flowers. The technique seems to have been originally developed in the Dutch provinces during the first half of the seventeenth century and nurtured most certainly by the economic phenomenon known as *Tulpomania*. It was presumably only in the mid-seventeenth century that the technique was introduced in Paris by the cabinet maker Pierre Gole (1620-1685), who had moved to the city from the Netherlands. From 1656 onwards, in which year Gole was appointed *M. menuisier en ébène et ordinaire du Roi*, he supplied furniture to important members of the court on a regular basis. There are splendid specimens by Gole in floral marquetry, marquetry of ivory as well as of tortoiseshell and brass. Nonetheless, he remained faithful to his very elaborate and personal floral style unto death (see for instance Gole's famous coffer on stand in tortoiseshell and brass marquetry for Cardinal Mazarin, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs).

If Gole as a forerunner paved the way for the taste in floral marquetry, a generation later it was up to André Charles Boulle (1642-1732), whose family also originated from the border region of the Netherlands and Germany, to bring the technique to its climax. Between roughly 1675 and 1700, Boulle's workshop cultivated its very own, exuberant floral style, while the master himself took particular pleasure in decorating furniture with a mix of wood and metal marquetry. Some of Boulle's superb pieces of floral marquetry, such as the great armoire with floral marquetry in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg (1690-1700) or the famous coin cabinet of Max Emanuel of Bavaria in the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich (1690-1695), show how influential these works were. Indeed, they also served as models for the floral design of the present commode. This concerns both the choice of motifs and the ornamental style as shown for instance in treatment of the acanthus. The present commode is, however, not by André Charles Boulle, whose workshop almost certainly never produced this type of *Commode Mazarine* in floral marquetry.

ATTRIBUTION: THE GAUDRON WORKSHOP

For the attribution of the present piece of furniture it is helpful to examine the dissemination of the commode as

new type of furniture introduced about 1700 in France. The first commodes were presumably produced in the workshop of the ébéniste Renaud Gaudron († 1727). They are recorded in the inventories of the Royal Garde-Meuble for the years of 1693 and 1695. Amongst the earliest commodes is the famous pair inlaid with tortoiseshell and brass which André Charles Boulle delivered to the king for the Grand Trianon in 1708/9 (Versailles, Musée National du Château). It is worth noting that in 1709 Boulle still referred to this new type of low wardrobe as bureau. Four years later the use of a floral marquetry commode is recorded at the château de Compiègne. It was supplied to Max Emanuel of Bavaria, who resided in Compiègne between 1708 to 1715 as a guest of the Sun King on account of his exile. This concerned two pieces commissioned by Gaudron on behalf of the intendant of the Royal Garde-Meuble, Moïse-Augustin de Fontanieu. The commissions arrived on 29 July and 7 August 1713 in Compiègne and were intended to furnish the princely apartment used by the elector. In the Journal du Garde-Meuble the delivery is recorded under number 562 which records a beautifully crafted but more understated Commode de bois dolivier ... Under number 563 we read:

Une autre Commode de marqueterie de bois de plusieurs couleurs fond d'Ebène, ornée au milieu d'un vase rempli de fleurs posé sur un bout de table et un masque grotesque au dessous; le reste rempli de rainceaux, fleurs, oiseaux et papillons au naturel, le tout enfermé par trois filets de bois blanc; la commode aiant trois grands tiroirs dont les entrées des serrures et anneaux sont de cuivre d'oré. Longue de 4 pieds sur 25 pouces 1/2 de large et 30 pouces 1/2 de haut.

Their maker, the court cabinet-maker Renaud Gaudron, supplied the Royal Garde-Meuble between 1686 and 1713 and produced much of the furniture in the royal palaces. Gaudron's commodes are characterised by their own stylistic features. Given their heavy bodies fitted with three drawers on short feet, the two examples from Compiègne were surely similar to the present Commode Mazarine. Furthermore, the measurements of no. 563 (c. 86×130×72 cm) are nearly identical to the size of the present piece. While the first commode was largely veneered in European woods, no. 563 exhibited the characteristic polychrome design ... d'un vase rempli de fleurs posé sur un bout de table. Indeed, the commode delivered to Compiègne probably bore a striking resemblance to the present commode. However, due to the different materials used they could not have been identical. In accordance with the rank of Max Emanuel as a royal prince in France, the piece from Compiègne displayed an even more costly and precious use of gilt bronze mounts on a marquetry of ebony. With regards to the use of veneers, it is worth noting, however, that admirers of sophisticated furniture, such as Elector Max Emanuel, did accept furniture in simpler black stained wood rather than tortoiseshell or ebony. Most important was that the piece followed the newest taste in fashion. Hence, in 1716 just such a Régence commode was recorded as being in the bedroom of Elector Max Emanuel in the main pavilion of Nymphenburg Palace. The French name of commode was not yet known to the composer of the inventory: 1 wardrobe table fitted with 3 double drawers of black stained wood, beautifully inlaid with brass, and similar handles, it belongs to the pieces of furniture which have just arrived from France.

Today there are a number of known commodes which are related to the present one. They are owned by the Victoria & Albert Museum (London), the Musée du Château de Versailles (Inv. No. V4655), the Collection Gismondi (Paris), the Musée de Cluny in Paris (Inv. No. CLUNY 11762). One such commode was sold at Christie's, Paris, 14-15 December 2005, lot 115; another example was offered by Richard Redding Antiques in 2007; and another commode at Artcurial, Paris, 14 December 2011, lot. 15. All commodes are veneered with polychrome floral marquetry and display on their tops the familiar composition of a central vase of flowers standing on a pedestal with or without grotesque mask below, within elaborate acanthus, butterflies, birds and flowers. Despite the formal correspondence between all of these commodes, it would be too a hasty a conclusion to attribute all to the cabinet-maker Gaudron. The issue of attribution relies far less on the iconographic theme, inspired by widely disseminated, popular engravings and prints, the use of which was not exclusive to the

Gaudron workshop. Instead special attention must be drawn to the individual style, to the hand, as it were, of the marqueteur, manifest and visible in the treatment of motifs. This said the marquetry decoration of the diverse commodes does not seem coherent enough as to allow their attribution to one single cabinet-maker.

However, based on the stylistic features of the marquetry of the present commode and Calin Demetrescu's relatively new archival research on the Gaudron-dynasty of cabinet-makers, a more precise attribution of this Commode Mazarine can be achieved. Thanks to Demetrescu we now know that the Paris workshop of father Aubertin († 1684) and son Renaud Gaudron, situated in the rue Saint-Honoré at the Palais Royal, supplied a table of wood marquetry featuring a vase de fleurs sur le bout d'une table to the French crown for the first time about 1670. The motif, later much elaborated, remained very popular over the course of four decades. A series of pieces of Louis-XIV furniture has been preserved from which a writing desk (a bureau brisé), dated c. 1680, in the National Museum Stockholm is well known. Furthermore, it can be shown that an important feature for Gaudron's workshop and the attribution of objects to it is his unusual mix of figural elements with the motif of the flower vase all executed in wood marquetry. This is recorded as being on a bureau brisé which was delivered on 13 June 1703 for the use of the king to the Trianon. The inventory tells us that the tabletop of this desk combined the vase motif with the depiction of two unusual sphinxes. This motif can be found on the tabletops of two desks which have been attributed to Gaudron for this reason: a desk, Paris, c. 1690-95 sold at the Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 17 December 1983, lot 133 and a very similar desk at the Collection Gismondi, Paris.

Identical motifs can be found on a second group of wood marquetry furniture whose decorative tops feature a large cartouche with forceful curves. The present commode forms part of this group as does a bureau Mazarin of c. 1695 formerly in the Mentmore collection. The tabletop of the Mentmore desk displays the same conspicuous cartouche. This frames the composition of the flower vase next to the depiction of sphinxes and figures in contemporary court costume which is specifically linked to Gaudron's workshop. This marquetry corresponds largely with the top of our commode, including details such as the inlay of flower garlands into the burl wood of the cartouche. The time which had passed between its making and that of the older desk explains slight differences in style for we may assume that in such large and important workshop as Gaudron's the same models and patterns would have been employed by his many craftsmen down the years.

A similar ornamental structure can be found on the commode of c.1710-1715 formerly in the Collection Didier Aaron, Paris. The top of this features the cartouche decorated with small grotesque masks shown in profile, which reappear on the present commode. The Aaron Collection commode, which can be dated c. 1710-1715, is one of the latest exponents of the series and may be attributed to the Gaudron workshop. All mentioned pieces of furniture are unanimously decorated with the jasmine blossoms which may have been quickly regarded as characteristic trade mark of the workshop.

It can be concluded that the production of the present Commode Mazarine may be attributed to the workshop of Renaud Gaudron. This foosts on new findings from the archives relating to Gaudron's furniture and takes the material and stylistic development of marquetry originating from his workshop into account. Thanks to the analysis of the furniture acquisitions of the Garde-Meuble for the personal use of Louis XIV, we are now aware that the taste for commodes inlaid with polychrome floral decoration is one to which the king remained faithful throughout his life.

COMPARISON PIECES:

The following commodes are related to the present Commode Mazarine: a commode at the Victoria and Albert

Museum (London); a commode at the Musée du Château de Versailles (Inv. No. V4655); an example at the Collection Gismondi (Paris); a commode at the Musée de Cluny in Paris (Inv. No. CLUNY 11762); a commode sold at Christie's, Paris, 14-15 December 2005, lot 115; another offered by Richard Redding Antiques in 2007; and a commode sold at Artcurial, Paris, 14 December 2011, lot. 15.

The following related pieces of furniture can be attributed to Gaudron's workshop:

a bureau brisé at the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; a bureau, sold at the Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 17 December 1983, lot 133; a bureau in the Collection Gismondi, Paris; a bureau in the former Rothschild Collection, Mentmore Sale, Sotheby's, 19 May 1977, lot 405; a commode formerly in the Collection of Didier Aaron, Paris forming a pair with a commode in a private collection; a commode sold at Mes Priollaud et Lavoissière, La Rochelle, 07.03.1998.

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