

The Dauphin's Sleigh

“ Il faut de l'enfance répandue partout”

“Youthfulness must be spread everywhere.”

Louis XIV, 1698



The body of the sleigh is a brilliantly carved dragon-headed *chimère* with eagle wings and a lion's body. The creature bounds forward on his hind legs while balancing the seat with his tail, and is accompanied in front by a pair of dolphins with twisted tails.

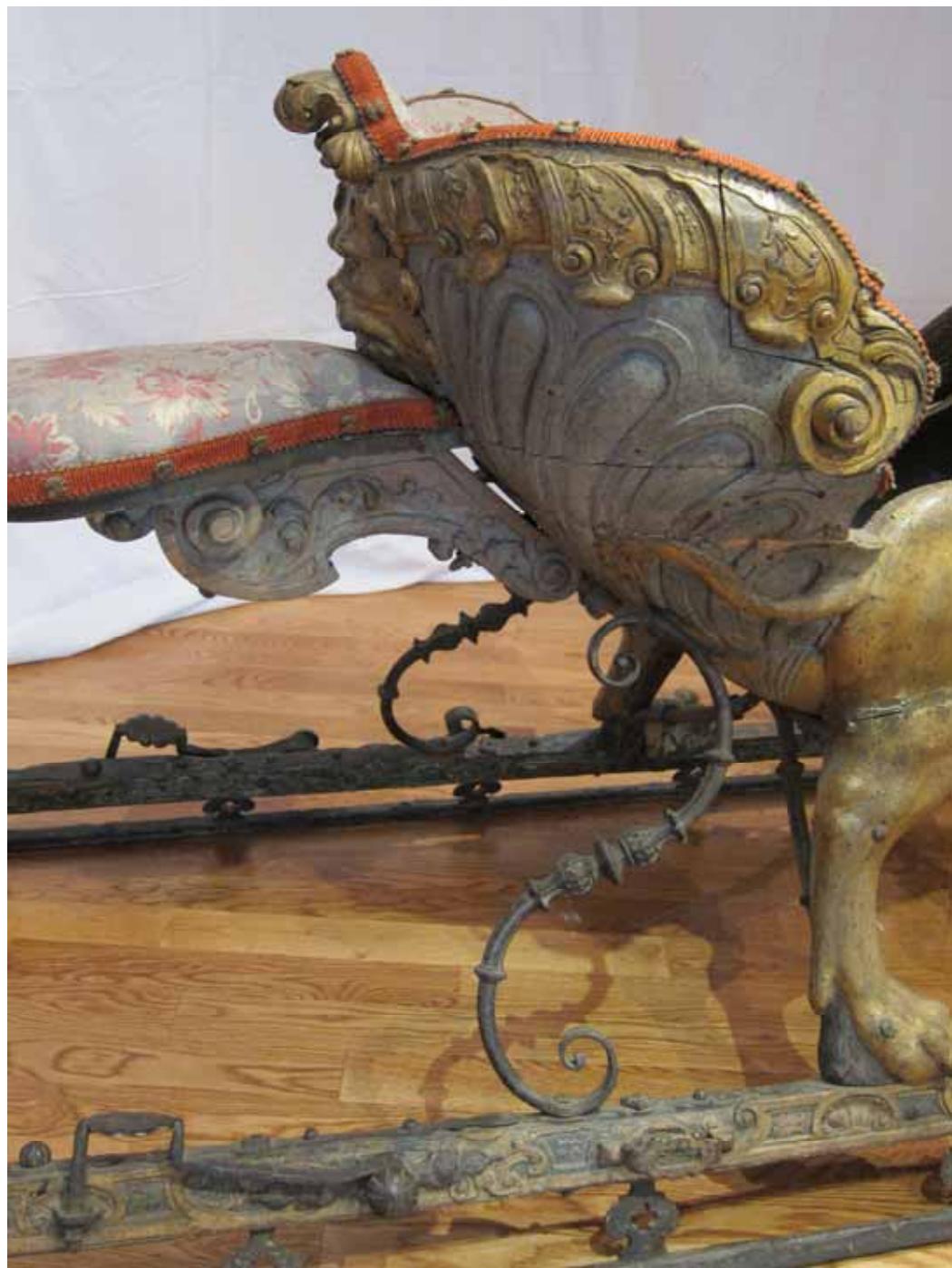
A gilded lion's mask, bearing a stylized acanthus crest and a mane composed of acanthus leaves, is carved onto the center of the outside back of the shell-form passenger seat. A gilded gadrooned molding borders the top of the passenger's seat.



The gadrooning on the molding bands centered on the lion contains three crossed “L’s” (the cipher for “Louis”) on each side. This encloses the passenger. Each crossed “L” has a small *fleur-de lis* at the bottom center.



There is a perch for the person controlling the draft horse behind the tub-shaped passenger seat. The cantilevered passenger's seat and the driver's perch are supported by large "S"-form parcel-gilt wrought iron brackets.





Because of its relatively small size, the sleigh surely was intended for a child.

Since the delicate rearing chimera has only six points of support, the sleigh rests on an unusually extensive parcel-gilt wrought iron framework. Posing the sleigh within a metal framework is unusual - most extant early sleighs are heavier, more solid, have lower centers of gravity and are composed of a higher percentage of wood.





Symbolic runners beneath the dolphins and the lion's rear legs are decorated with a band of carefully composed carved and gilded motifs on a painted ground.



The runners curve upward into a scroll carved in front with a gilded bearded face sporting acanthus leaf "hair" and a curving acanthus crest over the forehead. They are bolted to the supporting iron framework.



The working wooden runners that slid on ice and snow were attached with bolted straps to the wrought iron framework below the symbolic runners. A portion of one of the original working runners, held by its bolted strap, is still with the sleigh.



The wrought iron “S”-form supports under the passenger’s seat have cast-in bands of *fleurs-de-lis* (the French royal emblem and originally gilded). These are the only iron supports with the royal emblem, and, in their fitting place under the young prince, the gilded ornament would have made a striking contrast with the dark metal.



On the front cross-members, there are what appear to be two gilded three-dimensional iron *fleurs-de-lis* supported by gilded scrolls.



The reticulated motifs in the pieces separating the iron supports of the wooden runners can also be seen as stylized *fleurs-de-lis*.



There are sprung devices (now shortened) beneath the driver's perch that punched into the snow or ice to aid turning or braking when the driver stood on them.



[A small portion of the original red velvet upholstery is retained under the later reupholstery; the original black underupholstery is intact on the driver's perch. A modern leather strap and buckle is under the removable passenger seat, possibly replacing an original seat belt for the young passenger. Small missing pieces. Original paint and oil gilding somewhat worn.]

Height – 55" (140 cm) Width – 35" (89 cm) Length – 79" (200 cm)

Attribution & Iconography

The sleigh's design is strikingly reminiscent of the work of Jean I Bérain (1640-1711). He was famous for "grotesques" and arabesques composed of a matrix of horizontals, verticals and scrolls containing cleverly integrated decorative motifs that were simultaneously formal and fanciful. (Note: *All the following engravings and drawings are by Bérain, except the 1729 engraving on page 18 and the anonymous French drawing on page 34, which is a detail of a carriage probably designed by Bérain.*)

A typical print by Bérain, one of many possible examples, shows five panels of grotesques exhibiting many of the motifs found on the sleigh:

Acanthus leaves attached to scrolls used as balancing counter-curves; the abstract scrolls forming a framework and platforms for "real" objects. The wrought iron framework of the sleigh has the effect of making the composition analogous to a portion of a Bérain grotesque.

Lion masks [**orange arrow**]

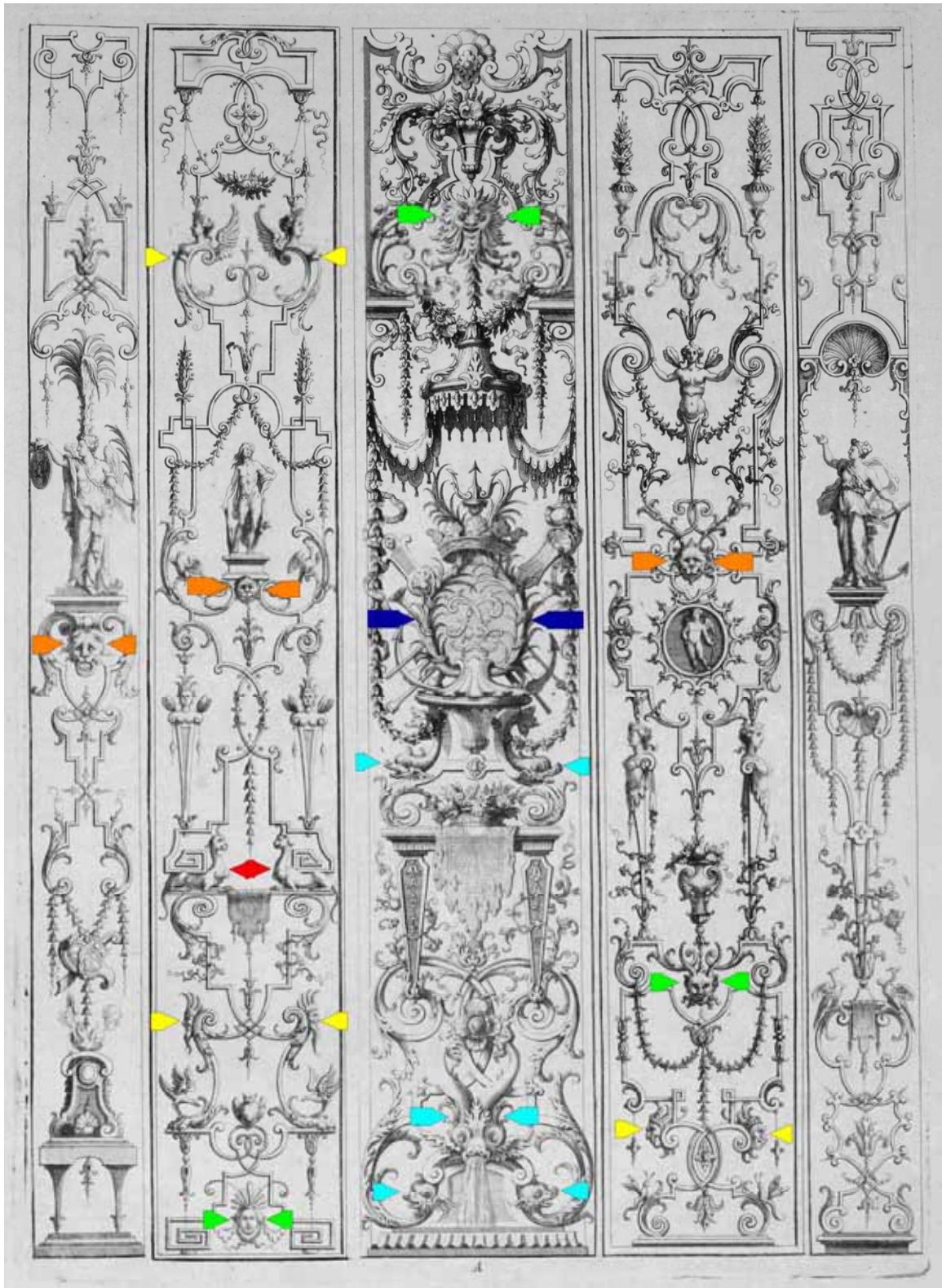
Dolphins [**light blue arrow**]

Faces at the ends of horizontals that terminate in scrolls [**yellow arrow**]

Masks framed with motifs, often acanthus, which integrate them into the overall design [**green arrow**]

Chimera figures - sometimes with the rare combination of dragon heads on winged lion bodies [**red arrow**]

Crossed L's - since he was designing for the crown so often - in many forms [**dark blue arrow**]



In 1674, Jean Bérain became the chief designer (*Dessinateur de la chambre et du cabinet du Roi*) for the *Menus Plaisirs et Affaires de la Chambre*, the department of the *Maison du Roi* responsible for the “lesser pleasures of the King” – the leisure time activities that were separate from the official state duties of the King. Bérain would have been the chief designer of stage sets, costumes, fireworks displays and the various festivities and tournaments the royal family enjoyed at Versailles. He also designed the exterior decorations of French warships, some of the “play” vessels for the canal at Versailles and some of the carriages and sleighs used at Versailles. A large collection of drawings of such subjects associated with the *Menus Plaisirs* and mostly by Bérain was bound into 24 folios and formed part of the library of M. de Rondray in 1719. The collection became part of Madame de Pompadour’s library and later went to her brother, the Marquis de Marigny. The 23rd volume of the collection was entitled *Dessins de différentes sortes de Traîneaux magnifiques: in-fol. 1 vol.* (“Drawings of different types of magnificent Sleighs: in-fol. 1 vol.”). [Jacques LeLong, *et al: Bibliothèque historique de la France*; Imprimerie de la Veuve Herissant, Paris, 1775. Page 435.] Unfortunately, the collection now seems to be lost. A similar collection of drawings and prints, formed in 1752 by Antoine Angélique Levesque, who worked at the *Menus Plaisirs* at the time, consisting of eight large volumes in-folio, was recently exhibited in Paris at the *Archives nationales* to commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of Bérain’s birth. Among many drawings by Bérain, several drawings of sleighs by other artists are displayed. The complete set of drawings is available online at culture.gouv.fr/documentation/archim/menus-plaisirs.html

Bérain also worked extensively for the son of Louis XIV, the *Grand Dauphin*, and was his favorite designer. Bérain started working on the decors at Meudon, the *Grand Dauphin*’s château in 1699. This collaboration is one of the foundations of the *Régence* style. The sleigh could have been made for the children of the *Grand Dauphin*. The first of his three children, Louis, the Duke of Burgundy, (who became the father of Louis XV) was born in 1682 and would himself be named *Dauphin* in 1711. His younger brothers were born in 1683 and 1686. Dating the sled to the late 1680’s or the 1690’s makes sense stylistically, and it is the period when the sleigh would have been deemed most useful since there were so many of the *Grand Dauphin*’s children to be entertained.



The Family of the Grand Dauphin in 1687 by Pierre Mignard

The Écuries at Versailles, the stables for the vast number of horses the court required, were completed in 1683. The Petits Écuries were for draft horses and the varied vehicles they pulled and the Grands Écuries were for riding horses. In 1701, work began on a double écurie at Meudon designed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart for the *Grand Dauphin*.

There are many first-hand reports from the late 17th and early 18th centuries attesting to the *Grand Dauphin*'s love for the outdoors, winter sports and *parties de traîneaux* during winters with severe enough weather.



Winter at Versailles – 1729 and 2012





The iconography of the unusual, and possibly unique, combination of animals composing the chimera is interesting in a royal context since the lion, the eagle and the dragon are all associated with noble qualities, strength, and leadership.

The lion is “the king of beasts”, associated in many cultures with courage and strength; it is also an attribute of Hercules who slew the Nemean lion and used its skin as impenetrable armor.

The eagle is “the king of the birds” and was a symbol of Imperial Rome, consecrated to Jupiter.

The dragon, identified in the west with vigilance, was an animal associated with the Goddess of Wisdom, Minerva, who like a dragon never sleeps. It would be fitting to have such a creature as the head of the chimera. The French, so interested in all things Chinese, must also have been familiar with the imperial connotations of the Chinese dragon.

The dragon's face and elegant knobby neck are very similar to those of dragons that appear in Bérain drawings and engravings. The pairs of large fangs in the upper and lower parts of the gaping mouth, the emphasized lobes on the neck, the nostrils and ears more canine than reptilian, and the eyes set in bulging brows would be somewhat unusual in other designers' dragons but are typical of Bérain's and are all present on the sleigh. Usually, Bérain's dragons seem to be fiercely bellowing; here, the dragon seems to be smiling, an appropriate expression for an animal at play with a child.





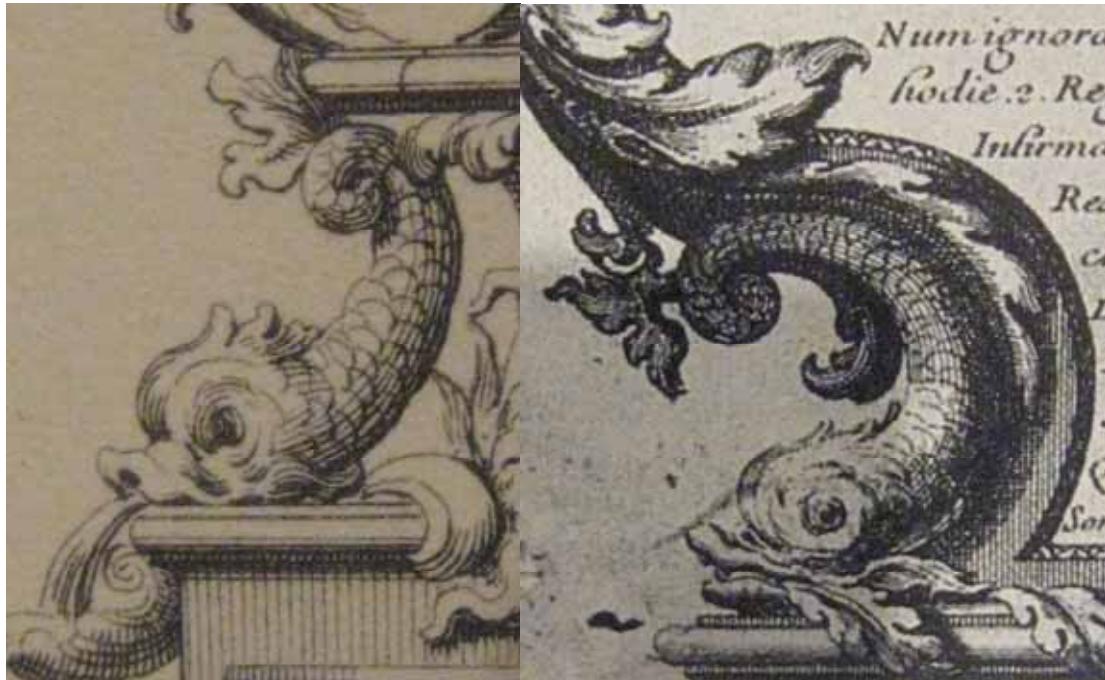


There are several *chimères* in Bérain's works with a similar unusual combination of creatures, but with dragon wings instead of eagle wings.



The dolphin became associated with the Crown Prince of France in 1349, when the province now known as Dauphiné was ceded to France with the condition that future crown princes should be known as “*Le Dauphin*” (“The Dolphin”).

While dolphins do appear sometimes as purely decorative elements, when they are an integral part of an object with crossed “L’s” (the royal cipher for “Louis”), *fleurs-de-lis* (the French royal symbol), and animal iconography symbolizing regal power, one can assume they most probably stand for *Le Dauphin*. There is no “abstract” reason to add them to the sleigh’s design in order to mask the forward metal supports except for their iconographical meaning. There are no other aquatic motifs on the sleigh. There are many dolphins in engravings and drawings by Bérain, sometimes with the curious twisted tails as on the sleigh. The tail flukes in Bérain are always tri-partite, perhaps to recall the *fleur-de-lis*. The ball, not found in his drawings or engravings, was probably placed in the dolphin’s mouth to make the open jaw less likely to break during the rough and tumble of sleighing.





Designs of various vehicles and chariots by Bérain usually have tub chair seats, often with shell-form backs.



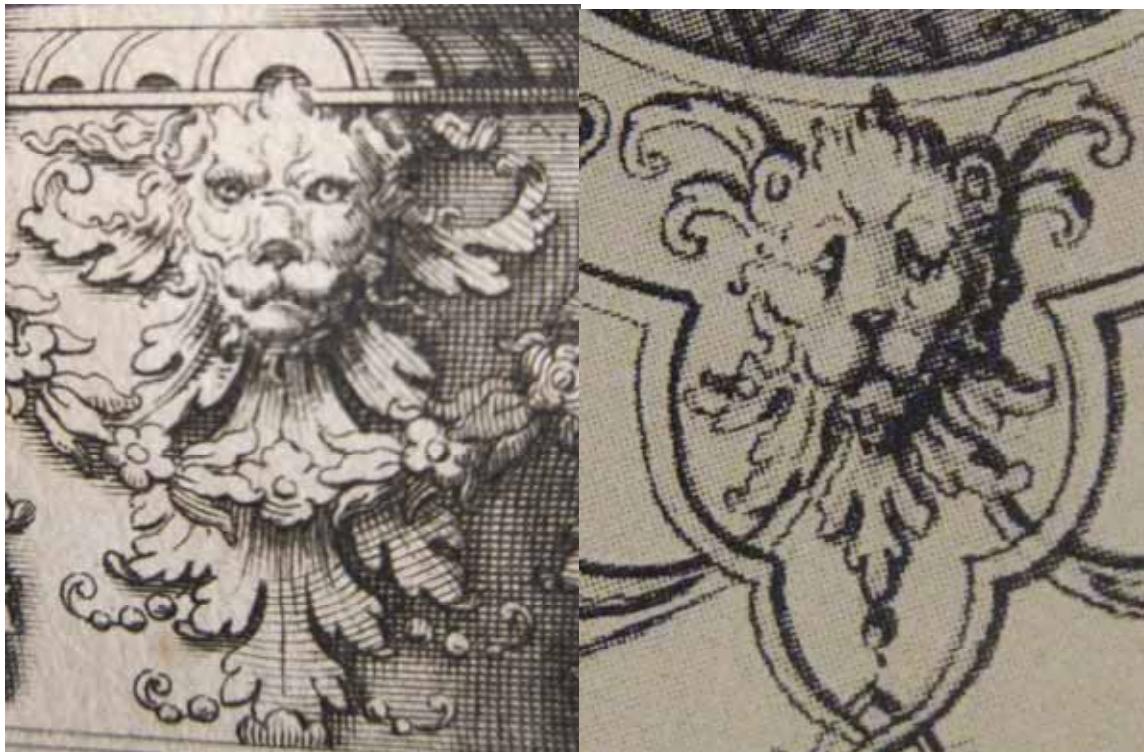




In Bérain's designs horizontal elements often terminate in scrolls with heads at the end, frequently with bearded faces, acanthus leaf "hair" and a headdress crest curving over the forehead. These would appear to be rare in other designer's works, but are ubiquitous in Bérain and might be considered a sort of signature.



Lion masks, beloved by Bérain, and common to all his works, are very often integrated into the overall design and tied into it by using scrolled acanthus motifs. His lion masks are often rounder than the masks of other designers or the muzzles of real lions and usually have some kind of crest.









The lion mask facing outward on the back of the passenger's seat, with teeth bared and a fierce protective expression, recalls Hercules's lion-skin armor, and contrasts with the dragon's joyous countenance.

The band of gilded and painted decoration on the horizontal wooden element beneath the sleigh closely resembles a frieze in a drawing of a Bérainesque French royal carriage from the same period. They share the stylized shells and acanthus shields arranged between scrolls.



With its royal iconography and symbols, this baroque masterpiece was conceived as a whimsical moveable throne to transport the future King of France while playfully recalling the statues and paintings of monarchs on rearing stallions.

In 1662, in a *Mémoire* to the Grand Dauphin, Louis XIV wrote about the pomp and the festivities that characterized his court and their political and propaganda value:

“ Un prince et un roi de France peut encore considérer quelque chose de plus dans ces divertissements publics qui ne sont pas tant les nôtres que ceux de notre cour et de tous nos peuples... S'il y a quelque caractère singulier dans cette monarchie, c'est l'accès libre et facile des sujets au prince... Les peuples... se plaisent au spectacle, où au fond on a toujours pour but de leur plaisir, ils sont ravis de voir que nous aimons ce qu'ils aiment... Par là nous tenons leur esprit et leur cœur, quelquefois plus fortement peut-être que par les récompenses et les bienfaits ; et à l'égard des étrangers, dans un Etat qu'ils voient florissant d'ailleurs et bien réglé, ce que se consume en ces dépenses qui peuvent passer pour superflues, fait sur eux une impression très avantageuse de magnificence, de puissance, de richesse et de grandeur... ” (“A Prince and a King of France can still consider something more in these public diversions which are not so much ours as those of our court and of our people...If there is some unique characteristic in this monarchy, it is the free and easy access of the subjects to the Prince... The people are pleased by spectacle, which basically has pleasing them as its goal, and they are always pleased to see that we love what they love...By these means we hold on to their minds and their hearts, sometimes perhaps more strongly than with recompense or gifts; and in regards to foreigners, in a State that they see flourishing and well ruled, that which is consumed by these expenses, which can seem superfluous, makes a very advantageous impression on them of magnificence, of power, of wealth and of grandeur...”)

The sleigh is an object invented to demonstrate the magnificence, power, wealth and grandeur that was the essence of the court-life of Louis XIV.

In an inventory of French Royal sleighs written in 1790, number 2 on the list was “A sleigh called The Flying Dragon, painted in varnished gold, (oil gilding?) the under-carriage red and gold, the said piece, one place with a cushion in red velvet and flower branches with its linen cover.” (Archives Nationales O2-469)

[“*L'État des traîneaux, Harnais et autres accessoires de transport de cy devant Petites Écuries au cy devant Menus, le 12 et 13 Thermidor l'an deuxième de la République. No. 2. Un traîneau dit le Dragon Volant, peint en or vernis, le train rouge et or, le dit, une place avec cousin en velours cramoisi et fleurs blanches avec sa housse de toile.*”]

Since our sleigh retains its original paint, with no traces of red anywhere, it cannot be *Le Dragon Volant*, but perhaps we could suggest *Le Dragon Souriant*, The Smiling Dragon.

