

**MANTEL CLOCK KNOWN AS À LA GLOIRE DES PRINCES**



PARIS, LOUIS XVI PERIOD, CIRCA 1775

SIGNED *VION*, FOR FRANÇOIS VION, CASTER AND CARVER MASTER IN 1764

THE DIAL IS SIGNED J CHAMBON, FULL NAME JEAN CHAMBON,  
CLOCKMAKER MASTER IN 1766.

ENGRAVED INSCRIPTION ON THE OBELISK : PRINCIPUM DECUS

DIMENSIONS :

H. 47.5 CM – W. 23 CM

H. 18 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> IN – W. 9 IN

**27, Quai Voltaire, 75007 Paris**

This Louis XVI ormolu mantel clock decorated with an obelisk is signed by the Parisian bronzemaker François Vion who worked during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is ornamented with putti on both sides of the dial: one is seated in front of a palm tree wearing a lion head and plume helmet; the other one is leaning against a tree trunk and bears a laurel wreath on his left arm. The body of the mantel clock is surmounted by an obelisk raised by paw feet and a lion head. The front of the obelisk is decorated with a military trophy: flags, a quiver, a Gorgon mask shield, a Roman cuirass, sabers and two crowns. A royal crown with fleur-de-lis on a cushion stands on the obelisk.

The dial has four concentric circles alternating Roman numerals for the hours and Arabic numerals for the quarters and dates, respectively painted in black and red. It is signed by the clockmaker Jean Chambon, declared master clockmaker on the 1st of March 1766.

The set is mounted on a black wood base decorated with a gilt bronze openwork interlacing frieze. This work rests on four gilt bronze feet, flattened balls-shaped.

This clock model was made by the bronzemaker François Vion as we can see on the below drawing executed by the artist circa 1770 which is kept at the National Institute for the History of Art in Paris (illustrated below in Figure 1).



Figure 1. François Vion. Clock model à la Gloire des Princes. Paris, circa 1770. ink drawing on paper. Paris, library of the National Institute for the History of Art, Reserve

Our mantel clock is the exact realization of this drawing in every single detail. Indeed, it has the same dimensions, 18 inches high, and doesn't show the horn of plenty that the left putto is supposed to carry. There is also at the bottom of the obelisk the same Latin writing *Principum decus* which could be translated as *A la gloire des princes* and seems to be inspired by old dedications from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries printed books.

The writing can be found in a dedicated preface to Cardinal Hippolyte of Este: "A te autem, Hippolyte, *Principum decus...* ». This preface comes from *Variarum lectionum libri VIII* published in Venice in 1559 by French humanist Marc-Antoine Muret (1526-1585).

« *Principum decus* » can also be found in a book called *Hoseam Prophetam Commentarius* published in 1616 by German Protestant theologian David Pareus (1572-1632). Its preface is dedicated to Maurice, landgrave de Hesse-Kassel (1572-1632) : « *Ad Mauritium Langravium Principum Decus* ».

This inscription is strengthened by the iconography used by François Vion : military trophy, laurel wreath and à la romaine helmet worn by a putto, all of it symbolizing war and victory and being associated to a palm tree, attribute of peace.

However it could also represent « *l'Allégorie de la Bonne Gouvernance* » as one of the putti was originally carrying the horn of plenty, a symbol of populations prosperity. The royal crown standing on a cushion, is clearly alluding to monarchy and make us think that the bronzemaker created it upon a royal request and was contemplating submitting it to some other foreign princes.

As a matter of fact, the Louis XVI clocks inventory made in 1787 in its Versailles private rooms reinforces this theory. At number 11, the document mentions the following : « *pendule de cheminée en bronze doré d'or moulu, sur socle orné de frises et rosaces, de deux génies dont l'un est assis et casqué tenant une corne d'abondance, l'autre debout tenant une couronne de laurier, derriere les enfants sont un tronçon d'arbre et un palmier, le corps de la pendule est surmonté d'un obélisque orné d'un trophé militaire, au dessous duquel est cette inscription, principum decus, h. de 18 po. [48,7 cm] sur 8 po. 6 l. [23 cm] de large, par Charles Leroy* », a clock that used to be in the gilded Cabinet driving to the bath one.

The Vion clock model was quite successful at the time. The artist did share this model with many clockmakers and the piece was executed either in gilt bronze or gilt and patinated bronze and with or without marble and wood base.

Many executions similar to our one now officially registered. One of them is from the Rothschild collection. It is fully made of gilt bronze, no base, and was created in Paris by Jean Léonard Roque. Another one belonging to the countess de Castéja collection shows gilt and patinated bronze putti and obelisk with a dial made by Brille.



François Vion was registered as a caster and carver master on February 17th, 1764. He worked for Saint-Denis Abbey for which he executed a shrine. He collaborated with Lepaute clockmaker in 1764 to create a clock featuring « The Three Graces » that was delivered to Madame Du Barry. It is now kept at the Louvre museum.

He also got recognition for three other clocks that were mentioned in the Inventory of the clockmaker Furet in 1786. He also used to provide clockmakers (Le Roy, Roque, Brille, Dubois and Chambon) with bronze clock bodies.

#### Bibliographie :

- Pierre KJELLBERG, Encyclopédie de la pendule française du Moyen-Âge au XXe siècle, Paris, Editions de l'Amateur, 1997.
- Pierre VERLET, Les bronzes dorés français du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris, Picard, 1999.