

## **Antoine Coysevox:**

(born Sept. 29, 1640, Lyon—died Oct. 10, 1720, Paris)

French sculptor known for his decorative work at the palace of Versailles and for his portrait busts, which introduced a trend toward the sharpened depiction of individual character.

Of Spanish descent, Coysevox became a sculptor to King Louis XIV in 1666 and by 1679 was engaged at Versailles, enriching the Galerie des Glaces (Hall of Mirrors) and the Ambassador's staircase and carving the brilliant equestrian relief of the King (c. 1688) for the Salon de la Guerre. He also executed much decorative sculpture for the royal gardens, notably the equestrian "Renown" and "Mercury" (1700–02). Other important works are the tombs of the finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1685–87; Saint-Eustache, Paris) and Cardinal Mazarin (1689–93; Louvre) and the votive group of Louis XIV on the high altar of Notre-Dame. These, like his formal portrait busts, have a marked Baroque character. His more intimate portrait sculptures, however, such as that of the Duchesse de Bourgogne as Diana (1710; Louvre), omit the Italianate swagger of Bernini and the formality of the state portraits and anticipate the naturalism and grace of the Rococo style. His principal students, including his nephews Nicolas and Guillaume Coustou, perpetuated his influence, especially on the development of French portrait sculpture in the 18th century.

### **Commission for horses at Marly:**

Antoine Coysevox received a commission in 1698 for a group of two equestrian subjects to the glory of the king. These were made in Carrara marble in 1701-2, and placed on either side of the upper part of the horse pond, at the entrance to the park at Marly. They were moved to the west entrance of the Tuileries Gardens in 1719, where they were replaced by replicas in 1986.

### **Political iconography:**

After the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, and the return of prosperity to France, Louis XIV entrusted his Superintendent of Buildings, Jules Hardouin-Mansart, to commission splendid statuary to adorn the park at the Château de Marly. Antoine Coysevox was chosen to sculpt two equestrian groups in Carrara marble, to be placed on either side of the balustrade overlooking the horse pond.

The resulting sculptures represented Fame and Mercury, each astride the legendary winged horse Pegasus, symbolizing the king's peacetime and wartime prestige. Both horses rear above military trophies representing the king's victories. Pegasus (the symbol of poetry) is guided by Mercury, the divine messenger and god of trade (symbolizing the benefits of the return to peace). The trophies under his rearing horse include a shield evoking the Spanish Succession, with Minerva (the goddess of war) presenting the portrait of Philip V to the Spanish people.

The statue of Fame, wearing a laurel wreath and holding an olive branch, is sounding the trumpet of truth to proclaim the king's warlike strength. The trophies here include a shield adorned with a winged Victory holding a palm and crown. The lion skin evokes Hercules, the mythological hero of legendary strength, to whom the king was often compared.

### **Technical prowess:**

Coysevox's work was a technical masterpiece in terms of size (such large marble sculptures had never yet been made in France), speed, and skill. The groups were made from monolithic blocks, with no joins, by carving into the mass and clearing the projecting parts. Marble is a fragile material that can easily be broken by an impact or intrinsic flaw, but Coysevox took the risk of clearing frail pieces such as the long, tapering stem of the trumpet, supported by the figure's upraised arm. He completed his sculpture in barely two years (1701-2), proudly drawing attention to this feat in the text engraved on the rocks.

### **A personal creation:**

Coysevox could also boast of having invented the model for this sculpture. Previous sculptors under Louis XIV had worked according to the instructions or drawings of painter Charles Lebrun (1619-1690) then architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646-1708), who were successively responsible for fine arts policy. Although Coysevox's composition remained faithful to the harmonious art of Versailles and gave greater importance to the front view, these dynamic groups also marked a baroque inflection in court art with the riders, clearly outlined against the sky, balancing on their rearing horses above their trophies of arms. The sculptures were transported to the entrance of the Tuileries Gardens in 1719, and have been in the Louvre since 1986.