

Italian baroque walnut mirror, *The Four Elements*, composed of large acanthus scrolls that contain putti, birds, dolphins, sunflowers and other floral motifs. These enclose four smaller scale mythological reserves symbolizing the Four Elements as engraved by Michel Dorigny after Simon Vouet. The carving is attributed to Maestro Giuseppe.







The Mythological Reserves



(*Air*) At the crest, Jupiter towers in the clouds with his attributes—an eagle and thunderbolts—above the winged god Aeolus, who wears a crown and holds a scepter in his role as king of the four winds, and the winged goddess, Iris, bearing her attribute, a rainbow.

The design reproduces a 1664 engraving by Michel Dorigny after a painting by Simon Vouet used as part of a decorative scheme for the Queen Regent, Anne of Austria, in the *Vestibule de la Reine* at Fontainebleau. The decoration, which no longer exists, symbolized the Four Elements, although at Fontainebleau, the Jupiter painting stood for “Fire” not “Air”.

The composition is subtly altered, in the mirror presented *di sotto in sù*, foreshortened, since it is meant to be viewed from below.



Flammanti e Solio vibras quos Jupiter ignes
Excipiant Aquilæ, sed nos hæc fulmina terrent.

2

Sim. Vouët pinx.

Cum privil. Reg. 1644

Mic. Dorigny Scul.



(Water) On the base, Neptune, wielding a trident, drives the hippocampi that pull his vessel over the waves. Triton holds Amphitrite while Cupid looks on. The reserve is framed by ribbon-bound floral wreaths.

This design is from another 1644 engraving by Dorigny after Vouet from the destroyed vestibule decorations at Fontainebleau. At Fontainebleau, it also symbolized “Water”.

After the death of Louis XIII in 1643, his queen, Anne of Austria, born a Spanish Infanta, became regent for the child-king, Louis XIV, until his ascendancy in 1651. In 1661, she would see him marry her niece, Maria Theresa of Spain which cemented the 1660 Treaty of the Pyrenees that had brought peace to the previously warring countries.



Rapta per undosi campos maris Amphitrite
Imperium raptoris habet: tenet illa tenentem.

4

Sim. Vouët pinx.

Cu. pñul. 1644.

Mic. Dorigny Sc.



(Fire) Hercules slays the Lernean Hydra, while his companion, Iolaus, cauterizes the wounds with a torch's flames to prevent the heads' resprouting. The relief is signed: "GIVSEP." and "AVP.FC."

The source was a 1651 Dorigny engraving after a Vouet painting made for the decoration of the lower gallery of the Hôtel Séguier symbolizing the accomplishments of Louis XIII - here, the victory over the Huguenots.



S. Vouet pinxit

Cum privilegio Regis

Mich. Dorigny sculp. 1651.

Rijksmuseum



(Earth) Apollo slays the Python at Delphi with his bow and arrow. The lair of the Python was considered the center of the Earth. The reserve is framed by a ribbon-bound laurel wreath. It is signed: "AV. F."

Another 1651 Dorigny engraving after a Vouet painting for the Hôtel Séguier was the source. The painting symbolized the taking of the Huguenot stronghold, La Rochelle. The paintings, like those at Fontainebleau, no longer exist.



St. Vouet pinxit.

Cum privileg. Regis

Mich. Dorigny sculp 1651

The Surrounds

At the crest, two dolphins with fiercely bared teeth are flanked by putti each holding aloft and gazing at a large pheasant. There are two huge sunflowers at the edges.



At the bottom, over the Neptune and Amphitrite roundel, a snake crawls through the ribbon that binds the leafage under the mirror glass.



The mythological roundels and the mirror glass are surrounded by an interwoven array of flowers, acanthus leaves, and ribbon-bound leafage containing acorns—a symbol of power and antiquity. The greenery is enlivened with naturalistic groupings of birds that cavort in the foliage. Probably doves, a pair is billing and cooing and another is mating.



There are three “Green Man” foliate masks—two smaller ones face inwards at the sides of the Hercules and Apollo roundels.



A larger “Green Man” mascarón is located at the bottom of the frame; he is holding oak sprigs with acorns in his mouth.



At the sides there are two unusual torsos of putti whose arms become acanthus scrolls that curve over their heads.



The Symbolism of the Surrounds

The surrounds, like the mythological roundels, depict the four elements, but here through motifs from nature: the birds symbolize *air*; the flora, the snake, and the Green Men *earth*; the dolphins *water*; and for *fire*, the sunflowers, which follow the blazing sun, and the two putti who protect themselves from the sun's flaming heat and light with their acanthus arms - probably an invention unique to this mirror. Extraordinarily, the mirror remains an object of great beauty while maintaining iconographic consistency across an array of interwoven motifs of varying scales.

The baroque penchant for theatricality is clear not only in the dramatic mythological scenes chosen for the roundels but also in how the birds and the putti are illusionistically integrated into the composition of the surrounds. The birds are perched helter-skelter on the foliage in lifelike poses and actions. The putti are individual spirits adapting to the structure of the frame by positioning themselves in plausible and useful ways: the pair at the base stand in *contrapposto* and seem to bear the weight of the rectangular framing of the glass on their backs; the pair higher up are balancing the Hercules and Apollo roundels on their shoulders; the pair shielding themselves from the sun become the acanthus scrolls that are the primary element of the overall composition; the highest pair casually sit on the corners of the mirror's upper frame, each with one leg dangling while they interact with the pheasants that they hold aloft.



The Signature(s)

It is very unusual, if not unique, to find a signature on Italian baroque decorative art; however, both side roundels are signed at eye level.

The Hercules reserve is signed: “GIVSEP. AVP. FC”



Both groups of letters have tildes above – indicating unwritten letters. Thus, “GIVSEP.” stands for “Giuseppe”. The meaning of the second group of letters remains obscure, although the “FC” almost surely stands for “*FECIT*”, *i.e.* “Made [this]”.



The Apollo reserve is signed: “AV. F.” This is probably an abbreviation of the “AVP. FC” of the Hercules reserve.

“Maestro Giuseppe” was Wood Carver to the Farnese Duke of Parma in the period the mirror was made. Only a virtuoso craftsman would have been awarded the title “*Maestro*” and have been famous enough to be known by his first name – in the same way Michelangelo and Leonardo are known by theirs. Italian scholars of the decorative arts have long searched for his identity, although the court carver, Giuseppe Bosi, has been suggested. It is well known that Maestro Giuseppe was a teacher of Andrea Fantoni, who became one of the most illustrious wood carvers of the late baroque. That the eminent Fantoni dynasty of wood carvers would send their most promising scion to Parma for training by Maestro Giuseppe is proof of his esteem.

Since it is so unusual for an Italian baroque decorative arts piece to be signed, one wonders if the artist was requested to sign it because he had successfully completed an enormous commission and difficult undertaking. It is certain that someone called Giuseppe was the sculptor of this masterpiece, and to sign such a piece in such a manner, the maker must have been well known. Since Maestro Giuseppe apparently is the only wood carver called Giuseppe with that sort of name recognition, it seems logical to assume that Maestro Giuseppe was the sculptor, especially since the mirror bears stylistic similarities with work from his region in his period.

It is possible that “AVP”, or “AUP” (in a sculptural convention, a “V” can be either a “V” or a “U” – as in “GIVSEP”), as well as the “AV”, are letters from Giuseppe’s lost last name; but more likely, they are letters associated with the name of another artist who designed the elaborate composition with the borrowed imagery and aesthetic of Simon Vouet and Michel Dorigny. A painter to the ducal court in Parma during the period the mirror was created, and the drawing teacher of Elisabeth Farnese, Pietro Antonio Avanzini, (**AV**[anzani]**P**[ietro]) is a possibility.

[Mirror glass replaced. Small repairs and a few missing pieces.]

Height - 82" (208.3 cm.)

Width - 57" (144.8 cm.)

Italian, Parma, late 17th - early 18th century

