Wheel lock musket

Place of origin: France (made)
Date: 1610-1620 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Carved pearwood with iron mounts
Museum number: 603-1864
Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 6, The Lisa and Bernard Selz Gallery, case CA1

Public access description

This gun is stamped with the number 5, an inventory number from the Cabinet d'Armes of Louis XIII, King of France (1610-1642). In view of the extreme lightness and small size of this piece, it would appear to have been made for Louis when he was a boy.

Louis XIII was the first real European gun collector. By 10 years old he already owned 7 arquebuses and by 13 he had over 50. He used to like pulling them apart, cleaning them and putting them back together and became known as Louis L'Arquebusier. Louis collected quite systematically, looking for outstanding decoration or technological innovations and his Court employed the best gunmakers in France such as Marin le Bourgeois who is credited with developing the flintlock firing mechanism.

Arms and armour are rarely associated with art. However, they were influenced by the same design sources as other art forms including architecture, sculpture, goldsmiths' work, stained glass and ceramics. These sources had to be adapted to awkward shaped devices required to perform complicated technical functions. Armour and weapons were collected as works of art as much as military tools.

As technical devices guns attracted princely collectors. Many are finely chiselled and engraved as works of art, some even on their insides, to be taken apart and reassembled at pleasure. The stocks were also often decorated with fine bone and horn inlays drawing on the skills of furniture makers and engravers.

Descriptive line
Wheel lock musket made for Louis XIII of France as a boy, ca. 1620

Physical description
The pearwood stock is slightly carved, with iron mounts. The lock is of French type with a detached mainspring. The barrel is octagonal at the breech, the remainder round. It is equipped with a V-backsight and stud foresight. The gun is stamped on the underside of the stock in front of the trigger guard with the number 5.

Dimensions
Length: 121 cm, Height: 18.8 cm, Depth: 4.9 cm, Weight: 1.26 kg

Museum number
603-1864

Object history note
The gun is stamped on the underside of the stock in front of the trigger guard with the number 5. Inventory number from the Cabinet d'Armes of Louis XIII (1601-1642). The corresponding entry reads; 'Quarante trois arquebuses toutes simples, de 3 pieds ou environ.' In view of the extreme lightness and small size of this piece, it would appear to have been made for Louis when he was a boy.

It is not known how it reached England. It may have been taken as a trophy from the Paris Arsenal by an officer in the British Army of Occupation in 1815.

Historical significance: Two other firearms bearing the same inventory number are in the Musée de L'Armée, Paris (M.101, M.103); another is in the Collection Paulilhac, now in the same Museum.

Historical context note
Louis XIII was the first real European gun collector. Born at the Château de Fontainebleau, Louis XIII was the eldest child of Henry IV of France (1558-1610) and Marie de' Medici. His father was the first Bourbon King of France, having succeeded his ninth cousin, Henry III of France (1574-89), in application of the Salic law. Louis XIII's paternal grandparents were Antoine de Bourbon, Duke of Vendome and Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre; his maternal grandparents were Francesco I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany and Johanna, archduchess of Austria.

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technological innovations, and employed Fracne's best gunmakers eg Marin le Bourgeois who is credited with developing the flintlock mechanism.

16th-century gunmaking was dominated by Germany but by the early 17th century France held pre-eminence. The interest shown by Louis XIII was influential in this. He led design and technical development and prized slender weapons whose efficiency of mechanism allowed for flimsy, light construction. This was in contrast to the large, brutish German guns of the same period.

Louis' Cabinet d'Armes was sited in the Louvre and gunmakers lived onsite. The Cabinet d'Armes had great variety of firearms. In 1673 Louis XIV ordered an inventory to be made which gives us much detail about the armoury's contents. Each weapon is stamped with an inventory number. Wheelock guns are referred to as 'arquebuses'.

Several pieces in the V&A including a pistol and larger wheel-lock as well as early flintlocks.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70510/wheel-lock-musket-unknown/