



Seance d'Escrime

Offerte au Profit des Pauvres
dans la Salle des Fêtes de l'École des Beaux Arts.

le 8 Décembre 1895.

Sous le haut patronage de:

Monsieur le Général Strahl, Commandant la 2^e Division d'Infanterie

Monsieur l'Amiral de La Motte, Chef du Port de Calcutta

Monsieur le Général Marchand,

Monsieur Lagnelle, Maire d'Amoy.

Avec le gracieux concours de:

M. M. les Officiers de la Garnison,

Amateurs et de Mesdames Étrangères,

et de la Musique du 3^e Régiment du Génie.

sous la Direction de M. Pierre Girard.

Fencing through the Ages

Adolphe Corthey

*Fencing through the Ages and On the Subject
of the Transformation of the Fencing Blade*

Peek inside

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II

It seems to us today completely natural to defend ourselves with the same weapon which we use¹ to attack. Nevertheless this idea, which seems so simple to us, took several centuries to develop in our minds.

At first, it was hardly more than intuition.

This is the moment to speak of a curious weapon, gigantic and terrible, which appears suddenly, plays a considerable role, if one believes the first works on fencing, then disappears as it came, almost without leaving a trace.

It is the two-handed sword.

It is not, however, the sword itself which is unknown. One sees, on the contrary, beautiful specimens in the Artillery Museum, in nearly all the arsenals and in the houses of many antiquaries. That which seems completely forgotten is that there existed an art of how to use it.

So, in M. Molier's first session,² the bout which took place between Messers Jeannonet and Boudin, and which had been directed by M. Vavas seur, equally an amateur, produced a kind of bewilderment in the spectators.

Let us suppose that any animal trainer, Bidel or Pezon, dared to exhibit in his menagerie a megatherium or a living ichthyosaur and made them do their various exercises. The effect would be a little near the same.

In reality, where does this mastodon of fencing come from? The Greeks, the Romans, the Spanish³ and later the Franks, made swords which were only heavy knives. On the other hand, we believe we know that certain peoples of Gaul used long broadswords which they were, it seems, forced to use two-handed.

If this information is correct, it would seem to demonstrate for the mountain-dwellers of the centre of Switzerland and the Scots of the Highlands a common origin since it is with these two peoples, nonetheless very far apart, that one finds in a relatively recent period the most frequent use of the large spadone.⁴ And this would be the last trace, carefully preserved by these mountain-dwellers, of the weapon with which our ancestors the Gauls, after having crossed the Alps and crossed Europe, battered the Roman legions in Italy and cut to pieces the Macedonian phalanx at Delphi.

1. lit: serves us

2. See "At the Cirque Molier" and "A Clown's Report from the Circus Molier" in this volume

3. *Cantabres*

4. *espadon*

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It should be added that the Swiss and Scots do not have the exclusive monopoly on the two-handed sword.

The broadsword of Jacques the Conqueror,⁵ preserved in the Madrid museum, is one example of such. Rabelais makes mention of a sword of this type and Froissard cites an English knight who used one in the war about the time of Du Guesclin.⁶

That which is certain is that from the first fencing with this weapon is relatively sophisticated⁷ and that the weapon itself is cleverly designed.

That the blade may be flat or fullered, or with stops⁸ or lacework or flamberg, with the end sharp or rounded or larger than the base, nothing is given to chance.

And even though the hilt of the ordinary sword is barely more than a simple cross, that of the great sword is armed with defences, not only to protect the hands, but to allow the person to act effectively in an unlikely but possible body-to-body [encounter].

The authors who concern themselves especially with the two-handed sword, or at least speak of it, are half a dozen. In 1529 Lebkommer, a German; in 1536 Marozzo, an Italian; the anonymous writer to whom one owes the Sword Player⁹ published in Anvers; Thibault; Alfieri.

This last, one would hardly believe it, is a contemporary of Molière and his treatise appeared very close to the moment when The Bourgeois Gentleman was performed.

It is probable nonetheless that the Dutch, Germans and Italians had to import the spadone from the Swiss, who had beaten the Austrians on Swiss territory, the Germans in Swabia, fought the Burgundians in the Pays de Vaud, the French and the Spanish in Italy. It is not doubted that, until the Burgundian wars, that is to say from the Battle of Mortgarten to that of Saint Jacques, it was for the Swiss the principle weapon with the halberd and the “morgenstern,” a type of mace ending in a point and bristling with other points on its upper part, all three about the same length, around two metres.

But, from that moment, the confederated troops,¹⁰ for the most part at least, adopted the great pike and, if one believes the regulations and the images

5. King of Aragon (1213-1276)

6. Either Bertrand Du Guesclin (1320 - 1380), Constable of France, or Olivier Du Guesclin (died c. 1400), his brother and a celebrity of the Hundred Years War

7. *aussi complet* - finished and lacking no important part

8. schilts?

9. *Joueur d'Épée*

10. ie: the Swiss

At the Circus Molier

Le Monde Illustré, 18 June 1887, p403

The two annual evenings offered by M. Molier to certain happy privileged constitutes one of the most elegant meetings of Parisian high society¹ who amuse themselves and the presentations of the circus, so charmingly set in the courtyard of the small hotel in the Rue de Benouville, are always one of the most sought out attractions which can be seen.

There is nothing quaint or original as far as this stage, framed in decoration including the balconies of Spanish houses or the galleries of Moorish palaces, on which piled the crowd of the invited.

The program for this year was one of the best combined and numerous surprises were arranged.

Our illustration summarises some of the more curious exercises and most entertaining numbers.

Among the artists of the elite troop that the director of this exceptional circus has grouped together, our friend and collaborator M. Adrien Marie welcomed a large share of the applause with the tour-de-force that he accomplished. He painted on a horse at the gallop a picture whose rapid execution surprised all attendees who greatly admired² this very spiritual fantasy executed by the amiable painter. We cite again the belly dancing³ by the gracious Mlle Rivolta; the entry of the clowns by Mme Dezoder from the Palais-Royal, of Brieges and Menty; the stunning work of M. H. de la Rochefoucauld whose suppleness equals that of the most celebrated professional gymnast; the jumping horse of Mlle d'Yvrès of the elite school by Mlle Valberg; the strength exercises of M. Van Huisen, a sportsman who playfully lifts weights of 170 kg; and finally the remarkable horse-work of M. Molier who showed himself as always a horseman⁴ full of elegance and knowledge.

A captivating resurrection of the forms of old-time⁵ fencing was particularly interesting.

We had a festival with two sword-players of Louis XII in a bout with dag-

1. *tout-Paris*

2. *a fort goûté*

3. *la danse de l'aimé*

4. *écuyer*

5. Although the word used in the text is *ancienme*, it carries connotations of previous, no longer existing, and simply not current rather than necessarily of the remote past

ger and with cloak, the bout of Saint Georges with the Knight of Eon, executed with astonishing gusto by Mme M. Chevalier and M. Gueldry, and finally with a modern fencing lesson by Messrs Corthey and Vavas seur.

The various elements of these presentations, so well combined, charmed a first class public who did not stop applauding with enthusiasm the artists and their director to whom one owes such attractive evenings.



The sword: The Mignons: dagger and sword (1606) | Swiss and Scots of the Guard of Louis XII: two-handed sword | Jarnac and Châteignerie (under Henry II): sword and buckler | Saint George and the Knight of Eon (1787): the French school | Modern fencing

1. Giralda, horse jumper | 2. Clowns | 3. Feathered equestrian entertainment | 4. The African dance, Mlle Rivolta | 5. The Sword | 6. Buffalo and Ostrich, a fantasy | 7. Dressage (M. Adrien Marie)

The evening of 11 June at the Circus Molier | Fencing in Different Periods | Exercises | (Drawings by M. Adrien Marie)

On the Subject of the Transformation of the Combat Sword

Adolphe Corthey
2nd edition

Paris

Printed: G. Camproger,
52 rue de Provence
1895

From the same author

Foil and épée, a study	1 fr
French and Prussians: Sidearms and Firearms 2nd edition	1 fr
A small treatise on fencing with the bayonet, 2nd edition	1 fr

To appear shortly

Fencing through the Ages, 1 volume

Minutes of the meeting of the Committee of 12 January 1894 at which this report was read and approved.

For a certain number of years, the manner of fighting in the field, the play of the duel, has preoccupied a great number of fencers and captivated the fencing halls.

Strangely enough, all concern themselves greatly with the manner of fighting. We have not seen them concern themselves with the weapon of combat.

Nonetheless, it is always this latter which made the former.

And if logic says it to us, the facts prove it to us.

Passing beyond Marozzo and the other Italian authors who parried with the buckler then with the sword and the left hand or the dagger, beyond still Saint-Didier who only employed the left hand unarmed and Thibault who uses the great quillions of the Spanish sword, we arrive at Besnard, Liancourt and the other masters of the period of Louis XIV who parried with the sword blade. We see that in the strikes as in the parries their play is constrained by the form of this blade which is flat, with or without stops, with or without fullers.

For example: they knew perfectly the *contres* but they did not employ them in the bout. They only used them as a lesson to exercise the hand.

The same constrained play, with only some variation, continues during the 18th century with Danet, Angelo, etc, and it is only in the 19th century, after the invention of the square bladed foil, that La Boëssière created modern fencing, this almost mathematical science with its powerful parries without effort, varied in all lines, passing from simple parries to *contres*, from the *tac à l'enveloppement*, from the envelopment to the *opposition*; this refined art with its attack strikes of nearly absolute safety and its feints of incomparable subtlety.

We are justified therefore to say that it is much less fencing which made the weapon than the weapon which made fencing.

And we could add that the history of fencing is but the history of the sword.

Today, after so much perfection and progress, we still use two weapons (we do not speak, it goes without saying, of those which are used in war), the one, the late comer, which is the creation of the 19th century, we preserve for the salle, for entertainment, for the art; this is the square foil. The other, more ancient and which is a legacy of the 18th century, we use for the duel; this is the triangular épée.

For people outside of fencing, this matters little.

A foil, an épée, a square blade, a triangular blade, it is still a weapon which stabs, is it not? While we can make a [blade edge of] greater or lesser angle, to what end is all this geometry!¹