

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

BASSEPORTE, Madeleine-Françoise

Paris 28.IV.1701–4.IX.1780

The daughter of a wine merchant, Jean Bassporte and his wife, Madeleine Guyon, she was baptised 28.IV.1701 at Saint-Louis-en-l'Isle (it is unclear why she signed a late botanical drawing “M. G. Basseporte âgée de 80”). Initially a pupil (and it was said “amie”) of Robert de Séry, then of Claude Aubriet (1665–1742), she copied pictures in the hôtel de Soubise and the Palais-Royal – among them works by Rosalba Carriera, whose influence was noted by contemporaries. She was no doubt the person Pierre Crozat refers to in a letter to Carriera in 1727 (Sani 1985, no. 386) explaining that the Venetian’s pastels were being copied by a great many artists, with Coypel at their head: “Il y a une damoiselle, élève de M. Robert, qui commence à y faire quelque progrès.” According to the notice (written by Castilhon & Louis Poinssinet de Sivry for the *Nécrologe des hommes célèbres*), her pastels were made before 1734:

Elle peignoit le pastel et fut bientôt connue par des portraits qu'on mit à côté de ceux de Rosalba; mais la crainte de manquer de l'occupation, l'embarras d'avoir sans cesse de nouvelles connoissances à faire, et d'autres inconvénients encore, l'engagèrent à prendre le parti de dessiner et de peindre les plantes.

She was particularly associated with the abbé Pluche and his *Spectacle de la nature*, a popular work of natural history for which she provided numerous plates. She was protected also by Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau, the plant physiologist at the Académie des sciences, and like him was suspected of being a Jansenist. In 1734 she received the survivance of peintre des plantes du Jardin du roi from Aubriet, effectively replacing him, and obtaining the position at his death. A brevet of “peintre en miniature du roi” was awarded 30.IV.1735 (O¹ 79). “Mlle Basseporte, Peintre & Dessinateur” continued to appear in the almanachs royaux until 1780 (the survivance of her position was awarded to Gérard Van Spaendonck in 1774: AN O¹ 119). She also practised miniature and mezzotint.

She taught drawing to the daughters of Louis XV, who “pour jouir plus souvent du plaisir qu'il trouvaît à sa conversation, la dispensa de toute étiquette”. She may have taught Anne Vallayer-Coster, to whose sister she was godmother in 1751 (they were daughters of Joseph Vallayer, orphèvre at the Gobelins). Basseporte was also godmother in 1772 at the birth of a daughter of Guillaume Debure, libraire (who would value her books in her estate inventory), niece of Louis-François and Marie-Jacques Barrois, both also libraires; the latter's wife would ultimately acquire Basseporte's autoportrait.

Mme de Genlis (1828) provides a later perspective—

Nous avons vu jadis au Jardin du Roi, mademoiselle Basseporte, pensionnée par le gouvernement pour peindre à la gouache des plantes et des reptiles, s'amuser de temps en temps (à plus de quatre-vingts ans) à faire de petits tableaux en pastel, et qui étaient charmans de fraîcheur et de vérité; elle nous dit

qu'elle avait eu ce talent dès sa première jeunesse; mais que depuis plus de trente ans elle le cultivait très-rarement; néanmoins elle l'avait parfaitement conservé.

Rousseau said of her flower painting that “la nature donnait l'existence aux plantes mais Mlle Basseporte la leur conservait”, while Natoire expressed his infinite esteem of her to Marigny in 1757. She enjoyed a royal pension from 1749, increased to 700 livres by brevet of 21.VIII.1774 (O¹ 653) by the new king; but in the last month of her life, her assistant, Mme Aillaud, appealed to Benjamin Franklin (letter, 26.VIII.1780; he had known her since 1767) to support an application to Buffon to increase the amounts.

Basseporte was known to many influential court figures, from Mme de Pompadour to the comte d'Argenson, Saint-Florentin and d'Angiviller, and was widely known in the artistic community, numbering Caylus, Parrocel, Boucher, Massé, Bouchardon and Falconet among her acquaintance. Among naturalists Buffon appreciated her talents.

In a letter to Bernard de Jussieu of 30.VI.1751 (cited Benharrech 2021), Linnaeus sent greetings to Mlle Basseporte (she is mentioned regularly in his correspondence with Paris between 1740 and 1769), asking her for a portrait of Jussieu to be displayed in his museum in Uppsala.

Salutes, quæso, itidem suavissimam dulcissimamque sponsam D[omina]m Bassaport; illa nondum mihi dedit foetum, tamdiu promissum, neque ingenii, neque manus; si posset mihi pingere parvum B[ernhardum] Jussieu in quarto, quem possem Botanici meis interserere in Musei pariete, mihi daret filium gratissimum.

It is unclear if the lost pastel of Jussieu known only from a later print was a response to this request.

Among her pupils was the anatomist Marie-Marguerite Bihéron (1719–1795) who appears to have inherited, or been given, her self-portrait (it was in her own will); in Basseporte's will (7.V.1776, copy AD75 DC 6 274), Bihéron received only two silver candlesticks. Basseporte's artists' materials, studies etc., including “tous les calques marquées, ... , dessins en rouge noir sur papier blanc ou gris, en bleu rehaussé de blanc, toutes les Etudes en pastel quelle a fait d'après nature ou d'après les grands maîtres sur feuilles volantes...” went to another pupil, Louise-Geneviève Dorigny (–1793), of whom nothing is known beyond her death. (The mention of pastel demonstrates that she used the medium throughout her career, while not necessarily for portraiture.) However according to Guiffrey 1885, her heirs were different, and included her cousins in Auxerre, Claude-François Guyon de Vallière (1716–1783), chef de fruiterie chez la reine, among them.

Ratouis de Limay reports six pictures from the artist's posthumous inventory of 5.X.1780 (AN MC/RE/XVIII/14/B; the pictures and prints were valued by Clément Lebel). As these are presumably lost, the Rijksmuseum girl (for which there is no evidence to identify it as the lost self-portrait) is the only example from which we can form any idea of her technique.

To it Toutain-Quittelier has plausibly proposed to add a stylistically similar anonymous pastel (J.9.6063; v. *Éc. fr.*) as a probable copy of a lost Rosalba (of which there is also a version by Vleughels and other anonymous copies).

Bibliography

Bellier de La Chavignerie & Auvray; Benharrech 2021; Léon Bultingaire, *Les Peintres du Jardin du roi au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1928, III, pp. 29–32; Bourin 1907; *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, online; Jean Castilhon & Louis Poinssinet de Sivry, “Notice”, in *Nécrologe des hommes célèbres de France*, ed. Charles Palissot de Montenois, XVI, 1781, repr. *Revue universelle des arts*, XIII, 1861, pp. 139–48; Gault de Saint-Germain 1808, p. 311; Gelbart 2021; Genlis 1828, pp. 46ff; Greer 2001; Guiffrey 1876; Guiffrey 1885, pp. 112–114, doc. CCCXV; Jal 1872; Lemoine-Bouchard 2008; Linnaean correspondence, Alvin database; Los Angeles 1976b, p. 40; Natania Meeker & Antónia Szabari, “Inhabiting flower worlds: the botanical art of Madeleine Françoise Basseporte”, *Arts et savoirs*, 6, 2016 [http://aes.revues.org/757, 12.VII.2016]; Pahin de La Blancherie 1783, p. 72f; Madeleine Pinault-Sorensen, “Les planches du *Spectacle de la nature*...”, in *Écrire la nature au XVIII^e siècle: autour de l'abbé Pluche*, ed. Françoise Grevy & al., Paris, 2006, pp. 142ff; Ratouis de Limay 1910; Ratouis de Limay 1946; Sanchez 2004; Saur

Pastels

J.1304.101 AUTO PORTRAIT, pstl, bordure dorée (l'artiste, inv. p.m. 5.X.1780. Marie-Marguerite Bihéron (1719–1795); testament 1.IV.1784, legs: Mme veuve Marie-Jacques Barrois, née Marie-Marguerite Didot). Lit.: Gelbart 2021, pp. 151, 205 n.r.

≠ *Femme en buste, pstl* (London, Christie's South Kensington, 9.VII.2009, Lot 616 repr., as *autoportrait, attr. Mlle Basseporte*), v. Rinalz

J.1304.103 Mme [Jean] BASSEPORTE [(c. 1789), née Marie-Madeleine Guyon], mère (l'artiste, inv. p.m.)

J.1304.104 Bernard de JUSSIEU (1699–1777), directeur du Jardin des plantes et des jardins du Trianon, pstl

~grav. N. H. Jacob, “d'après le portrait au pastel, peint d'après nature par M^{elle} Basseporte”, for *Galerie française*, 1823, III, p. 206



J.1304.11 Jeune femme, pstl/ppr, 44.5x37, sd *verso*,
"Peinte par Madeleine Basseporte 1727"
(Rijksmuseum SK-A-2119. Acqu. Roos & Co.,
Amsterdam, 30.IV.1900, as Carriera). Lit.: Los
Angeles 1976b, p. 41, n.145, "it seems
possible that it is a self-portrait"; Thiel 1976,
repr.; Toutain-Quittelier 2017b, fig. 218, as
autoportrait, c.1730 [autoportrait; ?evidence]
Φ2δσ



J.1304.112 ~version, pstl, 57x45 (Versailles, Palais
des congrès, 24.XI.1968, Lot 117 repr., attr.
Carriera, inconnue) Φβν



J.1304.127 Tête de jeune fille, pstl, 42x29.8 (de
Livry, premier commis du duc de La Vrillière;
Versailles, 13.I.1772 & seq., Lot 47 part, with
pastel by Hallé, 50 livres 1)

J.1304.131 Deux bustes de femmes avec mains,
œuvres originaux, 56.7x45.9 (l'artiste, inv. p.m.
1780)

J.1304.135 Deux bustes de femmes avec mains,
a/r Carriera, 56.7x45.9 (l'artiste, inv. p.m.
1780)

J.1304.137 [olim J.1396.101] =?Deux très beaux
bustes de femmes, pstl, a/r Carriera (Mesnard
de Clesle; vente p.m., Paris, rue Saint-Étienne,
coin du Boulevard Poissonnière, 1.I.1804 &
seq., Lot 13 n.r., If4)

J.1304.141 Jeune fille tenant un lapin, m/u
~grav. Marie-Jeanne Renard Dubos, publ.
Gaspard Duchange c.1720