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COLSON, Jean-Baptiste Gilles, dit
Verdun 1686 – Paris 1762
Colson, who adopted his mother’s name to avoid the ridicule attached to the commedia dell’arte name of Gilles (or Gille), followed the advice of his relative, the maréchal de Vauban, to pursue an artistic career in the face of his father’s opposition. He went to Paris, where he studied with Joseph Christophe and became a miniaturist. He was commissioned by the duc de Tresmes to produce a series of miniatures of Louis XV intended as diplomatic presents, but this work ceased after a row with cardinal de Fleury. He seems then to have switched to pastel. On 29.V.1720 he married Marthe, daughter of the portrait engraver Gaspard Duchange (her sister married Nicolas Dupuis, another important engraver). They had two sons, the artist Jean-François (q.v.) and the celebrated actor Jean-Claude, known as Bellecour. On 13.V.1720 Colson took on an apprentice for five years, for a premium of 120 livres, one Jacques Lemire, aged 17, the nephew of an ostler (AN MC/XXXVIII/202). An obligation (AN MC/XXXVII/512) records “Jean-Baptiste Gilles de Colson, peintre en miniature de Saint-Luc, demeurant rue Saint-Jean-de-Beauvais” on 18.III.1727.

According to the article in Fontenai’s Dictionnaire (1776), written by Colson fils (whose portrait of his father is in Dijon, mBA), Colson’s own lists included more than 4000 pastels, executed over 24 years of travels in the provinces of France (Avignon, Lyon, Dijon, Grenoble, Toulouse, Marseille). Of these few are now known for certain: only the Dumay couple, portrayed in Dijon in 1754 are signed. The attribution of the portrait of the comte de Toulouse-Lautrec seems plausible, and a group of pastel all showing the same characteristics has now emerged. (Other pastels which have been attributed to him do not share these.)

Apparently he worked fast, the head taking less than two hours and the portraits completed in three sittings. “Ses têtes étoient d’une ressemblance parfaite; elles étoient gracieuses, et ne sentoient nullement le travail et la peine.” He copied the work of Van Loo, Parrocel, Grimoüre and used these compositions as a basis to which he applied the heads of his sitters.

A number of the pastels here attributed to Colson stylistically appear in a distinctive highly burnished gilt Régence frame, with corners of sunflowers and fanned lambrequins. These may have been supplied by the artist.

Bibliography
Bellier de La Chavignerie & Auvray; Bénézit; Chabaud 1916; Lemoine-Bouchard 2008; Ratouis de Limay 1946; Ratouis de Limay 1929e; Fontenai 1776; Sanchez 2004; Saur; Schildof 1964–65; Tourneux 1898; Voreaux 1998


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Dictionary of pastellists before 1800


1.234.104 Charles-Guillaume Le Tellier de Louvois, pstl, 63x52 ov., 1712 (Versailles, Hôtel Rameau, Blache, 13.X.1968, ₣750)

1.234.105 Mme Joachim de Surian (œ 1734), née Jeanne Sauvaire (1710–1782), épouse d’un armateur, premier échevin de Marseille, pstl, 47.5x38.5, inscr. verso (Marseille, Leclerc, 24.V.2019, Lot 57 repr., éc. fr. XIX, est. €600–800) [new attr., ?]


1.234.1093 Homme en habit noir, gilet d’or, pstl/ppr, 46x37 (Paris, Drouot, Le Brech, 28.III.2019, Lot 11 repr., anon., est. €200–300) [new attr.] phi

1.234.1094 Homme en habit bleu galonné d’or, uniforme d’un commis de guerre 1750–70, pstl, 57x46 (Paris, Drouot, De Baecq, 27.III.2019, Lot 36 repr., anon., est. €300–400) [new attr., ?] phi


1.234.1095 Homme en habit violet, manteau bleu, pstl, 55x47 (Samceul Amiqtéris, Beaucaire) [new attr. ] phi

1.234.1101 Homme en habit bleu & pendant: 1.234.1102 Dame en robe blanche, manteau bleu, pstl/ppr, 47.5x38 (Marseille, Maison R&C, 28.II.2018, Lot 36 repr., est. €300–500; Marseille, Maison R&C, 18.IV.2019, Lot 42 repr.) [new attr. 2018] phi

1.234.1103 Portrait, pstl, Salon de Toulouse 1756, no. 50 (M. Reynis 1756)

1.234.111 Portrait, pstl, Salon de Toulouse 1756, no. 54 (M. Reynis 1756)

1.234.112 Portrait, pstl, Salon de Toulouse 1756, no. 237 (M. Roux 1780)