

Online edition

GRATIS, Sébastien

Metz 1.III.1754 – ?p.1799

Also Gratise, Gratien; Sebastian; Sébastien-Auguste-César. The French-born miniaturist was the son of Jean-Baptiste Gratis (– Metz 24.vi.1784), maître menuisier in Metz, and his wife, Élizabéth Lefebvre, who was born and baptised 1.III.1754 in Metz, Saint-Simplice (his forename appears as Bastien in the entry, but his parrain was a Sébastien). By the time a brother was born, Jean-Baptiste-Sébastien (Metz, Saint-Martin, 12.III.1774), his brother signed the register “Sébastien auguste le cesar Gratis”, and required the curé to add the names Auguste Cesar to his sibling’s three forenames. A comparison of that signature with the 1797 marriage register noted below confirms the identification, first published here in 2021.

He was known for his portraits of the French royal family which were engraved widely. The inscription on a 1788 self-portrait painting suggests that it was made in France; the dedication may identify the sitter, perhaps Mme de La Varinière, who may have been Marie-Marguerite-Élizabéth Haffner, the wife of Pierre-Jacques de La Varinière (–1789), artificier du roi; their only son was born in 1774.

Gratis was active also in the court of Köln before coming to London, where he adopted the spelling Sébastien Gratise and exhibited miniatures at the Society of Artists and the Royal Academy 1790–95. Most of the sitters were unidentified, but the “Elector of Cologne” (Marie-Antoinette’s brother, Maximilian Franz) and “Mme Khrumpholtz” were named in the catalogues. The harpist Anne-Marie Steckler, the daughter of an instrument maker from Metz, married the composer Johann Baptist Krumpholtz but eloped to London with Dussek. Several prints after his portrait of Marie-Antoinette were issued.

The inscription on a miniature self-portrait (art market 2016) provides some biographical details:

S^{bn} Gratis, peintre de la cour de cologne et Royale academien de londres a peint son portrait l’année 1790 au mois de juillet mois memorable a tout bon francais. ce portrait vous crie vive la constitution vive la liberté. Ma rue great windmille street hay market paroisse de St James.

A passage in the *Public advertiser*, 4.III.1791 announced that—

Three celebrated French artists, in different ways, have lately come to this kingdom, M. Mesnier in oil, M. de Creux in crayon, and M. Gratis in miniature painting. The little encouragement given to the arts in the present state of their country has made them emigrate, in hopes of finding that encouragement in this kingdom, which it has ever been ready to afford to men of merit in every way.

One wit had already remarked of “M. Gratis and M. Mosnier” (in the same paper, 4.II.1791) “J’espère que le premier ne peindra pas ici suivant *son nom*, & que l’autre de sera pas reduit de vivre *d’aumones*.”

Gratise did not however leave as quickly as Mosnier or Ducreux. On 30.XI.1796 he gave evidence at the Old Bailey in the trial of one Ann Kelby for theft of two diamond rings from a Mrs King. On 20.IX.1797 he married the illiterate

Elizabeth Benn at St Martin-in-the-Fields (the allegation made two days earlier describes him as a miniature painter). The RA catalogues give his addresses as 55 Great Windmill Street, 1790; 132 Pall Mall, 1792–93 and 10 St Alban’s Street, 1795. The rate books show him at St Albans Street East in 1795–97, in a house with a rental value of £45, the second highest in the street. He is not heard of later.

Bibliography

AKL; Foskett; Goodden 1999; Schidloff 1964; Gerrit Walczak, “Die Französische Revolution und der Kunstmarkt Englands: Jean-Laurent Mosnier in der Londoner Emigration”, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, LXIX, 2006, p. 41

Pastels

J3576.101 AUTOPORTRAIT painting the portrait of a lady, pstl/ppr, 35x44, sd \nearrow “gratis pint/par lui/meme/1788”, inscr. *verso* “Dedic á madame De la Varriniere/par son très/humble serviteur/S. Gratis” (Köln, Lempertz, 5.vi.2021, Lot 2103 repr., est. €3500–4500; Mülheim, Wettmann, 28.v.2022, Lot 4 repr., est. €1800; Essen, Wettmann, 31.viii.2022, Lot 95 repr., est. €1400) ϕ



Portraits in other media

Autoportrait, miniature, 8.5x7 ov. (Brest, Adjug’art, Yves Cosqueric, 30.x.2012, Lot 169. Philip Mould 2016. London, Chiswick Auctions, 20.III.2018, Lot 63)