

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastelists before 1800*

Online edition

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LA TOUR, Maurice-Quentin de

Saint-Quentin 1704–1788

Maurice-Quentin de La Tour was the most important pastelists of the eighteenth century. His œuvre consists almost entirely of pastel portraits of his subjects, both final works and the numerous préparations in chalk, occasionally with some pastel. He exhibited more pastels (and more portraits) at the official Paris salons than any other artist during the eighteenth century, and his importance has inevitably made him the subject of much scholarly attention. This has yielded limited information about some of the most interesting questions. The biographical details of a handful of more or less contemporary sources (Mariette’s sensible account, written in 1772, is the most useful, but is not without error; Duplaquet’s eulogy is overblown and second-hand; while Bucelly d’Estrées adds useful detail, it is too late to be reliable, and is not independent of Duplaquet) have been endlessly repeated and embellished, and inferences from casual observations developed beyond sense. The basic biographical facts were largely established by George Wildenstein’s 1928 monograph (“B&W”). The apparent wealth of salon criticism turns out to be largely repetitive, although this has not prevented it (and some of the better known portraits) being overanalysed from slanted academic fashions. The challenge of establishing the œuvre securely has nevertheless largely been ignored, with scholars, daunted by the virtual impossibility of establishing a reliable chronology, showing little interest in this task. The main tool remains connoisseurship, and the primary resource the body of information we attempt to gather in the worklists below and in our expanded and updated version of B&W’s tabular presentation of documents, the [CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE](#) (documents found there are referenced here by date alone).

The name

A somewhat pointless debate over the proper spelling of his name (de La Tour, de Latour, Delatour etc.) has already taken too much space; the “Delatour” which appears in some contemporary documents may be more strictly accurate, but de La Tour is accepted so widely (Debie 1991 and Debie & Salmon 2000, as well as the major retrospective La Tour 2004; he is indexed under L in all standard art historical dictionaries, the BnF and Getty ULAN) that the

solecism, if such it be, is followed here. D’Alembert called him Latour, while Voltaire addressed him as de la tour. One should note that the flexibilities of handwriting allowed subtleties such as the discernable gaps between the nevertheless cursive De_la_tour seen in a letter to Belle de Zuylen, or the distinct capital in DelaTour on his 29.XI.1774 expert report, found again in the codicil to his will and on the Académie register, 27.VI.1778. (La Tour’s brother Charles also signed De_La_Tour: 12.IX.1761.) A similar progression may be seen in his father’s increasingly elaborate penmanship: by the time (28.III.1726) of the baptism of the pastelists’ half-brother Jean-François, his father was clearly separating the particle from “La Tour”, as did his own father Jean de La Tour, a maître maçon. Jean’s signature is found in numerous parish registers, usually accompanied by his monogram (which may also be his mason’s mark), JLT in a circle.

Family background

Parish records for Saint-Michel, Laon indicate that Jean de La Tour was literate and a respected member of the community in that he appears as witness or parrain on numerous deeds. His eldest son François (the artist’s father) was a musician; he is said to have served in the army (as trompette in the duc du Maine’s company in the élite régiment des carabiniers, but this relies on a single document from 1684 in which his forenames are given as Jean-François, and should probably be disregarded) before becoming a “chantre” at Saint-Quentin. He is also recorded (according to a document which has not been located, and is also probably a confusion) as ingénieur-géographe, presenting an aerial view of Saint-Quentin to the Église royale there in 1712 (this said to have inspired his son’s first effort in drawing in 1718). By 1719 François was a maître écrivain (his relative, Denis Deschamps, maître écrivain in Laon, fought a legal case over his exercise of this protected profession; Denis’s brother Pierre was also a maître écrivain, in Vailly-sur-Aisne).

Families could ascend and descend the social hierarchy: what is remarkable is that La Tour retained contact with so many of his relatives who remained in humble occupations. The fact that La Tour mentions a large number of his “cousins” in his wills (made in 1768 and 1784) suggests that the exact relationships are worth exploring, and a number of links have now been established from parish records (Jeffares 2016j). The family circumstances were clearly artisanal, if educated, rather than haut bourgeois, on both sides. Of La Tour’s mother Reine little was known until Jeffares 2016j demonstrated that she came from Noyon, where her father Louis Havart was a tapissier and her mother Anne Joret (aunt of the Raphaël Jorret in La Tour’s will) came from a family of tailleurs. Reine was the niece of Charles Havart, a tapissier who settled in Saint-Quentin. Pierre Avart (as the name was spelt in Saint-Quentin, but not in Laon) was surely his son, but was a mere manoeuvrier, or labourer; his daughter Agathe married Claude-Nicolas Baudemont, a mulquinier or weaver (parents of the young girls who were mentioned in La Tour’s will, as also

was Agathe’s aunt Joseph [sic]); Pierre’s sister married Louis Deruys or Deruis (various misspellings arise from the numerous illegible occurrences in parish registers), whose father was a Latin teacher but who was himself first a manoeuvrier and then a jardinier, while his son Jean-Baptiste was another mulquinier.

On his father’s side there were several connections with the Garbe family of blacksmiths. La Tour’s paternal grandmother Marie was the daughter of François Garbe (1610–1678), maréchal ferrant in Laon; her brother Nicolas married Elisabeth, Jean de La Tour’s niece, while Marie’s sister Marguerite married Pierre Caton, a tapissier in Laon; their daughter Anne-Françoise married écrivain Denis Deschamps, father of La Tour’s subject chanoine Claude-Charles Deschamps; one of the canon’s half-sisters, Noëlle, married an Augustin Masse, marchand de tabac à Paris: their daughter Charlotte Masse married Jean-Robert Dorison, the son of a tailor from Saint-Denis (Dorison’s sister, also Charlotte, married a Michel Deschamps, perruquier à Saint-Denis). Confusingly Augustin Masse seems not to have been related to the marchand orfèvre, Grégoire III Masse, who, in 1752, married the sister of Dufloquet, comte de Réals, a senior cavalry officer: that Mme Masse was another La Tour subject, but not a relative.

This environment of tailleurs and tapissiers (textiles were the lifeblood of Saint-Quentin at the time) may well have cultivated the eye of the portraitist. Although La Tour’s half-brother Jean-François was to become an officer in the élite regiment of gendarmes bourguignons (he is named as lieutenant in that regiment in La Tour’s 1768 will and in the 1775 conveyance of his mother’s house, though his name does not appear in the État militaire), the artist’s influence at court was no doubt responsible for this. However La Tour’s elder brother Charles had obtained a position as directeur des vivres en Italie by 1736, before the artist had any such power; Charles, whom La Tour evidently admired (see his letter to Marigny of 21.VII.1766, after Charles’s death), seems to have caught the eye of the war minister d’Angervilliers and was sent to Corsica for several years in 1738 in a senior capacity.

Early years

La Tour left his native Saint-Quentin by the age of 15. According to tradition, on his arrival in Paris La Tour sought advice from the engraver Nicolas Tardieu who sent him to several artists, of whom Louis de Boullogne is reputed to have shown the most interest in his raw talent. His initial training was under the painter Dupouch (not Spoede, a confusion arising from Mariette; curiously Spoede, *q.v.*, is known to have worked in pastel, while there is no evidence that Dupouch did so). Marandet 2002 published the six-year contract of apprenticeship with Dupouch from 12.X.1719, which indeed was arranged by Tardieu, and included substantial penalties for unnotified absences. Dupouch’s output included history and religious paintings and some portraits, all of fairly modest achievement; he also probably dealt in pictures. He was the son of Jean Dupouch (–p.1713),

maître peintre, quai Pelletier, and his wife Marie-Madeleine Lefèvre (–1713) who was connected with the pastelist Jean-Baptiste Lefèvre (*q.v.*) and with the father of Vernezobre (*q.v.*). Dupouch married the widow of a minor painter, and after her death (1743) was connected with the niece of Oudry (*v. Lefèvre genealogy*).

La Tour is said (but the cliché is applied to most pastellists of this era) to have devoted himself to pastel following Carriera's visit to Paris in 1720–21 (he made two not very accomplished copies after her famous morceaux de réception, one of which may have inspired his own 1737 *autoportrait à l'index*); Duplaquet also appears to be the source for the suggestion that La Tour turned to pastels at this time because his health had suffered from exposure to oil paint. If so, perhaps that was the motivation for breaking his apprenticeship, which had evidently happened by the end of 1722, since his cousin Anne Bougier (an illiterate *tricoteuse de bas*) bore his illegitimate son the following August, and testified that La Tour was living at Saint-Quentin. La Tour's part in that incident, which came back to haunt his later years (*v. infra* for his charitable foundation), is known from Anne's testimony at her trial for concealing her pregnancy, an offence treated as infanticide under an edict of 1566. In this she claimed to be 22, just three years older than La Tour (she was fined only 3 livres); her baptismal entry has not yet been located. Anne's mother, Marie-Anne de La Tour, was just 12 when she married Philippe Bougier in 1695; like his brother-in-law François, the 26-year-old widower was also a chanteur in the church. Tourneux 1904a confused the matter by conflating her with a Marie-Anne Bruge, Mme Bécasse who died in 1740 aged 45; although the age would explain her mother's early marriage, the spelling, as well as a 1728 baptismal entry for the Bécasse couple, contradicts the identification.

La Tour is often said to have attended the congress of Cambrai in 1724–25. These reports all originate with Duplaquet (the English newspaper cited in Debric & Salmon 2000, p. 27 n.12 as independent confirmation is the 1790 *World* obituary which is drawn exclusively from Duplaquet and reappears as the *éloge* later published in the *Almanach littéraire* in 1792), who elaborates that he portrayed the wife of the Spanish ambassador (B&W's carelessness with “ambassadrice” has been universally copied), in pastel (another contradiction within Duplaquet's narrative); and that he travelled afterwards to London with the British ambassador who provided him with accommodation; according to Mariette, La Tour moved on from London and returned to Paris because his travelling companion had died. (This might conceivably refer to Lord Whitworth, who after Cambrai returned to his house in Gerard Street, London where he died on 23.X.1725.) However the evidence for this trip, and its duration, appears thin; the Cambrai pastel series is I think correctly attributed to Birochon (*q.v.*); it seems fairly plausible that he got to London, but his attendance at Cambrai is probably a simple confusion. (The Birochon series, being in pastel, might simply have been attributed to La Tour for that reason alone, and Duplaquet extrapolated erroneously.) As for the duration of his stay, Mariette indicates only a few months, while it has been inferred that he stayed until 1727 from du Plaquet, who states that he arrived in Paris at the age of 23, but as he also seems to imply that this was his first appearance in the capital, his statement should be disregarded. (Another report of La Tour being in London in

1751, in a letter from his pupil Katherine Read, *q.v.*, to her brother, seems scarcely more credible.) In any case La Tour was back in Paris by 1727, where he remained except for a trip to Holland in 1766 and his return to Saint-Quentin at the end of his life.

As well as Dupouch, La Tour also received advice from Restout, later describing him to Diderot as the only artist of stature who was able to communicate effectively.

Early works

Lépicier's publication in 1734 of an engraving of La Tour's pastel of Richer de Rhodes de La Morlière provides the starting point for his securely accepted work, although he was by then 30 years of age. (A portrait of Mme de Boulogne from 1733 is documented but lost.) Prints of Fontenelle and the actor Thomassin (*v. infra*) must also date to this period. It is not immediately clear on what basis La Tour practised before his agrément at the Académie royale in 1737; his apprenticeship had been with a member of the Académie de Saint-Luc, but he is not recorded as a member himself. Unresolved questions remain about his early steps: a pastel of the comte de Manissis (*v. Éc. fr.*) has some elements in common with both the early *préparation* of Voltaire (Saint-Quentin) and one of the two “Birochon” groups; but, although an argument can be advanced based on elements such as the drawing of the mouths, the application of the pastel is quite different. The circumstances which led Voltaire to commission his portrait from a virtually unknown artist (Cabezas 2009b) may have depended on the fortunate proximity of La Tour's atelier in the hôtel Jabach to his neighbour, the abbé Moussinot, Voltaire's agent in Paris. The sittings took place in April 1735; the portrait and its engravings transformed La Tour's reputation. La Tour remained in communication with Voltaire for some years (the reported letter from Voltaire to La Tour of 24.VII.1775 is however a confusion).

Possibly slightly earlier is La Tour's first portrait of his friend, the abbé Huber, a member of Swiss family of bankers who had converted to Catholicism and was taken up by the Cardinal de Rohan in the 1720s and by Chauvelin. An adventurer who belongs (and actually appears) in the pages of Smollett, from the 1730s he was close to Le Riche de La Popelinière, Paris de Montmartel and Philibert Orry; in the absence of documents we can only speculate how such contacts may have helped La Tour (the abbé left La Tour, “que j'ay toujours chéri comme mon enfant et dont je respecte autant la vertu que j'admire les talents”, an apparently valuable estate when he died in 1744, but this proved onerous and was disclaimed in favour of an annuity of 2000 livres, which in turn remained under discussion with the executor until 1770).

Another early work must have been the lost portrait of the Italian comedian known as Thomassin, who died in 1738. It is known only from an etching by the obscure T. Bertrand, who it is here suggested (2018) was Thomas Bertrand, son of the sculpteur Philippe Bertrand (1663–1724), an associate of René Frémin, subject of one of La Tour's most brilliant early pastels.

La Tour at the Académie royale

Agréé 1737, *requ* 1746, conseiller 1751, La Tour exhibited regularly at the Salons until 1773, omitting only 1765 (in 1759 he appeared in the *livret* but withdrew his exhibits as we was dissatisfied with the hang, according to Diderot): about 120 pastels in all, some 60% of which are

known today. From a letter of 19.II.1740 from the duc d'Aumont, in charge of the Menus plaisirs, we know that Madame Adélaïde borrowed La Tour's portrait (perhaps the 1737 self-portrait). He had an apartment in the Louvre from 1745 (he moved to another in 1750, the brevet being erroneously reported in numerous sources as an appointment to the title of “peintre du roi”, to which of course he was already entitled). His dominant position was already established by the 1741 Salon, where he exhibited the monumental portrait of the président de Rieux. La Tour's relationship with de Rieux was established as early as 1738, when he was commissioned to portray the niece of the magistrate's wife, Mlle de La Fontaine-Solare; and the artist became an habitué of de Rieux's château de Passy.

It was not until the following year that La Tour was finally *requ*. In 1737 he had been set portraits of François Lemoyne and Jean-Baptiste Restout. Lemoyne committed suicide a few days later, and Jean-Baptiste Van Loo was nominated instead: but his departure to London and later return to his native Provence created a further hurdle, before La Tour finally submitted Restout for his reception. Later (31.X.1750) he also presented the portrait of Dumont le Romain as a gift; it is often erroneously described as a *morceau de réception* – Salmon 2018, p. 169, argues that La Tour needed to present a second piece to advance to the level of conseiller, but there is no obvious mechanism for this within the rules of the Académie, and he may instead have given it in order to be able to retrieve the Restout which he wanted to “improve”.

Stuart commissions

Apart from work for the French royal family, La Tour was commissioned to make portraits of the exiled Stuart princes which have subsequently caused much confusion. A pastel of Henry, Duke of York must have been made some time in advance of the 1747 salon where it was exhibited: it shows the prince in military guise, although Henry had already (25.V.1747) reached Rome having decided to abandon such a role in favour of the Church: he was created a cardinal weeks later. It was more likely to have been made after Henry's arrival in Paris, shortly after the victory at Prestonpan in .IX.1745, while he was trying to raise support for the Jacobite rebellion, but before he left Paris in .XII.1745 for Boulogne, where he remained until .V.1746 when he was permitted to serve at the siege of Antwerp as aide-de-camp to the comte de Clermont; at the conclusion of that siege, in .VII.1746, Henry was sent to Navarre (Bongie 1986, p. 130). (It is probably mere coincidence that La Tour exhibited in the same salon pastels of Henry, Clermont and Maurice de Saxe, who took Brussels at the beginning of 1746.)

A pastel of Charles Edward Stuart was exhibited in 1748 (as “prince Edouard”, to distinguish him from prince Charles de Lorraine) but lost: the numerous copies show that the portrait must have been extremely similar to the earlier pastel, with which it has been repeatedly confused. Its timing too was curious: when the salon opened, Charles was to be expelled from France under the terms of the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (although not signed until 19.X.1748, its terms were already known). Both pastels are closest to La Tour's portraits of Louis XV: that of Henry, with the raised arm reminiscent of Rigaud, closer to the 1745 pastel of the king, while Charles follows the more conventional pose of the 1748 pastel.

La Tour at the salons

In each salon from 1738, La Tour was always the object of critical discussion, and almost always praised beyond his rivals. The 1741 portrait of the president de Rieux was described by Mariette as an “ouvrage de la plus longue haleine et qu'on n'en avoit point vu au pastel de pareille taille.” Mariette went on to describe the portrait of Duval de l'Épinoy shown at the 1745 Salon as “le triomphe de la peinture en pastel”.

One widely overlooked salon critique, the letter to the author of the *Jugemens sur quelques ouvrages nouveaux* (IX, 1745, pp. 291ff), even alleged that a cabal of académiciens had formed; jealous of his success, they had propagated the idea that pastel was an inferior medium.

Also overlooked until recently are the references to La Tour in the correspondence of Mme de Graffigny with her friend Devaux. Writing of the salon de 1742 (which she visited with Nicolas Vennevault, *q.n.*), she picked out La Tour pastels as masterpieces, “surtout le sien, peint avec un chapeau à point d'Espagne, detroussé d'un côté, qui lui fait un ombre sur le visage. C'est un morceau parfait: je ne pouvois m'en arracher.” Six years later she was horrified when she asked him about the piece: it had been intended for the Uffizi, he told her (this appears to be the only mention of this plausible commission; the pastel there purporting to be La Tour is unconvincing), but he had foolishly shown it to Louis XV, whose enthusiasm was not what La Tour hoped for; accordingly he tore it to pieces.

At the same encounter (7.VII.1748), Graffigny asked to see La Tour's large pastel of Mme de Pompadour, which had already (earlier than most researchers had known) become famous. La Tour told her that he had also destroyed that (“Il l'a encore brulé parce qu'il avoit donné un faux trait”), although it was of a size to have commanded a fee of 10,000 livres. Whether La Tour should be taken literally is unclear. The pastel now in the Louvre was not exhibited until 1755; it shows the addition of a new head on a separate sheet.

Diderot admired La Tour and his unrivalled ability to understand the mechanism of physiognomy and gaze; but his phrase, “machiniste merveilleux”, has been repeated uncritically. The full sentence was “Ce peintre n'a jamais rien produit de verve, il a le génie du technique, c'est un machiniste merveilleux”; Diderot hints at an emotional vacuum.

La Tour's clientèle

La Tour's subjects ranged from the royal family, whom he depicted in majestic poses with somewhat idealised faces, to his circle of artistic and intellectual friends, whose portraits in contrast reflect spontaneity and warmth. His many self-portraits occupy a central place in his œuvre. His clientèle extended to many of the leading figures from the worlds of diplomacy, war, politics, finance, music and literature. (These categories have provided the basic structure for recent studies of his work; however to pursue them properly requires the prosopographic approach only possible in the context of the complete catalogue with supporting genealogies attempted here.)

It is also clear that the choice of clients for La Tour was as important as the choice of artist for the client: the prestige from exhibiting a portrait of a great man was greatly valued, as is clear from d'Alembert's account of the pastel that La Tour did not make of Montesquieu (*Éloge de Montesquieu*: v. .XI.1755). Again, in a letter to Mme Du Deffand of 27.I.1753, d'Alembert wrote that “Latour a voulu absolument faire

mon portrait”, suggesting that, while he may have wanted to overcharge wealthy financiers, he was as anxious to establish his credentials as painter of the intelligentsia as many of them were to have their portraits shown in public.

The narratives of the versions of La Tour's portraits of Rousseau remain confused despite numerous iconographical studies as well as a good many contemporary documents, from the former's testaments as well as the latter's correspondence. (La Tour's name also appears among the recipients of presentation copies of a number of Rousseau's books, and they remained friends for many years.) The finest surviving pastel may be that in Saint-Quentin from the artist's studio, which may or may not be the primary version was shown in the Salon of 1753. Rousseau promised an (autograph) copy of it to Mme d'Épinay in 1757, the artist planning to bring it to Montmorency, but before the réplique was ready, Rousseau had quarrelled with Mme d'Épinay, and instead he gave it the duc and duchesse de Luxembourg. In 1762 Rousseau told Mme de Verdelin that La Tour had only made two versions, of which he knew only the Luxembourg location; the other might be the one she had seen with Jullienne. Two letters from Rousseau's printer Pierre Guy dated .XII.1763 make it quite clear that the Cathelin engraving showing Rousseau in Aremian dress was based on a version altered by La Tour himself, copied from clothing worn by real Armenians he had summoned; of this version no trace is now known. La Tour gave this or another version to Rousseau in 1764; it travelled from Paris to Môtiers securely wrapped to that Mme Alissan de La Tour was unable to inspect it when she facilitated its despatch. This was later said to have been given to Mme Boy de La Tour (the version now in the musée Jean-Jacques Rousseau at Montmorency), but an alternative narrative is that Rousseau sent it to Earl Marischal in Potsdam in 1765. La Tour's image was the only portrait of him that met with Rousseau's approval (“M. de la Tour est le seul qui m'ait peint ressemblant”) he wrote to Rey in 1770, dismissing the suggestion that Liotard's small pastel be engraved), and he distributed so many copies of the La Tour engravings that by 1765 his publisher had run out of copies. A vast number of pastel copies are known, of varied quality.

While pastel portraiture appealed in particular to the recently ennobled or moneyed classes, and more to the noblesse de robe than to the noblesse de l'épée, La Tour's reputation meant that the oldest established aristocracy also turned to him.

We also have the enigmatic record in the private accounts of prince Xavier de Saxe that (in .VI.1759) the Saxon ambassador paid 2 louis d'or to “les domestiques de M. de Latour, peintre”, quite possibly an inducement for the sitting to be arranged with a possibly reluctant artist notorious for his disdain for royal sitters.

Later years

The death of the dauphin in 1765 and his widow two years later marked the end of La Tour's work for the royal family, and a general falling-off in his output occurred throughout that decade. In a letter concerning the abbé Huber's legacy (6.XI.1770) he alludes to an injury to his eye of which nothing more is known, but which may have caused him to make his first will in 1768. It is evident from his surviving correspondence, which includes a number of what he aptly termed “jérémiades”, and from numerous contemporary accounts, that La

Tour's bizarre personality amounted to a psychiatric disorder (perhaps today it might be diagnosed as bipolar disease, but there may be elements of autism as well), which towards the end of his life had become disabling. That ultimately led to his retiring to Saint-Quentin under the care of his half-brother and the distressing accounts of his interdiction for mental incapacity.

Technical features

Despite the annotation on a copy of the 1743 livret (often attributed to Mariette) claiming that the portrait of René Frémin was completed in seven days, La Tour never employed the rapid, graphic attack of his rival Perronneau. La Tour's perfectionist technique (discussed in illuminating correspondence, in particular in letters to Marigny, 1.VIII.1763, and Belle de Zuylen, 14.IV.1770) was achieved through an individual style that synthesizes the graphic tradition practised by artists such as Perronneau with the stumped, painterly finish of Vivien or Nattier. He proceeded through a series of préparations to study various aspects of his sitters' expressions, aiming to enliven his portraits with fleeting glimpses of his sitters' personalities rather than relying on the mythological or official trappings employed by his rivals. These studies often commenced with simple monochrome outlines; a second préparation would then add colour, often setting the face against a shaded halo, leaving the rest of the paper uncovered. The process in relation to one portrait, that of Belle de Zuylen which La Tour undertook on his trip to The Netherlands in 1766, is unfolded not only in his own letters but those of the sitter herself. La Tour worked, not in Slot Zuylen itself, but Groenesteyn nearby (the property of Belle's uncle) where she went each morning for a three-hour session. La Tour engaged her attention through his lively and witty conversation. After a month however he abandoned the first version of the portrait, and made another (presumably that now in Geneva). The first préparation, which came to light only in 2015, gives some indication of what was lost in the Geneva pastel. La Tour made another préparation five years later, in Paris, but no finished portrait seems to have emerged.

The palette in his finished portraits was somewhat conventional, the predominant colours being pinks, blues and whites; colour, while often bold, is always controlled. Typically blue hatching is used on temples and jowls. Often La Tour adds linear, zig-zag highlights of directly applied lines over patches of stumped colour, providing apparently spontaneous touches of sheer brilliance whose effects derive from the optical reflection characteristics of pastel (to borrow William Empson's phrase, “The careless ease always goes in last”). His unrivalled mastery of the textures of the human face, fabrics and accessories in no way detracted from the overall conception or psychological penetration of his finished works; balance is always maintained. His lighting is subtle, frequently using the technique he learnt from Restout of “faire tourner une tête et à faire circuler l'air entre la figure et le fond en reflétant le côté éclairé sur le fond, et le fond sur le côté ombré”.

La Tour eschewed the extreme deconstructionist approach evident in Chardin and Perronneau, but the degree to which his hatching is allowed to remain visible ranged between extremes from the smooth, “caressée” style of the duc de Villars to the brutal Davidian style which is “plus soucieuse de vérité que de

charme” (Ratouis de Limay). But this range does not seem to correspond with specific periods in his career, and is even found in works done at the same time (“M. de La Tour, qui observe mieux la nature, ... varie comme elle” according to the abbé Le Blanc reviewing the 11 quite different submissions to the 1747 Salon), thus providing little assistance with the dating of his works, which (other than by relation to salons or other external points) remains exceptionally difficult. (The rumour at the time was that La Tour had bribed Le Blanc with his own portrait to induce him to attack La Font de Saint-Yonne’s *Réflexions*.)

In the 1746 Salon, for example, his portraits of Restout and Montmartel were contrasted: the first, intended for connoisseurs, used deliberate hatching; while the universal appeal of the second was due to a more finished effect. (The differences between the tight and free handling in two autoportraits, J.46.1101, J.46.1096, are illustrated in Moreau-Vauthier 1913, pl. xii, opp. p. 104; *v.g.* “Finir”, *Encyclopédie méthodique*.) The critic Baillet de Saint-Julien explained at some length why the use of deliberate hatching (by both La Tour and Perronneau) designed to be seen at some distance was justified in the imitation of nature, in much the same way as a dramatist would exaggerate emotions in the theatre. By the Salon of 1753, 17 of the 18 pastels shown displayed a new style, according to the critic Pierre Estève, in that their colours were not fully blended, and had to be viewed at a distance; this seems just to have been a development of the tendency already observed in earlier salons, and the objection was dismissed as imaginary by another critic who argued that any differences reflected the diversity of La Tour’s subjects.

It remains today easier to identify his work on the basis of pose and composition than on handling as such. For the lawyer Beaucousin, writing about the 1763 Salon, La Tour’s works could not be recognised by their style or handling, but only by their extreme perfection which he compared to the clarity of Pascal’s thinking.

La Tour is also famous for ruining his works by later alterations in an attempt to improve them. The portraits of Restout and Dumont le Romain in the Louvre (now damaged beyond repair) evidence this, with the procès-verbaux evidencing his borrowing the works long after they were completed. It is often thought that this occurred after senility had set in, but Katherine Read’s 1751 letter indicates that his habit was ingrained far earlier:

I don’t doubt of his getting money by his great merit and great price, not from his quantity of work, unless he leaves off that custom of rubbing out which he practised but too much, although I can scarce blame it in him as a fault, as it proceeded from an over delicacy of Taste and not from a light headedness as was alleged, for he has no more of that about him than is natural to and becoming a French man.

If La Tour’s handling of the chalks was varied, the same cannot be said of his compositions, to which the critics of the 1748 Salon objected as surprisingly (and boringly) uniform for an artist of such talent. While many portraitists re-used successful poses for different clients, La Tour was not above doing so in public, for prestigious clients: Marie-Josèphe de Saxe, in the pastel exhibited in 1761, holds her fan in exactly the same way as her mother-in-law shown in 1748. His restraint may have been intentional: La Tour is supposed to have said (in a theatrical review by PJ in *L’Artiste*, XIV, 1837, p. 135, the source unknown): “Il faut semer un

tableau d’effets et non pas l’en paver.” In some of the larger compositions errors of perspective are evident, a deficiency of which La Tour himself was well aware: he alludes to it in the postscript to his letter to d’Angiviller of 4.VII.1778.

La Tour (aside from two juvenile copies after Rosalba) never embraced the mythological genre of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries such as Nattier or Hubert Drouais: the abbé Gougenot (1748, p 115), applauding the demise of historical or pastoral garb, suggests “On en est redevable à M. de la Tour, qui le premier s’est fait une règle de peindre ses Portraits avec les habits ordinaires.”

La Tour’s works are never signed. He left no account books.

Anecdotes about the artist’s character

The stories illustrating La Tour’s awkward character and eccentricities are too numerous and unreliable to be repeated here (they can largely be found in the early biographies, where it is possible to trace the inflation of tropes as the stories are transmitted; but recent discoveries include several stories in the letters of Mme de Graffigny); they usually reflect the self-confidence of the autodidact extending himself beyond the sphere of his genius (Marmontel noted that La Tour, “le cerveau brouillé de politique et de morale...croiyait raisonner savamment...et se trouvait humilié lorsqu’on lui parlait de peinture”; other stories abound of his intellectual pretensions), or the genuine concern for talented artists to be recognised (and recompensed) in a society whose hierarchies were based on birth and wealth: he took a Robin Hood approach, believing that, as Marie Fel put it, “les riches devoit payer pour les pauvres.” Mme de Graffigny relates asking to see the famous work in progress in .VII.1748, only to be told by La Tour that, although it was of a size that would command a fee of 10,000 livres, he had burned it since he had made “un faux trait”. She concluded that he was mad. Mme de Genlis’s story (undated) of La Tour’s riddle about how he got from Paris to Passy without walking, swimming or using any horse or carriage merely shows him to have been tiresome.

Fees

Famously for the Pompadour pastel he demanded the unprecedented price of 48,000 livres, but this was not paid in full. This was not the sole example of overcharging: soon after his portrait was painted, Voltaire fulminated that La Tour demanded a further 4800 livres (possibly a misreading of 1800, but still a very large amount) for two copies “worth 10 écus”. Much later, in 1762 his portrait of the duc de Berry was estimated at 2400 livres, but when finally settled, in 1765, an order for 3000 livres was issued (La Tour’s letter to Marigny of 7.X.1763 suggests that he had agreed to reduce the price of each royal pastel from 3000 to 2000 livres); however, this was not immediately payable in cash, and Cochin, writing on La Tour’s behalf (7.X.1765), obtained an advance of 1200 livres.

Finances

Confusions in the royal accounts obscure the financial success of La Tour’s business, which is perhaps more evident in the investments he made: two annuities amounting to 6300 livres per annum on capital of 63,000 livres were purchased in 1765 alone, and La Tour’s 1768 will lists income of 19,750 livres (although by then his accounts may not be accurate). The property speculation by Pierre Salles which La Tour and his brother Charles financed, leading to losses

and claims on the guarantor (*v.* 12.IX.1761), confirm a considerable level of affluence, as well as carelessness (La Tour was unable to produce evidence of payments received). However the position may have been a little more complicated: for example, B&W report that c.1770 La Tour bought the house at Auteuil of which he had been a tenant for many years, selling it in 1772 for 30,000 livres: in fact he was forced to cede the property since he had been unable to pay the outstanding purchase price, which was paid by the purchaser to the original vendor.

La Tour’s friends: artists

La Tour’s genuine altruism towards his fellow artist was evidenced by the story told by Cochin in his life of the modest and unassuming Parrocel, where in 1743 La Tour intervened to secure him a royal pension (in the 1746 Salon, no. 55, Parrocel exhibited a sketch belonging to La Tour, possibly a token of gratitude; La Tour had a small collection of paintings by his friends: among those mentioned in his brother’s will were works by Carle Van Loo, Wouwermans, Greuze, and possibly Vien). Apart from Cochin, the intimate circle around Parrocel included also Silvestre and Jean-Baptiste Lemoine (La Tour’s friendship with whom is attested in Vigée Le Brun’s *Souvenirs*): Lemoine owned a copy of La Tour’s portrait of Parrocel, and who portrayed and was portrayed by La Tour, twice; the second of these was included in the Salon de 1763 “sous le même numéro” with another of La Tour’s intimate friends, the abbé Pommyer.

From about 1750, La Tour had a liaison with the singer Marie Fel which lasted more than 30 years until senility forced his retreat to his family in Saint-Quentin in 1784. His first will was made in 1768 and made numerous bequests to family members and fellow artists. On 25.VI.1783 he nominated a dentist, Furcy-Georges Le Roy, as executor in place of the abbé Pommyer (whose appointment is unrecorded). In .II.1784 he made a much longer will including a very large number of beneficiaries, ranging from Marie Fel to Benjamin Franklin (both of whom were portrayed around this time by Ducreux, *q.v.*). While this included clients and friends, in places it looks as though La Tour was simply listing every member of the Académie royale as well as other groups of scientists etc. The writing was so erratic that it was criticised by the magistrates examining the document after his death. Four months later, in .VI.1784 (and possibly in retaliation for the methods employed to induce him to return to Saint-Quentin), La Tour issued (in several copies) a revocation of all his wills and codicils, sending sealed copies to notaries in Saint-Quentin and Paris. This led to a series of notarial examinations in the days after his death, when Le Roy and Brichard, the Paris notary, first produced the 1784 will and then Jean-François de La Tour had it set aside on production of the second codicil.

Marie Fel corresponded with La Tour’s brother, advising him in 1785 of a risk of smoke damage to La Tour’s pastels at Chaillot according to a report by Pierre Pasquier. When she died at Chaillot in 1794, she left everything to Jean-François de La Tour, with Pasquier as executor; as he was then imprisoned, Dorison acted for him.

Philanthropy

La Tour had already put in place a number of philanthropic initiatives in his home town, notably the creation of an école gratuite de dessin as well as donations for the benefit of poor women in confinement and old artisans in

Saint-Quentin unable to earn their living. He was careful to stipulate, however, in rather detailed provisions governing the benefactions, that the recipients should not be immoral or of bad character; his continuing attempts to manage his benefactions led to lengthy quarrels with the municipal authorities. His philanthropic donations amounted to 90,174 livres 3 sols 4 deniers before interest. La Tour's philanthropy may relate to his links with freemasonry, which remain somewhat obscure: he seems to have attended sessions of *Les Neuf Sœurs* in Paris around 1745. Probably initiated by the saint-quentinois physician Louis-François Rigaut, in 1780 he was made an honorary member of the masonic lodge *L'Humanité* (of which he was already a member), along with Jérôme de Laval, professeur de dessin at the École gratuite in Saint-Quentin, and Joseph-Marie Nérét, receveur au grenier de sel and another local philanthropist.

Science

In a letter to Desfriches of 18.V.1785, the German painter Ryhiner recalled a dinner 25 years earlier "chez M. de la Tour le célèbre peintre en pastel, qui m'ayant accroché et retenu par un bouton de mon habit me fit suer sang et eau en me parlant astronomie où il n'entendoit rien, tout comme moy, à ce que j'appris ensuite." La Tour owned several telescopes by Dolland which he mentioned in his will, with rather bizarre provisions for their disposal by ballot. Unlike John Russell (*q.v.*) he does not seem to have used them for any constructive purpose.

La Tour's interests in scientific matters were superficial, if broad ranging – including apparently an interest in petrified tree roots under the Seine. This can be traced through to research by the abbé Soulavie. Similarly the interest in the Montgolfier brothers may have been stimulated by Pierre Barral, an engineer who had surveyed Corsica where La Tour's brother Charles had served.

Contemporary reputation

During his lifetime La Tour enjoyed an unequalled reputation (although curiously only the Académie d'Amiens elected him an honoraire, according to Duplaquet). Already by 1742 his celebrity was such that the visiting Ottoman ambassador Mehmed Said Paşa (who had been portrayed by Coypel on his 1721 trip with his father) demanded a portrait by him. In a letter of 7.IX.1749, Daniel Wray wrote to his friend Philip Yorke to advise him on things to be done in Paris: "Call in too at Chardin's, who paints little pieces of common-life, and upon Liotard (but he is the Colonel's painter), admirable in crayons", acknowledging however that they were more expensive than British artists like Pond. Several weeks later Wray added: "Give me leave to correct a mistake in my last letter. The Crayonist whom I meant to commend (from Hogarth's testimony) is La Tour. I confounded him with Liotard the Miniature-painter." By 1762, when Allan Ramsay (*q.v.*) published his *Dialogue on taste*, a La Tour portrait had become a by-word in England for "vastly natural" resemblance. During his 1753 visit to Paris, the young Stanislaw Poniatowski was it seems one of many anxious to visit the artist: "Le peintre en pastel, La Tour, tout difficile qu'il est, m'avait accordé l'entrée dans son atelier" (*Mémoires du roi Stanislas-August Poniatowski*, ed. St Petersburg, 1914, I, p. 101). In 1768 the marquis d'Argens was able to write "nous possédons aujourd'hui un artiste, qui est infiniment supérieur dans l'art de peindre au Pastel, à tous les peintres qui l'ont précédé, & à

ceux qui vivent aujourd'hui; c'est le célèbre la Tour, dont les portraits ont la force & la vérité de ceux de van Dyk." In contrast to his rivals, even those of the stature of Perronneau and Liotard, La Tour was able to remain in Paris virtually throughout his career. (The prince de Ligne exaggerated his powers of persuasion when he wrote to Voltaire on 1.VI.1766 "J'ai persuadé, il y a quelques jours à M. de Lattour, Le grand maître en pastel, d'aller vous faire sa Cour, et de nous la faire, par un portrait meilleur que tous les autres.")

Posthumous reputation

La Tour's reputation suffered after his death: when some of the pastels from his studio were offered for sale in 1810 after his brother's death, the prices achieved were derisory (for details of this confused sale and his brother's previous attempts to dispose of the collection, *n. Chronological table*). Lecarpentier included him in his *Galerie des peintres célèbres*, 1821, despite disapproval of the medium of pastel; while Jarry de Nancy 1841 included him in his dictionary of philanthropists, considering that the pastelist "ne peut être compté parmi les grands peintre français." With the help of the Goncourts and other enthusiasts for the dix-huitième, his importance was reestablished by the end of the nineteenth century. This process commenced in the middle of the century, with enthusiastic descriptions of the pastels in the Louvre by Arsène Houssaye (1849), Julien de La Rochenoire (1853), Théophile Gautier (1855), the Goncourts (1867) and Champfleury (1853), all of which emphasised the dominance of La Tour and Mme de Pompadour in particular (the Louvre had a dozen more La Tours from the earliest times).

In 1837 the musée de Saint-Quentin opened, and started to exhibit the collection of La Tour pastels left to the École de dessin. In 1849 an inventory was taken, published in catalogues issued from 1856 (many of the sheets still bear the paraph "Mt" presumably of Félix Mennechet, the school's administrator). Visits to Saint-Quentin were noted by artists such as Gauguin, Matisse and Mary Cassatt and writers including Anatole France. The young art historian Anatole de Montaiglon wrote an impassioned letter to his friend Robert Wheaton from Saint-Quentin in 1845 (manuscript, Morgan Library; partial translation in *Memoir of Robert Wheaton*, 1854, pp. 45ff). Degas copied La Tour; Jacques Doucet is said to have been inspired to collect eighteenth century pastels by seeing some La Tour heads at Degas's.

Since its revival the literature has burgeoned, with innumerable articles in French journals (among many examples, Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, *Le Gaullois*, 7.VI.1919: "Il n'y a pas...un peintre qui soit plus foncièrement français que Maurice-Quentin de La Tour", arguing for the supremacy of La Tour over Perronneau notwithstanding the attempt to prove otherwise in the Cent pastels exhibition of 1908) and tributes ranging from serious scholarship to ephemera such as Houssaye's plays and even a novel inspired by La Tour (*Pastel vivant*, by Paul Flat, 1904).

Ratouis de Limay, responding to Diderot's criticism, admits that he excelled at capturing the outer life of his subjects, their "mondanité" rather more than their thoughts; others will grant that La Tour made his sitters appear to be talking, or just about to do so (Starobinski contrasted this with Perronneau's sitters, who appear to be listening to music). Without accepting Brieger's assessment of him as the finest French painter, one recognises in La Tour

the portraitist who brought the most virtuosity, the most verve to the interpretation of human physiognomy.

Copies; pupils

A good many repetitions of La Tour's works were made in his lifetime: some are evidently autograph (and it by no means follows that the first version is the best). Others may be contemporary copies by unrelated artists: at the Menus plaisirs, for example, artists such as Louis-François Aubry (*q.v.*) made pastels of the royal family quite probably after La Tour's models. A substantial proportion however were probably made by pupils working under La Tour's guidance (although we remain ignorant of exactly how this was organised). Unlike most pastellists La Tour evidently had a substantial studio, and the practices and names of those involved have yet to be fully uncovered. Numerous claims to have been his "pupil" require sceptical evaluation (and possibly indicate no more than having been granted the privilege of watching the master at work), although Ducreux's claim to have been his "only pupil" cannot be correct. Among the pastellists he is supposed to have taught one can name also Ansiaume, Labille-Guard, J.-A.-M. Lemoine, Montjoie, Neilson, Read, J.-B. Restout, as well as obscure figures such as Mlle Allais and Damance (*q.v.*). To these suspects one might add the lengthy list of artists to whom he bequeathed "leur portraits et miniatures" in his will. Copyists such as Mlle Navarre and engravers such as G. F. Schmidt (*q.v.*) must also have frequented his studio.

The question of modern copies also arises. Fleury (1908) warned readers of copies by Adolphe Deligne and Jules Degrave, both directors of the École gratuite at Saint-Quentin, as well as by their pupils, Émile Queuin, Chevreux and Charles Escot; artists such as Raphaël Bouquet and J. Wells Champney also produced high quality work during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (Raymond Casez was less accomplished, while Dréolle de Nodon mentions an Auguste Williot by whom only oil landscapes are known), while numerous unidentified hands have produced fakes that are sometimes difficult to detect. Some are sufficiently accomplished that they can appear superior to the autograph versions, and are only detectable with certainty when the construction and materials are examined.

Frames

Little is documented about La Tour's frames (see Jeffares 2018m). The magnificent trophy frame for the président de Rieux may be to a design by Caffiéri (as Gimpel suggested in his *Journal*, 4.XII.1918), but no document confirms this. Pons 1987 notes that the sculpteur Louis Maurisan submitted an invoice in 1748 for frames for portraits of Louis XV and Marie Leszczyńska, citing "le tem de Maurisan pour les desseins dont un par Mr de la Tour", but the frames in the Louvre may not correspond to those described. In 1749 he made a limewood frame for the portrait of the new dauphine. But most of the preparations in the artist's atelier were described in his brother's 1806 testament as in "cadres noirs"; these, like so many others, have been changed.

Questions

Besnard & Wildenstein's 1928 monograph (essentially written by Georges Wildenstein with a short introduction by Albert Besnard, whose name nevertheless appears on the title page as co-author) made a creditable attempt at establishing the œuvre (the extent of its errors

and omissions may be gleaned from our [B&W Concordance](#); it also gathered together a useful collection of primary documents. It has not yet been superseded in scope, despite the more accurate and far better illustrated works by Christine Debrie and Xavier Salmon and the discoveries presented in the 2004 exhibition at Versailles. The B&W catalogue includes a great many works in upper and lower case type, indicating that no opinion on attribution is expressed (shown below as “?attr.” after the B&W number, equivalent to an absent \emptyset in our classification); unsurprisingly they include numerous pastels reattributed here to artists from Vivien to Vigée Le Brun.

There remain however many unanswered questions about La Tour’s work and methods. Where did he obtain his materials? Which of the portraits were fixed, and by what methods? These are questions to which modern science may provide some answers. Despite the evidence to be found in La Tour’s own correspondence (i.e. far more than we have for other pastellists), other uncertainties about his practices remain. How long did each portrait take, over how many sittings, where? How much work could be done without the sitter present? What role did assistants play in the primary versions? Where and how were the replicas and copies made? What were the finances of his business? Between the much-quoted prices asked for a handful of specific works and the size of his fortune at death are a host of missing accounting details from overheads to the simplest of all questions – how many pastels did he produce?

Monographic exhibitions

La Tour 1917, v. Mauberge 1917

La Tour 1930: *Exposition des pastels de M. Q. de La Tour (1704–1788) appartenant au musée de Saint-Quentin et au musée du Louvre*, La Société du XVIII^e siècle, Paris, Salle de l’Orangerie, 12.VIII.–25.IX.1930

La Tour 1981: *Pastels de Maurice-Quentin de La Tour*, Paris, musée du Louvre, cabinet des dessins. [no cat.]

La Tour 2004a: *Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, le voleur d’âmes*, Versailles, 13.IX.–10.XII.2004. Cat. Xavier Salmon

La Tour 2004b: *Une vie et une œuvre dans un fonds d’atelier*, Saint-Quentin, musée Antoine-Lécuyer, 16.VI.–13.XII.2004. Cat. Hervé Cabezas, in Salmon & al. 2004

La Tour 2004c: *Maurice-Quentin de La Tour au musée du Louvre*, Paris, musée du Louvre, 15.IX.2004 – 10.I.2005. Cat. Jean-François Méjanès, in Salmon & al. 2004

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Wissenschten und der freyen Künste, XLII/2, 1790, pp. 258ff; Dussieux 1876, pp. 221, 223, 232, 234, 276, 322; Egerand 1901; Erhard 1917; Fleury & Brière 1954; Fourcaud 1908; Gault de Saint-Germain 1808, p. 254f; Gimpel 1963; Gimpel 2011; Gombaud & al. 2017; Goodman 2000; Goncourt 1880; E. & J. de Goncourt 1867; Graffigny 1985–2018; Grandin 1894a–b; Grandin 1896; Guiffrey 1908; Harduin de Grosville 1892–94; Guillaulme 2004; Hays 1978; Hoisington 2006; Hordret 1781; Jal 1872; Jeffares 2001; Jeffares 2014h; Jeffares 2016g; Jeffares 2017s; [Jeffares 2018g](#); Jeffares 2018h; Klingsöhr-Leroy 2002; *La Tour. Masters in art*, .IV.1907; Laing 2005; Lapauze 1899; Lecarpentier 1821; Lemoine-Bouchard 2008; Leroy 1933; Leroy 1938; Leroy 1940; Leroy 1953; Lüthy 1959–61, II, pp. 219ff; Mantz 1854; Marandet 2002; Mariette 1851–60, III, pp. 66–78; Michel 1908; Monnier 1972, nos. 61–79; Geneviève Monnier, in Grove 1996; New York 1999a; Nolhac 1930; Nougaret & Le Prince 1776, II, pp. 246ff; Paris 1930; Paris 1949; Patoux 1880; Percival 1999; Pilkington 1852; Piot 1863, pp. 14–16; Rambaud 1965, I, p. 180; Ratouis de Limay 1929b; Ratouis de Limay 1946; Ronot 1932; Rosenberg 2007; Saint-Quentin 2007; Salmon 1997a; Salmon 2004a–e; Sanchez 2004; Shelley 2005; Simon 2007; Smentek 2014; Staring 1924; Tarabra 2008, pp. 293ff; Thiébault-Sisson 1905; Thieme & Becker; Tourneux 1904a; Waterhouse 1981; Frederick Wedmore, in Foster 1905–07, II, pp. 125–36; Whitley 1928, pp. 28–31; Wildenstein 1919; Wildenstein 1921, pp. 108ff; Daniel Wray, letters to Philip Yorke, British Library Add. MS 35401 f121v, 7.IX.1749; f123, 27.IX.1749; Wright 1992; Золотов 1960

Salon critiques: 1738, 1739, 1741, 1742, 1745, 1746, 1747, 1748, 1751, 1753, 1755, 1757, 1759, 1761, 1763, 1767, 1769, 1771, 1773

GENEALOGIES [La Tour](#), [Deschamps](#), [Garbe](#), [Havart](#), [Joret](#), [Masse](#)