MERCIER, Claude

France 1755–62

The few known pastels of Claude Mercier have historically been assumed to be by Charlotte Mercier (1738–1762), the daughter and pupil of the successful painter Philippe Mercier (q.v.), who lived in London. Little is known about her life, although a 1738 baptism record, identifying her parents as Philip and Dorothy Mercier, leaves no room for confusion about her age. Apart from the putative pastels, she is also supposed to have had a set of Four Ages engraved by Ravenet, and an oil painting of Lord Derby (London, Christie’s, 3.XII.1910, Lot 16 n.r.) was tentatively attributed to a “C. Mercier”. Charlotte is said to have turned to vice, and, despite an appeal from her mother read to the Society of Artists in 1761, she died in the St James’s workhouse in Westminster aged 23.

But the teenage English girl is not author of these very accomplished, rather suave pastels. The putative pastel of a magistrate from Brittany in Washington would have been executed in France; they are both dated 1757, although Le Gonidec seems to have died two years previously. The form of the signature is identical to that of the portrait of the Jeune dame au chien. The Mapledurham pastel, evidently by the same hand, is clearly signed “Claude Mercier 1755”. That did not prevent it being exhibited as the work of Charlotte Mercier in 1969, and although Ingamells & Raines (1978) noted that it cannot be by her, Ingamells (1995) retained the attribution. The subject of the pastel cannot be Joseph Blount (1752–1792), as traditionally believed; however, as he lived in France for much of his life, he may well have acquired it there.

The author of these works, with compositions echoing the works of Louis Vigée (but executed to a higher finish than he ever achieved), sophisticated modelling of the faces and reflections on the draperies reminiscent of Glain, must have been trained in Paris, and was probably associated with the Académie de Saint-Luc. It is here suggested that he, rather than Philippe, was the “Mercier” who made a copy (medium unknown) of La Tour’s pastel of Prince Charles Edward Stuart for his follower Colonel John William O’Sullivan when it was engraved by Gilles-Jacques Petit in 1753.

No Claude Mercier of the right period has yet been found in the usual biographical sources or documents. Guittry (1884, 1915) lists a Clair-Christophe Mercier, peintre de l’Académie de Saint-Luc and lançier de la grande écure du roi, who died in 1757, too early for at least one of the signed works (but who could well be the spouse of the “veuve du sieur Mercier, maître peintre”, who lodged an opposition against the estate of one Pillet in 1762); Granges de Surgères corrects the name to Merciez (Mersiez or Mérisez also appears in a document, identifying his widow as Catherine Delacron); she appears again, as veuve de Christophe Clair Mercier, peintre et doréur à Paris, in 1784), and provides a baptismal certificate from 1707. Another Mercier, peintre, was ruey in 1760. A M. Le Mercier was a professeur et exhibiteur of genre pictures at the Académie de Saint-Luc in 1753 and 1756, from the rue du Gindre, Faubourg Saint-Germain; his first name is given in Bénét as Clément; genealogies indicate that he was married to a Marie-Antoinette Berthier in 1742. From the couple of oil paintings he left, however, one would be reluctant to make the association. Bénét also lists a Lemercier active as a portraitist in Angers and La Flèche between 1737 and 1779, but the remarkable portraits of ladies mentioned are lost. A C. A. Mercier was active as a printmaker engraving Martiller’s frontispiece for Les Nuits d’Young of 1769. A Charles-Bernard Mercier, maître peintre, is mentioned in Chatelus 1991 (p. 92); his marriage, aged 30, took place 26.XII.1725 at Saint-Germain Vaux (Fichier Labodet), making him too old. Charles-André Mercier, an associate of the dealer Paillet, was too young.

It is tempting to think that the young artist of 1758, whose signature cannot be read, is a self-portrait. The composition anticipates the celebrated portrait of Laurent Cars by Perronneau.

Bibliography

Bénét; Granges de Surgères 1893; Greer 2001, i.e. Charlotte Mercier; Ingamells 1995; Ingamells & Raines 1969; Ingamells & Raines 1978; Oxford DNBR, Ratouis de Limay 1946; Redgrave 1874, p. 278; Waterhouse 1981

Pastels


J.5314.108 François-Martial, comte de CHOSFEL-BEAUPRÉ (1717–1792), lieutenant-général des armées, menin de feu M. le Dauphin, inspecteur général de l’infanterie, pstl, 68.5x55.5, sd “Mercier px 1702” [Φ] (Mäbel-Aktion Bilder; seized ERR, MA-B 1027, as by Philippe Mercier, feu de Paume, 1.1943; Nikoloub, 15.XI.1943; not restituted) [♀]

J.5314.104 7Joseph BLOUNT (1752–1792), pstl, 63.5x52, sd “Claude/Mercier 1755” (Mapledurham House. Exh.: Mercier 1969, no. 70 n.r., as by Charlotte Mercier) φν


15314.119 Jeune femme en corsage blanc, avec bouquet de fleurs, un petit chien près d’elle, sd “C. Mercier/p.x. 1757” (M. C.; Paris, Charpentier, 22.v.1923, Lot 1 repr.) Φ