

# Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

## Online edition

### WYL, Mathias-Antoine de

Lausanne – p.1784

The initials of the anonymous Lausanne pastellist engaged by Voltaire are in the same hand as that of de Wyl, the author of the unknown sitter in Geneva. The name refers to the seigneurie and château (Schloßwil) near Bern belonging to the Frisching family, but the pastellist was not the legitimate holder of this title, Vincent Frisching, baron de Wyl (1688–1764), but rather a charlatan known as Mathias-Antoine de Wyl from Lausanne.

Several letters describing a Lausanne pastellist sent by Voltaire to d'Argental (5.I.1758) and his niece Mme Dompierre de Fontaine (*q.v.*, 10.I.1758) have been assumed to refer to Liotard (Cabezas 2009b, p. 194, relates them to the La Tour pastel), apparently confirmed by Mme Dompierre's sister, Marie-Louise Denis, who wrote to d'Argental on 7.VI.1758: "Liotar...va peindre mon oncle la semaine prochaine." The letters envisage that the original would be sent to d'Argental and that copies would be made in oil in Paris, to be presented to friends. A contemporary engraving may have been made, as a copy by Hennezel (*q.v.*) in 1766 is in reverse. Voltaire initially enjoyed "jouer la comédie à mon âge, et de souffrir qu'on m'envoie de Paris des habits de Zamti et de Narbas" (10.I.1758). He was not however happy with the result, writing to d'Argental (8.V.1758) to whom he sent the portrait by coach: "Un gros et gras Suisse, barbouilleur en pastel qu'on m'avait vanté comme un Raphaël, me vint peindre à Lausanne il y a six semaines en bonnet de nuit et en robe de chambre." Mme Denis also apologised (7.VI.1758) for sending the portrait: "Mettez le au grenier. C'est bien malgré moi qu'il vous est parvenu.", and announced that Liotard would do a portrait next week: "cet homme atrape la ressemblance à merveille." On 16.VI.1758 Voltaire added another comment on "ma triste figure. Je vous jure que je sui aussi laid que mon portrait. Croyez-moi. Le peintre n'es pas bon je l'avoue, mais il n'est pas flatteur. Faites-enfaire, mon cher ange, une opie pour l'Académie. qu'importe après tout que l'image d'un pauvre diable qui sera bientôt poussière, soit ressemblant ou non. Les portraits sont une chimère, comme tout le rest." He does not mention a session with Liotard, and it seems most probable that Mme Denis merely reported a vague intention of trying the better artist, who had just arrived in Geneva.

De Wyl reappears some years later, in letters Thieriot wrote to Voltaire (21.V.1766, 16.VI.1776) after meeting this "peintre et chimiste qui a fait votre portrait et qui possède une eau dont la vertu et l'usage opèrent des guérisons suprenantes". Thieriot's hydrocele had diminished by a third after taking de Wyl's magic potion for six weeks. Evidently this is the Mathias-Antoine de Wyl whose name appears in the records of the Académie de médecine, as "De Wyl, suisse, se disant médecin". He had come to their attention as a mountebank ("empirique") and was reported by magistrates in 1778. Soon after "De Wyl, ci-devant peintre puis charlatan" was marketing both his eau de santé and his eau

pour les yeux. Amelot investigated; Félix Vicq d'Azyr, secrétaire perpétuel of the Société seemed to favour the grant of a patent, but there were two anonymous denunciations. In a futher submission to the Société in 1784, regarding his eau de santé, he claimed "S'il ne distribue plus son remède, il n'est plus soumis à la capitation. Les étrangers ne la paie pas."

#### Bibliography

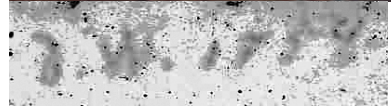
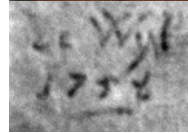
*Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1909, pp. 160ff; archives de la Société royale de médecine, Paris

#### Pastels

François-Marie Arouet, dit VOLTAIRE (1694–1778), pstl, 47x36.3, sd ^ "d.W. 1758", inscr. verso "Donné par Voltaire à Charles Augustin Ferriol, comte d'Argental, pour en faire une copie à lhuile" (le sujet; don: Charles-Augustin Ferriol, comte d'Argental; don: Mme de Vimeux, 7 rue Caumartin, Paris; M. Reynaud-Rigny; Bodin; Bonvalet 1860. Paris, hôtel Dassault, Artcurial, Briest-Le Fur-Poulain–F. Tajan, 13.XII.2005, Lot 52 repr., est. €15–18,000; PC; Alençon, Orne Enchères, 20.XI.2011, est. €12–15,000, €42,000 [=€50,035]). Lit.: *Gazette Drouot*, 25.XI.2011, p. 242 repr. [new attr.] **Φ**

~cop. Hennezel, *q.v.*

Homme en habit brun, pstl, sd ^ "de Wyl/1758" (Geneva, mA, CR 446) **Φ**



~version, pstl/ppr, 31x27 (Schloß Charlottenburg). Exh.: Sceaux 1978, no. 165 n.r., *Éc. fr.*, c.1775, *olim* attr. Friedrich II. **Φ**



~grav.: A. Faucheur 1862