

Ducreux's portrait of "Mme Poisson"

NEIL JEFFARES



[Joseph Ducreux](#)

Vieille dame à la coiffure blanche, dite à tort Mme Poisson

[Zoomify](#)

Pastel on five sheets of paper, 73x58.5 cm, oval

In original giltwood frame with sanded frieze, surmounted by an elaborate ribbon bow, stamped A. Levert



c.1783

Private collection

PROVENANCE: Château de Menars to 1845; Anselme-Alphonse Crignon de Montigny (1812–1877), conseiller d'État; his son, Anselme-Guy-Gaston Crignon de Montigny (1847–1898), officier du génie; Paris, Hôtel Drouot salle 6, Paul Chevallier, 24–27 May 1899, Lot 314 (as Mme Poisson par La Tour), FFr 780; Pierre Decourcelle (1856–1926); Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, 29–30 May 1911, Lot 103 n.r. (as Mme Poisson par Labille-Guiard), est. FFr 4000, FFr 2500; Grignard; Mme veuve Pierre Decourcelle, née Louise Edmée About (– p.1950). M et Mme L... C...; Paris, Palais Galliera, 14 December 1960, Lot 59, reproduced. Reacquired by the

Decourcelle family; Paris, Christie's, *Importants Dessins Anciens de la Collection Pierre Decourcelle*, 21 March 2002, Lot 318 reproduced (as portrait présumé de Mme Poisson par Labille-Guiard)

EXHIBITIONS: *Exposition rétrospective féminine*, Paris, Lyceum-France, 1907, no. 34 (as M. Poisson [sic] par Labille-Guiard). *Exposition des femmes peintres du XVIII^e siècle, du 4 mai au 6 juin 1926*, Paris, hôtel des Négociants en objets d'arts, rue de Ville-l'Évêque, Paris, no. 54. *Exposition du pastel français du XVII^e siècle à nos jours du 18 novembre – 9 décembre 1933*, chez Monsieur André J. Seligmann, 120 faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris, no. 19 (as Mme Poisson by Labille-Guiard)

LITERATURE: Hippolyte Mireur, *Dictionnaire des ventes d'art faites en France et à l'étranger pendant les XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles*, Paris, 1901–12, V, p. 97, as of Mme Poisson by Quentin de La Tour, de ¾ à gauche; Baron Roger Portalis, "Adélaïde Labille Guiard", in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1902, I, p. 112, reproduced p. 115 (as portrait de Mme Poisson par La Tour et Mme Labille-Guiard; collection Pierre Decourcelle); Portalis, *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard*, Paris, 1902, pp. 50, 53; duc de Caraman, *La Famille de la marquise de Pompadour*, Paris, 1901, reproduced as "Portrait de Louise de la Motte-Madame Poisson d'après un portrait de Labille Guillard" (BnF, collection Laruelle no. 63, folio); André Saglio, "Les académiciennes au XVII^e et au XVIII^e siècles", conférence, *La Grande Revue*, 10 mars 1908, p. 38 ("j'y vois une telle pénétration sensible de la vie..."); Charles Saunier, "Exposition rétrospective au Lyceum", *Les Arts*, April 1908, p. 6, reproduced p. 4 (as Mme Poisson par Mme Labille-Guiard; collection Pierre Decourcelle); Maurice Tourneux, "Une exposition rétrospective d'art féminin", *Gazette des beaux-arts*, April 1908, pp. 293–94 ("Le travail de notre collaborateur [Portalis] ne me laisserait plus rien à dire... si je ne tenais à m'associer aux réserves par lui formulées à propos du portrait présumé de Mme Poisson (collection Pierre Decourcelle) La collaboration de Mme Labille-Guiard à une « préparation » de la Tour me semble, jusqu'à preuve du contraire, une supposition bien risquée, et ce « rhabillage » audacieux ne se justifierait que si le modèle

ou ses enfants eussent insisté pour l'obtenir. Or la mère de Mme de Pompadour était morte en 1745 et le renom spécial qui s'attachait à sa mémoire n'était pas tel que la piété filiale de la marquise et celle de M. de Marigny tinssent à honneur de perpétuer ses traits sous un travestissement d'ailleurs anachronique, puisque la coiffure de la vieille dame est contemporaine des premières années du règne de Louis XVI. Tout au plus, comme le propose M. Roger Portalis faudrait-il admettre que le portrait est celui de Mme Filleul, mère de Mme de Marigny, et encore la supposition est-elle contestable, puisque Mme Filleul mourut en 1767. A moins donc que M. Pierre Decourcelle n'ait à opposer aux incrédules des preuves irréfutables, c'est tout un procès à reviser); André Linzeler, "L'exposition des femmes peintres du XVIII^e siècle", *Beaux-Arts*, June 1926, p. 162; Henry Puget, "Les femmes-peintres du XVIII^e siècle", *La Renaissance de l'art français*, June 1926, p. 361; Albert Besnard & Georges Wildenstein, *La Tour*, Paris, 1928, no. 380 (attribution to La Tour, unconfirmed, not reproduced); D. de Charnage, "Le pastel français du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours", *La Croix*, 5 December 1933, p. 4 "Mme Poisson, en blanc, par Mme Labille-Guiard"; Paul Ratouis de Limay, *Le dessin*, 1947, no. 3, p. 107; *Les Cahiers français*, 1953, p. 24 ("son [Mme Labille-Guiard] plus beau portrait est celui de Madame Poisson, une vieille dame aux yeux pétillants de malice"); Jacques Levron, *Pompadour*, 1963, p. 32 reproduced; Anne-Marie Passez, *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard*, Paris, 1973, no. 4, reproduced pl. III (as Labille-Guiard); Jean Nicolle, *Madame de Pompadour et la société de son temps*, Paris, 1980, p. 61, observing that the Caraman engraving, "qu'on dirait sortie d'un Goya", shows a sitter too old to be Mme Poisson, who was only 45 when she died; [Alden R. Gordon, *The houses and collections of the Marquis de Marigny*, ed. Carolyn Ayçaguer-Ron, Los Angeles, 2003, [741], p. 294]; Neil Jeffares, "A l'ombre de La Tour: quelques pastellistes des deux Académies", conférence, Colloque La Tour, Saint-Quentin, 22 October 2004; Xavier Salmon, "Hommage à la Tour: Joseph Ducreux", in *Joseph Boze (1745–1826): portraitiste de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration*, Martigues, musée Ziem, 18 November 2004 – 20 February 2005, pp. 35–36, reproduced colour p. 34, detail pp. 32–33; Jeffares 2006, p. 170, reproduced; Laura Auricchio, *Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. Artist in the age of revolution*, Los Angeles, 2009, p. 124f, n.r.; Robert Muchembled, *Madame de Pompadour*, Paris, 2014; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [j.285.656](https://www.pastellists.com)

ENGRAVED: etching, by Thomas, c.1923, for Geneviève Aclouque, vicomtesse de Croÿ, *Un Épisode sur la presse clandestine au temps de Madame de Pompadour*, Paris, 1923, frontispiece

THE PROVENANCE OF THIS WORK – Mme de Pompadour's château de Menars, according to the 1899 sale catalogue of a subsequent owner – has led to all sorts of nonsense about this fine, but misunderstood, work. Mme Poisson's colourful life, widely reported at the time and since, with extravagance, is clearly in need of a portrait; and this work has accordingly acquired inevitable celebrity.¹ Not only have the sitter and author been confused: even the chain of ownership deserves clarification. The only possible reference to it at the château de Menars in the inventaire après décès of Abel-François Poisson, marquis de Marigny (1727–1781), would be under no. 805:² this item includes "deux autres portraits de f[emm]e dans un ovale prisés vingt Livres", although as discussed below the present work may well have been made after this date and does not have a pendant. Further item 805 was priced, while the family portraits were listed without price "pour mémoire". The pastel was acquired by the Orléans politician Anselme Crignon de Montigny in 1845 (not 1854); his vast medal collection was dispersed on his death. His son Gaston, an army officer, had no interest at the time, but soon afterwards became fatally ill, and decided to devote his remaining years to reassembling his father's collection. This was the only pastel in the 1899 sale that took place shortly after the son's death, which included a group of miniatures accompanying large numbers of coins, medals, cameos and intaglios. The portrait, catalogued as by La Tour and of Mme Poisson, mother of Mme de Pompadour, was bought by the writer and collector Pierre Decourcelle. When baron Roger Portalis saw the work, he suggested that it was by Mme Labille-Guiard (not simply because he was working on her – one has to accept that a female portrait with lots of gauze will resemble to some degree Mme Labille-Guiard's works, such as the portrait of the marquise de Montciel, even if one hesitates today to agree with Portalis that the silk mousseline and white satin denote a feminine hand), but even he recognised that Labille-Guiard could not have done the face, with its bold, virtuoso deconstruction: "au dessin décidé des traits d'une femme qui n'est ni jeune ni jolie, à l'expression spirituelle des yeux, au travail des cheveux poudrés, il faut reconnaître l'empreinte inimitable du maître". Hence grew the absurd suggestion this pastel was a work of collaboration between the very old Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, for the face, and his

¹ See, e.g., Jean Nicolle, *Madame de Pompadour et la société de son temps*, Paris, 1980, p. 61: "Rédigée en avril 1745, la description de Louise de la Motte et de son entourage par Barbier (vi, pp. 32–33) est un exemple frappant de l'outrage du temps sur les mémoires..."

² While these portraits have been assumed (Gordon 2003) to be the Boucher heads that appeared in the Marigny sale, 18.III.1782 & seq., Lot 14 (versions of the familiar Dormeuse and Voluptueuse), those seem to appear elsewhere in the inventory (at no. 817: the three têtes de femme seem to correspond to Lots 14 and 15 in the sale).

young pupil Adélaïde Labille-Guiard for the remainder.

When the portrait was exhibited in the 1907 Lyceum exhibition organised by Mme Besnard, it was shown simply as by Mme Labille-Guiard, and hailed by one reviewer (Charles Saunier in *Les Arts*) as “une œuvre supérieure...qui tiendrait sa place dans n’importe quel musée”. It was contrasted with the other Labille-Guiard portrait, of the marquise de Coutances, whose treatment was found a little dry by comparison with that of Mme Poisson. In Besnard & Wildenstein’s monumental *La Tour* catalogue (1928), the portrait was discreetly relegated to the lower-case type signifying rejection from the master’s œuvre. The pastel was again described as by Labille-Guiard alone in Pierre Decourcelle’s sale in 1911, a sale in which the dramatist bought back a number of his favourite items, including it would seem this. The reviewer of the 1926 exhibition used the work as a point of comparison between Mmes Labille-Guiard and Vigée Le Brun: “Les portraits de la mère de Mme de Pompadour &c....révèlent chez leur auteur des dons de pénétration psychologique, une aptitude à saisir la caractéristique d’un type, une sûreté d’exécution qui nous font nous prononcer en faveur de Mme Labille-Guiard au désavantage du peintre charmant, mais superficiel, de Marie Antoinette.” Although subsequently sold in Paris in 1960, it was reacquired by Decourcelle’s descendents and reunited with eight old master sheets still held by them.



Figure 1

fabrics with the edges picked out in black chalk. Moreover his fascination with eccentricity led him to depict both himself and a number of old ladies in a highly realistic, uncompromising manner, showing none of the concessions to flattery which a Mme Vigée Le Brun would have made. Despite submitting to this “martyrdom”, the subject is not portrayed as a peasant but as a woman of fashion. The pastel has been dated to 1775 due to the bonnet “à la Thérèse” worn⁵ by the subject; the date clearly precludes the identification of the sitter as Mme de Pompadour’s mother Mme Poisson, who died some thirty years before; and Portalis’s alternative suggestion of Marigny’s mother-in-law Mme Filleul is impossible on similar grounds: she was still quite young when she died in 1767.

The authorship by Labille-Guiard, with or without the assistance of her master, was sustained by Mme Passez in her monograph on the artist, and was first challenged by Xavier Salmon, who proposed an attribution to Joseph Ducreux.³ Ducreux’s records included⁴ a portrait of “M. de Marignie” from as early as 1765, so there is at least no difficulty explaining how a Ducreux portrait arrived at Menars. Ducreux was perfectly capable of the handling of both face and costume. His hand is evident from how the flesh tones are built up, with the distinctive treatment found on other Ducreux pastels such as the self-portrait formerly with baron de Fleury; the portrait of Manuel (fig. 1) in Versailles or the portrait, said to be of his mother (fig. 2), in the comte de Chérisey sale (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, inv. NMB 2703); the last of these provides an excellent parallels also in the treatment of the muslin



Figure 2

³ Private communication, subsequently published in the Boze exhibition catalogue

The attribution was confirmed independently by Joseph Baillio (private communication).

⁴ See the list reprinted in Georgette Lyon’s monograph and reordered and annotated in the Ducreux article in the *Dictionary*.

⁵ Aileen Ribeiro (private communication, April 2002) confirms that this could have been worn into the early 1780s.

Another clue to the date comes from the frame, which must be the “cadre ovale en bois sculpté, avec nœud de ruban au sommet. (Encadrement originel.)” as described in the 1899 sale catalogue. It is stamped by Antoine Levert; the maître menuisier-sculpteur was awarded mastery on 14 December 1774 and was registered as a master on 23 August 1775, providing a *terminus post quem* for the work. Levert’s death in 1785 provides an endpoint.⁶ To Levert’s known output we can add not only the present frame, but probably an apparently identical one, on a Ducreux pastel of Turgot, dating from 1780 (private collection).⁷

Salmon (2004) summarises the arguments regarding the sitter’s identity, concluding that no identification can be made. As regards the authorship of Ducreux, Salmon points out how far Ducreux’s style evolved from his 1769 trip to Vienna:

Au traitement en aplat, somme toute assez sommaire, des œuvres du début de sa carrière, il substitua, dans les années 1780–1790, un métier plus élaboré qui privilégiait un modelé nuancé où la touche n’était pas fondue avec le doigt, mais bien au contraire demeurait perceptible, presque graphique, cherchant à renforcer le caractère psychologique de l’effigie. Le portrait dit de Mme Poisson est en ce domaine exemplaire de la manière de la fin des années 1780. Mis en valeur par un flot de gaze et de soie presque monochrome, vibre d’une multitude de petites superpositions de matière et de couleur, tout comme sur le portrait de Pierre-Louis Manuel probablement peint en 1792. Autour des yeux, pétillants de vie – siège de l’âme aurait-on dit au XIX^e siècle –, la peau se fait plus diaphane et se plisse en de nombreuses rides d’expression suivant un partie que Ducreux aima à répéter sur plusieurs de ses effigies peintes à la même époque. D’une grande maîtrise technique et d’une exceptionnelle acuité, l’œuvre ajoute incontestablement au talent du plus doué des élèves de Maurice Quentin de La Tour.

This sober assessment has not prevented continued speculation, including a somewhat extravagant suggestion made in a recent biography of Mme de Pompadour.⁸ According to Robert Muchembled (if I have understood him correctly), Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson was the incestuous offspring of Jean Paris de Montmartel and his niece, Antoinette-Justine Paris, whom he married just a few months before the child’s birth (1721) with papal dispensation (for which a payment of 200,000 livres was made). Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson was registered as the daughter of François Poisson and his wife. In addition to her brother, the marquis de Marigny, she had two twin sisters, one of whom died in infancy shortly after the birth in 1724, but the other remains shrouded in obscurity. Muchembled believes her to be the future Mme de Pompadour. The “real” Jeanne-Antoinette would then be the Françoise-Louise Poisson who married Charles-François de Flahault, comte de La Billarderie (1726–1793), and Muchembled suggests she is the mysterious visitor whom Dufort de Cheverny noted Marigny treating with great respect. (The theory needs some elaboration to explain why Montmartel would take such pains to support the wrong sister.) But Muchembled, citing an earlier version of this essay, goes further in a text which does contain a vivid description of the pastel worth quoting at length:

La théorie permettrait en outre d’expliquer une vieille énigme artistique: jusqu’en 1845 était conservé au château de Menars, propriété de la marquise puis de son frère, un pastel ovale présentant le portrait d’une femme âgée, “dit de madame Poisson”. Il ne peut s’agir de Louise-Madeleine de La Motte, décrite comme très belle et décédée à quarante-six ans, ni de la belle-mère du marquis de Marigny, morte également assez jeune. Comme l’œuvre paraît figurer dans l’inventaire après décès de Marigny établi en 1781, sa réalisation devrait se situer avant cette date, autour de 1775, à en juger d’après le “bonnet à la Thérèse” porté par le sujet. Accrochés dans le salon de musique de Menars, où se trouve un magnifique piano, en face du célèbre pastel de Maurice Quentin de La Tour représentant madame de Pompadour (aujourd’hui au Louvre), figurent en effet deux pastels ovales non identifiés,

⁶ For Levert and the documents establishing his biography, see Neil Jeffares, “Antoine Levert, maître menuisier-ébéniste”, 4 March 2018, neiljeffares.wordpress.com. Another stamped Levert frame, on an oval Louis XVI model which no longer has its contents, is lettered “La Princesse de Lamballe/Donné par elle a la Comtesse de Broc sa dame d’honneur”, almost certainly housed a repetition of Ducreux’s portrait of her, recorded in 1778, the year of Mme de Broc’s presentation to the princesse as Dame pour l’accompagner.

⁷ By descent within the Turgot family. Only the front of the frame is known, from modern photographs, and there is no information on any stamp on the frame.

⁸ Robert Muchembled, *Madame de Pompadour*, Paris, 2014.

dont l'un pourrait être le portrait de Marigny. Dans ce cadre intime et familial, l'image ne peut décrire qu'une personne chère au cœur d'Abel-François Poisson. Or la physionomie de "madame Poisson" est surprenante: une femme de qualité, âgée et laide, au gros nez, au menton en galoche, aux rides accusées et aux cheveux poudrés sous la somptueuse dentelle, regarde l'observateur avec des yeux pétillants d'intelligence, en esquissant un petit sourire malin. Certains y ont vu la patte du maître La Tour pour le visage, que son élève Adélaïde Labille-Guiard aurait plus tard complété d'une parure qu'elle pouvait admirer chez son père, marchand de modes réputé tenant boutique "À la toilette", rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, à Paris.

Quoi qu'il en soit de l'auteur, il est tentant d'identifier dans ce portrait, réaliste comme un Goya, la véritable Jeanne-Antoinette, peu avant ou après sa mort. Qu'Abel ait désiré conserver son souvenir concorde bien avec la manière dont il reçoit la mystérieuse dame Poisson. Et il suffit de regarder l'œuvre pour comprendre que l'intéressée n'avait aucune chance de séduire le roi dans sa jeunesse, mais qu'elle avait sûrement de l'esprit comme quatre diables, à la manière de ceux qui seraient, en suivant ce fil, ses parents nourriciers. Si le nez apparaît très différent, le bas du visage est d'ailleurs comparable à celui de Pâris de Monmartel, dont les traits assez rudes sont adoucis, comme dans son cas, par des yeux brillants de malice et un large front, sur le portrait en pastel du célèbre financier à l'âge de cinquante-six ans, réalisé par La Tour en 1746. La laideur expressive se dégageant de l'image de celle qui serait sa fille, selon cette hypothèse, se double d'une sorte de défi amusé aux futurs spectateurs, car elle semble leur dire: "Je vous ai bien eus." Avec raison, puisqu'aucune preuve formelle de son identité supposée ne peut être apportée.

It is perhaps unnecessary to analyse every fallacy in this argument. Muchambled's note criticises the illogicality my proposed dating of the pastel to c.1783 when Marigny's posthumous inventory was conducted in 1781, failing it seems to notice the question mark I attach to its being included in item 805 (an oval female pastel is hardly an unusual item in an eighteenth century inventory). Muchambled suggests that the pendant is of Marigny himself, notwithstanding the inventory's reference to "portraits de f[emm]e". The references he gives to Gordon 2003 (pp. 73 and 294) indicate a confusion between the pair of pastels, item 805, which hang in the Galerie, with the two oval portraits de famille that are listed in the Salon de musique, which are clearly described as oil paintings. But even if an oval pastel portrait de famille were listed in the *inventaire*, the inference that this is the portrait of the real Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson multiplies too many improbabilities to retain credibility.

The better view seems to be that the pastel was not in the 1781 inventaire, and that, if indeed it came from the château de Menars in 1845, it entered the collection after Marigny's death. In 1781, the château passed⁹ to the two young relatives, Auguste Poisson de Malvoisin (c.1769–1793) and his sister Jeanne-Charlotte (1762–1819), who had married (1779) Alexandre-Paul-Augustin-Félix-Élisabeth Barrin, comte de la Galissonnière. They were the children of Mme de Pompadour's cousin and heir Gabriel Poisson de Malvoisin (1723–1789), whose humble origins had prevented his entering the régiment du roi, but who was ennobled in 1754, became maréchal général des logis des camps et armées and rose to be maréchal de camp on his retirement in 1770. It is possible that the present sitter was his wife, whom he married in 1758; while many sources suggest she was a Mlle Ferrand from the family of fermiers généraux and related to Mme de Pompadour, documents show that she was in fact Marguerite-Jeanne Courtet d'Autreville. However with a daughter born in 1769, she was probably too young to be this woman in white.

A different approach sets aside the château de Menars legend, and considers Ducreux's worklists (which do not include a Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson or even a comtesse de Flahaut¹⁰); they record a number of elderly female subjects from the period 1771–85. Eliminating those under 50 years of age or those whose features we know from other portraits, we are left with just

⁹ See Dufort de Cheverny, *Mémoires*; Xavier Salmon, *Mme de Pompadour et les arts*, exhibition catalogue, 2002, p. 132; duc de Caraman, *La Famille de la marquise de Pompadour*, Paris, 1901; Jean Chavigny, *Le Château de Menars, un des joyaux du val de Loire*, Paris, 1954; Yves Durand, *Les Fermiers généraux...*, Paris, 1996.

¹⁰ Although a "La Mote" does appear, but in 1763 (far too early to correspond to the present pastel).

seven candidates: 1772: “Princesse de Montbazou”,¹¹ 1775: “Comtesse de Mailly”,¹² “Marquise de Sainte-Croix”,¹³ Mme Bonart and Mme de Saint-Souplé;¹⁴ 1780: “Comtesse de La Mark”,¹⁵ 1783: “Mlle Fel”¹⁶. Four of these subjects were from important families, and would almost certainly have appeared at court – where they would have worn the elaborate make up of white or grey face powder and rouge. The striking thing about the present portrait is that the subject’s natural flesh colour, and, as Olivier Blanc has pointed out, her willingness to submit to Ducreux’s rigorous treatment (which no member of the aristocracy could be expected to accept), suggests that she may not have been at Court but was an icon in her own right – as one would expect of the portrait of a singer such as Marie Fel.

By the time of the 1783 Salon de la Correspondance, where Ducreux exhibited the portrait of Marie Fel (1713–1794), the singer would have been 70 years of age. The livret described the portrait thus: “On a revu avec beaucoup de satisfaction les traits d’une Artiste qui a fait longtemps les charmes d’un des premiers théâtres de Paris; chérie par ses talents, honorée par l’existence qu’elle a dans la société, précieuse enfin à ses amis, Mlle Fel a semblé, par ce portrait, rendue aux acclamations du public qui la regrette. Une touche légère et fine qui indique avec peu des plans bien dessinés; des accessoires fait par méplats et dont le brillant s’accorde très bien avec le ton des chairs, qui sont d’une couleur vraie, annoncent dans ce tableau un artiste plein des leçons du célèbre Latour et en état de rendre les inspirations d’une Muse faite pour présider à plus d’un Talent.” Marie Fel’s features are known from La Tour’s famous *préparation*, now in Saint-Quentin (fig. 3), as well as La Tour’s larger pastel¹⁷ of Marie Fel, which belonged to the abbé Pommyer. These do not themselves provide an unambiguous account of her features; they are sufficiently different (the Pommyer face is round and chubby, the *préparation* is long and gaunt) to raise the question as to whether Pommyer’s portrait is really of the same subject. The inclusion of the music for one of the short songs composed for Marie Fel by her brother Antoine puts the matter beyond doubt. The differences between the La Tour images (which may perhaps be due to an intervening illness¹⁸) make it particularly difficult to project from these icons how she might be expected to appear nearly thirty years later, but the basic bone structure is similar in all three portraits. There is widespread agreement that in fact she was “généralement laide” with dark skin; and one is struck by the same lively, intelligent brown eyes (she retained to the end of her days an “incroyable jeunesse”); the “teint basané”, for which Marie Fel was known; a square, slightly cleft, chin; an identical hairline (at least with the Pommyer, where it is visible); and even

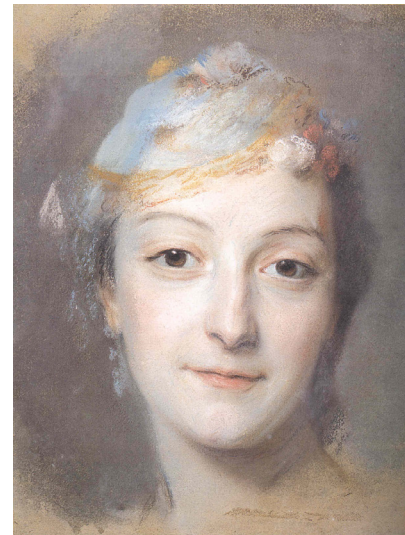


Figure 3

¹¹ Louise-Gabrielle-Rosalie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil (1725–1792) married, secondly, Louis-Armand-Constantin, prince de Montbazou.

¹² Marie-Michelle de Sérécourt (1713–1778), married Augustin-Joseph, comte de Mailly et marquis d’Harcourt (1707–1794).

¹³ Jeanne-Joseph de Torcy, married (1734) Jean-François-Joseph de Venant, marquis de Sainte-Croix (1711–).

¹⁴ Both of these are unknown to me.

¹⁵ Marie-Anne-Françoise de Noailles (1719–1793) married, in 1744, Louis-Engelbert, comte de La Marck.

¹⁶ Marie Fel (1713–1789).

¹⁷ *Marie Fel* by Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, c.1753, pastel, 0.79x0.635; location unknown (Pommyer; Theurier-Pommyer; Jacquier de Rosée; London, 10 December 1993, Lot 52). A third La Tour pastel has also recently been described as of Marie Fel (Dreesman collection, London, 11 April 2002, Lot 634), but without any clear support cannot assist much here.

¹⁸ Prod’homme, *op. cit.*, notes that the *Mercur* recorded on 12 October 1746 that she reappeared after a long and dangerous illness; while again in December 1760 she sang at concerts after a very long illness. There is no objective evidence to date either the Saint-Quentin or the Pommyer portraits other than the recorded portrait of Marie Fel at the 1757 Salon. Even if this was the Pommyer portrait it does not follow that it was executed in that year (Pommyer’s own portrait was probably executed several years before the 1763 Salon where it was shown).

the curiously shaped earlobes.¹⁹

The daughter of an organist, Marie Fel (1713–1794)²⁰ was born in Bordeaux and learned the Italian style of singing from Christina Antonia Somis, the wife of the painter Carle Van Loo and daughter of the violinist. They went to Paris in 1733 and Mlle Fel made her Paris debut at the Opéra in 1734, to widespread applause. For the next twenty-five years she dominated the operatic stage (often appearing with the other giant of the time, Pierre Jélyotte). She launched over a hundred new rôles; of these perhaps the most celebrated was that of Colette in Rousseau's *Le Devin du village* which she created in 1752, and which became one of Mme de Pompadour's own favorite rôles. When Marie Fel retired from the Opéra in 1758, she continued to sing in the Concert spirituels and for the Queen at least until 1764; Horace Walpole saw her in Paris in 1766.²¹ Her various pensions and allowances were consolidated into an annual 5000 livres from 1780 until stopped by the Revolution; thereafter she lived in somewhat straightened circumstances until her death, aged 81, in 1794.

Accounts vary as to her love-life. For Sophie Arnould, her pupil and successor, she was a “Penelope”, and the police reports of the time, which devoted much attention to most of her rivals, contain only a short paragraph, reporting that she is to marry the minor opera composer Louis de Cahuzac.²² Casanova, one of the least reliable eighteenth century memorialists, met her on his first Paris visit (in 1750) with three children of puzzlingly different appearances, whom she explained to the adventurer were the children of the duc d'Annecy, the comte d'Egmont and M. de Maisonrouge. Casanova apologised for having supposed that she was the mother of all three. Fel's response – “Vous ne vous êtes trompé, je le suis” – made Casanova realise how much he had yet to learn about a society in which “ces choses étaient dans l'ordre”.²³ There may well be some foundation in the story, as Fel clearly owed something to the financier Maisonrouge's support. Cahuzac was a different matter; his love for Fel, who would not marry him, is said to have been responsible for his death in the Charenton lunatic asylum in 1759. Grimm also fell for her, but was (if, with Mme d'Épinay, you credit Duclos's explanation more than Grimm's own) also rejected. She was attached to the banker Jean-Joseph de Laborde when she corresponded with Voltaire following a months' stay at Les Délices in 1759: for Mme Denis “c'est une fille aimable, indépendamment de son talent, et sa voix m'échante.”²⁴

The curious and touching relationship over many years between Marie Fel and Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, who called her his “Céleste”, is well known: they may even have lived together briefly in her house in Chaillot, faubourg de la Conférence, before the artist's dementia took a final grip and his family took him back to Saint-Quentin in 1784. Several of her subsequent letters survive, and La Tour left his furniture and personal belongings (but not his telescope) to her in his will of 1784. The circumstances of the commission of Ducreux's pastel of her remain conjectural, but during the early 1780s Ducreux seems to have made portraits of a number of people named in La Tour's 1784 will. A group of these were connected with the Auteuil–Passy–Chaillot district, and included Benjamin Franklin as well as his landlord, Le Ray de Chaumont. That these connections were more than merely commercial is evidenced by a letter²⁵ from Ducreux to Benjamin Franklin's grandson and secretary, William Temple Franklin,

¹⁹ Xavier Salmon (private communication, April 2002) notes that both La Tour portraits show a slight protrusion on the middle of the nose which is absent from the Ducreux model, and he does not accept the identification. However such features can change with age: a good example is the evolution of the images of Bonnie Prince Charlie studied in Vicki Bruce & Andy Young, *In the eye of the beholder*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 29, 97.

²⁰ The best overall account of her life is probably J.-G. Prod'homme, “A pastel by La Tour: Marie Fel”, in *The musical quarterly*, IX, 1923, pp. 482–507. Other useful summaries are contained in *The new Grove dictionary of music & musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, London, 1980 (article by Mary Cyr) and the *Dictionnaire de la biographie française*, Paris, 1933– (article by Roman d'Amat).

²¹ Manuscript note recorded in *Correspondence*, VII, p. 298. Some sources which report her appearances until 1783 probably confuse her with her niece and heir Marie-Antoinette-Françoise.

²² Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Archives de la Bastille, MS 10237, pp. 239f, cited in Prod'homme, *op. cit.*

²³ Casanova, *Mémoires*, éd. Robert Abirached & Elio Zorzi, Paris, 1958, I, p. 646.

²⁴ Letter, 8 June 1759, cited in Voltaire, *Correspondance*, ed. Théodore Besterman, Paris, 1980, v, p. 1371.

²⁵ 1 May 1782, unpublished: see franklinpapers.org.

inviting “M. Franklin fils” to dinner the following day to hear the comédiens MM Volange and Boyer. The noted salonnière now calling herself Mme Charlotte Sire de Cheminot (formerly the dancer Mlle Coupée) is also to be at the dinner: surely known to Marie Fel, she too is named in La Tour’s 1784 will. Ducreux later made a portrait of Brichot, the notary named in that document.

We do not know how this pastel got into the château de Menars. We do not know whether Ducreux’s portrait of Marie Fel was executed precisely in 1783, or was borrowed from an owner to be exhibited that year; Marigny himself was dead by then. But it is not implausible that his heirs would have wanted a portrait of one of Mme de Pompadour’s favourite singers. Marie Fel herself does not seem to have owned a large collection; the inventaire après décès of her belongings at Chaillot record only a few “family portraits” and “a pastel under glass”, which has been assumed to be by La Tour. “Not implausible” may be an advance on the traditional identification as Mme Poisson, but at this stage we do not have a definitive solution to the mystery of the identity of the woman in white.

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