

Hall's pastels of Mme Séguier and the Vassal sisters

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[Pierre-Adolphe Hall](#)

Mme Antoine-Louis Séguier, née Marguerite-Henriette Vassal (1747–p.1792)

Pastel on five sheets of paper, 64.5x54 cm, oval c.1782

Private collection

PROVENANCE: By descent within the sitter's family; Paris, Christie's, 27 March 2003, Lot 112 reproduced, attributed to Kucharski

LITERATURE: Jeffares 2006, p. 220, reproduced

RELATED WORK: A rectangular version in a different costume, also by Hall, pastel, 64x52.5 (by descent within the sitter's family; Paris, Drouot, Delvaux, 19 December 2001, Lot 88 reproduced, attributed to Johann Ernst Heinsius): see fig. 2 below

GENEALOGY: [Vassal](#); [Séguier](#)

MME ANTOINE-LOUIS SÉGUIER, future Mme de La Bastide, née Marguerite-Henriette Vassal (1747–p.1792) was a member of the wealthy Montpellier family of tax-collectors, and was the sister of the famous art collector Jean-Antoine Vassal de Saint-Hubert (1741–1782). She married, in Montpellier in 1767 (bringing a dowry¹ of 260,000 livres), Antoine-Louis Séguier (Paris 1726 – Tournai 1792), avocat général au parlement de Paris, a descendant of the famous chancellor Pierre Séguier who had presided over the infamous trial of Nicolas Fouquet.

Antoine-Louis became avocat général in 1755 and remained in this position until the Revolution. A gifted legal orator, one of his speeches had three crowned heads in the audience (the emperor Joseph II and the kings of Denmark and Sweden). Among his more celebrated

¹ According to the Villardi-Montlaur genealogy posted at www.montlaur.com.

cases was his defence of Lally-Tollendal.² His unflinching support for the king led to his being elected to the Académie française in 1757, occupying Fontenelle's seat. Séguier was notoriously the *bête noire* of the *philosophes*, dominating the *dévôt* faction in the Académie, including figures such as Hénault, Moncrif, cardinal de Luynes, the marquis de Paulmy and the maréchal de Richelieu. Each election required renewed efforts to stem the tide of the enlightenment. With Paulmy's aid, he blocked the election of Marmontel. At the reception for Loménie de Brienne in 1770, the orator Thomas attacked Séguier, who appealed to Maupeou and had the printing of the discourse banned. Séguier then threatened to resign if La Harpe was elected to the Académie.



Figure 1

During the Maupeou reforms he travelled to Marseille but was not offered the usual reception by their Académie owing to his unpopularity. It is difficult to tell how accurate was another accusation made by one of Séguier's own clients, Piron, in verses for Christmas 1763, that Séguier cut short one of his orations to attend a tryst at the Palais-Royal.³

Séguier was the close ally of Cochin and Pommyer in the matters regarding the Académie royale and the parlement de Paris, and he acted for the Académie royale in its efforts to suppress the Académie de Saint-Luc in 1763.⁴ Cochin's drawing for *La Justice protège les Arts*, engraved by Demarteau in 1765, belonged to Séguier. A medallion profile of Séguier was drawn and engraved by Cochin (FD 281). However when

Cochin put forward Séguier to join Pommyer as an honoraire at the Académie royale, he was blocked by d'Angiviller who preferred Saint-Non.⁵

The Séguiers lived in the rue du Hasard Richelieu (now the rue Thérèse, no. 6).⁶ The building had been a gaming-house from 1622 but was acquired by Séguier in 1750. From 1799 it became the Lycée de Paris, and is now a small theatre.

Mme Séguier's family included two brothers whose activities are sometimes confused: the younger brother, Jean-Antoine Vassal de Saint-Hubert,⁷ was a fermier général and connoisseur; he owned pastels by Chardin, Mme Fragonard and Rosalba as well as works by Hall which appeared in his 1783 sale; fig. 1 shows his portrait in oil by Greuze. In his 1774 sale, which achieved a total of 92,149 livres, paintings of all schools were represented, including some 64 of the finest Dutch pictures as well as the most modern French artists. He lived in the rue Vivienne in 1774, and appears not to have married. The elder brother Jean-André was a receveur général des finances and maître d'hôtel de Monsieur. It may well have been this brother who commissioned an unusual circular townhouse at (17 rue Pigalle) from an architect called Henry, who derived his curious and somewhat impractical plans from Ledoux.⁸ It is probably his wife who was the Mme Vassal⁹ who shared loge n° 9 at the Opéra with Beaujon. Jean-André was certainly the brother who



Figure 2

² Séguier's *mémoire* on behalf of the wine-merchant Dubarle against charges brought by his former partner Chefdeville of having stolen his wife is a fascinating illustration of eighteenth-century judicial process; see Santo L. Aricò, "A Lawyer's Defense of a Wine Merchant against a Carpenter's Deposition: A Story about Friendship and Betrayal", *Law and History Review*, 1999, xvii, 360.

³ Cited François Bluche, *Les Magistrats du Parlement de Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1986, p. 290.

⁴ See Christian Michel, *Charles-Nicolas Cochin et l'art des lumières*, Rome, 1993, p. 129.

⁵ Charlotte Guichard, *Les amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 2006, p. 61.

⁶ See Hillairet, *op. cit.*

⁷ An article on Vassal de Saint-Hubert appears in Grove. Durand, *Les Fermiers généraux*, Paris, 1996, also has some useful facts.

⁸ See Braham, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

⁹ She is mentioned en passant in Marquis de La Maisonfort, *Mémoires d'un agent royaliste*, Paris, 1998.

constructed a folie at Saint-Brice for his mistress Marie-Catherine Riggieri, the eldest of the three Colombe sisters, immortalised in the Fragonard paintings.¹⁰

A pastel portrait of Séguier by Louis Vigée (fig. 2) was until recently only known from an anonymous oil copy in the Académie française collection, but the original came to light in a Paris sale in 2001.¹¹ It descended in the family together with this pastel and a rectangular version (fig. 3) made to act as a pendant to the Vigée, although evidently much later (the Vigée may well date from Séguier's election to the Académie). Other portraits of the Vassal family evidently by the same hand include those of Mme Séguier's sisters Mme Rolland de Villarceaux, née Jeanne-Julie Vassal (1739– ; fig. 4), and Mme de Chamborant, née Marie-Julie Vassal (1748–c.1780); a pastel of one of Jeanne-Julie's daughters Mlle de Villarceaux presumably also belongs to the set.¹² The attribution of these works has caused endless confusion, with proposals ranging from Mme Labille-Guiard to Kucharski and Tischbein. In fact, documents found in Séguier's correspondence by John Rogister (private communication, 2002) demonstrate that these portraits were commissioned from the family's painter "Haal"; the portrait of Mme de Chamborant was to be a posthumous image. It is possible also that the reference in the *livre de comptes* maintained by Mme Hall to a pastel of "Mme de Vassi" in 1782 is to another member of this family.



Figure 3

Once suggested the attribution is quite evident. How the family became involved with Hall is not yet completely clear, although it is hardly surprising that so fashionable an artist would have been taken up by a family so well informed about art.



Figure 4

According to a label on the other version of this work, the sitter remarried a M. de la Bastide after Séguier's death. The pictures nevertheless seem to have remained within the Séguier family until now. Which of the two versions is the primary image? This of course may not be a well-defined question, and there is little to distinguish the works in terms of quality of execution. However given that the pictures of the sitter's sister and niece were oval, it seems more likely that the present version was executed first, and that the rectangular version designed as a pendant to the Vigée was the afterthought. Alternatively if the oval came second, it must have been preferred as the format for the remaining pictures in the series.

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¹⁰ See Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* exhibition catalogue, 1987–88, pp. 495f.

¹¹ Other portraits of Séguier include an anonymous print reproduced on the Académie française website.

¹² Both these pastels were in the Charles de Meurville sale, Paris, 26–28 May 1904, as by Mme Labille-Guiard, but only the mother was reproduced. We do not know if the daughter was Louise-Rose (1762–1829), Mme de Montebise; Albertine Jeanne (1765–1790); or Antoinette Aglaé Rose (1774–1851), Mme Le Vavas seur.