

La Tour, Duval de L'Épinoy

NEIL JEFFARES



[Maurice-Quentin de La Tour](#)

Louis DUVAL DE L'ÉPINOY (1696–1778)

Pastel on paper, 119.5x92.8 cm

1745

Lisbon, **Gulbenkian Museum**, inv. [2380](#)

PROVENANCE: Jean-Jacques Gallet de Mondragon (1711–1796), gendre du sujet; saisie d'émigré, 2.I.1797; restauré à sa veuve, née Marie-Jeanne Duval (1733–1823), par arrêt des Consuls, 6.IX.1802; leur fils, Jean-Jacques Gallet, 2^e marquis de Mondragon (1755–1819); son fils Théodore, marquis de Mondragon (1794–1875); sa fille, Eulalie, marquise de Beaumont (1828–1892); son fils, Guillaume-Marie-Théodore de La Bonnière, comte de Beaumont (1850–); vente, château de Beaumont, Beaumont-la-Ronce, 26–28.IV.1903, F5210. Acqu. Jacques Doucet a.1905, F120,000; Paris, Georges Petit, 5–8.VI.1912, Lot 75, est. F300,000, F600,000; baron Henri de Rothschild, Paris, 1927; acqu. 1943

EXHIBITIONS: Salon de 1745, no. 167 (“M. **, amy de l’auteur, aussi en grand”; Paris 1908a, no. 37, pl. 27; Paris 1927a, no. 37, pl. xxx-42; Washington 1950, no. 22 repr.; Lisbon 1999, no. 32 repr..

LITERATURE: [abbé Desfontaines], “Explication des peintures, sculptures, & autres ouvrages...Salon du Louvre, 1745”, *Jugemens sur quelques ouvrages nouveaux*, IX, 1745, p. 210; Desmaze 1854; Mariette 1856, III, p. 70; Desmaze 1854; Tourneux 1904b; Tourneux 1904c; Guiffrey 1908, p. 641; Furcy-Raynaud 1946, pl. XIV/19; Bury 1971, pl. 17; Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful science: Enlightenment entertainment and the eclipse of visual education*, 1996, fig. 180; Goffen 1995, pp. 96–97 repr. clr; Soares Costa & Sampaio 1998, pp. 92–95 repr. clr; English text, pp. 289–90; Debrie & Salmon 2000, pp. 119ff, ill. 53; *Calouste Gulbenkian Museum – album*, Lisbon, 2001, p. 123, no. 97 repr.

1912, p. 301; *New York times*, 27.X.1912; B&W 133, fig. 124; Ratouis de Limay 1946, pl. XIV/19; Bury 1971, pl. 17; Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful science: Enlightenment entertainment and the eclipse of visual education*, 1996, fig. 180; Goffen 1995, pp. 96–97 repr. clr; Soares Costa & Sampaio 1998, pp. 92–95 repr. clr; English text, pp. 289–90; Debrie & Salmon 2000, pp. 119ff, ill. 53; *Calouste Gulbenkian Museum – album*, Lisbon, 2001, p. 123, no. 97 repr.

RELATED WORKS: A number of copies of varying levels are known; see artist article in *Dictionary* for list

GENEALOGY: [Duval](#)

DUVAL: C’EST LE TRIOMPHE de la Peinture en pastel” according to Antoine Duchesne, prévôt des Bâtiments du roi, in an annotation to his copy of the livret of the Salon de 1745 where this work was coyly described as “M. ***, amy de l’auteur”.¹ Mariette too annotated his copy: “le roy des pastels de La Tour”. It is impossible to challenge either appraisal. But as we gorge our eyes on this sumptuous portrait of a man with a Jocondesque smile, a few thoughts may take us beyond the purely sensuous pleasure of the harmony of silvers and blues that flatter both the sitter and the medium itself – La Tour as always is showing off, choosing a composition that allows him to cover a wide expanse of moiré silk requiring the greatest virtuosity in technique, thereby forcing his critics to concede that these short strokes of white chalk which make no sense close up turn into pure light from the required distance. In the

¹ Among the other La Tour pastels exhibited that year, the portrait of Philibert H. Orry, directeur des Bâtiments du roi has similar dimensions and a reverse composition, so that they may almost be considered pendants. The subjects’ social positions were however quite distinct.

process the master overturns the received laws of colour: in pastel, blue can be a warm colour, and pinky reds can recede in favour of glowing silvers.

The subject is shown at his desk, in a pose of almost English nonchalance, caught in the act of taking snuff, his relaxation emphasised by his crossed legs and the placing of the chair at an angle to the gilt-mounted bureau on which are displayed a globe and the large tome he is reading. The presence of these working tools keeps the atmosphere this side of languour, but the impression of studied informality is reiterated by the dog's-eared page where the book lies open, and the angled volumes on the shelf which juxtapose a fine binding with the unbound books clearly intended for use. This sitter wants us to see him not simply as a well-dressed gentleman, but as a scholar and a man of action. La Tour also wants us to know that he was an “*amy de l'auteur*” – a phrase that carries additional resonance today as art historians continually remind us that this artist was at his best when portraying his friends.

How accurate was his description of the 49-year old Louis Duval, sieur de L'Épinoy, “*sans profession déclarée*” at the time of the pastel? Surprisingly little is known about this financier and his origins. His father Jean Duval was a marchand en gros in Amiens; even his dates are uncertain.² He rose to be an *échevin* of the town, a position sufficient for *Chaix d'Est-Ange* to decalre that the family came from the haute bourgeoisie; but the fact remains that when exhibited, La Tour's masterpiece was of a wealthy roturier whose ennoblement was only achieved two years later by the purchase of the office of *secrétaire du roi*. The commission of



Figure 1

this pastel may be seen as a stepping stone on the path of de l'Épinoy's social advancement, which had clearly come a long way from wholesaling in Amiens. The official line was that “[il] a fait pendant longues années le commerce de mer avec exactitude”,³ but the key step is revealed in a typically snide remark in Barbier's *Journal*:⁴ Duval made his money in John Law's Mississippi bubble. He subsequently invested his money in numerous maritime adventures, notably those of the baron d'Huart,⁵ who endeavoured to finance

various activities linked with trade routes to the West Indies via Canada, and the fly-by-night timber companies run with Philippe Seichepine and Antoine-François Angevin. By around 1730 he was in a position to make a reasonably good marriage, to a Marie-Anne⁶ Bersin (1699–1780), related to another Amiens négociant, Jean-Baptiste Bersin (1691–1772) and also Duval's own cousin. Bersin had arrived somewhat earlier than Duval, as he had bought his position of *secrétaire du roi* in 1720 and was to become a *grand audiencier de France*.

As for Duval's friendship with La Tour,⁷ this may have dated from 1739 since it has been suggested that he owned one of the best versions of La Tour's portrait of Dupouch which was exhibited that year. In any case the frame was said to be engraved with the verses:

² The otherwise reliable Favre Lejeune 1986 gives them as 1684–1730, but it is hardly plausible that he was 12 when his son was born.

³ AN V² 42.

⁴ Edmond-J.-F. Barbier, *Journal historique et anecdotique du règne de Louis XV*, Paris, 1851, III, p. 262, 1751: “Le second file de M. de La Garde est maître des requêtes et a épousé une fille de M. Duval, homme de fortune du Système et dans les affaires, dont il a eu cent mille écus en mariage. Celui-ci est plus convenablement marié.”

⁵ See J. F. Boshier, “A fishing company of Louisbourg, Les Sables d'Olonne, and Paris: La société du baron d'Huart, 1750–1775”, *French historical studies*, IX/2, 1975, pp. 263–77.

⁶ Not Jeanne-Françoise-Marie as in most sources.

⁷ This might have dated from 1739 if, as has been suggested, Duval owned one of the best versions of La Tour's portrait of Dupouch which was exhibited that year (now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington). Unknown in 1928 when Besnard & Wildenstein was published, the pastel was acquired by Jean Cailleux from Soffrey de Beaumont-Beynac before its sale to Samuel Kress in 1956. The suggestion appears in Colin Eisler, *Paintings and sculptures from the Samuel Kress collection*, Washington, 1959, p. 321 (repeated in Debie & Salmon 2000, p. 207 but is prudently omitted from Washington 2009); it appears to derive from Jean Cailleux but is not repeated in the firm's *Cailleux 1912-1962, album jubilaire* which

La peinture autrefois naquit du tendre amour
Aujourd'hui l'amitié la met dans tout son jour.

It is said by some of the early sources⁸ that La Tour strained this friendship by enlarging the commission, presumably from the standard bust length, in order to be able to secure a larger price.

Duval de l'Épinoÿ's elevation, within two years of the Salon, coincided with a number of further marks of arrival. Among these were the acquisition of the château, lands and title (a marquisate) of Saint-Vrain (fig. 1) which went back to the 13th century. Until 1735 it was in the de Broglie family, but it was acquired that year by the flamboyant and fabulously wealthy fermier général Alexandre Le Riche de La Pouplinière.⁹ Its location, only 36 km south of Paris, made it possible to hold the fêtes in which La Pouplinière delighted, involving the numerous artists, musicians and dancers whom he supported so lavishly. This was the world of Voltaire, Rousseau, Rameau and Casanova – and also of La Tour whose portrait of La Pouplinière's young wife is one of the best-known pastels at Saint-Quentin. There were clouds over La Pouplinière's enjoyment of the property, notably an interminable law suit with the neighbours which was only finally settled in 1762. By 1747 he decided to sell Saint-Vrain to de l'Épinoÿ and his wife, for 210,000 livres, payable in instalments (and to La Pouplinière's creditors) over 22 years, with the contents sold for 30,000 livres in cash.

Among the few facts about de l'Épinoÿ vouchsafed by the main sources are his daughters' mariages – the clearest indicators of social progress. In 1751 the nineteen-year-old Marie-Marguerite was a suitable match for François-Pierre Dedelay de La Garde, baron d'Achères et de Rougemont (1712–1789), maître des requêtes, and son of a secrétaire du roi. Mme de Pompadour witnessed the marriage;¹⁰ the bride brought a dowry of 100,000 écus and the Saint-Vrain estate. She died a year later; her widower soon remarried, into the Fénelon family, but de l'Épinoÿ had the foresight to draft provisions into the contract allowing him to recover Saint-Vrain: "M. Duval aimoit beaucoup cette habitation où il avoit un des premiers appelé le genre anglais pour rompre la monotonie de nos anciens parcs. Des bosquets d'arbres verts lui rappeloient ceux d'Italie où il avoit voyagé."¹¹

Duval de l'Épinoÿ left his mark on the gardens, which contained important botanical specimens such as a laurier à fleurs de tulipes (*Arbor tulpifera*, recently imported from Louisiana and described by Père Charlevoix¹²). He created a number of paths, at the intersection of which he placed a 12-metre-high obelisk which has puzzled specialists ever since. Was it a monument to Cassini who had recently commenced his work of mapping France by establishing the Paris meridian? The obelisk is in fact slightly off this meridian, but the inscriptions *Geographia incremento* and *Oblectationi publica* surely reflect the same interests as La Tour's globe – and the book of maps of North America in the English language found in de l'Épinoÿ's estate inventory,¹³ and which relate to his adventures with d'Huart.

There is other evidence of de l'Épinoÿ's interest in books: he is, for example, listed among the subscribers to a 12-volume edition of Corneille published in 1764. Saint-Vrain was not of course his main residence: that was the substantial house at 1, rue d'Antin, constructed by another beneficiary of the Law scheme, Bourgeois de Boyne, between 1715 and 1725.

The marriage in 1753 of de l'Épinoÿ's second daughter Marie-Jeanne (1733–1823) was to last far longer. The contract this time was signed by the king himself, and the groom was the very wealthy Jean-Jacques Gallet de Beauchesne, comte de Pleuvault, marquis de Mondragon (1711–

appeared in 1963. I suspect the suggestion was simply based on a confusion between of marquis de Beaumont, born both by the Beaumont-Beynac family and Duval's descendants, the family of Bonnin de La Bonnière, which do not in fact seem to be closely related.

⁸ Mariette, *op. cit.*

⁹ Georges Cucuel, *La Pouplinière et la musique de chambre au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1913, p. 84ff.

¹⁰ Archives nationales MC ET XC VII/329, 22.v.1751.

¹¹ *Mémoires historiques de Jeanne Gomar de Vaubernier, comtesse du Barry*, Paris, 1803, III, pp. 2–5.

¹² *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle France*, Paris, 1744, II, p. 6.

¹³ Inv. p.m., Archives nationales Y 10913; MC XC VII 499.

1796), maître des requêtes, maître d'hôtel du roi, son of a secrétaire du roi. This time however de L'Épinoy was unable to pay his daughter's dowry, as a result of the default by the Société d'Huart in the Canadian business. A séparation des biens ensued, but information about de L'Épinoy's subsequent affairs becomes very scarce. By 1770 he had sold his office as secrétaire du roi. Saint-Vrain was sold, and was acquired by Mme du Barry after the death of Louis XV.

De L'Épinoy died in 1778, in what circumstances we can only surmise. The building at rue d'Antin, which had already passed to de L'Épinoy's son-in-law Gallet de Mondragon and was now known as the hôtel Mondragon, was confiscated¹⁴ when he emigrated in 1792; it was valued at ₣164,000. Here Joséphine and Napoléon were married in 1796, within weeks of Mondragon's death in exile in Germany. The house and contents were restored to his widow by an arrêté des Consuls, 6.IX.1802.

La Tour's pastel seems to have stayed with the house in the rue d'Antin during this period. When Mondragon emigrated in 1792, the hôtel was visited by the painter Lemonnier, who designated the portrait of "Duval l'oncle, peint au pastel par La Tour" to be put in reserve for the benefit of the nation. It was then returned to the family, and descended to de L'Épinoy's great-great-granddaughter Eulalie (1828–1892), who married the marquis de Beaumont. At some stage before 1869, when the hôtel Mondragon became the seat of the Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas, the pastel was removed to the château de Beaumont, Beaumont-la-Ronce, where it suffered the indignity of public auction, as a presumed portrait of the marquis de Mondragon, and fetched the insignificant sum of ₣5210 in 1903. The matter of the sitter's identity was quickly resolved by Maurice Tourneux,¹⁵ and the pastel was very soon snapped up by the famous couturier Jacques Doucet, who paid a more respectable sum of ₣120,000. Here, in the rue Spontini, it took pride of place among one of the very greatest collections of pastels of all time, as can be seen in the 1905 watercolour by Alexander Karbowski (fig. 2). But its stay here was again short-lived, as Doucet decided to dispose of his entire collection of XVIII^e art in favour of the modern school. His sale, in 1912, was one of the most spectacular in a period in which pastels enjoyed their second era of fashion; and, at that sale, "le roy des pastels de La Tour" reigned again. It was bought by baron Henri de Rothschild for ₣600,000, double the estimate, and a world record price for a pastel. Writing in the *Burlington magazine*, Robert Dell, its first editor, although an ardent francophile, revealed typically British incomprehension of the medium: "Is it in accordance with common sense that a masterpiece by Fragonard [*Le Songe du mendiant*] should fetch 137,500 francs, and a masterpiece by Latour, who can hardly be counted the equal of Fragonard, 660,000? The truth is that prices have no sort of relation to artistic value."



Figure 2

But Duval de l'Épinoy was not yet at rest, disturbed this time, in Henri de Rothschild's splendid hôtel at the corner of the rue de Berri and the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, by the constant stream of new omnibuses that trundled down the faubourg. Every pastel collector's nightmare: the vibration caused the picture to shake, and the experts predicted that no pigment would remain if the situation persisted. Rubber pads and every type of insulation were tried in vain, before the baron implemented a Rothschild solution:

¹⁴ H. Monin & L. Lazard, *Sommier des biens nationaux de la ville de Paris*, Paris, 1920, pp. 257, 269, 276.

¹⁵ "Études d'iconographie française: identification de deux modèles de La Tour", *Gazette des beaux-arts*, xxxi, 1904, pp. 275ff. In fact the subject had been identified in a contemporary critique of the 1745 Salon published in the *Jugemens sur quelques ouvrages nouveaux* and usually attributed to the abbé Desfontaines, although Fréron and Mairault collaborated on this short-lived literary periodical. The review, and the subsequent letter to the editor, have been unaccountably overlooked in the literature of salon criticism.

he built a new house on the Avenue du Bois (now the Avenue Foch). During the war, forces of a different kind came into play; and by 1943 the pastel had been acquired¹⁶ by the oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian, where, in keeping with his motto “only the best is good enough for me”, it joined La Tour’s beautiful but restrained portrait of the dancer Marie Sallé. Having lost his British passport in 1940, he assembled a collection of antique, oriental and Western art of the highest quality in his house on the Avenue d’Iéna in Paris. Many of the stars, including Duval de l’Épinoy, were exhibited in Washington in 1950. After his death in 1955 the collection was moved to a specially built museum in Portugal. There it remains.

It is difficult to improve on Maurice Tourneux’s description¹⁷ of this masterpiece: “Duval de l’Épinoy ne *pose* pas, il vit de cette vie mystérieuse dont La Tour – au prix de quelles angoisses et de quel efforts! – surprenait le secret et qu’il fixait en molécules impalpables sur le châssis de papier bleu, muet témoin et muette victime de ses rages et de ses désespoirs, quand il sentait fuir l’insaisissable perfection.”

Neil Jeffares

¹⁶ This may have happened when both Gulbenkian and Henri de Rothschild were living in Lisbon in 1942. Both were represented by Lisbon’s leading lawyer José Azeredo de Perdigão, who was to become a trustee of the Gulbenkian Foundation (see Jonathan Conlin, “Philanthropy without borders: Calouste Gulbenkian’s founding vision for the Gulbenkian Foundation”, *Análise social*, XLV/2, 2010. However, unlike Gulbenkian’s pastel of Marie Sallé, which was deposited with the National Gallery and stored in the Manod slate quarry in Wales during the war, Duval may not have left Paris at this stage.

¹⁷ *Les Arts*, 36, .XI.1904, p. 6.