

# La Tour, *Mlle Ferrand méditant sur Newton*

NEIL JEFFARES



## [Maurice-Quentin de La Tour](#)

Élisabeth FERRAND (1700–1752) [Zoomify](#)

Pastel on paper, 73x60 cm

1752

Munich, HVB Group, dep.: Alte Pinakothek, inv. [HuW6](#)

**PROVENANCE:** Paris, Georges Petit, Baudoin, Mannheim, Féral, 14–15.VI.1920, Lot 7 n.r., Éc. fr., ?Mme de Chatenay, mère; Louis Dumoulin, Paris, 1922. James Schwob d'Héricourt, Paris, 1928. J. Ch., Paris; Galerie François Heim, Paris; acqu. 1966

**EXHIBITIONS:** Salon de 1753, no. 78 (“Mlle Ferrand méditant sur Newton”); Paris 1922; Munich 2022, no. 19

**LITERATURE:** Fleury 1922, repr.; B&W 145, fig. 53; H. Bauer, *Meisterwerke des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Munich, 1966, p. 36f; Hertha Wellensiek, “Eine Bank kauft Rokoko”, *Weltkunst*, 1966, p. 1204 repr.; Watson 1968, p. 351 n.r.; Bury 1971, pl. 46; Hohenzollern & Soehner 1972, p. 35, fig. 29; Laurence Bongie, *Diderot's femme savante*, Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century, CLVXI, 1977, p. 153, p. 150 repr., Ulrike Boskamp, “Mademoiselle Ferrand méditant sur Newton von Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. Zur Rezeption von Newtons Opticks in Frankreich vor 1760”, unpublished MA thesis, Freie Universität, Berlin, 1994; Debric & Salmon 2000, p. 172, ill. 88; Goodman 2000, pp. 105f, fig. 58; Patricia Fara, *Newton: the making of a genius*, 2002, fig. 5.2; Siefert 2009, pp. 76f repr.; Nina Rattner Gelbart, “Adjusting the lens...” *Early modern women*, XI/1, 2016, pp. 116–27, fig. 1; June Barrow-Green & al., “The gender gap in mathematical and natural sciences...”, *Proceedings of the international congress of mathematicians*, Rio de Janeiro, 2018, I, p. 1071, fig. 3; Monika Hinterberger, *Eine Spur von Glück*, 2020, pp. 185–226 repr.; Nina Rattner Gelbart, *Minerva's French sisters*, 2021, fig. 1; Hipp & al. 2022, p. 100f; Jeffares 2022e, fig. 5; New York 2022, fig. 34; Salmon 2024, fig. 308; Fend 2022, fig. 5; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [J46.1798](#)

*the making of a genius*, 2002, fig. 5.2; Siefert 2009, pp. 76f repr.; Nina Rattner Gelbart, “Adjusting the lens...” *Early modern women*, XI/1, 2016, pp. 116–27, fig. 1; June Barrow-Green & al., “The gender gap in mathematical and natural sciences...”, *Proceedings of the international congress of mathematicians*, Rio de Janeiro, 2018, I, p. 1071, fig. 3; Monika Hinterberger, *Eine Spur von Glück*, 2020, pp. 185–226 repr.; Nina Rattner Gelbart, *Minerva's French sisters*, 2021, fig. 1; Hipp & al. 2022, p. 100f; Jeffares 2022e, fig. 5; New York 2022, fig. 34; Salmon 2024, fig. 308; Fend 2022, fig. 5; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [J46.1798](#)

**RELATED WORKS:** autograph replica commissioned by sitter, executed 1753 after her death

**GENEALOGY:** [Ferrand](#)

IN A HIGHLY REGARDED and influential monograph entitled *The portraits of Madame de Pompadour: celebrating the femme savante*,<sup>1</sup> Elise Goodman devoted several paragraphs to the description of an important pastel by La Tour which graces the galleries of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, in the context of the fashion for women who “embraced Newton’s ‘philosophie naturelle’”:

One of those women was Mlle Ferrand, whom La Tour depicts meditating on her Newton in an incisive pastel exhibited in the Salon of 1753. Pictured in three-quarter length in the intimacy of her study and clad in her *deshabillé du matin* to facilitate comfortable contemplation, Ferrand interrupts her reading to discourse with the spectator who has just entered her intellectual domain. La Tour honors Ferrand’s intelligence. Her firm pyramidal form may ingeniously allude to the solid geometry employed by her English muse and undoubtedly concretizes the resoluteness of her active mind. Her wide-eyed acuity and firm mouth, as well

<sup>1</sup> Berkeley, 2000. This passage (footnotes here omitted) appears on pp. 105–6, and the pastel is reproduced as fig. 58.

as her upright attentiveness, signal to the beholder that Newton's physics is energizing her being. She clearly conveys that cerebral vigor. Her open hand and splayed fingers, directing the viewer to her ear and then on to her book, indicate that she wishes to hear what her interlocutor has to say about Newton's optics and gravitational theory.

Her tome, albeit magnified for expressive purposes – its monumentality signifies its importance – is Voltaire's *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*, whose first edition is actually a rather modest though richly illustrated octavo of 399 pages. Nevertheless, like Ferrand's book, the actual *Eléments* is identified on its rectos with the words "DE NEUTON." First published in Amsterdam in 1738, the volume was dedicated by Voltaire to its principal catalyst, the marquise du Châtelet (this time the deified "Minerve de la France"), to enshrine her glory and that of her sex. In the preface, Voltaire elaborates on the importance of Newtonian physics for people of all classes and both genders, counseling women to apply themselves to science as assiduously as their Gallic Minerva applies herself.

Mlle Ferrand, about whom we possess no biographical information, was a bourgeois beneficiary of Voltaire's attempt to disseminate to the French public in intelligible language Newton's opaque physics and its scientific method. This experimental method had displaced the outmoded but nonetheless entrenched a priori rationalism of Descartes and his principal French disciple, Fontenelle, whose *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) enjoyed a great vogue among women of the period. A sensational success in France, the *Eléments* was reissued in several editions throughout the eighteenth century – Mlle Ferrand may be reading the 1752 edition hot off the press – and caused one reviewer to gush: "Finally Voltaire appeared, and immediately Newton is understood or about to be; all Paris resounds with Newton, all Paris stutters Newton, all Paris studies and learns Newton." One native Parisian, Mme de Pompadour, was apparently taken with Newton: in her library were Voltaire's *Oeuvres complètes* (1757), which contained the *Eléments*, and a copy of Francesco Algarotti's *Il Newtonianisme pour les dames* (1738), one of the major popularizing scientific works geared to women, whose author "Newtonized" with du Châtelet and Voltaire.

In its own terms, Dr Goodman's analysis is an exemplary account of the way this picture fits into her thesis, expressed in the type of art historical narrative currently favoured in academic circles. There are useful insights (notably how La Tour has altered the page<sup>2</sup> depicted from the 1738 printed edition, fig. 1), valuable information about the cultural context and much good sense. But the passage retains an unsatisfactory element of speculation, and unsurprisingly is not entirely accurate. We can debate fruitlessly whether Ferrand is engaged in dialogue with an interlocutor, or "meditating" as La Tour informs in an unusually specific description, while the virtual duplication of the pose in other portraits from around the same date, such as Mme de Mondonville au clavecin (Art Institute of Chicago) or Marie Fel tenant un porte-crayon (fig. 2), arguably undermines the specificity of the compositional analysis. Other questions can be answered: as we shall see, Mlle Ferrand is not reading the 1752 edition; she might have been irritated that her fine *toilette du matin* and expensive lace are dismissed as casual "deshabille"; she would have been horrified to be described as "bourgeois", and would be justly disappointed that her very solid contributions to Enlightenment philosophy are conflated with vapid Sunday afternoon pretensions to intellectual accomplishment. The account mentions none of her secrets – I refer not to her lesbianism, but to her astonishing role in harbouring one of the most celebrated royal fugitives in European history. But most of all what this account omits, and what when known cannot fail but alter our emotional response to this magnificent portrait, is that it was commissioned by a woman who knew she was dying, and was exhibited publicly months after her death to an audience who knew exactly who she was and called her "la célèbre



Figure 1

<sup>2</sup> Although I believe Dr Goodman is correct in thinking that La Tour has based the page he draws on the octavo edition by Voltaire, scaling it up, adding additional marginal notes, and altering Voltaire's spelling to the English version. La Tour similarly enlarged the books he depicted in his portrait of Mme de Pompadour, "pour la plus grande gloire" of his sitter: see Hourcade 2004a, p. 129. La Tour himself had an interest in optics, and owned an English telescope (by Peter Dolland).



Mlle Ferrand”. How today we can have lost that information – and rediscovered it, only to lose it again, not once but repeatedly – is the subject of this essay: it touches on the processes of art historical research as much as on the glory of this single, if special, example.

\* \* \*

In the salon of 1753, at the height of his powers, Maurice-Quentin de La Tour exhibited an unprecedented<sup>3</sup> eighteen portraits, among them the picture described in the livret as *Mademoiselle Ferrand méditant sur Newton* (no. 78). They included many other well-known works, such as the splendid portrait of the abbé Nollet (no. 87) also now in Munich, the celebrated portrait of “M. Rousseau, Citoyen de Genève” (no. 90) and the much-loved *bouffon* Manelli (no. 91). There are also records of lost works, some with cryptic descriptions: the portrait of “Madame de Geli” (no. 75), although known to be a Mme Barbaut-Gély because of her gushing letter of praise to the artist, has only now<sup>4</sup> yielded up her full identity as Marie-Madeleine-Louise Barbaut, wife of Antoine Gelly, payeur des gages à la cour des aides de Bordeaux since 1743 and by 1749 a secrétaire des commandements du comte de Clermont. (Clermont and another of his secrétaires, Paradis de Moncrif, were La Tour subjects in previous salons.)

Among the critics, who were generally enthusiastic about La Tour’s submissions, only Fréron specifically mentioned the portrait of Mlle Ferrand:<sup>5</sup>

Je me contenterai de citer le Portrait de Mlle *Ferrand* méditant su *Newton*, qui est très-beau, & qui étoit d’une grande difficulté pour l’exécution.

The pastel then disappeared for 167 years, turning up at a mixed auction at the Galerie Georges Petit on 4–5 June 1920 where it was catalogued as anonymous French school (lot 7). Although not reproduced – and despite being given a fictitious presumed identification which shows that the expert (Jules Féral) must have had in mind a possible attribution to Vigée Le Brun since the name chosen (“Mme de Chateney mère”) appears in exactly that form in that artist’s work list for 1787 – there can however be no doubt that the picture described is the Munich pastel:

Les yeux bruns, le visage souriant et tourné de trois quarts vers la droite, elle est assise, vue à mi-corps, le bras gauche accoudé sur une table couverte d’un tapis bleu, la joue légèrement appuyée sur la main. Elle est vêtue de blanc, une fanchon de dentelle garnie d’un ruban bleu nouée sous le menton et, derrière elle, posé contre d’autres volumes, un livre est ouvert; on lit sur une page: DE NEWTON.

It was bought by the Paris dealer Louis Dumoulin, who soon recognised it as the lost La Tour pastel from the 1753 salon. By January 1922 it had been lent, along with another supreme masterpiece also then on the Paris art market (Paul Cailleux’s pastel of *Dumont le Romain jouant de la guitare*) to an exhibition at the Louvre of the Saint-Quentin La Tours which had been recovered after the war.<sup>6</sup> Élie Fleury, in a review in the *Burlington magazine*, confirmed that the pastel had been in a recent Georges Petit auction, he thought with an attribution to Mme Vigée Le Brun.<sup>7</sup> By 1928 it had been bought by James Schwob d’Héricourt (1874–1939), a wealthy industrialist with interests in wool manufacture and in the Mumm



Figure 2

<sup>3</sup> For him; Oudry exhibited a similar number of works at this salon, more if the drawings and prints are counted separately. Much earlier (1704) Vivien had exhibited 24 portraits in one salon.

<sup>4</sup> Letter dated 1 September 1753, published in Desmaze 1874. Her names are provided in an *obligation*, 4.IX.1751 (Archives nationales, minutier central, XXXVI/470, first published in the online *Dictionary of pastellists*, 25.III.2013; see also [www.pastellists.com/genealogies/barbault.pdf](http://www.pastellists.com/genealogies/barbault.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Élie-Catherine Fréron, *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce tems*, XI, 1753, p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> The story of their fate has been told most recently, and most fully, by Hervé Cabezas and Christine Kott in the exhibition catalogue Saint-Quentin 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Fleury 1922.

champagne house, and a close relation by marriage to the unfortunate capitaine Alfred Dreyfus. After his death the picture subsequently belonged to someone identified only as “J. Ch., Paris” in the records.<sup>8</sup> There is nothing to suggest that it suffered the fate of other pictures in Schwob d’Héricourt’s collection:<sup>9</sup> a 1929 painting by Foujita, seized by the Nazis from his residence in the rue Beauséjour, was not returned to his heirs until 1998.

The pastel was acquired in 1966 by the Bayerischen Hypotheken- und Wechsel-Bank for the collection which is now on display in the Alte Pinakothek. The sitter’s identity remained stubbornly unknown, Johann Georg Prinz von Hohenzollern, the influence behind the acquisition, remarking that “Die Lebensdaten der Dargestellten sind unbekannt”. Sir Francis Watson,<sup>10</sup> writing in the *Burlington magazine* in praise of the bank’s generous loan, noted rather sniffily the “two fine pastels by Quentin de la Tour” which “represent typical minor aspects of the Enlightenment in France”. He added “The unfortunate bluestocking Mlle Ferrand had recently gained notoriety as the result of a painful law-suit in which her father had been compelled to recognize her as his legitimate daughter.” What an interesting piece of information – sadly unreferenced: but is it true? As far as my research has been able to establish, there can only be one such case,<sup>11</sup> the celebrated action by a Mademoiselle Ferrand heard in 1738 concerning the estate of her father, Michel Ferrand, président aux requêtes au parlement de Paris, who had died fifteen years previously. He had married an Anne Bellinzani in 1676, and by her had one legitimate son, Antoine Ferrand, who predeceased his father without posterity. By 1686 the couple effected a legal separation, but Anne was by then pregnant and a daughter (whose first name we never learn) was subsequently born; she was sent to a convent and only much later discovered her identity, when she instituted the suit (which she won).

There are two problems with this: one is the implausibility of La Tour’s sitter being 67 years old; the other is more fatal, namely the sitter’s real identity which was discovered and published by Professor Laurence Bongie in a book entitled *Diderot’s femme savante*, published in the Voltaire Foundation’s prestigious series *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* in 1977 (vol. CLXVI). Unfortunately the book was not widely read by art historians.<sup>12</sup> Mlle Ferrand was not, I should say, Diderot’s muse of the title, but the chapter devoted to her explains how she might have been, giving her dates and explaining her contributions to Enlightenment thought. It also tantalises us with a Fermatian promise of a full-length study, a promise repeated in several subsequent publications by the author,<sup>13</sup> but never delivered.

Relatively little research on pastels or La Tour took place in these years, and it was not until the 1980s that academic interest began to focus on the works that Sir Francis Watson had disdained. By 1994 “Mademoiselle Ferrand méditant sur Newton von Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. Zur Rezeption von Newtons Opticks in Frankreich vor 1760” was a suitable topic for an MA thesis at the Freie Universität, Berlin, 1994 by Ulrike Boskamp,<sup>14</sup> who was well aware of Bongie’s research and had located further archival documents. Her work however was sadly unpublished, and evidently unknown to Dr Goodman when she reported the total lack of biographical information about her subject. Xavier Salmon, drawing on Goodman’s work in the discussion of the pastel in the definitive monograph<sup>15</sup> he co-authored with the by then deceased Christine Debie, reported only “la biographie malheureusement obscure”. Although the pastel was again

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Hohenzollern & Soehner 1972 and several other reports following the picture’s acquisition in 1966.

<sup>9</sup> A report by Vincent Noce in *Libération*, 19.VI.1998. At the time of the raid the Nazis destroyed a portrait of Mme Schwob d’Héricourt as a “portrait juif”, and arrested his daughter-in-law who died in Auschwitz.

<sup>10</sup> Watson 1978.

<sup>11</sup> An account is given by François-Alexandre-Pierre de Garsault, *Faits des causes célèbres et intéressantes: augmentés de quelques causes*, Amsterdam, 1757, pp. 324–29.

<sup>12</sup> The London Library copy which I borrowed in March 2013 had never previously been taken out.

<sup>13</sup> Most importantly Laurence L. Bongie, “A new Condillac letter and the genesis of the *Traité des sensations*”, *Journal of the history of philosophy*, xxv, 1978, pp. 83–94, which includes further remarks about Ferrand and her philosophical contributions. Professor Bongie died in 2020.

<sup>14</sup> I am extremely grateful to Dr Boskamp for sharing with me her main discoveries and in particular the transcripts of Mlle Ferrand’s will and posthumous inventory originally located by Laurence Bongie: testament. They can be found in the Archives nationales, Minutier central, will of 8.II.1752, AN MC/XCII/575; the inventaire après décès, 11.IX.1752, AN MC/XCII/578.

<sup>15</sup> Debie & Salmon 2000, p. 172, ill. 88.

reproduced with her full identity in 2002, by Patricia Fara,<sup>16</sup> her book was known mainly to historians of science and once again escaped the attentions of art historians. Thus M. Salmon, in his catalogue of the monumental La Tour exhibition of 2004, advanced no further in his reference to Mlle Ferrand, while I did no better in the print edition of my *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800* published in 2006.

The Munich website, consulted in March 2013, provided no indication of deeper knowledge:

Die Porträtierte gehörte einer der sehr vermögenden und hochgebildeten Magistratenfamilien von Paris an. Sie ist hier in ihrem Boudoir im Morgenkleid mit dem Häubchen auf dem Kopf am Toilettentisch dargestellt, auf dem allerdings keine Schminkutensilien liegen, sondern ein Folioband aufgeschlagen steht. Der Überschrift kann man entnehmen, dass es sich um die Werke von Newton handelt, die sie in der französischen Ausgabe liest und mit ihrem Gegenüber zu diskutieren scheint. Das Bild ist nicht nur eines der herausragenden Meisterwerke des Künstlers, sondern ist auch ein Beleg für die hohe Bildung der Frauen im Zeitalter der Aufklärung.<sup>17</sup>

Here matters might have lain had I not been researching a quite different matter, and come across Olivier Courcelle's excellent website devoted to the celebrated mathematician Alexis Clairaut,<sup>18</sup> where Bongie's work on Ferrand is cited.

\* \* \*

This is not the place to attempt to deliver Bongie's promised biography, nor is it necessary to recapitulate the very considerable amount of material that has been published about Élisabeth Ferrand (1700–1752). But I will attempt summarise the points that I consider illuminate her portrait, and by issuing this incomplete note online I hope it may attract a broader audience than previous research. It is also fair to say that by no means all her secrets have yet been revealed.

Among these is her relationship with the various families called Ferrand, several of whom seem quite plausible.<sup>19</sup> I had wondered, without foundation, that she might be related to Mme de Pompadour's cousin, the fermier général Laurent-René Ferrand. Munich evidently thought she belonged to the family of Parisian magistrates (which as it happens includes the judge involved in Watson's paternity suit); they descend from a Poitou family, originating with a Jean Ferrand, médecin ordinaire du roi, who was ennobled in 1574. We have only two clues: one is somewhat cryptic, arising from Mlle Ferrand's correspondence with Prince Charles which was mostly addressed to "Mademoiselle Luci", "sœur" de "La Grandemain" (the codename for the comtesse de Vassé, with whom she lived), but on one occasion a letter is addressed to "Mademoiselle La Marre". From this Jacobite scholars inferred a reference to Les Mares, an estate of a third family, the Norman Ferrands, seigneurs des Mares, de Rouville and de La Conté.<sup>20</sup>

The second piece of evidence seems to me of considerably greater authority, although it is spoilt by one typographical and another understandable error. In the recently launched *Annonces, affiches et avis divers*<sup>21</sup> we find her burial notice among the—

Enterrements. Du 5 septembre [1752] [...] d'Élisabeth Férand, fille majeure de Pierre Férand, Seigneur de Roulleau, décédée rue S[aint] Dominique. A S. Sulpice

There is however no territory called Roulleau. It stretches the error too far to get to de Rouville, and in any case that family is fully researched, with the only father of the right generation being Georges-Louis Ferrand, sgr de La Conté.

But there is a different noble family, not well documented but nevertheless claiming the seigneurie of Les Bouleaux, in the Marne. In the standard genealogy<sup>22</sup> we find the following clue:

<sup>16</sup> *Newton: the making of a genius*, 2002, fig. 5.2.

<sup>17</sup> "The woman portrayed was a member of a very wealthy and erudite family of Parisian magistrates. Here, she is in her boudoir wearing a dressing gown and bonnet, sitting at her dressing table, upon which there are no make-up accessories, but instead, an open folio volume. It can be inferred from the title that it is a work by Newton that she is reading in French, and she seems to be discussing it with the person opposite her. The painting is not only one of the artist's most outstanding masterpieces; it is also evidence of the superior education of women during the Enlightenment."

<sup>18</sup> In particular the page [www.clairaut.com/n11mai1748po2pf.html](http://www.clairaut.com/n11mai1748po2pf.html), consulted 28.III.2013.

<sup>19</sup> They are documented in the Ferrand genealogy file on my site, at [www.pastellists.com/genealogies/ferrand.pdf](http://www.pastellists.com/genealogies/ferrand.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew Lang, *Pickle the spy*, 1903, p. 48f.

<sup>21</sup> 1752, p. 568. My attention was drawn to this on the Clairaut site.



Election de Châlons, 1697: Ferand, Paul, seigneur de Bouleaux: *D'azur, à trois épées d'argent garnies d'or, en pal, les pointes en bas*

This must be the same family: Pierre Férand or Ferrand was the first seigneur des Bouleaux and was the father of Paul and another Pierre.<sup>23</sup> The “terre et seigneurie des Bouleaux, scize en la haulte Brie, paroisse de La Chapelle-sur-Orbais, concistant en justice haute, moyenne et basse, chasteau, fossez, pont levis, cour, colombier” was purchased<sup>24</sup> for 9330 livres by “Pierre Ferrand, bourgeois de Paris” from Jacques Lefebvre, sgr de Maurepas, on 15 June 1685. The château is indicated (on the far right) in a 1747 “plan de la route de Paris à Chaalons” (below).<sup>25</sup> Various documents in the archives of La Chapelle-sur-Orbais, near Châlons-sur-Marne establish the identities of “Pierre Ferrand, l'un des cent gentilshommes de la maison du Roy, demeurant à Paris, rue du Pan” and his brother Paul Ferrand, sgr des Bouleaux, formerly capitaine du régiment de Guyenne, both sons of Pierre Ferrand, also one of the gentilshommes du roi, deceased by 1692.



Figure 3

I have included the arms (fig. 4, left) because, for once, they provide an important further piece of the jigsaw. They confirm that this is the same family listed by Jouglé de Morenas<sup>26</sup> under the heading Ferrand de Montigny 15110 (Bourgogne). They also differ minutely from the arms of the Poitou family of Parisian magistrates (fig. 4, right), where the central sword is pointed upwards but the others are the same. It is likely that at some stage these families were connected, but Jouglé listed them separately. It would be a digression too far to explain the relationship to

<sup>22</sup> Édouard de Barthélemy, *Armorial général de la généralité de Châlons sur Marne*, Paris, 1862, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> My surmise in a first draft of this essay was subsequently confirmed by Professor Bongie (private communication, April 2013); see Nicolas du Bout, *Histoire de l'abbaye d'Orbais*, 1890, pp. 641 & passim.

<sup>24</sup> Archives départementales de la Marne, *Inventaire sommaire de la série H*, 1949, p. 370.

<sup>25</sup> Archives départementales de la Marne, C 4033/3.

<sup>26</sup> Henri Jouglé de Morenas, *Grand Armorial de France*, Paris, 1934–49, s.v. Ferrand, reporting a different source (Meurgesy).

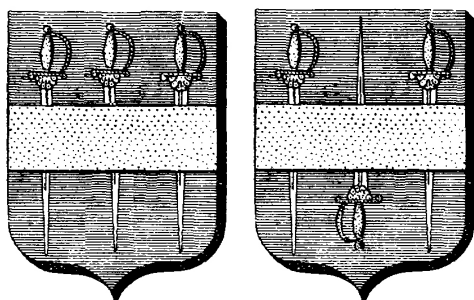


Figure 4

Charles Ferand, lieutenant général de police et lieutenant particulier au bailliage de Saint-Dizier<sup>27</sup> and the family's claimed relationship to Jeanne d'Arc. The état civil records for the parish do not currently seem to be available.

Elisabeth Ferrand is likely to have been born and baptised in the parish of La Chapelle-sous-Orbais, but the registers have not survived for 1699 or 1700 (her father does appear as parrain to a neighbour in one of the adjacent volumes). She is however mentioned in a tuition<sup>28</sup> issued 1

February 1714 after her father's death. This confirms that she was the daughter of "deffunt Paul Ferrand S<sup>r</sup> des Boulleaux capitaine au régiment de Guyenne." The family council included Antoine Mey de Valombre, lieutenant général, cousin, and his brother-in-law; Charles-Pierre Anget, sgr de La Chaboissière, commissaire général des cheuau-légers de la garde du roi, etc., as well as Jacques-Louis Duplessis, directeur général des gabelles de Lyonnais. The document identifies her mother as Marguerite de Laistre who had (by 1714) remarried, to Gilles Gadret de La Motte, lieutenant colonel du régiment de Guyenne, her late husband's commanding officer; after his death, Marguerite was married a third time, in Reims in 1722, to Jean Le Boucher de Lardenay, from a family of magistrates in Reims. The tuition confirms that her father had left her significant wealth in her own name, independent of her mother, and that they had recently moved to Paris from Sézanne. The move prompted the resignation of one of her tuteurs, Jacques Nardeau (1676–1714) of Sézanne, to be replaced by an avocat au parlement de Paris, Abraham-Charles Laisné. It also led to the sale of a house in Popincourt valued at 5400 livres and of a three-quarters interest in one in the rue Gît-le-Cœur, Paris, valued at 4500 livres. Also mentioned is an annuity of 750 livres p.a. on a capital sum of 15,000 livres on the head of the maréchal de Villars acquired by her father and uncle in 1704; these were to be liquidated to satisfy creditors.

Mlle Ferrand's inventaire après décès<sup>29</sup> record an outstanding debt of 18,000 livres due from the sale in 1735 to a Gabriel de Roquette (1696–1763) as unpaid purchase price for "sa terre des Boulleaux": 15,000 livres had been paid in cash, the balance as an annuity of 900 livres p.a. (In 1740 Élisabeth made over 500 livres p.a. to the comtesse de Vassé, who orally confirmed during the inventaire that she had later waived this.) Three further annuities were reported in the inventaire: of 900 livres p.a. bought in 1733 from the comte de Donges, 1200 livres from the duc et duchesse de Boufflers in 1735, and a further 1000 livres in 1740. Other property transactions were reported in an article by the baron de Baye in 1884 concerning the château de Montmort (Marne),<sup>30</sup> suggesting

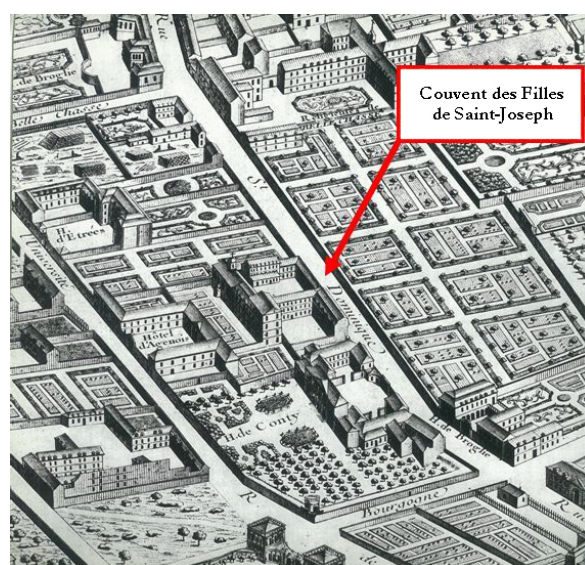


Figure 5

<sup>27</sup> See *Archives de la Société des collectionneurs d'ex-libris et de reliures historiques*, IX–X, 1902, p.117ff.

<sup>28</sup> Registres de tutelles, AN Y4246.

<sup>29</sup> A summary of this and the will were kindly provided to me by Ulrike Boskamp in 2013; I have subsequently consulted the originals.

<sup>30</sup> Baron J. de Baye, "Notes sur le château de Montmort (Marne)", *Revue de Champagne et de Brie*, XVI, 1884. "Du 17 septembre 1728 contrat d'acquisition par messire François Rémond, seigneur de Montmort, de demoiselle Elisabeth Ferrand fille majeure, des fiefs appelés: Le Borgne ou Beauregard et de la Mauricerie situés à la Gaure. Ces fiefs avant ladite acquisition devaient foi et hommage au seigneur de Montmort." (p. 24);



litigation continuing long after Mlle Ferrand's death, connected with an initial sale by "Élisabeth Ferrand fille majeure" of several territories in 1728. Her annual income from annuities was thus some 4000 livres.

It is time to turn now to Élisabeth Ferrand's life in Paris, a glimpse of which is again provided in her posthumous inventory. She lived on the ground floor of the couvent des Filles de Saint-Joseph at 10–12 rue Saint-Dominique (somewhat confusingly referred to as the îlot Saint-Germain: marked in the 1739 plan de Turgot, fig. 5),<sup>31</sup> a refuge for ladies made famous by Mme de Montespan, who moved there in 1687, and, 60 years later, by Mme du Deffand, with her famous salon, "tapissé de moire bouton d'or", frequented by everyone from Voltaire to Turgot. Ferrand's apartment included an antichambre, a salle de compagnie, and a chambre à coucher leading to a garderobe and a maid's room. She employed a servant and a chambermaid. This was a life which she shared for many years with the comtesse de Vassé, née Antoinette-Louise-Gabrielle des Gentils du Bessay (1710–1768), who had married, at the age of 14, Henri-Joseph Grognet, comte de Vassé, mestre de camp de cavalerie. Following his death in 1733, the wealthy widow never remarried, but lived in an adjacent apartment to Mlle Ferrand's until the latter's death.

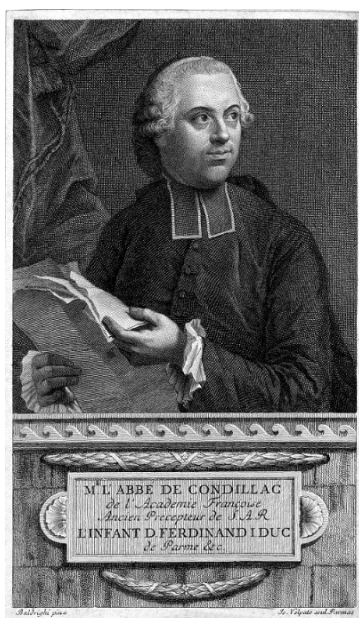


Figure 6

The list of celebrated Enlightenment figures with whom Élisabeth Ferrand was in intimate contact was remarkable, including Helvétius, Réaumur, Clairaut and the two Bonnot brothers, Gabriel, abbé de Mably and Étienne, abbé de Condillac (fig. 6 shows Volpato's engraving after Baldrighi's portrait). It is to the last of these that we owe the clearest indication of her intellectual accomplishments in an era when few women dared to publish in their own name. As Bongie has shown,<sup>32</sup> as early as 1747 Condillac alluded to Ferrand's incisive analysis of the Molyneux problem in his *Mémoire* of that year: "Locke, Berkelai et moi nous avons tous trois tort. Demandez en la raison à une

demoiselle qui m'en a fait appercevoir." It is difficult to imagine a clearer endorsement of her intellectual credentials.

Condillac's most significant work, the *Traité des sensations*, appeared in 1754 (fig. 7) with a generous acknowledgement of Ferrand's role in forming his thinking and exposing logical problems in his initial approach. For an account of this, particularly in relation to Condillac's most striking explanation of the development of the senses by progressively animating a statue, I turn to another distinguished art historian, Ewa

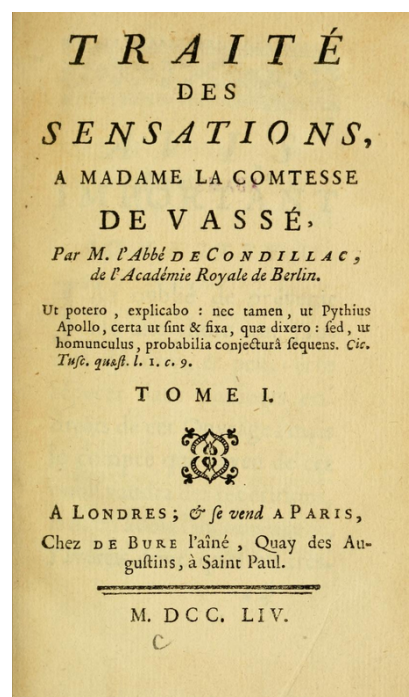


Figure 7

"Procès entre M. le marquis de Montmort seigneur des hautes et basses vendanges et madame de Roquette dame des Boulleaux avec deux sentences rendues au bailliage royal de Châlons les 22 mai et 3 juillet 1781 qui maintiennent M. de Montmort dans la possession desdits fiefs et ordonne que ladite dame et M. de Velyse feront déclaration des héritages qu'ils possèdent sur les mêmes fiefs." (p. 32).

<sup>31</sup> See Jacques Hilairet, *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris*, 1997, II, p. 402, who does not however mention Ferrand.

<sup>32</sup> Bongie, *op cit.*, 1978, p. 89.



Lajer-Burcharth,<sup>33</sup> who must narrowly have missed making the connection with the Munich pastel:

The idea of using a Galatea-like statue was in fact given to Condillac by his friend Elisabeth Ferrand, who had great influence on the development of his ideas regarding the relation between sight and touch, and whom he actually credits in a dedication as the real author of the *Treatise*. ... I may add that, in and of itself, the use of the statue metaphor in eighteenth-century discussions of human nature was not new. It appeared, for example, in André François Boureau-Deslandes's *Pygmalion, ou la statue animée* published in 1741. In his *Letter on the blind*, Diderot mentioned in passing a similar idea when he suggested that it was possible to imagine a block of marble that could think and feel ... Yet, in Condillac's *Treatise*, the statue is not a mere reference made in passing but the main actor in the theater of his argument, its structuring epistemological device. The fact that the idea to employ it came from Ferrand suggests that it was her touch that inscribed Condillac's philosophical manufacture of the self as an effect of touch, which is relevant to the argument I will be developing here.

Ferrand provided an epigraph from Cicero (*Tusculanarum quaestionum*, I/9) for the *Traité*: “Ut potero, explicabo, nec tamen, ut Pythius Apollo, certa ut sint et fixa, quae dixero: sed, ut homunculus, probabilia conjectura sequens.” Commenting on this, Grimm wrote:

Cette épigraphe est du choix de Mlle Ferrand, personne d'un mérite rare, philosophe et géomètre, morte il y a deux ou trois ans, et fort regrettée de notre auteur dont elle était l'amie intime, et de tous ceux qui l'ont connue. Si nous en croyons M. l'abbé de Condillac, Mlle Ferrand a une très grande part au *Traité des sensations*, et je ne sais si cet aveu fait plus d'honneur à elle ou à celui qui le fait. Ce qu'il y a de certain, c'est que l'introduction n'est pas la partie la moins intéressante du *Traité*. Notre philosophe en parlant de Mlle Ferrand, fait l'éloge de son propre cœur, et l'on aime à lire un auteur qui a le bonheur de connaître le prix de l'amitié.<sup>34</sup>

Grimm was rather less charitable in another passage:

M. Condillac avertit, dans la préface [du *Traité des sensations*], que ce qu'il y a de mieux appartient à Mlle Ferrand, qui lui a donné une idée de son ouvrage. Cette demoiselle était une personne de peu d'esprit, d'un commerce assez maussade, mais qui savait de la géométrie et qui a laissé un legs à M. de Condillac dans son testament.<sup>35</sup>

It is to Grimm too, writing much later (November 1779), that we owe the earliest account of her secret role in harbouring Bonnie Prince Charlie in the

period from 1749 after he left Avignon and decided to return to Paris in heavy disguise.<sup>36</sup> This she undertook with the comtesse de Vassé and their neighbour, and Charles's mistress, the princesse de Talmont, née Marie-Anne-Louise Jablonowska. Grimm:

Le malheureux prince Édouard, après être sorti de la Bastille, resta caché pendant trois ans à Paris, chez madame la marquise de Vassé, qui demeurait alors avec son amie, la célèbre mademoiselle Ferrand, à Saint-Joseph, au faubourg Saint-Germain. La princesse de Talmont, dont il était toujours fort amoureux, habitait la même maison. Il se renfermait pendant le jour dans une petite garde-robe de madame de Vassé, où il y avait un escalier dérobé par lequel il descendait la nuit chez la princesse, et le soir derrière une alcôve du cabinet de mademoiselle Ferrand. Il jouissait là tous les jours, sans être aperçu, de la conversation d'une société fort distinguée. On y parlait souvent de lui, on en disait et beaucoup de bien et beaucoup de mal, et l'on se doutait bien peu du témoin caché devant qui l'on parlait. L'existence du prince dans cet asile, et le



Figure 8

<sup>33</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, “Pompadour’s touch: difference in representation”, *Representations*, LXXIII/1, 2001, pp. 54–88, cited here without references. See also Bongie, *op cit.*, 1978, who includes a June 1750 letter by Condillac to Gabriel Cramer acknowledging Ferrand’s contribution.

<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Melchior, Baron Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister etc.*, éd. M. Tourneux, Paris, 1877–82, II, p. 438, 1.XII.1754.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>36</sup> Among more modern accounts, Frank McLynn’s *Charles Edward Stuart: a tragedy in many acts*, London, 1988, is very readable. Charles was no doubt called prince Édouard in France to avoid confusion with Charles, duc de Lorraine (1712–1780).

profond secret qui le déroba si longtemps aux yeux de tout l'univers entre trois femmes, et dans un maison où l'on recevait l'élite de la ville et de la cour, semblent tenir du prodige. M. de Choiseul qui, plusieurs années après le départ du prince, avait entendu parler de cette singulière anecdote, ne pouvait y croire. Etant ministre des affaires étrangères, il écrivit lui-même à Mme de Vassé pour lui en demander les détails. Elle lui avoua tout, sans lui laisser ignorer qu'elle avait été obligée de chasser le prince de chez elle, à cause des scènes trop vives qu'il avait eues avec Mme de Talmont, scènes qui commençaient toujours fort tendrement, mais qui finissaient souvent par des querelles et même par des coups. Nous tenons ce fait d'une amie très particulière de madame de Vassé.<sup>37</sup>

Charles was to stay in the convent for several months in early 1749, but returned repeatedly over the next three years. His own pastel by *La Tour*<sup>38</sup> had been made before this, as it was shown in the salon of 1748 (fig. 8 shows Michel Aubert's engraving of it), but it is likely that it was at some stage at the convent when his banker Waters lent it to the princesse de Talmont for copies to be made, in 1751–52.

As their extensive correspondence shows,<sup>39</sup> Charles relied heavily on Élisabeth not merely to act as peacemaker in his interminable and occasionally violent rows with the princesse, but during his absences from Paris to provide him with crucial intelligence – as when the princesse's Paris maid discovered the secret and was suspected as being unreliable. Another duty was to post forward-dated letters setting false trails intended to deceive spies as to his whereabouts. These were not tasks without grave personal risks for Élisabeth, and there is no doubt that it was she, rather than Mme de Vassé, who was committed to the matter.<sup>40</sup> The increasing demands Charles made on her created tensions in the relationships between the three women (McLynn had little doubt that Élisabeth and the comtesse de Vassé were lesbians). Towards the end of 1751, when Mlle Ferrand had been ill with a fever and unable to respond to the princesse's enquiries about Charles, the princesse wrote a series of vicious attacks on Élisabeth which she could only describe as “blush-making” (inter alia she was accused of “bassesse”).

Élisabeth was in fact seriously and chronically ill for several years before her death.<sup>41</sup> In his letter of 10 June 1750 to Cramer, Condillac was able to report to him that “elle [Ferrand] se porte mieux, mais elle n'est pas encore tout à fait remise de son accident.” It is likely that she did not expect her condition to recover when she made her will on 8 February 1752; she was to die on 3 September 1752. The will included bequests to Condillac (6000 livres “pour avoir des livres”), to his brother de Mably and to Clairaut, while Mme de Vassé was the principal legatee, with Nicolas Baille,<sup>42</sup> a former conseiller of the grand conseil and intendant of the duc d'Orléans, as the executor. In a most unusual clause of particular significance for art historians,<sup>43</sup> Mlle Ferrand stipulated the following:

Veut et entend la dite demoiselle testatrice que son portrait qui est chez le Sieur Delatour peintre soit comprice dans le dit legue universel. Duquel portrait elle prie Madame de Vassé d'en faire faire une copie par le dit Sieur Delatour et de Remettre cette copie a Monsieur Baille con<sup>er</sup> au grand conseil dont elle connaît l'attachement et l'amitié pour elle. Etant persuadée qu'il recevra avec plaisir cette marque de son souvenir quelque peu considerable que le soit.

So this enigmatic woman has left us with some final puzzles: was this réplique made? I am inclined to agree with Professor Bongie<sup>44</sup> in thinking that it probably was: there was every opportunity, the funds were available and there is no reason to doubt the commitment of her friends to honouring this very intimate request. We know from the drafting that the primary version was with *La Tour* by early February 1752, and was presumably well under way, if not actually finished, by that stage, but, it seems, not yet delivered rather than already returned for the copy – nor was either version recorded in the inventaire in September. It is a fairly safe bet

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, x, pp. 229–30.

<sup>38</sup> For the confusions between this and the pastel of his brother, see Grosvenor 2008.

<sup>39</sup> These are mostly preserved at Windsor. I have relied on the summary in McLynn, *op. cit.*, pp. 378–97.

<sup>40</sup> After Élisabeth's death, Mme de Vassé moved quickly to terminate the relationship.

<sup>41</sup> Bongie, *op. cit.*, 1978, pp. 92, 94.

<sup>42</sup> (1683–1761), conseiller honoraire du roi en son grand conseil et intendant des maison, domaine et finances du duc d'Orléans.

<sup>43</sup> Not reported by Bongie in 1977; I am particularly grateful to Dr Boskamp for generously providing this to me.

<sup>44</sup> Private communication (e-mail, 2.IV.2013).

that the picture was commenced in late 1751 or the very start of 1752, with the implication that I have drawn at the start of this essay. But the new questions that impose are: which version was exhibited at the Salon; what happened to them after the deaths of the respective recipients;<sup>45</sup> and which is now in Munich? It by no means follows from the accomplishment of the Munich pastel that it was the earlier picture: La Tour's autograph repetitions are often just as fine as his first attempts.

Shortly after her death, on 3 September, and burial, at Saint-Sulpice on 5 September, a posthumous inventory was conducted (11 September). A delightful detail that arises is the description of her clothing, including the dress in which La Tour shows her: “une robe et le tablier de Satin blanc des indes”, as well as “le bavolet et les engageantes a trois rangs et d'ancienne dentelle d'angleterre.” This *robe à la française* and skirt, of high quality silk satin, as well as the *point d'Angleterre* (which, despite the name, was a Brussels bobbin lace),<sup>46</sup> were expensive, prized garments rather than ones chosen for comfort.

Neil Jeffares

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<sup>45</sup> The Archives départementales de Nevers contain papers from the Jaucourt family (to whom the comtesse de Vassé was connected through her mother's first marriage), including the “exécution du testament” of the comtesse de Vassé, 1769; however this contains no mention of the pastel (Myriam Bernard-Lavie, e-mail, 16.IV.2013), nor I understand does the testament itself (M<sup>e</sup> Brolin, Paris, 30.V.1768, Archives nationales). Nicolas Baille, whose wife predeceased him by 26 years, died without surviving posterity (according to Saint-Allais). Neither pastel seems to have appeared at auction before 1920.

<sup>46</sup> I am grateful to Aileen Ribeiro, personal communication (28.III.2013).