

La Tour, *Mme de Pompadour*

NEIL JEFFARES



[Maurice-Quentin de La Tour](#)

Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson,
marquise de POMPADOUR
(1721–1764)

[Zoomify](#)

Pastel on ten sheets of
paper, 178.5x131 cm

1748–55

Paris, musée du Louvre,
inv. [27614](#)

PROVENANCE: Le sujet; inv. p.m., 4.vii.1764, no. 288; son frère, marquis de Marigny; inv. p.m., 1781, no. 1818, “un grand Tableau peint en pastel...portrait de famille...pour mémoire”. Auguste-Louis-César-Hippolyte-Théodore de Lespinnas de Langeac, comte d’Arlet (1759–1814) a.1796; offered to the Museum central des arts 26.ii.1796 & seq. but refused; Paris, Paillet & Delaroche, 11.vii.1803, Lot 335, “ce morceau, le plus grand Ouvrage de cet Artiste, est recouvert par une belle Glace blanche faite exprès à Saint Gobin, et a appartenu à feu Louis XV”, fr500; Paillet; acqu. Louvre 1803, fr500, dep.: Musée spécial de l’École française, Versailles, 1803–23; Louvre inv. 1815–24, no. 54, Chalcographie royale; dep.: Chambord 1939–p.1942

EXHIBITIONS: Salon de 1755, no. 58; Paris 1838–45, no. 1079, anon.; Paris 1930, no. 13, repr. p. 49; Paris 1935c, no. 99;

Paris 1949, no. 36; Paris 1963b; Paris 1965b, no. 75; Paris 1967a, no. 58; La Tour 2004c, no. 10 repr. clr; Paris 2018

LITERATURE: lettre du 8.vii.1748, Graffigny 2004, ix, pp. 175f, p. 178 n.6; Prinz Wilhelm von Preußen, lettres au marquis de Valori, 23.xii.1755, 17.i.1756; Anon. 1755a; Anon. 1755c; Anon. 1755d; Anon. 1755e; Dulondel 1755; Estève 1755a; Estève 1755b; Gautier-Dagoty 1755; Grimm 1755; La Porte 1755; Dusaulchoy de Bergemont 1800; Archives des musées nationaux, sér. D 2, cabinet des dessins; Houssaye 1849; Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, 16.ix.1850; 2e éd., 1852, ii, pp. 396ff; P.-C. [Philartète Challes], “Les nouvelles galeries du Louvre”, *Musée des familles*, 1851, p. 289, grav. repr. (in reverse); La Rochenoire 1853, pp. 58–60, 72; Mantz 1854, p. 177, “un de ceux que le temps a effacés”; Champfleury 1855, pp. 89ff; Dréolle de Nodon 1856, p. 132f & *passim*; Jean-Baptiste Capefigue, *Madame la marquise de Pompadour*, 1858, pp. 46, 195, 284 (“beaucoup préférable au portrait peint par Boucher”); Antoine-Jules Dumesnil, *Histoire des plus célèbres amateurs...*, Paris, 1858, i, p. 152f, “sa conservation est aussi satisfaisante qu’on pouvoit l’espérer d’un genre aussi éphémère que le pastel”; Gautier 1858; La Fizelière 1860, pp. 296ff, repr. opp. p. 300; Goncourt 1867, pp. 146ff, 350, Campardon 1867, repr. frontispiece; Reiset 1869, no. 819, p. 353; Guiffrey 1873, pp. xxxviii, 20f; Marsy 1875; Champfleury 1886, chap. ix; Alfred Trumble, *The collector*, 15.i.1890, p. 41; 1.ii.1890, p. 49; 15.ii.1890, p. 57; Champney 1891, p. 269 n.r., “the head cut out during the Revolution”; Dilke 1899, repr. opp. p. 160; Babin 1901; Magnier 1904, p. 5; Tourneux 1904a, repr. p. 113; Fourcaud 1908, p. 111 n.r.; Guiffrey 1909, fig. 99; MacFall 1909, pp. 136–42, repr. opp. p. 140; Glaser 1910, repr. opp. p. 129; Keim 1911, frontispiece; Vaillat 1912, pl. v; Jean-François Raffaëlli, *Mes promenades au musée*

du Louvre, Paris, 1913, repr. opp. p. 58; Fleury & Brière 1920, pp. 74f; Ratouis de Limay 1925, p. 34f, pl. 29; B&W 385, fig. 36, 38; repr.; *Illustrated London news*, 28.vii.1928, repr.; *Illustrated London news*, 28.vii.1928, repr.; Gillet 1929, pp. 13–16, pl. 11, 10 (detail); Bouchot-Saupique 1930, no. 46; Leroy 1933, pp. 43–45; Delpuech 1946, repr.; Ratouis de Limay 1946, pl. ix/12; E. & J. de Goncourt 1948, pl. 47; Guth 1952, repr. p. 48; René & Lydie Huyghe, *Cent chefs-d'œuvre du musée du Louvre*, 1952, no. 75 repr.; Золотов 1960, pl. 17; Mirimonde 1966, pp. 152ff, repr.; Золотов 1968, repr. p. 89; V. & L. Adair 1971, p. 92 repr.; Bury 1971, pl. 7; Monnier 1972, no. 74; Monnier 1973, p. 314; Richards 1984, fig. 6; Quoniam & al. 1986, no. 341; Roland Michel 1987, p. 39 repr. clr; Maheux 1988, fig. 3; Viatte & Sérullaz 1996 p. 391 repr.; Kathleen Nicholson, in Joanna Woodall, ed., as *Portraiture: facing the subject*, Manchester, 1997, p. 57; Inge E. Boer, “Culture as a gendered battleground”, in Tijtske Akkerman & al., *Perspectives on feminist political thought...*, 1998, fig. 6.2; Debie 1998; Margaret Crosland, *Madame de Pompadour: sex, culture and power*, 2000, pp. 10, 111; Debie & Salmon 2000, p. 107, ill. 46; Goodman 2000, repr.; Hyde 2000, pp. 463f, repr.; Andrea Weisbrod, *Von Macht und Mythos der Pompadour*, 2000, fig. 6; Akpabio 2002, p. 28; Ewa Lajer-Burchard, “Pompadour’s touch: difference in representation”, *Representations*, 73, 2001, pp. 54–88, fig. 6; Méjanès 2002, repr.; Pascale Gorguet Ballesteros, “Les atours de la Pompadour”, *Connaissance des arts*, 173, 2002, pp. 42–51, repr.; Xavier Salmon, “Un mécène à l’écoute de son époque”, *Dossier de l’art*, 83, .ii.2002, pp. 4–17, repr.; Versailles 2002, *passim*; Alden Gordon, “Searching for the elusive Madame de Pompadour”, *Eighteenth century studies*, xxxvii/1, 2003, pp. 97f, 105, 107, 111 n.15 n.r.; Marie-Josèphe Bossan, *L’Art de la chaussure*, 2004, p. 173 n.r.; Hourcade 2004a, pp. 129f, figs. 1, 2; Hourcade 2004b, p. 362; La Tour 2004a, pp. 151f, repr.; Méjanès 2004, p. 43 repr.; Salmon 2004f, p. 14, repr.; Mary Sheriff, “Decorating knowledge”, *Art history*, xxviii/2, .iv.2005, pp. 151ff; Ken Ireland, *Cythera regained?: the Rococo revival in European literature and the arts*, 2006, p. 80, as source for Théophile Gautier novella, *Le Petit Chien de la marquise*, 1836; Перова 2006, pp. 13, 77 repr.; Burns 2007, p. 135, fig. 23; Rosenberg 2007, p. 525; London 2008, repr.; Soulié & Lessing 2008, no. 380; Sprinson de Jesús 2008, fig. 12; Goodman 2009, fig. 6.29; Trauth 2009, p. 156 repr.; Eva Kathrin Dade, *Madame de Pompadour. Die Mätresse und die Diplomatie*, Köln, 2010, pp. 228f, repr. cvr; Petherbridge 2010, p. 133 n.r.; Rosamond Hooper-Hamersley, *The hunt after Jeanne-Antoinette de Pompadour: patronage, politics, art...*, 2011, fig. 16; Kaufmann-Khelifa 2013, p. 25 repr.; Le Prat & Luquet 2013; Burns & Saunier 2014, pp. 68f repr.; Dan Edelstein, “Political thought”, in Daniel Brewer, ed., *Cambridge companion to the French Enlightenment*, 2014, p. 78 n.r.; Barbara Lecompte, *Marquise au portrait*, roman, Paris, 2014, repr.; Smentek 2014, pl. 17, fig. 4.1; Fragonard 2015, pp. 180–82; Guichard 2015, fig. 9; Warsaw 2015, p. 32 repr.; Prat 2017, fig. 395, as 1752–55; Burns 2017, p. 22 repr.; Salmon 2018, no. 90 repr.; [Jeffares 2018g](#); Jeffares 2018k, p. 107 repr.; Jeffares 2018m; Wine 2018, p. 197 n.20 n.r.; Gutowska-Dudek 2019, pp. 16, 18f repr.; Hoisington 2019, fig. 6; Sandt 2019, p. 214; Faroult 2020, fig. 188; Jérôme van Wijland & al., *Académie de médecine: Catalogue des peintures et sculptures*, 2020, p. 150 repr., as model for Charles Champmartin portrait of Antoine Portal; Versailles 2022, p. 121 repr.; Nicolas Party & Xavier F. Salomon, *Rosalba Carriera’s Man in pilgrim’s costume*, 2023; Tessa Murdoch, “Rococo pops as a Rosalba pastel is fittingly framed”, *Apollo*, .vi.2023, repr.; Wunsch 2023, fig. 3 detail; Wunsch 2024, fig. 35; Salmon 2024, fig. 393–398; Rochebrune 2024, fig. 57; Tambling 2025; *Dictionary of pastelists* online, [J.46.2541](#)

RELATED WORKS: For preparations, copies, engravings etc., see *Dictionary of pastelists* online

GENEALOGY: [Poisson](#)

ON A TOUT DIT SUR MME DE POMPADOUR”, Charles Magnier¹ wrote in 1904, opening a volume of documentation which has been more often cited than read. There can however be little dispute that La Tour’s full-length pastel of Mme de Pompadour is the most important work in the medium made before 1800 – and perhaps ever. His président de Rieux ([J.46.2722](#)), exhibited 14 years earlier, is arguably more spectacular (by area it is 25% larger, although still smaller than Vivien’s largest pastel of Max Emanuel [J.77.285](#)); but *Pompadour*’s place at the apogee of the dix-huitième pastel is founded on the sitter’s personal importance and the work’s dominant position in the Louvre’s pastel collection, where it has been admired for some 200 years (while de Rieux has been in a public museum only since 1994), following a carefully planned appearance as La Tour’s sole submission to the 1755 Salon.

Proportionately the secondary literature is vast, although much of it uses the work as a starting point for theoretical explorations of Enlightenment or feminism; we do not pursue those here. Nor is there any need to rehearse the biography of the sitter which has been repeatedly told with varying degrees of scholarship. The themes explored in the pastel are those of the seminal exhibition at Versailles in 2002, *Madame de Pompadour et les arts*, to which of course it could not be lent for reasons of fragility, as Henri Loyrette explained in his preface to Jean-François Méjanès’s 2002 monograph devoted to the work: “la poudre fragile du pastel n’autorise ni vibration ni donc mouvement.” That book, together with Xavier Salmon’s extended catalogue entry following the most recent and detailed conservation campaign, remain the most important sources, to which any subsequent author must acknowledge their indebtedness.²

¹ Magnier 1904. All bibliographic references will be found in full in the online *Dictionary of pastelists before 1800*.

² The entry in the online *Dictionary of pastelists* has a larger bibliography than Salmon included. A vast number of copies are also listed in the *Dictionary* and are not discussed further here.

The commission

It might seem thus that there is nothing more to be said: but not so, even as regards the circumstances of the commission. While Méjanès 2002 (p. 6) conjectured that “tout indique que le projet remonte à 1748 et la commande à 1749”, he offered no conclusive evidence; and Salmon 2018 reverted to the traditional view that the work started in 1752, setting out the sparse correspondence between Marigny and the artist from that year as it appears in Besnard & Wildenstein 1928, which Salmon claimed proved that the work was commissioned in 1752. But Méjanès included hints from earlier correspondence between Pompadour and her brother (discussing her portraits by various artists which Marigny might take round the courts of Italy) that contact with La Tour had already been established, if perhaps broken off. All of this makes more sense if we start with a document that neither Méjanès nor Salmon seems to have been aware of – the correspondence of Mme de Graffigny, included in the expanded chronological [TABLE](#) of La Tour documents on this site since 2017 (the relevant Graffigny volume was published in 2004).

Earlier letters show that Graffigny had appreciated La Tour’s work at the salons of 1743 and 1745, but the crucial letter is that she wrote to her faithful correspondent François-Antoine Devaux on 8.VII.1748.³ After describing in detail one instance of La Tour’s insanity (he had destroyed the autoportrait au chapeau clabaud intended for the Uffizi, having shown it to Louis XV and being disappointed that the French king hadn’t liked it enough to demand it for himself), she went on to describe another “anecdote toute fraîche de ce maître peintre et plus, maître fol”:

Je lui dis que puisque j’étois en connoissance avec lui, j’espérois qu’il me permettoit d’entrer chez lui, où n’entre pas qui veut. Sur cela il me pria à genoux d’y dîner. (Je pourois bien le faire.) Je lui dis que j’étois fort curieuse de voir un portrait de Mde de Pompadour, dont j’ai beaucoup entendu parler, comme d’une merveille non achevée. Le boureau secoua encore l’oreille, baissa les yeux, et dit: « Il n’est plus. » Il l’a encore brûlé parce qu’il avoit donné un faux trait. Il étoit en grand. C’étoit un tableau de la taille de ceux dont il prend jusqu’à dix mille francs. Il est brûlé. Avez-vous une idée d’une tête aussi folle ? Je lui chantai pouille. Il me dit que j’avois bien aise de peindre à l’ancre, que j’en étois quitte pour une feuille de papier quand il me falloit retoucher une phrase, mais qu’il lui falloit des mois pour raccomoder un faux trait, et qu’il aimoit mieux recommencer. Voilà l’homme; au demeurant, de l’esprit et des sentimens.

Had he actually burnt it, or merely damaged it in frustration? We return to this below. But the letter proves conclusively what Méjanès suspected about the start of this project. And it puts in a different light the comments in a letter of 28 May 1750 Méjanès (but still not Salmon) does quote, in which Pompadour writes to her brother Marigny (then Vandières,⁴ in Turin while travelling in Italy) discussing the progress of various portraits (by Liotard, Boucher etc.), intending for him to have a good likeness of her to show at the courts he is visiting:⁵

Je suis fort aise que vous soyez content de mes portraits; on les a trouvés ici très-jolis, mais peu ressemblans. Quoiqu’il en soit, comme c’est le moins mal qu’il y ait, je vous l’ai envoyé. Il n’y a plus de ressources auprès de Latour, sa folie augmente à chaque instant.

In isolation this is ambiguous; but taken together with Graffigny’s letter, it is clear that the La Tour impasse we know from the later correspondence (see below) was already entrenched. It shows that there was already a first version of the Louvre portrait, if not an early state of that work itself.

³ Graffigny papers, Yale University, Beinecke Library, GEN MSS 353, XLI, 245: published in Graffigny 2004, IX, pp. 175ff.

⁴ Until 1754; but we shall refer to him as Marigny throughout to avoid confusion.

⁵ *Correspondance de Mme de Pompadour avec son père, M. Poisson, et son frère, M. de Vandières*, ed. Auguste Poulet-Malassis, 1878, p. 55. The full text of the letters, bibliographic references etc. will be found in my edition of the chronological [TABLE](#) of La Tour documents, and so are not cited repeatedly in this essay.

One further source reinforces this earlier date, albeit it has not hitherto remarked. In Mariette's account, written in 1772, La Tour had an exchange with the king about the state of the French navy while the king was present when he was working on the portrait of Mme de Pompadour. Mariette added: "C'étoit dans le temps que les Anglois avoient détruit notre marine et que nous n'avions aucun navire à leur opposer." Since the portrait was exhibited in 1755, this cannot refer to naval engagements during the Seven Years' War, but almost certainly situates the incident to the War of the Austrian Succession, probably to one of the two engagements at Cape Finisterre in 1747: during the first (14.v.1747), Anson dealt a severe blow to a French convoy, while in the second (25.x.1747), Sir Edward Hawke secured a decisive victory that persuaded the French that they were unable to protect convoys from the West Indies. It is reasonable to infer that La Tour spoke out soon after these disasters had arisen – late 1747 or early 1748.

There is I think another clue that the composition, with its distinctive *profil perdu*, had already emerged – perhaps even that the series of three *préparations* now in Saint-Quentin had already been done. They are of course discussed in both Méjanès and Salmon, the latter juxtaposing the final sheet as attached to the main work as a fourth *préparation* in the sequence: plausibly arguing that one (LT 71) might have been discarded from an earlier version.



La Tour – *préparations* for Mme de Pompadour (Saint-Quentin: LT 12; LT 71; LT 109)

This is from the other portraits that Pompadour is discussing with Marigny in her 1750 letter, which Méjanès argues are the various sketches Boucher had made for the magnificent portrait of the marquise now in Munich. The similarity of the exact turn of the head between the Boucher paintings and the La Tour pastel are inescapable. Although the Munich painting is dated 1756, the earlier sketches which Boucher made all use the same head, notably the version where she stands at a keyboard (Louvre, RF 2142) or at a dressing table (Waddesdon). There is a consensus that these date to c.1750.

If then La Tour had started his work in 1752, he would have been following Boucher rather than (as I suspect) the other way round. There is precedent in Boucher's œuvre: his 1754 demi-pastel of the marquise now in Melbourne (J.173.202) evidently draws directly from Nattier (1746). La Tour I believe would not have borrowed so directly. But, while the *profil perdu* was by no means common in his work, he had chosen it for both his Académie pieces, Restout and Dumont le Romain, had employed it to great effect in Perrinet de Jars (1740, J.46.2481), and rather less dramatically in the early Louis XV of 1745 (J.46.207). Yet in none of these had he found quite the perfect angle for the head: it is the retrogression that gives Pompadour such a commanding

presence. La Tour used the pose only once more – for the pastel of his friend, the abbé Pommyer (c.1757).

Let us pick up the correspondence again, with the letters from B&W's documentation which Salmon quotes.⁶ First the letter of 28.II.1752 which the future Marigny wrote from Versailles to La Tour in the Louvre:

Ma sœur voudrait savoir Monsieur dans quel tems vous comptés faire son portrait. Je me suis chargé de vous en écrire, vous me ferés plaisir de me le mander par votre réponse que j'attendrai demain et que je pourrai recevoir de bonne heure si vous voulés bien me la faire tenir par la voye des voitures de Versailles.

We then proceed to La Tour's letter of 13.VII.1752:⁷

J'ay mil remerciemens à vous faire sur les bontés que vous avez pour mon bon ami M. Restout et sur ce que vous avez bien voulu répondre de mon zèle à Made la Marquise de Pompadour. — Il est tel que je partirais sur le champ, si les portraits n'avaient grand besoin d'être préparés icy pour réparer le dommage qu'ils ont souffert; je ne sçais le temps qu'il me faudra parceque le chagrin que j'en ay eu m'a furieusement dérangé la cervelle, mais vous pouvez compter que je feray tous mes efforts pour me hatter, les bontés du Roi et la manière obligeante dont vous m'annoncez cette grâce me penètre de reconnaissance et de tous les sentimens, que vous devez inspirer à ceux qui aspirent à l'honneur de votre estime, et j'ose dire amitié, comme celui qui est très respectueusement...

To which he added this bizarre postscript:

Je ne suis plus si fâché d'avoir ignoré l'heure de la poste, puisque je puis, dans cette même lettre, vous faire part de ma situation, je ne sçay pas si ce sont les efforts que j'ay fait, hier après la lecture de votre lettre ou la complication d'idez différentes, mais je me trouve dans un abattement, un anéantissement, qui me fait craindre la fièvre, la teste vuide, étonnée et tout le corps brisé, je ne sçay que devenir, j'ay cru que le lit reparerait mes forces, il n'a rien opéré, je dois essayer si l'air me fera du bien, car je suis bien pressé de répondre au plus vite aux marques d'amitiés dont vous m'honorez.

Marigny replied (from Compiègne) on 24.VII.1752, with commendable restraint:

Lorsque je receus votre lettre du 11 de ce mois, Monsieur, je la communiquai à ma sœur, à qui il fut aussi impossible qu'à moi d'en interpreter le sens du post scriptum. Elle me dit de vous écrire pour sçavoir détermination si vous vouliez venir, ou non, et je l'eusse déjà fait si je n'avois trouvé l'interprétation désirée dans la lettre que vous avés écrite à M. Gabriel; quoy Monsieur, vous luy faites part du chagrin que vous avés des accidents arrivés en conséquence aux deux portraits de ma sœur et vous ajoutez que j'en suis la cause innocente? Pour innocente, cela est très certain, mais expliqués moy, je vous prie, en quoy j'ai pu en être la cause? Je comptois, je vous l'avoue, un peu plus sur votre amitié et je me flattois que vous auriez recours à moy pour faire cesser des chagrins que j'aurois pu occasionnés; vous me deviez, Monsieur, cette marque de confiance. Je me pique d'être juste et sensible, vous êtes l'un et l'autre, je laisse à votre cœur le soin de vous faire sentir combien je dois être blessé d'un pareil reproche de la part de quelqu'un à qui je n'ay cessé de temoigner amitié.

Ayés agréable, Monsieur, de m'écrire quels sont les griefs que vous pouvés avoir et quels sont les moyens que vous desirés que j'employe pour y remedier, vous devés compter sur tout le cas que je fais de vos talents et sur le plaisir que j'auray de vous le prouver en vous faisant justice. Ma sœur peut elle compter d'être peinte par vous? elle est impatiente de vous voir finir son portrait, faites honneur aux sentimens dont vous faites profession en venant au plustot terminer ce portrait pour la satisfaction de ma sœur, à qui vous devés de la reconnaissance, et pour celle de son frère, à qui vous deviez plus d'amitié. Je suis, etc...

J'attans votre reponse.

Although not in B&W (nor Méjanes or Salmon), it seems to me likely that the letter from Mme de Pompadour to La Tour, known only from a summary from an 1854 bookseller's catalogue

⁶ The MS drafts of these letters was first located by Courajod, AN O 1925, and first published by the comte de Marsy in an overlooked article of 1875.

⁷ Salmon 2018, p. 184, infers from Marigny's reply that the date of the main part of this letter must be 11.VII.1752, with the footnote added two days later; but a simple misreading by Marigny or Desmazes is a simpler explanation. Méjanes read it thus.

which omits the date, belongs to the same exchange.⁸ Sent from Choisy, the marquise told the artist that:

Elle est à peu près dans le même embonpoint où il l'a vue à La Muette, et elle croit qu'il serait à propos de profiter du moment pour finir ce qu'il a si bien commence. S'il peut venir demain, elle sera libre et avec si peu de monte qu'il voudra: "Vous connoissez, Monsieur, le cas que je fais de vous et de vos admirable talents."

At this stage both Méjanès and Salmon then recount the famous anecdote about La Tour's refusal to paint the marquise "en ville", a story which makes more sense in the context of her Choisy letter. It is of course part of the La Tour mythology which I analyse in my essay on the progression of [Tropes](#) in the early La Tour biographies, my [edition](#) of which has relevant annotations. Salmon cites the anonymous *Almanach littéraire* for 1792; Méjanès the same document, which however he credits to Jean-René Durdent. (Durdent may well have been the D-t who signed the abbreviated version of the story given in Michaud,⁹ the version Méjanès quotes; but he is unlikely to have been the original author as he was born in Rouen in 1776.) In fact however, as I have explained, the earliest occurrence was in the review of Duplaquet's *Éloge* which appeared in the revived *Année littéraire*.¹⁰ The author is not identified, but may perhaps have been the editor Louis-Marie-Stanislas Fréron, son of the founder of the original periodical. In any case here is that earliest version of the story:

Le feu Roi s'amusoit beaucoup des saillies originales de *M. de Latour*, qui les pousoit quelquefois assez loin: on en pourra juger par l'anecdote suivante. Mandé à Versailles pour faire le portrait de Madame de Pompadour, il répond brusquement: *Dites à madame la Marquise que je ne vais pas peindre en ville*. Quelques amis lui font observer l'inconséquence de ce procédé; il promet de se rendre à Versailles un jour indiqué, mais à condition que la séance ne sera interrompue par personne. Arrivé chez madame la Marquise de Pompadour, il réitère ses conventions, et demande la liberté de se mettre à son aise, pour pouvoir peindre commodément. On la lui accorde; alors il détache ses boucles de souliers, ses jarrettières, son col, ôte sa perruque, l'accroche à une girandole, tire de sa poche un petit bonnet de taffetas, le met sur sa tête; et dans ce déshabillé pittoresque, commence le portrait. Il n'y avoit pas un quart-d'heure qu'il étoit occupé lorsque le Roi arriva. *Vous avez promis, Madame, que votre porte seroit fermée*, dit *M. de La Tour*, en ôtant son petit bonnet? Le Roi rit beaucoup du costume et du reproche de l'artiste, et l'engagea à continuer. *Il ne m'est pas possible d'obéir à votre Majesté*, réplique *M. de Latour*; *je reviendrai, lorsque Madame sera seule*. Il se lève, emporte sa perruque, ses jarrettières, et va s'habiller dans une autre pièce, en répétant plusieurs fois: *je n'aime point à être interrompu*. La belle favorite céda au caprice du Peintre, et le portrait fut achevé. *M. de Latour* le peignit en pied, grand comme nature; on l'a vu exposé au Sallon du Louvre; c'est un des plus grands ouvrages qu'on ait encore exécuté en ce genre.

It is tempting to wonder if there is any truth to this at all, particularly as it seems to run parallel to a similar story in Mariette:

La conduite qu'il a tenu avec M^{me} la Dauphine, qui souhaitoit avoir son portrait de sa main, est trop singulière pour que je ne la rapporte pas, sans y rien changer, dans les termes que s'en est expliqué avec moi M. Silvestre, chargé de la négociation. Il avoit reçu une lettre de M^{lle} Silvestre, sa fille, attachée à M^{me} la Dauphine, par laquelle il demandoit à son père de faire ressouvenir M. de La Tour de l'engagement qu'il avoit pris avec la princesse, mais qu'elle désiroit qu'au lieu de Fontainebleau dont on étoit convenu, le portrait se fit à Versailles; elle marquoit que sa maîtresse avoit d'autant plus lieu de le désirer que son embonpoint étoit revenu, et que peut-être n'auroit-elle pas un aussi bon visage à lui offrir si elle redevenoit enceinte; elle faisoit assurer le peintre qu'elle se revêtiroit ce jour-là de toute sa bonne humeur et qu'elle l'invitoit à en faire autant de sa part. Qui ne croirait qu'à la lecture d'une lettre si honnête et si obligeante, M. de La Tour ne montreroit un désir égal à sa reconnaissance? Point du tout. Il répond froidement qu'il ne peut se rendre à l'invitation, qu'il n'est point fait pour ce pays-là, et cent autres choses qui alloient à le perdre si elles avoient été redites.

The suspicion that this is the source of the "peintre en ville" story is increased since Mariette follows on with one of the other stories about the sessions with Pompadour and the king:

⁸ It will be found in my chronological [TABLE](#) immediately after Marigny's letter. The summary here is from Auguste Poulet-Malassis's 1878 edition of Pompadour's correspondence, p. 246f. The repetition of the phrase "le cas que je fais de ... vos talents" by brother and sister suggests collusion.

⁹ *Biographie universelle*, XI.VI, 1826, pp. 343–44.

¹⁰ *Année littéraire*, VIII, 1789, 318–329; it was reprinted in *L'Esprit des journaux, français et étrangers*, XIX/3, mars 1790, p. 90.

Ce n'est pas le seul mauvais personnage qu'il ait joué à la cour. Il y a quelquefois pris des libertés qu'à peine se seroit-il permis avec ses égaux. Une fois qu'il y peignoit le portrait de M^{me} la marquise de Pompadour, le roi présent, Sa Majesté fit tomber la conversation sur ses bâtiments, sur ceux qu'il faisoit construire alors, et en parloit avec une sorte de complaisance. Tout à coup La Tour prend la parole, et, feignant de l'adresser à lui-même: « Cela est beau, dit-il, mais des vaisseaux vaudroient mieux. » Il disoit cela au moment que les Anglois venoient de détruire notre marine. Le roi en rougit et se tut, tandis que le peintre s'applaudissoit en secret d'avoir dit une vérité dans un pays qui ne la connoît pas; il ne sentit pas qu'il avoit commis une imprudence qui ne vaut que du mépris.

Yet another story concerns the pastel when finished, and the price La Tour demanded. Made famous by the Goncourts, it is repeated very widely¹¹ – but not as far as I can see mentioned by either Méjanès or Salmon. The source for the story of La Tour's demand for 48,000 livres, reduced to 24,000 on Chardin's advice, is uncertain. It appeared in an article¹² in the *Journal des arts, de littérature et de commerce*, 15.I.1800, p. 10:

Serai-ils hors de propos de rappeler à ces hommes une petite anecdote sur le Peintre de portrait au pastel, Latour. Il venait de terminer celui de la marquise de Pompadour, et avait *modestement* demandé 48000 francs. Madame la Marquise, quoique généreuse, trouva les prétentions de l'artiste exorbitantes, et lui envoya 24000 francs en or. Il n'est pas nécessaire de remarquer que c'était payer très-grandement un portrait au pastel. Latour, furieux, se promenait dans son appartement, criant à l'avisement de son talent, lorsque Chardin, son voisin aux galeries du Louvre, l'aborde d'un grand sang froid, et lui demande s'il sait combien tous les tableaux qui ornaient Notre-Dame, et au nombre desquels se trouvait le chef-d'œuvre de Lesueur, ceux de Lebrun, du Bourdon, de Tetelin, etc., ont coûté. – Non. – Eh bien, calculez, quarante tableaux environ, à 300 francs cela fait 12000 f., encore ajoute Chardin, chaque Artiste donnait-il le petit tableau aux Marguilliers en charge. La Tour se tut et eut raison.

How much credence should we put on the story? Presumably Méjanès and Salmon thought little – a view encouraged by there being yet another echo of a story in Mariette, about the price of the La Reynière portraits. Although the story was not printed in La Tour's lifetime, and is not mentioned by contemporary biographers, the article was probably contributed by the director of publication, Joseph-François-Nicolas Dusaulchoy de Bergemont (1761–1835), a playwright, author and journalist of some repute. And while the 48,000 livres may not be independently corroborated, the final price paid – 24,000 livres – is the number which a later owner, comte d'Arlet (see below), later claimed had been paid for the portrait¹³ – at around the time the article was written. All this suggests the anecdote may have had some real foundation – even though we remain uncertain as to when and where it was delivered.

The salon

The next stage in the story was the 1755 exhibition. Whether because, having worked intensively on this single piece, he had nothing else to show, or rather because he thought the single exhibit would maximise its impact, La Tour offered just this one work. Inevitably it was discussed by the critics – at least ten of them – the full texts of which are set out in the chronological [TABLE](#), and most of which are well known. They included one anonymous pamphlet¹⁴ which included this observation which, although citing at length, Méjanès did not analyse further:

il resterait à désirer pour ce Tableau, qu'il fût mieux placé; il est dans la partie la plus éclairée du Salon; tous les objets extérieurs viennent se peindre dans la glace, ce qui rend ce Portrait très-difficile à être vu; je ne doute pas que ce Tableau vu à nud ne fit encore plus d'effet; la glace paroît brune, et je crois qu'elle le noircit.

¹¹ Even Ratouis de Limay 1946, in a short summary (p. 35), includes the phrase “La Tour avait modestement demandé 48.000 livres”, revealing his source.

¹² The article was a review of *Invitations familières faites aux élèves de ce temps dans les beaux-arts ... par un ancien amateur* by Jean-Louis Dupain-Triel (1722–1805), ingénieur géographe du roi et de Monsieur. However the La Tour story does not appear in his pamphlet, but only the review.

¹³ Archives des musées nationaux, 1796–1800, documents; cited Salmon 2018, p. 182.

¹⁴ ANON. 1755d, *Lettre sur le Salon de 1755, adressé à ceux qui la liront*, Amsterdam, 1755. In Paris 1974a, p. 141, it is suggested that the La Tour pastel was placed beside Nattier's portrait of Madame Henriette jouant de la basse de viole (MV 4454) and Tocqué's portrait of Marigny; no source is cited: the extensive correspondence (Nattier 1999, p. 252f) concerning the positioning of the Nattier at the Salon does not seem to mention the La Tour.

What this led to can be inferred from a document¹⁵ which, while published in 1873 and again in 1904 and 1920, has since been largely overlooked. The reflections in the glass were so severe (and one can only imagine¹⁶ the determination of La Tour to put this right) that the work had to be moved overnight, at some expense:

Mémoire des frais faits pour le Salon de 1755 par Deschamps et payés par l'Académie.

Pour avoir changé de place le portrait de Mme de Pompadour	
pendant une nuit, employé 6 hommes	24
Pour le chevalet et la balustrade qui était autour dudit tableau	67
Pour le garçon menuisier	-/12

How was it actually displayed? It is tempting to imagine that the arrangement was similar to that used to display the Boucher portrait of the marquise in the following salon, as shown by Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's sketch of the Salon de 1757, where the enormous work was placed on a free-standing easel.¹⁷ While this will remain speculative, I suggest that had the La Tour already been on a free-standing easel, altering the direction would not have required the work invoiced. It seems more likely that the easel, with its new balustrade, was a response to the difficulties of hanging the pastel on any of the walls, given the unusual lighting in the salon.¹⁸

Those difficulties result of course from the need for pastels to be glazed. Another salon critique which has been universally overlooked is Gautier-Dagoty's *Observations...* (1755).¹⁹ It contains important comments on the original glass (which had to be removed at some stage after 1942 – see below), but the significance only becomes completely clear in the light of the move mentioned above:

L'harmonie de ce Portrait surpasse les compositions en huile de ceux de M. Michel Vanloo & de M. Tocqué: c'est, dit-on, la glace qui a cet avantage; elle met tout d'accord, & laisse une unité que l'on perdrait entièrement, si le Tableau étoit à nud. Des demi-Connoisseurs qui ont déjà écrit sur le Salon, ont prétendu au contraire que la glace étoit noire, & qu'elle gâtoit le Tableau. On voit bien que ces Auteurs n'ont pas vû comme moi le Tableau sur le chevalet. Le Pastel & la Peinture en caustique sont des Peintures froides & sèches que l'on ne peut vernir; la glace seule peut adoucir ces Peintures féminines, & leur donner une certaine chaleur suave que l'huile porte naturellement en lui-même; les yeux mâles sentent la beauté de cette composition; le beau sexe seul peut s'accommoder du Pastel & de l'ancoustique.

The remaining salon critiques are far more conventional, focusing on the identification of the attributes by which the marquise is surrounded. Sometimes one wonders if Pierre Clément wasn't right before his few words on La Tour's submissions to the 1748 salon, when he noted that "il me semble que ces curioistés ne sont faites que pour les yeux, & que la description n'en est guère moins ennuyeuse que la vue en est agréable"; perhaps even portraiture became the poor relation of history painting precisely because of the lack of something to discuss. For the critics in 1755, focusing on the detail allowed them to avoid an overall response, which on balance seems to have been rather muted. Against some enthusiasm, others wrote that it "laisse beaucoup de choses à désirer; mais il faut convenir qu'il renferme de grandes beautés de détails." For Pierre Estève, the lack of resemblance (compared with the Van Loo portrait of the marquise *en sultane* at the same salon) was a problem, and he strongly disapproved of the profil perdu composition. For Grimm, however, while—

¹⁵ AN O¹ 1908-3, f° 89; Guiffrey 1873, pp. xxxviii, 20f; with a typo in the date, so that it seemed to refer to the 1765 salon; Magnier 1904, p. 11. Fleury & Brière 1920, p. 75, mention that the work had been shown at the salon "avec un soin particulier, sur un chevalet isolé par une balustrade". The passage was recently spotted by Udo van de Sandt: Sandt 2019 (forthcoming; I am most grateful to the author for sharing a preprint with me).

¹⁶ But La Tour remained close friends with Chardin, tapissier for that year, giving him his portrait ([1.46.1436](#)) in 1760.

¹⁷ Waddesdon Manor. See Anthony Blunt, "Drawings at Waddesdon Manor", *Master drawings*, XI/4, 1973, pp. 359–64, 405–25, no. 5, pl. 5, reproduced in full; van de Sandt 2019, detail. Waddesdon also have a satirical cartoon showing the Boucher portrait by Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin.

¹⁸ The diagram on p. 54 of Isabelle Pichet's *Le Tapissier et les dispositifs discursifs au Salon (1750–1789)*, Paris, 2012 clearly illustrates the problem: light flooded into the Salon from three sides.

¹⁹ It is omitted from all standard bibliographies (and from Méjanès and Salmon); I published it online in 2015.

Ce portrait a été généralement déprisé; trop, à mon avis; la composition en est très riche; il y a dans le dessin et dans l'exécution des détails admirables, mais le total est froid; la tête est trop tourmentée et fatiguée; à force de retoucher, M. de La Tour lui a ôté ce premier feu sans lequel rien ne peut réussir en fait d'art.

Two years later, the *Correspondance littéraire*²⁰ returned to the La Tour pastel, comparing the fussiness of the new Boucher painting with it:

M. Boucher a exposé le portrait de madame la marquise de Pompadour. Le même portrait fait par M. de la Tour, et exposé il y a deux ans, fut beaucoup critiqué. Celui-ci me paraît bien autrement mauvais; détestable pour la couleur, il est si surchargé d'ornemens, de pompons et de toutes sortes de fanfreluches, qu'il doit faire mal aux yeux à tous les gens de goût....

Also omitted by all sources to date is the discussion of the portrait in two letters from Friedrich der Große's brother August Wilhelm von Preußen (1722–1758), known as prince Guillaume, to Guy-Louis-Henri, marquis de Valori (1692–1774), French ambassador to Berlin, dated 23.XI.1755 and 17.I.1756; these relate both to the perceived likeness of the work and to the role of the image as a diplomatic tool (Wilhelm being offered an unrecorded copy). We reproduce them in full, not least because they provide the only hint, albeit indirect, at what the marquise herself may have thought of her portrait:²¹

[23.XI.1755] Votre lettre, mon cher marquis, m'a fait un plaisir extrême; j'avais vu une relation de Paris, des tableaux qui ont été exposés au Louvre; le portrait de madame de Pompadour, peint au pastel par Latour, y était marqué comme étant très-bien travaillé, d'un grand goût, d'une belle composition, mais que la ressemblance y manquait; vous m'en avez donné la confirmation. Nous savons, par l'histoire, qu'Apelle réussit à bien peindre l'air audacieux d'Alexandre, mais je crois qu'il faut un pinceau plus fin pour exprimer, sous des traits réguliers, un esprit vif et une physionomie touchante et spirituelle, tant il est vrai, et les peintres devraient en convenir, qu'il est plus facile de peindre le dieu de la guerre que la déesse de l'amour. Cependant j'espère que la muse protectrice de la peinture ne refusera point ce portrait à la postérité, et qu'elle dirigera avec sagesse la main d'un de ses élèves, pour qu'il trouve enfin la ressemblance. Je vous assure que je suis vraiment flatté de le recevoir, et vous ai bien l'obligation d'y prendre part.

[17.I.1756] Vous m'avez fait rougir, cher marquis, par l'extrait de la lettre de M. de Puyzieulx, je suis à la vérité très-flatté de ce que madame la marquise de Pompadour a lu celle que je vous ai écrite; les sentiments vrais et sincères communiqués à un ami indulgent en font l'unique mérite; M. le duc de Nivernais, que j'ai depuis trois jours le bonheur de connaître, m'a assuré qu'elle s'est souvenue que son portrait me ferait plaisir; c'est à vos bontés que je serai redevable de posséder ce bijou.

The political programme

The centrepiece of every account of the work is what Méjanès justly described as the *nature morte* of books and pictures whose detail commands our attention today just as it did for the salon critics at the time. Unlike other portraitists of the day – notably Boucher,²² La Tour did not find it sufficient to depict a generic book in the sitter's hand: the detail had to permit viewers to identify each work on display – because the very essence of the portrait was the political manifesto the marquise chose to put forward. By prominently displaying Voltaire's *Henriade*, Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* and the most recent volume of the *Encyclopédie* (evidently a late addition to the portrait, as Salmon points out: volume IV was published in .X.1754; why the volume was moved slightly to the right isn't entirely clear, as the perspective of the objects in front of it remains unconvincing), Pompadour declared herself an unconditional supporter of the Enlightenment and the philosophes. She was of course not alone at court: Malesherbes himself would famously give protection to Diderot's papers when the *Encyclopédie* was to be suppressed: but as that measure demonstrates, the relative power between these factions oscillated.

²⁰ 15.X.1757, p. 182, no doubt also by Grimm. Tambling 2025 misreads "celui-ci" as referring to the La Tour.

²¹ *Mémoires des négociations du marquis de Valori*, 1888, II, pp. 339f. It seems highly unlikely that the unrecorded commentary La Fizelière 1859 attributed to Mme de Pompadour can be genuine: "Nul n'est plus propre que lui, a-t-elle dit, à rendre avec les ressources de son crayon le regard inspiré du génie ou le désordre sublime de l'enthousiasme. Aussi réussit-il mieux que personne à rendre la physionomie des philosophes, des acteurs et des écrivains célèbres; pour le reste, il n'est pas bien sûr qu'il puisse gagner à la comparaison avec Vivien et Mlle Rosa-Alba."

²² Emma Smith, *Portable magic*, 2022, p. 81 drew a parallel between the Boucher and two other portraits of women reading from different periods, noting that the Boucher fits into the iconography of the Virgin Mary reading in medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation.

And, as Méjanès argued, Pompadour's programme was simply too advanced. The king did not buy the picture for the royal collection.

Of course not all the programme on display was political. The sheet of music she holds was declared a masterpiece of illusion by one critic, while the baroque guitar also reminds us of her musical accomplishments. Guarini's *Pastor Fido* sits beside the *Henriade*: the six editions she owned of this work reveal a passion for the theatre that La Tour did not have to invent. Mariette's *Traité des pierres gravées* of 1750 represented her interest as a collector: a plate is draped over the table.²³ We discuss these further below. Salmon also cites Philippe Hourcade's observation²⁴ that the sizes of the books shown were exaggerated to emphasize their importance: the marquise owned the 1749 quarto edition of *L'Esprit des lois*, which was somewhat smaller, but didn't have a tome III; she owned no quarto edition of the *Henriade*; while *Pastor Fido* has also been enlarged – “pour la plus grande gloire” of the sitter. Another instance of that is given in my essay on [Mademoiselle Ferrand](#).

Every element of this portrait has been examined in great deal by one author or another, starting from the contemporary critics. Even the dress, as Salmon argues,²⁵ contains a political message of support for the Lyon silk industry (was that support intentionally withdrawn when Pompadour later posed for Drouais in a painted fabric imported from China?). Tiny details such as the “ravissantes mules roses” have been the subject of analysis and comparison.²⁶

Neither the apartment with its green and gold decoration nor the landscape painting in the background have been precisely identified, despite extensive research. The colours are more flattering for a pastel that would have been the white and gold colour scheme prevalent in Versailles. The Italianate landscape, which does not correspond to any item in the marquise's inventaire, nevertheless seems to be in the manner of a Dutch artist such as Nicolaes Berchem, by whom she did own several examples.²⁷ A similar ambiguity (both as to location and background paintings) arises with La Tour's other ambitious portrait, of Marie-Josèphe de Saxe et son fils (Saint-Quentin).

In both these and the third La Tour portrait en pied, of the président de Rieux (as well as with Duval de l'Épinoy), La Tour includes a terrestrial globe, rotated to show a part of the world. Pompadour's is turned to France.

Salmon mentions too the Savonnerie carpet “traité dans une perspective chromatique d'une folle audace” – but without noting the similar treatment in the président de Rieux which I highlighted in a lecture several years ago when I finally discovered the full identity of La Tour's mother, and demonstrated that the pastellist's maternal grandfather was a tapissier from Noyon:

²³ It is often misread as from her own Suite d'estampes, but Méjanès put this right. See also Smentek 2014.

²⁴ Hourcade 2004a, p. 129.

²⁵ Salmon describes it as “lampas”, but for Méjanès this is less likely than an embroidered fabric; he notes the ambiguity left by La Tour's pastel.

²⁶ See e.g. Marie-Josèphe Bossan, *L'Art de la chaussure*, 2004, p. 173; La Tour's delightful treatment is nevertheless found to have simplified the items compared with the depiction in the Munich Boucher.

²⁷ See Méjanès, p. 45, citing the paper by Danielle Gallet, “Madame de Pompadour et l'appartement d'en bas au château de Versailles”, *Gazette des beaux-arts*, .X.1993, pp. 129–38.



A word about the audacious perspective: the success of the président de Rieux, and its sense of immediacy, arguably comes from the greater proximity; the marquise de Pompadour is shown from a considerably more distant viewpoint.²⁸ Physically her face on the paper is only three-quarters the height his occupies.

Resemblance

Did La Tour's pastel convey an accurate resemblance of the marquise? There is no definitive answer to such a subjective question, particularly when the comparative evidence is also unreliable; but a rough grouping of images²⁹ seems to put the La Tour marquise somewhat out of line with the consensus: his cheek bones too high, his nose too straight, no matter how old she is in the other portraits. In short, as the critics suggested, he flatters – to a degree that may challenge the traditional image of La Tour as an uncompromising seeker of truth.³⁰



²⁸ La Tour discusses the question of distance from the model in his letter to Marigny of 1.VIII.1763, noting that he worked much closer to the model than other portraitists. However the letter is read (Schieder 2012, pp. 274f, interprets it as recommended practice), the Louvre portrait is exceptional in his œuvre.

²⁹ A comparative iconography of the marquise de Pompadour is beyond the scope of this article. The Versailles exhibition catalogue did not attempt a systematic list. A starting point might be Elise Goodman's monograph on *The portraits of Madame de Pompadour*, 2000, which Salmon omits. Earlier sources, including Raggio 1967, provide useful additions. La Fizelière 1860 may be the first, although it is unreliable: the claim that La Tour made an earlier pastel of Mme de Pompadour which was held by her husband rests on a story in untraced *Mémoires* said to be by an abbé Bayle, bibliothécaire to the marquise (possibly a confusion with Bridard de La Garde).

³⁰ Nattier (1746) – La Tour – Boucher (1757)/Drouais (1764) – Pigalle (1748) – Van Loo (1760) [approximate dates].

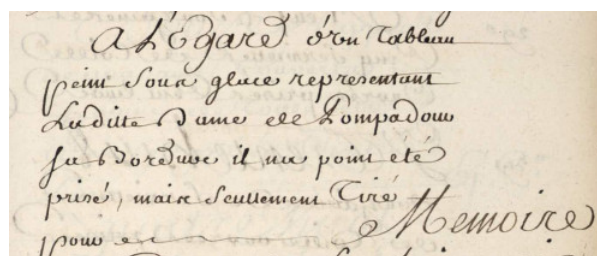
Frame

As Gautier-Dagoty's critique makes clear, pastel, frame and glass were each seen as inherently valuable, forming a trinity of independent craftsmanship indissolubly linked. While Pompadour's glass was lost around 1942, that of the président de Rieux was also lost more recently during transport while still in a private collection. But the magistrate retains his original, superb frame, unlike the marquise, which has been reframed at an uncertain date in the neo-classical austerity of Louis XVI rather than the opulence of his grandfather's reign.³¹ The visual confrontation of works which were executed only fourteen years apart needs no further commentary:

*History since the salon*

As noted above, the pastel was not purchased by the king. Instead the sitter herself acquired it, for a price of 24,000 livres as discussed above. Salmon expresses some doubt as to whether it appeared in her posthumous inventory, just nine years after the Salon: he wonders (p. 182, repeating exactly Monnier's text) if this may be the "tableau peint sous glace, représentant la dite Dame de Pompadour, sans bordure" noted in Cordey's 1939 transcription of the inventory, but with the necessary reservations – it is inherently unlikely in view of the weight of the original sheet (evidently present in 1755 and 1803 on, until c.1942) that the pastel could be under glass without a frame. However if we consult the original manuscript inventory (Marigny's copy is now at INHA), we find that Cordey's transcription is in error. Although the (exhausted) notary has carelessly omitted the word "dans", the next word is clearly "sa", not "sans". I think item 288 correctly transcribed includes "un Tableau peint sous glace representant la ditte dame de Pompadour [dans] sa bordure":

³¹ It has been suggested (Le Prat & Luquet 2013) that the original frame was the one with the marquise's devices (although the arms on the fronton have been changed) now gracing Gainsborough's portrait of Lady Alston (Louvre, inv. RF 1947-1, 228x166 cm). Pons 1987 considered this possibility, but thought the frame more likely to be for a Nattier portrait. Further the size is too far from the 1755 Salon livret dimensions to have been used for the La Tour then: the area of the Gainsborough is 65% larger than the La Tour portrait, presenting not only technical problems for pastel and glass, but visual problems for a composition incorporating what remains.



The writing for the pastel is rather smaller than for the large painting of her (item 168), evidently considered more important by the notary; but the most puzzling thing is its location – among an industrial quantity of pieces of glass (nothing else is inventoried in the room), suggesting it was effectively in storage rather than on display. You don’t get the full impression of this from Cordey, who cannot bring himself to transcribe these pages from item 288 preceding the picture.

One can thus ignore the story in Soulavie³² about Charles Le Normant d’Étiolles, who apparently reserved the term “ma femme” for his wife for “les occasions d’une menace” – as when “elle voulut ravoir un jour le superbe portrait par Latour, qu’il avoit encore d’elle. *Allez dire à ma femme de venir le reprendre elle-même*, lui fit-il dire par l’abbé Bayle.”

In any case, it passed to her brother, and “un grand Tableau peint au pastel sous glace” appeared among family portraits noted in the marquis de Marigny’s posthumous inventory at the château de Menars, no. 1818. It was not however included in the Marigny sale (the catalogue, by Basan and Joullain, dated .II.1782, although the sale is thought to have taken place 18.III.–6.IV.1782; it included a number of other pastels).

It is unclear how it then passed to “Lespinnasse d’Arlet” by 1796³³; he was surely Auguste-Louis-César-Hippolyte-Théodore de Lespinasse de Langeac, comte d’Arlet (1759³⁴–1814) rather than his apparent father (Salmon is unsure, but Étienne-Joseph was normally known by the title of marquis, or comte, de Langeac), although there are some confusions in the auction records with his brother, the poet Égide, chevalier de Lespinasse de Langeac whom Piot described as the “doyen des amateurs de tableaux”.³⁵ But d’Arlet, who was had served as capitaine de cavalerie, régiment Royal-Roussillon,³⁶ was certainly also active in the saleroom, with catalogues unambiguously annotating his name rather than his brother’s.³⁷ However in this case he had a special reason to be interested in this portrait: Mme de Pompadour was a great supporter of the comte de Saint-Florentin, later duc de La Vrillière, ministre d’État, secrétaire de la maison du roi, ministre de l’Intérieur, effectively Louis XV’s premier ministre – and d’Arlet’s natural father.³⁸

³² *Mémoires historiques et anecdotes de la cour...*, 1802, p. 351. The source is unclear, and may even be La Tour himself who met Soulavie in his later years.

³³ The earliest document in the Archives des musées nationaux concerning this affair is from 26.II.1796, when Pierre-Louis Ginguéné, directeur général de l’Instruction publique, made the proposal to the Musée central on Lespinasse’s behalf.

³⁴ His date of birth, 9.XI.1759, omitted in most published sources including Salmon, may be found in the État civil reconstitué. His age makes it less likely that he purchased the pastel immediately after Marigny’s death, so there is likely to have been an intermediate owner. There is a genealogy with sources [here](#).

³⁵ In the membership lists of the Club de Valois for 1790, the comte d’Arlet is shown at the rue Blanche, Chaussée d’Antin (the address from which the letters to the Louvre of 5.III.1797 and 15.XII.1800 were sent), while his brother, Égide, chevalier de Langeac, was separately listed, in the rue Poissonnière (Augustin Challamel, *Les Clubs contre-révolutionnaires*, 1895, pp. 36, 52. D’Arlet was also recorded at the rue Blanche in 1793 at the time of a notice to creditors disclosed in the very lengthy court case *Veuve Marchand c. Langeac d’Arlet* reported in the *Journal du Palais*, XI, 1813, pp. 558ff. In the registres de tutelles (following the death of his sister, AN Y5713A, 11.XII.1788), he alone of his brothers resided in the rue Blanche; he signed “Lespinasse Langeac C^{te} Darlet”. His eldest brother, the comte de Langeac, was portrayed by Vigée Le Brun in 1775 according to her lists, and is possibly best known for leasing the hôtel de Langeac to Thomas Jefferson in 1785.

³⁶ He is listed as a sous-lieutenant in this regiment in the *État militaire* in 1786, but is omitted from the 1789 edition. The 1788 document in the registres de tutelles gives his rank as capitaine.

³⁷ His posthumous sale, 4.I.1815, included nearly 300 pictures, mostly Northern school, but he disposed of many more during his lifetime, including a large group at the 1803 sale. His collection included works by Chardin, Fragonard and Prud’hon.

³⁸ Camille Hermelin, “Histoire de la ville de Saint-Florentin”, *Bulletin de la Société des sciences... de l’Yonne*, 1911, LXV, pp. 512f. For obvious reasons the evidence is not as certain as one would wish, but it is clear that d’Arlet’s mother was Saint-Florentin’s mistress, and the legal disputes between d’Arlet and the Saint-Florentin estate suggest paternity. Courcelles does not mention this, nor does he give the date of Étienne-Joseph’s marriage to Marie-Madeleine-Josèphe-Aglæe de Cusacque (19.X.1756, after three of the children he lists had been born). The gossip is provided by Pidanzat de Mairobert, *L’Espion anglais*, lettre III, 20.VII.1775, London, 1785, pp. 361ff. A modern source is equally candid: Jeffrey Merrick, “Marital

Whether he acquired it sentimentally or speculatively, he had difficulty in disposing of the pastel (his other purchases were all oils as far as I can see), and as Salmon narrates, between 1796 and 1800 he conducted fruitless negotiations with the then Museum central des arts (the Louvre) which foundered in part because the officials there declined to visit it in situ or arrange its transport, while d'Arlet was understandably concerned about possible damage, citing in particular its fragile glass (he also claimed that it was the only pastel *en pied* ever attempted in Europe). Indeed when he finally consigned it to public auction, Paris, Paillet & Delaroche, 11.VII.1803, Lot 335, Paillet added a note about the glass (along with two inaccurate puffs):

500 — 335. = Un très-beau Tableau peint au pastel, par le célèbre Latour. Il représente Madame de Pompadour, de grandeur naturelle, en pied et assise, tenant un Livre de musique, et près d'un Bureau où sont posés des Livres et autres accessoires. Ce Morceau, le plus grand Ouvrage de cet Artiste, est recouvert par une belle Glace blanche, faite exprès à Saint Gobin, et a appartenu à feu Louis XV.

It had no takers, so Paillet himself bought it for the modest sum of 500 francs,³⁹ and offered it immediately to the Louvre. Denon replied: not having had any intention of acquiring the pastel, he recognised that if he did not now do so, someone would buy it for the glass alone and the work would be destroyed. As Salmon continues the story, the work was sent to the Musée spécial de l'École française at Versailles in 1803, where it was on show for several years and then kept in storage until returned to the Louvre in 1823. It was recorded in the inventaire des dessin 1815–24⁴⁰ as

54. Idem [Tour, Maurice de la] Portrait en pied de Madame de Pompadour

in the Chalcographie royale. There it remained until the outbreak of war in 1939 when it was sent to Chambord – unlike the other Louvre pastels, which were recognised as too fragile to travel that far. (The most important were placed in underground vaults at the Banque de France until some months after it was noticed that the air-conditioning system had broken down, causing greater problems than the journey might have resulted in.)

While at Chambord, on 13.X.1942, a detailed condition report was made by Germain Bazin. Conditions were evidently not ideal: initially housed in the donjon, it had been transported to one of the first floor rooms in the appartements Henri II, where the relative humidity was 65° compared with 75° in the donjon, and the light was better. Bazin noted a little more dust on the inside of the glass than had been evident five weeks previously, but attributed that to the superior light; they were the inevitable consequence of the urgent move to which the work had been subjected in .IX.1939. In his report Bazin also noted an outbreak of glass disease.⁴¹ The glass was replaced at an unknown date after the pastel returned to the Louvre, perhaps by the Louvre framer Javouhey whom Bazin suggested should go to Chambord and take measurements for new glass and frame.

conflict in political context: *Langeac* vs. *Chambonas*, 1775", in *Family, gender and law in early modern France*, ed. Sizzanne Desan & Jeffrey Merrick, 2009, pp. 137–182. Lemoine exhibited busts (not in the livret) of Saint-Florentin and the comtesse de Langeac in the Salon de 1767 (Réau 1927, nos. 83, 92).

³⁹ Equivalent to about €2000 in today's money, after adjustment for consumer price inflation. But other La Tour pastels obtained even smaller bids in the 1810 sale. The reproduction above is from one of the RKD copies of the catalogue, and shows that it was bought by "Paillet/Musée", suggesting he acted as agent for them, notwithstanding the Denon letter which Salmon quotes. According to B&W the Louvre paid fr600, but the Denon letter implies there was no mark-up.

⁴⁰ Archives des musées nationaux, 1DD66.

⁴¹ The detailed reports are discussed in Le Prat & Luquet 2013; a digest appears in Salmon 2018. The description of the problem as "cynérèse" [*sic*, *recte* synérèse, or synaeresis], occurs only as Bazin's note of a telephone conversation with Jacques-Charles-Marie Cogniard, head of the laboratory at the Banque de France; the circumstances as well as the misspelling suggest this may have been a confusion. Jerzy Kunicki-Goldfinger (private communication, 22.V.2019) considers that synaeresis can be excluded, while noting that the formation of spherical bubbles within the glass as described by Bazin is not a normal symptom of glass disease, which more commonly appears as droplets on the inner glass surface: Dr Kunicki-Goldfinger suggests that Bazin may have mistaken the location of the bubbles perhaps because of refraction through the glass. See §V.9 of my [PROLEGOMENA](#) for a discussion of different types of glass disease.

Physical construction of the pastel

By far the most detailed account of the physical construction of the pastel is in Salmon 2018, although to follow the discussion it is necessary to view the excellent You Tube [video](#) showing the conservation of the pastel sponsored by Canson. Here is a screenshot:



Several problematic questions remain open. The first concerns the large hole in the canvas behind the marquise's head. We can discount the suggestion by James Wells Champney (1891), who thought "the head cut out during the Revolution". Salmon suggests that this intervention occurred in the early nineteenth century, in an attempt to repair the tear around the eye, by accessing the area from behind. If so it would seem a bizarre approach, not least because the hole is so large (covering the whole head, from throat to well above the hairline). Does it not seem more likely that the hole was actually made by La Tour himself – perhaps even during his attempt to destroy the picture in 1748 (which he may have exaggerated when he told Mme de Graffigny that he had burned it), only later to change his mind and fix it again?



The second concerns the *châssis à clés*, a structure that was rarely in use before the end of the eighteenth century (see §IV.1 of my [PROLEGOMENA](#) for a full discussion). Such keyed stretchers were more likely to be used than the fixed strainers for larger works: and indeed La Tour had already used them, for the *président de Rieux* (1741: the earliest known use of a stretcher on a pastel), for *Frémin* and for *Dumont le Romain*. Salmon believes that the stretcher was a later addition, perhaps at the beginning of the nineteenth century (further suggesting that this was done at the time the hole in the canvas was pierced): but his reasons⁴² for this are unclear, if they are not simply the widespread belief that *châssis à clés* were not employed before then. What does seem to support that view is the way the pastel is mounted onto the stretcher. The conventional

⁴² Salmon seems to be following the discussion in Le Prat & Luquet 2013. I am grateful to Valérie Luquet for making a copy of this unpublished report available to me, in .v.2019, after the first issue of this essay.

approach was to stretch the canvas around the stretcher, pinning it along the outer edge, and the paper would then be folded over the sides, if not all the way round to the back. Here the canvas and paper are cut sharply at the edges of the stretcher and do not project over the sides at all, the tacks going through the front edges of the surface. A further anomaly is that while the bottom and right edges of the strainer seem smooth enough, the left edge appears to be very roughly cut (I have not been able to observe the top): it is possible that this edge was shaved later to allow it to fit the rebate of a new frame: but any reduction in size would have been minimal (the width of the battens appears roughly the same all round, at approximately 10 cm).

All this leaves open the question of when, and why, this reduction took place. It might be tempting to assume that this occurred as a later intervention, but once a pastel as fragile as this is completed, the exercise of transferring it to another stretcher would be unacceptably hazardous – unless the artist himself were around to make good the extensive damage inevitably caused. One might imagine that in order to preserve the tension in the canvas, the new stretcher might have been constructed to fit inside an old strainer, so that the canvas could be tacked to the new frame before the outer one was removed: that requires us to believe that the original work was at least about 10 cm larger all round – say 200x150 cm. Part of Salmon's argument concerns the print, which is cut down the middle to remove the bust of Louis XV: Méjanès had advanced the seductive theory that this omission was an intentional delicacy which would have been understood by viewers in 1755; Salmon more mundanely attributes it to the accident of cutting down. But we should note, by comparison with the real Mariette print,⁴³ that the missing part of the print on the scale on which it is represented in the pastel requires an additional 7 cm on this side alone: and even then that would leave the bust of the king right at the edge, possibly in the shadow of the frame, which would be an arguably worse message. Further, in the current presentation the dead centre of the image falls on Pompadour's proper left eye (exactly where the tear is), any extension to the right only would lead to a visual imbalance (as the sitter faces left, it would be bizarre for the head not to be at or to the right of centre).



Salmon notes that the cutting down must have been done by the time Charles Steuben painted his copy in 1838 (MV 4446), as it has exactly the same dimensions and image as the Louvre pastel. But by the same logic, any such reduction must have taken place by 1755: the dimensions

⁴³ One notes not only the introduction of Pompadour's name as engraver (the original was engraved by the comte de Caylus, although the plate itself is unsigned), but considerable liberty with the lower part of the image.

given in the Salon livret, 5 pieds 6 pouces by 4 pieds (old units), at 178.7x129.9 cm, correspond almost exactly to the present dimensions (incidentally the livret and actual dimensions of the président de Rieux also match to similar accuracy). That would not permit even the extension for the bust of Louis.

There is a further argument that the pastel was exhibited in 1755 at essentially the present size. This concerns the glass. As we have established above, the pastel did have its glass in the marquise's posthumous inventory, and that glass was considered the most important part of the object in the 1803 sale – both in Paillet's description, and in Denon's response. Further that sheet seems very likely to be the one that developed the problems identified in 1942. Glass disease usually arises from incorrect proportions of the ingredients used to make the glass, and what is described is entirely consistent with a sheet made in France in the mid-eighteenth century, and much less likely to occur in a new sheet fixed in the early nineteenth century.

In the absence of any firm evidence to the contrary, the simpler explanation would seem to be that La Tour himself rescued the wreck of his first attempt, which he had attacked so vigorously as to penetrate the head and perhaps damage the original strainer, and that he cut it down and mounted it on the present stretcher before it was shown in 1755. La Tour himself, I suggest, may have patched the hole with layers of paper⁴⁴ before attaching the present sheet with the new head; but being then supported only by layers of paper rather than canvas, it was vulnerable to the tear we now see. An even more straightforward explanation of the anomalous attachment of the canvas to the stretcher with tacks on the face of the work is simply that the rebate of the (present or previous) frame was inadequate: rather than cutting the frame, the sides of the canvas were simply trimmed to fit. It is thus possible that the aspect of the work is exactly as it has been since 1755, if not 1748.

Condition and finish

It can be exceptionally difficult with pastel to follow how much deterioration has occurred since the work left the artist's studio. A work of this kind with the history unfolded above has had many opportunities to lose pastel, not just in the tear to the eye noted above (fixing tacks to the new stretcher would have resulted in unacceptable vibration levels for any conservation standard). What is perhaps surprising is that the work shows such variation in the level of finish. Here for example is the admirably clear image of the books, whose titles retain much of the sharpness they must have had originally (note that tome IV can only have been added after publication of that volume, in .X.1754):

⁴⁴ It should also be noted that the Getty président de Rieux also appears to have multiple layers of paper mounted on the canvas.



On the other hand the lace *engagements* look jumbled, and contrast with the sharpness La Tour obtained in an equivalent passage in the *président de Rieux*:



Similarly the sheet of music she holds is depicted with far greater haste than in comparable examples – the *princesse de Rohan* or *Marie Fel*, both of which have legible notes:⁴⁵



Critical fortune

⁴⁵ I discuss the erasure of the words in the *princesse*'s pastel in my [article](#) on that work.

Since the 1755 salon La Tour's portrait of the marquise de Pompadour had remained unknown and unreproduced. But after its return to the Louvre in 1823, it has been central to the museum's collection of pastels, and virtually no commentary has failed to mention it, usually at far greater length than any other work in the medium.

Arsène Houssaye first wrote extravagantly about the pastel (1849), and probably inspired Sainte-Beuve's famous discussion, in his *Causeries* for Monday, 16.IX.1850.⁴⁶ Champfleury 1855 prints this in full (before adding to it). Mantz (1854, p. 177), writing just 100 years after its completion, described the work as “un de ceux que le temps a effacés.” In contrast, Antoine-Jules Dumesnil, just four years later, thought that “sa conservation est aussi satisfaisante qu'on pouvoit l'espérer d'un genre aussi éphémère que le pastel”.⁴⁷

Théophile Gautier's beautiful essay “Les soirées du Louvre” (published in *L'Artiste* in 1858) concerns a concert held in the “magnifique Salle des Pastels” which he describes in meticulous detail. The La Tour Pompadour is of course discussed at length. This Grande salle des pastels seems essentially unchanged from then until when this photograph⁴⁸ was published in *La Renaissance de l'art français...* in 1919 (p. 239):



Magnier 1904 pointed out that the portrait was moved from its normal place in the Louvre to the newly opened “musée du mobilier français” in 1901, where it was mentioned by Babin 1901, alongside the La Tour comte de Provence (then thought to be the young Louis XV), before being rapidly returned to its earlier location “devant les protestations des amateurs et de artistes”.

The wonderful passage from the Goncourts' 1867 essay on La Tour (“La Tour a au Louvre une grande et magnifique place. ...”) is worth rereading, as is their later book on La Pompadour.⁴⁹ Campardon's biography of the marquise, with extensive documentation, appeared in 1867, with a truly wretched engraving after the La Tour pastel as frontispiece. Champfleury (published initially in *L'Athenaeum français* in 1853, expanded into the 1855 monograph on La Tour) devotes a chapter to “Son oeuvre au musée du Louvre” – it starts rather differently to the Goncourts: “Il ne faut pas juger La Tour au Musée du Louvre: on risquerait d'en garder une fâcheuse opinion.” While dismissing the pastels of the king, dauphin and dauphine – [ils] “ne sont pas des oeuvres d'une grande valeur” – he exempted “le fameux portrait de madame de Pompadour” from his wrath.

⁴⁶ The passage quoted in Salmon 2018 is the first page only in the fifth edition of the collected *Causeries*.

⁴⁷ *Histoire des plus célèbres amateurs...*, Paris, 1858, I, p. 152f.

⁴⁸ A similar photograph appeared in Guiffrey 1909, fig. 98, where several pastels on either side of the Pompadour had been interchanged.

⁴⁹ Many of these texts are freely available on Gallica, and absolve me from the need to quote lengthy passages.

Frédéric Reiset, in the appendix to his 1869 catalogue of the Louvre's pastels, summarized its importance in a few words:⁵⁰

Ce magnifique ouvrage, qui est le principal ornement de la salle des pastels du Louvre, est et restera, croyons-nous, le terme le plus élevé et le plus parfait du genre. Tant que le soleil ou l'humidité n'auront pas dévoré ces couleurs fugitives, tant qu'elles adhéreront à leur fond, le charme sans pareil de la figure principale, le bon goût, l'ingénieuse disposition des accessoires, la complète harmonie de l'ensemble feront de ce portrait le désespoir de tous les pastellistes et de bien des peintres à l'huile.

Inevitably the fame of the work spawned a flood of copies and reproductions, too numerous to list here, and too vacuous to discuss. It was popularized through engravings such as that made in 1838 by Léopold Massard (1812–1889, whom Salmon confused with Jean Massard, 1740–1822). Unknown however is the lost full-scale pastel copy by the forgotten Jules Chevreux (1837–1888) who died in a lunatic asylum. By 1890, when an American called Hamilton McKay Twombly thought he had bought the original for \$2250, Alfred Trumble, editor of *The collector*, discussed the swindle in several articles, pointing out that copies were available for as little as 1000 francs.

And so on, to modern times. The pastel even appeared on a French postage stamp in 2014 (from an engraving by Claude Jumelet).

No one summarized the importance of this work more succinctly than Pierre Rosenberg in his *Dictionnaire amoureux du Louvre* (2007): the portrait itself, as it were, defined La Tour:

Le pastel est impressionnant par sa taille. Il l'est par la virtuosité de son exécution. Il l'est encore plus par son ambition, son programme.

Neil Jeffares

⁵⁰ Reiset 1869, p. 353.