

Lion, *Le comte de Houchin*

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[Pierre-Joseph Lion](#)

Louis-Albert, comte de HOUCHIN (1710–1758)

Pastel on blue paper, 64.5x53.0 cm

Signed and dated, mid right “P. Lion pinxit/anno 1758”



Private collection

PROVENANCE: French private collection since before 1880; Nevers, Hôtel des Ventes, Maîtres F. & J.-M. Michaud, expert Pierre Étienne, 11 December 2004, Lot 5 reproduced

LITERATURE: Jeffares 2006, p. 334, reproduced

GENEALOGY: [Houchin](#)

THE LINING PAPER on the old backing board, trimmed from a Demarteau print, suggests that this pastel was executed and framed in Paris, where, in 1755, his fellow Liégeois Gilles Demarteau had established his studio at rue de la Pelterie, “à la Cloche”. The identity of the sitter has been inferred from a somewhat misleading later label: although there is a village of Houdain, it seems never to have been a marquisate, and the last known seigneur was Charles d’Artois, comte d’Eu (1394–1472). Although there was a d’Houdain family, the highest ranking were greffiers, receveur and procureurs – unlikely to have been the subject of a pastel whose importance is confirmed by the artist’s inscription on the backing board “le premier fait 1758”, indicating that further répliques were intended. The label itself refers to the famille Gosse de Gorre, a name that was not in use before 1824, and the handwriting confirms that the label is probably twentieth century. It probably transcribes an earlier label naming the sitter as le marquis d’Houchin, and identifying Gosse de Gorre as previous owners. Only one person of this age is likely to have been referred to: Louis-Albert-François-Joseph, comte de Houchin, marquis de Longastre et de Berghes, vicomte de Haubourdin et d’Emmerin, baron de Broucq, sgr d’Annezin, Franquereul, Heurengem, Chocques, Mory, Bliques, Hardoye, Vlemchove, Hartegreve, & autres lieux (1710–1758), fifteenth member of a line of nobility from the Artois

region, whose ancestry can be traced to the 12th century. The spelling Houchin for this territory was only made official by decree of 1970, and de Houchain, d'Houchain and other variants are common.

Louis-Albert married in 1734 Marie-Andrée-Josèphe de Berghes (1718–1738), daughter of the prince de Rache, who had married his niece Marie-Josèphe-Isabelle de Berghes. Marie-Andrée died shortly after the birth of their son, Jean-Joseph-Aimé-[Anne]-Marie, marquis de Houchin et de Longastre &c. (1737–1783), last of the Houchin male line. Louis-Albert was remarried in 1742, to Antoinette-Eugénie-Josèphe de Béthune (1710–1790), a member of another major family from this region, with whom the Houchins had been connected for generations. By 1754 he was député général et ordinaire du Corps de la Noblesse des Etats d'Artois et Député à la Cour par ce Corps.

Jean-Joseph-Aimé was notorious for his arbitrary and capricious behaviour. After a brief military career, during which he remained a sous-lieutenant, he married, in Paris in 1754, Marie-Jeanne-Georgette Toussaint de Kérouartz (p.1732–1785), a ward of the prince de Tingry following the condemnation of her father, the marquis de Kérouartz, by the Châtelet 1742.¹ The duc de Luyne passed over this in reporting only that “M. le marquis d'Houchin, homme de condition de Flandre, qui est fort riche, épouse M^{lle} Kérouart, riche héritière.”² By 1761, documents in the Archives nationales³ reveal that he had become separated from his wife, and that one Gosse, avocat au conseil superieur d'Artois, was acting as Jean-Joseph's guardian (“curateur”). The father's absence led to protracted litigation (not settled until 1804) over the legitimacy of a daughter, Mme Sirey, born that year.⁴ An elder daughter however married the marquis de Roquelaure, who joined her arms to his and inherited many of the Houchain family estates after Jean-Joseph-Aimé's death. As a result of Roquelaure's influence at court, Jean-Joseph-Aimé de Houchain was the first member of the family to be ennobled in France, receiving the Honneurs de la Cour in 1773; but he rapidly fell into disgrace. An inveterate duellist, he was constantly seeking opportunities to display his skill with the sword. In 1773 he shot a peasant working on the roof of his property in Emmerin on the grounds that he had shown a want of respect to his master. Two years later, he killed a neighbour, M. d'Aubers, whose family pursued him at law. Thanks to the privileges of the vicomté d'Haubourdin (or more likely the family's influence at court), the king issued lettres de grâce, effecting a pardon, while saying “prévenez le marquis que celles de celui qui le tuera dans les mêmes circonstances sont toutes prêtes.”⁵

Since Jean-Joseph-Aimé was under 25 in 1761, a guardian was a customary requirement, but it is not clear why this role was played by lawyer from a family of considerably inferior social station, Jean-Marie Gosse (1725–1793), avocat au parlement de Paris et au conseil d'Artois, propriétaire du château de Croisilles. A possible clue to the puzzle lies in a portrait of Gosse, possibly by Greuze (fig. 1, still in the



Figure 1

¹ It is likely that she is the “marquise de Houchin” referred to by comte de Salverte (*Les ébénistes...*, Paris, 1962, p. 136) as an important customer of Denis Genty, along with Mme de Pompadour etc. Salverte wrongly identifies her with her cousin, Isabelle-Claire-Eugénie, who was in fact marquise de Heuchin, and died in 1734.

² *Mémoires du duc de Luyne*, Paris, 1863, XIII, p. 264, 2 June 1754.

³ ET/XCI/984, 21 April 1761.

⁴ See Eustache Antoine Hua, *Mémoires d'un avocat au parlement de Paris*, 1871, p. 18.

⁵ This story may well be apocryphal, as it echoes closely the Regent's remark when asked under similar circumstances for pardon by the comte de Charolais: “Je vous l'accorde; mais s'il arrive que quelqu'un vous tue, je lui accorderai aussi sa grâce” (cited Pierre Narbonne, *Journal de police*, Paris, 2002, I, p. 153, 30 juillet 1726).

family); the remarkable similarity suggests that the relationship between the families was not just that of lawyer and client – Jean-Marie Gosse was born ten years after his siblings, and could conceivably be the illegitimate half-brother of Houchain.

It is evidently perfectly plausible that the portrait should have been acquired by the family, even though its most enthusiastic art collector, Henry-Joseph-Aimé Gosse, sgr d'Ostrel (1687–1752), notaire à Saint-Pol, died six years before the portrait was executed. There was also another Gosse family connection with this picture, which probably explains how the artist was commissioned: Lion's father lost his first wife in 1734, and remarried Marie-Christine Gosse, mother of his half-brother Henri-Joseph, while the artist's sister Marie-Catherine married Jacques-Joseph Gosse. (Connections with the Houchin family may also explain why Lion was selected to go to Vienna: some years later, Houchin's cousin Béthune-Hesdigneul became chambellan to Joseph II.)

The subsequent provenance of the pastel is not yet clear;⁶ it was sold by a Nevers family who acquired it around 1880. They also owned as a canvas by Mme Labille-Guiard of Mme Nicolas-François Charlot, wife of the artist's cousin and heir.

Whatever the history of this work, one cannot but be struck by the amazing vigour, precision and confidence of its execution. Distinctive elements in Lion's technique include the dappled red shadows on the black coat, as well as the bold single stroke of carmine marking the shadow under the chin, for which La Tour would have used blue, Perronneau perhaps green. It is rare to find pastels executed larger than life – some of Thomas Frye's works may be cited – but the scale is an important part of Lion's theatrical sense of composition (echoed by the bold, almost monogrammatic lettering of the signature). And while some features are almost stylised – the elegant serpentine delineating the eyes, or the beautifully modelled mouth and chin (which is reminiscent of a Rubens) – there is an astonishing level of accuracy in the execution of the blue-grey veins on the temples, the pock-marks on the face and the (possibly syphilitic) chancre on the nose.⁷ As Houchain died in the year of execution, it is tempting to speculate how advanced his condition may have been.

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⁶ It was not included in the Gosse sale of 11 April 1774; nor does it figure in Houchin's inventaire après décès (I am most grateful to Dider Bouquet for consulting this document; private communication, January 2005).

⁷ Dr P. W. M. Copeman (private communication, 19 January 2005) notes that the pock-marks are very accurate representations of a fairly severe attack of smallpox. Based on a photograph, he thinks that the lesion on the side of the nose may have two sites, which would not be typical of syphilis. But detailed inspection suggests that there is only a single chancre, in which case syphilis was the most common cause. Primary skin cancers, tubercular chancres or transient impetigo would appear to be unlikely.