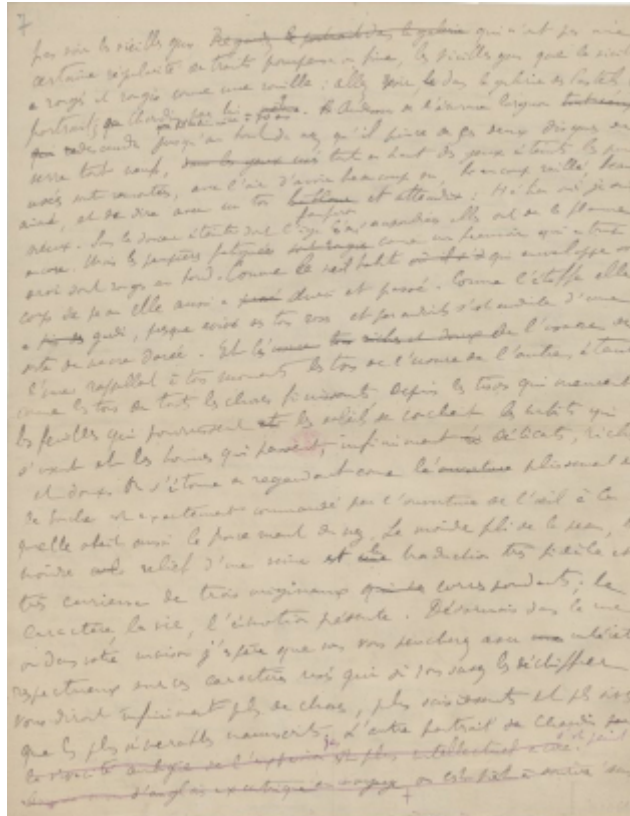


In search of Perronneau's lost years¹

NEIL JEFFARES



AMONG THE PICTURES in Karlsruhe which I did not discuss in my recent post was a wonderful Rembrandt self-portrait. When I got back to London I went straight to the National Gallery to look at theirs, and was drawn of course to the one aged 63 painted in his final year: it was observed by someone only a couple of years younger with very little original to say about it. Writing about portraiture so easily degenerates into tropes and clichés, and only the bravest would attempt to add to the volumes that have expatiated on this masterpiece. I should hazard a guess that a number of them would cite the parallel with Chardin (perhaps we remember Proust's fine 1895 article, above), who devoted the last half dozen years of his life to making a handful of the most wonderful pastels ever created. In turning from genre and still life to portraiture, and self-portraiture at that, he made the opposite trajectory to Liotard whose late period still lifes carry their own special charge for his enthusiasts: the quintessence of his eccentricity now interpreted as the anticipation of modernity.

But what of Perronneau? He too outlived Rembrandt, though only by about five years (65 was the median age for the top 250 pastellists, older than I might have expected), but we know relatively little about his late years. In particular there was an extraordinary gap of four years, 1773–77, for which absolutely no records were known: no pastels, no documents, no records of travel, notwithstanding the extensive searches made by Dominique d'Arnoult for her recent monograph. To repeat: from the Paris salon of August 1773 until mid-way through 1777 we had no record of the whereabouts or activity of one of the most important artists of the eighteenth

¹ This essay first appeared as a post on my blog, neiljeffares.wordpress.com, on 14 August 2015. It may be cited as Neil Jeffares, "In search of Perronneau's lost years", *Pastels & pastellists*, <http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/PerronneauInSpain.pdf>.

century. True, there were suspicions: in particular d'Arnoult notes how easily Perronneau might have followed the trade links from The Netherlands (where he travelled repeatedly) and Spain.

When Proust was writing his piece, his friend Reynaldo Hahn kept a diary in which he recorded his visit “au Louvre avec Marcel” to see the pastels of Chardin and La Tour. That evening (26 November 1895), they went to dinner chez Alphonse Daudet, and after dinner–

Sur le canapé, Goncourt me parle longuement de peinture. ... Je lui raconte ma visite au Louvre, le questionne sur les pastellistes. Il admire surtout Perronneau, le place très au-dessus des deux autres et le considère comme le peintre de l'école anglaise, “bien que personne ne s'en soit jamais aperçu”, ajoute-t-il avec un petit ricanement. Il n'a aucune envie de voyager, de voir des pays.

Much though we owe to Goncourt for the rediscovery of the *dix-huitième*, his insight into Perronneau may have relied more on intuition than evidence: the only [“Perronneau” he and his brother owned](#) was in fact by a different artist altogether. (As Guillaume Apollinaire noted, “il n'y a pas de comparaison à établir entre les pastellistes anglais du XVIII^e siècle et les pastellistes français de la même époque.”) But the other revealing comment in this passage is his lack of interest in foreign travel. I sympathise with the desire to avoid the inevitable discomforts and inconvenience, but occasionally there are rewards.



Russell, Sir Richard Glode (Lisbon, MNAA)

Earlier this summer I made my pilgrimage to the wonderful pastel by Perronneau's great rival in the Museu Gulbenkian (you can read my essay [here](#)), and I took the opportunity to call in on the other Lisbon museum, the Museu nacional de arte antiga. I wanted to see the rather striking John Russell, collected by Gulbenkian himself when such things were fashionable (it is a fine example), and ceded to the other Lisbon museum when they ceased to be so. (Sir Richard Glode of Orpington was the paradigm of self-made man, starting his career as journeyman bricklayer, but rising to be knighted as Sheriff of London.) I found too, as I expected, a large group of coloured chalk drawings by Bartolozzi, who went to Lisbon at the age of 74. Russell's pastel of him is now in the Louvre; his own self-portrait, 1813, pitilessly depicts the disappointment of those final years.



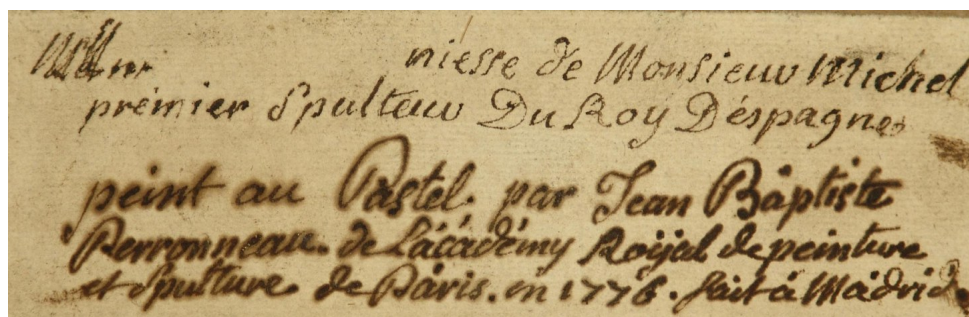
Bartolozzi, Self-portrait (Lisbon, MNAA)

What I did not expect to find, rummaging through the reserves, was an unframed pastel that would provide a key piece of missing information on Perronneau. I wish I could say that it revealed a late flowering comparable to Chardin's: but I confess that the pastel itself was a little underwhelming, showing a child with a rather bizarre hairstyle and in condition that at first made me think it might be a pastiche. But more careful examination revealed nothing inconsistent with eighteenth century manufacture.



Perronneau, Dorotea ou Cecilia Michel y Ballerna (Lisbon , MNAA)

And when some time later the inscription on the backing board was located, the story fell into place: here was a pastel which proved that Perronneau was indeed in Madrid in 1776.



You might when you see the label wonder if the artist could possibly be guilty of these spelling mistakes: *nièce* for *nièce* might just be archaic, but surely Perronneau would have made *royal* agree with *académie*? And what about “spulture” – twice? Well, I confess that I wondered about these, although it is difficult to see how they could have arisen in any other narrative. And we find exactly the same errors (including *spulture* – which incidentally is also found in a manuscript by Mme de Graffigny, who is not normally considered to be dyslexic) in another autograph label on an earlier pastel (Mme de Bussy, no. 329 Pa in Arnoult 2014: I am most grateful to Dominique d’Arnoult for drawing my attention to the inscription).

To see where this sits in the Perronneau œuvre, we need to look at a pastel made the following year, signed and dated 1777:



Perronneau, Inconnue (Copenhagen, SMK)

Here I think we can see where Perronneau was heading the year before. These late pastels are perhaps “difficult”, particularly when they are not in perfect condition; but in the Copenhagen portrait we see that harmony of colour and nuance that is the essence of Perronneau, and, *pace* Goncourt, virtually unintelligible to the English.

But who was the sitter in the Lisbon portrait? The fragmentary information is enough to confirm that Perronneau’s client was among the community of expatriate French artists in Madrid. Robert Michel (Le Puy-en-Velay 1720 – Madrid 1786), was trained in France but settled in Spain in 1740 where he rose to be *primer escultor de rey d’España* and head of sculpture at the Real academia de bellas artes de San Fernando. A rather fine oil of him in Madrid cannot (as once thought) be by Ranc, but it is surely French (and deserves an attribution).



Anon., Roberto Michel (Madrid, Academia)

Robert, known as Roberto in Spain, married Rosa Ballerna, sister of the silversmith Raphael Ballerna from Vitoria. Roberto’s brother Pierre-Antoine-Simon Michel (Le Puy-en-Velay 1728 – Madrid 1809; called Pedro Michel in Spain), followed him there in 1748. Pedro was also a sculptor and became director of sculpture at the Academia de San Fernando in the early nineteenth century. Pedro married his sister-in-law’s niece Barbara Ballerna, daughter of Raphael.

Roberto had no other sibling in Spain, so his niece (if accurately described) must be one of Pedro’s daughters. Of his six recorded children, Cecilia, Manuel, Dorotea, Bibiana, Rosa and Pedro Jr, Dorotea and Bibiana were both artists. Dorotea is said to have worked in pastel (and so already had an [entry](#) in the *Dictionary of pastellists*), although the 1801 and 1804 inventories of the Real academia record only a male nude drawn on blue paper (glazed and framed), 1793, and a drawing after an antique sculpture, 1794. Bibiana, who worked in pastel and in miniature, was made an academician in 1818, aged 21, submitting a pastel head of San Francisco de Paula, while

Dorotea was admitted as an *aficionado* in 1793. We cannot be sure of Dorotea's age, but amateurs were admitted young (María Micaela Nesbitt, for example, was admitted in 1820 aged 19 with a pastel after Sassoferrato); sharing the same mother – both girls bore the surname “y Ballerna” – Dorotea must have been born about 1770. Cecilia may have been older, but the same biological constraint – a sister born in 1797 – limits the age of Perronneau's girl to less than 10.

In an 1812 document, Pedro's orphaned children are named as Bibiana and Rosa. This may be because Dorotea and Cecilia were already dead, or simply that they had attained majority. If anyone has any more information on the ages of the two girls or the dates of their parents' marriage, I'd love to hear.

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