

La Joconde du XVIII^e siècle¹

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NEWS OF THE IMPENDING publication of Dominique d’Arnoult’s monograph on Perronneau in January [2015] (Arthena) fills me with excitement. There is a pre-publication offer with a substantial discount. I am confident that that book will be very good and urge you to subscribe. As you will know from my website, there is no shortage of Jeffares material on Perronneau’s pastels (you can start with the main [entry](#) and continuation articles, but you may also want to explore the essays on the [Journu](#), [Lyon](#) and [d’Aubais](#) pastels). So, for variety, let me tempt you here with a few comments about the oil painting which has been chosen for the cover, Mme de Sorquainville (1749).

The daunting undertaking for a catalogue raisonné of Perronneau is not merely to list and order his miracles, but to explain them. But surely one of the special challenges will be to reproduce these incredibly subtle works whose magic can only be transmitted *de visu*. For the quintessence of Perronneau is *nuance*. Of too many painters do we tritely observe their “harmonious palette”: but of far fewer can we say that their works inhabit that enharmonic zone where a composer holds us in exquisite suspense. La Tour’s modulations are clever and neat; Liotard, with his “idiotisme helvétique”, stays in a single key. But this Fauré of the art of portraiture is apt to be

¹ This essay is a slightly expanded version of an article which first appeared as a post on my blog, neiljeffares.wordpress.com, on 25 November 2014, just before the publication of Arnoult 2015, referred to as “impending”. It may be cited as Neil Jeffares, “La Joconde du XVIII^e siècle”, *Pastels & pastellists*, http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Perronneau_Sorquainville.pdf.

dismissed outside France as a mere Reynaldo Hahn. Dominique d'Arnoult's task will be to change that.

Mme de Sorquainville is one of the jewels in the Louvre, and merited this beautiful entry from Pierre Rosenberg in his *Dictionnaire amoureux du Louvre* (2007) – a book you should give any godchild, after you have devoured it for yourself. Here is the entry:

Portrait dit de Madame de Sorquainville

Huile sur toile H. 1,01 ;L. 0,81 S.D.h.g. : Perronneau 1749 R.F. 19378 Sully, deuxième étage, salle 46

Qui était Mme de Sorquainville? Et d'abord sommes-nous sûrs d'être en sa présence? Son nom, certes, se lit sur le châssis de la toile, mais cette inscription peu ancienne est-elle fiable?

Qu'importe: assise dans un fauteuil, coiffée d'un discret bonnet, elle nous regarde et sourit. On note ses yeux noirs, le ruban noir qui enserre son cou, le gros nœud sur le devant de la poitrine, les dentelles quelque peu fanées en bouillonnés de sa robe bleu tendre et vert acide, deux couleurs que Perronneau allie, marie, accorde avec bonheur.

On n'oubliera plus son fin visage amaigri, ses pommettes rosées, son teint ivoirin et son regard pétillant. Intelligente, c'est évident, élégante sans nul doute, coquette peut-être (mais quel peut bien être son âge?), spirituelle, qui pourrait en douter? Son sourire? Celui d'une Joconde du XVIII^e siècle, d'un XVIII^e qui parlait et pensait français...

Ce chef d'œuvre de Perronneau – il fut le rival, dans le genre du pastel, de La Tour et de Liotard, mais peignait également à l'huile – a été donné au Louvre en 1937 par David David-Weill.

The biographical facts about this lady are indeed meagre, but not quite so thin as this passage might suggest. I believe we can identify Mme de Sorquainville as Geneviève-Antoinette de Martainville (I can't see why the inscription would have been added to someone without this name, and I think she is the only plausible Sorquainville). She was born into a family which had been ennobled in the early sixteenth century. In 1550 Richard Le Pelletier, secrétaire du roi, became seigneur de Martainville (early documents spell this as Martainville, and others as Martinville), a territory near Rouen dating back to 1291. But the family is rather more complicated than a quick perusal of the standard genealogical tomes might suggest (there is no obvious connection with the famous Parisian family of lawyers), and the hidden mystery, belonging several hundred years before Perronneau's sitter, is hinted at in a wholly exceptional royal patent granted by Charles IX in 1571 allowing Richard to drop the name of Le Pelletier and adopt that of his estate. This in practice was what all nobles did, as attentive readers of this blog will know; the mystery was that permission to do so was set out in writing – in a document that effectively deemed the family noble from time immemorial when it was widely known that this was not true. The result was that the parlement in Rouen initially refused registration of the patent, and finally did so only after two years of vigorous dissent. (Hence the widespread confusions in the literature.) By the time Mme de Sorquainville was born, the specifics were forgotten, and her father, Philippe de Martainville, would have been described as “écuyer, chevalier, seigneur et patron honoraire dudit lieu” without the raising of an eyebrow. But there hung over the family an unresolved ambiguity as to the nature of its nobility (the noblesse d'extraction, de l'épée and de robe were subtly different categories).

Geneviève-Antoinette was born in Martainville-sur-Ry and baptised there on 8 November 1690:



(So to answer Pierre Rosenberg's question, she was 58 when Perronneau painted her.) A few years later her only (surviving) brother was born, Michel de Martainville (1694–1757). Despite an advantageous marriage in 1729, to Élisabeth-Lucie Le Normand d'Étiolles (1711–1783), Mme de Pompadour's sister-in-law, Michel was the last of the male line, and the family property reverted to his sister, who became "Dame de Martainville-en-Ry".

By this time, Geneviève herself had been married for some years. Her husband, Pierre-Salomon Couture de Chamacourt de Sorquainville (1692–1759), was born in Rouen, and was the son of a président de la chambre des comptes de Normandie who had only been ennobled in 1709. Salomon had been appointed conseiller au parlement de Normandie in 1716, and would remain in office until 1750. The marriage took place in Rouen, paroisse Saint-Amand, on 17 August 1722: as you can see from the parish register, it was far from a grand affair (marriages in those days were often witnessed by dozens of relatives and friends, usually including the highest ranking protectors of the families).

L'an de grace mil sept cents vingt deux le samedi
 quintieme douze jour de L'assomption de la Ste Vierge
 permission obtenue de M^{rs} les Vicaires generaux du
 venerable chapitre de L'Eglise metropolitaine et pri-
 mariale de Rouen le Siege vacant de marier ce
 de sie, apres fiancailles et publication d'un ban tant
 en la paroisse de St Patrice qu'en celle paroisse sans
 aucun empêchement ni opposition dispense obtenue
 de Messieurs les susdits vicaires generaux de dater
 du 14 du present mois de deux bans touchant le
 mariage de Messieurs Salomon Cousture Chevalier Sieur
 de Sorquainville Conseiller au parlement de Paris
 fils de Messieurs Antoine Cousture Chevalier Sieur
 de Chamaucourt Conseiller du Roy Tresorier de
 ce de general des finances a Rouen et de Dame
 Marie poyer ses pères et mere d'une part des
 paroisses Et Demoiselle Genevieve Antoinette de
 Martinville fille majeure de M^{rs} Messieurs Philippe
 de Martinville Chevalier Sieur de Martinville
 dufroni Castillon et de Noble Dame Marie Catherine
 de Bethencourt ses pères et mere d'autre part de la
 paroisse de St Patrice y demeurant chez les Dames
 Nouvelles Catholiques Nous soussigné Jacques Bruel
 vicaire curé de St Etienne et Bachelier de Sorbonne avons
 interrogé le dit Salomon Cousture et la dite Ge-
 nevieve Antoinette de Martinville et leur consen-
 tement mutuel par nous pris, les avons solennellement
 par parole de present conjoints en mariage et en
 suite recu la benediction nuptiale presence de Messieurs
 Antoine Cousture de Chamaucourt pere de L'Epoix
 Philippe de Martinville Chevalier Sieur de Cathel
 Sieur de L'Epoix de M^{rs} François Alexandre Carrey
 Chevalier Sieur de St Germain Conseiller au parle-
 ment et de M^{rs} Jean de Bethencourt Chevalier Sieur
 de Monchanchy pères et amis qui ont signé avec
 L'Epoix et L'Epoix
 Cousture de Sorquainville Genevieve de Martinville
 J. Bruel Cousture de Chamaucourt Philippe de Cathel Carrey

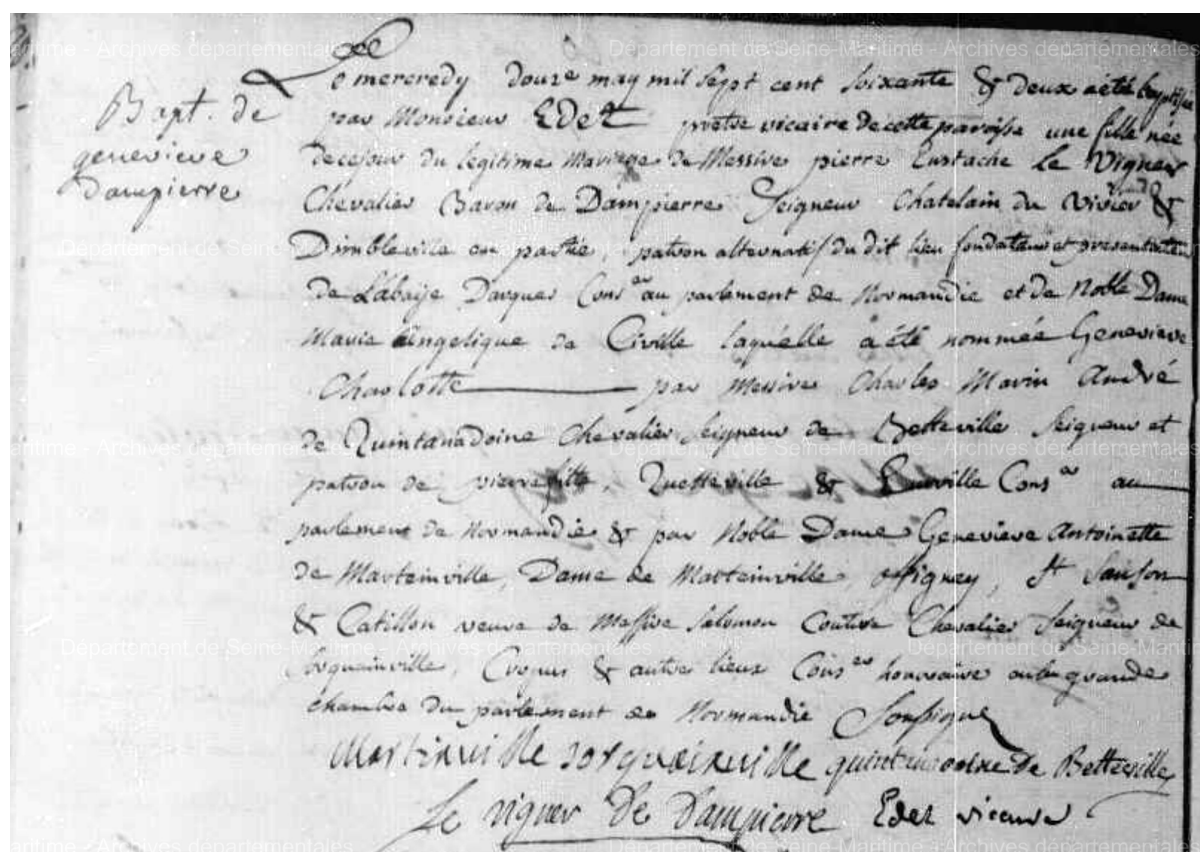
But I draw your attention to Geneviève's signature:

Genevieve de Martinville

It is that of a 32 year old, not a child; and to me it suggests that her education was probably not of that exceptional order that elevates her to the rank of her brother's sister-in-law, nor that of say [Elisabeth Ferrand](#), another La Tour subject shown meditating on Newton to emphasise her intellectual accomplishments.

At least three sons were born: ten months after the marriage, Antoine-Philippe, who died aged 7; the following year, Antoine-Louis, who, like his father, was appointed conseiller au parlement de Normandie in 1749. Ten years later, a third brother, Alexandre-Salomon, was born: he too would be appointed conseiller au parlement, taking over the office which his father had occupied for 34 years. So when Perronneau painted her, the family's future looked secure. But both brothers would die within a few years, leaving no male heir. When her husband died in 1759, Geneviève was the last remaining member of the family.

She would live another 22 years, her estates and titles passing to her first cousin, once removed, Pierre-Eustache Le Vigner de Dampierre, conseiller at the Grand'Chambre of the parlement de Normandie. They were evidently close, although Mme de Sorquanville did not attend his wedding at Rouen in 1750; but she was marraine to one of Le Vignier's daughters, Geneviève-Charlotte-Eustache, baptised at Rouen (Saint-Nicaise) on 12 May 1762:



It may be noted that forty years had seen a marked improvement in Mme de Sorquanville's handwriting.

The bell at the church Martainville² was founded in 1770 with this dedication:

L'an 1770, j'ai été nommée *Geneviève* par Maître Pierre Eustache Le Vigner, Seigneur, Baron de Dampierre, Fondateur et Présentateur de l'Abbaye d'Arques, Conseiller au Parlement de Normandie, et par Haute et Puissante Dame *Geneviève-Antoinette de Martinville*, Dame et Patronne honoraire dudit lieu, Catillon, Saint-Samson en Bray, Offignies en Picardie, Haute Justicière du dit lieu et autres terres et Seigneuries, Veuve de Messire Salomon Couture, Seigneur de Sorquanville, Cropus, Chamacourt, Mesnil-Godefroy et autres lieux, Conseiller au Parlement de Normandie.

² It is of course pure coincidence – but too good not to mention – that one of the three key episodes in Proust occurs with the clochers de “Martinville”. As with the madeleine and the uneven steps, the narrator is tripped by the ambiguities and nuances of an everyday experience – in this case, the visual illusion of the steeples – into the profound investigation of the role of intuition that is the central theme of his work. Isn't that precisely what these great works by Perronneau are doing?

Mme de Sorquainville eventually died at the age of 90 at Saint-Amand, in April 1781, her body being transported a few days later, on 4 April, to the family vault at Martainville with due ceremony, attended by her cousin and heir, and by Jean-Antoine-Jacques-François, chevalier de Banville. Here is the entry for the “transport” in the registers of Saint-Amand, Rouen, indicating that death took place on 2 April:

Ce jourd'hui Mercredi quatre d'avril mil sept cent
 quatre vingt un, Le corps de noble dame
 gouvernante antoinette De Montiville, Dame
 a Montiville et patronne honoraire De, parafy De Montiville,
 faulcon, Saint-Amand, haute justice d'offique,
 grand seble, flocquant, Rois-Norwég, sabbille
 D'autres terres & seigneuries, veuve De Messire Salomon
 Fontaine, chevalier, Seigneur De, Siquanville, Chamacourt,
 Signy, & autres lieux, vivant seigneur, seigneur
 Du Roy en la foy & grand foye Du parlement
 De Normandie, decedee le jour & jour precedent
 deux du present mois d'avril du sacrement
 De l'bonne entree, a été transportee De son hotel
 Si en cette paroisse, a celle de l'eglise De Montiville
 Sur ry, pour y être inhumee dans le foye et caveau
 De l'eglise pour la sepulture au foye de laquelle
 ont assisté l'abbé et plusieurs seigneurs, Messire Pierre
 attache, seigneur, baron Dampierre, seigneur
 d'Alençon Du chatelet et Simblaville en partie patron
 alternatif dudit lieu, fondateur et presbiter
 De l'abbaye d'Anges, seigneurs Du Roy en la grande
 foye De son parlement De Normandie, et l'abbé
 et plusieurs seigneurs, Messire Pierre antoine de laque
 françois De Barville seigneur seigneur Des foyes

But the acte of inhumation at Martainville-sur-Ry later that day gives the date of death as 1 April:

ce jour l'undy quatrieme d'avril a este inhumé le corps de
 noble dame genevieve antoinette de martinville dame
 de cette paroisie haute justiciere d'aufigny dame de
 catillon, St. samson et autres lieux. venue de messire
 salomon courtesaigner de sorquainville decroquer
 chameau et autres lieux conseiller du roy en son conseil
 de normandie decedee le premier decembre l'an mil six cent
 de la paroisie de St. amand en cette paroisie parachevee
 inhumee dans la cave sepulture de ses ancestres par
 pierre nicot lezard maraichier de sorquainville en pre sence
 de messire pierre eustache le vignier chevalier baron de
 d'auquier seigneur chatelein du vivier et d'ine blerville
 patron alternatif dudit lieu fondateur et possesseur de l'abbaye
 d'argue, conseiller du roy en la grand chambre du parlement
 de normandie et de messire jean antoine de launay
 officier d'infanterie
 L. vignier de d'auquier
 Martainville
 Martainville

Some idea of the circumstances of Mme de Sorquainville, dame de Martainville, may perhaps be gleaned from her château de Martainville, which survives as the [musée des Traditions et Arts Normands](#), although there is nothing to suggest that the staff there are aware of the connection with Perronneau's great portrait.



Possibly this is more information than you needed. As so often when one tries to expand one of Pierre Rosenberg's observations, you find that he has got the essence absolutely right. But

perhaps Dominique d'Arnoult will have more to tell us about this mysterious sitter who is in so many ways the objective correlative of all the ambiguities and uncertainties on which Perronneau's art is based. Every time however we should come back to the painting itself: this magnificent depiction of a lady who needs no Newton for her gravity, whose repute "lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands." Or, if I may put it more simply with a phrase from an even greater writer, this masterpiece of a lady "entourée de sa toilette comme de l'appareil délicat et spiritualisé d'une civilisation."

Neil Jeffares