

Voltaire in pastel¹

NEIL JEFFARES

Les portraits sont une chimère, comme tout le reste.
Voltaire to d'Argental, 16 June 1758

ONE MIGHT EASILY IMAGINE that Voltaire and the medium of pastel were ideally suited: the embodiment of the Enlightenment embodied in the material which reflected more light than any other painting medium,² and whose ability to represent human faces with unequalled verisimilitude sparked a popularity that coincided with Voltaire's own career. Within two years of François-Marie Arouet becoming "Voltaire", [Rosalba Carriera](#) had arrived in Paris; by the Revolution the vogue she inspired had come to an abrupt end. But iconography is never quite so neat, as we shall see. As Francis Haskell pointed out, although we owe to the author of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, the belief that, in principle, the visual arts, as much as literature and the sciences, constitute a gauge for testing the quality of a civilization, nevertheless "his actual treatment of them during the course of his historical studies shows that the issue was for him of purely theoretical interest. He had no real feeling for paintings and sculpture...."³

The earliest pastel portrait of Voltaire is also the most important, and it has been the subject of an immensely thorough study by Hervé Cabezas.⁴ Although the original pastel by [Maurice-Quentin de La Tour](#) is lost, some idea of its appearance may be formed from the numerous prints and copies, among them the pastel copy [J.46.31](#) now in Ferney:⁵



¹ This essay first appeared on my blog, neiljeffares.wordpress.com, on 16 May 2016. (An update, posted 29 September 2025, identifies Sompsois.) It may be cited as Neil Jeffares, "Voltaire in pastel", *Pastels & pastellists*, <http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/VoltaireInPastel.pdf>. Numbers beginning 1. are references to the online *Dictionary of pastellists* where full details will be found.

² On the optical properties of pastel and its superior "pigment volume concentration", see the short discussion and references cited in my [Prolegomena to Pastels & pastellists](#), p. 20. There too (chapter IX) will be found a discussion of the vogue for pastel and the various social reasons for the phenomenon. Hyperlinks in the online *Dictionary of pastellists* provide further details for each artist and the pastels mentioned in this post. "Voltaire" entered in the *Dictionary's* [search box](#), yielded 106 results (8 May 2016), indicating just how significant the writer is in any project connected with the eighteenth century.

³ Haskell 1993, pp. 202, 205.

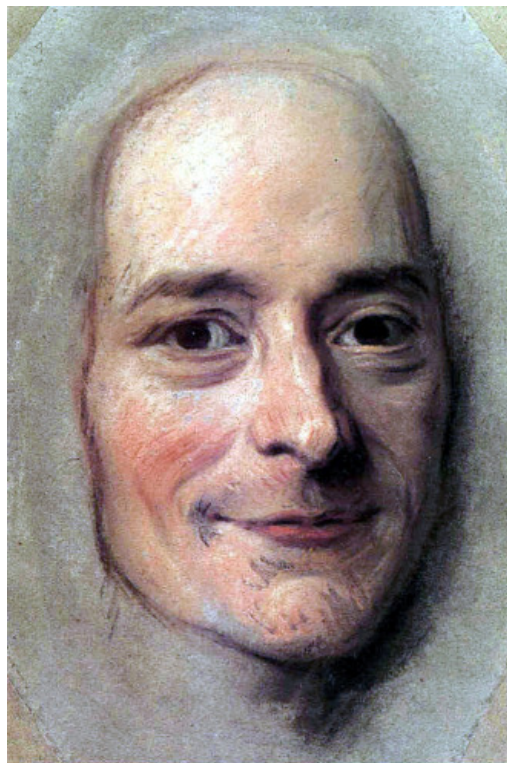
⁴ "Voltaire, ses portraits, par Maurice-Quentin de La Tour et Joseph Rosset...", *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 2009, pp. 175–202. The literature on Voltairean iconography is vast, but Jacques van den Heuvel's pocket-sized *Pléiade* album (1983) is often useful, despite the tiny images.

⁵ This was not among Voltaire's possessions, but rather acquired after the auction in Paris, 22–23 December 1834, Lot 71.

While it is tempting to posit some historical inevitability to the circumstances which led Voltaire to commission his portrait from the then virtually unknown artist, a far more mundane explanation is more likely: Voltaire's agent in Paris, the abbé Moussinot, was a neighbour of La Tour, then based in the hôtel Jabach. The sittings took place in April 1735; the portrait and its engravings transformed La Tour's reputation. The autograph *préparation* [J.46.3116](#) today in the musée Antoine-Lécuyer, Saint-Quentin, conveys with some immediacy the vigour of the encounter between these two personalities:



A rather different *préparation* [J.46.3121](#), now in Stockholm, has a less direct relationship with the final portrait and may have been an early exploration of the face:



As Cabezas has noted, a letter from Voltaire (24 August 1735) describes a portrait of his friend Thiériot holding the *Henriade*, so the book in Voltaire's hand may have been the writer's suggestion. But if so La Tour was happy to re-use the idea in quite a number of his later pastels.

La Tour remained in communication with Voltaire for many years, but no subsequent portrait was made. The prince de Ligne evidently exaggerated his powers of persuasion when he wrote to Voltaire on 1 June 1766 "J'ai persuadé, il y a quelques jours à M. de Lattour, Le grand maître en pastel, d'aller vous faire sa Cour, et de nous la faire, par un portrait meilleur que tous les autres."

But from the correspondence in the months and years immediately after the portrait was made, we can trace more about how Voltaire viewed the function of the image as well as the mechanics of a successful portraitist's practice. Voltaire repeatedly commissioned repetitions, and inevitably complained about the price: "Aujourd'hui, La Tour, peintre en pastel, demande 4800 livres pour deux copies qui valent 10 écus."⁶ Possibly this was why so many (and all the surviving) versions were not autograph.⁷ From the letter of 12 April 1736 to Bonaventure Moussinot, we learn that Voltaire knew that "la copiste" was to be a female artist, and since La Tour was to "retouch" it, Cabezas reasonably inferred that the copy was to be in pastel (but Voltaire may simply have assumed that La Tour too could work in oil). In July 1738, when the portrait was to be lent to an engraver, Voltaire wrote to Berger: "On ne veut point envoyer mon portrait en pastel; mais M. de La Tour en a un double; il n'y a qu'à y faire mettre une bordure et une glace. Je mande à M. l'abbé Moussinot qu'il en fasse les frais." From this we learn that La Tour not only kept a studio version at the ready (a common practice among portraitists) but that it was unframed (a hazardous state for a pastel, however carefully it was handled).

La Tour's great rival seen from today's perspective was [Jean-Étienne Liotard](#). But while in 1735 La Tour was at the start of a brilliant career in Paris, Liotard was digesting his rejection by the Académie royale who, [three years previously](#), had deemed his submission unworthy of any prize. As a last-ditch effort to gain recognition, he announced prints of Voltaire and Fontenelle in the *Mercure de France* (June 1735, pp. 1392f), claiming that his technique of colour printing was a "genre de peinture [qui] peut avoir la fraîcheur du Pastel et la force et la durée de la Peinture à huile." It is unlikely that he had taken the portrait of Voltaire from life (but see below).

Voltaire's experiences with pastellists were mostly at a rather less glorified level. Sometimes they involved the amateur talents of his friends and relations, gifted to varying degrees. Thus we learn somewhat cryptically that [Mme du Châtelet](#) may have been an amateur pastellist from Voltaire's letter of 26 March 1740 to the long-suffering abbé Moussinot:

Je vous écrivis hier pour demander encor un autre exemplaire de ces éléments [de Newton] avec une petite boete de crayons à pastel.

Un portrait promptement fait, et à bon marché est toujours ce que je demande de la part de madame du Chastelet.

Greater persistence as a pastellist was displayed by his niece, Mme [Dompierre de Fontaine](#) (later marquise de Florian), whose talents Voltaire oversold in his letters of 4 December 1753 and 20 January 1754 in both of which he called her "une Rosalba", later (16 December 1755) suggesting that "vous l'emportez sur Liotard." Graf Zinzendorf did not agree, likening her pastel figures to "morts qui ont mis du rouge, tant la chair est verte."⁸ There is however no record of a portrait by

⁶ Voltaire, *Sottisier, Œuvres complètes*, Paris, 1880, xxxii, p. 597, as 1800 livres; *Œuvres complètes*, Oxford, 1968–, lxxxi–lxxxii, p. 450, as 4800 livres.

⁷ The *Dictionary* lists some three dozen copies in various media, as well as numerous engravings. Among those that are not widely known let us cite the [oil copy](#) acquired by the British Museum in 1760, as of "Voltaire drawn by Mr Gardel, a young painter of Geneva". Théodore Gardelle (1722–1761) was an enamellist whose sensational trial for the murder of his landlady the following year involved the testimony of Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, whose trip to England was not the high point of his career.

⁸ At Dr Théodore Tronchin's, which he visited on 9 December 1764, the day after his visit to Ferney with Liotard and François Tronchin (unpublished, but to be included in the forthcoming edition of his diaries, ed. H. Watzlawick & G. Klingenstein, to whom I am very grateful for sharing the information).

her of Voltaire: his demands seem to have been less proper, as when he asked her (8 January 1756) “aimez-vous toujours à peindre de beaux corps tout nus...?”

Some of these amateurs were of the highest rank. [Friedrich der Große](#) made pastels in his youth (but not of Voltaire), while his sister [Wilhelmine Markgräfin von Bayreuth](#) assembled a collection of pastels at Bayreuth around 1750 which included a somewhat pedestrian pastel of Voltaire [J.687.186](#) whose author has not hitherto been identified:



It is here suggested that this might be one of the products of the pastellist who portrayed the writer in Potsdam in 1752 for Friedrich II., as mentioned by Voltaire in letter to comtesse Bentinck, 12 April 1752:

nous avons ici un peintre en pastel qui s'est avisé de me peindre. Le roi a voulu garder le portrait, tant il l'a retrouvé bien fait. Si ce peintre pouvait être assez heureux pour que vous lui accordassiez quelques heures, je vous demanderais en grâce la permission de faire tirer une copie.

We can now⁹ identify this pastellist from another letter Voltaire wrote from Potsdam to Johann Heinrich Samuel Formey, 21 March 1752:

M. de Samsoy s'est avisé de vouloir absolument me peindre. Que ne peint il ceux qui ont des visages? Je n'en ai point. Apparemment qu'il veut présenter un squelette à votre Académie.

Formey, reprinting Voltaire's letter,¹⁰ added this footnote: “Pour le peintre Samsoy, il vint alors de Pétersbourg à Berlin avec son épouse, mais il n'y fit pas un long séjour.” This identifies Voltaire's Potsdam portraitist unambiguously as the pastellist Pierre-Jean de Sompsois, and a stylistic and compositional comparison with other Sompsois pastels – notably the inconnu in the Hermitage ([J.687.187](#)) makes an attribution to him of the Bayreuth pastel reasonably convincing.

By far the most gifted of the royal pastellists was [Caroline Luise von Baden](#), as demonstrated by the wonderful recent exhibition in Karlsruhe. That makes it all the more frustrating that no trace remains of the portrait she was making of Voltaire when she wrote to him on 17 August 1759:

⁹ This identification added in an update of this essay, 29 September 2025.

¹⁰ *Souvenirs d'un citoyen*, 1789, 1, p. 248.

Votre pastel est en train. Jamais je n'ai travaillé avec plus de plaisir. Je m'abandonne à l'idée charmante que cela vous empêchera d'oublier une personne qui vous est tout acquise. C'est peut-être une illusion, mais ne me l'ôtez point, monsieur, j'en suis trop charmée.

One of La Tour's closest friends was the [abbé Huber](#), whose nephew [Jean Huber](#) was to become one of the writer's most devoted worshipers. Abandoning a military and political career, when Voltaire arrived in Geneva in 1754 he resolved to dedicate the rest of his life to illustrating his idol's life in media ranging from oil and pastel to découpage (at which Zinzendorf thought he was more capable). La Tour's 1768 will promised him the pastel of his uncle. Voltaire recommended him to Mme du Deffand (letter of 10 August 1772). In pastel, his most interesting image shows Voltaire playing chess with a friend (unlikely to be Rousseau as tradition has it, nor the père Adam whose sole duty at Ferney was "remuer de petits morceaux de bois": Huber also painted him thus, in oil), their friend Moultou reading from the great man's works (Lausanne, musée historique, [J.407.111](#)):



One of the difficulties for Voltaire portraiture was the remoteness of Geneva and Ferney from Paris, which meant that few professional portraitists made the journey (although the pastellist was probably more ready to travel than the oil painter). The identities of some of those that did are sometimes obscure, and often confused. A case in point is the curious figure of the charlatan [Mathias-Antoine de Wyl](#). Several letters describing this Lausanne pastellist sent by Voltaire to d'Argental (5 January 1758) and his niece Mme Dompierre de Fontaine (10 January 1758) have been erroneously assumed to refer to Liotard. The letters envisage that the original pastel would be sent to d'Argental and that copies would be made in oil in Paris, to be presented to friends. Voltaire initially enjoyed "jouer la comédie à mon âge, et de souffrir qu'on m'envoie de Paris des habits de Zamti et de Narbas" (10 January 1758).



He was however horrified with the result, writing to d'Argental (8 May 1758) to whom he sent the portrait [J.808.101](#) (above) by coach: “Un gros et gras Suisse, barbouilleur en pastel qu'on m'avait vanté comme un Raphaël, me vint peindre à Lausanne il y a six semaines en bonnet de nuit et en robe de chambre.” Despite this, a version [J.808.104](#) is in the Schloß Charlottenburg (how it got there is uncertain); and a pastel and chalk copy by the architect and amateur artist [Béat-Antoine-François de Hennezel](#) in 1766 reverses the direction, suggesting that a contemporary engraving may have been made. Mme Denis also apologised (7 June 1758) for allowing the de Wyl portrait to get to d'Argental: “Mettez le au grenier. C'est bien malgré moi qu'il vous est parvenu”, and announced that Liotard would do a portrait next week: “cet homme atrape la ressemblance à merveille.”

On 16 June 1758 Voltaire added another comment on “ma triste figure. Je vous jure que je suis aussi laid que mon portrait. Croiez-moy. Le peintre n'est pas bon je l'avoue, mais il n'est pas flatteur. Faites en faire mon cher ange une copie pour l'Académie. Qu'importe après tout que l'image d'un pauvre diable qui sera bientôt poussière, soit ressemblant ou non. Les portraits sont une chimère, comme tout le reste.” He does not mention a session with Liotard, and it seems most probable that Mme Denis merely reported a vague intention of trying the better artist, who had just arrived in Geneva.

It is perhaps surprising that Liotard did not make a surviving portrait of Voltaire. Perhaps the key to this is found in Graf Zinzendorf's account of his visit with Liotard and François Tronchin to Voltaire on 8 October 1764; apparently the great writer “parla de son portrait qu'il disoit pas fait pour être peint.” Presumably Voltaire relented (and the length of this post undermines his sincerity), as a small chalk drawing (not a pastel), “dessiné d'après nature en 1765”, was exhibited by the artist in Paris in 1771 (his own collection, so he hadn't persuaded Voltaire to take it).

Among the steady stream of visitors to Ferney at the end of 1764 was the young [chevalier de Boufflers](#), travelling incognito as a portraitist. Boswell was there at the same time and had eyes only for the “ingenious” artist's “most frolicsome little” model, but he also drew Voltaire, sending a copy to the prince de Ligne. The philosopher wrote to [Mme de Boufflers](#) that her son “n'a pas encore tout à fait le pinceau de Raphaël. Mais il a les grâces de l'Albane et plus d'esprit que les écoles italiennes, flamandes et françaises fondues ensemble. La Suisse n'a jamais rien vu de pareil; et je crois qu'à Paris et à Versailles il y a peu de peintres qui riment comme lui et peu de

rimeurs qui peignent aussi bien.” Voltaire mentioned his discovery in a number of letters to friends, and addressed him adulatory verses.

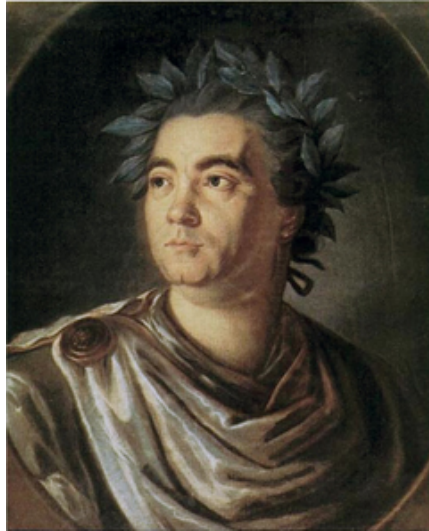
Back in Paris, Voltaire’s absence did not reduce the demand for his portraits to appear in public exhibitions. An interesting example is offered by the pastel ^{J.478.25} exhibited by [Simon-Bernard Lenoir](#) at the Académie de Saint-Luc in 1764:



If at first the attribution surprises, this may be because Lenoir was unaccustomed to working from other portraits (evidently it owes not a little to the La Tour). The pastel seems to have been commissioned by Voltaire’s friend, the actor known as Lekain: Lenoir had exhibited his portrait, “d’après nature”, in 1762; the Voltaire pastel descended through the family of the actor’s niece Geneviève-Adélaïde Cain, Mme Charles Marteau; and the preceding exhibit in the salon was Lenoir’s monumental pastel of Lekain in the role of Orosmane in Voltaire’s *Zaïre* (a [version](#) of this was recently acquired by the Louvre). So it is likely that Lenoir was the artist referred to in a contemporary letter from Voltaire to Lekain (30 June 1764):

Vous me parliez d’un jeune peintre qui est vôtre ami, je ne mérite assurément pas l’honneur qu’il veut me faire, mais j’y suis très sensible. Aureste, vous saurez qu’on ne veut point de portrait en pastel à l’académie; nous pensons tout différemment à Ferney. Je vous prie de lui dire que je suis plein de reconnaissance pour lui, et que je m’intéresse à ses talents et à ses succez.

Voltaire and Lekain came together again in the œuvre of a more obscure pastellist, [Pierre Martin Barat](#). In 1773 in Lyon he made a portrait of Lekain of which Voltaire managed to obtain a version ^{J.124.112} through d’Argental; this he kept over his bed.



Two years later Barat went to Ferney and made portraits of Voltaire [J.124.139](#) (and other members of his household):



Voltaire reported his new protégé to Catherine the Great (28 June 1775):

Un très bon peintre, nommé Barrat, arrive chez moi: il me trouve écrivant devant vôtre portrait; il me peint dans cette attitude, et il a l'audace de vouloir mettre cette fantaisie aux pieds de Vôtre Majesté Impériale. Il l'encadre et la fait partir. Je ne puis que vous supplier de pardonner à la témérité de ce peintre. C'est un homme qui d'ailleurs a le talent de faire en un quart d'heure ce que les autres ne feraient qu'en huit jours; il peindrait une galerie en moins de temps qu'on y donnerait le bal. Il a surtout l'art de faire parfaitement ressembler. Je ne lui connais de défaut que sa témérité de prendre Vôtre Majesté Impériale pour juge de ses talents. Peut-être aurez vous l'indulgence de faire placer ce tableau dans quelque coin, et vous direz en passant, Voilà celui qui m'adore pour moi même, comme les quiétistes adorent Dieu. Vos sujets sont plus heureux que moi, ils vous adorent et vous voient.

Voltaire repeated the same plea on 4 September 1775, and again apologised to the Empress in a mock-confession of 18 October 1775: "Je demande pardon d'avoir laissé partir le tableau d'un peintre de la ville de Lyon." Voltaire also ordered a version for Johann Rudolf Sinner, who, Constant d'Hermanches had told him, was collecting portraits of authors for his library. Others were less enthused; while recognising that Voltaire's face was "full of vivacity and spirit", Henry

Matthews (*Diary of an invalid*, London, 1820, p. 359) thought Lekain “a wretched performance in crayons”. There are numerous versions of the Voltaire, some even being published as by Jean Huber; it is unlikely that all are original, although the quality of the autograph repetitions must have been variable.

* * *

In this necessarily abbreviated review of the extensive body of portraits of the great man in pastel, three conclusions seem to emerge. First, as with so much portraiture of “great men”, aesthetic merit is rarely commensurate with the subject’s importance. Second, Voltaire’s exile from Paris for much of his life prevented his contact with many of the leading portraitists: the written word travelled better in those days than the painted image. Third – and there is no diplomatic way to put this – Voltaire had no eye. His visual judgment was so conspicuously unmatched to his other talents as to attract scathing comments from contemporaries: the prince de Ligne noted his “manque de goût pour les beaux-arts”,¹¹ while the great connoisseur François Tronchin commented that in these areas “il manquait sur tous ces objets de connaissances et de goût.”¹² This is abundantly evidenced in his mercurial correspondence where there is no correlation between the strength of his enthusiasms – or depths of his disappointments – and the skills of his various portraitists he encounters. There is a strong sense of what-might-have-been, but also I hope a lively picture of the great man’s responses to such a wide range of talent.

Neil Jeffares

¹¹ “Séjour chez M. de Voltaire”, *Le Musée des variétés littéraires*, 1822, t. i, p. 105.

¹² Henri Tronchin, *Le Conseiller François Tronchin et ses amis*, 1895, p. 299.