

Maurice-Quentin de La Tour and the Smile of Reason

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In 1951 Father Couturier, a Dominican friar who worked with stained glass, recorded a conversation with the great painter Henri Matisse, who told him that, for him, “Les deux plus grands portraitistes sont Rembrandt et La Tour, pour la vérité. Les autres, c’est toujours un peu du théâtre.” Perhaps that’s a rather theatrical way to start this talk, but the idea that Maurice-Quentin de La Tour stands with Rembrandt above all others for truth in portraiture will seem to many of you an extravagant claim. You might expect Rembrandt to be bracketed with Holbein, Rubens or Van Dyck. Even among French portraitists, Rigaud or David might be higher up your list.

[end slides: webcam]

But I’d like to explore why someone as eminent as Matisse might say this to a priest. There are of course plenty of reasons for the current neglect that have little to do with La Tour’s genius. Portraiture today is unfashionable, and especially so in La Tour’s case, given the elitism of his sitters – kings, powerful and wealthy men, a handful of women and just one black. And as for pastel, the medium is anathema in academic art history.

Ordinarily the best way to rehabilitate an artist would be with an exhibition. However the pandemic has had a devastating impact on museums and galleries worldwide, and in particular on temporary exhibitions. In any case pastels are too fragile to travel, so some may regard removing the temptation to move them as a silver lining. So we’re thrown back onto what we can do from home.

Some of you may have seen my previous Youtube video explaining the mechanics of my online Dictionary of pastellists and in particular the embedded catalogue raisonné of La Tour’s work. I’m going to assume you can all find your way among those resources, including the work lists, the in-depth essays on some of the pastels I’m going to mention today and the chronological table of documents. You’ll find Matisse’s comment, with a great many more opinions on La Tour, in the fascicle called Critical Fortune.

And I’m not going to attempt to give you a complete biography of the artist, who, you will know, was born in 1704 in the last years of Louis XIV’s reign and died in 1788 in the last years of his great-great-grandson’s. He was born and died in Saint-Quentin, a rather dour industrial town in the North East of France where another famous artist was educated... Henri Matisse. In La Tour’s day it was the centre of the linen trade. By Matisse’s time it was better known for sugar beet production.

La Tour escaped as soon as he could, and spent all his career in Paris, a half century more or less coinciding with the reign of Louis XV. He made one brief trip, to Holland for a few months. He never went to Italy, as all history painters wanted to do. And he only returned to Saint-Quentin when he was so demented that he fell for his brother’s promise of a trip in a hot-air balloon, spending the last few years of his life there certified insane but squabbling furiously with the local authorities over plans for the charities he founded. Invariably presented as a great local philanthropist, the

mayor and local councillors at the time viewed his apparent altruism as an attempt to buy control – a familiar theme today.

And when you read the vast literature that has grown up around La Tour, you will encounter story after story about him, more or less obviously apocryphal, certainly exaggerated out of all proportion. La Tour has been let down by his biographers, all of them greedily latching onto these legends. They derive from a eulogy given after his death by a priest who didn't know him, wasn't even the first choice to give the oration, and who derived his knowledge by talking to the locals in Saint-Quentin. They in turn knew only the stories La Tour himself had related during those last four years of his life. Thus his dementia is now solidified into hagiography.

Just to take a single example of how these stories propagated, even when they had a reliable origin: Mariette tells us of La Tour's intellectual pretensions, and how he studied Pierre Bayle's dictionary before presenting half-digested ideas in the intellectual gatherings of Enlightenment salons. Duplaquet has him as "le Peintre Philosophe; avide de tout savoir", and adds that he studied mathematics and geometry during the two years he devoted to mastering drawing, while for Bucelly d'Estrées he had "vastes connaissances en littérature, il était bon mathématicien et bon géomètre".

Louis XIV famously complained that his geographers had lost him more territory than he had gained from all his wars; so too my research on La Tour's biography seems to have resulted in rejecting quite a lot of information from these standard legends.

What have we learned?

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Well we do know a good deal more about the family. For example, it turns out that La Tour's mother, of whom virtually nothing was previously known, came from Noyon from a family of tapissiers and tailleurs. You might wonder whether that is of any interest at all: but I think the connection with weaving and the cloth trade generally helps explain the minute observation of fabrics which is central to his art. Look for example at the carpets in two of his most famous works: Mme de Pompadour in the Louvre, and the président de Rieux in the Getty.]

[slide] In case these are unfamiliar, let me show you them side by side:

In terms of sheer technical bravura, it is difficult to envisage anything to match these enormous pastels. The président de Rieux, exhibited in the Salon of 1741, stunned the critics with its achievement: this was, after all, "just" a pastel, but the miracle planted La Tour firmly centre stage, where he was to remain for thirty years, with a stream of commissions from the royal family, the old nobility, the *noblesse de robe* and the *nouveaux riches* financiers – the most powerful, the wealthiest, the most famous and the best informed sitters of ancien régime France.

I am of course jumping ahead – except that this Shandean talk isn't an attempt to supplant the linear narrative in my online material, which is a far better way to learn about La Tour, with nice pictures you can view properly and at your leisure. All I'm hoping to do here is to point out a few surprises you'll encounter if you do go through my catalogue.

[genealogy]

Returning to the family, of La Tour's eight siblings only four survived to adulthood; none married. Two of his brothers also broke away from this family background. You might assume this was through the artist's influence at court, but I don't think that is so. His elder brother Charles had obtained a position as *directeur des vivres en Italie* by 1736, before the artist had any such power. Charles was sent to Corsica for several years in 1738 in a senior capacity, and he made enough money for him to invest jointly with Maurice a huge amount – some 80,000 livres – in a property development which went wrong and led to protracted litigation. You can find an account of this hitherto overlooked incident in my documentation.

La Tour also had a younger half-brother, Jean-François, who was much better known than Charles since the collection at Saint-Quentin was his bequest. His career in the élite regiment of *gendarmes bourguignons* was hitherto rather obscure, but we now know that he fought at Fontenoy as early as 1745 and became an officer, and *chevalier de Saint-Louis*, 21 years later. He retired in 1778, returning to Saint-Quentin where six years later he would take charge of his brother.

Since none of the siblings married, there were no direct descendants. But a group of La Tour's pictures and papers passed through relations of his step-mother, the Duliège, to a certain Flore-Joséphine Warluzèle, whose connection I only unravelled a couple of years ago. Unfortunately although they were bought by the historian and La Tour biographer Charles Desmaze and presented to Saint-Quentin, they perished in the First World War – although miraculously the main collection of La Tour's studio survived, being seized and exhibited by the Germans in an episode that continues to divide opinion.

[image: Dupouch] To return to the pastelist. It's perhaps surprising that it was not until 2002 that his contract of apprenticeship was located in the Archives nationales, by François Marandet. This showed that just after his fifteenth birthday he was apprenticed for six years to a minor painter called Claude Dupouch, not as previously thought to an equally obscure painter called Jean-Jacques Spoede: perhaps Mariette misheard information given orally. Confusingly while Spoede occasionally used pastel, Dupouch does not seem to have done so. However, unusually for so obscure a painter, Dupouch was noble. He was also well connected in the art world, to the families of artists such as Oudry, Rigaud and the Lemoyne sculptors.

Mariette tells us about La Tour's encounter with the elderly Premier peintre Louis de Boullongne who recognised his raw talent. The story is repeated by La Tour's friend Marie Fel in a later letter in which she cryptically refers to “son arrivée à Paris, sa vie dissipée” – probably a reference to one of the best known stories about La Tour, namely that he broke his apprenticeship, returned to Saint-Quentin and got his cousin pregnant. The incident did indeed occur, when he was just 18, with his cousin Anne Bougier, an illiterate knitter of stockings. The infant didn't survive, but Anne was tried for concealing her pregnancy, an offence treated as infanticide under the rigorous laws of the day. She received only a modest fine, possibly because she admitted only to a small difference in age although she was in fact nearly five years older than La Tour. Her own mother had been just 12 when she married. What I think is clear is that the episode scarred La Tour deeply,

and relief for women in childbirth was prominent among the charitable causes he promoted towards the end of his life.

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As is said of almost every pastellist of this era, La Tour was supposed to have devoted himself to pastel following Rosalba Carriera's visit to Paris in 1720. There is nothing to suggest they met; but at some stage he made two not very accomplished copies after her best-known pastels. Here's one that shows that he hadn't quite got it when compared with the original in the Louvre. The second one may have been copied around 1732 when it belonged to the family of Louis de Boullongne.

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Of rather greater importance I think is La Tour's exposure to the work of French pastellists at this time. La Tour would surely have known the great Vivien pastels belonging to the Académie (among them this pastel of Robert de Cotte on the left), and may well have had access to the numerous Vivien pastels of French artists. Even if the influence is undocumented, visually La Tour's approach to portraiture (as we can see in his pastel of Orry) is far closer to Vivien than to Rosalba.

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But the big breakthrough in La Tour's career came with his portrait of Voltaire. That Voltaire should commission his portrait from a virtually unknown artist may have been less pre-ordination than the rather banal coincidence that La Tour, based in the hôtel Jabach, was a close neighbour of the abbé Moussinot, Voltaire's agent in Paris. The sittings took place in April 1735; the portrait, which is lost, the two préparations, the numerous copies and dozens of different engravings transformed La Tour's reputation.

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A minute point was picked up in the course of a very thorough investigation by Hervé Cabezas, who looked after the musée Antoine-Lécuyer at Saint-Quentin and, I should take this opportunity to note, has been extremely helpful in sharing La Tour documentation particularly as it relates to that collection. In a letter from Voltaire to his agent about repetitions, he refers to "la copiste". Sadly no name has come down to us, but the article alone tells us that she was female; that Voltaire probably knew who she was (or he would have assumed the copiste was male, as we would); and that La Tour already had an active business requiring the employment of copyists.

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I want then to pursue two strands of this. The question of copies is one I'll return to. But first I want to tackle one of the most important themes in La Tour's œuvre: the self-portrait. I'm prompted because I think there's an undeniable similarity between his preparation for Voltaire and one of his own self-portraits. Indeed it is arguable that La Tour had a habit of capturing genetic traits and projecting them onto more than one sitter: we'll come back to the the question of accuracy of representation.

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But the self-portraits range over the period from 1737 to perhaps 1770 and occupy a central place in his œuvre. Perhaps surprisingly they never show him working with pastel crayons. Nothing better illustrates the difficulties of establishing a chronology for La Tour's work than this series: to take the one on the right alone, one recent author has argued for 1737, another for c.1740 while most sources

accept Xavier Salmon's verdict that it belongs to the period 1755–60. The point is that there is no consensus, even when we know the age of the sitter, which is one of the reasons why, for practical utility, my catalogue is not arranged chronologically. Even if I were able to get the sequence right, it would be harder for you to find anything.

La Tour's were not the first self-portraits in art (or even in pastel), any more than Rousseau's *Confessions* were the first autobiography in literature; but the degree of self-obsession in both surely reflected the mood of the time: the ultimate expression of the *ens representans*, in Arthur Danto's phrase: the man who defines himself through making representations. But the obsessive search for an accuracy he never found satisfactory calls to mind another Latin phrase. Like Ovid's Narcissus, "et placet et video; sed quod videoque placetque, non tamen invenio" – "I am charmed, and I see; but what I see and what charms me I cannot find", before finally realising: "iste ego sum." "It's me!" is of course the message of all serial self-portraitists.

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While we're here it's time to broach one of the trickiest areas in cataloguing La Tour: the question of repetitions. Voltaire's was not the only portrait that was duplicated, and the degree of La Tour's involvement often highly debatable. This is particularly the case with the collection at Saint-Quentin where pupils were set pieces to copy at the drawing school he founded. Most of these later copies are easily discoverable because the nature of pastiche is to include sentiments and expressions that are anachronistic, and it is the task of the connoisseur to detect those lapses in taste. Sometimes the give-away is so blindingly obvious, as in this chimera in Saint-Quentin, sticking Maurice de Saxe's head onto the marquis de Voyer's body, that no one has spotted it until I did embarrassingly recently.

Often more conventional copies can be confirmed, or sometimes detected, by elements of the physical construction which depart from the traditional assembly of an eighteenth century pastel. You can find a lot of information on this in my Prolegomena, so that you can expect with a French pastel of this period that the paper will have been pasted to a canvas (or "marouflé sur toile") already mounted on a rigid frame called a strainer. When you find a keyed stretcher instead, or a canvas stamped with an 19th century suppliers' mark, or no canvas at all but a modern board, your suspicions are confirmed.

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But the problem with La Tour is that he often departs from convention, in all sorts of ways. For example, quite a number of the pastels turn out not to be "marouflé sur toile" at all, but to have been executed on paper pasted to cardboard, some of them even hacked irregularly to fit into new frames. If we'd found a single example, we'd have been tempted to call "fake", but there are so many even in the Saint-Quentin collection alone that we have to accept this as within his practice.

Even more astonishing is his bonkers idea of protecting pastels by encapsulating them between two sheets of glass. Most of these have been discarded by later conservators assuming they couldn't possibly be original, but by finding several examples as well as the account given of the technique I was able to show that these were original.

So construction alone won't decide the issue in many cases.

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Let us now look at one of the most famous self-portraits, the so-called *Autoportrait au jabot* at Amiens, the version on the right, with the more modest version in the musée Cognacq-Jay on the left. It is the Amiens version that has been universally reproduced not merely as the primary version of this portrait, but as the quintessence of La Tour used as frontispiece for innumerable La Tour publications.

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It's even chosen in two of the most important works on pastel – Ratouis de Limay's 1946 book and the 1927 exhibition catalogue. Indeed Ratouis de Limay called it "magistrale...avec un virtuosité que le pastelliste a rarement dépassé."

I suspect most people assumed that since La Tour was an honorary academician at Amiens and the work was there, it must have come from him. Wildenstein gives only a garbled account of its provenance, but when I examined this closely

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I discovered that the Amiens picture had belonged to the abbé Mangenot who had in fact disclosed in the *Mercure* that what he had been given was not the original La Tour had sent to the salon, but a copy by one of his pupils, Jean-Gabriel Montjoye: see the footnote.

Sometimes it's not the eye of the connoisseur (although I'd had some concerns about this one before, I'd kept them to myself in the face of universal acceptance), nor any kind of scientific investigation, but diligent archival work on dull documents that provides the real security in art history. Too many practitioners disdain this, or haven't the stomach for it, and favour the development of abstract theory which for me is a far less reliable approach to understanding art.

[image]

Perhaps I should mention too the role of overlooked documents in another case, despite even greater fame and even greater scholarly attention: the famous portrait of Mme de Pompadour that we saw at the beginning. Until I read them carefully about four years ago, La Tour scholars had largely ignored the numerous references to La Tour in the correspondence of Mme de Graffigny with her friend Devaux.

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For example, writing of the Salon de 1742, she picked out La Tour pastels as masterpieces, "surtout le sien, peint avec un chapeau à point d'Espagne, detroussé d'un côté, qui lui fait un ombre sur le visage. C'est un morceau parfait: je ne pouvois m'en arracher." The anonymous critic in the *Mercure* picked out this "portrait inimitable de l'Auteur, dans le goût du Rimbrand." Six years later she was horrified when she asked him about the piece: it had been intended for the Uffizi, he told her, but he had foolishly shown it to Louis XV, whose enthusiasm was not what La Tour hoped for; so he tore it to pieces.

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(It is notable that this is the portrait Diderot later mentions as having been shown in the famous confrontation between La Tour's self-portrait and Perronneau's; subsequent authors have all

assumed it was the Amiens autoportrait au jabot that was shown in 1750.)

At the same encounter (in 1748), Graffigny asked to see La Tour's large pastel of Mme de Pompadour, which had already (earlier than most researchers had known) become famous. La Tour told her that he had also destroyed that ("Il l'a encore brulé parce qu'il avoit donné un faux trait"). I doubt if La Tour should be taken literally – when he told Mariette that he had burnt his portrait after attempting unsuccessfully to fix it, Mariette didn't completely believe him.

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The pastel now in the Louvre was not exhibited until 1755; it shows the addition of a new head on a separate sheet, bizarrely covering a hole in the original canvas, and as I've argued at some length in my essay on the work, Mme de Graffigny's testimony offers an alternative and more plausible explanation to the state of that picture than any previously advanced.

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La Tour's willingness thus to destroy his work (even if it had reached an advanced stage) out of a sense of perfectionism was legendary at the time. Here are two more famous examples in the Louvre. As I pointed out in my review of the Louvre catalogue, the 1793 inventory noted that, in view of the damage inflicted by the artist, "on peut compter que les glaces." Three years later the next inventory recorded the two as "sans bordure." Astonishingly the marquis de Chennevières contemplated having a modern pastellist repaint them.

In many ways La Tour was the precursor of the tortured artist of the nineteenth century. This quest for perfection may arguably have led to mental illness: when, whether and in what form would themselves require a full lecture. Duplaquet noted, straightforwardly, that "Cette sévérité met un prix infini à ses Portraits"; it is possible to read this with modern art-world cynicism as an early example of an artist manipulating the market value of his work. La Tour certainly did have a keen sense of the importance of the great artist in society which would shock no one today.

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But while we've got Voltaire and the Amiens self-portrait in our heads, I want to touch on La Tour's expressions: something which is in many ways the main theme of this talk, as hinted in my subtitle. Those of you of a certain age will recognise my having borrowed the phrase "The Smile of Reason" from an episode in Kenneth Clark's classic television series *Civilisation*, where it was the title of Episode 10, on the Enlightenment. In the book there is only a passing reference to La Tour, in connection with salonnières:

we know exactly what they looked like because French artists like Perronneau and Maurice-Quentin de La Tour portrayed them without flattery, but with a penetrating eye for their subtlety of mind. Only in a highly civilised society could ladies have preferred this kind of likeness to the glossy fakes of fashionable portraiture.

In the film, although La Tour's name doesn't pass his lips (and make only a minute), his pastels do appear in a short clip which I think you should see for yourselves:

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Note the appearance of the Amiens self-portrait. La Tour's portrait of Fontenelle is known only from a rather wretched print, so Clark was right to show us the Rigaud instead. But in the slightly arch story about, I'm surprised he didn't tell us that "interviewer" was Mme Geoffrin. I'm less surprised he didn't tell us that his title – now my title – was borrowed from Jean-Raoul Carré's 1932 monograph on *La Philosophie de Fontenelle: ou, Le Sourire de la raison*.

But I think we can should a little more about La Tour's faces and how he set out to convey that "subtlety of mind" that Clark wrote about.

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One simple feature is the use of accessories. Instead of the pets or porte-crayons favoured by his rivals, it is the book that seems to take on special significance in La Tour's work. It is often of music, sometimes handsomely bound (Orry, with his arms prominently displayed: the bibliophile), in the process of actually being read (uniquely, abbé Huber), or being immediately reflected upon (Mlle Ferrand: the savante), or furtively consulted (the nun might be expected to be reading a work of devotion rather than what turns out on close inspection to be a musical score).

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It can be big (Dumont le Romain) or small (Voltaire); open (Laidenguive) or with just a finger holding a place (Orry).

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Mme Rouillé and the abbé Huber have additional books in piles; Mme de Pompadour has them in neat upright rows and flat on the table; the président de Rieux has paper book marks to show that his volumes are in use. Mlle Sallé's are still in the book case, practically invisible – but nothing in a La Tour portrait is unseen

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(except, nearly, the folio in veau fauve, edge on, hidden behind the bust of Louis XV leaning on the mirror – and so unseen twice – in the Dauphine and her son). Many of the volumes are dog's-eared: this visually gives the illusion of reality, while symbolically denoting the directness of the sitter's engagement: these are working materials, not unopened presentation volumes for show alone. While Mlle Ferrand's copy of Newton has been adapted by La Tour from the real edition (as he similarly enlarges some of Mme de Pompadour's volumes to give them greater visual presence), his depiction of the score in Marie Fel's copy of her brother's seventh cantatille is accurate.

The implication is clear enough: La Tour is the painter of the intellect, of minds that are at home among the volumes that epitomise their interests.

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Even when not explicitly bibliocentric an even rarer quality of La Tour's portraits is their ability to capture, or at least convey, the sitter's intelligence. It is notable that Lavater chose a La Tour pastel (of Paradis de Moncrif, wretchedly engraved) to illustrate this, adding this commentary which may be loosely translated as:

No one would easily relegate this face to the class of idiots. Nobody will fail to recognize the fine man of the world, the man of taste, whether in the whole picture, or in the eye, especially in the nose, also in the mouth.

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So how does this fit with Clark's smile? In a way this sits oddly with the focus on intelligence: in other artists' hands the two can be contradictory. From Champfleury to Matisse, La Tour's smiles have defied analysis: are they the essence of his portraiture, or are they artificial betrayals? Ernst Gombrich contrasted his approach with Roger de Piles's advice to painters which emphasised that "when the sitter puts on a smiling air, the eyes close": La Tour defied this, leaving the eyes open:

And yet the very combination of slightly contradictory features, of a serious gaze with a shadow of a smile results in a subtle instability, an expression hovering between the pensive and the mocking that both intrigues and fascinates. True, the game is not without its risk, and this perhaps explains the degree to which the effect froze into a formula in the eighteenth century portraits of polite society.

La Tour is also the master of showing (often only the tiniest glimpse) teeth, a phenomenon in eighteenth century portraiture that has received some attention recently. There are numerous smiles with visible teeth in earlier portraiture, from Boucher to Perronneau and Mme Roslin, but as Colin Jones notes, La Tour made "numerous subtly animated portraits, in which the teeth floated tantalisingly in and out of focus". He brackets the dental exposure in his Democritian self-portrait with those by "odd-ball artists" such as Liotard and Ducreux. In fact a much more subtle example is this portrait of Duval de l'Épinoy where La Tour employs a trick whose magic is only revealed *de visu*: it does not work from a photograph, however high the resolution. As the pastel is approached, the expression suddenly changes – at a distance of about one metre – from a wry, quizzical, almost cynical ambiguity, to one of pure pleasure. This is effected by the inclusion of the sitter's two top front teeth in the slightly opened mouth: they are virtually, but not completely, invisible in the pastel, but are not perceptible at a distance or in reproduction. The trick was used by other artists – notably by Vigée Le Brun, one of whose hallmarks it became, but never with quite so much subtlety.

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Among other examples are Mmes Dangeville; Le Comte; the so-called Inconnue no. 2; Roussel; and of course Manelli, where arguably La Tour went too far. One of the critics couldn't help but laugh with the Italian singer appearing in Paris in Pergolesi's *Maître de Musique*, while Gautier d'Agoty positively disapproved of hanging the picture beside portraits of serious philosophers. Of course Kenneth Clark explains the problem: Manelli had escaped the Smile of Reason and had started to make HaHa.

Perhaps that's a good note to end on.