

# La Tour, *Le président de Rieux*

NEIL JEFFARES



## [Maurice-Quentin de La Tour](#)

Le président Gabriel Bernard de RIEUX (1687–1745) [Zoomify](#)

Pastel on 16 sheets of paper, 200.7x149.9 cm c.1741

Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. [94.PC.39](#)

**PROVENANCE:** Le sujet; son fils, Anne-Gabriel-Henri Bernard de Rieux; desc.: duc de Clermont-Tonnerre, château de Glisolles, Eure, –.XII.1918; René Gimpel/Nathan Wildenstein; acqu. Nicolas Ambatielos 1919, £48,000; reclaimed on his bankruptcy; acqu. Maurice de Rothschild 1931; Rosenberg-Bernstein; seized ERR c.1940, ERR card BoR4; Führermuseum, Linz-Nr 1493; restituted 1946, Mü-Nr 7558, Edmond de Rothschild 1971; acqu. 1994

**EXHIBITIONS:** Salon de 1741, no. 118; Paris 1927a, no. 34, pl. xxvii-37; Paris 1934, no. 69; Los Angeles 2011, no. 90, fig. 48; Los Angeles 2018

**LITERATURE:** Mariette 1851–60, III, pp. 66–78; Desmaze 1854, p. 34; Champfleury 1855, p. 95; Dréolle de Nodon 1856, pp. 59, 123; E. & J. de Goncourt 1867, pp. 165, 171, 176; Desmaze 1874, p. 65; Régnier 1888, n.r.; Harduin de Grosville 1892, n.r.; Dilke 1899, p. 165; Fleury 1904, p. 52, “le plus grand effort pictural de De La Tour”; Tourneux 1904a, p. 40; Thiébauld-Sisson 1905; Fourcaud 1908, pp. 222f; Keim 1911, p. 29; Alfassa 1919, pp. 131, 136ff, repr.; Gillet 1919; Wildenstein 1919a; Wildenstein 1919b; Archives des musées nationaux, sér. D 5, cabinet des dessins; Réau 1925, pp. 75f, pl. 56;

Heywood 1927, p. 248; Ratouis de Limay 1927; Vitry 1927; B&W 427, fig. 35, 37, 40; Ratouis de Limay 1946, pl. xi/15; Florisoon 1948, p. 77; Francastel 1955, I, p. 139; Gimpel 1963, pp. 90, 99, 126, 169, 341; Hargreaves-Mawdsley 1963, pl. 8; Thuillier & Châtelet 1964, p. 193 repr.; Bury 1971, pl. 14; Walker 1983, p. 190; Monnier 1984, repr.; Richards 1984; Wakefield 1984; Pons 1987, fig. 2; Allen 1988; Debrie 1991, pp. 30, 61, 76; Châtelet 1992, repr. cl. p. 66; Monnier 1992, p. 165; Nancy Yocco, acquisition condition report for the Getty, 17.iv.1994 (unpublished); “Acquisitions 1994”, *J. Paul Getty Museum journal*, XXIII, 1995, pp. 6, 94 repr.; Wilson & al. 1996, pp. 53ff, fig. 7H; Fredericksen & al. 1997, no. 45 repr.; Hudson 1997, p. 82f; Hudson 1997, p. 82f; Debrie 1998; Debrie & Salmon 2000, p. 111, ill. 48, 49, 50; Shelley 2002; Brunel 2004b, p. 53 repr., p. 52, detail repr.; La Tour 2004a, p. 122, fig. 1; Salmon 2004a, fig. 3; Fumaroli 2005, p. 30 repr.; New York 2005, pp. 55 repr., 72, 220; Перова 2006, p. 14 repr., as in Louvre; Rosenberg 2006, p. 130 repr.; Simon 2007, p. 35 repr.; Cabezas & al. 2008, p. 36, detail repr.; Tarabra 2008, p. 101 repr.; Aurcchio 2009, fig. 5; Gimpel 2011, pp. 115, 127, 163, 223, 264, 494; Humphrey Wine, review of Los Angeles 2011, *Burlington magazine*, CLIV, .ix.2012, pp. 644f n.r.; Burns & Saunier 2014, p. 73 repr.; Prat 2017, fig. 396; Washington 2017, p. 2 repr.; Prenant 2017, p. 7 repr.; Jeffares 2017s, fig. 1; Jeffares 2018m; Hoisington 2019, fig. 1; Wunsch 2022, fig. 2; Liotard 2023, fig. 20; Wunsch 2024, figs. 29, 30, 31, 32; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [J.46.2722](#)

**GENEALOGY:** [Bernard](#)

**N**O MORE SPECTACULAR work exists in the history of pastel than this monumental portrait of the président de Rieux, exhibited by La Tour at the Salon de 1741, no. 118, where the livret recorded “Un Tableau en pastel de 6 pieds 2 pouces d’hauteur, sur 4

pieds 8 pouces de large, représentant M. le Président de Rieu, en Robe rouge, assis dans un Fauteuil, tenant un Livre dont il va tourner le feuillet, avec les attributs qui composent un Cabinet, comme Bibliothèque, Par-à-vent, Table, & un Tapis de Turquie sous les pieds.”

An anonymous contemporary critic<sup>1</sup> immediately recognised the extraordinary significance of this work:

Dans l'enfoncement qu'on trouve ensuite est placé un grand Pastel qui est le Portrait en pié de M. le President de Rieux dans son Cabinet. Il est assis dans un Fauteuil de Velours Cramoisi, adossé à un Paravent, et ayant sur sa droite une Table couverte d'un Tapis de Velours bleu, enrichi d'une Crépine d'or. Entre les objets qui chargent cette Table, on remarque comme inimitables une Tabatiere de ces Maubois entrelassés et une Plume un peu jaspée d'encre sur ses barbes.

Quant à la figure, elle est d'un ressemblance qui passe toute expression, toute imagination même, et d'une Etude qui tient du Prodige. Elle est terminée avec le dernier soin, et a cependant un air de liberté qui en déguise le travail. Elle est vêtue d'une Simarre noire et d'une Robe rouge; l'un se recree: la Peruque; l'autre: le Rabat; les plus somptueux sont jaloux des Manchetes. On sent la legereté du Cheveu, la finesse de la Trame du Linge et l'Aprêt de l'Ouvriere, la délicatesse et le détail immense de la Dentelle. C'est un ouvrage miraculeux, c'est de la Saxe même, il n'est pas possible que ce ne soit que du crayon. Ce M. La Tour a les secrets de toutes les Manufactures.

Tout ce que les gens les plus difficiles trouvent à réduire dans ce grand morceau roule sur les accidens. C'est que le Paravent est trop près du Fauteuil: il ne fait pas bien son effet. Une Table couverte les choque: ils disent qu'un Bureau à pié de Biche doneroit plus de dégagement, et n'auroit pas mis tant d'étofe l'une sur l'autre. Enfin, malgré ces legeres circonstances, ce Tableau sera toujours un chef-d'œuvre en son espèce; et pour vous donner une idée de son Prix, on prétend que la Glace et le Cadre coutent seuls cinquante louis.



Figure 1

The frame (fig. 1) is indeed spectacular, thought to be from a design by Caffieri.<sup>2</sup> Above all it adds to the sense that in this work La Tour has taken pastel to a new level. Described by Mariette as “ouvrage de la plus longue haleine et qu'on n'en avoit point vu au pastel de pareille taille” (an observation which may not have been strictly correct, as Vivien's 1706 pastel of *Max Emanuel devant la ville de Mons* is marginally taller), the sheer scale remains breathtaking today, not least because of the practical considerations imposed by the size on the manufacture of glass and the joining of the sheets of paper (which La Tour ingeniously cut to follow the outline of the robes).<sup>3</sup> This is not a work that can be dismissed as dainty frivolity – the pejorative connotation still borne by the word “pastel”. While La Tour uses colours of the greatest subtlety, arranged in a spectrum from the celadon vases on top of the bookcase and the delicate tones of the screen to the Turkey carpet in the foreground, he takes care to fill the middle of the space with the sitter's judicial robes in blacks and reds of a

saturation which is not bettered in oil, and a surface texture which pastel alone can attain. No opportunity is omitted to underline the wealth, power and intellect of its subject, and it is well worth analysing how and why this is achieved.

<sup>1</sup> Anon., *Lettre à Monsieur de Poirsson-Chamarande, lieutenant général au baillage et siège présidial de Chaumont en Bassigny, au sujet des tableaux exposés au Salon du Louvre*, s.l., s.d. [1741], also in *Nouveaux Amusemens du cœur et de l'esprit*, XI, pp. 1–28. The original orthography is preserved.

<sup>2</sup> The suggestion was made by René Gimpel in his *Journal*, 4.X.1918; there is however no documentation for this. Pons 1987 discusses the frame in some detail.

<sup>3</sup> The pastel is on blue paper, of which there seem to be several layers, mounted on canvas, tacked round the sides to a keyed stretcher (the earliest known example of the use of a stretcher in place of a strainer on a pastel). I am grateful to Michelle Sullivan at the Getty for sharing information on the construction (2019).

Gabriel Bernard, comte de Rieux, seigneur de Passy, de Glissoles (1687–1745), président de la deuxième chambre des Enquêtes au parlement de Paris, was the younger son of Samuel Bernard (1651–1739), reputedly the richest banker in France.<sup>4</sup> Samuel Bernard’s spectacular ascent to such heights (his father was a mere portrait painter, and he commenced his career as a merchant-drupe) inevitably incurred the disapproval of courtiers such as Saint-Simon, who recounts with glee how Louis XIV, in desperate need of money to finance his wars, managed to avoid a formal reception of the financier by staging a chance encounter at Marly.<sup>5</sup> Bernard was ennobled by letters patent only in 1699, the year in which he commissioned the imposing pastel by Vivien now at Rouen. Three years later he was made a chevalier de l’Ordre de Saint-Michel, and in 1725 his ascendancy was completed by his being made comte de Coubert. This too was marked by another of the most striking late baroque portraits – the full length painting (1726) by Rigaud at Versailles (fig. 2). La Tour, in the commission to paint the son, would have been as conscious as his client of the need to produce a supreme masterpiece, and there are indeed echoes of the Rigaud in the composition, and even such details as the inclusion of a globe by which Rigaud hinted at the origin of Bernard’s vast wealth, the Compagnie des Indes.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2

Bernard’s eldest child Madeleine was of marriageable age by 1701, when the family’s social position could aim no higher than Jacques Hardouin Mansart, son of the surintendant des bâtiments. Some years later the eldest son Samuel-Jacques Bernard de Coubert was married into an old but obscure family (his children did rather better, Louise marrying Lamoignon de Bâville in 1731). In 1717 Gabriel himself married the sister of his father’s second wife, from a family of old nobility; but after her death, two years later, he made a much more spectacular alliance, to Suzanne-Marie-Henriette de Boulainvilliers (1696–1776), daughter of the impoverished Henri, comte de Boulainvilliers, ironically an arch-reactionary (perhaps outflanking even Saint-Simon) who believed that the purity of the aristocracy was endangered by the French monarchy, and that the noblesse de robe, created by the delegation of legal powers to the bourgeoisie, was a “monstruosité”.

These alliances continued in the next generation, and their purpose was succinctly summarised by a contemporary: “Le mariage de M. le marquis de Mirepoix avec la fille de M. le président Bernard de Rieux, doit se terminer incessamment. Les emplettes se font par Samuel Bernard, c’est-à-dire avec une magnificence convenable à une fille de finance qui se métamorphose en femme de condition.”<sup>7</sup> Mathieu Marais commented in a letter to president Bouhier (12.III.1733): “La folie de la France est d’entrer dans la famille (ou dans la caisse) de M. Bernard, et voilà encore M. le marquis de Mirepoix qui épouse la petite de Rieux, âgée de onze ans, jolie comme un ange, fille du président et de la demoiselle de Boulainvilliers: elle ne risque que d’être duchesse et d’avoir tous les biens de la maison de Lévi.” She died three years later in childbirth.

The pastel may be seen as a part of de Rieux’s own metamorphosis, as of course did his career as a parlementaire. Commencing as a conseiller (1714) at the deuxième chambre des Enquêtes, he was promoted to président in 1727. In 1717 he was given the lands of the comté de Rieux

<sup>4</sup> For a general biography of Bernard and his son, see Clermont-Tonnerre 1914.

<sup>5</sup> Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, éd. Yves Coirault, Paris, 1984, III, pp. 133f. Saint-Simon himself borrowed heavily from Bernard, whose will (Clermont-Tonnerre, *op. cit.*, p. 130) shows an outstanding amount of 200,000 livres.

<sup>6</sup> Such was the dominance of these images that when de Rieux’s own son, the marquis de Boulainvilliers, was portrayed by Louis-Michel Van Loo in 1758, many of the same elements recur (New York 2005, no. 83 repr.).

<sup>7</sup> *Revue rétrospective*, Paris, VI, 1836, p. 266. The bride was just five days past her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday at the time of the marriage.

appropriated by his father from a defaulting debtor, and from then on was known by that title.<sup>8</sup> As the accessories in this portrait indicate, de Rieux was not merely a magistrate, but also a man of the highest culture. Although Humphrey Wine has argued that the books shown in the pastel may only have been those required for his official duties, to avoid the opprobrium attracted by financiers who kept libraries only for display, de Rieux formed a significant collection (of which the catalogue was published after his death), including valuable manuscripts (perhaps the large folio he holds in the pastel), the works of Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and a section on “l’art du dessin, de la peinture & de la gravure” indicating that he was an informed client.<sup>9</sup>

La Tour’s masterpiece has also to be seen as the ultimate in luxury objects, a fashion statement in line with de Rieux’s social pretensions, which (as with his elder brother) certainly involved conspicuous consumption at the highest level. Of course such complex matters had many sides in a society as sophisticated and complex as that of Ancien Régime France. There was also a competitive element to them, just as there was in the case of fashionable mistresses, as emerge from the pages of the police reports of the era. The dancer Mlle Le Duc<sup>10</sup> set so high a price after the death of her protector, the marquis de Vassé, that de Rieux alone could afford her – at a cost of some 80,000 livres in jewellery, silver and furniture. Mlle Le Duc’s charms also attracted the comte de Clermont, a prince of the blood, and a thoroughly nasty individual from whose clutches the more famous dancer la Camargo had only recently escaped. De Rieux had to cede his mistress, but was furious, and carried out an intricate programme of revenge by showering La Camargo with vastly expensive presents. To no avail: Le Duc is thought to have married Clermont secretly around 1765.

This lifestyle required de Rieux to be closer to Paris than either the territories of Rieux or of Glissolles, which he inherited on his father’s death in 1739. That year he purchased the splendid château de Passy from his sister-in-law. Here he entertained lavishly, and among the guests was Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, to whom was written the following note by another habitué:<sup>11</sup>

De Paris, ce 30 août 1742.

Si vous voulés vous trouver, ce soir, Monsieur, à l’opera comique, comme nous sommes convenus hier soir, je vous meneray a Passy, et je vous rameneray, après le souper.

Je suis charmé d’avoir cette occasion de vous assurer de la considération avec laquelle je suis, Monsieur, votre très humble et très obéissant serviteur

Le comte d’Egmont

Afin que nous puissions nous trouver plus sûrement, le rendés vous era sur le théâtre, après la piece.

La Tour’s relationship with de Rieux was established as early as 1738, when he was commissioned to portray the niece of the magistrate’s wife, Mlle de La Fontaine-Solare. The Getty pastel was complete in time for the 1741



Figure 3

<sup>8</sup> Gaspard des Monstiers de Mérinville forfeited the territory in 1707, but in 1739 had the judgment overturned and resumed possession of the title and lands; the président de Rieux however continued to be known by that name, although appending that of his wife, Boulainvilliers.

<sup>9</sup> *Catalogue des livres de la bibliothèque de feu Monsieur le président Bernard de Rieux*, Paris, 1747; it included some 3314 items, a number of which were multiple volumes. The principal categories were religion; law; philosophy, natural history, science and the arts; literature; and history. Among the collection was an early set of Vasari, a 1531 manuscript of Servetus (no. 468) sold for 799 livres. See also Renée Simon, *Henry de Boulainvilliers*, The Hague, 1975, p. viii.

<sup>10</sup> The story is told by Barbier, *Chronique de la régence et du règne de Louis XV (1718–1763)*, Paris, 1858, III, pp. 341ff, IV.1742, and, in more detail, in Jules Cousin, *Le Comte de Clermont*, Paris, 1867, I, pp. 156ff.

<sup>11</sup> Cited Clermont-Tonnerre 1914, p. 173; B&W, p. 35.

salon, but may have been executed in 1740 or even 1739. Evidently again satisfied, de Rieux soon after commissioned a portrait of his wife, née Suzanne-Marie-Henriette de Boulainvilliers (1696–1776), en habit de bal (Paris, musée Cognacq-Jay; fig. 3), which was exhibited in the Salon the following year. On a slightly smaller scale, this second work is another of the pastellist's great masterpieces.

La Camargo herself was the subject of a well-known *La Tour préparation*. This was his world too. After de Rieux's death<sup>12</sup> in 1745, Passy was inherited by his son, the marquis de Boulainvilliers, but soon after was sold to the fermier général Le Riche de La Pouplinière; *La Tour's* portrait of his wife, from around this date, is another celebrated icon.

Among the smaller footnotes about the possible influence of this pastel, one notes that de Rieux's secretary at the time it was being made, one Claude Maucourt, later turned to art and became a pastellist.

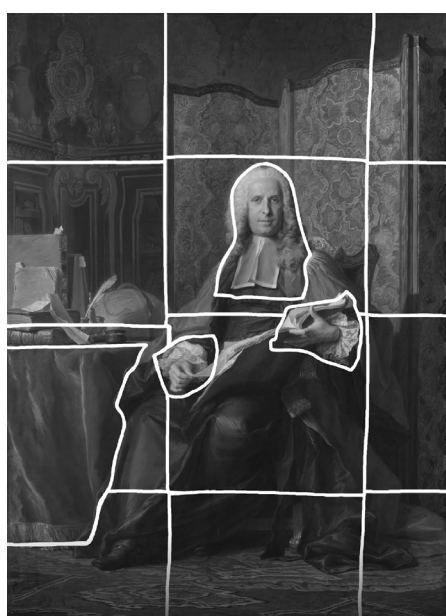


Figure 4

The history of the work illustrates the vicissitudes of *La Tour's* art. It descended in the sitter's family at the château de Glisolles, near Évreux, until finally sold by the duc de Clermont-Tonnerre, in 1918, when it was bought by the leading dealers of the day, René Gimpel<sup>13</sup> and Nathan Wildenstein in partnership (and published by Wildenstein's son Georges in 1919). There, in January 1919, it was seen by Georges Clemenceau, who proclaimed "c'est le plus beau pastel que j'aie vu...il devrait rester en France." It was also the most expensive, and although offered to the state later that year, it was rejected.<sup>14</sup> The Greek shipowner Nicolas Ambatielos purchased it for £48,000, but was unable to complete the purchase as he ran into severe financial problems, following his legal case with the British government. The pastel was reclaimed on his bankruptcy. Another twelve years were to pass before it found a suitable home – that of Maurice de Rothschild in 1931 (where the photograph in fig. 1 was taken). But,

along with much of his collection, it was seized by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, around 1940,<sup>15</sup> with the intention of being sent to Hitler's Führermuseum in Linz.<sup>16</sup> It was repatriated after the war, and returned to the family, where it graced the château de Pregny. Maurice de Rothschild's son, Edmond Adolphe, a banker in Geneva, offered *Le président de Rieux* to the Louvre, but once again France was unable to afford it, and thus, in 1994, it became the crowning glory in the magnificent collection of pastels at the Getty.

There in 2018 it was exhibited together with a reconstruction<sup>18</sup> demonstrating the montage of the 16 visible sheets of blue paper (fig. 4); head and hands are each on separate sheets. There are further layers of blue paper between the primary support and the canvas. This is large enough to have required a vertical seam along the whole height, located about a quarter the way across

<sup>12</sup> His posthumous inventory is at AN MC/ET/LXXXVIII/597 20 décembre 1745: "Inventaire de Gabriel Bernard de Rieux, conseiller du roi en ses conseils, président au Parlement et en la deuxième chambre des enquêtes, à la requête de Suzanne Marie Henriette de Boulainvilliers, son épouse".

<sup>13</sup> An account is given in his diaries, Gimpel 1963; see also the relevant collectors' biographies on this website.

<sup>14</sup> Archives des musées nationaux, sér. D 5, cabinet des dessins, refus, 25.VIII.1919.

<sup>15</sup> The ERR card BoR4 has some confusing annotations and alterations, indicating several sources: Edmond de Rothschild, the German embassy in Paris, and the Rosenberg-Bernstein collection.

<sup>16</sup> Linz-Nr 1493; restituted 1946, Mü-Nr 7558.

<sup>18</sup> Published online in 2020 via Google Arts & Culture.

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from the left. The canvas is tacked to the sides of a keyed wooden stretcher with central crossbars. In a number of places (notably the metal accessories) highlights are executed in what has been described as gouache, but is probably ground pastel mixed with a liquid vehicle and applied with a brush.

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