



Six Portraits

for a

Marriage

The Newlyweds:

Hubert Nicolas Cochet & Marie Catherine Victoire Mercier.

The Groom's Parents and their Maids of Honor.

Nesle (France), 8-11 June 1803.

text by Francesco Leone

ANONYMOUS ARTIST ACTIVE IN FRANCE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Collection of six profile portraits of a family, June 1803 (Nesle, France)

Pastel on watermarked paper

***The identity of the figures depicted as well as the place and date of their completion is written on the back of each work.

***Completed on the occasion of the engagement between the cloth merchant, Hubert Nicolas Cochet (1773-1834) and Marie Catherine Victoire Mercier (1785 - 1853), which took place in Nesle in June, 1803 and in advance of their marriage on the 26 October of the same year.



De Nicolas Watchet Serrurier, âgé de
neuf ans, ami du futur.

De Nicolas Magnier Serrurier, âgé
quarante huit ans, cousin de la future.

Et de Marie Nicolas Droville femme
âgée de vingt quatre ans, ami de la future
pour témoins à Nêpe.

Après quoi moi Ajouré de la ville
de Nêpe faisant les fonctions d'officier public
de l'état civil, ai prononcé qu'en vertu de
la loi l'acte de mariage est valide et
il est l'acte de mariage signé avec moi,
les époux et la mère de l'épouse ayant
déclaré en avoir le pouvoir de signer et
le légaliser.

Droville
Magnier

Mesmes
ajours

Du Troisième jour du mois de Brumaire
de l'an Douzième de la République.

Acte de Mariage du citoyen Hubert
Nicolas Socquet, âgé de trente un ans, né à
Nêpe le trois Novembre mil sept cent soixante
deux, marchand Drapier de profession, fils

In 1797, in an extraordinary account written following the suppression by Napoleon's government of the noble dynasty found in the Cisalpina Republic in Milan, Pietro Verri lucidly presents the radical changes being experienced by the symbolic figures and ancient ways of a waning regime. Verri clarifies, as no one else could, the terms of the rebirth put into motion by the new "civilised social class" that had proudly emerged from the forging of the French Revolution. "You have lost the privilege of carrying a key, of wearing a cross at your neck, a billy goat¹", writes Verri, "But if these golden emblems were a seal of your slavery [...], if in the opinion of the people, they wouldn't actually appear any more than a sort of charlatan, in reality the loss is nothing; now, the man who will distinguish himself will be the deserving one, not the man of pomp and circumstance, virtue and knowledge will truly distinguish one man from another".²

On the cusp of the new century, a totally different reality presented itself - changed in its values, in its attitudes and habits - which, in terms of the visual arts, immediately impacted the portrait genre, as documented with the paintings of Jacques-Louis David, Anne-Louis Girodet, Antoine-Jean Gros in France and those of Andrea Appiani in Italy.

¹ Here the writer uses a derogatory term that refers to the heraldic symbol of the Order of the Golden Fleece. This Order of Knights - established in Bruges by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, to spread the Catholic faith - used a ram as their symbol and would wear a ram-shaped pendant decorated with red ribbons.

² In A. Morandotti, *In una biblioteca milanese del Settecento. Il ritratto e il valore della cultura e dell'impegno civile*, in *La Milano del Giovine Signore. Le arti nel Settecento di Parini*, exhibition catalogue (1999-2000) F. Mazzocca, A. Morandotti (eds.), Milano 1999, pp. 72 – 74: p. 74. Verri's account was published for the first time by Gennaro Barbarisi in *Pietro Verri e il culto della memoria*, in *Pietro Verri e il suo tempo*, Study conference proceedings (Milan, 9-11 October 1997) C. Capra, 2 vol., Milano 1999; II, pp. 543 – 584.

In 1879, almost one hundred years after those events that had forever changed the destiny of Europe, in a volume entitled *Monti e l'età che fu sua*, the great man of letters, Cesare Cantù evoked with stinging irony the decisive turning point in the visual representation and the propaganda of the new bourgeois class, modelled on the revolutionary turn that had forever declared the end of the Ancien Régime. In Milan, capital first of the Republic and then of the realm of Italy, the second city of the Empire, loved by Napoleon and Josephine his wife, in the last years of the eighteenth century we could meet, wrote Cantù, fellows who “had developed a certain appearance, not just new in style but undeniably extravagant; long hair cut off, resembling Brutus; lively and colourful ties and high-necked collars; rosettes and flowing ribbons in hats, a large cane was also carried [...]. Amongst them, women with an inspired air and the shapes of classical nudes”³.

It was, thus, a new world for which it was necessary to reinvent a new semantic of images and meanings. In Paris, within an artistic environment and otherwise, the forging of this figurative revolution that the bourgeois world invested in was the great *atelier* of Jacques-Louis David. From the 1780s, young artists would meet, filled with the spirit of modernity, in pursuit of new languages and recorded in art history as the “Barbus”⁴: a congregation of fiercely spirited *bohémien* rebels, who entrusted their provocations to the Paris *Salons* and were able to colonize the new Parisian scene, born from revolutionary ideals. It was an artistic context pervaded by egalitarian tensions, in a democratic spirit. It was in 1791 that the followers of David proposed direct nomination by participating artists themselves of the

³ C. Cantù, *Monti e l'età che fu sua*, Milan, Treves, 1879, p. 7.

⁴ “The Bearded”; more precisely the so-called *Sect of the Bearded* (but sometimes also of the Primitives, the Meditators or the Thinkers) is the nickname given to a group of painters, pupils of Jacques-Louis David, grouped around their founder and leader Pierre-Maurice Quay, active in the early 1800's. They dissented against the teachings of their master, wanting to radicalize the neoclassical style then in vogue in French painting at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The group disbanded after Quay's death in 1803.

examiners for the competitive examinations at the *Académie Royale* in order to deconstruct the elitist conservatism of such academic institutions.



fig. 1 Jacques-Louis David, *Tennis Court Oath*, 1791, Paris, Musée du Louvre, on loan from Versailles, Musée National du Château.

In this period of rebirth, triggered by the revolution, social, political and ideal issues emerged from the so-called Third State; the authors of the revolution and the cultural changes would open a new *era* in which the greatest and most progressive strength of the bourgeoisie, business and commerce would merge together, as well as the cultural and professional sectors.

It is precisely to this social class, protagonist of the memorable years that went from the Revolution to the Reign of Terror, from the coup d'état of the 9 Thermidor (27 July 1794, in others words, the fall of Maximilien Robespierre) to the Directory and finally to the advent of Napoleon's absolute power, that belonged the group of figures depicted in this extremely rare series of portraits. We know this from the notes

written on the back of some of the paintings, in June 1803 in Nesle; a small town in the Somme region, Hauts-de-France, not far from Amiens.

To this world of progressives, to whom David had given a soul and dignity in the studies and large preparatory drawing for the unfinished *Tennis Court Oath* (1791) (fig. 1), this series of six portraits bring us back to the clothes and hairstyles fashionable amongst the Jacobins. It also faithfully traces David's portrait techniques, appearing as an essential reference for this anonymous but highly valued artist who achieved those pastels; an artist who worked in France at the beginning of the nineteenth-century.

The six portraits have a rather unique story in that they recount a joyous occasion: the marriage that occurred in Nesle in 1803 between the cloth merchant, Hubert Nicolas Cochet (1773-1834) (plate I) and Marie Catherine Victoire Mercier (Nesle, 1785 - 1853) (plate II). She was the daughter of Adrien Mercier, a notary in Nesle, and of Marie Anne Devaux de Punchy from Rosières.

From the inscriptions on the back of the pastels we know that they were completed in Nesle in June 1803. Consulting Nesle's marriage records, the exact date of the marriage between Hubert Nicolas and Marie Catherine Victoire is recorded as the 3 of Brumaire, year XII of the Republic or, the 26 October, 1803.⁵ We can thus be certain that this collection - a sort of precursor to the contemporary wedding album - was created on the occasion of the official engagement of the couple, who would marry some months later. In the series of six portraits, the bride and groom are depicted together with the parents of Hubert Nicolas: his mother, Anne Marie Delval (plate III) and Hubert Cochet (plate IV), also a cloth merchant from Nesle. The other couple of portraits depict the sister of the bride, Adelaïde Mercier (plate V), and Louis François Delvigne (plate VI) - both young like the bride and groom - who both

⁵ Thanks to Davide Trevisani for his research of Nesle's marriage records, available online via the regional directory of the Somme, Hauts-de-France.

are most likely witnesses to the marriage. The portraits were completed in June 1803 (one shows the date of 11 July), for the occasion of the engagement and of the future marriage.

From the marriage certificate, we know that at the time of the marriage Hubert Nicolas was 31 years old and Marie Catherine Victoire was 18 years old; born in 1772 and 1785 respectively.

These portraits are of great interest for several reasons. The figures are depicted in profile according to a portrait technique regularly deployed in the neoclassical style, one used for the depiction of prominent figures. The technique is derived from the ancient Romans and was brought back to popularity with the study of Roman coins. But with the particular typology of portrait found here, highly popular between the late 18th and early 19th century, a more private and domestic dimension is rehabilitated. This is testament not of an example of civic virtue but, rather, a geometry of feelings, of emotional consonance and a small family genealogy that shows, curiously, the eldest members - Hubert and Anne Marie - proudly and knowingly dressed in the clothing of the younger generation and protagonists of the revolution. Other examples of this particular portrait technique inspired by the ancient period can be found - particularly in Italy - in other artistic genres, seen with cameos and glyptics (by well-known artists like Giovanni Pichler and Giuseppe Girometti), as well as the wax works by Giovanni Antonio Santarelli (active mostly in Tuscany and highly sought-after amongst clients in Naples) and the reliefs in precious woods by the highly-skilled and rightly well-known Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo.

But this particular typology of portrait evolved in decisively new terms above all in France, where insistent references to the ancient world and forms developed from the classical period were abandoned. The profile effigy came to represent instead,

even in the clothes and hairstyles depicted, the contemporary bourgeoisie, attributing to them the same values and moral dignity that, until only a few previously, had been attributed to great historical figures, supporters of the nobility, war heroes and grand intellectuals. In other words, this cultural operation in this new moral dimension, allowed for examples of the bourgeoisie to be captured in their everyday lives and now recognised with the same virtue that, until only a few years before, had been assigned to other social ranks. This different approach, tied closely to contemporary values, is found with numerous other examples in the portraiture of David (fig. 2) or in the pastels of a noted artist in Paris in this years, Jean-Baptiste Fouquet.

There is another aspect of notable interest. In terms of technique, the artist of these six portraits demonstrates that he/she was completely up-to-date with the cutting-edge approaches to pastel portraiture in Paris at the time. The rendering of the outlines of forms is net and clearly delineated, and evokes from a distance the black *silhouette* technique from England, revealing a knowledge of a particular formula that had just been elaborated in Paris at the time and would revolutionise this type of portraiture. That is, “*physionotrace*”, created with a mechanical optical device made from an articulated wooden frame within which the sitter was placed and turned on a chair so that the individual’s portrait could be captured in a few minutes. A pencil was attached to a pantograph, allowing to delineate large lines and the outlines and physiognomy of the sitter. The instrument, that initially gave results similar to a black outline *silhouette*, was invented in Paris in 1783-1784 by Gilles Louis Chrétien, violoncello player to the court of Versailles. The technique was extremely popular for many decades until the advent of photography. The salient trace of this technique was the net precision of the outlines of the face - that is evidently seen with the series of portraits in question - then added to by the artist in a different technique to that of the *silhouette*, with the details of the face and hairstyle and with naturalistic elements thanks to a life sitting. This technical innovation was

much used, even in collaboration with Chrétien, by the famous pastellist, Jean-Baptiste Fouquet (Verdun, c. 1761 - Paris, 1799) (fig. 3); a name that seemed to be a precise point of reference for these pastels, completed on the occasion of the engagement of Hubert Nicolas Cochet and Marie Catherine Victoire Mercier, which took place in Nesle in June, 1803.

It should be mentioned that three works of the same anonymous artist responsible of the completion of our six portraits - they too, pastel profiles but dated to 1809 - are held at the Musée Carnavalet in Paris⁶.

Rome, May 2020

Francesco Leone

⁶ Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Reg. NN. D.6238, D.6239, D.6240.



fig. 2 Jacques-Louis David, *Portrait of Edmond-Louis-Alexis Dubois de Crancé*, 1792 c. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

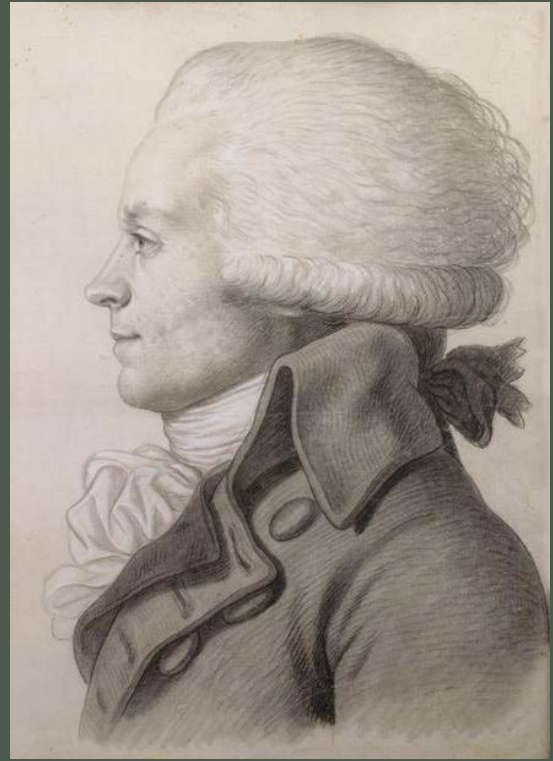


fig. 3 Jean-Baptiste Fouquet, *Physionotrace in pencil and white lead of Maximilien de Robespierre*, 1792 c. Versailles, Musée National du Châtea

De Nicolas Watchet Serrurier, âgé de
neuf ans, ami du futur.

De Nicolas Magnier Serrurier, âgé de
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Et de Marie Nicolas Droville femme
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Droville
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Ajouré

Du Troisième jour du mois de Brumaire
de l'an Douzième de la République.

Acte de Mariage du citoyen Hubert
Nicolas Socquet, âgé de trente six ans, né à
Nêpe le trois Novembre mil Sept cent Soixante
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plate I – The groom, Hubert Nicolas Cochet.



plate II – The bride, Marie Catherine Victoire Mercier.



plate III – The mother of the groom, Anne-Marie Delval.



plate IV – The father of the groom, Hubert Cochet.

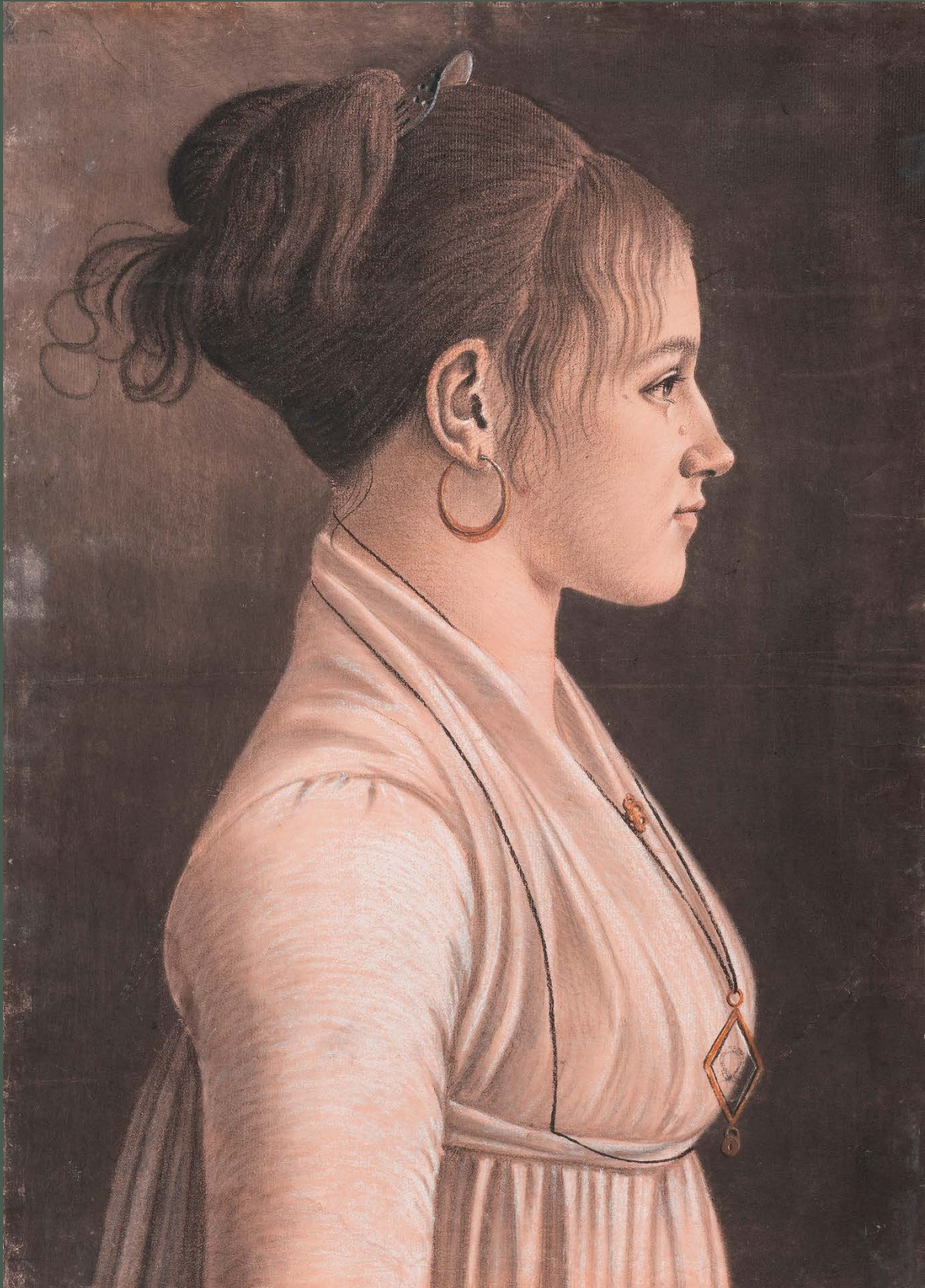


plate V – The sister of the bride, Adelaïde Mercier, marriage witness.



plate VI – Louis François Delvigne, marriage witness.



Anonymous artist active in France at the beginning of
the of the 19th Century (c. 1809)
Paris, Musée Carnevlet, Reg. N. 6238, 6239, 6240.



mariage: et ont assisté, eux, leurs
pères et mères, les tuteurs et autres
parents signés avec moi, au notaire
J. L. Pichet - Cochet
Merue Victorine Huc
Merue J. L. Cochet Delvigne
C. Desvieux
m. Delval (Lambert)
Lapierre

Du dix-septième jour du mois de
Brumaire de l'an Douzième de la République
Acte de mariage de Jean Baptiste
Victorine Margnès âgé de trente deux ans,
né en la commune de Blangy Crouville
Département de la Somme, le quinze novembre
mil sept cent soixante deux, Cultivateur de profession
demeurant au dit Blangy, fils majeur d'âge
Margnès aussi Cultivateur au même lieu, et
de Marie Elizabeth Rivet son épouse
d'une part.

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