

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

ABEL, Ernst August

Zerbst c.1720 – Darmstadt c.1790

Abel (also d'Abele, d'Abelle) came from an extended German family of artists and musicians about whose precise biographical data sources are contradictory. He was the son of Christian Ferdinand Abel (1682–1761), a violist born in Hannover but active in Köthen for most of his life. Johann Sebastian Bach was godfather to a daughter, Sophie Charlotte, in 1720. One son, Leopold August (1718–1794), a miniaturist, was based in Berlin, but abandoned painting for music, his son Wilhelm August Christian (1748–p.1803) worked mainly in Denmark; a second brother Carl Friedrich Abel (1723–1787) was the famous composer and instrumentalist active in London and painted by Gainsborough; Ernst Heinrich Abel (*q.v.*) was also a pastellist.

According to various sources, Ernst August Abel was a pupil of a virtually unknown portrait painter and art dealer, Rudolph Lafontaine (recorded in Hamburg until 1782), but this may be a confusion with Ludolf Lafontaine (1704–1774), Hofmaler in Braunschweig. Abel travelled between London, Hamburg and Paris and in 1778 undertook a journey to Köln, Frankfurt and the court of the Landgraf von Hessen-Homburg in Darmstadt, returning with a young wife to Hamburg, where he was also active as an art dealer. He made miniatures, watercolours and pastels; his favourite medium seems to have been the miniature portrait executed in a combination of watercolour and black chalk. Some of his work was engraved by C. G. Geysler. He exhibited at the Berlin Akademie in 1789, but seems to have met with little success in Berlin, as recounted by Chodowiecki in a letter to Graff of 6.VII.1789:

Miniatur Pastel Mahler und Zeichner, ein alter Mann der ehemals in Berlin war, nachher Frankreich, Italien, England und Holland durchreist ist, zuletzt in Hamburg sich aufgehalten hatt, ist schon ein Paar Monath hier und kan keine Arbeit bekommen, in seinen Arbeiten in Pastell ist Wahrheit, aber eben deswegen fürcht ich wird er nicht gefallen.

Bibliography

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Pastels

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- J.1.102 Georg Christoph LICHTENBERG, en face, à g., pstl. Lit.: Arndt & al. 2001, p. 727 n.r.
- J.1.103 ~cop. Johann Ludwig Strecker, Tuschzeichnung in grau und rot, 27x22 (Göttingen, Städtisches Museum). Lit.: Achenbach & Joost 1991, no. 19; Arndt & al. 2001, p. 50 repr.
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