

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

BESNIER, Séraphique-Élisabeth ou Marianne

Orléans 1741/44–1826

In two letters to Desfriches of 6.IV.1772 and 31.XII.1772, Louis-André de Grimaldi (1736–1806), évêque du Mans mentions a certain Mlle Besnier. She, and two of her heads which apparently Desfriches had sent to Greuze, came up in a conversation between Mgr de Grimaldi with the painter, who felt that her talents had been underestimated by the critics. He proposed to return the two works (which may have been copied after engravings) to Desfriches with his opinion. A pastel portrait was also to be sent, and the difficulties of packing it without risk were discussed. A letter from Mme Greuze to Mlle Bénier of 30.IV.1773 (Fondation Custodia, inv. 2006-A.443, addressed to her “chez M. Défriche à Orléans”) reports that Greuze praised her talents to the bishop. Perronneau also mentions Mlle Bénier in letters to Desfriches (2.I.1770, 4.V.1772), no doubt the same person as in the letter dated merely “vendredy, 1772”: he discussed the idea of spending more time in Orléans—

je seray très aise de voire souvent Mademoiselle Bénier, de la voire peindre, elle est pleine de reconnoissances pour vous car dans mon dernier voiage de Paris, il i a 2 ans édemie, elle ne sessa de me dire quelle joie elle resentoit du cas que vous fesiez d'elle. Son caractère gaie, active, sage me l'a fait estimé particulièrement.

A landscape drawing included in the Desfriches exhibition (Orléans 1965, no. 235, lent by Paul Ratouis de Limay; sold Paris, Drouot, Eve, 8.VI.2016, Lot 75), said to have been annotated on the mount “Dessin d'une élève de Desfriches”, is given in the catalogue to “Constance B***”, perhaps providing Mlle Besnier's nickname, although no Constance Besnier appears in baptismal records for the relevant period, and the inscription does not appear to read Bésnier.

Mlle Besnier advertised in the *Étrennes orléanoises* in 1773 (p. 76), 1774 (p. 85) and 1775 (p. 86) as a “peintre” or “peintre en mignature”, rue de la Lionne, Orléans; a note in the 1775 edition (p. 86) indicated that she gave lessons. An inaccurate notice of the death of “Mad. V^e Besnier, rue de la Lionne” appeared in the *Journal général du département du Loiret*, 2.II.1826, but conceals the sad truth. As sequential entries in the État civil reveal, two sisters, living together in the rue de la Lionne, both died on 28.I.1826: Séraphique-Élisabeth, aged 84, and, a few hours later, Marianne, her 81-year-old sister. They were the unmarried daughters of Thomas Besnier, a courtier de commerce, and Élisabeth Chesneau (who married in 1740), and were baptised in 1741 and 1744 respectively. We do not know which was the pastellist, but we may imagine that one supported the other.

Bibliography

Arnoult 2014, p. 160, n.814, 170f, n.870, 292; Edmond Pilon, *Muses et bourgeoises de jadis*, Paris, 1908, p. 262; Ratouis de Limay 1907, pp. 102f, 126, 128, 129; Vaillat & Ratouis de Limay 1923, p. 112