

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

NEILSON, Jacques

?Edinburgh 1714 – Paris 3.III.1788

Entrepreneur des ouvrages de la couronne en la manufacture royale des Gobelins, Jacques Neilson was born, probably in Edinburgh (rather than London, as found in numerous sources), to a merchant seaman ("négociant sur mer"), also James, himself the son of an Edinburgh merchant, Cornelius Neilson. His mother's name has been garbled in transcriptions of French documents, appearing variously as Marie Maquet, Marquet etc. (perhaps attempts to render Mackay); widowed before 1738, she remarried a John Scott. Neilson emigrated early to France, residing in Paris with his uncle, the surgeon and freemason Gilbert Neilson (a specialist in treating hernias, his prospectuses published in the *Mercure* and the *Gazette d'Amsterdam* place him at the Coq d'Or in the rue Dauphine 1736–46, removed to the quai de la Mégisserie from 1749 until his death in 1761). (When Neilson married, in 1738, he converted to Catholicism; the court papers state that he had left Scotland 14 years previously, for religious reasons; he was accordingly unable to produce his father's death certificate and unaware of his mother's location.)

Neilson was attached to the Gobelins by 1728 and was appointed tapissier du roi in 1734. Around 1743 he decided to become a painter, studying with Charles Chastelain, Charles Coppel, Parrocet and finally La Tour, according to a memorandum from Garnier d'Isle to Lenormant de Tournehem of 10.VIII.1749, on the basis of which he returned to the Gobelins, giving up painting. It is worth quoting in full:

*Mémoire au sujet de l'atelier de basse lisse des Gobelins
present vacant*

Ceux qui demandent sont:

Lasnier, excellent ouvrier de haute lisse chez M. Audran,

Rondet, excellent ouvrier de haute lisse chez M. Audran

Cozette, le cadet, fils du teinturier qui avait commencé à la haute lisse et a passé à la teinturerie,

Jean-Baptiste *Rançon*, le meilleur ouvrier de basse lisse dans ledit atelier: il y a un mémorial de dix à douze ouvriers qui témoignent ses talents qui sont connus,

Et le s^r *Neilson* qui a travaillé aux Gobelins sous M. Jans et était fort bon ouvrier. Il y a joint la théorie à la pratique; il dessine non seulement fort bien, mais est sorti des Gobelins pour se perfectionner, ayant pratiqué la peinture sous M. Coppel, M. Parrocet et M. de La Tour qui lui a appris le pastel où il réussit très-bien; d'ailleurs fort intelligent et capable de former des ouvriers pour remettre sur pied la basse lisse.

La basse lisse n'est tombée que faute de soin par les maîtres d'avoir formé successivement de bons ouvriers. Ils allèguent pour raisons que leurs apprentis n'ayant point été pris enfants d'ouvriers, à mesure qu'ils ont été formés, ils sont sortis pour joindre des priviléges de la maison.

D'ailleurs les deux frères Rançon, devenus seuls ouvriers, n'en ont point voulu former dans le dessein d'être seuls et d'élever seulement leurs enfants.

Les ouvriers sont gens de pratique sans dessin et quoiqu'ils travaillent bien, je doute qu'ils soient jamais en état de bien conduire.

Un homme intelligent, qui joint une grande théorie à la pratique, qui de plus possède la nuance et l'intelligence des couleurs et parfaitement bien le dessin est, je crois, bien plus en état de conduire un atelier et de former des ouvriers et de remettre la base

lissoir en honneur. D'ailleurs, il est, je crois, intéressant de s'attacher un homme qui a du talent plus que je n'en vois à aucun et qui pourrait porter ailleurs son talent et y faire des établissements. Les ouvriers supporteront peut-être cela avec peine, car je ne doute pas que les Rançon ne quittent, mais je crois que le bien du service du Roy doit l'emporter.

A Monsieur d'ordonner.

Paris, ce 10 aout 1749

G. d'Isle

Annotation de Tournehem:

Il est plus à propos de faire conduire cette partie de la manufacture par le s^r *Jacques Neilson* par toutes les raisons détaillées dans les informations qu'en a prises M. d'Isle, après l'examen des mémoires qui m'ont été présentés de plusieurs demandeurs.

Ce 11 aout 1749.

Post-scriptum. Et il sera à propos de l'en charger le plus tôt qu'il sera possible.

Neilson was duly given charge of the basse lisse workshop at the Gobelins, and introduced improvements in the method of copying cartoons that allowed this cheaper process to match the quality of the haute lisse workshops. Later (from 1768) he was responsible for dyeing, and from 1767 he was director of the school for apprentices. He remained close to La Tour and acquired the version of the famous Autoportrait à l'index now in the Louvre.

"Neilson peintre" appears in the accounts of Mme de Pompadour's expenditure at Bellevue, being paid 1868 livres on 24.II.1752 for unspecified work (J.-A. Le Roy, "Relevé des dépenses de Mme de Pompadour", *Mémoires de la Société des sciences morales... de Seinte-et-Oise*, 1853, III, p. 119), while the Pompadour inventory (27.VI.1764) included "Une femme tenant un enfant, et appuyée sur sa porte. Ce morceau est fait en petits points par Neilson aux Gobelins, d'après Adrien Van Ostade, sous glace et bordure dorée; prisée quatre cents livres." Neilson's work in tapestry is widely known and not further discussed here.

In 1760 Soufflot and Marigny corresponded about Neilson's concern with his alien status, which he believed prevented him from inheriting from his uncle (Neilson printed an invitation to the surgeon's funeral at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, 21.III.1761 – a copy is in the Archives nationales); but under a 1667 edict he was entitled to the rights of a French citizen by virtue of ten years' work at the factory (he had been an entrepreneur for 11 years, and had worked as master for longer).

In 1738 Neilson married Anne-Geneviève Garand, daughter of a wine merchant, François Garand. She remained in business after their marriage, as a maître marchande-lingère, taking on a younger sister, Geneviève-Marie Garand, as an apprentice in 1751. (Her brothers included Jean-Baptiste Garand, *q.v.*, a miniaturist recorded in the rue de la Mégisserie 1774–77, and Jean-François Garand, recorded as an orfèvre apprenti in 1748.) Their son Daniel-Marie (who travelled to England in 1767 to solicit business) died in 1777 (leaving a widow, née Marie-Julie Chipault dite Phlipault, daughter of the concierge of the Académie royale, who was accorded a pension of 600 livres, 1.I.1780), while a daughter, Marie-Geneviève-Dorothée (1745–1826) in 1771 married a marchand drapier, Michel Curmer (1743–1809), who, under the

name Curmer Neilson, received a payment due to Neilson of some 53,563 livres in the Liquidation et remboursement of the state debt of 2.VII.1791. Two other daughters were nuns at Port-Royal.

Neilson himself died at the hôtel des Gobelins, aged 73, and was buried the next day at Saint-Hippolyte. His will, made 3.V.1787, named members of the Garand family. The inventaire après décès was carried out 8.III.1787 (AN MC/ET/CIX/805); among numerous pictures were "cinq tableaux représentant des portraits de famille de Baviere" (22 livres 8 sols); "un grand Tableau chantré représentant la famille de Vivien dans sa bordure de bois sculpté et doré" (19 livres 4); a Vivien self-portrait, also in oil (14 livres 8); and "onze portraits au pastel par Vivien et autres sous verres dans leurs bordures" valued at 64 livres. (The Gobelins connection provides an obvious link between the pastellists.) There were a further "six études au pastel sous verres" (12 livres). Quite a number of the pictures were by or after Boucher, and a few by Oudry, but nothing linked to La Tour was identified.

Neilson's uncle Gilbert also had a number of pictures in his inventory, including "trois tableaux peints en pastelle qui sont tous portraits de famille, sous verre blanc, dans leurs bordures de bois doré", listed "pour mémoire" (Gilbert Neilson; inv. p.m., 15.III.1761, AN MC/ET/CIX/641). Perhaps these ended up with Jacques, but he had formally disclaimed the inheritance.

It is unclear whether Neilson was connected with the family from Haddington, but a group of pictures by "Neilson" recorded at Amisfield in 1792 included two religious paintings, medium unspecified, "a portrait of a French painter" (a copy of La Tour's pastel of Dupouch), as well as a pastel copy of a Rosalba which had belonged to Jean-François de Troy (who made a number of cartoons for the Gobelins factory) and was in Paris until 1764. These two pastel copies (both recorded in the manuscript inventory at Amisfield in 1771), which we suggest were by Jacques Neilson, reveal a high level of competence. Apart from these, only a posthumous portrait (medium unspecified) of Voltaire's teacher, the Jesuit priest, père Porée, is known (from a print by Balechou, who also engraved a portrait of Jullienne).

Bibliography

Curmer 1878; London, Christie's, 5.VII.2005, note to Lot 162; Oxford art online; Parker & al. 1964

Genealogies [NEILSON](#)

Pastels

J.5558.101 Claude DUPOUCH (c.1685–1747), peintre, appuyé sur un fauteuil, psrl, 63.5x52 (Amisfield, inv. 1771, no. 87, as by Neilson; PC 2012, as by or after La Tour). Lit.: Catalogue of pictures at Amisfield, *Archæologia scotica*, I, 1792, p. 81, no. 87 n.r., as a portrait of a French painter, m/u, by Neilson; Eisler 1973, p. 321, as ?La Tour qv



J.5558.103 One of the Muses [La Poseia, Calliope],
pstl, 63.5x52 (Amisfield, inv. 1771, no. 60, as
by Neilson; PC 2012, attr. Carriera). Lit.:
“Catalogue of pictures at Amisfield”,
Archaeologia scotica, I, 1792, p. 79, no. 60 n.r., as
crayons, 65x58.4, by Neilson. A/r Carriera pstl
(Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle, inv. KH 674)
φv



Portraits in other media

J.5558.106 Le père [Charles] PORÉE [(1675–1741),
éducateur], jésuite, m/u, p.1741
~grav. Balechou. Lit.: Titon du Tillet 1755, p.
731

J.5558.108 Our Saviour and the Virgin, m/u, 72x90
(Amisfield, inv. 1771, as by Neilson. Not
located 2012)

J.5558.109 Saint Andrew on the Cross, m/u
(Amisfield, inv. 1771, as by Neilson. Not
located 2012)