

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

WYL, Mathias-André-Louis de Wihl, *alias* de

Obernai 13.IV.1716 – Paris 9.VII.1790

The initials of the anonymous Lausanne pastellist engaged by Voltaire are in the same hand as that of de Wyl, the author of the unknown sitter in Geneva. The name refers to the seigneurie and château (Schloßwil) near Bern belonging to the Frisching family, but the pastellist was not the legitimate holder of this title, Vincent Frisching, baron de Wyl (1688–1764), but rather a charlatan known as Mathias de Wyl, who was baptised Mathias Andreas von Weil in Alsace (*v. infra*), more usually spelt de Wihl.

Several letters describing a Lausanne pastellist sent by Voltaire to d'Argental (5.I.1758) and his niece Mme Dompierre de Fontaine (*q.v.*, 10.I.1758) have been assumed to refer to Liotard (Cabezas 2009b, p. 194, relates them to the La Tour pastel). The letters envisage that the original would be sent to d'Argental and that copies would be made in oil in Paris, to be presented to friends (letter from Voltaire to d'Argental, 5.I.1758, from Lausanne):

Pour comble de Bénédiction il nous vient un peintre assez bon. Il ne peint qu'en pastel. Il travaillera sur ma maigre effigie, pour vous et pour les quarante. Il faudra une copie à l'huile pour mes confrères qui ne veulent pas de crayons.

A contemporary engraving may have been made, as a copy by Hennezel (*q.v.*) in 1766 is in reverse. Voltaire initially enjoyed “jouer la comédie à mon âge, et de souffrir qu'on m'envoie de Paris des habits de Zamti et de Narbas” (10.I.1758). He was not however happy with the result, writing to d'Argental (8.V.1758) to whom he sent the portrait by coach: “Un gros et gras Suisse, barbouilleur en pastel qu'on m'avait vanté comme un Raphaël, me vint peindre à Lausanne il y a six semaines en bonnet de nuit et en robe de chambre.” Mme Denis also apologised (7.VI.1758) for sending the portrait: “Mettez le au grenier. C'est bien malgré moi qu'il vous est parvenu.”, and announced that “Liotard...va peindre mon oncle la semaine prochaine”... “cet homme atrape la ressemblance à merveille.” On 16.VI.1758 Voltaire added another comment on—

ma triste figure. Je vous jure que je suis aussi laid que mon portrait. Croiez-moy. Le peintre n'est pas bon je l'avoue, mais il n'est pas flateur. Faites en faire mon cher ange une copie pour l'Académie. Qu'importe après tout que l'image d'un pauvre diable qui sera bientôt poussière, soit ressemblant ou non. Les portraits sont une chimère, comme tout le reste.

He does not mention a session with Liotard, and it seems most probable that Mme Denis merely reported a vague intention of trying the better artist, who had just arrived in Geneva.

De Wyl reappears some years later in Paris. “Louis Mathias André De Wyl, peintre, quai des Augustin” was witness at a wedding in Saint-André des Arts on 1.II.1763 between Antoine Hund, tailleur d'habits and Anne-Marguerite Craus (fichier Laborde). Evidently the same Mathias-André-Louis de Wihl [sic] married Marie-Anastasia Hildebrand, from Keipersberg,

Alsace, widow of Jacques Smith, in Paris, abbaye Saint-Victor, 14.IX.1770 (fonds Andriveau), by contract of 7.VIII.1770 (AN MC/ET/XVIII/710): see further below. The contract names him as “Mathias André Louis de Wihl bourgeois de Luzerne, suisse de nation, Peintre de Mesdames de France et privilégié d Roy pous les eaux de santé, demeurant à Paris rue Bouttebric paroisse Severin”, and identifies de Wyl's parents as André de Wihl and Marie Lauthenbacherin: evidently the Andreas von Wihl and Anna Maria Luthenbacherin recorded as parents of a Joseph Ignace von Wihl born in Obernai, 26.III.1723. An entry in the Sélestat parish register on 19.IX.1730 records the death of the child Ignace, son of “Andrea Vonwihl Civis et Pictoris”, surely the André von Wihl established as a religious painter in Sélestat c.1727 (Paul Adam, *Histoire religieuse de Sélestat*, 1967, p. 253). A half-brother, Christian Anton von Wihl, was born to Andreas von Wihl and Clara Elisabeth Scheidtin in Sélestat on 29.IX.1729, placing a *terminus ante quem* for Mathias's birth by the earlier wife: Christian Anton became a sculptor (Hermann Brommer, “Schlettstader Bildhauer des 18. Jahrhunderts”, *Annuaire de la Société des amis de la Bibliothèque de Sélestat*, xxiv, 1974, pp. 9–38). “Andreas Vonweille” and “Anna Maria Lautenbach” were married in Obernai on 1.vii.1715; the pastellist's birth was recorded there on 13.IV.1716, as “Mathias Andreas von Weil”.

The spelling, and Alsatian connections, permits conflation with the painter de Wihl recorded in Paris in 1754, before his stay in Switzerland. The pendant pastels of Ramond du Poujet and his wife, executed at the time of the couple's marriage in Strasbourg in .I.1754, “d'une remarquable facture”, are by an artist with poor handwriting, but allow us to identify the artist as from Hochstatt in Alsace, already living in Paris. No doubt André von Wihl's practice took him between Sélestat, Obernai and Strasbourg.

Thieriot wrote to Voltaire (letters of 21.V.1766, 16.VI.1776) after meeting this “peintre et chimiste qui a fait votre portrait et qui possède une eau dont la vertu et l'usage opèrent des guérisons suprenantes”. Thieriot's hydrocele had diminished by a third after taking de Wyl's magic potion for six weeks. By brevet of 19.VII.1771 “Louis-Mathias-André de Wyl” was granted a three-year privilege to sell and distribute his “eau dite de santé” (AN O¹117). His name appears in the archives of the Académie de médecine, as “[Mathias-Antoine] De Wyl, suisse, se disant médecin”. He had come to their attention as a mountebank (“empirique”) and was reported by magistrates in 1778. Soon after “De Wyl, ci-devant peintre puis charlatan” was marketing both his eau de santé and his eau pour les yeux. Amelot investigated; Félix Vicq d'Azyr, secrétaire perpétuel of the Société seemed to favour the grant of a patent, but there were two anonymous denunciations. In a futher submission to the Société in 1784, regarding his eau de santé, he claimed “S'il ne distribue plus son remède, il n'est plus soumis à la capitacion. Les étrangers ne la paie pas.”

A document of 30.VIII.1788 (registres de tutelles, AN Y5169^A), the two sons of De Wyl's widow by her first husband Jean-Jacques Smith, écuyer were identified as her heirs. “De Wihl” was then still living, but he was evidently the “de Wihlt, médecin suisse” who died 9.VII.1790, carré du Pont Rouge, Paris (AN Y26, index des scellés, Y 15101).

The somewhat confusing background about the Smith and de Wyl families emerged subsequently, in the Tribunal du 5^e arrondissement de Paris, in a law case brought by de Wyl's brother, Christian-Antoine De Wihl [sic; DeWille also appears in reports], against his two stepsons. Smith père, an Irishman and son of a doctor based in London, was apparently reçu at the medical faculty of Pont-à-Mousson. In France he met opposition from the corporations de médecins, and accordingly travelled in neighbouring territories. He met his wife Anasthase Hildebrant, daughter of a surgeon in Basel; they did not marry (perhaps because they were Protestant). The elder son, also called Jean-Jacques, was born in 1747 in Paris, but was not baptised; his brother, Georges-Antoine, was baptised in Bourg-Lastic two years later as legitimate. Around this time Smith received a brevet as médecin du duc d'Orléans and practised in Lyon. The couple married lawfully, and baptised the elder child in 1751. However he again faced legal action by the collège de médecine de Lyon: a letter of 15.IV.1750 from Potot, doctor at the Hôtel de Dieu in Lyons to Morand in Paris, outlined Smith's methods (which consisted simply in the use of three proprietary emetics) and described the dire effects on his patients; legal action was initiated the following year, and according to a memorandum they challenged Smith's “capacités nécessaires pour cet art.”

Two years later Mme Smith deserted her husband. In 1755 he fell ill and just before his death he made a will nominating Pierre Saintiéau de Salaberri as the boys' tutor. De Wyl hd apparently been a friend Smith, having switched from painting to medicine. He had no fortune at the time of their marriage in 1770, while the 50-year-old Mme Smith was wealthy, and he insisted on a marriage contract which provided that he received her assets should she predecease him, a clause whose invalidity was obvious to him. Accordingly when his wife fell ill in 1788 he secretly rented a room in which to keep her effects away from her rightful heirs. De Wyl died during the subsequent litigation (his place taken by his own heir, his brother Christian-Antoine), in which numerous irregularities in the Smith brothers' paternity (even the 1770 marriage contract declared Mme Smith to be childless) were the main defence to their action to recover their mother's estate. Nevertheless the court declared in favour of the Smith brothers and awarded costs against the artist's brother.

Bibliography

Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France, 1909, pp. 160ff; archives de la Société royale de médecine, Paris; *Journal des tribunaux*, 1792, 105, 27.III.1792; jugement du 16.IV.1792, reported and with different spelling, in the *Gazette des nouveaux*

tribunaux, 1792, IV, pp. 353–65; *Lyon médical*, CXXVI, 1911, pp. 300ff

Pastels

J.808.051 Charlotte de Constant [Mme Marc-Samuel-François CONSTANT DE REBECQUE, née Françoise-Charlotte Pictet (1734–1766)], tenant un masque, pstl, 55x43, sd de Wyl, 1758 (Hoirie Sarasin, Geneva, 1994). Lit.: Candaux 1994, fig. 29 φν



~grav. A. Faucheur 1862

~cop. Hennezel, q.v.

J.808.108 Homme en habit brun, pstl, sd r "de Wyl/1758" (Geneva, mAH, CR 446) φνσ



J.808.071 [olim J.7952.101] Pierre-Bernard de RAMOND DU POUJET (1715–1796), trésorier des guerres à Strasbourg; & pendant: J.808.072 [olim J.7952.102] épouse (∞ 1754), née Rosalie-Reine-Louise Eisentraut de Harthausen (1732–1762), père et mère de Louis-François-Élisabeth Ramond de Carbonnières, secrétaire du cardinal de Rohan, pstl, inscr. verso "Von Wihl/Mahler von Hohstadt 1754/je de mer a paris" (Lourdes, Musée pyrénéen, 1927). Lit.: Louis Le Bondidier, *L'Intermédiaire des chercheurs et curieux*, XC, 1927, 94f

J.808.101 François-Marie Arouet, dit VOLTAIRE (1694–1778), pstl, 47x36.3, sd r "d.W. 1758", inscr. verso "Donné par Voltaire à Charles Augustin Ferriol, comte d'Argental, pour en faire une copie à l'huile" (le sujet; don: Charles-Augustin Ferriol, comte d'Argental; don: Mme de Vimeux, 7 rue Caumartin, Paris; M. Reynaud-Rigny; Bodin; Bonvalet 1860. Paris, hôtel Dassault, Artcurial, Briest-Le Fur-Poulain-F. Tajan, 13.XII.2005, Lot 52 repr., est. €15–18,000; PC; Alençon, Orne Enchères, 20.XI.2011, est. €12–15,000, €42,000 [=€50,035]. Librairie Jean-Claude Vrain, cat. *Portraits d'écrivains*, 2022, no. 1276). Lit.: *Gazette Drouot*, 25.XI.2011, p. 242 repr. [new attr.] φν



J.808.104 ~version, pstl/ppr, 31x27 (Schloß Charlottenburg). Exh.: Sceaux 1978, no. 165 n.r., Éc. fr., c.1775, olim attr. Friedrich II. φν