

# L'abbé Le Brun

NEIL JEFFARES

ART HISTORIANS ARE AS PARTIAL<sup>1</sup> as any other clique to shibboleths – trivia that allow them to remind themselves what superior beings they are. Knowing for example that Chardin's forenames were not Jean-Baptiste-Siméon, or that Rosalba Carriera was not born in 1675, although these errors remain widespread; we of course know better. Best of all are the known unknowns: who was the mysterious ARD? Or who – apart from not being Mme Vigée Le Brun's husband – was the abbé Le Brun who published the *Almanach des peintres* (as it is usually known, since its full name is absurdly long), of which two volumes appeared, in 1776 and 1777?



The question of the authorship has been addressed many times, most notably in a couple of articles in the *Burlington Magazine*. In November 1992, Andrew McClellan, of Tufts University, reported a letter he had found in the Archives nationales from the author of the *Almanach* seeking d'Angiviller's patronage. This revealed that the author was "one Abbé Lebrun, Chaplain to the Cistercian nuns of Bellechasse, Faubourg Saint-Germain. The Abbé was also the great nephew of Charles Lebrun, First Painter to Louis XIV." In response, in October 1993, Fabienne Camus wrote to confirm this attribution, and while noting that little was known about the author, concluded that he must have been a descendant of Charles Le Brun's nephew Charles II

<sup>1</sup> This essay first appeared on my blog [neiljeffares.wordpress.com](http://neiljeffares.wordpress.com) on 24.IV.2021. This is the version of record, and may be cited as Neil Jeffares, "L'abbé Le Brun", *Pastels & pastellists*, [http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Abbe\\_LeBrun.pdf](http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Abbe_LeBrun.pdf).

Le Brun (Mme Vigée Le Brun's husband, Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun, was the grandson of another nephew of the Premier Peintre).

She mentions several more facts emerging from the two letters Le Brun had written to d'Angiviller, other correspondence and the entry about him in the *Almanach* itself: the abbé's "father lived at Saint Zacharie and his brother [was] a retired master surgeon of the French colonies"; that he was a corresponding member of the Académie de Bordeaux, and that from 1776 he was a chanoine at Beauvais, and had tried to obtain a position as chaplain to the royal household.

Several other clues emerged. For example, in the Supplément to *La France littéraire*, 1778, p. 56, a list of the correspondent members of the Académie de peinture at Bordeaux included "L'abbé le Brun, Chapelain de feu son A. S. Madame la Princesse de Conti."

Recourse to the standard genealogies (mine is [here](#)) on Charles Le Brun (notably Jouin's 1889 magnum opus) was of limited use: the descendance of his nephews was incomplete, and no one seemed to fit perfectly. (I should say checking this took a good deal of time, which is partly why I thought I would put up a blog post rather than simply correct the entry on my index of writers at <http://www.pastellists.com/Suppliers.html>.) Perhaps however someone should have noticed that Jouin lists a number of people claiming a relationship with Charles Le Brun but with no foundation.

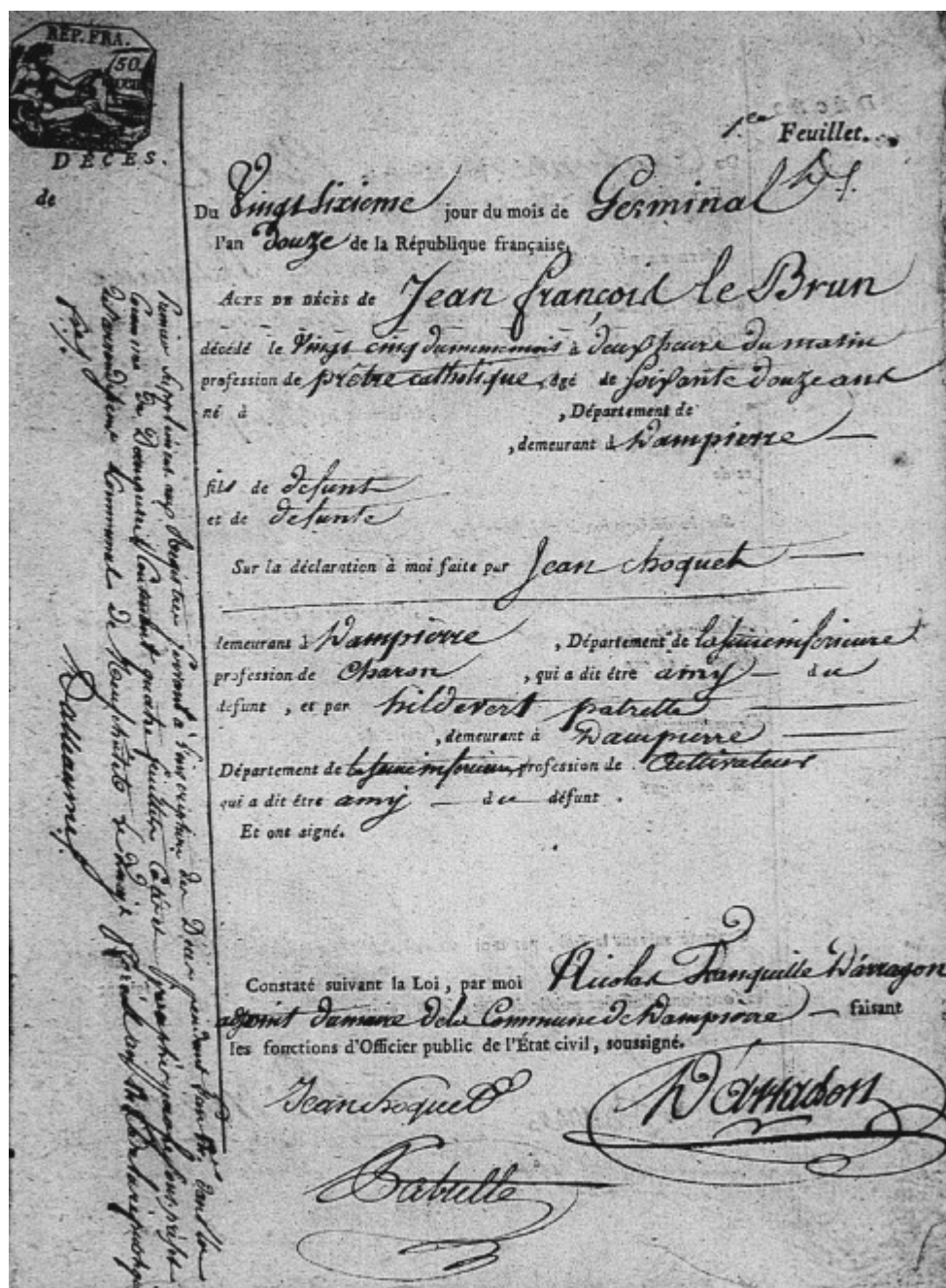
In any case the royal chaplaincy did send me off in various directions, as did the Bellechasse reference: evidently, like Miss Prism, he was remotely connected with education. So first out was Charles Gardeur-Lebrun, précepteur des enfants du duc de Chartres à Bellechasse, of whom Mme de Genlis tells us a good deal, but who does not seem to have been in holy orders.

Then, spurred on perhaps by a remark in Charles-Étienne Gaucher's attack on the *Almanach* hinting that the author was an oratorian, I investigated the abbé Louis-Joseph Le Brun (Reims, St Jacques 3.xi.1722–8.i.1787), régent au collège d'Oratoriens d'Angers, précepteur des pages des Écuries de la reine 1761–67, auteur du *Déluge* etc., chanoine de Reims. But his father was an avocat in Reims, one Timothé Le Brun (1673–1723), who died shortly after the celebrated educationalist was born, and cannot have been living in Provence in 1775.

More tempting among the chaplains in the royal household was the abbé Claude-Nicolas Le Brun de Chassinroy (Nogent-le-Rotrou 1721 – p.1791), vicaire de Bailly 1748–54, chapelain de Madame Sophie de France, maître des requêtes du comte d'Artois. But once again his humble origins didn't fit: his grandfather was a carpenter, Louis Le Brun.

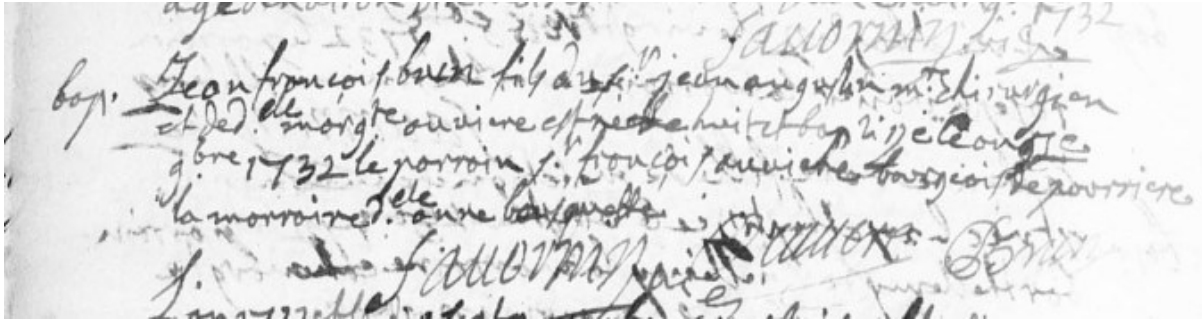
An extensive search of Le Bruns or Lebruns born in Provence or of surgeons of that name (however spelled) connected with the region was also fruitless.

However the answer emerged from a topographical volume about Beauvais which noted that a certain Jean-François Brun [sic], chanoine de Beauvais, published in 1792 *Tablettes historiques du département de l'Oise*, and provided his date and place of death. I'm afraid I cannot recreate the excitement in pursuing this lead in a narrative which you must by now have guessed has an outcome, but here is the death certificate at Dampierre-en-Bray in Normandie:



This in turn led to a more informative [account](#) of Le Brun's later years, in the *Annuaire des cinq départements de la Normandie*, lxi, 1894, pp. 108ff, in a piece entitled "Notes inédites sur quelques-uns des premiers glorificateurs de Nicolas Poussin en Normandie" submitted by a M. [Victor-Ernest] Veulin, imprimeur à Bernay. This helpfully informed us that Jean-François Le Brun [sic] was born on 8 novembre 1732 but in a place the author didn't know, and rather unhelpfully that he was chanoine de Versailles. He lost his place during the Revolution, fled to a village near Dampierre-en-Bray, where after a spell as a school teacher he resumed the priesthood when allowed to do so (1795), and was appointed curé at Dampierre. In an IX (1801) he decided to write a eulogy to Nicolas Poussin, and (just as he had done with d'Angiviller) offered to dedicate the work to the préfet de l'Eure, Claude Masson de Saint-Amand. This time the offer was accepted, but Masson sent the manuscript back to the abbé for corrections to be made, and it was not subsequently heard of.

Only one more difficulty: to find the Jean-François Le Brun born somewhere on 8 November 1732. And the answer, if your eye-sight can take the strain, is: Saint-Zacharie



where his father was still living in 1775 according to the letters cited by Camus. But the name wasn't Le Brun: it was simply Brun. And his genealogy (uncovered step by step from parish records, but presented here with all the drama of a crossword solution) goes back through four generations at least, based in the Var; indeed his brother was also a surgeon, living in Aubagne:

Jean Brun, chirurgien ∞ Catherine Arnoux

⇒ Jean-Baptiste Brun, chirurgien ∞ La Verdière, Var, 24.v.1649 Catherine Audiffren

⇒⇒ Honoré Brun (c.1665–Saint-Zacharie 30.iv.1725), maître chirurgien ∞ 14.ii.1694 Anne Roche (1668–)

⇒⇒⇒ Jean-Augustin [Le] Brun (Saint-Zacharie Var 28.viii.1709 –p.1774), maître chirurgien, habitant Saint-Zacharie ∞ Pourrières 12.ii.1732 Marguerite Ouyère (Saint-Zacharie c.1710 – Roquevaire 20.v.1775)

⇒⇒⇒⇒ L'abbé Jean-François Brun, dit Le Brun (Saint-Zacharie 11.xi.1732 –Dampierre-en-Bray 15.iv.1804), auteur des *Almanachs des peintres*, chanoine de Saint-Pierre, Beauvais, vicaire-général de Sagonne 1776, soi-disant petit-neveu de Charles Le Brun, auteur, membre correspondant de l'Académie de Bordeaux 1776, rue de Saint, chez Mme Mahuet à Paris 1777, chapelain de feu princesse de Conti douairière, chapelain des Cisterciennes de Bellechasse, curé de Dampierre-en-Bray 1795

⇒⇒⇒⇒ François-Benoît-Augustin Brun (13.viii.1744 – Aubagne 27.ix.1804), officier de santé, chirurgien au colonies, résidant à Aubagne ∞ 1° 1769 Marguerite Beaumont; 2° Aubagne 2.ii.1775 Rose Simian

I think we can add the abbé's name to Jouin's list of imposters: the author of the *Almanachs* was plain Brun. No doubt he admired Charles Le Brun as much as he later admired Nicolas Poussin.

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