

Gabrielle Capet's origins

NEIL JEFFARES

HERE, FROM THE EXHIBITION OF *Peintres femmes* that closed today¹ at the Luxembourg, is a fair summary of scholarship to date about the background to the artist universally recognised as Labille-Guiard's best pupil:

Marie-Gabrielle Capet
(1761-1818)

Fille de domestique, née à Lyon, on ignore quelle fut sa première formation artistique. Fait rare au XVIII^e siècle pour une femme de sa condition, elle réussit à devenir l'élève d'Adélaïde Labille-Guiard à Paris en 1781. Dès 1783, elle expose des pastels au Salon de la Jeunesse, puis en 1785 au Salon de la Correspondance. De 1791 à 1814, ses portraits sont présentés au Salon du Louvre. Elle produit de nombreuses copies en miniature des oeuvres de Labille-Guiard et parallèlement des portraits de sa composition, en miniature et au pastel plutôt qu'à l'huile, apanage de Labille-Guiard. Ses modèles appartiennent à l'aristocratie, à la famille royale et au cercle des artistes et proches du couple Vincent et Labille-Guiard. Devenue l'assistante, le modèle et l'amie fidèle de l'académicienne, elle habite avec elle sa vie durant, entretenant une relation de nature « familiale ».

I'll pass over the question of what an "amie fidèle" might mean, because my interest in this post is to investigate the question of how this girl came to be in Paris in the first place. (I'll also pass over the condition of some of Labille-Guiard's other pupils, which I have explored in detail in the relevant entries in the online [Dictionary of pastellists](#): many were quite humble – see for example Mlle [Carraux de Rosemond](#).) Already by October 1781, barely 20 years old, Capet was producing strikingly original work such as this pastel (see J.196.156 in the Dictionary for full details: it is signed and dated "Mlle Capet/8^{bre} 1781"), entirely consistent with her later œuvre.



Art history until now has not progressed beyond the discovery, by Léon Charvet, an architect in Lyon, about 1880, of the artist's baptismal entry, in the parish of Ainay, Lyon, 8.IX.1761, two days after her birth:

¹ This essay first appeared simultaneously on my blog neiljeffares.wordpress.com on 25.VII.2021. This is the version of record, and may be cited as Neil Jeffares, "Gabrielle Capet's origins", *Pastels & pastellists*, http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Capet_famille.pdf.

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Lecroy

Le buste de l'empereur n'est pas fait avec un aile
Baptême par moi de Marie Sophie Marie Gabrielle
Née le 17 Dudit Mois fille légitime de Henry Cappet,
Domestique de Madame Steuve son épouse, son parrain
aile Jacques Garbe, cominge de la prison de l'archevêché
de Mairraime Gabrielle Savatoy, épouse de Jean Baptiste
Mouet Domestique. Le parrain aile, non le père
pour être absent de la Mairraime pour le service de
la maison de Garbe, charron, Bremond, etc.

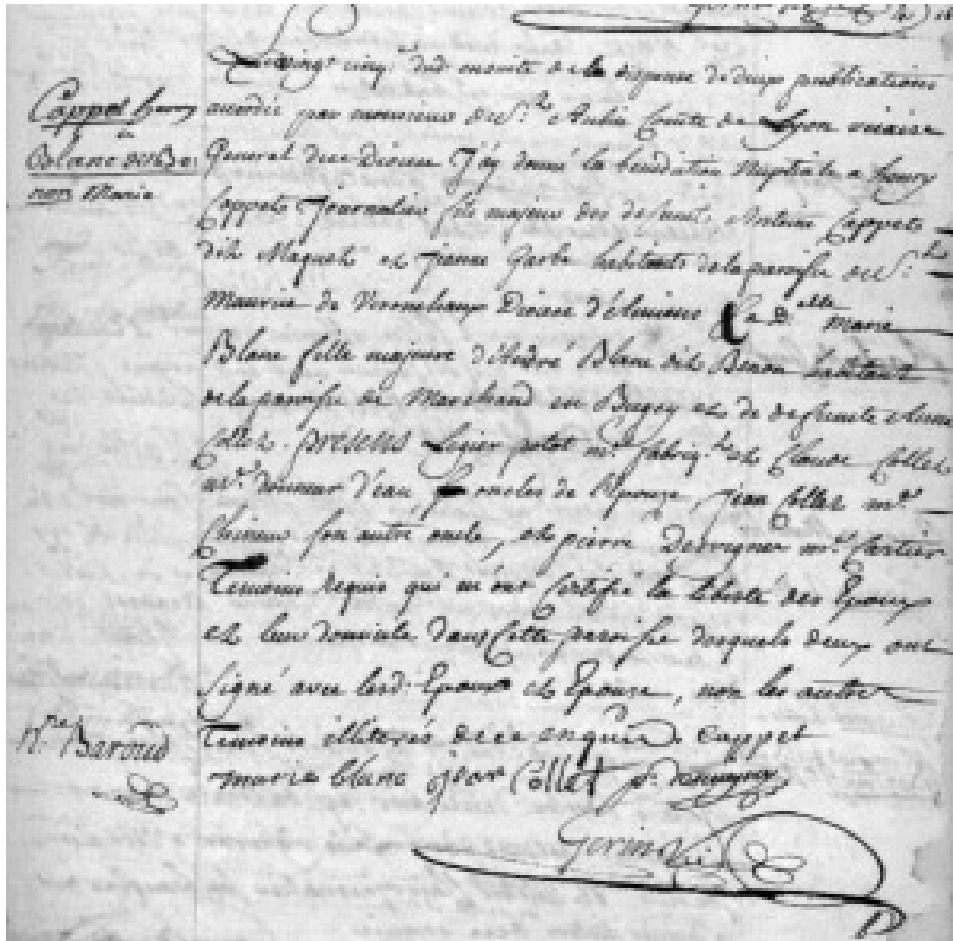
Soyez copie conforme
Lecroy

Until now no further documents were located, and the imaginations of art historians focused therefore on this document, incompletely or inaccurately transcribed in various sources and naming parents and godparents of whom nothing was known. Doria even “corrects” the spelling of her father’s name from Cappet to Capet, the form the artist always used. The suggestion by Henri Bouchot, in answer to the question of how she got to Paris, “qu’une marraine, portière dans une prison, la reçut à son arrivée, et, par des relations, la confia à Mme Labille-Guiard” is not only without evidence, but even confuses her parrain and marraine. Nevertheless, “en l’absence d’autres explications, cette hypothèse...reste la plus satisfaisante” according to the otherwise excellent biography by Christophe Marcheteau de Quinçay at the time of the 2014 exhibition in Caen.

I think we can go further, albeit without all the proof we would like to see.

It’s perhaps surprising that, with the plethora of genealogy sources all apparently indexed, it isn’t possible to pull out the documents I’ve found more readily, but the simple vagaries of spelling, gaps in the coverage etc. mean that a considerable amount of ingenuity is needed to locate these entries which accordingly I’ve set out for you below (not in the order in which I winkled them out!).

The first point is that Capet’s family name was properly spelled Cappet – as it correctly appears in her acte de baptême. Her parents were Henry Cappet and his wife named only as Marie Blanc in that acte. But there is more in their marriage documents: I first tracked this down from the contract dated 20.I.1759 indexed in a Lyon notary’s repertoire (Heurtaut & Berdoud, AD 69 3 E 17953, f° 220: still with Cappet). Although it didn’t specify the parish, it wasn’t too difficult to locate the entry in the register of Saint-Nizier, a different Lyon parish, five days later 25.I.1759:



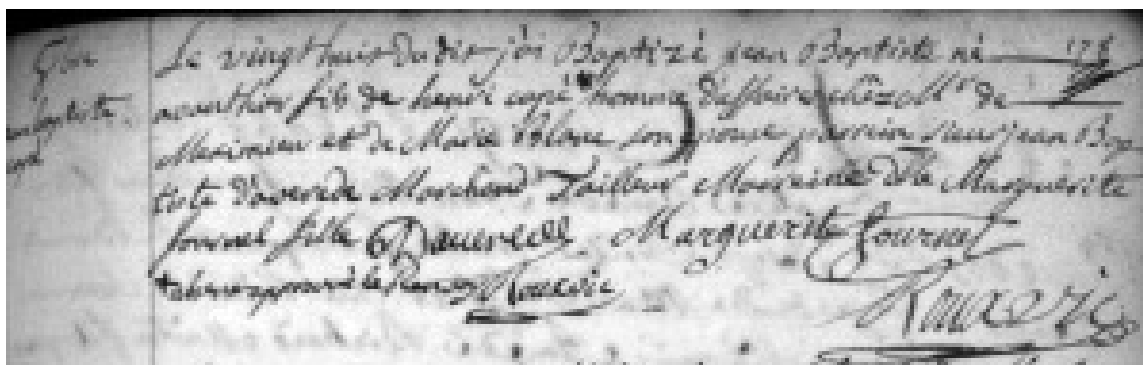
This reveals that Henry Cappet was then a mere “journalier”, son of Antoine Cappet dit Maquet ou Macquet (1690–1727) and Jeanne Garbe. They came from Vironchaux, Somme: and the parish register shows that the artist’s paternal grandparents married there in 1715. I won’t test your patience with all the generations one can trace back there, but “Cappet” was the established spelling for at least three. The Garbe family were based there by the late 16th century. The name, confined to the Hauts-de-France, is sufficiently unusual that it is tempting to wonder if, at that time, one of them moved to Laon, and started the line of blacksmiths that led to Marie Garbe, Maurice-Quentin de La Tour’s grandmother. If so the connection was so tenuous it is highly unlikely that either pastellist was aware of it.

Gabrielle Capet’s mother’s family were from Marchamp (Ain), a village about 75 km east of Lyon. Marie Blanc dit Benon, to give her the full family name, was baptised there on 17.XII.1730. It is clear thus that the match arose after Henry’s move to Lyon, and the key to that must surely be the parrain identified in the artist’s baptismal entry – Jacques Garbe, concierge de la prison de l’archevêché at Lyon. The office is confirmed in one other contemporary document which adds nothing further, but there are no parish records confirming a Garbe in the Lyon area. Except for one: the death on 25.V.1796 of a Charles-Honoré Garbe, a rentier, aged 61 – “natif de Vironchaux”! Unfortunately gaps in the Vironchaux register make it impossible to prove the connection, but it seems beyond doubt that Jacques and Charles-Honoré were closely related – possibly brothers or father and son, and, through Jeanne Garbe, Mme Antoine Cappet, no doubt cousins of Henry Cappet. So when Jacques Garbe moved to Lyon and secured a position at the prison he may well have been the magnet to draw Henry there in search of work. Incidentally Charles-Honoré was reasonably well off, at least able to make a modest patriotic donation at the time of the Revolution.

In 1759 Henry was a “journalier”; by 1761 he appeared as a “domestique” – the only information art history has had to date, summarised as an “homme de service dont la condition était précaire”, as Bouchot put it. So let us pursue this a little further afield, there being no further Capet or Cappet documents indexed in the Lyon genealogy sites.

My search discovered that over the next five years three siblings of Gabrielle were born: Denise, Jeanne and Jean-Baptiste. All died in infancy, having been sent out to nurse in Saint-Genis-L’Argentière, a village about 50 km west of Lyon, as was the custom at the time.

I couldn’t locate the baptismal entries for Gabrielle’s younger sisters Denise or Jeanne: they don’t seem to appear in either Ainay or Saint-Nizier, but at the baptism of the youngest, Jean-Baptiste (Saint-Nizier, 28.x.1765):



Henry was described as “homme d’affaires chez M. de Meximieu”, absent (as he was at Gabrielle’s baptism), no doubt travelling. There is no further record of the artist’s parents. As their links with the area were not profound they may have moved away.

But I think a possible key to the question posed by Bouchot is in this entry, and the mysterious employer whose name doesn’t easily Google. But we can identify him as Jean-François Trollier de Fétan (1731–1814), conseiller du roi en la cour des Monnaies de Lyon, who was known at the time by his title of seigneur de Messimieux – this is the name that appeared in the parish register at Ainay, 31.I.1764, when he married Louise-Marie-Suzanne Chappuis de Margnolas (among the guests was Liotard’s subject Claret de Fleuriau); it is even spelled Meximieux in a 1785 document in the registres de tutelles (AN Y5129^c).

Trollier was known as a philanthropist and patron of the arts: he was a founder member of the learned Société d’Agriculture, d’Histoire naturelle et des Arts utiles de Lyon, of which he was secrétaire pour la correspondance étrangère. “Aussi riche que charitable”, most notably, he paid for Marc-Antoine Petit, of humble and illegitimate lyonnais origin, to study in Paris for several years (and later wrote verses to put under the by then famous surgeon’s engraved physionotrace). Trollier lived in Paris, Île Saint-Louis; in the register of cartes de sûreté, his name is followed by that of his son, Alphonse, who described himself as a peintre, although he soon abandoned the profession.

We know virtually nothing of what happened to the artist’s parents after the death of her baby brother. No record for their deaths has been found. One might suspect that the artist had been orphaned young – which would explain why their daughter was unaware of the spelling of her name that had been used for many generations. The only information we have is the inference that her mother survived into the 19th century from the fact that the livret of the Salon de 1801 has this entry for “La Mère de l’auteur”:

M.^{lle} CAPET, élève de M.^{me} Vincent, ci-devant Guiard.

GRANDES MINIATURES.

50. Portrait du citoyen Houdon, Sculpteur, membre de l'Institut national, travaillant un buste de Voltaire.

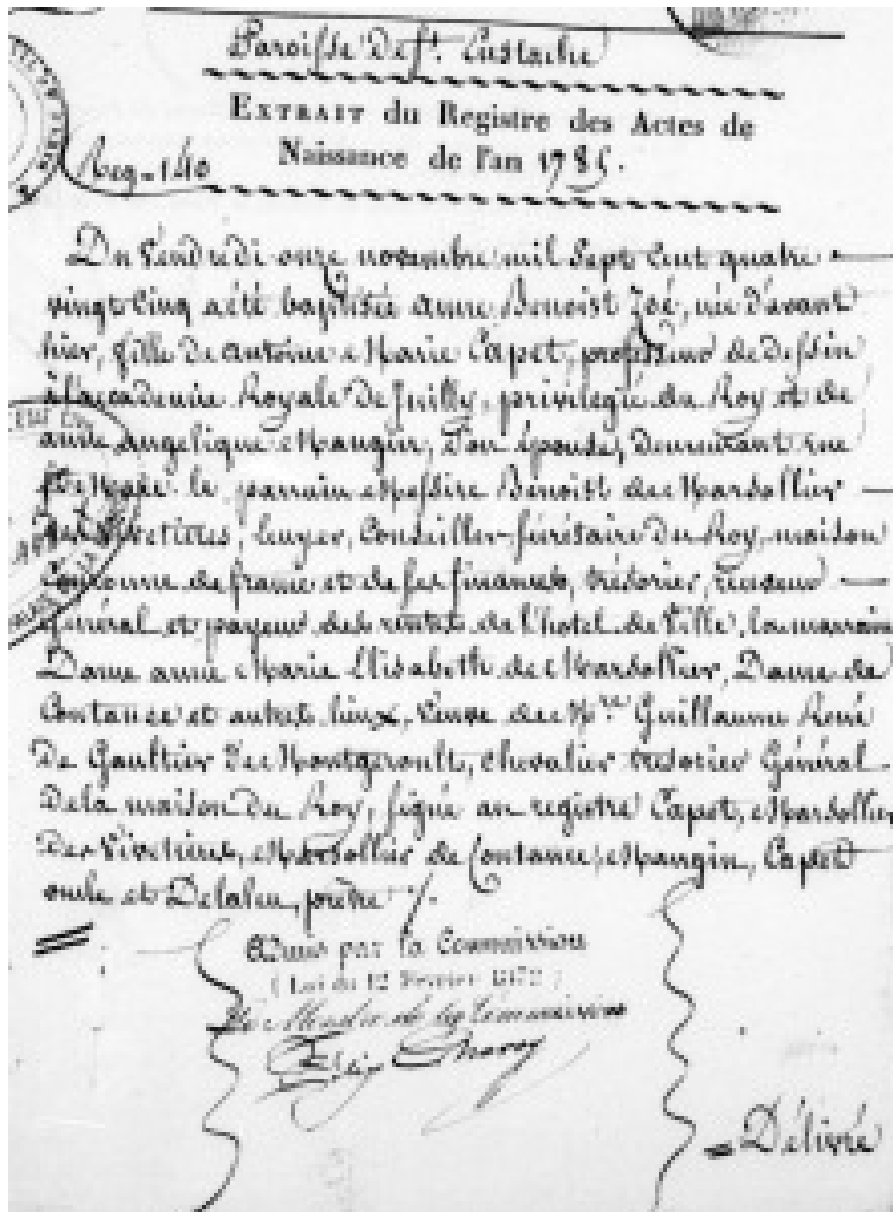
51. La mère de l'auteur.

This “grande miniature” is unfortunately lost. Doria, quite reasonably, takes it at face value, assumes it was painted from life, and wonders whether the lady, at least 60 (she was in fact 71), had travelled from Lyon for the portrait, had moved to Paris, or if her daughter had visited Lyon, a suggestion he rejects as unlikely. He doesn't consider whether it might not have been done from life, or necessarily while she was still living. Even more audaciously one wonders if Capet might be referring to Labille-Guiard – after all she does refer in her will to “mon père Vincent”, only later in the document describing him as “mon bienaimé père d'adoption”. (Omitted from earlier sources, Capet's testament of 20.X.1818 is helpfully reprinted in the voluminous documentation in Jean-Pierre Cuzin's 2013 monograph on *Vincent*, pp. 532f.)

There is however the record of the pair of pastels Gabrielle made of her parents (see note below) which does suggest they survived at least until the start of her artistic career. Whether or not, it seems probable that it was her father's employer who was responsible for ensuring that the girl was sent to Paris and to the studio of the best teacher – whose own father (as I recently [discovered](#)) had been chargé d'affaire to the président de Sénozan from another important family in Lyon. The rest is art history.

Or is it? While writing this post I was conscious that however plausible my theory was, it lacked documentary proof. So once again I went over my material, including more or less the only piece of writing of the artist that has survived – that 1818 will, where I found nothing to help.

Except that she left “trois cent francs de rente” to each of “Zoé et Suzanne Capet mes petites cousines”. I don't why they have been overlooked so far, but I thought I'd better investigate. And indeed the sisters were born, in 1785 and 1786 respectively, and would soon marry. But it is their antecedents who interest us. Here is Zoe's baptismal record, which is worth reproducing in full:



Here we discover that Mlle Capet's cousin was an artist of whom most of us have never heard: Antoine-Marie Capet. And you will struggle to find any reference to him in standard art historical works. After a great deal of research, the best account I could find was a newspaper article, written by Jacqueline Hériard-Dubreuil, on "La peinture religieuse dans les sanctuaires de Seine-et-Marne" which appeared in *L'Abeille de Fontainebleau* on 26.v.1939. This reports an inscription under two religious paintings (one a copy of Raphael's *Sainte Famille*, the other an original Baptism of Christ) in the church at Nantouillet, near Jully (about 40 km north-east of Paris), identifying them as by "Antoine Marie Copet [sic], né et mort à Paris (1743-1824), élève du célèbre Restout", further claiming that he had won the prix de Rome, and confirming that he had been professeur de dessin at the Académie royale de Jully, and then director of the École de dessin at Chantilly. And indeed an entry in the liste des élèves de l'Académie royale de peinture at ENSBA confirms, with the correct spelling:

Mars 1765. Antoine Marie Capet, P. de Paris, âgé de 22 ans au mois de septembre prochain. Protégé par M. Restout, demeure ché M. son Père, ché Le Serrurier Visavis St-Jean-en-Grève, rue du Martois.

Hériard-Dubreuil also reprints the short note in Charles Hamel's *Histoire de l'abbaye et collège de Jully* (1888 edition, p. 291; there is nothing in the 1868 edition), which explains that the teaching of drawing was confided to Capet, a layman, who made some good portraits, in pen and ink, of

several Pères de l'Oratoire de Juilly, and adds that he was buried in the church at Nantouillet. As to whether he taught at Chantilly, Hériard-Dubreuil consulted Henri Malo who was unable to confirm this.

There is also a reference to Capet and his role at Juilly in Nicole Willk-Brocard's immensely thorough account of *Jean-Bernard Restout*, 2017: this is on p. 16 (the references on pp. 124, 125 indexed as to Antoine-Marie Capet are in fact to the deposed king Louis XVI, illustrating why Googling art history questions isn't always as simple as it sounds), and introduces a document discovered by a bibliophile and reproduced in full on p. 203: a letter by Restout fils of 18.IV.1788 certifying Capet's good character:

Je soussigné, Peintre ordinaire du Roy atteste que le sr Capet, élève de mon père et le mien, m'est connu depuis sa première jeunesse pour avoir toujours tenu la conduite la plus régulière, que j'ai honoré son respect et sa reconnaissance envers mon digne père et d'après l'estime que j'ai fait de ses mœurs et de son caractère, je me suis intéressé et j'ai œuvré pour lui procurer la place qu'il occupe au collège de Juilly où depuis plus de vingt ans il m'a paru obtenir la satisfaction et mériter la bienveillance des supérieurs de cette maison et y a rempli ses devoirs. J'ai toujours aussi rendu justice à la douceur et à l'égalité de son caractère qui m'a été pareillement connu ainsi que son honnêteté et sa modération. En foi de quoi je lui ai délivré le présent certificat pour lui servir en tant que de raison. À Paris ce dix huit avril mil sept cent quatre vingt huit.

We should add too the evidence from Zoé's godparents: Benoît Marsollier de Vivetières (1712–1787), the fabulously wealthy marchand drapier nick-named “Mylord Velours” and his widowed daughter: his sister-in-law and her daughter were the subject of the fabulous Nattier painting now in the Met.

So here is firm evidence that Antoine-Marie Capet had been a pupil of Restout at the Académie royale and had been teaching drawing at the Académie de Juilly from the late 1760s. Given that Restout was the only teacher Maurice-Quentin de La Tour said had taught him anything useful, this obviously presents an alternative narrative of how Capet might have become a pastellist in Paris.

But first we must check whether they were really related. As far as I am aware this has never been suggested. So far all we have is the reference to “mes petites cousines” in Gabrielle's will, a term used quite loosely in those days (as witness La Tour's various references which we've discussed elsewhere in this blog).

Once again this proves to be trickier than you might expect: you won't get there directly through Geneanet, Filae or any of the other indexing sites. But here is a long-story-cut-very-short account. From Zoé's baptismal entry we know that Antoine-Marie Capet was married to an Anne-Angélique Mangin, and the Paris divorces are indexed: theirs took place on 6.VII.1793, when the girls were 7 and 8 years old. The divorce tables provide Antoine-Marie Capet's parents: Jean-Charles, and Jeanne-Claude Charonat. The Fonds Andriveau index reveals that this marriage took place in Paris, Saint-Séverin, on 3.VIII.1739; Capet was identified as a “domestique”, as Henry would be later. Further research reveals that “Jean-Charles dit Maquet Capet”, born in 1723, remarried at least three times; at his fourth marriage, at Regniere-Ecluse Somme 19.i.1773, his parents' names were disclosed as Antoine Capet and Jeanne Garbe. In other words he was Henry's brother, and Gabrielle's uncle, so that Antoine-Marie was indeed her first cousin, as we can see in this brief pedigree:

Jean Cappet ∞ Vironchaux 1715 N
 ⇒ Antoine Cappet dit Maquet ou Macquet (1690–1727), de Vironchaux ∞ Jeanne Garbe
 ⇒⇒ Henry Cappet ∞ Lyon Saint-Nizier, 25.i.1759 Marie Blanc dit Benon (bpt Marchamp 17.xii.1730 – p.1801)
 ⇒⇒⇒ Marie Gabrielle Capet (1761–1818sa), pastelliste
 ⇒⇒⇒ Denise (Lyon .xii.1762 – Saint-Genis-L'Argentière 16.ii.1763)
 ⇒⇒⇒ Jeanne (Lyon .xi.1765 – Saint-Genis-L'Argentière 7.ii.1766)
 ⇒⇒⇒ Jean-Baptiste Cappet (Lyon, Saint-Nizier, 28.x.1765 – Saint-Genis-L'Argentière 24.iii.1767)

⇒⇒Jean-Charles dit Maquet Capet (1723–p.1782), domestique 1739 ∞ Paris, Saint-Séverin 3.viii.1739
Jeanne-Claude Charonat; 2° Marie-Anne Courbet (1721–1747); 3° Vironchaux 11.ii.1766 Marie-Jeanne
Walet; 4° Regniere-Ecluse Somme 19.i.1773 Marie Anne Deleyen (1714–)
⇒⇒⇒Antoine-Marie Capet (1743–1824), professeur de dessin à l'académie royale de Juilly ∞ div.
6.vii.1793 Anne-Angélique Mangin, fille d'Antoine & Marguerite Michel
⇒⇒⇒⇒Anne-Benoist-Zoé (Paris, St Eustache 11.xi.1785–) ∞ Juilly 1819 Antoine-Denis Grevin
⇒⇒⇒⇒Antoinette-Marie-Suzanne (Paris, St Eustache 17.xi.1786–12.vi.1876) Jean-Baptiste-René Rigaud

And it is clear too that Gabrielle knew of her cousin, even though she mentions only the two daughters in her will. He was eighteen years older than she was, already established as a drawing teacher in an academy, known and respected by a *peintre du roi* and enjoyed (or was soon to enjoy) the patronage of an extremely wealthy financier. It seems inconceivable that she would not at the very least have sought her cousin's advice before joining Labille-Guiard's studio.

NOTE

I should clarify one further point. In her posthumous inventory (reproduced in Passez 1973; Cuzin has the testament, but they are different documents), a double portrait in oil of Zoé and Suzanne is mentioned. The preceding item included two pastels of M. et Mme Capet: as clarified in the testament they are of her parents rather than of her cousin and his wife. However, as with the 1801 miniature there is no indication of when they were made (unless we are tempted to conflate them with the anonymous couple dated 1782, my J.196.182 and J.196.183). This of course is pure speculation. But the point of this post is that, as “*homme d'affaires chez M. de Meximieu*”, he might well have been dressed in this manner; as a “*domestique*”, probably not.



Neil Jeffares