

## Coypel, *A new autoportrait*

NEIL JEFFARES



### [Charles Coypel](#)

Autoportrait

Pastel on paper, 61x48 cm

1734

**PROVENANCE:** L'artiste; ?don: Pierre Gallien (1701–1777), avocat au parlement, avec un portrait d'un abbé par Coypel et l'ébauche du morceau de réception de Noël Coypel, *La réprobation de Caïn*; sa veuve, née Marie-Elisabeth Grosley (1719–1798), sœur de l'auteur Pierre-Jean Grosley, Troyes, a.1785; sa fille Elisabeth Gallien (1743–1815) ∞ 1763 Bonaventure-Nicolas Huez de Pouilly (1732–1785), 1788; leur fils Nicolas Huez de Pouilly (1766–1842); sa fille, Barbe-Françoise (1800–1866) ∞ 1822 Antoine-Henri-François Corrad de Breban; [leur fille Léonie-Claire (1823–1852) ∞ 1845 Pierre-Edouard Levesque de Blives (1813–1879)]; leur fils François-Edouard Levesque de Blives (1849–1885) ∞ 1874 Louise-Pauline-Marie-Joséphine Leroy (1851–1929), [fille de Ferdinand-François Leroy (1808–1866)]; leur fille Valérie-Joséphine-Émilie Levesque de Blives (1883–1955) ∞ 1912 Yvan-Charles-Marie Oldekop (1881–1915); leur fille Marie-Lys-Napoléone-Pauline-Ivane Oldekop (1913–1958) ∞ 1934 Maurice William Auberjonois; leur fille Claire, Mme West; Von Oldekop-West collection; West Columbia, South Carolina, Charlton Hall, 27.III.2026, Lot 499 repr., attr., as ex F.-F. Leroy

**EXHIBITIONS:** Salon de Troyes 1788, no.

53, du cabinet de Mme de Pouilly, avec le portrait d'un abbé, "Ces deux tableaux sont précieux, tant pour la belle touche que pour l'auteur dont ils sortent"

**LITERATURE:** L. M. Patris-Debreuil, éd., *Éphémérides de P. J. Grosley*, Paris, 1811, II, p. 261 n.r.; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [1.2472.105](#) [[olim 1.2472.115](#)]

**RELATED WORKS:** (fig.1) AUTO-PORTRAIT, le bras gauche sur un carton de dessin, pstl/ppr, 98.1x80, sd → "Charles Coypel/s'est peint/lui meme pour Philippe/Coypel/son frere et son/ami/qui plus est./1734" (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 97.PC.19). Lit.: *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [1.2472.104](#)

**GENEALOGY:** [Coypel](#)

**N**OT QUITE A SLEEPER, but certainly undercatalogued, a new Coypel self-portrait has just appeared in an American auction in a small town in South Carolina, among a group of pictures, manuscripts and genealogical papers that apparently had descended from one Ferdinand-François Leroy and now formed part of what was described as the "Van Oldekop-West collection". Presented rather unhelpfully in a hideous modern red lacquer frame, rotated to "straighten" the head, the pastel had lost its original strainer, and when removed from the frame the corners were covered in a peculiar gilt substance: none of this was particularly promising, despite the compelling and unmistakably Coypel appearance of the face. Even more worrying



Fig. 1 Charles Coypel, *Autoportrait* (Getty)

was the complex relationship it bears to the very famous Coypel 1734 self-portrait in the Getty (J.2472.104, fig. 1): no wonder the auctioneers qualified the entry to “attributed to” Coypel. Nowhere is it mentioned in Thierry Lefrançois’s catalogue raisonné (1994).

But its quality demanded further enquiry. And the brief entry in the online *Dictionary of pastellists* (as J.2472.115, until renumbered now to J.2472.105) provided a bibliographic reference that rescues the attribution.

In the sales catalogue the provenance is based on a handwritten label, in a mid-nineteenth century hand, which reads as follows:

Charles Coypel  
né en 1694 mort en  
1752.

Peintre & homme de  
lettres. – Grosley parle

dans l’histoire de sa vie de sa liaison avec l’abbé Gallien, vicaire à St Germain l’Auxerrois. Coypel a peint au pastel un portrait de l’abbé Gallien qui est encore dans la famille, & outre le portrait ci contre “propria persona” il lui a donné une étude du Tableau de réception de son aïeul Noël Coypel à l’académie de peinture.

Provenance

Abbé Gallien – M<sup>e</sup> Elisabeth Gallien-Huez – Nicolas Huez de Pouilly.

To this provenance the auctioneers added “Descended in the family to Ferdinand François Leroy (1808–1866); thence by descent to Von Oldekop-West Collection”.

Unfortunately both documents contain errors. The only Gallien that the writer Pierre-Jean Grosley describes in his *Vie de M. Grosley*<sup>1</sup> was his brother-in-law, Pierre Gallien (1701–1771), avocat en parlement, from Bar-sur-Seine. He was the nephew of a miser who lived in a house above the passage du quai de l’École à l’église de Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois in Paris, and Gallien duly became the richest private person in Troyes (Grosley disliked his brother-in-law and his manoeuvres to secure inheritances). But he was not an abbé, still less vicaire of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois. The confusion may be explained by a passage in another book by Grosley: in his *Éphémérides de P. J. Grosley*, he describes the principal art collections in Troyes, among them—

*Chez E. Gallien Grosley, le portrait du dernier des Coypels, peint en pastel par lui-même. Celui d’un Abbé de ses amis, peint à l’huile de sa main. L’esquisse d’après laquelle Noël*



Fig. 2 Noël Coypel, *La réprobation de Caïn* (Louvre)

<sup>1</sup> *Écrite en partie par lui-même, continuée et publiée par M. l’abbé Maydiou, London and Paris, Barrois, 1787.*

Coypel a exécuté en grand, Dieu chassant Caïn qui vient de tuer Abel.

Grosley must have been writing shortly before his death in 1785; “E. Gallien Grosley” was his sister, Marie-Élisabeth Grosley (1719–1798), widow of Pierre Gallien, almost certainly the first owner of the pictures.

I suspect the author of the much later note pasted on the back of the autoportrait knew this passage as well as the *Vie de M. Grosley*, and incorrectly inferred that the second picture, the oil [not pastel] painting of an abbé, one of [Coypel’s] friends was the one “encore dans la famille”. The third picture, the sketch for Coypel’s grandfather’s *morceau de réception*, *La réprobation de Caïn*, confirms that the original recipient was in all likelihood a friend of Coypel. Indeed that painting has its own confusions: Noël Coypel’s *morceau de réception* was accepted by the Académie in 1663, but in 1748 Charles Coypel substituted a circular version (fig. 2)<sup>2</sup> to replace the original rectangular one; as recorded in the *Procès-verbaux*,

[Charles Coypel] a retiré le *morceau de réception* de feu M. Coypel, son aïeul, dont le sujet représente Dieu qui apparaît à Caïn après le meurtre de son frère Abel, et en a donné un autre du même sujet, infiniment supérieur.

This raises the possibility that third of the group of Coypel pictures reported by Grosley was this discarded rectangular version itself rather than a preliminary sketch, in which case it is likely that all three works were with Charles Coypel still in 1748.

That the group came to the owners directly from Coypel is put beyond any doubt by the appearance in the exhibition of the Salon de Troyes<sup>3</sup> in 1788, lent by Mme de Pouilly [i.e. Mme Gallien Grosley’s daughter, Élisabeth Gallien (1743–1815), by then widow of Bonaventure-Nicolas Huez de Pouilly (1732–1785)] of:

Du cabinet de Madame de Pouilly

53. Portrait de Coipel, pastel, peint par lui-même.

54. Portrait d’un abbé, par le même.

Ces deux tableaux sont précieux, tant pour la belle touche que pour l’auteur dont ils sortent.

But what was the connection between the Coypel family and Pierre Gallien? That isn’t yet clear. Gallien did spend time in Paris, and his prodigious wealth would have enabled him to purchase the three pictures: but it is highly unlikely that such a group (but no others of similar importance) would have been bought by a collector without a personal connection to Coypel. An alternative possibility is through Noël Coypel’s pupil Edme Herluison, an engraver, who was largely based in Troyes and his relation, the religious painter Louis Herluison. Another member of the Herluison family was closely connected with the cathedral in Troyes (the bishop was then a nephew of the famous Bossuet), and to the chantry and chanoine de Troyes, who was an abbé Gallien (Edmé-François, 1700–1764), Pierre Gallien’s first cousin. But that abbé Gallien’s testament left his estate to his brothers, and there is nothing (beyond the confusion in the note on the back of the pastel) to suggest that he was the recipient of the Coypel pictures.



Fig. 3 Charles Coypel, *Autoportrait*, 1746, oil (Versailles)

<sup>2</sup> The circular version, 99 cm in diameter, is the only surviving one (Louvre, inv. 3453, MR 1361). See Nicolas Milovanovic, *Peintures françaises du XVIII<sup>e</sup> du musée du Louvre*, 2021, p. 54, no. 122.

<sup>3</sup> *Catalogue des tableaux, estampes, dessins, gravures et modèles exposés au Salon de l’École royale et gratuite de dessin de Troyes, pour la distribution des prix de l’année 1788*. See Marty 2021.

There is a further confusion in the auctioneer's provenance which reports the picture as having belonged to Ferdinand-François Leroy (1808–1866) before descending in the family to the Von Oldekop-West collection. This is understandable in the context of the group of lots in the sale from this source which include many documents collected by Leroy, an amateur genealogist, as well as some materials connected with the miniaturist Lizinka de Mirbel with whom Leroy had a liaison. Mme de Mirbel (1796–1849) cannot however be the author of Lot 503, a miniature of Bonaventure-Nicolas Huez de Pouilly (1732–1785), as the label on the back identifies him. But that miniature evidently comes from the same group as the Coypel pastel. Crucially, as a study of the Gallien/Huez pedigree reveals, Leroy's connection arose through the marriage in 1874, after his death, of his daughter Louise-Pauline-Marie-Joséphine Leroy (1851–1929) to François-Edouard Levesque de Blives (1849–1885). The vendor in 2026 is their great-granddaughter.

Let us turn to the autoportrait itself. It clearly relates closely to the magnificent self-portrait now in the Getty (fig. 1), of which Thierry Lefrançois justly noted that “ce superbe autoportrait constitue un morceau capital du maître”. Dedicated to the artist's brother, its subsequent fate is unknown until it reappeared in 1927. The pose carries all the baroque drama one associates with Coypel at his best. It is notable that the much later (1746) oil self-portrait (MV 5813) retains all the elements of this composition – the artist before a canvas on an easel, with portfolio and porte-crayon – but strips it of all flamboyance.



Fig. 4 Getty and new autoportrait faces compared

Comparing the faces of the two 1734 autoportraits in detail (fig. 4) one notes a slightly softer finish in the reduced version, reminiscent of La Tour's habit of using two approaches in repetitions of portraits, one, more vigorous, intended for connoisseurs, the other softer handling for general appreciation. Apart from the far smaller scale, the other changes – the colour of the coat, and the elaborate lock of hair falling down his left shoulder in a style repeated in his portrait of Dufresny known from Joullain's engraving (Lefrançois P.53A) – are not those a copyist would have introduced. They leave one guessing whether this was a preliminary study for the Getty pastel or a *ricordo* or presentation version.

Initially puzzling is the presentation of the oval on a rectangular support with the corners covered in some form of gilding (fig. 5), with part of the cloak, lower right, overlapping the border of the geometric oval. But Coypel repeatedly experimented with these elements. The



Fig. 5 Coypel, *autoportrait* out of frame

tradition from late seventeenth century portrait engravings of oval borders, often in the form of a stone oculus, invited playful overlaps with hands or clothing breaking out of the picture space in a trompe-l'oeil manner. Even where portraits were intended to be simple ovals – and although oval strainers had been used by Vivien and many other artists, the simple convenience of working on a delineated oval space on a rectangular support could be accommodated by spandrels in the frame. Coypel himself experimented in leaving these area exposed in numerous examples, although they are often trimmed in reproduction. Readers of Lefrançois would be unaware

that the later (1739) *autoportrait* in Orléans has identical gilt corners to the present work (fig. 6). If Coypel's intention in making a reduced version was to include such gilt corners, that may explain his decision to change the colour of the coat: the dark grey giving a better colour balance than the brown against gold.

Coypel's 1752 *inventaire après décès*<sup>4</sup> included, "pour mémoire", "huit portraits tant d'hommes que de femmes tous de famille peint en pastelle et dans leur différentes bordures ovales de bois doré tous garnie de glaces." They may well have been his own work, but this is particularly curious as none has survived (it has been suggested that the Orléans pastel was one of them, but both it and the new *autoportrait* are in fictive ovals on rectangular strainers, and can never have been in oval frames).



Fig. 6 Coypel, *Autoportrait*, 1739 (Orléans, mBA)

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<sup>4</sup> 28.IX.1752 (AN MC LXXVI/337); see Scott 2016.