

Davesne, *Bourlet de Vauxcelles*

NEIL JEFFARES



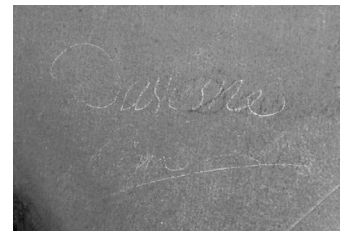
[Pierre Davesne](#)

[ZOOMIFY](#)

Simon-Jérôme BOURLET DE VAUXCELLES (1733–1802)

Pastel on five sheets of paper, 59.5x49.8 cm, oval

Signed, mid-right, black chalk “Davesne”; also in graphite, “Davesne/pinx” c.1775



Private collection

PROVENANCE: Paris, Christie's, 21 November 2007, Lot 110 reproduced

LITERATURE: *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [1.259.105](#)

RELATED WORKS: version wearing clerical costume, pastel, 46x37 cm (Lyon, Aguttes, 25 April 2009, Lot 120 reproduced, entouragement de Lenoir)

GENEALOGY: [Bourlet](#)

SIMON-JEROME BOURLET DE VAUXCELLES (Versailles 1733 – Paris 1802) was a priest and man of letters.¹ Docteur au Sorbonne, he became abbé prédicateur du roi 1756, chanoine de Noyon, abbé de Massay,² lecteur du comte d'Artois. To these offices, recorded on the frame of his portrait, he added in 1781 that of abbé commendataire of the Augustinian abbey of Saint-Ambroise in the diocese of Bourges, carrying an income of 3500 livres, and, in 1787, bibliothécaire de l' Arsenal – the celebrated library of Voyer d'Argenson acquired by the comte d'Artois and confiscated under the Revolution.

Born in Versailles in 1733 (usually reported as 1734), he was a brilliant student at the Sorbonne. After taking orders, his sermons were so highly praised that he was invited to give the funeral oration for the comte d'Eu, prince de Dombes (grandson of Louis XIV) in 1755. He was appointed abbé prédicateur du roi in 1756 at the age of 23.

In 1768 he travelled to England, where his succinct observations on the country were

¹ There is a short article in Grete, *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises*, 1960.

² He does not seem to have held this office. Jubert de Bouville was abbé de Massay from 1759.

conveyed in a letter to an unnamed lady.³ He approved of English inns and was struck by English clothes, particularly those of the girls which he describes minutely, initially finding them attractive before looking more carefully (he uses the English term “whores” but refrains from giving its French translation in the letter). He disapproved of the cuisine. St Paul’s and the hospital at Greenwich were the only decent buildings in London, but he gives qualified approval to the British Museum, built and decorated by French artists, although with very inferior collections compared with France. He was received by Sir Josué Vanneck, and Lord Marsh (later 4th Duke of Queensbury, and an inveterate gambler) welcomed him at Newmarket. His return journey allowed him to express his views on British education: “Nous fûmes coucher à Cambridge, ville savante et pauvre, où il y a trois mille pédans et pas un pavé de grès.” He attended a ball at Holland House, where he was impressed by one of the dancers, Lady Sara, a print of whom he promised to his correspondent. He disapproved of, but wrote at length about, John Wilkes.

Among his publications was an éloge on Henri-François Daguesseau, chancelier de France (1760), entered for the prize of the Académie française. He wrote a preface for the new edition of Fénelon’s *Éducation des filles*, and edited Bossuet (1805). He published an edition of Mme de Sévigné’s letters in 1801, and the following year the letters of abbé Sevin to the comte de Caylus on Constantinople. As well as his writing, his conversation was highly regarded, “semée d’anecdotes piquantes et de saillies gaies et heureuses”, according to one source,⁴ which added that “il possédoit un excellent cœur et des vertus réelles, qu’il étoit loin d’afficher. *Je ne veux édifier personne, disoit-il à ses amis, et il méritoit d’en avoir.*”

Vauxcelles’s relations with the major figures of the Enlightenment were ambiguous. Initially he was very much part of this movement – he figures in the *Correspondance littéraire* of Grimm, frequented the salon of Mlle de Lespinasse and was a correspondent of the abbé Galiani. He was, with the abbé Morellet, one of only a handful of compilers of the fifth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (which finally appeared in 1798). But early on he was suspicious of his colleagues: an annotation on his copy of the *Mémoires secrets* denounces Duclos as “un faux sincère” and alleges that “sa brusquerie étoit de commande.”⁵ Vauxcelles came to distrust the influence of Montesquieu on intellectuals; the philosopher’s original statement that “la raison a un empire naturel...” had been distorted into an “empire of reason” in which public opinion was imposed over society.⁶



Figure 1

During the Revolution Davesne was a journalist with *La Quotidienne* and *Le Memorial*. Together with J.-B.-A. Suard, he compiled the *Opuscules philosophiques* in 1796 which published for the first time Diderot’s influential *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (as well as Mme du Châtelet’s *Réflexions sur le Bonheur*, Thomas’s *Anecdote sur le roi de Prusse* and an essay by Necker); however this was accompanied by Vauxcelles’s bitter attack on Diderot as “le véritable instituteur de la sans-culotterie” and the instigator of atheism. This was part of the Thermidorian reaction at the end of an IV of the Revolution, where briefly it seemed that reactionary forces had beaten the Jacobins. One

³ Cited “some sixty years” later, in an article on “The English universities” in *The London magazine*, 1822, pp. 166f. The earliest appearance of these “Lettres écrites d’Angleterre au mois de juin et juillet 1768” appears to have been in *Archives littéraires de l’Europe*, Paris, 1806, IC, pp. 3–21, 169–82.

⁴ Louis-Maïeul Chaudon & Antoine-François Delandine, *Nouveau dictionnaire historique*, Paris, 1805, p. 331.

⁵ Cited in Elisabeth Badinter, ed., *Madame d’Épinay. Les contre-confessions*, Paris, 1989, p. 1555.

⁶ Colleen A. Sheehan, “Madison and the French Enlightenment: The authority of public opinion”, *The William and Mary quarterly*, LIX/4, 2002.

counter-attack by the journal *L'Éclair* denounced Vauxcelles: “A certain abbé, who once preferred chatting with Diderot to reading his breviary, is suddenly carried away by apostolic zeal and rends the memory of the philosopher, whom, when alive he called his friend.”⁷ He was among those *Journalistes, imprimeurs, etc. déportés par la loi du 22 fructidor an V, liste nominative fixée par arrêté du 16 fructidor an VII*.⁸

From an early age, Vauxcelles was known for his interest in painting: “il rapporta d’un voyage en Italie, des connoissances très-étendues sur les beaux-arts et un gout exquis” according to Chaudon & Delandine; this taste may have been cultivated earlier, since his aunt was married to François-Albert Stiémart, peintre du roi, garde des tableaux du roi, and other members of the family were employed in the maison du roi. Davesne’s portrait of the abbé de Vauxcelles shows a striking compositional similarity with Roslin’s portrait of his brother Charles-Auguste Bourlet de Saint-Aubin (Copenhagen; fig. 1). Both share the *di sotto in sù* perspective found in so many of the Swede’s portraits. Charles-Auguste inherited from their father the position of porte-manteau in the maison du roi, carrying with it a salary of 660 livres.⁹ Vauxcelles’s choice of portraitist was probably well informed. Depicting the abbé in the clothes of a *littérateur* rather than an abbé, the portrait confirms his worldly inclinations. . Unusually another pastel (fig. 2; possibly autograph but apparently much rubbed) derived from the Davesne portrait shows him in clerical costume.¹⁰



Figure 2

There is some confusion with an unrelated pastel supposed to be of the same sitter sold in 1980.¹¹ The 1980 work seems of very poor execution, below the standard of other Davesnes; the subject is wearing the Saint-Esprit – to which Bourlet de Vauxcelles was not entitled – and doesn’t particularly look like an abbé at the Sorbonne.

The frame on the present pastel is identical to one found on an unidentified young lady, holding a bouquet of roses, signed and dated 1770, and is no doubt original.

Neil Jeffares

⁷ Cited P. N. Furbank, *Diderot*, 1992, p. 458.

⁸ AN, *Les Procès-Verbaux du Directoire exécutif, an V – an VIII*, x, online ed., Pierre-Dominique Cheynet, 2006.

⁹ Accounts for the Maison du roi, 1775, published as *Comptes de Louis XVI publiés par le comte de Beauchamp d’après le manuscrit autographe du Roi conservé aux Archives nationales*, Paris, 1909.

¹⁰ Lyon, Aguttes, 25 April 2009, Lot 120, sold as circle of Simon-Bernard Lenoir.

¹¹ Monaco, Sotheby’s, 26 May 1980, Lot 524, reproduced in Jeffares 2006, p. 153Ai.