

# La Tour and *L'abbé Huber, lisant*

NEIL JEFFARES



[Maurice-Quentin de La Tour](#)

L'abbé Jean-Jacques-Clément HUBER (1699–1744)

Pastel on paper, 81x102 cm

c.1742

Geneva, musée d'Art et d'Histoire, inv. 1911-68

**PROVENANCE:** Jacob Huber, frère du sujet; Isaac Vernet, inv. 1773; [son frère Jacob Vernet (1698–1789); sa fille, Catherine-Charlotte, Mme Pierre Fabri; sa fille Catherine-Marie, Mme Michel-Jean-Louis Saladin du Vengeron; desc.: leur petit-fils] Ernest Saladin (1827–1911), legs 1911.

**EXHIBITED:** ?Salon de 1742, no. 129. Geneva 1951, no. 37.

**LITERATURE:** Stryienski 1912, p. 18 repr.; Clouzot 1920, p. 158 repr.; Albert Rheinwald, “L'abbé Huber ou la psychologie d'une conversion”, *Genava*, v, 1927, pp. 93–104, repr.; B&W 182, fig. 149; Lüthy 1959–61, II, p. 221 n.r.; Philip Conisbee, *Painting in eighteenth-century France*, Oxford, 1981, fig. 103; Apgar 1995, p. 128 repr.; Loche 1996, no. 124; Debré & Salmon 2000, p. 78, ill. 26; La Tour 2004a, p. 123, fig. 2; Salmon 2024, fig. 146; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [J46.1901](#)

**RELATED WORKS:** (fig. 6) replica, pastel, 79x98 cm, Saint-Quentin, musée Antoine Lécuyer, LT 1. Ancien fonds d'atelier de l'artiste; legs Jean-François de La Tour 1807. Exh: Paris 1927a, no. 36; pl. XXIX-41; Paris 1930, no. 40; Paris 1949. Lit: Lapauze 1899, no. 1 repr.; Erhard 1916, no. 2 repr.; B&W 181, fig. 117; Ratouis de Limay 1946, pl. XII/16; Fleury & Brière 1954, no. 23; V. & L. Adair 1971, p. 81 repr.; Bury 1971, pl. 24; Debré 1982, p. 16 repr.; Alastair Laing, *Lighting*, 1982, fig. 16; Debré 1983, p. 66 repr.; Debré 1991, p. 123ff repr.; Debré & Narbonne 1993, p. 35 repr.; Debré & Salmon 2000, p. 78f, ill. 27; Cabezas 2004, p. 28 repr., p. 32 detail repr.; Fumaroli 2005, p. 30 repr.; Fumaroli 2007, repr.; Brunel-Duverger & al. 2023

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

**I**N 1772, JUST A FEW YEARS before his death, the German engraver Georg Friedrich Schmidt decided to engrave a second of the self-portraits of his great friend, Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. Schmidt had worked closely with La Tour during his six years in Paris, and he presented his engraving of La Tour's first self-portrait (shown in the Salon de 1737) when he was agréé to the Académie royale in 1742. La Tour had reciprocated, rising (as he typically did with portraits of his closest friends) to one of the gorgeous pastel which melted the heart of André Gide when he saw it at the Cronier sale in 1905: "poussé, traqué, réduit aux abois avec quelle intelligence, quel amour! L'émotion me prenait à la gorge à contempler cette œuvre admirable." This time Schmidt drew on a slightly later self-portrait – the "petit Buste de l'Auteur, ayant le bord de son chapeau rabattu" which La Tour exhibited in the salon of 1742 – which is now lost, so his preliminary sanguine drawing (now in Saint-Quentin, fig. 1) and the resulting print (fig. 2) offer particularly valuable information about another great work in La Tour's career. As one critic put it,<sup>1</sup> "le Peintre s'est si bien représenté lui-même, qu'en regardant son portrait on évite de le louer trop, de peur de louer l'original en face, & de blesser sa modestie."



Figure 1



Figure 2

The sanguine shows a considerable amount of detail, not only of the work it celebrates, but of the accessories in the foreground, the books and papers which await only the lettering that can only be added directly to the plate since it reverses. But there are changes to the background: one apparently minor addition to the top right of the print is the lower part of an otherwise undelineated picture, ambiguously suggesting the interior of either a salon or a studio. On the other side, however, hanging much lower, is La Tour's celebrated pastel of his friend, the abbé Huber. This then we presume is the artist's studio, and here is supposedly the version of the pastel which La Tour kept with him till his death. In his 1768 will, he bequeathed it to the sitter's nephew, the soldier and amateur pastellist Jean Huber (1721–1786), "qui a tant de talens différens", while in the 1784 version it is to go to Baron Daniel d'Hogguer in Hamburg.) It differs from the version given to Huber himself (and now in Geneva) primarily in the absence from its own background wall of a framed picture: although more heavily foreshortened in the

<sup>1</sup> Possibly the abbé Pierre-François-Guyot Desfontaines, "Exposition des tableaux de l'Académie de peinture et de sculpture", *Observations sur les écrits modernes*, XXIX, 1742, lettre 435, pp. 353.

Geneva pastel than in Schmidt's print, the Louis XV swept frame (of the very latest fashion) is the same. Schmidt's self-referential game would sit happily in *Les Faux-Monnageurs*, and doubtless further amuse André Gide.



Figure 3

But if we look more closely at the detail on the left of the print (fig. 3), we note that Schmidt has made one further alteration: instead of being fixed on the book he is reading, the abbé's eyes are raised, to look at – and perhaps after – La Tour himself. This is no random selection: Schmidt has chosen a work La Tour exhibited in the same salon as his oval self-portrait,<sup>2</sup> but eschewing the drama of Dumont le Romain jouant de la guitare, the bravura of the présidente de Rieux en habit de balle or the quieter beauty of Mlle Sallé, “habillée comme elle est chez elle”, he elects a bibliophile, hunch-backed priest to preside over his friend. That merits deeper enquiry.

Fortunately there are a number of biographical studies<sup>3</sup> covering various aspects of the man Smollett called the “little

French abbé, a man of humour, wit and learning” who nevertheless perpetrated “an unparalleled piece of treachery” recounted in the pages of *Peregrine Pickle*.

The abbé Jean-Jacques-Clément Huber (1699–1744) was in fact Swiss, born into an important family of Protestant merchants and bankers. His father, also christened Jean-Jacques, was a Genevan négociant who had set up also in Lyon. In 1691 he married Anne-Catherine Calandrini, daughter of the recteur de l'Académie de Calvin and his wife, the niece of the mathematician, associate of Newton and religious fanatic, Nicolas Fatio de Duillier. Huber's elder brother Jacob (1692–1750) was linked with John Law, and in 1719 married the daughter of Jean Vasserot, a prominent Amsterdam banker; her expectations were far greater than the immediate cash dowry of 120,000 livres reported disparagingly by her uncle François Calandrini in his diary. Jacob's son, Jean Huber (1721–1786), was the amateur pastellist who became obsessed with painting Voltaire. Two of the abbé's sisters were the theologian, Marie Huber, and Andrienne, Mme Cannac d'Hauteville, who wrote mystical works. Perhaps in reaction to this atmosphere, the young Jean-Jacques rebelled and “ayant fait diverses friponneries chez son père” was imprisoned in a “maison de correction”. After 15 months he escaped, fled to Turin, converted to Catholicism, taking the additional name Clément<sup>4</sup> (that of the current pope), and obtained a degree in theology. The convert was welcomed and he was taken up by Germain-Louis Chauvelin (1685–1762), soon to become garde des sceaux and foreign minister (replacing

<sup>2</sup> One should not confuse this with the earlier autoportrait “à l'index”: although one anecdote also links Huber to it, suggesting that the mirth arose from a practical joke in which La Tour observes Huber's consternation as he is prevented from entering the studio (see La Tour 2004a, p. 48; E. & J. de Goncourt, *L'Art du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1881, I, p. 356, n.).

<sup>3</sup> Lüthy 1961 provides a useful introduction to the deeper studies by Albert Rheinwald, “L'abbé Huber ou la psychologie d'une conversion”, *Genava*, V, 1927, pp. 93–104; Jacob M. Price, “The French farmers-general in the Chesapeake: The MacKercher-Huber mission of 1737–1738” *The William and Mary quarterly*, XIV/2, J.V.1957, pp. 125–153, which discusses the American episode; and Paul Brazier, “Ce mystérieux abbé Huber”, *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Genève*, XI, 1957, pp. 91–152; 1959, pp. 339–403, which provides a thorough account of his Swiss adventures but breaks off in mid career (presumably the author intended to publish further parts). These documents are not without errors, some of which are mentioned in this article. While there is enough material for a full modern biography, this article focuses on the abbé's relationship with his portraitist.

<sup>4</sup> A Jesuit text in the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, Guillaume Budé, *De asse, et partibus ejus*, includes an “Ex-libris J. Jacobi Clementis Huber 1721.”

Rosalba's great patron, Fleuriau de Morville), and by his wife, née Anne Cahouet de Beauvain (1695–1758), to whom the diminutive Huber was described as “abbé du boudoir”.

By 1725 Huber had joined the retinue of the bishop of Strasbourg and grand aumônier de France, cardinal Armand-Gaston-Maximilien de Rohan (1674–1749). Chauvelin sent him on various missions of diplomacy or espionage. In 1731–32 he was in London, where he visited Sir Hans Sloane's private museum.<sup>5</sup> On his return to Paris he was befriended by the fabulously wealthy fermier général Alexandre-Jean-Joseph Le Riche de La Pouplinière (1693–1762), whose household was graced by the greatest artists, writers and musicians of the day, Voltaire, Roussau and Rameau among them; but Huber also met tax farmers and even sovereigns, such as Karl I. Herzog von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1713–1780).<sup>6</sup>

When La Pouplinière decided to marry his beautiful young mistress, the actress Françoise-Catherine-Thérèse Boutinon des Hayes (1714–1756), Huber's opposition made of her an implacable enemy: but Thérèse's brother was secretary to Cardinal de Tencin, and the celebrated salonnière Mme de Tencin used her influence with Cardinal Fleury to ensure that La Pouplinière was compelled to regularise the liaison, which took place in 1737. As we shall see, Huber was by then out of the country.

Several years before that, Chauvelin got Huber to conduct a secret investigation of the finances of Jean-Louis d'Usson, 2<sup>e</sup> marquis de Bonnac, French ambassador to the Swiss Grisons: malversation, and the suspicion of it, were frequent in eighteenth century diplomacy where ambassadors were expected to finance their own missions. Huber it seems also looked into the contraband trade in salt, targeted at evading the unpopular *gabelle*.

Based on a careful analysis of Huber's movements, Paul Brazier reached the conclusion – which seems highly probable – that the abbé's friendship with La Tour can be dated to the ten-month period between his return from Switzerland in August 1734 and his next foreign mission. Brazier plausibly suggests that the connection arise through the Chauvelins and may even have taken place at the château de Grosbois. Although La Tour was by then 30 years old, this is at the very start of his established œuvre and so the matter deserves careful examination.

One of the earliest portrait by La Tour is that of the curious figure Charles-Cardin Richer de Roddes de La Morlière (1681–1736), chevalier du Saint-Sépulcre, former secrétaire du vicomte d'Andrezel à La Porte 1724–26. Although now an avocat in Paris, he is shown in Turkish dress in a pastel which was engraved by Lépicié in 1734 (he had already been painted in essentially the same costume by Aved). The attribution of a pastel (fig. 4) corresponding to the engraving, but in reverse, has been disputed, on the basis that the artist's technique was poorer than in the Voltaire portraits from 1735. But the pastel may antedate the plate by several years, and it remains possible that it is the original work rather than a copy. An annotation on the BnF copy of the Lépicié engraving informs us that—

M. de la Morlière s'est fait graver en 1734, avec un habillement Turc, parce qu'il a séjourné plusieurs années à Constantinople. Il y avait passé avec M. Dandrezelle qui y a été et qui y est mort Ambassadeur du Roy. Il est fils de M. de Rodes, homme fort connu autrefois par rapport aux différentes mines dont il a fait l'ouverture en France, et il s'est ruiné à ce travail. Ce fils qui est celuy dont il s'agit a passé une partie de sa



Figure 4

<sup>5</sup> A letter from Huber to Sir Hans Sloane, 15.IV.1732, is in the British Library, Sloane MS. 4052, foll. 97–99.

<sup>6</sup> Voltaire's letter to his son, Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, which discusses Marie Huber, mentions the abbé as “très-connu de monseigneur votre père.” (*Lettres à s.a. mgr le prince de \*\*\* sur Rabelais...*, 1767).

vie à Paris dans les plaisirs; quoy qu'avec peu de bien. Il était fort connu de M. le Garde des Sceaux, et lorsqu'il a acheté Grosbois, il l'a établi dans cette terre pour y avoir soins des ouvrages qui s'y font et y faire prospérer la fonction de Capne du château sans y avoir aucun titre.

Lépicié also engraved a Vue du château de Grosbois after Jean Rigaud.

As Brazier deduced, this short period in 1734–35 must have been the date when La Tour made his first portrait of the abbé (fig. 5).<sup>7</sup> Shown in academic rather than clerical costume, the pose is more reminiscent of Holbein's Erasmus<sup>8</sup> than of other La Tour portraits. Perhaps one should also note the various Jean Clouet portraits of another humanist Guillaume Budé, whose book Huber owned.<sup>9</sup> The pastel is an astonishingly accomplished<sup>10</sup> work for so early a date: but the evident age gap between it and the later pastels of the *abbé lisant* confirm Brazier's analysis.

By May 1735 Huber was sent on another secret mission: Waldegrave, the British ambassador in Paris, saw fit to warn Newcastle of “a french Abbé called Hubert...gone for England upon some secret Errand from the Garde des Sceaux...his figure is remarkable for it is very crooked, Brownish Complexion with a sprightly Look; He is reckoned a very good for nothing Fellow, but has parts and will undertake anything for money.” Suspected of Jacobitism, he was probably closer to the Prince of Wales's opposition and in particular to Charles, Lord Baltimore, proprietor of Maryland.



Figure 5

This connection proved invaluable in the next episode in his career, that which attracted Smollett's interest. Teaming up with a Scottish adventurer, Daniel MacKercher (later known for his involvement in the Annesley peerage claim), aided by his intimate knowledge of the tobacco excise duties (which were the basis of La Pouplinière's *ferme*), and facilitated by Lord Baltimore's introductions, in November 1736 Huber obtained Chauvelin's support for an audacious plan to allow the French to import tobacco from America via Britain so as to avoid a substantial amount of tax. Huber and MacKercher travelled to America, and attempted to persuade the suspicious Virginia and Maryland planters to accept the scheme, which would offer them higher prices than they received from British purchasers. Doubts about the scheme's legality led to MacKercher's return to England to obtain an explicit license from the Board of Trade. In his absence, Huber amended the

terms extensively and obtain a commitment from a group of Virginia planters. With this apparently successful result, he left Chesapeake for Europe in the summer of 1738. But bafflingly the scheme was not pursued – whether rejected by the fermiers généraux themselves, or abandoned because MacKercher thought the abbé had betrayed him, is now impossible to say. Even more confusion surrounds the role of a certain George Fitzgerald who became involved in acquiring Huber's “interest” in the Virginia tobacco to be sold to the fermiers généraux.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Geneva, mAH, inv. 1927-1. By descent to N. Huber. Dep. Fondation Gottfried Keller, Berne, 1927). Lit.: Gielly 1927b, repr. p. 92, c.1736; Rheinwald 1927; B&W 183, fig. 69; Brazier 1957–59, pl. I; Lüthy 1959–61, II, p. 221 n.r.; Suzanne Stelling-Michaud, *Le Livre du recteur de l'Académie de Genève (1559–1878)*, 1972, p. 94, as 1732; Loche 1996, no. 123; Debré & Salmon 2000, p. 74, ill. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Longford Castle, on loan to the National Gallery.

<sup>9</sup> v. note *supra*.

<sup>10</sup> Debré & Salmon 2000, p. 78, note that the work does not yet present all the mastery of the later portraits, but concede that “la touche en est cependant fondue et, même à très faible distance, ne peut être décelée.”

<sup>11</sup> Price, Lüthy and the other Huber biographers were unaware that George Fitzgerald, who died in 1744, had a nephew (and partner) of the same name: see L. M. Cullen, “The two George Fitzgeralds of London, 1718–1759”, in David Dickson & al., eds., *Irish and Scottish mercantile networks in Europe...*, 2007, pp. 251ff.

Back in Paris, Huber sat for the second La Tour portrait. It was shown at the salon of 1742, no. 129: [le portrait] de M. l'Abbé \*\*\* assis sur le bras d'un Fauteuil, lisant à la lumière un in-folio. Two versions were made: that now in Geneva, and the one kept by the artist and now in Saint-Quentin (fig. 6). Both are astonishing. The adventures of the abbé in the seven years since the first pastel are clearly etched on this face so vividly described by Lord Waldegrave. This time, instead of disguising his friend as a humanist from another age, La Tour is explicit about his disability, his shoulders hunched unequally, even having him perch on the arm of the chair for the myopic perusal of his book. The Goncourt brothers, in a lengthy and beautiful discussion that is deservedly well known,<sup>12</sup> saw a “chef-d’œuvre où, dans un cadre à la Chardin, le pastel s’élève presque à Rembrandt.” La Tour’s first biographer, the verbose abbé Duplaquet whose purple prose was too much even for the diligent B&W to include, has nevertheless a description<sup>13</sup> of the “tableau inimitable” of the abbé Huber lisant which may have influenced the Goncourt description, and merits inclusion here:

L’heure de la scène est la nuit; le lieu une chambre, éclairée par deux flambeaux, le sujet, un de ces Etres disgraciés par la Nature dans leur formes extérieures & qu’ordinairement la providence équitable dédommage par les qualités intérieures, qui ont bien leur prix dans la société, mais qui ne peuvent pas être l’objet de la Peinture. Joignez à ces désavantages, le costume lugubre d’un Ecclésiastique, l’attitude penchée d’un lecteur, les yeux fixés sur un livre. Représentez-vous l’obscurité, qui éteint toutes les nuances, qui confond tous les objets. Voilà les difficultés que notre Peintre choisit, pour se montrer supérieur à tous les obstacles. L’art des Rimbrant acquiert une nouvelle perfection sous ses doigts. Ils nous offrent ici la Magie du clair obscur.

Tout est noir dans le tableau; cependant tout est nuancé, distingué, espacé. Au lieu de ces effets tranchants de la manière Flamande, qui coupent brusquement l’intervalles de l’ombre & de la lumière, c’est un passage doucement ménagé de l’une à l’autre, qui laisse jouer les reflets: la clarté réfléchie par les surfaces polies, constraste avec celle qui est absorbée par le mat des étoffes. Le livre s’élève obliquement sur une pile d’autres livres. L’œil mesure l’espace qui les sépare & sa saillie hors du tableau. Vous voyez couler graduellement la cire & se condenser en larmes sur la bougie. L’un des deux est écoulée dans toute sa longueur & sillonnée par la trace du feu, sans distraire l’attention du lecteur. La vue est frappée par l’ondulation de la flamme, elle s’obscurcit vers la points, par la surabondance des parties qui n’ont pu s’enflammer, & s’échappe en tourbillons de fumée. Dans ces effets merveilleux l’artiste à peint le mouvement des corps.

Dans la figure de son ami, il peint le mouvement de l’âme. Quoique sa face inclinée se présente en raccourci, vous en saisissez le développement & la phisionomie. Ses yeux, presque cachés, annoncent pourtant le regard d’un homme d’esprit. Son visage s’épanouit, le rire est prêt à se déployer sur ses lèvres, toute sa figure s’anime. Il lit sans doute une scène plaisante de Molière.

In fact the book is not Molière, but Montaigne: Duplaquet (and the Goncourts) knew only the Saint-Quentin version where the spine of the volume is not lettered.

The reference to Rembrandtisme, in both Duplaquet and the Goncourt, is perhaps more properly to Caravaggisme – although the autoportrait au chapeau en clabaud was also described by critics as “dans le goût du Rimbrandt” (Anon. 1742). The abbé Huber lisant is the sole example in La Tour’s œuvre of a candlelit scene, although it may have been rehearsed in the clever adaptation of a Rubens painting of the Magus Gaspard into the Saint-Quentin Diogène J.46.3785, holding a lantern in place of the bowl of gold; but the lighting effects are not fully

<sup>12</sup> *L’Art du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1881, I, pp. 356–57: “Le tableau, c’est l’abbé Hubert. – Le bonhomme d’abbé est représenté à mi-jambes, assis de côté sur un bout de fauteuil, le coude appuyé sur une table couverte d’un damas vert. Devant lui, un gros in-folio, relié en veau, se dresse sur deux gros volumes jetés l’un sur l’autre, et faisant pupitre. Une de ses mains disparaît, posée sur la page ouverte; l’autre joue dans la tranche rouge du volume d’où sort une marque blanche. La figure de trois quarts, l’abbé lit. Penché sur la table, son large estomac relevant le rabat gros bleu du temps qui s’envole à demi, les lèvres avancées, la mine gourmande, il semble enfoncé en plein dans une jubilation ecclésiastique et une jouissance épicienne de bénédictin. On le voit sucer la moelle du gros bouquin, savourer des lèvres l’epellement des lettres, des lignes, de la page. Juché sur un carton, un chandelier de cabinet à deux branches porte devant le lecteur deux bougies; une seule brûle encore, faisant flamber sur le noir sourd du fond le prisme de sa flamme à base bleue, et au bout du lumignon charbonné de sa mèche en feu, sa langue de lumière blanche; de l’autre bougie, creusée, ravinée par un fumeron, et qui a laissé pendre en grappes, en stalactites, en cascades, sur la bobèche, les énormes coulées de sa cire, il se lève en l’air les deux ronds de fumée d’une lumière éteinte à l’instant même. C’est tout le tableau. Un abbé, un livre et deux bougies, – de cela, La Tour a su faire, avec l’harmonie du vrai et l’intérêt de la lumière, ce chef-d’œuvre où, dans un cadre à la Chardin, le pastel s’élève presque à Rembrandt.”

<sup>13</sup> *Éloge historique de La Tour*, Saint-Quentin, 1789, pp. 29ff.

adjusted. We know too that the pastellist had some early exposure to his namesake's work: the Saint-Quentin copy J.46.3774 he made of one of the musicians in Georges de La Tour's *La rixe de musiciens* (Getty) which was in Paris before 1750.<sup>14</sup>

Huber was now within two years of his death. He undertook no further foreign travel, and it is possible (judging from the dramatic change in his appearance) that he was already sufficiently ill to make him aware of his mortality. Although critics have discussed the guttering candle only in terms of the intensity of Huber's concentration on his book, the metaphor of a life nearing its end does not need to be spelled out.

Huber nevertheless became involved in yet another money-making project. This time it involved a monopoly of a new textile process, the moirage of silks by calender. On 7.V.1743 Louis XV granted Huber this privilege. The machine with its rollers required special premises, located on the rue Louis-le-Grand, and the following year a 30-year royal licence was obtained for the calender, to be operated by a certain André Smith. He was not "flamand de nation",<sup>15</sup> but British; he had married Marie Fabry, the daughter of a goldsmith in Tours. Such business opportunities were not open to nobles (they would amount to derogation), leaving the way open for adventurers and foreigners such as Huber and Smith.

By 27 March 1744 Huber, close to death, made a will which was to have considerable implications for La Tour over many years; it is of sufficient significance that a transcription of most of it is appended to this essay. Huber's death occurred in Paris a few weeks later, on 16 April 1744.<sup>16</sup> The legacy however was not without complications. The principal terms of the will were as follows. Isaac Vernet was named executor, but "comme il n'est pas possible aujourd'hui d'avoir un état exact de mon bien, ayant actuellement entre les mains de M. Isaac Vernet 165 billets de la dernière loterie sur lesquels il y a des déducitons à faire pour les lots échus et dont les billets doivent être éteints...de plus n'ayant point arrêté mes comptes avec M. George Fitzgerald et Compagnie depuis le 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1743, je prie mon bon et cher ami Isaac Vernet de liquider tout cela." These uncertainties did not



Figure 6 Zoomify

<sup>14</sup> Rosenberg 2004 traced it to the 14.IV.1750 sale by the widow of Pierre d'Hariague; it was not specifically listed in his 1735 inventaire (but might have been one of the undescribed genre pictures), but may well have been on the Paris art market in the 1730s.

<sup>15</sup> As Huber's biographers have; see Paul Feuga, "Un mécanicien à Lyon à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle" in *Châtillon et sa région*, 1992, pp. 165f. Nine letters from the abbé Huber to Andrew Smith in Pall-Mall, London, were written between March 1742 and February 1743. Smith's son Joseph-Pierre (1741–1811) took over the calandre at his father's death, c.1763; in 1764 he married François-Hubert Drouais's sister-in-law, Marie-Anne Doré, at Saint-Roch; one of his sons by a second marriage became a history painter.

<sup>16</sup> There is considerable confusion over the date of his death. Debré & Salmon 2000 (p. 78 and n.17) and La Tour 2004a, aware of the conflict with Brazier's 16.IV.1744, decided that Fleury & Brière's 16.IV.1747 was to be preferred, assuming that 1744 was a confusion with the date of the will. All the Swiss biographers (Lüthy, Apgar etc.) give 1744, and Rheinwald 1927 even provides an extract from his uncle's diary a few days later (21.IV.1744): "Nous avons appris la mort de l'abbé Huber, à Paris. Il a fait un peintre son héritier, laisse à ses frères 1200 livres, et laisse à sa mère et à sa grandmère...50 livres de chocolat." The will, which was made on 27.III.1744, was deposited by Vernet on 16.IV.1744: AN MC L/366. The inventaire après décès was dated 8.VI.1744 & seq. (l./367: the document runs to some 49 pages), and numerous other documents in the same étude remove any doubt from the matter. Debré & Salmon cannot have known this document.

however restrain the abbé from nominating a large number of specific bequests: beneficiaries included Fitzgerald and Mme Geoffrin, as well as a large number of friends, protégés, godchildren and employees.<sup>17</sup> The derisory bequests to his mother and grandmother may reflect the religious conflict in the family: his grandmother's brother Fatio de Duillier was still alive. To each of his nine siblings he left 1200 livres, and two additional amounts of 1200 livres each for "mon frère ainé Jacob Huber et sa femme, ma belle-sœur, que j'ai toujours aimée". His brother Pierre was given the calender, with the licence and lands, subject to a pension of 800 livres p.a. for Smith and his family. To "M. Vernet, mon bon et cher ami, mon carrosse, ma chaise et mes chevaux de carrosse avec toutes leurs appartenances, mais à condition d'en faire usage et de prendre le carrosse ainsi que je l'en ai prié plusieurs fois et qu'il convient à son état"; to the contrôleur général, Philbert Orry "mon portrait peint par La Tour comme une petite marque de l'attachement sincère que j'ai toujours eu pour lui indépendamment de sa position...." Finally Huber named as his héritier universel Maurice Quentin de La Tour, "peintre du Roi", "que j'ay toujours chéri comme mon enfant et dont je respecte autant la vertue que j'admire les talents". Huber however had the prescience to foresee that La Tour might refuse, in which case Isaac Vernet was to receive the residue, subject to payment of a pension of 2000 livres p.a. to La Tour and to ceding to him an annuity worth 500 livres, "car je mourrais inconsolable si je le laissais dans le cas de manquer du nécessaire".

That annuity had it seems already been bought with La Tour in mind, as evidenced by a document in the Minutier central, summarised as follows:<sup>18</sup>

Constitution de 500 livres de rente viagère par le prévôt des marchands et des échevins de Paris, au profit de l'abbé Jean Hubert, licencié en théologie de la faculté de Turin, demeurant rue Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, moyennant la remise d'un billet de 300 livres de la loterie royale de 1743, auquel est échu un lot de 500 livres de rente; le bénéficiaire jouira de son vivant de ladite rente, constituée sur la tête de Maurice-Quentin de Latour, de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, demeurant rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, qui en aura la jouissance après la mort de l'abbé.

In the event it seems that the estate was insufficient to cover the various legacies and disputes with the Fitzgeralds and the fermiers généraux, while the profits from the calender monopoly never materialised, so that the machine was surrendered to Smith. La Tour renounced the succession universelle, but Vernet did so too. Four years later La Tour offered to surrender the annuity of 2000 livres against a single payment of 10,000 livres "par pure considération" for Huber, "et dans un esprit de conciliation". Lüthy thought this concluded the matter, but the estate was still under discussion in 1770, where it was the subject of a bizarre letter from La Tour to Vernet.<sup>19</sup> One can only imagine how many more lost letters related to this Jarndycean affair, and how much of the artist's nervous energy was consumed by them. It is medically improbable however that such concerns precipitated the degeneration of the artist's personality which was beginning to emerge in other correspondence.

Some idea of the complexity can be gleaned from the list of documents included in the abbé's inventaire après décès, which also provides some colour about the abbé's life. His servant, laying claim to some cooking utensils, testified that the abbé Huber never used the kitchen and that to his dying day, his master "s'en trouvé très peu de foin et avoine qui n'ait pas suffit a beaucoup près pour la Nourriture des chevaux". This library was inventoried in 76 numbers of up to 30 items each, and encompassed reference, classical, literary, theological, travel, historical, scientific, and mathematical works, including a high proportion in English – among them Pope's *Homer*, item 55 was "quatre Volumes in-quarto dont Essais de Montaigne prisés Sept livres." Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, in seven volumes (no. 66), was valued at 55 livres, while the two-volume Recueil

<sup>17</sup> Huber's valet de chambre, Louis-Michel Crouët dit Neüilly, later gained employment with Mme Geoffrin (I am grateful to Rochelle Ziskin, private communication, 2021, for this and other observations).

<sup>18</sup> 18 November 1743; AN MC CXV/544.

<sup>19</sup> It was printed by B&W but without identifying the recipient. For a fuller collection of La Tour documents see [www.pastellists.com/Misc/LaTour\\_chronology.pdf](http://www.pastellists.com/Misc/LaTour_chronology.pdf). Isaac Vernet makes another appearance in La Tour's story, in 1753, when with his wife he appears to have introduced La Tour to his famous pupil Belle de Zuylen, Mme de Charrière (see Mme Prévost's letter of 23.X.1753).

Crozat was 60 livres (no. 64). An extensive wardrobe included not only the clerical clothes – including nine rabats – of the kind shown in the later pastels, but also a coat in “camelot gris fourré de peaud de renard” which may be that shown in the earlier pastel. In the bedroom was found “un petit chandelier a deux branches et double cabochon decuivre dore d’or moulu” which might be that shown in the larger pastels, as could the armchair covered in “velours d’Utrecht cramoisi”. Apart from numerous prints in ebonised frames, the few pictures included “une esquisse en pastelle faite par Parrocel peintre a Paris representant une publication de paix sous glace dans la bordure a filets de bois doré prisé cent livres” – conceivably the framed picture in the background of the Geneva pastel, and no doubt his “beau dessin de Parrocel dont il est capable de connoître le mérite” bequeathed to Orry (in addition to the La Tour portrait).

The question as to which version of the *abbé lisant* was exhibited at the Salon in 1742 has recently been broached. The natural assumption is that this would have been the larger version which belonged to the sitter, while that retained by the artist was effectively a studio replica. But Debré & Salmon 2000 (p. 79) argue that the differences in handling, and the use of a technique in the Geneva version which is found in pastels shown at salons from 1746 on, indicates that the Saint-Quentin version was that shown in 1742, and that the Geneva version was a “l’imitation autographe destinée à l’ami portraituré ou à sa famille.”

There are it seems to me several difficulties with this theory, although none is insuperable. One might argue that the reference in Huber’s will to “mon portrait” intended for Orry demonstrates that the sitter possessed only one La Tour portrait, which must be the 1735 pastel: but both this and the later Geneva pastel formed part of the disputed estate, and must have belonged to Huber unless subsequently acquired by the family. But it seems unlikely that La Tour would have made such an important work (without even referring to it in the long 1770 letter) when his friendship was with the abbé rather than his family. For Salmon’s technical argument to be really convincing, the replica would have had to be made after a significant interval, and as close as possible to 1746. This presents no difficulty if as Salmon thought the abbé were still alive:<sup>20</sup> but with the earlier date, the interval is uncomfortably short for the technical differences to be attributed to chronological development.

To this debate we can now add the additional, if also imprecise, evidence of the inventaire après décès. Immediately after the Parrocel pastel mentioned above appear the only other pastels I could find in the inventory:

A l’égard de deux tableaux en pastelle représentans portraits d’hommes sous leur glaces dans leurs différentes bordures de bois doré étant au dessus des deux portes de lad[ite] chambre a coucher aux deux cotés de l’alcove il n’en a été fait aucune prisée attendu la réclamation qui a été faite par le Sr De Latour peintre de L’académie royale de peinture et de sculpture sur le proces verbal dud[it] Sr Commissaire Daminois comme appartenans aud[ite] Sr De la Tour pourquoi n’en est ici fait mention que pour servir de mémoire.

Of course it is not certain that these are portraits of Huber himself, nor whether they include the earlier pastel. But to me the positioning of these two as symmetric overdoors is supportive of the proposition that at least one was his version of the *abbé Huber lisant*, nor would it seem from the hang that it was in the course of being copied.

The difficulty bestetting any student of La Tour’s œuvre is the artist’s astonishing flexibility in working in completely different styles at the same time. There is ample evidence of this later in his career, and I am unpersuaded that this is not the case in 1742. In any case both the Saint-Quentin and Geneva versions are wonderful, autograph tributes from this artist for whom personal friendship always coaxed additional dash. It is notable that when La Tour’s brother was trying to sell the pictures (at some stage before he made his will in 1806), the handbill he printed gave pride of place to the *abbé Hubert lisant*, placing it at the head of the list:

<sup>20</sup> See note 15 *supra* as to whether Huber died in 1744 or 1747. Huber may not have needed to sit again, but our argument is that La Tour would not have made the replica for a dead friend.

Le Portrait d'un Abbé, assis devant une table, sur laquelle il y a un in-folio, qui sert de pupitre à un autre in-folio dans lequel il lit; il est si occupé de sa lecture, qu'il ne s'aperçoit pas qu'une des deux bougies qui l'éclairent, file et fait fondre la cire qui coule le long de cette bougie, et sur le chandelier à deux branches qui est à sa droite. Ce Tableau est sans contredit le plus vrai & le plus beau qui ait jamais été fait en ce genre, il fait l'admiration de tous ceux qui le voient.

So many of La Tour's patrons appear in this essay that it is unnecessary to list their portraits one by one. We may not have letters by which Huber introduced his friend to specific commissions, but the pattern – and the priority – of these connections, with Orry, the Rohans, Tencins, La Pouplinières and the other tax farmers is clear enough. Further Huber's circle, as indicated by his legatees, included intellectuals such as Mme Geoffrin and the abbé Le Blanc.<sup>21</sup> What Huber left La Tour was ultimately far more valuable than the financial legacy that did not materialise: it was this network of contacts and credit – in the broadest sense – on which an artist's career was founded.

Neil Jeffares

**Appendix – Testament de l'abbé Huber**  
AN MC/ET/L/366; with omissions

Ceci est mon Testament olographe et ma dernière volonté que je désire être exécutée dans tous ses points après mon décès.

Comme il n'est pas possible aujourd'hui d'avoir un état exact de mon bien, ayant actuellement entre les mains de Mr Isaac Vernet<sup>22</sup> cent soixante cinq billets de la dernière loterie sur lesquels il y a des déductions à faire pour des lots échus et dont les billets doivent être éteints, et en outre une somme due à Mr de Montmartel et payable le quinze février mille sept cent quarante cinq; de plus n'ayant point arrêté mes comptes avec Mr George Fitzgerald et Compagnie depuis le 1<sup>er</sup> 8<sup>bre</sup> 1743, je prie mon bon et cher ami <Mr Isaac Vernet> de liquider tout cela tant ce qu'il a entre ses mains que ce qui demeure et mains de Mr Fitzgerald au cas que je vienne à mourir avant d'avoir fait cet arrangement le nommant dès à présent mon exécuteur testamentaire, bien convaincu que son amitié le portera à me rendre ce dernier bon office, et voici quelles sont mes dispositions.

Je lègue à ma Grand Mère Calandrin douze sols et à ma Mère autant, ou cinquante livres de chocolat à lune et à l'autre à leur choix, les priant de trouver bon que je les déshérite d'autant qu'elles ne sont pas dans le cas d'avoir besoin de ma succession.

Je lègue à chacun de mes frères et sœurs qui se trouveront vivants au temps de mon décès douze cent livres à chacun pour leur tenir lieu ou à leurs enfants de toutes pretensions quelconques.

En outre je lègue séparément à mon frère ainé Jacob Huber et à sa femme ma belle sœur que j'ai toujours aimée douze cent livres ou une pièce de vaisselle d'argent de même valeur.

[other bequests to family, friends and servants]

Je lègue à mon frère Pierre douze cent livres en outre et par-dessus les douze cent livres ci-dessus.

Je lègue à Mr Vernet mon bon et cher ami mon carrosse ma chaise et mes chevaux de carrosse avec toutes leurs appartenances mais sous condition de faire usage et de prendre carrosse ainsi que je l'en ai prié plusieurs fois, et qu'il convient à son état.

Je lègue à Neuilly mon domestique dont je dois récompenser la fidélité l'attachement outre ses gages échus, cinq cent livres pour porter mon deuil, toute ma garde-robe mon linge mes fourrures en un mot tout ce qui peut être compris dans l'habillement et en outre une rente viagère de huit cent livres dont le fond sera pris sur tout ce qui je laisse et le placement fait pour mon ami Mr Vernet.

...

Je lègue à mon bon et cher ami Mr de la Pouplinière outre seize cent livres dont il a mon billet ma montre d'or à secondes de Graham ou celle que je me trouverai au temps de mon décès, comme un léger souvenir de l'homme du monde qui la le plus aimé, et tous mes papiers pour en faire l'usage qu'il trouvera bon, lesquels papiers lui seront remis par Mr Vernet après qu'il en aura tiré tout ce qui regarde mes effets.

<sup>21</sup> In *Lettres de Monseigneur l'abbé Le Blanc...*, ed. 1751, II, p. 243, lettre LIV is addressed to abbé Huber "sur l'utilité des manufactures" and commends his project for establishing the calandre in France.

<sup>22</sup> Isaac Vernet (1700–1773), officier des gardes suisses, négociant à Marseille, banquier, exécuteur du testament de l'abbé Huber, membre du conseil des Deux Cents à Genève 1738.

Je legue a Mr le Controlleur general, cest a dire a Mr Orry sil est vivant au tems de mon deces, mon portrait peint par la Tour que je le prie daccepter comme une petite marque de lattachement sincère que j'ay toujours eu pour lui independamment de sa place, et mon beau dessein de Parroccl dont il est capable de connoitre le merite

Je legue a Mad<sup>e</sup> Geoffrin dont j'honore et respect lamitié ma Thetiere dargent et deux goblets couverts a fleurs naturelles de porcelaine de Saxe qui font le coin de ma cheminée

...

Je legue a Smith Directeur de ma Calandre dont jay reconnu et ne saurois asses louer la probité et lattachement, une pension de huit cens livres a prendre sur le produit de ma Calandre – je dis une pension de huit cent livres pendant trente ans qui sont le terme de mon privilege pour passer apres lui ladite pension a sa femme et a ses enfans; et cela en outre et non compris le salaire qui pourra lui etre due au tems de mon decés ...

Je legue a l'abbé le Blanc dont je respecte lhonneur et la vertu dans lindigence une somme aussi de deux mille livres

Je legue a Mr Jacques Fitzgerald capitaine dans Dillon quinze cent livres, au lieu d'une bague que jaurois laissée a mon bon et cher ami George Fitzgerald le jeune son oncle qui jespere regardera cette marque damitié comme donné a lui-même

Je legue a mon frere Pierre Huber en outre ce que jay dit ci-dessus ma calandre, mon privilege, et le batiment, ma calandre pour toujours parce quelle mappartient, et la privilege et le batiment pour le tems marqué a condition de donner a Smith la pension de huit cent livres ci dessus et a Mr de la Tour Peintre une rente de mille livres tant que la dite calandre subsistera; et faute par mon frere Pierre daccepter ces deux conditions, le present legs sera tenu pour nul, et la dite calandre et privilege seront vndus, mais toujours a la condition des deux dites rentes, celle de Smith sera prelevée de prefernce a tout.

J'institue mon ami Mr de la Tour que jay toujours cheri comme mon enfant, et dont je respecte autant la vertu que jadmine les Talens, pour mon heritier et legataire universel; et lautorise pour et autant qu'il est en mon pouvoir, persuadé que son premier soin sera de paier ce que je pourrai avoir de dettes au tems de mon decés; je le prie de nen oublier aucune et sil sen trouvoit meme de douteuses, de juger favorablement de celui qui se portera pour creancier, sur tout si ce sont dhonnêtes gens

Et en cas que le dit Mr de la Tour ne fut pas en volonté daccepter ce legs universel crainte des embarras ou cela pourroit le jettter, j'institute et nomme a sa place mon bon et cher ami Mr Vernet <mon legataire universel>, sous condition de faire en sorte que le dit Mr de la Tour aie de moy deux mille livres de rente viagere bien assurées, en outre et par dessus un contract de cinq cent livres de rente que j'ay mis sur sa tete, et qui lui demeurera

Si quelcun trouve extraordinaire cette disposition en faveur de Mr de la Tour ce quelcun ne le connoit pas comme moy, qui mourrois inconsolable si je le laissois dans le cas de manquer du necessaire

Par cette mienne derniere volonté jannulle toute disposition anterieure Fait a Paris ce vingt sept Mars mille sept cent quarante quatre J J C Huber Je me reserve pourtant dajouter a cette presente disposition dautres legs que la douleur que je souffre dans ce moment pourroit mavoir fait oublier mais faute par moy dy ajouter elle nen aura par moins son plein effet. Elle consiste jusques a present en deux feuillets contenant chacune quatre pages...

Je legue a Mr Sermet mon ami dont jestime la probité et le bon cœur mon diamant pesant quatorze grains comme une legere marque de ma reconnaissance; ou suppose que je ne me trouvasse pas ce diamant au tems de mon decés un diamant de quinze cent livres

Je legue a Mr Sarrazin le fils en reconnaissance des soins qu'il sest donné pour ma calandre, deux mille livres Fait a Paris ce 1 Avril je dis premier Avril Mille sept cent quarante quatre

J J C Huber