

# Perronneau: rectification d'erreur<sup>1</sup>

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**W**HAT BETTER WAY to mark the beginning of 2015 than with a post on Perronneau, the 300th anniversary of whose birth falls this year. Or does it? The fact is, we don't know for certain, and we may never know. During the Paris commune, in May 1871, all the Paris parish records of baptisms, marriages and burials were burnt, leaving a terrible gap in the basic tools for all genealogists. Subsequent efforts to reconstitute the archives from other notarial sources (contracts, inventaires etc.) are estimated to have recreated about a third of the records, a fraction far too small to be the basis of any jigsaw-puzzle approach to family history.

We rely for the usual “born Paris 1715” on the statement in Vaillat & Ratouis de Limay's standard monograph based, they say, on the Académie royale's records, where the artist's death on 19 November 1783 was reported at the séance of 10 January 1784, “âgé de 68 ans”. But here is what the *Procès-Verbaux* actually state:

*Mort de M. Péronneau, décédé à Amsterdam, âgé de 68 ans.* – En ouvrant la séance, le Secrétaire a notifié la mort de M. Péronneau, Peintre Académicien, décédé à Amsterdam au mois [de] Novembre dernier, environ dans la 68<sup>e</sup> année de son âge.

So even here we have an ambiguity: do we rely on the headline (aged 68, i.e. born between 20 November 1714 and 19 November 1715), or the text (aetatis 68, i.e. born between 19 November 1715 and 18 November 1716)? Personally I'd attach more weight to the text, and suggest that it's marginally more probable that he was born in 1716; but I haven't (yet) altered the date in the *Dictionary* as the real weight should be on “environ”.

But in late 2013 I came across a document misleadingly indexed in the treasure trove of the Archives nationales' salle des inventaires virtuelles as “Mariage de la fille de Jean-Baptiste Perronneau”, dated 1749. This was evidently quite impossible, as Perronneau's (only) marriage was known to have taken place some years after, so it was obviously a mistake and I assumed quite irrelevant. But curiosity got the better of me (could it have been a [very] youthful indiscretion?), and I obtained a photocopy, discovering the material which I put online early in 2014.

It turned out that Perronneau's parents lived in Tours, and his role in the marriage of their daughter (his sister) was as proxy for his father Henry (hence the rather misleading summary). Henry was found to be a perruquier (a profession shared by the fathers of a number of other pastellists, from Ozias Humphry to Hugh Douglas Hamilton (as I mention in my [post on John Smart](#)). But it seemed to open up the possibility of discovering the artist's birth certificate, in the records of one of the parishes in Tours. An exhaustive trawl through these produced however only a few scraps, confirming that indeed the family came from Tours, but no concrete proof of my new hypothesis. I discussed all this in my *Dictionary* [article on Perronneau](#), and included all the documents in my [chronological table](#), including my very imperfect transcriptions. The marriage contract in particular was written by a notary with an especially difficult hand, and deciphering parts of it will provide an excellent Bank Holiday pastime for palaeographers (super-fiendish level).

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<sup>1</sup> This essay first appeared as a post on my blog, [neiljeffares.wordpress.com](http://neiljeffares.wordpress.com), on 1 January 2015. It may be cited as Neil Jeffares, “Perronneau: rectification d'erreur”, *Pastels & pastellists*, <http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/PerronneauRectification.pdf>.

There matters rested until last week, when I discovered that an anonymous genealogist had indexed a completely new, and quite unexpected, document, found in the Archives nationales in a section no one ever thinks of, Série Z1o which includes deeds of “rectification d’erreurs”. It isn’t a complete answer to all our questions, but it provides important new evidence which again you will find discussed and transcribed in the revised Perronneau article and chronological table. As this time the hand is readily legible, here it is:

L'an mil sept cent cinquante trois, le  
 dix Décembre, pardevant nous et Notaire  
 Regnaud vicere général de la ville de Paris  
 en compare Jean Baptiste Perronneau Sieur du Roy,  
 pere de Jean Baptiste Henry Perronneau Suppliant Clere  
 tonsure du diocèse de Paris, fils de Henry Perronneau, et  
 de Marie Genevieve Fremouze sa femme, un autre homme  
 ayant charge dudit s. de souffrir par une lettre notifiée  
 (ainsy quil adit) Lequel audit nous nous adit que doudit  
 pere avec la tonsure dans la chapelle de l'Archevesché  
 de Paris a l'ordination générale le trente un Mars mil  
 sept cent quarante huit, et que dans la lettre qui lui avoit été  
 delivree au secretaires dudit Archevesché il s'est trouve  
 une erreur consistante en que l'on avoit mis Perronneau  
 pour Perronneau au lieu de Fremouze; et comme il a intérêt  
 de faire rectifier l'adite erreur il nous a fait représenter  
 requeste en quel lui fut permis de faire pour ce devant  
 nous pour ce faire mettre par nous ordonné la rectification  
 pour ce que parvenue, luy parvenue nous a représenté  
 l'acte de l'ordination de mariage dudit pere, et une  
 extrais des registres de l'episcopale de Paris de cette  
 ville du cinq May mil sept cent huit, delivré par les  
 jureurs vicaires de ladite paroise; l'acte de baptême  
 et l'epitaphie extrais des registres de l'episcopale de Paris  
 aussi de cette ville du vingt une Juin mil sept cent treize,  
 delivré par les s. jureurs et soussignés de ladite paroise  
 et l'adite lettre de tonsure de la rectification de laquelle  
 il s'agit; et attendu que nous etatisfais de notre ordonnance  
 etant en suite de l'adite requeste et date de ce jourd'hui pour ce  
 permis de faire preuve, et de luy en faire aprouver  
 quelques personnes de compare de luy pour ce faire  
 leur declaration sur les fins de l'adite requeste, et que ces  
 personnes comparees, il nous a requis de vouloir présentement  
 prendre leur homme et les entendre; et a signé s. /s.  
 L. Perronneau.

This 1753 declaration by the artist rather puzzlingly sets out to correct the misspelling of his mother’s family name on the letters confirming the tonsure issued in 1748 to his brother, a

supplicant priest, Jean-Baptiste-Henry Perronneau. The artist produced his parents' acte de mariage, confirming that Henry Perronneau and Marie-Geneviève Frémont were married in Paris, at Saint-Sauveur, on 5 mai 1708. So it is likely after all that Perronneau was born in Paris, and that the record of his baptism went up in flames in 1871. Given the frequency of misspellings in documents of this era, not to mention handwriting that leaves you asking "how could you tell?" when a mistake is alleged, it is hard to understand why this single character mattered so much to the pastellist; but we are certainly grateful he took this trouble.

I was completely unaware of this brother, born in 1730, also in Paris (paroisse Saint-Benoist, evidently before his parents retired to Tours). We know that Perronneau exhibited in 1746 the portrait of "un jeune écolier, frère de l'auteur, tenant un Livre" – a portrait of which we don't even know the medium for certain. It has been suggested that this might be the pastel formerly in the Jacques Doucet collection; signed and dated 1744, it shows an infant of at most 3 years of age, who happens to be holding a book. Vaillat and Ratouis de Limay even suggest that the reported age of 42 on the artist's Dutch death certificate (1783) might apply to this brother. But it is highly improbable that a brother could have been born c.1741 (126 years after his grandfather, 33 years after his mother's marriage) – or indeed much after 1730, when his mother was likely to be around 40 years old (assuming she married aged 18).



Perhaps after all we should revert to a suggestion made by Vaillat and Ratouis de Limay, that the salon portrait be identified as the wonderful painting in the Hermitage, showing an unidentified boy who could easily be somewhere between 12 to 15 years of age? This was Perronneau's first salon, and he might well have shown work done a couple of years before.

That year Perronneau exhibited five portraits, "dont trois au Pastel". This was no. 150. Number 149, "le petit Desnoyel, tenant une Poule huppée", is lost, but it was seen by Doucet in 1900 and is a pastel (as you might expect from the subject matter). Gilcain (no. 148) is in oil. A lost portrait of Hubert Drouais (no. 147) is likely to be in pastel, like the later one now in Orléans. There are two competing candidates (one oil, one pastel) for the remaining portrait (no. 146), of the marquis d'Aubais, and the Hermitage theory would strengthen the claims for 146 being the pastel (or put another way, if you are convinced that the oil d'Aubais was the picture shown – or if you think Drouais was in oil – then the brother must have been a pastel).

But none of this is certain. We can only use what we have. And ultimately Perronneau's significance is not in these conflations, deductions or documents. By his works ye shall know him.

**Postscript (27 April 2016)**

A rather belated addition to the discussion of Perronneau's year of birth arises from the curious doctors's certificate which is reported by Tourneux and V&RdL (see d'Arnoult's discussion, p. 183). This adds after the artist's name, according to both sources "42 J Koorts", which they interpret as his age. But Boogaard 2011 suggests instead that this is "42 g Koorts", for a fever of 42 degrees Celsius. My first reaction to this was that it was probably anachronistic: did doctors in those days go round with clinical thermometers? But in fact their use was introduced by Herman Boerhaave of Leiden. Whether such a fever would result from the inhalation of fumes from the volcanic eruption that engulfed Amsterdam at the time is another question.

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