

Mme Roslin, *L'abbé Le Monnier*

NEIL JEFFARES

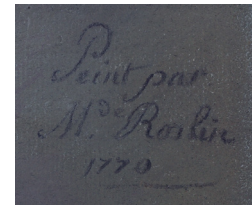


Mme Roslin, née Suzanne Giroust

L'abbé Guillaume-Antoine LE MONNIER (1692–p.1755)

Pastel on paper, 57.8x49.1 cm [Zoomify](#)

Signed, dated mid right
"Peint par/M^{de}
Roslin/1770"



Private collection

PROVENANCE: Charles Jourdir; la comtesse de Champfeu (1927; 1935). A French private collection in 1957. London, Christie's, 2 July 1996, Lot 251 (as a version of the Versailles portrait of Dumont le Romain), reproduced

EXHIBITIONS: [Possibly Paris, Salon de 1771, no. 151 ("Plusieurs autres Portraits sous le même numéro");] *Exposition de pastels français des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, Paris, Hôtel Jean Charpentier, 23 May – 26 June 1927, no. 124

LITERATURE: Bénézit (1999); Émile Dacier & Paul Ratouis de

Limay, *Pastels Français des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, Paris, 1927, no. 117, reproduced; Paul Ratouis de Limay, "L'exposition des pastels français du XVII^e et du XVIII^e siècles", *Gazette des beaux-arts*, xv, 1927, p. 327; G. W. Lundberg, *Roslin, liv och verk*, Malmö, 1957, p. 144, reproduced; G. W. Lundberg, article in *Svensk konstnärs lexikon*, Malmö, 1961, p. 536; Arthur M. Wilson, *Diderot*, 1972, p. 850; Xavier Salmon, *Les Pastels, Musée National du Château de Versailles*, Paris 1997, reproduced p. 124; Thieme & Becker; Jeffares 2006, p. 441, reproduced; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [J.63.119](#)

ICONOGRAPHY: (I) oil on canvas, by Mme Vallayer-Coster, Salon de 1775 (now lost). Lit.: Marianne Roland-Michel, *Anne Vallayer-Coster*, Paris, 1970; (II) drawing by Hoin, circular (Épinay, inv. 1920-29; ex collection Oulmont); (III) pastel, anonyme, en buste, de ¾ à dr., pstl, 48x38 ov. (Rouen, musée des Beaux-Arts. Don Lemonnier 1868). Lit.: Pierre Marcel, "La collection de dessins de Gabriel Lemonnier au Musée de Rouen", in *Mélanges offerts à M. Henry Lemonnier*, *Archives de l'art français*, VII, 1913, pp. 467–95, no. 1204, pp. 475, 477, 494, not reproduced

MME ROSLIN'S DEBT to her teacher La Tour is evident in her bold use of blue strokes around the face and on the coat; she achieves an enormous range of tonality for so restricted a palette as she has chosen in this work.

The erroneous identification of the sitter as Dumont le romain was made by Christie's by reference to the Lundberg monograph on Alexandre Roslin, where the caption for the reproduction of the present work was transposed with that for the portrait of Dumont le romain, now at Versailles (MV 5939, fig. 1), having been given by the artist's husband in 1786, some

fourteen years after her death.¹

Mme Roslin's reception piece for the Academy, the pastel of M. Pigalle now in the Louvre, was exhibited as no. 150 in the Salon de 1771, while no. 151 consisted of "Plusieurs autres Portraits sous le même numéro". Diderot, who wrote to Falconet on 29 December 1770 explaining the circumstances of her portrait of Dumont le romain ("Madame Roslin, mécontente des éloges que Dumont le Romain donnait à un de ses pastels, vient de le prendre à la boutonnière et d'exécuter, d'après lui, un portrait fort supérieur à celui qu'il attribuait à son mari"²), writes of this collection: "Ils sont d'une touche fine et d'un pinceau digne de son habile maître. (Notre ami l'abbé Lemonnier; c'est sa physionomie, sa simplicité, sa rusticité, sa vivacité, et même le reste de son apoplexie à la bouche. Très-vigoureux. Courage, Madame Roslin; ce n'est pas encore La Tour, il est aussi grand coloriste et il est plus harmonieux.)"³



Figure 1

While that description appears to capture the present sitter, it has been objected that he is not wearing the rabat of an abbé. Another portrait of Le Monnier, by Mlle Vallayer, was exhibited at the Salon de 1775, but is unfortunately lost. However, a portrait medallion by Claude Hoin (executed in the manner typical of the work of Le Monnier's friend Cochin; fig. 2)⁴ not only shows Lemonnier in lay attire, but reveals a face very similar to our Mme Roslin's, especially around the mouth and forehead. The blemish on Hoin's sitter's cheek does not appear in the Mme Roslin – perhaps as a concession to the sitter's vanity.⁵

Other Salon critics are less specific than Diderot: the *Mercur de France* (October 1771, p. 194) wrote "Le portrait de M. Pigal peint au pastel par Madame Roslin; plusieurs autres pastels de cette artiste, bien dessinés, d'un bon ton de couleur & touchés savamment, se soutiendront à côté des meilleurs portraits à l'huile." Pidansat de Mairobert (*Mémoires secrets*, XIII, 1784, lettre du 14 septembre 1771): "Si l'on ne trouve pas une grande ressemblance dans le portrait de M. Pigalle en habit de Chevalier de l'ordre de Saint-Michel, par madame Roslin, on voit qu'elle a été à l'école de son mari par le coloris & qu'elle trempe quelquefois son pinceau dans ses couleurs." The *Journal encyclopédique* (November 1771, p. 95): "Une autre Dame (Mme. Roslin) se distingue parmi les peintres en portrait; elle a ici plusieurs pastels d'une grande force; mais surtout le portrait de M. Pigal, Sculpteur, en habit de Chevalier de St. Michel. Il se soutient de pair avec les portraits à l'huile, au milieu desquels il est placé. Mme Roslin dessine & peint sçavamment: on voit qu'elle a étudié son art avec jugement, & qu'elle le connaît bien." *L'Année littéraire* (1771, p. 300) likewise reports "Plusieurs Portraits au pastel de Madame Roslin intéressent par les ressemblances qui sont vivement saisies, & par le faire qui est libre & hardi. On est frappé sur-tout de celui de M. Pigalle."

Guillaume-Antoine Le Monnier (1721–1797), "le riant abbé que Diderot aimera de grande

¹ I am grateful to Xavier Salmon for resolving this confusion.

² *Correspondance générale*, x, p. 197.

³ Diderot, *Salons*, ed. Jean Seznec, Oxford, 1967, IV, p. 203.

⁴ Musée d'Épinal; formerly in the collection of Charles Oulmont; see Épinal 2007, no. 65 reproduced I am grateful to M. Matthieu Gilles, conservateur, for providing me with a photograph and confirming that the sitter is almost certainly the same.

⁵ An anonymous pastel said to be of Lemonnier in Rouen is also similar, although it apparently shows the sitter's eyes as blue (Marie Pessiot, private communication, 24 July 2009). The depicted colour of sitters' eyes is an uncertain guide to identity. The portrait belonged to the painter Gabriel Lemonnier; it passed to his son Hippolyte, and was bequeathed to the musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, in 1868. The painter claimed only a distant relationship with the abbé (Christine Le Bozec, *Lemonnier: un peintre en révolution*, Rouen, 2000); he does not seem to have been the painter's brother as claimed by Pierre Marcel in the 1913 catalogue of the Rouen donation, and the identity of the sitter may not have quite the direct authority as might be supposed.

amitié” – according to André Billy – was an ecclesiastic, librarian, writer, and translator.⁶ He was born in 1721, at Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte; he studied at the collège de Coutances, and then the collège d’Harcourt à Paris. He became chapelain de la Sainte-Chapelle in 1743, where he taught Latin and plain-chant to the choir boys for over 30 years.

Having met Diderot at Sophie Volland’s, he became his faithful friend and correspondent: Diderot meticulously polished some of his verse,⁷ and corrected the proofs for his translation of Persius.⁸ Le Monnier was also close to Cochin, Greuze, Grétry, Sedaine, Moreau le jeune, the lawyer Élie de Beaumont, the abbé Raynal (who called him “le meilleur des hommes”) and Sophie Arnould. The portrait of him which appeared in the *Correspondance littéraire* in 1771 was almost certainly written by Grimm:

L’abbé Le Monnier est un auteur original, ayant dans son caractère un assemblage rare de naïveté, de rusticité, de causticité, de bonhomie et de finesse.

Il est Normand, et il a une place dans le chapitre de la Sainte-Chapelle. Il ne se pique ni de bon ton, ni de belles manières, ni d’un grand usage du monde; mais il est gai et bon vivant, ayant bien conservé son accent normand et aimant mieux passer sa vie dans les coteries des artistes que dans le grand monde.

Il chante de cette voix nasillarde qu’on nomme *haute-contre* en France.

Neither Le Monnier’s stroke, nor the exile from Paris two years before the Vallayer-Coster portrait of 1775 referred to by Roland-Michel, seem to be mentioned in his correspondance, although money problems (no doubt exacerbated by his philanthropy) dogged him throughout his life: he even had to ask Diderot to sell his copy of the *Encyclopédie* at one stage.

He escaped the Terror only narrowly, being released from prison after 9 thermidor, and became librarian to Sainte-Geneviève (Panthéon). He died 4 April 1797. Among his works was a



Figure 2

play, *Le Bon fils, ou Antoine Masson*, with music by Philidor, performed at the Théâtre italien 1773, under the pseudonym of Devaux. His translation of the *Comédies de Terence*, 1770, has a frontispiece and six illustrations⁹ engraved after his friend Cochin; it includes the memorable line “Rien n’est beau que le vrai”. The *Satires de Perse*, 1771, also has a Cochin frontispiece, which was exhibited by the artist in the 1771 Salon with the Terence. This was followed by Le Monnier’s own *Fables, contes et épîtres*, 1773. His *Fêtes des bonnes gens de Canon...*, of 1778, had a frontispiece engraved after Moreau le jeune. The same year he published his tract against slavery, *Discours d’un nègre marron qui a été repris et va subir le dernier supplice*. A version of Plautus was not completed. An obituary notice by Mulot appeared in 1797.

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⁶ See Le Moyne; Beauchamp; Feller; Hofer; Le Breton; Dezobry; Dantès 1; Oursel; Michaud, *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne*, Paris, n.d., xxiv; Wilson, *Diderot*, 1972; Diderot, *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Roth, Paris, c. 1950–1970; Chaix d’Est-Ange; Révérend.

⁷ *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. Assezat-Tourneux, Paris, 1875–77, xix, p. 370.

⁸ A. M. Wilson, *Diderot*, 1972, p. 850.

⁹ A preliminary drawing was sold in London, Sotheby’s, 7 July 1999, Lot 55 reproduced.

1773, under the pseudonym of Devaux. His translation of the *Comédies de Terence*, 1770, has a frontispiece and six illustrations¹⁰ engraved after his friend Cochin; it includes the memorable line “Rien n’est beau que le vrai”. Diderot solicited subscriptions for it, for example from Grimm (letter, 19 Debruary 1770). The *Satires de Perse*, 1771, also has a Cochin frontispiece, which was exhibited by the artist in the 1771 Salon with the Terence. This was followed by Le Monnier’s own *Fables, Contes et Épitres*, 1773, two of the fables in which are said¹¹ to be based on Diderot (*Le Philosophe et sa femme* and *L’Enfant bien corrigé*). His *Fêtes des bonnes gens de Canon...*, of 1778, had a frontispiece engraved after Moreau le jeune. The same year he published his tract against slavery, *Discours d’un nègre marron qui a été repris et va subir le dernier supplice*. A version of Plautus was not completed. An obituary notice by Mulot appeared in 1797.

Little is known of the provenance of the present work. Charles Jourdier (1839–1906), from Moulins, and of 32 rue Michel Ange, Paris, is listed¹² as a donor to the musée départemental. He was the only son of Claude-Elphège Jourdier, seigneur de La Charnée (1806–1874) and maire of Moulins in 1851. Charles died without issue, leaving his estate to Antoine-Louis-Léon, comte de Champfeu.¹³ Their family was closely connected with that of Alarose des Morins. The Champfeu family is also from Le Bourbonnais, and appear in the same list;¹⁴ the third comte de Champfeu, Antoine-Louis-Léon (Moulins 1848–1926), was a naval captain; he married (in 1893, in Paris) Brigitte Poissalole de Nanteuil de la Norville, the comtesse de Champfeu indicated.¹⁵ She owned, and lent to the Paris 1927 exhibition, an anonymous pastel of an Inconnu jouant à la viole. She also owned, until 1924, a Le Nain studio painting, *The young card players*, now in the Worcester Art Museum (inv. 1924.40); this had been in her family at least since her grandfather, an early enthusiast for the artist.

Neil Jeffares

¹⁰ A preliminary drawing was sold in London, Sotheby’s, 7 July 1999, Lot 55 reproduced.

¹¹ Wilson, *loc. cit.*

¹² *Bulletin de la Société d’émulation du Bourbonnais*, v, 1856, p. 468.

¹³ Administration granted 1907 for his English estate, amounting to £2153 2s. 6d. (England & Wales, National probate calendar). It is unclear if he was the same as the Charles Jourdier who seems to have been a dealer in Paris around 1904, owning briefly several works by Corot, among them a landscape (New York, Christie’s, 27 May 1992, Lot 144) which he bought from the Leicester Gallery in 1896 and had sold to Obach & Co. in 1904. A sale in Paris on 22 March 1902 included prints from a C. Jourdier among other vendors.

¹⁴ Another indication of the friendship of these families is an 1825 letter from the then comte de Champfeu and Charles Jourdier’s grandfather Philibert; see Philippe Tiersonnier, *Bulletin de la Société d’émulation du Bourbonnais*, 1939, pp. 27f.

¹⁵ Both her sons died in the First World War, without marrying. The wife of the second comte died in 1851.