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FORGOTTEN WORKS BY THEODORE CHASSÉRIAU: NEVER TWO WITHOUT THREE?

Xavier d'Hérouville, PhD, Aurore Caulier, PhD

Léonce Bénédite, in his reference work on the life and work of Théodore Chassériau, devotes a few pages to this stay in Marseille in the summer of 1836, during which he is supposed to have painted several portraits ¹. There is every reason to believe that he went there at the invitation of his cousin Charles-Frédéric, a Marseille architect, who offered him the opportunity to paint a series of portraits for one of Marseille's most distinguished families ².

Frédéric Chassériau à Théodore Chassériau - 21 juillet 1836

Ministère
de la Marine
et des Colonies

Je reçois, mon ami, une lettre de Frédéric¹⁷ du 15 ; il te demande de suite et il s'agirait de faire une série de portraits pour l'une des familles les plus distinguées de Marseille. Il t'en aura sans doute écrit de son côté, car il doit te savoir dans le midi. Tu comprends que je n'ai aucun conseil à te donner : c'est à toi de réfléchir et de voir si, dans cette occasion, tu peux concilier l'art et la fortune ou plutôt l'intérêt, car je ne pense pas qu'il s'agisse encore de la fortune.

¹ Léonce Bénédite, *Théodore Chassériau, sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris, Éditions Dezarrois, 1931: « We have little information about the work he did in Marseille... he worked quite assiduously, extending his stay until the beginning of October... What became of these portraits? At least there may still be some in a few

The painter's album 2229 shows us on the verso of folio 15 (RF 26054-32) and on the verso of the adjacent folio 16 (RF 26054-33) a series of three projects (or sketches?) of portraits duly framed in 1836.



The first sketch from the left clearly shows a little girl holding what we guess is a doll (?).



families in the region that Chassériau's growing fame will no doubt bring out one day »

² *Chassériau : Correspondance oubliée*, Les amis de Théodore Chassériau, 2014 (Annotated by Jean-Baptiste Nouvion & prefaced by Marianne de Tolentino)

The second sketch, in the centre, shows a very young child, a chain with a rattle (?) around his neck, sitting on a sofa and holding in his left hand an instrument (?) whose real nature is hard to guess.



The third and final sketch in this series of framed portraits, on the right, depicts a girl or young woman with her hair in a bun and her hands folded in her lap.



In 2001, the first portrait painted by Théodore Chassériau in 1836 reappeared in a French private collection.



The portrait of little Laure Stéphanie Pierrugues and her doll will be renamed '*L'Enfant & la poupée*' ('*The Child & the doll*')³.

In 2023, it was the turn of the second portrait painted by Théodore Chassériau to reappear in another private French collection.



³ Xavier d'Hérouville, *L'Idéal moderne selon Charles Baudelaire & Théodore Chassériau*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2016

The portrait of little Victor Pierrugues, Laure Stéphanie's own brother, a chased gold rattle with whistle and bells mounted on a mother-of-pearl handle dangling from an amber necklace around his neck, seated on a sofa and holding firmly in his left hand one of the two ebony branches of a straight serpent also known as a 'Russian bassoon', was in turn renamed '*L'Enfant au basson*' (*The Child with a bassoon*).

To date, the third and final portrait in this series of three painted in 1836 has yet to appear. Was it ever made? Has it survived the passage of time? Or does it still hang on the wall of a descendant of the eldest branch of the Pierrugues family who emigrated to the United States? Nobody knows!

Whatever the case - whether it remained a sketch or was actually painted - there is every reason to believe that this last portrait could be that of the mother of little Laure Stéphanie and little Victor Auguste: Françoise Augustine, alias 'Augusta' Pierrugues, born de Nayve in Philadelphia in 1808. Her father, the Marquis Louis Marie de Nayve de Combles de Noncourt, was Commissioner of the Royal Italian Navy and Commander-in-Chief of St Domingue after the surrender of Toussaint Louverture. It was in St Thomas (Danish Isles) that he married Augusta's future mother, Elisabeth Louise Antoinette Mary, a Creole from St Domingue.

A portrait of Augusta Pierrugues painted in 1843 by Benoît Blanc alias Benoni (1812-1887) has enabled us to extra-

polate what might have been this third and final portrait painted by Théodore Chassériau in 1836.



If it were to reappear one day, this painting would not only have the historical importance of the other two portraits painted by Théodore Chassériau in the summer of 1836, which bear witness to the 'childhood' of the young prodigy, only 17 years old, flying under his own steam, having just been freed from the influence of his master, Dominique Ingres? But also the unique and remarkable character of the 'missing link', the first realisation of a female silhouette, the beginnings of what was to become his 'trademark' and would later distinguish him from all the other painters of his time.

