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*Portraiture, Scandal,
and the Art of Power in
Napoleonic France*

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Kathryn Calley Galitz



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Dedicated to
JAYNE WRIGHTSMAN,
whose generosity and love of
French culture have immeasurably
enriched the Museum

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art
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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This past year the Met received a splendid gift of a portrait of the famed French statesman Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord painted in 1808 by François Gérard, one of the most celebrated artists of post-revolutionary France. The painting now hangs beside Gérard's portrait of Talleyrand's wife, Catherine, in a gallery bearing the name of Jayne Wrightsman, to whom this *Bulletin* is dedicated. The Jayne Wrightsman Gallery, one of the highlights of the newly installed European Paintings Galleries, contains what is unquestionably the finest collection of Neoclassical French paintings outside the Louvre: nine canvases, six of which, including Gérard's portraits of Talleyrand and his wife, were gifts of Mrs. Wrightsman.

Pride of place in the Jayne Wrightsman Gallery belongs to Jacques Louis David's magisterial double portrait of Antoine Laurent Lavoisier and his wife, Marie Anne Pierrette Paulze. Painted in 1788, on the eve of the French Revolution, the portrait commemorates the groundbreaking research that led to the publication the following year of Lavoisier's treatise on chemistry, which was illustrated by his wife. In 1925 John D. Rockefeller acquired the painting from the Lavoisiers' heirs and placed it in the library of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (now Rockefeller University) in New York. When the university sold the painting in 1977, Charles and Jayne Wrightsman acquired it for the Metropolitan, where it joined David's iconic history painting *The Death of Socrates*, which Thomas Jefferson proclaimed "the best thing" at the Paris Salon of 1787 and which the Museum had been fortunate enough to purchase from the painter's heirs in 1931. With the Wrightsman gift, the Museum possessed two landmarks in the history of European painting by one of France's greatest artists.

The two David paintings became the point of departure for a series of unparalleled purchases due entirely to Jayne Wrightsman's deep interest in eighteenth-century France and, especially, her fascination with Talleyrand, one of the greatest diplomats of modern times. In 1994 Mrs. Wrightsman purchased for the Museum a portrait of Talleyrand painted in 1817 by Pierre Paul Prud'hon. This was followed in 2002 by her gift of Gérard's elegant portrait of Talleyrand's beautiful wife. Then, in 2012, she acquired for the Met's collection Gérard's portrait of Talleyrand himself, which is without question one of his finest. No less a connoisseur than Dominique Vivant Denon, the first director of the Louvre, extolled the expressive character of the painting in a note he wrote to Napoleon on the eve of the opening of the Paris Salon of 1808, where it was displayed among a constellation of Napoleonic portraits by Gérard. Painted at a critical juncture in Talleyrand's career, the likeness captures the private side of the notoriously inscrutable diplomat who helped shape political events in Europe under five successive French regimes.

Thanks to Jayne Wrightsman, the Museum has united Gérard's portraits of husband and wife for what is possibly the first time. The stories told about Talleyrand are legion, but perhaps nothing set the tongues of nineteenth-century Paris wagging more than his unexpected marriage in 1802 to his mistress Catherine Verléé Grand, an event made all the more astonishing when one considers that she was a divorcée and he the former bishop of Autun. The captivating but much less familiar story of Madame de Talleyrand's rise in society, which might have been lifted from the pages of a novel like *Vanity Fair* or *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, is wonderfully told in this issue of the *Bulletin* by Kathryn Calley Galitz, who has done significant work in French painting of this period. But her text is above all the story of the artist who painted Catherine de Talleyrand's portrait, François Gérard, who entered Jacques Louis David's studio in 1786, when he was sixteen years old, and by the turn of the century had become the most sought-after portraitist in Napoleonic France. As the first major publication devoted to Gérard since the nineteenth century, this *Bulletin* is a fitting tribute to Jayne Wrightsman and her extraordinary generosity.

Thomas P. Campbell
Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



In the summer of 1804 François Gérard was cloistered in his Paris studio, finishing his submissions to that year's Salon, which would open in September. Held at the Musée Napoléon (now the Musée du Louvre), these biennial exhibitions could make or break an artist's career, and Gérard's well-publicized successes at recent Salons were attracting a flurry of aristocratic sitters to his spacious atelier. Although he had spent years as a student of the Neoclassical master Jacques-Louis David and still aspired to greatness as a history painter, Gérard was rapidly becoming the most sought-after portraitist in Paris.

Gérard's celebrated clientele included the soon-to-be empress of France, Josephine Bonaparte, and several other members of Napoleon's inner circle. It is not surprising, then, that among those seeking his services in the months after Napoleon was proclaimed emperor of France on May 18, 1804, was the wife of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord, Napoleon's minister of foreign affairs (figs. 1, 2). No doubt Catherine de Talleyrand Périgord wished to commemorate her recent—and dramatic—rise in the social hierarchy after her marriage in 1802 to one of the most influential men in France and a member of one of its oldest noble families. The details of Gérard's commission to paint Madame de Talleyrand are not known, but her husband's famous name must certainly have played a role in securing it. (As for her husband, his attentions were apparently already diverted, as he was rumored to have taken a mistress, one Madame Dubois, not long after their marriage.)

Gérard's portrait captures his sitter's legendary beauty at the apex of her extraordinary social triumph. Though she has been relegated to the footnotes of French history, her identity overshadowed by that of her larger-than-life husband, Catherine de Talleyrand led a life that would not have been out of place in a picaresque novel by Daniel Defoe or Henry Fielding, mirroring the tumultuous era in which she lived. Like "the little Corsican," she was an outsider in French society. If her rise, and subsequent fall, were less extreme than Napoleon's, her story was also linked to the social and political vicissitudes of the time. Her portrait offers a revealing glimpse of French society in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1789—replete with sexual, social, and political intrigue—and of the celebrated artist who memorialized its leading players.

Catherine de Talleyrand was one of the most prominent women in Paris during the heady and eventful decade that followed the French Revolution, when women wielded influence behind the scenes as salon hostesses, entertaining politicians, writers, and artists in intimate private gatherings. Catherine was renowned as one of the "Merveilleuses" (see fig. 3), the female counterparts of the "Incroyables" who held sway in fashionable circles in Paris in the 1790s, and her beauty and wealth conferred on her both status and power. She counted Josephine Bonaparte (see fig. 12),

1. Baron François Gérard (French, Rome 1770–1837 Paris). *Madame Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord* (Noël Catherine Verlée, 1761–1835), *Later Princesse de Bénévent*, ca. 1805. Detail of fig. 21

2. François Gérard. *Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord* (1754–1838), *Prince de Bénévent*, 1808. Detail of fig. 40



a Merveilleuse herself, among her confidantes. Louis Mathieu Molé, prime minister of France from 1836 to 1839, remembered her as “the most beautiful woman in Paris” when he was a young man.¹

Before her rise to prominence in the 1790s, long before she even set foot in Paris, Catherine had not escaped notice. Noël Catherine Verlée was born to French parents of modest means in the Danish colony of Tranquebar in India in 1761. Four months before her sixteenth birthday, in 1777, she married George Francis Grand, a naturalized Englishman who was a senior civil servant in the East India Company in Calcutta. At various gatherings of Anglo-Indian society the young Madame Grand

3. Jean Louis Darcis
(French, died 1801 Paris)
after Carle (Antoine Charles
Horace) Vernet (French,
Bordeaux 1758–1836 Paris).
Les Merveilleuses, January 22,
1797. Engraving, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.
(28.2 x 32.7 cm). Musée du
Louvre, Paris (21064LR)



attracted considerable attention, most notably that of the married Sir Philip Francis (fig. 4), a high-ranking official in the service of the governor-general of India who later described her to his second wife as “the most beautiful woman in Calcutta.”² She soon found herself at the center of a cause célèbre. In December 1778 Francis was discovered in her bedroom (having entered through the window with the aid of a bamboo ladder) by the household servants. Her wronged husband initiated a separation and sued Francis for damages in a trial that played out in the Supreme Court of Calcutta over the following year. Grand was awarded the substantial sum of 50,000 sicca rupees and declared himself “fully satisfied, content, and paid.”³ Fleeing the scandal—and her husband—Catherine left India in 1780, alone, on a Dutch ship bound for Europe.

By 1782, after an interlude in London with Thomas Lewin, a fellow passenger on the voyage from India, Catherine was living on her own in an apartment in the Sentier district of Paris, home to the city’s wealthy bankers and financiers. Money was apparently no object, as she spent freely on jewelry, the latest fashions, and interior decorations. Her numerous “protectors” paid her bills and lavished her with gifts, including a magnificent pair of white horses. She advertised her cultivation through subscriptions to the Comédie-Française and the Opéra, as well as with the library she maintained. Because she was a married woman, albeit with an absent husband, her lifestyle would not have raised eyebrows in aristocratic society in Paris during the last years of the



4. James Lonsdale (British, Lancashire 1777–1839 London). *Sir Philip Francis* (1740–1818), ca. 1806–10. Oil on canvas, 29½ x 24 in. (74.9 x 61 cm). National Portrait Gallery, London (NPC 334)

reign of Louis XVI, the period of licentiousness and excess that Pierre Choderlos de Laclos so memorably chronicled in his novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, published the very year Catherine Grand arrived in Paris. That her name appeared infrequently in the popular press suggests that she was more discreet in her liaisons in Paris than she had been in Calcutta.

In 1783 Madame Grand sat for Queen Marie Antoinette’s favorite portraitist, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, who happened to live on the same street, the rue du Sentier. Shown gazing upward (fig. 5), she assumes a recurring pose in Vigée Le Brun’s portraits of fashionable women that recalls the portrayals of female saints by the seventeenth-century Italian artist Guido Reni. Catherine’s portrait, however, is emphatically secular, and its erotic charge was not lost on contemporary viewers. One Salon critic writing in 1783, doubtless seduced by the generous display of décolletage, admired its “enchancing voluptuousness,” while another exclaimed, “The head

breathes.”⁴ The critics echoed the response the sitter herself elicited from her admirers, mostly wealthy financiers. As one ardent suitor, Baron de Frénilly, proclaimed, she was “a heavenly beauty, still radiant with youth, with incomparable teeth, a transparent pallor, and a forest of light blond hair like no one else’s.”⁵ Even Madame de Rémusat, Josephine Bonaparte’s lady-in-waiting who was far from kind to Talleyrand’s wife in her memoirs (published by her grandson some fifty years after her death), conceded: “I did not know Mme [Catherine] Grand in the prime of her life and beauty, but I have heard it said that she was one of the most charming women of her time. . . . Her complexion was dazzling, her eyes of the brightest blue. . . . Her fair golden hair was of proverbial beauty.”⁶ Vigée Le Brun’s portrait announced its sitter’s arrival in Parisian society, on the cusp of her dramatic social ascent.

While Catherine Grand was establishing her presence among the city’s social elite in the final years of the Ancien Régime, her future husband was consolidating his own power in his role as agent-general of the clergy, representing the French Church to the government from 1780 to 1785. For his services Talleyrand received a coveted bishopric in 1788. As bishop of Autun, he was elected to represent the clergy at the fateful meeting of the Estates-General at Versailles in May and June 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution (see fig. 6). This role catapulted him into public prominence and launched a political career he sustained over the course of some five decades and at least as many political regimes. His varied political allegiances are embodied in an 1815 caricature (fig. 7) that depicts him with six heads, each proclaiming his loyalty to a different authority, and wielding a bishop’s crosier in one hand and in the other a weather vane, a none too subtle allusion to his frequently changing loyalties. (His contemporary the writer Sophie Gay called him the *toujours ministre*.)⁷ Talleyrand’s political acumen was seemingly rivaled only by his fondness for women; having taken his first mistress as a young seminarian, he amassed an impressive succession of lovers and cultivated friendships with influential women throughout his life. In the

5. Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (French, Paris 1755–1842 Paris). *Madame Grand (Noël Catherine Verlée, 1761–1835), Later Madame de Talleyrand Périgord, Princesse de Bénévent*, 1783. Oil on canvas, 36¼ x 28½ in. (92.1 x 72.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Edward S. Harkness, 1940 (50.135.2)

words of Madame de Rémusat, who knew him well, “Women have much more influence over him than men.”⁸

Accounts vary as to when Talleyrand first encountered Catherine Grand. Their paths might well have crossed as early as the 1780s. In the wake of the social upheaval that followed the Revolution, Talleyrand resigned as bishop of Autun, his political





ambitions far exceeding his calling to the Church, and in 1797 he was appointed minister of foreign affairs by the Directory government. It was Catherine Grand's beauty, apparently undiminished since Vigée Le Brun had captured her likeness in 1783, that was said to have attracted Talleyrand. When in March 1798 her correspondence with a former lover, Emmanuel de Lambertye, then an émigré in London, was intercepted by the French police and she was arrested and incarcerated as a suspected Royalist spy, Talleyrand himself sent a heartfelt appeal to Paul, vicomte de Barras, the so-called king of the Directory:

There is not a soul in Europe more unlikely or more incapable of meddling in any business. She is a very beautiful and very indolent Indian, the idlest woman I have ever met. I ask you to use interest on her behalf; I am sure that not a shadow of pretext will be found for not putting an end to this affair to which I shall be sorry to see any publicity given. I love her and I declare to you, as man, to man, that never in her life has she meddled, or been in a position to meddle, in any business whatever.⁹

His rather unconventional declaration of love marks the only time that Talleyrand would break his public silence regarding his relationship with Catherine Grand.

6. François Bonneville (French, active 18th century). *Ch. M. Talleyrand-Périgord, Former Bishop of Autun, Deputy to the National Constituent Assembly of 1789*, ca. 1789. Engraving, 6% x 4% in. (17.4 x 11.8 cm). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

7. *The Man with Six Heads*, April 15, 1815. Colored engraving. Private collection. Published during the Hundred Days in which Napoleon returned to power in 1815, this caricature shows a six-headed Talleyrand proclaiming his changing loyalties during a succession of regimes, from the reign of Louis XVI through the restored monarchy under Louis XVIII. The sixth and last head is about to call out a new allegiance, deliberately not named.

Madame Grand's arrest and Talleyrand's prominent role in her release from prison were fodder for a voracious and scandal-seeking press. One radical left journal, *Le Républicain*, facetiously announced the "diplomatic marriage" of the former bishop: "The minister of foreign affairs, renouncing the antics of his gallant bachelorhood, has just married to salve his conscience: his bride is forty years old and possesses a very large fortune." And the public ridicule did not end with false proclamations of their marriage. Two weeks later the same newspaper published a satirical account of the affair. Talleyrand was mockingly described as wearing a portrait of "a beautiful Indian" around his neck, along with a bishop's cross. Among the papers spilling from his pockets is a letter from Grand to Lambertye in which she confides that "the new lover she calls PIEDCOURT has made her the most seductive offers of marriage, promising to place at her feet . . . a scepter and a crown."¹⁰ "Piedcourt," supposedly coined by Catherine herself, was of course a cruel nickname for Talleyrand, a vulgar double entendre that exploited his clubfoot. From this moment on, their relationship would be widely chronicled in the contemporary equivalents of today's tabloids and confessional blogs, with popular interest fueled by Talleyrand's very public political role.

On April 7, 1798, less than a month after Talleyrand intervened with the government on her behalf, Catherine conveniently obtained a divorce in absentia from George Francis Grand. (Divorce as recently legislated by the newly formed Republican government required little justification.) She may have been pregnant at the time, although the pregnancy was never publicly acknowledged, as it would have caused too great a scandal; in 1807 Talleyrand became the guardian of an eight-year-old girl known as Charlotte whose date of birth is recorded as 1799 and who was likely the couple's illegitimate daughter.

Newly ensconced as Talleyrand's mistress, Catherine hosted suppers and lavish soirées at his residences, from diplomatic dinners in Paris to evenings at his country house in Neuilly where, according to Napoleon's brother Lucien Bonaparte, "nymphs with mythological names served the coffee from golden ewers, and perfumes burned in silver chafing dishes."¹¹ As one observer said, "She was an inoffensive pleasing companion at table and beautiful as Venus herself, which was all that he (Talleyrand) looked for."¹² She was by his side at the Hôtel de Galliffet, the official residence of the minister of foreign affairs in Paris, when diplomats and other dignitaries were received. This arrangement so scandalized the British emissary Lord Cornwallis that he refused to be presented to her. Laure Junot, the duchesse d'Abrantès, whose husband was one of Napoleon's generals, saw it simply as a reflection of the times.¹³

Catherine Grand's liaison with Talleyrand, coupled with her beauty, made her one of the most prominent women in Paris at the close of the eighteenth century, a rival to the likes of writer and salon hostess Germaine de Staël (fig. 8) and Juliette Récamier (see figs. 15, 16), the beautiful young banker's wife whose salon, frequented by a stylish crowd of artists, writers, and politicians, was said to rule all of Paris. If the public nature of their intimate relationship reflected the liberal mores during the Directory (1795–99), it ultimately came to be seen as contravening First Consul



8. Jean-Baptiste Isabey (French, Nancy 1767–1855 Paris). *Baroness Germaine de Staël at the Age of Thirty*, 1797. Black chalk, stumping on paper; 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (20 x 14.4 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 3821)

Napoleon Bonaparte's call for a return to moral order. Napoleon, as Madame de Staël dryly observed, wanted "everyone to be married, Bishops, Cardinals, etc."¹⁴ She summed up the social dilemma that Talleyrand's relationship with Catherine Grand posed: "It is a real problem in polite company to know whether it is better to be the mistress of a priest or his wife."¹⁵

At the time, it was widely believed that Napoleon had ordered his minister of foreign affairs either to abandon his mistress or to marry her. (By some accounts, Napoleon gave Talleyrand eight days to marry, thinking that such an ultimatum would dissuade his minister.) A more malicious explanation circulated among some of the couple's acquaintances, namely that Catherine, upon learning that Talleyrand wanted to back out, blackmailed him into marrying her. She is reputed to have sent Talleyrand a note in which she implied that she possessed information that could send him to the guillotine: "Unless you marry me immediately, I'll have you shortened by a foot."¹⁶ For his part, Talleyrand, ever inscrutable, remained conspicuously silent as to his motives. Etienne

Denis Pasquier, later the duc de Pasquier, a statesman who held various posts under Napoleon and in several successive regimes, speculated that Talleyrand had simply given in "to the desire of finding some little amount of peace in a domestic arrangement, the habit of which he did not know how to shake off, [and] to a supreme indifference to public opinion and that custom of defying it which makes it a matter of course not to sacrifice anything to it."¹⁷

Marriage in this instance was not a simple proposition, as the marriage of a bishop required the pope's permission. Talleyrand successfully negotiated a "return to a secular and lay life," authorized by Pope Pius VII on August 20, 1802. Liberally (and falsely) interpreting this papal brief of reconciliation as also granting him permission to marry, Talleyrand wed his divorced mistress in a civil ceremony at the town hall on the rue de Verneuil less than a month later, on September 10, 1802. The affair seems to have been rather hastily arranged, for one of the witnesses claimed to have received only two hours' notice. A discreet religious ceremony at a friend's home outside Paris followed the next day. The signatures of Napoleon and Josephine Bonaparte appear on the marriage contract as witnesses to the union, but Napoleon later admitted that he would rather have made Talleyrand a cardinal than see him married to his mistress, whom he cruelly dismissed as a whore and eventually banned from his court.¹⁸

Napoleon was not the only naysayer. When Pope Pius VII was in Paris for Napoleon's coronation as emperor of France in 1804, he refused even to meet Talleyrand's wife. And the notion of the new Madame de Talleyrand "tied to her husband like a placard" by Bonaparte, as François René de Chateaubriand put it, prevailed among Talleyrand's entourage, who did little to hide their disdain.¹⁹ The duchesse d'Abrantès claimed that Talleyrand regretted the marriage even before it happened and unsparingly listed his wife's shortcomings: "Her carriage was as leaden as her thinking. Her

hair was of a rare beauty and a ravishing blonde. But if that made for a beautiful wife, she was after all nothing but a beautiful statue, and of no help to M. de Talleyrand.”²⁰ In 1803 Constance de Cazenove d’Arlens, whose brother-in-law was Talleyrand’s secretary, described his new wife in her journal: “She is tall, beautiful, well dressed, but her secret is written across her face: ‘Stupidity and vanity.’” She dismissed Madame de Talleyrand, whom she referred to as a “silly little goose,” as a social climber for whom “the pleasure of bearing a great name, of occupying an important position, has gone to her head.”²¹ A Polish aristocrat who met Madame de Talleyrand in 1810 summarily wrote her off as a parvenu whose “nullity nothing could conceal, not even her rise in status; her gaffes were quoted as often as her husband’s *bons mots*.” She went on to say that “a deadly boredom” prevailed in Talleyrand’s salon, blaming his wife, who “added to her natural worthlessness pretensions of grandeur as well as vague attempts at etiquette that made her unbearable.”²² The duchesse d’Abrantès offered a similar assessment: “Everyone knows how much good she was in a salon; the arm-chair she sat in was more useful than she was, and moreover, kept its mouth shut.”²³ “Her voice is disagreeable, and her manners ungracious; she is naturally ill-natured towards every one, and her inexhaustible fund of stupidity prevents her from ever saying the right thing,” concluded Madame de Rémusat, whose memoirs reveal her strong bias in favor of Talleyrand.²⁴

Talleyrand himself reinforced the popular perception of his wife as a *belle bête*. “She is delightfully stupid,” he once said. “One must have loved a woman of genius in order to savor the pleasure one feels at having married a fool.”²⁵ Napoleon later referred to her as “a dull-witted old maid.”²⁶ And her reputation crossed the Channel. *The Female Revolutionary Plutarch*, a self-proclaimed collection of “Biographical, Historical and Revolutionary Sketches, Characters and Anecdotes” that has sometimes been attributed to the infamous journalist, scandalmonger, and spy Lewis Goldsmith, lampooned her in 1805: “That Madame Talleyrand has no pretensions to genius, every body who has frequented her society knows.”²⁷ Even her defenders tended to confirm the widespread belief in her stupidity. Victorine, the comtesse de Chastenay, who met her in 1806, wrote of Catherine de Talleyrand: “I never heard anything come out of her mouth that resembled the meaningless remarks everyone enjoyed imputing to her. Never in my presence did she utter a single sentence in bad taste, never did she say a word that could be described as nonsense.”²⁸ In a similar dissenting vein, Louis Gabriel Michaud, one of Talleyrand’s early biographers, who encountered Madame de Talleyrand in 1814, recalled that “her conversation . . . was hardly that of a fool.”²⁹ Yet the assumption that Catherine was beautiful but stupid, perpetuated by members of Talleyrand’s circle, has only recently been challenged with evidence that she was in fact a shrewd businesswoman who profited (not always scrupulously) from her relationship with Talleyrand. When she married in 1802 she was already a landowner with assets that included foreign bank accounts, jewelry, and silver, all detailed in her marriage contract.³⁰

Her relationship with Talleyrand now legitimized through marriage, Catherine enlisted the talents of François Gérard, the most fashionable portraitist in Paris, to

9. Baron Antoine Jean Gros
(French, Paris 1771–1835
Meudon). *François Gérard*
(1770–1837), *Later Baron Gérard*,
1790. Oil on canvas, 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ x
18 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (56.2 x 47.3 cm). The
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Gift of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman,
2002 (2002.441)



commemorate her social triumph. It is easy to understand why an ambitious artist like Gérard would have agreed to paint Talleyrand's wife. Nonetheless, the commission was a coup of sorts for the new Madame de Talleyrand, given the demand for Gérard's portraits among what the influential theorist and art historian Antoine Quatremère de Quincy called "this crowd of celebrities of the time, who craved for themselves the kind of immortality they hoped to receive from the favor of his brush."³¹ It was Gérard who was in the enviable position of choosing his sitters, no doubt creating a sense of competition among those who desired his services as a portraitist. A portrait by Gérard was a coveted status symbol. According to Sophie Gay, who was a frequent guest at the artist's legendary Wednesday evening salons, "the men of that era believed themselves illustrious and the women beautiful only inasmuch as Gérard's brush had assured them immortality."³²

10. François Gérard. *Belisarius*, 1797. Oil on canvas, 36½ x 28½ in. (91.8 x 72.5 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (2005.10)



Gérard had entered Jacques Louis David's atelier in 1786, joining the ranks of such rising stars as Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson and Antoine Jean Gros. The competitive atmosphere of the studio was fueled by the intense friendships and equally intense rivalries among David's students. An informal portrait that Gros painted of Gérard as both a student exercise and a token of friendship (fig. 9) shows the young artist in 1790, just after he had assisted David with his seminal history painting *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789; Louvre, Paris), a privilege the master accorded only to his most talented students. Gérard made his debut at the Paris Salon in 1791 with an unremarkable history painting in the tradition of David. He attracted little attention in the genre until 1795, when he exhibited at the Salon a painting of the blind Byzantine general Belisarius that is known today through a replica (fig. 10). Gérard's reinterpretation of a subject David had painted with great

11. François Gérard. *Portrait of Alexandrine Emilie Brongniart*, 1795. Oil on canvas, 19½ x 15 in. (49.5 x 38.1 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Robert Lehman Foundation Acquisition Fund for Early European and Modern and Contemporary Art; the Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund; and the Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund (2010.97.1)



success some fifteen years earlier was a bold move, and his painting was lauded for its expressive power. A survey of contemporary French art published in 1801 declared that Gérard earned the title of history painter with his *Belisarius*, which was deemed “one of the most beautiful paintings of the French school.”³³

Despite his early acclaim as a history painter, as the eighteenth century drew to a close Gérard focused increasingly on portraiture, building his reputation in that genre and abandoning, at least for the moment, the loftier realm of history painting. He first exhibited a portrait at the Salon in 1795. Critics unanimously praised the painting, representing Emilie Brongniart, the adolescent daughter of a prominent Parisian architect (fig. 11), for its lifelike quality. The writer for the *Mercure de France* even speculated rather suggestively that Gérard’s subject “will blush if you look at her with too interested an eye.” Salon commentators admired the naturalism of Gérard’s work and likened it to Leonardo da Vinci’s. (The *Mona Lisa* was then housed at the palace of Versailles and would be transferred to the new Musée du Louvre three years later.)³⁴ Other portraits followed, but it was the success of Gérard’s portrait of Josephine Bonaparte (fig. 12)—hailed as a “masterpiece” at the Salon of 1801—that established

12. François Gérard. *Josephine Bonaparte (Marie Joséphe Rose de Tascher de la Pagerie, 1763–1814)*, 1801. Oil on canvas, 70 x 68½ in. (178 x 174 cm). The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (GE 5674)



him as the preferred portraitist of the elite. Josephine's elegant, languid pose may have been a nod to David's portrayal of Juliette Récamier in an unfinished painting from 1800 (see fig. 15), which Gérard would have seen in his teacher's studio.

Gérard's rise as a portraitist coincided with the unprecedented popularity of the genre in France during the mid-1790s, when "portrait mania" reigned.³⁵ The trend had been growing since the middle of the eighteenth century, when critics began lamenting the proliferation of anonymous visages on the walls of the Salons, at the expense of more edifying history paintings. Already in 1754 Etienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, the writer often cited as the first modern art critic, had bemoaned the "horde of unknown men, bereft of name, of talent, of reputation, and even of faces worth remarking."³⁶ The public appeared immune to the critical backlash, however, and nearly fifty years later the demand for portraiture showed no sign of abating. An engraved view of a gallery in the Salon of 1801 (fig. 13), where Gérard's painting of Josephine Bonaparte (fig. 12) was on view, shows a plethora of portraits, from the centrally placed lifesize image of one of Napoleon's generals dying in battle to the small, intimate portrayals of anonymous individuals that dot the lower registers of the display.

13. Antoine Maxime Monsaldy (French, Paris 1768–1816) and G. Devisme (French, active ca. 1800–1806). *View of the Paintings on Display at the Museum Central des Arts in Year IX of the French Republic, 1801*. Etching, 9¾ x 15 in. (24.8 x 38 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1959 (59.601.3a)



In 1792 the *Dictionnaire des arts de peinture, sculpture et gravure* blamed the public’s preference “on manners, on luxury, on egoism, more widespread than ever.”³⁷ In his *Histoire de la révolution française* (1847–53) Jules Michelet promulgated an alternate theory; he ascribed the surging demand for portraits in post-revolutionary France to a reaction to the widespread loss of life during Robespierre’s bloody Reign of Terror (1793–94) and the resultant desire for images of friends and loved ones—as a preemptive commemoration of sorts.³⁸ The increased wealth circulating in Paris following the Revolution further stimulated the market for portraits. More than ever, portraits were status symbols coveted by people of all social ranks. Whether created by sentiment, vanity, or a narcissistic quest for “immortality” among the new moneyed elite, the desire for portraits was a boon for artists.

Gérard’s reputation as a portraitist continued to grow, prompting inevitable comparisons with David, his former master. His fellow student Etienne Jean Delécluze alleged that despite his own fame, David resented Gérard’s success.³⁹ As the new century dawned it was Gérard, not David, who was extolled as an “oracle of taste.” According to his biographer Charles Lenormant, as a portraitist Gérard was thought to have surpassed David.⁴⁰ Yet despite these intimations of a rivalry, the two artists seem not to have lost their respect for each other. In 1809 Gérard gave David his portrait of the sculptor Antonio Canova (now in the Louvre, Paris) in exchange for a self-portrait by David (fig. 14), which he accorded a place of honor in his salon for the rest of his life.

Nothing fueled the perceived rivalry between student and teacher more than the selection of Gérard to portray Juliette Récamier, the fashionable salon hostess and arbiter of taste whose financier husband happened to be one of the richest men in post-revolutionary France. Madame Récamier’s celebrity was such that her rare public

14. Jacques Louis David (French, Paris 1748–1825 Brussels). *Self-portrait*, 1791. Oil on canvas, 25¼ x 20⅞ in. (64 x 53 cm). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



appearances attracted moblike crowds and were covered in the press all over Europe. David worked on her portrait (fig. 15) in 1800 but abandoned it soon thereafter, unfinished, without explanation. (The 1824 biography of David purportedly vetted by the artist himself blamed the painting's incomplete state on the sitter's "impatience" and the artist's "temper.")⁴¹ Five years later, in 1805, Gérard revealed his portrait of Juliette Récamier seductively posed in an intimate setting evocative of a *salle de bains* (fig. 16). The sensual qualities of his work, from the languor of Madame Récamier's pose to the wisps of steam rising from the pierced openings in the marble floor, stand in marked contrast to the cool austerity of David's portrayal. Indeed, it is hard to reconcile Gérard's image of Madame Récamier, in a state suggestive of semi-undress, with contemporary accounts of a woman who "seemed to blush at being so beautiful."⁴² In May 1805 the *Journal de Paris* reported that "connoisseurs of beautiful portraits



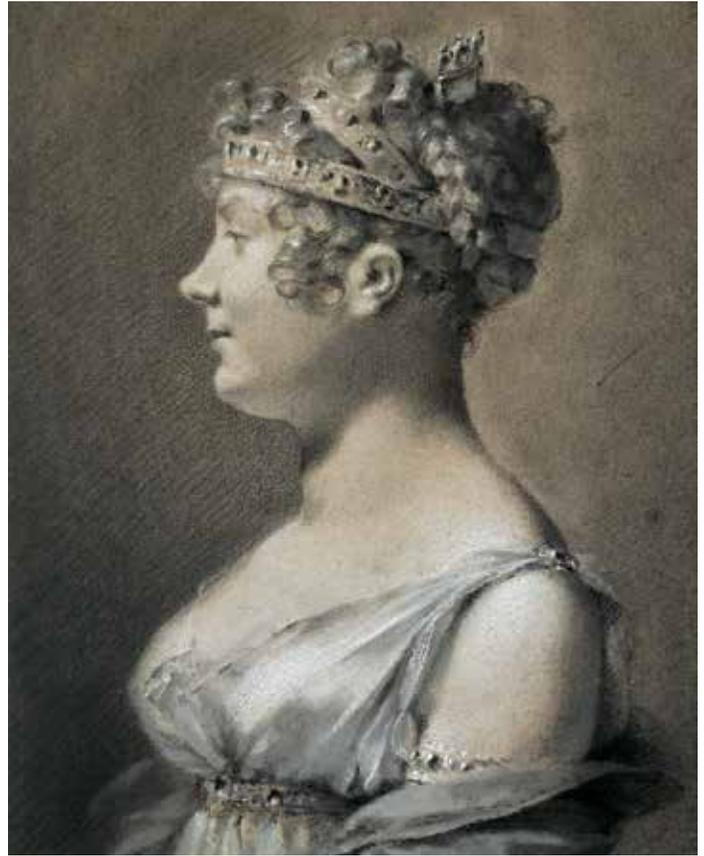
15. Jacques Louis David. *Madame Juliette Récamier* (1777–1849), 1800. Oil on canvas, 68½ x 96 in. (174 x 244 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris (INV. 3708)

and beautiful women” flocked to Gérard’s studio to see the portrait “whose face has a character of ingenuous perceptiveness and thoughtful gentleness that strikes as true all those who know the original.”⁴³ The painting’s renown quickly spread across the Channel, where in 1806 *The Female Revolutionary Plutarch* provocatively announced that Gérard’s portrait of Madame Récamier, “as Venus, reposing beneath a thin veil, [is] a performance considered at Paris as a chef-d’oeuvre.”⁴⁴ The reception of Gérard’s portrait of course had everything to do with the public’s fascination with his subject, who almost always dressed in white, evocative of the virgin it was said she remained following her marriage to Jacques Récamier, who was nearly forty years her senior and rumored to be her natural father. John Carr, an Englishman who visited the French capital in 1802, remarked that “Madame R___ is a disciple of Diana, even slander pays incessant homage to her chastity.”⁴⁵

As he was finishing his portrait of Juliette Récamier, Gérard was also at work on his portrait of Madame de Talleyrand (fig. 21), who elicited the collective disdain of the female contingent in Talleyrand’s inner circle. The duchesse d’Abrantès voiced the surprise that greeted the news of her marriage to Talleyrand in 1802: “Madame Grandt [*sic*] was no longer young, she was no longer even pretty. All that remained of this once renowned person was a colossus of flesh in a wig, with red-rimmed eyes—all in all a most undesirable person.”⁴⁶ Madame de Rémusat, too, observed the



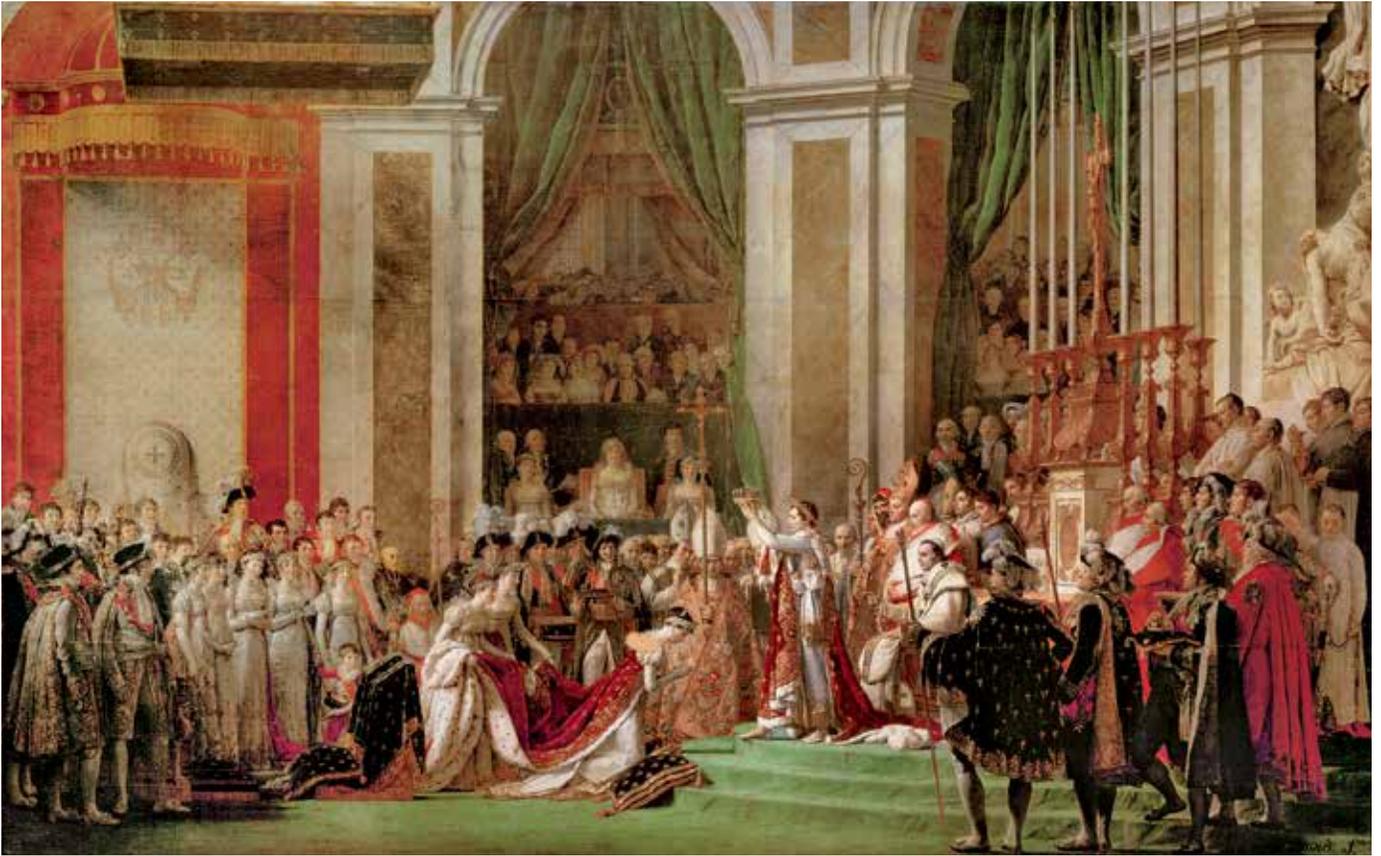
16. François Gérard. *Juliette Récamier*, 1802–5. Oil on canvas, 88 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 58 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (225 x 148 cm). Musée Carnavalet – Histoire de Paris, Paris (p.1581)



17 (left). Detail of fig. 21. 18 (right). Pierre Paul Prud'hon (French, Cluny 1758–1823 Paris). *Madame Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord*, ca. 1806–7. Black and white chalk on gray paper, 9 x 7 in. (23 x 17.8 cm). The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (or 43445)

signs of Catherine's decline by the time she wed Talleyrand: "I think she must have been at least thirty-six when she married M. de Talleyrand. The elegance of her figure had already begun to fade a little from the weight she had put on, which has much increased since then and has ended up ruining the delicacy of her features and the beauty of her complexion, now quite ruddy."⁴⁷ In contrast, the German playwright August von Kotzebue, who saw an elegantly attired Madame de Talleyrand at a gathering of Napoleon's coterie in 1804, singled her out as "particularly refined."⁴⁸

In keeping with artistic convention, Gérard's portrait gives no hint of the unflattering—and no doubt exaggerated—characterizations of his sitter. According to La Font de Saint-Yenne, the most successful portrait painters in the eyes of the public were those who possessed "the art of flattering their models with enough skill to persuade them that they were not flattering them at all."⁴⁹ Idealization was an intrinsic aspect of a portraitist's art, as reactions to Gérard's portrait of Josephine Bonaparte (fig. 12) attest. The writer Sophie Gay, a friend of both the sitter and the artist, admired "the art with which Gérard had made her look younger without spoiling the likeness."⁵⁰ The German musician Johann Friedrich Reichardt cautioned, though, that "it is wrong to see it before having been in the presence of Mme Bonaparte; you are bound to be disappointed."⁵¹ The English artist Joseph Farington recorded in his diary that Madame Bonaparte, sighted at a public ball, was "not at all handsome; unassuming in



19. Jacques Louis David. *The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine on December 2, 1804, 1805–7*. Oil on canvas, 20 ft. 4 in. x 32 ft. 1½ in. (6.2 x 9.8 m). Musée du Louvre, Paris (INV. 3699)



20. Detail of the figure of Talleyrand standing at the far right in fig. 19

her manner, and, plainly dressed.”⁵² Even Juliette Récamier, whose beauty was by all accounts unquestioned, later wrote to Gérard that her expression in her portrait (fig. 16) “pleases me more than it looks like me.”⁵³ And her devoted admirer Chateaubriand complained in his memoirs, “I do not like it because I recognize the model’s features but not her expression.”⁵⁴

In the absence of contemporary commentary about Gérard’s portrayal of Madame de Talleyrand (see fig. 17), which was not publicly exhibited during the sitter’s lifetime, a portrait drawing made by Pierre Paul Prud’hon around the same time (fig. 18) offers a worthy comparison. In fact, the two portraits resemble one another: in both, Catherine’s face appears somewhat fuller than when she was portrayed some twenty years earlier by Vigée Le Brun (see fig. 5), and both show just a hint of a double chin, which Gérard’s three-quarter view more flatteringly conceals. The profile format of Prud’hon’s portrait draws attention to Madame de Talleyrand’s “slightly retroussé nose,” which supposedly resembled her husband’s, as memorably recorded by David in his depiction of Napoleon’s coronation ceremony (see figs. 19, 20).⁵⁵





22. François Gérard. *Marie-Madeleine Maret (1780–1827), née Lejeas, Duchesse de Bassano*. Oil on canvas, 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (30 x 19 cm). Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon (MV4900). This is an undated, reduced-scale replica of the original painting.

21. François Gérard. *Madame Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord (Noël Catherine Verlée, 1761–1835), Later Princesse de Bénévent*, ca. 1805. Oil on canvas, 88 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 64 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (225.7 x 164.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wrightsman Fund, 2002 (2002.31). See also figs. 1, 17, 23, 29, 30.

Quite unlike Madame Récamier in her semi-recumbent pose, Madame de Talleyrand stands gracefully beside the fireplace, her slightly elongated figure reminiscent of Mannerist portraiture (fig. 21). Gérard would return to a similar pose in a later portrait of the duchesse de Bassano, depicted leaning languidly on a console table (fig. 22). The luxuriously appointed interior in Gérard’s portrait of Madame de Talleyrand befits her status as the wife of a prominent government official. The specific setting has not been ascertained, if one was even intended—Gérard may well have sought merely to evoke the salon of a Paris town house, in the same way he had employed a generic terrace setting to suggest the grounds of Malmaison in his earlier portrait of Josephine Bonaparte (fig. 12). Talleyrand had recently purchased just such an *hôtel* on the rue d’Anjou-Saint-Honoré where he and his new wife could host more intimate gatherings. The patterned carpet, the gilded sofa upholstered in velvet, and the Neoclassical chair on which a shawl with a paisley border is draped (fig. 23) suggest both affluence and an awareness of contemporary taste, doubtless reflecting the image Madame de Talleyrand wished to project. The chimneypiece plaque depicts the Judgment of Paris, doubtless meant to equate the sitter with those mythological

beauties. The elegant Greek klismos-style chair speaks to the period’s revival of classical prototypes and would not have been out of place among the furnishings in the Récamiers’ recently redecorated town house, which Edmond and Jules de Goncourt called a veritable “Pompeii” in their chronicle of Parisian life.⁵⁶ Josephine Bonaparte contributed to the popularity of cashmere shawls (see fig. 24), reportedly lavishing large sums of money on the expensive Indian imports that Napoleon and his officers brought back to Paris from the Egyptian campaign in 1799.

Like Josephine Bonaparte and Juliette Récamier in Gérard’s earlier portraits, Madame de Talleyrand wears a gown *à la grecque* then very much in fashion. By the turn of the century white dresses had become ubiquitous in France as women of all classes followed the lead of the trio of celebrity trendsetters dubbed “the Three Graces”: Juliette Récamier, Josephine Bonaparte, and Thérésia Cabarrus Tallien (see figs. 36, 37). These dresses, made of transparent muslin that clung to the contours of the body (see fig. 25), often revealed more than they concealed, leading *The Female Revolutionary Plutarch* to proclaim of fashion across the Channel: “Nakedness, absolute nakedness, and nothing but nakedness, was therefore seen at the play-houses, at



23. Detail of fig. 21

the opera, at the concerts, routs, and in public walks as well as in private assemblies.”⁵⁷ Madame Tallien, in particular, has been credited with popularizing the style, which she allegedly took to extremes, wearing a knee-length, sleeveless muslin tunic over a chemise of material “so thin it was more a vapor than a physical fabric.” The overall effect of her ensemble, according to an anonymous memoir of the period, was of “almost total nudity.”⁵⁸ A scurrilous pamphlet circulating in Paris after the fall of Robespierre in 1794 condemned Tallien for her “proud indecency” and likened her to a common prostitute.⁵⁹ Madame Récamier, on the other hand, succeeded in radiating an aura of purity in her all-white ensembles: “Madame Récamier almost always wears white, and very decently.”⁶⁰ It was said that Josephine Bonaparte rarely wore anything but white muslin dresses at Malmaison, her country retreat, knowing that nothing pleased her husband more than seeing “a woman gracefully wearing a white dress,” until, that is, his political ambitions led him to declare otherwise.⁶¹

In 1799, newly installed as first consul, Napoleon publicly denounced the fashion for transparent dress as indecent. That year, the French journal *Le Moniteur* proclaimed: “Women are going back to silk fabrics . . . because

fashion forces them to conform to decency.”⁶² By the time Gérard was painting Madame de Talleyrand in 1804, the style had been modified in response to Bonaparte’s call for a return to moral order. Women still wore white, but their dresses were made of silk, which was manufactured in Lyon, rather than transparent muslin (which, not insignificantly, since France was at war with Britain, was manufactured in English textile mills). Opaque chemises replaced the titillating flesh-colored undergarments popularized during the Directory. Appropriately, then, Madame de Talleyrand wears a dress of white silk with an overdress of sheer silk voile or chiffon.⁶³

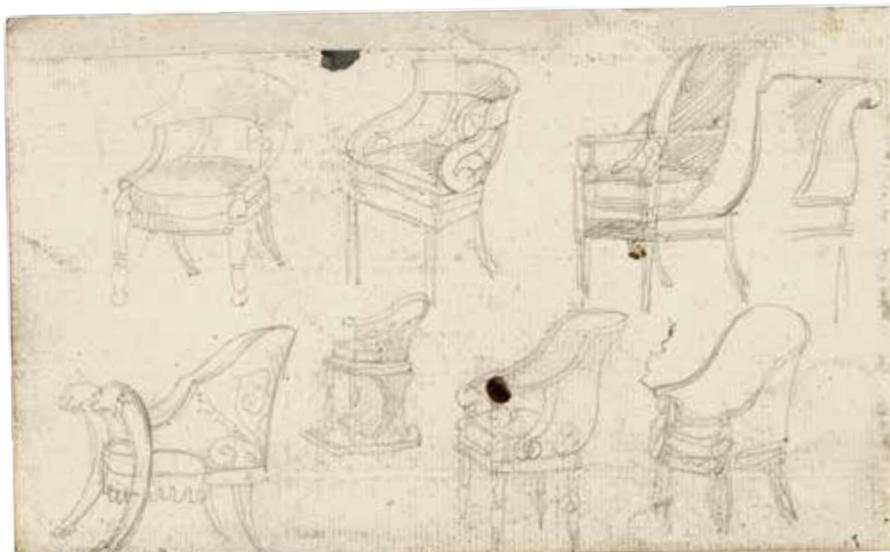
24. Shawl (detail). Kashmir, India, late 18th century. Pashmina wool; twill weave, double interlocking twill tapestry weave, pieced; 50½ x 115 in. (128.3 x 292.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Adrienne Minassian, 1994 (1997.319)



25. Evening dresses. France; left: 1804–5, right: 1804–14. Cotton. The Metropolitan Museum of Art; left: Purchase, Gifts in memory of Elizabeth N. Lawrence, 1983 (1983.6.1), right: Rogers Fund, 1907 (07.146.5)

Only one preparatory study for the portrait of Madame de Talleyrand is known: a small chalk drawing on the same sheet as two unrelated sketches of classicizing figures appropriate for a history painting (fig. 26). The sketch reveals that Gérard established the essential compositional elements—the pose of the figure, the fireplace, and the shawl-draped chair—before undertaking the painting. In contrast, several studies for the portrait of Madame Récamier (fig. 16) document the evolution of the composition, culminating in a preparatory watercolor (rare in Gérard's oeuvre) squared for transfer to canvas (fig. 27). The final canvas reveals that Gérard continued to rework

26. François Gérard. *Study for the Portrait of Madame Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord* (recto and verso). Pencil on paper, 5³/₈ x 8⁷/₈ in. (13.7 x 22.4 cm). Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon (D.2040). This is a preparatory study for fig. 21.



the composition as he painted, adding a laundry basket partially visible behind Madame Récamier's chair and altering the placement of the foreground column, its original position now visible as a pentimento.

In general, the known preliminary drawings Gérard made for his portraits vary in degree of detail and how closely they correspond to the finished work. When painting the portrait of Madame de Talleyrand, for example, he altered the placement of the chair, depicting it angled inward rather than parallel to the picture plane, as he had originally drawn it. The chair seems to have preoccupied Gérard, as drawings of different styles of chairs fill the verso of the sheet on which he sketched the composition (see fig. 26), none of which exactly corresponds to the klismos-style chair depicted in the painting. It is possible that the chair belonged to the sitter. For the double portrait of the comtesse de Morel-Vindé and her daughter that he painted in 1799 (fig. 28), Gérard requested that "one of the turned-back chairs" from the family's

27. François Gérard. *Study for the Portrait of Juliette Récamier*, 1802. Pen, black ink, and watercolor on paper; 12¼ x 9⅛ in. (31.2 x 23.3 cm). Musée Carnavalet – Histoire de Paris, Paris (p.8783). This is a study for fig. 16.



town house be sent to his studio. Infrared analysis of the portrait reveals that he had already completed the figure of the daughter, as well as the piano keyboard, before he painted the chair on which she sits.⁶⁴

Gérard's working method was documented by his longtime assistant, Marie Eléonore Godefroid, who entered his studio in about 1805 and remained with him until his death in 1837. He followed a traditional approach that was in keeping with his training under David. He first established the outlines of the composition and its "effect" (*l'effet*) in a preliminary sketch (*ébauche*) on the canvas, from which he then worked. As his studio practice expanded in the nineteenth century he relied increasingly on the aid of his students for the intermediate stages of the painting, reserving the finishing touches in "wet paint" (*pâte fraîche*) for himself. Significantly, according to Godefroid, Gérard was not averse to making enormous changes on the canvas as he progressed.⁶⁵ Traces of a preliminary sketch are visible in the portrait of Madame

28. François Gérard. *Comtesse de Morel-Vindé and Her Daughter (The Music Lesson)*, 1799. Oil on canvas, 79 x 56¼ in. (200.7 x 142.9 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Legion of Honor; Museum purchase, Mildred Anna Williams Bequest Fund and the William H. Noble Bequest Fund (1979.8)



de Talleyrand, notably in the area of the sitter's slippers, suggesting that Gérard altered the placement of the feet, although in this instance the canvas does not appear to have been extensively reworked (see fig. 29).⁶⁶

From the realistic rendering of the various materials to the pure bravura of the handling of the sheer overlay of the dress, which dissolves in a froth of gold-flecked translucent fabric at her feet, Gérard's portrait of Madame de Talleyrand also reveals



29. Detail of fig. 21

his stylistic debt to David. Here Gérard reprised the lavish brushwork in his portrait of Josephine Bonaparte (fig. 12), in which the diaphanous fabric of her semitransparent dress and the slightly worn appearance of the velvet seat cushions are so convincingly rendered. With equal skill, he depicted the reflected light of the unseen fire playing across the sheer white fabric of Madame de Talleyrand's dress and suggestively revealing the outline of her leg (see fig. 30). As an example of painterly virtuosity, this passage is on a par with the painted reflections of unseen windows on the glass globe of the scientific instrument in the foreground of David's portrait of the scientist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier and his wife (fig. 31). The dual sources of light—daylight and firelight—in the portrait of Madame de Talleyrand demonstrate the sustained interest in light effects that manifested itself early in Gérard's career. In the portrait of the celebrated singer Madame Barbier-Walbonne he painted in about 1796 (fig. 32), he shielded the sitter's face from direct sunlight so that it is bathed in shadows, allowing the light to fall instead on her figure and the open book on her lap, rendering its raised page semitransparent. With equal skill, he portrayed the family of the fashionable goldsmith Henri Auguste in a nocturnal scene lit only by an oil lamp and the distant moon (see fig. 33), dramatic lighting that elicited comparisons to Caravaggio and Rembrandt from Salon critics in 1798. Gérard's play with varied types of light in his portraits was a significant departure from the uniform lighting characteristic of David's portraits.



30. Detail of fig. 21

Although his painting of Madame de Talleyrand was not Gérard's first foray into full-length portraiture, its scale and compositional format prefigure the portraits of Napoleon and his extended family that became the artist's stock-in-trade during the Empire (1804–14). Between 1800 and 1815 alone, with the aid of studio assistants Gérard produced some fifty-six full-length portraits and forty portrait busts that represent a veritable who's who of Napoleonic Europe. Included among these works is an 1805 portrait of Napoleon himself in his imperial robes (fig. 34) that served as the prototype for numerous copies, including a tapestry version woven at the Manufacture des Gobelins in Paris between 1808 and 1811 that is now in the Metropolitan. Nevertheless, Gérard perceived his work as a portraitist as an impediment to his ambitions as a history painter, an attitude that stemmed from his experience in David's studio, where historical subjects reigned. The public, too, shared this bias. A Salon critic writing in 1801 lamented that the incessant demand for his portraits diverted Gérard from "work that would make him famous, if not rich."⁶⁷ In an attempt to limit the number of commissions but ensure his income Gérard reportedly kept the asking price for his portraits relatively high. Near the end of his life he complained that "a thousand reasons contribute to making this kind of work slower than any other."⁶⁸

31. Jacques Louis David. *Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743–1794) and His Wife, née Marie Anne Pierrette Paulze (1758–1836)*, 1788. Oil on canvas, 102¼ x 76⅝ in. (259.7 x 194.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, in honor of Everett Fahy, 1977 (1977.10)



Despite his apparent ambivalence toward the genre, in 1804 Gérard cited his portrait of a “Polish lady” as “decidedly my best painting.”⁶⁹ He must have been referring to his portrait of Katarzyna Starzeńska (fig. 35), a Polish countess who captivated Parisian society soon after she arrived in the city in 1803.⁷⁰ As a guest in the salon of Juliette Récamier, Katarzyna, or “la belle Gabrielle,” as she was called, was renowned for her beauty and temperament as well as her fortune (rumors of which were exaggerated). Her close friendship with Madame Récamier caused something of a sensation. She embarked on an adulterous affair with Eugène de Beauharnais, the son of Josephine Bonaparte, and the two scandalized Paris with their open relationship.



32. François Gérard. *Madame Barbier-Walbonne*, ca. 1796. Oil on wood, 31 x 23 in. (79 x 59 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 2192)



33. François Gérard. *The Goldsmith Henri Auguste (1759–1816) and His Family in 1798*. Oil on canvas, 10³/₈ x 8¹/₄ in. (27 x 21 cm). Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon (mv4855). This is an undated, reduced-scale replica of the original painting.

Allegedly pregnant with de Beauharnais's child, Katarzyna left Paris, with her husband, in 1804. Gérard, also a habitué of Madame Récamier's salon, painted Katarzyna's portrait sometime during the winter of 1803–4. He was said to have deliberately prolonged his sessions with his foreign model so as to spend more time with her. In her portrait, set outdoors, she appears silhouetted against a darkening sky—a dramatic setting that anticipates the Romantic taste for wild, uncultivated nature. Portrayed as if lost in a moment of reverie, a lyre-guitar by her side, Katarzyna evokes the melancholy heroines of Romantic literature. The landscape setting might well be a nod to British portrait types, years before the cross-Channel artistic exchanges of the 1820s.

Yet not long after he completed what he deemed his best painting, Gérard expressed his desire to distance himself from the demands of portraiture. In an 1804 letter, possibly to the painter Pierre Narcisse Guérin in Rome, he confided, “I am finishing some portraits but also I am not starting another and I have even summoned the courage to refuse one. . . . I am now finishing Mad Récamier and Mad Talleyrand. I hope you will not be dissatisfied with the former. At least I have done my best.”⁷¹ But Gérard's repeated forays into portraiture, and his range of approaches, contradict his wish to abandon the genre. In fact, not long after penning this note he was at work on a portrait of Thérésia Cabarrus Tallien, having already painted the other two “Graces,” Josephine Bonaparte and Juliette Récamier.

The portrait of Thérésia Tallien was likely commissioned to commemorate the sitter's third marriage, in 1805, to the Belgian comte François Joseph de Caraman, later

34. François Gérard. *Napoleon I in His Coronation Robes*, 1805. Oil on canvas, 87¾ x 56¼ in. (223 x 143 cm). Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon (MV5321)



prince de Chimay. Around the time Thérésia sat for Gérard, *The Female Revolutionary Plutarch* reported that “she has now three husbands alive, besides two children, of whom neither of them is the father.”⁷² The daughter of a Spanish nobleman, Thérésia Cabarrus first gained notoriety when she was imprisoned during Robespierre’s Reign of Terror in 1793–94, the period known as Thermidor (see fig. 36).⁷³ It was said that her romantic liaison with Jean Lambert Tallien inspired his role in the coup d’état that brought down Robespierre’s bloody regime in 1794. “Our Lady of Thermidor,” as she became known, married Tallien soon after she was released from prison. Madame Tallien presided over one of the first salons to reopen in post-revolutionary Paris.

Rumored to be the mistress of her husband’s coconspirator, Paul Barras, she was also linked with Talleyrand. In 1798 he apparently insinuated that the two had enjoyed intimate relations at the villa of his then mistress, Catherine Grand, but Thérésia denied his boast in a note addressed “to the pale and club-footed minister Talleyrand, the Hercules of Boudoirs” that was published in at least one popular tabloid, having already made the rounds of the salon crowd.⁷⁴

Rich, beautiful, and fashionable, Madame Tallien embodied Gérard’s ideal female sitter (fig. 37). At the time of her third marriage, she was said to look a decade younger than her thirty-one years and to be still “one of the finest, best formed, and handsomest women of the French capital.”⁷⁵ As a result of her 1802 divorce from Tallien, however, “Our Lady of Thermidor” had fallen from Napoleon’s favor, and Gérard’s portrait might well have been an effort on her part to rehabilitate her reputation.⁷⁶ Indeed, the portrait asserts her commanding presence. As she steps into an interior, she is an image of perfect decorum, but for the unexpectedly revealing glimpse of her left breast. The same sense of arrested motion infuses the composition of Gérard’s 1795 portrait of the painter Jean-Baptiste Isabey and his young daughter descending the steps of the Louvre (fig. 38). Thérésia’s elongated figure evokes Madame de Talleyrand’s portrayal, though Gérard exaggerated the mannered proportions even further in this portrait, painted soon after. In terms that bring to mind Gérard’s portrait, the duchesse d’Abrantès likened Madame Tallien, draped in a red cashmere shawl, to a marble statue, noting the “bright whiteness of [her] shoulders

35. François Gérard.
Katarzyna Starzeńska
(1782–1862), 1803–4. Oil
on canvas, 84 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 51 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.
(215 x 130 cm). Lviv Art
Gallery, Ukraine



36. Jean Louis Laneuville
(French, Paris 1748–1826). *The
Citoyenne Tallien in the Prison
of La Force, Holding Her Hair
Which Has Just Been Cut*, 1796.
Oil on canvas, 50¾ x 44⅞ in.
(129 x 112 cm). Present location
unknown



and her arms,” which she compared to ivory.⁷⁷ Gérard’s portrait similarly evokes antique statuary, and the figure’s marmoreal flesh and the classical drapery of her robe *à la grecque* further underscore her sculptural qualities. The cool palette, a marked departure from the rich, warm colors that dominate the contemporaneous portraits of Juliette Récamier and Catherine de Talleyrand, also builds on antique prototypes, as do the flowers that frame Tallien’s face, which have been identified as anemones, an attribute of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love—an apt choice for the thrice-married sitter. The sleeveless style preferred by Madame Tallien highlights her well-shaped arms, which were apparently a source of great pride. (Josephine Bonaparte, on the other hand, reportedly preferred longer sleeves to hide her allegedly less attractive arms.)

Gérard’s portrait of Thérésia Tallien brought to a close his engagement with the fashionable women who had dominated his clientele in the years leading up to the Empire. Their portraits demonstrate the range and originality of his approach. With the onset of the Empire in 1804, he found himself confronted with a sudden demand for commemorative portraits fueled by Napoleon’s dynastic ambitions. The Salon of



37. François Gérard. *Thérésia Cabarrus (1773–1835), Comtesse de Caraman*, ca. 1805. Oil on canvas, 83½ x 50 in. (212 x 127 cm). Musée Carnavalet – Histoire de Paris, Paris (p.2738)

38. François Gérard. *The Painter Isabey (1767–1855) and His Daughter Alexandrine*, 1795. Oil on canvas, 74¾ x 51⅛ in. (190 x 130 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris (inv. 4764)



1808 marked a coming-out of sorts for Gérard as an imperial portraitist: he exhibited no fewer than six full-length portraits and five portrait busts, among them an ambitious family portrait depicting Napoleon’s younger sister Caroline Murat, queen of Naples, and her children (fig. 39). Salon commentators were quick to note the political savvy of Gérard’s portrait submissions, “made to enhance his reputation.”⁷⁸ His mastery of portraiture was widely acknowledged. “The general opinion,” the *Petites Affiches de Paris* pronounced in 1809, “is that no artist is superior to him in this genre, and only very few can occasionally equal him.”⁷⁹ Gérard was lauded as the “French Van Dyck” by an enthusiastic reviewer, echoing the comparisons to the Flemish master that his magisterial portrait of the artist Isabey and his daughter (fig. 38) had elicited at the Salon of 1796.⁸⁰

39. François Gérard. *Caroline Murat (1782–1839), Queen of Naples, and Her Children*, ca. 1809–10. Oil on canvas, 85 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 67 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (217.5 x 170.5 cm). Musée National du Château de Fontainebleau (MM73.1.1). This is a replica by Gérard of the 1808 original, which was sold at Sotheby's, Monaco, on December 4, 1976.

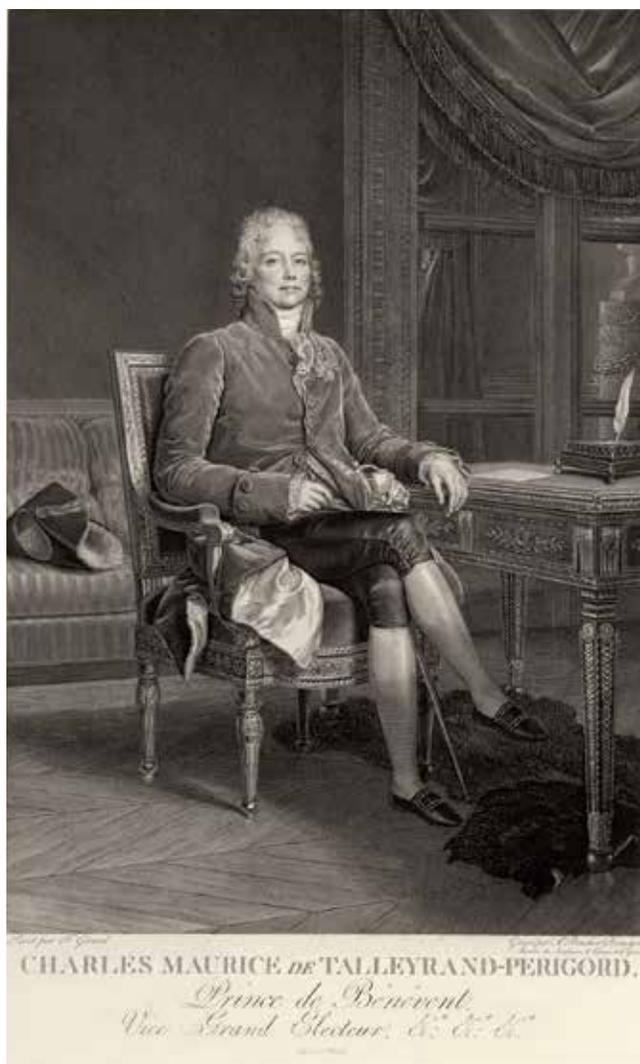


Among the constellation of Napoleonic portrait commissions that Gérard exhibited in the Salon of 1808 was an informal portrait of Monsieur de Talleyrand commissioned by the sitter himself for the sizable sum of 6,000 francs (fig. 40). In August 1807, at odds with Napoleon's expansionist territorial ambitions, Talleyrand had resigned as minister of foreign affairs. His recent fall from imperial favor might well have led him to hire Gérard, probably in early 1808, to paint him as a private citizen "at home." Despite the domestic setting, the portrait is not devoid of political content, most conspicuously the silver insignia of the Legion of Honor and the attendant red silk sash—awarded to him in 1805 by Napoleon—that Talleyrand sports. A bust of the emperor, identified by the inscription on its base, is reflected in the mirrored door behind the sitter, almost completely obscured by the doorframe and



40. François Gérard. *Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord* (1754–1838), *Prince de Bénévent*, 1808. Oil on canvas, 83 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 57 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (213 x 147 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, 2012 (2012.348)

41. Auguste Gaspard Louis Bouchard Desnoyers (French, Paris 1779–1857 Paris), after François Gérard. *Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord*, after 1808. Engraving with etching, image 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (50.1 x 34.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Georgiana W. Sargent, in memory of John Osborne Sargent, 1924 (24.63.1051)



portiere. Although it is difficult to discern in the background of the painting itself, the bust is visible in a nineteenth-century engraving (fig. 41). Napoleon’s former minister retained the title of prince de Bénévent given him by the emperor in 1806, and it was under that title that his portrait was listed in the Salon catalogue in 1808.

The portrait captures a private side of Talleyrand that Gérard came to know over the course of several decades. Talleyrand was both a patron and a friend. Gérard dedicated an engraving of his celebrated *Belisarius* to Talleyrand in 1806 (fig. 42) and also gave him a portrait of the sculptor Antonio Canova that he had admired during a visit to the studio in 1808. In turn, Talleyrand presented Gérard to the new king Louis XVIII in 1814 and later praised the painter as “one of the greatest geniuses of our century.”⁸¹ Gérard portrayed Talleyrand in an intimate interior dominated by furnishings in the earlier Neoclassical style of Louis XVI, capturing his sitter’s avowed taste for life in the Ancien Régime: “Anyone who has not experienced the years before the Revolution,” Talleyrand once said, “does not know how sweet life can be.”⁸² Even the statesman’s lightly powdered hair harks back to an earlier era, as powdered hair for men had gone out of fashion in France in the 1790s. The démodé furniture runs counter to Gérard’s usual practice and suggests that the choice of

eighteenth-century furnishings was indeed deliberate, intended to reflect the sitter’s personal taste, which the artist knew well.

In contrast to Gérard’s intimate portrayal, the portrait of Talleyrand painted by Pierre Paul Prud’hon in 1817 (fig. 43) plays on his identity as a public figure. Flanked by antique portrait busts, Talleyrand projects an authoritative, statesmanlike presence, his pose cleverly minimizing his clubfoot by showing it from the front, with his left leg behind it bearing his weight. Light from an unseen source illuminates his forehead, perhaps an allusion to his celebrated intellectual prowess. Prud’hon based this picture on a portrait he painted of Talleyrand in 1807 (fig. 44) that shows him in the official robes of the grand chamberlain, an honorific title Napoleon conferred on him in 1804. With the fall of the Empire in 1815, that portrait instantly became outdated, hence Talleyrand’s request for a reworked version showing him in civil dress.

Talleyrand’s pose in Gérard’s painting is both regal and elegantly nonchalant, his forearm resting gracefully on a *bureau plat* (writing table) richly mounted with gilt bronze in the *goût grec* style, an early and bold phase of Neoclassicism. With both facility and precision Gérard unleashed his brush on the gilding of the armchair and the gilt-bronze mounts of the writing table and captured the tonal richness of Talleyrand’s plush velvet jacket



42. Auguste Boucher Desnoyers, after François Gérard. *Belisarius*, 1806. Engraving with etching, sheet 23¼ x 17¼ in. (59.2 x 43.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Paul Spiegel on behalf of Mel D. Spiegel, 1973 (1973.662). See also fig. 10.

it was painted politically; if that is true, he could not have chosen a more suitable expression for the most skillful diplomat of our time.”⁸⁶ The Romantic writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was similarly struck by the portrait and the sitter’s “utterly impenetrable” gaze.⁸⁷ Gérard had memorialized Talleyrand’s characteristic inscrutability. His was “the face of death,” Constance de Cazenove d’Arlens remembered thinking when she met the statesman in 1803.⁸⁸ Years later, an exiled Napoleon complained that “Talleyrand’s face is so impassive . . . you never know how to read anything on it.”⁸⁹ Gérard’s refined portrayal of Talleyrand gives little hint of the man whose duplicitous nature earned him the epithet “a shit in a silk stocking,” an insult Napoleon himself delivered in public, at court, in 1809, just before Talleyrand was relieved of his honorific title of grand chamberlain. Nor does Gérard’s portrait reveal the other side of the man whose vaunted intellect was rivaled only by his reputed immorality. The duc de Pasquier’s memoirs echo a sentiment held by others who knew Talleyrand: “The world has, perhaps, never produced a man lacking more in delicacy of sentiment, and more incapable of being influenced by any idea of morality.”⁹⁰ The anonymous author of the *Memoirs of a Woman of Quality under the Consulate and the Empire* recalled meeting Napoleon’s foreign minister for the first time: “I saw that one could morally withstand the shame of two or three apostasies without being physically branded with the mark

and its opulent satin lining (see figs. 45, 46). The details of the writing table are replicated with such extraordinary fidelity that it has been convincingly identified as having been made by Pierre Garnier, the foremost cabinetmaker of his day, between 1762 and 1765. It was, moreover, a piece that Talleyrand himself owned.⁸³ The Neo-classical gilded armchair was made by Georges Jacob, whose furniture could be found in the Récamiers’ Parisian town house as well as in David’s studio.⁸⁴ In Gérard’s portrait the surface of the writing table, lined with green leather, is bare but for a sheet of paper and an inkstand (*écritoire*) of ebony with gilt-bronze mounts (see fig. 47) in which a quill pen rests, suggesting that, for the moment, Talleyrand has put aside his work.

By 1850 both the writing table and the portrait were in the possession of Talleyrand’s heirs at the château de Sagan in Silesia. A charming gouache made about that time (fig. 48) shows Talleyrand’s portrait on the wall of the *salon de famille*.⁸⁵

In 1808 a Salon critic slyly observed of Gérard’s portrait of Talleyrand, “David said that



43. Pierre Paul Prud'hon.
Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord (1754–1838), Prince de Bénévent, 1817. Oil on canvas, 85 x 55⁷/₈ in. (215.9 x 141.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, in memory of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, 1994 (1994.190)

44. Pierre Paul Prud'hon.
Talleyrand as Grand Chamberlain, 1807. Oil on canvas, 85¹/₄ x 56³/₄ in. (216.5 x 144 cm). Musée Carnavalet – Histoire de Paris, Paris (p.1065)

of the beast of the Apocalypse.”⁹¹ Talleyrand countered: “People call me immoral and Machiavellian; I am only impassive and disdainful.”⁹²

Although it has been presumed that Gérard painted Talleyrand’s portrait as a pendant to his wife’s, that either the artist or the sitter entertained the notion is highly unlikely. Gérard worked on the portrait of Madame de Talleyrand in the summer of 1804, almost four years before her husband commissioned his portrait, and its formality is at odds with the intimate air of Talleyrand’s portrait. The paintings are different sizes, Talleyrand’s being the smaller of the two, which would not be the case had they been intended as a pair. And, not least, if members of their circle are to be believed, by the time he sat for Gérard in early 1808 the marriage that Gérard’s portrait of Madame de Talleyrand implicitly commemorates was no longer of any interest to Monsieur de Talleyrand.

In the aftermath of Gérard’s triumph at the Salon of 1808 the demand for his portraits swelled. In 1810 he exhibited fourteen portraits, most of them full-length. His success, though, forced him to rely increasingly on the aid of studio assistants to maintain his prolific output. When the Empire collapsed in 1815 Gérard’s clientele expanded to include foreign rulers and military leaders, reflecting the changing political landscape of Europe. By then, David’s student Delécluze recalled, Gérard’s



45. Detail of fig. 40

studio had “transformed itself into a sort of factory. . . . Almost all the portraits Gérard made during this period are quite weak, and in part from other hands than his.”⁹³ Seconding Delécluze’s opinion, Henri Delaborde, author of an early biography of Ingres, faulted Gérard for his “imprudent fecundity.”⁹⁴

The fall of the Empire seems to have precipitated the demise of Talleyrand’s marriage as well. With the restoration of the monarchy—and a devout king—the ex-bishop Talleyrand could not escape the scandal that tainted his marriage to the divorced Catherine Grand. On May 6, 1814, the satirical political journal *Le Nain jaune* (The Yellow Dwarf) claimed that an English newspaper had reported that “yesterday after Mass, the Bishop of Autun had the honour of presenting his wife to the son of St. Louis.”⁹⁵ Talleyrand surely recognized that his marriage had the potential to undermine his political ambitions in the new Bourbon regime. Louise d’Osmond, comtesse de Boigne, then a regular at the Talleyrands’ salon, described one such evening: “Madame de Talleyrand, seated at the end of two rows of armchairs, calmly did the honors; and the remains of a great beauty adorned her stupidity with enough dignity.” The marriage posed a further irritation to Talleyrand as well, according to the comtesse: “The fact was that monsieur de Talleyrand, smitten like an eighteen-year-old



47. Attributed to Philippe Claude Montigny (French, 1734–1780). Inkstand. Paris, ca. 1770. Oak veneered with ebony and mounted with gilt bronze, $4\frac{3}{4} \times 14\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ in. (12.1 x 37.5 x 24.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mercedes T. Bass, Mr. and Mrs. Mark Fisch, and Mr. and Mrs. Oscar de la Renta Gifts, in honor of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 2013 (2013.20)

with his niece, the comtesse Edmond de Périgord, found himself inconvenienced by the princess's presence."⁹⁶

In the fall of 1814 Talleyrand was sent to Austria by the restored king, Louis XVIII, to represent France at the Congress of Vienna, the assembly charged with reorganizing Europe after the Napoleonic Wars. Dorothee de Courlande, the wife of his nephew Edmond de Périgord, accompanied him. Talleyrand's departure for Vienna—and his choice of companion—effectively signaled the end of his marriage. Years later, the comtesse de Boigne recounted that “since that day, [Talleyrand's wife] never saw Monsieur de Talleyrand again, and she was soon expelled from his home.”⁹⁷ In 1815 Prud'hon's portrait of Dorothee replaced his profile drawing of Catherine Grand in the salon of Talleyrand's Paris residence—a second, symbolic “expulsion.” Madame de Talleyrand left for London, and the terms of their separation were not finalized until she returned to Paris in the fall of 1816. The separation agreement included the stipulation that she could not live in the same arrondissement as her husband.⁹⁸

46. Detail of fig. 40

48. E. Hackert (French, active 19th century). *Salon de famille, château de Sagan*, ca. 1850. Gouache on paper, 8½ x 11½ in. (21.5 x 29.2 cm). Collection of Mrs. Edmond J. Safra



Contemporary accounts characterize the princesse de Bénévent, a title she retained, as longing for her former life and clinging to old traditions, receiving visitors in her apartment on the rue de Lille seated on a chair that bore the Talleyrand coat of arms and motto. She died unceremoniously at home on December 10, 1835. Talleyrand refused to visit his dying wife, whom he had not seen for more than twenty years, and when he was told of her death he responded, “This makes my position a lot easier.”⁹⁹ The former bishop of Autun died less than three years later, on May 17, 1838, at the age of eighty-four, having carefully orchestrated his final hours so that following a visit from King Louis Philippe and his sister Adélaïde, he received the Catholic Last Rites a few hours before dying.

Thanks to the generosity of Jayne Wrightsman, in 2012 Gérard’s portraits of Monsieur and Madame de Talleyrand were united for what is likely the first time in their histories. That they now share the same gallery in the Metropolitan Museum is not without irony. Even as she sat for Gérard, Catherine de Talleyrand was already an object of ridicule among those loyal to her husband. The subsequent demise of her marriage only intensified their scorn. And the impassive mien of the statesman Gérard posed “at home” reveals nothing of his tempestuous public and private life. More than two hundred years after they were painted, Gérard’s portraits are reminders of the persuasive and deceptive power of images. They epitomize the allure of portraiture as a means of self-promotion in Napoleonic France, especially in the hands of such a master as François Gérard.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, translations from the French are by the author.

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3. Jean-Paul Garnier, "La Jeunesse indienne de la Princesse de Talleyrand," *Revue des deux mondes*, April 15, 1963, p. 567.
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15. Waresquiel, *Talleyrand, le prince immobile*, p. 301.
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21. Constance de Cazenove d'Arlens, *Journal de Mme de Cazenove d'Arlens (février–avril 1803)* (Paris, 1903), pp. 22, 80, 15.
22. Anna Potocka, *Mémoires de la Comtesse de Potocka* (Paris, [1897] 2005), pp. 211–12.
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44. *Female Revolutionary Plutarch*, vol. 1, p. 165.
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 66. I am grateful to Charlotte Hale, conservator in the Department of Paintings Conservation at the MMA, for her observations on the work.
 67. “Beaux-arts: Suite de l’examen du Salon,” *La Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique* [1801], quoted in Alain Latreille, “François Gérard (1770–1837): Catalogue raisonné des portraits peints par le baron François Gérard” (thesis, Ecole du Louvre, Paris, 1973), p. 15.
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 83. I thank Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, curator in the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the MMA, for identifying Garnier’s work and for her generous assistance in guiding me to the relevant sources.
 84. Charles Hooreman identified the armchair in Talleyrand’s portrait in an email to Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide of March 18, 2013.
 85. The information on the writing table belonging to Talleyrand was provided by Alexandre Pradère in an email to Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide of January 25, 2013.
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