New Findings on the Life and Work of Claude Simpol

FRANÇOIS MARANDET
Independent Scholar

In 1939, Hélène Adhémar published the first study on the painter Claude Simpol (ca. 1666–ca. 1710), drawing attention to the influence of his compositions on Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). Little research followed the appearance of this article, but in the past few years the artist has begun to emerge from the shadows. In 1996, four genre scenes in the Metropolitan Museum that were originally thought to be the work of Bernard Picart (1673–1733) (Figures 1–4) were reattributed to Claude Simpol, and in 2008, Jamie Mulherron reinstated Simpol as the designer for a series of sixteen pastoral prints, Les divertissements et les occupations de la campagne, formerly given to Jacques Stella. Having identified some fifty drawings and four paintings by Simpol, and discovered a number of archival documents that concern him, I would like to take the recent survey of the current state of research on the artist.

Although it is impossible to confirm the date of Simpol’s birth, we know that he was born in Clamecy, a town in the present-day Department of the Nièvre, in Burgundy. His marriage contract has been found and tells us that he was the “son of Nicolas Simpol, a saddle merchant in Clamecy . . . and Charlotte Vesard.” Simpol must have left his native Burgundy by late 1683, for he is documented in Paris in the following year, competing for the grand prix of the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture, which sent the winners to the Académie de France in Rome for further training. As a pupil of the history painter Louis de Boullogne the Younger (1654–1733), Simpol must have benefited from the advice of both Louis and his older brother Bon Boullogne (1649–1717), with whom he lived between 1680 and 1687. Simpol did not win the prize in 1684, but was awarded the second prize on his next attempt, in 1687 (the subject was the Deluge). Although Simpol was received as a master painter at the Académie de Saint-Luc on March 23, 1695, his career at the Académie Royale did not go beyond the level of a certification (agréé), earned on April 30, 1701, with his sketch for Dispute Between Mars and Minerva. Unfortunately, his delay in submitting a reception piece caused his candidacy to be annulled in 1709. Simpol’s drawings for the Divertissements were commissioned by the engraver and publisher Jean Mariette (1660–1742), probably about 1690, and must be among the artist’s early productions. As we shall see, the careful and precise depiction of form in these designs offers a contrast with the more painterly, summary style of his drawings from the turn of the eighteenth century.

In 1703, Simpol was commissioned to execute the May, a large painting emphasizing devotion to the Virgin that was donated annually by the goldsmiths’ guild to the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris. Representing Christ with Martha and Mary, it was among the last of the Mays painted for Notre-Dame, as the tradition was abandoned in 1707 (Figure 6). Many of these works were lost after the French Revolution, but ironically, Simpol’s picture, which appears to be his only major religious commission, is well documented. A preliminary drawing for it is in the Louvre, Paris, and there are two petits du May—autograph reductions ordered by each of the two goldsmiths when the commission was signed. One of these is in the Musée Carnavalet, Paris, and the other recently appeared on the Paris art market.

Another known commission by Simpol involves three paintings executed for the Ménagerie at Versailles between 1702 and 1703, when he participated in the decoration of the newly built royal palace. In 1703, he received a payment of 600 livres for his work there. Although the decorations were dismantled, some of the painted panels have been discovered at the Château de Fontainebleau, where they were deposited about 1860. A painting preserved at Fontainebleau under the title Le jeu du tiers, or Les trois tas (Figure 7), corresponds with an early description of the work Simpol produced for the Ménagerie. Although the
1. Claude Simpol (French, ca. 1666–ca. 1710). *Three Women Bathing*, ca. 1700. Pen and gray ink, brush and gray wash, heightened with white over traces of graphite, contours incised, 3 × 4 1/8 in. (7.5 × 11.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1963 (63.167.5)

2. Claude Simpol. *Lady with a Pocket Mirror*, ca. 1700. Pen and gray ink, brush and gray wash, heightened with white over traces of graphite, contours incised, 3 × 4 1/8 in. (7.5 × 11.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1963 (63.167.3)

3. Claude Simpol. *A Man and a Woman Smoking Tobacco*, ca. 1700. Pen and gray ink, brush and gray wash, heightened with white over traces of graphite, contours incised, 3 × 4 1/8 in. (7.5 × 11.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1963 (63.167.4)

4. Claude Simpol. *A Picnic Party*, ca. 1700. Pen and gray ink, brush and gray wash, heightened with white over traces of graphite, contours incised, 3 × 4 1/8 in. (7.5 × 11.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund (63.167.6)
picture does not closely reflect either Simpol’s *May* or his drawings, this can no doubt be explained by its problematic condition.\(^{20}\) Up to this point, the corpus of Simpol’s paintings has been limited to his *May* and *Le jeu du tiers*. We may, however, be able to attribute an additional group of four paintings to the artist; they were sold in 1993 under the name of Michel-Ange Houasse (1680–1730) (Figures 8–11).\(^{21}\) In style, iconography, and dimensions, these decorative panels relate directly to *Le jeu du tiers* commissioned for the Ménagerie, and one might reasonably wonder if they were part of the same series.\(^{22}\) In each picture a children’s game—the kite (in two panels), the swing, and the seesaw—is depicted in a spontaneous and playful manner. Simpol’s inclination toward rounded form makes his work particularly well-suited to the representation of children.

Although Mireille Rambaud published documents in 1971 relating to the family of Simpol’s wife, Hélène Denis,\(^ {23}\) there has been no notice given to the fact that Denis was the daughter of the harpsichord maker and organist Louis Denis (1635–1718). Louis himself was born into a well-known family of harpsichord makers, and one of his daughters married the organist Louis Marchand (1669–1732), known for attempting to rival Johann Sebastian Bach during a trip to Dresden in 1717.\(^ {24}\) These interesting bits of information may shed light on the importance of musical subject matter to Simpol, as well as to Picart, the draftsman with whom he later shared a number of related projects and commissions. Marriages between families of painters and musicians were rare in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, and the union of Claude Simpol and Hélène Denis may well have occasioned exchanges between the two arts. This scenario is all the more likely as the harpsichord is the musical instrument that best lends itself to painted decoration. A “harpsichord lid representing a landscape” was, in fact, among the dozen or so paintings in the possession of Louis Denis in 1706.\(^ {25}\) By this time Simpol and Picart had probably known each other for at least a decade. Both men were called upon by Mariette to execute the designs for several print albums and would thus have been familiar with each other’s work.\(^ {26}\)

In 1696 Mariette commissioned from Picart the drawings for a series depicting actors from the commedia dell’arte (twelve plates entitled *Douze modes du théâtre italien*); these were distinct from the same artist’s designs for

---

Figures de modes, also of 1696, representing the minor trades, musicians, smokers, and ladies and gentlemen posed in different attitudes.27

In addition to the drawings for the Divertissements that Mariette commissioned from Simpol in the early 1690s, the publisher turned to him again about 1700 for the Différents sujets series, depicting—among other things—actors, musicians, game playing, couples on horseback, and more smokers.28 The four drawings at the Metropolitan Museum (Figures 1–4) were designed for the latter series. As a group, these print albums document the culture of the period, providing a glimpse of the manners, dress, and characteristic activities of people from different walks of life. The subjects are not only represented in costumes specific to various trades, but are shown in attitudes of work, rest, and even “gallant” conversation. Simpol’s drawings have very often been confused with those of Picart. Their very painterly style, however, permits us to distinguish them from Picart’s designs, which are comparatively flat; the stylistic difference is apparent if we compare drawings from the Figures de modes in the Louvre’s “Album Bernard Picart”29 with related works by Simpol.

Being older than Picart, Simpol may have influenced his collaborator, for example, in his decision to include two musicians in the series: Shepherd Playing the Bagpipe and Viola da Gamba Player (Figure 12). Notably, the viola da gamba player was taken up again by Picart in his famous The Concert, the first state of which was published in 1708 (Figure 13).30 By then the harpsichordist had become the central motif, possibly owing to the artist’s contacts with the Simpol family, and it will come as no surprise that the composition was intended to decorate a harpsichord lid.31 The influence of Picart’s The Concert on Watteau is often mentioned, but the idea of combining musicians with amorous couples in a park must have originated in the family environment of Simpol. As it happens, in 1706, all of Louis Denis’s harpsichords and spinets were moved from his home in Paris to his country house in Cormeille, a town
northwest of the capital. Perhaps Denis gave concerts here in this natural setting in the presence of his brother-in-law, or even with Simpol’s collaborator, Picart, in attendance.

It is clear that Watteau was especially receptive to Picart’s *The Concert* and that he closely studied the albums of prints based on the drawings of Picart and Simpol, as Adhémar has demonstrated. It is the case with Portrait of a Lady of the Court in Front of a Grove at the Château de Versailles. In addition to such stylistic similarities, Man Leaning on a Staff owes much to Horseman with Muff Covering Himself with His Cloak included in Picart’s Figures de modes. Surprisingly, François Verdier (1651–1730) also seems to have participated in this project: the very last illustration is characteristic of his style. As for the fifty compositions in oil on paper that constitute the greater part of this album, they are the work of none other than Claude Simpol. The three examples that represent his contribution here display a painterly handling in which the figures stand out against a light background (Figures 14–16).

A similar technique is used in the series in the Metropolitan Museum and in the four religious compositions in the Louvre. This may also be said of St. John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos Writing the Revelation, acquired by the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, with an attribution to Michel Corneille II (1642–1708), although it is typical of Simpol. The detail of the twisted tree topped by light foliage seems to be a stylistic signature of the artist. To this group of rediscoveries, we can add a very similar Saint Barbara in the Musée de Grenoble that was given an incomprehensible attribution to Jean André (1662–1753) (Figure 17).
Inasmuch as the “Album Matthieu Elye” originally belonged to Mariette, it seems likely that he had plans to publish the designs. Although we cannot identify any engravings made from them, the reverses of Simpol’s drawings show traces of red chalk, indicating that the images were transferred. Some (but not all) of the other drawings in the group also reveal signs of transfer. The project, which even included depictions of ancient Roman emperors, must have been a fairly ambitious one. Yet the lack of historical coherence (there are no figures from the Middle Ages), or of geographic balance (there are few Asian figures), clearly reveals the incompleteness of a project that might have served as an album of universal costume. Perhaps the extraordinary breadth of the project made it difficult to complete.

Under the circumstances, it is hard to maintain the view advanced by Mulherron according to which Simpol enjoyed “considerable success” at the turn of the century. We have seen that after having failed as a painter, Simpol was forced to restrict his activity to drawing. The unfinished state of the project referred to here as an “album of universal costume” seems to be further evidence of his lack of success. Mariette’s own testimony, which Mulherron quotes, supports this: “His disaffection for work, his poor conduct which continually reduced him to want, were an obstacle to it.”

The artist’s financial difficulties are confirmed by documents in the archives. Thus in 1691, upon marrying Claude Simpol, Hélène Denis received from her parents a trust of 1,000 livres that provided a yearly dividend of 50 livres. However, a document dated March 1695 shows that the couple had repurchased a third of the capital (335 livres). The same need for liquidity can be inferred from a document

15. Claude Simpol. A Sultana, ca. 1705. Oil and ink on paper, 10 x 7 in. (25.5 x 17.7 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris, Cabinet des Arts Graphiques (inv. 33818). Photograph: Suzanne Nagy, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY; Louvre, Paris, France


17. Claude Simpol. Saint Barbara, ca. 1705. Oil and ink on paper, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 in. (25 x 18 cm). Musée de Grenoble (MG D2133). Photograph: Musée de Grenoble
dated June 29, 1695: Simpol and his wife sold a share of the trust to their landlord—in the rue de Coq—in order to pay their overdue rent.

Following more repurchases, the trust was liquidated on March 28, 1701. The postmortem inventory of Simpol’s belongings is an eloquent witness to the couple’s difficult financial situation. Since it is dated July 26, 1728, it was at first thought to provide the date of the artist’s death. In fact, Rambaud’s publications show that in January 1711, Hélène Denis was already described as the “widow of Claude Simpol.” In 1728, she lived in a single room in the rue Saint-Thomas du Louvre, amid furniture appraised at the strikingly small sum of 200 livres. A sad testimony to Simpol’s later activity as an artist, the room contained six paintings, which were appraised at a total of only six livres.

Although the influence of Peter Paul Rubens, Northern art, Giulio Campagnola, and Claude Gillot on the work of Watteau is often noted by art historians, the roles played by two of Watteau’s French predecessors, Simpol and Picart, are less frequently mentioned. My study of Simpol’s life and work, including his collaboration with Picart in the creation of engravings with gallant subject matter, and a discovery of the association of his wife’s family with music and musicians, provides further background to Watteau’s development. The fact that the painter Jean-Baptiste Joseph Lebel, author of the two “fêtes galantes” in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, was actually Simpol’s son-in-law serves to confirm the existence of stylistic influences between Simpol and Watteau.

NOTES

1. Adhémar (1939) stressed the “similarities in conception and sentiment” between a number of Simpol’s designs and the works of Watteau and noted that “the quality of lightness and gracefulness of the engravings [after Simpol] seem to define the influence of the artist on his epoch and particularly on Watteau.” Years later, Adhémar (1977) presented additional information on Simpol. I thank Perrin Stein, curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, MMA, for sharing bibliographic information, as well as Ariane de La Chapelle, research engineer, Graphic Art Department, Musée du Louvre, Paris, for her helpful discussion of technical details.

2. This attribution was made by Blaise Macarez, who discovered the engravings associated with the drawings in the Albertina, Vienna, as well as the reference to Simpol as designer of the compositions among the original notes of Pierre-Jean Mariette, son of the publisher and engraver Jean Mariette. See Holmes in Stein and Holmes 1999, pp. 3–5. In 1992 the British Museum, London, acquired a religious composition by Claude Simpol: The Virgin and Child with St. Anne (1992,1003.1). Note that each of the Metropolitan Museum drawings is inscribed on the mount with B. Picart.f.1716 in an eighteenth-century hand.

3. See Mulherron 2008, supplemented by Grasselli 2009, which identified the subject of a genre scene by Simpol.


8. Simpol’s submission was Enos Invoking the Name of the Lord. Gregor Brandmüller was awarded the first, or grand prix, and the second prize went to Jacques Foacier; see Montaiglon 1875–92, vol. 2 (1878), p. 283 (September 2, 1684).

9. Ibid., pp. 357, 362 (October 11, 1687).


11. Montaiglon 1875–92, vol. 3 (1880), p. 313. The minutes state that Simpol was received in the “community of master painters.”

12. Ibid., vol. 4 (1881), p. 78 (March 2, 1709).

13. Perhaps Simpol’s name is omitted on the engravings as inventor because he had not yet been received as a master painter. Including his name in this context before 1695 would have been an infringement of guild regulations. Such an explanation would confirm a precocious date for the Divertissements series.

14. Louvre, inv. 23760.


16. Importants tableaux anciens, sale, Piasa/Drouot-Richelieu, Paris, December 13, 2006, lot 77; the work was identified as “circle of Louis de Boullogne” in Old Master Paintings and Frames, sale, Sotheby’s, Amsterdam, May 8, 2001, lot 199.

17. Mabille 1975, p. 99, fig. 11.

18. Engerand 1899, p. 495.


20. The painted surface reveals numerous small losses as well as some flaking. I thank Vincent Droguet for kindly providing me with photographs of the picture.


22. According to an early source (see Engerand 1899, p. 494) the two additional paintings that the Ménagerie commissioned from
Simpol represented a game of hide and seek, and L’huitre et les plaisardeurs, or “two men disputing who will be the oyster, with a young man who gives them each a shell,” from a fable by La Fontaine. Might the artist have benefited from a supplementary commission from the Ménagerie, or are we dealing here with an entirely different decoration?


27. See note 29 below. Fourteen prints from the Figures de modes series are in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum: 1871,1209.2056, 2685, and 2797; and 1874,0808.2224–31,2234–35, and 2243.

28. Adhémar 1939, pp. 67–68. The series of forty-three prints was engraved by Gérard-Jean-Baptiste Scotin, probably during the first decade of the eighteenth century; a drawing belonging to the Différents sujets series has reappeared on the art market (see Katrin Bellingier Kunsthandel, Munich, catalogue, November 2011, where it is referred to as Two Elegant Figures in a Landscape; it is in fact titled Two Duellists).

29. Drawings from the Figures de modes series in the “Album Bernard Picart” in the Louvre are: Horseman with Muff Covering Himself with His Cloak (inv. 32359); Woman Holding a Telescope (inv. 32359bis); Young Horseman with a Hat in His Hand (inv. 32359ter); Man Playing a Viola da Gamba (inv. 32360bis); Horseman Seen from the Back (inv. 32360quater); Musketeer (inv. 32361ter); Milkmaid (inv. 32364bis); Standing Nobleman Wearing a Tricorn (inv. 32365bis); Horseman with a Muff (inv. 32365ter); Woman with Her Hands in a Muff (inv. 32365quater); Servant Carrying a Pail of Water (inv. 32368); Peasant Girl Spinning Wool (inv. 32368bis); Shepherd Girl Holding a Crook (inv. 32368ter); and Shepherd Playing the Bagpipe (inv. 32368quater). Each of these drawings is reproduced in the set of prints owned by the British Museum (see note 27 above).

30. Paris, Cité de la Musique (E.86.1.32). This design may be the first impulse in the creative process that launched Picart’s The Concert.


33. All the drawings in this album are preserved at the Louvre under the attribution of “Anonymes français du XVIIIe siècle” [anonymous French artists of the 18th century] (inv. 33777–850). It is interesting that two of the drawings, Portrait of the Maréchal de Tallard (inv. 33795) and Portrait of a Court Lady (inv. 33819), were exhibited as the work of Simpol in 1967 (see Bacou 1967, no. 268). Although one would expect stylistically similar drawings in the album to be attributed to the same artist, this is not the case; for example, inv. 26542, a drawing that closely reflects the style of Simpol, is catalogued under the name of Matthieu Elye (see note 42 below).

34. Louvre, inv. 33790.
REFERENCES

Adhémar, Hélène
1939 “Sources de l’art de Watteau: Claude Simpol.” 
Prométhée 20, no. 3 (April), pp. 67–74.
Gazette des beaux-arts, ser. 6, 90 (November), pp. 165–72.

Bacou, Roseline

Eidelberg, Martin
2004 “In Search of Lebel: Two Attractive 18th-Century Fêtes 
Galantes.” Apollo, no. 511 (September), pp. 76–79.

Engerand, Fernand

Grasselli, Margaret Morgan
2009 “Tanging the Bees. A Curious Apiarian Practice in a 
Drawing by Claude Simpol.” Master Drawings 47, pp. 443–46.

Guiffrey, Jules
1915 Histoire de l’Académie de Saint-Luc. Archives de l’art 

Kazerouni, Guillaume, Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée, and 
Jérôme Delaplanchce
2001 L’idée et la ligne: Dessins français du Musée de Grenoble. 
Paris.

Mabille, Gérard
1975 “Les tableaux de la Ménagerie de Versailles.” Bulletin 
de la Société d’Histoire de l’Art Français, année 1974, 

Mariette, Pierre-Jean
1851–60 Abecedario et autres notes inédites . . . sur les arts et 

Mariette sale
1775–76 Catalogue raisonné des différents objets de curiosités 
dans les sciences et arts. Sale, François Basan, Paris, 
November 15, 1775–January 30, 1776.

Montaiglon, Anatole de
1875–92 Procès-verbaux de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et 

Mulherron, Jamie
2008 “Claude Simpol’s Divertissemens for Jean Mariette.” 
Print Quarterly 25, no. 1, pp. 23–36.

Rambaud, Mireille
1964–71 Documents du Minutier Central concernant l’histoire 

Samoyault-Verlet, Colombe
1966 Les facteurs de clavecins parisiens: Notices biographiques 

Stein, Perrin, and Mary Tavener Holmes
1999 Eighteenth-Century French Drawings in New York 

Whiteley, Jon
2000 Catalogue of the Collection of Drawings in the 
Oxford.

Widauer, Heinz
2004 Französischen Zeichnungen der Albertina vom Barock 
bis zum beginnenden Rokoko. Vienna.