

A New Preparatory Sketch by Maurice Quentin de La Tour

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IN 2005, MARY TAVENER HOLMES, IN MEMORY of her former professor Donald Posner, generously gave the Metropolitan Museum a preparatory sketch by the most famous French pastel artist of the eighteenth century, Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788). The work (Figure 1, Colorplate 5), which resurfaced on the Paris art market in July 2003, is of major importance, as it preserves the features of King Louis XV (r. 1715–74). At the La Tour retrospective at the Château de Versailles in 2004, I had the opportunity to highlight its momentous character, by demonstrating that it was a preparatory study for the artist's first portrait of the king from the Salon of 1745.¹

PORTRAITS OF LOUIS XV PAINTED BY LA TOUR

Maurice Quentin de La Tour was already well known in 1744, when he received a commission from the head of the Bâtiments du Roi for a first portrait of the monarch. From the moment of his certification by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, on May 25, 1737, the artist had made a point of showing a selection of his works at each of the Salons. He had quickly garnered great success, particularly after he exhibited the monumental portrait of the Président de Rieux in 1741 (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 94, PC 39). At the end of 1739, the artist had also rendered a likeness of Madame de Mailly, the king's mistress, in Versailles (now lost); and in February of the following year, one of his works, possibly the "self-portrait with index finger," had temporarily graced the apartment of Madame Adélaïde, the king's favorite daughter, in the royal residence.²

It was quite natural, then, that La Tour should be called upon in 1744 to paint a portrait of Louis XV. The commission was tantamount to a consecration, as it symbolized the kind of official recognition that every artist craved, and La Tour did his best to satisfy his patrons. In 1745, the same year in which he was invited to make a first pastel portrait of the queen, Marie

Leszczyńska, he presented the likeness of Louis XV at the Salon, under number 164. The exhibition brochure laconically gives only the sitter's name; but although La Tour's contemporaries left behind no comments to further our knowledge of this initial attempt, we should not conclude that it went unappreciated. The first image in fact proved to be masterful, and La Tour was again invited to paint the royal countenance. He exhibited a new portrait at the Salon of 1748 (no. 77). His remarkable skill at capturing likenesses and his talent for bringing out the subject's inner spirit even led the administration of the Bâtiments du Roi to select some of his works as models to be used by other painters who were also called upon to depict the king. So it was that, at the beginning of 1749, before delivering his grand portrait of Louis XV in military garb preparing to mount on horseback (Château de Versailles, mv 4389), Carle Vanloo (French, 1705–1765) had to wait for "the latest head study by M. de la Tour" to use as a guide.³ It is fairly certain that in this instance he used the preparatory sketch in pastel now conserved in La Tour's studio at the Musée Antoine Lécuyer in Saint-Quentin (LT 108), as the faces on both works are highly similar.⁴

Maurice Quentin de La Tour's second pastel likeness of the monarch inspired a few brief comments when shown at the Salon of 1748. In his *Lettre sur la peinture, sculpture, architecture, à M. ****, Abbé Louis Gougenot praised the skill with which the master had rendered the king's breastplate and garments.⁵ Although quite succinct, his note has long led art historians, understandably, to identify the 1748 pastel as the one conserved at the Louvre (Figure 2), until very recently the only one known. Celebrated for both its technical mastery and the dazzling beauty of its subject, this work played a large part in blotting out the memory of the first pastel, the one exhibited in 1745.

THE PASTEL FROM THE SALON OF 1745

In the course of a study of La Tour's work that lasted several years, I collected a number of images that evidently had been inspired by a single model. All of them depicted Louis XV in armor, his face turned to

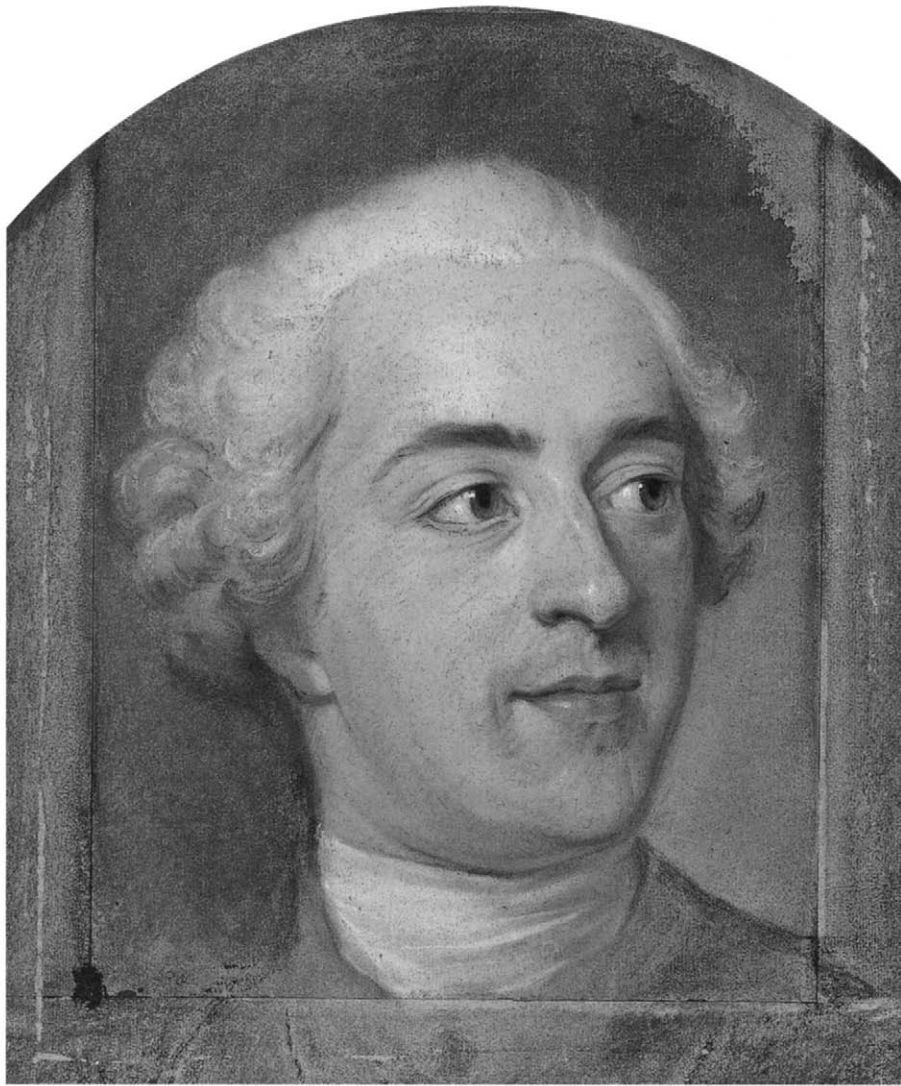


Figure 1. Maurice Quentin de La Tour (French, 1704–1788). *Preparatory Sketch for a Portrait of Louis XV*, ca. 1744–45. Pastel on blue paper, arched top, 32.7 x 24 cm (original sheet); 35.8 x 30.1 cm (with added strips of blue paper at sides and bottom). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mary Tavenner Holmes, in honor of Donald Posner, 2005 (2005.66). See also Colorplate 5

his left in three-quarter view, and were therefore distinct from the 1748 portrait. One of these, a pastel, was catalogued and reproduced by Albert Besnard and Georges Wildenstein in 1928 (Figure 3).⁶ On the verso, in period handwriting, was the annotation “La Tour, 1760”; the work belonged at the time to Jules Straus of Paris. In 1927, it was publicly shown at the Galerie Charpentier, as part of an exhibition of French pastels from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (no. 55). But though Émile Dacier and Paul Ratouis de Limay, the exhibition’s organizers, initially considered this portrait to be by the master’s hand, they soon revised their thinking and no longer considered it an autographed work—and rightly so.⁷ Of small dimensions (45 x 35 cm), it was put up for sale

at the Palais Galliera in Paris on June 20 and 21, 1966 (lot 9, ill.), and its current location is unknown. Although it is no longer included among La Tour’s works, this pastel nonetheless remains quite interesting, as it preserves a composition that was famous in its time and that inspired several copies.

In addition to the pastel version, we know of three other copies in oil that depict the king in the same posture. The first, sold at the Hôtel Dassault in Paris on December 14, 2002,⁸ is similar to the Straus pastel, but with a slightly wider image area and the blue ribbon of the Holy Spirit over the breastplate (Figure 4). The second, less skillfully executed, shows Louis XV at half-length, again with his head turned to his left and in armor, an ermine scarf with a fleur-de-lis pattern



Figure 2. Maurice Quentin de La Tour. *Louis XV in Armor*, 1748. Pastel on blue paper, 68 x 57.4 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 27615 (photo: RMN/J. G. Berizzi)

about his neck, his right arm pointing toward a city in the background. In this image, which went on auction in Toulouse on March 24, 2004,⁹ the king appears older (Figure 5). The third oil portrait, without a doubt the most interesting, is conserved at the museum of the royal monastery of Brou in Bourg-en-Bresse (Figure 6); it was deposited there by the Louvre in 1872, from the old collection of the museum (872-7). Mounted on an oval stretcher (72.5 x 52.8 cm), the canvas is in fact rectangular and, therefore, slightly larger. The king is again shown at half-length, still in the same position, before a landscape delimited at right by a tree trunk and opening at left onto a religious edifice with several bell towers. The scrupulous execution of the work suggests that it was made by one of the copyists from the Cabinet du Roi, whose job it was, at the Bâtiments superintendence in Versailles, to reproduce portraits of favored members of the royal family so that they could be given to those individuals one wished to honor.

Finally, these images of the monarch were recently joined by the preparatory sketch that was donated to



Figure 3. After Maurice Quentin de la Tour. *Louis XV*. Pastel. Location unknown. Formerly in the collection of Jules Straus, Paris (photo: Albert Besnard and Georges Wildenstein, *La Tour: La vie et l'oeuvre de l'artiste* [Paris, 1928], pl. 56, fig. 89)

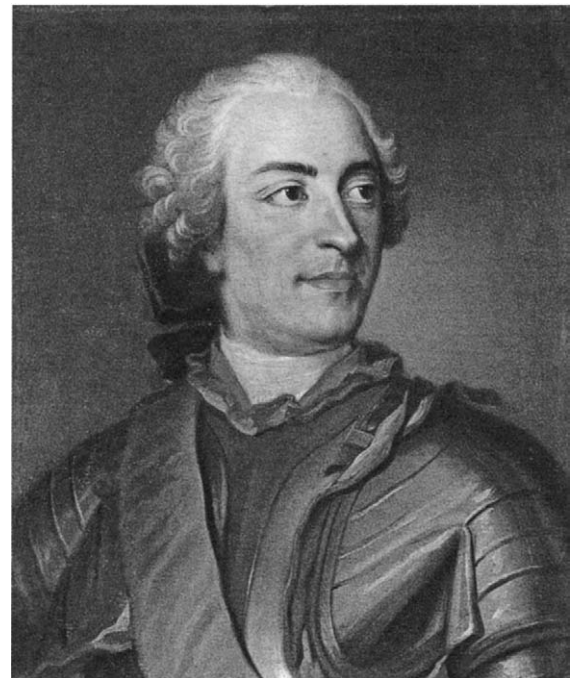


Figure 4. After Maurice Quentin de La Tour. *Louis XV in Armor*, after 1745. Oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm. Location unknown (photo: author's archives)



Figure 5. After Maurice Quentin de La Tour. *Louis XV in Armor before a Landscape*, after 1745. Oil on canvas, 102 x 83 cm. Location unknown (photo: author's archives)



Figure 6. Cabinet du Roi, after Maurice Quentin de La Tour. *Louis XV in Armor before a Landscape*, after 1745. Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 52.8 cm, Musée du Monastère Royal de Brou, Bourg-en-Bresse, 872-7, on deposit from the Louvre since 1872 (photo: Musée du Monastère Royal de Brou, Bourg-en-Bresse)

the Metropolitan in 2005 (see Figure 1, Colorplate 5). Executed on a sheet of blue paper with an arched top and added strips of blue paper at the sides and bottom, this study of Louis XV's face displays all the subtleties of Maurice Quentin de La Tour's art, particularly in its treatment of complexion. Although it may have been retouched in pastel at some point after its execution, especially around the wig, it constitutes a magnificent example of the celebrated portraitist's talents at capturing the essential nature of his sitter. Because it is in all respects identical to the royal countenance that appears on the Straus pastel and on the three oil canvases, the New York sketch also confirms that we must attribute to La Tour the composition depicting Louis XV in armor, facing toward his left and standing before a landscape. It even leads us to think that the master used this composition for the work exhibited at the Salon of 1745, as the monarch is wearing a different outfit from the one that Gougenot mentioned in 1748. This was my conclusion in 2004 for the Versailles retrospective, and there is now a further piece of evidence to add to the demonstration.

THE PORTRAIT OF 1745 REDISCOVERED?

Toward the end of 2004, I was made aware of the existence of a handsome pastel depicting the king in armor, at half-length, facing toward his left. The owners of the work had learned of my hypothesis regarding the pastel exhibited at the Salon of 1745 and had begun to wonder about the piece in their possession. The portrait, and its pendant depicting Marie Leszczyńska (now lost), had been catalogued by Besnard and Wildenstein in 1928 with the attribution "after or attributed to La Tour" for Louis XV and "attributed to La Tour" for the queen.¹⁰ Neither of the two was reproduced in the catalogue. Both had been put up for sale during the Delaherche auction on May 10 and 11, 1889,¹¹ then at the dispersal of the Philippe Sichel collection on June 22–28, 1899,¹² and finally at the sale of the Comte de B.'s collection, held like the others in Paris, on April 9, 1910. It was at that point that the two portraits were separated: the one of Louis XV was acquired for 1,540 francs by the great-grandfather of its current owner,¹³ and the one of Marie Leszczyńska was bought by the expert Charles Léon Mannheim.¹⁴

The portrait of the king (Figure 7, Colorplate 6) is painted on two sheets of blue paper. One of these sheets, of slightly smaller dimensions and with irregular edges (Figure 8), containing the monarch's face, has been glued onto a second, larger sheet (68 x 57.7 cm), which is itself backed by canvas. There is no doubt that the pastel was conserved at some point



Figure 7. Maurice Quentin de La Tour. *Louis XV in Armor before Tournai*, 1745. Pastel on blue paper, 68 x 57.7 cm. Private collection (photo: Jean-Marc Manaï, Château de Versailles). See also Colorplate 6

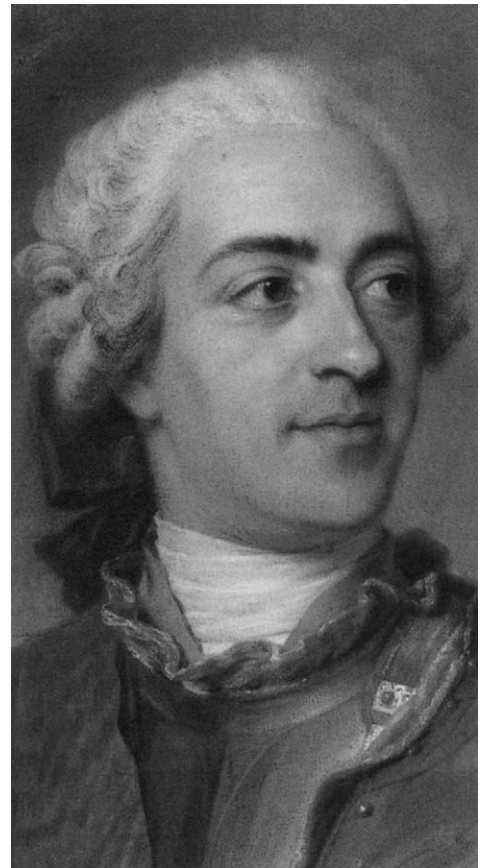


Figure 8. Detail of Figure 7

after its creation, as it is now on a stretcher that dates from the nineteenth century; the canvas backing, bordered with strips of blue paper, appears to be from the same period. There are dampness stains on the upper portion to the right, which may explain the current nature of the mounting. The border surrounding it is not original.

Louis XV is shown in a posture identical to the one in the canvas at Bourg-en-Bresse (Figure 6), and he stands in front of the same landscape with a religious building at lower left. The king's face is an exact replica of the Metropolitan's preparatory sketch, and is rendered with the same subtlety (see Figure 1, Colorplate 5). Bluish shadows on the chin and around the mouth and flesh-colored highlights on the cheeks give the complexion a nearly tactile quality. One can almost see the blood coursing beneath the skin. The artist has skillfully handled the transition from the sheet with the face to the one containing the upper torso and the rest of the composition. On the armor, the shadows and reflections are continued without interruption (Figure 9), as are the moiré effects on

Figure 9. Detail of Figure 7





Figure 10. View of the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Tournai. Vintage postcard

the blue ribbon. The extremely high quality of the overall work, its technique, and the manner of painting the face on a separate sheet of paper (a practice that La Tour used frequently, as in the portrait of Louis XV at the Louvre) lead us to attribute the work to Maurice Quentin de La Tour. Moreover, and because I know of no other example with the same technique, I am inclined to think that this pastel was the one that served as the model for the copy in oil at the Brou monastery, and that it was executed on the basis of the Metropolitan's preparatory sketch. Looking more closely, we can also conclude that it is indeed the composition exhibited in 1745, perhaps even the work from the Salon, given its technical mastery.

In addition, the religious edifice at left is none other than the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Tournai: we can easily recognize the five towers that majestically crown the transept (see Figure 10). During the Flanders campaign, French troops laid siege to Tournai beginning on April 30, 1745, and lasting for several weeks. The city finally capitulated on May 22, following the victory at Fontenoy on May 11. On May 24, a High Mass was celebrated in the cathedral in the presence of Louis XV and his son, the heir to the throne, after which a dinner for fifty held by the bishop, Comte de Salm-Reifferscheid, gathered all the illustrious guests at the bishop's palace. The cathedral's presence in the pastel, therefore, is hardly gratuitous—on the



Figure 11. Nicolas Cochin (French, 1610–1686). Engraving after *Vue de Tournay du costé du vieux chateau*, by Adam Frans van der Meulen (Flemish, 1632–1690), 1685 (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris)

contrary. Maurice Quentin de La Tour, who kept abreast of the latest events, had borrowed the image from the print engraved in 1685 by Nicolas Cochin (French, 1610–1686) after the *Vue de Tournai du côté du vieux chateau. Dessigné sur le naturel, et peinte pour le Roy très Chrestien, par F. Vander Meulen* (View of Tournai looking toward the old castle, drawn from life and painted for the very Christian king by F. van der Meulen) (Figure 11), which was distributed in Paris with the king's privilege at the Hôtel des Manufactures Royales des Gobelins and on the rue Saint-Jacques.¹⁵ On both the engraved proof and the pastel, the cathedral looks the same, with a carefully arranged perspective that affords a clear view of the city belfry on the left. If one were to adopt the viewpoint used on the print, however, this belfry should have been partly hidden by the high roof of the chancel. Not having personally made the trip to Tournai, La Tour had therefore borrowed the skyline bristling with bell towers from Van der Meulen, not realizing that it did not respect the topographical reality of the scene.¹⁶

In that time of war and of Louis XV's frequent absences, La Tour had taken the precaution of obtaining a posing session with the monarch in order to capture his features, the result of which is the Metropolitan's sketch. We can establish that the king granted the audience between November 1744, the month in which he returned to Versailles after his first Flanders campaign and the year the work was commissioned, and the beginning of May 1745. La Tour, then, worked to complete the final pastel after the end of the siege of Tournai, before the opening of the Salon, and several months after he had received the commission. Had he previously copied the head from the preparatory sketch onto the small sheet of paper, which he intended to affix to the definitive version because he was waiting for a decisive military event to lend his composition greater resonance? Was he still hesitating about the composition? These questions remain unanswered and add to the allure of La Tour's pastel.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Perrin Stein, curator, Drawings and Prints Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for inviting me to write this article, to Laure Chedal-Anglay for her administrative assistance, and to Elizabeth L. Block, Editorial Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for editing the article. Nor could I neglect to mention the owners of the beautiful pastel that is published here for the first time. Their warm welcome and their desire to know more about the work led to many pleasant moments together.

NOTES

1. Xavier Salmon, *Le voleur d'âmes: Maurice Quentin de La Tour*, exh. cat., Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon (Versailles, 2004), pp. 23, 125–26.
2. A letter from Duc d'Aumont to La Tour reads as follows: "The Duc d'Aumont begs Monsieur de La Tour not to be concerned about his portrait. Madame Adélaïde would like to keep it for a few days. She promises to take great care of it. The duke has instructed Monsieur de Cindré to provide further details to M. de La Tour tomorrow. Versailles, 19 February 1740." Quoted in Albert Besnard and Georges Wildenstein, *La Tour: La vie et l'oeuvre de l'artiste* (Paris, 1928), pp. 33–34.
3. Fernand Engerand, ed., *Inventaire des tableaux commandés et achetés par la direction des Bâtiments du Roi (1709–1792)* (Paris, 1900), p. 481.
4. See Salmon, *Le voleur d'âmes*, pp. 125–26, no. 27, ill. pp. 18 (detail) and 127.
5. Quoted in Besnard and Wildenstein, *La Tour*, p. 44.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 152, no. 278, pl. 56, fig. 89.
7. Dacier and Ratouis de Limay included it in the trade edition of their catalogue of the 1927 exhibition (*Exposition de pastels français du XVIIe et du XVIIIe siècle* [Paris: G. Vanoest, 1927], p. 38), but did not retain it for the deluxe edition of the same catalogue (*Pastels français des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* [Paris and Brussels: G. van Oest, 1927]). Seeing the pastel on the walls of the Galerie Charpentier must have made them realize how mediocre the execution was.
8. *Tableaux anciens*, sale cat., Artcurial-Briest in association with Hôtel Dassault and Poulain Le Fur, Paris, December 14, 2002, lot 59: "French School of the 18th century, follower of Maurice Quentin de La Tour. *Portrait of Louis XV*. Canvas, 55 x 46 cm." The auctioneers were Claude Aguttes, Artcurial, and Briest-Poulain-Le Fur, Paris.
9. Primardéco sale, Maîtres Prim and de Colonges, Toulouse, March 24, 2004, lot 5: "French School 18th century. 102 x 83 cm."
10. Besnard and Wildenstein, *La Tour*, p. 152, no. 281 (Louis XV) and pp. 154–55, no. 314 (Marie Leszczyńska).
11. *Objets d'art et de haute curiosité*, sale cat., Hôtel Drouot, Paris, May 10–11, 1889, lots 176, 177.
12. *Objets d'art et d'ameublement*, sale cat., Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, June 22–28, 1899, lots 31, 32.
13. *Objets d'art et d'ameublement*, sale cat., Hôtel Drouot, Paris, April 9, 1910, lots 7, 7bis. The bill of sale drawn up by Henri Baudoin, auctioneer in Paris, specifies that the sale price was 1,400 francs, plus a ten percent commission. The document remains in the possession of the buyer's descendants.
14. Besnard and Wildenstein (see note 10 above) mistakenly claim that Mannheim bought both portraits for 5,000 francs.
15. The artist's full name is Adam Frans van der Meulen (Flemish, 1632–1690).
16. Intrigued once I had identified the Tournai cathedral, the owners of the pastel found the print used by La Tour and informed me about it.

