

# Grétry Encore: A Portrait Drawing by François Dumont

JAMES DAVID DRAPER

*Associate Curator, Western European Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

OF THE FOREIGN COMPOSERS who dominated French opera throughout the later eighteenth century, the Belgian Grétry was one of the most celebrated. An indication of the high success he enjoyed is the number of his portraits, ranging from Moreau le Jeune to Isabey.<sup>1</sup> The grandest image of Grétry is the statue by Jean-Baptiste Stouf made for the Opéra-Comique in Paris between 1804 and 1809, and acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1969.<sup>2</sup> The Drawings Department has lately acquired a small, handsome likeness of exactly the same period, a charcoal portrait by the miniaturist François Dumont, signed and dated 1808 (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

The circular portrait of the aging composer (he was sixty-seven in 1808) leans against a stone wall, on the

corner of a stone ledge. On the right are a mask and a rifle. Tucked under the portrait at left are a sheet of music and a list whose legible titles are “Isabelle” (just discernible in the top line), “Silvain,” and “Lucile.” Most amusingly, the signature at left in the shadow of the wall is cut off by the edge of the portrait, so that it reads “F Dumo,” the rest being implied.

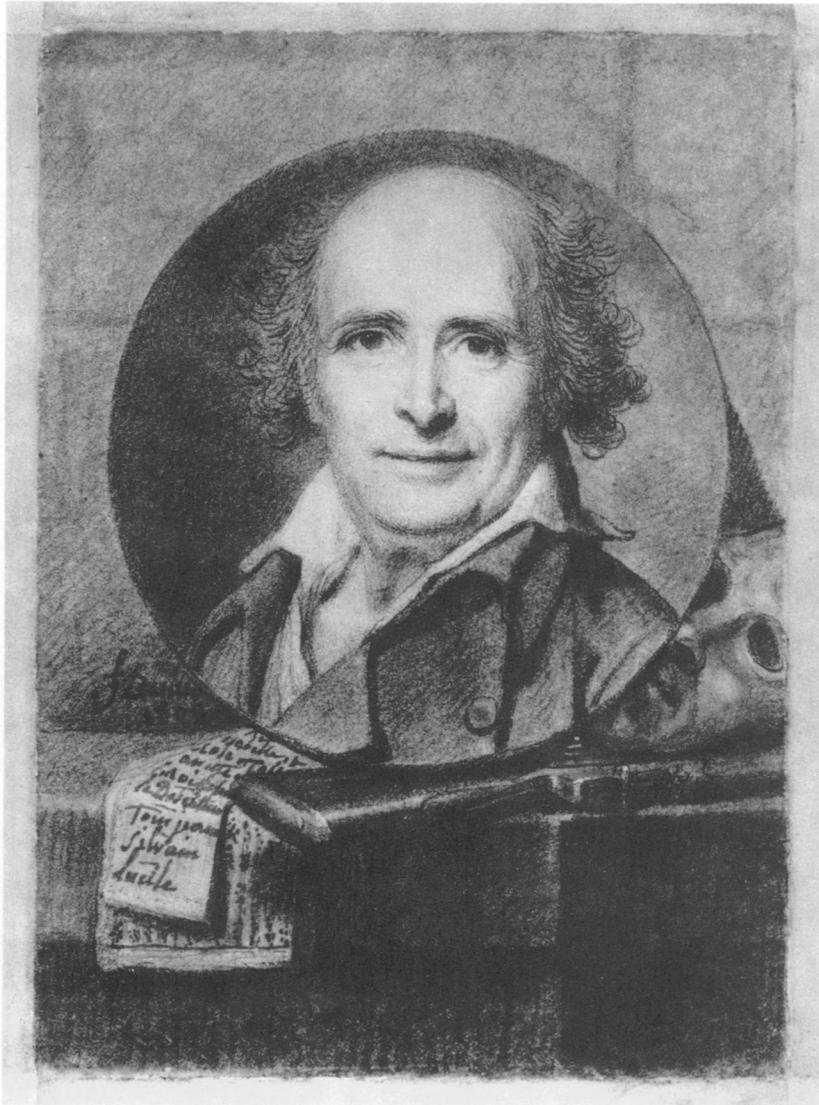
The paper was folded over a piece of board, recently removed. On the board is a later inscription in pencil, with the query: “Portrait de Grétry ? ou Monsigny ? Sedaine ?” In fact, the list under the portrait leaves no room for doubt. *Isabelle et Gertrude* (1767), *Lucile* (1769), and *Silvain* (1770) are early operas by Grétry. The rifle is the only puzzling attribute. It may refer to the pleasures of the hunt and thus to Grétry’s retire-

1. See Ch. Radoux-Rogier, *La maison de Grétry: Suivez le guide!* (Liège, 1946) p. 4, for a list of portraits. Grétry’s birthplace in Liège houses an enormous iconography of the composer.

2. James David Draper, “A Statue of the Composer Grétry by Jean-Baptiste Stouf,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (May 1970) pp. 377–387. Whereas I noted there (p. 386) that Grétry’s nephew, Louis-Victor Flamand, “related that the composer had sent him to the sculptor’s studio in the Sorbonne with a bust by ‘Quanon,’ from which Stouf could capture the features, but there is no trace of this ‘Quanon,’ ” it is clear to me now, thanks to a recent article, that he was certainly Jean-Louis Couasnon, a follower of Houdon active between 1777 and 1802, whose name was spelled phonetically by the Flemish nephew. See Michèle Beaulieu, “Le buste d’Emilie Brongniart par J.-L. Couasnon,” *La revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* XXIV (1974), pp. 105–108. Stouf’s reliance on a bust by another sculptor was not unusual artistic procedure and does not lessen our sense of the immediacy of Stouf’s head, even when we know further from Grétry himself that Stouf was satisfied with a single sitting. To be exact, Grétry’s

nephew collected, rather than delivered, the bust and afterward got it as a present. His description may fascinate those interested in the uses of portraits: “Stouff, sculpteur, . . . était chargé, par M. le chevalier de Livry, d’exécuter en marbre la statue de l’auteur de *Sylvain*; à cet effet, Grétry lui confia un de ses bustes (celui de Quanon), qui, avec ses traits, rappelle la bonté qui y régnait. Un jour qu’il vint me demander à dîner, il me dit: ‘Mon fils, je vais te charger d’une commission; tu iras avec un porteur chez Stouff, à la Sorbonne; tu le prieras de ma part de te remettre le buste que je lui ai prêté pour lui servir de modèle.’ Je lui demandai s’il fallait le faire porter chez lui, ‘non, me dit-il, tu le garderas chez toi, je te dirai ce que j’en ferai.’ Dès le lendemain ma commission fut faite, le porteur plaça le buste sur une colonne dans mon salon.” (From the *Mémoires* of Louis-Victor Flamand, cited in Edouard G. J. Gregoir, *Grétry* [Antwerp, 1883] p. 214.)

3. Charcoal, stumped and heightened with white chalk, inscriptions in brown ink, on white wove paper, 5¼ x 3¾ inches (13.3 x 9.8 cm.).



**FIGURE 1**  
 André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry  
 (1741–1813) by François Dumont  
 (1751–1831). Drawing, signed and  
 dated 1808. The Metropolitan  
 Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs.  
 Carl Selden, 1972.227

ment to the country. Around 1798, he had bought the Hermitage of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and devoted himself to philosophy and musical theory.

It could be thought surprising that the precisely contemporary portraits by Dumont and Stouf (Figure 2) represent the same man. Dumont melts Stouf's hawk-like stare into a genial, relaxed smile. Dumont's sitter is clearly balding, whereas Stouf shows Grétry with the full head of hair seen in all his official portraits. Both wear the same open shirt, a conventional intimation of artistic inspiration.

In their very different ways, the two artists responded to the charm of the composer-philosopher. In an essay,

“Sur les portraits,” of his *Réflexions d'un solitaire*, Grétry pondered the recognizability of portraits and told the following story:

. . . un assez mauvais peintre, qui louchoit, a peint toute ma famille, et nous louchons tous; mais ce qu'il y a de plaisant, c'est que moi, le seul qui ai un oeil qui tire un peu à droite, je suis celui de tous qui louche le moins dans ces peintures. Seroit-ce que deux louches qui se regardent se rectifient? Non, car j'ai vu que le peintre louchoit; c'est le common mérite des peintres médiocres.<sup>4</sup>

4. A.-E.-M. Grétry, *Réflexions d'un solitaire* (Paris-Brussels, 1922) IV, p. 55.

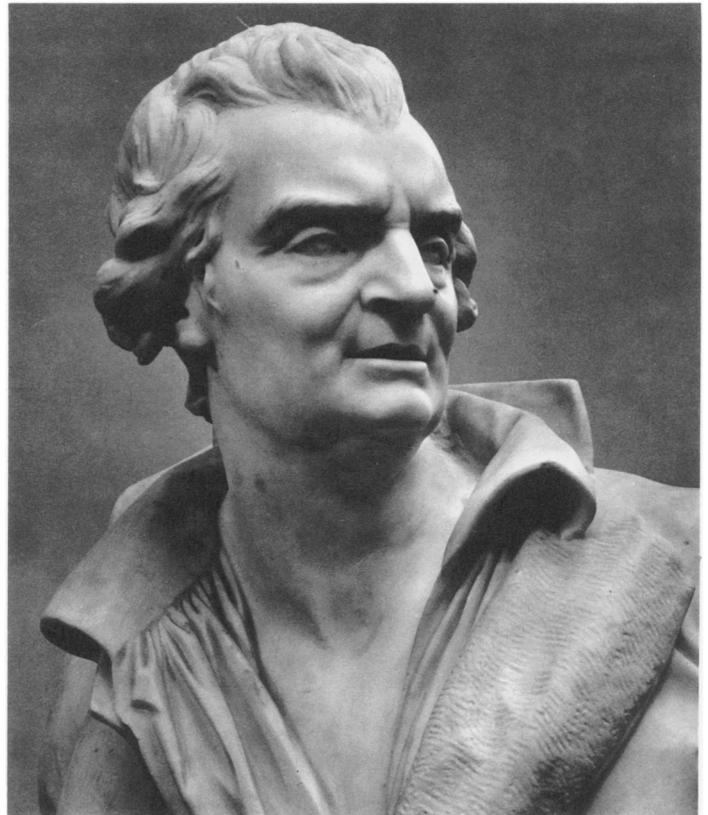
Neither eye in the head of Stouf's statue pulls to the right, but it is perhaps reasonable to see a squint in the close-knit brows. Dumont, at once more flattering and more intimate, as becomes the miniaturist, creates a mood that is friendly and still quite *dix-huitième*, much in keeping with the personality of the sitter and, one might guess, that of the artist.

It was standard for miniaturists, the portrait photographers of their day, to focus on heads strictly frontally, showing the eyes wide open. During the *ancien régime*, Dumont knew real favor as the court miniaturist of Marie-Antoinette. A watercolor in the Louvre of Marie-Antoinette with her children is a stylish example of his wide-eyed manner at that time. His watercolor of Cherubini (1792) in the Louvre, while more elegant, is less successful compositionally.<sup>5</sup>

In 1793, Dumont was imprisoned in the Abbaye for supposed royalist sympathies. He exhibited regularly at the Salon, however, and resumed his position as court miniaturist during the Restoration. But like that of many other artists who were highly favored in the *ancien régime*, his later work, from the Revolution to his death in 1831, is not well known. The portrait *aux trois crayons* of M. Parmentier, dated 1812,<sup>6</sup> where Dumont used the same feathery strokes in the hair as in the Grétry, is nevertheless a hard work. The spirited characterization of Grétry is more reminiscent of certain of Dumont's miniatures of the 1790s.<sup>7</sup> It is an altogether happy exception to that hardness in the late style, described by Henri Bouchot: "Ses portraits auront dorénavant un compassé, une raideur pénible, qui ira s'accroissant d'une journée à l'autre."<sup>8</sup>

FIGURE 2

Statue of Grétry (detail) by Jean-Baptiste Stouf. Marble, 1804–09. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, funds given by The Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation, Inc., and Charles Ulrick and Josephine Bay Foundation, Inc., 69.77



5. Catalogue of the exhibition *Das Aquarell, 1400–1950* (Munich, Haus der Kunst, 1972–73) nos. 98, 99.

6. Henry de Chennevières, "François Dumont miniaturiste de la reine Marie-Antoinette," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXIX (1903) p. 189. It belonged to Dr. Henry Gillet of Melun, most of whose important Dumont collection was given to the Louvre.

7. For example, the fine one of General Gobert, dated "l'an 3ème" (1795), sold at Christie's, November 5, 1968, no. 105.

8. Henri Bouchot, *La miniature française, 1750–1825* (Paris, 1907) p. 101.