Three Newly Identified Paintings by Marie-Guillelmine Benoist

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M A R I E - G U I L L E L M I N E B E N O I S T ’ S  Portrait d ’ u n e n é g r e s s e of 1800 has long been considered her masterpiece (Figure 1). Purchased by the French state in 1819, it hangs in the Musée du Louvre beside works of the artist’s two teachers, Marie-Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842) and Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). However, the painting has always raised a disturbing question: Why did an artist capable of producing an image of this quality leave us no other works of comparable distinction?

Benoist (1768–1826) was one of the best-known women painters of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic periods. From 1784 to 1812, she showed regularly at public exhibitions in Paris and Versailles and was awarded several honors by the French government. Most notably, she was given a studio and lodgings in the Louvre for herself, her husband, and their children. She also received a number of portrait commissions from the Napoleonic regime, an encouragement of 1,500 livres in 1795, and a second-class medal at the Salon of 1804.

But Benoist’s oeuvre as recognized up to now does not seem to justify fully the reputation and rewards she enjoyed. Most of her full-length portraits of members of the court of the First Empire are weakened by errors in perspective and anatomy. Her genre paintings, while attractive, show a hardening of color and contour and are disappointing when compared with the Nègresse. If it is unfair to judge the totality of the artist’s oeuvre on the basis of these works that date almost exclusively from the latter half of her career, her early pictures, aside from the Nègresse, remain largely unknown. In particular, the canvases that Benoist exhibited at the Paris Salon during the Consulate (1799–1804), which contemporaneous critics considered among her finest creations, have disappeared from public view. As their identification can only aid us to form a more balanced picture of the artist’s oeuvre, it is gratifying to be able to present three of these missing paintings, including a picture that belongs to the Metropolitan Museum.

The work, known as the Portrait of Madame Desbassayns de Richemont and Her Daughter Camille, was given to the Museum in 1953 (Figure 2). It was then attributed to the Neoclassical master Jacques-Louis David. The portrait was unknown to David scholars before 1897, when it was exhibited at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Elizabeth E. Gardner, who published the painting when it entered the Metropolitan’s collections, recorded the history of the canvas as given by the then-comte de Richemont. Citing family tradition, he indicated that David painted Desbassayns de Richemont and her daughter shortly before the girl’s death in an accident. The family sold the canvas after the tragedy because the child’s image evoked painful memories for her mother.

This touching story is unfortunately problematical, not least for its attribution of the painting to David. It

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Figure 1. Marie-Guillelmine Benoist (1768–1826). Portrait d ’ u n e n é g r e s s e, Salon of 1800. Oil on canvas, 81 x 65.1 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux)
Figure 2. Marie-Guillelmine Benoist. Portrait d'une jeune femme avec un enfant Madame Philippe Desbassayns de Richemont [Jeanne Eglé Mourgue and Her Son Eugène], Salon of 1802. Formerly known as Portrait of Madame Desbassayns de Richemont and Her Daughter Camille. Oil on canvas, 116.8 × 89.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Julia A. Berwind, 1953, 53.61.4
is instructive to compare the canvas to David's only mother-and-child image of the period, the 1795 portrait of Émilie Sériziat, née Pécoul, and Her Son Émile (Figure 3). The female figure in the New York picture is arranged in a simple profile pose, which contrasts with the technically demanding frontal view that David employed to paint his sister-in-law. In the Metropolitan's portrait, the skin tones are not so ruddy, the flesh is more softly painted, and the textures of the fabrics are rendered with less detail. Moreover, there is no record of the painting in the master's well-documented oeuvre. The work reflects his stylistic predilections primarily in the use of a somber background to focus the viewer's attention on the sitters. At present the attribution to David has been abandoned, and the portrait is now given to the school of David.

The customary identification of the child as the short-lived Camille Desbassyans de Richemont is also difficult to sustain. Family tradition notwithstanding, the yellow pantaloons, short jacket, and open shirt are the clothing of a boy rather than a girl. The child's abundant curls, fashionable for boys throughout the period in question, may have been the source of the confusion in gender.

But there is no reason to doubt that the female sitter is Mme Desbassayns de Richemont. Two other versions of the Museum's portrait are, or were, in the possession of different branches of her descendants, and in both cases family tradition agrees on the name of the woman portrayed. Born Jeanne-Catherine-Eugéne-Fulcrande de Mourgue, she was the wife of Philippe-Panon Desbassayns de Richemont, a diplomat and government administrator. He served under Napoleon I, Louis XVIII, and Charles X, holding posts in France and on his native island of Réunion. The couple, married in 1798, had three children. Camille, their only daughter, born in 1801, was preceded by a son, Eugène, in 1800, and followed by a second son, Paul, in 1809. Surely the little boy who appears in the Metropolitan's portrait is Eugène, since his mother's costume is that of the late Consulate and early Empire, precluding the possibility that the child could be her youngest, Paul.

The painting clearly pleased the Richemonts, because they had at least two copies of it made. In

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Figure 3. Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). Émilie Sériziat, née Pécoul, and Her Son Émile, Born in 1793, Salon of 1795. Oil on canvas, 131 x 96 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux)

Figure 4. Attributed to Marie-Guillelmine Benoist. Madame Philippe Desbassayns de Richemont. Oil on canvas. Present location unknown
them, the accessories and the color of the mother’s costume vary and the figure of the child is omitted. Interestingly enough, one of these copies (Figure 4) was attributed by its owners to Marie-Guillelmine Benoist, who is said to have painted it in 1804 after an original by David.10

In actual fact, it seems certain that the original—the Museum’s canvas—was painted not by David but by Benoist herself.11 It closely matches the description of a work she exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1802, under the title of Portrait d’une jeune femme avec un enfant. Along with another of her submissions (a portrait of a young woman holding a spray of lilacs), the work was praised as one of Benoist’s best paintings. The critic of La Décade Philosophique, Littéraire et Politique wrote:

Le portrait d’une jeune personne et celui d’une jeune femme avec un enfant, par Mme Benoist (Nos. 16 et 17), sont excellentes productions d’une artiste déjà connue par des succès. Mais, ici, c’est tout un autre talent que celui qu’elle avait montré dans ses autres ouvrages. On ne dessine pas mieux; on n’a pas une touche plus franche. Les plus habiles peintres de notre école se feraient gloire d’avoir exécuté le tableau de la jeune personne qui tient une branche de lilas, d’avoir composé le groupe de la mère et de l’enfant. S’il n’y avait eu au salon que le premier de ces deux portraits, on pourrait croire que la teinte un peu plombée qui règne dans les chairs appartient au modèle; mais comme on trouve le même défaut dans le portrait très-ressemblant de Mme D * *, dont la beauté est connue, et dont la carnation est aussi
délicate que les formes; mais comme un bel enfant blond est aussi également peint sans transparence, nous nous voyons dans le cas d’avertir Mme Benoist, qui s’est si fort approchée de la perfection, qu’elle doit consulter Vandyk et surtout le Titien.

Unfortunately, the dimensions of the portrait of the mother and child are not recorded in the register of works delivered to the Salon. Nor was the painting described by the art reviewer of the Journal des Débats, who joined the critic of La Décade in praising it. However, the comments of the writer of La Décade are invaluable in identifying the female sitter as “Mme D * *” and specifying that the child, a boy, was blond.

There are clear parallels between the composition of the Négressse of 1800 and the Portrait d’une jeune femme avec un enfant of 1802. The arm closest to the viewer is placed in the same basic position in the two works, although the musculature of its upper portion, so prominent in the Négressse, is veiled by the transparent sleeve in the image of Desbassays de Richemont. The gauze of the latter’s dress falls in the same long, unbroken folds as the slightly heavier fabric used for the costume of the Négressse.

The reviewer’s complaints about the coloring of the flesh tones of Mme Desbassays de Richemont and her son can be understood in relation to the somewhat somber palette chosen by Benoist. The colors are darker than those she had used to paint the Négressse two years earlier, but relate to the pigments utilized in her Portrait de M. L***, long unattributed, but here restored to Benoist’s oeuvre (Figure 5).

The Portrait de M. L***, an image of Benoist’s brother-in-law, Jean-Dominique Larrey, later Baron Larrey, was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1804. It entered the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse through a bequest of the sitter’s son, Baron Hippolyte Larrey. Jean-Dominique Larrey, a surgeon who joined Napoleon I’s Egyptian expedition and was later inspector general of health services for the French military, is shown holding a scroll inscribed “Relation chirurgicale de l’armée d’egypte [sic].” Although the painting attracted little attention from the critics at the Salon, where it seems to have been overshadowed by a portrait of Larrey (Figure 6) painted by Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy-Trioson (1767–1824), its appearance was recorded in a contemporaneous drawing. While preparing an engraved view of the 1804 exhibition, an artist named Antoine-Maxime Monsalvy (1768–1816) made thumbnail sketches of the most noteworthy works displayed. An album of counterproofs of these sketches is in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris; one of them (Figure 7)
records, in reverse, the portrait now in Toulouse. The counterproof, carefully labeled, identifies the work as the *Portrait de M. L.*

Larrey’s pose is similar to that of Mme Desbassayns de Richemont and, as already noted, the two works are related by their low-keyed colors. In each, the same chair, probably a studio prop, is employed. The upholstered seat and the highlights on the gold studs are painted in a similar way. Unfortunately, the portrait of Larrey, remarkable for the expressive face, is weakened by the inclusion of the rather flaccid legs. They betray Benoist’s lack of experience at painting the anatomy of the lower body, which was hidden by drapery in her images of female sitters, such as a newly identified *Portrait d’une jeune personne* from the Salon of 1802.

This last painting was praised by the same art critic of *La Décade* who described the Metropolitan’s *Portrait d’une jeune femme avec un enfant* (see above). Although he did not give details of the composition, other reviewers described it more precisely. One indicated that the model, “debout et adossée à une balustrade… tient de la main gauche son voile et de l’autre une branche de lilas.” A second specified that the veil was thrown over her head and chest. Their description of the painting matches exactly the appearance of a picture published in 1941 by Raymond Escholier as a work by Jacques-Louis David (Figure 8).

The canvas, which does not seem to appear elsewhere in the David literature, was reproduced under the title *Portrait de la Comtesse du Cayla*, without indication of ownership or dimensions. No such picture by David is documented, nor is the artist known to have painted any portraits of women in landscape settings; however, his pupil Benoist did paint several. The
Portrait d'une jeune personne is particularly close to her Portrait de Madame Lacroix-Saint-Pierre of about 1806 (present location unknown). Both works show three-quarter-length figures near the picture plane, backed by an expanse of landscape; each sitter wears a veil and a shawl draped over one shoulder. However, the Portrait d'une jeune personne is much the more graceful of the two works. The accessories are painted with care, and the elegant draping of the light veil recalls the talents of Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Benoist's first instructor in painting.

It is again Vigée-Lebrun's influence that one seems to detect in another painting from the period of the Consulate, which may also be attributable to Benoist. The image in question is a Portrait of a Lady, that was given to the San Diego, California, Museum of Art by Anne R. and Amy Putnam in 1946 (Figure 9). Originally ascribed to Jacques-Louis David, as were two of the three Benoist paintings mentioned above, it now remains without attribution beyond “Circle of David.” However, the appearance of the San Diego painting is compatible with a description of a Portrait de femme by Benoist exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1799. The reviewer of La Décade Philosophique, Littéraire et Politique, who saw the painting, commented that “cette femme enveloppée d’un schall et qui regarde, elle est peinte à éclipser toute la société que vous lui avez composée. Le pinceau n’a point hésité, ces touches sont aussi justes que vigoureuses et vraies...”

Unluckily, the dimensions of the painting were not recorded in the Salon register, and no other Salon critics described the work, making a secure attribution problematic. It can be noted, in any case, that the wide-set, liquid eyes and the firmly modeled face and hands of the sitter are consistent with those found in Benoist's images of women illustrated here. The coloristic harmony (maize-colored shawl, blue hair ribbon), which rivals that of the Nègresse, is worthy of a pupil of Vigée-Lebrun. In contrast, the loosely girded, classically inspired dress, while relating to the simple costumes favored by the latter (for example, Vigée-Lebrun's 1789 Portrait of the Artist with Her Daughter, Louvre), is closer to that employed by Benoist's second teacher, David, in the figure of Hersilie in his Sabines of 1799 (Louvre). The pose of the upper body recalls the composition of Benoist's self-portrait of 1786 (Figure 10); also, the hair is treated with similar softness and freedom in the two paintings. Details of the San Diego portrait's facture may provide further clues to the identity of its author, which still must be deemed inconclusive.

But even considering only the three works here securely attributed to Benoist permits us to reevaluate
the middle portion of the artist's production. If none of these paintings supplants the Portrait d'une négresse as her finest work, at least two—the Portrait d'une jeune personne and the Metropolitan's Portrait d'une jeune femme avec un enfant—are remarkably close to the Louvre's painting in quality. In them, Benoist combines the graceful fluidity and coloristic harmony that she learned from Vigée-Lebrun with the three-dimensional modeling and firm contours that she mastered under David. The canvases reflect her creator's abilities at the apogee of her career; that they were once misattributed to David is a backhanded acknowledgment of her skill. Yet it is more than time for the value of Benoist's own achievements to be recognized. For a start, we can restore these engaging portraits to her oeuvre.

NOTES

1. Benoist exhibited at the Exposition de la Jeunesse (Paris) from 1784 to 1788 and in 1791; at the Paris Salon in 1791, 1795, 1796, and from 1799 to 1812; and at the Musée spécial de l'École Française (Versailles) in 1800 and 1801.

2. Paris, Archives Nationales (hereafter abbreviated as A. N.), F13965, no. 147; A. N., F13965, no. 314. Benoist lived at the Louvre through 1797; then when lack of space forced the expulsion of numerous residents, was awarded an apartment and studio in the Maison d'Angivières. She had one of the most agreeable apartments and "un superbe atelier" in this government-funded residence for artists. In 1806, when the building was converted into offices for the Ministry of the Navy, she received a compensatory pension of 1,000 francs a year, which was paid regularly until the beginning of 1823 (A. N., F 4482, summary of a letter signed by the Minister of the Interior on 13 Frimaire an VI; A. N., F 4482, summary of a report submitted to the Minister of the Interior on 13 Floréal an VI; A. N., F21511, dossiers 1, 2, 6).

3. Bonaparte, Premier Consul, 1804 (Hôtel de Ville, Ghent); Portrait du Maréchal Brun, commissioned in 1805, destroyed by fire in 1871; Portrait du Grand Maître des Cérémonies, commissioned in 1806 (present location unknown); Portrait de Napoléon, 1807, for the Department of the Sarthe (present location unknown); Portrait de Marie-Pauline Bonaparte, princesse Borghèse, 1808 (Musée National du Château de Versailles, on deposit at Fontainebleau); Napoléon I, 1809 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers, on deposit at the École de Génie, Angers); Portrait of Napoléone Elisa Bacciocchi, later comtesse Camerata, Salon of 1810 (Musée National du Château de Versailles, on deposit at Fontainebleau); Portrait of Elisa Bonaparte Bacciochi (Pinacoteca, Lucca); Portrait de l'Impératrice Marie-Louise, Salon of 1812 (Musée National du Château de Fontainebleau).


5. See list of works in note 3 above.

6. E.G., La lecture de la Bible, Salon of 1810 (Musée de Louviers); La Danseuse de bonne aventure, Salon of 1812 (Musée de l'Échevinage, Saintes).

7. Elizabeth E. Gardner, "David's Portrait of Madame de Richemont and Her Daughter" MMAB 3 (Nov. 1953) pp. 58–59. As this article was going to press, Vicomte Guy de Richemont kindly supplied a more detailed provenance. The painting was given by Desbassays de Richemont to her brother Jean-Scipion-Anne Mourgue; the gift was made, it is said, after the death of Camille. The canvas passed then to Mourgue's niece Hélène Chabert, née Mourgue, and only in 1905 was sold out of the family.

8. Information from the archives of the Department of European Painting.


10. See note 8 above; also Ballot, Une élève de David, p. 253. There are at least two other known versions of the composition that include both mother and child. One belongs to the Ritz Hotel in Paris and is possibly identical with a painting reproduced in H. Longmon and F. W. Huard, French Provincial Furniture (Paris, 1927) p. 156; the other, a copy or sketch, was with Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox in London in 1978.

11. According to information in the archives of the Department of European Painting, Claus Virch had previously mentioned Benoist's name in relation to this painting. In 1970 he was cited by another scholar as having suggested that the Portrait de Madame Desbassays de Richemont was by a painter in the circle of Vigée-Lebrun, possibly Benoist.


15. A half-length copy of Benoist's portrait of Larrey is in the Musée du Service de Santé des Armées, Val-de-Grâce (Paris).


17. Raymond Escholier, La Peinture française XIXe siècle de David à Géricault (Paris, 1941) frontispiece.

18. The Portrait de Madame Lacroix-Saint-Pierre is reproduced in Ballot, Une Élève de David, opp. p. 176. It was in the collection of M. de la Courpier, France, in 1914.


21. The author has been unable to visit San Diego to examine the painting.