

the theme, but significantly in terracotta again, and produced a version of the group for himself when in Rome once more during the years 1791–2. This is elaborated from the first model but is yet more deeply *dix-huitième* in sentiment: Andromeda retains her very youthful piquancy, while greater sense of movement in the pose of Perseus makes him more animated. As a treatment of the subject it might have seemed very flippant in the Rome that was soon to see the pseudo-heroic posturing *Perseus* of Canova.

It was, however, for different reasons that Chinard found himself condemned. Two groups of *Apollo treading Superstition underfoot* and *Jupiter treading Aristocracy underfoot* (1791, Paris, Musée Carnavalet) resulted in his being imprisoned in Castel Sant'Angelo, from which he was released on French representation. It is part of the eddying, complex tide of events at the period that Chinard, after returning to Lyon, should have been arrested again, this time accused of being too moderate a republican. He was acquitted and released in 1794, not before he had presented the judges with a highly pertinent group of *Innocence seeking Refuge in the Bosom of Justice*. The style of this was probably resolutely neo-classical – for Chinard seems to have supposed that this style guaranteed political engagement – but Chinard's neo-classicism was never less than delicate and seldom dull. There is strong vitality in his bas-relief model of *Honneur et Patrie* (Lyon) which was intended to decorate the Arc de Triomphe that Bordeaux planned to set up in Napoleon's honour. Individualized faces of the citizens contrast with their Roman and Greek helmets, and the whole bas-relief is alive and boldly tingling – strangely more Renaissance than neo-classical in its romantic use of Antiquity. The bas-relief form suited Chinard very well; the pedestal of his own version of the *Perseus and Andromeda* is decorated with a lively frieze of figures with graceful limbs and flying folds of expressive drapery; and he produced a series of vigorous portrait medallions before concentrating on portrait busts.

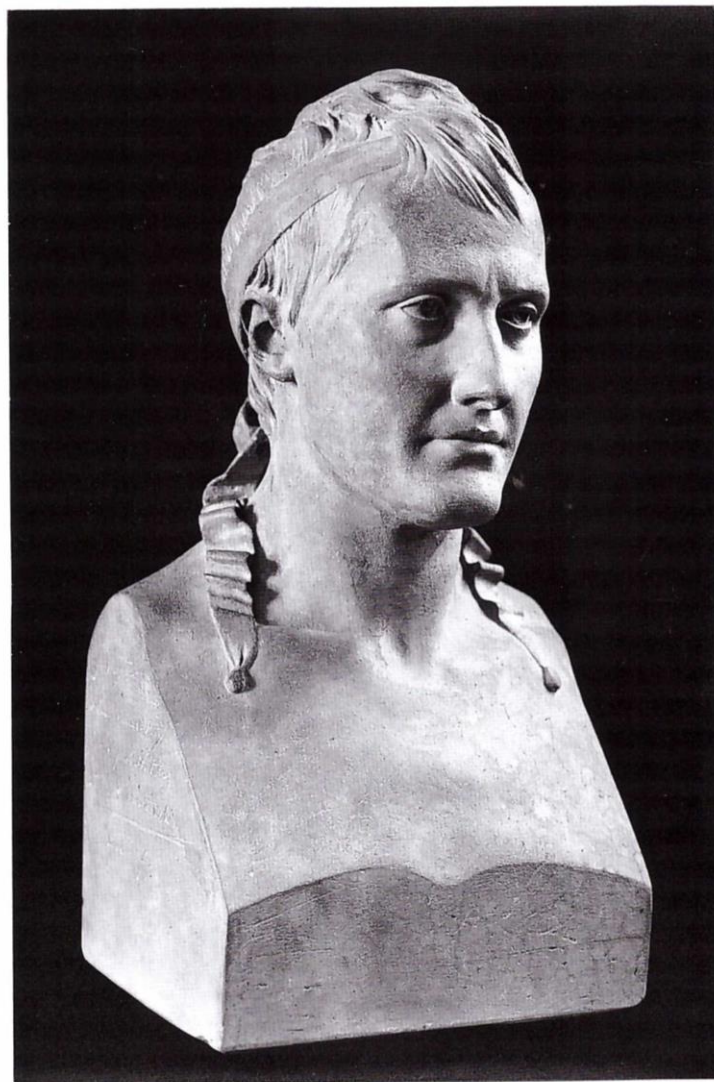
The years of the Consulat and Empire brought him several times to Paris. As well as working on the Arc du Carrousel, along with sculptors like Deseine, he executed busts of both Napoleon and Josephine's relations. His bust of Josephine herself (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum) is good but suffers from the sitter's personality being more sympathetically interpreted by paint than by sculpture. With Madame Récamier he succeeded where most paintings – even David's – fail. The ever-smiling, eternally gracious, but seldom yielding sitter was probably a sphinx without a secret. Chinard's bust hints at inner vacuousness but conveys the surface mixture of modesty and voluptuousness which fascinated and tormented so many men – Madame de Staël among them, one inclines to say. Indeed, the action of the hands that play with such teasing effect recalls the description of Juliette Récamier in *Delphine* when the character who is she draped herself in an Indian shawl which outlined her figure. In a moment or two, it seems, the woman of Chinard's bust will untie the bandeau in her hair and let it wave about her in the final climactic moment of her dance. This portrait is the total expression of that frigid personality, lost in smiling self-esteem and wrapped in self-admiration, which led Madame de Staël to ask: 'Why, whether in love or in friendship, is one never necessary to you?'³⁵ Even to that

apparently simple question Chinard's Madame Récamier is too absorbed by her own beauty to give an answer.

HOUDON

Not singled out for special treatment during the *ancien régime*, Houdon did not enjoy any particularly outstanding success under Napoleon. Although his was perhaps the finest bust to be produced of the emperor [254], it is rivalled by the sharply observant bust of General Bonaparte (1799, Lille) by Charles-Louis Corbet (1753–1808),³⁶ a sculptor whom Boilly painted among the assembled artists in his picture of Houdon's studio. It is posterity that has given Houdon pride of place, not without some concomitant unfairness to other great sculptors and some slight over-estimation of Houdon's own abilities.

The very realism of his portrait busts – which has helped to make him famous and popular – was sometimes disturbing to the eyes of his contemporaries. Quatremère de Quincy, for example, spoke of truth pushed 'à l'outrance' in busts like those of Gluck and Mirabeau (1791, Louvre).³⁷ This truthfulness is certainly the most positive mark of Houdon's thoroughly scientific observation. He obeys the century's dictum to follow nature until that obedience becomes his style. Although the results have astonishing virtuosity and



254. Jean-Antoine Houdon: *Bust of Napoleon*, 1806. Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts

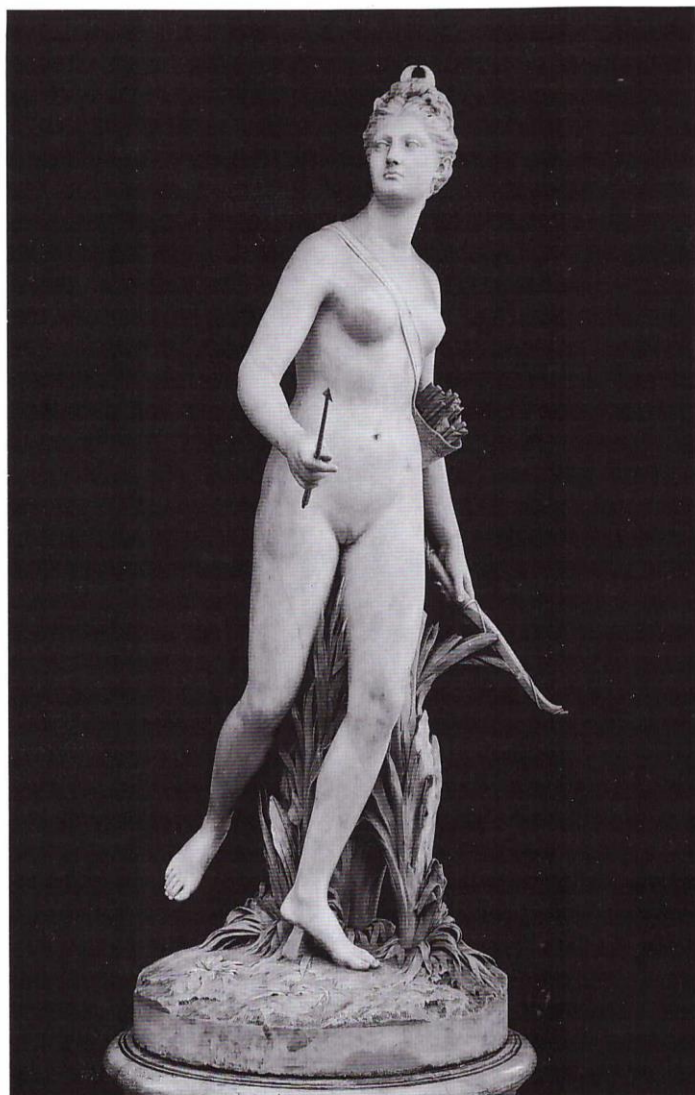


effectiveness, they do not encourage us to investigate the character of their creator; personally Houdon remains an uninteresting figure, somewhat unimaginative, and in one way perhaps too dependent on the canon of realism.

Even the eighteenth century did not mean its dictum about following nature to be taken quite as literally as Houdon took it. But Houdon shows how uncertain other standards had become by the time he was first active – in the late sixties. The Baroque was out of date; neo-classicism was not – was never? – firmly established as the distinctive, fashionable style. The safest convention lay between these two: simply to be realistic. Houdon early showed his preference for that stylistic alternative not only in the scientific *Écorché*, of which he remained so proud, but in the contemporary *St Bruno* in Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome (1767) [255]. Despite that statue's colossal scale, it is not a heroic or extraordinary figure. What distinguishes it is sober realism: it is the portrayal of any monk rather than of a fervent saint.³⁸ When Réau described the *St Bruno* as having the head of the *Écorché* planted on a cowl, he presumably meant to praise,³⁹ yet he also indicated some limitation in the statue and its sculptor. Houdon's whole career reveals him tacking about stylistically, veering between extremes of Rococo and neo-classicism, displaying even romantic *style troubadour* tendencies, as in the *Tourville*, but ultimately making his criterion nature's. Problems of imagination which afflicted him in non-portrait work disappeared when he was face to face with a sitter; here was the standard which he effortlessly understood. Art must be made to seem more natural than nature itself.

Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828) was trained under Michel-Ange Slodtz, but was significantly influenced by Lemoyne and also by Pigalle. Most significant of all was his attachment to his profession. Born the son of the concierge at the *École des élèves protégés*, where he was later a pupil himself, Houdon might well claim to have been, as he stated in an autobiographical notice, 'Né pour ainsi dire au pied de l'Académie.' He went on to say that he had worked as a sculptor since the age of nine. Even if that is something of an exaggeration, it expressed Houdon's lifetime absorption in his work. Without social or literary ambitions, barely educated, and interested outside sculpture only in his family and the theatre, he is the typical eighteenth-century worker-artist. He has no claims as a great draughtsman. His activity and his attitude were not made to soften the court prejudice which Cochin had recorded as expressed in the comment: 'il y avoit bien des mecanismes dans la sculpture.' The status of the sculptor in France was not altered by Houdon's career. He played no outstanding part in the Revolution, and perhaps was at heart a royalist. Despite some complaints by Pajou, he seems to have been largely unambitious. It is true that he put forward a request in 1803 for the *Légion d'Honneur* – which was granted – but in his letter of application he stressed his scientific application rather than the nobility of his art. 'Above all,' he wrote, 'the constant occupation of my whole life has been the study of anatomy applied to the fine arts.'⁴⁰

Houdon's *Écorché* (1767, Gotha), which was of course



256. Jean-Antoine Houdon: *Diana*, 1780. Lisbon, Gulbenkian Museum

mentioned in his letter to illustrate that preoccupation, had been conceived and executed while he was still a student at the French Academy in Rome. Already at fifteen he had won a prize at the Academy school in Paris; in 1761 he won first prize, and after the customary three years at the *École des élèves protégés*, received his *brevet* for Rome in 1764. He returned to France in 1768, was *agrégé* in 1769, and immediately took advantage of his new position to exhibit that year at the Salon. The pieces he showed not merely reflected, but were the positive fruits of, his Roman stay. They were much praised and indeed revealed a fresh artistic talent; varied in subject, scale, and style though they were, there was one conspicuous lack in the light of Houdon's later career: no male portrait bust.

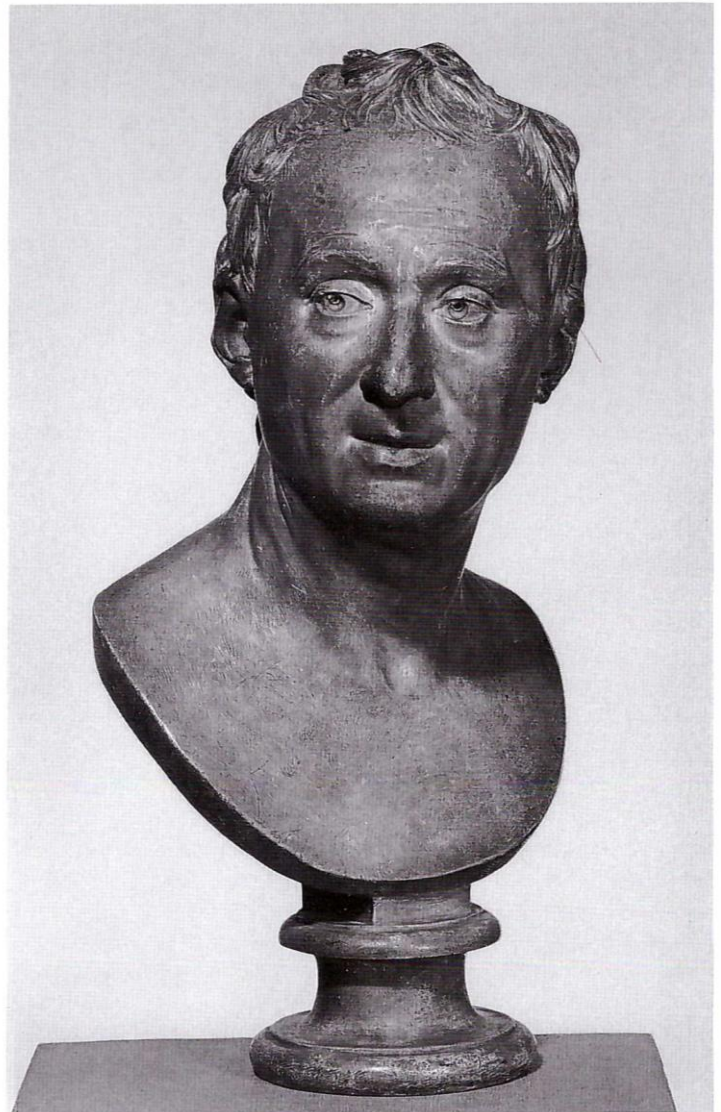
Houdon's work in Rome had prepared him for a career quite different from that of *bustier*. But the fundamental realism of his art was already patently declared in the origin of the *Écorché*, intended at first to be just a model for the *St John the Baptist* which had been commissioned along with *St Bruno* for the same church. The model eclipsed the final statue in importance; already Natoire, director of the French Academy at Rome, is found urging Marigny to allow a cast

255. Jean-Antoine Houdon: *St Bruno*, 1767. Rome, Santa Maria degli Angeli

of the *Écorché* to be placed in the Academy. And it is worth noting that when Houdon was pressing for the commission, which never came, to execute an equestrian statue of Washington,⁴¹ he prepared an *écorché* of the horse to convince Congress. To some extent he sought to combine his natural abilities with ambition to produce a monument comparable to those of Bouchardon, Lemoyne, and Falconet. Such projects were to be floated before him, but never to resolve into hard accomplished facts: an elaborate monument to Louis XVI at Brest, a simpler one to Gessner at Zürich – both were carefully planned in model but not finally executed.

Yet it is difficult to regret this. Although some of the reserves felt about Houdon were perhaps no more than intrigue, and the jealous reaction of fellow-sculptors like Caffiéri, there can be little doubt that he was not best suited to the creation of large-scale allegorical monuments. As long as taste required veils of gracious mythologizing to overlay a reality, Houdon was working to some extent in an unsympathetic climate. That this was not more noticeable is owing to his virtuosity and his ability to produce sculpture in almost pastiche style. Even in his portrait busts the stylistic shifts are patent and often quite surprising; this is less a matter of conscious essays *à l'antique* than of changes in mood between sober and Rococo realism which are like nods in the direction now of Pigalle and now of Lemoyne. In non-portrait sculpture there is yet more patent variety. *La Frileuse* (1785, Montpellier, Musée Fabre) is an essay in imitating Falconet; the Comte d'Ennery tomb (1781, Louvre) is sentimentally neo-classical; the *Diana* looks back to the School of Fontainebleau. Yet throughout there is that stamp of realism which becomes most obvious when Houdon's work is compared to Pajou's and Julien's. Julien's seated *Nymph*, or Pajou's *Psyche*, are like whitewashed plaster, cold and inert beside the springing, insolent vitality of the marble *Diana* of 1780, poised so unexpectedly today in the Gulbenkian Museum at Lisbon [256]. She is a woman before she is a goddess, but her superiority consists above all in having existence. Had she been placed in the dairy at Rambouillet it would have been an almost brutal naturalism which would have confronted Marie-Antoinette and the court. Even Catherine the Great, who became its owner without having commissioned the work, seemed to recognize its grasp of realism and positive lack of divinity when she wrote in 1786: 'La Diane est depuis ce printemps à Tsarsko-Sélo. Ce Tsarsko-Sélo renferme bien des diableries.'⁴²

If mythology and allegory were not best suited to be illustrated by Houdon this was not because he lived in an age of reason, but because his working methods largely dispensed with imagination altogether. Increasingly driven to be a sculptor of portrait busts, he first publicly revealed his abilities with the *Diderot* (New Haven, Conn., Seymour Collection) [257] – shown at the Salon of 1771 – the first of his own personal series of 'grands hommes'. The breathing, almost indeed breathless, quality of this is more exciting and immediate than in many of Houdon's later busts. Regardless of its likeness to Diderot, it remains lifelike. The pupils of the eyes are deeply cut, dark, and extraordinarily impressive, and the mouth is open – an effect Houdon did not often use again for busts of adults but sometimes for children. The inquiring twist of the head emphasizes another of Houdon's



257. Jean-Antoine Houdon: *Bust of Diderot*, 1771. New Haven, Connecticut, Seymour Collection

gifts of observation: that character can be conveyed by the way the head is held on the neck. The neck itself, in the *Diderot* just wrinkled as the head turns, becomes an object of study to the sculptor. Voltaire's bare skeletal throat suggests age more terribly than his still animated face [258]; Benjamin Franklin's thick dewlap sags slightly on to his neckcloth (an example of 1778 is in the Metropolitan Museum, New York). Part of the power of the *Diderot* comes from its simple directness and lack of accessories. Its nobleness has a naked quality, a candour, that perfectly suits the sitter. Perceptive and yet childishly enthusiastic, marked by life and yet still innocent, Diderot seems here the very image of his writings. There is an imaginative sympathy, or so it appears, between the comparatively young sculptor and the ageing writer; but the talents of Houdon are hardly similar to genius as defined by Diderot (*Encyclopédie*, vii, *Génie*): 'Je ne sais quelle rudesse,

258. Jean-Antoine Houdon: *Voltaire seated*, 1781. Paris, Comédie Française



VOLTAIRE.



259. Jean-Antoine Houdon:
Bust of Anne-Ange Houdon,
 c. 1791. Houston, Museum
 of Fine Arts, The Edith A.
 and Percy S. Straus
 Collection

les personnes qu'ils représentent que par leur exécution qui, en général, est froide et maigre'.

Yet to leave that as an implied summing-up of Houdon's achievements in busts alone would be absurd. Whatever may be granted to the character of his very varied sitters, his response to them, his capturing of them, must be recognized as astonishing and, in the best sense, artful – for all the apparent directness. His busts of children acknowledge the l'irrégularité, le sublime, le pathétique, voilà dans les arts le caractère du génie.'

Just as he had studied in a Roman hospital to produce the *Écorché*, so Houdon brought an almost medical attitude to the heads of his sitters. His use of life and death masks, his

measurements of the subject's head – and, in the case of Washington, all the subject's dimensions – point to an attitude paralleled perhaps only by Stubbs' concern with accurate anatomical depictions of the horse. Houdon is professional in a way that cannot be claimed for Lemoyne. Lemoyne seems to work by instinct; the result is uneven, occasionally dull, but often brilliant. Houdon is not uneven, never less than lifelike, careful of detail (even to the patterning of a coat, as in the bust of Turgot), and 'natural' by a re-definition so sober and exact that Lemoyne's busts by comparison may seem theatrical and over-expressive. Some of Houdon's contemporaries found his work limited, and possibly it always remains too dependent on the physiognomy of a sitter: 'des



260. Jean-Antoine Houdon:
Bust of Alexandre Brongniart,
 1777. Washington, National
 Gallery of Art, Widener
 Collection

portraits', said the *Journal de Paris* (19 September 1789) reviewing the Salon of that year, 'plus recommandables par individuality of each and do not make the mistake of treating every face as just a smiling putto-style mask. There is a touching quality to his plaster of his very young daughter, Anne-Ange (Houston) [259], hardly more than a baby, especially when compared to the keen-eyed, not unmischievous-looking Alexandre Brongniart, son of the architect (Washington) [260], whose very hair suggests liveliness. It seems fitting that the popularity of this bust, existing in terracotta and bronze, should have extended to its manufacture in Sèvres porcelain, since the adult Alexandre was to become director of the Sèvres factory.

The statesman is seen not only in Houdon's familiar busts of Washington but also in the much rarer and certainly no less fine bust of Jefferson (Boston) [261]. The tautness of the features, the slight tilt of the head make of it something challenging, without exaggeration. Time has been at work on the features, too, and subtly does the sculptor hint at the hollowing out of the throat, as more obviously in the sharply chiselled lines down the cheeks. As a contrast in vivacity, as well as sex, Houdon's *Comtesse de Sabran* (Potsdam) [262] could hardly be greater. There are so many charming, animated busts of women in French eighteenth-century art that it comes as a relief to know, on the testimony of Madame Vigée-Le Brun, that the Comtesse really was charming, lively,





262. Jean-Antoine Houdon:
*Bust of the Comtesse de
Sabran, c. 1785.*
Potsdam, Neues Palais

and intelligent – all as Houdon conveys, not least by the device of the sharply-turned head. And these four examples, in marble, plaster and terracotta, range in chronology over nearly a decade and a half: from young Brongniart (1777) to Anne-Ange Houdon (c. 1791).

261. Jean-Antoine Houdon: *Bust of Thomas Jefferson*, 1789. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, George Nixon Black Fund

Houdon never goes to an extreme. In that sense he is a classical artist, moving serenely between those poles represented in his early years by Slodtz and at the end of his career by Canova. It may be that for many people he represents the finest achievement of eighteenth-century sculpture; but it must always be remembered that his achievement did not altogether coincide with the century's aims in sculpture. Houdon is not above his century: he is part of a complex stylistic pattern which contained within it other great sculptors.