LIOTARD, Jean-Étienne

Geneva 1702–1789

After studying architecture and enamelled painting in his native Geneva, Liotard went to Paris in 1723 and worked under Jean-Baptiste Massé (p). Few works survive from this period (enamels and oils outnumber pastels), but his curiosity and ambition were evident in the announcement for his prints of Voltaire and Fontenelle in the Mercure de France (VII, 1735, pp. 1392): this claimed that his technique of colour printing was a genre de peinture qui peut avoir la fraîcheur d’une grande vérité & propreté de couleur; c’est dommage que les contours sont un peu trop tranchants. Both critics are simply alluding to Liotard’s distinctive use of bright, uniform light in his works, so much at variance with prevailing approaches to portraiture. A set piece for art students in Dresden, the plethora of later copies and reproductions of this genre picture in various media insinuates a trivialisation of Liotard’s art.

From Venice Liotard returned to Vienna, accompanying the court to Frankfort for the coronation of Franz I. Stephan in 1745. He then moved on to Bayreuth and thence to Darmstadt (where Caroline Luise took lessons from him for six weeks). He had returned to Geneva by 1746; a trip to Lyon took place later that year. By 1747 his fame was such that a treatise on international commerce noted (in connection with Geneva) that “On ne troverait que peu de Peintres dans l’Europe qui pourroient l’emporter sur un Liotard dans l’art de Portraire, & de se mettre” (Jean Larue, Le Bibliothèque des jeunes negocians, Lyon, 1747, p. 521).

By VI,1748 he had returned to Paris, this time with a long beard. Soon after, Maurice de Saxe introduced him at court; the duc de Luynes recorded (XV, 1749): “Sa Majesté entra chez Madame la Dauphine où on lui fit voir les portraits par le nommé Liotard, peintre habile... Il a peint Madame Infante, Mesdames toutes trois et l’Empereur, qu’il a fait aussi un portrait de Madame la Dauphine, mais qu’il n’a pas réussi.” (Confusions among the various portraits of Mesdames abounded.) On 29.III.1750 he used the title “peintre du roi” when he was witness to the marriage of one Nicolas-Sylvain Petitjean, sieur d’Arzillières, ancien conseiller de l’Académie “& de se mettre” (Jean Larue, 1747, p. 521).

In 1753, perhaps at the invitation of Duncannon (although Northcote says that it was Sir Everard Fawkener who persuaded him to come), he travelled to London, where he stayed for two years. Although Walpole records his arrival in London (letter to Sir Horace Mann of 5.III.1753), it has hitherto escaped attention that he was presented to the royal family almost immediately, but there can be no doubt of the identity of the artist described in this notice in Old England’s journal, 31.III.1753:

This Week a Turkish Gentleman, lately arrived here, who is very eminent in Portrait Painting, and known to Sir Everard Faulkner in Turkey, was introduced to his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, and graciously received. This gentleman is dressed in the Habit of his Country, and remarkable by his Beard being long, curiously sharpened and curled.

It was no doubt his stock which was advertised in the Public Advertiser, 21.XI.1753:

To the Curious

To be seen, at Two Shillings a-piece

At the House next Door to Monsieur Liotard’s, the Golden Head, in Golden-square. A Collection of Portraits in crayons, most of them Originals.

A longer advertisement appeared in the Public Advertiser, 11.I.1754 (repeated the following day), significantly addressed—

To the Curious

The Eagerness which the Public expresses, to see Mr LIOTARD’s Performances, encourages me to project anything that can give the Curious some farther Satisfaction; consequently he has added to his Works an original Picture of the Czar Peter the Great, done from the Life, while he was in Holland; a Picture of the Empress Queen on Horseback, dressed as she was at her Coronation at Presbury, as Queen of Hungary; an Original Drawing of the last Pope; another Original Painting of the famous Achmet Pacha, Count de Bonneval, and several other Drawings of Turkish Figures, all done from the Life at Constantinople.

His Friends are welcome to see the Paintings gratis.

Soon after another advertisement appeared in the same journal (28.III.1754, repeated 1.XI.1754):

The Three Graces, drawn at Rome by Mr Liotard, after the Antique Marble Group in the Prince Borghese’s Villa and coloured here after Life, are to be seen with his other Paintings at the Two Yellow Lamps in Golden-square.

(2) The portrait of Jean-Adam Serre, “Portrait Painter to the Empress Queen”, also advertised from the same address in the Public Advertiser, 15.XII.1753 and the two following weeks, offering his Essais sur les principes de l’harmonie as well as his miniatures of the Austrian and French royal families, Mme de Pompadour, Fontenelle, Crébillon etc.; although it is generally assumed that Serre copied Liotard, a note in a letter from

Neil Jeffares, Dictionary of pastellists before 1800

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1 Updated 25 October 2015
Fontenelle to Vernet of 16.VIII.1750 reveals that Serre had just painted the author from life.) From another notice in the Publick advertisement, 13.III.1755 (repeated 15.III.1755), we learn that Liotard returned to France in the summer of 1754:

Mr Liotard gives Notice that he is come back to London, chiefly in order to finish some Portraits he had begun before he went to France last summer, and therefore does not intend to make here a longer Stay than will be required for that purpose.

He had been over a couple of large Conversation Pieces in Crayons of his highest finishing. He lives in the same house in Golden Square.

Undoubtedly one of the conversation pieces he mentioned was Le Déjeuner Lavergne, considered by many to be his masterpiece, and known by his works in crayons. His likenesses were very strong, and too like to please those who sat to him; thus he had great employment the first year and very little the second. Devoid of imagination, he could render nothing but what he saw before his eyes... Minuteness prevailed in all his works, grace in none; nor was there any ease in his outlines, but the stiffness of a bust in all his portraits. Thence his heads want air and the softness of flesh so conspicuous in Rosalba's pictures. Her bodies have a different fault; she gave to men an effeminate prothromatiness about the breasts; yet peradventure his works are much more genial.

Elsewhere (Anecdotes, 1849, ii, p. 429, Isaac Fuller), Walpole comes back to this theme, citing Liotard as "a living instance" of the sterility of artists who "succeed only in what they see": "The cannot paint a blind eye of the lady is dressed in purple knots." Maximilien Joseph von Lambog, in a curious work entitled Mémorial d'un mondain (1774, p. 50), described the artist's problem when required to paint the Princess of Wales "qu'il ne vit qu'assise dans sa Tribune", suggesting that he resorted to a list of numbered features derived from other works. Northcote, no doubt reflecting Sir Joshua Reynolds's views, repeated Walpole's passage, adding "His likenesses were very strong, and too like to please those who sat to him; thus he had great employment the first year and very little the second. Devoid of imagination, he could render nothing but what he saw before his eyes..." Minuteness prevailed in all his works, grace in none; nor was there any ease in his outlines, but the stiffness of a bust in all his portraits. Thence his heads want air and the softness of flesh. Reynolds made the following remarks in his commonplace book (Hilles 1936, p. 18): those who are not capable of judging for themselves I think might smell something of the Quack from his appearance the long beard [and] Turk's dress which as well as his manner of [the] very essence of Imposture, a few nights ago some Italians talking about Liotard of the Great Success he met with in England in comparison of what he did in France, one of them opening his Eye with one of his fingers says Gli Fracesi hanno gli occhi aperti, the French have their eyes open and can see through imposture, with much more good humour than I fear I have shown in this Letter they begun to ridicule him, one said what punishment might be due to any one who should by any means cut off his beard since twofold deprive him of his support, another said he was like Samson his strength lay in his hair.

The impoverished artist in Hogarth's 1751 engraving Beer-Street "in a truly deplorable plight; at the same time that he carries in his countenance a perfect consciousness of his talents in this creative art" was said to be a caricature of himself. I. Ireland, Hogarth illustrated, 1806, ii, p. 77; repeating Biographical anecdotes of William Hogarth, 1781, p. 115; chronologically improbable, the passage nevertheless reflects contemporary artists' views of their rival.

Liotard moved on to Holland in 1755 to join his nephews in Delft. He stayed in Amsterdam and The Hague until at least 13.VIII.1756, when he sacrificed his beard to marry Marie Fargues, the daughter of a French Protestant merchant living in Amsterdam. During his stay in Holland, he made a large number of pastels of Dutch sitters, perhaps introduced by Bentinck, of whom Liotard had been a portrait in England the year before. Liotard returned to Geneva in 1757. There were further trips to Vienna (1762), Paris (XVI.1770; XII.1770–71), The Netherlands (1771–73), London (1772–74, during which he travelled to Birmingham in 1773), and again to Vienna (1776–77).

In Geneva Liotard took on the 14-year-old Louis-Ami Arlaud (p.), his only recorded apprentice; with whom he had left for Paris. Another unidentified pastellist, also described as a pupil of Liotard, was involved in attempts to have a pastel portrait made of Rousseau in 1764 but withdrew when his father died (this pastellist cannot have been Arlaud, whose father lived until 1806): Liotard's offer to step into his pupil's shoes was deferred by Rousseau, possibly because John Wilkes was to come with him. The pastel which Liotard made of Rousseau in Lyon in 1770 must have been made before Rousseau left the town on 8.V.1770. Liotard continued on to Paris, where, on 22.VI.1770, Charles Burney records having dinner with him, Greivy and the abbé Armaud, who presumably was involved in Liotard's travel (Burney later adapted Liotard's music; his nephew and son-in-law was named Charles Rousseau; Burney's meeting with Rousseau, on the 30.V.1770, is referred to in the Society, on 4.XII.1772, as an unnamed pastellist—perhaps Brézé—in the rue de Grenelle, 13.XII.1770, was the high point of his journey). A further trip to Paris in X.I.1770 was undertaken at the explicit command of masters. In 1761 Reifenstein (q.v.) visited his studio on behalf of Carolina Louise von Baden (q.v.), producing a list of 17 paintings by Dutch and French masters from the collection from which the Markgräfin was to choose five; he hoped that a largar, apparently equestrian, portrait would be better, but Mercy appears instead to have supplied one by Kranzinger (q.v.). Although the dates of Liotard's second trip to London are normally given as 1752–53, it is thought that he was already in the capital by late 1772 from the minutes of the Society of Arts. Charles Pache had submitted his crayons for approval, and the committee sought views on their merit through "most eminent and experienced" secretaries reported on 27.XI.1772 that Liotard, whom he had approached, had not yet had an opportunity to compare the crayons with his own; but Liotard later issued a certificate (presented to the Society, on 4.XII.1772, dedacting that "the Crayons of Mr Pache are as good as those of Stoupau, and that the dark Brown are rather more beautiful."

Liotard was also a collector-dealer in old masters. In 1761 Reifenstein (q.v.) visited his studio on behalf of Carolina Louise von Baden (q.v.), producing a list of 17 paintings by Dutch and French masters from the collection from which the Markgräfin was to choose five; Reifenstein describes his pleasure in Liotard's praise of his own works. Ten years later Liotard exhibited his collection in Paris, producing a catalogue in an effort to sell some 126 old masters. In 1773 another sale was organised in London, from his own house, as advertised in the St James's Chronicle, 5–9.III.1773 and other journals:

Mr Liotard, at Mr Henry's, in Great Marlborough Street, facing Blooms'-street, opened on Monday last, an Exhibition of Pictures, by the most admired Masters. This capital Collection may be seen every Day, Sundays excepted, from the Hours of Ten till Three, on the same Conditions with those of the annual Exhibitions of Pictures. NB Descriptive Catalogues may be had on Adminittance.

The following year, Christie's were instructed for a sale that took place 13.V.1774 (advertised, for example, in the Daily advertiser, 9.V.1774). When Sophie von La Roche and a companion visited Liotard in Geneva in 1784 (La Roche 1787, p. 250), she picked out a picture by Rosalba for particular praise (the Diana listed in Liotard's estate inventory). They were also shown flower and fruit pictures by Van Huysum, as well as Liotard's own peaches, which her companion preferred. By 1785 he attempted unsuccessfully to sell some 480 paintings to d'Angiviller for the French royal collection.

Liotard worked in a range of media including enamel and oil painting, but it is in his remarkable pastels where his pre-eminence is most evident. As many as 15 self-portraits are...
known, in various media; the 1744 version hung in the Uffizi during his lifetime (“notre ami Liotard…saute aux yeux avec sa longue barbe”), wrote the traveller Pierre-Augustin Guys in 1776; he owned the famous oil of M. Levent et Mlle Hélène Glavany), while his self-portrait shown at the Royal Academy in 1773 was described by Walpole as “very bold.” From around 1783, he executed another portrait of La Tour often praised for his technique: “The abbé Le Blanc (1788, p. 38). Some of his works were fixed by Jurine (1788), notably some of those owned by Lord Bessborough (it appears from the much quoted 28.vi.1763 letter to Bessborough about this that Liotard did not themselves fix his pastels and the competent inference is widely found in the literature), and may have suffered as a result. However at least one of the nine pastels at Roehampton listed by Dr. W. Leech, though that Liotard was “un peintre absolument pas à sa place” (Aragon & Cocteau 1957, p. 135), and the rehabilitation was complete when the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston bought a Liotard for a reported Swf 2 million. Liotard’s pastels have since consistently achieved the highest prices in the salerooms and attract museum curators who are normally unenthusiastic about pastel; and the literature devoted to him is far larger than for any other eighteenth century pastellist (and not far short of that of all other pastellists put together). It is unlikely that users of this Dictionary will agree with both parts of the assessment by a curator of the 2015 UK exhibition that Liotard is “...the greatest 18th century artist whom nobody knows.”

Inevitably the question of replicas, copies and fakes arises. The enamelist Serre, mentioned above, does not seem to have worked in pastel, but others in Liotard’s immediate circle who may have done included Kohler and Schuncke (1788).

The definitive catalogue, by Marcel Roethlisberger and Renée Loche (1961), came out in 2008 (Roethlisberger 2014 contains several additions). Catalogue numbers have been added in the form R&L n (references to the earlier, 1978 summary catalogue are given as L&R n; copies and variants are cited by page (R&L p. s.)).

Monographic exhibitions
Dictionary of pastellists before 1800

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~repl., enamel (Geneva, musée Patek Philippe, inv. E-196). Lit.: R&L 444, fig. 651
~grav.: J. R. Schellenberg. Lit.: R&L p. 585, fig. 654
~other copies in various media


~repl., enamel (Geneva, musée Patek Philippe, inv. E-196). Lit.: R&L 444, fig. 651
~grav.: J. R. Schellenberg. Lit.: R&L p. 585, fig. 654
~other copies in various media


~étude, dessin (Geneva, mAH, inv. 1960-32).
Lit.: Debrie & Salmon 2000, p. 61, ill. 23; Liotard 2006, p. 33 repr.; R&L, p. 589, fig. 659
~grav.: Liotard. Lit.: Baltimore 1984, repr.
~cop.: Mlle Thomasset, embroidery, 64x52 (Vevey, musée Jenisch). Lit.: R&L, p. 590, fig. 660

AUTOPORTRAIT
~grav.: Liotard (FD 1361)


AUTOPORTRAIT, Liotard the painter, in frame and glass (Sir Everard Fawkener; sale p.m., London, Ford, 27.III.1759, Lot 27)