This half-length portrait of Joachim Lebreton exemplifies the intimate yet elegant style of portraiture that Adélaïde Labille-Guiard developed in the aftermath of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror (1793–1794). Unlike Labille-Guiard’s most accomplished paintings of the 1780s, which portray their sitters in elaborate spaces that revel in illusionism and abound with markers of status and identity (Fig. 1), her portraits of the late 1790s emphasize naturalism over artifice and establish a less formal relationship between sitter and viewer (Fig. 2).
The spare composition presents Lebreton seated in a neoclassical wooden chair, of which only a portion of the back is visible. His brightly lit face and hands and his gently rumpled, white linen cravat and cuffs stand out against a background of muted grays and browns, in a space where the abrupt foreshortening of his right arm creates an illusion of shallow depth.

Lebreton appears in three-quarters view, with the right side of his body leaning against the back of the chair. His bent right elbow juts out behind him; his right hand rests nonchalantly on his left forearm; and his left hand grips the top of the rectangular backrest. Turning his face toward the picture plane, he gazes softly ahead and to the left, at a point beyond our view, while the corners of his closed mouth rise in the stirrings of a smile, giving him a welcoming air.

Labille-Guiard depicts Lebreton in the stylishly relaxed fashions that reigned in Paris in the mid-1790s. The flowing waves and flyaway wisps of his shoulder-length brown hair echo the suppleness of his generously cut brown redingote—a double-breasted coat with wide, flat lapels, inspired by the English riding coat in both appearance and name. The coat depicted here—which features a tall, unstructured collar and a wide, loosely draped lapel that spills onto Lebreton's sleeve—is worn open, revealing a shimmering silk vest in a bold pattern of diagonal red-and-black stripes. A narrow gold ring gleams on the little finger of his left hand, adding a note of understated luxury.

The daughter of a mercer, Labille-Guiard grew up amid fabrics and fashion and excelled at capturing the look and feel of materials. Technical analysis of Portrait of Joachim Lebreton reveals some of the methods that she employed to foster this verisimilitude. For instance, on a canvas that is otherwise thinly painted, subtle passages of impasto applied to the cuffs, the cravat, and the edges of the lapel foster an illusion of comparative stiffness in these areas. Near the sitter's right shoulder, the red and black of the vest are visible through an overlaid triangle of translucent linen, an effect created by painting wet-into-wet, whereas dry brushwork was used to generate feathery effects in the sitter's hair. Dabs of transparent, bright magenta paint add glints of light to Lebreton's silk vest and suggest lifelike notes of moisture on his lips and nose.
The unusual signature and date visible at the lower left of the painting—"Labille d'Guier / l'an 3. eme de la R"—situate the work specifically in the life of both the artist and the nation. The signature refers to the artist's marital history: Adélaïde Labille married Nicolas Guier in 1769 and began signing her paintings "Labille wife [femme] of Guier," but after her 1793 divorce, she adopted the signature "Labille called [dite] Guier." The date—"year 3 of the Republic"—refers to the new calendar adopted in 1793 by the National Convention, which started with September 22, 1792 (when France was declared a republic); "year 3" ran from September 22, 1794 through September 21, 1795.

Portrait of Joachim Lebreton is one of at least six portraits that Labille-Guier sent to the Salon exhibition that opened on October 2, 1795. This was the first exhibition in which Labille-Guier had participated since 1791. Having been elected to the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1783, Labille-Guier went on to attract the patronage of several members of the royal family in the final years of the ancien régime, attaining the status of "Painter to Mesdames" (the unmarried aunts of Louis XVI) and receiving major commissions from two of them, Madame Adélaïde and Madame Victoire; their niece, Madame Élisabeth (the king's sister); the comte de Provence (a brother of the king); and even Louis XVI himself. During the revolution, she advocated for moderate reforms in the academy and in the nation, arousing the ire of her more radical colleagues. She survived the Reign of Terror, in part, by moving to the countryside on the eastern outskirts of Paris, but several of her paintings depicting members of the royal family were destroyed in public bonfires in 1793 by order of the Paris city government.

The nation's art institutions were also in the midst of reinvention in 1795, with Joachim Lebreton playing an important role in the process. Born in Saint-Méen-le-Grand, Brittany, in 1760, Lebreton moved in 1772 to Paris, where he was educated and ordained by the brothers of the Théâtre Order. In 1779, he obtained a post teaching rhetoric in a Théâtre school in Tulle, in the Limousin region of south-central France. As Father Lebreton, he published his first book, La logique adaptée à la rhétorique, in 1788. At the outbreak of revolution in 1789, Lebreton left the order and returned to Paris. In 1794, he married Anne-Julie d'Arcet, the eldest daughter of the chemist Jean d'Arcet. When Labille-Guier exhibited his portrait, Lebreton was serving as head of the museum department of the Committee of Public Instruction and was an important contributor to the journal La Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique.

With support from Lebreton and other administrators whose patronage Labille-Guier cultivated, she began rebuilding her shattered career. In May 1795, the Committee of Public Instruction awarded Labille-Guier two thousand livres as a measure of compensation for the destruction of her paintings, and in September of the same year the National Convention also granted her a prize. She exhibited several oil portraits at the Salon exhibitions of 1795, 1798, and 1799, yet she never regained the stature that she enjoyed before the revolution. When Labille-Guier died in 1803, Lebreton eulogized her in an eight-page published "Notice" that summarized her life, her career, and her character, furnishing the basis for all subsequent biographies of the artist.

Lebreton's career also waned and waxed with the vagaries of political circumstance. During the Napoleonic era (1799–1815), Lebreton was a central actor in the articulation and implementation of national arts policies. In recognition of his service, he was honored with the title of Chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 1803. A vocal opponent of repatriating the antiquities seized by French Army expeditions, Lebreton was removed from his post at the National Institute after Napoleon's fall. At the invitation of John VI, King of Portugal (1767–1826), Lebreton relocated to Brazil with the intention of establishing a school of fine arts modeled on the French system. Lebreton died in Rio de Janeiro in 1819.

Although he did not live to see his project realized, he is acclaimed as a founding father of Brazilian art education.

Laura Auricchio
February 2018

Notes

1. On Labille-Guier’s biography and career, see Laura Auricchio, Adélaïde Labille-Guier: Artist in the Age of Revolution (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2009); Anne-Marie Passez, Adélaïde

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3. The published guide to the Salon of 1795 lists four paintings by Labille-Guiard in addition to “Plusieurs Portraits sous le même numéro” (Several Portraits under the same number); see Jean-François Heim, Claire Béraud, and Philippe Heim, Les Salons de peinture de la Révolution française, 1789–1799 (Paris: C.A.C. Sarl. ÉDITION, 1989), 248.

4. The academy had admitted female artists in small numbers since the seventeenth century, although no more than four women were permitted to be members at any one time. On the uneasy relationship between women and the academy, see Mary D. Sheriff, The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 73–104. For a more general history of women in the academy, see Octave Fidière, Les Femmes artistes à l’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture (Paris: Charavay Frères, 1885).

5. According to a report delivered to the Committee on Public Instruction on 13 Floréal Year III (May 2, 1795), “the Director of the Department of Paris, by an order of August 11, 1793, forced citoyenne Guiard to deliver to the procureur syndic the large and small portraits of the former prince and all the studies related to these works, to be devoured by flames.” Pierre-Louis Ginguéne, “Rapport au Comité d’instruction publique,” 13 Floréal an III (May 2, 1795), Archives Nationales, Paris, DXXXVIII/4.


The Theatine Order was an order of secular clergy founded in Rome and approved by Clement VII in 1524. Members of the Order were required to take a vow of poverty and obedience, but didn’t have to attend multiple masses day and night. They wore simple black cassocks and nursed the needy and sick in their communities. Due to their lack of evangelizing zeal, the Order was waning by the 18th century and now they exist only in their original country, Italy. See Deborah Howard, “Theatine Order,” Grove Art Online (2003): http://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T084340 In his position teaching at the Collège de Tulle, which was overseen by the Theatins from 1764 to 1791, Lebreton was friends with several other men of letters who would go on to have careers during the Revolution and successive regimes. See Marcel Dorigny, “Victor Lanneau, Prêtre, Jacobin et Fondateur du Collège des Sciences et des Arts (1758–1830),” Annales Historiques de La Révolution Française, no. 274 (October–December 1988): 347–65.


11. Indeed, Lebreton made a direct jab at the British when he asserted, “It was not the French who ripped off the sculptures of Phidias” (referring to the Parthenon sculptures, known as the “Elgin Marbles”). This stance made him some enemies. See Maria Teresa Caracciolo and Gennaro Toscano, eds., *Jean-Baptiste Wicar et son temps, 1762–1834* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2007), 90.


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**Technical Entry**

**Citation**

**Chicago:**


**MLA:**


*Portrait of Joachim Lebreton,* completed in 1795 by Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749–1803), was quickly executed with loose, confident strokes and wet-over-wet brushwork. The somewhat open, plain-weave canvas contains numerous slubs and weave irregularities, and a selvedge is present on the right tacking margin. The ground layer appears to be off-white in color, and its application is thin enough to allow the canvas texture to remain somewhat visible. Paint from the picture plane does not continue onto the preserved tacking margins, confirming that the dimensions of the portrait are original.

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Fig. 3. Details of the proper right shirt cuff, *Portrait of Joachim Lebreton* (1795), captured with normal illumination (top) and raking illumination (bottom)

No preliminary sketch, either drawn with dry media or painted via brush, was detected when the painting was studied with infrared reflectography or the stereomicroscope. While it is difficult to distinguish many of the earliest layers, glimpses of underlying paint—for
example, a brown wash beneath the upper hair and the outer edge of the proper left side of the face, as well as an opaque reddish-brown paint beneath the jacket and proper right hand—suggest an initial lay-in of the figure.

Subsequent applications of paint were thinly applied, forming only a small amount of low impasto in the highlights of the white collar and cuff (Fig. 3). The sitter’s expressive face was constructed using opaque layers of peach, pink, pale yellow, and beige in the highlights, while shades of gray and brown define the mid-tones and shadows. The subtle transitions between light and shade create volume and effectively model the face, even as the artist’s brushwork remains prominent (Fig. 4). With a fine-tipped brush and precisely placed strokes, Labille-Guiard portrayed the reflections and glistening appearance of the sitter’s eyes (Fig. 5).

1 Touches of transparent magenta, most likely a red lake, are apparent in the lower layers of the nostrils and lips. While a bright, opaque pink highlights the tip of the nose (proper left side), cool blue accents are present below the nose and proper right fingernail (Figs. 4 and 6).
Wet-over-wet brushwork is evident throughout the painting. Figure 7, a photomicrograph of the vest’s raised collar, illustrates the type of intermingling of color that occurred when one stroke was laid across the wet paint of another. In a similar manner, finely painted lines of red were drawn across the wet paint of the cravat to form the decorative pattern at its edge (Fig. 8). In this area, Labille-Guiard allowed red paint associated with the vest to be faintly visible beneath the thin white fabric in order to convey the transparency of the lightweight textile (Fig. 9). Pale orange paint on the proper left collar and in the shadows of the lower right cravat depict reflections of light from the adjacent red vest (Fig. 10). Shadows in the lower curls were deepened by a dark magenta glaze, and when the painting was examined under the stereomicroscope, a bright red glaze could be seen throughout the vest.
Fig. 9. Detail of the cravat, Portrait of Joachim Lebreton (1795)

Fig. 10. Photomicrograph of the sitter’s collar, Portrait of Joachim Lebreton (1795)
Above a preliminary layer of warm gray, the background consists of loose, energetic brushwork and thin, opaque paint that gradually shifts from an upper light gray to a lower dark brown. A scumble of cool gray overlaps the sitter’s dark brown coat in various locations but stops short of many of his curling locks, indicating that Labille-Guiard fully developed the figure before turning her attention to the background (Fig. 11).

Only minor adjustments were made to the portrait over the course of its completion. The pentimento of an unexplained, rectangular shape, now thinly covered by the gray background, is evident on the left side of the chair, near the bottom edge (Fig. 12). Labille-Guiard also cropped the edge of the chair, reducing its width by roughly one centimeter with overlying gray paint, and slightly modified the proper right edge of the sitter’s coat, where it rests on the back of the chair. Linear marks at the edges of the painting suggest that the portrait was framed before the paint film was fully dry.

The painting is in excellent condition. The edges of the canvas are supported by a strip lining, which was attached before the painting entered the museum’s collection in 1994. A slightly cupped craquelure is somewhat visually distracting in the darker passages of the portrait. Careful retouching was applied to reduce the prominence of a few of these cracks and address a small amount of paint abrasion below the nose and at the lower left corner. Retouching also covers frame abrasion at the outermost edges. The current varnish, estimated to be a natural resin, has an appropriate level of saturation and does not appear to be discolored.
Notes

1. A similar technique is described in the rendering of Portrait of the Comedian Tournelle, Called Dublin (Fig. 2), in which “pinpoint” touches of paint highlight the eyes.” See Andrew K. Kagan, “A Fogg ‘David’ Reattributed to Madame Adélaïde Labille-Guïard,” Acquisitions (Fogg Art Museum) (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, 1969–1970), 32.

To her son, Victor-Paul Marin (d. ca. 1929), Paris, by 1929;
Inherited by one of his nephews, Jules or Charles Amiot, by 1929–July 2, 1993 [4];

Sold by Jules or Charles Amiot at Tableaux Anciens et du XIXème Siècle, Christie’s Monaco S. A. M., Monte Carlo, December 4, 1993, lot 38, erroneously as Portrait de Jean d’Arcet;

With Didier Aaron, Inc., Paris, as Portrait de Joachim le Breton, by May 13, 1994–November 21, 1994;


Notes

[1] When the portrait first entered the art market with Christie’s in 1993, it was mistakenly identified as a portrait of Jean d’Arcet, the father-in-law of Joachim Lebreton. Christie’s is the first to suggest the painting was in the collection of Jean d’Arcet, but it seems more likely that the painting would have been in the collection of the sitter, Joachim Lebreton (1760–1819), and afterwards passed to his wife, Anne-Julie d’Arcet. Labille-Guïard probably gave this portrait to Lebreton in appreciation for his assistance in rebuilding the artist’s shattered career after the Revolution (see correspondence from Patricia Telles, Postdoctoral student from Coimbra University CEAAPC, Borba, Portugal, to Glynnis Stevenson, NAMA, September 17, 2017, NAMA curatorial file). The painting was not part of the group of art which Lebreton brought to Rio de Janeiro (now in the collection of the Museu Nacional de Belas Artes do Rio) in 1816. Therefore, the painting likely remained in Paris with his wife, Anne-Julie Lebreton.

[2] This and the following provenance is from Tableaux Anciens et du XIXème Siècle (Monte Carlo: Christie’s Monaco S.A.M., December 4, 1993), 38.


[4] The Marin family’s last name is often misspelled as “Morin,” as it is in both the Christie’s and Didier Aaron
catalogues. Further research has shown that “Marin” is the correct spelling. Victor-Paul Marin died ca. 1929 without an heir. He and his wife never drew up a marriage contract. As a result, his two nephews, Jules and Charles Amiot, and godson, M. Renaud, inherited his property. Charles Amiot was a minor at the time; Jules Amiot was of an age to represent himself legally. The bulk of Victor-Paul Marin’s estate was left to his godson, M. Renaud. See “Certificat de propriété,” Supplément au Journal du Notariat (April 25, 1929): 55–56. The Christie’s 1993 catalogue specifies that the painting came to them from a nephew of the son of “Madame Paul Morin [sic]”. This was probably either Jules or Charles Amiot.

Christie’s Monaco had the painting by July 2, 1993, when they began auctioning off items that belonged to the d’Arcet family.

Related Works

Adélaïde Labille-Guérin, Portrait of a Man, ca. 1795, oil on canvas, 35 ¾ x 23 3/4 x 2 1/4 in. (89.54 x 60.33 x 5.72 cm), Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Michael L. Rosenberg Foundation, 2017.18.

Exhibitions

Salon de l’an IV, 1795, Musée du Louvre, Paris, no. 236, as Le C. Lebretón, chef des bureaux des Musées à l’instruction publique.


America Collects Eighteenth-Century French Paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, May 21–August 20, 2017, no. 55, as Portrait of Joachim Le Breton.

References


Spire Blondel, L’Art pendant la Révolution: Beaux-arts, arts décoratifs, par Spire Blondel (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1887), 58, as le citoyen Lebretón.

Henry Jouin, Joachim Lebretón, premier secrétaire perpétuel de l’Académie des beaux-arts (Paris: Bureaux de l’Artiste, 1892), 23n1, as citoyen Lebretón, chef des bureaux des Musées, à l’Instruction publique.


Enrique Mayer, *International Auction Records: January 1 through December 31, 1993; Prints, Drawings, Watercolors, Paintings, Sculpture* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Editions Acatos, 1994), 139, 657, erroneously as *Portrait Jean-d’Arcet (1749–1803), de buste et assis, portant un gilet rayé rouge et une veste marron*.


Patricia Delayti Telles, *O Cavaleiro Brito e o Conde da Barca: dois diplomatas portugueses e a missão francesa de 1816 ao Brasil* (Lisbon: Documenta, 2017), 18, 92, 179, (repro.), as *Retrato de Joachim Le Breton*.