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Depicting Identity or Emotion? Clairon vs. Dumesnil at the Salon of the Louvre

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L'effet pour celui qui considère un ouvrage de peinture est la sensation ou le sentiment que cet ouvrage lui cause ; pour l'artiste, l'effet est ce qui doit résulter des différentes parties de l'art qu'il exerce.¹

These words defining 'effect' and written in 1755 by Claude-Henri Watelet in the *Encyclopédie* serve as a starting point for this article because they seem to correspond closely to the 'sensory experience' as it could be lived in 18th century exhibitions. Investigating the feelings of spectators confronted by artistic expression is to touch upon the notions of feeling, emotion and passion, which, while different, are linked to the arts because they can be expressed, even experienced, therein. From this point of view, the interactions between painting and theatre during the Enlightenment have already been the subject of many recent studies, but in art history terms these have focused largely on historical subjects, a genre that favoured giving expression to the passions of great heroes.²

My thanks go to Melanie Moore for the translation of the final version of my text, and to Alice Boudry for her fruitful remarks.

- 1 Claude-Henri Watelet, "Effet", in Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond D'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie*, Paris, t. V (1755), p. 406. In 1788, Watelet slightly modified the terms of his definition for the *Encyclopédie méthodique*: "L'effet pour celui qui considère un ouvrage de peinture est la sensation ou le sentiment que cet ouvrage lui cause ; pour l'artiste, l'effet est ce qui doit résulter des différentes parties de l'art qu'il exerce." in Claude-Henri Watelet and Pierre-Charles Levesque, *Encyclopédie méthodique*, Paris, 1788-1791, I, p. 239.
- 2 *Le théâtre des passions* (1697-1759). *Cléopâtre, Médée, Iphigénie*, Adeline Collange-Perugi and Juliette Trey (eds.), exh. cat., Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, 2011; Adeline Collange-Perugi and Jean-Noël Laurenti (eds.), *Le Tableau et la Scène. Peinture et mise en scène du répertoire héroïque dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle. Autour des figures des Coypel*, [conference proceedings, Nantes, 2011], s.l., Annales de l'Association pour un Centre de Recherche sur les Arts du Spectacle aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles, no. 5, 2014.

For my part, I intend to reconsider the issue of depicting emotions and feelings by studying a number of portraits of performers which were exhibited at the Salon of the Louvre.³ Whether they were actors, singers or dancers, these professionals, adept at expressivity, made very distinct choices in order to assert their identity and have their particular features immortalised. More than twenty years ago, Maria Ines Aliverti defined this phenomenon as the “memorable identity” of the modern actor.⁴ In the context of this article, it could also be considered a ‘third effect’ of the picture produced by the model’s choices, in addition to the other two defined by Watelet.

Focusing only on portraits that went on display, however, makes it possible to reach a better understanding of which public images these performers wished to convey, unlike many works used by researchers as evidence of celebrity which in fact belonged solely to the private domain. In addition, the study of these works makes it possible to compare the sensory experience of the spectators according to whether they observed the actors in a live theatre performance or whether they discovered the painted representations of these same actors at the Louvre.

To this end, I shall be taking the example of two famous and competing actresses who had their portraits exhibited under similar conditions, though were regarded in quite different ways. I shall first look at the well-known portrait of the actress Hippolyte Clairon as Medea (1759) by Carle Van Loo and then turn to the portrait of Marie-Françoise Dumesnil as Agrippina (1754) by Donat Nonnotte. I would like to show that putting the two paintings back into the context of the Salons enables new ways of interpreting the images the two actresses wished to present to their contemporaries. My analysis will not only shed light on the two painters’ intentions in depicting emotions but also on the diverse and sometimes conflicting feelings experienced by the spectators.

1759: Creating the event

At the very beginning of 1759, Carle Van Loo (1705–1765), a history painter at the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, created a sensational event by inviting several favoured guests to his workshop for a preview revelation of La Clairon as Medea, a painting destined for the Salon of the Louvre that was due to take place more than six months later (fig. 1).⁵ The strategy paid off in terms of notoriety since on the

³ This article is part of an ongoing personal project to study the portraits of 18th-century entertainers.

⁴ Maria-Inès Aliverti, *La naissance de l'acteur moderne : l'acteur et son portrait au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1998, p. 12–16.

⁵ Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon dans le rôle de Médée*, 1759, oil on canvas, 230 × 228 cm, Potsdam, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin-Brandenburg, Neues Palais, inv. GK I 5312. See: *Carle Vanloo, Premier Peintre du roi*, Marie-Catherine Sahut (ed.), exh. cat., Nice-Clermont-Ferrand-Nancy, Paris, 1977, cat. 165.



1 Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon in the role of Medea*, 1759, oil on canvas, 230 × 228 cm, Potsdam, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin-Brandenburg

1st of February the *Journal encyclopédique* published a lengthy piece about the painting, pondering “the most bizarre effect” produced in the spectators who felt themselves to be “more important” after seeing it.⁶ The article intensified the media impact created around the painting by highlighting the fact that many enthusiasts were deprived of the chance to see it as it had been hastily dispatched to Versailles to be presented to the king.⁷ Furthermore, Louis XV immediately indicated his approval of the painting by offering to commission an ornate frame from the sculptor Michel-Ange Slodtz.⁸ In this way, the king was publicly validating both the talent of the painter and that of the model. Lastly, a third incident which would now be described as a publicity bid took place at the Salon itself when the painting was not exhibited at the opening on the

6 Anonymous, “Lettre d’un artiste aux auteurs de ce journal sur le tableau de Mlle Clairon, célèbre actrice du Théâtre François peinte dans son rôle de Médée, par M. Carle Vanloo”, in *Journal encyclopédique*, 1759, I, 1st February, p. 126–134.

7 It was back in the painter’s workshop at the end of February.

8 This was immediately reported in the press by Jean-François Marmontel: “Arts agréables. Peinture”, in *Mercure de France*, February 1759, p. 188–189.

25th of August 1759 and it took several days before it appeared on the wall of the Louvre's Salon Carré. It was clear that Van Loo was seeking to heighten the expectations of the Salon's attendees since he had revealed his planned painting in 1757, that is to say, two years earlier. He did so in the exhibition booklet as "Un dessein, esquisse du portrait de Mademoiselle Clairon, qu'on se propose de peindre de grandeur naturelle, en Médée".⁹ Given all this, it seems that even before encountering the subject and composition of the final painting, which was presented in 1759, the spectator had been put into a state of increasing stimulation, in anticipation of the real sensory experience.

The painting of La Clairon as Medea

As for the subject, it was both simple and complex since the portrait was of a public figure but the painter had opted to depict her in role, thereby transgressing the pictorial genres that were still relatively strictly defined in the eighteenth century. Hippolyte Clairon (1723–1803) is seen at the point when Medea confronts Jason who has discovered their sons dead at his feet, but, under the sorceress' spell, is unable to move. The approximation of a history painting sought, of course, to ennoble the portrait of the actress, made famous not by her birth – which was very humble – nor her heroism, but simply by her acting. This aspect has been studied many times and I shall confine myself to outlining the opinions of two authors whose ideas complement each other's well, since one is the art historian Christophe Henry and the other the expert on literature Pierre Frantz.¹⁰

For his part, Christophe Henry has emphasised the underlying discourses that he attributes to Van Loo, as well as the royal protection that the latter benefited from.¹¹ He explains that the moment depicted by the painter comes from Pierre Corneille's *Medea* (1635) rather than that of the Baron de Longepierre (1694).¹² This claim leads him to

9 Booklet for the Salon of 1757, no. 8. For the drawing: Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon and Lekain as Medea and Jason*, c. 1757, pen, brown ink, wash, and white gouache on cream laid paper, 63.8 × 80.5 cm, Boston, Horvitz Collection. See *Tradition & Transitions. The Eighteenth-Century French Art from the Horvitz Collection*, Alvin L. Clark Jr. (ed.), exh. cat., Paris, Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, 2017, cat. 55.

10 Among recent studies, I will mention: Marie-Christine Sahut, "Carle Vanloo, Portrait de Mademoiselle Clairon en Médée", in Collange-Perugi and Trey, 2011 (note 2), p. 166–173; Barbara Gaehtgens, "Carle Vanloos Bild der Mlle Clairon als Medea", in Uwe Fleckner, Martin Schieder, Michael F. Zimmermann (eds.), *Jenseits der Grenzen – Französische und deutsche Kunst vom Ancien Régime bis zur Gegenwart*, Cologne, 2000, 2 vol., I, p. 226–248.

11 Van Loo was moreover appointed first painter to the King in 1762, an honour that had not been conferred since the death of Charles Coypel in 1752. See: Christophe Henry, "Le portrait de Mademoiselle Clairon en Médée de Carle Vanloo (Salon de 1759): un sacrifice nécessaire ?", in Christophe Henry and Daniel Rabreau (eds.), *Le public et la politique des arts au siècle des Lumières*, Bordeaux, 2011, p. 27–50.

12 Pierre Corneille, *Medea*, act V, scene VI. I will not decide the question, but I will point out that in an article commenting on La Clairon's acting in *Medea* published in 1754, the anonymous author made

interpret the sacrifice of Medea's children as a symbol of the necessary cruelty a king must show when betrayed¹³ and as having its parallel in the sacrifices of their works made by certain artists when too savagely attacked by the critics. Appalled by comments made about him at some of the Salons of the Louvre, Carle Van Loo is believed to have destroyed some of his own works on various occasions throughout his career.¹⁴ Furthermore, for Henry, the presentation of La Clairon's portrait in the painter's workshop well before the Salon opened was a cunning ploy allowing Van Loo to adapt his painting according to comments made in private before having to handle public criticism.

Nevertheless, contemporary reactions to the painting varied. The Abbé de La Porte was a passionate champion of the work and stressed the effect it had on Salon spectators reliving feelings experienced in the theatre:

La tête de Médée est le portrait, non pas de la personne seulement de Mademoiselle Clairon, mais de Mademoiselle Clairon Actrice, excitant encore sur la toile, une partie des passions qu'elle agite si fortement sur la scène. [...] Hazardons des dictionnaires particulières, pour mieux expliquer des sentimens généraux : en conséquence, distinguons dans ce Tableau, l'effet pathétique*¹⁵ d'avec l'effet pittoresque. Le premier nous a paru admirable, en ce que l'on éprouve à la vue de cette peinture, presque toute la terreur & l'indignation qu'inspireroit la réalité de l'action qu'elle représente. Médée, sur son char, éclairée de son funeste flambeau, toute formidable, toute barbare que la rendent les cruelles passions qui se peignent sur son visage, trouve encore quelque intérêt favorable dans le fonds de nos cœurs. On lit, on devine, dans le jeu terrible de ses traits, le dévorant alliage du crime & des remords. On seroit presque entraîné, jusqu'à partager avec elle la fureur & le mépris qu'elle marque si sensiblement au perfide Jason."¹⁶

This is double praise from the Abbé de La Porte, since not only is the actress expressing the emotions she conveyed to the audience, but the painter has also been able to make them evident in his depiction, once again arousing emotion in the spectator. As we know, the opinion of Denis Diderot was radically different, and the philosopher

explicit reference to Longepierre as the writer of the play. See: "Spectacles", *Mercure de France*, December 1754, p. 172-185 (p. 173).

13 I think specifically of the assassination attempt by Damiens on 5 January 1757.

14 Henry, 2011 (note 11), p. 40.

15 The author specifies in a footnote : "*Nous entendons par l'effet pathétique, l'impression que doit faire un Tableau sur notre âme, relativement à la représentation du sujet."

16 [Abbé de La Porte], "Lettre V. Le Salon des tableaux, Suite des Observations d'une Société d'Amateurs", in *L'Observateur littéraire*, année 1759, t. IV, p. 96-115 (p. 96-98).

openly declared that he felt nothing on seeing the painting. Even if his remarks were only disseminated in a limited way during the eighteenth century, they are evidence of a varied reception:

Enfin nous l'avons vu ce tableau fameux de *Jason et Médée*, par Carle Van Loo. Ô mon ami, la mauvaise chose ! C'est une décoration théâtrale avec toute sa fausseté ; un faste de couleur qu'on ne peut supporter ; un Jason d'une bêtise inconcevable. L'imbécile tire son épée contre une magicienne qui s'envole dans les airs, qui est hors de sa portée, et qui laisse à ses pieds ses enfants égorgés. C'est bien cela ! Il fallait lever au ciel des bras désespérés, avoir la tête renversée en arrière ; les cheveux hérissés ! une bouche ouverte qui poussât de longs cris, des yeux égarés... Et puis, une petite Médée, courte, raide, en-goncée, surchargée d'étoffes ; une Médée de coulisses ; pas une goutte de sang qui tombe de la pointe de son poignard et qui coule sur ses bras ; point de désordre, point de terreur. On regarde, on est ébloui et on reste froid.¹⁷

Following Maria Ines Aliverti, Pierre Frantz, for his part, has conclusively shown that the philosopher was unmoved because the composition lacks any illusionary effect.¹⁸ The inherent limitations of the portrait – the need for likeness – prevented the depiction of Medea's fury at its height and the imparting of a universal value. At that time, however, the rules of painting officially prevented the depiction of a person with an open mouth as Diderot appears to wish. A few years later, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing would take on the task of stressing this fundamental aesthetic difference between poetry and painting in response to Johann Joachim Winckelmann's theories.¹⁹ I am not going to dwell further on these analyses which are as varied as they are enriching, because I would like to put forward other arguments to explain the choices made by the painter and La Clairon in this portrait. This requires taking into account the artistic Salons preceding that of 1759, specifically the Salon of 1755.²⁰

17 Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1759*.

18 Aliverti, 1998 (note 4), p. 80–92; Pierre Frantz, “De la théorie du théâtre à la peinture. Réflexions en marge d'un tableau de Van Loo, Mademoiselle Clairon en Médée”, in Pierre Frantz and Élisabeth Lavezzi (eds.), *Les Salons de Diderot: théorie et écriture*, Paris, 2008, p. 31–42.

19 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, 1766, English translation by E. Frothingham, Boston, 1898.

20 On this, I share the view of B. Jobert, expressed as follows: “Il est naturel, comme le fait Diderot, d'analyser le Salon de telle année en tant que tel, mais aussi par rapport à celui, voire à ceux qui l'ont précédé. La carrière d'un artiste se construit ainsi de plus en plus au travers du Salon, où il exposera ses productions les plus récentes, cherchant à attirer l'attention par le format.” Barthélemy Jobert, “Diderot dans son cadre: le Salon au XVIII^e siècle”, in Frantz and Lavezzi (note 18), p. 15–27.

The painting of La Dumesnil as Agrippina

That year, the audience at the Louvre exhibition was able to see a portrait that is little known today: *Mlle Dumesnil as Agrippina* by Donat Nonnotte (fig. 2).²¹ Unlike Van Loo's painting, it went unremarked by the commentators of the day, bar one, which speaks volumes about its botched reception: "Le portrait de Mademoiselle Dumesnil ne fait pas d'honneur à Monsieur Nonnotte. J'ai vu jadis sa gloire, elle me paraît bien déperie."²²



2 Donat Nonnotte, *Mlle Dumesnil en Agrippine*, Paris, musée de la Comédie Française

Originally from Besançon, the painter Donat Nonnotte (1708–1785) trained in Paris with François Le Moyne and turned to portraits after his master's death in 1737.²³ It was as a representative of this minor genre that he was accepted into the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in 1741, and it is by no means irrelevant to point out that one of his first well-known portraits was of Marie Antier (1687–1747), a singer and celebrated interpreter of Lully.²⁴ As of 1751, Nonnotte spent the greater part of his time in Lyon where he gave lectures at the Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts with the aim of becoming head of the art school that had

21 Donat Nonnotte, *Mlle Dumesnil as Agrippina* [*Racine's Britannicus*], 1754, oil on canvas, 136 × 104 cm, Paris, Comédie-Française Museum, inv. I 0190.

22 Anonymous, *Lettre d'un particulier à un de ses parents peintre en province sur le Sallon. 19 7bre* [September] 1755, [s.l.], [1755], p. 638.

23 On Nonnotte, see : Sylvie Martin de Vesvrottes, "Les portraits de femmes dans la carrière de Donat Nonnotte", in *Bulletin des musées et monuments lyonnais*, 3-4, 1992, p. 26-49. Unfortunately the portrait of La Dumesnil is not mentioned in the article.

24 *Portrait présumé de Mademoiselle Antier*, around 1735, oil on canvas, 86 × 68.5 cm, private collection, reproduced in Martin, 1992 (note 23), p. 28.

just been set up there.²⁵ He retained regular links with the capital city, however, and it was in this context that he produced the portrait of La Dumesnil. We know nothing about the terms of the commission, only that the painting belonged to “Mr. Dugazon’s widow” who offered it to the Comédie-Française in 1809.²⁶ It shows the actress from the front and from the knees up, dressed in a magnificent courtly gown.²⁷ She is smiling faintly and solemnly raising her left arm in greeting, which is more in keeping with the representations favoured by painters from the end of the reign of Louis XIV or the Regency.²⁸ Be that as it may, the simple layout of the work, the unmoving grandeur of the model’s stance and her pronounced lack of expression are point for point in keeping with the portrait theory Nonnotte championed in his lectures.²⁹

A double rivalry exposed at the Salon

It is important to retain these points when recalling that Hippolyte Clairon rapidly became Marie-Françoise Dumesnil’s (1713–1802) main rival after joining the Comédie-Française in 1743 and having started out as the latter’s understudy.³⁰ The critics of the day largely stressed that, while equally talented, the actresses’ interpretations were fundamentally different in terms of their expression.³¹ In 1761, a newspaper editor comparing their respective roles in the Corneille tragedy, *Héraclius*, wrote the following:

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- 25 Anne Perrin-Khelissa, “Le *Traité de peinture* de Donat Nonnotte, ancien élève de François Le Moyne. Discours prononcés à l’Académie de Lyon entre 1754 et 1779”, in *Mémoires de l’Académie des sciences, belles-lettres et arts de Lyon*, 4th series, vol. 10, 2011, p. 221–371.
- 26 It could possibly be Louise-Rosalie Lefebvre, known as Madame Dugazon, whose husband Jean-Henri Gourgaud, known as Dugazon, died on October 10 1809.
- 27 Olivia Voisin, “Le portrait de comédien ou la fabrique d’une aura”, in *La Comédie-Française s’expose au Petit Palais*, Agathe Sanjuan (ed.), exh. cat., Paris, Musée du Petit-Palais, Paris, 2011, p. 93–97, and cat. 100, repr. p. 16.
- 28 On the subject, see: Mickaël Bouffard-Veilleux, “Attitudes de théâtre, civilité et dispositif narratif dans la peinture française entre 1700 et 1760”, in Collange-Perugi and Laurenti, 2014 (note 2), p. 11–39.
- 29 Donat Nonnotte, *Discours sur les caractères auxquels on peut reconnaître les excellents peintres et les vrais connaisseurs* (Ms. 193–70), delivered on 19th November 1761 in Lyon: “On reconnaîtra les meilleurs peintres de portraits par la vérité qu’ils auront répandue sur tous les objets, vérité dans la couleur et dans le dessein, expression naïve et juste qui donne la vie à celui ou à celle qu’ils auront représenté, qui en développent le caractère et l’humeur, qui en désignent l’âge et le tempérament. On les reconnaîtra dans la vérité, la variété et le caractère bien exprimé des étoffes, dans les attitudes aisées, gracieuses, nobles et convenables aux différents sexes et aux différentes conditions. Enfin, ils seront reconnus aux grâces du pinceau ménagées et liées intimement avec la plus grande et la plus scrupuleuse exactitude dans le dessein. Ce dernier article est essentiel au portrait, il est distinctif et absolument nécessaire à ce genre, il est aussi des plus difficiles à observer.” in Perrin-Khelissa, 2011 (note 25), p. 303.
- 30 La Dumesnil joined the Comédie-Française in 1737.
- 31 See: Sabine Chaouche, “Le jeu du comédien au XVIII^e siècle : faire sentir ou faire sensation ?”, in *The French-mag. Performance and Drama*, 10 May 2013. URL: https://www.thefrenchmag.com/Le-jeu-du-comedien-au-XVIIIe-siecle-faire-sentir-ou-faire-sensation-Par-Sabine-Chaouche_a716.html (accessed: 06.03.2024)

Le Spectateur équitable ne juge point sur des comparaisons les talens qui par des routes différentes tendent au même objet, sçavoir de toucher & d'émouvoir. Il couronne de ses suffrages toutes les fois qu'on atteint à ce but glorieux.³²

Specifically, the differences between the two performers rested on an interpretation based on naturalness in Dumesnil's case and on painstakingly honed acting in La Clairon's. From this, it is clear that the lack of expressiveness in Nonnotte's portraits was a deciding factor in his choice to depict Marie-Françoise Dumesnil. Regarded as a natural actress who allowed the flow of emotion to guide her on stage, it seems logical that her depiction in a studio portrait should lack any aspect of theatricality.³³ The actress also chose to emphasise the opulence of the dress, which in itself symbolises her fame.

By contrast, it is equally certain that Van Loo's composition was conceived as a radically different response to Nonnotte's, in order to portray both the contrast between the two actresses and the one that lay between a mere portrait painter and himself. For the

32 "Le Mercredi 25 Novembre on a remis Heraclius, Tragédie. Mlle Clairon y a reparu dans le Rôle de Pulcherie. Avec elle a reparu sur notre Scène le grand Corneille dans toute sa gloire, puisqu'il étoit secondé de son plus bel organe. On ne doute pas des applaudissemens qu'occasionne toujours la seule entrée de cette grande Actrice sur le Théâtre, lorsque sa santé l'a contrainte à s'en absenter pendant quelque temps. Nous ne tenterons pas de donner une idée précise de la perfection avec laquelle cet admirable Rôle a été rendu. En consultant l'impression que Mlle Clairon y fait sur le Public, on pourroit dire que le Spectateur y confond souvent dans son admiration le sublime du génie de l'Auteur avec le sublime du talent de l'Actrice. Lorsque Mlle Dumesnil a paru dans le Rôle de Léontine, on ne sauroit dire avec quel éclat le Public a marqué sa satisfaction, de voir réunir des forces si puissantes en faveur de la Tragédie d'Heraclius, c'est-à-dire du plus grand & du plus heureux effort de l'esprit humain. Qu'il seroit à désirer pour la gloire de notre Théâtre, & pour ses intérêts, que ce vœu général & si clairement énoncé, engageât quelquefois à donner la même satisfaction lorsqu'on met des Tragédies dans lesquelles se rencontrent deux Rôles de femmes à-peu-près d'une égale importance au grand succès. Mlle Dumesnil reçoit les applaudissemens les plus flatteurs & les mérite tous dans les grands traits dont son Rôle est rempli. Le Spectateur équitable ne juge point sur des comparaisons les talens qui par des routes différentes tendent au même objet, sçavoir de toucher & d'émouvoir. Il couronne de ses suffrages toutes les fois qu'on atteint à ce but glorieux ; heureux le genre de talent qui y conduit plus souvent & avec le plus de certitude." Anonymous, "Comédie françoise", in *Mercure de France*, décembre 1761, p. 189-191 (191).

33 The press again emphasised the simplicity of the actress's acting at the time of the exhibition of the painting of La Clairon as Medea: "Déposant l'emphase dramatique, éteignant même le fard inséparable de la Poesie, cette Actrice a rendu les grandes idées de Corneille, avec cette simplicité, cette vérité forte & mâle, avec laquelle ces mêmes idées étoient venues dans l'esprit de ce Poète. On peint au cœur & à l'esprit, par le récit & par le geste, comme on peint au yeux par le dessein & par les couleurs : ainsi l'on peut comparer la façon dont Mademoiselle Dumesnil se sert pour rendre certains rôles, à ce qu'on appelle manière dans les Peintres. Elle a donc senti, avec la plus saine portion du Public, que la grande & la seule manière étoit de rendre les objets tels qu'ils sont, tels que l'on croiroit les voir, & non pas comme certains goûts particuliers les veulent faire voir aux autres." Anonymous, "Lettre à M. l'abbé de la Porte", in *L'Observateur littéraire*, 1759, vol. IV, p. 209-216 (p. 214-215).



3 Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon dans le rôle de Médée*, Paris, musée de la Comédie Française

academicians, the Salon had become the place in which to express themselves in relation not only to the critics and the public but also to their peers. As we shall see, this explains why the differences between the two paintings relate to numerous points which correspond to each other despite having been created four years apart. Indeed, since the Salons of the Louvre had become biennial rather than annual as of 1751, the sketch that Van Loo submitted in 1757 and that heralded the great painting of 1759 was a direct response to the portrait exhibited by Nonnotte in 1755. It can also be argued that this answer is as much Van Loo's to Nonnotte as La Clairon's to La Dumesnil.

The painting was in fact commissioned by Princess Ekaterina Dmitrievna Golitsyna, to be given to the actress as a token of her admiration. Van Loo therefore had to organise

sittings with La Clairon, who was fully involved in the work's gradual development. In the case of Van Loo, there was the choice first of all to produce an action portrait that would more closely resemble a history painting and recall the difference in the status of the two artists within the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture: one belonging to a minor genre the other to the *grand genre*. Then there was the depiction of La Clairon herself, based not only on the imperative criterion of resemblance but also on emphasising a measured, moderate expressiveness. Diderot might well regret the lack of a Jason with “howls and wild eyes” because he liked that sort of visual effect in paintings, but the singularity of these extreme passions did not correspond to what La Clairon wished to express in her portrait destined for the public domain. The period of the 1750s is now identified as an evolutionary phase in acting, to which La Clairon contributed.³⁴ She was one of the first actors to give more room to contained emotions rather than exaggerated passions in order to demonstrate her command of her skills. It was this that the Abbé de La Porte referred to when mentioning the subtle “blend of crime and remorse” to be seen in her features.³⁵ This stance required that Van Loo did several life studies of her head in order to ensure a combination of resemblance to the model and a truthful depiction of the role. These efforts can still be seen today in the two studies held at the Comédie-Française Museum (fig. 3 and fig. 4).³⁶

At the level of composition, there is also the dynamic character of Medea's gestures compared to Dumesnil's hieratic posture, one arm simply raised in welcome. Of course, La Clairon's posture is also fixed, but her loosened hair and the ample drapery of her costume give the impression of movement. To my mind, this latter feature, of which Diderot was fiercely critical, should be seen in the light of La Clairon's efforts to have her costumes correspond with her character's context, unlike the courtly gowns worn by actresses on stage according to a tradition begun by Adrienne Lecouvreur during the Regency.³⁷ The upright stance of the sorceress, which emphasises the lack of a hoop – this lack is even more obvious in the reduced version of the painting held in Potsdam (fig. 5)³⁸ – seems to be

34 For this development, see: Laurence Marie, *Inventer l'acteur. Émotions et spectacle dans l'Europe des Lumières*, Paris, 2018, p. 167–185.

35 See note 16.

36 Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon dans le rôle de Médée*, 1757–59, oil on canvas on board, round frame 38 x 37 cm, Paris, Comédie-Française Museum, inv. I 0054; Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon dans le rôle de Médée*, 1757–59, black stone with white highlights on beige paper, 43.5 x 36.8 cm, Paris, Comédie-Française Museum, Res Cad DES 1 CLAI 1.

37 Mark Ledbury & Olivia Voisin, “De l'étoffe au costume : rêves et réalités au XVIII^e siècle”, in Agathe Sanjuan (ed.), *L'Art du costume à la Comédie-Française*, Moulins, 2011, p. 10–25.

38 Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon dans le rôle de Médée*, 1760, oil on canvas, 79 x 59 cm, Potsdam, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin-Brandenburg, Neues Palais. This reduction was painted especially in order to determine the engraving produced over the following years: Laurent Cars and Jacques-Firmin Beauvarlet after Carle Van Loo, *Hippolyte de la Tude Clairon. Ve acte de Médée. Gravure donnée par le Roy à Mlle Clairon*, 1764, etching and engraving, approx. 75 x 50 cm.



4 Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon dans le rôle de Médée*, Paris, musée de la Comédie Française

a clear response to the sumptuous and heavy gown worn by La Dumesnil. On this subject, it is worth recalling the anecdote related by the Baron de Frénilly about changes to the costume around 1750:

On sait l'histoire de Mlle du Mesnil [Dumesnil] qui jouait Camille et qui, en fuyant le poignard d'Horace, s'embarrassa dans son panier et tomba sur la scène ; Horace rengaina son poignard, mit ses gants, la releva poliment et la tua dans la coulisse. Pour Mlle du Mesnil, je la vis faisant Clytemnestre, en vertugadin de deux aunes et souliers à chappins.³⁹

Despite a degree of awkwardness in the choice of pose, La Clairon is thus underscoring that, while they are equally talented, she develops her interpretations from new, future-facing starting points, unlike her rival whose costume shows her looking to the past. Each in its own way, the portraits epitomise the choices of theatrical aesthetics made by the two actresses. As La Dumesnil's acting was based on impulsiveness and instinct, it was impossible for her to be portrayed in action outside the stage. She therefore chose to pose impassively in a theatrical costume which, in contrast to her very 'modern' acting, turned her back to the past because it was a court gown with no connection to the temporality of the role. On the other hand, La Clairon, unable to evoke the same surprising sensations that La Dumesnil could, preferred to emphasise her ability to control her expressions by being represented in the middle of a dramatic action. She also emphasised her willingness to adapt the costume to the role, one of the forward-looking artistic procedures that enabled her to better distinguish herself from her rival.



5 Carle Van Loo, *Mlle Clairon in the role of Medea*, 1760, oil on canvas, 79 × 59 cm, Potsdam, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Berlin-Brandenburg

39 Baron de Frénilly, *Mémoires du baron de Frénilly (1768–1848) : souvenirs d'un ultra-royaliste*, Paris, 1908, p. 10.

Depicting identity or emotion?

From these comments, it is clear that Van Loo did all he could to stress the contrast between the two actresses, as well as his own superiority as a history painter and leader of the French School. To achieve this, he took the risk of combining the trivial genre of the portrait with history painting, and, more specifically, with paintings of tragedy based on emotions. This made it possible to highlight La Clairon's talents and set them against La Dumesnil's naturalistic style, as well as to emphasise the painter's ingenuity. This choice led him to aesthetic compromises which explain the mixed reactions to the painting. While some spectators relived the emotions La Clairon had conveyed as Medea, Diderot experienced the opposite. Nevertheless, I think that all of the criticisms of the work could be responded to by explaining the painter's desire to underline the model's theatrical innovations as well as the emotions that La Clairon wished to convey to the public. In this respect, the painting, which is above all an artistic creation, may also be regarded as a testament to La Clairon's contribution to the development of the art of acting in the eighteenth century. The same cannot be said of Nonnotte's work, who, in his portrait of La Dumesnil, focused on resemblance, while neglecting to evoke what made the actress unique. This was expressed by Jean-Louis Soulavie in 1785:

L'Art du Portrait ne consiste pas seulement à rendre la figure trait pour trait d'une personne [...]. Le sublime de cette partie de l'Art consiste à choisir dans une personne ce qu'il y a, ou d'agréable ou de louable dans sa physionomie, & à l'exprimer dans sa figure. Dans les portraits de Gens de Lettres & dans ceux de l'homme public, il vaut mieux rechercher dans la physionomie, non les traits qui annoncent des vertus privées, mais les traits qui caractérisent la plus louable de leur qualité.⁴⁰

40 Jean-Louis Soulavie, *Réflexions impartiales sur les progrès de l'art en France, et sur les tableaux exposés au Louvre, par ordre du roi, en 1785*, Paris and London, 1785, p. 25.