

PORTRAIT OF A YOUTH: A STUDY BY GIRODET REDISCOVERED

BY

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IN 1931, the Smith College Museum of Art acquired a *Portrait of a Youth* from a London dealer (fig. 1)¹. Formerly the property of a Welsh collector, R.W. Pettigrew, who believed it a work by Velázquez, the painting arrived at Smith with a new attribution to Théodore Géricault. That attribution, more plausible from the standpoint of date, was discarded eventually on stylistic grounds. Since 1953 the picture has been exhibited as an anonymous work of the French School².

The quality of the painting is undeniable. The museum's director at the time of the acquisition, Alfred Vance Churchill, compared it with a piece of Gothic sculpture. "*The rendering of the clothing is superb*", he wrote. "*This is no mere study of a shirt, but a boy's chest and shoulders seen beneath a white textile*"³. The image is equally remarkable for the intense expression in the face, the masterful rendering of the tousled locks, and the subdued harmony of the muted colors. There are few painters of the Neoclassical era who could have produced an image of this rank. Now it seems

possible to put a name to the one who did: Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson (1767-1824).

Girodet, one of the most talented students of Jacques-Louis David, produced masterful portraits with a pre-Romantic verve. At the Salon of 1810, for instance, he displayed a Byronic image of the era's literary lion, Chateaubriand, under the title of *A man meditating on the ruins of Rome* (fig. 2). Napoleon I, taking in the disheveled hair and brooding expression that Girodet imparted to his sitter, said: "*He looks like a conspirator who came down the chimney*"⁴.

The youth in the Smith painting displays a similar intensity. His eyes are fixed on some object hidden from the viewer's gaze. His cheeks still retain some of the softness of youth, but his exposed throat, liquid eyes, and very slightly parted lips give his face a sultry expression and a slight erotic charge. The painting is lit from an invisible light source to the left front of the sitter, throwing gray shadows onto his neck and the right side of the face. The pink in the lips and cheek is the only touch of color, setting off the grayish

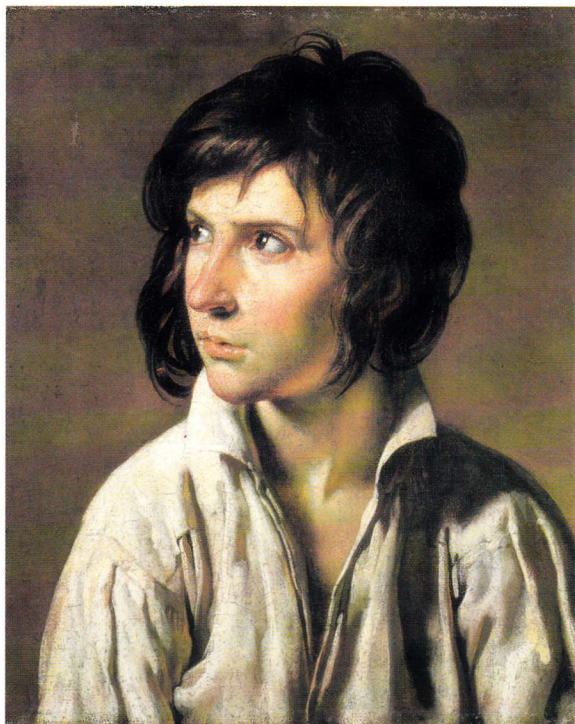


FIG. 1. — Here attributed to GIRODET. *Portrait of a Youth*, oil on canvas mounted on board, 45.2 × 36.2 cm. Northampton, Smith College Museum of Art, Drayton Hillyer Fund. Photo museum.

flesh tones and the sober palette of browns and white with a restraint echoing that seen in Davidian portraiture of the 1790s. The simple shirt worn by the sitter is of little assistance in dating the work more precisely, but the youth's hair, hanging down in front of the ears while apparently short in back, suggests a coiffure that became popular among men and women during the Directory (1795-1799), the period immediately following the French Revolution. According to George Duval, admittedly writing some years later, the style was born at a private dance hall called the "bal des Victimes", where admission was restricted to individuals who had lost a relative to the guillotine. In a macabre touch, some of the attendees cropped their hair close to the neck, imitating the trim the executioner gave his prey to expose their necks to the blade. Originally

referred to as the "coiffure à la victime", the style became known less morbidly as the "coiffure à la Titus" (named for the eponymous Roman emperor)⁵.

Is this indeed a work by Girodet datable to the 1790s? A suggestive bit of documentation exists. In early March 1809, a sale was held in Paris to disperse a large private collection, formerly the property of an *amateur* named B. Guyot. Guyot, a former canon and prevost of the Abbey of Tours, who died on August 28, 1808, sacrificed his time and fortune to the fine arts. Eager to share his knowledge, he gave public lectures on painting, and "to make his lectures more useful, he was on the point of having a gallery built where his precious collection would have been united... when a premature death carried him off from his good friends; it is thus that he called his good paintings"⁶.

Guyot collected primarily Italian paintings with religious themes, although he also owned a selection of works by Northern masters. The catalogue of his collection is remarkable for its array of glittering names: two Albanis, three Jacopo Bassanos, and a Ferdinand Bol, two paintings each by Ludovico and Annibale Carracci, two Caravaggios, a Castiglione, and two Correggios, two pendants by Claude Lorrain, a Domenichino, and a Giorgione, a Goltzius, a Guercino, and so on through the alphabet. Unfortunately, Guyot's passion for Old Masters seems to have outweighed his ability to distinguish originals from copies, as many of these masterpieces sold for only 20 or 30 francs.

Guyot did own a very small handful of modern works: a marble bust by Jean-Antoine Houdon of the great Revolutionary orator Mirabeau, and, interestingly enough, two paintings by, and a copy after, Girodet. The latter three items comprised lots 87, 88, and 89 of the catalogue. Lot 87 was *The Sleep of Endymion*, measuring 54 × 70.2 cm. and matching, it seems, from the careful description in the catalogue, Girodet's famous 1791 version of the subject. Presumably Guyot's *Endymion* was a reduction of the original (now in the Louvre) which measures 197 × 260 cm. The collector must have admired the painting, because lot 89 of the

catalogue was another *Sleep of Endymion*, this one attributed to the School of Girodet rather than the artist himself. Described as a "well-made copy of the *Endymion* described above", it had the same dimensions, 54 × 70.2 cm.

While these works are worthy of investigation in their own right, the Girodet painting listed as lot 88 is of primary interest here. Measuring 67.5 × 41.6 cm., it was described in the catalogue as "a life-size, half-length study of a young man, his arms crossed and his head turned in three-quarters view. This piece painted in his [Girodet's] youth is worthy both of its creator and the school from which he comes"⁷.

Do we have here an early reference to the *Portrait of a Youth* now owned by the Smith Museum of Art? While the Smith painting is bust-length rather than half-length, measuring only 45.2 × 36.2 cm., it was in fact cut down on all sides at some undetermined date and the canvas mounted on a linen-backed board⁸. In comparing the painting with the half-length study Guyot owned, the position of the sitter's shoulders is suggestive. The youth's arms, or at least his hands, must have been crossed for his upper arms to be pulled forward as they are in the painting. The head, in three-quarters view, also matches the description of the work sold at the Guyot sale, and the Smith painting, like Guyot's, could be referred to as a work of Girodet's youth. The sober palette, the details of the coiffure as described above, the slight "brushiness" of the facture: all suggest a date in the latter half of the 1790s. While Girodet, born in 1767, was no longer precisely a youth in the '90s, he did not win the Prix de Rome until 1789, and was considered as much a student of David as an artistic presence in his own right at least until his return from Italy in 1795. Most likely this work was painted not long thereafter, sometime in the second half of the decade. The prevailing brown, cream, and white color scheme, set off by gray shadows, is comparable with that seen in Girodet's *Psyche Asleep*, painted in 1798 or 1799⁹. The *Portrait of a Youth* is also particularly close to the handsome *Portrait d'homme* by Girodet at the Musée Bonnat in



FIG. 2. — GIRODET. *François-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand* (1768-1848), c. 1807-1808, oil on canvas, 130 × 96 cm. Saint-Malo, musée. Photo museum.

Bayonne¹⁰. The latter canvas is undated, but the sitter's pouting lips and sultry gaze, and the cut of his curling brown locks, make him a near cousin of the youth at Smith.

It seems probable that the Smith painting and Guyot's study are one and the same, but unfortunately there is no other written documentation connecting the two. Guyot's study sold at the 1809 sale for 101 francs to a buyer named Pierre and afterwards disappeared from sight¹¹. There is, however, a telling piece of visual evidence, dating from some fifteen years later, that further links the Smith painting with Girodet's œuvre.

At the Salon of 1824, the artist exhibited portraits of two French generals who, years before, had led counter-revolutionary forces in the region of western France known as the Vendée. The



FIG. 3. — GIRODET. *Jacques Cathelineau* (1759-1793), *généralissime vendéen*, salon of 1824, oil on canvas, 220 × 150 cm. Cholet, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, dépôt du Musée national du Château de Versailles. Photo R.M.N. — Gérard Blot.

portraits were the result of a State commission dating from 1816, designed to honor Vendéen military figures who had remained loyal to the Bourbon monarchy during the Revolution. Girodet, assigned to paint the portraits of Jacques Cathelineau (fig. 3) and Charles-Melchior-Artus, marquis de Bonchamps, put off the project year after year, finally delivering the paintings only two months before his death¹².

The fact that both portraits were posthumous could have accounted for at least part of the delay. That of Bonchamps may have been based on a miniature, but it seems that Girodet did not have access to any images of Cathelineau, who died in 1793 at the age of 34 from a wound received at the siege of Nantes¹³. Indeed, Girodet's portrait of Cathelineau appears to have been pure invention.

According to a reliable eye witness, the general had black hair, frizzy and rather sparse¹⁴. That description accords with a little-known drawing of Cathelineau (apparently unavailable to Girodet) which shows a sober, balding man who looks a little older than his years¹⁵.

In contrast, Girodet depicted Cathelineau as a youthful man with flowing blond locks, suggesting that he did not have even a verbal description from which to work. The painter and art critic Charles-Paul Landon said that Girodet used Cathelineau's son Jacques-Joseph (1787-1832) as his model because the latter's features resembled those of the general, but this contention must be set against Delécluze's report that the artist invented the portrait of Cathelineau¹⁶. Surely if the artist had been in contact with the general's son, he would have known that Cathelineau's hair color was black and not blond¹⁷.

The features of the general would have presented a particular challenge to Girodet, who normally based his paintings on detailed study of the live model¹⁸. The artist looked back instead to a model from his own œuvre: the face of Cathelineau, surprisingly enough, is nearly identical to that of the *Youth* at Smith.

The eyebrows, the shape of the lips, and the position of the eyes are the same, as is the lighting that casts a shadow on the left side of the face (figs. 1 & 4). The brown shadow surrounding and below the left nostril is painted identically in the two images, and in both a narrow gray band marks the transition between the shaded area under the nose and the flesh tones of the skin (figs. 5 & 6). The fine white highlight along the lower edge of the *Youth*'s left eye is shifted very slightly to the left in the Cathelineau, but the dark shadow in the corner of, and along the top edge, of the *Youth*'s left eye is replicated exactly in the later canvas (figs. 7 & 8).

Another shadow, tinted gray, that ascends diagonally from the left side of the left eye to the hairline in the *Cathelineau*, seems too prominent to derive naturally from the lighting of that picture. Rather it may have been suggested by the shadow that occupies the same position in the



FIG. 4. – GIRODET. *Jacques Cathelineau* (detail). Photo J.F. Edange.

Youth, darkened by the loose strands of hair that fall negligently on the face. In this context, it is curious to note the faint, dark brown stripe ascending diagonally from the eye toward the brow in the middle of the gray shadow in the *Cathelineau* (see fig. 8). Possibly the artist duplicated the falling lock of hair seen in the *Youth*, but later changed his mind and painted over it¹⁹.

On the right side of the face, Cathelineau's blond hair is darkened immediately to the right of the right eye, imitating the way in which the *Youth*'s dark locks set off the edge of his face in the same place. The slight crease in the right shirt collar appears in both works, as do the narrow bands of shadow (gray, fawn, and reddish brown) that shape the area where the shirt collar meets the throat.



FIG. 5. – GIRODET. *Portrait of a Youth* (detail). Photo museum.

The artist made only a few minor changes in adapting the study to the needs of the moment. The features of the *Youth*, especially the nose, were slightly smoothed out and idealized, while the addition of faint sideburns and the shadow of a mustache turned the face into that of a man rather than a teenage boy. The hair was changed from



FIG. 6. – GIRODET. *Jacques Cathelineau* (detail). Photo J.F. Edange.

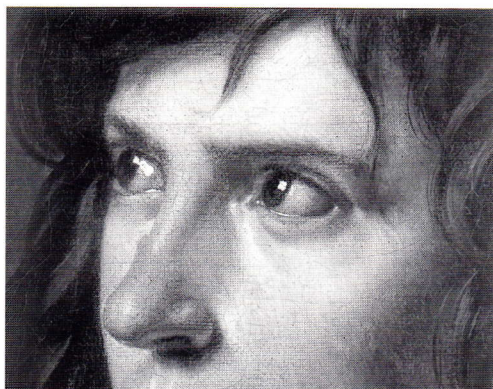


FIG. 7. — GIRODET. *Portrait of a Youth* (detail). Photo museum.



FIG. 8. — GIRODET. *Jacques Cathelineau* (detail). Photo J.F. Edange.

dark brown to blond, possibly so that the general's wind-blown locks would stand out more dramatically against the stormy sky. The most significant differences between the two works lie in the paint handling and color tonalities of the two faces, and reflect the change in Girodet's style between the 1790s and the 1820s. The face of the *Youth* still reveals traces of the artist's brush (although it is painted less thickly than the Bayonne *Portrait d'homme* dating from around the same period). There are a few areas of impasto, such as a brushstroke of white paint on the left brow, another marking the curve at the top of the chin, and the highlights on the nose and the lip. The prevailing colors in the skin are pink, white, and gray. In examining the painting close up, in many places it is possible to differentiate the individual brushstrokes (e.g., in the gray shadows to the left of the lip).

The paint in the face of the *Cathelineau* is blended more evenly and completely, with almost no impasto, and the pink and gray tonalities of the *Youth* yield to the stronger colors that Girodet used as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century (compare the skin tones in his 1810 *Revolt at Cairo*). The pink of the *Youth's* flesh tones becomes redder here, and some of the gray shadows (around the lips, for instance) are replaced with

brown and yellow. Both the smooth blending of the paint on the face and the ruddier tones of the skin can be observed in other late portraits by the artist, such as the *François Ribes* of 1818 (Montargis, musée Girodet)²⁰.

In tune with the glossier finish, some hairs in the eyebrows are picked out and painted individually in the *Cathelineau*, just as they are in the *Ribes*. In contrast, the eyebrows of the *Youth* are painted more as a single unit, as in the early *Portrait d'homme* in Bayonne and the 1795 *Self-portrait* at Versailles.

It is easy to understand why Girodet, in poor health and tackling a long-overdue commission, would have reused an old study rather than starting from scratch. It is less clear how he obtained access to the work. Assuming the study was that which appeared in the Guyot sale in 1809, perhaps the buyer, Pierre, was bidding on Girodet's behalf, or Girodet somehow re-acquired the work later. Alternately, he might have borrowed it temporarily to use as a model for the *Cathelineau* portrait, which would explain why it did not appear in the studio sale after his death²¹.

Whatever its precise peregrinations, it does seem highly likely that Girodet's model for the *Cathelineau* portrait was the *Portrait of a Youth* now at Smith. An impelling work in its own right,

it gains additional importance from its role in the genesis of one of the artist's last paintings and as one of the relatively few works by Girodet on view at public collections in North America. The Smith College Museum of Art already owns a female portrait by Girodet, monogrammed and dated

1804, and a portrait drawing of Girodet made by his student, Fanny Robert. With the addition of this newly identified study, Northampton, Massachusetts, becomes a significant site at which to study the work of Girodet in the United States.

NOTES

I would like to thank Linda Muehlig and Ann H. Sievers for the warm welcome they gave me at the Smith College Museum of Art, and their encouragement with this project; Michael Goodison for his assistance in answering my initial queries about the painting; Alain Katz and Elisabeth Hamzaoui for arranging for new photography of the portrait of Cathelineau, and Philippe Petout for supplying reproductions of the portrait of Chateaubriand.

1. The dealer was Percy Moore Turner of the Independent Gallery, who purchased the work at auction (Sale, Christie's London, 17 July 1925, no. 121, as Velázquez).

2. M. MATHERNY FABIAN, M. WENTWORTH, and C. CHETHAM, *19th and 20th-Century Paintings from the Collection of the Smith College Museum of Art*, 1970, p. 9, no. 1.

3. *Smith College Museum of Art Bulletin*, no. 13, May 1932, p. 13, no. 11.

4. G. de DIESBACH, *Chateaubriand*, Paris, 1995, p. 247.

5. G. DUVAL, *Souvenirs thermidoriens*, Paris, 1844, vol. II, pp. 76-81.

6. C. ÉLIE and F. DESTOUCHES, *Catalogue des tableaux, bronzes, terres cuites, marbres, et autres objets curieux qui composaient le Cabinet et Commerce de feu B. Guyot, ancien Chanoine et Prévôt de l'Abbaye de Tours*, Paris, 1809, n.p.

7. *Ibid.*, no. 88. "Une Étude de Jeune Homme vu à mi-corps, proportion de nature, les bras croisés et la tête tournée de trois quarts. Ce morceau peint dans sa jeunesse, est digne à la fois de son auteur et de l'école dont il sort."

8. Letter from M. GOODISON, Smith College Museum of Art, to the author, 17 February 1999; Intermuseum Conservation Association, condition report, May 1956.

9. Sale, Christie's, New York, January 31, 1997, no. 103, repr. in color. The *Psyche* is monogrammed and dated "A° VII" (September 22, 1798-September 21, 1799, according to the Gregorian calendar).

10. V. DUCOURAU, *Le musée Bonnat à Bayonne*, Paris, 1988, p. 88 (repr. in color).

11. The price and the name of the buyer are supplied in the *Répertoire des tableaux vendus en France au XIX^e siècle*, ed. by B.B. FREDERICKSON and B. PERONNET, assisted by J.I. ARMSTRONG, S. HAUSER, and A. JAQUINOT, Los Angeles, Calif., 1998, vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 473.

12. J. BOTTINEAU, "Les portraits des généraux vendéens, commande et critique – diffusion et destin", *Gazette des Beaux-*

Arts, 117^e année, VI^e période, t. LXXXV, May-June 1975, p. 183.

13. D[ELÉCLUZE], "Exposition du Louvre 1824. – N^o XV. *M. Girodet-Trioson*", *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, 12 November 1824, p. 1.

14. L.-M. CLÉNET, *Cathelineau; le "saint de l'Anjou"; premier généralissime de l'armée vendéenne*, Paris, 1991, p. 36.

15. Bibliothèque nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, N 2. An inscription beneath the image indicates that the drawing was sent from the Vendée as a souvenir after Cathelineau's death.

16. BOTTINEAU (as in note 12), p. 184; D[ELÉCLUZE] (as in note 13), p. 1.

17. In considering the question of a possible meeting between Girodet and the general's son, it should be noted that the Bibliothèque Nationale holds a bust-length lithographed portrait of the younger Cathelineau, issued after the latter's death in 1832. (Jacques-Joseph Cathelineau was involved in an attempt to restore the Bourbons to the throne of France, and was killed on being captured with two co-conspirators.) This portrait of Jacques-Joseph Cathelineau was lithographed by Bazin, after a painting by Girodet – or so the inscription would have us believe. Did Girodet really paint a portrait of Jacques-Joseph Cathelineau, the son of the famous general? The features, although not the costume, of the sitter in the lithograph seem to have been adapted from Girodet's 1824 portrait of General Jacques Cathelineau, and the head is placed in the same pose in reverse. It is possible that Bazin, eager to profit from the publicity surrounding the younger Cathelineau's death, used the 1824 portrait of Jacques Cathelineau for his model rather than an actual portrait of Jacques-Joseph Cathelineau by Girodet.

18. For Girodet's workshop practice, see P.A. COUPIN, *Œuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire, suivies de sa correspondance; précédées d'une notice historique, et mises en ordre*, Paris, 1829, pp. xl-xli.

19. It is also possible that the artist asked a studio assistant to transfer the features of the *Youth* onto the canvas for the Cathelineau, and then himself made the changes and adaptations necessary to suit the new composition.

20. Sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, Dec. 5, 1985, *Tableaux anciens...* (Ader Picard Tajan), no. 12 (repr. in color).

21. Another alternative is that Girodet did own the painting, even though it did not appear in the studio sale.

According to his friend Louis-François Bertin, some of the artworks in Girodet's studio were retained and not offered for sale; others were sold separately ("Les correspondants du peintre Fabre (1808-1834)", *Nouvelle Revue Rétrospective* IV, Janvier-Juin 1896, 44). For the studio sale, see PÉRIGNON, *Catalogue des tableaux, esquisses, dessins et croquis, de M. Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire....*, Paris, 1825).

RÉSUMÉ. — Portrait d'un jeune homme : *une étude de Girodet redécouverte*.

L'auteur identifie ici comme œuvre de Girodet le *Portrait d'un jeune homme* du Smith College Museum of Art. Peint probablement à la fin des années 1790, ce portrait aurait servi plus tard d'étude pour une des dernières peintures de Girodet, le *Portrait posthume du général Cathelineau* (Salon de 1824). Cathelineau mourut en 1793 et il semble que Girodet, n'ayant aucun portrait à sa disposition pour lui servir de modèle, créa un portrait imaginaire, en reproduisant dans son *Cathelineau* les traits du *Jeune homme*.