



Short notice

Who Is the Countess de Pagès? (De-)Identifying a Painting by Joseph-Désiré Court

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Since 2021, the project *Women of the Rijksmuseum* has conducted research aimed at shedding light on the women whose lives and achievements are revealed through objects on display in the museum's galleries. To this end, particular attention has been paid to portraits of women for whom information has either been lacking or scarcely presented to the public. Among the works included in this investigation was this intriguing portrait painting by French artist Joseph-Désiré Court (1797-1865).

The present canvas was registered in the museum's documentation as a portrait of the 'Countess de Pagès, née de Cornellan, as St Catherine' (fig. 1). It was viewed as a *portrait historié*: a portrait in which the sitter is depicted as a mythological, biblical or historical character – a fairly common genre in France since the eighteenth century. Signed but undated, it was thought to have been painted between 1820 and 1850. The painting's terminus ante quem was based on its earliest-known mention in an 1850 sales catalogue of works from the collection of an 'esteemed art lover', identified as the Amsterdam businessman Jacob Mendes de Leon (1784-1842).¹ Acquired post-sale by the banker and collector Adriaan van der Hoop, the painting entered one of the most important private collections in the Netherlands, where it joined works by

< Fig. 1
JOSEPH-DÉSIRÉ
COURT, *St Clare*,
c. 1838.
Oil on canvas,
83 x 66 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-C-303,
on loan from the
City of Amsterdam
(A. van der Hoop
Bequest).

Rembrandt and Vermeer. Upon Van der Hoop's death in 1854, the collection was bequeathed to the City of Amsterdam. In 1885, it was subsequently moved to the newly opened Rijksmuseum, where it is preserved today.

After being kept in storage for many years, Court's painting was put on display in the museum's galleries in 2016. However, with information on the sitter lacking, the text label meant to accompany the painting could provide no more than general information on the painting style and the artist's biographical data, with no mention of the woman's identity. The writing of this text was therefore postponed. To render a more complete picture, the first step in this new research from *Women of the Rijksmuseum* was to uncover the identity of the so-called 'Countess de Pagès'.

Who was the Countess de Pagès?

Fortunately, a search of the French press and archival documents provided a great deal of information on the 'Countess de Pagès'. Clémence de Vernède, Countess de Corneillan, was born in Marseille in 1819.² Her maternal great-uncle was Philippe de Girard (1775-1845), an engineer and inventor known for his innovations in the field of agriculture, and more specifically, the design of a

flax-spinning frame. Pierre de Vernède de Corneillan, her paternal great-uncle, was a collector of graphic art. Originating from Nîmes, he later relocated to the Netherlands, where he remained up until his death in The Hague in 1827.³ Pierre also owned shares in a sugar plantation in Suriname, which Clémence later inherited.⁴ Upon her marriage to Charles Hérald de Pagès de Pourcarès (1814-1904) in Paris in 1864, Clémence acquired the title of Baroness (not Countess) de Pagès. She would spend most of her life in Paris, where she was active in the fields of science and agriculture as a renowned specialist in silk farming. She owned her own private silkworm farm and patented a new method of silk extraction.⁵ She published books and articles, primarily on entomology, and was an avid member of numerous scientific societies.⁶ From 1852 onwards, Clémence's name appears annually in countless local and national French publications, chiefly in connection with her scientific work. Throughout her life, she dedicated herself to promoting the work of her great-uncle Girard.⁷ Alongside her scientific activities, Clémence was a member of charitable associations, most notably in the areas of education for young women and animal rights. She also fulfilled religious

duties as a cleric in a cathedral chapter. In addition, she published poetry and was a skilled draughtsperson and painter. Clémence died in Paris in 1901, at the age of eighty-two.⁸

Certain elements of the baroness's life seem consistent with our painting: the ownership of shares in Surinamese plantations, which she administered through an Amsterdam lawyer, possibly points to a tie with the Netherlands; her religious activity might explain her portrayal as St Catherine. Even so, her date of death raises questions. Commonly, one would expect portraits to remain either in the sitters' possession or that of their immediate circle throughout or beyond their lifetime. How did a French baroness's portrait enter a private collection in Amsterdam, acquired as early as 1850 at a time when she was alive and well? This question is all the more significant given the absence of any apparent connection between Pagès and Mendes de Leon. It also further reinforces two other, pre-existing doubts influencing the curatorial team's determination of whether the painting is in fact a portrait. First, the sitter's eyes are not shown – highly unusual for a portrait depiction. Second, the woman's facial features are ostensibly those of an unidentified model who appears in several of Court's genre scenes, such as *La Vénitienne au bal masqué* (fig. 2) and *La Glaneuse* (fig. 3). At the present time, no other portrait of the Baroness de Pagès is unfortunately known to exist, ruling out the possibility of an identification by comparison. These elusive aspects necessitated research into the history of the sitter's identification as Clémence de Vernède de Corneillan.

Tracing the Identification

Close inspection of the painting yielded little information. An inscription on the reverse reads 'Le prie Dieu', possibly a title of earlier date. In the 1850 sale catalogue of Mendes de Leon's col-

Fig. 2

JOSEPH-DÉSIRÉ
COURT, *La Vénitienne
au bal masqué*, 1837.
Oil on canvas,
92.7 x 74 cm.
Musée des Beaux-
Arts de Rouen,
inv. no. 886.9.3.
Photo ©
GrandPalaisRmn /
Agence Bulloz



Fig. 3
JOSEPH-DÉSIRÉ
COURT, *La Glaneuse*,
1841.
Oil on canvas,
129 x 97.5 cm.
Musée des Beaux-
Arts de Rouen,
inv. no. 875.1.1.



lection, the painting is merely described as 'a charming image of a woman, in rich attire, depicted as a saint'.⁹ In an appraisal list of the paintings in Van der Hoop's collection compiled after his death, the painting is described as 'a girl in religious contemplation'.¹⁰ From the eighteen eighties onward, the painting can be found in several catalogues of the Rijksmuseum's collection. In the earliest catalogues, the title reads 'A saint (St. Catherine?)'. In later catalogues, the question mark was dropped to become 'St. Catherine'. The last occurrence of this title appears on an inventory card of the Amsterdam Museum from 1957.

The first description of the painting as a portrait is found on another inventory card in the Rijksmuseum. The title still includes 'St. Catherine', but the description, added later in another handwriting, reads: 'Portrait of the Countess de Pagès, born de Cornellan [sic], at 18 years old'.¹¹ Unfortunately, this description states no date or source. The first public identification of the painting as a portrait occurred in 1976, when published in the extensively illustrated catalogue *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam*. Here the painting is titled 'Countess de Pagès, née de Cornellan, as St Catherine'.

This title was then retained in all subsequent publications.

Accordingly, the identification appears to have been made at some point in the late nineteen fifties or early sixties, possibly by Bob Haak, an art historian who worked at the Rijksmuseum from 1954 to 1963 and whose handwriting matches that of the painting description. However, no document in the museum archives provides insight into how this identification came about. Furthermore, as no member of the Vernède family – one branch of which today resides in the Netherlands – could be linked to the Rijksmuseum, it seems unlikely that Haak's finding was made in consultation with a family descendant. Obviously, the painting's late and undocumented identification as a portrait raised further doubts, with the identification consequently discarded at this time.

Recovering the Title

The next step was to determine whether the painting might match one of Court's many works known solely by a title or description, or whether the title 'Le prie Dieu' should perhaps be reinstated. The answer was eventually provided by a lithograph made after the painting. Held in the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the lithograph was produced by Bernard Romain Julien (1802-1871), a French printmaker responsible for engraved reproductions of many of Court's works (figs. 4, 5). In addition to being dated 1838, the print bears the title *Étude N:43. Sainte Claire*, thus ruling out the painting's classification as a portrait and confirming it as a depiction of a Catholic saint – though not St Catherine but instead St Clare of Assisi, a thirteenth-century saint and follower of St Francis of Assisi. The reference to Clare of Assisi is vague, however, as Court did not include her characteristic attributes: a veil and a Franciscan monk habit. The saint



appears in an everyday context, sitting at a prie-dieu, or prayer desk, and attired in pseudo-mediaeval dress. The plain background and halo give the canvas the character of a religious icon. The painting should therefore be interpreted as straddling the line between genre and religious painting. In works by Court from the same period, the theme of a woman at a prie-dieu occurs in two paintings known only by their descriptions: *Une Religieuse à son prie-Dieu* (1834) and *Dame espagnole à son prie-Dieu* (1838). A similar subject can also be found in *Jeune fille en prière* (fig. 6).

The recovery of the painting's original title revealed additional information regarding its provenance: it would have had to have been completed before Julien made the print in 1838. In 1840, the painting 'Sainte Claire' was exhibited at the Salon of the Société des Amis des arts in Lyon, where it was lauded in the local press; a journalist described it as a 'beautiful figure of a saint, poetic and ethereal'.¹² When exhibited the following year in Lisieux, Northern France, Court's rather profane representation of a saint failed to escape journalists' scrutiny. The

periodical *La Revue du Calvados* wrote: 'she is too worldly; even if lowered, her eyes are too provocative to be those of the founder of a religious order'.¹³ Not until the painting resurfaced at the sale of Mendes de Leon's collection could it again be traced. Given that Mendes de Leon died in May 1842, however, it was likely not long after the Lisieux exhibition that it entered his collection.

The conclusion of this investigation has multiple outcomes. Although we have learned that the Baroness de Pagès is not the sitter in the painting, we now know more about this versatile woman, who has never before been the subject of a publication. Having ascertained the original title, *St Clare*, and established a more precise dating, circa 1838, the present painting now finds its rightful place both in Court's oeuvre and in the Rijksmuseum's collection of French paintings. This serves as a useful reminder that many museum titles reflect above all a given state of research and are therefore to be questioned accordingly. Although primarily conducted for the purpose of gathering information on female sitters in painted portraits, this research has produced results far more comprehensive.

Fig. 4

BERNARD ROMAIN
JULIEN after
JOSEPH-DÉSIRÉ
COURT, *Sainte Claire*,
1838.
Lithograph.
Paris, Bibliothèque
nationale de France,
inv. no. DC-187 (A)-FOL.

Fig. 5

BERNARD ROMAIN
JULIEN after
JOSEPH-DÉSIRÉ
COURT, *Sainte Claire*,
1838.
Hand-coloured
lithograph,
595 x 470 mm.
Warsaw, National
Library of Poland, inv.
no. G.37202/WAF.1081.

Taking a closer look at the museum's many undocumented women's portraits is not for the sole purpose of putting names to unknown faces: it is a gateway to accessing knowledge of art collections that goes beyond the mere identification or the accumulation of biographical data. Thinking about who these women were, the reasons why they were portrayed and in what context, raises unexpected questions. In the investigation of the present painting, biographical information on the Baroness de Pagès led us to question the earlier misidentification, which might have persisted for many years had no one taken a closer look at the sitter.

Fig. 6
JOSEPH DÉSIRÉ
COURT, *Jeune fille
en prière*, 1836.
Oil on canvas,
55.6 x 46.6 cm.
Musées du Mans,
inv. no. 10.489.
Photo ©
GrandPalaisRmn /
Agence Bulloz



NOTES

- * The author would like to thank Jean-Loup Leguay, author of a forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the works by Joseph-Désiré Court, for his invaluable assistance.
- 1 'Verzameling schilderijen door voorname Meesters uit de Hedendaasche Nederlandsche, Belgische en Fransche Scholen, alles en alleen nagelaten door een geacht kunstliefhebber voor weinige jaren alhier overleden', sale ca. Amsterdam (De Vries, Roos & Brondgeest), 9 April 1850, no. 16.
- 2 Archives de Paris, v4E: Actes de naissance, mariage et décès (1860-1902), v4E: 1935, no. 207, Marriage certificate: 'Depages & de Vernède de Corneillan', 20 August 1864.
- 3 Following the sale of the collection in 1825, a substantial part of his collection now belongs to the Kupferstichkabinett Berlin. See Tania Tonelli, 'Die Graphiksammlung "Avant La letter" von Pierre de Corneillan im Berliner Kupferstichkabinett', *Jahrbuch Der Berliner Museen* 52 (2010), pp. 45-53.
- 4 The Hague, National Archives, Inventaris van het Archief van de Algemene Rekenkamer 1814-1919: Computabel Beheer (acc. no. 2.02.09.08), inv. no. 226: Suriname en Nederlandse Antillen: Vrij-verklaarde slaven (Emancipatie 1863), Voornaam: Jeanne Louise Henriette Clemence.
- 5 'Décartication, étirage en soie grège et cotonisation des cocons du bombyx cynthia de l'ailante, de l'arrindia du ricin et de tous autres cocons à orifice'. Courbevoie, Institut national de la propriété industrielle, no. 52297, 14 December 1861.
- 6 Among others, she was a member of the Société d'Encouragement pour l'Industrie Nationale, and of the Société des Agriculteurs de France.
- 7 Pagès painted portraits and sculpted busts of her great-uncle Philippe de Girard, which she donated to museums. In 1882, she officially unveiled a bronze monument in Avignon dedicated to him. To the Louvre, she bequeathed a portrait of Girard by Ary Scheffer, which the museum declined. She also gave lectures and published on his inventions, notably through the Association française pour l'avancement des sciences.
- 8 Archives de Paris, v7E: Faire-part de naissance, mariage, décès (1820-1930), no. 117, Death notice: 'Baronne de Pagès de Poucarès', 24 May 1901. This document announces her death at the age of 83. However, her marriage certificate lists her date of birth as 6 February 1819, which implies she was 82 years old at the time of her death.
- 9 'Een bevallige Vrouwenbeeld, in rijke kleeding, voorgesteld als eene heilige'. Sale cat. Amsterdam (De Vries, Roos & Brondgeest), 9 April 1850, no. 16.
- 10 'Een meisje in godsdienstige overpeinzing'. City Archives Amsterdam, Archief van de Commissie van Toezicht over het Museum Van der Hoop (acc. no. 272), Lijst met de vermelding van de schilderijen, inclusief de taxatie zoals die voor 't recht van successie is overgelegd, no. 247.
- 11 'Portret van Gravin de Pagès geb. de Cornellan op 18 jarige leeftijd'.
- 12 'belle figure de sainte, poétique et vaporeuse'. 'Exposition de 1840', *L'Entr'acte lyonnais*, no. 158, 10 January 1841, p. 3.
- 13 'elle est trop mondaine; bien que baissés, ses yeux sont trop provocateurs pour être ceux de la fondatrice d'un ordre religieux'. Georges Mancel, 'Exposition de Lisieux', *La Revue du Calvados*, 1841, p. 224.