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Kingdom
of Images

FRENCH PRINTS *in the*
AGE OF LOUIS XIV, 1660–1715

V

The Portrait

Knowledge and humility / Eloquence and charity /
Great prelate, / Have fashioned your portrait; / May heaven's ray
/ Put life into its features! / My pencil's feeble trait /
Need no more than indicate / the lineaments of nature.

The doggerel that accompanies engraved portraits often emphasizes the easiness of the task—all that is required is to follow the perfection of nature—or the impossibility of the same task, given that the perfection of the subject makes imitation quite impossible. The question of likeness is central: a good portrait was expected to give an accurate idea not only of an individual's physiognomy but also of his (or, more rarely, her) character, mind, and social status.

Under the reign of Louis XIV, the portrait took on previously unknown forms and attained real originality in the overall landscape of European printmaking. The second half of the seventeenth century witnessed a veritable love affair with this genre; the culmination came in 1699, when the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture decreed that any printmaker wishing to be received into its company must present a portrait. The genre thus became an obligatory rite of passage for anyone wishing to be recognized as an artist of the first order.

The individuals represented in portraits from the age of Louis XIV are very diverse but nevertheless reflect the practices and values of contemporary society. The great men and women of that world naturally formed the majority of the subjects. Claude Mellan "was unwilling to engrave the portraits of any but persons illustrious and distinguished by their rank or merit, and said that one should never engrave any others" (Ménage 1693, 1:30). First and foremost among these was, of course, the king. Many people displayed a portrait of the king on the walls of their house; if a painting was too expensive, a print was a perfectly adequate substitute. The face of Louis XIV can therefore be found on almanacs intended for the popular market—see the almanac on page 179, which presents the king, along with his wife and their son the Grand Dauphin, amid palms and fleurs-de-lis. Louis is also, of course, represented in some of the finest portraits by the greatest printmakers of the time. Robert Nanteuil made no less than ten portraits of the king between 1661 and 1678 (see cat. no. 58). Then came the high nobility and members of the court; they sometimes commissioned portraits, but their clients often undertook the commission to demonstrate fidelity to their patron, perhaps with an eye to being rewarded for their fealty (see cat. no. 59).

Portraits of high artistic quality should not blind us to the production of very substantial series of portraits that were of a lesser quality but were much more representative (see p. 180) of current practices; the latter were what contemporaries would usually see. The most important of these are the suites of prints copied from various sources, engraved in a rather severe style and sold by specialized dealers such as Balthazar Moncornet, Louis Boissevin, and Michel Odieuvre.

Whether they were fine, *demi-fine*, or quickly executed, all these portraits were engraved, and only at the very end of the century were prints prepared by etching and finished with the burin. Etching on its own was very rarely seen—Jean Pesne was one of the very few printmakers to employ this approach—while other techniques, such as mezzotint (see cat. no. 67), were a great deal rarer in France than in England.

Printmaker unknown. *Almanac for the Year 1667 (Portrait of the Queen, the King, and the Dauphin),* 1666, engraving. Paris, BnF, Est., Hennin 4434

ALMANACH. POVR L'AN DE GRACE.
MIL SIX CENT SOIXANTE ET SEPT.

A sheet with portraits published by Balthazar Moncornet, ca. 1650–70. Paris, BnF, Est., Ed-81-fol.

Sometimes the goal of a portrait was to evoke famous events of the time. The portrait of Guillaume de Limoges (see cat. no. 68) is of exceptional quality for a person of such low social rank; it primarily records the contemporary polemics between guilds, the Académie royale de musique (founded in 1669), and street singers, who reached a wide public. The portrait of La Voisin (Catherine Montvoisin) recalls the Affair of the Poisons (see cat. no. 69). In most cases, portraits were of single sitters, not groups; family portraits are rare and were often connected to a particular purpose. That of the Grand Dauphin (see cat. no. 65) should be read as a propaganda work intended to showcase the permanence of royal power.

Major court portraits traditionally display a border or frame, generally oval, on the side of which is inscribed in lapidary characters the name and titles of the person represented (see cat. no. 59). Occasionally, the spandrels are decorated with allegorical motifs (see cat. no. 58). More frequently, symbolic elements make an appearance (see cat. no. 62); these are sometimes quite discreet, taking the form of objects such as paper, rulers, and burins associated with the activity of the person represented, but on occasion they can be packed with allusions (see cat. no. 69). Such allusions or implications may also be carried by the decor (see fig. 64.1); the comte de Harcourt's fame as a soldier, for example, is shown in the form of a battle scene. Toward the end of Louis XIV's reign, realistic backgrounds start to appear in portraits, as in Pierre Drevet's work, which often show the subject in the visual context of his or her life (see cat. no. 66).

A portrait can also be found within a more elaborate composition, which may require the services of more than one artist: in *Allegorical Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Colbert* (see cat. no. 61), it is not the portrait that is represented so much as an allegory in which a piece of fabric embroidered with Colbert's portrait appears.

There is little variation in the sitters' poses, which are almost always stereotypical, and it sometimes happened that faces were burnished and one portrait gave way to another with nothing changed except the facial features. People nevertheless chose to have themselves represented in one of the costumes that befitted their rank, depending on the message that the sitters wished to convey or the image that they wished to leave of themselves.

The choice of the artist was a major consideration, since a portrait was very expensive: one by Nanteuil cost 1,100 livres in 1673 and as much as 2,200 livres in 1675. Such prices were, of course, attained only by the most beautiful productions by major printmakers—those whose originality left their mark on their period. The second half of the seventeenth century was the great period of original engraved portraits, in which the printmaker supplied the composition and made the preparatory drawing. Moreover, some printmakers were proud to declare that the portrait had been made *ad vivum* (from life), meaning that the subject had agreed to pose, at least for the initial sketches. This declaration appears systematically on prints, since it was supposed to guarantee the likeness of the portrait; the fewer the intermediaries, the more accurate the result. The argument had real merit—historians see the features of protagonists gradually deformed as they pass through the series of copies made by successive engravers, some of whom were of limited talent. Therefore, certain printmakers, aware of the commercial importance of this characteristic, would indicate the date at which a portrait was made and would then modify that date from time to time so that the likeness would continue to seem recent. To be able to make a portrait from life was not only an artistic ambition but also an indicator of social status; not just anyone could have access to a minister, a bishop, a duke, or, indeed, a king and take up an hour of his precious time.

Interpretive portraits nevertheless continued to be quite common during the reign of Louis XIV, and the name of the painter or draftsman appears on many of them alongside that of the person whose likeness is engraved. But for the most part, the painter was not involved in the process by which a painting was reproduced and might never know that an interpretative print was being made. Indeed, interpretations by many different printmakers of a single engraved portrait, such as that of Louis XIV by Charles Le Brun, show that printmakers could afford to take considerable liberties in nearly every detail of the composition without anyone objecting; the purpose of the reproduction was merely to ensure fidelity to the features of the face. Aware of the popularity of such prints, painters began in ever-greater numbers to organize the printed reproduction of their paintings. Hyacinthe Rigaud retouched his paintings before having them engraved.

Some of these portraits were distributed to family and friends or to the sitter's clients, but, for the most part, they were sold—by the printmaker himself, if he was sufficiently renowned (as Nanteuil was), or through a dealer, if he was not particularly well known. Buyers were sensitive to the date of the likeness, and artists therefore periodically altered the inscription in order to ensure that the date was not so very long past—confirmation that the print is at once a work of art, a document, and a simple commodity.

—RÉMI MATHIS