

# JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

## FINE ARTS

### ANTOINE-FRANÇOIS CALLET

Paris 1741 - id. 1823

French School

### CEREMONIAL PORTRAIT OF LOUIS XVI IN FULL CORONATION REGALIA

Oil on canvas

H. 2,68 m; W. 1,90 m

Signed lower left: *Callet*

DATE: 1780-1785

#### PROVENANCE:

Very probably given by King Louis XVI to Elisabeth Louise Lenoir de Verneuil, Marquise de Soucy (1729-après 1789), governess of the royal children of France.

Probably sale of the collection of the Marquise de Soucy, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 6 May 1893, "Full length portrait *donné par le Roy en 1785* [given by the King in 1785], inscription at the bottom of the wood frame sculpted with Arms of France and Austria, the King's Cypher in the corners], H. 2,75; W. 1,95"

Anonymous sale, Angers, Hôtel des Ventes, 24-25 March 1976 ("Portrait en pied donné par le Roi à la Marquise de Soucy" [Full length portrait given by the King to the Marquise de Soucy], H. 2,72; L. 1,91 m.)

Robert de Balkany Collection

Private collection, France

#### RELATED WORKS:

Other identified autograph versions of the full length portrait of King Louis XVI:

- 1) Clermont-Ferrand, Musée d'art Roger-Quilliot, oil on canvas, H. 2,54 m; W. 1,96 m
- 2) Versailles, Musée National du Château, oil on canvas, signed on the back: *Callet fecit*, H. 1,50 m; W. 1,03 m, from the collection of the descendants of the Comte de Vergennes (acquired in 2016)<sup>1</sup>
- 3) Schloss Ambras near Innsbruck, oil on canvas, signed and dated: *Callet ft. 1781*, H. 2,75 m; W. 1,94 m
- 4) Madrid, musée du Prado, oil on canvas, H. 2,75 m; W. 1,93 m

Prints after this full-length portrait of King Louis XVI:

Charles Clément Bervic (1756-1822), 1785 and reissued several times.

Louis Jean Allais, 1791; Johann Pichler

Gobelins Tapestries: woven between 1814 and 1817 (Fenaille, V, p. 396-397)

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<sup>1</sup> The château de Versailles already owned another version that is not signed and is probably later, oil on canvas, H. 278 cm; L. 196 cm.

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There was no intention for this official portrait of King Louis XVI, distributed in the form of many replicas around France and Europe, to be original. Callet repeated the formula created in 1701 by Hyacinthe Rigaud for his *Portrait of Louis XIV*, also used by Louis-Michel Van Loo in his *Portrait of Louis XV* in 1763, and which continued to be the model used until the 19th century.



Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV, roi de France (1638-1715)*, oil on canvas, H. 3,13 m; W. 2,05 m, Versailles, châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon



Louis-Michel Van Loo, *Louis XV, roi de France (1710-1774)*, 1763, oil on canvas, H. 2,77 m; W. 1,95 m, Versailles, châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon

Louis XVI is shown in the same position as his grandfather Louis XV: standing, turned slightly on a platform in front of a large drapery forming a canopy. Like Louis XIV, painted by Rigaud, the monarch looks at the viewer. Callet has succeeded in giving the king's face the expression of nobility we would expect but also an enchanting bonhomie. More restrained by a range of colours limited to shades of blue, white and gold, our effigy is marked with ease and flexibility. The monarch is wearing the coronation robe of the kings of France, a blue cloak with fleurs de lys lined with ermine. The ermine white radiates and brightens the king's face. The composition is animated by the movement of the cloth and the careful rendering of their material: the shiny effect created by the silk of his shirt, loose breeches and white stockings, forms a contrast with the velvety surface of the ermine and the light feathers of the hat. The king wears white shoes with a broad buckle and red heel. On his breastplate, the collars of the Order of the Holy Spirit and the Golden Fleece are visible. We can glimpse on the scabbard of his left thigh the sword known as Charlemagne's sword, used during the coronation of the kings of France since 1179. To achieve an authentic depiction, Callet was lent the royal *Regalia* conserved at the Abbey of Saint-Denis. These insignia of royal power are presented on a cushion with fleurs de lys, to the left of the composition: the hand of justice, the crown and the sceptre held in the king's right hand. The golden back of the magnificent throne is decorated with a bas-relief showing an allegory of Justice. The column that closes the composition on the left is a traditional element that appears in portraits from the Renaissance onwards and was especially appreciated by Antoon van Dyck. The impressive size of the canvas gives grandeur and majesty to the monarch who dominates over the viewer.

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This ceremonial portrait is the result of a commission awarded by the Foreign Affairs ministry in August 1778. The king's minister, the Comte Charles Gravier de Vergennes (1719-1787), asked Antoine-François Callet, who was at the peak of a glorious career, to create an effigy of the king in his coronation robes. This painting was intended to be made in multiple versions, for sending to the embassies and foreign courts as "Gifts of the King". Faithful reproductions of the monarch's features, these official portraits were to be substitutes for the king's physical presence (for example, one did not turn ones back to it). In fact, since Louis XIV had broken with the tradition of itinerant courts by settling at Versailles, it had become essential to circulate images of the king.

It is interesting to note that when the commission was given to Callet, the talented portraitist Joseph-Siffrein Duplessis (1725-1802) had just finished a splendid effigy of Louis XVI in coronation robes, commissioned by the Comte d'Angiviller in 1777. This painting, of which many replicas exist, seems not to have corresponded to the image of the king that the Comte de Vergennes wanted to circulate abroad.



Joseph-Siffrein Duplessis, *Louis XVI, King of France* (1754-1793), 1777, Oil on canvas,

Unlike Duplessis, the young Callet was not a portraitist, but a history painter. Like Berthélémy, Vincent and Ménageot, his work shows the classical renewal of history painting in France. Callet had stood out particularly for his major painted decors,<sup>2</sup> some of the most prestigious of which have unfortunately disappeared.<sup>3</sup> The Comte de Vergennes probably chose him to create the official portrait of the king because, in 1772, while in Rome, he had painted a large portrait

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<sup>2</sup> Among the decors that have survived are the cupola of the Salon de Compagnie in the Hôtel de Bourbon (1774), the trompe-l'œil paintings of the Chapel of the Virgin at the church of Saint-Sulpice (1777), *Spring* in the Galerie d'Apollon of the Louvre (1780) and the *Rising of Aurora* in the Senate (1803), see Brigitte Gallini, "Antoine François Callet (1741-1823), évolution d'un style lié aux aléas de l'histoire", published by *La Tribune de l'Art* in January 2016, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Brigitte Gallini cites among the lost works, the ceiling of the Palazzo Spinola in Genoa (1773), the décors of the Hôtel Thélusson (1781) and some of those at the Senate (1804-1807), see her article "Antoine François Callet (1741-1823), évolution d'un style lié aux aléas de l'histoire", published by *La Tribune de l'Art* in January 2016, p. 14.

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of the Cardinal de Bernis,<sup>4</sup> the French ambassador to the Holy Seat, which had been highly acclaimed by the Roman public.

Callet's career as a court portraitist, which ran parallel to his activity as a history painter, began precisely with this prestigious commission of 1778. Afterwards, Callet was asked, not only to supply many versions until 1790,<sup>5</sup> but also to paint several portraits of the king's two brothers. From then on, Callet used the title "Peintre du Roi, 1<sup>er</sup> Peintre de Monseigneur le Comte d'Artois et Peintre de Monsieur."

In a letter of 5 October 1779, the minister for Foreign Affairs asked the Comte d'Angiviller to organize two sittings with the King for Callet. The artist had already made a lot of progress on the picture and wanted to paint the head from life. For this, he suggested having the portrait transported from Paris to Versailles and placed in a room in the King's apartments.<sup>6</sup> It is not known exactly when Callet obtained his sittings. In any case, during the year 1780, Callet finished "the primary version", for which he received the large sum of 12,000 livres, proof of the high esteem in which he was held. By comparison, 6000 livres was paid for the large portrait of *Marie-Antoinette* by Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun dating to 1779.



Antoine-François Callet, *Portrait of Louis XVI*, 1780 (primary version?), oil on canvas, H. 2,54 m; W. 1,96 m, Musée d'art Roger-Quilliot, Clermont-Ferrand.

This "primary version" of the portrait of Louis XVI, as surprising as it may seem, is not easy to identify today. Marc Sandoz and Brigitte Gallini<sup>7</sup> did not exclude the possibility that it could be the version – cut down vertically and horizontally – at the Musée d'art Roger-Quilliot in

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<sup>4</sup> Antoine François Callet, *Portrait of Cardinal de Bernis, Ambassador of France*, 1772, oil on canvas, H. 2,14 m; W. 1,65 m, private collection, France, published by Brigitte Gallini "Antoine François Callet (1741-1823), évolution d'un style lié aux aléas de l'histoire", *La Tribune de l'Art*, January 2016, p. 3, fig. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Copies of the *Portrait of Louis XVI* were commissioned from Callet up to July 1790, Arch. Min. Aff. Etr., *Présents du Roy*, 2095 and *Registre récapitulatif 1753-1791* (cited by Brigitte Gallini "Antoine François Callet (1741-1823), évolution d'un style lié aux aléas de l'histoire", *La Tribune de l'Art*, January 2016, p. 16, note 43).

<sup>6</sup> Letter from the Comte de Vergennes to the Comte d'Angiviller, cited by Marc Sandoz, *Antoine-François Callet (1741-1823)*, Paris, 1985, p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Sandoz, *Antoine-François Callet (1741-1823)*, Paris, 1985, p. 100; Brigitte Gallini, "Antoine François Callet (1741-1823), évolution d'un style lié aux aléas de l'histoire", *La Tribune de l'Art*, January 2016, p. 16, note 38.

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Clermont-Ferrand. Could it also be the same painting exhibited at the Salon of 1789, no. 63 (10 x 7 pieds, or 3,25 m x 2,27 m)?<sup>8</sup>

The Château de Versailles, which already owned a (probably later) version, acquired a small scale replica in 2016,<sup>9</sup> which is autograph and signed. Callet had painted it for the Comte de Vergennes and the work comes directly from the family of his descendants.



Antoine-François Callet, *Portrait of Louis XVI*, c.1780, oil on canvas, signed on the back, H. 1,50 m; W. 1,03 m, from the descendants of the Comte de Vergennes, Versailles, Musée National du Château (acquired in 2016)

Between 1781 and 1790, many versions of our portrait, originals or copies from the studio, full length, half-length or bust length served as diplomatic gifts. It is not known how many replicas Callet created himself, nor how many he retouched. The names of two other painters, Lassave and Hubert, asked to create copies during the second half of the 1780s, appear in the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères. Callet may be the author of several versions painted between 1780 and 1785. In addition to the Clermont-Ferrand painting and the small replica in Versailles, two other versions are considered to be autograph: the one at the Schloss Ambras near Innsbruck (sent to the Viennese court by Louis XVI) and the one at the Prado museum in Madrid (Louis XVI had given it in 1783 to the Count of Aranda, the Spanish Ambassador). Marc Sandoz lists other versions (locations unknown); in particular one signed *Callet* which was in the Hirsch collection until 1906.<sup>10</sup>

Our painting stands out from the many existing versions because it is one of the rare portraits that bear Callet's signature. The two other signed portraits are the one in Versailles - signed on the back - and the one at Schloss Ambras in Austria. The high quality of its handling and the delicacy of execution of the monarch's face suggest that this could be one of the first autograph versions of the portrait from the early 1780s. It was very probably given by Louis XVI to

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<sup>8</sup> This hypothesis was suggested by G. Lacambre, exh. cat. *De David à Delacroix*, Paris, 1974, no. 17; see also Jean-François Heim, Claire Beraud, Philippe Heim, *Les Salons de Peinture de la Révolution française 1789-1799*, Paris, 1989, p. 157. Marc Sandoz believes it is the Versailles painting, Marc Sandoz, *Antoine-François Callet (1741-1823)*, Paris, 1985, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Oil on canvas, signed, H. 1,50 m; L. 1,03 m.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Sandoz, *Antoine-François Callet (1741-1823)*, Paris, 1985, p. 99: oil on canvas, signed *Callet*, H. 2,65 m; L. 1,86 m, Hirsch sale, 22 February 1906, no. 6.

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Élisabeth Louise Lenoir de Verneuil, Marquise de Soucy (1729 – after 1789), Deputy Governess of the Children of France.

This portrait of Louis XVI was very widely circulated by prints, the best of which is by Charles Bervic, who created the first proofs in 1785. Perhaps made from the Clermont-Ferrand version, this print, exhibited at the Salon of 1791 (no. 434) was reissued several times.



Charles Clément Bervic (1756-1822) after Callet, *Louis Seize, roi des Français, restaurateur de la Liberté* [Louis Sixteenth, King of the French, restorer of Liberty], engraving, H. 690 mm; W. 525 mm.

Engraved inscription, lower right: "gravé en 1790 par Bervic, graveur du Roi. [Engraved in 1790 by Bervic, engraver to the King]"; lower left: "peint par Callet, peintre du Roi [painted by Callet, painter to the King]". In the centre: "Louis Seize, Roi des Français, restaurateur de la Liberté. / Présenté au Roi et à l'Assemblée Nationale par l'auteur." et plus bas: "se vend à Paris, chez Bervic, aux Galleries du Louvre [Louis Sixteenth, King of the French, restorer of Liberty/ Presented to the King and to the National Assembly by the author." and lower down: "sold in Paris by Bervic at the Galleries du Louvre]".

In 1816, when he was 73 years old, Callet learned that a copy of his famous portrait of Louis XVI had been sent to the Gobelins to be woven without being retouched by him beforehand. Outraged, the artist asked the Comte de Blacas, the Ministre de la Maison du Roi and Dominique Vivant Denon for permission to retouch it, which seemed essential to him, and which he offered to do free of charge. Since Blacas and Denon found the portrait to be a perfect resemblance, this request was refused.<sup>11</sup> Given the importance of this commission and the

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<sup>11</sup> Marc Sandoz, *Antoine-François Callet (1741-1823)*, Paris, 1985, p. 96; Brigitte Gallini "Antoine François Callet (1741-1823), évolution d'un style lié aux aléas de l'histoire", *La Tribune de l'Art*, January 2016, p. 13-14.

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extent to which this portrait was circulated, it is not so surprising that, of Callet's long and rich career, history seems only to have retained his activity as a court portrait painter.