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JEAN-BAPTISTE ISABEY

1767 Nancy - Paris 1855

Portrait de l'acteur Simon Chenard

Black chalk and stumping; 1798.

Lower right signed and dated: *Isabey 1798.*

On the mount inscribed: *Chenard, acteur de l'opéra comique, 1798.*

574 x 415 mm (700 x 495 mm)

PROVENANCE: Presumably gift of the artist to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord – Count Hélie de Pourtalès de Talleyrand-Périgord, Paris – Alain Moatti, Paris – Carlo Antonetto (1924-2009), Turin – Thence by descent.

Jean-Baptiste Isabey had an exceptionally long career that spanned from the French Revolution until the Second French Empire. As the French Revolution began, Isabey found that, as an artist, he was dangerously close to the royal family and nobility. With a combination of talent and charm, he was lucky enough to be taken in by Jacques-Louis David, the revolutionary neo-classicist artist. He painted few miniatures at this time but made friends with the influential diplomat Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord. Eventually, he took a position as a drawing master where, by chance, he met the children of Joséphine de Beauharnais, who of course married a Corsican soldier by the name of Napoleone Buonaparte. Isabey gained favour with the emperor himself and both of his wives. Among the honours bestowed on him was a knighthood in the Légion d'honneur and appointments as draughtsman of the emperor's cabinet and first painter to the Empress Joséphine.

Isabey was not only a brilliant portraitist but also a master of the *manière noire* (black manner), in which the abundant use of black imitates the appearance of British *mezzotint* engravings¹. The pencil portraits he exhibited at the Louvre between 1791 and 1799 shared a common characteristic: they were all drawn in the *manière noire*. Isabey's success was such that, within a few years, he managed to forge a visual language and a method that would come to distinguish him, to the point where the artist and his *manière* became one and the same in the minds of his contemporaries. Critical reviews bear witness to this: the term 'manière noire' is increasingly being replaced by 'manière d'Isabey' in the discourse of amateurs.² Isabey was an early experimenter with the new printmaking technique of lithography, for which his work in the *manière noire* had prepared him well.³ After 1794, Isabey's style benefited from the invention that Nicolas-Jacques Conté had just perfected at the request of Lazare Carnot: a pencil designed to make up for the shortage of natural lead mines (graphite) imported from England as a result of an economic blockade. Conté pencils were both

¹ Mezzotinto is an engraving technique invented in 1642 by the German Ludwig von Siegen and rapidly brought to a high degree of perfection by the Frenchman Wallerant Vaillant and the Dutchman Abraham Blooteling. But it was in England, where it was imported around 1660, that it experienced its most remarkable expansion.

² Cyril Lécosse, *Le portrait sur papier*, in: *Jean-Baptiste Isabey. Petits portraits et grands desseins*, p. 109

³ Margaret Morgan Grasselli, in: *Renaissance to Revolution, French Drawings from the National Gallery of Art, 1500-1800*, exh. cat., October 1, 2009 until January 31, 2010, National Gallery of Art, Washington, p. 264

thicker than traditional pencils and harder than charcoal, and were characterised by their deep black colour. From 1795 to 1799, this became the draughtsman's main tool. Its highly distinctive rendering creates a real stylistic unity in the work.⁴

Simon Chenard (1758-1831) was one of the most popular actors and singers in France between the Revolution and the Restoration. He joined the *Comédie-Italienne* in 1783, which was renamed the *Opéra-Comique* in 1801. His circle of friends included artists like Baron Gérard and Pierre Paul Prud'hon; Chenard was an avid collector of their paintings and drawings.⁵ Louis Boilly in particular was to produce a number of portraits of Chenard, such as the wonderful double portrait of Simon Chenard and the artist Baron Gérard [Fig. 3] as well as a self-portrait together with him [Fig. 4], a study for his famous group portrait titled *La Réunion d'artistes dans l'atelier d'Isabey* [Fig. 5].⁶

During the Reign of Terror, the *Opéra-Comique* was one of the most patriotic stages in the capital: Simon Chenard repeatedly put his talents at the service of the regime by singing the revolutionary anthem. It was perhaps during this period that he became friends with Isabey, who was then one of David's most politically active pupils. As soon as he became successful, Isabey turned his back on politics and devoted himself entirely to his artistic career.⁷

Our drawing is an impressive artist's portrait – this genre was very popular in France during the revolutionary period. In its execution, this portrait of Chenard follows the style of contemporary English portraiture, which associates the model with nature to highlight his sensitivity and contemplative nature. Our portrait is comparable with the portrait of Hubert Robert [Fig. 1] in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the one of his teacher and mentor Jacques-Louis David [Fig. 2], in the collection of the Louvre.

In his early days Isabey produced several versions of some of his black chalk portraits, mainly because of the fame of the sitter. Three drawn versions of our portrait are known: one is in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans (1796)⁸; a second version (1797) is in a private collection⁹. Isabey also executed a mezzotint engraving related to our drawing, dated ca. 1800¹⁰.

We would like to thank Monsieur Louis-Antoine Prat and Mehdi Korchane, Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans, for their valuable advice.

⁴ Cyril Lécosse, *De la manière noire à la manière d'Isabey*, in: op. cit., p. 101 ff.

⁵ P. Berthier, *Chenard et les peintres*, *Bulletin de la Société des Sciences historiques et naturelles de l'Yonne*, XCV, 1947-52, p. 130-4, and for Chenard's iconography: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1963-I, p. 27.

⁶ Annie Scottez-De Wrambrechies in: *Le Salon de 1978 – L'atelier d'Isabey*, in: Annie Scottez-De Wrambrechies and Florence Raymond, *Boilly (1761-1845)*, exhib. cat., Palais des Beaux Arts de Lille 2011, p. 142 ff., cat. no. 68

⁷ Mehdi Korchane, *Portraits : Modèles de l'amitié*, in: *Entre lumières & romantisme. Dessins du Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans*, exhib. cat., no. 61, p.132, ill., Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans, 2006

⁸ Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *Portrait de l'acteur Simon Chenard*, black chalk and stumping, 1796, 580 x 420 mm, inv. no. 794

⁹ Sale Couturier et Nicolay, Palais Galliera, Paris, 30 May 1975, cat. no. 11

¹⁰ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Prints, SNR Isabey

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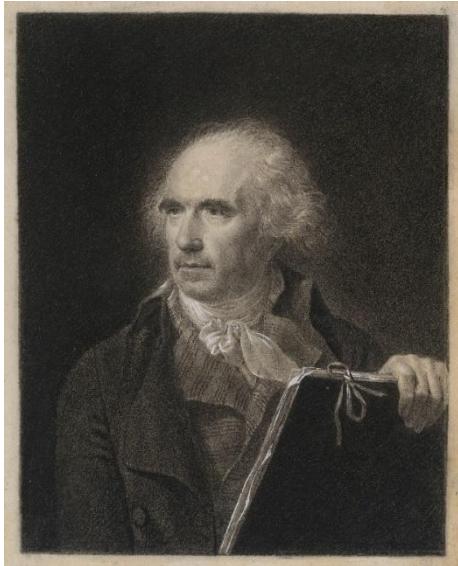


Fig.1: *Hubert Robert*, 1787
black chalk and stumping, heightened with white gouache,
wrapped around a drawing block prepared by Niodot fils
265 x 207 mm (323 x 240 mm).
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Inv. no. 2000.176.1



Fig.2: *Portrait du peintre David*, 1789
black chalk and stumping
176 x 140 mm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Inv. no. RF 3819

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Fig.3 : Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Portraits du chanteur et comédien Simon Chenard et du peintre François Pascal Simon Gérard, dit Baron Gérard*, c.1791-96
black chalk, heightened with white, on blue paper
192 x 280 mm.
Private collection, France

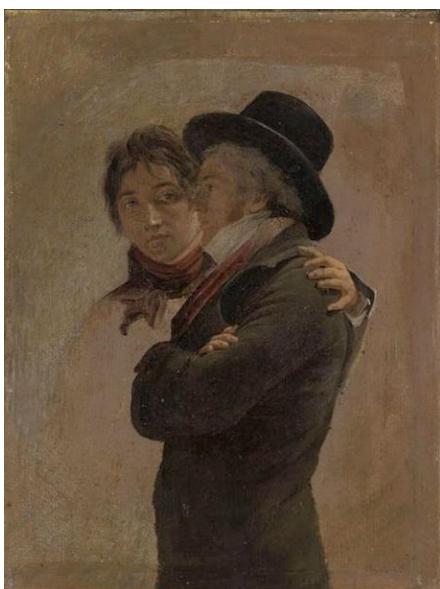


Fig.4: Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Louis Boilly et Simon Chenard*, c.1798
oil on paper laid down on canvas
24 x 18 cm.
Palais des Beaux Arts de Lille
Inv. no. P384

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Fig.5: Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Réunion d'artistes dans l'atelier d'Isabey*, 1798

oil on canvas

71.5 x 111.0 cm.

Musée du Louvre, Paris

Inv. no. RF 1290 bis