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The (in)visible woman: portraying Marie-Jacob Godefroid, restauratrice in eighteenth-century Paris

Yasemin Altun

La gloire des femmes est de faire peu parler d'elles ; bien différentes des hommes qui jouent à visage découvert tous les rôles [sic] que les passions leur distribuent sur le grand théâtre du monde, les femmes ne doivent jouer, pour ainsi dire, que *derrière la toile*.

Pierre-Joseph Boudier de Villemert, *L'Ami des femmes*, 1758.

Pour faire revivre les couleurs des tableaux, ôter tout le noir, & les rendre comme neufs. Il faut mettre par-derrière la toile une couche de la composition suivante [...]

Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt, «Tableau», in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 1765.

Softly lit against a dark wall, a woman gazes at viewers with mild composure (Fig. 1). Wrinkles etch her skin between the brows and at the chin. A luminous set of pearls frames her face, along with a neat *coiffe* of powdered, gray hair. Posing her body at a three-quarter turn, she stands with her hands folded over a chairback upholstered in mauve brocade. A cinched curtain of burgundy velvet hangs in the shadow of her left side, echoing the elegant slope of her shoulders. Layers of lace cascade down her neck and the cropped sleeves of her champagne *robe à la française*, decorated at the bodice with a large turquoise bow.

In 1755, Marie-Jacob Godefroid (c. 1705-1775) sat for this portrait from the society pastellist Jean Valade (1710-1787). Her simple and respectable appearance typifies what Neil Jeffares has called the 'quiet refinement' of Valade's mid-century representations of the French *bourgeoisie*¹. Indeed, Godefroid's portrait displays the intimate handling of textures and warm tones that the native to Poitou frequently used to flatter his sitters². Behind this prim pastel façade, however, is a woman at the height of her career as a leading art restorer in eighteenth-century Paris.

Born in Paris around 1705, Marie-Jacob van Merle descended from a Flemish family of artists. Her grandfather and father had been master-painters in the Paris corporation of painters and sculptors and were also active as print dealers in the French capital during the late seventeenth century³. Little is known about Marie-Jacob until 1726, when she married the art dealer Ferdinand Joseph

1 Neil Jeffares, « Jean VALADE », *Dictionary of Pastellists Before 1800*, <http://www.pastellists.com/Articles/Valade.pdf>, dernière mise à jour le 6 décembre 2022.

2 On Valade, see René Crozet, « Notes sur le pastelliste Jean Valade (1710-1787) », *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 1943, p. 35-46 ; Marie-Hélène Trope, *Jean Valade, peintre ordinaire du roi, 1710-1787*, cat. exp., Poitiers, musée Sainte-Croix, 22 juin-31 août 1993, Poitiers, Musées de la ville de Poitiers/Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest, 1993 ; N. Jeffares, « Jean Valade's Portraits of the Faventines Family », *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 26, 2003, p. 217-250.

3 Maxime Préaud, « Jacques van Merle A Flemish Dealer in Paris », *Print Quarterly*, vol. 1, n°2, juin 1984, p. 81-95.



Fig. 1 : Jean Valade, *Portrait de Mme Godefroid, née Marie-Jacob van Merle*, 1755, pastel sur papier bleu collé sur toile, 74 x 59 cm, Orléans, musée des Beaux-Arts. Photo © Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans.

Godefroid (before 1709-1741). For the next fifteen years, Madame Godefroid collaborated with her husband in the trade of selling and restoring pictures. The couple ran this business from their home along the cloister of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois. Concurrently, Marie-Jacob developed her skills in painting and acquired guild membership in 1736 through her paternal line⁴. Five years later, her husband died unexpectedly in a duel with Jérôme François Chantereau over the attribution of a picture⁵.

The then widow Godefroid swiftly took charge of her family workshop and seven children. She was soon also entrusted with caring for paintings in the French royal collection; in 1743, she inherited this position from her husband and held it until her own death in 1775. During her long and prolific

4 *Liste generale des noms et surnoms de tous les maîtres sculpteurs, peintres, marbriers, doreurs, etoffeurs & enlumineurs de cette ville & fauxbourgs de Paris [...]*, Paris, Houry Père, 1753, p. 63.

5 Jules Guiffrey (éd.), « Joseph-Ferdinand Godefroy, maître peintre. Procès-verbal et information sur sa mort violente (1741) », *Nouvelles archives de l'art français*, t. IV, 1883, p. 394-417. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2061803/f417.item>

service to the Crown, she treated hundreds of prized works of French patrimony⁶. Simultaneously, she amassed a loyal private clientele of art *amateurs* that included the Comte de Caylus and Louis Antoine Crozat, Baron de Thiers.

Marie-Jacob Godefroid thus mediated multiple stations in art and in life. As a widow for most of her adulthood, “she shared roles with men and women, and yet differed from both”, as Janine Lanza has written about the “ambiguous” position that widows occupied in *Ancien Régime* civil law and guild statute⁷. As one of the first professional painting restorers in France, Godefroid cultivated the diverse skillset of an artist, dealer, and connoisseur. More precisely, as both a royally pensioned restorer and the head of a private business that sold and restored paintings, she traversed State and market spheres of artistic activity. How did these liminal identities coalesce into one portrait?

This essay uses the little-studied likeness of Godefroid to explore some of the dynamics of (in) visibility that characterized her life and work as a widowed *restauratrice*. Contemporary reviewers wrote nearly nothing of the portrait when Valade exhibited it in 1755 at the Salon of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. Thereafter, it was kept by the sitter’s family until an unknown date. In 2019, it resurfaced at auction and was acquired by the Fine Arts Museum in Orléans through State preemption. Likely due to its only recent public accessibility as part of the French national collections, the portrait was virtually unremarked by scholars until 2020⁸. This delay comes despite Godefroid’s long-recognized importance to the history of painting restoration in France, and notwithstanding the rapid advances made in this field and in feminist art history within the last few decades⁹.

The belated reemergence of this image may seem fitting for a woman who was what Melissa Hyde has termed “quietly ambitious”¹⁰. For decades, Godefroid specialized in caring for the reverse side of paintings—literally “behind the scenes” of art objects. This perspective reflects the back rooms of shops and salons where she often executed her treatments, such as relining old canvases. Moreover, it aligns with moralist writings published in her lifetime, which prescribed women in general and old, widowed women in particular to withdraw from society and act with self-effacing deference toward male authority. Yet in the 1750s, the widow Godefroid did make her work visible to a public increasingly interested in the physical durability of artistic materials and techniques¹¹. Moreover, since about 1749, she had been charged, alongside her colleague François-Louis Colins (1699-1760), with overseeing a sweeping campaign to revamp the French royal paintings collection in preparation for the opening of the Luxembourg Gallery, a project that, as Andrew McClellan has

6 For a list of la veuve Godefroid’s principal restorations, see Nathalie Volle, Béatrice Lauwick, et Isabelle Cabillic (dir.), *Dictionnaire historique des restaurateurs. Tableaux et œuvres sur papier, Paris, 1750-1950*, Paris, Mare & Martin/Louvre éditions, 2020, p. 443-445.

7 Janine Lanza, *From Wives to Widows in Early Modern Paris : Gender, Economy, and Law*, Burlington, Ashgate, coll. « Women and gender in the early modern world », 2007, p. 4.

8 Since 2020, the portrait has appeared with brief description in : N. Volle, B. Lauwick, et I. Cabillic (dir.), *Dictionnaire historique des restaurateurs, op. cit.*, p. 443 ; Dominique Brême, « Portrait de Madame Godefroid née Marie-Jacob van Merlen », in Dominique Brême, Olivia Voisin (dir.), *Le Trait et l’ombre. Dessins français du musée des Beaux-Arts d’Orléans*, cat. exp., Sceaux, musée du Domaine départemental, 6 mai-31 décembre 2022, Milan, Silvana, 2022, p. 178-179 ; N. Jeffares, « Jean VALADE », art. cit.

9 Godefroid features in most histories of painting restoration in France published since the nineteenth century. For a bibliography, see N. Volle, B. Lauwick, et I. Cabillic (dir.), *Dictionnaire historique des restaurateurs, op. cit.*, p. 445, to which I would add Ann Massing, *Painting Restoration Before La Restauration : The Origins of the Profession in France*, London/Cambridge, Harvey Miller/The Hamilton Kerr Institute, 2012, p. 63-89.

10 Melissa Hyde, « Ambitions, Modest and Otherwise of Two Parisian Painters : Marie-Anne Loir and Catherine Lusurier », *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 50, 2021, p. 84.

11 Oliver Wunsch, *A Delicate Matter : Art, Fragility, and Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France*, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024.

argued, was integral to the Crown's mid-century program of cultural-political reform¹². Valade's modest depiction of Godefroid therefore belies her professional prestige at the time when the pastel was presented to Salon-goers.

Merging recent studies of female portraiture, widowhood, and painting restoration in eighteenth-century Paris, this essay argues that Godefroid's portrait camouflaged her activeness as an intermediary within royal-administrative and commercial realms of art behind the benign appearance of a dowager. As a piece of visual culture, and one shown at such a prominent venue like the Salon, Valade's pastel expresses broader period perceptions of the proper female widow and the latent figure of the art restorer through its interwoven and codified representation of the sitter's gender, age, marital status, and vocation. In addition to Godefroid's numerous treatment reports now held in the *Maison du roi* series of the Archives nationales de France, which have been well thumbed by scholars, this picture constitutes a valuable primary source for understanding how she constructed and performed her identity as a restorer by embracing socially acceptable forms of female behavior. As such, not only does the image enhance the scholarly consensus that art restoration in pre-revolutionary France was a vague activity whose practitioners had not yet developed clear modes of professional self-fashioning¹³. Furthermore, it supports the recurrent view in feminist art history that portraiture was a key means by which women asserted their agency as intermediaries within early modern art worlds¹⁴.

Derrière la toile : Women in Eighteenth-Century Art Worlds

As defined by cultural sociologist Howard Becker, an "art world" comprises a network of cooperative activities related to the production, distribution, and consumption of visual and performative art¹⁵. Operating throughout this dynamic field are various 'intermediaries' who intervene between an artist and the public, thereby determining the meanings and values that an artwork accrues during its existence¹⁶. While not explicitly feminist, this holistic concept has proven instrumental in revising myths of the isolated or exceptional woman artist in order to better account for the widespread, interconnected roles that women played in shaping eighteenth-century visual art and culture—not only as artists, but also as patrons, collectors, critics, dealers, connoisseurs, and restorers.

In her touchstone essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', Linda Nochlin hypothesized that the social sciences could provide effective analytical tools for deconstructing modern, liberal ideologies about art as the free expression of singular, male genius. Instead, Nochlin asserted, a work of art arises from concrete, historical conditions contextualized within social structures such as academies and markets¹⁷. Answering this call for a more sociological, institutionally oriented history of art, scholars have retraced women's pervasive networks in eighteenth-century art worlds, revealing how their personal-professional connections imbricated

12 Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre : Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth Century Paris*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1999.

13 Noémie Étienne, « Le restaurateur et l'espace public – Stratégies publicitaires et visibilité des restaurations à Paris entre 1775 et 1815 », in Ead. et Léonie Hénaut (dir.), *L'Histoire à l'atelier. Restaurer les œuvres d'art, XVIII^e-XXI^e siècles*, Lyon, Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2012, p. 303-328.

14 Cynthia Lawrence (dir.), *Women and Art in Early Modern Europe : Patrons, Collectors, and Connoisseurs*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997 ; Melissa Hyde et Jennifer Milam (dir.), *Women, Art, and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Aldershot/London, Ashgate/Routledge, 2003 ; Patrizia Cavazzini, *Painting as Business in Early Seventeenth-Century Rome*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008, p. 41-43.

15 Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

16 André Chastel et Krzysztof Pomian, « Les Intermédiaires », *Revue de l'art*, n° 77, 1987, p. 5-9.

17 Linda Nochlin, « Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? », *ARTnews*, vol. 69, n°9, janvier 1971, p. 26.

art academies, guilds, and manufactories with domestic workshops and private circuits of commission¹⁸. Adjoining these efforts, other researchers have deployed data-driven methods to chart women artists' increased participation in public exhibitions during the Revolutionary era¹⁹.

The visual and iconographic analysis of portraiture has served as another effective means of recovering evidence of women's pursuits as artists, as well as intermediaries and patrons of art. Art historians have highlighted women's strategic uses of this pictorial genre to control, construct, and communicate their various identities as makers of aesthetic taste and culture. Notable examples are the Marquise de Pompadour and the Marquise du Châtelet, who strategically adopted norms of feminine comportment in their commissioned likenesses. By choosing to present themselves in the customary guises of Vestal Virgin, Minerva, and other mythological or allegorical figures, women artists and elite female patrons of art could more passably advance their creative and intellectual ambitions in the central arenas of Enlightenment culture such as salon gatherings and art exhibitions²⁰.

I propose that art restoration was another such guise. Before it was organized within museum bureaucracy, this activity was considered a trade secret and minor routine of painters' workshops. Gradually since the mid-eighteenth century, it transformed into a distinct occupation that catered to new intellectual and economic interests in the attribution and materiality of art. By the Revolutionary era, it was advertised and debated in the press, theorized in dedicated literature, and propagandized for nationalist political agendas in France and abroad²¹. Before then, however, caring for the art of others within household workshops would have suited the recommendation that women live out of the public eye, '*derrière la toile*' of male sociability²².

Literally 'behind the curtain/canvas', this idiom, native to theater parlance, features in the popular eighteenth-century conduct book for women, Pierre-Joseph Boudier de Villemert's *L'Ami des femmes* (1758). Notably, the phrase also appears in contemporary recipes for restoration. As cited in my epigraph, the chevalier de Jaucourt used it in his entry on 'Painting' for Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1765). There, the chevalier advised readers to apply a mixture of tallow, walnut oil, and ground pigments 'behind a canvas' in order to render its dull painted surface as new. This semantic overlap illustrates the opportunity that restoration posed for women to exploit its humbling associations with artisanal labor to gain a livelihood and occasionally to even achieve renown, without appearing to contravene cultural conventions of feminine comportment.

18 M. Hyde, « Women and the Visual Arts in the Age of Marie-Antoinette », in Marianne Roland Michel et Eik Kahng (dir.), *Anne Vallayer-Coster : Painter to the Court of Marie-Antoinette*, cat. exp., Washington DC, NGA, Dallas Museum of Art, New York The Frick Collection, juin 2002-mars 2003, Dallas/New Haven/London, Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2002, p. 74-93 ; Jennifer Germann, « Tracing Marie-Éléonore Godefroid : Women's Artistic Networks in Early Nineteenth-Century Paris », *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 41, 2012, p. 55-84.

19 Séverine Sofio, *Artistes femmes, la parenthèse enchantée, XVIII^e-XIX^e siècles*, Paris, CNRS, coll. « Culture & Société », 2016 ; Paris A. Spies-Gans, *A Revolution on Canvas : The Rise of Women Artists in London and Paris, 1760-1830*, London, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2022.

20 Mary Sheriff, « The Naked Truth ? The Allegorical Frontispiece and Woman's Ambition in 18th-Century France », in Cristelle Louise Baskins et Lisa Rosenthal (dir.), *Early Modern Visual Allegory : Embodying Meaning*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, p. 253-256.

21 N. Étienne, *La Restauration des peintures à Paris (1750-1815). Pratique et discours sur la matérialité des œuvres d'art*, Rennes, PUR, coll. « Art & Société », 2012.

22 On female art restorers before 1800, see *Ead.*, « La pensée dans la pratique : Le cas de Marie-Jacob Godefroid, restauratrice de tableaux au XVIII^e siècle », in Mechthild Fend, M. Hyde et Anne Lafont (dir.), *Plumes et pinceaux. Discours de femmes sur l'art en Europe, 1750-1850*, Dijon/Paris, Presses du réel/INHA, coll. « Œuvres en sociétés. Anthologies », 2012, p. 80-81, <https://books.openedition.org/inha/4065> ; A. Massing, *Painting Restoration Before La Restauration*, *op. cit.*, p. 15-29 ; N. Volle, B. Lauwick, et I. Cabillic (dir.), *Dictionnaire historique des restaurateurs*, *op. cit.*, p. 49, 52-56.

As the eighteenth century's most prominent *restauratrice*, Godefroid represents an exemplary case of a female intermediary. Before examining how she visually negotiated that status in her 1755 portrait, one should note that in English the phrase 'female intermediary' is a tautology insofar as it underscores the oppressive role that women themselves have traditionally played in forging patrilineages. Building on Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of kinship, feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin notes:

It is certainly not difficult to find ethnographic and historical examples of trafficking in women. Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold. Far from being confined to the 'primitive' world, these practices seem only to become more pronounced and commercialized in more 'civilized' societies²³.

Such was true for women in *Ancien Régime* France; at the highest echelon, the Salic law of succession barred women from ruling as queens, limiting their functions to securing political alliances through arranged marriage and to birthing male heirs. Likewise, tradeswomen could inherit their father or husband's mastership to the Paris corporation of painters and sculptors, but they could not marry outside this guild without forfeiting their membership. Nor could they vote or hold administrative positions²⁴. Nonetheless, the archive abounds with historical evidence of early modern women who defied the sexist exchange of their bodies and personhood by working with some autonomy in the circulation and maintenance of luxury and artisanal goods, like paintings. Thus, the researcher's task is to analyze the strategies by which these women alchemized their personal situations as daughters, mothers, wives, and widows into professional identities within and beyond the 'family economy'²⁵.

'Le portrait de Madame Godeffroid, chargée de l'entretien des tableaux du roi'

Few critics seem to have noticed Godefroid's portrait when Valade exhibited it at the Salon of 1755, his first as an academician. They preferred works by the pastellist's more-famous competitor, Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. That year, La Tour presented an imposing portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour as an enlightened patroness of the arts²⁶. The artist and his model garnered ample praise, with Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty noting that '*Rien n'a plus attiré les regards & l'admiration du Public*'²⁷. By contrast, Gautier wrote curtly, without naming Godefroid as the sitter, that Valade's '*portrait sur-tout d'une Dame habillée en citron est d'un mauvais ton de couleur*'. He went on to complain: '*Les portraits du Salon sont en si grand nombre, & la plupart si médiocres que l'on ne finiroit pas si on vouloit en détailler les qualités*'²⁸. Gautier's displeasure distills the slew of caustic critiques made since the 1740s about the exorbitant number of mediocre portraits, often commissioned by women, that artists displayed at the Salon, allegedly diluting the potency of the French school of

23 Gayle Rubin, « The Traffic in Women : Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex », in Rayna R. Reiter (dir.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York/London, Monthly Review Press, 1975, p. 175.

24 J. Lanza, *From Wives to Widows*, *op. cit.*

25 Daryl Hafter et Nina Kushner (dir.), *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century France*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2015.

26 Elise Goodman, *The Portraits of Madame de Pompadour : Celebrating the Femme Savante*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, p. 118-138 ; M. Hyde, *Making up the Rococo : François Boucher and his Critics*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2006, p. 112-114.

27 Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, « Magazin philosophique, ou supplément aux observations sur l'histoire naturelle, sur la physique & sur la peinture », *Observations sur l'histoire naturelle, sur la physique et sur la peinture*, Paris, Delaguerre, t. XIII, 1755, p. 58.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

painting²⁹. In the words of another reviewer in 1755: '*A propos de portraits je vous avouerai que je suis indigné d'en voir un si grand nombre dans le Salon. On ne devrait se faire peindre que lorsqu'on se sent un personnage important*³⁰'.

Presented in a fashionable dress and in the culturally femininized medium of pastel, Godefroid's portrait got lost in the sea of modern, 'rococo' faces that flooded the Louvre walls, much to the disapproval of conservative critics. By contrast, the work's title in the *livret* aligned her with royal arts administrators, who were justifiably '*personnages importants*'. If Gautier penned the only response to Valade's 1755 showing, the official catalog did acknowledge Godefroid's role as resident restorer to the Crown. Listed among the pastellist's eleven portraits is: '*Le Portrait de Madame Godeffroid, chargée de l'entretien des Tableaux du Roi*³¹'. This entry identifies Godefroid as an employee of Louis XV, thereby associating her with the late director of the Bâtiments du roi, Charles-François Lenormand de Tournehem, and his successor, Abel-François Poisson, the Marquis de Marigny, whose portraits were also up at the Salon that year³². Moreover, the description corresponds with the official title that the Bâtiments gave the widow in 1743. As such, it captures what Nina Kushner and Daryl Hafter have called a woman's 'work identity'³³. Functioning as a job title, the entry indicates that Godefroid had a publicly recognized persona as a restorer that was distinct from her private roles as a mother and a widow.

As a painting restorer, Godefroid specialized in the transfer of old panels and canvases onto fresh supports. She also performed a procedure known as cradling, which entails attaching a wooden framework to the back of a panel to prevent warping. These treatments ensured the structural integrity of paintings but were invisible to art collectors and critics more preoccupied with pictorial surfaces. However, Godefroid did capitalize on a new widespread fascination in Paris with the physical aging of painting. For example, another Salon critic in 1755, although they did not reference the widow's portrait, did recognize her aptitude for the transfer technique. While assessing pictures made using an ancient method of painting in wax, whose comeback the Comte de Caylus championed as a more stable medium than oil, this reviewer credited '*la Dame Geoffroi*', as well as Robert Picault (1705-1781), for inventing a process of reviving decayed paintings by relocating their paint layers onto new bases³⁴.

In 1755, Godefroid was at the peak of her career. Since 1749, she had been busy restoring dozens of Louis XV's paintings that would soon go up at the newly public Luxembourg Gallery. In 1752, at the salon of the Académie de Saint-Luc, she had exhibited four tableaux that she had treated – much to the king's satisfaction³⁵. As described in the *livret*, Godefroid took this opportunity to advertise her proficiency with multiple restoration procedures, notably the transfer technique that had become a press sensation whetted by the notoriously secret methods of her competitor Picault. As one reviewer for the *Journal œconomique* wrote of Godefroid's presentation at the Arsenal in 1752: '*le secret du sieur Picaut [sic], de transporter les peintures sur des toiles neuves, n'est plus unique; Madame la veuve Godefroy a exposé quatre tableaux ainsi transportés*³⁶'. On the heels of this

29 M. Hyde, *Making up the Rococo*, op. cit.

30 *Lettre à un partisan du bon goût sur l'exposition des tableaux faite dans le grand Sallon du Louvre le 28 août 1755*, Paris, s.n., s.d., p. 11.

31 Abel François Poisson de Marigny (éd.), *Explication des peintures, sculptures, et gravures de Messieurs de l'Académie royale [...]*, Paris, Collombat, 1755, p. 26.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 14, 41.

33 D. Hafter et N. Kushner (dir.), *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century France*, op. cit., p. 10.

34 « Exposition de Tableaux dans le Salon du Louvre, par l'Académie Royale de Peinture & Sculpture », *Journal œconomique*, décembre 1755, p. 90.

35 Académie de Saint-Luc, *Explication des ouvrages de peinture et de sculpture de Messieurs de l'Académie de S. Luc*, Paris, Houry Père, 1752, p. 2-3.

36 « Exposition des tableaux de l'Académie de Saint Luc, commencée le 15 mai dans les salles de l'Arsenal », *Journal*

successful showing, in 1753 Godefroid received the rare privilege of studio space in the Louvre's Galerie d'Apollon, an honor which symbolized her installation as one of the Crown's principal restorers. Indeed, that year the Bâtiments solicited cost estimates from Godefroid and Picault for treating a portrait then attributed to Hans Holbein. After she promised to achieve the same result as Picault for 300 livres less, the widow was selected for the task and even allowed to exhibit her restoration of the painting at the Luxembourg in 1754³⁷.

During the same period, Valade's prospects with the Bâtiments seem to have been less promising. Sometime after his reception to the Académie royale in 1754, the Poitevin wrote to Marigny, offering to gift the Crown several portraits to hang in the royal residences. His request was denied³⁸. Furthermore, in 1755 Valade was a newly minted academician, and one who rarely attended its assemblies³⁹. He had participated in the Salon as an *agrée* since 1751 but did not gain any traction with reviewers until the 1760s. Why then, given her own achievements, would Godefroid choose him to portray her⁴⁰?

Selecting this lesser-known artist expected to attract little attention at the Salon would have aligned with the widow's broader approach to advancing in her career. Compared to the in-demand pastel portraitists La Tour and Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, Valade was a more sensible choice in terms of cost and reputation. Likewise, Godefroid offered her services to the Bâtiments for lower prices and in less time and was more transparent about her treatment methods than Picault. Noémie Étienne has cited these more reasonable working conditions as evidence that Godefroid deliberately embraced a persona of modesty and disinterestedness in order to secure her employment by the Crown⁴¹. Furthermore, as a dealer, the widow may have known Valade from his own side hustle in selling pictures⁴². Regardless, the mystery surrounding her portrait commission makes further attention to the visual qualities of the image imperative when assessing how Godefroid crafted her appearance as a strategy of professional self-promotion.

The Ambiguities of Representing a *restauratrice*

At the Salon of 1795, Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun (1748-1813) exhibited a self-portrait that conspicuously conveys the components of his proficiency as an art restorer (Fig. 2). Evidence of Lebrun's abilities at cleaning and relining pictures has been attested since his early training as a painter in the 1760s. During the final decades of the *Ancien Régime*, he transitioned to art dealing and also developed a reputation as a connoisseur and collector, particularly of Northern pictures. After 1789 he adapted to volatile political regimes to thrive as a dealer-expert with an international clientele and served as a vocal consultant in restoration and hanging campaigns for the Louvre Museum administrations⁴³. In his self-portrait, Lebrun holds a loaded palette and brushes before a large canvas to signal his ambitious artistic practice. With his other hand, he opens one volume of

œconomique, août 1752, p. 84.

37 A. F. Poisson de Marigny, *Correspondance de M. de Marigny avec Coypel, Lépicié et Cochin*, éd. Marc Furcy-Raynaud, *Revue de l'art français ancien et moderne*, t. XXIX (1903), p. 72.
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5512615m/f85.item.r=coypel>

38 AN, O1, 1920, s.d., Lettre du Sr. Valade à M. le Marquis de Marigny.

39 R. Crozet, « Notes sur le pastelliste Jean Valade (1710-1787) », art. cit., p. 35.

40 I thank Maxime Bray for prompting me to consider this question.

41 N. Étienne et Paulette Robic, « Veuve et déviance : Une approche comparée des stratégies d'entreprise », *Journées d'histoire de la comptabilité et du management*, 2010, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00465860>, mis en ligne le 22 mars 2010, consulté le 15 janvier 2024.

42 In his remarks on the Salon of 1769, Denis Diderot alluded slyly to Valade's dealing in painting. See M.H. Trope, *Jean Valade*, op. cit., p. 37.

43 Darius Spieth, *Revolutionary Paris and the Market for Netherlandish Art*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, p. 128-239.

his illustrated history of German and Netherlandish painting, referencing his intellectual prowess as a connoisseur and his role in facilitating the influx of Northern art to the Louvre that year⁴⁴. The Egyptian block sculpture over his shoulder and the cameo pendant and ring around his neck and finger allude to his dealing in antiquities.



Fig. 2 : Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, *Self-Portrait*, 1795, huile sur toile, 131 x 99 cm, coll. part. Photo © Zuri Swimmer / Alamy Stock Photo.

By contrast, Godefroid does not openly assert her credentials. Rather, through a void of vocational attributes, her portrait reflects the locational and social ambiguity of restoration for the widow's earlier generation. As a secondary line of work usually 'annexed' to art making and selling, this activity did not yet have clear theoretical contours, nor was it regulated by an academy or guild⁴⁵. This situation favored the informal participation of women within family workshops, which,

⁴⁴ Charlotte Guichard, « Le marché au cœur de l'invention muséale ? Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun et le Louvre (1792-1802) », *Revue de synthèse*, vol. 132, n°2, 2011, p. 97-98.

⁴⁵ Patrick Michel, *Le Commerce du tableau à Paris dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle. Acteurs et pratiques*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, coll. « Histoire de l'art », 2008, p. 66-73.

unfortunately, was rarely documented. To overcome this archival absence, it is fruitful to search not for evidence of female restorers as such, but as embedded within the contemporary domains of artistic production and consumption.

Godefroid, for one, is listed as a painter (*'maîtresse peintresse'*) in the membership register of the Académie de Saint-Luc, not as a restorer⁴⁶. Long before her, one of the first restorers of the French royal collection was a female painter, the portraitist Marguerite Bunel, née Bahuche (before 1595-1632)⁴⁷. Similarly, in the 1710s collectors wrote letters to the pastellist Rosalba Carriera asking her to mend their damaged or imperfect oil paintings⁴⁸. Therefore, it seems that some women restored paintings as part of their regular workshop practice as artists.

As buyers and sellers of art, women frequented shops like the one owned by the prominent merchant Edme-François Gersaint and famously rendered by his friend Antoine Watteau in 1720⁴⁹. Following Watteau, genre painters Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberg⁵⁰ and Étienne Jeaurat⁵¹ depicted women populating the shops and regular art fairs of Paris in the 1760s. Around 1785, Pierre-Antoine Demachy represented a crowded auction of paintings where people of various social classes converge⁵². These scenes all acknowledge the active presence of women throughout the public spheres of artistic consumption during Godefroid's time. Multiple sources attest to the widow's own work as a dealer. She advertised her merchandise in widely read periodicals such as the *Avant-coureur*⁵³. Her colleagues included the aforementioned Gersaint, who praised the widow's diligent restorations in his 1748 joint-estate sales catalog of her deceased husband and the banker-jeweler Charles Godefroy⁵⁴. The future *premiers peintres* Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre and Joseph-Marie Vien were among those who frequented her boutique on Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, which, according to her 1775 estate inventory, held an extensive stock of paintings⁵⁵.

Still, Valade did not clearly reference his sitter's agency within the art market. Nor did he deploy the emerging iconography of the female painter at her easel⁵⁶. Instead, he outfitted his client with all the accoutrements of a middle-class matron: she exposes little skin at her décolletage, bears a complexion clear of rouge, and covers her head with a demure butterfly cap. These details cast

⁴⁶ *Liste generale, op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁴⁷ A. Massing, *Painting Restoration Before La Restauration, op. cit.*, p. 21 ; *Artistes parisiens du XVI^e et du XVII^e siècles. Donations, contrats de mariage, testaments, inventaires, etc.*, éd. J. Guiffrey, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, coll. « Histoire générale de Paris », 1915, p. 81-86 ; Idelette Ardouin-Weiss, *Les Familles du peintre Jacob Bunel et de sa femme Marguerite Bahuche de 1517 à 1636*, Tours, Centre généalogique de Touraine, 1984.

⁴⁸ Rosalba Carriera, *Rosalba Carriera : lettere, diari, frammenti*, éd. Bernardina Sani, Florence, L.S. Olschki, coll. « Studi. Accademia toscana di scienze e lettere « La Colombaria », 1985, t. I, p. 221, 355 ; Angela Oberer, *The Life and Work of Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757) : The Queen of Pastel*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, coll. « Visual and material culture, 1300-1700 », 2020, p. 107.

⁴⁹ Antoine Watteau, *L'Enseigne de Gersaint*, 1720, oil on canvas, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin.

⁵⁰ Louis-Nicolas van Blarenberg, *The Fair of Saint Germain*, 1763, miniature painted on vellum, London, Wallace Collection, inv. M17.

⁵¹ Étienne Jeaurat, *Les Trois pucelles*, c. 1760, oil on canvas, Private Collection. See Elisabeth Bourguinat, *Les Rues de Paris au XVIII^e siècle. Le regard de Louis Sébastien Mercier*, cat. exp., Paris, musée Carnavalet, 18 mars-20 juin 1999, Paris, Éditions des musées de la Ville de Paris, 1999, p. 12.

⁵² Pierre-Antoine Demachy, *Vente publique de tableaux*, c. 1785, oil on canvas, Paris, musée Carnavalet, inv. P1932.

⁵³ « Peinture », *L'Avant-coureur*, 20 mai 1765, p. 306-307.

⁵⁴ François Marandet, « The Banker Charles Godefroy and His Dealings in Paintings, or the Secrets of an Account Book Revealed (1738-48) », *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 150, n°1265, août 2008, p. 521-528.

⁵⁵ P. Michel, *Le Commerce du tableau à Paris, op. cit.*, p. 88, 190, 195.

⁵⁶ Although this iconography did not emerge widely in France until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, it had been present in Italy and the Netherlands since the sixteenth century. See Marie-Jo Bonnet, « Femmes peintres à leur travail : de l'autoportrait comme manifeste politique (XVIII^e-XIX^e siècles) », *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, vol. 49, n°3, juillet-septembre 2002, p. 140-167.

Godefroid's portrait within the eighteenth-century visual typology of the decorous old woman, as cultivated by Madame Geoffrin and Queen Marie Leszczyńska⁵⁷. Valade repeated the same features in his later portraits, notably of the widow Marguerite-Catherine Baudry (17..-1785) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 : Jean Valade, *Portrait de Marguerite-Catherine Baudry*, 1773, pastel on paper, 80 x 65,5 cm. Poitiers, Collection des Musées de la Ville de Poitiers et de la Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest, © Musées de Poitiers / Christian Vignaud.

The likenesses of Godefroid and Baudry both adhere to cultural expectations of female widows and mature women⁵⁸. According to such expectations, a widow should behave in respect for her deceased husband, just as an old woman should gracefully accept her loss of physical attractiveness.

⁵⁷ Jessica L. Fripp, « Growing Old in Public in Eighteenth-Century France : Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin and Marie Leszczyńska », in J. Milam et Nicola Parsons (dir.), *Making Ideas Visible in the Eighteenth Century*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2021, p. 111-134.

⁵⁸ These two groups did not always coincide, as women often became widowed while still quite young. In this case, they were expected to remarry, lest they succumb to the reckless and licentious widow stereotype embodied by Laclos's Marquise de Merteuil and Molière's Célimène. On widowed and/or old women in French literature, see Joan Hinde Stewart, *The Enlightenment of Age : Women, Letters and Growing Old in Eighteenth-Century France*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2010.

In her well-known *Traité de la vieillesse* first published in 1747, the Marquise de Lambert (1647-1733) advised women of a certain age to make 'une honorable retraite' from the public eye and live a pious, domestic existence⁵⁹. Religious texts too urged widows to remarry or enter convents so as to limit the greater independence brought by their new legal rank, which, as Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie notes 'est généralement présenté comme une situation intermédiaire [...] caractérisée par sa brièveté'⁶⁰. This translated into contemporary works of visual culture that depicted widows as devout mothers, notably Jean-Baptiste Greuze's painting *La Veuve et son curé*⁶¹. In 1786, Greuze advertised prints available after this painting in the *Journal de Paris*, where he described the virtuous widow as a 'mère [qui] sourit avec un regard doux & modeste, & tourne ses yeux vers le Curé; les deux mains ouvertes de la mère expriment son admiration & sa reconnaissance'⁶².

In reality, however, many women embraced the legal and economic privileges accorded to widows during the *Ancien Régime* and pursued artisanal careers passed on by their husbands, and which exceeded the household duties expected for their sex. In fact, all the women who are recorded as restorers of the French royal collection were widows. Marguerite Bahuche assisted her husband Jacob Bunel, 'peintre et valet de chambre du Roi', until his death in 1614. Thereafter, she continued to inhabit Bunel's lodgings in the Grande Galerie du Louvre and took up his charge of caring for the king's paintings with her nephew⁶³. After Bahuche, similar positions were held by la veuve Lange, la veuve Dubois, and, of course, la veuve Godefroid⁶⁴.

In the 1755 portrait, the form and placement of the sitter's hands do hint at her civil and professional status. The modeling of Godefroid's hands and arms is strikingly similar to Baudry's pose. This visual resemblance suggests that Valade recycled certain compositional elements from his early commissions according to similar requests from clients regarding their desired mode of representation. Unlike Baudry, however, Godefroid exposes her hands, which look somewhat timeworn. She does not wear silk gloves or a cameo bracelet, which Valade sometimes included in his female portraits as a tribute to the sitter's husband and to her own social refinement. Instead, the restorer's bare, unadorned hands appear functional and primed for labor, matching the uprightness of her posture, the sturdiness of her compact silhouette, and the vitality in her eyes. These features urge us to regard her as a dignified worker rather than as a lady confined to the home.

Indeed, the widow had numerous workspaces. In Paris, she shuttled between her private studio and shopfront on the rue Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, and her nearby lodgings at the Louvre⁶⁵. As disclosed in her posthumous inventory, she also possessed another home in Passy that contained a 'chambre servant d'atelier'⁶⁶. For certain large-scale projects, it was necessary for her to work

59 Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, marquise de Lambert, *Traité de la vieillesse*, in *Œuvres de Madame la Marquise de Lambert* [avant 1733], Paris, Veuve Ganeau, 1748, t. I, p. 41-79, here p. 74.

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bd6t57841930/f105.item>

60 My emphasis. Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *Être veuve sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Belin, coll. « Essais d'histoire moderne », 2001, p. 103.

61 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La Veuve et son curé*, c. 1786, oil on canvas, St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. ГЭ-7521. On early modern images of widows, see Allison M. Levy (dir.), *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Burlington, Ashgate, coll. « Women and gender in the early modern world », 2003 ; Florence Fesneau et Maël Tauziède-Espariat (dir.), *Figures de veuves à l'époque moderne (XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles) : Images d'un statut social accepté, caché, revendiqué ?* Paris, Éditions du GRHAM, 2023.

62 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, « Lettre à MM. Les Curés », *Journal de Paris*, 5 décembre 1786, p. 1412.

63 Léon de Laborde, *La Renaissance des arts à la cour de France ; études sur le seizième siècle*, Paris, L. Potier, 1855, vol. 2, p. 938-939.

64 A. Massing, *Painting Restoration Before La Restauration*, *op. cit.*, p. 15-29.

65 Noémie Etienne has observed how Pierre-Antoine Demachy's painting *Vue de la colonnade du Louvre* (1772, musée du Louvre, Paris) nicely represents the widow Godefroid's imagined commute. See N. Étienne, « A Family Business : Picture Restorers in the Louvre Quarter », *Journal18*, n°2, *Louvre Local*, Fall 2016, <https://www.journal18.org/830>.

66 AN, MC/ET/XXIV/885, 6 décembre 1775, Inventaire après décès de la veuve Godefroid, fol. 11r.

on-site at royal residences in the capital and suburbs. Thus, Godefroid seems to have enjoyed a mobility that suggests the high demand for her services, and which was curtailed only by her declining health after 1773⁶⁷. Furthermore, several gilded frames are listed among the goods in her estate⁶⁸. The position of her hands over the wooden border of the armchair may therefore refer not only to her sale of picture frames, but also to her collaboration with cabinetmakers who carved the cradles she used in her restoration practice⁶⁹.

Perhaps Valade did not depict Godefroid as a female painter because she specialized not in the relatively artistic practice of retouching, but in more labor-intensive tasks like transferring and cradling. Instead, the composition more subtly captures her professionalizing strategy by placing a chair between her and the viewer, which lessens the activeness of her standing pose and symbolizes her deference. To that effect, we may read the placement of Godefroid's hands as a sign of hospitality, as if she were offering her seat to us. The empty spot could pay homage to the widow's late husband, or allude to one of her subsequent business partners, François-Louis Colins.

In fact, Colins' painted portrait was also exhibited at the Salon of 1755 and began circulating in print the following year (Fig. 4)⁷⁰. The colleagues jointly held the title of royal restorers from 1743 until Colins's death, after which point Godefroid received a sole appointment from the Bâtiments⁷¹. Given their display at the same Salon, albeit under different artists, these portraits form imagined pendants, with one subject's seated position complimenting the other's pose before a vacant chair. This arrangement stages the division of labor that characterized their collaborations: while Godefroid usually treated the structure of paintings, Colins retouched the pictorial surface. Yet, regardless of their respective specialties, neither portrait makes any discrete reference to the sitter's work as a restorer, nor, for that matter, as a painter and a dealer.

An etching by Pierre-Jules Hutin (ca. 1720-1763) summarizes the integrality by which women acted as art intermediaries (Fig. 5). This illustration was published in 1755, the same year when Valade executed his portrait of Godefroid, as the frontispiece of the collection of Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn⁷². The print depicts five figures within a *cabinet* filled with pictures hung on the wall and illuminated by a tall window at right. At the center



Fig. 4 : Aert Schouman, d'après Louis Michel van Loo, *Portrait de François-Louis Colins*, 1756, gravure, 14,9 x 9,8 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

67 A. Massing, *Painting Restoration Before La Restauration*, op. cit., p. 73.

68 AN, MC/ET/XXIV/885, 6 décembre 1775, Inventaire après décès de la veuve Godefroid, fol. 7v.

69 N. Volle, B. Lauwick, et I. Cabillic (dir.), *Dictionnaire historique des restaurateurs*, op. cit., p. 445.

70 A. F. Poisson de Marigny (éd.), *Explication des peintures*, op. cit., p. 7-8. On this painting, sold to a private collector in 2022, see Xavier Salmon, *Cent portraits pour un siècle. De la cour à la ville sous les règnes de Louis XV et Louis XVI*, Gent, Snoeck, 2019, p. 165-167. On Colins, see Anne Leclair, « François-Louis Colins (1699-1760), restaurateur des tableaux de Louis XV, marchand et expert à Paris », *Techne*, n°30-31, 2009/2010, p. 125-139.

71 AN, MC/ET/XXIV/692, 29 mai 1743, Convention entre François Louis Colins et Marie Jacob Van Merle, veuve Godefroy.

72 Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn, *Lettre à un amateur de la peinture avec des éclaircissemens historiques sur un cabinet et les auteurs des tableaux qui le composent*, Dresden, G. K. Walther, 1755.



Fig. 5 : Pierre Hutin, *Art critics before a painting of Leda and the Swan*, 1754, gravure, 14.1 x 8,9 cm. Wolfenbüttel, bibliothèque Herzog August, Graph. A1: 1132. Photo © Herzog August Bibliothek.

of the room, a woman dressed in a fitted bodice and striking cross pendant intervenes between two *amateurs* as they inspect a painting. The woman grasps this unframed picture set upon an easel as she looks inquisitively at the gentlemen. Holding a closed fan or perhaps a paintbrush to her mouth in a gesture of contemplation, she judges their response to this image of Leda and the Swan. Godefroid was, in fact, commended for rejoining a dismembered painting of that subject by Correggio⁷³. In 1753, the *Affiches de province* hailed this restoration as evidence of her '*talent merveilleux*'⁷⁴. Attesting to the widow's public recognition as a restorer, this press announcement, like the woman's confident, proprietary hold of the painting in Hutin's print, draws attention to the margins of art objects and the intermediaries whose work thrived there. Godefroid's recently reemerged portrait sheds new light on how women mediated their professional visibility behind a veil of feminine respectability in order to operate within eighteenth-century art worlds.

73 Antonio Allegri, called Correggio, *Leda and the Swan*, c. 1512-1552, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, inv. 218.

74 *Annonces, affiches, et avis divers*, n°30, 25 juillet 1753, p. 117-118.