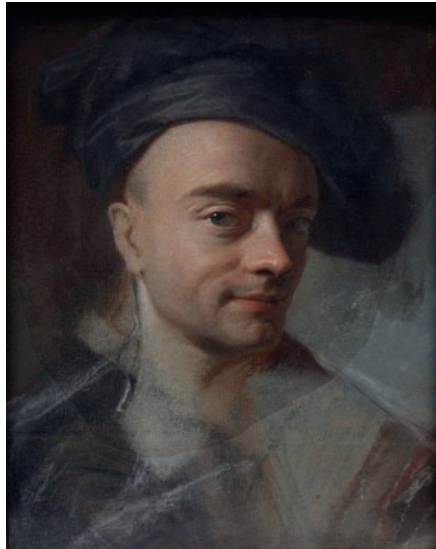




The pastel salons

MAURICE-QUENTIN DE LA TOUR'S STUDIO ARCHIVES, AN INTERNATIONAL TREASURE



Maurice-Quentin DE LA TOUR (1704-1788)
Autoportrait, 18th century, Pastel on paper, inv. LT 3
© Musée des Beaux-Arts Antoine Lécuyer / Luc Couvée

Celebrated across the globe, Maurice-Quentin de la Tour's (1704-1788) studio archives represent the finest part of the museum's collection. A rotation between all these pastels is regularly planned. They allow us to understand the « Prince of Pastelists' » vision and legacy while offering us an insight into France's age of enlightenment.

The museum's collection also includes pastels by artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, which constitute a scientifically coherent set and trace back the history of this technique, from its golden age to the 18th century, until the boldness of the following centuries. Thanks to this rich collection consisting of more than 200 pieces, the museum is considered as a leading heritage institution for pastels.

The visitor's route is organized around three main spots :

- First Salon : The pastel technique and the youth and education of Maurice-Quentin de La Tour
- Second Salon : Maurice-Quentin de La Tour as a pastel artist of Louis XV's era
- Third Salon : Pastel art following the French Revolution

The first salon highlights the artist's early copies as well as his studies, true treasures of the museum found in his studio archives upon his passing. Maurice-Quentin de La Tour worked through several stages : first, he used three different pieces of chalk : black, white and red (sanguine), in order to sketch the features and capture the expression of the subject, focusing his attention on the face, the eyes, the nose and the mouth, before adding color. He excelled in the art of capturing, spontaneously, the very essence of the soul and psychology of his subjects: " They think I only seize the features of their faces, but I penetrate their soul and capture it without their without their knowing ", he said.



These faces are sometimes reduced to hairless masks, without clothes nor accessories, and often envelopped with a shade of blue which was originally intended to blend with the color of the paper on which the artist worked. Unfortunately, the light to which these fragile works were exposed has sun-bleached the paper, which is now beige. Once the artist was satisfied, he would apply a fixative to help the pastel adhere better to the surface. However, this resulted in the appearance of rings or stains, visible on some of these preparatory studies.

In the centre of the table, the display case presents the tools used by pastel artists: boxes of pigments, a soft blender, pastel sticks, and a 19th-century color chart. This collection was brought together thanks to the generosity of Maison Rocher in Paris.

As from 1735, the local artist depicts, using pastels, those who distinguished themselves during the age of Louis XV as artists, dancers, ecclesiastics, members of the royal family, financiers, philosophers, soldiers, " the aristocracy of birth and talent " as he said. The second salon displays some of these wonderful portraits : Voltaire, Rousseau, the abbot Jean-Jacques Huber, the marshal Maurice de Saxe, Marie-Josèphe de Saxe, the actress Marie Fel or the painters Claude Dupouch and Louis de Silvestre. Consequently, on their visit to the Saint-Quentin museum in 1866, the Goncourt brothers enthuse :

« An astounding museum of the life and humanity of a society! As soon as you enter, a singular impression takes hold of you [...] : all these heads turn as if to watch you, with their eyes looking into you. It seems as if you had just interrupted a conversation of the eighteenth century, every single mouth shut. »

Associated to the Ancien Régime, the pastel technique experienced a period of rejection following the French Revolution, from artists as well as from collectors. It wasn't until the second half of the nineteenth century, with the gradual rehabilitation of eighteenth-century art, that the medium was able to extricate itself from its purgatory. With the creation of the Société de Pastellistes Français in 1885, pastels regained their place on the contemporary art scene, thanks to an annual pastel exhibition that attracted the "Tout-Paris". Proof of its success, the association had its own pavilion for the 1889 Universal Exhibition.

Pastels were much easier to work with than oil paintings and therefore remained the most treasured technique for portraits over the 19th century. But from then on, artists would also use them for picturing landscape, still life, and to a lesser extent historical and religious subjects.

THE ROTATION OF THE PASTEL SALONS

For preservation purposes and in order to ensure its transmission, the museum pastel collection has been displayed periodically since 2019. Graphic arts are particularly light sensitive : pastels, drawings and etchings require strict exhibition conditions, including low intensity lighting and a time-limited exhibition. Indeed, light is a major factor in the deterioration of any work on paper. Overexposed, paper becomes brittle. The same applies to materials like pigments, whether organic or synthetic, they fade away and lose their colour.

Rotation has many objectives : to observe the international suggestions regarding the display of these vulnerable pieces of art, but also to renew the visitor's interest thanks to an evolving exhibition allowing us to trace back the history of this art from the 18th to the 21st century. In addition, using presence detectors and a controlled lighting, the exposure of pastels to light is optimised; it contributes to a more comfortable visit and to a better understanding of the works. This policy is supported by the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles Hauts-de-France.



RESTORATIONS

The Musée des Beaux-Arts Antoine Lécuyer is committed to restoring its collections in order to safeguard and make them accessible to present and future generations, thus ensuring the preservation of this exceptional heritage.

Since 2019, the city of Saint-Quentin has been committed to a proactive policy of restoring its pastel collection. Thus, many pastels by Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, including some must-sees such as *Autoportrait à la toque d'atelier*, or *Louis de Silvestre*, were carefully restored by skilled graphic arts conservators.

The impressive portrait of the abbot Jean-Jacques Huber has therefore benefited from extensive dusting and removal of the mould that was compromising the powder coating. The *Préparation au portrait de Louis XV* and Marie Fel's delicate face have also been retrofitted with new risers to provide better distance for protective lenses.

As part of a renewed commitment to reconciling the challenges of preventive conservation with visitor comfort, the three pastels are now displayed in watertight encasements fitted with anti-reflective glass, which also protects the works from harmful UV rays. The risers have also been redesigned to ensure that the protective glass is kept at a better distance.



PUBLICATIONS NOT TO BE MISSED

Le guide des collections Faton edition

The Musée des Beaux-Arts Antoine Lécuyer published a guide to its collections at the end of 2023 in line with its policy of scientific publications. This book retraces the history of the museum and its collections, and provides an overview of the extent of the collections. Through a selection of artworks displayed in the permanent exhibition or kept in the museum's storeroom, this guide provides you elements for reading and understanding our greatest masterworks, from La Tour's studio archives to Art Déco sculptures, and from treasured medieval works of art to Benoist Stehlin's phenomenal harpsichord.

A new essential tool to accompany you during your visit, and promote the museum's collections, and highlight the wide range of works the museum preserves !

This policy is supported by the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles Hauts-de-France.



Maurice Quentin de La Tour, l'Oeil absolu Cohen & Cohen edition



A monograph on the most famous of eighteenth-century pastelists, Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, providing a precise study in which masterpieces and unpublished or little-known pastels are carefully analysed and placed in the context of the times.

A book written by Xavier Salmon, Conservateur Général du Patrimoine, Director of the Department of Graphic Arts at the Musée du Louvre.

These two books are on sale in the museum shop.

BECOME A PATRON AND PARTNER !

By supporting the museum, you are helping this essential facility in our region to develop, promote and raise its profile. The Aillagon Act of August 1st 2003 makes it possible for you to support the museum through a wide range of projects: financial sponsorship, sponsorship in kind or sponsorship of skills.

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In accordance with legal provisions, the value of these counter-parties may not exceed 25% of the value of the sponsorship.

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Persons with reduced mobility have partial access to the museum.

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