



Charles-Antoine Coypel (Paris 1694 - 1752)

Folly Embellishing Old Age with the Adornments of Youth

Pastel on paper mounted on canvas
81 x 66 cm. (31 7/8 x 26 inches)

Signed and dated on paving stones, lower right: C. Coypel 1743

When Charles Coypel exhibited this remarkable pastel at the Paris Salon of 1743, it was succinctly described in the livret as representing “Folly, Embellishing Old Age with the Adornments of Youth”. The pastel shows an old lady in an elaborately embroidered pink gown -- which she protects with a powdering mantle -- performing her morning toilette at her make-up table. As she applies beauty patches to her wrinkled face, a pretty, high-spirited attendant places a lace bonnet on her head; both the old woman and the girl -- who represents Folly -- cast their smiling gaze upon a mischievous, bare-bottomed Cupid who flees the scene, Love’s arrow in hand. Although the old lady’s girlish dress and flirtatious demeanor are absurd -- another 18th-century source describes her as “d’un caractère ridicule” -- the picture has an antic jollity and good humor that keeps its satire gentle. Folly Embellishing Old Age with the Adornments of Youth is unabashedly comic, a rarity in high art of any period, though something of a specialty of Charles Coypel, who was one of the most original and versatile French artists of the ancien regime. His pastel is a virtuoso effort that occupies a singular place at the nexus of fine art, theatre, art theory and philosophy in the first half of the 18th century.

Charles Coypel (1694-1752) was the youngest member of a dynasty of history painters that included his grandfather Noel Coypel (1628-1707), his father Antoine Coypel (1661 - 1722) and his nephew Noel-Nicolas Coypel (1690-1734), all of whom had successful official careers. Recognized as a prodigy,

Charles was accepted into the Royal Academy aged 21 with the submission of the vast history painting, *Jason and Medea* (1715, Berlin, Schloss Charlottenberg). Curious, highly intelligent and independently wealthy, Coppel was able to follow his interests where they led, and he pursued careers as a playwright and literary theorist as well as a painter, though his plays were criticized and he abandoned writing for the theatre in 1732. Nevertheless, his theatrical experience had a pronounced effect on his painting, in which he made ever greater efforts to capture the wide range of emotions, gestures and expressions typical of the stage. This too opened him to attack – the connoisseur Pierre-Jean Mariette wrote that Coppel “was incapable of introducing either the unaffected or the natural into his art” – but in many ways Coppel’s theatricality developed out of a respect for costume, readable narrative and emphatic gesture which were the staples of academic painting, handed down from Poussin to Le Brun. As his father had advised him, “If erudition is not seasoned with a certain ability to please, then it becomes dreary and dull”.

Throughout his career, and sometimes over long periods of time, Coppel would explore particular themes, interests and styles of artistic expression in each of the various media in which he worked, reconsidering his intellectual preoccupations in paint, pastel, stage plays and written discourse. Although he created the pastel of *Folly Embellishing Old Age with the Adornments of Youth* in 1743, he had taken up its central theme thirteen years earlier in both a philosophical treatise and a comic play.

Coppel’s play, a satire on the themes of vanity and the follies of fashion entitled *Le Triomphe de la Raison* (“The Triumph of Reason”), had an illustrious debut performance on 17 July 1730 at a fête given by Mlle. de Clermont at Versailles in honor of Queen Marie Leczinska. Coppel served as Premier Peintre to the Queen, and she was in attendance at the performance, which was dedicated to her.

Coppel described his play as “une Comédie d’un genre si bisare” and it combines sharp wit, contemporary social satire and classical allegory in a frothy and fast-moving (if less than entirely coherent) three-act entertainment of a sort that delighted sophisticated court audiences of the day.

The plot of *Le Triomphe de la Raison* is as convoluted as the libretto of a Baroque opera, but in summary, it deals with the struggle of Disappointment and Sorrow against Pleasure and Reason. Disappointment and Sorrow appeal to Old Age to disguise herself as Reason with the purpose of thwarting their enemies. Old Age regrets being asked to drive away Love and Pleasure and she enlists Folly – who appears on the scene wearing the mask of Fashion – to assist her. Folly dresses and makes up Old Age, who succeeds in deceiving Pleasure in an amusing burlesque. Unfortunately, Pleasure is disappointed to see Old Age and fades immediately. Old Age is angered and locks up Youth and Carelessness. They escape and run away leaving Old Age to admit the error of her ways and return to Reason. Remorse makes sure that Youth also returns to Reason, and Reason provides Youth with Moderation as his guide. Youth and Pleasure band together and agree to control Reason. Disappointment and Sorrow are defeated and banished; Youth and Pleasure are brought to heel; Reason triumphs.

The episode that Coppel would depict in the present pastel thirteen years after the play’s royal premiere comes from Act II, Scene I. As the stage directions indicate, the curtain opens to reveal Old Age’s bedroom, which is decorated with a mirrored toilette piled high with every accessory needed to increase a woman’s charms. Old Age hobbles onto the stage in a pink court gown, fashionable high-heeled shoes that are too tight for her feet, and painful new dentures; she is followed by Folly, who serves as her maid. After being seated at her make-up table, Folly tightens the old woman’s corset until she can barely breathe, and begins applying make up to her face and piling new curls on her wig: “Here is dark hair, blonde hair, foundation. With fresh looks and new curves, aren’t you certain to please?” she asks the ancient crone. “Those blonde braids are going to break so many hearts...”. Folly applies a variety of beauty spots to Old Age’s face, then gets her to rise to her feet and model her new look.

“Show me a pretty face,” Folly instructs. “Give me a tender look. Really nice! Try a nonchalant glance. Good! Now attempt flirtatious attitudes. Walk slowly! Hurry up! Give me more vivacity, more vivacity, the head in the air, elbows ahead, please more vivacity, trot, trot, trot, trot, Madam, please hurry!” “It’s easy for you” responds Old Age mournfully. “My whole body is crippled from head to toe.” Coppel burlesques the social impulse that led Montesquieu to write in 1721 that “the role of a pretty woman is much more serious than one might suppose. Nothing is more important than what happens each morning at her toilette, surrounded by her servants; a general of an army pays no less attention to the placement of his right flank or his reserve than she does to the location of a beauty patch, which can fail, but from which she hopes or predicts success”.

Less than two weeks after *Le Triomphe de la Raison* was presented at court, it was announced that Coppel would address the assembled members of the Académie Royale de Peinture with a lecture entitled *Discours sur la nécessité de recevoir des avis* (“On the Necessity of Receiving Advice”), which he delivered on 4 November 1730. As the son and grandson of distinguished painters himself, Coppel set out to examine the important role that the advice of other artists could have on a painter’s development, but he made a fascinating analogy between painting and the application of make up, between the creative blindness that artists can suffer in regard to the inadequacies of their own work and personal vanity of aging women. “If we spend time only with our own creations, we rarely persist in recognizing the faults in them”, he observed. “Just see the many women in the late autumn of life who are pleased with their faces after a long make-up session! The entrenched habit that they have of admiring but one object – which they think they can embellish, often with ridiculous additions – easily blinds them into thinking that these embellishments can even be used as a remedy against the assaults of time.” Coppel could expect that some of his audience would recognize this indirect reference to the subject of his recent play, but more interesting still is the way in which the remark reveals Coppel’s association between the vain, self-delusion of Old Age in his play and the ways in which painters can fool themselves in the practice of their craft.

The themes of vanity and the follies of fashion figure in many of Coppel’s other paintings as well, with adults behaving too young for their age, as in the present work, or with children play-acting like adults, notably in the painting *Children’s Games* (private collection), in which Coppel again satirizes the ritual of the lady’s morning toilette by enacting the scene with a band of infants wearing their parents’ clothing. In Coppel’s celebrated portrait of Pierre Jelyotte (c. 1745; Musée du Louvre, Paris), he depicts the famous opera singer dressed en travestie for the comic role of Platée; in Rameau’s famous opera, the title character is a ridiculous, vain water nymph who believes herself to be a great beauty with great powers of seduction over men. In the portrait of Jelyotte, Coppel presents the homely, middle-aged actor covered with beauty marks and preening like a young beauty in a Nattier portrait, oblivious to his actual appearance. Like Old Age in *Folly Embellishing Old Age with the Adornments of Youth*, Platée deceives herself with a fantasy of her own youth and comeliness and, as in the opera itself, Coppel maximizes his painting’s comic potential by casting a man in the female role. In a lost painting by Coppel called *Youth Dressed as Old Age* (“*La Jeunesse sous les habillements de la Décépitude*”), the artist depicts his pretty sister-in-law dressed as an old woman hunched over in a wicker chair with eyeglasses in one hand and a walking stick in the other. Thierry Lefrançois believes that this lost work may have served as a sort of companion piece to the present pastel, and that it was engraved as such in 1751 (shortly after it was painted) by the woman printmaker Renée-Elizabeth Lépicier (1714-1773). It seems unlikely that Coppel would have made an oil painting in 1750-1751 to provide an actual pendant for a pastel of seven years earlier, so presumably the pairing of subjects was intended for the engraved versions only.

It is not known whether *La Triomphe de la Raison* was ever performed again. Like most of the forty or so plays that Coppel is known to have written, it was staged with his friends appearing as an informal acting troupe in privately organized performances that he sometimes paid to produce. Most of his plays were never published and survive only in rare manuscript copies. A fair copy of his collected plays,

including *Le Triomphe de la Raison*, was only recently discovered by the American scholar Esther Bell in the Bibliothèque municipale de Valenciennes. In addition to the text of Coppel's short play, the Valenciennes manuscript includes – remarkably – the original cast list of *Le Triomphe de la Raison*, previously unknown and unpublished, which reveals that Coppel cast his royal performance with several friends who were members of the Quinault family, the most illustrious and socially prominent dynasty in the contemporary French theatre. Marie-Jeanne Quinault (1697-1793), who played Folly, was a legendary beauty and a celebrated star of the Opéra and Théâtre-Français who had officially retired in 1722 (at the age of 25). Famous for her powerful lovers, who included the financier Samuel Bernard, the duc de Nevers, and the duc de Chartres, and for her wit, she was admired as much for her influential friends as for her exceptional gifts as a comic actress. Her elder brother Jean-Baptiste-Maurice Quinault (1687-1745) appeared in the play in the female role of Old Age (shades of Jelyotte as Platée); although he had established himself early on as the star of tragedies by Racine and Voltaire, Quinault brought a distinctive finesse and wit to satires and farces and was regarded at the time of his retirement from the stage in 1733 as the preeminent comic actor of the age. The family affair that was *Le Triomphe de la Raison* continued with the Quinaults' cousin, the tragedienne Mlle. Balicourt (1701-1743), appearing as Reason, and Mlle. Dufresne (1705?-1767), the Quinaults' sister-in-law, portraying Pleasure. The handsome young leading man Charles-François-Nicolas-Racot de Grandval (1710-1784) – no relation of the Quinault family! – played Youth; he would be immortalized in the early 1740s in a rare portrait by Nicolas Lancret (Indianapolis Museum of Art).

It is unknown why Coppel waited thirteen years after the debut of his play and the presentation of his discourse to the Académie to produce the present pastel. It is possible that an unrecorded revival of the play prompted his renewed interest in the subject, or that he made his pastel as a record of the performance for an unidentified friend. He might also have made the pastel with the idea of providing the model for an engraving. Indeed, the printmaker Louis Surugue le père (1686-1762) made a popular engraving of it in 1745, which he exhibited twice, at the Salons of 1745 and 1750. Coppel had for many years shared with printmakers in the profits from engravings of his works, and had amassed a large fortune from the success of the prints made after his suite of paintings and tapestries illustrating the story of *Don Quixote*. Throughout his career he was eager to provide compositions for the booming print market. In addition to producing revenue, the prints disseminated Coppel's ideas and influenced generations of later artists: indeed, Francisco Goya's celebrated etching *Hasta la muerte* ("Till death") from his series *Los Caprichos* (1797-1798) is a biting satire showing a wizened crone making-up at her dressing table and was obviously inspired by Surugue's engraving after the present work.

The first recorded owner of *Folly Embellishing Old Age with the Adornments of Youth* was Ange-Laurent de La Live de July (1725-1779), who is today remembered for forming the first serious art collection dedicated to the encyclopedic display of French painting. Although it is possible that La Live was the first owner of the pastel – he began collecting art after he came into his inheritance in July 1751 – it is not mentioned in the scientific catalogue of his collection written by Mariette and published in 1764. Coppel's pastel is first recorded as belonging to La Live de July only in March 1770, when his collection came up for auction in Paris. In the catalogue of the sale, produced by the expert, Pierre Remy, the pastel is lot 134, and is precisely described in the section devoted to his collection of pastels.

The fact that La Live had a collection of pastels – including works by Rosalba Carriera (who was considered a French artist by La Live), Vivien, François Lemoyne and Jean-Baptiste Greuze – was in keeping with his goal of representing the French School in all its manifestations, or, as Baron Grimm noted in his correspondence, his "task of assembling a cabinet of French paintings [which] he did with zeal and patriotism". Coppel was one of the few major French artists to work extensively in pastel between the death of Vivien (in 1734) and the arrival of Quentin de La Tour on the Paris art scene in the mid-1740s, and he became a master of the difficult medium, frequently producing compositions in both oil and pastel versions. He had a particular gift for pastel portraiture, and his *Self Portrait* of 1734 (J.Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), *portrait of the Marquise de Lamure* (Worcester Art Museum),

and double portrait of M. and Mme. Francois de Jullienne (1743; Art Institute of Chicago) are among the most spectacular examples in the medium to be produced in the 18th century. Few of Coypel's pastels date from after 1747, when he was appointed First Painter to the King and he virtually ceased painting.

Alan Wintermute

Provenance:

Ange-Laurent de La Live de Jully, Paris; his sale, Paris, 2-14 May 1770, lot 134; sold for 56 livres, 1 sol.
Vente M.X. (La Beraudière), Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, 26 May 1913, lot 6, ill.; purchased by Gradt,
for 9600 FF
Private collection, France, since c. 1913, and by descent until 2009.

Exhibitions

Paris, Salon, 1743, no. 4

Literature:

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Mercure de France, September 1743, p. 2044
E. Bellier de la Chavignerie & L. Auvray, Dictionnaire général des artistes de l'école française depuis des arts du dessin jusqu'à nos jours, Paris, 1882-1885, vol. I, p. 316
F. Ingersoll-Smouse, "Charles-Antoine Coypel" in La Revue de l'Art ancien et moderne, vol. XXXVII, pp.145-146, 288.
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A. Pigler, Barockthemen Eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Ikonographie des 17 und 18 Jahrhunderts, Berlin, 1956, vol. II, p. 510.
A. Ananoff, "Le dessin ancien regarde de près", in Connaissance des Arts, no. 161, July 1965, p. 88.
C.B. Bailey, Ange-Laurent de La Live de Jully, New York, 1988. no. 134 in 1770 sale catalogue.
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