



Michael's Museum

FEATURING ANTIQUE MINIATURE PORTRAITS
OF THE TORMEY-HOLDER COLLECTION

FEATURED ARTIST:

PHILIPPE R. VALLÉE (FL. 1803-1812)

by Michael I. Tormey
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In both private and public collections, there are numerous early American miniature portraits, some of notably superior quality that bear the simple signature of Vallée – just the surname of Vallée, with no first name or initials inscribed. (See fig. 2.)

Traditionally, such Vallée miniatures have been attributed to French immigrant Jean François Vallée. Recent research has placed many of these attributions in doubt, however; and modern scholarship suggests that many should instead be attributed to Philippe R. Vallée.

Understandably, this thought has not been received well by many art dealers and museum curators. After all, Jean François Vallée has long been listed in research volumes and art journals, and famous works have long been credited to him (a miniature portrait of then General Andrew Jackson being chief amongst them). In contrast, Philippe R. Vallée (typically referred to simply as P. R. Vallée) is a name recognized by few; and trusted academics have long suggested that P. R. Vallée and Jean François Vallée are actually one and the same – a single individual who has simply been catalogued incorrectly in some sources.

In reality, Philippe R. Vallée and Jean François Vallée were indeed two individuals. Their separate identities have for nearly two centuries been conflated, however; and the history of and most works of Philippe R. Vallée have been mistakenly attributed to Jean François Vallée.



Figure 1:

***New Orleans Gentleman
of the Early Nineteenth Century***

by Philippe R. Vallée

circa 1810-1815

watercolor on ivory

1 1/4 x 2 3/4 inches (sight)

Tormey-Holder Collection

A GROWING CHORUS OF NEW THINKING

Despite traditionally accepted opinion to the contrary, an increasing number of respected scholars both in the U.S. and abroad, have spoken out about the separate identities and careers of the two unrelated Vallées.

In 1992, David Karel, professor of art history at Laval University in Quebec, Canada was the first to suggest that many miniatures previously attributed to Jean François Vallée should be reattributed to Philippe R. Vallée; and in his *Dictionnaire des Artistes de Langue Française en Amérique du Nord* (*Dictionary of French Speaking Artists in North America*), he documented separate histories of the two Vallées.¹ No doubt, Karel's ability to have conducted research in Paris in French (his *Dictionary of French Speaking Artists* was written in French) gave him an advantage in documenting the origins of Philippe Vallée so thoroughly.

Citing the work of Karel and echoing his conclusions, the much respected Nathalie Lemoine-Bouchard, in 2013, offered additional perspective into the origins and training of Philippe Vallée and provided analysis of a miniature by him, painted in Charleston, South Carolina in 1805.²

In the United States, Robin Jaffee Frank, then curator of the Yale University Art Gallery, took a bold step in 2000, when she challenged conventional thinking and asserted that *The Dead Bride*, an iconic miniature portrait of the deceased Harriet Mackie, long believed to have been painted by Jean François Vallée, was actually painted by Philippe R. Vallée. She, too, provided logical evidence of Philippe Vallée's presence in Charleston (where *The Dead Bride* was painted) that, if followed to its conclusion, suggests that Jean François Vallée never lived or worked in that city.³

More recently, in 2010, Carrie Rebora Barratt and Lori Zabar, of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, also cast doubts on the attribution of works to Jean François

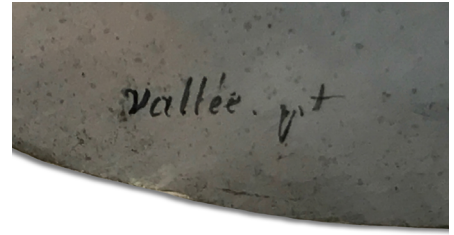


Figure 2:

Close up view of Philippe R. Vallée's simple signature, as appears in the miniature portrait featured in fig. 1.



Figure 3:

The Dead Bride: Harriet Mackie (1788-1804)

by Philippe R. Vallée, 1804

watercolor on ivory

1 15/16 x 2 7/16 inches

Yale University Art Gallery¹⁴

Note the similarities between this miniature and the one in fig. 1 – especially the way the background and facial features are painted.

Vallée and presented newly-found evidence about Philippe Vallée's presence in New Orleans during the period of 1810-1812 – in particular, his announcement in 1812 that he had opened a drawing school for children in New Orleans and offered lessons in miniature painting.⁴

FRENCH CARIBBEAN ORIGINS

It is David Karel's work that is most groundbreaking with respect to documenting the origins and artistic training of Philippe Vallée – so much so that one is left wondering why, in the 24 years since his research was originally published, his conclusions have not been adopted by more in the art community. (This can perhaps be explained by the fact that his work was only published in French, however.)

Karel outlines matriculation records of the former Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris, to which Philippe Vallée is recorded as having been admitted in 1798, at the age of 20 (which would place his year of birth as 1777 or 1778, depending on the month in which he was born). Per Karel, records show that Vallée was a pupil of the esteemed French neoclassical painter, François-André Vincent, himself descended from a family of miniature painters (and one can indeed see the influence of Vincent in the work of Vallée in America) and that he lived at the galleries of the Louvre with the famed sculptor, Augustin Pajou.⁵

Most remarkably, records of the Royal Academy uncovered by Karel reveal that Philippe Vallée arrived to Paris from the French colony of Saint-Domingue, on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (the island that is today comprised of both Haiti and the Dominican Republic). That he was able to study in Paris, one imagines that Vallée must have come from a family of means in Saint-Domingue, though it is unknown whether he came from a merchant class or military family. In either case, the colony had been a hotbed of turmoil during Vallée's formative years, culminating in a rebellion against French authority in 1791 by slaves and former slaves. Slavery was subsequently abolished in the colony in 1793, alienating the island's dominant slave-holding class and, not surprisingly, motivating many of French descent to return to France. It is surely not a coincidence that Philippe Vallée arrived in Paris from Saint-Domingue during this period of exodus from the colony.

ARRIVAL TO CHARLESTON

The first known record of Philippe Vallée in America dates to October 1803 (five years after he was admitted to the Royal Academy in Paris) when, according to Karel, Frank, Barratt and Zabar, advertisements in Charleston, South Carolina announced the arrival of P. Vallée from Paris and promoted his services as a miniature portrait painter.⁶ Newspaper ads by P. Vallée appeared in Charleston regularly thereafter, from 1803 through 1806; and, according to Karel, Vallée appeared in the Charleston Business Directory of 1807, listed as a miniature portraitist.⁷

It is significant, of course, that many prominent citizens of Charleston had their portraits painted by Vallée during the period of 1803 through 1807 and that virtually all such portraits have been incorrectly attributed to Jean François Vallée (with the exception of those that have recently been reattributed to Philippe R. Vallée by the likes of Karel, Frank, Barratt, Zabar and Lemoine-Bouchard). The fact of the matter is, numerous historical references to P. Vallée appear in Charleston during the period of 1803-1807 and none have been

discovered that reference Jean François Vallée or J. F. Vallée – drawing into doubt any attribution to Jean François Vallée of a miniature portrait painted later in New Orleans in the same manner and appearance as those painted by Vallée in Charleston).

RELOCATION TO NEW ORLEANS

While it is not known exactly when Philippe Vallée left Charleston, records show him to have arrived to New Orleans, Louisiana by 1810. Per Karel, Barratt and Zabar, newspaper advertisements by P. Vallée appeared in that city from October 1810.⁸ Vallée is also recorded as being a resident of New Orleans in the 1810 U. S. Federal Census.⁹ At that time, he was recorded as living in a home in New Orleans' French Quarter, on St. Pierre Street (today known as St. Peter Street), and being between the ages of 26 and 44. (Being born in 1777 or 1778, he would have actually been 32 or 33 years old at the time.)

According to the census of 1810, Vallée's household was made up of five persons: himself and four slaves (no wife or children). That he owned slaves is consistent, of course, with Vallée having originated in the French West Indies, where slave ownership by French colonists was prevalent, and with the narrative of slave-owning colonists having left Saint-Domingue in the late 1790s.

The last of Phillip Vallée's advertisements in New Orleans date to 1812, when, according to Barratt and Zabar, Vallée announced the opening of a drawing school for children and offered lessons in miniature painting.¹⁰

It would seem that Vallée's teaching career was short lived however, as later in 1812, with the outbreak of the War of 1812, he took up arms in defense of his new home. To wit, records show that Vallée enlisted in the 1st Regiment of the Louisiana Militia, then under the command of a Col. Dejan,¹¹ and that he remained a member of the militia through January 1815, when the war concluded.¹²



Figure 4:

**Early Nineteenth Century American Gentleman,
Identified as A. Laurason**

by Philippe R. Vallée, circa 1805-1810

watercolor on ivory

2 1/2 inches diameter (sight)

*Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery*¹⁵

Again, note the similarities between this miniature and the those in figures 1 and 3 – especially the way the background and facial features are painted.



Figure 5:

Close up view of Philippe R. Vallée's simple signature, as appears in the miniature portrait featured in fig. 4.

PORTRAIT OF ANDREW JACKSON

Of all the miniature portraits painted by Vallée, it is a portrait of then General Andrew Jackson (the future seventh president of the United States), painted between 1812 and 1815, that is considered the most important.

Jackson's portrait has long been attributed to Jean François Vallée, but it was most certainly painted by Philippe R. Vallée. That Philippe Vallée served in the Louisiana Militia during the War of 1812 lends credence to this, as it was General Jackson who, in January 1815, led American troops to victory over the British in the Battle of New Orleans. Jackson's decisive victory in the Battle of New Orleans, the final battle of the War of 1812, propelled him to national fame. Even before such notoriety, however, Jackson always had a high opinion of his own importance. It is not a surprise, therefore, that he would have commissioned a portrait to commemorate his prominent leadership role in Louisiana; and it seems entirely appropriate that a member of Jackson's own military force would be the one to capture his likeness.

Adding additional credence to an attribution by Philippe Vallée, the style and technique with which General Jackson's portrait was painted are entirely consistent with the style and technique seen in the miniatures painted by Vallée earlier in Charleston, South Carolina – miniatures that a growing number of scholars are asserting were painted by Philippe R. Vallée, not Jean François Vallée.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, not all art dealers and museum curators welcome such thinking, as it is contrary to knowledge that has long been accepted as fact – that Jean François Vallée was the miniaturist who painted General Andrew Jackson's portrait and that any reference to a P. R. Vallée is simply a miscataloged entry that should be considered one and the same as Jean François Vallée.



Figure 6:

General Andrew Jackson

by Philippe R. Vallée, circa 1812-1815

watercolor on ivory

4 3/8 x 5 3/4 inches (framed)

Historic Hudson Valley Collection¹⁶

This portrait has long been attributed in error to Jean François Vallée; but, as outlined herein, it was most certainly painted by Philippe R. Vallée.

In 1815, Jackson presented this portrait to his friend and colleague, Edward Livingston, an early American statesman. Enclosed within the portrait's frame is a handwritten note by the general to Livingston that reads as follows: "Mr. E. Livingston is requested to accept this picture as a mark of the sense I entertain of his public services, and as a token of my private friendship and esteem. Headquarters, New Orleans. May 1, 1815. Andrew Jackson."

Addressing this viewpoint, one is well served to review the writing of art historian Theodore Bolton, who was amongst the first to attribute Jackson's portrait to Jean François Vallée. In his 1921 work, *Early American Portrait Painters in Miniature*, Bolton reports that Jean François Vallée had been established in Philadelphia as a miniaturist and silhouettist, but that he moved to New Orleans in about the year 1815, at which time he painted the portrait of General Jackson.¹³

Posing a challenge to Bolton's timeline, however, is a pair of recently-discovered silhouettes (see fig. 7) painted in indigo ink and signed, "Jean François Vallée, New Orleans, 1787". Evidenced by his own pen, these signed silhouettes place Jean François Vallée in New Orleans two decades prior to what Bolton postulates. More importantly, there is a marked difference in quality between these 1787 silhouettes and miniature portraits known to have been painted later by Philippe R. Vallée.



Figure 7:

Late Eighteenth Century New Orleans Couple, Painted in Silhouette

by Jean François Vallée

dated 1787

indigo ink on paper or card

4 7/8 x 3 7/8 inches

This pair of silhouettes was sold at auction on March 30, 2008, for \$2,880 by New Orleans Auction Galleries (lot #01116).¹⁷

Notice should be taken, too, of Jean François Vallée's full signature on the silhouettes, which differs greatly from Philippe R. Vallée's simple signature of "Vallée". An objective analyst must question, if miniature portraits attributed to Jean François Vallée really were painted by him, why did he never sign such portraits in a similar manner to silhouettes that are inarguably painted by him?

That the silhouettes are dated 1787 leads one to also conclude that Jean François Vallée must have been considerably older than Philippe R. Vallée, who would have only been 9 or 10 years old in 1787.

A similar silhouette of Madame Olivette Sterne, painted in indigo ink, signed "J. F. Vallée" and dated 1814, offers another useful comparison. (See fig. 8.) Again, although it is just a silhouette, there is a marked difference in the quality of execution when compared to known works by Philippe R. Vallée; and, as is the case with the 1787 silhouettes, the signature on the image of Madame Sterne differs greatly from the signature that appears on known works by Philippe R. Vallée.

DISAPPEARANCE AND CONFLATED IDENTITIES

Sadly, no verifiable trace of Philippe R. Vallée can be found after the War of 1812, raising speculation that he might have died of an illness (the region suffered frequent bouts of yellow fever and cholera during the period). It is possible, too, that he might have returned to the French West Indies, where he grew up as a child.

Whatever the reason for Philippe R. Vallée's departure from New Orleans and the American art scene, however, it is not a surprise that historians would later confuse his identity and work with that of Jean François Vallée, who remained active as a silhouettist well into the 1820s. The quality of Jean François Vallée's work never rose to the ability of



Figure 8:

Early Nineteenth Century American Lady, Identified as Madame Olivette Sterne, Painted in Silhouette

by Jean François Vallée

dated 1814

indigo ink on paper or card

5 7/8 x 8 inches

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston ¹⁸

Philippe R. Vallée's, however, making it all the more ironic that he was for so long given credit for the art of his younger counterpart.

Two centuries having passed since the height of Philippe R. Vallée's career, it seems appropriate that he finally be given due credit for his remarkable portraiture; and it is hoped that the information outlined herein will aid that endeavor.



Figure 9:

Enlarged portion of the miniature portrait of the New Orleans Gentleman featured in fig. 1, allowing for a better analysis of the brush strokes used by Vallée. Note that, in the original portrait, the widest portion of the subject's face is a mere 5/8 inches (15.875 mm).

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NOTES

¹ Karel, David (1992). *Dictionnaire des Artistes de Langue Française en Amérique du Nord*, Musée du Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec City, Québec, pages 474, 800.

² Lemoine-Bouchard (2013). *Gros Plan Sur: La Collection de Miniatures des Musées et Expositions de Vendée* (article), *La Lettre de la Miniature*, Lemoine-Bouchard, Paris, France, Issue No. 16, January 2013, page 4.

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⁴ Barratt, Carrie Rebora and Zabar, Lori (2010). *American Portrait Miniatures in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, page 67.

⁵ Karel, page 800.

⁶ Karel, page 800; Frank, page 141; Barratt and Zabar, page 67.

⁷ Karel, page 800.

⁸ Karel, page 800; Barratt and Zabar, page 67.

⁹ 1810 U. S. Federal Census. Census Place: New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana; Roll: 10; Page: 230; Image: 00192; Family History Library Film Number: 0181355.

¹⁰ Barratt and Zabar, page 67.

¹¹ Pierson, Marion John Bennett (1963). *Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812*. Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2003 reprinted edition, page 119.

¹² National Archives and Records Administration. *Index to the Compiled Military Service Records for the Volunteer Soldiers Who Served During the War of 1812*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration. Microfilm number M602; Roll Box number 214.

¹³ Bolton, Theodore (1921). *Early American Portrait Painters in Miniature*, Frederick Fairchild Sherman, New York, New York, page 166.

¹⁴ *The Dead Bride*, the miniature portrait of Harriet Mackie, is a permanent holding of Yale University Art Gallery, Newhaven, Connecticut. Yale accession number 1936.300. The photograph of the referenced portrait has been designated by Yale University Art Gallery as an image of public domain.

¹⁵ The miniature portrait of A. Laurason is a permanent holding of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C. Smithsonian accession number 1958.5.4.; Luce Foundation Center, 3rd

Floor, 16A, Drawer 5. The photograph of the referenced portrait has been designated by Smithsonian American Art Museum as an image of public domain.

¹⁶ The miniature portrait of General Andrew Jackson is maintained in a permanent collection of the Historic Hudson Valley Collection, Pocantico Hills, New York. Historic Hudson Valley accession number MP.91.11. Photograph courtesy Historic Hudson Valley.

¹⁷ Images and information found at artnet.com. Accessed online, November 4, 2016 at http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-françois-de-vallée/new-orleans-gentleman-and-lady-pair-aOINzQT9oeLoSMJVf_vh3g2.

¹⁸ The silhouette of Madame Olivette Sterne is maintained in a permanent collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas; the Bayou Bend Collection; accession number B.99.4. The photograph of the referenced silhouette has been designated by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston as an image of public domain.



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