



Your money or your life, or why Jean-Pierre Norblin de la Gourdain left Paris*

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We don't know much about Norblin. Quite nothing, actually. Two monographs devoted to that artist, several dozen scientific articles, and above all the high position that Jean-Pierre Norblin de la Gourdain (1745–1830) [fig. 1] holds in the canon of Polish art history may suggest that in his case we are dealing with a well-recognized figure¹. Nevertheless, our knowledge of Norblin's biography is still limited, and his work is recognized only fragmentarily. Unfortunately, the aim of the following article is not to revolutionary change this state of affairs. It is intended, first of all, to remind that Norblin and the very foundations of his biography still require research and that the literature on the subject needs to be reviewed. The second focus of the text is to present intertwined problems concerning the artist's life. These are, on the one hand, the level of his income and social position in Poland; on the other hand, the reasons that led him to leave Paris in the early 1770s. The thesis that this article presents, assumes that Norblin's emigration to Poland was not solely due to an economic factor and an opportunity for social advancement (which, according to the theory of migration, could be interpreted as a pull factor), but above all the artist's difficult professional situation in Paris (in which one could see a push factor).

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The inspiration for my research on Norblin's youth was the financial accounts of the Princes Czartoryski from 1792 and 1794². In the counting of expenditures of the Princes' court we find the name of Norblin (then approaching fifty). The amounts assigned to him vary between 100 and 108 zloty per month³. Since they are written in tables containing the monthly salaries of persons employed at the court, one would

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¹ Among important works worth mentioning: Z. Batowski, *Norblin*, Lwów [1911]; A. Kępińska, *Jan Piotr Norblin*, Wrocław 1978; J. Michałowski, *Norblin de la Gourdain Jan Piotr*, [in:] *Polski słownik biograficzny*, vol. 23 (1978); A. Bernatowicz, *Norblin de la Gourdain Jan Piotr*, [in:] *Słownik artystów polskich i obcych w Polsce działających*, vol. 6, ed. K. Mikocka-Rachubowa [et al.], Warszawa 1998; therein a list of older literature.

² See Biblioteka Czartoryskich, Kraków, MS 6077, IV, vol. 1. E.g. accounts for 1793 which did not include Norblin were published by L. Dębicki: *Puławy, 1762–1830. Monografia z życia towarzyskiego, politycznego i literackiego na podstawie archiwum ks. Czartoryskich w Krakowie*, vol. 1, Lwów 1887, pp. 176–179.

³ Approximately 62–65 livres.

1. J.-P. Norblin de la Gourdain, *Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, 48 × 46, The Poznań Society for the Advancement of Arts and Sciences (lost in 1943), photo: courtesy of the National Museum in Poznań

like to see in them the salary given to the artist⁴. What does this pay mean in the realities of that time? Even if we assume that 100 zloty a month is only a part of the salary Norblin received (he was undoubtedly provided with an apartment and a place at the table in addition to his salary), it seems that he was not treated at the court with a big esteem. Although his basic salary was three times higher than that of the upholsterer, it was also twice as low as the monthly salary of the “good and respectable but very old and sickly” governess Madeleine Petit (2,780 zlotys a year, i. e. 230 a month), and three times lower than that of the senior governess Madame Paristot (339 zlotys a month)⁵. Norblin’s monthly income did not differ much from that of Puławy’s gardeners or court writers⁶. Even if we optimistically assume that at the Czartoryski’s court Norblin’s annual income (his ordinary salary and simple commissions together) would reach 2,500 zlotys a year, and if the princely family also commissioned him with painting works, the Frenchman could earn even more, it should be emphasized that in the eyes of contemporaries, even two thousand zlotys as an annual salary for a man educated abroad was considered modest⁷. The amounts received by Norblin from the Czartoryski should be considered relatively small also in the context of the earnings of the famous artists of his time. While Norblin in Puławy was given 100 zlotys as a monthly “base”, at King Stanisław August’s court the draftsman Johann Christian Kamsetzer (who obviously had a different cost of living than Norblin) earned about 300 zlotys a month, Jan Bogumił Plersch: 700 zloty, and the *direttore* Marcello Bacciarelli almost 2 600 zloty a month⁸.

Unfortunately, we do not know how Norblin’s earnings and wealth evolved in Poland. However, a depressing picture emerges from the period for which we have fragmentary data (a period that coincides, we have to admit, with the economic crisis and the collapse of Warsaw banks). In 1794, Norblin lived in a tenement house located in the bustling Old Town Square in Warsaw, a not very elegant district of the city. In 1801 he worked as a teacher of drawing for Miss Cecylia Dembowska, in a village near Puławy, with a modest salary of 50 zlotys⁹. At about the same time, he made an extra money as an intermediary in the artistic purchases of Princess Lubomirska¹⁰. He did not seem to spend too much on materials to draw. Both in the 1780s and 1790s, his drawings were dominated by works made on scraps of paper, other people’s letters cut into pieces, or pharmacy prescriptions.

Did Norblin do better before? What kind of money he had around 1760, when he came from the province to Paris, we do not know. It does not seem, however, that the son of the owner of a small farm in Misy-sur-Yonne was living in luxury, since the letter of recommendation addressed to the Academy authorities stressed that the limited fortune of his parents did not allow them to provide their son with a decent future¹¹. In 1774, when the artist, approaching the age of thirty, decided to leave for Poland, he

bought several drawings and paintings in Paris spending at least 4,141 livres and 12 sous¹². However, we do not know where he had the funds for these purchases from: did he cash his own movables or maybe he received an advance from the Czartoryski family? In the Parisian art market, his works reached very different prices at that time: Norblin’s drawings and gouaches were sold at auctions usually for a dozen, sometimes several dozen, or up to 200 livres¹³.

Did Norblin’s work sell better in Poland? The only known payments come from King Stanisław August. In 1778 Norblin received 8 ducats from him for landscape drawings, a year later: 20 ducats for a Watteau’s style painting, in 1781, he received 200 ducats for two Watteau’s style scenes¹⁴. In 1782 the King bought seven works from Norblin for 179 ducats on average 25 and half ducats per painting¹⁵. In 1788 the King paid him 60 ducats for making two drawings of the Łazienki Park¹⁶. The sums that the artist received from the King for small size paintings were about 20–30 ducats (360–540 zlotys), so they were considerable. However, it should be remembered that the King paid almost all the artists very generously and acted as if outside the logic of the local market for paintings. The more measurable value of Norblin’s works is therefore illustrated not by the monarch’s bills, but by the inventory of his collections. Price estimations of Norblin’s work are slightly lower than the original purchase prices: e.g. the Strozzi for which the King paid 12 ducats to Norblin, in the inventory was valued at half this amount (6 ducats, so 108 zlotys)¹⁷.

It is not known how much Norblin’s works were paid for by his other clients, such as the Czartoryski and Radziwiłł. However, it is unlikely that they would compete with royal lavishness. It should also be noted that in the case of these families we know only about a few orders, mainly frescoes or decorations. Their small number suggests that Norblin did not have many opportunities to obtain additional income. The number of his preserved easel paintings, on the other hand, suggests that he did not paint – and thus did not sell – much. The main trend of his work remained drawings, initially battle scenes, then landscapes. The few notes preserved on the reverses of his landscape works prove that he earned very well on them, between 100–120 zlotys a piece¹⁸. It should be remembered, however, that the drawings usually formed small groups, consisting of three or five works, and the demand for them was limited. Regardless of what Norblin’s real income was and which of the layers of the „middle class” he belonged to, it should be stressed that although he had a large family to support, he kept his financial stability. It is known that in 1784 he could afford to lend to Louis d’Auvigny (Czartoryski’s dance teacher) 100 ducats (1,800 zlotys). After 1804 he lent money to one of his students, Michał Płoński¹⁹. But can it be said that Norblin achieved great success or made a fortune in Poland? Although there is a legend in the literature that he has been granted nobility, it is still not confirmed. Nothing is also known about acquiring real

⁴ It used to be assumed that Norblin was permanently connected with the Czartoryski family only in the decade 1774–1784 (being under contract), after which he started working on his own. However, his inclusion in the payroll suggests that from time to time he returned to work at the court for a period of several months, being occupied with drawing, as well as decorating and renovating.

⁵ Norblin is said to have played a piquet with Madame Petit every day. Her pupil, Zofia Zamoyska, did not have a good opinion of Madame’s professional competence: “often irritable and suffering, she couldn’t pay close attention to my education, so there was a lack of supervision in my studies, over my health, and even in guiding principles, and I felt this deficiency later. I must admit that I was extremely neglected (as quot. in: L. Dębicki, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, Lwów 1888, pp. 285–291 and footnote 59). About Madame Parisot (Julie Parisot perhaps?) – see *ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 117. More on the life conditions of French governesses in the Rzeczpospolita: A. K. Guzek, *Francuzice w obcej im Polsce*, [in:] *W stronę Francji... Z problemów literatury i kultury polskiego Oświecenia*, ed. E. Z. Wichrowska, Warszawa 2007.

⁶ In 1793, the gardener earned 1000 zlotys a year, the poet Książnin was paid 1500 zlotys.

⁷ See A. Naruszewicz, *Dyjaryjusz podróży Jego Królewskiej Mości na sejm grodzieński*, ed. M. Bober–Jankowska, Warszawa 2008, p. 36.

⁸ See A. Bernatowicz, *Malarze w Warszawie czasów Stanisława Augusta. Status – aspiracje – twórczość*, Warszawa 2016, pp. 185–186. The disproportion becomes even more striking (monthly Bacciarelli earned 26 times as much as Norblin!) knowing that when in 1795 Stanisław August was close to bankruptcy, his first painter tried to convince him that after cutting his monthly salary to 60 ducats, i.e. about 1080 zlotys, he would not be able to afford his life. See M. Bacciarelli, letter to Stanisław August, dated 27 III 1795, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warsaw, MS 3291 III, p. 203.

⁹ A little later he also served as governor of Alexandra von Heildelshaim (nee Gunter). See Z. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 147; A. Bernatowicz, *Malarze w Warszawie...*, p. 72.

¹⁰ K. Niemira, *Przyczynek do badań nad kolekcją Radziwiłłów z Nieborowa*, „Quart”, 2018, no. 4, p. 14.

¹¹ See L. Courajod, *École royale des élèves protégés, précédée d’une étude sur le caractère de l’enseignement de l’art français, aux différentes époques de son histoire et suivie de documents sur l’école royale gratuite de dessin*, Paris 1874, p. 107.

¹² In January 1774 Norblin spent 3431 livres and 30 sous on paintings, in the following month he spent much less on the purchase of drawings, i.e. 707 livres and 42 sous, but one Berchem’s drawing cost him 2/3 of that amount, 480 livres, which is slightly less than the oil-painted landscape of Boucher. See Provenance Index Database (further references to Lugt numbers), Lugt 2224, 2234. For Norblin’s purchases see also: T. de Rosset, *Les Norblin. Une dynastie franco-polonaise de collectionneurs*, [in:] *Collections et marché de l’art. En France 1789–1848*, sous la dir. de M. Preti–Hamard, P. Sénéchal, Rennes 2005.

¹³ His most expensive sold work – after he left for Poland – was a gouache worth 600 livres. See Lugt 2982.

¹⁴ See D. Juszcak, *Wróżka* [catalogue note], [in:] *Rembrandt i inni. Królewska kolekcja obrazów Stanisława Augusta*, Warszawa 2011, vol. 2, p. 41. According to another specification, Norblin received 175 ducats for his works. See Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, Zbiór Popielów (further on: AGAD), 231, p. 264. Unless indicated otherwise, the prices of Norblin’s works quoted after Juszcak. The value of the ducat was fixed and amounted to 18 zlotys.

¹⁵ He paid 12 ducats for a painting with Strozzi, 50 ducats for *Polish Marionettes*, 50 ducats for two small paintings: *A Fortune Teller and Kugglers* and *A Monkey*, 16 ducats for *A Rooster Fight* and 15 ducats for *Flight into Egypt*. See T. Mańkowski, *Galeria Stanisława Augusta*, Lwów 1932, p. 302, ref. 786. In the Regional Museum in Vinnitsa (inv. no. Г–682) there is a drawing, which may be a preparatory study for the scene with Strozzi, lost today.

¹⁶ See A. Bernatowicz, *Malarze w Warszawie...*, p. 202.

¹⁷ See AGAD, *Korespondencja Stanisława Augusta*, 5a, p. 34 8v. Norblin’s other works in this list are two paintings valued at 80 ducats (perhaps the same as those for which the king paid 50 ducats for each one earlier?) and two paintings valued at 25 ducats each.

¹⁸ A certain example, giving a price from the 18th century is *View of Bielany*, with written “Norblin 120 florins” on the reverse (florins were worth as much as zlotys, and in Poland they stopped being used around 1795). See National Ossoliński Institute, Wrocław, no. I.G. 4962.

¹⁹ See Z. Batowski, *op. cit.*, p. 115.



2. [here as:] J.-Ph. Louthembourg, *Le diner du peintre Casanova*, etching, 10 × 17,8; Metropolitan Museum of Art, Nowy Jork. Photo: Public Domain

property by Norblin. No memoir text notes that Norblin was surrounded by excessive luxury, or at least dressed well. Although he painted his own wife shortly after the wedding in an elegant dress and with a pendant on her chest, in 1785 he placed her and her child against the background of a modest wooden porch²⁰. Around the same time he presented himself without a wig and in a modest outfit, reminiscent of the costumes of servants and young men from Watteau's paintings. Also the volt that took place in his life in 1804 is evidence against the image of Norblin as a man of success and of a great fame. The sixty-year-old artist, having spent thirty years in Poland and serving for the richest magnates, returned to France and acquired his first property in his life – a small farm near Provins, a town 30 km from his hometown of Misy. We do not know the price of this property, but the mere fact that Norblin decided to live in the countryside suggests that he managed his life with not an excessive supply of cash. The choice of a rural life model suggests that he did not look for an opportunity to spend the money either. The financial aspect of Norblin's career shows that although the artist was known and valued in court and magnate circles, he did not belong to the elite of the artistic sphere, and in any case, he could not equal himself with the wealth of Marcello Bacciarelli, Jan Bogumił Pleresch and André Le Brun. His earnings oscillated at the level of those of tutors, middle-ranking officials, or illustrators like Vogel²¹. This begs the question: why (if not for the money) did Norblin decide to go to Poland, or at least, why did he spend as much as 30 years there, despite his average income?

²⁰ The first portrait listed on the auction market in Paris (Ader-Picard-Tajan, 5 XII 1990), the second work: The Regional Museum in Vinnitsa, no. 7-183.

²¹ The monthly salary of Zygmunt Vogel in 1795 was 90 zlotys (separately, the king paid "The Bird" for the works, sometimes about 50-60 zlotys for a drawing). See K. Sroczyńska, *Zygmunt Vogel. Rysownik gabinetowy Stanisława Augusta*, Wrocław 1969, p. 24.

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I reject at the outset the explanation that the Norblin's migration was exclusively due to the invitation of the Czartoryski family and the splendours of their princely court²². The scale of Norblin's earnings shows that the pull factors were not particularly attractive in his case. Therefore, the question should be posed about the push factors that could have determined Norblin's migration. This problem is not addressed by studies so far devoted to the artist²³.

The hypothesis that I will present further in the text assumes that Norblin could have been pushed out of Paris by "the life", i.e. a specific combination of socio-economic and professional factors and his psychological disposition. In other words: I assume that for some reason Norblin wanted to leave Paris, and the decision to accept the Czartoryski's invitation was made not only because Norblin saw in them a chance for great success and money, but simply an alternative to the difficult situation he was in before 1774. Before I go on to try to identify these factors, it seems necessary to recall the current state of knowledge about Norblin's youth.

The date and circumstances of Norblin's arrival in Paris are unknown. It is not clear whether he had relatives there, nor whether Norblin's father was really a "Parisian bourgeois"²⁴. Norblin lived in Paris at least since 1760 and at the age of sixteen he began taking classes and working with Jacques-Philippe Caresme, a young, less than 30 year old painter and illustrator specializing in genre and erotic scenes, but aspiring to become a history painter²⁵. In 1763 Norblin collaborated with graphic artist De Montelais, printing anti-Jesuitian caricatures. At the same time, under unknown circumstances, he dropped his education with Caresme and entered the atelier of Francesco Casanova, a painter of battle scenes, who had belonged to the Royal Academy since May 1763. In 1765, without parting with Casanova, Norblin began his studies at the Academy. Thanks to the intervention of one of its members and the positive opinion of Jacques Dumont, he was admitted, contrary to the regulations, to the *École royale des élèves protégés*²⁶ in autumn 1770. The next stage of his career was to go to Rome. Due to austerity measures and the publicity given to the fact that Norblin entered the school thanks to an illegal appointment, the prize awarded to him was withdrawn in 1771²⁷. Shortly afterwards Norblin began his „independen-

²² See Z. Batowski, *op. cit.*; A. Kępińska, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²³ Z. Batowski (*op. cit.*, p. 19-21) in his study limited himself to giving merely pure facts related to Norblin's emigration. A. Kępińska (*op. cit.*, p. 12-16) suggested Norblin's artistic and stylistic "incompatibility" with the Academy. For Norblin's youth and early work see also: J. Miśchalowski, *U źródeł twórczości Jana Piotra Norblina*, "Biuletyn Historii Sztuki" 1971, no. 2; P. Ignaczak, *Nieznanym nauczyciel Jana Piotra Norblina - Jacques Philippe Caresme*, [w:] *Francusko-polskie relacje artystyczne w epoce nowożytnej*, ed. A. Pienkos, A. Rosales Rodriguez, Warszawa 2011.

²⁴ Admittedly, Parisian families with the names Norblin and Collet (the artist's mother's maiden name) are known and it seems that *marchand épicier* based on the street Frépillon and named Joseph-Vincent Norblin could be Jean-Pierre's relative. We can find suggestions in the literature that Norblin's distant relative was Alexandre Paillet, the famous art dealer. See E. Sauzay, B. François-Sappey, *La vie musicale à Paris à travers les Mémoires d'Eugène Sauzay (1809-1901)*, "Revue de Musicologie" 1974, no. 1/2, 1974, pp. 159-210; J. L. Edwards, *Alexandre Joseph Paillet. Expert et marchand de tableaux à la fin du XVIII siècle*, Paris 1996, p. 213, footnote 93; *Projet Familles Parisiennes*, <http://www.famillesparisiennes.org> (access date: 1 III 2019).

²⁵ P. Ignaczak, *op. cit.*; *Procès-verbaux de l'Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture*, ed. A. Montaiglon, Paris 1886, vol. 7: 1756-1768, p. 334.

²⁶ See *Correspondance de M. de Marigny*, "Revue de l'art français ancien et moderne" vol. 20 (1904), s. 211, 214; *Mémoire* addressed to Marigny in the Norblin case, Archives Nationales, Paris, O1 1914. The author of the document referred to the positive opinion of Dumont, rector of the Academy. On the document, Marigny wrote "okay" ("bon"), which, as further notes testify, was against the École statute. In December 1775 Norblin received 400 livres of compensation for the trip, which did not take place. In 1771, four colleagues from École went to Rome. In the instructions exchanged between the First Painter and the Director of Royal Buildings, we read that Norblin was excluded out of savings and convinced that he could apply for other graces. See L. Courajod, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

²⁷ In view of the context of the events mentioned above, the hypothesis already put forward in research on Norblin that it is precisely this failure to go to Rome that alienates Norblin from the Academy should be nuanced. In the light of École's regulations and in the light of the austerity programme associated with its operation – a programme of which Norblin was undoubtedly aware – it is perfectly understandable to refuse him the right to travel (although it should be stressed that the Academy did not follow the regulations in a strict manner as far as the students of its "distinguished" members were concerned). What is more: the unpleasant situation that Norblin faced was not the only one of its kind. In 1770, the jury did not award the prize to anyone, although it does not seem that the level of the works presented was significantly different from those that had won so far. In 1772 and 1773, although the Academy could send two students to the Eternal City, it decided to send only one. At the same time, a stay of those lucky ones who went to Rome was shortened from the statutory three years to one year, with restrictive controls on also imposed on them regarding the works they would prepare there. See L. Courajod, *op. cit.*, p. 107; Ch. Michel, *The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture: The Birth of the French School, 1648-1793*, Los Angeles 2018, pp. 96, 104.



dent career²⁸, and his first works appeared on the auction market. He made a trip to London and Spa²⁹. It is not clear under what circumstances he met the Czartoryskis, who were travelling around Europe at the time, and went to Poland at their invitation.

The episode that is most striking in the briefly outlined Norblin's Parisian biography is his association with Casanova's atelier. He spent as many as nine years (1763–1771) under the wings of the famous painter of battle scenes. We don't know how their cooperation worked out.

But we know how Casanova's atelier functioned. The artist opened his atelier in Paris in 1757 (he was 30 years old at the time) and gathered several students around himself. They came from middle-ranking families, usually without connections in the Parisian art world. In the 1760s they were, among others, Philippe-Jacques Louthembourg, two German-speaking students: Krause and Franz-Anton Meyer³⁰, and since 1763, Norblin.

The reality of Casanova's atelier is reflected in his well-documented collaboration with Philippe-Jacques Louthembourg (1740–1812), who trained with Casanova from 1758 (he was 18 at the time) until his loud parting with the master in winter 1762/1763³¹. Louthembourg not only did simple technical work and replicas for Casanova, but also – if we believe the testimonies of his friends – finished the paintings, which his master then signed with his own name and sold. At the age of 22, Louthembourg decided to leave Casanova's atelier and start his independent career. Whether the reason for his leaving was a sense of exploitation, both financially and symbolically, or an affair, which, as the gossip-mongering Diderot claimed, started between the young man and Casanova's wife – it is difficult to find out today³².

Without the funds to open his own atelier and without the legal possibility of practising his profession, Louthembourg found himself in a difficult situation. According to the (embellished?) account of his friend, Johann Christian Mannlich, Louthembourg went to the painter Carle van Loo to ask for help in selling his previously made painting³³. Confused by the similarity of this work to Casanova's canvases, van Loo accused an unknown young man of stealing. Louthembourg was therefore obliged to create a work in the halls of the Academy that would not only convince van Loo, but also serve as his *morceau d'agrément*. The painting was presented to the members of the Academy in June 1763, and in August it was included in the Salon's exhibition evoking, if we believe Diderot, quite a stir³⁴. For Diderot suggested that the paintings exhibited so far at the Salon under the name of Casanova, which he himself used to praise, were in fact works of young Louthembourg. Diderot ironically called the strongly exposed signature in the painting of the young artist “the subject of battle” (Casanova was a painter of battle scenes) and emphasized an ambitious side of Louthembourg's appearance at the Salon. In Diderot's text, Louthembourg's „debut” also found its echo in the paragraph on Casanova. In it, Diderot focused on the alleged decline of Casanova's art, suggesting that his paintings lack the “touch” of young Louthembourg³⁵. Similar accusations were also made against Casanova by other critics: as early as in 1769, in the “*Mercure de France*”, an anonymous author (in fact, the duo of Elie-Catherine Fréron and Charles-Nicolas Cochin) wrote that the master had not enough talent even in comparison with his own student, and that the gigantic scale of his

²⁸ That is, *de facto*: he worked in a vacuum. Practising the profession of a painter (i.e. establishing an atelier) was possible either within the guild (St. Luke Academy) or the Royal Academy. Norblin, however, acted outside *ancien régime's* legal system. Yet he was not an exception. See M. Tauziède-Espariat, *Autour de Gabriel de Saint-Aubin. Les artistes actifs à Paris hors de l'Académie royale de Peinture et Sculpture*, [in:] *Une histoire des savoir-faire. Création et vie artistique à Paris du grand siècle à nos jours*, ed. C. Henry, Paris 2018.

²⁹ These travels, contrary to the opinions that can be found in the literature, were not pilgrimages in the footsteps of Watteau (who travelled to London for medical, not artistic purposes). To Spa Norblin probably went for “recruitment” purposes. It is known that Spa was a place where the paths of many wealthy aristocrats crossed.

³⁰ See O. Lefevre, *Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg. 1740–1812*, Paris 2012, pp. 19, 23.

³¹ See *ibidem*, pp. 17–20.

³² See *ibidem*, p. 19.

³³ See *ibidem*, p. 17; Ch. Guichard, *La Griffes du peintre La valeur de l'art (1730–1820)*, Paris 2018, p. 162.

³⁴ D. Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. J. Assézat, M. Tourneux, Paris 1877, vol. 10, pp. 198–200.

³⁵ See Ch. Guichard, *op. cit.*, pp. 161–163.

3. J.-P. Norblin de la Gourdain, *Trompe l'oeil*, gouache, ink, watercolour on paper, 44,7 × 49,1; Louvre, Paris. Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / M. Urtado



4. J.-P. Norblin de la Gourdain, *Mes guenilles et gribouillages*, 1810, gouache, paintbrush, paper, 14 × 22; Regional Museum in Vinnitsa. Photo: courtesy of the museum

a quite specific address. For since 1768 Casanova has moved his atelier outside Paris, to rue de Amandiers in Faubourg Saint Antoine, which at the time looked quite rural. He did not seem to live at that address himself. Neither did his students live there, and in any case Louthembourg nor later Norblin (who lived on rue St. Louis au Marais, vis-à-vis rue de St. Claude)³⁹. It seems that the caricature was intended to denounce Casanova's business rather than artistic practice, and to point out that since the artist himself moves his atelier to a secluded suburb, beyond the gaze of his colleagues and collectors, he is aware of his misconduct.

painting production does not attest well about him³⁶. Casanova defended himself against these accusations in the "L'Anne littéraire", but of no avail³⁷. Echoes of critics' reluctance to Casanova can be traced still in 1771³⁸.

The aftermath of the conflict between Casanova and Louthembourg was probably an anonymous (perhaps made by the bittered Louthembourg?) etching entitled: „Dinner of the painter Casanova” [fig. 2]. The composition depicts Casanova's visit (whom we can identify because of a palette at his feet and an oversized name, probably alluding to the practice of signing by Casanova paintings of his students, the practise stigmatized by Diderot) at a poverty-stricken woman's. Since she holds a sausage stick in one hand and a painting in the other, she should be treated as a humiliated allegory of painting, or a variation on the theme of "painting cuisine". Casanova visits the woman just for a short while, he doesn't even take his hat off. He only takes off his gloves to eat the baked sausage and – as we can guess – pick up the prepared dishes. With a rude gesture, he points at the woman, but does not even look in her direction.

The scene, although it takes place in a barely sketched settings, probably refers to

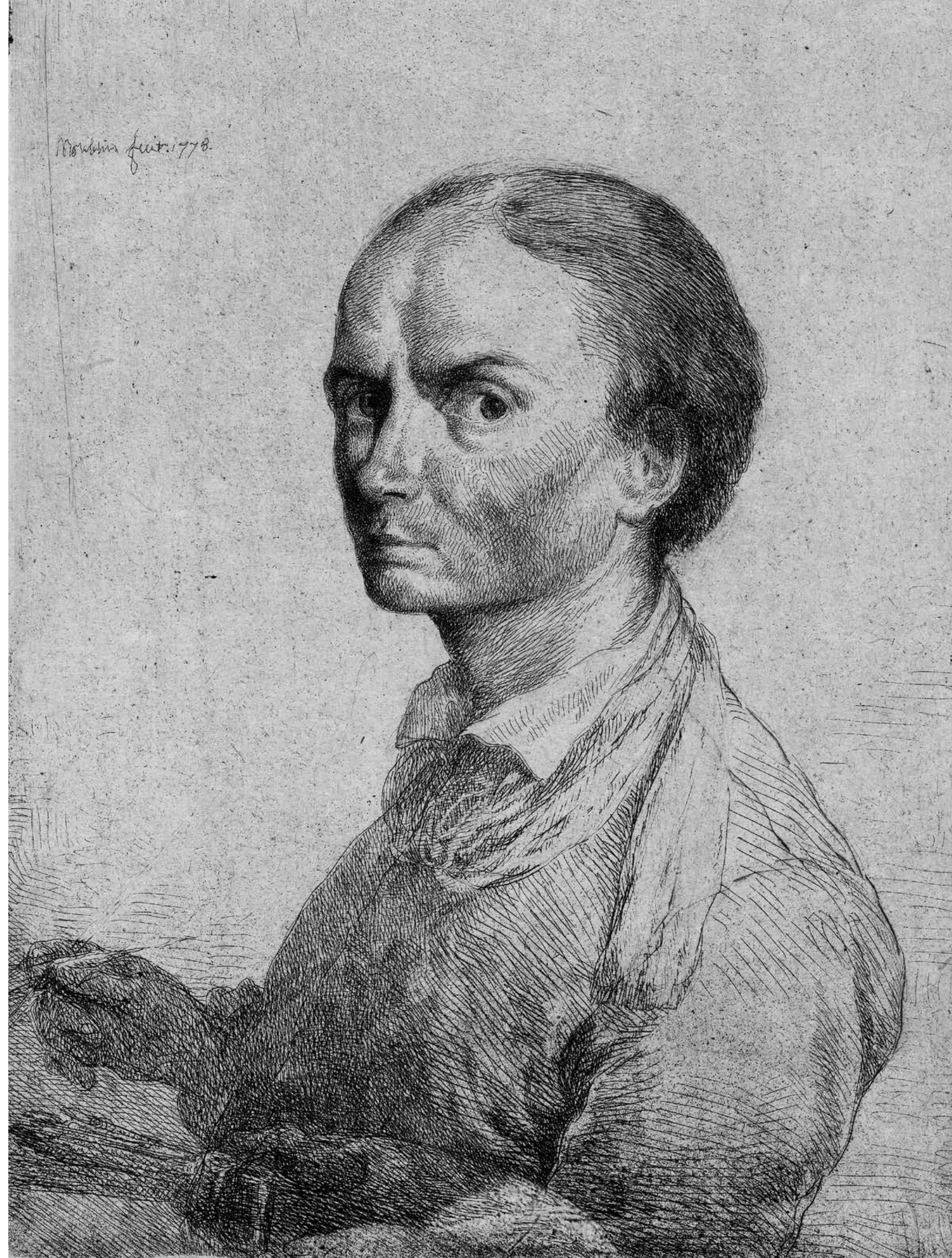
³⁶ *Lettre de M. Casanova, Peintre du Roi, en réponse à un Critique de ses tableaux*, "Mercure de France" 1769, nr 12. See also Ch. Michel, *Charles-Nicolas Cochin et l'art des Lumières*, Rome 1993; E. Kernbauer, *Judgement de valeur. La formation du public comme autorité d'évaluation esthétique*, [in:] *La Valeur de l'art. Exposition, marché, critique et public au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. J. Rasmussen, Paris 2009, pp. 121-122.

³⁷ *Lettre de M. Casanova...*

³⁸ See Ch. Guichard, *La Griffes du peintre...*, p. 164.

³⁹ P. Ignaczak, *op. cit.*, p. 139; *Liste alphabétique des élèves [...] 1758-1776, École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, Paris*, Ms. 45, p. 25, 109. On the latter sheet, Norblin's address is written as follows: "rue S. Louis au Marais près S. Anastase".

5. J.-P. Norblin de la Gourdain, *Selfportrait*, 1778, chalcography, 15,7 × 10,7; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo: public domain



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How do the above observations relate to our knowledge of young Norblin? First of all, they suggest that if Norblin actually learned something from Casanova, he learned under working conditions of a manufactory. According to one of the testimonies, Norblin was supposed to reproduce one of Casanova's paintings in thirty copies, and although the number is probably exaggerated, it suggestively reflects the mood in the atelier of the famous painter⁴⁰. So, perhaps, contrary to the idea that Norblin was "a student of Casanova's", we should look at him rather as an "assistant" or "collaborator", especially considering the fact that the two artists were associated with each other for almost a decade? Secondly, Norblin's professional position between 1763 and 1771 must have been difficult. He worked for an artist who aroused controversy among the Academy, critics and amateurs alike. Moreover, Norblin became associated with Casanova at a critical time for his reputation, i.e. during the period when Louthembourg and Diderot entered into conflict with Casanova. We cannot rule out that Norblin was to some extent involved in this conflict. Chronology suggests that he took up the place of rebellious Louthembourg in Casanova's atelier.

It does not seem, however, that association with a painter with a problematic reputation was an indication of Norblin's cynicism, or contributed to his social demotion. It should be remembered that Norblin began his education at the very low levels of the hierarchy of Parisian art world: he developed his wings in the circle of graphic lampoonists and a painter-pornographer. The sad ending of the career of his first teacher, Caresme (in 1778 he was expelled from the Academy in an atmosphere of moral scandal)⁴¹, clearly shows that the people with whom Norblin had the opportunity to work previously stood lower in the Parisian artistic world than Casanova.

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What is the relevance of these observations to study the case of Norblin? First of all, the specificity of Casanova's atelier outlined above explains why there are so few early paintings of Norblin. Like Louthembourg a bit earlier, he was probably forced to sign his own oil works with the name of his "teacher" until he was 26. Among the "Casanova's works" from the turn of the 1760s and 1770s must therefore be a group of works made by Norblin⁴².

The fact that Norblin's works functioned on the Parisian market as Casanova's paintings also provokes somewhat broader interpretations. With some caution, I would like to hypothesize that it is in the context of the de-personalization of Norblin's work that we should look at his tendency to change his stylistic costumes. The few known Norblin's works from the Parisian period are characterised by great diversity both in terms of their artistic form and themes. Perhaps they are not only the result of "artistic search", but also an attempt to escape from Casanova's style (which – due to the practice of his atelier – was, after all, Norblin's everyday style). Secondly, the fact that Norblin operated for a decade under the Casanova' label provokes us to examine how the problem of artistic independence and "the

name" is reflected in his own work⁴³. As we know, Norblin rarely signed his works. Recently, however, he has been attributed an interesting *trompe l'oeil*, or actually: a *quodlibet*, showing scattered drawings and engravings on which artists' signatures are clearly outlined, including those of Norblin himself and his first teacher, Caresme [fig. 3]⁴⁴. Thus, as we can see, Norblin's own name, names of other artists and the very fact of signing the works was the subject of his artistic reflection.

Finally, the briefly presented here Casanova's reputation in Paris (and the recent reflection by Paweł Ignaczak on Caresme's reputation) makes us look anew at Norblin's situation in the Parisian art world and once again consider the prospects that would await the artist if he decided to stay in France in 1771.

Insight into the mechanisms that determined whether the young artist would manage to make a career under his own name gives us – once again – Louthembourg. He was bitterly taught the price of professional independence. After leaving Casanova's studio, Louthembourg tried to get into the Royal Academy and sought the protection of the King's painter, Carle van Loo. However, Van Loo left Paris in 1764 and died a year later. When Louthembourg presented his candidature to the Academy in September 1766, the influential secretary Charles-Nicolas Cochin and a number of officers raised objections, claiming that the artist was conducting himself like a libertine (which, by the way, was true and also applied to his wife)⁴⁵. Louthembourg was therefore denied the right to present his works⁴⁶.

Several senior artists (François Boucher, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, François-Hubert Drouais, Gabriel-François Doyen) have unsuccessfully spoke out for Louthembourg at the Academy⁴⁷. There were also unsuccessful attempts to organise an atelier for him at the Louvre⁴⁸. Eventually, Louthembourg's colleagues decided to form a conspiracy: when, in August 1767, Cochin and the Marquis Marigny, hostile to the artist, went on a trip to the Netherlands, the lower-ranking academics in Paris gathered and voted for Louthembourg's membership⁴⁹.

Although, as we have seen, by leaving the Casanova's atelier, Louthembourg gained Diderot's sympathy and had friends among painters as influential as Boucher, his situation still remained difficult and he had to use a ploy to gain the Academy's recognition. In this context, it is worth considering what prospects had Norblin, an artist without connections in the world of art, without influential friends, without wealthy patrons and, above all, a teacher who would be respected in the milieu? Also Norblin's relationship with Caresme (controversial pornographer) wasn't very glorious. Norblin's other acquaintances were probably not influential: an art dealer Langlois and a painter Gabriel Bouquer⁵⁰, a painter named Crépin⁵¹, and even more so a draftsman and etcher Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, an artist aptly described as "*an artiste bohème avant la lettre*"⁵². The only figure we know that was conducive to Norblin at the beginning of his career, the painter Jacques Dumont, was slowly withdrawing from the life of the Academy in the late 1760s.

⁴³ It would be worthwhile to compare this problem with the situation of David's students, entangled in the relationship with the teacher–father and various issues of "fraternal" relations. See Th. Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists in Revolutionary France*, New Haven – London 1995.

⁴⁴ See Ch. Guichard, *op. cit.*, pp. 60–64. By the way, it is worth mentioning one more work from the Louvre's collection, which is, according to the author of these words, by Norblin – the drawing *An Elegant Party in the Park* (inv. no. 29739).

⁴⁵ See Ch. Michel, *op. cit.*, p. 105; O. Lefevre, *op. cit.*, p. 22. Louthembourg's "Lightness of character" – to use the expression of Cochin – is confirmed by the sources. Madame Louthembourg, accused of prostitution, had relations with a Captain of the Indian Company with her husband's knowledge. A little later, if we believe the police records, Louthembourg maltreated his wife, who in 1771 applied for separation. It is supposed that it was the marital conflict and the very concrete threat of division of the property that caused Louthembourg to cash in some of the movables and leave for London. In the following years, he did not maintain contact either with his wife or with their four children. See *ibidem*, pp. 25–27, 29, 32.

⁴⁶ It should be noted that the opposition to Louthembourg's candidacy was not a retaliation for his rebellion against Casanova. Cochin was equally hostile to both men (in 1769 he was to dictate a pamphlet against Casanova).

⁴⁷ See O. Lefevre, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ See Ch. Michel, *The Académie Royale de...*, p. 193.

⁴⁹ See *ibidem*, p. 105.

⁵⁰ See E. Defrance, *op. cit.*, pp. 82–83.

⁵¹ In 1775, a joint work by Norblin and Crépin (on which Norblin was to paint figures) was recorded on the Parisian auction market: Lugt 2441, 25 IX 1775, item 84 (links to Lugt after Getty Provenance Index).

⁵² *Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, 1724–1780* [exhibition cat.], Frick Collection, 30 X 2007 – 27 I 2008, New York 2007.

⁴⁰ See E. Defrance, *La Conversion d'un sans-culotte: Gabriel Bouquier, peintre, poète et conventionnel. 1739–1810*, Paris 1912, pp. 82–83.

⁴¹ It was about "abusive" rumors about the artist's conduct. The denunciation was submitted by the Secretary of the Academy, Charles-Nicolas Cochin, and d'Angivillier himself was involved in the expulsion of Caresme. In the case of this scandal two accused persons presented their defences before the Academy: Caresme and an unknown young student. The Caresme affair is discussed in detail in: *Procès-verbaux de l'Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture*, ed. A. de Montaiglon, Paris 1875, vol. 8, pp. 353, 357.

⁴² Norblin's works might also be found among the paintings currently attributed to Casanova. Perhaps Norblin executed the composition *The Drinking Man* from around 1770 (Louvre, Paris, MI 1064, a painting previously associated with Fragonard, now attributed to Casanova) or a pair of paintings: *Before Hunting* and *After Hunting*, also attributed to Casanova (private collection, paintings reproduced in Christie's catalogue, Old Master Paintings, New York, 4 VII 2014, sale 2855, lot 103). In the case of the latter works, it is worth noting Norblin's drawing which takes up a similar theme: The Regional Museum in Vinnitsa, Г-628, verso.

Finally, it should be emphasized that there are no sources suggesting that Norblin maintained contacts with Paris in the decade 1774-1783, there are no known letters to potential friends, there are no mention of Norblin in the documents left by the artists from the Academy circle. Nor does Norblin seem to have tried to send his works to France⁵³. Nor did he seek to be admitted to the Academy and thus to exhibit his works in the Salon, although it did happen that other academic immigrants did so. The easiness with which the artist managed to cut off his contacts with the city in 1774 makes one question whether Norblin had established any roots in the capital during the decade spent there.

What we know about the atmosphere in the Parisian art world, the atmosphere tense not only among the professors but also among the students, gives us every reason to suppose that Norblin might simply not want to participate in this world⁵⁴. He was not the only young artist who could not cope with the pressure of the Academy and the lack of career prospects on the market. Let us just recall that when Norblin was a student of the Academy, in 1767, Jean-Baptiste Greuze sought its recognition in vain. In the same year 1767 there were student protests related to the “unfair” granting of a scholarship to one of the students for a journey to Rome⁵⁵. In 1768, the academics rejected the candidature of Laurent Guiard, a talented sculptor returning from Rome to Paris, and he decided to emigrate in an atmosphere of conflict (finally, in 1771, he found a place for himself at the court in Parma). In 1772 the academics refused the *Grand Prix* to young Jacques-Louis David and in an atmosphere of conflict awarded it to Anicet Lemonnier⁵⁶. David himself started a hunger protest⁵⁷. A little later, in 1774, François Senechal, a student of Falconet, after the humiliation he had publicly suffered from his teacher, committed suicide⁵⁸. The atmosphere in which Norblin operated in Paris was therefore – as we can see – tense, and the Academy was not a friendly institution for all art adepts. Talent was not enough to make a career at the Academy⁵⁹.

However, I do not suggest that Norblin was an artist unfitted and programmatically solitary, or “excluded” by vicious academics. The non-existence of a group of personalities around Norblin that could help him start his career, i.e. leave Casanova’s atelier and work in his own name, could simply be linked to psychological issues that are difficult to grasp today. Although there are very few sources on Norblin’s personality, it is enough to mention that the Academy reports described him as “*fort rangé et tres laborieux*”, and Princess Czartoryska simply mentioned him as “an original”⁶⁰. The artist himself presented himself in self-portraits with merciless realism, emphasizing his unusual physiognomy (almost spherical head, a furrow on his forehead, a tiny chin and squeezed lips [fig. 5]). If judging from the preserved auto-thematic works, Norblin had quite a distance to his *oeuvre*. In 1810, he wanted to place on the front of his drawing file a dog peeing on cards, and described his drawings as “rags” and “scribblers” (*guenilles et gribouillages* [fig. 4])⁶¹. He never aspired to be a great artist. Let us also emphasize that Norblin was not remembered in the Czartoryski family as a great painter: Adam Jerzy Czartoryski simply wrote about him

“Mr. Norblin of drawings” and listed him among a number of nameless tutors in his memoirs⁶². Perhaps Norblin did not make a great career in Paris and Poland not because he was hindered, but simply because that was not his psychological disposition and ambition?

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The contextualization of facts from Norblin’s Parisian stage of life (the stage of life, not the „artistic stage”) shows that his youth was not just “learning” and “artistic search” free from the social context. Given the nature of Casanova’s atelier and the distribution of forces in the field of the Academy, it should be stressed that Norblin must have known already since his school years that his future professional situation in Paris would be difficult. The young provincial had no prospects of making a career either at the Academy (the mere fact of being admitted to it did not guarantee a career at all)⁶³, or in the guild. Little is known about his contacts with the world of Parisian collectors, but the number of works that appeared on the Parisian market in the 1770s and their prices suggest that he sold little⁶⁴.

Therefore, it seems that Norblin emigrated from Paris due to a lack of prospects. What are the consequences of this findings and previous considerations for research on the artist? First of all, we can slightly nuance the idealized image of the Czartoryski family as enlightened and generous patrons who are fishing for promising artistic talents on foreign markets. The scale of Norblin’s earnings suggests that the princely couple did not value the artist as much as art historians do. Secondly, the redefinition of Norblin’s “youth”, i.e., its shift from a field interpreted as a “period of artistic development”, to the meaning: “a period in which a person starts to confront various social and economic problems on their own, and in which their social and psychological disposition is formed”, opens a number of research questions. The issues of Norblin’s social and class identity are particularly intriguing. Neither Norblin as a “young provincial working in the artistic enterprise of Casanova as a subcontractor” nor Norblin as a “tutor and decorator working in the service of the Czartoryski family” can be squeezed into the intellectualized paradigm of the “artist”. Perhaps extensive research on Norblin’s biography might make it possible in the future not only to get to know the details of this “artist’s” life, but also to introduce into scholarly circulation a figure who escapes similar categorisation.

Słowa kluczowe

Jean-Pierre Norblin de la Gourdain, Jan Piotr Norblin, migracje artystów, Królewska Akademia Malarstwa i Rzeźby, Francesco Casanova

Keywords

Jean-Pierre Norblin de la Gourdain, Jan Piotr Norblin, migrations of artists, Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, Francesco Casanova

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⁵³ An exception to this may be the painting *Un cavalier Polonais* sold by Le Brun in 1775. The title would suggest that the painting could have been sent to Paris from Poland. It should be stressed, however, that the eastern horsemen were also painted by Casanova *in situ*, in Paris (see Lugt 2389, 3 IV 1775, item 185). Norblin’s subsequent “Polish” works did not appear in Paris at Le Brun’s until November 1783, probably in connection with the artist’s visit to the city (see Lugt, 36030, 19 IX 1783, item 179; see also Lugt 4126, 22 I 1787, item 335). As far as the earlier period is concerned, it is worth noting two drawings sold in 1775: *Un arracheur de dents* and *A Charlatan* (164 livres for both, at Pierre Remy’s), as they prove that Norblin took up the genre theme in Paris (see Lugt 2389, 3 IV 1775, item 184). Norblin’s painting copies of Rembrandt’s works also belong to the Parisian period (see Lugt 2772, 19 I 1778, item 212), as well as his pastiches of Watteau.

⁵⁴ At the Academy, it happened sometimes that students destroyed each other’s works. See **Th. Mascotay**, *The Profession of Sculpture in the Paris Académie*, London 2014, pp. 1, 329.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ See **Ch. Michel**, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁵⁷ See **A. Schnapper**, *David témoin de son temps*, Paris 1980, p. 24.

⁵⁸ See **Th. Mascotay**, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁵⁹ As **Th. Crow** (*Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-century Paris*, New Haven – London 1985, pp. 134–136) has convincingly demonstrated, the figure of a talented surprise invader is a myth.

⁶⁰ See **I. Czartoryska**, *née Fleming*, *Extraits et Melanges de Differens genres pour la Maison Gothique a Pulawy 1809*, BCz, 6070, III, vol. 3, pp. 51, 73.

⁶¹ See The Regional Museum in Vinnitsa, inv. no. Г-910.

⁶² See **A. J. Czartoryski**, *Pamiętniki i memoriały polityczne 1776–1809*, ed. **J. Skowronek**, Warszawa 1986, pp. 80, 83.

⁶³ The situation of young artists starting their career at the Academy after 1750 was rightly described by **T. Macsotay** (*The Profession of Sculpture...*, p. 330), who wrote that „Academic entitlement to this generation must have looked like an empty paper promise”.

⁶⁴ The change occurred shortly after Norblin settled down in Poland. In November 1774 his small oil painting depicting Pierrot playing the guitar was sold for 90 livres 9 sou. See Lugt 2332, 21 XI 1774, item 113.

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Summary

KONRAD NIEMIRA (University of Warsaw) / Your money or your life, or why Jean-Pierre Norblin de la Gourdain left Paris

The subject of the article is the youth of the painter and illustrator Jean-Pierre Norblin de la Gourdain (1745–1830), and the circumstances that led him to enter the service of Princess Izabela Czartoryska and her husband Adam Czartoryski. Starting from a thorough examination of Norblin's earnings in Poland, I analyze the non-economic factors that have caused his move there. The hypothesis presented in the text assumes that one of them was the artist's difficult professional and social situation. In the first years of his stay in Paris, Norblin used to be associated with a circle of painters of low social renown. For almost a decade he was employed by Francesco Casanova, a painter who has been a controversial figure for both the Royal Academy and critics. He also failed to gain an influential patron or loyal clientele in the Academy circles. It seems that he had no prospects for not only making a career in Paris, but also for becoming independent of Casanova. Perhaps it was this social and professional stalemate that prompted him to undertake the “recruitment journey” via London and Spa, which eventually led him to Puławy and Warsaw.