

Capturing Character

Andrew Butterfield

**Jean-Antoine Houdon:
Sculptor of the Enlightenment**
an exhibition at the National
Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,
May 4–September 7, 2003;
the J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles, November 4, 2003–
January 25, 2004; and the
Musée et Domaine National
du Château de Versailles,
March 1–May 30, 2004.
Catalog of the exhibition
by Anne L. Poulet.
National Gallery of Art/
University of Chicago Press,
384 pp., \$85.00

**Ein Versuch über
die Gesichter Houdons**
by Willibald Sauerländer.
Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag,
72 pp., 12€ (paper)

During the last decades of the eighteenth century, Jean-Antoine Houdon was the most famous artist alive. Although based in Paris, he had clients throughout the Western Hemisphere, from Russia to the United States, a claim no other sculptor could make. He was, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, "the first statuary of the world." Above all he was celebrated as a maker of portraits, and the list of his subjects seemingly includes every noteworthy figure of his day. Napoleon, Catherine the Great, Gluck, Lafayette, John Paul Jones, Robert Fulton—the list goes on and on. Houdon was especially favored by leaders of the Enlightenment—Diderot, Voltaire, d'Alembert—and by leaders of the American Revolution—Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington.

The images he made of these men were intended to provide a permanent record of their features and character; and to a very great degree they have succeeded in doing so. If, for example, one calls Voltaire's face to mind, it is exactly as Houdon portrayed him, with a wry grin and a penetrating gaze, suggestive of his irony and brilliance, ruthlessness and wit.

The first biography of Houdon appeared in 1829, only one year after his death, and he has been the subject of research ever since. Nevertheless, Houdon's work has remained an exceedingly difficult subject. The problem has been one of connoisseurship. Houdon made countless copies of many of his sculptures; he often formed versions of the same statue in different media—marble, bronze, terra cotta, plaster; and he sometimes created variants of the same portrait, altering the sitter's costume or hairstyle, for instance. In addition, because of the immense popularity of his sculptures, unauthorized copies were already being manufactured in the 1770s and his work has been faked without stop ever since. It has proved hard to untangle the connections between all the versions or to identify all the fakes; and consequently it has been all but impossible to develop a reliable picture of his work as a whole. So great are the problems that the last two scholars to attempt comprehensive studies of Houdon were never able to complete their research.

The show of Houdon's sculpture now on view at the National Gallery of Art is the first international exhibition ever devoted to the artist. Organized by Anne Poulet with the aid of Guilhem Scherf and others, it brings together nearly seventy works of outstanding quality and impeccable provenance. For the first time it is possible to see in one room works from every phase of his career, to examine side by side versions of the same piece in different

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Jean-Antoine Houdon: Denis Diderot, terra cotta, 18 inches high, 1771

media, and to study both the subtle changes in execution and the range of quality among the sculptures of the artists. The catalog, moreover, contains important new documentary information, and the entries cast clear light on both the works exhibited as well as related versions throughout the world. The show is an extraordinary achievement; it makes a contribution of permanent value to the study of a very great artist.

The catalog, however, lacks a biographical essay, and the sculptures, both in the catalog and in the exhibition, are arranged by type rather than chronology. There may be good reasons for this arrangement, but viewers unfamiliar with Houdon will likely have trouble following the development of his career. For anyone who can read German, the best way to overcome this problem is to consult the brilliant overview that the German art historian Willibald Sauerländer has just published, *Ein Versuch über die Gesichter Houdons*, a book we may hope will soon be translated. Although

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Houdon was born in 1741, the son of a concierge. His low birth turned out to be fortunate, however, for in 1748 the *hôtel particulier* where his father served was made into the *École Royale des Élèves Protégés*. This was the school where the winners of the Prix de Rome received advanced instruction before leaving for the French Academy in Rome. Thus from an early age Houdon was surrounded by artists of major talent. He began his formal training at fifteen, won the Rome Prize for sculpture at twenty, and moved to the Eternal City in 1764 at the age of twenty-three. Thomas Jefferson later was to characterize Houdon as an artist "panting after glory," and his ambition and brilliance must have been evident right from the start.

Soon after arriving in Rome, Houdon won the commission to make a pair of colossal statues for Santa Maria degli Angeli, the church that Michelangelo had built within the ruins of the ancient Baths of Diocletian. Undaunted by this challenge, Houdon de-

cidated furthermore to base the statues on exact knowledge of the human body. To this end, he studied with a professor of surgery who gave him "lessons in anatomy on cadavers." The importance and novelty of this should not be underestimated. Despite the emphasis on nature in art theory, relatively few painters or sculptors since Michelangelo had actually observed (or performed) a dissection. That Houdon chose to do so was a sign of both his independence of character and his scientific cast of mind, traits that later would win him favor with the *philosophes*.

On the basis of his anatomical studies, Houdon made a life-size statue of an *écorché*—a figure with its skin removed so as to reveal its musculature. According to one contemporary witness, other artists and connoisseurs judged this "to be the best anatomical statue ever to have been created," and it made him famous. Almost immediately art academies around Europe bought plaster copies of the *écorché* from Houdon and began using it to teach students the rudiments of anatomy.

At the same time that he was learning about the substructures of the body, Houdon also taught himself about the depiction of surfaces. He soon became the most technically accomplished sculptor since Gianlorenzo Bernini, whose works he studied in Rome. Like Bernini, he could carve and polish marble to make it look like almost any material. Houdon was especially brilliant in the representation of hair, flesh, and fabric; he could even imitate the distinctive character of different textiles, such as lace, cotton, silk, satin, and velvet. In his greatest portraits, he always gave special attention to the hair. For example, in his portrait of Madame Vermeux, a celebrated beauty, the hair cascades down in luscious masses of voluptuous locks. Houdon's debt to Bernini is particularly clear in this work: the hair is carved in a manner extremely similar to that of the nymph in the *Apollo and Daphne*.

The depiction of eyes had always been a problem for sculptors; the monochromatic character of most sculpture media makes it difficult to represent the light that is naturally reflected by the vitreous surface of the eye. To overcome this problem, Houdon invented a technique all his own. He formed the iris from a series of extremely fine lines, made a deep hollow for the pupil, and created a tiny wedge on top that projected from the rim of the iris to the center of the pupil. This wedge catches more light than the surrounding areas and thus effectively simulates the sheen and glimmer radiating from the eye. Houdon's innovation was greatly admired by the public. Typical are the comments of Frédéric Melchior Grimm, Diderot's friend who edited the influential newsletter *Correspondance littéraire*. Speaking of Houdon's bust of Molière, Grimm wrote,

That great man's genius for observation is expressed with an energy, a nobility, that no painter

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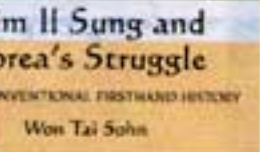
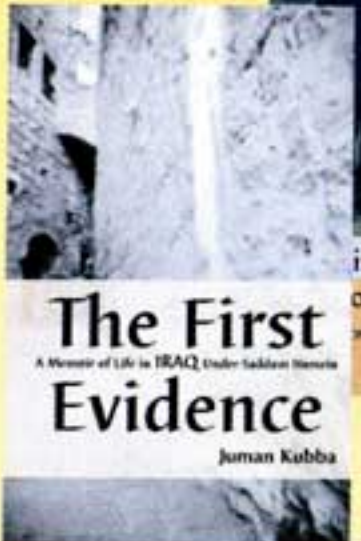
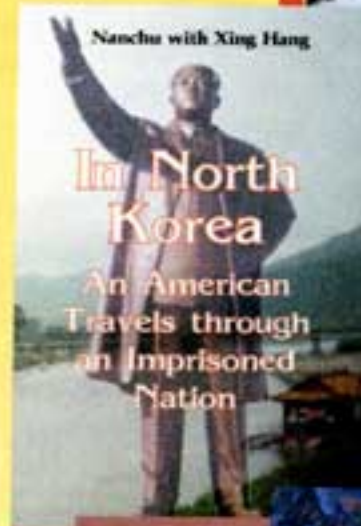
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has ever approached... His gaze (M. Houdon may be the first sculptor able to do eyes) penetrates deep into the heart.

Similarly, Grimm reported of the bust of Voltaire,

The eyes have so much life, an effect of light so ingeniously handled, that M. Greuze himself [the painter], on seeing the bust for the first time, initially thought that the eyes were made of enamel or some other colored material.

Since antiquity it had been widely believed that portraits should be moralizing and exemplary in character. This idea was still very much alive in eighteenth-century France, where it was applied especially to sculpture. Thus, a review in the *Mercure de France* in 1773 stated, "If one examines sculpture in moral terms, certainly the most worthy goal of this art is to preserve the memory of illustrious men."¹ But Houdon saw an important limitation in this view of sculpture. By representing great men primarily as examples of moral excellence, portraits suppressed the particular nature of specific individuals; they depicted them as idealized and generalized figures of virtue, rather than as real persons in all their actual complexity. Like his predecessors, Houdon wanted to represent character. But he was particularly interested in the psychological makeup of his subjects, and he wanted to capture their essential gestures and typical expressions.

This more intimate ideal of portraiture had already begun to appear in some of the paintings of Greuze, Liotard, and Quentin de La Tour, but it was still considered inappropriate for the more permanent and august medium of sculpture. In the entry on "the portrait" in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, the Chevalier de Jaucourt wrote,

The principal merit of this genre of painting is the exact resemblance that consists principally in expressing the character and air of the physiognomy of the persons that it represents... Each person has a distinctive character that it is necessary to capture.²

This was the ideal of the portrait that Houdon sought to pursue in sculpture. Remarkably, this ideal is manifest in the very first portrait bust Houdon is known to have made. The subject of the work is Diderot, the philosopher, who was also the most influential art critic alive (see illustration on previous page). Exhibited at the Salon in Paris in 1771, it is a startlingly original work. It shows Diderot with his head turned as if something had just caught his attention; he is staring alertly into the distance, and his lips are parted as if he were about to speak. That is to

¹*Mercure de France*, October 1773, p. 178.

²Le Chevalier de Jaucourt, "Portrait," in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, edited by D. Diderot and J. A. d'Alembert (Paris, 1765), Vol. 13, p. 153. It is worth noting that Houdon later sculpted both Jaucourt's wife (the bust is now in the Louvre) and his daughter (the bust of the Comtesse du Cayla, now in the Frick Collection).

say, the sculpture shows him in the midst of his most characteristic activities; he is looking, thinking, and engaged in conversation. We can be certain that this is what the bust represents, for on at least two occasions Diderot wrote that he should be depicted in just this way.³ Moreover, the bust shows him bare-shouldered and without a wig; this lack of ornament forces the viewer to concentrate on the intensity of his expression. The bust brims with energy and life. This effect is also due to Houdon's knowledge of anatomy, which allowed him to emphasize exactly those muscles of the face that give form to the expressions. Diderot praised the bust as "très ressemblant" and other reviewers said that it caught his "flame of genius."

One contemporary commented that Houdon "has an extraordinary talent for giving a soul to his figures."⁴ Nowhere is this talent more evident than in the astonishing portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The bust is all the



Jean-Antoine Houdon: Benjamin Franklin, white marble, 16 1/2 inches high, 1779

more amazing since it is a posthumous portrait and Houdon had only once seen Rousseau alive. The evening Rousseau died, Houdon was sent for and asked to make a death mask of the philosopher. The mask, which survives, appears inert and expressionless, but the portrait Houdon made from that mask is a deeply sympathetic image of a great but very troubled man. The bust shows Rousseau looking away, as if avoiding eye contact with the viewer. He appears awkward, hesitant, ill at ease. Yet at the same time the colossal magnitude of his intellect and energy are manifest; he seems almost possessed by some unbidded force of nature that is barely contained within and about to burst forth.

Houdon created this impression of anxious genius by stressing the disorder of the details. For example, Rousseau's coat has three large buttons and

³In a letter to Sophie Volland, Diderot admiringly described a now lost painting of himself, writing that in it "I live, I breathe, I move," and observing that it was clear from his expression that he was engaged in the process of thought. The letter, dated September 17, 1760, is quoted by Jeannette Geffriaud Rosso, *Diderot et le portrait* (Pisa: Editrice Libreria Goliardica, 1998), p. 16. Rosso quotes similar comments by Diderot on pages 47 and 126.

⁴The abbé de Véri as quoted in Colin P. Bailey, *Patriotic Taste: Collecting Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Paris* (Yale University Press, 2002), p. 108.

three large buttonholes, while his vest has four buttons. At the top, all these elements form nearly straight lines across the bust; but from the middle down, they go out of line, creating a kind of visual staccato. In a similar manner, Rousseau's wig is subtly asymmetrical and seems to rest slightly askew on his head. In his *Confessions* Rousseau proclaimed, "I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature." Houdon fulfilled this wish, although in a way that Rousseau could never have imagined.

Diderot and Grimm were among the most influential tastemakers in Europe, and they actively promoted Houdon, helping to launch his career. They praised his works in the *Correspondance littéraire* and they persuaded members of the German and Russian aristocracy, including Catherine the Great and the Dukes of Saxe-Gotha, to hire Houdon while he was still relatively unknown. They also brought visiting dignitaries and other potential clients to his studio. A trip to Houdon's soon became part of the Parisian experience. Carl-August of Saxe-Weimar (Goethe's patron), Grand Duke Paul of Russia, the King of Prussia, Alexander von Humboldt, Thomas Jefferson, and many other distinguished persons visited the artist. In 1778 "all of Paris" was said to have come to see Houdon's new busts of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Franklin. The artist became so famous that at least twice, in an effort at crowd control, he distributed tickets for viewings of his works, perhaps a first in the history of art.

Houdon's portraits of the celebrities of the Enlightenment were prized souvenirs to take home from the cultural capital of the world. The artist made unprecedented quantities of casts of his statues, and these were disseminated throughout Europe and the United States. Previously, sculptors had made extremely limited numbers of copies; two or three might be typical. By contrast, Houdon produced more than forty replicas of one bust of Voltaire, and he even had plans to make as many as two hundred copies of a portrait of Washington. His busts of Diderot, Rousseau, and Franklin were also immensely popular; no one is sure how many authentic versions exist.

Nothing like this had happened before. To be sure, portraits in prints and on medals had been circulated in large numbers since the Renaissance; but such images were vastly smaller in scale and expense than the casts sold by Houdon. In a sense, Houdon combined the wide distribution of prints with the grandeur and solemnity of sculpture. It is noteworthy, too, that the subjects of Houdon's most popular portraits were usually writers and *philosophes*, not popes or rulers. During the Enlightenment, the cult of genius had increasingly embraced thinkers as figures worthy of celebration. The Temple of British Worthies at Stowe, Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey, and Tilton du Tillet's *Parnasse François* were earlier eighteenth-century monuments dedicated to writers and intellectuals; likewise Angiviller's contemporary series of sculptures of the *grands hommes* of France, begun in 1775, commemorated several artists. Yet all

the figures these previous monuments celebrated were dead, whereas the majority of the men Houdon portrayed were still alive.

One reason for the popularity of Houdon's casts was that he had perfected the technique of making multiples in plaster or terra cotta. He was able to capture in these media all the subtle features of his hand-made models. The best of the plaster casts are even superior in quality to some of the marbles. It has not always been possible to see this in the past, because so many of the plaster casts have been damaged by repainting, overcleaning, or both. The exhibition presents a newly discovered plaster bust of Sophie Arnould, preserved in its original condition, and it is a revelation. It is more expressive and more finely detailed than the marble version on view of the same portrait. In these circumstances, the distinction between origi-



Jean-Antoine Houdon: Sophie Arnould, white plaster, 27 inches high, 1775

nal and copy became less significant than it had been before.

Another reason that Houdon made so many copies was that his sitters demanded them. Benjamin Franklin got one marble and four copies of his portrait; John Paul Jones bought sixteen copies of his own portrait; Sophie Arnould purchased thirty plaster casts of hers. Franklin, Jones, and Arnould gave the copies to their friends and admirers. (Diderot did something similar, asking Houdon to donate five copies of his bust to his home town.)

This was, I believe, a new practice, wholly without precedent. It must be examined in relation to broad changes in notions of fame and publicity that occurred at the end of the eighteenth century. Writing in 1787 Dézailler d'Argenville declared that the purpose of sculpture was "to erect statues to the gods and to famous persons [*personnages célèbres*]." This is a subtle but significant change from similar statements of the past, which had not placed the same emphasis on celebrity.⁵

Moreover, many of Houdon's patrons saw themselves as members of an elite brotherhood dedicated to virtue and progress. The collecting and exchange of portraits was one way

⁵A. N. Dézailler d'Argenville, *Vies des fameux sculpteurs depuis la renaissance des arts* (Paris: Debure l'aîné, 1787), p. i.

of expressing their fellowship. For example, on July 3, 1789—less than two weeks before the fall of the Bastille—Jefferson acquired seven busts from Houdon with the intention of making a "gallery of worthies" at Monticello. In the Renaissance, a portrait cycle of illustrious men often consisted of figures from classical antiquity, such as Cicero and Alexander, and more recent examples, too, only depicted men from the past. But Jefferson's gallery of worthies consisted almost entirely of his friends and colleagues: Franklin, Washington, Lafayette, John Paul Jones, and Turgot, plus busts of Voltaire and himself.

Commitment to the ideals of the Enlightenment also led many of Houdon's patrons to join the Freemasons, which before the French Revolution favored the advancement of learning and political reform. Voltaire, Franklin, John Paul Jones, Montgolfier, and Count Stroganoff were among the members of the most prestigious Masonic lodge in Paris, the Loge des Neufs Soeurs. Houdon, too, was a member, and it proved to be a very important factor in his career; it was through the Freemasons that he made his first contacts with American patrons. He met Franklin, whose bust he sculpted in 1778, at the Masonic lodge, and the lodge also commissioned a portrait of John Paul Jones in 1781.

The bust of Benjamin Franklin is a miracle of three-dimensional design. The outline of the head and shoulders is always lively, irregular, and interesting, no matter where one stands as one walks around the sculpture; this is an extraordinarily difficult accomplishment. In the version on view in the exhibition, the carving and polishing of the marble are of the very highest level of quality. The flesh of the face appears soft and tender, and slightly slack with age, and the skeins of hair fall in somewhat tangled locks. The marble of the hair is beautifully undercut and has a rougher and more matte finish than that of the skin. There is an abstract look on Franklin's face, as if he were lost in contemplation. Upon first viewing the sculpture, Grimm exclaimed, "What elevation of thought is seen in the bust of the legislator of the New World!"⁶

Franklin and Grimm introduced Houdon to Jefferson, whose portrait the artist did in 1789. At the end of the eighteenth century, the French idealized America as a realm of good government and Rousseauian virtue. One French fan wrote Jefferson, "For us you are men from the Golden Age. . . . Ah, Monsieur, your land is the promised land." Unmistakably, the artist too felt great admiration for the statesman. Jefferson has a simple but noble bearing, and his gaze is especially strong and focused; he appears confident and heroic, yet plain, a man of the people.

In 1784 the Assembly of the State of Virginia decided to erect a statue of Washington in the state capitol, and they asked Jefferson and Franklin to find a sculptor for the job. They chose Houdon. The artist regarded the statue

⁶As quoted by Charles Henry Hart and Edward Biddle, *Memoirs of the Life and Works of Jean Antoine Houdon, the sculptor of Voltaire and of Washington* (1911), p. 101.

of Washington to be one of the most important in his career. At the height of his popularity, he sacrificed nearly half a year to travel from Paris to Mount Vernon in order to record the general's features firsthand. To ensure the complete fidelity of the portrait, he made a life-mask of Washington, formed a model of his bust in clay, measured his head and limbs, and made drawings to preserve the characteristic details of Washington's stance, gesture, and expression. Working from these materials after his return to Paris, Houdon carved a life-size marble statue; the project took almost ten years to complete.

The sculpture depicts Washington as a modern-day Cincinnatus, the soldier of the Roman Republic who combined military prowess with the virtuous renunciation of power. Washington stands in a graceful and dignified pose; although dressed in contemporary clothing, he looks like an ideal hero from classical antiquity. At his side are a sword, a plow, and a fasces, the symbol of republican authority. The sculpture can be seen in the rotunda of the state capitol in Richmond, Virginia, and is never exhibited elsewhere. According to Garry Wills, who has written the best account of it,

He [Houdon] catches his subject in midtransformation from soldier to Virginia planter. Though Washington still wears his uniform, he has cast off his riding cloak, removed his sword, and taken up his walking stick. We witness a kind of spiritual "striptease" in which the emblems of power are being removed, one by one. Washington rests in the first moment of his return, at ease in the world he has chosen. . . . Houdon comes close to making him walk back among us, heroic but not distant after all.⁷

With the outbreak of the French Revolution, Houdon's career fell into decline. He was threatened with arrest during the Terror, and his studio at the Bibliothèque du Roi was taken away. Grimm and other friends fled into exile. By 1795 Houdon was so desperate for money he had to sell the contents of his studio, and between that year and the end of the century he showed no new sculptures at the Salons. This was an extraordinary change for a man who had exhibited as many as twenty-five works in 1777 alone.

Houdon continued to receive commissions, but far fewer than before, and increasingly he seems to have felt contempt for his sitters. In many of his portraits from this period, the subjects appear sullen and thuggish: Mirabeau looks like a gangster; Josephine like a gun moll. Houdon did two busts of Napoleon and in both the emperor has the eerie charisma of a cult leader and killer. Dismayed with the current crop of public figures, Houdon instead poured all his talent and love into a series of ravishing portraits of his three little daughters; these are perhaps the most beautiful images of children ever sculpted.

After the middle of the 1790s, Houdon's technique began to change;

⁷Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Doubleday, 1984), pp. 225, 240.

thereafter most of his sculptures are more summary in their technique. Before Houdon detailed every muscle in the face; now instead he emphasized the major planes. This is usually explained as a result of Houdon's response to the rise of Neoclassicism, and perhaps it was. But when he felt like it, Houdon still could work in a manner,

and at a level of quality, equivalent to that of his masterpieces of earlier years. The proof of this is the marble bust of Robert Fulton that he made in 1804. An artist and inventor, Fulton was the kind of person Houdon truly admired. Fulton was renowned for his good looks and personal charm as well as his intellect, and the bust has an extraordi-

nary allure. The carving of the hair and face is especially fine, and the polish of the skin and clothing has an unearthly glow. The sculpture radiates with the star power of Fulton's personality.

One hundred years earlier, a bust of such exquisite beauty could only have been made of or for a king. But Houdon lived in an era when, more than

ever before, the virtues of talent and personality rivaled or surpassed the privileges of rank and station. It was Houdon's mission to record and celebrate the men and women who helped create this more open and more modern world. In doing so, he has left us with a gallery of portraits of remarkable figures from a remarkable age. □