

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

ANNE-LOUIS GIRODET

Montargis 1767 - Paris 1824

French School

PORTRAIT OF MORDECAI

Oil on canvas

H. 0,61 m; W. 0,49 m

DATE: ca. 1790-1800

PROVENANCE:

The artist's studio until his death

Private collection, France

RELATED WORKS:

Mardochee (Mordecai), lithograph by Jean-Joseph Dassy (1791-1865) under Girodet's direction in 1824, printed by Vilain, with the inscription *Joseph Dassy del 1824 / d'après Girodet pinxt et dirext*, legal deposit on 21 February 1824, exhibited with the lithograph of *Mustapha* at the Salon of 1824, no. 2096.

Mardochee (Mordecai), oil on canvas, H. 0,59 m; L. 0,46 m, with the inscription *Pérignon père d'après Girodet ; 1623* on the back, private collection, France, see Sylvain Bellenger (dir.), exh. cat. *Girodet, 1767-1824*, Paris, 2005, p. 389, no. 85 (Becquerel version).

LITTERATURE:

Sidonie Lemeux-Fraitot, « Inventaire après décès d'Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson (1776-1824) », in Valérie Bajou et Sidonie Lemeux-Fraitot, *Inventaires après décès de Gros et de Girodet. Documents inédits*, Paris, 2002, rééd. 2003, p. 229, no. 196 : « sont attachés à la porte d'entrée les trois tableaux Suivans tête de Mardochee prisée trente francs (...) ».

Jean-Marie Voignier, « La fortune de Girodet », *Bulletin de la Société d'émulation de l'arrondissement de Montargis*, no. 128-129, avril 2005 : *Etat descriptif des objets d'art et autres effets mobiliers dépendant de la succession de M. Anne-Louis Girodet*, p. 27, no. 196 : « sont attachés à la porte d'entrée les trois tableaux suivans : la tête de Mardochee prisée trente francs (...) »

Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy, known as Girodet-Trioson, one of the major painters of the French School, is a primary figure in the transformation of French art between the Revolution and the Restoration. His *oeuvre* does not enter the categories of Neoclassicism or Romanticism. While pursuing the principles of the School of David, his teacher, Girodet also distorted the rules in combining representation with the unearthly and the mysterious.

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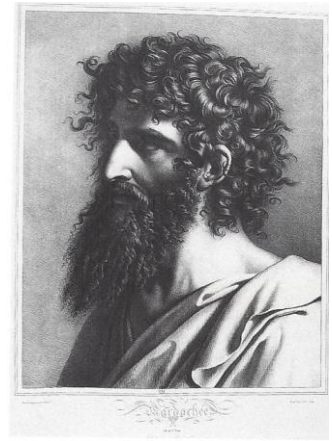
Sent to Paris at an early age, where classical studies revealed his literary and artistic abilities, he had the Doctor Trioson as a tutor, whose adopted son he later became. In 1784, he began working in David's studio and prepared for the *Prix de Rome*, which he won in 1789 with the *Story of Joseph and his Brethren* (Paris, Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts), a work highly influenced by David. It was at this moment that he put significant distance between himself and his teacher, which he increasingly expressed in his painted works. His *The Sleep of Endymion* (Paris, Musée du Louvre), completed in September 1791, demonstrated this rupture: it is the subjective that influences reason. The painting enjoyed great success and founded his reputation as an original and poetic painter.



Girodet, *Hippocrates Refusing the Gifts of Artaxerxes*, 1792, Paris, Faculté de Médecine



Girodet, *Self portrait*, 1795, musée de Versailles



Girodet (after), *Mordecai*, lithograph, Paris, BNF

At the same time, Girodet had already begun to prepare the major painting of his stay in Rome: *Hippocrates Refusing the Gifts of Artaxerxes* (Paris, Faculté de Médecine), painted out of friendship for his guardian, Doctor Trioson, whose profession inspired the subject of the piece. Having begun immediately after completing *Endymion*, the painting exhibits an entirely different approach. Girodet adopts the style of David, as much through his artistic vocabulary as through his choice of subject, which in fact remained the only *exemplum virtutis* among Girodet's works. The piece portrays a Greek doctor who refuses to treat the King of Persia, whose country is ravaged by the plague. The king's ambassadors, dressed in white as a sign of mourning, are depicted in a Poussin-like manner, expressing a whole spectrum of emotions.

While it is not a preparatory study, *Mardochee* shares stylistic similarities with the aforementioned painting. Indeed, we find a reduced range of colours, with a white cloth, soberly draped, in Greco-Roman style, over an ochre tunic. The background is also neutral, and the tones of grey find an echo in the highlights of the subject's hair and skin tones. Girodet is invested in representing a real feeling: the expression of the eyes and the parted mouth are touched with a softness and profound spirituality.

In January 1793, following the pillage the Académie de France in Rome, Girodet was able to escape to Naples with the remaining residents. On the road back to France, in Genoa, where he was held up by illness, he painted his *Self Portrait* (1795, Musée de Versailles) for Gros, who had come with the Italian army, which he traded for his friend's own self-portrait.

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This painting has many points in common with *Mordecai*. The artist portrays a monochrome grey backdrop and the subject in a similar position, with one shoulder draped in a white cloth, the other in an ochre tunic.

Between 1798 and 1819, Girodet painted a dozen Oriental bust paintings of male subjects, half of which have been located today. These busts, featuring flamboyant colours and luxurious clothes, were painted in quite a different style from that of *Mordecai*. Among these we find *Portrait de Mustapha*, 1819 (Montargis, Musée Girodet).

During the final years of his life, Girodet decided to have several of his works lithographed by Jean-Joseph Dassy (1791-1865), a painter and lithographer from Marseilles who was one of his best students. He lithographed three bust studies: *Mardochée* (Mordecai) *Mustapha*, and the *Première étude pour Galathée*, as well as *Héro et Léandre*¹. This choice revealed Girodet's preference for these works and a desire to increase their visibility. He exhibited these prints at the Salon in 1824, where *Mardochée* and *Mustapha* were displayed together².

The names *Mordecai* and *Mustapha* can be identified by Dassy's prints, who placed a candle holder with seven branches placed under the name of Mardochée and a crescent under the name of Mustapha, recalling Jewish and Muslim symbols.

Traditionally, the biblical character of Mordecai is depicted as an old man dressed as a beggar³. In our painting, however, *Mordecai* is a young man, seemingly like the Assyrians from his *Hippocrates Refusing the Gifts of Artaxerxes*. His voluminous hair, with unruly curls and messy beard, make him seem like an ancient prophet or even a Saint John the Baptist figure. This man was in fact a real person named Mordecai, who posed as a model for various artists in Paris during the 1790s.

Our painting remained in Girodet's studio until his death, and appears in his post-mortem inventory under number 196 (*Tête de Mardochée*)⁴. As Pérignon says for other bust studies⁵, *Mordecai* probably served as a model for the students in Girodet's studio. After his death, our painting must have been conserved by the family, or otherwise given or sold to a family friend or a student, for it neither appears in the records of the sale after his death⁶, nor in the "List of the main works of Girodet" published in 1829 by Coupin⁷ and based on the catalogue of the aforementioned sale.

¹ Sidonie Lemeux-Fraitot, *A l'épreuve du noir : Girodet & la lithographie*, Montargis, 2010, p. 15-17.

² *Salon de 1824*, no. 2095-2098.

³ The biblical character of Mordecai, is a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, living in exile in Susa, capital of Persia. He is the uncle of Esther, chosen to be queen by the King Ahasuerus. Under the reign of Esther, the Jewish population was threatened by extermination by the decree of the Grand Vizier Haman, but was saved by Esther and Mordecai (*Book of Esther*). The celebration known as *Purim* is an annual commemoration of this miracle.

⁴ Sidonie Lemeux-Fraitot 2002 et 2003, Voignier 2005.

⁵ Sidonie Lemeux-Fraitot 2003, p. 309 : « Pérignon no. 49 p. 16 : *Etude d'après un vieillard endormi ; cette étude est très terminée jusque dans ses moindres détails. Ainsi que les deux précédentes elle servait de modèle dans l'atelier des élèves.* » We thank Mrs Lemeux-Fraitot for having drawn our attention on the educational use of the studies of heads in Girodet's workshop.

⁶ Jean-Marie Voignier, 2005, p. 57-92.

⁷ P. A. Coupin, *Œuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire : suivies de sa correspondance*, Paris, 1829, t. I.

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After a second examination of the picture on November 5th, 2012, Mr Sylvain Bellenger is not convinced that our painting is by Girodet. After several examinations of the painting, Mrs Sidonie Lemeux-Fraitot confirmed her will to include *Mordecai* in the *catalogue raisonné* of Girodet that she is currently preparing.

As other art historians, we are convinced that this head study was painted in the 1790s, still under David's influence, and not in the 1824s. On the back of *Mordecai* of the Becquerel collection, it is mentioned that it is a copy by Pérignon, and this picture does not support the comparison. Our conviction is that our painting is an authentic work by Girodet and was used as a model for the Becquerel version.

We are grateful to Mrs Sidonie Lemeux-Fraitot for her help in writing this information sheet.