

Monomania of drunkenness by Géricault

The Monomanias was a series of portraits commissioned in the 19th century by the alienist Étienne-Jean Georget to the master Théodore Géricault to immortalise the physiognomic expressions of ten patients with these obsolete types of insanity. Upon Georget's death, two pupils—Lachèze and Maréchal—acquired the paintings and divided them into two sets of five. Since 1864 we have known of the whereabouts of the five portraits received by Lachèze¹ (representing patients with kleptomania, envy, compulsive gambling, obsessive fixation, and kidnapping), but the other five have been missing for two centuries. Last year, I identified one of them²: a portrait of a melancholic man compatible with the monomania of religion, a type of insanity consistently described in alienist works^{3,4}.

The six located portraits are similar in size (width 47–65 cm, length 61–81 cm) and show common technical and stylistic features (i.e., all are half-length portrayals, faces emerge from a gloomy, neutral background, bodies are entirely shadowed, hands are not shown, gazes are oblique and not directed at the viewer, heads are slightly tilted, and the patient is shown in humble, outdoor, winter clothing). Clinical descriptions of these supposed medical conditions were made by the alienists in their treatises^{3,4}.

Recently I located a second missing portrait of the Maréchal series in a gallery in France (Fig. 1). The size is very similar to that of the other six, and the composition is identical (an illuminated face over a dark background, the portrayed man wears a shirt very similar to other garments seen in the series, and the painting technique is the same in terms of the palette of colours and brushstroke pattern, etc.).

The man's appearance is congruent with one of the classical monomanias: the “monomania resulting from drunkenness”. He shows several signs suggesting this type of disturbance: reddened cheeks, an open shirt suggesting a period of hyperthermia (despite his winter hat revealing the weather to be cold), and two superficial wounds (a bump and a haematoma) on the left of his forehead, perhaps the consequence of a drunken episode.

Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, Georget's mentor and the person who coined the term monomania, described this type the illness over the course of five pages in his medical text³, and in his own treatise Georget indicated that “the abuse of alcoholic liquors eventually leads to dementia.”⁴ He went on to identify drunkenness as one of the important causes of insanity among the patients of the Bicêtre asylum (106 out of 1079 patients).

Importantly, the assignment of the portrait to the Géricault Monomanias series is strengthened by an old, partially torn label on the back of the portrait that reads: “*This portrait of an insane man painted by Géricault was given to me by the widow... of D... Maréchal in 1866, Paris, 9*

November... Louis Lemaire” (Fig. 2). The label has been spectroscopically dated to the second half of the 19th century (see appendix).

The discovery of this second missing monomania brings us closer to knowing the locations of the full series conceived by the French alienists and executed by Géricault.

- 1 Viardot L. Cinq études d’aliénés. In: *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité: supplément à la Gazette des beaux-arts*, 1864.
- 2 Burgos JS. A new portrait by Géricault. *Lancet Neurol* 2021; **20**(2):90-91
- 3 Esquirol JED. *Mental maladies: a treatise on insanity* [facsimile of British ed, 1845]. London: Hafner Publishing, 1965.
- 4 Georget EJ. *De la Folie, considérations sur cette maladie*. Paris: Migneret (printer), 1820.

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Figure 1: “*Monomania resulting from drunkenness*” by Théodore Géricault. This painting (51.0 × 70.5 cm) is held in the Gallery Meier (Versailles, France). Reproduced with permission from the gallery.

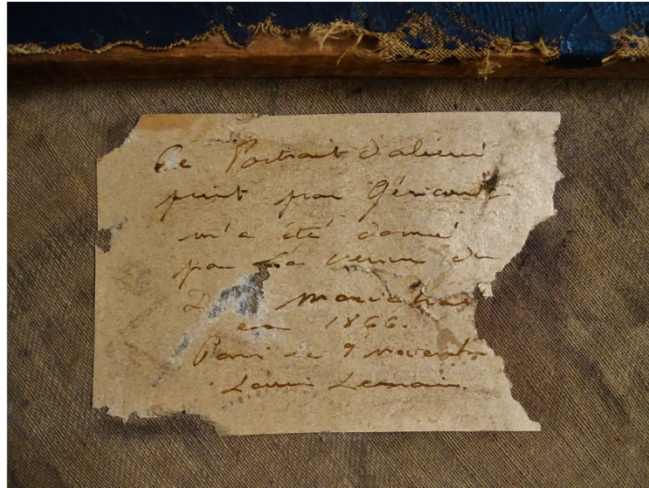


Figure 2: Label dated to the second half of the 19th century after. Reproduced with permission from the gallery.

Supplementary appendix

The analysis performed on the label by the company Art in Lab (Paris) using Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy and x-ray fluorescence spectrometry, showed that the cellulose has suffered a process of aging, and that the absence of barium sulphate and titanium oxide, together with the presence of lignin and chloride, is congruent with the paper having been produced in the second half of the 19th century.