

A new portrait by Géricault

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Word count: about 542 words

In 1864, Louis Viardot published a letter in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*¹ revealing the discovery of five portraits painted by Théodore Géricault, a master of French Romanticism. Géricault had been commissioned by the psychiatrist Étienne-Jean Georget, a disciple of Dominique Esquirol, to immortalize the physiognomic expressions of ten of his patients^{1,2}.

Viardot named the series *Monomanias*. The original ten portraits were acquired by two of Georget's pupils: doctors Lachèze and Maréchal. Viardot found the five portraits described in his letter in Lachèze's penthouse in Baden-Baden, and they are currently exhibited in five museums. The paintings portray five patients with five different monomanias, as described by the Parisian psychiatrists of that time: kleptomania, envy, compulsive gambling, obsessive fixation, and kidnapping.

These five portraits have common features (webappendix). They have a similar size (width from 50 to 65 cm; length from 61 to 81 cm), they are half-length paintings of faces emerging from the gloom (the bodies remain entirely in shadow and hands are never showed), and were painted following the classical formal or honorific portraits of that age. The portraits are always focused in the enlightened face over a fused dark background giving the aspect of an aura, gazes are not directed to the viewer, the portraited monomaniacs never wear patients clothing, but street clothes of the winter season (they were probably painted between the end of 1822 and beginning of 1823).

The existence of the other five portraits has been in discussion since the publication of Viardot's letter. Historically, one of the main discussions about the lost portraits has been if they could be new patients or, on the contrary, they are the same five patients after treatment. There are several reasons to think that they are different subjects. Firstly, the time between when they were painted, and the Géricault's death (January, 1824), suggests not enough time to cure the insane (Georget recognized the difficulty to cure this mental condition). Secondly, the distribution of the packs between both Georget's disciples; it seems reasonable to assume other sharing if the ten series corresponded to a before-and-after experiment.

I have identified one of these missing Géricault's portraits, currently hosted in a private collection in Italy. This painting was displayed in an exhibition in Ravenna in 2013, together with other Géricault's artwork: *Le médecin chef de l'asile de Bouffon*. The title of the novel portrait, as referenced in the official catalogue of the exhibition, is *Portrait of a man. Homo melancholicus*.

The size of this portrait is congruent with that of the other five pictures (47 x 62 cm), the composition is similar (illuminated face over a dark background), the man wears a religious garment (a modest chasuble) of a very similar color tone that the red scarf in the picture portraying envy. That clothing and the tonsure mark indicate that this potential monomania could be related with religion. The title of the portrait suggests that it corresponds to sadness (melancholy), as described by Esquirol³. Moreover, in the Dictionary of 1819⁴ there is a case report suitable with this “monomania” (*Monsieur le C...*, around 40 years). This condition is confirmed by the presence of wrinkles on his brow drawing the classical omega sign (or *omega melancholicum*) described by Heinrich Schüle⁵ as distinguishing feature of melancholy.

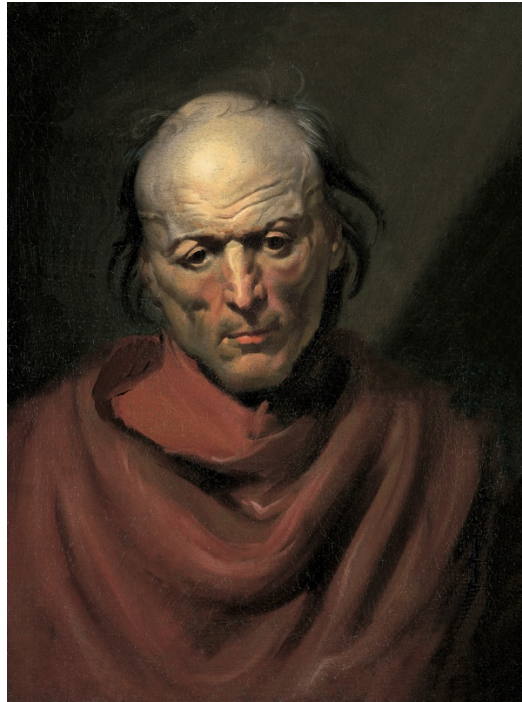


Figure “Portrait of a man. *Homo melancholicus*”. Théodore Géricault. Private collection (47 x 62 cm). Picture exposed in the temporary exposition “Bordeline” in 2013 (February, 17th to June, 16th) in the Ravenna Art Museum.

1. Viardot L. *Cinq études d’aliénés. La Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité. Supplement à la Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 1864
2. Boime A. *The Oxford Art Journal*, “Portraying monomaniacs to service the alienist’s monomania: Gericault and Georget” 1991; **14**(1): 79-91.
3. Esquirol JED. *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity* [facsimile of British ed, 1845]. London, England: Hafner Publishing Co 1965
4. Esquirol JED. *Monomanie. Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales, par une société de médecins et de chirurgiens*. Paris 1819
5. Schüle H. *Traité clinique des maladies mentales*. Delahaye y Lecrosnier, Paris 1888