

A forgotten painter at the Impressionist exhibitions: 'Jacques François' or the Marquise de Rambures (1844–1924)

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FOR OVER A CENTURY, a question mark has remained at the margins of Impressionism's history: the identity of Jacques François, a pseudonymous woman painter. Under this assumed name, she participated in the second and third Impressionist shows in 1876 and 1877, in which she presented portraits, landscapes and still-lives.¹ Of the reviewers that mentioned her submissions, none framed her contribution to the avant-garde group better than Jacques Rivière in 1876:

M. Jacques-François (a lady, I think) exhibited a remarkable still life with raisins, pastries, a box of figs, etc. It's a master's work without precedent. Never before has such a still life with such spirit and such facture been seen. It's an extraordinary work [. . .] M. Jacques-François has given us a result from which other artists will most certainly benefit.²

Yet the identity of this painter remained such a well-kept secret that no assessment of her involvement or oeuvre has ever been thought possible. In his *History of Impressionism*, John Rewald referred to her simply as 'Jacques-François (pseudonym for a woman painter)', a parenthetical epithet repeated in subsequent appraisals.³ And, like many of the fifty-six artists who appeared in the eight Impressionist shows, she has never been the subject of dedicated study.⁴

The artist behind the alias may be identified as Louise Amour Marie de La Roche de Fontenilles, née de Bouillé, Marquise de Rambures (1844–1924). Born in Guadeloupe, titled, politically connected and artistically active in France and Spain, the painter appeared at the second and third exhibitions as 'Jacques François' and at the last Impressionist exhibition in 1886 in her own name. Not only does Rambures attest to the aesthetic and organisational heterogeneity of the collective's ventures, but she also links the visible circle to several understudied demographics in the canon of French nineteenth-century artists, including the *amatrices aristocrates*, whose production has yet to be fully explored and incorporated into feminist art history.

Long published but never before connected, four documents establish the Marquise de Rambures as a participant in three, not merely

21. *Self-portrait*, by Jacques François, here identified as Louise Amour Marie de La Roche de Fontenilles, Marquise de Rambures. c.1875–1900. Oil on canvas, 125 by 90 cm. (Private collection).



22. *Louise Amour Marie de Bouillé, later Marquise de Rambures*, by Federico de Madrazo y Kuntz. c.1871. Oil on canvas, 38.5 by 31 cm. (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid).

Impressionist champion recounted the full list of participants, noting at the end a ‘comtesse de Rambure [*sic*] whose entries the catalogue did not dare mention’.⁸ Her name has puzzled the few scholars who noted her presence in the critic’s assessment.⁹ If one accepts that she participated as ‘Jacques François’ and acknowledges her connection to Degas, however, it is not surprising that the ‘comtesse de Rambure’ reappeared at the exhibition in 1886, over which Degas wielded significant organisational control. Moreover, rather than a slight against her work, Fénéon’s remark may have been an acknowledgement that it would benefit neither the group nor the lady to mix the conservative aristocracy with the artistic avant-garde.

The last evidence predates the inaugural Impressionist exhibition of 1874. At the Salon of 1873, a painter named ‘Jacques François’ made a debut with a still life submission entitled *Flowers and fruit*.¹⁰ For its ‘true qualities of colouration’, the painting received an honourable mention in the eighth instalment of Charles Garnier’s review for *Le Moniteur universel*.¹¹ In the Salon’s catalogue, the artist listed Guadeloupe as a birthplace in the biographical by-line. This record, when taken with Caillebotte’s letter, Degas’s notebook entry and Fénéon’s reference, provides irrefutable evidence that the Marquise de Rambures was both the ‘Jacques François’ of 1876 and 1877, a painter featured at the last Impressionist exhibition of 1886 and a participant at the official, juried Salon.

The Marquise de Rambures was an even greater outsider to the established art world than most of the Impressionists, but an exceedingly well-positioned one. Born in Petit-Bourg, Guadeloupe, Louise Amour Marie de Bouillé was the scion of two noble and distinguished French families. Her father, Comte Jules François Amour de Bouillé – from whose first two names, it would seem, the artist drew inspiration for the pseudonym she adopted – was the grandson of Marquis François Claude Amour de Bouillé (1739–1800). An erstwhile governor of Guadeloupe, Martinique and St Lucia, the Marquis rallied a band of royalists to protect Louis XVI on the flight to Varennes in 1791.¹² Dispersed and exiled following the Terror, a branch of the family returned to Guadeloupe by 1800. Similarly, the artist’s mother’s family, the De Vernou-Bonneüil, fled France at the outbreak of Revolution and re-established themselves in Guadeloupe through sugarcane

two, Impressionist exhibitions. The most significant dates from 1881. In January of that year, on the heels of the fifth show, Gustave Caillebotte wrote to Camille Pissarro to level criticism at Edgar Degas, whom he blamed for sowing discord and inviting outsiders to join the circle. As he reminded Pissarro, Degas invited ‘in 1876, Lepic and Legros and Mme de Rambure [*sic*], in 1877, Moreau [*sic*] and again Mme de Rambure [*sic*].’ Jacques François alone participated in both the second and third exhibitions, framing the ‘Mme de Rambure’ singled out by Caillebotte as the only possible match for the pseudonymous figure.

A page from one of Degas’s notebooks establishes that ‘Mme de Rambure’ – his invitee in 1876 and 1877 – was the Marquise de Rambures, née de Bouillé. In a *cahier* dating from the late 1870s Degas jotted down two names

and an address: ‘Mme de Bouillé pour Mme de Rambures, 69 ave Joséphine.’⁶ The annotation undoubtedly refers to the artist and her mother, Augustine Charlotte Eudoxie de Bouillé, née de Vernou-Bonneüil. As noted in the record of her marriage in 1864, Rambures’s parents resided in the eighth arrondissement, not far from the avenue Joséphine (now avenue Marceau).⁷ Given the impossibility of there being concurrently more than one ‘Mme de Bouillé’ and ‘Mme de Rambures’ associated together in Paris, let alone based in the same neighbourhood, Degas’s acquaintance ‘Mme de Rambure’ could only have been the young Marquise de Rambures.

Félix Fénéon provides a third source, which further corroborates Rambures’s involvement in the independent exhibitions and expands upon the history of her participation. In his review of the final Impressionist show in 1886, the Neo-



farming.¹³ In 1849, in the wake of the revolution of 1848, and most likely weary of simmering social turmoil mirroring the rebellions of the 1790s, five-year-old Marie and her parents left the island for France.¹⁴

Her European lineage and birthplace in the Antilles cast her as *créole* by French nineteenth-century definition, and the displacement inherent to this identity characterised the rest of her life, particularly her artistic one as Jacques

23. Carte de visite of Louise Amour Marie de La Roche de Fontenilles. c.1870. Photograph mounted on card, 10 by 6.5 cm. (Private collection).

François. Although based in Paris, Rambures led a largely peripatetic existence in and outside France, which had an impact on her formation as a painter. Shortly after her marriage in Paris at the age of twenty to Charles Antoine de La Roche de Fontenilles, Marquis de Rambures

(1839–1930), she registered as a copyist at the Louvre.¹⁵ This auto-didactic training was likely an extension of a basic education in drawing and painting with a private tutor, as was common among young women of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy. In the early 1870s, the young couple briefly relocated to Madrid, where the Marquis held a diplomatic post at the French embassy, probably organised by Rambures's first cousin once removed, Amour Louis Charles René, Marquis de Bouillé, one of the witnesses to their marriage in 1864 and the French ambassador to Spain from 1871 to 1874.¹⁶ As a result, Rambures met Antonio Gisbert (1834–1901), director of the Museo Nacional del Prado, who co-signed her registration as a copyist there, and Federico de Madrazo y Kuntz (1815–94), who painted her portrait, perhaps in the museum itself (Fig.22).¹⁷ On returning to France, she divided her time between Paris, Hyères and the family estate in Picardy, the Château de Rambures, until her death in 1924. Only by obfuscating her identity at the Salon and at Impressionist exhibitions, as *noblesse* obliged and gender required, was she able to realise her artistic path.

None of her submissions to the second, third or eighth Impressionist exhibitions has yet been located, but other works survive that manifest the gestural, distinctive touch singled out by Rivière in 1876. In *Self-portrait* (Fig.21), the artist emerges from a clearing and fixes her gaze upon her beholder, while a hunting dog accompanies her in the lower left corner. The portrait preserves a vivid surface, from her dress constructed with saturated, unmodulated expanses of pink pigment, to the three-quarters profile of her dog, rendered with meticulous, *empâté* modelling. In the folds of her intricately-pleated rose ensemble, which formally complements the blue-green foliage framing her, the artist carries a bunch of flowers. Given Rambures's established experience copying at the Louvre, it is tempting to interpret this motif and the pose of her hands as an allusion to Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *La Cruche cassée* (1773; Musée du Louvre), which she would have known from her visits to the museum.¹⁸ It is also probable that Rambures made use of photographs while conceiving the portrait, since it is recorded that she owned a number of cameras and often staged photographic sessions. A number of her own *cartes de visite* from family albums (Fig.23) and a posed self-portrait (Fig.24) parallel her painting, and may reflect a response to the methods and exploration of photography being made by the Impressionists, her friend Degas included.

Jacques François's identification as the Marquise de Rambures opens new lines of inquiry. Operating outside traditional, nineteenth-

century studio culture and the École des Beaux-arts, and yet engaged with elite cultural circles in Paris and beyond, Rambures raises questions as to the role of amateurs in the social and artistic organisation of the Impressionists. Her aristocratic status places her at odds with the best-known women in the group, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, whose elevated but not noble social standing granted them more freedom to train and share their work. Her history of exhibiting with the Impressionists at Degas's invitation also complicates the increasingly challenged yet enduring portrait of him as an incorrigible misogynist. Evidently,

24. *Self-portrait*, by Louise Amour Marie de la Roche de Fontenilles, Marquise de Rambures. c.1905. Photograph, 10 by 8 cm. (Private collection).



her work interested Degas, enough so that he sought her participation on several occasions. In addition, although she left Guadeloupe as a child, her *créole* origins provide a link between the Impressionist exhibitions and the colonial French Atlantic. Although a more detailed portrait of this hitherto unknown artist remains to be traced, the identification of Louise Amour Marie de La Roche de Fontenilles, née de Bouillé, Marquise de Rambures, as the mysterious Jacques François sheds new light on a figure who identified as '*sans profession*' when she married but found a place among the most celebrated avant-garde bands in the history of art.¹⁹

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- 1 *Catalogue de la 2e exposition de peinture* [. . .], Paris 1876, p.10; and *Catalogue de la 3e exposition de peinture* [. . .], Paris 1877, p.7.
- 2 'M. Jacques François (*une dame, je crois*), a exposé une remarquable nature morte, des raisins secs, des pâtisseries, des boîtes de figues, etc. C'est un morceau de maître sans précédents. Jamais on n'a fait une nature morte avec cet esprit-là et dans cette facture. C'est une œuvre extraordinaire [. . .] M. Jacques François vient de donner un résultat dont beaucoup d'artistes profiteront certainement', P. Dax: 'Chronique', *L'Artiste* (1st May 1876), pp.348-49, repr. in R. Berson: *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886*, Seattle 1996, I, p.70. As noted by Berson, this was a reprint of Jacques Rivière's review.
- 3 J. Rewald: *History of Impressionism*, New York 1961, p.391; J.-J. Lévêque: *Les années impressionnistes: 1870-1889*, Paris 1990, p.294; and H. Clayson: 'The second exhibition, 1876: a failed attempt', *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886*, San Francisco 1986, p.146.
- 4 For a near-comprehensive list, which omits only the Comtesse de Luçhaire, who showed at the first exhibition, see Rewald, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.591.
- 5 'En 1876, Lepic et Legros et Mme de Rambure, 1877 Moreau et encore Mme de Rambure', Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (hereafter BnF), YB3-4776 (1)-4, letter from Gustave Caillebotte to Camille Pissarro, 24th January 1881. Reproduced in J. Rewald: *Histoire de l'impressionnisme*, Paris 1955, p.270; and M. Berhaut: *Caillebotte, sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris 1978, p.246.
- 6 BnF, DC 327D, carnet 23, fol.80, transcribed in T. Reff: *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, Oxford 1976, I, p.137.
- 7 Archives de Paris, Paris, V4E 805 (1864, Mariages, 07), acte no.265, fols.13-14.
- 8 'Pour clore la liste: la comtesse de Rambure dont le catalogue n'a pas osé mentionner les envois', F. Fénéon: 'VIIIe Exposition Impressionniste I', *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*, Paris 1886, p.11.
- 9 R. McMullen: *Degas, his Life, Times, and Work*, London 1985, p.2; and Rewald, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.523.
- 10 *Explication des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, gravure et lithographie des artistes vivants, exposés au Palais des Champs-Élysées le 5 mai 1873*, Paris 1873, p.92.
- 11 C. Garnier: 'Salon de 1873', *Le Moniteur universel* (21st June 1873), p.1.
- 12 Amour Louis Charles René de Bouillé: *Essai sur la vie du marquis de Bouillé, François-Claude-Amour*, Paris 1853, pp.324-38; and A. Borel d'Hauterive, ed.: *Annuaire de la pairie et de la noblesse de France et des maisons souveraines d'Europe*, Paris 1844, pp.213-14.
- 13 Rambures's maternal grandparents, Marquis Jean Marie Maximilian de Vernou-Bonneuil and Félicie de Vernou-Bonneuil, née de Bébian, settled in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, around 1815. See I. O'Reilly: 'An interesting correspondence', *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 14 (1903), pp.299-382, at p.312.
- 14 Communicated to the author by the artist's family.
- 15 On her marriage, see the document cited at note 7 above, fols.13-14. For her copyist registrations between 1867 and 1869, see Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter ANP) 20150337/461, fols.201 and 203.
- 16 See document cited at note 7 above, fol.14. See *Annuaire diplomatique de la République française pour 1871-1872 (quatorzième et quinzième années)*, Paris 1872, p.31; *Annuaire diplomatique de la République française pour 1872-1873 (quinzième et seizième années)*, Paris 1873, p.31; and *Annuaire diplomatique de la République française pour 1874 (dix-septième année)*, Paris 1874, p.31.
- 17 Biblioteca del Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 1864-1873 *Registro de Copistas* (L36), fol.30; and G. Navarro: *El retrato español en el Prado, de Goya a Sorolla*, Madrid 2007, p.138.
- 18 Greuze's *La Cruche cassée* was the most copied painting in the Louvre in the nineteenth century. The surviving copyist registers account for 545 copies after it, but this figure must have been much higher given the limited period covered by these documents. See ANP 20150337/463, fols.82-85, 225-27, 234-38, 252-53, 255 and 338; and ANP 20150337/465, fols.437-43.
- 19 See document cited at note 7 above, fol.13.