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ANTOINE-JEAN GROS, BARON GROS

1771 Paris - Meudon 1835

Portrait of Marquis Pierre Gaston Henri de Livron, Aide-de-Camp of Maréchal Murat

Oil sketch on canvas; executed c.1812.

21.6 x 19.6 cm

PROVENANCE: *Vente de l'atelier de l'artiste*, Paris, 23 November 1835, no. 28, 'Portrait en petite proportion du marquis de Livron' – Auguste-Joseph Carrier (1797-Paris-1875, painter, miniaturist and pupil of A.-J. Gros) – *Vente après décès du peintre et miniaturiste Auguste-Joseph Carrier*, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 5 May 1875, no. 175 – Germain Seligman (1893 Paris - New York 1978), art dealer, collector and historian; 1955-79 – Private collection, France

LITERATURE: Jean-Baptiste Delestre, *Gros et ses ouvrages*, Paris 1867 (2nd edn.), pp. 163-70, p. 373 – Justin Tripiier Le Franc, *Histoire de la vie et de la mort du baron Gros*, Paris, 1880, pp. 312, 675, n. 1 – John Richardson (ed.), *The Collection of Germain Seligman. Paintings, drawings and works of art*, New York 1979, no. 31, repr.

EXHIBITIONS: Jacques Seligmann & Co., *Baron Antoine-Jean Gros*, New York, 15 November - 10 December 1955, p. 34, no. 15, repr. (exhibition travelling to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 4 - 21 January 1956 and to Cleveland Museum of Art, 8 March - 15 April 1956)

This very fine portrait by Antoine-Jean Gros depicts the French military officer Marquis Pierre Gaston Henri de Livron (1770-1831). It is a study for one of the central figures in an exceptionally large oil sketch on canvas titled *La Prise de Capri*¹ [Fig. 1]. The canvas was the intermediate stage in a project for a monumental version which never came to fruition. Gros executed it in 1812 for Joachim Murat, Napoleon's brother-in-law, who was granted the crown of Naples in 1808. It illustrates the first military success of the new King, namely the recapture of Capri in 1808.

On 4 October 1808 Murat dispatched around two thousand soldiers under the command of General Jean-Maximilien Lamarque to retake the island of Capri from the English. In the large-format canvas Gros depicts Lamarque at the centre of the image brandishing a sword in his raised right hand. Two officers, namely the adjutants Livron [Fig. 2] and Thomas, are glimpsed behind him to the right. The three officers had developed a plan to scale the seemingly impregnable heights of Anacapri on ladders joined together by ropes.² Livron distinguished himself in the battle by successfully leading a hundred men up the cliffs. He rallied his men with the cry 'Soldiers! We are not yet acquainted but if you would kindly follow me, we soon shall be.' In the right background of the oil sketch soldiers are shown climbing up the ladders. Livron and his men succeeded in breaking through the first enemy

¹ David O'Brien, *After the Revolution, Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. The French translation appeared under the title *Antoine Jean Gros, peintre de Napoléon*, Paris 2006, p. 186, repr. p. 184, fig. 112.

² The French writer Alexandre Dumas wrote about the recapture of Capri in a travel volume titled *Le Spéronare* published in 1842. The text is both a literary achievement and a well-researched account of a dramatic historical event: *Lamarque stopped in front of the jutting escarpment and ordered Adjutant Général Thomas and Squadron Commander Livron to join him. They conferred for a moment and then called for ladders to be brought.* (See *Le Spéronare, Impressions de Voyage*, I, Paris 1988, p. 28).

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line by opening several rounds of gunfire from the cover of the cliff edge. This freed the way for the remaining French forces. The English under General Sir Hudson Lowe made a short-lived attempt to fend off the assault but were forced to capitulate to the French only a few days later, on 17 October 1808.

The present portrait of Livron was made by Gros on a visit to Naples in 1812. Livron served Murat as a general in Naples until Napoleonic rule ended in May 1815. Gros almost certainly intended to use the present study as a model for the figure of Livron in the planned monumental version of the battle scene.

The vitality and expressive energy of the portrait head are remarkable. Livron's cheeks are flushed with exertion, his thick curly hair is dishevelled by the turmoil of battle and his gaze resolute as he faces the adversary. The curved ends of his moustache betray apprehension but his tightly pressed lips signal his readiness for battle.

Gros has captured Livron's likeness with rapid, mobile brushwork and remarkable lightness of touch. But his great achievement is to have succeeded in conveying so many layers of expression despite working with such speed. The facial features are modelled in pale skin tones and a reduced palette of browns and reds is used to describe the head. A flurry of whirling brushstrokes defines the hair and beard. An inventive technique of hatched lines, occasional touches of white and scrubbing or scratching with the brush captures light models and form. In its painterly virtuosity the oil sketch has all the hallmarks of a masterpiece.

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Antoine-Jean Gros received his first lessons in drawing from his parents, who both were painters of miniatures. In 1785 he entered the studio of Jacques-Louis David, whom he revered but whose Neoclassical style was uncongenial to Gros's romantically passionate nature. Two years later, he entered the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. As a student, he was more influenced by the energetic brushwork and colour of Peter Paul Rubens and the Venetians than the hard linearism of his contemporary Neoclassicists. His formal education ended in 1793, due to the bankruptcy and death of his father, and – like other artists in the tumult of the French Revolution – he turned to portrait painting for an income.

In the same year, with David's help, Gros went to Italy, where in Genoa he met Joséphine de Beauharnais and, through her, Napoleon. In 1796 he followed the French army to Arcole and was present when Bonaparte planted the French flag on the bridge. This incident he immortalized in his first major work, *Napoleon on the Bridge at Arcole* (1796). Gros accompanied Napoleon on his campaigns and also helped select works of art from Italy for the Musée du Louvre.

During the French Empire (1804-1814/15) Gros is principally remembered for his historical pictures depicting significant events in the military career of Napoleon. Of all the artists who contributed to the Napoleonic myth, Gros had the most profound effect on the rising generation of Romantic painters. The elegance, richness, and dramatic power of such historical paintings as *Napoleon visiting the Pesthouse at Jaffa* (1804) and *Napoleon on the Battlefield at Eylau, February 1807* (1808) influenced Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix. During these years he also was constantly employed in painting portraits of imperial society and, in particular, of the military.

After the fall of Napoleon, and the restoration of the Bourbons, the paintings celebrating the achievements of Napoleon were removed from public exhibition, but Antoine-Jean Gros remained nevertheless the most honoured painter in France. In 1814 he was appointed Portrait painter to Louis XVIII, and in 1815 he was given a seat in the Institut de France. Jacques Louis David was forced into exile in 1816, and Gros subsequently taught many of his pupils.

In the years between 1821 and 1835, Gros painted large compositions, amongst them the ceiling of the Egyptian room of the Louvre (1824). In the same year, he completed the series of frescoes for the cupola of the Panthéon, for which he was made Baron by Charles X. But these academically Neoclassical pictures lacked the Romantic vitality of his earlier historical paintings. His best works after 1815 were portraits, some of which approached the quality of his Napoleonic pictures. The artist was continually plagued by criticism of his work and became increasingly dissatisfied with his own accomplishments. In 1835 he sent two paintings to the Salon of 1835. At best the critics were mildly appreciative. A sense of failure exacerbated his already melancholic nature, and on June 1835 he drowned himself in the River Seine.



Fig. 1: *La Prise de Capri (éskisse)*, 1812, oil on canvas, 84 x 140 cm.
Fondation Dosne-Thiers, fonds Masson, Paris.



Fig. 2: *La Prise de Capri (éskisse)*, 1812. Detail.