

1785







Condorcet by Houdon, commissioned by Duc Louis-Alexandre de La Rochefoucauld-d'Enville, given by his widow to William Short and given by him to the Society.

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Two Friends' Nobility in Stone, Oil and the Eye of the Beholder

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LIKE so many others, the mathematician and philosopher Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), was an advocate of the French Revolution and then a victim of it. He is probably known to Americans now, if at all, for his "Sketch of Human Progress," a treatise on human development up to the revolution that predicted mankind's ultimate perfectibility. He wrote it while trying to elude the revolutionary tribunal, something he achieved only by dying in a jail cell -- a suicide, perhaps -- before he could be brought to judgment.

He was also one of a group of liberal French aristocrats (Lafayette was another) known as "les Americains," friends of Franklin and Jefferson and passionate if sometimes unrealistic enthusiasts for the new United States, which they believed to be a model for revolution in France. Condorcet, who had been made an honorary citizen of New Haven, even liked to sign the prerevolutionary pamphlets he wrote as "un bourgeois de New-Haven" and "un citoyen des Etats-Unis." Les Americains met at the Hotel de La Rochefoucauld, a salon for intellectuals of the late Enlightenment and the home of Marie-Louise-Elisabeth-Nicole de La Rochefoucauld, Duchesse d'Enville.

The Duchess, being especially fond of Condorcet, evidently commissioned Jean-Antoine Houdon, the pre-eminent French sculptor, to make a marble bust of him in 1785. It is on loan to the Frick Collection from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, which owns it and recently had it restored. The society has also lent a 1777 portrait of Franklin by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, the French painter of domestic scenes richly admired by Diderot. Greuze happened to belong to the Paris Masonic Lodge called Les Neuf

Soeurs, which, because of Franklin's membership, was another vehicle for American propaganda in France.

The Houdon bust is an exceptional work of subtle and urbane portraiture. A contemporary of Condorcet, the Duchesse d'Abrantes, described him as having an immense and high forehead, prominent aquiline nose and a mouth that "was his most distinctive feature," she said. "His smile was calm but became easily satirical. It announced some private matter which he only indicated through this lightly mocking expression that raised the corners of his mouth when the thought that it accompanied was too strongly felt."

This is what Houdon seems to show: Condorcet's head is turned and slightly raised, and he glances sideways and upward, eyebrows gently arched below a high forehead topped by a wig that sweeps back into bulking curls, so that the effect in profile, which takes in the curve of the nose, is nearly hawklike. He is dressed in shirt, coat and ruffled cravat, its elaborate folds as delicately sculptured as the wig, which is lightly incised to simulate the waves of hair. The mouth is somewhere between a smile and a smirk, if it is expressive at all: many of Houdon's subjects have the same mildly ironic expression, so it's hard to tell. But in this case the mouth can recall the Duchess's description, when combined with the arched brows and sidelong glance -- a private, inscrutable look of haughty temperament.

Or put differently, knowing the Duchess's description, this is how we interpret the expression, which, being inscrutable, as most portraits are, could be judged differently. Condorcet's craftiness could be called loftiness in another situation. If somehow we did not know which of the two portraits on view in this show was which, it would almost be possible to imagine that the Duchess was even talking about Franklin, whose forehead is also immense and high, nose aquiline and expression satirical, though grimmer, certainly, than Condorcet's. Edgar Munhall of the Frick, in the pamphlet for the exhibition, says Greuze partly idealized Franklin, minimizing the moles and lines on his face. No doubt he did, though not more than Houdon idealized Condorcet: the sculpture gives no indication of his pockmarks, stooped posture or general boorishness, which one observer said "verged on frenzy and rudeness."

In Greuze's rather chilly depiction, Franklin seems to frown, staring to the side, a remote, impatient man, his face shadowed in a way that emphasizes the folding flesh, double chin and stubble. A contemporary of Franklin described the picture as capturing "all the nobility of a free spirit, all the wisdom of a well-ordered mind and all the sagacity of a statesman." If so, not

obviously: both the Greuze and the Houdon are proof that one tends to see in portraits what one wishes to see or what one already knows about the sitter.

This is probably why, for example, when a photograph of the bust was published in 1914, Georges Giacometti, a Houdon expert, declared it was not of Condorcet: not only did it differ from other portraits of him but it did not match Giacometti's mental picture, in which he imagined Condorcet to be even more aristocratic than Houdon showed. The truth was that Condorcet, if anything, was less suave and more awkward, in the way of certain socially inept men of genius, like Samuel Johnson.

He ended up, as Johanna Hecht describes in the show's pamphlet, alienating the family of the Duchesse d'Enville by aggressively espousing the republican cause while the family remained constitutional monarchists. Their dislike of him intensified with the belief that he did not do enough to extricate the Duchess's grandson when he was imprisoned by the revolutionary authorities and then killed by a mob.

Who can be sure about the intricacies of a relationship, especially at a distance of two centuries? At the least, Condorcet was insensitive to the Duchess's longtime affection, and consequently his bust was removed from the Hotel de La Rochefoucauld to be sold, which is how it eventually ended up in Philadelphia.

Condorcet lacked politesse as well, it seems, when it came to the revolutionaries who he thought were his allies. They proscribed him. He escaped house arrest in Paris but was finally caught after ordering an omelet at an inn. "How many eggs?" the innkeeper asked. Twelve, said Condorcet, which, as Simon Schama tells the story in "Citizens," revealed "a damaging unfamiliarity with the cuisine of the common man." It's not clear whether Condorcet died of starvation, drank poison from his ring or had a heart attack; he had had one before. He shouldn't have been eating eggs.

The portraits of the Marquis de Condorcet and Benjamin Franklin from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia will remain on view at the Frick Collection, 1 East 70th Street, Manhattan, through Nov. 16.

Photos: Subtle and Urbane Portraiture -- Houdon's 1785 bust of the Marquis de Condorcet, an advocate of the French Revolution and then a victim of it. Recently restored, the work is on view at the Frick Collection. (American Philosophical Society)