DAVID’S PORTRAIT OF MADAME DE RICHEMONT AND HER DAUGHTER

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It is a pleasure to announce the return to the Museum’s galleries of French paintings of a portrait last shown here in 1935 in the Exhibition of French Painting and Sculpture. At that time it was lent by the late Edward J. Berwind, and it now joins the permanent collections of the Museum as part of the generous gift of his sister, Julia A. Berwind. The painting is Jacques Louis David’s well-known portrait of Madame Desbassays de Richemont and her daughter Camille.

This work was unknown to critics and biographers of David until 1897, when it was shown at the Exposition des Portraits de Femmes et d’Enfants at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Since that time writers on David have acclaimed it as one of his finest portraits, painted shortly after 1800. The costume and the coiffure confirm its execution in the early days of Napoleon’s reign as First Consul.

David, born in 1748, studied first with Boucher, then with Joseph Marie Vien. He won the Premier Prix de Rome, awarded by the Royal Academy, and went to Italy in 1775 to continue his studies. He remained there for five years, absorbing the teachings of the great German classical archaeologist Winckelmann and joining Mengs and Pompeo Batoni in the development of a style of painting based on the principles of classical antiquity. He returned to France, where his first successful work in the classical vein, The Oath of the Horatii, met with great enthusiasm on its exhibition in the Salon of 1785. He became the leader of the new classical movement in French painting, and his influence was widespread throughout the world of taste, not only in painting but in architecture and decoration and in fashions. David led a revolt against the rigid academic tradition in painting, took an active part in the French Revolution, and became the official painter of Napoleon’s empire. After Napoleon’s downfall in 1815, David, who had voted the death of the king in the Assembly, went into exile in Brussels and died there ten years later.

David’s long sojourn in Rome under the influence of Winckelmann’s classic revival tempered considerably the teachings of his first master, that exuberant painter of the roccoco François Boucher. However, something of Boucher’s style remains in David’s portraits, in which realism is combined with the restrained elegance characteristic of the classical bas-reliefs the compositions are based on. They have nothing of the coldly formal treatment of his classical subjects, such as The Oath of the Horatii or The Death of Socrates. Certainly our portrait is a warmly human and altogether appealing picture.

This painting follows in every respect David’s theories about portraiture: that true beauty is in repose, that it is universal, that all that is artificial and foreign to the model should be eliminated and that accessories should be suppressed. The figures, lighted from the left front, are modeled in relief against a dark neutral background in a simple pyramidal composition. The young mother is relaxed and serene and even the lively child surrenders to the calm mood of the portrait and leans for a moment on her mother’s knee to play with her bracelet. The white dress, like a Greek tunic, caught in at the high waist with a bright green sash, the transparent sleeve, accented at shoulder and wrist by the flash of rubies in brooch and bracelet, are foils for the sparkle of the vivid orange of the fringed shawl over the back of the chair. Camille’s yellow dress and blue jacket repeat the deep blue of her eyes and the gold of her hair.

Madame de Richemont was born Jeanne
Catherine Eglé Fulcrande Mourgue. She married in 1798 the young Philippe Panon Desbassayns de Richemont, a proprietor of large properties on the Île Bourbon (now Réunion) off Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. Their eldest child, Camille, was probably born in 1799. The present Count de Richemont, a descendant, recounts the family story that shortly after David painted Madame de Richemont with her little daughter the child was killed in an accident and the bereaved mother could not bear to see the portrait, a
constant reminder of her loss. The painting was therefore sold out of the Richemont family only a little while after it was painted. It was not publicly shown until 1897, when the Viscount G. Chabert lent it to the Beaux-Arts exhibition. He had bought it at a somewhat earlier date from a Paris collector, Sigismond Bardac. Mr. Berwind acquired the painting in 1918. This portrait is an important and welcome addition to the Museum's collection and will be exhibited some time after the reopening of the galleries next January.