Every visitor to the Metropolitan Museum, if he is fond of paintings, remembers a delightful portrait of a winning blond girl with a rosy skin who has paused in making a large drawing and is looking at the spectator as if he were her model. She is quite young, perhaps about sixteen to eighteen years old. The seriousness of her eyes contrasts with her gentle simplicity and gives her a vaguely dreamy air. She is seated before a window against the light, bathed in a faint penumbra, which instead of modeling her makes her almost transparent. The cold light stirs up pale gold gleams in her curls. A rose-colored drapery tossed across a blue chair and a brownish wall which serves as background accentuates the whiteness of her dress and defines her slender silhouette. Behind her, through a broken window pane, is seen the terrace of an austere building, where a young couple stands conversing in the serene summer light. The girl’s delicate face, the golden light in her hair, the radiant whiteness of her dress, the attraction of the sun-bathed sky, all these charms, set off by the bareness of the studio, leave an exquisite impression of youth, of morning freshness.

This portrait represents Mademoiselle Charlotte du Val d’Ognes. Her costume dates the work close to 1800. The picture bears no signature but it has been regarded for many years as a work of Jacques Louis David, indeed as one of his most celebrated portraits.

French visitors, men of letters, musicians, and others have felt its appeal in a more or less surprising way, but they have always felt it very deeply. André Maurois wrote recently (1948) in his book on David: “But the most astonishing of the women’s portraits is that of Mademoiselle du Val d’Ognes, a merciless portrait of an intelligent, homely woman against the light and bathed in shadow and mystery, which is to be found in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The light comes through a cracked window. The colors have the subtlety and the singularity of those of Vermeer. A perfect picture, unforgettable.” Francis Poulenc also writes of our portrait at length and with unexpected comment, in La Table Ronde for February 1950. The keen reaction of these eminently perceptive men cannot leave us indifferent: the manifold attractions, the luminous embellishment which seems to them mysterious and unexpected in David, led them to see in this picture the most astonishing of his portraits of women. Unconsciously they are pronouncing a critical judgment which attacks the attribution to David.

My own impression, when I studied the picture for the first time in 1942, was a mixture of admiration and skepticism. In discussing the matter with my colleagues at the Museum I found that they shared my doubts. The very conception of this portrait, which immediately strikes one as so original, is foreign to David. This painter never places his model in a complex setting including an open-air view. His aim is to endow his portrait with the chaste nobility of a classical bas-relief, and in almost every instance he places his figure against a neutral unified background. Those portraits by him which have backgrounds showing an interior are early ones, carrying forward the tradition of the eighteenth century. From about 1793 on, David eliminates the complex background, and when he paints M. Sériazet seated on a hillock (1795, in the Louvre), the sky that he puts behind him is a simple unit, rather like a white wall. The lighting in our picture, as well as the background, is at variance with David’s usual practice. It is indirect and reflected, whereas David’s lighting is simple and strong, serving only to round out the volume, to give it sculptural relief. One notices such treatment even in his sketches. It is clearly illustrated in the portrait of Mme Récamier, begun in 1800 and left incomplete. There the light
Portrait of Madame Sériziat, painted in 1795 by Jacques Louis David (1748-1825). In the Louvre
Mademoiselle Charlotte du Val d’Ognes, traditionally ascribed to David. Contrary to David’s severe simplicity as a painter, this artist has bathed the subject in a complicated light and placed her in a topical setting with many details. The picture, which is imbued with a romantic mood, reveals little of David’s classical style, or of his superbly correct anatomy and modeling. Height 63½ inches. Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917
falls from the side and front in accordance with academic traditions. Not a single example is known of a portrait by David where the figure is placed against the light.

In the Museum's portrait neither the drawing, the modeling, nor the general construction of the woman's figure measures up to the severe standards of David. The modeling of the flesh and of the textiles is gentle, the articulation of the shoulder and the wrist lacks correctness. The fingers are conventional in character; the legs, of excessive length, betray a mannerism such as David never exhibits in his portraits, and in no such degree as here even in his figure compositions. Our sitter's back is likewise long and awkward. How different from the easy grace of Mme Récamier's portrait, although the tall figures and the poses are not dissimilar! All the contours in Mlle du Val d'Ognes's portrait are more rectilinear, less sensitive than those drawn by David, and one feels in them a kind of reserve and fragility. Mlle du Val d'Ognes's figure seems like a tenuous silhouette, without the robustness and convincing vitality that enliven all the women painted by David.

In all the works of David where do we find the like of the two small figures on the terrace, treated in a few sinuous touches as if by a minor eighteenth-century painter? And when did he paint flesh as pink as this and as transparent? When did he strive for charming effects which make one think of English portraits, of Nelly O'Brien under the shadow of her big hat? One further detail should aid us in contesting the attribution to David, the broken pane of glass and the care that the painter has taken to distinguish between the portion of the view filtered through the glass and that which we see where the glass is lacking. Here is a preoccupation with fortuitous detail, a display of virtuosity, conveying a suspicion of pettiness totally foreign to the spirit of David.

There are in our picture many features that are like David, the harmony of rose and blue, the execution which does not entirely lack impasto, the ground made up of small vibrant touches. But these are conventions which by about 1800 had become part of the common property of most of David's pupils. It is indeed one of these pupils, Gérard, who uses complex backgrounds, interiors with a glimpse of landscape, who plays with these studied effects of contre-jour. In the Salon of the year viii (1800) his portrait of Mme Barbier-Walbonne (now in the Louvre) shows her before a window that looks out on the park of Saint-Cloud; her face is flooded with reflected light exactly like that of Mlle du Val d'Ognes; it is pellucid with this light, as if molded in glass. The entire conception of Gérard's portrait, even to the pose of the model, is so close to our picture that its influence seems certain. It is Gérard who was fond of sweet young heads wreathed with light, after the manner of English painters. In style our portrait of Mlle Charlotte is based upon two masters. It combines the precepts of David with those of Gérard, but it is Gérard's style that prevails, though not the Gérard who later adopted the glassy surface of Girodet.

Thus, for the stylistic reasons which have been stated, the doubt concerning the attribution of our portrait to David is strong indeed. Are there, in its favor, any good documentary data? What is the provenance of the picture, the oral or written tradition attached to it?

Our portrait of Mlle Charlotte was mentioned for the first time comparatively recently, in 1897, when it appeared in Paris in the Exhibition of Portraits of Women and Children (no. 44). It belonged at that time to Commandant Hardouin de Grosville, and it is listed as a portrait of Mlle Charlotte du Val d'Ognes painted by David. Family tradition, transmitted by Maurice Tournieux in an article about the exhibition in the Gazette des Beaux Arts, informs us that the model, the grandmother of Commandant Hardouin de Grosville, is supposed to have been a pupil of David, although she is not included in Delecluze's list of pupils. David is said to have painted the portrait in 1803, in a private residence in the rue de Lille. From this house, according to the family tradition, the former Hôtel de Bourbon, today the Chambre des Députés, could be seen. The two small figures on the terrace were said to be portraits, but the painting of them is far too summary for that. The broken window pane as well as the little figures occasioned a romantic family anec-
Madame Récamier. Louvre. Painted by David in 1800 and left unfinished. His simple lighting, his modeling, pure as classical sculpture, his accurate and elegant drawing are seen here and in the portrait of Madame Sériziat. Loveliness is simply expressed with no striving after charm.

dote, but it can have no special significance, for it was fashionable at that time to paint broken panes. The Salon of the year ix (1801) included at least two other pictures, both by minor artists, which showed such windows, one in a picture by Mme de Chaudet (no. 62) and one in a work by Jacques Roland (no. 299; see Le Moniteur universel, 1801). In any case it is highly improbable that the empty room in which our elegant young lady is pictured was in her own house. It surely has the bare atmosphere of a studio, and the rose-colored drapery thrown across the chair is no more than a typical painter’s property. Thus from the entire tradition we see that nothing remains except the identification of the subject as Charlotte du Val d’Ognes, and this is sufficiently credible.

The family report on the identity of the sitter and the picture’s provenance are absolutely all that we know. The picture is not mentioned in any list of David’s works—not in the inventory composed by the artist himself, nor in the catalogue compiled by his nephew, Jules David, nor in any of the catalogues in the numerous monographs on the painter. In his account of the exhibition in which this picture appeared, Maurice Tourneux illustrated it and praised it, calling it, however, “an anomaly in the list of the master’s works.” He is surprised, moreover, that David “should care for such tricks of lighting and should wilfully heap up so many difficulties merely in order to surmount them.”

About 1904, in a book on David, Charles Sauzier wrote: “In 1803, at the moment of his greatest power, when he is most engrossed in theory, David is called upon to portray Mlle du Val d’Ognes. In the room where the model sits a pane of glass is cracked. David reproduces this crack in his painting. Greater realists than he would have recoiled, would have substituted a drapery or a column. In truth if David had consistently indulged in this sort of reporting
Part of an engraving of the Salon of 1801 by Monsaldy and Devisme. The portrait of Charlotte du Val d'Ognes is shown at the right halfway up, next to the corner. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

he would have been a very mediocre artist.” Later writers on David repeated what Tourneux and Saunier had said but without pausing to note these penetrating observations of theirs, which amounted to nervous hesitation.

It is only in recent years that doubts have been clearly expressed. About 1944 Otto Benesch told me that he agreed with me in rejecting David’s authorship of our picture, and in December 1946 Gaston Brière, in the Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de l’Art Français, expressed a similar opinion. We would still be lost in doubt and controversy concerning the connection of our portrait with David except for the fortunate circumstance that we have found very strong documentary evidence that the picture is not by him. In an engraving, the Vue du Salon de l’An ix (1801), by Monsaldy and Devisme, we see quite clearly hung on the wall the portrait of Charlotte du Val d’Ognes. It is at the right between two oval portraits on which may be seen tiny numerals engraved on the frames giving their numbers in the Salon catalogue, and from the catalogue we learn that they are portraits respectively of Franklin by Duplessis and of an unknown woman by Vestier. But the little reproduction of our lady sketching has, unfortunately, no number; that is the first of the numerous difficulties that we encounter in looking up our picture in the catalogue of the Salon.

There can be no doubt, however, that this small reproduction represents the portrait of Mlle du Val d’Ognes. Indeed, the Cabinet des Estampes has sketches by Monsaldy made from the paintings exhibited in the Salon in preparation for his engraving of the whole. They are rubbings, or “proofs,” in reverse, of drawings,
made for copying directly on the copper plate. The sketch of our artist is among them, and the details, all visible, though weakened by the process of rubbing, include not only the little figures on the balcony but the break in the window. Thus we can be certain that our portrait already existed in 1801. The date of 1803, given by both Tourneux and Saunier as the year when Mlle Charlotte’s portrait was painted, falls down like a house of cards.

By whom, then, was the picture painted? Let us open the official Catalogue (or Livret) of the Salon for the year 1801 and look up David. But David is not in the catalogue; he sent nothing to the Salon of 1801. Let us open the biographies of David and examine the newspapers of the period. David did not merely fail to exhibit in 1801; he deliberately boycotted this Salon. At the time when the Salon was in progress he showed in his own studio in the Louvre, along with the Sabines which had just been offered to the public there, his most recent productions, the original and the replica of Bonaparte crossing the Alps. Although there were instances of late entries in the Salons, it seems most unlikely, after all the evidences of David’s scorn for the official exhibition, that he would have sent in a painting after the opening and after the catalogue had been printed. To impute to David such a change in attitude would be to misunderstand his nature.

But there are more reasons than psychological ones for thinking David’s work was missing from this Salon. There is the press, and the press mentions no contribution by David. Pamphlets and newspapers complain of David’s attitude, which they find cynically self-centered and disdainful toward his colleagues and the public. However, his new-found friendship with the First Consul and his position as uncontested head of the French school conferred on David so much prestige that these newspapers felt they must send their critics to the great man’s studio so that an account of the Bonaparte portrait might be added to the Salon reports.

The catalogue of the Salon lacks not only the name of David but likewise those of Gérard, Regnault, and Isabey. We know from the press that after the opening Gérard sent a portrait of Joséphine Bonaparte, Regnault, The Death of Desaix, and Isabey, a large miniature. However, it is impossible to imagine for an instant that if David had sent in a late entry, it would have been passed over in silence by all the twenty-odd published accounts of the Salon. That would be as though Picasso were to exhibit in the Salon d’Automne today without a single journalist’s breathing a word of it. We may rest assured that the press of 1801 thoroughly covered the Salon to its very closing.

Thus the evidence is clear that David did not exhibit in the Salon of 1801. But since it is equally clear that the portrait of Mlle du Val d’Ognes was exhibited on that occasion, we are forced to conclude that she was not painted by David. But neither was she painted by any of the other important portrait-painters of the day. The press insists that neither Guérin nor Girodet-Trioson sent anything to the Salon, while Gérard showed only the portrait of Joséphine, and Regnault only a historical scene.
Our portrait is accordingly by a less well-known artist, and a glance at the catalogue should suffice to reveal to us who it was that painted it. But we search in vain for either the name of Mlle du Val d'Ognes or any portrait with a title that could describe our picture. There is, indeed, under number 234 a Young Artist painted by Mlle Henriette Lorimier, but this item is illustrated with its number in Monsaldy's engraving and is also described in the papers, and it is an entirely different picture. But our young lady sketching must be hidden under one of the entries of the catalogue, for the journalists mention no such portrait among those that came late. How then can it be discovered?

A Salon catalogue of this time is the despair of the scholar. Pictures are described in the briefest way, names and poses are not mentioned, and dimensions are omitted. On nearly every page there is an entry such as: "No. 86, several painted portraits, under the same number." Men, women, and children are mixed up in the completest anonymity. And there was no lack of portraits in the Salon of 1801. The critic of the "Journal des débats" cries out: "A frightful multitude of portraits of every sort, of every size, and at every price. I don't blame the painters, they have to live; but the models!" Actually the catalogue of 1801 lists as many as twenty-nine entries which refer to vaguely described portraits of women or simply to "several portraits." Among all these portraits that of Mlle du Val d'Ognes could well be hidden.

The catalogue, however, is not the only evidence concerning a Paris Salon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To begin with, as in the case of number 234 by Mlle Lorimier, some portraits of women are recognizable in Monsaldy's Vue du Salon, and these may be thrown out immediately from the list of possibilities. The critics' accounts sometimes give details of the portraits, poses, or accessories, helping us to distinguish between them. But the most fruitful and complete source of information is the register in which an employee of the Louvre, called at that time the Museum Central des Arts, wrote down in the order of delivery all the pictures that the artists brought to present to the jury before the opening of the Salon, including even those which arrived after the catalogue had gone to press. The list of works refused by the jury is appended to the register, and by omitting these we get the account of what really was in the Salon when the exhibition opened. Such other works as were brought in after it had actually begun are noted in the press.

What, then, does this precious register of the Louvre offer? The name and the address of each artist and a very brief description of each work brought in, sometimes with dimensions. For instance, where the catalogue refers only to "several portraits under the same number" the register tells what these several portraits were. Descriptions appear, often more extensive than those in the printed catalogue, sizes, which the catalogue omits, and other details necessary for eliminating the portraits of women which can't be ours.

Employing all these means we are able to discard twenty-seven of the twenty-nine doubtful entries. There remain only the names of
Jean Baptiste Genty and of Madame Charpentier as artists who might have painted the portrait of Mlle du Val d'Ognes.

Jean Baptiste Genty painted portraits, but most of them were miniatures. He was probably little known even in his own time, for the very dates of his birth and death are unrecorded. Besides, it seems highly unlikely that our portrait, full length and broadly treated, could be the work of a painter who was essentially a miniaturist.

This leaves Mme Charpentier, who showed several portraits which were catalogued under number 60. The Louvre register reveals that among these portraits there were two of women. One represents a lady having her lunch; the other is not described at all. But in the paper Les Petites Affiches de Paris for 18 Fructidor An IX (September 5, 1801) the critic Ducray-Duminil publishes an account of the Salon which says: “In the group of portraits by Mme Charpentier, a very remarkable one must be singled out, no. 60. It shows a young lady almost entirely in shadow. This difficult effect is well expressed. But to avoid reddish shadows the painter made them gray, which gives a heavy tone, cold throughout. The execution in works by this pleasing painter, however, is firm and decisive, as are the arrangement of her poses and the choice of her masses.”

If Ducray-Duminil, one of the most serious critics of his time, had included along with his technical comments on style even a single word about the model’s pose, he would have done us

Melancholy, now in the Amiens Museum, the only painting positively known to be by Constance Marie Charpentier (1767-1849). A comparison of the figure with Mademoiselle Charlotte du Val d'Ognes (see next page) shows similar peculiarities of style in the drapery folds and the anatomy.
a very great service. As it is, alas, we cannot know which of the two portraits he is here discussing, the woman eating her lunch or the other woman. But we are struck by the fact that the essential quality which we see in the portrait of Mlle du Val d'Ognes is the same as that found in the portrait by Mme Charpentier which this critic describes as so remarkable. Recent cleaning indeed reveals its cold light and its consistently gray shadows, and the decided opposition of light and dark masses is a conspicuous characteristic of our picture. But to accept Mme Charpentier as the painter of our portrait we must first see a very close similarity between it and known works by this artist.

Constance Marie Charpentier, née Blondelu, was born in Paris in 1767 and died there in 1849. Most of our information about her life is found in the biographical dictionaries of Gabet and Bellier-Auvray. Her style was formed by three minor painters, Wille, Laffitte, and Bouillon, and by the two masters who at that time dominated portrait painting in France, David and Gérard. Between 1795 and 1819 she contributed to ten salons, where she showed more than thirty genre scenes and portraits. Of all these paintings only a single one is known today. It is Melancholy, bought by the State
from the Salon and now in the museum at Amiens. It had been exhibited as number 58 in the Salon of 1801, the same Salon in which the portrait of Mlle du Val d'Ognes appeared. Her other pictures are still unknown, either because they are hidden in private collections, or because they mistakenly bear the names of better known painters.

One other work in portraiture by Mme Charpentier is known today, the drawing in the Musée Maurice et Jeanne Magnin at Dijon, an interesting place to study artists forgotten today. It came direct to that museum from the family of the artist. Although this drawing of a head is harder than the painted head of Mlle du Val d'Ognes, it shows a similar awareness of the light, which casts a broad patch of transparent shadow upon the cheek, the throat, and the nape of the neck. The excellent connoisseur Jeanne Magnin described it as "a pleasant portrait in which the melting grace of the modeling is not far removed from the influence of Gérard."

For the present, then, the only work in oils by Mme Charpentier with which we can compare our portrait is the allegorical composition Melancholy, which bears the signature C. M. Blondelu f(emme) Charpentier. It is a large
canvas with exactly the same dimensions as that of Mlle du Val d'Ognes. It represents a woman dressed in white and dreaming sadly and, one must confess, a little ponderously. She is seated at the edge of a pool shadowed by a weeping willow. Some of our portrait's peculiarities of style are immediately recognizable in this picture. The light-colored figure is clearly silhouetted against a low-keyed background. The legs, especially the thighs, are very long, the curve of the back is exaggerated, the joints of the hands and the shoulders are weak, the tips of the fingers bent back. As Landon, one of the best critics of that time observed, the contours of Melancholy lack refinement. In the same way the contours of our Mlle du Val d'Ognes are vague. In both figures the line of the leg is rigid but at the same time slightly indented just where it connects with the foot. Both dresses have parallel folds, marked where they break with sharp streaks of light; the draperies that trail on the ground in the direction of the spectator are very similar in character. The sashes of the two women are of the same shade of violet, which also is seen in the ribbons tying the sandals of Melancholy and on the slippers of our young lady. And though Melancholy is not seen against the light but is illuminated from the front, her rounded arms and her cheek call to mind the luminous flesh of Mlle du Val d'Ognes. It is interesting to see how in both pictures the arms have been corrected, with very obvious repaints. Certain details, such as the fringe of Melancholy's shawl, which lies on the ground, are brought out with broad, luminous accents, as are the tapes of the young artist's portfolio.

In spite of so many stylistic analogies it is only fair to state that there is a certain divergence in spirit. Mademoiselle du Val d'Ognes, bathed in a subtle light, has a diaphanous grace which we miss in Melancholy, who is robust, sculptural, and without animation. Is this perhaps merely the difference commonly found in France about 1800 between portraits and allegorical figures, the latter always more academic in character? Portraits of this period are almost always more varied and lively, less sculptural than the figure pieces.

But, it may be asked, could so impressive and attractive a portrait really be the work of a painter who is completely forgotten today? It could. In all the history of French painting there are few periods so incompletely known as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Aside from only a few artists of the first rank who have been thoroughly studied, all the others are virtually unknown. Yet one is constantly coming across remarkable pictures of this period which cannot be assigned to any of the principal artists. In the Louvre, for instance, there is an extraordinary portrait of a negress by one of Mme Charpentier's contemporaries, Mme Benoist. This portrait, painted in 1800, is finer than most of the portraits by Regnault, Gérard, Guérin, Girodet, or Gros, who were painting in the same period. It is inferior only to those by David and Prud'hon. Why, then, might not Mme Charpentier, far better known in her own time than Mme Benoist, be the painter of the highly sensitive and successful portrait of Mlle du Val d'Ognes? Although in Melancholy she scarcely seems to rise above the usual level of David-like academicism, she was highly thought of by the critics of her own day. She received an official gold medal and her work was bought by such amateurs as the Marquis de Rougé, who owned David's Death of Socrates, now in this Museum.

Finally, then, certain documents concerning the Salon of 1801, in which Mlle du Val d'Ognes appeared—the printed catalogue, the handwritten register of the Louvre, Monsalvy's sketch and engraving, newspaper criticisms—have afforded us the strongest reasons for rejecting the attribution of this remarkable portrait to David. At the same time they have led us to believe in the attribution to Madame Charpentier. Credible though it is, this assumption will not be verified until the day when some oil portraits by this artist are discovered. Meanwhile the notion that our portrait of Mlle Charlotte may have been painted by a woman is, let us confess, an attractive idea. Its poetry, literary rather than plastic, its very evident charms, and its cleverly concealed weaknesses, its ensemble made up from a thousand subtle artifices, all seem to reveal the feminine spirit.