Joseph Ducreux and the Physiognomical Millieu

Josiah Phelps

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Joseph Ducreux and the Physiognomical Millieu

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by
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Abstract

Joseph Ducreux was an eighteenth-century artist from Nancy, France, whose grimacing self-portraits made their way into the Parisian Salons during the age of the French Revolution. His self-portraits showcased himself in a state of yawning, state of laughing, state of self-confidence, and state of fear. This series is believed to derive from his study of physiognomy and his knowledge of physiognomical studies by such Enlightenment scholars as Johann Kasper Lavater. It will contextualize Ducreux’s oeuvre of self-portraits and his commercial portraits including those previously executed for the French court, with the influence of the pseudo-science of physiognomy. The first chapter is a biographical introduction to Ducreux’s life and how he became the first portraitist of Marie Antoinette in Austria. The first chapter will also go into discussions on how the French Revolution of 1789 allowed him to reinvent himself after the fall of the Ancien Regime. The following chapter will discuss physiognomy in the context of Enlightenment intellectual history. The final chapter will situate Ducreux’s iconography in a wider field of eighteenth-century artists who were influenced by physiognomy. Overall, the purpose of the thesis is to show how Joseph Ducreux used his study of physiognomy as a means to increase his visibility through self-identity and to anticipate modern marketing techniques as a portraitist to a wider audience.
Introduction

Joseph Ducreux was an eighteenth-century painter who, during the Ancien Regime, was mostly known for his portrait of Marie Antoinette, which earned him the title First Painter to the Queen (Fig. 1). Today he is known for his self-portraits, but most particularly one called *Portait de l’artiste sous les traits d’un moqueur*, which depicts Ducreux pointing towards the viewer smiling (Fig. 2). In 2009, Ducreux attained digital fame when his *Portait de l’artiste sous les traits d’un moqueur* turned into an internet meme with Notorious B.I.G. lyrics ‘*Fuck Bitches, Get Money*’ written over the painting. This appropriation sparked an interest in millennials, which demonstrates how an eighteenth-century painter can, surprisingly, relate to twenty-first-century youth culture.

The science of physiognomy influenced portrait artists like Ducreux in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. Physiognomy is the study of the human face to read the mind and soul, which was first re-launched by Giambattista della Porta in 1586 but was rediscovered and studied in an art context by Charles LeBrun by the middle of the seventeenth century. LeBrun founded the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1648 and oversaw the building of Versailles. Artist like Joseph Ducreux, Maurice Quentin de La Tour, Jean Baptiste Greuze, Louis-Léopold Boilly, and Jean-Jacques Lequeu all used the “science” of physiognomy in their portraits throughout their careers. Ducreux extended his study of the “science” further by painting himself multiple times throughout his career. His oeuvre of self-portraits allowed him to reinvent himself in the Salons of the 1790s, after the outbreak of the French Revolution of 1789.
While preparing admission to the Painters’ Guild of St. Luc, Ducreux became the only pupil of the pastelist Maurice Quentin de LaTour, who subsequently exercised a strong influence on Ducreux and his œuvre of self-portraits. LaTour was widely recognized for his portraits of the upper classes, which may account for why Ducreux wanted to study under him. It is known that while he worked with him, he adopted the idea of painting oneself over and over again. LaTour was the first artist to hang a grimacing self-portrait in the Parisian Salon of 1737, when he presented *Laughing* (Fig. 3).¹ This rendering depicts LaTour looking at the audience pointing to the right side of the canvas, as if he were literally laughing at someone out of the picture frame. Ducreux enjoyed painting himself in variations, stressing exaggerated body language and unusual facial expressions.² These expressive self-portraits became the hallmark of his career in the Salons during the 1790s. He was intrigued with Physiognomist Johann Lavater’s idea of


studying one’s own physiognomy by repetitively painting self-portraits with different facial expressions.  

3 Johan Kasper Lavater’s physiognomical study played a very important role in Ducreux’s career and those of other eighteenth-century artists.

Joseph Ducreux was a member of the Guild of Saint-Luc. It was very exceptional for Guild artist to have a career as a court painter at Versailles. To be a painter at Versailles, an artist was expected to be trained by the Royal Academy. Ducreux was able to become a painter at Versailles after his appointment as portraitist to Marie Antionette of Austria. In 1769, Ducreux was sent to Vienna to paint a miniature of Marie Antoinette for Louis XV in preparation for her arranged marriage with Louis-Auguste, the Duc de Berry, forming a political alliance between France and Austria.  

4 He soon became the official painter of Marie Antoinette after her marriage

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to the Duc de Berry, the future Louis XVI, which led Ducreux to rise to the position of one of the foremost painters of the French monarchy. This involvement would eventually lead to his fleeing the country, after the outbreak of the French Revolution, to England. After 1789, Ducreux had an interest in downplaying his previous role as a court painter. For Ducreux, the Salons of the 1790 were showcases for his self-portraits, which he used as a way to self-advertise his paintings while “mocking” his critics. There was a clear difference between his hundreds of commercial portraits and his self-portraits which made him stand out in the eyes of his critics.

Ducreux’s strategy of repeatedly exhibiting his self-portraits throughout the 1790s allowed him to reinvent himself as a Revolutionary and potentially recruit new clients. Ducreux exhibited numerous portraits in the Salons of the 1790s, but it was his self-portraits that kept the public talking. Ducreux did not hesitate to take advantage of the new opportunities that the Revolution afforded him. The Monarchy was the reason Ducreux had a successful career during

the Ancien Regime, but the Revolution allowed the artist to set a new foundation by allowing him to exhibit in the official Parisian Salon, a prestigious exhibition venue for which he previously lacked the required credentials.

Although Ducreux was a painter of the Queen and fled during the Revolution, he still was able to come back to France and restart his life with the help of Jacques-Louis David, a friend of Revolutionary leader Robespierre. Ducreux still had sympathy for the royal family. This association put him at risk of being labeled an aristocratic supporter, which posed a personal risk for him. The artist was allowed to enter the Temple prison that held the King and Queen. He drew the last portrait ever created of Louis XVI on the very day before the King’s execution, thus possibly advertising his sympathy for the Monarch (Fig. 4).

Joseph Ducreux has been discussed in literature twice since his death in 1802. There are sources that mention the artist briefly in the context of the life of Marie-Antionette. In 1958, Georgette Lyon published the history of Ducreux’s life and his involvement with Marie-Antoinette under the title *Joseph Ducreux, Premier peintre de Marie Antoinette*. Lyon focusses mostly on the letters written by the Duc de Choiseul, and other important political figures in connection with the arranged marriage of King Louis XVI and Marie-Antionette. She discusses these documents in chronological order, retracing how Ducreux became the first painter to Marie-Antoinette until he escaped persecution from the Revolutionaries. In 2004, Emilie-Juliette Gauby a Master student at Blaise Pascal University Clermont II, wrote her thesis on the artist titled *Joseph Ducreux 1735–1802, Peintre de portrait*. As opposed to these previous studies, this thesis will constitute the first scholarly study of Joseph Ducreux in English. Moreover, its emphasis will be on the physiognomical context and him being a major figure of French

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5 Georgette Lyon, *Joseph Ducreux, premier peintre de Maria-Antoinette*.!
Revolutionary art; an aspect which has been overlooked in older studies. No previous author investigated Ducreux’s physiognomical studies and how he used the pseudo-science of discerning character traits through facial appearance to reinvent himself after the 1789 French Revolution through his self-portraits.
Chapter One. The life of Ducreux

Joseph Ducreux was born the 26th of June 1735 in Nancy, France. He was the child of a local painter, Charles Ducreux, and Anne (Béliard) Ducreux. According to the Ducreux family history provided by Georgette Lyon, Ducreux was the eldest of four children. He had two sisters, Marie-Françoise Ducreux, Rosette Ducreux, and a younger brother, Louis Ducreux. Since he was the son of an artist, Ducreux studied under his father but did not attend the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris. The artist evidently inherited his talent from his father, with whom he worked closely from a younger age. After thus completing his early studies, he furthered his art education by enrolling in the studio of the famous pastelist Maurice Quentin De Latour. The artist married Philippine-Rose Cosse and had a total of six children: Rose-Adélaïde Ducreux, Adrien-Charles Ducreux, Auguste-Joseph Ducreux, Alexandre-Jules Ducreux, Antoinette-Clémence Ducreux, and Antione-Léon Ducreux. His eldest daughter, Rose-Adélaïde Ducreux, soon followed in her father’s footsteps and became an artist who exhibited in the first “open” Salon of 1791.

The artist did not attend the French Art Academy but, in 1760, he moved to Paris and became the only student who ever trained under the pastelist Maurice Quentin de LaTour. LaTour’s reputation preceded him in Rococo pastel portraits of the upper class. LaTour introduced self-portraits with grimacing expressions as a novelty to the Salon of 1737, calling one of his works simply Laughing (fig. 3). With his knowledge LaTour, Ducreux started representing himself multiple times with changing facial expressions in the 1780s. His pastel self-portraits later blended in with the growing fashion for têtes d’expression, which originated

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6 Georgette Lyon, Joseph Ducreux, premier peintre de Maria-Antoinette, 23.
7 Ibid., 24-25.
8 Ibid., 31.
with Jean-Baptiste Greuze. These studies allowed the artist to create multiple self-portraits to highlight diverse physiognomical aspects. Ducreux’s self-portraits throughout the late 1700s revealed himself laughing, yawing, in a stage of shock, and other expressions and poses. Under the influence of Greuze, Ducreux also began to paint in oil.9 It is not known if Greuze gave lessons to Ducreux, but the two did have a connection after meeting in 1760; after their introduction, Ducreux began working with oil paint.

It is very interesting to note that Ducreux would later, in 1764, become a member of the Guild of St. Luc, and then the First Painter to the Queen Marie Antoinette. The Guild of St. Luc was a guild of painters and sculptors, which ranked in terms of prestige below the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. Since the Royal Academy held a monopoly over the official Salon, the Painters’ Guild tried to organize alternative venues for works of its members.10 Artist from the guild were typically not selected to paint members of Royal Families. Ducreux, however, began receiving aristocratic commissions even before becoming the official painter to the Austrian Archduchess, Marie-Antionette.11 Ducreux painted portraits of many powerful individuals by the early 1760s. His early patrons came from the distinguished Noailles and La Rochefoucauld families of the upper nobility. Ducreux, keenly aware of the shortcomings of his guild background, began painting members of the Court and aristocrats as part of his self-marketing strategy. With more commissions from aristocrats, Ducreux began a successful career as a Guild artist. Ducreux’s fame rose with the fame of his sitters. By becoming a painter of the

aristocracy, Ducreux placed himself in the eyes of the Revolutionaries and was forced to flee in 1791 to England to escape persecutions of aristocratic sympathizers. A career as a Court painter was looked upon unfavorably by the Revolutionaries. Such a career path gave the impression of monarchist sympathies, which probably held true in Ducreux’s case.

Throughout the 1760s, Ducreux began to rise as a portrait painter. The artist was becoming well known for his pastel and oil portraits in France, gaining recognition by some of France’s important diplomats, like Étienne François, Marquis de Stainville, duc de Choiseul, the Foreign Minister of France. The duc de Choiseul was the mastermind behind the marriage negotiations with Austria. The Empress Maria Theresia of Austria was about to marry off her children for political reasons. Arranged marriages were designed to forge political alliances across royal families and their countries during both peace and war.12 These marriages allowed monarchs to wield influence in another, foreign country. The Empress was very insistent on finding the right artist to paint her daughter, Marie-Antionette, in order to introduce her likeness to a potential bridegroom, the Dauphin.13 Allegedly, none of the artist at her Viennese Court were capable to “favorably render the features of Marie-Antionette,” in such a way that she would please the future king.14 Maria Theresia insisted that Louis XV send an artist from France to come and paint portraits of all of the members of the Habsburg Imperial family in Vienna.15 It was an astute political move to ask the King of France to select and appoint himself an artist whom he trusted to paint not only Marie-Antoinette, but also the other Habsburg family

14 Ibid., 38.
15 Ibid., 39.
members. This move allowed the future French King to behold an “objective” likeness of Marie-
Antionette free from attempts by the Empress to manipulate the image of his proposed fiancée.

However, the request to paint Marie-Antoinette and to travel to Austria did not go
directly to Joseph Ducreux. The court at Versailles had a hard time choosing who to send to
Vienna to paint the Archduchess. The administration needed an artist who was able to not only
paint the Austrian Imperial family, but also to record the likeness of them truthfully. Finding an
artist took time which the King could not afford. The first choice was a “renowned painter of
childhood,” François-Hubert Drouais, but the latter had demanded the outrageous sum of 80,000
livres.16 Typically, a large, commissioned canvas from a living artist was remunerated with
around 5,000 livres at the time. Drouais demanded this high amount because of travel expenses,
the large number of court portraits to be painted in Vienna, plus the cancelations of commissions
to which he had previously agreed.17 These complications paved a way for Joseph Ducreux’s
artistic breakthrough:

Choiseul grew impatient and, fearing that his goal might not be reached, hasted the
decision; his choice fell on Joseph Ducreux. Choiseul appreciated the good manners that
came with Ducreux and he was interested because of the artist’s origins in Lorraine.
These reasons should assure the artist a good reception at the Hofburg, where his name
was not entirely unknown. Jean Ducreux, surgeon, had a few years previously treated the
Emperor. Joseph Ducreux, moreover, enjoyed in France at this period, a great reputation,
where his talent was known and appreciated.18

This decision upset Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre, the first painter to the King Louis XV, who felt
strongly that an artist from the Royal Academy, and not the Academy of St. Luc, should paint the
Archduchess in King Louis XV’s name. As mentioned before, to have a painter work for the

16 Ibid., 39.
17 Ibid., 39.
18 Ibid., 39.
Court who did not pass through the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture was an anomaly. The Académie de Saint-Luc was the artist’s guild; it did not provide the same opportunities for training and advancement as the Royal Academy and its members did not enjoy any of the royal privileges, including showing their works at their biennial Salon in the Louvre. Ducreux, too was therefore excluded from the Salon because of his guild background. The Salon was reserved for artist of the Royal Academy, whether men or women, but non-members were ineligible. Thus, to have an artist from a guild background be commissioned to paint the Habsburg Imperial family at Versailles’ request was unacceptable to Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre the First Painter to the King. But ultimately the opinion of Pierre did not matter since Ducreux was well-connected politically and was soon chosen by Choiseul to go to Vienna.  

In January of 1769 Ducreux was given 10,000 livres to travel to the Austrian capital. A letter from Florimond Claude, comte de Mercy-Argenteau, an Austrian diplomat, to Wenzel Anton, Prince of Kaunitz-Rietburg, who was an Austrian and Czech diplomat accredited at Versailles, goes into details what the court in Vienna expected from Ducreux:

They said Sieur Ducreux also let me understand that his mission was not limited to making the portraits of the Serene Archduchess but that he had also been ordered to make every effort execute the portraits of the Emperor and the Empress in order to bring them here [to France].  

It was another achievement of Ducreux’s life to not only paint a portrait of the future wife of Louis XVI, but also the portraits of the Austrian Emperor, Empress, and the whole Imperial

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19 Ibid., 40.
20 Ibid., 42.
family of Austria. These works would be sent to the impatient future Louis XVI, who was eager to see what his supposed in-laws looked like.

Ducrêux created multiple pastel portraits of the sisters of Marie-Antionette to be sent back to Versailles. These pastel portraits depicted Archduchesses Amalia, Anne, Christine and Elizabeth (Fig. 5). Ducrêux, after having completed the portraits of Empress Maria Thérèse, Archduchesses Christine and Elizabeth began work on Marie-Antoinette’s portrait. Instead of

![](image5.jpg)

**Image 5.** Joseph Ducrêux, *Archduchess Christine of Austria*, pastel on parchment. 1769.

using pastels, he switched to oil paints (Fig. 6). This change of medium was a clever idea. It made Maria-Antoinette’s portrait stand out from the pastel portraits that were sent to Versailles. This episode established the foundation for Ducrêux’s appointment as First Painter to the Queen in France, after the marriage between Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette had been consumed.
Ducreux therefore became Marie-Antoinette’s favorite artist after his success with painting her and the Habsburg Imperial family for the future Louis XVI.\textsuperscript{21} This circumstance, after the Revolution, motivated his flight to London in 1791. The artist had completed hundreds of commercial portraits of the French court as Versailles and the French aristocratic class. This engagement branded Ducreux as a supporter of the monarchy, since he had derived substantial advantages from it. When the Revolution erupted, members of the court and the aristocracy either fled, were imprisoned, or put to death by the Revolutionaries. Even artist seen as connected to the court at Versailles were suffering a similar fate for their involvement with the Royal Family. Another portrait artist who was also the painter to Marie-Antoinette was Elisabeth Vigée LeBrun. LeBrun was an artist who shared the same fears that Ducreux faced during the Revolution. LeBrun was one of the artists who supported the monarchy and fled the country to Italy, Austria, and Russia to escape possible repercussions.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 77.
In 1791, Ducreux feared that his life was in danger but, most importantly, that his artistic fortune was compromised. All of the artist’s patrons had either been executed or had fled France. If members of the Court and Aristocracy were executed and fled the country, the consequence was that Ducreux not only lost his commissions, but his life was in danger due to his implied allegiance with the Monarchy. Ducreux feared that he could no longer pursue his art in France. In 1791 Ducreux kept painting self-portraits. He completed *Le Discret* (Fig. 7.), in which he looks at the audience with his finger pressed against his mouth, as if he were trying to beg them to be silent.

Not much is known about Ducreux’s life in London except for his admission to the Royal Academy in London. The artist exhibited five works at the Royal Academy 1791, but the same year he traveled back to Paris after receiving news that the first “open” Salon was going to be held at the Louvre. The opening of the Salon was an outcome of Jacques-Louis David’s lobbying for the abolition of the Academy and the termination of the jury. The goal of David’s personal vendetta was to completely dismantle the Academy. This event was a very turning point for Ducreux because “non-academic artists were the most conspicuous beneficiaries of the opening of the Salon to non-members of the Academy in 1791.” The Salon went through many changes during the Revolution. The jury was abolished in 1791 and all artist, no matter whether they were members or non-members of the Academy, were allowed to exhibit. This situation

22 Ibid., 77.
23 Ibid., 77.
24 Ibid., 78.
allowed Ducreux to enter his portrait, *Le Discret* (Fig. 7). The “opening” of the Salon came about because of the Revolution’s principle of equality and abolition of all privileges.\(^27\) All submissions were automatically accepted because there was no jury anymore. The Academy was abolished because it was allegedly allied with the King and the Court, meaning Versailles had an influence over the jury and chose who would be accepted into the Salons.

Before the Salon of 1791, according to David’s argument, the Salon was about control over artists through royal power. The “open” Salon was a drastic change from the Salon of 1789. The Académie royale controlled the access in the Salons, only admitting artists who the jury saw fit. The Académie de Saint-Luc was dismantled in 1776, leaving the members without a place to exhibit their works. There was a sharp difference between the Royal Academy and the Guild of

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 26.
Saint-Luc. The Royal Academicians thought of themselves as intellectuals who felt that they held a higher rank than the Académie de Saint-Luc. The Académie de Saint-Luc members thought of themselves primarily as craftsmen.

The open Salon of 1791 allowed members from the Guild of Saint-Luc to exhibit for the first time in the official Salon. Ducreux submitted *Le Discret*. The painting triggered many commentaries by Salon critics. This abolition of jury presented a great opportunity for Ducreux and his daughter who now both showed at the Salon. The Open Salon, however, was not the first time Ducreux had exhibited a self-portrait publicly. In 1783, the artist showed two self-portraits, *Self-Portrait, Yawning*, and another untitled work, in the Salon de la Correspondance of 1783 (Fig. 8). The Salon de la Correspondance was established by Mammès-Claude Pahin de La Blancherrie in 1778. Pahin organized small exhibitions in his apartment, which were endorsed by distinguished men of all nationalities, such as Baron Grimm, Benjamin Franklin, and

![Image 8. Joseph Ducreux, Self-portrait, *Yawning*, oil on canvas, 1783.](image)

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28 Georgette Lyon, *Joseph Ducreux, premier peintre de Maria-Antoinette*, 80.
Condorcet. In 1779, the Salon de la Correspondance became the official Salon for Guild artists due to the dismantling of the Academy of St. Luc.

The opening of the official Salon in 1791 was an invitation for Ducreux to exhibit his têtes d'expressions. The study of physiognomy, particular, allowed Ducreux’s career to advance after the fall of the Ancien Regime. Even though the artist at first supported the monarchy due to the advantages it gave him to advance his career, he was able to benefit from the new opportunities that the Revolution provided. With connections with revolutionaries, Ducreux gained success by having a studio at the Louvre and a studio in the former Hôtel d’Angiviller. Ducreux exhibited seventy-nine portraits into the Salons throughout the 1790s and early 1800s, after the dismantling of the jury in 1791. The bulk of these works, of course, were commercial portraits, distinct from his smaller body of self-portraits that kept critics and the general public talking about Ducreux.

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Chapter Two. The Influence of Physiognomy

The study of physiognomy occupied the minds of many artists and philosophers from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. Physiognomy is a science that originated with early Greek philosophers and scientists, such as Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen.\(^\text{31}\) The Aristotelian distinction between body and soul, provides for the foundation of physiognomy. Physiognomy is the study of a person’s facial expressions to determine their character or soul.\(^\text{32}\) By the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, classical sources spawned teachings about the Four Temperaments: Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholic, and Phlegmatic (Fig. 9). These “four humors” suggest that each human being has a distinct personality trait which can also be linked to their physiognomy (Fig. 10). In this chapter, I will discuss the foundation of physiognomy and how throughout the centuries it has had an influence on philosophers, writers, and artists. I will discuss the manifold intellectual and scientific influences on Joseph Ducreux which lead to his self-portraits mocking his critics and rebranding his name.

The “four humors” have distinct characteristics that describe four personality types which each comes with its own physiognomy. The Sanguine disposition describes an extroverted person, who is known as “the talker.” Individuals in this category are very active, but this characteristic is also accompanied by destructive behavior. The Choleric humor is associated with a person who is also extroverted, but they are independent, decisive, goal-oriented, ambitious, and natural leaders. This person also displays violent behavior and can be vengeful and short-tempered. The Melancholic disposition is typical for an analytical person; they are perfectionist. These people are deep thinkers, thoughtful, and emotionally receptive. This person


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 495.
is very introverted, often anxious. Lastly, the Phlegmatic personality type, has a relaxed, peaceful, and quiet personality. This type of person cares about others, yet they hide their own emotions. Phlegmatic people are good at generalizing ideas and making compromises. These humors were the foundation of the study of the human body and soul.

There were many ideas about the four temperaments implicit in the “science” of physiognomy, which scientists of today consider a fallacy. But is there a core truth behind the ideas of Physiognomy? Subjectively, there appears to be some relevance to this idea, but the science behind it cannot be proven - after all, how can one measure the degrees of the soul of a human being by looking at their facial features? Although physiognomical studies do not begin chronologically with Johann Casper Lavater, his writings provide us with a good definition with what physiognomy is. According to Lavater, who lived in Switzerland during the eighteenth century, not only does physiognomy reside in man, but also in everything around us, including the sky, trees, plants, etc. Since physiognomy is defined as the study of a person’s facial expression,


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then how can everything in the world have a physiognomy have a physiognomy? Lavater believes that since we, as humans, judge subjects/objects by their appearances and have knowledge about them, then they, too, can have a physiognomy.34

An Italian sixteenth-century scholar by the name of Giambasttista della Porta was a major figure in the history of this idea. Della Porta explored not only physiognomy but also physiology. Della Porta dedicated most of his time to science. His ideas reinterpreted the classical ideas of physiognomy and physiology based on collected and excerpted classical and medieval texts.35 Della Porta, for instance, analyzed the elements of the human face one part at a time by introducing a series of analogies to animals, the elements, and the stars within a Neoplatonic cosmic system. In De humana physiognomonia libre (1586), he compared the human facial features and traits to those of animals, for example, a human face that resembles a lion indicates strength and courage. By elaborating on his predecessors, Della Porta stressed the visual similarities in physiognomy, drawing on the ideas that man and animal are the same in nature. Della porta also breaks down the human body based on details about on how every part on the body functions.

Charles LeBrun, the founder of the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture and the first painter to Louis XIV, became a great influence on eighteenth-century philosophers and artists through his theoretical lectures before the French Academy. LeBrun’s take on theories on physiognomy were based on the mechanical movements of the human face and why the muscles move when expressing emotion. One of his main contributions to the pseudo-science was its foundation on passions. Passions, in this context, is a list of emotions that the soul expresses

34 Ibid., 6.
physically through aerial form and muscular movements. LeBrun also approached physiognomy from della Porta’s point of view by drawing connections between man and animal. His first comparison of man and animal derived from the similarities between the Greek gods Zeus and Hercules with lions, which he established through drawings (Fig. 11). LeBrun’s comparisons between humans and animals were inspired by investigations who we are as people individually and how humanity is our common base. By comparing human profiles with those of animals, LeBrun arrived at the conclusion that our behaviors are linked. For example, a lion represents courage, ferocity, fearlessness, bravery, strength, and power, so LeBrun would associate its physiognomy with the physiognomy of human heroes, such as mythological gods, kings, etc. (Fig. 12). LeBrun specifically derived his analogies between man and nature from the texts written by his predecessor, della Porta and his De humana physiognomonia libre (1586). But LeBrun’s main “scientific” focus was on the emotion and character intrinsic to facial

expressions. When LeBrun gave his lecture at the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture on *L'Expression des Passions* in 1668, he demonstrated to the attending artists “how to use such expression, to show them, in short, how to paint the passions.”

When an emotion captivates the mind, it triggers the muscles in our faces to react and to produce the physical equivalent of what we feel. Not only is physiognomy the study of one’s initial appearance at first glance, but it is also the study of similarities in man and nature. It is the study of the expressions which we feel. LeBrun stated that the “face is where the soul shows its feelings.” In LeBrun’s opinion, the reason why the human soul expresses our emotions physically was first formulated by René Descartes, who identified the pineal gland as the organ

Image 13. Charles Lebrun, *The Expressions* 1642, engraving (31.1 x 22.9 cm)

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39 Ibid., 30.
connecting the human brain to the soul. Descartes was a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientific thicker, natural philosopher, and metaphysician, who had a great influence on Charles LeBrun and who provided the foundation of his work. The pineal gland, according to Descartes, determines the “passions/emotions which are affecting of the soul through the functions of the pineal gland which, in turn regulates a response of the body and influenced the flow of what were termed spirits to the muscles.” LeBrun believed that his interest in physiognomy was directly related to this study (Fig. 13).

By the middle of the eighteenth century the pseudo-science of physiognomy became part of the age of reason. Johann Casper Lavater, a physiognomist, philosopher, writer, poet, and theologian, wrote his Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe (1775). Lavater introduced a physiognomy, which highlighted a different set of ideas compared to his predecessors. Stephanie O’Rourke, in her dissertation on Bodies of Knowledge: Fuseli and Girodet at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century, discusses how Lavater “envisioned a new form of physiognomy that would have practical, moral, and spiritual value.” She points out how Lavater’s writings differ from those of before him.

Firstly, it was a system that purported to enable social and political transparency during a period when these identities were becoming increasingly mutable. The notion of “transparency” had specific moral valences as well. A body that was readily available to physiognomic analysis was an “honest” body; conversely, a body that sought to conceal its true nature indicated grave moral shortcomings.

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41 Stephanie O’Rourke, Bodies of Knowledge: Fuseli and Girodet at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century (New York: Columbia University 2015), 19.
42 Ibid., 19.
Lavater espoused a variety of theories on what he believed physiognomy to rely. In his *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775), he gives his own definition of physiognomy is:

> Physiognomy is the science or knowledge of the correspondence between the external and internal man, the visible superficies and the invisible contents… opposed to pathognomy, it is the knowledge of signs of the powers and inclinations of men - Pathognomy is the knowledge of the signs of passions. Physiognomy therefore teaches the knowledge of character at rest, and pathognomy of character in motion.\(^{43}\)

This theory of physiognomy as the knowledge of character at rest breaks away from Lebrun’s theory of the science. LeBrun’s theory is based on the idea that the human passions which our soul produces from the pineal gland is the essence of physiognomy. Lavater disagrees with Lebrun in this context, leading to the idea that Lebrun’s theory is of pathognomy not physiognomy, which discredits LeBrun’s work. Pathognomy is the study of passions and emotions and facial expressions which is separate from physiognomy, which is the study of facial features and character rather than emotions and expression. Lavater also believed that human physiognomy was an image of the spiritual essence of God, an idea which he derived from Johann Gottfried Herder.\(^{44}\) This is where Lavater’s work differed from other physiognomists before him. Lavater developed a new understanding that “presented the science as a means of deciphering the mysterious inner world through bodily signs.”\(^{45}\) Lavater also drew on inspiration from Emanuel Swedenborg, who believed that physiognomy showed the inner man based on the idea of a correspondence between the spiritual and earthly world.

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\(^{43}\) Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy: Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind* 31.

\(^{44}\) Joan K. Stemmeler, "The Physiognomical Portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater." 153.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 153.
Although della Porta, LeBrun, and Lavater were at the foundation of developing new ideas of the science in their studies, they were not a direct influence on Ducreux. In the context of Ducreux’s career as a portraitist, physiognomy inspired many artists, but particularly his mentor, Maurice Quentin de LaTour. Artists began using physiognomy to depict themselves and others in a Democritian style of way, laughing in an exaggerated expression and mocking the world. Democritus was an Ancient Greek philosopher who discovered the atom and how every aspect of the universe was made of it. Democritus was known as the “laughing philosopher,” who laughed at the “follies of the world.”

Throughout the centuries, Democritus had appealed to the imagination of artists, who showcased him as mocking the world. I will provide two early examples that establish a distinct connection between the eighteenth century and this Democritian iconography. Seventeenth-century


Dutch Baroque painter, Johannes Paulus Moreelse, painted the “laughing philosopher” pointing at the world with a hysterical laugh (Fig. 14). Charles-Antoine Coypel, an eighteenth-century French painter, art critic, and playwright, depicted Democritus sitting at a window smiling, pointing, and gesticulating at the audience (Fig. 15). These paintings reveal many similar characteristics to Joseph Ducreux’s self-portraits. In the early eighteenth century, Jean Antione Watteau painted self-portraits in this Democritian mocking style (Fig. 16), which can be compared to Joseph Ducreux’s self-portraits, in which he mocked his critics (Fig. 17). Watteau depicted himself in these smiling/laughing poses demanding the “closed, tight, prim, decorous mouth of courtly civility that the Regency seemed to erase.”


After the death of Louis XIV in 1715, Philippe, duc d’Orléans became the Regent of France until Louis XV was old enough to reign. The Regent, Philippe of Orléans, had always been disliked by Louis XIV, so he hardly had respect for Louis XIV. After Louis XIV death, the duc d’Orléans:

unleashed a torrent of high living, relaxed morals, urbane sociability, political experimentation, intellectual openness, and a fundamental question of courtly values. Smiles, along with wit, humor, laughter, daring, imagination, and new thinking, seemed to be replacing po-faced solemnity and etiolated high seriousness.48

Watteau is known to have influenced LaTour with his sense of self-mocking. The fashion for Democritian subjects led to LaTour’s exhibiting *Laughing* (Fig. 3) in the Salon of 1737, as mentioned earlier. LaTour depicted multiple “Democritian portraits” over the years which pushed the iconography into the mid and late eighteenth century (Figs. 18-19). Being the mentor of Joseph Ducreux, LaTour established a direct link to Ducreux creating his self-portraits in the late eighteenth-

48 Ibid, 44.
century. He was clearly aware of the Democritian style portraits. Physiognomy became a key tool for self-expression for artists during the eighteenth century. Ducreux, compared to his predecessors, took this idea further in his self-portraits. Ducreux’s portraits extended those of his mentor by introducing himself in a variety of physiognomical stages, over-exaggerating the facial expressions in his work.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, physiognomy had provided new ideas on the reason why and how humans look and express their emotions. Theories on physiognomy developed by della Porta, LeBrun, and Lavater had provided sources of advanced knowledge on humans that pushed the boundaries between man, nature, and God. Artists began using these ideas to develop their own interpretations based on the pseudo-science. Although these physiognomical theories expounded by the physiognomists were not at the direct foundations of Joseph Ducreux’s art, their theories still set the intellectual foundations for his mentor LaTour and Ducreux’s artistic milieu throughout the eighteenth century. The final chapter will discuss eighteenth-century artists who were influenced by physiognomy, and how they used the science to apply their skills on depictions of the human form. I will furthermore discuss how the Enlightenment helped advanced artistic skills using physiognomy and compare and contrast the work of contemporary artists with Ducreux’s.
Chapter Three. The Artists of the Physiognomical Millieu

Enlightenment ideas made artists engage with a new type of self-awareness. Artists interested in physiognomy began to prefer more expressive subject matter in their portraits. Although della Porta’s and LeBrun’s theories on human physiognomy were developed before the Age of Reason, their ideas about the science and empirical observations of facial features appealed to the Enlightenment. Artists during the Enlightenment were not theorists, but the eighteenth century still brought forth new artistic ideas according to which artists depicted themselves and their sitters. The Enlightenment is an intellectual movement which consist of ideas that encouraged the French citizens to rebel against the aristocracy. This allowed individuals to question who they were and why were they being placed and ruled by the aristocracy. Physiognomy became not only a scientific concern, but also an artistic theme. This chapter will discuss artists who used the pseudo-science to turn portraiture into an Enlightenment phenomenon to express individuality. The discussion will include not only French portrait painters, but also German portraitists as well.

The eighteenth century saw the rise of portrait painters and sculptors who became very skillful in illustrating human physiognomy through the appearance of expressive grimaces. I will discuss the physiognomical milieu in chronological order by those artists and their works who engaged in this trend. I will then compare their œuvre to that of Joseph Ducreux, explaining differences in detail, skills, and subject matter. The examples chosen will be limited to these artists’ physiognomical work and how the artists used the science in their portrait studies. The physiognomical artistic milieu of Ducreux is a key field for the understanding of physiognomy in general. Compared to his contemporaries, Ducreux was the only portraitist using the pseudo-science to give his artistic career a new direction during the Revolution.
As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jean-Antione Watteau (1684-1721) was one of the influences on Maurice de LaTour in using the pseudo-science. Although Watteau had no direct influence on Ducreux, his character heads were reflecting conventions of the previously “divine” Baroque style, favoring expressions with heavenly raised heads and eyes (Fig. 20). Watteau’s character heads were not exaggerated in terms of their expressions and grimaces, but the artist did set a foundation for the physiognomical interest in French portrait painters who subsequently used the pseudo-science in their studies.

The first artist who I will examine from the outside of France is German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1735-1783). It is important to include this foreign artist not only because of his skills and understanding in depicting physiognomy during the eighteenth century but also because he demonstrates how physiognomy incited artistic interest outside of France. Messerschmidt was known for his collection of character and expression studies that were supposedly influenced by Lavater’s writing, but there are multiple theories as to why the artist created his bronze heads.⁴⁹

Another explanation of why the artist started to create these busts was the death of his longtime friend Martin van Meytens, in 1770, who was a painter to the Austrian Royal Court. The death of van Meytens caused Messerschmidt to develop mental health problems and anger, which are believed to have influenced in his sculptures. Messerschmidt began his character heads depicting the human passions in Vienna in the early 1770s. Between 1770-1783 Messerschmidt sculptured up to forty-nine character heads, which were exhibited at the Citizens Hospital in Vienna in 1793 (Fig. 21). Messerschmidt’s character heads were sculptured with great attention to disturbing details. The artist seemed to have been fascinated with elongating the neck; almost all facial features he depicted were distorted into grimaces (Fig. 22). The artist also seemed to be interested in the wrinkles which were a very important part of his portraits and which further served to highlight the character of his sitter. By exaggerating the wrinkles, the artist added physiognomical passions to his busts. Messerschmidt

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50 Ibid., 41.
51 Ibid., 42.
52 Ibid., 68.
physiognomical studies were a prime example of the expansion of physiognomy into art in Europe during the eighteenth century. His busts characterized individuality in terms of the ranges of human passions.

In France, artists such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805), Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757-1826), and Louis-Léopold Boilly (1761-1865) were experimenting with subcategories of physiognomy to enhance the expressive power of the sitters in their paintings. The Enlightenment idea of self-identity was slowly taking root in the late 1700s. Greuze was a portrait, genre, and history painter, whose physiognomical interest was best expressed in his large genre paintings. Greuze began creating large multiple-figure genre paintings, in which each character is individualized. Greuze loved to wonder the streets of Paris in search of models to attract them to his studio to pose for his moralizing genre paintings.53 According to Diderot, Greuze would adventure out every morning in

Paris for the purpose of collecting notes for his paintings, and “if he came across a head which pleased him, he would willingly have fallen on his knees in the mud, if by so doing he could entice the bearer of their head into his studio.” Given the Enlightenment interest in self-identity, Greuze used physiognomy to re-invent individuality artistically in his œuvre.

Greuze conveyed sentimental emotions and moralistic stories through physiognomical expressions of sadness, desperation, anger, and cheerfulness. The artist’s portraits expressed soulful facial expressions that showcased the joys and pains of peasant families. The Enlightenment allowed Greuze to individualize his characters in his work, giving each a role to play in a moralizing setting. What set Greuze apart from other French artists was that he introduced physiognomy to a narrative context. His work was very subtle and did not indulge in exaggerated expressions, but the artist did project passions into his work (Fig. 25). Greuze incorporated his portrait studies into his genre scenes which made him popular with general audiences (Fig. 26). He also produced a great many stand-alone tête d’expressions, which started out as studies for his domestic genre scenes, but then became a staple of his art in their own right. After the artist studied and captured individual heads, he integrated them in larger paintings. In examining the sketch of Head of a Woman Turned to the Right (Fig. 25) we see a woman he likely accosted in the streets of Paris, and in The Angry Mother (Fig. 26), both figures show similar features and poses. Greuze’s work was one of the first to highlight everyday people selected solely on their exceptional physiognomy and hence their ability to enhance his genre painting. The truthfulness of physiognomy was a way for Greuze to connect to large segments of society.

54 Ibid., 132.
Before the Revolution, the Ancien Régime’s aristocracy defined itself through rules of *esprit* and codes of social politeness. These linguistic codes drew a clear distinction between the upper- and lower-class citizens in Paris. During the Revolution, Revolutionaries deliberately broke these social rules of polite behavior thereby attacking what symbolized these distinctions and differentiations. In an artistic context, with the rise the Enlightenment idea of self-identity, artists began to overturn the codes of *politesse* with the help of the Open Salon. The Salon was controlled by influences of royal power giving only opportunities to artists who held membership or were *agréé* by the Royal Academy. The opening of the Salon allowed Ducreux to not only mock the critics but also showed a type of rude or vulgar behavior previously unseen. During the 1790s, artists such as Lequeu and Boilly almost certainly attended these Salons and were inspired by Ducreux’s grimacing paintings and how he invented a new form of self-identity.

Jean-Jacques Lequeu was a French draughtsman and architect who had developed an interest in physiognomical themes in the 1790s. Although he was mostly known for his architecture, Lequeu’s portraits were also a great example of the impact of physiognomy. Lequeu not only focused on physiognomy but on anatomy as well, drawing studies of the human body in pornographic poses. It is unknown when the artist completed his series self-portraits but based on visual evidence it seems certain that his inspiration comes directly from Ducreux during the 1790s. According to the dates of his portraits, Lequeu created his head studies, portraits, and self-portraits after the first Open Salon. Lequeu’s interest in physiognomy differs from those of other portrait artists during this time. The artist’s interest was solely based on theories about knowledge to be gathered from the human face:

Yet here is a great deal of knowledge of the human species on our character,

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our inclinations: and if we believe in the reality of this, of course the physiognomist would have a great day: however, although this research is still valuable for the arts, I am not afraid to say that it will be impossible to determine the true combinations of passions on our face…

Lequeu’s head studies applied principles that allowed a way for a new approach to the study of the human head in various geometrical positions (Fig 27). The artist created a total of five self-portraits which depicted pouting, grimacing facial features, sometimes yawning, and sticking his tongue out (Figures 28-30). By taking himself as a subject, Lequeu executed his portraits which “derogate from the terms of an identity regime based on the permanence of oneself.” Since Lequeu did not exhibit

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59 Ibid., 32.
60 Ibid., 34
his self-portraits, there is no clear understanding why the artist created these grimacing portraits, but one can speculate that it was due to experiments with self-identity.


Louis-Léopold Boilly was a French painter and draftsman who produced numerous genre paintings portraying the French bourgeoisie. In 1794 Boilly began to experiment with “high drama of Greuzian” genre-style scenes. The artist participated in a national art competition, the great Concours de l’an II, which appealed to the public at the height of the Terror. Boilly’s expressed great physiognomical passions in these genre paintings. Throughout the rest of the 1790s and into the nineteenth century, Boilly slowly worked on individualizing his subjects, giving each sitter his or her own characteristic by using grimacing features. Physiognomy was becoming a major part of his artistic œuvre. It seems that the artist’s intention was to entertain the public by introducing physiognomy in his work.

In the nineteenth century, Boilly continued to probe into the psychological depth of his sitters, but he painted them with “strongly marked features, which suggest his adherence to physiognomic

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62 Ibid., 44.
theories that understood the study of character.” His work evolved into clusters of grimacing heads, showcasing his masterful play with the human physiognomy. During the eighteenth-century clusters of heads were recurring compositional forms in studies of *têtes d’expression* and caricatures. Boilly’s *Thirty-five Expressive Heads*, 1823-28 provides an example of these eighteenth-century studies of clustered heads. Artist who proceeded him in this manner were Francesco Goya, William Hogarth, Joseph-François Foulquier, Vivant Denon and others. In his *Thirty-five Expressive Heads*, Boilly was “interested in expression and in how far expression could distort the face.” Like Ducreux and Lequeu before, Boilly depicted himself in these grimacing expressions (Fig. 31). Unlike Ducreux, neither Boilly nor Lequeu expanded their grimacing heads into full body figures that were popular during the eighteenth century. Boilly’s work allowed for him to entertain his viewers during the Restoration. The artist published a total of ninety-six lithograph series showcasing the *Collection of Grimaces*, which depicted people from ‘all over the world’ (Fig. 32). By introducing physiognomy to his œuvre, Boilly was able to individualize figures in his genre scenes, caricatures, and his self-portraits.

The artists of the physiognomical millieu applied Enlightenment ideas of self-identity to the faces of Paris, to caricatures, and to themselves. Although some artists used the science to entertain, their main goal was to introduce a new idea of morality and individuality through their work. Although physiognomy is a science that dates back to the Aristotelian age, the Enlightenment and the Revolution encouraged artists to apply the science to attack the order and the social conventions of the Ancien Regime’s aristocracy.

63 Ibid., 118.
64 Ibid., 123.
Image 29. Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Grimacing man (Self-portrait)*, 1822 or 1823 Black chalk with touches of white and red chalk on light brown wove paper (24.8 x 19.7cm).

Conclusion

Joseph Ducreux made a substantial mark on French artistic life during the 1790s by engaging ideas derived from physiognomical sciences. It is clear that his grimacing self-portraits not only allowed him to reinvent himself after the Revolution, but also provided inspiration for other portrait artists. His self-portraits of the 1790s gave him an opportunity to win new portrait commissions despite his previous connection to the monarchy and the aristocracy (Figs. 33).


As painter of the old guild system, the first painter to Marie-Antionette, and a painter of the French court, Joseph Ducreux was able to observe the rise of the revolutionaries and the downfall of the Old Regime from a unique perspective. The artist tried to restart his artistic career in England but because of the support of Jacques-Louis David who informed him of the opening of the Salon, Ducreux was encouraged to go back to France and exhibit in the Louvre for the first time. Although the artist had
previously experimented with the grimacing depictions as early as the 1780s, his recognition did not come until the opening of the Salons to all artists.

The grimacing self-portraits Joseph Ducreux exhibited during these open Salons became major milestones of his artistic career. Not only were they marketing tools, but they also became a way for the artist to attack to his critics. The Contemporary physiognomical millieu gave him an opportunity to engage with a wider audience in a comical way while attacking social conventions of *politesse* of the Old Regime. Inciting controversy with his self-portraits, Ducreux managed to attract new sitters and patrons.

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Vita

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