

**PORTRAIT OF THOMAS GERMAIN AND HIS WIFE**

NICOLAS DE LARGILLIERRE

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**FROM THE CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN MUSEUM**, the portrait of Thomas Germain (1673-1748) and his wife Anne-Denise Gauchelet, painted by Nicolas de Largillierre in 1736, is, as Antoine Schnapper wrote, “a masterpiece in colour harmony.” The painting is a particularly clear example of Largillierre’s thoughts about the technique of portraiture: the use of a light-coloured plain background, a palette of soft colours, the extensive gradation of greys starting from whites and the illumination of subjects’ shoulders to minimise tonal contrast with their faces”. These technical characteristics set Largillierre’s portraits apart from both the tradition of classic French portraiture of Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674), dominated by rigorous lines and the prominence of figures over a dark background, and from the exuberant pomp of his contemporary friend and rival, Hyacinthe Rigaud, the great portrait painter of the courts of Louis XIV and Louis XV.

The elegance of Largillierre’s portraits reflects the eclecticism of his training. Born in Paris in 1656 and the son of a successful milliner, at the age of two Nicolas accompanied his father in settling in Antwerp and later followed his family at the age of nine to settle in London during the restored monarchy of Charles II. Subsequently returning to Antwerp, in 1668 he entered as an apprentice in the workshop of Antoon Goubau (1616-1698), a genre and still-life painter with whom he worked until 1674, when he was received as a painter in the Guild of Saint Luke. The following year he once again left for London, the home of his friend Pieter van der Meulen, where he came under the influence of Peter Lely (1618-1680), the great portrait painter of the English court, whose compositional elegance and sense of colour constituted a highly novel approach to portraiture in comparison with the French tradition.

It was precisely with a portrait of Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), the master painter of Louis XIV, that Largillierre was admitted to the Royal Academy of Paris in 1686, and it was under the



Nicolas de Largillierre  
***Portrait of Thomas Germain  
and His Wife***

France, 1736

Signed and dated: *N. de Largillierre /1736*

Oil on canvas

Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, inv. 431

influence of Le Brun that he resisted establishing himself at the English court, although he would return to England in 1687 to complete some portraits of the family of James II.

In Paris, Largillierre devoted himself to portraiture with increasing success (having painted over a thousand portraits by the time of his death), serving a bourgeois clientele of high officials and nobles related to the royal family. His work was innovative not only in terms of

its palette and composition but also in terms of the settings, providing references that served to identify and clarify the social position and the thoughts of the subject, thus aligning this genre more closely to great historical painting, which was more highly valued than portraiture in the somewhat rigid opinion of the Royal French Academy. It is precisely during Largillierre's period of greatest creativity in the early eighteenth century that the writings of Roger de Piles (1635-1709) questioned the distinctions between major and minor genres of painting. Piles was a great admirer of Flemish art and extolled the importance of colour over line, a new framework of values that was clearly favourable to Nicolas Largillierre's work.

The portrait of Thomas Germain and Anne-Denise Gauchelet belongs to what almost constitutes a subgenre in the Largillierre's work: portraits of artists, which Largillierre cultivated with particular care and talent, as those portrayed were almost always personal friends. Many of these portraits served as a basis for engravings, which served to disseminate the image of the artists and their fame, and which emphasised their social importance, particularly evident in the case of the painting in question. Germain is portrayed within an almost luxuri-

ous interior, in a direct reference to his profession as a goldsmith, which is further underlined by the letter on the table in the foreground, addressed to *Monsieur Germain Orfèvre du Roy*, the king's goldsmith. Thomas Germain is pictured with a drawing instrument in his hand and his arm around a magnificent ewer, unfortunately now lost, while pointing with his other hand to a shelf that bears a silver candelabrum and some plaster and terracotta models. The candelabrum is similar to those that were to be produced by his son François-Thomas for King Joseph I of Portugal, and which form part of the famous silver service that is kept in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (Room 69). The clay cherub is also reminiscent of the decorative trim of the tureens which form part of the same set. As is also well-known, Thomas Germain was responsible for the royal silver service produced for King John V of Portugal which was lost in the Lisbon earthquake.

Acquired in London in 1903 by Calouste Gulbenkian, in its plain, clear tones, the painting is a striking example of chromatic elegance, demonstrating Nicolas Largillierre's great interest in dignifying the great Parisian artists that were his contemporaries through portraiture.

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