

## Online edition

**BOZE, Joseph**

Martigues 1745 – Paris 1826

Many of the widely repeated biographical details of this artist come from Volcy-Boze's memoir, based on recollections of Boze's youngest daughter Victoire, which Gérard Fabre (Boze 2004) has shown to be fanciful, misleading or simply wrong. The son of a sailor, Boze left Martigues for Marseille around 1760–62, and may have studied at either the École pratique de dessin et de peinture or the Académie de peinture. It seems probable that he was taught, or at least influenced, by the pastellist Pierre Bernard, with whose style some of Boze's early works bear clear similarities in terms of composition and cool tonality (the portrait of Joseph André is a good example of the difficulty of distinguishing their work, while Boze's first known pastel, the *inconnu* of 1771, is placed in the sort of decorative stone border that Bernard frequently employed). At the beginning of 1770, Boze married Madeleine-Françoise Clétiez (1751–1835), from Alès, where they settled (while continuing to travel to Marseille); they were to have six children. In 1776 they moved to Nîmes, then an important town in the South. While at Nîmes, Boze forged a close relationship with Rabaut-Saint-Étienne, and became sympathetic to the Protestant cause. Throughout his career, these links were to be a significant source of commissions, although his publication of an engraving of the *Assemblée des protestants à Nîmes* in 1785 was to prove a commercial disaster. Boze moved to Paris in 1778, under circumstances that are far from clear. Through his wife's relative, the abbé de Vanmale, he met M. Duché, avocat général au parlement du Languedoc, who may have introduced him to artistic circles in Montpellier. Shortly afterwards he is found in Paris. He is also said to have studied with La Tour; while a meeting is possible, a formal relationship is improbable.

Boze dabbled in inventions, including a machine for unharnessing runaway horses and a hands-free device for turning pages of music, and was a member of the Académie des arts utiles and the Société des inventions et découvertes; some of his ideas were praised in a 1780 report to the Académie des sciences by the brilliant Vaucanson – whose portrait Boze exhibited at the Salon de la Correspondance in 1782, to the acclaim of Pahin de La Blancherie: "L'Artiste veut bien faire présent de ce Portrait, le seul qui ait été fait de ce Savant célèbre pour enrichir la précieuse collection que l'on prépare au chef-lieu de la Correspondance. M. Bose, très habile mécanicien lui-même, étoit plus qu'aucun Artiste dans le cas de mettre un prix aux séances dont l'avoit gratifié M. de Vaucanson. Indépendamment du mérite de la ressemblance, ce portrait a tout celui de l'Art." (As may be expected, Boze also devised his own method of fixing pastels.) Boze evidently hoped to make money out of these inventions, but although they met technical requirements they seem not to have been put into production. However they led to his meeting the comte de Tessé, premier écuyer de la reine, who may well

have been responsible for Boze's introduction to the court (it seems unlikely that, as Volcy-Boze says, he was presented to the king by the abbé de Vermont).

Boze's career was thenceforth linked to the royal family. He wrote to a friend on 29.V.1785 (cited Hugues 2003): "J'ai eu l'avantage de peindre le Roi et je l'ai fait d'une ressemblance frappante ce qui m'a procuré les portraits de la famille royale, et m'a donné une réputation distinguée. De cette affaire là, ma famille est venue me joindre à Versailles où nous passerons un an... le Roi m'a logé aux appartements de Mgr. le Prince de Conti... au château de Versailles." However in the transcript of an enquiry about Houdon's bust of Madame Adélaïde raised by d'Angiviller in 1785, there is a note from Cuvillier, premier commis des Bâtiments du roi: "On s'émerveille, comme on le fait sur ce pastel de peintre provençal qui s'évertue actuellement sur le Roy, la Reine et les enfants d'Artois et qui paroît aussi fort en ressemblance qu'il est foible et peut-être mauvais quant à l'Art." Nevertheless, Boze's account book for 1786–88 (cited below as *Livre de comptes*) shows the amount of his work which was devoted to repetitions of royal portraits in this period, both in pastel and in miniature and probably oil (for example, he supplied the head of the comte de Provence for a portrait en pied). He charged up to 1200 livres for an original pastel portrait and 360 livres for a pastel repetition. His success (or at least his expectations, as his accounts show that he borrowed 2000 livres from the banker M. Feyt Cadet in Paris in 1783) was displayed in the stylish apartment he rented in the place des Victoires for 2000 livres per annum.

He may have been a member of the now suppressed Académie de Saint-Luc, but never joined the Académie royale. He exhibited for the first time in the open Salon of 1791, to negative reviews: one critic advised Robespierre, one of his subjects, to stick to women painters for his portrait (Labille-Guyard's portrait was in the same Salon), while another said Boze's work was "sec, froid, grisaille et incorrect", and Robespierre was "tout jaune et tout pâle". The "amateur vraiment impartial" however came to his defence, noting that Boze and Labille-Guyard had invited comparison by showing so many portraits of the same politicians, and praised "le talent si estimable et si distingué de M. Boze. Celui-cy, dans tous ses portraits, et notamment dans ceux de Mirabeau, de MM. Fayet, Robespierre et le sien, montre réunis à un si haut degré le mérite d'une incomparable vérité de ressemblance dont est si loin l'à peu près de tel autre et celui d'un ton de couleur qui, varié comme celui de ses modèles, est ainsi constamment fidèle à la nature; M. Boze, dis-je, à chaque indication de ses ouvrages que donne la critique ne recueille qu'une épithète injurieuse." Boze was not to exhibit again at the Salon until 1817.

Boze's role during the Revolution has been the subject of some controversy, not least because his daughter's royalist inclinations made her try to get Volcy-Boze to ignore this episode in Boze's life. In fact Boze welcomed the initial

stages, joining the Jacobins and portraying numerous movers of whom Mirabeau, Robespierre and La Fayette were the most famous. With the help of Thierry, valet de chambre du roi, Boze acted as an intermediary between the king and the Girondins in 1792, but was arrested in 1793 and tried as a counter-revolutionary. He was acquitted after the intervention of his wife. In 1794 Boze published a print after his earlier portrait of Marat, no doubt in an attempt to reestablish his revolutionary credentials. After his release he did not leave France, as is widely reported. Very little is known of his activities between 1803 and 1813. He was given a pension by the restored Louis XVIII in 1817. He died on 17.I.1826 (17, rue du Regard, Paris).

Fabre provides an analysis of Boze's working methods. He probably made his initial images in pastel, working up a highly finished version, from which other images were derived. This was partly because (as with other royal artists) pastel was quicker and placed fewer demands on busy sitters, but also because this was the medium in which he felt more comfortable. It is still not clear to what extent Boze obtained proper sittings from his royal subjects; it is most likely that he relied on images of Louis XVI from artists such as Callet, amending these based on personal observation in public appearances of the king. The repetitions, in pastel, oil or miniature, were made to widely varying standards of finish, dependent on the recipient and no doubt the price. Oil was clearly still considered the more important medium: the banker Delessert commissioned his oval portrait in oil, while his wife was done in pastel. Although many of Boze's miniatures are outstanding, his command of oil was at best uncertain; and in larger commissions he did not hesitate to engage help, in the form of Robert Lefèvre. While initially this partnership was kept secret, the later controversy with Lefèvre over the authorship of works such as the full-length portrait of Mirabeau must have damaged Boze's reputation as a painter, and underlines his technical weaknesses.

His style is characterised by a cold tonality (exemplified by the grey-blue silk coat in his virtuoso autoportrait, and shared with Bernard) combined with a precise draughtsmanship; an apparent dryness left him open to criticism. Backgrounds are usually plain with a gradation of light focused on the sitter. His treatment of fabric was often brilliant: silk dresses and coats are recreated with bold use of broad white highlights which only make sense from a distance. Similarly his treatment of wigs looks blurred from too close, but sharp when viewed as intended. Possibly drawn from his early contact with Bernard, his compositions usually involve the bust thrown back and seen from below. He was at his best with the simple oval bust, but his sense of colour was a permanent limitation on his achievement.

**Monographic exhibitions**

Boze 2004: *Joseph Boze (1745–1826), portraitiste de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration*, Martigues,

musée Ziem, 18.XI.2004 – 15.II.2005. Cat. Gérard Fabre

**Bibliography**

Alauzen 1962; Bellier de La Chavignerie & Auvray; Blame 2006; Bouchot 1907; Boyer 1969; *Le Grand Livre de comptes de Boze, 1783–1788*, Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie, Paris, MS 72; Busse 1977; Foskett 1987; Foulon de Vaulx 1901; Heim, Béraud & Heim 1989; Harbin-Devedjian 1981; Hugues 2003; Lemoine-Bouchard 2008; Simon Lee, in Grove 1996; Paris 1974b; Ratouis de Limay 1946; Ratouis de Limay 1929c; Rosenberg & Stewart; Salmon 1997a; Sanchez 2004; Saur; Thiérier & Becker; Volcy-Boze 1873; "Notice sur le peintre de portraits Joseph Boze (1749–1831)", *Nouvelles archives de l'art français*, 1872, pp. 407–408

**Salon critiques**

PAHIN DE LA BLANCHERIE, Salon de la Correspondance 1782, *Nouvelles de la république des lettres et des arts*  
L'Artiste veut bien faire présent de ce Portrait [de M. Vaucanson], le seul qui ait été fait de ce Savant célèbre pour enrichir la précieuse collection que l'on prépare au chef-lieu de la Correspondance. M. Bose, très habile mécanicien lui-même, étoit plus qu'aucun Artiste dans le cas de mettre un prix aux séances dont l'avoit gratifié M. de Vaucanson. Indépendamment du mérite de la ressemblance, ce portrait a tout celui de l'Art.

Anon., *Salon de peintures de 1791*

[Boze] M. Bose s'étoit fait, dit-on, une réputation par un portrait du Roi fort ressemblant. C'est un mérite commun que celui d'une ressemblance. Mais le talent d'un grand peintre n'entra pas dans la tête de M. Bose. Il est sec, froid, grisaille et incorrect. Son n° 215 de M. Robespierre est tout jaune et tout pâle. Celui de Mme Guyard, n° 34, est tout rouge. Est-ce la conversation qui a fait changer le modèle de visage? ou est-ce le foible talent des deux peintres?

Anon., Un Amateur vraiment impartial, "Réclamation Aux auteurs du journal", *Journal de Paris*, 1791, suppl. n° 19, p. 2

Deux artistes, M. Boze et Mme Guyard, appellent assez naturellement le parallèle entre eux, comme s'étant appliqués à reproduire la ressemblance de plusieurs députés, parmi lesquels l'un d'eux, M. Robespierre, a été peint par l'un et par l'autre. On pouvait louer Mme Guyard, on le devoit également, sans se croire obligé de lui sacrifier avec tant d'injustice le talent si estimable et si distingué de M. Boze. Celui-cy, dans tous ses portraits, et notamment dans ceux de Mirabeau, de MM. Fayet, Robespierre et le sien, montre réunis à un si haut degré le mérite d'une incomparable vérité de ressemblance dont est si loin l'à peu près de tel autre et celui d'un ton de couleur qui, varié comme celui de ses modèles, est ainsi constamment fidèle à la nature; M. Boze, dis-je, à chaque indication de ses ouvrages que donne la critique ne recueille qu'une épithète injurieuse.