

July OOM 2011

Comtesse d'Egmont Pignatelli in Spanish Costume , by Alexander Roslin 1763  
2006.33

### **Alexander Roslin**

- Born in Malmo in 1718, studied in Stockholm, Italy 1747 (Florence,Rome, Naples and Parma until 1752).

- consummate French Court painter, trained in the European academies, but Swedish.
- Lived in France from 1752 to his death in 1793 An aristocrat to the core, he died quietly in his apartments in the Louvre palace six months after Louis XVI was beheaded in a nearby plaza.
- Prolific painter yet very meticulous – large output of portraits of nobility from all countries.
- Style : Polished naturalism, innate elegance, penchant for neoclassical gravity. Strong rendering of costumes (Italian influence there) similarity with work of scottish painter Allen Ramsay
- Friend of Francois Boucher whom he met in Rome – he painted his portrait. And is reputed to have painted drapery in some of Boucher's paintings.

### **What was happening in 1763**

**Feb 10** The French and Indian War ends with signing of the Treaty of Paris. As part of the treaty, Canada is ceded to England by the French on this day in history

**Nov 15** Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon begin surveying Mason-Dixon Line between Pennsylvania and Maryland on this day in history

The scene is being set for the Revolution in 1789 :The later years of [Louis XV's](#) reign saw some economic setbacks. While the [Seven Years' War](#), 1756–1763, led to an increase in the royal debt and the loss of nearly all of France's North American possessions, it was not until 1775 that the French economy began truly to enter a state of crisis. An extended reduction in agricultural prices over the previous twelve years, with dramatic crashes in 1777 and 1786, and further complicated by climatic events such as the disastrous winters of 1785-1789 contributed to the problem.

At the same time development of the philosophy of enlightenment challenging the status quo.

### **The subject**

Sophie Jeanne Septimanie du Plessis , Duchesse of Richelieu. 1740 – 1773  
daughter of the duc de Richelieu – close confident and minister of Louis XV  
Mother died within a year of her birth – traditional education in convent  
(Benedictine) – conversant in the Arts, literature and history – familiar with  
Voltaire

*Spanish costume* = slashed beribboned sleeves, pearls (to excess) raised lace a  
la Medici collar – very fashionable and exotic at the time. Guitar reinforces the  
Spanish sentiment. Husband was a noble of Spain, Married at age of 15 in  
brokered marriage ie a union of convenience. Husband left for War within weeks  
of the wedding. Comtesse could not have children.

*The Comtesse was highly acclaimed as a member of the Parisian high society.*  
Also acclaimed for her beauty and charm. “her spirit resembled her figure , it  
was mannered yet full of grace.”

Familiar at the Salon of Mme Geoffrin , a renowned salonniere who received  
politicians, diplomats and foreign celebrities as well as an elite society of artists  
and intellectuals known collectively as the *philosophes*. Imagine these meetings  
taking place for instance in our Grand Salon.....

The Comtesse was a figure of the Enlightenment as very familiar with Jean  
Jacques Rousseau – the leader of the movement. Rousseau even composed  
some 28 airs for her to play on her guitar.

She was a close of friend of King Gustav III of Sweden before he became King.  
She remained in correspondence with him leaving 29 letters in archives.

She died childless of Tuberculosis at the age of 33.

### **The painting :**

It was commissioned by the sitter’s husband.

The museum bought the picture two years ago for \$3.5 million and then promptly  
lent it to a major Roslin retrospective presented in Stockholm and Versailles,  
France.

The countess was the star of that exhibit, said Patrick Noon, the Minneapolis  
curator who organized the present show. In return, those museums and others  
in London and Edinburgh lent paintings to Minneapolis in honor of the picture's  
return to its new home.

"It's rare that you find a sitter with a story like this," said Noon. Besides the quality

of the painting and the significance of the sitter, the 1763 portrait fills a gap in the museum's collection and it came with an impeccable provenance, or history of ownership. It had remained in the countess' family until the Minneapolis museum bought it through a New York dealer.

### **The iconography**

Spanish references as described above – also spandrel above the picture mythological love scene between Jason and Medea – another Spanish allusion. Order of the Golden Fleece both branches of the Counts family were knights of that order. Trim on cushion is also Spanish lace.

Battle scene on wall to her left is allusion to her husband's military exploits as a marshal of France.

Table is neo classical greek – possibly belonged to artist as appears in many of his paintings. Could show furniture in our collection.

Landscape in painting is rare in Roslin's work and could be reference to a favourite place of the Comtesse = Chateau de Braisne in Picardy – a favourite country retreat where Rousseau read his Confessions to the Comtesse.

Interesting factoids :

Painting relies completely on frontal lighting and was criticized for this. Accused of being cold, lifeless in Diderot's critical writings. Could be interesting to compare and contrast with Lucretia (Rembrandt ) where chiaroscuro is greatly used.

### **The Jewels**

The famous "Pignatelli pearls" were a wedding gift from her husband, Casimir Pignatelli, Comte d'Egmont, an immensely wealthy aristocrat, army general and courtier. When he married Septimanie in 1755, he was 29 and a widower with a 5-year-old daughter. He outlived her by 28 years. The pearls were valued at 1.2 million pounds in 1755.

### **The pose.**

It mimics that of her friend Madame de Pompadour -- the king's mistress -- in two

famous portraits by François Boucher, including this one on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Comtesse is laid back and relaxed but surrounded by attributes of her learning, accomplishment and wealth (book, guitar, wealth, fabric)

### **The setting**

It reflects the height of the neoclassical style, which was then replacing Rococo exuberance. The landscape signals her allegiance to the philosophy of her friend Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who championed the "natural" goodness inherent in people uncorrupted by society. It may also allude to her luxuriously rustic retreat in Picardy, the Château de Braisne.

### **The pooch**

Dogs are a traditional symbol of loyalty. Her spaniel's failure to get Septimanie's attention suggests her refinement and sensitivity to literature.

### **The frame**

Hand-carved and gilded, the frame was custom-designed for the portrait and is festooned with symbols of a happy marriage -- floral garlands, Cupid's bow and arrows, the torch and laurel wreath of Hymen. Very high quality frame – unusual to have original frame.

### ***Possible questions “***

What is the sitter wanting us to know about herself ?

What do we know of her social standing?

What do you wear to have your picture taken?

How do you record what you look like?

### **Potential tour uses**

Women of substance

You are what you wear ( <http://artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/fivefacts.cfm?v=144>)

Compare with Elizabeth Vigee LeBrun 's Comtesse Bucquoi – how things have changed in 30 years... pre and post revolution  
Oh Lala France

### **Bibliography**

<http://www.startribune.com/entertainment/stageandarts/30182829.html?page=all&prepage=1&c=y>

Minneapolis institute of Arts brochure from exhibition Alexander Roslin and the Comtesse d'Egmont Pignatelli