



LOST PORTRAITS

By Kenneth N Kurtz

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LOST PORTRAITS

A play in three scenes
About the loveliest of French portrait painters

By Kenneth N. Kurtz

Lost Portraits (81 pages) is a trio of scenes about Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun, the loveliest and most successful portrait painter of late 18th Century France.

Portrait of a Patriot (27 pages.) Playwright Beaumarchais (40) and painter Elisabeth (21) have very different suggestions for newly arrived diplomat, Ben Franklin (72), on how to seduce France to meet a new America's needs.

Portrait of a Pronoun (17 pages.) The Chevalier D' Eon (43), the century's most famous sexual ambiguity, desires a portrait. Will Elisabeth (22) paint the Dame or the Dragoon?

Portrait of a Peasant (37 pages.) concerns a portrait commissioned by Marie Antoinette (28). She wishes to be shown as a shepherdess. Elisabeth (now also 28) will paint it, but only if the queen abandons her elegant theatre costume in favor of the genuine and repellent peasant rags that the artist provides, and thereby experiences some of the miseries of her lowest subjects.

Three scenes with one intermission, 1:45.

Bare stage with period furniture groupings around a three-fold changing screen.

4 men (or two men double cast), 2 women. Eighteenth century period costumes.

Scene One

Portrait of a Patriot

The Cast

Philippe-August Caron de Beaumarchais (43)
(A playwright, among other things)

Benjamin Franklin (72)
(A printer, among other things)

Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun (21)
(A portraitist, who is well on her way to other things)

And the voices of two boys,
Temple (16) and Benny(7),
who are Franklin's grandsons.

The Scene: 1776, a Versailles interior, but not of the palace. In fact, this is the very best chamber of a traveler's inn, yet only a grouping of furniture provides us with a sense of place. Center-right is an old Louis XV *bergère*, quite worn and rumped, no gilding, just sinuous curves of carved wood and the padded warmth of tattered rust-colored silk moiré. It is above all a most comfortable armchair (with footstool), the kind that a portly older man could sink into with relief.

Just left stands a small table and a side-chair in the current style of Louis XVI. The chair is stiff in a delicately gilded way, with a tiny oval back and circular seat, something that only a much younger person, lithe and brimming with energy, might manage to perch upon.

Up stage is a three-panel dressing screen, oh-so rococo in its carving, and painted with faded pastoral scenes ala Boucher. A rustic walking stick leans against it. A threadbare Aubusson carpet warms the floor like fallen autumn leaves.

The grouping is framed by the mullioned light coming through imaginary downstage windows overlooking the street below, and as it is the middle of December, that light is blue with cold.

During the opening blackout we hear the voices of two boys. They are Benjamin Franklin's grandsons, Benny and Temple:

T-The enemy's here. Ready, Benny?

B-All ready, Temple.

T-Aha. Attack!

B-Fire Cannon number one!

T-And number two! We've hit him, and he's ours!

B-No, he's regained his carriage, sir.

T-Quick, two more cannon balls, for he'll try to escape.

B-Here he comes!

T-Ready? Fire away!

B-No, halt. We must be honorable and observe his white handkerchief.

T-Monsieur, you may pass.

The lights have come up during this, and our attention is drawn to the three-fold screen. First we hear a *basso profundo* laugh from behind the up center screen. Soon the person beyond begins to whistle (but does not sing) the famous French song:

Alouette, gentille Alouette

Alouette je te plumerai

(a plain brown coat flips
over the screen)

Je te plumerai la tete

Je te plumerai la tete

Et la tete, et la tete

(A hat, made of fur, is hung
on the corner.)

O-o-o-o-oh

Alouette, gentille Alouette

Alouette je te plumerai.

(A plain gray waistcoat flips over.)

And then Pierre-August Caron de Beaumarchais makes his entrance from down right. He is sporting the most elegantly fashionable Parisian costumes and wigs, albeit disheveled by being the obvious target of several snow balls. Beaumarchais carries a large bundle which he drops upon the footstool. One hand displays the white handkerchief of snowball surrender.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Your grandsons, Monsieur Franklin, though utterly charming, would seem to have vast reservoirs of energy in the manufacture and hurling of snowballs.

FRANKLIN

(Still behind the screen) As do all of my compatriots, Monsieur Beaumarchais.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Perhaps you might consider enrolling the boys in our Ecole Militaire, since they are so good at hitting their mark. Ah, but here we are Monsieur, two proud polymaths united in the service of patriotism.

FRANKLIN

And I emerge from this screen, to use a word from your country's Song Of The Lark, as a thoroughly "plucked" polymath. A Portly one as well. In fact, a roly-poly polymath.

BEAUMARCHAIS

With wit into the bargain.

FRANKLIN

So now you must show me your suggestions for my new plumage.

BEAUMARCHAIS

The contents of this bundle were gathered yesterday from the very best establishments of the capital. When I was apprised that you had disembarked on the Breton Coast, I raced back to Paris and met with your Monsieur Silas Deane to obtain your necessary measurements, for we knew you would be able to gain admittance to the splendid halls of Versailles only by wearing the mandatory costume of the court. This, Monsieur, is a court coat, worthy of your status as America's prime plenipotentiary.

FRANKLIN

More like prime popinjay. I have never seen so many laurel wreaths, and all embroidered in -- gold?

BEAUMARCHAIS

But of course, Monsieur. Perhaps we should get such a wreath to gird your brow.

FRANKLIN

Girding my waist may prove wasteful enough.

BEAUMARCHAIS

No problem there, for the coat is always worn open. And here is the waistcoat. Observe the floral embroidery.

FRANKLIN

I think florid to be the better word. This item, I assure you Monsieur, will never make its way around the broad equator of my torso.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Not to worry, I shall simply rip out the back seam. Waistcoats are like scenery for the stage. It is only that which is painted upon the front that really matters. You must trust me, Dr. Franklin, for I have spent much of my career making actors look good. I know the tricks of the theatre as well as you know the secrets of the printing press.

FRANKLIN

I find myself to be poor parchment on which to print grand illusions.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Then perhaps we must use even more care in choosing the proper type-face. And speaking of faces, yours will be set off by this jabot. The very best silk from Lyon.

FRANKLIN

Were that bouquet to hang 'round my neck, I should think my head to be served up rather than set off.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Oh no, no, no. 'Tis now the very height of fashion. Believe me, Dr. Franklin, only through my good advice will you be able to gain entry to that greatest of palaces at the other end of this avenue.

FRANKLIN

With all of this lace bobbing about, I am like to trip and fall down the grand staircase. Hardly an auspicious entrée.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Nonetheless, the only way to gain it. Now, for your feet, these black pumps with small silver buckles.

FRANKLIN

No.

BEAUMARCHAIS

No?

FRANKLIN

Absolutely not. Gout denies it utterly. Such tiny shoes will cause pain beyond all endurance. Indeed even now I would rather retreat to the comfort of a chair.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Then we shall have to solve that problem later. I know the very best cobblers in Paris. No matter. Today we need only to make your upper regions presentable.

FRANKLIN

But not my nethers. How so?

BEAUMARCHAIS

Why for your portrait, of course. At any moment now Monsieur Cochin's coach will arrive from Paris, so that he may sketch your likeness. Cochin is our foremost engraver, and within the week I will make certain that your courtly visage vibrates upon every citizens' wall. All France is madly desirous to obtain your image.

FRANKLIN

The portrait of a powder-puffed patriot. Is there more?

BEAUMARCHAIS

We can dispense with hose and culottes, but two things remain. The first, in this red leather box, I will withhold as a final surprise. The other is your court sword.

FRANKLIN

This is a sword? It is more like a lady's hat pin. And all of these jewels, Monsieur. Diamonds and emeralds? Such an unwarranted expense. I assure you that I and my principals have been granted no funds to cover these excesses.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Worry not. That sword came from the storeroom of the Comédie-Française. Those jewels are but paste, Monsieur. And the sword is the result of...how shall I put it? Ah yes...an unofficial loan.

FRANKLIN

How very -- convenient.

BEAUMARCHAIS

As for the others, you must realize that funds have been made available, very large loans in fact, by which my company has been able to acquire those exports so desired by...your principals...loans from the Royal Excheq...

FRANKLIN

(Raises his hand in caution)...from the royalties of your plays.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Yes, of course, and in France one learns to skim...

FRANKLIN

...cream?

BEAUMARCHAIS

How well you put it, Monsieur. Well then, an excess of cream provides this apparel gratis. And there is much more. I must soon rush back to Le Havre, for two of my ships are being loaded as we speak. You will be happy to know that another has already sailed. And it's cargo...oh, such needed wonders. Twenty casks of the finest gun powder...

FRANKLIN

...Ladies' face powder.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Ten thousand musket balls...

FRANKLIN

...Ball gowns?

BEAUMARCHAIS

And fifty-two cannon...

FRANKLIN

...Capons? Surely, they will be appreciated by the cooks of Philadelphia.

BEAUMARCHAIS

I most humbly beg your pardon, Monsieur, for no one warned me that you might be hard of hearing.

FRANKLIN

I assure you that I am not. It is only that there are certain things that I do not wish to hear...

BEAUMARCHAIS

Yet you must understand...

FRANKLIN

Or anyone else to hear.

BEAUMARCHAIS

But I will need you to guarantee that my ships will return to France loaded with cotton and tobacco and other American things...that I can sell off in order to repay those...

FRANKLIN

Monsieur, you may speak of this only if we walk outside. But the weather being so very dismal, let us change the subject to décor.

BEAUMARCHAIS

I beg your...

FRANKLIN

That screen behind us is covered with a hundred little curlicues of gold carving.

BEAUMARCHAIS

But of course. It's done in the style favored by the late king.

FRANKLIN

And so is the paneling that covers these walls.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Intricate caprices of curve and counter curve. The Italians have named the style “rococo”.

FRANKLIN

An apt appellation. Tell me, Monsieur, do all of those squiggly shapes remind you of anything in nature?

BEAUMARCHAIS

Hmmm...let me think...Oh, now I know...sea shells! Now science meets art. It is such a joy to converse with a fellow man of the world.

FRANKLIN

I was thinking more of human anatomy.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Well...there is that...certain part of a lady’s lower... Dr. Franklin, this style has on occasion been called licentious, but...Oh, Monsieur, I do believe that you have made me blush.

FRANKLIN

I meant something altogether higher in our nature. Look at me. Do you not see something of this “rococo” somewhere about my face?

BEAUMARCHAIS

Certainly age does have a way...but I assure you, Dr. Franklin, that your wrinkles are hardly to be characterized as rococo.

FRANKLIN

I should hope not. What I meant was the tiny curves and counter curves of the human ear.

BEAUMARCHAIS

Aha! Yes, of course. And now that you mention it I can see ears everywhere. What an artistic insight, Monsieur, and to think that someone from the new world should have so much to teach the old one.

FRANKLIN

My lesson, Beaumarchais, had naught to do with art.

BEAUMARCHAIS

But...

FRANKLIN

When our ship landed us in Brittany, we spent a week recuperating as the guests of a banker in Nantes. His rooms were done in such a style. Yet as I chanced to observe the paneling more closely, I found that little holes had been drilled in various crevasses. In France, Monsieur, the walls are carved with ears, because the very walls are ears. I have no doubt that the ministers of both Kings Louis as well as George have by now read reports of every word that was spoken in those rooms.

BEAUMARCHAIS

And you think that here...

FRANKLIN

Monsieur, I know that here...(Beaumarchais covers his mouth, most theatrically, of course.) How, in fact, did you learn that I had chosen this particular inn for a one-night stay on my journey to Paris?

BEAUMARCHAIS

Well...I must...er...confess that an agent of the King's minister, whispered a little something in my ear.

FRANKLIN

Which is why, in France, certain conversations must be held outside, in plain air so to speak, where at least the trees are slightly less likely to have ears.

BEAUMARCHAIS

I take your meaning, Monsieur, and most happily change the subject back to that of apparel. First the waistcoat.

And rip, rip, rip we must. There. Now all is well. Button, button, button! Next the jabot.

FRANKLIN

Strangled by a lace garrote.

BEAUMARCHAIS

No, Monsieur, for there are such things as pins.

FRANKLIN

That must not prick!

BEAUMARCHAIS

Your pardon. There. You are quite, quite dashing. Now for the coat. Oh dear. Hmm, this coat cannot, or rather, must not be ripped. Too bad we don't have a sash and medallions to -- fill the space? None-the-less Monsieur Cochin will be able to adjust all, I'm sure of that. And next the sword. This belt goes 'round you thus. Well, it won't quite...yet, another pin to two will...somehow...perhaps...if we just...Bend down and come up under your coat...