



**FERDINANDO PAUL LOUIS QUAGLIA**  
(Piacenza 1780 – Paris 1853)

*Portrait of Ignazio Degotti (d. 1824)*

Watercolour on ivory

H: 21.7cm

Signed and dated top right: *Quaglia f. 1812*

# TRINITY FINE ART

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## PROVENANCE

Helft Bensimon Collection, Paris

With Leo R. Schidlof, from whom acquired by Ernst Holzscheiter in Paris, 5 May 1936 (inv. nos. MD/0682 and 465)

Treasured Portraits from the Collection of Ernst Holzscheiter, Christie's London, 4 July 2018, lot 23

The Twinight Collection

500 Years of European Ceramics including the Twinight Collection, Bonhams London, 4 July 2024, lot 59.

## EXHIBITED

Paris, Salon, 1812, no 750 (as a portrait of M. Degotti)

Arenenberg, Napoleonmuseum, *Miniaturen und Karikaturen*, 1954, no. 33 (as a portrait of Talma)

Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire, *Chefs d'oeuvre de la miniature et de la gouache*, 1956, no. 367, illustrated (as a presumed portrait of François-Joseph Talma)

Zurich, Haus am Zurich, 1957-58 and 1961

Vienna, Albertina, *Meisterwerke der Europäischen Miniaturmalerei von 1750-1850*, 1965, no. 311 illustrated fig. 19 (as Talma)

London, Royal Academy and Victoria & Albert Museum, *The Age of Neoclassicism*, 1972, no. 976 (as a portrait of Talma).

## LITERATURE

Gabet, Charles. 1831. *Dictionnaire des artistes de l'école française au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Mme Vergne), p. 575.

Jeannerat, Carlo. 1922. 'Il Pittore Ferdinando Quaglia', *Dedalo*, vol. II, iss. 8, pp. 536-49.

Isler-Hungerbühler, Ursula. 1961. 'Dir Miniaturen-Sammlung Holzscheiter', *Artis*, February 1961, pp. 32-3, fig. 4.

Schidlof, Leo. 1964. IV vols. *The Miniature in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt), vol. II, p. 657, 1026, vol. IV, pl. 468, fig. 962.

Cavalli-Björkman, Görel. 1981. *Svenskt miniatyrmåleri: en konstbok från Nationalmuseum* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren), p.141.

Parisio, Chiara. 2012. *Ferdinando Quaglia (1780-1853) da Piacenza a Parigi* (Brescia: Starrylink), pp. 35-6.

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Born and trained in Italy, Ferdinando Quaglia settled in Paris in 1805 at the age of 25 and soon found patronage in the cultured circle of Josephine, wife of the recently self-crowned Emperor Napoleon.<sup>i</sup> A celebrated miniaturist, he exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1808, 1812 (an occasion upon which the present portrait of Degotti was shown), 1814, 1817 and 1822. It is reported that in 1814, Quaglia was awarded a *Médaille d'or*. He was an elected member of the Academies of Paris and of Florence and, according to Charles Gabet's *Dictionnaire des artistes de l'école française au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, he was working on an in-depth treatise about miniatures at the time of the dictionary's publication (1831).<sup>ii</sup>

If these artistic accolades were not enough to demonstrate his reputation during his lifetime, one need only consider the rank and prestige of his subjects to understand the standing Quaglia enjoyed. He painted the Empress Josephine several times and is believed to be the last artist to do so before her death in 1814. The portrait held at Malmaison, where the Empress lived at the end of her life, claims to be the 'Dernier Portrait / de l'Impératrice Joséphine / par Quaglia / Fait à la Malmaison avant sa mort.'



Figs. 1 & 2 – Ferdinando Quaglia, *Portrait de l'impératrice Joséphine*, 1814, watercolour on ivory, Musée national des châteaux de Malmaison et de Bois-Préau, Reuil-Malmaison (inv. no. M.M.2005.6.1).



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The Wallace Collection, London, has a similar, but somewhat finer, depiction of the Empress. She is shown in the same sumptuous garments, decked in the same glorious jewels, but it is in this version that Quaglia's talent as a miniaturist is best displayed. The luminosity of Josephine's skin and the brilliance of her accoutrements, the delicate pose of her right hand on her velvet cloak and her gentle yet powerful upward gaze demonstrate exactly why she brought him into her household retinue. Among the other notable figures who were immortalised by Quaglia are the Duc and Duchesse de Berry, the Queen of Sweden and Norway, the Grand-Duke of Würzburg and Marshall Junot. Gabet highlights a portrait of Napoleon, perhaps the one now at the Cleveland Museum of Art, amongst the eight works of Quaglia's that he deemed most significant, a small selection of his much larger oeuvre, which also includes the portrait of Degotti.<sup>iii</sup>



Fig. 3 – Ferdinando Quaglia, *The Empress Joséphine*, 1814, watercolour on ivory, 11.2 x 8.8 cm, Wallace Collection, London (inv. no. M288).



Fig. 4 – Ferdinando Quaglia, *Portrait of Napoleon I, Emperor of the French*, 1805, watercolour on ivory, 5.4 x 3.2 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH (inv. no. 1953.426).

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Eusebio Ignazio Maria Degotti, much like Quaglia, was born in Italy but is best known for the work he did in Paris. Born in Turin in 1758, he arrived in the French capital in 1790 in the midst of the Revolution and took up residence in the city until his death there thirty-four years later. Degotti was invited by Giovanni Battista Viotti, his former Turinese neighbour and famed violinist, to work with him at the Théâtre Feydeau, staging the plays of Luigi Cherubini. Degotti thereby joined a considerable community of Italian-born and -trained artists working in Paris during the upheaval of the ousting of the Ancien Régime and the establishment of the First Republic, the Consulate and Napoleon's Empire. Degotti even saw the reinstatement of the monarchy and managed to stay employed throughout these major shifts of power.<sup>iv</sup> From 1795 until 1822 (with a notable gap between 1810 and 1815), he held the position of *peintre-en-chef* at the Théâtre de l'Opéra, a role which saw him design major productions for the glorification of Napoleon.<sup>v</sup> His association with the Emperor's image is further illustrated by his role in the painting of *Le Sacre de Napoléon*. It is possible that Degotti met Jacques-Louis David in Rome in 1784 when they both worked there in close proximity, albeit on different projects. Their relationship, however, is clearly documented by correspondence between 1805 and 1809.<sup>vi</sup> They worked together several times, but the *Sacre* is the most significant product of their collaboration.<sup>vii</sup> As an expert in architectural perspective, Degotti was asked by David to design and draw the background features of the *Sacre*, and as testament to his invaluable assistance, David portrayed him next to his own self-portrait as a member of the party on the balcony above *Madame Mère*, Napoleon's mother Letizia.

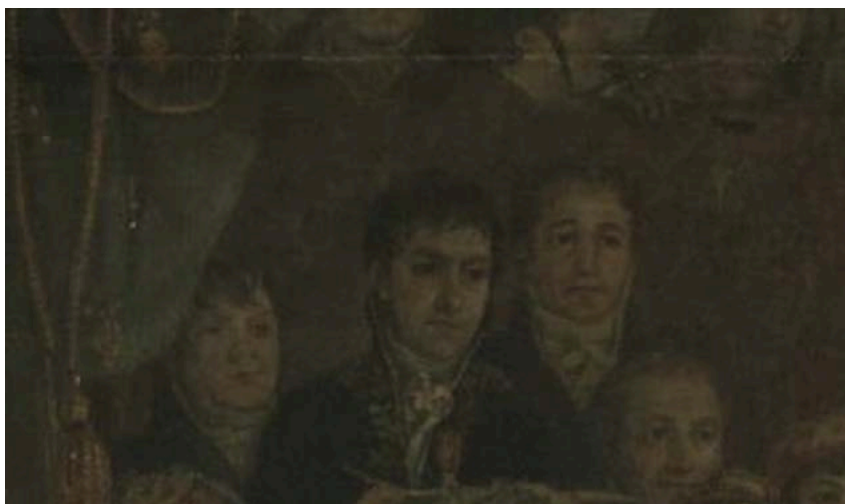


Fig. 5 – Jacques-Louis David, *Le Sacre de Napoléon I<sup>er</sup> et couronnement de l'impératrice Joséphine dans la cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, le 2 décembre 1804*, 1806/7, oil on canvas, 6.21 x 9.79 m, Musée du Louvre, Paris (inv. no. 3699), detail.



Fig. 6 – Jacques-Louis David, *Portrait d'Ignace-Eugène-Marie Degotti*, c.1810, black chalk on brown paper, 17.7 x 12.9 cm, sold at Christie's Paris, 'Dessins Anciens et du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle', 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008, Lot 131.

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Quaglia's miniature portrait of Degotti is notable within his oeuvre. As previously written, Gabet chose it as one of the artist's works most worthy of particular mention. In his comprehensive *The Miniature in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Schidlof argues that in his finest works, Quaglia surpassed the quality of his most prominent contemporaries and that his miniatures "are amazing in expression and life, his drawing is faultless, as well as his sense of colour."<sup>viii</sup> He then highlights two masterpieces – a portrait of the singer Josephine Grassini as Norma, and "the portr. presumably of Talma, sitting, wrapped in a cloak with a fur collar in a gilt Empire chair".<sup>ix</sup> This certainly seems like a description of the present work, but the sitter is identified differently. Fortunately, dispelling any uncertainty, the portrait is illustrated in the fourth volume of the work, and does indeed correspond to this so-called portrait of Degotti. In fact, this work is often referred to as a portrait of Talma, an actor and confidant of Napoleon. Illustrated by Cavalli-Björkman to show the inspiration for the Swedish miniaturist Jakob Axel Gillberg's self-portrait, it is described as being of Talma.<sup>x</sup> Of the six times the piece has been exhibited, four times it was claimed to be a depiction of Talma, including at the most recent exhibition in London in 1972.<sup>xi</sup> This historic uncertainty does not affect the undeniable quality of Quaglia's work – regardless of whether the sitter is Degotti or Talma, the painting has repeatedly been singled out for its virtuosity and its illustrious provenance remains unchanged.

The painting is instantly remarkable for its colour and clarity. Quaglia uses an almost pointillistic technique to represent the skin of the sitter, using a subtle green tone to render it incredibly life-like. The light reflected off his high forehead and the flushes of pink on his cheeks, chin and knuckles give a vivid impression of the soft texture of his flesh. The realism of the different materials depicted – the fur coat collar and cuffs, the velvet hat in his lap, the gilt chair frame – add depth to the portrait. The rich textures create a sense of sumptuousness which is somewhat juxtaposed by the sitter's wild hair, plunging neckline and pensive gaze. He does not look directly at the viewer, but instead into the distance to his left, his lips parted slightly, as if deep in thought, his downward-slanting eyes both sad and serious.

This portrait is an informal one, perhaps more fitting for an actor than for the Opéra's *peintre-en-chef*, making Talma a viable candidate. François Joseph Talma (1763-1826) has been described as "the supreme tragedian of the era," admired by many, notably Napoleon himself and the young

Alexandre Dumas *père*.<sup>xiii</sup> Talma became a *sociétaire* of the Comédie-Française in 1787 and appeared on stage continuously across regime changes until his death in 1826. An advocate for historical costuming, he shocked his contemporaries by appearing on stage bare-legged and -armed, wearing just a toga when starring in classically set plays.<sup>xiii</sup> As a famous actor, Talma was depicted extensively and so it would be perfectly plausible that Quaglia would have painted this portrait of him. There is also a strong resemblance between this portrait and other likenesses of Talma, both physically and in the way of presentation.



Fig. 7 – Rembrandt Peale, *Portrait of François Joseph Talma*, 1810, pencil on paper, 20.2 x 13.9 cm, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD (inv. no. 37.1554).



Fig. 9 - Aimée Perlet, after Edouard Picot, *Portrait de Talma célèbre acteur tragique*, 1823, on porcelain, 18.5 x 14 cm, sold at Sotheby's Paris, PF1201, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012, lot 197.



Fig. 10 - Godefroy Engelmann, *F.J. Talma, sociétaire de Théâtre français*, 1820-9, lithograph, 15 x 12 cm, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Perhaps in the past, it was also believed unlikely to have been a portrait of Degotti considering his financial situation in 1812. Between 1810 and 1815, Degotti was rather out-of-favour, having resigned from the Opéra de Paris over contract disputes. He was notoriously indebted – not through particular extravagance or mismanagement on his part, but the poor financial judgment of his younger brother and onetime artistic collaborator, Ilario, in Turin – and was often obliged to borrow money from his friends, especially Viotti. He was also caring - physically, emotionally and monetarily - for his ill lover and so remained in Paris but seemingly without a fixed source of income.<sup>xiv</sup> As tempting as a renaming of the sitter may therefore be, it is impossible to ignore the primary, contemporary sources. According to the *Livret du Salon de 1812*, Quaglia, residing at *rue du Harlay, n. 2*, exhibited the *Portrait de M. Degotti*.<sup>xv</sup> As the *Livret* is unillustrated, this does not entirely prove that the portrait in question is of Degotti, but it does annul the argument that Quaglia did not paint Degotti in 1812, and as the portrait is clearly signed and dated in the top right-hand corner, it certainly narrows down the possibilities. The most interesting document, however, is a letter dated 28 April 1828 to the



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Duchess Maria Luigia of Parma by Quaglia. In it, the artist writes of ‘il Ritratto originale del fù Degoty celebre Pittore in Decorazione’ [the original portrait of the late Degoty, famed painter of decoration]. He goes on to write that “Questa Miniatura di grande dimensione e trattata nello stile storico gli ha meritati nel 1812 gli onori della medaglia d’oro all’esposizione Pubblica del Louvre coll’applauso unanime de più valenti Artisti Francesi che la giudicarono un Capo d’opera in tal genere” [This miniature of great size and rendered in the historical style earned him in 1812 the honours of the gold medal at the Public Exhibition at the Louvre with the unanimous acclaim of the most esteemed French artists who judged it a masterpiece of its genre].<sup>xvi</sup> Although the exact dimensions are not given, the fact that the portrait of Degotti written about is described as being a miniature of “grande dimensione” is important. The painting is indeed surprisingly large for a miniature, and it was not a habit of Quaglia’s to paint such large portraits. His only other known work similar in size to this portrait is one of the *Three Daughters of Andoche Janot, Duc d’Abrantès* (1809, watercolour on card, 23.1 x 15.8 cm, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore MD (inv. 38.188)), painted on card, making the size of the ivory support for the portrait of Degotti even more noteworthy.<sup>xvii</sup>

According to Chiara Parisio’s catalogue of Quaglia’s work, there is no evidence that Quaglia ever painted Talma and it is unlikely that such an unusual work would be completely undocumented were this the case. Considering the *Livret*, it is curious that these doubts ever arose and that the sitter was sometimes named as Talma from 1954 onwards. The recent unearthing of the letter to the Duchess of Parma and a subsequent one to Professor Paolo Toschi, director of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Parma, during Parisio’s research further suggests that this is indeed a portrait of Degotti and the confusion may have stemmed from the sitter’s resemblance to the more familiar and better-known Talma.

In 1828, Quaglia was in possession of the portrait which was potentially the case from its inception as the artist did on occasion keep his finished works with him in his studio.<sup>xviii</sup> Most recently, it was part of the Twinight Collection, an assemblage of over 7000 pieces of fine porcelain from great manufactures, such as Sèvres, Meissen and Wedgwood, gathered by Richard Baron Cohen.<sup>xix</sup> A selection was lent to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for their 2008-9 exhibition *Royal Porcelain from the Twinight Collection, 1800-1815*. It was also “one of the foremost collections of enamel portraits from the 17th-19th century.”<sup>xx</sup> Cohen had acquired the portrait of Degotti fairly recently in 2018 from the Christie’s sale of *Treasured Portraits from the Collection of Ernst Holzscheiter*. Holzscheiter, a lifelong collector, started purchasing miniatures seriously in 1928, eventually acquiring over 700 pieces which were sold in a series of auctions after his death. The 2018



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Christie's sale was the final one, consisting of the greatest works which had been kept by his family for over 50 years following Holzscheiter's death in 1962. He had been helped by the great auctioneer, collector and expert, author of the aforementioned and seminal book *The Miniature in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Leo R. Schidlof, from whom he acquired the portrait of Degotti in 1936.<sup>xxi</sup> Prior to this, the portrait had been in the Helft Bensimon Collection in Paris.

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<sup>i</sup> Benezit 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Gabet 1831, p. 575.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>iv</sup> See Cazzato 2020, pp. 226-31.

<sup>v</sup> Cazzato 2023, p. 289.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>vii</sup> Natale 1988.

<sup>viii</sup> Schidlof 1964, p. 657.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>x</sup> Cavalli-Björkman 1981, p. 141.

<sup>xi</sup> *The Age of Classicism* p. 48.

<sup>xii</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica.

<sup>xiii</sup> Comédie Française website entry for Talma.

<sup>xiv</sup> Cazzato 2024, p.14.

<sup>xv</sup> Sanchez & Seydoux, 1999-2004, p. 232.

<sup>xvi</sup> Letter published in Parisio 2012, pp. 95-6.

<sup>xvii</sup> Parisio 2012, p. 34.

<sup>xviii</sup> See Gabet 1831, p. 575.

<sup>xix</sup> *The Twinight Collection in Bonhams' Sale*.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Treasured Portraits from the Collection of Ernst Holzscheiter* sale introduction.