

ELLIOTT FINE ART

Nineteenth Century to Early Modern

Aimée Brune-Pagès
(Paris 1803 – 1866)

A young lady playing the lyre, either Sappho or Erato

Signed and dated at left: *A. Pagés 1826.*

Oil on canvas

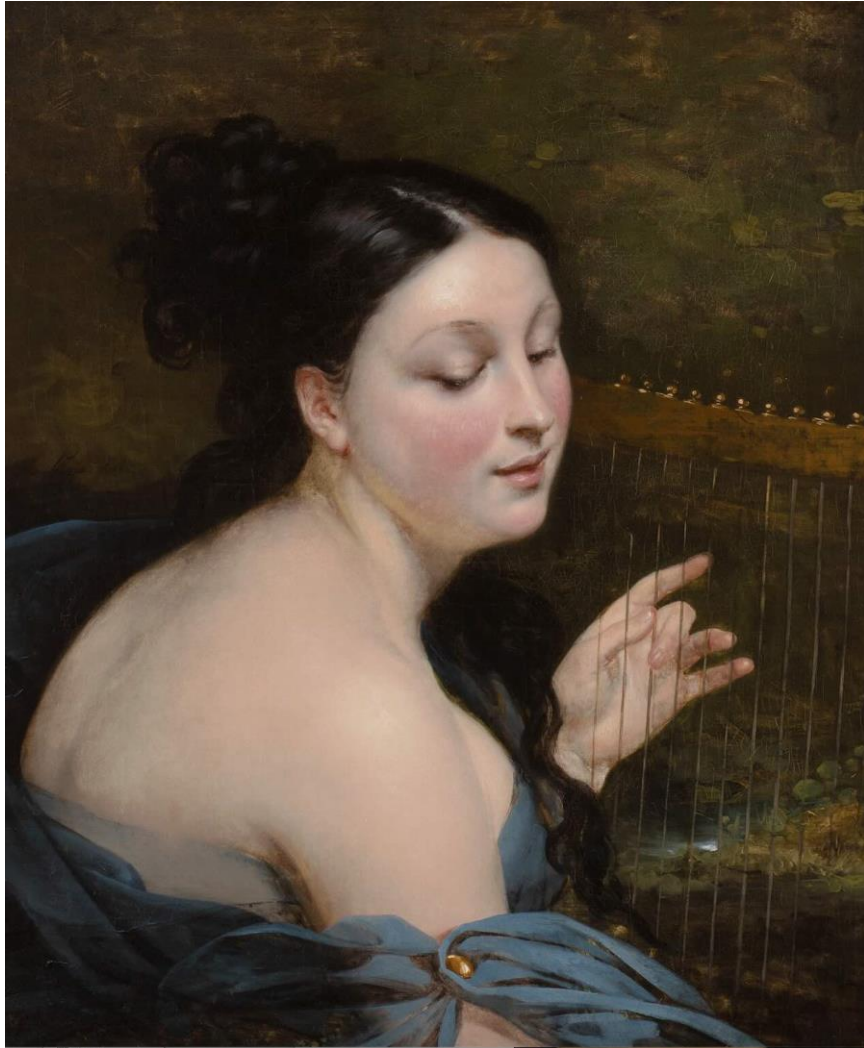
With *À la Palatte de Rubens* stamp on reverse

65 x 55 cm. (25 ½ x 21 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Various French collections of the 20th centuries (as per the labels on the reverse);

Private Collection, Bordeaux, until 2023.



Introduction

Painted by a twenty-three-year-old Aimée Brune-Pagès in 1826, this recently rediscovered depiction of a young lady playing a lyre, likely representing either Sappho or Erato, dates to a crucial period in the artist's career and, more broadly, to the culmination of a period of transformative opportunity for French women artists, then enjoying unprecedented levels of activity and visibility.

Brune-Pagès, formed in the dynamic studio of Charles Meynier alongside Louise Hersent and Amélie Legrand de Saint-Aubin, was one of the most highly acclaimed and successful of these women artists. She exhibited regularly at the Salon, from 1822 to 1853, successfully submitting dozens of works of diverse subject matter, ranging from portraits and genre scenes to large scale history paintings, winning a *medaille d'or de première-classe* at the Salon of 1841, a rare distinction for any artist, let alone a woman artist.¹ Another rare distinction was accorded to her in 1826, with the state commission she received for a portrait of Charles X.

Despite her contemporary acclaim, Brune-Pagès, like many of her female contemporaries, has been forgotten by art history. Now though, with the onset of an exciting and profound change in scholarship, these long-overshadowed artists are emerging from the footnotes, to be better understood and appreciated, as merited by their significant talents. Brune-Pagès, for example, featured prominently in the Martine Lacas' pioneering exhibition *Femmes Peintres, 1780-1830*² and Isabelle Mayer-Michalon is currently studying the painter as part of her research into the Meynier studio.

Given these foundations, future discussions of French art of the early decades of the 19th century will no doubt give Brune-Pagès much more significance than she has hitherto enjoyed. As part of these ongoing scholarly evolutions, it is a privilege to have been able to research this previously unknown painting, which can be considered an important example of Brune-Pagès' work at the outset of her career. Of beautiful quality, the painting is the only extant work of the 1820s that is not a portrait, thereby shedding light on the artist's mythological depictions which, to go by her Salon entries, formed a significant part of her production during the opening decade of her career.

¹ From 1822 to 1831 she exhibited under her maiden name of Pagès, and thereafter under her married name of Brune.

² Musée du Luxembourg, 19 May to 21 June 2021 (M. Lacas, *Peintres Femmes 1780-1830. Naissance d'un Combat*, exhibition catalogue, Paris 2021, cat. no. 118).

Biography

Aimée Brune-Pagès (née Pagès) was born in Paris on the 24th of August 1803, during the final years of the First French Republic, though the details of her parentage and upbringing remain unknown. That said, she probably came from at least comfortable circumstances, since in the Salon catalogue of 1822, at which date she was unmarried and therefore by convention in her parental home, Brune-Pagès is listed as living on the rue de la Vielle Estrapade in the Sorbonne quartier, where Diderot had written some of his *Encyclopédie* three-quarters of a century before.

We do not know for certain in which year Brune-Pagès entered Charles Meynier's studio (fig. 1), though it would have been at least a few years prior to her first Salon appearance in 1822 as a nineteen-year-old. Meynier ran a dynamic studio '*de demoiselles*', dedicated to the training of aspiring women artists, who were not permitted to study at the École des Beaux-Arts.³ Situated at 20 rue Monsieur-le-Prince, in the grounds of the Sorbonne and underneath the studio of Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, proximity to her own home may have played a role in Brune-Pagès' decision to study with Meynier. Location aside, Meynier would have been an attractive teacher for any budding young artist, given his status as a leading artistic figure of his time, elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1816. A further draw would have been the fact that several successful women painters had already passed through the studio and continued to be affiliated with it, most notably Louise Hersent and Amélie Legrand de Saint-Aubin. Indeed, a later report, discussing the little-known painter Jenny Thorel, who entered the studio in 1815, wrote that 'such an environment could only be advantageous to talent'.⁴



Fig. 1, Amélie Legrand de Saint-Aubin, *Charles Meynier's Studio*, 1833, oil on canvas, 113.5 x 145.5 cm, Musée de Beaux-Arts de Caen

³ Around this time Abel de Pujol and Léon Cogniet also ran similar studios.

⁴ Le Gazette de Château-Gontier, 11 March 1886, n.p., '*un pareil milieu ne pouvait manquer d'être propice au talent*'.

Under Meynier's guidance, Brune-Pagès would have learned to paint and draw after the antique, as well as the great masters of the past. Despite not practising it much himself, Meynier must have also taught portraiture, given the success enjoyed by his three leading pupils in this genre. The composer and singer Julie Candeille was so pleased with her 1828 portrait by Brune-Pagès (fig. 2) that she described it as 'perfect' and 'breath-taking'.⁵ Clearly Meynier ran a congenial studio and was close to his students, several of whom are mentioned in the artist's testament of 1832.⁶



Fig. 2, Aimée Brune-Pagès, *Portrait of Julie Candeille*, 1828, oil on canvas, Musée de Beaux-Arts de Nîmes

Brune-Pagès exhibited at her first Salon in 1822, displaying a depiction of Psyche, as well as a portrait. She appeared once again at the Salon in 1824, a highwater mark for women artists, where a record 101 participated, exhibiting 237 works.⁷ Here Brune-Pagès exhibited two portraits alongside two history paintings: *Daphnis and Chloe* and *Clotilde and Aurélien*. The following year she painted a portrait of Jeremy Bentham, then in Paris, which received high acclaim.⁸ Obtaining such a commission is testament to the reputation she had already gained, so early in her career. Indeed, her reputation was compounded in 1826, the year of the present work, when Brune-Pagès was commissioned by the state to paint a copy of a portrait of Charles X and the dauphin Louis. At the Salon of 1827 she showed three works and across the next two Salons, those of 1831 and 1833, a total of fifteen paintings combined.

⁵ Cited by J. Vignaud, *Portrait de Liszt enfant*, Nîmes 2011, n.p.

⁶ I. Meyer-Michallon, *Charles Meynier 1763-1832*, Paris 2008, p. 78.

⁷ Though it must still be remembered that during this period women suffered Salon rejections more frequently than their male counterparts (S. Sofio, *Artistes femmes. La parenthèse enchantée XVIIIe – XIXe siècle*, Paris 2015, p. 533).

⁸ *Revue Encyclopédique*, volume XL, Paris 1828, p. 509.

Her first decade of professional activity could therefore be considered one of remarkable accomplishment, though this was only the start of further success. Over the next twenty years Brune-Pagès would exhibit at several more Salons up to and including the Salon of 1853. In total, across her career, she successfully submitted 43 works for exhibition, with only one painting rejected in 1837. This was an outstanding achievement for any painter of this time, not forgetting the state purchases and her obtention of a First-Class medal in 1841. Beyond these accolades, further proof of her success is demonstrated by the numerous engravings commissioned after her paintings, the most well-known of which was the lithograph after her now lost *Leonardo painting the Mona Lisa* of 1843, which sold in vast numbers.

The evidence shows Brune-Pagès to have been commercially minded and adaptable as an artist, successfully evolving her subject-matter and style over the years, perhaps as her interests and fashions dictated, moving from mythological depictions in the 1820s to troubadour scenes and other Romantic subject matters by the 1830s. The latter is exemplified by *Une fille à genoux* (fig. 3), the first painting by a woman artist to enter the Musée de Beaux-Arts d'Orléans when it did so in 1839. From the late 1830s, though continuing with troubadour subjects, Brune-Pagès also started to have success with large-scale biblical scenes, such as the daughter of Jephthah, shown in the Salon of 1846 and now in the Musée de Picardie. Further evidence of her commercial nature, and wide-ranging skills, are the costume designs she created in 1829 for Rossini's comic opera *Le Comte Ory* (fig. 4). Here the half-length series of female characters are not dissimilar in composition and spirit to the present work. Though particularly important to her in the 1820s and 1830s, portraiture seems to have been a constant throughout her career.



Fig. 3, Aimée Brune-Pagès, *Jeune fille à genoux* 1839, oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm, Musée de Beaux-Arts d'Orléans



Fig. 4, Aimée Brune-Pagès, *Cunigond*, from Rossini's *Le Comte Ory*, 1829, lithograph

Brune-Pagès married the landscape painter Christian Brune in 1833, with who she sometimes collaborated, and thereafter signing her pictures with both surnames. Though a frequent Salon entrant and named a professor at the École Polytechnique in 1826, Brune did not achieve the same career heights as his wife, never winning a First-Class medal nor receiving the same success with the French state. Certainly, 'Brune-Pagès paintings were no less sought after than her husbands', and probably more so.⁹ They had one son, Emmanuel Brune, who went on to be a leading architect.

Young lady playing a lyre

Brune-Pagès painting depicts a young lady playing a lyre, shown at bust-length and against a verdant backdrop of foliage. A small stream, with beautifully painted white highlights, is visible at the lower right. The young lady plucks gracefully at her instrument, her cheeks flushed red and her eyes half-closed in a moment of reverie. She wears her hair in an Apollo knot, then highly fashionable in France. Indeed, Brune-Pagès likely wore her own hair in this way, as demonstrated by Legrand de Saint-Aubin's depiction of the women artist of the Meynier atelier (fig. 1). A Grecian-style fabric wraps round her torso, with a diaphanous strip extending from under her arm and around her back.

Brune-Pagès convincingly renders the various fabrics and surfaces, whether the delicate hand plucking the strings, the glowing skin of the young lady or her shimmering black hair. Other than the more loosely painted foliage and some lovely impasto highlights, all is achieved with little visible brushwork, giving a polished smoothness typical of the techniques, founded on solid line and anatomy, then widely taught within the leading schools and studios of the day. Clearly Brune-Pagès technical methods owe much to Meynier's teaching, as is indeed the case with Hersent and Legrand de Saint-Aubin, though it must be said that, despite these shared foundations, each artist developed their own idiom, distinct from both Meynier and one another.

The painting likely depicts either Sappho or Erato, both of whom enjoyed popularity in the fine arts during the Neoclassical period and were invariably depicted with a lyre. Sappho, the Archaic Greek poet from the island of Lesbos, who famously threw herself from the Leucadian cliffs, was notably painted by Jacques-Louis David, Antoine-Jean Gros and Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (fig. 5) during the opening decades of the 19th century.¹⁰ As for Erato, the muse of lyric and erotic poetry, perhaps the best known depiction of her was Meynier's canvas from 1800, which formed part of a series on the Muses now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 6). Almost certainly Brune-Pagès would have known this canvas, if not directly then via studies that had remained in Meynier's studio during her formation there.

⁹ Le Gazette de Château-Gontier, 11 March 1886, n.p., '[ses] toiles ne sont pas moins recherchées que celles de son mari.'

¹⁰ Jacques-Louis David, *Sappho and Phaon*, 1809, oil on canvas, 225 x 262 cm, Hermitage Museum; Antoine-Jean Gros, *Sappho at Leucate*, 1801, oil on canvas, 122 x 100 cm, Musée d'Art, Bayeux; Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, *Sappho on the Leucadian Cliff*, c. 1805, oil on canvas, 188 x 114 cm, Hermitage Museum.

In fact, lyre-playing mythological figures consistently appear in Meynier's paintings, for example his *Polyhymnia* of 1795 or *Terpsichore* of 1801, and these would clearly have been a source of inspiration to Brune-Pagès. Meynier was one of the painters of antique history scenes par excellence and his admiration for the ancients seems to have been taken up by Brune-Pagès, at least in her earlier years, to judge by the present work, as well as her *Daphnis and Chloe* of 1822 or her *Psyche and Zephyr* of 1824. Meynier's mythological depictions tend to be either multi-figure compositions or full-length single figures, rather than the bust-length depiction we see here. That said, bust or half-length depictions may have been a focus of his training methods, given that the only other extant mythological work by one of Meynier's students from their early career is Hersent's recently discovered half-length depiction of a Nymph (fig. 7).¹¹

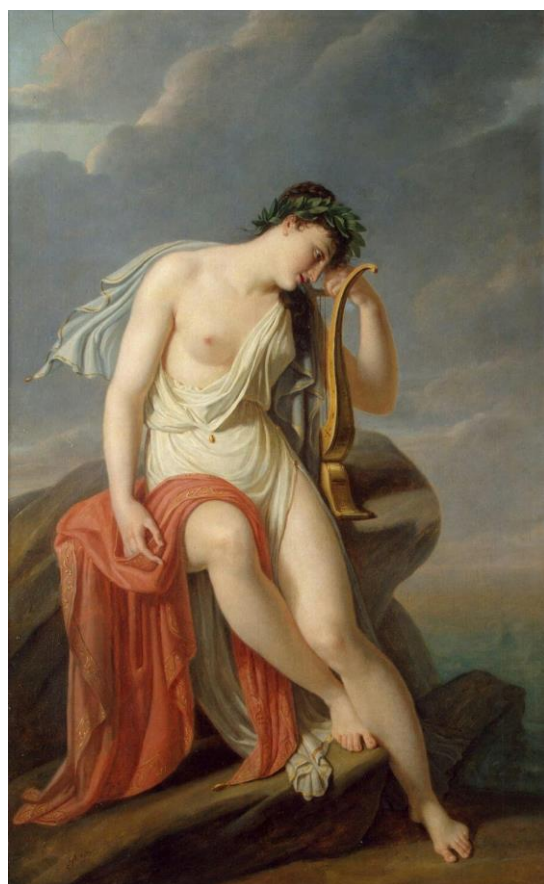


Fig. 5, Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, *Sappho at the Leucadian Cliff*, oil on canvas, 188 x 114 cm, Hermitage Museum



Fig. 6, Charles Meynier, *Erato*, 1800 oil on canvas, 273 x 176 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art

Compositionally, this Nymph, as a bust-length, turning female figure enveloped in a swirl of drapey, is very comparable to Brune-Pagès' painting, though the facture and physiognomy is quite different, supporting the abovementioned notion that each of Meynier's students developed their own style. Indeed, in terms of physiognomy, Brune-Pagès' picture is closer to the work of a painter like Claude-Marie Dubufe. So close in fact that the model for Brune-

¹¹ The painting was previously given to Guérin before a cleaning in 2021 revealed the signature 'Louise Maduit' (Hersent's maiden name and therefore dating the painting prior to her marriage in 1821 to the painter Louis Hersent).

Pagès' picture is possibly the same as Dubufe's *The Surprise* (fig. 8), painted at almost the same date. The relationship between Brune-Pagès and Dubufe merits further exploration since there was overlap between the two in the 1820s and early 1830s, not just in terms of style but also of subject matter.

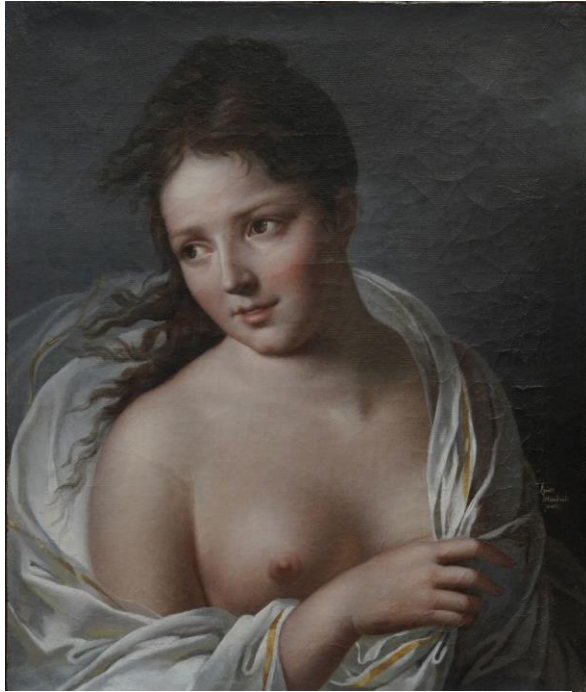


Fig. 7, Louise Hersent, *Nymph*, oil on canvas, 54.5 x 45.5 cm, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon



Fig. 8, Claude-Marie Dubufe, *The Surprise*, 1827, oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm, National Gallery