



COLNAGHI

ELLIOTT FINE ART

‘One has to work constantly because the most successful artists are the ones who work the most.’

Sophie Frémiet, 22 October 1840

Sophie Rude, née Frémiet
(Dijon 1797 – 1867 Paris)

Portrait of a father with his two daughters: possibly the Lechêne family

Signed and dated upper right: *Sophie Rude / 1840*

Oil on canvas

100.4 x 80.2 cm. (9 ½ x 31 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Purchased by the uncle of the previous owner in New York, during the 1960s;

Thence by descent to Private Collection, Finger Lakes, New York;

By whom sold, Crescent City Auction, New Orleans, 14 September 2024, lot 671.



Although Sophie Frémiet achieved considerable success and recognition in her time, her legacy has often been eclipsed by that of her more famous husband, the sculptor François Rude. In recent years, however, this imbalance has begun to shift. A turning point came with the publication of a comprehensive monograph on Frémiet in 2004, followed by a milestone acquisition in 2024, when the J. Paul Getty Museum purchased an important Neoclassical portrait from her early career (fig. 1). This painting, now the first by Frémiet to enter an institutional collection outside France or Belgium, marks a significant step in bringing her work to a wider international audience.



Fig. 1, Sophie Frémiet, *Portrait of a woman*, 1818, oil on canvas, 162 x 118.5 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum

As with the Getty painting, the present work is a recent rediscovery which marks an important addition to Frémiet's body of work. The portrait, depicting a father with his two young daughters, is notable not only for its beautifully rendered figures but also for its subject matter, which offers insight into Frémiet's personal and professional life. With one of the daughters shown sketching, the portrait underscores Frémiet's role as a teacher and mentor, transmitting her knowledge to a new generation of women artists, many of whom went on to have professional careers.

The portrait also highlights Frémiet's impressive technical ability and illustrates her successful transition from Neoclassicism to the type of portrait, marked by realism and a focus on bourgeois ideals, that gained popularity during the July Monarchy. Paintings like this contributed to Frémiet's success and growing reputation in mid-19th century Paris, establishing her as a leading artistic figure in the French capital, where she exhibited regularly at the Salon.¹

¹ Frémiet exhibited at eleven Salons between 1827, the year of arrival in Paris, until 1867, the year of her death.

Sophie Frémiet: From David's Studio to Salon Success

Sophie Frémiet (fig. 2) was born in Dijon in 1787, into an artistic and supportive family. Her maternal grandfather, Louis-Gabriel Monnier, was the first director of the Dijon Museum and a well-regarded engraver, while her mother inherited this artistic inclination. Her father, Louis Frémiet, was a merchant and later a tax inspector, as well as a committed Bonapartist. He was also a passionate patron of the arts and a supporter of François Rude, who his daughter would marry in 1821. Frémiet's artistic training began early under Anatole Devosge, a former student of Jacques-Louis David. Under Desvosge's tutelage, Frémiet rapidly developed her skills, mastering Neoclassical principles and showing great promise as an artist.



Fig. 2, Sophie Frémiet, *Self-Portrait*, 1841, oil on canvas, 83 x 65 cm, Musée des Beaux-Art de Dijon

In 1816 the Frémiet family left Dijon for Brussels, escaping the political repercussions then being meted out to Bonapartists after the fall of Napoleon. This relocation coincided with Jacques-Louis David's own exile to the city, where he attracted a following of French émigrés. Frémiet and her sister Victorine became some of David's first students in Brussels, developing a close bond with the great Neoclassicist. In 1818, at just twenty-one, Frémiet debuted at the Salon of Brussels, exhibiting two full-length portraits.

David clearly held Frémiet in high esteem, entrusting her to make copies after his own works – a privilege he reserved for only his most talented students. He regarded her copy of

The Farewell of Telemachus so highly that he claimed ‘there were few artists in Europe who could distinguish the copy from the original’.² David also allowed her to train the newly arrived women artists in his studio, including Adèle Kindt, who would soon become one of Belgium’s most celebrated artists, winning a gold medal at the Salon of Ghent in 1826

David’s confidence in Frémiet’s abilities led him to encourage her to compete for the prestigious first prize in history painting organised by the Royal Academy of Ghent in 1820. Her ambitious mythological scene, *La Belle Anthia*, won second prize, losing to Joseph Paelinck’s version of the same subject. However, most critics considered Frémiet’s work to be far superior to Paelinck’s, whose local status and gender no doubt biased the judges. Joseph-Denis Odevaere reported back to David, ‘I admire the beautiful, the graceful *Anthia*, painted by your young student, who is only a woman by her clothing but a man by her talent’.³

In 1821, Frémiet married the sculptor François Rude, who was seventeen years her senior. The couple welcomed their only child, Amédée, a year later.⁴ Around 1823, the Frémiet family distanced themselves from David for unknown reasons. Frémiet, however, continued to succeed independently, earning acclaim for both portraiture and history painting, and winning another medal at the Salon of Ghent in 1824 for the *Death of Cenchirias* (fig. 3). Her work, according to one critic, ‘conferred on her a distinguished place amongst the painters of the modern school’.⁵



Fig. 3, Sophie Frémiet, *The Death of Cenchirias*, 1823, oil on canvas, 206 x 257 cm, Private Collection

² ‘il y a peu d’artistes en Europe qui puissent avec moi distinguer la copie de l’original’, cited in M. Geiger, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³ Spies-Gans, p. 73.

⁴ Amadée was sadly to die in 1830 aged eight. In 1839, the couple adopted her the daughter of Frémiet’s sister Victorine van der Haert, who had been orphaned in that year.

⁵ ‘ses ouvrages lui assignent encore une place distinguée parmi les peintres de l’école modern,’ *Messenger des Sciences et des Arts*, March and April 1824 (cited in M. Geiger, *op. cit.*, p. 64).

By 1827, Frémiet and François Rude had relocated to Paris, where they opened a shared studio on Rue d'Enfer and began taking on students. Frémiet's paintings at the Paris Salon of that year, particularly the portrait of her sister, signalled her transition away from David's grand neoclassicism towards a more personal style. From then on, apart from the occasional history painting - such as her *The Farewell of Charles I* which won a medal at the Salon of 1833 and was purchased by the state - her principal activity was portraiture (figs. 4 and 5), a genre in which she excelled. Her intimate portraits of close friends, family and the Parisian bourgeoisie were praised for their elegance, sensitivity and 'perfect resemblance' to their sitters.⁶ As one critic remarked of a portrait of exhibited in Dijon in 1838, 'there is nothing more real, nothing more elegant nor better finished...it is the perfect example of its genre'.⁷



Fig. 4, Sophie Frémiet, *Portrait of Mary Matthews*, 1843, oil on canvas, 146 x 94.5 cm, Sizbergh Castle

Fig. 5, Sophie Frémiet, *Portrait of a woman*, 1849, oil on canvas, 82 x 65 cm, Musée de Beaux-Arts de Dijon

During her lifetime, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon recognised her talent by acquiring and displaying her work, creating the largest single collections of her art. Nonetheless, by the end of her life, Frémiet's own achievements had been overshadowed by those of her husband, whose legacy she had tirelessly promoted above her own.

⁶ H. Baudot, *Société des Amis des Art de Dijon. Comte rendu de l'exposition des produits des Beaux-Arts et de l'Industrie*, Dijon 1838, p. 19-20.

⁷ 'Rien de plus vrai, de plus gracieux, de mieux fini...c'est la perfection du genre', F. Schindler, *Journal de la Côte d'Or*, 28 July 1838, cited by M. Geiger, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

Portrait of a father with his two daughters: Frémiet as a teacher

Frémiet's portrait dates to 1840, a moment when the artist was at the height of her abilities and sought after by the Parisian bourgeoisie, especially for her depictions of children (fig. 6). Her skill in rendering diverse materials is evident, beautifully capturing the textures and volumes of various fabrics and surfaces. The sitters' expressions also reveal Frémiet's sensitivity to emotion and character: the father's countenance reflects paternal pride confidence and the eldest daughter's gaze exudes confidence, whilst her younger sister appears to regard her with a hint of bemusement. A dynamic interplay of hands further enlivens the composition and directs attention to the sketchbook in which the elder girl is drawing. In the background, the bookshelves indicate father's education and cultural interests.⁸



Fig. 6, Sophie Frémiet, *Portrait of two boys*, 1842, oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm, Private Collection

Given that Frémiet often painted friends and acquaintances, it is likely that the young girl with the sketchbook was one of her students. This possibility suggests that the portrait may depict the Lechêne family, with the two girls identified as Alice and Mathilde Lechêne. Born in 1833 and 1836, they would match the ages of the children in the portrait. Frémiet was formally listed as the teacher of Mathilde and their mother, Amicie, in exhibition catalogues; however, Alice, seen with the sketchbook, also became a painter and exhibited at the Exposition de la Société des Amis des Arts de Dijon in 1858, so it is entirely possible that Frémiet gave her some informal instruction at this early age.⁹

⁸ This motif appears in several other portraits by Frémiet during her Parisian period. See, for example, the portrait of Dr Legrand from 1859, sold at auction in 2013 (Eric Caudron, 3 April 2013, lot 93).

⁹ Amicie exhibited still life paintings at the Salons of 1855, 1857, 1859 and 1868. Mathilde, a portraitist, exhibited at the Salon of 1857 and also at Exposition de la Société des Amis des Arts de Dijon in 1858. In the review of this exhibition, Alice is listed as a pupil of Mme Girardin (*Journal de la Côte d'Or*, 7 August 1858, p. 2). She also seems to have been a still life painter.

Originally from Dijon, the Lechêne family moved to Paris, where they likely met Frémiet through mutual Burgundian contacts. In fact, all but one of Frémiet's students were from Dijon or Burgundy, demonstrating the continued importance of her connections with her native region. Her other students included Sophie Berger, Anna Delautel, Mlle Hucherot, Hippolyte Magnien, and Clémentine Dondey de Sainteny, most of whom exhibited at the Salon and achieved professional success. The sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet, though a pupil of François Rude, took his first drawing lessons from Frémiet, his aunt.

Taking on students was common practice among established women artists, offering them both a supplementary income and a way to pass on their skills to the next generation. The fact that Frémiet was able to attract talented and serious pupils aspiring to professional success is testament to her contemporary reputation. Frémiet's guiding principle for success as a painter was straightforward yet demanding: 'one has to work constantly because the most successful artists are the ones who work the most'.¹⁰ This work ethic, instilled in her students, contributed to their own achievements.

The shared studio of Frémiet and François Rude was a lively and welcoming space, fostering close bonds between among teachers and students. Every Monday, the couple hosted a *soirée* for their pupils and friends. According to François Rude's biographer, these 'somewhat dishevelled and colourful gatherings exasperate Mme Rude, who is startled by certain eccentric outfits: romantic and Spanish-style capes and wide-brimmed hats.'¹¹ Emmanuel Frémiet recounted how 'from eight o'clock, the first arrivals would empty the room of its furniture, piling it in the adjoining rooms'. Then Frémiet's sister Victorine, 'would begin playing music, with polkas, quadrilles, schottisches, and mazurkas following one another without interruption until tea was served around half-past ten, accompanied by a plate of dry cakes.'¹²

It is entirely possible that the young girls in this portrait attended one of Frémiet's lively *soirées*, especially if they are indeed Alice and Mathilde Lechêne. Regardless, the portrait stands out as an exceptional example of Frémiet's Parisian work, reflecting not only her considerable technical skill but also illuminating her social connections, personal interests and influential role as a teacher.

¹⁰ 'il faut un travail constant, car, voyez-vous, celui qui réussit le mieux est toujours celui qui a le plus travaillé', in a letter from the 22 October 1840, cited in M. Geiger, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹¹ 'Ces réunions, d'abord quelque peu débraillées et bigarrées, désespèrent Mme Rude, effarouchée de certaines mises excentriques, capes romantiques à l'espagnole et feutres à grands bords', L. de Fourcaud, *François Rude sculpteur, ses œuvres et son temps*, Paris 1904, p. 287.

¹² 'Les lundis soir, dans le salon de Mme Rude, on dansait. Dès huit heures, les premiers arrivants vidaient la salle de ses meubles qu'ils entassaient dans les pièces voisines. Quelques jeunes filles amies ou parentes venaient ensuite. On débutait par quelques morceaux de piano exécutés à quatre mains d'après la méthode Jacotot, un des intimes de Rude ; puis, la cousine (sic) du maître, Mlle Martine, remplaçait au clavier les jeunes virtuoses, attaquant la musique de danse, les polkas, les quadrilles, les scottishs et les mazurkas se succédaient sans interruption jusqu'au thé que l'on servait vers dix heures et demie avec une assiettée de gâteaux secs.' M. Geiger, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.