

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Jean-Antoine Houdon (Versailles 1741 - Paris 1828)

Herm bust of Maréchal Jean-de-Dieu Soult, Duke of Dalmatia (1769-1851)

Circa: 1813

Marble

49cm.

Signed and dated 'houdon, f. 1813'

1813

A son of the Age of Enlightenment, Jean-Antoine Houdon closely witnessed some of the most significant events in European history, from the French Revolution to the rise and fall of Napoleon, relentlessly capturing with his hands and chisel the likenesses and spirit of its foremost protagonists. One such figure was Jean-de-Dieu Soult, the subject of this beautiful and subtly carved marble herm bust, signed and dated by Houdon in 1813. A French general and statesman, Soult had a formidable military and political career in post-Revolution France. He was made Maréchal de l'Empire by Napoleon in 1804, served three times as President of the Council of Ministers and, in 1847, was named Maréchal General de France, a title only bestowed on five other occasions in the country's history, which gave its bearer authority over the entire French army. The young Houdon's proximity to some of the best

artists in France encouraged his vocation. He trained in the studios of René-Michel Slodtz, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne and Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, and won the Académie's third prize for sculpture in 1756 and the Grand Prix (Prix de Rome) in 1761. He subsequently spent three years at the Ecole des Elèves Protégés before leaving for Rome in 1764. In Italy Houdon dedicated himself to the study and reproduction of classical models. His early works display considerable talent and express a deep understanding of classicism paired with a close observation of human anatomy and emotion. These characteristics were to inform all of Houdon's prolific career, including, most notably, his portraiture, the body of works he is certainly most renowned for. Back in France the sculptor exhibited regularly at the Salon and cultivated the patronage of the highest echelons of society, as demonstrated by his portraits of the Marquis of Miromesnil, shown in his magisterial robe and wig; of the musician Christoph Willibald Gluck and the writers Molière, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and of fashionable dames such as Madame de la Houze, the Comtesse de Cayla and Madame Adélaïde and Madame Victoire, the two daughters of King Louis XV. In 1777 he was fully received as an Academician and became acquainted with Benjamin Franklin whom he would accompany to America in 1785. Having returned to Paris the following year his career progressed from one success to another. Throughout the years of Napoleonic rule Houdon continued exhibiting at the Salon and receiving prominent commissions. His style, unchanged at its core, adapted to an extent to the demands of Imperial idealisation and aggrandizement, as exemplified by his documented portraits of Bonaparte. One of them, a terracotta dated 1806 now in Dijon, represents the Emperor undraped, fully frontal and in herm format, the same composition as the present portrait of Maréchal Soult. As Arnason writes, in the Dijon terracotta Houdon "has carried his classic idealisation beyond simple frontalisation and generalisation, to a point of abstract structure, in which he has flattened the planes of the head in the ideal formula of Greek antiquity. The interpretation is one of reflection combined with power" (p. 102). This search for an essential idealisation of both sculpted form and human character can also be discerned in the present bust of Soult, in which the sitter, stripped of the mundane paraphernalia typical of state portraiture, conveys the power of his role through the serene yet austere quality of his stare, the distended arc of his brows and his solemnly pursed lips. Signed and dated 1813, the present bust of Jean-de-Dieu Soult is the only surviving testimony of a commission that originated with a bust of the statesman intended for the Tuileries Palace's Salle des Maréchaux, a gallery of France's leading military men. This was lost following the Tuileries' great fire of 1871, so the present bust must correspond to the one recorded by Houdon's first great scholar Georges Giacometti as having been executed in 1812, and known to have been given to Soult's family, as a pencil inscription formerly on its reverse confirms. Pinned in French, it identifies the sitter as Jean-de-Dieu Soult and states the herm was owned by his descendants, the counts de Mornay. The specific heir named, Pierre de Mornay Soult (1837-1905), is to be identified with the sitter's grandson, whose niece Marie-Adrienne Auguste de Mornay Montchevreuil (1872-1935) married Jacques de la Cour (1870-1948), Marquis de Balleroy, who inherited the present bust. The inscription must have been added around the time the bust passed from the de Mornay to the Balleroy families, as a means to preserve its history for generations to come. Born in 1769 in Saint-Amans la Bastide, a small town in the south of France, Jean-de-Dieu was the eldest son of a royal notary. Expected to follow in his father's footsteps, he was instead determined from a very young age to pursue a military career. He thus enrolled in the royal army's infantry regiment at sixteen, soon displaying great prowess. Promoted to caporal rank a couple of years later, he surprisingly decided to abandon the army, fearing his humble birth would never allow him to become an officer, and temporarily attempted to ply his trade as a baker (1787). Giving heed to the pleas of his army companions, he soon rejoined their ranks and was made sergeant in 1791. In March 1793 his courage was particularly noted in the battle of Uberfelsheim, which inaugurated a season of military successes for Soult, culminating in his promotion to général de division in 1799. By then, he had fought on some of the most important fronts in Northern Europe, including Belgium, Southern Germany and Switzerland, the latter alongside the famous Napoleonic General André Masséna. In the wake of the Brumaire coup, Napoleon entrusted the crucial Italian front to Masséna and the latter, mindful of Soult's excellent service in Helvetia, appointed him to command an entire wing of his army. In Italy Soult lived through the infamous siege of Genoa and was captured by the Austrians, but freed following the French victory at Marengo (1800). Remaining in Italy, he received an administrative command under General Murat, but returned to France in May 1803, when he was made commander of the important Saint-Omer military camp in Boulogne. Breakthrough came in 1804, when Soult was amongst the first officers to be made Maréchal of the newly declared Napoleonic Empire and was named grand officier de la légion d'honneur – he had officially joined the highest ranks of France's military and political elite. His rise continued and Soult won great favour with Napoleon after his men played a key role in the critical French victory at the battle of Austerlitz

(December 1805). After peace terms were agreed with Russia in 1807, the Grande Armée shifted its focus to the Iberian Peninsula, where Bonaparte had proclaimed his brother Joseph regent, shattering the Spanish army by the river Ebro. Soult's division took the city of Burgos and began the advance that would ultimately lead them to Portugal, where the Maréchal was to meet his match in General Arthur Wellesley, future Duke of Wellington. Notably, in June 1808, Napoleon rewarded Soult with the title of Duke, choosing Dalmatia as his province. This certainly delighted the Armée's enemies from the other side of the Channel, amongst whom Soult came to be known as "the Duke of Damnation", a sobriquet that added itself to the already popular "General Salt". In Spain, Soult's men engaged in a relentless pursuit of the retreating English troops led by General Moore, cornering them at La Coruña in January 1809. Both sides suffered considerable losses, and the latter eventually capitulated, taking flight by sea. From Northern Spain, the way into Portugal lay open for Soult. Marching from Galicia towards Lisbon, he took Verin, Chaves, Carvalho, Braga and Oporto. There, in one of his most audacious military moves, General Wellesley ultimately outwitted Soult by secretly crossing the river Duoro and attacking where French defences were weakest, thus retaking the important port city. In the following months Soult remained stationed in Portugal, where the situation escalated from battle to battle, the Iberian front now much stronger thanks to Wellesley's command. In this framework of increasing uncertainty for the French, Soult nonetheless reported major victories at Ocaña, Oliveça and Badajoz and took Andalucía in 1810. It is interesting to note that throughout this period Soult gained a reputation as a keen collector of Spanish Old Master Paintings, including Murillo's famous Immaculate Conception now in the Louvre Museum. At the beginning of 1813 Soult was recalled to France at Joseph Bonaparte's request. Initially taking a position with the Imperial Guard, he took command of the IV Corps at the Battle of Bautzen and, in July, he was sent back to Spain to head the Armies of Spain and the Pyrenees. Events had by then – after Napoleon's disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812 – taken a turn for the worst and, the Emperor's power now increasingly threatened and the troops demoralized after years of conflict, it was not long before Soult was forced to call for a ceasefire in Spain. After the tumultuous events that followed – Napoleon's abdication, his first exile, the Bourbon restoration in France, the Hundred Days, the Battle of Waterloo, the Congress of Vienna and the deposed Emperor's definitive exile to Saint Helena – Soult, demonstrating remarkable powers of adaptability and political skill, was reinstated as army officer by the new King of France in 1819. Important political appointments followed, including Minister of War and, in 1832, président du Conseil under Louis-Philippe of Bourbon. In April 1838 he was France's ambassador to the coronation of Queen Victoria, the prelude to a career as Minister of Foreign Affairs. In 1847 Soult was bestowed the title of Maréchal General de France as thanks for his invaluable service to the French crown. He retired the same year to his country estate in Saint-Amans, where he died in 1851, a few days before the coup of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte.

Literature:

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S. Lami, *Dictionnaire des Sculpteurs de l'École Française*, Paris, vol. I, 1910, p. 434□

G. Giacometti, *Le Statuaire Jean-Antoine Houdon et son Époque (1741-1828)*, Paris, 1919, vol. I, p. 288, vol. II, p. 330