

## THE LEGEND OF THE PETER THE GREAT'S HEART SHAPED PUPILS

### *THE COLLOT-FALCONET RELATIONSHIP*

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#### Abstract

The bust of Peter the Great created by Marie-Anne Collot, a young Frenchwoman, assistant to Etienne-Maurice Falconet, has heart shaped pupils. These resemble posterior synechiae. Collot began an apprenticeship with Falconet when she was 16 years old and he, 48. She was exceptionally talented. He took her with him to Saint Petersburg to help create Catherine the Great's massive monument to her predecessor, Peter the Great. Collot lived with Falconet nearly every year from the time she joined his atelier until his death. This intimate relationship led to a legend that holds the bust's heart shaped pupils represent Collot's romantic love for him. This legend will be analyzed in this paper.



Figure 1: Collot bust of Peter the Great, Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg,

Photograph by the author

#### Introduction

In 1766, four years after Catherine the Great seized power, a fifty year old French sculptor arrived in St. Petersburg to create Catherine's monument to Peter the Great, now known as the Bronze Horseman. The sculptor, Etienne-Maurice Falconet, was accompanied by his 18 year old assistant, Marie-Anne Collot, his student the previous two years in Paris. The Russian State Museum in St. Petersburg prominently displays a terra cotta bust made by Collot of the head of Peter the Great (Figure One). Falconet used it as the model for the mold he used to cast the head of the Bronze Horseman. The bust's vivid expression of determination, recklessness, ambition, and possibly even slight madness are striking. Particularly notable are its heart-shaped pupils that mimic irregular, bilateral posterior synechiae (Figure Two, next page). A account of the local legend that holds Collot gave them that shape to express her love for Falconet appeared a few years ago in a Saint Petersburg [newspaper](#).<sup>1\*</sup> The intertwined lives of Collot and Falconet underlie the legend. They lived together nearly all the time from when she was 16 until his death 27 years later. She made the bust in her early twenties. For the previous five or six years she had been studying and living with Falconet, a widower 32 years older than she. He had taken her from poverty into his atelier, had trained her and promoted her career as a sculptor. He had introduced her to his En-

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<sup>1</sup> St. Petersburg Gazette, *См. Петербургский Ведомству*, 21.August.2012

\*see author's translation on p.33



Figure 2: Pupils close up, Peter's bust, Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg,

Photograph by the author



Figure 3: Peter's eyes, detail, from Robert Massie's "Peter the Great", after p. 210



Figure 4: Rastrelli, Carlo Bartholomeo, Peter's pupils' details, from Getty web site

lightenment circle and taken her to the Russian Court in St. Petersburg. Her commissions there had made her very wealthy.

#### Alternative Explanations to the Legend

What other explanations might account for her making those heart shaped pupils? Might Peter have had abnormal,

perhaps colobomatous, pupils? Life illustrations of Peter's head (Figures Three and Four) show normal pupils, however.

Earlier sculptors might have made heart shaped pupils. In antiquity, if pupils appeared in sculpture, they were painted on the globe. Around the time of Hadrian, they began to be cut out as bean shaped or apple shaped depressions. This practice continued through the 18th century as demonstrated in a late 19th century illustration from an instruction manual for sculptors (Figure Five, next page). Note that Peter's lower pupillary margins<sup>2</sup> extend far lower than shown in the manual.

Sculptors might conventionally have made heart shaped pupils. Sculptures by Falconet's and Collot's contemporaries show bean or apple shaped pupils. A bust by Falconet's teacher, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne (1704-1778)<sup>3</sup> in the Cognacq-Jay Museum in Paris

<sup>2</sup> See Figure 2

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, 15 February 1704 – 1778, one of the premier French sculptors and teachers of the 18th century



Figure 5:

Lanteri, Eduoard,  
Modelling,  
Fig 26  
Chapman and Hall, 1902

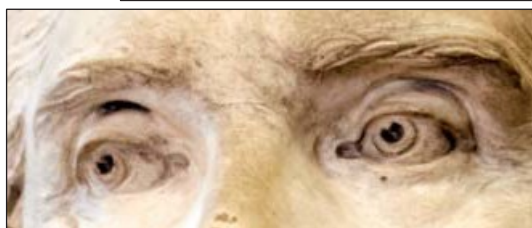


Figure 6 & 7:  
Jean-Baptiste, Lemoyne  
Maréchal Saxe,  
Cognacq-Jay Museum,  
2012, photo by the author

demonstrates such pupils (Figures Six and Seven), as does Falconet's own bust of King Louis XIV's personal physician, Camille Falconet<sup>4</sup> (Figures Eight and Nine), although the left one appears slightly more deeply cut than the right.

<sup>4</sup>no relation to Etienne-Maurice



Figures 8 & 9:  
Falconet, Etienne-Maurice,  
Camille Falconet,

Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon

Lastly, Collot might have routinely created heart shaped pupils. Her work shows quite conventional pupils as seen on her bust of Etienne-Maurice Falconet himself (Figures Ten and Eleven, next page).

Other examples include her bust of Etienne-Nöel Damilaville<sup>5</sup> (Figure Twelve, next page), done when she was studying in Falconet's atelier in Paris, and her bust of Lady Mary Cathcart (Figure Thirteen, next page), daughter of the British Ambassador, done in Petersburg in 1768.

Or she may have carelessly or whimsically cut Peter's lower pupils' contours deeper than usual. The commission's great significance to her at her young age makes this seem very unlikely.

<sup>5</sup> figure in the French Enlightenment, correspondent of Voltaire's





Figures 10 & 11: Collot, Marie-Anne, Falcone, Etienne-Maurice, Etoeva p. 207



Figure 12: Collot, Marie-Anne, Lady Mary Cathcart, Louvre, 1768, 2014, photo by Jacques de Caso 2014



Figure 13: Collot, Marie-Anne, Etienne-Nöel Damilaville (?), 1765, Louvre, photo by Jacques de Caso 2014

### Persons of the Legend

Both Collot and Falconet lived remarkable, closely interwoven lives. She moved in with him at age 16, and aside from a couple of years, lived with him until his death. Both were born poor and achieved considerable acclaim as sculptors, Falconet being ranked among the first rank of sculptors of his era.



Figure 14: Lemoyne, Jean-Baptiste, Falconet, Etienne-Maurice, 1741 Drawing, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Falconet (Figure Fourteen) received little or no schooling. After his uncle had taught him wood carving, he entered Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne's atelier for sculpture training. Ten years later he set up his own shop. Lacking formal education, he worked hard to educate himself and earn a place in the Enlightenment environment of Denis Diderot<sup>6</sup> and Lemoyne. He learned Italian and Latin from a priest and read avidly on history of art and sculpture.

He contributed the article on "Sculpture" in Diderot's Encyclopedia. (E.-M. Falconet). He translated into French, and published, 3 volumes of Pliny's, "Natural History." (E.-M. Falconet, ed. and trans.) His own work on the Beaux-Arts appeared in six volumes (É. Falconet). In their jointly published work, "Le Pour et le Contre" (Diderot), Falconet and Diderot dueled, expressing their opposing views on what influence old opinions on art works of antiquity should have on contemporary art.

Unfortunately, he had a difficult personality<sup>7</sup>. Denis Diderot, his closest friend, wrote that he was, "... misanthropic". Ot-

<sup>6</sup> Denis Diderot, 5 October 1713 – 31 July 1784, French philosopher, encyclopedist and critic

<sup>7</sup> Did a squint contribute to his ambition or his personality? See Collot's bust of Falconet, Fig. 11



Figure 15: Falconet, Pierre-Etienne, Collot, Marie-Anne portrait, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nancy

hers described him as egocentric, short tempered, aggressive, prickly, hypersensitive, and hypercritical, characteristics often impeding his achieving his career goals. His personality led both Diderot and Catherine to break with him late in his Russian stay. As a result neither he nor Collot were invited to the unveiling of the Bronze Horseman..

Fortunately, Madame de Pompadour supported him. She arranged his appointment as director of sculpture or *artiste-en-chef* at the Sèvres Manufacture; a move that restored both his and the factory's fortunes.

Around 1764 Catherine sought to build a massive monument to link herself with her great predecessor, Peter the First. Through Diderot's intercession, Falconet won the commission. This assignment advanced greatly his reputation as one of the great figures in French sculpture of the 18th century.

While Falconet was negotiating with Catherine, Marie-Anne Collot (Figure Fifteen) entered his atelier to begin her training as a sculptor. Collot was born very poor. She left

home at 15 to escape her abusive father, and found work in the atelier of Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, who taught Jean-Antoine Houdon<sup>8</sup>, Augustin Pajou<sup>9</sup>, and Falconet, among others. Within a year she moved into Falconet's atelier to study sculpture. There she lived for two years until their departure for St. Petersburg.

She was very popular with members of Falconet's circle, such as Diderot, Prince Dmitri Alexevich Galitzine<sup>10</sup>, Friedrich Melchior Grimm<sup>11</sup>, and Jean-Paul Lemoyne. Their pet name for her was Mlle Victoire. Collot's husband's portrait of her (Figure Fifteen) shows a very attractive woman, confirming descriptions by members of the group around Falconet.

Falconet found her extraordinarily talented. While in Paris with Falconet she created four outstanding busts whose quality, observed Grimm, would have earned her unanimous admission to the French Academy. They depicted Denis Diderot (Figure Sixteen), Prince Dmitri Alekseyevich Galitzine, Prévaille, the actor famous for playing lead role in Moliere's *Doctor in Spite of Himself*, and one possibly of Etienne-Noël Damilaville<sup>12</sup>.

Falconet was 50 when he took her at age 18 to St. Petersburg. There they lived together for nearly all the next 12 years. Catherine II was very impressed with Collot's talent and commissioned several busts and medallions of herself and her family members. She encouraged court members to do the same. Additional independent commissions from local dignitaries and foreign inhabitants of Petersburg augmented Collot's work load. She became very wealthy. She was elected a Member of the Russian Imperial Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture soon after their arrival. Then, sometime between 1770 and 1772, she prepared the bust that evoked the romantic legend.

<sup>8</sup> Houdon, Jean-Antoine, 1741-1828, 18C French sculptor known especially for busts of G.Washington and B. Franklin

<sup>9</sup> Pajou, Augustin, 1730-1828, 18 C French Royal sculptor

<sup>10</sup> Russian minister to the French Court, later Russian Minister to the Netherlands and a Fellow of the Royal Society

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, 1723-1807, German journalist, Encyclopédie contributor, opera supporter

<sup>12</sup> Etienne-Noël Damilaville, 1723-1768, friend and correspondent of Voltaire's



Figure 16: Collot, Marie-Anne,  
Denis Diderot,

from M. L. Becker, *L'Objet d'Art*, Juin 1998

In the mid-1770's Falconet's son, Pierre-Etienne, unexpectedly appeared in Petersburg. In 1777 Collot married him. Nine months later, just before birth of her daughter, he returned to Paris without her. She returned to Paris, visiting Falconet, Sr. at The Hague en route. Then, before Falconet, Sr. returned to Paris in 1779, she filed an assault complaint against her husband. With her daughter she rejoined Falconet, Sr. After Falconet's return to Paris from the Hague with Collot he was honored by his peers and continued to write. In 1783, aged 67, he suffered disabling right hemiplegia. After his stroke, Collot continued to live with and care for him until his death in 1791. Collot became his heiress. She fled Paris with her daughter, her money, and Falconet's bequest. She bought an estate near Nancy and married her daughter to Baron Antoine-Stanislas Jankovitz. Following the birth of her grandson, she moved back to Nancy and died there age 71.

People gossiped about the Collot-Falconet, Sr. relationship. Diderot wrote to Falconet in Petersburg urging him to marry Collot, saying that everyone in Paris considers them to be husband and wife. Visitors to Petersburg wrote that they considered her to be his mistress. After her death her daughter burned all of her mother's personal papers,

excepting those that were part of her inheritance from Falconet. To this hiatus in her daughter's incendiary zeal we owe the present availability in French archives of Falconet's correspondence with Catherine, Diderot, Grimm, Galitzine, and others. No body of direct evidence exists that might clarify their true relationship, whether it was father-daughter like, or had some sort of a sexual nature. There is no doubt of her fealty to him.

### Legend

The legend presumes a loving or even sexual relationship between Collot and Falconet. They lived together for many years. She was in her early twenties when she made the bust. She had recently been blessed by his attentions. Association with Falconet had greatly changed her life. He had uncovered and polished her exceptional talent. Through his support she had risen from a life of poverty to one of plenty, from despair to being desired, from being abused at home to being admired in the society of the Enlightenment and in the glamour of the Russian capital. She must have been very grateful to him, as she displayed in his last years. But only circumstantial evidence exists for a sexual alliance between the pair.

### Alternative Explanations

The heart shaped pupils on Peter's bust lack other explanations. Peter the Great's own pupils were normal. Neither a historic nor a contemporary precedent for the pupils appears to exist. Collot herself made no other similarly shaped pupils. Peter's bust's pupils seem to be a unique exaggeration of the classical apple or bean shape. No alternative to the legend thus appears viable.

### Legend Variants

One possible variant of the legend is that she might have been quietly thanking Falconet for his role in changing her life. Or the pupils might express her affection for some other figure, possibly Catherine, who had so strongly supported her in Petersburg. But the pupils may represent nothing more than a whimsical impulse, arising from a vague romantic feeling of a young woman. We'll probably never know the true reason for



those pupils, so let's enjoy the original, charmingly romantic legend.

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### Suggested reading:

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### \*Translation of the Russian Article

"Petersburg is celebrating the 230th anniversary of the unveiling of the bronze monument to Peter the First, known from the work of Pushkin as the "Bronze Horseman". This immortal creation of the French sculptor, Etienne-Maurice Falconet, has long stood as the main symbol of our city. However, an interactive exhibit, "In Search of Peter", allows one to see him from a new view point. The exhibition opens today, and a correspondent of the St. Petersburg Gazette visited it yesterday evening.

A Stern Tsar, through the eyes of love It seems as if a bronze Peter on a rearing horse looks at us from everywhere: from emblems of Leningrad, from street signs, confectioner's boxes, colorful calendars, packages, t-shirts, mugs and other souvenirs. And in this is a paradox: despite his general fame he has still not been revealed to us, observes the author of the exhibition a leading member of the staff of the museum, Svetlana Timofeeva. For example, we now know that Peter the Great looked at our city through the loving eyes of Marie-Anne Collot for her teacher Falconet. She loved him passionately, was with him her whole life until his death. Even when he was paralyzed in Paris, she supported him until he died, as written records show.

Immediately after telling me this, Svetlana Timofeeva showed me a tinted terra cotta model of the head of Peter. This work turned out not to be the work of Falconet himself, but was made by Collot. So I looked at the bust and I immediately gasped the idea: the pupils of Peter's eyes were carved heart shaped! It turns out that Peter the Great in the truest sense looks out through the eyes of Marie-Anne Collot's love for Falconet.