

## Physionotracess: galerie de portraits, de la Révolution à l'Empire

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Fifty-four anonymous portraits, exhibited together, six lines deep, nine frames wide, along the wall of an otherwise darkened room. Packed so close and so small, the *physionotracess* invite scrutiny yet these people have no name, no identity. Any information is printed so fine that it is barely decipherable to the naked eye. Instead, recognition is for the procedure; sometimes for the engraver ('*dess. Au Physionotrace et gravé par Quenedey, rue nueve des Petits Champs*' or '*Fait avec le Physionotrace par...*'). The consistent uniformity of pose, along with the identical size and repetitive frames give the display the look of a Boltanski installation: a wall of anonymous heads, but cast within a late eighteenth-century idiom.

Between 1788 and 1820, these fifty-four men and women climbed into a wooden frame (1.75m high x 6.5m wide), sat and turned to the side to pose against a dark background. With the chin supported nothing moved, and with the head still and the profile exposed, the resemblance could be captured. A life-size drawing was available on the spot. One week later the sitter received an etched plate and twelve little prints. These printed portraits were issued in colour or black and white and they measured on average 8cm high x 7cm wide. The method was quick and apparently cheap, and it is this combination of exactitude and rapidity which makes the *physionotrace* the precursor of the photograph – a sort of early modern *photomaton*. *Physionotracess* were a craze of the Revolution and Empire. The method was exported to Hamburg and taken to America; it was eventually eclipsed by the invention of the *daguerreotype*.

The *physionotrace* was invented by Gilles-Louis Chrétien (1745-1811) in 1784 and initially the term referred to his 'machine'. The process relied on the collaboration of a draughtsman and a printer so Chrétien, former engineer turned engraver, teamed up with the miniaturist, Edmé Quenedey (1756-1830) and in their first year they produced 850. In 1790, the two parted ways and became rivals. Chrétien continued with Jean Fouquet, another professionally-trained artist and when Chrétien died in 1811, Etienne Bouchardy (1797-1849) took over the work. *Physionotracess* signed by (or attributed to) all four men are included in this exhibition. The selection of fifty-four images has been made from a larger group of one hundred prints which entered the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1970. The Cabinet des Estampes at the Bibliothèque Nationale have 2,800, however.

The term *physionotrace* clearly plays to a contemporary vogue for physiognomy. The French translation of Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* was published in Paris between 1781 and 1803. The four volumes were issued with the original 800 plates depicting silhouettes, profiles, busts or head and shoulder portraits, for in this pseudo science the fixed features of the face – the size and shape of the nose, of the brow, of the eyes – were read as the exterior signs of the individual's true, inner character. Furthermore, Lavater recommended drawing as the most accurate medium for capturing an individual's physiognomy. In this respect, the invention of a drawing machine which could capture a physiognomy, while eliding the distracting and personalizing presence of the hand, would seem important. In newspaper advertisements, the *physionotrace* was venerated for its superiority over traditional portrait methods, because it reproduced a likeness unmediated by the hand of an artist. When the sitter had been posed, the operator traced their profile through a *visier*. His pencil was attached via a jointed metal arm to another, moving across a separate sheet, simultaneously copying the drawing to a different scale. This mechanical drawing was referred to as the *grand trait* and surviving examples measure 46 x 37.5cm. The subsequent addition of stain, chalk or coloured washes could make the mechanically-copied image resemble a hand-drawn portrait, however. The principal function of the *grand trait* was to be

reproduced (again, with the aid of a pantograph) as a scaled-down drawing, which was used to transfer the sitter's profile to a metal plate. It was the resulting image etched or aquatinted and printed in reverse, which became known as the physionotrace.

The physionotrace therefore signalled the democratization of portrait painting: as mechanised portraiture it placed the art of the miniature within the reach of many, but as the mechanical reproduction of a physical likeness had been allied to newly fashionable printing techniques, the procedure offered the customer a *set* of identical portrait prints. Sittings were booked in advance and secured by deposit. The final price paid depended on the portrait options selected (in 1790 the price for the *grand trait*, the plate and 12 prints was 24 *livres*). From 1793 physionotrases were exhibited at the Salon and by 1795 there were 600 on display, arranged in twelve groups of fifty images. This suggests that the organisation of the present display recreates the manner in which physionotrases were viewed in public. The prints exhibited in the exhibition span the period during which physiognomy was popularised. Quick physiognomic assessments became possible with *Le Lavater Portatif*, or handbooks offering practical introductions to the art of reading faces. During the same period, the physionotrace evolved from its novelty status as magic mimicry to become a form of perfunctory image-making, one that had reduced the art of portraiture to the simple recording of a likeness.

One of the striking aspects of this exhibition, however, is the meticulous appearance of so many of the prints. With no visible *facture* or texture the smooth appearances suggest this high level of precision, and invite a belief in the exceptional accuracy of their representation. The distinguishing features of a sitter's identity are minutely transcribed, and lie in the particular shape of the chin, the size of the nose, the cut and colour of the hair. This sense of a direct and intimate encounter is enhanced by the use of colour. Six physionotrases are simply

coloured in, and the tinted head is left against a white background. Forty of the fifty-four on display are colour prints, and in these examples the subtle tints of the skin, hair and clothes are set against plain, dark backgrounds. Here, colour is rich and the delicate tonal variations suggest how, in the hands of a skilled artist, a print could be made to look like a painted medallion portrait. Eight physionotrases are printed in black ink on white paper but even these aim at a variety of pictorial effects. Some resemble pencil drawings, others pen and inks, enhanced with a monochrome wash. In these examples, the frame has been laid close to the image. This eliminates the title-line and the ridge of the plate-mark which, on the contrary, is left prominently visible in some of the colour prints, where it is exploited as part of the frame.

This temporary display clearly demonstrates how engravers of the physionotrace were exploiting colour-printing techniques, mixing and adapting etching and aquatint to produce sophisticated tonal effects that provided exact imitations rather than translations of other media. Printed portraits, chalk manner or wash manner prints circulated in Paris from the late 1770s as refined and expensive graphic products, and also as useful, cheaper versions of luxury items. In this busy market, the appeal of colour prints lay in their capacity for mimicry, their ability to look like pencil, chalk, crayon or oil. The physionotrace exploited this flexibility, the capacity of a printed image to maintain the labour-intensive appearance of a luxury product while simultaneously lending itself to a variety of utilitarian uses. They were framed and hung on the wall as portrait medallions, exchanged as gifts, used as decoration or for identification – to identify deserting soldiers or to preserve the appearance of the dead. Posthumous physionotrases were made from sculpted busts, and notably of revolutionary heroes. Chrétien and Fouquet's physionotrace of Marat was made from a bust that was modelled from the death mask. The physionotrace of Lepeletier de Saint Fargeau, 'first martyr' of the Revolution, who was assassinated in January 1793 for voting for the death of the King, was made from the wax effigy of his head. It was thus the physionotrace

which enabled Lepeletier's physical likeness to be broadly disseminated in revolutionary France. Maybe it is this early but persistent association between the physionotrace and radical politics which explains why this mechanical physiognomical procedure never seems to have crossed the Channel.

*'Physionotrices: galerie de portraits de la Revolution à l'Empire' was at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, from 28 March to 2 July 2012.*