

# CÉSARINE DAVIN-MIRVAULT'S ANTONIO BARTOLOMEO BRUNI

February 9 through May 21, 2006

In her lively portrait of Antonio Bartolomeo Bruni, painted about 1804, Césarine Davin-Mirvault has captured the ease of a master musician at his craft. Bruni, an accomplished violinist, composer, and conductor, is not depicted in the public arena of the orchestra or the opera. Instead, he plays in an informal, private setting, plucking (rather than bowing) the strings of his instrument. Bruni is casually perched on a chair, with his legs crossed, his eyes and head turned to the right, and his lips slightly parted. A string, nonchalantly wound around the neck of Bruni's violin, trails off the canvas, and the white hair powder dusting his shoulder suggests that an energetic performance has just concluded. The portrait is direct and immediate; we see Bruni in a moment of relaxed, yet inspired, music making. Usually hung in the office of the director, this masterful painting will be on view in the North Hall from February 9 through May 21.

Bruni and Davin-Mirvault were friends, and the private setting of the portrait recalls the musical evenings that the violinist and the painter, who was also an amateur singer, frequently attended. By the time Davin-Mirvault executed his portrait, Bruni was a well-known figure on the Parisian musical scene. He was born in Cuneo, Italy, in 1757. By 1780 he had moved to Paris, where his debut, a performance of one of his own violin concertos, was enthusiastically received. Soon thereafter he began writing operas, composing nearly twenty of them between 1785 and 1801. He also achieved considerable success as a performer and as the director of various Parisian orchestras. A supporter of the French Revolution, he composed patri-

otic songs and was appointed to official positions by the new regime in 1794 and 1795. In 1806, he went back to Italy but returned to Paris in 1814, the year the Bourbon monarchy was restored. Bruni's earlier affiliation with the Revolution eventually forced him to leave France permanently, and in 1816 he retired to his estate near Cuneo, where he stayed until his death in 1821. His portrait remained in the possession of his descendants until The Frick Collection acquired it in 1952.

The portrait of Bruni was first exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1804. The Salon was a biennial, sometimes annual, state-sponsored exhibition of contemporary art, and it was the premier venue for artists desirous of critical attention and patronage. In 1804, Davin-Mirvault succeeded on all counts. The portrait garnered positive reviews in the press, she was awarded a second-class medal by the administration, and she attracted both private and official commissions. Critics praised the vitality and the exceptional likeness of her painting. One reviewer wrote that the portrait was "full of energy and merit"; another noted that "everyone who knows signor Bruni has been amazed by the resemblance of the portrait to this artist." Her painting also drew the attention of Dominique Vivant Denon, director of the Musée Napoléon and Napoleon's art advisor. In a private report to the emperor, Denon declared that she had painted the portrait with "an assurance and vigor of expression that resembles more the touch of a history painter than the delicate grace of the feminine brush." History painting—depictions of classical, biblical, or historical scenes—had long been considered the most

respected genre. Denon's comment is based on the assumption, common in early nineteenth-century France, that history painters should be men (although women excelled in the genre as well), and that women artists were inherently more suited to the lesser genres. His comparison of Davin-Mirvault's talents to those of a history painter is thus very high praise.

Davin-Mirvault was at the beginning of her career when she exhibited Bruni's portrait, and her decision to submit the likeness of a well-known public figure to the Salon audience is one of the many astute choices she made in managing her professional life. She was one of several women painters who benefited from the relaxation in 1791 of restrictions on Salon participation. Whereas only four women a year could take part in the Salons of the ancien régime, by 1804, 41 of the 247 painters who exhibited there were women. Davin-Mirvault used the public forum of the Salon to her advantage, submitting work to every Salon held between 1798 and 1822, and exhibiting numerous portraits and genre scenes.

She enjoyed great success. In 1814, she exhibited a history painting, the *Death of Malek-Adhel* (now in the Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie, Aurillac), for which she was awarded a gold medal, the highest prize conferred on Salon submissions. Davin-Mirvault also was awarded official commissions by both the imperial and Bourbon administrations. In 1805, she was one of only two women artists (the other was Marie Benoist) among the eighteen painters commissioned by Denon on behalf of Napoleon to paint portraits of the imperial marshals

RICHARD DI LIBERTO



Césarine-Henriette-Flore Davin-Mirvault (1773–1844), Antonio Bartolomeo Bruni, c. 1804, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection

studying with him by 1804, when, in the Salon catalogue, she identified herself as his student.) By working with the most celebrated artist of the day, Davin-Mirvault had again made a shrewd choice. Critics praised her Davidian style and patrons appreciated it; she also was able to use her relationship with David as a selling point for her school.

Her assimilation of David's style was so accomplished that when her unsigned portrait of Bruni entered The Frick Collection, it was mistakenly attributed to David. In the absence of a signature, the assurance that Denon recognized in the portrait, the liveliness of the depiction, and the formal similarities to the work of David—such as the neutral background, informal pose, and high finish—led specialists to conclude that he was its author. It was only in 1962 that the portrait was correctly attributed to Davin-Mirvault.

The earlier attribution of the portrait to David, the most respected painter of the era, is a testament to Davin-Mirvault's consummate skill and her command of his technique. In an undated prospectus for her art school, she praised David as the "celebrated regenerator of the French school," stating that her goal as a teacher was "to inculcate in her students the precepts that she had drawn from the advice of this great master." Today, most of Davin-Mirvault's many canvases remain untraced; perhaps they, too, are masquerading as Davids, as her remarkable portrait of Antonio Bartolomeo Bruni once did.—*Kristel Smentek, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow*

for the Tuileries palace. Her contribution to the series, a full-length portrait of Marshal Lefebvre (now in the Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon), was finished in 1807. Davin-Mirvault was also a teacher; by 1805 she had established a respected art school in Paris for women.

Very little is known about her early artis-

tic training. Born in Paris in 1773, she began her career after having a family, first studying with the painter Joseph-Benoît Suvée and the miniaturist Jean-Baptiste Augustin. Soon thereafter, probably after Suvée left France in 1801, she began working with Jacques-Louis David, the foremost painter of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. (She certainly was