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Marlet's painting of the match between Saint-Amant and Staunton: the original, the lithograph, and the copies



— Portrait of Saint-Amant - Le Palamède 2nd series, volume two, 15 July 1842 P.CH.F. de Saint-Amant (Pierre Charles Fournier de Saint-Amant) Director of Le Palamède
By Henri Grévedon

by Jean Oliver Leconte

This article concerns the conflict about the painting made by Jean Henry Marlet during the match played in 1843 between Saint-Amant and Staunton. More exactly this painting represents the 19th game of the match, played on December 16, 1843 at the Paris Chess Club (Cercle des Échecs de Paris). This conflict led to a lawsuit between Saint-Amant and the painter Marlet.

The painting of Marlet is an exceptional document in many ways:

- Most of the notabilities of the Chess Club (Cercle des Échecs de Paris - on the 1st floor of the Café de la Régence) are represented, with the significant exception of Deschappelles.
- It is to our knowledge the only representation of the Chess Club of this time.

I discovered in the Parisian press of the time the report of the lawsuit which opposed the painter Marlet to Saint-Amant about the painting. This report brings several very interesting details which Saint-Amant mentions partially in the chess review Le Palamède.

There are, so to speak, at least 3 different versions of this painting:

- The original by Marlet
- A lithograph by Alexandre Laemlein
- Copies painted from the engraving.



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We are grateful to Mr. Jurgen Stigter for this picture of Marlet's original work. You can count 34 figures in this picture and a window in the background... You can also see two busts, the one on the left is La Bourdonnais and on the right Philidor.

But how can we be sure that this is the original painting by Jean Henry Marlet?

In the newspaper *Le Droit*, bulletin des tribunaux (The Law Bulletin of the Courts) of 4 January 1846 (source Retronews), Marlet's lawyer, Étienne Blanc, gives us the key element that allows us to identify the painting as the original:

"Me Étienne Blanc maintains, in fact, that all the presumptions are in favour of his client, and tend to establish that the parties only wanted to contract for the ownership of the painting. The lower price is clear proof of this, since, for 500 francs, we have a work composed of thirty-four figures,

and, what is even more decisive, thirty-four figures painted from life, that is to say thirty-four portraits, including that of the purchaser; which gives an average of 14 francs 70 centimes per portrait.

Thus, the work alone, the canvas, the material object, has been sold at a low price, so what will it be if we add the right of reproduction?"

As it is written above several times, the original painting contains 34 portraits.

The judgement also reveals that the price of the painting was obtained by deceit, which Saint-Amant eludes in *Le Palamède* when he justifies himself.

Let's consider this sentence from *Le Palamède* of 15 January 1846 before reading the rest...

"M. Marlet, who had been friends with Saint-Amant for more than twenty years, asked him to attend the sessions of the Grand Défi against the English." (Great Challenge against Staunton of course).

We also take into account the article published in the newspaper *Le Droit* with Marlet's lawyer:

"It is the *Palamède*, a monthly review of chess and other games, where one reads, on February 15, 1844, that the beautiful composition of Marlet has, for all the chess players, an inestimable price; one exalts there the genius of the painter and one expresses the wish to see his picture engraved, so that each amateur can get a copy.

The Court must know that this diary is signed by Saint-Amant and that this painting was not yet finished."

So Saint-Amant already had a little (business) idea in the back of his mind... to trade copies of the painting, even before it was finished. The rest is interesting:

"A few days later, Marlet sees Mme Saint-Amant enter his studio. She is very keen to buy this painting, in which her husband plays the main role: it is a surprise that she is keeping secret from him, and above all Marlet, considering the long-time friendship between them, must not be too demanding about the price, because Mrs Saint-Amant will pay with her small savings.

Marlet agrees, and, as soon as he does, Mme Saint-Amant has a promise to sell signed in his name. This unusual precaution reveals the agreement between husband and wife to obtain a lower price for Marlet's work. Indeed, a few days later, the painting was withdrawn and paid for by the husband, as the receipt issued by the artist shows. If there was any surprise, you can see that it was

not for Saint-Amant, but for Marlet, who had obviously been the victim of a rather cleverly concerted ruse.”

Saint-Amant replies to Marlet through the *Palamède* of 15 January 1846 (page 36):

"We handed over the bank note of five hundred francs. And yet M. Marlet was our debtor, by recognised account, stopped and due, of more than 800 fr. for the supply of wine, for many years! Our lawyer mentioned these facts. We pass over them as well as the affair of the frame, a miserable villainy which was nevertheless the cause of our rupture.”

Shortly afterwards, Marlet noticed the existence of a lithograph made from his painting. He complained in strong terms to Saint-Amant. In order to avoid a lawsuit, they agreed to share the profits, but Saint-Amant asked Marlet to share the costs, which Marlet refused. His name was even removed from the lithograph and replaced by that of the lithographer, Alexandre Laemlein.

Whether it was Marlet or Saint-Amant, the two were not very clear-cut in their friendship of over 20 years, which ended with this trial. In the end, the court allowed Saint-Amant to distribute the lithograph, but acknowledged Marlet's prejudice.

"(The court) dismisses Marlet's main claim;
Condemns Saint-Amant to pay Marlet 200 fr. in damages for the prejudice caused to him to this day.
Says and orders that Saint-Amant will be obliged to put the names of Marlet and Lavaucher at the bottom of the copies that will be issued again.”

_ Reproduction of the lithograph by Laemlein in *La Stratégie* - November 1911 - Quoted by Etienne Cornil

So here is this lithograph. The lithograph contains only 32 figures (compared to 34 for the original work).

And finally here is a copy made from the lithograph. When the latter arrived in England, it seems that one or more artists transformed it to create a new painting. These copies are easy to identify, since they have only 30 figures and you can see that the window in the background has disappeared.

_ A copy, with 30 figures and the back window missing.

It is this copy that can be found on Wikipedia as being by Marlet.

However, a few months ago, on eBay, this copy indicated as being the original work of Marlet, was for sale for more than 12,000 USD (more than 11,000 EUR).

Finally, here is a variant of the lithograph published in the newspaper l'Illustration on 10 January 1846, a few days after the publication of the trial report.

All things considered, we can say that Marlet missed a golden opportunity...while Saint-Amant demonstrated a remarkable flair for good business deals.

 L'Illustration - 10th January 1846

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