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### PIERRE PUGET

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## PIERRE PUGET.

BY FREDERIC BERNELLE.

ON the 16th of October, 1620, at Marseilles, Simon Puget, a mason, with two friends came before his parish priest to declare the birth of a boy, who was christened Pierre. When doing this the simple-minded workman was certainly far from foreseeing that, thanks to this small child, his obscure plebeian name would one day be more famous and enduring than those of the high and mighty lords for whom he often built costly and gorgeous mansions. However he was prevented from seeing this by his death, which took place two or three years later.

About his fourteenth year the young Pierre was placed in the workshop of Roman, the master-carver in charge of the decoration of the galleys in the dockyard of Marseilles. There he soon became more skilful than his comrades and thus helped in directing the workmen. Very probably he had a good share in the carvings of the galley squadron which defeated the Spaniards on the 1st of September, 1638, off Genoa. About this time he left for Italy to complete his training.

When he returned, six years or so later, the French Navy was in the full swing of its development. The great minister, Richelieu, had given a regular and definite organisation to the dockyards—Toulon for the sailing ships, Marseilles for the rowing craft. The decorating workshop of Toulon was under the rule of Nicholas Levray, a man generally well thought of and a friend of Gaspard Puget, Pierre's eldest brother, a mason and something of a sculptor. Accordingly introduced by Gaspard, the young artist was duly accepted.

At that time the superintendent of the dockyard was the Chevalier Louis Le Roux, Seigneur d'Infreville. A fine ship was then under construction, to be named *La Reine* and dedicated to the Queen, Anne of Austria, who was now "Grand maître de la Navigation." Certain decorators, Puget among them, were instructed by d'Infreville to prepare decorative schemes so that the best might be selected. Puget enjoyed the triumph of seeing his own design taken for the ship. His joy was deep and its memory so lasting that before his death, after a long life full of successes, the design of *La Reine* was hung in his room over his bed, as a token of the first step of his reputation.

These circumstances seemed to foretell for him a rapid and brilliant career with the Navy. However it was much later that this took place. Now, about 1646, he left again for Italy. He had indeed an enthusiastic nature in which there was some weakness as the counterpart of the talent ; he was more ready to burst into flames than to persevere. Having begun as a wood-carver he became a painter, and in his own mind he was a sculptor without disdaining the building science of an architect. It would be impossible in the limits of this study to follow him throughout his complicated existence.<sup>1</sup>

He joined the Navy in 1668. After a long stay in Genoa, where he enjoyed unequalled celebrity, he suddenly wished to come home again. D'Infreville, who knew him and remembered the design of *La Reine* put his name before Colbert as director of the decorating service. The arrangement was hard to settle, by the artist's own fault. His head turned by his past triumphs and his exaggerated conception of his own value, he thought himself impossible to replace and dared to put such bold conditions that the result was that a year passed before his admission, and that the cold and rough Colbert was always ready to throw him overboard.

His time on the Navy List was a warlike and troublesome period, during which he interfered with all the chiefs of departments and was on a hostile footing with everyone. With Maitre Gedeon Rodolphe, chief constructor ; because he eagerly affirmed that ships' framing must be adapted to their ornaments, instead of the logical reverse process, and that he must therefore have the shipbuilding under his supervision. With the Chevalier de Clerville, " Ingenieur en chef des Fortifications," who became his worst enemy ; because, under the pretence that he was an architect, he said he had to survey every building in the Dock-yard. His main conflict was with the naval officers ; because his exaggerated conceptions overloaded and strained the stern of the vessels and were greatly prejudicial to their buoyancy. For instance, in the decoration of the *Monarque* the stern carried no less than 27 statues all greater than life-size without mention-

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(<sup>1</sup>) He made gigantic figures, some of them twice life-size. His paintings were often religious. In 1868 a good book, " Pierre Puget," was written by Leon Legrange, Perrin-Paris, with a catalogue. More recently, in 1906, there was published " Pierre Puget, Decorateur Naval et Mariniste," Longuet-Paris, by Phillippe Auguier, curator of the Longchamps Museum ; an album of 36 plates with a catalogue and a biographical notice.

ing the smaller details ; while in the *Furieux* the lateral stern-galleries had to be removed as soon as the ship went to sea.

After these distasteful experiences he began to neglect his work, and was in addition ran after everywhere for private work. At last, one day in 1679, he learned that he had been struck off the dockyard staff without warning. After this his relations with the Navy became more and more distant. He was cut down by death on the 2nd December, 1694, at the age of 72. In his death certificate he was described as "a man excelling in painting, carving and architecture."

Pierre Puget's naval drawings are divided into two very distinct series. One consists of the official designs for the ornaments of ships under construction. They are very valuable documents, giving the exact appearance of characteristic features of ships of those days. Thirteen are known :—*La Reine*, *Monarque*, *Isle de France*, *Sceptre*, *Trompeuse*, *Boufonne*, *Therese Royale* (two drawings), *Paris*, *Madame*, *Rubis*, and two unnamed designs. The *Soleil Royal*, according to recent research, was not by him but by Le Brun, first painter to the King. Certainly he worked for many other ships. It is worth noting that, to avoid expense, Puget proposed a standard design of stern to be used for a series of ships allowing for special alterations for each vessel to prevent monotony and preserve sufficient originality in each case.

The other part of his naval work consists of studies of every sort—views of ships, of squadrons, of galleys, and in this last respect he shows the influence of the Italian arist, Della Bella, of the end of the seventeenth century, who was practically a specialist. These drawings are numerous, many are still in existence, mainly in museums at Marseilles, Toulon, the Louvre, etc. Amongst these works some are particularly well known, such as the storm studies giving a good impression of a raging sea, a plate of galleys in the road of Marseilles, ships with flags and ensigns and some others. The third deserves a particular notice ; on the left a ship seen broadside on is going off under sail, in the middle another vessel showing her profusely carved stern, is leaving, the third ship on the right is seen bow on at anchor but setting sail and about to leave ; they are carrying rank and squadron flags and ensigns at the various masts.

Pierre Puget's genius is very personal and a characteristic feature of his naval drawings is an exuberant life. The ships are always doing something, firing guns, hoisting or lowering masts or sails. There are always a lot of ships, or galleys or boats

crowded with men in the background. In the foreground you see a bit of shore with figures ; a porter with a heavy box on his shoulders—a good excuse for depicting solid muscles—or spectators showing clearly their feelings. In the plate showing a ship firing a gun at a suspicious galley, a man lying on the ground near his resting horse is considering the scene with superb indifference, whilst near him another is running away obviously terrified, and a dog is barking at the noise.

This care for "framing" the subject sometimes gives surprising results. In a large plate a ship marvellously accurate, landing goods with her lower yards struck, has by her side the remains of a ruined temple, whose high columns are nearly as tall as her masts. Behind, in the corner of a fortress crowned with two guns which evidently belong to the field artillery. In another case you see a galley under her night awning, and an unfitted ship in a sort of small haven directly open to the high sea with marble quays surrounded by elegant buildings, a portico with a terrace, a palace with statues ; both, like the temple, very unexpected in a seaport.

Nevertheless the marine drawings of Pierre Puget have great documentary value. The ships are accurate and complete, and when a rope is missing it is from forgetfulness or haste, not from ignorance. There is no naval absurdity. The artist always worked in pen and ink with touches of sepia ; the relief is modelled with small pen strokes close together, but, it is worth mentioning, never crossed. Many drawings are on vellum. No naval oil painting by him is known.

In conclusion, we can say that Pierre Puget was an agreeable artist, sincere and true, and that we owe to him a good knowledge of the French Mediterranean fleet of the seventeenth century.