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Laura Auricchio

# Fiction in the Archives (*pace* Natalie Zemon Davis)

Those of you who know me will not be surprised to hear that I am about to be brutally honest. When I received the invitation to speak today, my first thought was that the e-mail had reached me by accident. After all, Laura is not an uncommon name. And it was not at all clear to me how I might contribute to a conference that was, as I initially understood it, devoted to doctoral study grounded in practice. Far from the studio and the charrette, I conduct my research in museums, libraries, and archives. I could not imagine why anyone present would want to hear about my experience completing a PhD [SLIDE 1: LG MET] on the eighteenth-century French portraitist Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. To give you a sense of my topic, I show you Labille-Guiard's monumental *Self-Portrait with Two Students*, which was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1785, and now hangs prominently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. My hesitation was not because I find Labille-Guiard uninteresting. On the contrary, her paintings are spectacular and her story fascinating. She was one of fewer than twenty women ever to win admission to France's Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, and she was the only female academician to participate in the reinvention of the nation and its art during the French Revolution. [SLIDE 2: JOURNAL DE PARIS, CHAVAN IAC INVENTORY] Still, contemplating today's event, I had visions of an entire audience dozing off as I droned on about months spent in the Bibliothèque Nationale in

Paris, reading through daily newspapers like the *Journal de Paris*, seen here the left. I had a hard time seeing the relevance of the weeks spent in dusty archives trying to decipher the handwritten inventories of chateaus seized during the French Revolution, like this 1792 inventory on the right. But no, Lisa Grocott assured me, the invitation was, in fact, intended for me. The goal is to put a wide variety of methodologies on the table, so that we can find areas of common interest while also learning from our differences. And so, with that in mind, I offer something completely different.

[SLIDE 3: FICTION IN THE ARCHIVES] In 1987, Natalie Zemon Davis, an influential historian of early modern France, published a book entitled *Fiction in the Archives*. Like mine, much of Davis's work involves crafting tales from fragments: her sources include court records, probate inventories, personal letters, and legal statements. In the case of *this* book, the "fiction" mentioned in the title refers to one group of sources. Davis is studying pardon tales that were submitted by accused criminals in the sixteenth century as attempts to exculpate themselves. They were, as Davis argues, essentially exercises in strategic storytelling.

Today, I'd like to suggest a more expansive view of "fiction in the archives." Taking one chapter of my dissertation as a case study, I'd like to propose, first, that fictions of various sorts are all that we can ever construct from our sources, whether they be visual or textual. Second, I'd like to underscore my belief that the *process* of historical writing is necessarily a creative act. No mere report of predetermined facts, the art history dissertation is the *medium* through which doctoral candidates analyze and make sense of the snippets found in the museum and the archive. It is through *writing* that the past—or, at least, a version of the past—comes to life in the present.

[SLIDE 4: PROVENCE: OIL SKETCH; PASTEL]

Like a murder mystery, chapter four of my dissertation begins with a corpse in need of explanation. In this case, the deceased is a painting by Labille-Guiard that was apparently destroyed in 1793 during the violent period of the French Revolution known as the Reign of Terror. Why, the chapter asks, was the work destroyed? Why did others escape this fate? Who orchestrated the painting's demise? What rhetoric justified the iconoclastic act? Like any other corpse, this one could not be resurrected. All I could do was seek a culprit. Funded with a Fulbright grant to support a year of research in France, I set out after a trail of clues.

Let's start with the visual evidence. On the left is a small oil sketch, measuring 14 by 31 inches and housed in the Museum of the Legion of Honor in Paris. It depicts the Comte de Provence, a brother of King Louis XVI. We see him receiving a new member into the military and hospitalier order known as the Chevaliers de Saint-Lazare. On the right is a pastel study of the Comte de Provence, now in the Musée Lécuyer in Saint-Quentin. Both of these preliminary works appear to have been created for the same commission, received in 1788.

We know about the commission from several sources. First, we have a letter dated May 2, 1795. Written on Labille-Guiard's behalf, and housed in series D of the National Archives, the letter seeks financial compensation for losses suffered during the Revolution. It reports that the finished painting was seventeen feet high and fourteen feet wide. It was "as rich as an *objet d'art*," filled with figures and "an abundance of accessories." However, it states that the Paris city government, "by an order of August 11, 1793, forced citizen Guiard to deliver the portrait of the former prince and all the studies related to this work to be devoured by flames."

How much credence can we place in this letter? After all, we know that it's not entirely true. It states that all the studies related to the work were burned, but here we have two of them. Moreover, the letter, like those studied by Natalie Zemon Davis, is, in some sense, a fiction—it's

a narrative crafted to present its protagonist in a sympathetic light with an eye to eliciting a particular response. What part of it can be believed?

Some of the information could be independently verified. A letter written by Labille-Guiard in 1790, housed in series K of the National Archives, mentions that she had to move to a larger studio in order to accommodate a large painting commissioned by the comte de Provence. But I had no way of knowing what had come of that work.

Maybe, I thought, I could find that piece of legislation—the order of August 11, 1793, that had required her to turn over the painting. So off I went to the archives of the city of Paris, located on the outskirts of town. But when I got there, I learned that most of the documents pertaining to municipal laws from this period had burned with City Hall during the uprising known as the Paris Commune in 1870. No legislation was likely to be found.

Now what? Perhaps, I could find some mention of burned paintings in the daily newspapers. There was only one way to do this: I sat down in front of a microfilm machine at the Bibliothèque Nationale and skimmed through all the Paris papers from August, 1793. In the *Journal de Paris* of August 16, I found an elliptical report that "the decree ordering the destruction of paintings and mausoleums of the kings and other prominent figures of the French monarchy, has been carried out." A more detailed story appeared on August 17. It described a blaze that engulfed "shameful signs of feudalism" while a crowd chanted "long live the Republic, one and indivisible." Still, barring any records documenting precisely which works were burned, I have no proof that *this* was the fire that claimed Labille-Guiard's painting.

So I shifted gears. If I could not learn precisely when or where the painting was burned, could I at least understand why? Here, I had better luck. Because it turns out that, in the fall of 1793, people throughout France were writing letters to the National Assembly boasting of the

paintings they had destroyed. One of these, found in the Parliamentary Archives, came from the citizens of Fontainebleau who were eager to demonstrate that, although they lived in the shadow of a royal palace, they were faithful to the Revolution. Terming the chateau of Fontainebleau "a temporary residence of tyrants and their court," the letter explained that a local political club had "built a pyre composed of all the effigies of despots that decorated the walls of their former chateau, and the flame soon annihilated these reminders of our ancient enslavement." In this way, the good citizens had ensured that "our eyes will no longer be offended by the discouraging spectacle of the arts prostituted to transmit the image of tyrants." As I understood it, burning royal family portraits served as a means of proving ones patriotism, while also purging an unwanted past from the visual landscape.

Were these, precisely, the reasons why *Labille-Guiard's* painting was destroyed? I don't know for certain. I *can't* know for certain.

I returned from France with a laptop full of notes. As I sat down to try to make sense of all of these fragments, I realized that I was trying to build a story on a foundation of ruins. Given the nature of the subject, second-hand tales of torched paintings were all I had to go on. My task, then, was not to *report* the past, but to *construct* a plausible narrative.

In the year that I spent writing the dissertation, I came to understand that the chapter about lost paintings differed only in degree—not in kind—from any other chapter. The past cannot be recovered, so that any story constructed from the visual or textual archive will always be a fiction. Like the writers of Natalie Zemon Davis's pardon tales, historians can do little more than craft persuasive stories based on selected versions of the truth.

Thank you.