

ALEXIS GRIMOU

(Argenteuil, near Paris 1678 - Paris 1733)

Portrait of a Gentleman, Half-Length, Wearing a Cuirasse, a Hat and a Red Cape

signed 'Grimou / .f.' (centre left)

oil on canvas

48 x 39.5 cm (19 x 15½ in)

IN ALEXIS GRIMOU'S *PORTRAIT OF A GENTLEMAN, HALF-LENGTH, WEARING A CUIRASSE, A HAT AND A RED CAPE* a young man looks back over his shoulder towards the viewer. Dressed in a cuirasse, the armour of a heavy cavalry officer, he holds an armed pole, which is complemented by the elegance of his cape, collar and hat. The rich red, blue and yellow hues of his clothing enliven the picture, despite its shadowed background.

Portrait of a Gentleman, Half Length, Wearing a Cuirasse, a Hat and a Red Cape has many of the characteristics of a typical Grimou portrait. This is evident if we compare the work to one of his best-known works, the Uffizi's *Young Male Pilgrim* (fig. 1). The similarity in pose of the two figures, with their heads turned back over their right shoulders, and staff clasped in their right hands is immediately evident. Their poses create a sense of intimacy, as if the sitters have only just become aware of the viewer's presence, a technique used repeatedly by Grimou in his portraits. The faces of the sitters in both paintings are also intensely illuminated, lifting the figures out of the canvas, from their dark shadowy backgrounds.

One of the most distinctive features of Grimou's portraits is the different costumes that worn by his sitters. Although he painted many conventional portraits, Grimou is at his best and most original in his many 'fantasy portraits'. He depicted his sitters dressed as Armenians, as Pilgrims, as Savoyards, as Spaniards or, as in his *Portrait of Jean Bart* (1700, Louvre, Paris), as Poles. He even portrayed himself as a Greek god in *Self-Portrait as Bacchus* (1728, Museum Magnin, Dijon).

In 1704 Grimou married a niece of the tavern-keeper Procope, whose house in Paris was a meeting-place for artists and intellectuals. The following year he was approved by the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. Although instructed by the Académie to paint as his *morceaux de réception* portraits of the sculptor Jean Raon (1630-1707) and the painter Antoine Coyppel, he failed to present either picture and in 1709 the commission was annulled. As a result he joined the Académie de St. Luc.

Grimou was a pupil of François de Troy (1645-1730), from whom he learnt to use a palette of unusually warm colours and to work with uncomplicated pictorial formats in the tradition of rigorous seventeenth-century classicism. Certain audacities in his handling, however, place him well into the eighteenth century. The significance of Grimou's portraits for the development of early eighteenth-century French art has not yet been fully appreciated. Many of them are half-lengths, and they clearly stimulated the fantasy portraits later sketched by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806) (see catalogue no. 96), who, moreover, painted pastiches of Grimou's manner, such as *Portrait of a Girl*, (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London), although this attribution has been questioned.¹ Grimou's influence can also be discerned in the work of Charles



Alexis Grimou,
Young Male Pilgrim,
The Uffizi Gallery,
Florence
(Figure 1)

Eisen (1720-1778), Joseph Ducreux (1735-1802) and Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805). For this reason it can be said that by introducing into France northern formulae for improvised portraits, Grimou played a role not unlike that of Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), who was responsible for introducing the *fête galante* into French art.

In terms of style as well as iconography, Grimou was influenced by Dutch seventeenth-century masters, notably Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), almost to the point of pastiche, and because of this he was often confused with his contemporaries Jean-Baptiste Santerre (1651-1717) and Jean Raoux (1677-1734). His characteristic warm, earthy palette and golden *sfumato* reveal his close study of Dutch art and demonstrate why he was known to his contemporaries as *le Rembrandt français*. In addition to the aforementioned Santerre and Raoux, many artists from the French Académie, such as Hyacinthe Rigaud (1659-1743), worked in the style of Rembrandt in the first decades of the eighteenth century, all considering Rembrandt to be their true master. Certainly the deep *chiaroscuro* of the works discussed reflects Grimou's debt to Rembrandt as well as to the work of George de La Tour (1593-1652).

¹ Donald Bruce, 'The Dulwich Gallery Restored' in *Contemporary Review*, 1st December 2000.

