

THE LIMNER COMPANY



Attributed to NICOLAS HALLÉ (1749 - after 1790)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, almost certainly Suzanne Elisabeth de Gaulmyn (1752-after 1804), Countess-Canoness of Saint-Denis Church, Alix (later married name Puy de Semur), wearing white satin dress, a red moiré silk sash, an order and gold epaulette, seated, holding a letter in her right hand and her left arm resting on a table with marble top, maroon covered book beside her; blue silk curtain background

Circa: circa 1777

circa 1777

Watercolour on ivory (licence S5WHJHPL)

Circular, 75 mm (3 in) diam.

Silver frame stamped with a coin pattern

Previously called the Chanoinesse de Golmin by Christie's, London, this fascinating portrait shows a young woman, who can now be identified as Suzanne Elisabeth de Gaulmyn.[1] Like many other teenage girls, she became a noble canoness at St Denis in Alix (in the Lyonnais region of France). In 1771, Suzanne entered the 'Chapter' of the church, after the highly selective process to prove her nobility.[2] At the age of 23, in 1775, she left to marry Jacques Augustin du Puy de Semur, a musketeer in the King's Guard, which she did in 1777.[3] The portrait here likely marks the occasion of her marriage, but she still wears the insignia of her Chapter: an enamelled gold cross attached to a ribbon worn as a sash for church services.

The option of entering a Chapter would have had much appeal to young women of the period, where choices were limited to the authority of a husband or a bishop. A canoness, however, remained free to determine her own destiny. Upon entering the Chapter, she would acquire the title of Countess, and kept it for the rest of her life, whereas in civilian life she lost (unlike her brothers) her father's title of nobility to take that of her husband. She was not cut off from the world and regularly stayed with her family. At the age of 25, she could choose to return to live in the society with which she had not broken

ties, or took vows, and from then on was able to benefit from a portion of the Chapter's income. Once a professed canoness, a semi-religious, semi-worldly lifestyle could be lived until her death.

During the Revolution, the chapters, which combined clergy and nobility, were the first to be dissolved. The canonesses of Alix fought to keep their houses and their income, but many returned to their families, and their houses were eventually sold as national property.

The traditional identification of the artist of this portrait as the elusive Nicolas Hallé still stands. The painting of the silks of the sitter's dress fit with the description of his painting by Bernd Pappe, given when discussing a miniature attributable to Hallé in the Tansey Collection. Pappe states that Hallé's miniatures 'show an individual painting style which is easily recognised: the facial features are painted very precisely and sharply, the face is often directly turned to the viewer, and the clothes appear almost metallic because of the conspicuously placed highlights with their rich contrasts. Further hallmarks of his style are a mouth that appears pinched because of the narrow brown dividing line of the lips, together with striking red accents in the corners of the eyes'.^[4]

This portrait of the Countess de Gaulmyn is typical of the clientele who were attracted to Hallé's precise yet grand style of miniature painting. Apparently married to a Baroness, Hallé found a patron in the Duc de Penthièvre (1725-1793), the illegitimate grandson of Louis XIV.

Hallé was working at the same time as the successful artist Pierre Adolphe Hall. The similarities in their names, techniques and statuses as artists caused some confusion and rivalry, culminating in an incident where, one year after the outbreak of the French Revolution, Hallé's wife had allegedly thrown apples from her opera box on patriotically minded fellow citizens, but the blame was cast on Hall's wife.

[1] This identification is a new reading of a handwritten old label on the backing paper, which previously identified the sitter as 'Chanoinesse de Golmin trisaïeule de Ary Chevallier homme de lettres'. The spelling of 'Golmin' is phonetic for 'Gaulmyn' and her identity is further proved by the order of the Chapter of a canoness of Alix that she wears on her sash.

[2] Before the letters patent of Louis XV in 1753, proof of nobility was testimonial, but the king imposed five generations of paternal nobility. The Chapter's own statutes, written in 1756, went beyond royal prescriptions and required eight degrees of paternal nobility. The evidence was presented to the Canon-Counts of Lyon designated by the Prioress of Alix, and studied by a genealogist.

[3] Suzanne and Jacques had several children, including Jacques Claude Augustin, born in 1778, Gilbert in 1780, Marie Louise, born around 1781, and Charles in 1783.

[4] See <https://tansey-miniatures.com/en/collection/10244> (accessed March 2025). Very few signed works are known, but one is illustrated in J. de Bourgoing, *Die Französische Bildnisminiatur*, Vienna, 1928, pl. 45.