

The faces of history. The imagined portraits of the Merovingian kings at Versailles (1837-1842)

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‘One would expect people to remember the past and imagine the future. But in fact, when discoursing or writing about history, they imagine it in terms of their own experience, and when trying to gauge the future they cite supposed analogies from the past; till, by a double process of repetition, they imagine the past and remember the future’. (Namier 1942, 70)

The historian Christian Amalvi observes that during the first half of the nineteenth century, most of the time history books presented a ‘succession of dynasties (Merovingians, Carolingians, Capetians), an endless row of reigns put end to end (those of the ‘rois fainéants’¹ and of the last Carolingians especially), without any hierarchy, as a succession of fanciful portraits of monarchs, almost interchangeable’ (Amalvi 2006, 57). The Merovingian kings’ portraits, exhibited in the Museum of French History at the palace of Versailles, could be described similarly: they represent a succession of kings ‘put end to end’, with imagined ‘fanciful’ appearances, according to Amalvi. However, this vision disregards their significance for early nineteenth-century French society. Replacing these portraits in the broader context of contemporary history painting, they appear characteristic of a shift in historical apprehension.

The French history painting had slowly drifted away from the great tradition established by Jacques-Louis David’s moralistic and heroic vision of ancient history. The 1820s saw a new formation of the historical genre led by Paul Delaroche’s sentimental vision and attention to a realistic vision of history, restored to picturesqueness. Representing French history was indeed a way of questioning French national identity, within a society struggling to define itself after the 1789 Revolution, the Napoleonic Empire and the return of the Bourbons to the throne in 1814 (see Bann 1985; Chu and Weisberg 1994; Gadoin and Palmier-Chatelain 2008). The shift in history’s interpretation and representation expressed the feeling of uncertain times, and was part of a process of recovery and adaptation to the new era. ‘What is France now, and what constitutes French identity?’ were major questions, to which art was a privileged way of answering.

Using history as a Bible, painting, but also literature, theatre and music caught a ‘historical fever’, to which the Merovingian portraits at Versailles are closely related. In these kings’ faces, the physical and moral traits of the nation could be revealed, as they work as an embodiment of national identity expressed through national history. They appear as a synthesis of some of the characteristics of the representation of history. Several levels of comprehension can be discerned. Following Serna (2016, 8) these portraits layer four temporalities: the simple past, through the representation of historical facts; the appropriation of the past, which is the result of a mental representation from the artists enriched by historical researches. Thus, they combine the taste for historical veracity which appeared in the 1830s, with imagination. Thirdly, they are a testimony to some of the preoccupations of the artists and their society, and are the aesthetic result of contemporary pictorial tendencies. And last, they question the future, through a back and forth movement between the past, present and future. Additionally, these portraits work on two paradoxical levels of discourse: the heroic vision of the French monarchs is intertwined with a more subjective vision, which induces a difference of scale, from a distant, monumental vision of the kings, to a closer, personal vision. This article studies these different levels of discourse and temporality, which constitute the interest and mystery of these portraits, in order to answer the question: how do these portraits embody the state of mind of French society in the 1840s, questioning its roots and heritage, and through it, its own identity? We shall first consider the social and cultural context, their commissioning by the state, and the historical representations created by the artists. The article will focus specifically on two portraits, *Dagobert I^{er}* and *Clovis II* by Émile Signol (Figures 1 and 2), in order to understand their significance for the contemporary viewer, and what they tell us about the deep identity concerns of uncertain French nineteenth-century society.

Eighteen portraits

The Museum of French History at the palace of Versailles opened its doors in 1837, after several years of intense work led by its architect Frédéric Nepveu, under the orders of King Louis-Philippe (Gaehtgens et al 1984, 57). The aim of those galleries was dear to this ‘citizen king’. He had been crowned during the revolution of 1830, put on the throne by the people, especially the bourgeoisie, and wished to be approachable by walking alone in the Paris streets (Marrinan 1988, 4). Striving to secure his place and to honour his legacy, he dedicated a museum to the French nation, a ‘centre of popular education’ (Gaehtgens et al 1984, 57), tracing its history from its beginnings to 1830. Creating a national museum in the former palace of the French kings was not without significance. Valérie Bajou, former curator of the museum, notes that the palace gave up its former status as a private residence and symbol of an oppressive monarchy, in order to become a public and historic monument (Bajou 1999, 239). In this



Figure 1: Léopold Massard after Émile Signol, 'Portrait of Dagobert I, King of Austrasia, Neustria and Burgundy (d. 638)' (1842), in Charles Gavard, *Galeries Historiques de Versailles* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1838-1842). © Sainte Menehould; Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 2012.

temple to the nation's glory, the representation of the history of France, closely associated with the monarchy's history, became the privileged medium of a patriotic and royalist hagiographic discourse (Sabatier 2013, 12-13). Political disagreements, clashing opinions, conflicting memories of the Revolution of 1789 were put aside; regaining prestige, unity and stability became the dominant theme. The discourse sponsored by the museum also accentuated continuity and dynastic legitimacy, and allowed Louis-Philippe to stand more firmly on a throne that he did not take for granted (Gaehtgens 1984, 57-79). During the fitting out, the museum centralized contemporary production of historical paintings and portraits. The Maison du Roi made hundreds of orders, and transferred many canvases displayed in other museums or other and palaces. Among these orders for new work was a large number of original or copied portraits, including the series of portraits discussed here.

The seventy-two portraits of the French kings were brought together in the 'Kings' room', displayed in Marie-Antoinette's former apartments. Eighteen of



Figure 2: Léopold Massard after Émile Signol, 'Clovis II, King of Austrasia, Neustria, Burgundy' (1842), in Charles Gavard, *Galeries Historiques de Versailles* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1838-1842). © Sainte Menehould; Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 2012.

these paintings represented the Merovingian dynasty. Louis-Pierre Anquetil, one of the most widely-read French historians of the nineteenth century,² listed twenty-one in his *Histoire de France* (Anquetil et al 1838, 143), but the Maison du Roi chose to exclude paintings of the kings whose origins were too doubtful (Pharamond, Clodion, Mérovée and Childéric I). This allowed the series to start with Clovis (c. 466-511), who had symbolic significance as the first Christian king of what would become France. Seven history painters (none of whom were portraitists) were commissioned between 1835 and 1842. Their talent and fame varied, but each received five hundred francs per portrait (Archives Nationales), which went against the practice at the time of adjusting the price of a painting according to the artist's fame.

History painter François-Louis Dejuinne was commissioned to paint Clovis I, and produced a frontal full-length portrait that contrasted with the head-and-shoulders portraits of other kings. The religious painter Jean-Louis Bézard painted the two sons and successors of Clovis, Childebert I (King of Paris and King of Orléans from 511 to 558) and Chlothar I (King of the Franks from 558

to 561). Jean-Joseph Dassy provided Charibert's portrait (King of Paris from 561 to 567). Atala Varcollier, a copyist, and god-daughter of Chateaubriand (Anquetil's collaborator), painted Chilperic I (King of Soissons from 561 to 584), a full-face portrait against a surprising green background, again contrasting with the rest of the series. Georges Rouget (Jacques-Louis David's favoured pupil), Raymond Monvoisin (who led the newly founded academy of Santiago de Chile) and Émile Signol (a religious painter who produced the most fascinating paintings of the series) shared the last Kings of the dynasty: Chlothar II, known as the Younger (King of Neustria then King of the Franks from 584 to 629) by Monvoisin; Dagobert I (King of Austrasia then King of the Franks from 622 to c. 639); Clovis II known as the Lazy (King of Neustria and Burgundy from 639 to 657) by Signol; Chlothar III (King of Neustria and Burgundy from 663 to 673) by Monvoisin; and Childeric II (King of the Franks of Austrasia, then of the Franks from 662 to 675) by Signol. These last three kings died in their twenties. Signol also painted Thierry III (King of the Franks and of Neustria, then of the Franks from 673 to c. 679) and Dagobert III (King of the Franks from 711 to 715, from age twelve to his death at sixteen). Georges Rouget painted Clovis III (King of Austrasia from 682 to 695) as pale and affected. Monvoisin delivered the portrait of Chilperic II (initially a monk, he became King of the Franks of Neustria and Burgundy, and finally King of the Franks from 715 to 721). Finally, Signol was recommissioned for the portraits of Thierry IV de Chelles (King of the Franks from 721 to 737, the last genuine Merovingian King) and of Childeric III (of unknown descent, he is the last ruling member of the Merovingian dynasty and led the Frank realms from 743 to 751) (Geary 2011).

Reading such a list may seem tedious, but the detail is important, in order to have a clear vision of the series we are dealing with, including the gap lying between the generic term of 'Kings of France' used during the nineteenth century and the historical reality. Indeed, after the accession of Clovis, the first King of the Franks, the territory split into several kingdoms, which his successors sometimes failed to keep together. Not all the Merovingian Kings were actually styled 'King of the Franks', and the terms of 'France' and the 'kingdom of France' would not exist until centuries after the Merovingians' reigns (see Werner and Favier 1984; Favier and Caron 1984).

The portraits, however, had to symbolize the permanence of the monarchy, and the simplified historical discourse of the Versailles museum inaccurately assimilated the Merovingian kings as kings of France (as did some contemporary historians).³ The idea was to establish continuity between the monarchs through the image and the museographic set which followed the chronological order of the succession. We must note, however, that if efforts were made in order to ease the reading of the ensemble, disparities in style and quality impede its linearity and continuity.

A veneer of historical authenticity: The use of sources by the artists

These history portraits come from a long iconographic tradition, studied by Francis Haskell in particular (1993), inherited from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the ‘galleries’ of famous characters – books printed to enlighten the reader by the contemplation of great men (and sometimes women) – were a huge success. Alexandre de Laborde, the author of *Versailles ancien et moderne* (1841) announced ‘We have sought to reproduce the features as faithfully as we could, from all the elements that reached us, medals, seals, busts or portraits’ (Laborde 1841, 313-14). This portrait tradition asserted the most careful attention to the sources they used to reconstitute the faces of the past, as Haskell notes, but the reality was often less clear, and many portraits were in great part derived entirely from the engravers’ imagination (Haskell 1993, 79-81). As a result, the portraits of Versailles are in most part imagined, but rest upon historical research. Louis-Philippe himself wanted the works shown to be as accurate as possible, historically speaking, and throughout his reign, he encouraged the deepening of past knowledge and the improvement of the role of historians. He therefore requested the support of the renowned historians François Guizot, Jules Michelet, Adolphe Thiers and Augustin Thierry (Gervereau and Constans 2005, 31). Guizot in particular, as his minister, was truly the architect of this rebirth in historical studies. He led the publication of many books and memoirs taken from the archives and created the first learned society, the Société de l’Histoire de France, in 1833 (Guizot 1822-30).

The painters commissioned for this work therefore drew from different sources, among which were ancient iconographic documents (or identified as such but often of a later date). Raymond Monvoisin was obviously inspired by the representation of the grave of Chlothar II the Younger for his portrait. The ‘sepulchral stone’ dating from the sixth century, on which Chlothar II is engraved, is restored by a drawing in the 1800 catalogue by Alexandre Lenoir (founder of the museum of the Monuments Français: Figure 3), and by a drawing from the collection of scholar Roger de Gaignières.⁴

The long hair and beard, the shape of the crown, the sceptre and even the coat are taken from this sculpted stone slab. François-Louis Dejuinne was also inspired by Clovis’s funeral slab in the necropolis of Saint-Denis (Figure 4). The hieratic, frontal posture of the king, his long coat and the money bag hanging from his belt, the shape of his crown, the beard and the moustache – these elements are taken from the recumbent statue, which dates from the later date range 1220-1230.⁵

Jean-Louis Bézard makes Chlothar I (Chlothar II’s grandfather), sit on a throne which Lenoir also reproduced in his catalogue, just above the drawing of Chlothar’s slab (Lenoir 1800, 166). This seat, which was probably created in the seventh or eighth century, is known today as the ‘throne of Dagobert’ and is

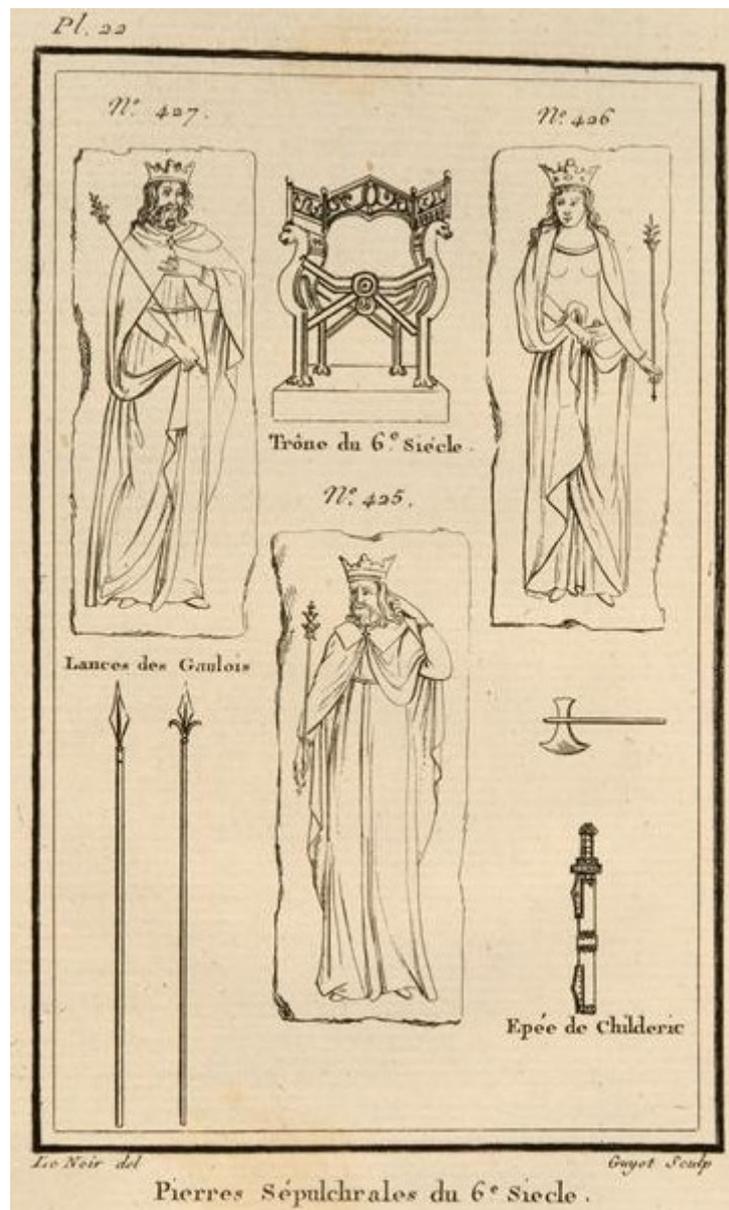


Figure 3: Alexandre Lenoir, Laurent Guyot, Musée des Monuments Français; tome 1 par Alexandre Lenoir: 166, planche 22, 1800. Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, collections Jacques Doucet.

kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Bézard kept only the panthers' heads, which he moved from the feet to the armrests in order for them to be more visible.



Figure 4: Léopold Massard after François-Louis Dejuinne, 'Clovis, King of the Franks (465-511)' (1835), in Charles Gavard, *Galeries Historiques de Versailles* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1838-1842). © Sainte Menehould; Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 2012.

The artists also drew from the works of historians and historically reliable information for inspiration for the costumes, attributes of power, and ideas about attitude and appearance. In some cases they turned to visual and textual documentation. For example, in order to paint his *Pharamond élevé sur le pavois*, displayed in the French history rooms, Michel-Philibert Génot was advised in 1845 to consult the Roger de Gaignières collection and Bernard de Montfaucon's *Monuments de la Monarchie Française* (1729-1733) (Gaetgens et al 1984, 79 and 382). Furthermore, Jean-Joseph Dassy, who was to paint Charibert, seems to have read the work of historian Louis-Pierre Anquetil, or the eighteenth-century historian François-Eudes de Mézeray, from whom Anquetil also took inspiration (Mézeray 1755, 229). The artists often consulted both historians. Anquetil tells us that when 'inaugurated', the Merovingian kings were

dressed with ‘a crimson tunic, a pearl and diamond diadem across their forehead, placed upon long braided hair’ (Anquetil 1838, 182). Indeed, Charibert, as represented by Dassý (Figure 5), wears a diadem of pearls and gold, giving a jewelled effect. The highly-groomed hairstyle, smooth across the head and with long curls at the temples, and the indecisive posture, give a curiously anachronistic impression: the king seems to have been taken out of a theatre performance. This impression is enhanced by Dassý’s rather glittering style, with the gleaming gold sceptre, the contrasting red and the tactile texture of the coat.



Figure 5: Léopold Massard after Jean-Joseph Dassý, ‘Charibert, Frank King of Paris and of Western Gaul (died in 567)’ (1837), in Charles Gavard, *Galeries Historiques de Versailles* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1838-1842). © Sainte Menehould; Musée d’Art et d’Histoire, 2012.

In opposition to this care for verisimilitude, some adjustments were made against historical reality. Clovis, as the founder of the French monarchy, holds a sceptre with the fleur-de-lis, which is part of the royal regalia, symbols of French monarchical power. However, the fleur-de-lis only became the emblem of the French kings under the Capetians, during the twelfth century. This symbol, however, was so much associated with the French monarchy in the collective imagination, that it was deemed natural, and desirable, to add it to Clovis's portrait in order to signify his status as the father of the monarchy. Several other kings also bear a sword, similar to Charlemagne's sword and those carried by kings at their coronation in Rheims. This was also an anachronism, since this custom making the king the defender of the Church only dated from the twelfth to thirteenth century. But it symbolically assimilated the Merovingian kings with the French kings, already working in their own time for national glory.

The perception of the Merovingian kings during the nineteenth century

The portraits of the Merovingian kings work as a series, but they are a part of the broader ensemble of French kings' portraits. They constitute a kind of chapter in a continuous historical narration. According to Hayden V. White's works on historical discourse, the events (here the Merovingian kings) are 'encoded so as to appear as phases of a *process* with a discernible beginning, middle, and end' (White 1975, 54). Every portrait of the French kings is, indeed, 'encoded' in order to mark continuity but also an evolution of costumes, fashions and mores, which therefore implies the feeling of progress, an idea inherited from the Enlightenment. Mores seem to 'refine' from the Merovingian kings' barbarian manners to the sophistication of Louis XIV's court and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

History-book illustrations inform us further about the image of the 'Merovingian period' (Thierry 1840) in the nineteenth century. Publishers favoured illustrating contemporary historical facts, but the agony of Queen Brunehilde is one of the most represented, and is a good example of the perceptions of this period. Brunehilde, who ruled over Austrasia and Burgundy,⁶ fought for years against the King of Neustria Chlothar II and before that against his mother Fredegund. She was finally defeated and made prisoner by Chlothar in 613, which temporarily brought peace between the Frankish realms. After several days of torture, she was attached by her hair, a leg and an arm to a wild horse, and dragged on the ground until she died. Two history books in which illustrations are prominent chose to represent this episode (Figure 6): Louis Michelant, in *Les faits mémorables de l'Histoire de France* (1844), illustrated by history painter Victor Adam, includes it in the four vignettes given to the Merovingian history (Michelant et al 1844, np).

CLOTAIRE II.

ANNÉE 613.



MORT DE BRUNEHAUT.

La mort de Brunehaut fut le tragique dénouement d'une des plus intéressantes luttes des temps mérovingiens : celle de l'esprit de civilisation contre la barbarie; du pouvoir royal contre la fière indépendance des chefs austrasiens. Brunehaut, fille d'Athanagild, roi des Wisigoths, fut mariée dans tout l'éclat de sa jeunesse et de sa beauté au roi d'Austrasie Sigebert, petit-fils de Clovis. La jeune reine en arrivant en Aus-

Figure 6: 'Mort de Brunehaut', in Michelant, L, Adam, V, Ségur, P, *Faits mémorables de l'histoire de France... précédés d'une introduction par M. de Ségur... et illustrés de 120 tableaux de M. Victor Adam* (Paris: Aubert et Cie et Didier, 1844), 23. © Google Books

The second book is Théodose Burette's *Histoire de France depuis l'établissement des Francs dans la Gaule jusqu'en 1830* (Burette 1840, 95), illustrated by Jules David, famous for his fashion and history engravings. Both represented the event with similar compositions, focusing on the group of wild horses and on a half-naked, despairing and helpless Brunehilde, who both seem not to comprehend their situation. The episode attracted publishers and artists because of its extreme violence and graphic efficiency, and because of what it expressed of

the nineteenth-century's feelings about this period. As Michelant stated, the episode represented 'the tragic outcome of one of the most interesting conflicts in the Merovingian times: the spirit of civilization against barbarity, royal power against the proud independence of the Austrasian leaders' (Michelant 1844, 23). This statement seems to summarize the perceptions of this period, standing at the turning point between the obscurantism symbolized by Brunehilde, and the civilization brought by Chlothar II's monarchy (despite his cruelty when torturing Brunehilde). In that way Chlothar II could be seen as portending Charlemagne's prestigious reign.

The Merovingians seemed to have attracted and repulsed at the same time: repulsion for a period considered as 'barbarian', along with a fascination for what came out of an era where violence seemed to be common practice. The aesthetics of costumes and accessories in the portraits contributed to this feeling of exoticism (hair left loose, clothes embroidered with gold, unfamiliar patterns). A tension was at work here, a distortion effect, between the distance expressed by the clothing, decorative elements and aesthetics, and the empathy induced by the expressions and attitudes of the characters.

The portraits of Émile Signol

The portraits by Émile Signol are particularly conspicuous and of a high quality. They demonstrate some continuities of the use made of the Merovingian kings' imagery by the portraitists. Signol has mostly represented those whom history recalls as the 'rois fainéants'. This line of princes ruled for sixty years after Dagobert I, in the seventh and eighth centuries. The latter was the last of his dynasty to rule by himself, and played a significant role in improving the judiciary, administrative and tax systems. Anquetil commented dramatically that 'the glory of the Merovingians disappeared with him' (Anquetil 1838, 180). The origin of the expression 'rois fainéants' and the image that historiography remembered from that period came from a severe description by Eginhard in his *Vie de Charlemagne*, written around 829 (Guizot 1824, 123-24). In order to enhance the prestige of Charlemagne, the successor of the lazy kings, Eginhard portrayed a line which 'displayed no vigour', was content with 'just bearing the name of king', travelling 'in a wagon dragged by oxen and driven like peasants by a cowherd' (Guizot 1824, 123-24), inasmuch as their suite, their income and their prestige were small. In most cases, the reigns of these kings were very short (most of them died in their twenties) and were controlled by the mayors of the palace, in charge of administrating each part of the Frankish realms: Burgundy, Neustria and Austrasia. Their position was first asserted under Dagobert, and the administrators kept increasing their power until the kings were nothing more than puppets they controlled in order to serve their own interests.

Dagobert, whom Signol painted first, was therefore the last Merovingian king to benefit from a relatively flattering image in historiography. 'Magnificent

and profligate' Anquetil proclaimed, 'his court's wealth and luxuriousness is praised'. He has 'the ancient laws amended in his presence' and 'likes to mete out justice in public session' (Anquetil 1838, 180). Mézeray was less generous: after describing Dagobert as 'gentle, affable and generous', working 'night and day when granting audience', he portrayed a man carried away with 'the passion of youth and [...] the violence of sovereign authority', devoted to the upkeep of a veritable harem of spouses and mistresses, and starving his subjects in order to maintain his extravagant lifestyle. 'He affected to seem rather than being fair' are Mézeray's definitive words (Mézeray 1669, 228-37). In contrast, Michelet's *Histoire de France* described Dagobert as a 'wise and fair, justiciar' king, who first wrote 'the barbarian laws'. He considered him as the 'Solomon of the Franks' who, 'like the Jew Solomon [...] shares his time between his concubines and his priests' (Michelet 1835, 250). As we can see, Dagobert's image is relatively constant between historians, but their opinions vary.

Signol, however, abandoned completely the traditional representation of Dagobert, whose portrait was published in books by abbé Velly, Mézeray and Abel Hugo (Victor Hugo's brother), among others (Velly et al 1778, 17; Mézeray 1669, 226; Hugo 1837, plate XXVI). They all present similar facial features for the king of a thick mouth and a strong nose, bearing an open crown adorned with a trefoil pattern. This appearance was inspired from the recumbent figure of his grave, transferred from Saint-Denis to the museum of the Monuments Français after the 1789 Revolution (Lenoir 1800, t.1, 153-155, plate 19).

Signol portrays Dagobert with sharp, aristocratic features (Figure 1). The long hair is pulled away from the forehead, the nose is straight, and the mouth is thin and severe, whereas the cheekbones are hardly visible and flattened by the crude light. The bottom of the face is swallowed up by a beard and a well-brushed moustache, which reinforces the eyes' striking effect. Sunk into the shadow of the eyebrow arch, they pierce the viewer's gaze. His left hand lies on the pommel of the coronation sword, the crown is firmly placed on his head, the coat draped around his shoulders. Dagobert is presented as charismatic, overbearing, almost conceited. This stylistic bias is the same in all of Signol's portraits: very strongly shaped by a powerful chiaroscuro, the characters stand out against the plain background in shades of browns, golds and reds. The features are emphasized by strong lighting. In this dramatic effect, we see Signol's signature as a religious painter: bodies seem to emerge from the dark background, massive in their red coats adorned with stones, and their faces stand out, framed by long, dark hair against light-coloured skin.

This portrait of Dagobert appears, in its majesty, as the perfect opposite of Figure 2, of Clovis II. King from the age of four to twenty-two, the effective power was taken away from him by the comptrollers of the palace. The historian Henri Martin described him as a 'fornicator and seducer of women, devoted to greediness and drunkenness' (Martin 1844, 204), and suggested that Clovis

might have lost his mind after he profaned the grave of Saint Denis. Anquetil also mentioned some ‘disturbances which made him suspected of mental illness’ (Anquetil 1838, 185). Michelet noted the twelfth-century legend of the ‘de-nerved of Jumièges’, although the vagueness of his anecdote suggests that he expected his readers to be familiar with the episode.⁷ The legend, discovered by the prior of the abbey of Jumièges in 1623 (Langlois 1623, 784), tells that Clovis II, eager to undertake a trip to the Holy Land, left the government in the hands of his wife Bathilda, as regent for his oldest son. The son, however, joined forces with his younger brother to rebel, pushed Bathilda aside, and organized an army against Clovis, who had to hastily return home. To punish them, their king and father condemned them to have their leg nerves burnt and set them adrift in a small boat. They were then found and taken to the abbey of Jumièges, where they became monks. This legend is unfounded, since Clovis died when he was twenty-two, and could not have seen his sons at an age to rebel against him. The legend received some success at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly from the striking representation by Evariste-Vital Luminais, from around 1880 (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Evariste-Vital Luminais, 'Les énérvés de Jumièges', after 1880, oil on canvas, Rouen Museum of Fine Arts. © C. Lancien, C. Loisel/Réunion des Musées Métropolitains Rouen Normandie

Signal's portrait seems to focus on the juvenile, easily swayed and, perhaps, psychologically fragile side of Clovis II. The young man is represented in prayer, looking down at his hands clasped together on a velvet and gold cushion.

The sceptre lies beside him, as to signify that from his reign on, power shifted from the kings to the comptrollers. His hairstyle and crown look like Dagobert's: Signol ensured the visual continuity of his paintings. His mouth is thin, a little bitter, and the lowered eyelids drawn in the arch shadow. With greater contrast than in Signol's other portraits, the face of the young man is covered with shadows, the skin is waxen and his expression is contrite and sad.

Thierry IV de Chelles⁸ also presents the image of a pious man, but his eyes, this time, are looking up to the sky. In contrast with the portraits of the beginning of the series, showing the kings, like Clothar I or Childebert I, self-confident and settled in their thrones, the 'lazy kings' are mostly represented as sickly, elusive, or even distraught, as is Thierry III. One cannot avoid the impression that these men are not where they belong, which was indeed the case for some of them: Thierry IV de Chelles and Chilperic II were monks before they were taken out of their monastery to be put on the throne by comptrollers. Dagobert III is even represented stooping, with a dull look, and appears to move past the viewer like a shadow. For most of them, the eyes do not express anything, and they do not look at the viewer. Sometimes they address God or themselves, perfectly absent from their own bodies. Only one of the 'lazy kings', Clotaire III, painted by Monvoisin, has an expressive face, but his sidelong eyes and his strained mouth seem to show treacherousness and self-interest.

The 'networks of intentionalities'

In the first half of the nineteenth century, as noted above, two major perceptions of history painting coexisted: the first tried to carry on with the traditional conception of the prestigious 'grand genre', led by David especially. David based his work on Winckelmann's vision of ideal beauty, which he thought was achieved in classical Greek statuary. The latter summarized, in a striking formula when describing the sculpted group of the *Laocoon*, the qualities of Greek art: 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' (Winckelmann 1755, 30). This formula became a true motto for Jacques-Louis David and his followers of the neoclassical school, at the turn of the nineteenth century. The ambition of these painters was to renew the tradition of the great historic genre, 'the antic tradition, [...] the cult of the truth', through the representation of 'epic grandeur, [and] rigorous precision of style', Henri Delaborde explains in his essay on French painting (Delaborde 1864, 179). This vision of history painting was, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, confronted with a new conception (though the boundaries were not always very clear), expressed first by the Troubadour school in the 1810s, then developed by Paul Delaroche: the 'anecdotal' history genre, which borrowed both from the classical tradition of the history painting and to genre painting. In the history paintings, a much more familiar vision of historic figures progressively appeared, and a representation of a history which was no longer Greek or Roman but French. A painting like Paul

Delaroche's *Joan of Arc, sick, interrogated in prison by the cardinal of Winchester* (1824), showed a girl sure of her destiny and of heaven's protection, yet frightened, sick and lonely (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Paul Delaroche, 'Jeanne d'Arc, malade, interrogée dans sa prison par le cardinal de Winchester', oil on canvas, Rouen Museum of Fine Arts. © C. Lancien, C. Loisel/Réunion des Musées Métropolitains Rouen Normandie.

Delaroche's accurate style, his attention to historical detail and his talent in establishing dramatic tension, allows the viewer to feel for and identify with the characters, and to truly come into history. In the portraits at Versailles, these two conceptions of history painting coexist: the idea of representing through portraits a royal status requiring a 'calm grandeur' and high moral qualities, and the idea of showing the men behind the kings, with their flaws and weaknesses, making them men with whom the viewer can communicate.

Alfred Gell developed the theory of intentionality: within an artwork, several networks of intentionality meet and intertwine (Gell 1998). They all contribute to the understanding and the appreciation of the work. As anthropologist Maurice Bloch explains, in his attempt to comprehend and also to go deeper with Gell's theory, using as an example the creation of the bow of a canoe from the Trobriand Islands, the 'beam of intentionalities' exists as follows: 'the artist's intention to succeed in causing fear and stupefaction, the chief's intention to commission, realise and display it, as well as the crew's intention which both terrifies and seduces the trade partners, and finally the tree's intention, considered as a living force, have all supported the making of the wooden piece; that is in addition to the intentionality of the spirits summoned during the realisation, which, in every manner, are always present, struggling against the deadly intentions of the sea and against those who resist the trade' (Bloch 1999, 120).

In the case of the portraits of the Merovingian kings, we posit that that three main intentionalities are intertwined here. In the first place, the intentionality imposed by the State, that is to say the sponsor, takes priority. As we saw, the viewer is led to identify the represented characters as of royal status, thanks to an easily recognisable set of elements: the sceptre, the crown, the coronation sword, the crimson coat (except for one painting, in which the coat is blue, which was to become the royal colour under Philippe-Auguste) (Pastoureau and Simonnet 2005, 21). However, those accessories are also important temporal indicators. Because of their generic nomination (crown, sword, etc) and their multiple presence in the paintings, they emphasise the status of the French monarchy. However, because of their specific form, the metal they are made of, their ornamentation, they bring to mind the particular period of the Franks and of Merovingian dynasty. These portraits work as tangible traces, 'testimonies' of the past, even if they were painted long afterwards. They become history paintings, depicting historical events. This first intentionality contributes to create a feeling of distance between the subjects of the painting (the French kings) and the viewer. The sponsor seeks to arouse respect along with a feeling of national membership, and to encourage reflection by the viewer.

The second intentionality comes from the artists, in the imaginative work they provide. In *Le portrait du roi*, Louis Marin states that the portrait endeavours to 'pretend that the other, the absent one, is here and now the same, not as

a presence but as an effect of presence' (Marin 1981, 9). The painters have indeed tried to produce an 'effect of presence' through these portraits, and to give some kind of reality to men whose customs and ways of thinking were so far away from the nineteenth-century reality, that it was uneasy to conceive they might actually have, some day, existed, breathed, and felt. It certainly takes no less than a Chateaubriand or a Michelet to succeed, as they did themselves, in experiencing the 'feeling of history' and this idea of the physical existence of men appearing to be rather fantasies or fairy-tale characters than real historical figures (see Nora 2006). These authors, besides, wrote a history close to the genre of the historical novel. Chateaubriand observes this balance of power: 'Those lively paintings will make harder and harder the task of the historian [...] In our time the true History will have its fictional history, which will make it disappear into its brightness, or will follow it like its shadow' (Chateaubriand 1838, VIII). From this perspective, the portraits at Versailles are related to the historical novel: the historical sources the artists draw from to create their portraits brings authenticity, but their imagination complements them to 'give life' to the kings. The characters therefore all have a unique appearance, their own way of behaving, of looking at or avoiding the viewer, showing a personality, or at least an intention of personality. The artist's double intentionality lies in the desire to evoke a past time as well as giving the characters a depth, allowing the viewer to identify with them and better understand what is given him to see. Maurice Bloch writes that 'every cognitive psychologist agrees to recognise the capacity to ascribe to other individuals beliefs and desires, which allow us to understand them and the messages they wish to pass on us, whether these messages are linguistic or not, as one of the most essential features, if not the most fundamental feature of human behaviour' (Bloch 1999, 121-122). It is indeed the very process used by the artists, which guaranties the efficiency of the portraits. A double identity therefore appears. On one hand the royal identity of the sovereign rules over his people almost as a collective identity, a public figure of a king belonging to his subjects. On the other hand, an individual and personal identity allows us to see the man behind the king.

Finally, a third intentionality results from the first two: the portraits of the Merovingian kings literally attempt to give substance, to embody the idea of a French nation with a prestigious past as a legacy, in which the Merovingian kings stand as ancestors of the monarchy and nation. We may add that, if both intentionalities of the State and of the artists are implemented here, so is that of the Versailles museum: the function and the very intentionality which led to the museum's creation influence the reading of all the exhibited paintings.

In the light of what we just saw, we might therefore think, at first, that these portraits do not quite answer the State's commission, whose aim was to edify the people with heroic examples. Thus, it seems there is a confrontation and therefore a reduction of the message between the terms of the State's commission and the reality of these portraits. However, it appears to us that they actually

favour the message of the State by showing both the prestige and flaws of the first kings. The series, as we mentioned, is part of a broader ensemble of French kings' portraits, and has to be read as such. The purpose of the Merovingian portraits is to show a time when the strength of the French mind had not yet manifested. This representation thus enhances the image of successive kings, and especially those who were very popular during the nineteenth century: Charlemagne, Saint Louis, Henri IV and Louis XIV. Each one symbolised one phase of the royalty (and of the nation, so to speak, according to the logic of the Versailles museum), becoming more refined and cultivated, more French, in short, if we believe the nineteenth-century texts asserting that French culture was partly founded on these qualities (Haskell 1976; Zerner and Rosen 1984).

History manifested itself in these portraits through a complex relationship with the nineteenth century. Although the portraits evoked lives, they remained limited, and could not perfectly nor completely describe the facts, the habits and the 'spirit of ancient times', to recall a nineteenth-century phrase. This very impossibility, however, left room for imagination and inventiveness in order to 'fill the blanks'. What history rendered of the past, readers or viewers wanted to be able to take hold of it, to make it their own, to identify themselves with it, by removing, thanks to imagination, the distance between centuries and men. Michelet expressed this dilemma when he confessed in his famous phrase: 'more complicated, more alarming, was my historical problem raised as a resurrection of life in its entirety, not on its surface, but deep inside its organism' (Michelet 1880, IV). This desire for a complete restitution of history, in facts and 'feeling', was the impossible wish of romantic and liberal historians. They indeed attempted to combine both approaches of factual and 'living' history, to make it familiar to the reader by the artifice of literary writing and the impact of anecdote. The portraits of the Merovingian kings bear the mark of these attempts at writing a sociological history.

The question asked at the beginning of this article was as follows: how do these portraits testify of a state of mind of 1840s French society, questioning its own roots and heritage, and through it, its own identity? Through the consideration of the Merovingian period, historical, political and moral conceptions were expressed. The vision of Merovingian times, with its violence, chaos and licentiousness, comforted the nineteenth-century French, as they considered the supposedly more civilized characteristics of their own time. On the other hand, this feeling of comfort was probably balanced by a feeling of doubt and uneasiness with the very normality of their society. The authors of the study *La fabrique du Moyen Age au XIX^e siècle* note that in the nineteenth century, 'time as a historical moment was put aside', meaning the Middle Ages as a historical object became subject to narcissistic appropriation: 'the Middle Ages are no longer a mirror in which man seeks to recognize the old features of his face, and is rather a screen on which he plays and makes a projection of his fantasies and imagi-

nation, which are inspired by his repugnance of the present and of reality' (Bernard-Griffiths et al 2006, 19). This observation is only partly true concerning the portraits of the Merovingian kings. Their faces are characterized with a uniqueness imagined by the artists, but the (French) viewer can find their own features in them, since, if they are French, they might feel (or, through these portraits, are told to feel) they are heir to these kings, even as a commoner. They are shown as a path through the viewer's own identity. On the other side, these portraits cause a questioning of the self, and open an exit from the self through dreaming and fantasy. In this sense, they encourage viewers to develop an almost metaphysical questioning of their own identity and their desire to escape from this identity. These portraits allow the viewers to perform a reflexive loop, a pendulum swing, to centralize and decentralise themselves, between the necessity to be anchored, to catch what makes them individuals and members of a nation, of a society and of a given time, and the need to get away from that anchorage.

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- 1 'Rois fainéants' can be literally translated as 'lazy kings', and refers to several Merovingian kings from Thierry III (673-c. 679) to Childéric III (743-751). All translations from French are by the present author.
- 2 His *Histoire de France* was republished thirty-nine times between 1805 and 1880, each time extended with an appendix and often illustrated.
- 3 Anquetil, in his 1805 edition of the *Histoire de France* uses 'the four first French kings' to designate the predecessors of Clovis (243). Gabriel Peignot uses 'kings of the French' to denote all chiefs and monarchs from the Franks to the Restoration (1815, XXVIII), as does Laure de Saint-Ouen in her 1827 pedagogical work intended for primary schools (5).
- 4 The drawing is preserved by the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford, alongside with other original drawings of gravestones and epitaphs, but the major part of the collection is preserved by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and digitized in its catalogue; <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb405561394>. This collection was frequently consulted by the nineteenth-century painters.
- 5 Alexandre Lenoir noted that the style and craftsmanship of the statue suggests that it was executed after Clovis' death, but he did not give it a more precise date (Lenoir 1798, 141-42).
- 6 Austrasia, Burgundy and Neustria constituted the three parts of the Frankish realms.
- 7 The original name of this episode is 'les énervés de Jumièges', translated here by 'de-nerved', literally 'without nerves'. 'The symbol of this race [the lazy kings] are the *de-nerved* of Jumièges' (Michelet 1835, 281). Michelet makes this episode the symbol of Merovingian decadence, blinded by the pleasures offered by the Roman world they had conquered.
- 8 Thierry IV of Chelles is incorrectly called Thierry II in the painting by Signol and in Charles Gavard's book. Thierry IV de Chelles did rule from 721 to 737, and grew up in the abbaye de Chelles.