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**LOT 136**

**ELISABETH-LOUISE VIGÉE LE BRUN**

PARIS 1755 - 1842

PORTRAIT OF AGLAÉ ANGÉLIQUE GABRIELLE DE GRAMONT (1787-1842), WIFE OF  
GENERAL ALEKSANDR DAVYDOV

oil on canvas

32 1/2 by 26 in.; 82.6 by 66 cm.

**ESTIMATE 400,000-600,000 USD**

### PROVENANCE

Probably painted for Madame Davydova's father, Antoine Louis Marie, Duc de Gramont (1755-1835), Paris;

By inheritance to his son, Antoine Geneviève Héraclius Agénor, Duc de Gramont (1789-1855);

To his son, Antoine-Alfred-Agénor, Duc de Gramont (1819-1880);

To his son, Antoine-Alfred-Agénor, Duc de Gramont (1852-1925);

To his son, Comte Louis-René-Alexandre de Gramont (1883-1963);

Thence by inheritance to a private collection, subsequently acquired by the present owner.

## LITERATURE

É.L. Vigée Le Brun, *Souvenirs*, Paris, 1837, vol. III, p. 352;

J. Baillio, *Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun 1755-1842*, exhibition catalogue, Fort Worth, 1982, p. 19;

This painting will be included in Joseph Baillio's forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the works of Vigée Le Brun.

## CATALOGUE NOTE

In July of 1789, in the wake of the fall of the Bastille, Aglaé Angélique Gabrielle's mother (the Duchesse de Guiche), grandmother (the Duchesse de Polignac) and some of the most unpopular members of Queen Marie Antoinette's entourage fled France in the first wave of the Émigration. For almost twenty years, they led a peripatetic existence in European countries that had not been invaded by French troops. Aglaé Angélique followed her mother from country to country in search of a haven, finally ending up in Latvia and Russia. In August of 1804 she was living in Mittau (Jelgava), where the exiled Bourbon King Louis XVIII and members of his court, which included the Duchesse de Guiche, were in residence. There the girl married an officer in the Imperial Russian army, the somewhat older Colonel Aleksandr Lvovich Davydov (1773-1833).<sup>1</sup> The groom was one of the sons of Lev Denisovich Davydov (1743-1801) and his wife, the prodigiously wealthy Ekaterina Nikolaevna Samoïlova (1755-1825), a niece of Potemkine and a sister of Count Aleksandr Nikolaevich Samoïlov, whose wife and children sat to Vigée Le Brun for a full-length portrait now in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Davydov's half-brother was General Nikolaï Nikolaevich Raevski. Aglaé Angélique and her husband had three children: Ekaterina Aleksandrovna (1806-1882), who in 1826 married Ernest de Cadoine, Marquis de Gabriac (1792-1865); Adel Aleksandrovna Davydova (1810-1881), who eventually became a nun in the convent of the Trinità dei Monti in Rome; and Vladimir Aleksandrovich Davydov (1816-1886), who also became an officer in the Russian army.

Aleksandr Davydov took part in campaigns against Napoleon's army and was present at Austerlitz (1805) and on battlefields in Poland and Finland (1807-1809). During the Campaign of 1812 he served at Winkovo, Maloïaroslavets, Viazma and Kraznoi. The following year he led the troops under his command at the Battles of Lutzen, Bautzen, Dresden and Kulm. When France was invaded in 1814, Aleksandr Lvovich was assigned to Bar-sur-Aube, Troyes, Arcis-sur-Aube, Fère-Champenoise and Paris. He was promoted to the rank of major general in mid-June of 1815. After the Napoleonic wars had come to an end, Aglaé and Aleksandr Davydov spent considerable time with their children and other members of the Davydov-Raevski clan on their vast Ukrainian estate of Kamenka the Caucasus near Kiev, a center of the secret Green Lamp society whose membership was conspiring against some of the worst excesses of the czarist regime in their homeland, among them the system of serfdom, the Turkish domination of Greece and antisemitism.

Aglaé Gabrielle de Gramont and her husband formed an odd couple. While she was svelte and physically attractive, he was a giant of a man, tall and monstrously overweight. In the course of her marriage, the flirtatious Aglaia Antonovna Davydova was a notoriously unfaithful wife. Russia's greatest poet Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin (fig. 1) was a friend of the Davydovs and a guest at Kamenka in late 1820. It was at this time that Pushkin was writing *A Prisoner in the Caucasus*, in which he gave vent to his liberal convictions. The writer, who was stationed as a translator with the army in the nearby Moldavian town of Kishinev, fell under the spell of both Aglaé (Aglaia) and her twelve-year old daughter Adel Aleksandrovna. Henri Troyat, Pushkin's biographer, wrote of the general's ravenous appetite for food and drink. He cites Pushkin:

"Alexander Lvovich was a second Falstaff : gourmand, cowardly, a braggart but no fool, totally devoid of principles, full of self-pity, and obese. He had one distinctive feature, however, which gave him added charm: He was married. Shakespeare never had time to marry of his bachelor, and Falstaff died without knowing the joys of cuckoldom or fatherhood.

In *Eugene Onegin* Pushkin wrote of

A magnificent cuckold [an allusion to A.L. Davydov],

Ever content with his person,  
His dinner, and his wife. (...)

Repelled by serious manhood, Pushkin fell back on frivolous femininity. “Much champagne, few women...” True, there were not many women at Kamenka. But Mrs. Davydov, the “magnificent cuckold’s” wife, was as good as a harem. The fair Aglaia was born de Gramont; she was French, and thirty years old. She had a plump face, a pert nose, a soft and velvety mouth, a downy bosom. Her grace, her wantonness, her eternal coquetry turned the head of every general and cornet who came to the Kamenka estate. Aglaia was happy only when she was in the center of a ring of admirers, and there was always someone around to admire her. Pushkin himself fell in with the custom of the house and paid court to the pretty Frenchwoman, out of habit and because he had nothing better to do. But she wanted to play the romantic heroine in the grand manner, and the poet, frightened by her intensity, beat a hasty retreat before obtaining anything more from her than smiles and a brush of the lips. These flutterings with fat Alexander’s wife irritated Pushkin, and he relieved himself by composing epigrams [in “To My Promiscuous Aglaia” he quipped]:

Some have had my Aglaia  
For their mustache and braided coat,  
Some for money—that I understand;  
Or because they were French.

Leo was no doubt impressive,  
Daphnis sang so well;  
But tell me, my Aglaia, what  
Your husband had you for?

Pushkin sent this epigram to his brother with the comment: “For the love of Christ, don’t let it get around. Every word of it is truth.” In another epigram, he preached restraint to the eager Aglaia:

Let us leave impassioned fevers...  
(Our day is drawing to a close)

You, my dear, to your oldest girl [sic, meaning Adel Aleksandrovna],  
And I to my young brother...

Pushkin’s allusion to Adèle, Aglaia’s eldest daughter, was not fortuitous. “She was a very pretty lass of twelve, and he was not above bestowing some of his attention upon her. Pushkin imagined,” [Ivan Dmitriyevich] Yakushkin wrote, “that he was in love with her, he kept ogling her, coming up to her, clumsily teasing her.”<sup>2</sup>

In December of 1834, after her Russian husband’s death and she had returned permanently to France, she wed the Corsican-born infantry general, Horace-François-Bastien Sébastiani della Porta (1772-1851), who in his youth had been so handsome that he was known as the ‘Cupid of the Empire.’ Having served in Italy in the revolutionary wars, he had been a high ranking officer in the Grande Armée of his fellow Corsican, the Emperor Napoleon; moreover, he had served as an officer in the Spanish (1808-1811), Russian (1812), Saxon (1813) and French (1814) Campaigns. In 1815, after Napoleon had returned to France from his exile on the island of Elba only to be defeated at Waterloo, Sébasiani alligned himself with him during the so-called Hundred Days. When Louis-Philippe d’Orléans came to power after the fall of Charles X in 1830, the liberal-minded Sebastiani served his government as Minister of War and then as French ambassador to Naples. By his first wife, Antoinette-Françoise-Jeanne de Franquetot de Coigny (1778-1807), he had a daughter, Françoise-Attarice-Rosalba (Fanny) Sébastiani della Porta (1807-1847).<sup>3</sup> Aglaé Angélique died in Paris on January 21, 1842. Sebastiani della Porta survived her and went on to become Louis-Philippe’s Minister of War and his ambassador to England.

Vigée Le Brun’s close relationship with Aglaé Angélique Davydova’s family were considerable. Prior to the revolution she painted several portraits of her grandmother, the Duchesse de Polignac,<sup>4</sup> and her mother, the duchesse de Guiche.<sup>5</sup> And during the period of the Émigration, she painted a bust-length portrait of Madame de Guiche wearing a blue turban, a red dress and a necklace of coral beads, a work done in Vienna in 1794, as well as pastel likenesses of two of her younger brothers, one of which, the profile portrayal of Jules de Polignac, was recently acquired by the Louvre. Finally, around 1805, Madame Le Brun painted a pastel image of Aglaé Davydova’s older sister, Corisande

de Gramont, Countess of Ossultun and future Countess Tankerville (private collection).

Vigée Le Brun's portrait of the blue-eyed and still strikingly beautiful Aglaé Angélique Davydova, despite her thirty-seven years, depicts her subject in the open air against a cloudy sky. She is attired in a short-sleeved velvet gown with a deep neckline over a muslin chemise with gold trim, and around her long neck hangs a gold chain to which is attached a gold pendant. Her dark hair is styled in ringlets, or "anglaises" falling onto her brow, and those strands that are piled high on her head are held in place with a gold and coral diadem. Over this hairdo is draped a muslin veil she clasps to her bosom with the long, tapering fingers of the hands crossed over her breast, and the end of this length of sheer fabric floats in the wind behind her. The portrait was executed by the artist around 1824, the year of Louis XVIII's death and the accession of his brother, Charles Philippe, Comte d'Artois, to the throne of France as Charles X. The portrait exists in two autograph examples: the present rectangular canvas and an oval version at one time in the Bartholini collection as a portrait of 'Madame de Talleyrand' and later with the Paris dealers Nathan Wildenstein and Arnold Seligmann (it is today in a private collection). An anonymous copy of the painting under discussion (oil on rectangular-shaped canvas, 81 x 65 cm.), in which Madame Davydova is shown without the gold chain, was featured in a recent Paris auction.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Baillio

1. One of Aleksandr Lvovich's nephews, Lev Vassilyevich Davydov (1837-1896), the son of Aleksandr Lvovich's bother Vasily Lvovich Davydov (1792-1855), was the brother-in-law of the great composer Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovski.
2. Henri Troyat, *Pushkin* (trans. by Nancy Amphoux), New York, 1970, pp. 165, 167-168.
3. Her husband, Charles-Laure-Hugues-Théobald de Choiseul, Duc de Praslin (1804-1847), stabbed her to death during a violent altercation brought about by his infatuation with their children's governess, Henriette Deluzy-Desportes, and then, while imprisoned, committed suicide. This was the subject of the 1940 Warner Bros. movie, *All This and Heaven Too*, in which Barbara O'Neill played the Duchess, Charles Boyer the Duke and Bette Davis, the governess.
4. The two finest are in the Musée national des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon and at Waddesdon Manor.
5. The half-length oval pastel executed in 1784 is in a private New York collection (see Joseph Baillio, "Vigée Le Brun pastelliste et son portrait de la duchesse de Guiche," *L'Oeil*, no. 452, June 1993, pp. 20-29 and exh. cat., Wildenstein, New York, *The Arts of France from François I<sup>er</sup> to Napoléon I<sup>er</sup>*, 2005-2006, pp. 302-304, no. 130) and an oil painting depicting her in a garden setting holding a garland of flowers (a work of 1787 probably reflected in the so-called *Portrait of a Noblewoman Wearing a White Silk Dress and Bonnet in a Yard* [sic], oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm., sold, Amsterdam, Christie's, September 1, 1999, lot 130, reproduced, possibly with image reversed).
6. Paris, Drouot-Richelieu, June 26, 2002, lot 83, reproduced (attributed to the French School, c. 1820, entourage of Baron Gérard).



Fig. 1

VASIL ANDREEVICH TROPININ, *Portrait of Alexander Pushkin*, (1799-1837), State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, Giraudon, The Bridgeman Art Library