

A detail from a classical painting, likely by Johann Tobias Sergel, depicting Socrates and Alcibiades. Socrates, on the left, is an older man with a thick, dark, curly beard and hair, wearing a blue robe over a yellow tunic. He is looking towards the right. Alcibiades, on the right, is a younger man with curly blonde hair, wearing a laurel wreath and a blue robe over a yellow tunic. He is looking down at Socrates. The background is dark and indistinct.

François-André Vincent and Johan Tobias Sergel.
On a New Acquisition – *Alcibiades Being Taught by Socrates*, 1777

Magnus Olausson
Director of Collections

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Daniel Seghers (1590–1661) and Erasmus Quellinus the Younger (1607–1678), *Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child*, c. 1645–50. Oil on copper, 85.5 x 61.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7505.

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Fig. 1 François-André Vincent (1746–1816), *Alcibiades Being Taught by Socrates*, 1777. Oil on canvas, 98.5 x 129.5 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7517.



Fig. 2 François-André Vincent (1746–1816), *Portrait of Johan Tobias Sergel*, 1774. Pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash, 323 x 205 mm, Harry G. Sperling Fund, 1974. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1974.46.

François-André Vincent (1746–1816) is one of the early Neoclassicists in French painting.¹ He was the son of the Swiss miniaturist François-Élie Vincent (1708–1790). Through his father's friend, the Swede Alexandre Roslin (1718–1793), he was introduced around 1760 to Joseph-Marie Vien (1716–1809). And it was through Vien that Vincent acquired not only a taste for Greek antiquity, but also an admiration for 17th-century Bolognese artists such as Guido Reni (1575–1642) and Guercino (1591–1666). It was between these poles of austere Classicism and full-blooded Baroque that Vincent would later move in his mature painting. He won the Grand Prix de Rome as early as 1768, but was not able to travel to Italy until 1771. Vincent arrived in Rome in October of that year to join the large circle of artists and architects at the French Academy in the Palazzo Mancini.

Associated with this circle was a whole group of artists of other nations, among them the Swedish sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel (1740–1814). It seems that Sergel got to know Vincent at the very start of the Frenchman's stay in Rome. One indication of this is that Vincent, together with the French architect Pierre-Adriaen Pâris, made the acquaintance of the Swedish architect and surveyor to the king's household, Fredrik Adolf Ulrik Cronstedt, who was in Rome from 1771 to 1772.² Cronstedt was among Sergel's immediate circle, and it therefore seems highly likely that the Swedish sculptor had already become Vincent's friend by then.³ There was another reason for the Frenchman's preference for Scandinavian artists, and that was that, as we have seen, Vincent, a Protestant, had from early on enjoyed the patronage of the Swedish-born portraitist Roslin.⁴

The earliest definite evidence we have of Vincent's friendship with Sergel is from 1774. That year, Vincent made two portrait drawings of his Swedish friend, which provide an unusually lively picture of the Roman artistic scene. Here, Sergel

is wearing a tricorne and a queued wig. He is dressed in a long, fashionable coat with buttoned slits. One of these washed drawings shows Sergel sitting at a spinet, somewhat strangely as we do not know whether he in fact played this instrument (Fig. 2).⁵ In the other portrait, he is standing next to an unknown man, who is seated at the same instrument (Fig. 3).

Vincent and Sergel both appear in a figure frieze, an unusual etching by Moricaud Franconville after a drawing by Jean Baptiste Stouf (Figs. 4–5).⁶ Most of the figures depicted here were scholarship holders at the French Academy in Rome, like the sculptors Boizot, Julien, Sénéchal and Stouf himself, and the painters Le Bouteux, Suvée and Ménageot. There were also a few fellow artists from other countries, such as Rigaud, Tischbein and Sergel. The Swede was something of a central figure in the group. This was due not only to his warm and generous disposition, but also to the fact that he had been in Rome for many years. Sergel had arrived in the city four years before Vincent and was thus well established there.

Of all the artists portrayed in Franconville's etching, Sergel and Vincent seem to have developed a particularly close friendship, no doubt a result of their kindred spirits. Alongside their studies, they devoted themselves to depicting their fellow artists and friends in a series of slightly caricatured situational images. In terms of technique, they are so similar that for a long time staff at the Nationalmuseum attributed several of Vincent's drawings to Sergel. Now Jean-Pierre Cuzin has been able to show that Vincent is in fact the author of several of the caricatured drawings in Sergel's collection.⁷ On the other hand, Cuzin still considers a portrait showing Vincent with a lofty expression and aristocratic profile, rapidly drawn with a few sweeping strokes of ink from a reed pen, to be a work by Sergel.⁸

It was not unusual, as such, for artists to exchange drawings. Sergel owned two counterproofs by Vincent, for example,



Fig. 3 François-André Vincent (1746–1816), *Johan Tobias Sergel and an Unknown Man Playing Cembalo*, 1774. Red chalk, pen and brown ink, brown and grey wash, 344 x 200 mm. Purchase: Axel and Nora Lundgren Foundation. Nationalmuseum, NMH 49/2014.



Fig. 4 Moricaud Franconville (active 18th Century), inventor Jean-Baptiste Stouf (1742–1826), *Foreign Scholarship Holders in Rome, I*, 1770s. Etching, one of eight sheets mounted together. Purchase 1876 (J.T. Sergel). Nationalmuseum, NMG 176/1876.



Fig. 5 Moricaud Franconville (active 18th Century), inventor Jean-Baptiste Stouf (1742–1826), *Foreign Scholarship Holders in Rome, 7*, c. 1772. Etching, one of eight sheets mounted together. Purchase 1876 (J.T. Sergel). Nationalmuseum, NMG 182/1876.



Fig. 6 François-André Vincent (1746–1816), *Battle with a Centaur*. Black chalk on paper. Contre-épreuve, 408 x 457 mm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 1678/1875.

one depicting a struggle with a centaur (Fig. 6),⁹ the other showing Achilles driving his enemies down into the river Scamander (Fig. 7).¹⁰ Vincent signed the first of these sheets in 1775, suggesting that it may have been a farewell gift from the Frenchman when he left Rome. In the case of Sergel and Vincent, however, the practice of exchanging drawings was

clearly part of the reason why, for a time, their respective manners of drawing were confused.

When Vincent drew his two portraits of Sergel, the sculptor was in the process of carving the marble for *Diomedes*. In the course of its creation, this work was one of the most admired contemporary sculptures in Rome. The Greek hero, exuding

energy, must have made a strong impression on Vincent as well – not least, the classical profile of Diomedes with a Greek helmet, all borrowed from ancient images of Pallas Athena/Minerva (Figs. 8–9). Presumably Vincent, too, saw the marble before it was shipped to Thomas Mansel Talbot (1747–1813) in Wales in June 1775. The Frenchman himself left Rome that



Fig. 7 François-André Vincent (1746–1816), *Achilles Pursue His Enemies into the River Scamander*. Black chalk, heightened with white, on paper, 493 x 380 mm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 1690/1875.



Fig. 8 Johan Tobias Sergel (1740–1814), *Diomedes, Two Sketches of Helmet and Head in Profile*. Pen and brown ink on paper, 278 x 107 mm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 1019/1875.



Fig. 9 Johan Tobias Sergel (1740–1814), *Diomedes, Sketch of Helmet and Head in Profile*. Red chalk on Italian paper, 277 x 200 mm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 1026/1875.

October to return to Paris. Perhaps the memory of Diomedes was still fresh in his mind as he started sketching a new composition, showing the young, vain and amoral Athenian general Alcibiades being taught by Socrates. In his recently published monograph of Vincent, Jean-Pierre Cuzin has drawn attention to the similarity between the helmeted head of Alcibiades and Sergel's representation of Diomedes.

In both human and artistic terms, then, there was an affinity between the two artists. This was also a major consideration when the Nationalmuseum decided

to acquire a replica of Vincent's well-known painting *Alcibiades Being Taught by Socrates* (Fig. 1), made the same year as the original was exhibited at the Salon (1777).¹¹ There, the work was shown together with *Belisarius*⁸ (Fig. 10), one of the first paintings made by the artist following his return to Paris. The latter represents the lessons Vincent had learnt from Roman Baroque, with its warm colours, while the cooler, more sculptural depiction of Alcibiades draws its inspiration from Raphael and Classicism. In the rendering of the philosopher, however,

there are lingering traces of the Italian *seicento*.

The story of the close friendship between Pericles' relative, the beautiful, gifted and ambitious Athenian general Alcibiades, and the philosopher Socrates is told by the latter's pupil Plato. According to Plato, the two protagonists were each other's opposites, a fact that clearly contributed to the attraction which one exercised over the other. The demanding Socrates would eventually be let down by the fundamentally selfish Alcibiades, however. The tale of the general and the philosopher had a



Fig. 10 François-André Vincent (1746–1816), *Belisarius*, 1776. Oil on canvas, 99 x 131.5 cm. Musée Fabre, Montpellier, 837.1.94.

clear moral and became so popular that Vincent made several replicas, of which the one recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum was the first.¹²

Comparing the replica with the first version, we are struck by how well Vincent has managed to capture the character of the original, both technically and artistically. One might expect a risk of repetition and hence a stiffer, drier execution, but that is not the case. Rather, the artist is surprisingly successful in recreating the freshness of the painting, for example in the ornament of the helmet, and in the shadows and lights. One difference, however, is that Alcibiades' shimmering purple cloak has been given a pale red tone in the replica. Although Vincent has accentuated the pastosity of the lights, for instance on Socrates' forehead, he does so in more marked relief in the original. Apart from

these differences, the first and second versions are unusually similar in execution.

Vincent was *agrégé* by the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture as early as 1776, when *Belisarius* was among the works he presented. Despite his success at the Salon the following year, he would not be admitted as a full member until 1782. Soon, however, a rival appeared who would quickly leave Vincent in the shade – Jacques Louis David (1748–1825). Despite this, they never became enemies. Artistically, though, they were very different indeed, a difference which several art historians saw as a shortcoming in Vincent. Only in our own day has he, at last, been rehabilitated as a pioneer of Neoclassicism. One of the foremost examples of his achievement in that respect is his composition *Alcibiades Being Taught by Socrates*.

Notes:

1. The authoritative work on François-André Vincent is Jean-Pierre Cuzin, *François-André Vincent 1746–1816: Entre Fragonard et David*, Paris 2013.
2. Cuzin 2013, p. 28.
3. Magnus Olausson, "The launching of Johan Tobias Sergel in Sweden", in *Nationalmuseum Bulletin* 1990, vol. 14:2, p. 79.
4. Cuzin 2013, p. 14.
5. Cf. Cuzin 2013, p. 56.
6. Nationalmuseum, NMG 176–183/1876.
7. Cuzin 2013, pp. 73, 387–388.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
9. This sheet is signed "Vincent f. 1775". See also Per Bjurström, *French Drawings*, vol. II, Stockholm 1982, cat. no. 1245.
10. Cf. Bjurström 1982, cat. no. 1246. This drawing has been questioned by Cuzin, although that seems unreasonable, given its direct provenance from Sergel. See Cuzin 2013, p. 512, for further discussion.
11. It is regarded by Cuzin as the first replica by Vincent (cf. Cuzin 2013, p. 417, cat. no. 312P). The original was acquired by the painter François-Xavier Fabre and has long been in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier (inv. no. 837.1.95).
12. Cuzin 2013, p. 417.