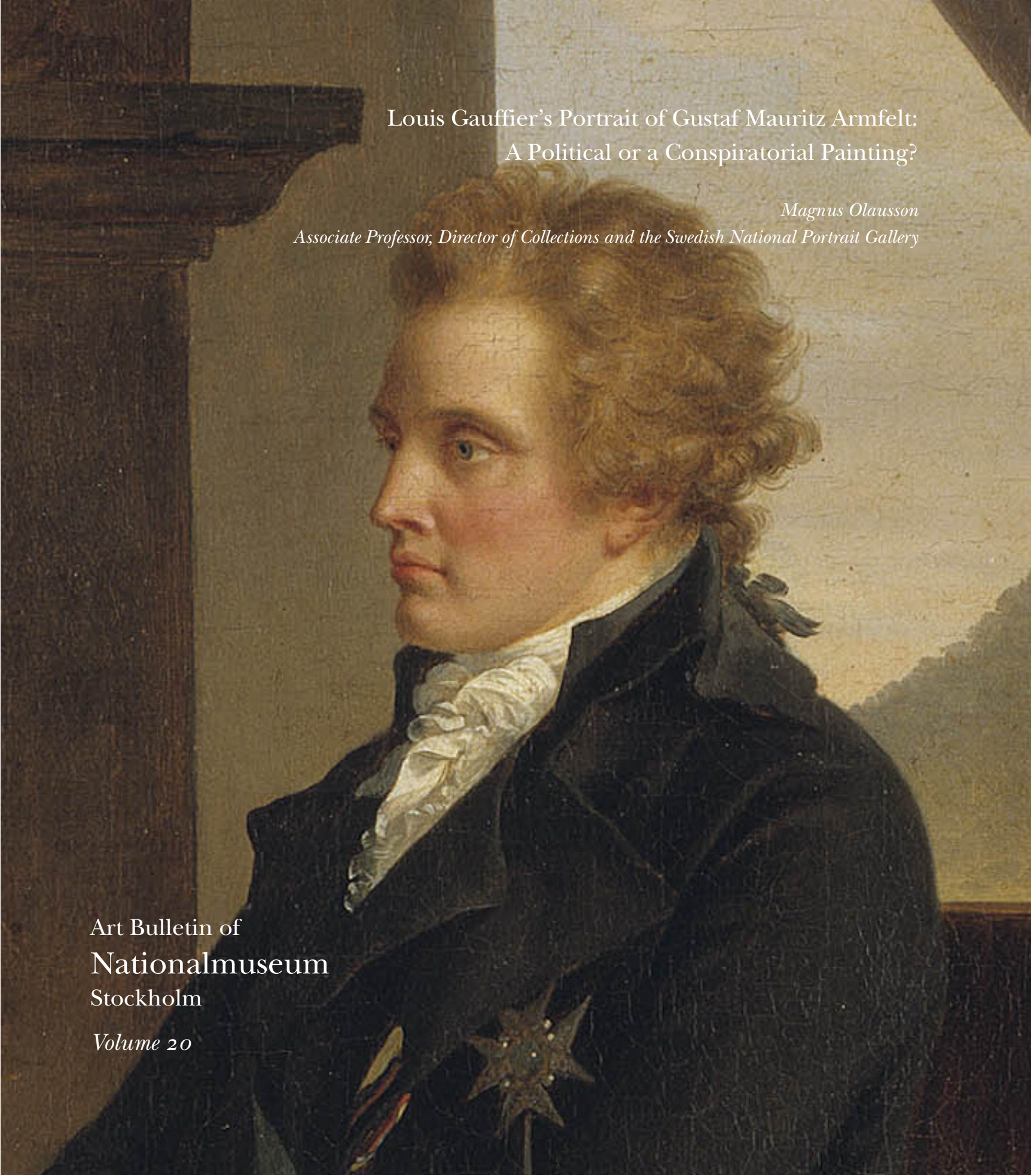

Louis Gauffier's Portrait of Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt: A Political or a Conspiratorial Painting?

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Louis Gauffier's Portrait of Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt: A Political or a Conspiratorial Painting?

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Louis Gauffier (1762–1801), *Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt (1757–1814)*, 1793. Oil on canvas, 50 x 65.5 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 2654.

In connection with Gustav III's journey to the resort town of Spa in 1780, the young baron Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt (1757–1814) became the principal favourite in the immediate circle of the king. Like Gustav's former closest confidant, the crown equerry Adolf Fredrik Munck, Armfelt was a Finn, and he was the only person allowed to address the monarch using the familiar *du*. He was a man of handsome looks, which served to reinforce a somewhat narcissistic disposition. According to the Duchess Hedvig Elisabet Charlotta, though, he was not entirely perfect: "Armfelt had a pleasant appearance, but no grace

of figure – the head of an Apollo on an ungainly body, and legs like an elephant's, though he was very agile."[1] For over a decade, Armfelt was the most powerful individual at the court of Gustav III. He thus attracted the envy of many, as became clear not least after the king's death on 29 March 1792. Just before he died, Gustav seems to have realised that his brother, Duke Charles, may have known of a conspiracy against him. He therefore made a codicil to his will. Through this document, which has not been preserved, Gustav is said to have compelled his brother, as regent, to retain the provisional government he established in the days immediately following the attack on him on 16 March. The duke's subsequent decision to annul and destroy the dead king's addition to his will has been interpreted in different ways by a succession of Swedish historians, from Elof Tegnér to Erik Lönnroth.[2] From an earlier view that was sympathetic to Armfelt, and in fact took his side, more recently Lönnroth has attempted a more nuanced, source-critical examination of the historical reality.

For the purposes of this essay, however, absolute historical truth is of less importance, since our concern here is with Armfelt's self-image, as reflected in a specific portrait. What is clear is that Armfelt was well aware that his situation was precarious and that he would soon end up out in the cold, despite his position as governor of Stockholm. In July 1792, therefore, he decided to request five months' leave of absence. In reality, this marked the start of a ten-year exodus. Those now in power nipped in the bud anything Armfelt might have been planning to do during his leave by appointing him head of mission in Italy in early September, thereby safely removing him from the political scene in Stockholm. He himself cannot have been unaware that that was their intention, but at the same time it gave him an opportunity to pursue, from abroad, his own campaign against his enemies in the regency government. Armfelt's wish for regime change in Sweden was to involve him both in negotiations in various quarters and in the publication of a pamphlet in memory of the dead Gustav III. He did not pen this political document himself; that would have been too dangerous. Instead, it was ghostwritten by a French emigrant, the Abbé Heral. The pamphlet was printed in Lucca in the summer of 1793, with the title *Prospectus d'un ouvrage, ayant pour titre Histoire de la vie et de l'administration de Gustave III, roi de Suède* (Prospectus of a work, having as its title A History of the Life and Administration of Gustav III, King of Sweden). Its appearance provoked much resentment on the part of the regency in Stockholm and suspicion immediately fell on Armfelt, who was placed under close surveillance.

The role of spymaster was played by one of Armfelt's fellow diplomats in Italy, Francesco Piranesi, who was Swedish consul in Rome. They had met ten years earlier during Gustav III's Italian tour. Piranesi had adroitly trimmed his sails to the new political winds, and now saw to it that the head of mission's post was secretly opened. Other members of Armfelt's staff also acted as spies for the regency government, including the secretary of legation, Claes Lagersvärd.[3]

In March 1793, Armfelt presented his credentials to the pope in Rome. Florence was his next stop, in April, followed by Venice and finally Genoa in August. During this time Armfelt served as host to Princess Sofia Albertina, who was touring Italy *incognita* as the Princess of Vasa. In July, moreover, he was reunited with his wife and two children in Florence.

Armfelt used his tour of Italy as an opportunity to establish important political contacts, in particular with Russian and British diplomats. He had already written to the Empress Catherine II in late 1792, seeking her protection and the possibility of entering Russian service. Her response had been positive. Armfelt's contacts with the Russians were of particular interest to the spies who were shadowing him. Little by little, his plans became clearer to the authorities in Stockholm, as did the circumstances surrounding the publication of the *Prospectus*. The intention was to tighten the noose in Florence. That was where the head of mission was to be arrested. By then, though, he had reached Naples, partly unaware of what was brewing. Only when a Swedish warship dropped anchor there for the purpose of conveying him to Sweden did he quickly realise his precarious situation. This was in the middle of January 1794, and Armfelt had to flee Italy head over heels, with Piranesi and his associates in hot pursuit.

The cat-and-mouse game was still under way during Armfelt's stay in Florence in September and October 1793. It was now that he placed a series of commissions with artists, seemingly without a thought for the costs involved, despite in fact having to borrow the money. Most of these artists were Frenchmen, all of them forced to leave Rome after the anti-French rioting and persecution following the execution of Louis XVI in January of that year. One of them, the original Bénigne Gagneraux, Armfelt had already met in Rome during Gustav III's visit. Another was the miniaturist Antonio Zuccarelli, who painted portraits of Armfelt and his family, intended for relatives back in Sweden.[4] Others we know only by name, like a certain Lefevre, again a miniaturist. Two of the other portraits Armfelt commissioned, though, proved all the more spectacular in character. The artist in one case was Louis Gauffier, who produced a painting that has long been in the Nationalmuseum's possession.[5] The other work, by François-Xavier Fabre, has unfortunately not been preserved. However, the subjects of several of these commissions and the story of their origins are known to us from the many reports which Francesco Piranesi and his assistants wrote to the new authorities in Stockholm. Nothing was too trivial or uninteresting for them, especially if it breathed the slightest hint of a conspiracy on Armfelt's part.

By the time one of Piranesi's spies, the engraver Giovanni Brunetti, arrived in Florence in November 1793, Armfelt had already left the city. Brunetti was mainly trying to track down the manuscript of the *Prospectus* and documents relating to it, although initially he had little to show for his efforts. He did, however, mana-

ge to ferret out all the portrait commissions Armfelt had placed before leaving Florence in October of that year. The hurry the sitter was in may possibly explain why Gauffier appears to have painted, not from life, but from another portrait made by the artist Anton Graff in Dresden earlier the same year.[6]

To begin with, Brunetti did not get to see the paintings for himself, and had to make do with what he learnt from his informants. One of them was Armfelt's host Pio Lombardi at the Aquila Negra hotel,[7] who was able to tell him that the Frenchman Gauffier had painted a portrait of the Swede, composed entirely according to the sitter's instructions. Armfelt, the hotelier said, was shown contemplating two busts, supposedly representing Gustav III and the executed French king. Furthermore, he claimed, the subject held in his hand a sheet of paper bearing a text which allegedly described the two monarchs as victims and political martyrs.

On a later visit to Florence, Brunetti had the opportunity to see the portrait for himself.[8] He now provided another description of it, one that, understandably, is more detailed and correct: "The said Baron [Armfelt] is portrayed in black, dressed *alla francese* and adorned with all his orders. He is represented in a pensive pose, with a couple of sheets of paper in his hand (as a kind of symbol of life), regarding the two busts of Gustav III and Julius Caesar, the latter in the form of a bronze bust, placed on a gilded table. In the background there is a view of Le Cascine, one of the most beautiful places in Florence."[9]

Reporting Brunetti's account of the portrait to his political masters, Piranesi chose, for propaganda reasons, to create a kind of hybrid or historical harmonisation in keeping with their expectations. In his letter to Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm, a key figure in the regency government, he claimed that, in the painting in question, Armfelt was contemplating the portrait busts of Gustav III and Louis XVI.[10] Undeniably, this made Gauffier's portrait seem far more sensational than it really was, and therefore Piranesi simply edited out the more nuanced interpretation. The murdered Swedish king, referred to by Reuterholm as the "persecutor", was here placed alongside the executed French monarch, to better fit the picture of Armfelt's alleged counter-revolutionary conspiracies against the regency in Stockholm. In Reuterholm's imagination, Gauffier's painting could no doubt easily be transformed into a scene in which Armfelt was penning his *Prospectus* before a portrait of Gustav III.

To stir things up still further in Stockholm, Piranesi added a paragraph claiming that Armfelt had commissioned another French artist, François-Xavier Fabre, to paint an equestrian portrait of him as a general at the head of an army.[11] With Reuterholm's propensity to see conspiracy at every turn, such a subject could easily be associated with treasonable activity. Armfelt had been made a lieutenant general in spring 1792, and already had some military experience from the war against Russia a few years earlier. During his stay in Florence in the late summer and autumn of 1793, he had even entered into negotiations with Spain over the possibility of his commanding an army corps to fight in that country's service against the young French republic. This was just a passing fancy that came to nothing, but Piranesi's spies may very well have got wind of it, and the news could certainly have coloured the interpretation of Fabre's equestrian portrait of Armfelt.

Given that Armfelt was now suspected of treason, the most innocent of paintings could serve as evidence of his alleged conspiracy against the regency government. But were all the suspicions justified? Gauffier's portrait of Armfelt was, undoubtedly, a political painting. Its essential message, even if reduced to a simple declaration of loyalty to the memory of the dead king, could escape no one. The comparison to the murder of Julius Caesar was plain, not least given the similar historical fates of the two rulers, with Caesar assassinated on 15 March and Gustav III fatally wounded on 16 March. The parallelism is emphasised and in fact directly spelt out by the Latin inscriptions, with *Divo Caesare* set alongside *Divo Gustavo, Regi Sveciae* and I *Caesare Virtute Tibi et Fato Similis*. In his hands Armfelt holds, not a piece of paper on which to record the historical events that have unfolded, but Voltaire's tragedy *La mort de César,* although the sheets on the marble table could possibly cast him in the role of Clio, the Muse of history. This is a classical interior, with a crimson mantle on the table as a historical disguise, and Armfelt, moreover, is seated on a "consular" chair, but he himself is in contemporary attire, clearly stressing that his contemplation is taking place in the present. Local colour is provided by the view, and this we may assume was the artist Louis Gauffier's contribution. As a recurring background motif in his portraits of fashionable tourists, he often used the most famous silhouette of Florence, with the dome of the cathedral, or views of the immediate environs of the city. What is remarkable about the image we see here of the park of Le Cascine is its striking freshness. This is in reality a piece of *plein air* painting, before the major breakthrough of that genre. Several of the French artists in Rome were in fact pioneers in the field, and Gauffier himself made a number of *plein air* studies. There are thus many different layers to his portrait of Armfelt.

Apart from the original portrait, which was a gift to the British minister in Florence, Lord John Hervey, and his own personal version of it, Armfelt got Gauffier to make two replicas in 1796.[12] The latter, like Armfelt's version, have remained in Finland. The original was acquired by the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm as a gift from Sophie Nordenfalk in 1927. By then, it had led a long and adventurous existence. After Armfelt had left Florence, his good friend Lord Hervey had attended to his interests there and redeemed the work from the artist. Following Hervey's premature death in 1796, his widow Elizabeth had remarried to Lord Seafort, and their son, Lord Howard de Walden, had inherited the portrait. It was sold at Christie's in 1868 to the British diplomat Philip Currie, who presented it to Armfelt's grandson Carl Edvard Piper,

the Swedish minister in London. Subsequently, the painting passed by inheritance to Sophie Nordenfalk, née Piper, at Blekhem.[13]

The other three paintings appear to have found their way home through the efforts of Armfelt's wife, Countess Hedvig De la Gardie. Armfelt's close confidant, Johan Albrekt Ehrenström, recounts in his "Historical Notes" that, of these three versions of the portrait, one (Armfelt's own) was intended for the sitter's wife, one for his friend Aminoff and the last for Ehrenström himself.[14] He continues: "During her visit to me at the fortress of Waxholm, the Countess Armfelt told me that she had brought the version intended for me to Stockholm, and when she later sent it to me, she wrote that it could at least have such value in my eyes as was lent to it by the bust of King Gustav III. I was in a quandary as to how to answer her courteous letter without betraying my resentment towards the giver."[15]

This was undoubtedly a delicate gift to receive if you were locked up in a fortress, convicted of involvement in the so-called Armfelt conspiracy. But Countess Armfelt was at least as brave herself, as Ehrenström also recalls:

It caused no little surprise when, some time after this, the Countess Armfelt was appointed governess to the newborn Crown Prince Gustav. She was accordingly given a room in the Royal Palace, in which the king, the queen and the dukes, together with the duchess and the princess, often gathered. Her husband was still proscribed at this time. His name was posted up outside the Stockholm jail and in all the major towns of the realm. … Yet the Countess Armfelt put up his portrait over the sofa in the large salon, hung with red damask, in which she received the royal family and the court. People praised her courage, but found the comparison between the place in which her husband's portrait hung and that still occupied by his publicly insulted name strange in the extreme.[16]

These were indeed strange times in the history of Sweden and the rest of Europe: one day governor of the capital, the next an outlawed minister on the run. In the feverish mood gripping both Sweden and the continent in 1793, as new values were pitted against old, even an intimate, almost miniature-like example of "fine painting" like the portrait of Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt could become political dynamite. It would be a mistake to read Gauffier's picture simply as a pre-Romantic, theatrical portrait of the Gustavian Armfelt, absorbed in contemplation of a bust of the dead king. The work also touched a raw political nerve, as Armfelt made himself the advocate of a legitimate regency government, prescribed by Gustav III himself, but set aside by the Duke-Regent Charles. There was some justification, therefore, for the agitation Piranesi's intelligence reports must have provoked in Stockholm when the subject of Armfelt's portrait came up. Louis Gauffier's painting carried a clear political message, undoubtedly reinforced by the context in which it came into being – but did that make it a conspiratorial work?

Notes:

1. *Hedvig Elisabeth Charlottas dagbok,* Cecilia af Klercker (ed.), vol. IV, Stockholm 1920, p. 223.

2. Elof Tegnér, *Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt,* I–III, Stockholm 1883–1887. See also Erik Lönnroth, "Kodicillen till Gustaf III:s testamente", in Scandia: *Tidskrift för historisk forskning,* vol. 63 (1), 1997, pp. 35–46.

3. Carl Lagersvärd (1756–1836) was also portrayed by Louis Gauffier in 1799. The painting (NM 7026) belongs to the Nationalmuseum's collections since 2004.

4. RA (National Archives of Sweden), E 5135, Francesco Piranesi to Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm, 7 December 1793 (with an attached intelligence report dated 3 December). Cf. ibid., letter dated 18 December 1793 (with annex dated 14 December 1793).

5. Fredrik Sander, who published a study of Piranesi as early as 1880, explored the genesis of Louis Gauffier's painting, but with little understanding of how political machinations affected the way the portrait was read (Fredrik Sander, *Francesco Piranesi: en svensk konstagent och minister i Rom: ett bidrag till belysningen af högmålsprocessen mot baron Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt,* Stockholm 1880, p. 14).

6. Marja Supinen has refuted the earlier erroneous reference to a mysterious "Japy", who was in fact none other than Anton Graff. (Marja Supinen, "Om några porträtt av Gauffier, Graff och Fabre", *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland,* vol. 82 (3), 1997, p. 319.) Cf. Pontus Grate, *French Paintings, II, Eighteenth Century,* Stockholm 1994, pp. 156–157, n. 3). The alleged haste surrounding the production of Gauffier's portrait can be compared with Armfelt's own remarks in a letter to a female friend: "J'espère que la copie qui fait Gauffier de mon portrait, sera aussi bien que l'original sans quoi je suis prêt à lui donner une séance pour la tête." (RA, E 5139, Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt to Ann Hatton, dated Naples, 28 December 1793.)

7. RA (National Archives of Sweden), E 5135. Dispatch from Giovanni Brunetti, November 1793.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.: "il Ritratto del do Barone vestito di nero alla francese ornato di tutti gl'ordini in atto pensieroso, con una carta in mano (Emblema di descrivere la vita) d'avanti, che guardando li due Busti di Gustavo III et Giuglio Cesare (ed ora si e meglio diziffrato il secondo) espresi à guisa di Bronzo sopra d'un tavolino dorato: in fondo del meda quadro vi é rapresentato la veduta delle cascine, uno delli belli siti Firenzi."

10. RA, E 5135, Francesco Piranesi to Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm, 11 December 1793.

11. Ibid.

12. A detailed account of the complex issue of the different versions and copies of Gauffier's portrait can be found in Supinen 1997, pp. 323–335.

13. Ibid. Cf. Grate 1992, p. 156.

14. Johan Albrekt Ehrenström, *Stadsrådet Johan Albrekt Ehrenströms efterlemnade Historiska Anteckningar,* vol. II, Uppsala 1883, p. 444. Of these three paintings, Aminoff's has been preserved at Rilax Manor in Finland, while Ehrenström's and Armfelt's own ended up at Sveaborg; cf. Supinen 1997, pp. 324–325.

15. Ehrenström 1883, pp. 444–445.

16. Ibid.