

## The history of the painting

The painting appears to be unrecorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although a restorer's label from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century shows that it was then already in England. It was acquired in the early 1920s by Lytton Strachey, who hung it in a place of honour in his study. After Strachey's death in 1932, the painting passed to his heirs. In 1983, Giles Barber acquired the painting for the Voltaire Foundation from a Mrs Strachey, then living in Park Town, Oxford.



The restoration and reframing of this picture in 2008, 25 years after it first came to the Foundation, was made possible by the generous benefaction of Mrs Madeline Barber. The frame, acquired from Arnold Wiggins & Sons, is a French frame in 'Empire' style, dating from around 1800. The restoration of the picture was carried out by Ruth Bubb.

*Madeline Barber's benefaction to restore and reframe this painting is made in recognition of the work of the staff of the Voltaire Foundation.*

## Exhibitions

- 1978, Oxford, Bodleian Library (*The philosophers at dinner*): Giles Barber, 'Voltaire and the English: catalogue of an exhibition', *SVEC* 179 (1979), p.159-91 (p.191)
- 1994, Paris, Hôtel de La Monnaie (*Le souper des philosophes*): *Voltaire et l'Europe*, éd. F. Bléchet (Brussels, 1994), no 217, p.164
- 2001, Pau, Musée national du château de Pau (*La Sainte Cène du patriarche*): *Voltaire et Henri IV* (Paris, 2001), no 88, p.79

## Bibliography

- Garry Apgar, *L'Art singulier de Jean Huber: Voir Voltaire* (Paris, 1995)
- Jean Goulemot, *L'Inventaire Voltaire* (Paris, 1995), p.1036
- Nicholas Cronk, 'Voltaire et la Sainte Cène de Huber: parodie et posture', in *Philosophie des Lumières et valeurs chrétiennes: Hommage à Marie-Hélène Cotoni*, éd. C. Mervaud et J.-M. Seillan (Paris, 2008), p.23-34



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## VOLTAIRE FOUNDATION



Jean Huber  
*La Sainte Cène du Patriarche*  
(c.1772)

## The subject of the painting

Jean Huber (1721-86), born in Geneva, began his career as an artist producing silhouettes of landscapes and figures. From the late 1750s, he made his reputation as the portraitist of Voltaire. It was through Grimm, one of his patrons, that Huber received the commission from Catherine II to paint a series of scenes depicting everyday life at Ferney, Voltaire's estate near Geneva. These nine pictures, showing Voltaire in a whimsical and even satirical light, remain today in the Hermitage in St Petersburg.



*La Sainte Cène du Patriarche* ('The Patriarch's Last Supper') – the title is Grimm's – is related to the paintings in this series, but differs from them, both by virtue of its size (it is larger than the others) and its subject matter, which is more serious. The seemingly parodic allusion to the Last Supper probably made the picture too 'dangerous' for Catherine II, and the painting seems never to have been sent to Russia, if that was indeed the original intention.

The painting resembles what in English art is called a conversation piece. Voltaire sits at the head of the dinner table, surrounded by his followers. To his right are D'Alembert and La Harpe, his two most faithful disciples. Next to them is Grimm, who is turning to the Jesuit Father Adam, with whom Voltaire played chess. To Voltaire's left are seated first Huber himself, then (somewhat hidden) Sophie d'Houdetot and the poet Saint-Lambert. At the right-hand end of the table, Diderot sits in profile. To his left is Marmontel, and further round sits a figure with his back turned to the viewer – perhaps Condorcet, who visited Ferney with D'Alembert in 1770.



The reunion is, of course, an entirely imaginary event. Diderot in particular never visited Ferney, despite Voltaire's repeated invitations. The early 1770s were a difficult time for Voltaire, as the increasing prominence of atheists among the ranks of the *philosophes* came to threaten the coherence of their group. This picture imagines the longed-for unity of the party of the *philosophes* under the leadership of the patriarch Voltaire.

At one level the picture parodies the story of the Last Supper told by all four evangelists. Yet the parody is far from exact: the disciples do not number a dozen, and there appears to be no Judas. In fact the portrayal of Voltaire as Jesus is not altogether parodic – and it would not have displeased him. He admired the ethical teachings of the New Testament, and believed that it was the *philosophe's* duty to be active in society. In an extraordinary passage in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* ('Religion' II, 1771), Voltaire goes so far as to imagine an encounter between himself and Jesus.



This is a programmatic picture, therefore, and it seems unlikely that the modest Huber would have imagined the subject entirely by himself. It seems more probable that the subject was dictated to Huber by Voltaire himself. This is an image of Voltaire which comes with his own seal of approval.

*Images: Heads of Voltaire from engravings by J. Huber*