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GIOVANNI BOLDINI
(Ferrara 1842 – 1931 Paris)

PORTRAIT OF MONSIEUR HENRY POIDATZ,
c. 1889

signed lower left: 'Boldini'
oil on canvas
116 x 92 cm; 45 5/8 x 36 1/4 in.

Provenance

Henry Poidatz (1854-1905);
thence by descent to the present owner.

Literature

P. Dini, F. Dini, *Giovanni Boldini 1842-1931. Catalogo Ragionato della Pittura a Olio con un'ampia selezione di pastelli e acquerelli*, Turin 2004, vol. 2, no. 1391, p. 695.

F. Dini, F. Mazzocca, C. Sisi, *Boldini*, exh. cat., Padua, Palazzo Zabarella 2004, p. 227, no. 89, illustrated p. 226.

F. Dini, F. Mazzocca, *Boldini. Lo Spettacolo della Modernità*, exh. cat., Forlì, Musei San Domenico 2015, no. 245, pp. 300, 371.

Exhibited

Padua, Palazzo Zabarella, *Boldini*, 2004, no. 89, p. 227.

Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, *Boldini*, 2005, no. 89, p. 227.

Forlì, Musei San Domenico, *Boldini. Lo spettacolo della modernità*, 2015, no. 245, pp. 300, 371.

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In this portrait of Monsieur Henry Poidatz, Giovanni Boldini (1842 – 1931) - celebrated by his contemporaries as the “magician of movement” for his *bravura* brushwork and deft psychological insight - captures the composure of a sitter whose commanding presence and refined bearing offer a lively reflection of the Belle Époque’s elegant modernity. The painting, dating from *circa* 1889 and preceding Boldini’s larger *Portrait of Madame Henry Poidatz and her daughter Hellen* (Fig. 1), displays a harmonious interplay of blacks, whites, and a warm vinous-brown background that recalls Édouard Manet’s *Portrait of Henri Rochefort*, 1881 (Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Fig. 2), especially in the subtle chromatic refinements of the sitter’s attire, the crisp cuffs, and the contrasting flesh tones, all of which echo the refined palette admired by the baritone Jean-Baptiste Faure - Manet’s patron who also commissioned works from Boldini (Fig. 3).¹ The same chromatic and compositional qualities may be observed in Boldini’s famous portrait of Giuseppe Verdi, 1886 (Fig. 4).

Although the pose appears more traditional than the animated interior scenes Boldini sometimes favoured for his sitters, the atmosphere remains relaxed and imbued with a personal warmth befitting the close friendship between artist and model: one hand tucked into the waistcoat, the other holding a cigarette, the sitter’s feet slightly apart, and his expression exuding the unguarded confidence of a successful bourgeois. This particular informality, as noted by scholars, sets Poidatz in the lineage of the self-assured figures in the bourgeois narratives of Guy de Maupassant - solid, respectable, and representative of a socially ascending class.² Henry Poidatz (1854 – 1905) was indeed the epitome of modern entrepreneurial spirit: born in Sannois (Val-d’Oise) to Louis Emile Poidatz (a local notary) and Estelle Wittersheim, he studied law, became an avocat at the Barreau de Paris in 1882, served briefly as a lieutenant, and thanks to the influence of his maternal uncle, M. Wittersheim (printer of the *Journal*

¹ Faure owned Manet’s *Portrait of Henri Rochefort* and also commissioned works from Boldini; see F. Dini, F. Mazzocca, C. Sisi, *Boldini*, exh. cat., Padua, 2004, p. 227.

² On the bourgeois type in Boldini’s male portraiture and comparisons to Maupassant’s “respectable” protagonists, see Dini, Dini, *Giovanni Boldini 1842–1931*, 2004 and *ibid.*

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officiel), gained swift entry into the Parisian press. He wrote under the pseudonym “Le Boursier” for *Le Figaro*, served as secretary-general at *Le Petit Journal*, and in 1894 became co-director of *Le Matin* with Maurice Bunau-Varilla, ultimately receiving the rank of Officer of the *Légion d’honneur* in 1899.³

He was also known for his enthusiasm as an art collector, as evidenced by the sale of twenty paintings from his collection to Theo van Gogh in May 1886 and his participation in the *Vente Poidatz et autres* at the Hôtel Drouot on 15 March 1888;⁴ further underscoring his prosperity was his ownership of the Château des Rhuets at Vouzon (Loir-et-Cher), sold after his untimely death in May 1905 at the age of fifty. Contemporary correspondence, notably Boldini’s letter to Banti (10 – 12 February 1887), documents how the artist and sitter travelled together to Milan for the première of Verdi’s *Otello* at La Scala – where Boldini had secured tickets from his friend Emanuele Muzio, along with a *panettone* – and then continued on to Venice with plans for Trieste and Vienna, their sociable rapport likely sealed by attending gala dinners and receptions in honour of Verdi.⁵ It is no surprise, therefore, that Boldini would later paint not only Henry himself but also his wife, Marguerite Francoeur, and daughter, Hellen, in a more expansive portrait (1889, private collection). Scholars generally concur that this portrait of Monsieur Poidatz must date to around the same moment, between 1887 and 1889, as indicated by stylistic parallels and documentary evidence.⁶

Within Boldini’s *œuvre*, the painting perfectly conveys the artist’s bridging of conventional portraiture – anchored in Van Dyck and Gainsborough’s legacy – and the forward-looking innovations of the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and other moderns – including John Singer Sargent, a close colleague. Boldini’s distinction lay in painting that was at once a “conservative genre in an avant-garde manner,”

³ Pinsolle, F., “La Presse et la Construction de la Figure du Fondateur d’Entreprise à la Belle Époque,” *Entreprises et histoire*, 3(69), 2012, pp. 213–226; see also references to Poidatz in contemporary press archives.

⁴ *Vente Poidatz et autres*, Paris (Hôtel Drouot), 15 March 1888.

⁵ Letter from Boldini to Banti, 10–12 February 1887.

⁶ Dini, Mazzocca, Sisi, (2004, p. 227) and Dini, Mazzocca (2015, p. 371).

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capturing the era's transformation and its love of fashion, speed, and self-presentation much in the same way Émile Zola or Marcel Proust immortalised it in writing. Indeed, as members of high society, aristocrats, and celebrities vied for Boldini's portraiture, he emerged - alongside James McNeill Whistler and Sargent himself - as one of the leading exponents of high-society painting in Europe. His famous *Portrait of Count Robert de Montesquiou*, 1897, equally blends a pose taken from the great tradition of 17th- and 18th-century portraits with an image of modernity - possibly introducing a little irony about Montesquieu's fanatical aestheticism (Fig. 5). In Poidatz's portrait, the slightly lowered vantage point and the sitter's strong, pyramid-like arrangement echo the majestic amplitude of Boldini's subsequent portrait commissions, while the exacting definition of the hands, face, and delicate textiles reveals the meticulous finish that lent his portrayals their distinctive verve. At once traditional and urgently modern, exuding the calm authority of a prosperous financier and magnate at the centre of the Belle Époque, the present work captures Boldini's ability to distil not only the outward trappings of wealth and sophistication but also an affable, convivial spirit nurtured by genuine friendship.

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Fig. 1. Giovanni Boldini, *Portrait of Madame Henry Poidatz and her daughter Hellen*, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 205 x 116 cm.
Private Collection.

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Fig. 2. Édouard Manet, *Portrait of Henri Rochefort*, 1881.
Oil on canvas, 81.5 x 66.5 cm.
Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

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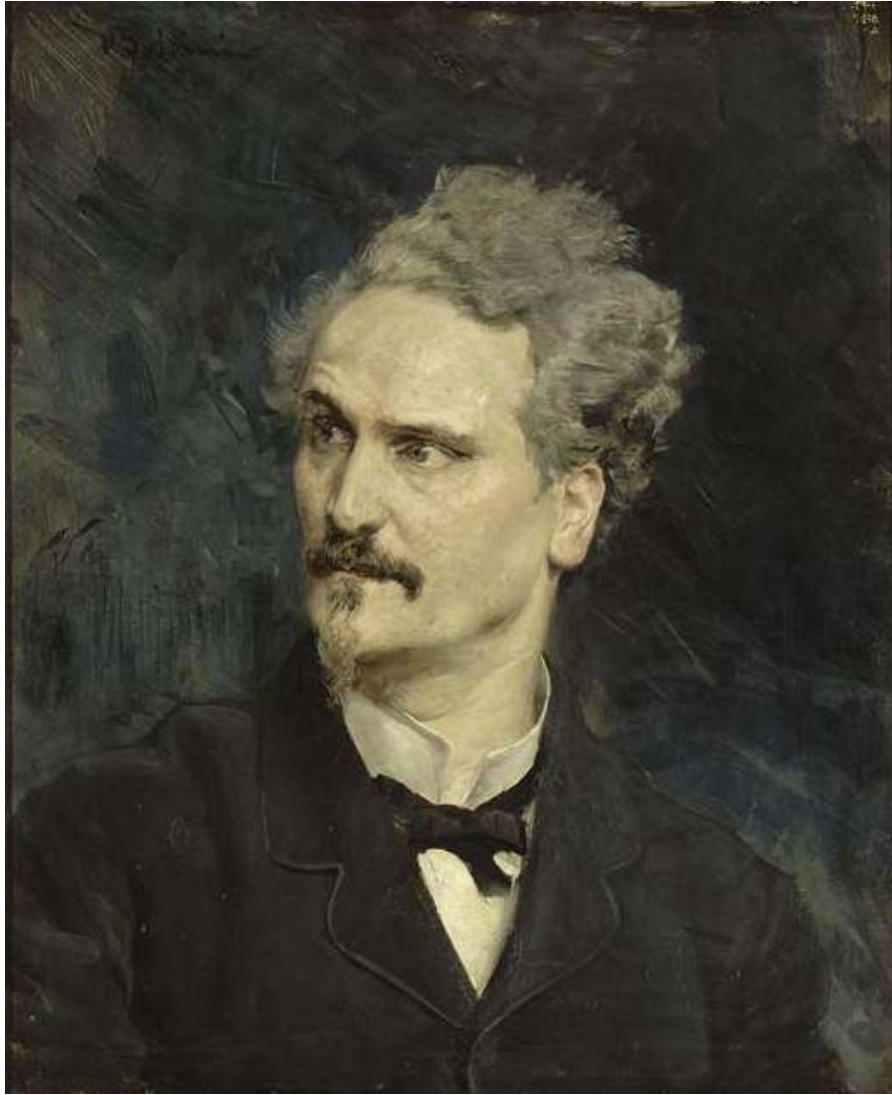


Fig. 3. Giovanni Boldini, *Portrait of Henri Rochefort*, 1882.
Oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

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Fig. 4. Giovanni Boldini, *Portrait of Giuseppe Verdi*, 1886.
Oil on canvas, 118 x 96 cm.
Casa Verdi, Milan.

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Fig. 5. Giovanni Boldini, *Le Comte Robert de Montesquiou*, 1897.
Oil on canvas, 115,5 x 82,5 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.