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The Brandy Merchantess at the
guardhouse and Interrogation at the
guardhouse, by Pierre Duval Le Camus

Oil on canvas

1822

55 x 47 cm (21,6 x 18,5 in)



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The 1822 Salon catalog mentions, at n°440 and 441 : *La marchande d'eau-de-vie au corps de garde* [The Brandy Merchantess at the guardhouse] and *L'interrogatoire au corps de garde* [Interrogation at the guardhouse], two scenes exhibited alongside nine other paintings by Pierre Duval Le Camus, a Norman painter born in 1790, a pupil of Claude Gautherot and then of Jacques-Louis David.

We know these two scenes were conceived as pendants for the 1822 Salon — the second Salon in which the artist attended — thanks to two lithographs advertised that same year in the *Tablettes universelles* : “This etching [*La Marchande d'eau-de-vie au corps de garde*], makes a pair with *l'interrogatoire au corps de garde*. We owe it to M. Lecamus, to whom we owe the beautiful picture of *la réprimande*.” The link between the two scenes is emphasised by many subtle details the painter inserted in the paintings. The most picturesque of them all is the playing card — a five of hearts — that the guards might have dropped carelessly, after having played during their watch. That the same five of hearts lies on the

floor in both interiors suggests these scenes unfold within a unified time and setting.

The *Tablettes universelles* mention *La Réprimande* because this “beautiful picture, also exhibited at the 1822 Salon alongside *La Marchande* and *L’Interrogatoire*, brought considerable fame to Duval Le Camus. *La Réprimande* was purchased in 1822 by the Duchess of Berry, a major patron, daughter of Francis I of the Two Sicilies and widow of Charles-Ferdinand d’Artois, second son of Charles X. The year 1822 thus marks the beginning of royal favor for Duval Le Camus under the Restoration and inaugurates a prestigious career: in 1827, another genre scene exhibited at the Salon and awarded a first-class medal was acquired by Charles X; yet another scene was purchased by Louis-Philippe in 1831, who named the painter Chevalier of the Légion d’honneur in 1837, likely for founding the Musée de peinture et de sculpture in Lisieux. Duval Le Camus continued to exhibit his canvases regularly at the Salons. In 1845, he exhibited alongside his son Jules-Alexandre, also a painter, his famous *Pifferari donnant une leçon à son fils*, now in the Louvre. Baudelaire, in his *Salon de 1845*, immortalized him with these two lines:

*Duval Le Camus Père sait d’une voix légère
Passer du grave au doux, du plaisant au sévère.*

La Marchande d’eau-de-vie au corps de garde and *L’Interrogatoire au corps de garde* thus bear witness to the taste for genre painting under the Restoration, a broad domain often overshadowed by grand Romantic compositions and history painting. These are also among the earliest preserved works by Duval Le Camus, marked by an almost northern austerity strikingly close to the compositions of Martin Drolling — an austerity that softens, warms, and fades as taste evolves and the painter gains mastery in the decades that follow.

A signed version of *La Marchande d'eau-de-vie* appeared at Sotheby's in 2006, alongside a scene showing *La Partie de piquet de deux invalides*. This version of *La Marchande* was therefore thought to be the one exhibited at the 1822 Salon. The pendant to *La Marchande*, that is *L'Interrogatoire*, was not known at the time, replaced by *La Partie de piquet*, and it was incorrectly suggested that it formed a pair with *La Marchande* due to their similar dimensions, matching frames, and identical nameplates. However, it is impossible that these two paintings were ever a true pair, since *La Partie de piquet* predates *La Marchande* by three years and the two were never shown together at the Salon. Furthermore, the version of *La Marchande* in question is smaller than the one we have here, with certain details clearly cropped.

The current pair, *L'Interrogatoire* and *La Marchande*, bears on the back of the canvas the stamp of the Belot firm, at no. 3 "Rue de l'Arbre sec." The Belot firm, founded by Michel Belot in 1768, and a supplier of canvases to painters in the early 19th century, changed ownership in 1824, becoming "Vallé et Bourniche," still at 3, rue de l'Arbre Sec.

All these elements — the Belot stamp dating from before 1824, the cropped details in the version sold at Sotheby's, and the fact that these two canvases have been preserved together just as they were exhibited at the 1822 Salon — seem to confirm that these are indeed the paintings shown at the 1822 Salon, and that the *La Marchande* sold at Sotheby's is a slightly later replica.

The two paintings are housed in period frames which, over the centuries, have suffered significant losses. The canvases themselves are in perfect condition.

Sources

Explication des ouvrages de peinture et dessins, sculpture, architecture et gravure des artistes vivans, exposés au Musée royal des Arts, le 24 avril 1822, Paris, 1822 ; Jean-Baptiste Gouriet, Tablettes universelles, Paris, 1822 ; Michaël Vottero, “Pierre Duval le Camus, peintre de genre“, in Les Duval Le Camus, peintres de père en fils, Saint-Cloud, 2010.

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