



Jean-Marc Nattier

(Paris 1685 - 1766)

Soldier begging for Mercy

(preparatory study for *The Victory of Poltava* - 1717)

Black and white chalk on paper

Dimensions: 9 1/2 x 7 7/8 in (24 x 20 cm) - Framed 15 x 13 3/8 in (38 x 34 cm)

Provenance: Studio of Nattier

Etienne Parrocel (1696-1775) or Joseph-François Parrocel (1704 – 1781) and by descent until its sale in 1983

Senon Collection

Bérain baguette frame, carved and gilded wood from the Regency period

Price on request

While Nattier's preparatory drawings for portraits or historical scenes¹ are extremely rare, the drawing we are presenting here is part of a well-identified set of preparatory studies, executed in 1717 for one of the painter's first commissions, the painting commissioned by Tsar Peter I of Russia to celebrate his victory over the Swedes at Poltava (in today's Ukraine) on July 8, 1709.

Kept in Nattier's studio, these studies were used throughout his career to embellish the backgrounds of military portraits with battle scenes, such as that of Isidore Florimond Marié de Toulle (1741 - Nelson Atkins Museum of Arts - Kansas City) or that of the Duke of Penthièvre (1745 or 1746 - Fondation Bemberg - Toulouse).

1. Peter I of Russia, one of Nattier's first patrons

Jean-Marc Nattier was born in Paris in 1685 into a family of artists: his father Marc was also a portraitist and his mother Marie Courtois was a miniaturist, his brother Jean-Baptiste was also a painter.

Gifted with a very precocious talent, he won first prize for drawing at the Academy at the age of fifteen. Although his godfather, the painter Jean Jouvenet (1644 - 1717), gave him the opportunity to go to the French Academy in Rome, he preferred to stay in Paris and made drawings of the paintings by Rubens in the famous Luxembourg Palace gallery commissioned by Marie de Médicis. He was then admitted to the Académie in 1713 and became a full member in 1718.

In 1716, an envoy of the Russian Tsar Peter I convinced him to go to Amsterdam, while the Tsar was visiting, and then follow him to Russia. When in Holland, he painted a portrait of Peter I's wife, the future Empress Catherine II, and a painting representing the Battle of

¹ The *Victory of Poltava* is the only battle scene ever painted by Nattier.

Poltava. Nattier preferred to return to Paris than to follow the Tsar to Russia, but he did paint his portrait between May and June 1717 during the latter's visit to Paris.

Nattier then became the portraitist of the Orleans family and, from 1748 onwards, of the Court of Louis XV. He died in 1766 ill and destitute, shunned by the public after having enjoyed extraordinary success as a portraitist during his mature years.

2. Description of the artwork

This drawing represents a soldier on the ground, leaning on his left elbow and raising his right arm, begging for mercy. It is vigorously executed and organised around two diagonals that cross at the level of the soldier's chest: that of his arms, extended by his open hands as a sign of abandonment and despair, and that of the reverse of our soldier's jacket, extended by the arch of his nose.

While the shadow cast on the ground by the soldier adds a dramatic dimension to the scene, the few strokes of white chalk enliven the drawing and poignantly underline the character's immense vulnerability: the hands, the uncovered face with its imploring mouth, the belt that seems to have broken in his fall.

3. *The Victory of Poltava*, a major painting with a rich body of preparatory studies

Peter I, better known as Peter the Great, was born on 30 May 1672 in Moscow and died on 28 January 1725 in St Petersburg. He became Tsar of Russia in 1682 and received the title of Emperor of all the Russias in 1721, at the conclusion of the Great Northern War (1700-1721) opposing Russia to the Swedish Empire of Charles XII, of which the victory of Poltava (now in Ukraine) in 1709 was a decisive turning point.

Nattier's composition during his stay in Amsterdam in 1717 presents an imaginary view of this battle in which the painter does not attempt to render the specificity of the place, but rather translates the confusion of the battle between the Russian army (in green uniforms) and the Swedish army (in blue uniforms).

Nattier took particular care in the preparation of this work, drawing a study for each of the soldiers involved in the battle. The drawing we are presenting is one of five known studies², the other four represent:

- a study of an officer wearing a tricorne (a preparatory sketch for the figure of the Tsar), reproduced below;
- a study of a rider (for the rider on the left of the Tsar);
- a study for the soldier wielding the bayonet rifle in the centre of the painting,
- a study for the Russian soldier lying under the white horse in the centre of the painting.

² All these studies are reproduced in the catalogue of the Nattier exhibition held in Versailles (3 figures 1 to 4)



Jean-Marc Nattier – The Victory of Poltava - Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts - Moscow - Russia

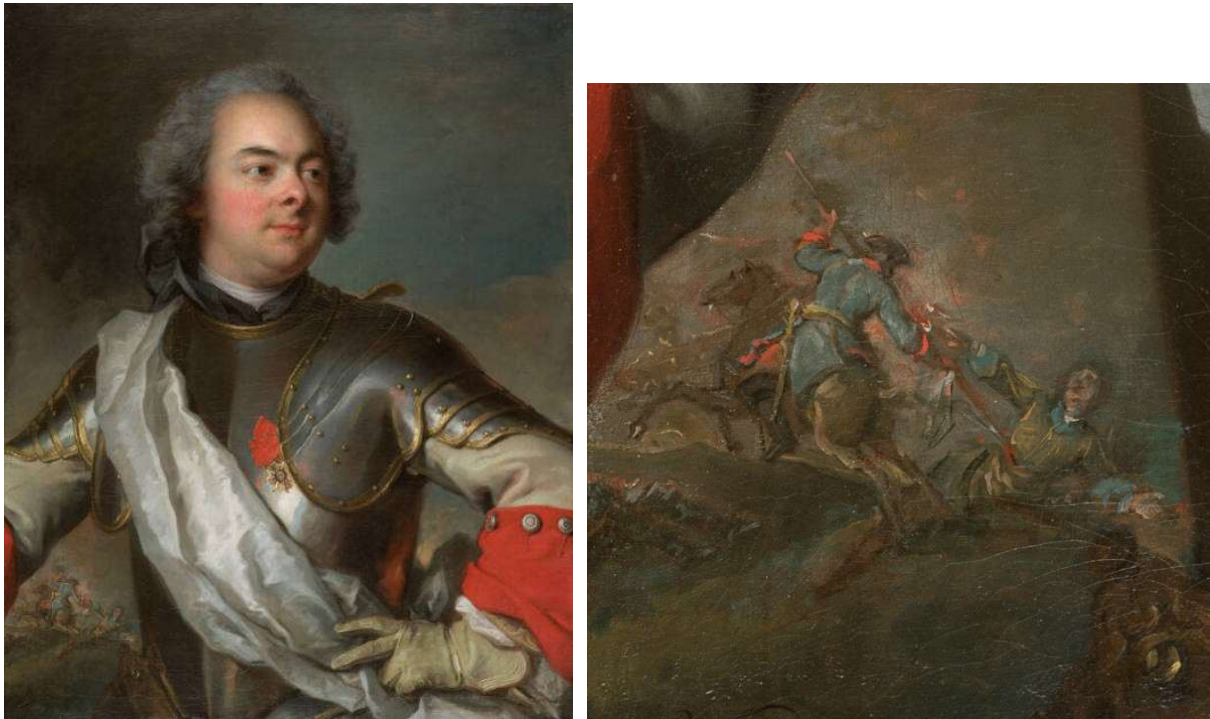


Jean-Marc Nattier – Study for the Victory of Poltava (Portrait of Peter I) - Calvet Museum - Avignon – France

Although our drawing is unusual in that it was not used in the final composition, its execution by Nattier was recognised by Xavier Salmon³, the author of the catalogue of the Versailles exhibition (where the Calvet Museum drawing was displayed).

All five drawings were kept in Nattier's studio until the end of his career. While *The Victory of Poltava* is the only battle scene painted by the artist, these studies subsequently formed a repertoire that he drew on throughout his career to embellish the backgrounds of his military portraits with scenes of combat, such as those of Isidore Florimond Marié de Toulle (1741) and the Duke of Penthièvre (1745 or 1746).

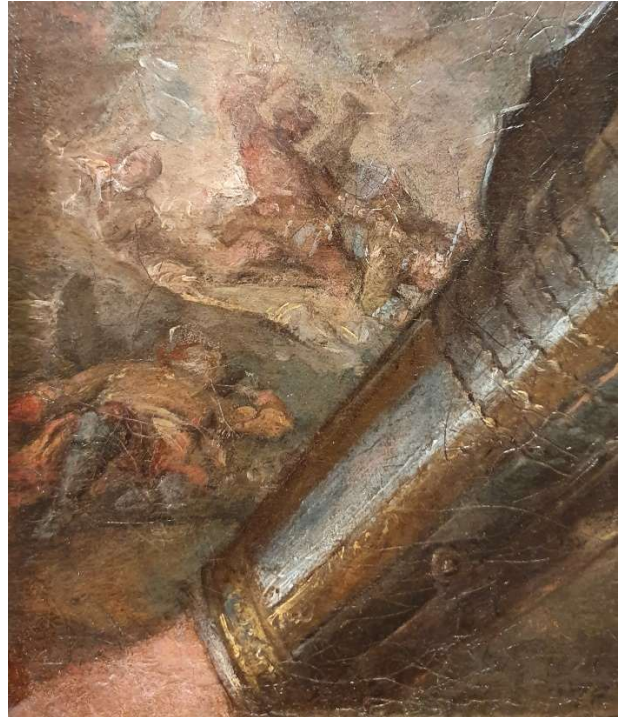
Isidore Florimond Marié, Lord of Toulle and Foucaucourt-hors-Nesle (Amiens 1705–1792), is depicted here in 1741 in his uniform as captain of the Grammont Cavalry Regiment, in which he served during the War of the Austrian Succession. The enlargement of the battle scene at the bottom right allows us to recognize without any doubt the reuse of our drawing in the character begging for mercy from the horseman who is about to pierce him with his lance.



Jean-Marc Nattier – *Portrait of Isidore Florimond Marié de Toulle* (and detail showing the reuse of our drawing) – Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art – Kansas City – USA

We find this same figure with arms outstretched on the right (in the second row) of the battle scene depicted in the background of the *Portrait of the Duke of Penthièvre*, held at the Bemberg Foundation in Toulouse. The prince (born in 1725) is shown wearing the Golden Fleece (which he received in 1738), and the battle in the background may recall those of Fontenoy (1745) or Raucoux (1746), during which he distinguished himself, suggesting a re-use of our drawing almost 30 years after the creation of the *Victory of Poltava*.

³ Our drawing is also mentioned in Louis-Antoine Prat's reference book on 18th century French drawing (page 218).



Jean-Marc Nattier - *Portrait of the Duc de Penthièvre* (and detail showing the reuse of our drawing) - *Fondation Bemberg*
Toulouse - France

4. Framing

We have chosen to frame this drawing with Bérain rods dating from the first quarter of the 18th century, which were supplied to us by the Maison Lebrun.



Jean-Marc Nattier - *Soldier begging for Mercy*

Main bibliographical references :

Le dessin français au XVIIIe siècle Louis-Antoine Prat Edition Musée du Louvre/ Somogy éditions d'art March 2017

Jean-Marc Nattier Xavier Salmon - Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris 1999

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945 - The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*