STORIES BEHIND THE IMAGES

A veterinarian in the Napoleonic army

ABSTRACT
Because much information is lost in history, there are a lot of ‘anonymous’ portraits. We do not know the sitter anymore and even the photographer is almost always unknown. This article focuses on the rare opportunity of identifying a Napoleonic veteran in a daguerreotype and telling the stories behind this portrait. Finding his relatives and his records in the archive of the Grande armée made it possible to reconstruct a part of his professional and private life. As a Frenchman born in 1793 and living near Paris he grew up in a very tempestuous era. After his studies he served as a veterinarian in the army of Napoleon.

KEY WORDS: History of Photography, daguerreotype portrait, veterinarian, école vétérinaire d’Alfort, Napoleonic army veteran, First Empire, France

The occasion of writing this article was the rare presence of a number of private annotations to a notably early daguerreotype portrait. Pictures need a story in order to stay alive. In most cases the picture alone is not enough to tell it. Unlike many portraits that have become anonymous, or even storyless, over the years, these annotations enable us to give back a story to this picture, and the man, his name was Jean Borgnon, that is in it. (ill. 1). The annotations even may reveal something about how photography was experienced in its early days.

A considerable share of the surviving daguerreotype portraits were made for private purposes. As such, they rarely bear any captions because the audience knew the people who were in them. Exceptionally, a date of when the picture was taken or received may be found. Another exception are post mortem portraits. The reason for possessing a portrait was (and still is) first and foremost to bring to mind a memory, a sentiment, of the person depicted. Since it was obvious to the contemporary environment, family and friends whose portrait it was, any addenda are usually of a later date. When the person in the picture has already passed away (long ago), and is unknown to the generations to come, some elucidation is needed to situate this particular portrait in its family context. This way, the portrait can regain some of its sentimental value. Whether these later annotations are completely reliable is anyone’s guess. While they mostly are the only clue to more information, some misgivings will inevitably arise. Obviously, anybody could add just about any kind of annotation to a photograph.

Ill. 1, M. Moulin, Portrait of Jean Aglibert Borgnon. One quarter plate mounted with a paper window mat and a wooden frame, collection Wouter Lambrechts. See on Daguerreobase
Despite these misgivings, it is precisely two of such (partly later) annotations to the daguerreotype (Ill. 2) which were the beginning of a search that lead to the person depicted in this portrait.

Specifically, the back of the framed daguerreotype portrait contains three annotations. The most elaborate one, dated October 1970, is a piece of family history that was carefully added in black ballpoint pen, but was originally composed in 1963 by Germaine Nicolas, a distant relative. Here is a transcription and translation:

Jean Aglibert BORGNON from Vaud'Hérlánd graduated "Veterinary master" from the college of Alfort in 1812. He entered the army as veterinary maréchal en second in the artillery. After the abdication of Napoleon 1st he was given an absolute discharge. In 1816, he married Elisabeth Laperlier. Their son died aged 16.5 years. Widowed in 1835, he married Bathilde-Alexandrine Guillemaudt widow of François - Nicolas NICOLAS the 3rd of June 1843. Settled at first in Villepinte they bought a house in Livry in 1853 where they retired. It was in Livry that he died the 17th of January 1861. He left all his belongings to Mother Borgnon, our grandmother. G. Nicolas, October 1970

A second, undated annotation in blue fountain pen (possibly written over an earlier identical annotation in pencil) reads that Jean Aglibert Borgnon was né 9 Février 1793 "born 9 February 1793" and that it was the Portrait et écriture de Mr Borgnon "Portrait and writing of Mr Borgnon". This writing that is here claimed to stem from the person in the picture himself, in brown fountain pen, reads:


G. Nicolas Octobre 1970

Turning from the actual portrait to the quest for the man behind it, we find that Jean Aglibert’s parents lived in a hamlet called Vaudherland not far from Paris in Val d’Oise, where his father was a municipal deputy. The family also ran an inn. According to the new republican calendar Jean Aglibert Borgnon, son of Jean Baptiste Borgnon and Marguerite Vaillant, is born on 21 Pluviose an I, nineteen days after the execution of Louis XVI. This was during the upheaval of the start of the French First Republic. Robespierre’s reign of terror was on the verge of bursting out.

The inn’s son spends his youth in his small birthplace. When sixteen years old, Jean-albert Borgnon de Vaudherland [sic] officially started in November (1er 9e 1809) his veterinary studies at the École Impériale Vétérinaire in Alfort. He studied in the military department of the veterinarian college (Ill. 3). It was also this Départements [sic] Corps Militaires that paid for his enrolment fee (E. civil grat.). After three years of study, Jean Borgnon was graduated by the jury in October 1812 as Maître Vétérinaire. At the age of 19, November 1812, he finally left the school. In this year 23 students in total graduated from Alfort, three of them, including Jean Borgnon, with a military degree.

The French Revolution introduced sovereignty of the people as a foundational quality of the state. As a result, the defense of the republic became the responsibility of the people and no longer of mercenaries. Citizen Jean Borgnon fulfilled this duty as a conscript in the Napoleonic army. In 1813, 1611 conscripts were called up from his department, Seine-et-Oise. This new batch of conscripts was
needed to reinforce Napoleon’s decimated Grande armée after the utter defeat following the Russian campaign.

In 1800, the French Consular army’s artillery was thoroughly reorganized to make it more flexible. During the French Revolution, transport of supplies for artillery was still carried out by civilians. This hampered the quick deployment of these units. By means of a reorganization that was fixed on January 3rd, 1800, the First Consul intended to integrate the artillery’s logistics into the army’s activities. This led to the creation of the Bataillons du train d’artillerie, which were responsible for the supply of cannon balls and gunpowder. The same year, on the 17th of March, it was decreed that each battalion had to have an artiste vétérinaire.

This structure was novel in European warfare, and was maintained during Napoleon’s entire reign and further extended to create a formidable weapon.

According to the decree of 15th January 1813 every battalion of the train d’artillerie had to have two veterinaries. One maréchal-vétérinaire en premier and one maréchal-vétérinaire en second. About a year after graduating, Jean was appointed maréchal-vétérinaire en second du Bataillon. According to his files he resided at that time in Pontoise. The decision (N°743) of his appointment was taken on 13th June 1813. The title meant that Borgnon now mostly worked as a blacksmith rather than as a medical veterinary (ill.6). On 22nd June 1813 he was incorporated in the 9th Bataillon bis du train d’artillerie. The décret de Moscou of 1813 ordained the division of labour between the various ranks, also specifying that the maréchal-vétérinaire en second had to remain in the barracks during campaigning. The horses of the spare troops also had to be taken care of. The maréchal-vétérinaire en premier accompanied the squadrons that fought.

Borgnon, then, after having received this
order from the administrative head (Conseil d’administration) of his army unit, swiftly had to report back to the barracks (dépôt) of his unit.

The monthly pay Borgnon received for his commission was calculated on his rank and seniority. Until the end of his active service, less than 10 years after he entered the army, he earned 30 francs a month. Senior members with more than 20 years of service could earn up to 66 francs.\(^1\)

The artillery regiments on foot and the battalions were rarely used as units. Instead, a smaller company was added to a larger army unit. This led to a very diverse deployment of these train d’artillerie battalions. Since we do not know which company Jean Borgnon belonged to, it is almost impossible to find out if his company actually participated in actions during the period 1813-1814. Unfortunately for him, even though this battalion had been established since 1805,\(^2\) it never became eligible for the Armes d’Honneur.\(^3\)

During the Consulate and at the beginning of the first Empire, veterinarians did not have specific uniforms. This changed with the décret d’Anvers (30th September 1811). Their uniform now had to conform to the “Bardin” directive (1812) and had a lighter shade of blue than the common “imperial blue”. The embroidered emblem on the turnbacks of their coats for this group of army officers was a silver grenade. They also wore a black leather shoulder belt pouch (giberne) with a silver horse head to a white lanyard, also in leather. Their swords were the same as those of the regiment to which they were assigned. For the train d’artillerie this was the sabre-briquet (a short infantry sword) or the sword of the light cavalry.\(^4\)

Jean Borgnon stayed in the emperor’s army until after the first abdication of Napoleon I. During the early days of the Restoration, a little more than a month after the official coronation of Louis XVIII, he was given an absolute discharge from military service (congé absolu), only to briefly re-enter service after Napoleon escaped from Elba, during the “Hundred Days”. After this brief comeback, Jean Borgnon settled in his birth village, Vaudherland, to practice once again his vocation as a veterinary. Two years later, on the 3rd of June 1816, he married Marguerite Elisabeth Laperlier in Gonesse. From this marriage comes a single son, Jacques Alexandre, who unfortunately died in 1833 at the premature age of 16. Furthermore on March 13th, 1835, fate met Borgnon again and he became a widower. Eight years after, on June 3rd, 1843, he remarried to Bathilde Alexandre Guilleminault,\(^5\) the 50-year-old widow of the late François Nicolas Nicolas,\(^6\) a butcher. The newly wed couple first settled in Villepinte, but after some years bought a house in Livry to enjoy their retirement. Villepinte is also the village where Jean Borgnon died on January 17th, 1861, at the age of 68. Childless, he bequeathed his entire estate to his second wife, known as “Maman Borgnon” and to the offspring of her first marriage. Bathilde Guilleminault lived on to the age of 85 and died April 18th, 1878 while in Paris.

So finally we have also arrived at 1847, the year in which Borgnon had his portrait made. By now, we know a bit more about him. He is a retired veteran, happily remarried but sadly childless, a proud house owner. This is the man that paid a photographer to take his picture. Now, unlike today, having your picture taken was not an ordinary thing to do back in 1847. Not only did it take longer, it was also still fairly expensive.

An important goal of having a lasting portrait was of course to have a striking, clear, and therefore sharp resemblance. Yet despite the enormous progress, the portraitist still had to sit dead-still for several seconds. Only then was it possible to avoid motion blur. To this end, enormous progress, the portraitist still had to sit dead-still for several seconds. Only then was it possible to avoid motion blur. To this end, photographers used a variety of aids such as special comfortable chairs and less comfortable head-clamps. These attributes inspired cartoonists and critics to the clever description of studios as “torture chambers”. This photographic work environment surely will have contributed to the event of having one’s picture taken. The caricature by Honoré Daumier, from the same year when Borgnon’s portrait was made, wittily depicts this situation.

High prices meant that daguerreotypes were a luxury for most people. In the early years (around 1842), prices for a single photograph ranged between 10 and 50 francs. By 1846 this had decreased to 2 to 20 francs.\(^7\) These more democratic prices meant that more people could afford it. Yet times had been rough first with the Monarchie de Juillet and also because of the agricultural crisis. Basic products such as bread became considerably more expensive.\(^8\)

Luxuries such as photography were among the first things many people could drop. Another reason why photographs were still fairly exclusive items was the simple fact that there were not too many active photographers in these early days. According to the Chambre de Commerce, the whole of Paris only boasted 56 active photographic entrepreneurs in 1847-1848, on a population of around a million Parisians.\(^9\) The success of this new medium, though, would lead to a great increase in this number during the more stable regime of the Second Republic and after the invention of the wet collodion process, with no less than 365 registered artistes photographes in Paris by 1868.\(^10\)

These possible concerns of being ‘tortured’ and even having to pay for it did not frighten Jean Borgnon. Usually people went to a photographer for a special family occasion. Memorable events in one’s life could take many shapes, including birth, decease, a wedding or simply the sealing off of friendships.
or family relations. What about Jean Borgnon? Many veterans from the Napoleonic war appear in portraits with the so-called Sainte-Hélène medal, known for its chocolate hue. (See ill. 6) This medal was instituted in 1857 by the emperor Napoleon III, to celebrate all living veterans of the campaigns between 1792 and 1815.

In principle, as Mr Borgnon had died after 1857, and his military career officially lasted from 20th July 1813 until 25th July 1814, he was entitled to receive it as living veteran.24 However, Borgnon’s daguerreotype had already been made in 1847, before the medal could have been presented. As it is, portraits with such medals postdate the heydays of the daguerreotype. In the absence of any military insignia, it is thus unlikely that Borgnon wanted to be identified as a war veteran in his portrait. The only clue we get from the portrait are the (official?) documents Borgnon is holding. While they do not reveal anything at all about their nature, they must have been important enough for Borgnon to clearly display them.

A further indication of the importance attached by the 54-year old Borgnon to the portrait is the fairly extensive personal note attached at the back. Not only does the note give the precise date, it also strikingly narrows down Borgnon’s age to a half-year window. He also mentions that four portraits were made, and that he paid 20 francs in total for them, or 5 francs each. Both the presentation with frame and the formal mention of the number and price of the portraits bought makes it unlikely that the photographer, M. Moulin, was an amateur from Borgnon’s inner circle. More likely, Moulin was a itinerant daguerreotypist. The neatly dressed Jean Borgnon poses in front of a white cloth, which serves as a clear background. This rudimentary studio set-up and the fairly flat light could indicate that the picture was taken in open air.25 As for the other portraits, we can only guess who figures in those. It seems likely they include a photograph of his second wife. Did he do multiple portraits of his and, possibly, his wife, to present as a gift?

While the occasion will inevitably remain mysterious to us, the first sentence of the note is a notable witness to the way photography, which was not yet an ubiquitous mass medium, was perceived at the time. It reads *peint par m. moulin d’après la Dagerréoptique [sic!], or “painted by M. Moulin after the Dagerréoptique (technique)”. It was not unusual to link photography to the more familiar technique of painting, in order to comprehend and describe this unfamiliar form of depiction. Apparently the name this new discovery received from Daguerre caused some confusion with Borgnon, who renders it as *daguerroéoptique instead of *daguerreotype. It was, and is still, quite common to spell this difficult term in various odd ways. What is striking here is how Borgnon, in an intelligent attempt of making sense of the term, has blended Daguerre with optics.

Certain questions inevitably remained unanswered. Yet it has been possible to make use of this typical daguerreotype to reconstruct a *petite histoire* of Jean Borgnon. By furnishing an anonymous portrait with a story, the image regains contextual meaning beyond the visuals captured by the photographer on his ground glass. Conversely, the portrait of this man lent a face to an otherwise matter of fact-like mention in a long family tree. Contact with his relatives revealed that the three other daguerreotypes had stayed in the family for some generations. Afterwards they gradually spread when inheritances were divided, and eventually were sold; a common and understandable practice which, unfortunately, leads to the loss of much original context and history.

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**NOTES**

1. Over another letter that is no longer legible.
2. Ibid.
3. MAES Herman. *‘In het volle zonlicht’ De Daguerreotypieën van het Museum Enschede te Haarlem*, 2009
4. Archives départementales du Val-de-Marne: registre de contrôle des élèves coté 1ETP 104
5. E. civil grat. Archives Départementales du Val-de-Marne: registre de contrôle des élèves coté 1ETP 104
6. Archives départementales du Val-de-Marne: registre de contrôle des élèves coté 1ETP 104
7. DUMAS Emmanuel. Les vétérinaires militaires sous le Premier Empire, 17 November 20128. See Gebhardt, p. 79
9. DUMAS Emmanuel. Les vétérinaires militaires sous le Premier Empire, 17 November 2012
11. SHAT Yg 584, Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre à Vincennes
12. Ibid.
13. DUMAS Emmanuel. Les vétérinaires militaires sous le Premier Empire. décret du 15 janvier 1813, article 42
14. Ibid.
15. DUMAS Emmanuel. Les vétérinaires militaires sous le Premier Empire, 17 November 2012
16. BROUGHTON Tony. *Napoleon Series* 2004
17. DUMAS Emmanuel. Les vétérinaires militaires sous le Premier Empire, 17 November 2012
18. ’10 April 1793 - Vaujours, Seine Saint Denis, Ile de France. +18 April 1878 - Paris, Ile de France
19. ’19 January 1788 - Villepinte, Seine Saint Denis Ile de France. +1841 butcher - GeneaNet
20. DENOEL Charlotte. [Website](http://www.histoire-image.org)
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. file: 219654 BORGNON Jean Aglebert [sic] Seine Saint Denis, Le Raincy, Livry, F93 - [Website](http://www.stehelene.org)