Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen—The Model

Martine Kahane

Introduction

It was Anne Pingeot at the Musée d'Orsay who proposed to me in 1997 that I undertake the task of repairing the tutu that clothes Edgar Degas's *Little Dancer*, *Aged Fourteen* (figs. 1, 2). Richard Kendall, who was preparing an exhibition on the *Little Dancer* for the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, was having the tutu of the plaster model remade and encouraged Anne Pingeot to follow suit. Moreover, the Opera de Paris had just presented an exhibition dedicated to this type of attire, highlighting the best knowledge of their costume shop.

After spending a great deal of time researching the young girl's petticoats, I began to ask myself many questions about her identity. The various indications gathered from books and exhibition catalogues were incomplete and at times contradictory. Thanks to Degas's notes and his extant studies, we know that the model for the little dancer was Marie Van Goethem, born in 1865, a student of the Paris Opera Dance School who later performed in the set of a quadrille in the Opera Ballet.

The sculpture is listed as number 34 in the catalogue of the fifth exhibition of impressionist paintings (1 April to 30 April 1880, at 10, rue des Pyramides), under the correct name *Petite Danseuse de Quatorze ans (wax statuette)*, but Degas displays only the empty showcase. The following year it was number 12, for the sixth exhibition at 35, blvd. des Capucines, from 2 April to 1 May 1881, and finally the sculpture appears in the showcase, but only on 16 April. The appearance and attitude of the young girl provoke sarcastic comments. Most critics see a street urchin clearly displaying every indication of her future fate. Is she not a dancer? That, in the view of those critics, classifies her as a loose girl. The work remains in Degas's studio for years, slowly deteriorating. In spite of

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formal offers, he refuses to sell it, but he reworks it in 1903. Upon his death, his heirs decide to cast bronzes, and on 13 May 1918 a contract is signed with the foundry A. A. Hébrard. The first casting is done in 1922. The model that interests us was made in 1931 and was exhibited inside the large display case for Degas's sculpture at the Musée d'Orsay; the same year, it entered the collections of the Musée du Louvre.

Soon it became evident that in order to know Marie Van Goethem better, I would have to look into her family history. I began at the civil registry office, with documents made available to me through the archives of the city of Paris. I continued my search at the Opera museum library. The reading room of the National Archives greeted me every Saturday for my examination of the series dedicated to the archives of the academy of music and dance. But I was highly disappointed—legal records for that particular period were never stored in the National Archives and instead immediately destroyed at the courthouse, and police records had long vanished.

The quest continued at the Bibliothèque Nationale. I was granted permission to look through the two Degas notebooks now in the storage room of the Département des Estampes that make mention of the Van Goethem girls. At the Musée de Montmartre I researched sources on prostitution printed around 1880. The observations made by male writers (in the absence of female writers on the matter) on ballerinas evolve very quickly between 1860 and the end of the century, and it is necessary to sift through that period closely. During these long weeks, I retold the story of little Marie van Goethem to the entire Opera, considering that it was a type of family story, and I now present to you the story of the Van Goethem family. It is not fiction, a Zola novel, or a topic in the Goncourt's *Journal*—these people really existed.

A Novel by Halévy

When evoking the circumstances of dancers during the second half of the nineteenth century, their role in the trade of love, their family background, and the triangle formed by the dancer, her mother, and her protector, it is customary to refer to the novels by Ludovic Halévy. He was a well-to-do theater lover and a habitual backstage visitor, taking along his friend Degas, and he coauthored numerous operatic librettos.

Halévy published *Madame Cardinal* in 1870, the following year *Monsieur Cardinal*, and in 1875 *Les Petites Cardinal*. In 1883, he grouped the trilogy in one volume under the title *La Famille Cardinal*. Madame Cardinal sells her daughters Virginie and Pauline, ballerinas in the ballet corps of the Opera, to rich admirers, with the tacit consent of her husband. The primary characters are the Cardinal parents, while the young ballerinas are treated as accessories to the story. The matters Halévy describes may, perhaps, involve himself and certainly some of his friends, but from a distance, as he is a society man. Poverty, exploitation, and prostitution are not mentioned in such an elegant novel. The story of the Van Goethem family falls on the dark side of those narratives. Halévy, whose literary approach conforms to his social status, spends twenty years writing for the stage and haunting the backstage. He will provide Emile Zola with many details on the great courtesans of the time and will help compose the character of Nana in Zola's famous novel by that title.

One of the finest ballet observers at the end of the century is the painter Paul Renouard. He covers the Opera world during the construction of the Palais Garnier and makes himself at home there, sketching the stage, firemen, street performers, musicians, and props, but most of all the ballerinas and their daily activities. Some of his etchings will be assembled in two albums, *A l'Opéra*, prefaced by Ludovic Halévy, and *La Danse* (figs. 3, 4). All three, Degas, Halévy, and Renouard, knew the Van Goethem family.

On 2 September 1857, Antoine Van Goethem, a twenty-year old tailor, enters into wedlock in Brussels with Marie Van Volsom, who has no trade or profession and is his senior by three years. From that union, five children were born. Only three will survive, all girls, who all will serve as models for Degas; Jean-Baptiste, the only boy, born in Brussels in 1859, dies in Paris in 1862. Antoinette, the oldest girl, was also born in Brussels in 1861. Marie, born in Paris in 1864, died eighteen days after her birth. The little Marie appearing in this narrative is her sister, Marie Geneviève, born 7 June 1865, the model, or one of the models, for the *Little Dancer*. Finally, the youngest, Louise Joséphine, who quickly adopts the name Charlotte, was born in Paris 18 July 1870 and died there 17 January 1945.

The Van Goethem couple arrives in Paris between April 1861 and February 1862. We do not know their reasons for leaving Belgium; as most immigrants, they were perhaps in search of better opportunities. Relatives may have been living in Paris; a Rosalie Van Goethem resided at 9, rue Bréda, and died in Paris in 1895, the widow of a Mr. Fraryn. The Van Goethems go in search of lodging and find it at Cité Coquenard. Everything that happens later on stems from this choice of lodging. The ninth arrondissement is a very diverse district where one can just as easily meet wealthy members of the upper classes as artists, fortune-seeking models milling around the famed basin of the place Pigalle, and poor people, small craftsmen, and day laborers. It is also the red light and nightclub district.

The story of the three Van Goethem girls is already recorded in the list of the successive residences occupied by the family: 1862, 5, Cité Coquenard; 1864, 34, rue Lamartine; 1865, 8, place Bréda (fig. 5); 1870, 64, rue Pigalle; 1873, boulevard de Clichy; 1880, 35, rue de Douai; 1882, 9, rue de l'Orient. The addresses are all located in the ninth arrondissement, with the exception of the last one, in the seventeenth arrondissement. The frequent changes in residence are an indication of poverty, of the inability to pay rent on time, but could also be considered an indication of vagrancy bordering on prostitution.¹

The family income comes from the parents' earnings. The father is a tailor and the mother, listed without trade or profession until Marie's birth in 1865, later appears in the records as a laundress. There are about 70,000 laundresses in Paris at the end of the Second Empire. The occupation is well represented among ballerinas' mothers, who are also sewing maids, fruit peddlers, concierges, and theater ushers.

I was unable to trace Marie's baptismal record in the parish records of the Saint-Eugène church. The three sisters' childhood takes place in a geographic and social environment that exerts a heavy toll. The young girls, probably streetwise, spend more time in the street than in the dark and joyless hovels that make up the district's poor dwellings. The Bréda district, Marie's birthplace, was one of the poorest, most squalid locations for Parisian prostitution.

In 1873 Degas enters into the life of the Van Goethem family. In the artist's notebook this entry is found: "Vanguthen Boulevard de Clichy. Antoinette, small twelveyear-old blond."² In the official documents, the spelling of the last name is Van Goethem, yet there are numerous variations. In the city hall of the ninth arrondissement Charlotte is entered under the name of Van Goutem, a spelling only corrected twenty years later. During my search I found the following spellings: Van der Geutten, Van der Goethen, Van der Goeuthem, Van Goethem, Van Goethen, Van Goeuthem, Van Goeuten, Van Goeuthey, Van Gothen, Van Goetheun, Van Gotheun, Van Goutem, Van Guthen, and Van Gutten.

Among the names and addresses recorded by Degas in his notebooks, one finds young ballerinas who, like Marie, are listed in the Opera Ballet of 1880: the two sisters Léonie and Louise Prince, Eugénie Grangé, the Carpenter girls, and Blanc and Perrot. These young girls and others came to model for the painter, and this caused him some problems: "He was making sketches at the Opera, and many professional ballerinas were also modeling in his studio, even the *petits rats* [young ballet girls]; to the point that one day he received the visit of a police inspector seeking an explanation for the many comings and goings of little girls to his house at rue Victor Massé."³

During the years 1880 to 1883, Degas visits the Opera regularly. He is present during auditions, in his box, or with a backstage pass; he begs his friends to intervene on behalf of ballerinas who would like roles and want to be promoted. All the documents that bear testimony to his relationship with the dancers show a touching paternal concern without reciprocal demands.

Young Antoinette, who is twelve years old, appears perhaps in some of Degas's sketches, drawings, or paintings. She grows in beauty; however, we later find her only as an extra, or walker, at the Opera. She is not part of the permanent dance corps but employed on a temporary basis, for staging or as a replacement. The list of temporary extras with contracts indicates that employment is surprisingly stable. There are twenty positions for extras and as many walk-on positions for men; they are poorly paid, according to seniority.

Beginning in May and November 1878, respectively, Marie and Charlotte are students at l'Ecole de Danse. Monthly bookkeeping records of the Opera, preserved at the National Archives, indicate that they earn bonuses for their participation in some shows, Marie between 20 and 30 francs and Charlotte up to 20 francs. Madame Van Goethem also is mentioned briefly in the bookkeeping records as an additional dresser during an evening performance in 1879 and six evening performances in 1880. She is paid 1 franc per performance.⁴

In 1880 Marie, now fifteen years old, is recruited by the ballet. Her contract⁵ cites her mother as her guardian, who is listed as "Widow Van Goethem;" the father would have died between 1870 and 1880, but the civil register of the ninth arrondissement shows no record of his death. The mother assumes the heavy burden of raising three daughters, and one can imagine that she may have obtained enrollment for all her progeny from the Opera. It is not an unusual phenomenon for that time—often several members of the same family are on the Opera's employment roll. In the same year, 1880, there are one hundred forty dancers, not counting the school's students, among them many groups of family members.

The contract also allows us to verify the family residence: 36, rue de Douai, which agrees with the mention recorded in Degas's notebook: "Marie, 36 rue de Douai/ Van Gutten,"⁶ as well as another mention at the top of a study for the sculpture of the *Little Dancer* at the Musée d'Orsay.⁷ The building register gives a description of 36, rue de Douai, with the names and occupations of the tenants. The house, a seven-story structure, faces the street and it is built with cut and quarried stones. It has only one "very dark" staircase. There are two shops at street level: an innkeeper and a hairdresser. The tenants are laundresses, an earthenware merchant, and a barber; two paint shop proprie tors, a beer retailer, and "Dame Van Gotten." It appears that the mother of our ballerinas has no husband and no trade or profession.⁸

At the Opera, Marie and Charlotte are good employees; they do not call attention to themselves. They follow the dance classes drawn by Paul Renouard and described by Ludovic Halévy (fig. 6). "A large square room, the floor is slightly slanted, there is an earthen stove, some benches for the mothers, and a rattan chair for the professor, and this is the extent of the decor. Handrails are fixed to the walls. Daylight streams in from above, brutal and garish. The lesson has not yet begun; there is an infernal din...fifteen little brats laughing, screaming, leaping, squealing, howling, absolute hell breaking loose; gallops, glissades, blows and scuffles, everything happily intermingled with entrechats and pirouettes. And calm and serene in the midst of this brouhaha, the mothers. They are about ten of them, seated on their benches, sleepy, knitting, weaving, reading *Le Petit* *Journal.* The young lasses are dressed in ballerina costumes...low-necked; bare-armed; dresses of white chiffon; silk belts, blue, red, or rose; ballet shoes in twill that have been stitched and re-stitched twenty times over....Almost all of them, skinny, lanky, tousled-headed, unwashed faces, but with an air of boldness, courageousness, and good-humor. They love their position, they love the Opera, they love dancing. Their work is hard, but they love it. It is the great virtue of that small world of theirs.⁹

Twice every season there are auditions that will allow Marie to climb the tiers of the ballet hierarchy. Sets of quadrille, small role, big role; it is Charlotte's fortune to pass from the younger class to the upper class for older girls, then to be enrolled in the ballet corps. Auditions take place in June for December promotions. At the center of the orchestra stall, the jury or "examination committee" position themselves. Toward the back of the auditorium, on the courtyard side, spectators and mothers wait, "agitated, feverish, panting, flushing." That day, Madame Van Goethem is most likely in the auditorium to encourage Marie and Charlotte, both of whom pass the examination.

Perhaps Degas is also there. He appeals to his friend Albert Hecht, whom he depicted with his pair of opera glasses in the painting *Ballet de Robert le Diable*, for a pass, pleading: "I have done so many of these dance exams, without having seeing them [*sic*] that I am embarrassed." Assuming the simultaneous presence of the main protagonists of our story in the auditorium of the Palais Garnier is both plausible and very alluring.

The ceremony begins with the younger class, all of them between twelve and fifteen years old, with white skirts, ribbons in their loose hair, and gray cloth dance slippers.¹⁰ In addition to a great deal of effort and much anguish, the exam is very expensive for the young ballerinas: tarkatan skirts cost 15 francs, silk ribbons 6 francs, artificial flowers 6 francs—the shoelaces for the dance shoes are provided by the Opera. New Year's gifts to the Opera's supporting personnel are customary. For the sets of quadrille, the total reaches as much as 47.80 francs; the dancers earn a monthly salary ranging between 75 and 87 francs.¹¹

How much do the Van Goethems earn at the Opera? Antoinette, an extra without a contract, is paid per performance; she has already discovered other sources of income. Marie, recruited by the ballet at the bottom of the scale, second set of quadrille, second section, second class, has an annual contract of 900 francs, thus a monthly salary of 75 francs, to which are added the bonuses she receives when she dances. Charlotte, a day student, has an annual contract of 852 francs plus bonuses. In May 1880, with salaries and bonuses included, Marie earns 109 francs and Charlotte 82 francs.¹²

According to the documentation gathered by Zola in 1885 for *L'Oeuvre*, a model earns "five to six francs for a four-hour sitting. But the prices have increased, and today they are paid 10 francs."¹³ Degas, as it appears, was paying a fair price, as his friend Forain attests: "I remember a nuisance that we had had, a ballerina, who was modeling for us, was picked up by a rich amateur....At his place she was getting port wine, cookies, and all sort of things we were not providing....Degas was extremely annoyed. We would run into that amateur at the Opera, and Degas, one evening, told him what was on his mind: 'Sir, you don't have the right to take our tools away from us."¹⁴

The payroll records for either sister do not show any disciplinary measures for days missed or illnesses. In 1880 both sisters appear in *La Korrigane;* Marie dances as a peasant and Charlotte as a sprite. In 1881, in *Le Tribut de Zamora*, Marie dances as a slave and Charlotte as a street performer.¹⁵ The *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen,* is announced and presented in 1881 at the sixth impressionist exhibition. In the absence of photographic portraits, we now know how Marie looked during her adolescent years.¹⁶ We are struck by the "modernity" of that figure, slender and long-limbed—the fifteen-year-old Marie can easily be compared to dancers of today.

Prostitution

In 1882 the life of these young girls begins to resemble the novel about the Cardinals. Just like Mrs. Cardinal, Mrs. Van Goethem prostitutes her daughters. In the newspaper *L'Evénement*, dated 10 February 1882, an article reports: "Miss Van Goeuthen—fifteen years old, has an older sister who is supernumerary at the Opera and a younger sister in the Opera dance school —consequently she frequents the Martyrs Tavern and the Rat Mort." The article in question is written on the occasion of the Opera presentation of the *Namouna* ballet. Marie and Charlotte are scheduled to dance, and each dancer gets a few lines in the article. Marie does not particularly shine in her performance, but it should be noted that she is the only one cited as an artist's model. Martyrs Tavern, as well as the Rat Mort, are not desirable places for a young girl. The bad company will prove fatal for little Marie. The Rat Mort, located at 7, rue Pigalle, is open all night. It is a bar for artists, models, journalists, and bohemians; Martyrs Tavern is famous in artists' circles. Degas patronizes both establishments: "He loved picturesque places, the unpredictability of the backstage, the little working-class girls play the part of fairies, the fatherly conversation in the Opera foyer and at the Rat Mort, and the conversations of Zola's friends."¹⁷

In April, "in Pluque's handwriting and countersigned by Vaucorbeil," a note states that Marie has been dismissed from the Opera; in June her name is crossed off the list, and effective in August, Marie is no longer on the roster for a quadrille group of the ballet.¹⁸ The employment rule for the ballet corps indicates penalties for mistakes, tardiness, and absences during rehearsals and shows. Marie is unemployed and the family budget seriously encumbered. It is well known that very young ballerinas are easy prey and highly desired by admirers like the one mentioned by Richard O'Monroy: "I have a passion for novices, 'little rats' still in poverty. I like to be the patron who discovers newborn talents, who, in spite of pronounced collar bones and red hands, prerogatives of their awkward age, reveal future curves that facilitate the first steps in the career from the beginning in a quadrille set all the way up to the principal ballerina…."¹⁹

Charlotte is from now on the only one of the three sisters on the Opera Ballet roster. The visits to cabarets are apparently a family affair, the two oldest girls flanking by the youngest. In December 1991, Rodolphe Salis opens his Chat Noir nightclub. The Van Goethem girls patronize the fashionable spot from the outset. The weekly paper of the same name, published by Salis beginning January 1882, notes "young Charlotte Van Goeuthey, a student from Miss Théodore's class. She is a pretty *petit rat* who could very well become a first ballerina in a few years. Be careful, Halévy, the Cardinal ladies must behave." Most likely Charlotte is mentioned because her sisters patronize the place and know the publisher's friends, but the prophecy shall be fulfilled, for Charlotte will have a long and beautiful career at the Opera.

At the time of the newspaper article, Antoinette is spending time in jail for stealing 700 francs from a patron at the Chat Noir, and her digression is reported by several newspapers. I was unable to find any trace of her, the oldest Van Goethem daughter, after her sentencing in 1882 to three months in jail for stealing and her incarceration in the Saint-Lazare prison. Antoinette's fate is bleak: a twenty-year-old woman, without a job, well acquainted with the backstage of the theater and night haunts, could in the best of circumstances return to the family dwelling at 9, rue de l'Orient. For her and for Marie there are very few opportunities left.

These types of stories are not unheard of in the Opera Ballet during the latter part of that century. Anna Johnsson (1885–1975), who entered the dance school in 1893 and became a star dancer, relates in her memoirs an anecdote very similar to ours: "A depraved mother was compelling her daughter to follow a path very far from the way to chastity. She already had a bone to pick with the police when a prominent sculptor began showing interest for the young ballerina. He halted the legal proceeding, and honor to whom honor is due, he was prepared to levy the most pleasant of tithes, when our ingenue met a man in his fifties, honest, and rich to boot."²⁰ We begin to dream of such a happy ending for the young Van Goethem girls.

Destiny

Charlotte, the youngest, learned from her sisters' bad experiences. Her career in the Opera Ballet was long and respectable. She entered the dance school in 1880, at the age of ten, and retired at age sixty-four in 1933. Enrolled in the ballet as a member of a quadrille group in 1883, she became leader of the ballet in 1887 and a soloist in 1889. The newspaper *L'Evénement* regularly reports on Charlotte's progress and her picture often appears in articles about the ballet (figs. 7, 8). These images show a young woman not without charm; she is flawlessly dressed, and her jewelry is unpretentious. Charlotte finishes her career as a ballerina in 1907 and becomes a dance teacher at the school. Gustave Coquiot, in *Degas*, relates a visit to the Palais Garnier: "We are now in Mrs. Van Goethem's class, an illustrious ballerina who often modeled for Degas."²¹ Charlotte evidently corroborated that statement.

If Charlotte, with an impeccable career as a choreographic artist and pedagogue, asserts at the beginning of the twentieth century that she was one of Degas's models (fig. 9), it seems that we can trust her. At the time, such a statement probably did not help the pride of a woman who desired upper-class respectability. Finally, to conclude the Van Goethem family's saga, Charlotte came to life for me in a particularly endearing manner through Yvette Chauviré, whose eightieth birthday was just celebrated by the Opera and who was Charlotte's pupil for a few months in 1927. With all the freshness of the little girl she had once been, she started to mimic her professor. Suddenly, there stood a star, an incarnation of the great tradition of the Opera Ballet, the former student of a ballerina who had been a model for Degas.

Notes

1. Alain Corbin, Les Filles de noce (Paris, 1982), 21.

2. Theodore Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas* (Oxford, 1976), 21. The original is at the Département des Estampes, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Dc 327d, notebook 8.

3. Gustave Coquiot, Degas (Paris, 1924), 172.

4. Archives Nationales, Paris, AJ 13 838,842.

5. Archives Nationales, Paris, AJ 13 1005A.

6. Reff 1976, notebook 26, 4. The original is at the Département des Estampes,Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Dc 327d, notebook 2.

7. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 4646.

8. Archives de Paris, Cadastre, DIP4, carton 353.

9. Ludovic Halévy, "A l'Opéra—mai 1880, la classe des petites," in *Les Petites Cardinal* (Paris, 1875), 245–246.

10. Richard O'Monroy, Les Petites Manchaballe (Paris, Lévy, 1893), 302-303.

11. L'Evénement, 17 December 1881.

12. Archives Nationales, Paris, AJ 13 840, 841, 842, 905.

13. Emile Zola, Carnets d'enquête, Henry Mitterand, ed. (Paris, Plon, 1986), 252.

14. Daniel Halévy, Degas parle (Paris, 1995), 210.

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, Paris, O.ARCH 19
 891, 893.

16. Richard O'Monroy, Les Propos de Madame Manchaballe (Paris, Lévy, 1892), 130.

17. Halévy 1995, 201.

18. Archives Nationales, Paris, AJ 13 905A.

19. Richard O'Monroy, Madame Manchaballe (Paris, Lévy, 1892) 142.

20. Anna Johnsson, *Chaussons rose et tutu blanc, Souvenirs d'une étoile* (Paris, 1930),35.

21. Coquiot 1924, 81.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, without tutu, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, photograph Patrice Schmidt, 15 December 1997

Fig. 2. Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, fitting of new tutu by Eliane Denimal, collection manager of the Opera dressmaking shop, and Delphine Pinasa, in charge of Opera costumes, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, photograph Patrice Schmidt, 26 January 1998

Fig. 3. Edgar Degas, *Madame Ludovic Halévy and Daniel Halévy*, 1895, photograph, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 4. Paul Renouard, *Repos (Resting)*, after Charles Saunier and Paul Renouard,
"Mouvements, gestes et expressions," *Art et Décoration* (December 1910), 177, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Renouard's composition is visible above the head of Daniel Halévy in fig. 3

Fig. 5. Félix Buhot, *A la place Bréda*, 1879, etching for *l'Art* (2 January 1881), Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

Fig. 6. Paul Renouard, *Saut à la barre (Jumping the Barre)*, in *Eaux-fortes sur l'Opéra, deuxième série*, etching, Bibliothèque Nationale, Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, Paris

Fig. 7. Henri Mairet, *Carlotta Zambelli, Camille Bos, Louise Joséphine (called Charlotte) Van Goethem, and Clotilde Piodi*, in *Le Théâtre* 12 (December 1898), 12. The third sister of the model for the *Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen*, in the bonnet wears the same bracelet and brooch as in the Degas photograph (figure 9), Bibliothèque Nationale, Bibliothèquemusée de l'Opéra, Paris

Fig. 8. Henri Mairet, *Louise Joséphine (called Charlotte) Van Goethem*, before 1898, Bibliothèque Nationale, Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, Paris Fig. 9. Edgar Degas?, *Dancer*, late 1895 or early 1896; the bracelet and brooch are the same as on Charlotte Van Goethem, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris