

Portrait of General Pierre Cambronne (1770-1842)

Attributed to Jean Baptiste Joseph de Bay (1779-1862)

Circa 1816

Plaster Bust

Height: 59 cm.



This elegant plaster herm, full of brio in the hair, represents one of the best known characters of the Napoleonic era.

Born in Nantes in 1770, Cambronne joined the Grenadiers in 1792 and fought several campaigns for Napoleon, rising through the ranks and acquiring a Légion d' Honneur and the title of Count.

His name is of course forever linked to the final moments of the Battle of Waterloo and to the word that he, according to some, shouted when Colville told him to surrender.

Cambronne insisted for all his life that his words were "La Garde meure et ne se rend pas!" ("The Guard dies and does not surrender!"), but the legend that he swore with what later became know as "le mot de Cambronne" became immensely popular. So much that Victor Hugo included it in *Les Misérables* : "Le lecteur français voulant être respecté, le plus beau mot peut-être qu'un Français ait jamais dit ne peut lui être répété. [...] L'homme qui a gagné la bataille de Waterloo, ce n'est pas Napoléon en déroute, ce n'est pas Wellington pliant à quatre heures, désespéré à cinq, ce n'est pas Blücher qui ne s'est point battu ; l'homme qui a gagné la bataille de Waterloo, c'est Cambronne.

Foudroyer d'un tel mot le tonnerre qui vous tue, c'est vaincre."

After Waterloo, Cambronne remained in the army and became a Viscount. He retired in 1823 to his native Nantes, where he died in 1842.

He is celebrated in his city with a beautiful bronze monument by De Bay dating to 1848.



The comparison between our plaster and that monument shows very convincingly that the sitter is the same.

Further evidence comes when we look at the marble bust of Cambronne, again by De Bay, in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Brussels. The bust is signed and dated 1816 and made with the sitter in front of the sculptor (the inscription says "Cambronne fait d'après nature par De Bay 1816". The Brussels Museums also own a plaster version of this portrait).

There are so many similar features in the portraits: the rich locks of hair, the long and curly sideburns, the thick eyebrows, the heavy eyelids, the straight nose, the slightly drooping lower lip, and the heavy chin. Even the mole on the cheek is the same.

Although this plaster herm is not signed, it seems plausible to attribute it to De Bay. It could be a preliminary study connected to the portraits in Brussels, with the final decision being that of representing Cambronne in uniform and with his decorations, a fitting choice for a man who dedicated his life to the army and to his Country, or instead it could date to some years later.