

Scholars and Literati at the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille (1726–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati at the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille, between its creation in 1726 and 1800. For more detailed information about these individuals, please visit the comprehensive database available at <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>.

1 THE ACADEMY

The first informal meetings of the academy began around 1715 in Marseille. During the 1720 Great Plague of Marseille, a group of learned friends, who had fled to the countryside, began to meet regularly. At the end of the epidemic, they decided to found the Académie des belles-lettres de Marseille. They obtained letters patent from King Louis XV of France in 1726, and the Académie was affiliated with the Académie française (founded in 1635) that same year. It received official recognition under the protection of the Governor of Provence, the Marshal de Villars (1653-1734), a member of the Académie française, and had twenty founding members, plus Monseigneur de Belsunce (1709-1755), the Bishop of Marseille (who was heroic during the plague of 1720). Its motto, *Primis renascor radiis* ("At the first rays [of the sun], I am reborn"), chosen in 1728, reflected the belief that the academy was the heir to an ancient institution that had existed in Greek Marseille, in Gaul.

Some academicians could request the status of "veteran," either because they had left Marseille or because their age or health no longer allowed them to attend academy meetings; a successor was then elected. From 1740 onwards, the academy welcomed associate or corresponding members, both French and foreign. These members did not have to reside in Marseille and were required to send at least one work per year to the academy (Dassy 1877).

Initially devoted mainly to literary pursuits with only twenty members, the Académie des belles-lettres was transformed into the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in 1766, and welcomed ten additional members to study scientific and technical subjects (astronomy, navigation, natural history, agriculture, trade, etc.). In 1781, following the suppression of the Jesuit order, it was entrusted with the management of the naval astronomical observatory. The academy was abolished by the National Convention in August 1793, though it managed to preserve its archives. It was revived in 1799 under the name *Lycée des sciences et des arts*, and reassumed the title "Académie" in 1802, when the term *lycée* was officially reserved for secondary schools (Bertrand and Guyon 2025; Lautard 1836).

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2 SOURCES

Two main sources were used to reconstruct the historical membership of the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts of Marseille. The first is the official website of the academy, which details the history of its chairs and allows the identification of its ordinary members. The numbering of the chairs was established mostly according to the alphabetical order, based on their first holder's surname, except for the first chair, which was reserved for the *secrétaire perpétuel*, and the second, for the director. This list already provides extensive biographical information on both ordinary and honorary members.

The second source is the work of L.-T. Dassy (1877), entitled *L'Académie de Marseille — ses origines, ses publications, ses archives, ses membres, avec quatre planches de sceaux et de médailles*. This book lists all the corresponding members in chronological order and includes additional information about their other affiliations.

Additional information comes from Lautard (1836), with his work on the history of the academy (*Histoire de l'Académie de Marseille, depuis sa fondation en 1726 jusqu'en 1826*) and from Paul Masson's encyclopedia *Dictionnaire biographique des Bouches-du-Rhône, des origines à 1800* (Masson 1931), which includes biographical information for well-known local people.

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 presents some descriptive statistics. We identified 277 members from the foundation of the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille up to the year 1800. Information on birthplaces and dates is available for about 70% of the members, which is very close to the overall average. The mean age at appointment is higher than at most other academies: in Marseille, scholars became members at an average age of 43.3, compared to the general average of 38 years across all academies (Zanardello 2024a). However, the members of the Marseille academy tended to remain active slightly longer, up to almost 70 years of age, compared with 67 on average elsewhere. Interestingly, the founding members were criticized during the project for their youth (more than half of them were between 21 and 33 years old), which led to older members being added to the academy when it was created in 1726, according to Dassy (1877). Traces of work by academy members can be found in Wikipedia and VIAF for approximately half of them.

4 FIELDS

Originally, the academy was primarily devoted to literary subjects, under the influence of its first secretary, poet Antoine de Chalamont de la Visclède (1695–1760), who won the prize awarded by the Académie française several times. Only after the 1760s did the academy broaden its scope to include the applied arts and sciences, with particular attention to maritime, commercial, and agricultural issues in Provence. This evolution is illustrated in Figure 1, where approximately half of the publishing scholars are active in the humanities and law, while only a smaller share is associated with medicine, science, and applied science.

The academy brought together both members of old elites—clergymen, magistrates, and rentiers who wrote poetry and collected art—and new ones, including prominent merchants, doctors, and galley masters. It regularly awarded prizes for public speaking, poetry, and fables, and in its early years (until 1750s) submitted original theses to the Académie française. The contest topics ranged from almond tree cultivation or the risks of filling in Marseille's port to questions such as whether “emulation is useful to talent” (1730 prose competition).

5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 2 shows the documented birthplaces of the ordinary members active at the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille. Most ordinary members were born in or near Marseille, and residency in the city was in fact a requirement for holding an ordinary membership (Dassy 1877;

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1686–1733	43	86 %	86 %	43.5	68.1	69.8 %	51.2%
1734–1800	234	70.1%	65.8%	43.1	70.4	46.2%	53.4%
1686–1800	277	72.6%	69%	43.2	69.9	49.8 %	53.1%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

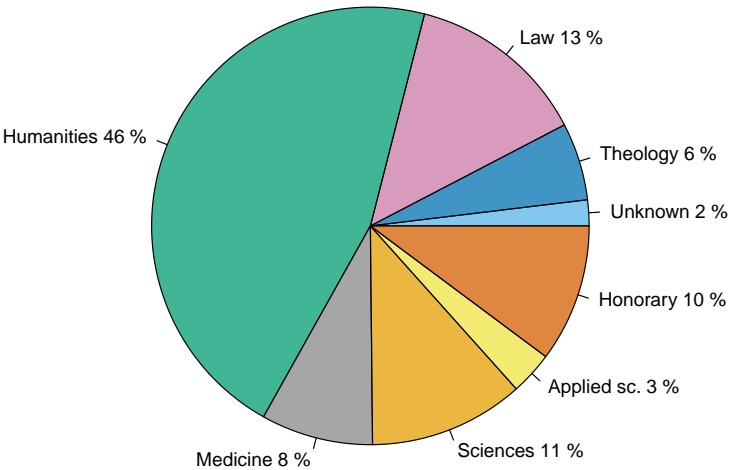


Figure 1: Broad fields at the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille (published scholars only)

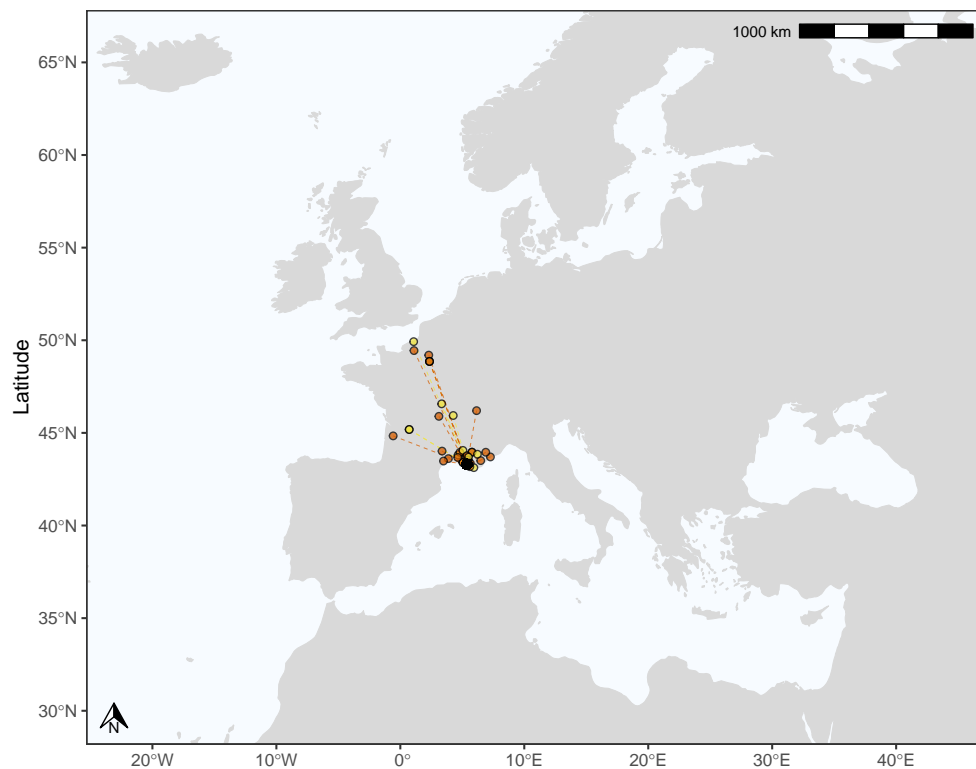


Figure 2: Places of birth of the members of the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille

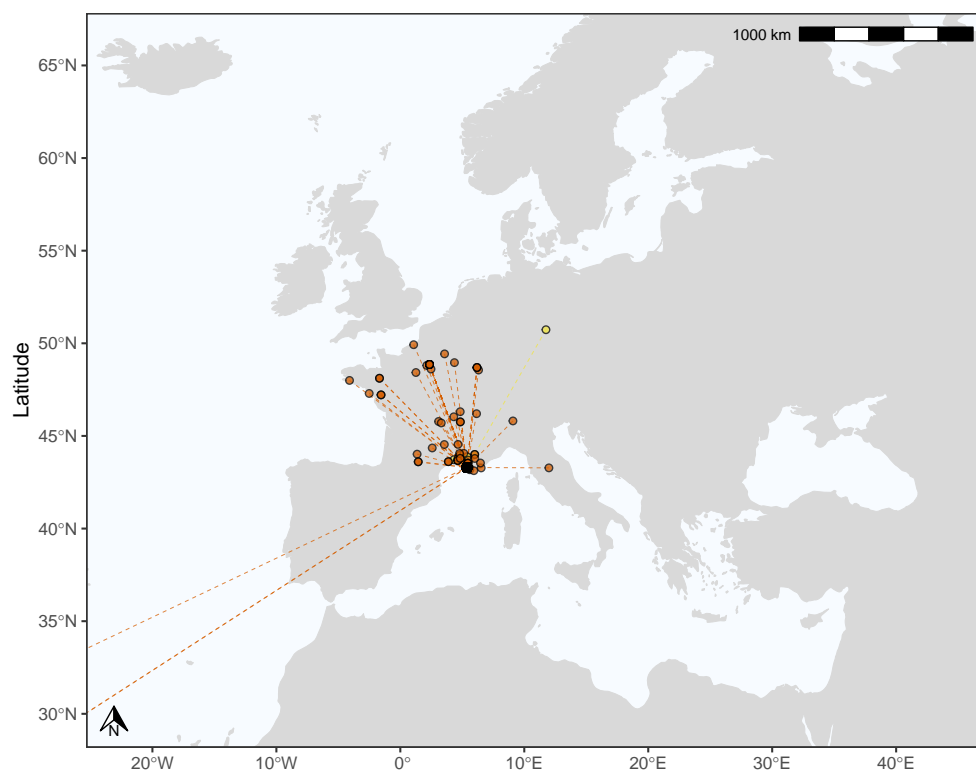


Figure 3: Places of birth of the corresponding members of the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille

Bertrand and Guyon 2025). Those not born there were nonetheless French, mostly from Paris and, to a lesser extent, from the central regions of France.

Figure 3 presents the birthplaces of corresponding members. The latter were generally scholars who resided further from the academy's seat during their appointment. This is also reflected in their places of origin, which include a much broader geographical range — encompassing other French regions, as well as several Italian, German, and Swiss cities, and even some extra-European locations, such as Haiti or the French Antilles.

6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index, identified by combining information from VIAF and Wikipedia using principal component analysis. The details are given in Curtis and De la Croix (2023). Figure 4 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index at the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille.

7 TOP 7 SCHOLARS

We provide a brief overview of the top seven ordinary members with the highest human capital index, excluding the corresponding members who have a higher index. In total, there are 21 corresponding members with a higher quality index than Michel-François Dandre-Bardon who ranks first among the ordinary members with a score of 8.84.

The highest-ranked member overall is Voltaire, with an index of 18.27; in 1746, he became an associate member of the Académie des belles-lettres of Marseille, at his request. It was the first provincial academy to count him as a (corresponding/associate) member. One of his correspondents at the academy was Dominique Audibert, a wealthy Protestant merchant, who helped spark his interest in the Jean Calas affair, which led to his famous *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763).

Michel-François D'Andre-Bardon (Aix-en-Provence 1700 – Paris 1783). He was one of the leading Provençal painters of the 18th century, the permanent director of the Marseille academy of painting, and became a member of the Marseille Académie des belles-lettres in 1750. He was also a poet and musician.

Jean-Pierre Papon (Puget-Theniers 1734 – Paris 1803). A priest of the Oratory until 1782, he was appointed curator of the library in Marseille in 1780. He was the author of *Histoire générale de Provence* (4 vols.), but also a historian of the plague and one of the first historians of the Revolution. He was elected to the academy of Marseille in 1773 (seat 23, 70th academician), and became its director in 1781; he took on the status of veteran in 1786 as he had moved to Paris. He was an associate member of the Institut de France. Marseille named a street after him: rue Papon, where the house where he was born is located.

Jean-François Féraud (Marseille 1725 – Marseille 1807). A priest and former Jesuit, he was a famous French grammarian and lexicographer, best known for his *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* (Critical Dictionary of the French Language, 1787). After the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in 1764, he joined the secular clergy and earned his living as a writer. He was a member of the Académie de Marseille, but did not attend its meeting frequently. In 1791, having refused to take the constitutional oath, he emigrated to Nice and then to Ferrara. In 1798, he returned to Marseille, where he probably resumed his role as a vicar. He was the correspondent of the Institut de France from 1795 onwards, and was elected in 1800 to the *Lycée des sciences et des arts*, the institution that succeeded the Marseille academy.

Claude-François Achard (Marseille 1751 – Marseille 1809). A French physician, librarian, and scholar, he studied medicine at the University of Avignon, where he received his doctorate in 1772, before settling in Aubagne, near Marseille. He was known as a charitable doctor. Forced by his almost complete deafness to give up his medical career, he devoted himself to

literature. In 1786, he was accepted to the Marseille academy, and was appointed its director in 1790. Among other works, he wrote *Le Dictionnaire de la Provence et du Comté Venaissin* (six volumes, published between 1785 and 1788). He was put in charge of the books confiscated from the clergy with the Revolution, and founded the Marseille municipal library (1793–1999), becoming its first librarian. Following the decree of the Convention of August 8, 1793, the academy was abolished. After the fall of Robespierre, Achard was one of the first to consider reestablishing it: in 1794, he obtained the appointment of a temporary arts commission from the district administration, which in 1796 became the conservatory and museum of arts; in 1798, this institution became the national museum administration, from which emerged the *Lycée des sciences et des arts*, chaired by Claude-François Achard. He was then joined by former academy members.

Pierre-Augustin Guys (Marseille 1721 - Zante, Greece 1799). Pierre-Augustin Guys was a merchant, a traveler, and a writer. After studying with the Oratorians in Marseille, he left for Constantinople in 1740 as the manager of his uncles' trading company. He traveled extensively throughout the Middle East, with a particular focus on Greece, which was occupied by the Ottomans. His *Voyage littéraire sur la Grèce* (*Literary Journey through Greece*) (1776), which compiles his archaeological observations and studies on the language and private life of Greeks, was a great success. He was also a great lover of art and owned several sculptures. He became a member of the academy in 1752 and served as its permanent secretary from 1782 to 1784. He set up a trading post in Saffi (Morocco) and established an agreement with the Royal Danish Africa Company in Copenhagen.

Toussaint Alphonse De Fortia de Pilles (Marseille 1714 - Marseille 1801). The Marquis de Pilles was aide-de-camp to Villars (the protector of the Marseille academy). In 1723, he was appointed governor of Marseille. A passionate lover of literature, he became a member of the academy in 1737.

Jean-André de Peyssonnel (Marseille 1694 - Saint-Bertrand, Guadeloupe, 1759) Having studied at the Oratorian College in Marseille, which placed particular emphasis on the history of science, he then obtained a doctorate in medicine from the University of Aix-en-Provence in 1718. His dedication during the Great Plague of Marseille in 1720 earned him an annual pension from the king. After the plague, his country home was one of the first meeting places for the core group that would go on to form the academy. He played an important role in its creation, arguing (unsuccessfully) for sciences to be incorporated into the academy from the outset. He was a founding member of the academy in 1726, but became a veteran the same year, as he was appointed physician to the king in Guadeloupe. His scientific curiosity gradually led him to research "marine productions," such as coral, sponges, and algae, and he eventually demonstrated the animal nature of coral. He was a corresponding member of the Académie royale des sciences (created in 1667) and of the Royal Society.

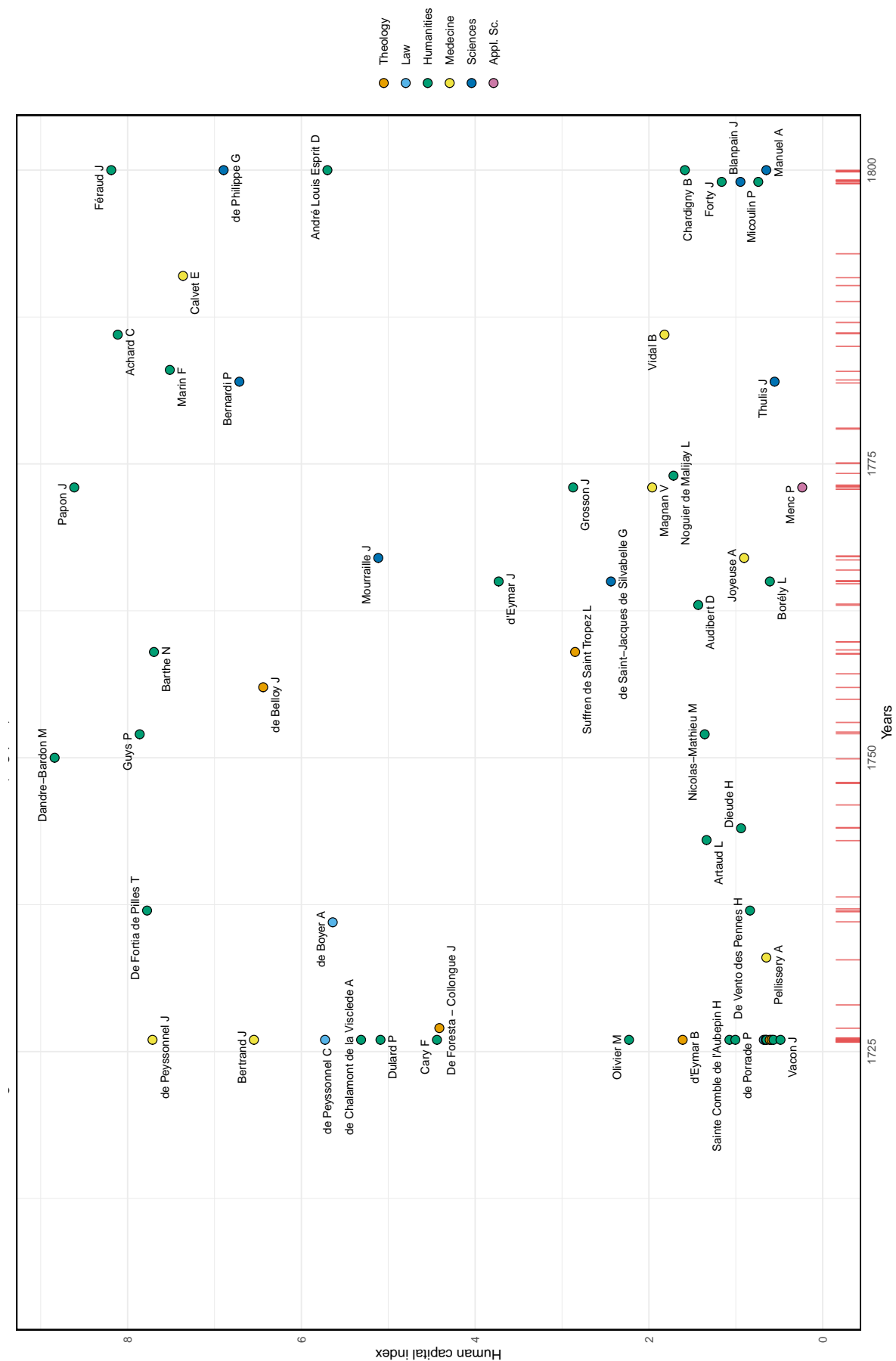


Figure 4: Famous scholars at the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille

8 VICTIMS OF THE REVOLUTION

The French Revolution was probably the deadliest event for academics over the period 1000-1800. Not only was every French academy and university shut down in 1793, but many scholars were arrested, jailed, and sentenced to death. We provide a list the members of the Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille who were victims of the Revolution, beyond the cases already described in Zanardello (2024b), De la Croix and Zanardello (2022), and De la Croix and Delvaux (2023).

In 1792, before its dissolution, the academy's membership was declining: several of its members had gone abroad, while others confined themselves to their country homes or to other regions of France. During the Terror, several were guillotined.

Guillaume-César Collé (? – Marseille 1794) A Marseille apothecary, skilled chemist, and naturalist, he was appointed a member of the Marseille academy in 1778. He was often consulted by the Marseille Chamber of Commerce and possessed a natural history cabinet that was famous throughout Provence. He became the director of the academy in 1791 and was guillotined during the Terror in 1794.

Henri-Charles de Thiard de Bissy (? 1723 – Paris 1794) A Lieutenant General of the King's Armies, Permanent Commander-in-Chief in Provence (1782–1787), and man of letters, he was guillotined in July 1794, on the eve of Robespierre's fall.

Louis-Marthe Gouy d'Arisy (Paris 1753 – Paris 1794) In the 1789 elections, he was elected deputy of the nobility of Saint-Domingue to the Estates-General, and was one of the signatories of the Tennis Court Oath. He was guillotined in July 1794 in Paris, after being tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal following the Prison Conspiracy.

Jacques Seymandy (Marseille 1720 – Marseille 1794) A Marseille merchant and shipowner, he was specialized in the fabric trade and exported his products to the Levant (with trading posts in Thessaloniki, Constantinople, India, and China). A prominent member of a group of Protestant businessmen in Marseille, he held a literary salon and corresponded with Voltaire and Necker. He became a member of the Marseille academy in 1763. He was a driving force behind the Marseille Chamber of Commerce and an active member of the *Saint-Jean d'Ecosse* Masonic lodge in the 1780s. In 1785, he purchased a title of nobility as advisor-secretary to the king. Accused of involvement in the Marseille revolt against the Convention, he was guillotined on February 26, 1794 after a summary trial. The judgement states: "Seymandy, Jacques, merchant, aged 70, counter-revolutionary, royalist, known since 1789 for his infamous principles, having provided funds for the rebel army" (Lautard 1836, vol. II, p. 447).

Jean François Ange d'Eymar (Forcalquier 1741 – Offenbourg 1807) A canon of the cathedral, he joined the academy in 1765 and went on to serve as its permanent secretary from 1768 to 1774, before becoming a veteran in 1781. The deputy for the clergy of Haguenau (East of France) at the Estates-General, he resigned from the Constituent Assembly on November 30, 1790, and emigrated soon thereafter.

Alphonse-Toussaint-Joseph De Fortia de Pilles (Marseille 1758 - Sisteron 1826) The grandson of Toussaint-Alphonse (see above), he was promoted to lieutenant in 1788, traveling throughout Central Europe and Russia. He left France at the start of the Revolution but returned after Robespierre's fall and became the governor of Marseille. He co-authored of *Les Mystifications de Caillot-Duval*, a collection of epistolary pranks, with a friend from the Nancy regiment.

Pierre-Victor Malouet (Riom 1740 – Paris 1814) An advisor to the king and navy administrator, he was sent to Marseille in 1780, where he joined the academy in 1781, and was affiliated to the *Saint-Jean d'Ecosse* Masonic lodge. He secured the transfer of the Marseille Naval Observatory to the academy in 1781. He was a leading figure among monarchists at the start of the Revolution (and the deputy for the Third Estate of Riom to the Estates-General) and emigrated

to England from 1792 to 1801. He was also the Maritime Prefect under the Empire, a Baron of the Empire (1810), and the Minister of the Navy under Louis XVIII.

Louis Jérôme Suffren de Saint Tropez (Saint-Cannat 1722 – Turin 1796) The provost of the chapter of Saint-Victor in Marseille, he joined the academy in 1759. His appointment as Bishop of Sisteron (1764–1789), where he built the irrigation canal that bears his name, led him to become a veteran of the academy in 1765. He became Bishop of Nevers in 1789, and emigrated to Italy during the French Revolution.

Several members of the academy also fled temporarily during the Revolution. For instance, Jean-Pierre Papon (see Section 7), a veteran of the academy, then in Paris, retired to Puy-de-Dôme from 1792 to 1797; Jean-François Féraud (see Section 7) emigrated (1791–1798) to Nice and to Ferrara, before returning to Marseille; and Jean-Baptiste De Belloy (Morangles, Oise, 1709 – Paris 1808), Bishop of Marseille (1755–1790), elected to the academy in 1756, retired to Chambly (Oise) during the Revolution.

9 INTERACTIONS WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF AIX-EN-PROVENCE

The Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts in Marseille did not have any members at the University of Aix-en-Provence (De la Croix and Fabre 2021) in the 18th century. The main reason was that academicians had to reside in Marseille, a residency requirement that seems to have been strict. For example, academics who left the city had to leave the academy: some asked to become veterans, but the academy still elected their successors. Nevertheless, some professors from the University of Aix-en-Provence—particularly in medicine—were associate members of the academy, as were others from other universities (i.e. Avignon and Montpellier).

10 FINAL THOUGHTS

In the 18th century, Marseille exemplified a cosmopolitan port, with merchants from across Europe, and trade spanning the Mediterranean and beyond. The Académie des belles-lettres, sciences et arts gathered local elites—merchants, clergy, and aristocrats—some linked to the academy of painting and sculpture or the *Saint-Jean d'Ecosse* Masonic lodge, which had a Mediterranean and transatlantic network. While Provençal was the everyday language in 18th century Marseille, the academy's work was conducted in French. The academy focused on regional issues—the harbor, trade, and agriculture—and the history of Provence. It gradually distanced itself from the Académie française, which stopped publishing the memoranda from the Marseille academy.

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Homepage: <https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html>

Database: <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>

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