**MALENCHINI-MEONI, Maria Metilde**, named **Matilde**, Tuscan painter and lover of Louis de Potter.

Matilde was born in Livorno on 3 December 1779 and baptized two days later (deed Archivio vescovile, Livorno). Her parents were Luigi Meoni and Francesca Ferrandi. According to the Belgian painter Navez she belonged to an old Tuscan 'house' (Correspondance de Navez, Brussels). She died in San Marco Vecchio, municipality Fiesole (Tuscany), on 8 September 1858. The death certificate mentions her as 'housewife,

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[?]middle-aged, widow of Vincenzo Malenchini and pensioner of the Grand Duchy' (Stato civile toscano, Archivio di Stato, Florence).

At a young age she married (November 22, 1796) with the Freemason Vincenzo Francesco Malenchini, also a native of Livorno. The couple did not stay together for long. When exactly and why she was abandoned by her husband is not clear. Matilde kept the Malenchini surname for a lifetime.

Presumably to provide for her own living, Matilde chose painting, for a woman at that time a rather unusual choice. She studied under the supervision of Benvenuti at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. For the main subject Copy to old masters, the Grand Ducal Art Gallery in the 'Uffizi' offered plenty of options. Matilde copied between 1807 and 1809 among other works by seventeenth-century artists from the Low Countries, such as Rubens, Sustermans and Van Slingeland. Here her first contacts with the 'North' were made. Possibly from 1806 (Caracciolo 2005, 148) but at least from 1811 she received from the Tuscan court, where Napoleon's eldest sister, Eliza Bonaparte, held the scepter, a lifelong stipend. This recognition by the Tuscan court, which in the past had been maecenas of illustrious artists, must have given Matilde great satisfaction and made possible her long-term move to Rome, when the second capital of the Napoleonic Empire.

Commander of the French troops in the Eternal City was the French General Miollis. This art-loving commander supported artists by organizing exhibitions and buying their works from his own resources. Matilde’s first major exhibition was on November 19, 1809 in the Senator Hall of the Capitol in Rome. At this international exhibition of living artists she exhibited Portraits of seven famous Italians. From the Low Countries Matilde met Martin Verstappen, Joseph De Meulemeester and Joseph Ducq, and from France Ingres and

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Granet, who all showed their oeuvre. Granet, who himself underwent the influence of old Dutch and Flemish masters, was important for Matilde's further artistic education. Miollis was impressed by Matilde’s art. He bought the above portraits of seven famous Italians and wanted more. In 1814 his collection consisted of eighteen paintings, most religious depictions, including A praying woman with her children in a church (now Rome, private property, the rest of the collection would have been lost [Caracciolo 2006, 376-377]).

The French commander also provided Matilde with a shelter in the monastery of San Trinità dei Monti next to the Villa Medici at the top of the Spanish steps. Since 1804, the French Art Academy, where French artists, Prix de Rome-winners, resided, was housed in the Villa Medici. The director of the Academy was, until his unexpected death in February 1807, the Bruges painter Joseph Benoît Suvée (NBW, vol. I, 928). The monastery of San Trinità dei Monti, which French Friars had been forced to leave after the arrival of the French, served as a kind of branch of the French art academy. Matilde had a large apartment, including three rooms at the front, given to her by Stochove from Bruges. Granet and Verstappen moved into the monastery; also Ingres and the Dutchman Pitloo stayed there. Matilde thus became acquainted with an international group of artists, in particular a group of artists from the Low Countries.

We can assume that Matilde met the Bruges-born Louis de Potter for the first time in this group. This well-to-do West Flemish nobleman (Bruges 26 April 1786-Bruges 22 July 1859, Biographie Nationale, t. V, [1876]) found shelter with an old furniture maker from Nijvel 'entouré que j'y étais de compatriotes, la plupart artistes et quelques-uns même pensionnaires de l'Académie de France' (quotation from De Potter’s *Souvenirs intimes*, 27). It remains unclear what made Louis de Potter decide to go to Italy and when he arrived in Rome. Was it for his health, to

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avoid military conscription ('pour

échapper au fléau dévastateur', De Potter’s *Souvenirs intimes*, 27) or because of the rumpus in his family after the birth of an illegitimate son in 1807? (N. De Potter, 15, 151). The tradition of the 'Grand Tour' certainly lived for him. Moreover, he saw an opportunity to delve deeper into history and especially the history of the church. In any case, De Potter was already in Rome in May 1811. Then one of the 'compatriotes', the townsman Joseph Denis Odevaere, who won the Prix de Rome in 1804, finished his portrait of De Potter playing on a guitar. The painter and his model were apparently both satisfied with the result. Odevaere presented his neoclassical work at the Brussels exhibition of 4 November 1811 and De Potter found the portrait very similar and painted (Van Caloen, 178, No. 31, portrait now in the Castle of Loppem, Zedelgem Loppem). Also from Matilde a portrait is known from that time. She was portrayed around 1812 as a charming woman with a lively gaze by the Rome-leading neoclassical painter Camuccini (Rome, Accademia di San Luca). This is how Louis De Potter must have got to know her. For Matilde, the meeting with the seven years younger De Potter was decisive for her further life. She became his lover in Italy.

Quickly and intuitively it seems she knew how to choose good relationships that at that time mattered at the administrative level and in the world of art. On 20 August 1815 she was admitted as a 'member of merit' to the Accademia di San Luca in Rome. In March 1816, on the advice of Camuccini and the famed sculptor Canova, she submitted an application for an increase of the scholarship to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinando III, who returned in 1814. As a support she sent the *Interior of a girls' boarding school*. Canova praised the composition and the coloration of the work in an accompanying letter and he also pointed out to the grand duke the tight financial position of the painter: the

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bursary was barely adequate for rent and purchasing paint. Fortunately, the application was honoured; the *Interior of a Girls School* pleased the Grand Duke with its intimacy and

naturalism, which reminded him of Dutch painters from the seventeenth century (Florence, Galleria d'arte moderna di Palazzo Pitti). Portraits of Canova, Camuccini and the Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen can also be found in a painting by Matilde from the same period, entitled Viering van Witte Dinsdag in the Sistine Chapel (Rome, private collection). It is an interesting work because of the place and the people who are depicted. In the papal house chapel, members of the Bonaparte family could be identified alongside the three artists.

A good relationship - personally and later also in writing - arose with the German diplomat and poet Johann Gotthard Reinhold. In August 1814, this Protestant was appointed by the new Oranjevorst, soon William I, king of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, as an extraordinary envoy and authorized minister to the Italian powers, with Rome as its base. The evening meetings of Reinhold were renowned; until the guests heard an international group of poets, artists and scholars. Both Matilde and De Potter benefited from Reinhold's good relations with the Roman clergy. She portrayed the two high clergy Naro and Piccolomini (no further details); De Potter was granted permission to inspect forbidden books in libraries for the benefit of his church history study.

Matilde became acquainted with another Flemish company when De Potter was appointed lay rector of the Hospice of Sint-Juliaan-der-Vlamingen in 1815. This centuries-old guest house accommodated pilgrims from Flanders, as well as 'bread and wine' and, in later times, a bonus. After the French occupation of Rome, Pinchart, with whom De Potter first lived, and the sculptor François Laboureur took control of the hospice. On 12 March 1815 they chose De

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Potter and the architect Tilman Suys (NBW, vol. XII, 717) from Ostend to their new

colleagues. In May 1816 the council of rectors expanded further with the already mentioned engraver De Meulemeester and the lawyer Isidore Plaisant. When a 'compatriote' approached De Potter for financial support, he also asked the opinion of François-Joseph Navez, a painter from Charleroi. The scholar Navez was from December 1817 to 1819 a roommate of Matilde and De Potter in the palazzo Malaspina, near the piazza Venezia. They were close friends.

When De Potter decided in 1821 to [?]deepen in the Italian jansenist Scipione de'Ricci, from 1780 to 1791 bishop of Pistoia and Prato (in Tuscany), Matilde would have had little trouble with the decision of her beloved to go to Florence, where the archives and memoirs of De'Ricci were in family possession. After all, it meant a return to a familiar environment for her. In September 1821 Matilde was admitted as 'Accademica Professore' to the Florentine Academy of Fine Arts. Artists who belonged to a famous association or who distinguished themselves in their work were eligible for this award in the class of drawing arts. Matilde belonged to the small group of female members of merit of the prestigious art academy in Rome and her works received favourable reviews; still in January 1821 the *Gazzetta di Firenze* had praised her recently completed *Interior of the kitchen of 'Tor de' Specchi'*, a beautiful monastery in the heart of Rome (no further details).

It is quite possible that the library of Bishop De'Ricci is the library in which Matilde portrayed her beloved (*Louis de Potter in a library*, Bruges, Stedelijke Museums, Marechal 1991, 228). De Potter was perfectly suited to immortalize himself with a quill, sitting next to a bust of Lucian, a satirical writer from the second century AD, who was critical of Christianity and superstition. The

painter used her portrait of De Potter for a

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self-portrait with the same colour combination of red, brown and black (*Self-portrait of Matilde Malenchini painting the portrait of Louis de Potter* [Bruges, private collection]). Matilde also contributed to De Potter's biography on De 'Ricci, his third church-historical work. She created a *Portrait of De'Ricci* that would be depicted opposite the title page. The *Vie de Scipion de Ricci* study first appeared in Brussels in 1825. She showed that De Potters' interest in church history had coincided with a political interest. The reactions to the publication varied greatly. This publication also ended up on the Index of Prohibited Books, which had happened earlier in January 1824 with De Potter's first church-historical publication.

De Potter's stay in pleasant Florence was demolished in the spring of 1823 when his family urged him to return to Bruges because of his father's poor condition. During De Potters' absence, the painter put the finishing touches to *The Interior of the San Miniato al Monte.* The faithful representation of this beautiful Romanesque church, located on top of a hill in Florence, was received with great enthusiasm not only by Florentine friends as the publisher Vieusseux but also by the Grand Ducal family, who bought the painting (Florence, Galleria d'arte moderna di Palazzo Pitti: restored in 1976). The death of his father in January 1824 and the arranging of inheritance matters prevented De Potter from returning to Italy, his original intention.

De Potter therefore suggested to Matilde that she should come to Brussels, especially as she was not welcome in Rome. Matilde's relationship with the critical freethinker De Potter did not escape the Roman authorities. According to a police file, her banning from the city of Rome in the first months of 1824 had not only to do with Matilde's unreasonable behaviour – there had previously been quarrels with neighbours; the expulsion certainly also related to her relationship with De Potter. At the beginning of July 1824 the painter left Italy.

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De Potter met her in Paris, and they then travelled together to Brussels. On July 31, 1824, the Italian woman was registered in the aliens register of Brussels with the following note: 45 years old, painter by profession, born and living in Livorno, coming from Paris, and preferred residence in Brussels *Hotel Pays Bas* (Brussels, City Archives) . Her 'Grand Tour' had started. Unfortunately, detailed information about impressions, meetings and artistic work is missing. No doubt Matilde became acquainted with the circles in which De Potter now moved and felt at home. The Potters’ house in Brussels was a meeting point for Italians passing through or staying for a longer period in the Netherlands. De Potter was really a *trait d'union*. Around 1825 he joined the editors of the liberal newspaper *Le Courrier des Pays-Bas*. He was included in a circle of 'hommes de lettres' who controlled liberal opinion and he moved in an environment of international revolutionaries in Brussels. Furthermore, Navez was an old acquaintance from Rome. His house with several workshops and numerous pupils was renowned. A relation of Navez’s, a female model named Eleonora, posed for Matilde (no further details of this portrait).

In these two foreign years, Matilde also spent a few months in London and Paris. Presumably the merchant Anichini, also from Livorno, but exiled in London, asked Matilde to make the crossing to help his wife in childbirth. In London, the painter met other political refugees from Italy also known to De Potter. Shortly after her return to Brussels in September 1825, Matilde travelled to the French capital. She and De Potter had argued, probably because of De Potter’s desire for legitimate offspring, which of course did not do them good. In Paris at the Louvre, Matilde very faithfully copied the *Portrait of a young woman by the window* by the North Dutch painter Jan Victoors from 1640 (Florence, Galleria d'arte moderna di Palazzo Pitti).

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It is no surprise, though, that she chose a seventeenth-century 'Dutch' painter from the extensive collection of the Louvre. After all, her first copied artworks in Florence were by Rubens and Van Slingeland.

In May 1826 Matilde and De Potter said goodbye to each other in Paris. A turbulent love affair came to an end. The 'sometimes oppressive but flowered yoke' had been thrown off by De Potter. This imagery can be found in his *Souvenirs intimes*. De Potter mentioned no names, but the words undoubtedly refer to the relationship with Matilde, his last 'loose liaison' (*Souvenirs intimes*, 25-26, 62).

Returning to Florence, she soon received a great disillusion. In the first weeks of 1827, De Potter announced to Matilde that he had implemented his old plan. She reacted furiously. On November 11, 1827, Sophie Eugenie van Weydeveldt, daughter of a Bruges carpet weaver and 20 years De Potter’s junior, gave him his longed-for son and heir, Agathon (Biographie Nationale, XLIII, 1983- 1984) – and also gave him the 'cruel necessity' of breaking up with Matilde as a lover.

Despite this drama, Matilde remained faithfully loyal to her 'Luigi'. After some hesitation, she accepted an annual allowance that he wanted to give her. Kept up to date by De Potter himself, she followed from afar, intensely sympathetic, his activities in Brussels as journalist of the important liberal opposition newspaper, the previously mentioned *Le Courrier des Pays-Bas*. The consequences for him of his polemical writings against the regime of King William I were trials, convictions, imprisonment (in the 'Petits-Carmes'), and eventually expulsion from the Kingdom – and also his brief political appointment as a member of the Provisional Government at the time of the Belgian Revolution of 1830.

In the late 1820s Matilde lived mainly in Tuscany and worked there, also on commission. In Rome, where she could

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happily return with a visa, a confidential friendship with Antonio Capece di Minutelo, Prince of Canosa, arose in the 1830s.

It was a special relationship. This reactionary prince, who held a few successful government positions in Naples between 1816 and 1822, was not considered by liberal contemporaries to be much. In April / May 1844 the Tuscan court granted an extra pension to Matilde for life, on the advice of the Florentine art academy. Because of her advanced age (more than sixty years) and physical discomfort she was no longer able to live the art, as she had done in the past. Matilde spent her last years in loneliness and wandering. At the end of 1854 she sent De Potter a moving letter: she wrote to share his grief on the unexpected death in Pisa of his young second son Eleuthère, born in 1830. The young man was enjoying his art education in the studio of Navez, and his work won several awards. In 1852 he had left for Italy (Biographie Nationale, XVIII, 1905), and Matilde wrote that she had met him without realizing that he was his son.

Finally, Matilde’s increasingly suspicious nature proved fatal. In July 1855 this suspicion reached a climax in the affair of a maid whom she accused of theft. Matilde lost her self-control and pushed the girl out of a window. She was arrested. It is not surprising that Matilde allowed De Potter to share in the misery of her imprisonment and the concerns of the coming process. In December 1855 the Court of Florence sentenced Matilde to a prison sentence of three and a half years. On appeal in early March 1856 the verdict was quashed, and the Court of Lucca had to make a new judgment. Perhaps after this more hopeful news Matilde got inspiration for her last painting *The Prison of Florence* (Livorno, Museo Civico, *La pittura in Italia*, *L'Ottocento*, 895); but then in March 1857 the court in Lucca also found her guilty. For the second time the Court of Cassation heard an appeal against the judgement; but in May 1857 it was dismissed, and her conviction upheld.

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Before the sentence was imposed, and probably not in prison, Matilde died in the early evening of 8 September 1858 at the age of 78. Since her imprisonment she had been looking forward to death.

The artist Matilde Malenchini is an exemplary figure to describe and connect artistic and intellectual environments in Rome, Florence and Brussels in the first half of the nineteenth century. The meeting with Louis de Potter was decisive in Rome. While many events in Matilde's fascinating life have been influenced by turbulent political relations after the French Revolution that did not leave Italy undisturbed, she is an artist at home in the period of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. The oeuvre of the painter comprises about fifty works; unfortunately only a title with a probable date is known for a large part. Although she had a feeling for colours, composition, romance and monumental art, her style, as far as to judge, was neither original nor innovative. Following the successful French painter Granet, who also had his studio in the San Trinità dei Monti monastery in Rome, Matilde concentrated mainly on interiors of churches and monasteries with scenes from daily life. The many portraits she made also show her distinguished and special connections. It is therefore interesting to know clients and owners of her artworks in and outside of Italy. An example from the Low Countries can suffice here: Mgr. Antonius Wemaer (1812-1875) from Bruges, De Potter’s birthplace, had in his possession two paintings, depicting Pope Pius VII (with thanks to D. Marechal [Brussels] for this information).

Matilde Malenchini is an example of special artistic relations between Italy and the Netherlands. She is therefore rightly included in the publication *Femmes artistes en Belgique* (Creusen 2007).

**Portraits**: Vincenzo Camuccini, *Portrait of Matilde Malenchini*, circa 1812, oil on canvas,

61.5 x 49 cm., Rome, Accademia di San Luca

(image, see: *Incisa della Rocchetta*, 215);

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Matilde Malenchini, *Self-portrait of Matilde Malenchini painting the portrait of Louis De Potter*, early 1820s, oil on canvas, 61 × 48 cm., Bruges, private collection (image, see Marechal 1991, 226 and *De Romantiek in België*, 144).

**Sources & Lit**. : BRUSSELS, National Archives, Fonds Raffin-Tholiard, no. 750: letters from Louis de Potter to [Matilde Meoni] 1829-1833, 41 items (perhaps the sealed package that Matilde entrusted to her lawyer Salvagnoli in 1855), nr. 714: testament Louis de Potter, in which Matilde is conceived, no. 716: death certificate Matilde Meoni; Royal Library, Correspondance de L. De Potter, II-5488, vol. I-III, VIII-IX and Correspondance de F.-J. Navez, II-70, vol. IV and VI; City Archives, Registries du déclaration des étrangers, nos. 20, 23 (1824-1825). Explication des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture, engraving and design, exécutés par des artistes vivans et exposés au Musée de Bruxelles, le 4 novembre 1811, Brussels, [1811] 2e ed., 36; - Catalog d'une belle collection de tableaux, ... delaissés par M. J. Odevaere ..., Brussels, 1830, 6; - Catalog d'une belle et riche collection the tableaux anciens et modernes et de quelques engravings délaissée par feu Monseigneur Antoine Jean Philippe Wemaer ... décédé à Bruges, le 17 décembre 1875, Bruges, [1876], 26; - L. DE POTTER, Souvenirs intimes. Return on knowledge of intellectual and social issues with the rat affair, 1786-1859, Brussels, 1900; - M. BATTISTINI, Livornesi amici di Luigi the Potter (La pittrice Malenchini, Antonio Benci e Pompeo Anichini), in: Bollettino storico livornese, I / 1, 1937, 62-72; - M. BOLOGNE, Louis de Potter. Histoire d'un banni de l'histoire, Liège, 1954, 41-55; - G. INCISA DELLA ROCCHETTA, *La collezione dei ritratti dell'Accademia di San Luca, Rome*, 1979, 72, 215; - M. SCHILLINGS, Matilde Malenchini, 1779-1858. Life and work of an Italian painter, Nijmegen, 1987 (unpublished doctoral thesis New history Catholic University Nijmegen, available in the Royal Library of Belgium, book number ms. III 1783), list of unprinted sources in Brussels, Florence (including correspondence Accademia di Belle Arti and procedural documents), The Hague, Livorno, Lucca (procedural documents), Naples and Rome (including Trinité des Monts, Fondation de St Julien des Flamands, police file 1830-1831 and principle di Canosa) (pp 176-179), list of printed sources and literature (pp 179-192) and a chronological list of works by the artist (p.165-166); E. DI MAJO, B. JØRNAES, S. SUSINNO, Bertel Thorvaldsen 1770-1844 scultore danese a Roma, Rome, 1989, 7-8, 22 n. 20, 272; - D. MARECHAL, Of portraitists and portraits. Some nineteenth-century paintings and miniatures in Bruges civic ownership, in: *Jaarboek 1989-90. Stad Brugge. Stedelijke Musea,* Bruge*s,* 1991, 221-234; - *La pittura in Italia. L'Ottocento*, t. II, Milan, 1991, 895, entry for

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Matilde Malenchini by C. M [ORANDI]; - V. VAN CALOEN, J.F. VAN CLEVEN, J. BRAET, The castle of Loppem, Oostkamp, ​​2001, 11-13, 169-170, 178 n. 31 (two letters that De Potter wrote to his brother-in-law J.-B. Van Caloen from Rome in 1811 are kept in the Van Caloen Archive, Zedelgem-Loppem, IB 303: with thanks to Mrs. V. Van Caloen); - Th. BUSER, Religious art in the nineteenth century in Europe and America, Book 2, Lewiston; Queenston; Lampeter, 2002, 373; - Romanticism in Belgium. Between reality, memory and desire, (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium), Brussels, 2005, 48, 67 and 144-145 (portraits De Potter, Malenchini explained by D. MARECHAL); - M.T. CARACCIOLO, L'exposition du Capitole de 1809. Un nouveau document et quelques précisions, in: Les cahiers d'Histoire de l 'Art, 3, 2005, 137-151 (with thanks to D. Coekelberghs for this alert); - M.T. CARACCIOLO, Goût classique et crites modernes du général Miollis collectioneur (Rome, 1814), in: O. BONFAIT, Ph. COSTAMAGNA, M. PRETIHAMARD edd., Le goût pour la peinture italienne autour the 1800, prédécesseurs, modèles et competes du cardinal Fesch. Actes du colloque Ajaccio, 1er-4 mars 2005, Ajaccio, 2006, 177-192, 376-377; - A. CREUSEN, *Femmes artistes en Belgique*, Paris, 2007, 30, 215, 345 (list); - Galleria d'arte moderna di Palazzo Pitti. Catalog general - tomo 2, Livorno, 2008, 1306-1307; - S. BARKER, Studied skills, innate talents. [Women artists at work in the Uffizi], in: J. FORTUNE, L. FALCONE edd., Invisible women. Forgotten artists of Florence, Florence, 2010, 111-119, ibid 212 (Inventory of works by women artists in Florence); - N. DE POTTER, R. DALEMANS, Louis de Potter. Révolutionnaire belge de 1830, Brussels, 2011; - H. KLARENBEEK, brush princesses & bread painters. Women in the visual arts 1808-1913, Bussum, 2012, 45-47 (the entrance of women at the academies). Illustration: plate XIII opposite col. 647-648, plate XIV opposite col. 649-650.

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