

Sherlock Holmes' French Connection

In *The Greek Interpreter*, Sherlock Holmes gives two clues of his past. In addition to noting his ancestors were country squires, he also shares that art was in his blood, given his grandmother was the sister of Vernet, the French artist.

Some speculation exists as to *which* Vernet. Three generations of Vernets garnered patronage from both the French monarchy and Napoleon: Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714 – 1789); Antoine Charles Horace Vernet, known as Carle Vernet (1758 – 1836); and Émile Jean-Horace Vernet, known as Horace Vernet (1789 – 1863)¹. Simple mathematics suggests the most logical choice would be the youngest Vernet. For Sherlock and Mycroft's mother to be between twenty and twenty-five at marriage, she would have to have been born between 1821-1826. Taking another twenty to twenty-five years or so for Sherlock's grandmother to be born, means a birth date of about 1795 - 1800 or earlier, clearly putting her as a contemporary of Horace.

In reality, Horace Vernet had one sister: Camille Françoise Joséphine (1788-1858) who married the French painter Hippolyte Lecomte (1781-1857) and whose son, Charles Emile Hippolyte Lecomte-Vernet, was also a painter².

Obviously, Doyle could not have selected a better family than the Vernet dynasty to provide Sherlock his inherited artistic tendencies. Claude-Joseph was known for his landscapes and seascapes³; Carle for his realistic horses, based on his own knowledge as an expert horseman⁴; and Horace for portraits and realistic battle scenes⁵. A little research also supplies some interesting facts for additional color in Sherlock's "ancestry." Horace Vernet was born in the Louvre, and his father, fleeing with his wife and children, barely escaped being shot during the French Revolution. Horace was also known for having an incredible memory, able to sketch a scene or face seen only once with total recall⁶.

The Vernet family had an English connection as well. Claude-Joseph married an English woman, Virginia Parker, during his time in Italy, and British visitors on the Grand Tour were his most loyal patrons.⁷ It might have this British link that provided the basis for selecting the Vernet family for Sherlock's artistic inheritance, but his great-uncle's ability to remember a location years later seems quite Holmesian as well.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Joseph_Vernet

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolyte_Lecomte

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Joseph_Vernet

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carle_Vernet

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Vernet

⁶ David Bartlet, *Paris with Pen and Pencil*

⁷ <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/biography/16017.html>