

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Gabriel-Jacques De SAINT-AUBIN (Paris 1724 - Paris 1780)

Sheet of Studies of Several Women, One Nursing a Baby, with an Artist Drawing [recto], Three Women in a Landscape [verso]

Graphite and stumping, pen and brown ink and grey and brown wash, with touches of watercolour.

The verso in pen and grey ink and grey wash, with touches of watercolour.

101 x 134 mm. (4 x 5 1/4 in.)

Probably once part of a small sketchbook, this double-sided sheet is likely to date from the decade of the 1760s. As Suzanne McCullagh has noted, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin 'created a number of study sheets in the 1760s that reflect either the methods of Watteau or the time-honored use of drawings to prepare for paintings. A number of Saint-Aubin's most charming and informal sketchbook pages juxtaposing various figurative studies – occasionally different views of the same figure – can be dated to this period. Usually executed in black chalk, occasionally heightened with other media, such miscellaneous sketches imitate Watteau's unusual practice of artfully arranging intimate chalk studies of figures across a sheet of paper. It is rare that Saint-Aubin's seemingly random observations can be linked to a finished composition.' Several drawings of this type appear in a sketchbook, known as the Groult album, used by Saint-Aubin between 1759 and 1778 and today in the Louvre.

Furthermore, as the Saint-Aubin scholar Kim de Beaumont adds, 'Gabriel's composite drawings, combining disparate images and inscriptions into enigmatically cohesive entities, are among the most distinctive in his oeuvre... Yet they present extraordinary challenges for scholars. Identifying each element of the drawings is, in itself, an ambitious, often not entirely feasible, undertaking, particularly with regard to fragmentary details depicted out of context... Understanding why the artist chose to bring these particular elements together, assuming it is possible to discern a pattern of selection, is a still more daunting task.'

A particularly interesting feature of the various studies on the recto of the present sheet is the portrait of what appears to be an artist in the act of drawing, at the lower right. Could this be Gabriel's younger brother, Augustin de Saint-Aubin (1736-1807), or his nephew Germain-Auguste de Saint-Aubin, the son of his brother Charles-Germain? As Mary Tavener Holmes has noted, 'Although portraits form a relatively small percentage of Saint-Aubin's enormous output, those we have, both drawn and etched, are very affecting, with an emotional transparency and engaging blend of genre and portrait. The sitters were often participants in the world of art and theater or members of his large family.'

According to Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, the present sheet was part of an album of 116 drawings by both Gabriel and Augustin de Saint-Aubin - numbering 97 studies by the former and 19 by the latter – at one time in the collection of the ceramicist Auguste Delaherche (1857-1940). When the album appeared at the 1893 sale of the collection of Hippolyte Destailleur (1822-1893), the present sheet was described as ‘a grouping of six heads of men, women, [and] children, among whom is a woman who is nursing her child...On the verso of this sketch, which has the grace and appearance of a drawing by Watteau, [is] a group of women in a park; [a] very curious watercolor.’ The album remained unsold, however, and was reoffered for sale again three years later, when it was broken up and the drawings sold individually; at this time the present sheet, described in the sale catalogue as a ‘charmant croquis’, was sold for 460 francs.

Literature:

Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *L’art du dix-huitième siècle*, Paris, 1880, p.435 (‘Réunion de six têtes d’hommes, de femmes, d’enfants, au milieu desquels se trouve une femme qui allaite son enfant. Le dessin (H. 10 c., L. 14 c.), exécuté à la pierre d’Italie, avec des parties reprises à l’aquarelle, et où les frais roses, les doux incarnats gouaches du petit maître se mêlent et se confondent avec des roux et des verdâtres harmonieux, a malheureusement la tête de la mère nourrice et d’une autre femme coupée au milieu de la figure. (Collection Delaherche.)’); Émile Dacier, *Gabriel de Saint-Aubin: Peintre, dessinateur et graveur (1724-1780)*, Vol.II: *Catalogue raisonné*, Paris, 1931, pp.50-51, no.312 (‘Études de femmes, d’hommes et d’enfants’, not illustrated).

Artist description:

Gabriel de Saint-Aubin’s career was, by and large, devoted to drawing. Only a relative handful of paintings and etchings by him exist, and it is as a draughtsman that he is best known, and on which his modern reputation rests.

Trained in the studio of François Boucher, Saint-Aubin is first recorded in 1747 as a teacher in the *Ecole des Arts* established in Paris by the architect Jacques-François Blondel. He tried to gain admission to the *Académie Royale* by competing for the *Prix de Rome* three times, between 1752 and 1754, without success. By the end of the 1750’s he had largely abandoned painting in favour of an almost obsessive focus on drawing. Saint-Aubin produced countless scenes, usually on a small and intimate scale, of 18th century Parisian daily life, society, theatrical performances and public events. As his elder brother noted of him after his death, ‘he drew all the time and everywhere’, while another posthumous account recorded that ‘He was the most prolific draughtsman that we have, perhaps, ever seen. One never met him without a pencil in his hand.’

Saint-Aubin also recorded, in the form of thumbnail sketches in the margins of exhibition and auction catalogues, the appearance of thousands of works of art exhibited at the annual *Salons* or sent for sale in Parisian auctions. Some one hundred such annotated catalogues are listed in the inventory of the artist’s estate after his death, along with several thousand drawings.