Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Herman van Swanevelt (1603 - 1655)

Landscape with the Ruins of the Grotto of Egeria

Pen and brown ink and grey wash, laid down and mounted onto a large album page, with a grey wash border.
Inscribed Fontaine de la Nymphe Egerie at the upper left and numbered 49 on the album sheet.
Further inscribed Bartolomeus on the verso.
138 x 185 mm. (5 3/8 x 7 1/4 in.)

The attribution of this drawing to Herman van Swanevelt was first made by Martin Royalton-Kisch and has since been confirmed by Anne Charlotte Steland. The drawing depicts a view of the so-called grotto of the nymph Egeria (in actual fact part of the estate of the suburban villa of Herodus Atticus), near the Via Appia to the southeast of Rome. The natural grotto was developed into a man-made arched interior, with a statue of Egeria set in a niche in the apse, and the walls faced with mosaics and marble. A later, more finished drawing of the grotto of Egeria by Swanevelt is part of the large group of drawings by the artist in the collection of the Uffizi in Florence, and is, in turn, a preparatory study for an etching of The Grotto of the Nymph Egeria, one of an undated series of twelve landscapes etched by Swanevelt.

The present sheet represents an early study for the composition developed in the Uffizi drawing and the final print. Swanevelt's practice seems to have been to produce preliminary studies of a landscape in wash, drawn from nature and capturing the atmospheric qualities of a particular scene. These would then be adapted to the size and format of a print, with the inclusion of figures and drawn in a more linear manner, in a second drawing that would serve as a modello for the etching itself.

Drawings such as these, in the words of one scholar, are 'the record of Swanevelt's response to the stimulus of the Roman Campagna, expressed in the classical vocabulary through which artists in Rome were defining landscape…his drawings are highly controlled and methodical products, and yet they do have that freshness that the paintings sometimes lack.'

Artist description:

A painter, draughtsman and etcher, Herman van Swanevelt seems to have briefly visited Paris in 1623 before settling in Rome, where he lived for several years, between 1629 and 1641. He befriended several French artists in the city, and is almost certain to have come into contact with Claude Lorrain. Like Claude, Swanevelt developed a type of ideal landscape in both his paintings and drawings, and the two artists must have known and influenced each other; this is particularly evident in the similarity of

their drawings, with their emphasis on effects of light and atmosphere. When he was admitted into the Schildersbent, the association of Netherlandish artists in Rome, Swanevelt was given the nickname ‘Heremyt’ or hermit, apparently because his preference for depictions of Italian ruins often led him deep into the remote countryside around Rome.

Swanevelt’s paintings of landscapes with biblical or mythological subjects were in great demand, and among his most significant patrons in Rome were the Barberini family, for whom he painted frescoes in their palazzo in the Piazza Navona, and Philip IV of Spain, who commissioned a number of large paintings for the Buen Retiro. Other Roman projects included a series of landscape paintings for the Galleria Doria and a pair of lunette frescoes in the sacristy of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, of which one survives. By 1643 Swanevelt was briefly back in the Netherlands, but for much of the later part of his career he lived in Paris, where his work proved very popular. Swanevelt spent the last eleven years of his career in Paris, where among his important commissions was the fresco decoration of the Hôtel Lambert, painted in the mid-1640’s. He was admitted to the Académie Royale in 1653.

Some two hundred landscape drawings by Swanevelt survive today, with the largest extant group - numbering fifty-eight sheets and for the most part consisting of preparatory studies for etchings - in the Uffizi in Florence. A gifted and prolific printmaker, Swanevelt also produced around 118 prints, and provided drawings for other artists to engrave. While in Rome he shared a house with the French printmaker Charles Audran, who published some of his etchings. A significant number of preparatory drawings by Swanevelt for his prints are known, and the etchings tend to follow the designs fairly precisely, with ‘the painterly effects of the drawings…converted into a great richness of surface texture in the print.’