

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

The Rape of the Sabine Women

Graphite and stumping on paper laid down onto another sheet, with framing lines in brown ink.
Signed and dated G. de St. Aubin del. 1763 in the lower margin.
Faint traces of a signature or inscription at the lower left.
Inscribed Composé par gabriel d. S aubin 17[63?] on the verso, laid down. Further illegibly inscribed in ink on the verso, laid down.
187 x 135 mm. (7 3/8 x 5 1/4 in.)

This is a preparatory study by Gabriel de Saint-Aubin for an engraving used to illustrate Philippe de Prétot's monumental history of ancient Rome, the Spectacle de l'histoire romaine, depuis la fondation de Rome, jusqu'à la prise de Constantinople par Mahomet II, l'an de J.C. 1453, published in 1776 and 1777. The drawing appears, in reverse, as the second plate in the book; reproduced in an engraving by the printmaker Pierre Aveline. Philippe de Prétot commissioned Saint-Aubin to provide drawings or painted designs for twenty-nine of the forty-four illustrations for the Spectacle de l'histoire romaine, with the remainder of the scenes designed by Charles Eisen, Hubert François Gravelot and other artists. Given by far the largest share of the commission, Saint-Aubin worked on the project for much of the 1760s; between 1760 and 1768. His illustrations were engraved by Aveline and, among others, Pierre-François Tardieu, Pierre Chenu and Saint-Aubin's younger brother Augustin.

A noted cartographer and professor of history and geography, Étienne-André Philippe de Prétot (c.1708-1787) first announced a plan to publish a lavish illustrated history of Rome in April 1762. It was not until 1776, however, that the first volume, illustrated with a set of twenty reproductive engravings of scenes from ancient Roman history, including one after the present sheet, was published. A further twenty prints – devoted to Roman battles, military triumphs, ceremonies, public games and so forth – were issued with the second volume the following year. Plans to publish a third set of engravings were abandoned with the death of Philippe de Prétot in 1787, and only seven of the engravings were

completed. The complete set of engravings was then acquired by the publisher Nyon and used to illustrate a similar book by the Abbé Claude-François-Xavier Millot, the Abrégé de l'histoire romaine, published in Paris in 1789.

As the eminent Saint-Aubin scholar Émile Dacier has written of the artist's drawings for this project, 'Excellent when he observes, insignificant if he invents, Saint-Aubin can show himself at his most advantageous when he can enrich a detail taken from reality with the product of his imagination. Nowhere is this clearer than in a series of illustrations - the largest he produced, the most important in his eyes and the one on which he worked on the longest - in which one would not think, at first sight, that it would offer the means of arriving at such a verification: I mean the compositions destined for the Spectacle de l'histoire romaine.'

Certainly, the commission from Philippe de Prétot was the most significant project undertaken by Saint-Aubin to this stage of his career, and he lavished a great deal of time and effort on the drawings. As has been noted by a recent scholar, 'Judging from the virtual disappearance of Philippe's Roman history, its long postponed publication ended in commercial failure. Back in 1759, though, Gabriel had no way of anticipating this disappointing outcome. At the time he can only have felt very fortunate to be included at the inception of such an expansive project, promising years of employment and possibly the sort of public notice that had eluded him so far. As the work progressed steadily into the 1760s, he would have had every reason to believe that his most favorable expectations were being fulfilled.'

All of Saint-Aubin's final preparatory drawings for Philippe de Prétot's Spectacle de l'histoire romaine remained together in a private collection until being dispersed in 2004. Twenty-eight of the drawings, including the present sheet (as well as an unpublished design for a frontispiece), appeared together at auction in Paris in June 2004. These were preceded three months earlier by the two largest drawings executed by Saint-Aubin for the project, intended as double-page illustrations, which are today in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

It was during the 1770s that Saint-Aubin's achievements as an illustrator, of which his work for the Spectacle de l'histoire romaine may be regarded as the culmination, resulted in some of his finest works, and was also perhaps the closest he came to his youthful ambitions as a peintre d'histoire. As Kim de Beaumont has noted, 'Gabriel's astonishing production of the 1760s and 1770's, prolific and rich in memorable works of very description, testifies to his ultimate success in expressing his native genius.'

Provenance:

Étienne-André Philippe de Prétot, Paris; Private collection, France
Anonymous sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 16 June 2004, lot 78.

Literature:

Philippe de Prétot, Spectacle de l'histoire romaine, Paris, 1776, Vol.I, pl.II; Abbé Milliot, Abrégé de l'histoire romaine, Paris, 1789, pl.II; Jérôme Delaplanche, Le goût de la grâce et du joli. La collection Oulmont: Dessins, peintures et pastels du XVIIIe siècle, exhibition catalogue, Épinal, 2007, p.75, under no.28, fig.10 (as location unknown).

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.