Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Jean DUPAS (Bordeaux 1882 - Paris 1964)

Study for The Chariot of Poseidon Mural for the S.S. Normandie
Pen and black and grey ink, brown wash, charcoal and stumping.

Squared in black ink.

Signed and dated Jean Dupas / 1935 at the lower right.

The left and lower right edges of the sheet show losses from fire damage.

422 x 725 mm. (16 5/8 x 28 1/2 in.) at greatest dimensions.

This large drawing is a preparatory compositional study for The Chariot of Poseidon, part of Jean Dupas's most famous work; the four hundred square metres of glass mural decoration installed in the Grand Salon of the S.S. Normandie. The most beautiful and luxurious ocean liner of its day, the Normandie was launched in 1932 and made its maiden transatlantic voyage in May 1935. Intended as an exemplar of French engineering and design, the ship's lavish interiors served as a showcase of French Art Deco, incorporating specially commissioned work by such leading designers and craftsmen as Dupas, Jean Dunand, Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, René Lalique and Jean-Michel Franck.

Completed in 1935, the murals for the Grand Salon were executed on giant glass panels in the technique of verre églomisé, and were the result of a collaboration between Dupas and the glassmaker Jacques-Charles Champigneulle (1882-1964). The four paintings depicted The Chariot of Poseidon, The Sea Nymph Thetis, The Birth of Venus and The Rape of Europa. A fifth panel, incorporating a sliding door, was decorated with lacquer panels by Jean Dunand, also after designs by Dupas, depicting The Chariot of Dawn and The Chariot of Night, as well as The Four Winds. Made of painted and engraved glass panels, with the design etched and painted onto the reverse, the murals had the appearance of three-dimensional reliefs. Each composition was comprised of a mosaic of dozens of glass panels, held together with bronze brackets at each corner.

As the scholar Bruno Foucart has described them, 'Dupas's glass reliefs, aureated, silvered, and painted on the reverse side by the glazier Champigneulle, using "gold, silver, platinum, and palladium" colors, became the pièces des resistance of the Grand Lounge. There were four such reliefs, each measuring 21 feet high and 49 feet wide…These great golden panels have about them a joyousness, a humor, and a sophistication that now seems the very embodiment of the 1930s, a between-the-wars world that, in the middle of the ocean, could appear like an interlude between pleasures. Dupas himself

stated that the panels had been conceived “with the desire to create an abundant, splendid effect.”’

In December 1941, following the entry of America into the Second World War, the Normandie was requisitioned by the US government, to be converted into a troop ship. In February 1942 a fire broke out while the ship was being refitted at Pier 88 in Manhattan, and the Normandie was severely damaged and eventually capsized. However, the ship had already been stripped of much of her decorations, with Dupas’s glass panels removed from the Grand Salon and placed in storage. The mural of The Chariot of Poseidon is preserved in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which also houses a smaller preparatory drawing for the composition. Four large cartoons for the Normandie panels, each drawn in black chalk and measuring 2.20 x 5 metres, were exhibited in Paris in 1980.

Dupas’s Normandie panels have long been recognized as his finest work. As one scholar has noted, ‘“The larger my work, the happier I am’, writes Dupas who, with this ensemble, realizes his most accomplished masterpiece. The brilliance of glass, sumptuously enhanced with panels of gold, silver and palladium, exalts the supreme rhythm that runs through these panels, a composition both tumultuous and majestically organized against a backdrop of tangled sails and large vessels. Sea horses, tritons and dolphins, under the control of sculpted deities, prance on a sea of shells; there reigns a sort of Golden Age jubilation which is like the dream, at last fully made real, of Dupas.’

This large sheet shows traces of the damage it received in a fire in Jean Dupas’s studio that destroyed much of his work. A glimpse of the artist’s crowded studio was provided by the Art Deco illustrator George Barbier in his article on Dupas, published in 1927: ‘The activity of our artist is amazing; in his atelier, frames accumulate constantly against the walls; canvases cover canvases; the tables are heaped with sketches; loose leaves are pinned to the walls – sketches of some graceful movement, of some Virgilian landscape. One is forced to climb over the cartons on which Dupas traces his life-sized figures, or the large scrolls representing the columns for some temple yet unbuilt. Enough cannot be said in praise of these charming studies, where the black pencil, here and there relieved by a touch of red chalk, takes on a caressing sweetness, a voluptuous grey.’

The first owner of this drawing was the painter Marguerite Grain (1899-1986), a pupil of Dupas who also posed for a number of paintings by the artist.

Provenance:

Marguerite Grain, Paris
Her estate sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 26 February 1987, lot 5 bis
Steven A. Greenberg, New York, until 2012.

Literature:

To be included in the forthcoming Jean Dupas catalogue raisonné being prepared by Romain Lefebvre.

Artist description:

One of the leading artists of the Art Deco period, Jean Théodore Dupas was the son of a merchant marine captain and began his adult life as a merchant seaman. Poor health meant that he had to abandon this career and he enrolled in art school instead, first in his native Bordeaux and later in Paris. He won the Prix de Rome in the category of painting in 1910 and studied at the Académie de France in Rome, from where he sent several paintings to the Paris Salons, although his studies were interrupted by the outbreak of war. Dupas's work came to public prominence on the occasion of the seminal Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1925. He was chosen by the furniture designer Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann to provide paintings for the latter's Maison d'un collectionneur, alongside furniture by Ruhlmann and objects by many of the leading Art Deco craftsmen of the day, while other paintings by Dupas were also displayed to great effect elsewhere in the Exposition.

In the late 1920's and 1930's Dupas won a number of important and prestigious commissions. In 1926 he worked alongside Ruhlmann and the sculptor Alfred Jeanniot on the decoration of the tearoom of the ocean liner Ile-de-France; the first of the grand transatlantic ships to be built in France after the First World War. By this time Dupas had firmly established his reputation. Writing in 1927, his fellow artist George Barbier could already note that 'Few artists have at such an early age attained such a degree of success, or gathered around them such swarms of imitators and disciples.'

Dupas reached the height of his fame in the mid 1930's, and in 1934 he received his most important commission to date; a series of large glass murals for the Grand Salon of the new French ocean liner, the Normandie. He was also commissioned to provide murals to decorate the Salon de l'Argenterie in the Royal Palace in Bucharest, but the work was only partly completed, and the outbreak of World War II meant that it was never installed. In 1940 Dupas was named curator of the Musée Marmottan in Paris, and the following year was admitted to the Académie des Beaux-Arts and appointed a professor of painting at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He ended his career as the Director of the Musée Marmottan.

As Edward Lucie-Smith has noted of Dupas and such fellow Art Deco artists as Robert Pougheon and Raphaël Delorme, who were known collectively as the School of Bordeaux, 'During the 1920s and 1930s their work had a particular appeal to the patrons who were also enthusiasts for the more extreme manifestations of the style in the applied arts…the style they practised, though apparently coherent, has roots in many different places. For example, Dupas and his colleagues can be thought of as the last descendants of early nineteenth-century neo-classicism…Another, quite different, influence upon the Art Deco painting of the Bordeaux School is to be found in Italian Mannerism.' Dupas was also strongly influenced by contemporary sculpture, and in particular that of Antoine-Emile Bourdelle and, as Lucie-Smith points out, 'A number of monochrome works by Dupas have the air of being either designs for, or imitations of, relief sculpture.'