

Jules Bastien-Lepage (Damvillers 1848 - Paris 1884)

Orpheus

Charcoal, with stumping, and white chalk, on light brown paper.
Signed J. BASTIEN LEPAGE at the lower left.
Numbered 102 at the upper left.
455 x 303 mm. (17 7/8 x 11 7/8 in.)

The present sheet is a preparatory study for an unfinished and now-lost painting of Orpheus by Bastien-Lepage, painted in 1877. The artist mentions the painting in a letter written to his parents in January 1877: 'I went back to work starting a small painting (I mean small in size). It represents Orpheus asking once again for Eurydice from the god of the underworld…Orpheus walks in front, as it was agreed; as he walks, he plays the lyre. Distracted or rather tormented by the desire to see Eurydice, we feel that he will soon turn his head, and Mercury, who does not lose sight of him, will abduct his beloved. All of this is outlined, and I hope to finish it in a short time.'

This painting of Orpheus was, however, eventually abandoned. Its composition is nevertheless recorded in a handful of preparatory oil sketches, most of which are also now lost, as well as five drawings and an etching for the figure of Orpheus. Bastien-Lepage also produced a small sculpted statuette for the figure of Orpheus, which is today in a private collection.

This small statuette of Orpheus reappears in Bastien-Lepage's magisterial portrait of the actress Sarah Bernhardt, painted in 1879 and exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in London the following year; the painting is today in a private collection. Arguably the definitive portrait of the famous actress, Bastien-Lepage depicts Bernhardt holding the small sculpture of Orpheus. Although Bernhardt had a produced and exhibited a number of sculptures and had indeed achieved some renown as a sculptress, the small

statuette of Orpheus which she holds was, in fact, that executed by Bastien-Lepage two years earlier.

The present sheet was, in all likelihood, at one time in the collection of Dr. Joseph Liouville (1809-1882), an eminent mathematician who was a close friend of the artist and acquired several paintings and drawings by him. Bastien-Lepage also painted a portrait of Liouville in 1880.

Provenance:

Probably Dr. Joseph Liouville, Paris
Anonymous sale ('Rare ensemble de trente dessins par Jules Bastien-Lepage'), Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 26 April 1985, lot 29.

Literature:

Probably Masters in Art: Bastien-Lepage, Boston, 1908, p.40 ('He also made a drawing for the statuette which is full of remarkable and subtle qualities.'); Marie-Madeleine Aubrun, Jules Bastien-Lepage 1848-1884: Catalogue raisonné de l'Oeuvre, Paris(?), 1985, p.116, no. D.130; Louis-Antoine Prat, Le dessin français au XIXe siècle, Paris, 2011, p.442, fig.1058 (as location unknown).

Artist description:

One of the foremost Realist painters of the late 19th century in France, Jules Bastien-Lepage enjoyed a brief but remarkably successful career of barely fifteen years. Born Jules Bastien in the town of Damvillers, north of Verdun in the département of the Meuse, he adopted the professional surname Bastien-Lepage very early in his career, adding his mother's maiden name to his own. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, entering the studio of Alexandre Cabanel, and achieved his first public success at the Salon of 1874, where both paintings he exhibited were later purchased by the State. It was during the mid-1870's that Bastien-Lepage, who had already achieved success as a portrait painter, found himself at an artistic crossroads; torn between the demands of the Académie for important historical, religious or mythological subjects, and his abiding interest in peasant genre scenes. His failure to win the Prix de Rome in 1875 and 1876 seems to have been the catalyst towards abandoning any pretence of a career within the official art circles of the Académie, in favour of a Realist painting characterized by a rustic naturalism.

Bastien-Lepage soon established a reputation as a painter of portraits and genre scenes of peasant life, which proved very popular among collectors. He also painted the occasional historical subject, notably the large canvas of Joan of Arc Listening to the Voices, now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Despite Bastien-Lepage's international fame, however, his reputation dimmed soon after his death of cancer at the young age of thirty-six, and his work became little more than a footnote in most early studies of French 19th century painting. It was not until the last quarter of the 20th century that his paintings were rediscovered and underwent a scholarly reappraisal, and his importance as one of the leading artists of the Realist tradition in France was fully recognized.