

Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre (Paris 1714 - Paris 1789)

The Head of a Female Figure Wearing a Helmet

Pastel and black chalk on blue paper.

Signed *Pierre* at the bottom centre.

305 x 227 mm. (12 x 8 7/8 in.)

Although a record of the contents of his studio, published after his death in 1789, mentions 'boëtes à couleur & au pastel', Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre seems to have only used the medium of pastel occasionally. Just a handful of works in this medium by the artist have survived, although other examples are recorded in 18th and 19th century auction catalogues. Pierre's few known pastel drawings take the form of character heads or têtes d'expression, either of beautiful young women – seemingly inspired by the example of Rosalba Carriera - or of old, bearded men. It has been suggested that, during the last two decades of his career, as he found himself burdened with administrative duties and unable to devote much time to painting, Pierre continued to produce pastel drawings, many of which may have been intended as gifts. This drawing remains unrelated to any surviving painting by Pierre, although a close physiognomical similarity may be noted with the head of an allegorical figure of Strength, one of a series of red monochrome paintings executed by the artist in 1753 for the Cabinet de Conseil at the Château of Fontainebleau.

Similar heads are also found in other paintings by Pierre, such as that of Athena in two of a set of four canvases illustrating scenes from the story of Ulysses, painted around 1747. While the present sheet has the appearance of being a study for a painting, the fact that it is signed suggests that it may also have been intended as an independent work of art, despite being not as finished as most other surviving pastel heads by the artist.

A stylistically comparable drawing in pastel by Pierre, also drawn on blue paper, is a study of a bearded man in the collection of the Albertina in Vienna.

Provenance:

Louis Meier, London
Purchased from him in c.1955 by Ralph Holland, Newcastle
Thence by descent until 2013.

Exhibitions

Newcastle upon Tyne, Hatton Gallery, *Old Master Drawings, From the XVIth to the XIXth century*, 1960, no.57; Newcastle upon Tyne, Hatton Gallery, *Old Master Drawings*, 1964, no.81; Newcastle upon Tyne, Hatton Gallery, *Italian and Other Drawings 1500-1800*, 1974, no.112.

Literature:

Ralph Holland, *Italian and other Drawings 1500-1800*, exhibition catalogue, Newcastle, 1974, unpaginated, no.112; Nicolas Lesur and Olivier Aaron, *Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre 1714-1789: Premier peintre du roi*, Paris, 2009, p.459, no.D.437 (as location unknown); Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800* [online edition], p.2, illustrated.

Artist description:

Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre enjoyed a highly successful career as a painter of easel pictures, church altarpieces and large-scale decorative schemes, mostly executed between the 1740's and the 1760's. He won the Grand Prix de Rome in 1734 with a painting of Samson and Delilah, now lost, and studied at the Académie de France in Rome between 1735 and 1740. Pierre made his debut at the Salon the following year, and was reçu at the Académie Royale in 1742, followed two years later by his appointment as a professor there. In 1752 he was named premier peintre to the Duc d'Orléans, for whom he produced ceiling paintings for the Palais Royal in Paris. Pierre painted numerous works for Parisian churches, including altarpieces for Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Saint-Louis du Louvre, Saint-Sulpice and Saint-Roch, where he also painted the cupola of the church, as well as the cathedral of Saint-Louis in Versailles. He also provided mural and ceiling decorations for the chateaux of Fontainebleau, Versailles and Saint-Cloud. In 1770, Pierre was named premier peintre du roi, succeeding François Boucher, and director of the Académie Royale. The 1770's and 1780's found the artist mainly engaged on administrative tasks, with a corresponding decline in his painted output.