

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Nicolas de Largillière (Paris 1656 - Paris 1746)

A Sheet of Studies of Hands and Arms

Black, red and white chalk, on buff paper.
A portrait study of a cleric in black chalk on the verso.
155 x 304 mm. (6 1/8 x 12 in)

The 18th century critic and art historian Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville wrote of Largillière that he worked directly on the canvas, without recourse to preparatory drawings, except for studies of heads, hands and drapery. Indeed, only a handful of drawings by the artist are known. (Among the few universally accepted drawings by Largillière are a group of eight academies - seven in the collection of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and one in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – which would seem to date from his tenure at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in the early 18th century.)

It has been assumed that, when preparing his compositions, Largillière must have worked from drawings and oil sketches which he kept in his studio. One such oil sketch depicting various studies of hands, which can be related to several portraits by the artist, is in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Algiers, on deposit at the Louvre. It has also been suggested that 'Dezallier d'Argenville's observation that Largilliere used few drawings can be explained by the fact that Largilliere preferred oil sketches to drawings, probably because the establishment of colour relationships was of primary importance to him.'

The attribution of this drawing, which may be dated to the end of the first decade of the 18th century, has been confirmed by Dominique Brême. A closely comparable sheet of studies of hands and arms by Largillière, also drawn in red and black chalk, is in a French private collection.

Artist description:

One of the leading portrait painters in France during the latter half of the reign of Louis XIV, Nicolas de Largillière was trained in Antwerp and London, settling in Paris in 1679. He soon established a reputation as a portrait painter, and as early as 1681 had painted a portrait of the King and other members of the royal family. Largillière was accepted into the Académie Royale in 1683, and later served twice as its Director. As well as members of the royal family and the Court nobility, Largillière also painted portraits of the landed aristocracy and the haute bourgeoisie, as well as leading civil, religious and military figures. The success of his portraiture and the numerous commissions he received allowed the artist to amass a considerable fortune. From the beginning of his career many of his formal portraits were reproduced as engravings, which served to further his reputation. He also painted a handful of still lifes and some landscapes. After 1725 Largillière ceased to exhibit at the Salons, and from 1730 he worked more slowly and his output began to decline.