François-Marius Granet (1775 - 1849)

Monks on the Staircase of the Villa of Maecenas at Tivoli

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, with touches of watercolour.
Inlaid on an old mount.
Signed Granet. and inscribed villa mécène / 15=2/40. in the lower margin.
193 x 157 mm. (7 5/8 x 6 1/4 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

In his memoirs, Granet often makes reference to the priests and monks he met in Rome, and he portrayed the daily life of the monastery, church or cloister in numerous paintings. Such works found admirers throughout the artist's clientele, and even Louis-Philippe himself wrote in a letter of 1826, 'I like M. Granet's souvenirs of Italy, those churches, those chapels, all that has a character I like, and then those ceremonies, those Italian priests or monks who delight me...All of this from the brush of M. Granet takes on a truth and vigor that carry one away...' This small but atmospheric drawing was probably part of an album of Roman views of the type that Granet would assemble and produce as gifts for friends or for sale to collectors.

Granet made his first visit to Tivoli in 1804, and returned there often during his stay in Italy. Here he depicts the staircase at the entrance to the Villa of Maecenas, with the darkness of the foreground contrasted with the bright sunlight at the top of the stairs. A slighty smaller variant of this drawing by Granet, with differences in staffage, was formerly in the collection of John Gaines in Lexington, KY, and was sold at auction in New York in 2001.

Another watercolour view of the Villa of Maecenas at Tivoli, showing a view of the former stables similarly populated by monks, was on the New York art market in 1985. An oil sketch of an almost identical view of the staircase of the Villa of Maecenas, generally attributed to Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot but more recently given, albeit tentatively, to Granet, is in the Gere collection at the National Gallery in London.

Literature:

Christopher Riopelle and Xavier Bray, A Brush with Nature: The Gere Collection of Landscape Oil Sketches, exhibition catalogue, London, National Gallery, 1999, p.64, fig.21, under no.18.

Artist description:

Trained in the studio of Jean-Antoine Constantin, François-Marius Granet was from his youth recognized as a gifted draughtsman. His early sketchbooks, preserved in the Musée Granet in Aix, already show an interest in architectural ruins and church interiors; motifs to which he would remain devoted throughout his career. After studying briefly in the studio of Jacques-Louis David in Paris - where his simple brown attire and ascetic personality led his fellow pupils to give him the nickname 'the Monk' - he eventually resolved to return to the South. Before his departure, however, he submitted a painting to the Salon of 1799, depicting the cloister of a church on the rue St. Honoré. This painting, greatly admired at the exhibition, marked the beginning of Granet's successful career.

In 1802 Granet traveled to Rome, remaining there for most of the next twenty-two years. He set up his studio in an abandoned monastery and working extensively in the city and the surrounding Campagna. Although never a pensionnaire at the Académie de France, he was able to make a reasonable living selling views of Rome to the many French tourists who visited the city during the Napoleonic occupation. At the Salon of 1819 he exhibited a painting of The Choir of the Capuchin Church in Rome, widely praised by critics, which firmly established his reputation in France. The painting was coveted by King Louis XVIII, although eventually purchased by Caroline Murat, Queen of Naples.

Returning to France in 1824, Granet was appointed to a position as a curator at the Louvre in 1826, and was later given the task of establishing a Museum of French History at Versailles by Louis-Philippe. From then on, he seems to have been less active as a painter, although he continued to draw, and his stay in Versailles saw him produce a series of charming watercolours of the gardens. After Granet's death, some two hundred of his drawings and watercolours were presented to the Louvre. The remainder of his studio, numbering around three hundred paintings and some 1,500 drawings, were left to his native city of Aix; a bequest that forms the nucleus of the Musée Granet there.

Granet's work is characterized by an appreciation for and understanding of the effects of light, and he delighted in achieving atmospheric effects in his drawings and watercolours. The freshness and immediacy of his watercolours show him to be the equal of such contemporary masters of the medium as William Callow, Thomas Shotter Boys and Richard Parkes Bonington, all of whom were active in Paris in the 1820's and 1830's.