Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Alphonse Legros (1837 - 1911)

The Viol Player (Le joueur de viole)

Brown ink, brown wash and black chalk, extensively heightened with white, on buff paper.
Signed and dedicated a mon ami Holloway / A. Legros at the lower left corner of the backing sheet.
212 x 223 mm. (8 3/8 x 8 3/4 in.)

This drawing is a preparatory study, in reverse, for Legros' etching Le joueur de viole of c.1868. As one modern scholar has noted, both the drawing and the print 'strongly evoke Italian prototypes. The viola player set in a landscape suggests Venetian sources. The reserved bystanders in the print are similar to the angels in Piero della Francesca's famous Baptism of Christ that was acquired by the National Gallery, London in 1861. Contact with latter-day Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Burne-Jones may have motivated Legros to draw upon such sources.' A related etching by Legros entitled Le joueur de contrebasse may also be dated to the same period.

The present sheet bears the artist's dedication to the printseller Marseille Holloway (d.1910). Holloway dealt in old and modern prints from premises in London, first in Henrietta Street and later in Bedford Street, and published a number of etchings by Legros. The drawing later entered the collection of Frank E. Bliss, who assembled one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of etchings and lithographs by Legros. Together with a large number of drawings and paintings by the artist, these were exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1922. Many of the paintings and drawings, including the present sheet, were sold at Christie's the following year.

Provenance:

Given by the artist to Marseille Holloway, London
His posthumous sale, London, Sotheby's, 1 March 1911, lot 74
Frank E. Bliss, London, his collection label on the old backing board
His sale, London, Christie's, 9 February 1923, lot 41
The Fine Art Society, London, in 1987
Mr. and Mrs. Jerrold Ziff, Urbana, Illinois.

Literature:

Frits Lugt, Les marques de collections de dessins & d'estampes, Amsterdam, 1921, p.342, under no.1875; Alexander Seltzer, Alphonse Legros: The Development of an Archaic Visual Vocabulary in 19th Century Art, unpublished Ph.D thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1980, pp.199-200, figs.6-7; Urbana-Champaign, Krannert Art Museum, The Ziff Collection of Old Master & Nineteenth-Century Drawings, 1999, pp.132-133, no.63 (entry by Sung Lim Kim).

Artist description:

Apprenticed to a house painter, in his spare time Alphonse Legros studied drawing at the School of Fine Arts in Dijon. He later moved to Paris, where he entered the Petite École de Dessin (later the École des Arts Décoratifs), run by Horace Lecoq des Boisbaudran. Among his fellow pupils was Auguste Rodin, who years later recalled that 'My drawings were absolutely impersonal; those of Legros, on the contrary, were already a master's.' Legros first exhibited at the Salon of 1857, and two years later his painting Angelus was greatly admired by the critic Charles Baudelaire. Although Legros was, in essence, a somewhat conservative artist, his friends included such nonconformist painters as James McNeill Whistler, Edgar Degas and Camille Pissarro, and it was Whistler who encouraged Legros to settle in London, which he did in 1863. He was able to support himself by teaching a class in printmaking at the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) at the recommendation of the painters Dante Gabriel Rossetti and G. F. Watts. Rossetti also introduced him to other artists, such as Edward Burne-Jones, as well as a number of important collectors, notably Alexander Constantine Ionides. He later succeeded Sir Edward Poynter as professor of design at the Slade School of Art at University College, a post he held from 1876 to 1894.

In England Legros began devoting more and more time to his work as a printmaker, and in the mid 1880's he and Francis Seymour Haden founded the Society of Painter-Etchers. Prolific as an etcher, he produced several hundred prints. Legros was to live in London for almost his entire career, apart from a period of some six years in a cottage in Brasted Chart in Kent, between 1899 and 1905. Nevertheless, Legros continued to exhibit, if only occasionally, at the Paris Salons. He produced a large number of painted and drawn portraits throughout his career, and it is as a portraitist that Legros is perhaps best known today. Among his sitters were such prominent figures as Cardinal Manning and Charles Darwin, as well as artists such as Watts, Rodin and Alfred Stevens.

Legros was a superb draughtsman, and employed a wide range of media, including pen and ink, lead pencil, metalpoint (both gold and silver), watercolour, chalk and charcoal. His drawings were greatly admired by such contemporaries as Edgar Degas, who is said to have hung a drawing of hands by Legros between two drawings by Ingres in his bedroom.

Léonce Bénédite, who organized an exhibition of the artist's work at the Musée de Luxembourg in Paris in 1900, wrote of Legros that 'His entire work, whether painted, drawn, engraved, or sculptured, represents enormous achievement, in which exceptionally fine results abound. And as I write these lines, the quiet and simple artist, whose glory two nations share, is quietly sitting at his working table in the solitude of his little country cottage near Brasted, engaged in increasing his splendid store, without thought of the noisy world outside, or of the laurels which shall be showered on him, with the serenity of the sage who esteems labour itself as the sweetest fruit of his travailing.'