

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Nicolas II Huet (Paris 1770 - Paris 1828)

An Indian Elephant

Pen and brown ink and watercolour, with touches of gouache, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, on vellum laid down on board.

Signed and dated huet fils 1810 at the lower right.

Inscribed L'Elephant femelle, Elephas indien, / Par huet peintre du Muséum d'histoire naturelle à Paris. on the verso.

312 x 446 mm. (12 1/4 x 17 5/8 in.) [sheet]

The Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus indicus*) is native to mainland Asia, and is smaller than African elephant. Nicolas Huet made this drawing at the menagerie of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, part of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.

This drawing depicts one of a pair of elephants - a male and a female, originally from Ceylon – taken from William V of Orange's menagerie at Het Loo during the French occupation of the Netherlands in 1795 and presented to the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in 1798. Although the male elephant, known as Hans, died of pneumonia in 1802, the female elephant drawn here by Huet - who had been named Parkie by the Dutch and was renamed Marguerite in France - lived for a total of 34 years before her death, of unknown causes, at the Jardin des Plantes in March 1816.

Two years before the present sheet was drawn, Huet exhibited another drawing of what may have been the same female elephant at the Paris Salon of 1808. He also drew an elephant, depicted eating some grass with a curled trunk, for the Collection de mammifères du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, published in 1808.

The present sheet may be grouped with a handful of highly finished drawings in watercolour and gouache on vellum by Nicolas Huet the Younger that have appeared on the art market in recent years. These include an American Cougar, signed and dated 1811, sold at auction in London in 2004, and a Tiger, signed and dated 1812, which appeared at auction in New York in 2007. Another example is a drawing of a giraffe presented to Charles X by the Viceroy of Egypt, dated 1827 and on paper rather than vellum, which is today in the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

Literature:

Sally-Ann Héry-Simoulin, 'Les Animaux observés par Barye au Muséum', in Emmanuelle Brugerolles, ed., Antoine-Louis Barye, "Le Michel-Ange de la Ménagerie", exhibition catalogue, Paris, École des Beaux-Arts, 2013-2014, p.93, fig.XIII.

Artist description:

Born into a family of artists, Nicolas Huet the Younger was the eldest son and pupil of Jean-Baptiste Huet and the grandson of the animalier Nicolas Huet the Elder, and like both of them specialized in depictions of animals. The young Nicolas took part in Napoleon's scientific and artistic expedition to Egypt between 1798 and 1801, and made his Salon debut in 1802 with several animal pictures. A gifted watercolourist and engraver, Huet developed a reputation as a natural history draughtsman. In 1804 he was appointed painter to the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle and to the Ménagerie of the Empress Joséphine, who was a collector of animal, bird and plant specimens, many of which were drawn by Huet.

Among Huet's most significant works were a series of 246 elaborate drawings on vellum - studies of mammals, reptiles, birds, insects and sea life - for the library of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, published in 1808 as 'Collection de mammifères du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle'. From 1823 until his death Huet served as Professeur d'iconographie des animaux, and he continued to exhibit at the Salons until 1827, showing mainly drawings and watercolours of animals. Apart from his official duties, Huet also made elaborate drawings of animals, usually on vellum, for private collectors such as King Friedrich Augustus II of Saxony, the military officer André Masséna, Prince d'Essling and Duc de Rivoli, and others.

Writing at the end of the 19th century, one art historian noted of Huet, in comparison with his older contemporary, the natural history artist Nicolas Maréchal, that 'The works on vellum by Nicolas Huet may be the finest after those of Maréchal; sometimes he even does just as well and better than him. If he did not have the anatomical accuracy of Maréchal, he had something more precious perhaps from an artistic point of view: the gift of life; his animals, his birds, always have their familiar attitude, with which they are characterized: they live.'