

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



François LEMOYNE (Paris 1688 - Paris 1737)

Study of a Female Nude, with Two Separate Studies of a Leg

Black and red chalk, with touches of white heightening, on blue paper.

Numbered No 7. at the upper right, and inscribed Lemoine twice on the old backing sheet.

391 x 231 mm. (15 3/8 x 9 1/8 in.)

A splendid example of Lemoyne's draughtsmanship, this drawing is a preparatory study for the allegorical figure of Truth in Lemoyne's large canvas of 'Time Saving Truth from Falsehood and Envy', painted at the very end of his career – between 1735 and 1737 - and today in the Wallace Collection in London. The painting was, in fact, completed the day before the artist's suicide, as noted by his biographer, the Comte de Caylus; 'The day before his death, he finished a painting begun long before which depicted Time uncovering Truth. I have never forgotten the kindness with which he showed me the picture after having added the last brushstrokes in front of me to the foreground. There is certainly no sense of his alienation of spirit in the work; it is even one of his most beautiful cabinet pictures.' The painting depicts the female figure of Truth carried by her father Time, who with his scythe repels the masked figure of Falsehood, while Envy crouches fearfully in the background.

The figure of Truth, for which this drawing is a study, is one of the artist's loveliest figures, and highlights Lemoyne's influence on the sensual nudes of his pupils Natoire and Boucher. At the same time, as Bordeaux has noted, 'The figure of Truth may stand for a restored ideal of bodily perfection and beauty which was more in line with an earlier French version of Bolognese classicism traceable from Simon Vouet to Antoine Coypel.' The painting had been commissioned (and had in fact already been paid for) by Lemoyne's chief patron, the financier François Berger. Berger claimed the picture from the artist's studio shortly after his death, and it joined other paintings by the artist in the collector's home in Paris, where one room was hung entirely with works by Lemoyne. The painting was later engraved, in reverse, by Lemoyne's onetime pupil Laurent Cars; the print shows the original dimensions of the canvas, before it was extended on all four sides later in the 18th century. The combination of red and black chalk is a technique that Lemoyne used relatively sparingly in his later career.

The present sheet may be compared to a stylistically similar study of a female nude in 'trois crayons' in the British Museum, which is a preparatory study by Lemoyne for another Berger picture, the 'Hercules and Omphale' of 1724, today in the Louvre. Only one other preparatory drawing by Lemoyne related to the Wallace Collection 'Time Saving Truth from Falsehood and Envy' may be identified. A study for the bearded head of Time, drawn in black chalk on blue paper and with a counterproof on the same sheet, is in the Louvre.

Literature:

Jean-Luc Bordeaux, François Le Moyne (1688-1737): Catalogue Raisonné. New Findings and Legacy, Cinisello Balsamo, 2024, pp.214-215, no.D227 (as location unknown).

Artist description:

A pupil of Louis Galloche, François Lemoyne (or Le Moyne) won the Prix de Rome in 1711 but was unable to make the trip to Italy due to lack of funds on the part of the Académie. Agréé at the Académie Royale in 1716 and reçu in 1718, Lemoyne met François Berger, contrôleur général of the Dauphiné and a noted connoisseur and collector, in 1721. Berger became one of Le Moyne's greatest patrons, commissioning in 1722 the Tancred and Clorinda, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Besançon, and the following year the Perseus and Andromeda today in the Wallace Collection, London. Berger also sponsored Lemoyne's long-delayed trip to Italy in 1723.

In 1725 Lemoyne shared first prize in a competition for history painting with Jean-François de Troy, and as a result won a royal commission for the decoration of the ceiling of the Salon d'Hercule at Versailles.

The great Apotheosis of Hercules, painted between 1732 and 1736 and widely praised, was the crowning achievement of Lemoyne's career, and established him as one of the most renowned history painters of the day. Appointed premier peintre du roi by Louis XV in 1736, his death by suicide a year later marked the end of a short and promising career. Among his pupils were Charles-Joseph Natoire and François Boucher; the early work of both artists reflects Lemoyne's influence.

Some two hundred drawings by François Lemoyne survive today, with about one-third of these in the collection of the Louvre. Many of his drawings can be related to extant paintings, or works known through engravings. One 18th century connoisseur compared the artist favourably with Rubens; noting that 'Le Moyne's drawing is superior to that of Rubens because the French artist always managed to keep a certain rigor and decency, while Rubens didn't.' That Lemoyne's drawings continued to be sought after by 18th and 19th century connoisseurs is seen in the fact that large numbers of drawings by the artist were in the Lempereur, Silvestre and Paignon-Dijonval collections.