

Pierre Paul PRUD'HON (Cluny 1758 - Paris 1823)

The Happy Mother (La Mère heureuse)

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, with touches of white heightening, over traces of an underdrawing in pencil.
Inscribed P. P. Prud'hon / Marie Louise / et le roi de Rome / 1812 on the backing board.
73 x 51 mm. (2 7/8 x 2 in.)

In 1803 Pierre-Paul Prud'hon accepted into his studio a young painter, Marie Françoise Constance Mayer-Lemartinière (1775-1821), who soon became his favourite pupil and, in time, his mistress and artistic collaborator. As Prud'hon remained legally married, however, he and Mayer were never able to formalize their close personal relationship. Nevertheless, the two artists lived and worked together for eighteen years, sharing adjoining studios at the Sorbonne, and Mayer took on the task of raising Prud'hon's children. In May of 1821, at the age of forty-six and in a fit of depression, Mayer was overcome with the sudden fear that Prud'hon would never be able to marry her, or even wish to do so, and so took her own life, slashing her throat with her lover's razor. Prud'hon was left distraught and never recovered from the loss, sinking into a depression. He organized a memorial exhibition of Mayer's work in 1822, but died the following year.

As an independent painter, Constance Mayer had begun exhibiting at the Salon in 1796, showing mostly portraits. After 1804 she worked closely with her lover and mentor, painting finished pictures derived from Prud'hon's drawings and sketches, often of subjects that she had suggested. These collaborative works, though designed by Prud'hon, were largely painted by Mayer and exhibited under her name alone. They included genre scenes - a field not explored by Prud'hon in his own work - as well as portraits and allegorical subjects. It has been suggested that Prud'hon, who worked slowly and completed relatively few paintings, may have preferred to work in collaboration with Mayer. In so doing, he was able to indulge in his lifelong penchant for drawing, producing detailed studies for these

collaborative paintings without the necessity and time-consuming constraint of having to put brush to canvas.

This exquisite little drawing by Prud'hon is related to a large painting by Constance Mayer entitled La Mère heureuse (The Happy Mother), today in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. The painting was exhibited at the Salons of 1810 and 1814 alongside a pendant entitled La Mère infortunée (The Unfortunate Mother), also now in the Louvre, which depicted a mother mourning at the tomb of her dead child. Both paintings were greatly admired, and were purchased by Louis XVIII for the Louvre in 1815. As Jo Hedley and Stephen Duffy have noted of the present composition, and of its pendant, 'The Happy Mother reflects the early nineteenth-century concern with motherhood, influenced by the novels of Rousseau and by the philosophy of the Enlightenment...Both paintings are set in woodland landscapes and emphasize the private nature of maternity...Maternal subjects seemed to have attracted Mayer in particular, and despite Prud'hon's preparatory work, she is generally credited with devising the theme of both pictures.'

In his 1924 catalogue raisonné of the work of Prud'hon, Jean Guiffrey lists a total of six drawings by the artist for the entire composition of Mayer's painting of The Happy Mother, as well as four studies for the head of the mother4, but the present sheet seems to have been unknown to him. Among the extant preparatory studies by Prud'hon for The Happy Mother is a small oil sketch of the composition in the Wallace Collection in London and a compositional drawing in the Louvre, as well as a study for the head of the mother in the J. Paul Getty in Los Angeles. Another compositional drawing for the picture appeared at auction in Paris in 2007.

Given its size and level of finish, the present sheet is unikely to have been a preparatory study for the Louvre painting. It may have been intended as a study for a never-executed print, or else as a small souvenir of the composition, to be sold as a finished drawing to a collector.

At the time of Prud'hon's death in February 1823, all of the drawings that remained in his studio passed into the possesion of his pupil and fellow painter Charles-Pompée Le Boulanger de Boisfremont. The present sheet does not bear Boisfremont's collector's mark, however, and must have left Prud'hon's studio before the artist's death.

Provenance:

Galerie de Bayser, Paris
Private collection, London.