Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Jean-Jacques Lagrenée (Paris 1739 - Paris 1821)

A Grouping of Trophies

Gouache, pen and black ink.
Laid down on a 19th century French mount.
168 x 365 mm. (6 5/8 x 14 3/8 in.) [sheet]
287 x 485 mm. (11 1/4 x 19 1/8 in.) [including mount]

Jean-Jacques Lagrenée frequently experimented with different techniques in his work, and as a draughtsman was fond of applying highlights in gold, often on prepared paper washed brown or a deep blue. As Victor Carlson has noted, 'One of the most delightful aspects of Lagrenée's art is his chiaroscuro drawings on blue paper, where the support is tinted with gouache or watercolour...creating a ground against which the figures are defined with black ink and white highlights. This combination of media is used to evoke a scintillating play of light over surfaces...The fact that highly finished chiaroscuro drawings...can be found throughout Europe at this time is one aspect of the growing preference for drawings as independent works of art.'

The present sheet is likely to date from Lagrenée's stay in Rome in the second half of the 1760s, when he produced a number of drawings and prints after antique reliefs, sculpture and classical vases. Marc Sandoz has suggested that these types of drawings, perhaps inspired by the prints of Giambattista Piranesi, were part of a group of frieze-like decorations of antique objects. In 1782 Lagrenée engraved a series of four prints of similar subjects as the Recueil de Compositions par Lagrenée le jeune en 1782, published two years later in 1784.

Three similar drawings of antique trophies, datable to 1765, are in the collection of the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin. While one of these is a study for one of the plates of the Recueil de Compositions, the present sheet is particularly close to the two others, which are both on blue paper and of rectangular format. Also similar in spirit is a drawing of a Decorative Frieze with Vases, Trophies, Helmets and Two Winged Victories in the Schlossmuseum in Weimar, as well as a much larger drawing of A Vestal Virgin with Antique Trophies, drawn in black ink and blue wash heightened with orange gouache, with the Galerie Coatalem in Paris.

A drawing of a military trophy in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, of vertical orientation and drawn in pen and black ink, brush and brown wash with yellow gouache, has been attributed to Jean-Jacques Lagrenée, as has a drawing of a Still Life with Antiquities in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, while a similar drawing depicting fragments of antique vases is in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen. As Benjamin Peronnet has noted of such drawings, Lagrenée 'copied antiquity or rather reinterpreted it in his own way throughout his career...Lagrenée's antiquity, like his mythological or historical scenes, is attractive and arranged in a picturesque and especially decorative way.'

Provenance:

Private collection, New York.

Artist description:

A pupil of his elder brother, Louis-Jean-François Lagrenée, called Lagrenée l'aîné (who was sixteen years older), Jean-Jacques Lagrenée (also known as 'Lagrenée the Younger') studied at the Ecole des Elèves Protégés and earned a second-place prize in the Prix de Rome competition of 1760. The same year he accompanied his brother to Saint Petersburg, where Louis had been appointed painter to the Empress Catherine the Great. The two brothers remained in Russia until 1762, when they returned to Paris. In 1765 Jean-Jacques left for Rome, where he was able to study at the Académie de France, although not officially as a pensionnaire. It was in Rome, where he lived until 1769, that the young Lagrenée developed a particular love of classical art, and made an intensive study of ancient Roman wall paintings and decorations. He also established a reputation as a painter of decorative ceiling paintings, winning a commission from the Roman senator Abbondio Rezzonico in 1768 to decorate his Roman residence, the Palazzo Senatorio, with ceiling paintings that were much admired.

Soon after his return to Paris in 1769, Lagrenée was tasked with a cycle of paintings for the abbey of Montmartre, a commission he shared with the painters Charles de La Traverse and Michel Honoré Bounieu. He also painted history subjects and ceiling paintings for the Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre and at the Petit Trianon at Versailles. Admitted into the Académie Royale in 1775, Lagrenée received commissions from such important patrons as the Comte d'Angiviller, and exhibited paintings and drawings of historical and Biblical subjects at the Salons between 1771 and 1804. His skill as a decorator was also readily evident in his activity as the artistic director of the Sèvres porcelain factory between 1785 and 1800, for whom he created numerous designs, notably the Etruscan service for Marie-Antoinette's dairy at Rambouillet. He also produced a large number of etchings, both original designs and reproductive works after other artists.

After 1805 Lagrenée seems to have stopped exhibiting, and he ended his career in relative obscurity. Comparatively few paintings by the artist are known today, while drawings by Lagrenée are in the collections of the Louvre, the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, MA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, and elsewhere.