

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



JACQUES FÉLIX DUBAN

Section of One of the Championnet Houses at Pompeii

Watercolour and pencil.

Inscribed A. and POMPEIA at the top of the sheet and Coupe d'une des maisons Championnet dans son état actuel. / Sur une échelle de 0,010 p.m. at the bottom of the sheet.

Further inscribed citerne(?) and perle(?) douce.

255 x 411 mm. (10 x 16 1/8 in.)

This watercolour may be dated to Félix Duban's time in Italy, when he made numerous studies of the interiors and exteriors of the newly excavated buildings and houses of Pompeii. As the contemporary critic Charles Blanc noted at the time of the 1872 exhibition, 'L'impression qui firent sur Duban ses études à Pompeii fut vive et profonde; elle ne s'effaça plus.' Three albums of architectural drawings by Duban from this period, entitled *Italie, Rome and Pompeii*, are today in the library of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

The so-called Championnet houses at Pompeii were excavated in 1799, during the Napoleonic period, and are particularly notable for the marble paving, known as *opus scutulatum*, of the atrium, as well as the painted wall decorations of the interiors. The excavation of the two houses, located side by side in the southern quarter of Pompeii, was initiated under the supervision of General Jean Etienne Vachier, called Championnet, the commander of the French army in Naples, for whom the houses were named. Duban made a number of drawings of the Championnet houses at Pompeii, all of which are to be found in an album in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. These include a closely related watercolour of a longitudinal section of the same house, together with details of the paving of the atrium and the decoration in other parts of the interior. Other drawings of the Championnet houses in Duban's Pompeii album at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts include a study of the ground plan of the two houses, a detail of the mosaic pavement of the peristyle of one of them, and two drawings of the polychrome mural decorations for which the Championnet houses were particularly renowned. All of these drawings, like the present sheet, may be dated to between 1824 and 1825, not long after Duban's arrival in Italy.

The present sheet was in the collection of the French architectural historian Roger Rodière (1870-1944). Rodière owned at least one other drawing by Duban of the same period; a study of a section and floor plan of the House of Diomedes at Pompeii.

Provenance:

Roger Rodière, Montreuil (his collector's mark, not in Lugt, stamped in black ink on the verso)
The Artis Group, New York, in 1985.

Literature:

New York, The Art Institute of Chicago, Architectural Drawings 1700-1930, 1985, unpaginated, no.33, illustrated.

Artist description:

Félix Duban entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1814, and in 1823 won the Grand Prix de Rome in the category of architecture. He spent the next five years as a pensionnaire at the Académie de France at the Villa Medici in Rome. Soon after his arrival in Rome he visited Pompeii with his friend, the architect Henri Labrouste, and there seems to have been particularly interested in the houses which had been discovered at the beginning of the 19th century. He produced plans and drawings of several of these, as well as of temples, theatres and baths. Duban was also particularly influenced by the polychrome wall paintings of Pompeii, as can be seen in his approach towards interior decoration in his later career.

On his return to Paris, he exhibited elaborate architectural drawings at the Salons of 1830, 1831 and 1833, although he does not seem to have exhibited there in later years. Nevertheless, he enjoyed a successful career as an architect, with perhaps his best known work the main buildings and courtyard of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, begun in 1830 but not completed until some thirty years later. Duban also worked on the restoration of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris between 1839 and 1849 and the Galerie d'Apollon at the Louvre, begun in 1848, as well as the chateaux of Dampierre, Gaillon and Blois. In 1854 he was elected to the Institut and appointed inspector-general of public works.

Duban was a gifted draughtsman, and produced a large body of drawings and watercolours of superb quality. These included not only studies of ancient, medieval and Renaissance buildings in Italy and France, but also imaginative reconstructions of how these buildings once looked, with subjects such as A Room in a Classical Villa, The Cella of the Parthenon with the Statue of Phidias and A Street in Pompeii. He also received private commissions for his drawings, such as a portfolio of Views of Several Paris Monuments Completed During the Reign of Louis-Phillippe, executed in 1837 for the Duc d'Orléans. As has been noted, 'His draughtsmanship is of exemplary quality and goes far beyond the realm of simple architectural drawing... The vacuum left by Duban in terms of theoretical writing seems largely filled by his body of drawings. He was, in every sense, a complete artist - an embodiment of his own ideal as reflected in his achievements at the Beaux-Arts and the Chateau de Blois.' In 1872, two years after Duban's death, a retrospective exhibition of his architectural drawings and watercolours was held at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, to considerable critical acclaim.