Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Narcisse Virgilio DIAZ DE LA PENA (Bordeaux 1807 - Menton 1876)

The Interior of the Forest of Fontainebleau

Pen and brown ink and watercolour. Laid down.
Signed N. Diaz at the lower right.
Stamped with a Knoedler inventory mark and number on the verso.
Inscribed Fontainebleau on the old backing board.
138 x 216 mm. (5 3/8 x 8 1/2 in.)

Woodland and forest scenes abound in Diaz's oeuvre, and account for some of his finest, and most admired, works. Perhaps his greatest champion was the critic Théophile Thoré, who, in a review of the Salon of 1846, noted of the artist that he 'shows us not a tree or a figure, but the effect of sunlight on this figure or on that tree.' Two years earlier, Thoré had written that, 'Monsieur Diaz has studied much in the most virginal corners of the Forest of Fontainebleau...The trees, the terrain, the shadows in his landscapes have an appearance that is strange and very poetic.'

Similarly, a later 19th century writer noted of Diaz, 'there can be little doubt that it is chiefly as a painter of the forest that he will live in the future. There are still those who collect his glowing Eastern figures, and his flower pieces are equally strong, but in his forest scenes alone does he reach the level of a great master.' Diaz was particularly known for 'sous-bois' depictions of the undergrowth beneath the forest canopy. The subject of the present sheet, a small pond in the middle of a forest clearing, was another favourite motif of the artist's, and occurs frequently in his paintings.

As a highly finished, signed landscape watercolour, the present sheet was probably intended as an autonomous work of art. Watercolours are, however, quite rare in Diaz's oeuvre. Indeed, only fifteen small landscape watercolours were included in the estate sale of the contents of Diaz's studio, held in Paris in January 1877, a few months after his death.

Among comparable watercolours by Diaz, also on a small scale, is a landscape with trees is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art and The Edge of the Forest in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. Other watercolour landscapes by the artist are in the Louvre and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans, as well as in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and in the collection of Karen Cohen in New York.

Provenance:

M. Knoedler & Co., New York
Possibly anonymous sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot [Piasa], 12 December 1996, lot 64 ('Sous-bois. Encre de Chine rehaussée d'aquarelle, vernisée, sur carton marouflée sur panneau, signée en bas à droite. 14 x 23 cm.')

Private collection, London.

Artist description:

The son of Spanish émigrés, Narcisse Diaz began his career as a painter of porcelain decoration, and received little fomal artistic training. He first exhibited a painting at the Salon of 1833, at the age of twenty-three, and his earliest works were of nymphs and bathers, as well as of exotic Orientalist subjects. It is as a landscape painter, however, that he was to become best known. In the 1830s, he joined a group of artists who met at the village of Barbizon in the forest of Fontainebleau to paint closely from nature. One of these, Théodore Rousseau, although five years younger than Diaz, was to become his mentor, and one of his closest friends. Recognized as a brilliant colourist, Diaz enjoyed a reasonably successful career. He drew somewhat less than most of his fellow Barbizon artists, however, and seems to have only seldom made drawings en plein-air. After 1859, the year of his last submission to the Salon, Diaz retired to Fontainebleau, although he continued to hold regular auctions of his work; a novel practice of marketing his work that he had begun in 1849.