

Eugène GRASSET (Lausanne 1845 - Paris 1917)

The Capture of Joan of Arc at Compiègne: Design for a Stained Glass Window

Watercolour, pen and black ink and black wash.
Signed EGrasset at the lower right.
Inscribed GAUDIN peintre verrier – PARIS on a label pasted onto the lower left margin.
866 x 445 mm. (34 1/8 x 17 1/2 in.) [image]
970 x 575 mm. (38 1/8 x 22 5/8 in.) [sheet]

ACQUIRED BY THE MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS.

Eugène Grasset produced some of his finest and most attractive drawings as a designer of stained glass windows. As his pupil, the Art Nouveau artist and decorator Maurice Pillard Verneuil, wrote, 'Without a doubt, artists other than Grasset have composed cartoons for [stained glass] windows, and some of these are admirable. But none of these artists are glassmakers in their soul, and do not see or translate their thoughts as would a true glassmaker. Their compositions, deeply erudite and beautiful, could as well have been cartoons for tapestry or decorative paintings. But Grasset's cartoons for stained glass can only be stained glass and nothing else. They have been conceived as such, understood in this particular medium, and nothing need be changed for their final realization.' Grasset produced his first known cartoon for a stained glass decoration in 1880, and continued to produce designs – both of sacred subjects intended for churches and secular themes for domestic interiors -

until the end of his life. From 1886 onwards he worked almost exclusively with the glass painter and mosaicist Félix Gaudin (1851-1930), who produced some of his finest work in collaboration with him.

Writing in The Studio in 1894, Octave Uzanne opined of Grasset that, 'Among his principal achievements, his glass ware and stained windows do him the greatest credit, and those aërial transparent paintings will secure for his name the most lasting reputation. He has at his command a fund of resource, not merely due to the religious spirit pervading his compositions, but to his care in selecting beautiful iridescent glass, shimmering, striated and rich in tone, all of which he knows how to arrange in concert with M. Gaudin, the clever executant he has selected to produce them. The cartoons and small models which he has exhibited at the Joan of Arc window competition for the Cathedral at Orleans, made an enormous impression on the artistic public who visited them last year at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. This portion of his work is assuredly the most beautiful and elevated.'

Drawn in 1893, this very large watercolour was one of ten designs by Grasset, all depicting scenes from the life of Joan of Arc, intended for the stained glass windows of the cathedral of Sainte-Croix in Orléans, but never executed. Instigated by the Bishop of Orléans, Pierre Coullié, the competition to design the windows for the nave of the cathedral was one of the most significant ecclesiastical commissions for stained glass of the late 19th century. As M. P. Verneuil, writing a few years later, recalled of the competition: 'Twelve large windows to furnish, retracing the whole life of Joan of Arc! What a unique opportunity for a glassmaker to create an immense work, a masterpiece! Grasset set to work with enthusiasm. And the expected masterpiece was soon born from his hands. Conceived in the style of the 15th century, his designs follow the life of the heroine, with a beauty, a style, a character that one could never admire enough…In truth, we do not know what should be placed first: the erudition, the science of composition, the ingenuity of the artist, [or] the pure and noble beauty of the draughtsmanship.'

The concours for the Orléans windows was announced in December 1892, and in October of the following year the various preparatory studies and cartoons submitted for the competition were exhibited at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and in Orléans. It was generally agreed by critics that Grasset's designs, to be executed in collaboration with Gaudin, were by far the finest of the entries.

However, and to the surprise and disappointment of many critics and observers, Grasset and Gaudin's designs for the Orléans windows were rejected by the jury of the competition. The commission was instead given to the painter Jacques Galland and the master glass-painter Esprit Gibelin4. The decision caused a scandal. As the critic Arsène Alexandre noted at the time, 'Those people who have not been touched by the aesthetic and technical beauty of [Grasset's] cartoons and maquettes for the Joan of Arc competition, or who, being aware of this beauty, have moved on elsewhere, are guilty of one of the most striking denials of justice ever seen in the artistic history of our time, and shall assume a grave responsibility to our descendants.'

Grasset's designs for the Joan of Arc windows for the cathedral of Orléans were widely praised for their intrinsic beauty, the animation and unity of the compositions, and the exquisite interplay of light and colour. The Belgian writer and critic Camille Lemonnier described the large drawings as 'a pure jewel, one of the highest expressions of the art of our time...The exquisite polychromy evokes the flowery and heavenly tones, the airs of grave faces, the noble and simple attitudes of the most beautiful missals. Each window frames one of the heroine's episodes, and these borders symbolise the virtues, the perils, the treacheries, the dominations, as a commentary on this miraculous life', while another critic, writing in 1900, observed that '[Grasset's] cartoons for the cathedral at Orléans seem to be the enlarged drawings of fine and precious miniatures.'

Only one of Grasset's designs for Orléans cathedral was ever produced as a stained glass window. His drawing for the scene of The Coronation of Charles VII at Reims was later repurposed by Félix Gaudin, with some minor alterations, for a window in the church of Saint-Germain in the town of La Châtre, executed between 1903 and 1905.

Six of Grasset's large drawn cartoons for the Orléans cathedral windows, of similar scale to the present sheet and sharing the same provenance, are today in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. As the art historian and influential art critic Gabriel Mourey noted of these drawings, 'The art of stained

glass, after four hundred years of sleep, had just awakened, and no influence could have been more fertile than that of this work, if it had been realized…One must imagine [these designs] if they had been executed, materialized in the splendour of glass illuminated by light, these lively paintings of The Departure from Vaucouleurs, of Joan of Arc at the Assault of the Fort of Les Tourelles, of the Coronation [of Charles VII], of The Entry into Orléans. Grasset had never gone so far in the employment of his talents: what abundance of precise and expressive gestures, what richness in these costumes, in these architectures, and what science of composition, of grouping!'

Provenance:

Félix Gaudin, Paris
By descent to Sylvie Gaudin Blanc-Garin
Yves Plantin and Françoise Blondel, Paris, in 1980
Galerie du Luxembourg, Paris.

Exhibitions

Paris, Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Jeanne d'Arc. Exposition de projets de verrières pour la cathédrale d'Orléans, October 1893; Orléans, Salle des Fêtes, Concours pour l'exécution de verrières relatives à Jeanne d'Arc destinées à la cathédrale d'Orléans. Exposition des projets, October – November 1893; Paris, La Plume, Salon des Cent, Oeuvres d'Eugène Grasset, part of nos. 270-279 ('Les Verrières de Jeanne d'Arc pour la Cathèdrale d'Orléans, aquarelles au 10e d'exécution.', lent by Félix Gaudin); Paris, Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, 1896, part of no.448.

Literature:

Ed. Didron, 'Le concours de vitraux de Jeanne d'Arc pour la cathédrale d'Orléans', Revue des Arts Décoratifs, 1893-1894, p.202; Yves Plantin and Françoise Blondel, Eugene Grasset, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 1980, p.45, no.33.

Artist description:

One of the precursors of the Art Nouveau style, Eugène Samuel Grasset was trained as an architect in his native Switzerland and travelled to Egypt before eventually settling in Paris in 1871. He was mainly active as a specialist designer in the applied and decorative arts, in particular producing designs for jewellery, furniture and stained glass. He made a close study of Gothic architecture and stained glass windows, and became friendly with Eugène Viollet-le Duc, the architect responsible for the restoration of Notre-Dame. These archeological studies allowed him to create accurate depictions of medieval towns, castles, weapons and objects for the elaborate and beautiful illustrations that he produced between 1881 and 1883 for a lavish edition of the Carolingian epic Histoire des Quatre Fils Aymon. Published in 1883, the book is today recognized as an important forerunner of Art Nouveau book design in France. Grasset exhibited watercolours at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and also showed a painting at the inaugural Salon de la Rose + Croix in 1892, a year after he took French nationality. He also exhibited at Le Libre Esthétique in Brussels and with the Vienna Secession.

It was not until 1894, when he was already in his early fifties, that Grasset had his first and only one-man exhibition in his lifetime; a large retrospective of his work at the Salon des Cent, a new gallery on the premises of the magazine La Plume. The exhibition included drawings and watercolours, numerous designs for furniture, stained glass, metalwork, fabric and jewellery, as well as theatrical and advertising posters, book and magazine covers, illustrations and other work as a graphic designer. Inspired by Japanese art (which he had noted at the Exposition Universelle of 1878) as well as medieval art, Grasset published two important books on ornamental design; La plante et ses applications ornamentales, which appeared in 1898-1899, and Méthode de composition ornamental, published in

1905. He also contributed articles and reviews to the journals Revue des Arts Décoratifs and Art et Décoration, and between 1881 and his death in 1917 served as the highly influential Professor of Decorative Arts at the Ecole Normale d'Enseignement du Dessin. Large groups of drawings, designs, studies and sketches by Grasset are today in the collections of the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.