

Giovanni BOLDINI (Ferrara 1842 - Paris 1931)

A Path Through Trees in the Bois de Boulogne

Watercolour, with some traces of an underdrawing in pencil. Laid down.
Signed or inscribed Boldini at the lower right.
538 x 367 mm. (21 1/8 x 14 1/2 in.)

Large-scale landscape watercolours such as the present sheet are a relatively small but choice feature of Boldini's oeuvre as a draughtsman. This impressive sheet, which can be dated to the early years of the 20th century, may be compared with a number of other large watercolour landscapes by the artist of the same period. These include a study of the Bois de Boulogne in a private collection in Bologna, as well as a study of poplars along a riverbank, signed and dated 1905, in a private collection and a large watercolour known as After the Storm, today in the Museo Boldini in Ferrara. Writing of another, stylistically comparable landscape in watercolour by Boldini, one recent scholar noted that 'its thin washes and delicate touches of opaque paint record the scene with a great economy of means. The direct, spontaneous quality of this work, almost certainly painted outdoors on the site, suggests that the artist had fully absorbed the principles of plein-air painting, though…he seems to have considered it most often in its traditional role as preparatory work, rather than as complete in its own right. This further differentiates him from his Impressionist colleagues.'

The present watercolour probably depicts trees in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, which the artist used as the setting for one of his finest paintings, a full-length double portrait of Captain and Mrs. Phillip Lydig Walking in the Bois de Boulogne of 1909, now in the collection of the Museo Boldini in Ferrara. A possibly related compositional sketch in pencil is in a Milanese private collection.

Artist description:

The son of a minor painter and restorer in Ferrara, Giovanni Boldini arrived in 1864 in Florence, where he enrolled in the Accademia di Belle Arti. He first exhibited his work in Florence in 1867, and in the same year visited the Exposition Universelle in Paris. From the earliest years of his career he displayed a remarkable talent as a portrait painter. During a trip to London in 1870 he obtained several portrait commissions, and by October 1871 he had settled in Paris, taking a studio on the Place Pigalle, and making his public debut at the Salon de Mars in 1874. Boldini's bold, fluid style of painting was to prove immensely popular in Paris.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s he produced genre paintings of elegantly dressed women portrayed in lavish interiors - subjects made popular by Alfred Stevens and James Tissot - and these works found a ready market in England and America through the efforts of the Parisian art dealer Adolphe Goupil. By the time he moved to a new studio in 1885, however, he had begun to paint society portraits, and soon developed a formidable reputation for his dazzling, elegant depictions of the fashionable women of Paris, painted with a virtuoso technique of bold, fluid brushstrokes. Within a few years Boldini had risen to a position of prominence in Parisian art circles. He befriended other society portrait painters such as Paul-César Helleu, John Singer Sargent and James A. McNeill Whistler, and became a close friend of Edgar Degas, who is said to have once told the artist, "Vous êtes un monstre de talent!".

By the turn of the century Boldini had become the most sought-after portrait painter in Paris, achieving such success that his reputation rivalled that of his friend Sargent in London. His fame reached as far as America, from where he received several portrait commissions, stimulated by an exhibition of his work held at Boussod, Valadon and Co. in New York in 1897.

Boldini was a gifted and somewhat compulsive draughtsman, and filled many sketchbooks with drawings. (He would also use whatever paper came to hand, and there are examples of quick sketches drawn on menu covers, receipts, ledger paper, postcards, hotel stationery, pages torn from auction catalogues, and so forth.) His drawings, characterized by a restless energy and a spirited technique wholly in keeping with the bravura brushwork of his oil paintings, range from quick sketches of figures, landscapes, buildings and objects to more elaborate studies of these same motifs. As Richard Kendall has recently written, 'Evident in almost all of [Boldini's drawings] is a vivid engagement with the pleasures of looking and with the nervous exuberance of the drawing process, irrespective of the chosen subject…Some of these drawings would have taken only minutes or even seconds to complete, while others are the work of hours of concentrated labor…This engagement was vividly physical and sensuous, as his hand erupted in wild flourishes of pencil, pen and ink, crayon, and charcoal, or opted for extreme delicacy as the situation demanded.' The largest surviving group of drawings by Boldini, bequeathed by the artist's widow, is today in the collection of the Museo Boldini in Ferrara.