

Jean-Baptiste OUDRY (Paris 1686 - Beauvais 1755)

The Annunciation

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, extensively heightened with white and yellow gouache, on buff paper.

Framing lines in brown ink.

Numbered and inscribed 2810 / 313. / Oudrÿ on the verso.

208 x 160 mm. (8 1/8 x 6 1/4 in.)

An early drawing by the artist, the present sheet is very likely to have come from Oudry's so-called 'livre de raison'; two albums of wash drawings, begun by the artist in June 1713, which recorded the compositions of all of his finished paintings, as well as many ideas for unexecuted works, over the next five or six years, until around 1718 or 1719. An indispensable record of Oudry's activity during his earliest years as an independent artist, before his admittance into the Académie, the 'livre de raison' as it survives today is, unfortunately, largely incomplete. More than half of the contents of the two albums, including the present sheet, were removed and sold by the printmaker and publisher Gabriel Huquier, who owned the 'livre de raison' albums after Oudry's death, long before the remainder were eventually acquired by the Louvre in 1957. The wash drawings of the 'livre de raison' are characterized by a free and colouristic draughtsmanship, with a wide ink border and an extensive inscription by the artist in the lower margin identifying the subject or sitter, date and size of the related painting. (Many of the loose drawings thought to have come from the two albums, however, have had their inscriptions and borders trimmed away.) Oudry is known to have painted only a handful of paintings of religious subjects, all in the earliest years of his career, and almost none of these survives. The present sheet may therefore record a lost, or perhaps never-executed, painting.

Two stylistically comparable early drawings of religious subjects by Oudry, both also from the 'livre de raison', are an Adoration of the Magi in the Courtauld Gallery in London, which is a study for an altarpiece of c.1717 in the church of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, near Paris, and a drawing of The Judgement of Solomon in the Louvre, for which no related painting is known. The Courtauld and Louvre drawings, as well as the present sheet, were among just seven drawings of religious subjects, out of a total of some eighty sheets, that were removed by Huquier from Oudry's 'livre de raison' albums within a few years of the artist's death and sold at auction in 1761.

The eminent 18th century French printmaker, publisher, art dealer and collector Gabriel Huquier (1695-1772) assembled one of the largest collections of Oudry's drawings and published several series of prints after them.

Exhibitions

London, Yvonne Tan Bunzl, Old Master Drawings, 1984, no.42; London, Yvonne Tan Bunzl, Master Drawings, 1994, no.33; Stanford University, Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Classic Taste: Drawings and Decorative Arts from the Collection of Horace Brock, March-May, 2000.

Literature:

Hal N. Opperman, Jean-Baptiste Oudry, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Chicago, 1972; published New York and London, 1977, Vol.I, p.32, note 1, p.243; Vol.II, p.662, no.D166 (as present whereabouts unknown); Hal Opperman, J.-B. Oudry 1686-1755, exhibition catalogue, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, 1983, p.95, under no.4; Louis-Antoine Prat, Le dessin français au XVIIIesiècle, Paris, 2017, p.357.

Artist description:

'Jean-Baptiste Oudry is one of the most prolific artists – and without question the most versatile – of the French eighteenth century. Once established he was also one of the most successful of his time.' Such is the Oudry scholar Hal Opperman's succinct description of the artist, who enjoyed a successful career of more than forty years. A pupil of Michel Serre and Nicolas de Largillière, Oudry took classes in drawing at both the Académie Royale and at the Académie de Saint-Luc of the Parisian painter's guild, where he also later taught. The early part of his career found the artist painting mainly still life subjects and portraits. Admitted into the Académie Royale in 1719, by the following decade Oudry had come close to supplanting Alexandre-François Desportes as the leading painter of animals and hunting scenes. He began receiving significant royal commissions for paintings of hunts, and in 1725 was granted lodgings in the Tuileries palace. (The following year, at the request of Louis XV, he exhibited twenty-six of his paintings - the entire contents of his studio – in the Grands Appartements at Versailles.) It was also in 1726 that Oudry was engaged as a designer at the Royal tapestry works at Beauvais, where his masterpiece was the series of huge painted cartoons for the Chasses royales de Louis XV tapestries, eventually woven at the Gobelins, for which he was paid some 52,000 livres over a twelve-year period. In 1734 he was named director of the Beauvais factory, where he in turn soon employed the young François Boucher as a designer. The last fifteen years of his career saw Oudry paint numerous easel pictures of hunting scenes, dogs, game pieces and still life subjects, many of which were shown at the Salons. In 1743 he was appointed a professor at the Académie, where he had taught since 1739, although he does not seem to have been an inspirational teacher, and his only real pupil of any note was his son, Jacques-Charles Oudry. Apart from the King, Oudry counted among his most significant patrons the Swedish ambassador, Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, and the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin.

Oudry was a prodigious draughtsman, and drawings were an integral part of his artistic practice. Although the 18th century art historian Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville wrote of him that 'His finished drawings are all in black chalk, highlighted with white using the brush [and] his studies are also in black chalk, highlighted with white chalk', and while it is certainly true that black and white chalks were his favoured medium as a draughtsman, Oudry worked also in pastel, red chalk, brown ink and sepia wash. While the Oudry scholar Hal Opperman catalogued around a thousand drawings by the artist, many of these were only known through descriptions in old auction catalogues. While Oudry parted with some drawings in his lifetime, the vast majority of his output as a draughtsman – mainly studies of animals and birds, highly finished landscapes and book illustrations, carefully organized into albums - remained in his studio until his death.