Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Jean Honoré FRAGONARD (Grasse 1732 - Paris 1806)

A Statue in a Garden

Pen, brush and brown ink and brown and grey wash, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, with framing lines in brown ink.

Inscribed frago at the lower left.

173 x 233 mm. (6 3/4 x 9 1/4 in.)

In the summer of 1760, the painter, engraver and amateur Jean-Claude Richard, Abbé de Saint-Non, invited the young Fragonard, then a student at the French Academy in Rome, to join him for several weeks in July and August at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli. There Fragonard was inspired to make a number of superb red chalk drawings of the extensive gardens of the Villa, as well as views of the town of Tivoli and its famous waterfalls. Natoire, writing from Rome to the Marquis de Marigny, director of theBâtiments du Roi, at the end of August 1760, noted that 'M. l'abbé de St Nom [sic] has been at Tivoli with the painter Pensioner Flagonard [sic] for a month and a half. This amateur is keeping himself greatly amused and much occupied. Our young artist is making some very fine studies that will serve him well and do him much honour. He has a very lively taste for this kind of Landscape in which he introduces rustic subjects with great success.'

Drawn with incredible freedom in brush and wash, this atmospheric landscape drawing is likely to have been made during or shortly after Fragonard's summer at Tivoli in 1760. As one scholar has described the drawing, 'The shadowy, diffuse figures in the foreground seem to be worshipping, or at least contemplating, the statue of a female figure set on a pedestal in a niche or grotto. The latter is placed at the end of a vaguely defined structure, natural or man-made, which compounds the enigmatic quality of the scene.'

The present sheet may be included among a handful of small-scale, early landscape drawings in pen and wash by the artist, all datable to around 1760, which 'represent some of Fragonard's earliest independent experiments with wash techniques, in which he is a draftsman still devoted to line, but at the same time he is discovering a natural and instinctive expression through atmosphere and color.' Executed during the first of Fragonard's two stays in Rome, these drawings share a similar use of ink and wash over a black chalk underdrawing.

Other stylistically comparable small landscape drawings by Fragonard of c.1760 include A Temple in a Garden in the collection of the Peabody Institute, on loan to the Baltimore Museum of Art, a Scene in a Park in the Cleveland Museum of Art and a Garden in an Italian Villa in the collection of Jean Bonna in Geneva. Two further drawings from this group are A Wooded Landscape with Figures on a Bluff, formerly in the collection of Dr. and Mrs. Francis Springell and sold at auction in 1986, and A Couple in a Park, at one time in the collections of Camille Groult and Jacques Bacri and recently sold at auction in Paris. A somewhat more sketchy Italianate landscape drawing in pen and wash of the same period was on the French art market in 1986.

As Eunice Williams has written of the Baltimore and Cleveland drawings noted above, in terms that apply equally to the present sheet and others from of this same group of small pen and wash landscapes, 'The scale and decorative concept [of these drawings] may seem far removed from Fragonard's great sanguine landscapes made in 1760 during his stay at the Villa d'Este; but these works, regardless of size, share related ideas of compositional structure. The unifying principles are surprisingly classical in their emphasis on formal balance and deliberate contrasts and on clearly defined space. Depth is usually limited or blocked, and lateral space is contained by framing devices such as trees or architectural features. Staffage provides a sense of scale and animation. The sanguine series made at the Villa d'Este records identifiable sites, while the group of small, early wash drawings…may depend more on the artist's invention. It is significant that they both reflect traditional principles of composition which Fragonard had learned in his academic training from Vanloo and Natoire, and from his own study of artists of the past.'

Exhibitions

Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Three Masters of Landscape: Fragonard, Robert, and Boucher, 1981, no.10; Paris, Galerie Cailleux, Rome 1760-1770: Fragonard, Hubert Robert et leurs Amis, 1983, no.22; Paris, Galerie Cailleux, Aspects de Fragonard: Peintures – Dessins – Estampes, 1987, no.44; Paris, Galerie Éric Coatalem, Fragonard: Collections privées, 2022, no.39.

Literature:

Pinkney L. Near, Three Masters of Landscape: Fragonard, Robert, and Boucher, exhibition catalogue, Richmond, 1981, p.23, no.10; Jean Cailleux and Marianne Roland Michel, Rome 1760-1770: Fragonard, Hubert Robert et leurs Amis, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 1983, unpaginated, no.22; Marianne Roland Michel, Aspects de Fragonard: Peintures – Dessins – Estampes, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 1987, unpaginated, no.44; New York, Pandora Old Masters, Recent Acquisitions, 2004, pp.24-25, unnumbered; Emmanuelle Brugerolles, ed., Suite française: Dessins de la collection Jean Bonna, exhibition catalogue, Paris and Geneva, 2006-2007, p.203, under no.47 (entry by Diederik Bakhuÿs); Sarah Catala, Fragonard: Collections privées, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2022, p.96, no.39.

Artist description:

Jean-Honoré Fragonard was a pupil of Jean-Baptiste Chardin and François Boucher, whose studio he entered around 1749. Although he only remained in Boucher's studio for about a year, he continued to assist the elder artist on large-scale works for some time thereafter. After winning the Prix de Rome in 1752, Fragonard studied under Carle Vanloo at the Ecole Royale des Elèves Protégés before arriving in Rome in 1756. While a pensionnaire at the French Academy in Rome, Fragonard made numerous drawings after ancient sculpture and paintings by Italian artists, as well as a series of superb landscape drawings, in which he was encouraged by Charles-Joseph Natoire, the director of the French Academy.

On his return to France in 1761, Fragonard was agrée at the Académie Royale with a large history painting of Coresus and Callirhoe, but he was never appointed a full Academician. Rejecting the practice of history painting, he turned his attention instead to genre and landscape painting, choosing not to exhibit at the official Salons. Among his finest works were a series of large mural paintings of The Progress of Love, painted between 1770 and 1773 for Madame du Barry at Louveciennes and today in the Frick Collection in New York. Following the completion of the series, Fragonard made a second trip to Italy, in the company of the financier Pierre-Jacques Bergeret de Grancourt. In the late 1770s, to compensate for a lack of painting commissions brought about by a change in taste in favour of Neoclassicism, Fragonard began to turn his considerable talents towards book illustration. From the 1790s onwards, he painted very little, although he continued to draw. His only pupils were his son, Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard, and his sister-in-law, Marguerite Gerard.

Fragonard was among the most gifted draughtsmen of the 18th century in France. He drew in a variety of media, using pen and ink, red or black chalk or brush and wash with equal freedom and complete assurance. It is often difficult to securely date his drawings, as few are dated and only rarely can they be specifically connected with his paintings.