

Claude-Louis DESRAIS (Paris 1746 - Paris 1816)

Study for a Frontispiece or Monument, with Allegorical Figures Surrounding an Oval Portrait of a Young Woman

Pen and black ink, over an underdrawing in black chalk, with framing lines in black ink. Laid down.

Signed with the artist's monogram LDR and dated 1767 at the lower centre, on the pedestal.

200 x 130 mm. (7 7/8 x 5 1/8 in.)

The present sheet would appear to be a design for a monument in honour of a young woman, whose portrait is shown in an oval frame set on a pedestal, surmounted by angels and putti and flanked by, on the left, a male figure of Death and, at the right, an allegorical female figure with attributes that are, unfortunately, difficult to decipher. What appears to be the fragmentary ancient Greek marble statue known as the Belvedere torso appears at the lower right.

Drawings which bear a monogram of the three interlaced letters L, D and R have been traditionally thought to be by either the sculptor and engraver Louis-Félix de La Rue (1730-1777) or his elder brother, the painter Philibert-Benoît de La Rue (1718-1780), to whom the present sheet was formerly attributed. A pupil of Charles Parrocel, Philibert-Benoît de La Rue exhibited battle scenes, genre subjects, landscape and portraits at the Salons, and was agrée at the Académie Royale in 1754. Although the drawings of the two brothers have often been confused, an attribution of the present sheet

to either Philibert-Benoît or Louis-Félix de La Rue is untenable when compared to autograph works by them. This drawing displays a freedom of line that differs from the more restrained linearity of studies by the De La Rue brothers.

The present sheet may instead be more plausibly attributed to another artist of the period, Claude-Louis Desrais, who employed a similar LDR monogram. In an article published in 1984, Anne Leclair convincingly attributed nine drawings – each signed with a similar monogram LDR and variously dated between 1767 and 1769 – to Desrais, based on a stylistic comparison with a signed drawing of 1769. One of these drawings, an Allegory in Honour of King Stanislas Leczynski in the Art Institute of Chicago, is particularly comparable to the present sheet in subject, style and execution. Both this drawing and that in Chicago may therefore be placed within an early and still relatively obscure period in the career of Claude-Louis Desrais.

Artist description:

A student at the Académie Royale from 1764, Claude-Louis Desrais seems to have been active almost exclusively as a draughtsman. He received most of his artistic training in the studio of the battle painter Francesco Casanova, and between 1768 and 1772 exhibited his drawings at four of the annual Expositions de la Jeunesse, eliciting a measure of critical appreciation. After spending much of his early career working in a neoclassical style, he eventually abandoned this manner to become, as one scholar has noted, ‘one of the most sought-after illustrators of the last third of the eighteenth century, specializing, even under the Empire, in fashion plates, portraits of famous men and military and historical scenes.’