

Antoine-Jean GROS (Paris 1771 - Meudon 1835)

Sheet of Studies of Horses and Mounted Soldiers, the Head of a Helmeted Warrior and other Figures

Pen and brown ink and red chalk.

Made up at the top right corner and along much of the right edge.

186 x 189 mm. (7 3/8 x 7 1/2 in.)

Of Baron Gros as a draughtsman, it has been noted that 'When the sketches, drawings as well as studies in oil, are considered there is never any question of Gros' role as a romantic, all possessing a vigorous spirit, beauty of line and continued freshness and originality in…pencil drawings of simple figures, as well as widely active groups of men and horses, fighting, charging, or in mortal combat.' The nervous, vibrant penwork of the present sheet is wholly characteristic of the artist's mature drawings, which were much admired by the succeeding generation of Romantic painters. As Arlette Sérullaz has noted of Gros, 'his pen drawings retain a violence which was no longer indebted to classicism: as soon as the artist became the eulogist of the Napoleonic epic, his stroke became swifter, more spirited, his ardent sensibility was expressed in broken, zigzag, spasmodic lines…gifted with an impulsive temperament, Gros showed the way to the fiery, ardent drawing of Delacroix.'

The present sheet of studies remains unconnected with any surviving work by Baron Gros, and as such is difficult to date with any accuracy. It may conceivably be an early work by the artist, at a time when he was one of the leading members of David's studio, and perhaps before his trip to Italy. To judge from the antique armour worn by many of the figures in this drawing, the artist was here working out ideas for a classical composition of the type made famous by his master, yet the vigorousness of the pen technique, and in particular the attitudes of the horses, are far removed from David's restrained manner and reveal something of Gros's innate Romantic sensibility. The study of a soldier wearing an antique helmet, drawn in red chalk, finds some parallels with a similar figure in Gros's large canvas of Eleazar Choosing Death over Eating Forbidden Meats, painted for the Prix de Rome competition of 1792 and today in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Saint-Lô.

Gros produced numerous sketches and studies of horses, in various attitudes; in a stable accompanied by a groom or alone at rest, elsewhere ridden by soldiers or jockeys, or galloping free. The artist's pupil and biographer Jean-Baptiste Delestre praised Gros for 'His surprising ability to capture the appearance of horses. He especially enjoyed reproducing their elegant forms and proud and gracious movements. The sketchbooks from the happy years of his adolescence have retained precious notes. Several of these ink drawings showing cavalcades or beautiful teams of horses, which he followed racing, from Paris to the Bois de Boulogne, without stopping, so appealing was this spectacle to his eyes.'

Among comparable sheets of studies by the artist is a drawing of horses and figures that was part of a large and important group of drawings by Gros assembled by Delestre and dispersed at auction in Paris in 2017.

The use of red chalk is quite rare in the drawings of Gros, and is generally only found in his early drawings. Three pages of a sketchbook in the Louvre, dating from the artist's period in Italy between 1793 and 1800, include a few studies in red chalk among the more typical pen and ink or pencil sketches. Another example of the artist's use of red chalk is found in a drawing also datable to his Italian period; a study of seated woman in a landscape formerly the Delestre collection.

The present sheet bears the collector's mark of Charles Martyne (1876-1936). Martyne (or Martine), the librarian at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1905 and 1934, assembled a large and eclectic group of paintings, drawings, books and autograph letters, all kept in a crowded apartment on the rue Bonaparte. Much of his collection of drawings was sold in Paris in May 1939, although a part of it was inherited by his nephew, the magistrate Jean-Louis Debauve (1926-2016).

Artist description:

The son of a portrait and miniature painter, Antoine-Jean Gros entered the studio of Jacques-Louis David at the age of fourteen, studying alongside Anne-Louis Girodet and François Gerard. He enrolled in the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1787 and won second place in the Prix de Rome competition in 1792. The following year, a few days after the death of Louis XVI on the guillotine, Gros decided to leave Paris for Italy. He was to spend the next eight years in Italy, working mainly as a portraitist in Florence, Genoa and Milan, and this period was to have a profound influence on his mature style. It was while he was in Genoa that he was introduced to Joséphine Bonaparte and accompanied her to Milan to be presented to Napoleon, resulting in a majestic portrait of Napoleon at Arcole, exhibited at the Salon of 1801. The huge popularity of the engraving made after the painting served to establish the artist's reputation in Italy and France.

Through the influence of Napoleon, Gros was appointed a member of the committee entrusted with selecting important works of art in Italy to be sent to France. Although he made his debut at the Paris Salon in 1798, Gros did not return to France until October 1800. Soon afterwards, he was commissioned to paint three portraits of Napoleon as First Consul, and he continued to be one of the foremost painters of the Napoleonic era. Among his major works of this period was Napoleon Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa, exhibited to much acclaim at the Salon of 1804, and Napoleon on the Battlefield at Eylau, completed in 1808. In 1811 Gros received a commission to decorate the cupola of the church of Sainte Geneviève (the Panthéon) in Paris, completed only in 1824.

After the fall of Napoleon in 1815 and David's subsequent exile to Brussels, Gros took over his master's Parisian studio and pupils at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, although he also admired and influenced the work of such younger artists as Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault. As one modern scholar has noted, 'At heart Gros was a romantic, and for modern painting and French painting in particular, the forerunner of that expressive mode, an inspiration to Géricault and Delacroix, as well as to a large group of other artists, even if none was his pupil. Géricault and Delacroix were the actual foundation of romantic expression in nineteenth-century French painting; but Gros played a considerable part in its advent and himself uninfluenced produced it from the inherent impulsion of his own feeling.'

Gros gained important commissions during the reigns of Louis XVIII and Charles X and in 1824, at the height of his public success, was ennobled as a Baron by Charles X. But at around the same time his work began to fall out of fashion, and he soon found himself at odds with the generation of younger artists centred around the dominant figure of Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres. Long prone to fits of depression, and distraught over the poor reception at the Salon of his latest painting, a Hercules and Diomedes, he committed suicide in June 1835, throwing himself into the river Seine at Meudon. Several months later the contents of his studio were dispersed at auction. Held at his studio in Paris, the sale included 122 lots of framed and unframed drawings, including one lot of twenty-four sketchbooks and another lot containing some fifty sketches and studies for compositions by the artist. Many of these drawings, including the sketchbook pages, have since been widely dispersed. The most significant extant collection of drawings by Gros, numbering four sketchbooks from his seminal Italian period and seventeen individual drawings, is today in the Louvre.