Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Pierre Joseph REDOUTÉ (Saint-Hubert 1759 - Paris 1840)

Turmeric (Curcuma longa)

Watercolour and pencil, with touches of gum arabic, on vellum.

473 x 342 mm. (18 5/8 x 13 1/2 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, CA.

Regarded as Redouté's masterpiece and one of the finest illustrated books ever published, Les Liliaceés occupied the artist for fourteen years, and involved the assistance of three botanists and eighteen engravers. In his introduction to Les Liliaceés, Redouté wrote, 'I have chosen for the subject of this new work, of which I am sole proprietor, the family of Liliaceae, so interesting for its variety of forms and for the brilliance and richness of their colors. The plants of this brilliant series will be drawn, engraved, and colored with the luxury of detail with which nature has embellished them. Long researches into the best means of engraving to produce a colored impression, and numerous trials, have shown me that art can capture and record the impact and the varied nuances that we admire in these flowers.' He goes on to note that, since plants of the Liliaceae family were very difficult to keep preserved in herbaria, or as dried specimens, his accurate illustrations of them would be of great benefit to naturalists. Published in eighty instalments, the complete work contains a total of 486 hand-coloured engraved plates illustrating 476 different species of plants, each based on a highly finished watercolour on vellum by Redouté. Although not commissioned by the Empress Joséphine, this immense project could not have been undertaken without her support and patronage, and she was eventually to purchase the complete set of original preparatory watercolours for Les Liliaceés from the artist.

As has been noted of Les Liliaceés, 'Although the plates are spectacular examples of the botanical engraver's art…they cannot equal the coloristic brilliance, accuracy, and luminosity of the originals. On vellum sheets of the finest quality, Redouté made only the lightest outline in pencil, over which he applied pure watercolor to achieve the full effect, conveying with matchless skill the delicate gradations in the shade of petals and foliage. The flowers seem to break free of the flat vellum surface, inviting the viewer to reach out and pluck them up. Indeed, it is the creamy quality of the vellum, smoother than any paper, that gives the drawings their special incandescence. Redouté took infinite care with the arrangement of his plants and their placement on the page. All but the largest specimens are reproduced at life-size, and never do the supplementary pencil drawings of bud, bulbs, seed, and other details detract from the impact of the complete plant.'

Despite its title, Redouté's Les Liliaceés included not only plants of the Liliaceae family, which in fact account for only about half of the species illustrated, but also numerous other species of monocots with petal-like flowers; all from the gardens of Malmaison, Saint-Cloud, Sèvres and Versailles. Les Liliaceés includes depictions of plants from, among others, the families Agavaceae, Alismaceae, Amaryllidaceae, Cannaceae, Iridaceae, Strelitziaceae and, as in the case of the present sheet, Ziniberaceae, or ginger family. Turmeric is a flowering plant native to the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Its roots, when ground into powder, are often used for medicinal and cooking purposes (particularly as a spice for curries) and also for dyeing fabric. At the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, and likely at Malmaison as well, the turmeric plant flowers in the month of August, which is probably when Redouté painted it.

The 487 original watercolours by Redouté for Les Liliaceés – including the present sheet - were acquired from the artist by the Empress Joséphine (1763-1814) and bound, together with a copy of the text also printed on vellum, into sixteen large folio volumes4. At the death of the Empress, the Redouté albums were inherited by her son, Prince Eugène de Beauharnais, later Duke of Leuchtenberg (1781-1824). They remained with his descendants until 1935, although nineteen of the watercolours were removed sometime in the 19th century5. Sold at auction in Switzerland in 1935, the watercolours for Les Liliaceés were acquired by Erhard Weyhe (1882-1972), a rare book and print dealer in New York. The volumes remained intact until their sale at auction in 1985, after which they were broken up and the 468 watercolours by Redouté subsequently dispersed among various public and private collections.

Literature:

Peter and Frances Mallary, A Redouté Treasury: 468 Watercolours from Les Liliacées of Pierre-Joseph Redouté, London, 1986, p.41, no.36.

Artist description:

Known in his day as 'the Raphael of flowers', the Belgian artist Pierre-Joseph Redouté was among the finest botanical painters of the 18th and 19th centuries, and arguably remains the most famous to this day. Born in Saint-Hubert in the Ardennes, Redouté arrived in Paris in 1782 and, at the age of twenty-three, was employed and mentored by the wealthy magistrate and botanist Charles Louis L'Héritier de Brutelle. L'Héritier gave the young artist instruction in botany and plant dissection, allowed him access to his extensive library of books and specimens, and commissioned many illustrations from him. In 1787 Redouté accompanied L'Héritier on a trip to England, where they visited the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and the artist learned the technique of stipple engraving from Francesco Bartolozzi.

On his return to Paris Redouté soon earned a reputation as a botanical illustrator. His work for L'Héritier brought him to the attention of the flower painter Gérard van Spaendonck, who was in charge of the

vélins du roi, a series of several thousand natural history drawings on vellum begun in the 17th century by Louis XIII's brother Gaston, Duc d'Orléans, and continued into the 19th century. Van Spaendonck commissioned Redouté to make several hundred flower drawings for the vélins du roi (by then called the vélins du Muséum d'Histoire naturelle) and was also a particular influence on the younger artist's manner of achieving luminous effects in painting with watercolour on vellum. Redouté was also active as a drawing teacher, and counted many members of the Parisian upper classes and nobility among his clients and patrons. He was appointed draughtsman to Queen Marie-Antoinette, and is said to have even visited her in prison during the Revolution. Despite his many connections with the aristocracy, however, Redouté's stature does not seem to have been adversely affected by the events of the Revolution.

After the Revolution, Redouté's role of official artist was transferred to the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle at the Jardin Botanique, where he continued to work. He enjoyed the particular patronage of Napoleon's wife Joséphine, who began employing the artist in 1798 (eventually paying him a salary of up to 18,000 francs a year) and for whom he produced some of his finest work. Joséphine loved flowers and gardens, and commissioned the artist to record her collection of plants at her estate at Malmaison, a few miles west of Paris. Redouté drew 120 illustrations for Etienne Pierre Ventenant's Jardin de la Malmaison, published between 1803 and 1805, and fifty-two plates for the Description des plantes rares cultivées à Malmaison et à Navarre by Aimé Bonpland, which appeared in 1813.

Redouté's largest and most ambitious work, however, is his Les Liliaceés, a compendium of illustrations of the different members of the lily family which was published by the artist, in an edition of only two hundred copies, between 1802 and 1816. This lavish production was followed by the equally extravagant Les Roses, comprising 170 plates, which appeared between 1817 and 1824, and is perhaps the artist's best-known work. Long after Joséphine's death in 1814, Redouté continued to produce elaborate and beautiful watercolour drawings of flowers for sale to collectors. Although he enjoyed the patronage of the 19th century Bourbon monarchy, in later years he often found himself in financial difficulties. In 1822, following the death of Van Spaendonck, Redouté was appointed maître de dessin at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, and three years later was admitted into the Légion d'Honneur.