

Jacques BARRABAND (Aubusson 1768 - Lyon 1809)

A Male Blue-Throated Barbet (Megalaima asiatica)

Watercolour and gouache over an underdrawing in black chalk.

Signed *Barraband* in brown ink in the centre.

Numbered *No.21* in pencil at the lower right, and *24* / *x245* in pencil at the upper right.

522 x 386 mm. (20 1/2 x 15 1/4 in.)

This large watercolour by Jacques Barraband is a preparatory study for one of the 197 engraved plates in François Levaillant's two-volume 'Histoire naturelle des oiseaux de paradis et des rolliers, suivie des celle des toucans et des barbus', appearing in reverse in the published work. The drawing depicts the blue-throated barbet (Megalaima asiatica), a member of the Asian barbet family of birds native to Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Characterized by bright green, blue and red feathers, barbets get their name from the bristles which fringe their heavy bills.

As one writer has noted of Barraband's watercolours for Levaillant, '*they are considered among the most beautiful bird drawings in existence. Barraband often showed his subject in profile, perched on a short tree branch jutting into the empty space of the sheet; no one else equalled his mastery in the rendering of feathers, in evoking their fragility, stiffness, or incredible lightness. He displayed a preference for harmonies of blue and green…The evocative power of these realistic and precise works, featuring all the colours of the rainbow, is almost dream-inducing.*'

The present sheet was once part of the exceptional collection of French ornithological watercolours of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries - including some three hundred works by Jacques Barraband - assembled in the 1920s and 1930s by the French industrialist and bibliophile Marcel Jeanson (1885-1942).

Literature:

François Levaillant, *Histoire naturelle des oiseaux de paradis et des rolliers, suivie des celle des toucans et des barbus*, Vol.II, Paris, 1806, pl.21.

Artist description:

Relatively little is known of the life of the ornithological and botanical painter Jacques Barraband, who was one of the finest natural history draughtsmen of the early years of the 19th century in France. The son of a tapestry worker in Aubusson, he was a pupil of the flower painter Joseph-Laurent Malaine at the Académie Royale in Paris. Barraband began his career painting designs for the Aubusson, Beauvais, Gobelins and Savonnerie tapestry factories, as well as for the porcelain manufactory at Sèvres. Several of his porcelain designs were exhibited between 1798 and 1806 at the Paris Salons, where he won a gold medal in 1804. Among his most important commissions was a series of watercolours of birds and flowers, executed between 1801 and 1804 for the First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, who also employed the artist to decorate the dining room of the Château de Saint-Cloud, demolished at the end of the 19th century. Additionally, Barraband collaborated with the architects and designers Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine in the promotion of the Empire style, notably in the decoration of a room, known as the platinum cabinet, constructed in Paris and installed in 1804 in the Casa del Labrador, a neoclassical palace in Aranjuez in Spain.

Barraband's mature career lasted only some eleven years, and just a handful of oil paintings, porcelain works and tapestries by the artist have survived. He is instead best known for his superb, lifelike watercolours of tropical birds, usually based on mounted specimens, which he sometimes exhibited at the Salons. Perhaps his most beautiful works in this vein were several hundred remarkable drawings of exotic birds in watercolour and gouache that he produced for three seminal books by the ornithologist François Levaillant: the Histoire naturelle des perroquets, published between 1801 and 1805, the Histoire naturelle des oiseaux de paradis et des rolliers, suivie des celle des toucans et des barbus, which appeared in 1806, and the Histoire naturelle des promérops et des guêpiers (et des couroucous et touracos, faisant suite à celle des oiseaux de paradis), published in 1807. A friend of the botanical painter Pierre-Joseph Redouté, Barraband was appointed a professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Lyon in 1807, and died there two years later, at the age of forty-one.