

Jacques GAMELIN (Carcassonne 1738 - Carcassonne 1803)

The Sacrifice of Iphigenia

Pen and black ink and grey wash, and watercolour, within a fictive drawn circular mount with lines in black ink.

Signed and dated Gamelin inv. / 1792. at the lower centre.

178 mm. (7 in.) diameter [image]

258 mm. (10 1/8 in.) diameter [sheet]

The present sheet may be added to an interesting and distinctive group of independent pen and wash drawings of scenes from classical history, executed by Jacques Gamelin between 1792 and 1795, which are in the same circular format and of similar dimensions. A large number of these oval drawings – depicting such subjects from Greek and Roman history as Socrates Defends Alcibades, Alexander I of Epirus Killed by the Lucanians, Syphax Taken Prisoner by the Romans and Scipio Africanus Saves his Father - are today in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts on Carcassonne, while others are in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Narbonne. Another drawing from this group is The Death of Cato of Utica, dated 1792, in the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, while several others are in private collections. As an early 20th century scholar has described them, these drawings are among Gamelin's finest works as a draughtsman: 'sa riche série de l'histoire ancienne… vivement enlevés, très originalement composés, et montrant sa conception si personnelle des faits de l'antiquite.'

Artist description:

Among the most gifted French painters of the latter half of the 18th century, Jacques Gamelin is unusual for his refusal to make his career in Paris, choosing instead to work mainly in southwestern France and the Lanquedoc; in Carcassone, Montpellier, Narbonne and Toulouse. (As Pierre Rosenberg has written, 'Against the current of official painting – cold, pure colours used without intermediate tones, an increasing predilection for line and static composition – the art of Gamelin resists the centralisme parisien and reflects instead original local traditions, thus helping to modify the over-simplified image

we have of painting in France during the second half of the 18th century.') Gamelin's early artistic training with Jean-Pierre Rivalz in Toulouse was followed in 1764 by a brief period in the Parisian studio of Jean-Baptiste Deshays. In the same year he competed unsuccessfully for the Prix de Rome. Nevertheless, in 1765 he travelled to Italy under the auspices of an important patron in Toulouse, the Baron de Puymaurin, and remained there for almost ten years. He studied with Jacques-Louis David and Joseph-Marie Vien, and won a prize for drawing at the Roman Accademia di San Luca in 1765 and another for drapery studies the following year. Admitted into the Accademia as a painter of battle scenes, Gamelin also won a commission to paint a Fall of Phaeton for a ceiling in the Palazzo Rondinini in Rome. By the age of thirty-two, he had become the official painter to Pope Clement XIV.

On his return to France in 1774, Gamelin settled first in Toulouse, where he established a school of dissection and in 1779 published an anatomical treatise entitled Nouveau receuil d'ostéologie et de myologie dessiné, devoted to studies of bones and musculature and illustrated with engravings of some thirty of his drawings. (Although the publication was a failure, the book is thought to have had an influence on Goya, who either owned or had access to a copy, and may have been inspired by Gamelin's sometimes macabre illustrations in the design of his print series Los Desastres de la Guerra.) He later settled in Montpellier, where he served as director of the Ecole de Dessin de la Société des Beaux-Arts between 1780 and 1783, and then in Narbonne. Gamelin executed several paintings for churches in his native Carcassonne and was also commissioned to paint four large canvases for the church of Saint-Just in Narbonne, where he remained throughout the period of the Revolution. A member of the 'Société Populaire et Révolutionnaire des sans culottes de Narbonne', Gamelin was charged with the organization of pubic ceremonies and the design of revolutionary monuments in Narbonne, fulfilling a role much like that of David in Paris. He was also active as a war artist, and was attached to the staff of General Dugommier, commander of the Army of the Pyrénées-Orientales. In 1796 he was appointed Professor of Drawing at the Ecole Centrale de l'Aude in his hometown of Carcassonne, where he ended his career.

Gamelin produced a large body of work of considerable variety and originality. His battle scenes, for which he is probably best known, incorporate a distinctive figural style, and the same is true for the large religious paintings commissioned for churches in Carcassonne and Narbonne. Yet perhaps his finest work is that done on a smaller and more intimate scale, notably in the form of genre scenes and drawings.

As Victor Carlson has also noted, 'Gamelin evolved his own singular, somewhat eccentric version of neoclassic draftsmanship', and his drawings, often executed in pen and ink with sombre washes, display a distinctive freedom of handling, bold technique and dramatic lighting. During the period of the Revolution, the artist often chose to depict themes from classical history; subjects which held moral lessons for the citizen. He was an avid reader of classical texts, in which he found inspiration for many of his compositions, and was often drawn to obscure themes and violent or dramatic episodes. As Carlson has pointed out, 'the artist often chose episodes of great complexity, which he treated in drawings with numerous figures gesticulating dramatically…his bold lighting effects, together with his bravura execution, give to these classical themes an emotional expressiveness that seems closer in spirit to the work of Henry Fuseli or James Barry than to any specifically French tradition.'

The largest collections of drawings by Gamelin are today in the museums of Narbonne and Carcassonne, which in 1898 hosted the first significant exhibition of the artist's oeuvre. Other groups of drawings by Gamelin are today in the Musée Fabre at Montpellier, the Musée des Augustins and the Musée Paul-Dupuy in Toulouse, and elsewhere. In America, drawings by the artist are in the collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.