Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Jean-Simon BERTHÉLEMY (Laon 1743 - Paris 1811)

Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus(?)

Oil on paper, over an underdrawing in pen and black ink.

Laid down.

445 x 592 mm. (17 1/2 x 23 1/4 in.) [sheet]

Jean-Simon Berthelémy's working process involved preparing for most of his large-scale paintings with fluid compositional oil sketches on paper or canvas, together with studies and figure drawings in chalk. As the scholar Nathalie Volle, the author of a catalogue raisonné of the artist's work, has noted, 'Throughout his career, Berthelémy retained the light, bright palette and free brushwork of the generation of artists who were trained by the school of Boucher…A series of dazzlingly virtuosic preparatory oil sketches for ceilings and other decorative paintings, once ascribed to Jean-Honoré Fragonard, probably represent his talent best.'

The attribution of this oil sketch, previously given to Jean-Baptiste Deshays (1729-1765) is due to Alastair Laing. The free handling of the paint in this nocturnal scene finds parallels in a number of coloured oil sketches by Berthelémy, such as the Queen Tomyris Dipping the Head of Cyrus into a Basin of Blood in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nîmes, which is a study for a large painting of 1766 in the same collection. Laing also notes some stylistic comparisons with two freely executed oil sketches of Apollo and Sarpedon5, both of which are preparatory for a painting that was Berthelémy's morceau de reception for the Academie Royale in 1781, today in the Musée Saint-Didier in Langres, as well as with a sketch 'en camaïeu brun' of The Nurse of Nero Pouring his Ashes into the Tomb of his Ancestors, which was on the art market in 1985-1986.

The distinctive facture of the present sheet is particularly close to a monochrome oil sketch on paper of Nessus Offering his Poisoned Tunic to Dejanira in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Quimper. Although the Quimper sketch has been attributed to Jean-Baptiste Deshays, Laing has recently suggested that it, like the present sheet, is more likely to be the work of Berthelémy.

A similar subject to the present sheet, though different in composition, is found in another stylistically comparable oil sketch by Berthelémy; an Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus in the Snite Museum of Art of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

Artist description:

The son of the sculptor Jean-Joseph Berthelémy, the history painter Jean-Simon Berthelémy was trained in the studio of Noël Hallé. Among his earliest independent commissions was a group of decorative paintings for the Hôtel de l'Intendance de Champagne at Châlons-sur-Marne. Berthelémy won the Prix de Rome in 1767 with a painting of Alexander Cutting the Gordian Knot, and, after three years at the Ecole Royale des Elèves Protégés, was enrolled as a pensionnaire at the Académie de France in Rome between 1771 and 1774. Little survives of his work while in Rome, however, apart from a handful of splendid landscape drawings in red or black chalk and a painting of The Death of a Gladiator, today in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Berthelémy was adept at working on a large scale, and early in his career developed a particular reputation as a ceiling painter. Agrée at the Académie Royale in 1777 and reçu in 1781, he exhibited regularly at the Salons between 1779 and the outbreak of the Revolution ten years later.

Highly regarded as a history painter, Berthelémy received several important commissions, including ceiling paintings for the Palais du Louvre and the Palais de Luxembourg in Paris and the château of Fontainebleau. He painted altarpieces for churches in Paris, Laon, Douai and elsewhere, as well as a number of portraits. Like his master Hallé before him, he provided cartoons for the Gobelins tapestry manufactory, mainly of scenes from classical and French history, and also designed costumes for the Paris Opéra. During the period of the Directoire, Berthelémy served on a committee tasked with selecting works of art from Italy to be brought back to Paris, and he continued to earn official commissions during the Consulate and Empire.