

Anne-Louis GIRODET (Montargis 1767 - Paris 1824)

The Genius of Greece (The Artist Meditating on the Ruins of Athens)
Pencil, with double framing lines in pencil.

Signed and dated (in mirror writing) 1820 in pencil at the lower left and G.T. in pencil at the lower right.

135 x 99 mm. (5 1/4 x 3 7/8 in.) [image]

215 x 164 mm. (8 1/2 x 6 1/2 in.) [sheet]

Anne-Louis Girodet was an accomplished writer and poet as well as an artist. As Sylvain Bellenger has written, 'Throughout his entire life Girodet followed two parallel vocations, two destinies which he aspired to combine into one. He pursued two artistic forms, painting and literature, which he hoped to fuse, but which nevertheless required him to live two lives. This two-fold quest, which pushed both arts to the limits of their similarity, demanded unstinting determination.' In the last years of his career, Girodet devoted himself increasingly to the literary arts; translating ancient poetry and writing his own verse in Greek or Latin style, as well as producing essays on art, such as Considérations sur le génie particulier à la peinture et à la poésie.

Arguably Girodet's most important literary work was his late poem Le Peintre, written over a period of several years right up until his death, and only posthumously published in 1829 by his pupil Pierre Alexandre Coupin. Written in six cantos, this long didactic poem about art was written between 1820 and 1824. Partly autobiographical, Le Peintre takes the form of an account of the training, travels and career of a French artist. The first three cantos describe the young painter's education and his winning of the Prix de Rome, his voyage over the Alps to Italy and the great works of art he sees in Rome and Naples. The fourth canto finds the painter travelling to Greece, Egypt and Palestine, as well as Scotland

and America, before returning to France. The final two cantos are devoted to the artist's career, his challenges and successes, culminating with his eventual apotheosis to posthumous fame and glory.

The published poem was accompanied by six engravings after illustrations by Girodet, of which the present sheet is one. The drawing depicts a self-portrait of the artist, with his stylus and portfolio, dreaming amidst the ruins of Ancient Greece. As Marc Fumaroli has described the composition, 'The painter, sitting on the ruins at the foot of the Acropolis…symbolize[s] the deep independence of the artist who, like a new Petrarch, draws his moral and creative strength, not from his times, from which his melancholy alienates him, but from the ruins, the tombs and the venerable dead of antiquity.' The related engraving by Henri Charles Müller which appears in Coupin's Oeuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson reverses the composition of this preparatory drawing.

The provenance of this drawing can be traced back to the Parisian book dealer and editor Jules Renouard (1798-1854), who is recorded as the owner of the six original drawings by Girodet for the poem Le Peintre that were first published in Coupin's Oeuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson in 1829. The present sheet then entered the collection of the scientist Antoine César Becquerel (1788-1878), Girodet's cousin and the executor of his will. Becquerel acquired a large portion of the contents of Girodet's studio, thereby assembling one of the finest collections of drawings and paintings by the artist. He saw to the publication of several suites of drawings by Girodet after his death, and also laid the foundations of the collection of his work in the museum in the painter's native Montargis. Many of the drawings by Girodet amassed by Becquerel, including the present sheet, remained with the collector's descendants until they were dispersed at auction in Paris in 2008.

Exhibitions

In reverse by Henri Charles Müller for Coupin, Oeuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, Paris, 1829, illustrated between pp.142 and 143.

Literature:

Pierre Alexandre Coupin, Oeuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, Paris, 1829, p.lxxxv (1820. L'Origine du dessin, le Génie de la Grèce, Appelle et Campaspe, Michel-Ange, Raphaël, Poussin. Dessins très terminus. Ces six compositions ont été faites pour le poème du Peintre, auquel ils sont jointes; trois ont été gravées du vivant de Girodet: la première par M. Henriquel Dupont; la seconde par M. H. C. Müller; la troisième par M. Bein. Les trois dernières ont été lithographiés, depuis sa mort, par M. Sudre. Appartiennent à M. Jules Renouard.)

Artist description:

One of the principal history painters of the Napoleonic era, Anne-Louis Girodet entered the studio of Jacques-Louis David in 1783, at the age of sixteen. He won the Prix de Rome on his third attempt in 1789, when he shared the prize with Charles Meynier. He was in Italy between 1790 and 1795, working in Rome and Naples, and in 1793 sent back to Paris his first submission to the Salon, The Sleep of Endymion, an evocative painting which proved immensely popular and established his reputation. A huge theatrical canvas of a Scene from a Deluge was exhibited to much acclaim at the Salon of 1806, while two years later a painting of The Burial of Atala was equally celebrated. These paintings evoke a distinctly proto-Romantic sensibility at odds with the strict neoclassicism of the artist's Davidian training, although Girodet always remained first and foremost a history painter. As Neil MacGregor has succinctly noted, 'Girodet is the paradigm of the artist caught in a change of traditions, a man in whom

neo-classicism and romanticism – however specially defined – coexisted in conflict. Reluctant to submerge his personality in an idealized aesthetic, unable to throw off its weight, he is the enfant terrible of late eighteenth-century French art.'

In 1810 Girodet was awarded a prize for the finest history painting of the past decade, the premier prix du concours décennal, for the Scene from a Deluge of 1806. (His master David's The Intervention of the Sabine Women of 1799 came second.) Several of Girodet's finest later works were of Napoleonic subjects, such as the Ossian Receiving the Shades of the French Heroes of 1801, commissioned by the First Consul for Malmaison. In 1809 he was entrusted by the Empress Josephine with the decoration of the Imperial apartments at Compiègne. After 1810, Girodet produced only a handful of history paintings, preferring instead to concentrate on portraiture. At the Salon of 1814 he exhibited fifteen paintings, three of which were acquired by the Crown. The end of that decade saw a falling off in his powers, however, exacerbated by bouts of severe depression and a weakened constitution aggravated by his habit of working late at night. After 1820 he seems to have largely given up painting and instead devoted himself almost exclusively to his writings, notably his epic poem Le Peintre, and to producing highly-finished drawings on literary themes. A popular teacher, Girodet had many pupils, of whom the most notable were Alexandre-Marie Colin, Léon Coigniet, Théodore Gudin and the brothers Achille and Eugène Deveria.

Girodet worked extensively as an illustrator, collaborating with the publisher Pierre Didot to provide superb illustrations for editions of Virgil, Racine and Anacreon. He is known to have regarded illustration as of equal importance to grand history painting, and the posthumous sale of the contents of his studio in 1825 included a large number of drawings for book illustrations and engravings, several of which achieved very high prices. The Girodet scholar Sylvain Bellenger has noted that, 'A devotee of literature, Girodet was especially concerned with the relationship between text and image…and he devoted himself particularly to illustrating literature. Nowhere better than in his illustrations for Racine's Phèdre and Andromaque did Girodet advance the sophistication and subtlety of literary illustration to create profound historical compositions. He explained their importance in a letter to the Marquis de Pastoret…"It is a mistake for drawings to be nothing but drawings, and they require the same conception and almost the same study as a painting when one takes pride in giving them style and character; only the process of execution is different. The artist who succeeds at such drawings can be none other than a history painter."'