

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Jean-Baptiste PILLEMENT (Lyon 1728 - Lyon 1808)

A Chinoiserie Design, with Two Figures on a See-Saw and Another Figure on a Chariot with a Hand-Held Sail

Black chalk, with stumping, with framing lines in brown ink.

Signed and dated Jean Pillement / 1770. at the lower right.

302 x 207 mm. (11 7/8 x 8 1/8 in.)

This delightful drawing, signed in full and dated 1770, is one of a number of chinoiserie drawings by Pillement incorporating see-saw subjects. It is a preparatory study for one of six designs of oriental figures perched on see-saws, engraved by Jean-Jacques Avril, which appeared in 1773 under the title *Cahier de Balançoires Chinoises*. Comparable preparatory studies by Pillement for other plates in the *Cahier de Balançoires Chinoises* include two drawings in the Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, and one in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. An unsigned, reversed and possibly reworked black chalk counterproof of the present sheet was at one time in the collection of the art historian K. E. Maison.

Such charming and original compositions as this, with their immense visual appeal, were the source of much of the artist's contemporary fame. As one author has written, '[Pillement's] chinoiseries exaggerate wispy, fragile qualities of the style. It is as though the world is a fairyland conjured out of gossamer and stalks of grass, and the humans inhabiting it, fanciful little creatures who dance and tumble around so effervescent and lively they seem more creatures of the air than earth.'

Literature:

Maria Gordon-Smith, Pillement, Cracow, 2006, p.197, fig.195.

Artist description:

‘An artist with a great deal of merit, gifted with a prodigious talent, this busy man worked in all genres (except history painting and portraiture) in oil, pastel, chalk, ink, pencil, and always with an ease, a facility, a remarkable rapidity. His touch is extremely firm, neat, precise. One never sees hesitation or indecision in his works, all of which are characterized by a great harmony, and by an abundance of spirit.’ Thus was Jean Pillement described some twenty years after his death, and such assessments of his abilities have lasted into the present day, with one modern scholar aptly describing the artist as ‘a versatile painter and an exquisite draughtsman’.

One of the most influential decorative and ornamental draughtsmen working in Europe in the second half of the 18th century, Pillement was an equally gifted painter, producing pastoral landscapes, marines, flowerpieces, animal subjects and chinoiseries. A precocious talent, by the age of fifteen was working as a designer at the Gobelins tapestry factory in Paris. In 1745, aged seventeen, he left France to spend three years in Madrid. This was to be the first in a long series of travels throughout Europe over the next forty years. After a period in Lisbon, where he was offered, and declined, the title of Painter to the King, Pillement spent the next few years working in London, between 1754 and 1763. His pastoral scenes, seascapes and picturesque views found an appreciative audience in England, and he became a popular and respected member of artistic society in London. It was also in England in the 1750’s that some of his ornamental designs were first engraved and published, and where he established himself as a fashionable decorative painter.

Pillement continued to travel extensively during the 1760’s, receiving several prestigious commissions. Between 1763 and 1765 he was in Vienna, where he won commissions from the Empress Maria Theresa and the Prince of Liechtenstein. He was appointed court painter to King Stanislas August Poniatowski of Poland, for whom he decorated rooms in the Royal Castle and the palace of Ujazdów in Warsaw between 1765 and 1767. Back in France and appointed peintre de la reine in 1778, Pillement painted three decorative canvases for Marie Antoinette’s Petit Trianon at Versailles; the only real instance in his long career of an official French commission. For much of the 1780’s he worked in Portugal and Spain, and it was during this period that he produced some of his finest landscape drawings. Returning to France in 1789, he abandoned Paris during the Revolution and spent much of the decade of the 1790’s working in the small town of Pezénas in the province of Languedoc. The last years of Pillement’s career found the artist in his native Lyon, where he was employed at the Manufacture de Soie et des Indiennes and gave lessons in decoration and design. He died in relative obscurity at the age of eighty, his output having suffered from the decline of the French taste for the rococo in the aftermath of the Revolution.