

Gustave DORÉ (Strasbourg 1832 - Paris 1883)

Shipwrecks Beneath the Sea (Au fond de la mer)

Watercolour and pen and brown ink, heightened with touches of white, over an underdrawing in pencil, within fictive mount lines in brown wash.

Stamped with the Doré studio stamp (Lugt 681a) in red ink and numbered 257 in black chalk on a piece of canvas now attached to the reverse of the frame.

394 x 489 mm. (15 1/2 x 19 1/4 in.) [sheet]

In April 1873 Gustave Doré visited Scotland, ostensibly to go salmon fishing with his close friend Col. Christopher Teesdale, an equerry to the Prince of Wales, although the artist soon abandoned fishing in favour of sketching. On his return to Paris, he wrote of his trip to an English critic: 'I took a good many notes and jottings in water colour – the first time I have tried that medium. I have employed it solely in obtaining qualities of intention or impression.' It is from this year onwards that Doré began to work extensively in watercolours, and he first exhibited his work in this medium at the Exposition de L'Union Artistique in Paris in 1877. His oeuvre as a watercolourist was certainly much admired in his day, and one contemporary biographer described these works as 'the most perfect achievements of any water-colour painter since the Renaissance. In this branch of art Gustave Doré had few rivals, and may unhesitatingly claim unlimited praise. Critic and connoisseur may pick flaws here and there in Doré the illustrator, Doré the oil-painter, Doré the etcher, Doré the sculptor; but no one in justice can deny the ripe perfection of Doré the aquarellist.'

This striking watercolour, executed in shades of blue and green, is among the most highly original compositions in all of Doré's oeuvre as a watercolourist. A masterpiece of Romantic imagination, it is likely to be related to his illustrations for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's long poem The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, published, at the artist's own expense, in London in 1876, and in America the following year. Doré often depicted marine subjects, with a particular predilection for storms and shipwrecks, and his illustrations for The Rime of the Ancient Mariner are some of his most powerful images of the sea and ships. As an obituary of the artist, published in the American journal Harper's Weekly a few days after his death at the age of fifty-one, noted, 'Coleridge's weird and fantastic poem presented a magnificent field for the display of Doré's best qualities. Here was everything to excite and nothing to trammel his imagination. The excellence and beauty of his illustrations were at once acknowledged.' Of these same images, a modern biographer has opined that 'Doré revels in the storm at sea, the overpowering waves, the polar regions, the water-snakes, the solitary ship on the seemingly boundless moonlit ocean.

They inspired some memorable illustrations.'

Dore's illustrations for the book took the form of line drawings for wood engravings, not atmospheric watercolours such as the present sheet, and indeed this unusual composition does not appear among the images in the published text. Nevertheless, a similar underwater subject, depicting the sea underneath the Mariner's ship littered with wrecks and sea creatures, is included in the book, illustrating the lines: 'Under the keel nine fathom deep / From the land of mist and snow / The Spirit slid: and it was he / That made the ship to go.'

It has been suggested that the present sheet may also have been inspired by Jules Verne's novel Vingt mille lieues sous les mers (Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas), published in instalments in the French journal Magasin d'éducation et de récréation between 1869 and 1870, and as a book in 1871, five years before Doré created his illustrations for The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

It is interesting to note, in passing, that Doré himself seems to have regarded the sea as a place of danger, at least according to an account given by his friend Col. Teesdale of the artist's trip to Scotland in 1873. Writing ten years later, in a letter to the artist's friend and biographer Blanchard Jerrold, Teesdale recalled of Doré: 'When I prevailed upon him to come to Scotland with me, we travelled from Paris to London together; and in the first days of April 1873 left by steamer for Aberdeen. I had not, until then, had an idea that my friend had such a horror of the sea, la grande vague, as he used to call it. Our passage was good enough, but for some four-and-twenty hours poor Doré remained in his berth and would not be comforted.'

Literature:

Henri Leblanc, Catalogue de l'oeuvre complet de Gustave Doré, Paris, 1931, p.479, no.257; Pierre Miquel, Eugène Isabey 1803-1886. La Marine au XIXe siècle, Maurs-la-Jolie, 1980, vol.X, p.59, fig.52 (where dated c.1875-1880).

Artist description:

Arguably the most widely-known French artist of the 19th century, Gustave Doré was immensely prolific as a draughtsman, printmaker, watercolourist and illustrator. Born in Alsace, he was a precocious artist, and drew from a very early age. He produced his first lithograph at the age of eleven and his first album of lithographs, Les Travaux d'Hercule, appeared four years later. It was also at the age of fifteen that Doré settled in Paris, having gained employment as a cartoonist for the newly-founded Journal pour Rire, while at the same time continuing his studies at the Lycée Charlemagne. He made his debut at the Paris Salon of 1848, where he exhibited two drawings, and two years later showed his first painting. He also began producing albums of his lithographs. By the middle of the 1850s Doré was working extensively as an illustrator, producing highly inventive and original wood engravings to accompany editions of such novels as François Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel and Honoré de Balzacs Contes drolatiques, as well as his La Légende de juif errant, which appeared in 1856. His fame as an illustrator was well established by 1860, and later projects found him producing illustrations for editions of works by Dante, Cervantes, Perrault, La Fontaine, Chateaubriand, Milton and Tennyson, as well as the Bible. He also continued to produce illustrations for such magazines as the Journal amusant.

Despite his renown as a book illustrator, which brought him considerable wealth, Doré always wanted to be recognized as a painter. Although he was a regular exhibitor at the Salons, his paintings never

achieved much critical success, at least in France. (He received an honourable mention for a battle scene in 1857, while in 1865 one of his paintings was purchased by the State.) In England, however, where he began to establish close ties in the 1860s, his work as a painter was much more highly regarded, and among the collectors of his work was Queen Victoria. Several of the artist's large Biblical paintings were exhibited in London, mainly at the Doré Gallery on New Bond Street, which opened in 1868 and was devoted to his work. (The Doré Gallery continued to show the artist's work to the paying public in London until 1892, long after his death.) In 1872 he published the illustrated London: A Pilgrimage, in collaboration with the journalist William Blanchard Jerrold, based on some 250 drawings made while exploring the sprawling city between 1869 and 1870. Doré served in the National Guard during the Franco-Prussian War and the Siege of Paris, and produced a number of works with patriotic themes. An accomplished watercolourist, Doré began working extensively in the medium from 1873, following a visit to Scotland, and exhibited several works at the Société d'Aquarellistes Français in 1879, 1880 and 1882. He was also active as a sculptor, most notably with a statue of the writer Alexandre Dumas, completed in 1881, but it is for his accomplishments as a book artist - with an oeuvre of nearly ten thousand illustrations - that he remains best known and most admired today.