

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Louis-Jean DESPREZ (Auxerre 1743 - Stockholm 1804)**

## **The Church of the Madonna della Croce in Barletta, Puglia**

Pen and grey ink and watercolour, with traces of framing lines in black ink.

Inscribed *Vue de Leglise de la Madona di Barletta dans / Pouille* and numbered 13 on the verso.

147 x 219 mm. (5 3/4 x 8 5/8 in.)

This fine watercolour was reproduced as an engraved illustration in the Abbé de Saint-Non's lavish *Voyage pittoresque, ou description des royaumes de Naples et de Sicile*. Published in Paris between 1781 and 1786, the five volumes of the *Voyage pittoresque* must rank as one of the finest books of the 18th century. With a text by Dominique-Vivant Denon and illustrations by Desprez, Claude-Louis Châtelet, Hubert Robert, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Jean-Pierre Houel and Pierre-Adrien Pâris, among others, the book was the most complete survey of the sights, customs and cultural traditions of southern Italy that had appeared up to that time. Desprez drew a total of 136 watercolour illustrations for the *Voyage pittoresque* and was, alongside Châtelet, the most significant artistic contributor to the volumes.

This watercolour depicts the Servite church of the Madonna della Croce just outside the coastal town of Barletta, some sixty-five kilometres northwest of Bari in the southern Italian province of Puglia (Apulia), which in the 18th century was part of the Kingdom of Naples. Guided by Dominique Vivant Denon, who served as secretary and chargé d'affaires at the French embassy in Naples for seven years, the artists of the Saint-Non expedition arrived in Puglia in April 1778. Travelling south along the coastal road towards Brindisi, the party arrived at Barletta on the evening of April 20th. According to Saint-Non's travel diary, there was relatively little of note in the town, apart from the castle. However, 'A small church of Our Lady, called the Holy Cross of Barletta, which we came across on our way out of town, was the only place that merited a stop for a single moment. One of our draughtsmen portrayed a small view of it...' Built between 1516 and 1526, the small, centrally planned church of the Madonna della Croce at Barletta no longer survives, having been damaged by an earthquake in 1721 before being completely destroyed by another earthquake in 1830. Some fragments of the building, as well as the rose window, survive today in the Museo Civico in Barletta.

The engraving made after the present watercolour, executed by the German printmaker Karl Gottlieb Guttenberg (1743-1790/2), appeared with the caption '*Vuë de l'Eglise de La Madona di Sta Croce di Barletta*' in the third volume of the *Voyage pittoresque*, published in 1783. A squared preparatory pen

and ink study by Desprez for this composition is in the collection of the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm.

As Mary Tavener Holmes has recently commented, '*Desprez, an architect with a talent for set design and an interest in classical antiquity...was a logical choice to provide drawings for the abbé de Saint-Non's Voyage pittoresque...While Desprez may have been approached initially as an architect, it was his scenographic talents that prevailed. Far from being dry schematic renditions, his scenes are alive with action, the small figures (so reminiscent of the work of Jacques Callot, which he must surely have known) expressive and energetic.*' Other watercolours by Desprez for the *Voyage pittoresque* are today in the collections of the Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie in Besançon, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, the Albertina in Vienna, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and elsewhere.

This fine drawing is one of a large group of around seventeen watercolours of Italian views by Desprez, all related to the *Voyage pittoresque*, that were in the collection of a Mr. P. P. Stevens of Dover in the 1930s.

#### **Literature:**

Nils G. Wollin, *Desprez en Italie*, Malmö, 1935, p.54, p.208, fig.51; Petra Lamers, *Il Viaggio nel Sud dell'Abbé de Saint-Non: Il "Voyage pittoresque à Naples et en Sicile": la genesi, I disegni preparatori, le incisioni*, Naples, 1995, p.214, no.195b, fig.195b.

#### **Artist description:**

Following an apprenticeship with Charles-Nicolas Cochin, Louis-Jean Desprez was admitted into the Académie Royale d'Architecture in Paris in 1765. He frequently entered the architectural competitions held at the Académie, submitting large, highly finished pen drawings. While he studied architecture for several years, he also took up studies in drawing and engraving, eventually being appointed a Professor of Drawing at the Ecole Royale Militaire. Desprez was to spend almost all of his independent career outside France, however. In 1776 he won the Prix de Rome in the field of architecture, although soon after his arrival in Italy he seems to have finally abandoned the study of architecture in favour of landscape drawing. This was perhaps inspired by the fact that in 1777 he was commissioned by the Abbé de Saint-Non to produce illustrations for the *Voyage pittoresque, ou description des royaumes de Naples et de Sicile*, published in five volumes between 1781 and 1786. Together with Claude-Louis Châtelet and Dominique-Vivant Denon, Desprez spent just over a year travelling throughout southern Italy, making numerous topographical drawings which, on his return to Rome in 1779, he often adapted as designs for engravings.

After more than four years in Rome, Desprez was summoned to Sweden in 1784 by King Gustav III, who engaged him on the design of theatrical decorations for the new Royal Opera House in Stockholm. He worked in Sweden for the rest of his career, obtaining the position of court architect and scenographer, and producing numerous stage designs for the theatres at Drottningholm and elsewhere. Buoyed by the patronage of the King, who shared with the artist a love of the theatre, Desprez enjoyed a position of some importance in Swedish artistic circles. Following the assassination of Gustav III in 1792, however, his star faded. In the hope of finding a new patron responsive to his ambitious vision, he made several drawings for the Empress Catherine II of Russia but was unsuccessful in gaining her support. He eventually died in poverty and obscurity in Stockholm.

Desprez's watercolour drawings, sometimes of a considerable scale, reveal an artist fascinated with the dramatic possibilities of a scene. (Indeed, it was just this ability and vision that made him such a success as a theatrical designer.) Much of his surviving work as a draughtsman is today to be found in Swedish collections. The largest extant group of drawings by Desprez is today in the Nationalmuseum

in Stockholm, while a significant number of theatrical designs by the artist are in the collection of the Teatermuseum at Drottningholm.