

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Charles-Dominique-Joseph EISEN (Valenciennes 1720 - Brussels 1778)

Bacchanal with a Satyr, a Nymph and Putti

Pen and black ink, with grey and black wash, over a pencil underdrawing, within a fictive drawn mount.

Signed and dated Ch. Eisen. invenit. et fecit / 1777 at the lower centre.

Numbered No 17. at the lower right.

160 x 248 mm. (6 1/4 x 9 3/4 in.) [image]

193 x 273 mm. (7 5/8 x 10 3/4 in.) [sheet]

Charles Eisen was highly regarded as a draughtsman and illustrator, and his work appeared in some four hundred books during his lifetime. As one early 20th century writer has opined, 'The art of Charles Eisen overflows with grace, delicacy and ingenious handling of themes that would be inartistic but for a magic pencil...At the same time as some of his finest illustrations were executed, Eisen painted sacred, mythological, and other subjects in oil colours...small paintings in oil or water colours, etchings, drawings in Indian ink, or in sanguine passed from the artist's hand to exhibition, engraver, publisher, author and patron, incongruous in media and so varied in subjects that they might easily have been by different artists, were it not for the uniform charm and beauty apparent in all Eisen's good work...There is a grace and fascination in his work, especially in his small drawings, that would captivate any lover of the beautiful...Ingenuity, good composition, originality, life, soft gradation from silvery lights to dense velvety shades, are the characteristics of Charles Eisen's art.'

Apart from his work as an illustrator, Eisen was also known for his finished drawings of allegorical and mythological subjects. Drawn in 1777, the year that Eisen settled in Brussels, this highly finished, signed and dated sheet is a very late work by the artist, who died a few days into the following year. Among stylistically comparable drawings by Eisen is an Allegory of the Fine Arts Paying Homage to Louis XV, signed and dated 1753, in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and an Apollo Presiding over an Academy of Letters, signed and dated 1762, in the Courtauld Gallery in London.

Literature:

Hervé Lalau, 'De Thèbes à Rome, avec l'ami Dionysos', Les 5 du Vin, 5 February 2025.

Artist description:

Born in Valenciennes in northern France, Charles Eisen was the son of a painter. He moved to Paris in

1741, and there trained as an engraver in the studio of Jacques-Philippe Le Bas, where he remained until 1746. One of his first significant independent commissions was for a series of illustrations for a volume commemorating the engagement of the Dauphin to Maria Theresa of Spain, published in 1745, while two years later he provided drawings for an edition of the poems of Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux. Eisen is indeed best known for his book illustrations and vignettes for such works as Jean-Baptiste Descamps' four-volume *La vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandais*, published between 1753 and 1763, and Voltaire's epic poem *Henriade*, which appeared in 1770, as well as editions of the *Fables* of Jean de La Fontaine (1762) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1767-1771). He also painted pastoral landscapes, religious and mythological scenes and genre subjects, as well as a handful of portraits, although very few of his works on canvas survive. Eisen became court painter and draughtsman to Louis XV and served as drawing master to Madame de Pompadour. Although he was admitted as a history painter into the artist's confraternity in Paris, the Académie de Saint-Luc, in 1750 – where three years later he is recorded as a drawing teacher and where he exhibited regularly until 1774 – Eisen never gained entry into the more prestigious Académie Royale. In 1753 he published a book of ornamental designs, while a book of engravings in the crayon manner appeared in 1757. His pre-eminence as a book illustrator was confirmed with the publication in 1770 of the *Recueil de divers petits sujets agréables d'après Eisen et autres maîtres*, wherein the majority of the works reproduced were after drawings by Eisen, alongside examples by Charles-Nicolas Cochin, François Boucher and Hubert-François Gravelot. In 1777, heavily in debt and pursued by creditors, Eisen left Paris for Brussels. He died there a few months later, at the age of fifty-eight.