

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Jean-Guillaume MOITTE (Paris 1746 - Paris 1810)

A Design for a Basin or Tazza with an Acanthus Leaf Rim

Pen and black ink and black wash.

229 x 568 mm. (9 x 22 3/8 in.)

Jean-Guillaume Moitte's drawings for the *orfèvre du roi* Henri Auguste may be counted among the most refined designs for silverwork produced during the Neoclassical period, incorporating motifs inspired by those of ancient Roman vessels. As Peter Fuhring has noted, '*Simple geometrical forms, the use of friezes with acanthus scrolls, palmettes and other classical ornaments such as mascarons taken from vessels of Roman Antiquity are recurrent motifs in Moitte's designs for silver. Moreover, the use of ornaments in bas-relief points to an excellent knowledge of the classical works that were excavated and studied in the eighteenth century... Moitte's direct Roman experience, combined with his talent as a designer and draughtsman, were superbly complemented by Auguste's talents as a silversmith.*' The curator Reinier Baarsen has further pointed out that '*Moitte's designs were extremely modern for their time, showing as they do many characteristics that would become mainstream only during the Empire period.*' The fame of the artist's elegant designs for silver and gold objects spread even beyond France, and among the contemporary collectors who acquired silver designed by Moitte was the wealthy English writer and politician William Beckford, who purchased several items from Auguste between 1788 and 1802.

In 1806, however, Henri Auguste was declared bankrupt, and three years later he fled his creditors and left France, eventually dying in a debtor's prison in Haiti in 1816. Much of the contents of Auguste's workshop, including many of Moitte's decorative designs, among them the present sheet, acquired by the rival Parisian silversmith Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odier (1763-1850), with whose descendants they remained until the late 1970s.

This very large sheet – a design for a large *tazza* with Grecian masks on the handles – may be counted among the finest of Moitte's drawings for silver. Henri Auguste's firm produced at least two, and possibly three, silver basins derived from the present design by Moitte, together with accompanying ewers, in 1787 and 1789. Two of these are recorded in the collection of William Beckford at Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire, and one of these was described, in the catalogue of the Fonthill sale of 1822, as '*A MAGNIFICENT HANDLED TAZZA, modelled after the antique, by the celebrated French Sculptor Moiette [sic] and executed by H. Auguste (Paris, 1802), in a style of superior excellence; the borders and masques most exquisitely chased, and worthy the best period of Grecian art.*' These were among several pieces of silver acquired from Henri Auguste by William Beckford during his visits to France between 1788 and 1802, which also included one gold and three silver-gilt ewers, two basins, a pair of gold tazzas, a candelabrum, candlesticks and a jewel box. One of the Beckford basins of the type seen in this drawing was later with Jacques Kugel in Paris in 1965 and is now in the Gilbert Collection and on

loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, while another basin and accompanying ewer of the same design is in a private collection.

Another drawing by Moitte for the same basin, of similar dimensions and numbered 355 *bis*, was also in the Odier archive collection and is today in the Gilbert collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. A very similar basin, but with a different base, appears on a table in a signed and dated drawing by Moitte depicting several silver objects in a room, in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

A stylistically comparable design by Moitte for a wine cooler, with the same Odier provenance, is in the Harvard Art Museums in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while two other drawings – designs for a tureen and a surtout de table – are in the Horvitz collection and a drawing for a silver-gilt basin and ewer is in the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh. Other drawings of designs for silver by Moitte are today in the collections of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, and elsewhere.

Exhibitions

New York, Armin B. Allen, Inc. and Hobhouse Ltd., *An Exhibition of Ornamental Drawings 1520-1920*, 1986, no.66; Stanford, Stanford University, Cantor Center for Visual Arts, *Classic Taste: Drawings and Decorative Arts from the Collection of Horace Brock*, 2000; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, *Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection*, 2009, no.153.

Literature:

New York, Sotheby's, *Fine Silver*, 8 April 1986, illustrated under lot 72; Monaco, Sotheby's, *Argenterie Européenne*, 24 June 1986, illustrated under lot 1601; New York, Armin B. Allen, Inc. and Hobhouse Ltd., *An Exhibition of Ornamental Drawings 1520-1920*, exhibition catalogue, 1986, unpaginated, no.66 (illustrated); Timothy B. Schroder, *The Gilbert Collection of Gold and Silver*, Los Angeles, 1988, pp.620-621, fig.135; Gisela Gramaccini, *Jean-Guillaume Moitte (1746-1810): Leben und Werk*, Berlin, 1993, Vol.II, p.64, no.159.10, fig.219 (as location unknown); Horace Wood Brock, Martin P. Levy and Clifford S. Ackley, *Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Boston, 2009, p.159, no.153, illustrated p.144.

Artist description:

Born into a family of engravers, the Neoclassical sculptor and draughtsman Jean-Guillaume Moitte was trained in the studios of the sculptors Jean-Baptiste Pigalle and Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne and won the Prix de Rome for sculpture in 1768. After a period of study at the Ecole Royale des Elèves Protégés, he arrived in Rome in 1771, although his stay was cut short, after about a year and a half, for reasons of ill health. Nevertheless, his study of ancient sculpture in Rome, and of Roman reliefs, vases and urns, was to be of great importance in his later work. One of Moitte's first commissions upon his return to France was the decoration of the château of the Prince de Conti at L'Isle-Adam. Although he was admitted (agrée) to the Académie Royale in 1783, the year that he first exhibited at the Salon, he was never reçu as a full Academician. In 1784 he produced a number of sculptures and reliefs for the Hotel de Salm, and in the succeeding years worked on the decoration of the barrières or toll-houses of Paris, built by the architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. During the Revolution, Moitte took part in the decorations for the Fête de la Fédération in 1791, and the following year designed a new pediment for the Panthéon, since destroyed. Other public commissions included a pediment in the old Palais du Louvre and a bas relief in the Luxembourg Palace, as well as a handful of monuments. In 1795 Moitte was made a member of the Institut de France and later received several important Imperial commissions from Napoleon.

Moitte's wife Adélaïde-Marie-Anne, née Castellat, was an amateur painter and draughtsman.

Moitte was an exceptional draughtsman and produced drawings for sculptural projects and decorative

arts, as well as finished compositions of narrative subjects and book illustrations. In the middle of the 1780s he began designing projects for the noted Parisian gold and silversmith Henri Auguste, including designs for dinner services and candelabra, in a collaboration that lasted for several years. Moitte was recognized as among the most gifted draughtsmen employed by Auguste, for whom he is said to have produced over a thousand drawings. As one contemporary author recorded, after his return to Paris from Italy, Moitte 'drew in pen many large friezes in a beautiful style, that were much admired among artists. Although he had not been able to model and work marble in Rome, his head was full of ideas and his folders filled with drawings. M. Auguste, goldsmith to the King, employed him to make drawings that served as designs for his best works. Thus he obtained an enormous advantage over all the other goldsmiths. M. Moitte made perhaps over a thousand drawings of this kind, and he obtained a special reputation in this field, which he perhaps dismissed too much later on; he gave to a luxury genre a degree of merit which had not existed in France for over a century. The great masters did not hesitate to depict his designs.'