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Charles LE BRUN (Paris 1619 - Paris 1690) and Gaspard DUGHET (Rome 1613-Rome 1675)

Allegory of Tiber

Oil on canvas

74x95,5 cm

Executed circa 1645

The reasons for Charles Le Brun's trip to Italy remain uncertain to this day: rivalry with his master, Simon Vouet, who dominated the Parisian art scene at the time; Chancellor Séguier's wish to obtain copies of Italian works; or the desire of the young artist, already the master of a vigorous, lyrical style, to go—as Poussin had done—to drink at the fountain of inspiration for all the great works of the Renaissance and Classical periods.

It was this very Nicolas Poussin, who, according to Nivelon, was “particular benevolent” to the young man, that Le Brun met up with in Lyon before arriving in Rome on 5 November 1642. There he was reunited with François Perrier, his former teacher, and became friends with Gaspard Dughet, also known as “le Guaspre”, 4 years his elder.

Thanks to Nivelon and to Florent Le Comte (in his “Cabinet des singularitez d'architecture, peinture, sculpture, gravure”, Paris, 1699), we have a list—perhaps partial, but none the less a rich resource with its ten or so examples of works executed by Le Brun in Rome for the three whole years of his stay there.

Several works that are directly comparable to our Allegory of the Tiber figure in it: Horatius Cocles (Dulwich College), The Deification of Aeneas (Musée de Montréal), Mucius Scaevola (Musée de Macon).

Nivelon notes that, “Le Brun did a study for a painting of the Tiber River in the same noble style as Mr Le Poussin and as a gesture of friendship le Guaspre volunteered to paint the landscape”. The charming idea that the young Le Brun was paying homage to the older Poussin seems obvious. Having come under the decisive influence of Vouet for certain of his Parisian masterpieces (as he would be drawn to the influence of Caravaggio for his Caton in the Musée d'Arras), Le Brun—an artist with many facets if every there was one—here comes close to the elegiac sensitivity of Poussin.

The cool, measured palette of colors in the painting, the Tiber's languid pose and melancholic expression, and the sleeping figure of the spirit of Rome give ample evidence of it. The dramatic lighting of the landscape, with its violent luminous accents drawing the eye to the horizon, and a stormy sky with deep slate tints, are very similar to other works in Dughet's early manner. Also, the treatment of the foreground, where water is pouring from the basin onto ground in ochre accents, painted in a rapid, spontaneous fashion, is quite typical of le Guaspre. M.N. Boisclair points out the exceptional character of this type of collaboration in Dughet's work: “One thing is certain...the scene of the composition”.

Another version of our composition, of considerably smaller dimensions (53 x 64 cm), and done in lighter, warmer colors, reappeared in a sale at the Hôtel Drouot in 1944, and is currently in the collection of the Musée de Beauvais. The more restrained drawing of the figure of the Tiber and the less sensitive treatment of the landscape in the foreground leads us to see it as a replica painted later, perhaps even done in the studio of the master after his return to France.

Provenance:

Perhaps painted for Chancellor Séguier; in the collection of the engraver Jacques Rousselet (1610-1686), where the inventory made after his death mentions an Allegory of the Tiber by Le Brun; in the collection of Jacques Prou, domiciled at the Hôtel Royal des Gobelins, "...a painting by Monsieur Le Brun representing a river and the landscape by Guaspere valued one hundred livres with its gilded wood frame...", 1706; in the collection of d'Abel, Minister of Hanseatic Cities in Paris in 1824; Private collection, Stuttgart.

Literature:

Nivelon, "Life of M. Charles Le Brun and detailed Description of his works", circa 1700, Paris, p.23; Description of Paintings in the office of Mr d'Abel, Minister of Hanseatic Cities, 1824, p.77, n°166, like Nicolas Poussin, Allegory on future grandeur of the city of Rome, described as by Nicolas Poussin at number 166 "The Tiber, depicted after the famous statue of the river which is in the Museum in Paris, is seated in the foreground, right hand resting on the urn from which its water flows, and left foot on the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus. Behind, one can see Fame, who is still sleeping, and Minerva, who is awake. In the background is a beautiful landscape"; E.Miller, "Manuscrit de Claude Nivelon sur Le Brun", Gazette des Beaux-Arts, XV, 2 (1863), p.203; Jouin, 1889, p. 52, 54 and 515; Thuillier, catalogue from the Versailles exhibition, 1963, p. XXXVI, 15; Meyer, 1985, p.300, fig. 186; M-N. Boisclair, 1986, p. 191-192, n°79, fig.102; Boyer, 1991, p.48, fig. 12.