

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Jean Michel called Clodion (Nancy 1738 - 1814 Paris)

Bacchic Group

34 cm.

Claude Michel, popularly known as Clodion (1738-1814), exemplifies the artistic tradition of the ancien régime in France. His uncle, Lambert-Sigisbert Adam (1700-1753) the prominent sculptor whose works graced the gardens of Versailles and the palace of Sanssouci. Following Clodion's early training under his uncle, he won the Prix de Rome in 1762 and left for the Eternal City to continue his studies in the French Academy. He remained in Italy for the next nine years, studying the great works of ancient and Renaissance masters alongside contemporaries such as Jean-Antoine Houdon and Hubert Robert. On his return to Paris, he set up a studio and rapidly established himself as one of the most sought-after sculptors of his day.

Although Clodion was to have great success with large scale marbles and monumental architectural friezes, he is principally known for his intimate terracottas depicting lively scenes of bacchanalian revellers and music-making fauns. Produced for private patrons, these small-scale groups reveal the influence of the sculptures and terracotta sketches by Bernini (Apollo and Daphne, 1622-5, Borghese Villa) which Clodion saw while studying in Rome, yet they are fully a product of the French Rococo in their subject matter and playful demeanour.

The present sketch, full of bravura, is a preparatory study for the slightly larger and more highly finished group previously in the collection of Gustave de Rothschild and now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1983.185.4). Like Bernini and others before him, Clodion's artistic process consisted of producing one or several studies of the same composition before arriving at a final version, altering

details and improving elements of his compositions at each iteration. This practice of change and repetition can be observed when comparing the present example with its finished counterpart at the Metropolitan Museum. In our study, the central male figure and putto are human, the toppled vase has a plain surface, and the only instrument visible at the base is a tambourine. In the Metropolitan Museum terracotta, the putto and central figure are satyrs, the neck of the toppled vase is gadrooned, and a larger array of instruments is visible by the stump.

The practice of producing small-scale, sketchy and unsigned preparatory models was not uncommon for Clodion. Other well-documented examples are known, such as his *Study for The Deluge* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1989.130), which is a first iteration for the larger signed version of *The Deluge* (1800) also in the MFA collections (1981.398). Just as the present group, Clodion's *Study for The Deluge* is unsigned and displays the same rough yet beautifully expressive modelling throughout, highlighting Clodion's unparalleled mastery of clay.

Although intended to serve in a strictly preparatory capacity, by the late 18th century, spontaneous studies like the present group came to be highly prized as works of art in their own right. Allied with the emergence of the cult of the artist, his technical abilities and artistic practices, amateurs increasingly grew to appreciate these first models for their primacy and immediacy. By the first decades of the 18th century, discarded studies by artists like Bernini – often salvaged from destruction by studio assistants for study – became highly sought after by connoisseurs as their sensibility to the moment of artistic creation deepened. By the late 18th century, the widespread appeal of bozzetti like the present group is demonstrated by the large number examples by artists like Joseph Chinard, Antonio Canova and Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, that still survive today (*L'esprit créateur*, op. cit., pp. 95, 116-7, and 137, respectively). Literally bearing the imprint of Clodion's fingers, one can imagine the present terracotta as the pride and joy of a late 18th century amateur; a uniquely personal and no-doubt treasured tour-de-force by the greatest master of small-scale sculpture of the Grand Siècle.

The sales of the collection of Madame de Polès which took place at Galerie Georges Petit in 1927 and Galerie Charpentier in 1936 were landmark events in the market for French fine and decorative arts, with historic works by Fragonard, Boucher and Hubert Robert alongside masterpieces by all the best cabinet-makers of 18th century France such as André-Charles Boulle, Martin Carlin, Jean-Henri Riesener, and David Roentgen.

Provenance

Madame de Polès;

Her Sale; 22-23-24 June 1927, Paris. Galerie Georges Petit, lot 211.

Paul Cailleux

Jean-Louis Picard, Paris, 7 March 1993, lot 97.

Private Collection, France, until 2019.

Exhibited:

Paris, Galerie André Seligmann, *Sulpture Française*, 1932.

Paris, Galerie Cailleux, *Esquisses et maquettes de l'Ecole Française du XVIIIe siècle*, 1934, no. 111.

Paris, Palais National des Arts, Chef-d'oeuvre de l'Art Français, 1937, no. 1060.

Paris, Galerie Bernheim Jeune, Le nu à travers les ages, 1954. no. 71.

Literature:

Connaissance des Arts, 15 June 1955, p. 73 (reproduced)

A. L. Poulet, G. Scherf, exh. cat., Clodion, 1738-1814, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 19 March - 29 June 1992, p. 393.

D. Draper, G. Scherf, exh. cat., L'esprit créateur de Pigalle à Canova : Terres cuites Européens, 1740-1840, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 19 September 2003 - 29 August 2004.

L. R. Cannady, Materiality, the Model and the Myth of Origins: Problems in Eighteenth-Century European Terracotta and its Reception, B.A. University of Montevallo, 2004.