

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Jean Michel called Clodion (Nancy 1738 - 1814 Paris)

Leda And The Swan; and The Bath Of Venus (A Pair Of Rectangular Terracotta Preparatory Reliefs For The Salle De Bains Of The Hôtel De Besenval, Paris)

Circa: c. 1780-2

c. 1780-2

33 x 98 x 6 cm (13 x 38 ⁵/₁₆ x 2 ³/₁₆ inches)

Both signed 'CLODION'

Commissioned by one of the greatest aesthetes and collectors of his day baron de Besenval (1721-1791), for one of the grandest projects in 18th century Paris by his architect Brongniart, these preparatory presentation sketches are some of the largest terracotta works produced by Clodion, the undisputed master of that medium, for the two stone reliefs now held in the Louvre.

The fact that they even still survive is nothing short of a miracle. Conceived as preparatory models out of the incredibly fragile material terracotta, Clodion probably only used these reliefs as sketches meant to be viewed by his patron Besenval and his architect Brongniart. The finished stone reliefs installed in Besenval's famous salle de bains, now both in the collections of the Louvre, are perhaps Clodion's most ambitious sculptural accomplishment. Having remained relatively unknown and out of the public eye, these terracottas can now be widely appreciated as masterpieces of French neoclassical sculpture, created by one of the most celebrated artists of the 18th century and for one of the most important collectors of the Ancien Régime.

Besenval was one of the most sophisticated men of late 18th century Europe. As the head of the Swiss Guards in France, he was a career soldier. However, he also had the interest and intellect to amass one of the most important collections of paintings and decorative arts in France. He was an honorary member of the Académie and a writer with multiple published books to his name. His most famous book, however, was the posthumous publication of his Mémoires, published by the Vicomte de Ségur between 1805-1807, who may have been Besenval's illegitimate son, which created a sensation in France at the time as they detailed numerous and intimate scandals from the court of King Louis XVI

and Queen Marie-Antoinette.

While many of the details of his *Mémoires* may have been exaggerated to emphasize his close connection to the King and Queen, it is indisputable that Besenval was a close friend of Marie-Antoinette and an intimate witness to the last years of her life in Paris and at Versailles. After the Revolution broke out in 1789, Besenval, made a series of catastrophic military decisions which had enormous consequences for the Bourbon dynasty, and indeed for European history. As the commander of the French troops in Paris and the Ile-de-France that remained loyal to the Crown, he gave the July 12 order for them to withdraw from Paris leaving the Bastille to be stormed on July 14. Besenval fled from Paris and was arrested shortly thereafter but spared the guillotine. After a trial at Châtelet, he was acquitted. However, disgraced by his military errors and his close association with the now-imprisoned royal family he died shortly afterwards in 1791.

As a hyper-sophisticated aesthete, it is no surprise Besenval would have turned to Clodion and Brongniart to build his famous *salle de bains*. Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart (1739-1813), was a well-connected and superbly-talented and fashionable architect who designed many prominent private residences and public buildings in the last years of the Ancien Régime. He also successfully transitioned into one of Emperor Napoleon's favourite architects and was responsible for the layout of Paris's most famous cemetery, Père Lachaise, as well as the Paris Bourse (stock exchange) which is still named the Palais Brongniart, in his honour. Brongniart, a close friend of the sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, was clearly intensely sympathetic to the integration of sculpture and architecture. Indeed in his *salle de bains* for Besenval, sculpture, and of course Clodion, were given centre stage.

Poulet and Scherf extensively discussed Clodion's role in Besenval's *salle de bains* in their groundbreaking exhibition catalogue on Clodion held at the Louvre in 1992. Clodion, one of the most fashionable artists working in Paris in the 1780s, with other projects for the prince de Condé and the comte d'Artois, would have been a natural choice. Clodion's masterful mixture of sensuality and intimacy - under the guise of a cool classicism - was the ideal artist for Besenval's project. Clodion was commissioned to provide not only the two enormous stone reliefs that are now in the Louvre, the first, Venus and Cupid with Leda and the Swan and the second, Pan pursuing Syrinx with Cupid watching, but also a set of four vases which are all now in the Louvre. Clodion also produced the focus of the entire room, a figure of a reclining woman with a vase pouring water, *La Source*.

When Besenval's *salle de bains* was finished it found immediate fame and was praised as among the most beautiful, luxurious and modern interiors of Paris. After the Revolution started, the satirist Rivarol wrote that Besenval '...let the Invalides be taken because he was afraid that if the rioting became too widespread, they would pillage his house in which he had just had an entire apartment painted and charming baths installed. These are the kind of men who served the King!' Despite the attention to the design and execution, practically Besenval's baths were a disaster however. Anecdotally, the baths were actually used only once, by a Swiss Guard who then shortly thereafter died of pneumonia. In any case, the humidity was intense and, ultimately, too destructive for Clodion's sculptures which were all removed in the 1820s.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the subject matter of Clodion's reliefs - water, bucolic settings and beautiful women bathing - the iconography is intensely complex. Scherf has extensively detailed the varied literary and artistic sources Clodion drew upon and which are reflected in these reliefs. Clodion was directly inspired by Antique cameos, wall frescoes at Herculaneum, the Renaissance paintings of Correggio and Carracci as well as his predecessor François Giarion, and contemporaries, such as

the sculptor Falconet. Love is everywhere, with the putti presenting flowers and encouraging pleasure - yet the restraint of love is also present, symbolized by Venus disarming the cupids and holding their wings.

The terracotta relief of Leda and the Swan differs slightly from Clodion's finished relief in stone which is now in the Louvre, as it is slightly more complex, so Clodion might have modified the final version to make carving the stone simpler. As Scherf notes, in the present relief, there are two additional putti in the air and a third in the water and the tree to the right is more bushy (Scherf, 1992, p. 230). Interestingly, in Brongniart's architectural drawings of the *salle de bains*, it is the present relief of Leda and the Swan that is represented, indicating that this was Clodion's original design. As Scherf also notes, Clodion's inclusion of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus was a curious choice and was possibly inspired by an illustration of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which had been translated by the abbé Banier and published in Amsterdam in 1732 (*Ibid.*). The Bath of Venus, apparently, did not progress further than the preparatory stage of the present terracotta as it has been substituted with the relief of Pan pursuing Syrinx in both Brongniart's architectural drawings and the final realized version now in the Louvre.

Besenal's glorious *salle de bains* existed only for seven short years before the Revolution. However, these remarkable reliefs remain, now newly 'discovered,' and are not only as reminders of one of the most intriguing interiors of the Ancien Régime but also of the baron who commissioned them, and the architect and artist who created this fantasy.

Provenance

Peter-Josef-Victor, baron de Besenal et de Brünstatt (1721-1791), hôtel de Besenal, 142 rue de Grenelle, Paris

Anonymous sale (possibly d'Espagnac or Tricot), Le Brun, Paris, 22 May 1793, no. 187

with Dalva Brothers, New York, 1986

Acquired by Ann and Gordon Getty from the above in 1986, sold by the heirs, 2022

Literature:

G. Scherf, 'Auteur de Clodion, variations, imitations, répétitions,' *Revue de l'Art*, no. 91, 1991, p. 58, no. 23 and 24, note 17

A. Poulet and G. Scherf, *Clodion: 1738-1814*, Musée du Louvre, 17 March-29 June 1992, exh. cat., p. 230