

PIERRE-HENRI DE VALENCIENNES

1750 Toulouse - Paris 1819

Byblis transformée en Fontaine

Pencil and black chalk, with stumping, heightened with white chalk, on beige paper.

Signed and dated lower right: *P. Valenciennes 1790*. On its old mount.

390 x 524 mm

PROVENANCE: Christie's London, 25 March 1969, lot 69 – Schab Gallery, New York 1973 (cat. 137, no. 155) – Dr. Paul Erni, Basel – Thence by descent

LITERATURE: Bruno Mantura and Geneviève Lacambre, *Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes 1750-1819*, exhib. cat., Palazzo Racani Arroni, Spoleto 1996, p. 145, see under no. 66 – *La nature l'avait créé peintre. Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes 1750-1819*, exhib. cat., Musée Paul Dupuy, Toulouse 2003, p. 238, see under no. 116

Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes is one of the most influential figures in the history of French landscape painting. He began his artistic training at the Académie Royale in Toulouse. He made his first trip to Italy in 1769 at the age of nineteen, accompanying his patron, Mathias Dubourg, a member of the Toulouse parliament. He moved to Paris in 1771 and joined the studio of Gabriel François Doyen, a history painter, in 1773. He returned to Italy in 1777 where he remained more or less permanently until 1784 or 1785, living mainly in Rome. Returning briefly to Paris in 1781 he came into contact with Claude-Joseph Vernet, who encouraged him to work outdoors *sur le motif*, to paint directly from nature and to appreciate the importance of the sky in landscape painting as the source of natural light. So, after returning to Rome, he began to produce landscape sketches executed in oil before the motif. These firmly established him as a pioneer in the growing practice of *plein-air* painting. The sketches later served him as models for the idealized landscape backgrounds of large-format historical scenes he executed in the studio. On his return to France in 1787, Valenciennes was appointed a member of the Académie Royale and made his debut at the Salon. He taught perspective at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from 1796 to 1800. He published a groundbreaking treatise in 1800 titled *Éléments de perspective pratique à l'usage des artistes, suivis de réflexions et conseils à un élève sur la peinture et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage*. The treatise was to have a major influence on the development of landscape painting. Its success prompted the Académie to create a new prize in 1817 – the 'Prix de Rome de paysage historique'. The first prizewinner was Achille-Etna Michallon.

The present drawing was executed in 1790 – five years after Valenciennes's return from Rome. It is very probably based on landscape studies made in Italy which he had taken with him to France.¹ In its relatively large format, high degree of finish and meticulous attention to detail, the drawing is comparable with only a very small number of drawings in his surviving *oeuvre*.

¹ A similar landscape motif – almost certainly executed in Italy *en plein air* – is found in a pencil drawing titled *Paysage et Étude d'Arbre*, 1777-80, Musée Paul-Dupuy, Toulouse, [inv. 664630] (see exhib. cat., Toulouse 2003, op. cit., no. 61, repr.). In the present drawing the ancient tree stump with its shoots and branches recalls a tree stump depicted in a sketch executed in Rome titled *Étude d'Arbre*, 1780, pencil, stumping and white heightening, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, [inv. RF 12976] (see exhib. cat., Toulouse 2003, op. cit., no. 69).

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A pendant to the present sheet displaying very similar handling and identical in format is documented. It depicts Narcissus gazing at his own reflection (fig. 1).² Both drawings are directly related to a pair of paintings depicting the same subjects executed two years later and exhibited at the Salon in 1793.³ Two of his most celebrated works, they are now in the collection of the Musée des Beaux Arts in Quimper (fig. 2 and fig. 3).⁴ In the painting *Byblis transformée en fontaine* Valenciennes has made no changes to the figure of Byblis but has modified elements of the landscape.

The subjects of both drawings – the transformation of Byblis and the punishment of Narcissus – are taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. According to the myth, Byblis, a young woman, falls in love with her twin brother, Caunos. When she declares her love for him, he rejects her in disgust and flees. In despair, Byblis pursues him: *The woods were thinning when, weary with her pursuit, Byblis collapsed and lay where she fell, her hair spread out upon the hard ground, and her face pressed into the fallen leaves. Often the Lelegeian nymphs tried to raise her in their soft arms; often they urged her to find a cure for her love (...), but she was deaf to them. She uttered not a word, but lay digging her nails into the green grass, watering the meadow with a river of tears. They say that the nymphs fashioned a channel for these tears, which could never run dry; (...) so Byblis, Phoebus's grandchild, was consumed by her own tears and changed into a fountain, which even now wells up in that valley, beneath a dark ilex tree, and still bears the name of its mistress.*⁵

Valenciennes's interpretation of the subject closely follows Ovid. He depicts Byblis lying on a slab of stone beneath a large oak tree. He focuses on the moment of her transformation – the waters of the spring have already begun to flow from her face, hands and feet. The new shoots and branches of the ancient tree stump depicted at the right of the image symbolize the emergence of new life. Valenciennes has placed the scene in an ideal, heroic landscape in the tradition of Nicolas Poussin, Caspar Dughet and Claude Lorrain. The continuation of this tradition puts his work at the forefront of the reorientation of landscape painting which had begun in Rome in the 1780s. Its basic tenets were the acute study of nature and a deep analysis of classical landscape painting of the seventeenth century. Valenciennes's *plein-air* landscape studies and the idealised landscapes of his drawings and paintings made him a pioneer and his work was to have a major influence on later generations of artists. One of the artists he paved the way for and whose work was to make a major contribution to the development and revaluation of the landscape genre was Johann Christian Reinhart, who arrived in Rome in December 1789.⁶

² *Narcisse se mirant dans l'Eau*, 1790, pencil and black chalk with white heightening, on brown paper, 390 x 525 mm. Private collection. Until recently both drawings (planned by Valenciennes as pendants) were in the collection of Dr. Paul Erni in Basel. A second version of *Narcisse se mirant dans l'Eau* (pencil, stumping, 318 x 510 mm) is in the Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, [inv. RF 12975]. Probably executed in 1791-2, it is identical to the finished painting of 1792 in almost every detail. (See exhib. cat., Toulouse 2003, op. cit., no. 118).

³ Salon, Paris 1793, nos. 521 and 331.

⁴ *Byblis transformée en Fontaine* and *Narcisse se mirant dans l'Eau*, 1792, oil on canvas, 54 x 79 cm each, Musée des Beaux Arts, Quimper, [inv. 873-1-439] (see exhib. cat., Toulouse 2003, op. cit., nos. 116 and 117).

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (*Met. IX: 649-66*), trans. Mary M. Innes, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1955. (*Deficiunt silvae, cum tu lassata sequendo / concidis, et dura positis tellure capillis, / Bybli, iaces, frondesque tuo premis ore caducas. (...) / muta iacet, viridesque suis tenet unguibus herbas / Byblis, et unectat lacrimarum gramina rivo. / naidas his venam, quae numquam arescere posset, / subposuisse ferunt. (...) / sic lacrimis consumpta suis Phoebeia Byblis / vertitur in fontem, qui nunc quoque vallibus illis / nomen habet dominae, nigraque sub ilice manat*).

⁶ See Herbert W. Rott, *Erdichtete Landschaften. Johann Christian Reinhart als Maler, in Johann Christian Reinhart, Ein deutscher Landschaftsmaler in Rom*, exhib. cat., Hamburger Kunsthalle and Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich 2012-3, p. 49 f.

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Fig. 1: *Narcisse se mirant dans l'Eau*, 1790, pencil and black chalk with white heightening, on beige paper, 390 x 525 mm. Private collection



Fig. 2: *Byblis transformée en Fontaine*, 1792, oil on canvas, 54 x 79 cm. Musée des Beaux Arts, Quimper



Fig. 3: *Narcisse se mirant dans l'Eau*, 1792, oil on canvas, 54 x 79 cm. Musée des Beaux Arts, Quimper