



GALLERY
NOTES®

from

JOHN MITCHELL
FINE PAINTINGS

EST 1931

JULY 2022



ANTOINE BERJON (1754-1843)

Bouquet de Roses dans un Vase

oil on canvas, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 13 ins. (40.4 x 33 cm.)
signed and dated 1819; with original frame

Literature:

Jacqueline Custodero, *Antoine Berjon (1754-1843), peintre lyonnais*
(doctoral thesis, University of Lyon, 1985), no. A142, illus. p.2220.



PIERRE-JOSEPH REDOUTÉ (1759-1840)

A Sprig of Spring Flowers – hyacinth, narcissi, camellias and a pansy
graphite and watercolour on vellum, in a gold-leaf oval framing line, 15¾ x 11 in. (40 x 28 cm.)
signed and dated 1819; with Louis XVI carved and gilded frame

Provenance:

Auguste de Marmont (1774-1852), Duc de Raguse, Maréchal de France et de l'Empire;
thence by descent in his family until 2016.

In our firm's long association with European flower painting, two artists have always been especially revered, Antoine Berjon (1754-1843) and Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759-1840). Surprisingly, and in spite of compelling similarities, there has never been until now a pretext to compare directly the lives and art of two of the greatest flower painters in history. Born and dying within only a few years of each other, both men enjoyed exceptionally long lives by the standards of any age, and witnessed the seismic upheavals which France underwent in a century, from the high days of the *ancien régime*, through revolution and the age of Napoleon to the restored Bourbon monarchy. Berjon, who came from Lyon, a city convulsed by violence during the French Revolution, was perhaps something of a radical and held firm anti-monarchical beliefs. On the other hand Redouté, who was not French-born, and had been drawn in his youth from his native Ardennes to Paris and employment at the court of Louis XVI, was for a few years close to the Empress Joséphine. Redouté was also acquainted with Bonaparte himself. Both were versatile artists, mastering oils, watercolour, chalks and pencil with consummate mastery, although one is now exalted for no more than a dozen, exceptional oil paintings*, the other for his breathtaking prowess in the medium of watercolour on vellum. Furthermore, both men had a profound influence as instructors of flower painting. Berjon was 'Professeur de Fleurs' at Lyon's Ecole des Beaux-Arts until his resignation in 1823, and then continued teaching in a private capacity for the remaining twenty years of his life. Meanwhile in Paris and after the restoration, Redouté held classes for flower painting in watercolour in the Palais des Tuileries, where his pupils included both the daughters of the aristocracy and aspiring professionals.

Now, by one of the happy coincidences which enlightens our *métier*, and just as our gardens begin to reach their full midsummer glory, we can present one of Berjon's excessively rare and exquisite oil paintings next to a comparably breathtaking example of the work of Redouté, both elegantly linked together by being created in the same year, 1819. Berjon's flowerpiece

passed through our hands once before, more than thirty years ago, when my late father was already fully alert to the artist's magical qualities. His vociferous advocacy of these same qualities was, alas, inhibited by the scarcity of Berjon's surviving work. At that time, he may have been able to offer as many as half a dozen important Redouté vellums each year, when no more than that number of paintings in any medium by Berjon had found their way to him in two decades. The passage of time and the present example's occlusion from public view for a generation have only heightened our excitement at being able to present it now; ironically this moment is made all the more stimulating precisely because so few other paintings by Berjon have come to light during the long interlude. Thus, Berjon's fabled reputation today hangs on a handful of justly celebrated still-lives and the anecdotes of his rather cantankerous nature and reclusive ways. With the recent record-breaking sale of a Chardin in Paris in mind, it is notable that even more than a century ago Berjon was compared with this colossus of still-life, one critic claiming that his paintings had 'la sensation de réalité et de beauté des meilleurs Chardin'. In modern times it is additionally for his qualities of originality, technique, mystery and poetry that Berjon is acclaimed, 'the most singular and gifted French flower painter before Fantin-Latour,' as my father described him. In his hands everyday summer flowers mysteriously achieve monumentality and neo-classical grandeur; the sensuousness of the roses here is offset by the daring conceit – only noticed upon a closer look - of one of their petals floating down, still-life no longer as still, and surely unprecedented in European flower painting at this time? The boldness of the lighting, and the contrast of the robust form of the vase, set slightly off-centre in the composition, with its delicate contents are all hallmarks of this remarkable and strange artist. These same characteristics can also be found in the best-known Berjon painting of this same year, the imposing Salon piece in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with its open drawer and sinister shark's skull (*Still Life with Flowers, Shells, a Shark's Head and Petrifications*).



It is always engaging to speculate whether artists which we admire today ever knew of one another, but in this case it seems unlikely, so different were they in outlook and circumstances. Would each have dismissed the other's efforts as derivative or formulaic? The silk industry in Lyon afforded Berjon his initial training, during which he contributed designs for hundreds of 'broderies'. Similarly, Redouté is famous for his painstaking drawings of the myriad species of roses and lilies which flourished at Joséphine's Chateau de Malmaison, and which were published in the great series of botanical books which immortalised his name. But, like Berjon, Redouté was first and foremost an original and dedicated flower painter, not the 'botanical artist' he is erroneously and all-too-often referred to. In his posy here, the undiminished strength of the colours, the tonality and piercing detail are in themselves extraordinary; but what further distinguishes this particular watercolour is the latent artistry. Liberated from the more prosaic, dry technique he adopted for purely botanical documentation, Redouté here paints flowers for the sheer virtuoso joy of his art, and these common flowers are given the same care as one of the Empress's exotic and costly cultivars. Because it is prohibitively difficult to see his original work, the technique of watercolour on parchment in which Redouté remains unrivalled has not always been fully understood. It is now known that, contrary to previous accepted wisdom, his watercolour pigment remains on the surface of the vellum, even after two centuries, and has not penetrated the skin, nor ever will. Thus the disturbing thought that the vellum could be easily wiped clean with some damp cotton wool seems to accord with our notions of still-life painting and the ephemeral nature of flowers: Berjon would perhaps have delighted in Redouté's fragile creations after all!

James Mitchell

*More than half of which are to be found in public collections – Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts; Paris, The Louvre (acquired in 1974), Montpellier, Musée Fabre; Philadelphia, Museum of Art (1981), The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio (2015) and Stockholm, The Nationalmuseum (2020).

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JOHN MITCHELL FINE PAINTINGS

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17 AVERY ROW, BROOK STREET,
LONDON W1K 4BF
TEL: +44 (0)20 7493 7567

WWW.JOHNMITCHELL.NET

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