



Jean-Jacques Bachelier (1724 - 1806)

Descent from the Cross

oil on canvas

laid on panel

30.4 x 22.5 cm.

Literature:

L'Année Littéraire, 1761, p.81;

Mercure de France, oct. 1761, p.111;

Diderot, 1761, 1967, rééd.

Provenance:

Private Collection UK, until 2024.

Exhibition:

1761, Salon, Paris, no.66.

It's not without some astonishment that one passes most of the paintings done by this painter (M. Bachelier) to a sketch in grisaille, in which he has depicted a Descent from the Cross. Without overpraising it this piece shows where great art can come from.

Mercur de France, October 1761

This striking *grisaille* oil sketch depicting the Descent from the Cross was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1761 where it stunned the viewing public, not only for its ingenious treatment of the venerated subject, but for how astonishingly uncharacteristic it was for the artist. By the time this painting was exhibited at the Salon, Jean-Jacques Bachelier (1724-1806) was a renowned animal and still life painter, whose flower paintings were held in high regard. Although flower painting was a relatively minor genre in the mid-eighteenth century at the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, Bachelier's precocious ability in this field earned him a place at the Académie. His talent for decorative painting was recognised by senior academicians such as Charles-Antoine Coypel, and as a result Bachelier, who came from a family of modest means, was to receive a Royal pension from July 1749 to support his artistic education. The following year he was recognised by the president of the Académie, Jean-Baptiste Oudry as '*aspirant peintre dans le genre des fleurs*', and was definitively received into the Académie on 30th September 1752. Indeed, the last Bachelier painting to pass through our hands was an elegant flowerpiece from 1753. The contrast between that bouquet, with its colourful blossoms and airy blue backdrop, and the drama of this deposition nearly a decade later, reveal to what extent Bachelier had set his artistic ambitions beyond decorative painting in the intervening years.

From 1751 to 1767 Bachelier exhibited consistently at the biennial Salon. Having shown his aptitude for flower painting and gained admission to the Académie, he set himself to become a '*peintre d'histoire*' a title and status awarded to artists capable of painting the most noble and challenging genre in art.

Through the later 1750s he increasingly exhibited history subjects alongside his flower and animal paintings, such as the *Resurrection of Christ* (1759, untraced) and *The Death of Milo of Croton* (1761, National Gallery of Ireland). These pictures were certainly part of a deliberate campaign to prove his ability at history painting. His efforts were rewarded in 1763 when he exhibited *The Death of Abel* and attained the esteemed title of *peintre d'histoire* and was made a *professeur* of the Académie, no doubt a satisfying elevation for an artist of humble origin. It is a revealing aspect of Bachelier's character that once he had attained this title, he replaced his original morceau de réception, a decorative *Portrait de Louis XV en médaillon, entouré de fleurs* (1752) with *The Death of Abel* to shore up his reputation as a history painter for posterity. And seemingly unsatisfied with this work in the following year, he amended his reception piece again with *Roman Charity* (1764, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts). As he was rising to the top of the Académie the ambitious Bachelier painted this *Descent from the Cross*.

History painting was considered the highest form of art, both in terms of subject matter and in the demands it made on the artist. A successful painting had to convey a narrative drama through a complex multi-figure scene, requiring a mastery of anatomy, gesture, light and colour, all contained within a balanced and legible composition. It was Bachelier's working practice when creating complex paintings such as this to paint a small *grisaille* version, before enlarging the scene in the final work. *Un ours attaqué par sept chiens* (Fig 2, Musée de Tours) is another example of this practice. The *Descent from the Cross* with its complex twelve figure composition was clearly the subject of some creative effort for Bachelier, as he first refined the idea in a preliminary chalk drawing (Fig 3, Paris, École

nationale supérieure des beaux-arts).

The drama of the Passion is conveyed through the gestures of the actors; two figures stand on ladders having just detached Christ from the cross, the upper one holds the pincers that removed the nails, he is traditionally identified as Nicodemus. Lower down Christ is supported by Joseph of Arimathaea and St John on a linen sheet, to the right the Virgin swoons, while Mary Magdalene kneels, kissing the feet of Christ. The third woman on the far right who thrusts her hands out can be identified as Mary the wife of Clopas whom John's Gospel mentions being present at the crucifixion. The other figures who are harder to distinguish stand around the main cast, wringing their hands in anguish. For a subject so commonly depicted in European art Bachelier presents us with an energetic and original vision. The figure halfway up the ladder whose bare back faces the viewer is a wholly unique motif. The two ladders placed on either side of the cross form a pyramidal composition, which is balanced by the frieze-like lower third, where the draped figures are rhythmically arranged to focus our attention on the lifeless yet serene body of Christ. The ingenuity of this design was not lost on contemporary viewers, as a review in the October 1761 edition of *Mercure de France* wrote:

'A wise and ingenious sequence in the composition, with appropriate and striking effects of expression and light, everything that would suffice to constitute the great Painter, would be found in the development of this beautiful intention, if it were executed in a painting as successfully as in this sketch.'

Even the great philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot, who rarely had kind words to say about Bachelier's efforts in history painting, had to concede *'There is a sense of boldness, some movement and warmth in the Descent from the Cross sketch.'*

Despite the impact this small 'intention' made at the Salon it was never realised into a full-sized painting. We can only speculate as to why the project was never completed. Perhaps the sketch was a proposal for a larger commission (such as his earlier *Resurrection of Christ* of 1759 intended for the Church of Saint Sulpice, Paris) or painted simply to advertise his ability to create such work?

After having secured the title of *peintre d'histoire* and his professorship in 1763 Bachelier's output of exhibited paintings declined as he increasingly dedicated himself to teaching, and to the formation of what would become his greatest legacy, *L'École gratuite de dessin*. Parallel to his painting career Bachelier been an active educator in the arts. As early as 1751, before he was even accepted into the Académie, he was appointed the artistic director of porcelain manufacture at Vincennes and later at Sèvres; a post he maintained until September 1793 when dismissed by the Revolutionary committee. His role was to oversee the design of decorative projects and to guide the artists in their execution. He observed first-hand the difficulties workers confronted when copying designs and recognised the need for formal training in the decorative arts that was available to all. His modest upbringing and own struggles to support his early artistic training no doubt informed his belief in the importance of young craftsmen having access to an education. He envisioned a drawing school for the benefit of all working in the decorative arts; goldsmiths, fabric, tapestry, cabinet and porcelain makers. A school that crucially was free to enrol in and sponsored by a royal bursary system. To that end, from 1754 he ran a drawing course for the manufacture workers, the genesis of what would evolve into his free drawing school. *L'École gratuite de dessin* opened 19th September 1766 and met with immediate success, becoming oversubscribed with students within a year, reflecting the demand for training that Bachelier had recognised. The school still exists, albeit after several changes of name and location, and is today the

École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, in the collection of which Fig 3 is fittingly held today.

Bachelier's legacy is undoubtedly that of a pioneer in public education. From 1767 he was fully occupied in his various teaching roles as a professor at the Académie and a director at his drawing school and the porcelain manufactures, and did not exhibit at the Salon again. This *Descent from the Cross* was painted during his rise through the Académie, before his vocation as an educator occupied him fully, and it is an enticing vision of what this talented, multi-disciplinary artist could have achieved had he pursued history painting.