



IMPERIAL ART
Paris Beijing



François Pascal Simon GÉRARD, known as the Baron Gérard. 1770-1837.

Hercules protector of the arts. 1785.

Signed « Gérard » et dated « 1785 »

Blacklead, quill and black ink

25,4 x 36,2 cm

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The Baron Gérard

François Gérard was born in 1770 in Rome where his father was intendant to the Cardinal de Bernis, French ambassador to the Pope. At the age of twelve, he left Rome for Paris. Showing early aptitude for drawing, he first joined the studio of the sculptor Augustin Pajou, a more affordable solution for his parents than training with a painter. Then it is with Nicolas Guy Brenet painter of the Academy that he continues his training. He then presents at the age of fourteen a completed composition of history painting to his master begging him to authorize him to create the painting. Facing Brenet's categorical refusal, Gérard persisted and, in within a few days, produced a composition of *La Peste*. This early work already reveals the talent of the future painter. In 1786, Jacques Louis David's *Serment des Horaces* upset the established aesthetic and fascinated aspiring painters, who rushed to the artist's studio. Among them, Gérard, who was then introduced to the great genre and produced historical or allegorical subjects. In 1789, he was defeated by his rival Girodet on the theme of Joseph recognized by his brothers and came second in the Grand Prix de Rome. The following year, the death of his father led him to abandon the competition and travel to Rome at his own expense. However, his stay was short, fearing being put on the list of immigrants and thereby losing the very small family pension, he had no choice but to return to Paris. Losing his mother in 1793, he had to support his two brothers by himself. He was then selected by David alongside Girodet and Chauvet to participate in the new project designed by publisher Pierre Didot. The latter, who took over the family publishing house with his brother, came up with an ambitious new collection, consisting of ancient works illustrated by the best artists of the moment in a monumental format: the folio. Gérard thus produced plates for the prestige editions of the works of Virgil published in 1798 and for the works of Racine published in 1799. In 1794, his drawing of August 10, 1792, earned him with the first prize in the competition opened by the Convention: a housing and a studio at the Louvre. History painter and talented portraitist, his activity extends from the Revolution to the Restoration.



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This drawing dated 1785 is an early work by Gérard, which he made while he was in Brenet's studio. The anecdote relating his determination to produce a composition of *La Peste* at the age of fourteen confirms that

he already possessed a virtuosity in drawing. Further proof of this precocious talent, in September 1785 he won a third medal at the Academy's district prize, with a figure of a man with a shield. It was therefore the same year that he produced this scene representing a Hercules probably writing his exploits on a shield facing

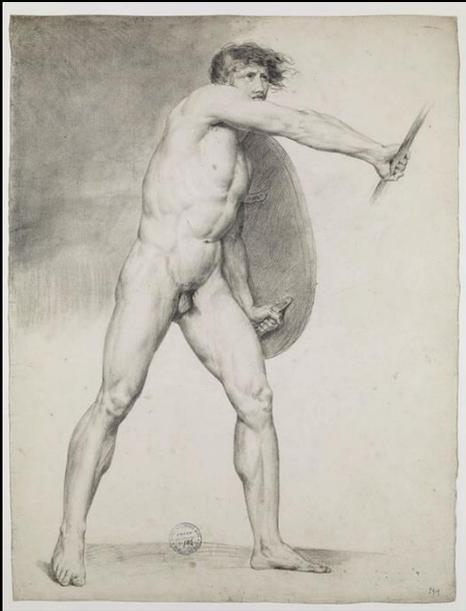
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François Pascal Simon Gérard

Man holding a shield

1785

Black chalk, stump

60,1 x 45,6 cm

Ecole des Beaux-arts de Paris

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an audience of female characters. Work of a magnificent brushwork, the meticulousness that Gérard brings to the details is breathtaking, the work done on the drapes and the hair demonstrates the qualities of a successful designer. The influence of his time with the sculptor Pajou is very noticeable, the modeling of the characters recalls ancient statuary and the treatment of the naked body of Hercules seems greatly inspired by the statue of Hercules Farnese. The accuracy of the line and the harmony of the composition seize the spectator who is first captivated by the quality of the realization before wondering about the reading of the scene. Gérard seems to have created a composite scene using several mythological references allowing him to try out different exercises while maintaining consistency in the composition. If the character of Hercules is easily identifiable thanks to his club and the skin of the Nemean lion he is wearing, the other figures are sometimes more difficult to analyze. The female group seems to be composed of muses because of the attributes they display, the woman holding a lyre would then be Euterpe (the music) or Terpsichore (the dance). In front of her the two women, each holding a tablet and a stylus, could correspond to Calliope (epic poetry) and Erato (lyric poetry). In the background, the two women bent over a book could be the muses Clio (history) and Polyhymnia (rhetoric). Although each of them cannot be clearly identified, the attributes indicate that these figures work in all cases as allegories referring to the

arts. The subject would then be a well-known mythological theme, that of Hercules musagète, or Hercules protector of the muses and by extension of the arts. The epithet "musagète" is generally added to the figures of Apollo and Hercules, in Rome the Temple of Hercules Musarum built by Marcus Fulvius Nobilior is dedicated both to the hero and the muses. This idea of Hercules leading the muses finds an echo in the action accomplished by him writing on a shield. This image derives from a widespread Roman mythological motif, that of Victory writing on a shield. Appearing on Trajan's Column, this figure will be extremely popular, especially during the Italian Renaissance. The scene could then be interpreted as Hercules listing his works while the muses take note of them to sing them and engrave them in posterity. This action probably takes place in front of a statue of Nike the Victory or Tyche the Fortune. The figure being cut it is not possible to know if it is winged, however the palm that it holds in the hand refers to the figure of Fortune, Glory, or Victory. The scene is overlooked by several enigmatic figures. The character on the right who rises on a quadriga could be Apollo or Helios driving the chariot of the sun, but the presence



The Victory writing on a shield

113 av. J.-C.

Plaster cast after a low relief, 110 x 2,5 cm

Trajan's Column,

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of the muses seems to reinforce the thesis of Apollo. Regarding the helmeted character wearing a tunic, it is possible to put forward the idea that it is a woman even if the features are not very discernible. The presence of the helmet coupled with the female gender then pleads for Athena. Just below a male, winged figure seems to be spreading something over the assembly of muses. The most plausible hypothesis as to its identification



Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *The Genius of Alexander I*,
1814
Oil on canvas,
110 x 84.5 cm
Hermitage Museum

is that of the figure of the Genius, the Roman Genius, a sort of winged divine double associated with each man and representing his immortal part. The study of his iconography reveals that he is often associated with glory, as demonstrated by the work of Vigée-Lebrun, in which the genius of Alexander I notes on a shield the exploits of the general. The character of the genius therefore works in its classical representation with a connection to glory, victory and the action of materially engraving its achievement, which perfectly echoes Gérard's drawing and reinforces our identification. The couple of characters on the right, each riding a horse corresponds to the Dioscuri, recognizable by their attribute the star, which recalls their astral metamorphosis. Their presence can refer to the idea of apotheosis, which would give a second meaning to the scene or rather a continuity in the reading. Added to the theme of Hercules musagete, haloed by glory, who inscribes his bravery in posterity, is the apotheosis of the hero, who, oscillating between the terrestrial world (symbolized by the tiny window that the artist opens on a pastoral scene) and divine world, achieves its final metamorphosis thanks to the works accomplished on earth. Hercules is therefore in a place between two, he is no longer on earth since she is visible

below but has not yet reached the celestial world. This divine space is materialized by the presence of the god Apollo initiating a movement towards the heavens, and by the figure of the genius who symbolizes the immortal part of the hero and the reference to Castor and Pollux, the twins metamorphosed into stars. Three spaces coexist in the drawing and allow the artist to demonstrate his mastery of the perception of different planes and depth. Through a complex composition Gérard manages to underline both his artistic dexterity but also the extent of his ancient culture. A work from the artist's youth, it already reveals the qualities of a future great painter.

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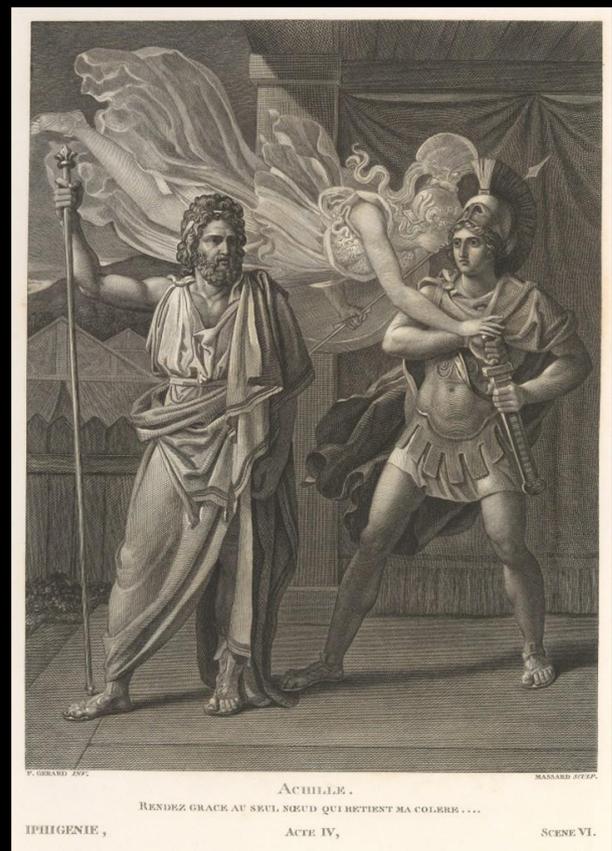
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Baron Gérard will subsequently produce many drawings in this style and inspired by mythology, such as on the publication from 1791, by Pierre Didot, of a new ambitious collection of works by ancient and modern authors, illustrated by the best artists of the moment, in a monumental format: the folio. Or as for the drawing acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in Caen representing Achilles swearing to avenge the death of Patroclus.



Clytemnestra for Iphigenia of Racine
Engraving after à drawing by François Pascal Simon
GÉRARD.
1801
50 x 35 cm
Edition Pierre Didot
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Achille for Iphigenia of Racine
Engraving after à drawing by François Pascal Simon
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Achilles swearing to avenge the death of Patroclus

François Pascal Simon GÉRARD.

Black pencil

26,8 x 35,5 cm

Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts

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