

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

CHARLES EISEN

Valenciennes 1720 – Brussels 1778
French School

SELF-PORTRAIT IN HIS STUDIO

Oil on canvas
H. 0,28 m; W. 0,25 m
Signed lower left

DATE: c. 1760

PROVENANCE:
Private collection, France

Charles Dominique Joseph Eisen was known for the ornamentation of books in the 18th century, of which he was almost the archetype. He was especially famous for his tailpieces and vignettes in the rococo style. He was the son and a pupil of the painter François Eisen who settled in Brussels around 1732. In 1741, he entered the workshop of Philippe Le Bas in Paris to learn printmaking. He was also a pupil of the Académie Royale de Peinture where he won a second medal for drawing from the live model in January 1746.¹ Many young talented printmakers frequented Le Bas's studio including Moreau le Jeune and Cochin.

In 1747, one of his first important projects was published, an edition of Boileau for which he provided the illustrations. At the same time, Eisen created paintings and was admitted to the Confrérie de Saint Luc in 1750 as a history painter. It was as a very talented designer of vignettes that Eisen became famous from then on. In 1762, La Fontaine's "Contes et Nouvelles" was published and these are his most famous illustrations. Madame de Pompadour appreciated his work and asked him, as well as Boucher and Cochin, for drawing and printmaking lessons. Benefitting from such protection at the court, he was given positions as professor of drawing and painting and was made draughtsman to the Cabinet du Roi. But his rude manners and loose morals led to him losing the Marquise's protection. He seems to have fallen into disgrace at court for having made and worn a costume that was similar to one he had designed for the king. From then on he could not hope to become a member of the Académie Royale. In debt and pursued by his creditors, Eisen found refuge in Brussels in 1777 where he died in January of the following year.

Painting was for Eisen a complementary activity compared to his countless illustrations, but it was very important to him. He depicted all the genres in painting, religious works, mythological subjects, gallant scenes and still lifes. In her catalogue of the artist's paintings published in 1961,² Claire Lemoine-Isabeau listed sixty-two works. When Eisen died in 1778 and his wife's apartment was sealed, the inventory included a self-portrait of the artist painted on canvas.

¹ Antoine Cahen, "Les Prix de quartier à l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture", *BSHAF*, 1993, p. 73.

² Claire Lemoine-Isabeau, "Les peintures de Charles Eisen", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LVIII, October 1961, p. 223-236.

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Could it be our painting? Claire Lemoine-Isabeau, who was not aware of our painting, found trace of another self-portrait, signed and dated 1763.³ Oval in format, this painting shows him half-length, three-quarters to the left, his hand resting on volumes he had illustrated.

Our painting shows Eisen sitting at his easel in his painting studio, working on a composition showing *Rinaldo and Armida*, an episode from the poem of the *Gerusalemme Liberata (Jerusalem Delivered)* by Tasso. Rinaldo, an unarmed knight is reclining at the feet of the seductive Armida. Putti are preparing to install a magic mirror in which the lovers will look at themselves.

³ *Self portrait*, 1763, oil on canvas, H. 0,57 m ; L. 0,46 m, signed and dated: "Ch. Eisen f. 1763", Bourgeois sale, 27-29 October 1904, Cologne, no. 4; current location unknown; cf Claire Lemoine-Isabeau, "Les peintures de Charles Eisen", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LVIII, October 1961, p. 231, no. 27.