

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

ERNEST MEISSONIER

Lyon 1815 – Paris 1891
French School

HORSE OF THE *GUIDES*, NAPOLEON'S ARMY

Oil on paper laid down on panel
H. 0,64 m; W. 0,35 m
Monogrammed lower right

DATE: 1877

PROVENANCE: Private Collection

At the 1864 Salon, Meissonier, who until then had been known as a genre painter, began a second career as a painter of military subjects mostly from the Napoleonic period. Abandoning contemporary history to return to a legendary past, he exhibited *1814, The French Campaign* (oil on panel, H. 0,52 m; W. 0,77 m, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). This new specialization proved to be much better suited to his imagination and his methods of research. He was talented at giving realistic details to his vision, which he prepared conscientiously. He researched enthusiastically the habits of his main characters and, whenever possible, he used accessories from the period. Meissonier prepared each of the figures and horses separately on small panels.¹ It was also at this time that he began to make small sculptures of certain equestrian motifs to work on a model in three dimensions that could make movement static. Meissonier's main source was the *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire* by Adolphe Thiers which was published in 20 volumes between 1845 and 1862.

Our painting is a study for a *Guide* on horseback from Napoleon's army. The companies of *Guides* on horseback formed a group of a few dozen men around the leadership of the various armies and were charged with the protection of the leaders' escort as well as opening up routes. The most famous are the horseback *Guides* of the Italian army of 1796 and 1797. Reorganized by Bonaparte when he was made leader of the Italian army, the company was put under the leadership of Jean-Baptiste Bessières (1768-1813). Destined mainly for escorts, they supplied specific positions, reconnaissance activities under the orders of the aide-de-camp of the leading general or more simply his close escort. They were also used on occasion as an additional force for audacious activities or as a reserve force in battle.

¹ *Ernest Meissonier. Rétrospective*, exh. cat. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, 25 March – 27 June 1993, p. 191.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS



Ernest Meissonier, *Chasseur on Horseback (Guide)*,
Oil on panel, H. 0,22 m; W. 0,15m, New York, The
Forbes Magazine Collection