

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes

(1824 – Paris, 1898)

Saint Lazarus, Mary Magdalen and Saint Martha Disembarking in Provence, c.1876

Oil on canvas
225 x 219.8 cm

Provenance:

- Alphonse Puvis de Chavannes (1851-1930), the artist's nephew;
- between 1899 and 1905 on deposit with the Galerie Durand-Ruel (Paris) and finally returned to the above;
- Thence by descent until now.

Exhibition:

- *Exposition de tableaux, esquisses et dessins de Puvis de Chavannes*, Paris, Galerie Durand-Ruel, June-July 1899¹, n° 36;
- *Große Berliner Kunstausstellung*, Berlin, 1903, n° 738 (repr.);
- *Salon d'Automne*, Paris, Grand Palais, 15 October – 15 November 1904, n° 13;
- *Puvis de Chavannes*, The Hague, Haagsche Kunstkring, 1905, n° 3;
- *Puvis de Chavannes et la peinture lyonnaise du XIX^e siècle*, Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1 June– 6 November 1937, n° 49;
- *Puvis de Chavannes 1824-1898*, Paris, Grand Palais, 26 November 1976 - 14 February 1977; Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 18 March – 1 May 1977, n° 196;
- *Arcadia by the Shore – The Mythic World of Puvis de Chavannes*, Tokyo, The Bunkamura Museum of Art, 2 January - 9 March 2014; Matsue, Shimane Art Museum, 20 March - 16 June 2014, cat. 27.

Literature:

- "Exposition de tableaux, esquisses et dessins de Puvis de Chavannes", *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*, 1899, n°24, p. 219;
- G. Mourey, "Some sketches by Puvis de Chavannes", *International Studio*, 1900, vol. IX, pp. 17-18, repr. p. 12;
- E. Chauvelon, "Les affiches d'art à l'école. Puvis de Chavannes éducateur.", *La revue pédagogique*, volume 36, January-June 1900. p. 307;
- M. Martersteig, "Große Berliner Kunstausstellung", *Die Zukunft*, 1903, vol. 44, p. 68;
- H. Rosenhagen, "Die Große Berliner Kunstausstellung 1903", *Die Kunst für Alle*, 1903, XVIII^{ème} année, p. 428;
- C. Ponsonailhe, "Le Salon d'Automne", *La Revue illustrée*, 1904, 19^eannée, n° 21, n.p., repr.;
- A. Brown-Price, *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes*, New Haven, 2010, vol. 2 ("A catalogue raisonné of the painted work"), pp. 217-219, cat. 244, repr.;
- B. Puvis de Chavannes, L. d'Argencourt, D. Lobstein, *Aquarelles et Lavis de Pierre Puvis de Chavannes*, exh. cat. Cuiseaux, 12 September – 28 September 2014, n.l., 2014, p. 15, repr.

¹ Following a mistake in the catalogue of the exhibition *Puvis de Chavannes et la peinture lyonnaise du XIX^e siècle* (Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1 June – 6 November 1937, n° 49), all the publications about our painting mention an exhibition at Durand-Ruel in 1897. In reality it never took place, which has been confirmed by the gallery's archives.

Lyonnais by birth, Puvis de Chavannes studied the humanities in Paris, at the Lycée Henri IV before becoming a pupil of Henri Scheffer, Delacroix and Thomas Couture. Fascinated from early on by mural decorations, he admired Chassériau's work and the loss of this artist's frescoes at the Cour des Comptes during the Commune had an effect on him. For a long time, Puvis was an isolated figure whose art was unclassifiable and aroused only mockery. He created private decorative schemes, for his brother in 1854 and for Claude Vignon's hôtel in 1866. After many years working in the margins of artistic life, his participation at the Salon of 1861 with *War* and *Peace* marked the arrival of success. These paintings, completed by a series of other compositions, formed the décor of the museum of Amiens, one of the artist's great triumphs. Finally pampered by the Third Republic, Puvis practiced easel painting alongside the execution of many public commissions that brought him glory. His art, made from simplification, balance and flatness, and synthesis, which had been met with incomprehension, now responded to the ambition of great decorative programmes as they included an appreciation of the needs of the specific context. Far from wanting to "make holes in" the walls, his painting returned to tradition by finding inspiration in frescoes and early Italian artists. He covered walls with an elegiac and peaceful world comprised of clean lines and subdued colours. Communication through the symbol, simplification of drawing, synthesis of faces and a feeling of timelessness contrast with the academic art of the time and carry the seeds of much of 20th century art. *The Poor Fisherman*, exhibited in 1881, was the first painting by Puvis de Chavannes to be bought by the State at the Salon: it is emblematic of his genius that the Symbolists claimed him as a major precursor. In 1895, Rodin presided over a banquet in his honour that brought together over 500 artists. Puvis de Chavannes, maker of decorations at the Panthéon, Boston Public Library, and the Sorbonne as well as in the museums of Amiens, Marseille, Lyon and Rouen was a fundamental influence, not only for the Nabis and Neo-Impressionists, but also for Picasso and Matisse.

In 1899, just after Puvis de Chavannes' death, a retrospective exhibition opened in his honour at the Galerie Durand-Ruel. The large painting presented here was lent by the artist's family and given the title of *Les Saintes Marie*. The writer for *La Chronique des Arts et de la curiosité* wrote a commentary about it, "the sketched group of the Saints Mary landing at Aigues-Mortes is part of the Pantheon series; it was originally intended to be placed above the isolated panel showing the saint in prayer."² This very explicit reference, which curiously has not been used until now, clarifies certain issues about chronology and destination that have been raised over the years. A painting created at the same time as Puvis's first decorative programme for the Panthéon (1875-1876), but not connected to it, according to some scholars,³ a later work from the mid-1890s, mysterious regarding its destination and a truly "modernist" statement for its spectacular synthesis, for others:⁴ this was the question. Beyond the fact that, in our view, chronology is not the be-all and end-all of art history and these two hypotheses are not fundamentally an oxymoron (a work from the 1870s can be innovative and experimental without belonging to the artist's final period), the response to these questions is now absolutely clear. *St. Lazarus and his Sisters Mary Magdalen and Saint Martha Landing in Provence*, is in fact a preparatory work for the upper section of Puvis's first decoration at the Panthéon. This

² "Exposition de tableaux, esquisses et dessins de Puvis de Chavannes", *La Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité*, 1899, n°24, p. 219.

³ Such as Aimée Brown-Price who mentions the reference to the *Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité* in her bibliography on the painting however, without citing its text, although she concludes with the same date as us through a stylistic analysis of the painting, Aimée Brown-Price, *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, A Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Work*, Yale University Press, 2010, II, cat. 244, p. 217-218.

⁴ As Jacques Foucart suggests, with aesthetic arguments that are also practical: if such an important work was in fact created in the 1870s, Puvis would have shown it at his "key exhibition" of 1887. We shall see that this argument no longer applies. *Puvis de Chavannes*, exh. cat. Paris, Grand Palais, 1977, n° 196, p. 217.

painting was thus designed to be installed above the famous *Saint Genevieve at Prayer*. In fact, the accuracy of the *Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité*, a supplement of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, should not be questioned. Thus there can be no confusion between the two isolated figures (*Saint Genevieve at Prayer* and *Saint Genevieve Watches over Paris*) of the two cycles by Puvis at the Panthéon, which are twenty years apart. Nor is it credible that his family could have forgotten the destination of a work created in the 1890s as soon as 1899, and to confuse it with a much earlier project. In addition, on the photograph reproduced for the exhibition in *The Studio*, the painting seems to show the marks of having been rolled. This would not be very logical if it had only been painted a few years earlier and not several decades beforehand.⁵

Although it is crucial, none of the published references to this painting cite the *Chronique des arts et de la curiosité* text about it. This could explain why opinions about its dating and destination vary from 1876 to the 1890s. The “discussion” is however not without foundation, or more precisely, it could be comprehensible in aesthetic terms. On the one hand, it is possible to wonder how in 1876 Puvis could have imagined a work of this size with such monumentality, a treatment that is so synthetic, with its refined drawing, bright colours with a beige sky and golden halos (made from a sort of bronzine that is partially oxidized); on the other hand, if the painting does date to the 1890s, the circumstances under which it could have been created and for what purpose need to be questioned. No commission or any monumental project provides any justification for the creation of an easel painting of this size at that date. In addition, it cannot be connected to the second programme of the Panthéon as we know Puvis was not able even to start the frieze section for it. Raised to the status of a convenient testament when considered to be closer to the end of the century than the 1870s, however, there is no logical place for it in that period of the artist’s production. The certainty about its original destination, confirmed in addition by its format which corresponds exactly to the part of the frieze that is isolated above the *Saint Genevieve in Prayer* of 1876, sheds new light on the genesis, the context and understanding of the work’s history. Certainly, the painting is not in the location in the church, now Panthéon, for which it was intended. But it is precisely this lack of connection between the work and its initial destination that explains its isolated situation and the questions raised. What happened?

On 7 May 1874, Philippe de Chennevières the *Directeur des Beaux-Arts* described in his report to the minister Oscar Bardi de Fourtou the programme of painted and sculptural decoration that would adorn the “Basilique Nationale de Ste Geneviève”, “where the legend of the Patron Saint of Paris will be combined with the religious history of France”.⁶ The first of the artists mentioned, Puvis de Chavannes, received for the architectural elements, the four murals that form the lower section of the decoration; he was told to evoke the saint’s pastoral life in a scene in the three intercolumniations on the left and her education in the spaces between the isolated columns on the right. Regarding the four “metopes” of the upper area, the secretary of State suggested a procession of saints, recalling corteges of pilgrims coming to adore relics. In describing his iconographic programme for this frieze, Chennevières mentions the “first apostles of Gaul” and cites “St. Lazarus of Marseille” as the first. Other bishops, then martyrs follow and lastly, mentioned as “*divers*”, “St Magdalen at the Sainte Baume” and “St Marthe at Tarascon”. The upper section is structured in the same way as the lower area: there are four areas between columns (fig. 1). The general dynamic of the lower mural, as it was conceived by the artist in accordance with the authorities’ wishes was of 1 + 3, from right to left. Initially therefore Puvis probably thought of a first image for the right “metope” above the praying saint,

⁵ G. Mourey, “Some sketches by Puvis de Chavannes”, *The Studio*, 1899, vol. XVIII, n° 79, p. 17, repr. p. 12.

⁶ “où la légende de la Patronne de Paris se combinerait avec l’histoire religieuse de la France”, Paris, Archives Nationales, F21 4403.



Fig. 1 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *The Childhood of Saint Genevieve*, 1875-76, Paris, Panthéon.

in order to follow the same logic. He combined three figures mentioned in the iconographic programme who are connected by sacred history, since Saint Lazarus, Saint Mary Magdalen, and Saint Martha were said to have arrived in Provence together to convert a land that was still pagan. This is referred to by the ancient architecture visible in the landscape, possibly inspired by the Greco-Roman temple of Diana or Apollo evoked by the painter in his *Marseille Greek Colony* of 1869 (Marseille, Palais Longchamp). According to the Gospels and the Golden Legend, Lazarus, who was resurrected, is accompanied on his journey to Gaul by Saint Martha his sister and by Mary of Magdala or Mary-Magdalen, among others. The painter created a certain number of sketches showing these first Christian heroes of Gaul disembarking. The first figure is in a sketchbook (fig. 2): the artist has here sketched half a dozen figures in a mountainous landscape with indeterminate architecture and perhaps a boat. The format of this sketch is still horizontal and seems especially to be the formalization of a simple idea. Soon the square format will reveal an idea intended precisely for the Panthéon panel. A large pen and brown ink drawing on tracing paper, unknown until recently and therefore absent from the catalogue raisonné, repeats the idea of about ten figures (fig. 3); in the left section, indigenous figures greet the group of three with presents while a temple overlooks the beach. On the right, the three saints are already in positions that are close to the final composition. However, Mary Magdalen is not wearing a veil, Saint Martha is seen from the back in three quarters and graphic halos in perspective indicate the sacredness of the figures. A preparatory drawing for Mary Magdalen alone probably corresponds to this project (fig. 4) as well as another study of St. Martha, but she is still shown in three



Fig. 2 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Lazarus and the Saints Mary*, private collection.

quarters and not in profile (fig. 5).⁷ It is also likely that the head study exhibited in 1977 (n° 124) and described by Jacques Foucart as “one of the most modernist that can be



Fig. 4 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Martha*, Shepherd Gallery, New York (in 1977).

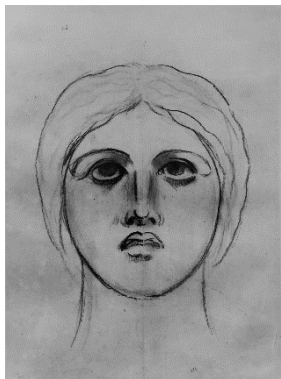


Fig 6 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for the Face of St. Martha*, with the artist's heirs.

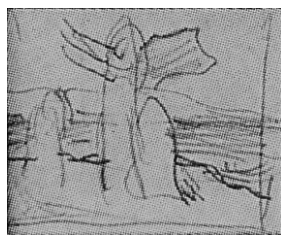


Fig. 7 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Lazarus and the Saints Mary*, private collection.

imaged” corresponds to this stage of Puvis’s thinking (fig. 6). The face is not yet veiled, but the hair is short and the head is already strongly circular in shape. Three other studies show Puvis abandoning the additional figures and concentrating the composition solely on the triad: a succinct sketch (fig. 7), a wash (fig. 8) and a study drawn in greater detail (fig. 9). The placing of the figures is the same. Finally, two other studies, one drawn the other painted, confirm the definitive poses: in the first the two saints are still turned towards Saint Lazarus (fig. 10) while in the second which is very close to the final work, Mary Magdalen, wearing a veil is seen frontally while Saint Martha is in profile (fig. 11). These two sketches include the decorative border that confirms the destination of the project: the Panthéon. All of these drawings show the gradual development of the motif as we find it in our painting.⁸

Having reduced the project to three figures according to a triple scheme with a pyramidal structure, which he had just tested with *The Fisherman’s Family* (fig. 12) and to which he would return with *Young Girls by the Seaside* (fig. 13), and conscious of the more decorative character of the frieze compared to the lower register, Puvis has simplified the scene. The figures are now formed in a hieratic manner in masses comprised of flat areas with subtle colours, pale pink, mauve, grey, straw yellow, and browns. The colour of the sky, a light ochre, borders on a sort of unreal unity recalling the gold backgrounds of early Italian paintings, while the heavy drapery evokes Giotto’s figures in the Scrovegni chapel.



Fig. 3 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Lazarus and the Saints Mary*, private collection, Paris.



Fig. 5 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for Mary Magdalen*, private collection.



Fig. 8 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Lazarus and the Saints Mary*, private collection.

⁷ Paris, Piasa sale, 10 December 2003, lot n° 216.

⁸ There are other drawings for St. Lazarus, some of which have been auctioned, but not reproduced in the catalogues : a study on tracing paper for St. Lazarus (Paris, Audap-Godeau-Solanet, 11 March 1988, lot n° 158); St. Lazarus, graphite on paper (Paris, Renaud sale, 3 March 2001, lot n° 160); two studies for St. Lazarus (Paris, Tajan sale, 15 November 2004, lots n° 207-208); study for St. Lazarus and the two saints Mary (Brest, Thierry Lannon sale, 15 May 2005, n°147).



Fig. 9 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Lazarus and the Saints Mary*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.



Fig. 10 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Lazarus and the Saints Mary*, private collection, Macon.



Fig. 11 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Study for St. Lazarus and the Saints Mary*, private collection.

Gabriel Mourey has emphasized this strong influence and referred to the Padua cycle in his article.⁹ The haloes, originally golden and painted flat, emphasize this archaic dimension. Only the wave, a few natural elements and the temple retain a certain pictorial character. The static nature of the gestures and the arrangement of the three saints give the image an undeniable monumentality. *The Fisherman's Family* was doubtless a model here: the same pose in the male figure, the boat and the general organization of the composition are the same. But the new painting reveals a different synthetic focus. It is probably at this precise time, when our work was almost finished, that Puvis de Chavannes became aware of the difficulties that were to

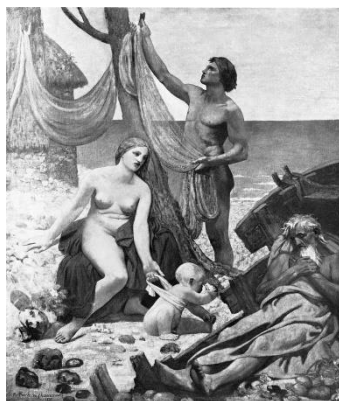


Fig. 12 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *The Fisherman's Family*, 1875, Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, destroyed in 1945 during the American bombing.

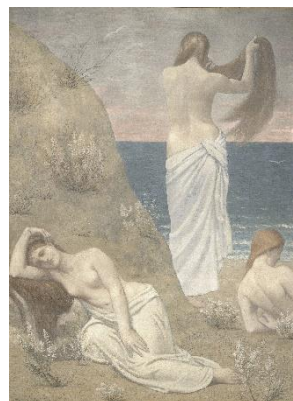


Fig. 13 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Young Girls by the Seaside*, 1879, Paris, Musée d'Orsay (RF 1970 34).

come. This was to form a connection between this space and the rest of the frieze. How do you show the cohort of other saints and martyrs in the three other intercolumniations? No "scene" could in fact show figures from different centuries and which are not connected by any story. However, he probably realized that his painting showed a difference in scale with the lower level of the décor which was already finished. *The Childhood of Saint Genevieve* shows a smaller figure "lost" in a landscape and our painting, with its proportions, would overwhelm the scene. The monumentality that was supposed to be decorative would appear

⁹ G. Mourey, "Some sketches by Puvis de Chavannes", *The Studio*, 1899, vol. XVIII, n° 79, p. 17.

disproportionate and too narrative compared to the painting over which it was to be placed. We can imagine that Puvis then sought a solution, but in vain. He therefore abandoned this painting and reworked the entire upper decoration. This is the only explanation for the frieze that now lines up all the figures according to a system reminiscent of Hippolyte Flandrin's murals, both at Saint-Germain-des-Prés and at Saint-Vincent-de-Paul. Puvis has shown the three figures simply adorned with their attribute: Saint Lazarus with his shroud from his resuscitation, Mary Magdalen with her skull and Saint Martha with the Tarasque (fig. 14). To complete this cortege, he therefore designed a new painting for the right section of the décor and chose an allegorical scene of *Faith, Hope and Charity or the Theological Virtues at Genevieve's Crib* (fig. 15). The figures, against a guilloché gold background, have an allegorical dimension and are in proportion to the rest of the décor, matching the ornamental border easily. Narrative is abandoned in favour of the emblematic. Everything is in order.



Fig. 14 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *Procession des saints* (détail), Paris, Panthéon

From then on, separated from the project to decorate the Pantheon, our painting began a new life. Paradoxically liberated from the constraints of a programme into which it could not be fitted, the canvas, by its forced independence, became an intriguing and singular easel painting. After the 1899 exhibition, it was shown in 1903 at the major *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* (a fact that until now had escaped experts on the artist), and was the subject of several commentaries in the German press. The work's "career" then began: the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1904, an exhibition at The Hague in 1905, then the Puvis de Chavannes exhibition in 1937 where the painting had already lost its genesis since the art historian René Jullian proposed that it was a late work. At the exhibition held in Paris at the Grand Palais and at the National Gallery of Ottawa in Canada in 1976-1977, the painting continued to incite questions and was again considered to be a work of the 1890s. The argument developed by one of the curators seemed at the time to be accurate: if it had been painted around 1876 "a painting this important would obviously have been shown by the artist in his key exhibition of 1887".¹⁰ The idea appears pertinent, unless the painting was the result of a failure in the context of the Pantheon programme. In fact, it is hard to imagine Puvis showing in public a work that was conceived for the monument which he was forced to abandon. The argument is overturned in this way and becomes an additional plea for what is now proven to be obvious.



Fig. 15 - P. Puvis de Chavannes, *La Foi, l'Espérance et la Charité ou Les Vertus théologiques au berceau de Geneviève*, Paris, Panthéon

A souvenir of Puvis de Chavanne's artistic investigations, this masterpiece of simplification of lines, figures and masses, of chromatic analysis and monumentality inspired by the primitives forms part of the artist's evolution towards ever greater simplicity. That this effort is found during the mid-1870s, does not remove anything from the strength of its invention and originality, on the contrary. Puvis would go further along this path, marked by original and audacious creations. Despite its turbulent history, and although it is the result of an abandoned project, this work, which is not at all a sketch, forms part of the group of the most finished and striking works by the artist.

¹⁰ See note 4.