

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM  
FINE ARTS

**HORACE VERNET**

Paris 1789 - id. 1863  
French School

**VESUVIUS ERUPTING**

Oil on paper laid down on canvas  
H. 0,55 m; W. 0,43 m

DATE: c. 1820

PROVENANCE: Private Collection

RELATED WORK:

Our painting is the preparatory study for an oil painting, H. 0,92 m ; L. 0,73 m (two versions: Rome, Galerie Alberto di Castro and Houston, Museum of Fine Arts), one of them exhibited by par Horace Vernet in his studio in 1822, cf Etienne de Jouy, Antoine Jay, *Salon d'Horace Vernet: Analyse historique et pittoresque des quarante-cinq tableaux exposés chez lui en 1822*, Paris, 1822, no. XII "Vue du Vésuve", p. 72-74.

**Famous during the 19th century for his battle paintings, Orientalist scenes and portraits, Horace Vernet was one of those painters who, like his son-in-law Paul Delaroche, or Ary Scheffer, alternated between realism and romanticism.**

A portrait and history painter, Horace Vernet (1789-1863) was a member of a well-known family of artists. His grandfather, Joseph was the famous painter of seascapes who enjoyed the patronage of Louis XV. Carle, his father, who in his early career was a proponent of Neoclassical painting, created battle scenes. His mother, Catherine-Françoise Moreau was a daughter of Moreau the Younger, draughtsman and printmaker for the King's Cabinet under Louis XVI.

He received a rather chaotic education due to the political events and the ups and downs of his father's career. He was sent for a short time to David's studio, before his father recommended him to Géricault with whom he shared a fascination for horses. This explains his highly independent character and his scorn for a certain academic tradition, which also prevented him from winning the Rome Prize in 1810.

**Early Success at the Salon**

That year, Vernet married Louise Pujol, whom he had probably met through Isabey. Despite her lack of fortune, she received a perfect education and had an important network. The La Ferronnays for example were to be very useful for Horace's career. From then, he built up a strong customer base and began to show at the Salon in 1812, where he came to the attention of Napoleon's brother and King of Westphalia, Jérôme Bonaparte, who commissioned an equestrian portrait from him.

# JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

## FINE ARTS

Horace Vernet's early style between 1814 and 1830 should be placed in the context of the work of his contemporaries Géricault and Delacroix who created their best art under the restored Bourbon régime. The paintings Vernet created in this period are fully Romantic. According to Robert Rosenblum,<sup>1</sup> Vernet brought together animals, landscapes and figures with a baroque and exuberant energy that gives the impression that Rubens's tradition full of vigour had been revived to Romantic ends. With his quivering touch full of vitality, Vernet's paintings are permeated with lively and warm colours. His compositions are always supported by a strong feeling for narrative. He also turned to landscape for a while, precisely at that time.

After 1830, Horace Vernet turned to a more naturalistic form of art, giving a precise description of the Holy Land (Hagar and Abraham, Nantes, musée d'Arts). He clearly distinguished himself there from the broader and more freely brushed style of Delacroix by rendering scenes with highly refined precision.

### **Many Official Commissions**

Despite his opposition to the Restoration, Horace Vernet was awarded commissions by the king Charles X, such as ceiling paintings for the Louvre Museum and the Council of State. He was also appointed director of the French Academy in Rome in 1828, where he established a lively atmosphere as soon as he arrived. He stayed there with his wife and daughter until 1834. After his return to Paris, he became professor at the Academy of Fine Arts and the king Louis-Philippe made him one of the main decorators of the Museum of the History of France at Versailles. His large paintings, depicting battles of the First Empire and especially fighting during the Algerian campaign, are among the most popular works of French painting. Vernet's art is in addition essential for the development of Orientalism in France. Accompanying the French Army on battle fields as an official chronicler or traveling alone, he went to Algeria, Syria, Palestine, Turkey and Russia. Always showing great curiosity, a tireless voyager, sometimes on diplomatic missions to the pope or the Tsar, Vernet above all sought a truth that was as accurate as possible.

Official painter to several successive political regimes, Vernet's career ended as official painter to the Second Empire. An entire room was devoted to him at the Universal Exposition of 1855. Like Delaroche and Scheffer, Vernet then became one of the artists supported by the Galerie Goupil, which was also a major publisher of prints. In this way his work was promoted internationally through branches of the gallery and circulated by the art press.

### **A Major Event**

Our painting is the study for *The Vesuvius Erupting*, shown in the artist's studio in 1822, during one of the first private exhibitions ever organized by an artist, in opposition to the Salon. It dates to his first trip to Rome, between January and June 1820 when he travelled with his father, during which he also visited Naples.<sup>2</sup> On 21 February 1820, they witnessed the eruption of

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Rosenblum, exh. cat. *Horace Vernet (1789-1863)*, March-July 1980, Académie de France à Rome, ENSBA Paris, Rome, 1980, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Michallon met the Vernets, father and son, in Rome during February 1820. He wrote to Émile de l'Espine in a letter of 17 February 1820 (Musée du Louvre, département des Arts graphiques): "A few days ago, I had the

## JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM FINE ARTS

Vesuvius which produced a column of smoke and a variety of colours rising above the crater by about 15 metres. The wild and disturbing nature of the volcano offered a perfect subject for an artist of the Romantic period, when calm landscapes controlled by Man were beginning to lose their attraction. The immensity and grandiose force of nature then became a source of marvel.

After his return to Paris, a convinced supporter of Napoleon and sympathiser of the liberal opposition against the Bourbons, Vernet's studio became the meeting place for many opponents. Seven of his paintings were refused at the Salon of 1822, not because of their artistic qualities, which were not questioned at all, but due to their anti-royalist themes. So, he courageously organized an exhibition of his own works and some others in his large studio in the Nouvelle-Athènes quarter. There he exhibited, on a non-commercial basis as the catalogue states, 45 of his painting, including the final version of our *Erupting Vesuvius* (Rome, Galerie Alberto di Castro or Houston, Museum of Fine Arts). The event attracted an enormous amount of interest and led to a publication by two fashionable writers Étienne de Jouy and Antoine Jay, who commented on *Vesuvius Erupting*: "[...] Horace Vernet [...] approached the crater; he has led the viewer to the subterranean entrance. His painting shows this terrible opening carved at the summit of a few arid and burnt rocks. From there escapes, not a light and volatile flame, but a dense, thick strong, so as to say solid, flame; if hell had an entrance, it could only be here! How magnificent is the volcano in its fury! How beautiful and terrible are these torrents of fire; how sterile is nature around this flaming chasm! Such is the despotism, in the unfortunate regions over which it dominates; it demands a high price for its arid pomp and its disastrous magnificence. The great effect of this painting comes from the very picturesque contrast between the Italian sky, the furnace which takes up such a large proportion of the painting, and the dark horror of the landscape. Among a few voyagers who are climbing the formidable rampart of the crater, we see Mr. Horace Vernet himself. This creation by this artist is perhaps the one that recalls in the most striking way the brush of his ancestor Joseph Vernet. Nobody had brought any further than him the art of reproducing the shades and colours of nature with an energy that does not exclude finishing the work. These are precisely the characteristics that distinguish the View of Vesuvius".<sup>3</sup>

Our painting shows the multitude of artistic genres treated by the artist, a tireless worker who excelled not only in large format compositions often showing battles, but also in portraits and, like here, in romantic landscape. In fact, landscape only occupied a negligible place in his corpus; but during the 1820s, before being monopolized by official commissions, he created several landscapes imbued with a Romantic sentiment before the grandeur of nature.

---

chance to find myself with the Vernets. [...] they left yesterday for Naples where they will stay for a very short time".

<sup>3</sup> Étienne de Jouy, Antoine Jay, *Salon d'Horace Vernet : Analyse historique et pittoresque des quarante-cinq tableaux exposés chez lui en 1822*, Paris, 1822, n° XII, Vue du Vésuve, p. 72-74.

Andlauer Hof, Münsterplatz 17, 4051 Basel, Switzerland  
Phone +41 61 681 35 35 - Mobile +41 78 955 77 77  
Fax +41 61 681 75 70 - jean.f.heim@galerieheim.ch - www.galerieheim.ch