

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

CLAUDE JOSEPH VERNET

Avignon 1714 - Paris 1789
French School

STORM SCENE ON A MEDITERRANEAN COAST

Oil on canvas

H. 0,49 m ; L. 0,66 m

Signed and dated lower left: *J. Vernet 1749*

DATE: 1749

PROVENANCE: Private collection

Vernet was the most famous painter of landscape and seascape in the second half of the 18th century. Until his death, he was overwhelmed by commissions from all over Europe.

Diderot moved to tears

From the mid-1760s until the 1780s, Joseph Vernet touched the sensitivities of the public of the Salons especially with his storm scenes and shipwrecks. The vision of a terrible shipwreck with victims lamenting on the shore must have been a captivating experience. Visitors of the time reacted with authentic emotion to scenes of marine disasters in which art and reality seem to be combined.¹

In 1767, a *Shipwreck* moved Diderot to the point that, he claimed, he shed sincere tears: “I saw from all over the ravages of the storm but the spectacle that stopped, it was that of the passengers who, scattered on the shore, struck by the danger from which they had escaped, cried, embraced, raised their hands to the sky (...) I saw all these touching scenes, and I shed real tears for them”.² Philip Conisbee emphasized how important it is not to underestimate the power exercised by the painted image over a public ignorant of the brutal reality that is revealed to us today by photography and video.³

The Sublime

Diderot, and equally the poet and art critic Baillet de Saint-Julien, reacted to what was to be called in their time the “Sublime”. This aesthetic term was created by the politician and philosopher Edmund Burke in his essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* which, published in 1757 and translated into French in 1765, became highly influential. Burke examines the foundations of various types of aesthetic experience, especially the pleasure procured by the fact of viewing from a distance disasters

¹ Philip Conisbee, “La nature et le sublime dans l’art de Claude-Joseph Vernet”, exh. cat. *Autour de Claude-Joseph Vernet, la marine à voile de 1650 à 1850*, Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 20 June – 15 September 1999, p. 38.

² Diderot, *Salons*, ed. 1983, vol. 3, p. 163-164.

³ Philip Conisbee, “La nature et le sublime dans l’art de Claude-Joseph Vernet”, exh. cat. *Autour de Claude-Joseph Vernet, la marine à voile de 1650 à 1850*, Rouen, musée des Beaux-Arts, 20 June – 15 September 1999, p. 37.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

FINE ARTS

such as fires, of discovering the overwhelming power of nature, the vastness of the ocean, or being witness to the misfortunes of others, all things that were likely to inspire a feeling of terror. The terrible then became a source for the Sublime. Fascinated by aesthetic theories, Diderot, who would become a most eloquent spokesperson from the point of view of naturalism and sensations towards the middle and the end of the 18th century, provided an echo to Burke's definition in his *Salon of 1767*: "everything that surprises the soul, everything that imprints a feeling of terror leads to the sublime."⁴

Favourable Reaction from Critics

Diderot and certain other critics were struck by the power of Vernet's paintings, especially his scenes showing disasters the narrative range of which was especially convincing. These works seem to be livelier, more meaningful and more closely related to the experience of modern viewers than the history paintings that benefitted from a certain superiority in academic milieus. Diderot was even led to compare such storm scenes to the greatest history paintings, such as Nicolas Poussin's *Seven Sacraments*.⁵

The Key to his Success

Vernet's art fits into a European tradition. In the collections of Avignon and Aix-en-Provence, Vernet became familiar with the landscapes and marines of artists such as Claude Lorraine, Gaspard Dughet and Salvator Rosa. He also discovered the works of the prolific Dutch and Flemish schools of landscape and marine scenes such as Ludolf Backhuysen with whom contemporary critics sometimes compared him. In Rome, Vernet saw the dramatic storm scenes of Pietro Tempesta.⁶ Vernet's ability to paint the human body, acquired during his initial formation in Philippe Sauvan's studio in Avignon was doubtless one of the keys to his success. For these figures with their varied attitudes, placed in the foreground of his landscapes and seascapes, Vernet created a large number of preparatory drawings. The Vernet sale of 1790, after the artist's death, included over 700 drawings by the artist. Vernet seems to have kept them in his studio to be able to refer to them.

An Innovative Artist

Less idealist than Claude Lorraine, Vernet's art corresponds perfectly to the tastes of his contemporaries. "Truth" in the art of painting, which was in such high demand from the mid-18th century can be found in his work, as La Font de Saint-Yenne commented enthusiastically in 1746.⁷ It is interesting to note that Vernet's growing reputation from 1756 coincides with a renewal of interest in Dutch 17th century painting, proof of the increasing importance of the "feeling for nature" appreciated by his contemporaries. Rejecting rococo art and turning to the attentive study of nature, Vernet was seen by his contemporaries to be an innovative artist. Until the late 19th century, he was even considered one of those who renewed French art. His name appeared again in 1852 in the writings of the Goncourt brothers when they described the

⁴ Diderot, *Salons*, ed. 1983, vol. 3, p. 143.

⁵ P. Vernière, ed., *Diderot: œuvres esthétiques*, 1965, p. 726: "(...)Vernet's seascapes, which offer all sorts of incidents and scenes are as much history paintings to me as Poussin's *Seven Sacraments*".

⁶ Philip Conisbee, "La nature et le sublime dans l'art de Claude-Joseph Vernet", exh. cat. *Autour de Claude-Joseph Vernet, la marine à voile de 1650 à 1850*, Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 20 June – 15 September 1999, p. 29-30.

⁷ La-Font-de-Saint-Yenne, *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France*, Paris, 1747, p. 102: "This is all by a Great Painter, a Physician [sic] who is a skilful examiner of Nature whose most singular moments he spies with surprising wisdom."

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

FINE ARTS

Barbizon School as “the 19th century School that had been founded in the 18th by Vernet, were beginning to look [...]”⁸.

Study from Nature

Compared to Claude Lorraine, Vernet created more realistic and probable views that were closer to nature, which he continually exhorted his colleagues to study. He told Pierre Henri de Valenciennes, who was his pupil for a while, that he had spent his life studying the sky and that there was never a day when he did not learn something. Very likely influenced by Vernet, Valenciennes later studied the effects of nature from oil sketches made outside. According to a story told by his the author of his obituary in the *Correspondance Littéraire*, Vernet supposedly had been attached to the mast of a ship to experience and observe a sea storm close up. This anecdote was used as the subject of a large painting by his grandson Horace, *Joseph Vernet attached to a Mast in a Storm* (Salon of 1822, Avignon, Musée Calvet).

Our Painting

This storm scene is, like almost all of Vernet’s seascapes, a pure invention. The fortified port visible in the background, with its square lighthouse of several stories, is probably inspired by the port of Genoa. Especially during the years 1760 and 1770, Vernet created multiple compositions and the variations of this motif where the sea breaks against rock, often overlooked by castle and with a stormy sky. Here, the study of the sky streaked by a bolt of lightning is a real example of skill with the rain that bursts through the threatening clouds and which, piercing through gaps illuminates the birds’ wings. In the foreground, a few shipwreck survivors have managed to reach the coast on a small boat. Creating a setting for the human drama in the midst of picturesque aspects of hostile nature, our painting is a foretaste of Romanticism.

⁸ E. and J. de Goncourt, *Le Salon de 1852*, 1852, p. 34.