

DIDIER AARON

Paintings · Drawings · Sculpture

JEAN PILLEMENT

(1728 – Lyon – 1808)



***A pair: A moonlit rocky landscape with figures by a campfire
and
A stormy landscape with shepherds***

Both pastel on primed canvas
Each 570 x 810 mm (framed: 71.5 x 95 cm)
c.1780-5

After having worked for Marie-Antoinette at the Petit Trianon in 1778, Pillement – indefatigable voyager at the service of the Courts of Europe – travelled to the Iberian Peninsula. He executed this pair of pastels during his second stay in Portugal, between 1780 and 1786. He was very active at this period: official painter of Queen Maria I and King Pedro III, Pillement also founded and directed a drawing school in Porto (L'Escola da Porta do Olival), where his successors were Joaquim Marques and Alexandre-Jean Noël. He then moved to Spain, where he worked for King Charles IV.

Famous for his delicate *chinoiseries*, as well as for bucolic landscapes, from 1780 Pillement turned towards new types of landscapes. Dramatic and terrifying, they were a response to contemporary ideas of the Sublime, aiming to be 'productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling' (Edmund Burke, 1757). They included shipwrecks and ships caught up in violent storms, such as in



Fig. 1

The Tempest (fig. 1; dated 1782; see also M. Gordon-Smith, *Pillement*, 2006, p. 218-223) at the Art Institute of Chicago, or scenes of storms where the unleashed forces of nature test the otherwise peaceful lives of shepherds (see Katharine Baetjer 'Jean Pillement, les naufrages et le Sublime,' in the *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 51, 2016), as in this *Stormy landscape*.

This pastel of *A stormy landscape* perfectly illustrates the taste for the Sublime prevalent



Fig. 2

in landscape painting during the second half of the eighteenth century. Diderot himself confessed that he had wept in empathy with the fate of those unhappy souls exposed by Vernet to the forces of a terrible tempest. Whether in the form of an imaginary or real catastrophe, Pillement treated the theme many times in the 1780s, often in pastel.

A stormy landscape with shepherds brings tumult and movement to this pair,

providing a dramatic counterweight to the calm *Moonlit rocky landscape with figures by a campfire*. Shepherds and animals flee to shelter from lightning, while gusts of wind bend the branches of an old tree, its silhouette leaning diagonally into the composition. The extraordinary meticulousness with which the artist detailed the bark and leaves of the shrubs in the foreground, the velvety nuances of grey and the treatment of the clouds - stacked in successive masses to create a sense of depth - make this pastel a veritable *tour de force*. A comparable pastoral scene, but of a calm day, is dated 1779 (National Gallery of Art, Washington; fig.2).

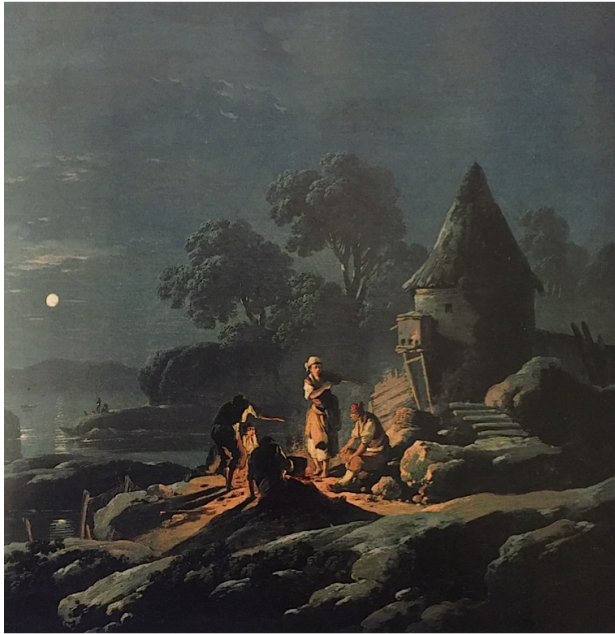


Fig. 3

Night scenes are particularly rare in Pillement's work, unlike in that of other mid-century landscapists, such as Vernet (who influenced Pillement), Volaire, Hackert and Wright of Derby. Such scenes offer opportunities to excel in the depiction of contrasting light as in this *Rocky landscape with figures by a campfire*: bathed in the cold light of the moon which can barely be seen through the foliage of a large tree, the water, rocks and leaves take on silvery accents. Hidden behind one of the men, the comforting, reddish light of the fire gives off sparks to beautiful effect, making the group appear in a theatrical, poetic and almost religious atmosphere. We find the group of peasants again, around a fire under a full moon, in a painting dated 1786, now in a private collection (fig.3).



Both pastels, exceptionally fresh and in perfect condition, are in Louis XVI period frames.

Fig. 4: A moonlit rocky landscape with figures by a campfire, detail.



Fig. 5: A stormy landscape with shepherds, detail.

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