

VAN HAM

Auction 370

Fine Art

May 13th, 2015

Lot 538

Certificate for

Antoine Pesne (1683-1757) - Portrait of Princess Sophie

Certificate for **Portrait of Princess Sophie (Dorothea Marie) of Prussia** (1719-1765, in 1734 married to Marcgrave Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Schwedt) by **Antoine Pesne**, oil on canvas, relined edges, 154 x 120cm. Old inscription on the original canvas: "Princesse Sophie/ Quatrième fille du Roy de Prusse" as well as at the top "No: 276 Inv. 1872". Adhesive label on the stretcher "Königl.Garde-Meubles Verwaltung / cap....Nr. 198" with royal crown.

I know the painting from very good colour photographs. There has been some confusion regarding the designation of the depicted. Ekhart Berckenhagen, who knows the painter best and authored the catalogue raisonné "Antoine Pesne. Mit Beiträgen von Ekhart Berckenhagen, Pierre du Colombier, Margarete Kühn und Georg Poensgen", describes the lack of knowledge concerning the inscription on verso the type of the painting on p. 96 in no. 6 and designates the depicted as "Amalie (Anna), Princess of Prussia, 1723-1787, sister of Friedrich the Great...Standing knee-length portrait with an ermine coat and cordon, the left arm resting on the railing on the right, in the background on the left a wall part of a grotto with a small cascade, on the right view of a landscape – identity uncertain". Under the no.s "a" and "aa" he mentions two samples, however, in "aa" he states that this was a replica of "a". There happens to be a mistaken identity with a portrait of Elisabeth Dorothea Juliane Baroness of Buddenbrock. Consequently, there is only the copy "aa" of which Berckenhagen assumes the following: "Supposedly a gift from Friedrich the Great for the Saxony Court. Formerly Dresden Castle; since the 20s until 1938 in possession of Dr. H. H. Zwillenberg, Berlin (now Amsterdam); whereabouts unknown, ca. 1738". The printed adhesive label on the stretcher "Königl.Garde-Meubles-Verwaltung. Cap....Nr. 198" confirms the Dresden origin. The prior possession of H. H. Zwillenberg is also confirmed. I also have a bad photocopy of one sample (a copy?) without cordon as a portrait of Princess Amalie, which was formerly in possession of Dr. Wille in Zurich.

The designation of the depicted as Amalie and therefore also the dating around 1738 is mistaken due to the estimated age of 15 years. The red cordon with the cross and the oval medallion in which there is an image of Mary with the Child (ill. 1) clearly identifies the Chapter of Nuns in Herford, in which Amalie's older sister Sophie was admitted in 1729.

Berckenhagen's mentioned tradition that this might be a gift from Friedrich the Great is to be doubted. Why should the Prussian crown prince or king make the Saxon king a present of the portrait of one of his sisters? It would be much more plausible to assume that it was a gift from the Soldier King Friedrich Wilhelms I for August the Strong, who received the Prussian king in Dresden in 1728. In the same year followed a return visit which Antoine Pesne depicted in a large, lost painting. It is recorded by means of a preparatory sketch (today to be found in Castle Charlottenburg). The stays of Pesne and his works for August the Strong are confirmed for 1728 and 1729. As Berckenhagen quotes (p. 224) on October 23rd, 1728 the Brunswick ambassador Stratemann reported: "...that the local royal court painter Pesne has started working on portraits of the royal family this week, because August demanded them. He started with portraying the 4 princesses..." The portrait of Princess Sophie should presumably be seen in this context. However, it must have a later origin (but still before her marriage in 1738), because she looks a bit older on the full-length double portrait with her husband in Castle Charlottenburg (ill. 2). I presume an origin of the painting around 1732. The style of painting is still entirely dominated by the strict

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period of the Soldier King. Ca. 1735 the style loosened and together with the court period of the Francophile crown prince in Rheinsberg starting from ca. 1736 this led to a brilliant ease in brushwork and atmosphere. However, due to the representation's accuracy of the brocade dress and the detailed area with vivid lines (such as for instance the cordon and the ermine-set red coat on the left that leads to a simple figuration of a triangle with hand, forearm and the red fabric underneath on the right) also the portrait of Sophie reaches a high quality level. The viewer's eye is skillfully directed to the cross of the order in the center of the composition. This harmony of shapes combined with the classy colour tone makes one forget the correctness of anatomy (e.g. the right arm which is too long) and even makes it fade into the background behind the beauty of the overall appearance. However, this is disturbed by the additions on the right and at the bottom. Pesne's common format of a knee-length portrait of ca. 144 x 112cm has been extended. As a result the head is no longer in the work's centerline. Possibly the reason for the painting's enlargement was its lavish régence frame which could not be downsized. To me the frame does not appear to be of Prussian nor of Saxon origin.

Prof. Dr. Helmut Börsch-Supan, Berlin, April 09, 2016



ill. 1: medaillon of the Herford Chapter of Nuns



ill. 2: double portrait, 1734

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