



PRESS RELEASE

from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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GROUND-BREAKING COLLABORATION BY FRICK AND LOUVRE IS THE FIRST MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE IN EIGHTY YEARS ON GABRIEL DE SAINT-AUBIN (1724–1780)

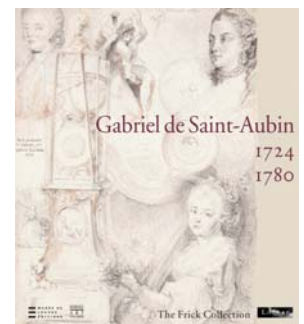
October 30, 2007, through January 27, 2008



Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, 1724-1780, *The Flirtatious Conversation*, 1760, watercolor and gouache, 7 7/8 x 5 3/16 in. (20 x 13 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Forsyth Wickes Collection

This fall, The Frick Collection will present an exhibition devoted to the art of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (1724–1780), one of the French Enlightenment’s most original and innovative artists. The fruit of many years’ research by curators on both sides of the Atlantic, the exhibition is the first major retrospective on the artist in more than eighty years and the first ever to include works from both European and North American collections. It is also the first such collaborative effort between The Frick Collection and the Musée du Louvre (where the show will be on view from February 27 through May 26, 2008). The exhibition includes a prime selection of Saint-Aubin’s prolific and varied oeuvre, comprising some fifty drawings and a small but exceptional sample of his most memorable paintings and etchings. These selections demonstrate the artist’s achievement in a variety of thematic areas, ranging from ancient history to

portraiture to the decorative arts, while highlighting the representations of contemporary Paris for which he is best known. Several fine examples of a unique aspect of his work—the small art sale and exhibition catalogues that he filled with hand-drawn illustrations in the margins of the printed texts—are also featured. The exhibition and its catalogue—the first monographic color publication on the artist—will be the foundation for future decades of Saint-Aubin appreciation and research.



Comments Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator Colin B. Bailey, “Contemporaries knew Saint-Aubin as ‘a priapic draftsman’—his elder brother joked that he had produced at least ‘one hundred thousand drawings’—yet apart from

a small number of eighteenth-century enthusiasts, this engaging and truly original artist is hardly known today. In keeping with the Frick's well-established program of monographic exhibitions devoted to major eighteenth-century artists, it is thrilling to introduce Saint-Aubin to a larger audience. He was indeed a draftsman of genius; a brilliant, idiosyncratic engraver; and an engaging, if not always successful, painter. As the unsurpassed chronicler of the city of Paris in the heyday of the Enlightenment, he captured all aspects of cultural life with wit, affection, and pride—providing an immensely vivid window into that lost world.”

Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (1724–1780) was organized for The Frick Collection by **Colin B. Bailey**, Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator, and **Kim de Beaumont**, Guest Curator; the curators at the Musée du Louvre are **Pierre Rosenberg**, President-Director Emeritus, and **Christophe Leribault**, Chief Curator in the Department of Drawings. Major funding has been provided by The Florence Gould Foundation. Additional generous support has been provided by The Christian Humann Foundation, the Michel David-Weill Foundation, and The Grand Marnier Foundation. The project is also supported, in part, by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.



ILLUSTRATOR OF GRAND HISTORICAL SUBJECTS & DAILY LIFE IN PARIS

Gabriel de Saint-Aubin never left his native Paris. Born in 1724 into a family of skilled craftsmen, he was, by the age of twenty-three, teaching figure drawing in a school of architecture. He began his career as an illustrator supplying figures for elaborate architectural drawings that recorded municipal fêtes celebrating great events at court. He studied at the prestigious Royal Academy but failed to win the coveted Prix de Rome that would have provided him with a scholarship to study at the French Academy there. He is often said to have reacted to this disappointment by throwing aside all hopes of a traditional artistic career and hastening out into the thoroughfares of Paris to sketch everything in sight, living an errant, bohemian existence and succumbing increasingly to an obsession with drawing. In fact, despite his personal eccentricities, he was employed as an illustrator all his life.



The Triumph of Pompey 61 BC (detail), 1763, watercolor and gouache, pen and black and brown inks, over chalks and graphite, 8 3/16 x 15 7/16 in. (20.8 x 39.2 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Promised gift of Leon D. and Debra R. Black and Purchase, Rogers Fund, 2004

The greatest illustration assignment of Saint-Aubin's career was the *Spectacle de l'histoire romaine*, which preoccupied him for much of the 1760s. This project was the ideal vehicle for the artist's vast erudition—his brother Charles-Germain said he could speak confidently with “professors in various sciences” regarding their respective fields of expertise—and it enabled him to combine his skills as a miniaturist, an architectural draftsman, and a keen observer of human behavior in a way that is often reflected in his scenes of contemporary life and history. The two masterpieces he

created in connection with this enterprise recently were acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art (*The Triumph of Pompey 61 BC*) and The J. Paul Getty Museum (*The Navel Battle Near Ecnomus 256 BC*); both will be highlighted in the show.

A network of converging forces, rather than one lifelong obsession, caused Paris to become the dominant theme of Saint-Aubin's formal and informal production. His early architectural drawings formed the catalyst for his interest in specifically Parisian themes—usually intertwined with intricate allegorical conceits that weave supernatural variations on contemporary reality. The combination of fact and fancy that characterizes Saint-Aubin's earliest works will forever remain a hallmark of his art.

The reason his approach to Parisian subjects was so exciting and new is that he did not think of himself exclusively as a genre painter. He drew on every aspect of his richly varied artistic background to express a more immediate fascination with those events in Paris that were attracting differing degrees of local, national, and—sometimes—international attention. In his capacity as a commemorative illustrator, the artist had occasion to portray most major occasions in the lives of the French royal family between 1750 and 1780. As an associate of local architects and engineers, he glorified great building projects of national significance and visualized utopian schemes intended for the greater good of humanity. Developing an almost reportorial sense of current events, Saint-Aubin took it upon himself to capture for posterity such memorable occurrences as calamitous fires, the appearance in Paris of foreign dignitaries, public courses on scientific subjects, theatrical performances, and other lavish entertainments. Cumulatively, over his lifetime, Saint-Aubin's work became an embodiment of contemporary Parisian history.



Germain-Augustin and Rose de Saint-Aubin, Drawn by Their Uncle, 1766, brush and gray wash, over black chalk and graphite, 7 3/16 x 4 13/16 in. (18.2 x 12.2 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971

A more profound expression of the artist's gifts as a portraitist is found in a dual likeness of his niece and nephew Rose and Germain-Augustin de Saint-Aubin. The young boy and girl are characterized with sincerity and respect, recalling Chardin's attentiveness to the dignity of childhood. The sense of a moment suspended is enhanced by the way in which Rose holds the hurdy-gurdy resting in her lap, as if she were preparing to play. The artist's special sensitivity to children points up the irony that he never married or had a family of his own.

There also may be a component of family portraiture in one of Saint-Aubin's best-known sheets, *The Flirtatious Conversation* (see front page). It is a superb example of his inimitable

painterly drawings, intricately layered with watercolor and gouache. He inscribed it with verses of his own composition, which translate: "Old, unreformed debauchee/You think you are seducing this beautiful creature/But long ago the damsel/Made up her mind to be honorable." Saint-Aubin hereby



Society Promenade (detail), 1760, pen and brown and black ink, brush and gray wash, watercolor, and gouache, 31.4 x 25.8 cm, The Hermitage, Saint Petersburg

creates an ostensibly conventional genre scene, entirely suitable for reproduction in an engraving. Yet the “old debauchee” bears a sneaking resemblance to known profile portraits of Saint-Aubin’s recently widowed elder brother Charles-Germain. About the time he made *The Flirtatious Conversation*, the artist was, in fact, producing a variety of genre scenes that targeted the ever-thriving market for reproductive prints in eighteenth-century France. His most successful efforts were updated versions of the *fêtes galantes* of Watteau, in which Saint-Aubin adapted



A Street Show in Paris (detail), 1760, Oil on canvas, 80 x 63 cm, National Gallery, London

this more idyllic pictorial tradition to highly specific places and circumstances of contemporary Parisian life. The *Society Promenade* is a particularly fine example of a finished drawing that may be considered tantamount to a painting. It was engraved in 1760 by A. J. Duclos (1742–1795), an associate of the artist’s brother Augustin. Among the most beautiful and effective of Saint-Aubin’s own (and quite rare) paintings in oil on canvas is *A Street Show in Paris* (left), also engraved by Duclos to be paired with the *Society Promenade*. Here we see a somewhat humbler aspect of Parisian social life, with locals and urchins gathered to watch mock play sword between outdoor performers at one of the unofficial theaters then lining the boulevards.

Saint-Aubin’s most original contribution was to capture in paintings, finished drawings, and thumbnail sketches the art exhibitions and sales of his day, both as great events in the life of Paris and in all their fascinating documentary detail. Saint-Aubin was, in fact, the first artist ever to produce panoramic representations of the exhibitions of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, held every other year in the *Salon carré* of the Louvre. In his unfinished view of the Salon of 1765, we witness his inaugural attempt to encompass an entire exhibition in a single image. This exquisite sheet is the immediate forerunner to his celebrated *View of the Salon of 1767*.

Saint-Aubin’s fascination with the Parisian stage and his admiration for the writings of Voltaire merged most wonderfully in two of his greatest late works. One shows the famous author shortly before his death, making one of his final public appearances. On the evening of March 30, 1778, Voltaire received two spontaneous ovations at the Théâtre Français during the sixth performance of his tragedy *Irène*: first, when he entered his box and was crowned with a laurel wreath by the actor Brizard and the marquise de Villette; and, again, immediately after the play, when the entire company took turns crowning his portrait bust on stage. Instead of choosing between Voltaire’s coronation at the beginning of the evening and the figurative coronation of his bust a few hours later, he asked viewers to imagine both as part of a single glorious moment.



Allegory in Honor of the Death of Voltaire, c.1779, black chalk, brown ink, gray wash, and watercolor, 20 x 13.1 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Close to the time of his own death, Saint-Aubin produced a stranger and more idiosyncratic tribute to his literary hero. In a composition (right) bursting with images and annotations, he creates a dreamlike *mélange* of unlikely juxtapositions. The central figure of a lovely but mournful naiad, based on a sculpture by Houdon, pours water from an urn into a shell-shaped vessel. The spray agitates a swan (an attribute of Poetry) near her feet, while a

muse opposite tranquilly inscribes a scroll with the following words: “His spirit is everywhere, but his heart is here alone” (a reference to the author’s beloved residence, the Château de Ferney). Above is Voltaire’s tomb. As the philosopher lifts himself up in his coffin to continue writing, inevitable Death places a seal upon his lips.

Identifiable art objects by contemporary masters play a vital role in Saint-Aubin’s composite drawings, combining complex and disparate elements in a way that is unique to him. In what is probably the single most beautiful extant example (see catalogue cover on front page), he depicts a portrait of the famous actress Mademoiselle Clairon (upper right), not taken from life but copied from a reproductive engraving. However, the true star of this image is a magnificent clock with astronomical mechanisms, which was offered for sale in Paris in 1773, the year this drawing was made. As in his Salon views, the work of other artists is filtered through Saint-Aubin’s subtle perceptions.

The key to Saint-Aubin’s originality may be his refusal to accept preconceived boundaries for the interpretation of any given subject. Saint-Aubin confidently recombined traditional elements to meet his own finely tuned thematic purposes. He prized the small details of everyday experience that dwell in our memories of life’s greatest occasions. And like the history painter he fully deserved to be called, he aspired to the ephemeral essence of events otherwise soon to be absorbed into the historic past. He surpassed all of his contemporaries in his awareness of how everyday events are perceived by the mind and the eye, not as accumulated pieces of information but as living moments captured in time. Through the matchless power of his pictorial imagination, Saint-Aubin discovered a new and intensely personal way of portraying the city that was his world.

IMPORTANT COLOR-ILLUSTRATED REFERENCE ON THE ARTIST

The exhibition catalogue, illustrated on the front page, is an important collaborative effort spanning the Atlantic, featuring pioneering essays by principal organizers Pierre Rosenberg, Colin B. Bailey, Kim de Beaumont, and Christophe Leribault; it also features an essay by Suzanne Folds McCullagh, Anne Vogt Fuller and Marion Titus Searle Curator of Earlier Prints & Drawings, The Art Institute of Chicago. Perrin Stein, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, has catalogued a selection of the artist’s etchings. The book offers the general public and scholars an updated resource on this master, particularly important given that the primary reference work on Saint-Aubin, Émile Dacier’s monograph and catalogue raisonné (1929–31), was published nearly eighty years ago. Many of Gabriel de Saint-Aubin’s works have not been reproduced in color before, and this well-illustrated publication conveys the sheer beauty, impressive scope, and highly personal charm of Saint-Aubin’s art. Published by Musée du Louvre Éditions and Somogy Éditions d’Art, the book is available this fall in English and French in both soft and hardcover editions (approximately 320 pages) in the Museum Shop of the Frick, on the institution’s Web site (www.frick.org), and by phone (212) 288-0700.

FREE PUBLIC LECTURES (SEATING FOR LECTURES IS LIMITED AND UNRESERVED)

Date: Wednesday, November 7, 2007, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Colin B. Bailey, The Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator, The Frick Collection
Title: *“Strange, ferocious, unkempt...with the reputation of an indefatigable draftsman”:
Introducing Gabriel de Saint-Aubin*

Colin B. Bailey, one of the show’s organizers, will discuss the life and career of this original and eccentric figure, placing him in the context of his time and examining the range of his artistic activities and ambitions, from history painter to assiduous cataloguer of auctions and art exhibitions.

Date: Wednesday, December 5, 2007, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Kim de Beaumont, Guest Curator, The Frick Collection
Title: *Gabriel de Saint-Aubin and the “Spectacle de l’histoire parisienne”*

Saint-Aubin’s lifelong immersion in Parisian opera and theater, motivated by an intense personal fascination and varied professional involvements, gave rise to the artist’s quintessentially theatrical vision of contemporary urban life and yielded many significant records of stage and musical performances in eighteenth-century Paris. This talk, presented by one of the show’s organizers, will explore the overlapping realms of theater and reality in Saint-Aubin’s oeuvre.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700

Website: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: open six days a week: 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year’s Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln’s Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Admission: \$15; senior citizens \$10; students \$5; “pay as you wish” on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection, and those under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide INFORM® Audio Tour of the permanent collection, provided by Acoustiguide. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Manager of Media Relations & Marketing, or Geetha Natarajan, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator

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