



Original bas-relief plaster maquette for one of four bronze friezes at the base of the statue commemorating Johannes Gutenberg in Strasbourg.
700 by 1420mm (27.5 by 56 inches).

“ET LA LUMIERE FUT” (GENESIS I:3)

Les Bienfaits de l'imprimerie en Amérique - The Benefits of Printing in America.

Author

DAVID d'ANGERS, Pierre Jean

Publication date

1837-1840.

Publisher

Publication place

Angers,

Physical description

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Dimensions

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Notes

An allegory of the printing of the Declaration of Independence, depicting Benjamin Franklin proffering the newly-printed broadside, surrounded by all 56 Signers, Founding Fathers, and other important Enlightenment figures of the Americas.

This preliminary maquette is a new discovery, and is almost certainly the first state of this iconic bas-relief. Having been packed away in a long-forgotten wooden crate by the family of Victor Pavie, lawyer, printer, publisher, and close friend of David d'Angers, it has not previously been exhibited.

David d'Angers's finished frieze, 'Les Bienfaits de l'imprimerie en Amerique', was cast in bronze, and created to commemorate the 400-year anniversary of Johannes Gutenberg's invention of moveable type. It was also a bald political statement, demanding freedom from the tyranny of Empire, which history has shown can be achieved by the enlightenment that printing brings. David d'Angers's sculpture can be seen as a "quest to redefine the notion of a monument in a period marked by both intense historicism and the ever-accelerating rhythms of modernity... His theoretical and aesthetic innovations greatly contributed to our modern obsessions with memory and celebrity, and provide a timely reminder of the possibilities for politically-engaged artistic practice in the twenty-first century" (Bowyer).

This maquette, and one of the statue of Gutenberg, was given by David d'Angers to his dear friend, lawyer, and printer, Victor Pavie. In an emotional letter that he wrote to Pavie, David d'Angers reveals quite how important this particular commission was to him: "I have worked hard to finish the models of the bas-reliefs of the Gutenberg monument. Finally, here is another completed work, and I am happy about it, because I very ardently wanted to be able to pay this homage. Thorvaldsen made the man who prints, I sought to depict the consequences of the discovery of printing. I assure you that, in my last illness, one of my bitterest sorrows, was the fear of not finishing this monument" (May 31st, 1840).

David d'Angers and Pavie maintained a close correspondence throughout their lives: a testimony which reveals as much about the creative process of the sculptor, as the political ideas, and humanist ideals, particularly concerning the abolition of slavery, that the pair shared.

David d'Angers honoured another close friendship within the frieze itself. The Marquis de Lafayette is represented to the left of the printing press, firmly holding in his right hand the sword presented to him by his adopted homeland, and clutching that of Washington in his left. On behalf of Congress, Lafayette had commissioned a bust of George Washington from David d'Angers (now in the Huntington Art Gallery).

The first half of the nineteenth century was a very tumultuous time in France, which saw successive regimes vie with each other for control of popular opinion via political and physical revolt, fluctuating franchise, and through control of the freedom of the French press. This was particularly true of the July Monarchy (1830-1848), the period during which David d'Angers achieved some of his greatest work.

David d'Angers became the pre-eminent monument-maker of the 1830s and 1840s, lauded by Victor Hugo as the "Michelangelo of Paris", "Pierre-Jean David d'Angers was one of the most important sculptors of the nineteenth century. An ardent Republican, experimental writer, respected teacher, and confidant to innumerable artists and intellectuals (from Balzac and Paganini to Goethe and Delacroix), he was both celebrated and controversial during his lifetime" (Bowyer).

In this light, David d'Angers's friezes for the pedestal of the statue of Johannes Gutenberg in Strasbourg show how the printing press has emancipated the peoples of the four continents. In common with his previous public monuments, David d'Angers has forsworn conventional neo-classicism, of nude heroes of old, and replaced them with recognizable portraits of eminent figures from a more tangible history: Europe portrays great thinkers, writers, and artists: René Descartes holds the press, supported by Luther, Erasmus, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Molière, Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant, and many others; Asia shows William Jones and Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-

Duperron offering books to Brahmins, who give them manuscripts in return; Africa has William Wilberforce embracing an African holding a book; while European figures distribute books to the tribes-people and read to children, Thomas Clarkson breaks the shackles of a slave, and broken whips and irons lie beneath.

America commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence on the 4th of July 1776. It shows Benjamin Franklin offering the printed Declaration to all 56 of his fellow Signers, all of whom are named, but also present are Lafayette, and Bolivar, who is seen freeing Latin American nations from Empire, as well as George Clinton, Thomas Paine (as "Thomas K.ran"), John Dickinson, John Jay, Charles Thompson, John Laurens, Patrick Henry, George Washington, and George Whyte.

Above them all towers Johannes Gutenberg, presenting a sheet from his printing press incised: "et la lumiere fut" - "and there was light".

The casting of the Gutenberg monument was paid for by public subscription - d'Angers having provided the plaster casts for free - and unveiled during the 'Fêtes de Gutenberg', which took place over three days from June 24th to 26th, 1840. It was erected opposite the north tower of the cathedral in Strasbourg, a location deliberately, and provocatively chosen by Gustave Silberman, a printer, like Gutenberg, head of the committee to build the monument, and a fervent republican. The monument defiantly faces the cathedral, in a direct reference to Victor Hugo's novel 'Notre Dame de Paris', and a scene in which Frollo holds up a book with one hand, points to the cathedral with the other, and predicts the victory of Democracy over Theocracy: "this will kill that". The maquette appears to be one of David d'Angers's earliest renderings of the scene that he had in mind for the finished frieze. It differs from that kept at the David D'Angers museum in Angers, by the absence of the background in the final version, where the names of the historical figures appear. The portraits of Thomas Nelson and John Morton are also absent, and some figures, such as those of John Adams, are less detailed, as are some other aspects of the whole, such as clothing. The heart of the composition, the printing of the Declaration of Independence proudly displayed by Franklin, remains empty.

Pierre-Jean David d'Angers (1788-1856).

From an early age, "David assisted in his father's ornamental wood-carving workshop in Angers, a city located some two hundred miles southwest of Paris. In 1808, against the wishes of his father, he traveled to Paris to enroll in the École des Beaux-Arts as a student of the sculptor Philippe- Laurent Roland. There he attracted the attention of Jacques Louis David, who invited him to study in his studio. In early 1811 David d'Angers won the École's annual tête d'expression competition with La Douleur, an extraordinary bust representing pain. It draws not only on antique precedents (the Laocoön and the Dying Alexander) but also on David's close study of a posed model and dissected corpses. Rather than relying solely on facial features to convey emotion, the head, neck, and shoulders act in concert, each contributing meaningfully to the depiction of pain. The result is an innovative, hybrid figure that explores the relationship between classical idealism and the fleshy, pulsing reality of the living body. As such, it teeters on the brink of Romanticism. In September 1811 David took first place in the Prix de Rome competition, which enabled him to spend the next four years studying in Italy. There he frequented the studio of the great sculptor Antonio Canova, whose cool neoclassicism he admired but made little attempt to emulate. It was probably in Canova's studio—filled to capacity with plasters of the master's sculptures—that David first imagined a museum of his own work - in 1839 the Galerie David d'Angers would open within the museum of fine arts in his native city, the first permanent institutional exhibition space devoted to the oeuvre of a living artist. The study at left, possibly made during this period, depicts the head of the ancient full-length statue known as the Apollo Belvedere, revealing David's idiosyncratic approach to canonical art of the past. By choosing to show only the god's face, lying across the page like a fragmented artifact or death mask, David comments, perhaps, on the distance between the classical tradition

and modern life" (The Frick).

David d'Angers "extended his definition of public monuments to include portrait medallions. In the 1820s he dedicated himself to a personal campaign of creating contemporary and retrospective medallions of illustrious sitters, including one of his friend, and owner of the maquette, Victor Pavie, preserved in the Museum D'Angers. By the end of his life David had executed almost five-hundred portrait medallions, frequently travelling great distances to model his sitters from life. The medallions most often were not commissioned. David himself chose whom he deemed worthy of inclusion into his medallion pantheon. David also did not profit from the portraits. He generally delivered his wax models to professional founders for casting and dissemination through sale" (The Met).

Victor Pavie (1808-1886)

Scion of a family of local news-printers, at a time of great repression in the industry, Pavie founded the short-lived journal, 'La Gerbe', and ran the local newspaper 'Les Affiches d'Angers'. He published Aloysius Bertrand's avant-garde 'Gaspard de la Nuit', and was a prolific author himself. He wrote poems, travel stories, memoirs and histories. His work reflects a natural philosophy, with romantic and religious overtones, hinting at anti-modernism, which is surprising, given his close association with both David d'Angers, and Hugo. He was a member of many learned societies of Anjou, and philanthropic by nature (Trigalot).

Related works

David d'Angers, 'Monument à Gutenberg, 1840-1846', bronze (3310mm high), Place Gutenberg, Strasbourg; David d'Angers, 'Les Bienfaits de l'imprimerie en Amérique', 1840, plaster bas-relief, original model, signed "P.J. DAVID D'ANGERS" (820 by 1430mm), framed, Angers, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. MBA 842.10; David d'Angers, 'Étude pour le bas-relief l'Amérique', on paper (260 by 210mm), Angers, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. MBA 364.2.52; David d'Angers, 'Monument à Gutenberg', cast-iron replica, courtyard of the former Imprimerie Nationale buildings, Paris 15th arrondissement; David d'Angers, 'Les Bienfaits de l'imprimerie en Amérique', terracotta bas-relief (370 by 581 by 75mm), gift of Mme Leferme, daughter of David d'Angers to the State in 1903 for the Musée de Lille, Lille, Musée des beaux-arts, inv-74; David d'Angers, 'Heroes of Independence', bronze copy cast from the original moulds in 1906 and donated by the artist's daughter, Madame Leferme, to the Daughters of the American Revolution, Washington.

A list of individuals appearing in the Frieze:

Founding Fathers of the United States, and others eminent to the Republican cause:

George Clinton

Thomas Paine, as "Thomas K. Rah"

John Dickinson, as "John Dukinson" John Jay

Charles Thompson

John Laurens, as "Laurens"

Patrick Henry, as "Henry"

George Washington, as "Washington" Marquis de Lafayette, as "Lafayette" Simon Bolivar, as "Bolivar"

George Whyte

Signers of the Declaration of Independence:

1. John Hancock (Massachusetts Bay), as "Hancock" 2. Josiah Bartlett

3. William Whipple, as "W. Whipple"

4. Matthew Thornton

5. Samuel Adams

6. John Adams, as "John Adams"
7. Robert Treat Paine, as "Rob Great Paine"
8. Elbridge Gerry, as "Elbridge Dor"
9. Stephen Hopkins, as "Step. Hopkins"
10. William Ellery, as "William Ellerge"
11. Roger Sherman, as "Rogers Sherman"
12. Samuel Huntington, as "Sam.L Huntington"
13. William Williams
14. Oliver Wolcott, as "Oliver Wolgot"
15. William F, as "Wn. Floyd"
16. Philip Livingston, as "Phil Livingston"
17. Francis Lewis as "Fran.s= Lewis"
18. Lewis Morris, as "Lewis"
19. Richard Stockton, as "Rich. Stockton"
20. John Witherspoon, as "N.s Witherspouck"
21. Francis Hopkinson
22. John Hart, as "John Ha."
23. Abraham Clark, as "Abba Clark"
24. Robert Morris
25. Benjamin Rush
26. Benjamin Franklin, as "Franklin"
27. John Morton
28. George Clymer, as "Geo Geymer"
29. James Smith, as "Ja.s Smith"
30. George Taylor, as "Geo. Taylor"
31. James Wilson
32. George Ross
33. Caesar Rodney, as "Ar Rodney"
34. George Read, as "Geo. Read"
35. Thomas McKean, as "Tho. M Beam"
36. Samuel Chase
37. William Paca, as "W.m Paca"
38. Thomas Stone, as "Tho. Stone"
39. Charles Carroll of Carrollton, as "Charles Carol of Carroltown"
40. George Wythe
41. Richard Henry Lee, as "Richard Hery Lee"
42. Thomas Jefferson, as "Jefferson"
43. Benjamin Harrison
44. Thomas Nelson, Jr., as "Th. Nelson"
45. Francis Lightfoot, as "Francis Light Foot Lee"
46. Carter Braxton, as "Carter Praxton"
47. William Hooper, as "W. Hopper"
48. Joseph Hewes, as Joseph Heives"
49. John Penn, as "John Pinn"
50. Edward Rutledge, as "Edward Rutter"
51. Thomas Heyward, Jr., as "J.f Weyneard Jun"
52. Thomas Lynch, Jr., as "Thomas Lynchson"
53. Arthur Middleton
54. Button Gwinnett, as "Butto Cwinett"
55. Lyman Hall, as "Lyman Ha."
56. George Walton, as "Geo Walton"

Bibliography

Literature:

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Provenance

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Presented by David d'Angers to Victor Pavie (1808-1886), of Angers, lawyer, printer, publisher, and close friend; by descent to the present owner.

Price:

Inventory reference: 21962