Of all the celebrated French history painters working in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, Bon Boullogne (1649–1717) is the one whose graphic oeuvre is the most difficult to reconstruct. The protean nature of his work (which Antoine-Joseph Désallier d’Argenville had already remarked in 1745) is not the only obstacle to grasping his style, whether in the realm of painting or drawing.1 Although literally hundreds of sheets by his brother, Louis de Boullogne (1654–1733), and by others of his contemporaries like Antoine Coypel (1661–1722), are preserved in the Louvre, no such “foundation” has so far been discovered for Bon Boullogne.2 Works on paper by this master are so rare that the drawings that can be attributed to him with absolute certainty can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Apart from the Saint Thomas recently acquired by the Pierpont Morgan Library, which has in the past been wrongly attributed to Charles de La Fosse, there are a Bacchanal in Stockholm, a Rape of Proserpina in Princeton, and a Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite in Chicago (Figures 1–4).3

All of these drawings date to late in Bon Boullogne’s career. The group of satyrs and maenads in the Bacchanal in Stockholm reappear in the background of Zephyr and Flora (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen), which seems to be the painting by that title that Boullogne showed at the Salon of 1704. Pierre Rosenberg has identified the drawing in Princeton as preparatory to The Rape of Proserpina, a signed painting (now in very poor condition) in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lisieux.4 Boullogne depicted the same subject in another painting that appeared at the Salon of 1704. The Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite in Chicago is a preliminary study for one of the four overdoors that Louis-Alexandre, the count of Toulouse, commissioned from Boullogne for the Chambre du Roi in the château of Rambouillet, just outside Paris. Bon Boullogne seems to have executed the four mythological paintings during the same period that his brother, Louis, painted two overdoors with scenes from the life of Diana for the château that date to 1707. (All six pictures are preserved in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Tours.) The Saint Thomas at the Morgan is a first compositional sketch for the gallery in the chapel at the


Château de Versailles, where he also worked with his brother, and so can be dated to 1709–10.

The somewhat loose style of these drawings makes it difficult to accept a priori the attribution to Bon Boullogne of Medea and Her Sons (Figure 5). This is because that drawing is one of the artist's early works, if not his earliest known work on paper. Signed and dated 1672, it was executed during the young painter's residency at the Académie de France in Rome from 1670 to 1673. Together with his efforts at description, his attention to perspective probably represents the greatest difference between this sheet and Boullogne's later drawings: the figure of Medea is clearly positioned on her chariot in the foreground, while Jason is placed farther back, on a staircase situated parallel to the picture plane.

Having seen Medea and Her Sons, my attention was drawn to A Sacrifice to Jupiter (Figure 6), a sheet in The Metropolitan Museum of Art that has long been attributed to Bon's father, Louis Boullogne (1609–1674), on the strength of the annotation in the bottom right corner: Boullogne La. Louis Boullogne, who like his sons studied in Rome early in his career, worked as a painter and decorator for a number of important private and public clients, eventually becoming peintre du roi. He was one of the founders of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris in 1648 and taught there beginning in 1656. The Paris Goldsmiths' Corporation called on Louis Boullogne on three occasions to paint the May of Notre-Dame, the altarpiece they presented to the cathedral each year. His three altarpieces—The Miracle of Saint Paul at Ephesus (1646),

6. Bon Boulogne. A Sacrifice to Jupiter, ca. 1675. Pen and black ink heightened with white gouache over a preliminary design in black chalk, 12 1/2 x 16 3/4 in. (31.8 x 42.6 cm). Inscribed in black ink at bottom right: Boulogne La (cropped). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1964 (64.196.2)
The Martyrdom of Saint Simon (1648), and The Beheading of Saint Paul (1657), the first two now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Arras, and the third in the Louvre—are damaged, but the engravings the artist himself made of two of them (Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris) give an idea of his style. The most characteristic feature of the “Mays” is the monumentality of the figures, and that is also true of the five “Académies” by Louis Boullogne (see Figure 7) that belonged to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture and are now preserved at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. That the author of such colossal creatures also drew a figure as alluring and graceful as the priest at the center of the sheet in New York is doubtful.

On March 29, 1779, and again in April 1783 the drawing now in the Metropolitan was included as “an offering to Jupiter, . . . by Louis de Boullogne l’aîné” in the sale of paintings and drawings from the vast collection of French financier Jean-Antoine-Hubert Vassal de Saint-Hubert, who was a close friend of Louis XVI’s brother the count of Provence.9


It appeared with the same designation at a sale held in Paris in April 1791. As Schnapper has demonstrated, however, works from the hand of Bon Boullogne were strangely enough sometimes sold under the name “Louis de Boullogne l’aîné” (Louis de Boullogne the elder)—frequently shortened to simply “Boullogne Laisné”—to distinguish him from his younger brother. Bon Boullogne often signed both his works and legal documents in this way. And this is exactly the signature that was at the lower right in the New York drawing before it was cropped to Boullogne La.

The argument for attributing A Sacrifice to Jupiter to Bon Boullogne rather than to his father is further strengthened when it is compared with the signed Medea and Her Sons (Figure 5). The treatment of the central figures is especially analogous. Both the priest and Medea appear to move toward the viewer, looking behind them as they step forward, the front foot squarely on the ground and the heel of the rear foot raised. On the left side of the New York drawing two nude women recline on a riverbank, one leaning against the other. The short horizontal strokes across her buttocks and heels suggest that the woman shown in profile is lying in shallow water. This group is a veritable leitmotiv in Bon Boullogne’s work. It reappears in his painting The Birth of Jupiter of about 1680 in the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Cholet (Figure 8), where a pair of women, in the foreground this time, lie perpendicular to one another, and the one leaning against her companion dips her heel in the water. Exchanging one of the nymphs for a river god, Bon Boullogne reused this motif in two other mythological paintings, The Education of Jupiter (Musée Bossuet, Meaux) and Pan and Syrinx (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lisieux), both of which can be dated to about 1700. The same uneven shoreline, to which cling similar trees that branch near their bases, can be seen in the drawing in New York and the painting in Cholet. These details are also apparent in The Battle of Hercules with the Centaurs and the Lapiths (Musée du Louvre, Paris), the painting he presented to the Académie Royale as his reception piece in 1677.

Thanks to this rare example preserved in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which in all likelihood was executed about 1675, on his return from Rome, the complex question of Bon Boullogne’s early style is gradually being elucidated. Although his style changed profoundly after the turn of the eighteenth century, this suave group of women attending a sacrifice to Jupiter heralds the artist who was to participate in the decoration of the Grand Trianon at Versailles.

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NOTES

1. Désallier d’Argenville 1745, p. 373 (cited in Schnapper 1978, p. 122): “C’est ici un Protée en peinture, un homme qui s’est transformé en toutes les manières, & qui a saisi les differens goûts si parfaitement qu’il a trompé les plus habiles connoissseurs” (We have here a Proteus of painting, a man who was continuously transformed, and who grasped the different styles so perfectly that he deceived even the most expert connoisseurs). In 1994 I wrote a post-graduate dissertation on Bon Boullogne under the direction of Professeur Antoine Schnapper at Université Paris IV-Sorbonne (Marandet 1994).

2. The works of Antoine Coyvel were acquired by the French Crown after his death in 1722. The provenance of the 163 drawings by Louis de Boullogne preserved at the Louvre can be traced back only to their purchase in 1846 from the art dealer Pierre Defer.

3. To these must be added the two “Académies” preserved at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (EBA 2784, 2785). Most of the many attempts to attribute drawings to Bon Boullogne have been unconvincing, if not completely far-fetched.


7. The submission of “un saint Jean, demi-figure” to the Académie Royale earned Bon Boullogne a residency at the Académie de France in Rome (see Désallier d’Argenville 1745, p. 374). He is documented in Rome from 1670 to 1673 and then extended his stay in Lombardy. This had a decisive influence on his style.


9. Sale, Paris (P. Rémy, expert), March 29–April 13, 1779 (Catalogue d’une riche collection de dessins et estampes des plus grands maîtres . . . pastels et miniatures . . . qui composent le cabinet de M. Vassal de Saint-Hubert . . . par Pierre Rémy; Lugt 2982), lot 87: “Une offrande à Jupiter, composition de neuf figures à la plume lavée et rehaussée de blanc au pinceau par Louis de Boullogne l’aîné. Hauteur: 12 pouces; longueur: 15 pouces 6 lignes” (An offering to Jupiter, composition of nine figures in pen washed and heightened with white with a brush by Louis de Boullogne the elder. Height: 12 pouces; width: 15 pouces 6 lignes). Sale, Paris (P. Rémy, expert), April 24, 1783, lot 144 (Lugt 3561).

10. Sale, Paris (Du Charteaux and others; P. Rémy and J. B. P. Le Brun, experts), May 2–17, 1791, lot 512 (Lugt 4722): “L’offrande à Jupiter composée de neuf figures à la plume rehaussée de blanc au pinceau par Louis de Boulogne l’aîné” (The offering to Jupiter composed of nine figures in pen heightened with white with brush by Louis de Boullogne the elder). The drawing was at the time framed under glass.


12. The painting was sold at Sotheby’s, Monaco, June 17–18, 1988, lot 881, as by Hyacinthe Collin de Vermont. Xavier Salmon rejected the attribution to Collin de Vermont when it was acquired by the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Cholet in 1988. At the time, I brought his attention to the existence of a preliminary drawing by Bon Boullogne for the figure at the foot of the tree (Louvre, 24821F); see Marandet 1994, no. D2.
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