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## Houdon's *Bather* in a Drawing by Pierre Antoine Mongin

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In 2011 the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, was given a modest graphite drawing by the relatively little-known artist Pierre Antoine Mongin (1761/62–1827). It was purchased by the donor, former Philbrook curator Richard P. Townsend, about 1987 from the Chicago dealer William Schab.<sup>1</sup> The drawing came with the spurious title *Fountain of Diana at the Bath* and with no additional information (Figure 1). Its sketchy handling and small size, and the relative obscurity of the artist, might suggest—erroneously as it turns out—that the drawing has little to reveal. In fact, what this unassuming drawing actually depicts is crucial for our understanding of Jean Antoine Houdon's exquisite marble *Bather* (Figure 3), bequeathed to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1913.

This simply executed sketch depicts a fountain with two nude female figures, one sitting, one standing. The seated figure is shown in profile, with her left leg elegantly extended. Behind her, the standing figure bends slightly over her, appearing to pour water on her neck and back. The group is at the center of a wide basin supported by an architectural foot, and the fountain is pictured in a vaguely defined outdoor setting, with a canopy of leaves and branches framing the scene. This is apparently a study of a motif rather than a finished compositional drawing. Similar studies by Mongin survive in the collections of the Louvre and the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this drawing is wholly in keeping with Mongin's oeuvre and his preferred subject matter.

Pierre Antoine Mongin studied at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris and exhibited at the Salon from 1791 to 1824. He was a painter, a watercolorist, and an engraver, and later in life he became known for the decorative wallpapers of exotic scenes that he designed for the French manufacturer Zuber et Cie.<sup>3</sup> Landscape was his primary subject. In particular, he favored landscapes with gardens carefully manicured and ornamented with sculpture, fountains, follies, and other garden architecture. He depicted

many of the great French châteaux with their lavish and extensive parks, including Versailles, Saint-Cloud, and the Château d'Anet in Dreux (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Mongin's work is similar in tone to that of more celebrated contemporaries like Jean Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806). In fact, his wallpaper designs, when installed, would have functioned as murals portraying gardens or exotic locales, complete with amorous, elegantly attired couples strolling, chatting, and sometimes cavorting.<sup>5</sup> In some senses they simulated commissioned suites of paintings such as Fragonard's *Progress of Love*.<sup>6</sup>

Mongin also proved exceptionally pragmatic and willing to embrace technological innovation, as his work for the wallpaper manufacturer Zuber suggests. In 1816 Godefroy Engelmann (1788–1839) moved to Paris from Munich, where he had been studying the new technology of lithography. In Paris he opened a small press in the rue Cassette and in the same year, 1816, submitted his first lithograph to the *dépôt légal*. That print was a landscape by Mongin entitled *Le Chien de l'aveugle*.<sup>7</sup> More lithographs after his designs quickly followed. Engelmann, aided in no small part by Mongin, is generally credited with France's supremacy in lithography. In many ways, Mongin's work with both Engelmann and Zuber reflects the degree to which his career straddled the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and took cues from earlier traditions as well as the emerging industrial age.

The drawing given to the Philbrook Museum is distinctly eighteenth-century in character. Though it came with the title *Fountain of Diana at the Bath*, and though the fountain shows a woman being bathed, the drawing includes none of the attributes traditionally associated with Diana. However, those familiar with the Metropolitan Museum's collection of French sculpture will recognize the familiar form of Jean Antoine Houdon's *Bather* (Figure 3). That only this marble fragment of the fountain that Mongin sketched survives owes in large part to the circumstances of the fountain's history.

Houdon (1741–1828) proposed his fountain with a bather and an attendant to Jean Baptiste Marie Pierre (1714–1789), director of the Académie Royale and *premier*



1. Pierre Antoine Mongin (French, 1761/62–1827). *Study of a Fountain with Bather and Attendant*, 1782–95. Graphite on cream laid paper,  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{8}$  in. (14.6 × 11.1 cm). Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Gift of Richard P. Townsend in memory of his grandparents Harry and Joan R. Renek (2011.2). Photograph: Shane Culpepper

*peintre du roi*, as a suitable royal commission by early 1779.<sup>8</sup> In a letter of January 10, 1779, to the comte d'Angiviller, director of the Bâtiments du Roi, Pierre described the group as a “marble figure of a *Bather*, life-size, and another figure in lead, of the same size. The latter would represent an *Attendant*.”<sup>9</sup> Probably because of Houdon's high estimate of the cost of the fountain group, the project never became a royal commission. Nonetheless, Houdon managed to obtain a prestigious patron—his proposed fountain group would be acquired by the king's cousin Louis-Philippe-Joseph d'Orléans, duc de Chartres, who intended the fountain for the large pleasure garden he was having built at Monceau.<sup>10</sup> This garden, designed by Louis Carrogis, known as Louis de Carmontelle (1717–1806), was located on twenty-eight acres northwest of Paris and southwest of the village of Monceau. The design was exceptionally ambitious, sprawling across the landscape and containing sculptures, fountains, follies, countless meandering paths, and a number of exotic touches such as a minaret and a Dutch windmill. It was a garden designed to amuse, entertain, and even entrance its well-heeled visitors.<sup>11</sup> The garden was commemorated by a 1779 publication created by Carmontelle himself, in which text and seventeen engraved views as well as a ground plan guide the reader on a tour along the paths and past the many sights to be found there (Figures 4–6). Interestingly, the garden vistas with which Carmontelle highlighted his text are very much in keeping with the oeuvre of Mongin, including elegantly dressed visitors enjoying the garden's various aspects. In the body of this text we encounter the first substantial description of Houdon's fountain group.



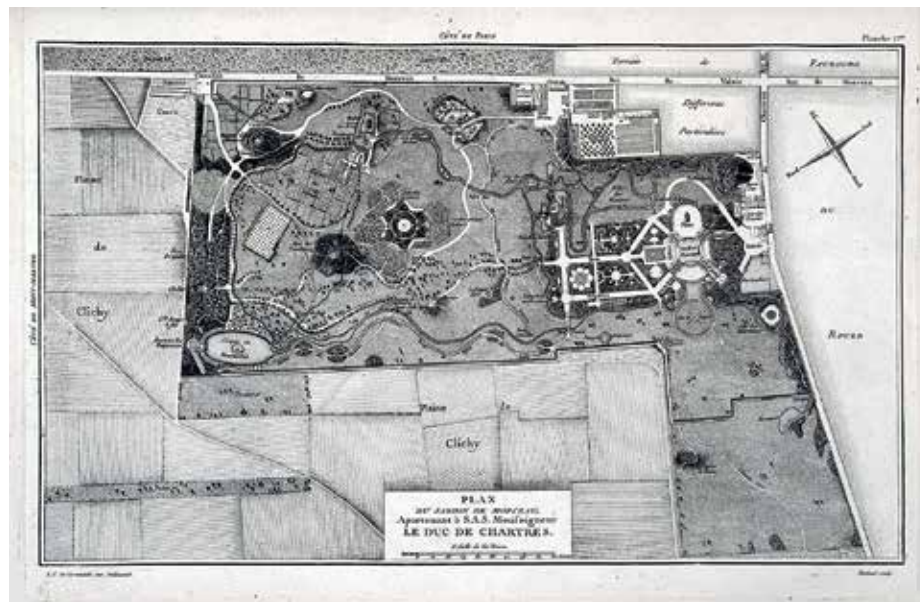
2. Pierre Antoine Mongin. *View of the Park at Versailles: Landscape with Memorial Column and Grove of Trees*, n.d. Black chalk, heightened with white chalk, on blue laid paper,  $17\frac{1}{2} \times 24\frac{1}{4}$  in. (44.5 × 61.4 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of William H. and Frederick G. Schab in honor of Harold Joachim (1968.684.12)



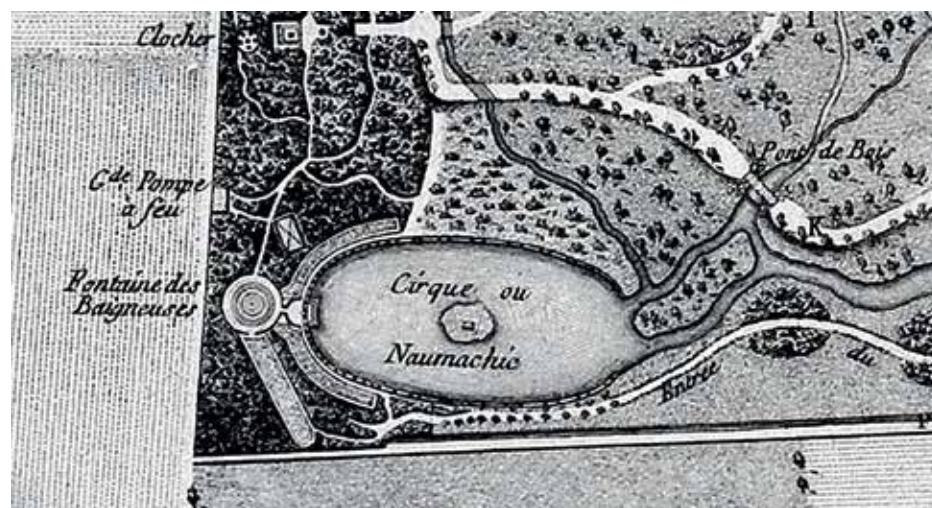
3. Jean Antoine Houdon (French, 1741–1828). *Bather*, 1782. Marble, 47 × 43 × 28 in. (119.4 × 109.2 × 71.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913 (14.40.673). Photograph: Paul Lachenauer, The Photograph Studio, MMA



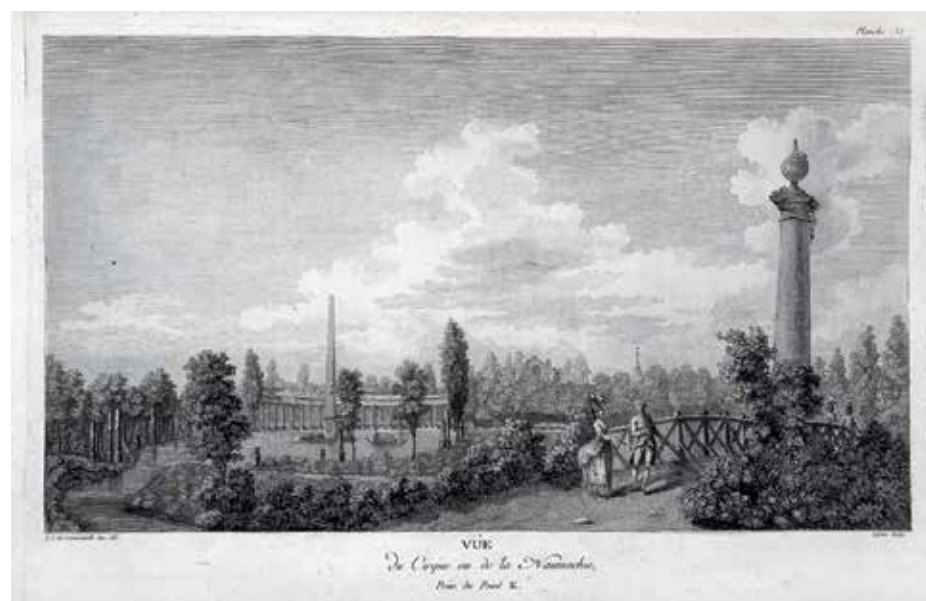
4. Louis de Carmontelle (French, 1717–1806). *Plan du Jardin de Monceau, Appartenant à S.A.S. Monseigneur le duc de Chartres*. Carmontelle 1779, pl. 1. Engraving, sheet 16¼ × 22½ in. (41.3 × 57.2 cm). Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C. (Typ 715.79.260)



5. Detail of Figure 4



6. Louis de Carmontelle. *Vue du Cirque ou de la Naumachie, Prise du Point K*. Carmontelle 1779, pl. 11. Engraving, sheet 16¼ × 22½ in. (41.3 × 57.2 cm). Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C. (Typ 715.79.260)



Carmontelle described the visitor's journey through a part of the garden he called the *Bois irrégulier* (Irregular Wood), past an antique statue of Mercury and two ruined monuments. The visitor would then arrive in a small clearing, where "there is a basin encircled by three steps, where one sees a figure of a woman in white marble, who is bathing, and a Negress in bronze [sic], who is pouring water over her body. These two figures are by M. Houdon."<sup>12</sup>

Since Pierre wrote that the attendant figure would be cast in lead, it is odd that Carmontelle described the figure as made of bronze. And though the fountain's location is indicated on the plan of the garden (at lower left), to the immediate left of the narrow end of the large oval pool that Carmontelle called the "Circus" or the "Naumachia" (Figure 5), the fountain group appears in none of the broad views of the garden. It should be visible in the view of the Naumachia, and yet it is not there (Figure 6). As we know from the map, the fountain would have been located behind the columns seen in this illustration, and the water from it would have fed the large oval pool. To explain these seeming anomalies, it is important to recall that Carmontelle's guidebook came out in 1779, yet as of January 10 of that year Houdon's fountain was still in the design stage. The fountain had been commissioned and the location chosen for it in the park, but at the time of the guidebook's publication it had been neither completed nor installed.<sup>13</sup>

In a list Houdon himself compiled of his work, he put the fountain group under the year 1781,<sup>14</sup> and the marble *Bather* at the Metropolitan Museum is inscribed with the date 1782. A description of the fountain and its installation in the Jardin de Monceau was included in the catalogue to the Salon of 1783, indicating that the fountain was still considered new and was already installed at Monceau.<sup>15</sup>

The first substantial description of the fountain that was written once the piece was in situ appears in a 1787 guidebook to Paris by Luc-Vincent Thiéry, which contains an account of the Jardin de Monceau. Like Carmontelle's description, Thiéry's discussion is structured like a guided stroll through the garden. Once again, the reader is taken through the Irregular Wood to a clearing where could be seen "a basin of white marble, in the middle of which is a charming group by M. Houdon, Sculptor to the King, representing a superb figure in white marble, taking a bath; behind her is another woman, executed in lead and painted black, a negress holding in one hand a white marble drape, and in the other a gold ewer, from which she spills water over the body of her mistress, whence it falls in sheets into the basin."<sup>16</sup> That Thiéry's account of the fountain was not illustrated is regrettable, since the fountain remained in the grove for only a brief period. The duc d'Orléans (which title the duc de Chartres inherited on the death of his father in 1785) was guillotined in 1793, and his pleasure park fell into disrepair. In October 1794, Houdon described the



7. Jean Antoine Houdon. *Head of a Negress*, probably 1781. Painted plaster, 12 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 8 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (32 × 21 cm) with base. Musée Municipale Ancienne Abbaye Saint-Léger, Soissons (93.7.2766). Photograph: M. Minetto © Musée de Soissons

fountain: "A group: a *Bather* in marble on whom a *Negress* in lead pours water, for the garden of Monceau. The *Negress* is in bad shape and needs to be restored."<sup>17</sup> A year later, when the Commission Temporaire des Arts appropriated the fountain figures, the head of the attendant was missing.<sup>18</sup> At some point after the fountain group's confiscation, the now-headless attendant figure disappeared, probably to be melted down. The sole contemporary trace of the lead figure that survives is a plaster version of the head, which is in the collection of the Musée Municipale Ancienne Abbaye Saint-Léger, Soissons (Figure 7).<sup>19</sup> Houdon's innovative fountain group was dismembered and largely destroyed just thirteen or fourteen years after its installation.

Houdon's maquette for the fountain—presumably the model shown to the duc d'Orléans in 1779—appeared in a sale in France on July 30, 1786,<sup>20</sup> and can then be traced down through a series of collections until the early twentieth century, when it was with Duveen Brothers in London. A version of the maquette is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 8)<sup>21</sup> and serves to convey Houdon's original plan for the disposition of the figures in the fountain. It differs somewhat from Mongin's sketch, particularly





8. Attributed to Jean Antoine Houdon. *The Bather*, ca. 1780 or 19th–early 20th century. Terracotta, H. 8 1/8 in. (20.6 cm), Diam. 6 1/4 in. (15.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931 (32.100.159). Photograph: Katya Shaposhnik

in the orientation of the attendant, in the shape of the vessel she holds, and in the design of the basin itself, and it is precisely these incongruities that make Mongin's drawing so significant, documenting as it does changes and adjustments that were made to the fountain during the fabrication process. Indeed, Mongin's sketch is now the sole visual record of Houdon's exquisite and unusual fountain as it was actually—and all too briefly—installed in the Jardin de Monceau.

## NOTES

1. William Schab gave drawings by Mongin to the Art Institute of Chicago (1968.684.1–12) and the Musée du Louvre, Paris (donated in 1973, RF 35723). He may have had a collection of Mongin's drawings. Indeed, the drawings given to Chicago are mounted in an album and appear to be a thematically linked group; email correspondence with Suzanne Karr Schmidt, curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, September 18–21, 2012.
2. For some studies by Mongin at the Louvre and the Art Institute of Chicago, see also notes 1 and 4.
3. Argencourt et al. 1999, pp. 463–65.

4. Among the works by Mongin that William Schab gave the Art Institute of Chicago are scenes of Versailles, including *View of the Park at Versailles: Women Bathing Beneath a Bridge* (1968.684.10bR). The drawing he gave the Louvre depicts the Château d'Anet (*Vue du jardin du château d'Anet*, RF 35723r).
5. Two relevant sources on Mongin's wallpaper designs are Jacqué 1980 and Ravel 1999.
6. Fragonard's *Progress of Love*, originally painted for Madame du Barry, is in the Frick Collection, New York, 1915.1.45–55A–D.
7. Gilmour 1996, p. 483.
8. Poulet 2003, pp. 241, 245n2.
9. Furcy-Raynaud 1906, p. 238: "en marbre une figure de *Baigneuse*, grande comme nature, et une autre figure en plomb, de même proportion. Cette dernière représentera une *Suivante*." Translation from Poulet 2003, p. 241.
10. Poulet 2003, p. 241.
11. Carmontelle was also employed to provide entertainment in the household of the duc de Chartres, where he wrote skits, sketched portraits of visitors, and arranged similar charming diversions; Hays 2001, pp. 295–96. Much has been written on the Jardin de Monceau, today's Parc Monceau; see, especially, Andia 1978, pp. 25–35; Hays 1990; Hays 1999; and Dispozio 2006.
12. Carmontelle 1779, p. 9: "il y a un bassin entouré de trois marches, où l'on voit une figure de femme du marbre blanc, qui se baigne, & une Nègresse de bronze, qui lui répand de l'eau sur le corps. Ces deux figures sont de M. Houdon." Translation from Poulet 2003, p. 241.
13. This conclusion is shared by Hays (2001, pp. 309–10, 414n82).
14. This list was published in Vitry 1907. It was reprinted in Arnason 1975, pp. 127–29; the fountain group is no. 81 on p. 128.
15. Salon 1783, p. 49, no. 251: "Une Fontaine composée de deux figures de grandeur naturelle, l'une en marbre blanc, & l'autre imitant une Nègresse, exécutées & placées dans le Jardin de Monseigneur le Duc de Chartres, à Mouceaux [sic], près de Paris."
16. Thiéry 1787, vol. 1, pp. 69–70: "un bassin de marbre blanc, au milieu duquel est un charmant groupe de M. Houdon, Sculpteur du Roi, représentant une superbe figure de marbre blanc, prenant un bain; derrière elle, une autre femme, exécutée en plomb & peinte en noir, figure une nègresse tenant d'une main une draperie de marbre blanc, & de l'autre une aiguière d'or, dont elle répand l'eau sur le corps de sa maîtresse, d'où elle retombe en nappe dans le bassin."
17. Réau 1964, vol. 1, p. 99: "Un groupe: une *Baigneuse* en marbre sur laquelle une nègresse en plomb verse de l'eau, pour le jardin de Monceau. La nègresse est en mauvais état et a besoin d'être restaurée." Translation from Poulet 2003, p. 243.
18. Poulet 2003, pp. 243, 245n9.
19. See *ibid.*, pp. 241–45, no. 42. Two bronze bust-length versions of the attendant also exist, both late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century casts. A full-size cast is in the Musée Nissim de Camondo, Paris (CAM 259), and a reduced cast is in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris (D 37621).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 245n6.
21. Another version of the maquette was in the auction of the estate of Mrs. Evelyn St. George, *Catalogue of the Important Contents of Cam House, Campden Hill* (Sotheby & Co., London, July 24–25, 1939, lot 84). In 1940, Preston Remington, curator at the Metropolitan Museum, visited Duveen Brothers in London. While there, he was shown Mrs. St. George's maquette and told by Edward Fowles of Duveen the following things about it: that he had purchased it at her estate sale; that it was the original, bought for her by J. Pierpont Morgan; and that the Museum's maquette was a cast

made by Duveen for Benjamin Altman soon after he had acquired the marble *Bather* from Duveen in 1910–11. According to notes in the Metropolitan's Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, the formerly Mrs. St. George maquette was still at Duveen in New York in 1961; its present location is unknown. Altman's version came into the Museum with the bequest of Michael Friedsam in 1931.

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