

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART

VICTOR HUGO

Besançon 1802-1885 Paris

Landscape with a Castle

Pen, brush and brown ink and brown wash.

Signed with initials and dated *V. H. 20 7^{bre} 1842* in brown ink at the lower right.

92 x 188 mm. (3 5/8 x 7 3/8 in.)

Provenance

Louis Barthou, Paris

His sale (*'Bibliothèque de M. Louis Barthou de l'Académie Française'*), Paris, Galerie Jean Charpentier, 4-6 November 1935, lot 1045

Anonymous sale, Paris, Sotheby's, 21 June 2012, lot 102

Gérard Lhéritier (Aristophil), Nice.

Literature

Louis Barthou, 'Victor Hugo: carnets et dessins inédits', *Revue des deux mondes*, December 1918, illustrated p.727 (as *Les bords du Rhin*).

Arguably the most significant literary figure in 19th century France, over a career that lasted more than sixty years, Victor Marie Hugo was also an accomplished and prolific draughtsman. He produced nearly three thousand drawings, the principal groups of which are today in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Maison de Victor Hugo in Paris. Although he began to draw seriously around 1825, relatively little of this early work survives, and it was not until some twenty years later that he was to develop his distinctive personal graphic idiom. As a draughtsman, Hugo seems to have been most productive during periods when he was writing less, as for example in 1850. Conversely, there are very few drawings from the period between 1852 and 1853, when he was engaged on a spell of intense literary activity. His drawings achieved a height of expression during the years of his political exile from France on the Channel Islands of Jersey, where he and his family lived from 1852 to 1855, and Guernsey, where he settled in October 1855 and remained until 1870.

Although he often gave drawings as presents to friends and colleagues, and allowed several sheets to be reproduced as engravings, the act of drawing was a largely private occupation for Hugo. (As he wrote to his friend Paul Meurice in 1863, *'these scribbles are for private use and to indulge very close friends.'*¹) For much of his life Hugo's drawings were known, outside of his family, only to a handful of writers and connoisseurs. Writing in 1859, the poet Charles Baudelaire praised *'the magnificent imagination that flows from the drawings of Victor Hugo like the mystery of the heavens. I speak of his drawings in Indian ink, because it is too obvious that in poetry our poet is the king of landscape.'*² In the last ten years of his life Hugo drew much less, a decline mirrored in his literary output. The first public exhibition of his drawings was held at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris in 1888, three years after his death, when over 150 sheets

were shown. Since that time his drawings have remained popular with both enlightened collectors and artists; indeed, Picasso is known to have owned several drawings by Hugo.

As a draughtsman, Hugo relied primarily on brown or black ink, with washes applied with a fluidity and transparency that allowed for remarkable tonal and atmospheric effects. He also experimented with different techniques and media, including inkblots (*taches*), folded paper, stencilled cut-outs, gold leaf and impressions taken from various objects, including leaves and lace. Hugo's idiosyncratic working methods have been described by his son Charles: *'Once paper, pen and ink-well have been brought to the table, Victor Hugo sits down and without making a preliminary sketch, without any apparent preconception, sets about drawing with an extraordinarily sure hand not the landscape as a whole but any old detail. He will begin his forest with the branch of a tree, his town with a gable, his gable with a weather vane, and, little by little, the entire composition will emerge from the blank paper with the precision and clarity of a photographic negative subjected to the chemical preparation that brings out the picture...The result is an unexpected and powerful drawing that is often strange, always personal, and recalls the etchings of Rembrandt and Piranesi.'*³

Another vivid description of Hugo as a draughtsman was provided by his grandson Georges: *'I sometimes saw him drawing: they were only quick little sketches, landscapes, caricatures, profiles drawn at a single stroke, which he made on any little scrap of paper. He scattered the ink haphazardly, crushing the goose quill which grated and spattered trails of ink. Then he sort of kneaded the black blot which became a castle, a forest, a deep lake or a stormy sky; he delicately wet the barb of his pen with his lips and with it burst a cloud from which rain fell down onto the wet paper; or he used it to indicate precisely the mists blurring the horizon.'*⁴

The present sheet may be associated with drawings made in Hugo's notebooks during his travels along the Rhine in 1838, 1839 and 1840, in the company of his lover Juliette Drouet. On these journeys he was particularly captivated by the numerous, imposing mountaintop castles, or *burgs*, which appeared in towns here and there along the course of the majestic river, and he made pencil sketches of many of the picturesque sites they visited in his travel diaries and notebooks, as well as in letters sent to his family and relatives. This voyage inspired Hugo's great book *Le Rhin: Lettres à un ami*, published in three volumes between 1842 and 1845; this was a sort of travel guide in which he included reflections, anecdotes and Rhine legends, along with descriptive passages of the places he visited.

After travelling through France and Belgium to reach the Rhine, Hugo's book takes the reader along the course of the great river, from Cologne to the cataract of the Rhine Falls in Switzerland. In *Le Rhin*, the writer, referring to himself, noted that *'The encounter with this great river produced in him what no incident of his journey had inspired in him until that moment; a will to see and observe with a determined aim fixed the wandering course of his ideas, gave a precise meaning to his at first capricious excursion, gave a centre to his studies, in a word, made him pass from reverie to thought. The Rhine is the river of which all the world speaks and which no one studies, that everyone visits and no one knows, which one notices as one passes by and which one quickly forgets, which every glance touches and which no one penetrates spiritually. Yet its ruins occupy lofty imaginations, its destiny occupies serious minds; and this admirable river, through its*

*transparent waves, allows the eye of the poet as well as that of the publicist to see the past and future of Europe.*⁵

Hugo's voyage along the Rhine in 1840, the longest of his journeys on the great river, was spent partly on board a steamship, and allowed him ample time to record his observations. As his friend and contemporary biographer Alfred Barbou noted of this period, '*About this time he wrote "Le Rhin", a work that exhibits another side of his genius. This consists of a series of letters, supposed to be written to a friend, giving a humorous account of an archaeological tour. The style is racy, but affords the author every opportunity of illustrating his wide erudition. Under the character of a goodnatured savant he carries his readers from Aix-la-Chapelle to Cologne, thence to Mayence and Frankfort, visiting the numerous monuments on his way, relating the various legends connected with town, village, or castle, digressing into philosophy and politics, and introducing a number of graphic stories full of interest and amusement. He sketches as he goes, and his drawings manifest his unbounded admiration of the scenery of the river and the old "burgs" upon its banks...His descriptions and his illustrations are equally admirable; the painter and the poet go hand-in-hand.*'⁶

It is after his trips along the Rhine that Hugo's pen and ink drawings take on a more visionary aspect, inspired by the poetic sights he saw, and in particular the sequence of over thirty ruined castles – '*forteresses à demi écroulées*', in Hugo's words – on the high ground overlooking the river between Koblenz and Mainz. As the modern scholar Pierre Georgel has noted, with his book *Le Rhin Hugo* '*finally passed from a picturesque manner to the contemplative vision in which his genius was to find mature expression. At the same time, the draughtsman's most obsessive themes began to crystallize around the memorable image of the burg...After the journey of 1840, which, for several weeks, concentrated Hugo's imagination on the dark outlines of the Rhenish Burgs, dreams of a more obscure kind poured out into his drawings. A whole world began to be formed around signs recollected from memory – ruined castles, outlines of towns by the waterside.*'⁷ Sketches and descriptions of castles or *burgs* occur frequently in Hugo's drawings, notebooks and letters, and indeed castles play a significant role in much of his published work.

The first owner of this small drawing was the lawyer, journalist, politician and bibliophile Jean Louis Barthou (1862-1934), who briefly served as prime minister of France in 1913, and who published a number of books and articles about Victor Hugo. A stylistically comparable drawing of a Rhine landscape by Hugo of the same date, also at one time in the Barthou collection, is today in the Louvre, on loan to the Musée Victor Hugo-Maison Vacquerie in Villequier⁸.

1. '*ces griffonages sont pour l'intimité et l'indulgence des amis tout proches*'; Hugo in a letter to Paul Meurice, dated 6 March 1863.

2. Charles Baudelaire, 'Lettre à M. le Directeur de la Revue Française sur le Salon de 1859', *Revue Française*, 1859, p.524; Quoted in translation in Kevin Salatino, 'Ego Hugo', *Master Drawings*, Winter 2019, p.534.

3. Quoted in translation in Marie-Laure Prévost, 'The Techniques of a Poet-Draftsman', in Florian Rodari et al., *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 1998, p.31.
4. Quoted in translation in Florian Rodari, 'Victor Hugo, a Precursor *a posteriori*', in Rodari et al., *ibid.*, p.25.
5. '*La rencontre de ce grand fleuve produisit en lui ce qu'aucun incident de son voyage ne lui avait inspiré jusqu'à ce moment; une volonté de voir et d'observer dans un but déterminé fixa la marche errante de ses idées, imprima une signification précise à son excursion d'abord capricieuse, donna un centre à ses études, en un mot, le fit passer de la rêverie à la pensée. Le Rhin est le fleuve dont tout le monde parle et que personne n'étudie, que tout le monde visite et que personne ne connaît, qu'on voit en passant et qu'on oublie en courant, que tout regard effleure et qu'aucun esprit n'approfondit. Pourtant ses ruines occupent les imaginations élevées, sa destinée occupe les intelligences sérieuses; et cet admirable fleuve laisse entrevoir à l'œil du poète comme à l'œil du publiciste, sous la transparence de ses flots, le passé et l'avenir de l'Europe.*'; Victor Hugo, *Le Rhin: Lettres à un ami*, Brussels, 1842.
6. Alfred Barbou, *Victor Hugo and his Time*, London, 1882, pp.201-202.
7. Pierre Georgel, *Drawings by Victor Hugo*, exhibition catalogue, London, 1974, unpaginated.
8. Inv. 36043 (Musée Victor Hugo, Villequier, Inv. 1694); Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo, *Le Rhin: Le voyage de Victor Hugo en 1840*, exhibition catalogue, 1985, p.107, no.84. An image of the drawing is also visible online at <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020037215> [accessed 12 November 2022].