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Jill Newhouse Gallery presents

An Incessant Ardor: Drawings by Stephanie de Virieu (1785-1873)

“Drawing was not simply a hobby for me; it was a dominant, unique, and all-consuming passion, and it lasted with an intensity far beyond many other passions, until sorrows and constant worries came to tear me away from it... and even then, as soon as I had a little peace of mind, drawing almost became my sole occupation again and brought me all my joy.”

Stephanie de Virieu was a draughtsman and sculptor born to the next generation of painters after Vigée Le Brun and Marguerite Gérard. Her drawings are a very recent discovery and her work is virtually unknown outside of France. Her story involves art, literature, politics and society in early nineteenth century France.

Her Life Story

Stephanie de Virieu was born July 14, 1785 into an aristocratic family from the Dauphiné region in southeast France. She lived to be 88 years old. Her oeuvre consists of some 3,000 drawings, and some sculpture, which she began making late in life as her eyesight started to fail.

De Virieu's family had close ties to the court of Louis XVI, thus **the French Revolution and Reign of Terror had a profound and devastating impact on her childhood**. The family home Château de Pupetières was destroyed by revolutionaries, and in 1793, Stephanie's father was killed during a Royalist uprising called the Siege of Lyon. De Virieu, her mother, and two siblings were forced into exile in Switzerland, at times disguising themselves as peasants in order to escape persecution. Once Napoleon Bonaparte established the French Empire in 1804, de Virieu's family was allowed to return to France and retake

possession of their partially destroyed home. They were even able to build a new home at Grand-Lemps in Isère, and still the seat of the de Virieu estate today.

Throughout the tumultuous years of her childhood, Stephanie's mother remained committed to her daughter's **education which included instruction in drawing**, albeit in an ad hoc manner. The artist would later regret her lack of a conventional or consistent art education which stunted her creative growth, as she wrote to her brother in 1816, *"I believe that I was born a painter, but the worthlessness of my studies means that I am, and will only ever be a failure."*

De Virieu's talent and passion for art were given a better outlet during the course of two stays in Paris when, at age 13, she took **lessons from two former students of Jacques-Louis David**, De Lavoipierre, an artist from Rouen, and Albertus-Jacop-Frans Grégorius (1774-1853), a Belgian portraitist. De Virieu later shared a studio in Paris with a friend named Mme du Cayla in the Hôtel Jaucourt. (Notably, Comtesse du Cayla, 1785–1852, was an intimate friend, confidante, and *maîtresse-en-titre* of King Louis XVIII of France. The King referred to his affection for her as paternal, calling her "his daughter"). Drawing meanwhile remained a central activity in de Virieu's life, and it was in her memoirs around this time that she wrote **"I draw with an incessant ardor."**

Testimony to De Virieu's deeply aesthetic nature is her friendship with **Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869)**, a close childhood friend of her brother Aymon de Virieu. Lamartine would become an important figure in 19th century France, renowned as the country's first Romantic poet and a pivotal statesman during the French Revolution of 1848. Following Aymon's death in 1841, Stephanie and Alphonse remained devoted correspondents, sharing their mutually artistic spirits as well as their concerns for home and hearth.

During the 1860s, driven by failing eyesight and a deep commitment to her faith and her family (both her brother and sister had died, so she became very involved with the upbringing of her nieces and nephews), de Virieu **turned to sculpture**, collaborating with the reknowned architect **Eugène Viollet-le-Duc** on the restoration of her family's ancestral home, the Château de Pupetières. Stephanie contributed to the interior décor, and at age 78, sculpted a stone fireplace mantle depicting her 12th-century ancestors.

Research by Cora Michael, Ph.d

Works in the Exhibition



The Dream (Le Songe), c. 1820-1830

Ink wash on paper

3 7/8 x 4 5/8 inches

Executed in de Virieu's signature sepia ink and wash media, *Le Songe* depicts two sleeping children on a rocky plateau. The distaff held by the child at right suggests that they may be wayward shepherds who have abandoned their flock to sneak a nap in the open air. Hovering above the children at upper right is a semi-nude female figure, held aloft by the parachute formed by her billowing drapery. The Alpine landscape setting may have been inspired by de Virieu's travels in Savoie and Auvergne. As she recalled in her Memoirs, during one of her many visits to Evian, where her aunt Madame de Blonay lived, she had been captivated by the landscape scenery:

"Evian seemed to me a wonderful place. The lake, the magnificent vegetation of its surroundings, the beautiful mountains—everything, in short, charmed me... I had the best legs in the world back then, and I did more hiking in the mountains than I did in the rest of my life combined. And then, I drew as much as I could."

On another trip to Mont d'Or, where de Virieu took the waters with her mother in the spring of 1830, she ventured into the countryside to sketch, staying overnight with local peasants. The artist remarked on the landscape, calling it "a unique country where the volcanoes seem to have gone extinct just the day before."

Though the realistic depiction of the mountainous setting in our drawing may have been inspired by one of these trips, the symbolic female figure -- perhaps a personification of Dreams -- demonstrates de Virieu's embrace of the motifs of Romanticism gaining popularity in this period.



Motherhood, c. 1820-1830

Ink wash on paper

10 13/16 x 4 5/8 inches

While de Virieu's oeuvre consists of a broad range of subject matter, including landscapes, literary illustrations, and scenes from imagination, her specialty was undoubtedly portraiture, and she was fond of making on-the-spot likenesses of her closest friends and family acquaintances during social gatherings. The

woman in this drawing has not been identified, but the intimacy of the image -- both its portrayal of motherhood and the tenderness of the artist's drawing style, with its delicate washes of sepia ink -- suggests that the sitter was someone in the artist's inner circle, perhaps her sister Émilie or her sister-in-law, Emma de Fargues, who married Stéphanie's brother, Aymon, in 1822. While Stéphanie de Virieu never married or had children of her own, she was extremely close with her niece and nephews. A devoted aunt, Stéphanie took a keen interest in their education and well-being, especially after the death of her sister in 1831.



***Death Unmasked and the Maiden*, c. 1819-1823**

Pencil, ink wash and white gouache on gray paper

6 3/4 x 8 inches

This drawing depicts a young woman seated on a bench, pulling away from the figure of Death who has revealed his face from behind his mask. The woman turns away in horror, shielding her eyes from the ghoulish sight. De Virieu's drawing style is free and spontaneous, with repeated contour lines describing the forms of the figures -- particularly the sleeves of the woman's dress and the right arm of Death -- with only the sparest indication of a background setting. At the same time, the drawing has an agitated quality, as if the artist's own heart were made to race by the dramatic subject she described.

Though the source for de Virieu's drawing is unknown, it may relate to the poetry of Alphonse de Lamartine, a close friend of both Stéphanie and her brother Aymon. At several points between 1818 and 1823, Lamartine asked Stéphanie to provide illustrations for his poetry, including *Clovis*, *Méditations*, *Nouvelles Méditations* and *Mort de Socrate*, though none of her illustrations were actually published. The present drawing may have been inspired by more improvisatory narratives, spoken out loud to Stéphanie while she drew and painted. Lamartine recalled days spent with the de Virieu family in Isère: "We spent the long autumn days reading to her while she painted, or devising subjects for her paintings, which the rapid improvisation of her pencil instantly brought to life and gave form to."

Given the rapid and fervent quality of de Virieu's line, *Masque de Mort* might well have been an impromptu illustration for one of Lamartine's afternoon lectures.



Three Women Around a Fireplace, c. 1825-1830

Pencil and charcoal on paper

7 7/8 x 10 1/4 inches

In this drawing three women are seated before a hearth. The room is illuminated by the flickering flames of a fire, while the dramatic interaction among the figures suggests a scene from a Gothic ghost tale. The narrative

element is palpable. At left, an older woman is seen speaking to two young girls, as she gestures demonstratively with her finger. The two girls cling to one another in fear, seemingly terrified of the words spilling from the crone's mouth. The nocturnal setting and eerie lighting effects add to the drawing's thrilling atmosphere of foreboding and mystery.



Portrait of Guy Joseph François Louis Timoléon d'Auberjon, Marquis de Murinais, c. 1820

Black chalk, charcoal, white gouache highlights on paper
7 3/8 x 7 3/8 in.

Stéphanie was an incisive portraitist and would often draw from life during social visits with friends. Our exquisite portrait drawing in black chalk with white highlights, whose attribution is confirmed by a label on the reverse of the old frame, is thought to portray Antoine-Victor de Murinais (1754-1815), whose wife Lucile de La Forest-Divonne Murinais (1771-1847) was a close friend of the de Virieu family and served as a tutor to Stephanie. A detailed oval-format portrait drawing of her is in the collection of the Marquis de Virieu.

The Marquis and his wife, Lucile de La Forest-Divonne Murinais (1771-1847) lived very close to Stéphanie in Le Grand-Lemps, in the Château de Marlieu, where they hosted lively salons and welcomed an array of stimulating guests.

The Marquise was herself a talented artist with a particular affinity for drawing landscapes.

Our portrait was likely made during the years immediately following de Virieu's training in Paris under Delavoipierre and Grégorius. The sheet reflects the Davidian tradition in its highly refined execution, black chalk medium, and uncannily realistic manner, similar to other portrait drawings by David's students such as Jean-Baptiste Isabey.