

The Pilgrims at Emmaus by Louis Le Nain

Original Lithographic Bookplate - Main Subject: Religion & Belief



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**Medium**  
Original Lithographic Bookplate

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**About Louis Le Nain**

The work of the Le Nain family, and especially that of Louis, is an ideal example of the naturalism that typifies the French national style through the ages. With them an intelligent balance was struck between the exaggerated realism of the Netherlandish and German schools on the one hand and the noble generalization and idealism of the Italian school on the other.

The Le Nain brothers were born in Laon, which is between Paris and Flanders; this closeness to Flanders perhaps accounts for their preference of the peasantry as subject matter, but their presence on French soil may account for their awareness of the value of infusing classical standards, for reasons of balance, into their art. There are distinctions within this formula, however,

among the three brothers. And here, once again, is manifest another characteristic of French art: the fluctuation within the naturalistic mode between medieval mannerism and classicism. The former is noticeable in the small-scale, calligraphic, and archaically composed style of the eldest brother, Antoine, and it is also present in the animation, variety of dramatic lighting effects, and social consciousness of the youngest brother, Mathieu. But the work of the middle brother, Louis, with large, quiet figures, monumentally posed, and cool tonal neutrality, appears to stabilize by classical means the other brothers' relative exuberance. We have, thus, in a single family of artists a demonstrable composite of the ingredients of French art.

Because only 15 dated works survive, all executed between 1641 and 1648 and signed "Le Nain" but without a Christian name, the plausibility of collaboration points up even more their microcosmic interrelationship. The gamut of their distinctively expressive means in collaboration is apparent in *Venus at the Forge of Vulcan*.

The brothers were probably jointly trained in Laon in the prevailing Netherlandish styles of Adriaen Petersz van der Venne and Hendrick Avercamp, and all three probably died in Paris, Antoine and Louis a few months after the founding in 1648 of the Royal Academy of Sculpture and Painting, of which the three were original members. In 1629 Antoine is recorded as master painter to the abbey of St-Germain-des-Prés in Paris. Mathieu and Louis, still apprentices, arrived the next year. In 1633 Mathieu is listed as master painter to the city of Paris. Antoine excelled in miniature and small-scale single and group portraits on copper, painted in strong local tones (*Portrait of the Marquis de Troisvilles* and *Family Reunion*).

### **Louis Le Nain**

There are indications that sometime between 1626 and 1630 Louis must have gone to Rome, for the influence of the Netherlandish artists painting in Rome at the time, the Bamboccianti, or painters of small low-life scenes, particularly that of Pieter van Laer, is strong, as is that of Orazio Gentileschi. A Roman sojourn is implied also by the reflections in subject matter, composition, and mood in Louis's *Peasant Family* (ca. 1645-1648) and the *Procession of the Ram of The Drunkards* by the Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, who was in Rome in 1629-1630. Louis Le Nain's expressive content differs, however, from the vulgar bravado and hilarity of contemporary Dutch painters of the peasantry. Such a work as his *Peasants in the Country* dignifies and memorializes into frozen, immutable silence his subjects, calmly posed like monoliths among the carefully selected paraphernalia of the barnyard. These immortal peasants sit among the tokens of an earthly pilgrimage with the hushed deference which bespeaks an awareness of their being the guests of God. Their environment is lonely, the landscape airless, anticipating the aridity of some surrealist paintings.

### **Mathieu Le Nain**

While Antoine's and Louis's clientele was probably among the sober provincial bureaucracy, Mathieu's was undoubtedly a more urban and prosperous middle class. Surviving his brothers by almost 30 years, he was, as the artistic heir of two extremely competent brothers, not only more facile in his painting technique but also worked in a more socially evolved municipal environment. Mathieu's relatively baroque frivolity is, therefore, understandable. He was a lieutenant in the Paris militia and a knight, probably of the Order of St. Michael, which the king frequently conferred on deserving artists. Mathieu somewhat pompously styled himself lord of Jumelle, a small farm he owned near Laon.

Mathieu took pleasure in underlining social distinctions. An extreme example, a late work, is *The Gardener*, which anticipates the arch sentimentality of Jean Baptiste Greuze a century later. The humble, obviously love-sick young gardener is mischievously eyed by a housemaid as he offers flowers to their demure mistress. Such pretentiousness bespeaks the courtly influence of Versailles on French and international taste. Whether or not this content can be called inherent or incipient mannerism as found in late baroque and rococo art, it is fundamentally antagonistic not only to the gravity of the early 17th century but also to the naive sincerity of Mathieu's older, long-deceased brothers.

Despite the expressive variety within the formula of uniformity of the Le Nain brothers' styles, the sobriety of their work as a whole concurs with the substantial values and metaphysical quiet of the first half of the 17th century everywhere in France other than in the courtly milieu. In their production, particularly that of Louis, sincere respect for the dignity of man is the grand and universal theme.

## **Original Lithographic Bookplate**

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