François Auguste Biard (1798/9-1882), French

The Artist's Den, (not dated)

Oil on canvas laid down on masonite

The Artist's Den is a narrative based on François Auguste Biard's own adventures in the Brazilian rain forest where he painted, illustrated, and engaged in his passion as an amateur naturalist. A native of France, he went on a self-financed expedition to Brazil from 1858 to 1860. The oil painting is undated, may have been executed during his sojourn, using his atelier in Espirito Santo as the setting.

The tropical studio, similar to a large greenhouse, is filled with a palm tree, lush foliage, and a wide assortment of birds and animals including monkeys, a turtle, crocodiles, and a bear. Strong light pours in from the background. In a strategic compositional gesture, Biard partially hides himself behind a tree, not showing his face. Seated sideways, balancing his palette on his knee, he paints on an easel. Out of his direct line of vision, he reveals a fantasy or dream narrative which angles to the right of the picture. A young man sits in admiration at the feet of a voluptuous blond model dressed in native dress, asleep on a hammock. Meanwhile two surprised priests leading a cluster of people, unexpectedly discover the scene. One priest looks with scorn and the second one peeks over the foliage at the scene.

The subject most likely reflects the artist's biography as he contrasts the views of a young man with those of the priests as they scornfully confront the voluptuous model. Biard himself originally intended to become a priest, but chose a career in painting instead.

Biard wrote and illustrated a travel account of his trip to Brazil which was published by Hachette (Paris, 1862). The book includes over 180 wood engravings, drawn by Édouard Riou from Biard's original sketches and engraved by French artists. The book records Biard's activities collecting and classifying insects, birds, shells, plants and orchids. This interest vied with his time sketching plants and Indians, painting panoramas of the rain forest and experimenting with photography. Biard sought to entertain his reader by creating images showing his conflicts with his Indian models.

Before his Brazil sojourn, he travelled to Greece and the Middle East, England, Scotland, Spain and Switzerland. He participated in a scientific mission to Scandinavia, Lapland and the Arctic island of Spitsbergen. He was commissioned to decorate the vestibule of the Galerie de Minéralogie at the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris.

The specimens in The Artist's Den suggest his Brazilian atelier may have functioned similarly to Biard's chic Paris Salon at 8 Place Vendome. In Paris, he displayed a small museum or "cabinet of curiosities" of exotic objects, weapons, vases, cooking implements, musical instruments, tools, tents and tools from his travels. He viewed the museum as extending the boundaries of knowledge and thus rendering a service to mankind.

Biard's unique approach in which he combined an explorer-naturalist's realism with artistic fantasy and drama, distinguished his paintings which he submitted to the Paris Salons (1861 and 1865) for exhibition. He was celebrated during the reign of King Louis Philippe as one of France's leading genre painters.

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