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RICHARD PARKES BONINGTON (London) 1802 - 1828
Francis Ier et La Reine de Navarre (Francis I and the Queen of Navarre)
oil on canvas
35.5 x 27.5 cm

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Provenance:

possibly John Proctor Anderdon¹ 1760-1846, Fairley Hall
possibly Thomas Woolner 1825-1892
Christie's, 12 June 1875, lot 129, bt Ellis
Thomas McLean, London
private collection, London

Exhibited:

Paris Salon, 1827-28, second instalment, no. 1604

Literature:

Jal, A., *Esquisses, croquis, pochades où tout ce qu'on voudra sur le salon de 1827*, Paris, Ambroise Dupont, 1828, p. 498
Illustrations of the Keepsake, *The Literary Gazette*, 21 October 1829, p. 667
Gautier, Théophile, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe*, Paris, 1856 II: 47
Mantz, Paul, *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 1876, II. 299
Ingamells, John, *Richard Parkes Bonington*, Wallace Collection Monographs, London, 1979, p. 74
Ingamells, John, *The Wallace Collection: Catalogue of Pictures*, Wallace Collection, London, 1985, pp. 24-6
Pointon, Marcia, *Bonington, Francia and Wyld*, Batsford Books in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986, passim
Noon, Patrick, *Richard Parkes Bonington - the complete works*, Yale University Press, 2009, no. 409, pp. 444-445

Engraved:

1. Engraving, by Charles Heath, for Mary Shelley's 'The False Rhyme,' *The Keepsake* (London, 1829)
2. Engraving, by Normand for T. Hamilton, *The English School*, a series of the most approved productions in Painting and Sculpture (London, 1832) IV:225
3. Aquatint, by Jazet, 1829
4. Lithograph, by A. Devéria, 1833
5. Lithograph, by A. Bouchet, 1836, probably a copy after no. 3

In his Salon review, Jal noted of this picture: 'François I^{er} et la reine de Navarre is a small study totally Venetian in colour; with a bit more in the indication of contours it would be a charming picture; the dogs are very beautiful in form and tone.' For the sources of the features of the royal siblings, see no. 408.

Ingamells suggested that the pose of Marguerite might derive from a figure in Veronese's *Supper in the House of Simon the Pharisee*; however, a Bonington graphite, pose study of a female in contemporary dress is the more immediate model.² Two small pen and

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ink studies on the verso of a sheet of preparatory sketches for the near contemporary illustration *La Sylphide* may also relate.

This version of the composition appears as an element of bric-a-brac in a ca. 1834 watercolour study by John Frederick Lewis of a 'romantic interior'.³

In 1828 when Richard Parkes Bonington, then aged only twenty-six and with a bare seven months to live, exhibited at the Paris Salon a painting titled *François I^{er} et la Reine de Navarre* alongside another of his best-loved and most animated historical scenes *Henri IV et l'Ambassadeur de l'Espagne* (Wallace Collection, London) a reviewer identified him as the artist whom 'les romantiques s'applaudissent de compter au nombre de leurs maîtres.' We cannot be certain whether it was this exquisite painting or the variant now in the Wallace collection that was exhibited in Paris but the fact that this young artist was acknowledged in 1828 as effectively a master of a school of painting is indisputable. In so far as the work now in the public eye for the first time for generations is more complex in terms of its composition, more focused on the figures and considerably more detailed than the Wallace Collection version, it seems the more likely candidate for the exhibit. Moreover, it is in outstandingly good condition with none of the signs of craquelure that may be seen on the surface of the variant. It may be that Bonington executed, as was his habit, a quick sketchy narrative composition and then worked it up for exhibition, adding a second hunting dog, re-positioning both the King and his sister, Marguerite, and making far more explicit details of clothing and furniture.

During the Bourbon restoration (after the fall of Napoleon in 1813 and before the 1830 revolution) subjects from French history were extremely popular among the so-called Troubadour painters; the domestic lives of early modern aristocrats were recreated in paint complete with vividly imagined costumes and architectural details often based on antiquarian books and reflecting the contemporary interest in fancy dress balls rather than any serious historical study. Kings and Queens were shown, as here, relaxing, joking or (as with Bonington's painting of Henry IV making the Spanish ambassador wait until he has finished the game he is playing with his children, *en famille*). François I was a passionate hunter and spent a great deal of time away from Paris at any one of his many hunting lodges, the grandest of which was the Chateau of Chambord. Retinues of servants and royal favourites and mistresses had to trail along, as did ambassadors from foreign powers such as Henry VIII's England. This scene takes place at Chambord where the King's sister, with evident fascination (as opposed to the somewhat sceptical look she has in the Wallace Collection version), leans forward, her hand familiarly resting on the King's shoulder, to read what he has written with the aid of a diamond tipped implement or brush⁴ which remains in his right hand (its case hanging from his belt) the famous verses 'Souvent femme varie / Bien fol est qui s'y fie' (Woman is often fickle / He who puts his faith in her is very foolish). Whether or not he ever actually did this is impossible to ascertain; the first account comes from the memoirs of a courtier named Pierre de Bordeille half a century after the King's death.

Bonington possessed a quite remarkable ability to conjure these scenes from a far distant national past and endow them with dynamism and a sense of human vitality. Drawing on

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sixteenth-century Italian artists like Veronese, Titian and Tintoretto both for the vibrant richness of his colour and the effects of scumbling that so effectively evoke textiles like velvet and brocade as well as for the studied informality of his figures, Bonington in a key work such as this surpassed even his most skilled peers in this genre, men like Eugène Delacroix and Alexandre Colin. In this painting of *Francois I^{er} et la Reine de Navarre* the ferociousness of Bonington's palette is in evidence at its most intrepid: the King in salmon pink breeches, doublet and matching hose with a hat, coat and shoes of deep red velours-like cloth set off by his dazzling white linen is seated (in a charming anachronism) on something like a sofa covered in deep gold tinged tapestry. His sister's brilliant acid green gown is pulled aside to reveal a voluminous gold coloured expanse of skirt. While Bonington's painting style with bold dry brushstrokes in both oil and watercolour always tends towards panache, his attention to the kind of detail that endows these pictorial narratives with their authenticity can be seen here in the carefully observed piping along the edge of the sofa, the Queen of Navarre's (equally anachronistic) fichou with its green edged collar, the King's wedding ring and the gold chains they both wear as well as the dogs' gold collars, the 'Gothic' carving of the furniture leg, the panelling visible in the tenebrous Rembrandt inspired recesses of the room, and the diamond leaded window panes. In an age when artists were still taught to follow the rules of physiognomy and facial expression adumbrated by Chares Le Brun and Johann Kaspar Lavater, Bonington insists on angled views of his subjects' heads: he ensures that all the force of this imaginative reconstruction of a specific moment is concentrated not on the averted faces as they look towards the window but on the bodies in their brilliant clothing and on a composition which – for all the stillness of the two subjects – is characterised by sinuous movements whether of the dogs or of the King and Queen both of whom face one way while gazing another. As an evocation of an intimate moment in the imagined life of a great early modern monarch it is perhaps unrivalled.

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¹ Anderdon annotated his 1828 RA catalogue with note: 'R P Bonington 248/ Henri III of France/ nb I must content myself with Francis I and his sister.' Grangerized into this page was an impression of Heath's engraving.

² Nottingham 2002, no. 125.

³ See William Griswold, et al., *The World Observed, Five Centuries of Drawings from the Collection of Charles Ryskamp* (The Pierpont Morgan Library: New York, 2001) no. 95, repr.

⁴ Since the writing on the glass appears not to be scratched but to be in black pigment a brush seems the probable implement.