

**ABRAHAM LOUIS RODOLPHE DUCROS**

(Moudon, 1748 – Lausanne, 1810)



*Arethusa's Fountain in Sicily*



*The Baths of Caracalla*

Two oils on canvas, 75 x 61cm  
Signed and dated: DuCros / 1781

Provenance: Johann Rudolf Sinner von Ballaigues, Switzerland; Private collection, Switzerland; Private collection, Milan.

Abraham Louis Rodolphe Ducros was born in Moudon (Canton de Vaud, Switzerland) on 21 July 1748. His father, Jean Rodolphe, was a teacher of calligraphy and drawing, and the family settled in Yverdon in 1750, where Jean Rodolphe had been appointed to the post of professor and master of calligraphy in the local college. On his father's death in 1764, Louis took over his post in the college, but he resigned from the job

after a few years in order to devote his energies to trade; his true calling, however, lay in painting. In 1769 he enrolled in a course in a private academy run by the Chevalier de Fassin in Geneva. He copied the Flemish and Dutch masters a great deal, and travelled to Flanders with his master in 1771. Growing tired of copying, however, Ducros decided to travel to Rome in 1776. Two years later he was staying with his compatriot La Croix in the home of the painter Fortunato Vercelli in Via delle Carrozze, but in March 1778 he was hired by a Dutchman named Nicolaas Ten Hove to accompany him to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, together with two gentlemen from The Hague and an Englishman. Ducros began to work with Volpato in 1779, and in 1780 he published his first twenty-four *Views of Rome and its Environs* with Giovanni Volpato, forging an excellent reputation for himself in Rome as a *vedutista*. His fame spread even as far as his native land, because his presence in Rome is recorded in an almanac of 1783 which tells us that "he has published coloured prints of various views of this capital, showing in particular its ancient ruins which are astonishingly true to life" ("Ertennes Helvétiennes", 1783). He also found favour with Pope Pius VI, accompanying him to the Pontine Marshes, and an oil on canvas in which he depicted *Pius VI at the Pontine Marshes* (99 x 137 cm.) is now on display in the Museo di Roma. His patrons included Grand Duke Paul Romanov, the son of Empress Catherine the Great and future Czar Paul I. He received numerous commissions for *vedute*, which were particularly popular on the foreign market. The "Memorie per le Belle Arti" for April 1785 reports all of these commissions, praising Ducros' landscapes to the heavens. In 1786 the painter made the acquaintance of Sir Richard Colt Hoare, who was to become his most important patron and indeed his most ardent admirer. Following the uprising against the French in Rome, the artist left the city and travelled to Naples, where he remained from 1784 until 1789. On the House of Bourbon's restoration in 1799, Ducros was forced to flee the city for Malta after the architect Pietro Martorana had accused him of Jacobinism. He returned to Rome in 1806 and then to Switzerland the following year. He was named an honorary member of the *Société des Arts* in Geneva on 30 November 1807, together with Mme. Vigée-Lebrun and Baron Stroganoff. He showed the work that he had brought back with him from Italy in Berne in 1809, and the exhibition was so successful that the city fathers appointed him to the post of professor of painting at the Academy. Ducros accepted the appointment with enthusiasm and prepared to take up the post on 1 April 1810 but, sadly, he suffered a stroke and died in Lausanne on 18 February of that year.

As we mentioned, Ducros formed a partnership with the Dutch artist Nicolaas Ten Hove in 1778 to travel around southern Italy, recording the experience in a set of drawings. Ten Hove, in his turn, invited three friends from The Hague to join the

expedition. They were 24-year-old Willem Carel Dierkens, a functionary with the Estates General, Willem Hendrik van Nieuwerkerke, a diplomat also aged twenty-four, and Nathaniel Thornbury, the son of an English merchant who live in The Hague. The group of friends left Rome in the company of six servants on 10 April and spent the next four months touring Naples, Campania, Apulia, Calabria, Sicily, Malta and Gozo. Ducros produced hundreds of drawings in the course of the trip, which Ten Hove then glued into three folio volumes (all of which have survived and are now in the Rijksprentenkabinet at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam) along with detailed descriptions of the places depicted. Dierkens and Nieuwerkerke, for their part, took it in turns to keep a detailed diary of the journey.

The group was in Syracuse from 1 to 5 June and its members were eager to visit, among other things, Arethusa's Fountain, as described by Cicero, which was situated in the ancient port neighbourhood of Ortigia.

The story goes that the nymph Arethusa called on the goddess Artemis to help her escape the clutches of the god Alpheus who lusted after her. Artemis promptly turned her into a fountain, but the river god Alpheus, travelling under the sea from the Peloponnese, still managed to reach his beloved Arethusa and to merge his waters with hers.

As Dierkens explains in the diary, Arethusa's Fountain was used by the city's entire population to wash their linen before its waters entered the port. When the five travellers reached the site, they found: "...over thirty washerwomen, all of them more or less ugly, and all of them bare-legged up to their thighs".

Brydone's guide entitled *Viaggio in Sicilia e a Malta* associated the washerwomen with Artemis' nymphs who, the legend says, were not to be approached or spied on by an ordinary mortal because otherwise the goddess would turn that imprudent mortal into a stag. This is what happened to Actaeon, who was promptly devoured by his own hounds. The washerwomen whom our travellers encountered, at any rate, did not seem to mind their presence: "...we gave them a few coins, and two of them led Dierkens through the water to the rock from which the fountain springs. The joke amused all of these women, who were a far cry from Diana's nymphs and who were all suffering from common scab".

The Fountain was rebuilt in 1843 and papyrus now grows proudly in its basin. Situated as it is on the port's waterfront, it is still a customary meeting point for the inhabitants of Syracuse even today.

The oil painting depicting *Arethusa's Fountain* is based directly on the drawing from life made at the site (now at Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; **Fig.1**), but unlike the horizontal drawing, the painting develops in a vertical sense and is a more finished



product than the rapid sketch. For instance, the neutral background is replaced by an exploration of the cityscape which appears unrelated to the location, the right-hand side of the fountain is covered in plant life, and the statue above the arched entrance to the cave plays a far more important role in the painting than it does in the drawing, where it is in the background by comparison with the washerwomen. In the painting it looks on with benign indulgence at the women as they go about their daily business.



**Fig.1** Abraham Louis Rodolphe Ducros, *Arethusa's Fountain*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

The artist had a true weakness for the site of the Baths of Caracalla, making various drawings of it from the most varied viewpoints. There also exists an identical engraving of the baths by Giovanni Volpato, watercoloured by Ducros (**Fig.2**).



**Fig.2** Giovanni Volpato and Abraham Louis Rodolphe Ducros, *The Baths of Caracalla*, engraving

Both oil paintings are on their original canvas and framed in their original roman carved and gilded wood frames.

The frames on the back and the stretchers bear old inscriptions written in ink:

- *Arethusa's Fountain in Sicily* inscriptions -

frame:

*La fontaine d'Arethuse en Sicilie*

8

stretcher:

*p'r M'r Sinner*

- *The Baths of Caracalla* inscriptions -

frame:

*Les Thermes de Caracalla*

7

stretcher:

*p'r M'r Sinner*

The name "M.r Sinner" which appears on the stretcher of both paintings, might indicate the collection, or even the patron who commissioned the work, and may

probably be identified as Johann Rudolf Sinner von Ballaigues (1730-87), a celebrated scholar and historian from Berne who was the Director of Berne Library from 1748 and was later appointed Bailiff of Erlach, a post he held from 1776 to 1781. He published *Voyage historique et littéraire dans la Suisse occidentale* in Neuchâtel in 1781.

Adolf Burri wrote a biography of Sinner in 1912, entitled *Johann Rudolf Sinner von Ballaigues, 1730-1787. Vorgelegt von Adolf Burri*.

M. P. Dunker painted his portrait.

Portrait of Johann Rudolf Sinner von Ballaigues:

