A SOUVENIR OF FONTAINEBLEAU

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A sixteenth-century painting depicting, with slight variations, a design by Rosso for one of the decorative panels for the great Galerie François Ier at Fontainebleau has been given to the Museum by Mrs. Heyward Cutting. According to Rosso’s plan the panel consisted of a central medallion in which was painted the Nymph of Fontainebleau, surrounded by a handsome framework of putti, fruits, masks, and caryatids, to be carried out in a combination of painting and stucco relief. The entire framework has been faithfully imitated by the artist of our painting, but in the central theme he has given free rein to his imagination and has made it more a small independent picture, less a part of a harmonious ornamental whole, by creating a wide, open landscape as a setting for a dainty bejeweled little Diana. This landscape suggests that the painting was executed in the last quarter of the century, while the school of Fontainebleau was still flourishing and spreading its influence through France and the Low Countries. The eclecticism which distinguishes the masterpieces of the school permeates the minor works as well, and it is idle to insist on national characteristics when they have been so happily blended. But if the perception of them contributes no more to the enjoyment of our painting than the recognition of herbs in a sauce, it contributes at least as much, so we may be forgiven for smacking our lips over a distinctly Flemish flavor. This is noticeable not only in the medallion, where the landscape has been expanded to an almost equal interest with the figure, but also in the physical types of the caryatids. Compared with the same groups by the French engraver René Boyvin, these, though somewhat clumsily painted, are almost human—one feels indeed that the artist had some difficulty keeping them up on their pedestals. The little Diana, too, though of finer clay than the caryatids, is far more approachable than Boyvin’s sculptural nymph and reminds us that Flemish artists have never been remarkable for keeping goddesses in their place.

The painting in the medallion tells the story of the origin of the name Fontainebleau and is the version which Father Pierre Dan, writing in 1612, repeats as the traditional legend of that region. There for many centuries the kings of France sought relaxation in the favorite royal sport of the chase. One day a dog named Bleau—a common name for hunting dogs, it seems—hot and thirsty from his exertions, discovered in the midst of the forest a clear, pure spring. His master, “un de nos Roys,” missing and seeking him, found him there and named the water for him, la Fontaine de Bleau. It was this pleasant legend that Rosso chose, most appropriately, for one of the fourteen panels which he designed for the king’s gallery when Francis I summoned him from Italy to take charge of the decoration of the palace. Both Francis and Rosso died before the entire scheme was completed, and of this particular panel only the framework was finally carried out; in the center a Jupiter and Danaë was substituted for Rosso’s nymph. But thanks to the engraving by Boyvin we have a record of Rosso’s original intention, for Boyvin copied, probably from a sketch, the central figure as well as the surrounding decoration. Here, as in our painting, Bleau has just broken through the rushes to discover the spring, represented in the classical tradition as a nymph leaning upon an urn from which flow the refreshing waters. Beneath the engraving Boyvin has inscribed in Latin a florid apostrophe, which our artist has repeated: “O Phidias, O Apelles, could anything more excellent have been devised in your times than that sculpture of which you see here a picture, which Francis the First, King of the Franks, the most mighty father of fine arts and literature, left unfinished in his home, surrounding a figure of Di-
The Nymph of Fontainebleau. A painting of the Fontainebleau school, late XVI century. Gift of Mrs. Heyward Cutting, 1942

The Nymph of Fontainebleau. An engraving by René Boyvin after Rosso
ana resting from the chase and emptying the urn of the Fountain of Beautiful Water.” It is amusing to note that although Boyvin has not endowed the nymph with any of the attributes of Diana he throws a bouquet to the reigning beauty of Fontainebleau, Diane de Poitiers, in his inscription, by suggesting that the goddess of the chase is represented. This suggestion has been taken literally by our artist, who has given the nymph Diana’s crescent to wear in her hair.

Although the panels of the *Galerie François Ier* were favorite subjects with the engravers of the Fontainebleau School our painting may be connected with Boyvin’s print rather than another because our artist has repeated Boyvin’s inscription. This leads us to conclude that he based his work either on the engraving itself or on a close copy of it, perhaps a painting. Such a painting did exist and was recorded in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* of 1861 by Barbet de Jouy. As the description of this picture in the catalogue of Cardinal Fesch’s collection, whence it came, corresponds with Boyvin’s nymph rather than our Diana, it could not be our painting, although it too was on wood, of almost identical dimensions, and, like ours, repeated Boyvin’s inscription. Dr. Kurt Kusenberg, in his work on Rosso, published in 1931, notes a painting, after Boyvin’s engraving of the Nymph of Fontainebleau, in the possession of Baron Edmond Seillière in Paris. This may be the Fesch example or still another, but again it is not ours, for ours came to America in 1923 from France, where it had belonged to Heyward Cutting’s aunt, Madame de Constantinovitch.

*The Nymph of Fontainebleau is now being shown in Gallery B 19.*