

**Gustave Doré, *Poor Children of London***  
Strasbourg 1832 – 1883 Paris

watercolor on paper, *circa* 1882-83  
49 by 23 inches (124 by 60 cm)  
stamped lower right with the Doré estate stamp

provenance: Doré estate sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, April 10-15, 1885;  
Private Collection, Neuilly-sur-Seine

note: The French artist Gustave Doré was a child prodigy who became a self-taught painter and sculptor, but he is best known as a book illustrator. He was hugely successful and very productive, as during a thirty-year period, he employed a team of engravers to publish over 30,000 drawings. He illustrated many classic works such as the Bible, Don Quixote, Dante, and Rabelais, but he also devoted energy to capturing scenes of contemporary life and history. In 1868 he went to London to attend the opening of his Doré Gallery, exhibiting primarily his large-scale religious paintings. Receiving a warm welcome for his works there, he returned several times to London. In the course of his stays, he became friendly with the journalist Blanchard Jerrold, who proposed in 1869 that they do a volume entitled *London: A Pilgrimage* to record the artist's impressions of the great city. It was published in 1872 and has remained enormously popular to this day, primarily for Doré's illustrations. Like the writer Charles Dickens, Doré was able to seize on the striking contrasts in London society during the Victorian era, when the Industrial Revolution plunged so many of the city's population into abject poverty. The East End of London was the home of masses of poor, and Doré was moved by their plight, especially the suffering of the children. Other nineteenth-century French painters, like Bouguereau, had already produced sentimental scenes of poor children (fig. 1). But in Doré's more realistic renderings they seemed to touch a responsive chord. An early painting (fig. 2) of mothers and children is entitled *L'espoir (Hope)*.<sup>1</sup> Then as a result of his visits to Spain, he was inspired to paint and draw works depicting impoverished street families and children (figs. 3a-c). However, in London the situation was even worse. As Jerrold observed, it was especially "the abiding places of the poor that riveted Doré's attention – touched his charitable heart and are the most picturesque."<sup>2</sup> In *London* he further described Doré's reaction to the poverty he witnessed:

The Cockney *gamin* was the constant wonder of my fellow pilgrim. It appeared terrible, indeed, to him that in all the poverty-stricken districts of our London, children should most abound, that some of the hardest outdoor work should be in their feeble little hands that infant poverty should be the news-distributor; that, in short, there should be a rising generation, hardened by its earliest years to vagabondage; and allowed to grow to the most miserable of human creatures, the unskilled, dependent, roofless man.<sup>3</sup>

Thus in the published book there are several illustrations which show the swarms of poor children in the streets including many young girls carrying babies (figs. 4a-c), and Doré also made a number of independent paintings and drawings of the dispirited mothers and children (figs. 5a-d). Jerrold further told of one particular group of young girls, the flower sellers of London:

Some country wenches, who have been cast into London – Irish girls mostly – hasten out of the horrors of the common lodging-house to market, where they buy there flowers, for the days huckstering in the City. They are to be seen selling roses and camellias along the kerb by the Bank,

to dapper clerks. There is an affecting expression in the faces of some of these rough *bouquetieres*, that speaks of honorable effort to make headway out of the lodging-house and the rents; and reminds one of Hood's Peggy.<sup>4</sup>

Jerrold is referring here to a popular poem of the 1840s by the writer Thomas Hood (1799-1845) that, as he quoted in his 1891 biography of Doré, went: "Poor Peggy sells nosegays from street to street/Till – think of this, ye who find life sweet –/She hates the scent of roses."<sup>5</sup> An illustrated version of Hood's poem was published in London in 1870 with a rather sweet illustration (fig. 6) by Thomas Secombe.<sup>6</sup> Doré could have known this but was apparently introduced to the term, which he used in correspondence, by Jerrold.<sup>7</sup> Clearly he found the poor flower girls or "Peggies" a sympathetic subject, and Jerrold makes a point of stating that Doré "made some studies of the flower-girls by the Royal Exchange; but when he painted or drew them afterwards, he put French baskets on their arms and was impatient when I pointed this out."<sup>8</sup> In addition to the engraving included in the book (fig. 7), Doré produced a number of other depictions of them. A multi-figured large painting of ca. 1875 is now in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (fig. 8). Another painting of 1881 showing just the flower seller was exhibited at the Doré Gallery in 1885 (fig. 9),<sup>9</sup> and several other paintings, drawings, and prints were also devoted to variations on the theme of the young flower seller (figs. 10a-c).

Although the present watercolor has sometimes been identified as "Poor Peggy," the girl here is not a flower seller, but rather one of the many ragged young girls that Doré frequently incorporated in his London scenes. It seems that mothers were absent and elder sisters often had to tend to their younger siblings. Of these sad individuals, Doré, although he did not include it in the published volume of *London*, repeated several times the image seen here of a standing, young girl holding a sleeping baby. While this girl is quite young, her contour and the splitting dress seam may indicate that she herself is pregnant and perhaps even the mother of the baby she holds. The girl wears a cape and the usual little hat but is barefoot with one foot on top of the other. In 1883 Doré exhibited at the French Watercolorist Society in Paris this very subject which was titled *Enfants pauvres de Londres (Poor Children of London)*, and it was reproduced in a line version in the accompanying catalogue (fig. 11).<sup>10</sup> A rapid ink drawing of the subject (fig. 12a) was reproduced in the biography of Doré by Blanche Roosevelt as "Little Peggy" from the collection of a Mr. Michael (fig. 12b).<sup>11</sup> What is most likely an early version of the theme is also a watercolor (fig. 13), bearing the stamp of the Doré sale.<sup>12</sup> It is notably unfinished in the details of the drapery. More fully developed is another large version, 50 x 25 inches, (fig. 14) which shows the older girl looking more forcefully out at the viewer.<sup>13</sup> Here she has a red rose on her hat, and the baby is bound by a blue ribbon. In the present watercolor (fig. 15), which is only slightly smaller, the standing girl is turned more at an angle and her striped cloak resembles that of the 1881 flower-seller (fig. 9). In this version the background wall is more articulated, there is no rose on the hat, the expression seems to have become more beseeching, and the big baby has no ribbon, but very dirty feet.

It is difficult to identify this work in the Doré estate sale of 1885. One listed work, *La Jeune Mendicante (The Young Beggar)*, is described as an "ébauche à la sépia," (1 m 20 cm x 60 cm.)<sup>14</sup> nearly identical in size with this watercolor. Jerrold relates that to help promote their book, Doré produced a series of large-scale drawings which were "bound in a colossal album to give a broad outline of our conception." This album, although sent to America for possible sale, was in the end dismantled and the drawings either remained with Doré or were given to his friends.<sup>15</sup>

In any case this is one Doré's most monumental treatment of this subject, the *Poor Children of London*. It was clearly intended for wall display, and it makes a powerful impression. While in all of the versions one senses the weight – the immense burden – that the young child imposes on its sad, elder sister or possible mother, here it is made even more emphatic. Dressed in her tattered rags and near to tears as she beseechingly confronts the viewer, one can only hope the poor girl will survive in the harsh London underworld.

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<sup>1</sup> See Louis Dézé, *Gustave Doré: Bibliographie et Catalogue Complet de l'Oeuvre*, Paris, 1930, pp. 117 and 161.

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<sup>2</sup> Blanchard Jerrold, *Life of Gustave Doré*, London, 1891, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage*, London, 1872, reprint 1971, pp. 62-63.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1872, pp. 116-117.

<sup>5</sup> Jerrold, 1891, p. 307.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hood, *Miss Kilmansegg and her Precious Leg*, London, 1870, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> See Samuel F. Clapp, *Gustave Doré*, exhib. cat. Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, London, 1983, p. 61, under no. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Jerrold, 1891, p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> Reproduced in Dézè, 1930, opp. p. 275.

<sup>10</sup> La Société d'Aquarellistes Français, *Catalogue*, Paris, 1883, no. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Blanche Roosevelt, *Life and Reminiscences of Gustave Doré*, New York, 1885, p.189.

<sup>12</sup> Reproduced in exhibitions in London, 1983, no. 74 and Strasbourg, 1983, pp. 113-14, no. 80, it is now in the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg. See *Gustave Doré: Un Nouvelle Collection*, Strasbourg, 1993, p. 70, no. 21.

<sup>13</sup> This version, which was sold at Sotheby's, New York, October 26, 2004, no. 233 and at Sotheby's Arcade, New York, January 29, 2005, no. 24, was reproduced as from a private collection in the exhib. cat. *Gustave Doré: un peintre-né*, Monastère royal de Brou, Bourg-en-Bresse, 2012, fig. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Doré estate sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, April 10-15, no. 290.

<sup>15</sup> Jerrold, 1891, pp. 151 and 204.