Primary Maker: Charles-Balthazar-Julien Fevret de Saint-Memin
Title: Unidentified Osage Warrior Wearing Bird Headdress
Date: 1807
Medium: Charcoal with stumping, Conté crayon, black pastel, and black and white chalk on pink prepared paper, nailed over canvas to a wooden strainer
Dimensions: Overall: 23 × 17 in. (58.4 × 43.2 cm) Framed: 25 5/8 × 19 5/8 × 1 1/4 in. (65.1 × 49.8 × 3.2 cm)
Credit Line: Purchase, Elizabeth DeMilt Fund
Object Number: 1860.91

Classification: DRAWINGS

Curatorial Remarks:
This stunning life-size portrayal belongs to a group of eight life-size portraits of indigenous Americans (six men and two women) by Saint-Mémin in the Society’s collection. The subjects were members of official delegations of Plains Indians who visited Washington, D.C. three times between 1804 and 1807 with the dual purpose of meeting President Thomas Jefferson and establishing trade after their lands were acquired by the federal government in the Louisiana Purchase. While they were in Washington, itinerant artist Saint-Mémin drew their portraits, which are the earliest known representations of Plains Indians, predating those of Karl Bodmer, George Catlin, and Charles Bird King by many decades. Saint-Mémin’s remarkable sensitivity and use of the mechanical physiognotrace to outline the sitters’ profiles ensured their accuracy and objectivity. While later painters of indigenous peoples tended to emphasize their costumes and customs, Saint-Mémin generally stressed the noble character and psychological presence of his subjects, though in this portrait he relishes the combination of extravagant headdress and trophy
kerchief. Although the artist retained the drawing and did not publish the image, two small replicas by Saint-Mémin exist, as do subsequent copies of the watercolors made by the Russian artist Pavel Svinin and by Baroness Anne-Marguérie Joséphine-Henriette Hyde de Neuville (1953.215). Inscriptions on the mount of one of the Saint-Mémin watercolors place the warrior at the 1807 conference and provide further description of the man’s appearance. Whereas the atypical hairstyle in the artist’s portrait of Payouska (1860.92) is the subject of some historical curiosity, this warrior sports the more customary style of plucked—not shaved—eyebrows and hair. He also wears a silver armband, a crown and headdress, and earrings comprised of small glass beads, dyed swan’s down, and a tube of opaque white glass. Saint-Mémin’s watercolors also illustrate the warrior’s make-up—red-orange pigment across his chest, arms, and cheeks with green shades at his ear and around the headdress. In the spring of 1807, the explorer and governor of the Louisiana Territory, Meriwether Lewis, commissioned Saint-Mémin for likenesses of the final Indian delegation to be published in his journals. Lewis died before the plan could come to fruition, and his journals were published posthumously without illustration. However, given that Lewis was not in Washington in 1804 during the first delegation, when Saint-Mémin took the portrait of Payouska, at least a portion of the Society’s group of portraits was separate from the project envisioned by Lewis (depicted in a watercolor by Saint-Mémin, 1971.125).

Physical Description:
Portrait

Inscribed: Inscribed along left edge vertically in Conté crayon: "Osage Warrior"; at lower left in graphite: "Guerrier / Osage"; at lower right: "guerrier / Osage"

Related Objects: