Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Erich Wolfsfeld (Krojanke 1884 - London 1956)

An Old Woman with a Basket

Pastel on handmade paper.
Signed Erich Wolfsfeld at the lower left.
670 x 498 mm. (26 3/8 x 19 5/8 in.) [sight]

Writing a few years after his death, one critic noted that 'To say that Erich Wolfsfeld was just a brilliant technician would be unjust to his memory. He was much more than a technician. He was an artist who loved drawing for its own sake - who could combine power and sensitivity – who enjoyed describing the human form either with brush or chalk or the etcher's needle. And he solved the problem of the portrayal of the human race with an intensity of perception that is deeply moving particularly in his studies of old men and young children.'

More recently, another critic wrote of Wolfsfeld, 'The simple reality of what he saw on his travels did not move him either to exaggerate or caricature his subject matter. The elderly, poor and blind whom Wolfsfeld observed and painted did not, in any case, merit such treatment. His compassionate vision records the dignity of peoples thoroughly accustomed to adversity. Wolfsfeld's is an outlook with which Rembrandt himself might have sympathised... 'In [oil paint] and other media, such as chalk or pen and wash, Wolfsfeld demonstrated a wonderful certainty yet fluency in his drawing...He was an artist of rare ability.'

Provenance:

The Tib Lane Gallery, Manchester
Private collection.

Artist description:

Born in western Prussia, Erich Wolfsfeld enrolled in 1904 at the Berlin Academy of Arts, studying drawing with Konrad Böse, a follower of Adolph von Menzel, and etching with Hans Meyer. He completed his studies with Jules Lefèbvre at the Académie Julien in Paris in 1906, and between 1908 and 1909 lived and worked in Rome, where he befriended other expatriate German artists such as Otto Greiner and Max Klinger. Wolfsfeld's early career was largely devoted to printmaking, and in Rome he produced a number of large etchings of nudes and Roman beggars. Beggars were to serve as a common motif in his work throughout his later career, though always imbued with a particular dignity. On his return to Berlin, he won a gold medal for an etching entitled The Archers in 1910.

Wolfsfeld soon began painting in oils, although he seems to have always worked on treated paper, rather than on stretched canvas, as the former could be easily carried in large rolls. In 1918 he took up a post as a professor of drawing at the Akademie in Berlin. Two years later he rose to the position of professor of painting and etching, and in the same year the first monograph devoted to his work was published. In 1924 an exhibition of his etchings was held in Vienna to considerable acclaim, and the following year he exhibited twenty-nine paintings of Turkish or Moroccan subjects in Berlin. He travelled widely in Europe, and was also in particular drawn to North Africa and the Middle East. In 1928 Wolfsfeld made a trip through Egypt and Palestine that had a profound impact on him, and led to the publication of an account of his travels entitled Einedrücke von einer Orientreise. Although he was a popular and highly regarded teacher, Wolfsfeld, as a German Jew, was forced to resign from the Akademie in 1935 as a result of Nazi pressure. Three years later he emigrated to Britain, if somewhat reluctantly, bringing much of his work with him but leaving behind a large painting of Joseph and his Brethren, now in the Magdalenakirche in Berlin.

After a brief period at an internment camp on the Isle of Man, Wolfsfeld settled first in Sheffield and later in London. An exhibition of his work, held at the Graves Art Gallery in Sheffield in 1939, led to a number of portrait commissions, and in 1943 he exhibited his etchings at the Royal Academy. But he seems to have been quite unsettled by his uprooting from Germany, and only a relatively few works may be dated to the war years. After the war he remarried and moved to a large home and studio in Golders Green, where he worked in his habitual outfit of a long white Arab robe. He also began again to travel, visiting favourite sites in Brittany, Morocco and Spain. A large and comprehensive exhibition of his work, numbering 163 paintings, drawings and prints, was held at the Derby Art Gallery in 1953. Three years later, shortly before his death, he was elected an associate member of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers, and in the same year was included in an exhibition of Jewish painters in England, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

Two years after Wolfsfeld's death in 1956, a memorial exhibition of his work was mounted at the Ben Uri Art Gallery in London, and later exhibitions of his work were held at the Jewish Community House in Berlin in 1962 and at Turner House in Penarth in 1978. Wolfsfeld's work is today represented in several museums in England, notably the National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Imperial War Museum in London, as well as the museums of Huddersfield, Dudley and Birmingham and, further afield, in New York, Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Stockholm and Jerusalem.