

Paul Cesar Helleu

Portrait of the Artist's Wife, Alice Helleu

Black, red and white chalks on buff paper.
Signed Helleu at the lower right.
648 x 577 mm. (25 1/2 x 22 3/4 in.) [sheet]

This large drawing in red, black and white chalks is a portrait of the artist's favourite model, his wife Alice Guérin, whom he married in 1886, when she was sixteen years old. A woman of great beauty, Alice was the embodiment of Helleu's lifelong penchant for depicting elegant women. She was praised as a 'modele des épouses' by Robert de Montesquiou, who dedicated his monograph on Helleu to her ('à "la multiforme Alice dont la rose chevelure illumine de son reflet tant de miroirs de cuivre".) In his memoirs, the English artist William Rothenstein recalled Alice as 'a beautiful young girl with delicate features, slight and slim fingered, of whom [Helleu] made some of his best dry points and drawings.'

Alice Helleu had striking, long auburn hair, whose abundant tresses she would pin up on occasion. An elegant woman of reserved manners, she was always depicted by her husband dressed in stylish clothes, often wearing hats from the finest Parisian milliners. Alice also occasionally posed for other painters, including Giovanni Boldini and John Singer Sargent; the latter painted a double portrait of Paul and Alice Helleu.

The present sheet is a particularly fine example of Helleu's practice of producing large-scale portrait drawings of his wife, executed in red, black and white chalks; a technique particularly suited to depicting her lustrous red hair. (Alice's striking russet hair was a favourite motif of the artist, who also preferred red-headed models for other works, including a number of his nude studies. As the art critic Félix Fénéon once noted of Helleu, 'like M. [Albert] Besnard he delights in the prestige of red hair'.) Many of these intimate drawings depict Alice deep in thought, reading a book or asleep in a chair; she is also occasionally shown with one of her young children.

A number of large, stylistically comparable trois crayons drawings of a pensive Alice Helleu are today in private collections; these all have the appearance of finished works of art, rather than preparatory studies or sketches. As one recent scholar has written, ‘Many of Helleu’s best and most delightful productions are his portraits of his wife...These quick impressions, drawings or dry-points, are extraordinarily effective and have a much subtler appeal than the long series of commissioned portraits of fashionable ladies and celebrated beauties that helped bring him fame and fortune.’ Indeed, Alice Helleu came to epitomize the beautiful, elegant women painted by the artist; a type that came to be characterized as ‘la femme Helleu’.

Artist description:

Admitted into the École des Beaux-Arts in 1876, at the age of sixteen, Paul-César Helleu studied there with Jean-Léon Gerome, whom he accompanied to London in 1885. He developed a strong attachment to England, and was to return to London frequently throughout his career. In Paris, his circle of intimate friends included his fellow artists Giovanni Boldini, Alfred Stevens, James Whistler, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and, in particular, John Singer Sargent, with whom he briefly shared a studio and who bought a pastel from Helleu. He exhibited a number of large pastel portraits at the Salons of 1885 and 1886, where they were greatly admired, and his career was launched with a large exhibition of pastels at the Galerie Georges Petit in 1888. Although friendly with many of the Impressionist painters and invited by Degas to participate in the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition of 1886, Helleu declined to do so, claiming a profound dislike of the work of Paul Gauguin. The following year he met Comte Robert de Montesquieu, who was to become his leading patron and who, in 1913, published the first important monograph on the artist. Helleu also enjoyed a long friendship with Marcel Proust, who based the character of the painter Elstir in A la recherche du temps perdu on him.

The 1890s found Helleu and his young wife Alice popular figures in polite society in both France and England, with the artist receiving numerous portrait commissions and enjoying considerable financial success. He was a gifted portraitist, and was highly regarded for his portraits of the elegant women of the beau monde of Paris, London and New York. His subjects included the Comtesse Greffulhe, Queen Alexandra and Consuelo Vanderbilt, the Duchess of Marlborough. These works were greatly admired by his contemporaries; as Edmond de Goncourt noted in a letter to the artist, written in February 1895, ‘Your work has for its inspiration that dear model who fills all your compositions with her dainty elegance. It is sort of a monograph on Woman, in all the infinite varied attitudes of her intimate home life.’

Encouraged by his friend Sargent, Helleu began travelling to America in 1902, where his reputation had preceded him, and where he achieved much success as a portrait painter (despite apparently only knowing one word of English, namely the word ‘charming’). It was in 1912, on his second visit to New York, that he completed his most public work, the vaulted ceiling of the main hall of Grand Central Station, painted with the signs of the zodiac and the stars of the Milky Way. Helleu’s later reputation, however, has rested primarily on his etched work, executed in the medium of drypoint. First introduced to the etching medium by James Tissot, Helleu produced a large number of portraits of fashionable women in this manner, for which he charged up to 1,200 francs. The popularity of these prints has, however, tended to overshadow his less numerous oil paintings and pastels. In 1931, four years after Helleu’s death, a retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris.