

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Firmin BAES (Saint-Josse-ten-Noode 1874 - Brussels 1943)

Still Life with Mushrooms and a Pitcher (Les Champignons)

Pastel on canvas.

Signed Firmin Baes at the lower left.

Further signed and entitled Les Champignons. / Firmin Baes and numbered No.4 on the backing board.
590 x 790 mm. (23 1/4 x 31 1/8 in.) [sight]

From around 1900 onwards Firmin Baes worked almost exclusively in pastel, employing a confidence and a virtuoso technique reminiscent of such 18th century masters of the medium as Jean-Baptiste Chardin. Baes's exhibition pastels were usually drawn on canvas, rather than paper or board, and he seems to have developed a particular (and secret) technique of fixing the friable pastel medium to the canvas support. The resulting works, usually executed on a fairly large scale, are characterized by a refined technique and luminous colour.

Almost certainly intended as an exhibition piece, this splendid large still life may be dated to the decade of the 1930's, and is a fine and typical example of Baes's meticulous pastel technique. A comparable pastel still life with a plate of mushrooms, dating from 1936 and of similar dimensions, is illustrated in a recent monograph on the artist, while another, much smaller example was recently sold at auction in Belgium. It is of works such as this that the author of a review of an exhibition of the artist's work in 1934 noted, 'Behold a still life by Firmin Baes, extraordinarily true in its tonalities, in the very matter of its objects. The eye is truly touched by the glistening round form of the translucent porcelain, the coarseness of the orange, the softness of the velvet cloth.'

Writing at the time of an exhibition of Baes's work in a Brussels gallery in 1932, another critic praised the artist's pastel technique, and noted in particular a similar still life of mushrooms: 'The Studio Gallery presents a series of new works by this pastellist who, by subtly squeezing with his thumb chalk in selected tones on the paper or the canvas, achieves a delicacy, softness or an intensity which is not often attained with such great effect with oil painting, and only rarely with the same successful use of the medium...I am referring...above all of the Mushrooms where the virtues of the pastel medium are excelled in reproducing the blue background and the jug made of black stoneware...'

Provenance:

Private collection, London.

Artist description:

The son of the decorative painter Henri Baes, Firmin Baes was active as a portrait painter and a painter of still life subjects, nudes, landscapes and interiors. He studied under Léon Frédéric at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels between 1888 and 1894, and the elder artist's influence is evident in many of Baes's early paintings. Baes was a superb draughtsman, adept at charcoal, chalk and pastel, and often worked on a large scale. Between 1899 and 1900 Baes and his father collaborated on the decoration of a hotel restaurant in Brussels. In 1900 his painting *The Archers* won a bronze medal at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, which brought the young artist to wider notice. (The English periodical *The Artist* noted that 'M. Firmin Baes is a very young painter, admirably gifted, who neglects no labour to realise his very personal ideal. ...his skill borders on mastery.') Baes exhibited annually at galleries in Brussels and elsewhere in Belgium, and also occasionally in Europe and in America. While at first he showed oil paintings and large charcoal drawings, as his career progressed he began to work mainly in pastel, producing highly finished portraits, still life subjects and nudes. He achieved much success as a portrait painter and pastellist.

In 1910 Baes built a large house and studio in Brussels which he filled with his collection of paintings and objets d'art, and where he would receive visitors and patrons. He worked to a strict schedule, with mornings spent on portrait sittings and paintings from posed nude models, while the afternoons were devoted to the painting of still life subjects, interiors and landscapes. A member of the Belgian artist's association 'Pour l'Art' from 1898 onwards, Baes exhibited with the group almost every year for the rest of his career. He became a member of the Société Royale des Beaux-Arts in 1919, and between 1920 and 1921 painted a memorial to the Belgian army for Hôtel des Invalides in Paris. Baes's account book lists a total of 1,340 paintings sold to collectors, of which 212 were portraits and 264 were still life subjects, together with 152 nudes and 227 landscapes. The artist also produced a number of posters and decorative wall panels, as well as numerous drawings and smaller pastels, which were often given to various friends. Paintings and pastels by Baes are today in the collections of several museums in Belgium, and elsewhere.