

Lucien Levy-Dhurmer (1865 - 1953)

The Dent du Chat, Savoy

Pastel.
Signed L. Lévy Dhurmer at the lower right.
Inscribed L. Lévy Dhurme[r] and Dent du Chat on the backing board.
720 x 474 mm. (28 3/8 x 18 5/8 in.)

Among Lévy-Dhurmer's landscape paintings and pastels, studies of mountains are particularly prominent. A large mountain view, commissioned for the home of a private collector in Paris, was sent by the artist to the Salon de la Société Nationale in 1911, while at the Salon des Pastellistes Français the following year he exhibited four Impressions de montagnes,

This very large and impressive pastel landscape is a view of the Dent du Chat, a mountain peak - rising to nearly 1,400 metres - above Aix-les-Bains on the western edge of the Lac de Bourget, in the département of Savoie in the French Alps. Lévy-Dhurmer visited the region in 1925 and 1935, and the present pastel is likely to date from the first of these trips.

Another pastel view by Lévy-Dhurmer of the Dent du Chat, of horizontal dimensions and with the mountain viewed from a greater distance, was in a private Parisian collection in 19733. A pastel view of a rainbow over the Lac de Bourget may also be dated to the same period as the present work, while another stylistically comparable pastel landscape is a view of Lac Léman, dating from 1925, which was recently acquired by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

Philippe Saunier's incisive comments on the large Musée d'Orsay pastel of Lac Léman may equally be applied to the present sheet, with which it shares many characteristics: 'In Savoie in 1925, and again in

1935, the artist executed a series of landscapes: of Lakes Léman, Bourget and Garda. The use of pastel permitted an absolute poetic transformation of the scenery. The delicate and powdery medium confers a tremulous, misty atmosphere in which all detail disappears. Reality gives way to the sublime by virtue of blurring the parameters between water, earth and sky and merging their properties. This communion of elements creates a climate of mystery...the incredible variations of blue – the colour of spirituality – in this landscape falls into the lineage of Whistler. In his own way, the artist ventures to the edges of representation and seems to explore the virtues of colour for colour's sake, of which the monochromatic is the ultimate outcome.'

Artist description:

Lucien Lévy began his artistic career as a lithographer and decorator, and was the head of a decorative stoneware factory in Golfe-Juan. Trained at the Ecole Superieure de Dessin et Sculpture in Paris, he exhibited infrequently at the Paris Salons, and it was not until 1895, following a visit to Italy, that he began to take up painting seriously. His first exhibition, at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris in 1896, was comprised mainly of pastels and a handful of paintings, and revealed the artist as a painter of mythical scenes and portraits, a vein he was to continue in throughout his career. (It was also at the time of the 1896 exhibition that he adopted the name Lévy-Dhurmer, adding part of his mother's surname to his own.) An exhibition of his work in 1899 added to his reputation, and the following year he won a bronze medal at the Exposition Universelle.

Soon established as a fashionable portrait painter, Lévy-Dhurmer also painted landscapes and decorative mural schemes; one such set of wall paintings, painted between 1910 and 1914 for a dining room in a Parisian home, is today installed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In later years, he produced works inspired by the music of composers such as Debussy, Beethoven and Fauré. He travelled extensively throughout Europe, making numerous trips to Italy and also visiting Spain, Holland, North Africa and Turkey, while in France he worked in Brittany, the Savoie, Alsace, the Vosges and the Côte d'Azur, as well as around Versailles. He exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français, the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and the Salon d'Automne, and mounted a number of one-man shows throughout his career. A retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1952, the year before his death.

Lévy-Dhurmer had a penchant for the medium of pastel, with which he was able to achieve striking chromatic effects. Indeed, he had a distinct preference for the medium, using it for portraits, allegorical scenes and landscapes, all of which he exhibited regularly at the Salon des Pastellistes Français between 1897 and 1913. It was in reference to such pastels that one contemporary critic, in one of the first accounts of the artist's work to appear in an English publication, described Lévy-Dhurmer's paintings as 'the manifestation of one of the most remarkable figures in the art world of to-day. For here we have something more than promise. This is the work of an artist in full possession of style and method, master of himself and of his art.' A modern scholar has reserved particular praise for Levy-Dhurmer's pastels; 'Here indeed, is unquestionably the Symbolist painter who shows the most brilliant mastery of pastel…his pastels strike us with the perfection of their execution and the originality of his inspiration.'