

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Paul Albert Besnard (1849 - 1936)

Portrait of a Baby

Pastel on brown paper, mounted onto canvas.
Signed ABesn in blue chalk at the lower right.
409 x 327 mm. (16 1/8 x 12 7/8 in.)

This spirited pastel sketch can be tentatively related to a large painted Portrait of the Artist's Family of 1890, today in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, in which what appears to be the same baby appears. The baby in the painting has been identified as the artist's youngest child, Jean Besnard (1889-1958), who was to become a ceramic artist.

The Besnard scholar Chantal Beauvalot, however, has suggested that the sitter may instead have been the artist's granddaughter Françoise Besnard (1903-1998), the daughter of his son Robert. Certainly, the present sheet was once owned by Robert Besnard, who lent it to the exhibition of the Société de Pastellistes Français at the Galerie Georges Petit in 1904.

The attribution of this pastel has been confirmed by Chantal Beauvalot, who dates the work to 1904.

Provenance:

The artist's son, Robert Besnard, in 1904.

Exhibitions

Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, Société de Pastellistes Français, no.14.

Artist description:

Albert Besnard entered the École des Beaux-Arts in 1866, studying with Alexandre Cabanel before making his debut at the Salon in 1868. Six years later he won the Prix de Rome with a painting of the Death of Timophanes, Tyrant of Corinth. His five years at the Villa Medici in Rome were followed by three years in London, between 1879 and 1881, during which he obtained several important portrait commissions. By the 1880's Besnard was one of the most highly regarded and fashionable society portrait painters in Paris. He developed a particularly evocative manner of depicting his sitters that relied on luminous, vibrant colours, dramatic (and at times artificial) lighting and bold brushwork. These elements also found their way into the artist's other main activity; his work as a decorative mural painter.

Besnard painted large decorative schemes for several public buildings in Paris, including the Sorbonne, the Ecole de Pharmacie and the Pavillion des Arts Décoratifs at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, as well as ceiling decorations for the Salon des Sciences of the Hôtel de Ville, the Comédie Française and the Petit Palais. He also created mural decorations for a number of private homes, including L'Art Nouveau Bing, the shop of the Parisian dealer and collector Siegfried Bing on the rue de Provence in Paris, and the villa of Baron Joseph Vitta at Evian.

Although Besnard was strongly influenced by the work of the Impressionists, he never exhibited with them, leading Edgar Degas to comment that 'Besnard is flying with our wings'. Besnard did, however, exhibit regularly at the Salons, and at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts from 1890 onwards. He also worked as a printmaker, executing a series of twenty-six etchings on the theme of Death for his patron Baron Vitta in 1900, and produced designs for stained glass. In 1910-1911 he travelled extensively around India, and the paintings from this trip were exhibited to critical acclaim in 1912 at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris. Between 1923 and his death in 1934 Besnard served as the director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.