Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Eugène Grasset (1845 - 1917)

Design for a Brooch

Gouache and watercolour over a pencil underdrawing, on buff paper.
A number of pencil sketches for various elements of the brooch are drawn near the centre right edge of the sheet.
Signed with the artist's monogram EG at the lower right.
Inscribed Eugene Grasset (?) Vever expo 1900 at the lower left edge of the sheet.
Further inscribed 11c.4, 9.8, and 8.2 at the upper right.
Numbered 4 in pencil on the verso.
101 x 140 mm. (4 x 5 1/2 in.) [image]
320 x 250 mm. (12 5/8 x 9 7/8 in.) [sheet]

ACQUIRED BY THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA.

This drawing is a design for the 'Marguerite' daisy brooch - executed in gold, ivory, enamel, sapphire and topaz - made by the jewelers Henri and Paul Vever in 1900 and today in the collection of the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris. Half hidden by the woman's flowing hair, the inscription reads 'Un peau, beaucoup, passionément, pas du tout' ('I love you a little, a lot, passionately, not at all'), which may better be freely translated into English as 'She loves me, she loves me not.' The 'Marguerite' brooch was one of the most admired of some twenty pieces of jewellery, designed by Grasset and made by Vever, which were shown at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900 to considerable acclaim, winning several prizes.

As the art critic and curator Léonce Rosenberg noted of Maison Vever's display at the Exposition Universelle, 'Every work is thoroughly researched and is of particular interest. Each was created with this important exhibition in mind, an exhibition which aspired to make France unrivalled in an art which it deserved to call its own...It is a real joy to contemplate these showcases. Diadems, corsage ornaments, pendants, brooches, combs and buckles captivate you, and entice you back again. One is not only

attracted by the splendour, the material allure of this extraordinary gem-set jewelry, by the mineralogical beauty of the white, yellow and blue diamonds; by the rubies, emeralds and sapphires that fuse the glowing and flickering brilliance of their multicoloured fires into a vast and dazzling spectacle. One is also captivated by the charm of an art full of elegance and taste, simplicity and harmony, by an exquisite grace that is truly French and in which imagination and variety are consistently underpinned by strong discipline. M. Vever has also endeavoured to make a truly artistic contribution to gem-set jewelry and has spared no effort, time or sacrifice in order to achieve this distinction.'

In another review of the Exposition Universelle, Charles Saunier wrote that 'One should also point out the interesting experiment attempted by Mr. Vever with Mr. Grasset. The latter has designed a series of jewels, mainly brooches and pendants, which appear somewhat grim at first sight, but which obviously respond to a private and well thought out conception by that eminent artist. Mr. Vever has translated them using gold and enamel without softening this somewhat brutal aspect. He has done well to do so. Each of these jewels when seen placed on the dark material of clothing looks utterly different from its aspects in a showcase, where it astonishes by the contrast to its surroundings...Will the women of our day appreciate the jewels imagined by Mr. Grasset? It is my opinion that they prefer the ornaments for hair or corsage with which Mr. Vever has truly triumphed in the jewellery section of the Universal Exhibition.'

Of the pieces of jewellery designed by Eugène Grasset for Henri Vever, twelve examples survive today - eleven of which are in museum collections - while the appearance of a further five pieces are known through old photographs or preparatory drawings by Grasset. Four similar drawings by Grasset for jewellery by Vever, including a 'Naiade' brooch, a 'Poesie' pendant and a brooch or belt buckle with a peacock motif – are in the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York.

Provenance:

Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 20 March 1987, lot 228
Ralph Esmerian, New York.

Literature:

Évelyne Possémé, 'Les dessins de bijoux d'Eugène Grasset réalises par la maison Vever', in Catherine Lepdor, ed., Eugène Grasset 1845-1917: L'art et l'ornement, exhibition catalogue, Lausanne, 2011, p.216, note 10.

Artist description:

One of the precursors of the Art Nouveau style, Eugène Samuel Grasset was trained as an architect in his native Switzerland and travelled to Egypt before eventually settling in Paris in 1871. He was mainly active as a specialist designer in the applied and decorative arts, in particular producing designs for jewellery, furniture and stained glass. He made a close study of Gothic architecture and stained glass windows, and became friendly with Eugène Viollet-le Duc, the architect responsible for the restoration of Notre-Dame. These archeological studies allowed him to create accurate depictions of medieval towns, castles, weapons and objects for the elaborate and beautiful illustrations that he produced between 1881 and 1883 for a lavish edition of the Carolingian epic Histoire des Quatre Fils Aymon. Published in 1883, the book is today recognized as an important forerunner of Art Nouveau book design in France. Grasset exhibited watercolours at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and also showed a painting at the inaugural Salon de la Rose + Croix in 1892, a year after he took French nationality. He also exhibited at Le Libre Esthétique in Brussels and with the Vienna Secession.

It was not until 1894, when he was already in his early fifties, that Grasset had his first and only one-man exhibition in his lifetime; a large retrospective of his work at the Salon des Cent, a new gallery on the premises of the magazine La Plume. The exhibition included drawings and watercolours, numerous

designs for furniture, stained glass, metalwork, fabric and jewellery, as well as theatrical and advertising posters, book and magazine covers, illustrations and other work as a graphic designer. Inspired by Japanese art (which he had noted at the Exposition Universelle of 1878) as well as medieval art, Grasset published two important books on ornamental design; La plante et ses applications ornamentales, which appeared in 1898-1899, and Méthode de composition ornamental, published in 1905. He also contributed articles and reviews to the journals Revue des Arts Décoratifs and Art et Décoration, and between 1881 and his death in 1917 served as the highly influential Professor of Decorative Arts at the Ecole Normale d'Enseignement du Dessin. Large groups of drawings, designs, studies and sketches by Grasset are today in the collections of the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.