

Roger de La Fresnaye (1885 - 1925)

Portrait Arabesque

Pencil on buff paper. Laid down.
249 x 197 mm. (9 3/4 x 7 3/4 in.)

This drawing, which was included in the major retrospective exhibition of La Fresnaye's work at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1950, may be dated to the later years of La Fresnaye's career, after the First World War, and more precisely to the early 1920's. As Germain Seligman has written of the artist's work of this period, 'There are few oils, none after 1922, but the drawings, watercolours, and gouaches are among the most beautiful he ever produced, infinite in their variety and often extremely moving. It was a time of constant experiment with new techniques, new media, and new subject-matter, and the works have few links with those of the pre-war years. There [is] a humanity and warmth in the late works…New also is the sensuous quality of the sinuous lines – an emotionalism which becomes more and more evident in the movingly beautiful late drawings.'

A stylistically comparable drawing - a schematic portrait of the artist Marie Laurencin, dated 1921 and drawn in ink - is in a private collection. Also similar is a pencil drawing of the head of a man, again dated 1921, which was formerly in the collection of Helena Rubinstein and was sold at auction in 1966. A similar pose is found in La Fresnaye's self-portrait drawing of c.1919, which was on the art market in Geneva in 1969, as well as in a drawing of A Couple in Conversation of c.1920, in a private collection in New York.

The present sheet was once in the collection of the art dealer André Level (1863-1946), owner of the Galerie Percier in Paris. In 1904 Level founded the La Peau de l'Ours, the first modern art investment fund, for which he purchased several works by Pablo Picasso (with whom he enjoyed a close relationship), Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Paul Gauguin, Edouard Vuillard, André Derain, Raoul Dufy and other artists. The collection was sold at auction in 1914 and achieved considerable financial success, quadrupling the initial investment.

The attribution of this drawing has been confirmed by André Schoeller.

Provenance:

André Level, Paris
Galerie Percier, Paris
Acquired from them by a private collector in 1938
Edwin Livengood, Paris, in 1950
Thence by descent until 2013.

Exhibitions

Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Roger de la Fresnaye, July-October 1950, no.152 ('Tête d'homme, 1921. Crayon. H. 0 m. 25; L. 0 m. 20. Ni signé, ni date. Collection Edwin Livengood, Paris.')

Artist description:

Roger de La Fresnaye enrolled at the Académie Julian in Paris in 1903 before being admitted to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts the following year. In 1908, following military service, he entered the Académie Ranson in Paris, where he studied with Paul Serusier and Maurice Denis. From 1910 La Fresnaye began exhibiting yearly at both the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d'Automne. Shortly thereafter he began to be associated with a group of artists known as the Puteaux group, later known as the Section d'Or, which also included Jacques Villon, Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, Juan Gris, Fernand Leger, Robert Delaunay, Frantisek Kupka and Francis Picabia, among others. These artists were attracted to Cubism but at the same time wished to move beyond the largely monochromatic or muted tones of much Cubist work, in favour of a more radical use of colour.

La Fresnaye exhibited four paintings at the first exhibition of the Section d'Or in November 1911, and took part again in the second exhibition of the group the following year. In 1914 he had his first one-man exhibition – the only one in his lifetime - at the Galerie Levesque in Paris, where he showed forty-seven paintings, sixteen drawings and twelve watercolours. By this point La Fresnaye was at the height of his career, producing paintings of still-life compositions, landscapes and figural scenes, all executed in a highly toned manner derived from Cubist principles. After serving in the infantry during the First World War, La Fresnaye was honourably discharged in 1918 after suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis, from which his health never fully recovered. After the war, the artist spent much of his time in the town of Grasse in Provence, where, despite his frail condition, he continued to be productive. However, by 1922 his poor health meant that had largely stopped painting, although he continued to make drawings and watercolours, including several self-portraits. La Fresnaye died in November 1925, at the age of forty. The following year a retrospective exhibition of his work was mounted at the Galerie Barbazanges in Paris.