Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Henry Somm (1844 -1907)

La Japonaise

Watercolour, with pen and black ink.
Signed hy. Somm at the lower right.
208 x 160 mm. (8 1/8 x 6 1/4 in.)

Like several of his contemporaries, Henry Somm developed a fascination with Japan. He studied the Japanese language and in the early 1870's had planned a trip to Japan that was abandoned with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war. He was friendly with the pioneering 'Japoniste' art critic and collector Philippe Burty, and often used oriental motifs in his work. Indeed, Somm became one of the earliest artistic exponents of Japonisme, his work in this genre first developed in his illustrations accompanying a series of articles by Burty under the general title of 'Japonisme', published in the magazine L'Art in 1875 and 1876.

As one recent scholar has noted of Somm, 'His fascination with Japanese art is manifested in countless drawings, watercolors, and etchings that depict Japanese geishas, street scenes, and gardens, as well as Oriental objets d'art…Several watercolors painted in the 1880s depict women in Japanese dress and some appear to be geishas – women trained to sing and dance for the pleasure of men. Somm's fascination and glorification of the Japanese woman appears to be a reaction against the "modern female", who emerged during the belle époque.'

The present sheet may be included among a group of vibrant watercolours by Somm of women in Japanese dress, several of which depict the subject in a nearly identical pose to that of the woman in this drawing.

Provenance:

Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, London, in 2000.

Artist description:

After studying at the École Municipale de Dessin in Rouen, François Clément Sommier, known professionally as Henry Somm, settled in Paris in the late 1860s, where he trained briefly with Isidore Pils. He enjoyed a successful career as an illustrator and draughtsman, contributing regularly to such popular journals as Le Monde parisien, Tout-Paris and Alfred Cadart's bi-monthly L'Illustration Nouvelle, as well as providing illustrations for satirical books like Jacques Olivier's Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice de femmes, published in 1876. Somm was also active as a graphic designer, providing menus, theatre programs, invitations and announcements for the many fashionable events of Belle Epoque Paris. He also produced visiting cards and bookplates, as well as designs for plates for the Haviland porcelain factory, commissioned by the firm's artistic director, Félix Bracquemond. At the invitation of Edgar Degas, Somm took part in the fourth Impressionist exhibition of 1879, showing his prints alongside those of Braquemond and works by Degas, Mary Cassatt and Camille Pissarro. The 1880s found Somm among a group of artists associated with the cabaret Le Chat Noir in Paris, for whose eponymous journal he published reviews and articles. Somm's finished drawings are often related to his more commercial work as an illustrator for magazines or such books as Georges Montorgeuil's La Parisienne peint par elle-même, published in 1897. In the latter part of his career, he was chiefly employed by the periodical Le Rire. Required to provide several drawings for each issue, his draughtsmanship became both more economical in line and more self-assured. Somm died in 1907 in relative obscurity.