

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 settled in Paris in the late 1860's, training briefly with Isidore Pils and adopting the name Henry Somm. It was under this name that he illustrated his first book, Alexandre Le Noble's *La Rapinéide ou L'Atelier, poème burlesco-comico-tragique en 7 chants*, published in 1870. Somm was to enjoy a successful career as an illustrator and draughtsman, contributing regularly to such popular journals as *Le Monde Parisien*, *Le Rire* and *L'Illustration Nouvelle*, as well as providing illustrations for satirical books like Jacques Olivier's *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des 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 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. Somm was one of the graphic artists who fell under the spell of Japonisme, which first emerged in France in the early 1860's and continued throughout the late 19th century. Some of his earliest work in this genre was first developed in illustrations accompanying a series of articles by Philippe Burty published in *L'Art* in the early 1870's. Somm studied Japanese language and history (an illustrated notebook with his notes on Japanese grammar is in the Louvre), but his plans to travel to Japan in 1870 were halted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war.

At the invitation of Edgar Degas, Somm took part in the fourth Impressionist exhibition of 1879, showing his drawings alongside those of Bracquemond, Degas, Mary Cassatt and Camille Pissarro. The 1880's found Somm associated with a group of artists and writers at the Parisian cabaret *Le Chat Noir*, where he produced shadow-plays, and for whose eponymous journal he published reviews and articles. Among his friends at *Le Chat Noir* was Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who made an etched portrait of Somm in 1898, and the two were members of an anti-establishment art group known as *Les Incohérents*. In the latter part of his career, Somm was 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's finished drawings are often related to his more commercial work as an illustrator for magazines or books. Although he died in relative obscurity, a retrospective exhibition of his work was mounted at the *Galerie Berthe Weill* in Paris in 1911.