

Edouard VUILLARD (Cuiseaux 1868 - La Baule 1940)

Mme. Hessel on the Telephone

Pencil.
Stamped with the atelier stamp E.V. (Lugt 909c) at the lower right.
192 x 143 mm. (7 5/8 x 5 5/8 in.)

Datable to around 1917, the present sheet is drawn on a page from a sketchbook. With its lively, sketchy manner, is typical of Vuillard's drawings made in preparation for a painted portrait or interior; the artist would diligently assemble a large number of these small sketches of various details and motifs, from which he would develop a final, complete composition. This drawing depicts Lucy Hessel, the wife of Vuillard's principal agent and dealer Jos Hessel, in the Hessel home in Paris. The Hessels were close friends of the artist, and throughout the latter part of his career, over a period of almost forty years, Lucy Hessel was to be Vuillard's muse, model and lover.

This pencil sketch may be related in particular to a painting of 'Mme. Hessel Telephoning', formerly in the André Goldet collection and today in a private collection in Paris. In both the drawing and the painting, Lucy Hessel is depicted with the telephone receiver to her ear, while the same side table, hat stand and vase of flowers appears in both works. As Antoine Salomon and Guy Cogeval have noted of the painting, 'The posture Vuillard has reserved for [Lucy Hessel] is something of a caricature...She would probably spend hours on the telephone.'

Vuillard painted two other paintings of Lucy Hessel on the telephone, one in a private collection in Switzerland and the other now lost. The present sheet may be compared stylistically to a preparatory study for the latter painting, possibly from the same sketchbook, in a private collection.

Provenance:

The studio of the artist
JPL Fine Arts, London
Lilian Heidenberg Gallery, New York
Private collection.

Artist description:

At the start of his career, Edouard Vuillard joined a group of young artists - including Maurice Denis, Paul Sérusier, Pierre Bonnard and Kerr-Xavier Roussel - who called themselves the Nabis and were united by a desire to develop a new, more expressive pictorial language, inspired by the work of Paul Gauguin. In the 1890's, Vuillard began receiving a number of private commissions for wall panels intended to decorate the rooms of private houses. This was a genre in which he was to become very successful, and between 1892 and 1901 he painted a number of these large-scale panneaux décoratifs, almost all the result of commissions from a small group of mutual friends and enlightened collectors. Vuillard's work of this type remained largely unknown to the public at large until several panels were exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1905.

In the early years of the new century, enjoying the fruits of a commercial arrangement with the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Vuillard began expanding his repertoire of decorative panels and small, intimiste domestic interiors to include portraits and landscapes. Although his work as a peintre-décorateur was largely confined to private homes, he did receive a handful of public commissions, including the decoration of the foyer of the newly built Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in 1912. The later years of his career found Vuillard saw mainly as a portrait painter, often depicting his sitters within an interior setting. He rarely exhibited in public after 1914, and it was not until a large retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1938, two years before his death, that interest in Vuillard was renewed.

As a modern scholar has noted, 'Vuillard was in many ways the supreme graphic artist among the Nabis. He drew throughout his life, indeed daily...' From around 1900 onwards he used mainly pastel for his drawings, and came to master the subtlety and vibrancy of this challenging medium. In one of the first monographs on the artist, the critic and art historian Claude Roger-Marx wrote that, 'Vuillard often found expression by means of pastels', and he made more extensive use of the pastel medium than perhaps any French artist since Degas in the previous generation. Pastel was to become an essential part of Vuillard's working process until the end of his career, and was used for landscape and figure studies, compositional drawings, still life subjects and as preparatory studies for portraits.