

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Paul SIGNAC (Paris 1863 - Paris 1945)

Boats in the Harbour of Saint-Tropez

Pencil and watercolour.

Variously inscribed with colour notes in pencil.

258 x 207 mm. (10 1/8 x 8 1/8 in.)

As one scholar has noted, 'Signac's earliest watercolors indicate that he quickly showed an amazing aptitude for the medium and was immediately capable of exploiting its possibilities...Signac had found a new means of expression, which he was able to take to a high level of perfection and which was to occupy a major place in his work. He began systematically to exhibit his watercolors alongside his oil paintings and his drawings; indeed he often insisted that his works on paper be shown alongside his paintings on canvas.'

In 1892 Paul Signac sailed his yacht Olympia into the little fishing port of Saint-Tropez, and promptly decided to live there. As he wrote to his mother in October 1892, 'I am settled here since yesterday and overjoyed...the golden coast of the gulf, the blue seas breaking on a beach, my beach...In the background the blue silhouettes of the Maures and the Esterel – there is enough material to work on for the rest of my days. Happiness – that is what I have just discovered.' From 1892 onwards Signac lived part of each year at Saint-Tropez, spending his time working and sailing. From this point onwards he stopped painting Parisian scenes and concentrated his attentions on the views in and round this Provençal port.

Signac's interest in such harbour scenes as this was later to be firmly established in the form of a major series of finished watercolours. Between 1929 and 1931 he worked on a project that he had long been considering; a series of watercolours depicting the ports and harbours of France. As Marina Ferretti Bocquillon has noted, 'Signac had in mind a journey that would take him to one hundred harbors in France with the objective of painting two watercolors of each site. He would let [Gaston] Lévy, who commissioned the project, choose the one he liked best and keep the other for himself...The watercolors...attest to the artist's vital energy and his delight at being able to devote himself

unreservedly to his favorite subjects: harbors, the sea and boats...the tireless traveller conveyed the variety of the skies, the riggings, and the harbor equipment with obvious relish. There is not a trace of nostalgia in these brilliantly fresh and energetic sheets.'

This watercolour was part of a group of six views of Saint-Tropez sold together at auction in 1978.

Provenance:

The studio of the artist, with the posthumous atelier stamp (Lugt 2285b) at the lower right
Anonymous sale, London; Sotheby's, 29 June 1978, part of lot 139
Private collection, Germany
Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 25 October 1995, lot 2
Private collection, London.

Artist description:

Active as a painter, draughtsman, writer and collector, Paul Signac was one of the leading artists of the Neo-Impressionist movement. He came from a wealthy bourgeois family, and as such was able to support the careers of several of his fellow artists as a patron and collector. He became a close friend of Georges Seurat, whose work he first encountered at the inaugural exhibition of the Société des Artistes Indépendants in 1884, and between them the two painters formed the nucleus of the group of artists known as the Neo-Impressionists. Signac would spend the winter working in his Parisian studio, while the summer months were spent painting at a coastal resort, eventually settling in Saint-Tropez from 1892 onwards. In 1904 Henri Matisse spent the summer with Signac at Saint-Tropez, a period that was to have a profound effect on the younger artist.

Signac painted around six hundred canvases as well as a significant body of works on paper, mainly watercolours. As Marina Ferretti Bocquillon has noted, 'Signac was the neo-impressionist who practiced watercolor most consistently...For him, watercolor was a seductive alternative to the demanding labor of studio painting, a zone of freedom that suited his restless temperament and love of the outdoors. It gradually took over from his work in oil...'