

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Georges Antoine Rochegrosse (Versailles 1859 - El-Biar, Algiers 1938)

A Woman Reclining in a Field of Flowers: Study for Le Chevalier aux Fleurs

Watercolour.

Signed G Rochegrosse at the lower right.

237 x 241 mm. (9 3/8 x 9 1/2 in.) [sheet]

This radiant watercolour is a preparatory study for the nymph at the lower left of Rochegrosse's monumental canvas *Le Chevalier aux Fleurs* (The Knight of the Flowers), painted in 1892. Nearly four metres long, the painting was first exhibited at the Internationale Kunstausstellung in Munich in 1892 and, two years later, at the Salon des Artistes Français in Paris, where it was acquired by the State; it is today in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay. The subject of the painting is taken from Wagner's *Parsifal*, an opera first produced in Bayreuth in 1882. Here the chaste hero Parsifal, having just defeated the guardians of the castle of the magician Klingsor, walks through the castle's enchanted garden, deaf to the entreaties of the beautiful and seductive flower maidens, bodies barely covered with flowers, who call to him ('Komm, komm, holder Knabe!'). The large painting was much praised by critics, one of whom described it as a 'bouquet of fireworks.'

Wagner's operas were popular subjects among French Symbolist painters, and Rochegrosse also painted subjects from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Tannhäuser*. In his painting of *Le Chevalier aux Fleurs*, however, the artist chose not to precisely follow the libretto of the opera. As Rochegrosse explained in an article published in 1894, 'je n'ai voulu en aucune façon représenter exactement la scène de l'opéra de Wagner. J'ai négligé volontairement le décor avec le château magique, le costume de Parsifal et tous autres détails se rapportant d'une façon trop absolue au livret de l'Opéra. J'ai voulu généraliser et comme symboliser l'idée même de la scène. L'être épris de l'idéal, les yeux fixés vers son but, marche à travers la vie, presque sans s'apercevoir des tentations, sans entendre les voix qui l'appellent au dehors de sa route. C'est seulement à l'approche du héros et par rapport à lui que les fleurs se personnifient et deviennent des formes tentatrices. Après son passage, elles retombent à l'état impersonnel et reprennent leur forme primitive.'

Many of Rochegrosse's paintings of the period between 1890 and 1920 feature his favourite model; his wife Marie Leblond, who is likely to have posed for the present sheet. Another watercolour study of the same figure is illustrated in colour in a deluxe edition of Octave Charpentier's poem *Le chevalier aux fleurs*, inspired by Rochegrosse's large painting, published in Paris in 1941. The book reproduces

several preparatory studies by Rochegrosse for the painting.

Exhibitions

Moulins, Musée départemental Anne-de-Beaujeu, Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse: Les fastes de la décadence, 2013-2014, no.41.

Literature:

Louise Bourgoïn and Edwart Vignot, Orsay mis à nu, Paris, 2012, illustrated p.14; Laurent Houssais, Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse: Les fastes de la décadence, exhibition catalogue, Moulins, 2013-2014, p.99, no.41.

Artist description:

Abandoned by his father as a child, Georges Rochegrosse was a pupil of Alfred Dehodencq before entering the Académie Julian at the age of twelve, studying with Jules Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger. He later enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where he was twice a finalist in the competition for the Prix de Rome. He made his debut at the Salon de la Société des Artistes Français in 1882, winning a third-class medal for his painting of Vitellius Dragged Through the Streets of Rome by the Populace, while at the Salon the following year his painting of Andromache was purchased by the State for the Musée de Rouen. His earliest exhibited works tended towards scenes from literature, legend and scenes from Egyptian, Roman and Byzantine history, often tinged with violence, seen in such paintings as The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar and The Death of Caesar, shown at the Salons of 1886 and 1887, respectively.

The 1890s found Rochegrosse working in a more Symbolist vein, exemplified by his large painting The Knight of the Flowers of 1892, inspired by Wagnerian mythology. Nearly four metres long, the painting was first exhibited at the Internationale Kunstausstellung in Munich in 1892 and two years later at the Salon des Artistes Français in Paris, where it was acquired by the State; it is today in the Musée d'Orsay. In 1898 Rochegrosse decorated the staircase of the Sorbonne with a mural of The Song of the Muses Awakening the Soul, one of several commissions for public decorations that the artist received.

By the turn of the century, however, Rochegrosse had come to be best known as a fashionable painter of Orientalist and mythological subjects, finding inspiration for much of his work in his travels throughout North Africa. (From 1900 onwards he spent the winter months in Algeria, where he maintained a studio in El-Biar, a suburb of Algiers. He also frequently exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Algériens et Orientalistes and the Union Artistique de l'Afrique du Nord.) By the end of the first decade of the 20th century Rochegrosse was seen as one of the leading exponents of Orientalism in France, exhibiting his work at the annual Salons, as well as at the Salon des Peintures Orientalistes Français.

From an early age, Rochegrosse made drawings that were reproduced in the journal La Vie Moderne, and his work continued to be featured in magazines throughout his career, particularly from the 1890s onwards. His friendships with writers and poets meant that he was often asked to illustrate their books, and he produced drawings for Gustave Flaubert's Salammbô, Victor Hugo's Les Misérables and Charles Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal, among others. The original drawings for these illustrations were often exhibited at the Galerie Georges Petit and the Salons de la Société des Aquarellistes Français. Rochegrosse also produced designs for posters, theatrical productions and Gobelins tapestries.