

Conrad Felixmuller (Dresden 1897 - Berlin 1977)

Luca Peeling an Orange (Die Apfelsine) [recto]; Circus Scene [verso]

Watercolour.
Signed and dated C. felixmüller / 29. at the upper left, and -lixmüller [partially cut off] on the verso.
Titled and dated Die Apfelsine 1929 on the verso.
551 x 364 mm. (21 3/4 x 14 3/8 in.)

Drawn the same year that the artist's manifesto declaring his break with the tenets of Expressionism was published in the periodical Kunst und Künstler, this vibrant drawing is a portrait of Felixmüller's son Luca, the artist's eldest child, born in 1918. Luca and his younger brother Titus were to be the painter's favourite models throughout their childhood, and he produced numerous painted and drawn portraits of them at rest and play. A pendant watercolour of the same size and date, entitled Die Milch and depicting Luca or Titus drinking a glass of milk, is in a private collection.

Shortly after Conrad Felixmüller's death, his son Titus provided an account of the way in which he and his elder brother would pose for their father. As he recalled, 'for the sons, modeling created a special relationship with their father which lasted past their childhood years and carried over into manhood… Ideas for family portraits or scenes arose spontaneously. Watching one of his children playing, be it with a wooden train, a cat or a paper hat, would end with the categorical demand: "Just keep standing still like that, I will be back with pencil and paper." We then knew what was in store for us; we had been trapped into being his models again…After a few sketches or sometimes even grand drawings – of which a few still exist – came the fine scratching noise of charcoal on canvas to fix the composition. That often signaled the end of the first day of modeling...A day of modeling lasted two to three hours, interrupted by short breaks which gave the children the opportunity to view the picture and also to criticize it…I draw from these times of being together an understanding for the great work of my father. I

am happy about that, even if it meant many “quiet” hours which are not always easy for children.’

A closely related painting of the same subject, dated 1929, in which a potted plant is seen on the table, is in a German private collection. Also related in subject is an earlier work of 1925; a painting of Luca seated and drawing at a table on which rests a vase of flowers.

The verso of the present sheet, drawn in a bold, Expressionist manner typical of the artist’s work of the early 1920’s, must predate the portrait of Luca on the recto by several years. It is, in fact, closely related to a watercolour of a pair of circus performers, dating from 1921, which is today in a private collection in Germany. Felixmüller produced a handful of drawings of clowns, acrobats, tightrope walkers and other circus folk in the first half of the 1920’s. The artist must have decided to use the reverse of an old drawing when he came to make the portrait of his son several years later.

Dated 1929, this watercolour portrait of Luca, which the artist kept throughout his life and which has remained in the possession of his family until recently, gains added poignancy in its depiction of the happiness and tranquility of the artist’s family life in the years before the Nazi rise to power and the subsequent upheavals in the artist’s life and career.

Provenance:

The Felixmüller estate
Thence by descent in the family of the artist until 2010.

Exhibitions

Dortmund, Museum am Ostwall, Weisbaden, Nassauischer Kunstverein and Saarbrücken, Saarland-Museum, Conrad Felixmüller 1897-1977, 1978-1979, no.117; Wuppertal, Von der Heydt-Museum and Altenburg, Lindenau-Museum, Conrad Felixmüller. Die Dresdner Jahre: Aquarelle und Zeichnungen 1912-1933, 1997, no.33.

Literature:

Jutta Penndorf, Antje Birthälmer and Sabine Fehlemann, Conrad Felixmüller. Die Dresdner Jahre: Aquarelle und Zeichnungen 1912-1933, exhibition catalogue, Wuppertal and Altenburg, 1997, p.35, no.33 (recto illustrated only).

Artist description:

Born in Dresden, Konrad Felix Müller studied music at the Royal Conservatory and took drawing lessons at the Applied Art School in the city. He also seems to have taught himself the basic techniques of printmaking before being accepted into the Royal Academy of Art in Dresden at the end of 1912. His first oil paintings date from 1913, and in the same year he produced a series of woodcuts in a distinctively Expressionist manner. By 1915 the young artist had taken to calling himself Conrad Felixmüller, and had embarked on an independent career in Dresden. He spent some time in Berlin, where he briefly shared a studio with the artist Ludwig Meidner, and also contributed to Herwarth Walden’s avant-garde magazine Der Sturm. Soon established as a leading member of the second generation of Expressionist artists In Dresden, Felixmüller was associated with a group of progressive artists and writers in the city. A conscientious objector, he repeatedly ignored his military draft orders and was eventually arrested and conscripted into the army as a hospital orderly. Marriage in 1918 and fatherhood the same year inspired a new interest in domestic themes, the result of the contentment he found in family life. A burst of activity as a painter, printmaker and illustrator, as well as experiments in sculpture and stage design, found Felixmüller exhibiting his work in Berlin, Dresden and Hanover, while several portfolios of his engravings, etchings and woodcuts were published.

By the middle of the decade, however, there began to be a pronounced change in the Felixmüller's style, with the Expressionist tendencies of his work of the late teens and early 1920's eventually giving way to a brighter, more naturalistic manner. This break was codified in 1929 in an article written by Felixmüller for the magazine Kunst und Künstler, entitled 'Malerglück und Malerleben' ('Painter's Happiness and Painter's Life'), in which the artist gave notice of his break with Expressionism. His paintings and drawings began instead to focus on a more private and optimistic approach to subject matter and mood, with a particular emphasis on depictions of domestic life.

Nevertheless, during the years of Nazi rule, Felixmüller found his work labeled as 'degenerate' and struggled to work freely. A former member of the German Communist Party, he was excluded from official artist's organizations, and between 1937 and 1938 some 150 of his works which were in public collections were confiscated by the Reich and either sold or destroyed. After the war Felixmüller continued to work as a painter, printmaker and illustrator, although living in East Germany he remained isolated from avant-garde trends in the West. He taught drawing and painting at Martin Luther University in Halle and later settled in East Berlin, working in relative anonymity before he and his wife were allowed to move to West Berlin to join their sons in 1967. In the years before his death ten years later his graphic work in particular began to earn the artist a considerable reputation outside Germany.