

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



## **Mortimer MENPES (Adelaide 1855 - Pangbourne (?) 1938)**

### **An Illustrated Letter, with the Head of a Young Breton Girl**

Pencil and watercolour, on the artist's headed notepaper with the address 21 / Cadogan Gardens / SW.

Signed and inscribed by the artist 'Dear Miss Stoney / Indeed I know your / father & I am proud to / receive your kind / letter. Someday I hope / to be allowed the privilege / of showing you my studio / built in Japan & brought / over to England bodily. / Yours sincerely / Mortimer Menpes.' on the left half of the sheet.

132 x 196 mm. (5 1/4 x 7 7/8 in.)

In this letter, Menpes refers to his studio in London. As a contemporary article noted, 'Mr. Mortimer Menpes, the well-known Australian painter, during a recent visit to Japan made an especial study of Japanese house decoration and, armed with the plans of a house constructed for him in Cadogan Gardens, London, in which the fittings and decorations had not been completed, he set himself the task of superintending the construction of a complete range of fittings, each detail of which should not only be designed but actually made by a Japanese craftsman; the whole being so constructed as to be readily taken to pieces, packed, and put together again in London.' ('Mr. Mortimer Menpes' House. An Experiment in the Application of Japanese Ornament to the Decoration of an English House', in an unknown English magazine [The Studio?], p.172.)

The drawing illustrates the typical headdress of Breton women; in 1905 Menpes published an illustrated book on Brittany, accompanied by text by his wife Dorothy.

### **Provenance:**

Mr. and Mrs. Giorgio Marsan, London.

### **Artist description:**

Born in Australia, Mortimer Menpes settled in London in 1879, studying at the South Kensington Schools. He also travelled through Europe, spending some time at Pont-Aven in Brittany. In 1881 he met James McNeill Whistler, and offered him the use of his large studio in which to complete his set of Venice etchings. Menpes soon afterwards abandoned his studies to work, alongside Walter Sickert, as Whistler's studio assistant and disciple. He began exhibiting at the Royal Academy in 1881 and, largely as a result of his association with Whistler, was invited to show at the more avant-garde New English Art Club in 1886. In 1887 Menpes travelled to Japan, one of the first modern Western artists to do so.

When he came to exhibit his Japanese paintings in London his refusal to sign himself as a pupil of

Whistler caused the two artists to fall out, a situation only exacerbated by Menpes's elopement with Whistler's mistress. Menpes was never to be reconciled with Whistler, and was not invited to exhibit with the New English Art Club again. Nevertheless he continued to show at the Grafton Gallery in the 1890's and at the Fine Art Society in the early years of the 20th century. Apart from Japan, Menpes travelled widely throughout Europe, and also visited Egypt, Morocco, India, Burma, Mexico and South Africa.