Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Henry SOMM (Rouen 1844 - Paris 1907)

An Elegant Woman Chased by Demons

Watercolour on paper, laid down on board.
Signed Henry Somm at the lower right.
Inscribed or signed Henry Somm on the reverse of the backing board.
210 x 322 mm. (8 1/4 x 12 3/4 in.)

The subject matter of Henry Somm's drawings and watercolours tend towards elegant, often wistful young women, depicted with a particular delicacy of touch. The critic Louis Morin, writing in 1893, noted of the artist that 'Somm is above all a painter. His pastels and water colors are much sought after; he has the painter's eye to the highest degree imaginable...More than any other artist Somm is the painter of the Parisienne; not the society woman, but the prettily dressed girl who runs about the streets, her nose in the air, laughing unceremoniously at the compliments of the passers-by, and who sometimes enters the Moulin Rouge or the Elysée-Montmarte. It is by Somm's works that she will live, this masterpiece of roguish grace, the grisette of Paris.'

Datable to the late 1880's, the fantastic subject of this watercolour reveals another, darker aspect of Somm's art. As the scholar Elizabeth Menon has written, 'Throughout his career, Somm treated aspects of modern life that interested the Impressionists, as well as those that preoccupied Symbolist artists such as Théophile Steinlen, Félicien Rops, and Toulouse-Lautrec...During the tumultuous decade of the 1880s in France, the simultaneous presence in the graphic work of Henry Somm of Far Eastern motifs, scenes from Parisian life, social commentary, and elements of the macabre show how the artist responded – in surprisingly innovative ways – to the complex, coexisting currents of Japonisme, Impressionism, and Symbolism in French culture.'

What appears to be a partial study in pen and ink for the woman in this composition appears on a sheet of studies of women in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. A watercolour of a similar subject by Somm, titled Les farfadets and depicting an elegant woman chased by goblins, was on the art market in Paris in 2007.

Provenance:

Peter H. Dietsch, New York
By descent to a private collection, London.

Artist description:

After studying at the École Municipale de Dessin in Rouen, François Clément Sommier, known professionally as Henry Somm, settled in Paris in the late 1860s, where he trained briefly with Isidore Pils. He enjoyed a successful career as an illustrator and draughtsman, contributing regularly to such popular journals as Le Monde parisien, Tout-Paris and Alfred Cadart's bi-monthly L'Illustration Nouvelle, as well as providing illustrations for satirical books like Jacques Olivier's Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice de femmes, published in 1876. Somm was also active as a graphic designer, providing menus, theatre programs, invitations and announcements for the many fashionable events of Belle Epoque Paris. He also produced visiting cards and bookplates, as well as designs for plates for the Haviland porcelain factory, commissioned by the firm's artistic director, Félix Bracquemond. At the invitation of Edgar Degas, Somm took part in the fourth Impressionist exhibition of 1879, showing his prints alongside those of Braquemond and works by Degas, Mary Cassatt and Camille Pissarro. The 1880s found Somm among a group of artists associated with the cabaret Le Chat Noir in Paris, for whose eponymous journal he published reviews and articles. Somm's finished drawings are often related to his more commercial work as an illustrator for magazines or such books as Georges Montorgeuil's La Parisienne peint par elle-même, published in 1897. In the latter part of his career, he was chiefly employed by the periodical Le Rire. Required to provide several drawings for each issue, his draughtsmanship became both more economical in line and more self-assured. Somm died in 1907 in relative obscurity.