

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Henry SOMM (Rouen 1844 - Paris 1907)**

## **Elegant Figures in a Parisian Square**

Brush and brown wash.

Signed Hy. Somm at the lower right.

213 x 321 mm. (8 3/8 x 12 5/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM.

Henry Somm is perhaps best known today for his depictions of Parisian society. As the scholar Elizabeth Menon has noted, however, 'The artist has been termed a "petit impressioniste" by art critics and historians. While some of his works – mainly scenes of leisure in the city of Paris – exhibit stylistic qualities that support this designation in a broad sense, careful examination of his drawings reveal that Somm is a transitional figure between Impressionism and Symbolism, whose subject matter is principally concerned with contemporary life in Paris.'

The fascinating technique of this drawing, with the use of a combination of ink blots and pale brown washes applied with a brush to create a composition devoid of pen outlines, is highly unusual in Somm's oeuvre.

### **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 settled in Paris in the late 1860's, training briefly with Isidore Pils and adopting the name Henry Somm. It was under this name that he illustrated his first book, Alexandre Le Noble's *La Rapinéide ou L'Atelier, poème burlesco-comico-tragique en 7 chants*, published in 1870. Somm was to enjoy a successful career as an illustrator and draughtsman, contributing regularly to such popular journals as *Le Monde Parisien*, *Le Rire* and *L'illustration Nouvelle*, as well as providing illustrations for satirical books like Jacques Olivier's *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des 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 Époque Paris. He 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. Somm was one of the graphic artists who fell under the spell of Japonisme, which first

emerged in France in the early 1860's and continued throughout the late 19th century. Some of his earliest work in this genre was first developed in illustrations accompanying a series of articles by Philippe Burty published in L'Art in the early 1870's. Somm studied Japanese language and history (an illustrated notebook with his notes on Japanese grammar is in the Louvre), but his plans to travel to Japan in 1870 were halted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war.

At the invitation of Edgar Degas, Somm took part in the fourth Impressionist exhibition of 1879, showing his drawings alongside those of Bracquemond, Degas, Mary Cassatt and Camille Pissarro. The 1880's found Somm associated with a group of artists and writers at the Parisian cabaret Le Chat Noir, where he produced shadow-plays, and for whose eponymous journal he published reviews and articles. Among his friends at Le Chat Noir was Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who made an etched portrait of Somm in 1898, and the two were members of an anti-establishment art group known as Les Incohérents. In the latter part of his career, Somm was 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's finished drawings are often related to his more commercial work as an illustrator for magazines or books. Although he died in relative obscurity, a retrospective exhibition of his work was mounted at the Galerie Berthe Weill in Paris in 1911.