Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Ker Xavier ROUSSEL (Chènes 1867 - L'Étang-la-Ville 1944)

Faun and Nymphs in a Landscape

Pastel and charcoal on light brown paper.
Signed and dated K. X. Roussel, 1910 at the lower right.
266 x 359 mm. (10 1/2 x 14 1/8 in.) [sight]

ACQUIRED BY THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA.

For much of his mature career, the bulk of Roussel's work was in the form of pastels. The artist's large decorative mural schemes were often based on small sketches in oil or pastel, of which the present sheet is a particularly fine and fresh example.

Provenance:

Galerie Paul Vallotton, Lausanne (Inv. 9993)
Anonymous sale, Berne, Kornfeld & Klipstein, 12 June 1969, lot 1130 ('Prachtvolles, unberührt farbfrisches Pastell von 1910')
Peter H. Dietsch, New York
By descent to a private collection, London.

Artist description:

Francois-Xavier (known from boyhood as Ker) Roussel met his lifelong friend and future brother-in-law, Edouard Vuillard, at school in Paris in 1884. It was Roussel who convinced Vuillard to take up painting as a career, and the two youths studied at the École des Beaux-Arts between 1886 and 1888. They then entered the Académie Julian, where they met Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Paul Sérusier and Félix Valloton, and together with these artists formed the group known as the Nabis. Roussel exhibited with the group at the Café Volpini and at the gallery Le Barc de Boutteville, showing mainly landscapes and still life subjects executed in both oil and pastel. The sombre tonalities of his work of the late 1880's and early 1890's, influenced by the paintings of Paul Cézanne, eventually gave way to a lighter palette, as the artist fell under the influence of Impressionism. Roussel had his first one-man exhibition, of pastels, drawings and lithographs, at the offices of the magazine La Revue Blanche in 1894. In 1895 he visited an exhibition of Cézanne's paintings at the gallery of Ambroise Vollard, and came away inspired to paint mythological subjects.

A lifelong admirer of the classical poetry of Virgil and Ovid, as well as the paintings of Nicolas Poussin, Roussel found his metiér in antique themes and classical subject matter, depicting nymphs, gods, fauns and satyrs in Arcadian landscapes. He was able to translate this penchant for classical and pastoral themes into large-scale wall decorations for both public buildings and private homes, such as a set of panels, now destroyed, for the Château des Clayes, a county estate near Versailles belonging to the art dealer Jos Hessel. Other patrons included the art dealers Gaston and Josse Bernheim, the actor and director Aurelién Lugné-Poe, the writer Claude Anet, the automobile magnate Lucien Rosenart and the Russian textile manufacturer and collector Ivan Morozov. In 1912 Roussel was commissioned to paint the stage curtain for the newly built Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris, working alongside his friend Vuillard, and also provided decorations for the museum at Winterthur and the Palais de Chaillot in Paris.

By 1920, Maurice Denis could write that 'K.-X. Roussel, of all painters, is the only one who has continued the tradition of Cézanne…the splendour of his mythological paintings relates them through Cézanne to the decorative schemes of the palaces of Rome which he has never seen; he creates Poussin in front of nature: and naturally he also possesses the grace of Guido Reni and the nobility of Annibale Carracci.' In all, Roussel completed some forty decorative projects, although several were destroyed during the Second World War and others have since been altered or mutilated. He was also an accomplished book illustrator, providing drawings for an edition of Virgil's Les bucoliques and Maurice de Guérin's prose poem La Centaure.

Writing in 1964, Denys Sutton opined that, 'It is, I think, true to claim Roussel as one of the unjustly neglected members of the French school of the period 1890 to 1940. This is mainly due to one fact, understandable under the circumstances; namely, that he painted in a way which does not accord with the canons of contemporary taste. He was a large-scale decorator who found his inspiration in the evocation of a sensuous and pagan world and he deserves our attention because of his conviction that decoration as such still has a rôle to play in the arts. He evolved a manner of painting – bold, dramatic and colourful - which, stylistically, may best be described as Neo-baroque…It is this combination of strong and powerful brush-work with an artist's eye for colour which gives his work its character.'