

Emil NOLDE (Nolde 1867 - Seebüll 1956)

Head of a South Sea Island Woman (Bildnis einer Südseeinsulanerin)
Watercolour and gouache, brush and black ink, on rice straw paper.

Signed *Nolde.* at the lower right.

522 x 371 mm. (20 1/2 x 14 5/8 in.) [sheet]

This large watercolour was drawn in New Guinea in the early months of 1914. Nolde and his wife Ada visited the island – the southeastern part of which was, at the time, Germany's main colonial territory in the Pacific – in 1913-1914 as part of a scientific expedition organized and funded by the German government. Unlike Paul Gauguin in Tahiti before him, or Max Pechstein in Palau at about the same time, Nolde seems not to have gone to German New Guinea with the romantic idea of seeking an alternative way of life, but rather for the purposes of study. As the Nolde scholar Jill Lloyd has written of this period, 'Like most Expressionists, Nolde displayed a growing interest in the art of non-European cultures during this period...Nolde's enthusiasm for what he imagined to be the pure and childlike qualities of 'primitive' peoples, and his admiration for the expressive vitality of non-European art, reached a peak in 1913 when he decided to join an ethnographic and demographic expedition to German New Guinea. His journey overland through Russia, Manchuria, Korea, Japan, China, Manila and the Palau Islands resulted in a series of lively sketches, depicting the people and situations he encountered. In New Guinea he painted large, luminous watercolours of native heads...'

In a letter sent while on his journey, Nolde wrote, 'All these countries are so unique, the people, the animals, the plants, everything is so strange, not always beautiful, but always interesting.' The artist painted only a few oil paintings during this trip, and the bulk of his output was in the form of watercolours and drawings. Many of these were confiscated on his journey back to Germany, when war broke out,

and were only recovered by the artist from a warehouse in England in 1921.

The watercolour portraits and head studies that Nolde produced in New Guinea are invariably frontal images that are direct and reflect the artist's personal encounter with the subject. Nolde's autobiographical recollections of his time in New Guinea show how closely he studied the inhabitants, and recorded their appearance: 'The other natives put white paint onto their foreheads as a sign of mourning. At dances they covered their bodies with light-coloured dots and lines, sometimes also blue. They rubbed lime into their hair to rid it of bugs, which made it a curious brown or rather brownish-red. All that made their appearance even more interesting.'

On his trip to New Guinea, Nolde developed a watercolour technique of translucent layer of colour over outline drawings in pen or brushed ink. The present sheet, previously unpublished, is a particularly fine example of his head studies of native subjects of this period.

As Peter Vergo has written of the artist's trip to the South Seas, 'Nolde's most vivid images brought back from the Pacific remain his figure drawings and watercolours, particularly the powerful series of watercolour heads, both male and (occasionally) female. These, for the most part represented singly, are often shown wearing the characteristic headdresses and ornaments of the New Guinea tribespeople, "as colourful as parakeets, with flowers and brightly coloured feathers in their hair", according to Ada Nolde's recollection.'8 Jill Lloyd adds that, 'The South Seas journey, which terminated with the outbreak of World War I in 1914, was a turning-point in Nolde's art. Coinciding with the end of the heroic years of first-generation Expressionism, it marked the end of the artist's engagement with modern, urban subjects. Nolde's objections to colonialism, which he believed detrimental to the pure racial integrity and creative originality of indigenous peoples, confirmed his mistrust in the progress of modern civilization. From this time Nolde drew inspiration more exclusively from the recurrent cycles of nature, peopling his paintings with primitivist figures from the Bible, from fables, or from the wells of his imagination.'

Dr. Manfred Reuther, director of the Stiftung Nolde, has confirmed the authenticity of this hitherto unknown watercolour, which had remained in the same private collection since 1921, only a few years after it was drawn.

Provenance:

Acquired by a private collector in December 1921
Thence by descent until 2015.

Exhibitions

London, Dickinson at Frieze Masters, and New York, Dickinson Roundell, *Expressionism in Europe*, 2017.

Literature:

Angela M. H. Schuster, 'Master Class: Great Art Hits the Auction Block', *Avenue*, 19 January 2022; Seph Rodney, 'Subtle and Finessed Depictions at the Master Drawings Fair', *Hyperallergic*, 24 January 2022.

Artist description:

Born Emil Hansen, Emil Nolde took his name of his birthplace, on the border of Germany and Demmark, in 1902. He grew up and spent much of his life in the province of Schleswig-Holstein, and apart from some time spent in Berlin was never far from the sea. His first studio was a hut on the beach on the island of Alsen, where he spent summers beginning in 1903, and there he delighted in observing the sea at close hand. This obsession with the sea and its power was to remain with him throughout his

career, and provided the inspiration for a large number of paintings and watercolours. He was briefly a member of the expressionist group Die Brücke (The Bridge) in 1906-1907 and the Berlin Secession between 1908 and 1910, but eventually left both groups. He also exhibited with the Der Blauer Reiter (The Blue Rider) group in 1912, although he was never a member.

Despite being a successful and highly regarded artist, Nolde found himself, at the age of seventy, crushed by the Nazi party's official condemnation of modernism in art. In 1937 he was declared a 'degenerate' artist by the Nazis, and nearly fifty of his works were included in the Entartete Kunst ('Degenerate Art') exhibition held that year. More than a thousand of his works – more than those of any other artist - were confiscated from museums and private collections, as well as from his studio, and many of his paintings and drawings were destroyed. In 1941 he was expelled from the Reichskunstkammer (the Reich Chamber of Art), and was forbidden to paint, even in private; he was also prohibited from exhibiting or selling his work. As a result he turned towards working on paper, producing a large number of small watercolours and gouaches that he referred to as his 'unpainted pictures'.

Nolde produced watercolours almost continuously from around 1908 onwards, and the medium would come to dominate his output over oil paintings. As one scholar has noted, 'Numerically...it is the watercolours which occupy pride of place in his oeuvre: indeed, he can claim to have been one of the most prolific watercolourists of the twentieth century – one of the relatively few modern artists to devote such close attention to what seemed to many an old-fashioned medium. In his hands, watercolour revealed new possibilities...It was the medium to which he would confide his most intimate thoughts...It was also the one in which he felt most thoroughly at home.'

Nolde's watercolours are characterized by a technical proficiency and a preference for the finest materials. He would occasionally use tempera colours rather than watercolour, to achieve greater permanence, diluting the tempera with water. He painted 'wet on wet', using very wet brushes and large amounts of diluted colour to soak the highly absorbent, translucent Japanese paper he preferred - at times, he would even apply colour to the back of a sheet and let it bleed through to the recto – so that the colour took on a particular intensity, as if it were in the paper itself rather than lying on the surface.