Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Joseph (Josef) SIMA (Jaroměř 1891 - Paris 1971)

The Sea

Watercolour and gouache.

Signed and dated SIMA 1934 at the lower right.

45 x 310 mm. (1 3/4 x 12 1/8 in.)

In the spring of 1933, Josef Šíma returned to the seaside resort town of Hendaye, in the French Basque country on the southwestern tip of France. He had first visited Hendaye in 1921, and on this return visit was inspired to produce a series of works entitled Sea, ten of which he exhibited a few weeks later, at the artistic organization Umělecká beseda in Prague in May 1933. Until then, Šíma had painted landscapes and figure subjects in a more or less non-representational manner, but now he began to paint the ocean, albeit still in an abstract vein. Most of Šíma's marine compositions of this period, such as the present sheet, are made up of two horizontal passages; one blue for the sky and the other green for the sea, from which emerge patterns of foaming waves, which appear as cylindrical rollers. In other works, sky and sea merge to form a continuous blue surface, divided only by the darker line of the horizon.

This small watercolour may be related in particular to three seascape paintings by Šíma, each painted in Hendaye in 1933, which are today in the National Gallery of Prague.

The scholar and art dealer Hélène Drude, director of the Galerie Le Point Cardinal in Paris, owned a number of works by Josef Šíma, including a sketchbook from 1921.

Provenance:

Hélène Drude.

Artist description:

A significant figure in 20th century European art, Josef Šíma was trained in the studio of Jan Preisler at the Academy of Arts in Prague. After completing his studies, he became a member of the avant-garde Devětsil artist's group, founded in 1920. The following year Šíma moved to Paris, where he met the painters Albert Gleizes and Amédée Ozenfant at the magazine L'Esprit nouveau and also befriended such figures as Tristan Tzara and his fellow Czech František Kupka. He soon became closely associated with Surrealist circles in art and literature in Paris, and exhibited his work in the Surrealist section of the Salon des Surindépendants. In 1926 he took French citizenship, and at around the same time met Max Ernst and André Breton. Choosing not to be associated with Breton's Surrealist group,

Šíma, together with the poets and writers Roger Gilbert-Lecomte and René Daumal, formed the parallel group Le Grand Jeu, whose members met at his studio. (He also became the artistic director of the short-lived literary review of the same name.) Nevertheless, Šíma took part in the Surrealist exhibition at the Kunsthaus in Zürich in 1929, and accompanied Breton and Paul Eluard on their trip to Prague in 1935, when he also designed the cover for the Czech edition of Breton's iconic Surrealist novel Nadja.

After the Second World War, Šíma returned to work with a renewed interest in landscape. His work was shown widely in France and abroad, culminating in a major exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1968. Šíma also produced a number of book illustrations, notably for works by the poet and novelist Pierre Jouve, as well as some designs for stained glass windows. In 1992 an exhibition devoted to Le Grand Jeu was held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which also served as a retrospective survey of Sima's work.

As the eminent critic and art historian Meyer Schapiro wrote of him, 'Sima is one of those painters, uncommon in our culture, who see the mysteriously grand, the cosmic. He discovers it not in the multiplicity or fullness of things, but in a few elements of narrow span, often a single chord. They shape a sparse silent world congenial to a mood of revery and invite a solitary communion with the distant and high. His reticent image calls one away from the habitual in our surroundings to a vast unlocalized space, without footholds or landmarks, beyond the reach of our hands. However strange this space may be, it is no domain of the fanciful and incongruous, but a transmuted reflection of nature. From an older more realistic art Sima has inherited an aesthetic of the airy and luminous and disengaged it from the ties with earthly objects and weather...I do not know of another painter who has maintained with such purity and steadfastness this contemplative attitude which is more familiar through the poets than the painters.'