

Louis-Maurice BOUTET DE MONVEL (Orléans 1850 - Paris 1913)

Design for the Poster for the 19th Annual Exhibition of the Société des Aquarellistes Français, Paris, 1897

Watercolour, ink wash, heightened with gold and gouache, on paper laid down on canvas.

Signed *MB de Monvel* at the centre right.

955 x 632 mm. (37 5/8 x 24 7/8 in.)

This large watercolour is a design for the poster for the 19th annual exhibition of the Société des Aquarellistes Français, held in May and June of 1897. The Société des Aquarellistes Français was founded in 1879 at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris, by a group of artists that included Eugène Lami, Ferdinand Heilbuth, Gustave Doré and Jean-Georges Vibert. Maurice Boutet de Monvel joined the association in 1890, alongside James Tissot, Léon Augustin Lhermitte, Henri-Joseph Harpignies, Ernest Meissonier and Léon Bonnat, and exhibited there annually for many years.

As a contemporary of the artist noted of Boutet de Monvel, 'In the rooms on the Rue de Sevres where the Society of Water Colorists have exhibited for so many years, and also in the Galleries of the Champs Élysées, we have tasted the most delicate artistic delights before the works of this master. Under his signature we have seen the most beautiful fantasies...'

An impression of the finished poster, printed by Imprimerie F. Champenois, is in the collection of the Musée Carnavalet in Paris.

The composition used in this design, however, may be dated several years earlier, since a close variant of it was first seen, with the title Un Conte de fées ('A Fairy Tale'), in a watercolour exhibited by Boutet de Monvel at the Société des Aquarellistes Français in 1891. The image was also used in the catalogue of the exhibition.

Provenance:

The artist's son, Bernard Boutet de Monvel, Paris
Thence by descent to his daughter, Sylvie Boutet de Monvel, Paris.

Literature:

Paris, Galerie Manzi-Joyant, *Exposition rétrospective de l'oeuvre de Maurice Boutet de Monvel*, 1913, no.83.

Artist description:

Born in Orléans but raised in Paris, Maurice Boutet de Monvel enrolled in the studio of Alexandre Cabanel at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1870, and later studied at the Académie Julian with Jules Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger. In 1873 he exhibited his first painting, a Temptation of Saint Anthony, at the Société des Artistes Français. A visit to Algeria in 1876 resulted in a number of plein-air oil sketches. In the early 1880s Boutet de Monvel began making a name for himself as an illustrator, producing numerous pen and ink drawings for the weekly illustrated children's magazine Saint Nicolas over a period of several years. He also created charming illustrations for numerous children's books and anthologies, such as Vielles chansons et rondes pour les petits enfants and Chansons de France pour les petits Français, as well as La civilité puerile et honnête expliqué pour l'oncle Eugène. As a friend of the artist noted, in an article published in 1899, 'In this series of drawings and water colors he suddenly reveals a profound knowledge of children's habits, attitudes and movements...Added to this exceptional comprehension of children was a manifestation of a rare and particular talent.' Many of Boutet de Monvel's drawings were originally intended for his two sons, Roger (1879-1951) and Bernard (1881-1949), who were later to gain fame as a writer and artist, respectively.

Maurice Boutet de Monvel's masterpiece as an illustrator, however, was a lavish book devoted to Joan of Arc, which he both wrote and illustrated. Published in 1896 to great acclaim, Boutet de Monvel's Jeanne d'Arc firmly established his reputation beyond France. The following year, at the fifth Vienna Secession exhibition, an entire room was devoted to his drawings, which proved to be a revelation. As one Viennese critic recalled of Boutet de Monvel some years later, 'This man has become indispensable in Vienna, where he has played a vital role over the past few years...He and [Eugène] Grasset have practically shaped our young illustrators; yet he has remained completely unknown in central Europe; only a few Viennese painters who are 'in the know' possess his books, almost as though they were a well-kept secret.'

Boutet de Monvel's reputation also spread to America, where he had been submitting drawings for The Century Magazine, and where his books of children's illustrations proved so popular that it was said that sweet and well-behaved young children were often praised by their parents as 'my little Boutet'. Exhibitions of Boutet de Monvel's work were mounted in 1889 at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. A commission for six paintings of scenes from the life of Joan of Arc for the American collector William A. Clark occupied the artist for several years between 1906 and 1913; the paintings are today in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.. Among his last major projects was an illustrated life of Saint Francis of Assisi, which was eventually published in 1921, several years after the death of the artist. A retrospective exhibition of Boutet de Monvel's work – the first to be held in Paris – was mounted in 1913 at the Parisian gallery of Michel Manzi and Maurice Joyant.