

Charles MAURIN (Le Puy-en-Velay 1856 - Grasse 1914)

The Guardian Angel

Watercolour and gouache. Laid down.
Signed and dated Ch. Maurin / 1894 at the lower right.
650 x 465 mm. (21 5/8 x 18 1/4 in.)

Signed and dated 1894, this large and highly finished watercolour and gouache drawing is unrelated to any painting or print by Charles Maurin, and must have been executed as an independent work of art. Studies of young girls appear in around fifty works by the artist – paintings, pastels, drawings and prints – and make up a distinct part of his oeuvre, but the present sheet is much more refined in handling and appearance than most of these. Instead, this impressive work may be related to a small group of highly finished religious or allegorical subjects by Maurin, dating from the first half of the 1890s.

Among stylistically comparable works on paper of this type is a large Annunciation in pastel and gouache with gold, signed and dated 1893, in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Quimper, and an equally large allegorical drawing of Virtue Between Two Vices (also known as L'Amour profond), likewise executed in pastel and gouache and dated 1893, in a private collection in Paris. Like these two works, the present sheet displays something of the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites on Maurin.

Provenance:

Anonymous sale, New York, Sotheby's, 26 May 1994, lot 196
Private collection, New Jersey.

Artist description:

Having won the art scholarship known as the Prix Crozatier in 1875, Charles Maurin entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, studying with Jules Lefèbvre and Gustave Boulanger, and with Rodolphe Julian at the Académie Julian. He first exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1882, where he showed a pair of portraits, one of which gained an honourable mention. He continued to exhibit at the Salon des Artistes Français until 1890. He participated in the Salon des Indépendants for the first time in 1887, showing a number of paintings, drawings and engravings that were admired by, among others, Edgar Degas. As an artist, he worked in a variety of styles, the most distinctive being a sort of Symbolism evident in a range of allegorical subjects that he treated.

Maurin had a lifelong interest in the depiction of the female nude, and, like Degas and Mary Cassatt, was fond of portraying women at intimate moments of their daily routine. He also produced a handful of splendid portraits, mainly in the 1880s and 1890s, of friends, patrons and fellow artists including Georges Seurat and Rupert Carabin, as well as drawings and pastels of café, theatre and street scenes. Around 1885 he took up an appointment as a professor at the Académie Julian, where he met Félix Vallotton, who became a close friend. Another good friend was Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, with whom Maurin shared an exhibition in 1893 at the Galerie Boussod et Valadon in Paris. It was there that, at the urging of Degas, the collector Henry Laurent began to acquire Maurin's work, eventually becoming his foremost patron and collector.

The 1890s found Maurin enjoying a moderately successful career, with one-man shows with Ambroise Vollard in 1895 and at Edmond Sagot in 1899. He received a commission from the State for a painting of Maternité (Motherhood); completed in 1893 and sent to the museum in his native town of Le Puy, the painting was soon regarded as one of the artist's finest works. The previous year he took part in the inaugural Salon de la Rose + Croix, where he showed one of his largest and most important paintings; a monumental triptych entitled L'Aurore (Dawn). He also contributed works to the Salons de la Rose + Croix of 1895 and 1897. Maurin painted a series of large decorative panels of Tragedy, Dance and Music for the foyer of the municipal theatre in Le Puy in 1893, and for Sarah Bernhardt designed sets and costumes for Edmond Rostand's La Princess Lointaine in 1895. He visited Holland, Belgium and England, and sent works to Le Libre Esthétique in Brussels in 1896 and 1897, and the Exhibition of International Art in London in 1898. A man of firm anarchist leanings, Maurin produced illustrations for the radical journal Le Temps nouveau, and published portrait prints of the French anarchists Louise Michel and François Koenigstein, known as Ravachol. In 1895 he was also commissioned to provide illustrations for the art and literary journal La Revue Blanche.

After 1900, however, Maurin's output declined considerably, partly due to ill health, and the last years of his life were spent in Brittany and Provence, where he died in obscurity in 1914. His work was largely forgotten after his death, although a retrospective exhibition was held at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris in 1921, while a monograph on his work by Ulysse Rouchon was published the following year. Although a significant collection of Maurin's work is today in the collection of the Musée Crozatier in Le Puy-en-Velay, his paintings and drawings remain little represented in museums outside France.

As a draughtsman, Charles Maurin was equally adept in pastel, chalk and pencil, and was highly regarded by critics, collectors and fellow artists; his drawings were, for example, particularly esteemed by Degas, who compared his draughtsmanship to that of his own great hero, Ingres. An innovative artist, he invented a method of using an atomizer to spray pigment onto the surface of the paper to create what he termed 'peintures au vaporisateur'; large, atmospheric watercolour landscapes of great subtlety and beauty. Maurin is perhaps best known today, however, as a gifted and prolific printmaker, and played an important role in the revival of colour etching and wood engraving in the 1890s. Like his paintings, many of his prints focus on the female nude, or the theme of mothers and children, and account for some of the artist's most striking and individual works. Maurin also developed a number of new techniques and processes, particularly with regard to printing in colour. Some of his prints were published in editions of ten or less, however, and much of his graphic work remains very rare today.

Although long forgotten or ignored after his death, Charles Maurin's eclectic oeuvre as a painter, printmaker and draughtsman remains one of the most distinctive of any artist in France in the late 19th century. The French scholar Jacques Foucart, writing in 1979, succinctly described the artist as 'that curious and libertarian figure, so typical of the effervescent Paris of the Belle Epoque, an engraver of social customs comparable with Louis Legrand, a perfectionist and an inventive technician, a sensitive

draughtsman à la Besnard, a friend of Lautrec and Valloton. He created some of the most extravagant humanitarian and 'socialist' visions of the fin-de-siècle, which he treated in a flexible and decorative 'graphisme' in the manner of Eugène Grasset, or even of De Feure...That an artist of such intriguing qualities – even though, as engraver of nudes, he does at times become rather tiresomely vulgar and commercial – and so representative of a period that was hungry to explore everything (it is often said that all modern art was contained in the years before 1914), has been the subject of neither an exhibition, since that of 1921 at Bernheim's, nor of a monograph, certainly sets one thinking about the vagaries of Taste and about the nature of the present fashion for the art of 1900.' In recent years, however, a revival of interest in Maurin's remarkable body of work culminated in a major monographic exhibition, entitled Charles Maurin, un Symboliste du Réel, at the Musée Crozatier in the artist's native town of Le Puy-en-Valey in 2006.