Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

John MINTON (Great Shelford 1917 - London 1957)

Portrait of a Seated Young Man

Pen and two shades of brown ink.

Signed and dated John Minton 1950 at the upper right.

Priced 8 gns and inscribed with mountmaker's instructions in pencil on the verso.

382 x 281 mm. (15 x 11 1/8 in.)

A gifted portraitist, John Minton painted portraits throughout his career, but especially in the 1950s. In his painted and drawn portraits, he often chose to depict his subjects seated and seen from a high vantage point. As one recent scholar has noted, the artist 'formed a personal lexicon which was largely concerned with the male figure, whether in landscape and urban settings, or in sensitive portraits of friends, students and lovers...Minton depicted many of his sitters in the same wooden Oxford Windsor Chair, with a high back and arm rests that enabled them to rest comfortably with their hands in their lap...These are not 'heroic' portraits concerned with conveying the outward masculinity of the sitters, but instead posses a quietness and intimacy which convey the sense of an inner reverie.' Minton exhibited at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in the two years before his death, in 1955 and 1956.

John Minton's portrait studies in pen and ink - 'superb examples at their best of unforced draughtsmanship', in the words of one friend and critic - are among the finest of his drawings. The present sheet is likely to depict one of a group of young art students who gathered around the inspiring figure of Minton and became known as 'Johnny's Circus'. The drawing may be a first idea for a more finished pen and ink portrait drawing of what appears to be the same sitter, which appeared at auction in 1997.

Provenance:

Piccadilly Gallery, London, in 1958
Acquired from them by Charles Ribon on 24 December 1958
Private collection, Canada.

Artist description:

Although he had only a relatively brief career before his death at the age of thirty-nine, John Minton was enormously prolific and achieved a great deal of success in his lifetime. Between 1945 and 1956 he had eight one-man shows, mainly at the Lefevre Gallery in London, as well as taking part in a number of group shows and the Royal Academy Summer exhibitions. Alongside his output as a painter and draughtsman, he provided numerous illustrations for books, book jackets, magazines and advertisements, and also designed posters, wallpaper and stage sets.

While he enjoyed considerable early success, by the 1950's Minton's work was becoming overshadowed by that of other artists in his circle, notably Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon. As a friend of his later wrote, 'He saw himself as overtaken by fashions in art – abstract expressionism among others – for which he had no liking. While others of his contemporaries – Lucien Freud, Francis Bacon, Keith Vaughan - held their ground and came through, Minton saw himself as obsolete, as eccentric and old-fashioned as Edward Lear. He could not come to terms with new developments and he lost faith in his own talent…He was, I suppose, one of those kingfisher-like specimens whose bright plumage briefly glinted then was gone. It might, perhaps, have been different in other circumstances; a little more patience and he could have survived the disorienting shifts in taste.'

Minton devoted much of his later career to teaching, in particular at the Royal College of Art, and was a popular and inspirational figure among his students. As Frances Spalding has written of him, 'Minton's virtuoso performances with pencil or pen and ink commended him as a teacher. His students aspired to his dexterity and adopted his devices.' Minton died, by his own hand, in January 1957.