Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Paul César HELLEU (Vannes 1859 - Paris 1927)

A Young Woman Asleep

Black, red and white chalks on buff paper.

Signed Helleu in red chalk at the lower right centre.

480 x 670 mm.

This is a particularly fine example of Helleu's practice of producing large-scale drawings in a combination of red, black and white chalks, which were almost certainly intended as independent works of art in their own right. Many of these drawings depict the artist's favourite model, his wife Alice Guérin, whom he married in 1886, when she was sixteen years old. A woman of great beauty, Alice Helleu was the embodiment of the artist's lifelong penchant for depicting elegant women. She had striking, long auburn hair, whose abundant tresses she would pin up on occasion. An elegant woman of reserved manners, she was always depicted by her husband dressed in stylish clothes, often wearing hats from the finest Parisian milliners.

The intimate subject of the present sheet would suggest that the model was Alice Helleu, whom the artist often depicted deep in thought, reading a book or asleep in a chair; she is also occasionally shown with one of her young children. Helleu did, however, also occasionally portray other women sleeping, such as in a large drypoint etching of the actress Madeleine Carlier asleep on a couch, executed around 1900, and a drawing of The Duchess of Marlborough Asleep on a Settee with her Dog of the same date, today in the Musée Bonnat-Helleu in Bayonne.

A number of large and stylistically comparable 'trois crayons' drawings of a pensive Alice Helleu are today in private collections; these all have the appearance of finished works of art, rather than preparatory studies or sketches. As one recent scholar has written, 'Many of Helleu's best and most delightful productions are his portraits of his wife...These quick impressions, drawings or dry-points, are extraordinarily effective and have a much subtler appeal than the long series of commissioned portraits of fashionable ladies and celebrated beauties that helped bring him fame and fortune.'

Artist description:

Admitted into the École des Beaux-Arts in 1876, at the age of sixteen, Paul-César Helleu studied there with Jean-Léon Gerome, whom he accompanied to London in 1885. He developed a strong attachment to England, and was to return to London frequently throughout his career. In Paris, his circle of intimate friends included his fellow artists Giovanni Boldini, Alfred Stevens, James Whistler, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and, in particular, John Singer Sargent, with whom he briefly shared a studio and who bought a pastel from Helleu. He exhibited a number of large pastel portraits at the Salons of 1885 and 1886, where they were greatly admired, and his career was launched with a large exhibition of pastels at the Galerie Georges Petit in 1888. Although friendly with many of the Impressionist painters and invited by Degas to participate in the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition of 1886, Helleu declined to do so, claiming a profound dislike of the work of Paul Gauguin. The following year he met Comte Robert de Montesquieu, who was to become his leading patron and who, in 1913, published the first important monograph on the artist. Helleu also enjoyed a long friendship with Marcel Proust, who based the character of the painter Elstir in A la recherche du temps perdu on him.

The 1890s found Helleu and his young wife Alice popular figures in polite society in both France and England, with the artist receiving numerous portrait commissions and enjoying considerable financial success. He was a gifted portraitist, and was highly regarded for his portraits of the elegant women of the beau monde of Paris, London and New York. His subjects included the Comtesse Greffulhe, Queen Alexandra and Consuelo Vanderbilt, the Duchess of Marlborough. These works were greatly admired by his contemporaries; as Edmond de Goncourt noted in a letter to the artist, written in February 1895, 'Your work has for its inspiration that dear model who fills all your compositions with her dainty elegance. It is sort of a monograph on Woman, in all the infinite varied attitudes of her intimate home life.'

Encouraged by his friend Sargent, Helleu began travelling to America in 1902, where his reputation had preceded him, and where he achieved much success as a portrait painter (despite apparently only knowing one word of English, namely the word 'charming'). It was in 1912, on his second visit to New York, that he completed his most public work, the vaulted ceiling of the main hall of Grand Central Station, painted with the signs of the zodiac and the stars of the Milky Way. Helleu's later reputation, however, has rested primarily on his etched work, executed in the medium of drypoint. First introduced to the etching medium by James Tissot, Helleu produced a large number of portraits of fashionable women in this manner, for which he charged up to 1,200 francs. The popularity of these prints has, however, tended to overshadow his less numerous oil paintings and pastels. In 1931, four years after Helleu's death, a retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris.