

Roderic O'CONOR (Milton 1860 - Neuil-sur-Layon 1940)

Portrait of a Man (Paco Durrio)
Charcoal.

Watercolour tests on the verso.

Inscribed O. C(?) in pencil at the upper right.

305 x 242 mm. (12 x 9 1/2 in.)

Although the subject of this striking drawing bears a passing resemblance to Roderic O'Conor himself, is has been plausibly suggested that this is a portrait of the expatriate Spanish sculptor and ceramicist Francesco (Paco) Durrio (1868-1940). Indeed, a distinct resemblance can be seen with the portrait of Durrio that appears in Hommage à Gauguin, a large canvas by Pierre Girieud, painted in 1906, that depicts a Last Supper-like composition, with Gauguin surrounded by his friends and disciples, including O'Conor, Paul Serusier, Maurice Denis and several others. The painting, today in the collection of the Centre nationale des arts plastiques in Puteaux and on deposit at the Musée de Pont-Aven, was painted on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition of Gauguin's oeuvre at the Salon d'Automne of 1906. Durrio's features – notably his distinctive hairstyle, moustache and ears - also identify him as the subject of Gauguin's painting The Guitar Player of c.1894, in a private collection.

Like O'Conor, Paco Durrio was a close friend of Paul Gauguin, whom he met in 1886. The two shared a workshop in Paris and had many of the same interests; Gauguin even invited Durrio to accompany him back to Tahiti, although, like O'Conor, the Spaniard declined the opportunity. Before Gauguin departed on his second and final journey to the South Seas in 1895, he entrusted Durrio with a large and important group of his paintings and drawings, to which he added several works sent from the tropics. After Gauguin's death, Durrio became one of his foremost champions, lending works by the master

from his collection to various exhibitions in Spain and France - notably the Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d'Automne in 1906 - and introducing his work to fellow Spaniards in Paris, including the young Pablo Picasso.

Roderic O'Conor's drawings are relatively rare, and are largely comprised of studies of Breton peasants and the landscape around Le Pouldu and Pont-Aven, drawn in the 1890s. Few of his drawings seem to be studies for paintings, and most were 'independent works which contributed to his visual education.' As has been noted of the artist's draughtsmanship, 'The use of fluid and rhythmic strokes, combined with a simplicity of line and tonal scale, are typical of the charcoal works of O'Conor. His pencil and pen and ink studies often have a more decorative style due partly to this technique.' O'Conor produced etched portraits of his friends and fellow artists Paul Gauguin, Armand Seguin and Paul Sérusier in the mid 1890s, and this drawing may perhaps be dated to around the same period. Among stylistically comparable drawings in black chalk is a head of a bearded man in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rennes.

The present sheet was once part of the extensive collection of works by O'Conor inherited by his model, mistress and later wife, Renée Honta (1894-1955) at the artist's death in 1940. The collection remained largely intact until it was sold at auction in Paris in 1956, the year after her death. The present sheet, however, was not included in the 1956 sale and does not bear the O'Conor atelier stamp, since it was part of a portfolio of drawings and etchings by the artist that had earlier been bequeathed by Renée Honta to her housekeeper, a Mme. Bellard. These were subsequently given or sold to the family's physician, a Dr. Robelet, from whose collection they were eventually dispersed at auction in 2007 and 2009. Other works by O'Conor with the same provenance are today in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, as well as in several private collections.

An artist whose entire career was spent outside his native Ireland, Roderic O'Conor can nevertheless claim a significant place in the history of Irish art. Uniquely among Irish artists, as Roy Johnston notes, 'his success was achieved outside Ireland in the critically demanding context of avant-garde painting in late nineteenth-century France…O'Conor's best work is outstanding and wholly pertinent to its time. When considered in the context of when they were created, and this is especially true of the Brittany pictures between 1892-1895, his paintings stand as the most progressive work ever produced by an Irish artist.'

Artist description:

Born in Milton in County Roscommon, the Irish artist Roderic Anthony O'Conor trained at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, between 1879 and 1881 and again between 1882 and 1883. He continued his studies at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp in 1883 and 1884, before entering the atelier of Carolus-Duran in Paris. Although he sent works to the Paris Salons of 1888 and 1889, he eventually abandoned his academic training in favour of an association with more avant-garde artists. In 1889 he exhibited three works at the Salon des Indépendants (as did the then-unknown Van Gogh, who was to be an influence on O'Conor's work), and he showed there again in 1890 and 1892. Perhaps at the suggestion of John Lavery, O'Conor spent the summers of 1889 and 1890 in the artist's colony at Grez-sur-Loing, south of Paris, and by 1890 was living and working in Brittany, mainly at Pont-Aven but also at nearby Le Pouldu. At Pont-Aven he became part of the circle of artists active in the town, which included Cuno Amiet, Emile Bernard, Charles Filiger, Paul Gauguin and Armand Séguin, with whom he was especially close. His friendship with Gauguin was also close, and Gauguin even invited him to join him on his trip to Tahiti, but O'Conor refused the offer. O'Conor was to remain in Brittany for several years, with only occasional trips to Paris and two visits to London. He exhibited in group shows at the gallery Le Barc de Boutteville in Paris in 1894 and 1895, and with the group Le

Libre Esthétique in Brussels in 1898.

Soon after the death of his good friend Séguin in 1903, O'Conor left Brittany and settled in Paris, moving into a studio in Montparnasse where he was to work for the next thirty years. He exhibited at the Salon d'Automne and the Salon des Indépendants, showing landscapes, nudes, still life subjects and the occasional portrait. Financially independent, O'Conor did not need to make a living from his painting, and was often reluctant to sell his work, even to friends. (He also turned down the opportunity to be represented by the dealer Clovis Sagot.) He only exhibited a handful of paintings a year, and rarely allowed anyone to see the numerous works in his studio. In 1933 he married his former model and mistress Henriette Maria (known as Renée) Honta, and settled in Neuil-sur-Layon in western France. It was not until four years later, in 1937, that he had his first one-man exhibition, at the Galerie Bonaparte in Paris, which comprised fifteen paintings and a handful of drawings. In 1956, after the death of Renée Honta, the contents of O'Conor's studio, including a large number of his paintings and drawings as well as works by other artists, was dispersed at auction in Paris. A significant proportion of the work was acquired by the gallery Roland, Browse and Delbanco in London.