Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Henri Edmond CROSS (Douai 1856 - Saint-Clair 1910)

View of Le Lavandou

Watercolour over a pencil underdrawing.

Stamped with the studio stamp H.E.C. (Lugt 1305a) at the lower left.

Inscribed 26 Nov – 4h on the verso.

Inscribed Le Lavandou (cyprés) and numbered 720 on the verso.

173 x 248 mm. (6 3/4 x 9 3/4 in.)

Watercolours occupied Cross throughout his life, and, in the words of one scholar, 'hold a special place' in his oeuvre. This is particularly true of the later stages of his career, after he had settled in the South of France. In March 1900 he wrote to his fellow painter Charles Angrand that he was concentrating his activities on watercolours, adding that 'It's fun. The absolute necessity to be quick, bold, even insolent, has brought a kind of beneficial feverishness into my work after the months spent languishing on my paintings...' Cross would make these drawings from nature, having already begun with an idea of what colour combinations and forms he would need, and having developed these basic ideas in the studio. As the artist wrote to one critic, 'I compose in the studio, coming as close as possible to my interior vision; then, the harmony being established, partly on paper and canvas, and partly in my head, I set about making my sensations objective – sensations corresponding to the initial vision – in front of nature. These documentary sketches, during the definitive execution of the painting, more often than not are behind me or in a filing box.'

As the Cross scholar Patrick Offenstadt has written, 'Cross produced drawings and watercolours throughout his life, but it seems that it was not until around 1888, advised by Pissarro and guided by Signac, that it became a daily practice. True, he used watercolour initially as a preparatory springboard for his oil paintings, but some of them are so accomplished, harmonious and poetic that one can only consider them as fully-fledged works of art in their own right, and sometimes even as masterpieces. Then came watercolour for watercolour's sake. It was around 1903-05 that he freed himself of all constraints...Signac used ink and pencil to structure his compositions and explore his subjects, while Cross worked directly with the brush. His technical mastery and sure hand allowed him to be bold, while his chronic arthritis drew him to the medium because it forced him to work 'light'. Watercolour was therefore the result – and great beneficiary of both his physical suffering and his genius.'

From 1895 onwards Cross sold some of his watercolours through the Galerie Bing in Paris, and also showed some at the Salon des Indépendants in 1903. The importance of his watercolours to Cross is seen in the fact that, in the two major solo exhibitions of his work, held in galleries in Paris in 1905 and 1907, the artist chose to show numerous watercolours alongside his finished paintings; indeed, there were more of the former than the latter in both exhibitions. Cross's watercolours are, however, only rarely signed and are almost never dated, making a chronology of his drawings difficult.

The small fishing port of Le Lavandou lies below the hilltop town of Bormes and some two kilometres from the inland village of Saint-Clair, where Cross lived for much of the last two decades of his life. On one of his first visits to the area he wrote to Paul Signac, 'It's so beautiful! I owe you a debt of gratitude for guiding me to this corner of Provence. After the two or three conversations we had on the subject, two names have always stayed in my mind: Bormes – Lavandou.' In another letter, written ten years later, after he had settled at Saint-Clair, Cross wrote to Charles Angrand, 'The light which bathes all things in its radiance is enticing, dazzling, overwhelming…Our beaches here are deserted. Elegance can be found only in the pines that rise out of the sand and in the delightful half-moon of the shoreline. But what never-ending beauty!' Cross made numerous paintings and drawings of this coastal region, and is buried in the cemetery at Le Lavandou.

The present sheet belonged to the esteemed French collector Georges Renand (1879-1968), who served as director of the Parisian department store Samaritaine for forty years. Beginning in the 1920s, Renand assembled an important collection of 19th and 20th century paintings and drawings, as well as some fine Old Master paintings, sculpture and antiquities. Although most of the Renand collection was dispersed, after the death of his wife, at three auctions in Paris in 1987 and 1988, the present sheet was among those works inherited by his daughter Jeannine Renand-Chapet (1918-2017), herself a notable collector.

This work will be included in the forthcoming Cross catalogue raisonné being prepared by Patrick Offenstadt.

Artist description:

Born in Douai to an English mother and a French father, Henri Edmond Delacroix studied first in Lille and later in Paris. Early in his career he changed his surname to Cross, an Anglicized version of croix, to avoid comparisons with the famous Romantic painter and confusion with a contemporary artist named Henri Eugène Delacroix. Little is known of his work before 1884, when he first exhibited with the Société des Artistes Indépendants, of which he was a founding member. Cross did not, however, adopt the Neo-Impressionist techniques of his colleagues Georges Seurat and Paul Signac until the early 1890's, shortly after Seurat's death. One of his first paintings in the pointillist technique was a portrait of his future wife, exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in 1891 and today in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. At around the same time he left Paris for the south of France, seeking to relieve his chronic rheumatism, and eventually settled in the village of Saint-Clair, near Le Lavandou in the Var region. The Mediterranean landscape of the Côte d'Azur was to become his preferred subject matter for the remainder of his career, although he also painted idyllic scenes of bathers and mythological figures.

From 1892 onwards Cross took part in all the exhibitions devoted to the Neo-Impressionist movement.

His style became less rigid as his career progressed, however, with his paintings gradually adopting a greater freedom of brushwork than the more rigidly pointillist scenes of his close friend Signac. He also developed a brighter palette; the colours of his paintings reflecting his fascination with the light of the South. As Maurice Denis, a friend of the artist, noted in 1907, 'Cross has resolved to represent the sun, not by bleaching his colours, but by exalting them, and by the boldness of his colour contrasts...The sun is not for him a phenomenon which makes everything white, but is a source of harmony which hots up nature's colours, authorizes the most heightened colour-scale, and provides the subject for all sorts of colour fantasies.' His friend and fellow Neo-Impressionist Paul Signac, who assembled a large personal collection of Cross's paintings and watercolours, wrote of him that 'One…feels in him the joy of panting, the love for delicate harmonies, something undefinably hesitant and mysterious and unexpected.' Cross's work may be said to have influenced such Fauve artists as Henri Matisse, André Derain, Louis Valtat and Henri Manguin, among others, who visited his studio in the Midi in the 1890's and early 1900's.

Towards the end of his career, Cross had largely stopped painting out of doors, preferring to make small watercolours from nature which were then developed into finished paintings in the studio. He was, however, never very productive as a painter, largely due to a combination of failing eyesight and severe arthritis, and from 1900 onwards painted relatively little. Cross's first one-man exhibition of paintings and watercolours was held at the Galerie Druet in Paris in 1905, followed two years later by a retrospective exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, organized by his friend Felix Féneon, which included thirty-eight paintings and fifty-one watercolours. As one scholar has written of Cross, 'By the time of his death, his work stood as a hymn to color and sunlight, and helped form the vision of the Mediterranean coast which is commonplace today.'