Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Charles Robinson SYKES (Redcar 1875 - Berkshire 1950)

A Woman Stepping into a Bath

Pencil, with touches of brown ink, on thin buff paper.

369 x 510 mm. (14 1/2 x 20 1/8 in.)

The present sheet is reflective of Charles Sykes's fine line drawings, which he would often translate into delicate brushwork.

Artist description:

The English sculptor, painter and graphic designer Charles Robinson Sykes is perhaps best known for the design of the Spirit of Ecstasy figure used on Rolls-Royce cars, which he executed in 1911. Born in Yorkshire to an artistic family, Sykes was raised in Newcastle and was apprenticed to his father's painting and decorating business, while at the same time studying art at Rutherford College. In 1898 he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in London, and he remained working in the capital after his studies had been completed. He established a successful career as both a fine and commercial artist. Sykes's first significant commission was received from Lord Montagu, for a triptych in the Cistercian abbey of Beaulieu. This was completed in 1903 and was soon followed by a second commission for a nearly life-size bronze sculpture of the Madonna and Child, also for the Abbey. A statuette of a bacchante exhibited at the Royal Academy a few years later led to the commission to design a mascot for Rolls-Royce cars, known as the 'Spirit of Ecstasy' or 'Flying Lady'. Each cast of the Spirit of Ecstasy was made to order, and in later years Sykes enlisted the help of his daughter Jo Sykes, who was also to become a sculptor, in the casting and finishing of each individual mascot.

Building on his success of his work for Rolls-Royce, Sykes was asked to design the gold and silver cups for Ascot, and also received other commissions for ceremonial gold and silverware, as well as numerous trophies and medals. (Several of his designs for these projects are today in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.) Deemed unfit for service during the First World War, Sykes worked in a factory making acid, where he nearly lost his life in an explosion caused by an industrial accident. After the war he began to focus more on the commercial projects, with his work in this field signed with the pseudonym 'Rilette'. (The name 'Rilette' stems from the artist's surname Sykes, or sike;

a Scottish word meaning a little brook whose flow creates a shallow channel, or rill.) Over the next few years he produced, as ‘Rilette’, numerous fashion drawings which filled the pages of the Sunday Dispatch and the monthly covers of the magazine Woman. Sykes also designed a series of travel posters for the LNER railway and painted a number of landscapes, although, as his grandson was later to recall, he apparently disliked the countryside. In 1951, the year after the artist’s death, a memorial exhibition of Sykes’s work, including over one hundred bronzes, drawings, watercolours, pastels and oil paintings, was held at the Walker Galleries in London.