

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Jean-Pierre LAURENS (Paris 1875 - Fontenay-aux-Roses 1932)

Portrait of a Young Prisoner, Full Face, Wearing a Cap

Pen and brown ink and watercolour.

Inscribed Witberg début [?] and numbered 18 on the verso.

187 x 165 mm. (7 3/8 x 6 1/2 in.)

On 25 September 1914 at Rocquigny, near Péronne, Jean-Pierre Laurens was wounded by a bullet in his right leg and taken prisoner by the Germans. He was transferred to the prisoner of war camp at Wittenberg, on the Elbe river in Saxony-Anhalt, which became notorious for its appalling conditions.

With 15,000 French, Belgian, British and Russian prisoners of war confined in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, the camp was the scene of an outbreak of typhus in the winter of 1914-1915 that killed many prisoners. The outbreak was so severe that the German doctors at Wittenberg abandoned the camp, and the prisoners, most of whom were British, were quarantined together, which only made matters worse. The doctors only returned to the camp in August 1915.

During his three years as a captive at Wittenberg, Laurens produced a number of drawings and watercolours of everyday life in the camp and of his fellow prisoners. These drawings recorded the harsh conditions of captivity and, in particular, the ravages caused by the typhus epidemic in the camp in 1915. In 1916 Laurens was transferred to a 'punishment' camp at Courland, in western Latvia, where he spent seven months of hard labour before being sent back to Wittenberg. Severely weakened by his ordeal and suffering from 'nervous exhaustion, a weak heart and heart failure', Laurens was interned by the Red Cross at Montreux in Switzerland in June 1917, before being eventually sent back to France in September 1918. Some of his drawings of the Wittenberg POW camp were later used to illustrate his book *Prisonniers de guerre: Cahier à la mémoire des compagnons de captivité du camp de Wittenberg*, published in 1918, first in *Le Figaro* and then as a book.

In 2019 the Musée de l'Armée in Paris acquired at auction a group of watercolours and drawings by Laurens of the German prisoner of war camp at Wittenberg. One of these watercolours depicts a young Russian infantryman seated on a cot, who may have also posed for the present sheet.

Literature:

Jean Guitton, Jean-Pierre Laurens (1875-1932), Paris, 1957, illustrated pl.12 (where dated 1915).

Artist description:

The son of the history painter and sculptor Jean-Paul Laurens, Jean-Pierre (known as Pierre) Laurens entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1895, studying with Léon Bonnat. He made his debut at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1898, winning a third-class medal, while the following year he won a silver medal and a travel grant, which he used to visit North Africa and Italy. His earliest exhibited works were mainly genre subjects and portraits. He also won a medal at the Salon of 1906, and in later years was a member of the Salon jury. Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, Laurens served in the French 25th Territorial infantry regiment. Captured by the Germans in 1914, he spent much of the next four years at a prisoner of war camp in Wittenberg in Germany before being repatriated to France in 1918. After the war, Laurens continued his artistic career with renewed success, and was appointed a professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1924, a post he retained until 1931, when he retired for reasons of ill health. He also taught at the Académie Julian, and in 1930 was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Apart from elegant portraiture, Laurens became known for his religious pictures, executed in a simple and direct manner somewhat akin to that of the painter Maurice Denis, who was a few years older. His most significant public commission was for the decoration of the newly-built church of Notre-Dame-du-Calvaire in Chatillon, a suburb southwest of Paris, constructed between 1932 and 1934. Laurens had received the commission from Cardinal Jean Verdier, archbishop of Paris, in 1928, but was only able to produce sketches for the project before his death in 1932. The extensive fresco decoration of the church - supervised by the artist's wife, the painter and sculptor Yvonne Diéterle Laurens – was undertaken by several of his students, and was only completed in 1962. Paintings by Laurens are today in the collections of the museums of Beauvais, Bordeaux, Fécamp and Rouen, as well as in the Musée national d'Art moderne and the Musée de l'Armée in Paris.