

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

Portrait of a Zouave Prisoner, Looking to the Left
Watercolour.

Signed and dated Pierre Laurens 1915 at the lower left.

260 x 198 mm. (10 1/4 x 7 3/4 in.)

The watercolours made by Jean-Pierre Laurens during his period of captivity at the German prisoner of war camp at Wittenberg during the First World War account for some of his most deeply personal works. In a note written in the camp in July 1915, the artist observed that, 'The more I study, the more I feel how essential humility is to anyone who wants to do well...A ray of winter sunshine illuminating with its warmth a group of poor devils crouching on their straw mattresses is enough for the heart to fill with tenderness and adoration.'

Laurens was fascinated by the cultural diversity of the soldiers from different nations which he encountered in the camp at Wittenberg. The present sheet depicts a solder in the distinctive uniform of one of the French army regiments of colonial troops, either Zouaves or tirailleurs. Zouave soldiers were originally recruited mainly from Algeria, and in particular from the Zouaoua mountain tribe of Kabyle Berbers, who had a reputation as fierce fighters, and wore distinctive uniforms of red silk trousers, a blue tunic and a red fez. Also recruited in the French colonial territories in the 19th and 20th centuries, tirailleurs were used as light infantry skirmishers, often acting in advance of the main body of troops. Like Zouaves, many tirailleurs were from the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, while others were from Senegal and other West and Central African territories. Several

regiments of Zouaves and tirailleurs algériens served on the Western Front during the First World War.

Writing in 1957, the prominent French theologian and philosopher Jean Guitton, who was himself in a German prisoner of war camp between 1940 and 1945, noted of Laurens's portraits of his fellow prisoners at Wittenberg: 'Even before the camps, where he was reduced to watercolour by destitution, Laurens must have had an affinity for it...In captivity, watercolour found itself suited to the scenes of pure humanity, where the slow and weary gestures of its heroes, with their overly long garments like those of monks or the poor, were a grey liturgy, to which the plain and washed-out hues were well suited. The watercolour also suited these heads, which had been dulled by starvation and were even a little hallucinated, as can be seen in the most beautiful of the watercolours of his imprisonment…And it is understandable that he judged his watercolours of the camps, which are still unknown to the public, to be the best of his work 'because they were done without timidity'. He had reached the height of his art, in this evocation of the state of men, the clothing of men, the burials of men. After the second captivity, that of 1940-1945, these watercolours are even more beautiful to see. For me, who lived through similar conditions, I find the eternity of this ordeal translated into the eternity of art.'

Literature:

Jean Guitton, Jean-Pierre Laurens (1875-1932), Paris, 1957, illustrated pl.19 (as Tirailleur Arabe).

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.