Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Louis-Albert BESNARD (Paris 1873 - Paris 1962)

Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt in the Role of Lorenzaccio

Pencil, watercolour, brown wash and gouache.

Signed Louis ABesnard. at the lower right centre.

109 x 205 mm. (4 1/4 x 8 1/8 in.)

Born Henriette Rosine-Bernard, Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1922) was the most famous actress and celebrity of her age. As one recent author has commented, 'no actress - not even Garbo - has ever attained such heights of fame. As early as 1883, a reliable witness, Emile Bergerat, ranked her, together with Victor Hugo and Gambetta, as one of France's three most illustrious citizens.' 'The Divine Sarah', as she was known, loved to be surrounded by images of herself, and was in turn much admired by artists. She posed for artists as diverse as Alfred Stevens (with whom she studied painting), Georges Clairin, Jules Bastien-Lepage, Louise Abbema, Alphonse Mucha, Edward Burne-Jones and William Graham Robertson; the last of these once noted of Bernhardt that 'This strange dream-beauty was impossible to transfer to canvas; no portrait of her holds even the shadow of it.'

The present sheet depicts Sarah Bernhardt in the title role in Alfred de Musset's Romantic play Lorenzaccio, performed in Paris in 1896. Written in 1834, the play was meant to be read rather than performed, since - with thirty-nine scene changes and numerous characters - it was deemed too complicated to stage, and indeed no performances of the play occurred in Musset's lifetime. Lorenzaccio was first staged in 1896 at Sarah Bernhardt's Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris, where she took on the lead role of Lorenzo de' Medici. As the poet and writer Anatole France wrote of her performance, 'She formed out of her own self a young man melancholic, full of poetry and of truth.'

At least two other drawn portraits of Sarah Bernhardt by Louis-Albert Besnard are known. A watercolour portrait, dated 1894, was given by the artist to the sitter, and is now in a private collection, while a highly finished portrait in watercolour and gouache, dated 1896, was dedicated to Bernhardt's daughter-in-law, Mme. Maurice Bernhardt, née Princess Maria-Teresa ('Terka') Jablonowska, and is in another private collection.

The present sheet was said to have been given by Bernhardt to her granddaughter, Simone Bernhardt-Gross (1889-1982), the daughter of her son Maurice, and thence passed by descent to Simone's daughter, Emmie Terka Reichenbach (b.1910).

This drawing was included in the recent exhibition Sarah Bernhardt: Et la femme créa la star, held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris at the Petit Palais in Paris in 2023.

Exhibitions

Paris, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Sarah Bernhardt: Et la femme créa la star, 2023.

Literature:

Jean-Michel Charbonnier, 'Grands rôles', Connaissance des Arts. Sarah Bernhardt: Et la femme créa la star, 2023, illustrated p.34.

Artist description:

Very little is known of Louis-Albert Besnard, who was the eldest son of the artist Paul-Albert Besnard (1849-1936), from his first, brief marriage to Ernestine Aubourg. Although recognized by his father, Louis does not seem to have been much involved in the family life of the elder Besnard after his second marriage, to Charlotte Dubray in 1879. He does not appear in any of Paul-Albert Besnard's family portraits of his four younger children, all of whom were, like Louis-Albert, active as artists. Louis-Albert Besnard exhibited in 1938 and 1939.