Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

Gisbert COMBAZ (Antwerp 1869 - Saint-Gilles 1941)

Squash Blossom

Pen and black ink and watercolour, on buff paper laid down on board.

Signed with the artist's monogram at the lower left centre.

449 x 595 mm. (17 5/8 x 22 5/8 in.) [sheet]

Much of Gisbert Combaz's mature work is keenly influenced by his intensive study of Japanese and Chinese art; something that is particularly evident in this large watercolour of a squash blossom, or courgette flower, that belongs with a group of flower studies executed around 1912. During this period Combaz was consistently producing works with a pronounced Oriental influence, reminiscent in style of his work from before the turn of the century. The painterly style of these large-scale floral watercolours stylistically mirrors the artist's posters of the same period, such as one for the exhibition Les art anciens du Hainaut, Salon d'art moderne in Charleroi, published in 1911. As a modern scholar has written of Combaz, 'His overall concern for legibility and clarity of message is paramount in all his works. The beauty of the compositions reside in his perfect choice of colors, tone, and his simplification of the composition.'

The present sheet was once part of the remarkable collection of late 19th and early 20th century Belgian graphic art assembled by Louis and Berthe Wittamer-De Camps, the owners of the town house known as the Hôtel Solvay on the Avenue Louise in Brussels. A masterpiece of Belgian Art Nouveau architecture and interior decoration, the Hôtel Solvay was the work of the architect and designer Victor Horta, and was built between 1895 and 1900. The house was acquired by the Wittamer family in the 1950s and remains a private home today, with its unique furnishings intact. Berthe Wittamer was a pupil of Gisbert Combaz, and she and her husband became keen collectors of his work.

A pair of comparable large watercolours by Gisbert Combaz - Wisteria, dated 1911, and Orchids and an Emperor Moth, dated 1912, both also from the Wittamer-De Camps collection - have recently been acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Exhibitions

San Francisco, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, and elsewhere, La Belle Epoque: Masterworks by Combaz, Léo Jo and Livemont. A Loan Exhibition from the Collection of L. Wittamer-De Camps, 1980-1981, no.39 (as Colocynth).

Literature:

Yolande Oostens-Wittamer, La Belle Epoque: Masterworks by Combaz, Léo Jo and Livemont, San Francisco and elsewhere, 1980-1981, p.35, no.39 (illustrated).

Artist description:

The leading Belgian Art Nouveau artist, Gisbert Combaz began his career as a lawyer, but in 1893 abandoned the legal profession to devote himself to art. He studied briefly at the Royale Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels before leaving in search of a teaching position to finance his new career as an artist. His first post was at the Institute Agricole in Gembloux, where between 1895 and 1900 he instructed students of engineering, chemistry and agriculture in drawing. Much influenced by the work of the Belgian artistic and literary group known as Les XX, Combaz exhibited with the group's successor, La Libre Esthétique from 1897 onwards, and designed many of its exhibition posters. Known mainly for his poster designs and postcards, he was also active as a painter, lithographer, illustrator and furniture designer, and was a leading scholar of Oriental art. Yet although he exhibited between 1897 and 1914 at La Libre Esthétique, and also with L'Estampe, Combaz was never given a one-man show during his career, and only one brief article about his work was published in his lifetime. For over forty years Combaz taught decorative composition at the Ecole des Arts Industriels et Décoratifs in Ixelles, and later at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, where among his pupils was René Magritte.