

Giuseppe SIGNORINI (Rome 1857 - Rome 1932)

A Man in a Japanese Costume

Watercolour over traces of a pencil underdrawing.

Signed and inscribed Giusep. Signorini / Roma at the lower left.

369 x 286 mm. (14 1/2 x 11 1/4 in.)

Datable to around 1890, this large sheet is a fine and typical example of Giuseppe Signorini's Orientalist watercolours of single figures dressed in elaborate costumes, drawn with great verve and confidence. Drawings such as this were not studies for larger compositions, but were made and sold as independent works of art in their own right. As one scholar has noted of the present sheet, 'Rather than a portrait or figure study, this watercolor is a tour-de-force study of the qualities of a silk oriental robe, seen from the back. The model clearly displays the sleeve in order to show the complex design to full advantage. Signorini's washes have captured the vibrant effects of light on the fabric. It is one of the most skillful examples of the watercolor medium in the late nineteenth century, and the exotic nature of the subject matter is typical of the artist.'

This striking watercolour once belonged to the painter and engraver Giovanni Piancastelli (1845-1926), who served as the curator of the Borghese collection in Rome and assembled an important private collection of drawings. Piancastelli included the present sheet in an album that he put together, containing over 280 drawings by numerous artists working in Italy in the late 18th and 19th centuries, a few of which bear dedications to the collector. In 1901 Piancastelli sold some 3,600 drawings from his collection, mainly of ornament and stage designs, to the nascent Cooper-Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration in New York. Three years later, in 1904, the rest of his collection, amounting to around 8,600 drawings, was purchased by the American collectors Edward and Mary Brandegee. After the death of Edward Brandegee in 1938, his wife sold most, but not all, of the drawings to the Cooper-Hewitt

Museum.

The remainder of the Piancastelli collection – including the bound album of drawings in which the present sheet was included – was sold on the American art market in the second half of the 1940s. The album then found its way into the collection of a Maltese priest, the Revd. Francis Agius (1891-1958), who had arrived in America in the 1920s and served as a parish priest at a Catholic church in Inwood, Long Island. The album remained with his heirs until 1976, when it was broken up and the drawings dispersed.

Exhibitions

New York, Shepherd Gallery, Italian 19th Century Drawings & Watercolors. An Album: Camuccini & Minardi To Mancini & Balla, 1976, no.41; Washington, National Gallery of Art, and elsewhere, Italian Drawings 1780-1890, 1980-1981, no.100 (lent by David Daniels).

Literature:

Roberta J. M. Olson, Italian 19th Century Drawings & Watercolors. An Album: Camuccini & Minardi To Mancini & Balla, exhibition catalogue, New York, 1976, unpaginated, no.41, illustrated pl.55; Roberta J. M. Olson, Italian Drawings 1780-1890, exhibition catalogue, Washington and elsewhere, 1980-1981, pp.234-235, no.100.

Artist description:

Giuseppe Signorini studied with the painter Aurelio Tiratelli in Rome and first exhibited his work at the Mostra del Circolo Artistico in that city. Early in his career he decided to devote himself to the medium of watercolour, and indeed relatively few oil paintings by him are known. Before he was twenty he was so highly regarded as a watercolourist that his finished drawings – of exotic Orientalist genre subjects, costume studies or lavish interiors, typified by a masterful technique – were being avidly sought after by dealers and collectors in Italy, France, England and America. Although he seems never to have travelled to the Near East or the Maghreb, Signorini maintained a large collection of Oriental costumes in his studio, as well as furniture and tapestries, which he used to add a level of authentic detail to his compositions. He established a studio on the Via Margutta in Rome, and in 1881 organized an Arab festival, with participants, made up mostly of fellow artists, parading along the streets around the Piazza del Popolo, dressed in Oriental robes and turbans.

Although he continued to maintain a studio in Rome, from 1899 onwards Signorini also spent much of his time in Paris, where he lived and worked for over thirty years. He won a number of prizes at the annual Salons and served as director of the Académie des Champs-Elysées. At the height of his career, Signorini's Orientalist watercolours were being sold for high prices in Italy, France and America. A leading member of the Società degli Acquarellisti in Rome, Signorini also taught a number of the succeeding generation of Italian Orientalist painters. His work remained popular for many years after his death and was the subject of retrospective exhibitions in Milan and Turin in the years after the Second World War. Works by Signorini are today in the collections of museums in Barcelona, Bremen, Hamburg, Madrid, New York, Paris, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere.