

Simon BUSSY (Dole 1870 - London 1954)

An Angelfish

Pastel, over an underdrawing in pencil, on paper laid down on board.

Signed Simon / Bussy. in pencil at the lower right.

Titled and inscribed No 19 / Angel Fish / f. 18 in ink and Poisson Ange / Angel Fish on the backing board.

304 x 286 mm. (12 x 11 1/2 in.)

Simon Bussy's pastels were widely admired by his contemporaries, and were avidly collected. The poet Guillaume Apollinaire wrote of the artist that, 'The pastels of Simon Bussy are delicate images, as precious as Persian miniatures. Precision and vitality are the characteristics of Simon Bussy's talent, and his use of colour often reaches the heights of Matisse.'

The present sheet is a fine and typical example of Bussy's refined, delicate pastel technique. The artist invariably used a combination of French-made Roché pastels and buff paper produced by the firm of Cartridge in London. His pastel studies are usually depicted against a toned background of one muted colour, with a reserve of white paper left untouched around the edges of the composition. As the contemporary scholar François Fosca noted, in one of the first monographs to be published on the artist, 'Simon Bussy developed a new style: with minute precision he applied a vaporous and blurred technique to drawing. In his work, there was never any hatching or vertical marks which would reduce the effect of the layer underneath, or make it stand out. Bussy developed a soft, velvety medium which always avoided becoming cloying or limp.'

Most of Bussy's pastel drawings of fish seem to have been made at the zoo at Vincennes, since he was unable to find adequate lighting at the London Zoo in order to make studies of fish there. As the French writer André Gide noted of the artist, 'what now attracts him more and more rather than the likenesses

of human beings are the likenesses of birds, fishes, insects. He spends most of his time at the London Zoo or in the Vincennes park or aquarium; then he shuts himself up with his collection of studies and by a kind of patient and lover-like distillation evolves from them his paintings. In face of each living form he seems to be asking, 'And you there! What have you to tell me?" And the mygale, the crab, the scorpion become motionless and give up their secrets…There are some of Simon Bussy's fishes whose stupidity fascinates me (as Flaubert's St. Anthony said of the catoblepas) and at whom I can stand gazing in long drawn-out contemplation. And yet, with all its ineptness this matter is alive and a perfect organism.'

Artist description:

Albert Simon Bussy studied under Gustave Moreau at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He mounted his first exhibitions of pastels at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in 1897 and 1899. Around 1901 Bussy visited London, where he was introduced into local artistic circles and the New English Art Club by his friend, the artist William Rothenstein. (Several years later, in April 1907, Rothenstein wrote a letter to Bussy in which he praised the exhibition of his work held at Leighton House the previous month; 'It was a real delight to see your work again, and I got more pleasure and emotion from your beautiful pastels than I have had from any pictures of late.') In 1903 Bussy married Dorothy Strachey, and while on their honeymoon they discovered a small house at Roquebrune, near Monaco, which they soon bought and where they lived for the next three decades. The house, called Le Souco, became a meeting place for English and French artists, writers and intellectuals visiting the area, including Dorothy's brother Lytton Strachey and her cousin Duncan Grant, as well as Rudyard Kipling, André Gide, Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, Mark Gertler, Paul Valéry, Virginia Woolf and Bernard Berenson, who came to own several of Bussy's pastels, as did Gide, Valéry and Jean Schlumberger.

Throughout his career, Bussy's pastels and paintings were exhibited at galleries in London and Paris. Among the most significant of these was an exhibition of forty paintings and sixty-two pastels of animals and birds, held at the Galerie Druet in Paris in 1925. By the Second World War Bussy's reputation had fallen into a decline in France, although he continued to exhibit at the Leicester Galleries in London. He died in London in 1954, at the age of 88, and the contents of his studio were eventually dispersed at auction at Sotheby's in 1960. Paintings and pastels by Simon Bussy are today in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate in London, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Musée nationale d'Art Moderne in Paris, the Musée départemental de l'Oise in Beauvais, and elsewhere.

From about 1912 onwards, Bussy began to focus on pastel drawings of animals, many of which he studied at the London Zoo. His approach was one of long, close and careful study. As he himself noted of his paintings: 'Each [work] is an invention, a poetic composition, not only decorative…the animals I paint and the foliage which surrounds them…in my opinion there is no element that has not been the object of patient observation; my numerous studies in pastel, created with the paintings in mind, proves it. My animals, birds and reptiles have nothing trivial; they are actual portraits in which I desire that the resemblance emerges from the incidental with always further clarity, precision and purity.'