

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Jules HABERT-DYS (Fresnes 1850 - Paris 1930)

Illustration for Caprices Décoratifs: Oiseaux d'Afrique [Birds of Africa]

Watercolour and gold ink, over a pencil underdrawing.

Signed J. Habert-Dys in black ink at the lower right.

260 x 180 mm. (10 1/4 x 7 1/8 in.)

One of a group of original watercolours by Jules Habert-Dys that are studies for seven of the thirty-two colour plates in his book *Caprices Décoratifs: des Oiseaux, des Fleurs, des Paysages, des Algues et Poissons*, published in 1901. As the scholars Gabriel and Yvonne Weisberg have noted, 'Although the motifs in these watercolors are randomly placed on the surface of the paper, without any clear orientation to each other, or directions about how they were to be used by a ceramic decorator on specific pieces, the fact that these drawings served as a starting point for actual objects...can be incontestably supported.' The influence of Japanese prints is evident in each of these works, which stand as masterpieces of the Art Nouveau style.

This series of watercolours of birds are in superb, fresh condition, having been kept in an album since they were commissioned from Habert-Dys by Henri Laurens, the publisher of *Caprices Décoratifs*. The birds depicted in these works include kingfishers, goldfinches and hummingbirds. The use of gold in many of these watercolours is a particular characteristic of much of the artist's work. As the Weisbergs have pointed out, 'Habert-Dys' fondness for the use of gold, sometimes just a small speck in the overall design and at other times being employed more extensively, suggests that his designs were being developed for people of considerable wealth; any gold objects in their interiors would be matched by the gold on the plates which they were using for dinner ware.'

Artist description:

Of humble origins, the prolific designer Jules-Auguste Habert-Dys was initially trained as a porcelain decorateur from the age of thirteen, working under the ceramic artist Ulysse Bernard at a factory in Blois in the 1860s. In 1874 he moved to Paris to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, while continuing to work for ceramic manufacturers, notably the designer, ceramicist and sculptor Ernest Chaplet at Haviland & Co. Among his friends and acquaintances were such artists as Edgar Degas, Félix Bracquemond and Eugène Carrière. Like many of his contemporaries, Habert-Dys became particularly interested in Japanese art, particularly ukiyo-e prints, which he had first experienced at the Japanese pavilion at the Exposition Universelle of 1878. (The artist is also thought to have owned a collection of Japanese prints.) By the beginning of the 1880s he had established a successful career as a graphic artist, and was in particular responsible for most of the illustrations for the weekly magazine *L'Art*, which he joined in 1881 and for which he produced over five hundred drawings. His reputation also began to spread beyond France, and in 1884 an article on his work appeared in English in the magazine *The Art Amateur*. The same year Habert-Dys published *Fantaisies Décoratives*, a design manual of motifs and patterns of plants, animals and insects for the use of artisans in the decoration of ceramics, fabrics and wallpaper. A second volume of such designs was published in 1901 under the title *Caprices Décoratifs*, which featured four groups of motifs - of birds, flowers, fish and landscapes - shown as free-standing images on the page, rather than in the repeating patterns seen in the earlier *Fantaisies Décoratives*.

Established as one of the most creative and original designers in France, Habert-Dys earned one of the most significant commissions of his career in 1889, when the private ceramic firm of Pillivuyt asked him to design a table service to be exhibited at the Exposition Universelle that year. He was paid 15,000 francs for his work, and the service was much admired and written about by critics when it was shown at the Exposition Universelle, winning a gold medal. Apart from Pillivuyt, Habert-Dys worked for several other independent porcelain manufactories, and also produced drawings and designs for the Manufacture Nationale at Sèvres. In 1907 he was appointed a Professor at the Ecole Nationale des Arts Décoratifs, and worked there for the next two decades. In his spare time began to experiment with glassmaking techniques, and eventually his glass vessels, made with layers of both coloured and colourless glass, were exhibited at the Salon of 1913, where they won a Gold Medal. Habert-Dys never really recovered the heights of his career after the First World War, although he continued to produce designs for bookplates, illustrations, metalwork, glass and lacquer objects. Almost all creative activity ceased in 1922, however, when his wife became very ill and eventually died.