Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

Isidre NONELL (Barcelona 1872 - Barcelona 1911)

Two Gypsies

Charcoal, black chalk and coloured chalks on buff paper, with framing lines in black chalk.

Signed Y. Nonell at the lower left.

298 x 196 mm. (11 3/4 x 7 3/4 in.)

One artist who seems to have studied the work of Isidre Nonell particularly closely was the young Andalusian painter Pablo Picasso, who spent several years in Barcelona, and who is said to have described Nonell as the local artist he admired the most. (Picasso also rented Nonell's Montmartre studio, in the latter's absence, soon after he first arrived in Paris in October 1900, at the age of nineteen.) As another scholar has noted, 'Isidre Nonell…exercised a special influence on Picasso. The themes of people on the fringe of society which Nonell explored, especially in his strongly expressive gypsies, were developed by Picasso during his Blue Period, especially in Barcelona in 1902.'

Datable to c.1897, the present sheet is closely related to a larger drawing by Isidre Nonell of the same couple, but with the addition of several other figures in the background, in a private collection in Barcelona. Among stylistically comparable drawings by the artist is a study of gypsies, signed and dated 1897, in the collection of the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Artist description:

A leading member of the second generation of Modernista artists in Barcelona, Isidre Nonell i Monturiol was born into an affluent Catalan family and studied at the Escola de la Llotja arts and design school in Barcelona from 1888. He also took lessons with the painter Lluis Graner, who inspired him to find inspiration in the poor and destitute people of the city as his subjects. In 1893 he became a founder of the Colla del Safrà; a group of Barcelona artists that included Ricard Canals, Joaquim Mir, Juli Ramon Pichot, Juli Vallmitjana and others. Nonell worked as a graphic artist at the Barcelona daily newspaper La Vanguardia, where he exhibited his drawings in 1896, and also contributed illustrations to the Catalan publications Pèl & Ploma, L'Esquella de la Torratxa, Papitu, La Campana de Gràcia, Luz and Quatre Gats. In 1897 he travelled with Canals to Paris, where the two artists shared a studio on the Butte de Montmartre and exhibited at the Chez Doesburg gallery.

Nonell's work often focused on the downtrodden inhabitants and street life of Barcelona, with a particular emphasis on Roma gypsies, beggars and poor women. Nonell's particular interest in the gypsy life of Barcelona was partly inspired by his friendship with the Catalan painter, writer and playwright Juli Vallmitjana, who made an extensive study of gypsies, their language and customs. As the scholar Marilyn McCully has observed, 'Nonell's devotion to the sub-culture of gypsies – also appreciated by modernista writers such as Vallmitjana – preoccupied him personally (he increasingly lived most of his time among them), and their marginal lives were given great dignity in his canvases… His limited, fairly dark palette and thick, impasto brushstroke produce figures of striking beauty. Theirs is not a pathetic kind of isolation but a mysterious one.' Nonell had his first solo exhibition of paintings in 1898, at the recently-opened artist's café Els Quatre Gats in Barcelona. In 1899 he returned to Paris for an exhibition of his drawings at Ambroise Vollard's gallery, which was not a success. Nevertheless, he remained in Paris for about a year, and some of his works were purchased by the dealers Paul Durand-Ruel and Berthe Weill. Over the next few years Nonell developed a reputation in France, showing his drawings at the Salon des Beaux-Arts and the Le Barc de Boutteville gallery. Between 1902 and 1910 he exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants, and also at Le Libre Esthétique in Brussels in 1903. Around 1901, following his return to Spain, Nonell began concentrating on paintings over drawings. Although best known for his gypsy pictures, he also began to paint still-life subjects, from around 1908. Nonell was a founder member of the Barcelona artist's association Les Arts i els Artistes and took part in their first group exhibition in 1910, the same year that he achieved his first real critical and commercial success with a one-man exhibition at the galleries of the Faianç Català. However, the artist's promising career was cut short by his death from typhoid fever the following year, at the age of thirty-five, and his burial was preceded by a gypsy procession. Much of Nonell's surviving work is today held in public and private collections in Barcelona.