SPHINX FINE ART



Paul Mak (St. Petersburg 1891 - Brussels 1967)

Portrait of a Woman

signed, inscribed and dated 'Paul Mak/1948/Bruxelles' (upper right)
pencil, ink and coloured crayon on paper
43 x 37 cm (16⅞ x 14⅛ in)

This exotic figure holds the viewer's gaze with her large, round eyes. Upon her head, she has wrapped an enormous turban, decorated with opulent blue brooches; tassels from her headdress tumble down the woman's shoulders, intermingling with her curled hair. Her thin, willowy right hand is raised to her chest, which supports a heavy blue shawl and draws attention to her bare breast. Her body and face are thin and elongated, giving her an ethereal appearance.

Portrait of a Woman reveals Paul Mak's skill as a draughtsman. The delicate modelling of the woman's collarbone, for example, demonstrates an economy of line which, because of his exquisite handling, is highly effective. Similarly the woman's eyes are given a touch of colour, which Mak has used to endow them with the glassy and reflective quality that captivates the viewer's attention.

The woman's appearance is slightly oriental and fantastical. This was a common motif throughout Mak's work, and the present example has much in common with his *Shéhérazade,* (1946, Private Collection) from a similar period. The figures share a stark resemblance, with their slender physiques, large, bejewelled headdresses, bared breasts and peculiarly large and distinctive eyes. It would not be

surprising if *Portrait of a Woman* was a depiction of Shéhérazade, as it was a subject to which Mak returned throughout his artistic career. Shéhérazade was the legendary narrator of *One Thousand and One Nights.* The Persian king, Shahryar, was so angry at his wife's infidelity that he began to marry a series of virgins, only to execute each one the next morning. Despite this Shéhérazade, the Vizier's daughter, volunteered to marry the king and on their wedding night began to tell a captivating tale, which she hadn't finished by dawn. The king was so eager to hear the end of the story that he postponed her execution. The next night Shéhérazade finished her story, only to start a new one. This pattern continued for 1,001 nights by which time the king had fallen in love with Shéhérazade. Mak frequently sought inspiration from the exoticism of Eastern tales and history, depicting figures such as Salome, Tamberlane, and the cast of *One Thousand and One Nights.* The anonymous sitter in the present work is clearly in keeping with that tradition.

After studying at Konstantin Fedorovich Iuon's (1875-1958) studio in Moscow, Mak provided illustrations for Moscow and St. Petersburg journals for two years, before enrolling at the Kiev Military Academy following the outbreak of World War I. He was something of a war hero, being promoted to Captain before being wounded in action. After the war he was imprisoned for six months by the Bolsheviks in the infamous Butyrka prison, but was swiftly rehabilitated. By 1920, he was working as an artist for the Theatre of Revolutionary Satire in Moscow.

Mak's emigration in 1922 marked the creative turning-point in his work. Mak travelled extensively throughout the Middle East, eventually settling in Persia (modern-day Iran), where he initially worked as a racehorse trainer, before an introduction to the Reza Shah (1878-1944) led to his appointment as official court artist. During this period, Mak devoted himself to the study of the Persian miniature, renowned for its exquisite detail and intricacy, and he found constant inspiration from the culture of the region. He continued to travel throughout the 1920s and 1930s, eventually settling in Belgium, where he worked for the rest of his life.

Artist description:

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