

LE CLAIRE KUNST SEIT 1982

LÉON-AUGUSTIN LHERMITTE
1844 Mont-Saint-Père (Aisne) - Paris 1925

Paysage avec gerbes en tas, coucher de soleil

Pastel on paper; c.1890.
Signed in blue chalk at the lower left: *L. Lhermitte*.
347 x 260 mm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, Limoges

Léon Lhermitte, like Bastien-Lepage and Jules Breton, carried the pictorial tradition of peasant life in France into the 1890s. He was himself of farming stock and his family came from the village of Mont-Saint-Père (Aisne) north-east of Paris. Lhermitte's precocious drawing skills won him an annual grant from the state. In 1863, he moved to Paris and enrolled at the École impériale de dessin, where he studied under Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran. Lhermitte submitted his initial entry to the Salon in 1864 when he was just nineteen. He won his first medal in 1874 with a work titled *La Moisson* [The Harvest].¹ In 1869 he went on the first of many trips to England and in the late 1870s he was a frequent visitor to Brittany. Throughout a long career his many prizes and awards included the Légion d'Honneur and the Grand Prix at the Paris World's Fair in 1889. He was a founding member of the Société nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1890.

In 1879 Degas noted his intention to invite Lhermitte to exhibit with the Impressionists, though Lhermitte never in fact participated in any of their shows. In 1885, pastels began to constitute an essential part of his oeuvre. He went on to become one of the foremost proponents of the medium. In 1886, he exhibited with the Société des pastellistes français at Galerie Georges Petit in Paris for the first time and helped to forge a new group, the *pastellistes*. Here he acted as a mentor for younger artists.

Although Lhermitte enjoyed considerable international success in his lifetime he remained true to his rural origins, returning regularly to his home village, where he found many of his motifs. He usually spent winter in Paris, and spring and summer in Mont-Saint-Père. His preferred subjects were scenes from simple rustic life, although he later focussed on pure landscapes. Jean-François Millet, who, like Lhermitte, was equally proficient in pastels and oils, strongly influenced his work. Like Millet, Lhermitte created fine, light-filled works in the Barbizon tradition, eulogizing the dignity of rustic life and the grandeur of the French countryside in the face of encroaching industrialization.

Harvesting forms a recurrent theme in Lhermitte's oeuvre. In multiple images of rustic activity he depicts the cutting of the corn, the binding of the sheaves, the women gathering up single grain stalks, the harvesters at rest in the fields at midday and the workers being paid. And he depicts the

¹ Musée des Beaux-Arts, Carcassonne, inv. no. D 50. See Monique Le Pelley Fonteny, *Léon Augustin Lhermitte (1844-1925)*. *Catalogue raisonné*, Paris 1991, p.89, no. 6.

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large, thatched stacks of grain or hay [*meules*] that immediately recall Monet's famous 1890-1 series of paintings.²

The present sheet shows a landscape empty of figures. Two stooks have been left standing in a stubbly field. The diagonal positioning of the stooks leads the viewer's eye towards a clump of trees sharply silhouetted against the evening sky. The long day's task is done.

Monique Le Pelley Fonteny has confirmed the authenticity of this pastel.

² Daniel Wildenstein, *Monet. Catalogue raisonné* (new edition), Taschen, Cologne 1996, III, nos. 1213-17 and 1266-86.