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ERNST BARLACH

Wedel 1870 - 1938 Rostock

*Der singende Mann* [*The Singing Man*]

Bronze with fine, olive-brown patina. Conceived in 1928 (the initial plaster model). One of 16 lifetime casts. Inscribed with the artist's signature: *E. Barlach* on the right side (on the hem of the singer's robe). With the foundry mark: *H. NOACK BERLIN* on the back (at the lower edge).

Height: 49.3 cm

PROVENANCE: Thilda Colman, Langenberg, acquired directly from the artist in 1936 and given as a gift to her husband Adalbert for his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday – Thence by descent

LITERATURE: Friedrich Schult, *Ernst Barlach. Das Plastische Werk*, Hamburg 1960, no. 343 – Elisabeth Laur, *Ernst Barlach. Das plastische Werk*, Güstrow 2006, no. 432

*Der singende Mann* is arguably the most celebrated of Ernst Barlach's bronze sculptures. The present cast is a fine example of the rare early casts produced by the Noack fine art foundry in Berlin. The Berlin and Düsseldorf-based art dealer Alfred Flechtheim took over the representation of Barlach's interests in 1926 on the death of his friend Paul Cassirer. Despite his financial difficulties, Flechtheim actively supported Barlach, providing him with a loan for the construction of a new studio in the town of Güstrow in Mecklenburg. On 14 July 1930, Barlach and Flechtheim entered into an agreement covering the casting of a group of twenty works based on original plaster models Barlach had made between 1907 and 1930. An initial edition of 10 casts of *Der singender Mann* was planned. All 10 casts were completed by 1931. The numbered edition sold rapidly and to satisfy the strong demand for Barlach's work, six additional casts were made. They were completed before his death. The first sixteen casts were made between 1930 and 7 February 1938. A total of 57 casts of *Der singende Mann* exist. Elisabeth Laur records an additional three casts in zinc dating from 1940 and at least 38 posthumous bronzes, most of which were made after the war and through the 1970s.

Early casts of the piece are frequently stamped with the foundry mark *H. Noack Berlin Friedenau*, however Hermann Noack Jr. has confirmed that the foundry stamp *H. Noack Berlin* was often also used before 1938. The present sculpture was produced using the sand casting technique and its surface finely hammered after casting – a characteristic of the early casts. The inner walls of the cast have a plaque-like residue of silvery-grey sand of the type used at that time by the Noack foundry for sand casting models. The feet and hands of the present cast are crisp and particularly finely worked and the delicate olive-green of the patina contributes to the work's powerful sculptural presence. The subtle tone of the patina was achieved by laying the piece in a salted vinegar bath before the patination process. Later casts differ significantly in all these details.

*Der singende Mann* is one of the icons of German Expressionist sculpture. The figure of a young man sits with his arms stretched forward and his hands clasped around his raised right knee while his head and upper body lean back. He is entirely absorbed in his singing. The figure's weight rests on the

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sharply bent left leg, creating a dramatic triangular configuration which, like the closed eyes and backward thrust of the body, emphasizes the powerfully emotional yet deeply contemplative character of the sculpture. The singer's posture can be seen as the expression of a certain degree of spiritualization – the outer manifestation of an inner state.

*This sculpture, which is one of Ernst Barlach's best-known and most popular works, was created at a time in his career marked by increasing public recognition, a time when he felt at the peak of his creative powers despite his health problems and advanced age. Barlach's pleasure in creative activity and his awareness that this activity gave his life meaning is convincingly conveyed in the sense of untroubled serenity that the work radiates.<sup>1</sup>*

Bertold Brecht noted in his 'Notizen zur Barlach-Ausstellung' (1952): '*Der singende Mann*', a bronze of 1928, does not sing like the three women of 1911 [see Barlach's '*Drei singende Frauen*' (Three Women Singing)] – he sings boldly, his posture relaxed, working away at his singing. He sings alone but evidently has listeners. Barlach's humour would have it that he is a little vain, but no more than is compatible with the practice of art.<sup>2</sup>

We are grateful to Hermann Noack Jr., Berlin, and Elisabeth Laur, Hamburg, for confirming the sculpture to be a cast from Barlach's lifetime.

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Giesen (ed.), *Der Bildhauer Ernst Barlach. Skulpturen und Plastiken im Ernst Barlach Haus – Stiftung Hermann F. Reemtsma*, Hamburg 2007, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Notizen zur Barlach-Ausstellung', in *Sinn und Form*, *Viertes Jahr*, 1952/1, p. 183.