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OSKAR KOKOSCHKA

1886 Pöchlarn - Villeneuve 1980

Portrait of Mary Meerson

Red chalk on paper. 1931.

Signed lower right: *O. Kokoschka*.

446 x 311 mm

PROVENANCE: Paul Cassirer, Amsterdam (1931) - Walter Feilchenfeldt, Zurich (1963) – Paul Cassirer & Co., Amsterdam (1965) – Curtis O. Baer Collection, New Rochelle, New York – Thence by descent

EXHIBITIONS: *Oskar Kokoschka*, Galerie George Petit, Paris, 18 March-10 April 1931 – *Drawings from the Collection of Curtis O. Baer*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard, Cambridge 1958, no. 61 – *Master Drawings from Titian to Picasso: The Curtis O. Baer Collection*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta 1985 (exhibition travelling to the National Gallery of Art, Washington; Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1986; The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota 1986; Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery at UCLA, Los Angeles 1986-7), no. 175

LITERATURE: Ernest Rathenau, Vorwort Paul Westheim, *Der Zeichner Kokoschka*, Hamburg 1962, plate CXXI - *Drawings from the Collection of Curtis O. Baer*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard, Cambridge 1958, no. 61 – *Master Drawings from Titian to Picasso: The Curtis O. Baer Collection*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta 1985 (exhibition travelling to the National Gallery of Art, Washington; Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1986; The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota 1986; Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery at UCLA, Los Angeles 1986-87), no. 175, repr.

The dancer and artists' model Mary Meerson (1900-93) may have been of Bulgarian origin. She first came to Paris from St. Petersburg as a member of Serge Diaghilev's famed 'Ballets Russes', the ground-breaking, travelling ballet company which made its first appearance in Paris in 1909 and continued to perform throughout Europe and overseas until 1929. Meerson was married to the Russian Constructivist painter and set designer Lazare Meerson. After his death in 1938, she became the companion and associate of Henri Langlois, the Turkish-born founder of the Cinémathèque française. A native Russian-speaker and colourful cosmopolitan, Meerson is reputed to have spoken Bulgarian, French, English, Italian, German, Yiddish, Mandarin and Sanskrit. She led a lavish lifestyle and was the embodiment of glamour and elegance. Often referred to as *La Muse de Montparnasse*, she was a patron of art and literature and an idolised source of inspiration for Parisian artists, sitting for many of the leading painters of her time. Picasso spoke of her as *la femme la plus belle du monde*. Oskar Kokoschka, who settled in Paris in 1925, was also captivated by her charm and beauty. In 1931, she was his model for a series of at least twenty-nine drawings. Executed in sanguine, the group included portraits, full-length and half-length nude and semi-nude figure studies.¹ In the year of their

¹ Rathenau, op. cit., (1962) and II-V (1971 - 76), publishes 29 sheets from the series (including the present sheet).

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execution the drawings were shown in an exhibition staged at Galerie George Petit in Paris. The show was organised by Walter Feilchenfeldt, the owner of the Amsterdam branch of Kunstsalon Paul Cassirer. As a group, the drawings display a remarkable variety of moods and attitudes, from bovine placidity to open eroticism.

Meerson's physiognomy has a certain Slavic quality. The visage that confronts the viewer seems haughty, almost sphinx-like in its aloofness. As in many of the studies of her, Meerson's undefined cheeks and jaw seem stiff, almost mask-like, and jowls in an imprecise shell of heavy strokes. The features, which seem almost pasted on, are rendered with light lines. The face is an image that emerges through a layer of the most casual drawing.



Mary Meerson, anonymous photograph, 1931