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PAUL-CÉSAR HELLEU

1859 Vannes - Paris 1927

Nu endormi

Red, white and black chalk on buff paper; executed after 1900.

Signed in red chalk at the lower left: *Helleu*. Bearing the number 89 in pen and brown ink in the upper right corner.

461 x 355 cm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, France

Paul-César Helleu moved to Paris in 1876 and studied at the École des Beaux-Arts. He established his reputation at the Salon of 1885 where he exhibited several large pastels. In 1886 he married Alice Guérin, then aged 16, who became his favourite model and the embodiment of his penchant for elegant women. In the following year, he came into contact with Robert de Montesquiou, who was to be his chief patron and who introduced him to the Parisian *haut monde*. His circle of friends included James Whistler, John Singer Sargent, Alfred Stevens, Edgar Degas, Giovanni Boldini and Claude Monet. He was also a friend of Marcel Proust, who was to base the character of the painter Elstir in *À la recherche du temps perdu* on him. A gifted portraitist, Helleu enjoyed considerable success throughout his career with his portraits of the elegant women of fashionable society. His works were greatly admired by his contemporaries and he received a large number of portrait commissions. He was a regular visitor to England and in 1902 began travelling to the United States. His artistic reputation is based on his output of drawings and prints – he produced over two thousand drypoints. They were in great demand in their time.

The present sheet is executed in the distinctive *trois crayons* [three chalks] technique. While the buff paper provides a middle tone, black chalk is used for the main outlines, to accentuate delicate areas of shadow and more emphatically, to describe the dark hair of the young woman. Strokes of red chalk gently rework contours and suggest the warm tone of the body. White chalk serves to indicate highlights. Helleu was inspired to use this technique by eighteenth-century artists such as François Boucher and Antoine Watteau, who made figure, drapery and nude studies *aux trois crayons*. The technique was pioneered and popularised in the seventeenth century by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens.

Helleu depicts a young woman with dark hair, reclining against pillows or on a chaise longue. She has fallen asleep, her eyes are closed and her head is turned to one side. Relaxed and completely naked, she presents herself to the viewer.

Describing Helleu's nudes, Frédérique de Watrigant writes: ... *the artist, a great admirer of women, produced relatively few nudes; when he did, it was always at home (the seats on which the model posed, or the surrounding furniture, are recognizable) and he only worked with professional models – Marie Renard in his early career and later Sonia Speranza or Yolande Warin. Helleu, however much in love he had always been with Alice, was not one of these painters who take so much*

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*pride in the anatomy of their wife that they have to expose it to third parties. Furthermore, such a practice was deemed unacceptable in the circles in which he moved.*¹

Paulette Howard-Johnston (one of Helleu's daughters) recalls: *For his life studies, Paul Helleu preferred redheads as models, and the Aga Kahn brought him several. He was famously fond of sweets, and they had all been salesgirls in sweet shops! Although my father's professional work was well separated from his family life, he always showed my mother his day's work, and asked her opinion.*²

¹ Frédérique de Watrigant (ed.), *Paul-César Helleu*, Paris 2014, p. 82.

² Cited after Paulette Howard-Johnston, 'Helleu and his models', in *Nouvelle Revue des deux mondes*, 1974, reprinted in De Watrigant, op. cit., 2014, pp. 269-76.