

Smith&Singer

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RUPERT BUNNY'S MASTERPIECE OF HIS FIANCÉ POISED TO CHALLENGE
WORLD AUCTION RECORD AT SMITH & SINGER THIS NOVEMBER

*Formerly in the Personal Collections of Rupert Bunny, Sir Leon & Lady Trout
& John Schaeffer AO*

*'Portrait of Mlle Morel' (1895) is the First Full-length Portrait of the Artist's
Career-defining Muse & Marks the Moment Bunny Turned from the
Allegorical to the Belle Époque*



RUPERT BUNNY 1864-1947

Portrait of Mlle Morel (1895)

oil on canvas, 185 x 90 cm

Estimate \$800,000–1,200,000

MELBOURNE, 2 November 2020 – In 1892, Rupert Bunny fell in love with an art student, Jeanne Heloise Morel, forever changing the young artist's life and work. The present canvas is the first, major full-length portrait by Bunny of Morel, painted tenderly by her fiancé and revealed to the public at the epicentre of art at the time – the Salon, Paris, 1895. John Longstaff, one of Bunny's closest friends and fellow Australian artist living and working in Paris recalled: 'I remember ... the very night they met, and how he fell in love with her at first sight. She was a regular Dresden china girl with a deliciously tip-titled nose.' (1)

Smith & Singer is delighted to present this landmark work for sale this November. Of remarkable personal significance to the artist and bearing distinguished provenance from some of Australia's most renowned collectors, *Portrait of Mlle Morel* (1895) represents one of the most important paintings – by one of Australia's most celebrated artists – remaining in private ownership.

ARTIST, MUSE, LOVER, FIANCÉ, WIFE: MADEMOISELLE JEANNE HELOISE MOREL

Jeanne was born on 29 July 1871 in Paris. Her mother, Marguerite Morel, was a servant, and unmarried. Her father, not named on the birth certificate, was said by Jeanne to be Eugénie François Morel, an officer in the French Navy. Jeanne received training in the fine arts at the Orphanage of Arts at 96 rue de Vannes in Paris. In 1884, Jeanne made her public debut at the Société des Artistes and subsequently exhibited at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, working in oils, monotypes and embroideries. All these genres were also explored in some depth by Rupert Bunny in the 1890s.

The influence of Jeanne Morel on Rupert Bunny was immediate and consuming: 'Jeanne changed not only Bunny's life but also his art, which now focused on subjects in which beautiful women played the central role, with Jeanne as his favourite model.' (2) From the early 1890s pencil drawings of Jeanne began appearing in Bunny's sketchbooks and as independent studies. Romantically and artistically Jeanne responded with a drawing inscribed, 'à mon cher Rupert son amie Jeanne'. (3) Indeed, during the following two decades, much of Rupert Bunny's work comprised images of women. In compositions of languid summer days and sultry nights he presents his wife, Jeanne Morel, and her fellow models as gorgeous, elegant creatures, in full possession both of their own intimate world and of the artist's (and viewer's) worshipful attention.

RUPERT BUNNY 1864-1947 *PORTRAIT OF MLLE MOREL* (1895)

Redolent of the poise and splendour of the Belle Époque, *Portrait of Mlle Morel* (1895) was Bunny's first major full-length portrait of his fiancé and made its public debut at the Old Salon in Paris in 1895. Ambitious in scale and execution, it represented the pinnacle of Bunny's portraiture to date. His previous large-scale subjects shown at the Salon and Royal Academy and Royal Society of British Artists in London had been predominantly allegorical. Here, Bunny extends his artistic influences, from the dashing portraiture of the eighteenth century as personified by Thomas Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds and George Romney, to the present vogue for society painting by James Abbot McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent.

As described by David Thomas – Bunny's devoted champion and author of the recent catalogue raisonné – *Portrait of Mlle Morel* represented the beginning of the artist's preoccupation with the Age of Elegance and with portraying the female form in various states of contemplation.

'Presented with all the grace and style of the belle époque, it combined a touch of the grand manner in setting and sweep of red curtain, with an informality of pose and contemplation. Jeanne had just put down the book she was reading to look into the far off distance. The ever-present water provides the background for a painterly sonata on the mystique of femininity, keyed in indolent elegance.' (4)

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PROVENANCE BEFITTING ITS QUALITY

Long regarded as one of Rupert Bunny's finest compositions, *Portrait of Mlle Morel* bears a particularly distinguished provenance. Retained by the artist for his personal collection, the painting was inherited by his niece Marie Mackinnon, daughter of Bunny's sister, Hilda, and the politician Donald Mackinnon. Marie married Tristan Buesst in 1933. In 1974 the Buessts sold the painting through Joseph Brown Gallery to Sir Leon and Lady Trout, who assembled one of the most formidable and comprehensive collections of Australian art of their time and were generous benefactors to the Queensland Art Gallery. A highlight of the Trout auction, in 1989 the painting was subsequently acquired by the remarkable John Schaeffer AO, renowned for his passion for Pre-Raphaelite art and in particular for the Australian expatriates John Russell and Rupert Bunny.

Geoffrey Smith, Chairman of Smith & Singer commented: 'We are honoured to be entrusted with the sale of Rupert Bunny's magnificent Portrait of Mlle Morel. A highly important and deeply personal image within the artist's oeuvre, the canvas is among Bunny's most significant compositions remaining in private ownership. We look forward to welcoming visitors to our Melbourne and Sydney galleries this November to see this magnificent painting in person.'

RUPERT BUNNY AT SMITH & SINGER



RUPERT BUNNY 1864-1947

The Cliff Path (1910)

oil on canvas, 65.4 x 81 cm

Private Collection

Sold Sotheby's Australia (now trading as Smith & Singer), 23 November 2010 for \$624,000

SECOND-HIGHEST PRICE ACHIEVED AT
AUCTION FOR THE ARTIST



RUPERT BUNNY 1864-1947

Matinee Ensoleillee (Morning Sun) (circa 1913)

oil on canvas, 81 x 54.5 cm

Private Collection

Sold Sotheby's Australia (now trading as Smith & Singer), 20 November 2019 for \$610,000

THIRD-HIGHEST PRICE ACHIEVED AT AUCTION
FOR THE ARTIST

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- (1) Nina Murdoch, *Portrait in Youth of Sir John Longstaff*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1948, p. 30
(2) David Thomas, *The Life and Art of Rupert Bunny: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Thames and Hudson, Melbourne, 2017, Vol. 1, p. 79
(3) *ibid.*
(4) *ibid.*

AT A GLANCE

Lot 9

RUPERT BUNNY 1864-1947

Portrait of Mlle Morel (1895)

oil on canvas

185 x 90 cm

Estimate \$800,000–1,200,000

Important Australian & International Art

Estimate: \$7,261,000–10,283,000, 74 lots

Auction, Sydney, 18 November 2020, 6.30 pm

National Council of Jewish Women of Australia, 111 Queen Street, Woollahra NSW 2025

The health of our clients, employees and community is of paramount importance. We have implemented stringent protocols within our premises, including social distancing, frequent hand and area sanitising, and a maximum number of clients in each exhibition at any time. Full details are available upon request.

Viewings in Melbourne 5-8 November 2020, 10 am to 5 pm

14-16 Collins Street, Melbourne

Viewings in Sydney 11-18 November 2020, 10 am to 5 pm

30 Queen Street, Woollahra

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