

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

FINE ARTS

HENRI-EDMOND CROSS

Douai 1856 - Saint-Clair 1910

French School

BATHERS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, IN THE BACKGROUND THE ÎLES D'OR

Oil on canvas

H. 0,46 m ; L. 0,55 m

Signed and dated lower right: *henri Edm. Cross 1906*

DATE: 1906

PROVENANCE:

Galerie Bernheim-Jeune

Count Harry Kessler, Weimar (bought from Bernheim in 1907)

Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paul Lauvé

Private collection, France

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Isabelle Compin, *H. E. Cross*, Paris, 1964, p. 266, no. 166 (ill.).

EXHIBITION:

H. E. Cross, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 22 April – 8 May 1907, no. 12.

H. E. Cross, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 1910, no. 6.

La Libre Esthétique, Rétrospective H. E. Cross, Brussels, 18 March – 23 April 1911, no. 35.

H. E. Cross, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 1913, no. 20 (*Les Petits Baigneurs*).

Exposition d'Art français du XIX^e siècle, Musée Royal, Copenhagen, 1914, no. 53.

This painting will be included in the catalogue raisonné currently being prepared by Patrick Offenstadt. He would be happy to establish a certificate of authenticity

Unlike the Impressionists, Cross did not set out to capture the fugitive. Like Signac, he tried to translate a perfect order in which humans merge with nature. He dared to simplify and distort and only retained the essential elements of shapes.

A Prominent Figure of Neo-Impressionism

Henri Edmond Joseph Delacroix, known as Henri-Edmond Cross, exhibited for the first time at the Salon of 1881, translating his surname “Delacroix” into the English “Cross” to distinguish himself from Eugène Delacroix. In 1884, he was one of the founders of the Salon des Indépendents where he met Georges Seurat (1859-1891) and Paul Signac (1863-1935) amongst others. With them, he became one of the three great masters of Neo-Impressionism. This new and original artistic movement had an interest in *plein-air* work in common with Impressionism in addition to a love of bright colours and the practice of dividing colours. However, it was essential to them to provide a scientific foundation to the division of colours, based on the

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meticulous study of optical phenomena that the Impressionists had practiced by instinct. Seurat's reading of Chevreul¹ and the mathematician Charles Henry,² provided a scientific foundation for his painting and his essay *Esthétique*³ published in 1890. In 1899, Signac published his treatise *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme*, which was the product of fruitful exchanges of correspondence between him and Cross. To facilitate Signac's work, Cross, whose mother was English, translated Ruskin's book *Elements of Drawings* into French in 1896.

Friendship with Signac

Cross adopted divisionism quite late, in 1891 the year of Seurat's premature death and five years after the birth of Neo-Impressionism.⁴ Signac became one of his closest friends and together they developed the Neo-Impressionist technique which they wanted to make freer and more colourful. From 1895, a broader touch and the choice of more strongly contrasted harmonies embodied the second phase of the movement that distanced itself from the subtle vibrations of light painted in Seurat's time.

The Move to the South of France

In 1891, at the age of thirty-five, Cross left Paris for the south of France, attracted by the beauty of the sites and a climate beneficial to his chronic rheumatism. With his future wife, Irma Clare (1849-1933) who had been married to Hector France, he moved close to Cabasson in the Var. In 1893, the couple settled permanently in the small coastal village of Saint-Clair. A relatively isolated life began for the couple which only returned to Paris once a year for the Salon des Indépendants. From 1892, Signac divided his time between Paris and Saint-Tropez not far from Cross.

Decorative and Monumental Power

Cross's landscapes and seascapes give an impression of softness and harmony; they touch the viewer for their fineness and rippling in the light. Unlike the Impressionists, Cross did not try to capture fugitive effects. Like Signac, he tried to translate the perfect order in which man merges with nature.

In order to obtain the unity, decorative and monumental power that are typical of his landscapes of the years 1906-1908, Cross liberated himself from the literal depiction of nature. He only retained the essential elements of forms, daring to use simplifications and distortions. Maurice Denis wrote in 1910: "his desire for expression became rougher, more demanding as his desire for synthesis increased. He managed to signify with a few simple forms, a few relations with pure colours, what had had previously been described with a multitude of nuances and variegations."⁵

¹ Michel-Eugène Chevreul, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs*, 1839.

² Charles Henry, *Introduction à une esthétique scientifique*, 1885.

³ This text dated 1890 was published for the first time by Félix Fénéon, "De Seurat", *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, Paris, Bernheim-Jeune, no. 9, 17 June 1914.

⁴ In May 1886, the critic Félix Fénéon had called the movement "neo-Impressionism" when he discovered *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* which Seurat showed at the last exhibition of the Impressionist group.

⁵ Maurice Denis, Preface to the catalogue of the exhibition *H. E. Cross*, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 1910.

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The theme of the Nude in a Landscape

At the same time, Cross introduced nudes to his landscapes. His personal fantasy was set free, interpretation taking over gradually from his desire for an objective vision. In the same way as landscape, the nude expresses the pantheistic sensitivity of Cross for magnified nature. They are fully integrated into the landscape, and participate in the decorative rhythm of the composition.

It is not surprising that Cross's art also influenced Henri Matisse, the leader of Fauvism. During the summer of 1904 Matisse discovered the painting, *The Evening Air* (1894, Paris, Musée d'Orsay) when visiting Signac at Saint-Tropez and was directly inspired by it in his *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (1904, Paris, Musée d'Orsay).

Kessler Collection

Our painting was in the collection of Count Harry Kessler. This young German had inherited a fortune when his father died in 1895 and had a lively interest in modern art, especially the French Avant Garde. The part he played in the spread of Neo-Impressionism in Germany was decisive. Kessler met Cross in Spring 1898 in Paris at the Salon des Indépendants. In 1902, Kessler commissioned from him a large painting, *The Leafy Shaded Beach* (Aichi, Menard Art Museum), showing a beach with female nudes grouped harmoniously under a pine. At the major Cross solo exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in 1907, Kessler bought our painting and *Le Lesteur* (Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire). In his journal, he wrote: "at midday, at the Cross exhibition where I met old Druet [a Parisian gallery owner] he said to me: "he's the best of all. This has nothing to do with Impressionism, it's a new formula which is now fully developed. With Cross, it has become flexible. It won't go any further, nothing as beautiful has ever been done, like enchantment, as in the painting of the *Clearing*⁶ [...] I bought Cross's *Le Lesteur* for 3500 francs.⁷ Especially enamoured by Cross's art, Kessler collected a large number of his works and also encouraged enthusiasm among other German connoisseurs, such as Bodenhausen. German museums also reacted favourably to Cross's work, while it was not until 1923 that three paintings by him entered the collections of the Musée d'Orsay, thanks to the bequest of the Vicount Guy de Cholet (1868-1915).

The Intensity of Happiness

Our painting dates to the final years of Cross's life, a period marked by intensive productivity as well as considerable physical suffering. He suffered from bouts of rheumatism that not only affected his limbs but also his eyes. Cross was forced to cope with periods of complete inactivity and experienced the periods of reprieve he had with increased avidity and ardour. Between May and November 1905, he was not able to paint, and was forced to rest his eyes in the dark.⁸ Isabelle Compin dates our painting between June and December of 1906.

⁶ Cross, *La Clairière*, 1906-1907, oil on canvas, H. 1,62 m ; L. 1,30 m, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum

⁷ Harry Kessler, *Journal. Regards sur l'art et les artistes contemporains*, Paris, 2017, t. II, 22 April 1907, p. 6.

⁸ Isabelle Compin, *H. E. Cross*, Paris, 1964, p. 57-58.