

## LOUIS LE BROCQUY – *A personal reminiscence*

Extraordinary as it sounds, for someone 35 years his junior, I knew his father long before I met Louis le Brocquy.

I joined the Irish Philatelic Society (IPS) in 1966 and Albert le Brocquy, then its President, was very generous and supportive of young philatelists like myself. I first acquired a Louis le Brocquy artwork – a 1967 first day cover with an ink drawing by his son, which Albert had donated to an IPS charity auction. It cost me the princely sum of fifty shillings (€3.20) and is one of my most treasured possessions. It is apposite that I write about it now as it is one of the many drawings Louis made in preparation for *The Táin* (see lot 47 in this sale).

So it was as a stamp collector that I first got to know and appreciate Louis le Brocquy's work. Louis was a brilliant graphic designer and ably met the challenge presented by producing art in a miniscule form – in effect a 40 by 20mm (1.6 x .8in.) canvas. He did this to great effect with his design for the *Europa* stamps of 1970 – an image chosen by international competition, and issued by most Western European countries that year, bringing Louis' work to the attention of over 200 million people.

It was not until 2007, that I properly engaged with Louis le Brocquy when he came to our galleries to see a watercolour, coincidentally

offered here as lot 43. He identified it as his first watercolour Head, which was exhibited at ROSC in 1971, and his delight at seeing it again was obvious. My last conversation with Louis was at his 90th birthday celebration in the Hugh Lane Gallery where we talked about his father and his Belgian stamp collection, which Louis still owned and enthused about.

Whyte's have had the privilege of selling hundreds of works by this outstanding artist, from lithographs for around €1,000 to a version of his greatest masterpiece, *The Family* for €800,000, and it is that range that made this man not just the greatest Irish artist of his generation but also the most popular. He, like Jack Yeats, deliberately made his works accessible to collectors at all price levels and that will stand to his stead forever.

Today I attended his last work, *A Celebration of The Life of Louis le Brocquy* in St. Patrick's Cathedral, which he himself – with the help of his wife Anne and his children – had carefully and painstakingly arranged, just as he did his paintings. With the participation of the President of Ireland, The Abbot of Glenstal, his great friends Anthony Cronin and Seamus Heaney and The Director of Dublin City Gallery, it was a fitting tribute to one of the great Irishmen of the 20th century.

Ian Whyte, April 28 2012.

### 43

#### Louis le Brocquy HRHA (1916-2012)

STUDY FOR RECONSTRUCTED HEAD OF S. B. (SAMUEL BECKETT), 1965  
watercolour  
signed and dated lower left  
22 by 15in. (55.88 by 38.10cm)

#### Provenance:

Gimpel Fils Gallery, London;

Whence purchased by Bruce Arnold in 1968;

Sold to the present owner, May 1975

#### Exhibited:

'Louis le Brocquy Paintings', Gimpel Fils, London, 1-26 March 1966, catalogue no. 67; 'The Irish Imagination 1959-1971, an exhibition in association with Rosc', Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 23 October to 31 December 1971, catalogue no. 11 in 'The Literary Influence' section (Lent by Bruce Arnold); 'Irish Art 1943-1973: an exhibition in association with Rosc', Crawford Municipal Gallery of Art, Cork, 24 August to 7 November 1980, toured to the Ulster Museum, Belfast, January to February 1981, catalogue no. 66 (Lent by the present owner)



Over a period of thirty or so years, from 1965 when this work was painted, Louis le Brocquy carried out numerous images of Samuel Beckett, mainly in oils but also, as in this case, in watercolour. The Head series began with the early experimental works, known collectively as the Ancestral Heads (1964-1975), followed by the Portrait Heads (c.1975-2005). It is thought that the present *Study* is the first watercolour in the series, and the artist himself confirmed this on a visit to Whyte's in 2007.<sup>1</sup> *Study for Reconstructed Head of S.B. (Samuel Beckett)* belongs to the early experimental phase when the artist was searching for a distinctive method for representing the intellect, imagination and creativity of a range of individuals chosen for their historical significance or exceptional literary and artistic achievements. Mostly, though not

exclusively, Irish, the figures included James Joyce, WB Yeats, Louis' wife - artist Anne Madden - and his friends Francis Bacon and Seamus Heaney, as well as Beckett.

The Head series was a remarkable development for le Brocquy, emerging after a period of struggle for direction. A visit to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris in the winter of 1964 brought him into contact with the Polynesian heads in that collection, which touched a chord in the artist. As he explained "Like the Celts I tend to regard the head as this magic box containing the spirit. Enter that box, enter behind the billowing curtain of the face, and you have the whole landscape of the spirit."<sup>2</sup>

In attempting to convey the elusive presence of the person within, the heads are presented as touches and swathes of colour, devoid of defining outlines, and variously ethereal. While he knew Beckett, le Brocquy did not paint the images from life, but from photographs or memory, preferring to respond to the afterimage rather than the literal presence of the individuals. Typically, each head in the series is shown floating, disembodied, on a muted background, thereby focusing attention on the essential individuality of the character, as well as the ultimate reality of human isolation.

The *Study* presented here shows one of the earliest experiments in this genre. Composed in blues, red and brown, the head is modelled to give an overall form, but limited detail: there are no visible eyes, and little external description – it is not intended as literal and mimetic, though some later works of Beckett are more recognizable. This work, however, while referencing the distinctive brow, high cheekbones, and strongly cleft chin, is less concerned with the surfaces of his appearance than with the interior abstract complexities of his imagination.

Dr Yvonne Scott,  
April 2012

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Whyte's for this observation.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Peppiatt, 'Interview with Louis le Brocquy', *Art International*, Vol. XXIII/7, October, 1979, pp.60-66. Reproduced in Pierre le Brocquy (ed.), *Louis le Brocquy, The Head Image*, Gandon Editions, Kinsale, 1996, p.23.

€25,000-€35,000 (£20,500-£28,700 approx).