

69

Louis le Brocquy HRHA (1916-2012)

ANCESTRAL HEAD, 1965

oil on canvas

signed and dated in pencil lower left; signed again and titled on reverse; also numbered [157] on reverse;
with inscribed Hillsboro Fine Art label on reverse
26 by 21½in. (66 by 53cm)

Provenance:

Gimpel Fils Gallery, London, c. mid 1960s;
Whence purchased by John Hirschhorn;
Later donated to The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC;
From where de-accessioned c.2004;
with Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin;
Where purchased by the present owner

Exhibited:

Gimpel Fils Gallery, London, c. mid 1960s

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.¹

This painting is an early example of one of the most important series in Louis le Brocquy's oeuvre. In the winter of 1964, the artist paid a visit to the anthropology museum in Paris, the Musée de l'Homme. He had been experiencing something of a crisis in terms of the development of his work, destroying many images with which he was dissatisfied, and he felt at a loss as to how to progress. At the museum, he came across a collection of Polynesian skulls, decorated for ritualistic purposes, and this was to prove the impetus for one of the defining themes of his work. It sparked in him a recognition of the potential of the head image and its relevance to his interpretation of Celtic ethnography. This encounter is credited with inspiring his own series of profound images within the overall concept. This ranged from the early Ancestral Heads, to which this work belongs, and evolved into the portrait series of great writers and artists, like Samuel Beckett and Francis Bacon.

Ancestral Head (1965) was carried out in the months following the artist's epiphany and it typifies the series. Presented frontally, it is rendered in white and pale tones, and seems to emerge disembodied from a muted ground. The bands on the dome of the head are a feature of some of the early examples suggesting ancient adornments and a concept of Celtic ancestry. The unidentified individual and the generalisation of the features which are deliberately blurred, infers a universal relevance. The work reflects the artist's stated intention to represent human reality beneath the material appearance.

Dr Yvonne Scott
January 2014

¹ The artist in conversation with Michael Peppiatt, 1979 (Ed., le Brocquay, P., *Louis le Brocquy, The Head Image*, Gandon, Cork, 1996, p. 22-23)

€35,000-€45,000 (£28,930-£37,190 approx.)