

GALERIE MAGDELEINE



Hortense Haudebourt-Lescot (Paris, 1784 - Paris, 1845)

Portrait de la comtesse de Ségur

Circa: 1833-1834

Hortense HAUDEBOURT-LESCOT (Paris, 1783 – Paris, 1855)

Portrait de la comtesse de Ségur.

Vers 1833-1834.

Huile sur toile.

H : 64,5 ; L : 54 cm.

Exposition : Salon des Artistes Vivants, Paris, 1834, n° 958 : « Portrait de Mme de S*** ».

This portrait depicts a woman dressed in black, a translucent veil delicately draped over her head and shoulders. The lace, created by the thicker paint on the canvas, frames the model's serene face, which evokes a slight smile. The softness of the latter's features is rendered by subtle fading of the skin tones and the sober background of the work.

Hortense Haudebourg-Lescot is a French painter renowned for her genre scenes and portraits. Born in Paris, she studied under the painter Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, with whom she traveled to Rome in 1808. During her stay in Italy, she developed an interest in scenes of Italian daily life, which were to become a recurring theme in her work.

After her return to France, Haudebourg-Lescot participated regularly in the Paris Salon, where she achieved a certain degree of renown. She also received official commissions for portraits, notably of members of the royal family.

After enjoying success with the quality of her genre scenes, she stopped publicly exhibiting popular Italian scenes to devote herself to portrait painting from 1831 onwards. Indeed, after a first successful attempt at the 1827 Salon, she forged a reputation as a talented portraitist. It was in this new specialty that she distinguished herself during the 1830s, her quality as a portraitist having not failed to be noticed:

“If I had any advice to give Mme Haudebourg-Lescot, I'd tell her:

- Do you want to do well?... well! make portraits, make portraits!...[1]”.

Hortense Haudebourg-Lescot's studio in her sublime residence on rue de La Rochefoucauld was an obvious asset in attracting a wealthy clientele. Indeed, Haudebourg-Lescot did not travel to her model's home, but invited her to take part in posing sessions in her own studio. An invaluable letter from 1838 to a certain Monsieur Guérin reveals the terms and conditions imposed by the artist on his clients: “If the young person of whom you speak can give me a fortnight, I believe this time is necessary to complete what must be done from life. I must point out to you that I may only take as many as ten sessions. As for moving around, that, Sir, is completely out of my habits. [2]”.

By ostentatiously demonstrating the luxury of her studio and home, Haudebourg-Lescot cultivated the image of a star portraitist among her clientele. In the heart of New Athens, the studio also enabled her models to remain in their own social universe, with the artist and her clientele often living just a few streets apart. The proximity and affluence of the location are coupled with the supposed respectability of Haudebourg-Lescot's status as a resident of New Athens.

Capitalizing on his image as a fashionable portraitist, and counting among his models some of the most famous figures in Paris, Haudebourg-Lescot took the liberty of charging relatively high prices for a portrait. In the same letter of 1838 to Monsieur Guérin, she explains: “Depending on the layout of my full-length portraits, I charge 2,500 or 2,000 fr. In order to assess the value of this sum, Anne Martin-Fugier informs us that it exceeds the annual income of a petit-bourgeois family[3]. It is highly probable that the price of a full-length portrait could have reached 3,000 fr. in the early 1830s, a time when it was more

successful, and even more so if the commissioner came from a noble family or held a state office.

It was in this context that the portrait of the Countess de Ségur was commissioned. Given the importance of the model, the painting was exhibited at the Salon of 1834 along with four other portraits: those of Antoine Vincent Arnault, academician, Gilbert Breschet, physician, Jean-Baptiste Claude Odier, goldsmith to the King and Atala Stamaty-Varcollier, painter and friend of the artist. The latter portraits represent a wide range of personalities from the Parisian elite, and testify to Haudebourg-Lescot's vast network of clientele.

Sophie de Ségur (1799-1874) is depicted with simplicity, seated in dark surroundings. To emphasize the face, Haudebourg wraps a lighter vapor around the head. This spiritual staging is echoed in the portrait of Arnault exhibited at the same Salon.

Sophie de Ségur's expression, with her eyes turned away from the viewer and a slight smile, marks the young countess's humility. This humility of feeling echoes the model's humility of dress. Dressed in black, with no cleavage, a lace mantilla in her hair and an imposing gold-plated cross around her neck, the Countess presents herself as a religious woman,