



Luis de Perinat (1872 - 1923)

Portrait of Cléo de Mérode

Circa: 1909

1909

Marble

51 x 47 cm

Signed and dated Luis de Perinat/1909 lower left

The subject of this striking marble portrait is the companion, muse, and lover of the sculptor Luis de Périnat - the Belle Epoque dancer, and most photographed woman in France, Cléo de Mérode. Executed in a dynamic, typically romantic, art deco style, her beauty emerges from the rough-hewn marble as a glamorous icon, befitting of the lady who was undoubtedly an emblem of the age.

Cléo de Mérode was the daughter of the Viennese Baroness Vincentia de Mérode (1850-1899), descended from the notable Belgian noble family, and the self-styled Baron Carl von Mérode (1853-1909) an Austrian landscape painter. At the age of seven she began training with the Paris Opera Ballet, making her professional debut when she was just eleven years old. Her youthful talent was matched by her beauty and by the age of thirteen she had already posed as an anonymous model for Edgar Degas and Jean-Louis Forain – whose work centred on the imagery of ballerinas, and ballet schools and theatres of the French capital.

At sixteen the ballerina's trademark hairstyle - parted in the middle, pulled back over the ears, and wound in a chignon at the back - became the vogue in Paris and synonymous with her name. The young beauty's fame grew, coinciding with the advent of photography and she became one of the first professional photo-models. Her image became famous around the world as she posed for fashion magazines and was promoted by the famous Parisian photographic studios, such as Paul and Félix Nadar and Léopold-Émile Reutlinger, who placed her image on postcards and playing cards. By the early 1900s, Cléo de Mérode's photos could be found in every European city and given her graceful beauty she became known as 'The Postcard Madonna'.

Painters and sculptors of the early 20th century idolized Cléopatra and in 1895 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec executed her portrait. A string of other notable artists followed including Giovanni Boldini,

Alfredo Muller, Georges Despret, Mariano Benillure, and Manuel Benedito amongst others. In 1896, the following year, the newspaper L'Eclat announced a beauty contest with the winner being chosen by the readers. Among 130 contenders, including Sarah Bernhardt, the public chose Cléopatra as the first beauty of the Parisian scene. That same year, further scandal occurred when King Leopold II of Belgium, aged sixty-one, and a known womaniser, began to attend her concerts and express his admiration for her. With society unused to any notion of an independent young woman of fame, the press looked disapprovingly on her glamorous lifestyle as reason enough to suggest that she was his courtesan; taking hold of salacious rumours about an affair between the King and the twenty-two year old ballet dancer. Further sensation followed when in the Autumn, Alexandre Falguière caused a furore at the Paris Salon with a statue of Cléo known as 'The Dancer' (now held in the Musée d'Orsay) which depicted her naked.

Having taken up a solo career at the age of 23, the peak of Cléo de Mérode's popularity was in the 1900s and 1910s, when the present marble was executed. Cléo performed on the stages of the Royal Theatres of France, had sell-out shows at the Folies Bergère and went on tours to across Europe and in the USA - where she recalled in her memoirs people immediately buying postcards with her image on in news-stands and rushing to get her autograph. Mérode was also popular in Germany and Austria, her character appearing in the German film *Women of Passion* (1926), played by Fern Andra. In Vienna, her beauty caught the attention of painter Gustav Klimt, whose primary focus was on female sexuality. Their story was the basis of the film *Klimt* (2006), in which the character of Lea de Castro, played by Saffron Burrows, is based on de Mérode.

Mérode continued to dance until her early fifties, when she retired to the seaside resort of Biarritz but continued teaching Ballet until 1965 when she was 90 years old. In 1955, she published her autobiography, *Le Ballet de ma vie* (*The Dance of My Life*). Having never married or had children, she claimed in her autobiography that she had only been involved with two men in her life. The first, a French aristocrat, to whom she was engaged, before he died of Typhoid fever in 1904. The second, Luis de Périnat, Marquis de Périnat (1872–1923) a Spanish nobleman and diplomat, was her companion and lover from 1906 to 1919. The author of the present marble Périnat was a passionate amateur sculptor and had a studio in Paris in which he received models and pupils, one of his students was the Spanish sculptor Sebastián Miranda (1885-1975).

Cléo de Mérode, the iconic Belle Epoque dancer, died on 17 October 1966 and was interred in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. A statue of her by Périnat which relates to the present marble, depicts her mourning her mother, who is interred in the same plot, and decorates the gravestone. Another version of the present marble, slightly larger, is held in the Musées Royaux Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels (inv. 11345, 62 cm high).