

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Alexandre Iacovleff
(Saint Peterburg 1887 – 1938 Paris)

Portrait of Hu Xuan-Zhai

Signed, located and dated lower right: *A Iacovleff / Uroumtsi / 1 Nov. 1931*

Artist's stamp lower right

Inscribed in Chinese characters lower left (see Annex)

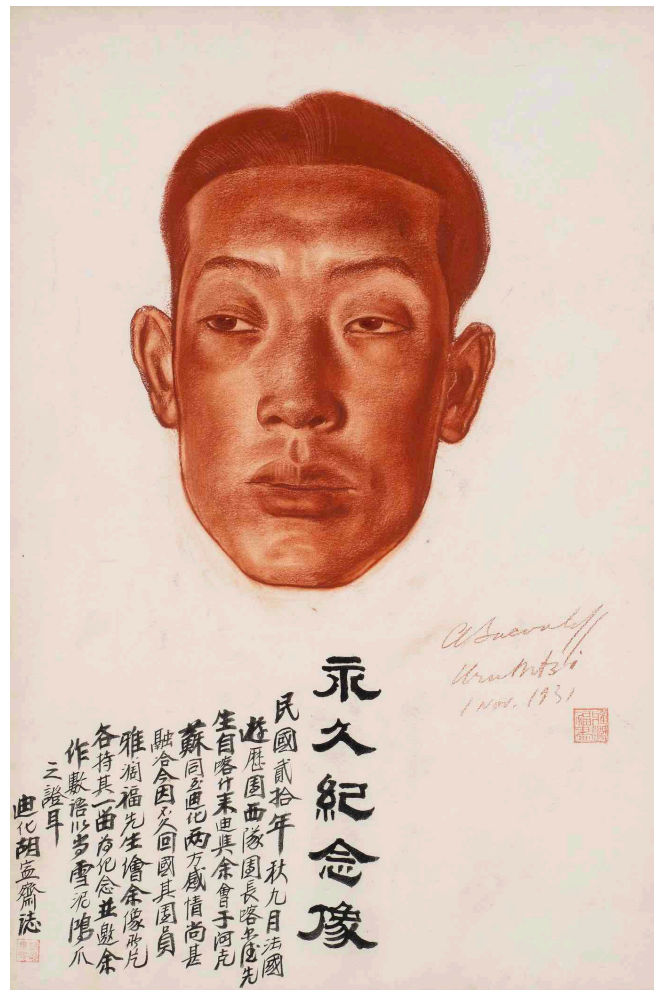
Seal of Hu Xuan-Zhai lower left

Red chalk and ink

54.6 x 37 cm. (21 ½ x 14 ½ in.)

Exhibited:

Paris, Galerie Charpentier, *Alexandre Iacovleff: Exposition de dessins et peintures de l'Expédition Citroën Centre-Asie*, 16 May – 4 June 1933, no. 285.



Escaping the Russian Revolution, and funded by the St. Petersburg Academy, Alexandre Jacovleff departed for his first trip to the Far East in 1917. His travels abroad prompted a change in his artistic direction, distinguishing him from his Russian counterparts, though his inimitable technical skill for capturing likeness of character remained constant throughout his oeuvre. Such mastery led to more than one critic comparing him to John Singer Sargent and the American artist himself called Jacovleff 'one of the greatest living draftsmen'.¹

His first journey to Peking and the Far East instilled in Jacovleff an insatiable hunger for travel and adventure, and he went on to become the official artist for Georges-Marie Haardt's Citroën-sponsored expeditions, crossing Africa in 1925 and Asia in 1931. His notable ability to work quickly and accurately, and to win the trust of his subjects, made the charismatic artist ideally suited for this role. Jacovleff's extensive travels to these regions were considered unprecedented for an artist at this time, and from them he produced an astounding repertoire which transcend both geographical and artistic boundaries.

The Citroën-sponsored Asian expedition, on which the present portrait was drawn, began in April 1931 and spanned countries and regions that included Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, the foothills of the Himalayas, China and Indochina. Jacovleff played a seminal role in the preparation of this journey and sketched and painted continuously throughout its duration, culminating in over 500 works of art (fig. 1).



Fig. 1, Alexandre Jacovleff, *Mother and Child*, red chalk, charcoal and pastel, 56 x 66.5 cm, Private Collection

The portrait of Hu Xuan-Zhai, the expedition's translator, was drawn in Urumqi in the Autumn of 1931, as related by the inscriptions in both French and Chinese, the latter being by Hu himself. Urumqi, in Xinjiang, was a place of near disaster for the expedition. Xinjiang was then a de facto independent region of China under the control of the warlord Jin Shuren. Following a misunderstanding, he held a group within the expedition hostage. It

¹ E. Forbes, *A. Jacovleff*, exhibition catalogue, New York 1936, p. 4.

was only after five months, at the end of November 1931, that the hostages were released. The mission therefore did not reach its final destination, Peking, until February 1932.

The exceptional technical quality and visual impact of the portrait is typical of Iacovleff, as is the use of red chalk. The disembodied head, with its strong outlines, focusses all the attention on Hu's handsome and striking countenance. The portrait illustrates Iacovleff's tremendous facility as a draughtsman and underscores his uncanny ability to capture likeness and character.

Annex

永久紀念碑

民國二十年秋九月，法國遊歷團西隊團長喀爾德先生自喀什來迪興余會余河克蘇，同至迪化，兩方感情尚甚融洽，今因不久回國，其團員雅闊福先生繪余像兩張，各持一幅為紀念，並邀余作數語，以當雪泥鴻爪之證耳

迪化 胡宣齋 誌

Permanent Monument

During the autumn of 1931, which marked the 20th year of the Republic of China, Mr. Chardin, the leader of the West Group of the French Tour, met me in Aksu from Kashgar Laidixingyu and we travelled together to Dihua. We developed a very cordial relationship during our time together. As he was about to return to France, Mr. Chardin's team member, Mr. Alexandre Iacovleff, painted two portraits of me, with each party keeping one as a cherished memento. In addition, I was honoured to be invited to contribute a few words to serve as a permanent monument to our friendship.

Written by Hu Xuan-zhai in Dihua