

# ELLIOTT FINE ART

*Nineteenth Century to Early Modern*

Clément Serneels  
(Brussels 1912 – 1991)

*Portrait of a Mohutu woman*

Inscribed lower right: *Femme Mohutu*

Oil on panel

49 x 38.5 cm (19 ¼ x 15 in.)

Provenance:

Private Collection, Brussels;

Auguttes, Paris, 12 June 2024, lot 29.



This portrait of a Congolese woman is one of Clément Serneels' finest bust-length portraits, notable for its remarkable quality, fine condition and the striking beauty of the sitter. Though undated, the portrait was probably painted during Serneel's second trip to the Belgian Congo, in 1938-39. Stylistically, it is in keeping with other works from this period, for example the portrait of a woman from Goma (fig. 1) or the portrait of an unidentified man (fig. 2), both recently sold by Elliott Fine Art.

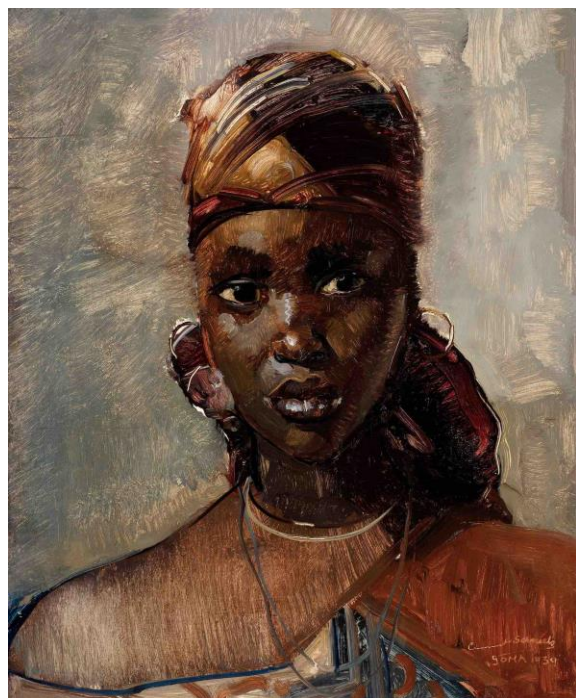


Fig. 1, Clément Serneels, *Portrait of a woman from Goma*, 1939, oil on panel, 36.7 x 38.5 cm, Private Collection, formerly with Elliott Fine Art



Fig. 2, Clément Serneels, *Portrait of a man*, 1939, oil on panel, 36.5 x 28 cm, Private Collection, formerly with Elliott Fine Art

The artist has inscribed 'femme Mohutu' at the lower right. Since a people of that name is not known, it is perhaps a mistranscription. The Hutu, of course, are a prominent tribe from the Great Lakes region, where Serneels, living in Kivu, was based at this time.

The portrait has been painted in Serneels' typical bravura style. The artist focusses the viewer's attention on the key areas of the composition, painting these parts with a high degree of finish, whilst filling in the remainder with beautifully fluid and seemingly spontaneous brushstrokes. As a contemporary reviewer wrote, Serneels' 'technical dexterity is above reproach'.<sup>1</sup> From a purely painterly perspective, the artist is certainly one of the most talented painters of his generation, with the same reviewer likening the artist to a 'modern Rubens'.<sup>2</sup>

Clément Serneels, born in Brussels in 1910, was the son of a Belgian architect. He first visited the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi in 1936-37, though there was initial resistance from the Belgian minister of the Colonies due to the expensive nature of such travels. However, he was eventually granted the necessary finances thanks to the support of Alfred

<sup>1</sup> *Art News*, 1949, vol 48, issue 7, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Bastien, the director of the Académie de Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, where Serneels was one of his most brilliant students. Thanks to the success of the first trip, with a sell-out exhibition on his return to Belgium, Serneels travelled back to Central Africa in 1938, this time using his own resources. When World War II broke out, the artist stayed on in Costermansville, an important town on the south-west shores of Lake Kivu in the Belgian Congo.

Serneels moved to South Africa after the end of World War II, before returning in 1953 to Costermansville, which by then had reclaimed its ancient name of Bukava. He stayed there with his wife until 1960, the year of the Congo's independence from Belgium, leaving once again for South Africa, before finally settling back in Brussels.