

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Armand Rassenfosse
(Liège 1862 – 1934)

Artibus et Pulebritudini vitam impendere

Signed, dated and dedicated lower edge: *à Paul Lambotte / amicus amico / très affectueux
souvenir / Rassenfosse / 1928*

Red ink and wash, with white highlights, on paper
45 x 32 cm. (17 ¾ x 12 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Paul Lambotte (1862 – 1939), Brussels, by 1928.



'Artibus et Pulebritudini vitam impendere' - an entirely appropriate maxim for the title of Armand Rassenfosse's gift to his friend Paul Lambotte, who, as the director-general of the Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts, did indeed enjoy 'a life spent in Art and Beauty'. Rassenfosse's two Grecian figurines, enveloped and connected by a swirl of white drapery, allegorise these dual and interlinked concepts. Drawn in 1928, Lambotte's sheet is a beautiful example of Rassenfosse's late style, which demonstrates a poised and classical elegance, almost verging on the Art Deco, quite far removed from the sensual Symbolism with which the artist made his name at the turn of the century. The two allegories, with their Olympian features, wavy locks and head bands, clearly derive from Hellenistic statuary (fig. 1).



Fig. 1, Roman 1st century AD copy of a Greek 2nd BC work, marble, 30.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Rassenfosse is perhaps one of the best kept secrets of the fin-de-siècle, very little-known outside of his native Belgian, languishing in the shadow of his great friend and countryman, the inimitable Symbolist innovator Félicien Rops. This is quite unfair, as Rassenfosse is at the very least the equal of Rops when it comes to pure graphic talent and, in his own way, arguably as original, developing his own deeply personal and unconventional style. The two first met in 1886 when Rassenfosse, at the age of twenty-six and up to then largely self-taught, made his way to Paris to seek out Rops in his atelier. Though separated by thirty years, they maintained a close friendship until Rops' death in 1898, developing novel etching techniques together. The year after in 1899 Rassenfosse realised his magnum opus, a series of drawings for Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, still considered a highlight in the field of book illustration.

In the illustrations for *Les Fleurs du mal*, and in his work in the 1890s more generally, the influence of Rops on Rassenfosse is undeniable. However, from the beginnings of the 20th century the younger artist began to move away from his compatriot, his forms becoming softer and developing a sort of sfumato which gives his compositions a dream-like ambiance. Though, like Rops, the driving force behind his work was always the representation of the female form, Rassenfosse's subject-matter started to diversify too

from around this time, with his daring originality on view in works such as *Le Marchand des Masques* (fig. 2) from 1917, whose female figure provides a template for the left-hand allegory in the present work.



Fig. 2, Armand Rassenfosse, *Le Marchand des Masques*, 1917, oil on card, King Baudoin Foundation