

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Eugene de Blaas
(Albano 1843 – 1932 Venice)

Portrait of Paola de Blaas in a white blouse

Signed lower right: *E de Blaas*
Inscribed upper right: Blaas
Black and white chalk on paper
50.6 x 35.4 cm. (20 x 14 in.)



This arresting image is undoubtedly the finest portrait drawing within the known oeuvre of the Italian artist Eugene de Blaas, notable for its scale and finish. De Blaas' mastery is evident throughout, with the more rapidly executed white blouse and fashionable necktie standing in counterpoint to the acutely detailed head, built up with varying degrees of subtle shading and highlights. Also noteworthy is the use of chalk, unusual for de Blaas who invariably worked in watercolour, other than for his rapidly dashed-off preliminary studies.

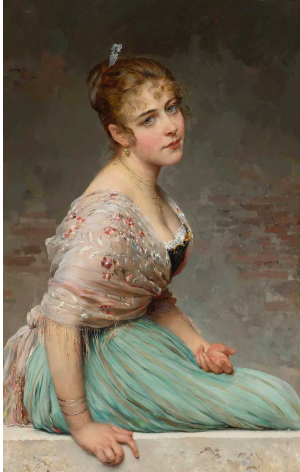


Fig. 1, Eugene de Blaas, *Contemplation*, 1893, oil on canvas, 55 x 35 cm, Private Collection

Portraiture, in the strictest sense as opposed to the studies of generic Italian beauties for which the artist is best known (fig. 1), forms a small but important component within de Blaas' oeuvre. Clearly though it was not a significant source of income for the artist, as most of his portraits depict close family members.

The informality of the medium would suggest that this is also the case here and indeed the sitter is almost certainly the artist's wife Paola de Blaas, née Prina. In a watercolour of Paola from 1898, though the angle is quite different, we see the same aquiline nose, strong chin and narrow lips, crowned by a thick, wavy hair lifted into a chignon (fig. 2). These features also closely accord with a photograph of Paola from about 1875 (fig. 3). The present work likely dates to the late 1880s, when Paola, born in 1844, would have been about 40.



Fig. 2, Eugene de Blaas, *Portrait of Paola de Blaas*, 1898, watercolour, 28 x 21.5 cm, Private Collection

Fig. 3, Photograph from 1875 of Paola and Agnese de Blaas

Though rooted in the classical training de Blaas received from his father, this portrait is a world away from the soft and sweet academicism of his paintings. In technique and feel, it is reminiscent of the early works of several Symbolist and Successionist artists north of the

Alps, particularly from the German speaking world, such as Max Klinger, Franz von Stuck and Gustav Klimt (fig. 4). Perhaps this is not so surprising, given De Blaas' Austrian heritage and his continued links to Vienna through his brother Julius, a professor at the Academy and court painter to the Habsburgs.



Fig. 4, Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of a woman*, c. 1890, charcoal and white chalk on paper, 44 x 32 cm, Private Collection

Born in Albano near Rome to an Italian mother, Agnesina Auda, and a Tyrolean father, the successful painter Karl von Blaas, de Blaas grew up in affluence in Venice. De Blaas studied under his father and others at the Venetian Academy, winning numerous prizes. When time permitted, he would travel to Vienna to help his father on a suite of forty-two frescoes for the Arsenal, completed in 1872. In 1870 de Blaas married Paola Prina and her large private fortune, estimated at one and a half million francs by the artist, allowed the couple to live in some style, acquiring a palazzo in Venice. By this point de Blaas' career had taken off and he was successful in his own right, with an international clientele and exhibitions in Paris, Berlin, Munich, Brussels and London.