

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Emilie Mediz-Pelikan  
(Vöcklabruck 1861 – 1908 Dresden)

*Peasant boy in traditional hat, 1903*

Graphite and watercolour on paper

32.5 x 29 cm

12 3/4 x 11 3/8 in.

Signed, dated, and inscribed upper right: *MITTELBERGE. PELIKAN 19(0)3*

## Provenance

Private collection, until 2023.



This delicate graphite and watercolour drawing by Emilie Mediz-Pelikan (1861-1908) portrays a young Alpine peasant boy half-length against a simple wooden plank backdrop. He wears a crisp white buttoned shirt with broad rustic braces and a dark felt hat adorned with a garland of pink wildflowers, a detail that situates him in traditional regional attire. Mediz-Pelikan's composition closely crops the figure, directing focus to the boy's tilted head and soft, direct gaze.

The inscription "Mittelberge" likely refers to Mittelberg, a village in the Tyrolean Alps, indicating that the drawing was made during one of the artist's frequent Alpine sojourns. The boy's costume - notably the broad-brimmed Alpine hat wreathed in wildflowers - reflects the Tracht (folk dress) of rural Austria at the turn of the century. Such hats, often decorated with flowers or feathers, were emblematic of regional pride and commonly worn during seasonal festivals and daily farm life alike. By portraying a local peasant child in his customary Sunday best, Mediz-Pelikan aligns with the *fin-de-siècle* fascination for peasant themes and the idealisation of the Alpine pastoral context. Contemporary Austrian artists and intellectuals often saw in the rural populace a source of national authenticity and romantic innocence, in contrast to the modern city. The artist, who worked extensively in Tyrol and the South Tyrolean mountains, here celebrates the local character of the region without resorting to sentimental cliché.

Although Emilie Mediz-Pelikan is primarily renowned as a landscape painter, the present portrait of a Peasant Boy exemplifies her versatility and keen eye for human subjects. Trained in Vienna under the landscape artist Albert Zimmermann, she mastered a rigorous academic technique and a love of nature's detail. Zimmermann's influence is evident in her meticulous draftsmanship and the confident rendering of natural textures, even in a work focused on a human figure. Yet Mediz-Pelikan's artistic development did not remain bound by academic convention: in the late 1880s she spent time in Paris studying the Impressionists, and by the 1890s her style had absorbed the looser brushwork and modern colour sensibility of Impressionism.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, her mature work increasingly reflected a Symbolist outlook, infusing natural scenes with emotive atmosphere and subjective mood. While this intimate portrait of a Tyrolean boy is grounded in direct observation, one can sense in its hushed tone and finely tuned colours the same poetic feeling that characterises Mediz-Pelikan's Symbolist-tinged mountain landscapes. Such synthesis of influences – the plein-air naturalism of Impressionism and the introspective mystique of Symbolism – was very much in keeping with the progressive Viennese art circles to which Mediz-Pelikan belonged.

She was an active participant in the Vienna Secession movement, which championed artistic renewal at the dawn of the 20th century. In 1898 Emilie and her husband, the painter Karl Mediz, were invited to exhibit in the inaugural Secession exhibition, each showing three paintings. Her inclusion in this seminal show (alongside Gustav Klimt and other modernists) signalled her standing among the avant-garde of Viennese art. Critics at the time praised her

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<sup>1</sup> For Emilie Mediz-Pelikan's biography see R. Schmidt, "Mediz(-Pelikan), Emilie", in *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950 (ÖBL)*, Vienna 1975, Vol. 6, p. 185.

work: her reputation as a gifted landscape painter and watercolourist was quickly established, and colleagues admired her technical virtuosity and lyrical vision.

She was also an accomplished portraitist, especially in drawing media, and often sketched portraits during her travels (see for example Fig. 1); in fact, the British-Austrian art historian Amelia Sarah Levetus observed that the artist couple “*painted scenery and portraits and everything else between*” on their mountain pilgrimages.



Fig. 1. Emilie Mediz-Pelikan, *Portrait of a young girl*, 1888-1908, pencil on paper. Vienna, Albertina Museum.

All these facets of her talent coalesced around 1903, when Mediz-Pelikan reached a high point in her career. In that year she and Karl Mediz were honoured with a large joint exhibition at the Hagenbund (one of Vienna’s foremost artist associations), where Mediz-Pelikan showed twenty-four paintings and sixteen drawings - likely including portrait studies such as this alongside her alpine views. The exhibition was a critical success: the Austrian state purchased her canvas *Blossoming Chestnut Trees* in 1903 for the newly founded Moderne Galerie (today the Belvedere), and the Hagenbund named her an honorary member, a notable distinction given that the group would not formally admit women artists until 1924.

By the mid-1900s, Mediz-Pelikan was exhibiting beyond Austria as well, with showings of her graphic works in Dresden (1904) and her paintings in the Berlin Künstlerhaus (1905 and 1906). Critics like Levetus, writing in 1905, extolled Mediz-Pelikan’s “immense energy, combined with a poetry of expression” and her superior sense of colouristic nuance, noting that “of the two, Frau Mediz has the wider field... more tones and nuances, more delicacy and more variety” than her husband.

Tragically, Emilie Mediz-Pelikan's promising career was cut short by her premature death in 1908 at the age of forty-seven. Her sudden passing inadvertently consigned her oeuvre to obscurity for many years. Her only daughter, Gertrude, refused to allow exhibitions of her parents' works after their deaths. As a result, despite Mediz-Pelikan's achievements during her lifetime, her paintings and drawings were largely unseen by the public for much of the 20th century. It was only in the 1980s, with political and cultural shifts, that Mediz-Pelikan's legacy began to re-emerge. A small retrospective exhibition in Linz in 1986 marked the first step in the rediscovery of her oeuvre. Scholarly interest since the 2000s has grown, and her paintings and drawings are now celebrated for their unique synthesis of realism and symbolist imagination.

Today, Emilie Mediz-Pelikan's reputation has been firmly reestablished, and her work is featured in prominent collections and exhibitions, reflecting a broadening appreciation of women artists of her era. In 2019, her art was showcased in *City of Women: Female Artists in Vienna 1900–1938* at the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere in Vienna – a landmark exhibition highlighting the often under-recognised contributions of female modernists. Fittingly, the Belvedere Museum itself holds four of Mediz-Pelikan's paintings in its permanent collection (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Emilie Mediz-Pelikan, *Chestnuts in bloom*, 1900, oil on canvas. Vienna, Belvedere Palace.

Her works on paper have also entered esteemed repositories: the Albertina in Vienna houses some 17 of her drawings, and the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden preserves another 15 sheets of her graphic work. In recent years, major international museums have acquired Mediz-Pelikan's works. The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles acquired a large pastel landscape from 1896, and several of her drawings have recently been purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design.