

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Ernest Hébert
(Grenoble 1817 – 1908 La Tronche)

Portrait of a young Neapolitan woman

Signed, dated and located lower right: *Naples 8^{bre} 1875 / E Hébert*

Watercolour

21 x 17 cm.

Provenance:

Private Collection, Pays de la Loire.



Like many of his fellow French 19th-century artists, Ernest Hébert formed a deep attachment to Italy. Its peoples and places were a constant source of inspiration to him. Above all, his subject of predilection was the female peasantry of the peninsula, captivated as he was by their proud bearing and 'deep, cold gazes'.¹ The present watercolour, executed in Naples in 1875, perfectly encapsulates this fascination.

Drawing was a crucial aspect of Hébert's art, as should be expected from an academically trained French artist of this time. Of course its preparatory function was important but, beyond this, drawing served as an essential mode of expression, a way for the artist to distil his emotions with spontaneity. This aspect is clearly visible in the present work, a beautiful watercolour of a young Neapolitan woman, who self-assuredly looks out at the viewer through her beguilingly large eyes. Like other female Italian models depicted by Hébert (fig. 1), the woman possesses a certain gravity, though her immobile features mask her true thoughts and bestow an air of mystery. She is set against a backdrop of bright blue wash, which gives the image a feeling of modernity.



Fig. 1, Ernest Hébert, *Study of a young woman, named Crescenza*, crayon with white highlights on paper, 35 x 32.5 cm, Musée Hébert, Paris

Born in Grenoble, the son of a notary and cousin of Stendahl, Hébert moved to Paris in 1835 to study law, though he simultaneously took art lessons with David d'Angers and Paul Delaroche. His artistic inclinations soon took over and the young painter entered the École de Beaux-Arts, winning the prix de Rome in 1839. Hébert arrived in Rome the following year, overlapping with the directorship of Ingres at the Villa Medici. Staying in Italy for eight years, and visiting much of the peninsula, Hébert returned to France in 1848, where he became a leading artist of the Second Empire. Hébert became best known for his society

¹ 'ces regards profonds et froids' quoted from <https://www.photo.rmn.fr/Package/2C6NU099KFNO?PBC=2C05S9IZDCBN:2C6NU0L9DI1X:2C6NU099KFNO>

portraits, as well as his quasi-Realist depictions of the daily toils of the Italian peasantry (fig. 2).



Fig. 2, Ernest Hébert, *La Fienaroles de San Germano*, oil on canvas, 50.5 x 75 cm, Musée d'Orsay

Hébert was twice director of the Académie de France in Rome, between 1867 and 1872, and again between 1885 and 1890, and enjoyed several other sojourns of various lengths to Italy, continuing to derive inspiration from his country of adoption