

CHARLES DESPIAU (1874 - 1946)

Head of Madame Despiau (Marie Rudel)

Unique Plaster
Unsigned
Damage at the back, on the right below the chignon
H 25,5 x L 22,5 x P 21,5 cm

- This proof is listed as number 2020-3P in the *catalogue critique de l'œuvre sculpté de Charles Despiau* (The Critical Catalogue of the Sculpted Work of Charles Despiau) established by Elisabeth Lebon.

Provenance

- The artist's studio

Marie Rudel, known as Marion, shared Despiau's life from at least 1899 on, and perhaps earlier. They were married in 1903, thus Marie was fully involved in the years of the young sculptor's life after he quit the École des Beaux Arts and was seeking his own path. Extremely poor, the young couple earned their living by coloring postcards, with Marion also making bouquets of dried flowers. Despiau continued his education on his own, working in museums such as the Louvre and the museums of ethnography, comparative sculpture, and Indo-Chinese art at the Palais du Trocadéro. He was counting on a success at the Salon to begin to make a name for himself. Until 1905, he was part of the movement of figurative sculpture "in contemporary dress," which opposed the academy's tradition of the nude. Marion served as Despiau's model. By positioning her in calm, languid poses, he could eliminate all unnecessary detail and treat the clothing as a plane across which the light would glide, topped by a face that was wholly focused inward. Though you can still see the influence of

Rodin's *Balzac* in this piece, elements of Despiau's future work are already well-established. This small head is a study for the large figure *Spleen* (now lost), which was shown at the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1902. A separate bust of that figure, cut just below the shoulders, *à l'italienne*, had been shown earlier, at the 1900 Salon.

Despiau, who was penniless at the time, no doubt made the molds of his work himself, which in certain cases, introduced weaknesses that caused damage apparent today, but he kept the damaged pieces until the end of his life. Through them, he could trace the path that he followed to arrive at the finished forms. In the simplification of its masses, the study for the head of *Spleen* marked a step on the way toward the fruitful new direction that he would soon be taking. It's one of the earliest, if not the very first, surviving bust by this artist, who became one of the great portraitists of his time.

Many years later, Despiau recalled, in conversation with Léon Deshairs: "When I modeled *Spleen* and then *Convalescent*, (…) I was under the influence of Rodin's *Balzac*. Not only did that brilliant work confirm my antipathy for classical drapery, but I also admired the eloquence of its great volume, devoid of petty detail, and it encouraged me to see with my own eyes, forgetting all formulas, all prescriptions."

Elisabeth Lebon, October, 2020