

COLNAGHI



Leonor Fini
Two Standing Figures
Study for Monsieur Vénus by Rachilde, ca. 1971

Leonor Fini

COLNAGHI

LEONOR FINI

(Buenos Aires 1907 – Paris 1996)

TWO STANDING FIGURES (STUDY FOR MONSIEUR VÉNUS BY RACHILDE), ca. 1971

Ink on paper

30 x 23 cm (11 3/4 x 9 in.)

Signed lower centre: "*Leonor Fini*"

Provenance

Leonor Fini Estate, Paris;
Private collection, New York;
Private collection, Italy.

COLNAGHI



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

BRUSSELS

COLNAGHI

The present sheet sets two figures side by side, divided by a single ruled vertical that runs almost the height of the page. At the left stands a woman in an off-shoulder gown, her bodice tightly drawn and her skirt breaking into a long train that sweeps away in a few long, loose strokes. Her hair is piled into an enormous mass of curls, described with a fine, coiling, almost ornamental line, and her face, the most finished passage in the drawing, is turned towards the viewer with a steady, appraising directness. One arm crosses her body, the other is raised high, the fingers meeting the vertical line at the sheet's centre. At the right stands a partially-draped figure, seen from behind and in three-quarter view, weight placed on one leg, arms folded up against the chest, the head turned in profile beneath a loose fall of hair. The body is drawn in a single contour, traveling down the shoulder, spine, hip, calf, with no interior modelling at all, and its sex is deliberately left unresolved.

Fini was a lifelong reader, and from the 1940s onwards the illustrated book became one of the central vehicles of her art. She produced *livres d'artiste* for Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Poe, Verlaine, Genet, Petronius and Pauline Réage, gravitating consistently towards texts concerned with desire, disguise and the instability of the individual self. Among the most sympathetic of these commissions was Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, for which Fini executed thirty-five original etchings, published by the Éditions d'Art Agori in an edition of some 275 numbered copies on Rives, each impression signed by the artist. The plates were printed by Dominique Viglino at Bourg-la-Reine and are dated 1971, while the portfolio itself appeared the following year.

Rachilde was the pen name of Marguerite Eymery (1860–1953), later Vallette, one of the defining figures of French Decadence and, in time, a power at the *Mercure de France*. Published in Brussels in 1884, when she was in her early twenties, *Monsieur Vénus* provoked a prosecution for pornography; the author was convicted in her absence and the edition was banned and ordered destroyed, an expurgated Paris version following in 1889. The novel turns on the aristocrat Raoule de Vénérande and her pursuit of the young florist Jacques Silvert, whom she progressively feminises, reversing the conventional distribution of desire, dress and command, and treating gender itself as something assumed rather than given. Few nineteenth-century books could have suited Fini more exactly. She had been dressed as a boy throughout her own childhood, built a life out of costume and masquerade, and populated her painting for six decades with dominant women and passive, decorative, androgynous men.

The pairing is the argument of Rachilde's novel reduced to its essentials: the clothed, coiffed, self-possessed woman on one side; on the other, the stripped, averted, ambiguous body that is the object rather than the author of the gaze. Fini gives the woman a face and gives the nude only a contour, and the asymmetry is the point.

COLNAGHI

Whether the ruled vertical was intended as an architectural element, a mirror edge or simply a division of the sheet into two studies, it holds the two figures apart while insisting they be read together. Technically the drawing shows Fini's graphic hand at its most economical: a thin, unbroken, unhesitating pen line, no wash, no underdrawing and no correction, with the white of the paper doing all the work of volume and light. The concentration of detail in the coiffure and face against the near-shorthand of the nude is characteristic of her preparatory sheets, where she settles the passages that will carry the plate and leaves the rest provisional.

Born Eleonora Fini in Buenos Aires on 30 August 1907, she was taken as an infant to Trieste by her mother, fleeing a tyrannical husband. To foil his kidnapping attempts, Leonor was dressed as a boy whenever she left the house, an early experience of enforced disguise usually linked to her lifelong obsessions with costume and with the instability of gender. From about the age of thirteen she made regular visits to the public mortuary in Trieste, sitting among and drawing the laid-out dead, where she was struck by how beautifully they were dressed, flowered and cushioned. She later said her interest shifted to the perfection of skeletons, the most resistant corporeal element to decay. At sixteen, an ocular illness confined her to a darkened room with both eyes bandaged for two months, where she learned to construct elaborate images purely in the mind, and it was on emerging that she resolved to become an artist.

Largely self-taught, she absorbed the Flemish primitives and above all the Italian Mannerists, whose elongation and cool eroticism marked her permanently. In 1928 her uncle financed a period of study in Milan. There she met Giorgio de Chirico, exhibited with the Novecento Italiano group, met Sironi and Carrà, and studied under Achille Funi, whose neoclassicism informed her early, Renaissance-inflected portraits. Repelled by the Fascist atmosphere of the city, she travelled to Paris with Arturo Tosi, and settled there permanently around 1931. Max Jacob showed her paintings to Christian Dior, then directing the Galerie Bonjean, who gave her a solo exhibition in 1932 and then introduced her to Elsa Schiaparelli. At a garden party of the couturier Jacques Heim, she met Max Ernst, who became her lover and her entrée to the Surrealist circle so that by 1935, she was already exhibiting alongside de Chirico, Dalí, Ernst, Miró, Picasso and Tanguy in the Surrealist drawing exhibitions at the Galerie des Quatre Chemins. Despite these associations, Fini famously refused to submit to André Breton's authority and openly despised the movement's fixation on the femme-enfant, likewise rejecting the label "woman artist."

Around that time, she gained immense international recognition, holding her first major solo exhibition in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1936, and appearing later that year, in MoMA's landmark *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show. She returned to Paris in 1946, after a period in Rome, where her painting entered its so-

COLNAGHI

called “mineral period,” inspired by the underwater world she discovered in Corsica. Settling first with the painter Stanislao Lepri and, from 1952, the Polish writer Constantin “Kot” Jelenski, she then turned to writing, publishing three novels in the 1970s. She died in Paris on 18 January 1996 and was buried at Saint-Dyé-sur-Loire beside Lepri and Jelenski.

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com