

RONNY VAN DE VELDE



Otto Gutfreund (Dvur Králové 1889 - Königinhof/Elbe 1927)

Cubist still life and female figure, c. 1914

Pencil on paper
277 x 227 mm

With the atelier stamp numbered 20 on the reverse

In 1909, art student Otto Gutfreund discovers the work of Antoine Bourdelle at an exhibition in Prague.

Under this stimulus, he travels to Paris and for a year follows lessons with the famous sculptor.

Gutfreund's new, expressionist visual language shows a cubist influence from 1912 on, and the principles of analytic cubism quickly gain the upper hand. The aim is no longer for a harmony of continuous 'general' forms but rather a subjective intervention that dissolves the motif through sharp contrasts. Now it is about creating an independent, sculptural space out of discontinuous movements. The sculpture suggestively conducts the viewer's gaze, the gaze that can again reassemble the broken up, rearranged masses. Gutfreund's cubist drawings are autonomous works as well as being project-designs for sculptures, as with *Morning Toilette* (1911) and *Cubist Bust* (1914). In contrast to the 'heaviness' of the final sculptures – that indeed have the advantage of revealing all facets to the enveloping gaze – the drawings are remarkably light. In a few planes and lines the figures are decomposed and displayed to the viewer as recomposable. The expressive fragments of some drawings are no longer present in the completed sculpture. Gutfreund was very much aware of the complex nature of the creative process. In 1913, for example, he notes that the new sculpture has a 'tendency to contain an abundance in a single point, to enrich a single view from elements of other views, to condense an entire abundance into each view. This leads to new formal possibilities, new conditions and new questions. The solution to these questions is the task of a strong individuality; they will not be solved theoretically, but intuitively, in agreement with other sensibilities. The answer will emerge from the given preconditions of the age and its views.'

Provenance:

Estate of the artist

Acquired by Eric Estorick (Grosvenor Gallery, London) in the 1960s

Artist description:

Otto Gutfreund, born in 1889, is one of the few modern Czech sculptors to have attained an international reputation beyond the borders of his own country. During a crucial phase in the development of European sculpture, Gutfreund kept abreast of developments, developed a distinctive style of his own and consequently exerted an influence on the European avant-garde. Gutfreund grew up in a Jewish environment in a small town in northern Bohemia. After attending a pottery school at Bechyne from 1903 and the Prague School for the Decorative and Applied Arts from 1906 to 1909, Otto Gutfreund went to Paris to study under Émile-Antoine Bourdelle, who taught the sculpture class at the private Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Gutfreund worked in Bourdelle's studio until 1910. His direct experience of contemporary painting in Paris moulded Gutfreund's definition of his aims as a sculptor and the path his work would follow: 'Being a sculptor does not just mean being able to model. The sculptor must be a mathematician in the first instance, who builds mass in according to a deliberate plan, that means he must be an architect.' After visiting several western European cities, Otto Gutfreund returned to Prague in 1910, where he joined the group of artists known as 'Skupina výtvarných umelcu v Praze', whose first (of four) shows was mounted at the Prague parish hall in 1912. Gutfreund showed some sculptures at the first 'Deutscher Herbstsalon' in 1913 and was also represented at Herwarth Walden's Berlin gallery, Der Sturm, as well as the Goltz salon in Munich. Gutfreund, who was by then on the threshold of Cubism after his personal experience of the Paris school, developed these leanings further along with the Czech painters Emil Filla and Bohumil Kubišta, becoming a leading exponent of Cubist sculpture with Picasso and Archipenko. After serving in the first world war, when he was interned in a camp in Provence, Otto Gutfreund eked out a living doing odd jobs in Paris from 1918. After gradually recovering his creative powers, Gutfreund returned to Prague in 1920. There he joined the artists' association 'SVU Mánes' in 1921. After experimenting briefly with Constructivism in 1919, Gutfreund returned to figuration in the 1920s. In 1926 he was appointed professor of architectural sculpture at the Prague School for the Decorative and Applied Arts. Only a year later Otto Gutfreund drowned himself in the Moldau on 2 June 1927.