

EXTREMELY RARE FEMALE NUDE GROUP PAINTING

BY SANYU

QUATRE NUS

TO LEAD SOTHEBY'S HONG KONG
MODERN ART SALE IN SPRING 2020



Sanyu, *Quatre Nus*

1950s, oil on masonite, 100 by 122 cm, estimate upon request

Hong Kong, 15 November 2019 Following the record-breaking price for a work by **Sanyu** achieved at Sotheby's Hong Kong in October, another iconic masterpiece by the Chinese émigré artist, ***Quatre Nus***, is set to lead Sotheby's Modern Art sale in Spring 2020. Paintings by Sanyu depicting a group of female nudes rarely appear on the market, not least those on a grand scale, making the emergence of this exceptional work from the artist's later years a momentous event.

Vinci Chang, Sotheby's Head of Modern Asian Art, commented: "This autumn, we set a new benchmark for Sanyu when *Nu* was sold for a record HK\$198 million (US\$25.2 million). With interest in the artist at an all-time high, Sanyu's paintings of female nudes, particularly the larger-scale works, have sparked lively conversations amongst collectors and art lovers worldwide, both for their aesthetic value and their place in modern art history. By the time he created *Quatre Nus* in the post-war 1950s, life and art for Sanyu were reaching new expressive peaks, his awe of the female nude, in all its vitality, providing the impetus for an extraordinary body of work. *Quatre Nus* is arguably the most alluring of these masterpieces, and undoubtedly of huge appeal to today's collectors."

RAVISHING BEAUTY IN GREEN

Peacetime in the late 1950s and 1960s offered Sanyu a precious opportunity to reinvent his approach to well-established and important subject matters from his early career, including the female nude. The emerging post-war avant-garde movement had stirred within him a newly creative passion, and he proceeded to create a series of large-format female nudes of a kind that his audience had never seen before. These proved to be the masterpieces of his later years.

Sanyu's early female nude paintings tended to feature a single figure, while his later creations depicting a group of nudes marked a breakthrough in composition, style and the use of perspective. From early in his career, Sanyu had been creating multiple paintings with similar compositions, in different colours or brushstrokes, especially if he was fond of the work. *Quatre Nus* is one of these creations, completed after a meticulous artistic process, and the most representational composition within the series.

According to *SANYU Catalogue Raisonné: Oil Paintings*, the artist produced only six paintings depicting groups of three or more female nudes, including *Quatre nus sur un tapis d'or*, in the collection of the National Museum of History in Taipei. These six works dedicated to group figures were all completed in the 1950s, and among them *Quatre Nus* is the most vivid in its composition. Exceeding one metre in both height and width, *Quatre Nus* applies a diagonal composition in its depiction of four reclining female nude figures. Their postures, hair colour, and facial features are each different: one rests her head on her arm, two are whispering together, and one has her hand on her cheek. They all appear to be enjoying a warm summer's day reclining on the grass.

A METICULOUS CREATIVE PROCESS

At the same time he was creating *Quatre Nus*, Sanyu was working on two further oil paintings: *Trois nus* (87 x 122 cm) and *Quatre nus* (95.5 x 125 cm), both of similar composition and at a smaller scale. The present lot, *Quatre Nus*, combines the best elements of these two works, achieving a balance between the abstract and the figurative, and imbuing the scene with an elegant restraint. In perfecting his masterpiece through painstaking effort, this painting certainly held an important place in the artist's heart.

PIONEERING THE FORM OF FEMALE NUDE

Female nudes in Sanyu's paintings are often distorted and exaggerated. In the 1920s, the renowned Chinese poet Xu Zhimo humorously referred to Sanyu's nudes as the 'thighs of the universe,' – certainly an original description of their beauty. Upon closer examination, the slim forms in the painting evoke a healthy female body in all its allure, as it stretches and relaxes. Against a luminous green semi-abstract background, the viewer is invited to gaze upon the postures of the figures, which are full of ease, and the almost translucent skin tone. The way of depicting these women was a departure from the style of the Western canon of classical painting, an evolution of the approach to female nudes explored by Sanyu in the 1920s and '30s. The artist's pushing of boundaries signified that he was truly an artist of his time, if not, ahead of it.

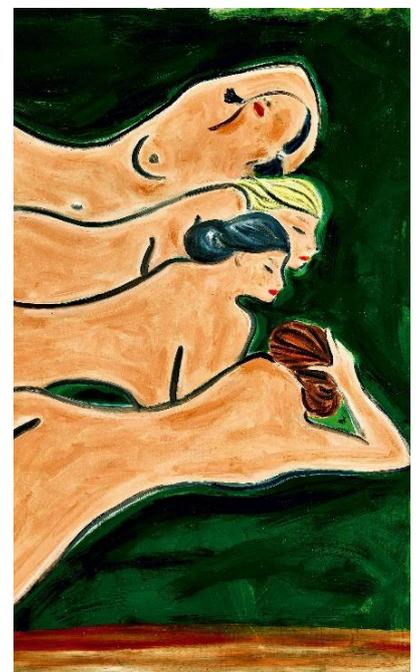


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