

GUSTAVE COURBET
(1819-1877)

La Dame à la Mouette

Plaster

Diam 70 cm.

Signed in the plaster: G. Courbet

The medallion of La Dame à la Mouette or The Woman with the Seagull was commissioned from Courbet in 1876 by M. Nicollier during the last years of his life, when the artist was in exile in Switzerland. It was his last work and was one of two reliefs depicting women, which he executed for the facade on a building at the corner of the quai Perdonnet and the square of the Ancien-Port at Vevey. The grand-son of the proprietor Oscar Nicollier remembered seeing Courbet dressed in a large white smock perched on a ladder working on the piece (C. Leger, Courbet, Paris 1929, p. 200 & illus.p.201). This is a plaster maquette for the final model; there is another of identical dimensions in the Musée Jenisch, Vevey (cf. R.Fernier, La Vie et l'Oeuvre de Gustave Courbet, Geneva 1978, vol. II, p.318, no.8 illus.). In a letter from Courbet to Ruchonnet (Doc. 92), the artist states that plaster copies of the relief are for sale (Pierre Chessex, Paul-André Jaccard and Leo Mingrone, exh. cat. Courbet et la Suisse, Château de la Tour-de-Peilz, Switzerland 1982, no.93). The present plaster appears to be the only other example, presumably sold by Courbet, of the plaster at Vevey, which hitherto was considered to be the only version extant, and from which a bronze was cast in 1982 by M. Pastori in Geneva for the Musée Jenisch at Vevey.

Dr. Paul Collin, a close friend of Courbet's who visited the sculptor before his death, recorded that the artist believed himself to be as great a sculptor as painter. " Il avait exécuté un médaillon d'un sentiment très-tendre et dont il m'a parlé plus d'une fois" (C. Lemonnier G. Courbet et Son Oeuvre, Paris 1878, p.89). Courbet told the doctor that he had made the relief for one of his friends at Vevey. The médaillon depicting the head of a woman deep in meditation with a seagull perched above her forehead was also entitled La Dame du Lac by Courbet since he said the seagull was that of the lake, presumably the neighbouring lake, Geneva. Dr Collin further noted that the woman symbolised exile and the seagull on her forehead to which she conveyed her thoughts represented the absent fatherland.

It is interesting to note that this is not an isolated example of the theme of the seagull in Courbet's work, his Fille aux Mouettes painted at Trouville in 1865 (James S. Deely coll., New York) depicts a girl carrying seagulls.