

Otto Schoff, Two Female Circus Performers with a Donkey, c. 1920, watercolor on paper, 37.1 x 29.8 cm, signed lower right "Schoff," handwritten dealer's mark on the reverse, mounted on cardboard at the top. Condition: Small tears at the edges, browned at the edges, otherwise good.

The print was provided – in museum quality – with a new passe-partout (60 x 45 cm) of the company HALBE. A fitting frame – in museum quality – with museum glass (anti-reflective, very high UV protection, anti-static, abrasion resistant) of the company HALBE can be provided on request.

Otto Schoff (Bremen 1884 – 1938 Berlin) was one of the most interesting and provocative artists of the 1920s, but his art, which also addressed female and male homosexuality, was defamed by the Nazis as “degenerate” and many of his works were destroyed. As a result, his life ended far too early. The once celebrated and now almost forgotten painter, graphic artist, and illustrator urgently needs to be rediscovered by a wider public.

Coming from a modest background, Schoff initially began an apprenticeship in a tobacco factory and with a decorative painter before taking lessons at the Bremen School of Applied Arts in 1902 and with Otto Linnemann (1876–1961) in Frankfurt am Main in 1903. On the recommendation of Gustav Pauli (1866–1938), director of the Kunsthalle Bremen, Schoff was accepted at the School of Applied Arts in Berlin in 1909, where he became a student of Emil Orlik (1870–1932). After this highly formative period, a one-year scholarship from the city of Bremen enabled him to spend an extended period in Paris in 1913/14—together with George Grosz (1893–1959) and Herbert Fiedler (1891–1962)—where he took lessons at the Académie Colarossi.

Back in Berlin, he exhibited at J. B. Neumann. In 1914, the magazine *Kunst und Künstler* wrote: "The Graphisches Kabinet (J. B. Neumann) introduced the talented graphic artist Otto Schoff. Schoff is a student of Orlik, and one senses influences from Pascin and Guys, as well as other dependencies. But his drawings of Parisian grisetten life also reveal a peculiar wooden grace that heralds a personal talent for illustration." Shortly thereafter, he was drafted into military service—his efforts to avoid conscription failed. In 1918, he suffered gas poisoning on the Western Front.

After World War I, Schoff moved into a studio on Motzstraße in Schöneberg, which he kept until his death. A veritable creative frenzy began. In addition to paintings and watercolors, he produced large portfolios and illustrations for books—most of them with an erotic-sexual background: Martha, drawn after a virtuous girl by Benjamin Schmolke (1920), Étienne de Jouy's Sappho or The Lesbians (1920), August von Platen's The Condemned Eros (1921), Joachim Ringelnatz's Seafarers (1922), Ernst Wenger's Bacchanalia of Love. Verses (1922), Théophile Gautier's Das Hündchen der Marquise (The Marquise's Little Dog) (1922), Kindergarten (1923), Die Liebesspiele der Venus (The Love Games of Venus) (1924), Bordell (Brothel) (1924), Orgien (Orgies) (1924), Mädchenfreundschaft (Girl Friendship) and Knabenliebe (Boy Love) (1925), Allerlei Liebesspiele (All Kinds of Love Games) (1925), Pierre Louÿs' Les chansons de Bilitis (1926), Albius Tibullus' The Book of Marathus. Elegies of Boy Love (1928), Perpetual Calendar (1930), etc.

Two of the most important gallery owners of the time were crucial to Schoff's success with these often very explicit motifs: Wolfgang Gurlitt (1888–1965) and Alfred Flechtheim (1878–1937). Both sold several of these graphic portfolios, with Flechtheim in particular also representing him with other works. In addition, between 1926 and 1929, Schoff participated in the exhibitions of the Berlin Secession, the Second Exhibition of Post-Impressionist Art at the National Gallery in 1928, Flechtheim's group exhibition *Seit Liebermann in Deutschland* (Since Liebermann in Germany) in 1930, etc. From 1928 onwards, Schoff's works were featured annually in the magazine *Jugend*. In 1928, the magazine *Kunst der Zeit* placed his humorous sketches in a series alongside those of George Grosz, Otto Dix (1891–1969), and others.

Although Hermann Göring (1893–1946) collected Otto Schoff's works, his milieu studies, big-city scenes, and erotic and homosexual depictions of men and women were classified as “degenerate” by the Nazis in 1935, meaning that he was no longer allowed to exhibit. In 1937, as part of the “Degenerate Art” campaign, many of Schoff's works were confiscated—e.g., from museums in Dortmund and Ulm; the Kunsthalle Bremen appears to have voluntarily destroyed at least one work—and destroyed. After the Gestapo searched his studio and confiscated many more works, Otto Schoff died on July 3, 1938, allegedly of cardiac arrest. Shortly thereafter, his fiancée Ilse Thäns took her own life.

An original watercolor by Schoff such as the one offered here is rather rare on the market due to the destruction of many of his works as described above—even the MoMA and the Met in New York, for example, only have parts of his portfolio in their collections. The watercolor is probably related to a series of circus depictions by Schoff and can be dated to the early 1920s. In 1923, two watercolors of similar size with the titles *Circusreiterin auf dem Pferde stehend* (Female Circus Rider Standing on Horseback) (lot 484) and *Circusreiterin beim Aufsitzen* (Female Circus Rider Mounting Horse) (lot 485) were sold by Paul Graupe (1881–1953) in Berlin.

This work shows two female circus performers who appear as a lesbian couple on other sheets. Both wear the bobbed hairstyle typical of the time and are scantily clad for their circus act in red swimsuits and red shoes. The red is repeated in a piece of clothing placed in the background, as well as in one of the underpants on a clothesline—for Schoff, a rather harmless erotic allusion. Whether the somewhat moronic-looking donkey, which appears to be part of the circus act, refers to a male-connoted meta-level and what that means remains a matter of speculation. It is a wonderful drawing by Otto Schoff, containing many elements that we today associate with the art of the 1920s and the Weimar Republic.