

Willi Münch-Khe, Portrait of Hans Thoma, 1920, etching on paper, 205 x 148 mm (image = plate), 357 x 242 mm (sheet), signed with pencil lower right “W Münch-K” and numbered lower left “91/100,” stamped “HvR” on the reverse, indicating the Horst von Rabenau Collection, unframed. Condition: slight creases along the edge, but overall very good.

The print was provided – in museum quality – with a new passe-partout (40 x 30 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.

Willi Münch-Khe (Karlsruhe 1885 – 1960 Karlsruhe), born Heinrich Eduard Wilhelm Münch, was the last master student of the famous painter and professor Hans Thoma (1839–1924). To avoid confusion with the artist Willi Münch-München, he added “Khe” (for Karlsruhe) to his name. During his lifetime, Münch-Khe—whose work deserves to be rediscovered—was a well-established painter, graphic artist, porcelain and ceramics artisan, and interior designer.

Born the son of a postal worker, Münch-Khe first completed an apprenticeship as a stained-glass artist before studying primarily the art of etching under the Karlsruhe-based graphic artist Walter Conz (1872–1947), as well as under Ludwig Schmid-Reutte (1862–1909). At the State Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe, he became the last master student of Hans Thoma. At the same time, he worked for the State Majolica Manufactory there. From 1911 to 1914, he lived in Meissen, then in Leipzig, and from 1919 onward in Wangen on Lake Constance. As an early artist, he worked throughout these years for the former Royal Meissen Porcelain Manufactory, as well as for Rosenthal and others. Beginning in 1934, he returned to Leipzig and then moved to Berlin in 1934 before settling back on Lake Constance (Hegau) in 1939.

During the Nazi era—a period often omitted from biographies—the artist adapted to the circumstances, continued to exhibit his work, and can be classified as a follower. He participated in several *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* without—as far as we know today—revealing himself to be a staunch Nazi. His drawing *Unser Luftschutzwart F. Hagen* (Our Air-Raid Warden F. Hagen), shown there in 1940, is relatively harmless compared to the work of other artists of the time. However, his name also appears in the journal *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte. Zentrale politische und kulturelle Zeitschrift der NSDAP* (74.1936), edited by Alfred Rosenberg. In the early 1940s, he published the adventure novels *Die Flaschenpost* and *Kapitän Römer bezwingt den Atlantik*, the latter about Captain Franz Römer, who in 1928 became the first person to cross the Atlantic in a Klepper folding boat.

After World War II, Willi Münch-Khe lived in Argentina from 1949 to 1953. Upon his return to Germany in 1954, he once again began creating designs for the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory, as well as for the well-known companies Villeroy & Boch and Hutschenreuther. He died in 1950 in his hometown of Karlsruhe.

The portrait offered here depicts the famous painter and professor at the Karlsruhe Academy of Art, Hans Thoma, whose last master student had been Münch-Khe. To mark the master's 80th birthday in 1919, Münch-Khe created several portraits of the elderly Thoma, including this etching. It displays many of the characteristics for which Münch-Khe was praised. For instance, the well-known art critic Joseph August Beringer attests in the prominent journal *Die Kunst für alle* (35.1919/20, pp. 193–196) that Münch-Khe possesses an “outstanding and

strong sense of style....” And he states: “There may be freer, more witty improvisations in portraits by contemporary artists; but in terms of visual impact, coherence, meticulous formal execution, and yet a grand vision, few in modern printmaking will surpass them. Above all, the clarity and confidence of form and expression are admirable...”. It is precisely the expression of Thoma, who fixes us with his piercing gaze, that stands at the center of the composition.

A few years later, Werner Teupser would write in the journal *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (57.1925/26, pp. 207–210): “A very special aspect of Münch’s art has always been his portraiture. It is here that he most directly demonstrates his skill as a draftsman and his quick and sure grasp of his subject.” And finally: “Willi Münch-Khe is now in the prime of his creative career.” This very well-preserved etching from a prominent collection is representative of this period in the artist’s career.

Provenance

The print was once part of the Collection of Horst von Rabenau, which became apparent by the collector’s stamp (Lugt 4427) on the backside.

Horst von Rabenau, who came from an aristocratic family first mentioned in documents in the 13th century, was born in Rybnik in Silesia in 1899, but spent his youth in Pyritz (Polish: Pyrzyce) in West Pomerania. After serving as a soldier in the First World War, he studied dentistry at the University of Greifswald, received his doctorate in 1923 and set up as a dentist in Stolp (Polish: Słupsk). During this time, he began to collect African art in particular, partly as a result of several trips to Africa, but also prints, and became friends with the painter Walter Timmling (1891–1948). Von Rabenau fought on several fronts during the Second World War. Afterwards, his family had to flee their homeland, which had now become Polish, and found a new home in Wuppertal, where his wife was from. He lost his entire collection during the Second World War.

From the 1950s onwards, von Rabenau built up a new collection, concentrating now primarily on German, Dutch and French prints and – to a lesser extent – drawings from the 15th to 19th centuries. He acquired these mainly from the Düsseldorf art dealer C. G. Boerner. Horst von Rabenau's collection remained in the family until his death in 1993 and was only gradually broken up in the last two decades.