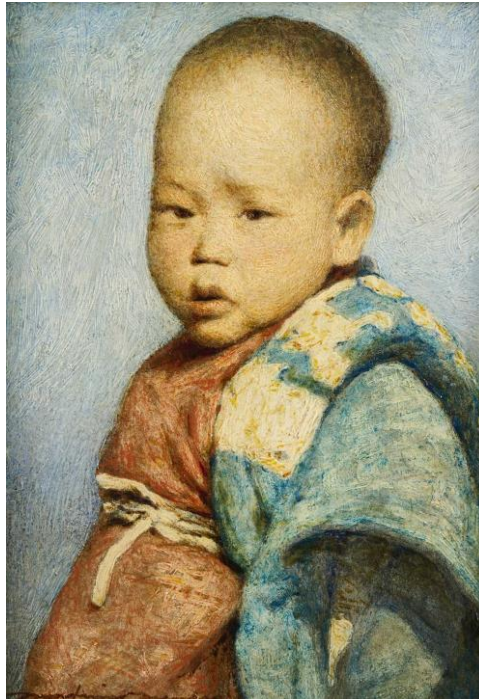


A GLOBAL GAZE FROM AN AUSTRALIAN BRUSH: MORTIMER MENPES MASTERPIECES SET FOR JUNE AUCTION

15 rare works by the Australian artist, raconteur and traveller to head to auction in June



Young Boy, Japan by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £1,500-2,500 (lot 5)

LONDON, UK. MAY 2025. Olympia Auctions is excited to present a rare group of fifteen artworks by the famed Australian painter Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938). The renowned artist was born in Port Adelaide, Southern Australia in 1855 and moved to the UK in his 20's. Little did he know the impact he would have on the global art world. He soon went on to exhibit at the Royal Academy (1880) and became a member of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers in 1881, Royal Society of British Artists in 1885, Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours in 1897 and Royal Institute of Oil Painters in 1899. His works will be offered in a sale of **Fine Paintings, Works on Paper and Sculpture at Olympia Auctions in the UK on 11th June.**

He is most celebrated for his insights into other cultures through his travel to Japan and India amongst other countries and these rare works reflect this. Over fifteen years, starting in 1887, Menpes made regular trips to Asia as well as South America and Africa. The paintings he returned with describe everyday life at the end of the nineteenth century in what were then very distant, often closed and extremely foreign places and societies. The sale is especially representative of the people he encountered in Japan and vistas of India, including Kashmir.

The works he brought back from his travels shed a fascinating and rare first-hand light on the local customs, costumes and habits of the sights he saw and the locals he encountered. Typically painted on small pieces of panel or board measuring approximately 10 x 16cm for ease of transport, the small format of the paintings possess a vigour of execution that clearly suited his scrutiny of the subject before him. He put what he saw as if under a microscope, and in the process achieved a remarkable intensity of expression in each work.

His interest in the Far East, in particular Japan, was stimulated by working in London as studio assistant to James McNeil Whistler, the leading advocate of *japonisme*, the style at the time which was all the rage. Menpes subsequently made two visits to Japan, in 1887 and 1896 (a trip Whistler was never able to make himself). Five of the works in the sale were painted during Menpes' second trip, including four small, exquisite and intimately painted Japanese character studies in oil on board in which the sitters completely fill the picture surface.

Lot 5 in the sale is a half-length study of a very young Japanese boy (estimate £1,500-2,500) – see main image. Dressed in what we would call 'traditional costume' but which are clearly his every-day garments, Menpes' depiction of the striking round bald dome of the child's head suggests his natural intelligence, while the candour of his gaze for one so young as he turns to look the viewer directly in the eye is disarming.

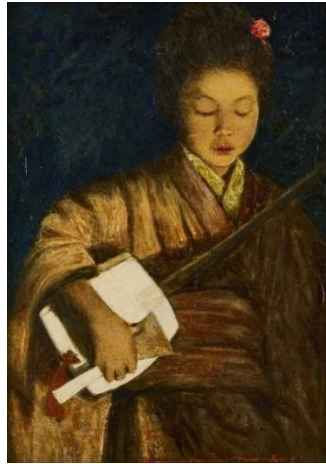
Another small format work *Mother with her Baby on her back* (lot 7 – estimate £2,500-3,500), shows a half-length study of a Japanese mother walking intently with her eyes cast down carrying a baby in a sling across her back. The child's head lolls to one side. Menpes was clearly interested in Japanese attitudes to young children, including how they were so often carried in this manner. In the book he illustrated and published on his travels in Japan he illustrates three similar examples of this quintessentially Japanese habit. **Lot 7** (below)



Mother with Her Baby on her Back, Japan by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £1,500-£2,500 (lot 7)

Two of Menpes paintings of Japan in the sale, one of a geisha and one of a stencil-maker (lots 6 & 9 - £2,500-3,500 & £1,500-2,500 respectively) describe the working life of the Japanese. Menpes was fascinated by geishas, he described them as wanting to be 'as charming as nature and art will allow; she wants to be beautiful... the geisha is always a picture, beautiful beyond description'. His study of a geisha in the upcoming auction depicts the young girl in a

striking light, her face illuminated as she plays the shamisen a traditional three-stringed instrument that all geishas were obliged to learn to serenade their guests. **Lot 6** (below)



Geisha Playing the Shamisen by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £2,500 - £3,500 (lot 6)

Menpes also recorded his delight in the work of the stencil maker: 'Stencil cutting is one of the most beautiful arts imaginable. To see the stencil-workers cutting fantastic designs from the hard polished cardboard beneath their instruments – so delicate that it is like the tracery of a spider's web in its tenuity – is a sight that one never forgets.' Menpes' study of a stencil-maker labouring over his craft, his razor sharp scalpel in hand as he squints intently at his work, is captivating. **Lot 9** (below)



The Stencil-Maker by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £1,500-£2,500 (lot 9)

Menpes interest in evoking authentic life in Japan is evident in a watercolour in the sale in which he paints an umbrella seller promoting his wares outside his shop (lot 10 – estimate £1,000-1,500). For period realism he mounted the work within a Japanese stencilled and ornamented handscreen fan.

Lot 10 (below)



Umbrellas and Commerce, Japan by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £1,000-£1,500 (lot 10)

As well as Japan, three views of India feature in the sale. Two are small format vistas looking across the Ganges, one painted in Benares (lots 1 & 2 - estimates £3,500-5,500 & £3,000-5,000 respectively). The third rather larger painting depicts a mother cooking outside in a village on the bank of a river in Kashmir surrounded by small children playing (lot 3 - estimate £5,000-7,000).

All three works featured in Menpes' exhibition *India, Burma and Cashmere* [sic] at the Dowdeswell gallery on New Bond Street in 1891. And the two paintings of the Ganges are offered still in their original Menpes commissioned Japanese frames that were such a feature of his London exhibitions.

Lot 1 (below)



On the Marge of the Sunset, Benares by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £3,500- £5,500 (lot 1)

Menpes had been so taken with the quality of Japanese craftsmanship on his travels in the country that he ordered two hundred frames to be made for him there and sent back to England. On their arrival in London they were gilded by the framer Frederick Grau in his Fulham workshop (Grau's label still remains stuck to the back of the frame of lot 1). The delicate fluted designs with their distinctive off-set windows presented Menpes' small format paintings to perfection, especially when hung close together in clusters 'Japanese style' – reflecting the country's aesthetic for the careful placement of objects in space. London buyers at the Dowdeswell exhibition were captivated, with several collectors buying multiple works. Lot 2 (below)



On the Ganges by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £3,000-£5,000 (lot 2)

Menpes' fascination for Japan spilled over into his every day life. With the success of his exhibitions at the Dowdeswell gallery he commissioned a leading architect A.H. Mackmurdo to design and build him a distinctive Japanese style house just off Sloane Square at 25 Cadogan Gardens. Menpes decorated the interiors in authentic Japanese style carried out by Japanese craftsmen. He entertained in lavish style and enjoyed the company of a roster of leading figures from Oscar Wilde to Arthur Conan Doyle and was visited there by the Prince of Wales. The house remains to this day, although sadly the Japanese interiors are no longer in situ.



Family in Kashmir by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £5,000-£7,000 (lot 3)

As well as Asia, Menpes also travelled to Africa and South America and throughout Europe. His trips are recorded in the sale in lots 4, 12 and 13 with scenes from Morocco, Mexico and Venice (estimates £1,200-1,800, £800-1,200 and £1,500-2,500 respectively). Menpes was also a highly able etcher, a skill he had originally perfected whilst working for Whistler. He returned to printing in later life and a delicate etching of the interior of the church of Saint-Maclou, Rouen is lot 15 in the sale (£200-300).

Menpes' work is in numerous public collections including the British Museum, Tate Britain, Sheffield Museums, Penlee House Gallery and Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide where the most recent retrospective of the artist's work was held in 2014: *The World of Mortimer Menpes, Painter, Etcher, Raconteur*. Nine of the works being offered in the forthcoming auction were featured in this exhibition.



A Root Seller by Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938)
Estimate £1,200-£1,800 (lot 4)

Biography

Menpes grew up in Port Adelaide, Southern Australia where he showed early artistic potential. In 1875, aged twenty, he arrived in London with his parents, two of his sisters and Rosa Grosse to whom Menpes' father was guardian, her father having recently died. The sole beneficiary of her father's estate, Rosa became engaged to Menpes on the voyage over, and the couple were married shortly after arriving in Britain. It was a fortuitous union, Menpes acknowledged that it gave him both financial assurance and considerable artistic freedom.

Menpes studied in London at The Government School of Design, South Kensington (now the Royal College of Art). But it was his meeting with James McNeill Whistler in 1880 that transformed both his work and his social network. Together with Walter Sickert he worked as Whistler's studio assistant, accompanied the American artist on sketching trips and shared a flat with him in Chelsea. Greatly influenced by Whistler's aesthetic in particular his exploration of *Japonisme*, after his first trip to Japan in 1887 he held his first major exhibition: *Paintings, Drawings and Etchings of Japan* at Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell's, 160 New Bond Street in 1888.

The show was a huge success, but it caused his rupture with Whistler, who was furious that his seminal influence on the younger artist's work had not been acknowledged in the catalogue. Despite Whistler's ire, the exhibition marked the beginning of Menpes' long and successful collaboration with Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell's. Virtually every other year Menpes travelled to distant parts returning with material to be show, such as India, Burma, Kashmir, Italy, France, Morocco, Egypt and Mexico.

In 1900 he was commissioned by the magazine *Black and White Illustrated Weekly* to accompany the City of London Imperial Volunteers as a war artist during the Boer War in South Africa. Two years later he returned to India to cover the *Delhi Durbar* - the coronation of King George VII, Emperor of India - for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Illustrated London News* and *Punch* magazine. In London, in conjunction with the publishers A & C Black he pioneered a new form of illustrated travel book, printed in colour, and established a colour printing firm The Menpes Press.

In the early 1900s he and Rosa built Iris Court in Pangbourne in Reading, and in true opportunistic and entrepreneurial spirit he re-invented himself as a market-gardener, setting up Menpes Fruit Farms close by in Purley-on-Thames. There he constructed forty large green houses in which to grow flowers – especially carnations – fruit and vegetables. He also built eight cottages to accommodate the farm workers. Away from the London and the limelight he lived for the last three decades of his life in the relative calm of the 'shires.

Menpes first showed his work at the Royal Academy in 1880, he became a member of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers in 1881, Royal Society of British Artists in 1885, Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours in 1897 and Royal Institute of Oil Painters in 1899.

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