Georges Clairin, *Sarah Bernhardt in the Role of Izeyl*
Paris 1843 – 1919 Belle-Île-en-Mer

oil on canvas, *circa* 1894
46 by 30 inches (117 by 76 cm.)
signed at the lower right corner*: 'G. Clairin'*

provenance: Private collection, France;
sold Millon & Associés. Paris, December 8, 1997, no. 186 (as "Sarah Bernhardt");
Private collection, France

note: The very dapper Georges Clairin (figs. 1a -c) studied in the workshops of the traditional painters Isidore Pils and François-Édouard Picot before in 1861 entering the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and then first exhibited at the Salon in 1866. In 1869 he travelled to North Africa where he would return several times, and this inspired both scenes of native life and fantasy.[1] During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 he served in the Garde National and was posted as an *attaché* to the French embassy in Tangiers.[2] Later he had success as both a symbolist and decorative painter especially of theaters. He even designed the *décors* for the first production of Bizet's *Carmen*, but Clairin was best known for his famous friends – the painters Henri Regnault, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Marià Fortuny, the composer Camille Saint-Saëns and, above all, the great actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923). They met about 1874,[3] and he was first her lover and then one of her closest confidants for nearly fifty years. The handsome Clairin, who has been described as "warm, cultivated, amusing and critical in the way of a loving brother,"[4] was "a hopeless romantic, who dressed the part of a painter in the most expensive of bohemian clothes."[5] Proust's friend, the composer Reynaldo Hahn (1875-1947), who often visited Bernhardt late in her life, described Clairin as a "delicate-minded, magnanimous artist." And he related that Clairin called Bernhardt "Dame Jolie," and she called him "Jojotte."[6] In 1878 Clairin accompanied Sarah on her infamous ascent over Paris in a hot air balloon (fig. 2), about which she wrote a charming account, *In the Clouds*, illustrated with "delightful drawings" by Clairin.[7] He also helped decorate her luxurious new Parisian house on the corner of the Avenue de Villiers and the rue Fortuny with a fresco of *Aurora,*[8] and later in 1887, he was with her when she discovered the location of her dream escape house in Brittany at Belle-Île-en-Mer. There she built a bungalow for him where he could work and also take seaweed baths, and they spent many summers together playing tennis, dancing, and entertaining (figs. 3a-b),[9] and there he died. He also joined her on her tours to London in 1879 and 1896. But most importantly it was Clairin, along with the Czech artist Alphonse Mucha, who provided posters and depictions of Madame Sarah that helped spread her image and fame. The first sensational canvas was the over-life-size portrait of Sarah lounging at home with her sleek wolfhound at her feet (fig. 4a). This was shown at the Salon of 1876 and won the praise of some critics, but both Émile Zola and Henry James disliked it.[10] Nevertheless, Clairin, who told a friend that formerly his inspiration had been absinthe, but "now it's Sarah,"[11] went on to produce many images of the "Divine Sarah" in allegorical works (fig. 4b),[12] and in both private moments (figs. 5a-d) and in a variety of her theatrical roles (figs. 6a-j), although in some cases it is difficult to tell them apart.

Bernhardt had immense talent to go with what Victor Hugo called "her golden voice." The writer Jules Lemaître outlined three causes for "the powerful attraction which Sarah Bernhardt exerts on us." These were first of all her intelligence; she "understands the parts she plays, constructs them carefully and plays them without sparing herself." The second cause was "her physical appearance…heaven has endowed her with exceptional gifts; it has made her strange, surprisingly

slender and supple, and it has covered her thin face with a disturbing grace." In addition to her chameleon-like ability to adapt her persona to a wide-range of diverse characters from gypsies to princesses, "she dresses and makes up delightfully... she resembles the fantastic queens of Gustave Moreau, those dream figures, in turn hieratical and serpentine, possessing a mystical and sensual attraction. Even in modern parts she keeps this strangeness which is given her by her elegant thinness and her Oriental, Jewish type…But the greatest originality of this entirely personal artist is that she does what no one had dared to do before her – she acts with her whole body."[13]

Beyond all these stellar attributes, Bernhardt was a notably hard worker, continually performing throughout her long life to support both herself and her extended family in a grand manner. She and the French public of the late nineteenth century loved exotic costume dramas in which she could indulge in elaborate costumes and passionate death scenes. Thus when Sarah took over management of the Théâtre de la Renaissance in 1893, she presented a series of plays, both old and new, ranging from the classic *Phédra* to *Lorenzaccio* by Alfred de Musset, and *Gismonda* by her favorite playwright Sardou (who also wrote *La Tosca* for her). As she declared of her approach, "In the theater the natural is good, but the sublime is even better."[14] Early in 1894 the choice fell on a new play, written in verse, Sarah's favorite format,[15] by Armand Silvestre and Eugène Morand with incidental music by Gabriel Pierné. This was *Izeyl*, which had its premiere on January 24, 1894.[16] Set in India it was a variation on the theme of *Thais* with a beautiful courtesan converted by a holy man, a tale ultimately derived from the Biblical account of Christ and Mary Magdalen. In this case the rather complicated plot centers on the part played by Bernhardt – Izeyl, who is what the text describes as a "Nautch girl."[17] That was a term for a specific kind of Indian dancer (fig 7a), who often performed at Hindu temples, but then in European settings became a popular entertainer (fig. 7b). In the context of the play she is definitely revealed to be a successful courtesan with a palace of her own. From here she sees and falls in love with the prince, who will become the Buddha, but he refuses her advances, and after she travels to his retreat, she is converted to his new religion and decides to give up all worldly pleasures and goods. Izeyl is in the process of distributing her wealth when she is accosted by the prince's younger brother, who desires her passionately, and (much like Tosca in Sarah's previous stage success) she grabs a dagger and stabs him. For this murderous act she is condemned to blindness and terrible torture after which she dies in the arms of the Buddha.

Bernhardt, interested in all aspects of contemporary culture, dabbled in mysticism, *ésotérism*, *exotisism*, and spiritualism. She was known to recite the poems of Sar Joséphin Péladan, the founder of the Rose+Croix Society.[18] In France during the late nineteenth century there was something of a craze for theories and things Indian and Buddhist, as witnessed, for example, in the poetry and prose of Jean Lahor and the *Parnassiens* as well as by paintings and prints by Gauguin and Paul Ranson (figs. 8a-b).[19] The playwright Lugné Poë even wrote at this same time two Hindu dramas.[20] The authors of Sarah's play revealed in an interview that they had actually read Buddhist texts and found there accounts of courtesans converted by Buddhist princes, but for their purposes, they invented the more "harmonious" name of "Izeyl."[21]

This play with its mix of melodrama and religion in what was characterized as "virile poetry"[22] had grand sets evocative of India by several designers. The first act (fig. 9a) was done by a well-known stage and opera designer, Marcel Jambon, and the third (fig. 9b) by the distinguished team of Amable Petit and Eugène-Benoît Gardy.[23] Both Clairin and Bernhardt had a hand in devising the costuming. The premiere of a play with Sarah was news, and a number of sketches of the dramatic action appeared in both French and English journals (figs. 10a-e). The play, or at least Sarah's performance, was well received by the press and public.[24] One critic described her as "a delicious and troubling synthesis of all the mysterious painters like Gustave Moreau."[25] And a writer in *Le Figaro* observed, "What makes the greatness of this artist, and which I have never more clearly seen than this evening, is the mixture in her of the poetry of an impersonal, mythical being with an almost frightening precision of movement….In the third act she wears a costume which clings to her figure so that she seems to be naked."[26] Despite this and the sumptuous sets and costumes, the play ran for only two months, and then in June 1894 Bernhardt took it to Daly's Theatre to open her London season (fig. 11a). The magazine *Punch* concluded it's rather tongue in

cheek review of “Sarah Chrysostoma” (fig. 11b) with the opinion: “Not exhilarating, but memorable.”[27] Later in 1896 Bernhardt performed the play in French with the original sets and costumes a few times on her tour to the United States, first in New York at Abbey’s Theatre[28] where some photographs of the final scene were made (fig. 12a) and then at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Boston’s Tremont Theater during March (fig. 12b). [29] Here critics wrote:

> Sarah Bernhardt has not been seen in Boston for four years and *Izeyl* is one of the most sensational novelties of a decade on the Paris stage… Bernhardt’s art was evidenced in all its power in the third act. No one can portray pure, unbridled passion as she can. There is in her nature an immense sympathy with primeval traits. She is not modern. She has nothing to do with self-restraint...She is an animal. She weeps, she laughs, she rages. Why? Because she feels like it.[30]

She then took it on to Baltimore and Canada;[31] and she even recorded one of its dramatic passages when in New York, but the fragile cylinders do not seem to have survived.[32] As late as her 1905 tour to America, a photo of Bernhardt in *Izeyl* (fig.13a) was still being used for publicity, and upon her death a photo of her as Izeyl (although misidentified) was included in the montage of images in *The New York Times* (fig. 13b).[33]

Fortunately, a great many photographs by the era’s greatest portrait photographer, Félix Nadar (figs. 14a-c) and others (fig. 14d), as well as the period sketches and cartoons in the press allow us to appreciate and identify Bernhardt’s richly adorned costume. The key feature of this in the early acts was a large flower jewel, a blue enamel lotus, designed by the leading *art nouveau* jeweler of the day, René Lalique (fig. 15),[34] which she wore, like a corsage, in the center of her chest.[35] Looking carefully at the present painting, one does see such a jewel. Certainly the hair style is different, and there is no moment in the play when she sits in a courtyard in this manner. However, the English translation of the play states that Act III, “the strong act of the play,” takes place in the court room of Izeyl’s palace, which, sounding a lot like Sarah’s own home (fig. 16), is described as “skins of rare animals, magnificent brocades, exquisite flowers are everywhere in reckless profusion.”[36]

It was Clairin’s general approach in his theatrical depictions of Sarah to portray her in costume as the central figure and to then extrapolate all the surrounding action or ethos of the particular play. This can be seen in his paintings of her in the roles of Ophelia, Théodora, Cléopatra, L’Aiglon, and St. Théresa (figs. 6b, e, f, g, and h). In the present painting he appears to give similar treatment to the Indian tinged *Izeyl*. Not only is the costume appropriate, but, as can be seen in several of Nadar’s staged photographs (figs.17a-c) and one of the journal sketches (fig. 18), a distinctive prop was a huge fan of peacock feathers, which was in some cases held by her servant behind her head. Just such a fan can be seen on the ground at the left corner of Clairin’s painting, but he also incorporates it to create a halo-like effect for his leading lady. Her very rigid pose with crossed legs is reminiscent of Indian sculptural images of the seated, meditating Buddha (figs. 19a-b). In addition her grim, set face with its ferocious intensity and the fact that her right hand is clutching a dagger also remind one of Indian bronze sculptures of Kali the all-powerful Hindu goddess, the destroyer of evil, who is often shown brandishing a knife (fig. 20). And in fact the directions of the play specify that Izeyl’s own palace is across from a temple dedicated to Kali, “the goddess of death.”[37] For inspiration such Indian works of art could be seen in Paris at the Musée Guimet which had opened in 1889. Thus, this painting, like the play itself, combines both Hindu and Buddhist elements, so that when all is considered, it does seem reasonable to conclude that this painting is indeed Clairin’s highly evocative response to *Izeyl.* To the Indian-inspired elements Clairin goes over the top in adding his own fantastic invention of the pair of frightening Oriental dragon fish flanking the space above Izeyl. He had employed a similar decorative motif in his watercolor of Sarah wearing a kimono (fig. 21).

Even the original frame has the lotus motif, possibly derived from Owen Jone’s well-known *Grammar of Ornament* (fig. 22a)[38] and also frequently used in designs by Mucha (fig. 22b), which is appropriate for both an Indian or an Egyptian subject. The same tile wall with its combination of lotus and peacock feather patterns is also found in what has usually been described as Clairin’s

painting of a North African Ouled Naïl dancer (fig. 23).These semi-nomadic residents of Algeria and Morocco in their highly elaborate costumes (fig. 24)[39] had indeed been seen and depicted by Clairin (figs. 25a-b), but here he is clearly combining the memory of them with elements from *Izeyl*, most notably the flower ornament and large fan. In fact several of the photographs and sketches of Sarah as Izeyl show her in the dramatic pose of holding up her arms to spread a magnificent cape behind her head (figs. 26a-c), so one could well identify this work as well as "Bernhardt as Izeyl."

It was Marcel Proust in his grand survey of French nineteenth-century society, *Remembrance of Things Past*, who, portraying Sarah in the guise of his character Berma, rightly noted: "She contrived to introduce those vast images of grief, nobility, and passion, which were the masterpieces of her own personal art."[40] Clairin captured this, but he was not the only artist to be entranced by Sarah Bernhardt. Among the many who depicted her in different media were her other close life-long friend, Louise Abbéma, and also Gustave Doré, Toulouse-Lautrec, Bastien-Lepage, Alfred Stevens, Lalique, and, just about the same time as she was appearing in *Izeyl*, Gérôme made a striking bust of her as the embodiment of tragedy and comedy (fig. 27). In this painting of Bernhardt as Izeyl, Clairin has put Sarah's face exactly in the center of the composition, so that she dominates the entire richly contrived setting. And it is her eyes which rivet the viewer. This but confirms the observation of a contemporary biographer who wrote, "That which gave to Sarah's face its unique and fascinating character are her eyes – these, her long, strange, superb eyes of which the pupils seemed to change their color with variations of light, as if to accent the changes in her physiognomy; they seemed like old gold when the artist was dreaming; or dark blue when smiling; and like light green when anger contracted her brow."[41]

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[1] Clairin's Orientalist works shown at the Salon of 1913 drew the praise of Guillaume Apollinaire. See *Apollinaire on Art*, Boston, 1972, p. 311.
[2] See Hollis Clayson, *Paris In Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71),* Chicago, 2002, pp. 14-15 and 238.
[3] According to Philippe Jullian, *Sarah Bernhardt,* Paris, 1977, p. 87.
[4] Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, *The Divine Sarah,* New York, 1991, p. 134. See also an English version with Clairin's illustrations in Sandy Lesberg, *The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt,* New York, 1977, pp. 204-256.
[5] Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Madame Sarah,* Boston, 1967, p. 94.
[6] See Reynaldo Hahn, *Sarah Bernhardt, Impressions*, trans. by Ethel Thompson, London, 1932, p. 86; and Gold and Fizdale, 1991, p. 266.
[7] Robert Gottlieb, *Sarah: The Life of Sarah Bernhardt,* New Haven, 2010, p. 91.
[8] See Sarah Bernhardt, *Memories of My Life,* New York, 1908, p. 281.
[9] See Hahn, 1932, pp. 83-85; and Joanna Richardson, *Sarah Bernhardt and Her World,* New York, 1977, pp. 118 and 122.
[10] The reviews of the 1876 Salon by Zola and Henry James are quoted in the exhib. cat. *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama,* The Jewish Museum, New York, 2005, pp. 29 and 141-42.
[11] Skinner, 1967, p. 18.
[12] See *Portrait(s) de Sarah Bernhardt*, Bibliotheque nationale de France, Paris, 2000, pp. 97 and 133; and *Les Peintures de l'Opera de Paris*, Arthena, Paris, 1980, p. 180, fig. 200.
[13] Jules Lemaître, "Madame Sarah Bernhardt," in *Literary Impressions,* trans. by A, W. Evans, London, 1921, pp. 283-85.
[14] Hélène Tierchant, *Sarah Bernhardt: Madame "Quand même*," Paris, 2009, p. 234.
[15] Sarah Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre,* trans. by H. J. Stenning, New York, 1924, p. 119.
[16] Ernest Pronier, *Un vie au théâtre: Sarah Bernhardt*, Geneva, 1942, p. 339.
[17] In French this was rendered as "Nautch wallah." See *Argument of "Izeyl, Drama in Four Acts*, New York, 1895, p. 3.
[18] Paris, 2000. pp. 91-94.
[19] See *Gauguin's Nirvana: Painters at Le Pouldu*, exhib. cat., Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, 2001, pls.152 and 153.
[20] Pronier, 1942, p. 101.
[21] "Izeyl," in *Supplement Illustré de l'Écho de Paris,* January 1894.
[22] A. Gallus, *Sarah Bernhardt: Her Artistic Life*, New York, 1901, np.
[23] They not only created the sets for well-known operas by Verdi and Wagner, but also for more exotic works like Meyerbeer's *L'Esclarmonde* and *Le Magus* and Reyer's *Salammbo*.
[24] Positive reviews can be found in *Le Figaro*, January 25, 1894, p. 2; *Gil Blas,* February 24, 1894, p. 3, and March 8, 1894; and again March 28, 1894.
[25] Tierchant, 2009, p. 237.
[26] Henri Fouquier in *Le Figaro* of January 28, 1894 quoted in Robert Horville, "The Stage Techniques of Sarah Bernhardt," in *Bernhardt and the Theatre of her Time,* ed. by Eric Salmon, Westport, 1984, p. 50.
[27] "A Sara-Scenic Show," *Punch, or The London Charivari*, June 30, 1894, p. 301.The term "Chrysostom," deriving from the eloquent St. John, patriarch of Constantinople, means "golden-mouthed."
[28] According to *The Best Plays of 1894-1899,* ed. by John Chapman and Garrison P. Sherwood, New York, 1955, pp. 162-163, *Izeyl* in its American premiere had eight performances at Abbey's Theatre between January 20 and February 22, 1896; and then the Bernhardt company returned for one performance of the play in May of 1896.

[29] See Richardson, 1977, p. 136.
[30] Reviews from the *Boston Journal* and other newspapers in clippings inserted in a copy of Gabriel Pierné, Izeyl, Paris, 1894(?), which is dedicated to Georges Clairin.
[31] The Canadian performances were In Montreal on February 26 and in Toronto on April 6. See Georgette Weiller, *Sarah Bernhardt et le Canada*, Quebec, 1973, p. 33.
[32] William A. Emboden, *Sarah Bernhardt: Artist and Icon*, Los Angeles, 1992, pp. 119 and 124; and David Menefee, *Sarah Bernhardt in the Theatre of Films and Sound Recordings,* London, 2003, p. 47. Much later she recorded "La Mort d'Izeyl," a poetic monologue not from the play but written by her son, Maurice. See Emboden, 1992, p. 126.
[33] "Sarah Bernhardt Passes Into the Ages," *The New York Times*, Photogravure Picture Section, April 1, 1923.
[34] Paris, 2000, p. 79.
[35] Tierchant, 2009, p. 237.
[36] *Argument of "Izeyl*," 1895, p. 19.
[37] Ibid., p. 3.
[38] Owen Jones, *The Grammer of Ornanent*, London, 1856, pl. IV.
[39] See Wendy Buonaventura, *Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World,* London, 2010, pp.94-97. The Ouled-Nail dancers in their resplendent headdresses and extravagant garments and jewels were known for being able to make their belly pulsate violently in syncopation with the music, unlike the simple undulating of the abdominal muscles practiced by Egyptian dancers.
[40] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, New York, 1981, vol. 2, "The Guermantes Way," chapter 1, p. 48.
[41] Gallus, 1901, np.