

Robert Ward Johnson, *Portrait of Jean-Paul Le Tarare*
San Francisco circa 1881 - 1953 New York

oil on canvas
17 ¾ by 15 inches (45 by 38 cm.)
signed and dated lower right: 'Johnson / 1922'

provenance: Private collection, France

exhibition: Paris, Salon d'Automne, 1924, no. 933

note: Robert Ward Johnson was born in San Francisco. He received his early artistic training at the Art Students League in New York under George Bridgman, a classically trained instructor who emphasized drawing. Johnson studied at the Munich Akademie and participated in World War I. After the war, he traveled to Paris where from 1919-1928 he exhibited landscapes and figural painting regularly at the Salon d'Automne. In the 1930s Johnson illustrated a posthumous edition of Samuel Butler's, *The Way of All Flesh*, which was edited by Theodore Dreiser. At the end of his career, the artist returned to the Art Students League as an instructor.

During the 1920s Johnson lived at 194 Avenue Michel Bizot in the 12th arrondissement, but spent much of his time in the more artistically stimulating Montparnasse, associating with avant-garde artists such as Man Ray, Moise Kisling, and Tsuguharu Foujita. In Montparnasse he met the dwarf Jean-Paul Le Tarare (1899-1982) a noted actor, film director and writer. Le Tarare was the first "little person" to achieve prominence as a dramatic actor and appeared in some of the earliest silent movies produced in Montparnasse, including *La Lys de la vie* (1920) with Loie Fuller, *L'odyssée d'un film* (1923) and *La terre du Diable* (1922). In the 1924 film *La Galerie des Monstres* his co-stars included Lois Moran, the actress who was the inspiration for the character of Rosemary Hoyt in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, and Kiki (Alice Ernestine Prin) - the "Queen of Montparnasse." Kiki drew a portrait of Le Tarare in 1925 (fig. 1).

Painted in 1922 during the height of Le Tarare's film career, Johnson's rendition of the actor is a straightforward bust-length portrait. The focus is on the sitter's visage so there is no indication of his diminutive stature. Dressed in a somber black coat and tie, Le Tarare directly engages the viewer, his sober visage and pale blue eyes are framed by a full shock of wavy auburn hair. Much like Le Tarare who, in his film career wished to be taken seriously as an actor rather than as a sideshow entertainer, Johnson, in this portrait, by concentrating on the sitters face, attempts to convey that depth of character. At once painterly in the execution of the bushy head of hair, floppy tie and the facial tonalities, the work also relies on strong line to define the nose, ears and chin. In many ways, the bust-length, intense gaze, and crisp outline of the figure recall the haunting portraits of Ferdinand Hodler (fig.2).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

