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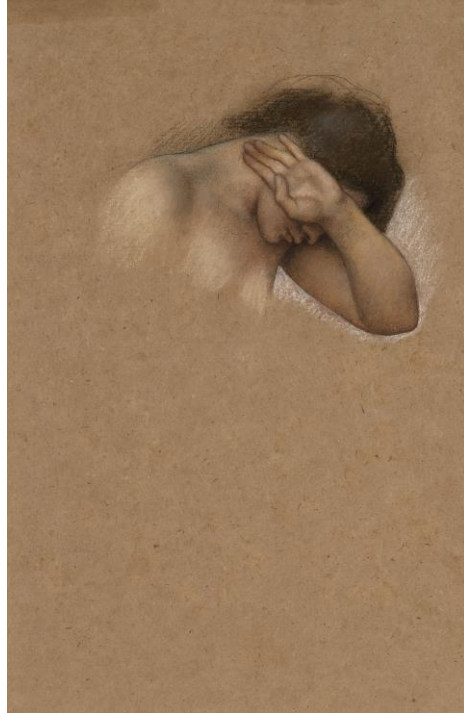
Evelyn De Morgan (London 1855 - 1919)

Study of a Female Head for 'The Captives'

Coloured chalks and pastel on buff paper laid on canvas

14 x 9 in. (35.6 x 22.8 cm.)

Executed c.1915



Provenance

Private collection, United Kingdom.

As a woman born in the mid-nineteenth century to middle class parents, Mary Evelyn De Morgan was aware of the barriers she would face when she expressed a wish to be an artist. Her mother, who had expected her daughter to be presented as a debutant to Queen Victoria, stated how she had wanted 'a daughter, not an artist' but Evelyn persevered and enrolled at the Slade School of Art in 1873, taking her unisex middle name rather than her Christian name, Mary, in order to protect her art from gender bias and ensure she would be judged on merit.¹ She must have felt vindicated when a reviewer of her early painting 'St Catherine of Alexandria', when displayed at the Dudley Gallery, was noted for its brilliance, with the

¹ Stirling, *A. M. W. William De Morgan and His Wife*. New York: H. Holt and Company, 1922, p. 174.

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reviewer exclaiming 'it is surprising for more reasons than one to find [De Morgan] is a lady'.² In 1889, de Morgan would add her signature to the 1889 Declaration in Favour of Women's Suffrage and she continued to paint feminist subjects for the rest of her career. When she married the ceramic designer and novelist William De Morgan she found an ally in her cause. By 1914, William De Morgan had taken up the position of Vice President of the Men's League of Women's Suffrage and passionately campaigned for equality. This public support from her husband and the growing traction of the Suffrage movement was the catalyst for Evelyn De Morgan to paint *The Captives* in 1915.

The Captives (oil on canvas, De Morgan Collection, fig. 1) portrays classically draped women in a dark cave surrounded by phallic stalactites and stalagmites, confronting shadowy dragons which they cannot see or feel. Described by the art historian Jan Marsh as 'fearsome demons of patriarchy', the beasts symbolize the invisible force of sexism in the early 20th century.³ The painting invites contemplation of universal themes like captivity and the indomitable quest for liberation. In this sensitive pastel study for the right-hand figure in *The Captives*, De Morgan has arranged and sketched her model with her arm covering her eyes and her head lowered in submission. The figure appears to rise from the buff paper and has terrific presence and power, as with the best of the artist's drawings.

We are grateful to Sarah Hardy, Director of The De Morgan Foundation, for her help researching this drawing.

² "The Dudley Gallery." *Daily News*, October 24, 1876, p. 2.

³ Marsh, *Jan. Pre-Raphaelite Women*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987, p. 152.

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