

Basic Detail Report



Robert Louis Stevenson

Date

1887

Primary Maker

Augustus Saint-Gaudens

Medium

Bronze

Dimensions

44.4 x 44.4 cm

Description

This roundel or medallion portrait of the writer Robert Louis Stevenson was done from life. It was Augustus Saint-

Gauden's most popular commercial work and there are several versions of the piece with a rectangular bronze one in Musee d'Orsay, believed to be first. Another version can be found in Edinburgh Cathedral as a memorial to the writer. In the Edinburgh version he is shown lying on a chaise longue. In the version in the Hugh Lane collection (identical to the one in the St. Louis Museum, US), Stevenson is depicted lying on a bed. He was suffering from TB and was frail and had gone to America seeking a cure. Saint Gaudens wanted to do a portrait of Stevenson and the introduction came from William Lowe. Saint Gauden's idea to show Stevenson in a bed was due to the fact that he spent a lot of time in bed but also the bed serves as a framing device. In this work, Stevenson appears to be holding a cigarette whereas in other versions he holds a quill. Saint Gaudens very successfully conveys the sense of different textures in the way that they are modelled. Ivy and flowers run around the edge of the roundel. Both artist and sitter got on very well together and Saint Gaudens said his meeting with Stevenson was one of the most important of his life with Stevenson in turn referring to Saint Gaudens as "the God-like sculptor". The main sittings for this piece took place in a Hotel on 11th Street in New York. There were two to three sittings and they took about five hours in total. At that time, Stevenson was very famous in New York and his Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was running on Broadway. Saint Gauden's likeness of the face is very good but the hands were at first modelled on the sculptor's wife but he was unhappy with the way these turned out and had a further sitting in New Jersey. On that occasion, Saint Gaudens brought his eight-year old son, Homer, with him to meet the great writer but his son was not remotely interested in him and was sent out to play. Stevenson was in a grumpy mood that day because he was clearly very unwell so Saint Gaudens suggested that he start writing, which he did and he kept writing ever after Saint Gaudens told him he could stop. He was in fact writing a letter to the artist's son and he marked the envelope Master Homer Saint Gaudens and told the sculptor to give it to him in 5 or 10 years or when he was dead. The letter was dated 27th May 1888. Stevenson left for Samoa shortly afterwards. A copy of the roundel was sent to Samoa and because he was living in an

inaccessible place, it took a long time to get it to him. When he received it, he was delighted with it and placed it over his mantelpiece. He died in Samoa on 3 December 1894 and was buried there.