

SARAH BERNHARDT (French, 1844 – 1923)

Born in Paris in 1844, Sarah Bernhardt's original name was Henriette Rosine Bernard. Little is known about her family and heritage; the illegitimate daughter of a Dutch Jewish courtesan, she later adopted the name Bernhardt, and it was with this name that she came to be regarded as one of the greatest French actors of the 19th century. A figure renowned for her eccentric personality and extravagant lifestyle, Bernhardt cultivated an incredible legacy that became synonymous with 19th-century theatre whilst acting as a key visual figure of the Art Nouveau movement.

Bernhardt was raised by a foster family and initially attended a Catholic convent before joining a stage school. Her natural talent and affinity for captivating an audience brought her into the public eye early into her career. Bernhardt's performances gained her a dedicated following, due to her silken voice and particular exuberance on stage following her debut in 1866. In 1879, Bernhardt made her first tour to Britain and recalls in her memoirs how thousands of people lined the streets and chanted her name. During her time in London, through the aid of her agent Edward Jarrett, she was able to hold her first exhibition in Piccadilly, showcasing her sculptural artistic talent. This exhibition proved immensely popular and was attended by prominent figures such as John Everett Millais and Charles Dickens. During this exhibition, her work was also admired by William Gladstone and Lord Frederic Leighton. Thus, her reputation as a talented performer grew to include her accomplishments as an artist.

Bernhardt's decision to exhibit her work whilst performing in London reveals her acute business acumen, recognising the unique position of her fame and contemporary appeal. In her memoirs, she reveals that she used the money from a sale of her work at this exhibition to purchase a pet cheetah from a zoo in Liverpool.

Whilst touring in America in the 1880s, she also exhibited her art. An exhibition at O'Brien's Gallery was advertised on the theatrical programme of the McVicker's Theatre in Chicago in 1881, further highlighting how her roles as both an artist and actress were interlinked throughout her career. Bernhardt was close friends with a number of prominent 19th century artists, most notably Georges Clairin whom she posed for a number of times.

An expert in self-promotion, Bernhardt remained a significant public figure throughout her life, offering her likeness to be reproduced on now iconic Art Nouveau posters. As her fame and reputation grew,

BOWMAN SCULPTURE

Bernhardt faced backlash for her confident outspoken persona, despite now being seen by many as a feminist icon of the 19th century. In many cases, Bernhardt received criticism with a high-spirited endurance. Following attacks in newspapers regarding her nationality, Bernhardt confirmed her pride in her Jewish heritage and cosmopolitan upbringing, alongside her French identity.

In 1915, following a long-term injury to her knee, Bernhardt chose to amputate her leg in order to perform without pain during a tour to entertain French troops on the front lines during the First World War.

To this day, there remains an air of mystique around such an enigmatic individual, with rumours that she slept in a coffin and had a close relationship with the Prince of Wales. Whilst her skill as a performer cannot be viewed by a modern audience, as her limited film repertoire does not provide much evidence, her talents as an artist can be recognised in the sculpture she produced during her lifetime.