



RA GALLERY

# Jean Pougny

(1892 - 1956)

*Arlequin*

1934

signed 'Pougny'  
oil on canvas  
46 x 38 cm

**Sold**

**Provenance:**

Robert Simon, Paris  
Private collection, UK

**Literature:**

Pougny: Jean Pougny (Iwan Puni) 1892-1956. Catalogue de l'oeuvre. Herman Berninger, Jean-Albert Cartier. E. Wasmuth 1972. vol. II. Paris, Cote d'Azur, 1924-1956, peintures. p. 139, no. 487 (reproduced)

Pougny: Jean Pougny (Iwan Puni) 1892-1956. Catalogue de l'oeuvre. Herman Berninger, Jean-Albert Cartier. E. Wasmuth, 1992. Tome 2, Paris-Cote d'Azur 1924-1956, peintures. p. 259, no. 1004 (reproduced)

«Les Lettres Francaises» 1959, Paris, article d'Armand Lanoux, (reproduced)

**Exhibitions:**

1934 Salon des Tuileries, Paris, Cat. No. 2024  
1958 Retrospective Pougny, Musee d'Artet d'industrie; Saint-Etienne, Cat. No. 11  
1959 Pougny-Oeuvres de Jeunesse et Oeuvres Choiesies, Galerie Coard, Paris



'Arlequin' - a painting created by Jean Pougny during his French period, or, looking from the perspective of his whole oeuvre, at the late stage of his artistic search. This work precisely demonstrates how diverse was the path that Pougny has taken in his career, starting with the most radical avant-garde movements: Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, and culminating with something completely different. The longing for innovation and experiment, playful paradox, and the desire to find original, fresh forms began to gradually disappear from the Pougny's works after his departure from Russia in late 1919. Pougny's paintings of the 1920s - 1950s no longer celebrate graphics, these works, including 'Arlequin', are based on colour harmony, overt decorative effect, as well as, ideas of Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and the legacy of the artistic group 'Nabis'. Due to the characteristic features of his late artistic style, Pougny has firmly established his reputation as one of the most authentic and distinct representatives of the multinational School of Paris (École de Paris). The richness and delicacy of the colour scheme and its patterns evoke associations with beautiful Oriental carpets. The feeling of the deliberate carelessness of brushstrokes creates an effect of absolute spontaneity during the process of painting, thereby imbuing the work with sensuality, movement and ease.

The choice of the theme for the painting is not surprising and quite indicative of the modern Parisian artist of the first half of the XX century. First, it is worth remembering that Pougny was involved in theatrical enterprises in the 1920s: he worked on the creation of costumes and scenery. Second, the characters of Commedia Dell'arte, Italian theatre of the Renaissance, and especially Harlequin, was extremely popular in art since the end of the XVI century and, particularly, during the XX century among modernists. Harlequin has repeatedly appeared in the works of Paul Cezanne, Juan Gris, and, above all, Pablo Picasso. Pougny was returning to the theme of Harlequin in his subsequent works of 1940 - 1950s on numerous occasions. Harlequin often appears in painting as a symbolic portrait of the artist, his alter-ego, portraying the role of the artist in society and his relationship with other people. It is likely that Pougny, too, identified himself with the figure of Harlequin, whose colourful costume can serve as a symbol of his unpredictable, changeable mood. Despite the main heyday of Commedia Dell'arte happening in Europe in XVI - XVIII centuries, it has a remote predecessor in the period of ancient Rome, when the actors of the theatre, depicting obscene farce, wore masks and



were similar to the characters of Commedia Dell'arte, which is familiar to us. The image of Harlequin can always be found at the carnival festivals of the Middle Ages, when the main prototype used to be a jester. Harlequin, representing a servant to his master, should look cheerful, carefree, agile and insightful. The character often imitates the more serious figures of the play and is generally recognised as a mischievous clown, joking at every opportunity. Harlequin has the magical ability granted to him by the ancient Roman deity, Mercury, to become invisible, to vanish and appear in any part of the world and to transform himself into different people. Usually Harlequin wears a black mask, but Pougny has painted it white, which looks more like an attribute of Piero, another character of Commedia Dell'arte, and rather expresses melancholy than Harlequin's mischief. This technique was mainly used by Picasso in his images of Harlequin. Pougny turns his Harlequin into an artist, depicting him with a brush and palette in his hands, which again emphasises the idea of self-portrait.

