LOT 55
PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK
ISIDOR KAUFMANN
AUSTRIAN
1853-1921
PORTRAIT OF A BOY
signed Isidor Kaufmann (lower left)
oil on panel
11 1/2 by 9 1/2 in.
29.2 by 24 cm

ESTIMATE 150,000-250,000 USD
Lot Sold: 348,500 USD

PROVENANCE
In the summer of 1894, Isidor Kaufmann first journeyed to what was then called Western Hungary to search out communities where observant Jews still maintained their traditional way of life. The hardships of travel were eclipsed by inspiration found in what he described to a friend as “my Promised Land.” While painting the old yeshiva of Pressburg (Bratislava) and the sixteenth century synagogue of Holleschau, Kaufmann slowly earned the trust of wary residents (Tobias Natter, Rabbiner, Bocher, Talmudschüller, Bilder des Weiner Malers Isidor Kaufmann 1853-1921, exh. cat, Jüdischcen Musuem der Wien, 1995, p. 25). When Kaufmann returned to his wife and family in Vienna, he set out to transfer the dozens of sketches and impressions from his extensive tours. He painted interiors of synagogues, portraits of the venerable rabbis Talmudic scholars, and, as in the present work, young orthodox boys, among his most popular subjects. While the artist occasionally painted his son Eduard, Portrait of a Boy, like most of his portraits, is likely informed by a compendium of sketches and not an identifiable model.

The present work is painted on one of the artist’s typical wooden panels, many shipped from an English supplier. Panel was the perfect support for Kaufmann’s rich pigments applied in complex layers and details made by a fine brush which vivify his subject. A front view, with the body turned slightly, affords the viewer both a connection with the model and a close study of the parokhet (the curtain which covers the Torah Ark) and its gold embroidered date translating to “1847,” which likely refers to the date of its donation to the synagogue.

Kaufmann’s portraits preserve and celebrate Jewish culture, and can also be placed among the finest Naturalist and Realist paintings of his contemporaries in France and Germany. Throughout his lifetime, the artist’s works were purchased by a diverse group of collectors, including the Austrian state minister for culture and education and the reigning prince of Lichtenstein. The wide ranging reach of Kaufmann’s work was further secured by its exhibition at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris, where he was one of many European artists revealing regional, cultural themes to a global audience (Richard I. Cohen, “Artist’s Biographies,” p. 175-6; Gabriel P. Weisberg, “Jewish Naturalist Painters: Understanding and Competing in the Mainstream,” The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe, exh. cat., The Jewish Museum, 2001-2002, p. 149). More recently, Kaufmann’s place in the history of celebrated Viennese portraiture was recognized with his inclusion in a landmark exhibition Facing the Modern: The Portrait in Vienna 1900 at the National Gallery, London in 2013-2014.