

Paul Albert BESNARD (Paris 1849 - Paris 1936)

A Woman Smoking

Pastel on paper, laid down on board.

Signed and dated ABesnard / 1899 in white chalk at the right centre.

608 x 498 mm. (23 7/8 x 19 5/8 in.)

In a review of the 1899 exhibition of the Société de Pastellistes Français, in which the present pastel was shown, Emile Dacier noted in particular 'the impressions of Spain of M. Besnard (Fragility, The Cigarette Smoker, Woman), where the pink, the mauve and the yellow of mantillas and capes drapes so harmoniously the amber flesh.'1Another critic, writing of the same exhibition, remarked that, 'The most desirable works of this exhibition are those of MM. Besnard, Aman-Jean and Menard...Besnard is brilliant and the imagination in these subjects is admirably adapted to the process. A pale green scarf on a brown-haired woman with warm flesh asserts all the qualities of pastel as, in a neighboring work, a fragile cup or, elsewhere, the feathery smoke of a cigarette.'

Exhibitions

Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, Société de Pastellistes Français, 1899, no.16; Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, Rétrospective de l'œuvre d'Albert Besnard, 1905, no.145 ('La Cigarette', lent by M. G. Pannier).

Literature:

François Thiebault-Sisson, 'Le Salon des Pastellistes', Le Temps, 4 April 1899, p.816; Octave Fidière(?), 'Les Pastellistes', La chronique de arts et de la curiosité, 8 April 1899, p.122; Emile Dacier, 'Exposition de la Société des Pastellistes français', Le Bulletin de l'Art ancien et moderne, 9 April 1899, p.117; Jean Lorrain, 'Pall Mall Semaine', Chroniques d'art, 28 April 1899, p.400; Jacques Copeau, 'Albert Besnard', L'Art décoratif, July 1905, p.16 (illustrated).

Artist description:

Albert Besnard entered the École des Beaux-Arts in 1866, studying with Alexandre Cabanel, before making his debut at the Salon of 1868. Six years later, in 1874, he won the Prix de Rome with a painting of The Death of Timophanes, Tyrant of Corinth. His five years at the Villa Medici in Rome were followed by four years in London, where he obtained several important portrait commissions. By the middle of the 1880s Besnard was one of the most highly regarded and fashionable society portrait painters in Paris. He developed a particularly evocative manner of depicting his sitters that relied on luminous, vibrant colours, dramatic (and at times artificial) lighting, and bold brushwork. These elements also found their way into the artist's other main activity; his work as a mural painter. Besnard painted large decorative schemes for several public buildings in Paris, including the Sorbonne, the Ecole de Pharmacie and the Pavillon des Arts Décoratifs at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, as well as ceiling decorations for the Comédie Française, the Salon des Sciences of the Hôtel de Ville and the central hall of the Petit Palais, newly-built for the Exposition Universelle. He also created mural decorations for L'Art Nouveau Bing, the shop of the dealer and collector Siegfried Bing on the rue de Provence in Paris, and the villa of the financier Baron Joseph Vitta at Evian. In addition, Besnard produced designs for stained glass and worked as a printmaker.

Although Besnard was strongly influenced by the works and techniques of the Impressionists, he never exhibited with them, leading Edgar Degas to complain that 'Besnard is flying with our wings'. He did, however, exhibit regularly at the Salons, and also at the Societé Nationale des Beaux-Arts from 1890 onwards. In 1910-1911 he travelled extensively for several months throughout India and Ceylon. The paintings from this trip were shown to critical acclaim at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris in 1912 and also at the Venice Biennale, and in 1913 Besnard published an account of his travels with the title L'homme en rose. The following year Besnard was appointed director of the French Academy in Rome, where he remained until 1921, and in 1925 he published Sous le ciel de Rome, a memoir of his time in the city. From 1923 until his death in 1934 Besnard was the director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris; as such, his influence on a later generation of artists was considerable. Although he was the first French artist to be granted an official state funeral, his fame and reputation had faded considerably within a decade or two of his death.