

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**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.'<sup>1</sup> Another 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 in 1868. Six years later 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 three years in London, between 1879 and 1881, during which he obtained several important portrait commissions. By the 1880's 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 decorative 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 Salon des Sciences of the Hôtel de Ville, the Comédie Française and the Petit Palais. He also created mural decorations for a number of private homes, including L'Art Nouveau Bing, the shop of the Parisian dealer and collector Siegfried Bing on the rue de Provence in Paris, and the villa of Baron Joseph Vitta at Evian.

Although Besnard was strongly influenced by the work of the Impressionists, he never exhibited with them, leading Edgar Degas to comment that 'Besnard is flying with our wings'. Besnard did, however, exhibit regularly at the Salons, and at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts from 1890 onwards. He also worked as a printmaker, executing a series of twenty-six etchings on the theme of Death for his patron Baron Vitta in 1900, and produced designs for stained glass. In 1910-1911 he travelled extensively around India, and the paintings from this trip were exhibited to critical acclaim in 1912 at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris. Between 1923 and his death in 1934 Besnard served as the director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.