

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Paul Albert BESNARD (Paris 1849 - Paris 1934)

The Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, Kandy, Ceylon

Watercolour over an underdrawing in pencil.

Signed, dated and inscribed *L. Peradinya / Kandy 1910 / ABesnard* at the lower left.

Further inscribed *Mr. A. Eichal / Bd. Malesherbes* on the backing board.

128 x 223 mm. (5 x 8 3/4 in.)

In his account of his travels in Ceylon and India in 1910-1911, published in 1913, Albert Besnard devoted several paragraphs to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, a few kilometres west of the city of Kandy. As he writes, '*The fabulous garden of Peradeniya, so poetically described by [André] Chevrillon, was my favourite walk during our stay in Kandy, and, as we are about to leave Ceylon for India, I want to return there in order to savour once more its immense melancholy at the foot of the giant bamboos, facing the bluish peaks over which the grey clouds seem to march in long strides, in close ranks, like soldiers going into battle. Silence reigns over this corner of the world; alone, beneath the threat of a sky heavy with an approaching storm, as if to emphasize the strangeness of this natural world, resounds the plaintive cry of the great bats. It is the only voice that rises from this transcendent landscape.*

I tried my hand at a few sketches, but to no avail. For how can one capture, in a few strokes of colour, the aspect of a world to which we have no connection whatsoever? How can one convey the strength, the bursting forth of exuberant nature, the vigour of powerful vegetation where the vine, becoming the sister of the tree, makes of its skin a second bark? How can one describe the inconceivable blend of plants and flowers that form, with their colossal thicket, a bulwark against the river that borders Peradeniya? And the river itself, how can one retrace its supreme elegance? And that river itself, how can one retrace its sovereign elegance? Ever flowing, its current as measured as that of Time. No obstacle hinders its godlike pace. Tawny as a Hindu, the sky sometimes tinges it with lilac.

For hours I stand gazing at this stream as it flows along the riverbank, illuminated by the sun with the certainty and rhythm of a royal mantle sweeping around a peristyle.

A quick sketch, let alone a study that is too meticulous, and perhaps because of that, cold, cannot convey the majesty of this Paradise, at times sombre due to a cloud, at times bathed in sunshine, through the centre of which these heavy, golden waters slowly flow.'

Three watercolour views of the gardens at Peradeniya, one of which may have been the present sheet, were included in Besnard's exhibition *Voyage aux Indes* at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris in 1912. As one critic noted of the exhibition, '*without doubt it counts as the most important artistic event of the present year...Paintings, water-colours, and drawings, all were of so beautiful a conception, all were instinct with such power, that it is really difficult, and, indeed, almost impossible, to describe and explain his achievement by mere words...More than ever before Besnard has sought for brilliancy of colouring and strong effects; he passes from one tone to another with the utmost boldness...He seems to me to have extracted from the people and from their surroundings the characteristics essential to them, and to have expressed in his notes and sketches just that elusive something which it seems almost impossible to capture.*'

Exhibitions

Probably Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, *Exposition Albert Besnard. Voyage aux Indes. Peintures – Aquarelles - Dessins*, 1912, either no.43 ('*Les Bambous au jardin de Péradénia (Kandy). Aquarelle.*') or no.63 ('*Bosquet de bananiers, dans le jardin de Péradénia, près Kandy. Aquarelle.*').

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 Société 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.