

# ALBERT BESNARD

## THE MAN AND HIS ART

WITH SOUVENIRS OF HIS RECENT VISIT TO INDIA

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FROM THE DRAWING BY  
ALBERT BESNARD

have made of him a master, if, indeed, not *the* master, of French painting, one can easily imagine the extraordinary importance of his life-work—a life-work filled with variety. One hesitates to say whether he was greater in the execution of the decorations for the entrance-hall of the Ecole de Pharmacie, near the Luxembourg Gardens, of those in the Berck church belonging to the New Sorbonne, of the ceilings for the two art palaces on the Champs-Élysées, of those for the Théâtre Français, of the wall painting in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, or those in the house of M. Jacques Rouché, or in work on many other walls of other mansions.

But if Besnard, the brilliant improvisator, sure of himself, one in whose scientific and instinctive art the memories of Florentine and Venetian masterpieces blend harmoniously with the free tenderness of the

impressionists, shows himself plainly delighted in the painting of broad surfaces, and then, suddenly changing his style, is happy in a tenderly sensuous painting of the blond skin of woman as it forms under the luminous caress of his brush, he remains none the less a vigorous and profound analyzer of the male face. The portraits of M. Barrère, French ambassador at Rome; M. Frantz Jourdain, president of the autumn Salon; and M. Cognacq—these among others are veritable masterpieces of craftsmanship, cleverness, and vitality.

Nevertheless, it is fair to recognize the fact that Besnard, like the great British masters of the eighteenth century, has devoted the larger, if not the better, part of his time to the painting of women. Often he has sought for effects of an exceptional kind in the rendering of his favorite subject. Who can forget the portrait of Mme. R. J—— (Salon of 1886), the picture that won the nickname of “Lady in Yellow,” the one that was so vehemently discussed? After Besnard, an artist with new ideas in lighting of a special sort, whose art has had remarkable influence on the colorists of his day, had continued his experiments on combinations of lighting and reflected lights, there resulted from these bold and constant experiments the distinguished portrait of the actress Réjane. Its appearance in the Salon of the National Painters roused almost as many contentions as those which greeted the “Lady in Yellow.”

But the works in which Besnard shows himself a marvelous painter of modern wo-



From the painting in the Gallery of the Luxembourg

#### PORTRAIT OF ALBERT BESNARD BY HIMSELF

man are to be found in that series of pastels which has stamped him as the rival of Latour or of Perroneau. In these he seems to have established the very flower of his art, and that with a veritable piety of sensuousness.

In landscape he has known how to interpret and vivify nature, and not only that of the West, steeped in a kind of floating humidity, but the glowing poetry of the African desert. No Orientalist of the brush has expressed with greater force the savage beauty of the typical, perceived beneath the shadows of the *casbahs*. As an etcher, he will leave behind him prints full of luminous power and a rare personality, side by side with those of Anders Zorn and Forain.

At sixty, Besnard finds his fame worldwide. The works already finished are enough to establish it in foreign parts as well as in his own land, where, nevertheless, it must candidly be recorded, they still meet with opposition.

Last year Besnard passed six months in India in company with his wife, a sculptor of remarkable talent, and his two younger sons, returning in June. The artistic results of this trip are soon to be exhibited in Paris. His enthusiasm leaves no doubt concerning the profound emotion he experienced throughout the whole voyage. I asked him if India had revealed itself to him in the semblance which he had fancied.

"Still more beautiful," he replied. "I

had imagined India far below its actual beauty, even as seen through descriptions of travelers. Moreover," he added, "people who love to travel ought to amuse themselves by sketching beforehand in fancy the appearance of the places they intend to see, according to the preconceived idea they have of them. It would form one of the most interesting collections, one that would demonstrate the imaginations of authors. There are a lot of false images in our memories. For do not descriptions, no matter how exact they may be, often bring up nothing but erroneous conceptions?"

Unlike the majority of contemporary painters, Besnard is a natural writer. Besides the treasures of his artistic impressions of India, he will reveal himself as a writer of rare penetration and charming style by publishing his personal souvenirs and running observations in a book which he himself will illustrate—a precious feast for bibliophiles. I give a few extracts.

"Savage, strange land of symbols as old as the world, pardon my ignorance. . . . I belong to those who can learn only through their eyes, and in a few months I shall have seen so much, shall have looked so much about, that I shall certainly need all your indulgence. . . .

"The women here show admirable shoulders and most enviable arms, but this tearing down of the ear, which pulls the torn lobe to the bosom in rags, puts them apart and degrades them, no matter what may be the wealth of jewels which bedeck them for a length of twenty centimeters. Their faces are sweet and sad, and one looks in vain for a single spot on their mouths that might afford room for a kiss. For the juice of the betel-nut does not

spare the mouth of a woman any more than that of a man."

Here is a picturesque passage:

"Strolling along with a trailing step are the Buddhist priests, injecting into the picture of the mass of passers-by the joyful note of their yellow draperies. Shave-polled like vultures, and holding in one hand a big palm-leaf fan, and with a black umbrella under the arm, they come to a full stop here and there, absorbed by the hundred incidents of the thoroughfare. Suddenly down comes the rain,—a sufficiently frequent occurrence beneath

a sky ever prone to storm-sickness,—and they paddle along through the swampy street, their togas rolled up to the waist like hunters, exaggerating the movement of a woman who is afraid of getting her skirt wet."

Again a glimpse of the bathers:

"Down below me the spout of grumbling water falls noisily to the foot of the hill, though up above there it was so well behaved. In a bird's-eye view, as if at the bottom

of a wash-bowl, I see other bathers amid the foam and spume. To look at their gestures one might think that they are performing certain religious rites. The shadow of the leafy trees and the high cliffs about the waterfall cover them with mystery. Still, the sun, taking advantage of a missing branch or a bend of the cliff, lights up, just as it can, here a shoulder, there a head, and yonder a torso."

I have had the pleasure of seeing all the objects in the forthcoming exhibition of the Indian sketches. It is to appear at a timely moment. Never before has the pale West turned its eyes toward the mysterious East with more of vague disquiet. Never, at the same time, has its artistic



Cliché Vizzavona

YOUNG INDIAN GIRL AT BENARES  
FROM THE PAINTING BY ALBERT BESNARD

gaze been more directed toward that focus of inspiration. It is like a new crusade—a crusade of ideas borne upon the flotillas of dream toward those distant lands where everything is filled with the divine essence,

work is steeped in warm, burning sensuousness! No other artist was better equipped for the accomplishment of such an art pilgrimage through that land, bathed in a kind of eternal apotheosis,



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INDIAN DANCING-GIRL

FROM THE PAINTING BY ALBERT BESNARD

where, in a diffused fashion, the puissance and majesty of divinity manifest themselves under forms and aspects of the greatest number, variety, and uncertainty.

What a vast and fruitful realm for such a talented explorer of the brush as Albert Besnard, a great pantheistic painter, if ever one was, whose entire

made up of the intimate union of a marvelous dream and a striking reality. His high literary culture, which has included an impassioned study of the hymns of the Vedas and the gigantic Brahman epics; his uncommon sensitiveness, ever on the alert; his love of mystery; his refined sensualism; his Bacchic color-sense; his swift



comprehension—all designated Besnard as the portraitist of that extraordinary country, the ardent life and changing, varied aspect of which we know to-day only through the cold exactitude of pictures with-

Madura. There at last, under the guard of its walls, he was enabled to work in quiet for sixteen days. Then came Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Pondicherry, Madras, Hyderabad, and Calcutta.



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INDIAN GIRLS NINE AND TWELVE YEARS OLD

FROM THE PAINTING BY ALBERT BESNARD

out warmth—pictures for the most part engendered from a toilsome and labored interpretation of photographic impressions.

Besnard's trip took him first to Ceylon, where he visited the Buddhist temples besieged by the crowd of the faithful, and reveled in the rich, deep-green landscape; then to Benares the divine; to Agra, Delhi, Jeypore, Ahmedabad, Bombay, and

In examining a mass of paintings, water-colors, and sketches which are to form part of the exhibition, I noticed that the greater number of his works represented southern India. When I called his attention to this, Besnard answered that the lack of ethical proportion in the entire body of his works was the result of the fact that the life of northern India,



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# THE BRACELET MERCHANT

FROM THE PAINTING BY ALBERT BESNARD

the India of the Rajputs and Moguls, is still difficult of access for the curious artist. In those regions it was with difficulty that even Mme. Besnard herself, after long diplomatic efforts, was permitted to penetrate into the dwellings reserved to women, those poor hermits to whom all life outside the home is forbidden. Of these two parts of India Besnard says:

"In the South the light, the violent contrast of shadows and reflections and their reactions, causes one inevitably to think of Rembrandt. In the North it is Paul Veronese and Tiepolo."

The general impression which disengages itself from this magical collection of splendid canvases of swift and incisive sketches, of water-colors as fresh as flowers,—like the flowers of the tropics,—is the expression which they contain of intense vitality, and, above all, of the vitality of the people. Here there is nothing fixed and hard, nothing official. The models are rarely members of the higher classes. It is among the fresh shadows of

the byways, lanes, and booths that Besnard discovers those phantom-like anatomies of men, lighted up by eyes of flame in which one divines all the hallucination and the resignation of Buddhism.

But he does not show us merely the contemplative and resigned Hindu, seeking after holiness by the way of mortification of the senses. His curiosity led him also into the throbbing circles of laborers of humble life, whose gestures and movements he has powerfully conventionalized. I can still see before me the picture which he calls "The Bracelet Merchant," in which the principal personage, having the foolish visage of a faker, tries to pull off a too tight bracelet from the arm of one of his women clients. Besnard has very cleverly expressed the beauty and the pained resistance of the woman.

Without any appearance of effort of the imagination, by a kind of instinctive movement of his brush, Besnard has the art of giving his vision style,—even the

most lowly vision,—without changing the reality of the subject, without doing violence to the truth of nature. His lithe dancers, with fine slits of the eye, tapering fingers, little feet heavily weighted with silver ornaments, bleeding mouths—they live again with a real existence in their hieratic postures. If in his fresh water-colors and his explosive paintings they borrow such noble attitudes from the past, the reason is that these dancers are truly the sisters of those of Herculaneum, and likewise of those of Ispahan, whose exquisite gracefulness Firdusi described many centuries ago. He has caught to perfection the mysterious charm of their art. His power of giving style to a type is no less evident whenever he cares to paint the miserable drawers of water, the women half-clad in striking cotton wraps as they pass through the scorching street with their jars. He has the art to ennoble their gestures without overdoing them; the white-skinned *canephora* who figured in the festivals of Dionysus were neither more Olympian in their bearing nor less truly beautiful than these bearers of water,

with their gold-colored skins and fine, nervous silhouettes. Then there are visions of forests brilliant with striking blossoms, through which, like the fabled heroines of Ramayana, there pass young women holding themselves like idols, covered with jewels, riding upon sacred young bulls of pale-colored hide. And then, to make an end, there is architecture that is like a dream, rising up white or rose-colored against the blue sky and reflected, along with the bodies of women and the flutter of many wings, in the limpid reaches of mighty streams.

Writing of those vistas of temples which inspire in the artist respect and a religious fervor, Besnard says:

“Behold the portal of the temple! We draw near; the declining day is scattering its violet powder over the roofs and the trees. A sudden stoppage, and we have arrived. The tall folds of the heavy door are partly opened and permit a clamor to escape toward us, which turns me cold. In my own mind I liken myself to Dante on the point of entering the circle of the Souls in Anger.”



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## TWO NATIVES AT DELHI

FROM THE PAINTING BY ALBERT BESNARD





Half-tone plate engraved by H. Davidson

PORTRAIT OF MRS. J. W. L. —

PAINTED BY W. G. VON GLEHN

(EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH ART)