

Albert Besnard

MODERNITÉS BELLE EPOQUE

25 October 2016 - 29 January 2017

PRESS RELEASE
October 2016



Petit Palais
Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

Tuesday – Sunday 10 am – 6 pm
Late closing Friday 9 pm

INFORMATION

www.petitpalais.paris.fr

The Petit Palais and the Palais Lumière in Evian are joining forces to present in Paris a retrospective devoted to Albert Besnard, pride of French Belle Epoque painting. Laden with honours and responsibilities in the course of his career – member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1912, director of the French Academy in Rome between 1913–1921, admitted to the French Academy in 1924, director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1922–1932 – he was the first painter in France to be given a state funeral, well before Georges Braque. Too soon forgotten, he was mistakenly consigned to the ranks of the sterile academics. **The aim of the exhibition planned for this autumn at the Petit Palais, where Besnard decorated the enormous dome over the vestibule, is to show that this painter, thoroughly modern in his bold use of colour and range of inspiration, deserves our renewed attention.** Some 200 works outline a career that included Paris, Rome, London and the banks of the Ganges.

Through a scenography evocative of Belle Epoque Paris, the exhibition eloquently illustrates the different facets of the Besnard persona: **late Symbolist, bard of the curves of the woman of the early 1900s, portraitist, talented decorator, virtuoso pastellist and disquieting engraver.** Thus we begin with his early years as a painter, culminating in the Rome Grand Prize in 1874 and a subsequent residency at the French Academy in Rome from 1875 to 1878. At the Academy he met his future wife, the sculptor Charlotte Dubray, and together they travelled to England, where Besnard discovered pre-Raphaelite painting and became friends with the engraver Alphonse Legros, who helped him master the art of etching. Back in Paris early in 1884, he began to receive the many portrait commissions that would make his reputation. **He also became the much sought after painter of feminine charms, in intimate pastels, sensual nudes and society portraits, and, at the same time one of the French capital's most prominent decorative painters.** The major projects then afoot in Paris gave him the opportunity to regenerate the art of monumental decoration, in a range extending from the walls of the School of Pharmacy and the Sorbonne to the ceilings of the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall), the Petit Palais and the Comédie-Française. **His potent originality found expression in his recourse to modern themes, symbolic language and a flamboyant palette.** A more secret Besnard emerged in his engravings, in which he was able to address more serious subjects, such as the existential self-questionings of man facing death, and thus reveal all the complexity of his personality and his art: the works making up the series *Elle (She)* are among the most original and arresting engravings of the turn of the century. The exhibition closes with Besnard's Orientalist vein: **his travels in Algeria and India gave rise to a personal vision of an East at once harsh, spellbinding and burningly wondrous.** With their saturated colours his big Indian oils and gouaches were a sensation at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris in 1912 and, like his oeuvre as a whole, helped open up new avenues in art.

COMMISSARIAT :

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Stéphanie Cantarutti: chief curator, Petit Palais

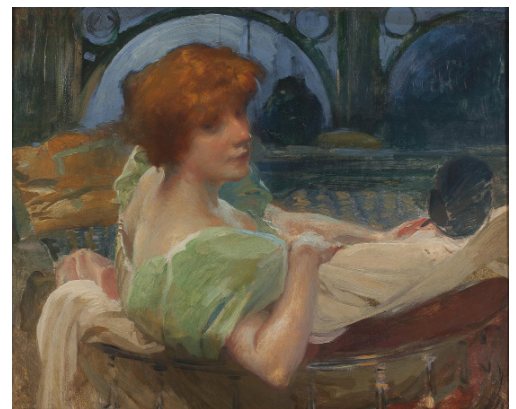
Christine Gouzi: lecturer at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne

Christophe Leribault: director, Petit Palais

William Saadé: honorary chief curator, representing the City of Evian



Albert Besnard, *Truth Leading the Sciences (detail)*, 1890. Paris, Hôtel de Ville, Salon des Sciences.
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Albert Besnard, *Portrait of Madame Georges Rodenbach*, oil on wood, 52 x 62 cm, Toulon, Musée d'Art. Rodenbach donation. Photo © 2015 F. Joncour

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