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Anne Leonard, Gilles Genty, Petra ten-Doesschate Chu

Responses to "*Young Woman Lying on a Meadow Looking at Swans*: A Riddle for *NCAW* Readers"

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New Discoveries

Responses to "Young Woman Lying on a Meadow Looking at Swans: A Riddle for *NCAW* Readers"

by Anne Leonard, Gilles Genty, Petra ten-Doesschate Chu

In our last issue, [we posed a riddle](#): we asked our readers for their opinions regarding the attribution of an anonymous painting descriptively entitled *Young Woman Lying on a Meadow Looking at Swans*, currently in a private collection in the Netherlands. We mentioned that the painting was publicly shown in 2003 at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor, NY as *Reclining Woman with Swans and Thistles* in the exhibition *La Belle Epoque and Toulouse Lautrec*. In that exhibition's catalog, the painting was attributed to the French artist Paul Ranson (1864–1909), but that attribution has been questioned. The current owner acquired the work as "anonymous."

Two of our readers have responded with brief commentaries. Anne Leonard, Curator and Mellon Program Coordinator at the Smart Museum of the University of Chicago, points to a general resemblance of the painting to Emile Bernard's *Madeleine dans le Bois d'Amour*. On the basis of that resemblance, she proposes that the work may have been painted by an artist in the circle of Bernard and Gauguin, and she tentatively suggests Georges Lacombe (1868–1916) as the author of the painting. Gilles Genty, an independent art historian and collector in France, whose contribution follows Leonard's, suggests that the painting may be the work of the Russian-born artist Jean Peske or Peské (1880–1949). The attribution to Peske was also suggested, by Gloria Groom, David and Mary Winton Green Curator of 19th Century European Painting and Sculpture at The Art Institute of Chicago, in an e-mail of June 22. Though allowing for the possibility of attributions to Paul Ranson ("although the style and subject doesn't fit with his Nabi period") and, in a pinch, to Georges de Feure, Groom feels that Peske is the most likely candidate. Meanwhile, Valentino Radman, a Croatian artist and visual arts blogger, in an e-mail of July 18, is of the opinion that the painting has much in common with the work of George de Feure—confirming Groom's hesitant suggestion.

It is clear that no unanimous agreement has been reached. De Feure, Lacombe, Peske, and Ranson all seem to be in the running, though it appears that Peske may be a favored candidate. If any of our readers has a further suggestion, please let us know your opinion by writing a comment below.

Anne Leonard, Curator and Mellon Program Coordinator at the Smart Museum of the University of Chicago

Upon seeing the "mystery painting" in the Spring 2011 issue of *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*,^[1] I thought immediately of Emile Bernard's *Madeleine dans le Bois d'Amour* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris; fig. 1), dating from the artist's stay at Pont-Aven with Paul Gauguin. In both, a woman stretches on the ground by a body of still or slow-flowing water. Each painting is set in

an autumnal landscape. We know that Bernard's painting of Madeleine dates from September 1888, the same month in which Gauguin painted her portrait now in Grenoble. Each woman wears a long blue dress—tightly wrapped in the Bernard, more flowing in the mystery painting—and each is in an apparent state of reverie that harmonizes with the melancholy of the surrounding landscape. Yet one is supine and the other is prone. Was the mystery painter responding directly to Bernard's canvas?

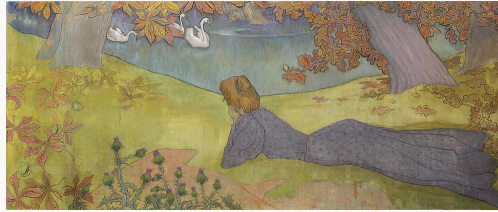


Fig. 1, Anonymous, *Young Woman Lying on a Meadow Looking at Swans*. Oil on canvas. Private Collection, Netherlands. [\[larger image\]](#)

Granted, the differences are many: the palettes are entirely dissimilar; the mystery painting's emphatic horizontal format contrasts with Bernard's squarish canvas (whose many vertical tree trunks balance Madeleine's horizontality); the perspective is raked much more steeply in the mystery painting than in Bernard's, though the latter, too, has a high horizon line; and judging by the image on the website, the mystery painter has used flat planes of color, quite distinct from Bernard's visibly aligned brushstrokes.

Nonetheless, the woman stretched out alone in a wood—a rare motif despite its wealth of Symbolist associations—forms a strong connection between the two paintings. In Bernard's painting, the hand Madeleine cups to her ear has been interpreted as a listening gesture (as in the famous sculpture of Joan of Arc by François Rude now at the Louvre). Closer inspection reveals that Madeleine is actually blocking her ear to the outside, as if the object of her listening could only be within herself. The same is true of the woman in the mystery painting: she covers one ear with one or both hands, propping her head as she turns toward the edge of the pond where three swans are swimming.

When the painting was published in 2003, it was tentatively attributed to Paul Ranson (1864–1909), and many aspects of the painting do suggest an association with the Nabis. One must always be cautious in venturing names, but, if pressed to do so, I would think of Georges Lacombe (1868–1916) rather than of Ranson. Lacombe came into Gauguin's orbit in 1893–94, a period during which Lacombe produced a decorative commission for Gabrielle Wenger on the theme of the Ages of Life. Of those four monumental canvases only *Spring* and *Fall* survive, but the same landscape (with seasonal adjustments) orders both.^[2] Tree branches enlance to form a thick canopy. In the mystery painting, flowers and leaves are strewn more haphazardly, yet delineated with care as in Lacombe's *Fall*. The leaning tree trunks and undulating line of the pond edge lend essential structure. In particular, the woman at the right of *Spring* (fig. 2), kneeling contemplatively with her long dress folded under her and with hair upswept, could be another version of the woman in the mystery painting.

During his time in Brittany, Lacombe used egg tempera rather than oil paint; one would need to check the medium of the mystery painting. True, Lacombe's hot palette, so often favoring the red-orange range, is one reason to doubt his authorship of the present canvas. Yet his compositions seem governed by a principle of symmetry and order that also reigns there. His contour outlines and strokes in the woman's hair, for example, match the style of *Breton portant un enfant* (CR 21a) or *Portrait de Paul Sérusier, le Nabi à la barbe rutilante* (CR 22a), both from 1894–95. In a later period, 1905–10, he was repeatedly drawn to forest scenes, closely delineating the foliage (as here) and placing figures in the foreground (CR 130–131b, 138).

Certainly, one would need much more information, and a close look at the painting itself, to venture further toward an attribution. The painting remains a mystery. For the moment, it is fascinating to see the posture of the “*gisante*”^[3] (as Madeleine was already described, before her death from tuberculosis in 1895) flipped, as it were, to a vital embrace of aestheticized nature.

Gilles Genty, independent art historian and collector

The rediscovery of a forgotten work, is always cause for excitement, both for art historians and art lovers. Such is the case for the painting acquired not long ago by a collector in the Netherlands and posed as a riddle to the readers of *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*. The painting's anonymity adds to the excitement of its discovery a sense of curiosity about the identity of its maker.

In the task of attributing a work of art to a specific artist, art historians use a variety of tools to help them determine the geographic region in which, and the time when, it was made, as well as the stylistic movement to which it belongs. These tools are here brought to bear upon a large canvas, unprimed (as we can see in the lower part of the painting), and covered with a fluid, matte, oil-based paint.

At first glance, the painting impresses the viewer by its size: 87 x 211 cm. Though today it is presented as an easel picture, it has the dimensions of a decorative panel and may indeed have been originally made for that purpose. The exaggerated downward curve of the lake in the center of the composition could indicate that the painting was originally placed high on a wall or even on a ceiling. Seen from below, the curve would have seemed less exaggerated and may have conveyed a subtle sense of depth.

The near absence of any underdrawing in this painting suggests that it may be a copy. If that is true, the major preoccupation of the artist would have been exactitude rather than experimentation. Copying was not an uncommon practice in the context of the production of decorative ensembles intended for domestic interiors. Most often, the original composition was traced and the tracing lines were punched with small holes. With the stencil thus obtained, the composition was transferred to a fresh canvas.

A cursory examination of several contemporary art journals, including *Art et Industrie*, *L'Art Décoratif*, and *Art et Décoration* did not produce a reproduction of the painting but it did bring renewed consciousness of a phenomenon that should not to be neglected: the quantitative as well as qualitative importance of amateur production at the end of the nineteenth century. *Art*

et Décoration, in particular, regularly organized contests in which amateur artists demonstrated that their productions could equal those of professional artists. The quality of this painting is such that it was probably painted by a professional artist, though the possibility that it was a copy by an amateur artist after the work of a professional cannot be excluded.

The clues that help us to establish the attribution of a work of art are both iconographic and stylistic. Iconographically, the painting offers few useful keys. The thistles in the foreground certainly are among the recurrent vegetative motifs that one sees in the art of the School of Nancy, but further research in this area has proven fruitless. The major Nancy School painters, Victor Prouvé and his followers, used the smooth brushwork that came from academic painting but did not apply it in large areas of flat color as we see in this painting.

The painting is rather in the style of the Nabis. The chestnut trees, on the left, are a motif that is frequent in Nabi decorative paintings. We find them for, example, in the window designed by Ker-Xavier Roussel, *The Garden (Le Jardin)* of 1894–95, produced for Siegfried Bing.^[1] The swans that glide on the lake in the background are a motif often seen in symbolist painting, notably the work of the Belgian painter William Degouve de Nuncques. Swans, which signify mystery, solitude, and meditation on the passing of time, are also found in the art nouveau compositions of the Nabis, in which they are favored for their naturally curved forms. We find them, for instance, in the large watercolor of Maurice Denis, *Women by a Brook (Femmes au ruisseau)* of 1894,^[2] as well as in the decoration of a cigar box of Paul Ranson, *Woman Leaning against a Tree (Femme adossée à un arbre)* of c. 1899.^[3]

An attribution to Ranson has been suggested for the panel, because of its similarity to the decorative aspect of some of the works of this Nabi painter. Certain aspects of the work, especially the chestnut trees, resemble those found in Ranson's *Diana the Huntress near a Lake (Diane Chasseresse près du lac; fig. 1)*.^[4] If, in the end, we reject his attribution, it is because the woman in the foreground has so little in common with Ranson's style. In fact, it is perhaps the woman who furnishes the most important clue to the painting's authorship. She shows some very interesting affinities with two works of the Russian artist Jean Peské (1870–1949).^[5] A similar female figure—with practically no sense of volume—is found in Peské's famous lithographed poster for *L'Estampe et L'Affiche* of 1898 (fig. 2). The manner in which the chignon is represented in both works, in a completely flat tone but articulated by fine lines, is identical. The reclining woman is also quite similar to another composition by Peské called *After the Bath* (1898; figs. 3, 4).^[6] In that work we find a similar decorative use of chestnut leaves as well as the same decorative use of the flattened planes. The proximity of Peské to the Nabis (like them, he enrolled in the Académie Julien; he participated in the same exhibitions; and was friends with Paul Sérusier and Henri de Toulouse Lautrec), may confirm the tentative attribution of this Nabi-esque painting to Peské, until such time as we can find an irrefutable proof of its authorship.

Anne Leonard, Gilles Genty, Petra ten-Doesschate Chu

Notes

Anne Leonard

[1] "New Discoveries: *Young Woman Lying on a Meadow Looking at Swans*: A Riddle for NCAW Readers," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2011), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring11/new-discoveries-young-woman-lying-on-a-meadow-looking-at-swans>.

[2] Joëlle Ansieau, *Georges Lacombe 1868–1916: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Somogy, 1998), cat. 28 and 29. "CR" references in the next paragraph refer to this publication. Gabrielle Wenger was Lacombe's future mother-in-law; he married her daughter Marthe, who is the model for the women in the series.

[3] The term, with strong resonances of tomb sculpture, comes from Bernard's own *Souvenirs inédits sur l'artiste peintre Paul Gauguin et ses compagnons lors de leur séjour à Pont-Aven et au Pouldu*, cited in MaryAnne Stevens and others, *Emile Bernard 1868–1941: A Pioneer of Modern Art*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, 1990), 196.

Gilles Genty

[1] The window, made of Tiffany glass and measuring 124 x 93 cm, is in a private collection today.

[2] Measuring 143 x 71 cm, this work, a gouache on paper, is in the Musée Maurice Denis in St. Germain-en-Laye.

[3] Reproduced in Brigitte Ranson Bitker and Gilles Genty, *Paul Ranson 1861-1909, Catalogue raisonné: Japonisme, Symbolisme, Art Nouveau* (Paris: Somogy, 1999), 278, cat. no. 443.

[4] *Ibid.*, 219, cat. no. 311.

[5] On Peské, see the very interesting catalogue of the October 10–December 14 exhibition: *Les peintres graveurs, 1890-1900* (Paris: Galerie Berès, 2002).

[6] The work, a diptych, is in a private collection. For reproductions, see the exhibition catalog for the December 17, 2010 sale at Hôtel Drouot, "*Pour le plaisir*" (Paris: Millon & Assoc, 2010), 13, cat. no. 26. See http://www.millon-associes.com/vol7122010/millon_17122010.pdf (accessed August 20, 2011).

Illustrations

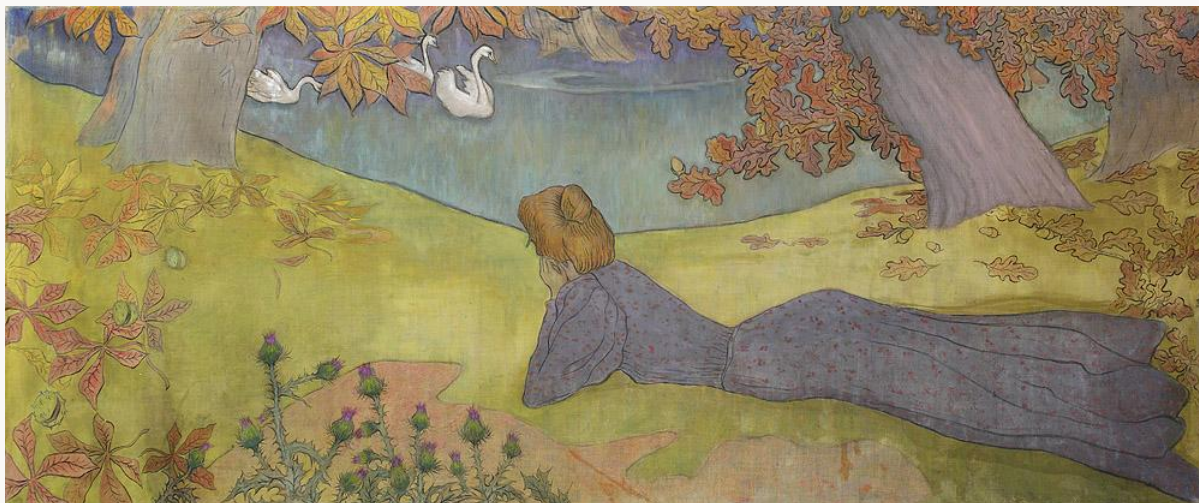


Fig. 1, Anonymous, *Young Woman Lying on a Meadow Looking at Swans*. Oil on canvas. Private Collection, Netherlands. [\[return to text\]](#)