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book review of

Jacques-Emile Blanche by Jane Roberts

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Jane Roberts, *Jacques-Emile Blanche*. Paris: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2012. 215 pp.; 25 b/w illustrations, 190 color illustrations; bibliography; index. 39 € ISBN 978 -2-35340-129-1

The complex career of Jacques-Emile Blanche (1861–1942) has not yet been the subject of detailed study, or of exhibitions, given the fact that many of his paintings and pastels are buried in private collections and that research on the artist necessitated a careful awareness of the sitters that Blanche painted, as well as an intimate grasp of how the finished portraits were actually done. [1] There is now an increasing awareness of Blanche’s contribution to the importance of portrait painting in the late nineteenth century. Blanche knew almost everyone who was involved in the arts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whether this was another painter, a literary figure, a stage performer, a connoisseur of art, a musician, or a member of fashionable society, Blanche tried to get to know them; many, in turn, wanted to become sitters for the artist since being painted by Blanche endowed them with an aura of significance while adding to the panorama of the famous that Blanche recorded. Since he was widely traveled, moving between England and France on a frequent basis, he gained access to the most famous political personalities of the day. He also formed close friendships with other painters such as Charles Cottet (1863–1925), a painter from Brittany, and the English painter Walter Sickert (1860–1942). Blanche knew the work of many other painters, artists whose canvases informed the way he worked whether it was Edgar Degas, in many of his pastels, or the Norwegian artist Frits Thaulow. Blanche’s portrait of Thaulow, now in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, confirms how Blanche was positioned as an art nouveau creator, since this painting was shown at Siegfried Bing’s first Salon of Art Nouveau in December 1895. [2]

Jane Robert’s book, the product of continuous research on Blanche since 1987, reflects the author’s broad familiarity with his canvases. It also demonstrates Robert’s methodological ability to provide information and insight into the people painted by Blanche. The study of portraits, no matter in what period of time, necessitates an awareness of the sitter, the relationship of the model with the painter, and, if possible, the sitter’s reaction on seeing the finished canvas. Without providing this type of background contextualization for every work, the value of a given composition would be diminished. Happily, Robert’s does this in a comprehensive, and detailed way through capsule statements that are positioned alongside

individual examples in many sections of the book. A reader has ample evidence as to who the sitter was without having to consult an encyclopedia or find additional information gleaned on the Internet.

Organized chronologically and thematically, the book moves from Blanche's early years, his privileged background, and his desire to become a painter, to his ties with various larger-than-life individuals in artistic society in Paris and London. His parents' wealth allowed Blanche to satisfy his curiosity through the study of books; and their association with well-to-do and cultured people gave the young boy an opportunity to meet social and cultural leaders, thus giving him an advantage based on his family's social standing. While not always able to locate works of art that are linked to a given period in Blanche's evolution (especially his early years in London), Roberts uses later examples from Blanche's career to provide visual evidence of how he expanded his interest in the world beyond being solely a painter of stylish portraits. As the painter's career evolved, especially in the 1870's, Roberts examines Blanche's interest in still life painting, and in pastels based on scenes outdoors in Paris; she also provides some of the early portraits that Blanche completed such as the imposing *Portrait of a Woman* (1889) which would have easily found a place at the exhibition of the Salon des Artistes Français since it suggests compositions produced by such Third Republic stalwarts as Henri Gervex. In this way, the type of portrait that Blanche completed adds to the impressive ways in which he was then absorbing the visual style of Third Republic France (31).

When Blanche moved away from portraits of single sitters, he completed his early masterpiece *The Tennis Party* (1882). As Roberts notes, this work was most likely painted in the studio of Henri Gervex; it became the first composition to document the sport, which had become the rage in France. As one examines the composition, the ease with which Blanche integrated a group of figures provides a compelling reason to see it as one of the most complex paintings that he was ever to complete. The delicacy of the women, and their demeanor, conveys the grace of a certain genteel class; it also underscores the fact that Blanche had already absorbed some of the key aspects of the paintings of James Tissot, who by this time, was regarded as one of the most accomplished society painters of the era. Blanche's budding career is well chronicled through numerous pastels of the 1880s, which are too often unfamiliar to readers since they are housed in private collections (40–41).

Two paintings stand out from the close of the 1880s and early 1890s. One of these is the *Portrait of Henri Guérard* and the other is the complex Symbolist work, *The Host or the Last Supper* (44–45). Since both of these paintings are in public collections in France, and thus easily available to the interested viewer, seeing them within the broader context of the evolution of Blanche's work provides new insight into their contributions. The *Portrait of Henri Guérard* (1889), showing the artist holding an engraved copper plate, provides ample evidence of the artist's own creative interests, and links him to other creators such as Marie Bracquemond who painted her husband Félix in his studio holding a copper plate (1886). Just as he did in his later (1895) portrait of the painter Thaulow, Blanche here demonstrates that he could provide information about a sitter's career through the activity of a model or the location where the portrait was set. In this case, the artist's studio, with a painting on an easel and Guérard holding a copper plate for etching, revealed the two aspects of his creative life. With *The Host* Blanche attempted a far more ambitious program that links him to Symbolist artists. In the interior of his house at Auteuil, he positioned the painter Louis Anquetin as Christ, seated and addressing both the audience of

onlookers outside the canvas and those who are seated around the table, including Blanche's parents. In this imposing picture the painter was able to modernize a biblical scene by bringing it up-to-date. Beyond a Symbolist canvas however, it is evident that Blanche had already found his *métier*; his interest in portraiture from life remains his best-known work.

The next section of the book "A Very Parisian Life" reveals Blanche's expanding array of friends and colleagues, as he became a member of the fashionable, social elite. His self-portrait with Rafael de Ochoa (1890, The Cleveland Museum of Art) documents how painters from other cultures, in this case Spain, entered his life. The enigmatic quality of this canvas, combined with a broad range of drawings that showed Ochoa in his house at Dieppe (or elsewhere), established Blanche as an elegant artist, one who saw himself as a dandy even as he was painting a portrait. [3] As this chapter unfolds, we become aware of the intellectual elite with whom Blanche was associating and where he was headed as a portrait painter; it also reveals that he had absorbed the earlier contributions of the paintings of James McNeill Whistler as demonstrated in such canvases as the portrait of Louis Metman (1888), the curator at the Museum of the Decorative Arts in Paris (57). Through her careful detective work, Roberts has located unusually seductive, impressive pastels bringing into the light some well-known fashionable celebrities at the time. Among these is the actress Julia Bartet whose sumptuous pastel portrait (1889) conveys both the aura of the *femme fatale*, a creation of the period, and the presence of a diva within whom Blanche conveyed a quality of purity combined with enticement (63).

In this same chapter, Roberts shows Blanche's developing talent as a portraitist as he expands his repertoire to the treatment of young children, including his creatively designed portrait of Lucie Esnault (1889) seated before a mirror (68). Cognizant of the fact that Blanche could master almost any traditional approach to portrait painting led Roberts to find examples that suggest his understanding not only of other French portraitists, but also of English portrait painters, such as Thomas Gainsborough. Although not much is made of this point in the text, Roberts was correct to bring it forward as it was one way in which Blanche distanced himself from earlier portrait painters while also demonstrating that he understood how they worked.

As the book evolves, Roberts very astutely highlights certain relationships. The first is Blanche's association with Robert de Montesquiou; a second is his tie with Marcel Proust, and a third is his relationship with André Gide. The *Portrait of Marcel Proust* (1892, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) is most likely the best known of Blanche's portraits. Roberts adroitly evokes the timelessness of these three portraits in her text, pinpointing them as significant paintings for the artist and as important records of three noteworthy literary leaders. This further cements the relationship that Blanche had with the leading intellectual creators of the era, especially with those figures who were not painters themselves.

With the next section, Roberts focuses on "Dieppe Summers" when friends were either staying with him, or visiting the locale. Drawing on a rich number of portraits including those of the symbolist writer Arthur Symons, the English artist Aubrey Beardsley, or the Australian painter Charles Conder, Roberts lays out evidence of Blanche's friendships, seeking to establish the exact moment each of these figures actually came to Dieppe during the summer of 1895. Once again, the documentary material is positioned next to each painting in the book, providing key information on who these individuals were. Without this type of reference, a reader might easily fail to recognize these sitters, whose names are now lost in the recesses of late-

nineteenth-century history. It would have been useful at this point in the text to provide further visualization as to what Dieppe looked like when these figures gathered there. Even further contextualization is needed, as it seems unlikely that each individual went there only to meet with Blanche. Was Dieppe an artistic community? Was it a place where many people went on vacation? Or was it, as in Paris, a place where friends and patients of Dr. Blanche could come to receive the benefits of his treatment?

With the next chapter, “At Home in Paris and London,” Roberts gives priority to the general appearance and importance of society portrait painters. Here, she explores the emergence of the society portraitist as well as some earlier examples of painters who had worked in this tradition. She also comments on “... how the vast number of ‘nouveau riche’ clients...wished to express their newly acquired importance and to give some permanence to their newly acquired position...” through portraits (108). Roberts makes the case that Blanche’s great talent enabled him to become a part of the world that he was painting. He had become a well-accepted member of the wealthy elite; he also emerged as “the painter friend” of some of the richest and most important families in England and France. By reiterating this point, Roberts underscores just how Blanche was able to maintain his position, and to complete so many portraits throughout his life.

Roberts maintains interest in Blanche’s singular focus even when the world he knew best was disappearing. A world of privileged social class and personal fortune was being passed over, hastened by the catastrophe of World War I. Roberts writes that Blanche continued to maintain an interest in doing portraits in an earlier style—one associated with the nineteenth century—even when more modern portraits were being produced by artists working in a more challenging mode. Recognizing that Blanche hated what was termed as “modern,” Roberts is clear-eyed in demonstrating that he became a pitiless critic of the young (151). Perhaps she might have done more with Blanche’s clinging to the past, but she does provide a fair overview of his entire career so that one can see its scope and focus.

The book provides a carefully documented chronology of Blanche’s career, with evidence of the articles that have been published on Blanche, and an infinitely rich number of examples of his work drawn from all phases of his career. There is no doubt that this was a painstakingly researched book. While the text might have interpreted Blanche’s choices of subjects and his painting technique a bit more, the reader is left with a very strong appreciation for the artist and his work. His paintings and pastels are continually featured, the range of his creativity is strongly advanced, and since he was a supreme portrait painter, Roberts has offered a crucial understanding of who his sitters were. This is a very valuable service. Roberts has also gone far in making it apparent why Jacques-Emile Blanche needs to be studied by reconstructing many of the intimate relationships he recorded in his vibrant portraits in oil and pastel. With this book, Jane Roberts has made sure that Blanche’s portraits will continue to be studied, valued, and collected, especially since they contributed to a deepening awareness of a section of the society of his time.

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[1] *Jacques-Emile Blanche peintre (1861–1942)*, exh. cat. (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997).

[2] See Edwin Becker, “Les Salons de l’Art Nouveau: Perfect Harmony and Unpretentious Beauty” in *The Origins of l’Art Nouveau the Bing Empire*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs; Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2004), 130–31.

[3] For more on this relationship, see Gabriel P. Weisberg, “Jacques-Emile Blanche and the Stylish Portrait: 1880–1905,” *Arts Magazine* 59 (Summer 1985): 6–14.