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JACQUES-ÉMILE BLANCHE Paris 1861 - 1942 Offranville

Portrait of Desirée Manfred (The Summer Girl)

oil on canvas

157 x 118 cm

signed lower right: *J. E. Blanche*

Dated by Jane Roberts to 1904 this painting portrays one of Blanche's favorite models in informal pose, seated on the arm of a delicate fauteuil. When reproduced in the Illustrated London News in 1905 it was given the title "*The Summer Girl*", but we cannot be sure if this was a title given it by the artist or his dealer.

The subject, a beautiful young woman named Denise Manfred, was one of Blanche's favorite models, whom he painted no less than thirteen times. She is something of a mysterious figure, Desirée Manfred almost certainly not being her real name, but chosen because of some romantic Byronic connection of her own (or her mother's) invention. Blanche seemed to have discovered her secret, and identified her as the love-child of some well-known public figure, fathered when he was in his eighties (but whose name has never been revealed). It seems that Blanche was first asked to paint her by her mother when she was a child of ten or eleven, and even then captivatingly beautiful. The author Maurice Barrès, another of Blanche's friends and sitters, saw her in one of her early sittings and was likewise so entranced that he made her the heroine of his novel, *Bérénice*. Blanche painted her for Barrès again, dressed as *Cherubino*, the young page from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, always played by a light soprano (this latter painting is now in the Musée de Reims). We do not know what became of Denise, whom she married or when she died.

Blanche's talent for capturing the sitter's personality is apparent in this work, perhaps a legacy from his father's fashionable psychiatric clinic, where he came into contact with many of his sitters.

Biography:

Jacques-Émile Blanche was born the son of an eminent pathologist and was raised in the stylish Parisian neighbourhood of Passy in a house which once belonged to the Princess de Lamballe, and enjoyed a privileged and cosmopolitan upbringing. Blanche received some early training under Henri Gervex and Jacques-Fernand Humbert, and spent time in the more advanced studios of Manet and Degas, but he is generally acknowledged to have been self-taught.

From about 1884, Blanche made frequent trips to London, where he spent a formative period working closely with James MacNeill Whistler and William Sickert. From 1887, he exhibited regularly at the New English Art Club. He also spent significant periods at his home in Dieppe which became a locus for French and English artistic and literary celebrities, several of whom sat for portraits by Blanche including Degas (Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art), Aubrey Beardsley, James Joyce, and Walter Sickert (all London, National Portrait Gallery). During the 1890s he became a successful portrait painter of fashionable society, exhibiting with the Société Nationales and winning a gold medal at the Exposition Legion d' Honneur in 1900 and the Salon des Tuileries in 1933. Blanche exhibited at the Salon from 1882 to 1889 and at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts from 1890. In 1884, together with Ary Renan, he organized and exhibited at the first Salon des Indépendants at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris. This was an eclectic show of Neo-Impressionist, Symbolist and other works. He held his first one-man exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, Paris in 1914, and a retrospective exhibition took place at the Musée de l'Orangerie in 1943.

He was also a regular exhibitor in London at the Leicester Galleries and was given a monographic show at the National Gallery, a rare distinction for a living painter. In London, Blanche was an important Parisian contact for Oscar Wilde, through whom he met Marcel Proust in 1891. They had first met in 1883, while Wilde was trying to gain a footing in the French capital, after his tour of America. Wilde and Blanche shared many friends including Beardsley, Sickert, Charles Edward Conder, and Sir John Rothenstein. Later in 1927, Blanche shared the same sort of relationship with Virginia Wolff, whom he also introduced to Parisian intellectual circles.

In the early 1900s, Blanche had a successful teaching atelier that attracted many students from Australia, Russia and Britain including Henry Lamb, Kathleen O'Connor and Rupert Bunny. Blanche was also a prolific writer and published many books of which his most famous are *Mes Modeles* (1928), *Portraits of a Lifetime 1870 - 1914*, (1937), and *More Portraits of a Lifetime 1918 - 1938*, (1939).

The Matthiesen Gallery, London