

Paul César Helleu
(1859 – 1927)

No other artist depicted the “Belle Epoque” in the art of printmaking as strongly as Paul César Helleu, be it in his “posed portraits”, “portraits seized in a moment”, or “intricate affectionate studies”. With his engravings in black and white or those printed in color he made use of all the drama and techniques of his medium to produce studies which could be compartmentalized into formal compositions, family scenes and nudes, either in interior or outdoor settings.

During his lifetime Helleu achieved fame and a luxurious lifestyle, mixing socially with the high society before the War are to become one of the most successful and popular portraitists of his age.

Helleu attended the atelier of Jean Leon Gerome in 1876. To provide himself with sufficient income he began his career by decorating ceramics, and as his reputation increased he began to receive portrait commissions. In 1884 he undertook to paint the young Alice Guerin, then only aged 14 years old, with whom he fell in love. After a two year courtship her parents relented and the couple was married. Their first child was “Ellen”, later to become one of her father’s favorite models, was born in 1887.

In 1885 he made his first attempt at drypoint etching. Over the following decades he was to execute over two thousand etchings, sometimes making only one or two copies of each subject. No other artist was able to capture the sensuous texture of fur and plumes which dominate his striking portraits of society’s most beautiful women at the end of the nineteenth century.

His sitters included eminent personalities such as Queen Alexandre, Princess Patricia of Connaught, Comtesse de Greiffuhle, Madelaine Le Maire, and one favorite was Consuelo Vanderbilt — the American born Duchess of Marlborough, whom he met in 1900. His prominent clientele introduced him into society both in England and also the USA where he was commissioned in 1912 to design the ceiling of the Great Hall of the Grand Central Station in New York.

The advent of the great war heralded the end of the “Belle? Epoque” and saw the demise of Helleu’s clientele and their elegant world of conspicuous consumption. He began to concentrate on oil paintings of majestic cathedral views, statues in the park at Versailles and vibrant still-life’s of flowers. Although he continued to paint and draw until his death in 1927, he destroyed almost all his copper plates four years earlier. His works in both drypoint and oil show the influence of Japanese prints in their unusual angles and perspectives. In 1887 he met Comte Robert de Montesquiou who was to become his patron, friend and biographer. Helleu was also close friends with John Singer Sargeant, Edgar Degas, Alfred Stevens, Giovanni Boldini and Whistler, of whom he made a drypoint portrait.

According to Rieder, Whistler greatly admired the white color scheme in one of Helleu’s rooms.