



Jean-Louis Forain (1852-1931)



"Le foyer de l'Opéra"

Oil on canvas signed lower left

24.02 x 31.50 inch

Jean-Louis Forain was born in Reims in 1852. His father was a painter and decorator and Jean-Louis Forain showed a real passion for drawing very early on. He was a trainee to a business card engraver and then his family settled in Paris in 1863. Aged 14, the young Forain went to draw at The Louvre to learn from the artists. The painter Jacquesson de la Chevreuse took an interest in him and gave him drawing lessons for a year. Then the sculptor Carpeaux noticed him in a gallery of The Louvre and took him into his studio where he stayed for more than a year. He also had a brief stay in Gérôme's studio at Beaux-Arts. He regularly spent time at the print room of the National Library, where he admired Holbein and Goya. Here the living conditions were very tough. At that time, he met Verlaine and Rimbaud, who nicknamed him "Gavroche". Forain shared an apartment with Rimbaud for two months and painted his portrait. In 1874, he joined the 101 st Infantry Regiment in Laval. During the 1870s, in the Latin Quarter and in Montmatre he led a bohemian life and drew satirical drawings in which depicted Parisian society which he sold to the newspapers of that time., Le Scapin in April 1876, la Cravache , then le Monde parisien ,le Café Concert ,le Chat Noir ,Le Journal pour tous ,Le Rire ,L'Echo de Paris , etc. It was at this time that he met Manet and Degas, as well as the writer and art critic Huysmans and he drew the portrait of the latter in 1878 (Orsay Museum, Depot of the National Museum at the Versailles Château). He met up with them almost every evening in the Café Guerbois, then at the Café de la Nouvelle Athènes. As a result Forain studied art with Manet and Degas. In 1876 he illustrated Huysmans' Marthe . Following Degas' invitation, he participated in the fourth, fifth and sixth Exhibitions of Independent Artists in 1879, 1880 et 1881, where he again met up with his impressionist friends Bracquemond, Mary Cassat, Gauguin, Pissarro, Raffaelli, and his teacher, Degas. Forain and Raffaelli illustrated Huysmans's Croquis parisiens (Parisian sketches) in 1880, before going to Italy in 1883. He exhibited his work at the Official Exhibition in 1884 for the first time with is painting Le Buffet (The Buffet). The following year he exhibited at the Le Veuf Exhibition (Orsay Museum), but this did not prevent him from also participating in the eighth Exhibition of Independent Artists in 1886. Forain became a well-known figure in Parisian life and enjoyed great success. In 1886, Durand-Ruel exhibited his canvasses in New York, along with those of Degas, Manet, Monet and Renoir (to name but a few) and his drawings were printed in the Courrier Français and the Figaro newspapers. It was the beginning of an extremely successful collaboration. Through the press, Forain was able to show an extraordinary vision of the daily life of the French during the Belle Epoque. Having been launched into society life, he attended dances at the Opera and racecourses. However, having been born amongst 'common' people, Forain also stayed close to them. His dream came true in 1889 when he launched his own weekly satire magazine, named the Fifre .

In 1890 he set up his first private exhibition of satirical drawings in Boussod-Valadon's gallery and rather left painting aside in preference for satirical work. He produced hundreds of drawings which were in demand by both the illustrated publications and major newspapers. The majority of his drawings were grouped together in albums:

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La Comédie parisienne (1892), Les Temps difficiles (1893), Nous Vous Eux (1893), Doux Pays (1897), etc.

Forain married Jeanne Bosc in 1891; she was also a painter and he painted her in several portraits. During all this time, they made several trips to various destinations: Venise (1893), Madrid (1894), New York and Chicago (1893), Guernsey (1894), Greece (1913), Constantinople, the Straits, the Holy Land and Egypt (1913), London (1925), Copenhagen, Rome, Brussels, The Hague, Geneva (1925), Barcelona (1930) and Lourdes. In 1902 he did a series of etchings: the subjects were taken mainly from the gospel and the Bible. He worked relentlessly and produced paintings and engravings during this time (Madame de Noailles , 1915). In the cellar of rue Laffitte, he was often a guest at Vollard's famous dinner parties, where once again he met with Degas, Cézanne and Renoir. He drew Renoir's portrait in 1905 which was exhibited at Georges Petit's and then at the Bernheim gallery in 1909. With his friends Sem, Helleu and Boldini, he regularly frequented Parisian society whom he met at Maxim's or Weber. In 1910 his work was shown at the International Exhibition in Brussels, and Octave Maus, the president of the Groupe des XX exhibited fifty-four of his pieces of work. He exhibited in London at the Society of Painters and Engravers in 1911. Forain brought back a series of mystical etchings from Lourdes in 1912 where he had been a stretcher-bearer with his son. The following year, he had a big private exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts, bringing together 390 paintings, watercolours, drawings, lithographs and etchings. When war was declared in 1914, Forain used his talent for the good of the homeland, particularly in the columns of the weekly paper L'Opinion and then in the Figaro . In 1915, even though he was 62 years old, he signed up with the camouflage platoon. He was greeted like a friend by the military leaders, whilst his drawings were still being published. Once the war was over, Forain continued to collaborate with the Figaro until January 1925, but bit by bit, he abandoned his pencils to take up his brushes again. Then he painted cabaret scenes, court scenes, war scenes, and more and more often, gospel themes (Le Repas à Emmaüs), which had been haunting his mind since 1900. Forain chaired the Montmartre Commune and Humorist Society in 1920. He illustrated some books, such as Pantins de Paris by Gustave Coquiot (1921) and an edition of Tribunaux by Courteline. He exhibited at the Employers' Federation of Fine Arts in 1921. In 1923 he was elected a member of the Institute. Two years later (1925), he was nominated President of the National Society of Fine Arts. From 1926 he showed his work at the Knoedler gallery in New York, then at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh in 1929. He was Chevalier of the Legion of Honour from 1893 and was nominated Commander of the Legion of Honour in 1928. He then became a foreign member of the Royal Academy of Sweden and, in 1930, a member of the Royal Academy of England. Showered with glory, he was elected a member of the Institute of France. He was friends with Louis Gillet and Paul Léon and was at the height of his fame in the 1920s-1930s. Troubled by a religious dilemma, he devoted the end of his life to pious themes.

Forain's work is varied and punctuated by marked stylistic evolutions. For example, he painted the theme of dance in several different ways according to all the processes and pictorial styles which characterised it and he adopted the impressionist style of his teachers Manet and Degas together with his own expressionism. Following Degas, the Opera ballets enabled him to portray a woman's body in motion.

But above all, the show world was a much sought-after social viewpoint for Jean-Louis Forain, a concentration of humanity. He enjoyed wandering behind the scenes, in the dancers' and artists' dressing rooms, listening to their conversations. The influence of Degas can be seen in Forain's pastels, but Forain also owes a lot to Manet in the way he approaches his subjects. In his work, the artist showed understanding of the very different circles which he knew well, having mixed in them, be it law, medicine, theatre, artists, 'common' people, high society, bourgeoisie or the world of prostitution. Without a doubt, Forain portrayed the most complete range of French society of that time.

Museums

Musée d'Orsay , Paris.

Cabinet graphique du Musée du Louvre.

The Dixon Gallery and Gardens Collection, Memphis, Tennessee.

The Art Institute of Chicago

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

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Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russie
Hirshorn Museum, Washington DC.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
M F A, Boston
National Gallery of Art, Washington
National Gallery, Ottawa
National Gallery, Londres
Courtauld Institute of Art, Londres.
Aberdeen Art Gallery, Ecosse
Ashmolean Museum of Art, Oxford.
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid.

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