

Biography

The varied work of Octave Denis Victor Guillonnet makes him an unclassifiable artist. From history painting to the softness of female subjects, his artistic production is polymorphous and multiple. In the early days of his career, Guillonnet, receiving a significant number of official commissions, initially devoted himself to monumental art, abandoned by the Impressionists, while retaining a palette that was still very academic. Later, he chose to follow in the footsteps of Chabas, a French painter and illustrator, a pupil of Bouguereau, by favouring pastel tones, with a bright and clear light. His contrasted work then celebrates the beauty of a domesticated nature. Landscapes with acidulous colours multiply, inhabited by refined young women, with a Parisian elegance. Moreover, a trip to the Orient undeniably marks the gaze of this young painter, who develops a new pictorial aesthetic. He then abandons pure, hard lines in favour of a softer touch, blending in with the background, which gives a velvety rendering to his subjects.

Born in Paris on 22 September 1872, Octave Denis Victor Guillonnet, decorator of the national palaces, was also a designer, portraitist and illustrator. He came from a family of leather workers, with modest incomes, however, a large part of his childhood was spent in the Loiret department, in Jargeau, far from the hustle and bustle of Paris. In fact, in fragile health, he was welcomed by his maternal grandparents during his many periods of convalescence.

At the age of 13, in 1886, Guillonnet exhibited for the first time at the Salon "Blanc et Noir" a portrait of Louis XI, Louis XI at prayer. Indeed, gathered at this event, many well-known illustrators exhibited alongside the young Guillonnet. Among them, Lionel Royer, a renowned history painter and portraitist, noticed his plastic qualities and suggested that he join his studio. The work of this artist had a huge impact on Guillonnet's future. He spent many hours studying literature, in parallel with his plastic arts training, and Guillonnet built up a great literary culture and developed many writing skills.

Two years later, in 1887, Guillonnet's work was exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français. At the age of 17, he obtained an honourable mention at the 1890 Salon, then a third class mention in 1892. Finally, he was awarded a second-class mention at the 1894 Salon.

In 1896, Guillonnet went on a study trip to discover the colours of the Orient. Indeed, in 1896 he will be granted a national travellers' scholarship, which allows him to set up his easel on Algerian soil. After this passage in North Africa, his vision of light remains particularly impacted. Although previously revisited by the Impressionists, it became more vivid, more intense and occupies a preponderant place in the painter's work. He discovers a new management of contrasts. In the wake of the Impressionists, the artist strives to restore these coloured shadows, impregnated with the colour of the surrounding elements: contrasts that are too marked are no longer favoured in his canvases. On his return, he took part in the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris. Within this framework, he was commissioned to execute a monumental decoration for the pavilion of the Ministry of Colonies. His work *L'Asie, l'Afrique et l'Amérique* will be awarded a silver medal.

After attending Lionel Royer's studio, Guillonnet was accepted at the School of Fine Arts in Paris and joined the studios of Joseph Blanc, a French painter devoted to religious and mythological subjects and a history painter. He also received instruction from Fernand Cormon, answering under the pseudonym Ferdinand-Anne Piestre, specialized in history painting.

A few years later, in 1913, Guillonnet was chosen by Léon Bonnat, director of the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, to illustrate the cardboard of the banquet and concert given to raise Cormon's rank to Commander of the Legion of Honour. His production in February will become his major work. His master, occupies the central place

in this painting entitled The Flight of Cain.

Gradually, Guillonnet's work became more and more famous. He is now exhibited alongside Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley in Paris by Georges Petit, Durand-Ruel's great rival and one of the most influential figures on the art market of the period.

However, the historical and political context of France became more complex: the First World War broke out. In 1914, Guillonnet was forced to leave his town and chose to take refuge in the south of France. His work took a different turn. From the so-called "official" painter of the Third Republic, he abandoned this history painting in favour of a more luminous and lighter painting: we find a multitude of naked female bodies, languid, draped in long coloured stoles. This rupture with the aesthetics of his work is marked by the abandonment of his signature in favour of a new pseudonym: O.D.V, followed by the first three letters of his first name GUI.

It is to this last artistic period that this harmonious painting by Guillonnet, depicting a group of four women bathing at a fountain in an architectural setting. We find in it the characteristics of Guillonnet's finished work: The bluish monochrome colours, the blurred and melted contours, the large vaporous veils, the naked bodies of young girls in the prime of life, and the bright, yet soft shades.

Museums

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes

Bibliography

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