

Paul Cesar Helleu

(1859-1927)

1859

Paul Helleu is born in Vannes, county of Morbihan in Brittany, on the 17th of December. He is the second son of Pierre-César Helleu, of the local landed gentry and Marie-Esther Guyot, of Parisian origin.

1862

Death of his father, forcing his mother to manage, on her own, the lands in the Morbihan.

1866-1872

Education from age 7-13 in Vannes by the "Friars of Picpus"

1873

He is sent to Paris to study at the Collège Chaptal (secondary school) but already he is attracted to the art of drawing.

1874

*His vocation as a painter is revealed after seeing the painting "Chemin de Fer" by Manet with his mother at the Salon de la Peinture of 1875
Encouraged along this path by Galland, he very strongly opposes his mother's wish that he enter a business career.*

1876

He finally returns to Paris to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts (School of Fine Arts) where he is admitted into the studio of Gérôme. With Sargent, he goes to Durand-Ruel's for the second exhibition of the Impressionists. The same evening, they dine with Monet at the "Café du Helder".

1876-1878

Attracted by the painters of the new generation and the new art movements, he becomes friends with Degas, Monet, Rodin, Forain, Paul Bourget, as well as with young foreign painters, Boldini, Madrazo, Stevens, Ochoa and particularly with Whistler and Sargent. At first working in a studio at Notre-Dame-des-Champs, he joins, upon invitation, Sargent's studio, where he can work in more comfort.

1879

Death of his elder brother Edouard.

1880

Journey to the Netherlands with R. Curtis, Chadwick, and Sargent.

1882

He paints plates for the ceramist Deck to earn enough to survive as his mother, with great parcimony, sends him the money repeatedly asked for, mainly to acquire canvas and paint. He rents the studio from Alphonse de Neuville.

1883

At the "Cercle des Arts Liberaux", he exhibits a painting named "La Plage de Pouliguen" and a pastel showing a woman reading, which will be noticed and appreciated by Duez.

Second journey to the Netherlands with Belleruche and Sargent.

1884

Through Ochoa, he meets Mr and Mrs Louis-Guérin who commission a portrait in pastel of their daughter Alice, then 14 years old.

1885

At the Salon, he exhibits the portrait of Miss Alice Louis-Guérin (to whom he becomes engaged) as well as another pastel, "La Gare Saint-Lazare".

Huysmans, Octave Mirbeau and Roger Marx write flattering articles. He makes a first attempt at engraving with a diamond point that James Tissot gave him and Sickert does the inking of the copper plate of his first engraving.

Upon a recommendation from Gérôme, he is hired as a decorator to work on a "Panorama" in London.

He remains a month and a half in England and discovers a true passion for the country, and shares anglomania with Jacques-Emile Blanche whom he met the same year at Whistler's.

1886

He declines (together with Claude Monet), an invitation by Degas to exhibit at the 8th Show of the Impressionists. He begins to be acclaimed by the press.

On May 22nd, Caran d'Ache publishes in "The Figaro" a caricature of Helleu.

He marries Alice Louis-Guérin in the church St-Pierre of Neuilly on July 29th. This marriage will bring more stability to his life. With his wife, Helleu lives two years at his in-laws, 7 Rue Ancelle, in Neuilly, where he creates "The Blue Garden" and paints beach-scenes at their villa "St-Augustin" in Benerville.

1887

He exhibits six works at "the Salon of the Pastellistes", at Georges Petit, including, two portraits of Alice and a "Head of a Spanish Woman" in the spirit of Manet.

Admiring Helleu's dry point engravings, Robert de Montesquiou buys a set of six from him.

1888

Contrary to the taste prevailing at the time which had a general preference for dark interiors, he paints all the walls of his apartment (68, Boulevard Pereire) in white.

This innovation becomes a conversation piece, and gets the approval of Whistler and the admiration of Oscar Wilde.

In Brussels, the XX invite him to exhibit with Toulouse-Lautrec, Signac, Whistler, Blanche, Forain...

Alice and Paul Helleu befriend Berthe Morisot, Mallarmé and Renoir.

1889

He stays in the village Calcot Mill (Oxfordshire, west of London) where Sargent had settled; the latter makes several studies of Mrs. Helleu.

The Comtesse Greffulhe purchases Helleu's first drawings for a sum of 3000 francs: the most substantial sale that he had made so far.

1890

He lives in the Avenue Bugeaud, Paris. Not only the walls are white, but the curtains and seat-covers are made of a white Louis XIV Damask cloth, originally church decoration for a wedding.

Mallarmé sends him a letter, which is addressed as follows:

*"Au 55, avenue Bugeaud
Le gracieux Helleu
Peint d'une couleur inconnue
Entre le délice et le bleu"
(vers de circonstances)*

*« At 55, Bugeaud Avenue
Gracious Helleu
Paints with an unknown colour
Between delight and blue »*

Stays at Sargent's in Fladbury.

1891

He does portraits in pastel of the Comtesse Greffulhe in her castle at Bois-Boudran, as well as thirty-odd sketches and drawings. Helleu becomes the darling of the upper-class ladies. He makes the portrait of Henri Rochefort in London.

1892

He is a witness at Claude Monet's second marriage. Fascinated by the interiors of cathedrals, he paints Chartres, Rouen, the Basilica of Saint Denis and exhibits at the Salon "La Cathédrale de Reims".

1893

He exhibits at the Salon "La Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris ". He works intensely and cultivates his image as a dandy; he is seen at café-concerts and at exhibition openings. He haunts the sophisticated world with Forain. Art dealers such as Durand-Ruel and Bing take an interest in him. After London, he exhibits in Munich.

1894

He changes theme and makes paintings inspired by the park of the Chateau de Versailles. He exhibits at the Salon "Les Grandes Eaux de Versailles au Bassin de Latone ". He makes three engravings of Eugène Boudin.

He meets Edmond de Goncourt through Princess Mathilde and engraves his portrait. De Goncourt writes in his diary: "His wife could not make a movement that was not grace and elegance and ten times a day he would try to capture these movements with a quick dry point ".

1895

He exhibits at the Pastellistes; the critics favour him; he receives namely the keen support of Roger Marx who had taken an interest in him since 1885 and who made this very point in recalling it in his article. He exhibits 59 engravings and 5 pastels in London, at Dunthorne's; Edmond de Goncourt writes the foreword of the catalogue. He meets the Prince of Wales, future Edward VII (he will later engrave the portrait of Queen Alexandra). He is introduced to Marcel Proust by Montesquiou. They embark on an elegant correspondence after Helleu sends a painting to Proust that the novelist admired particularly: "Automne à Versailles". A close friendship is born and, later, Helleu is the inspirational model for the painter Elstir in Proust's famous novel "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu".

1897

He now prefers to paint rather than to engrave. He exhibits at the Salon du Champ de Mars paintings of Versailles and seascapes (very flattering article by Gustave Geffroy), then in London, Munich and Brussels at the 4th Salon of "Libre – Esthétique". He engraves three portraits of Whistler.

1898

Accidental death of their 18-month old daughter Alice. To distract his wife, he rents a yacht, the "Barbara".

1899

Taken by a passion for the sea, he travels on the yacht "Bird" and paints a lot of "seascapes" and "still lifes" mostly with flowers. He declines contracts with art dealers such as Durand-Ruel and Bernheim, in order to stay independent.

1900

He buys the yacht "Etoile". The Duchess of Marlborough sits for him. He makes two pastels and five engravings and, during his stay at Blenheim Palace, he makes several drawings.

1901

He has the attention of the period's top dress designers; Félix, Doucet, Worth who follow his ideas and suggestions on creating and launching new fashions. He exercises a large influence on the ladies' fashion of the day. The inseparable trio is formed: Helleu, the caricaturist Sem, and Boldini.

1902

The departure for New York is announced in Le Journal and the Figaro, as well as American newspapers who run a long interview with the artist. His arrival was carefully prepared and appreciated. His success becomes a triumph; Russell, an editor, commissions an album representing New York's twenty finest beauties, for which he pays 150 000 francs. But his stay in New York, expected to be for three months, was shortened, despite a great number of orders; after three weeks he returns to France, in great haste, his daughter Ellen having contracted typhoid fever.

1903

He lives Rue Emile Menier in Paris and continues to have a white interior. On the walls of the flat, paintings by Gauguin, Monet, Renoir, Boudin, Cézanne neighbour beautiful antique frames, which he leaves empty and admires them for their own beauty. He starts engraving again.

1904

He is made Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur and refuses to present himself to the Institute. He spends the summer months with his family on his yacht, as he does every year.

1905

He engraves 18 Portraits, one of them of Anna, Countess Mathieu de Noailles, author of "Cœur innombrable".

1908

He now prefers making pastels rather than engravings. Helleu makes the famous portrait of Queen Alexandra. He buys the yacht "Brunette".

1909

At the "Libre Esthétique " (Brussels), he exhibits the dry point of "Whistler" that reaps a huge success.

1912

He returns to New York where he makes 37 portraits and decorates the ceiling of the "Grand Central Station" with a night blue arch crossed by golden signs of the zodiac and a silvery Milky Way. A grand dinner for about sixty guests is given in Helleu's honour at the Ritz.

1913

Helleu is 54 years old and still very well known. Montesquiou publishes the first important monography on Helleu. In the summer, Helleu convinces Coco Chanel, while looking at the sands in Deauville, to make use of the impression of sand and its beige colour

1914

His career is momentarily interrupted by World War I. Material problems arise: he sells his yacht, furniture and other precious items; he even has to part with his Watteau of which he was so fond.

1915

He makes nude studies of a model, Sonia Speranza, a redhead.

1918

After a long time absent from exhibiting, Helleu makes a comeback. He displays a portrait in pastel of Miss Toussaint at the Salon. Becoming an advisor of several important art collectors and at the same time mounting his own collection, Helleu

discovers a Watteau, a "Scene Gallante" in a park setting. The find of this Watteau causes quite a stir; Helleu was known for his love for "the genius of the three pencils", as he was called.

1919

Death of his mother. He sells all the family land in Brittany of which he had kept rather bad recollections notably as a place where his destiny as a painter had been challenged.

1920

He makes a trip to New York where he remains for six months. He exhibits at the Wildenstein Gallery. He makes numerous portraits of rich Americans and famous actresses, which he sells for prices ranging between 5,000 and 15,000 dollars. He writes to his wife and daughter about his extraordinary success in New York. He meets with Charlie Chaplin and works with him on a film project "The Tramp Painter". (also known as "Charlot Peintre")

1921

Death of Robert of Montesquiou, which affects him a lot.

1922

Death of Proust. Helleu makes a last portrait, a quick dry point, of his friend on his deathbed.

1923

Deeply affected by the death of his two dear friends, Helleu begins to weaken and become frail . He destroys his engraved copper plates. He paints in the park of Versailles.

1924

New series of nude studies of the model Yolande Warin.

1925

Death of Sargent, which is a shock that affects him deeply.

1927

Helleu dies after a surgical operatio , while planning a great exhibit of his paintings with Forain.

"And would it not be a beautiful praise, if one engraved it on his marble:

Man of

one God

ART

one Master

TASTE

one Woman

HIS OWN "

said Robert of Montesquiou.