

MYSTERY AND GLITTER. PASTELS IN THE MUSÉE D'ORSAY.
8 October 2008 - 1 February 2009

Temporary Exhibition halls, level 0 (Seine side)

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For the first time since it opened, the Musée d'Orsay presents an exhibition exclusively from its pastel collection of over three hundred works. With a selection of 118 masterpieces, the *Mystery and Brilliance* exhibition takes the visitor through the main artistic trends in the second half of the 19th century, with highlights from some of the most important figures who revived this technique, like Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas and Odilon Redon. Some pastels by Albérola and Sam Szafran demonstrate the interest this technique still holds for artists today.

Described by Antoine Furetière in 1690 as this “paste made by binding or crushing several pigments together or separately, and with which all kinds of pencils are made for painting on paper or on parchment”, pastel is one of the most appealing artistic techniques. Having first made its appearance in the 15th century, pastel painting soon established itself as an art form in its own right. Although the 18th century is considered as the golden age for pastels - the extraordinary success of Venetian artist Rosalba Carriera, the work of Maurice Quentin de La Tour and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin spring to mind – the 19th century was not without distinction. Certainly, the Neo-Classicism of David and his followers, intent on virile scenes from Antiquity and heroic paintings, had the upper hand over this precious coloured powder for a short time. But the overt sensitivity of the Romantics helped to bring pastel back into favour after its eclipse at the beginning of the century. It is in the context of this revival that the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay opens.

The first section is dedicated to Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), and clearly shows that his use of pastel rendered the realism in his art less severe – an effect welcomed by his contemporaries. Influenced by the 17th century Flemish and Dutch masters, Millet produced several bucolic scenes where his peaceful peasants devote themselves to working in the fields, unquestioningly, a nobility in their age-old gestures, as in *La Femme au puits [Woman at the Well]*, circa 1866. Millet's idealised realism is continued in *Le Berger [The Shepherd]* (1887) by Puvis de Chavannes and in *Deux baigneuses au bord d'un étang [Two Bathers by a Pool]* (circa 1893) by Léon Lhermitte.

One room devoted to the pastels of Manet (1832-1883) offers an unexpected view of this artist. Although *Madame Edouard Manet au canapé bleu [Madame Edouard Manet on a Blue Sofa]* (1874) and *Le Tub [Woman in a Tub]* (1878) demonstrate the frank, unaffected expression that one readily attributes to Manet, his delicate feminine portraits, on the other hand, reveal him to be a worthy heir to the 18th century masters, or, in Paul Valéry's words, to be “by nature passionate about elegance” (*Portrait d'Irma Brunner [Portrait of Irma Brunner]*, circa 1880-1882).

The Impressionist works in the following section are the perfect embodiment of what can be achieved with pastel. In order to define the sensitive works by Boudin, Monet (*Pont de*

Waterloo [Waterloo Bridge], circa 1899) and Pissarro, to which pastel brings an incomparable freshness, one might be tempted to borrow Diderot's compliment to Chardin: "It is the air and light you take with the tip of your brush and fix to your canvas." Edgar Degas (1834-1917), for his part, preferred to bury himself in theatre wings or in some corner of a flat; his daring perspectives and his glowing palette transcend the lowly world of dancers, women bathing and ironing. There is range of pastels by Besnard, Guillaumin, Duez, Gervex (*Dieppe*, circa 1885), mainly from the 1880s, showing a realist vein which has its roots in the Impressionism of their elders. The society portrait also has its place in the exhibition, like the *Portrait de femme [Portrait of a Woman]* (1887) by Jacques-Emile Blanche (1861-1942), emblematic of these elegant Parisian women who were so much a part of high society. The exhibition finishes with five rooms devoted to Symbolism. The wealth of the Musée d'Orsay collections encompasses artists as diverse as Maurice Denis, the Belgian William Degouve de Nuncques, the Czech Alphonse Mucha and even George Desvallières, whose extraordinary, monumental pastel *Les Tireurs à l'arc [The Archers]* (1895) is being shown for the first time.

Thanks to the pastel's powdery composition, the old legends (Emile-René Ménard, *Le Jugement de Pâris [The Judgement of Paris]*, 1907) and languid beauties (Alphonse Osbert, *Au bord des eaux [At the Water's Edge]*) are shrouded in mystery. To Verlaine's sigh of: "Your soul is a chosen landscape", the Swiss author Henri-Frédéric Amiel replied "any landscape is a condition of the spirit". In fact, *Un parc la nuit [A Park at Night]* (1892-1893) by Jozsef Rippl-Ronai, and *La Barrière [Gate]* (circa 1892) by Ker-Xaviel Roussel have the fascination of haunted places. After a room dedicated to the work of Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer (1865-1953), the exhibition finishes in a beautiful blaze of colour with the thirteen pastels by Odilon Redon (1840-1916). In his own words "By putting, as far as possible, the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible" Redon expresses the very essence of Symbolism, and, through his audacious use of form, borders on a kind of abstraction, full of promises.

Curator: Philippe Saunier, curator, Musée d'Orsay, in charge of pastels.

Media partner: Paris Première, RATP, 20 minutes, Evene.fr

Around the exhibition

LECTURES

BETWEEN ROCOCO AND SYMBOLISM: REVOLUTIONS IN MODERN PASTELS.

Guillaume Faroult, Juliet Wilson-Bareau and Margret Stuffmann

Tuesdays 7, 14, 21 October 2008 at 6.30pm, Musée d'Orsay auditorium

Free entrance according to availability

PUBLICATIONS

Mystery and Brilliance. Pastels from the Musée d'Orsay Collection, special edition, edited by Guy Cogeval, 22.5 x 28.5 cm, hardback, Musée d'Orsay/ RMN publications, €39

Mystery and Brilliance. Pastels from the Musée d'Orsay Collection, illustrated album, 21 x 26.5cm, 48 pages, joint publication

Musée d'Orsay / RMN