
Bastien-Lepage, Jules

(b Damvillers, Meuse, Nov 1, 1848; d Paris, Dec 10, 1884).

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French painter. Bastien-Lepage grew up on a farm. Although his earliest efforts in drawing were encouraged, his parents violently objected when he decided to become a professional artist. To mollify them he worked for a time as a postal clerk in Paris while studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In 1868 he left the civil service and was accepted into Alexandre Cabanel's atelier. During this apprenticeship, Bastien-Lepage won two prizes in drawing, and in 1870 he made his *début* at the Salon with a *Portrait of a Young Man* (untraced). In the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) he joined a regiment of sharpshooters and was severely wounded in the chest. When he recovered he attempted unsuccessfully to find work as an illustrator. A pastiche of Watteau was accepted at the Salon in 1873, and two further canvases in 1874—an allegory, *Song of Spring* (Verdun, Mus. Princerie), and *Portrait of my Grandfather* (Nice, Mus. B.-A.), the critical success of which launched his career.

The Communicant (1875; Tournai, Mus. B.-A.) reveals, in its intricate detail, Bastien-Lepage's study of 16th-century northern masters: in examining the work, critics commented on its 'Holbein-like' gravity and spirituality. For his Prix de Rome entry of 1875, the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (Melbourne, N.G. Victoria), he borrowed elements from Ingres and the 17th-century Spanish painter Jusepe de Ribera; although Bastien-Lepage did not win the competition with this work, it was much admired for its skill and erudition. He submitted the *Hay Gatherers* (Paris, Mus. d'Orsay) to the 1878 Salon; contemporary critics were appalled by the supposedly simian features of the peasant girl in this work. The following year he sent a pendant picture, *October Season: The Potato Harvest* (Melbourne, N.G. Victoria).

Bastien-Lepage's next major work was *Joan of Arc Listening to the Voices* (1879; exh. Salon 1880; New York, Met.). In homage to Joan's intense heroism and patriotism he visited her birthplace to gather details and returned to his own village to find suitable models for the figure. In the finished painting Bastien-Lepage depicts the saint leaving her chores to follow the celestial voices. The apparitions he painted behind her aroused considerable controversy when the painting was first shown, as this was an unconventional rendering of the theme. The picture provoked a mixed response among art critics because of the tension between the naturalistic rendition of the setting and the supernatural elements of the subject. Bastien-Lepage retreated to London, where a small retrospective of his work was arranged at the Grosvenor Gallery.

By 1880 Bastien-Lepage was suffering from stomach cancer. In his last years he remained faithful to peasant themes, inspired by the memories of his childhood. For example *The Beggar* (1881; Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyp.) and *Le Père Jacques* (1882; Milwaukee, WI, A. Mus.) effectively contrasted aged peasants to children. In *Le Père Jacques* Bastien-Lepage used the theme of the woodcutter to show that all forest inhabitants, including children, had a place in nature. The unfinished *Burial of a Young Girl* (1884; oil sketch, see Aubrun, 1985, p. 195) was meant to extend the rustic naturalism of the *Hay Gatherers*. Paintings such as *Pas mêche* (1881; Edinburgh, N.G.) spread a type of

Salon naturalism that influenced painters internationally. British artists, especially George Clausen and Henry Herbert La Thangue, Australians such as Tom Roberts and Americans such as Julian Alden Weir were deeply affected by his compositions and complex and varied painting technique.

In his handling of a rich, thick paint texture he owed much to an awareness of earlier Realist painters such as Courbet; he was also influenced by Whistler and possibly John Singer Sargent. Bastien-Lepage's ability to keep certain areas of his canvas free from reworking also reflected an awareness of Impressionistic broken brushstroke painting and an immediacy of touch. However, other sections of a work reflected a painstaking exactitude, suggestive of a classical training and an interest in photographic detail. This technique, as well as the subject-matter of his paintings, made him seem compellingly modern when his work was shown at Salons in Paris and exhibitions in London. This modernity is also evident in numerous portraits of theatrical friends, including *Marie Samary* (priv. col.), *Coquelin* (U. Notre Dame, IN, Snite Mus. A.) and his emblematic image of *Sarah Bernhardt* (priv. col.). These portraits were often inspired by photographic techniques. A large retrospective exhibition of his paintings and drawings in Paris in 1885 displayed his contribution to the naturalistic style through elevation of peasant and rustic themes as subjects for large-scale painting, completed in a detailed and intricately painted manner.

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External resources

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