
Breton, Jules

(b Courrières, Pas-de-Calais, May 1, 1827; d Paris, July 5, 1906).

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French painter and writer. After the death of his mother he was brought up in the village of Courrières by his father, grandmother and uncle. The last instilled in him respect for tradition and a commitment to the philosophical ideas of the 18th century. Breton's father, as supervisor of the lands of the Duc de Duras, encouraged him to develop a deep knowledge of and affection for his native region and its heritage, which remained central to his art.

Breton received his earliest drawing lessons at the College St Bertin (nr St Omer). In 1842 he met Félix de Vigne (1806–62), and from 1843 he studied with him and Hendrik Van der Haert (1790–1846) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. Breton's training was academic though he was aware of traditions of genre painting. During the spring of 1846 he worked at the Antwerp Art Academy under Baron Gustaf Wappers but spent most of his time at the museum studying the Flemish masters, including Hans Memling, Jan van Eyck and Rubens.

Breton went to Paris in 1847 to complete his education in the atelier of Michel-Martin Drolling, and he became friendly with the Realist painters François Bonvin and Gustave Brion. His painting (1849; priv. col., see 1980 exh. cat., p. 158) of the studio he shared with Ernest Delalleau (1826–64) illustrates his early Realist style.

During the Revolution of 1848 Breton sided with the liberals. *Misery and Despair* (1848; exh. Salon 1849; destr.) and *The Hunger* (1850; exh. Salon 1850–51; destr.) mirrored his preoccupation with social causes and his own intense struggle to make ends meet. The successful exhibition of *The Hunger* in Brussels and Ghent encouraged Breton to move to Belgium, where Félix de Vigne's daughter, Elodie, became his model and in 1858 his wife.

In 1852 Breton returned to France and made trips to the outskirts of Paris, garnering ideas for new canvases. *The Return of the Reapers* (exh. Salon 1853; priv. col.) is the first in a series of rural peasant scenes that Breton based on an awareness of contemporary themes and of similar subjects painted by Léopold Robert. Breton's interest in peasant imagery continued and in 1854 he settled in Courrières, where he began *The Gleaners* (Dublin, N.G.), a work inspired by seasonal field labour. The third-class medal it received at the Salon drew Breton to the attention of other artists including Jean-François Millet, and his career developed rapidly during the Second Empire. *The Blessing of the Wheat, Artois* (1857; Arras, Mus. B.-A.) was awarded a medal at the Salon of 1857 and due to the fervent support of Count Emilien de Nieuwerkerke his work was bought by the State.

Other major paintings of the 1850s present a serene view of field work; for example, the *Recall of the Gleaners* (1859; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay) and *Dedication of a Calvary* (Lille, Mus. B.-A.), both shown at the Salon of 1859. In these canvases Breton's realistic themes were modified by an idealized treatment of physiognomy and anatomy that recalls works of the Italian High Renaissance, most notably those by Raphael. In 1861 Breton received the Légion d'honneur for works such as *The Colza* (1860; Washington, DC, Corcoran Gal. A.).

Breton travelled in 1862 and 1863 to the south of France where he did studies for the *Grape Harvest* (exh. Salon 1864; Omaha, NE, Joslyn A. Mus.), which marks the apex of his more classical style. By 1867 Breton's fame was further assured when he exhibited ten paintings at the Exposition Universelle in Paris and was awarded a first-place medal. His interest in provincial life, especially views and religious rites of Brittany (e.g. a *Great Breton Pilgrimage*, 1867; Havana, Mus. N. B. A.), continued throughout the 1870s and guaranteed his importance during the Third Republic.

In such later paintings as *St John* (1875; Norfolk, VA, Chrysler Mus.) Breton modified his Realist inclinations to create images with a pronounced Symbolist inflection. This shift is most notable in late poetic canvases such as the extremely popular *Song of the Lark* (1884; Chicago, IL, A. Inst.), where a solitary field worker is contrasted against a dimming light to create a highly subjective mood. Such paintings became increasingly sought after by American collectors, such as W. P. Wilstach, in the last years of the 19th century. Popular demand often led Breton to repeat motifs and to produce canvases that are feeble reflections of his more thoughtful works. The wide availability of his work through engravings enhanced his real talent and made him one of the best-known artists of the period.

Breton was also a productive writer. In 1875 he published a volume of poems, *Les Champs et la mer*, with considerable success, followed in 1880 by the long poem *Jeanne*. Such works as *La Vie d'un artiste: Art et nature* (1890), *Un Peintre paysan* (1896) and *Nos peintres du siècle* (1899) added to Breton's esteem in artistic, literary and official circles. He was appointed to the Institut de France in 1886. Breton's brother Emile (1831–1902) and daughter Virginie (1859–1935) were also painters.

Writings

La Vie d'un artiste: Art et nature (Paris, 1890)

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Breton, Jules: Le Pardon de Kergoat, 1891, Muse des Beaux-Arts (Quimper) http://musee-beauxarts.quimper.fr/htcoib/oe_747.htm

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