
Lhermitte, Léon(-Augustin)

(b Mont Saint-Père, Aisne, July 31, 1844; d Paris, July 27, 1925).

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French draughtsman, printmaker, painter and illustrator. He was the only son of a village schoolmaster and his precocious drawing skill won him an annual grant from the state. In 1863 he went to Paris and became a student at the Petite Ecole, where one of his teachers was Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, famed for his method of training the visual memory. Jean-Charles Cazin, a fellow pupil, became a lifelong friend and Lhermitte later got to know Alphonse Legros, Henri Fantin-Latour, Jules Dalou and Rodin, who had all studied at the school. In 1864 his charcoal drawing the *Banks of the Marne near Alfort* (untraced) was exhibited at the Salon. By inclination and by training a meticulous draughtsman, he continued to exhibit his drawings at the Salon until 1889.

In 1866 his first oil painting, *Violets in a Glass, Shells, Screen* (untraced), was exhibited at the Salon, and he produced his first etching, for his friend Frédéric Henriet's book *Paysagiste aux champs* (Paris, 1876). He also did illustrations for a book on insects and for furniture-makers and designed boxes for sweets. In 1869 he made his first visit to London, where he met Legros. On his second visit in 1871 Legros recommended him as an illustrator for *Works of Art in the Collections of England Drawn by E. Lièvre* and introduced him to the dealer Durand-Ruel, who agreed to sell several of his drawings. In 1873 Durand-Ruel sent some of Lhermitte's works to the Dudley Gallery for the first of the annual Black and White exhibitions and Lhermitte subsequently became a regular participant. Prints after Lhermitte's works, which were published in the Galerie Durand-Ruel's *Recueil d'estampes gravées à l'eau-forte* (1873), contributed to his growing reputation.

Lhermitte won a third-class medal in the Salon of 1874 for his painting *The Harvest* (Carcassonne, Mus. B.-A.), which was bought by the state. In 1879 Degas noted in a sketchbook his intention to invite Lhermitte to exhibit with the Impressionists, but Lhermitte never participated in any of their shows. *The Tavern* (priv. col., see Le Pelley Fonteny, 1987), exhibited in the Salon of 1881, initiated the monumental series of paintings on the life of the agricultural worker that came closest to justifying van Gogh's admiring appellation 'Millet the Second'. The next in the series, *Harvesters' Payday* (1882; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay), was bought for the state and became the artist's best-known work. *The Harvest* (1883; St Louis, MO, Washington U., Gal. A.), third in the series, was included with ten charcoal drawings in the Exposition Nationale in 1883. Lhermitte received the Légion d'honneur in 1884 when he exhibited the fourth monumental composition the *Grape Harvest* (New York, Met.), where the shift in emphasis from physical toil to the emotional rapport between a peasant woman and small boy is indicative of the increased sentimentality of his later work.

Lhermitte was commissioned in 1886 to do two large portrait groups to decorate the Sorbonne. The first, *Claude Bernard in his Laboratory at the Collège de France* (Paris, Acad. N. Médec.), was shown in the Salon of 1889. In 1888 André Theuriet asked him to illustrate *La Vie rustique* (1888), a major commission for which Lhermitte used the many drawings of peasant life he had already executed. Lhermitte was a founder-member of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1890. In 1894 he was made an officer of the Légion d'honneur while working on the enormous painting *Les Halles* (4.0×6.3 m; Paris, Petit Pal.), commissioned by the city of Paris to decorate the Hôtel de Ville. This huge, opulent

panorama depicting workers at the market dwarfs Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (Manchester, C.A.G.) as an image of labour. Lhermitte was elected to fill Jacques Henner's chair in painting at the Institut in 1905. He continued to exhibit in the first decades of the 20th century, when he was generally seen as a relic of a bygone era, although his style later had an influence on Socialist Realism. Increasingly he worked in pastel, his draughtsman's skill ever in evidence, producing some sensitive portraits and peasant scenes reminiscent of the earlier and more powerful depictions that van Gogh had cited as 'an ideal'.

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See also

Lecoq de Boisbaudran, Horace

Mural, §1(i): Europe, c 1810-c 1930

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Lhermitte, Léon Augustin <<http://oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00109175>> in Oxford Art Online <<http://oxfordartonline.com>>

External resources

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Lhermitte, Lon: Harvesters' Payday, 1882, Muse d'Orsay (Paris) http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/resultat-collection.html?no_cache=1&S=0&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bzoom%5D=0&tx_damzoom_pi1%5BxmlId%5D=009169&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bback%5D=en%2Fcollections%2Findex-of-works%2Fresultat-collection.html%3Fno_cache%3D1%26S%3D0%26zsz%3D9

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