



# Melancholy and elegance

## The art of Alfred Stevens reveals depth below the surface

REBECCA BENOOT

Alfred Stevens was a 19th-century Belgian painter who became famous for his vivid and graceful portraits of upper-class Parisian women who appear to have spent their days doing nothing in particular besides simply being beautiful. These elaborate and intricately detailed portraits of society women in their boudoirs may have become his trademark but there is more to Alfred Stevens than meets the eye. The Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels has decided to bring a different view of his *oeuvre* focusing mainly on his contribution to 19th-century European genre painting.

Stevens was born in Brussels in 1823 but spent most of his life (from 1844 onwards) in Paris where he mixed with artists like Eugène Delacroix, Théodore Rousseau, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas and writer Alexandre Dumas. He even became known as "the Fleming who was more Parisian than most Parisians".

The focus of his work at the beginning of his career was slightly historical with a hint of Romanticism.

But it soon started to tend more towards Realism as the social issues of the time (like the common man or, in Stevens' case, the common woman's burdens), started to trickle through. Once installed in Paris, however, he became influenced by the *Belle Epoque* era and all the luxury it entailed, shifting the focus of his paintings in an entirely new but still very realistic and humane direction.

Upper-class Parisian women of the Second Empire (and later the Third Republic) became the focal point in his works – women who seemed to have nothing better to do than wait for something that might never happen. These paintings are suffused with an air of melancholy and despair, which clashes with their otherwise colourful and ingeniously detailed style.

Stevens was a keen observer of these women's inner and outer states. Not only does he accurately portray their feelings of loneliness and boredom, but he also has a remarkable eye for gestures, facial expressions, habits and even skin tone. The lavish 19th-century salons decorated with silk fabrics

and lacquer in which these women spent their days were perceived as fundamentally shallow, contrasting the superficial beauty of the period with its inner anguish. Stevens did a spectacular job in creating tangible textures and fragrant flowers that produce a truly dramatic and decadent atmosphere, which successfully distracts the viewer from the hidden truth beneath the shiny surface.

His paintings resemble snapshots of crucial moments in the lives of countless women. Stevens often incorporated books and letters in his *oeuvre*, which have the intriguing effect of inviting the spectator to make up stories about what could have happened or better still what is going to happen. Turmoil, sorrow, bad news – all are recurring themes in his work as he depicts women's reactions to these consuming states. Tables also frequently feature in his paintings – symbolising support during particularly dark days.

Although he often portrays these women as divine, even ethereal beings (his *Salomé*, for example, is slightly reminiscent of Khnopff), he



Alfred Stevens' *De dame in het roze* (*The lady in pink*), 1866

also leaves room for the flaws that make them human. These women are strong *femme fatales* (illustrated by the many portraits of his friend, the French stage actress Sarah Bernhardt), but at the same time they are vulnerable. The rare moments when they get to be themselves – behind closed doors and away from prying eyes – are what most fascinate Stevens.

This duality is also emphasised by his love for mirrors, often showing both sides of a woman (front and back representing the inner and outer states), and his suggestion of other rooms through open doors. These doors offer a contrast between the vibrant and hopeful world of high society, and the inner world of a woman locked away with only her memories.

Eastern influences slowly make their way into the portraits as Stevens begins to incorporate Japanese ornaments and clothing, enhancing already sumptuous canvases. His fascination with exoticism forms a separate part of the exhibition, and includes various ornaments and props featured in his works.

During the final stages of his career,

Stevens spent considerable time by the sea in Normandy due to poor health. This resulted in several paintings of harbours and beaches which lack the lustre of his prime.

The exhibition continues on the second floor, where one room is dedicated to his *magnum opus*, *History of the Century* (1789-1889). This collaboration with Henri Gervex was made especially for the World Fair in Paris in 1889 and originally consisted of 18 works – of which only the four seen here have survived. The idea behind this masterpiece was to depict important historical figures from the 19th century like Victor Hugo, Napoleon and Alexandre Dumas.

Henri Gervex was mainly responsible for the main characters while Stevens occupied himself with the portrayal of the women, providing the decorative elements and finishing touches. The panorama is accompanied by a useful who's who for those of us keen to identify the celebrities. For anyone who wants to relish the grandeur and vulnerability of the French *Belle Epoque*, this exhibition is a must. ♦



One of the four remaining panels from *History of the Century*, 1789-1889

→ [www.fine-arts-museum.be](http://www.fine-arts-museum.be)