



CAMILLE MAUCLAIR

Henri Le Sidaner

Obolus Art History Series No. 1



Marie Duhem, *Portrait of Henri Le Sidaner* (1894)

CAMILLE MAUCLAIR

HENRI LE SIDANER

With a Foreword by Gabriel Mourey

Translated by Andrew Rickard



THE OBOLUS PRESS
NEWMARKET · ONTARIO · CANADA

2020

The Obolus Press
www.oboluspress.com

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Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mauclair, Camille, 1872-1945

[Henri Le Sidaner. English]

Henri Le Sidaner / Camille Mauclair ; translator, Andrew Rickard.

Translation of: Henri Le Sidaner.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-9811780-3-5 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-9811780-6-6 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-9811780-7-3 (electronic book)

1. Le Sidaner, Henri, 1862-1939. 2. Painters — France — Biography.
3. Painting, French — 19th century. I. Rickard, Andrew, 1973-, translator II.
Title. III. Title: Henri Le Sidaner. English.

ND553.L588M38I3 2019

759.409'034

Cover: Detail from *Petite table près de la rivière au crépuscule. Nemours* (1921)

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Translator's Preface

When Georges Petit and Henri Floury published this book in 1928, it contained four colour plates and 205 black-and-white etchings. The pictures were often placed in such a way that they had nothing to do with the accompanying text.

In this translation there are just 70 images but all of them are in colour, and when the author discusses a specific painting I have tried to position it on either the same page or on one of the adjacent pages. If there has been any discrepancy between the title of a painting in the original text and the one listed in the *catalogue raisonné*¹ I have relied on the latter.

In many cases the choice of illustrations has been dictated by availability and resolution size, although my own preference has also played a role. Where I thought it appropriate I have reproduced several works that Henri Le Sidaner painted after this book first appeared.

The foreword was not part of the French edition and is taken from one of Gabriel Mourey's essays.²

All of the footnotes are my own.

Andrew Rickard

¹Yann Farinaux-Le Sidaner, *Le Sidaner: L'Oeuvre peint et gravé* (Monaco: Éditions André Sauret, 1989).

²Gabriel Mourey, "Henri Le Sidaner," *Des Hommes devant la nature et la vie* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1902), pp. 57–76 (at pp. 66–68).

Foreword

Henri Le Sidaner looks at nature and life in the same simple, fresh way as the good monks of the 13th and 14th centuries, and he is just as open to the simple poetry of things. He converses with the venerable stones of houses in which so many have been born and died, the leaves of hundred-year-old trees, and the images reflected in the peaceful water. He speaks with them in the same way that St. Francis spoke with the birds, fish, and flowers. His heart, however, does not carry the same torch of faith that illuminated the lives of these holy men; he may be fortunate or unfortunate in this regard. It is not the relations between the beings and things of God's creation and God himself which interest and inspire Le Sidaner. He only cares for the human element. This is what moves him, this is what he is passionate about.

The picturesque *per se* leaves him cold. If Le Sidaner lovingly paints the façade of a house in the moonlight, one with a small lit window that looks out from a pale, anxious face like a tear-filled eye, it is not so much that he is captivated by the delicate contrast between the bluish white of the moon and the rose-gold light of the lamp, nor has he been seduced by the subtle set of values. No, he paints the scene because he wants to make us dream. We stand in front of something that is very ordinary and yet very profound, and he awakens a mystery in our souls with the sight of a few bright panes of glass — they pierce a luminous hole through the wall and testify to the presence of one or more human lives behind it.

In the same way, when he chooses to paint a flight of dilapidated steps with a rusty railing that drips red onto the moss-covered stones like tears of blood, what is he trying to accom-

plish? He seeks to remind us of those people who, with feet made light by happiness or heavy with distress, crossed these same stairs, these degrees which separated them from an entire world of joy or misery. And beyond the disjointed planks of the door that he paints with such religious respect and tender concern, what a world of internal reflection he awakens! Looking at one of these closed doors, I have actually smelled the damp odour of those long-uninhabited rooms. You stop on the threshold and hesitate to enter — the thought of the dormant memories on the other side weighs upon your heart. It is as if the people who once lived in this place have used up the air and made it impossible to breathe.

I come at last to my conclusion: Henri Le Sidaner is a sort of mystic without a religion.

Gabriel Mourey
Saint-Cloud, 1902

Career

WHILE IT IS CUSTOMARY TO OFFER SOME PERSONAL INFORMATION in a book of this kind, readers should not expect to find any surprises or curiosities. Henri Le Sidaner lived through one of the most troubled and tumultuous periods in the history of visual art, but no one has led a more simple and less “original” existence. Although he was aware of them, he stood aloof from polemics and theories. He took part in no battles and caused no scandals, nor did he have to endure a period of bitter repudiation before enjoying the sweet gratification of recognition. His life has been planned, orderly, and has moved at a gentle pace. He has maintained a delicate balance between his work and his family arrangements, and he has lived a life of refined intimacy and seclusion. To look at his paintings is to see the very reflection of his character and soul. Nothing has ever “happened” to him apart from happiness and, eventually, fame — which arrived like one of the fine, golden, supreme brushstrokes that he places atop the grey mist of a calm and silent place.

Henri-Eugène Le Sidaner was born on August 7, 1882 at Port Louis in Mauritius, where his Breton parents had taken up residence. He remained there until 1872, and the sunshine and Créolie charm of those childhood years left a blurred but tender impression. The family’s business led them back to France and they settled in Dunkirk. As an adolescent Le Sidaner showed some inclination for painting: His parents were not opposed to the idea, and he took some academic courses in the city. His art teacher was Alexandre Desmidt, who had been a pupil of the Belgian painter Philippe-Jacques van Bree. Le Sidaner’s work was remarkable enough to win him a scholarship from the city of Dunkirk, which allowed him to continue his studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He arrived in the capital in 1880, where, at the age of 18, he joined

Alexandre Cabanel's studio. It was here that he befriended Jean Veber, a man who went on to have an interesting career as a designer and cartoonist and who eventually earned himself a mention in the competition for the Prix Troyon.

Édouard Manet was near the end of his life, but all of the young artists were under the influence of his wild genius. The *École des Beaux-Arts* and the official art critics held him in contempt, he was excluded from the Paris Salon by obstinate juries — and yet Manet shone all the same. The students of Cabanel, Gérôme, or any of the other high priests of academic dogma were certainly not unmoved or unenthusiastic when they went off (almost always in secret) to look at his works. People used to say that Manet was an ignorant revolutionary, half-mad, and even a voyeur. In fact he was an elegant, courteous, and urbane man who thought seriously about his art; he was highly cultivated, studied Goya and the Venetians, and had the temperament of a headmaster.

Manet's talent, perseverance, and the burden of the obviously unjust ostracism he had borne for twenty years excited a great deal of sympathy. In the end, younger Realist painters like Alfred Roll, and others who had come up since the war of 1870, became interested in the research the "nasty Impressionists" had conducted. Little by little Manet's supporters worked their way onto the Salon's jury and managed to have two of his paintings accepted (on principle, Manet had continued to submit his work each year) — these were portraits of Henri Rochefort and the lion hunter Pertuiset. In the latter, the subject was pictured kneeling beside the dead animal with a very traditional green forest in the background; Manet had done much better work than this, but his supporters used it as an excuse to give him a second-place medal and ultimately award him the Legion of Honour, which they considered a victory over public opinion. Not long afterwards Manet, who was only in his fifties, died of ataxia — the amputation of his foot had resulted in gangrene, and he perished soon afterwards.

Le Sidaner saw Manet's final works at the Paris Salon, and they made him pause and reflect for a long time: The result of this reflection was that he went to Cabanel's studio and quietly

resigned from the school, walking away not only from the advantages and the “promising future” it offered, but also from its precepts, which he had decided were false. He later said, “I felt as if I had been poisoned without knowing exactly how, and I left to find a cure in the open air and in nature.”



LA PROMENADE DES ORPHELINES, BERCK (1888)

The twenty-year-old man then moved to Étaples, a city in the Pas-de-Calais. He found himself alone in a land of pasture and sea-swept dunes, a place filled with harmonious greens, yellows, and greys, where there was an endless procession of clouds across vast skies; rain; hard and dreary winters; and nostalgic, sensitive poetry. It offered everything capable of fostering a state of intense concentration in a mind that was already inclined to dream. His Breton ancestry joined with the tropical influences of his childhood to establish a temperament that was both reticent and suffused with a warm tenderness. Le Sidaner remained in Étaples for twelve years, almost without interruption. Between 1882 and 1887 he worked and studied on his own, in voluntary seclusion. All the while the Impressionist battle raged on in Paris; the Société des Artistes Indépendants was being organized, the Pointillists were gaining notoriety, academicism was collapsing on all fronts, and, despite the appalled juries, a bright and colourful style of painting was taking the Paris Salon by storm.