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"Plaisirs de l'epoque 1900"

Foreword

By

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402



There is scarcely a picture in *Plaisirs de l'epoque 1900* that does not arouse some of the same emotions as *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*: that heart-ache of pleasure that comes of looking back into the day before yesterday, the nostalgia of trying to recapture not merely a world lost, but a world lost all too recently, too soon and far too quickly.

Ladies in mutton-leg sleeves, with tiny waists and waistbands, with boas and parasols; ladies holding with grace and elegance the skirts of long dresses, this made possible because of both hands being free from the encumbrance of the inevitable handbag of today; ladies who look like ladies; well-nourished ladies. Men in Edwardian trousers, in monocles and opera hats, ruby roues, men of doubtful virtue and design. Girls in boaters and striped shirt blouses, girls on sandy summer beaches under raspberry coloured parasols. What Proust himself called "a sea-scape of girls". Is it merely distance that lends enchantment, or is it true, as one cannot help feeling, that l'epoque 1900 had more elegance, enchantment and a sheer unashamed sense of pleasure than our own? If, at the time these pictures were painted, there was any sort of tribulation, worry about the gas-bill, trouble with trade unions, travail for womens' emancipation, anxiety about foreign affairs, doubt about man's humanity to man, it either did not bother the painters very much or has evaporated completely. We, from our distance, have the pleasure of counting only the golden hours.

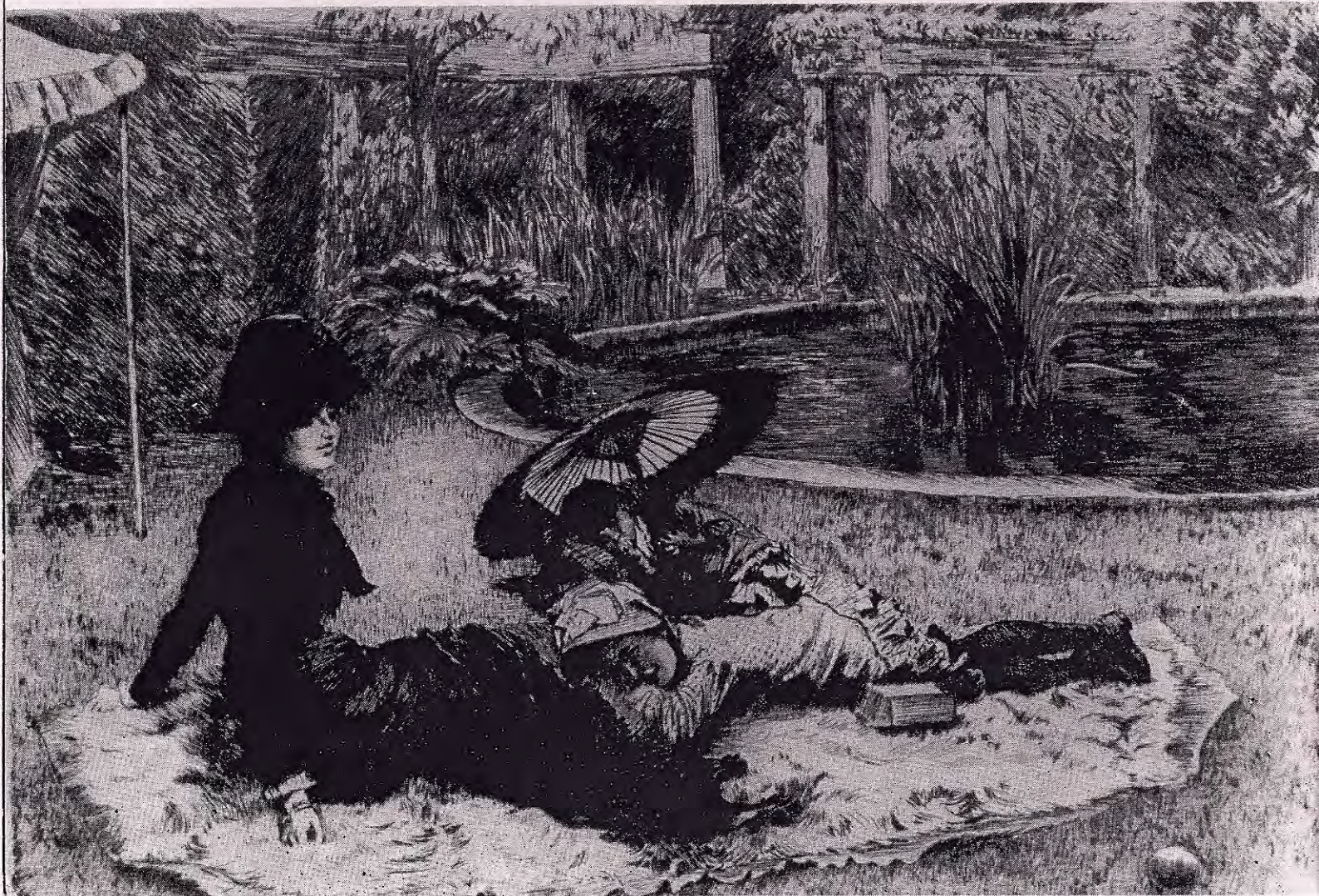
All this is seen at its most obvious, though not its best, except in the matter of



costume, in Tissot; and at its most English, and again for costume, in Conder, though the dresses of Conder's golden-haired young ladies are fifteen years nearer to Jennyson than they ought to be, simply because an affluent patron of Conder decreed that he liked them better that way. He too, perhaps, was already looking backwards towards an age that seemed far away and long ago.

England yields little else but Sickert's dreamy little pastel of a plage, and one exquisite little head by Sidney Starr, that *rara avis* of whom Sickert thought so much. It is not surprising, in fact, that the true spirit here is French. But what may well surprise many of us is that the larger part of the French painters represented here are, today at any rate, little known. Lautrec, Villon, Van Rysselbergh, Raffaelli, LeGrand, Dufresne: these are obvious masters. But what of Helleu, Boutet, Samanos, Mourin, Betti, Robbe, Anquetin, Chartran, even Goeneutte?

If in England these names are dim and their reputations temporarily obscured, there are behind them still dimmer, obscurer reputations. Who is Robbe? How many of us





have heard of *Helleu*, *Villon's* master, whose delicate young girls haunt with some of the dreaminess of *Renoir's*? Who knows that *Goeneutte*, another *rara avis*, painted well enough to be mistaken for *Manet*? Who in England knows anything of *Mourin*, whose delightful '*La femme aux gants*', No. 2 is the essence of the entire epoch, more alive, more nostalgic than *Tissot*?

Plaisirs de l'époque 1900 is not, as it therefore turns out, a mere nostalgic excursion into an age of slimmer waists, rosier bosoms and tighter corsetry than our own. It offers not merely the pleasures of pleasures, but the pleasures of discovery. Enchantment begins by beckoning us back and leaves us with the experience of some good painting; fresher, firmer and even sometimes more distinguished and exciting painting than we had a right to expect from an age when charm was not a word of ridicule.