

JOHN MITCHELL

FINE PAINTINGS



Alfred Stevens (Brussels 1823 - Paris 1906)

La Dame en blanc

oil on panel

36 x 19 cm.

signed

As readers of *Gallery Notes* will know, my family has been writing about and dealing in the work of this great Belgian artist for nearly sixty years, and our steadfast conviction in his merits continues to be rewarded by periodic 'discoveries' such as this one. As we have seen so often before, he is able to make a complete painting of *une élégante* in her salon on a panel barely a foot high. Showing Stevens at his painterly best, this oil study probably took him no more than a few hours, and yet in spite of the rapid brushwork and unwavering touch, no part of the composition is left incomplete or neglected - the perfect synthesis of on the one hand his own, oft-professed preference for Gerhard Ter Borch and the Dutch masters, and on the other his friendship with Edouard Manet and awareness of the Impressionist methods.

This picture should not be admired as a portrait so much as an evocation of mood and sophistication.

After all, this model is no stranger to his paintings, and here, one feels, Stevens revels in a virtuoso rendition of her dazzling dress and the shimmering blue satin at her neck rather than wishing to tell us very much about the young lady posing for him. It is enough that she bears the faintest of smiles, and that her beautifully-rendered hands express repose and contentment. Classic Stevens trademarks, as well, are her small fan in the Japanese style, the two pictures on the wall (perhaps one of his own scarce flowerpieces?) and the clever reflection of fabrics on the polished parquet floor.

In spite of the great commercial success and celebrity enjoyed by Alfred Stevens in Paris in the 1870s, he continues to be dismissed in the modern French artworld as a minor painter from Brussels, even though it is plain to see from paintings such as this one that he was innately gifted and that very little separated him artistically from his now-famous French friends. Unlike their productions, however, those of Alfred Stevens are not yet all located and recorded, and remain accessible to collectors - some compensation, surely, for his overlooked reputation.

James Mitchell