

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Madeleine Lemaire  
(Les Arcs 1845 – Paris 1928)

*A lady sitting in an interior with a parrot*

Signed lower left: *Madeleine Lemaire*  
Gouache on card  
54.9 x 35.5 cm. (21 ½ x 14 in.)



With a much-read book placed temporarily on her lap, a young woman in a luxurious Belle Époque interior enjoys a moment of reverie, contemplating a parrot fluttering on its perch. Highly detailed, and displaying considerable technical skill, this is one of the finest gouaches by Madeleine Lemaire to have been on the market in recent years, and is an example of the type of elegant, Rococo-inspired genre scene which made her famous in her day. Everything has been executed with consummate skill and it would not be going too far to suggest that Lemaire was one of the finest watercolourists of her generation, even if her subject matter was rooted in the previous century, and her technique was academic rather than avant-garde.

### Madeleine Lemaire

Celebrated salon hostess and artist, admired by Marcel Proust and Robert de Montesquiou, Madeleine Lemaire (fig. 1) was born into an upper middle-class family, the daughter of General Baron Joseph Habert and niece of the miniaturist Mathilde Herbelin, who ran a well-known salon. She married Casimir Lemaire in 1865, and they had one daughter.



Fig. 1, Photograph of Madeleine Lemaire at home, c. 1885

Bought up around artists and literary figures, Lemaire was initially tutored by her aunt, and then Charles Chaplin, whose style and subject matter had a deep impact on his pupil. Lemaire debuted at the Salon of 1864, continuing to exhibit there regularly for the rest of her life, winning prizes in 1877 and 1900. She also participated in the exhibitions of Société des aquarellistes français from 1879 and enjoyed commercial shows at the Galerie Georges Petite. Her focus was on portraiture, still life and genre scenes, usually of refined interiors, all displaying a fascination for French Rococo art of the previous century. She was also active as book illustrator, working on Proust's *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, Ludovic Halévy's *L'Abbé Constantin* and de Montesquiou's poems. Lemaire did not shy away from asserting herself in a masculine dominated world, becoming, alongside Catherine Breslau, one of only two female members, out of 184 in total, of the refounded Société nationale des beaux-arts in

1890. Lemaire was awarded the Legion of Honour in 1906, and taught many young artists, including Marie Laurencin, whose palette owes much to Lemaire.

Today Lemaire is best known as a society hostess, who interacted with many of the leading cultural figures of her day. Every Tuesday evening, writers, musicians, actors and politicians would flock to her sought-after music and literary salon, which took place in her hôtel particulier on the rue de Monceau. In the summer, Lemaire decamped to her château in the Marne or her villa in Dieppe, continuing to host from these locations. Her guests are too numerous to list in their entirety but included Proust, Montesquiou, Guy de Maupassant, Sarah Bernhardt, Anatole France, Raymond Poincaré and Alexandre Dumas fils, with whom she had a relationship. Lemaire's connection to Proust has been much noted, and she served as the inspiration for two of his characters in *In Search of Lost Time*: Madame de Villeparisis and Madame Verdurin.

### Composition and context

Silk japonais cushions, palm fronds, Eastern carpets, an iznik vase, an Ottoman inlaid table with oranges and a green parrot: these are all accoutrements common to the opulent upper class Parisian homes at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, one only has to look at an interior scene by Mihaly Munckacsy or Louise Abbéma (fig. 2) to see this continuity of decorative taste amongst the capital's elite. All the objects depicted in Lemaire's gouache were no doubt owned by the artist, with many reappearing in other works by her, as well as in photographs of her at home and in her studio. To give just a few examples, the red silk cushion and high-backed chair can be seen in a painting of a young girl sleeping (fig 3); the palm fronds and carpet on the floor crop up in a gouache of a woman in a kimono; the parrot, perch and palm fronds appear in a painting of a woman playing the guitar (fig. 4): and finally the Ottoman inlaid table can be seen in both a gouache of a women reclining and a photograph of Lemaire at home (figs. 1 and 5), this latter also displaying the chair and a corner of the carpet. Very likely the pink silk dress, shawl and well-leafed blue book could all be found in Lemaire's home as well.



Fig. 2, Louise Abbéma, *Lunch in the greenhouse*, 1877, oil on canvas, 194 x 308 cm, Musée de Beaux-Arts, Pau

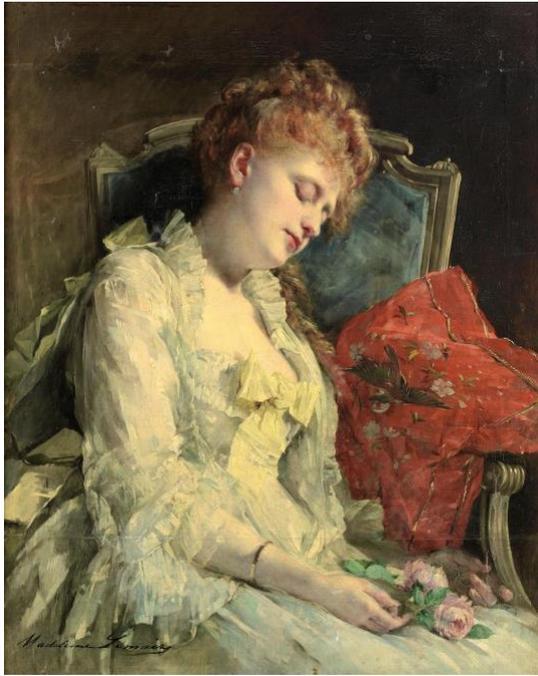


Fig. 3, Madeleine Lemaire, *Woman sleeping*, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 73 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 4, Madeleine Lemaire, *Woman playing the guitar*, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 56 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 5, Madeleine Lemaire, *Woman lying on a chaise longue*, gouache on paper, 33.5 x 46.5 cm, Private Collection

Lemaire's gouache of course refers directly to 18<sup>th</sup>-century genre scenes depicting fashionable aristocratic ladies in sumptuous interiors, popularised principally by François Boucher and Jean François de Troy. The theme of women reading was of particular interest at that time, embodying the cultured lifestyle treasured by high society in pre-Revolutionary France. Lemaire's image has a satisfying ambiguity though: it's not clear whether the lady is inspired by a passage in her book to a moment of reverie, gazing dreamily at the parrot; or whether the parrots flapping and cawing has caused a momentary distraction, causing her to look up contentedly with enjoyment at the bird. Either way, it is no surprise that Lemaire, a deeply cultured woman herself, connected to the leading literary figures of her day, was drawn to this subject. The identity of Lemaire's model is not known, though there is a good chance it is one of her salon acquaintances: several of the young ladies in the artist's genre scenes depict actresses and opera singers, such as Jeanne Granier and Marie Renard.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 6, François Boucher, *La Toilette*, oil on canvas, 52.5 x 62.5 cm, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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<sup>1</sup> See *Femmes peintres et salons au temps de Proust de Madeleine Lemaire à Berthe Morisot*, exhibition catalogue, 2010 Paris, pp. 83 and 132-133.