

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

## KUNST



ALFRED STEVENS

1823 Brussels – Paris 1906

*Portrait of Léopold Stevens*

Oil on paper, mounted on canvas.

Monogrammed lower right: *AS*.

Circa 1883–86

44 x 20 cm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, Belgium – John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London – Private collection, England – Private collection, France

LITERATURE: Christiane Lefebvre, *Alfred Stevens 1823–1906*, Paris 2006, p. 65, no. 61 (repr.)

EXHIBITION: *Alfred Stevens. A Loan exhibition*, Adam Williams Fine Art, New York, 19 October - 12 November 2004

Alfred Stevens spent most of his artistic career in France. In 1844, he moved to Paris to train as a painter. At the École des Beaux-Arts one of his teachers was Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Stevens returned to Brussels long enough to make his artistic debut at the Brussels Salon in 1851, but returned to Paris the following year, remaining there for the rest of his life.

During the 1860s, Stevens became an immensely successful painter and was acclaimed for his paintings of elegant modern women. His exhibits at the Salons in Paris and Brussels attracted favourable critical attention and were sought after by collectors.

Although Stevens was never considered an Impressionist himself, many of the artistic elements that characterized the work of contemporaries such as his friends Manet and Degas would appear in his portraits. This striking portrait of his eldest son Léopold,<sup>1</sup> painted on Léopold's return to Paris after his military service in Algeria, clearly owes a debt to Impressionism.

As the son prepares to follow his vocation as an artist, the father looks at him with indulgent pride and paints him in the casual outfit of a young *rapin* with pointed goatee, linen smock, espadrilles and boater.<sup>2</sup> But there is more than just a streak of fatherly sentiment to this seemingly informal portrait. Stevens's treatment of his subject is highly perceptive and conveys a sense of his son's self-assurance and resolve. Bright sunlight highlights the figure, which is set against an indeterminate background depicted in a flurry of short strokes and occasional dabs of freely applied, unblended colour.

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<sup>1</sup> Léopold Stevens (1866–1935), eldest son of Alfred Stevens, did not attend art school but was taught painting by his father. He began by specializing in genre painting and went on to produce female portraits and a large body of marine paintings and Brittany landscapes. He exhibited at the Salon in Paris and was awarded a bronze medal at the Exposition Universelle in 1900.

<sup>2</sup> Christiane Lefebvre, *Piété filiale et vie de famille*, in *Alfred Stevens 1823–1906*, Paris 2006, p. 66.

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The portrait was clearly painted *en plein air* and Stevens's obvious interest in catching the fleeting effects of light in a natural setting reflects an Impressionist approach *par excellence*.

In the 1880s, Stevens's work underwent a temporary change of style. For health reasons, he was obliged to spend his summers by the sea. The experience markedly influenced his work and coastal subjects came to represent an important part of his repertoire of motifs. He painted hundreds of views of popular resorts; many of them in a sketchy style that shows the direct influence of Impressionism.