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ARMAND BERTON

1854 - Paris - 1917

Portrait de Lionel Royer à son chevalet

Oil on panel, probably executed in the 1880s.

Signed lower left with a personal dedication: *à mon ami Royer / A. Berton*. Inscribed by another hand on the verso in pencil: *Signé: Berton / A mon ami / Royer*.

20.5 x 15.6 cm.

PROVENANCE: Private collection, France

Armand Berton began his artistic training at the *École des Arts décoratifs* in Paris. He went on to study at the *École des beaux-arts* under Alexandre Cabanel and Adolphe Yvon but the gradual onset of total deafness forced him to break off his studies. Determined to pursue his career as an artist, he nevertheless set up a studio of his own. His achievements as a sought-after portraitist and genre painter were considerable. He exhibited regularly at the Paris Salon between 1875 and 1907. In 1892 he became a member of the *Société nationale des beaux-arts*. At the World's Fair in 1900 he was awarded the 'Médaille d'or des artistes français' and in the same year was named Chevalier of the *Légion d'Honneur*. Between 1905 and 1915 he produced a series of etchings and made illustrations for two books. As a draughtsman and printmaker he developed an expressive style that recalls the work of Albert Besnard and Louis Legrand. Berton's prints convey a mood of powerful introspection. His work is widely represented in public collections in northern and central France – in Beaune, Douai, Limoges, Gray and Morlaix. In Paris, the *École des beaux-arts*, the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay hold examples of his drawings, watercolours and paintings.

In the early 1890s, the painter Eugène Carrière produced a highly sensitive portrait of his friend Berton [Fig.1]. In the work Carrière, who is best known for his use of a distinctive monochrome palette, focuses on his deaf friend's state of mind and his psychology. Translucent glazes allow Berton's features to emerge only gradually from the shadows. Engulfed in silence, he seems to rely on his inner voice to perceive the world around him.

By contrast, Berton's portrait sketch of his friend, the history painter and portraitist Lionel Royer (1852-1926), is strikingly different and has a very spontaneous quality. The two artists probably met as students at the *École des beaux-arts* where both were pupils of Alexandre Cabanel.

The small panel depicts Royer at work on a painting which represents the partly discernible figure of a woman with raised head in a white-collared grey dress. The painting demands the artist's full concentration. To steady his brush, he supports his working hand with a painting stick. He is seated in a relaxed position with his legs crossed. He is wearing an overcoat and has socks and slippers on his feet, suggesting that it is chilly in the studio. Light enters from above, perhaps from a skylight, indicating that Royer's sparsely furnished studio may in reality be a small attic room.

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The painting shows Berton to be a true colourist. His palette is bright and the brushwork rapid and robust. The panel has evidently already been used for another painting. The paint surface exhibits pentimenti where unintentional traces of the underlying composition can be made out. It is not inconceivable that the aspect of Royer so deeply absorbed in his work inspired Berton to pick a panel at random and spontaneously sketch over an abandoned composition. He then signed the new work with a personal dedication to his friend.

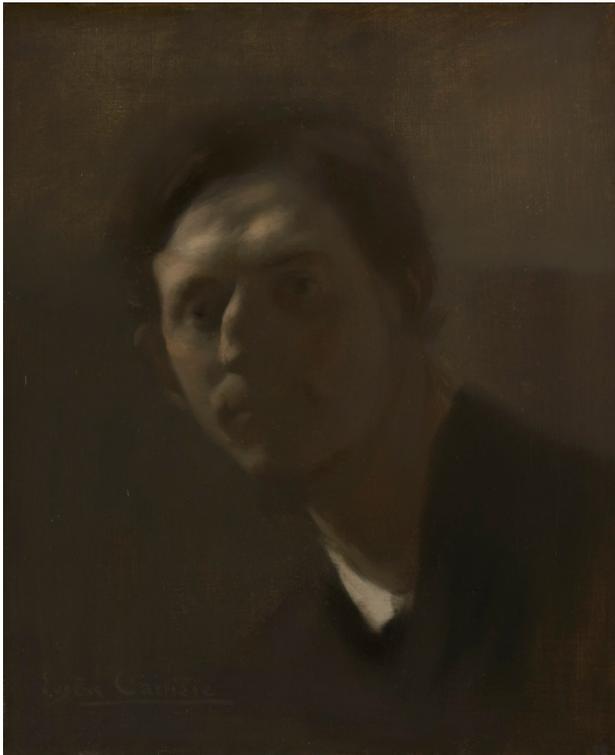


Fig.1 : Eugène Carrière (1849-1906), *Armand Berton*, circa 1891.

Oil on canvas, 46 x 38 cm.

Cleveland Museum of Art; Bequest of Noah L. Butkin [inv.1980.244]