



GALLERY  
NOTES<sup>®</sup>

*from*

JOHN MITCHELL  
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On a recent visit to the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio I saw a celebrated portrait by the American artist William Merritt Chase, entitled *Dora Wheeler* (1883). From across the gallery I had initially mistaken the painting for the work of Alfred Stevens, an error mitigated by the fact that Chase owed far more to Stevens than art historians care to admit. Chase first visited Stevens in Paris in 1881, when the Belgian artist with the English name was at the zenith of his career, and would return to call on – and learn from – him for several years afterwards, even sending his own pupil, Eleanor Norcross, to study with him in 1883. Not only did Chase borrow freely from Stevens' compositions and ideas, but he also amassed a collection of his paintings and was the principal lender to an exhibition on Alfred Stevens in New York in 1911. Thus through Chase, with his hundreds of pupils, and through the Boston painters Joseph de Camp, Edmund Tarbell and William Paxton was Alfred Stevens' mastery of the theme of 'la femme élégante dans son intérieur' disseminated in American art of the Belle Epoque.

Meanwhile in 1888, with remarkable energy for one in his mid-sixties, Stevens entered into an agreement with Henri Gervex (1852-1929) to prepare for the following year's *Exposition Universelle* in Paris a 120-metre long *Histoire du Siècle*, a commemoration of a hundred years of French history from 1789 to the present day in the form of portraits of all the notable figures of the century – six hundred and sixty of them in all. They were to be shown standing in imaginary architectural settings inspired by the Jardins des Tuileries, where the rotunda housing the panorama would be erected.

Effectively a celebration of the vitality of the Third Republic, the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 was a truly extraordinary spectacle, and will, incidentally, be further explored in my brother's forthcoming book on Gabriel Loppé and his ground-breaking paintings of the Alps. Without doubt its most enduring legacy has been the Eiffel Tower, but in the light of my opening paragraph it is startling to consider that the second largest national school of painting on show that summer was that of the United States (with over three hundred and fifty paintings). For the cost of one franc, the visitor to the *Histoire du Siècle* (and there were one hundred and forty-two thousand of them!) could walk round from the days of Louis XVI to Napoleon III, and beyond into 1889. Gervex, although nearly half his age, was already known to Stevens, and his 1884 portrait now in the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts in Brussels is the best likeness of Stevens in his heyday. The division of labour between the two for the panorama will never be accurately known, but Stevens held only a small minority of the shares in their joint enterprise\*, and appears to have restricted himself to the female figures. A notable exception was Président Carnot, who sat to Stevens at his studio on Avenue Frochot. Many less important figures of the day tried to get themselves included in the latest scene of this 'pageant of the century', and offered substantial sums for the privilege.

Whatever hopes Stevens and Gervex had entertained for their monumental undertaking providing them with lasting financial security came, alas, to nought, as no forethought had been given to the long-term future of the panorama. Today only two fragments survive, one at the Ringling Museum in Florida, but it lives on in a set of four copies now kept in the Brussels museum and thoughtfully made by Stevens himself before the original was dismantled.

We invite you to come and see this attractive memento of the *Exposition Universelle* on our stand at the B.A.D.A. Fair in Chelsea from 14th-20th March.

JAMES MITCHELL  
March 2018

\*The original *pièce notariale* of August 1888 setting out the agreement between Gervex and Stevens, signed by both, is preserved in our extensive Alfred Stevens archive.





**Alfred Stevens (1823-1906)**

*Une Élégante au Bal* – study for the panorama, *Histoire du Siècle* (1889)

oil on canvas, 26 ½ x 16 ¾ in. (67 x 42.5 cm.)

signed, and stamped with the official seal from the venture.

I am grateful to Céline Tranquille of the Comité Alfred Stevens in Paris for pointing out that this figure is recorded in Stevens' key to identification as 'no. 476', one of the *Femmes du Monde*.

## GALLERY NOTES®

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