

A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk



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15-03 WILLIAM-ADOLPHE BOUGUEREAU

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau,
Nymphs and Satyr, 1873

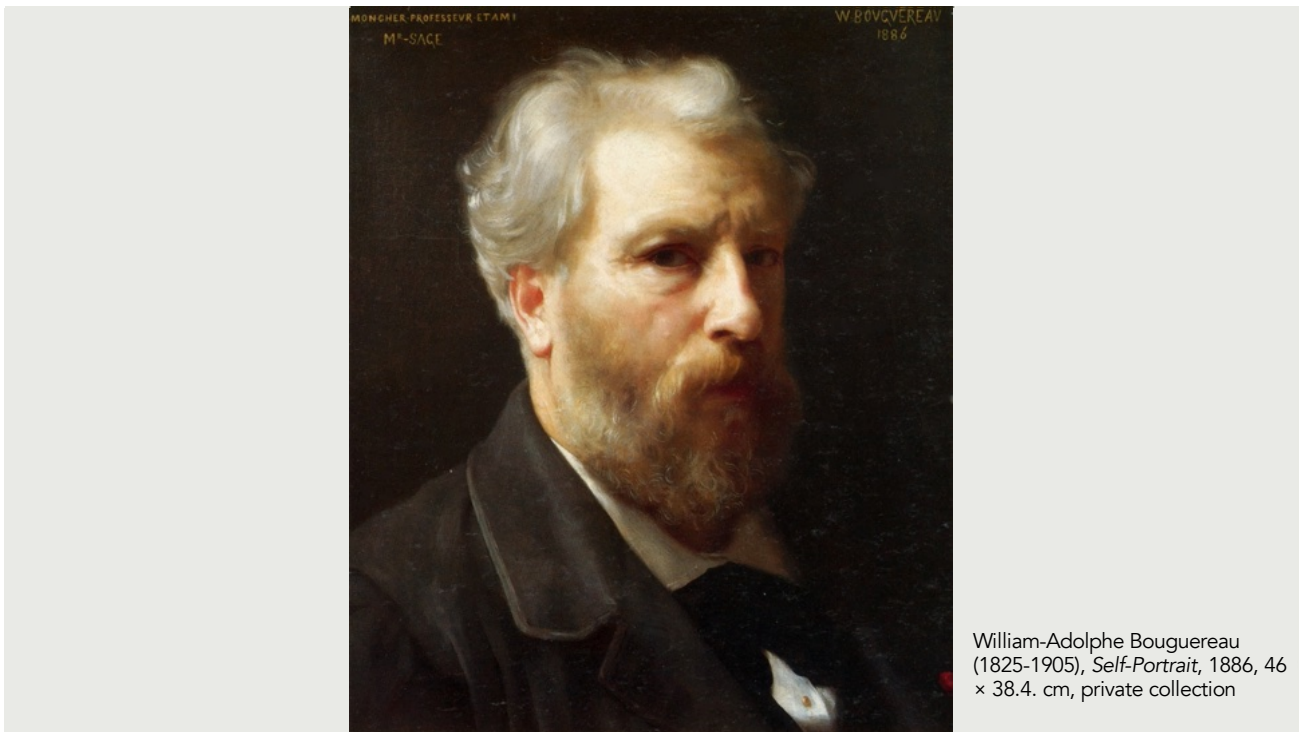
- This is Section 15 on Academic Art and this talk is on William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Self-Portrait*, 1886, 46 × 38.4. cm, private collection

- William-Adolphe Bouguereau was born on November 30, 1825 in La Rochelle, France, and became one of the most celebrated academic painters of his time. This self-portrait from 1886 shows the artist at 61 years of age, with his characteristic beard.
- The term *Pompier* (pronounced "pomp-ee-ay") artist is sometimes used to describe artists like Bouguereau. *L'art pompier*, was used at the time as a mocking term for academic painters whose work overly grandiose, often representing historical or allegorical themes, and painted in a highly polished, technically proficient style. The term originates from the helmets worn by French firemen, which resembled the classical Attic helmets frequently shown in such paintings. It is also a pun on the French word for pompous, reflecting contemporary views of the art as bourgeois, insincere, and overly theatrical. The word is also now used to describe those artists at the time who were slavishly conventional. Another Pompier artist is Alexandre Cabanel.
- This portrait was from late in his career and was dedicated to Monsieur Sage, his professor, and represents a mature artist at the height of his powers. Bouguereau created eight self-portraits throughout his life, each capturing different stages of his artistic journey.
- Interestingly, this portrait was painted as a companion piece to a portrait of Elizabeth Jane Gardner, an American painter whom he would marry in 1896 when he was 71 and she was 59 following a 17 year engagement. The two

works formed a pair and were considered by the artist to be a pledge of love to his fiancée.

- During this period, Bouguereau was at the pinnacle of his career, serving as president of the Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers and as a member of the prestigious Institut de France. His works commanded enormous prices, particularly from American collectors.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, 1850, 281 cm × 225 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, 1850, 281 cm × 225 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- Going back to the start of his career, this was painted in 1850 when he was 25. It is *Dante and Virgil in Hell* and is one of his earliest and most dramatic works. After failing twice to win the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1848 and 1849, he was determined to make a powerful impression at the Salon with this piece. He knew it would appeal to the judges but was again unsuccessful but later in the year he won second prize for another work (*Shepherds Find Zenobia on the Banks of the Araxes*) although it is this work that is now well known.
- It shows a scene from **Dante Alighieri's *Inferno***, specifically from the **eighth circle of Hell**, where the poets Dante and Virgil witness **a violent fight between two damned souls**: Capocchio (pronounced "car-poch-io") , a **heretic and alchemist**, being attacked by Gianni Schicchi (pronounced "jar-ni ski-key"), who had **fraudulently claimed an inheritance by impersonating a dead man**.
- The renowned critic and poet Théophile Gautier (pronounced "theo-fil-ay") praised the work, writing: "**Gianni Schicchi throws himself at Capocchio, his rival, with a strange fury, and Monsieur Bouguereau depicts magnificently through muscles, nerves, tendons and teeth, the struggle between the two combatants. There is bitterness and strength in this canvas – strength, a rare quality!**"
- This painting demonstrates Bouguereau's early artistic boldness, pushing aesthetic boundaries through exaggerated muscle structure, dramatic poses, and stark contrasts of colour and shadow. The work shows influences of

Romantic artists like William Blake, Henry Füssli, and Thomas Lawrence.

- Interestingly, this exploration of the **terrifying and sublime** represents a direction Bouguereau would take in his later career, as he moved toward more idealized, serene compositions that would become his signature style.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau
(1825-1905), *The Dance*, 1856, 367
× 180 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Dance*, 1856, 367 × 180 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- Completed a few years later, in 1856, *The Dance* showcases Bouguereau's growing **mastery of allegorical painting** and his evolving neoclassical style. The work measures 180 x 367 cm and is currently housed at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.
- This ethereal composition depicts **three figures floating among the clouds** – three female figures in flowing drapery of white and golden yellow with one partially nude playing a tambourine. The arrangement creates a sense of graceful, circular movement that embodies **the essence of dance** itself.
- The painting was created during a pivotal period in his career, **shortly after his return from Italy** where he had studied Renaissance masters. The influence of Raphael and Titian is evident in the harmonious composition and luminous colour palette.
- Art historian Fronia Wissman noted that works like *The Dance* "**established Bouguereau** as a painter who could create beautifully crafted, large-scale mythological scenes that appealed to the Second Empire's taste for **sensual but dignified classical subjects**."
- The same year, 1856, he began living with one of his models **Marie-Nelly Monchablon** (1836-1877). She was 19 at the time and they married ten years later and had five children.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Holy Family*, 1863, 138.5 × 109 cm, Chimei Museum, Taiwan

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Holy Family*, 1863, 138.5 × 109 cm, Chimei Museum, Taiwan

- Painted in 1863, ***Holy Family*** (originally titled "Sainte Famille" in French) demonstrates Bouguereau's approach to religious subjects.
- It shows the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child on her lap and young John the Baptist, set against a serene landscape background.
- During the Second Empire period in France, 1852 to 1870, religious paintings like this one were highly valued by the bourgeoisie who sought art that reflected traditional values. Bouguereau received numerous commissions for church decorations and religious subjects throughout his career.
- A critic at the time, Charles Blanc (1813-1882), praised Bouguereau's religious works for their "**purity of line and sentiment**," noting that the artist brought "**a sincere devotion and profound respect to sacred subjects, treating them with both technical perfection and spiritual sensitivity**."
- The painting exemplifies Bouguereau's characteristic smooth finish and meticulous attention to detail, from the delicate rendering of the children's skin to the carefully observed textures of fabric and foliage.

NOTES

- The Second Empire in France lasted from 1852 to 1870. It began when Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, proclaimed himself Emperor Napoléon III on 2 December 1852, following a successful coup d'état

and a plebiscite approving the restoration of the empire.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Bather*, 1864, 166.5 x 103.6 cm
Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, Belgium

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Bather*, 1864, 166.5 x 103.6 cm Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium

- Painted the following year, in 1864, *Bather* is one of his most daring early works. It is in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium, where it was purchased immediately after its exhibition.
- This provocative nude caused a sensation when it was first exhibited in Ghent. Art historian Fronia Wissman who has written a book titled *Bouguereau*, wrote that "**the painting was a spectacular success, shocking in its unabashed sensuality yet painted with such consummate skill that critics could only marvel.**"
- The composition shows a young woman emerging from her bath in a woodland setting, with her discarded red garment providing a striking contrast to her pale skin. The careful attention to the translucent quality of her skin and the subtle play of light through the foliage demonstrates Bouguereau's technical virtuosity.
- During this period, Emperor Napoleon III and his court were promoting a more sensual aesthetic in French art, and Bouguereau's nudes were particularly **appreciated by wealthy collectors**. This painting represents the artist's growing confidence in tackling subjects that balanced classical references with contemporary appeal.
- Interestingly, Bouguereau created this work **shortly after his first wife's death in 1863**, during a period of personal turmoil. Despite his personal circumstances, his professional career was flourishing, with this painting marking

his emergence as one of the most sought-after artists of the Second Empire.

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William-Adolphe
Bouguereau (1825-1905),
The Knitting Girl, 1869, 99 x
145 cm, Joslyn Art Museum
in Omaha, Nebraska, USA

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Knitting Girl*, 1869, 99 x 145 cm, Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, USA

- Completed in 1869, *The Knitting Girl* (originally titled "La Tricoteuse" in French) exemplifies Bouguereau's mastery of genre painting.
- We see a young peasant girl seated beneath a tree, absorbed in her knitting work. The serene rural setting and the girl's modest clothing reflect Bouguereau's idealized vision of rural life during the rapid industrialization of Second Empire France.
- Art critic Charles Blanc praised Bouguereau's genre scenes for their "perfect execution and sentiment," noting that "he elevates simple subjects through his technical brilliance and sensitivity to human expression." The girl's concentrated gaze and delicate hands demonstrate the artist's ability to infuse everyday activities with dignity and grace.
- It is now in the US as it was bought by American banker Samuel Peck in the 1870s. There was a growing interest in American art at that time for French academic art. By 1869, Bouguereau had established a significant **American client base**, with his works selling for **up to 30,000 francs** – equivalent to several years' salary for the average French worker.
- The composition reveals Bouguereau's careful study of the **Dutch Golden Age masters, particularly Vermeer**, whose influence can be seen in the quiet dignity of the subject and the luminous quality of the light.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873, 260.4 × 182.9 cm, The Clark Art Museum, Massachusetts

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873, 260.4 × 182.9 cm, The Clark Art Museum, Massachusetts

- A few years later, in 1873, he painted *Nymphs and Satyr*, one of his most celebrated mythological works. The monumental canvas measures 260 x 180 cm and is currently housed at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.
- It's a scene of playful eroticism. Four nymphs attempt to drag a reluctant satyr into a woodland pool. Bouguereau exhibited it at the Paris Salon of 1873 alongside a verse from the ancient Roman poet Statius: "**Conscious of his shaggy hide and from childhood untaught to swim, he dares not trust himself to deep waters.**"
- The renowned critic Théophile Gautier called it "**the greatest painting of our generation**," praising its technical virtuosity and classical references. The work exemplifies Bouguereau's ability to combine academic precision with sensual subject matter that appealed to wealthy collectors of the period.
- After its Salon success, the painting was **purchased by American art collector John Wolfe** for the substantial sum of **35,000 francs**. It was later displayed in the bar of the Hoffman House Hotel in New York City, where it **became one of the most famous paintings in America**, known to virtually every educated person.
- Curiously, the painting **disappeared from public view in 1901** when it was purchased and placed in storage by a buyer concerned about its "**offensive**" **content**. It remained hidden **until 1942**, when collector Robert Sterling Clark

discovered and acquired it, ensuring its preservation for future generations.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Pietà*, 1876, 148 × 230 cm, Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, USA

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Pietà*, 1876, 148 × 230 cm, Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, USA

- Created in 1876, *Pietà* is one of Bouguereau's most emotionally powerful religious works.
- This dramatic composition depicts the Virgin Mary cradling the body of Christ, surrounded by mourning angels. The work demonstrates Bouguereau's ability to combine Renaissance influences with his own distinctive academic style, creating a scene of profound emotional impact.
- The painting was exhibited at the Paris Salon of **1876, where it received considerable acclaim**. The influential critic Albert Wolff (1825-1891) wrote: "**Bouguereau's *Pietà* is a masterpiece of religious sentiment. The artist has succeeded in expressing the most profound grief while maintaining a noble restraint that elevates the subject beyond mere pathos.**"
- Bouguereau's treatment of this traditional Christian subject reflects the **religious revival occurring in Third Republic France following the traumatic events of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune**. The painting's emotional resonance spoke to a society seeking spiritual consolation during a period of national recovery.
- The artist employed an innovative compositional approach, placing the central figures against a dark background with a golden halo effect, while using the surrounding angels to create a **circular movement** that draws the viewer's eye to the central tragedy. This technique shows the influence of Baroque masters

like Rubens while maintaining Bouguereau's characteristic smooth finish and idealized forms.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), *The Nymphaeum*, 1878, 144.7 × 209.5 cm, Haggin Museum, Stockton, California, USA

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), *The Nymphaeum*, 1878, 144.7 × 209.5 cm, Haggin Museum, Stockton, California, USA

- *The Nymphaeum* (pronounced "nymph-a-um") refers to ancient Greek and Roman monuments consecrated to nymphs, especially those of springs. Originally they were built in natural grottoes but later they were purely artificial, there is one in Hadrian's Wall.
- However, despite the classical reference this is clearly an way of displaying the female nude in a way that was almost acceptable at the time. According to a writer for the Chicago Evening Post in the 1920s, Bouguereau's **reputation in America was built upon his paintings of nudes**. When another of his paintings of nudes called *The Bathers*, now in the Chicago Art Institute, came up for sale, it received applause and was promptly bought for a New York saloon for **eighteen thousand dollars**. Critics at the time discussed whether his nudes were erotic or chaste, acceptable or in poor taste, but clearly wealthy patrons loved them.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Evening Mood*, 1882, 207.5 × 108 cm, National Museum of Fine Art, Havana, Cuba

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Evening Mood*, 1882, 207.5 × 108 cm, National Museum of Fine Art, Havana, Cuba

- Completed in 1882, *Evening Mood* (also known as "Le Crépuscule" in French) exemplifies Bouguereau's allegorical approach to the female form.
- A solitary female figure stands on the shoreline at dusk, the crescent moon visible in the background. Art historian Fronia Wissman noted that **"Bouguereau's allegorical figures often represented natural phenomena, with this twilight figure embodying the transitional moment between day and night."**
- We are now in the 1880s, a particularly productive period in Bouguereau's career. He had achieved significant commercial success and was serving as the president of the Society of French Artists, which organized the annual Salon exhibitions.
- The painting was acquired by a wealthy Cuban sugar magnate in the late 19th century, explaining its current location in Havana. It represents one of the few major works by Bouguereau in Latin American collections, as most of his paintings were purchased by American and European collectors.
- The composition demonstrates Bouguereau's masterful handling of light, particularly in the subtle gradations of the evening sky and the luminous quality of the figure's skin. Contemporary critic Albert Wolff, though generally critical of academic painting, acknowledged that **"even Bouguereau's detractors must admit his technical virtuosity in rendering the effects of light on flesh."**

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Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889), *Birth of Venus*, 1863, 130 × 225 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris



William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Birth of Venus*, 1879, 300 cm × 218 cm (120 in × 86 in). Musée d'Orsay, Paris

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Birth of Venus*, 1879, 300 cm × 218 cm (120 in × 86 in). Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889), *Birth of Venus*, 1863, 130 × 225 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- Painted in 1879, *The Birth of Venus* is one of Bouguereau's **most ambitious mythological works**. The monumental canvas is three metres high and is currently displayed at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.
- This interpretation of the classical myth shows Venus emerging from the sea on a shell, surrounded by nymphs, tritons, and putti. Bouguereau drew direct inspiration from his studies in Italy, particularly **Raphael's "The Triumph of Galatea"** and **Botticelli's earlier treatment** of the same subject.
- The painting was first exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1879, where it was **acquired by the French state** for the Luxembourg Museum, the national gallery of contemporary art. This prestigious purchase represented official recognition of Bouguereau's status in the French art establishment.
- Art historian Richard Muther observed that "Bouguereau's Venus represents the **culmination of academic idealism**, combining classical references with a distinctly modern sensuality that appealed to the tastes of the Third Republic." The painting's cool pastel palette and refined naturalism exemplified the new artistic standards of the 1870s.
- (CLICK) Sixteen years earlier in 1863 **Alexandre Cabanel** (1823-1889) achieved great success with his ***Birth of Venus*** which was bought by Napoleon III for his

private collection. The mythological theme is of course being used as a pretext for the portrayal of a nude figure, which, though idealised, is nonetheless depicted in a lascivious pose. Emile Zola denounced this ambiguity: "**The goddess, drowned in a sea of milk, resembles a delicious courtesan, but not of flesh and blood – that would be indecent – but made of a sort of pink and white marzipan**".

- The work's popularity has endured despite changing artistic tastes. When the painting was temporarily loaned to the Metropolitan Museum in New York in **1985, it attracted record crowds**, demonstrating the continuing public appeal of Bouguereau's technical virtuosity and classical themes even as modernism had long since eclipsed academic painting in critical estimation.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Young Shepherdess*, 1885, 157.4 × 72.3 cm, San Diego Museum of Art

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Young Shepherdess*, 1885, 157.4 × 72.3 cm, San Diego Museum of Art

- Created in 1885, *The Young Shepherdess* showcases Bouguereau's idealized vision of rural life.
- The work depicts an Italian peasant girl standing barefoot in a pastoral landscape, looking back at the viewer while tending her flock. The painting was based on one of the Italian immigrant girls whom Bouguereau employed as models during his family vacations in La Rochelle, his birthplace.
- Art historian James Harding wrote that "**Bouguereau's shepherdesses represent a romanticized view of rural poverty, transforming the harsh realities of peasant life into elegant visions of rustic nobility.**" This approach contrasted sharply with the more socially conscious rural scenes of contemporaries like Jean-François Millet.
- Because the proponents of *Pompier* painting sought to extol the virtues of the peasant class, Bouguereau always depicts his peasant girls as poignant rather than threatening, as wistful rather than resentful.
- The painting was purchased by American railroad magnate Henry Edwards Huntington in 1905, the year of Bouguereau's death, reflecting **the artist's enormous popularity among wealthy American collectors**. It was later donated to the San Diego Museum as part of a bequest to make European masterworks accessible to the American public.
- Technical analysis has revealed Bouguereau's meticulous working methods for

this painting. He began with detailed charcoal studies of the model, followed by a careful underpainting in grisaille (monochrome gray), before building up thin layers of colour to achieve the luminous skin tones and atmospheric effects that characterise his mature style.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Return of Spring*, 1886, 117 × 215 cm., Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Return of Spring*, 1886, 117 × 215 cm., Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

- Completed in 1886, *The Return of Spring* (originally titled "Le Printemps" in French) is one of Bouguereau's most celebrated allegorical works.
- The composition depicts a nude female figure representing Spring, surrounded by a group of playful putti or cherubs. The work exemplifies Bouguereau's synthesis of classical mythology with contemporary academic technique, creating an **idealized vision of seasonal renewal**.
- The painting **caused a sensation when first exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1886**. Critic Émile Zola, though generally dismissive of academic art, acknowledged that "**Bouguereau's technical mastery is beyond question, even if his vision lacks the vitality of nature itself.**" The work's sensual content generated controversy but also contributed to its commercial appeal.
- In 1890, the **painting was vandalized** while on display at a gallery in **Chicago**. A seminary student attacked it with a chair, **claiming it was immoral**. The incident made headlines across America and **ironically increased public interest** in Bouguereau's work. After careful restoration, the painting was acquired by businessman Francis T.B. Martin, who later **donated it to the Joslyn Museum in 1951**.
- Art historian Gerald Ackerman noted that "***The Return of Spring* represents Bouguereau at the height of his powers, combining flawless technique with a poetic sensibility that transcends mere academic formula.**" The painting's

enduring popularity has made it the centerpiece of the Joslyn's European collection.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The First Mourning*, 1888, 252 × 203 cm, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The First Mourning*, 1888, 252 × 203 cm, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA), Buenos Aires, Argentina

- William-Adolphe Bouguereau painted ***The First Mourning*** (also known as *Premier Deuil* in French) in 1888, during a **period of personal tragedy**. The artist had suffered the **loss of his second son** shortly before creating this powerful work.
- This monumental canvas measures 203 x 252 cm (80 x 99 inches) and is housed at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where it has been one of the museum's centerpieces since its acquisition.
- The painting depicts the **biblical scene of Adam and Eve mourning over the body of their son Abel**, who was **murdered by his brother Cain**. This represents the first human death recorded in the Bible, hence the title "The First Mourning."
- The composition is masterfully arranged with **Adam seated**, holding the lifeless body of Abel while embracing Eve, who collapses in grief against him. The dramatic emotional intensity is heightened by the stark contrast between the pale body of Abel and the tanned skin of his parents.
- Art historian Edward Strahan wrote that this work "**shows Bouguereau at his most emotionally powerful, combining technical virtuosity with profound human sentiment.**" The painting's emotional impact is universally understood regardless of religious background.
- The dramatic cloudy sky in the background enhances the somber mood, while

the barren landscape emphasizes the desolation of the first parents' grief. The composition forms a tight triangular grouping that focuses attention on the intimate family tragedy.

- Théophile Gautier commented on Bouguereau's ability to convey grief, noting: "**He has captured that first terrible moment when humanity confronted mortality, with a dignity that transcends mere illustration.**"
- The work was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1888, where it received significant critical acclaim for its emotional power and technical excellence, further cementing Bouguereau's reputation as one of the leading academic painters of his time.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *Whisperings of Love*, 1889, 203.2 × 138.43, New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana, USA

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- ***Whisperings of Love*** was completed in 1889, during the **height of his career** when he was widely recognized as one of France's greatest living artists.
- A young woman in classical white drapery is seated on a stone bench, while a cupid or cherub whispers in her ear. The allegorical scene represents the **awakening of love and desire in youth**.
- The composition demonstrates **Bouguereau's mastery of the female form** and his ability to create **idealized beauty**. The young woman's pose is graceful yet natural, while the cupid is rendered with anatomical precision despite its mythological nature.
- Art critic Charles Blanc praised Bouguereau's treatment of mythological subjects, writing: "**He brings to classical themes a freshness and immediacy that makes ancient allegories speak to modern sensibilities.**"
- The painting exemplifies Bouguereau's signature technique of smooth, porcelain-like skin tones achieved through multiple thin layers of paint and careful blending. The luminous quality of the woman's skin contrasts with the subtle background landscape.
- **The work was created during a period when Bouguereau was experimenting with more intimate, poetic subjects alongside his larger mythological and religious compositions. This shift reflected changing tastes in the art market.**
- Paul Mantz, reviewing the painting when it was exhibited at the Paris Salon of

1889, noted: "Bouguereau continues to charm us with his technical perfection and his gift for creating images of timeless beauty that speak to the heart."

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Shepherdess*, 1889, 159.4 × 94 cm, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Shepherdess*, 1889, 159.4 × 94 cm, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA

- ***The Shepherdess*** (also known as *Pastourelle* in French) was painted by William-Adolphe Bouguereau in 1889, the same year as *Whisperings of Love*, demonstrating the artist's remarkable productivity and versatility.
- A **barefoot young shepherdess** standing confidently with her staff, dressed in simple rural clothing. Her direct gaze engages the viewer, creating an immediate connection that transcends the painting's 19th-century origins.
- Unlike Bouguereau's mythological works, this painting reflects **his interest in rural French life and ordinary working people**. The artist frequently traveled to the countryside around La Rochelle, his birthplace, to find models and inspiration.
- Art historian Richard Muther noted that "**Bouguereau's peasant girls are never coarse or vulgar; he ennobles his subjects while maintaining their essential character**," a quality clearly evident in this dignified portrayal.
- The technical execution is characteristic of Bouguereau's mature style, with meticulous attention to details such as the texture of the girl's clothing, the subtle landscape in the background, and the naturalistic rendering of her bare feet.
- The painting was created during a period of **growing interest in rural subjects in French art**, partly as a response to **rapid industrialization** and urbanization. However, Bouguereau's approach differs from the social realism of

contemporaries like Jean-François Millet.

- When exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1889, the work was praised by critic Albert Wolff, who wrote: "**Bouguereau gives us not just a shepherdess, but an emblem of rural virtue and natural grace that stands in contrast to the artifice of modern urban life.**"

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), *The Bohemian*, 1890, 150 × 124.5 cm, private collection

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), *The Bohemian*, 1890, 150 × 124.5 cm, private collection (owned by Minneapolis Institute of Art until 2004)

- A barefooted young woman sitting on a concrete bench on the south bank of the Seine across from Notre Dame de Paris resting a violin in her lap. Interestingly in a photograph taken before he sold the work there is a bare stone wall behind the girl. The change was definitely made by the artist probably at the request of a potential purchaser.
- His painting reflect a moral message which in this case is the **virtue of labour** in contrast with the ignominy of poverty.
- The painting is dated 1890 but "89" can be seen in the under-paint. Bouguereau often changed the date of a work probably to reflect when he actually completed the work.
- It was owned by the Minneapolis Institute of Art until 2004 when it was auctioned by Christie's to benefit the acquisition fund. It sold for \$735,500.

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William-Adolphe
Bouguereau (1825-1905),
The Broken Pitcher, 1891,
134.6 × 83.8 cm, Fine Arts
Museums of San Francisco,
USA

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905), *The Broken Pitcher*, 1891, 134.6 × 83.8 cm, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, USA

- ***The Broken Pitcher*** was completed by William-Adolphe Bouguereau in 1891, when the artist was 66 years old yet still at the height of his technical powers and productivity.
- The painting depicts a **young peasant girl sitting on a stone wall with a broken pitcher at her feet**. The broken vessel has traditionally been interpreted as a **symbol of lost innocence or virginity**, adding a layer of **moral allegory** to the seemingly simple genre scene.
- The **girl's expression** was thought to be particularly captivating – a mixture of **regret, embarrassment, and resignation** that demonstrates Bouguereau's psychological insight and ability to convey complex emotions.
- Art historian James Gurney has noted: "**Bouguereau's genius lay in his ability to combine technical perfection with genuine human emotion. In works like 'The Broken Pitcher,' we see not just virtuoso painting but authentic psychological portraiture.**"
- The composition is **carefully balanced**, with the vertical line of the well post contrasting with the seated figure, while the bright green of the pitcher provides a focal point of colour against the more muted tones of the girl's clothing and the stone wall.
- This painting exemplifies Bouguereau's later style, which maintained his commitment to academic technique while incorporating more naturalistic

elements and emotional depth than his earlier, more strictly classical works.

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), *Ocean Nymph (L'Océanide)*, 1904, 96 × 205 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de La Rochelle, France

William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), *Ocean Nymph (L'Océanide)*, 1904, 96 × 205 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de La Rochelle, France

- William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Ocean Nymph* (1904) stands as **one of his final masterpieces**, completed just **a year before his death**. You may be asking yourself by now were some of his paintings just an excuse to show naked women. The short answer, I think, is yes.
- This luminous oil painting depicts a nude ocean nymph reclining on a shoreline, her pale form contrasting with the azure waves behind her. The work exemplifies his lifelong dedication to **classical themes and technical perfection**, even as his health was failing.
- The artist's personal life was marked by **profound tragedy**. In **1856**, he married **Marie-Nelly Monchablon**, with whom he had **five children**. Devastatingly, **he outlived four of them**, with only his eldest daughter Henriette surviving him. In **1877, both his wife and infant son died**, leaving him a widower at 52. He later found companionship with fellow artist **Elizabeth Gardner**, whom he married in 1896 after his mother's death removed her objections to the union.
- William-Adolphe Bouguereau died on August 19, 1905, at the age of 79 in his hometown of La Rochelle, France. He suffered from heart disease, and his **final months were difficult** after his **house and studio in Paris were burgled** in the spring of that year. Despite the modernist revolution that had already begun to eclipse his reputation, Bouguereau was **honoured with grand funeral processions** and memorials in both Paris and La Rochelle. He was **buried in Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris**, leaving behind a **legacy of over 800**

finished paintings and a profound influence on academic art. At the time of his death, he was still serving as president of the Société des Artistes Français and remained committed to traditional artistic values until the end of his life.

- Bouguereau's **legacy remains complex and contested**. During his lifetime, he was among the **most celebrated artists in the Western world** receiving **countless honours**. His **influence on American art** collecting was particularly significant, with wealthy industrialists eagerly acquiring his works during the Gilded Age.



15-03
WILLIAM-ADOLPHE
BOUGUEREAU

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William-Adolphe Bouguereau,
Nymphs and Satyr, 1873

- For decades he was **dismissed by modernist critics** as **over sentimental** and **technically rigid**. However, **contemporary reassessment** has recognized his **extraordinary craftsmanship** and his contribution to art. **His paintings now command millions at auction**, and his influence on figurative art endures through the generations of students he mentored at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts.
- Thank you for your attention.
- I hope you will continue to watch my 200 Views of Western Art.



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