

**Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Le Petit Ramoneur (Damvillers)***

oil on canvas  
40 ¼ by 45 ⅝ inches (102 by 116 ccm)  
signed and dated lower left: 'J. Bastien-Lepage 1883'

- provenance: Estate of the artist;  
studio sale, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, May 11-12, 1885, lot 3;  
Fenaillé Collection n.d.;  
to Private Collection (by 1940);  
thence by descent.
- exhibited: Paris, Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts, *Jules Bastien-Lepage*, 1885, no. 193.  
Paris, *Exposition Universelle*, 1889, no. 21.
- literature: 'Obsèques de Bastien-Lepage', *Le Soir*, 13 décembre 1884  
'Bastien-Lepage', *La Petite République Française*, 14 décembre 1884  
'Bastien-Lepage', *La Liberté*, 14 décembre 1884  
'A l'atelier de Bastien-Lepage', *La Presse*, 14 décembre 1884  
'Bastien-Lepage', *La Ville de Paris*, 14 décembre 1884  
'La mort et les obsèques de Bastien-Lepage', *Journal d'Indre-et-Loire*, 14 décembre 1884  
'Bastien-Lepage', *L'Événement*, 15 décembre 1884  
Emmanuel Ducros, 'L'exposition de l'oeuvre de Bastien-Lepage au Palais du Prince de Chimay', *L'Artiste*, vol 121, 1885, pp. 390-4  
André Theuriet, 'Jules Bastien-Lepage, L'Homme et L'Artiste', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1885, p. 831  
*The Athenaeum*, no 3004, 23 May 1885, p. 670  
Armand Dayot, 'Un siècle d'art. Notes sur la peinture française à l'exposition centennale des Beaux-Arts', Paris 1890, p. 117.  
André Theuriet, *Jules Bastien-Lepage and his Art, A Memoir*, 1892 (T. Fisher Unwin), p.69, 132 (illus)  
Julia Cartwright, *Jules Bastien-Lepage*, 1894 (Seeley & Co), p. 71 (illus)  
Anon [Fr.Castre], Henry Roujon ed., *Bastien-Lepage*, n.d. [c. 1914], (Les Maitres Illustrés, Pierre Lafitte et Cie; English ed., Frederick A Stokes Co, New York), opp p. 64 (illus in col)  
Philippe Pagnotta, *Jules Bastien-Lepage, 1848-1884*, 1984 (exhibition catalogue, Musées de la Meuse, Verdun and Montmédy), p. 127 illus  
Christian Debize, *Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884)*, 1984 (Editions des Musées de la Meuse), pp. 4, 21 as 'oeuvre importante non localisée'  
Marie-Madeleine Aubrun, *Jules Bastien-Lepage, catalogue raisonné de l'Oeuvre*, 1985, p. 266, no. 436, illustrated (as location unknown)  
Dominique Lobstein, *Jules Bastien-Lepage, 1848-1884*, 2007 (exhibition catalogue, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), p. 39 (illus from an engraving by Charles Baude)
- note: By a kitchen fireplace in north-eastern France, a white cat patiently observes a boy about to eat his lunch. He in turn looks down on a kitten lapping up crumbs at his feet. The scene takes place in the village of Damvillers in the Meuse region, and the house to which the boy has been assigned is the family home of the painter, Jules Bastien-Lepage (fig 1).



Fig 1 Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Le Petit Ramoneur (Damvillers)*, 1883, 102 x 116, the present picture

Nimble, and small for his age, he represents a newly mobilized work-force that emerged in the villages, towns and cities of western Europe in the nineteenth century – that of the chimney sweep. He was, wrote Arnould-Frémy, ‘the youngest of all French artisans, [and] the representatives of the only trade of which the humble monopoly can be engrossed by (sic) children, exclusively’.<sup>1</sup> As winter drew close and fires were lit, one would hear the distinctive street cries of those who managed this enterprise.<sup>2</sup> Its juvenile practitioners, aged between eight and ten, hailed, for the most part, from Piedmont and Savoy, mountainous provinces added to France by Napoleon III in 1860. Itinerant peasant children from these regions grew up as climbers and had for many years crossed the border to be put to work by often unscrupulous entrepreneurs.<sup>3</sup> The tools of their trade were obvious: knee-pads and a *raclette*, a small hand-rake or scraper, but even more obvious was clothing deeply impregnated with soot. In the summer months those who had not made the long trek on foot to their homes in the Rhône-Alps, remained in the *banlieues* as vagabonds.

But why, when this lad appeared, did the artist think him worth painting? The answer to this question uncovers the quasi-sociological recording of ‘types and trades’, one of the most significant strands in French painting in the nineteenth century. In discussing the *ramoneur* back in 1841, Arnould-Frémy was contributing to an important enterprise – the *feuilleton* publication entitled *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*. This aimed simply to classify the French in visual and literary terms. While its authors were men of letters, who were sometimes given to flights of fancy, its illustrators, of necessity, placed more emphasis on empirical observation. It is not too much to claim that these serial publications, in their taxonomies, formed one of the bases of

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<sup>1</sup>Arnould-Frémy, ‘Le Ramoneur’, in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes, types et portraits humoristiques à la plume et au crayon*, 1840-2, (vol 3, 1850 ed., Philippart, Paris), p. 137. The original French publication was immediately translated into English and published in selections in 1840 and 1841. For ‘The Chimney-Sweeper’ see Jules Janin, Balzac, Cormenin and other celebrated French Authors, *Pictures of the French, A Series of Literary and Graphic Delineations of French Character*, 1841, (Thomas Tegg), pp. 17-23, (all quotations are taken from this source, and although the translation is literal, it does not satisfy modern English usage – eg, the Victorian employment of the verb ‘engrossed’. We would probably use the verb ‘ascribed’ today).

<sup>2</sup> Street vendors had of course been a common feature of towns and cities since the Middle Ages. More recently, in the eighteenth century, charts were published illustrating their characteristic costumes and impedimenta, of which *Les Cris de Paris* were typical. Street criers then became a common feature in literature from Balzac to Proust.

<sup>3</sup> Arnould-Frémy, 1841, pp. 18-20, describes circumstances in which boys, leaving ‘the sublime horrors of the Simplon’, would be trapped in chimneys and die of asphyxiation. From a wage of 30 or 40 sous, they would receive a meagre six (p. 21; translated as a farthing, ie one quarter of a penny, in English).

the modern social sciences.<sup>4</sup> And where Paul Gavarni, the chief illustrator, led, others followed. Rag-pickers, pedlars, street-singers became heroic in the work of Edouard Manet and other second generation Realists.<sup>5</sup> The *ramoneur* was presented barefoot, and in a battered top hat, or wearing a Phrygian cap and knee-pads, like Bastien-Lepage's boy (fig 2).



Fig 2 Paul Gavarni and others, *Le Ramoneur*, 1841, from *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes, types et portraits humoristiques à la plume et au crayon*, 1840-2, (vol 3, 1850 ed., Philippart, Paris), p. 137

As a Savoyard, he had crept into painting in the eighteenth century in the work of Antoine Watteau, but was brought up-to-date in François Bonvin's *Le Petit Savoyard* (fig 3). Such pictures, complemented by those of Théodule Ribot and Pierre Edouard Frère took the viewer into the world of the *cuisinière* and the *patissier* (fig 4).



Fig 3 François Bonvin, *Le Petit Savoyard*, 1845, 21 x 27, Musée Municipale, Boulogne-sur-Mer

Fig 4 Pierre Edouard Frère, *The Little Cook*, 1858, 28.3 x 20.2, The Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Robert B Woodward

<sup>4</sup> They were for instance immediately imitated in Spain in *Los españoles pintados por si mismos* (1843-4) and in Britain in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). All of these publications were reprinted in various forms.

<sup>5</sup> It is well-recognized that leading intellectuals poured over their plates, and their impact in the visual arts, in conditioning the thinking of the most radical painters of the age from Manet to Van Gogh was profound.

These small canvases, often sentimental in character, were Bastien-Lepage's starting point as he sought to remake *genre* painting. The diversions of a little cook or naughty schoolboy in Frère's work in the 1850s had become debased in the coarse visual doggerel of Paul-Charles Chocarne-Moreau, and must be brought to a much more serious and Naturalistic conclusion in the present work. The noble lineage which lay with Chardin and the so-called *bodegones* of Velazquez, contained a modern challenge and there was more to be done. It could only be achieved by rejecting the metropolitan elite, escaping the din of aesthetic debate and returning regularly to the Meuse, his *coin de terre*, from where his true inspiration came. The programme that underwrote his work between 1877 and his death in 1884, was the visual equivalent of what Walter Benjamin dubbed *literature panoramique*, that of itemizing, almost botanizing, the social types and trades passing through Damvillers, his unique 'corner of the world'. Dorothy Tennant who acted as the painter's host on several London visits and to whom he presented his finest *Self-Portrait*, confirms that such thoughts were ever present (fig 5).



Fig 5 Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Self-Portrait*, 1882, 26.7 x 22.5. Private Collection

When in Britain, she notes that aside from painting views of the Thames, Bastien-Lepage was searching for a *type très Anglais*, and would not be satisfied until he had secured the services of a flower-seller and a troublesome bootblack from Cheapside.<sup>6</sup> The same principles applied to the *faucheur* and the *colporteur*. Starting with hay-makers and potato-gatherers, he moved to the beggar, the wood-cutter, the pedlar, the school-girl, and the barge-boy, before arriving in the early months of 1883 at the chimney-sweeper. This cavalcade of figures, accentuated individual character – the barge-boy in *Pas Mèche* is insolent, 'cheeky' or somewhat aggressive; the little girl going to school is coquettish (figs 6 & 7). They are, as the artist, George Clausen

<sup>6</sup> Mrs HM Stanley, 'Bastien-Lepage in London', *The Art Journal*, 1897, pp. 53-7; also Kenneth McConkey, '“Un petit cercle de thuriféraires” Bastien-Lepage et la Grande Bretagne', 48/14, *Revue du Musée d'Orsay*, printemps 2007, pp. 20-33. For reference to Bastien-Lepage's *Little London Bootblack* and *London Flower Seller*, see Lobstein, 2007, nos 53 & 55. *L'Amour au Village*, a scene of rustic lovers, was, according to Mrs Stanley an English-inspired theme through which he hoped to express a 'very English sentiment'.

noted, ‘... placed before us in the most satisfying completeness, without the appearance of artifice, but as they live; and without comment, as far as is possible on the author’s part’.<sup>7</sup>



Fig 6 Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Pas Mèche*, 1882, 132.1 x 88.3, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

Fig 7 Jules Bastien-Lepage, *La Petite Coquette, (Allant à l'école)*, 1882, 80 x 58.4, Aberdeen Art Gallery

Just as writers from Balzac and George Sand to Zola and Maupassant, sought character in types, trades and social classes, so too did painters of the Naturalist generation of Jean-François Raffaelli, Léon Lhermitte, Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret and others, influenced by Bastien-Lepage. And the circle widened to British and American artists - Clausen, Henry Herbert La Thangue and the Glasgow School, and to Thomas Alexander Harrison, Lovell Birge Harrison, Charles Sprague Pearce and many others.<sup>8</sup>

There was nevertheless an implied commentary on contemporary society in the prevalence of *mendians*, *chiffonniers* and *colporteurs*. Yet while the *ramoneur* was on the fringes of vagabondage, his skills were valued, albeit for the limited number of years until he reached adolescence, and it was such an urchin who became part of the artist’s winter work programme when he returned to his family home in January 1883. Having recorded the deathbed of Léon Gambetta, the recently deposed President of the French Republic, his major task was to add the finishing touches to his Salon painting, *L’Amour au Village* (Pushkin Museum, Moscow).<sup>9</sup> When André Theuriet visited him in March, this was completed and he had turned to the present interior. Theuriet takes up the story,

<sup>7</sup> George Clausen, ‘Bastien-Lepage and Modern Realism’, *Scottish Art Review*, vol 1, 1888, p. 118. For a fuller analysis of these works see Gabriel P Weisberg ed., *The Realist Tradition, French Painting and Drawing, 1830-1900*, 1980 (exhibition catalogue, Cleveland Museum of Art), pp. 208-212 (entries by Kenneth McConkey).

<sup>8</sup> For further reference see McConkey 2007, pp. 20-33.

<sup>9</sup> The much admired Gambetta had died as a result of an accident with a revolver. He lived in Honoré de Balzac’s former house at Ville d’Avray.

The sullen sky, continually blotted out by chilling showers, allowed us few walks in the open air; but every morning we went up to the studio. Jules dismissed the little sweep, who was sitting for a picture that he had on hand, and, taking a sheet of copper, he made us pose for an etching.<sup>10</sup>

The *Ramoneur* picture evidently did not accompany *L'Amour au Village* to Paris and it appears not to have been shown prior to the retrospective exhibition which preceded the studio sale in May 1885.<sup>11</sup> It nevertheless provides an important glimpse of an inner sanctum from which the artist sprang. Two other works, pictures of the artist's grandfather, enable us to identify the specific setting. The first of these, *Vieillard assis dans un fauteuil*, clearly shows the chair in the background of the *ramoneur* canvas, while *Portrait de son Grand-Père*, produced at the same time, gives us much of the *mise-en-scène* (figs 8 & 9).<sup>12</sup> Here we have the black fire-surround, the grey hearth, the iron cooking pot, and even the long-handled ash shovel.<sup>13</sup>



Fig 8 Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Vieillard assis dans un fauteuil*, 1880, watercolour, 35 x 28.5, Musée Marmottan, Paris  
Fig 9 Emile Bastien-Lepage (?), *Portrait de son Grand-Père*, c. 1880, 22 x 28, Private Collection

We know that Bastien-Lepage thought deeply about his craft, searching for ‘that inmost radiance which lies at the heart of things’, and according to Julia Cartwright, he

... would not adopt conventional arrangements ... or “prettify types”. He would rather ‘by the great variety of his execution ... [be] ever careful to note the objects on which he desired to fix the spectator’s attention.’<sup>14</sup>

This is obvious in the present work in the detailed observation of the boy’s head and hands which stand in contrast to the summary, but equally brilliant handling of the white cat. It is clear

<sup>10</sup> Theuriet, 1892, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> At this time, an unidentified visitor to Bastien-Lepage’s studio in Paris at rue Legendre, makes no mention of the work amongst other recent canvases; See A Correspondent, ‘M. J Bastien-Lepage’, *The Architect*, 7 April 1883, pp. 222-3.

<sup>12</sup> In Weisberg ed. 1980, p. 254, this work is given to Emile Bastien-Lepage, although the author surmises that Jules may have collaborated with his brother in painting it, and notes that the Lepage descendants attributed it separately to both Emile and Jules. While this is possible, given the presence of the Marmottan watercolour, it seems more likely that Jules Bastien-Lepage, rather than Emile was the guiding hand. By 1883, Emile was nevertheless exhibiting alongside his brother as a landscapist.

<sup>13</sup> What appears to be a large open triangular piece of furniture – thought at first to be a portfolio stand - also appears prominently in the background of both pictures.

<sup>14</sup> Cartwright, 1894, p. 75.

that in a few strokes the animal's characteristic posture is deftly drawn. This selective focus is entirely typical. We see it elsewhere in the cursory blocking of the background in *Pas Mèche*, for instance, and it was a feature particularly admired and imitated by a whole generation of young British and American followers. But while formerly Lepage's country characters up to this point adopt frontal poses and are held in focus, this *ramoneur*, unlike the barge boy and school-girl, is presented in situ, tempting the household cats with his frugal meal. Incident expresses character. And where formerly, such a moment would be captured, *à la Frère*, on a small scale for the connoisseur's cabinet, here the canvas is over a metre square. A poised cat, leather knee-pads, and scraper, beautifully rendered, give more than circumstantial authenticity to blackened hands and face. They are part of the human chain that brings this character, these furnishings, in this moment, vividly alive. Few around him could achieve the rigour, the linear precision, and depth of scrutiny that we find in Bastien-Lepage. Naturalism, in short, achieves its fullest expression.

A watercolour version, presumably a study of the *Ramoneur* appeared in the studio sale but has since disappeared, and a fine engraving by the artist's friend, Charles Baude, is known. Following the artist's death the work, although apparently sold at the studio sale, passed to the artist's younger brother, Emile Bastien-Lepage (fig 10).<sup>15</sup>

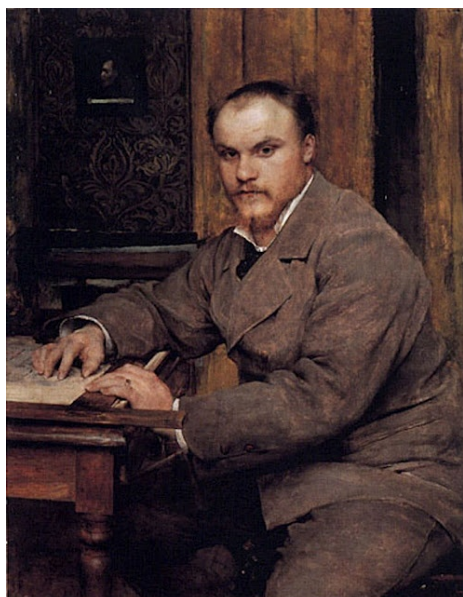


Fig 10 Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Emile Bastien-Lepage*, 1879, 33 x 25, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

At some point it transferred to Maurice Fenaille, one of the leading French industrialists and philanthropists of his generation.<sup>16</sup> Although Emile and Fenaille had known one another since the early 1880s, this sale or gift may have occurred after or around the time of the Great War, since the work is illustrated in Fr. Castre's short monograph of c.1914, as being in Emile's

<sup>15</sup> *The Athenaeum*, no 3004, 23 May 1885, p. 670.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Fenaille, (1855-1937) a supplier of lubricants and gasoline, greatly expanded the family firm that he inherited from his father, Alphonse Fenaille, in 1883. Later in the year he commissioned Emile Bastien-Lepage (1854-1938) to design villas for himself and his mother in the *quartier Saint-James*, at Neuilly. A friendship lasting many years developed between the two, and through Emile, Fenaille was introduced to Auguste Rodin in November 1885, resulting in a number of collaborations. Other art world connections followed – in some cases through Emile's commissions on Fenaille's behalf. Before the Great War, Fenaille was donating works to all of the major museums in Paris and publishing a lavish survey of Gobelins Tapestries (1905 ff., 5 vol.); see <https://www.inha.fr/fr/ressources/publications/publications-numeriques/dictionnaire-critique-des-historiens-de-l-art/fenaille-maurice.html>.

studio.<sup>17</sup> At this point, it appears that Emile wished to bequeath the painting to the Louvre. He notes,

Cette belle toile se trouve aujourd'hui dans l'atelier du frère de l'artiste, à Neuilly, et fait partie du legs que M Emile Bastien-Lepage destine au Louvre.<sup>18</sup>

There is no doubt that had this occurred, the work would not be out of place.

*Kenneth McConkey*

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<sup>17</sup> Anon [Fr.Castre], Henry Roujon ed., *Bastien-Lepage*, n.d. [c. 1914], (Les Maitres Illustrés, Pierre Lafitte et Cie; English ed., Frederick A Stokes Co, New York), opp p. 64 (illus in col).

<sup>18</sup> Castre 1914, pp. 69-70; Castre continues, 'Elle n'a figure à aucun Salon, comme d'ailleurs bien d'autres tableaux ou portraits qui n'ont pas été exposés au public ...' Emile Bastien-Lepage died in 1938, the year following Fenaille, without realizing his ambition to place the *Petit Ramoneur* in the Musée Du Louvre, although his own portrait by his brother (fig 10) entered the national collection.