

Paul Lemasson



By Françoise Lemasson-Giquel

PAUL LEMASSON, the last child of a family of five, was born on January 10, 1897, in SAINT-MARS-DU-DESERT, a little town located about fifteen miles from Nantes (France). He lived there with his parents, three brothers and sister in a house which also served as the family shop. Following his schooling at Ancenis, Lemasson attended the **Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Nantes** from 1913 to 1915.

During World War I, an eighteen year old Lemasson enlisted in the army before call up, serving in the light artillery and taking part in the Chemin des Dames battles.

In 1920, Paul joined his older brother Albert in Paris, and studied under **Fernand Cormon**, a painter who had been a student of Maurice Denis. On May 13, 1921, Paul was admitted to the **Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris**. When Fernand Cormon passed away, **Pierre Laurens** became Paul's teacher.



At about the same time, Paul studied the art of fresco with **Paul Baudouin** who was a student of Puvis de Chavannes.

In 1925, Paul Lemasson did a public showing of small panels representing the **Four Seasons** at the **Salon des Arts Décoratifs**. He also painted a large mural for the **boardroom of the City of Paris' masonry contractors**.

Paul Lemasson is then called to decorate many churches:

In COURBEVOIE and BOBIGNY, he was commissioned to produce small frescoes.

In NANTERRE: a 100 square meters fresco showing the **Translation of St. Genevieve's ashes** adorns the walls of the chapel located in the Sainte-Genevieve-Saint-Maurice's cathedral.

LE CELLIER: a **Way of the Cross** which features throughout the 14 stations a "*realism brought forth by the physiognomy of its main characters*".

Decoration of the Chapel of the castle of Clermont, near LE CELLIER, on which Paul Lemasson worked with his brother Albert.

LA HAIE-FOUASSIERE (1927-1931), where Paul Lemasson participated in the design of the frescos of the Stations of the Cross that would be created by his brother. Paul himself painted several scenes of the Round dealing with the celebration of the Eucharist: **Easter**, the **Multiplication of the Loaves** and the **Supper at Emmaus**. It can be reasonably assumed that the south gable of the cross-aisle of the church which shows the **Ascension** may also be his of own labour (composition, attitudes of characters, landscape, tree form ...) as well as the panels bordering the side doors, "**St. Remi teaching Clovis**" and "**St. Louis**", with the etched motto: "Death rather than sin." Unfortunately, the signatures are concealed by the panelling.

CORSEPT

PETIT-MARS

FRESNAY-EN-RETZ

In LA PLANCHE (1931-1932), Paul depicts **Saint Anne in the Village** (he places the scene on the church square) and the **Miraculous Fishing**.

On October 17, 1933, Paul married **Madeleine Chauveau** at the church of Sainte-Croix in Nantes, the city where he lived until his death. They had three children.

More works of Paul Lemasson:

Church of La ROCHE-BLANCHE (1933-1935)

JOSSELIN: decoration of the church of Notre-Dame-du-Roncier.

Church of MAISDON-SUR-SEVRE: the **Stations of the Cross**.



Church of MAISDON-SUR-SEVRE: the Stations of the Cross. (Sketch)

First station: Sentencing to death of Jesus

At the Calvary of PONTCHATEAU (1939-1942): many murals grace the walls of the Temple, the Cenacle and those of buildings scattered throughout the park.

Chapel of Father de MONTFORT: frescoes depicting the Father's life.



Fresco on Temple of Calvary of Pontchateâu.

Jesus driving the merchants from the Temple.



The Annunciation. St Mars-du-Desert

In 1942, in SAINT-MARS-DU-DESERT, Lemasson's hometown, Paul's rendering of **The Annunciation** and **the Flight into Egypt** adorns the cut-off corners of the front choir of the church. Frescoes done around the apse by Paul's brother Albert are of a very different style. They were restored in 2009, at the same time as the church.



The Flight into Egypt. St Mars-du-Desert.

COUFFE (1944)
THOUARE (1947), the last two
decors were never completed.
LE FRENE: **Virgin and Child.**

Paul was chosen to decorate the
pavilion of Brittany for the PARIS
INTERNATIONAL FAIR in 1937.

In 1947, during the Eucharistic
Congress of Nantes, Paul participated in
the EXPOSITION OF THE SACRED
ART with a fresco of **St. Donatien and St.
Rogatien** and a representation of **the
Visitation**.



St Donatien and St Rogatien (Sketch)
Exposition of the SACRED ART. NANTES.

All the while, Paul Lemasson never stopped doing paintings. Shortly after the creation of the frescoes of Josselin, Paul displayed forty paintings at Galerie Mignon Massart in Nantes. An art critic from Nantes, J.A.B., notes about the **Streets of the Yeu Island** that it *"epitomizes the special atmosphere of the island"* and observes about a composition titled **The Circus in the Snow** that it is *"inspired by Brueghel"*.



Nantes: the Erdre River near the Tortiere bridge

Paul Lemasson painted **landscapes**. He produced several works depicting the banks of the Loire and the Erdre rivers: The Loire at Mauves, The Erdre at Tortiere Bridge, The Hoche Wharf, Barges, Angles, and Willows. **Bouquets of flowers** also inspired him such as the ranunculus, the anemone, the sweet pea ... Paul also did **portraits** as well as **compositions**. In 1934, one such composition, no doubt inspired by the mural **"Sainte Anne in the Village"** done at La Planche, attracted the attention of Mr Escholier, art critic at La Dépêche. Mr Escholier compared the piece to a *"charming little Flemish primitive."* Also in 1934, another composition, **The Bowl Players**, is mentioned in La Bretagne à Paris. In 1935, during an exhibition of Lemasson in Nantes, **The Entombment** is reported as *"the most beautiful piece"* and **Wedding Dance** attracted the attention of a critic who wrote: *"gaiety, youth, poetry combine to challenge the present time. Colors, harmonized with impeccable taste, sing joyfully."*



Nantes: the transporter bridge seen from the Moncoussu dock

Early in his career, Paul Lemasson would evoke in his work the day to day life of his youth: country scenes, the harvesters' meal, the road to school, the greasy pole, the village fair ... These pieces gained quick notoriety and sold well.

In **Nantes**, Paul Lemasson exhibited his work regularly at the **Mignon Massard** gallery.

In **Sao Paulo**, Brazil, on December 22, 1953, at the exhibition of works by Paul Lemasson in the **Galeria de Arte Ita**,

Judas Isgorogota wrote in the newspaper A Gazeta: *"He understands and loves the small towns of France whose spirit he cherishes as much as the good and simple life of its inhabitants, all of which has been faithfully reproduced on his tiny paintings, full of gaiety and humor, full of spirit and gentleness. This remarkable work carries both the names of P. Lemasson and that of France on a cloud of tenderness and marvel that goes beyond frontiers... He is now known around the world as a painter of the spirit of the small towns of France."*

In 1961, Eric de Perre, an art dealer interested in his work, asked Paul Lemasson to grant him the exclusivity of his compositions.

His works are exhibited in Paris (Duncan Gallery and Galerie Matignon, 1966), as well as abroad: England, USA, Canada, Chile, Peru.

NEW YORK: an exhibition is devoted to him in April 1970.



Sweet pea bouquet

In May 1966, a Paul Lemasson exhibit is held at the Atelier Matignon in Paris. Pierre Mazars writes in an introduction: *"Paul Lemasson complies with only one rule which is to ban triviality from his work; hence it is not the genre scene that occupies the largest place, but rather the sky, the overwhelming snow... Paul Lemasson knows that the key is to have these large patches of gray, white, blue, which give his paintings their special quality: tranquillity"*.

An art reviewer for the Ouest France newspaper, Lenormand draws a fine portrait of the artist: *"A true citizen of Nantes who for years, usually at the same hour, loves to wander about the city; there he finds relaxation and entertainment. He dresses like you and others, and his only eccentricity lies in his aloofness. Yet, he remains a clear-minded stroller, and, with a keen sense of observation, stores in his mind the scenes that will later trigger his imagination."*

Because Paul Lemasson is a quintessentially unique artist.

One wonders who could follow him in his world, a demanding world where a generous heart and keen skills are nowadays uncommon. Neither spontaneous nor naive, he is a strong and reflective practitioner who tackles difficulty without cheating and without mock immaturity "



Portrait of Emile Chauveau.
Stepfather of Paul Lemasson.

Paul Lemasson died in Nantes on September 22, 1971 following a long illness.

Lenormand then devotes him an article which aptly depicts him:

"The painter Paul Lemasson was a lonely and discreet man, who has fulfilled his destiny without playing the bohemian, never speaking about himself and, above all, avoiding to deal with what some would describe as "the problems of painting".

He died after a painful illness and he wanted his death to be as private as his life had been. The man was likeable and had a sober distinction about him. His demeanour was warm with just the right touch of humour.



The arrival of the Gypsies

The artist kept away from dogmatic groups. But while the commotion of the time could annoy him, it could also amuse him. He earnestly fought his battles, and his perseverance and his self-imposed reclusion lead him to his own truth. The man had something to say and, in order to do so, he wanted to protect himself from all outside influences. His account of the soul of villages and the durability of his work is rooted in the perpetually renewed acts of life.

A painter he was, and he put all his knowledge and the overpowering love of his craft into expressing the intimate and poetic little world of our villages, the hustle and bustle of every day life. The quality of his work and the scarcity of his sunny inspiration place him among the privileged guardians of our time, a sometimes excessive period, but a period always fond of everything that brings it back to its past...

We shall not see him anymore, this man of habit, walking all by himself every day. Those who knew him are aware of having lost an irreplaceable friend. But his work remains, not only as a testimony but as a smile; let it now follow him in his path”.



Bastille Day

Retrospective exhibitions

New York, April-May 1972 at the Reine Gallery.
Chardin Gallery in Paris, also in 1972.

On this occasion, Maurice Tassart wrote in Carrefour des Arts "Paul Lemasson died at seventy-four on September 22, 1971, as he had lived, quietly and humbly, in the city of Nantes that he almost never left, inspired for most of his work by the villages of his native country.

The village, as it still existed between the wars, was for Paul Lemasson the ideal microcosm in which simple people lived around their bell-tower, their town-hall and their pubs.

His use of the isometric projection brings to mind both Breughel and Jules Romain, the former because of the pictorial aspect of Lemasson's work and the latter because of its literary expression. How can we not be seduced by such a combination which sums up a very French way of life, using means whose plainness is equalled by their sheer cleverness? "

Françoise LEMASSON-GIQUEL
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Note:

Some paintings of Paul Lemasson are incorrectly attributed to Jean-Paul Lemasson, another - much younger- painter who works in a very different style. This misconception is explained by the fact that my father signed PAUL LEMASSON Jeune, which means “young”, most likely to differentiate himself from his brother Albert, with whom he worked on some paintings early in his career. Subsequently, he reduced his signature to PAUL LEMASSON. J (capital or small letters) and sometimes Paul LEMASSON. The style of his paintings is very recognizable and can not be attributed to someone else.