



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

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Benjamin-Constant: A Multi-Faceted Artist

by Peter Adams

FRANCOIS JEAN BAPTISTE BENJAMIN CONSTANT (1845–1902), later known as Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, had an art career that was not only remarkable and legendary, but one that was multifaceted. He was a brilliant colourist who specialized in painting historic subjects and “Oriental” themes. He was a coveted art instructor who subsequently taught future leaders in the American Impressionist movement. He was a muralist whose works encompassed grand epic themes and allegorical motifs. In his later years Benjamin-Constant became one of the world’s most sought-after portrait artists, painting royalty and notables on two continents.

Benjamin-Constant was born on June 10, 1845 in Paris to Jean Baptiste Joseph Constant de Salinié, a geographer by profession, and Catherine Pichot-Duclos. The family lived in Paris at 22 Rue Lemercier until Catherine died when Benjamin-Constant was only two years old. In 1847 Benjamin-Constant’s father moved to Toulouse and entrusted the care of young Jean-Joseph to his two unmarried sisters, Anna and Louise Constant de Salinié while he worked as a general administrator for the post office. The family was considered comfortably middle class and Benjamin-Constant had a happy childhood. His two aunts cared for him as if he were their own child.

Toulouse, the City of Art

Benjamin-Constant loved the Midi-Pyrénées city of Toulouse and retained its distinctive local “Midi” accent all his life. He was an integral part of the community and had



Entry of the Sultan Mehmed II into Constantinople on May, 1453, 1876
Oil on canvas 274" x 211"
Courtesy of Toulouse, Musée des Augustins
inv. 2004.I.140

many friends. In grade school his best friend was Honoré Serres who later became mayor of Toulouse. Benjamin-Constant was fond of the Catholic Church and may have entertained the idea of entering the clergy after graduating from secondary school. His spiritual director was Father Marie-Antoine with whom he stayed in close contact all his life, and who heard his last confession.

In 1901, a year before his death, Benjamin-Constant gave a speech in Paris describing the path he took in life. He spoke of his love of music and wanting to become a great composer like Gounod or Bizet. But, being raised in Toulouse—where the visual arts were dominant—how could he? “In such a town,” he said, “where art informs everything, where an admirable museum invites you to enter, where every generation as soon as it is born cannot but glorify its artists,



Angèle Delasalle (1867–1938)

Benjamin-Constant, 1902

Oil on canvas 28" × 22"

Paris, Musée d'Orsay

inv. RF1977135



Too Late, 1870

Oil on canvas 51" × 69"

Perpignan, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Hyacinthe Rigaud

anyone with the slightest inclination for art is devoted to itI had to be an artist, and I was." In an interview of that same year, he again explained his seemingly inevitable life as an artist, saying:

"Had [I] lived anywhere else I might have been a lawyer or a doctor, I think. But in Toulouse art is held sacred, the whole atmosphere quivers with its praise, and if a child has but a trace of the artistic temperament his path in life is marked out for him as soon as he leaves the cradle. As far as I was concerned, the museum and its admirable collection of pictures very early became my daily pilgrimage, the shrine at which I worshipped."

Throughout Benjamin-Constant's life, although he travelled extensively and maintained a house and studio in Paris, he always considered Toulouse his home town. He jokingly remarked about the great painter, **Dominique Ingres** (1780–1867): "As for Ingres, how foolish to have been born in Montauban when he was so close to Toulouse."

Education and Influences

In October of 1859 at the age of fourteen Benjamin-Constant entered the **École des Beaux-Arts** in Toulouse where he spent the next six years under the tutelage of **Jules Joseph Garipuy** (1817–1893), a close friend of the celebrated artist **Eugène Delacroix** (1798–1863) and Director of the **Musée des Augustins, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Toulouse**. Each year as Benjamin-Constant matriculated through the school he received many of the top honours the École awarded. In 1866 he was granted a major municipal prize for his history painting of *The Death of Alcibiades*. The prize was shared with his good friend **Jean-André Rixens** (1845–1925), and entitled them both with 1,800 francs per year for three consecutive years to study at the illustrious **École des Beaux-Arts** in Paris.

On November 20, 1866 the young *Toulousian* art student travelled to Paris and enrolled at the **École des Beaux-Arts** in the studio of **Alexandre Cabanel** (1823–1899). Apparently, Cabanel must have believed very highly in Benjamin-Constant's talents, as he encouraged him to compete for the top award, the **Prix de Rome**. The highly-coveted scholarship was

created during the reign of **King Louis XIV of France** in 1663 to further cultivate talented French artists by providing them funds to study in Rome for three to five years. Although Benjamin-Constant won numerous awards at the Paris **École**, the **Prix de Rome** persisted in eluding him. Nevertheless, from 1869 he began exhibiting regularly at the prestigious **Paris Salon** and achieved great success. In his first year at the Salon, his *Hamlet and the King* was purchased by the French government, and the following year his allegorical painting, *Too Late*, caused quite a sensation and was also purchased by the French State. Benjamin-Constant described some of the symbolism in *Too Late*:

"I was scarcely four-and-twenty at the time, and, like most novices, I fancied that the more *intentions* the artist displays the better the picture. I entitled my work *Too Late*. On a bed in a bare room lay the dead body of an artist, pale and wan. A figure representing Death held open the door through which two female figures had just entered. One, Fortune, held a casket [filled with riches] in her hands; the other, Glory, a wreath of laurel."

When asked if *Too Late* was successful, Benjamin-Constant enthusiastically responded:

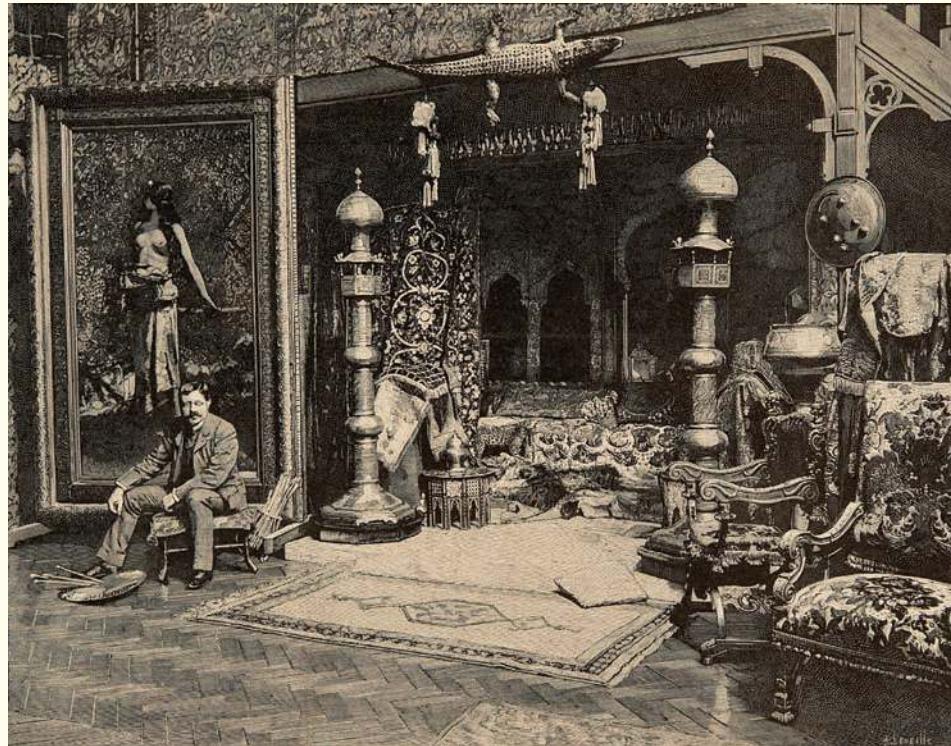
"Successful! The success it had was absolutely scandalous, principally, naturally, among the younger generation of critics. Every post brought me a flood of enthusiastic encomiums in prose and verse. Among the letters, one particularly impressed me. It was written clearly by the feeble, tremulous hand of age. The writer, a professor of musical composition, congratulated me warmly on my work, and described, in eloquent and thrilling terms, the emotion with which it had inspired him. He would have liked, he said, to come and see me, but he was worn and weary with the years, and he begged me, if I could spare the time, to pay him a short visit."

"I was too deeply touched by the letter to dream of refusing the request, but I had hardly set foot within the garret he lived in, before I started back, appalled at the harrowing expression of surprise

and disillusion I saw overspreading the poor, withered face that had greeted me. 'What,' he exclaimed. 'You are as young as that, while I have been representing you to myself as a man buffeted by life's storms, and, in your work, beheld the struggle of despair, the wild groan of one as unfortunate as I have been! What do I perceive instead?—youth, health, rubicund cheeks, eyes brimming over with hope! Your *Too Late* touched me to the core; it was the very image of my own life and destiny. Now, I realize that for you it was but a means to attain success too soon. Out of my sight, you scoundrel!"

Morocco, Marriages, and Spain

After two years studying at the Paris École Benjamin-Constant left the school and travelled with his two artist-friends, **Georges Clairin (1843–1919)** and **Henri Regnault (1843–1871)** to Tangier. In 1871 Regnault was killed fighting in the Franco-Prussian War, but before his untimely death his work played a major influence on many young French artists.



After a photograph by Edmond Bénard (1838–1907)

Benjamin Constant's Studio

Wood engraving 8" x 11"

Courtesy of The Montreal Museum of Arts Archives, Benjamin-Constant Archive



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The Pink Flamingo, 1876

Oil on canvas 25 3/4" x 26 1/4"

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Gift of Philippe and Michele Stora in honour of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' 150th anniversary

Photo MMFA, Christine Guest



Interior of a Harem in Morocco, 1878

Oil on canvas 122" x 207 1/2"

Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts

Photo © RMN-Grand Palais / Philipp Bernard

Regnault's two masterful paintings of 1870, one of which was titled *Salome* and the other, *Execution under the Moorish Kings*, which he was working on at the time of Benjamin-Constant's visit, had a profound influence on the younger artist.

Back in Paris in March of 1871 Benjamin-Constant married a

schoolteacher by the name of **Delphine Badie**. Apparently Delphine suffered from some health problems, possibly tuberculosis, which may have been the reason why she helped finance a trip to the warmer climes of Granada, Spain in late April. In Granada, Benjamin-Constant met and became

inspired by the paintings of **Mariano Fortuny** (1838–1874), the father of the famous fashion and tapestry designer of the same name. At that time the young Toulousian artist met up with a childhood friend of his father's, **Charles Tissot**. Tissot was an archaeologist who became France's Plenipotentiary Minister to Morocco and invited Benjamin-Constant to meet him in Tangier. There, in North Africa, he spent eighteen months painting, travelling, soaking up the culture, and collecting artefacts to use in his studio for future paintings. Benjamin-Constant's studio became known for its elaborately exotic décor. One personal account was described by Alder Anderson (*Pearson's Magazine*, New York, July 1901):

"When Benjamin-Constant received me one morning in one of his sumptuous ateliers, rich with the spoils of the East, the lofty walls literally hidden under barbaric gold and pearls, heavy brocaded silks, panoplies of Damascened steel, priceless prayer carpets of Persia, and delicate Cairene moushrabiyyeh, I almost forgot that the sky I had left outside was cold and gray, and not the turquoise blue which I have seen bathing the minarets of Egypt's capital."

Benjamin-Constant's work became recognized for his distinctive use of vibrant colours, and it was probably in Morocco that he was motivated to become an Orientalist, a painter of the Middle East and a portrayer of Eastern culture and history. He once said, "The witchery of the Orient made an indelible impression on my imagination." It was a theme that would resonate strongly through his work for the next twenty years.

In 1873 Benjamin-Constant returned to Paris with his wife who died on October 28 in Narbonne. Grief-stricken, he decided to share a house with another Toulousian landscape painter, Edmond Yarz (1846–1921), in the Montmartre district on Rue Gabrielle. In November of 1875 he married **Catherine Jeanne Arago**, the daughter of **Emmanuel Arago** (1812–1896), a high government official and a Member of the Assembly. They had two sons, **Emmanuel** and **André**.

Influenced by the Orient

In the Salon of 1876 Benjamin-Constant exhibited a painting that seemed to

secure his reputation as one of the foremost Orientalists. It was titled *Entry of the Sultan Mehmed II into Constantinople*. The painting received a second prize and was purchased by the Musée des Augustins, Toulouse. Describing the canvas that stood an immense twenty-three feet high by seventeen feet wide, the famous novelist Émile Zola wrote, "It could shade a whole battalion from the sun." The triumph of the painting encouraged Benjamin-Constant to continue with a succession of Orientalist scenes.

Also in 1876 Benjamin-Constant painted a more intimate and charming work entitled, *The Pink Flamingo*. Two years later he composed the gigantic *Interior of a Harem in Morocco*, which measures ten feet and two inches high by seventeen feet and three inches wide. Because of its imposing size it commanded the attention of all who entered the Salon. In addition, the painting depicted twelve nearly life-size figures, and although not terribly risqué, it portrayed an interior scene of which most European men at the time dreamt of entering—the harem. Included among the many notable Middle Eastern subjects painted by Benjamin-Constant are: *The Favourite of the Emir* (1879); *Saracen Reclining on a Divan* (n.d.); *Sharifas* (1884); *Sharif's Justice* (1885); *the Emperor Justinian* (1886); *the Empress Theodora* (1887); and *Day of a Funeral* (1889).

Murals

The decade of the 1890s brought fame and fortune to Benjamin-Constant in an unexpected way, not as an Orientalist painter, but rather as a muralist and later as a portrait painter. As a muralist he received commissions to paint medallions and wall panels for the newly reconstructed **University of Sorbonne** in Paris, and ceilings and walls for the **Hôtel de Ville**, and the **Opéra-Comique**, also in Paris. In America he painted murals of Venetian and Byzantine subjects in the **Frederick Ames Mansion** in Boston. But closer to his heart was the work that he did in his home town of Toulouse where he painted murals in much of the interior of the City Hall, known as the *Capitole*. His most ambitious and controversial work there was the large mural, *Entry of*



The Favourite of the Emir, c. 1879

Oil on canvas 60" x 87"

Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art

Courtesy of the United States Naval Academy Museum

inv. 2010.95.1



Sharif's Justice - Moorish Spain, 1885

Oil on canvas 145" x 261 1/2"

Work destroyed

Urban II into Toulouse in 1096. The mural was controversial because it bespoke of Toulouse's involvement with the Church and the first Crusade, a subject about which the republicans of the day didn't want to be reminded. It was also controversial because some areas were flattened and seemed unfinished and yet in situ the work looked brilliant, and Benjamin-Constant believed it to be the masterpiece of his decorative style.

Teaching

Benjamin-Constant taught at the **Académie Julian** in Paris where most American art students came to study in the 1880s and 1890s. He became a full professor at the Académie in 1888, after the death of the well-known classical and Orientalist painter, **Gustave Boulanger** (1824-1888). At the Académie he taught classes during the heyday when other renowned artists, including **Jean-Paul**

Laurens (1838–1921), Jules Joseph Lefebvre (1834–1912), and William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), were also teaching.

Among his most notable American students were **Ernest Leonard Blumenschein (1874–1960)**, **Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937)**, **Charles Courtney Curran (1861–1942)**, **Frank Vincent Dumond (1865–1951)**, and **California Art Club members, William Griffith (1866–1940)**, **Richard E. Miller (1875–1943)**, **Granville Redmond (1871–1935)**, **Guy Rose (1867–1925)**, and **Joseph Henry Sharp (1859–1953)**. Constant's students flourished and propagated his

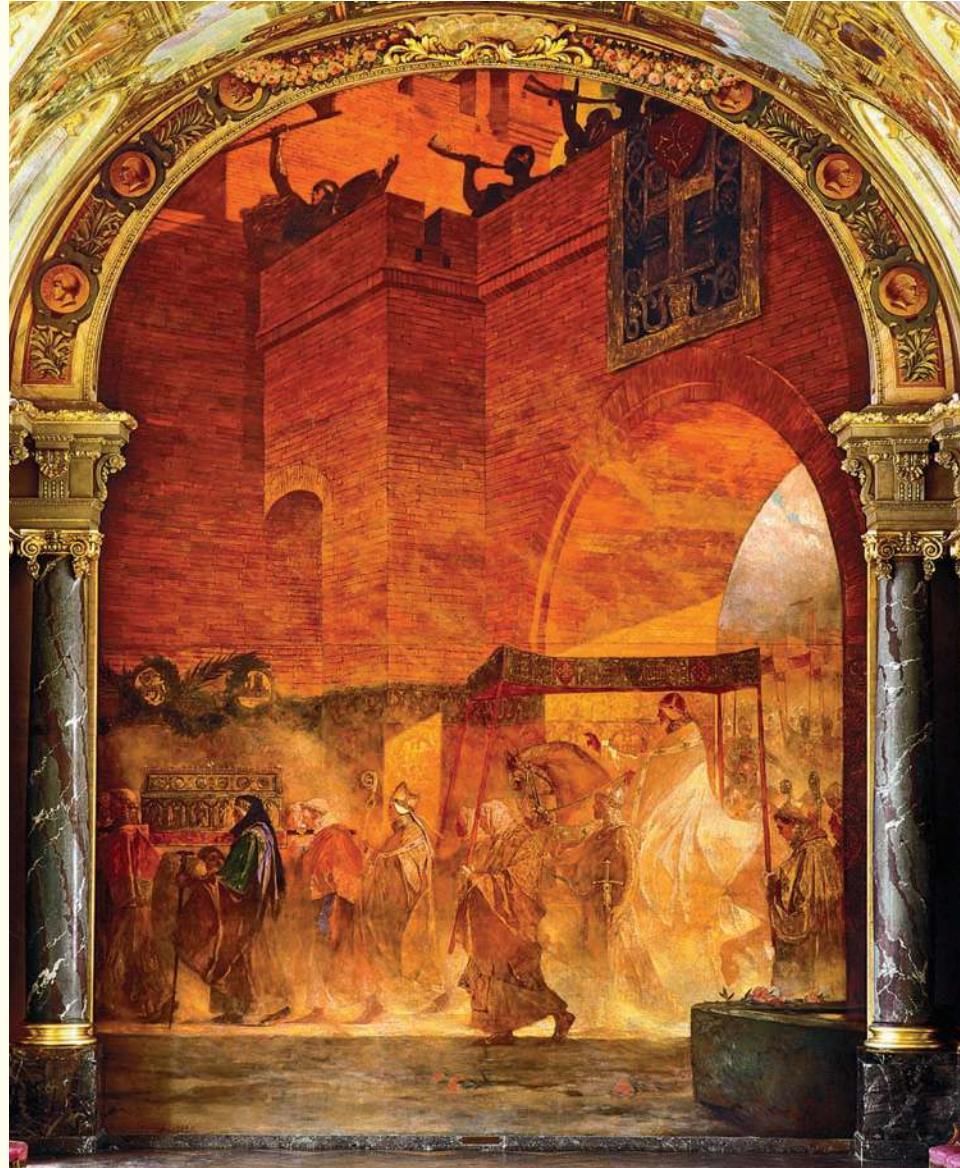
teachings through the art of their time. Blumenschein went on to become a founder of the **Taos Art Colony**, and was later joined by Joseph Henry Sharp. Both Richard E. Miller and Guy Rose were among the group of American artists who became part of a select community living in the French village of Giverny where they were influenced by Claude Monet, and returned to America developing a high-key Impressionist palette. Frank DuMond became one of the most influential American art instructors of the 20th century—teaching at New York's Art Students League for six decades. Henry

Ossawa Tanner became the first African-American painter of international prominence who interpreted many biblical scenes in his paintings.

Benjamin-Constant was a man of good humour and laughter and was beloved by his students for his energy and positive attitude. He was industrious and temperate. His countenance was calm, expressive, and intellectual. Benjamin-Constant didn't smoke and he rarely drank. He hated laziness in his pupils, but was encouraging to even the most untalented that showed a desire to learn.



The Empress Theodora, 1887
Oil on canvas 88" x 49 1/2"
Courtesy of Buenos Aires, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes
Donated by Carlos Madariaga y Josefa Anchorena de Madariaga, 1911
inv. MNBA 2513



Entry of Urban II into Toulouse, 1900
Panel for the decorative ensemble in the Salle des Illustres in the Capitole, Toulouse
Oil on canvas 362" x 263 3/4"
Toulouse, Capitole

America and Portraits

Perhaps because of his association with many American students, Benjamin-Constant ventured to America in 1888. There, less inhibited than he might have been in France, he started accepting portrait commissions. "It is America which made me a portrait painter," confessed Benjamin-Constant. "Until I went there I was almost solely a painter of subject pictures. I had made one or two attempts at portraiture, which I had not deemed satisfactory. I need not tell you that I was received in the United States with the most exquisite courtesy. And little by little I acquired confidence in myself, and portrait painting soon became more interesting to me than anything else."

In America, the artist had the good fortune to secure influential portrait sitters, including the financier **Jay Gould**, author and social activist **Mary Foote Henderson**, and **Consuelo Vanderbilt** who became the Duchess of Marlborough. After returning to Europe, he painted portraits of royalty and aristocrats such as **Henri d'Orléans**, the **Duc d'Anumale**; the **Grand Duchess of Mecklenburg**; the **Princess Catherine Radziwell**; **Sir William Ingram**, head of the London Times; **Sir Julian Paunceforte**, British Ambassador to the U.S.; **Queen Alexandra of Denmark**, **Queen Consort of the United Kingdom**; and **Elisabeth, Grand Duchess Serge of Russia**. It is likely that the remuneration Benjamin-Constant received as a portraitist may have had much to do with his abandoning Oriental subjects and devoting himself almost exclusively to portrait painting in the latter part of his life.

Awards and Conclusion

In recognition of his work, in 1878 Benjamin-Constant was awarded with the Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur, and later presented with the Order of Officer in 1884. He was also made a member of the Paris Salon in 1893. Although he had been exhibiting his popular Orientalist paintings at the Salon since 1869, the top award he craved, the Médaille d'Honneur, eluded him until 1896 when he was finally recognized by the Paris Salon for the portrait of his son, André. Two of



Portrait of Angèle Desalle, 1900
Oil on canvas 39 3/4" x 30"
Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris
inv. PPP2040



André Benjamin-Constant, 1895
Oil on canvas 46" x 34"
Paris, Musée de Orsay
inv. R.F. 104

Benjamin-Constant's last commissioned portraits were one of **Pope Leo XIII** when His Holiness was at the age of 99 and one of **Queen Victoria**, which he completed in 1901. That fall, before the installation of Queen Victoria's portrait in Windsor Castle, Benjamin-Constant caught the flu in England, and although he was able to rally for a few months he died the following spring at his home in Paris. He was only fifty-six years old, but left a tremendous legacy in art by teaching younger artists his skills, by creating dignified portraits, and by striking the imagination of all those who continue to look upon his work with a sense of beauty, romance, and wonder. ■

Notes:

Peter Adams is an artist and has served as president of the **California Art Club** since 1993. Research sources for this article include: Benjamin-Constant: Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism by **Nathalie Bondil**, Yale University Press, 2015; and A Painter of England's Queens, by **Alder Anderson**, published in Pearson's Magazine, New York, July, 1901. The author wishes to thank **Elisabeth-Anne Butikofter** from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for granting permission to reproduce images.

The **Montreal Museum of Fine Arts** in Canada recently held a retrospective survey from January 21 to May 31, 2015, displaying 250 works by Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, titled *Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism: From Spain to Morocco, Benjamin-Constant in His Time*. The exhibition was curated by **Nathalie Bondil**, Director and Chief Curator of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and **Axel Hémery**, Director of Musée des Augustins, Toulouse (the same museum that Benjamin-Constant adored and which purchased one of his earliest works, *Entry of the Sultan Mehmed II into Constantinople* with the support of the Franco-American institution FRAME (French Regional American Museum Exchange.) A comprehensive 400-page hardcover book, titled *Benjamin-Constant: Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism* by **Nathalie Bondil**, is available through the museum and on Amazon (approximately \$50).