



Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, Portrait of Emma Calvé (detail), 1896, huile sur toile, N. Mus. 2022, Don de M. Keane en 1939 © François Fernandez - M. VILLE DE NICE - JH | 04.2024

 **MUSÉE DES
BEAUX-ARTS**
JULES CHÉRET | NICE

DE LA SCÈNE À LA TOILE ARTISTES ET MONDAINES DE LA BELLE ÉPOQUE

MUSEE-BEAUX-ARTS-NICE.ORG

19 JUIN 2026 > 4 AVRIL 2027



VILLE DE NICE

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DE LA SCÈNE À LA TOILE

ARTISTES ET MONDAINES

DE LA BELLE ÉPOQUE

19 JUIN 2026 > 4 AVRIL 2027

Press release

The Jules Chéret Museum of Fine Arts celebrates, through its new exhibition layout, the splendour of the Belle Époque (1871–1914), a period that forms one of the core themes of its collections.

Donations from artists, collectors and socialites offer a glimpse – albeit limited and subjective – of this romanticised era and the cosmopolitanism of Nice.

Featuring scenes from carnival celebrations as well as portraits of famous composers and foreign princesses, the exhibition shines a particular spotlight on talented opera and dramatic artists who, through the global recognition they achieved, exercised unprecedented independence and authority.

The question of representation thus extends from the stage to the art of portraiture, from performance to self-expression, and also highlights the importance of fashion, which reached its peak in the second half of the 19th century with the development of tailoring, the forerunner of ready-to-wear, and the emergence of haute couture. By immortalising their subjects clad in theatrical costumes, fancy dress, festive attire, ceremonial robes or the very latest fashions, portraitists offer them, on the canvas, the setting for a final and eternal performance.

With the support of



Exhibition curatorship

Jeanne Pillon-Megale, Senior Curatorial Assistant, Musée des Beaux-Arts

With the invaluable assistance of **Louise Guillot**, Heritage Curator, Musée des Beaux-Arts



From the stage to the canvas

Artists and socialites of the Belle Époque

During the Belle Époque, cultural life was flourishing. The Ballets Russes revolutionized the art of dance, and flamenco took Paris by storm. Crowds flocked to laugh and weep at dramas, vaudevilles, and operas performed in the many theaters, cabarets, and café-concerts springing up across France. The stage, and the artists who graced it, became subjects of artistic representation. Society painters and portraitists vied to immortalize their likenesses. Later generations perceived this era — spanning from 1871 to 1914 — as a golden age, idealized through nostalgia for a world that preceded the World Wars.

The Belle Époque was marked by the establishment of the Third Republic, economic prosperity, and diplomatic prestige that made France a highly attractive nation. Major technical inventions, showcased at the World's Fairs, followed one after another, including the automobile and electricity. The dream of flight, shared by an entire generation fascinated by balloons and airships, led to the invention of the airplane and was closely linked to the ethereal, aerial figures in the works of Jules Chéret, a key artist of this period. Modernity, however, also had its darker side. Society, marked by deep inequalities, was fractured by strikes, epidemics, and spectacular accidents linked to these innovations. These darker aspects fueled latent fears, which art, entertainment, and festivals helped to exorcise.



Jules Chéret, *Colombine, Pierrot, Polichinelle*, 1910, pastel on canva, 200 x 104,5 cm, Nice, musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2186.
Donation of baron Joseph Vitta in 1927
© Ville de Nice

The collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, assembled in part thanks to the generosity of overwinterers and patrons, offers a limited and subjective glimpse into this romanticized era. Featuring carnival scenes alongside portraits of famous composers and foreign princesses, the exhibition shines a particular spotlight on talented opera and dramatic performers who, through the international recognition they achieved, exercised unprecedented independence and authority. The question of representation thus extends from the stage to the art of portraiture, from performance to self-projection, and reveals the central importance of clothing. By immortalizing their subjects in theatrical costumes, disguises, festive attire, or ceremonial robes, portraitists grant them, on canvas, a final and eternal performance.



Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Miss Fiocre*
1869, plaster, 42 x 18 cm, Nice, musée des
Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2953.
Donation of Mrs. Clément-Carpeaux in 1958
© Ville de Nice



Félix Ziem, *Woman with a domino mask*, 19th century,
oil on wooden panel, 31 x 22,5 cm, Nice, musée des
Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 1855.
Donation of Mrs. Ziem in 1912
© Ville de Nice



The Frenzy of Masquerade and Costume Balls

In the highly unequal society of the Belle Époque, marked by social tensions, theater and balls emerged, in various forms, as pastimes shared across all levels of society. Carnival, in particular, was the quintessential festival where aristocrats, bourgeoisie, and workers mingled in the streets, hidden beneath masks and disguises. Extending beyond the carnival season, masked and costume balls became a year-round pastime, practiced with greater enthusiasm than in any other century. Theaters, circuses, skating rinks, café-concerts, and cabarets organized their own events, open to everyone for an admission fee. At the same time, lavish receptions proliferated in aristocratic and high-society circles.

At these parties, the eighteenth century became the dominant source of inspiration. A certain eclecticism prevailed in the costumes: shepherds and flower girls from courtly scenes mingled with Marie-Antoinettes and characters from the commedia dell'arte, foremost among them Harlequin, Columbine, and Pierrot. This fascination with the eighteenth century in the age of artificial lighting is wonderfully depicted in the pastels of Jules Chéret, where costumed figures encounter the wild play of electric light, rendering the colors almost phosphorescent.



Jules Chéret, *A glass of chianti*, n.d., pastel on canva, 106,7 x 58 cm, Nice, musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2183.

Donation of baron Joseph Vitta in 1927
© Ville de Nice

The ball, however, also served as a metaphor for a society in perpetual motion, in which everyone seemed condemned to revolve within an assigned social sphere. The prominence of Pierrot costumes is particularly revealing: this folk hero, through his carnivalesque madness, physical distortions, and buffoonery, challenges the established order. The numerous charges of debauchery and obscenity that surrounded balls and carnival festivities are symptomatic of a society that found in these celebrations an outlet for the anxieties of its time. The paintings *Pierrette* and *Pierrot* and *The Praise of Folly* reflect these fears while transforming them into works of art.



Raoul Dufy, *Firework at Nice, the Casino of the Jetée-Promenade*, 1947, oil on canva, 65,5 x 54 cm, Nice, musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 5616;
Bequest of Mrs. Émilienne Dufy in 1962
© Ville de Nice



Cosmopolitan Nice

The splendor and richness of the artistic social scene

The Belle Époque witnessed the rise of celebrities who achieved international fame. Sarah Bernhardt, the queen of the stage, was foremost among them. Opera singers Sophie Cruvelli and Emma Calvé, whose names may be less familiar today, also enjoyed spectacular careers that took them on tour around the world. Photographs, postcards, and advertising posters widely circulated the likenesses of these talented women, who had become true icons, alongside café-concert stars such as Arlette Dorgère and Louise Fagette. Their success granted them financial independence—still rare for women at the time—and absolute freedom, sometimes criticized as exuberance.

It is therefore no surprise that the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts includes portraits of these dazzling personalities, who graced the stages of Nice's theaters. Dressed in theatrical costumes, Sophie Cruvelli and Emma Calvé are immortalized as iconic characters: Elsa (Lohengrin, Richard Wagner) and Carmen (Carmen, Georges Bizet). Alongside them are portraits of women—painters and socialites—who faced far greater difficulties asserting their talent within the rigid, male-dominated world of the fine arts. Madeleine Lemaire, known above all for the brilliant salon she hosted in Paris, portrays herself in disguised as Corinne, a fictional poetess embodying an ideal of female emancipation.



Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant,
Emma Calvé's Portrait, 1898, oil on canva,
220 x 120 cm, Nice, musée des Beaux-Arts
Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2632.
Donation of Mr. Keane in 1939
© François Fernandez

Marie Bashkirtseff, meanwhile, immortalizes herself in the midst of an artistic creation, brush in hand.

Artistic life was part of the splendor of Nice, the quintessential cosmopolitan city of the Belle Époque. Great composers such as Giacomo Puccini, internationally renowned soloists, and literary figures like Jean Lorrain spent time there. Marie Bashkirtseff met Sophie Cruvelli—by then Viscountess Vigier—who hosted a musical salon in her villa. Madeleine Lemaire exhibited at L'Artistique, a circle frequented by Jules Massenet and his librettist Henri Cain, while the latter's wife, Julia Guiraudon-Cain, occasionally shared the stage with Emma Calvé. These anecdotes, to name just a few, illustrate the idea that “high society,” though cosmopolitan, is a microcosm—a distinct social sphere marked by luxury, fame, and a taste for leisure.



Walter Spindler, *Portrait de Sarah Bernhardt*, 1894, pastel, sanguine and pencil on canva, 62,2 x 51,5 cm, Nice, musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2345. Bequest of Pauline Duval-Lorrain in 1928 © Ville de Nice



Society Portraiture

Elegance and Style

Society portraiture inherited the traditions of aristocratic portraiture from earlier centuries. Alongside its traditional clientele—monarchs, aristocrats, and members of the upper middle class drawn from the worlds of finance and industry—the bourgeoisie and artistic circles are increasingly commissioning such portraits. Prominent figures from the fashion world also embraced this art form, among them Madame Jenny, founder of the eponymous haute couture house.

Leading portraitists of the Belle Époque, such as François Flameng and Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, succeeded in establishing their distinctive aesthetic vision while attracting a vast international clientele. The status of society portraitist was highly coveted, as it offered considerable financial security and social prestige. Some artists even adopted lifestyles comparable to those of their wealthiest sitters, such as Philip de László, who built an imposing house-studio in the heart of Budapest, or Kees Van Dongen, whose extravagant and luxurious soirées gathered together the elite of Parisian society.

Both sitters and painters placed increasing importance on clothing. For the sitters, dress served as a visible expression of elegance, social values, and, in some cases, power. For painters, fabrics, embellishments, and



Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Baroness Marina von Derwies (born Schoenig)'s Portrait*, 1898, oil on canva, 290 x 170 cm
Nice, musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2763.

Donation of Miss von Derwies in 1948
© François Fernandez

adornments created sophisticated effects of light and texture that demanded refined artistic treatment. The attire of the model therefore became central to the composition of the portrait.

After World War I, the market for commissioned portraiture declined sharply due to the collapse of great fortunes, the disintegration of dynasties, and the growing rise of photography. Only a small number of celebrated portraitists, among them Philip de László, succeeded in preserving their pre-war status. Kees Van Dongen, meanwhile, saw his career flourish after 1914. He was among the artists most determined to assert a modern aesthetic, shaped by French Fauvism and German Expressionism, while maintaining a constant dialogue with the pictorial traditions of the past.



Kees Van Dongen, *Mrs. Jenny's Portrait*, 1923, oil on canva, 163,5 x 131,5cm

Nice, musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 3055.

Bequest of Mrs. Jenny Sacerdote in 1962
© Ville de Nice

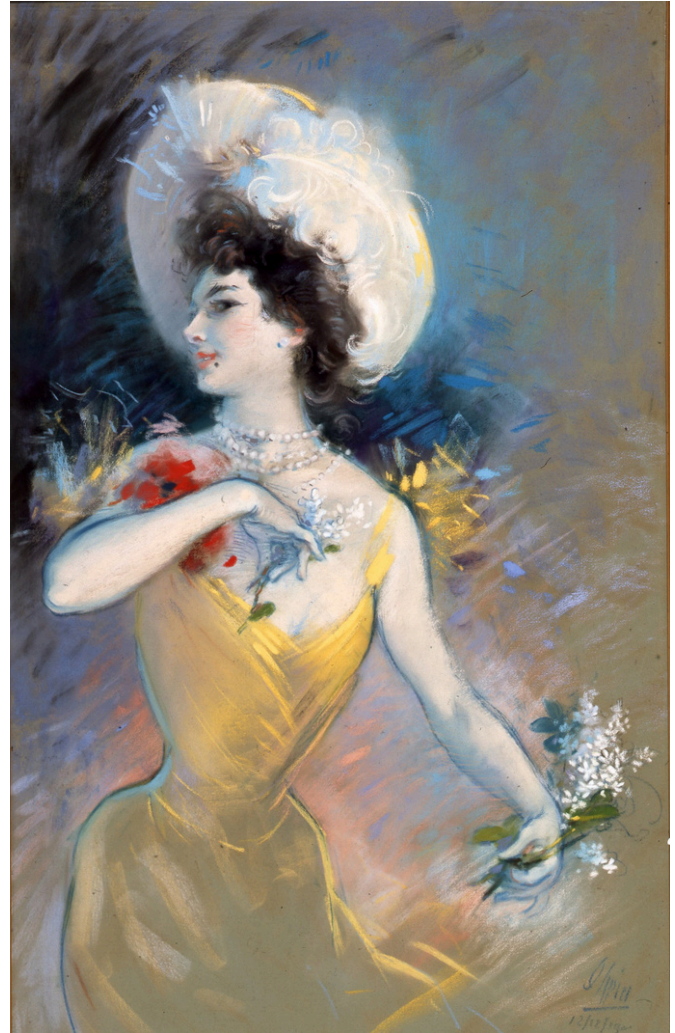


Feathers, Fruits, and Flowers

The Golden Age of Hats

The craze for fashion reached its height during the second half of the nineteenth century and became a symbol of modernity. This period witnessed the development of ready-made clothing—the precursor to ready-to-wear fashion—as well as the rise of haute couture. Both phenomena were fueled by industrialization and the expansion of trade. Department stores diversified their offerings, selling fabrics alongside ready-made garments, jackets, coats, dresses, suits, and a wide variety of accessories.

Between 1890 and 1920, hats became an essential element of fashion: an adult woman, particularly a married woman, was not expected to appear in public bareheaded. During the 1910s, headwear grew increasingly extravagant, balancing silhouettes that were becoming slimmer and straighter, notably through the “column” line introduced by Paul Poiret. Hats continued to expand in size, reaching astonishing dimensions of up to sixty centimeters or even one meter in diameter. This was the era of the great milliners, among them Caroline Reboux, Esther Meyer, Lucienne Rabaté—future mentor to Gabrielle Chanel—and Georgette de la Plante. These women elevated millinery to the status of an art form at the beginning of the twentieth century and collaborated with the first great couturiers, such as Madame Virot with Charles Frederick Worth.



Jules Chéret, *Fagette*, 1901, pastel on canva
110 x 63 cm, Nice, musée des
Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2125.
Donation of baron Joseph Vitta in 1927
© Ville de Nice

Fabric was readily used to create appliqués imitating jewelry, artificial fruit, and fabric flowers, while animal-derived materials were equally common. Many hats featured taxidermied specimens—such as bats or owls—covered in fur or, more often, adorned with feathers. Thrushes, roosters, peacocks, ostriches, and pheasants could decorate the entire brim of a hat or be arranged in a “minoché” or “aigrette” style.

Of all the accessories that composed an outfit, the hat was perhaps the one best suited to expressing personality. In private, hair may be left uncovered, worn loose or styled in a bun. When posing for intimate portraits, models appear bareheaded, sometimes adorning their hair with fresh flowers or draping it with a light fabric, according to their taste or the painter’s instructions. The status of a portrait or the intimacy between the figures in a scene can thus be inferred from the hairstyle.



Philip Alexius de László, *Mrs. Hélène Alberti's Portrait*, 1923, oil on canva,
96,5 x 84 cm, Nice, Musée des Beaux-Arts
Jules Chéret, N.Mba 2020.2.1.
Donation of Mrs. Sekutowicz in 2020
© François Fernandez

In relation with the exhibition

Visits

GUIDED TOURS

Tuesdays 7th, 21th, 28th of July and 4th, 11th, 18th and 25th of August, 2 p.m. with Sandra Pascual, tour guide.

Every Saturdays, at 11 a.m., in French, from the 20th of June 2026 to the 3rd of April 2027 with Julie Valladier, Mediator and Cultural Outreach Officer

Duration : 1h.

Cost : price of the entrance fee (10€) + 7€.

Booking by email :

julie.valladier@ville-nice.fr

FAMILY TOUR

After an adjusted visit of the exhibition, come and decorate a society portraiture or create your special fan!

Creative workshops are planed on Wednesdays 22th and 29th of July, 5th and 26th of August, from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. and are intended for 7 years old (or more) children with their parents.

Cost : 9€ per participant.

Booking by email :

julie.valladier@ville-nice.fr

TASTING TOURS

The chefs Diane and Daniele Mundo of the restaurant L'Ardoise created a unique tasting experience inspired by the works presented in the exhibition. A special tour for gourmet !

The 23rd of September, the 16th of October, the 25th of November, the 24th of February and the 19th of March, from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Duration : 45 min. From 12 years old.

Cost : 7€. Compulsory booking on website : <https://www.musee-beaux-arts-nice.org/>

Conference

"CELEBRATING 19TH CENTURY"

Friday the 5th of June 2026 à 3 p.m.

At the gallery "L'Artistique".

Exhibition preview : *De la scène à la toile. Artistes et mondaines de la Belle Époque*, Fabrice Roy, President of the "Société des Amis du Musée des Beaux-Arts" invite to a diving in a vibrant century where art becomes reflection of a society which discover pleasures of free time, gardens'lightings and joie de vivre. Conference related with the outer programm of the museum, at the gallery "L'Artistique" associated with the "Société des Amis du Musée des Beaux-Arts".

Free entry, up to the limit of seats.

Gallery "L'Artistique", Art and Culture Center & Espace Ferrero : 27, Dubouchage boulevard, 06000 Nice

Concert

Friday the 19th of June 2026, at 7 p.m. For the opening of the exhibition *De la scène à la toile. Artistes et mondaines de la Belle Époque*, the museum offers classical singing's concert on the thematic of the Belle Époque, with the students of the singing classes of Nice's Conservatoire lead by Elizabeth Vidal, Claire Brua, Stéphanie Varnerin and Isabelle Gioanni ; Sophie Brissot-Darmon and Julien Martineau for piano. Free entry, up to the limit of seats.

Acknowledgments

PATRONAGE OF THE EXHIBITION

Eric Ciotti

Mayor of Nice

President of the Métropole Nice Côte d'Azur

Auguste Vérola

Deputy mayor for Culture

EXHIBITION CURATORSHIP

Jeanne Pillon-Megale

Senior Curatorial Assistant, Musée des Beaux-Arts

With the invaluable assistance of

Louise Guillot

Heritage Curator, Musée des Beaux-Arts

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Manager of the technical team of the Nice's
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Loïc Quelart

Carpenter, team of the Nice's Museums

Bovis Compagny

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret warmly thanks the institutions of the Ville de Nice for their loans, especially :

The Musée Masséna and its director Jean-Pierre Barbero

The Bibliothèque du Chevalier de Cessole and its director Elise Carbou-Hansson

The curators salutes the efforts of every member of the Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret's team for the realization of this project :

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HOURS

Open from the 2nd of May to the 31st of October :
10 a.m. - 6 p.m.
and from the 1st of November to the 30th of April :
11 a.m. - 6 p.m.
Closing on Mondays and the 1st of January,
Easter sunday, the 1st of May and the 25th of December.

ACCESS

Bus : lign 38, stop : "musée Chéret"
Tram : lign 2, stop: "Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen" (access by the stairs).

ACCESSIBILITY

The museum does not have an elevator.
The first fload is reachable after a few steps.
A single-storey access is available on asking for people with restricted mobility, not in use of wheelchair.

TARIFS

Entrance fee : 10€ (8€ per person for a group of more than 10)
"Pass musées" 4 days: 15€ (Access to all museums of the Ville de Nice for 96 hours)

FREE ACCESS

For people of less than 18 years old, for people having a "Pass Musées de Nice" card, exclusively for residents of the Métropole de Nice Côte d'Azur and special categories (see at the museum's reception), for teachers with a "Education" pass, delivered by the National Education Ministry, for the owners of ICOM cards, for tour guides.

TOURS

Commented tours of the permanent display or temporary exhibition each Saturdays, 11 a.m. in French, and 3 p.m. in English.

Cost : 7 € (per person), free for children younger than 13 years old accompanied

Groups : Price of 85€ for groups between 14 and 30 people.

Compulsory booking, a month in advance, minimum

SCHOOL

Free guided tours for schools of the Métropole, from primary school to University, during the academic year, and for the institutions which host children extracurricular

21€ for schools and institutions which host children extracurricular, from outside the Métropole

Informations and booking :

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