

## 108 LÉONIE'S TOILET *or* DOLLS

Oil on canvas 75 x 62.25 cm (49½" x 28")

Signed and dated 1894

East Riding of Yorkshire Council (Museums)

Exh. RA 1935

The model Léonie was introduced to Fred Elwell on his arrival in Paris by his Lincoln friend Tom Warrener. When Tom painted her, he used the longer stage-name of Léonline. This painting of *Léonie's Toilet* announces that Elwell was not only sharing Warrener's model but also the artistic scene his friend inhabited. This particular choice of subject recalls Seurat's then contemporary painting of the *Young Woman Powdering Herself*,<sup>41</sup> and that was exhibited at the Société des Artistes Indépendants when Elwell first came to Paris in 1892. To represent a woman at her toilet was becoming a modern subject. Degas painted *The Tub*,<sup>42</sup> for instance. Elwell's Léonie is similarly self-absorbed as she powders her face. Alone within her own ambience, she is unaware of being observed.

The painting also displays Elwell's surprising involvement in French contemporary life. A copy of the day's issue of the gossipy newspaper *Gil Blas* is draped over the washstand, and Japanese dolls, which were currently in vogue, hang from the mirror.<sup>43</sup> Again, Elwell is truly alive to aspects of abstract and modern formal principles: see how Léonie's left arm parallels the mirror edge; the doll opposite echoes her own form yet in reverse; and everywhere can be spotted those shapes which somehow and interestingly overlap and inter-relate.

Yet the painting is also witness to his training at the Julian under the academic William-Adolf Bouguereau. In this context, he would be expected to portray the nude from a life model, employing subtle gradations of tone for the pearly tints of her flesh, and this he does. Sibylle Cole, writing on this subject, points out the fine range of whites and lovely soft edges where "the light leaks into the background",<sup>44</sup> in a manner which relies more on tonal values than colour. Elwell was inspired by both academic and modernist elements simultaneously, but it was the alignment in general terms with the academic camp that most assisted him in his submissions to the Paris Salon, and even more to the Royal Academy London where this was exhibited in 1895.

Despite the foregoing, Elwell had been obliged to part with the Léonie picture in payment of rent for his Paris



accommodation; and she was discovered only when a fellow royal academician, James Bateman, some 50 years later, espied her on display in an antiques shop in King's Road, Chelsea. He gladly bought the painting and returned it to the now elderly Elwell, who was delighted to become re-acquainted with this early work. He nostalgically said that it rang "a whole peal of bells" in his memory.

He refused emphatically to part with her again, and when Elwell exhibited the picture for a second time at the Royal Academy, *The [Hull] Daily Mail* reported how Academicians were talking with unusual enthusiasm about one picture, as well as seeing the veteran artist in a somewhat different light. Elwell himself was still quietly fixated on Léonie's "lovely, exquisite feet"! <sup>45</sup>