



Virginie Demont-Breton

(Courrières 1859 - Paris 1935)

Portrait of a Painter (her father Jules Breton?) at his Easel

Oil on canvas

Dimensions (viewing area): 13 1/8 x 8 1/4 in (32.2 x 21 cm) - Framed : 18 1/8 x 8 1/4 in (46 x 34 cm)

Signed lower right "9 Juin 1883 - Virginie Demont-Breton"



Provenance : Private collection, Paris

Modern Louis XVI-style gilded wood frame

Price upon request

This beautiful portrait, signed and dated, offers a glimpse into the family life of Virginie Demont-Breton, a prominent female artist of the late 19th century whose work is currently undergoing a rediscovery, as evidenced by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam's 2026 acquisition of her painting *L'homme est en mer* (*The Man is at Sea*). This portrait likely depicts her father, the painter Jules Breton, visiting his daughter at her home in Montgeron. Executed in a very free Impressionist style, this portrait attests to the precocious mastery achieved by this young artist, who was only 23 years old at the time.

1. The life of commitment of a female artist

Virginie Élodie Marie Thérèse Breton was born in 1859 into a family of artists: she was the daughter of the painter Jules Breton (1827–1906), an academic realist painter who evolved toward naturalism, and the niece of Émile Breton (1831–1902), a landscape painter. Her mother, Élodie De Vigne, was herself the daughter of the Flemish painter and medievalist Félix De Vigne (Ghent 1806–1862). In 1880, Virginie Breton married the landscape painter Adrien Demont (1851–1828).

Initially settled in Montgeron in the Essonne (where our painting was likely created), the Demont-Breton discovered the coastal village of Wissant, situated between the Blanc-Nez and Gris-Nez capes, in 1881. They made frequent visits, before settling there permanently in 1891 after having built the *Villa Le Typhonium*, a striking Neo-Egyptian structure designed by their uncle, the Belgian architect Edmond De Vigne. Together with her husband, Virginie Demont-Breton founded the artistic hub known as the School of Wissant, which would include artists such as Georges Maroniez.



Villa Le Typhonium in Wissant

Virginie Demont-Breton's artistic career began early. Though she came from an artistic and affluent background, she had first to convince her family to let her pursue a professional career as a painter. Admitted to the Salon des Artistes (where her father served on the jury) as early as 1880, she received an honorable mention there that same year. The year 1883, when our painting was created, marked Virginie Demont-Breton's rise to prominence as an artist: she won a second-class medal at the Salon for her painting titled *La Plage (the Beach)*, followed by a gold medal at the World's Fair in Amsterdam.



Virginie Demont-Breton - *The Beach* (1883) - Arras Museum of Fine Arts

She then joined the *Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs* (Union of Women Painters and Sculptors), the first society of women artists founded in France in 1881, serving as its president from 1894 (which earned her the title of Knight of the Legion of Honor at the age of 35) to 1901. This Union campaigned for women's equal access to art education, professional careers, and institutions. Thanks to the UFPS and under her presidency, women were admitted to the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts* in Paris in 1897. In 1903, the UFPS also secured the right for women to compete for the *Prix de Rome*.

Virginie Demont-Breton's work often addresses themes related to the daily lives of seafarers in Wissant Bay. Moved by the difficult lives of fishermen in the north of France, Virginie Demont-Breton dedicated several of her paintings to the dramatic episodes of maritime life. Her painting enjoyed some success during her lifetime, as one of her most famous paintings, *L'homme est en mer* (*The Man is at Sea*), dated 1889, inspired Vincent van Gogh to create a painting on the same subject, also completed in 1889. Presented at TEFAF 2026, this painting by Virginie Demont-Breton was purchased by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.



Virginie Demont-Breton - *The Man is at Sea* - Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam

Virginie Demont-Breton died in Paris in 1935 at the age of 75.

2. Description of the work and proposed identification of the model

Our painting is dated June 9, 1883, a pivotal year in the life of the young artist thanks to the success of the exhibition of *The Beach*. Likely painted in her garden in Montgeron, our painting is a portrait of a painter at work. Seated on a chair placed in the grass of a grove and lit from behind, our subject is depicted painting a large-format canvas. The very loose brushwork in the depiction of the undergrowth in the background evokes the Impressionists, much like this detail from an early painting by Claude Monet, dated 1866, which depicts his father Adolphe Monet reading in a garden.



Claude Monet - *Adolphe Monet Reading in the Garden at Le Coteau in Sainte-Adresse* (detail - 1866) - Private collection

The rather formal nature of his attire (a dark frock coat and top hat) suggests more a city attire than a country one. We are tempted to see the portrait of an older relative of the artist who had come to visit her in the countryside – as her father, Jules Breton, might have done – rather than a portrait of her husband, Adrien Demont.



Jules Breton in 1883 (self-portrait) - Aberdeen Art Gallery



Cléopâtre Photographie par H. C. Journal Le Nord Contemporain, N°33, année 1883

Adrien Demont in 1883 - photograph from the period

Although the suggestive treatment of the face makes it difficult to identify the model with certainty, a comparison between the portraits of both her father and her husband, represented in 1883, lead us to believe that this would rather be a portrait of her father.

3. Frame

The painting is presented in a gilded wood frame in the Louis XVI style.



Virginie Demont-Breton - *Portrait of a Painter (her father Jules Breton?) at his Easel*