

Bernard Boutet de Monvel, *The Mules*

Paris 1884 – 1949 Azores, Portugal

oil on canvas

31 ½ by 81 inches (80 by 205.8 cm)

signed and dated lower right: 'Bernard B. de Monvel /1906'

provenance: Sale Sotheby's, New York, October 28, 1986, no. 125;
Private collection, New York;
sale Christie's, New York, May 6, 1998, no. 231;
Sotheby's, New York, May 26, 2016, no. 23;
Private collection, New York.

exhibited: Kunstsalon Emil Richter, Dresden, no. 2238;
possibly *Profiles: Bernard Boutet de Monvel*, Knoedler Galleries, New York, November 10-29, 1947, no. 55 (*Mules*).

note: The distinguished Paris-born painter, illustrator and interior decorator Bernard Boutet de Monvel (figs. 1a-c) was the son of the painter and children's book illustrator Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel (1850-1913) who was also his first teacher and to whom he owed his gift for drawing. The family resided both in Paris and at the artist's maternal grandparent's home in Nemours. He made a further study of drawing in 1897 at the private studio of the academic master Luc-Oliver Merson. Then in 1901 encouraged by a meeting with Degas, he entered the Académie Julian to study painting. He began exhibiting at the Paris Salon in 1903. Boutet de Monvel first specialized in and established a reputation for his complex colored etchings and then branched out into very precise, even starkly composed, geometric paintings of subjects found around Nemours. In 1904 following a trip to Italy, he shifted to a pointillist style using more vibrant light and color. During World War I Boutet saw service in Morocco, but continued to draw and paint. After the war he returned to Paris and launched his fashionable career that would bring him fame on both sides of the Atlantic.

Boutet de Monvel is often viewed as a precursor or even embodiment of Art Deco. From his first visit in 1926, when Anderson Gallery in New York, presented an extensive exhibition of his works, he spent almost every winter in America, especially in New York City where, as a dandified member of café society, he was described as "the handsomest man in Europe."¹ He gained recognition for his highly realistic and elegant portraits and precisionist studies of architecture. Boutet de Monvel would later have a house and studio in Palm Beach, which he first visited in 1936. On a flight from Paris to New York with other French celebrities his plane crashed in the Azores on October 28, 1949.

One of Boutet de Monvel's distinctive methods of working that he developed quite early was to employ photography to provide the basis for his compositions. From 1907 he was equipped with a Kodak Brownie to aid his creative process.² In the early years of the 20th century he had already used glass plate negatives to record for example the distinctive candelabra-like, bare trees in winter lining the road and riverside of the Loing River near his home in Nemours (figs. 2a-b). These in turn served as the subject for at least one pure landscape (fig. 3)³ as well as the backdrop for the 1909-10 painting and print of *Boarding School Students, Nemours* (figs. 4a-b)⁴ and also the

present painting. They even reappeared later in very different settings (fig. 5). As to his subject matter in these early years, the artist, who was to become the epitome of high society imagery, was most inspired by the French painter Lucien Simon (1861-1945, fig. 6) to depict “the rural poor of Nemours pictured in the impoverishment of their daily lives.” In this his chief biographer continues, “he was not motivated by any desire to call attention to the realities of society, but rather by a romantic wish, mingled with naturalism, to capture the memory of the places and people who had populated his childhood.”⁵ Thus he painted works such as *The Horse Cart* of 1905 and *Horses Pulling a Barge in the Rain* (figs. 7a-b). His interest in these rural, river-side scenes had already appeared in his 1899 colored etching, *Les Haleurs (The Barge Haulers)* (fig. 8a), and he followed up with a more brilliantly colored painting of the same subject in 1906 (fig. 8b).⁶ In these works, based on photographs, he shows two men struggling to pull their barge along the river, but here the lined-up trees are truncated. Other of the series of color etchings of *The Banks of the Loing River* (figs. 9a-b) produced by Boutet de Monvel in the early years of the 20th century show a man towing a boat and a long, horizontal view of a barge on the river.

These themes all come together in the present painting of 1906 in which the human haulers are replaced by two mules on the river-side path. They pull a barge, just visible at the far right, along the canal, and are followed by a straining man. Boutet also treated the same subject in one of his series of colored etchings (fig. 10).⁷ In the print, apparently also of 1906, the man is even more bent over in his laborious struggle in the rather bleak setting. In the more lively painting, with its rhythmic patterns, the geometric houses and decorative trees along the far bank reflected in the canal have a more transparent effect. Everything is rigid and upright except for the man’s posture moving to the left which creates a sense of great effort. The shimmering colors employed for this precisely rendered image create a haunting illusion of time standing still.

The artist would go on to produce a wide range of subjects, but he always retained his fondness for this formal, procession-like format, as evident in a number of his later works, like the 1915 *Aviator’s Luggage* (fig. 11a), scenes set in Morocco during 1917-18 (figs. 11b-c), and in various studies of animals (figs. 12a-c). In 1947 Knoedler Gallery in New York City mounted a retrospective of Boutet de Monvel’s “Profiles,” which included as *Art News* noted “scenes of the Paris of a bygone era” with “a quaint decorative elegance.”⁸ This painting was apparently shown at that time and may well have been purchased then and remained in America. It, and all his essentially decorative works, display the quality that the artist’s ardent biographer has described so well: “The foundation of Boutet de Monvel’s talent, its hidden structure, remained first and foremost the solidity of his drawing, powerfully structured, firmly modeled, distinguished, sublime, and founded on converging lines that were forceful and stripped of all superfluous detail and functionless features.”⁹

¹ See Stephane-Jacques Addade, *Bernard Boutet de Monvel at the Origins of Art Deco*, Paris, 2016, p. 17.

² Ibid, p. 82.

³ Sale Drouot-Ferri, Paris, October 14, 2016, no. 279.

⁴ The painting is in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau, acquired in 1910; and an impression of the print was sold at Sotheby’s, Paris, April 5-6, 2016, no. 340.

⁵ Addade, 2016, pp. 72-76.

⁶ Sotheby’s, Paris, sale April 5-6, 2016, no. 139.

⁷ Ibid as part of no. 328.

⁸ “Reviews and Previews: Bernard Boutet de Monvel,” *Art News*, December 1947, p. 59.

⁹ Addade, 2016, p. 11.