Edgard Maxence, *Pureté (Purity)* or *Saint with Calla Lily*
Nantes 1871 - 1954 La Bernerie-en-Retz

oil on canvas
38 by 20 inches (97 by 51 cm)
signed and dated in red paint at the lower right: *'Edgard Maxence/1895'*
scratched into the paint at the lower middle edge: *'à mon ami Plat….1895'*

provenance: Private collection, France

note: A pupil of Gustave Moreau, Maxence (fig. 1), born in Nantes, is often considered the last of the French Symbolist artists. He is best known for his religious and folkloric subjects but did also paint portraits and still-lifes. The present early work exemplifies his life-long devotion to mystical faith symbolized by saintly women of virtue and purity. In fact on the verso of its original wood stretcher is written in graphite as the title "*Pureté*." Further it states the work "*a été au Salon de La Rose + en 1894*" ("has been shown at the Salon of the Rose+Croix in 1894"). This, however, is somewhat misleading, since Maxence only participated in the Paris Salons of the Rose+Croix from 1895 to 1897. At the first he showed a painting titled *Gloria in excelsis* and at the second two *Heads of Saints*.[1] Nevertheless, this painting does fit well with the goals of the Rose+Croix order and the rules for works to be submitted to its Salons as propounded by its founder Joséphin Peladan:

> The Order favors first the Catholic Ideal and Mysticism. After Legend, Myth, Allegory the Dream of great poetry and finally all Lyricism; the Order prefers work which has a mural-like character, as being of superior essence.[2]

While Maxence is best known for the smooth and precise style of his later compositions, in the 1890s he was painting in the rougher, more textured manner evident here and in such other similar religious compositions as the 1897 *Le Concert d'anges* (fig. 2*), Le Choeur des ange*s (fig. 3) and *Female Saint* (fig. 4).[3] These works have the hieratic presence of Byzantine frescoes and also the glowing quality of medieval stained glass windows. As has been observed, all these saints and angels have "expressionless faces, are lost in an inner world, and are set into indistinct, church-like backgrounds."[4] Maxence was one of several Moreau students to exhibit in the Rose+Croix Salons at this time, and it was evident that their work owed something to the influence of the English Pre-Raphaelites, who had become fashionable in France.[5]

In addition to mixing wax with his paint Maxence here also uses gilt plaster or gesso painted gold to form the halo around the saint's face, and this three-dimensional element gives the work a remarkable presence.

The calla lily (*arum* in French), which is not actually a lily, was a frequent traditional symbol of purity and innocence associated with the Virgin Mary and the chastity she embodied, and because it blooms in the spring at Easter time, this white flower also

symbolized rebirth and resurrection. Maxence used it elsewhere both to represent virginal purity (fig. 5) and simply as a still-life motif (fig. 6). Here the bloom without stem, held in the woman's left hand, seems to be emitting rays of light to connote its spiritual powers. With her other hand she makes a gesture of benediction, and her comforting presence seems ideal for a nameless saint who becomes the very incarnation of religious devotion.

In later works Maxence was to refine his vision of the religious female personage with hypnotic gaze holding symbolic flowers (figs. 7-8),[6] but this earlier version, which Maxence dedicated to his unknown friend Plat, retains a haunting intensity.

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[1] See the exhib cat. *Edgard Maxence 1871-1954: les dernières fleurs du symbolism,* Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 2010, pp. 25 and 150.
[2] Quoted in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, New York, 1976, p. 212.
[3] See Nantes, 2010, nos. 11 and 12; and sale Christie's, South Kensington, November 20, 1997, no. 249.
[4] Nantes, 2010, p. 25.
[5] Pincus-Witten, 1976, p. 180.
[6] A painting of *Women with Lilies* was sold in Paris on December 2, 1946 and a *Young Girl with Lily* of 1901 was sold at Paris on June 21, 1983.