Alfred Stevens

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Van Gogh Museum
until 24 January

The Belgian-born, 19th-century painter Alfred Stevens was no rabble-rouser. A portrait of the artist by Henri Gervex that welcomes visitors into this exhibition makes clear right away: Stevens was part of the Parisian beau monde, a man who liked the good things in life and, as a short wall text further reveals, cared as little about politics as he did about aesthetic innovation.

A few quotes reveal the contempt he felt for the experiments of his more bohemian contemporaries, the impressionists. Throughout this exhibition it's impossible not to marvel at the steadfast adherence – and brilliance – of his old-fashioned craftsmanship. And he was utterly surprised that his dignified, realistic depictions of the lower classes were seen as revolutionary at all.

Beloved by his bourgeois peers, Stevens soon dedicated himself entirely to portraying what he loved most: well-to-do and fashionable women in ornately furnished interiors. He captures the texture of fabrics and design details of these scenes exquisitely, and the 64 pieces in this retrospective – the first of his work in the last 30 years – have an almost mesmeric quality. The anonymous female figure is central to his oeuvre, in sections entitled 'Motherhood' to 'Interior with a Lady' and 'Femmes Fatales'.

And, while it was rare at that time to portray ordinary women instead of mythic Venuses or biblical Magdalenas, it didn't amount to challenging the moral order of the day. For that, you need Manet's 1863 masterpiece, 'Olympia': a prostitute looking the viewer straight in the eye, insinuating that he is the next client.

But Stevens did focus on portraying female stereotypes: virtuous mothers and devilish sinners. Regardless of class or beauty, the women in his pieces are either keepers of moral propriety or sexual objects: dolls to be dressed and undressed in accordance to their setting.

Therefore it is advisable to keep an eye on the short texts that fortunately accompany the exhibition and offer another reading of these portraits, which otherwise might just be the painterly equivalent of cream pies.
Catherine Somzé

'Het Japanse Masker' (ca. 1877)