

# AGNEW'S

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## Jules Breton (1827 - 1906)

### *Young Woman in the Fields*

Inscribed, signed, and dated: A Olivier Merson  
Souvenir affectueux/ Jules Breton 1864 (or  
1866)

Oil on canvas

15 ¾ x 12.5 inches (40 x 31.75 cm.)



A 19th-century French Realist painter, Jules Breton's paintings are heavily influenced by the French countryside and this painting perfectly reflects his idyllic vision of the beauty of rural existence. Born in Courrières, a small Pas-de-Calais village, the respect for tradition, love of the land and for his native region remained central to his art throughout his life



Jules Breton, *The End of the Working Day*, 1886-87,  
Brooklyn Museum

After training at the College St. Bertin near Saint-Omer and later travelling to Ghent and Antwerp, in 1847, he left for Paris where he hoped to perfect his artistic training at the École des Beaux-Arts. In Paris he studied in the atelier of the Michel Martin Drolling. He met and became

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friends with several of the Realist painters, including François Bonvin and Gustave Brion and his early entries at the Paris Salon reflected their influence.

After experimentations with history painting, he returned to the memories of nature and of the country which were impressed on him in early youth. In 1853 he exhibited *Return of the Reapers*, the first of numerous rural peasant scenes influenced by the works of the Swiss painter Louis Léopold Robert. Breton's interest in peasant imagery was well established from then on and what he is best known for today. In 1854, he returned to the village of Courrières where he settled. He began *The Gleaners*, a work inspired by seasonal field labor and the plight of the less fortunate who were left to gather what remained in the field after the harvest. The Gleaners received a third class medal, which launched Breton's career. He continued to exhibit throughout the 1870s and into the 1880s and 1890s and his reputation grew. His poetic renderings of single peasant female figures in a landscape, posed against the setting sun, remained very popular, especially in the United States.

Breton's circle of friends included both artists and art critics, and a fortunate number received his sketches as gifts; in turn, the artist received works by Henri Joseph Harpignies among others. As suggested by its inscription, the present work was given to Charles-Olivier Merson (1822-1902), an art critic for *Le Monde Illustré* who supported Breton's career and shared his love of the French countryside. The Merson and Breton families shared a long-lasting friendship, and Charles' son, the artist Luc-Olivier Merson (best known for his *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), received early training in the same studio as Breton.

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We would like to thank Annette Bourrut Lacouture for providing additional catalogue information and for confirming the authenticity of this lot. This work will be included in her forthcoming Jules Breton catalogue raisonné.



Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.