

# **PUVIS DE CHAVANNES**

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Puvis de Chavannes by André Michel

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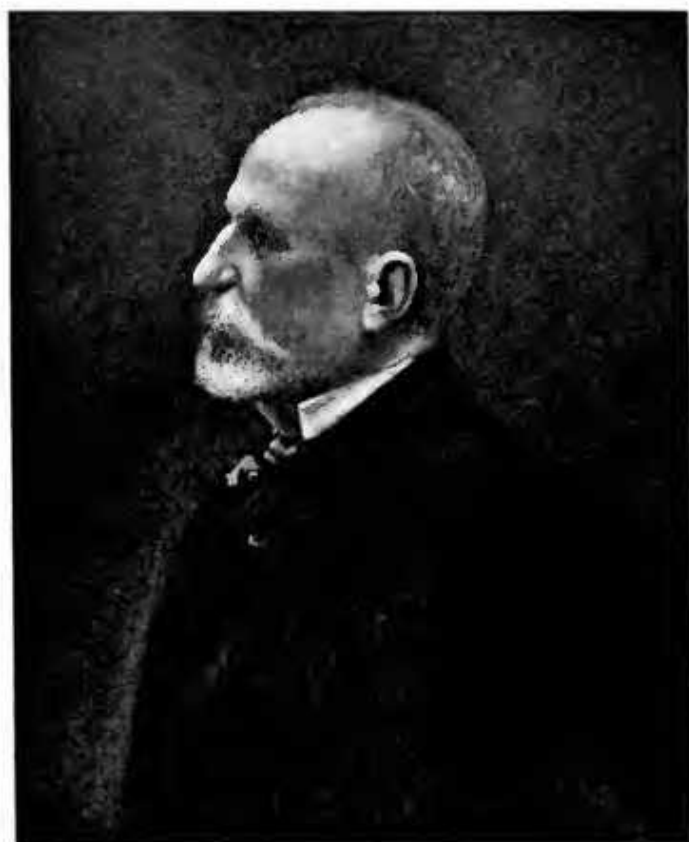
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**ANDRÉ MICHEL**

**PUVIS DE  
CHAVANNES**





I. PUVIS DE CHAVANNES.

# PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

With a Biographical & Critical Study  
By ANDRE MICHEL, Cura-  
tor of the National Museums,  
Professor at the Ecole du  
Louvre; and Notes by  
J. LARAN · With  
Forty-Eight  
Plates



LONDON · WILLIAM HEINEMANN · 1912

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## PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

(1824—1898)

**T**HE portrait reproduced in the first plate in this little volume might well be taken as the most direct comment upon it; it is the most natural introduction. Here, depicted exactly as he was to us who knew and loved him in the portrait painted "da Medesimo" for the Uffizi Gallery, is the creator of so many great pictures which, much reduced though still recognizable and compelling, are here considered. It was those clear, steady eyes that saw the satisfying and luminously lovely visions that restored French art to the empire of idealism, which was even more compromised by the writings of some of its champions than by the most furious onslaughts of those who most fervently denied it; it was in the mind behind the pure lofty brow, in the sound uncontaminated will, the calmly creative brain that was even mistress of itself that they slowly took shape. There is nothing in his dress, his attitude or the setting of the portrait to betray the "artist" and the "painter." His bearing is that of a correct and rather "distant" gentleman, erect, supple and slim in his tight-fitting frock-coat, with the significant stiffness of the shoulders that he often gave to his ideal figures; there is nothing, not a single detail to "localize" the portrait in which every feature is strongly marked (particularly the nose which Puvis de Chavannes himself called "colossal" when he sent me his photograph for the "Revue d'art Viennoise") and yet even in the closeness and preciseness of the individual resemblance the master's generalizing temper of mind is clearly to be seen. The whole man is in the portrait.

It was painted in 1887. He was sixty-three; he was working on the Sorbonne cartoon; he was at the very height of his career, in full possession of his genius; he could with confident serenity look back, and from the threshold of his old age consider the imposing series of his pictures, which had for so long been misunderstood, though henceforth they were to be universally acclaimed. I may be permitted perhaps to go back in memory and to state that it was not until that time, to be exact, at the beginning of 1888, that I made his acquaintance. Before that, beginning with May 8, 1881, when he wrote me a few lines in his admirable handwriting (as beautiful as that of Racine and José-Maria de Hérédia) thanking me for an article I wrote in "Le Parlement" on "Le Pauvre Pêcheur," I had received many previous tokens of his gratitude after various battles waged in defence of his art; but we had never met. After a correspondence of several years he wrote to me: ". . . after such energetically expressed appreciation as yours I would much have liked to know you personally and I have more than once felt an impulse to contrive it; but, not to speak of my dread of trespassing on your kindness, I am also conscious of a rare delicacy in such relationships in which an artistic sympathy is enough to set up a current, which on my side at any rate, I feel to be very near affection. . . ." It was left for Cazin to introduce us at a monthly dinner presided over by Puvis de Chavannes (and christened, I believe, by Jean Béraud, with a compromising play on words, in no wise justified by the sobriety of the guests or the bill of fare, the "rum-dinner" (pris de rhum because there was not a single Prix de Rome among the members!) and so to establish a personal relation between