

Portraying the Elegance of an Era  
Painting Pairs: An art historical and  
technical study of *Portrait of the  
Artist's Wife* by Albert Braïtou-Sala

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## A Study of Albert Braïtou-Sala's *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*



Figure 1. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, 41 x 33.3 cm, early 1920s, presumed oil on embossed paper, 41 x 33.3 cm, private collection, UK.

It is easy to be seduced by the charm and elegance of Albert Braïtou-Sala's paintings. *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* (Fig. 1), with its calm atmosphere and gracefully posed figure, provides a fine example of the French-Tunisian artist's most prolific and favoured genre, portraiture. The picture is a small-sized, impressionist-style portrait painted on textured paper. In the foreground, Marie-Jeanne, the artist's wife, lounges in a plush, *Bergère en cabriolet* style armchair, balancing a

teacup and saucer in one hand. She exudes a 1920s elegance with her cupid-bow shaped red lips and bobbed hairstyle. Her downcast glance contributes to the peaceful mood of the painting. Behind Marie-Jeanne, Braïtou-Sala has loosely rendered a refined interior setting, including a tea service atop a dark wooden table, gold-framed pictures hanging on a pink wallpapered background, and trinkets sitting on a back table.

This investigation into *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* was conducted as part of the annual Painting Pairs project, an art historical and technical research collaboration between graduate students at The Courtauld Institute of Art<sup>1</sup>. This painting came to The Courtauld from a private collection to be researched and treated. There is minimal pre-existing art historical scholarship surrounding Braïtou-Sala, and to our knowledge, there has been no previous technical examination of his paintings. We suggest that due to the nature of Braïtou-Sala's favoured genre, portraiture,

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<sup>1</sup> Organised by The Courtauld Gallery and the Department of Conservation and Technology, the program draws paintings from private and public collections.

and the tendency for portraits to remain in private hands rather than in public collections, there is a lack of awareness and appreciation of his contribution. This paper aims to broaden the scholarship on Braïtou-Sala, his *oeuvre*, and rejuvenate the interest in his work. Our research will contextualise *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* within Braïtou-Sala's career, suggest a probable date for the piece, and fill in the gaps in the painting's provenance. Additionally, through careful technical analysis and visual examination of the work, we will shed light on the artist's working methods and painting techniques. Despite the wane in appreciation of this overlooked artist, our aim throughout this project is to underscore the significance of Braïtou-Sala's career. As a highly successful portraitist, Braïtou-Sala not only reflected the curated images of his socialite patrons, but also witnessed and captured an epoch in

paint, one that would soon devolve into the chaos of war.

### Artist's Biography

Braïtou-Sala was born in La Goulette, Tunisia, in 1885 while the country was under French protectorate status.<sup>2</sup> The artist's parents gave him a Westernised name, Albert Sala; however, throughout his childhood his family had many nicknames for him including Braïtou, thought to be a Judeo-Arabic nickname for Albert. He decided to adopt this moniker to sign his works (Fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>

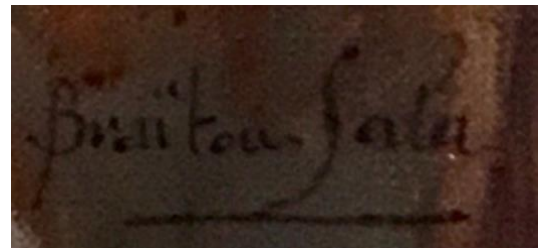


Figure 2. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, signature detail

In 1901, Braïtou-Sala left his family in Tunisia to pursue his dream of an art career in Paris. He enrolled at the famed *Académie Julien*, where he trained under the well-known artists

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<sup>2</sup> Biographical information gleaned from “Repères Biographiques,” in *Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L'élégance d'un monde en peril*, ed. Alice Massé and Amandine Delcourt, exhibition catalogue, La Piscine, Roubaix. (Roubaix: Mare & Martin, 2016), p. 226-232.

<sup>3</sup> Braïtou-Sala adapted his signature throughout his career, often choosing to sign the work in a specific manner according to the type or purpose of the piece. We have identified three main categories: first, initials (as seen in Figure 9), which he used to sign sketches; second, scrolls, where the artist would draw a rolled piece of paper under his signature to make it appear more prominent, which he often did for his commissioned portraits; and third printing his name in the corner of the picture, as seen in *Portrait of the Artists' Wife*, (Fig. 2).

Adolphe Déchenaud, Henri Royer, and Paul-Albert Laurens.<sup>4</sup> From the start of his career in Paris, Braïtou-Sala garnered praise and experienced success. He was awarded the Académie Julien’s best portrait artist prize in 1916, won a silver medal from the Salon of French Artists in 1920, then the salon’s medal of honour in 1922, and finally was named as a member of the jury in 1935.<sup>5</sup> The portraits he submitted to the salons received widespread critical acclaim and were often featured on the cover of popular journals, such as *L’illustration* (Fig. 3) and *Women’s Journal* (Fig. 4).<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Braïtou-Sala remained a well-respected and highly sought-after portraitist of high society, both in France and further afield. With a style that merged traditional academic portraiture with modern glamour, Braïtou-Sala’s portraits reflect idealised versions of their sitters. Among his clients were actresses, singers, performers, political figures, royalty, and other wealthy individuals. A testament to his success, from 1936 to 1939 Braïtou-Sala’s work represented France at the International Exhibition held at The Carnegie Institute in

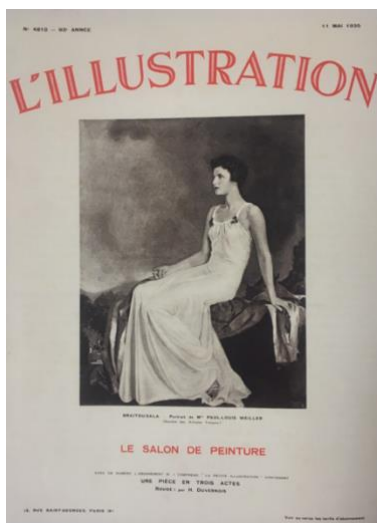


Figure 3. Cover for *L’illustration* from May 11, 1935, reproduction of Albert Braïtou-Sala’s *Le Portrait de Mme Paul-Louis Weiller*.



Figure 4. Cover of *The Women’s Journal*, March 1929, reproduction of Albert Braïtou-Sala’s *Le Portrait de Mme Pierre Benoist*.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Gaudichon, ‘Derrière le miroir de l’élégance,’ in *Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L’élégance d’un monde en peril*, ed. Alice Massé and Amandine Delcourt, exhibition catalogue, La Piscine, Roubaix. (Roubaix: Mare & Martin, 2016), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Timeline published in “Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L’élégance d’un monde en peril”, Roubaix La Piscine Musée d’art de d’industrie André Diligent, press kit, p. 12-13. On La Piscine, Roubaix Website. [https://www.roubaix-lapiscine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DP-Exposition-Braïtou-Sala\\_LaPiscine2016.pdf](https://www.roubaix-lapiscine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DP-Exposition-Braïtou-Sala_LaPiscine2016.pdf) Accessed May 26, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> “Portraits Mondains,” in *Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L’élégance d’un monde en peril*, ed. Alice Massé and Amandine Delcourt, exhibition catalogue, La Piscine, Roubaix. (Roubaix: Mare & Martin, 2016), p. 136-137.



Pittsburg<sup>7</sup>. Other artists represented included well-known names such as Pablo Picasso, Raoul Dufy, Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Marcel Grommaire.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in 1936, Braïtou-Sala was included in France's prestigious Legion of Honour, and the following year was invited to the Élysée Palace for dinner with the French president, Albert Lebrun.<sup>9</sup> As his various awards and accolades highlight Braïtou-Sala had firmly established himself as a portraitist during the interwar period, catering both to an elite Parisian and international clientele.

Unfortunately, shortly after attaining such successes, Braïtou-Sala's career was interrupted by the Second World War and he was barred from working. Living on savings from his lucrative career and supported by his wife and son, he took shelter in a Catholic

Abbey.<sup>10</sup> Tragically, five members of Braïtou-Sala's family, including two of his sisters and a beloved nephew, José Sala, were rounded up by the Gestapo, deported to Auschwitz and murdered.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 5. José Sala et la Chienne Mousse, quatre consines et deux mannedquins, dans l'atelier de Braïtou-Sala, photograph from the family archives.

Emotionally impacted by the personal losses he suffered during the war and experiencing eye problems that affected his ability to work, Braïtou-Sala's career never picked up to its former level of success.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Braïtou-Sala continued to paint and

<sup>7</sup> Howard Devree, "What to Do about the Carnegie?" *Parnassus* 11, no. 7, 1939, 11-15. Accessed May 12, 2020. doi:10.2307/771952.

<sup>8</sup> "Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L'élégance d'un monde en peril", Roubaix La Piscine Musée d'art de d'industrie André Diligent, press release, p. 3. On La Piscine, Roubaix Website. [https://www.roubaix-lapiscine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DP-Exposition-Braïtou-Sala\\_LaPiscine2016.pdf](https://www.roubaix-lapiscine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DP-Exposition-Braïtou-Sala_LaPiscine2016.pdf) Accessed May 26, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> "Repères Biographiques," p. 229-230.

<sup>10</sup> "Repères Biographiques," p. 230.

<sup>11</sup> "Repères Biographiques," p. 231.

<sup>12</sup> "Repères Biographiques," p. 231-232.



Figure 6. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Self-Portrait or Braïtou au chevalet*, 1945, oil on marouflaged paper attached to canvas, 41 x 33.1 cm, Sala collection.

participate in exhibitions. In his post-war works, Braïtou-Sala exchanged the refined genre of society portraiture for hedonistic compositions celebrating the female nude. Braïtou-Sala liberated himself from the curated, idealised portraits and found inspiration in biblical stories or classical mythology. In 1961, Braïtou-Sala and Marie-Jeanne, left Paris and moved south to Provence; he died nearly ten years later in 1972 in relative obscurity.<sup>13</sup>

While there have been a small number of posthumous exhibitions and retrospectives, today Braïtou-Sala is unknown to most art

historians; his contribution to the Parisian art scene remains all but forgotten. The most significant exhibition of his work was held in 2016 at La Piscine in Roubaix, France. The show drew heavily on loans from private collections and contributions from the artist's family. He is remembered as a reserved and sensitive man, with a deep passion and love of art. In 2016, Isabelle Sala, granddaughter of Albert and Marie-Jeanne, reminisced about her grandfather, his creative spirit, and his calm demeanour.

Une présence paisible, qui contrastait tant avec l'exubérance et le dynamisme de Marie-Jeanne, ma grand-mère. Toujours une touche d'élégance avec ses gilets de laine et ses foulards en soie, une distinction naturelle, un humour fin. Même âgé, il avait gardé un sens aigu de l'observation, sensible aux lumières, aux nuances de couleurs, spectateur du monde qui l'entourait, en retrait de l'effervescence et du bruit. Assis sur son grand fauteuil en cuir, il aimait écouter de la musique classique, goût qu'il partageait avec son fils. Dans ces moments-là, on sentait comme ailleurs, dans son imaginaire, dans ses pensées. Quel souvenir ou nostalgie l'habitaient alors ?<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "Repères Biographiques," p. 232.

<sup>14</sup> Isabelle Sala, *Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L'élégance d'un monde en peril*, preface. 'A peaceful presence, which contrasted greatly to the exuberance and dynamism of Marie-Jeanne, my grandmother. Always with an elegant touch in his wool

Despite a career marked by tragedy and interrupted by chaos, we contend that Braïtou-Sala's peaceful presence emanate from his paintings. Retrospectively, his works can be categorised into three main themes: societal portraits, which illustrate the glamor and elegance of 1920s and 1930s French society; more intimate family scenes, including self-portraits and studies of his family members; and finally the re-imagination of biblical and mythological scenes in which he would transpose his figures to

contemporary settings such as landscaped parks and palaces. *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* falls within the second category of intimate familial scenes.



Figure 7. Example of societal portrait. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait d'Elena Olmazu*, 1931, oil on canvas, 162 x 114 cm., private collection.



Figure 8. Example of mythological scene. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Léda et le cygne noir*, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm, private collection.



Figure 9. Example of familial portrait. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait d'Emile enfant (aux cheveux longs)*, 1917, oil on canvas board, 49.5 x 41.8 cm, Sala collection.

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vests and silk scarves, his natural distinction and refined humour. Even when he was old, he held onto his keen sense of observation, his sensitivity to light and nuances of colour, he was a spectator of the world around him, withdrawn from the excitement and noise. Sitting in his big leather armchair, he loved listening to classical music, a taste he shared with his son. In those moments, one felt he was somewhere else, in his imagination, in his own thoughts. What memory or nostalgia lived in there, then?

### Provenance of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*

*Portrait of the Artist's Wife* came to The Courtauld from a private collection in the UK. Based on information provided by the owner, the provenance of the painting dates to before the 1940s.

Sometime in the 1920s or 30s, the first owner of the painting, a Mr. Elliot—listed on the gallery label attached to the canvas support—acquired the work for £50 from the Royal Institute of Oil Painters (Fig. 10). In the late 1940s, Mr. Elliot gave the painting to a friend, a relative of the current owner. In 1976, the current owner inherited the piece. It has remained in his possession for the last 44 years<sup>15</sup>. While the portrait is undated, several clues allow us to presume that the work was completed in the early 1920s. Firstly, Marie-Jeanne and Albert were married in 1912, shortly after meeting, giving us a *terminus post quem* for the work. Secondly, the perceived age of the figure when compared to other dated



Figure 10. Royal Institute of Oil Painters label, attached to the back of the painting's support.

portraits painted by Braitou-Sala (Figs. 11 and 12). Lastly, the suggestion of Isabelle Sala, who upon seeing the painting, remarked on her grandmother's youthful appearance and suggested that the likeness was completed in the early 1920s.

The next question that naturally arises about the painting was how it came to the UK. Although no records exist of Braitou-Sala traveling abroad, he submitted works for exhibitions in the UK, including at the Royal Academy in Edinburgh in 1923, and at the French

<sup>15</sup> We would like to thank the current owner for providing details of the painting's provenance.





Figure 11. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait de Marie-Jeanne*, 1917, oil on marouflaged masonite, 33 x 24 cm, Sala collection.



Figure 12. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait de Marie-Jeanne à l'hermine*, 1935, oil on panel, 35 x 27 cm, Sala collection

Gallery in London in 1927<sup>16</sup>. Perhaps through one of these occasions the painting came to the UK and ended up in London. However, Braïtou-Sala had many British clients and possibly a dealer in London to whom he could have entreated the work. Indeed, it could have been Mr. Elliot who was Braïtou-Sala's London confidant, as the label is written "c/o Mr. Elliot", suggesting he acquired the painting directly from the artist.<sup>17</sup>

### Comparisons to Other Images of Marie-Jeanne

The label on the back of the painting states the title for the work as, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, and when we compare this painting to other known works of Marie-Jeanne, the similarity between the sitters is striking. *Portrait of Marie-Jeanne aux hermines* (Fig. 12) from 1935 demonstrates the continuity of Braïtou-Sala's painterly presentation of his wife. In the 1935 portrait, the sitter is almost

<sup>16</sup> See "Liste des Expositions," *Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L'élégance d'un monde en peril*, ed. Alice Massé and Amandine Delcourt, exhibition catalogue, La Piscine, Roubaix. (Roubaix: Mare & Martin, 2016), p. 235-237.

<sup>17</sup> The title of the painting, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, indicates that it was not the artist himself who named the work. Typically, Braïtou-Sala used specific titles such as *Portrait of Marie-Jeanne*. Perhaps it was the artist's London dealer who provided this title. In fact, a missing portrait entitled *Marie-Jeanne assise dans un fauteuil* (Marie-Jeanne seated in an armchair), is mentioned in the La Piscine exhibition catalogue. While we were unable to prove definitively that this is the missing portrait, it remains an exciting possibility.

identical to the figure in *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* with her piercing blue eyes, long nose, prominent cheekbones, and cupid-bow shaped red lips. The only apparent difference in the two paintings are the subtle signs of ageing, which are discernible in the gestural strokes on the forehead and slightly lowered shapes of the eyebrows in *Portrait of Marie-Jeanne aux hermines*. Still, the figure projects the same air of sophistication with her subtle makeup, black and white ensemble, and jewellery. In a photo from the family archive, *Marie-Jeanne convalescente* (Fig. 13), the pose and gaze of the sitter in *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* is identical to the photograph. Comparing these images, it is incontestable that *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* is a painting of Marie-Jeanne.



Figure 13. *Marie-Jeanne convalescente*, photo from the Sala family archive

### Braïtou-Sala's Painting Technique

Braïtou-Sala's confident, gestural strokes in *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* demonstrate his painterly skill. The quick, fluid manner and the absence of paint in certain sections suggest that this work is one of Braïtou-Sala's sketch-like paintings. The artist painted in an academic manner, as was typical for the time. He employed a mixture of paint techniques, using smooth strokes and impasto touches. The teacup demonstrates his deft ability for impasto effects, implying that it was painted with a loaded brush, and possibly towards the end of the work (Fig. 14). Braïtou-Sala employs an impressionistic style; routinely denoting finer details using limited brush strokes; and the patterned wallpaper in the



Figure 14. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, teacup detail

background is merely alluded to, suggested through the artist's quick hand. Still, the viewers find themselves transported to the interior Parisian scene, sharing the space with the artist's wife. Light microscopy reveals wet-in-wet paint mixing, providing further evidence that this painting was executed quickly. For instance, the sitter's right eye is rendered in three simple strokes of black and white, while her lips are formed from two daubs of red paint, allowing the underlying flesh tone to create contrast and definition (Figs. 15 and 16). Similarly, the blue vase in the background is rendered quickly; Braïtou-Sala picks up the lighter underlying paint as it is still wet and uses it within the modelling of the final form (Fig 17). This close examination of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* demonstrates Braïtou-Sala's confident and quick mastery of paint and his ability to capture his sitter's elegance and beauty through an economy of brush strokes.

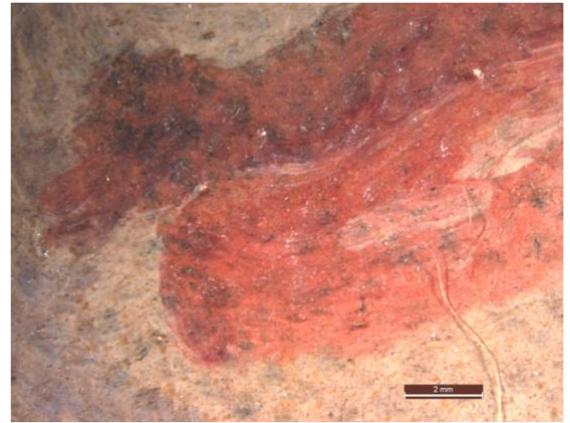


Figure 15. Albert Braïtou-Sala, photomicrograph of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, lip detail



Figure 16. Albert Braïtou-Sala, photomicrograph of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, eye detail

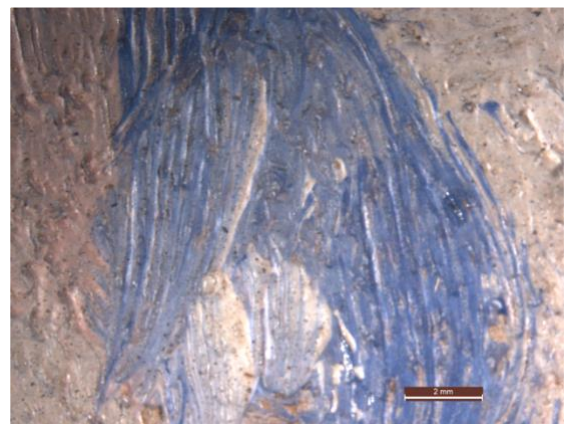


Figure 17. Albert Braïtou-Sala, photomicrograph of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, vase detail



### Use of a Paper Support

Another technique borrowed from the Impressionists was the use of the tone of the paper support in the final composition, much like the Impressionists would use a white ground to steep their paintings in light<sup>18</sup>. *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* contains numerous passages where the artist has left the paper support exposed, for example in the areas surrounding the far table, against the wall. Photomicrographs taken from the areas where the paper is exposed and where the brush has skipped over the tops of the pattern reveal the canvas-imitating texture of the paper (Fig. 18). This effect was further reinforced by a piece of stretched canvas to

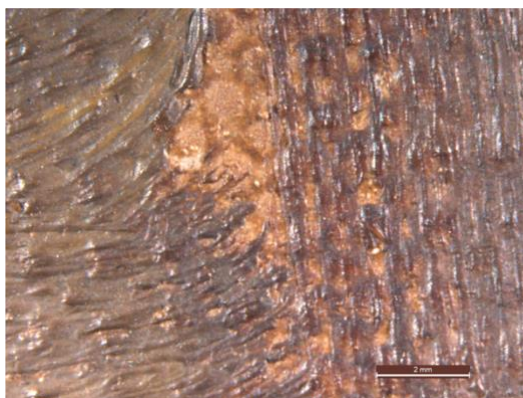


Figure 18. Albert Braïtou-Sala, photomicrograph of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, paper detail of background above back table.



Figure 19. Albert Braïtou-Sala, photograph of auxiliary support, view from the front.



Figure 20. Albert Braïtou-Sala, photograph of auxiliary support, view from the reverse.

which the paper was nailed (Figs. 19 and 20). The auxiliary support consists of a four-member wooden stretcher and the fabric is thin cotton. The painting was nailed from the

<sup>18</sup>Anthea Callen, "Ground Colours and the Paint Layer," in *The Art of Impressionism: Painting technique and the making of modernity*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 64-65.



front in all four corners to this auxiliary stretcher and a frame was placed over the top, covering the nails. While we are unable to determine if the auxiliary support is original to the painting, the Royal Institute of Oil Painters' label attached to the back dates to the 1930s at the latest, when it was acquired by Mr. Elliot. This is all to say that the painting, which is executed on paper, was intended to appear as if it was painted on canvas<sup>19</sup>.

Artists throughout history have used paper supports in painting as a portable, cheaper alternative to canvas. Evidenced by the extensive collection presented in the artist's 2016 retrospective at La Piscine, Braïtou-Sala painted on a variety of supports, including canvas, paper and artist's board. Additionally, he worked in different media, but primarily chose to paint in oil and tempera. While we are unable to determine conclusively if *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* was painted in oil or tempera, its sale at the Royal Institute of Oil

Painters' suggests that it is indeed oil. Although, due to the paper's thickness, there is no leaching of the oil medium onto the reverse of the paper support, the efflorescence on the surface of the painting, particularly in the areas around the sitter's hair, indicates the presence of a fatty binding agent which are characteristically found in both egg tempera and oil paint films (Fig. 21)<sup>20</sup>. Further testing would conclusively determine the medium of this painting.



Figure 21. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, hair detail

<sup>19</sup> The painting may have been attached to this auxiliary canvas support in order to aide its sale at The Royal Institute of Oil Painters in the 1930s.

<sup>20</sup> Efflorescence in oil and egg binders follows from the migration of fatty acid components in the media. It appears as a hazy surface coating that can obscure the aesthetic quality of a work.

### **Braïtou-Sala's Family Portraits**

Looking holistically at Braïtou-Sala's oeuvre, his materials, and techniques, we notice that he adapted his style to the different genres of paintings produced. His familial portraits, like *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, tended to be sketchier, appearing to be executed quickly in a single sitting. From his adolescence in Tunisia, through the height of his career, Braïtou-Sala was reported to have relied on his family members, most often his sisters, wife, and son, as models. Another example of a family portrait is Braïtou-Sala's 1939 study of his nephew, José Sala (Fig. 22). In this



Figure 22. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Yoya à 16 ans*, 1939, tempera on cardboard, 24.1 x 18 cm, Sala collection.

portrait, painted on board, the burnt sienna coloured ground shows through the dark hair, bouncing areas of light across the sitter's face. Rather than building up layers of light and shadow as he would in a highly finished work, Braïtou-Sala allows the ground to create the illusion. Numerous sections reveal wet-in-wet mixing; across the figure's chest and in his blue clothing, suggesting that the portrait was painted quickly, without waiting for layers to dry. Additionally, in contrast to Braïtou-Sala's societal portraits, which were full-length figures on a large canvas, this work is a small, cropped composition without the artist's signature. Unsurprisingly, these familial portraits reveal familiarity and intimacy between the artist and sitter. The fluid application of paint and lack of finish demonstrates the artist's unhampered approach to painting his family.

### **The Artist's Use of Underdrawing**

We would like to emphasise that while we believe this painting was painted rapidly, it was still a planned painting. The composition is painted directly onto the paper support,

exploiting both the texture and colour of the ground—just as the artist did in the portrait of his nephew. Another tool at The Courtauld’s disposal, infrared reflectography, offers further insights into Braïtou-Sala’s painting technique, and demonstrates his incorporation of the textured paper.<sup>21</sup> This is particularly visible in the details of Marie-Jeanne’s dress, where the paper is exposed as a mid-tone with textured highlights and shadows used to create forms in paint (Fig. 23). While there is no visual evidence of a distinct underdrawing stage, the infrared reflectograph reveals gesturally painted lines used both to position the hands and define details of the sitter’s head. These sketchy strokes indicate that Braïtou-Sala planned parts of the initial composition despite the quick execution of the work. Infrared imaging reveals a change to the positioning of the figure’s hands, from the initial notations to the finished portrait. As the hands are at the centre of the composition,



Figure 23. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, OSIRIS infrared reflectograph.

this implies that Braïtou-Sala recognised the significance of their position within the piece and revised them to improve the painting (Figs. 24 and 25). Additionally, faint lines painted millimetres lower than the sitter’s hairline within the final composition of the painting suggest that the artist later raised the figure’s hairline (Figs. 26 and 27).

<sup>21</sup> Infrared reflectography (IR) is a non-invasive imaging technique that offers information about materials through their characteristic absorbance or reflectance in the infrared region. IR has been used in painting examination since the 1960s to look at underdrawing in works of art.



Figure 24. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, detail of hands.



Figure 25. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, OSIRIS infrared reflectograph, detail of hands.



Figure 26. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, normal light, detail of sitter's head.



Figure 27. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, OSIRIS infrared reflectograph, detail of sitter's head.

These instances provide examples of minimal pentimenti and do not affect the overall composition. Instead, they demonstrate aesthetic changes that reveal his artistic process. Observing the background of the work, which was painted in a looser style,

Braïtou-Sala may have blocked in details using a non-carbon-based medium that does not absorb infrared radiation. The lack of background underdrawing suggests that the artist began the painting by sketching his sitter's features, then built up the background



from memory or painting existing objects within his studio or home. This could have been a technique to limit the amount of time spent directly observing the model. Despite these uncertainties, this underdrawing reveals information about Braïtou-Sala's working practice. Although the paint is applied quickly, the artist still planned his compositions and defined details before he began to build up the paint layers.

Notably, the signature does not register in the infrared image, suggesting that it too is painted in a non-carbon containing pigment. We would be interested to conduct further technical analysis on other works by Braïtou-Sala to compare his techniques across genres.

### **Braïtou-Sala, *Les Années Folles* and the Influence on his Palette**

Our aim thus far has been to provide background on Braïtou-Sala's biography, his body of work, and the circumstances in which *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* was completed. We have conducted technical analysis and close observation to glean further insights into Braïtou-Sala's working

techniques. In what follows, we will draw attention to how these technical observations and analyses can divulge information not only about our specific artist but also about an entire era.

Braïtou-Sala lived and worked in Paris during the inter-war period, including during *Les Années Folles*, from 1921 until the Great Depression descended on France in 1931. During this time, Paris became a cultural capital of the Western world; artists, writers and musicians of all genres flocked to this city. We can assume that Braïtou-Sala took full advantage of this period by painting wealthy, beautiful and powerful people. The allure of this era is evident within his painting style; its hues are indicative of the period, incorporating pastel shades of pink, blue and green with occasional vivid colours. Indeed, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, showcases Braïtou-Sala's palette and its embodiment of the glamor of the period. There are no previous treatment records for this painting and it has visibly accumulated surface dirt, which obscures the paint's original brightness. Most of Braïtou-Sala's paintings are in private



Figure 28. Albert Braïtou-Sala, photograph of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, showing location of cross-section samples.

collections, and to our knowledge no other technical examination has been conducted into his work. While this provides little material for comparison, it presents an exciting opportunity to widen the research and understanding of Braïtou-Sala's painting technique, and uncover the pigments he used in his palette. To conduct technical analysis of the paint layers, initially we took two paint cross-sections, one from a tear at the bottom edge of the painting and another from a tear at the top edge of the painting (Fig. 28).

Both samples confirm that the work is unvarnished, which is not uncommon for contemporary paintings. The samples also reveal an off-white ground consisting of finely ground white and black pigments, which are most likely carbon black.<sup>22</sup> In sample one (Fig. 29), there is only one additional layer of paint above the priming layer that consists of multiple pigments, with some notable larger blue pigment particles that are characteristic of cobalt blue. Also

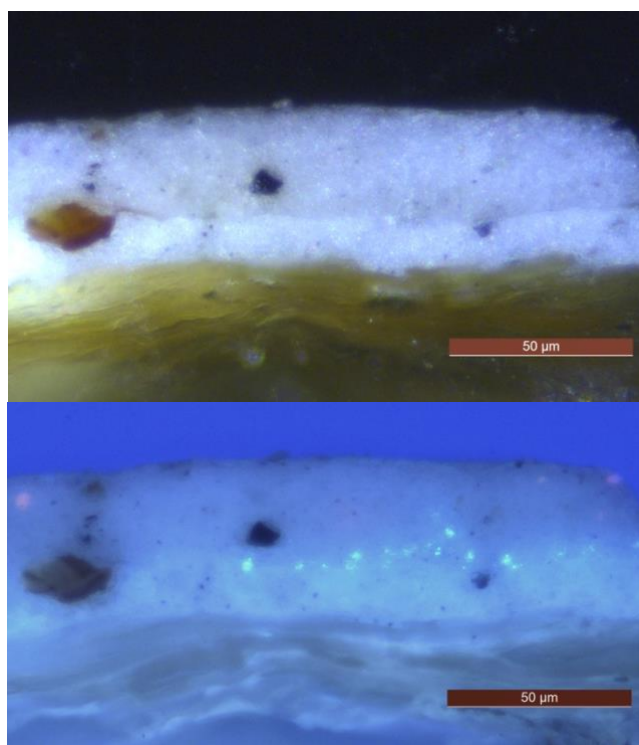


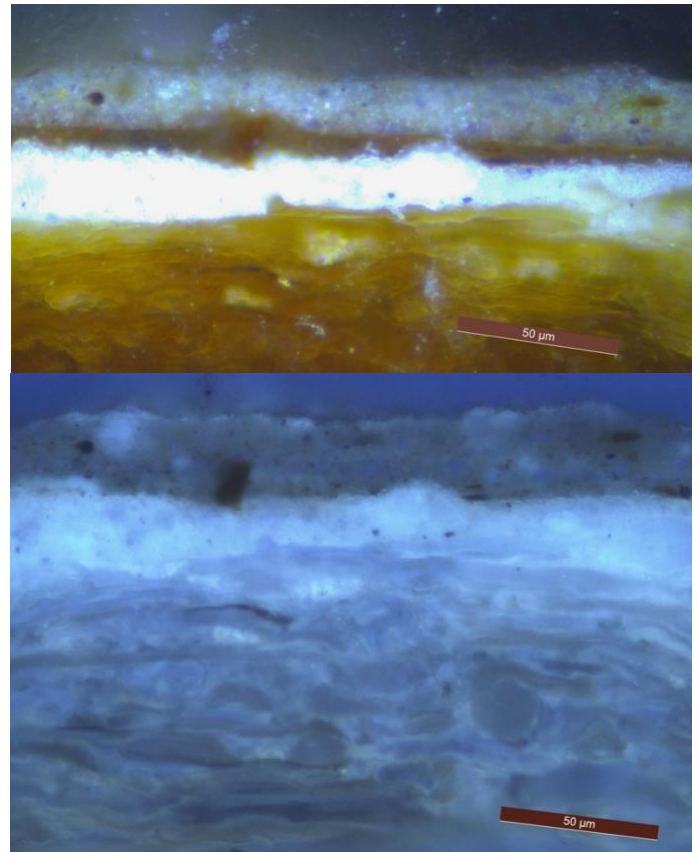
Figure 29. Cross-section 1, top, normal light, bottom, UV light. The cross-section consists of 3 layers: paper support, priming layer and the top paint layer.

<sup>22</sup> Although we have not conducted elemental analysis on the cross-sections, we did analyse the painting's surface using handheld XRF, the results of which we discuss later in this paper.

present are some larger, visibly orange pigment particles that fluoresce pink when viewed under ultraviolet light. This is characteristic of certain cadmium yellow and red lake pigments, both of which were typically used by artists in the 1920s.

Sample two (Fig. 30) shows two layers above the priming; a thin translucent layer, containing finely ground pigments, and a thick layer of off-white, black and blue pigments, similar to the upper layer in sample one. Notably, some of the white pigments in sample two demonstrate a fluorescence, suggesting zinc white<sup>23</sup>. However, the pigment particles in the priming layer do not fluoresce. The fact that the white pigments behave differently in these two samples suggests that Braïtou-Sala used a mixture of two or more white pigments. Further elemental analysis of these cross-sections will provide reliable identification.

Using handheld XRF, we were able to pinpoint several areas across the paint surface



*Figure 30.* Cross-section 2, top, normal light, bottom, UV light. The cross-section consists of 4 layers: paper support, priming layer and two paint layers.

that demanded further elemental analysis.<sup>24</sup> Through our findings, we can confirm the presence of both lead and zinc white, cobalt blue, and various iron earth pigments in shades of brown, red, and yellow. There was also a chrome-based green which we assume is chrome green. (Braïtou-Sala did not exclusively use these pigments, however, some chemical elements are undetectable

<sup>23</sup> We would like to thank Professor Aviva Burnstock from the Department of Conservation and Technology for her help with identifying certain pigments.

<sup>24</sup> XRF (X-Ray Fluorescence) is a non-invasive method of analysis that can provide elemental information for inorganic materials based on characteristic absorption spectra.

using XRF). This ensemble of shades was popular among early twentieth-century artists. Evidently, pigments such as cobalt blue were used to paint the minute details of the painting, such as the blue vase in the background and the bright green pipe under the sitter's hands. These details attract the viewer's eye: a flash of green draws the gaze to the gracefully posed hands; the spark of blue engages the viewer and calls attentions to the illusory recession of space. Working in tandem, these details create a picture of elegance and a realistic setting. Furthermore, as XRF did not detect cadmium, the fluorescent particles in the cross-sections are more likely to be red lake.<sup>25</sup> While the muted tones of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* might imply that the artist used a different set of pigments when compared with his other, more colourful paintings, the presence of these pigments parallels the presumed palettes of his other paintings.

### **Braitou-Sala's Use of Zinc White and Lead White Simultaneously**

Earlier, we discussed the possibility that Braitou-Sala used two shades of white in this work. Artists are known to use different pigments of the same hue in a painting to manipulate the properties of the paint. Sometimes, a more expensive pigment, such as lead white, is "cut" or extended by a manufacturer with a cheaper pigment of the same hue, such as zinc white to make more profits. Zinc white was also often added to lead white paints to improve consistency as lead white by itself is stiff. Cremnitz white, on the other hand, consists of pure lead white without any zinc white. The Impressionists favoured lead white because of its rapid drying properties, which was suitable for their impastoed areas.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, zinc white, which became commercially available in the 1830s, is cooler in tone, more

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<sup>25</sup> Further elemental analysis using SEM-EDX would confirm this hypothesis however due to global disruptions caused by Coronavirus we were unable to presently test this cross-section in time for publishing.

<sup>26</sup> Callen, 2000.



transparent and less toxic than lead white. By the 1920s, as Braïtou-Sala painted *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, zinc white was widely available. This explains the presence of both lead and zinc white in Braïtou-Sala's painting. XRF analysis demonstrated the predominance of lead white over zinc white, for example in the white teacup, the pink wallpaper in the background, and in the flesh tones of the figure. Still, in the sitter's dress, the highest elemental peak registered by the XRF spectrometer was zinc, indicating that either Braïtou-Sala painted the dress using a higher proportion of zinc white to lead white, or that the commercial tube paint was "adulterated" lead white as described above. In fact, throughout the painting, both zinc and lead were detected, making the latter possibility more likely.

Finally, we took an x-radiograph of the painting (Fig. 31). The canvas-like texture of the paper support is visible across the painting's surface as paint flows into the grooves of the paper creating areas of contrast. Moreover, the contrast between light and dark in the x-radiograph

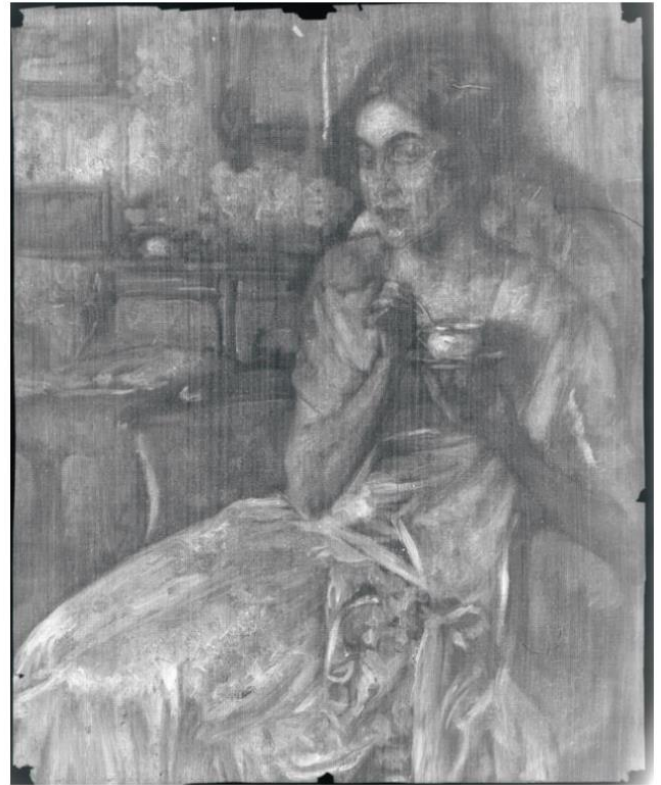


Figure 31. Albert Braïtou-Sala, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, X-radiograph, 15 keV, 3.5 mA, 30 seconds exposure.

demonstrates where Braïtou-Sala incorporated the exposed paper into his composition, namely the darker areas. Unlike the infrared image, the x-ray shows no visible pentimenti, highlighting Braïtou-Sala's swift execution of this work. The ways in which Braïtou-Sala denotes finer details within the painting become astonishingly clear in the x-ray. The highlights on the edge of the teacup are painted in a few strokes of lead white paint, drawing our eye to the hands, a focal point of the work. The sheen of the fabric dress is skilfully created using both lead and

zinc white; Braïtou-Sala built up tone and modelling through the contrast of white paint and the exposed paper support. The wallpaper in the background is applied in a quick, brushy manner through dappling a fully loaded brush with lead white paint to create the illusion of an ornate pattern. Through these highlights the viewer's eye is guided across the work. All of this comes together to demonstrate Braïtou-Sala's skilful mastery and application of paint to capture his sitter in serene elegance.

### Conclusion

Our goal in conducting this project was to broaden the art historical scholarship on Braïtou-Sala and kindle an interest in his works. Through our research we have contextualized *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* within Braïtou-Sala's career and deduced the date of completion. In conjunction with our art historical research, through technical analysis we have uncovered some of Braïtou-

Sala's painting methods and techniques, including his choice of support, the pigments he used, and their manner of application.

Bruno Gaudichon, Director of La Piscine Museum in Roubaix, wrote,

Le carnet mondain de l'artiste ne peut aujourd'hui se lire sans rappeler que toute cette brillance annonce l'une des plus terribles nuits de l'histoire humaine. Et ce paradoxe effrayant donne à l'œuvre révélé et au parcours reconstruit de Braïtou-Sala une grandeur bouleversante et terriblement romanesque par les télescopes que, malgré lui, il impose désormais à notre regard et à notre conscience.<sup>27</sup>

Gaudichon encourages a holistic understanding of Braïtou-Sala's work within the context of a Europe on the brink of war. It would be easy to read the works of Braïtou-Sala only through the lens of 1920s glamour and elegance, of the innocent period before the descent into chaos. As a highly successful portraitist, Braïtou-Sala not only created glorified images of his socialite patrons but also captured the era in paint. Yet, in his

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<sup>27</sup> Bruno Gaudichon, 'Derrière le miroir de l'élégance,' in *Braïtou-Sala (1885-1972): L'élégance d'un monde en péril*, ed. Alice Massé and Amandine Delcourt, exhibition catalogue, La Piscine, Roubaix. (Roubaix: Mare & Martin, 2016), p. 14 'The social register of the artist cannot be read today without recalling that all of this brilliance foreshadows one of the worst nights of human history. And this frightening paradox, and these clashes, gives to the body of work and to Braïtou-Sala's reshaped journey an overwhelming and terribly romantic grandeur that, despite itself, now demands our gaze and our consciousness.'

familial portraits, such as *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, his works testified to an individual family, their relationships, experiences, and struggles.

There is not enough space here to explore the myriad of questions that our initial research

and investigation has roused.<sup>28</sup> We would like to reiterate the benefits of further examination and continued analysis of works by this significant artist so that we can better understand Braïtou-Sala's working methods and techniques.

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<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, due to limitations imposed on us by the Coronavirus pandemic, our *in-situ* research and technical analyses were cut short. We were unable to travel to France, where we hoped to gain insights and establish visual comparisons between *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* and other works by the artist.

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**Figure 28.** Image of *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, showing location of cross-section samples.

**Figure 29.** Image of cross-section 1. The top image shows normal light and the bottom image shows UV light. The cross-section consists of 3 layers: paper support, priming layer and the top paint layer.

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