Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861-1942) is rarely included in histories of late nineteenth-century French art, despite his prolific career as an artist who produced over 2,000 paintings. A portraitist, Blanche’s upbringing as the son of an eminent psychiatrist provided him with a wealth of sitters connected to his father’s fashionable clinic and, I argue, a distinctive approach to their representation. These relatively unstudied portraits of famous Parisian intellectuals and socialites deserve our attention as works of ‘psychological impressionism’. Combining penetrating observation with painterly execution, Blanche’s methods emphasised the ‘nervous’ disposition of his sitters. Blanche’s practice as a portraitist is one of the reasons for his neglect. His contemporaries were evasive when it came to writing about the genre, uncertain of how to evaluate it – a critical apprehension that has persisted to this day. Art historians are as implicated in what may be thought of as a hesitation around the status and significance of portraiture in late-nineteenth-century French art. The thesis seeks in part to redress this through its examination of Blanche’s portraits as intuitive works of art that not only reflected but also,
‘Charles Conder’ 1904 by Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861–1942). This is a portrait of the British painter Charles Conder (1868–1909), who was greatly interested in contemporary French art. Blanche first met Conder in Paris, but they became friends in 1895 when they both spent the summer in Dieppe. This portrait, which captures his flamboyant character, was painted in Conder’s house in London. Among the many portraits he painted of English sitters are those of Mrs Holland (1885; untraced) and the Saville Clark Sisters (c. 1890; Leeds, C.A.G.), both of which have a panache worthy of Sargent. Blanche’s closest connections, however, were with Paris. He exhibited at the Salon from 1882 to 1889 and at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts from 1890. Blanche was unhappy about Proust’s remark in his introduction that the artist when young had been known as one whose ‘sole ambition was to be a much sought-after man of the world’; but this criticism is born out by his own memoirs, which recount his life in society and often compromise accuracy for entertainment. Bibliography Exposition Jacques Emile Blanche, 1861–1942 (exh. cat. by D. Halévy, Paris, Mus.)