

The Graphic Work of Félicien Rops

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"Lust... is Satanism" proclaims J.-K. Huysmans in the article "Instrumentum Diaboli", which immediately follows Lee Revens' preface to "The Graphic Work of Félicien Rops" (New York: Léon Amiel, 1975). I open it and my eyes fall on an etching of *Pallas* (page 41). An owl is perched on her headgear; which has a smiling sun affixed to its front. Pallas stares ahead with a somber stare; on her shield is featured a hollow-eyed Medusa. The next reproduction depicts a young maiden who is walking through a wood with a bag on the back of her head. It is followed by a sketch of six washerwomen at the edge of a lake; three are working, the others are talking and smiling. More washerwomen follow, observed by a little boy. Next I perceive portraits of *Father Much* (page 45) (The translated list of captions at the back has "Father Muck". No such insult is intended. The list has mistranslations as well as such typographical errors), of *My Aunt Johanna* (page 46) and *The Village Oracle* (page 47) and other realistic depictions: *The Boat* (page 48), *Hunting Hares*, (page 50), *Girl Reading* (page 51). Clearly I have strayed into the wrong universe. This could be the work of any realistic illustrator of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Some of the sketches *Oude-Kate* (page 53), *The Old Woman Sewing* (page 54), *The Lace Maker* (page 55) and especially *The Old Countrywoman* (*La vieille gouge*) (page 61) even remind one of Vincent van Gogh in his naturalistic phase.[1]

The sketch entitled *Tea* (page 52) gives a first inkling that Félicien Rops is interested in more than realistic portrayal of people and landscape. A skull lurks beneath the table cloth. A middle-aged man emanates from the tea kettle's steam, pursuing nudes. A munchkin bounces up and down in a bottle, perched above him is a large bird. The specific details that compose this sketch are easily recognizable, but evidently the total sketch has its origins in the male imagination of the late nineteenth century; death, drink, sex, sin, and madness. *The Satyr's Doll* (page 63) confirms this vision. The satyr sports hooves and hairy thighs and in his left hand he holds a naked female whom, it seems, he is

ready to devour. Some pages later, *Modernity* (page 72) features a smiling fashionably dressed lady who is carrying a plate on which is perched the head of a bourgeois male. Rops has updated the story of Salome. There is nothing decadent or sinister about this woman. She is the joyful victor over the bourgeois, bespectacled fat-lipped male.

Félicien Rops is an interesting phenomenon because, like some other artists, he has a foot in two different eras. For example, such a work as *Modernity* is at once thoroughly fashionable and, simultaneously, mired in the Judeo-Christian world of sin, sex and corruption. *Venus milita* (page 73) confirms this. It portrays a somewhat heavy woman in partial undress, staring into space in a sombre manner. Again and again, Félicien Rops hesitates ever so slightly between simple portrayal and "immoral" intent. It is because Rops' women are always observed and are constantly viewed as the embodiment of desire. These wholesome creatures stare out at us satisfied with themselves and confident in their power. Hefty northern European beauties, symmetrically constructed and well-proportioned, they exude prosperity and well-being. A plate such as *Bourgeoisie* (page 82) celebrates hefty self-confidence. There can be no doubt that this class has arrived and is in robust health.

But on the opposite page, another female figure confronts us. She is entitled *Mors syphilitica* (page 83). Being Death, she comes equipped with a scythe and a menacing smile. Her eye sockets are largely black and her scrawny frame is draped with a thin transparent gown. Prosperity has brought promiscuity and with it has come venereal disease. Syphilis and tuberculosis are the two diseases that felled the artists of the age. Keats caught tuberculosis from his brother, and Audrey Beardsley — Félicien Rops' English counterpart — also died of it. Baudelaire, Guy de Maupassant and Oscar Wilde were syphilitic. Baudelaire is an intellectual precursor of Huysmans and Rops and is trapped in the same dichotomy as they are. He may wish to escape to "Anywhere out of this world", but in the meantime he vacillates between two poles: "The Flow-

ers of Evil", and an "Artificial Paradise". Before his mind finally sank into darkness, he was heard to mutter repeatedly: "Crénom...Crénom". Rumor has it that Oscar Wilde always held his hand before his mouth when he laughed in order to hide his mercury-blackened teeth — mercury was used to treat syphilis. In 1895 Wilde took the Marquess of Queensbury to court for having asserted correctly that he had been "posing as a somdomite"[sic]. Wilde received two years at hard labor, and then exiled himself to France, where he died in 1900 from physical disintegration.



Figure 1: *Pornokrates*, pencil and gouache, 22 x 19 cm.

Félicien Rops also vacillates between two poles. On the one hand, he depicts females in robust health, which he couples with blatant and unashamed lust and desire; on the other hand, he focusses on morbid figures, satyrs, and ostensibly blasphemous, phallic adulation.

Félicien Rops' nudes are seldom graceful figures. Instead they seem to embody the ideal of Flemish beauty as popularized by Rubens. These females are big and strong, and they have healthy appetites. They look capable of a good day's work in the home and a good night's work in bed. Compare that to Aubrey Beardsley's drawings in which everyone seems to leer out of their long, flowing robes. Beardsley's characters apparently exist only for the sake of decorum and depravity. Félicien Rops' characters are not stylized because they are grossly prosperous and middle class, and as such they embody

a lifestyle. His work represents the graphic confirmation of the thoughts expressed by such writers as Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, the Goncourts, and Huysmans. Indeed, Félicien Rops is more blunt and crude, and also more entertaining than most of these authors. Hailing, as he does, from the land of Hiéronymus Bosch, Rubens, and Ensor, Rops avoids subtlety and prefers to hit the nail right on the head. The drawing entitled *Pornokrates* (page 118) features a rotund blindfolded nude who is led along by a pig. In *Cocotocratie* (page 150), a bulky female satyr is straddled across the back of a male satyr whom she is urging along with a whip. The great abundance of females in Félicien Rops' work brings out another significant aspect of his work. Their dominant role reflects a shift in society. The bourgeoisie spends its working days worrying about making profits; however, it passes its leisure time in rêverie and sexual fantasy. The omnipresent bulky female represents the final object of his pursuits, the material justification of his fruitful labor.

The first part: *Études et compositions* concludes with a sketch entitled *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (page 162). In Théophile Gautier's novel of the same title she is the embodiment of the androgynous heroine. Not so in Rops' illustration. Here she is depicted as broad of beam and full of breast. I wonder if the decadents would have taken such a non-ephemeral beauty to heart. After all, the purpose of the androgyne was to confuse and to lead both male and female down the garden path. The bulk of this Flemish maiden would have instantly squashed the ethereal dreams of any dandy, be he named Lord Henry as in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or Des Esseintes as in Huysman's *À Rebours*.

The second part of Rops' book is entitled *Frontispices et Illustrations*. These drawings are blatantly sexual in focus. In *Praying* (page 165) we perceive a woman peeking around the door at a semi-nude female about to get dressed and the picture is surrounded by the various saints in ecstasy. In fact, *The devotional exercises of Mr. Henri Roch*, for such is its correct title, have pulchritude as its object even if the framework was inspired by religion. *The Lascivious Oriental Flower* (page 166) boasts some of the most robust far Eastern females I have laid eyes on, but they are appropriately attentive to some phallus-shaped flowers and, as the platitude goes, they seem eager to please. *The Lower Depths of Society* (page 167), however, again contrasts skeletal and wholesome beauty, death, and desire. It is in this sense that Huysmans is right to speak of the spirituality of Lust. The obsession with the fe-

male form remains but a temporary respite. Their bulky good health represents the outlines of prosperity, their smiling game-playing and curvaceous attractions permit one to close one's mind momentarily to death and decay. Consequently, each one of these drawings, whether it celebrates a mass, a song or poetry, concentrates on the nude in various sexual poses or states of repose. But these females are not alone. The male is always there and he is reduced to his simplest sexual expression and, of course, this part of him is writ large. In retrospect and after decades of sexual liberation, these drawings seem silly if not simple-minded. But their graphic realism notwithstanding, these drawings must not only be seen as obsessively symbolic of an era where sexual satisfaction could be viewed as solving problems, or as creating a temporary paradise: they are also clues to our modern world in the same sense that Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* is. The latter's obsessive consuming of men, clothes, money, and dreams ends up exhausting her and it leads to her suicide. Rops' universe is dominated by the obsessively greedy stare of male and female desire and ultimately that becomes its limiting factor.

In the third part, *Planches libres*, the frantic note becomes even more pronounced. In it we are shown God warning naughty boys who have erections; nudes embrace Christ on the cross; others climb giant phalluses or ride frantically on hobbyhorses. This is the world of unbridled sexuality spurred on by the Almighty as well as the devil. Perennial titillation in all its possible forms and expressions now sketches the parameters of the human consciousness. There is only one focus in these sketches, whether the inspiration is satirically modernistic, as in *Penny Fainting* or *Artificial Procreation* (page 241), mythological, as in *Sapho* (page 214) or *Léda* (page 246), or ostensibly domestic and intimate, as the *The Little Cousin* (page 239) and *Coquetterie* (page 243). The final section of the book, *Les Sataniques*, while confirming the conventionality of Rops' vision, also stresses the orgiastic vision of sexuality. Bodies are everywhere in these drawings and usually they are indulging in sexual gymnastics. No erogenous zone is left untouched and the male organ is served and serviced with "joyous gallantry". But now and then darker fantasmagoria begin to obtrude in this universe of wishful thinking. Juxtaposed with pensive or smiling nudes we see *The Woman Drinking Absinth* (page 257) stare out at us forlorn. Her foreboding look juts out from the dark background. She seems frozen by impending doom and, like the pillar against which she leans, as still as death. She is succeeded by *Satan sowing weeds* and *Satan cre-*

ating monsters (page 261-2). Other drawings have as titles: *Theft and Prostitution dominate the world* and *Prostitution and Madness dominate the world*. Indeed, Rops is verily the poet of bourgeois obsessions.

In his universe, women are products of prosperity and therefore objects of obsessions. They provoke male sexual desire and titillate his senses but, simultaneously, he lets us know that evil, decay and death are never far away. Of course the male symbolizing theft and the female nude symbolizing desire go together, because she is seen as robbing him both of his energy and his money. This is the universe of abundance which must be frantically enjoyed because, as it consumes itself, it burns with a hard, gem-like flame, to cite Walter Pater, until nothing is left. The graphic work of Rops is an attempt to provide the imaginary dimension of the bourgeois mind. His lucidity often supplies an ironic, satirical, or macabre twist to their obsessions, but on other occasions he is harshly realistic or delightfully romantic. The present day pornography industry makes Rops' work seem febrile and only the expression of a technically limited age. But in fact, Rops was celebrating something else besides Satanic lust. The hefty females, the protruberant phalluses, the sexual gymnastics, the saintly and satanic overseers and bystanders, all function to bring out one central facet of an age long gone. In it, unmitigated desire can be viewed as the essential operative principle. It stands both for salvation and suffering, because it embraces all. The robust females together with the giant male appendages stand momentarily as monuments to health, prosperity, and joyous abundance. Rops has captured that moment in all its diversity, perversity, and splendour, and since they are portrayed before they are spent, one cannot yet say of them what Sartre will say of all of us some five decades later: namely that "Man is a useless passion".

Notes

- [1] Critics appear to be of two minds about Félicien Rops. In *The Romantic Agony* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956, pp. 305, 369) Mario Praz associates him with Moreau and claims that they are, "The artist[s] most representative of the Decadent Movement." Bram Dijkstra in his book *Idols of Perversity. Fantasy of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1986, p.98) claims that Félicien was "a favorite among the writers of the French Symbolist movement."