Gustave Moreau

An exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City (June 1-August 22)

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City is currently presenting two exhibits devoted to French art of the late nineteenth century— *Cézanne to Van Gogh: The Collection of Doctor Gachet* (May 25-August 15) and *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream* (June 1-August 22).

Dr. Paul-Ferdinand Gachet (1828-1909) was the physician who looked after painter Vincent Van Gogh in the months prior to the latter's suicide in 1890. Gachet was as well a friend or patron to Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Sisley and Cézanne. The collection on display contains some remarkable works by Cézanne and Van Gogh in particular.

But since no one is likely to deny that Impressionism and Post-Impressionism have received over the years considerable and well-deserved critical and popular recognition—and indeed one might argue that, in fact, some of the Impressionists' blander creations have been over praised (and certainly over-reproduced)—I would like to pass by the Gachet exhibition, packed with visitors, and visit instead for a moment the nearly empty galleries at the other end of the same floor of the museum, where the efforts of Gustave Moreau are on display.

I found the Moreau exhibit much the more exciting of the two current shows. Indeed some of the paintings seem to me as remarkable as any accomplished in that era.

Moreau was born in Paris in 1826 and, according to the exhibit catalog, "nourished on classical culture from infancy. When he was ten years old, his father, an architect, gave him a two-volume edition of neoclassical engravings by the Englishman John Flaxman illustrating Dante, Homer, Hesiod, and the Greek tragedians." At the age of 20 he was admitted to the École des beaux-arts, where he studied for several years. He pursued a career as a painter in Paris from 1850, but a two-year stay in Italy (1857-59) proved a significant turning point in his life. In Rome he studied Renaissance artists—Michelangelo, Raphael, Correggio and Sodoma—but also devoted himself to the art of the ancient world. He also met and befriended Edgar Degas in Rome. According to the catalogue, "In Florence he began by copying Titian, in Milan he waxed enthusiastic over Luini, in Venice he discovered Carpaccio. Returning to Florence, he traveled with Degas to Siena and Pisa and developed an interest in the Italian primitives.... Back in Paris, he resolutely set to work."

A painter of enormous erudition, Moreau collected thousands of prints, photographs and illustrated periodicals and visited museums assiduously. "Driven by his perfectionist temperament, he chose, while still a young man, to devote his life entirely to art, refusing the constraints entailed by family life." His ambition apparently from an early age was to reinvigorate history painting, a division of painting that had become largely the domain of uninspired academics. In a certain sense Moreau's effort was futile, but in the heroic attempt to revive an expiring form he created something new, a kind of dream painting.

Moreau was at odds with the main artistic current of his time. The symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, in his generally insightful piece *The Impressionists and Edouard Manet*, observed that "we must affirm that Impressionism is the principal and real movement of contemporary painting. The only one? No; since other great talents have been devoted to illustrate some particular phrase or period of bygone art," and he mentions Moreau in this regard.

Certainly a "great talent," but simply a devotee of illustrating a bit of "bygone art"? His work doesn't strike me that way. It is true that instead of painting music halls and Parisian restaurants, lily ponds and sun-drenched fields, Moreau represented figures from classical mythology and the Bible, and borrowed motifs from a whole host of ancient civilizations, as well as medieval art. He reorganizes them according to some internal principles, in an effort to make sense of contemporary spiritual and social problems, and with an intensity that is frightening. The titles of some of Moreau's paintings indicate his interests and obsessions: *Diomedes Devoured by His Horses*, *Sappho Leaping from the Leucadian Cliff*, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, *Salome Dancing before Herod*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Bathsheba*, *The Triumph of Alexander the Great*.

Douglas W. Druick, in "Moreau's Symbolist Ideal," an essay in the exhibit catalog, notes the concerns of certain artists who came of age in the mid-nineteenth century: "They found the culture in which they were living increasingly debased; they deplored the materialism of the age, fed on the one hand by the prosperity of an increasingly industrialized France and on the other by a growing deference to science and its findings. The capitalist-positivist spirit embodied in Napoleon III's illegitimate Second Empire [1852-70] bred what Moreau called a 'savage love of coarse reality,' a focus on the 'real' at the expense of a transcendent 'ideal.'" Moreau rejected the academic painters, but he also rejected Realism "as an art appealing primarily to the senses and thus unthinkingly pandering to the materialist spirit of the times in its emphasis on tangible reality."

Druick continues: "Over the years Moreau developed a clear-eyed approach to this task which was informed, on several levels, by the advanced scientific and philosophic thinking of the day. He believed that, in order to produce art that signifies at the exalted level he envisaged, the painter must develop the 'eyes of the soul and spirit as well as the body.' Moreau associated this inner vision with the predominant role of the imagination; following current ideas, he apparently connected this faculty with 'psychological penetration' and the unconscious.... Moreau wrote that his 'greatest effort' was devoted to directing his imaginative energies, to channeling 'this outpouring of oneself.'"

I think in his best work Moreau succeeded to an extraordinary degree. He manages to convey in visual forms the truth of some extraordinarily heightened, almost traumatic inner state, which is not simply an individual inner state, but speaks to the needs and desires and fears of his audience.

Moreau conceived of the critical struggle as one taking place between "the call of the ideal and the divine and the physical nature that resists

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[it].” Druick notes that he aimed to create “visual situations that are more evocative than descriptive, imbued with ‘an indecisive and mysterious character.’” His Hercules, for example, is a representative of “man's best instincts battling the ‘vile' and ‘savage' forces of unconscious ‘matter.' In his work, “woman represents the forces of destruction and chaos. She is the ‘unconscious,' lacking thought and an ‘inner sensibility'; an ‘animal nature,' at once ‘vegetal and bestial,' driven by ‘unsatisfied desire' for the fulfillment of which she is ready to ‘[trample] everything underfoot.' Hence she is naturally ‘fatal.’” Thus temptresses like Salome, Delilah, Bathsheba, Cleopatra, etc., people his canvases.

It almost goes without saying, of course, that this conscious horror at woman's “animal nature” was matched by an unconscious fascination and near adoration. What one remembers most about his pictures are those female figures, which threaten to disrupt everything. There is something monstrous, violent and tense in them, something that Moreau must have felt in himself, rejected on the conscious level and materialized in these forms of the bestial Other. He is an artist, like a Poe, who seems a kind of illustrator of psychological complexes before they had been “invented,” so to speak, by Freud and others. It is difficult to imagine art so fraught with neurosis and yet so naive and unaware about its implications being produced after the turn of the century.

Moreau made an immense impact on certain artists. Among the painters, Paul Gauguin was an admirer; Georges Rouault and Henri Matisse were Moreau's pupils. A small but select group of writers as well have expressed their great admiration for Moreau, among them the French novelist J.-K. Huysmans, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust and André Breton.

Wilde was inspired to write his play *Salome* in part as a result of viewing of Moreau's painting (1874-76) of the princess who, in exchange for agreeing to dance before her stepfather, King Herod, demands the head of John the Baptist. The most famous tribute to Moreau's work takes up half a dozen pages of Huysmans' *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*). The novel, which became a cause célèbre on its publication in 1884, is considered a kind of handbook of Decadence and dandyism. Huysmans—a former disciple of Zola, interestingly enough, who had concluded that Naturalism had reached a dead end—created in Des Esseintes, the book's central figure, a man who despises and cuts himself off from “modern times and modern society” and worships everything perverse and artificial. Moreau is one of his favorite artists. Des Esseintes has purchased two of his paintings and spends hours “dreaming in front of one of them, the picture of Salome.”

After an extended description of the painting, Huysmans continues: “Des Esseintes saw realized at long last the weird and supernatural Salome of his dreams. Here she was no longer just the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the morale and breaks the will of a king with the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly, the quivering of her thighs. She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.”

This somewhat overheated response, a perfect example of the “Critic as Artist” (in Wilde's phrase), perhaps says more about Des Esseintes' (and Huysmans') fantasies than it does about Moreau's painting, but it does indicate the sort of passion that his work has generated. The passage gives the impression, if not read carefully, that the painting depicts a scene of unbridled sensuality and passion. In fact, Moreau has presented the opposite of obvious voluptuousness. His Salome is vaguely Asiatic, still and restrained.

Druick writes: “[She] is cast in an impossible pose that, rather than evoking the eroticism of the dance of the veils, embodies the static quality Moreau referred to as ‘that motionless and disquieting aspect of fixity.' The figure of Salome, resolutely inactive, thwarts the narrative context, freezing its flow. In fact she exists out of time, as if between two continuous moments of a sequence.” Or, one might say, there is something in the painting, conveyed to the viewer, of the determined attempt made to slow down or freeze the flow of events common to certain forms of hysteria.

Marcel Proust devoted a 10-page meditative essay to Moreau. He makes reference to a number of the paintings, most prominently to *Bathsheba* (c. 1886 and 1890), based on the biblical story. (King David spies on Bathsheba and eventually seduces and impregnates her. He then has her husband exposed in battle and killed, and makes Bathsheba his favorite wife.) The painting—not shown at the Metropolitan, unfortunately—is extraordinary. In the lower left of the painting Bathsheba, unclothed, with a robe draped around her shoulders, is seated on her terrace, attended to by a kneeling servant. Behind her and to her left we see a rather desolated-looking wooded area and beyond that, in the background, the walls of a palace—in fact, King David's palace. It takes a moment for the viewer to register the fact that David is present in the painting at all, as a tiny figure in the upper right-hand corner, staring (one supposes) at Bathsheba from a palace wall. The eye has to travel an enormous distance to link the two figures, just as David's gaze has to “traverse the entire field on a diagonal that proceeds from the upper-right background to the luminous body of the coveted young woman in the lower-left foreground” (exhibit catalog).

Whatever else it addresses, the painting certainly speaks to Moreau's own sense of himself as he confronted female sexuality and the dilemma of human relations more generally. Here is a figure, so small as to be almost invisible, atop this battlement, looking down from a vertiginous height and separated by a terrifying distance from the object of his love and desire. Can a story with such a tragic and desperate beginning have an entirely happy ending?

Proust refers to Bathsheba several times in his essay, observing that she “has the grave air of a saint.” He writes: “For the courtesan has the air of being a courtesan just as the bird flies—by a destiny which is in no way the result of her choice or her disposition—but her face is sad and beautiful and she gazes while she plaits her hair among the flowers.”

André Breton was another Moreau admirer. In his biography of the inventor of Surrealism, Mark Polizzotti writes:

“But the artistic discovery that had by far the greatest impact [on Breton] was the Gustave Moreau museum.... The fact that the museum was seldom frequented made it all the more mysterious and attractive in Breton's eyes, ‘the ideal image of what a temple should be,' and he dreamed of being locked in it for the night, free to roam the halls at will.

“The real fascination of the place, however, lay in the paintings themselves. Moreau had been captivated by the ‘evil women' of history and mythology—Helen of Troy, Salome, Delilah—whose voluptuous figures reclined on divans of cruel sensuality and debauched opulence. It was the paintings' unabashed sexuality that gave Breton's admiration its full charge, and his response to them was on grounds as much erotic as aesthetic: ‘My discovery, at the age of sixteen, of the Gustave Moreau museum influenced forever my idea of love,' he wrote in 1961. ‘Beauty and love were first revealed to me there through the medium of a few faces, the poses of a few women.'”

In *Communicating Vessels* (1932), years later, Breton was to write about encountering a woman who reminded him of “those eyes that have never ceased to fascinate me for the last fifteen years, the *Delilah* of the little watercolor by Gustave Moreau which I have gone to see so often in the Luxembourg museum.”

Moreau seems one of the precursors of Surrealism in painting in a fantastic work such as *The Triumph of Alexander the Great* (c. 1874, c. 1882, and c. 1890). The painting makes visual reference to the victory of Alexander over the northern Indian king Porus in 326 BC at the battle of Hydapses, after which the former allowed Porus to rule all the territories

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he had conquered east of the Jhelum river. But it is no attempt to reconstruct an actual historical scene. Alexander sits on a majestic throne in the lower right foreground, his conquered foe before him. In the center, beneath a towering statue (which Moreau based on a tenth century Jain saint he copied from a photograph), stands a pack of elephants. Most remarkable is a shimmering temple, filigree-like, in the background. As well, in Moreau's own words, “we see ... azure mountains brushed with pink, rocks carved into architectural forms, towering vegetation of poisonous scent ...” There is no attempt to make the various elements and areas of the picture cohere seamlessly. The painting has the feeling of a collage and a reverie.

The Moreau exhibit moved and fascinated me as much as any I have seen in years.

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