Honoré Daumier, Intimate Contemporary

Tim Tower
25 April 2000

A retrospective of 245 lithographs, sketches, sculptures and oil paintings by the nineteenth century Parisian Honoré Daumier is now on view at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. Previously exhibited in Ottawa and Paris, this historic exhibition will close on May 14. The first of its kind ever seen in America and arguably the finest ever assembled, it is a show not to be missed.

The acknowledged father and master of lithographic caricature and a major influence on many painters who came after him, Daumier died in obscurity and poverty in 1879 in the quiet town of Valmondois outside Paris. Until the current exhibit, the only retrospective of his work had been one organized by a group of Republican friends in a committee chaired by Victor Hugo a year before his death. That effort to raise funds for the ailing master and his wife proved a failure, actually losing money. Although Daumier's work has been prized for many decades, the centenary of his death passed without a major exhibition in France. It is fitting that this show comes to its finale in the collection of Duncan Phillips, who was one of the first collectors to recognize his greatness.

Born in 1808 into the poor family of a frustrated poet, Daumier was apprenticed to a bailiff at the age of 12. The following year he became a clerk in a bookstore located close to the Louvre where he could indulge his passion for art. What little formal training he got began with a family friend who followed Jacques-Louis David. Embarrassed by a stutter, Honoré hardly spoke and never wrote, but hung around studios and print shops, making his first lithographs at 14.

Social and political turmoil during the Bourbon restoration in the aftermath of the Great Revolution and Napoleonic wars made fertile ground for caricature. In 1830 Charles Philipon launched the weekly *La Caricature* to advance the Republican cause of democratic freedoms and social equality. Daumier earned five months in jail for an 1831 lithograph, not published, but offered for sale. Louis-Phillipe as *Gargantua* gobbles the nation's wealth which is hauled up a ramp and dumped in his mouth.

Daumier's career coincided with the revolutionary struggles of Parisian workers from 1830 through 1871; failing eyesight compelled him to retire in 1872. He produced an incredible 4,000 lithographs, of which 74 are included in the exhibit. In *La Crinoline en temps de neige* (The crinoline when it snows), a street sweeper's heavy hands and relaxed frame offset a slicing wit. She asks a lady whose dress has collected snow, “Ma belle dame, faut y vous donner un coup de balais?" (My pretty lady, do you need a pass with the broom?).

What has been termed the finest polemical print ever and the first of the school of realism, *Rue Transnonian, 15 Avril 1834* chronicles a massacre in which troops stormed a house at 5 a.m., killing all12 inhabitants. A worker on his back, legs extending from his nightshirt, crushes an infant in a pool of blood. The poet Charles Baudelaire wrote, “In this cold attic, all is silence and death.” What he saw was not caricature; “It is history, reality, both trivial and terrible.”

Daumier's concentration approaches scientific intensity in the mood of resignation caught in the watercolor *Clowns leaving a crowd*. The point is not physical, but moral exhaustion contrasting with a few white lines in the background which indicate a happy crowd at dusk.

Seventy-five of a known three hundred oil paintings are displayed. Sequences and dates are tentative, most not dated by him, not exhibited and not sold in his lifetime. Daumier kept the paintings in his studio and often returned to rework them, or do a slightly different version. A number of spectacular groups include different treatments of the same image with individual pieces separated by as much as a decade.

In 1846 Daumier moved to 9 Quai d'Anjou on Ile

Saint Louis. For the next decade and a half, he portrayed numerous family scenes, especially with children. In *The first bath* a father wades in shallow water, supporting his baby under the arms. The figures have a solid, sculptural quality. His wife and older child look on from the bank. Sunlight warms masonry walls in the background, setting a somber mood to frame the passage of generations. In *Rescue*, a man and woman carry a naked child from the water. Few details are clear. Their bodies bend against the storm, and the child's naked flesh stands out against their dark garments in the wind. Hurried execution and uncompleted forms accentuate their anguish.

In 1864 Daumier did a commission of three water colors of first, second and third class train passage for William Walters in Baltimore. It was a sociological study. The two large oils of *Third class carriage* followed. In the more finished version, there is a shift in palette spectrum from red to blue. Here the influence on Picasso and modernism is striking in the reduction of the background heads to their essential geometry and in the focus on social and psychological analysis. A poor family of three generations occupies the front bench. While the others sleep, the old woman is awake, wrapped in the closeness of her family and her reflections. From one version to the next, the younger mother's legs have parted slightly as she slipped into slumber, leaning toward her mother. On the other side, a grandson nods asleep.

There are 39 sculptures—the most significant from the end of his career in the series called *Emigrants*, or *Fugitives*, which includes sketches, bas reliefs and oils. Daumier kept in his studio a cast of a Roman frieze depicting an exodus of conquered people. He must have worked on his own version over decades, only completing it around the time of the Paris Commune. The originals were done in clay, perhaps as a model for a painting. A mass of people move through open country. Men carry a stretcher and bundles. Children struggle beside their mothers. All are left in the nude, the central figure a muscular woman seen from the back. With her left hand, she holds a small child's hand. Leaning back and twisting her hips, she looks to her baby in the other arm. The whole creates a timeless image of war's horror. One feels a palpable connection to the taut figures of the twentieth century sculptor Alberto Giacommetti.

Although he never traveled outside France, Daumier's major influences included Michelangelo, Rubens, Rembrant and Goya. He lived in a tumultuous and fertile culture including among his friends Millet, Corot, Courbet, Baudelaire, Préault and Degas and exercised a strong influence on Cezanne, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, Redon, Munch, Picasso and Rivera, among others. A modest master, his work is full of treasures. The images of a *Painter at his easel* from the end of his career have been called self portraits, one scowling, another smiling. We can be grateful that the current exhibition offers the opportunity to join him in reflecting on his work.