

Gustave Moreau The Fables of La Fontaine

Room 1 of the exhibition
Atelier, 2nd floor

Antony Roux commissions the watercolours

Théophile Amédée Antonin Roux (1833-1913), known as Antony Roux, was the son of a Marseille shipowner who lived off an allowance and spent his life travelling and collecting art. Initially, he was interested in artists from the Provence region of France and early on struck up a friendship with Gustave Ricard (1823-1873), who painted his portrait, and with Félix Ziem (1821-1911). It was they who introduced him into Parisian artistic circles. At the end of the 1870s, Roux decided to commission a series of watercolours from various artists for the *Fables* of Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695).

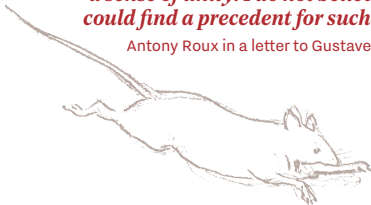
In 1879, he met Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) through the intermediary of Élie Delaunay (1828-1891), a painter from Nantes. Although Roux later abandoned the idea of producing the book, Moreau quickly became the sole illustrator of the *Fables*, painting 64 watercolours between 1879 and 1884.

Through the over 200 letters between the painter and the collector held by the musée Gustave Moreau, it is possible to trace their relationship over the years. It soon transformed from the simple commissioning of the watercolours to a frenzy of purchases by Roux, making him one of the biggest collectors of Moreau's works.

“

*What infinite variety there is
in this collection while maintaining
a sense of unity. I do not believe that one
could find a precedent for such creativity.*

Antony Roux in a letter to Gustave Moreau



Gustave Moreau illustrates La Fontaine's Fables

Originally created for the sole enjoyment of Antony Roux who was a significant collector of the works of Gustave Moreau, the 64 paintings were intended to illustrate a new edition of the *Fables* of La Fontaine. They were produced by the artist between 1879 and 1884 in his studio at 14, rue de La Rochefoucauld in Paris. In 1881, 25 of them were exhibited in a private salon of the Société d'Aquarellistes français (French Society of Watercolourists) at the Paul Durand-Ruel gallery on 16, rue Laffitte in Paris. They were shown together again at the Bousso et Valadon gallery (formerly La Maison Goupil), at 9, rue Chaptal in 1886, and in London that same year. The last time that most of these watercolours were brought together was over 100 years ago in 1906 under the aegis of the French socialite, Countess Elisabeth Greffulhe and author, Robert de Montesquiou.

It is the first time since then that 34 of the paintings are being exhibited together in what was the home and studio of Gustave Moreau where they were created, and which now houses a museum in his honour. They join *The Peacock complaining to Juno*, which was donated to the institution in 1936. The other works on show include preparatory studies, some of which are almost complete, for the paintings that went missing during the Second World War.

The preserved correspondence between Moreau (who had two editions of the *Fables* in his library) and Roux does not shed a light on how they chose which texts were to be illustrated. In the beginning, lists were exchanged between the two men that were full of notations that were probably intended to indicate to one another their degree of interest in a particular fable. On several occasions, there were also specific requests by Roux as to what he wished to see represented. However, Moreau remained the master of his choices, tackling the subjects as he pleased, but always to the great satisfaction of his patron.

“

*The watercolours arrived
last night, my admiration
is limitless, what
deep emotions I felt ...
Your immense talent
has been revealed to me
in a new light.*



Gustave Moreau's source of inspiration

Moreau did not illustrate the *Fables* in their order of publication but followed the wishes of both his patron and his own inspiration, of which there were multiple sources. We have attempted to illustrate the main ones through this collection of drawings chosen from the 350 preparatory studies held at the musée Gustave Moreau. The artist's personal research was so extensive and varied that these may have been accompanied by engravings and photographs.

Moreau drew the motifs used in the paintings from this documentation and many of the details of his drawings were taken from the illustrated magazine, *Le Magasin pittoresque*. But magazines were not his only source. He also borrowed ideas from his personal library, searching for motifs in Welsh architect Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* and the French engraver, art historian and antiquarian, Xavier Willemin's *Les Monuments français*.

In addition, Moreau sometimes left his studio, going to copy manuscripts at the National Library and the collections of mainly Flemish and Dutch paintings and works of art at the Louvre. He was inspired by exhibitions like the *Exposition des Beaux-Arts de l'Extrême-Orient* which opened in 1873. Finally, as a young student he often went to the botanical gardens, the Jardin des Plantes, to sketch the animals at the zoo there, as can be seen in the drawings shown opposite.

“

I don't know enough about the appearance of these animals and what I thought I would achieve in a few days at the other end of my pencil, I had to spend a whole month studying them at the Jardin des Plantes.

Gustave Moreau in a letter to Antony Roux

The first collection of Fables

The first collection of La Fontaine's *Fables*, dedicated to 7-year-old Louis, the son and heir apparent of King Louis XIV and Marie-Thérèse of Austria, was published in Paris in 1668 by Claude Barbin or Denys Thierry. This first volume was composed of six books comprising 124 fables, many of which are still recited today by children at schools across France.

Moreau illustrated 13 of the stories in the first book, mainly with animal scenes. Unlike his predecessors, such as the French caricaturist, Jean-Jacques Grandville, he did not try to transpose them into the human world. In fact, his depiction of the heroes of these fables was a combination of both realism (he made drawings of the animals at the museum) and invention, giving them expressive poses. To make his illustrations more accurate, he even kept stuffed mounted animals and live frogs at his home. And when La Fontaine abandoned the animal world for the plant world, as in *The Oak and the Reed*, Moreau remained faithful to the tradition of realism.

“

I use animals to teach men.

Jean de La Fontaine



At the source of the Fables

In the opening pages of the initial collection published in 1668, Jean de La Fontaine included an essay entitled *The Life of Aesop the Phrygian*, a tradition dating back to the 14th century. It was first used by the Byzantine monk, Maximus Planudes, who prefaced his compilation of Aesop's *Fables* with a biography of his famous predecessor. The Roman fabulist, Phaedrus, and his successors right up to the Renaissance authors, all served as role models for La Fontaine.

Moreau, for his part, engaged in a process of adapting the motifs evoked by La Fontaine. To do this, he frequented the zoo in the Jardin

des Plantes to make “the animals accurate, alive, and having their natural appearance”. He visited the galleries at the Louvre Museum and other exhibitions, consulted books in his own library, and manuscripts at the National Library.

However, in his work he went beyond all these references and adopted a realistic perspective, as he did in *The Fox and the Grapes*.



“
*I sing the heroes
of old Aesop’s line,
Whose tale, though false
when strictly we define,
Containeth truths
it were not ill to teach.*

Jean de La Fontaine

Room 2 of the exhibition
Atelier, 3rd floor

Innovative illustrations

Jean de La Fontaine elevated the status of the fable which until then had been seen as a minor genre intended only for children or people of little culture. In Gustave Moreau’s interpretation of them, we often see an authentic adaptation of the famous poet’s verses. In fact, Moreau said to Antony Roux: “The ways to be eloquent in our art [...] are quite different from those in literature.” With this spirit in mind, he added picturesque details of his own, such as the lyre carried by the cheeky monkey in *The Monkey and the Dolphin* in the fourth book. It was not until the sixth book that Moreau abandoned the animal repertoire and ventured into a representation of the divine world. *Phoebus and Boreas* is a typical example of the artist’s use of external references in the development of his illustrations. Inspired by an antique bas-relief, Moreau lavishly revisits the motif of the sun god on his chariot. A master of colour, Moreau’s imaginative details permeate each of his watercolours.

“
What a poet my Moreau is!

Antony Roux in a letter to Gustave Moreau

“

*Animals are the teachers
of men in my book.*

Jean de La Fontaine

“What infinite variety in this collection”

Following the first publication of the *Fables* in 1668, editions and re-editions followed one another at a rapid pace. In 1671, a collection entitled *New Fables and other Poems* was published by Denis Thierry. Seven years later in 1678, the first of four volumes of a work bringing together the first edition of the *Fables* and five new books (7 to 11) was published. It was dedicated to Madame de Montespan, King Louis XIV’s favourite mistress. In a note at the start of the seventh book, Jean de La Fontaine made it clear that he wanted to set a different tone with these new fables in order to add variety to his work.

The same idea inspired Gustave Moreau’s approach to the watercolours, resulting in this comment from Antony Roux: “What infinite variety there is in this collection while maintaining a sense of unity.” Thus, unlike the first fables, such as *The Fox and the Crow*, in which there were always just two protagonists, the form of La Fontaine’s stories became more complex, and so did Moreau’s watercolours. And it is with *The Animals Stricken with the Plague*, a striking portrait of French monarchical society, that the artist broke away from his predecessors, placing the protagonists of the scene in a desolate landscape that was in harmony with with the tragedy.

“

*As mentioned, I tried to vary them
in style, tone and execution
so that when presented together,
there is a range of looks.*

Gustave Moreau in a letter to Antony Roux



Gustave Moreau, subtle colourist

The protagonists represented in the fables illustrated by Moreau are extremely diverse. In addition, the settings vary from ones evoking antiquity (*Democritus and the Abderites*), to the Orient (*The Mouse who was Transformed into a Girl*), or the realism of nature (*The Bear and the Gardener*). The common thread in the paintings is colour in all its subtlety.

A master of watercolours, Gustave Moreau dazzles with a palette that is sometimes intense, and sometimes muted, but is always adapted to the subject. For what he described as normal everyday subjects, such as in *The Cobbler and the Financier*, he said these “do not, on the contrary, need the fanfare of colours”. Amazed by his wide range of hues, Antony Roux said to him: “You are my dear, the painter of southerners, those who feel with their imagination, colour, and light.”

“

I always thought he was a great painter, but now I see him as a giant, and what a colourist.

French writer, Charles Yriarte, in a letter to Antony Roux



Oriental inspiration

In the last book of *Fables*, La Fontaine abandoned references to antiquity for authors that were new, or ones that he had not referred to before. Oriental literature opened the doors for him to enchanting stories of universal wisdom. *The Book of Lights*, by Indian sage Pilpay, inspired him to write *The Two Adventurers and the Talisman*. *The Pañchatantra*, a collection of Indian animal tales by the semi-legendary brahmin, Bidpai, to whom La Fontaine paid homage in the preface to the second volume of the *Fables* published in 1678, led him to write *The Tortoise and the Two Ducks*. The culmination of the genre can be found in *The Dream of an Inhabitant of Mongolia*, inspired by 13th century Persian poetry. It was this painting that gave Moreau an opportunity to rival the oriental miniaturists. The fullness of colour and complex representation, together with his virtuosity with a paintbrush, made him their equal.

In 1693, two years before his death, La Fontaine published the 12th and final book in the collection, composed of 29 fables. It provided Moreau with the inspiration for five more paintings. The genre had evolved considerably and Moreau, described by French painter Ary Renan as the “Rembrandt of Asia Minor”, produced *The Matron of Ephesus* – a tale rather than a fable – which is a masterpiece of chiaroscuro.

“

It's interesting [...] this goldsmith-poet's watercolours that seem washed with the gleaming treasures of The Thousand and One Nights.

French writer and art critic, Edmond de Goncourt