Gustave Moreau
The Middle Ages Rediscovered

Exhibition
15 November 2023 – 12 February 2024

Musée national Gustave Moreau
The Middle Ages permeate many of the works of Gustave Moreau, a history painter usually thought of as only interested in mythological or religious scenes. But he was a man of his time, and not immune to the taste for the mediaeval period running through the 19th century and finding its expression in museums, literature, architecture, the restoration of monuments, the study of history and collecting. The most obvious example of this taste is the fascination with Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris, as seen in Victor Hugo’s famous novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and the restoration of the monument by Jean-Baptiste Lassus and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.

Ever curious, Moreau drew inspiration from a wide number of sources, largely in museums, libraries and his own archives, but also from his voyage to Italy (1857-1859) and his stay in Belgium and the Netherlands (1888).

After the “Romantic pastiches” of the 1850s, inspired by Eugène Delacroix, Moreau developed a profoundly original art of his own.

With the exception of the emblematic *Chimeras* and *Unicorns*, his artistic production is situated at a crossroads between different periods and sources of inspiration. In his works, at once secular and sacred in character, he deploys a composite art combining the Middle Ages with the Renaissance, East with West.

Gustave Moreau, *Saint Cecilia* (detail)
Watercolour on wove paper,
Gustave Moreau Museum, Inv. 13992 bis

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The curators and the exhibition designer propose a choice of two routes for the exhibition, either starting from the “Gallery” on the 1st floor, or from the studios on the 2nd and 3rd floors.

Visitors are thus invited not only to discover the richness of Moreau's mediaeval sources of inspiration, but also to immerse themselves in the unique creative process of this “worker and assembler of dreams”.

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**First floor**

- **The mediaeval sources**

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**Second floor**

- **History, legend and politics**
- **The Chimeras**
- **“The Middle Ages gave the key-note to Romanticism”**
- **“A mediaeval chatelaine”**

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**Third floor**

- **Variations on the unicorn**
- **A syncretic vision**
- **“This sublime Catholic religion”**
Mediaeval sources

Museums and Libraries of Paris

Moreau made frequent visits to the museums and libraries of Paris. In two of his notebooks, he drew up a list of manuscripts held by the Imperial Library thus demonstrating his interest in illuminated manuscripts. In addition he went to the Library’s Print Room and to the Louvre where he studied not only the Italian primitives but also metalwork and mediaeval enamels such as the Arm Reliquary of Charlemagne and a Limoges Reliquary dating from the 13th century, of which he made a watercolour.

In the painter’s studio

Moreau’s own library was a vital aid to his work. Grammars, illustrated encyclopaedias of ornament and even popularising magazines, of which he possessed a great number —Le Magasin Pittoresque for example—nourished his imagination. His rich archive of thousands of prints and photographs was a veritable “iconographic reservoir” into which he dipped repeatedly.

Amédée Pérée
“Civilian Costumes of the late 14th century, Excerpts from Manuscript Hours in the Royal Library”

Nicolas Xavier Willemin, Les Monuments Français inédits, 1839
Printed copy enhanced with colours, Gustave Moreau Museum, Inv. 14592-2

Gustave Moreau
Study from a Reliquary
(Musée du Louvre, MR 2647)
Graphite, watercolour on fine-grained wove drawing paper, mounted in an album,
Gustave Moreau Museum, Des. 12746-19

Séraphin Médéric Mieusement
Gargoyle from the chevet, south side, restored by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris, before 1886
Albumen print,
Gustave Moreau Museum, Inv. 11932-9
“The Middle Ages gave the key-note to Romanticism”

This quote by Gustave Moreau demonstrates how important Romanticism was to the rediscovery of the Middle Ages. From the 1850s he saluted Eugène Delacroix, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Théodore Chassériau as his precursors. Following on from these artists, he illustrated the tragic history of Paolo and Francesca, inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and developed an interest in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. Shakespeare in turn inspired *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Lady Macbeth*. Nor was he indifferent to the myth of Faust, reworked by Goethe and highly popular in the 19th century.

“*A mediaeval chatelaine*”: art criticism at the Salon

During the 1860s, Moreau sent an increasing number of works to the Salon. In 1864, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) was praised by the critics including Théophile Gautier who wrote of it: “[...] There is, moreover, a well of learning hidden beneath this Gothic Hellenism.”

The following year, Gautier compared the Medea of *Jason* (Paris, Musée d’Orsay) and then the Thracian maiden of *Orpheus* (Paris, Musée d’Orsay), exhibited in 1866, to “mediaeval chatelaine[s]”, drawing attention to the mediaeval ornaments on the young girl’s dress.

In 1900, when seven works by Moreau were shown at the Universal Exhibition, art critic Gustave Geffroy echoed Gautier’s remarks when he recalled the “slightly Gothic Antiquity” of the works of the 1860s, underlining again the syncretic vision of the artist.
"this Island of fantastic dreams contains all the forms of passion, fantasy and caprice to be found in woman"

The chimera is, in Greek mythology, a creature of evil intent which in the Middle Ages becomes identified with the monsters and demons of Christian hell.

Moreau’s interest in this figure dates back to 1856, and almost thirty years later he reinvented it *ad infinitum* in *The Chimeras*. Subtitled *Satanic Decameron*, this allegorical work portrays the Vices as linked to the fantasies of female figures, each accompanied by her chimera. The leafy setting with its subdued tones and shallow perspective recalls the millefleurs style of late mediaeval tapestry.

“Long meditated”, the painting was preceded by more than five hundred preparatory studies in which Moreau assembled real animals and fantastic creatures. It is signed and dated 1884, the year in which Moreau’s mother died, but was never completed and remained in his studio until the end of his life.
History, legend and politics

The war of 1870
Moreau was profoundly affected by the Franco-Prussian War and the events of the Commune. For the 1872 Salon, he had imagined making a polypych entitled *France Vanquished* to illustrate France’s defeat in symbolic terms. A note describes the project: “triptych/reliquary/shrine/funerary monument/Byzantine style Basilica/Orvieto-OrsanMichele/of Florence. Basilicas/Italian of 1400.” This work never saw the light of day. After the conflict of 1870, mediaeval “warrior” figures begin to appear in his work in the form of the Crusader, a Christian knight departing for the Holy Land, and Joan of Arc.

A world of chivalry
The painter was absorbed by such subjects as heralds, the hunter with a falcon and courtly love. Although they evoke the mediaeval period, their pictorial transcription is characterised by a blending of the art of East and West, Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

“Mystic pagan”
Ambiguous in his relation with religion, Moreau was described as a “mystic pagan” by Jean Lorrain. The cherubs’ heads on the Church’s robe in *The Church Triumphant* reappear on the tunic of one of the women in *The Chimeras*. This reuse of a motif in works of contrasting iconography is characteristic of the artist’s creative process.

Emblematic saints
Moreau’s iconographic repertoire is peopled with figures of saints whose plastic treatment frequently suggests a mediaeval inspiration. One example is the watercolour *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary* (Private Collection) which he painted for Charles Hayem in 1879, the composition of which is reminiscent of an illuminated manuscript.

A dreamed cathedral
While “troubadour” artists often depicted Gothic interiors, the religious architecture of the Middle Ages is little present in Moreau’s work. Only the series of *Travelling Angels*, dating from around 1890, uses the cathedral motif which was so emblematic of nostalgia for the mediaeval period.

“This sublime Catholic religion”

*Gustave Moreau
Two heralds
Watercolour and gouache on paper
Gustave Moreau Museum, Cat. 576

*Gustave Moreau
Travelling Angel
Oil on canvas,
Gustave Moreau Museum, Cat. 627
Variations on the unicorn

An important creature in the mediaeval bestiary, the unicorn abounds in the miniatures, ivories and tapestries of the late 15th century. The rediscovery and presentation of *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries at the Universal Exhibition in 1878 and subsequent display at the Musée des Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny in 1883 certainly contributed to this mythical beast becoming topical once more.

*The Unicorns*, despite being originally destined for Edmond de Rothschild, never actually left Moreau’s studio. The picture was doubtless not to the collector’s taste and he chose to buy another work instead (Private Collection).

With its mediaeval and Renaissance influences, the painting is of astonishing decorative richness. Moreau utilised in particular motifs from an 8th century ivory diptych acquired by Alexandre Du Sommerard and shown at the Musée des Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny from 1844 onwards. It was certainly by visiting this museum that he was able to study the famous *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries and acquire an interest in the technique of tapestry.

Many variations of the woman with a unicorn exist in the Museum or in private collections. They bear witness to the artist’s fascination with this fantastic creature and what it symbolises.
A syncretic vision

From the 1860s, a syncretic approach starts to appear in Moreau’s work as he deliberately combines motifs from different periods, cultures or religions the better to render a timeless universe. The Middle Ages is thus often defined by its juxtaposition with Classical Antiquity or the Renaissance.

Such assemblages were remarked on by art critics of the time as a particularity of the artist. Moreau pursued and developed this ornamental eclecticism during the last twenty years of his life as he completed canvases begun earlier in his career.

So, at the end of his life, he resumed work on *The Apparition* in particular by transferring mediaeval motifs on to the surface of the canvas in white.

Photographs and plates taken from the *Album du Musée de Sculpture comparée* by Paul Frantz Marcou, which Moreau acquired a year before his death, permitted him to depict in greater detail the interior in which Salome performs her dance.
Around the exhibition

◆ Guided visits of the exhibition

Duration: 1h  
Full rate: 10 € / Reduced rate: 8 €  
Booking required

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<td>November 15, 19, 22, 26 and 29  &lt;br&gt;December 2, 6, 13, 20, and 27  &lt;br&gt;at 3 pm</td>
<td>January 3, 6, 10, 14, 17, 24 and 31  &lt;br&gt;February 3, 7 and 11  &lt;br&gt;at 3 pm</td>
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◆ Family story-telling visits  
*Children aged 5 and over*

Over two weekends, storytellers take adults and children on a fabulous journey to discover the world of chivalry, the marvellous bestiary and the medieval legends that inspired Gustave Moreau.

Duration: 1h  
Full rate: 10 € / Children and reduced rate: 8 €  
Booking required

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<td>December 9 and 10  &lt;br&gt;at 11 am and 4 pm</td>
<td>January 20 and 21  &lt;br&gt;at 11 am and 4 pm</td>
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◆ Carte blanche to students

Over two weekends, students from the Law, Art history and archaeology double degree of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University will explore the exhibition and offer visitors short, participatory mediation sessions in front of artworks of their choice.

Free of charge, included in your exhibition ticket  
No booking required

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<td>December 16 and 17  &lt;br&gt;from 10:30 am to 1:30 pm  &lt;br&gt;and 2 pm to 5 pm</td>
<td>January 27 and 28  &lt;br&gt;from 10:30 am to 1:30 pm  &lt;br&gt;and from 2 pm to 5 pm</td>
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Further information and bookings at www.musee-moreau.fr

Further information

Additional works related to the exhibition can be discovered in the museum using information cards available on each floor.
Gustave Moreau National Museum
14, rue de La Rochefoucauld
75009 Paris
T: 01 83 62 78 72
Open every day except Tuesday from 10.00 to 18.00
Metro: line 12, Trinité or Saint-Georges
Bus: 26 | 32 | 43 | 67 | 68 | 74
Full rate: 7 € | Reduced rate: 5 €
_booking strongly recommended
Free access on the first Sunday of each month (booking required).
Free for visitors under 18, visitors under 26 from an EU country and holders of the ParisMuseumPass.
Joint ticket to Jean-Jacques Henner National Museum
Adults: 9 € | Concessions: 7 €

Cover: Gustave Moreau, Travelling Angel, graphite, watercolour, gouache on wove grain paper, Gustave Moreau Museum, Cat. 441. Back cover: Gustave Moreau, Study of a crowned figure (detail), pen and brown ink (recto), graphite, traces of transfer (stylet or graphite) (verso) on tracing paper, Gustave Moreau Museum, Des. 5825