



Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing before Herod*, 1874
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

Gustave Moreau's Palace of Art

by Gail Leggio

The Musée Gustave Moreau, at 14 rue de la Rochefoucauld, is one of the most magical places in Paris. Since it opened in 1903, five years after the artist's death, the house has been an intimate palace of art, but it has rarely been on the general tourist's itinerary. Gustave Moreau (1826–98) was highly successful in his lifetime, both with the salon establishment and with avant-garde critics. Writers such as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Théophile Gautier, and Marcel Proust composed prose poems in praise of his art. In his later years, Moreau became a great teacher, counting among his students the early film fantasist Georges Méliès, Georges Rouault, and Henri Matisse. Matisse learned from Moreau the delights of opulent color and sinuous line. Yet, as early as 1912,

when the Surrealist André Breton discovered it, the Musée Gustave Moreau had been almost forgotten.

Moreau bequeathed to the state not only his home but nearly 14,000 objects, only 6,000 of which have been described and exhibited. Preparatory sketches, exquisite drawings and watercolors, finished and unfinished paintings, models, letters and reference books offer an extraordinary glimpse into the mind and working methods of a learned and wildly imaginative artist. In a first-floor apartment Moreau displayed works or reproductions of works by other artists he admired: Théodore Chassériau, Edgar Degas, Rembrandt, and Edward Burne-Jones. A suite by Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation*—soulful, heavy-winged angels holding globes with miniature creation scenes—was a particular favorite. Because of their fragility, drawings are usually stored out of sight, unless displayed for special exhibitions; at the Musée Gustave Moreau, works-on-paper are permanently on view in handsome, wood-framed screens, accessible but protected in the soft light of the mansion's invitingly dim interior.

Most of the works in the exhibition “Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream,” at The Metropolitan Museum of Art this past summer, were from the Musée Gustave Moreau, supplemented by major loans from other museums and private collections.¹

Organized by The Met, the Réunion des musées nationaux, and The Art Institute of Chicago, this retrospective of forty paintings and 130 watercolors and drawings introduced to a wider audience a quintessential artist of the last fin de siècle. The exhibition demonstrated how the complexities of individual genius elude the neat categories of art history. Hailed as the Symbolist painter *par excellence*, Moreau worked as a history painter, choosing his subjects from the Bible and Greek myth. Capable of slick finish, he kept many of his canvases in an unfinished state for decades. His last thought was often to draw, rather than paint in, crucial areas. Traveling through Italy in the 1850s, he found in Degas a sympathetic companion. A mythmaker and a jeweler, a master of filigree and line, Moreau painted color essays so loose that they suggest late Turner and the Abstract Expressionists. Moreau considered his near-abstractions finished works; he had them framed and labeled for hanging in his future museum.² The artist himself declared the formal imperative of his aesthetic: "One thing is uppermost in me, an impulse and order of the strongest kind toward abstraction.... I am less inclined to express...movements of the soul and spirit than to render visible, so to speak, the flashes of illumination that one doesn't know how to situate, that have something/divine in the seeming insignificance and that, translated by the marvelous effects of pure plasticity, open magical horizons that I would even call sublime."³

Yet Moreau will always be remembered for his mythic images. The exhibition gathered material around some major themes in his iconography, beginning with his first great success, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864), now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. A score of sketches, watercolors and related items created a rich context for the finished painting, showing how Moreau experimented with poses and accessories to dramatize the ancient confrontation. Included were a contemporary cartoon exploiting the unusual configuration of a female Sphinx scaling Oedipus' torso, and a 1778 Piranesi engraving of an antique vase, the model for the griffin-decorated urn in Moreau's painting.⁴ Contemporary critics noted the influence of Renaissance artists and Ingres's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1808–25, Louvre), which also presents a near-naked Oedipus eye-to-eye with a small, rather chic Sphinx. Moreau's composition is tall and thin, leaving room at the bottom for a concise metonymy of victims—a grayish foot and hand, a bit of bone, a crown.

Moreau's landscape is a rocky pass in cool blue-grey tones that pick up the colors of the Sphinx's wings. In geology, as well as in color, the scene is reminiscent of Leonardo's landscapes. Moreau owned a large collection of photographs of works by, or attributed to, Leonardo, including *The Virgin of the Rocks*.⁵ The Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti had written in 1848 a sonnet "For Our Lady of the Rocks by Leonardo da Vinci" that captures the mysterious pull of that configuration:

...is that outer sea
 Infinite imminent Eternity?
 Mother of grace, the pass is difficult,
 Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered souls
 Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through.⁶

Moreau's landscapes mimic Leonardo's melancholy color and fantastic rock formations. His faces echo the introspective androgynous beauty that made Leonardo a late-nineteenth-century cult, celebrated in France by Jules Michelet and Théophile

Gautier and in England by Rossetti, the poet Algernon Swinburne, and the aesthete Walter Pater. *Oedipus and the Sphinx* was a painting that fired imaginations. The young Odilon Redon welcomed it as an oasis from “naturalism at its height,” and Gautier emphasized its intellectual as well as art historical interest: “It does not displease us to find a bit of Hamlet in Oedipus and a bit of Mantegna in an artist of our day who treats an antique subject.”⁷

Moreau’s creative scholarship was again evident in his 1863–65 *Jason* (Musée d’Orsay). The pose of Jason and Medea was borrowed from figures in Sodoma’s *Wedding of Alexander and Roxanne* (1516–17) at the Farnesina in Rome, which Moreau had copied in 1857. With their crinkled golden hair and slender bodies, they could almost be twins, except that Medea’s skin is an even paler shade of alabaster. She rests her hand on his shoulder, a detail critics saw as foreshadowing her future baleful influence. But the picture is more decorative than dramatic. The ram’s head tops a column studded with cameos and ancient coins, and tiny jewel-colored hummingbirds flit around the lovers’ heads.

Another salon success of the same period was *Diomedes Devoured by His Horses* (1865), showing the violent scene in front of a real, if Piranesi-inspired, section of the Forum of Nerva in Rome; the vertical-format oil is now in the collection of the Musée des beaux-arts, Rouen. Moreau’s propensity for multiple versions of a subject is highlighted by a recent discovery. Less than a decade ago, a large oil sketch of Diomedes was discovered, rolled up, in a storage cabinet in the Musée Gustave Moreau. The sepia-toned *ébauche*, a full-size sketch in underpaint, can be quite elaborate. Moreau’s horizontal-format Diomedes is dynamic. The setting has been radically simplified: only a few brushstrokes indicate a building at one side, a column at the other. The maddened horses are drawn with all the anatomical skill of Théodore Géricault; Moreau owned reproductions of Géricault’s famous images of the Barberi horserace in Rome.⁸ Drawing with paint, Moreau convincingly depicts the arched muscular necks, lethal hooves, and wild expressions of the animals; one of the horses exposes the flailing Diomedes by tugging at the last of his garments. It’s a strikingly energetic composition, demonstrating the vigor of an artist conventionally pigeonholed as a dreamer. Moreau was a great admirer of Michelangelo, albeit a Michelangelo filtered through his own sensibility, an artist of epic power but imbued with “*belle interie*.” “All the figures of Michelangelo,” Moreau wrote, “appear to be arrested in an ideal state of sleepwalking....they appear to be rapt in sleep and borne toward some other worlds than ours.”⁹

Moreau’s visionary, very personal style is rooted in eclectic taste and wide-ranging visual curiosity. Elements collaged from a variety of sources—sketched or sometimes traced from photographic reproductions—are incorporated into new, startlingly original works of art. This exhibition was particularly good at laying out the encyclopedic sources that Moreau transformed. Nowhere is this alchemy more persuasive than in the various versions of his most famous subject, Salome. Moreau’s 1874–76 *Salome* (Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles) caused a sensation at the Salon of 1876, prompting a spate of Symbolist and Decadent prose poems, notably Joris-Karl Huysmans’s extravaganza of composite architecture and hothouse sensuality in his novel *A Rebours* (1884).¹⁰ The germ of the legend is found in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, where an unnamed princess, at her mother’s insistence, dances for King Herod and obtains the head of John the Baptist. While there are medieval and Renaissance images of Salome, notably Fra Filippo Lippi’s graceful dancer in *Herod’s Feast* (1452–66) from the cathedral in Prato, Italy, she became a major figure in the

late nineteenth century. The fin de siècle's favorite femme fatale inspired scores of paintings and poems, Oscar Wilde's 1894 play, Aubrey Beardsley's marvelous black-and-white illustrations, and Richard Strauss's 1905 expressionist opera.

The central figure of Moreau's *Salome* is, given the size of the painting and the headiness of its cultural context, surprisingly delicate. Eyes cast down, a lotus blossom held in front of her face, she moves as if in a trance, impossibly skimming along on the toes of naked, pearl-draped feet. Her jeweled garments and mitered headdress mix elements drawn from Moreau's ethnographic research and pure fantasy. I find the best prose equivalent not in Huysmans but in Walter Pater, in a paean to a drawing attributed to Leonardo: "Daughters of Herodias, with their fantastic headdresses knotted and folded so strangely to leave the dainty oval of the face disengaged....They are the clairvoyants through whom, as through delicate instruments, one becomes aware of the subtler forces of nature all...that is magnetic...."¹¹ Salome's ceremonial finery and eerie stillness give her a Byzantine air. The Empress Theodora, wife of the sixth-century emperor Justinian—the stately queen in the processional mosaics of S. Vitale, Ravenna—had begun her career, according to the historian Procopius, as a dancer and circus performer.

Contemporary observers described the fantastic architecture of Herod's palace-temple as Romanesque, Byzantine, Muslim and Hindu.¹² In fact, as researchers have documented, Moreau concocted the scene from a variety of sources. Herod—immobile as a statue, a sinister hierophant in jeweled robes—is encased in a throne of gold, porphyry and lapis lazuli, surmounted by a many-breasted deity. It could be Isis or the Diana of the Ephesians denounced by Paul, a universal goddess of Hellenistic syncretism. In creating his costumes, decor and architecture, Moreau utilized his vast stock of photographs, including images of Hagia Sophia, the Alhambra, the Sphinx, and Indian and Mexican temples, as well as Arabian and Tibetan costumes. He consulted his collection of Mughal miniatures and standard source books, such as Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (first published in London, 1856).¹³

Moreau was working on another version of the Salome legend simultaneously, *The Apparition*, which remained in his studio. He continued refining it almost to the end of his life. A fascinating pendant to the Salon painting, *The Apparition* is the



Gustave Moreau, *The Unicorns*, 1887–88
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

more daring composition. Moreau creates convincing recessive space with nearly abstract washes of smoky color, a restricted palette of browns, ochres, green and orange. His incense-fumed colors are a reminder that Rembrandt was one of his heroes. "There are times," Moreau wrote, "when one would give everything for the mud of Rembrandt."¹⁴ The strongest color in *The Apparition* is scarlet—a vertical slash indicating a guard, a horizontal one at Salome's feet representing a rug, or perhaps blood. The elaborate architectural and sculptural detail is drawn in, a fine network of black and white tracery over the shadowy color field. Herod, Herodias, the throne, the palace itself dissolve. Impasto is reserved for Salome, now nearly naked and wide-eyed, and the eponymous apparition. The head of John the Baptist floats before her, haloed in white and gold paint, with a streak of red for blood. There is a disturbing intimacy, a peculiar emotional connection between the two.

Moreau's last additions to *The Apparition* include the architectural details, based in large part on medieval models, which he traced from books such as Nicholas Xavier Willemin's *Monuments Français inédits* (1859) or sketched during visits to the Musée de Cluny in Paris.¹⁵ Moreau's eclectic approach defies anachronism as it sidesteps the literalism of archaeology. Technically daring, he combines the physical presence of impasto and the fluid color of oil painting with the delicacy of pure line. While some Symbolist art slides into kitsch, Moreau's images are genuinely mysterious, simultaneously imaginary and authentic. He finds painterly correlatives for the myths that stir his imagination. As Pater wrote of Leonardo, Moreau uses "incidents of the sacred legend, not for their own sake, or as a mere subject for pictorial realization but as a language for fancies all his own."¹⁶

In spite of his large-scale victories at the Salon, Moreau worked more often in watercolor than in oil. One of his loveliest watercolors is the 1871–72 *Sappho* (Victoria and Albert Museum), depicting the ancient Greek poet who, in despair over a faithless lover, threw herself from a cliff. Sappho became an icon for the Romantics and Symbolists, a martyr to love and art. Moreau's friend and mentor Chassériau, who died at age 37, had painted Sappho as a cosmic figure, her dark hair spread out against a deep blue night sky. There is nothing specifically Greek about Moreau's Sappho. Her scarlet robe with stylized blue flowers was inspired by a Japanese print Moreau owned.¹⁷ The gold-and-lapis column, topped by a griffin, looks Venetian. The cliff overlooks a Leonardo landscape touched with failing light. Swooning, she seems to hover in a trance of creativity, leaning on a poet's lyre.

The dead or dying poet mourned by nature is a recurring theme for Moreau. Orpheus was a *locus classicus*, the poet who could charm beasts with his music, who brought Eurydice back from Hades only to lose her. After Orpheus was savaged by murderous baccantes, his severed head floated away, still singing. Moreau's salon oil *Orpheus* (1865, Musée d'Orsay) became another icon of the *tête coupée*, a fin-de-siècle obsession. The young Thracian woman reverently holding that head on the lyre is a chaster sister of Salome. Moreau returns to the motif in two particularly touching late works. In *Orpheus at the Tomb of Eurydice* (1891), the classical world is reduced to a blocky temple shape. Spongy trees turn blood red against a dark blue sky. In a late watercolor, *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur* (c. 1890), a grey-bearded centaur tenderly supports the young poet with jeweled lyre. The poet's blue-white skin is in striking contrast to the shaggy brown flanks of the man-beast. The figures are a reverse image of a *Deluge* group in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, which Moreau had studied during his time in Rome. In the background, low on the horizon, glowers a blue and red sunset, a

circle of molten yellow-white at its core, worthy of Turner.

The mythic fellowship of human and animal runs through Moreau's oeuvre, especially in images of women and their totemic beasts. Moreau painted *The Peacock Complaining to Juno* (1881–82) as an illustration for the *Fables* of La Fontaine. The artist described his goddess as “milky white, very idealized, with olympian white light emanating from the airy sky of Greece.”¹⁸ In contrast to *Juno*, with its luminous pastels, *Delilah with an Ibis* (1873) glows like stained glass, illustrating the variety of Moreau's watercolors. Posed like Pauline Borghese in Canova's celebrated *Venus Victrix* (1805), the nearly white Delilah is a pearl set off by loosely brushed splashes of emerald green, cobalt blue, and scarlet. *Fairy with Griffin* (1885–90), in watercolor, pen and brown ink, was André Breton's favorite picture at the Musée Gustave Moreau.¹⁹ The fairy's grotto is a Rembrandtesque cavern of rich smoky browns with flashes of peacock blue. The haloed central figure, quickly sketched in, sits enthroned between two golden griffins with deep blue wings. At her feet writhes a blue-and-emerald chimera, a half-woman, half-serpent that suggests John Keats's Lamia: “a gordian shape of dazzling blue.... some penanced lady elf, / some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.”²⁰

Another contemplative female figure appears in the 1895–96 *Beside the Waters*, one of those gestural, free compositions that looks proto-abstractionist to modern eyes. The draped female figure leans against what may be a lyre. Sweeping brushstrokes and saturated patches of crimson, pumpkin, deep blue, brown and green hint at a lake and the far shore of a landscape. In places, the white of the paper shows through. In profile, the thoughtful, exotic beauty gazes at a floating mass of color that seems to contain a smaller head in profile, perhaps a demon or a muse.²¹

If Moreau could reduce the iconographic attributes of his legends in some compositions, he remained entranced by both classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. One of his favorite late themes was the story of Jupiter and Semele, the nymph destroyed because she begged to see the god undisguised. Jupiter took her unborn child, Bacchus, and sewed it into his own thigh. Moreau's monumental oil *Jupiter and Semele* (1889–95) did not travel to New York, but smaller watercolor and oil versions did. The big oil is an elaborate syncretic composition, with a flower-bedecked throne and architectural frame, a young Christ-like Jupiter with a poet's lyre, and dozens of smaller figures with their own allegorical gloss. I find the smaller pictures, focusing on a titanic, classically bearded Jupiter and the smaller figure of Semele, more effective. The startling scale of the couple owes something to Ingres's stunning *Jupiter and Thetis* (1811). The Zodiac is borrowed from an engraving by the English neoclassicist John Flaxman. The pale, terrified Semele is draped across Jupiter's leg. Staring straight ahead, he rests one arm on a lyre, usually Apollo's attribute. A tiny red-winged figure—the “genius of sensual and earthly love, the goat-legged genius,” in Moreau's words—weeps over Semele.²² Jupiter's gold halo, composed of serpents, glows against a blue-black sky under the Zodiac arch.

Moreau's most medieval image is *The Unicorns* (1887–88), inspired by the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries rediscovered in 1841 and displayed at the Musée de Cluny beginning in 1882. With a *mille fleur* design strewn across a red background, the Cluny ensemble is equaled only by the Cloisters unicorn tapestries in New York. The legend that only a virgin could tame the fierce creature has been read as allegory, a story of marriage or the Incarnation. Moreau's version is a dream of medieval romance, set in an “enchanted isle with a gathering of women, only women, providing the most precious pretext for all the plastic motifs.”²³ Moreau's pale-eyed unicorns

gather around fairy-tale princesses in fantastic regalia. The nearly nude half-reclining figure in the foreground wears a red velvet Renaissance beret with green ribbons. A transparent crystal chalice floats at her feet. The standing princess with the Pisanello profile is elaborately gowned in soft colors that look like faded velvet. Once again, Moreau has spun a fine web of tracery lines to indicate the filigree of lace and jewelry. The Turneresque lakeshore shimmers like a mirage. This wonderful image reminds us how sumptuous line and thin, weathered color can be, redefining the notion of an oil painting. The exhibition over, *The Unicorns* have returned home, to the artist's own palace of art.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, works discussed are from the Musée Gustave Moreau.
2. Geneviève Lacambre, with contributions by Larry J. Feinberg, Marie-Laure de Contenson, and Douglas W. Druick, *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream* (La Reunion des musées nationaux/The Art Institute of Chicago; Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1999), pp. 175–77.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
5. Larry Feinberg, "Gustave Moreau and the Italian Renaissance," in Lacambre, *Moreau*, p. 6.
6. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Works*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti, first published, 1911 (New York: Adler's Foreign Books, Inc., 1972), p. 171.
7. Cited in Lacambre, *Moreau*, p. 81.
8. Lacambre, *Moreau*, p. 120.
9. Cited in Lacambre, *Moreau*, pp. 10–11.
10. For another example, see *Symbolist Art Theory: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Henri Dorra (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 44–8. For Salome in literature, see Francoise Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). The whole phenomenon is discussed in A.M. Hammacher, *Phantoms of the Imagination*, trans. by Tony Langham and Plym Peters (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), pp. 89–107.
11. Pater's Leonardo essay first appeared in *The Fortnightly* in November 1869. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1893), ed. by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 91.
12. Lacambre, *Moreau*, p. 164.
13. Lacambre, "Moreau and Exoticism," in Lacambre, *Moreau*, pp. 15–20.
14. Cited in Pierre Louis Malthieu, *Gustave Moreau*, translated by James Emmons (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), p. 22.
15. Marie-Laure de Contenson, "The Middle Ages as Reinvented by Gustave Moreau," in Lacambre, *Moreau*, pp. 23–24.
16. Pater, p. 97.
17. Lacambre, *Moreau*, p. 113.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
19. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 194.
20. Malthieu, *Moreau*, p. 246.
21. John Keats, "Lamia," *Poetical Works*, ed. by H.W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 162.
22. Lacambre, *Moreau*, p. 267.
23. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 240.
24. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 229.