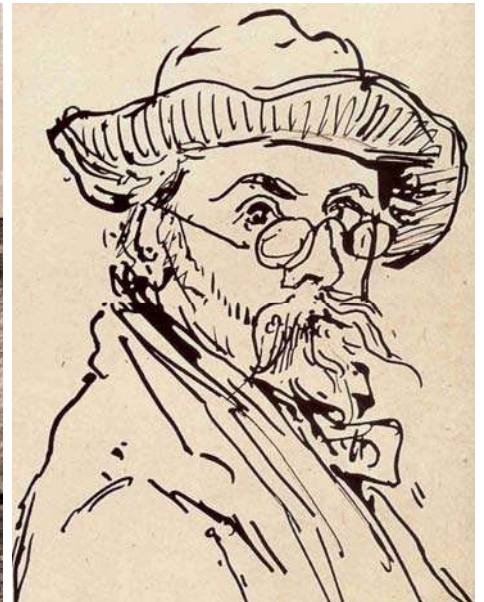
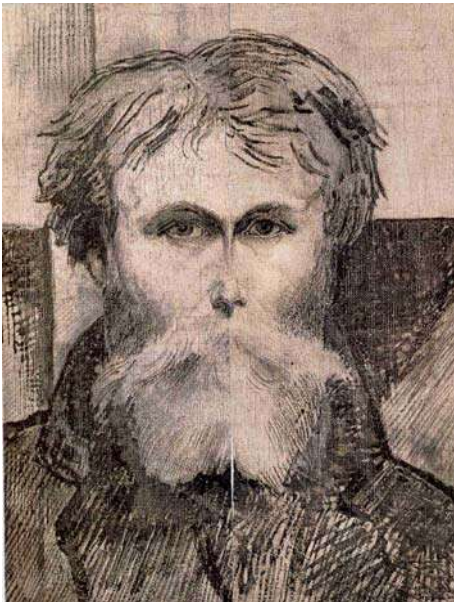


THE MANY FACES OF GUSTAVE MOREAU

THE 19TH-CENTURY FRENCH PAINTER INFUSED HIS DIVERSE WORKS WITH EXOTICISM AND POETIC IMAGINATION

by Bennett Schiff, *Smithsonian*, August, 1999



Moreau's numerous self-portraits include, from left: an 1850 oil in Romantic, Rembrandtesque style; a pen-and-ink drawing, c. 1872; and a rare sketch of the artist at work (detail), c. 1880.

At the art institute of Chicago last February, two women were looking at the striking exhibition of the work of Gustave Moreau, an artist long out of fashion and little known in this country. A brief dialogue followed:

"Wow!" said one from across the gallery.

"Wait just a minute! Would you just look at this one," said the other, transfixed.

It was, although in slightly varied terms, a reaction identical to that of visitors at the Grand Palais in Paris, where the show began, and at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is now on view through August 22.

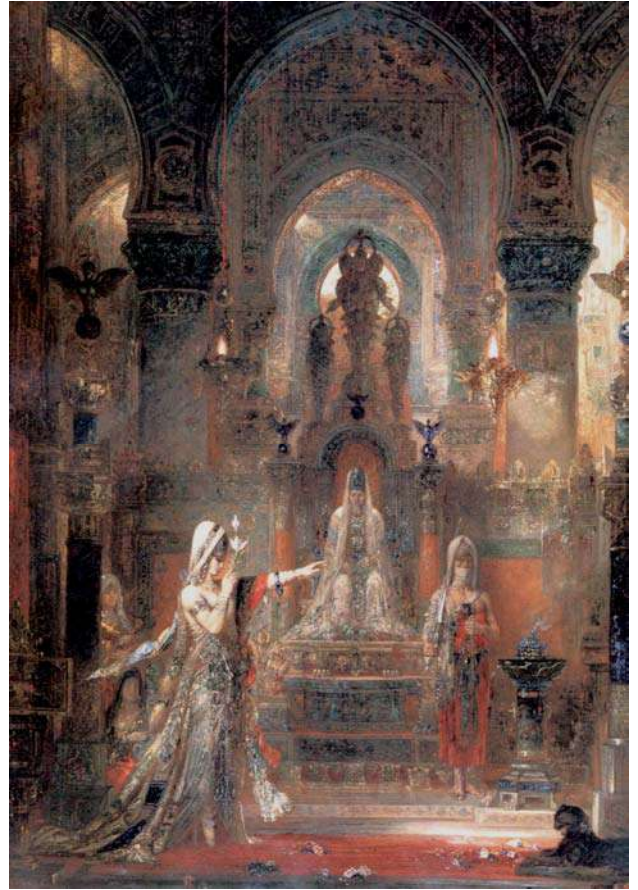
The international press, with few exceptions, was in agreement. *Paris Match*, the popular weekly magazine, gave the show eight pages. England's highly intellectual and highly regarded fine arts magazine *Burlington* gave Moreau an academic rave. London's *Financial Times* applauded. The Italian and German press joined in. Even *Paris Vogue*, which presides with magisterial prerogative over what is of importance in fashion's imperial city, ran a special layout using models in costumes inspired by the paintings—a concept that would have shocked the quiet and proper painter.

What they saw was an impressively mounted, varied exhibition of the dreamworld fantasies of a correct and elegant little man who lived precisely in one way and painted distinctly in another. It is difficult to decide which, to Moreau, was more real—or, in fact, of more importance. "All that I have sought," he wrote, "I have found, in small proportions no doubt, but in forms perfectly pure and flawless, for I have never looked for dream in reality or reality in dream. I have allowed my imagination free play, and I have

not been led astray by it." Driven by his voluntary illusions, Moreau painted elaborate spectacles in hallucinatory colors—a world inhabited by figures and settings taken from the Bible, and from Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Oriental mythology.

At first view the sheer theatricality of his painting comes as an eye-opener—an operatic curtain-raiser, an opulent extravaganza. But after the initial impression, the extraordinary quality of so much of the work follows and you realize that you are, like it or not—and it is just as easy to be put off by it as it is to be entranced—in the presence of a unique, visionary master. A prodigious technician with an active and often fervid imagination, Moreau produced thousands of works—paintings, drawings, watercolors—during his 50-year career, roughly from the mid-19th century to its end. His watercolors are a revelation and may well turn out to be his major accomplishment. In any event, he excelled in that discipline and was one of the finest, most expressive and daring watercolorists in France during the second half of the century.

Reclusive, he nevertheless knew what was going on. When the then-popular Symbolist writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, who was greatly influenced by Moreau's paintings, called the artist "a hermit locked up in the heart of Paris," the acerbic painter Edgar Degas, who knew Moreau well, replied, yes, "a hermit who knows what time the trains leave."



His jewel-like Salome caused a sensation at the 1876 Salon.

He was greatly admired by Proust, who frequently wrote about him. Later, his strange and dramatic work caught the attention of Andre Breton, plumber and propagandist of dreams, the high-priest theoretician of Surrealism, which would become an important movement in 20th-century art.

Living quietly and comfortably on a private income, Moreau was able to indulge his taste for a solitary life, painting obsessively and selling selectively at high prices to collectors who both commissioned and eagerly applied for works that might become available. And then, slowly, as the new century turned over, just two years after his death in 1898, he slipped out of sight and descended into the darkness that is the fate of visual artists whose work people no longer look at.

It was an odd situation considering that Moreau had, in effect, built himself a memorial right there in Paris, where he was born and lived his entire life. Devoted solely to his work, the Musee Gustave Moreau opened to the public in 1903, his bequest to France, but few people came.

About 25 years ago you could make a pilgrimage to the museum, a trip quickly accomplished in about ten minutes on the Metro from the center of the city. Once there, you could walk through the extraordinary rooms of the Beaux-Arts-style mansion, surrounded by the artist's exotic and visionary images, and be transported to another realm. And, at least for one visitor on that day, you would be the only person there.

Ten years ago the American writer Edmund White went there and found the place to be "a refuge, a closed temple, even a hiding place." He relates the story of an expatriate American writer who just after World War II went to see the museum, only to find a guard there who denied him access. Bribing his way

in, he was startled to find that the entire museum had been turned into a chicken coop, a black-market poultry yard. It was a situation that would have delighted the Surrealists. It would, however, have devastated Moreau, though the scene could not have been more bizarre than some of those depicted in his own paintings.

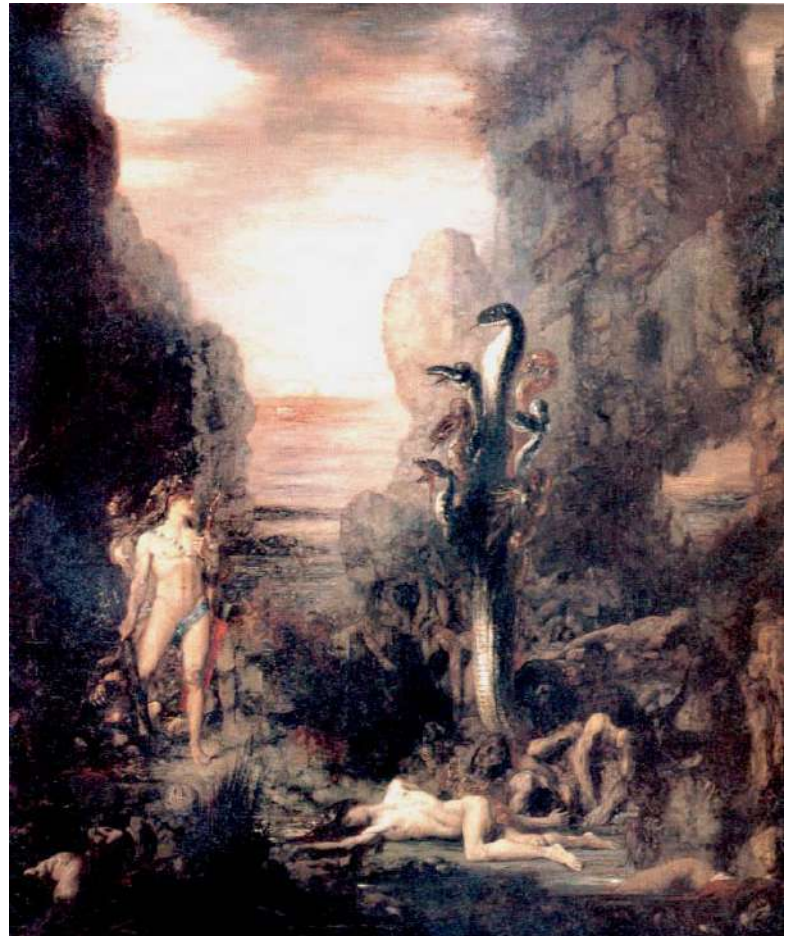
The Art Institute of Chicago's Larry J. Feinberg was one of the curators of the current exhibition. Titled "Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream," the retrospective brings together more than 180 paintings, watercolors and drawings, and marks the centennial of the artist's death. Feinberg, who spent two years digging in the Moreau Museum's storage rooms and closets researching the show, recalled recently that there "one feels transported back in time to his world. The rarefied air is so intoxicating, it's barely breathable."

The museum is still turning up spectacular surprises. Just a few years ago its director, Genevieve Lacambre, found an unfinished version of *Diomedes Devoured by His Horses* rolled up in the corner of a hidden cupboard, overlooked since the museum opened some 90 years before. The unfinished work, done ten years after the original, is impressive. Sweepingly free, its tones pale in the underpainting—with bare patches of canvas here and there—the masterwork surpasses the original painting. Both are included in the show, which is the largest and most completely researched Moreau exhibition ever mounted.



Possibly Moreau's most carefully conceived painting, Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra (1869-76) made its debut at the 1876 Salon. The artist made a number of studies for the epic canvas, including the black chalk sketch of Hercules and the watercolor of snakes above.

Gustave Moreau was born in Paris in April 1826 and died there, almost to the day, 72 years later. His father, Louis, a successful architect, was in charge of the construction of the Place de la Concorde in the heart of Paris and of a number of central buildings, including those for several international industrial expositions. His mother, Pauline Desmoutier, daughter of a chateau owner and former mayor of Douai, also came from comfortable, upper-middle-class circumstances.



There was a younger sister, Camille. The family was close, loving and supportive of one another. Gustave was sent to a carefully selected boarding school at the age of 11 but left when Camille died three years later. Even more protective now, the parents educated Gustave at home, where there was a rich and extensive library that the young student devoured. There he encountered the classic volumes on mythology, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the like, which became the basis of so much of his major work.

He also studied Roman architecture, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the designs and decorations of the Middle and Far East, Shakespeare and, devotedly, the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. He was to keep the library, adding to it steadily, until he died.

His interest in art as a profession was never in doubt. His parents supported him warmly, with high expectations for his talent. Around 1844, he entered the studio of the neoclassical painter Franois-Edouard Picot on the rue de La Rochefoucauld. Some years later Louis Moreau would buy a house on the same street, number 14, which would then become the family home, Moreau's studio and ultimately the Musee Gustave Moreau. With Picot, a follower of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Moreau prepared for the rigorous entrance exams for the state-supported Ecole des Beaux-Arts. If one had any expectations of making a living as an artist in the France of that day, it was considered mandatory to gain admittance to that august institution.

Moreau made it on his first try (it took Matisse, eventually his devoted pupil, at least two) and was admitted in October 1846. Students of distinct promise were expected to compete annually for the prestigious Prix de Rome, awarded by the Academie des Beaux-Arts, which ran the school, administered the annual Salon and was considered, in its heyday, the Supreme Court of Art. The award guaranteed a fine future and carried with it a residency at the magnificent Villa Medici, France's cultural outpost in Rome. Moreau entered two Prix de Rome competitions and twice failed to win. He then left the Beaux-Arts and struck out on his own, a path made smoother by his father, whose connections led to several commissions.



*The Torture of
Prometheus, 1868*

As a struggling artist striving for recognition, Moreau entered the seasonal salons, gaining acceptance at some, failing at others. The government commissioned one entry and placed it in a museum in Dijon. Another entry was sent to a museum in the town of Bourg-en-Bresse in a region known to this day for the quality of its chickens.

In the early 1850s Moreau came into contact with the Romantic painters Eugene Delacroix and Theodore Chasseriau, who influenced both his style of painting and his style of life. From these two masters, Moreau derived his penchant for exotic romanticism, dramatic lighting and brilliant colors. Taking a studio near Chasseriau's, Moreau developed an interest in up-to-the-minute fashion, became something of a dandy, and frequented the literary and artistic salons of the time.

Chasseriau's untimely death in 1856, at the age of 37, devastated Moreau, who retired to his studio to brood and work. Not satisfied with what he was doing, he decided to go to Italy for an extended period of study, delving deeply into the methods and work of masters of the Renaissance and the architectural remains and artifacts of Greek and Roman antiquity. He was to travel throughout the country, and its art and atmosphere were to have a profound and lasting effect on his work. The trip also exposed him to the influence of Byzantine enamels, early mosaics, and Persian and Indian miniatures, all of which would play a significant role in the evolution of his individual style and in the jewel-like effect of his technique. At the Villa Medici in Rome, Moreau met Edgar Degas and traveled around the country with him for a while. They became fast friends, but over time, as their styles diverged, the friendship cooled.

Soon after his arrival in Italy, Moreau wrote to his parents from Rome: "There is a great noise within me, a great movement of ideas and sentiments....I'm putting everything aside for when I'll have need of it." The experience transformed him. It was as if the young artist had built a permanent library of visual memories on which he could always draw.

His copies of the masters—Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Sodoma—painted during this period, were marvels of exactness. A sampling of them is included in the exhibition. "What was unusual," writes Feinberg in his illuminating essay on Moreau and the Italian Renaissance, in the show's excellent catalogue, "was Moreau's approach to the art of Leonardo and Michelangelo." He "eschewed the heroic and the narrative in favor of a depiction of the mysterious and the private experience of the individual. He looked not to Leonardo's *Last Supper* but to his enigmatic Saint John...he preferred Michelangelo's Sistine prophets and sibyls, each involved in personal meditation or ecstatic revelation, to the chapel's grand, dramatic scenes."

Moreau was especially absorbed by the "sleeping" figures in the Sistine Chapel and by the idea of an "otherworldly sphere to which they seem to belong. For everything in them is a mystery to us," he wrote. "We do not walk, we do not act, we do not rest, we do not ponder, we do not weep, we do not think in that way on this planet, in this our world." He once described himself as an "*assembleur de rêves*," an assembler of dreams. This idea, which lay so deeply embedded in much of Moreau's subsequent work, explains a great deal about the many detached and enigmatic figures who appear placid and virtually expressionless in the face of the most intense and threatening situations.

Outstanding examples of psychological and physical detachment can be seen in one after another of Moreau's paintings. In *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864), for instance, the winged creature—half nude female, half lion, an incubus clawed into Oedipus' breast—does not seem to inflict pain at all. Instead, the grotesque creature and its placid victim appear to be dreamily engrossed in each other, although Oedipus is soon to answer the Sphinx's riddle and she, or it, is to fall dead to the ground, finally, having already shredded any number of hapless voyagers unable to answer the riddle. Their bits and pieces are, in Moreau's superbly rendered canvas, strewn about the foreground.

And so, Hercules, in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, stands unperturbed as he is about to end the awful career of the seven-headed Hydra—the serpentine monster that had held Argos terrorized—which readies itself to strike once more as it is about to be dispatched by the hero.



Shown at the 1864 Salon, Oedipus and the Sphinx (above) established Moreau's reputation and prompted a rethinking of history painting.



The Apparition (Dance of Salome). 1876

Even the glowingly beautiful Salome dances as if in a reverie before a hazy Herod seated on his throne, as though the bloody deed of separating John the Baptist from his head hadn't occurred to her, although that is precisely what her dance is all about. Salome appears here as still and straight as a motionless spindle balanced *en pointe*. A work of sheer wonder, the painting burns and glows in muted oranges, sulfurous saffrons and turquoise blues, in the midst of which Salome stands, an enameled figure, a balanced dagger. Moreau painted her, he said, as if she were a jeweled reliquary. And what, if not dreamy, is the lyrical nude in the beguiling late painting *The Unicorns* (next page), a delicate, fairy-tale picture.

Upon his return to Paris in 1859, Moreau went to work in his studio but, for a number of years, did not show his art to the public. With the exhibition of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* in the Salon of 1864, and *Orpheus* in the Salon of 1866, however, Moreau achieved formal recognition of his prodigious talent. With these two paintings, the

artist helped reinvigorate the tradition of history painting, infusing his epic tales with poetic imagination, exoticism and a sense of the bizarre.



The idyllic, meticulous rendering of The Unicorns (left), c. 1887, provides a poignant contrast to the rapid, scratchy brushwork and somber expression of The Parca and the Angel of Death (right).



In 1859 Moreau had met Alexandrine Dureux, his "best and only *amie*." They never lived together. Instead he paid the rent for a flat for her in a nearby apartment building. When his mother died, he wrote to Alexandrine: "I want nothing more for my last hours than [your] hand in mine, and that we be left alone." But he didn't invite her to share the spacious family mansion, and perhaps she didn't want to. Yet he did not want ever to be far from her. The couple was devoted for 31 years, until she died in 1890, at the age of 54. Distraught, and more than ever alone with his work, Moreau painted two memorial paintings—*The Parca and the Angel of Death* (above right) and *Orpheus at the Tomb of Eurydice*. "After the death of a cherished being," he wrote, "one must isolate oneself to remain faithful to her."

Following Alexandrine's death, Moreau's style changed. His brushwork became looser and more expressive; his pigment grew thicker, more impastoed; and his forms became increasingly abstract. The overriding effect of these later paintings was to evoke an emotional response through the use of color, line and form. Some even view his later nonfigurative works as heralds of Abstract Expressionism. Certainly his art inspired a generation of Symbolist painters, poets and writers and had a marked impact on other artists, including the Surrealists and the radical group known as the Fauves.

In the last six years of his life, Moreau continued to work obsessively. Emerging from his seclusion, he honored his artist friend Elie Delaunay's deathbed request and accepted an offer to teach at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He quickly became the mentor, if not to say idol, of his students, to whom he imparted, through impassioned lectures before masterpieces in the Louvre and thoughtful critiques of their work, a sense of freedom from the otherwise rigid controls of the school. He taught, among a number of others who became known afterward, Georges Rouault and Henri Matisse—both of whom never ceased to praise him for setting them free.

Rouault, greatly influenced by Moreau's style, went on to become the first curator of the Moreau Museum. Matisse, who studied with Moreau for six years and whose style was quite different from that of

his mentor, spoke with reverence and affection of Moreau and what he had meant to him. "He didn't set his pupils on the right road," Matisse said. "He took them off it. He made them uneasy....He didn't show us how to paint; he roused our imagination in front of the life he found in those paintings."

In March 1896, having encouraged Matisse to enter a competition, Moreau came to the artist's studio on the Quai Saint-Michel to see what his pupil was doing. "Already frail, crippled with shooting pains in his limbs and walking with difficulty," Hilary Spurling relates in her fine and indispensable recent biography of Matisse, "Moreau had to be helped up more than a hundred steep steps to the fifth floor." Matisse never forgot the intimacy of the visit, Spurling tells us. "Nearly half a century later Matisse could not speak of it without tears in his eyes."

It was at this time that Moreau went about building his museum. In 1895 he undertook extensive renovations, adding two exhibition halls to the top of the building. It was the realization of an idea he had noted on the bottom of a sketch in 1862, the year in which his father died: "I think of my death and of the fate of all these works and compositions I have taken such trouble to collect. Separately they will perish, but taken as a whole they give an idea of what kind of an artist I was and in what kind of surroundings I chose to live my dreams."

In his will, he said it was his "dearest wish that it [France] keep this collection always or for as long as is possible and maintain the wholeness of its character as a definition of the sum of the work and effort of the artist during his life." The collection he left behind came to more than 14,000 works—paintings, watercolors, drawings and numerous sketches—as well as a vast archive of documentary and supportive material and personal effects.



Painted c. 1895, Moreau's watercolor Landscape Study exhibits the bold, expressive color and abstract quality of his late works.

As it happened, as fashion twisted and twirled, he had painted himself into a cul-de-sac, but as it has turned out, one from which a phosphorescent, reactivated volcano is sending out waves of intensely colored light and dreams.

For now, the people are coming.

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By BENNETT SCHIFF

In researching this article, contributing editor Bennett Schiff revisited Paris' Moreau Museum after 25 years and found it filled with visitors.