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## **"Daumier Was No Camera"**

by Sarah Studnicki

For a man who did not hold lithography in very high regard as an art form in his early career, Honore Daumier became a prolific artist in this genre, producing thousands of drawings throughout his life. While working at *La Charivari*, a French political magazine, Daumier completed 1600 lithographs in approximately ten years<sup>1</sup>. Due to Daumier's numerous achievements in his field, I will concentrate only on those lithography series done for *La Charivari* between the passing of the September censorship laws of 1835 and the subsequent round of French Revolution that occurred in 1848. The September Laws were the French government's way of hushing the politically dissatisfied press during a socially turbulent era in France's history. However, these stern restrictions did not quiet the press or the reactionaries; it made them hone their talents as they worked around the political repression. Instead of directly criticizing the King or a specific politician, the censorship laws forced the artists and writers to think of increasingly more creative

methods of attack. This period of time also marks a stage in Daumier's career where he was fully devoted to his lithography. Later in his life, he concentrated most of his effort on painting and spent his nights bearing his monthly lithography burden to *La Charivari*.

Born in 1808 to an aspiring writer and his wife, Honore-Victorin Daumier grew up in various locations throughout France, as his father desperately tried to make a living through his literature. Although art teachers schooled him for short periods of time, Daumier did not have intensive formal training. Alexandre Lenoir was the most important among those who had a hand in Daumier's education.<sup>2</sup> Lenoir's love of Michaelangelo transferred directly into Daumier's illustrious drawing style. Lenoir was also passionate about the Louvre's collection of classical sculpture and forced an unenthusiastic Daumier to copy many a Roman nose.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this seemingly trivial work further motivated Daumier's biting recreations of classicism later in his career. Most accounts of Daumier's life reveal drawing as his first interest in art. Supposedly, the artist himself stated at an early age, "I want to draw." However, Howard P. Vincent, author of *Daumier and His World*, claims that Daumier, like his father, had a life-long dream to be known for something other than what he was. His father wanted to be a writer, but instead worked as a book-maker; Daumier longed to be a painter, but worked as an illustrator.

In lithography, Daumier found a medium between his inherent skills as a draftsman and his ambition to paint. In many of his lithographs, he used monochromatic swaps of the greasy pencil just as effectively as if he held an entire color palette in his hand. One can say that lithography and Daumier found each other in Paris. This means of printing had only recently become indispensable to Parisians around 1828, when the Department of the Seine itself contained 23 shops, up from a single novelty venture in 1815.<sup>4</sup> In 1798, German playwright Aloys Senefelder discovered lithography as a cheap and quick alternative to print his scripts. Lithography soon entered the studios of important artists like Gros, Guerin, Ingres, Delacroix, Gericault and Goya, as well as the print shops of the cheap press.<sup>5</sup> The potential duality of lithography, as a fine art and an art for the masses, paralleled Daumier's wish to be a fine artist able to reach the people.

During those years of struggle for a free press, the "people" were of great concern to many members of French society. The various political factions each had their own publications with which to rally their particular causes. Consequently, the success of revolts relied on the

people's support. There were three groups who constantly clashed: the Legitimists (Monarchists, Orleanists), who favored a monarchy; the Republicans, who believed in a constitutional ruling of the nation; and the contemporary government. Though all factions were opposed to one another, the Legitimists and the Republicans shared a common enemy in the government. An ardent fighter for journalistic freedom, Charles Philipon was a fierce Republican who took advantage of the lithography press, by simultaneously running papers and projects to hold the ambivalent King Louis-Philippe to his promises to ban censorship. Philipon had as little political confidence in Louis-Philippe as he did in Charles X, whom the French had forced into abdication in 1830 because of his stranglehold on the press. Daumier had done some freelance work concerning the flight of Charles X, for which he was first published in 1829 by *La Silhouette*.<sup>6</sup> Sympathetic to his convictions, Daumier soon began working with the energetic Philipon. At this time, the young Daumier attentively heeded the advice of Philipon and even strove to follow in his footsteps. After taking Philipon's suggestion to draw Louis-Philippe as Gargantua, Daumier quickly landed himself in jail in August of 1832. Knowing that Philipon had previously gone to jail for one of his caricatures, Daumier carelessly signed his name to Gargantua, performing his first act of defiance. The conditions of Saint-Pelagie Prison hardly scarred Daumier, who served his sentence in the prison's comfortable political quarters. If his jail time influenced him in any way, then it strengthened his repugnance for the politicians who put him there, thus making him a more forceful artist.

While Daumier served his jail term, Philipon developed yet another Republican paper to monitor the King. This time he aptly entitled it *La Charivari*, which means rough music or "hubbub".<sup>7</sup> Philipon granted Daumier a place on the paper immediately upon his release. Daumier later characterized the staff as a rowdy band for the paper's header. Philipon's timing could not have been better, for the increasingly tyrannical King subjected his other paper, *La Caricature*, to countless illegal seizures. The King eventually forced Philipon's paper to close down after the passing of the September censorship laws in 1835. Although in a more subversive manner, *La Charivari* allowed the activist Philipon and the artist Daumier to continue their political attacks.

The editors of *La Charivari* encouraged their artists to work in series and Daumier made major contributions to this genre. Three of Daumier's series, Robert Macaire, which addressed bourgeois materialism; Ancient History, which ridiculed society's and, especially, the

artistic world's fascination with neoclassicism; and Bluestockings, which poked fun at the hard-core feminists of Daumier's day, made distinct social comments on French urban life drawn from Daumier's Realist perspective. Influenced by his circle of Realist friends, which included artists Millet and Courbet and writers Flaubert, Zola, and Baudelaire, Daumier focused the subject matter of his art on the present time and the world around him.

After *La Caricature* had shut down, Daumier completed a catalog of French types that included "The Errand Boy," "The Tailor," "The Public Stenographer," "The Banker," "The Man of Leisure," "The Cook," "The Restaurateur," "The Coiffeur," "The Wig-Maker," "The Art Student," and "The Butcher."<sup>8</sup> This exercise served as fodder for his first great series, Robert Macaire, which lasted from August of 1836 until November 1838. The actor Lemaitre created Robert Macaire from a floundering play. Philipon latched onto the character, developed his numerous schemes, and trusted Daumier to give them life through illustration. Macaire became a national symbol for an entire age that at once embodied the ideals of the money-hungry French society of the mid-1800s, but also ridiculed these same thoughts. Daumier followed the example of Lemaitre by giving Macaire an ambiguous physical description in order to avoid any trouble from the government censors. The actor drew his inspiration directly from a wandering vagrant he randomly encountered in the street one day:

His hair was dressed in windblown style under a shapeless top hat. One eye was covered with a black patch. A voluminous red flannel scarf covered his face from the nose down and hid the place where a shirt ought to have been but was not. From a pocket of what had once been a green coat with silver buttons cascaded a bundle of many-colored rags, the remains of a splendid scarf. The right hand with which he gestured magnificently wore the fragments of a white glove; in his left hand he grasped a huge cane. His red military trousers clung to his shanks, and showed dingy white stockings above a pair of woman's satin shoes.<sup>9</sup>

In appearance, the shabby Macaire is the complete opposite of the uppity bourgeois. However, his outfit contains the remnants of their social trappings: a top hat, a splendid scarf, white gloves, a cane, a military uniform, and satin shoes. This manner of dressing disgraces not only the bourgeois' textile regalia, but also their way of life. Daumier's rendered another likeness that was difficult for the censors to prove, but

still obvious to the French people — the King. The rumpled top hat and the beaten cotton umbrella that Macaire dons are Daumier's direct references to Louis-Philippe.

The heists, which the natural-born swindler Macaire tried to accomplish in every episode of Daumier's serial, paralleled the bourgeois materialism that was prominent in France. Macaire does not hesitate to dress in any guise in order to take advantage of numerous victims, some of whom were evident in Daumier's earlier catalog of French types. Macaire is insatiable: no matter how many swindled possessions or how much ill-gotten money he has, they are never enough. It is the chase, the hunt, the potential of having more which thrills him. The genius of Macaire lies in the discrepancy between his ragged, downtrodden reality and his absurd fantasy of wealth. This is Daumier's warning to the bourgeois.

The next great Daumier series dealt with the onslaught of Neoclassicism in both the Parisian society and the art world during his lifetime. The author Baudelaire, a friend of Daumier's, likened the scene to a damaging plague of locusts. *La Charivari*, Daumier's employer, highlighted the failings of classic sculpture: "The life, the movement, the intimacy—all that was completely lacking to [the Greeks]. Statuary was impoverished...until at last it came to Apollo Belvedere, the stiffest, the silliest of all the white marble gods."<sup>10</sup> The writers of *La Charivari* went for the jugular when they blasted the Apollo Belvedere—the antique statue globally regarded as the premiere example of classical genius. Daumier shared his editors' sentiments when he began a series deriding the public's willingness to give themselves over to a past they had never experienced. Even more poignantly, Daumier aimed his satirical powers at fine art — a field in which he longed to be more highly esteemed. In a series of fifty works published in *La Charivari* between 1841 and 1843, Daumier ridiculed the reluctance of contemporary artists to depict topics of their own era. Instead of portraying antique characters in their traditional roles of beauty and heroism, Daumier reinvented them as "unrefined rustic slob."<sup>11</sup>

In Menelaus the Conqueror, he maintained the traditional circumstances of the story of Troy. The background of the composition contained the burning city submerged under a sea of hanging black smoke. Intense white flames surround the Trojan horse and engulf the people near it. Numerous bodies lay in the mid-ground, nameless and faceless. Knowledgeable of antiquity from his many hours of classical study with Lenoir, Daumier blasphemed the sacred by making a mockery

of the hero and his rescued love. Menelaus does not demonstrate the characteristically heroic muscular stature of the nude rescuer, but shows a saggy frame with a tremendous paunch. Likewise, his sword is not raised in victory, but hangs listlessly from his limp wrist. Only his neck and toe muscles strain not to see or to touch the dead laying before him. The supposedly beautiful Helen is now a frumpy old woman, with appendages as thick and stubby as those of Menelaus. As an added insult, she thumbs her nose at the man who saved her. Many of Daumier's classical reincarnations display women as possessing masculine behavior, thus perverting the ancient story. This was a powerful statement urging people to live in their own time, not in someone else's history.

Bluestocking was Daumier's series of forty prints that featured "dangerous" women, which ran in *La Charivari* from January to August of 1844.<sup>12</sup> The name "bluestocking" hails from a mainly female club of 18th century London, sarcastically called the *Blue Stocking Society* because of the unusual dress of one member, Benjamin Stillingfleet.<sup>13</sup> Some have criticized Daumier because of this series' seemingly sexist nature. However, the object of these prints was not to ridicule women in general, but to satirize a situation in which women played highly visible roles — the feminist movement of the 1840s.

Feminism swept through many cultures during this time, not only in France, but also in England and the United States. Since the September Laws had limited the range of their political targets, male journalists and satirical artists found a new source of material in the "threat" of these women who demanded that more and more of their human rights be delivered to them. These bluestockings also educated themselves and wanted a place in the job market alongside the learned men. This kind of equality went against everything that the patriarchal society believed about women. As a result, they saw intellectually motivated women as threats to the norm of domestic life: "'Bad' wives also usurped male attributes and were shown as posturing, pretentious, willful, neglectful of their household duties and children, adulterous, and even as forcing their men to act as surrogate mothers and 'househusbands.'"<sup>14</sup> In Daumier's Bluestockings, no. 7, a young mother engrossed in her writing turns her back to a messy, unkempt house and a child who is drowning due to her lack of attention. One can certainly see that Daumier added to the controversy surrounding the vocal women of his time. Perhaps, as with the Macaire series, the presentation of these women as dangerous threats was meant to satirize the stereotype.

Instead of lampooning the women who were merely searching for a voice, Daumier showed the foolishness of the alarmists who thought these feminists were such a threat.

As Howard Vincent has said, "Daumier was no camera";<sup>15</sup> he saw things with his own human eyes. Instead of working from models, he drew upon his phenomenal powers of recall to express his view of the contemporary world. Through this utterly personal method of communication, Daumier invites the viewer to look at his subjects through an aura of humanity. This aura is what binds these three examples of his work. In Robert Macaire, he served a warning by reducing the snooty, materialistic bourgeois to a real, human level occupied by a scoundrel named Robert. Daumier broke the myth of perfect antiquity in Ancient History, by unveiling the "sacred" classics to reveal a mortal stature beneath all that white marble. Bluestockings was Daumier's attempt to assay the frenetic alarmists by highlighting the foolishness of their worries: these women were only searching for a voice.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Vincent, Howard P. Daumier and His World Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. p. 95.
- <sup>2</sup>Maison, K.E. Daumier Drawings NY: Thomas Yoselhoff, 1960. p. 9.
- <sup>3</sup>Laughton, Bruce. Honore Daumier London: Yale University Press, 1996. p. 5.
- <sup>4</sup>Vincent. His World p. 8.
- <sup>5</sup>Vincent. His World p. 9.
- <sup>6</sup>Hamill, P. "Daumier Dilemma." Art and Antiques February 1993 v15: 66.
- <sup>7</sup>Symmons, Sarah. Daumier London: Oresko Books, 1979. p. 18.
- <sup>8</sup>Vincent. His World p. 70.
- <sup>9</sup>Larkin, Oliver. Daumier: A Man of His Time Boston: Beacon Press, 1968. p. 37.
- <sup>10</sup>Vincent. His World p. 101.
- <sup>11</sup>Maxmin, Jody. "A Hellenistic Echo in Daumier's Penelope?" Art International August 1984 v27: 39.
- <sup>12</sup>Symmons. Daumier p. 70.
- <sup>13</sup>Morris, William (editor). The American Heritage Dictionary Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976. Entry for bluestocking.
- <sup>14</sup>Casteras, S.P. "Femmes d'esprit in Daumier's Caricatures."



Woman's Art Journal Spring/Summer 1993 v14: 44.

<sup>15</sup>Vincent. His World p. 94.

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