



EXHIBITION AT THE FÉLICIEN ROPS MUSEUM PROVINCE OF NAMUR

FROM 21 OCTOBER 2017 TO 25 FEBRUARY 2018

This dossier is designed primarily for teachers and may be used:

- as an aid for unaccompanied visits: teachers will find all the information they need to accompany their pupils in the exhibition rooms;
- as a support for guided visits: the texts can be provided for pupils after the visit to the museum as a starting point for work and discussions to continue the activity in class.

Ideally, only the presentation of the exhibition (page 2) will be read in class before the guided visit: this enables an initial approach without affecting their encounter with the original works.

The dossier is based mainly on the catalogue¹ and the audioguide that accompany the exhibition. It is one of the educational tools provided to encourage encounters between the Félicien Rops museum and schools. It is not intended to be exhaustive. The educational team at the museum is available if you would like to arrange a meeting or have any special requests.

¹ Catalogue of the exhibition presented at the Hotel Sandelin Museum in Saint-Omer (France) from 24 May to 30 August 2017, entitled *Shakespeare romantique. Füssli, Delacroix, Chassériau*.

PRESENTATION OF THE EXHIBITION

The early 19th century witnessed a real rediscovery of Shakespeare in France. The feelings, strangeness and morals found in the poet's tragedies influenced painters, engravers and sculptors to create an art of emotion and narration. Delacroix, Chassériau, Moreau, Préault and the Belgian artists Samuel, Meunier, Smits and Stevens all drew inspiration from the world of the English playwright.

The exhibition *Romantic Shakespeare* is dedicated to the way in which artists in the Romantic period and then from the late 19th century saw in the works of the English author, who had died almost two centuries previously, a source of inspiration for their own creations. They used his writings to open up the possibility of reviving art, drama and painting. Shakespeare thus became a romantic icon.

This exhibition, which is the result of a partnership with the Louvre and the national Eugène-Delacroix museum, presents sixty outstanding works from French museum collections, supplemented by Belgian fin-de-siècle artists.

CONTEXT

1. William Shakespeare and his reception

William Shakespeare (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1564-1616) is the playwright whose work is most widely performed, read and commented on in the world. Combining the sublime and the ridiculous, his plays surprise with the richness and penetrating charm of his style, his command of dramatic construction and the abundance of his characters. And yet his life remains an enigma for historians and his texts are a challenge for translators. Some people long doubted his very existence, while others disputed the authorship of certain works. These quarrels are now largely behind us. His existence has been historically established and he is indeed considered to be the author of his plays, even if their chronology is approximate.

Whereas in the early 18th century Shakespeare's tragedies did not influence the plastic arts, by the end of the century, entire galleries were devoted to them. Engravings depicting scenes from his plays became popular both in the form of prints and as illustrations in various publications. "The second half of the 18th century saw a multiplication not only of Shakespearian illustrations but also of painted interpretations, produced by leading artists of the time. Around 1760, almost one-third of the plays performed in London in the course of a year were works by the Elizabethan playwright, stressing the topicality of his influence over 150 years after his death."²

Engravings publisher John Boydell officially opened the Shakespeare Gallery in London in 1789. The project was born in the context of an emerging British national culture and deliberations on how to celebrate it. William Shakespeare appeared as the obvious standard bearer of this national culture, and images of the playwright were imprinted in the collective imagination through paintings and engravings.

² Guillaume Faroult, Shakespeare in Art, *La fortune iconographique de Shakespeare dans l'art britannique vers 1760-1840*, 10 April 2014, http://www.musee-delacroix.fr/IMG/pdf/Compte-rendu_de_la_conference_de_Guillaume_Faroult-3.pdf

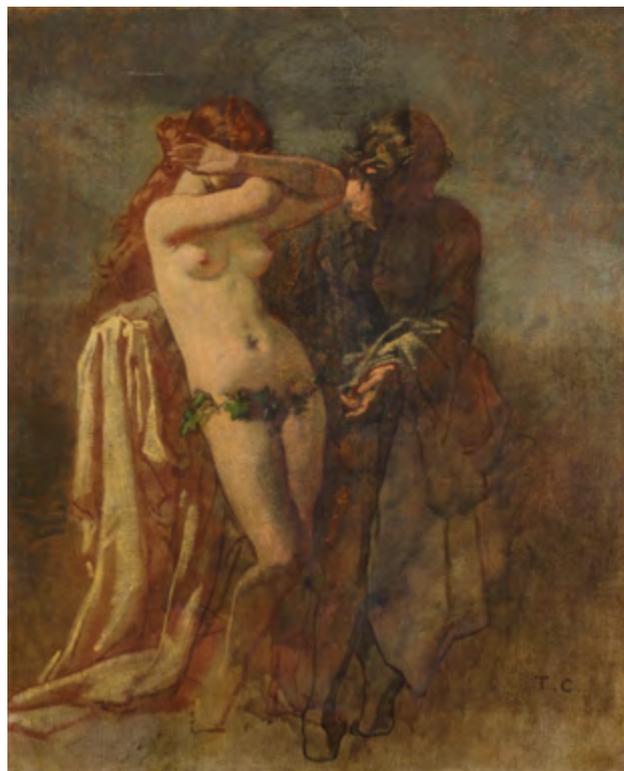
2. Why did the French Romantics revive Shakespeare's plays?

Romanticism is a literary and artistic movement that appeared in England in the 18th century and then in France in the 19th century, promoting the exaltation of feelings and passions, and the liberation of the imagination.

It was not until the 1820s that the work of the English playwright really became significant in France thanks to the interest of Romantic authors but also painters. The major literary panoramas of the past, those of Dante and Racine but also Shakespeare, became vital sources of inspiration for the Romantics, who maintained a special relationship with the art of stage production. In the midst of the English revival, Victor Hugo wrote *Cromwell* (1827), the first Romantic play about 17th-century England. His son, François-Victor, then translated the complete works of Shakespeare, which appeared in 1859. Among the many French adaptations of the time, the French actress Sarah Bernhardt took on the male role of Hamlet, already a highly popular character.

The discovery or rediscovery of Shakespeare's works was to help the Romantics to affirm, on stage, the right of the body to be recognised and, in language, the right to mix registers. Readings and performances of these plays were to contribute towards the depiction of violence in history, but also towards the liberation from the rules of classical theatre and decorum. Thanks to Shakespeare's works, dramatists and painters alike felt free to proclaim disorder in dramatic art, released from the hierarchy of the genres. The violence of the Elizabethan dramas was imported into the Romantic scene: as in Shakespeare, there was a lot of death and killing.

The strength of the passions expressed, the strangeness of the characters and the plots, the temporal and spatial freedom of Shakespeare's plays captivated French painters, engravers and sculptors such as Eugène Delacroix, Gustave Moreau, Théodore Chassériau and others. Shakespeare's works were a notable source to renew their creation, bringing forth an art of emotion and narration. The Romantics adopted many motifs, situations, principles of dramatic art and character types which nurtured their aesthetics of dread.



Thomas Couture, *Nu, study for Timon d'Athènes*, 1857, study on canvas, Paris, Orsay museum, on loan in Reims museum of fine arts, inv. RF 1964.17 D 966.4, Donation Bertauts-Couture, 1953. © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski

EXHIBITION ROUTE

1. Rops under the influence of Shakespeare

Room 1

“Ah, life has moments that are at once funny and unexpected & sublime, as in Shakespeare !”³ wrote Félicien Rops, for whom the torments of love were a source of inspiration.

Rops liked to see himself as one of the last of the Romantics⁴. His many letters reveal his interest in literature and the theatre, which he attended regularly: “Reading L’Assommoir by Emile Zola. For me, it’s the finest thing to have been published since M^{me} Bovary. This is the first time since Shakespeare that an author has dared to write a novel in the language of the characters on stage.”⁵



In an undated study plate, Félicien Rops groups together various figures, including *Madame Hammelette*, which was the subject of a *découpage*, that is a specific print run. A pretty woman, partially naked, is looking at a skull bearing a hat, while other severed heads lie around on the ground. In a letter written in 1890, Rops said that he had produced “the study - drawing of a skeleton - a woman holding Hamlet’s head.”⁶

Félicien Rops, *Madame Hammelette*, ca. 1890, soft-ground etching and aquatint, 6,5 x 10,4 cm. Private collection

This head of Hamlet which Félicien Rops mentions refers to Act V, scene I of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*: at the funeral of Ophelia, fiancée of the prince, the gravedigger gives Hamlet the skull of Yorick, the court jester of his childhood. Confronted with this bereavement, Hamlet realises that death is inevitable. His subsequent soliloquy ‘To be or not to be’ was henceforth to become famous.

Hamlet meditating on the skull of Yorick has become an emblematic and profound representation depicted by artists of every age as a symbol of mortality.

³ Letter from Félicien Rops to Edmond Lambrichs, place unknown, undated. - Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, Manuscripts Room, inv. III/215/11/24. On-line edition: www.ropslettres.be - publication No 1024.

⁴ Rops produced a caricature entitled *Le Dernier des romantiques*, lithograph, 21. 2 x 28,5 cm, published in *Uylenspiegel*, No 58, 18/01/1857.

⁵ Letter from Félicien Rops to Henri Liesse, Paris, 3/01/1877. Maurice Kunel and Gustave Lefebvre, Correspondence of Félicien Rops, sole copy kept in the Archives of Contemporary Art at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Limal, publisher unknown, 1942, vol. V, p. 201-205.

⁶ Letter from Félicien Rops to [Armand] Rassenfosse, Paris, 4/03/1890. - Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, Manuscripts Room, inv. II/6957/19/50. On-line edition: www.ropslettres.be - publication No 1720.

2. Eugène Delacroix and *Hamlet*

Rooms 1 & 2

Upon the death of the king of Denmark, his brother Claudius takes his place on the throne and, less than two months later, marries Gertrude, the widowed queen. The king's ghost then appears and reveals to his son, Hamlet, that he was assassinated by Claudius. Hamlet has to avenge his father and, to achieve his end, simulates madness. But he seems incapable of acting and, faced with the strangeness of his behaviour, questions are asked about the extent to which he retains his reason. This temporary madness is put down to his love for Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, chamberlain and advisor of the king. Claudius sees the danger and decides to get rid of his capricious nephew. In the fifth and final act the queen, Hamlet's mother, tells Laertes, the unfortunate brother of Ophelia, that his sister is dead. Whether by accident or suicide remains in doubt. The fragile young girl is swept away by a stream, the victim of a broken branch⁷.



Eugène Delacroix, *Self-portrait as Hamlet*, 1821, oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm. Paris, Louvre museum, inv. RF 1953-38

The 1820s were rich in cultural exchanges on either side of the Channel. Anglomania was the order of the day. Even before travelling to England, the painter Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), the leading exponent of French Romanticism, painted his self-portrait as Hamlet, since this Shakespearean character was already popular. During his stay there in 1825, he met British artists and discovered Elizabethan theatre. He was marked by performances of actors and the stage productions which broke with the customs of French classical tragedy. He was captivated by *Othello* and *Macbeth*: "William Shakespeare, a wild contemplator of human nature", he said.

Delacroix's first major lithograph was dedicated to Macbeth's encounter with the witches on the heath. At the time, lithography was a recent printing technique, invented in the early 19th century. The artist developed new effects, slashing the drawing vehemently and wildly, playing on the strength of contrasts. From the early 1830s, Delacroix devised his set of lithographs dedicated to Hamlet. He even gave him his features. His prints bear witness to a consummate art of lithography and a careful reading of Shakespeare's play. Delacroix had selected the scenes most charged with emotive tensions, opting to reduce the setting to the bare minimum so as to focus on the attitudes and the faces. He was thus able to accurately render the most intense moments of the work, when the plot topples. In *La Représentation théâtrale : Hamlet fait jouer aux comédiens la scène de l'empoisonnement de son père*, the artist builds a scene on three successive planes; the density of the lithographic crayon, the gradual rhythm of blacks and their shading, exalt the Shakespearean artifice of the theatre within the theatre. This set of lithographs, published in 1843, which immortalised the postures of English actors, were in turn to serve as a role model for the actors of this century.



Eugène Delacroix, *La Représentation théâtrale : Hamlet fait jouer aux comédiens la scène de l'empoisonnement de son père*, 1834-1843, lithographic stone, 31.2 x 43.6 cm. Paris, national Eugène-Delacroix museum, inv. MD 1968-4

⁷ <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet>

As regards France, Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Chassériau (1819-1856) were the first artists to illustrate one of the Shakespearean tragedies as a continuum, Delacroix opting for *Hamlet* and Chassériau for *Othello*. In doing so, each of them endeavoured to isolate the 'poignant moments' and explain a little of the structure of the plot.

3. Ophelia: a leading secondary character

Room 2

Present in the painting, sculpture, poetry and music of the 19th century, the 'poor Ophelia' of Shakespeare's tragedy, unceremoniously buried in the fifth act, gained the centre of the artistic stage in just a few decades. Whether accident or suicide, the doubt surrounding the death of Hamlet's beloved gave free rein to the imagination of Romantic and Symbolist artists. Eugène Delacroix was one of the initiators behind the promotion of Ophelia as a subject for painting in France. In England, the Pre-Raphaelite painters drew inspiration from his Ophelia to depict this drama in which femininity, youth, madness, nature and death are combined in a single poetic figure.



From 1834, Delacroix devoted two lithographs in his *Hamlet* series to her. One of them sets out the elements that are part of the pictorial myth of Ophelia's death: water, the luxuriant vegetation along the river bank, horizontality, spreading hair, the flowers in her hair. Delacroix shows us a living Ophelia who resists, clinging to her branch, her face marked with pain.

Eugène Delacroix, *La Mort d'Ophélie*, 1834-1846, lithograph, 80 x 59 cm. Paris, Louvre museum, inv. MD 2002-69

At the end of the 19th century, the depictions of the heroine are tinged with latent eroticism. Beneath the air of a femme fatale, she synthesises the medical discourse on femininity and the vision of authors of misogynous narratives. Her madness and supposed suicide become emblematic of feminine hysteria.

Ernest Hébert's *Ophélie*, with her diaphanous face, her hair loose and intertwined with flowers, directs an intense, disquieting gaze at the onlooker look through sombre eyes edged with dark circles. She embodies the death wish at the moment when the fin-de-siècle topples into decadence.

Ernest Hébert, *Ophélie aux lisérons*, second half of the 19th century, oil on canvas, 43.7 x 33.6 cm. Paris, Hébert museum, inv. RF 1978-98



4. Romeo and Juliette

Room 3

Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet are bound by a love that is pure. Unfortunately, their two families devote themselves to a hatred as perfect and everlasting as the passion the young couple feel for one another. The day after they meet at a masked ball, they ask Friar Laurence to marry them in secret.

But Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, challenges Romeo to a duel. He refuses and is replaced by his friend, Mercutio, who is to pay for the confrontation with his life. Romeo vows to avenge him and, having killed Tybalt, is banished from the city. Juliet's father then resolves to marry her to Count Paris. Juliet seeks refuge with Friar Laurence, who gives her a potion that enables her to feign death for forty-two hours. Having made the friar promise to warn Romeo of the subterfuge, Juliet swallows the drink. Unfortunately, Romeo does not receive the news in time and, mad with grief, he goes to his beloved's tomb to kill himself. He meets Paris, whom he slays in a duel, before himself swallowing a poison that kills him instantly. Juliet awakens and, realising that her young husband is dead, seizes his dagger and joins him in the next world.



Many couples experience dramatic fates in the work of Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliette, the adolescent lovers, are probably the most famous as they have inspired renowned directors of the stage and of the screen from the 1960s to the present day⁸. Delacroix could not but depict them, in an austere setting, their intertwined bodies discernible in the shadow.

Tony Robert-Fleury, *Roméo et Juliette*, 2nd half of the 19th century, oil on canvas, 69 x 59 cm. La Roche-sur-Yon, municipal museum, inv. 894 3 1

Delacroix opted to depict Act V, scene 3, the moment when Romeo, having learnt of the death of his beloved, enters the crypt of the Capulets and holds in his arms the lifeless body of Juliet, whom he believes is dead. This is one of the most poignant moments in the play and if the testimonies of contemporaries are to be believed, it was in these tragic scenes that the English actors most excelled and which so impressed the young generation of Romantics who jostled one another at the doors to the Odeon theatre in Paris in the autumn of 1827⁹.

Eugène Delacroix, *Roméo et Juliette au tombeau des Capulet*, ca 1850, oil on mounting paper on canvas, 35.2 x 26.5 cm, Paris, national Eugène-Delacroix museum, inv. MD 2008-3



⁸ *Roméo et Juliette* by Franco Zeffirelli (1968) ; *Romeo + Juliet* by Baz Lurhmann (1996) with Leonardo Di Caprio and *Romeo and Juliet* by Carlo Carlei (2013)

⁹ <http://www.musee-delacroix.fr/fr/les-collections/peintures/romeo-et-juliette-au-tombeau-des-capulet>

5. Othello and Desdemona

The daughter of the Venetian senator Brabantio, Desdemona marries the General Othello, known as the Moor of Venice, against the advice of her father, and follows him to Cyprus. There she falls victim to the intrigues of the ensign Iago, who places a handkerchief belonging to her in the apartments of Othello's lieutenant Cassio, to make the general believe that his wife is deceiving him. Desdemona tries to proclaim her innocence, but Othello refuses to believe her and suffocates her in the last act.



Théodore Chassériau created a series of fifteen etchings on *Othello*, perfecting his future plates by drawing almost sixty studies. He proved to be a poet of the female form, captivated by the character of Desdemona who appears in twelve of the fifteen etchings. The young woman suffers a tragic fate, dying at the hand of her husband, Othello, who suffocates her, wrongly believing that she is an adulteress. The countries and periods in which Shakespeare's plots are set, in this case Cyprus, enabled artists to explore worlds and customs that are sometimes more fantasy than reality, in particular orientalism, one of the trends of the Romantic movement.

Théodore Chassériau, *O ! O ! O ! pour Othello*, plate 14, 1844, etching, 80 x 59 cm.
Paris, national Eugène-Delacroix museum, inv. 2009-4

6. Macbeth and 'his' Lady

In medieval Scotland, the general Macbeth, influenced by the prophecy of three witches and by his wife, assassinates the king. Racked by guilt, the couple slowly sink into madness, scattering death around them as they do so. The witches in *Macbeth*, like the ghost of the father in *Hamlet*, are themes that inspired the Romantic artists who saw in the supernatural an opportunity to express the forces that go beyond the human condition. The mid-19th century was partial to mystical theories revolving around hallucinations, ghosts and possession. Spiritualism reached all layers of society, according demonstrations of paranormal phenomena a place of honour.

Alfred Stevens, *Lady Macbeth*, undated, oil on canvas, 127 x 97 cm.
Verviers museum, inv.616



CONCLUSION

Very much in vogue in England, France and Belgium during the 19th century, the influence of Shakespeare penetrated the iconographic field of various artistic movements. Romantics and Symbolists drew on his work, inspired by themes such as chance, fate and fatality. For these artists, the main aim was to cultivate the image of characters rendered fascinating by their particularity, whether they appeared as literary figures or actors embodying their role.