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# L'Art d'Eugène Carrière



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Exhibition texts

The painter Eugène Carrière (1849-1906), who was famous in his time, in the last part of the nineteenth century, distinguished himself by the originality of his style: his work can be recognised by his palette, reduced to a single colour, the *camaiëu*, sometimes the *grisaille*, and by his very particular style, consisting of expansive brushstrokes of thin and fluid matter. This fast, virtuoso technique was used to translate shapes by means of the model and thanks to chiaroscuro, in a movement of successive curves which eliminate all detail. His compositions are simple, often close-up, eschewing accessories, any decor and the background. The subjects represented by Carrière are in keeping with this style: a narrow register, centred on his family in its intimacy, his wife and their children, but without anything ever being described, numerous and striking portraits stripped to the essentials, a series of unidentifiable landscapes, a few rare still lifes. His painting *Le Sommeil*, from 1896, brings together all the elements of his art, including its symbolism. Eugène Carrière met with artistic celebrity during his lifetime, as evidenced by his relationship with Puvis de Chavannes and Rodin and his friendship with Gauguin. He was also prominent in the Parisian society of his time, where he was on friendly terms with writers, musicians, scientists and politicians.

Far from any interpretative discourse, through a choice of paintings, drawings and prints taken from the totality of his body of work, this exhibition aims to help visitors to discover, understand and appreciate Eugène Carrière's art.

Curator: Serge Lemoine

## Style

Eugène Carrière was one of the most singular painters of the late nineteenth century, which was so rich in original creations, from Puvis de Chavannes to Cézanne, from the Nabis to the Symbolists, in a context in which the so-called academic painting of Jean-Léon Gérôme and Léon Bonnat triumphed. Eugène Carrière's *Maternité* painting, produced circa 1893-1900, is a characteristic example of his style. A colour, or rather the absence of colour: it is a *camaiëu* which fills the canvas with its brown hue. A technique: balayage, which sets up the forms in a single movement. A vocabulary: that of the curve with its different lengths, their sequences and convolutions. A light: that of chiaroscuro, against which the volumes with their shapes stand out, highlighted by a few flashes. A composition reduced to its simplest expression: the close-up motif, on a curved diagonal plane. A subject: a mother and her child, without detail or decoration. This work shows everything that separated Carrière from his contemporary Jules Bastien-Lepage, the leader of naturalism,

represented by his painting *Les Foins* (1877). We can also see his affinities with the sculptor Auguste Rodin. They shared the same approach and the same aesthetics, as illustrated by Carrière's painting representing Rodin sculpting (1900). The two artists met in the early 1880s and were very close. The painter exerted a real influence on the sculptor with his way of treating subjects, the sequence of figures and his practice of non finito. Each owned works by the other: Rodin's sculpture, *Le Péché*, could be found in Carrière's home, and many of the painter's works were collected by Rodin. Both bodies of work are symmetrical. Camille Maclair wrote: "Rodin painted in marble and Carrière sculpted with shadows." In 1900, Carrière produced a masterful lithograph depicting Rodin sculpting, probably *La Faunesse à genoux*, which characterises both artists' work.

# Evolution

Eugène Carrière was born in 1849. He was initially an apprentice lithographer outside of the capital. In 1869, he went to Paris: he was admitted to the studio of the painter Cabanel at the École nationale des Beaux-Arts. He married Sophie Adélaïde Desmonceaux in 1878, with whom he had seven children. On a trip to London, he discovered Turner's work at the National Gallery. His first compositions belong to the naturalistic movement, inspired by Jean-François Millet. His style was similar to those of François Bonvin and Théodule Ribot, as evidenced here by the *Portrait de jeune fille* (circa 1877) which already stands out against a black background. Painted a decade later, *Au salon* is a genre scene undoubtedly representing the critic Claude Roger-Marx and his wife in a more synthetic style which surprisingly foreshadows that of Félix Vallotton.

In 1891, Carrière found his style, his subjects and his vision, as shown in his painting *Le Matin*, which belonged to the sculptor Henry Moore. These were the first years of his success: he received commissions for large set pieces, he exhibited in the Salons, his works were acquired by the State. He travelled to Spain, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland. In 1890, Carrière painted the portrait of Verlaine, one of his most famous effigies. Between 1890 and 1895, he painted an ambitious composition, *Le théâtre de Belleville*, a social subject showing the spectators as apparitions drowned in the darkness. This is what his painting *Enfant dormant dans les bras de sa mère* evokes: no description, no feeling, no narration, but a scene where everything is expressed by the form. His lithograph *Le Sommeil*, from 1897, shows a representation close to abstraction in the interlacing of its curves and its play of light. As time went on, blurring imposed itself in his vision, as seen in his portrait of Marguerite Carrière from 1900.

At the same time, Carrière was an artist with generous ideas, who was very involved in the society of his time. He took a stance in 1897 in favour of Captain Dreyfus and contributed to Clémenceau's launch of the French newspaper *L'Aurore*. In 1898, he founded a coeducation painting studio, the Académie Carrière, whose students included Matisse, Derain, Puy and Laprade. In 1904, he received a commission to decorate the town hall of the 12th arrondissement in Paris, which remained unfinished because of the illness he had been afflicted by for several years. Eugène Carrière died in 1906, his life having coincided with his work.

# Form

Form dominates in Eugène Carrière's art. It is the means by which the artist transmits his vision. This painting, *L'enfant au violon*, remains a silhouette, whereas his composition *Le Baiser sur la nuque*, painted in 1900, imposes itself by its volumes and its powerful modelling, translated here by grisaille. The sweeping brush strokes that create this set of curves leads to the elimination of details and the absence of any description. Here we find the opposite of Meissonier's painting, who illustrated an episode of Napoleonic history with his painting *La Campagne de France - 1814*, where, to use Degas' phrase, "there is not a gaiter button missing." Carrière's painting *Femmes embrassant un enfant*, created in 1899-1900, is of striking effect: indistinct forms appear from the background, coming out of the darkness, against which the light mass of the newborn child held in the arms of his mother stands out.

# Drawing

Drawing, or more precisely its absence, is one of the primordial characteristics of Eugène Carrière's art. This *Portrait d'homme* (1885), still marked by the style of his previous period, clearly shows all its details and accurately distinguishes the silhouette of the model. The evolution of the painter's style is marked by the progressive erasure of the line, the disappearance of the contours, the transitions between the masses, the back-and-forth between the planes, in favour of the modelling, the recourse to blots of colour and the use of the "fendu enchaîné," the example here being the painting *Enfant en robe blanche* (1888), where blurring effects dominate.

The memory of Turner's painting is of course present: let us recall his famous painting *Rain, Steam and Speed* from 1844. A more contemporary painter was Whistler, who was also marked by the translation of the fog, the representation of the cloud and the dissolution of the form (*Nocturne: Grey and Gold and Canal in Holland*, 1881). As for Henri Fantin-Latour, he too had often eaten away at the outline of forms in his paintings, drawings and engravings (*Fée des Alpes*, 1873).

In a play on curves which Edvard Munch would later replicate, the painting *Femme regardant son enfant* from 1900 is entirely solved by the movement of the brush which conveys a very diluted material on the canvas, partially treated with the technique known as "à l'arraché," that is, wiped down with a cool cloth. The lithograph *Élise riant*, which was completed in 1895, shows not only Carrière's mastery of this technique, but also his way of composing using blurring and especially the process of appearance-disappearance which characterises his art and confirms his affinities with the Symbolist movement.

# Graphic art

Eugène Carrière drew extensively, which is not contradictory with the aesthetics of blurring which eventually triumphed in his last period. His graphic work contains notes made on the spot, studies of motifs and compositional sketches which show the extent to which his painting was actually based on detail and reality and its perfectly elaborated forms. Witness his various studies of hands, his quick notation of the structures that contain the volumes, his way of translating space by means of crosshatching which would then become the balayage in his paintings, how he sets up his compositions to represent his favourite subject: here *Maternité, sommeil d'enfant*.

## Light

Together with volume, and going hand in hand with it, light is the other great subject treated by Eugène Carrière. The painter, as Rembrandt's heir, was the master of chiaroscuro. His forms appear from the depths and are shaped by the light, as shown in this *Étude de femme en buste*. The light can be so intense in this *Portrait de jeune fille* that the figure seems to radiate, becoming a mere halo from which all detail is eliminated, reinforcing the impression of an apparition. Less ghostly, the *Portrait du Dr Élie Metchnikoff* (1902-1903) imposes itself by its liveliness and, one presumes, by its resemblance (we cannot imagine Verlaine other than how he was painted by Carrière). The effect of the light on the volume of the face is striking in its presence.

## Colour

From the outset, Eugène Carrière used colour sparingly: the artist was instinctively drawn to monochrome painting with dark tones. In the pleasant *Portrait de Madame Dumont* (circa 1877-1888), the figure is painted with light hues that stand out from the background, which is left dark. Only the discreetly placed pink colour of the lips revives the painting as a whole. The same thing goes for the *Portrait d'homme* (1883), with a classical posture, massively encased in the format of the canvas. Black and grey dominate, the face is pale. A bit of contrasting red attenuates the severity of the representation: the splash of colour of the armrest in the foreground, a hint of pink on the lips.

More pleasing, the *Portrait d'Élise* (circa 1886) represents a misty vision of an interior scene in a solid construction of planes in space. The shades are treated in  *camaïeu*. The light, coming from the background, is primordial here. In the foreground, the red blot of an object revives the overall composition. But the real subject reveals itself to be the wonderful bouquet of white flowers in its vase placed on the table. In his last period, the painting *Femme se reposant* (1894- 1896) is a paroxysm of all the characteristics of Carrière's style: a *grisaille* from which any reminder of colour has been eliminated.

## Composition

Eugène Carrière's compositions are always scholarly, even in their most extreme simplicity. His painting *Maternité* from 1892, another version of the one kept at the Musée Rimbaud in Charleville-Mézières (as well as another at the Musée de Saint-Cloud), shows Mme Carrière sitting with her daughter Lucie on her lap, kissing her son Jean-René whose face she holds with her right hand, whilst in the background her daughter Nelly stands out, seen against the light. With these two centres, the treatment of space is particularly elaborated between the foreground, where the mother's group stands in front of a dark screen, and the secondary centre in the background, where the couple's fourth daughter is represented, illuminated from behind by a light source that cannot be seen. The representation of the group in curves and diagonals is particularly dynamic and reflects an extreme tension.

The four members in the *Portrait de la famille Bernheim* (1904-1905) are more calmly represented: three characters sit on a sofa side by side in subtly staggered positions, Gaston Bernheim in the centre, Mathilde and Suzanne on both sides, while Josse stands at the back. The figures are recognisable, but the scene is blurred and all the details are erased. More often than not, a single figure occupies the whole canvas, as shown by the representation of this *Femme assise* (circa 1902): starkness, concentration. To be compared with the opulence of staging and the luxury of details in Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting *La Réception du Grand Condé*

# Genres

Eugène Carrière is known for his genre scenes representing maternities, of which he produced multiple variations from 1883 onwards. The register of his subjects is much broader, to the extent that one can encounter all genres, treated in a personal way in relation to the production of his time: Carrière was not only the champion of family intimacy but also a socially-conscious artist (*Théâtre populaire*, 1895), capable of translating an urban atmosphere (*Place de Clichy la nuit*, 1883-1890), not averse to decorative commissions (*Hôtel de Ville*, Paris), concerned about religion (*Christ on the Cross*, 1897), taking sides for ideas (poster for *L'Aurore*, 1897), embracing the cause of pacifism (*Le Baiser de la Paix*, 1903) and in many aspects close to symbolism (*Le contemplateur*, 1901).

We can see the multiplicity of genres practiced by Carrière. The portrait, in which he excelled: here that of his little daughter. Then the nude (*Femme assise*), treated in an almost allusive way, unlike for example in the painting by Gervex Rolla (1878). The genre scene: *Les Modistes*, an episode of everyday life. Less prosaic, *Promenade à la campagne (Rêverie)*, a vision with symbolic accents of a silhouette floating in a sketched landscape.

He used the same approach and the same method to address social subjects, as shown in this study for the decorative cycle entitled *Passants* (circa 1890-1895), which remained unfinished: ghostly figures, summary, juxtaposed, immobile silhouettes. To be compared with the painting by Alphonse de Neuville, *Les dernières cartouches* (1873), which forcefully represents the details and actions of a heroic episode in the Franco-Prussian war. Similarly, this study of spectators for the *Théâtre populaire* (1890-1895), commissioned by Paul Gallimard. Also entitled *Théâtre de Belleville*, this painting, in an exceptional format measuring nearly 5 m in length, takes as its subject the darkness against which some rare silhouettes stand out, united by fervour. It is the opposite of the big show painting and it represents his most ambitious composition.

In 1890, Carrière was commissioned to decorate one of the salons of the town hall of the 12th arrondissement in Paris. He chose to represent the stages of life, in an allegorical way obviously indebted to Puvis de Chavannes: we see here a masterly study of the head, for the panel devoted to *La Jeunesse*.

The lithographs *Le Mineur* and *Le Fondeur*, made in 1900 for the World's Fair in Paris, show Carrière's mastery of this technique and his attention to manual labour. The compositions are spectacular, especially the curve-laden *Le Fondeur* "à la Guimard." Both lithographs are self-portraits.

Finally, Carrière produced a few still lifes, between Chardin and Morandi, which are even more imprinted with stillness and silence, as well as approximately forty landscapes, made in successive periods, often in connection with his travels. They do not represent an identifiable location, like all his faces, depicted without any particular expression, they are apparitions, evocations of reality, momentary presences, pretexts for daydreaming.

# Posterity

Eugène Carrière's art was greatly appreciated during his lifetime, over the course of which he exerted a real influence, not only on Auguste Rodin, as we have seen, but also on another great sculptor, Medardo Rosso: see his sculpture *Ecce Puer* (1906). He was also a close friend of Antoine Bourdelle. It might be said that Carrière was the painter of sculptors, as evidenced by the painting that Henry Moore kept in his room and the one owned by Alain Kirili. Carrière's influence was also manifest in the field of photography through the movement of pictorialism, as it appears in the work by Edward Steichen, *Rodin Le Penseur* (1902). Giacomo Balla studied Carrière, as did Pablo Picasso, but Carrière's art proved too unique, inimitable, and ultimately devoid of posterity, unless we consider it today in light of contemporary criteria and the artistic currents that emerged after 1945, abstract landscapes, expressionism, informal art, tachism, nuagism, monochrome painting, the use of series.

His name was more or less forgotten over the course of the twentieth century, although his works appear in many public and private collections, with some museums choosing to no longer exhibit them. In 1949, his paintings were exhibited in Toulouse and at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, then in Strasbourg in 1964. From 1968 to 1970, a travelling exhibition toured the United States. The impetus came from galleries and the private sector, which organised magnificent exhibitions, first the Marlborough Gallery in 1970 in London, then the Trigano Gallery in Paris in 1984, 35 years after the exhibition at the Orangerie, the Bernard Bouche gallery in Paris in 1954. In 1996, thanks to Rodolphe Rapetti, the Musée de Strasbourg finally organised a large scholarly exhibition. We had to wait until 2006 to see a similar exhibition in Germany, and another in the same year at the Musée d'Orsay, together with Rodin. In 2008, the publication of the catalogue raisonné of his paintings by Véronique Nora-Miliin crystallised his recognition, reinforced by the inauguration of the Musée Eugène Carrière in Gournay-sur-Marne in 2012. In 2022, in Paris, Galerie Kamel Mennour exhibited a broad selection of his works, before Jocelyn Wolff, who had been nurturing this project for a long time, devoted the present exhibition to him in 2023.