

1866 HENRY DE GROUX 1930  
Obsessions & Symphonies





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THOMAS DEPREZ FINE ARTS  
19th & 20th Century Belgian works of art

MATHIEU NÉOUZE

TREBOSC + VAN LELYVELD  
European Sculpture Paris

# Henry de Groux, the paradoxical artist

What do we know today about the artist Henry de Groux, a contemporary of Fernand Khnopff, James Ensor, and of William Degouve de Nuncques, his close friend?

In the end, very little!

We know of his lineage and relation to the painter Charles Degroux, his father, who was a prominent figure in the social realist circles of the day.

Amateurs of the nineteenth century may also remember his fiery and provocative temperament, his passion for mythology, history, and for the great figures of European culture: Dante, Beethoven, Wagner, Baudelaire....

Already during his lifetime he intrigued and fascinated people. The brilliant lawyer and politician, Jules Destrée described him thus: "A man, as unusual as his work, and whose characteristic silhouette Brussels knows well: of medium height, rather small, always dressed in black and with a white tie, his long brown hair under a soft felt hat, the look unkempt, absorbed in his legendary distractions and whose startling features are being spoken of. De Groux walks through life like a sleepwalker, far removed from all that which constitutes normal existence, proudly withdrawn in his dream."

For Henry de Groux it all began at the *Salon de l'Essor* in Brussels. And then, when he turned 21, in 1887, he exhibited with the *Groupe des XX*, alongside James Ensor, Fernand Khnopff, Félicien Rops, Constantin Meunier, Camille Pissarro, Auguste Rodin and Georges Seurat. His success was immediate, and his dream of glory and recognition seemed to realise itself. De Groux sold his works, which entered in some of the most prestigious collections, including that of the Brussels lawyer Edmond Picard. Emile Verhaeren, another eminent art critic, singled him out and saw in him a reflection of hope for the development of Belgian painting.





But if all had started well, his conflicted relations, especially with the *Groupe des XX*, made his career more complex, and his fragile mental health forced him into psychiatry. A relentless worker, de Groux could not be discouraged and never stopped experimenting with different techniques: pastel, painting, lithography, book illustration and sculpture.

Unlike a James Ensor, whose aura has never faded, or a Fernand Khnopff, unjustly forgotten after his death in 1921 but brought back into the limelight at the end of the 1970s, the work of Henry de Groux – as surprising today as it ever was – remains to be rediscovered.

At the time of my research on Fernand Khnopff, which resulted in the publication of the catalogue raisonné, the enthusiasm of art historians for the work of Henry de Groux was palpable. He was the artist who had to be taken out of the shadows and into the light. Occasionally de Groux was included in collective publications on international art at the end of the nineteenth century, or in exhibitions specifically devoted to symbolism. Since then, some successful initiatives have been materialized: the publication in Paris, in 2007, of part of his journals, an interesting testimony on cultural and political life; the exhibition, the same year, devoted to his work during the first World War, organized by the In Flanders Field Museum in Ypres, and the more recent retrospective at the Félicien Rops Museum in Namur in 2019, to name only those presented in Belgium.

Let's congratulate Thomas Deprez, Mathieu Néouze and Trebosc – Van Lelyveld, for this captivating tribute which, let us hope, will help to bring the work of Henry de Groux the recognition it deserves.

Catherine De Croës

## WORD FROM THE DEALERS

It is with great pleasure that we are able to present this magnificent exhibition to you today. Considered during his life-time as one of the most innovative painters of the Symbolist generation, Henry de Groux has been progressively forgotten over the course of the past century. However, the artist had certainly left his mark on the art of the fin-de-siècle. At the age of 21 years old, de Groux joined the ranks of the Brussels avant-garde society *Les XX*. He resigned in 1890, after publicly opposing the art of Van Gogh's art and the resulting quarrel with Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Signac at the opening banquet of the exhibition. Surrounded by icons of modernity, from Félicien Rops to Oscar Wilde, from Paul Verlaine, over Whistler, to Mallarmé and many others, his fantastical life gave way to a strange and visionary oeuvre in which the last fires of Romanticism burn proud. Both nervous, and of a lyrical harmony, de Groux's paintings, pastels and drawings are defined by the artist's own erudition and sense of music. In a way, everything he did is defined by his obsessions and his love for symphonies.

Born from a collaboration between three dealers with a passion for Symbolism, the fin-de-siècle, and more specifically the work of Henry de Groux, the present exhibition mainly draws from a single private collection, based in France. It is the document and product of more than 20 years of collecting art, with a special focus on Henry de Groux and the larger Symbolist movement. Showcasing an almost perfect cross-section of the artist's oeuvre, we feel it is an honour to bring some of the artist's most important works and most celebrated compositions back on the market. This exhibition, which we hope will be an important step in the rediscovery of this amazing artist, covers most if not all of the important aspects that characterise his work. You are invited to discover the portraits of his personal Panthéon, the rare sculptures, the works around Dante, Napoléon, and of course *Le Christ aux Outrages*; all of which have defined the style, work and career of Henry de Groux. Presented simultaneously in Brussels and in Paris, the exhibition in itself reflects the career of Henry de Groux, who has lived and worked in between the two cultural capitals of Europe around 1900.

Thomas Deprez  
Mathieu Néouze  
Olivier Trebosc  
Alfred van Lelyveld

## WORD FROM THE COLLECTOR

Already fascinated with the Symbolist movement, almost 20 years ago, I discovered in a corner of a provincial gallery Henry de Groux's painting *Alexandre pleurant la mort de Darius*. Although the artist was entirely unknown to me, I instantly fell in love with it and brought it home. I subsequently documented myself, and thus discovered the originality and madness of this atypical and obsessive painter. The peculiar and untamed spirit of the artist can be found in all his work, and as time went by I managed to find more and more of de Groux's paintings. I was delighted to be able to acquire some of the artist's most distinguished compositions, and when I found out he had also sculpted, I tried to get my hands on anything that came onto the market. They are rare and not easy to find, but to imagine even Rodin himself appreciated them...

The title of the exhibition dedicated to him today, "Obsessions and Symphonies", sums up the artist's work in two words.

The collector  
who has chosen to remain anonymous.











## Obsessions & Symphonies

“[Henry de Groux’s] work exuded the sound of a Wagnerian orchestra; he made the cries of an exasperated crowd be heard on a canvas, begging for a divine sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup>

– Emile Bernard

The life and work of Henry de Groux has fascinated, intrigued and attracted people, from the moment his career first touched base at the exhibitions of Les XX, right up until today. While he was friends with and admired by many influential figures, his eccentric and brutally outspoken personality made for as distinguished a list of people whom de Groux quarrelled with, offended, or resented. Struggling to make ends meet, to love and be loved, and above all to find peace, all of life seemed to be a battle to the artist. Over the years, Henry de Groux has been presented as a *bohème*, a genius, or as the quintessential example of the *artiste maudit*; while others saw in him no more than a lunatic, a degenerate, or a savage. As if tales of legend, numerous stories have been noted down about the artist, and already during his life-time the artist’s peculiar being clearly spoke to the imagination of the general public. Since his death, almost a century ago today, some of the world’s leading scholars in 19th-century, fin-de-siècle and symbolist art have dedicated articles to this uncategorizable artist, who had been successful as a painter, a writer, a draughtsman and printmaker, and even reinvented himself as a sculptor in mid-career.

What seems to define all of de Groux’s art and life, is the idea itself of ‘obsession’; ‘to obsess’, that is, to preoccupy or fill the mind continually and to a troubling extent. More passionate than passion itself, Henry de Groux obsessed over his work, was obsessed by his work, and made obsession an intrinsic part of that very work. “*L’obsession c’est en effet*

1. Emile Bernard, *Le symbolisme pictural*, in *Mercure de France*, Paris, 47th year, nr. 912, 15 June 1936, p. 528: “Son œuvre répandait une rumeur d’orchestre wagnérien; il venait de faire entendre sur une toile les cris d’une foule exaspérée demandant un sacrifice divin.”



*tout mon art*"<sup>2</sup>, the artist wrote in the journals which he obsessively kept during the better part of his life. This habit, which completely defines the way in which we now see, know, and study the work of the artist, had become – for better or for worse – “maniacal”; and he was well aware of it.<sup>3</sup> In fact, everything the artist did was defined by excess. He wrote in his own words: “I love things with excess and it is precisely *the excess* itself that I like about it and I enjoy the excess in excess.”<sup>4</sup> His intimate yet complex friendship with the writer Léon Bloy, for example, could certainly be described as excessive. A sublime sort of adoration can be noted from the very beginning, which was followed by an intense way of experiencing that friendship by living together and corresponding constantly. It all ended abruptly, however, in a massive rupture caused by de Groux’s delusional thought that Bloy wanted to poison him over his stance in what we can call the Dreyfus-Zola-affair. Over the course of 16 years, the two men didn’t speak to each other; but the pages of de Groux’s diaries continue to name Bloy, and tell of his growing wish to make up with the writer he still profoundly admired.

As a matter of fact, literature has always played a quintessential role in Henry de Groux’s art and life. The complex iconography of his work and the vastness of his own erudition, hint towards this obsession. Recalling the times when he was living with the Degouve de Nuncques family in Brussels, the ferocious reader’s greatest pleasure consisted in devouring the entire private library of *Degouve père*. Over the course of no more than two years, de Groux reportedly read Shakespeare, Balzac, Molière, Aeschylus and Sophocles, Taine and Schopenhauer, Gérard de Nerval, Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Gautier, Michelet and Augustin Thierry, Marbot, Ségur, Thiers, Norvins, Quinet, Gogol, Tourgueniev, Dostoïevski, Tolstoï, and the Goncourt brothers.<sup>5</sup> Closely observed, all the main themes that defined his art, be it history or mythology, derived from literature in one way or another. Of all literary influences, however, it was likely Dante’s *Divine Comedy* which had the most profound impact on the artist, and to which he probably devoted the most substantial number of works.

2. Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *Henry de Groux 1866–1930. Journal*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, Institut national d’histoire de l’Art, 2007, p. 75, 1901 (Ms 718, INHA, Paris). Roughly translated: “Obsession is in fact the whole of my art.”

3. *Idem*, p. 130, 1897 (Ms 714, INHA, Paris): “Le fait d’écrire mon “journal” est heureusement – ou malheureusement? – devenu maniaque! sans quoi, je ne sais où je trouverais le courage et la disposition opportune de le poursuivre... Son utilité, ou son inutilité, m’apparaîtront plus tard.”

4. *Idem*, p. 136, 1898 (Ms 715, INHA, Paris): “J’aime les choses avec excès et c’est précisément l’excès qui me plaît en elles et je jouis de l’excès avec excès.”

5. *Idem*, p. 164, 1908 (Ms 726, INHA, Paris).

“Needless to say, I can’t get out of the *Divine Comedy*. Especially out of *Hell*. It really seems that the inexorable bronze doors have closed on me like on most pilgrims on whom the requiem had already passed ... with this difference, that it is precisely there, that I seek my “*hope*”.”<sup>6</sup>

The Italian poet of the *Trecento*, Dante Alighieri, should be seen in the context of de Groux’s many heroes, or idols, with whom he identifies himself deeply. Reuniting defining figures of European history and culture in a sort of Pantheon of Great Men, their portrayal in itself certainly counts as another “obsession”. In fact, de Groux favored biographies, memoirs and confessions, above all other forms of literature.<sup>7</sup> And it was through reading these Great Men’s life stories, especially in their own words, that de Groux managed to form those intimate connections and moments of identification. Great military leaders like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, mythological figures such as Hercules and Oreste, writers like Balzac or Baudelaire, or great musicians like Beethoven and Mozart, were all granted the honors of being portrayed by Henry de Groux. A special place however, was reserved for one in each category.

Napoleon Bonaparte was praised by Henry de Groux for his courage, statesmanship, military genius, and perhaps surprisingly, his humanity. The cool and clear way in which Napoleon managed to strategise and think his way out of difficult situations, was something de Groux greatly admired and longed for in his own life of struggles.<sup>8</sup> The figure of Napoleon also allowed him to look past the person in order to portray defining scenes of European history, and thus paint the larger scheme of things. This is the case with one of his absolute masterpieces from the Napoleonic series, *The Battle of Austerlitz* (cat. 11). The artist placed the figure of Napoleon all the way out on the horizon, iconically staggering on his white horse. The viewer’s attention goes out to the campaign and battle scene in the foreground of the massive painting, only to find the figure of Napoléon after a much closer look. Often referred to as the “Last Romanticist”<sup>9</sup>, de Groux’s reference to Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (fig. 1) cannot be misunderstood.

6. *Idem*, p. 112, 1892 (Ms 711, INHA, Paris): “Il n’y a pas à dire, je ne sors plus de La Divine Comédie. De L’Enfer surtout. On dirait vraiment que les inexorables portes de bronze se sont refermées sur moi comme sur la plupart des pèlerins sur qui a déjà passé le requiem... avec cette différence que c’est là précisément que je vais moi chercher mon “espérance”.”

7. *Idem*, p. 137, 1899 (Ms 716, INHA, Paris).

8. For example: *Idem*, p. 149, 1900 (Ms 717, INHA, Paris): “La seule nécessité de mettre de l’ordre dans ma sacrée vie et dans ma seule gestion financière réclamerait seule le cerveau lucide et classificateur d’un Cuvier, d’un Napoléon ou d’un Colbert!”

9. De Groux was well aware of this characterisation of his own person, writing about a new idea for a painting on Napoleon in a thunderstorm: “Cela est évidemment du dernier romantique comme la plupart des choses où se plaît mon imagination. Mais ce pourrait être très beau quand même, exécuté d’une certaine façon.” *Idem*, p. 106, 1910 (Ms 728, INHA, Paris).



Fig. 1. Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, 1818-19. Oil on canvas, 491 × 716 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 4884.



Fig. 2. Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), *La Bataille de Taillebourg*, 1837. Oil on canvas, 489 × 554 cm, Musée National des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, inv. MV 2676.



Artistically, however, the artist's greatest example was without a doubt Eugène Delacroix (fig. 2); with whom he shared a "predilection for the violent and eventful aspect of natural conflicts – battles, massacres, catastrophes or apotheosis"<sup>10</sup>. As he did with all great figures he admired, de Groux thoroughly enjoyed any literature on the artist that he could get his hands on, and the reading of Delacroix's own journals further opened the artist's eyes to the many similarities between them.

The critic André Fontainas, had noted early on that all of de Groux's compositions seemed to be inspired by the notion and the movement of a flame<sup>11</sup>, and when his friend and patron, Remy de Gourmont, called him the "painter of violence"<sup>12</sup>, the artist clarified that it wasn't much fire or violence in itself, rather than his obsession with movement, which dominated his art.<sup>13</sup> In a way, the notion of a flame, which indeed characterises an important part of de Groux's compositions, needs to be seen as part of Henry de Groux's complex and personal iconography. Among his recurring symbolism we also find many predators: from hyena's and wolf-like creatures, to birds of prey, such as owls and eagles. In fact, nature plays a hugely important role in de Groux's imagery and concepts. "It has always been my dream and it will always be my ideal to conceive paintings as a sudden, unforeseen thing, passing under the eyes of the indifferent [...] like the blazing plume of comets!"<sup>14</sup>, the artist said. This double obsession with painterly movement and with the forces of nature, explains why the initial feelings de Groux's paintings exude are often entirely reminiscent of a big and uncontrollable storm:

"Everything has always prompted me to see in a storm the very symbol of life, the very sign and movement of fate. I cannot treat an episode of history or legend without making it look like a stormy scene, whether I treat an oak tree or the reed, or the *Christ aux outrages*. It is always the magnetic rotation of the unleashed elements that orients and determines my inspirations and dictates my compositional formulas."<sup>15</sup>

10. *Idem*, p. 57, 1892 (Ms 711, INHA, Paris): "[...] prédilection pour l'aspect violent et mouvementé des conflits naturels – batailles, massacres, catastrophes ou apothéoses – [...]"

11. Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 68, 1897 (Ms 714, INHA, Paris): "C'est André Fontainas qui a remarqué le premier que toutes mes compositions affectaient d'abord la notion et le mouvement d'une flamme et la flamme ne reçoit son geste que du vent."

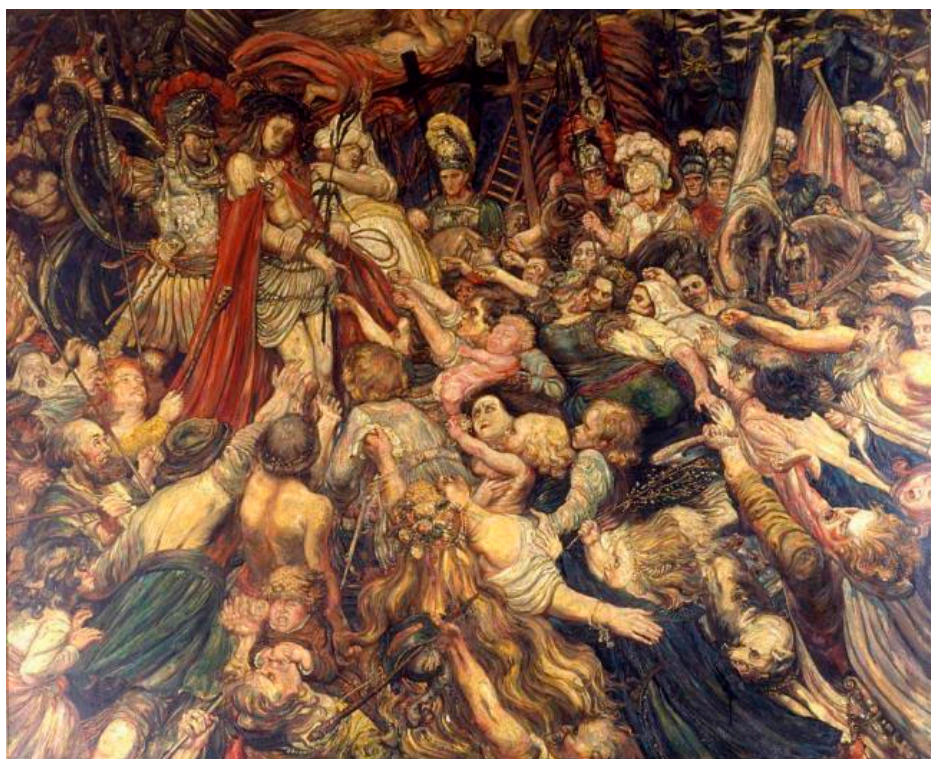
12. *Idem*, p. 78 (1901, Ms 718, INHA, Paris).

13. Camille Lemonnier, "Les Vingt" (suite et fin), in *L'Art Moderne*, 26th year, nr. 22, 3 June 1906, p. 172: "Mon rêve serait de faire des choses qui se meuvent, m'écrivait-il récemment ; ce qui m'intéresse très particulièrement, sinon le plus, c'est d'arriver à l'énonciation plastique la plus puissante du mouvement."

14. Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 55, 1892 (Ms 711, INHA, Paris): "C'eut [sic] toujours été mon rêve et ce sera toujours mon idéal de concevoir le tableau comme une chose soudaine, imprévue, passant sous les yeux des indifférents ou des chercheurs, comme le panache flamboyant des comètes!"

15. *Idem*, p. 68, 1897 (Ms 714, INHA, Paris): "Tout m'incite, depuis toujours, à voir dans la tempête le symbole même de la vie, le signe et le mouvement même du destin. Je ne puis traiter un épisode de l'histoire ou de la légende sans lui donner l'aspect 'un épisode orageux, que je traite du chêne et du roseau, ou du Christ aux outrages. C'est toujours la magnétique rotation des éléments déchaînés qui oriente et détermine mes inspirations et dicte mes formules de composition."

Fig. 3. *Le Christ aux outrages*, 1889, oil on canvas, 293 × 353 cm, Palais du Roure, Avignon, Fondation Flandreysy-Espérandieu, inv. 2PDR\_F\_OAO15



Devote by choice rather than upbringing, the life of Christ, and biblical themes in general, became an important part of Henry de Groux's own mythological universe. In his magnum opus, *Le Christ aux Outrages* (fig. 3), Henry de Groux clearly sets forth a solitary, beaten, and persecuted figure of Christ, with whom he can identify both himself and his art. In this painting, to which the artist returned many times throughout his career, Christ's deliverance to the judgment of the crowd, and his psychological turmoil and distress, is further accentuated by the whirling mass of bodies and the triangular composition that engulf him like a body of water in which he is about to drown. Several versions of de Groux's *Christ aux Outrages* are known, ranging from preparatory drawings and studies in oil, to prints and highly finished adaptations on a different scale (cat. 1 & 2). Generally, these were executed years later. This idea of coming back to one's own compositions, copying, reworking, adapting, or expanding, is in itself a testament to de Groux's personal attraction and obsession with some of his major themes and biggest masterpieces.

Of the great men of history represented in de Groux' pantheon, the musical genius of Richard Wagner likely stands out as the most prominently inspirational. In Wagner as a person, which de Groux again discovered primarily through the composer's own writings and journal, the artist admired his almost naive humbleness.<sup>16</sup> This, of course, could not have been a bigger contrast to the figure of Wagner as a musician; and de Groux's admiration for the man only grew by the discovery of this richness of person. Ultimately, Wagner, like Dante, was also the creator of a mythological universe which would find one of its most adept illustrators in the person of Henry de Groux. Throughout his career, de Groux created a sequence of well-defined series around the main objects of his obsessions, and their execution in itself can easily be seen as obsessive. Around 1895-1896, de Groux devoted almost two entire years to the production of his *cycle napoléonien*, after which he delved into Wagner's *Siegfried*, which in turn was followed by the *cycle dantesque*. When the artist was granted a retrospective at the *Salon d'Automne* of 1911, he presented an entire body of works in sculpture, an obsession which he had only started the year before. This focus on a single theme, clearly characterized by their distinctive periods in time, allowed the artist to completely submerge himself into these contrasting universes and execute a fully researched, highly detailed and minutely sophisticated body of works around that theme. The analogy with his beloved world of literature isn't far off when we compare for example his series on Napoleon with a 12-volume description of Napoleon's endeavours written by a devoted historian. A "necromancer", bringing history back to life, Henry de Groux himself also became part of that very history, by always planting some of his own madness into the scene. As a revolutionary painter stuck in the past, his largest canvases were no doubt intended to rival the most established salon painters of the day, and embody his undying wish for the fame and glory which had once been promised to him.

It goes without saying that the following words, written by Wagner to Liszt, must have had an enormous resonance with Henry de Groux: "it seems to me that my music is terrible: it is a quagmire of horror and sublimity!"<sup>17</sup> And to say that Wagner, again in his correspondence with Liszt, had also pondered the fact of once being a painter<sup>18</sup>... What would his paintings have looked like? In tandem with his great idol, the multitalented Henry de Groux seemed to have but one major regret: the lack of any musical talent

16. "Le titan [Richard Wagner] se raconte avec simplicité, avec bonhomie, sans aucun souci de se statuer ou de solenniser son récit d'aucune vue transcendante." (*Idem*, p. 60-61, 1893 (Ms 727, INHA, Paris), passage regarding his reading of the publication *Mein Leben*, published only in 1911.

17. *Idem*, p. 93, 1904 (Ms 722, INHA, Paris): "[...] il me semble que ma musique est terrible: c'est un bourbier d'horreur et de sublimité!"

18. *Idem*, p. 83, 1902 (Ms 719, INHA, Paris).



whatsoever. In 1897, de Groux wrote: “Late revelation, and more than probably irreparable, of my true vocation which was to be, not a *painter*, but a musician and composer.”<sup>19</sup> This obsession with music, especially that of Richard Wagner, and his focus on the symphonic and lyrical abilities of music to express the most intimate and sophisticated of human emotions, became a central yet subtle part of his artistic vision. Henry de Groux even thought of painting in musical terms, and more specifically the kind of music he preferred: large, elaborate, and sweeping symphonies. As such, the artist found it impossible to imagine a great painter painting only small paintings: “It is as if one would claim to deliver all the symphonic richness of a musical page in the reduction for piano.”<sup>20</sup> Quoting Michelangelo Buonarroti, de Groux concluded: “A good painting must be music.”<sup>21</sup> In more ways than one, Henry de Groux was indeed a musician, a composer; painting great symphonies of decadence. His nervous, broken and repetitive brushwork reading like the notes on the music scores of an epic symphonic concerto.

Thomas Deprez

19. *Idem*, p. 67, 1897 (Ms 714, INHA, Paris): “Révélation tardive, et plus que probablement irréparable, de ma vraie vocation qui était d’être, non peintre, mais musicien compositeur.” Several other passages repeat this regret.

20. *Idem*, p. 85, 1902 (Ms 720, INHA, Paris): “Il m’est à peu près impossible de concevoir un grand peintre ne faisant que des petits tableaux. [...] C’est comme si l’on prétendait donner toute la richesse symphonique d’une page musicale dans la réduction pour piano.”

21. *Idem*, p. 55, 1892 (Ms 711, INHA, Paris): “Un bon tableau, disait Michel-Ange, doit être une musique.”





"Because I have always felt this strange attraction to horror, to excess, to paroxysm which is, according to Nietzsche, the sign of supreme decadence and which was in my case certainly the inclination towards a sort of grandiose depravity of the aesthetic sense that brought me to paint, invincibly, to seek to reproduce in the maximum of brutality, intensity, cruelty and violence, things of which I certainly could not have borne the sight ..."

Journal, 7 June 1892



# CATALOGUE

BRUSSELS

# Le Christ aux Outrages 1893

Oil on canvas, 71 × 85 cm.

Signed, dated and dedicated lower right:

'A Alidor Delzant / Hommage amical / Henry de Groux / 93'

## PROVENANCE

Ancienne collection Alidor Delzant, Paris, probably on request and in lieu of financial aid;

By descent to his daughter, Mme Louis Loviot, Paris;

Bought from the above by Jean Paulhan, Paris;

By descent into his family, until 2021;

Private collection, Belgium.

## LITERATURE

Léon Souguenet et al., *L'Œuvre de Henry de Groux*, special issue of *La Plume*, Paris, 1899, p. 79,

ill. as: *Le Christ aux Outrages (D'après la réduction en peinture app. à M. A. Delzant.)*

## NOTE

This recently rediscovered painting is Henry de Groux's very first reduction in oil of his masterpiece *Le Christ aux Outrages*, 1889 (Oil on canvas, 293 × 353 cm. Avignon, Palais du Roure, Fondation Flandreysy-Espérandieu, inv. 2PDR\_F\_OAO15).

After a gap of almost 30 years, several other late versions of the composition survive. It was probably painted on request and given by the artist to the writer Alidor Delzant (1848-1905), in lieu of financial aid. In 1893, Alidor Delzant came to aid de Groux, who was financially struggling, and the two men became close friends. Besides a collection of de Groux's prints, Delzant owned at least three other works by the artist: a painting entitled *Les Moissons*, and two pastels, *Le Christ calmant les flots* and *Les Emigrants* (Paul Ferniot, *Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre d'Henry de Groux*, published in the special edition of *La Plume*, 1899). The present painting was later sold to the writer Jean Paulhan (1884-1968), who had also known de Groux personally, and of whom a portrait by de Groux (dated 1914, with Paulhan dressed as a Zuave) survives.





# Le Christ aux Outrages 1925

Exceptionally fine print with marginal drawings, 750 × 900 mm.

Etching and drawing, manually retouched with gouache, and gold and silver paint.

Presented in its original frame.

Titled, signed, dated and dedicated at the bottom:

*'Le Christ aux Outrages – à monsieur J. Guiran – Henry de Groux – 1925'*

## PROVENANCE

Gift from the artist to the painter Jaume Guiran (1896-1950);

By descent in the family, Aix-en-Provence;

Private collection, Belgium.

## EXHIBITED

*Exposition Rétrospective Henry de Groux, Galerie d'Alignan, Paris, 1930.*

## NOTE

Around 1925, the artist came back to the composition that had made his name and started his career.

The two versions in oil of Henry de Groux's *Christ aux Outrages* that are held in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels (oil on canvas, 74 × 92 cm, inv. 9207, and: oil on canvas, 174 × 145 cm inv. 12502, ex coll. Gillion-Crowet), also date from around this period. Henry de Groux had already made a small lithograph of his *Christ aux Outrages* around 1894-1896, which was hand-finished with pastels in a limited edition, and which can be found in several private and museum collections.





Christ and Outrage -

יֵשׁוּעַ עֲדָרְיָהוּ הַיְּהוּדִי  
 יֵשׁוּעַ עֲדָרְיָהוּ הַיְּהוּדִי  
 יֵשׁוּעַ עֲדָרְיָהוּ הַיְּהוּדִי

Christ and Outrage -



Reynolds, J. M. - 1885

# Alexandre pleurant Darius ca. 1892

Oil on canvas, 65,5 × 81,5 cm.

Signed lower left: 'Henry de Groux'

## PROVENANCE

Studio of the artist by 1899;

Private collection, France.

## EXHIBITED

*Exposition Henry de Groux*, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1901.

## LITERATURE

Léon Souguenet, et al., *L'Oeuvre de Henry de Groux*, special issue of *La Plume*, Paris, 1899, p. 23, 53, 69, 74, 77, 87, & 44, ill. with mirrored image, as: *Alexandre Pleurant Darius (D'après la peinture originale.)*

Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *Henry de Groux 1866–1930 : Journal*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, Institut national d'histoire de l'Art, 2007, p. 51, 1892 (Ms 711).

## NOTE

In the present painting, Henry de Groux's sense of theater and the theatrical clearly comes to life. The figures are placed in a shallow space, organised as on a stage, and starkly delineated against the desolate and otherworldly background. It is one of the purest examples of the artist's wish to give life to "the great subjects of human emotion". Paul Ferniot's catalogue raisonné published in *La Plume*, in 1899, records a pastel drawing with the same theme belonging to M. Férard.

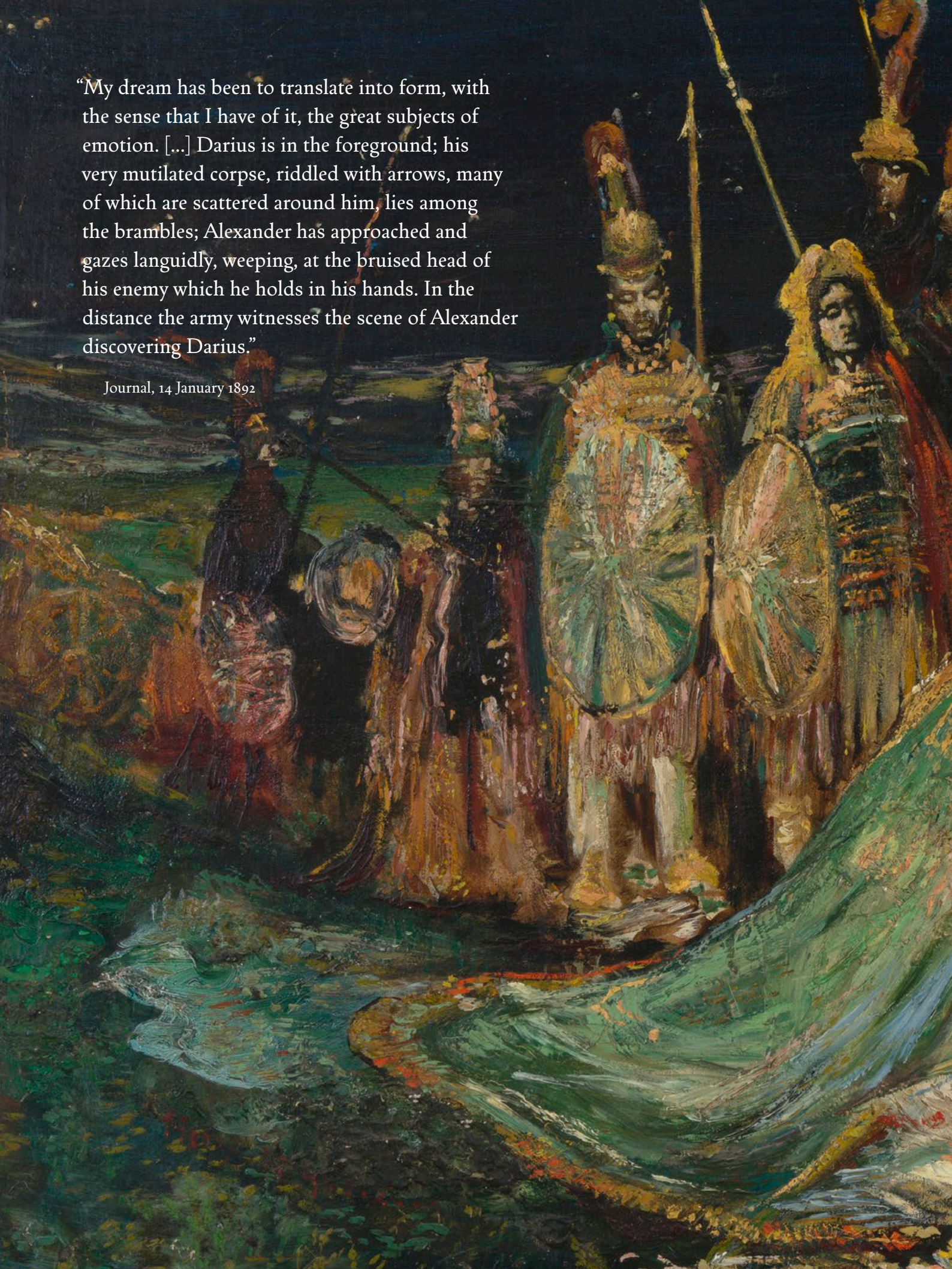






“My dream has been to translate into form, with the sense that I have of it, the great subjects of emotion. [...] Darius is in the foreground; his very mutilated corpse, riddled with arrows, many of which are scattered around him, lies among the brambles; Alexander has approached and gazes languidly, weeping, at the bruised head of his enemy which he holds in his hands. In the distance the army witnesses the scene of Alexander discovering Darius.”

Journal, 14 January 1892









# Les Mauvais Bergers (Le Tas) 1898

"Maquette du tableau"

Pastel on canvas, 76 × 106 cm.

Unsigned, canvas by the supplier Paul Denis, Paris.

## PROVENANCE

Studio of the artist by 1899;

Private collection, France.

## LITERATURE

Léon Souguenet, et al., *L'Oeuvre de Henry de Groux*, special issue of *La Plume*, Paris, 1899, p. 57, ill., as: *Les Mauvais Bergers (Le Tas)*. / (*Reprod. d'après la maquette du tableau.*)

## NOTE

The present work was inspired by Octave Mirbeau's play *Les Mauvais Bergers*, which was first performed at the *Théâtre de la Renaissance* in Paris, on the 15th of December of 1897, with Sarah Bernhardt and Lucien Guitry in the leading roles. It was then published by Charpentier-Fasquelle (Paris) in March of 1898. In the present pastel, Henry de Groux literally takes to the stage in order to convey profound human emotion and suffering. Set on a theater scene, a group of people helplessly look onto another group that has just been shot by a firing squad. The artist made at least two works after this subject, with the present pastel already published by 1899.





# Les Captifs 1893

"*Etude pour le Hallier infernal*"

Oil on canvas, 81,5 × 65 cm.

Signed lower right: 'De Groux'

Canvas by the supplier Blanchet, Paris.

Several sales numbers on the verso.

## PROVENANCE

Studio of the artist by 1899;

Private collection, France.

## LITERATURE

Léon Souguenet, et al., *L'Oeuvre de Henry de Groux*, special issue of *La Plume*, Paris, 1899, p. 43, ill.,

as: *Les Captifs (étude pour le "Hallier infernal")*. / (*Reprod. d'après la peinture originale.*)

Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *Henry de Groux 1866–1930 : Journal*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, Institut national d'histoire de l'Art, 2007, ill. p. 300, nr. 7, as: *Le Hallier infernal, 1893, huile sur toile, 81 × 65 cm, collection particulière.*

## NOTE

*Les Captifs*, or *Le Hallier infernal*, represents a subject taken directly from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, illustrating *canto XIII* of Dante's *Inferno*. The present work, however, predates Henry de Groux's so-called *cycle dantesque* made around the turn of the century. The title used here is taken from its illustration in the special edition of *La Plume* (1899), published under the supervision of the artist. Another painting entitled *Les Captifs* was exhibited by the artist at the *Paris Salon des Indépendants* in 1893, and sold to the influential art collector Charles Hayem.





# Les Harpies 1894

Pastel on paper, 89 × 69 cm.

Signed lower right: 'Henry de Groux'

## PROVENANCE

Formerly Giard collection;

Formerly Loëz collection;

Private collection, France.

## NOTE

*Canto XIII* of Dante's *Inferno* introduces the Harpies as bird-like creatures with the face of a woman. The Harpies' existence consisted of tormenting the souls of sinners who had committed suicide for all eternity. Having renounced their bodies in earthly existence, they were deemed unfit for human form in Hell. Their souls were cast down to the 7th circle of Hell, where they would grow from the grounds as gnarled trees forming an immense forest. The Harpies would continuously feed on their leaves, and, nesting in their branches, dominated the crying forest. The present work was likely made during de Groux's stay at the house of Georges and Laure Flé in 1894, and shows many of the predatory animals typical of de Groux's iconography.





# Napoléon Bonaparte au pont d'Arcole ca. 1897

Pastel on paper, mounted on canvas, 151 × 217 cm.

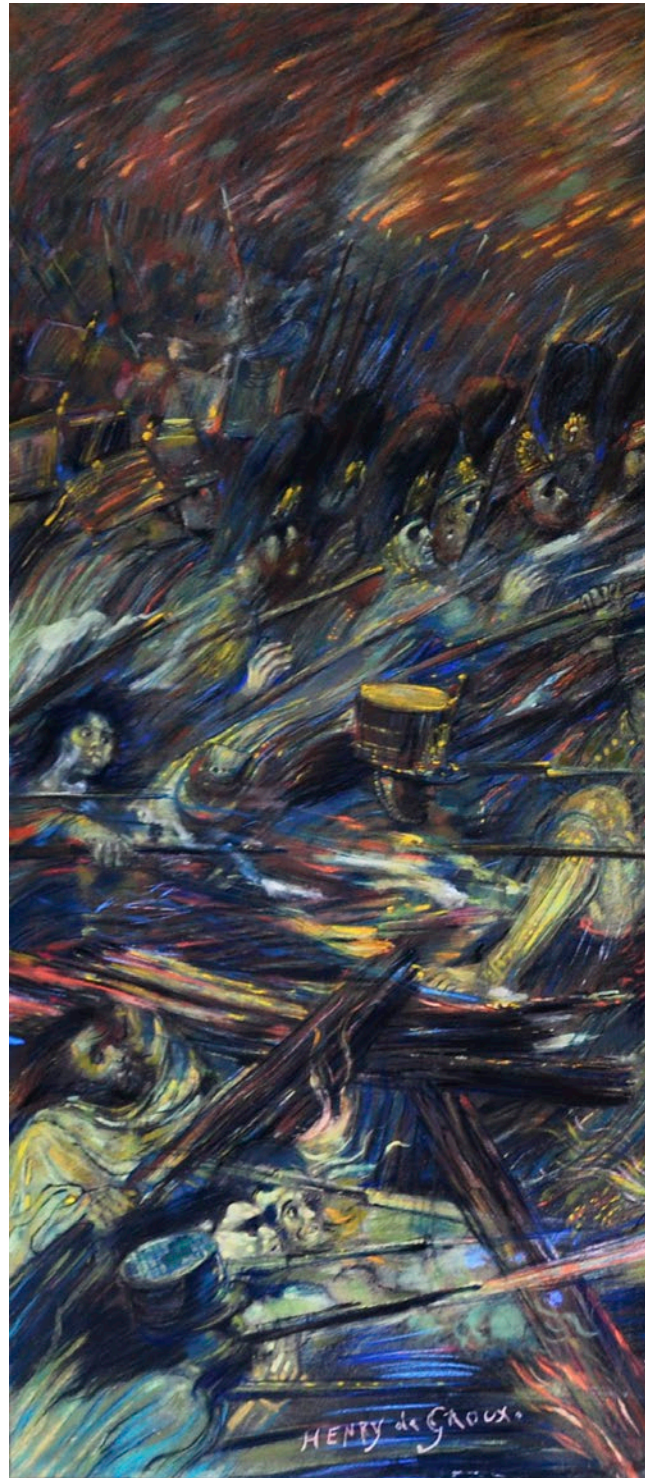
Signed lower left: 'Henry de Groux'

## PROVENANCE

Private collection, France.

## NOTE

In this monumental pastel drawing, Napoleon is represented as the courageous and ingenious military leader, who personally leads his men to victory. Typical of Henry de Groux's work, the scene is set in a dantesque, fiery and otherworldly landscape. It is through the presence of the bridge that Napoleon is crossing, that we can confidently identify the scene as the victorious battle of the Pont d'Arcole. The bodies of the slain soldiers again remind us of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, and the presence of a bird of prey integrates once again de Groux's personal iconography in the scene. A smaller and later version, held in a Belgian private collection, was exhibited at the retrospective exhibition *Henry de Groux: Maître de la démesure*, at the Musée Rops, Namur, 2019, nr. 88.









# Dante et Virgile aux Enfers ca. 1898-1900

Pastel on paper, mounted on canvas, 120 × 150 cm.  
Unsigned.

## PROVENANCE

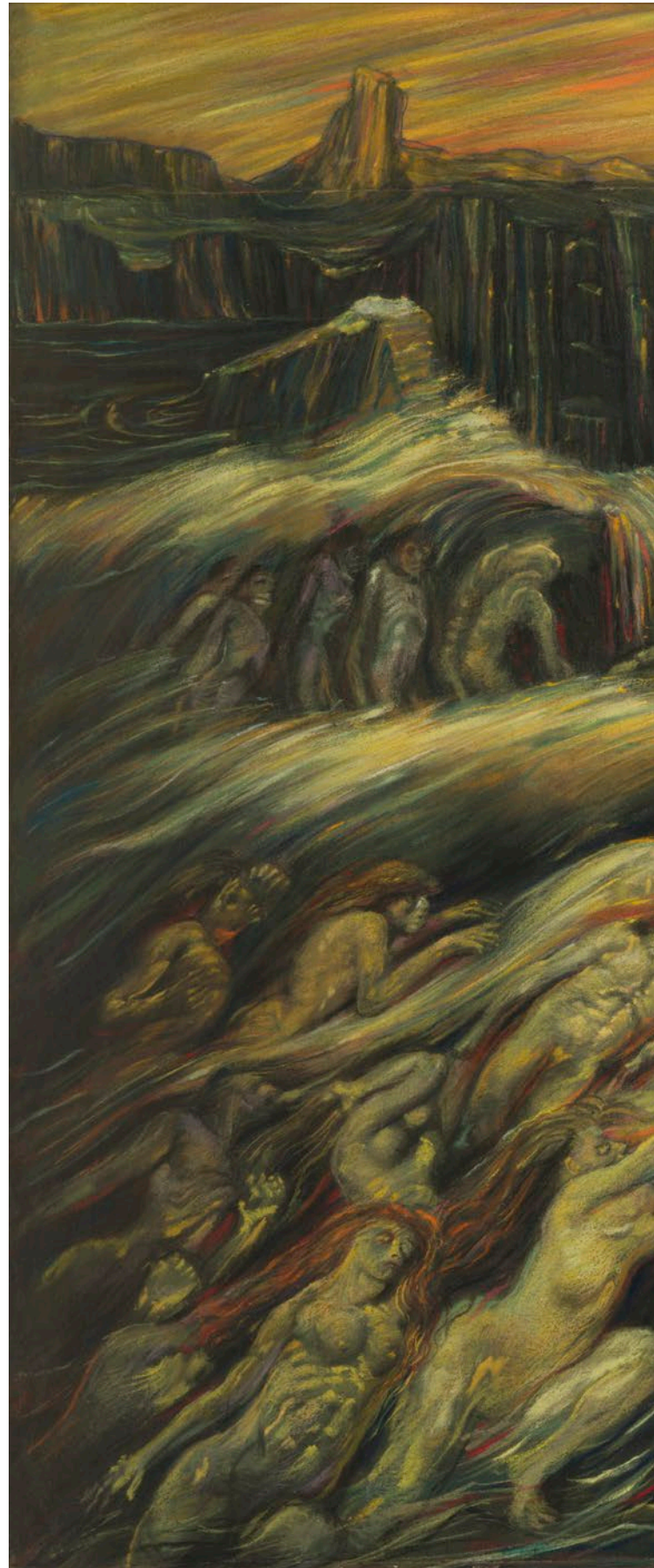
Private collection, France.

## EXHIBITED

Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1901  
Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1902  
Galerie L'Art Nouveau, Paris, 1903  
Galerie H. O. Miethke, Vienna, 1906 (?)

## NOTE

The largest known work from the so-called *cycle dantesque*, the present pastel was made on adjointed pieces of paper, mounted on canvas. At least five other known works from the series are held in a single private collection of Symbolist art in France. The present pastel drawing represents what might arguably be the most iconic vision of Dante's *Inferno*. Dante and Virgil gaze over a large and seemingly uncrossable river of damned souls, separating this life from the next. Generally referred to as the Styx, it might actually be another of the five rivers of Hell, namely Acheron, the crossing of which was enabled by the ferryman Charon.









# Hercule et l'Hydre de Lerne ca. 1907-08

Oil on paper laid down on panel, 50,5 × 60,5 cm.  
Unsigned.

## PROVENANCE

Formerly in the collection of Emma Lambotte, Antwerp;  
Galerie Georges Giroux, Brussels;  
Private collection, Brussels.

## EXHIBITED

*Salon d'Automne*, 1911, nr. 1.

## NOTE

One of Henry de Groux's last important series was devoted to one of the most famous figures in Greek mythology: Hercules, or Herakles. The present painting was made in the running up to that series, and, being unsigned, was probably given by the artist to the famous art collector Emma Lambotte. Representing the most iconic of his so-called Twelve Labors, we see Hercules slaying the Lernaean Hydra. The painting clearly shows Henry de Groux recycling his own oeuvre, with the composition copied from an earlier work on Siegfried, the general tone in colour clearly based on his Italian works and even the inclusion of an eagle in the top right corner, a symbol which goes back to the very first important compositions of the artist.





# Minerve protège Oreste 1903

Oil on canvas, 60 × 72 cm.

Signed lower right 'Henry de Groux'

## PROVENANCE

Galerie Alfred Flechtheim, Germany;

Private collection, Germany;

Private collection, France.

## EXHIBITED

*Esposizione d'arte*, Palazzo Corsini, Firenze, 1904, nr. 2, as: *Minerve protège Oreste*.

## NOTE

Made during his Italian *soggiorno*, *Minerve protège Oreste*, is one of the main works from de Groux's series around Orestes. Several other works from this series are known through old photographs or reproductions. The homogeneity of colour is typical of this period in his production, and further accentuates the hysteria of the moment. The fully armored goddess is readily recognisable as Minerva, through her typical attributes of the spear, the shield with the head of Medusa, and the owl. Based on the play by Aeschylus, the father of Greek tragedy, we see Orestes seeking refuge from the Furies. The Furies, goddesses of vengeance, gave Henry de Groux free reign to turn the painting into a spectacle of fire and storm.





# La Bataille d'Austerlitz ca. 1896

Oil on canvas, 138 × 158 cm.

Unsigned.

## PROVENANCE

Studio of the artist by 1899;

Private collection, France.

## EXHIBITED

Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1899, nr. 709.

*Exposition Henry de Groux*, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1901.

Salon d'Automne, Grand Palais, Paris, 1911, nr. 18.

## LITERATURE

G.H. Marius, *De Idealisten. Henry de Groux*, in *De Gids*, P.N. Van Kampen & Zoon, Amsterdam, 61st year, 1897, p. 373.

Léon Souguenet, et al., *L'Oeuvre de Henry de Groux*, special issue of *La Plume*, Paris, 1899, p.18, 54, 74, 75, & p. 48, ill.,

as: *Bataille d'Austerlitz. (D'après la peinture originale.)*

Félicien Fagus, *Notes sur Henry de Groux*, in *La Revue Blanche*, Paris, Editions de la Revue Blanche, vol XXVI, Sept.-Dec. 1901, p. 386

## NOTE

One of the most iconic works from the Napoleonic cycle, *La Bataille d'Austerlitz* ranks amongst the artist's most distinguished compositions. Henry de Groux was inspired by Turner's *Hannibal crossing the Alps* and especially Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, to place the central subject of the composition all the way out on the horizon. Amongst the epic and lyrical battle scene in the foreground, the artist hinted for example towards a papal crown, and integrates as such several symbols that are part of his highly personal iconography. Another painting, simply called *Austerlitz*, and often mistaken for the present one, was recorded in the collection of M. Joseph Barreau.















# PORTRAITS

PARIS





Paris - a l'exposition Petit  
le 24 Octobre 1901 - Paris -  
Mme de Leizy

# The Pantheon of a tormented artist The Great Men of Henry de Groux<sup>1</sup>

LAURA FANTI

*The few great fellow souls who assist me the most are: Dante, Beethoven, Wagner, Baudelaire and Poe, whose colossal works and immense labour demanded so much effort, so much constancy, so much energy and so much faith! ...*<sup>2</sup>

In his voluminous diary, Henry de Groux (1866–1930)<sup>3</sup> constantly mentions famous names among which we find poets, composers, as well as political figures. They are all historical characters forming a sort of pantheon of great men accompanying the Belgian artist over time and rubbing shoulders with him in his private life.<sup>4</sup> De Groux identifies with some of them, embodying the creative genius but although they are suffering and melancholic at the same time, thereby assuming a dual role within his work. In fact, de Groux feels persecuted and misunderstood, despite the recognition for his work. His saturnine soul prompts him to get hold of the melancholy of artists and to use their work and the mythical aura surrounding them as an antidote to his own melancholy. These figures become essential and define the career of the artist who devotes several paintings, drawings and sculptures to them.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, his identification is total,

1. The following article is a translation of an original text in French by the author.
2. Henry de Groux, *Journal*, Saturday 23 January 1904 (Ms. 722, INHA, Paris. I am using the transcription that Jérôme Descamps kindly made available to me, I express my gratitude to him). Original in French: "Les quelques grandes âmes congénères qui m'assistent le plus sont : Dante, Beethoven, Wagner, Baudelaire et Poe, dont les œuvres colossales, le labeur immense ont réclamé tant d'efforts, tant de constance, tant d'énergie et tant de foi !..."
3. The eighteen volumes of the Henry de Groux's journals are held in the Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) in Paris, they were recently put online at the following address: <https://blog.bibliotheque.inha.fr/posts/de-groux.html>. A selection of these pages had previously been published: Rodolphe Rapetti – Pierre Wat (dir.), *Henry de Groux 1866–1930 : Journal*, Paris, Éds. Kimé, Institut national d'histoire de l'Art, 2007.
4. A first account of the artist's life was sketched out by his son-in-law, Elisabeth's husband, Émile Baumann (1868–1941), who, however, hadn't known the artist and uses a moralizing and partial tone (*La Vie terrible d'Henry de Groux*, Paris, Grasset, 1936); for a more scientific overview, read Jérôme Descamps – Denis Laoureux (dir.), *Henry de Groux (1866–1930). Maître de la démesure*, Musée provincial Félicien Rops, Namur, 24 May–23 Septembre 2019, In fine éditions, Paris, 2019.
5. There is no catalogue raisonné of the artist, but for the years 1880–1899, reference is usually made to the list drawn up by Paul Fériot in the special issue of *La Plume* (*Henry de Groux et son Œuvre*, Paris, 1899, pp. 93–95) which, however, doesn't mention the year of production of the works, nor their dimensions.



even in adversities, such as the affection that his father Charles (1825-1870) felt towards people in distress: “I love the heroes that I paint like my father must have loved the poor and actually loved them. I exalt myself in their glory, I suffer from their setbacks, I am interested in all the postures to which fate has forced them.”<sup>6</sup>

The poet to whom Henry de Groux devotes a significant number of works is Dante Alighieri<sup>7</sup>, the name who actually opens his diary in 1892.<sup>8</sup> As other artists of this end of the century, he is haunted by *The Divine Comedy*, in particular the passage through *Hell*, especially from 1899 and until 1903, when he goes to Florence.<sup>9</sup> A cycle of works inspired by Dante was soon exhibited in Paris, first at the Galerie Georges Petit in 1901 and then with Siegfried Bing in 1903. This cycle includes Dantesque paintings as well as a good number of portraits of Dante himself. De Groux especially uses pastel as in the portrait of the Florentine poet exhibited (cat. 19). Here, the artist refers to an entire iconographic tradition, from Sandro Botticelli to Gustave Doré, representing the *divine* poet with an austere and solemn expression, but he nevertheless makes some changes: his laurel wreath is gilded and the colours are used in a free and anti-mimetic way,<sup>10</sup> as in other major compositions of the artist (*Les Walkyries* for instance); the treatment of the coat is particularly “modern” with hatching spread out in an intense way, yellow is dominant, especially in the face of the poet. Dante is depicted in profile as a Roman emperor on a medal or as a prince of the Quattrocento. Other Dantesque paintings draw on the work of William Blake and Eugène Delacroix – the latter being particularly appreciated by de Groux. Delacroix’s influence is more evident in *Dante et Virgile aux enfers* (cat. 8), where the bodies of the damned, of an acid green and magnetic power, are modelled in the manner of the romantic masters, with a unique sensitivity for the time in Belgium, even among the Symbolists.

6. Rodolphe Rapetti – Pierre Wat (dir.), *Henry de Groux 1866–1930 : Journal*, op. cit., p. 58, 1893 (Ms 727, INHA, Paris): “J’aime les héros que je peins comme mon père devait aimer les pauvres et comme il les aimait réellement. Je m’exalte à leur gloire, je souffre de leur revers, je m’intéresse à toutes les postures auxquelles le destin les contraignit.”
7. The Dantesque cycle of Henry de Groux was the subject of two studies by Denis Laoureux (*La Divine Comédie selon Henry de Groux*, in J. Descamps – D. Laoureux (dir.), *Henry de Groux (1866–1930). Maître de la démesure*, op. cit., p. 139–149) and *Henry de Groux, peintre de la Divine Comédie*, in *La Porte des rêves. Un regard symboliste. Peintures, sculptures, dessins, lithographies*, Yverres, Propriété Caillebotte, 2018, p. 193–196.)
8. As indicated by Laoureux, in *La Divine Comédie selon Henry de Groux*, op. cit., p. 139.
9. A first glimpse of the artist’s trip to Italy has been outlined by the author of this text (Laura Fanti, *Henry de Groux fantôme de Rembrandt à Florence*, in J. Descamps – D. Laoureux (dir.), *Henry de Groux (1866–1930). Maître de la démesure*, op. cit., p. 53–56.)
10. Laoureux wrote: “On the other hand, our artist finds in the master of romanticism (Delacroix) an approach to colour and brushstroke that frees the palette from the principle of chromatic mimicry. His colour schemes are conceived in terms of expressiveness, ferocity, one might say De Groux indeed favours chromatic associations foreign to the physiological rules of visual perception. The bringing together of green and yellow which dominates the Dantesque cycle derogates from the law of simultaneous contrasts. Perhaps this is what prompted Gauguin to cite de Groux among the most important painters of the second half of the 19th century.” (*La Divine Comédie selon Henry de Groux*, op. cit., p. 147).



Fig 1. Antoine-Emile Bourdelle, *Beethoven*, Bronze, probably modeled 1902, executed 1926, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 26.232

Furthermore, the pantheon of the Belgian is also inhabited by German musicians, especially Beethoven and Wagner, who fascinated other painters and sculptors at the time. De Groux devotes to them as many paintings as drawings, but also sculptures, practice he learned almost entirely as an autodidact.<sup>11</sup> Of the two known sculptures dedicated to Beethoven, dated to 1910–1911,<sup>12</sup> one represents the musician with his eyes closed (cat. 21), as in other sculptures of the nineteenth century, in order to suggest introspection, while his bulging forehead evokes his initiation. This is not, however, an invention of de Groux: the French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929), who exhibited at the *Salons de la Rose-Croix* in 1892 and 1893, had executed several portraits of Beethoven from the year 1888 onwards, showing the same characteristics (fig. 1)<sup>13</sup>; likewise, the symbolist Max Klinger (1857–1920) worshipped the composer. As such, all these sculptures dedicated to Beethoven are based on the same source, that is to say his death mask, a cult icon for artists. But the strongest connection between Bourdelle and de Groux<sup>14</sup> is their identification with the

romantic genius together with the fact that they also honour Beethoven through their drawings too. Indeed, the drawing by the Belgian (cat. 14), a charcoal heightened with white chalk, still represents a face with a rounded forehead, with, as for the sculpture mentioned above, the eyes closed, even if it shows a more diffuse tenderness. In this way, Henry de Groux shows that he shares the ideals of the so-called idealistic symbolists according to whom Beethoven embodies the romantic genius, tormented by melancholy and doomed to introspection. When portrayed in pastel on a larger scale (cat. 15), Beethoven becomes a hero rather than an initiate. With his blue eyes wide open, frozen in an attitude of pride, he no longer embodies the melancholic genius, but becomes a kind of italian *condottiere*, like Federico da Montefeltro, or later, the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, a hero of the pantheon of Henry de Groux too.

11. According to Jérôme Descamps, who quotes a letter dated 1910, de Groux devoted himself to sculpture from 1910 (*Henry de Groux, de Florence à la Provence (1904–1914)*, in J. Descamps – D. Laoureux (dir.), *Henry de Groux (1866–1930). Maître de la démesure*, op. cit., p. 77). On artistic influences, ancient as well as modern, see J. Descamps, *Effigies et monuments. Henry de Groux sculpteur*, in J. Descamps – D. Laoureux (dir.), *Henry de Groux (1866–1930). Maître de la démesure*, op. cit., p. 153–169.
12. See J. Descamps (*Effigies et monuments. Henry de Groux sculpteur*, op. cit., p. 156), who mentions a letter from the artist to Jeanne Thieffry (Bruxelles, March 1910, Lille, Bibliothèque Jacques Lévy, fonds Jeanne Thieffry, THI 6-1.1932).
13. This contradicts Bernard Tillier's assertion that "de Groux does not seek physical or psychological resemblance and he does not refer to the earlier effigies of his models" ("Henry de Groux (1866–1930) peintre symboliste de l'épopée napoléonienne", in *Sociétés & Représentations*, nr. 23, 2007, 1, p. 289).
14. On the identification of Bourdelle with Beethoven see *Le broyeur de sombre. Bourdelle, dessins de jeunesse*, Cabinet des arts graphiques, Musée Bourdelle, Paris, 6 March–7 July 2013.



However, it is perhaps to Wagner, a true icon of Symbolist art, that de Groux devotes the greatest number of works if we put aside those inspired by Dante. He is once again represented in profile, in the manner of famous ancient Italian characters (*Personaggi illustri*) (cat. 16), his gaze turned away from the viewer, his air is austere without being “distant”; the composer is painted with such a degree of mastery and control that the painting might even be a commission. A predominance of red can also be noted, in the famous frock coat, in the mottled background or in the face. Regarding Wagner, De Groux writes the following: “One thing I love about Wagner is that the songs of victory themselves are imbued with a sort of incurable melancholy which is, despite everything, at the bottom of all his work.”<sup>15</sup> It is again the inner reflection of the German genius that arouses the artist’s interest, who gives us an idealised reading of his artistic inspiration.

Finally, two other historical figures frequently appear in the work of Henry de Groux: Napoleon Bonaparte and, to a lesser extent, Alexander the Great. They appear in works with a military subject, an alien theme to the Symbolist universe, to which de Groux belongs. These characters are often represented in unsuspected forms, as solitary, thoughtful, melancholy geniuses for example, or in their more “human” form, as is the case in *Alexandre pleurant Darius* (cat. 3), an oil painting executed before 1899.<sup>16</sup> By painting him on his knees, in a gesture of humanity towards the defeated adversary, de Groux puts aside the military power of the King of Macedonia to emphasise his human emotions.

While a certain amount of infatuation with Dante, Beethoven and Wagner was usual during the Symbolist era, a fascination with Napoleon wasn’t common practice at all. From 1888, the Belgian made several paintings inspired by Napoleon,<sup>17</sup> intensely between 1895 and 1900. Napoleon often appears in de Groux’s work as a defeated hero, at rest or as a young visionary,<sup>18</sup> or, even, in the posture of a resistant but weakened man, as in *Napoléon sur le Pont d’Arcole* (cat. 7). De Groux was less interested in history and its sources, but instead sought to create visionary effects, which are in particular reflected in his very expressive touches of colour, almost “proto futuristic” because of their dynamism.

15. Henry de Groux, *Journal*, 2 April 1904 (Ms 722, INHA, Paris, transcription Jérôme Descamps): “Une chose que j’aime dans Wagner, c’est que les chants de victoires eux-mêmes sont imprégnés d’une sorte de mélancolie incurable qui est, malgré tout, au fond de toute son œuvre.”

16. We can establish this approximate date thanks to the list in *La Plume*.

17. D. Laoureux, *Henry de Groux, Peintre antimoderne à la fin du XIX siècle*, in J. Descamps – D. Laoureux (dir.), *Henry de Groux (1866-1930). Maître de la démesure*, op. cit., p. 33 ; Bertrand Tillier, *Peindre un “Raté grandiose” : de Groux et Napoléon*, op. cit., and Id., “Henry de Groux (1866–1930) peintre symboliste de l’épopée napoléonienne”, in *Sociétés & Représentations*, nr. 23, 2007, 1, p. 283-295.

18. Bertrand Tillier wrote: “Henry de Groux paints the figure and epic of Napoleon as he paints ancient or medieval history, with the same dreaminess tinged with nightmare.” (*Henry de Groux (1866–1930) peintre symboliste de l’épopée napoléonienne...*, op. cit., p. 288).

On top of a pile of defeated soldiers, and in a Dantesque infernal landscape, Napoleon sets himself up as a lonely hero, exhausted, but courageously seizing the tricolour in the hope of perhaps achieving glory... Isn't it, then, fair to say de Groux has celebrated the "Superlative aesthetic beauty of misfortune in glory, Darius, Hannibal, Caesar, Napoleon, Rembrandt, Christopher Columbus, Dante, Shakespeare and Molière"<sup>19</sup> ?

19. Rodolphe Rapetti, Pierre Wat (dir.), *Henry de Groux 1866–1930 : Journal*, op. cit., p. 100 (1908, Ms 726, INHA, Paris).



# Paul Verlaine ca. 1893

Black and white chalk on paper, 630 × 470 mm.

Signed in red chalk lower right: '*Henry de Groux*' and annotated: '*Paul Verlaine*'.

## NOTE

Henry de Groux met Paul Verlaine on the 21st of September 1892, at the café François 1er in Paris, where the poet was a regular. He describes him exactly as portrayed in one of the most iconic photographs of the poet: "He's always there at the end of the bench, in the little nook near the counter, stiff, imperious, erect rather than leaning against the wall's baking padding. His thick, raised eyebrows, his forehead overhanging the whole face, his eyes or alveoli which seem to quiver in silver jewels, all his male and spiritual ugliness, he looks like some Socrates drawn by Hokusai."

Other portraits of Verlaine by Henry de Groux are held amongst others in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Brussels (Oil on canvas, 46 × 38 cm, inv. 12315) and the David E. Weisman & Jacqueline E. Michel Collection, in Palm Beach, USA.





## Léon Bloy ca. 1893

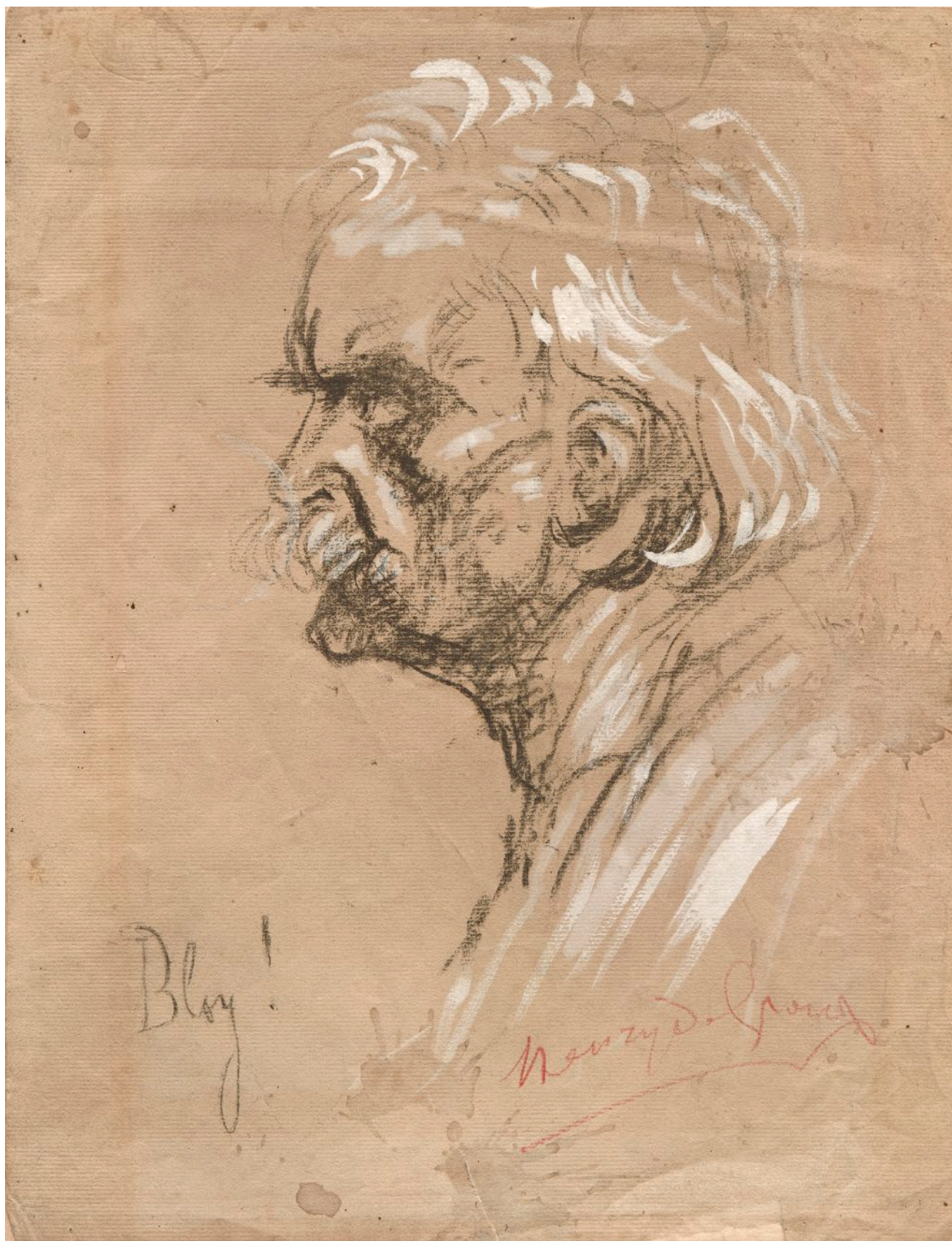
Black chalk and highlights in white gouache on light brown paper, 440 × 340 mm.

Signed in red chalk lower right: '*Henry de Groux*'

Annotated lower left: '*Bloy !*'

### NOTE

The exclamation mark after the subject's name embodies as it were the intensity of Henry de Groux's relationship with his sitter. After meeting Léon Bloy in 1892, the two quickly became very close, with Bloy offering the young struggling artist his hospitality. Thinking Bloy's wife wants to poison him, de Groux breaks off all relationship with the writer. Over the course of 16 years they stopped speaking entirely, but the journals of the artist are still filled with Bloy's name and the desire to make up with the writer he so profoundly admired. They reconciled a year before the death of Bloy in 1917.





# Ludwig van Beethoven ca. 1893

Black and white chalk on grey paper, mounted on cardboard, 635 × 495 mm  
Signed in red chalk lower right: '*Henry de Groux*'





# Ludwig van Beethoven ca. 1896 (?)

Pastel on paper, laid down on canvas, 78 × 64 cm.

## EXHIBITED

Probably one of two portraits of Beethoven exhibited by Henry de Groux  
at *La Libre Esthétique* in 1897.





# Richard Wagner 1907

Oil on canvas, 85 × 56 cm

Signed and dated lower left: '1907 – Henry de Groux'

EXHIBITED

*Salon d'Automne*, Paris, 1911, nr. 6bis.

“I love Wagner’s music, I say to Bloy, like I love it to be sunny, for the weather to be nice during my stroll. It is not because Wagner is a mystic Christian, a Catholic or a Muslim that I like his music better or worse. I prefer by the way the *Nibelungen*, the *Tetralogie*, to *Parsifal*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* and *Tristan*. It is simply for me the most beautiful music that men on Earth have ever heard with their own ears!”

Journal, 5 September 1898





# Lohengrin

Oil on canvas, 70 × 50,5 cm

Signed lower right: '*HENRY DE GROUX*'

## NOTE

Easily recognisable by his swan topped helmet, Lohengrin was famously adapted from German mythology into opera by Richard Wagner in 1848. Son of Parsifal, Lohengrin was a knight of the Holy Grail, who was sent out to protect the duchy of Brabant which was in turmoil after the duke had died without a male heir. Lohengrin arrives in a boat pulled by swans to protect and rescue the duke's daughter Elsa. She could, however, never ask for his identity or origins. He weds the duchess and serves Brabant for years, but one day Elsa asks the forbidden question. He explains his origin and steps back onto his swan boat, never to return. The fact that the story was set in Brabant, modern day Belgium, might explain a secondary and more profound attraction for Henry de Groux.





## Honoré de Balzac 1913

Pastel on paper, laid down on cardboard, 75 × 53 cm

Signed and dated lower left: '*Henry de Groux / 1913*'

Signed lower right: '*HENRY DE GROUX*'





19

# Dante

Pastel on paper, laid down on cardboard, 65,5 × 49,5 cm  
Signed lower right: *'Henry de Groux'*







# Henry de Groux: between Fame and Famine

THOMAS DEPREZ

*“The first virtue of a painting is to be a feast for the eye”*  
– Eugène Delacroix

Repeated at several instances by Henry de Groux in his own journals<sup>1</sup>, the present quote, in turn from the journals of Delacroix, really embodies all that we feel when looking at a painting by the artist. Unclassifiable as he was, the spirit of Henry de Groux cannot be captured in the word “painter” as much as his paintings are known to deliver “feasts for the eye”. Few anecdotes capture the essence of the figure as poignantly as when Henry de Groux exhibited his first major work at the exhibition of *L’Essor* in Brussels in 1886. When, of his peculiar and already highly personal painting, *Le Pèlerinage de Saint-Colomban*, was said: “*But it has nor drawing, nor colour. It is not the work of a painter...*”, the famous poet and art critic Emile Verhaeren replied: “*What importance does it have, it’s the work of an artist.*”<sup>2</sup>

And what an artist he was. Henry de Groux is part of that restless and tormented breed of artists, whose life and work stands out like a force of nature, both violently emotional and gently moving at the same time. Painter, draughtsman, portraitist, sculptor, lithographer, critic and diarist, the genius of Henry de Groux has known very few boundaries or limitations. The fact that de Groux also actually made a name for himself in all of the aforementioned categories, might give an insight as to his relentless work ethic and artistic courage. At the time, the idea that de Groux could only be classified as an ‘artist’,

<sup>1</sup> Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *Henry de Groux 1866–1930 : Journal*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, Institut national d’histoire de l’Art, 2007, p. 59 & 81.

<sup>2</sup> Emile Verhaeren, *Chronique Artistique: Dixième exposition de L’Essor*, in *La Jeune Belgique*, 6th year, vol. 5, nr. 2, 1 February 1886, p.159: “*On s’écrie : « Le Pèlerinage de Saint-Colomban? Mais il n’a ni dessin, ni couleur. Ce n’est pas d’un peintre... ».* — *Qu’importe, c’est d’un artiste.*”



was further aided by his uncompromising nature and conflictual character; behaviour to be expected from the so-called '*artiste bohème*' typical of the end of the 19th century. From the special edition of *La Plume* in 1899, dedicated entirely to the artist, to the massively important mid-career retrospective at the *Salon d'Automne* in 1911, where he was thought to be dead before showing up to his own opening, to the publication of the biography *La Vie Terrible d'Henry de Groux* written by his son-in-law Emile Baumann after his death in 1936, many have tried to capture, understand and explain the peculiar spirit of the artist and the almost mythological life he has led. "No one," said his close friend Arsène Alexandre in the artist's obituary, "is able to write his life, with its incessant shadows and the rays of his mind. It would be the most extraordinary of novels."<sup>3</sup>

## The birth of an artist

A quintessential figure in fin-de-siècle Brussels and Paris, de Groux's social circles consisted of just about every name that rings a bell. Son of the famous realist painter Charles Degroux, who passed away when Henry was only 4 years old, the young artist's formative years were defined by some of his late father's closest friends. Félicien Rops, Constantin Meunier and Louis Artan de Saint Martin, all encouraged the young Henry to follow in his father's footsteps. His first artistic training came from another close friend of his father: Jean-François Portaels. Very much a child of his time, however, Henry de Groux turned out decidedly different from his father.<sup>4</sup> He forged his own path within the intellectual and literary circles of the fin-de-siècle, and, at the age of 18 years old, in 1884, he had already designed the cover of a short-lived but influential new avant-garde magazine entitled *La Basoche*. The list of people who contributed to the magazine reads as a 'who is who' in Brussels at the end of the century: Edmond Picard, Camille Lemonnier, Jules Destrée, Stuart Merrill and André Fontainas, to name just a few.<sup>5</sup> It is a peculiar fact that of all the many and notable figures Henry de Groux has met, befriended or quarreled with during his lifetime, often eventfully described in his journals, every single one of the aforementioned names would confidently and loyally stand by his side throughout his tumultuous life, his misfortunes and his adventures.

When only two years later, Henry de Groux was elected member of the Brussels avant-garde society Les XX (Les Vingt), it was for no other reason than the fact that he had

<sup>3</sup> Arsène Alexandre, *Henry de Groux*, in *Le Figaro*, 15-01-1930: "Sa vie, personne n'est capable de l'écrire avec ses ombres incessantes et les rayons de son esprit. Ce serait le plus extraordinaire des romans."

<sup>4</sup> While it has been argued that Henry de Groux wasn't a child of his time, we beg to differ and point out that even though his subjects and his artistic language might be influenced by earlier periods or artistic movements, the essence of his art was at once both entirely new and intrinsically modern, and begs for no other affiliation than to the symbolist movement of the day.

<sup>5</sup> Cover of *La Basoche*, 1st year, nr. 1, 13 November 1884.

already earned his stripes as a revolutionary artist. As a matter of fact, it seems fair to say Henry de Groux had made ‘revolution’ both his theme and his *mode de vie*. When he exhibited for the first time with Les XX in 1887, his arrival sent shockwaves through the Belgian art scene and his success was immediate:

“One single revelation : HENRI DE GROUX. Almost unknown before the opening, and now famous. The last to arrive among the XX, and already one of the first. [...] Muses! rejoice: an artist is born to us!”<sup>6</sup>

Who could have expected the enthousiasme with which he was received? Especially if one knows that he exhibited “scenes of carnage” of a “tragic magnitude” and “a splendid horror”?<sup>7</sup> The confidence and strength with which the young artist had already managed to define the foundations of his future oeuvre, must have been an extraordinary sight to see. The peculiar and often disquieting subject matter, the singular use of colour – often detached from reality<sup>8</sup>-, the violent brushwork, the spectacular and epic compositions, were all present in his work from the moment his career first touched base. Although specific parts of his artistic production entered his oeuvre on a later date, for example sculpture around 1910, it is clear that Henry de Groux reached artistic maturity very early on. The last cornerstones of his artistic practice and identity were confidently put in place in his submission to Les XX of the following year. For the very first time, the artist presented a series, or in his own words a “cycle”: a coherent body of works that were made in relation to one another, and inspired by the same general theme; often one of his many heros. The *Trois rêves après le bataille* or *Three dreams after the battle* which he exhibited in 1888, were inspired by unfortunate events of the Napoleonic wars. Jokingly, a critic in the avant-garde magazine *L'Art Moderne*, mouthpiece to the *Groupe des XX*, stated he preferred the title to be “nightmares” instead of “dreams”. They represented visionary landscapes, covered in bare corpses with rolled up eyes, severed arms and stripped bodies, liquefied as if washed by rain.<sup>9</sup>

6 Jules Destrée, *Chronique Artistique: L'Exposition des XX*, in *La Jeune Belgique*, 7th year, vol. 6, nr. 3-4, mars-avril 1887, p. 133: “Une seule révélation : HENRI DE GROUX. Inconnu presque avant l'ouverture, célèbre maintenant. Le dernier arrivé parmi les XX, l'un des premiers déjà. [...] Muses! réjouissez-vous : un artiste nous est né!”

7 Ibidem: “Oh! l'admirable emportement, romantique si l'on veut, mais d'une horreur splendide dans ces deux corps confondus : le meurtrier accroupi sur sa victime, dégrisé de l'ivresse du meurtre par le regard qui s'immobilise dans l'œil vitreux de l'assassiné ! Et cet Assassiné ensuite, seul, perdu au milieu du solennel paysage du soir, le repos de la mort et du crépuscule descendu sur cette lutte, avec l'herbe rouge de sang et le grand horizon au loin majestueux et serein ! — Après ces scènes de carnage, j'admire fort ce Vieillard.”

8 On this subject Emile Verhaeren wrote: “Objective colour is hardly M. de Groux's concern; he gives his subjects the colour of his own tragic vision, which take flight in sinister greens, cruel reds and vivid blues. His palette, where blood, bile and pus fight obscurely with each other, expresses carnage, turmoil, noise.” (as translated citation in: Philippe Jullian, *The Symbolists*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1977, p. 232, note 58.)

9 *Le Salon des XX*, in *L'Art Moderne*, 8th year, nr. 7, 12 February 1888, p. 53: “Il intitule ses envois : Rêves après la bataille; nous préférons : Cauchemars. Et ce sont en un paysage de vision, créé par le cerveau bien plus que vu par les yeux, des cadavres tragiques, les torses nus, des yeux révoltés, des bras flasques, des jambes contractées : un pêle-mêle de corps dépouillés, lavés de pluies, liquéfiés presque.”



## Painting violence or violently painting

Henry de Groux's vision of beauty was entirely his own, his art entirely original, and he mastered it all as well as only he could have.<sup>10</sup> In his journals he described it as a visual translation of the great themes of human emotions<sup>11</sup>, reinforced by his strange attraction to the horrific, to excess, brutality, intensity, cruelty and violence.<sup>12</sup> When around 1901 his friend and patron, Remy de Gourmont, called him the "*peintre de la violence*", de Groux responded with a clarification. "Why of violence?", he asked, "If many of my works give this impression, perhaps it is a result; it has never been a goal. In any case, I have never sought violence for violence; my main research, when I really did what I wanted, was *movement*."<sup>13</sup> His highly charged art, glorifying heroes and portraying visions of the imagination, had the emotional power and visual impact of the greatest Romanticists. Time and again it has been likened to the art of Eugène Delacroix; who was indeed one of the greatest artistic inspirations for Henry de Groux. Notwithstanding his complete and utter idiosyncrasy, the young artist was immediately grouped with the symbolist stronghold within Les XX, alongside Félicien Rops, Fernand Khnopff and Xavier Mellery. Like de Groux, they were more 'artist' than 'painter', intellectuals, addressing themselves more to their sensibilities than to their senses, and formed together with his friend James Ensor a barricade or alternative to the neo-impressionist doctrines that entered the group in 1887. "*De faux vingtistes*"<sup>14</sup>, they were called; but Les XX had always promoted individuality and originality within its ranks.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding this early and enthusiastic acceptance, tensions with Les XX rose quickly for de Groux. In 1889, his close friend William Degouve de Nuncques had failed to be elected a member, despite de Groux' sponsorship, and wasn't even invited to exhibit. In turn, de Groux publicly threatened to withdraw his submission days before the opening of the *Salon des XX* of 1890, refusing to exhibit next to that "execrable pot of sunflowers

10 Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 83, 1902 (Ms 719, INHA, Paris): "Mon art véritablement m'appartient – nul autre artiste [...] ne peut en revendiquer l'inspiration. On ne peut me refuser cette injustice de reconnaître que je l'ai inventé et constitué de toutes pièces."

11 *Idem*, p. 51, 1892 (Ms 711, INHA, Paris): "Mon rêve eut [sic] été de traduire en plastique, avec le sens que j'en ai, les grand sujets d'émotion."

12 *Idem*, p. 54-55.

13 *Idem*, p. 78, 1901 (Ms 718, INHA, Paris): "De Gourmont m'appelle volontiers le "*peintre de la violence*". – Pourquoi de la violence? Si beaucoup de mes travaux en effet donnent cette impression, c'est peut-être un résultat; ce n'a jamais été un but. Je n'ai, dans tous les cas jamais cherché la violence pour la violence; ma principale recherche, quand j'ai vraiment fait ce que j'ai voulu a été le mouvement."

14 *Le Salon des XX* (*op. cit.*), p. 52: "Rops, Khnopff, Mellery, De Groux, forment groupe aux XX. Avant d'être des peintres, ils sont des artistes; ils s'adressent au sentiment et à l'intelligence plus qu'aux sens. Aussi oublie-t-on, devant leurs envois, toutes recherches de lumière et de couleur qui sont la raison d'être victorieuse des peintres dont nous avons parlé dans le précédent article. On les déclare de faux vingtistes, idiotement."

15 *Ibidem*: "D'abord, le – vingtisme « cela n'existe pas; il n'y a que des vingtistes. Le vingtisme, cela ne se définit, ni ne se codifie, ni ne s'explique; cela n'est pas une école, cela ne signifie rien. [...] Rops, Khnopff, De Groux sont aussi vingtistes que Schlobach, Finch ou Toorop."

by Monsieur Vincent or any other *agent provocateur*".<sup>16</sup> His exit sign came after an exalted argument with Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Signac, on the topic of Van Gogh's art at the opening banquet; which resulted in a challenge to a duel.<sup>17</sup> That same night, Henry de Groux' exclusion from Les XX was decided by unanimous vote. The next day he submitted his own written resignation. While de Groux lost most of his social circle and support that night, he couldn't be discouraged. Even in his darkest hours, his optimism and sense of self-worth always seemed to have the upper hand.

During the summer he exhibited at the official salon in Brussels what was to become unquestionably his biggest masterpiece, both in size and in importance. *Le Christ aux Outrages* (first exhibited under the title *Christ montré au peuple*) was an enormous success, and didn't fail to be the talk of the town that summer. It might be telling of the artist, that the moment in which his name lay on everybody's lips in Brussels, Henry de Groux left for Paris. His *Christ aux Outrages* was actually seen as some sort of cleverly prepared reply to his unforeseen ex-communication:

"Few subjects could suit Henry Degroux's [sic] temper as well as this *Ecce Homo!* which he exhibits this year. Isn't it, in fact, his art and Art itself which he symbolizes, delivered to the mercy of the crowd who, for this involuntarily felt majesty and grandeur, for this royalty of the soul and of light, has a feeling of odious confrontation with her own resigned shame, and, not knowing how to find enough gall and hatred to take revenge for it, thus delights in crucifying him."<sup>18</sup>

## Paris Caput Mundi

In Paris, de Groux quickly rose to notoriety as the *enfant terrible* who had left his *heimat* on the cusp of his biggest success. Denis Laoureux noted that de Groux's chosen exile might also have had something to do with his being wanted by the civil guard due to avoiding military service.<sup>19</sup> In the French capital, de Groux could count on the support

16 Madeleine Octave Maus, *Trente années de lutte pour l'art. 1884-1914*, Brussels, Librairie L'Oiseau Bleu, 1926, p. 100.

17 For a relatively full and nuanced account of the situation: Henri Perruchot, *T-Lautrec*, Cleveland, World Pub. Co., 1961, p. 136.

18 Georges Destrée, *Chronique Artistique: Le Salon Eternel*, in *La Jeune Belgique*, 10th year, vol. 9, nr. 10, Octobre 1890, p. 376: "Peu de sujets pouvaient convenir aussi bien au tempérament de Henry Degroux que cet *Ecce homo!* qu'il expose cette année. N'est-ce pas, en effet, son art et l'Art tout entier qu'il symbolise, livré à la merci de la foule qui, pour cette majesté et cette grandeur involontairement ressentie, pour cette royauté d'âme et de lumière qu'elle pressent odieuse à confronter avec sa honte résignée, ne sait trouver assez de fiel et de haine pour s'en venger et se délecte à le crucifier."

19 D. Laoureux, *Henry de Groux, peintre antimoderne à la fin du XIX siècle*, in J. Descamps & D. Laoureux (dir.), *Henry de Groux (1866-1930). Maître de la démesure*, Musée provincial Félicien Rops, Namur, 24 May–23 Septembre 2019, In fine éditions, Paris, 2019, p. 42 & note 23.



of Félicien Rops, a dear friend of his father and a very well-connected figure in the Parisian art scene. The artist's own efforts towards being seen paid off early, when the critics Félix Fénéon and Octave Mirbeau noticed his submission to the *Salon des Arts Libéraux*. King Leopold II of Belgium, later declared by de Groux to be one of his few actual friends in his native country, kindly enabled shipment and insurance of *Le Christ aux Outrages*, from Brussels to Paris, in order for the painting to be exhibited at the *Salon du Champs de Mars*. However, the painting was rejected; notwithstanding the fact that Alfred Stevens, another close friend of his late father and supporter of Henry de Groux in Paris, presided over the jury. Much in the spirit of Gustave Courbet, who by the way had also been a friend of his father, and with whom the young de Groux shared both a rejection of academic traditionalism and bourgeois convention, and a love for artistic and social conflict, *Le Christ aux Outrages* was eventually exhibited in a barn in the Vaugirard district. The space, a shed-like structure where chickens roamed freely, was lent to de Groux by the symbolist painter Alphonse Osbert who had his studio next door.

A couple of months earlier, Henry de Groux had met and befriended the famous poet Léon Bloy, with whom he would have an intimate yet complex relationship. Taken in by Bloy because he had nowhere else to go, de Groux would ultimately break with his soulmate over their respective opinions concerning Dreyfus and especially Emile Zola. They eventually reunited about a year before Bloy's death, but even over the course of the 16 year long quarrel Bloy occupied a vast portion of his mind. Bloy and the art critic Arsène Alexandre had dedicated riveting articles to de Groux's vast canvas *Le Christ aux Outrages* being exhibited in a barn, which managed to attract the whole of Paris' arts and literary scene to come and admire the painting *in situ*. Once again, de Groux managed to surround himself with the crème of society. Puvis de Chavannes, Mallarmé, Heredia and Debussy, among others, came to visit, and Joséphin Péladan extended an invitation to exhibit at the *Salon de la Rose-Croix* where he had reserved him the *place d'honneur*.<sup>20</sup> His network soon snowballed as it had in Brussels: he met James McNeill Whistler at Stéphane Mallarmé's, Oscar Wilde at Stuart Merrill's, was introduced to Paul Durand-Ruel by Heredia, and to Ambroise Vollard by Félicien Rops. De Groux dined with Remy de Gourmont, Joris Karl Huysmans, Moréas, and even had too much to drink with Paul Verlaine. Over the years, most of them became intimate friends of the artist, and the complete list of all the notable figures he surrounded himself with seems just long enough to fit the 18 volumes of his own journals. Only two years after the dispute at the banquet of Les XX, de Groux even gives a lively account of how spent the evening at the cabaret *Le Rat Mort* in Place Pigalle, in the company of Louis Anquetin and ... Henri Toulouse-

20 Invitation which Henry de Groux kindly declined to accept.

Lautrec, with whom he regularly participated in the *Expositions des peintres impressionnistes et symbolistes* at the Galerie Le Barc de Boutteville. It is around this time that Henry de Groux started these journals, which are an extraordinary account of a bohemian artist at the end of the 19th century as well as, we must admit, an excellent psychiatric case-study.

## Between fame and famine

In the years that followed, de Groux reached full artistic maturity and things seemed to be looking out for the brilliant young artist. He continues to perfect all intellectual and technical aspects of his art, and experiments ceaselessly with new techniques and media. The great erudition which lies at the basis of all his art, and the beginnings of which he attributed to the personal library of Degouve de Nuncques *père*, reaches new heights through his intimate contact with Europe's most distinguished writers. He exhibits in some of the most prestigious exhibitions in Europe, receives plenty of attention from critics and the press, and becomes all in all a famous figure in the Parisian art world. However, money always seemed an issue, and the young artist, now married with children<sup>21</sup>, moves from one place to the next and is clearly struggling to survive. Holidays were spent at the homes of their friends, and it seems not without cause that Henry de Groux and Marie Engel moved back to Belgium for a while after the birth of their first daughter Elisabeth. Staying in Marie's hometown Spa, the couple probably sought financial security under family wings. Over the years, de Groux had tried to establish relationships with influential dealers in modern art; entering into contracts, often with several at the same time, securing monthly revenues, or making arrangements in exchange for paints, canvases and even studio spaces. All these efforts seemed however not very long lasting. This was likely due to his difficult character, as well as the fact that de Groux had difficulties in finishing his works to a satisfactory degree. Of all the many stories, or should we say tales, written about de Groux, most of them are outrageous to such a degree that they become unbelievable. But where there's smoke, there's fire, and at least some of them should be true, even if only in part. De Groux was reported to personally track down rich art collectors to present them his works, forcing his way into their homes, sometimes accompanied by all parties that had a stake in a particular painting: paints dealers, framers, carpenters who made the stretchers, or even landlords to whom he owed rent.

<sup>21</sup> Henry de Groux married Marie Engel in 1893, and had his first daughter (Elisabeth) in 1894. His second daughter (Marie-Thérèse) was born in 1898. Already in 1893, the artist wrote in a letter to Edouard Gérard: "*Je suis marié et je ne veux pas infliger à ma femme une existence que je n'ai trop longtemps supportée moi-même.*" (Letter copied in his journals: Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 121, 1892 (Ms 711, INHA, Paris). Notwithstanding inscribed in 1892 related to 1893.)



During this time, more than ever in between fame and famine, de Groux invested a lot of time and effort in the production of prints, most often lithographs. He even explained their market dynamics himself: “One could very well live off prints alone. Better perhaps than off painting, with the very advantage that the print is an otherwise powerful medium of diffusion. It goes everywhere, gets in easily and spreads a name with certainty. But one would have to find ideas for series. Thus, the person who falls in love with one is encouraged to take the others as well, and the labor can advantageously be amplified in all directions.”<sup>22</sup> De Groux clearly made a name for himself as a printmaker, publishing far and wide in the leading art magazines of the day. The artist even prided himself on the fact that Fantin-Latour was one of the most serious collectors of his prints.<sup>23</sup> Close in both spirit and body to a lot of the leading writers and poets of the day, he was furthermore often commissioned to do book illustrations.

In 1895, de Groux also started his career defining series of paintings: first the Napoleonic cycle, followed a year later by the historic portraits. A series around Wagner’s operas was started in 1897, and the Dantesque cycle around 1899. These were all brief but intense periods of production around a central theme or style, with all four of the aforementioned series growing out to define the rest of his oeuvre.

## Turn of the century, personal turning point

The year 1900 meant a turning point in Henry de Groux’s personal life. The artist severed all ties with his closest friend Léon Bloy, started an affair with his wife’s niece, Germaine Lievens, and even had his furniture seized over unpaid bills at the paints dealer. Bloy tried to reconcile, but de Groux would have no ears for it. Discovering the affair, de Groux’s wife Marie sent Germaine, who lived in with the de Groux’s for a while in Paris, back home to her parents and didn’t further speak of it. In his diaries, de Groux takes note of his consecutive and horrible nightmares, but all the while the artist courageously continues on his path, persistently filled with the belief of imminent glory.<sup>24</sup>

“In the midst of all the storms of the heart, of the spirit, of the passion, at the heart of all the betrayals, of all the errors, of all the miseries, of all the accumulated faults,

22 Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 64, 1893 (Ms 727, INHA, Paris): “On pourrait très bien vivre par l’estampe uniquement. Mieux peut-être que par le tableau, avec cet avantage même que l’estampe est un moyen de diffusion autrement puissant. Elle va partout, s’introduit facilement et propage un nom avec certitude. Mais il faudrait trouver des idées de séries. Ainsi, celui qui s’éprend d’une seule est incité à prendre aussi les autres et le labeur peut avantageusement s’amplifier dans tous les sens.”

23 *Ibidem*.

24 For the nightmares: *Idem*, p. 147-148. For the imminent glory: *Idem*, p. 157.

of all the tribulations of this terrible Parisian life of a needy artist, one thing has remained faithful to me all the same and I have kept a lively and unprofane [sic] enthusiasm for it: it is my art, the love for my art. And the higher understanding than ever of my true *mission*, in that sense. On this point, my energy is intact and I feel it as somewhat *invulnerable* – as long as I have a drop of blood left in my veins.”<sup>25</sup>

As always, small personal victories were just around the corner. After a studio visit, Georges Petit offered de Groux a big solo exhibition at his gallery in Paris, including no less than 60 works. While not a lot seemed to have come out of it financially, the exhibition was a success in terms of recognition and embodied that continuing promise of fame and glory. In order to make a living, the artist reluctantly accepted a commission for conservative murals in the Chapelle Sainte-Agonie in Paris. His next important show would be in 1903 at Siegfried Bing’s gallery *L’Art Nouveau*, where he showed his complete series on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. An exhibition at the gallery *L’Art Nouveau* had initially been planned for 1898, but several practical reasons, sided by de Groux’s own pride, had forced it to be cancelled.

## A painter among the mad

De Groux now lives in Paris with his mistress, Germaine Lievens, while his wife and daughters live with his in-laws in Spa, Belgium. The lovers come out to their respective families as an enamored couple, which was followed by a divorce proposal to his wife. In the midst of all the tumult, Henry and Germaine left for a prolonged stay in Florence, Italy. During these trying times, the artist’s diaries seem to gain in vigour, an exaltation seems to get a hold of him, and in Italy this immense energy came to full fruition. De Groux is drunk with enthusiasm for his newfound home, his new friends, and no less than two new series: Savonarola and Orestes. The artist also became a critic, writing several articles for the Italian press concerning other artists he holds close to his heart.<sup>26</sup> It should therefore not surprise that the two most crucial encounters during his Italian *soggiorno* were in fact literary figures. In Florence he met, befriended and started corresponding with the leading art critic Vittorio Pica, who would grow out to become one of the principal supporters of his cause. It was however the Italian poet Gabriele D’Annunzio,

25 *Idem*, p. 146, 1900 (Ms 717, INHA, Paris): “Au milieu de toutes les tempêtes du coeur, de l’esprit, de la passion, au centre de toutes les trahisons, de toutes les erreurs, de toutes les misères, de toutes les fautes accumulées, de toutes les tribulations de cette terrible vie parisienne d’un artiste besogneux, une chose m’est entre toutes restée fidèle quand même et j’ai gardé pour elle un enthousiasme vivace et improfané [sic] : c’est mon art, l’amour de mon art. Et le sens plus élevé que jamais de ma vraie mission, dans ce sens. Sur ce point, mon énergie est intacte et je la sens en quelque sorte invulnérable – aussi longtemps qu’il me restera une goutte de sang dans les veines.”

26 Amongst others on Delacroix, Whistler, Rops and Meunier.



known for his decadent literature and extravagant lifestyle, with whom de Groux could identify himself completely. Before travelling to Italy, he had already desperately wanted to illustrate D'Annunzio's novel *Il Fuoco*.<sup>27</sup> It is known that the two upheld a relatively intimate correspondence over the years to come, although these letters could not be traced.

In Florence, in 1904, de Groux was granted an entire exhibition room at the Palazzo Corsini. The event was organised by a nucleus of artists and intellectuals opposed to the local art establishment, and presented yet another great success for the artist. He exhibited the works painted up to date in Florence, among which *Minerve protège Oreste* (cat. 10). Unfortunately, the exhibition got caught up in de Groux's tumultuous life. Henry de Groux, who had seen Germaine in *tête-à-tête* with another gentleman and accused her of infidelity, was arrested after the violent public outburst that followed. The artist was escorted to the psychiatric asylum of San Salvi, Villa Fabri, where he was to be detained until further notice. Around the same time, the exhibited works came to be confiscated due to unpaid debts. His Florentine friends, amongst which Giovanni Papini, had tried in vain to have him freed; but before long de Groux himself managed to escape during one of his complementary walks.

After reportedly travelling by foot from Florence to Genua, penniless and surviving by grace of his drawings he sold<sup>28</sup> along the road, he managed to secure a ferry to Marseille where his wife Marie was waiting to bring him back with her to Spa, Belgium. Once safely on French soil, and out of the hands of the Italian civil guard, de Groux held a press conference to tell his adventures to the world. The Italian, French and Belgian press, had all covered his escape from the asylum, but no further news had brought them to speculate on his death or possible suicide. Only a handful of newspapers were sceptical about the whole affair. Tales of psychiatric detention were not a new phenomenon in the life of Henry de Groux.<sup>29</sup> And some called it nothing more than, yet another, elaborate publicity stunt. To this day it remains unclear what events actually took place. The Belgian public, however, read his own words through an article first published in *Le Matin* (Paris) and then republished under the title "*Un peintre chez les fous*" in most Belgian newspapers. Talking to the French journalist, the artist explained his predicaments of

27 *Idem*, p. 207, 1902 (Ms 719, INHA, Paris).

28 *Le Retour d'Henry de Groux*, in *Le Petit bleu du matin*, 23-08-1904. Talking about the drawings he made in cafés in order to earn some change, he was quoted as follows: "*Ils n'étaient pas fameux, dit-il; aussi, pour ne pas compromettre ma réputation d'artiste, je les ai signés Georges Hugo... ou Antoine Van Dyck!*"

29 We're referring to the backlash of Henry de Groux's open letter of 1897 in which he resigned to his Belgian nationality.

being admitted by force, escaping and travelling by foot all the way to Genua; a situation the very improbability of which, he stated, granted him success.<sup>30</sup>

Days later, Henry de Groux distanced himself from the stories that he himself had seemingly put into the world, saying that what the press had made of it was “mere fantasy or at least very imperfectly accurate”.<sup>31</sup> As soon as the painter was proven to be back in Spa, Belgium, at home with his wife and children, the news frenzy came to a dazzling halt. Making international news out of an artist’s delirious and manic state, as well as the whole drama that reportedly would have taken place, still serves as a testament to Henry de Groux’s fame at the time. The break which followed his return, is also clearly present in his journals. Even for the obsessive diarist, his personal notes abruptly came to an end in 1904, only to begin again in 1906. At the end of 1905, Edmond Picard proposed de Groux to publish his own and honest account of the adventures and misfortunes that came to pass in Italy. And although it was initially intended to be written in the form of a series of letters, which suited the artist’s own writing habits, Henry de Groux never came around to putting his story on paper.

## The Re-entry of Christ in Brussels

After his return to Belgium, things went quiet for de Groux. As supporters of the first hour, Edmond Picard and Camille Lemonnier, tried to help the artist by commissioning him to illustrate several of their new publications. In 1906 he painted the portrait of his old friend James Ensor; who had, 10 years earlier, included Henry de Groux as one of the principal artists battling for artistic freedom and expression in his iconic painting *Les Cuisiniers Dangereux* (fig. 1). As a matter of fact, the artistic identities and careers of both Ensor and de Groux, had walked similar paths. Both artists could not easily be categorized and were artistically speaking only, and profoundly, themselves. They painted their respective masterpieces at the same time, incorporating in them similar themes, practices and even compositions. The friendship between de Groux and Ensor can be traced back to as early as 1883, the date from which a portrait of de Groux by Ensor survives. Ensor played a pivotal role in the election of de Groux as a member of Les XX, and had always admired his idiosyncratic art. Although they respected one another profoundly, the initial promise of fame and eternal glory that was promised to the both of them, was only

<sup>30</sup> “(...) son invraisemblance même me donna le succès”.

<sup>31</sup> “(...) n’ont été que fantaisie ou sont en tous cas très imparfaitement exactes.”





Fig. 1. James Ensor (1860-1949), *Les Cuisiniers Dangereux*, 1896. Oil on panel, 38 × 46 cm, Private collection. This iconic painting is an interesting meta-critique on contemporary art criticism at the time. Ensor portrayed the leading men behind Les XX, Edmond Picard and Octave Maus, serving the heads of the most avant-garde artists of the group to a panel of hungry critics, among which Camille Lemonnier and Emile Verhaeren. The artists portrayed, from left to right, are: Anna Boch as a plucked chicken, Théo Van Rysselberghe, the spectacled Georges Lemmen, Guillaume Vogels with pig ears, Ensor on a plate, the monocled Van der Stappen and, finally, Henry de Groux as lobster in bottom right hand corner.



Fig. 2 Henry de Groux, Portrait of James Ensor, 1907. Oil on canvas, Mu.ZEE, Ostend, inv. SM000372.

fulfilled in the case of James Ensor. A slight frustration can be noticed in the tone with which Henry de Groux speaks of his friend. During the time of his portrait sessions with Ensor, de Groux was introduced to the art collectors Albin & Emma Lambotte. Guided by the wise judgement of James Ensor, they still saw that promise of greatness embodied in Henry de Groux. And after finishing Emma's portrait, he often resided with the couple in Antwerp. De Groux

exhibited left and right, continued working, finished commissions and got on with his life. Opposed to his early days of high society dinners, drunken nights out on the town, and vagabonding Parisian streets, Henry de Groux now lived his life in a rather reclusive manner. So much so that the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, the famous *Salon du Champs de Mars*, finally declared the artist dead in their catalogue of 1908.

**“I have been considered dead and I have been considered crazy. Today, it seems, I am considered alive and “resurrected” and perhaps even wise.”<sup>32</sup>**

In 1911, Henry de Groux was granted the honour of a personal retrospective at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris. Started in 1903, this annual exhibition quickly gained its reputation as one of the most important events on the European art world calendar. This was in part due to the yearly organisation of single artist retrospectives. For the first edition, this honour was given to Gauguin, who died earlier that year. In 1904, the *Salon d'Automne* mounted retrospectives of the work of Paul Cezanne, Puvis de Chavannes, Odilon Redon, Auguste Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec. Since then, important retrospectives had been granted to the most illustrious and glorified artists of modern times. That, at the time of Cubism's exponential rise to fame, such a tribute was deemed fitting of Henry de Groux, is in itself a testament to his importance as an artist. Walking in, late to his own

<sup>32</sup> Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 95-96, 1904 (Ms 722, INHA, Paris), although concerning de Groux's retrospective at the *Salon d'Automne* of 1911: “J’ai passé pour mort et j’ai passé pour fou. Aujourd’hui, je passe, paraît-il, pour vivant et “ressucité” et peut-être pour sage.”



opening, Henry de Groux startled the public which was convinced the legendary artist had now definitely passed away. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, as the exhibition in itself proved to be an invigorating and illuminating mid-career-retrospective. Alongside many of his most acclaimed works of the past years, Henry de Groux came out of nowhere with an entirely new facet to his artistic production: sculpture. In less than two years, the artist had sculpted an entire body of representative works. Reporting on the exhibition, which he called “[unquestionably] the chief attraction of the Salon d’Automne”, Guillaume Apollinaire, remarked:

“Until then, I had known neither Henri [sic] de Groux nor his paintings, and of the man I knew only his legend, which is marvellous and unbelievable. I thought, moreover, that he had been dead for many years when, suddenly, I found myself in the presence of a ghost full of life and vigor, whose conversation was witty and whose face recalls Baudelaire’s. At first, his painting seemed to me to be the most outmoded thing in the world; I felt that these Shakespearean and Dantesque evocations were purely literary. How sadly I looked, without daring to linger, at his *Humiliation of Christ*, at the tragic *Napoleon Crusoe*, and at his portraits! But then, I gradually grew accustomed to the poetic tumult; Henri [sic] de Groux’s lyrical imagination was revealed to me, and I understood the meaning of this plastic delirium; suddenly, the romantic crowds, the mournful and solitary figures came to life before my eyes.”<sup>33</sup>

Apollinaire further remarked on the relevance of Henry de Groux’s work for younger generations of artists, effectively ensuring his readers of the importance of de Groux for the development of modern art. Hadn’t de Groux been sold, after all, by the likes of Ambrose Vollard and Paul Durand-Ruel, alongside paintings by Cezanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh? Weren’t his paintings part, after all, of some of the most distinguished collections of modern art in Europe? And wasn’t the artist, then not, an integral part of these monuments of modern art? After this last outburst of international acclaim, however, Henry de Groux quietly started avoiding the public stage. The war years still proved a productive period for the artist who had once exclaimed that “there’s nothing more beautiful than war”<sup>34</sup>! The letters he writes to his wife and daughters nevertheless seem to speak most of worry and disquietude. In 1915, Henry de Groux was granted official permission to document the war on the front lines. No more than a year later, the artist

<sup>33</sup> LeRoy C. Breunig (ed.), *Apollinaire on Art. Essays and Reviews 1902-1918*, Boston, MFA Publications, 2001, p. 181.

<sup>34</sup> Rodolphe Rapetti & Pierre Wat (dir.), *op. cit.*, p. 223, 1893 (Ms 727, INHA, Paris): “Il n’y a au fond rien de plus beau que la Guerre.”

presented a full print folio of 40 etchings, as well as a massive collection of more than 300 drawings he produced on the front lines, in an important exhibition at the Galerie d'Alignan in Paris. Recently several exhibitions focused on this part of his production.<sup>35</sup> He also continued sculpting and completed several important public monuments in the south of France, where he chose to reside with his family. The war years actually seem to embody a sort of catharsis in the artist, and the death of his friend Remy de Gourmont certainly played an important part in his reconciliation with Léon Bloy. Their refound friendship didn't last long, as Bloy died no more than a year later. In the south of France, de Groux was close to Emile Bernard who was painting murals in Villeneuve-les-Avignon. It is also during this time that the artist came to befriend the owner of the Palais du Roure in Avignon, Jeanne de Flandreysy. She eventually became his new patron, and for the last 10 years of his life effectively influenced the whole of his art. She supported him by collecting older works, wishing to decorate an entire room of the Palais du Roure with works around Dante Alighieri, and made sure Henry de Groux's masterpiece *Le Christ aux Outrages* received a final home and destination. She also commissioned paintings, and, perhaps unknowingly, launched Henry de Groux's last series and obsession: the life of Petrarch.

When Henry de Groux finally parted this life for the next, nobody knew if he was going to Hell or Heaven, and whether the place that was granted to him suited his taste. A large retrospective exhibition was organised at the Galerie d'Alignan in Paris, made in collaboration with his daughter Elisabeth. Also the year of the centenary celebrations of the Belgian nation, Jeanne de Flandreysy sent *Le Christ aux Outrages* from Avignon to Brussels, to be hung pride of place at the mile-stone exhibition of 100 years of Belgian art. The following year, Elisabeth married the writer Emile Baumann, who dedicated a biography to the life and art of the painter he had never known. But in the end, has anybody ever really known Henry de Groux?

<sup>35</sup> Jan Dewilde & Thomas Schlessen, *Henry De Groux (1866-1930): Oorlogsgetuige 1914-1918*, Ieper, In Flanders Fields Museum, 2007. And: *Figures de Guerre. Henry de Groux*, Ville d'Avignon, Palais du Roure, 2014.





# SCULPTURES

PARIS



## Ludwig van Beethoven 1911

Sand-casted bronze, with a brown and '*mordorée*' patina.

Signed and dated in the cast, on the right shoulder: '*Henry de Groux 1911*'.

Foundry mark: '*Fonderie Natle de Bronzes / J. Petermann / Bruxelles*'

50 × 42,5 × 39 cm

### PROVENANCE

By descent in the family of the artist;

Private collection, France.

### EXHIBITED

Salon d'Automne, 1911, n° 35.





## Ludwig van Beethoven ca. 1910

Sand-casted bronze, with a so-called '*patine médaille*'

Signed in the cast, on the front: '*Henry de Groux*'

41 × 33 × 25 cm





## Stéphane Mallarmé ca. 1919

Bronze cire perdue, with a brown patina.

Signed in the cast on the left shoulder: '*Henry de Groux*' and numbered '2'.

Foundry mark: '*Cire Perdue Valsuani*'

54 × 56 × 33 cm





## Léo Tolstoï 1910-11

Bronze *cire perdue*, with a brown patina.

Signed in the cast: '*Henri de Groux*', and titled on the front of the base: '*TOLSTOI*'.

Foundry mark: '*CIRE PERDUE C. Valsuani*'.

58 × 28 × 33 cm

### PROVENANCE

Formerly in the collection of Mlle Heuertz;

Formerly in the collection of Geneviève and Pierre Hebey, Paris;

Their sale: *Le regard de Pierre Hebey: Les passions modérées*, Artcurial, Paris, 23 February 2016, lot 491;

Private collection, France.

### EXHIBITED

Salon d'Automne, 1911, n° 34 ter.

*Exposition Henry de Groux*, Galerie d'Alignan, Paris, 1916, nr. 298.

### NOTE

In his article on de Groux as a sculptor, Jérôme Descamps writes: "Among his sculptures, it is his buste of Tolstoï that in first instance De Groux is most proud of." p. 158





## Timeline

1866

Henri Jules Charles Degroux was born on the 16th of November 1866, at the Brussels commune of Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode. His father, Charles Degroux, was a well-known realist painter, central to the development of modern art in Belgium.

1870

Death of his father, Charles Degroux, who had co-founded the *Société Libre des Beaux-Arts* two years prior. The contents of his studio were dispersed at auction: *Vente Charles de Groux. 6 et 7 juin 1870.* (Bruxelles, M. Weissenbruch).

1877

First artistic formation at the *Académie Portaels*, directed by the painter Jean-François Portaels, a friend of his father. The young de Groux received support from many of his father's closest friends, such as Constantin Meunier, Félicien Rops and Louis Artan de Saint Martin.

1881-1883

Is present on the list of inscriptions of several courses at the *Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels. His grades are quite mediocre. Here he meets his co-students Jean Delville and Jan Toorop. In 1883, James Ensor draws his portrait.

1884

Short enrollment at the *Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, in the studio of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Already lives with very poor financial resources. Beginning of a life-long friendship with the symbolist painter William Degouve de Nuncques. Shares a studio with Jan Toorop in Machelen-Haeren, in the countryside



Jan Toorop (1858-1928), *Portrait of Henry de Groux*, 1884. Watercolour on paper, 230 x 281 mm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, inv. KM 101.692.

outside of Brussels, until he cedes his place to Degouve de Nuncques. Already frequents the intellectual and literary circles in Brussels, and designs the cover for the short-lived but influential magazine *La Basoche* (1884-1886), to which amongst others Edmond Picard, Camille Lemonnier, Jules Destrée, Stuart Merrill, and André Fontainas contributed. From this year a portrait of de Groux in watercolour by Jan Toorop survives, as well poems dedicated to the young artist by amongst others Albert Giraud and Max Waller.

1885

Officially debuted his career at the 9th exhibition of *L'Essor* in Brussels; to which he also participated the following year. On the 1st of June, de Groux is present at the funeral of Victor Hugo in Paris. Exhibits amongst others a portrait of Max Waller at the *Exposition libre d'art flamand* in Antwerp, and is encouraged by Emile Vehaeren.

1886

Exhibits *Le Pèlerinage de Saint Colomban* at *L'Essor*. Elected member of the Brussels avant-garde society *Les XX (Les Vingt)*, as a replacement for the deceased Charles Goethals.

## 1887

His first participation at *Les XX*, clearly shows that the artist already had a small but distinguished following (cf. works from the collections of baron de Haulleville, painter Willy Schlobach, writer Georges Eekhoud, industrialist Frédéric de La Hault, and violinist Joseph Dupont). His success is immediate and the press takes great interest in his work.

## 1888

Exhibits at *Les XX* his first epic series: *Trois rêves après la bataille*, which inspire amongst others James Ensor to do Napoleonic themes. He defines his pseudonym “Henry De Groux” as noted in the catalogue of *Les XX*. Illustrates *Le Théâtre de Bayreuth* by Octave Maus. Shares a studio with William Degouve de Nuncques at Perwez. Illustrates *Le Lys* by the poet Fernand Séverin. During the summer of that year, he is already working on the composition and concept of his most famous work: *Le Christ aux Outrages*. William Degouve de Nuncques is said to have posed for the figure of Christ.

## 1889

Passing of his mother, Jeanne Degroux (née Geyssens). Further refines his pseudonym to “Henry de Groux”, as to suggest noble birth. Jules Destrée publishes *Les Chimères*, which contained besides a lithograph by de Groux, also a frontispice by Odilon Redon. The candidature of William Degouve de Nuncques, with whom he now shares a home and studio in Schaerbeek (Brussels), is rejected at *Les XX*, notwithstanding de Groux’s efforts to have him elected. Tensions within *Les XX* are rising against de Groux and vice versa. The father of Degouve de Nuncques has a rich library, where de Groux manages to read just about anything he can get his hands on. Meets his future wife, Marie Engel, aged 18 years old, and starts a correspondence the following year.

## 1890

Decides to resign from *Les XX* following his refusal to exhibit next to “that despicable pot of sunflowers by Vincent, and any other agents provocateurs”. Two days later de Groux violently attacks Van Gogh, who was defended by Toulouse-Lautrec and Signac. To put an end to the situation an unanimous vote was cast amongst the members of *Les XX* for de Groux’s immediate exclusion. The same year, de Groux decides to exhibit his work together with Degouve de Nuncques at their shared studio. Vincent Van Gogh dies. Exhibits his *Le Christ montré au peuple* (later called *Le Christ aux Outrages*) at the official *Salon Triennial* of Brussels.

## 1891

De Groux left Brussels for Paris, where he can count on the support and friendship of his fellow countrymen Félicien Rops and Alfred Stevens, who were both close to his father. Meets Léon Bloy, with whom he will have a very close but complex relationship, and who offers his hospitality. Exhibits with the *Salon des Arts Libéraux* where he is noticed by Félix Fénéon, Octave Mirbeau, and came into contact with the famous Parisian art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. Jules Destrée, Albert Aurier and Camille Lemonnier publish articles on de Groux. Starts keeping his journal, which he continued obsessively throughout his life.

## 1892

Léon Bloy publishes an elaborate article on de Groux in *La Plume*. The *Christ aux Outrages* was shipped to Paris with the support of King Leopold II of Belgium, in order to be exhibited at the *Salon du Champs de Mars*, but was refused. De Groux exhibited the work in a barn in the Vaugirard district, put at his disposal by the painter Alphonse Osbert. An article about the curious work and setting was published by Arsène Alexandre in *Le Figaro*, which captured the attention of the French public. The whole of Paris’ vibrant arts and literature scene came to see the work, amongst others Puvis de Chavannes, Mallarmé, Heredia and Debussy.



came to visit. Refuses Joséphin Péladan's invitation to exhibit with the *Salon de La Rose-Croix*. Aided by Puvis de Chavannes, Albert Besnard and Alfred Agache, *Le Christ aux Outrages* was accepted for the *Salon des Arts Libéraux*, and sent to London with the help of Alfred Stevens to be exhibited at the Hanover Gallery. Henry de Groux's work is programmed to be included in the avant-garde magazine *Van Nu & Straks*, directed by amongst others Auguste Vermeylen and Henry van de Velde, but his participation doesn't come through.

### 1893

On the 2nd of February, he married Marie Engel in Enghien-les-Bains. Stuart Merrill and François Barbée are de Groux's witnesses, Léon Bloy and Albert Rouget those of Marie. The married couple lives in Paris, in a financially precarious situation. Illustrates Bloy's *Sueur de sang*, and designs several lithographs. Participates at the 4th exhibition of the *Peintres impressionnistes et symbolistes* at the gallery Le Barc de Boutteville in Paris. Camille Mauclair wrote the introduction to the exhibition, and would become one of the leading supporters of de Groux both professionally and personally. "Disappointing visit of the *Salon de La Rose-Croix*", where he meets Péladan in person for the first time. Exhibits successfully at the *Salon du Champs-de-Mars* (*Les Captifs* and *Bohémiens en voyage*). Sells works to the collectors Charles Hayem and Paul Gallimard, to the dealers Kleinmann and Foyot, paints the portrait of the anarchist poet Laurent Tailhade, and receives financial aid from Alidor Delzant.

### 1894

First serious recognition as a printmaker. Illustrates *Les Vendanges* by Léon Bloy. Commences a lithograph after his *Christ aux Outrages*, which is dated to 1889. The de Groux's spend their summer with Georges and Laure Flé, where he paints *Le Hallier infernal* and *Les Harpies* after Dante's *Inferno*. Continues to exhibit at Le Barc de Boutteville, exhibits with Durand-Ruel,

participates in the *Salons des Cents*, and can be seen at the Galerie Kleinmann. Produces several illustrations for Remy de Gourmont.

On the 4th of November de Groux's first daughter Elisabeth is born, who will stay by her father's side throughout his life and became an artist in her own right.

### 1895

After a period of intense artistic production and presence in Paris, de Groux's work is shown in Brussels again for the first time since 1890 at the second exhibition of *La Libre Esthétique*. Accepts a proposal by Eugène Marlier to offer part of his production for a fixed revenue of 500 francs per month, which allows him to dedicate himself to the epic series he had dreamt of. Start of the *cycle napoléonien* in pastel. Spends the summer in Spa, Belgium, where his wife finds him a studio in a former casino, the *Vaux Hall*, and where he organised an exhibition of his work.

### 1896

Personal exhibition at *La Maison d'Art*, Avenue de la Toison d'Or, in Brussels. The series on Napoléon is enlarged with paintings and lithographs. Meets Prince Eugen of Sweden, who offers him an exhibition in Stockholm. Bloy bases the figure of the *Lazare Druide* in his book *La Femme pauvre* on Henry de Groux. The artist is included in James Ensor's iconic painting *Les Cuisinier Dangereux*. Passionate about Wagner, de Groux travels to Bayreuth. Moves back to Brussels. Start of his series of portraits.

### 1897

Exhibits his series on the rise and fall of Napoléon Bonaparte at *La Libre Esthétique*, as well as his first historic portraits: Baudelaire and Wagner. Start of his series inspired by Wagner's operas. Makes several hard-hitting statements about Belgium and his fellow countrymen, which spoils his relationships with the

press and the establishment once more. Rumors of duels and being interned at a psychiatric asylum. Leaves Brussels again for Paris.

## 1898

On the 5th of February his second daughter, Marie-Thérèse, is born. De Groux becomes passionately involved in the so-called *Affaire Dreyfus*. Admires Emile Zola's courage, which he translates in the pastel *Zola aux outrages*. His relationship with Léon Bloy becomes uncertain, resulting in internal turmoil and psychological distress. The brothers Joseph and Auguste Barreau propose a contract with monthly revenue and a studio. An exhibition of his work at Siegfried Bing's gallery *L'Art Nouveau* was cancelled. Touched by the deaths of Félicien Rops and Stéphane Mallarmé.

## 1899

Publication of a special issue of *La Plume*, entirely dedicated to Henry de Groux. The artist expresses disappointment as to the published product. Disappointed by the reactions in the press on his participation in the *Salon du Champs de Mars*. Can be seen at the gallery of the famous Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard. Increasingly suffers from financial stress and insecurity. Bloy leaves for Denmark, tensions with de Groux high over Zola and Dreyfus. After the inspired reading Dante's *Divine Comedy*, starts a series of large-scale pastel drawings: *cycle dantesque*.

## 1900

De Groux offers his hospitality to the painter Armand Seguin, who over the course of several months, is witness (and possibly collaborator) to the development of the *série dantesque* in view of an illustrated edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Is close to Paco Durrio, Zuloaga and Fantin-Latour. Breaks off his relationship with Bloy, upon the latter's return from Denmark. Begins a passionate affair with his

wife's cousin, the pianist Germaine Lievens, aged 21, who moved in for a while. The furniture of the apartment was seized by a bailiff, due to unpaid bills at the paints dealer. Life goes on. Germaine was sent home about a month later, by Marie, who discovered the affair. De Groux and Germaine continue to have a passionate correspondence over the course of the next three years.

## 1901

After a personal visit to his studio, Georges Petit offers de Groux a big solo exhibition at his gallery in Paris. The show at the Galerie Georges Petit included amongst the about 60 works, a large replica of *Le Christ aux Outrages*, the series of Napoleon and the series on Dante. Decoration of the Sainte-Agonie chapel (the 7 sorrows of the virgin Mary) in Paris, which will be destroyed in 1960.

## 1902

Asks Ambroise Vollard to loan his works for *La Libre Esthétique*, who refuses. Gauguin cites de Groux amongst the most important artists of the second half of the 19th century, in his autobiographical *Raconters de Rapin*. Receives a visit from André Gide.

## 1903

Exhibition at Siegfried Bing's gallery *L'Art Nouveau*, showing amongst others works from the series around Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Germaine lives with de Groux in Paris while Marie de Groux resides in Spa. Paints the portrait of count Hoyos, Emperor François-Joseph of Austria's emissary. Vollard refuses to loan another work, this time to the *Salon du Champs de Mars*. Offers a painting to the countess Fitz-James as a token of gratitude and a portrait to the countess de Wolkenstein-Trotsburg. De Groux and his mistress Germaine Lievens come out to their respective families as an enamoured couple. Proposed a divorce to his wife. Leaves for a prolonged stay in Italy, in the company of Germaine. In Florence,



de Groux starts a series dedicated to Savonarola. Reads two volumes of Delacroix's journals, and meets Richard Wagner's wife and son, Siegfried, who are on holiday in Florence. Fellow Belgian symbolist painter Charles Doudelet, also resides in Florence at the time. Writes several articles for the Italian press, amongst others about Whistler, Delacroix, Rops and Meunier. The *Corriere Italiano* publishes an article on de Groux's presence in Italy. Is close to the Papini Group (Giovanni Papini, Ardengo Soffici, David Edstrom, etc.). Start of his correspondence with Vittorio Pica.

#### 1904

Intense artistic production since his arrival in Italy. Exhibition of the Italian works at the Palais Corsini, in Florence, at the end of March. Beginning of his friendship with the Italian poet and writer Gabriele D'Annunzio. April announced a major personal crisis in the life of de Groux. Violently breaks off his affair with Germaine on suspicion of infidelity, and suffers from financial stress. After his public outbreak de Groux is interned against his will in the psychiatric asylum of San Salvi, where he manages to escape three weeks later. Travels by foot from Florence to Genoa, thinking he is wanted by the police. News is out and suspicions of suicide. Manages to secure a ferry to Marseille, where his wife Marie is waiting to escort him back to her family home in Spa, Belgium. Organises an interview with the press in Marseille, where he gives an account of his odyssey. Continues correspondence with his Italian friends, amongst others Vittorio Pica. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs returns his paintings left at the Palais Corsini.

#### 1905

Is present on the Belgian art scene, with submissions to the *Salon des Beaux-Arts* of Ostend, and in Liège in the context of the *Exposition Universelle*. Assist to the funeral of Constantin Meunier, friend of both his late father and himself, where he refuses to talk

to Germaine who is also present. Large exhibition of his work organised at the Galerie Miethke in Vienna.

#### 1906

De Groux returns to Brussels after a year of recovery in Spa. Gets back to writing his journal. Gets back together with Germaine Lievens and reactivates his social life. Designs the frontispiece for Edmond Picard's play *Trimouillat et Méliodon ou la Divine amitié*, and is commissioned by Camille Lemonnier to illustrate *Les Charniers* and a new edition of *Happe-Chair*. Touched by the death of Alfred Stevens. Paints a portrait of James Ensor, with whom he has stayed in touch since his beginnings at *Les XX*, and of Ensor's friends Albin and Emma Lambotte. Continues working on the main series that have dominated his oeuvre: Dante, portraits, Savonarole, and the revolution. Integrates contemporary news in his existing artistic language: the catastrophe at the mine of Courrières becomes a modern *Charnier*.

#### 1907

Founding member and first exhibition of the *Cercle L'Estampe* in Brussels. Germaine Lievens gives birth to a daughter, Eve-Marie, non-marital child of de Groux. His submissions to the *Salon Triennal* of Brussels, amongst other his large-scale portraits of Ensor and of Emma Lambotte, were very well received by the press. Ensor makes a drawing of *Henry de Groux jouant au billard au Kursaal*, which remained in the collection of Albin Lambotte. Another breakup with Germaine.

Has an affair with Emma de Georgie, which lasts for another three years.

#### 1908

Starts to copy and comment the first volumes of his journal. One of de Groux's portraits of Richard Wagner is on the cover of the *Leipzig Illustrirte Zeitung* (13 February 1908). For the illustrations of

*Les Charniers*, de Groux studies the corpses of dead horses at the slaughterhouse. The catalogue of the *Salon de la Société nationale des Beaux-Arts* in Paris notes Henry de Groux as deceased. Vittorio Pica dedicates an article to de Groux in the magazine *Emporium*. Stays repeatedly with Emma Lambotte in Antwerp.

### 1909

Makes a portrait of Claude Debussy in pastel. Exhibits for the first time a series of his portraits of living people at *La Libre Esthétique* in Brussels. Beginning of a life-long friendship with the pianist and composer Jeanne Thieffry. Exhibition at the galerie Berthe Weil in Paris. De Groux passionately starts experimenting with sculpture.

### 1910

At the *Salon de l'Estampe* an ensemble of works is shown by the three generations of artists: Charles Degroux, Henry de Groux, Elisabeth de Groux. Starts a new series: the *cycle herculéen*. Realises several of his first sculptures: amongst others *Ecce Homo*, two Tolstoy's and a bust of Beethoven. Makes notes in his journal on the processes and techniques used for his sculptures. Breaks up his affair with Emma. The jury of the *Exposition Universelle* in Brussels refuses his bust of Wagner, of which he himself is very pleased. Writes the following day to Victor Rousseau, member of the jury. Envisions writing and publishing a book on his Italian adventures of 1904, entitled *L'Épave* or *The Pavement*. Realises a portrait of Edmond Picard. Henry de Groux learns that the Futurists like his work, while the following year he writes that their work fails to excite him. A note of de Groux is published in the supplement to the *Dictionnaire Larousse*, the content of which he finds meager. The painter Emile Bernard asks to collaborate on several magazines of which he insures publication, especially *La Rénovation esthétique*.

### 1911

Gets a studio in the Abbey of La Cambre in Brussels. Major mid-career retrospective at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris. Receives a whole room and exhibits 44 paintings and pastels, 12 lithographs and 20 sculptures. Was generally believed to be deceased, before showing up to his own opening. Very well-received by the press and a rediscovery for the large public of all different facets of de Groux's work and series. Apollinaire devotes an article to him in *L'Intransigeant*, calling the exhibition "unquestionably the highlight of the *Salon d'Automne*". Invited by Rodin, who admires his sculptures. Is decorated with the *Ordre de Léopold*.

### 1912

Devotes himself to his literary work under the title *La Tour de la faim*. Notwithstanding the help of Edmond Picard, he fails to sell his masterpiece *Le Christ aux Outrages* to the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Brussels. The painting had been in danger of being sold on many occasions over the past years, due to unpaid storage bills. Germaine Lievens meets the writer André Baillon, with whom she would have a relationship. Together with her daughter Marie-Eve, de Groux's non-marital child she lived in an antoiniste cult.

### 1913

Death of Camille Lemonnier. Made a name for himself as a sculptor. Temporarily moves to Lançon, French Provence, to work on a public commission of a monument for the poet Emmanuel Signoret. His wife, Marie, and two daughters, Elisabeth and Marie-Thérèse, settle permanently at Vernègues in the French Provence.



## 1914

Participates in an exhibition in honour of the *Cinquantenaire de l'Ecole de dessin de Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode*, his place of birth. Leaves Brussels to join his family at Vernègues, Provence. Witnesses the first days of the war in Paris, where he occupies an immense studio rue Chaptal. Decides to document the war from the front lines.

## 1915

Receives permission to enter active battle zones as an artist, and produces several hundreds of drawings on the frontline. These sketches were then reworked in his Parisian studio as the basis of a new series: large paintings, pastels and prints on the theme of war. Actively uses newspapers and press photographs as the basis of his artworks, expressing as such his horror and disgust on the concept of war. Death of Remy de Gourmont.

## 1916

Reconciliation with Léon Bloy after 16 years of fierce enmity. De Groux publishes a bundle of 40 prints on the subjects of the ongoing war, entitled *Le Visage de la Victoire*. Exhibits his war drawings and prints at the *Galerie Alignan* in Paris (301 works of which 238 drawings). Is close to Emile Bernard, who is decorating the abbey of Saint-Andrew in Villeneuve-les-Avignon. Emile Bernard paints his portrait.

## 1917

Death of Léon Bloy.

## 1918

Death of Claude Debussy. De Groux is commissioned to design a monument in honour of his great admirer Debussy, but the project will never be realised.

## 1919

An important set of war drawings is exhibited in Rome and later in Stockholm. Illustrates *Les trois contes* by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Designs the monument for the son of Alignan on the cemetery Père-Lachaise. Short stay at the Palais du Roure in Avignon, the first of many until the end of the 1920s.

## 1920

Having managed to buy the home in Vernègues after the war, often residing in Marseille, and with Jeanne Flandreysy at the Palais du Roure in Avignon, De Groux spends the last years of his life entirely in the French Provence. Illustrates Joséphin Péladan's *Le livre secret*, René Louis Doyon's *Proses mystiques* and *Du Rhône à l'Arno* by his close friend Louis le Cardonnel. Jeanne de Flandreysy orders large-scale paintings with regional themes, and de Groux also finds inspiration in the life of Petrarch and Laura.

## 1921

Is commissioned to design the monument for the fallen soldiers at La Roque-d'Anthéron. With the design finished the following year, it will eventually be cast in bronze in 1925.

## 1922

Exhibits at the Venice Biennale. Jeanne de Flandreysy continues the acquisitions and envisions a room entirely dedicated to Dante. In Marseille to work on a vast decorative project at the opera hall, which was destroyed by fire in 1919. While he was charged with the whole by his friend Gaston Castel, only two large-scale paintings were eventually completed: *L'Apothéose d'Hélène* and *Le Festin de Trimalcion*, illustrations to Petrarch's *Satiricon* (painted in 1926 and installed the following year). Starts a series of drawings capturing figures of daily life.

## 1924

Jeanne de Flandreysy continues buying his work. Jean Snollaerts, cousin of the artist, handles de Groux's commercial affairs in Belgium and ensures a more consistent financial situation. De Groux created a large-scale etching of his *Christ aux Outrages*. Death of Edmond Picard.

## 1925

Sells *Le Christ aux Outrages* to Jeanne de Flandreysy, which will be displayed prominently at the Palais du Roure in Avignon.

## 1927

At the Palais du Roure, de Groux paints an enormous *Pétrarque à la Fontaine de Vaucluse* for Jeanne de Flandreysy.

## 1928

Serious degradation of the artist's health given his cardio-respiratory problems.

## 1929

Tries to market his provincial drawings after daily life figures, which have more success than his large-scale paintings.

## 1930

During the very first days of the new year, Eugène Montfort tries to obtain a *Légion d'Honneur* for de Groux, but his Belgian nationality seems to cause problems. Dies on the 12th of January in Marseille, in a hotel close to the old harbour. He was buried the following day at the cemetery of Vernègues. At the end of April an enormous retrospective exhibition of his work is organised by his daughter Elisabeth and the critic Arsène Alexandre, at the *Galerie d'Alignan* in Paris. *Le Christ aux Outrages* was sent

to Brussels by Jeanne de Flandreysy in order to figure at the milestone exhibition *Exposition centennale de l'art belge* in the summer of that year. This work was exhibited on Belgian ground again for the first time since 1930 in 2019 during the exhibition *Henry de Groux: Maître de la démesure* at the Musée Rops in Namur.

## NOTES ON PROVENANCE

Over the years artworks naturally change hands, through dealers, auction houses or private sales. To track down their provenance is never an easy given. Due to the high number of works bearing similar titles, or the number of different versions of the same theme, subject or composition, the oeuvre of Henry de Groux makes this task particularly difficult. We have therefore chosen to only include provenances that seem to be without question. The same difficulties are of course found in regards to dating the works in the exhibition. Aside from the intense periods in which the artist works around a single theme or subject, many works relating to such themes or subjects were made outside of those periods.

Unless otherwise noted, all works reproduced in the special edition of *La Plume* (1899) were still in the collection of the artist, and are not included in Paul Ferniot's catalogue raisonné at the end of that publication. Oftentimes, the given provenances of *La Plume* have been misused or wrongly attributed. We have carefully tried to stay clear of such mistakes.

## CONDITION REPORTS

Condition reports for every work are available upon request.



## WORKS BY HENRY DE GROUX ARE HELD IN THE FOLLOWING MUSEUMS

*Varying between paintings, drawings, pastels, sculptures and prints*

Artizon Museum, Tokyo  
Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario  
Art Institute, Chicago  
Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Paris  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris  
British Library, London  
British Museum, London  
Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio  
Collection de la Communauté Flamande, Brussels  
Collection de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Brussels  
Collection de la Province de Hainaut, Charleroi  
Detroit Institute of Art  
Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Palazzo Pitti, Firenze  
Imperial War Museum, London  
KULeuven  
Maison Camille Lemonnier, Brussels  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Musée Calvet, Avignon  
Musée de l'Image, Epinal  
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Saint-Denis, Reims  
Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris  
Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence  
Musée Lambinet, Versailles  
Musée Léon-Dierx, La Réunion  
Musée Marmottan, Paris  
Mu.ZEE, Ostend  
National Gallery of Art, Washington  
Palais du Roure, Avignon  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam  
Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels  
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Brussels  
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Antwerp  
Spencer Museum of Art, Kansas  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition “*Henry de Groux* (1866-1930): *Obsessions & Symphonies*”, organised in collaboration by Thomas Deprez Fine Arts, Mathieu Néouze and Trebosc – Van Lelyveld.

The exhibition takes place simultaneously in Brussels and in Paris, and runs from September 23rd until October 15th 2021.

Opening hours: Tuesday to Saturday, from 10 AM until 5 PM.

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THOMAS DEPREZ FINE ARTS  
19th & 20th Century Belgian works of art

**MATHIEU NÉOUZE**

TREBOSC + VAN LELYVELD  
European Sculpture Paris