

DREAMS AND SYMBOLS IN THE WORK OF GUSTAVE MOREAU

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French painter Gustave Moreau (1826-98) received a solid training in history and philosophy — he knew everything of the Neoplatonists for example—before he followed the teaching of Picot, a painter in the neoclassical tradition, and attempted to win the contest of the “Prix de Rome” in the Paris school of Fine Arts, which he left after a second failure in 1849. By contrast he also admired Géricault’s and Delacroix’s contemporary art and actively visited museums and exhibits. He was very close to Chassériau, who had a neighboring workshop on avenue Frochot near Place Pigalle, until he moved to 14 rue de La Rochefoucauld, a house that he was to enlarge and turn into a museum at the end of his life. While visiting the decoration of the stairway of the Cour des comptes (famous murals in the Palais d’Orsay, partly destroyed by fire in 1871 and now in the Louvre) that Chassériau had just finished in 1848, he said to his father, “I want to make epic art that does not belong to a school.” After a few years during which Chassériau’s influence on him was very strong—for which critics of the Salons of 1852 and 1853 reproached him—Gustave Moreau decided to go to Italy to complete his training (1857-59).

He refused the traditional rules of academic painting and searched instead, like the English Preraphaelites, for a new iconography for the most classical subjects of ancient history, mythology and the Bible. He proclaimed the supremacy of the imagination and tried to render the idea in a purely plastic way which would be clear for the spectator, without need for comment. Nevertheless, at the end of his life, he wrote many explanations of his main works, some of which were published in the catalogues of the museum and collected in his *Ecrits sur l’art*! (Writings on Art). He refused any attempt at historical reconstruction and in his compositions he mixed decorative elements and costumes from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and from all over the Orient.

A biblical theme like Salome and Saint John the Baptist, very often represented in Western painting, attracted him only later, unlike his friends Pierre Puvis de Chavannes or Henri Regnault. On the eve of the French-German war, these two artists illustrated this theme in compositions that were noticed in the Salon of

