



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Spoofting the Classics

Daumier's *Histoire Ancienne*

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

In the salons of early nineteenth-century Paris, aesthetes were squabbling over the merits of Romanticism and Neoclassicism, the two contemporary artistic movements of the day. The former relied on emotional reactions elicited from rousing subjects whereas the latter focused on the serene realm of Graeco-Roman logic and idealism. Classical influence had dominated art for 400 years by the 1820s, prompting Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), a proponent of the Romantic movement, to quip sarcastically: “*Who will deliver us from the Greeks and Romans?!*” Delacroix and his cronies could not have hoped for a better deliverer than Honoré Daumier.

Born in 1803 to a lower-class family in Marseilles, Honoré Daumier would never forget his working-class roots, which heavily colored his future opinions and artistic output. Art historians debate whether Daumier was a Realist or a Romantic (or a mix of the two), but he won the praise of artists from both groups. Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), one of Daumier’s most ardent supporters, called him “one of our leading men, not only in caricature, but in modern art.” Daumier was astoundingly prolific, effortlessly oscillating between printmaking, sculpture, and painting. Though his paintings were exhibited at the Paris Salon more than once, he is probably most remembered today for his acerbic lithographs produced for various satirical newspapers. One parody of King Louis Philippe (r. 1830–1848) landed Daumier in prison for six months. That did not discourage him.

The Parisian daily paper, *Le Charivari* (1832–1926),* featured caricatures and satirical essays focused on social, political, and cultural events. Daumier began work for *Charivari* in 1832, an association that would last more than thirty years. The paper’s artists and writers became known for satirizing the elite and their esteemed French institutions, particularly the “ennobling characteristics” supposedly bestowed by the classical educations attained through those institutions. The “beau idéal” (beautiful ideal) became



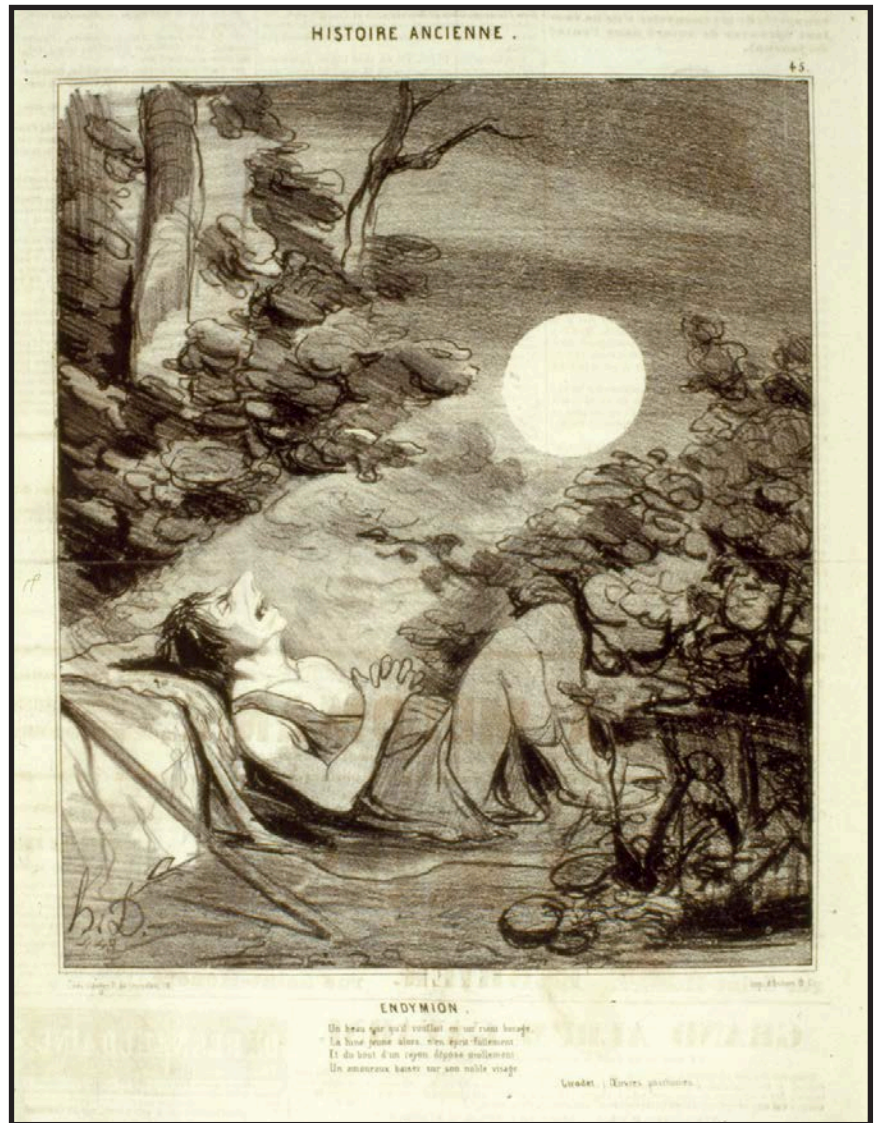
Honoré Daumier (French, 1808–1879)
La Colère d'Agamemnon (The Wrath of Agamemnon), 1842
From the series *Histoire Ancienne*
Lithograph on paper
Gift of Esther Randolph in memory of John Randolph (86.130)

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the “ignoble idéal” (despicable ideal) in the hands of *Charivari* staff. For example, the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres focused on the study of the past, often producing publications in the new discipline of archaeology. Members traveled the Mediterranean, describing and drawing antiquities, as well as spiriting them back to France. *Le Charivari* spoofed members pondering an inscription on a stone, arguing whether its date is Roman or not. A local stonemason trots up and informs them that the inscription refers to his village’s bread oven, which is ten years old. The Académie des Beaux-Arts, which held sway over painting and sculpture by jurying the salons and overseeing art instruction at the École des Beaux-Arts, was satirized as the Académie des “Laid-Arts” (Ugly Art), while the classically-inspired art produced by the École was described as “froid et roid” (cold and stiff). Those institutions and their tenets became Daumier’s chief targets in *Histoire Ancienne*, which also lampooned specific people. In December 1841, *Charivari* introduced *Histoire Ancienne* as if it were a new archaeological study, explaining that Daumier had gone to Greece for research, and that “he worked day and night to reveal the Greek soul of the past.” Concluding in 1843, the series contained fifty lithographic plates by Daumier. The scenes represented classical mythology in addition to historical figures, all in a style described as “burlesquing of the antique.” Brief text “verses” accompanied the images but Daumier probably did not write them.



Honoré Daumier (French, 1808–1879)
Endymion, 1842
From the series *Histoire Ancienne*
Lithograph on paper
Gift of Barbara Stratton Bolling and Deborah S. Booker
in memory of Arthur Mills Stratton (76.44.15)

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Some of the scenes were presented as fake *bas reliefs*, such as one representing the anger of Agamemnon (*illustrated on page one*). Throughout Homer's *Iliad*, Agamemnon and Achilles are at odds with each other over perceived slights and insults. Daumier spoofed a debilitated Agamemnon standing with the help of crutch, railing at an oblivious Achilles, who intently fishes in the background. This image was also aimed at Jean Vatout, Louis Philippe's librarian, who was seen by the satirical press as an academic fribbler and royal sycophant, and who had recently been in a rage after being refused membership by the Académie Française. Daumier's bearded Agamemnon apparently had more than a passing resemblance to Vatout.

Daumier had a knack for creating spindly-limbed figures utterly lacking in vigor, humorously countering the robust, classical ideal. The sleeping shepherd Endymion, for example, was so beautiful that Selene, the moon goddess, fell in love with him as she drove her chariot across the night sky. Daumier's Endymion (*illustrated on page two*) is snoring and snaggle-toothed, a dolt clutching a potbelly. Aeneas is an absurdly tall, beak-nosed figure horrified by the sight of Dido in the Underworld, skewered by her own sword she used to commit suicide after the hero abandoned her. She gestures dismissively toward him, and the text amplifies her scorn: "I don't give a damn about you!" She is hardly the beautiful Carthaginian queen, but instead a dumpy, disheveled caricature. His Ariadne, abandoned by the hero Theseus on the island of Naxos, is no different. She sits sprawled and dejected, staring



Honoré Daumier (French, 1808–1879)
Enée aux Enfers (Aeneas in the Underworld), 1842
From the series *Histoire Ancienne*
Lithograph on paper
Gift of Barbara Stratton Bolling and Deborah S. Booker
in memory of Arthur Mills Stratton (76.44.3)

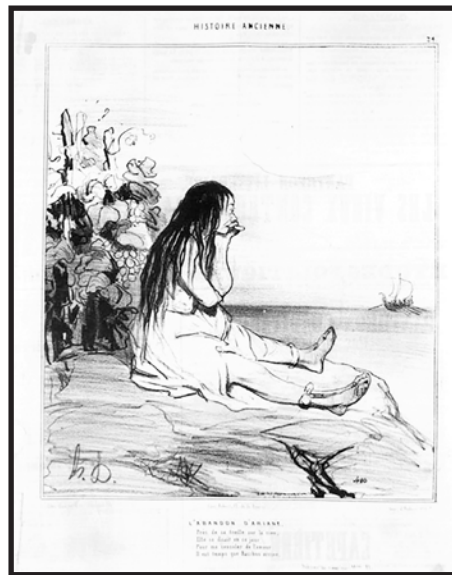
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after the departing ship. The text seems punning, noting the grapevine behind her, ending with “it’s time for Bacchus to come.” In the myth, Bacchus does rescue her, but does it also imply that Ariadne is ready for a nip? His Calypso image follows suit. Abandoned by Odysseus (do we see a pattern with Greek heroes and women?), the nymph sits in teary despair before an empty sea. The humorous text informs the reader that, in an effort to forget the “ingrate,” Calypso has hung new wallpaper in her grotto.

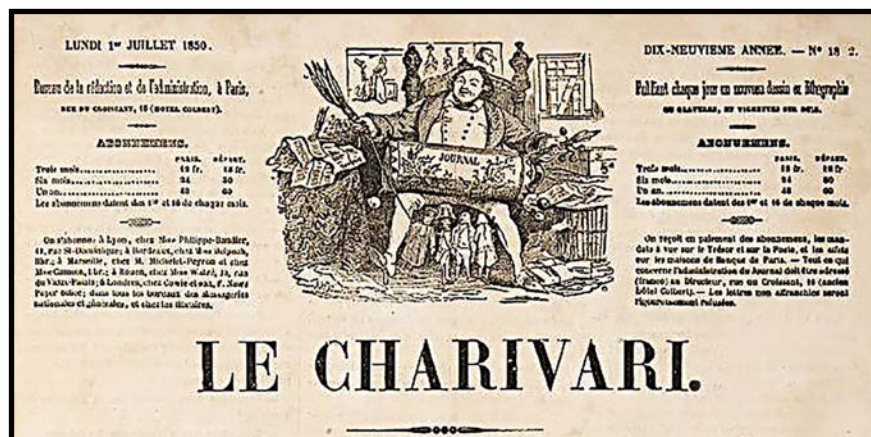
The year before Daumier died, the French government recognized his contributions to visual culture, and granted him a monthly pension. A circle of his friends also arranged a retrospective of his paintings in Paris. It was not the financial success they may have wanted, but it was well received by critics and helped to solidify Daumier as an important artist. He died a few months later, February 11, 1879, leaving a legacy of 100 sculptures, 500 paintings, 1,000 drawings, 1,000 wood engravings, and 4,000 lithographs. ■



Honoré Daumier (French, 1808–1879)
L'Abandon d'Ariane
(*The Abandonment of Ariadne*), 1842
From the series *Histoire Ancienne*
Lithograph on paper
Gift of Barbara Stratton Bolling and Deborah S. Booker
in memory of Arthur Mills Stratton (76.44.6)



Honoré Daumier (French, 1808–1879)
Le Désespoir de Calypso
(*The Despair of Calypso*), 1842
From the series *Histoire Ancienne*
Lithograph on paper
Gift of Barbara Stratton Bolling and Deborah S. Booker
in memory of Arthur Mills Stratton (76.44.11)



Le Charivari title page (July 1850)

**Le Charivari* continued as a weekly from 1927 to 1937.