MAGDALENENSTRASSE 50 · 20148 HAMBURG · TELEFON +49 (0)40 881 06 46 · FAX +49 (0)40 880 46 12
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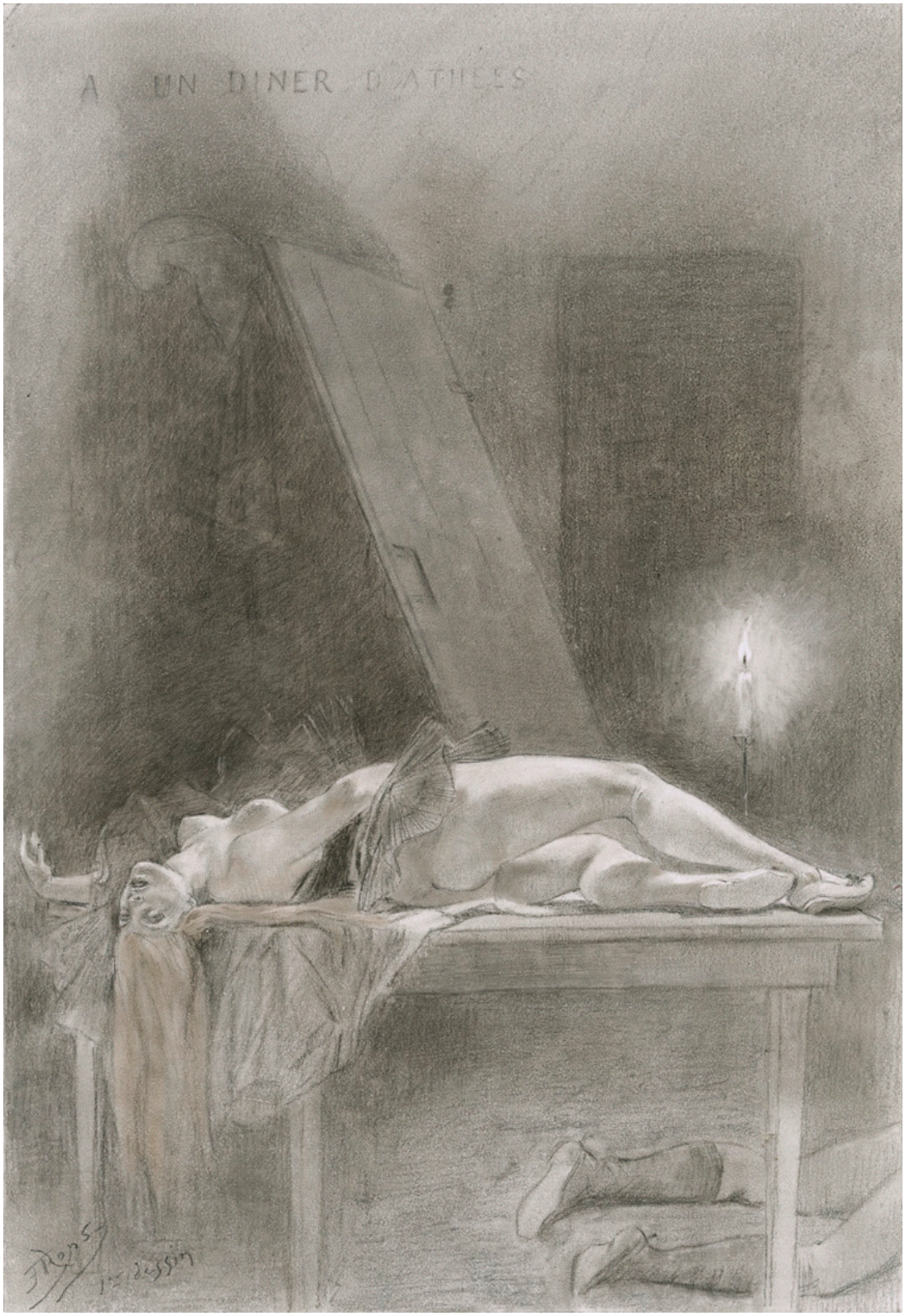

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FÉLICIEN ROPS

1833 Namur - Essonnes 1898

À un dîner d'athées [*At a Dinner of Atheists*]

Graphite and pencil with stomping, brown pastel, heightened with white on prepared paper. Executed *c.*1879-85. Signed and inscribed at the lower left: *F. Rops | 1er dessin*; titled at the upper left: *A UN DINER D'ATHÉES*.
305 x 220 mm

PROVENANCE: Maurice Pereire, Paris; stamped with his red collector's mark lower left (Lugt 3509) – Jacques Odry, Brussels (by 1972); stamped with his collector's mark lower left (Lugt 3486) – Carlo De Poortere, Courtrai (by 1980) – Galerie Patrick Derom, Brussels – Private collection, Belgium (purchased from the above in 1999)

LITERATURE: Maurice Exsteens, *L'œuvre gravé et lithographié de Félicien Rops*, Paris 1928, nos. 509 (heliogravure) and 431 (vernis mou) – Robert Delevoy, Guy Cuvelier et al., *Félicien Rops*, Brussels 1985, p. 197, repr. (here dated 1879) – Eugéne Rouir, *Félicien Rops, Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre gravé et lithographié*, Brussels 1992, III, no. 939, (heliogravure) - *Geschlechterkampf. Franz von Stuck bis Frida Kahlo*, exhib. cat., Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 2016-7, pp. 129, 138-139, no. 73, repr.

EXHIBITED: *Les XX*, Brussels 1889 – *Félicien Rops*, exhib. cat., Musée des Beaux-arts, Ixelles 1969, no. 150, repr. – *Félicien Rops*, Namur 1971 – *Félicien Rops: Opera prohibita*, Casino, Ostend 1971 – *Peintres de l'imaginaire. Symbolistes et surréalistes belges*, exhib. cat., Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris 1972 – *Le Symbolisme en Belgique*, Casino, Knokke 1974 – *Painters of the mind's eye: Belgian symbolists and surrealists*, exhib. cat., The New York Cultural Centre, New York and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston 1974, repr. – *Le Symbolisme en Europe*, exhib. cat., Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris; Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden 1975-6, no. 197c, repr. – *Belgian Art: 1880-1914*, exhib. cat., The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn 1980, no. 81, repr. – *Aspecten van het symbolisme. Tekeningen en pastels,* Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp 1985, no. 4 – *Félicien Rops 1833-1898,* exhib. cat., Le Botanique and Musées royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, Brussels; Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris; Musée des Beaux-arts Jules Chéret, Nice 1985, no. 175, repr. – *Open Mind*, exhib. cat., Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent 1989 – *Félicien Rops: Rops suis, aultre ne veulx estre*, exhib. cat., Maison de la culture, Namur 1998, no. 161, repr. – *Geschlechterkampf. Franz von Stuck bis Frida Kahlo*, exhib. cat., Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 2016-7, pp. 129, 138-139, no. 73, repr.

This drawing is one of an important group of drawings executed by Félicien Rops in the years 1879 to 1885. The drawings were to illustrate a collection of short stories by Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808-89), but published separately. Titled *Les Diaboliques*, the short stories were first published by Dentu in Paris in November 1874.[1] The first printing was sold out in a few days but the Public Prosecutor ordered the small number of books still in production to be seized. Barbey was indicted on charges of

[1] The collection contains the following short stories: *Le Rideau cramoisi, Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan, Le Bonheur dans le crime, Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist, À un dîner d'athées* and *La Vengeance d'une femme*. Barbey, hoping to see publication of a further six, writes in the preface: *Voici les six premières! Si le public y mord, et les trouve à son goût, on publiera prochainement les six autres; car elles sont douze, - comme une douzaine de pêches, - ces pécheresses!*

causing an *outrage à la morale publique et au bonnes mœurs, et complicité* but further prosecution was dropped when the Republican leader Gambetta intervened.

In 1882, the Parisian publisher Alphonse Lemerre acquired the rights and brought out a second edition of Barbey's short stories. He went on to publish Rops's drawings in the form of a portfolio titled *Dix eaux-fortes pour illustrer Les Diaboliques de J. Barbey d'Aurevilly, dessinées et gravées par Félicien Rops* in 1886. The portfolio included nine plates after drawings by Rops. These were reproduced as heliogravures in reduced format. The tenth plate in the set was a portrait of Barbey by the engraver Paul Rajon (1843-88). Six of the nine plates reproduced drawings for each of the six short stories in *Les Diaboliques*. They included *À un dîner d'athées* [Fig. 1]. The three additional plates – *Le Sphinx* (frontispiece), *La Prostitution* and *La Femme et la folie dominant le monde* (first and second postscript) – were not directly linked to the short stories. The heliogravures were printed by Léon Evely. Rops was not involved in the printing but did retouch the plates.

The portfolio was extraordinarily well received. This was surprising, given that Rops's work had had little public exposure at the time. The profusion of articles about the plates by contemporary writers like Joris-Karl Huysmans, Jacques Paradelle, Joséphine Péladan and Octave Uzanne was to lend them almost legendary status.[2]

Rops was evidently dissatisfied with the plates both in terms of format and quality of reproduction. In a letter dated 8 April 1886 he noted: *The small plates convey nothing*.[3] This led him to start work on a second series of larger-format plates only a year later, and to involve himself more closely in their production. A set of nine vernis mou (soft-ground etchings) was duly completed in collaboration with his friend, the painter and printmaker Armand Rassenfosse, in the years 1887 to 1893 [Fig. 2].

Rops's drawings for *Les Diaboliques* rank as some of his best work. He made a number of versions of some of the motifs, although they often differ in only a few details. The inscription on the present sheet reads *1er dessin* – a clear statement that this was the first version of the motif. A second version is recorded. Both the first version and the second version were at one time in the Carlo De Poortere Collection in Courtrai [Fig. 3]. The first version is richer in terms of colour and it is more finely worked. The body of the woman is more smoothly modelled and the effects of light more successfully handled. Nevertheless, the fact that both the heliogravure and the vernis mou correspond with the second version in every detail, down to the lettering, shows that Rops chose to use it, and not the first version, as the model for reproduction. It is not improbable that the somewhat schematic handling of the folds of drapery spread over the corner of the table and the distribution of shadow in the background may have prompted him to make the second version. A third, unfinished version, formerly in the collection of Paulette Rops [Fig. 4] shows a further attempt to formulate the distribution of light and shade and underlines the difficulties he encountered in his attempts to resolve the problem.
Three drawings for *Les Diaboliques* are now in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay. They are *La Vengeance d'une femme* [inv. RF 29876], *Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist* [inv. RF 29875] and *Le Sphinx* [inv. RF 40087]. At least seven other drawings related to the series - namely, the majority - were in the Carlo

[2] See Alric Delaporte, *Félicien Rops et l'illustration des Diabologues de Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly: divagations et artifices sur la genèse des œuvres*, in Marie Gispert et al. (eds.), *Actes de la Journée d'études, 'Actualité de la recherche en XIXe siècle'*, published online January 2015 <http://hicsa.univ-paris1.fr/documents/file/JEMeneux Master 2014/3-Delaporte-Diaboliques Rops.pdf>, accessed 13 March 2015. Many articles reappeared in the journal *La Plume*, no. 172, 15 June 1896, a special issue devoted to Rops, with articles by Bailly, Huysmans, Mirbeau, Péladan, Pica, Pradelle and Uzanne.
[3] *Les petites planches ne disent rien*. Félicien Rops in a letter to François Taelemans. Cited after Alric Delaporte, op. cit., p. 13, note 74.

De Poortere Collection in the 1980s and 1990s. A number are executed in the same technique as the present drawing and are on similar prepared paper.[4]

Barbey d'Aurevilly writes in the preface to the collection of short stories: *Les DIABOLIQUES ne sont pas des diableries: ce sont des DIABOLIQUES, des histoires réelles de ce temps de progrès et d'une civilisation si délicieuse et si divine que, quand on s'avise de les écrire, il semble toujours que ce soit le Diable qui ait dicté!* […] *Quant aux femmes de ces histoires, pourquoi ne seraient-elles pas des DIABOLIQUES?* […] *Pas une ici qui soit pure, vertueuse, innocente. Elles pourraient donc s'appeler aussi «Les Diaboliques», sans l'avoir volé.* In the short story titled *Le Dessous de carte* he writes*: L'enfer, c'est le ciel en creux.* […] *Le mot diabolique ou divin, appliqué à l'intensité des jouissances, exprime la même chose, c'est-à-dire des sensations qui vont jusqu'au surnaturel*.[5]

The short story titled *À un dîner d'athées* focuses on a dinner attended by a group of soldiers and former revolutionaries. One of the soldiers, had just been seen inside a church and is required to justify himself. He responds with his dramatic story of adultery, jealousy, rage and murder.[6] Rops's interpretation of the subject diverges somewhat from Barbey's text. He minimizes detail to heighten the dramatic impact of the scene. The naked body of the woman spread-eagled on the table, the door torn from its hinges, the burning candle, the Phrygian cap on the wall and the corpse of a man on the floor are enough to stimulate the viewer's imagination.

Rops's illustration for *Les Diaboliques* even caught the imagination of Max Beckmann, who produced a drawing titled *Murder* [Fig. 5] in December 1945. Executed in pen and black ink heightened with watercolour, the composition is clearly indebted to Rops. But Beckmann introduced a new detail of his own invention – the savagely slashed throat of the woman. A number of other details, such as the door torn from its hinges and the Phrygian cap on the wall, are so schematized as to be almost unrecognizable. Beckmann's deployment of the title *Murder* thus takes the image to a more general level and the link to Barbey d'Aurevilly's text is almost wholly lost. It comes as no surprise that Beckmann, in a letter dated 21 November 1946 to a friend in New York, makes a point of emphasizing the creative context of the watercolour: *Incidentally, the sheet titled 'Murder' is inscribed with the letter 'R', meaning, after an idea Rops had which I found amusing.*][7]

[4] All three drawings were recently shown in the exhibition *Les Archives du Rêve, Dessins du musée d'Orsay – Carte blanche à Werner Spies*; exhib. cat., Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris 2014 and Albertina, Vienna 2015, p. 426, repr. pp. 222, 226 and 227. The drawings at one time in the Carlo De Poortere Collection, including the present drawing sheet, are reproduced in Robert Delevoy, Guy Cuvelier et al., *Félicien Rops,* Brussels 1985, pp. 194, 195, 197-199 and 201.
[5] Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Les Diaboliques*, Lemerre, Paris 1883, p. 1 and p. 273.
[6] Ibidem, p. 303-401.
[7] Klaus Gallwitz, *Die Spur führt zu Rops, Mörderisches Bilderrätsel für den Kunstsammler und Juristen*, in K. Reichert, M. Schiedermair, A. Stockburger and D. Weber (eds.), *Recht, Geist und Kunst, liber amicorum für Rüdiger Volhard*, Baden-Baden 1969.

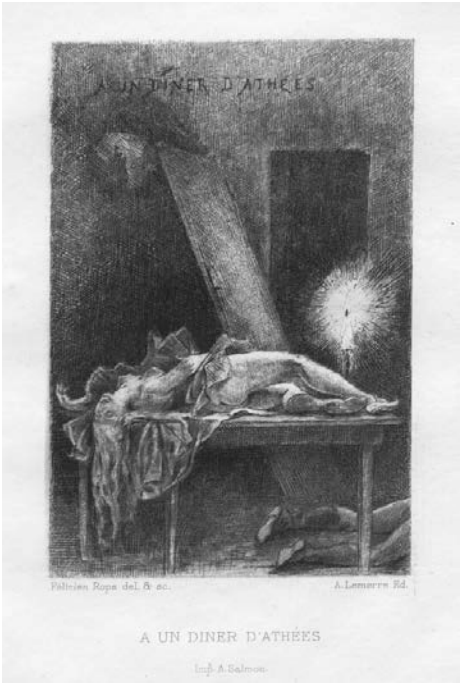

Fig. 1: *À un dîner d'athées*, heliogravure (small plate), from *Dix eaux-fortes pour illustrer Les Diaboliques de J. Barbey d'Aurevilly*, Alphonse Lemerre (pub.), Paris 1886.
87 x 59 mm. (Exsteens 509).

Fig. 2: *À un dîner d'athées*, vernis mou (large plate), from the series of nine prints for *Les Diaboliques c.*1892.
247 x 165 mm. (Exsteens 431)

Fig. 3: *À un diner d'athées*, gouache, pastel and pencil on paper, 233 x 167 mm.
Formerly Carlo De Poortere Collection, Courtrai; with Ronny Van de Velde, Antwerp (2005)

Fig. 4: *À un diner d'athées*, charcoal and pencil on card, 245 x 170 mm
From the collection of Paulette Rops, Mettet; Christie's, London, 18 November 1994, lot 196

Fig. 5: Max Beckmann, *The Murder*, 1945, watercolour over pen and black ink, signed and inscribed: *Beckmann, A 45 R*, 422 x 315 mm. Private collection, Germany