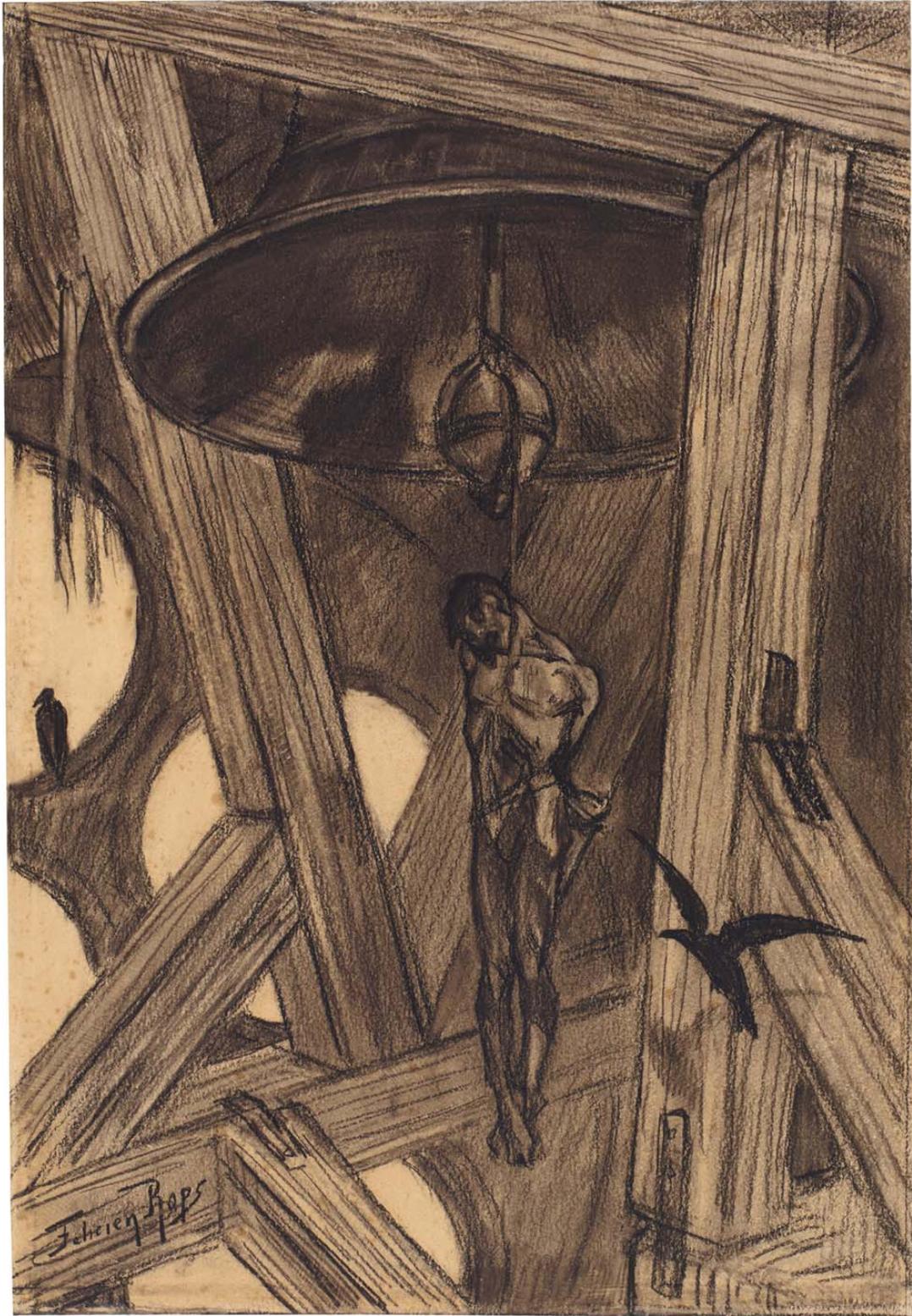


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FÉLICIEN ROPS

1833 Namur - Essonnes 1898

Le pendu (Study for *La légende d'Ulenspiegel*)

Black chalk on paper; 1867-9.

Signed lower left: *Felicien Rops*

380 x 260 mm

PROVENANCE: Edmond Deman, Brussels (editor and friend of Félicien Rops) – Ronny Van de Velde, Antwerp – Private collection, Belgium

LITERATURE: *La Plume, Revue bi-mensuelle illustrée. Numéro spécial consacré à Félicien Rops*, no. 172, Paris, 15 June 1896, reproduced and annotated: *LE PENDU | D'après le grand dessin original appartenant à M. E. Deman.* – Bernadette Bonnier, *Het provinciaal museum Félicien Rops, Namen, Bruxelles 2005*, cf. p. 165 (reproduction of the etching)

EXHIBITED: *Félicien Rops*, Service des Expositions de la Communauté Française de Belgique (exhibition label on the verso)

This drawing served as the direct model for Rops's etching of the same title [fig. 1]. It was published as one of the illustrations for the 1869 edition of the sixteenth-century prose epic by the Belgian writer Charles De Coster titled *La Légende et les Aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs*. The romance was the first Belgian prose epic to be written in French and is regarded as De Coster's chief literary achievement. It eulogizes a mythical Flanders and celebrates nationalist fervour for freedom. De Coster is still one of the most widely-read Belgian writers today. The first edition of *La Légende* appeared in 1867 without illustrations. The second, lavishly produced edition published in 1869 contained thirty-two etchings by twenty artists. Three of the etchings were by Félicien Rops. The book was not a commercial success because it was too highly priced to attract a wide readership. After De Coster's death in 1893 – in poverty – a new, cheaper edition was published. This quickly became a bestseller. Rops and De Coster knew each other well, having founded and worked together on a satirical weekly magazine named *Uylenspiegel*. De Coster contributed a weekly column and Rops regularly supplied illustrations. De Coster continued to produce columns for the magazine until 1863.

The background to De Coster's epic draws on the legend of Till Eulenspiegel, a prankster who appears in early folklore. The tales of Till Eulenspiegel have a long literary tradition in German and in German-speaking parts of the Low Countries, Bohemia and Poland. An early version of the tales appeared in 1483 in Lower Saxon dialect. The first text was published in High German in Strasbourg in 1515 under the title *Ein kurtzweilig lesen von Dyl Vlenspiegel ...* De Coster embroiders tales of the

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youthful Ulenspiegel's pranks with discreditable episodes from his adult life and transfers the story to the sixteenth century and the Eighty Years War – the Dutch Revolt against Spanish rule (1568-1648).¹ Ulenspiegel is reborn as a Protestant hero fighting against Spain and the Spanish Inquisition. De Coster draws on, and romanticizes, historical sources – chiefly E. van Meteren's *Histoire des Pays-Bas*, published in 1618.²

The drawing illustrates a scene from the Revolt of Ghent in 1539 – the uprising by the citizens of Ghent against the Spanish King and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The uprising provides the historical background for Book I, Chapter 28 of De Coster's epic. In 1537, Ghent had refused to support the Emperor, himself a native of the city, in the war with France. In 1539, the Emperor crushed the revolt with extraordinary savagery. Its leaders were beheaded or humiliated by being paraded in sackcloth and ashes and forced to beg for pardon with nooses around their necks. The city gates were destroyed and the symbol of civic defiance and independence, a huge bell known as 'Roelandt', was ousted from the belfry. A new fortress known as the 'Spanjaardenkasteel' [Spanish castle] was built to house a permanent garrison to stamp out further protest.

De Coster writes on page 46 of his text: *Then he [Charles V] looked at Roelandt, the fine bell, and hanged on its pendulum the man who had sounded the alarm and called the citizens to arms in defense of their rights. He had not an iota of mercy for Roelandt, the language of his mother, the voice with which it addressed Flanders.* This is the passage Rops is referring to in his powerfully emotive drawing. Part of the passage is quoted in the lower margin of the etching. The drawing depicts the massive timberwork construction of the belfry with its huge bell and the emaciated body of the bell-ringer suspended from the pendulum. Behind the beams are the outlines of the upper part of the tower window with its Gothic tracery. At the left, behind the window, is the ragged end of the rope used to ring the bell. The dark shapes of ravens hover around the cadaver.

Rops was very probably acquainted with Charles Meryon's etching, *La Galerie Notre-Dame* [fig. 2]. It is a rooftop view – also populated with ravens – through the slender columns of the upper gallery of Notre-Dame. More significant than that, however, is Rops's readiness, as one of very few artists, to depict the horrors of war in harsh, gruesome visual language. Two of these artists were Jacques Callot in his series of etchings titled *Les Grandes Misères de la guerre*, executed in 1633 [fig. 3] and Francisco de Goya in his set of eighty etchings titled *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (executed between 1810 and 1823, first published in 1863) [fig. 4]. In the present drawing Rops has produced an image of shattering emotional force.

¹ The war ended in 1648 with the Treaty of Münster. The northern, largely Protestant provinces of the Low Countries were finally separated from the Holy Roman Empire. An Act of Abjuration had been signed in 1581 formally declaring the independence of the seven northern provinces of the Netherlands from Spanish rule. The southern, Catholic provinces retained their allegiance to Spain. The Netherlands were thus divided. The Belgian State was to emerge from the southern provinces of the Low Countries in the nineteenth century

² For further details of De Coster's life and work, see < <http://www.litde.com/autoren/coster-charles-de.pph> > and Rudolf Radler (ed.), *Kindlers Neues Literatur Lexikon*, Munich 1989, IV, p. 239f.

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Fig. 1: Félicien Rops, *Le Pendu*, etching, 1869, from C. De Coster, *La Légende d'Ulenspiegel*

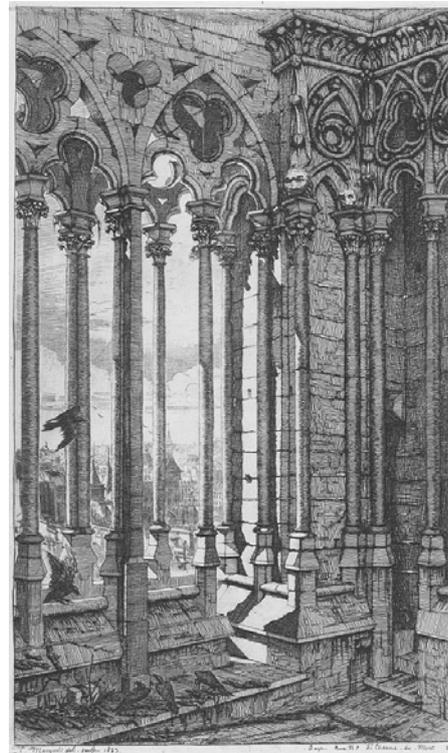


Fig. 2: Charles Meryon, *La Galerie Notre-Dame*, etching, 1853 (Schneidermann 29)



Fig. 3: Jaques Callot, *La Pendaison*, etching, 1633, from *Les Grandes Misères de la guerre* (Meaume 517)



Fig. 4: Francisco de Goya, *Tampoco (Non se puede saber por qué)*, etching and aquatint (Harris 156)