

Death, Sex, Punishment and Springtime in Paris

By Lauren Hasty



Théodore Géricault, *Étude de pieds et de mains*, 1818-1819, Montpellier, musée Fabre

While outside soaking up much needed sun rays in Paris after what seemed to be an endless winter, I couldn't help but notice the advertisements for the springtime exhibitions popping up everywhere like fresh flowers. I also couldn't help but notice a trend: gore.

Three major Parisian museums have mounted B-movie worthy exhibitions: *Crime and Punishment* at the Musée d'Orsay, *Vanities* at Musée Maillol and last but not least *SEX, DEATH, AND SACRIFICE in the Moche Religion* at the Musée Quai Branly.

Are the Parisian museums struggling? Was the financial crisis or the long winter harder on the Parisian culture scene than I realized? Are high-nosed Parisians actually resorting to Hollywood-style blood and guts to attract visitors? Apparently so.

Take for example, the *Crime and Punishment* exhibition currently at the Musée d'Orsay. While entering into the darkened entrance, I felt more like I was going inside the haunted house at Disneyland than visiting a major Parisian museum. I had to strain my eyes to read the title cards accompanying the artwork and just as my eyes adjusted to the darkness they landed on an bona fide guillotine, head-basket and all, sheathed in a long black veil as if were mourning its forced retirement. What, I asked myself, is that doing in the famous museum of the French impressionists? Well known artists' portrayals of decapitated heads (45!), severed limbs, stabbings, and all the grisly like are on display by many a well known artist: Géricault, Delacroix, Warhol, Hugo, Munch... but it's not only art, one also finds a seemingly endless display of criminality, old newspaper articles recounting murders, scientific representations of a criminal's brain, insights into criminology and in a seemingly desperate aim to please the masses they even managed to integrate the much loved *Petite Danseuse de 14 Ans* by Edouard Degas, under the pretext that it was actually created by the artist not as an homage to one of the many ballerinas

he painted, but rather a symbol for crime. So much sin, so much bloody material but why?

A close look at the (severed) digits

Well, perhaps it's because the Musee d'Orsay reported only **3,025,164 visitors in 2008, almost 200,000 less than in 2007**, despite the highly publicized exhibition *Picasso/Manet : Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which was presented in conjunction with the *Picasso et les Maitres* exhibit at the Grand Palais, and according to the museum's records, for undisclosed reasons, **approximately one-third of all visitors for 2008 were admitted gratis**. Furthermore, as of April 2009, a law was passed which allows free entry into national museums for all Europeans 26 years old or younger. The museum seems to simply be practicing simple survival skills: sink or swim; and it's working because the Museum has already welcomed **over 500,000 entries during the first month of the exhibition**.

It's true, this could start a new trend, the museum could perhaps next stage a high profile exhibition highlighting its beautiful collection of Toulouse-Lautrec paintings alongside actual modern day prostitutes and dancers from the seedy Pigalle area of the Moulin Rouge, or, it could try to recreate the scandal provoked by the popular painting *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* where Manet shockingly presented a nude woman casually picnicking amongst clothed men, a work that created outrage when he admitted it for show at the prestigious *Salon de Paris* (where it was refused) and controversy when it was displayed for the 1863 *Salon des Refusés*. A new exhibition could position the work alongside the replicas by Monet and Jacquet, while at the same time presenting a live installation. *Pourquoi pas?*

While making a mental timeline of modern and contemporary art- one does note that the artists who created the most scandal, and provoked discussions are in fact the artists who made history, and contemporary artists are using the same tried and true methods to make headlines. Who hasn't heard about the **diamond clad-100 million dollar skull, *For The Love of God* (2007)**, by Damien Hurst? It seems curators are now using the same method to attract ticket buyers.

Speaking of Hirst, you can see his work *The Fear of Death* (half skull, 2007), if you visit at the ambitious *Vanities* exhibition currently at the Musee Maillol. This one not only has all the necessities to make you say your prayers before you go to bed: a boogy man by Annette Messager, Boltanki's scary shadowy figure cast onto a wall, multitudinous momento mori and vanitas by a range of artists such as Caravaggio, Keith Harding, Basquiat, and Jake and Dinos Chapman, there's even a cabinet of curiosities. Death is literally everywhere you look, and you leave with the feeling the financial crisis is the least of your worries. But despite the vast collection of art by high profile artists, it still seems the theme is disappointingly simple – rather than contribute to the public's discovery of less popular art such as it has done in the past with shows like 2008's Weegee exposition, it resorted to attracting the masses with a freak show, drawing upon death, one of the most primitive crowd pleasers, for profit.

« This exhibition presents Moche ceramics depicting explicit sexual acts »

Notice posted regarding the exhibition on the website of the Musee Quai Branly



Woman caressing a skeleton figure with ape-like attributes © Museo Larco, Lima photo Daniel Giannoni and Steve Bourge

That being said, if you do fancy the primordial, you don't want to miss the *SEX, DEATH, AND SACRIFICE in the Moche Religion* exhibition on display until the end of May at the Musee Quai Branly. This high profile, relatively new Parisian museum specialized in primitive art boasted 1.496.438 visitors in 2009, a 7.9% increase from 2008 which is not bad, but they need to be extra creative if they want to compete with the other museums in Paris (the Louvre, for example, welcomed over 8.5 million visitors in 2008), which is probably why they decided to highlight the unusual display of sexual relations of the Moche culture (located where one currently finds Peru). This exhibition that can't help but make Parisians laugh with irony as the word moche in French is slang for unattractive, and for those with their mind in the gutter (and French humor can be quite *guttural*) they might just think about the similarities between the museum's name and another, less tasteful slang French word, *branler*. A sight for sore eyes, this prurient exhibition puts the Moche tribe on the map with its explicit display of statues performing felatio, sex, sodomy and autoeroticism between people, animals, the living and the dead (in all combinations possible). I did find the exhibition interesting, if not shocking, but unfortunately had no feeling of enlightenment or inspiration that I've become accustomed to after being spoiled by the generally outstanding Parisian art exhibitions, however, when one considers the title, one has to really wonder if that was the museum's goal.

Keeping the (decapitated) head above water

What is, by the way, the goal of a museum? At the end of the day, is the objective really to elegantly show the work of talented artists, or to simply show their work? After all, the most important thing is that the museum stay open, and Paris has already seen the 2009 closing of the first-rate Musee de Luxembourg, which offered sophisticated exhibits such as *From Miro to Warhol*, *the Berardo collection* in 2008 and 2009's breathtaking retrospective of Louis Comfort Tiffany's stained glass workings. Although the closing was apparently not for monetary reasons, **it was still closed**, to the regret of protesters who signed petitions and fought for its survival. On top of everything, the worst thing – as the stats have shown- is that **the public actually likes raunchy exhibitions**, so while television seems to be going to the dogs with all the trashy reality TV shows, apparently, *alas*, museums are taking suite.

<http://artyparade.com/flash-news/30>