

Ingeborg Reichle PhD, Lecturer at the Institute of Cultural History and Theory, Humboldt University, Berlin

Art after Darwin: Darwinian Aesthetics in French and German Art after 1859

When Charles Darwin (1809–1882) finally published his theory of evolution, *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, a number of artists and art critics became interested in Darwin's idea of aesthetics in evolution and beauty in sexual selection as an essential frame to rethink the origin of artistic practices and symbolic thinking within the evolution of early humans. In my contribution I want to present two case studies to discuss how artists in Germany and France became familiar with Darwin's encounter with aesthetics and also became very interested in the emergence of modern science.

The Austrian painter Gabriel von Max (1840–1915), born and raised in Prague, studied fine arts from 1855 in Prague, Vienna, and Munich. As a painter he became known for his religious and mystical symbolism and he opened his own studio in Munich in 1869. From 1879–1883, Gabriel von Max was a professor of historical painting at the Academy of Arts in Munich. From early on he was not only interested in the fine arts, but also in Asian philosophy, spiritism, and Darwinism and was well acquainted with the writings of British naturalists like Charles Darwin as well as those of German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919). Seeking the origin of the human imagination and an intrinsic artistic *drive*, in his stately home in Munich Gabriel von Max accumulated a large collection of prehistoric artefacts and ethnological and anthropological finds. He also kept in his garden a number of apes in a vivarium. Like many of his contemporaries Gabriel von Max was fascinated by the assertion that the ancestors of the genus *Homo* were apes: When Ernst Haeckel turned 60 in 1894, von Max sent him the painting *Pithecanthropus alalus* (1894) to Jena as a present. The painting was an attempt to make a visual statement about his idea that Darwinian concepts like *sexual selection* (*Zuchtwahl*) or *struggle for existence* (*Kampf um's Dasein*) were not sufficient to explain the development of the human mind.

In the second case study I turn to the artworks of the French historical painter Fernand Cormon (1845–1924), one of the leading painters in modern France whose students included Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). Fernand Cormon studied fine arts in Paris and set up his own studio, the *Atelier de Cormon*; later he became a professor of historical painting at the Academy of Arts in Paris (*École des beaux-arts de Paris*) where he was elected a member in 1898. Like Gabriel von Max, Fernand Cormon was deeply interested in Darwin's ideas and the debates about humans in prehistoric times. One of his most well-known paintings Fernand Cormon presented at the Paris Salon in

1880, *Cain fuyant avec sa famille* (1880), which is today on display at the Musée d'Orsay. Based on *La légende des siècles* by the writer Victor Hugo (1802–1885), *Cain* challenged the expectations about the appearance of the body, after Darwin's troubling new conception of corporeality. The emergence of Darwin's evolutionary theory made the human body a site of particular anxiety for nineteenth-century French audiences, because it disrupted the long-held idea of the body as a stable, fixed entity with absolute limits (created by a divine god some 4000 years ago). This doctrine had been challenged earlier in the century by French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's (1744–1829) theory of the transformation of species, but it was not until the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which provided exhaustive evidence of the variation of species and explained in detail the mechanisms driving evolution, that the foundations of the doctrine of a fixed body were seriously shaken. The first French translation of *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1862 titled *De l'origine des espèces ou des lois du progrès chez les êtres organisés*, translated by Clémence Royer (1830–1902), with three further editions up to 1870.

These two case studies provide insights into the process of how Darwinian aesthetics influenced some German and French artists, who were highly interested in the emerging modern sciences.

Suggested readings:

Kate Holterhoff, Beauty as a Terministic Screen in Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. In: *Victorian Network* 2.1 (Summer 2010), p. 49-69.

Matha Lucy, Cormon's *Cain* and the Problem of the Prehistoric Body. In: *Oxford Art Journal* 25.2 (2002), p. 107-126.

Further readings:

Peter J. Bowler, Changing Conceptions of „Early Man“. In: Bernhard Kleeberg, Tilmann Walter, Fabio Crivellari (eds.): *Urmensch und Wissenschaften. Eine Bestandsaufnahme*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005, p. 47-58.

Peter Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism. Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades around 1900*, London, John Hopkins University Press, 1983.

Peter J. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress. Victorians and the Past*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 1989.

Fae Brauer, Barbara Larson (eds.), *The Art of Evolution. Darwin, Darwinisms, and visual culture*, Hanover, NH, Univ. Press of New England 2009.

Ingeborg Reichle, Charles Darwins Gedanken zur Abstammung des Menschen und die Nützlichkeit von Weltbildern zur Erhaltung der Art. In: Christoph Markschies, Ingeborg Reichle, Jochen Brüning, Peter Deuflhard (eds.), *Atlas der Weltbilder*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag 2011, p. 318-332.

Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press 2006.

Jonathan Smith, Picturing Sexual Selection. Gender and the evolution of ornithological illustration in Charles Darwin's „Descent of Man". In: Ann B. Shteir (ed.), *Figuring it out. Science, gender, and visual culture*, Hanover, NH, Dartmouth College Press 2006, p. 85-109.