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GRATIS
FREE

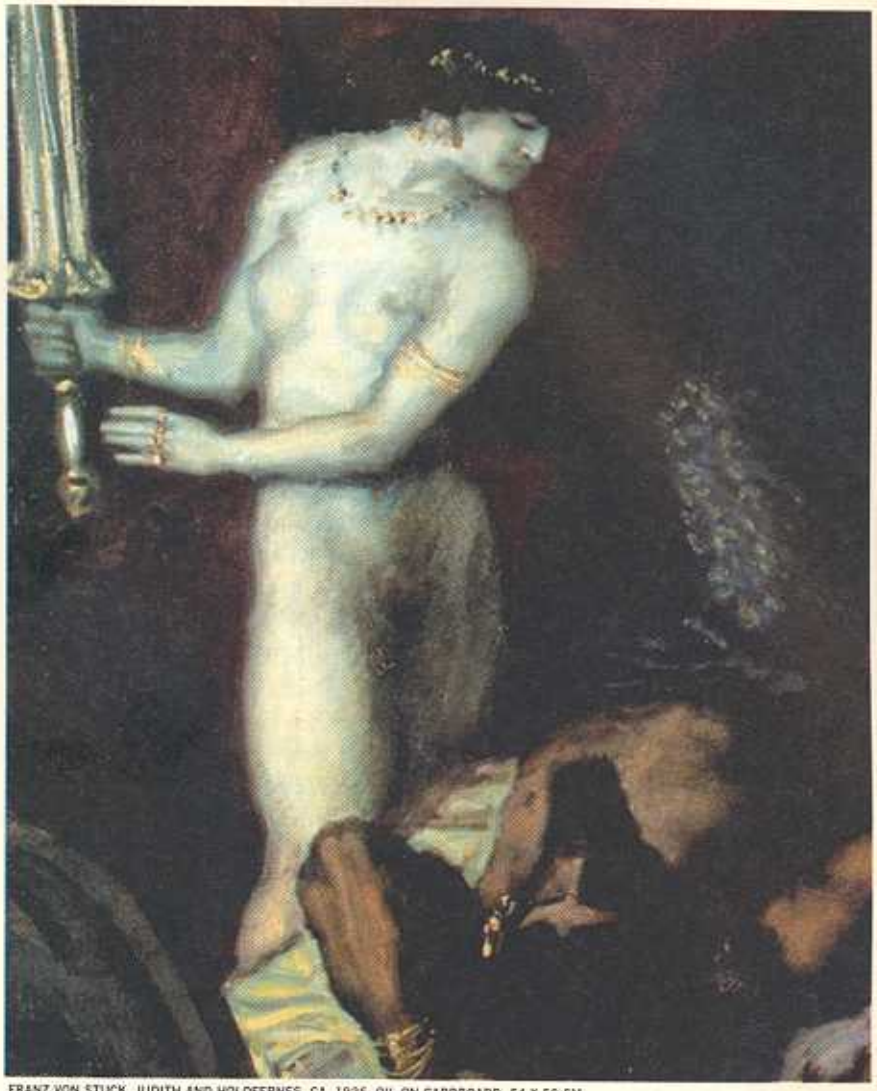
FEMMES FATALES

1860 - 1910

BIBLICAL CHOPPERS
SALOMÉ, JUDITH UND DELILAH

LIESBETH GROTENHUIS

Biblical women make use of sharp objects with a certain regularity. Salomé performed an exotic veil dance so perfectly that she was entitled to request the severed head of John the Baptist – which she received, presented on a silver tray. Judith managed to intoxicate Holofernes, the general of the occupying troops, staggered into his tent with him and used his own sword to decapitate him. Delilah extracted from Samson the secret of his extraordinary strength and immediately sheared his locks off. What possessed this trio?



FRANZ VON STUCK, JUDITH AND HOLOFERNES, CA. 1926, OIL ON CARDBOARD, 54 X 50 CM, COURTESY GALERIE KATHARINA BÜTTIKER, ZÜRICH

SUGGESTIVE SILENCE

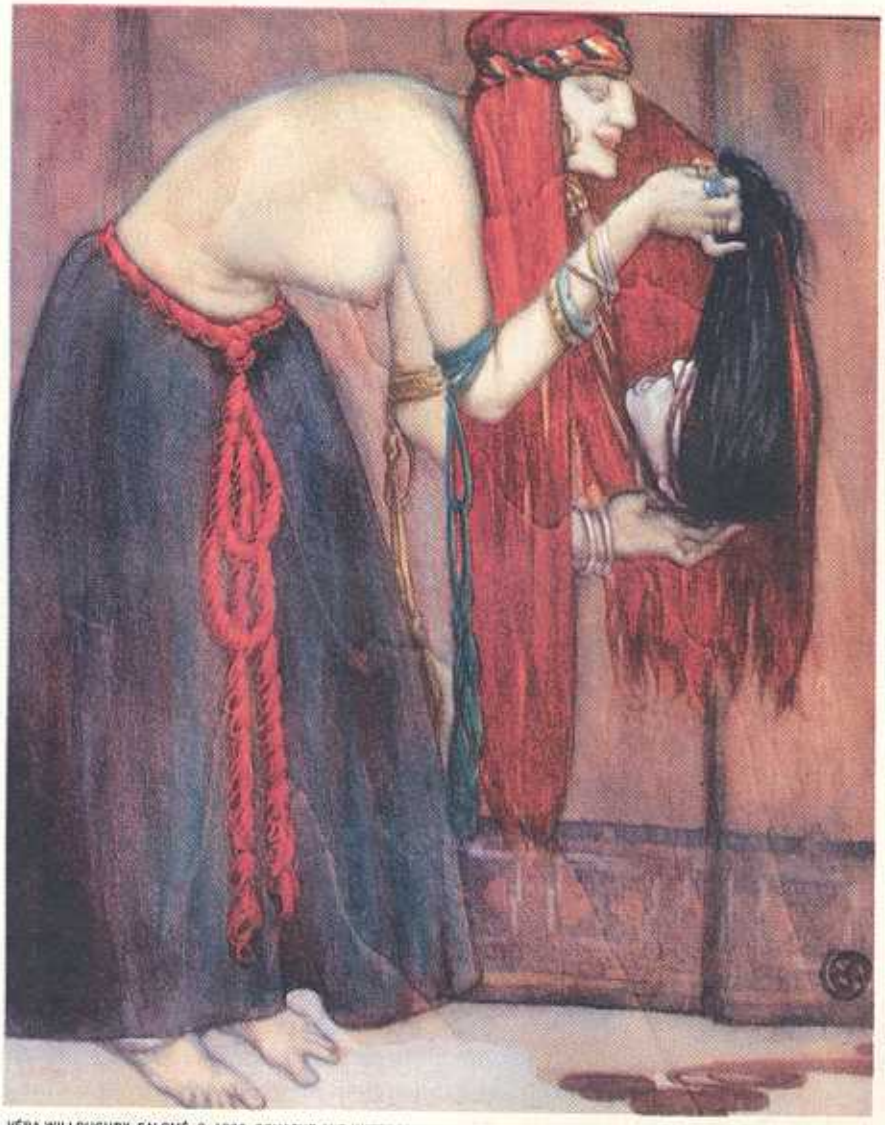
The women are apparently the victors. The motive for their rather rigorous activities was different in all three cases. Salomé was originally a component of a didactic narrative that cost John the Baptist his life. But Salomé's deed enabled him to gain saintly status, as the many auras around his head indicate. And Salomé is not really the source of evil: the depraved genius is actually her mother who whispers to her daughter what she can ask as a reward for her dancing.

Judith was a respectable widow, certainly in moral terms. She adopted a pose as temptress to save her people, captivating Holofernes' attention. Delilah was actually only looking for a substantial sum of money. She won Samson's confidence and turned him over to the highest authorities of the Philistines. In all these stories, the woman makes use of her appearance to charm and cheat the man. Salomé's dance is the direct cause of the death of a genuine prophet. Judith and Delilah are faced with a physically powerful man but they nevertheless succeed where strongmen and soldiers have failed. With their beauty and female charm, they isolate him and then seize their chance. This deployment of attractiveness gives the narratives an erotic tint, although this is not enlarged upon in the bible. But by explicitly avoiding the sexual layer, it becomes even more suggestive. What happened when Judith was alone in the tent with Holofernes? What is the significance of Samson falling asleep with his head on Delilah's lap? Liebermann was very aware of this sultry atmosphere, as his adaptation of Delilah shows. The bible tells of Delilah's conquest: by pressuring Samson, she could discover the secret of his strength. Immediately afterwards, she calls in the Philistine soldiers to finish the job. In iconographic terms, this is a less sensual solution: the presence of others reduces the erotic tension. So Liebermann leaves the soldiers outside. They peep through the entrance to the tent and the half-naked Delilah is clearly poised for victory: She has taken her spoils and is looking for eye contact with her financiers. She has emasculated the hero herself.

RUTHLESSNESS

Delilah was the least popular of the three. She was probably not ruthless enough: she was not busy with a severed head but with severed locks. In addition, she did not perform the treacherous deed herself in the original version, but had the soldiers do the dirty work. It was only later that this eventually led to Samson's death.

Judith was a completely different type. This gave her a good name in the Middle Ages, due to her courage in the

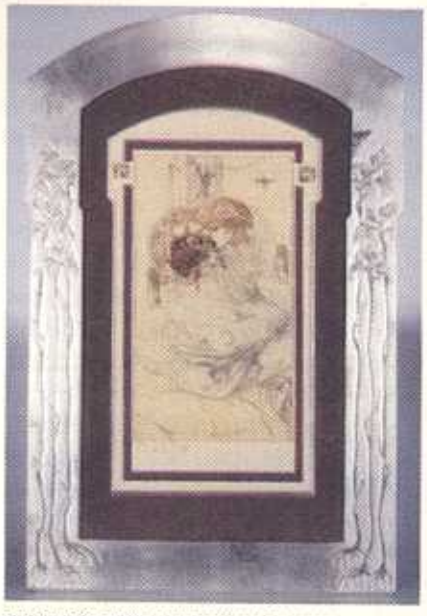


VÉRA WILLOUGHBY, SALOMÉ, C. 1922, GOUACHE AND WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER, 30 X 25 CM
COURTESY: VICTOR & GRETHA ARWAS COLLECTION, LONDON

lion's den. But nineteenth-century artists recognised her as a dangerous seductress, someone who knew how to handle swords. Franz von Stuck portrayed her as unambiguous and sinister. She is standing proud and gazes at her recumbent victim with a suggestive laugh. But perhaps Judith went too far on the scale of ruthlessness. Or perhaps the good aura as saviour of her people remained with her. Whatever the case may be, Salomé overtook Judith in terms of artistic popularity. Of course, she already had a number of very attractive aspects. She is less savage than Judith, more feminine perhaps. Salomé did not have a preconceived plan to kill John the Baptist. She only opted for his decapitation at the instigation of her mother. As a marionette of her evil mother, the bible did not even mention her name – it was the Jewish historiographer Flavius Josephus who passed down the story. In addition, it was an 'executioner' who carried out the deed, so that she could lift the head on the tray with spotless hands. This ruthlessness is an interesting calibration, especially in relation to the motives of nineteenth-century artists. Cutting off heads and shearing off locks were typical metaphors for castration: the anxiety of the nineteenth-century man in a nutshell.

SEXY DANCE

The exotic dance by means of which Salomé enchanted her public is her second strongpoint. Dance is feminine, can refer to the sexual act, and is a splendid iconographic element. Salomé performed this dance on the occasion of the birthday of her father, King Herod. Her performance gives artists the opportunity to paint a beautiful woman from all angles and in all seductive poses. And the spectator could subsequently enjoy these. During her dance, the viewer can imagine that he or she is a guest at the celebration. With his countless adaptations of the Salomé narrative, Gustave Moreau created a strong precedent: on her tiptoes, in exotic robes, a flower in her hand. She still has seven veils to go. The series can be read as a comic strip and at the climax, the head of John the Baptist appears floating in front of her. Successors to Moreau took the story further. In literature, authors such as Wilde and Huysmans make her character more ominous, and artists follow this approach. They combine the dance with the decapitation: the head becomes a sinister prop. But it becomes even more decadent when Salomé takes the head in her hands to kiss it.



GUSTAV ADOLF MOSSA (1883-1971), SALOMÉ, 1907
WATERCOLOUR, PENCIL AND INK ON CARD
COURTESY: VICTOR AND GRETHA ARWAS COLLECTION, LONDON