

# GRONINGER MUSEUMMAGAZINE

16TH YEAR OF PUBLICATION - NO. 1 - THIS PUBLICATION WAS REALISED BY UITGEVERIJ INTERMED GRONINGEN  
16. JAHRGANG - NR. 1 - DIESE AUSGABE WURDE VERLEGERISCH VON UITGEVERIJ INTERMED GRONINGEN RETREUT

GRONINGER MUSEUM

19 - JAN - 2003 - 04 - MEI - 2003

GRATIS  
FREE



## FEMMES FATALES

1860-1910

HEINRICH HEINE (1797 - 1856)  
 AUS: BUCH DER LIEDER, 1839

Das ist der alte Märchenwald!  
 Es duftet die Lindenblüte!  
 Der wunderbare Mondenglanz  
 Bezaubert mein Gemüte.

Ich ging fürbass, und wie ich ging,  
 Erklang es in der Höhe.  
 Das ist die Nachtigall, sie singt  
 Von Lieb' und Liebeswehe.

Sie singt von Lieb und Liebesweh,  
 Von Tränen und von Lachen,  
 Sie jubelt so traurig, sie schluchzet so froh,  
 Vergessene Träume erwachen.-

Ich ging fürbass, und wie ich ging,  
 Da sah ich vor mir liegen,  
 Auf freiem Platz ein grosses Schloss,  
 Die Giebel hoch aufstiegen.

Verschlossene Fenster, überall  
 Ein Schweigen und ein Trauern  
 Es schien, als wohne der stille Tod  
 In diesen öden Mauern.

Dort vor dem Tor lag eine Sphinx,  
 Eine Zwitter von Schrecken und Lüsten,  
 Der Leib und die Tatzen wie ein Löw',  
 Ein Weib an Haupt und Brüsten.

Ein schönes Weib! Der weisse Blick,  
 Er sprach von wildem Begehren;  
 Die stummen Lippen wölbten sich  
 Und lächelten stilles Gewähren.

Die Nachtigall, sie sang so süß -  
 Ich konnt' nicht widerstehen -  
 Und als ich küsste das holde Gesicht,  
 Da war's um mich geschehen.

Lebendig ward das Marmorbild,  
 Der Stein begann zu ächzen -  
 Sie trank meiner Küsse lodrende Glut  
 Mit Dürsten und mit Lechzen.

Sie trank mir fast den Adem aus -  
 Und endlich, wollusttheischend,  
 Umschlang sie mich, meinen armen Leib  
 Mit den Löwentatzen zerfleischend.



GUSTAVE MOREAU, LE SPHINX, 1886, WATERCOLOUR, 31,5 X 17,5 CM,  
 COLLECTION CLEMENS-SELS MUSEUM, NEUSS

Entzückende Marter und wonniges Weh!  
 Der Schmerz wie die Lust unermesslich!  
 Derweilen des Mundes Kuss mich beglückt,  
 Verwunden die Tatzen mich grässlich.

O schöne Sphinx! O löse mir  
 Das Rätsel, das wunderbare!  
 Ich hab' darüber nachgedacht  
 Schon manche tausend Jahre".

Die Nachtigall sang: "O schöne Sphinx!  
 O Liebe! was soll es bedeuten,  
 Dass du vermischest mit Todesqual  
 All deine Seligkeiten?"

# THE SPHINX AND CLEOPATRA

LIESBETH GROTENHUIS

The lion shape lies majestically on the ground, legs extended forwards. A human head completes the mythical creature. We are becoming acquainted with the Sphinx. He first saw the light of day in the valley of the Nile. We say 'he' because the Egyptian Sphinx is almost always male. Only the pharaohs were allowed to represent themselves in this way, because they were no less than the son of the Sun God himself. The head-dress and the braided beard assign him royal allure.

But the archetypal motif also appears in other cultures. For example, Sophocles (approx. 496-406 BC) mentioned an exceptionally cruel Sphinx in his myth of Oedipus. In ancient Greek art, the Sphinx has become female and, seated on a rock with raised wings, was ascribed more far-reaching powers. A striking element is thus the gender change. We now see a female face and, above all, the bared breasts. This Sphinx had completely different things

on her mind. Sophocles explained her method of working: she plagued the city of Thebes with a riddle: What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening? An erroneous response inevitably meant death. But Oedipus knew the answer: humankind. At the dawn of life he crawls, during the crest of life, he stands upright, and as an elderly person, he uses a walking stick. The Sphinx conceded defeat and threw herself from the rock. Despite her terrifying behaviour, the Greeks continued to regard her positively: this kind of intellectual provocation could only originate from a source of wisdom.

## NEW SPHINX

Although he or she may have been archaic, the Sphinx never became outdated. The creature was an ideal vehicle for the notions of the nineteenth-century artist. The original significance was probably not discerned, or at any rate the artists chose to make their own use of the motif, combining Egyptian

and Greek elements as they saw fit. Among other things, the Sphinx offered the possibility of personifying a *femme fatale*, an idea largely borrowed from the Greek variant. The semi-bestial posture was a perfect analogy for the animal nature of the woman. Moreover, her astute approach made her a worthy opponent. With the poem in the foreword of the *Buch der Lieder*, Heinrich Heine gave a literary impulse to an increasingly sensual Sphinx. And the art of painting would also never be the same again after *Oedipe et le Sphinx* by Gustave Moreau. Moreau was one of the first artists who took the Sphinx as an independent theme. The oil painting with which he gained renown in the Salons presents Oedipus and the Sphinx in the heat of battle. In full compliance with the style of the Symbolists, Moreau added a few coded references. For example, the blood-red string of beads on the limbs of the Sphinx announces her own demise. Despite this masterpiece, which won several awards, Moreau was not yet



FRANTISEK ORTIKOL, SPHINX (CLEOPATRA), 1913, PHOTOGRAPH/OIL ON PAPER, 34,8 X 46,6 CM. COLLECTION MUSEUM OF DECORATIVE ARTS, PRAGUE

done with the Sphinx. In 1888, he made a new watercolour of her, gazing out across a wide panorama, anticipating her next victim. The watercolour originated from a later period than the oil painting, but illustrates an earlier moment in the narrative. Oedipus has not yet arrived. Moreau depicted the entire cycle of the narrative of the Sphinx. But not only that: although the works follow the ancient narrative accurately, Moreau litters the work with personal symbols. With this, he set the trend for two countenances: a mysterious and a sensual Sphinx.

#### MYSTERY

Edvard Munch did not restrict himself to Sophocles' lesson. Although he called his lithograph 'Sphinx', the mythical monster has completely disappeared from view. A female trio represents the life stages of Oedipus' answer. But the chaste virgin, the *femme fatale*, and the wise crone furnish the answer with a hidden meaning. At the *fin de siècle*, the Sphinx provided the artists with a new assignment: the unfathomable female.

The trinity is a favoured motif. Jan Toorop drew three brides (see p.10). With regard to the trio in his drawing of *De Sphinx* (1893), Toorop explained: the figures represent the chaste yearning (bestial level), deliberation and reflection (human level) and decisiveness (spiritualisation). They not only portray three female types but also primarily symbolise the development of mankind. His drawing of *Souls around the Sphinx* ought to be interpreted as an extension of this idea. Artists at the *fin de siècle* based their concepts on occultism and mysticism. The ideas that Toorop connected to these life stages were taken from theosophy. In her writings, the renowned Madame Blavatsky presented her concepts of mysticism: all religions actually carry the same message. The fundamental principle is a well-ordered cosmos with the law of evolution. Humankind can develop in three steps from 'the material' to 'the spiritual'. These three steps

are: the animal (related to the material), the human, and the spiritual. The Sphinx is an important theosophical symbol, not as a *femme fatale* but as a guide for humankind in its spiritual development. The animal stage represents earthly and material aspects, as well as combining Egyptian and Greek wisdom in this form, making him or her the ultimate tutor. It is not without reason that Toorop closed the eyes of the Sphinx. Just like other 'theosophical sphinxes', this creature demonstrates that, by means of (half-)closed eyes, or meditation, earthly temptations can be converted into a higher spiritual state.

#### SENSUALITY

Where Moreau's Sphinxes would appear to be rather cool matrons and Toorop's versions express esoteric wisdom, Franz von Stuck painted a high-spirited example of a completely different calibre. In a passionate embrace, his Sphinx squeezes a man to her breast, forcing him down on to his knees. Just like Max Klinger's Siren, the man succumbs to female fury (see p.14). The embrace is so vehement that Oedipus cannot be the person involved. The Sphinx obviously has a hold of someone else, and imposes a passionate kiss of death. It is trivial to accuse Von Stuck of deviating from the myth. After all, her victim may be someone who appeared at the gates of Thebes prior to Oedipus, although the myth never refers to a kiss from a beautiful and sensual woman. The myth is no longer directly relevant to the work of Frantisek Drtikol: she is lying on her front, lifting her torso, thus allowing a maximum amount of light to fall upon her face and breasts. In his version, with her smile and closed eyes, she appears to be rejoicing in her most recent acquisition. A man is trapped under her; it seems that he will not live to tell the tale. This Sphinx is undoubtedly female and the victim, too, seems to refer to the Greek narrative. Nevertheless, her hair and especially her posture recall the Egyptian prototype. Lying flat on her stomach with claws extended in front of her, the artist

needs no physical reference whatsoever to any feline creature. The pedestal makes it clear that this is a representation of the Sphinx. At the same time, she is allocated the status of a sculpture – *femmes fatales* are not of his world.

#### EGYPTIAN CLAWS

With this work, Drtikol made another remarkable step. Despite the clear inscription on the pedestal, he launched the work of art under the title 'Cleopatra'. With her two world-famous lovers, Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony, the last queen of ancient Egypt was much appreciated as a *femme fatale*. It is a simple way of adding an extra layer of significance. But vice versa is also possible. Alexandre Cabanel painted one of the most deadly Cleopatras. Whether or not the depicted narrative corresponds to true history is debatable; Cleopatra furnishes enough stimulation for pictorial interpretation. Cabanel's Cleopatra seems not to be immune to a slight infection by the 'Sphinx'.

This Cleopatra is often accused of radiating supreme tedium. However, the left hand, placed on the divan like a claw, betrays the fact that other factors also play a role. The calculating pose is not coincidence – a pre-study in oils in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Beziers presents a fist instead. The fact that Cabanel ultimately opted for a 'lion's claw' makes it clear that Cleopatra is a full-blooded *femme fatale*. Her feline character is further expressed by the panther at her feet and the tiger skin on the divan. The tiger's head with the dangerous fangs has been placed at the end of the divan so that the predator, in line with Cleopatra, opens its jaws to the victims. As Egyptian 'sisters', Cleopatra and the Sphinx undergo a kind of hybridisation. Where the Egyptian ambience assigns the Sphinx a seductive, exotic aura, the claw defines Cleopatra as a vicious, heart-rending woman.