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Charles Adrien Prosper d'Epinay
Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt as Hermione, c. 1903

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CHARLES ADRIEN PROSPER D'EPINAY

(Pamplemousses, Mauritius 1836 - 1914 Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire)

PORTRAIT OF SARAH BERNHARDT AS HERMIONE, c. 1903.

Terracotta with blackened wooden pedestal

Height without base: 58 cm.

Height with base: 78 cm.

Width: 34 cm.

Length: 30 cm.

Signed on the reverse, on the neckline of her clothing: *D'EPINAY*

Provenance

Private collection, South of France, until 2019.

Literature

F. Thiébault-Sisson, 'L'art élégant. Prosper d'Epinay', in *La Nouvelle Revue*, no. 49, November - December 1887, pp. 830 - 849;

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P. Roux-Foujols, *Prosper d'Epinay 1836-1914, sculpteur*, thesis, 1981;

P. Roux-Foujols, *Prosper d'Epinay, un sculpteur mauricien à la cour des princes*, L'Amicale Ile Maurice-France 1996;

A. Blühm, "Une beauté Sauvage" Prosper d'Epinay's Head of Medusa', in *The Van Gogh Museum Journal*, 1996, pp. 133-144;

N. Guibert, *Portrait(s) de Sarah Bernhardt, catalogue de l'exposition Sarah Bernhardt ou le divin mensonge*, exh. cat., Paris 2000;

P. Haughey, 'Bernini's Medusa and the History of Art', in *Thresholds*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 50-57;

J. Lorcey, *Sarah Bernhardt: l'art et la vie*, Biarritz 2005;

I. Lavin, *Visible spirit. The art of Gianlorenzo Bernini*, vol. II, London 2009.

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Fin-de-siècle Paris, of social upheaval and cultural transformation

In the early 20th century, Paris experienced what commentators would later call "the Belle Epoque". Crowned 'capital of the world', the City of Lights shone with an unparalleled artistic and cultural influence. In a survey of *La Revue blanche*, in 1897, Emile Verhaeren wrote that 'a thousand exhibitions, a thousand reviews, a thousand newspapers [that] inform us hour by hour about each other.'¹ The 'madness of enjoyment' that had, according to Emile Zola, animated the Second Empire² survived the defeat at Sedan and continued under the IIIrd Republic. Within this new Republic, the bourgeois elites succeeded in capturing the historical and cultural prestige of the aristocracy. The bourgeois relationship to art reflects a desire to imitate an idealised aristocracy. The taste was for the past, as reflected in the increased collection of antique objects. These bourgeois, playing central roles in industrial modernity, began a paradoxical quest for singularity and authenticity, even as the work of art entered the era of its 'technical reproducibility'.³ Masterpieces from Antiquity, the Renaissance or even the 18th century became aesthetic references for fashionable artists. Under the impetus of Albert-Ernest Carrier de Belleuse (1824-1887), one of the most prolific sculptors of the century, terracotta busts came back into fashion, as a tribute to the sculpture of the last century. As admirer of the busts of Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741-1821) but also of those of Germain Pilon (1528-1590), Prosper d'Epinay became famous for his refined use of terracotta.

More than any other period before it, the 19th century was haunted by the notion of distinction. Among other social rituals (assiduous attendance at Salons, horse races, the Opera...), having one's portrait painted or sculpted by famous artists was an act of pageantry, a sign of social recognition. Although sculpture explored new forms at the end of the century (symbolism renewed the themes, Auguste Rodin and Aristide Maillol transformed the form), these commissions were mostly executed in an academic, often neo-classical style. As the strict social hierarchy inherited from the Restoration gradually faded, this luxury was no longer reserved for aristocrats or the upper middle classes. The *demi-monde*, a paradoxical

Footnotes

¹ J.-C. Yon, *Histoire culturelle de la France au XIXe siècle*, Paris 2021, pp. 227-267 [translated].

² E. Zola, *La Curée*, (ed.) Charpentier, Paris 1872, pp. 80-81 [translated].

³ W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, (ed.) H. Arendt, New York 1936, pp. 217-251.

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category, 'a sort of intermediate world that combines free morals and respect for certain customs',⁴ made enthusiastic use of it.

The *demi-monde* is dominated by a handful of women called 'demi-mondaines'. These courtesans, maintained by rich lovers and admitted into high society, solicited artists to portray them. Often actresses or singers, they thus encouraged the publicising of their image, which became essential to their profession. The Italian Giovanni Boldini became famous by painting the most fashionable courtesans of the time: Cléo de Mérode, Lina Cavalieri, Réjane and... Sarah Bernhard.

The careers of these 'demi-mondaines' often benefited more from the polemics shaking the art world than from the quality of the works produced. Jean-Baptiste Clésinger's *Woman Stung by a Snake*, modelled on Apollonie Sabatier, caused a scandal at the 1848 Salon, as did Alexandre Falguière's *Dancer*.

Famed artists of the late 19th century differed considerably from the 18th century masters. While the *Universal Exhibition* was triumphant in Paris, the trend was towards cosmopolitan artists who were constantly travelling between Paris, London and Rome. Integrated into the circles of knowledge and power, these elegant 'boho' ended up belonging to the *demi-monde*. The American painter John Singer Sargent, who frequented Sarah Bernhardt during his stays in Paris, is the archetype of the socialite artist. He is said to have served as a model for the painter Maitland, the main character in Paul Bourget's novel *Cosmopolis* (1892), an acerbic account of the moral decadentism of an Anglo-Saxon society based in Rome.

An internationally acclaimed artist

Although less famous than the painters Sargent and Boldini, Charles-Adrien Prosper d'Epinay nevertheless belongs to the very closed club of these cosmopolitan artists. Born in Pamplemousse (Mauritius), Prosper d'Epinay moved to the French capital to study sculpture. The young artist then abandoned the academic artistic study to complete his training with the caricaturist Jean-Pierre Dantan. In 1860, he left Paris for the Italian capital. In the streets of Rome, he discovered the ancient masterpieces that would strongly influence his work. His *atelier* in Via Sistena became a popular meeting place for the Roman high society. It was here

⁴ D. Masseau, *Une histoire du bon goût*, Paris 2014, pp. 223-294 [translated].

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that Prosper d'Epinay met fellow artists Mario Fortuny and Henri Regnault, who would become lifelong friends.

However, it was in London that Prosper d'Epinay enjoyed his first success. Noted for his humorous sculptures, the sculptor was commissioned to realise a portrait of the Princess of Wales. The bust, completed in 1864, aroused admiration and earned Prosper d'Epinay comparisons with the sculptor Clodion (1738-1914).⁵ Subsequently, sovereigns, nobles and celebrities from all over Europe flocked to be portrayed by the Mauritian, thus renamed 'sculptor of sovereigns'. From then on, the sculptor divided his life between Rome, Paris and London. A regular visitor to royalist clubs and Parisian artistic circles, he ensured his notoriety among the European high society.

Although he willingly yielded to 'the variations of taste and the changing whims of fashion', Prosper d'Epinay could not be reduced to the status of a socialite sculptor. The presentation, at the 1874 Salon, of a marble sculpture entitled *Ceinture dorée* (fig. 1) reveals the breadth of the sculptor's significant talent. The art critic François Thiébaut-Sisson described the work as follows: 'a naked young woman who, with her head bowed, both arms joined to her body, is tying a belt under her breasts. Absorbed in the contemplation of her beauty, she forgets to bring the clasps together, and marvels, with a light smile, at what she sees'.⁶ While the same commentator sees in the sculpture the refined representation of a 'woman of the world', other critics rather see in it 'the initiation of an honest woman into the works of the gallant life'. It is true that the sculpture by Prosper d'Epinay strangely echoes the 'solitary pleasure' to which Nana, the eponymous courtesan in Zola's novel, devotes herself: 'Nana was absorbed in her delight in herself. [...] It always surprised her to see herself; she had the astonished and seduced air of a young girl who discovers her puberty.'⁷

With *Ceinture dorée*, Prosper d'Epinay emancipated himself from the princely commissions and their purely academic style. So much so that the sculpture, although acclaimed by the spectators, was snubbed by the Salon's jury. However, Prosper d'Epinay was praised by the critics. In addition to his busts, his allegorical sculptures are praised by the press. In *La Nouvelle Revue*, Thiébaut-Sisson praises *Hannibal l'enfant* (remade by Théophile Gautier, this

⁵ C. Vento, *Les Peintres de la femme*, Paris 1888 [translated].

⁶ F. Thiébault-Sisson, 'L'art élégant. Prosper d'Epinay', in *La Nouvelle Revue*, November - December 1887, pp. 830-849.

⁷ E. Zola, *Zola*, (ed.) Charpentier, Paris 1881, p. 444.

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bronze is inspired by Gustave Flaubert's novel, *Salammbô*), or *L'Amour mendiant* (kept in the Hermitage Museum). Although d'Epinay liked to sculpt male figures, according to Claude Vento, women remain the 'keystone of his work': 'no one has understood as well as he did this curious assembly, these complicated springs, these imperceptible cogs, but combined to perfection, which constitute the woman of our days'.

A life-long friendship and a common passion for art

Prosper d'Epinay enjoyed reputation of some renown at the time he produced this *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt as Hermione*, probably around 1903. This was not the first encounter between the sculptor and the actress. Inhabiting the same cosmopolitan and socialite spheres, the two artists were bound to cross paths during their respective peregrinations, whether European or even transatlantic.⁸ Like so many others, Prosper d'Epinay was attracted by the theatre industry, which was booming at that time. In particular, he produced a remarkable bust of the actress Marie Magnier in 1868. Above all, Sarah Bernhardt and Prosper d'Epinay shared a passion for sculpture: in search of new forms of expression, the actress took up the artform under the tutelage of Mathieu Meunier. She exhibited her first work - a marble portrait of the actress Louise Abbéma - at the Salon in 1874, the same year that Prosper d'Epinay presented *Ceinture dorée*. It is tempting to see in this circumstance the beginning of an artistic and friendly relationship. By the end of the 1870s, the sculptor had undoubtedly joined the long list of the actresses' 'friend-lovers', which also included Gustave Doré, Edmond Rostand and Oscar Wilde.

'Queen of attitude, Princess of gestures'

As the 'Sculptor of sovereigns', Prosper d'Epinay had to immortalise the woman whom the playwright Edmond Rostand had crowned 'Queen of attitude and Princess of gestures'.⁹ He portrayed Sarah Bernhardt four times in the 1870s. An undated and currently unlocated marble bust of Sarah Bernhardt is presumed to have been sculpted by Prosper d'Epinay and acquired by the Prince of Wales in 1881. Although most of the works remain poorly documented, the catalogue compiled by Patricia Roux-Foujols refers with certainty to two

⁸ From 1873 Sarah Bernhardt regularly toured the United States. As for Prosper d'Epinay, he crossed the Atlantic in 1898 to visit New York, accompanied by his daughter.

⁹ Poem by Edmond Rostand composed on the occasion of 'Sarah Bernhardt Day': 'In this time without beauty, you alone still remain / Knowing how to descend, pale, a wide, clear stairway / Ribbon your forehead, carry a lily, with a sword make play / Queen of attitudes - Princess of gestures of calm or passion' [translated].

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full-length statuettes executed in 1876, both entitled *Sarah Bernhardt in La Fille de Roland*, depicting the actress is shown in the role she plays in *La Fille de Roland*, a patriotic play by Henri de Bornier. An unconditional interpreter of Racine,¹⁰ Sarah Bernhardt played Hermione in 1903. The tragedy would have been well known to the actress: Sarah Bernhardt had played Andromache, the eponymous heroine of the play, in 1873, when she was a resident at the Comédie-Française.

This time, the play was staged at the Théâtre des Nations,¹¹ a playhouse that Sarah Bernhardt bought in 1899. Far from the stiff atmosphere of the Comédie-Française, the actress enjoyed total creative freedom within its walls. She was not content to simply play her part: she also directed the play and directed the *troupe*.

Sarah Bernhardt was at the height of her fame. A series of tours in the United States and Australia brought her worldwide success. Considered the first international star of the show, she was certainly one of the most famous women of her time. A 'Sarah Bernhardt Day' was even organised in her honour in 1896. During this exceptional event, nearly 100 artists, journalists and political representatives gathered to pay tribute to the actress.

Such a reputation allowed Sarah Bernhardt to be daring. At almost 60 years of age, she didn't hesitate to portray the young Hermione. No doubt the actress saw in this fatal heroine a double of Medea, whom she had played in 1898. Or perhaps she found in Hermione's insolence the ardour of Salome, a character she should have played at the Palace Theatre in London in 1891.¹²

In this portrait Prosper d'Epinay makes no attempt to disguise Sarah Bernhardt's age. The hardness of the features is indeed that of maturity and does not feign an illusory youth. The actress is recognisable by the long and emaciated shape of her face, and by the characteristic shape of her nose and her thin lips. The hair, although stylised, is clearly reminiscent of the bun usually worn by the actress. The profile of the sculpture evokes the portrait of the actress painted by Gustave Doré in 1870 (fig. 3). Only the shape of the eyes is enlarged and rounded in order to fully convey the expressive power of the character she

¹⁰ 'Pourquoi je n'ai jamais pu jouer Corneille', from S. Bernhardt, *L'Art du théâtre. La voix, le geste, la prononciation*, (ed.) L'Harmattan, Paris 1923, pp. 126-137.

¹¹ Place du Châtelet, now Théâtre de la Ville.

¹² Written for Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde's play was censored by Lord Chamberlain and never performed by the actress.

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embodies. The bust corresponds fairly closely to the description of the actress by her granddaughter, Lysiane Bernhardt:¹³

‘Sarah Bernhardt had messy red hair [...] Blue, wide-set eyes and pronounced nose [...] There was a far-away look in her eyes, something brazen and loyal that made her unforgettable.’

The costume sculpted by Prosper d'Epinay is minimalist, far from the opulent finery that Sarah Bernhardt used to wear on stage (fig. 4). The square neckline and the armour pattern merely evoke, without embellishment, the ancient origin of Racine's tragedy. Prosper d'Epinay sculpted a similar garment for his portrait of the Countess of Lutzow as Athena in 1911. The garment is not even the occasion for a play of drapery elegantly linked to the pedestal, a subtle refinement that is nevertheless the sculptor's special touch. Superfluous fantasies seem to have been banished from the work: Prosper d'Epinay's main goal is to pay tribute to the talented tragedienne.

‘Who are those snakes for, hissing in your hair?’

The moment immortalised by the sculpture corresponds to the denouement of Racine's play. Hermione, in love with Pyrrhus, cannot consent to Pyrrhus' marriage to her rival Andromache. She orders Orestes, who is secretly in love with Hermione, to sacrifice Pyrrhus and promises to marry him at this price. Orestes accepts and murders Pyrrhus; but when Hermione learns of the execution of the crime, she repels the murderer with horror, curses him and runs to kill herself over Pyrrhus' corpse. Overcome by madness, Orestes then sees visions of Hermione accompanied by the Erinyes, the vengeful female deities of the underworld. Charged with punishing criminals, these mythological creatures torment the guilty with remorse to the point of madness.

¹³ L. Bernhardt, *Sarah Bernhardt, ma grand-mère*, (ed.) Pavois, Paris 1947.

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*Pyrrhus! Do I see you once more?
Must I always find the rival I abhor?
Pierced by blows, how have you survived?
Wait, wait! Here's one you were denied.
What's this? Hermione embraces him?
She comes perhaps to save him from his sin?
You Gods! What poisoned looks fly from her!
What demons, what snakes, drag behind her!
Ah! Daughters of Hell, are you prepared?
Who are those snakes for, hissing in your hair?
Who is this destined for, infernal sight?
Do you come to take me to eternal night?
So, Orestes yields to you, the Furies.
Yet, turn back, leave me to Hermione:
She, more than you, knows how to rend me;
My heart she shall devour, I'll not defend me.*

Jean Racine, *Andromache: Tragedy in Five Acts*, 1667.

Translated in English verses by

Richard Wilbur. Ed. Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich, San Diego, 1984.

The intensity of the gaze, the exaggerated frown of the eyebrows - whose spiral movement frames the face and recalls the undulation of the snakes - the hardness of the thin lips, evoke Hermione's wrath. It is also an expression of severe reprobation, the very incarnation of the guilt that torments Orestes.

While Prosper d'Epinay fully illustrates the strength of expression of the face, the viewer's attention is obviously captured by the imposing snake hair that overhangs the bust. The sculptor interprets the famous alliteration of Racine's play: "Who are those snakes for, hissing in your hair?".¹⁴ This startling vision of the Erynia was inspired to the French tragedian by

¹⁴ J. Racine, *Andromache: Tragedy in Five Acts*, 1667, translated in English verses by Richard Wilbur. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 1984.

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Euripides' *Orestes*. As for the precise image of the head wreathed by snakes, an attribute of the vengeful goddesses, inspiration for the motif would have lain in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Seneca's *Medea*.

Hermione meets Medusa

The snake motif shows the link between Hermione and Medusa, the mythological Gorgon frequently represented in art. Fascinated by ancient art, Prosper d'Epinay produced a clay *bozzetto* entitled *Head of Medusa* (fig. 5) in 1866, which bears some similarities to Bernhardt's portrait. In this 1866 sketch, the snakes are already coiled in decorative symmetry, echoing the famous *Rondanini Medusa* that Prosper d'Epinay admired during his stays in Rome. However, Bernhardt's portrait seems much more accomplished than the original *Medusa*: the facial expression is refined, the snakes are executed with greater technique and precision, revealing the extent of the sculptor's talent. Particular attention seems to have been paid to the eyes. As a connoisseur of the ancient legend (the Medusa is said to have the power to petrify turn into stone the beholder), Prosper d'Epinay took care to restore the power of Bernhardt's gaze, a gaze which had enough power to 'move the world' according to Jules Renard.¹⁵

Prosper d'Epinay added wings to Hermione's teeming hair, another characteristic attribute of the Gorgon, present on the *Rondanini Medusa*. However, it was Bernini's *Medusa* (fig. 6), the Baroque masterpiece, that certainly guided Prosper d'Epinay in his concern to make the snakes livelier and the face more expressive. Indeed, it is in the portrait of this tormented Medusa that we find the subtlety of the feelings captured by Prosper d'Epinay, 'a deep moral suffering, an almost meditative spiritual anguish, similar to an experience of catharsis'.¹⁶ Suffering and anger share the same name, since Hermione, who curses Orestes, also weeps for Pyhrus, the lost object of her destructive passion.

The idea of associating Hermione and Medusa most certainly came from Sarah Bernhardt herself. Indeed, the actress created a marble bust entitled *Hermione* (fig. 7) in 1875. The serpentine hair and wings of Prosper d'Epinay's *Hermione* are already present in this work. However, Bernhardt's sculpture is in a much more academic style, revealing a strong influence of neo-classicism. The work seems to be influenced by the *Medusa* (fig. 8) made in 1854 by

¹⁵ J. Renard, *Journal 1887-1910*, 1914 [translated].

¹⁶ I. Lavin, *Visible spirit. The art of Gianlorenzo Bernini*, vol. II, London 2009.

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Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, a pupil of the Welsh sculptor John Gibson. The expression on the Medusa's face, which is gracefully turned away from the spectators' gaze, is harmless and abstract.

Prosper d'Epinay does not intend his Medusa-Hermione to be an ideal female beauty. The androgyny of the actress is accentuated by the absence of breasts and the hardness of her features. The sculptor was certainly aware of the mythological uncertainty surrounding Medusa's sex - early representations show the figure with a beard. Unless he was inspired by the succession of male roles played by the actress during the same period (Lorenzaccio in 1896, Hamlet in 1899...).

Like his illustrious predecessors, Prosper d'Epinay makes his Medusa the privileged vessel through which he expresses extreme emotions and attributes. On Hermione's face, as on those of the *Rondanini Medusa* and Bernini's *Medusa*, the fusion of opposites is played out: anger and distress, ugliness and beauty, femininity and masculinity.

As for the back of the sculpture, it offers a poignant metaphor for the madness that torments the characters. Prosper d'Epinay abandons the smooth academic facture for an expressive treatment, giving his work an even greater tension. The back of the hair is left in rough draft form, so as to better capture Orestes' distorted perceptions. This subtle 'unfinished' work exacerbates the expressive potential of terracotta, frequently used in the realization of sketches. It should be noted that Prosper d'Epinay was undoubtedly inspired by his contemporaries, notably Rodin, who used to let many of his sculptures in a deliberately unfinished state.

Seen in profile, Hermione's dramatic bun is striking in its shape and symmetry with the face. The back of the sculpture thus seems to form a monstrous counterpart to the human face that the viewer has admired from the front. Roughly sculpted, the snakes are indistinguishable, barely arising from an unworked formless mass. Nonetheless, the back of the sculpture seems teeming with life thanks to the irregular undulating patterns flowing through the entire surface.

The strangeness of this part echoes the description of Hell found in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1321), the famous medieval poem much appreciated among symbolist artists and certainly well-known to Prosper d'Epinay. In particular, the hostile environment suggested by the back

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of the sculpture resembles the 'Wood of the Suicides' (Canto 13), in which the souls of the people who attempted or committed suicide - just like Hermione and Orestes - are transformed into gnarled, thorny trees.

Medusa, an avatar of the 19th century 'femme fatale'

At the end of the 19th century, the theme of the Medusa experienced renewed interest. The artistic and philosophical significance of the Medusa myth - the monstrosity concealed beneath a dangerous beauty - echoes the emergence in society of a new female type: the femme fatale. The idea of a destructive female vice, the fatal spring of beauty, haunts writers and artists. Death, evil and pleasure are part of the same movement: although Sigmund Freud had not yet published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), symbolism already sensed the close link between Eros and Thanatos. In *Les Rougeon-Macquart*, Nana is likened to a "fly", "a ferment of destruction, corrupting and disorganising Paris" by her charms. Whether she is reproached for a certain virility or, conversely, for her excessive femininity, the woman frightens as much as she obsesses *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals. Here is what Beatrice Slama, historian and specialist on the late 19th century wrote:

'The 'fin de siècle' woman was most of all the 'femme fatale', fascinating and blameworthy, such as the decadents Lilith, Dalila, Herodias or Salome. [...] Courtesan from Antiquity [...] or modern woman like Jean Lorrain female characters', [...] the 'femme fatale' both represents the fatality of physical pleasure (oscillating between the sacred and the profane) and the fatality of degradation, pain and death'.¹⁷

For Mario Praz,¹⁸ Medusa became one of the allegories of the 'algolagnic libido' (from the Greek 'algos', pain, and 'lagneia', intimate relations: sexual pleasure linked to the pain felt or provoked). The serpentine hair evokes the original sin, and the Gorgon is readily confused with the temptress figure of Genesis. The representation of Medusa as a 'femme fatale' enjoyed some success among *fin-de-siècle* painters, whether Pre-Raphaelites (Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, etc.) or Symbolist (Fernand Khnopff, Arnold Böcklin, Franz von Stuck, etc.). In 1893, Franz von Stuck shocked the public with his painting *The Sin* (fig. 9), in which the German painter depicts a naked avatar of Eve, embraced by a large

¹⁷ B. Slama, 'Où vont les sexes? Figures romanesques et fantasmes fin-de-siècle', November - December 1991, pp. 28-29 [translated].

¹⁸ M. Praz, *La chair, la mort et le diable dans la littérature du XIXe siècle*, (ed.) Denoël, Paris 1977.

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glowing snake. Although Prosper d'Epinay's bust is subtler than the Symbolist work, the snake on Hermione's right shoulder, ready to cast its venom on the viewer, is reminiscent of Von Stuck's tempting snake.

Close to symbolist and pre-Raphaelite movements,¹⁹ Sarah Bernhardt stands for the perfect embodiment of the 'femme fatale'. This all-powerful, famous and wealthy actress defies social conventions. She fascinates as much as she shakes up polite society, for whom 'the most estimable woman remains the one who is least talked about, and the most perfect, the one who is not talked about at all'.²⁰ Licentious sexuality, androgyny and a certain attraction to morbidity are enough to confine Sarah Bernhardt into a character of venomous Venus. George Clairin's painting *Portrait de Sarah Bernhardt* (fig. 10), presented at the 1876 Salon, established this image in the public eye: lying on a garnet-coloured sofa, Sarah Bernhardt looks at the viewer with the calm assurance of a 'diva'. She is dressed in one of her characteristic dresses that transforms her thinness into 'serpentine sinuosities', as Zola put it.²¹ The spiral silhouette of the actress, evokes what the painters of the Italian Renaissance called 'the serpentine line', that contortion of the body that wraps around its centre of gravity to give the impression of movement even when the subject is motionless. The influence of Sarah Bernhardt's style on the aesthetics of the Art-Nouveau is obvious.²² It also certainly inspired Prosper d'Epinay's execution of this bust: the convolutions of the hair, the winding of the two snakes around the neck, the accentuated curve of the eyebrows... are all subtle allusions to Bernhardt's legendary figure.

Beyond its formal beauty, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt as Hermione* bears witness to Prosper d'Epinay's virtuosity and creativity. While Sarah Bernhardt modernised the classical character of Hermione on stage, Prosper d'Epinay modernised the ancient Medusa with this strikingly expressive bust. Although the influence of the ancients remains perceptible, the sculptor was probably inspired by the symbolist aesthetic. Finally, this unique work bears witness to the long artistic and friendly relationship between the two creators. At once socialite stars and true artists, Prosper d'Epinay and Sarah Bernhardt alone evoke all the ambiguities of the 19th century, a century engaged in a paradoxical quest for frivolity and profundity.

¹⁹ Oscar Wilde introduced Sarah Bernhardt to the Pre-Raphaelite painters, while Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939) told her about symbolist aesthetic.

²⁰ D. Masseau, *Une histoire du bon goût*, (ed.) Perrin, Paris 2014, pp. 223-294 [translated].

²¹ E. Zola, *Le Salon de 1876 - Lettres de Paris, Deux Expositions d'art au mois de Mai*, 1876.

²² The Art Nouveau painter and decorative Czech artist Alphonse Mucha created many illustrated posters to promote Sarah Bernhardt's plays.



Fig. 1. Charles-Adrien Prosper d'Epinay, *Ceinture dorée*, last quarter of the 19th century.
Private collection

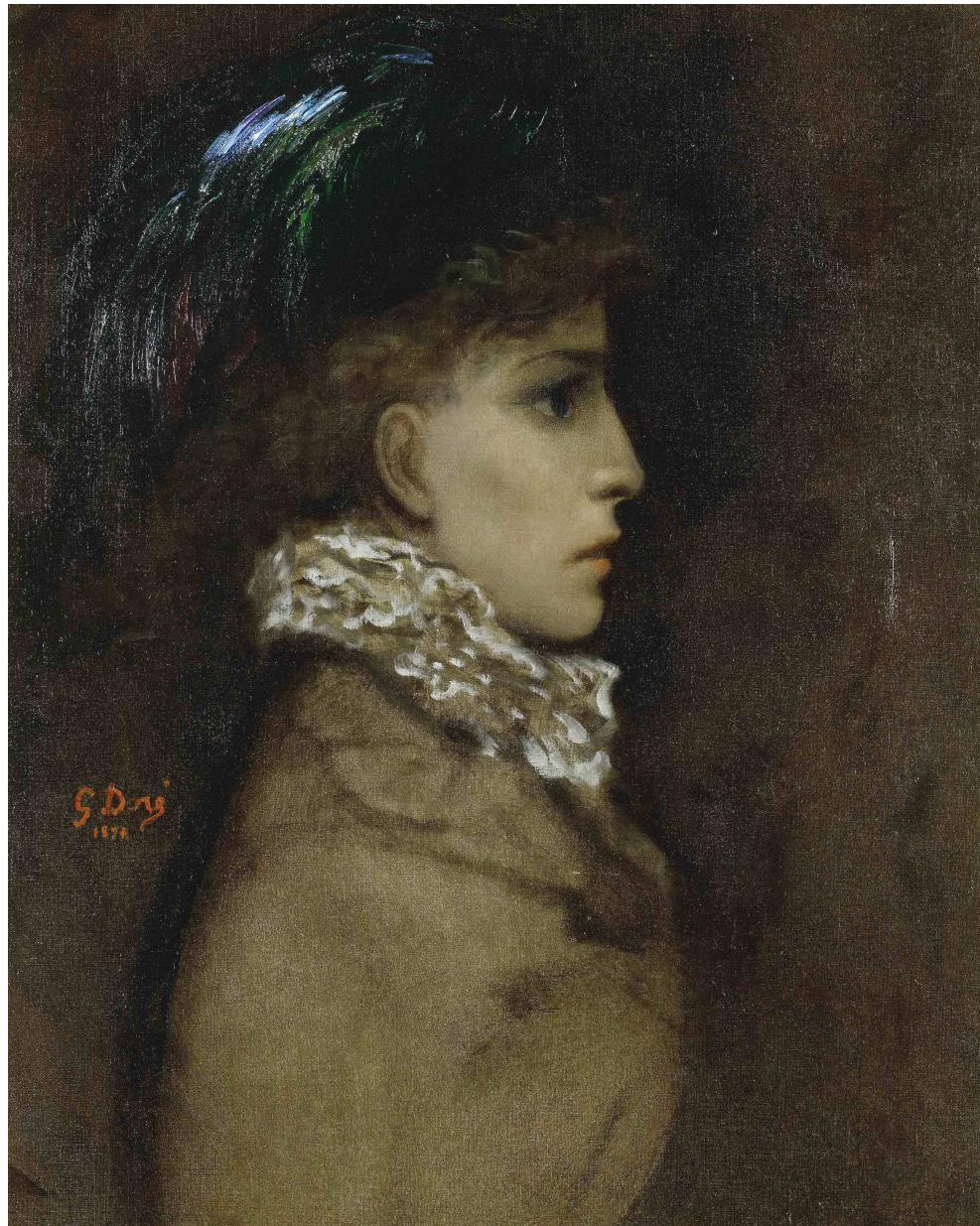


Fig. 2. Gustave Doré, *Portrait de Sarah Bernhardt*, 1870.
Private collection



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 3. Louis Roosen, *Sarah Bernhardt dans Andromaque*, 1903.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris



Fig. 4. Charles-Adrien Prosper d'Epinay, *Tête de Méduse*, 1866.
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Fig. 5. Anonymous, *Medusa* (copy after *Medusa Rondanini*), 17th or 18th century.
Prado Museum, Madrid

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Fig. 6. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Bust of Medusa*, c. 1640.
Capitoline Museum, Rome



Fig. 7. Sarah Bernhardt, *Hermione*, 1875.
Sold at Sotheby's, 11 July 2018



Fig. 8. Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, *Medusa*, 1854.
Minneapolis Institute of Art



Fig. 9. Franz Von Stuck, *The Sin*, c. 1908 (second version).
Wiesbaden Museum, Germany

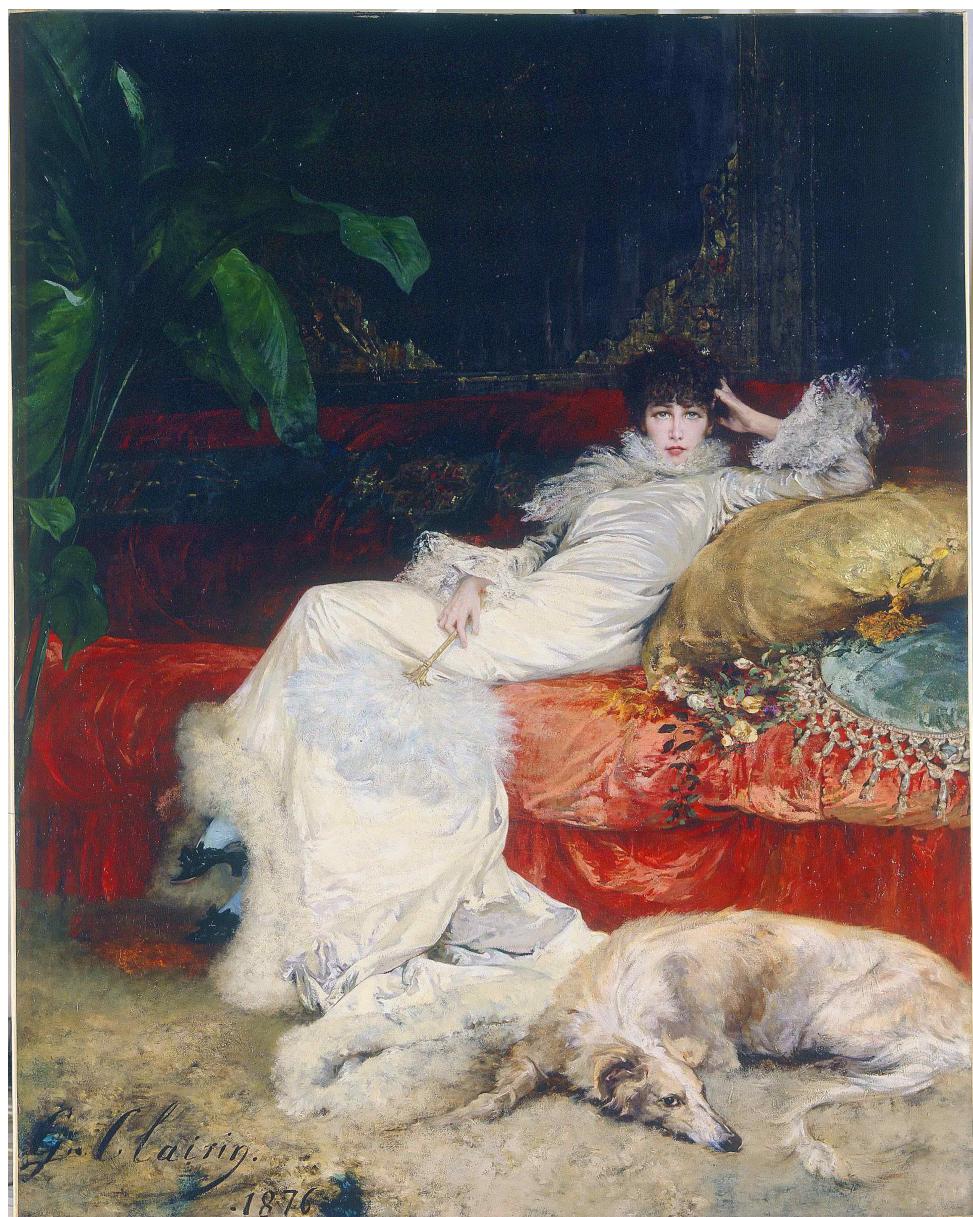


Fig. 10. Georges Jules Victor Clairin, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*, 1876.
Petit Palais (City of Paris Fine Arts Museum), Paris

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