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Henry Cros, *La Belle Viole* and *Circe, Flora, and Medea*

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New Discoveries

Henry Cros, *La Belle Viole* and *Circe, Flora, and Medea* by Dominique Morel

The recent entrance of two wax sculptures by Henry Cros (1840–1907) into the collections of the Musée d’Orsay in Paris and the European Museum for Modern Glass of Veste Coburg in Bavaria, respectively,^[1] is an occasion to look at an aspect of the artist’s work that has not received much attention in recent times.^[2] Better known for his works in *pâte de verre*,^[3] Cros is also seen by many today as an artist whose work nostalgically evokes a classical arcadia in a manner reminiscent of Puvis de Chavannes.^[4]

In the December 10, 1872 entry in his journal, Edmond de Goncourt relates his visit to the studio of the artist in the “rue des Champs” in Paris.^[5] He is accompanied by Philippe Burty, who has commissioned a portrait of his daughter from Cros. Goncourt describes Cros as a person shrouded in mystery, devoting himself in the cell-like space of his atelier to practices that seem close to magic:

He is a very skinny, very swarthy, very bearded lad, with a disconcerting fixity in his deeply set eyes. And that lit lamp, those small pieces of wax, which, kept in a cigar box, look like little pieces of flesh; and that profile of Mary Magdalen on the black glass plaque, which gradually takes on a mysterious reality in the evening light, ends up instilling in me a sort of fear for that magic life that that pale lad cooks up in his cave.
^[6]

According to Maurice Testard, the first work in wax executed by Henry Cros was a portrait of Charles VII (1867; current whereabouts unknown).^[7] Next, in 1869, at the request of Alexandre Dumas fils, he made a copy of the waxen *Head of a Young Girl* attributed by Dumas to Raphael. The so-called *Wicar Head* had been one of the treasures of the Musée Wicar in Lille, whose collections had merged in 1866 with those of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in that city. Cros’s copy is currently in a private collection. From 1870 to 1883, Cros regularly exhibited wax sculptures at the Salon, where they were accompanied by works he executed in more traditional materials—stone, plaster, or bronze.

In the preface to the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition of Cros’s works at the Salon d’automne of 1922 (*Exposition rétrospective des œuvres de Henry Cros*), Léonce Bénédicté gives some information about the working method of the artist, who molded and assembled his pieces while they were heated:

In the beginning he modeled monochrome wax figures, which were tinted afterward; later he worked with wax that was colored throughout. He began with small loafs of wax that were prepared in advance with the desired colors and that were placed, heated, in a plaster mold, each tone in the place reserved for it. After the sculpture had come out of the mold, he used a hot iron to correct and complete the subject.

Other critics and writers about art, contemporary with Cros, such as Jean Aicard^[8] and Jules Laforgue,^[9] likewise mentioned this original working method, which they considered the only one that could do justice to modern life in its color and its variety. In total, only some twenty wax sculptures by Cros—medallions, figurative plaques, or figures in the round—have been preserved, many protected by thick glass frames.^[10]

The Musée d'Orsay has acquired *La Belle Viole* (fig. 1),^[11] which Cros gave as a present to the wife of the Parnassian poet José-Maria de Heredia (1842–1905), well known for *Les Trophées*. The title of Cros's work is a reference to the seven-stringed viola d'amore (in French, *viole*), played by the female model of the sculpture. Metonymically, the name of the instrument could also refer to the player of the violin. *Viole* is an anagram of the first name "Olive" the mysterious muse of Joachim du Bellay (ca. 1522–60), who in 1549 published a book of fifty sonnets entitled *L'Olive*. Cros's sculpture was reproduced in the *Revue des deux mondes* of April 1874 after a "drawing of the author engraved by A. Prunaire." By way of a caption, the reproduction is accompanied by a quatrain that explicitly refers to Du Bellay:



Fig. 1, Henry Cros, *La Belle Viole*, 1874. Polychrome wax with oil paint highlights. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph courtesy of Eric Gillis Fine Art. [\[larger image\]](#)

La Dame qu'a fait vivre à jamais Du Bellay,
De ses doigts en fuseaux gratte ici la viole,
Chantant quelque orgueilleuse et rythmique [*sic*] parole
Échappée à l'amant du bonheur accablé.

(The Lady whom Du Bellay has immortalized,
Plucks here the *viole* with her spindly fingers,
Singing some proud and rhythmic strophe
Escaped from the lover crushed by happiness.)

La Belle Viole also inspired José-Maria de Heredia to write a poem entitled, after the sculpture, “La Belle Viole,” which in the 1893 edition of his poems carries a dedication to Henry Cros as well as a quotation from Du Bellay.

À vous troupe légère
Qui d’aile passagère
Par le monde volez . . .
(Joachim Du Bellay)

Accoudée au balcon d’où l’on voit le chemin
Qui va des bords de Loire aux rives d’Italie,
Sous un pâle rameau d’olive son front plie.
La violette en fleur se fanera demain.

La viole que frôle encore sa frêle main
Charme sa solitude et sa mélancolie,
Et son rêve s’envole à celui qui l’oublie
En foulant la poussière où gît l’orgueil Romain.

De celle qu’il nommait sa douceur Angevine,
Sur la corde vibrante erre l’âme divine
Quand l’angoisse d’amour étreint don cœur troublé;

Et sa voix livre aux vents qui l’emportent loin d’elle,
Et le caresseront peut-être, l’infidèle,
Cette chanson qu’il fit pour un vanneur de blé.

(To you, flock, ever so light
Which on fugitive wings
Flies across the world . . .)
(Joachim Du Bellay)

(Leaning on the balcony whence one sees the road
Which goes from the banks of the Loire to the shores of Italy,
Under a pale olive branch her head sinks.
The blooming violet will wilt tomorrow.

The *viole*, which her frail hand still lightly touches
Charms her solitude and her melancholy.
And her dream flies away to him who forgets her
Trampling the dust where lies Roman pride.

From her whom he named his sweetheart from Anjou,
On the vibrant string errs the divine soul
When the agony of love grips her troubled heart;

And her voice delivers to the winds who take it far away from her,
And will fondle him perhaps, the unfaithful,
That song he made for a grain sifter.)

In gratitude, Cros gave Madame Heredia in 1893 his bust of *Isabeau de Bavière* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). That bust and *La Belle Viole*, according to Heredia's son-in-law Henri de Régnier, decorated the poet's office in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, of which since 1901 he was the librarian.[12]

Two other versions of *La Belle Viole* are known. One of them was listed in 2012 in an exhibition catalogue of the Terrades gallery under the title *La Belle Olive*. [13] It is a relief in polychrome wax mounted on slate, inscribed in the lower left, "L'Olive de Messire Joachim du Bellay." The other variant, belonging to the Musée d'Orsay and entitled *The Woman with the Mandore*, accidentally melted in 1996 while in a sunlit display case in the Musée d'Art in Narbonne. [14] It is not too far-fetched to assume that the new acquisition by the Musée d'Orsay was aimed in part at erasing the memory of this painful accident.

The acquisition of *Circe, Flora, and Medea* (figs. 2, 3) by the Museum for Modern Glass of the Veste Coburg probably has another reason; namely, to acquire a work of an artist who was one of the principal creators and renovators of *pâte de verre*. Cros has transposed three classical goddesses into a medieval fantasy, representing them as if they had escaped from "old missals." [15] *Circe, Flora, and Medea* is close to a watercolor in a private collection that has been wrongly considered as a preparatory study for *The Prize of the Tournament* of 1873 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), a confusion that is understandable as the two sculptures are quite similar. [16]



Fig. 2, Henry Cros, *Les Trois fées* (The Three Fairies), 1881. Polychrome wax on wood with colored glass and oil paint highlights. Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg, Coburg. Photograph courtesy of Eric Gillis Fine Art. [larger image]



Fig. 3, Detail of *Circé, Flora et Médée* (Circe, Flora, and Medea), Henry Cros, *Les Trois fées* (The Three Fairies), 1881. Polychrome wax on wood with colored glass and oil paint highlights. Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg, Coburg. Photograph courtesy of Eric Gillis Fine Art. [\[larger image\]](#)

These two acquisitions, made by two museums at about the same time, increase the public representation of an artist whose importance museums have been late to grasp. Already in 1908, Henry Roujon deplored the fact that Cros's wax sculptures, those "delicate marvels, supreme farewells to an abandoned art form, were still waiting for the day when they'll find a place in the great museums."^[17] It seems that this day has finally come.

Notes

All translations are by Petra Chu.

[1] The two sculptures were sold by Eric Gillis Fine Art (Brussels) in partnership with Mathieu Néouze (Paris). They are discussed in the exhibition catalogue *1874–1896, Sculptures et Arts Décoratifs symbolistes: L'écho d'un monde ancien* (Brussels: Eric Gillis Fine Art; Paris: Mathieu Néouze, 2015), 6–15, to which this article owes much. They were formerly in the collection of Roberto Polo. See Werner Adriaenssens and others, *Roberto Polo: The Eye; A Selection of Masterpieces from the Collection Which He Has Formed* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), 177–79.

[2] This was not always the case. In his own time, Cros was well known for his wax sculptures. Jules Laforgue, for example, called him "le délicat crier aux sincérités de primitif" (the delicate artist working in wax with the sincerity of a primitive). See "L'encaustique et les autres procédés de peinture chez les anciens," *Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*, September 6, 1884, reprinted in Jules Laforgue, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: L'Âge d'Homme, 2000), 3:289.

[3] On Cros, see the pioneering study by Jean-Luc Olivié, "All of Antiquity in a New Soul," *New Work*, no. 31 (Autumn 1987), 10–15. This study was refined in Emmanuelle Héran, "Art for the Sake of the Soul: Polychrome Sculpture and Literary Symbolism," in *The Colour of Sculpture: 1840–1910*, by Andreas Blühm and others, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1996–97), 93–102; and Emmanuelle Héran "Henry Cros: Le Moyen Âge et la couleur," in *La Dame aux éventails: Nina de Callias, Modèle de Manet*, ed. Luce Abélès, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 2000), 103–18. See also Dominique Morel, "Henry Cros ou la nostalgie du Paradis perdu," *L'Objet d'art / L'Estampille* 446 (May 2009): 44–49.

[4] The poet Henri de Régnier wrote, "Il y a dans les beaux-bas-reliefs de Cros en pâte de verre, il y a, si l'on peut dire, du Puvis de Chavannes cristallisé." Henri de Régnier, *Les Cahiers inédits, 1887–1936* (Paris: Gérard Watelet, 2002), 461.

[5] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, vol. 2, 1866–1886 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), 534, entry for December 10, 1872. In 1872, Cros lived at 53, rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, in what is today the 6th arrondissement of Paris.

[6] “C’est un garçon tout maigre, tout noir, tout barbu, avec une inquiétante fixité dans ses yeux caves. Et cette lampe allumée et ces petits morceaux de cire, qui semblent, dans leur boîte à cigares, de petits morceaux de chair, et ce profil de Madeleine, qui prend peu à peu, sur la plaque de verre noir, une réalité mystérieuse, sous le jour crépusculaire, me jettent à la longue dans une espèce de peur de cette vie magique, que cuisine, dans cette cave, ce pâle garçon.” Ibid.

[7] Maurice Testard, “Henry Cros,” *L’Art décoratif*, April 1908, 152.

[8] “M. Cros est aujourd’hui le seul, croyons-nous, qui fasse des cires. Pourquoi ne remarque-t-on pas cette recherche qui nous paraît à tous grosse de promesses, et qui devrait paraître à tous du moins originale?” Jean Aicard, “M. Henry Cros: Les cires,” *La Renaissance littéraire et artistique*, June 22, 1872, 67.

[9] “Mais de même qu’au-dessus d’une scène vivante, reproduite en gravure, je mets cette même scène reproduite avec toute sa vie de tons et de valeurs dans l’atmosphère, etc., autant je mets au-dessus d’un buste en marbre ou en bronze, ce buste, en cire par exemple, avec les yeux bleus ou noirs, des lèvres rouges ou exsangues, les cheveux et la parure, etc.” (But just as I prefer, over a lively scene reproduced in an [black and white] engraving, that same scene reproduced in all its lively colors and atmospheric values, etc., so I prefer over a bust in marble or in bronze, this bust, in wax, for example, with blue or brown eyes, red or bloodless lips, [colored] hair, jewelry, etc.) “Posthumes de Jules Laforgue: Notes d’esthétique,” *La Revue Blanche*, December 1, 1891, 481.

[10] The best example may well be *Les Dames de Thélème* (*The Ladies of Thélème*) in the Musée du Petit Palais in Paris. See Dominique Morel, “Les Dames de Thélème, une exceptionnelle cire colorée de Henry Cros rejoint les collections du Petit Palais,” *Revue du Louvre* 4 (October 2005): 8–10.

[11] See the entry on Cros by Emmanuelle Héran in *De l’Impressionnisme à l’Art nouveau: Acquisitions du musée d’Orsay, 1990–1996*, ed. Henri Loyrette and Marc Bascou, exh. cat. (Paris: RMN, 1996), 134.

[12] “Les murs de ce cabinet étaient tendus d’un papier argenté sur lequel étaient accrochés des cadres. Au-dessus de la table se trouvaient *la Belle Viole*, d’Henry Gros [*sic*] en cire colorée, et du même Gros, un médaillon de la *Reine Isabeau*, accompagné d’un paysage de Jules Breton, de toiles de Lansyer, et d’une eau-forte de Bracquemond, d’après Gustave Moreau.” (The walls of this cabinet were hung with a silvered paper on which framed works were hung. Above the table were *La Belle Viole* of Henry Gros [*sic*] in colored wax, and by the same Gros, a medallion of *Reine Isabeau*, accompanied by a landscape by Jules Breton, paintings by Lansyer, and an etching by Bracquemond after Gustave Moreau.) Henri de Régnier, *Vues* (Paris: Le Divan, 1926), 56–57.

[13] *1600–1900: Tableaux, sculptures et dessins*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Terrades, 2012), 52–54, cat. no. 21.

[14] See the Musée d’Orsay’s on-line catalogue, “[Henry Cros, Femme à la mandore](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no_cache=1&zsz=5&lnum=&nnumid=134286),” Musée d’Orsay, accessed February 2017 http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no_cache=1&zsz=5&lnum=&nnumid=134286.

[15] In his review of the Exposition des Indépendants of 1881, Joris-Karl Huysmans links Degas’s works in wax to those of Cros, who, he said, used the colored wax process “to translate into sculpture the figures painted in old missals” (pour transporter dans la sculpture les figures peintes dans les vieux missels). See J.-K. Huysmans, *Écrits sur l’art, 1867–1905*, ed. Patrice Locmant (Paris: Bartillat, 2006), 241.

[16] The two works are reproduced in the catalogue of the exhibition, Abélès, *La Dame aux éventails*, 99 (pl. 18) and 107 (pl. 56).

[17] “délicates merveilles, suprême adieu d’un art abandonné, attendant encore leur place dans les grands musées.” Henry Roujon, *La Galerie des bustes* (Paris: J. Rueff, 1908), 304.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Henry Cros, *La Belle Viole*, 1874. Polychrome wax with oil paint highlights. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph courtesy of Eric Gillis Fine Art. [\[return to text\]](#)



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