



Prints by
Félicien Rops

R R H
RARE BOOKS

The prints of Félicien Rops (1833-1898) have always been controversial and admired. An artist's artist, he pressed hard against the moral conventions of his day (and ours still), creating highly imaginative art that remains both shocking and seductive. A technical virtuoso, his works are brought to life with tremendous skill, delicacy, and creativity, often mixing techniques to produce the precise effect he was after, making him a favourite of the leading Symbolists and Decadents of his time as well as the most discerning print collectors of our own.

Rops was born in Namur in the Wallonia region of Belgium, where a museum devoted to his work stands today. In 1851, he moved to Brussels for school, and this is where his earliest published work first appeared, in the form of lithograph caricatures published in various student journals. In 1856, Rops, along with Charles De Coster, founded *L'Uylenspiegel*, a weekly satirical review, to which he continued to contribute until its publication ceased in 1863.

This enterprising spirit continued throughout his life as he became a lauded member of the avant-garde in Brussels as well as in Paris. He was a founding member of Brussels's *Société Libre des Beaux-Arts* (1868-1876), for which he served as vice president for many years, as well as the founder, in 1869, of that city's *Société internationale des aquafortistes* (1869-1871; 1874-1877). This was part of an effort to bring the latest printmaking techniques to Belgium. Although first trained in lithography, in 1862 he had studied etching in Paris with Félix Bracquemond (1833-1914) and Jules Ferdinand Jacquemart (1837-1880), two of the greatest etchers of the nineteenth century who were largely responsible for the French etching revival. He quickly mastered the techniques and switched from lithography to intaglio that same decade. Having produced an incredible 34 frontispieces between 1864 and 1870 alone, he went on to become the highest-paid illustrator in Paris, where he settled in 1875. In 1884 he first exhibited with the major avant-garde group *Les XX* and in 1886 he became one of its highly select members. He was, indeed, a great success already in his day, and was awarded the Légion d'honneur, France's highest honour, in 1889.

This amount of success may seem somewhat surprising, not for any lack of talent—as Baudelaire noted already in 1865, his talent was “as great as the pyramid of Cheops”—but because of the controversial, even scandalous nature of his work which is often highly erotic and steeped in themes of decadence and the occult. This counter-culture aspect of his oeuvre granted him something of a cult following, and while representative of his most famous works, it was not always Rops's focus, nor does it characterize the breadth of his interests.

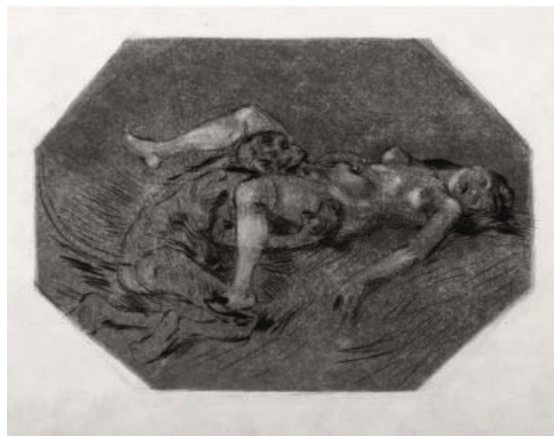
Instead, Rops's background in caricature and journalism is important context for approaching his work, which offers an exploration of contemporary society, albeit through myriad lenses and manners. In the 1870s, this was often performed in a realist mode, as in the beautiful etching of a firewood collector *La Bûcheronne* of 1874, and a concern with social welfare is evident in *La Grève* of 1876. Such interests persist throughout his career, as



Detail of *La Bûcheronne*, 1874.

evinced by *Maturité* of 1887 and *Le dernier des romantiques*, the latter executed in 1891 after a lithograph illustration published in the 18 January 1856 issue of *Uylenspiegel*.

However, the bourgeoisie became a particular source of fascination for Rops, especially as he increased the time he spent in Paris. Deeply curious about and interested in this world, of which he himself was part, he wanted especially to record the effects of what he called its "love of brutal pleasures" and financial fixations.¹ He read these "petty interests" as clearly marking the people around him, "having stuck on most faces of our contemporaries the sinister mask of the instinct of perversity of which Edgar Poe speaks." As an artist keen to represent his own time, he felt it was important to represent all of this, to capture "above all the passions, the character of the physiognomies, the scenes of manners, the moral feeling and the psychological impression of his century, before the costumes and the accessories of this century."²



Transformisme n. 3, or Troisième darwinique, le prédécesseur, ca. 1890.

Perhaps this "before" is part of the impulse for the gradual shedding of clothes performed by many of his female protagonists over the 1870s. From the 1880s until his death in 1898, his work is often highly sexual in nature, sometimes frankly pornographic, as in the *Troisième darwinique*, which shows an anthropoid ape performing cunnilingus on a naked woman, a surprisingly common theme in the pornographic response to Darwin's recently published theory of evolution. More often, however, the nakedness of Rops's women "uncovers" the contemporary obsession with the *femme fatale*. Women, according to this view, were pernicious and cruel, "the germs of disease and death" who "captivat[ed] men in order to lead them to their own destruction."³

1 Letter by Félicien Rops to Henri Liesse, March 1872. Cited in Edith Hoffmann, "Rops: Peintre de la femme moderne," *The Burlington Magazine* 126, no. 974 (May 1984), 260.

2 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Réserve, "Pièces, MS de Rops," p. 20 of "Notes et lettres," cited in Edith Hoffmann, "Rops: Peintre de la femme moderne," *The Burlington Magazine* 126, no. 974 (May 1984), 261.

3 Bernadette Bonnier and Véronique Leblanc, *Félicien Rops: Life and Work* (Bruges: Stichting Kunstboek, 1997), 46.

Sex, death, and satanism, the hallmarks of a beautifully diseased modernity, were interests Rops shared with Charles Baudelaire. Rops had met Baudelaire's printer-publisher Auguste Poulet-Malassis (1825-1878) in 1862; the artist and the poet met two years later, in 1864, when Baudelaire went to Brussels to give a series of lectures and to evade his creditors. Baudelaire spent the last two years of his life there, during which time the two men formed a close friendship that no doubt relied on their similar artistic perspectives.



Detail of *Masques modernes* or *Masques parisiens*, *Le cerveau de Paris*, 1889.

They were especially fascinated by makeup and masks as symbols of societal decay, along with a "love for the primary crystallographic form," as Rops explained to Poulet-Malassis, that is, "the passion for the skeleton."⁴ In 1866, Rops produced the frontispiece for *Les Épaves*, a collection of Baudelaire's poems that included the six works censored from *Les Fleurs du mal* when it was published in France in 1857, and he appropriately created a skeleton-based image for the volume. The skeleton returns again throughout Rops's oeuvre, including in his frontispiece for Villiers de L'Isle Adam's *Chez les passants* (1890), while the notion of masks is given centre stage in his title image for Félicien Champsaur's *Masques Modernes* (1889).

While many of Rops's images of women seem to us problematic, they are certainly of their time, and it is worth taking a moment to highlight a certain level of ambiguity that runs through them. For while women are undoubtedly positioned as the connection between sex, lust, death, and decay, the downfall of man and society in general, they are also the figure by which Rops (and indeed a great many Decadent and Symbolist writers and artists) pushed against established Bourgeois norms, particularly in relation to sex and religion, the repression of lust and instinct and the

categorizations of depravity. As Rops writes on the pediment in *Holocauste* (1895), upon which stands a beautiful woman with her dress around her knees, "Naturalia non sunt turpia"—What is natural is not dirty.

Indeed, one of the things that makes Rops so remarkable, beyond his extraordinary creative production, is the way he truly practiced what he preached. As he wrote to Edmond Deman in 1893, "In my time, I have often walked with or without a shirt, and sometimes totally naked,

4 Letter by Félicien Rops to Auguste Poulet-Malassis, s.l., s.d. PU/LE/001. www.ropslettres.be, edition no. 3490.

without turning around, knowing that what the curious could see was of 'fine bearing', and of an appearance of which I had nothing to be ashamed. And in my letters as in my drawings, I... have always called a spade a spade!"⁵ Well aware of the perceived blasphemies of his work and, indeed, of his life (which is also still scandalous by today's standards), he lived by a motto that proclaimed the validity of his own truth: "Can't be virtuous, won't deign to be a hypocrite, Rops I am."⁶

The selection offered here testifies to this great counter-cultural spirit, the creativity of his imagery as well as the ingenuity of his printmaking.



Holocauste, 1895.

5 Letter by Félicien Rops to [Edmond] Deman. Corbeil-Essonnes, 31 October 1893. Province de Namur, Musée Félicien Rops, LEpr/132. www.ropslettres.be, edition no. 105.

6 Draft letter by Félicien Rops to Émile Leclercq. Paris, s.d. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, III/215/2/12a and III/215/2/12b. www.ropslettres.be, edition no. 564. See also "Rops Erotic Works," Musée Félicien Rops, www.museerops.be/rops-erotique.

Prints by
Félicien Rops



La Bûcheronne or La Ramasseuse de fagots, 1874.

Etching and drypoint on thick paper with full margins. (285x190; 425x295 mm).
Rouir 943, II / II.

Signed in red crayon lower right.

\$750



La grève II or *La carbenière* or *La charbonnière*, 1876.

Etching and drypoint on paper. (198x154; 162x200 mm). Rouir 758, VII / VII.

From a posthumous print run published in Lemonnier, 1908.

\$150



Femme à la fourrure, debout, 1879.

Heliogravure and drypoint on laid paper with Glaslan watermark. (175x130; 305x240 mm). Rouir 671, III / IV.

Signature in red crayon lower centre.

From the collection of Eugène Rodrigues, better known by the pseudonym 'Ramiro', under which he published the well-known catalogue of Rops's engraved work (R. 44; L.897). The same scholar noted on the card to which the sheet is affixed, "Epreuve avec les marges. Introuvable".

\$1,600





Chansons badines de Collé, ca. 1880.

Heliogravure and drypoint on Japan paper with wide margins. (139x86; 320x250 mm).
Rouir 530, single state.

Monogrammed in red crayon at lower center, collection stamp on verso.

From the collection of Heinrich Stinnes (Rouir 52; L. 1376a), sold at auction in Berlin on
November 10, 1936.

\$1,000





Le Christ au Vatican, no later than December 1880.

Heliogravure, etching and drypoint on thick paper. (195x153; 448x315 mm).
Rouir 741, V/V.

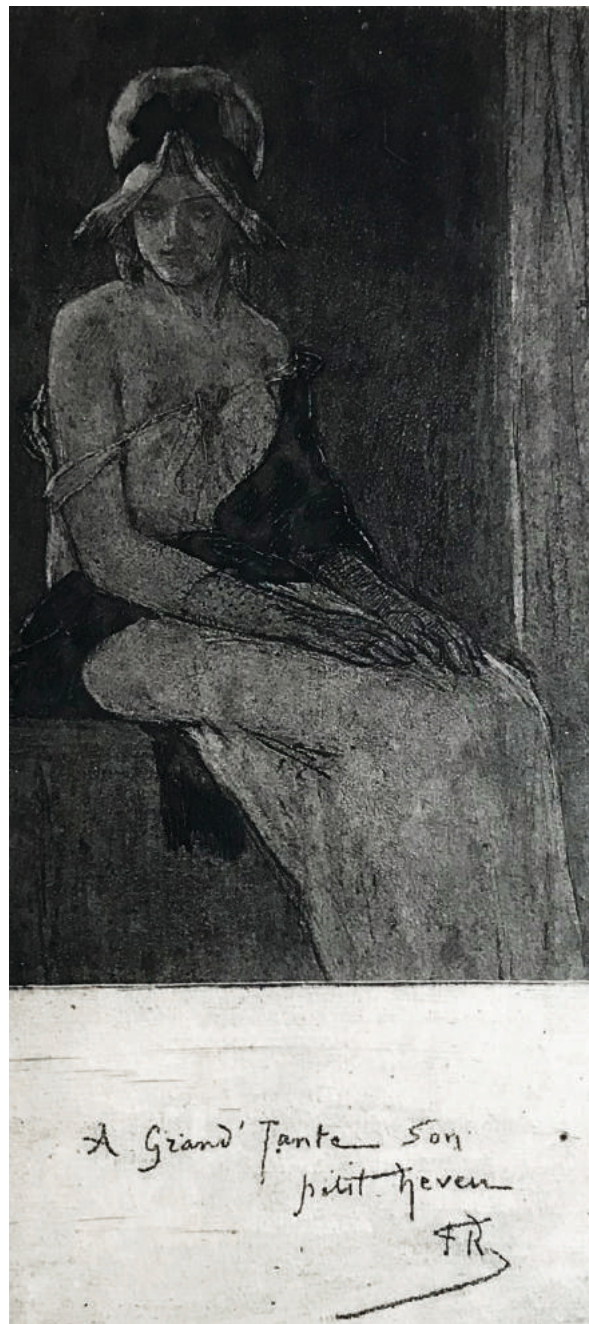
Signed in pencil at lower centre.

Example of the final state, before the cutting of the remarks and their circulation as single works. In a letter dated 22 December 1880 to Hannon Rops he writes: "Et moi aussi, mon vieux, je préfère mes croquis des marges au Christ du Vatican, mais le Christ m'intéresse parce que 1° il faut que la pointe varie suivant les sujets //

2° il faut prouver aux Académiteux que si l'on voulait, on ferait ce qu'ils appellent du 'style'. Puis mon Christ est cocasse et va à l'encontre des traditions religieuses"(Lettres à Hannon, CHR. 91). Formerly in the Delafosse Collection (pencil indication on verso) and the Heseltini Collection (monogram in pencil on verso).

\$1,200





Ma grand'tante I, ca.1880.

Heliogravure on Japan paper with wide margins. (246x163; 450x300 mm). Rouir 862, I / III.

Signed in red crayon at lower centre. Clean, sharp proof of the very rare first state in pure heliogravure.

\$2,200



La sphère de la lune, 1881.

Heliogravure and soft-ground etching. (157x115; 298x200 mm). Rouir 590, II / V.

Signed in red crayon at lower centre. Collection stamp in ink on verso.

A very rare example. From the collection of Ottokar Mascha, which was sold at auction in Brussels between 7 and 15 December 1921 (R.33; L.1904).

\$1,200



Canicule I, 1882.

Heliogravure on Japan paper. (222x155; 310x230 mm). Rouir 807, I / III.

Signed in red crayon at lower centre, collection stamp lower left.

Extraordinarily rich toned proof of the first state of this plate. This is the second known example of the first state after that recorded in Exsteens. From the collection of Léon Dommartin (R. 15; L. 681).

\$4,000

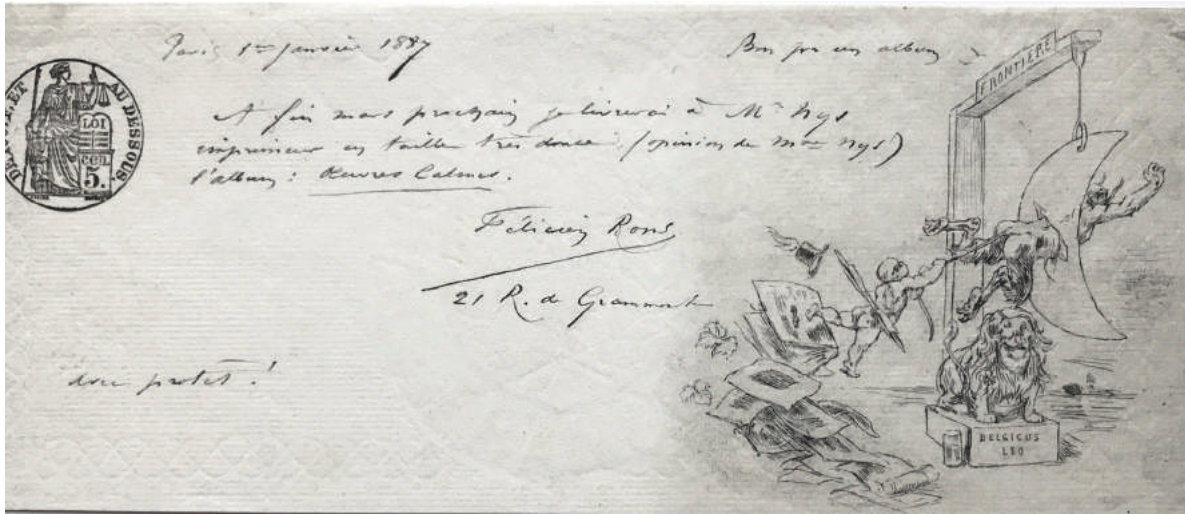




La nourrice au satyrion, 1883.

Heliogravure retouched with drypoint on Japan paper. (268x206; 327x272 mm).
Rouir 912, II / II.

\$1,600



Frontière de Belgique (Billet à desordre), 1886.

Etching, soft varnish and drypoint on laid paper with watermark. (95x235 mm). Rouir 595, II / IV.

Autographed card signed by the artist, laid on a sheet engraved with the second state of the famous Belgian Border plate, before the shading on the face of the cherub.

\$1,800



Maturité, 1887.

Soft varnish, drypoint and aquatint on paper. (190x150; 260x200 mm). Rouir 724, V / V.

From a posthumous print run published in Lemonnier, 1908.

\$250



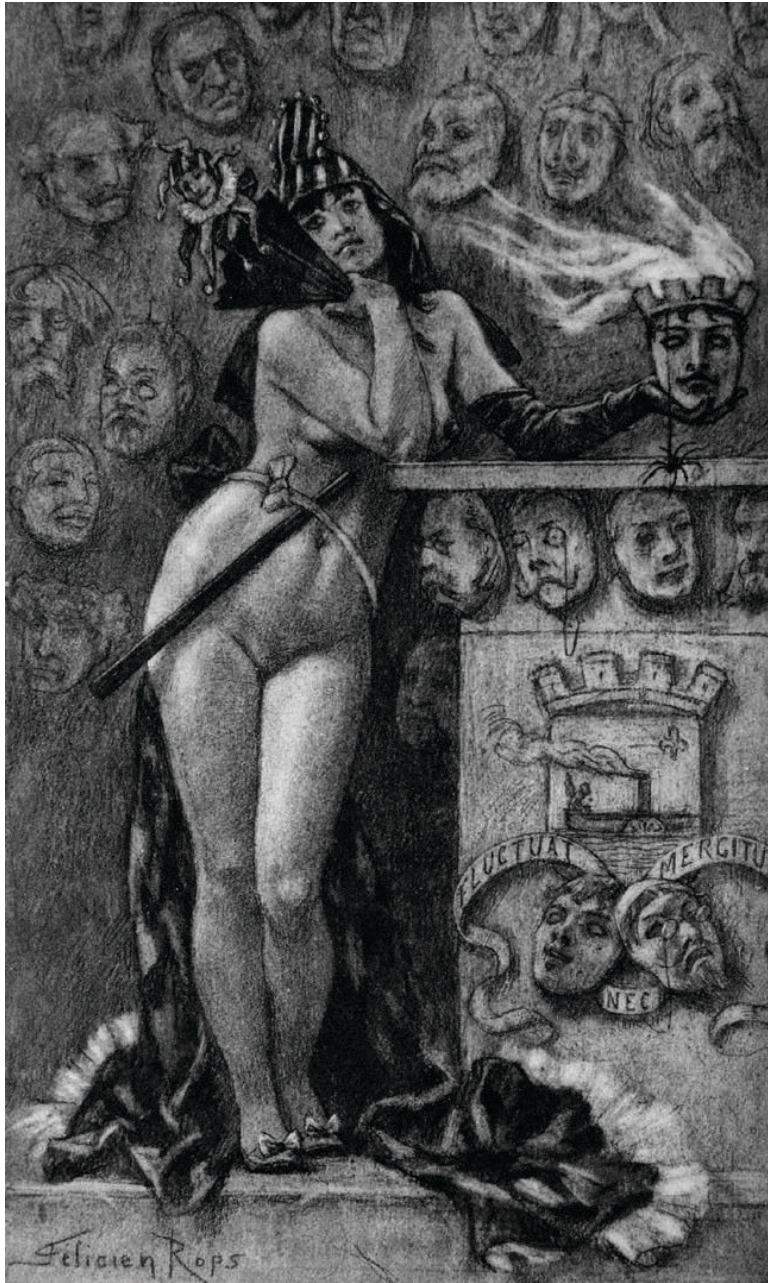
A cœur perdu or Eritis similes deo, 1888.

Heliogravure and soft varnish in bistre on Japan paper with wide margins. (158x100; 300x170 mm). Rouir 641, II / II.

Rare print run in bistre ink, preceding the addition of the addresses for use of the plate as the frontispiece of Péladan's novel of the same name.

\$1,200



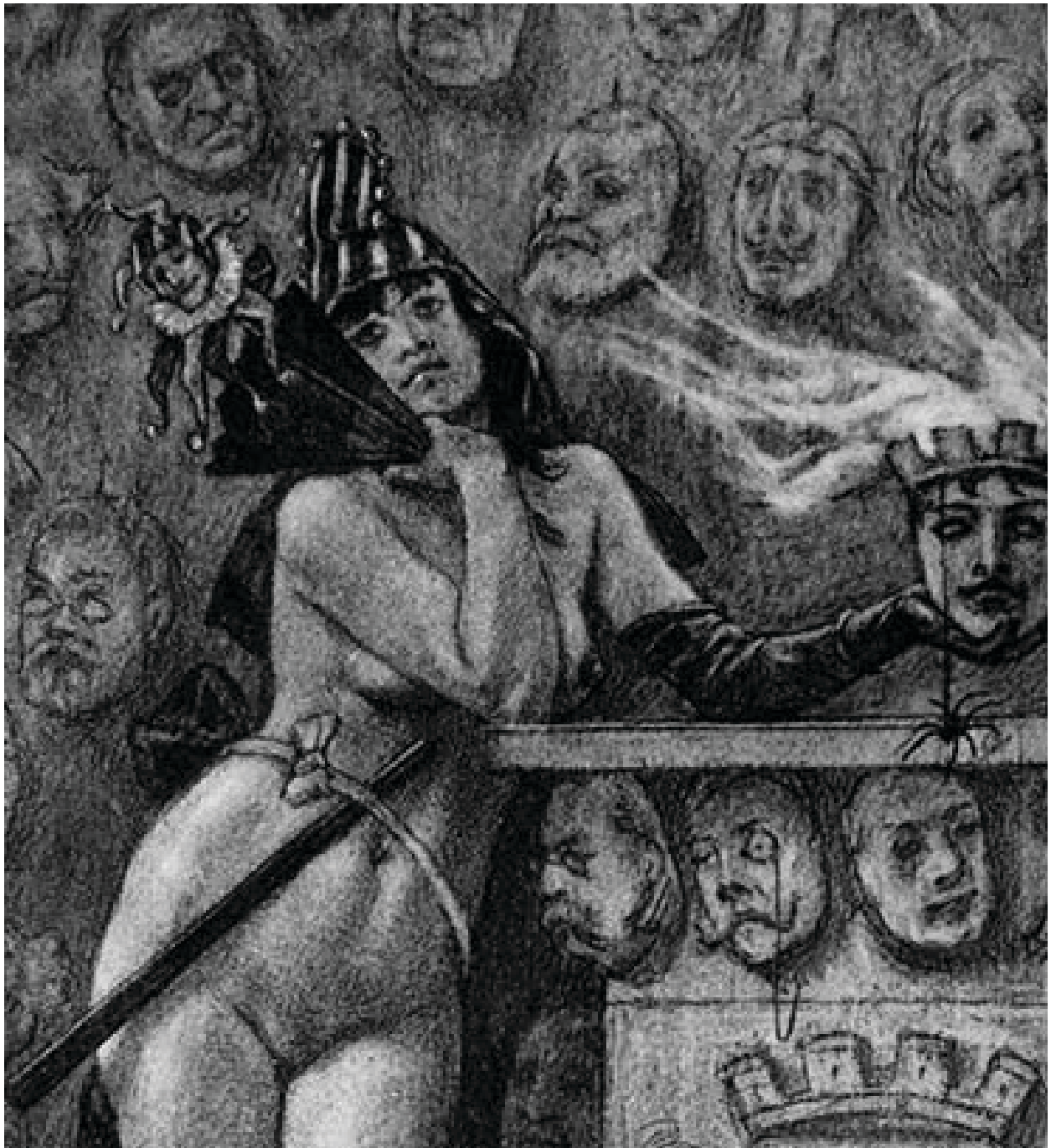


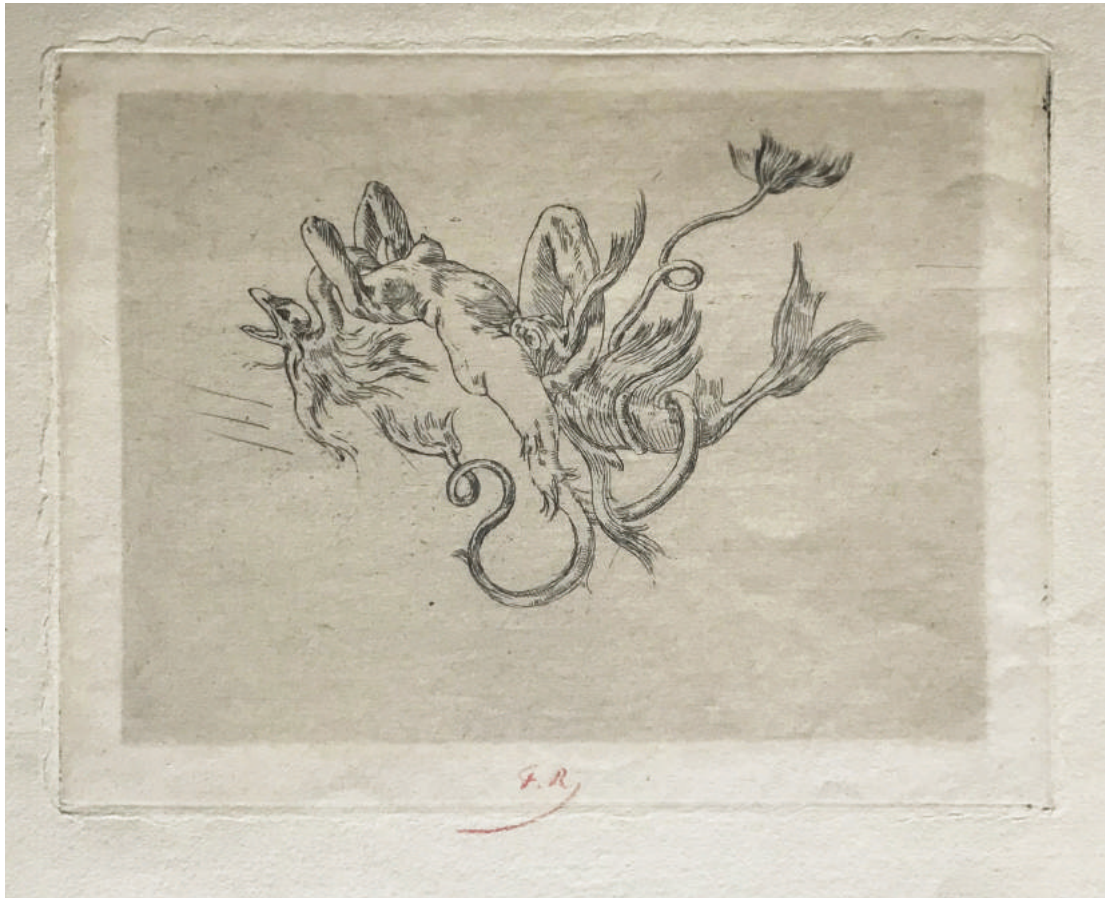
Masques modernes or Masques parisiens, Le cerveau de Paris, 1889.

Heliogravure on Japan paper. (249x175; 435x343 mm). Exsteens 522.

Apocryphal signature in pencil at lower centre. Uncommon advance printing of this plate used as the frontispiece for *Masques modernes* by Félicien Champsaur, 1889.

\$1,400





Transformisme n. 1 or Première darwinique, ca. 1890.

Heliogravure retouched with drypoint on laid paper with Van Gelder watermark. (127x165; 310x410 mm). Rouir 479, II / IV.

Monogrammed in red crayon at lower centre.

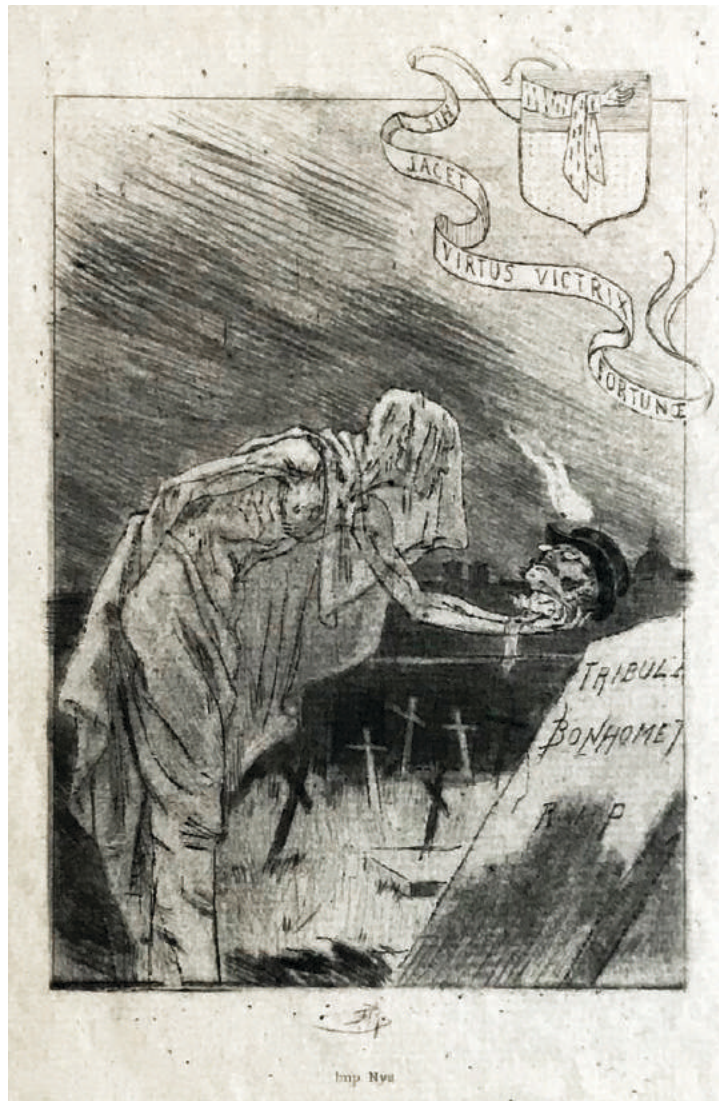
\$1,200



Transformisme n. 3, or Troisième darwinique, le prédécesseur, ca. 1890.

Drypoint and aquatint on japan paper with wide margins (111x170; 273x350 mm).
Rouir 427, II / II.

\$1,200



Chez les passants, 1890.

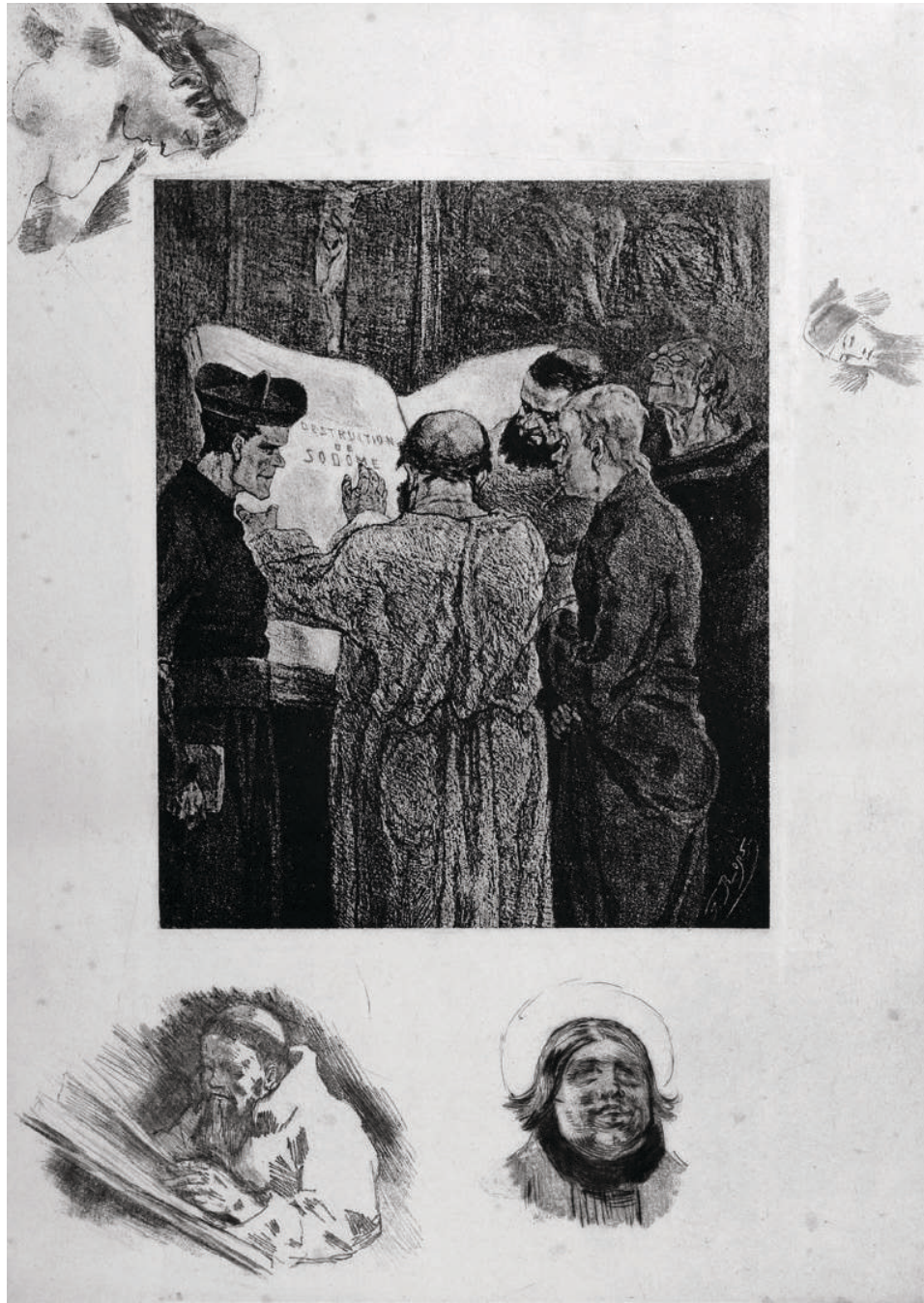
Soft varnish and drypoint on laid paper with MBM watermark. (151x97; 465x350 mm).
Rouir 571, III / III.

Collection stamp on verso.

Beautiful proof from the Heinrich Stinnes collection (Rouir 52; L. 1376a). His collection of Rops prints was sold at auction in Berlin on 10 November 1936.

\$1,800



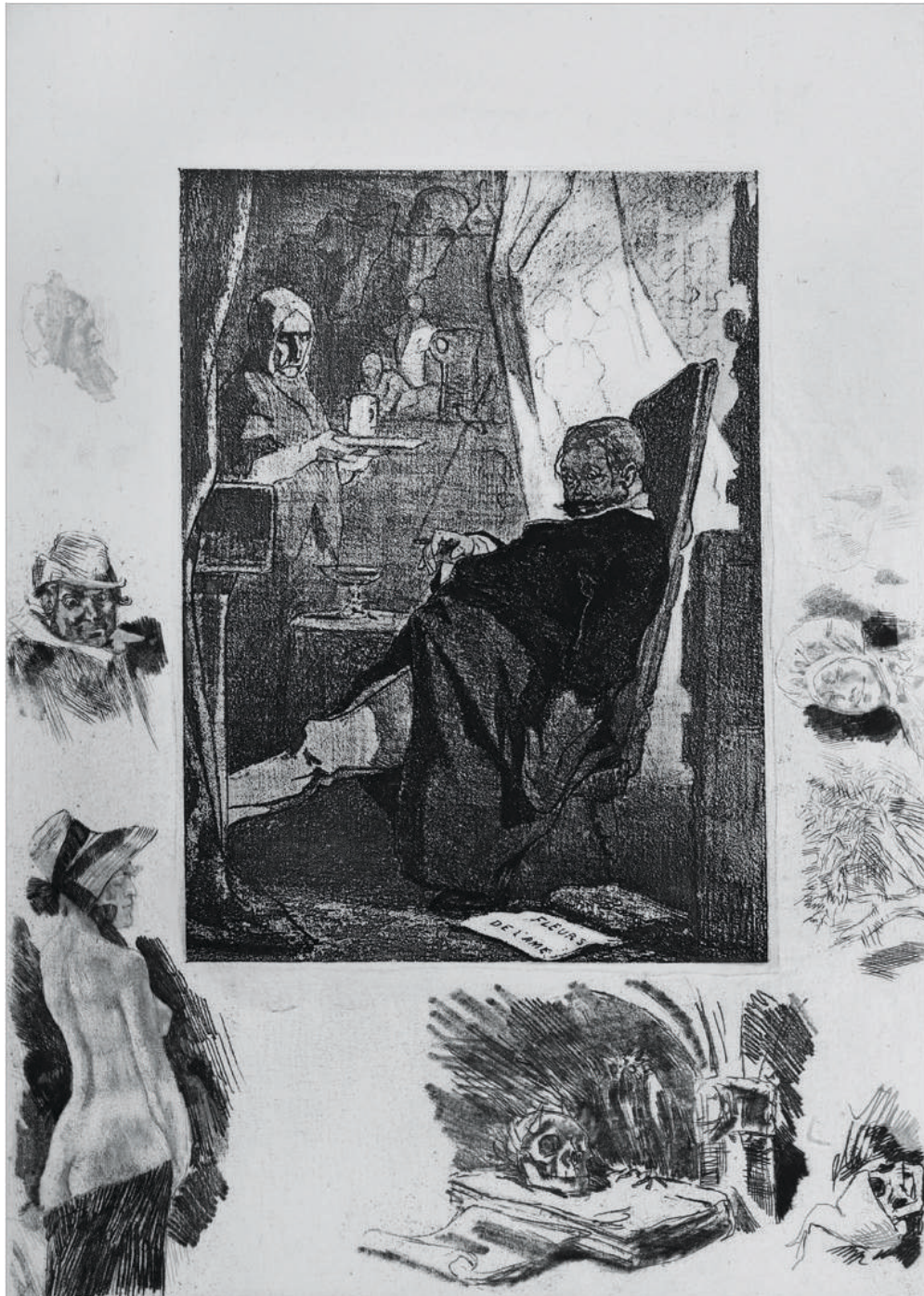


Chez les trappistes, 1891.

Heliogravure with soft varnish retouching and drypoint on thick paper. (228x166; 330x258 mm). Rouir 823, VI / VI.

\$600





Le dernier des romantiques, 1891.

Heliogravure, soft varnish, drypoint and aquatint on thick paper (228x167; 315x235 mm). Rouir 825, IV / IV.

\$1,000



Indolence, no later than February 1895.

Soft varnish and drypoint on ivory paper. (43x195; 280x380 mm). Rouir 279, uncensored state.

Magnificent proof with deep, even inking. Unknown print run, before the plate was cut in preparation for publication with the title *Etude de nu* in *L'épreuve*, February 1895.

\$1,600



Holocauste, 1895.

Heliogravure and drypoint on japan paper. (238x156; 290x205 mm). Rouir 843, III / IV.

\$1,200



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