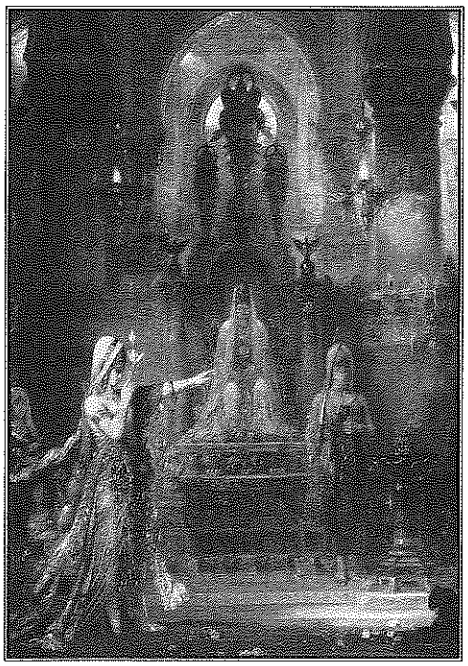
Exhibition Guide

Gustave Moreau

BETWEEN EPIC AND DREAM



All that I have sought,
I have found,
in small proportions no doubt,
but in forms perfectly pure
and flawless,
for I have never looked
for dream in reality
or for reality in dream.
I have allowed my imagination
free play, and I have not
been led astray by it.

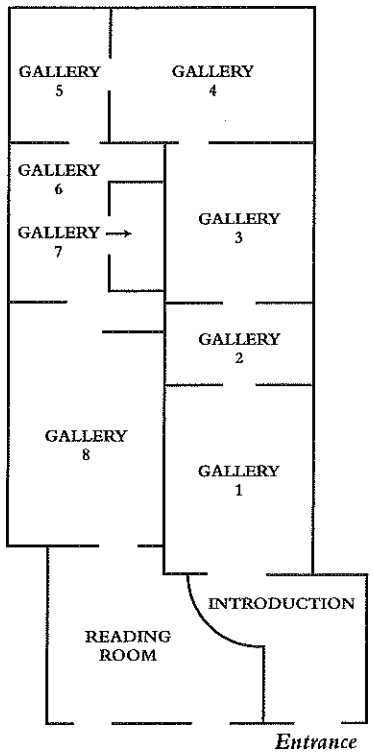
GUSTAVE MOREAU

THE ART INSTITUTE
OF CHICAGO

February 13—April 25, 1999
Regenstein Hall
The Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Building

Please use this guide as you move through the exhibition. The text follows the sequence of numbered galleries (see floor plan), explaining the theme of each room, and directing your attention to particular works of art, identified by catalogue number. More extensive information is provided by the audio tour (available at the exhibition entrance) and in the exhibition catalogue (available in the Reading Room and on sale in the Museum Shops).

Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream was organized by The Art Institute of Chicago, the Réunion des musées nationaux, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.



To be modern does not consist of searching for something outside of everything that has been done ...
It is on the contrary, a question of coordinating all that the preceding ages have brought us, to make visible how our century has accepted this heritage and how it makes use of it.

GUSTAVE MOREAU

Introduction

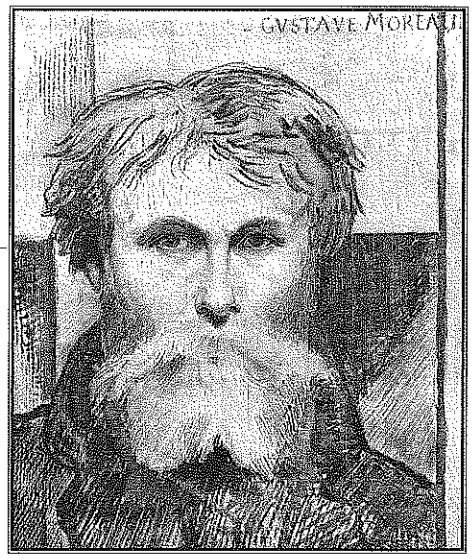


Fig. 1. *Self-Portrait*, 1872/75. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau (cat. no. 57).

Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) is perhaps best known as a forerunner of the Symbolist movement, a painter of epic stories, and the teacher of Henri Matisse. A man of elegance and erudition, Moreau reinvigorated the tradition of history painting by adding a new, imaginative, and poetic dimension to it.

Like other artists and writers in the mid-nineteenth century, Moreau found the culture of his time to be overtly materialistic and indifferent to religion and art. He looked to the art of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Italian Renaissance, and non-Western cultures to develop a form of expression that offered spiritual guidance in what he believed to be an age of confusion.

Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream traces Moreau's remarkable contribution to French art, situating him as a leader in the revival of the tradition of academic painting and as a precursor to movements seeking to reassert the human spirit in painting. Throughout his career, Moreau drew his subjects from the Bible, mythology, and ancient legend, finding these rich stories well suited to personal interpretation. His early paintings are imbued with the beauty and violence of Romantic art; those from the 1860s and 70s make epic statements by fusing classical erudition with technical knowledge; and his increasingly abstract late paintings evoke emotional response through color, line, and form. This exhibition, including over one hundred and eighty of Moreau's most important paintings, watercolors, and drawings, assembled from public and private collections worldwide, reveals an evocative poet who nonetheless always considered himself a history painter.

Travels in Italy

Upset by the early death in 1856 of his artistic inspiration, Chassériau, and concerned about the incompleteness of his own education, Moreau went to Italy, spending two years traveling through Rome, Florence, Siena, Pisa, Milan, Venice, Naples, and Pompeii. During this time, he executed hundreds of copies of antique frescoes, Italian primitive art, and works by such Renaissance masters as Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, and Titian. He also made lasting friendships with fellow French artists studying in Italy, including Léon Bonnat, Élie Delaunay, and Edgar Degas. The closeness that developed between Moreau and the young Degas is suggested in two drawings, *Full-Length Portrait of Degas in Florence* (cat. no. 23) and *Degas in the Uffizi* (cat. no. 24).

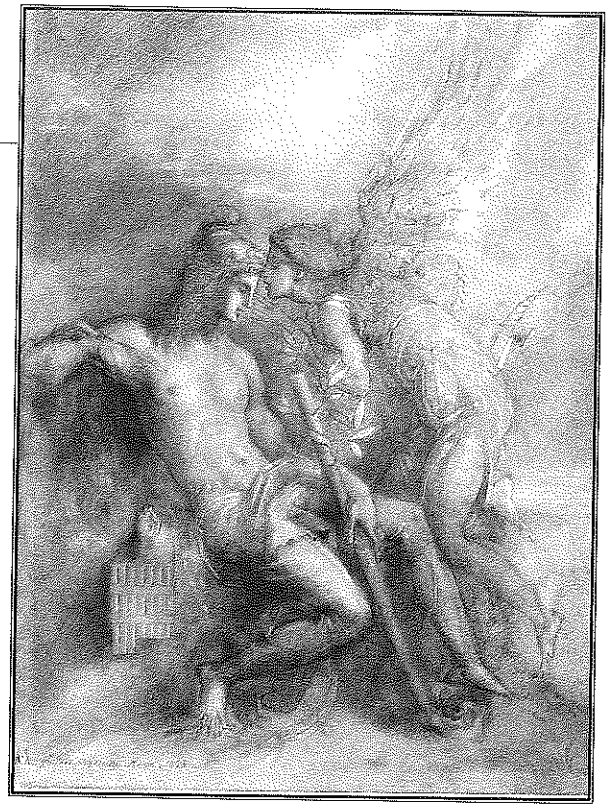


Fig. 3. *Hesiod and the Muse*, 1858. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (cat. no. 16).

One of the few original works that Moreau created during his travels in Italy, *Hesiod and the Muse* (fig. 3) demonstrates his engagement with ancient and Renaissance sources. The drawing depicts a muse whispering the divine mysteries of life to Hesiod, a Greek seventh-century B.C. shepherd. Moreau's classically educated audience would have known the story of the muse inspiring Hesiod to write the *Theogony*, an early epic that explained the origins and genealogies of the Greek gods. This interest in the primal mysteries of life would remain a theme in Moreau's art throughout his career. Here, Moreau underscored the ancient source of his subject by modeling Hesiod's pose on a marble relief figure of the beautiful Greek youth Endymion in Rome's Capitoline Museum.

Fig. 4. *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1864. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of William H. Herriman (cat. no. 28).

GALLERY 2

Oedipus and the Sphinx

Moreau caused a sensation at the Salon of 1864 with his painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (fig. 4), which earned the artist his first medal at the academy and was purchased immediately by Prince Napoleon, the nephew of Emperor Napoleon III. Critics credited Moreau with reviving the discipline of history painting—high praise for an artist who exhibited with over 1500 others, including Édouard Manet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and Berthe Morisot. In *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, Moreau fused his classical education, academic training, and Italian studies to treat what would become recurrent themes in his career: the epic confrontations of good and evil, man and woman, and enlightenment and chaos.

According to Greek legend, Oedipus' quest for truth began with his encounter with the sphinx, a fabulous monster that posted itself at the crossroads between Thebes and Delphi, devouring those who could not solve the enigma it posed: "What animal goes on four feet in the morning, on two at midday, and on three in the evening?" When Oedipus answered, "A man crawls on all fours as an infant, walks erect when grown, and uses a stick in old age," he destroyed the sphinx.

Moreau's choice of subject matter placed him within the heritage of French academic art by referring to a canonical painting of Oedipus and the sphinx executed by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres in 1808. In contrast to the earlier painting, which depicts Oedipus answering the riddle, Moreau painted the sphinx as she poses the enigma, emphasizing her aggressive nature. He also followed the traditional process of making numerous studies of the composition (see cat. nos. 28-6, 28-8, 28-10) and separate studies for each element (cat. nos. 28-12 to 28-14), combining them in a final study before embarking on the definitive painting. With *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, Moreau emerged as a significant figure in the Paris art world, displaying his command of complex narrative and sophisticated technique.

GALLERY 3

Years of Success

Fig. 5. *Orpheus*, 1865. Paris, Musée d'Orsay (cat. no. 32).

Throughout the 1860s Moreau continued to choose subjects from mythology, the Bible, and ancient history, interpreting them in unprecedented ways. The popularity and impact of his paintings during this period is most evident in *Orpheus* (fig. 5), which he exhibited in the Salon of 1866. Although Moreau did not receive a medal for the painting, he gained enough critical support to encourage the French State to purchase the work and place it on display in the Musée du Luxembourg. During Moreau's lifetime, *Orpheus* was his only painting on permanent display in Paris; it inspired many Parnassian and Symbolist writers and poets, as well as Marcel Proust, who wrote in *Notes on the Mysterious World of Gustave Moreau*: "We thought the poet dead, we made a pilgrimage to the Luxembourg as one goes to visit a tomb, we went simply, like a woman carrying the dead head of Orpheus . . . and we see in this head of Orpheus something that looks at us, the thought of Gustave Moreau painted on this canvas [*sic*] that looks at us with its beautiful blind eyes that are the color of thought."

The traditional source for the story of the legendary lyric poet Orpheus is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. According to the ancient Roman writer, Orpheus, who was inconsolable after the death of his wife, Eurydice, was torn to pieces by Maenads, the frenzied followers of the god Bacchus. Orpheus' head and lyre were then thrown into the Hebros River. These remains floated out to sea and later washed to shore. Moreau, however, assured the viewer that this tragedy was not final, emphasizing the Thracian maiden's contemplation of Orpheus. To suggest the eternal significance of lyric poetry, Moreau drew upon Renaissance art, modeling the poet's disembodied head on that of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* and thereby alluding to the release of the soul from the body.

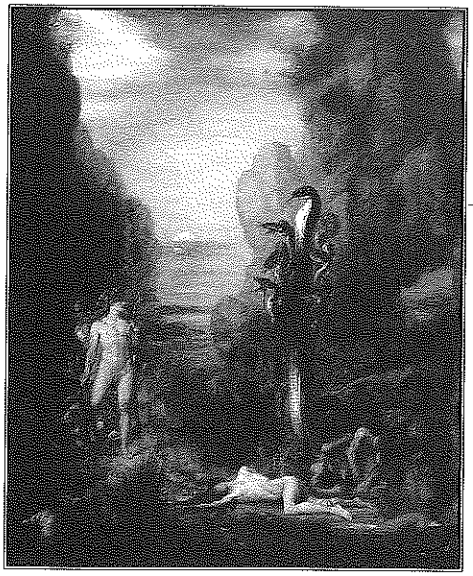


Fig. 6. *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, 1869–76. The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mrs. Eugene A. Davidson, 1964.231 (cat. no. 58).

GALLERY 4

Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra

After the Salon of 1869, Moreau did not appear at the Salon again until 1876. In fact, the painter barely produced any work between 1870 and 1872. Instead, he fought in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), which was widely regarded as a result of the immorality and materialism of Napoleon III's Second Empire. The experiences of the war and of the Prussian siege of Paris affected Moreau and his art profoundly. *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (fig. 6), completed in 1876, probably reflects the artist's perspective on the cataclysmic events of the war. In the painting, Moreau seems to have linked the French nation with the heroic Hercules, and the monstrous Hydra with Prussia and the deposed Napoleon III.

Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra illustrates the second of the young hero's twelve labors. Club in hand, he confronts the seven-headed Hydra, a serpentine monster that ravaged the Greek state of Argos. As the works in this gallery demonstrate, Moreau again relied upon rigorous academic methods, producing hundreds of preparatory studies to develop this unique vision. In order to portray Hercules' strength as primarily psychological rather than physical, Moreau depicted the hero as an androgynous youth rather than a conventional, muscle-bound strongman. Hercules' beauty presents a dramatic contrast to the countenance of the horrible Hydra, whose heads were adapted from illustrations in scientific books on reptiles. It is possible that Moreau also examined live snakes in the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris. To further suggest the transcendent aspects of the moment, Moreau modeled his Hercules on Apollo, the god of the sun, and bathed the hero in light. The Hydra, however, lurks in ominous shadow.

Instead of showing Hercules and the monster engaged in battle, Moreau selected the moment before the confrontation. In his own words, he hoped to: "give the Hydra that aspect of motionless and alarming fixity, while the other reptiles grafted to its body, which are only the instruments or members of its anger, dart forth their tongues in fury, expressing the inner passion of the contest. Nothing could be finer than this man and this animal eyeing each other before the fight: it is quite terrifying."

GALLERY 5

Salome

Fig. 7. *Salome* (*Salome Dancing before Herod*), 1874–76. Los Angeles, The Armand Hammer Collection; UCLA at The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center (cat. no. 63).

In *Salome* (fig. 7), which Moreau also exhibited in the Salon of 1876, the artist challenged himself to reinterpret a popular subject based on the story of Saint John the Baptist as told in the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark. The biblical background of the tale involves the marriage of King Herod to Herodias, the wife of his brother and the mother of Salome. At his birthday banquet, the elderly king, seated on a raised throne, was so enchanted by his stepdaughter's dance that he rashly swore to grant any wish she made. Seeking revenge on John the Baptist, who condemned the king's marriage (seen then as incestuous), Herodias, hiding behind a pillar, told her daughter to ask for the Baptist's head on a dish. Herod, though much distressed, kept his oath.

Moreau became fascinated by Salome's story perhaps as early as 1870. He rigorously researched it, making at least 120 preparatory drawings, over half of them for the figure of Salome alone. The artist presented a Salome who is quite different from the temptresses that usually populated the annual Salon. An embodiment of the forces of destruction, she is encased in a costume that Moreau described as "a kind of jeweled reliquary." Her floating pose, derived from the mannequin on view in this gallery, evokes a trancelike fixity. Moreau filled the canvas with signs of Salome's spellbinding power, encrusting it with symbols from Eastern art such as the Ujat, the immense Egyptian eye dangling from her bracelet. This fusion of diverse and unrelated symbols, Salome's irrational pose, and the play of light and color combine to inspire a dreamlike mood of mystery and exoticism.

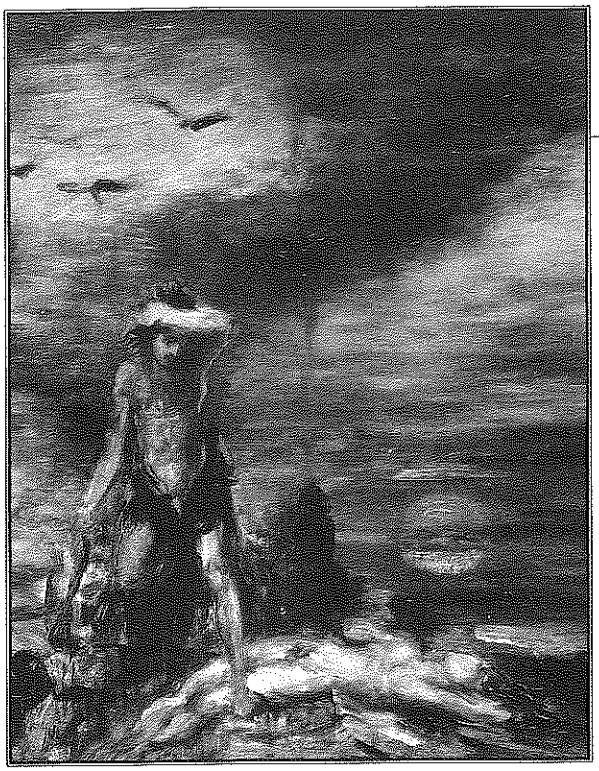


Fig. 8. *Evening: Death*, from *The Life of Humanity (second version)*. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau (cat. no. 105-9).

GALLERY 6

Continued Success

Moreau exhibited at the Salon for the last time in 1880, and he became more selective about showing his work through the following decades. His colleague Degas described Moreau as "a hermit who knows what time the trains leave." The artist, however, continued to accumulate official accolades and had a core of private collectors who eagerly commissioned both new works and watercolor reproductions of his oil paintings. In critical circles, Moreau was one of the few traditionalists accepted and written about by such supporters of the "New Painting" as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Félix Fénéon, and Roger Marx.

Moreau considered no painting finished, no theme exhausted. He would often revise a painting he had started a dozen years earlier, stenciling over his figures with delicate tattoolike patterns. One of Moreau's most ambitious projects of these years, *The Life of Humanity* (cat. nos. 104, 105-1 to 105-9), returns to themes that the he originally formulated during the Franco-Prussian War. Drawing upon biblical and classical narratives, Moreau created this sequence of nine panels, grouped under an image of Christ the Redeemer. The upper register, featuring Adam in the garden, represents the Golden Age of man. The central register recalls the Silver Age, or Youth, in which Hesiod and Orpheus suggested the civilization of mankind. The jewel-like colors of the Silver Age, which evoke beauty, sharply contrast with the muddy browns, metal grays, and angry reds of the bottom register, which depicts the Iron Age, or Maturity. In the debased Iron Age, Moreau represented man's decline and fall with the story of Cain and Abel. Throughout the painting, Moreau experimented with the possibilities of color for evocative rather than descriptive effect.

GALLERY 7

Moreau's Watercolors

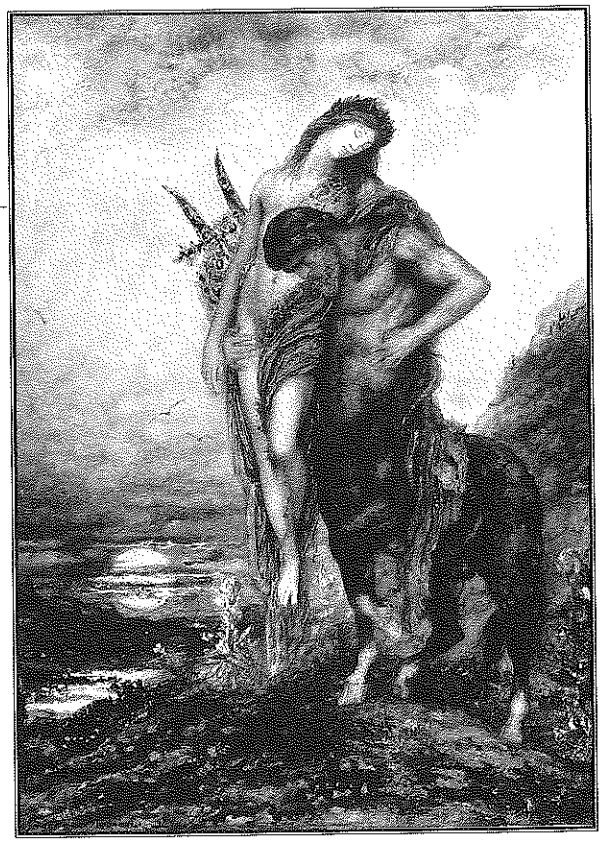


Fig. 9. *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur*, c. 1890. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau (cat. no. 123).

This gallery features Moreau's astounding achievements in watercolor, the medium in which he conducted some of his boldest experiments in composition and color. Moreau made watercolor central to his artistic practice: over half of the works that he sold during his lifetime were watercolors. Frequently, he even submitted them to the Salon. One of his most moving images is *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur* (fig. 9). In it, the centaur—symbol of the primitive, pre-scientific Golden Age—carries the expiring poet, who represents the youth of humanity during the Silver Age. Moreau depicts both of them as the last of their kind, and a fiery red sun sets on the great traditions they embody. The painting seems to dissolve into a myriad of sapphires, rubies, and emeralds, signaling the end of the nobler times with which Moreau, through his art, had sought to establish a connection. Moreau's abstraction of the setting sun and his dazzling use of color encourage a highly personal interpretation on the part of the viewer. This poetic strategy, apparent in watercolors as early as *Phaeton* (cat. no. 78), influenced Symbolist painters such as Odilon Redon.

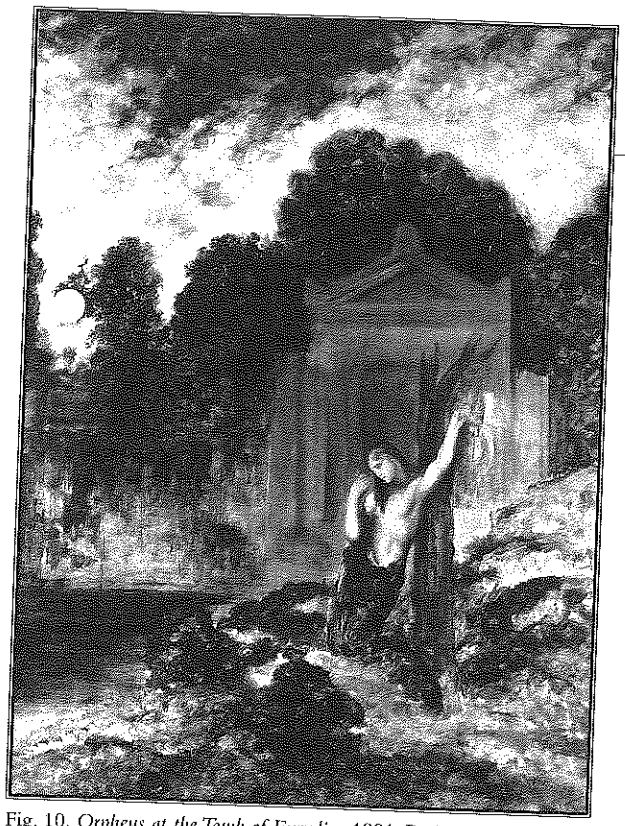


Fig. 10. *Orpheus at the Tomb of Eurydice*, 1891. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau (cat. no. 128).

GALLERY 8

Final Achievements

The last decade of Moreau's life began in 1890 with the death of Alexandrine Dureux, who had been his companion for over thirty years. The bereft painter commemorated their relationship in *Orpheus at the Tomb of Eurydice* (cat. no. 128). The painting demonstrates Moreau's belief in the intrinsic expressive power of color, line, and form, which led to his increasingly abstract images. Orpheus, mourning the death of his wife, leans against a tree; its shattered form echoes his grief. To heighten the sense of death and transience in the image, the artist painted the trees with autumnal colors.

Perhaps sensing his own mortality, Moreau embarked on one of his most ambitious projects in these later years: the conversion of his home and studio at 14, rue de La Rochefoucauld into a museum that he bequeathed to the French State. In addition to commissioning architectural renovations, Moreau also decided to replicate some of the masterpieces that had entered public and private collections and to rework earlier paintings such as *Saint George and the Dragon* (cat. no. 124) and *The Triumph of Alexander the Great* (cat. no. 125). Additionally, he organized more than 1200 paintings and watercolors, and assembled over 13,000 of the drawings that remained in his studio.

Simultaneously, Moreau honored the deathbed request of his friend Élie Delaunay and began his career as a professor at the École des beaux-arts in 1891. One of Moreau's final contributions to the discipline of painting manifested itself in his outstanding talents as a teacher and mentor to the next generation of artists.

Today, the legacy of Moreau's art can be discerned in the disquieting disjunctions of Surrealism, in the modern tendencies toward abstraction that are presaged in his expressive late paintings and watercolors, and in the dark moodiness of the works of his student Georges Rouault. Perhaps most surprisingly, it is in the joyous color, graceful arabesques, and decorative sensibility of another of his pupils, Henri Matisse, that Moreau's dream of a symbolic language found its true voice.

April 6, 1826 Birth in Paris of Gustave Moreau, first child of architect Louis Moreau (1790–1862) and his wife, Pauline Desmoutier (1802–1884).

October 7, 1846 As a student of Neoclassical painter François Édouard Picot (1786–1868), Moreau is admitted to the École des beaux-arts.

October 1857–September 1859 Moreau travels to Italy to study, making drawings and paintings after antique art and works by Renaissance masters in Rome, Florence, Milan, Venice, and Naples.

1864 Moreau wins a Salon medal for *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (fig. 4).

1870 During the Franco-Prussian War, Moreau joins the National Guard, but is forced to leave the service due to rheumatism in his arm. He envisions making a multipaneled painting titled *France Vanquished*, but it does not advance beyond sketch stage.

1876 Moreau makes a remarkable return to the Salon with two paintings, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (fig. 6) and *Salome* (fig. 7).

July 31, 1884 Moreau's mother dies, leaving the artist battling a period of depression that lasts more than six months.

November 22, 1888 Moreau is elected to the Académie des beaux-arts.

March 28, 1890 Death of Alexandrine Dureux, Moreau's "best and only *amie*," whom he had known since 1859.

January 1, 1892 Moreau becomes a professor of painting at the École des beaux-arts. Among his pupils are Henri Matisse, Georges Rouault, and Albert Marquet.

April 18, 1898 Gustave Moreau dies in Paris.

January 13, 1903 The artist's house at 14, rue de La Rochefoucauld is opened to the public as the Musée Gustave Moreau.

RELATED EVENTS

The following programs are free with museum admission. Program questions? Call (312) 443-3680. For general museum information, call (312) 443-3600. Web site: <http://www.artic.edu>

PERFORMANCES

Hercules: The Double-Edged Sword of Strength, Odds Bodkin, master storyteller and musician
February 14 and 15 at 1:30 and 2:30, February 16 at 6:00
FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

Voices for Moreau: Images in the Company of Poets and Writers
April 15, 12:15–1:00
PRICE AUDITORIUM
Voices programs are made possible through founding and continuing support from the Lester and Hope Abelson Fund with additional support from The John Nuveen Company.

Concert for Moreau: Evocative Imagery—Ravel, Debussy, and Fauré, The Boston Artists' Ensemble, featuring cellist Jonathan Miller with guest artist Charles Pikler on viola/violin
April 18 at 2:00
FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

EVENING LECTURES, 6:00–7:00

Memento Mori: Gustave Moreau and Mortality, Thomas L. Sloan, professor, The School of The Art Institute of Chicago
March 16
FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

Parallel Passion: Gustave Moreau and Edward Burne-Jones, Debra Mancoff, author and art historian
March 30
FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

Gustave Moreau in the Context of Symbolist Art, Lyn Pudles, art historian
April 6
FULLERTON AUDITORIUM

WEEKEND GALLERY TALK, 11:00–12:00

Introduction to the Exhibition
February 27
GALLERY 150

WEEKDAY GALLERY TALKS, 12:15–1:00

Introduction to the Exhibition
March 12 and 24, April 21
GALLERY 150

Women in Myth and Literature
March 26, April 9
GALLERY 201

FAMILY PROGRAMS

Children must be accompanied by an adult. Family program questions? Call (312) 857-7161.
KRAFT EDUCATION CENTER, BASE OF THE GRAND STAIRCASE

The Artist's Studio: *Fantasy Watercolors*
March 6, 7, 13, 14, 20, 21, 27, and 28, 12:30–3:30 (all ages)

Family Workshop: *Mythical Monsters and Heroes*
March 20, 10:30–11:30 (ages 4–6)

Family Workshop: *Imagine That! The Art of Gustave Moreau*
March 20, 2:00–3:30 (ages 7–12)

AUDIO GUIDE

Narrated by Douglas Druick and Larry Feinberg. Public, $5; members, $4. Available at exhibition entrance. The audio guide is free for the visually impaired. A large-type script is available free for the hearing impaired.

PUBLICATIONS

The fully illustrated catalogue, *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream*, is available in the Reading Room and on sale in the Museum Shops ($60.00 hardcover; $29.95 softcover).