

A note on Frédéric Loewe-Marchand's *The Soul of Mhyrra*, (Madrid, Galería Nicolás Cortés).

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Abstract

The painting by Frédéric Loewe-Marchand, *The soul of Myrra* (Madrid, Galería Nicolás Cortés), exhibited in Rome in 2021, in the context of the exhibition on *Inferno*, curated by Jean Clair for the Scuderie del Quirinale, is a wonderful example, virtually unknown prior to the roman exhibition to the general public, of the interest of French Academic painters towards Dante's *Comedy*. The beautiful frontale nude depicted by Loewe Marchand, though, is also an explicit reaction to Dore's *Myrra*, becoming, in this way, a painting which transcends the academic to involve the french art tradition of the XIX century, from Delacroix to Rodin.

Keywords: Loewe-Marchand; Academy; Mhyrra; Ovid; Nude; Dante; Vergil.

Riassunto

Il dipinto di Frédéric Loewe-Marchand, *L'anima di Myrra* (Madrid, Galería Nicolás Cortés), esposto a Roma nel 2021, nell'ambito della mostra sull'*Inferno*, curata da Jean Clair per le Scuderie del Quirinale, è un mirabile esempio, pressoché sconosciuto al grande pubblico prima dell'esposizione romana, dell'interesse dei pittori accademici francesi per la *Commedia* dantesca. Il bellissimo nudo frontale raffigurato da Loewe-Marchand, però, è anche un'esplicita reazione al *Mirra* di Doré, diventando, così, un dipinto che travalica l'accademico per coinvolgere la tradizione artistica francese del XIX secolo, da Delacroix a Rodin.

Parole chiave: Loewe-Marchand; Accademia; Mirra; Ovidio; Nudo; Dante; Virgilio.

Frédéric Loewe-Marchand's painting *The Soul of Myrrha*, exhibited at the Scuderie del Quirinale in the context of the *Inferno* exhibition curated by Jean Clair in 2021, and still in the catalogue of the madrilean gallery Nicolas Cortés, was first presented in the Salon des Champs Elysées of 1892, where it obtained a *remarque* that granted Loewe Marchand (1854-1892), among other things, the possibility of exhibiting his painting the following year (1893) at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The artist's premature death sadly denied him this opportunity. In reference to the Salon and specifically to the *The Soul of Myrrha*, the critic Georges Lafenestre wrote in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*: «La recherche de la beauté, saine et calme, telle que l'Antiquité et la Renaissance l'ont comprise, telle qu'elle éclate encore au milieu des laideurs et maladies de la vie contemporaine, se retrouve encore dans quelques études sérieuses, une fille d'Ève, par M. Jules Lefebvre, couchée dans une attitude difficile, la Myrrha, de M. Loewe-Marchand, dessinateur un peu sec, mais précis et des plus attentifs». ¹ (Figs. 1-2)



Fig. 1 - F. Loewe-Marchand, *The Soul of Mhyrra*, 1892, Oil on canvas, 260 × 140 cm., Madrid, Nicolás Cortés Gallery,

1. Cf. Lafenestre, 1892, p. 620. On Loewe Marchand's artistic career see Caro, 2022.



Fig. 2 - F. Lœwe-Marchand, *The Soul of Mhyrra*, 1892, Oil on canvas, 260 × 140 cm., Madrid, Nicolás Cortés Gallery (Detail).

Generally speaking, therefore, Lœwe-Marchand's work falls within the category of late-nineteenth-century Parisian academic painting. This is consistent with the painter's education and the public his ideas were aimed at. Stylistically, the brushwork—especially the one used for the nude Myrrha in the foreground, as well as for Virgil and Dante—reveals Lœwe-Marchand's artistic context and confirms the academic 'air' the work distils. The careful execution of the poets' clothes and the woman's naked body, as well as the Alpine landscape where the scene takes place, echo traditional elements which are reinterpreted by means of an original composition, where all figures are exposed to the viewer.

Taking this stylistic analysis further, however, we begin to appreciate certain features that distance the work from our first interpretation—small and unremarkable signs that suggest that the mystery of this work lies in something new and more engaged than one would have imagined at first sight. The mountains that define the landscape and serve as a backdrop for Dante and Virgil's infernal journey collide with our expectations, as do the wide and near-Impressionistic brushstrokes used by Lœwe-Marchand to depict the turbulent waters of the infernal valley and Myrrha's dark, uncomfortable gaze she defies the viewer with.

The truth is that, for an academic painting, Lœwe-Marchand's *The Soul of Myrrha* presents many modern elements, beginning with the choice of theme. It is well known that nineteenth-century French history painters frequently resorted to the figures of Dante and Virgil as they appear in the *Divine Comedy*. Ever since Delacroix exhibited his *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (Louvre, Paris) in the Salon of 1822, which signalled a milestone in his artistic career, Dante's *Commedia* had become a favourite source of inspiration for French artists.² (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 - Delacroix, *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (1822), Musée du Louvre (Paris).

It is precisely in the context of the Salon where this subject reaches its most exquisitely academic peak, as we can see clearly in what may be considered the most obvious model for Lœwe-Marchand's painting: *Dante and Virgil in Hell: The Circle of Traitors* (1879) by Gustave Courtois (1853-1923). (Fig. 4)

The choice of the *Commedia* was, therefore, in no way a novelty in late-nineteenth-century French painting, especially in the context of the Salon and the Academy. The female nude was also a source of great interest for the art market. One need only think of Bouguerau, on the one hand, and his *Falsari*, on the other. (Figs. 5-6)

2. See Allard, 2004. In the Rome exhibition *Inferno*, Lœwe-Marchand's *Myrrha* was exhibited precisely next to Delacroix's *Dante and Virgil in Hell* and Courtois' *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (Clair, 2022).



Fig. 4 - Gustave Courtois, *Dante and Virgil in Hell: The Circle of Traitors* (1879). Oil on canvas, 299 x 215 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie (Besançon, France).



Fig. 5 - W. A. Bouguereau, *Dante and Virgil and the Falsari* (1850), Musée d'Orsay (Paris).



Fig. 6 - W. A. Bouguereau, *The Bathers* (1884), The Art Institute of Chicago.

Despite the popularity of the *Commedia*, the specific scene chosen by Lœwe-Marchand was far from obvious. Myrrha is no Francesca da Rimini, nor is her love the romantic incarnation that had become commonplace in nineteenth-century interpretations of the passage of *Inferno* V. Myrrha is a complex and disturbing character, whose sin is not only lust, but also falseness and deceit. Drawing from Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Alighieri, 1991-1997; Cattermole and Ciccuto, 2019) Dante places the counsellors of fraud in the eighth *bolgia* of the Eighth Circle, i.e. in the depths of the infernal funnel: further down, in the frozen lake of Cocytus—the world of Satan—there is only room for treachery, the worst of all sins (Alighieri, 1966).

Inferno XXX 37-41³

*Ed elli a me: «Quell' è l'anima antica
di Mirra scellerata, che divenne
al padre, fuor del dritto amore, amica.*

*Questa a peccar con esso così venne,
falsificando sé in altrui forma,*

The sin that makes Myrrha so obviously *scellerata* is not lust, but falseness. Indeed, from a hermeneutic perspective, the adjective is clearly pleonastic: if

3. And he to me: 'That is the ancient ghost / Of the nefarious Myrrha, who became / Beyond all rightful love her father's lover. / She came to sin with him after this manner, / By counterfeiting of another's form'. [Trans. H. W. Longfellow].

Myrrha dwells where she does, she cannot be anything other than *scellerata*. What Dante adds, therefore, has no real connotative value and merely serves to reinforce Myrrha's criminality and to emphasise the sadly unnegotiable nature of her infernal sentence. In this respect, what is true for *Myrrha scellerata* was also true in Canto V for Cleopatra, who is referred to as lustful in the context of a condemnation of lust (Alighieri, 1966; Tartaro, 2008):⁴

*«La prima di color di cui novelle
tu vuò saper», mi disse quelli allotta,
«fu imperadrice di molte favelle.*

*A vizio di lussuria fu sì rotta,
che libito fè licito in sua legge,
per tòrre il biasmo in che era condotta.*

*Ell' è Semiramìs, di cui si legge
che succedette a Nino e fu sua sposa:
tenne la terra che 'l Soldan corregge.*

*L'altra è colei che s'ancise amorosa,
e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo;
poi è Cleopatràs lussuriosa.*

*Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo
tempo si volse, e vedi 'l grande Achille,
che con amore al fine combatteo.*

*Vedi Paris, Tristano»; e più di mille
ombre mostrommi e nominommi a dito,
ch'amor di nostra vita dipartille.*

Cleopatràs lussuriosa: the words express the disgrace that befalls Cleopatra, reinforcing the poem's narrative and, from a dramatic perspective, conditioning the moral sequence on which Hell is built. In both cases—it is significant that they should both be passionate women—Dante does not merely place the figures physically on a moral level of Hell but insists on the moral condemnation through the use of pleonastic, rhetorically striking adjectives. Cleopatra

4. 'The first of those, of whom intelligence /Thou fain wouldst have,' then said he unto me, / The empress was of many languages. /To sensual vices she was so abandoned, /That lustful she made licit in her law, / To remove the blame to which she had been led. / She is Semiramis of whom we read / That she succeeded Ninus, and was his spouse; /She held the land which now the Sultan rules. / The next is she who killed herself for love, / And broke faith with the ashes of Sichcaeus; /Then Cleopatra the voluptuous.' / Helen I saw, for whom so many ruthless / Seasons revolved; and saw the great Achilles, / Who at the last hour combated with Love / Paris I saw, Tristan; and more than a thousand /Shades did he name and point out with his finger, / Whom Love had separated from our life. [Trans. H. W. Longfellow].

is *lussuriosa* in the same way that Myrrha is *scellerata*, not only because Minos, in his role of infernal judge, condemns the former to the Second Circle and the later to the Eighth Circle of Hell, but because Dante ties their names and their very beings to a destiny of lust and crime which they will never be able to escape. It is very significant that Dante should choose to refer to Myrrha as *scellerata* once again in his VI *Epistola*, where he describes how the city of Florence had unjustly sentenced him to exile—*haec Myrrha scelestis et impia, in Cinyrae patris amplexus exaestuans*—thus extending the metaphorical implications of the figure of Myrrha to the field of politics. And it is perhaps no accident that the recipient of the VI *Epistola* should be precisely the *scelestissimis Florentinis intrinsicis*.⁵

In contrast to Alfieri's (1786-1788) tragic play, where we witness Myrrha's evolution from *scelus* to innocence,⁶ it is her criminal side that Dante emphasises in his story, sign of his fidelity to his source of inspiration, Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There the Latin poet insists precisely on the criminal nature of Myrrha, because *scelus est odisse parentem, hic amor est odio maius scelus*.

Victim and perpetrator of an incestuous relationship with her father Cinyras, Ovid's Myrrha will become the homonymous tree (*myrrh*) that will give birth to Adonis. Its resin (the tears of Myrrha) is the source of the myrrh the Three Wise Men will present to Jesus on his birth and which Dante himself will evoke in *Inferno* XXIV. In the history of art, depictions of Myrrha generally focus on her transformation or the birth of Adonis, fruit of her incestuous love with her father. (Fig. 7)

In Dante's *Commedia*, as in Løwe-Marchand's painting, the characterisation of Myrrha insists on the two initial aspects of the story, that is, lust and falseness. From this perspective, it is very interesting to compare Løwe-Marchand's composition with what was probably his very first visual source of inspiration. I am referring to the engraving made by Gustave Doré in 1861 as part of his illustrated edition of the *Divine Comedy*. (Fig. 8)

In Doré's scene, Myrrha adopts the same position we find in Løwe-Marchand's painting, separated from Dante and Virgil and turning her back on them, naked and bent over herself with her legs crossed, as if her potential transformation into a tree—which is not told in the *Commedia* but forms the implicit subtext of the scene's dramatisation—was already taking place. Yet in contrast to Løwe-Marchand's Myrrha, Doré's engraving does not reveal her face nor is her nude body fully shown, neither to us nor to the onlooking Dante and Virgil. It is likely Doré aimed to replicate Dante's scene exactly, emphasising Myrrha's efforts to hide—i.e. falsify—her identity in order to be

5. A Cf. Alighieri, 2016: *Dantes Alagherii florentinus et exul inmeritus scelestissimis Florentinis intrinsicis*.

6. Alfieri 1985. See also: Iliao, 1972.

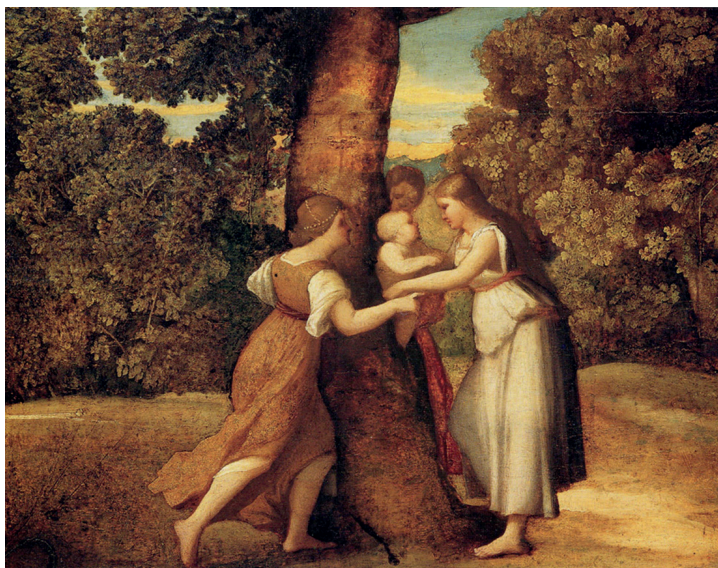


Fig. 7 - Luciani Sebastiano (Sebastiano del Piombo), *Birth of Adonis* (1505), Museo Civico Amedeo Lia (La Spezia, Italy).

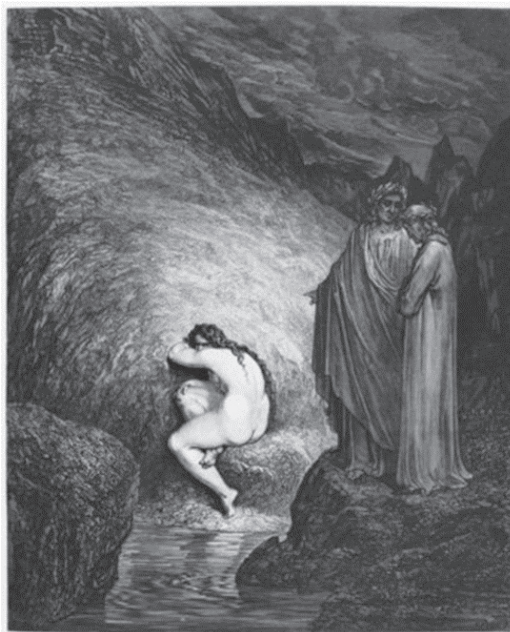


Fig. 8 - Gustave Doré, *The Divine Comedy* (1861), Paris.

able to commit the incestuous adultery with her father Cinyras, as narrated by Ovid. Be this as it may, Doré's depiction of Myrrha retains the moralising nature of Dante's tale, as if the sinner was aware of her crime and were trying to hide her face and her guilty nudity.

Although Lœwe-Marchand portrays Myrrha in an equally nervous and elusive posture, her nudity is fully exposed to the viewer. The moralising nature of Doré's scene is visible in Virgil's gesture, who points towards the sinner as a clear example of a criminal. And yet Lœwe-Marchand revels in the frontal view of Myrrha's sinful beauty, inviting the spectator to exercise a certain voyeurism. What moves us is not just the sensuality of her naked body but, above all, her disturbed and disturbing gaze, the face that reveals the hidden identity of the sinner, the forger unveiled.

It is in Myrrha's face, perhaps, where the mystery of Lœwe-Marchand's painting lies, the exact moment where the artist is able to overcome the typical academic canons of his time (the classicism of Dante and Virgil, the eroticism of the youthful nude, the mountainous landscape) by means of a composition that is much more modern, in the sense that it is more disturbing, more emotionally dynamic, where the traditional lines of academic draughtsmanship are confronted by the psychological turbulence of the protagonist: the same breeding ground that would lead Rodin to put Dante and Baudelaire together in the *Gates of Hell*—from the city of Dis to modern Paris, to turn the viewer into a *hypocrite lecteur*. (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9 - A. Rodin, *The Gates of Hell* (1880-1917), Musée d'Orsay (Paris)

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