



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

Ontstellend weerzinwekkend maar wonderbaarlijk intens: vijf perspectieven op Emmanuel Fremiets gorilla-beelden (1859-1888)

Broekhuizen, B.J.M. van

Citation

Broekhuizen, B. J. M. van. (2022, June 21). *Ontstellend weerzinwekkend maar wonderbaarlijk intens: vijf perspectieven op Emmanuel Fremiets gorilla-beelden (1859-1888)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3309992>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3309992>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

English summary

TERRIBLY REPULSIVE BUT WONDERFULLY VIGOROUS. FIVE VIEWS ON EMMANUEL FREMIET'S GORILLA SCULPTURES (1859-1888)

It is striking that nineteenth-century French sculpture has long been controversial in twentieth-century art historiography. Twentieth-century critics and art historians see France and metropolitan Paris as the cradle of modernity and contemporary art, but the medium of sculpture, ubiquitous in Paris, has often come under fire from them. The roots of this lie partly in the nineteenth century itself, as witnessed for example by the remarks of Baudelaire, who in 1846 stated that he found sculpture tedious. Ultimately, nineteenth-century sculpture was criticized to an increasing extent in the twentieth century. Later, Baudelaire was cited both frequently and avidly by those who were constructing a master narrative in the twentieth century, in which contemporary art was compared to that of the nineteenth century. Every effort was made to show how progressive twentieth-century sculpture was as compared to that of the previous century, which was said to be ultra-conservative.

In this study an endeavour is made to formulate a retort to the still-slumbering idea that the nineteenth century was such an ugly period, full of kitschy sculptures and reactionary monuments. The manner in which to formulate a counter-narrative is to take a sculpture that falls manifestly beyond the aesthetic

norms of the twentieth century, but which nonetheless gives rise to the formulation of new insights into the nineteenth-century artistic world in Paris. This treatise is therefore primarily a critique of the art historians, who for decades have virtually dismissed an entire decade of sculpture as being irrelevant, whilst for me it would seem more important to gain the broadest possible insight into the Parisian art world of that time through a scientific-analytical approach.

In this case I take a closer look at two sculptures, the *Gorille enlevant une Nègresse* (Gorille-N. 1859) and the *Gorille enlevant une Femme* (Gorille-F. 1887), by the artist Emmanuel Fremiet (1824-1910). The examination of these two sculptures gave me the opportunity to reconstruct the master narrative of nineteenth-century sculpture in the twentieth century and to construct a counter narrative myself. Chapters 1 and 2 relate to this master narrative, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 deal with aspects of history and iconography, which do not form part of the master narrative but bring the sculptures and the artist closer, so that we are able to understand them better and place them in their own era.

Chapters 1 and 2 deal with two literature corpora, which are the standard refuges for art historians who have to read up on a subject. This relates to the handbooks and to the artists' biographies. Before the Second World War hardly any general literature in the form of handbooks or overviews were published. Only Luc-Benoist, curator at the Louvre, wanted to write a history of romantic sculpture, which in addition had the aim of discussing the nineteenth century in his own time. He is the only one. Modern sculpture is discussed by authors such as Michel Florisoone, Alfred Kuhn or Fritz Novotny from what they saw as the meagre or rotting roots of the nineteenth century. The contrast with the twentieth-century sculpture is thus made greater and greater, to the detriment of that of the nineteenth century. For example, Albert Elsen idolizes Auguste Rodin, whom at a stroke he describes as an artist who leaving all other sculptors streets behind him, thus disqualifying them, an extremely exaggerated opinion. In 1963 Fred Licht describes the *Pompier*, the 'hypocritical' artist in the nineteenth century who does nothing but uncritically carry out the tedious commissions of the tasteless bourgeoisie, the *nouveau riche* of Paris, in ten-a-penny statues in a simple style of classicism and in which he has long since left the moral high ground in favour of money. Licht's viewpoint is incorrect.

Fremiet is a sculptor no importance in these histories. In about 1970 the atmosphere changes and the attention to French sculpture grows, firstly in America but also quite quickly in Europe. Research into technique and into the embedding of the medium in a history of art that is driven by societal, political and economic questions means that a new interest in the nineteenth century

is growing. Pioneers such as Jeanne Wasserman and Ruth Butler Mirolli, Horst Janson and Albert Elsen are important, but the great visionary in the 1970s is Bo Wennberg, who is aware of many perspectives, stylistic devices and sculptors that also later appear to be relevant to the research into nineteenth-century sculpture. A real milestone is the opening of the Musée d'Orsay in 1986, where sculpture occupies the central place of the presentation. The foundation of this museum ensures that the nineteenth century becomes a worthy specialism, so that it is only recently that we can speak of serious attention to this sculpture since the mid-1980s.

Fremiet and his gorilla images scarcely appear during these discussions, although he is there in the biographies. For a forgotten artist, who has only received attention again since around 1970, there are to be found a relatively large number of biographies and biographical articles from his own time. What is remarkable is that Fremiet's youth is seen as a genesis, which is discussed mythically, through topoi and other narrative constructions. Biographers' texts about 'how the artist came into being' are characterized by a lack of factuality or a coloured representation of youth. That is not so strange, because the artist's biography is a genre that is subjected to all manner of literary traditions and constructs, in order to show that the young man is destined for an artistic life. The life of the adult artist is only very seldom cast in these constructions, but focuses more on a positive image of the artist who is living at the time. Issues of a psychological or (art) political nature are important in explaining art and the artist. When it comes to the gorilla sculptures biographers do acknowledge their existence, but a satisfactory explanation for the sculptures cannot be found in isolation in the relevant paragraphs. It is justified to see the historiographical, short Chapters 1 and 2 as negative research results for the study of the gorilla sculptures. However, as a measurement of the wind chill of nineteenth-century sculpture and Fremiet in particular, they are significant.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 contain all manner of positive research findings, with which I hope to become 'closer' to the sculptures in order to understand them from different points of view. The third chapter explains how it was possible that a sculptor was able to portray a gorilla naturalistically in 1859, when the animal was only discovered in 1847. That was possible, because Fremiet was raised and trained as an artist in the zoo — Jardin des Plantes — and in the world of anatomy and medical science, mainly as a model maker. The documentary material had been arriving in small amounts at the Jardin des Plantes since 1849, and Fremiet had access to that. Until 1859 he worked mainly as a craft expert and as an unobtrusive animal artist or *animalier* in the zoo. As an artist he was perhaps

not taken very seriously, which prompted him to take action. He offered the Gorille-N. to the Salon, and this sculpture subsequently caused a scandal. Chapter 4 examines the complex material of the rape, because both gorilla sculptures show us the abduction of an indigenous woman, who is picked up and taken away by the gorilla. All manner of aspects of misuse, rape, abduction, the place of this theme in the arts and literature (Edgar Allan Poe and the *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is a strikingly eloquent example), give rise to the consideration of the Gorille-N. as a sculpture, which shows us above all a reconstruction of the gorilla in its natural habitat that is carrying off a Gabonese woman, as the behaviour of the gorilla was judged to be in 1859. The Gorille-F. shows its viewer an alternative reality, namely an image of a gorilla in which all kinds of visual elements are included that justify the conclusion: it is a parody or paraphrase of the Abduction of the Sabine Women (1574-80) by Giambologna. In doing so Fremiet, as he first presents his statue in 1887, gives his gorilla sculpture a place in the history of western art and not in the colony in Gabon.

The sculpture is a parody or paraphrase of the Rape of the Sabine Women, by which Fremiet, already aware of the blending of genres and sculptural traditions, creates an image that can be appreciated by the public, whilst showing the viewers a monstrous animal. At the same time Fremiet makes a statement about sculpture, against Neoclassicism and for the Neo-Florentines, as in Neo-Florentine sculpture the representation of dynamism, liveliness and emotion is more important than in the ubiquitous Neo-classicism, dominated by the ideals of Winckelmann, the noble simplicity, grandeur and silence. In addition, the Neo-Florentines are also criticized by Fremiet as, instead of Giambologna's magnificent muscular men, Fremiet uses the gorilla, the epitome of ugliness. Is there then any more to be said than just sculpture-related, stylistic criticism, Fremiet, like me, seems to wonder.

Discussed in the last chapter is this metaphorical symbolism of the sculpture, the rape of beauty by the monster. In the context of the Franco-Prussian War an irresolvable animosity arose between Germany and France. The Gorille-F., lauded at the Salon 1887, is exhibited at the *Internationale Kunstausstellung* in Munich in 1888. Here too it triumphs. We know that the sculpture has been exhibited in Munich next to an equestrian statue by Von Moltke. This juxtaposition is seized upon by critics in order to reflect on the direction sculpture is going in the recently-formed, brand new German Empire. They ask themselves: in the case of a German sculpture should we think of France, with as the example the virtuoso Fremiet and his exceptionally beautifully made, but morally utterly obscene Gorille-F., or is the equestrian statue of Rudolf Von Siemering the

example? Without question the latter must be the case, according to the German art connoisseurs. All this is then confirmed by the most curious source in which Gorille-F. is a central figure, the critique of Viktor Widmann. He writes a text, a Novella, in which he tries to re-evoke in the reader the emotions that the figure evokes, as do French critics such as Baudelaire or Gautier. Hij fantasizes a love story, dripping with both anti-Semitism the negative clichés about Paris and France, concluding that this image portrays the rape of a beautiful girl by a Jewish beast. This shocking anti-Semitism, used in order to make a statement about the moral reprehensibility of the iconography used, has the effect that the Gorille-F. should no longer be a valid example for German artists.

The last three chapters make it clear that the biological, iconographic and historical-political perspectives, connected with the stories, the visual imagination, the documentary representation of the animal, the narrative traditions and the nationalistic interpretation and application of these perspectives, provide an exceptional insight into nineteenth-century reality, explored in a different region from the word of Parisian art. The ultimate conclusion for this study can therefore be that the choice for a different sculpture can lead to a different art history, set in the same era as that of Antoine-Louis Barye, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux or Auguste Rodin. Fremiet also needs that attention, not in order to rehabilitate him, but because it produces all kinds of new history and art history that is worth putting into writing, at least as a supplement to the existing image of sculpture in the nineteenth century. Personally, I would put it more strongly, by stating that it produces a different image of nineteenth-century sculpture, which has consequences for the master narrative of current art history. (vertaling Peter Longbottom)

