

Henry De Groux, *Le Charnier: Les Chevaux blessés (The Mass Grave: The Wounded Horses)*
Brussels 1866 – 1930 Marseille

pastel on prepared canvas
40 by 29 inches (102 by 74 cm)
signed and dated lower right: 'De Groux 94'

- provenance: Durand-Ruel, Paris; Marlier collection, Brussels, by 1899;
Mme. Michot by 1911;
sale Sotheby's, Amsterdam, December 2, 2003, no. 252;
sale De Vuyst, Lokeren, March 11, 2006, no. 532;
sale De Vuyst, Lokeren, March 5, 2016, no. 79;
Private Collection, Belgium
- exhibited: *La Libre Esthétique: Deuxième Exposition*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1895, no. 171.
Salon d'Automne, Grand Palais, Paris, 1911, under no. 25.
- literature: Léon Souguenet, *L'Oeuvre de Henry de Groux*, Paris, 1899, pp. 24 and 94.
Pierre Sanchez, *Dictionnaire du Salon d'Automne, 1903-1940*, Dijon, 2006, vol. 2, p. 629.
Henry de Groux 1866-1930, Journal, Paris, 2007, p. 261.
Bernard Tillier, *Henry de Groux (1866-1930) Peintre Symboliste de l'Épopée Napoléonienne*, Sociétés & Représentations, Sorbonne, Paris, 2007/I, no. 23, section 12, fn. 46.
- note: Of all the many eccentric 19th-century Belgian symbolists, Henry de Groux (figs. 1a-b) was one of the most eccentric. Known for both his difficult temperament and the often brutal subjects he depicted, he was the son of the engraver Charles de Groux, and like his father trained at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. He was in the forefront of the various avant-garde artistic movements in his country, joining the group *L'Essor* (Flight) in 1886 and *Les XX* in 1887, although he was expelled from the latter for his opposition to van Gogh and Toulouse Lautrec. De Groux gained early notoriety at age twenty-one in 1889-90 with the showing at the Brussels Salon of his enormous painting *Le Christ aux Outrages (The Mocking of Christ)* (fig. 2), which with its densely packed composition of massed figures was to be characteristic of his approach. Léopold II, the King of Belgium, was so impressed by the work and the young artist that he agreed to pay for shipping it to Paris for the Salon du Champ-de-Mars. However, the painting was refused for this Salon and was exhibited instead in 1892 in a shed on the rue Alain-Chartier and then again at the Salon des arts libéraux. This brought de Groux a great deal of critical attention and frequent comparisons to Rubens, Goya, and Delacroix.

In addition to religious subjects, de Groux was inspired by heroic poets like Homer and Dante (figs. 3-4), by Wagner's *Ring Cycle* (fig. 5) and by Napoleonic history (fig. 6). He early developed a talent for pastel, and his *Les Errants (The Wanderers)* of ca. 1889 (fig. 7) can be seen as a prelude to the imaginative subject of the present work with its tightly compressed grouping of animals and people under a foreboding sky. Monstrous, violent, and sad beasts as well as piled up bodies also comprise the subjects of several of the lithographs de Groux produced in the early 1890s (figs. 8-11).

In 1892 the artist went to Paris for the exhibition of his *Christ*. There he became friendly with the writer-activist Émile Zola and even served as one of his bodyguards during the time of unrest created by the Dreyfus affair. De Groux commemorated the occasion in a pastel of Zola assailed by a crowd upon emerging from the Palais de Justice after his trial for supporting Dreyfus (fig. 12) that clearly mirrors the composition of his *Mocking of Christ*. De Groux remained active as a print maker and also produced illustrations for a number of books including *Le Livre Secret* by the mystical founder of the Rose+Croix movement, Joséphin Péladan. In Paris de Groux was acquainted with many leading members of the cultural world such as Mallarmé, Huysmans, and Oscar Wilde. His works were shown there by Ambroise Vollard, Georges Petit, and even the supporter of the Barbizon and Impressionist artists, Durand-Ruel, who was the first owner of the present piece. Exhibitions of his work also took place in England, Germany, and Italy. Later in his life de Groux turned to sculpture. He also produced portraits of his friends and heroes such as Wagner, the poets Verlaine and Baudelaire, and his Belgian contemporary painter of equally strange visions, James Ensor (fig. 13). De Groux's daughter, Elisabeth (1894-1949), became a print maker and painter and made a frightening portrait of her father (fig. 1b). Together they illustrated what would become a favorite book of the Surrealists, *Les Chants de Maldoror*. World War I inspired a number of vivid allegorical compositions by him. De Groux spent his last years in Provence. He executed large decorations for the staircase of the Opéra of Marseilles, where he died in January of 1930. Later that year in Paris the Galerie d'Alignan, as a testament to de Groux's compulsive productivity, held a memorial exhibition of 566 works!¹

In 1911 at the Paris Salon d'Automne de Groux, who was mistakenly thought to have died, received the high honor of an extensive retrospective with thirty-three paintings and pastels, twenty sculptures, and a dozen lithographs.² A special section of the *Catalogue* was devoted to these, and the introduction was written by Arsène Alexandre, who described himself as a friend of "the strange" Henry de Groux and characterized the artist as "a painter supremely attuned to the life of the imagination... consumed and transported by a lyric and prophetic fury."³

Among the group of pastels on view at the Salon in 1911 was the present example, *Le Charnier*. It is a remarkable large work, both vivid and violent that seems to represent an almost apocalyptic scene of animal bestiality. Bernard Tillier has described it as "a metaphor for modern society" and related it to de Groux's depictions of Napoleonic battle subjects.⁴ However, as the listing in the *Catalogue* of the Salon exhibition indicates, this unusual work was one of three produced in conjunction with a book by the Belgian writer and art historian Camille Lemonnier titled *Sedan ou les charniers*, which described the 1870 Battle of Sedan. And the Salon's *Catalogue* also provides the full title for the pastel -- "Les Chevaux blessés" ("The Wounded Horses").⁵ The Battle of Sedan waged on September 1, 1870 was the deciding conflict of the Franco-Prussian War in which the French forces suffered a crushing defeat, the Emperor, Napoleon III, was captured and surrendered, leading to the collapse of the Second Empire and the creation of the Paris Commune and a new provisional government. Lemonnier, who was later to describe de Groux as "a painter of the dream, mystery, sadness, fear; who painted above all aspects of the world his own soul, passionate and convulsed,"⁶ witnessed the Battle and its aftermath first hand and in highly realistic prose described the horrors he saw.⁷ One of the memorable elements was that since so many thousands of French cavalry troops had been killed, their riderless horses filled the battlefield and were found wounded and dying throughout the surrounding area. They even responded to the call of the bugle, and this sad scene was the subject of both paintings and prints (figs. 14 a-b). De Groux could well have known these or similar images and extrapolated from them his own horrific, imaginary scene of the destruction of the horses. Or the many gory descriptions of suffering horses in Lemonnier's text, as well as of the packs of marauding wild dogs, could easily have provided the inspiration. De Groux's powerful pastel transforms Lemonnier's prosaic account into a universal allegory of suffering.

In the foreground of this pastel are seen, in remarkable foreshortening, two horses which have fallen to the ground. As they still have their saddles on, one infers immediately that this carnage is the result of some warfare, but there is no human present. A skull at the lower right indicates that death is the subject, and the mass of fallen and terrified horses is being attacked and literally

devoured by a pack of ravenous hyenas. A ferocious wolf with open jaws emerges at the left. This dramatic frenzy is contrasted with the patches of bright red and yellow blooms of flowers. Above in the blasted, wind-blown landscape a bird of prey circles in wait against the cobalt blue sky, and a large orange owl regards the scene from the branch of a shattered tree. The sinister, all-knowing owl was a frequent presence in de Groux's works (figs. 15 a-c), and he may even have identified with it, for a poem dedicated to him by his biographer, Léon Souguenet entitled *L'Hibou (The Owl)* is addressed to "the clairvoyant owl" who observes a scene of violence reminiscent of this pastel.⁸

One of the many visitors to the 1911 Salon d'Automne was the noted modernist poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire. Like most, he went to see the provocative new works by his Cubist artist friends, but he could not miss the gallery devoted to de Groux, and he was forced to admit: "The chief attraction of the Salon d'Automne is incontestably the exhibit of Henri de Groux's works." He went on to observe:

The group exhibited by Henri de Groux gives one the impression of an immense labor and a sensibility of the highest order. A canvas like his Christ is worthy of any museum. And if his other paintings do not all command our admiration, they do at least command our attention.⁹

The title *Le Charnier* would be reused by the artist for a pastel of a human mass grave depicting the result of the mine disaster at Courrières, France in 1906 (fig. 16), where an explosion killed over one thousand miners. Some survivors remained underground and stayed alive by slaughtering one of the mine horses to eat.

De Groux, according to his friend the poet Fernand Séverin, seemed to create in a trance-like state in which "One might consider there was a child's hand guided by some other invisible and supernatural hand. The child's hand trembled but it traced some strange and unusual things."¹⁰ As the leading scholar on Belgian Symbolism, Francine-Claire Legrand, has observed, in the hallucinatory world created by de Groux, there is, despite his "hurried" manner, "something inspired and unusual, which holds one's attention...the echo of what he called 'the ferocious and sublime poetry of fire and destruction.'"¹¹

¹ Marcel Schmitz, *Henry de Groux*, Patrimoine des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, 1941, p. 17.

² Frantz Jourdain, *Le Salon d'Automne*, Paris, 1926, p. 71.

³ Arsène Alexandre, "Henry de Groux," *Société du Salon d'Automne, Catalogue des Ouvrages*, Paris, 1911, pp. 207 and 210.

⁴ Tillier, 2007, on line text.

⁵ The other two "compositions" for *Les Charniers* were "*L'Hécatombe*" ("*Carnage*") and "*Episode*," both unlocated.

⁶ Camille Lemonnier, *L'École Belge de Peinture 1830-1905*, Brussels, 1906, p. 187.

⁷ Originally published as *Sedan* in 1870, it was republished in 1881 as *Les Charniers*, and it served to inspire Zola's novel *La Débâcle*.

⁸ See Souguenet, 1899, p. 70.

⁹ Translated in *Apollinaire on Art*, New York, 1972, pp. 181-182.

¹⁰ Quoted in Francine-Claire Legrand, *Le Symbolisme en Belgique*, Brussels, 1971, p. 103; English translation *Symbolism in Belgium* by Alistair Kennedy, Brussels, 1972, p. 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1971, p. 104; 1972, p. 114.