

The Presence of Death in Gustave Moreau's Paintings¹

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Résumé: La présence de la mort dans les oeuvres de Gustave Moreau

L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier la présence de la mort dans les oeuvres de Gustave Moreau. Même si Gustave Moreau est considéré parmi les représentants du courant symboliste dans la peinture française du 19^e siècle, de nos jours, les historiens d'art le considèrent comme un peintre d'histoire (Peinture d'Histoire). Dans les deux contextes, les images sont les reflets de ses pensées, son imagination et son caractère émotionnel. Cette situation lui permet de réfléchir sur la mort et la vie éternelle pour les refléter dans ses oeuvres.

Mots-clés : *Gustave Moreau, la mort, mythologie, Oedipe, Sphinx, peinture d'histoire*

Özet: Gustave Moreau'nun Yapıtlarında Ölüm

Gustave Moreau 19. Yüzyıl Fransız resminde sembolist akımın temsilcileri arasında yer almışsa da günümüz sanat tarihçileri tarafından tarih ressamı (Peinture d'Histoire) olarak değerlendirilir. Her iki bağlamda da Moreau'nun yapıtlarında yer alan görsel imgeler; onun inançlarının, düşüncelerinin, imgeleminin ve huzursuz kişilik yapısının yansımalarıdır. Bu durum onun sıklıkla ölüm ve ölümsüzlük üzerinde düşünmesine ve bunu yapıtlarına yansıtmasına neden olmuştur. "Oidipus ve Sfenks", "Yolcu (Oidipus Yolcu; Ölümün Karşısında Eşitlik)", "Genç Adam ve Ölüm", "Ölü Şairi Taşyan Kentaur" ölüm kavramının belirgin olarak ortaya çıktığı yapıtlardır. Özellikle "Ölü Lirler" sanatçının ve sanatının bir ağıtı (requiem) olarak nitelendirilir. Öte yandan "Ölüm Turnuvarının Galibini Taçlandırıyor"da ölüm tümüyle tuale egemendir. Makalenin amacı Moreau'nun özellikle yukarıda adı geçen yapıtlarında -kişisel notları ve hakkındaki eleştirilerle birlikte- sanatçının ölüm gerçeğine yaklaşımının irdelenmesidir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Gustave Moreau, ölüm, mitoloji, Oidipus, Sphinx, tarihsel resim*

Abstract: The Presence of death in Gustave Moreau's Paintings

Gustave Moreau, 19th century French artist, though was regarded as one of the representatives of Symbolist movement in French art, is now starting to be recognized as a history painter by the art historians. In both contexts however Moreau's visual images serve to express his faith, ideas, imagination and his anguished and emotional personality often led him to think about death and immortality. "Oedipus and the

Sphinx”, “*The Wayfarer (Oedipus the Wayfarer; Equality in the Face of Death)*”, “*The Young Man and Death*”, “*Dead Poet Borne by Centaur*” are some of the artist’s paintings that death is apparently revealed. Especially the “*The Dead Lyres*” is considered as the artist’s requiem for himself and his art. On the other hand, the painting “*Death Offers Laurels to Victor of the Tournament*” death is intensely depicted and deeply mastering the whole Canvas. The objective of his paper is to discuss the presence of death especially in the paintings mentioned above, together with Moreau’s personal writings as well as the critiques about them.

Key words: *Gustave Moreau, Death, Mythology, Oedipus, Sphinx, History painting*

The aesthetic progression of Gustave Moreau’s art must be assessed in the context of the ineluctable decline of “history painting” (*le grand art* to which he clung throughout his life) on the one hand and, on the other, the dichotomy created by the rise of Romanticism. Around the middle of the 19th century, history painting continued to be influenced by two somewhat different movements: one was the notion of “art for art’s sake” (*l’art pour l’art / l’art pur*); the other was so-called “ocular realism” (*la réalité oculaire*), which would later evolved into 20th century modernism. One thing both movements had in common was their rejection of the doctrine of *ut picture poësis* (“As is painting so is poetry”). Worried by what he regarded as the increasingly decadent state of academic art in his day, Gustave Moreau sought to rescue history painting by reinventing it.² By internalizing the patient quest for technique on which Renaissance art had been based along with a new aesthetic approach, he discovered a way to create new and captivating pictures which nevertheless were faithful to tradition. Although Moreau remained committed to history painting’s moral themes that inspired noble, lofty sentiments as prescribed by the Academy of Fine Arts (École des Beaux-Arts), he also rejected some of the principles of academic art, especially as they applied to “theatricality”. He depicted his subjects with a static and enigmatic approach and with emotional restraint. In his notes, Moreau once commented that theater and drama in the plastic arts were “an idiotic and childish mixture” (Mathieu, 1984: 178); on another occasion he expressed the ambition to “create an epic art that is not academic.” (Brisson, 2/12/1899) Opting for poetic expression instead, he achieved the mystical depth that French Romanticism called “Symbolism” and in the process created a new and entrancing pictorial language.

In the pictorial language that this artist formulated, “the anxious, uneasy, sensitive, but nevertheless self-assured (Lacambre, 1999: 1) personality coincided with Symbolist attitudes that opposed the Positivist approaches of the day and instead pursued beliefs anagogic and surreal” was influential.

According to Symbolist theory, reality is not limited exclusively to that which is concrete (physical): it also incorporates thought as well. A thinking mind discovers what lies behind the visible and seeks out the cryptic meaning concealed in concrete phenomena.

"I believe neither in what I touch nor in what I see. I believe only what I do not see and solely in what I feel. My brain and my reason seem an ephemeral and doubtful reality to me; my inner feeling along seems eternal, undeniably certain to me" (Cooke, 2002: 163)³ Moreau once said, while also frequently investing his works with such themes as exhaustion, disillusionment, and death. Of these, that of death is particularly prominent.

Moreau sought to recharge history painting, which had begun to exhaust itself in the 1860s, with a new energy. In the Salon of 1864 he exhibited *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, a work which became the object of intense interest and which provoked considerable debate and sustained reactions. Théophile Thoré said that the attention that Moreau's admirers devoted to the work would make "*The Sphinx* the lion of the 1864 Salon." (Lacambre, 1999: 81) Drion called the work "a clap of thunder in the midst of the Salon" (Drion, 8/12/1864).⁴ The subject of this center of attraction was taken from ancient mythology, a fountainhead to which Gustave Moreau returned frequently.

Oedipus, one of the most tragic protagonists of ancient Greek mythology, was the son of King Laius of Thebes. While his wife is still pregnant, Laius receives a prediction from the oracle of Apollo that his son will kill him and marry his mother.

As soon as the infant is born, it is abandoned on a mountainside where it is found by a shepherd who gives it to the childless king and queen of Corinth. Years later as a youth Oedipus is on his way to Thebes from Delphi, where he was going to consult the oracle, when he encounters an old man and his servant at a crossroad. A fight ensues and Oedipus kills them both, unaware of course that the old man is his real father. Oedipus proceeds to Thebes where he finds the city in the thrall of the Sphinx, a monster that asks everyone attempting to enter the city a riddle and devours those who fail to answer it. When Oedipus answers the riddle, the Sphinx kills herself by jumping off the cliffs. Proclaimed the savior of Thebes, Oedipus marries Queen Jocasta (his mother) and becomes king, unwittingly fulfilling the prophecy given to King Laius, years later. After sometime a plague struck the city that caused him to learn the shameful secret, while Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself and left the city.

Among the mythical heroes that Moreau employed in the symbolic language with which he created his works, Oedipus is the most important. In *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, the artist depicts a crucial moment in the course of events. (figures 1) Oedipus is an idealist triumphantly resisting a moral temptation leading to death. In order to reinforce and refine the painting's central allegorical meaning, Moreau used symbols which were drawn from iconographic tradition. One is the laurel or bay behind Oedipus (the laurel being sacred to Apollo and symbolizing man's highest achievements); another, located behind the Sphinx, is the fig tree, which is a traditional symbol of sin (Cooke, 2004: 612).

The concept of death was something of an obsession for Gustave Moreau and he expressed it in many of his works. He had originally planned to represent it in *Oedipus and the Sphinx* as a skull, which was iconographically consistent and in keeping with the traditions of Vanitas art. (figure 2.) However he abandoned this

element which was generally recognized as being symbolic of the ephemerality of life in 16th and 17th century European art, and he used instead an ancient vase, an engraving of which had been published in Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Vases, Candelabras, Grave Stones, Sarcophagi, Tripods, Lamps and Antique Ornaments* (1778). This vase decorated with four gryphons appears as a funeral monument urn in the Piranesi album (figure 3.). According to Louis Ménard, the serpent entwined on the column supporting the urn represents death while the butterfly fluttering off represents the soul (Kaplan, 1982: 38). The saturninity of the Sphinx symbolizing the mystery of existence is comparable to that of Atropos, the oldest of the Three Fates and the one who ended the life of each mortal by cutting their thread (Capodiceci, 1998: 31). In this symbol-fraught work, the artist expresses the death to which its protagonists (Oedipus Sphinx, father) are fated with his arrangement of the devices of serpent, urn, and butterfly....

In 1887, many years after the initial showing of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* at the 1864 Salon, Moreau produced another work, *The Wayfarer (Oedipus the Wayfarer; Equality in the Face of Death)* (figure 4), in which Oedipus now stripped of his mythological identity is transformed into a universal symbol of death. In notes that Moreau set down in November of 1897, the artist wrote that he posited the wayfarer as "the very image of Man confronting Death", The Sphinx's victims have become the symbol of different states of humanity (Lacambre, 1999: 222) crown represents a king, the weapons a warrior, and the lyre a poet (Lacambre, 1999: 222). Each of them is subject to death. The Sphinx, standing on a natural rock altar on the cliffs by the road leading to Thebes is waiting for Oedipus to arrive. Oedipus for his part appears to be laden with the heavy burden of life and lost in deep thought.

In notes that Moreau set down in November of 1897 he wrote that he posited the wayfarer as the very image of man confronting death... "The Enigma is there for all. It is the final ordeal, triumphant or fatal.

Cadavers lie on all sides, victims of the terrible and mysterious force that brings death to the weak and over which strong souls can triumph.

The great Theban rocks, the dark sea, close the clouded horizon on all sides, the abyss is at the feet of this altar of life and death, before which passes a trembling humanity." (Lacambre, 1999: 222)⁵

Continuously pondering the mystery of existence and mortality, Moreau was distraught by the death in 1856 of Théodore Chassériau, a man whose friendship he had greatly valued and whose art he much admired. In homage, he began working on *The Young Man and Death* (figure 5.) As its title suggests, it is a purely allegorical painting that represents time, glory, and death. The painting's subject is a young man crowning himself with a laurel wreath, traditionally a symbol of victory. The youth's features are idealized bearing a vague resemblance to Chassériau, the figure is meant to symbolize the *Artist* (concept of artist). The figure holds freshly-cut flowers that symbolize a life that faded and ended abruptly as they too must do. The *putto* holding a torch is thought to represent death while the bird on the wing at the right probably

represents the soul (Kaplan, 1982: 30-32). The young woman behind the youth is a personification of Death itself.

In Greek mythology Death (Thanatos) was represented as a male figure with wings. Much later a *putto* holding a burning or extinguished torch became a symbol of death. In this work however, Moreau chose to symbolize Death by means of a female figure. All of the elements we see in this painting manifest themselves as a completed work. In his preliminary sketches however, the way in which Moreau's ideas about depicting Death developed are revealed. In one such sketch for example he originally considered portraying Death as a winged male figure in an amorphous atmosphere. At its feet he placed an upturned vase symbolizing the headlong flow of time and hourglass another iconographic symbol of passing time. (figure 6.)

In another (figure 7) painting he also seems to have tried using a skeleton, a classic symbol of Death. Ultimately however he decided to abandon iconographic tradition and to personify Death as a delicate female figure sleeping in her eternal indifference gracefully clasping a sword and hourglass (Lacambre, 1999: 197). Along with the presence of death itself here, the significant development of Moreau's poetics can be clearly seen in these examples.

Poets, duality, and human nature are the themes that continuously fascinated Moreau, who, from them developed allegories in which he charged myths with different meanings. *The Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur* (figure 8) is a work that was done in the 1890s in which the animalistic and physical aspects of human nature are symbolized by the Centaur, an unpredictable creature capable of both violence and benevolence, while the spiritual aspects of that nature are represented by an ethereal and androgynous poet, here no longer identifiable as a mythical personage such as Orpheus or a historical one such as Hesiod. The lyre that is apparently strapped to the poet's back represents the immortality of art while the poet is mortal.

Concerning the pessimistic approach inherent in Moreau's treatment of the poet and centaur Ary Renan said "How many have perished without funerals at the bottom of lonely streams? To be sure, sometimes a charitable centaur gathers up the victim, musing in his simple heart on man's senselessness; but oblivion engulfs most of them like stagnant water." (Renan, 1900: 104) This work is a tragic allegory and expression of an ideal that its artist was constantly in pursuit of.

Moreau as a visionary artist in his painting named *Death offers Laurels to the Victor of the Tournament* (figure 9), death is obviously depicted mastering the pictorial composition. The rider of the white horse sees Death confronting him at the very moment of his victory and reacts with startled violence. Death holds a laurel wreath with which it stands waiting to crown the rider. In this work Moreau conforms to iconographic tradition by representing Death by means of a skeleton. In this work, the artist reminds the viewer that a person may encounter death at any moment and when it is least expected.

On Christmas eve in 1897, by now over 70 years of age and quite ill, Gustave Moreau was drawing sketches for his last painting in one of his little notebooks. He felt that his strength had been ruthlessly exhausted by time. In a draft of a letter that he was writing to an unknown recipient he said "It's all quite clear now. I'm on my way out. ... There's nothing else that's noteworthy. I've given so much of myself: perhaps too much. I've nothing left in reserve any more. That being so, one must only surrender oneself humbly and meekly to God to have any hope of salvation-be it relative salvation or true salvation... And that is what I have done by keeping my morale strong."⁶

He had but four more months to live. In 1895 he had delivered *Jupiter and Semele* (figure 10) to its buyer. Undoubtedly one of his greatest masterpieces, this was a work that he had begun in 1889 and spent six years on making constant and frequent emendations. Not long after selling that painting he started thinking about another composition. The work that he conceived of, *The Dead Lyres* (figure 11), was begun but Moreau did not live long enough to finish it.

Although the thematic and analogical points of departure for both *Jupiter and Semele* and *The Dead Lyres* were the same, for Moreau these two works must have been fundamentally different, because during the intervening years there had been changes in the artist's mental state. He had lost Adelaide-Alexandrine Dureux, a woman with whom he had had a liaison of some twenty-five years, and he himself had begun to have serious health problems. The source of inspiration in *The Dead Lyres* was no longer ancient mythology but rather the self-mythos of an artist who was well aware that death was swiftly approaching (Capodiecici, 2002: 72). *The Dead Lyres* is an oxymore of music and silence (Capodiecici, 2002: 72).

Concerning this unfinished Moreau work, both a preparatory cartoon⁷ done by the artist's student Emile Delobre (figure 12) based on his master's sketches and watercolor and oil studies. (Figures 13 & 14) consisting predominantly of brown and red tones that Moreau himself had done, will help give us an idea of what *The Dead Lyres* might have been had the artist been able to complete it.

In the first drawing that Moreau did for *The Dead Lyres* (figure 13), we see creatures from some pagan pantheon emerging from water surrounded by steep cliffs. Parallels may be drawn between the artist's preliminary sketches and his construal of *Jupiter and Semele*. In both works, immortality has begun; all the living things are enamored of the light; satyrs, fauns, and dryads exuberantly break free of their worldly bonds and enthusiastically ascend to the peak and turn into angels (Cooke, 2002: 47). In *Jupiter and Semele*, Jupiter is seated with one foot on the head of a ouroboros while the angel that Moreau calls "The Great Lyre-Carrier" (*Le Grand-porte Lyre*) (Capodiecici, 2002: 76) stands atop a sphere. Both serve the same function, which is to say that they mediate the act of ascension.

Semele, stretched out on Jupiter's knee, seems somewhere between death and life. She is on the point of severing the bonds with her body and becoming one with the god. The divine love in her body collides with profane love and will destroy her. The tattoo-like adornments on Jupiter's body and the lotus blossom that he grasps both evoke the vital energy that exists by virtue of the power

of divine will. The ouroboros (a serpent swallowing its own tail and forming a circle) on which Jupiter treads was included in the painting as an expression of that divine omnipotence that transcends even infinity.

The eagle, a symbol of Jupiter, has spread its wings and is looking towards the divine standard; through its stance it complements the sanctity of the divine layout. To the left of the eagle is the figure of a seated woman holding a sword. Like the hourglass next to her, she symbolizes death. She sits there waiting for the time when she will fulfill her sacred duty. The young woman at the right wearing Jesus' crown of thorns and holding a lily is an allegory of Christian suffering and redemption.

The lower part of the canvas is the domain of the Erebus, within which are depicted images enshrouded in darkness such as that of Hecate, a goddess associated with danger, evil, and the night. Besides echoic references to authors like Dante and Goethe,⁸ one also senses strong currents of Neo-Platonism in this painting. The lyre on which Jupiter's arm rests symbolizes celestial music. Taking into account the overall meaning imparted by all of these symbols and their complex iconography, *Jupiter and Semele* resembles nothing so much as a refrain on Christian divinity decked out with pagan symbols.

Turning now to *The Dead Lyres*, the lyre held by the angel is almost identical to the one on which Jupiter's arm rests. However while there is only a single lyre in the blue holiness of *Jupiter and Semele*, we see there is a proliferation of them in *The Dead Lyres*: indeed Moreau has given one to just about all of the creatures swimming about in the waters of the profane world. The lyre occupies a very important place in Moreau's artistic life. The artist made the lyre a symbol of his own journey towards the ideal, taking the view that its lyrical qualities prevailed even over all the expressions of violence which had been characteristic of literature since the days of Homer. In his notes he wrote "The lyre remains a lyre. Even in the midst of blood, shrieks, and tears, the lyre always emerges resplendent." (Cooke, 2002: 57)

In works whose theme is a dead poet, there are two crucial moments to which Gustave Moreau devotes his attention: the moment of inspiration and the moment of death. The first is an expression of the fountainhead of divine melody; the second underscores immortality. This is because faith is closely associated with the poet in overcoming purely physical death: even if a poet dies, his poetry is immortal. With this notion in mind, the lyre in Moreau's poet-themed paintings must therefore represent death as well as inspiration. Death here however is only a transfiguration for the sake of an ideal: a drawing near to God and to divinity on the spiritual plane (Capodieci, 2002: 86). Christian elements are much more prominent in *The Dead Lyres* (is intended as a requiem for him self and his art) than they are in *Jupiter and Semele*. The central figure of Jupiter in *Jupiter and Semele* for example is replaced by a seraphim while the lotus blossom becomes a crucifix.

There are two different iconographic interpretations of this complicated painting: Seeing a deep mysticism in *The Dead Lyres*, Luisa Capodieci says it is

an expression of the final transformation in Moreau's thinking as he approached his own mortal end. She calls it a religious syncretism of pagan and Christian creeds in which one becomes the transfiguration of the other. But she also believes that it would be unfair to conclude from this, that what Moreau was trying to accomplish was to show the victory of Christianity over paganism and she maintains that this may suggest that the artist had turned away from his deep belief in eternal value of great antique myths and reverted to faith and implies a refutation of the profundity of art (Capodiecici, 2002: 76). She thinks it's only a deviation of symbolism.

Peter Cooke for his part is of the belief that the influences of Catholic mysticism begin to make their appearance in the works that Moreau did during the last years of his life because of the loss of Alexandrine Dureux in 1890 on the one hand, and of his increasingly failing health on the other. In Cooke's view, Moreau was preparing himself for the eternity of the afterlife and thus was now exalting Christianity in his works instead of the pagan myths that he had once so passionately celebrated. In *The Dead Lyres*, which is extremely complex but perfectly harmonious, the subject is the ascent of Christianity (the bloody crucifix being a symbol of sacrifice) and the death of pagan myths. At the same time, *The Dead Lyres* is both the artist's acknowledgement that *le grand art* had at last run out and an expression of his acquiescence to his own end (Cooke, 2008: 88-90).

These two different iconographic interpretations of course are open to discussion. However for sure Gustave Moreau is an artist who expressed his ideas through metaphors and symbols about death and immortality more than most other artists of his time did. His single-minded project to turn his home into a museum during the last years of his life as death approached and he became more and more feeble, the increasing attention he gave to producing replicas of works that he had previously sold, and the extraordinary efforts he made to complete unfinished works should be seen as a rebellion of life-however pessimistic a life it may be-against death and as a striving to achieve immortality through his own works. It must be said that in this, Gustave Moreau succeeded more than most.

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Notes

¹ This paper was presented at the "VIIIth Hawaii International Conference on Arts & Humanities" in Honolulu. (14.01. 2010)

² For detailed information see Peter Cooke, "Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting", *Art Bulletin*, 90 (2008): pp. 394-416; "Symbolism, Decadence and Gustave Moreau", *The Burlington Magazine* CLI (2009): 312-318.

³ Je ne crois ni à ce que je touche, ni à ce que Je ne vois pas et uniquement à ce que je sens. Mon cerveau, ma raison me semblent éphémères et d'une réalité douteuse: mon sentiment intérieur seul me paraît éternel incontestablement certain.

⁴ Drion, Journal de Loire (8112/1864), "Un coup de tournerre en palais de l'industrie.", *Gustave Moreau Archives*, Paris, (Album of newspaper clippings.)

⁵ Courbé sous le poids de la vie, il a gravi le grande montée, il arrive sur la plate-forme autel naturel où su tienta monstre à tête de femme qui l'attend.

L'Énigme est là pour tous. C'est l'épreuve dernière, triomphante ou fatale.

Des cadavres gisent de tous cotes, victimes de cette force terrible et mystérieuse qui donne la mort aux faibles, e dont l'âme forte peut triompher.

Les grands rochers thébains, la sombre mer, ferment de tous côtes l'horizon voilé l'aubine est aux pieds de cet autel de la vie et la mort devant lequel passe l'humanité tremblante. Pierre-Louis Mathieu (ed.), *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁶ M.G.M Archives. GM 151.136-157. Draft of an undated letter written in pencil in one corner of a small notebook, probably some time between December 1897 and January 1898.

⁷ Sketches that Gustave Moreau did for The Dead Lyres were completed in a charcoal drawing on cardboard after his death by his student Émile Delobre.

⁸ An edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy* with Flaxman's illustrations and a copy of Goethe's *Faust* translated into French by Henry Blaze were two books that Gustave Moreau had owned since he was a young boy. The artist appears to have been influenced by these works both visually and intellectually. For example the figure in *Jupiter and Semele* that seems to be fleeing is from Flaxman's illustration

for the 22nd canto of the *Inferno* (punishment of Ciampolo of Navarre). See Kaplan 1982: figure 63. As an example of the influence of Dante's philosophical and religious views on Moreau's intellectual content one may cite this excerpt from the 21st canto of the *Paradiso* in the *Divine Comedy*:

And she smiled not; but If I were to smile,
She unto me began, thou wouldst become
Like Semele, when she was turned to ashes.
Because my beauty, that along the stairs
Of the eternal palace more enkindles,
As thou hast seen, the farther we ascend,
If it were tempered not, is so resplendent
That all thy mortal power in its effulgence
Would seem a leaflet that the thunder crushes.

For detailed information see Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*.

Gustave Moreau was also influenced by the religious and philosophical views of Goethe's *Faust*. Among the many examples that may be cited are the references to the Sphinx, Orpheus, Galatea, Helen, Pan with his "fearful voice", and Father Erebus in the second part of *Faust*. In the climax of Act II just as Helen is about to leave Faust taking their son Euphorion with her Helen says:

Alas, the ancient word proves true for me, as well:
That joy and beauty never lastingly unite.
The thread of life, as the thread of love, is torn:
Painfully, lamenting both, I must say: farewell,
And enter your embrace, once, and then no more.
Persephone, receive me, and this child of ours!

(She embraces Faust: her body vanishes, her dress and veil remain in his hands.)

(*Faust Part II, Act III, Scene II*)

The Presence of Death in Gustave Moreau's Paintings



1



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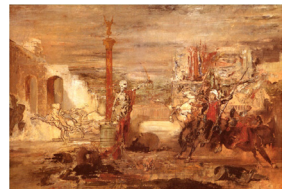
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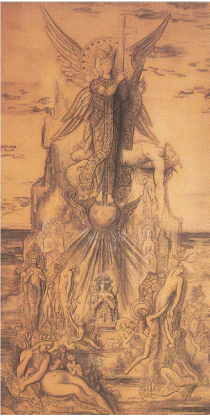
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The Presence of Death in Gustave Moreau's Paintings

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Figure 3: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Urn from Piranesi Album*, engraving on paper, 19th century, Paris: Musée Gustave Moreau, Inv. 11919-23
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