

The republican art of Honoré Daumier on exhibit at the Phillips Collection

by Bonnie James

Honoré Daumier, the 19th-century French artist, is most famous for his devastating caricatures of lawyers and judges — a subject which continues to strike a chord today. An exhibition of Daumier's works at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. brings together for the first time in the United States, a comprehensive retrospective of Daumier's art. The 245 works, including 75 paintings, 57 drawings and watercolors, 39 sculptures, and 74 lithographs reveal Daumier as a serious artist, who shared many of the qualities of the great Spanish master Goya (1746-1828), whose work he would have known. Goya's famous "Third of May 1808," which dramatizes the brutality of Napoleon's troops against the people of Spain, as well as his caricatures of Spain's Bourbon King Charles IV and his family, provide a link between the

two artists: Not only did Daumier "take to the barricades" against the French Bourbons, and later Napoleon III, but the massacre of Spanish partisans by Napoleon's troops, so unforgettably portrayed by Goya, occurred in the year of Daumier's birth.

Honoré Daumier's life (1808-79) spanned one of the most politically turbulent periods in French history, and the events of that era are powerfully reflected in his work. He was at the center of the political conflicts of his day.

Daumier was born into a world which had been forever changed by the American Revolution, in which France's leading citizens played a significant role; no less important in shaping Daumier's world was the counter-example provided by the *failure* of the French Revolution, whose mobs, led by

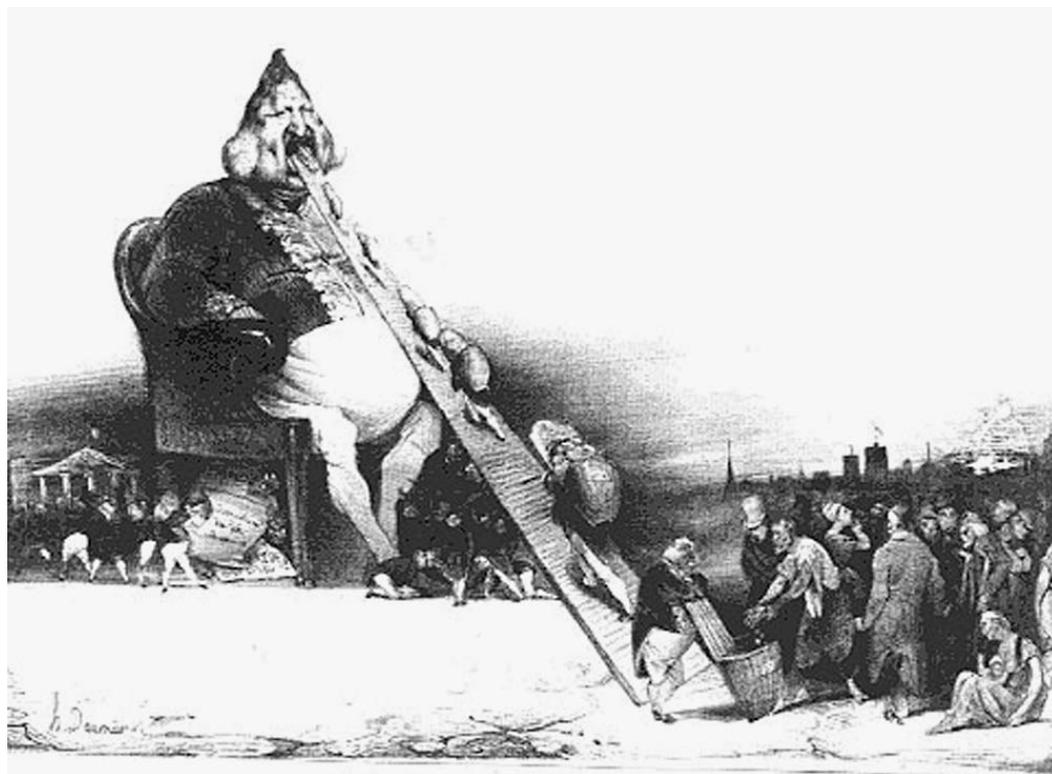


Figure 1. *Louis-Philippe as "Gargantua," the King as glutton, from François Rabelais's satiric masterpiece, Gargantua and Pantagruel.*



Figure 2.
 “A Famous Case.”
 Here, Daumier likens
 the courtroom antics of
 the lawyer to that of the
 carnival barker in “The
 Strongman” (Figure 3).

the mad Robespierre, and manipulated by British agents such as Talleyrand and the Duke of Orléans, meted out “justice” under the blade of the guillotine. The French republic literally lost its head.

It was a century of turmoil for France: from the collapse of Napoleon’s hollow empire and the restoration of the Bourbons, followed by the farcical “July Revolution,” which placed the clownish Louis-Philippe on the throne in 1830, to the bloody “revolution” of 1848, followed by the Second Empire of Napoleon III, itself brought down in 1870, and replaced by the short-lived Paris Commune and the horrors of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Through all of this, Daumier was at work, with his pen and ink, his lithographs, his paints, and his clay, leaving behind a treasure-trove of political commentary.

The King as a pear

Nor was Daumier a mere observer of these events. A passionate republican, he became an early master of the stone lithograph, which he used to mass-produce political cartoons for wide distribution; such cartoons were the most effective way to reach an illiterate populace. In 1830, Daumier, then 22 years old, was employed as an artist by the republican political journal *La Caricature*, and took part in the brief but violent “July Days,” which ended the reign of the hated Bourbon King, Charles X. Daumier’s devastating cartoons of his successor, Louis-Philippe, known as “Philippe Egalité,” and his so-called July Monarchy, hit their mark: To outflank the censors, Daumier began portraying Louis-Philippe as a large pear, which was immediately recognized by everyone as the King; it was also a pun—the French word “*poire*” also

means “fool.”

But it was Daumier’s cartoon of the “Citizen King” as “Gargantua” that provoked the biggest reaction (Figure 1). Here, Louis-Philippe is portrayed as the gigantic glutton from Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*: His tongue extends to the ground, as the little people climb up to deliver tribute into his enormous mouth, while out the other end, Gargantua/Louis-Philippe deposits medals and prizes for his favorite sycophants and courtiers. For such effective caricature, Daumier was sentenced to six months in the Sainte-Pélagie prison.

In 1835, when new censorship laws were introduced banning all political caricature, Daumier was forced to find new material. He turned to political and social satire—no less devastating in its incisive depiction of the follies and foibles of the French bourgeoisie, beginning with his series on “Married Life,” and “The Bluestockings,” which poked fun at the “feminists” of his day.

Satirizing the legal profession

The target at which Daumier aimed his most famous satirical arrows was the legal profession.

The issue of justice was at the heart of the republican agenda, and Daumier had learned at a very tender age to despise the hypocrisy of lawyers and judges. When Daumier was only 12, his father, a glazier by trade, and would-be poet, who had moved his family from Marseilles to Paris, apprenticed Honoré to a process-server, a profession which the elder Daumier apparently held in high esteem as one of importance and authority. This employment introduced Daumier to the environment so scathingly depicted by the great French nov-



Figure 3. “*The Strongman.*”

elist Honoré de Balzac, and later Charles Dickens, and which would play so important a part in his own later work.

In “A Famous Case” (**Figure 2**), Daumier likens the courtroom antics of the lawyer to that of the carnival barker in “The Strongman” (**Figure 3**). In numerous satirical renditions of the members of the legal profession, Daumier makes clear his contempt for their hypocrisy and disregard for justice (if you are tempted to draw parallels to today’s exemplars of this profession, you have understood Daumier’s point). In another work, “The Incriminating Evidence,” a knife and other objects on the evidence table are pointed to by a lawyer, while the judge ostentatiously ignores them, clearly having already decided the outcome of the case.

In perhaps one of Daumier’s most powerful evocations of the principle of justice, “The Pardon,” a lawyer stands in the foreground, while on the wall behind him hangs a painting of the Crucifixion, a reminder that justice must be associated with mercy and forgiveness—a lesson still to be learned today by those who insist on the Spartan “rule of law,” i.e., Shylock’s “pound of flesh,” rather than Portia’s “quality of mercy.”

A glimpse of his own personality

It is perhaps in Daumier’s preoccupation, beginning in the late 1840s and lasting until his death, with Miguel de Cervantes’ characters Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (**Figure 4**), that we find the truest expression of his own personality.

Many of Daumier’s compatriots became utterly demoralized by the failure to establish a French republic, and Daumier himself was ultimately afflicted by this pessimism. Much of his work, beginning 1848, veers toward the romantic; but in the *Don Quixote* series, we can see the artist grappling with the ironies embodied in Cervantes’ masterpiece: the tragicomic adventures of the “knight” Don Quixote, who wants to change the world and bring aid to those who suffer injustice, but whose madness prevents him from acting effectively; and his sidekick, the worldly Sancho Panza, who (like Louis-Philippe, perhaps) is too consumed by his own appetites to govern wisely, when given the chance.

Daumier returns again and again to this subject.

The exhibit at the Phillips Collection will run until May 14. The Phillips is located at 1600 21st NW, Washington, D.C. Admission is \$5.00 per person. For hours call (202) 387-2151, or visit their website at: www.phillipscollection.org.



Figure 4. *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza*, Cervantes’ famous characters, who personified for Daumier the failure of the French republican movement.