

19th century French satirist offers searing social analysis through lithos and paintings

Pain and power come hand in hand when an artist chooses to devote his career to political and social satire. Nineteenth century French artist and caricaturist Honoré Daumier (1808-1879) experienced both as he exposed the tyranny of the monarchy, the ineptitude of the government and the idiosyncrasies of the middle-class throughout his life. An exhibition of his work is currently being viewed at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) until September 8, providing a comprehensive collection of lithographs, paintings and sculptures.

Daumier's career was frustrated by censorship. His caricature of King Louis-Philippe as the *Gargantua* even earned him a six-month pri-

son sentence. The image is of a giant king enthroned, his huge, ramp-like tongue stretching to the ground as peasants load goods into his mouth, while various edicts pour out suggestively from underneath his chair and are collected by members of the government.

During periods of censorship Daumier was forced to confine his lithographs to the seemingly apolitical ground of French society and social attitudes. These lithographs tend to be less accessible to today's viewer as, like most of Daumier's work, they are extremely topical. There are works in the collection, however, portraying the machinations of everyday human contact and communication. The universal qualities expressed are still capable of producing a chuckle from the modern viewer. A selection from a series

on the foibles and frustrations of train travelling still manages to evoke empathy from today's TTC rider.

Long explanations are necessary for understanding the humorous context of most of Daumier's lithographs and unfortunately they are not always provided in the exhibition. The expressiveness and detail of the lithographs, however, help to maintain the viewer's interest. Daumier's use of light and shadows within the medium brings life to his caricatures.

Although Daumier never fully developed his skills as an artist and sculptor, devoting most of his time

to lithography, the simplicity of his sculptures maintains an exquisite expressiveness that is a delight to behold. His studies of the leading figures in Louis-Philippe's government, small busts cast in bronze, peer, mutter and scowl out of their glass encasements with bushy eyebrows, hooded eyes, hooked noses and sagging, furry chins. Some of the caricatures are almost grotesque in their crudely depicted humor yet the character of each individual remains piercingly clear.

The few paintings exhibited at the AGO reflect a completely different quality in Daumier's work. Impres-

sionistic in style, the paintings express a soft use of vivid color and a delicately intense quality of form. The sympathetic treatment of his characters suggests thoughtful insight into the lives of the lawyers, actors and mythological characters he treats. These works provide an enlightening contrast to the rest of the exhibit, posing potential qualities which the artist never fully explored in his lifetime.

The exhibition of Daumier's work reflects two sides of the man; Daumier the artist and Daumier the republican. Most of his career was devoted to his beliefs as he offered a weekly, searing account of French life. This commitment never fully allowed the artist to develop his skills and as a result his paintings and sculptures are few in number and only begin to express his potential as an artist. His life's work was an irreplaceable commentary on life during his time, and the people of France could only have benefitted from his clarity of vision. In retrospect, it is impossible not to respect the lifework of Daumier, and the choice of career that he made illustrates that a committed artist need not necessarily be committed only to art.



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TWO DAUMIER LITHOGRAPHS: Above - *Garantua* (1831); below - *On the train... A pleasant companion* (1862).



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