A SOLITARY NOMAD IN PARIS

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Rodolphe Bresdin, known as Chien-Caillou, after Fenimore Cooper's Chingachgook, was a visionary who lived the life of a solitary nomad in the heart of Paris.

In the celebrated novelette Chien-Caillou, Champfleury described his friend Bresdin as living with a tame white rabbit as his sole friend in a room furnished with only a bed and a ladder. According to Champfleury, Chien-Caillou pulled proofs of his prints by means of a shoe brush and some blacking and sold them for a few francs to a second-hand dealer who passed them off as Rembrandts.

Odilon Redon signed one of his early prints "pupil of Bresdin," and it is from Redon's journal that most of our reliable knowledge of his eccentric master is drawn. His father was a tanner and a metal-polisher; his mother was of the nobility. Perhaps, Redon suggests, this mixed origin explained the incongruities of his temperament, "the peculiarities of his strange, whimsical nature, his abruptness mingled with kindliness, sudden fits of reserve, and equally sudden frankness and gaiety."

Around 1869 Bresdin disappeared from Paris. He was not seen there again until 1876, when he marched into a café with a wife, six children, and a negro servant. He had realized the dream of his life and had gone to America. But it had been a complete disappointment. He brought back no important work. Later, he became a road mender, living in a Paris attic which he had miraculously and painstakingly transformed into a garden. In 1885, penniless and far from his wife and family, he died at Sevres upon a bed of unpainted wood which he had made himself. On the bare wall of the room hung a fine impression of Rembrandt's Descent from the Cross, worth at the time at least two hundred francs.

So far as we know, Bresdin's work consisted entirely of his prints and drawings. His meticulous technique was carried out with a patient, almost niggling exactitude that bordered on madness. He seems to have looked at the world through a magnifying glass.

Bresdin was strongly influenced by Bosch, Rembrandt (whom he called his God), Seghers, Callot, and Dürrer. His visual memory was fantastic. Yet he said repeatedly: "The artist should not even glance at nature. He has everything within himself."

Obsessed with dreams of flight to better worlds, Bresdin's refuge was in reconstructing line by line and dot by dot a region of the mind which his tormented vision peopled with legions on the march, skeletons lurking beneath the earth's face, and Holy Families surrounded by all the gentle beasts of creation, resting on the flight into Egypt.
ABOVE: An Allegory of Death, French woodcut, xvi century. Dick Fund, 1926. LEFT: Lovers Surprised by Death, chiaroscuro woodcut by Hans Burgkmair (1473-1531). Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1917. To the medieval world the Dance of Death was not weird. It was an everyday concept, a familiar warning that in the midst of life we are in death and that when faced with mortality all men are finally equal. The “memento mori”—a reminder of death—was another way of expressing the Christian view of the vanity of this life. When, after centuries of classicism, the Romantics rediscovered the Gothic style, they revived the Dance of Death and the memento mori. But by then the climate of Christian culture had changed and such subjects were no longer part of the iconography of daily life. In Bredin’s lithograph on the opposite page, Death, which Holbein and his contemporaries accepted as an everyday fact, is seen as the Romantics saw it: a phenomenon filled with poetry and terror.
The Comedy of Death, lithograph by Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-1885), dated 1854. The prints shown are in the current exhibition Bresdin and Other Masters of the Weird.
The Rider in the Mountains, etching by Rodolphe Bresdin. Bresdin worried a theme constantly, dwelling obsessively on each variation. This is only one of numerous versions which he made of a traveler through a desolate landscape. The rider is always alone, and the countryside is invariably some Gobi Desert of Bresdin's imagination. It is interesting to compare his treatment of the subject with Rembrandt's Polish Rider in the Frick Collection.
The Knight, Death, and the Devil, engraving by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Dick Fund, 1943, 1926.

Dürer was a great crystalizer. His engravings and woodcuts, with their marvelous precision, have served generations of artists as the pictorial archetypes of certain ideas. Bresdin certainly knew this engraving, in which Dürer froze the poetic image of the lonely rider in the valley, with its connotations of fear, death, and man’s solitary voyage through life. Around Dürer’s rider loom the symbolic figures that have served as a jumping-off point for endless iconographic conjecture. Redon’s etching, like an illustration for Poe, is particularly interesting in showing Bresdin’s influence on his pupil, not only in technique but also in subject matter.
LEFT: Drawing by Bresdin. RIGHT: The Dream of Reason Produces Nightmares, aquatint by Francisco Goya (1746-1828). Gift of M. Knoedler and Company, 1918. Goya wrote: "Fantasy without reason produces monsters; united, they engender true artists and create marvels." He himself was always able to maintain a tightrope balance on the edge of nightmare.
Detail from the Temptation of Saint Anthony, engraving by Jacques Callot (1592-1635). Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1917. The work of Callot, a Frenchman who spent much of his life in Italy, undoubtedly had a considerable influence on Bresdin. Callot’s point of view, unlike that of the northern Gothic masters of the weird, was typical of the late Renaissance: all Italianate bravura. His Temptation is a whirling theatrical spectacle, worthy of the Bibienas, at the conclusion of which we should quite naturally expect a ducal display of fireworks.
The Good Samaritan, lithograph by Bresdin. The entire world of Bresdin’s imagination is concentrated in this extraordinary print. Around the oriental figure of the Samaritan revolves an unreal lacy landscape full of fanciful figures, reminiscent of the monsters of Bosch. Despite the infinitely detailed life it contains, the design is curiously gentle and still, as if the universe were transfigured by this moment of mercy and tenderness. The Bresdins illustrated are from the collection made by J. B. Neumann, the gift of F. H. Hirschland, 1950, 1951, 1952.