

Honoré Daumier

Critical dualism

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The Baillieu Library recently purchased for its print collection Honoré Daumier's lithograph *En ballon captif* (In a captive balloon) of 1867. This has led to preliminary research being conducted into the Baillieu Library's holdings of the works of this 19th-century French caricaturist.

The Exposition Universelle of 1867, held in Paris from April to November, contained exhibits from almost 50 countries and is believed to have been attended by over 11 million people.¹ Staged at extraordinary expense, the exhibition was an opportunity for Napoleon III to display the power, importance and harmonising influence of the Second Empire.² Here commerce, progress and technology were painted as the universal aspects of world-making; here was to be found the (enlightened) future. Yet this veneer of equality and friendly competition barely concealed the threat of war and unrest. For example, Prussia displayed a 50,000 kilogram Krupp steel cannon, the largest cannon ever made, and many other major exhibits included armaments.³ The sense of impending war between France and Prussia was pervasive (it eventually broke out in 1870), while the previous year France had pulled troops out of Mexico,

where Republicans then executed the French-backed Emperor Maximilian in June 1867.⁴ The world, the Second Empire in particular, was far removed from the constructed image presented at the exhibition.

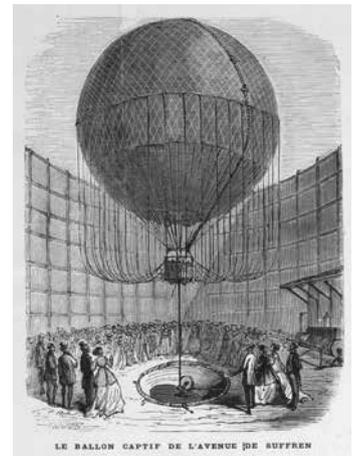
Published in November 1867 in the newspaper *La Charivari*, as part of Daumier's daily series *Actualités*, the lithograph *En ballon captif* (opposite) illustrates the fear and tension that were glossed over by the Exposition Universelle. At the same time, the print satirised the small-mindedness of the bourgeoisie. Through their telescopes, the two men ballooning high above the world see—or at least believe they see—the presence of war. One looks to the south and exclaims 'The deuce!' while the other, looking to the east, exclaims 'The devil!'; their surprise reveals a naivety and metaphorical short-sightedness towards the political context.⁵ The contradiction between the directions in the caption (east and south) and the opposite sight lines of the two men is jarring; this disjunction questions whether they are even looking in the right direction. What kind of competence do these men have? Meanwhile the height of their balloon is exaggerated and it is, very clearly, not literally a captive balloon. Rather the 'captive' balloon makes two references. Firstly

it points towards the display of a captive balloon in the Exposition Universelle (see example opposite, above), explicitly making the link between the veneer of harmony and the wars being played out globally. Secondly, because the balloon is not tethered down, its 'captivity' is, perhaps, also a metaphor for the bourgeois who are captives of their own small minds and limited vision. The balloon, an explicit symbol of technological advancement, has been appropriated by Daumier to mock these inflated visions of progress, while revealing their myopia.

By virtue of their form, Daumier's caricatures are part of a wider and interwoven set of discourses. They were made in dialogue with his previous works and with series published by other caricaturists and writers in *La Charivari* and similar newspapers. While we can read the prints as individual artworks, each is also part of a broader commentary. For example, the man on the left of *En ballon captif* is Monsieur Prudhomme, a recurring character in Daumier's work, who represents the self-congratulatory but incompetent nature of the bourgeois class. Originally developed by Henry Monnier in 1831 to embody those conceited and inept characteristics common to all humans

Right: Trichon, *Le ballon captif de l'avenue de Suffren*, 1868, engraving, 13.8×10.7 cm. Brown University Library Digital Repository.

Below: Honoré Daumier, *En ballon captif* (In a captive balloon), 1867, plate 240 from the series *Actualités* (News of the day), lithograph, second state, image: 24.3×21.6 cm. Reg. no. 2013.0009, purchased 2013, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



and, in particular, the middle classes, Prudhomme became a widely known symbol across France.⁶ By recognising Prudhomme, the viewer can build on the character's previous development, understanding that he is to be ridiculed. The irony of the captive balloon floating high above the Earth, and of the fact that Prudhomme needs a telescope to see the obviously approaching war, is sharpened by being part of these discourses.

Honoré Daumier (1808–1879), hailed as one of the greatest caricaturists of his age, bore witness to a time of intense technological, economic, social, political and cultural change. His artworks serve as historical documents and, given his prodigious output of more than 4,000 lithographs alone, could almost be used as a history of France during his lifetime.⁷ Yet his work has resonances that transcend observational documentation and comedy. Daumier creates and dissects a complex image of society. As Baudelaire argued, while grounded in the specificity of his own time and place, Daumier speaks to a wider humanity and constructs a moral, social and cultural critique of modern society generally.⁸ The specific and the universal are intertwined, and in Daumier's hands a specific event touches on a deeper human nerve. In other words, the



essential humanism of his caricatures can be separated from their topicality, so that our gaze is reflected back onto ourselves.⁹ This is the enduring power of Daumier's art.

Daumier, the son of a glazier, was born into the *petite bourgeoisie* and continued living as an artisan his whole life, marrying the daughter of another glazier and residing at Quai d'Anjou on the Ile St Louis—an area that was home to people from a range of social classes.¹⁰ As the effects of the Industrial Revolution threatened the future of the artisan, Daumier sat on the border between the working and middle classes, allowing him to genuinely document the former and lampoon the latter. As T.J. Clark observed, as an artist Daumier was rare in his desire to document what he saw in the streets—this is especially evident in his paintings.¹¹ He lived in the worlds of both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, yet was outside both: an observer. This liminal position allowed him to develop a reflexive social and cultural critique of modernity. A committed republican and humanist, Daumier presents the foibles of his contemporary society alongside compassion towards those who are disadvantaged. Partly because of his social position, Daumier was more interested in lampooning the Prudhommes of France than the

emperor and the elites.¹² He drew and painted those around him, and was acute in observing the historical force of the rise of the middle class and the commercialisation of Paris.

This astute dualism (of the specific and universal) and Daumier's social critique are also evident in the six lithographs from the series *Les cent-et-un Robert Macaire*, made by Daumier and his publisher and collaborator Charles Philipon, held in the Baillieu Library Print Collection. Robert Macaire, similar to Monsieur Prudhomme, was a widely known character and trope whom the authors appropriated and used to foster their own complex symbolic dialogue. Developed as a theatre character in the 1830s, Robert Macaire came to symbolise the commercial domination of the July Monarchy as well as the 'universal knavery' of contemporary French society.¹³ A trickster and opportunist, Macaire, with the help of his sidekick Bertrand, was a shape-shifter who did anything possible to deceive and extort others. In the series *Les cent-et-un Robert Macaire*, Macaire morphs between journalist, parliamentarian, surgeon, painter and banker, among many other professions.¹⁴ The common denominator of all of these situations is the transaction of money and the opportunism attached to the rise of

the market.¹⁵ Macaire was a character and tool to reflect the culture that this created and perpetuated, one who had perfected those human tendencies favoured by a capitalist structure.

In the prints held in the Baillieu Library, Macaire acts as—among other professions—a journalist and hypnotist, with the breadth of metamorphosis allowing for universal and reflexive critique. Of particular interest is the hundredth print of the series (see opposite), which appears to depict Macaire and Daumier in the latter's studio. Macaire is pouring praise on Daumier for 'the faithful portrait of innumerable crooked characters one finds everywhere', and is shocked that Daumier has not yet been awarded the Cross of Honour.¹⁶ This print plays a number of self-aware games in which, despite the caption text, the figure illustrated is actually Philipon, representing the joint authorship of the Macaire series.¹⁷ The lithograph also makes the insightful observation that we are willing to see others as the problem but not reflect on our own behaviour: Macaire is anywhere but in us. Counteracting this tendency is an awareness of the universality of 'macairism', and of Daumier's own part in the social game, which sees the meeting point between the specific and the human as well as the cultural and social critique.

Honoré Daumier and Charles Philippon, *Macaire chez monsieur Daumier* (detail), c. 1840, plate 100 from series *Les cent-et-un Robert Macaire* (The hundred and one Robert Macaires), lithograph, sheet: 26.8 × 16.9 cm. Reg. no. 2012.0219, gift of Russell Beedles 2012, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Honoré Daumier's caricatures were created to be accessible to the largest possible public, yet they also speak across time. The openness, humour and reflexivity in these prints allow them to be significant not only as historical documents and artworks, but also to society today. Considering that caricatures are embedded in a series of broader discourses, the importance of these particular prints in the university's collection is amplified by other holdings. The Baillieu Library Print Collection contains a number of other Daumier prints and a large number of caricatures by Daumier's contemporary, the caricaturist and illustrator Paul Gavarni (1804–1866). Further research and documentation of these will allow a dialogue to develop between the individual prints, providing a richer understanding of each.

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Researchers may request items from the **Baillieu Library Print Collection** for viewing in the Cultural Collections Reading Room on the third floor of the Baillieu Library; see www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/prints/ to search the catalogue.

- 1 Volker Barth, 'Displaying normalisation: The Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 20, no. 4, December 2007, p. 462.
- 2 Anne Green, *Changing France: Literature and material culture in the Second Empire*, London and New York: Anthem Press, 2013, p. 10.
- 3 Green, *Changing France*, p. 10.
- 4 J.P.T. Bury (ed.), *The new Cambridge modern history: Volume X: The zenith of European power 1830–70*, Cambridge University Press, 1960, p. 464.
- 5 Dieter Noack and Lilian Noack, Daumier Register, www.daumier-register.org/werkview.php?key=3605.
- 6 Bruce Laughton, *Honoré Daumier*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 83.
- 7 Laughton, *Honoré Daumier*, pp. 1–2.
- 8 Elizabeth Childs, *Daumier and exoticism: Satirizing the French and the foreign*, New York: Peter Lang, 2004, p. 4.
- 9 Childs, *Daumier and exoticism*, p. 6.
- 10 Childs, *Daumier and exoticism*, p. 28.
- 11 T.J. Clark, *The absolute bourgeois: Artists and politics in France 1848–1851*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1973, p. 102.
- 12 This, perhaps, was in part because of the jail term he served early in his career for his famous cartoon of King Louis-Philippe, *Gargantua*. (See Laughton, *Honoré Daumier*, pp. 6–7.)
- 13 Stanislav Osiakowski, 'History of Robert Macaire and Daumier's place in it', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 100, no. 668, November 1958, p. 389.
- 14 Osiakowski, 'History of Robert Macaire', p. 390.
- 15 Osiakowski, 'History of Robert Macaire', p. 391.
- 16 Noack and Noack, Daumier Register: www.daumier-register.org/werkview.php?key=433.
- 17 Noack and Noack, Daumier Register: www.daumier-register.org/hintergrundlist_popup.php?key_m=433.

