



Karel de Nerée tot Babberich's Forgotten *Torture Garden*

• SANDER BINK •

The Rijksmuseum holds ten drawings and a large pastel portrait by Christophe Karel Henri (Karel) de Nerée tot Babberich (1880-1909). Although the art historian Bettina Spaanstra-Polak regarded the 'spectacular pen drawings by this extremely sensitive artist' as highlights of *fin de siècle* Dutch art in her standard work *Het Symbolisme in de Nederlandse schilderkunst* in 1955,¹ there are few art historical publications about his oeuvre.

One of his largest drawings in the Rijksmuseum's collection is *Allegorical Scene with Figures and a Peacock in a Garden*, which has been neither exhibited nor reproduced until now (fig. 1). A central figure and a smaller figure are shown in an exotic garden landscape. The garden is filled with bizarre plants, a peacock and strange human figures drawn with and surrounded by fanciful lines.

In this article I will argue, in part on the basis of sources never studied before in this connection, that this drawing was inspired by a literary work. This means that it can be dated more accurately and interpreted more clearly, thus elucidating its relationship with the various other works by De Nerée in the museum's collection. The literary source for *Allegorical Scene* sheds new light on this remarkable minor artist, his place in Dutch Symbolism and his contribution to it.

< Detail of fig. 1

Le Jardin des supplices

Le Jardin des supplices (*The Torture Garden*) was published in June 1899, the first novel in almost ten years by Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917), the angry young man of the French literary scene. Mirbeau suffered a debilitating literary crisis after his debut trilogy *Le Calvaire* (1886), *L'Abbé Jules* (1888) and *Sebastian Roch* (1890), although he did publish short stories, articles in journals and reviews. He was an ardent defender of modern art and worked hard for the post-impressionists, in particular for artists like Paul Gauguin, Camille Claudel and Vincent van Gogh. His great interest in Van Gogh is also evident in his short novel *Dans le ciel*, which he published in serial form in 1892-93 in *L'Echo de Paris* but never turned into a full novel in book form.

Mirbeau was considerably less impressed by Symbolism, the other movement in art around 1890. He thought it consisted of 'snobs, Jews and pederasts' and wanted nothing to do with 'aesthetes': 'Ah, these aesthetes of evil caused harm when they discoursed in silken voices on the horror of nature, of life, on the uselessness of drawing, on the need to lead art back to the state of larvae; this is the exasperation of ugliness.'²

This notwithstanding, for the majority of the twentieth century, *Le Jardin des supplices*, with which

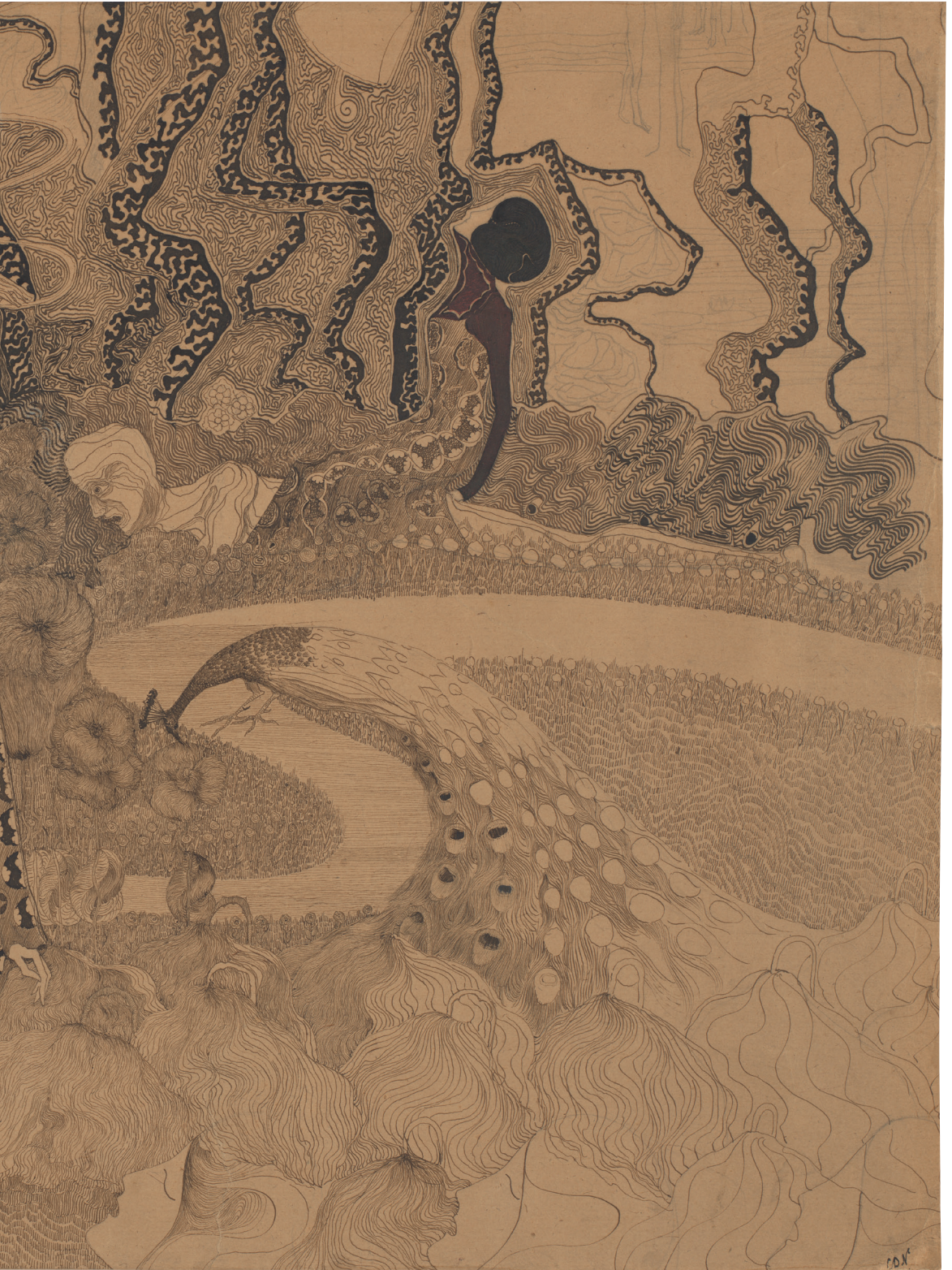
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Fig. 1

KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Allegorical Scene
with Figures and
a Peacock in a
Garden*, 1899-1901.

Pencil, pen and brown
ink, brush and red ink
and white bodycolour
on light brown paper,
495 x 738 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-1951-176.



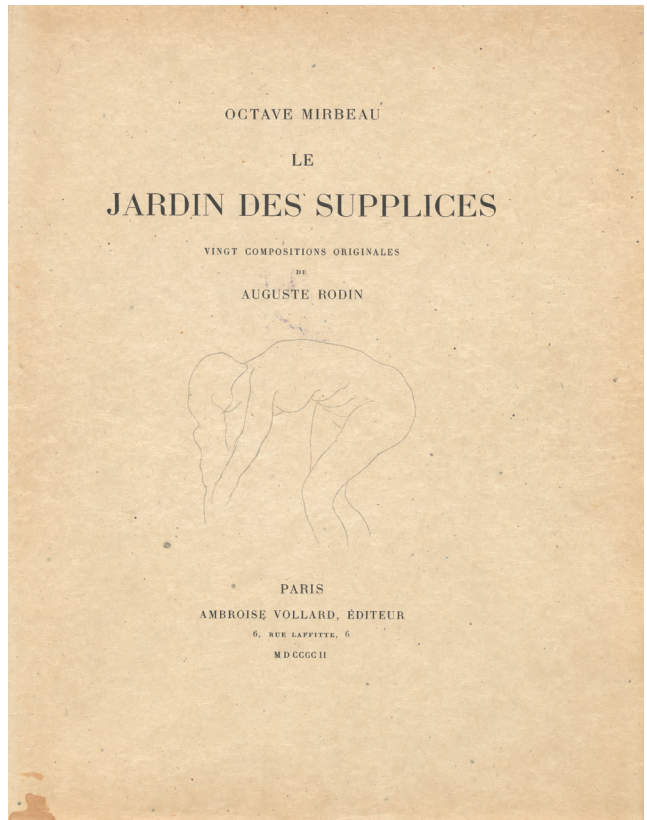


Mirbeau resumed his career as a novelist in 1899, was regarded as a classic work of 'decadent symbolism'. In his study of Symbolism, *Dreamers of Decadence*, fin de siècle expert Philippe Jullian described it as 'the bible of modern exoticism'.³ *Le Jardin des supplices* was acknowledged in art history, too, thanks to the de luxe edition published by the French art dealer Ambroise Vollard in 1902, in which watercolour drawings by Auguste Rodin enhance and reflect Mirbeau's text (fig. 2).⁴

In recent decades *Le Jardin des supplices* and Mirbeau's entire literary oeuvre have both been considered primarily in the context of a subversive literary discourse, in which the convinced anarchist author wanted to shock 'the citizen' and hold up to him a mirror of his own hypocritical behaviour.⁵ Mirbeau described his novel as an account of murderous bloodlust, and prefaced it ironically thus: 'To the priests, to the soldiers, to the judges, and to the men, who educate, lead and govern mankind I dedicate these pages of murder and blood.'⁶

The Chinese torture garden through which the narrator and Clara roam and where they see the most terrible things – in which Clara in particular takes pleasure – symbolises the endless sadistic cruelty of which mankind is capable: 'And the universe seemed to me like an immense, inexorable torture garden. Everywhere there was blood and where life was most apparent, there were horrible tormentors to flay the flesh, saw up bones and turn the skin inside out with sinister expressions of joy on their faces.'⁷ The theme of the novel could be summarized with a quote taken from it, 'in that atrocious second I realised that lust can attain the darkest depths of human terror and vividly imitate Hell in all its terror.'⁸

Mirbeau was not unknown in the Netherlands around 1900. He was famous for his role in the Dreyfus affair, because he paid the fine that



Émile Zola could not afford after he published his *J'Accuse!* His plays were performed there too, the most popular being the cynical *Les affaires sont les affaires* of 1903. But his anarchic and anti-bourgeois prose work, full of violence and perverted sexuality, seems to have been condemned to be sold under the counter. Any mention of *Le Jardin des supplices* in the press was invariably disapproving: 'It is an atrocious book and a bad book, for it does not achieve its objective with the vast majority of readers, who instead of horror would find morbid titillation in it.'⁹

Although French literature was usually read in the Netherlands in the original language around 1900, translations aimed at the wider, more popular market were also published. French authors who were initially revolution-

Fig. 2
Title page of Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices*, Paris 1902, showing a drawing by Auguste Rodin. Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, inv. no. p2648s2012.

ary because they openly dared to describe the sexuality and dark desires of mankind, were admittedly controversial in their own country, but were soon accepted and even became canonical, and this continues to the present day. Zola's oeuvre, long controversial in the Netherlands, is a good example of this, and fifty years after the publication of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* it was still being praised as a 'salacious book'. 'This is one of the most famous books in French literature, but at the same time one of the most infamous. It is a literary jewel, and when one knows that it embroiled the author in a heated obscenity case, it is patently obvious that this is not a book for children.'¹⁰ This recommendation came from the small Amsterdam publishing house of Bauer which specialized in erotica – according to the standards of the time teetering on the edge of pornography – and in translations of modern French literature.¹¹ The reception of Mirbeau's work in the Netherlands must also be seen in this context.

Although there is no known Dutch translation of *Le Jardin des supplices* dating from around 1900, it is not out of the question that one actually was published. Several of these kinds of translations by Bauer and similar small publishing houses we know of from advertisements seem to have completely disappeared, as there is no trace of them whatsoever in any public collection or in the antiques trade. The first known Dutch translation of *Le Jardin des supplices* in full was published in 1929 under the racy title *O, vrouw!...* (Oh, Woman). As yet no physical copy of this publication has been found.¹² Between 1890 and 1910 the rather more liberal Dutch-Indonesian periodicals published some translations of Mirbeau stories. In 1898 among others 'The Dead Pearls' and 'The Little Fairy Dum-Dum', which the author went on to

rework into chapters of *Le Jardin des supplices*.¹³

The fact that Dutch publishers around 1900 saw that good money could be made from Mirbeau's novels is evident from the translation of his next novel, the equally controversial *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (Diary of a Chambermaid). This was immediately published in 1900 as *Het dagboek van een kamenier* (Diary of a Lady's-Maid): 'Banned in Austria because the moral degeneracy of the bourgeoisie is too vividly described,' trumpeted the Amsterdam bookshop Fortuijn.¹⁴ There was evidently so much demand for moral degeneracy that a second edition was needed; it was published in 1907 under the title *Dagboek van een kamermeisje* (Diary of a Chambermaid), likewise untraceable.

In the Netherlands Mirbeau's novels were read more or less on the quiet: by 'the public at large' in search of soft porn and by a more broad-minded, artistic hard core. At least we can infer the interest of the more liberally-minded from the 'coming of age' novel *Het liefdeleven van Leo Trelong* (The Love Life of Leo Trelong) by De Nerée's contemporary L. de Rooy van Heerlen (pseudonym of P. Valkhoff) which was published in 1905 and has also been consigned to oblivion. In it, Leo Trelong reads *Le Calvaire* by Mirbeau with close attention. The subversive character of this novel is emphasized in a discussion about it.¹⁵

Thanks to the bestseller *Moeder* (Mother) by Anna van Gogh-Kaulbach, countless readers from 1908 onwards – the fifteenth edition was published in 1937 – were indirectly warned about Mirbeau's shocking novel. In *Moeder* the innocent Hermien reads it with fear and trembling: 'Would I dare to enter the *Jardin des Supplices*? No, it's far too cruel. It can hardly be true.' Hermien says that her young friend Anton would likewise be 'upset' by the book which also made her 'miserable'.¹⁶ But there was one Dutch reader who,

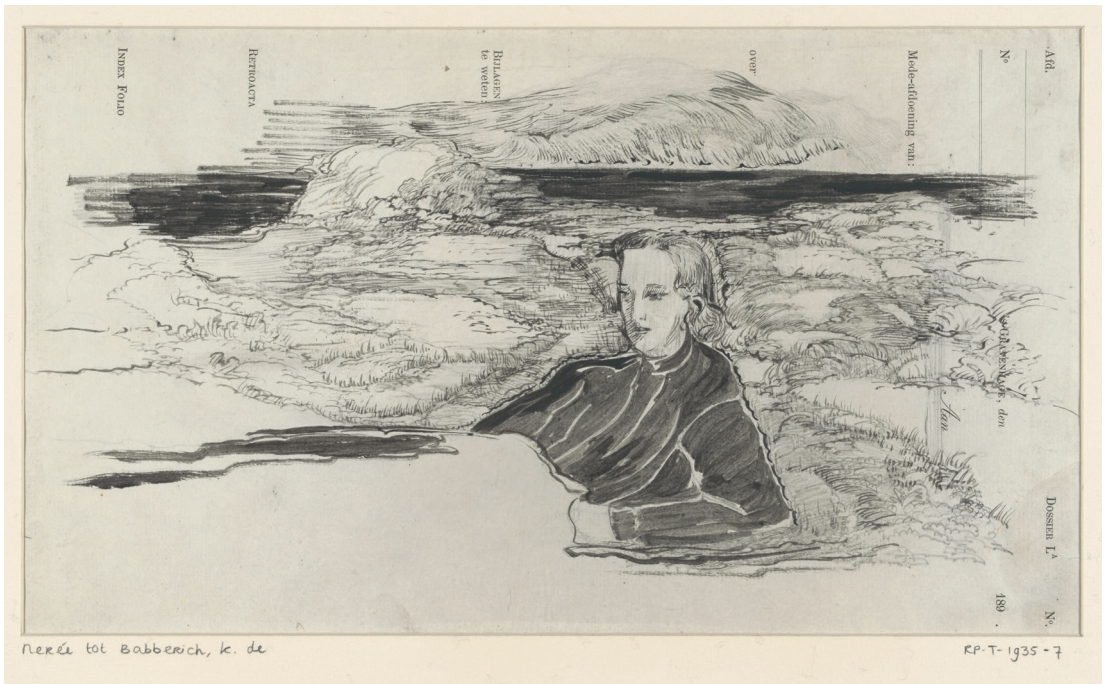


Fig. 3
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Self-Portrait Reclining
in a Dune Landscape*,
possibly 1899-1901.
Pen and brush and
grey ink, pencil,
215 x 345 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-1935-7.

in the not unlikely event that he had read *Moeder* in 1908, must have smiled at this passage. *Le Jardin des supplices* did not upset this budding artist or make him miserable, but almost nine years earlier had inspired him to make one of his first works of art in its own right.

Karel de Nerée

In the summer of the year in which *Le Jardin des supplices* was published, Karel (or Carel) de Nerée tot Babberich was working in the Consular Department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He had started in late 1898 but rapidly became bored to death:

I did a lot of work today, read and re-read almost three books ... Really satisfying though, doing that little bit of work, in the empty day. Working is actual a silly thing; people work from necessity, like walking and sleeping – or eating, but with more frenzy, with more affectedness.¹⁷

His reading matter consisted chiefly of works by French symbolist poets and Dutch authors like Herman Gorter, Louis Couperus and Frederik van Eeden. Initially his ambitions were mainly literary, but as far as we know he did not publish during his lifetime; a few poems in French were not published until after his death.¹⁸ In the summer of 1898, more or less by accident, he had discovered that he had a talent for drawing and went on increasingly to devote himself to it.¹⁹ As was not unusual in Symbolism, literature became an important source of inspiration for his art. He also made drawings while he was at work: many of his drawings from 1899 to around 1901, when he left the ministry, were done on his employer's paper. One example in the Rijksmuseum's collection is the *Self-Portrait Reclining in a Dune Landscape*; the pre-printed text of the file number and letterhead appear on the right-hand side of the sheet (fig. 3). This previously undated work can consequently be placed in

the 1899 to 1901 period. A further argument in support of this is that he spent most of his time in The Hague during those years and frequently went to the dunes at Scheveningen.

In the high society of The Hague, De Nerée was a high-profile figure whose dandified appearance attracted attention (figs. 4, 5). From 1897 or 1898 onwards – greatly influenced by the French symbolists – he penned poems and sketches, and although he did not publish them, people were aware of them. Around 1903, according to a witness, he raised eyebrows in the Kurhaus 'because of his exceptional clothes and the stories that were told about his literary works'.²⁰ A *roman à clef* about him, titled *Het eerste principe* (The First Principle) by Hans Steengracht (pseudonym of Adriaan David van der Gon Netscher), was published in 1903. The artist René Richell in Jacob Israël



Fig. 4
Portrait photograph of Karel de Nerée tot Babberich, 1901. Private collection.



Fig. 5
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Self-Portrait with
Cap*, 1902.
Black chalk,
heightened with
white chalk,
on grey paper,
275 x 249 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-1964-57.



Fig. 6
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
Black Swans, 1901.
Chalk, pastel and
paint on canvas,
97.5 x 54.5 cm.
The Hague, Kunst-
museum Den Haag,
inv. no. 0322792.

de Haan's 1908 novel *Pathologieën* was probably based on him, too.²¹ In both novels he is portrayed as a rather decadent, totally eccentric artist.

Although De Nerée died of tuberculosis in October 1909 at the age of twenty-nine, he left an oeuvre which, including sketches, is estimated to amount to some four hundred works. This is quite a lot for an artist who was in fact only active for a few years and who seems not to have contemplated

a professional career. The greater part of his oeuvre consists of pencil and pen and ink drawings, probably three hundred or so, but De Nerée also made a few pastels, around forty works in oils and watercolours and, together with his mother, a number of embroidered works.

The art he made can be roughly divided into three periods. The first ran from 1899 to 1901, when he made pastels like *Black Swans* (fig. 6),



Fig. 7
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Henri van Booven
as a Young Priest*,
1900-01.
Pastel on canvas
mounted on card-
board, 81.5 x 57 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-5063;
purchased with
the support of the
Knecht-Drenth
Fonds/Rijksmuseum
Fonds.

Henri van Booven as a Young Priest (fig. 7) and the ink drawings based on Couperus's novel *Extaze* (Ecstasy). Over the course of 1901 the tuberculosis he had contracted earlier that year in Spain worsened and in 1902, in his own words, he did nothing. In 1903 the artist picked up his drawing pen again but produced no more than five to ten works. From that year onwards, he also collaborated with his mother, the artist Constance de Nerée tot

Babberich-van Houten (1858-1930), and together they created large embroidery works such as *Colloque Sentimental* (fig. 8) and *The Seven Princesses*²² based on Paul Verlaine and Maurice Maeterlinck respectively.

He had his second productive period in 1904 and 1905, when he also introduced more colour into his work, as in the watercolour *Rococo* or the gouache *The Meeting*.²³ From 1906 onwards De Nerée concentrated more on his

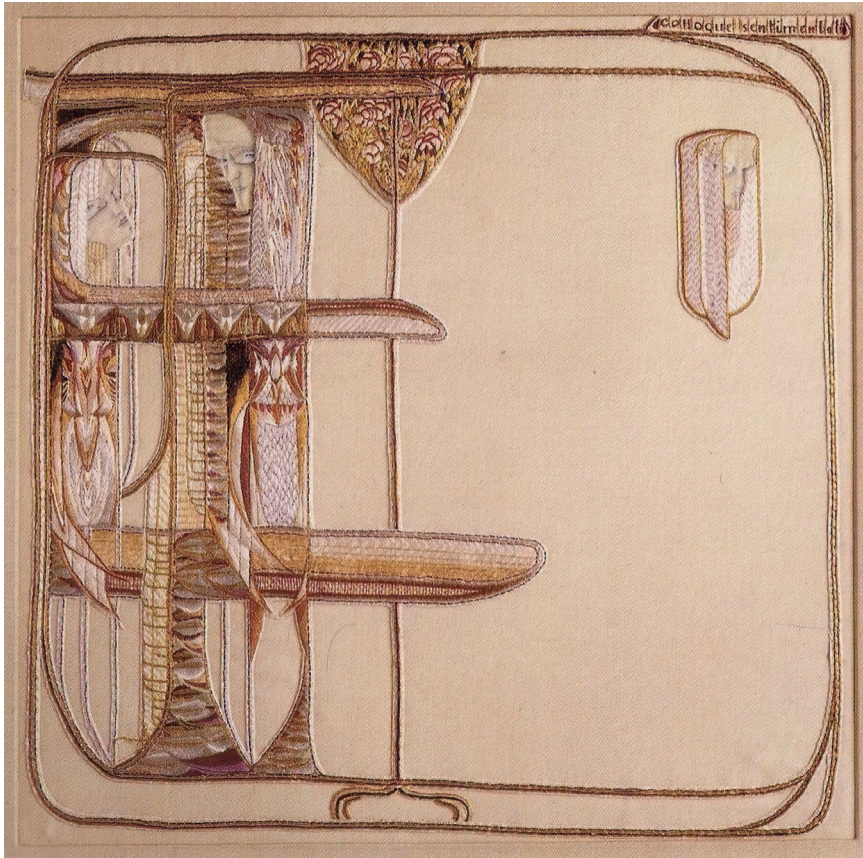


Fig. 8
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH
(design) and
CONSTANCE
DE NERÉE TOT
BABBERICH-
VAN HOUTEN
(execution),
*Colloque senti-
mental*, 1903.
Embroidery on
drawn and painted
silk, 50 x 50 cm.
Meentwijkstraat
Collection.

social career and tried to penetrate the highest diplomatic and royal circles.²⁴ Nevertheless there are various striking works from this third period made in pencil but also in pastels and watercolours, which have less to do with Symbolism, Art Nouveau or Decadentism. They most resemble the more modernist works by Ferdinand Hodler after 1900. The fact that De Nerée was a great admirer of Hodler is documented, because the art critic Albert Plasschaert – a good friend of De Nerée’s – remarked that Hodler was one of the artists ‘around whom De Nerée’s life revolved’.²⁵

This later work is very hard to find and seldom appears on the market. The Rijksmuseum has a rare example of it in the 1907 ink drawing *Fantastic*

Landscape (fig. 9). This is probably not an imaginary landscape as the title given to the work later suggests, but an Italian landscape, possibly near Florence, where the artist spent some months in the first half of that year.²⁶

De Nerée frequently gave his work to friends. They could be finished works or portrait sketches he had made at a dinner, for instance. He did not exhibit during his lifetime, despite the plans that Plasschaert proposed around 1904. The first exhibitions were staged between 1910 and 1914, after his death, in Amsterdam, The Hague, Groningen, Utrecht and Rotterdam and in Berlin and Munich. Plasschaert was the only person to write about De Nerée’s art while he was alive: in his one-man magazine *Kritiek van Beeldende*

Kunsten en Kunstnijverheid (1904-05) he mentioned him in passing in articles about Jessurun de Mesquita and Thorn Prikker.

An Early Drawing Inspired by Literature

Modern literature was a major source of inspiration for De Nerée's art, as it was for many symbolist artists. As well as the *Extaze* (Ecstasy) drawings he made series of drawings based on Henri Borel's *The Last Incarnation* (1900), Henri van Booven's *White Nights* (1901) and Van Eeden's *Johannes Viator* (1892). De Nerée called these works 'dust jackets', although they were never used as such. One example in the Rijksmuseum's collection is the undated

ink drawing *Ornament with Female Figure* which De Nerée likewise described as a 'dust jacket' (fig. 10). On the basis of this title and the handling of line and style, which is reminiscent of the English artist Aubrey Beardsley, it can be dated to 1900-01, or at the very latest 1903.

One of De Nerée's closest friends, from early 1899 to around 1903, was the writer and journalist Henri van Booven (1877-1964), who devoted his life to keeping alive the memory of his friend who had died so young.²⁷ Among other things, he wrote a lavishly illustrated commemorative article for *Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift* which was published at the end of 1911.²⁸ In it Van Booven referred to an early drawing:

Fig. 9
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
Fantastic Landscape,
1907.
Pen, 304 x 373 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-1935-8.



The 1899 work was important, but the steely permanence which would later characterize it was still largely lacking. I recall from that time a drawing in pencil, which had not been in the exhibitions in the Kunstkring in The Hague or in Arti in Amsterdam, titled *Le Jardin des supplices* after the book of that name by Octave Mirbeau.²⁹

In his own copy of the catalogue of the exhibition at Arti in December 1910, Van Booven made a note next to entry number fourteen, the *Extaze* drawing *Finale*, probably as a reminder for himself: 'Illustration for *Le Jardin des Supplices* by Octave Mirbeau'.³⁰ The existence of a work by De Nerée that had been based on Mirbeau's novel can also be inferred from the recollection of Hermine Schuijlenburg, an actress in Eduard Verkade's famous theatre company. Verkade was an extremely close friend of De Nerée's from 1900 until the end of the artist's life. She recalled that he 'was very impressed by Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices*'.³¹

What must have appealed to De Nerée was the recalcitrance and the condemnation of bourgeois mentality it contained. As far as he was concerned, to be bourgeois was almost the worst thing you could be, as Van Booven recalled: 'If I objected to Karel's urges or desires with cool determination, he said that I had become "bourgeois" and he lost more "grip" on me.'³² It was not entirely original to write people off as bourgeois, for in the higher social, aristocratic and patrician circles in which the artist primarily moved it was 'an easy term to dismiss anything to which one felt superior, but with a pleasurable undertone of objectivity', to quote the historian Ileen Montijn in her study *Leven op stand: 1890-1940*.³³ The fact that De Nerée took this anti-bourgeois attitude seriously is evident from the novel *Burgerdom*, which he is said to have written. Van Booven

recalled that when he posed for the 'priest portrait', 'Karel sat very industriously writing a work aimed at "the citizen" as he said'.³⁴ However this novel, possibly inspired by Mirbeau, remained unpublished and only fragments of it appear to have survived.³⁵

According to Schuijlenburg, he may also have made drawings for Mirbeau's novel: she remembered a drawing of a fat executioner in the torture garden.³⁶ She had seen this drawing when she visited De Nerée in his room in The Hague to choose a work. It must have been before 1901, because that was when De Nerée went to Madrid to start work as a junior consul. Van Booven visited him there in May and wrote about that stay in the *roman à clef* *Een liefde in Spanje*.³⁷

It was probably because Van Booven had criticised De Nerée's first works, as he also wrote in *Elsevier's* magazine, that despite their close friendship he was not allowed to choose a work:

I've never understood why he never gave me anything (I don't even know who has my portrait *Henri van Booven as a Young Priest*). To be honest I believe he thought that I found that his first work had too little "of himself" in it, looking in vain for the mature individuality, that alas! alas! I was never allowed to see in him, not even in the upcoming exhibition.³⁸

De Nerée's works rarely have established titles given to them by him or by others, but in the catalogues of the exhibitions staged from 1910 to 1914, which generally featured a hundred or so works, there is not one that could be linked to Mirbeau's novel. There is, though, a plausible candidate: the drawing the Rijksmuseum has entitled *Allegorical Scene with Figures and a Peacock in a Garden*.

De Nerée hardly ever made drawings larger than around twenty by forty centimetres. At forty-eight by slightly

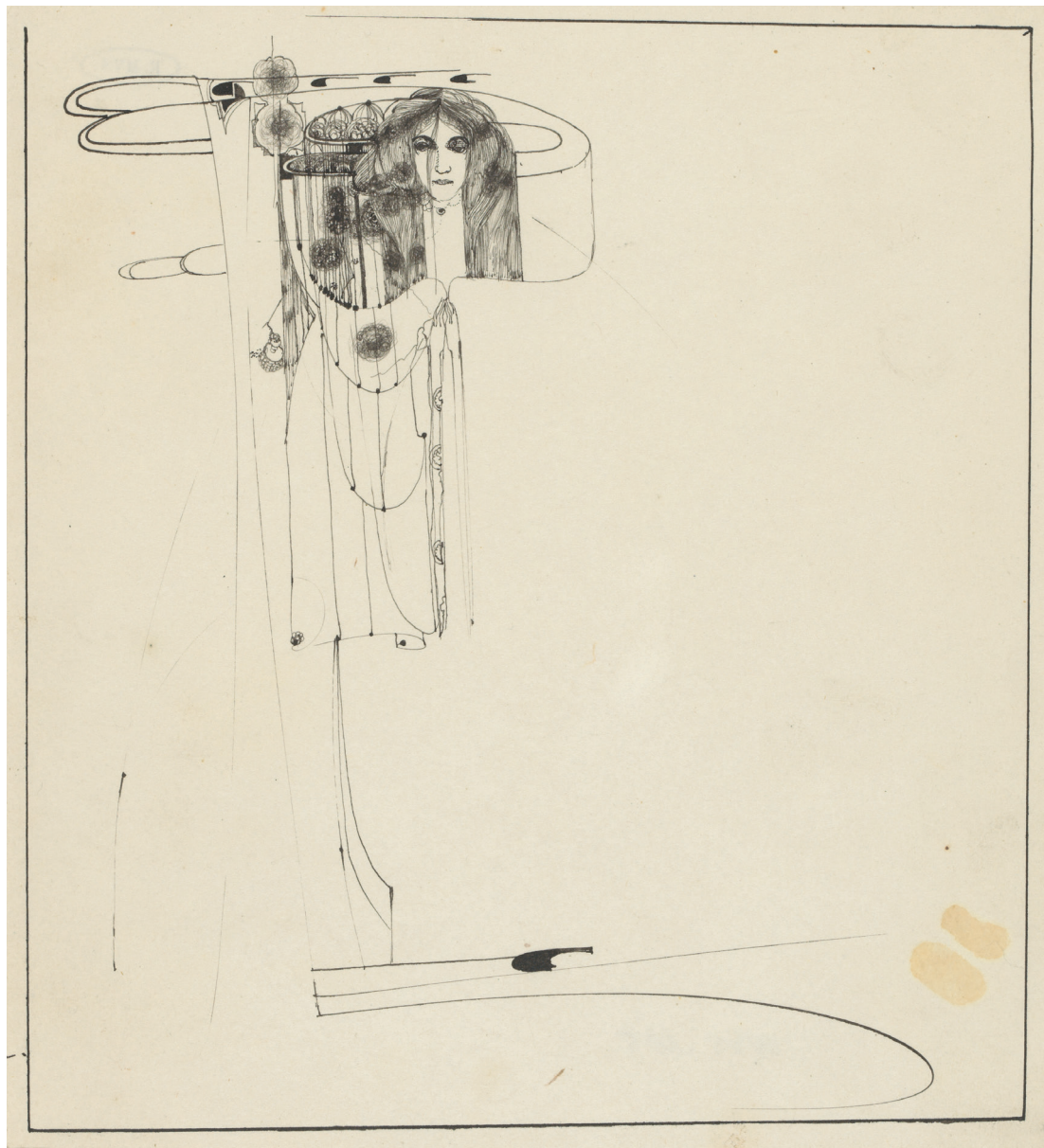


Fig. 10
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Ornament with
Female Figure*,
c. 1900-03.
Pen and Indian ink,
210 x 192 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-1935-5.

more than seventy-three centimetres *Allegorical Scene* is an exception in his oeuvre. The paper mounted on linen is, or has become, yellowish brown and the drawing was made with a pencil, Indian ink and a little white and red paint here and there. That the artist was more or less happy with the work can be gathered from the signature 'CDN', lower right in

pen, which looks very much like the signature on the pencil and pen and ink drawing of *The High Priest* from 1900-01.³⁹ That work is also a similarly unusual size and was made on the same kind of paper.

Allegorical Scene came from De Nerée's estate, which was administered by his mother and brother Frans (1882-1929) and went

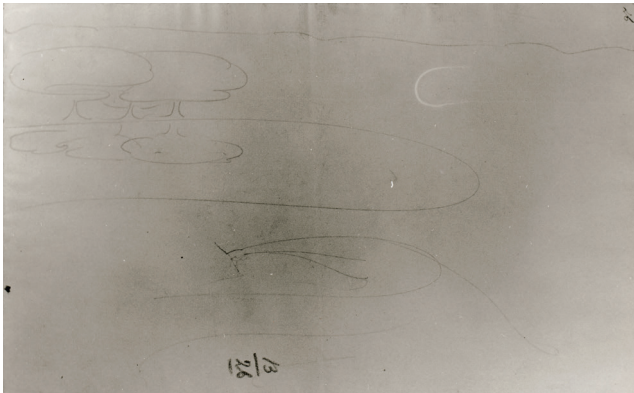


Fig. 11

KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Study of a Stylized
Head of a Man*,
1899-1901.

Pencil, 342 x 210 mm.
Utrecht, Wim
Meulenkamp Collection.

Fig. 12

The verso of *Study
of a Stylized Head
of a Man* (fig. 11),
showing a landscape.

under the hammer on 21 March 1933 as lot 52, *Le Jardin Symbolique*, at the Mak van Waay auction house, where it was purchased by a certain Van der Linde.⁴⁰ At the sale held from 7 to 9 May 1951 at the auction house of Paul Brandt, the Rijksmuseum bought a drawing (lot 21) entitled *Fantasy of Figures and a Peacock in a Garden* from the collection of Jan Knoef (1896-1948) for twenty guilders. We do not know who in the Rijksmuseum gave the work its present title or when this happened.

Preliminary studies by De Nerée are extremely rare, so it is unusual to find what appears to be one for the *Allegorical Scene*. There is a pencil drawing of a swan-like figure of a man, *Study of a Stylized Man's Head* (fig. 11), and on the back he drew a horizontal, elongated landscape in looping lines with trees and a peacock (fig. 12). This drawing was made on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' paper in De Nerée's drawing style of 1899-1901. It may be a design for the landscape in *Allegorical Scene*. Van Booven's remark that the Mirbeau drawing was in pencil, whereas the work in the Rijksmuseum was done in Indian ink, is puzzling. However, it was started in pencil and Van Booven may well have seen a first version that De Nerée had begun in 1899 which became the drawing Schuijlenburg had seen before April 1901.

Possible Influences

The large drawing in the Rijksmuseum was never finished. De Nerée seldom if ever completed his works anyway. 'Oh, richness of the unfinished', wrote one of De Nerée's favourite poets, J.H. Leopold, in about the same period.⁴¹ In part this failure to complete things came about because the 'dilettante' De Nerée always did art 'on the side', but according to Van Booven it was a deliberate artistic process, particularly in his early works:

... it may well be called a peculiarity of the first drawings, most of which appear unfinished, an impression that was created on purpose and in a particular way, where undivided attention was focused on the quality of certain lines.⁴²

By postponing a final version De Nerée was reflecting a symbolist aesthetic, in which the search for the rendition of an idea was key and signified 'a state of perpetual incompleteness'. In the words of the symbolism expert Rodolphe Rapetti: 'This rejection of a "definitive" version suggested the mental possibility of extending a work beyond its physical limits, which would also lead to a redefinition of the technical characteristics of any given mode of artistic expression.'⁴³ Van Booven, however, also provides a more prosaic and less art-theoretical explanation:

In the first drawing of *Le Jardin des supplices* – at any rate when I knew it; it is quite possible that De Nerée made changes to it later – the artist appeared to be at an utter loss with the grouping of the strange miscellany that had to be incorporated.⁴⁴

The dating of 1899-1901 is supported by the echoes of the symbolist works of Jan Toorop, one of his great examples. The kneeling, dark-haired female figure with upturned face calls to mind the figure in Toorop's poster *Venise Sauvée* (1895) (fig. 13). Similar female figures also feature in his *Staatskas* lithograph (1895) and his ribbon design for Couperus's *Metamorfoze* (1897).⁴⁵ These fragile female figures looking away from the earth – from the material – link the work of both Toorop and De Nerée with the neo-mysticism so fashionable at the time. The piously folded hands are also present in De Nerée's works made between 1899 and 1901, such as the *Ecstasy* series, *Two Women by a Tree-trunk with Sunflower*, *Female*

Figure and the *Claartje Rijnbende Triptych*.⁴⁶

In his earliest years as an artist, De Nerée had certainly also looked at the work of Johan Thorn Prikker, as is evident from one of his first drawings, *Thesbe* from 1899.⁴⁷ The parallel lines that De Nerée used to shape the large figure in the centre seem to have been borrowed from Thorn Prikker's *Moine épique* (1894) (fig. 14) or *Le Forgeron* (1895). Although Thorn Prikker's work was rarely exhibited in the eightennineties, De Nerée had seen reproductions of these works in the magazine *De Tuin* (1899) and in *Maandschrift voor Vercieringskunst* (1896-97).⁴⁸

Fig. 13
JAN TOOROP,
Venise Sauvée,
1895.
Lithography,
501 x 332 mm.
Amsterdam,
Van Gogh Museum,
inv. no. p1222v2000.





< Fig. 14

JOHAN THORN
PRIKKER,
Moine épique,
1894.
Indian ink, chalk and
pencil on vellum,
984 x 730 mm.
Utrecht, Centraal
Museum, inv. no. 4757.

Finally, a hint of Antoon Derkinderen can be found in the dress of the central figure. The circular elements resemble the decorations on the title page of the *Gedenkboek der Hollandsche schilderkunst* (1898) he designed.⁴⁹ The artist invariably used the text as a starting point for the extremely individual, totally subjective representation of his reading experience. A direct link with the original text is therefore often difficult to establish. For example, when Van Booven saw the drawings De Nerée had based on *White Nights* published in September 1901, the writer was initially angry because 'I thought that none of the four drawings he made for my first work showed even the slightest connection with the content'.⁵⁰

As far as we know De Nerée did not give the drawing in the Rijksmuseum a title, but in the light of the information we have found it can be linked to the text in Mirbeau's novel. The fact that the scene in the drawing is the garden from the novel is clear from the winding path flanked by exotic plants and flowers that gives the narrator and his cruel lover Clara access to the torture garden. These figures do not appear in the drawing, but the path does.

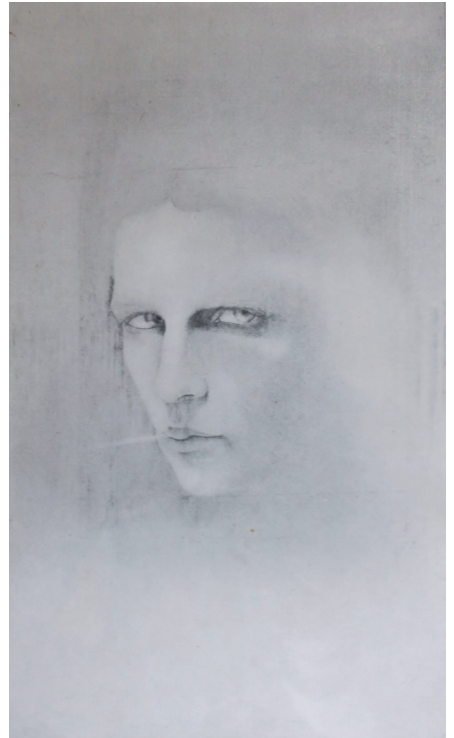
In the novel, the ground is fertilized with the remains of the Chinese 'coolies' who constructed the garden: 'Mixed with earth as manure (for they were buried on the spot), the dead fertilized it with their slow decomposition. In any event, nowhere else in the world does an earth richer in natural humus exist – not even in the heart of the most fantastic tropical forest.'⁵¹ De Nerée represented this by incorporating human figures in the bushes on the left of the female figure with black hair and having eye sockets spring out from the shrubbery lower left. The Chinese character of the whole drawing is emphasized by the dragons on the dress of the figure in the middle.

The pale, emaciated figure on the left could refer to the passage in the novel in which someone is tortured by having their skin flayed off. His hands are clasped, but not in mystical resignation, more in an appeal for mercy. Schuijlenburg thought that she recalled a 'fat executioner' but what she meant by that is unclear. It may be the figure in the middle although – as in the novel – it is not fat, nor does it have an instrument of torture.

Mirbeau describes how the garden is populated by peacocks, and these birds can be seen in the preliminary study and in the drawing in the Rijksmuseum. In the novel Clara feeds them human flesh and encourages them to take part in unnatural, 'decadent' behaviour. The peacock motif is conspicuous in late nineteenth-century modern art. The bird is perhaps the overarching symbol of the Aesthetic Movement with its most famous examples *The Peacock Room* (1876-77) by James Abbott McNeill Whistler and *The Peacock Skirt* (1893) by Aubrey Beardsley.⁵² From the variations in the *Salomé* series that De Nerée made in 1900 and 1901, part of which is *The Peacock Skirt*, it is obvious that he was familiar with that work.

With their dystopian visions of the garden, De Nerée and Mirbeau reinforce a theme from Symbolism, in which the picturesque spot is an allegory of wilderness. Consider, for instance, the dark, occult forests by Arnold Böcklin (like *Forest View* of 1882) or by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (for example *The Sacred Grove* of 1884). In the most modern literature from that period J.-K. Huysmans' *En rade* (1887) is an example of a dystopian perception of nature.

If a landscape in a symbolist artwork is populated, it is usually by apparitions from dreams or fantastical beings, often animal and human hybrids. In a broader sense this is a recurring theme in Symbolism,



of which Franz von Stuck's *Die Sünde* (1893) and Fernand Khnopff's *Caresses* (1896) are famous examples. The woman in these works is portrayed allegorically as a highly dangerous animal. Mirbeau follows the same path by taking the thin line between human civilization and animal rawness as the principal theme of his novel. In what is probably De Néréé's best known work, the pastel *Black Swans* of 1901, this is represented by zoomorphic beings: swans fused with female figures. In *Allegorical Scene* the synthesis of raw nature and man is represented by the heads floating like birds in the centre at the top. He may have taken his inspiration for this from Odilon Redon (fig. 15), whose art was associated with De Néréé's: 'The artist, who died young, was akin to Odilon Redon. His imagination was rich and dramatic,' commented *De Arnhemse Courant* decades later.⁵³ In 1901 he embarked on a Da Vinci-

esque self-portrait in pencil in which he depicted his own head floating in a nebulous vacuum (fig. 16). The floating head in one of De Néréé's drawings for *Johannes Viator* of 1903 is also like Redon's (fig. 17).

As a landscape drawing the *Allegorical Scene* in the Rijksmuseum fits seamlessly in the trends of Symbolism. At the same time, it is an exceptional work in De Néréé's oeuvre, in which nature is virtually absent. As a true 'decadent' the natural held no attraction for him whatsoever: 'His soul had no aspiration towards nature, the fantasies of his mind provided him with ample nourishment.'⁵⁴

Conclusion

With the purchase of *Fantasy of Figures and a Peacock in a Garden*, later renamed *Allegorical Scene with Figures and a Peacock in a Garden*, in 1952, the Rijksmuseum's Print Room acquired one of Karel de Néréé tot

Fig. 15
ODILON REDON,
*L'Esprit gardien
des eaux*, 1878.
Various charcoals,
with touches of black
chalk, stumping,
erasing, incising, and
subtractive sponge
work, heightened
with traces of white
chalk, on cream
wove paper altered
to a golden tone,
466 x 376 mm.
Chicago, The
Art Institute of
Chicago, David
Adler Collection,
ref. no. 1950.1428.

Fig. 16
KAREL DE NÉRÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
Self-Portrait, c. 1901-05.
Pencil, 200 x 150 mm.
Private collection.

Babberich's very first drawings. The fact that he made it after eagerly consuming Mirbeau's novel gives it an extra dimension.

To call this drawing a 'dust jacket' or 'illustration' would rank it alongside other drawings based on literary sources, but that is to demean this Rijksmuseum work. It is precisely the licence he allowed himself so as to

depict his experience of what he read, which can in part be traced back to the text, that makes it a valuable work of art in its own right. The proposal is that from now on we acknowledge the literary origin of this 1899-1901 drawing and give it the explicit title *Torture Garden: Allegorical Scene of Human Cruelty (after the Novel by Octave Mirbeau)*.



Fig. 17
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Illustration for
Johannes Viator,
no. 3, 1903.*
Pencil and brush
and Indian ink,
195 x 144 mm.
Meentwijk
Collection.

ABSTRACT

In her standard work *Het Symbolisme in de Nederlandse schilderkunst* (1955) Bettina Polak regarded the oeuvre of C.K.H. de Nerée tot Babberich (1880-1909) as one of the highlights of *fin de siècle* Dutch art. A fine example is the pastel portrait of *Henri van Booven as a Young Priest* (1900-01) that the Rijksmuseum acquired in 2019. The museum's collection already had nine sheets by Carel de Nerée in different techniques (pencil, ink and bodycolour). One of them, an allegorical scene of figures and a peacock in a garden, is striking in its relatively large size, the Symbolist style and the exotic subject. Based on technical characteristics of form and previously unknown or little studied sources, it is argued that the scene is based on *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899) by Octave Mirbeau. This novel was regarded as pornographic in the Netherlands, but it nonetheless inspired the contrarian young artist to create one of his first works, which proves to have been made between the summer of 1899 and the spring of 1901. In the article the drawing is placed in its biographical context and a number of other sheets by De Nerée from the collection are interpreted in more detail.

NOTES

- 1 'grootse pentekeningen van deze uiterst gevoelige kunstenaar'. Bettina Spaanstra-Polak, *Het Symbolisme in de Nederlandse schilderkunst, 1890-1900*, Bussum 2004 (original ed. 1955), p. 304.
- 2 Quoted from Philippe Jullian, *The Symbolists*, London 1973, pp. 36, 228.
- 3 'het lijfboek van modern exotisme.' *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 4 See recently Marieke Jooren, 'The Painter as Illustrator: Livres d'artistes in the Collection of the Van Gogh Museum', *Kunstlicht* 36 (March 2015), no. 1/2, pp. 91-114.
- 5 See for example Martin Smit, 'Octave Mirbeau: literair anarchist', *de AS – anarchistisch tijdschrift* 45 (Summer 2017), no. 198, pp. 1-5.
- 6 Octave Mirbeau (transl. Michael Richardson), *Torture Garden*, Sawtry 1995, p. 3. 'Aux Prêtres, aux Soldats, aux Juges, aux Hommes, qui éduquent, dirigent, gouvernent les Hommes, je dédie ces pages de Meurtre et de Sang.' Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des Supplices*, Paris [1899], p. 1.
- 7 Mirbeau 1995 (note 6), p. 189. 'Et l'univers m'apparaît comme un immense, comme un inexorable jardin des supplices... Partout du sang, et là où il y a plus de vie, partout d'horribles tourmenteurs qui fouillent les chairs, scient les os, vous retournent la peau, avec des faces sinistres de joie...' Mirbeau 1899 (note 6), p. 294.
- 8 Mirbeau 1995 (note 6), p. 202. 'Je compris, en cette atroce seconde, que la luxure peut atteindre à la plus sombre terreur humaine et donner l'idée véritable de l'enfer, de l'épouvantement de l'enfer...' Mirbeau 1899 (note 6), p. 320.
- 9 'Het is een afschuwelijk boek en een slecht boek, want het doel wordt niet bereikt bij de overgrote meerderheid der lezers, die in plaats afschuw er veeleer ziekelijk prikkeling in zouden vinden.' Anonymous, 'Wreedheid', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 20 July 1899, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010163089:mpeg21:a0007>.
- 10 'Dit is een der beroemdste boeken uit de Franse literatuur, maar een der beruchtste tevens. Literair is het een juweel en als men weet dat de schrijver er een vinnig zedelijkheidsproces om heeft gehad, begrijpt men genoeg, dat dit boek geen kinderlectuur is.' Publisher's advertisement in Jean Lorrain, *Het huis met de roode lantaarn* (*La Maison Philibert*), Amsterdam [c. 1905].
- 11 About modern French literature in translation see various posts by Sander Bink at <http://rond1900.nl>. About Bauer in particular see Sander Bink, 'Over Exhibitionisten, Zoöphilen, Nekrophilen, Mixoskopisten en over *Het huis met de roode lantaarn* [1905]', 16 June 2017, <http://rond1900.nl/?p=21705>.
- 12 *O, vrouw!...* was translated by J. Feitsma and published in 1929 by G. Schoonderbeek in Laren, see <http://mirbeau.asso.fr/darticlesfrançais/Gevers-reception%20en%20hollande.pdf>.
- 13 'De dode parelen' and 'De kleine fee dum-dum', *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 2 March and 7 May 1898.
- 14 'In Oostenrijk verboden omdat het zedenbederf van de bourgeoisie te sterk wordt getekend.' *Het Volk*, 22 September 1901.
- 15 Sander Bink, 'Een geval van fictieve receptie van Majesteit', *Arabesken* 13 (2005), no. 25, pp. 34-35.
- 16 'Of ik in de *Jardin des Supplices* zou durven? Nee, 't is ál te wreed, dát. 't Kan haast niet waar zijn.' See Sander Bink,

- 'Fictieve receptie van Octave Mirbeau (2)', 14 December 2006, <http://rond1900.nl/?p=291>.
- 17 'Ik heb vandaag veel gewerkt, zowat drie boeken gelezen en overlezen ... Wel tevredenstellend toch, dat beetje werken, in de lege dag. Het werken is eigenlijk een dwaze zaak; men werkt uit noodzakelijkheid, zoals men loopt of slaapt – of eet, maar met meer frenesie, met meer gewildheid.' Letter from Karel de Nerée to Claartje Rijnbende, 23 December 1900, De Nerée tot Babberich, Babberich Family Archives. With thanks as ever to Richard and Ralph de Nerée for making it available to me.
- 18 Sander Bink, 'Karel de Nerée "Il y a la chute grande" (1900-'01)', 17 December 1901, <http://rond1900.nl/?p=22841>.
- 19 Sander Bink, 'Het debuut van Karel de Nerée tot Babberich', 19 October 2011, <http://rond1900.nl/?p=17193>; *ibid.*, 'Over het opgedoken, werkelijke tekendebuut van De Nerée uit 1896', 25 October 2015, <http://rond1900.nl/?p=21237>.
- 20 'door zijn uitzonderlijke kleding en de verhalen, die over zijn literaire werken verteld werden'. 'In Memoriam Jeanne C. van Leyden', *Het Vaderland*, 14 February 1939. Jeanne van Leyden was De Nerée's dance partner in the Kurhaus.
- 21 Article by Sander Bink to be published at the end of 2020 in *Jaarboek Godlinze* (Aspekt publishers, Soesterberg).
- 22 Karel de Nerée tot Babberich (design) and Constance de Nerée tot Babberich-van Houten (execution), *De zeven Princessen*, 1904, drawing and embroidery on linen, 167 x 239 cm, The Hague, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, inv. no. MWE-1929-0001.
- 23 Karel de Nerée tot Babberich, *Rococo*, 1904, pen and brush and Indian ink and watercolour, 350 x 220 mm, Arnhem, Museum Arnhem, inv. no. GM 7012; *ibid.*, *De ontmoeting*, 1904, pen and brush and Indian ink and gouache, 344 x 210 mm, Arnhem, Museum Arnhem, inv. no. GM 8886.
- 24 Sander Bink, 'Karel de Nerée op de thee bij Hare Majesteit', 30 April 2013, <http://rond1900.nl/?p=18787>; *ibid.*, 'Van en over De Nerée's portret van General von Meissner uit 1908', 8 November 2018, <http://rond1900.nl/?p=23662>.
- 25 'om wie De Nerée's leven cirkelde'. A. Plasschaert, 'Karel de Nerée tot Babberich', in *ibid.*, *Opmerkingen en gegevens over schilderkunst*, Ooltgensplaat 1910, p. 59.
- 26 Letter from Edzard Falck to Henri van Booven, 22 November 1951, Henri van Booven Archives, Amsterdam.
- 27 Sander Bink, *Karel de Nerée tot Babberich en Henri van Booven. Den Haag in het fin de siècle*, Zwolle 2014, published to coincide with the exhibition in the Louis Couperus Museum, The Hague, November 2014–May 2015.
- 28 Henri van Booven, 'Karel de Nerée, 18 March 1880 – 19 October 1909', *Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift* 21 (1911), pp. 6-18.
- 29 'Het 1899-werk was belangrijk, maar de stalen vastheid die het later zou kenmerken, ontbrak nog grotendeels. Ik herinner mij uit die tijd een potloodtekening, die niet op de tentoonstellingen in de Kunstkring te Den Haag, of in Arti te Amsterdam geweest is, getiteld: *Le Jardin des supplices* naar het boek van die naam door Octave Mirbeau.' *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 30 *Tentoonstelling van tekeningen en aquarellen door C.H. Karel de Nerée tot Babberich. Maatschappij Arti et Amicitiae*, Amsterdam, 1910. The Hague, Literatuurmuseum, inv. no. B 00737.
- 31 '[hij] zeer onder de indruk [was] van Mirbeaus *Le Jardin des supplices*'. Hermine Schuijlenburg's recollections of Karel de Nerée, recorded by Dick Veeze on 22 June and 12 September 1970, manuscript by the author on loan from Veeze.
- 32 'Ging ik tegen Karels drijven of verlangen met koele beslistheid in, dan heette het dat ik "burgerlijk" was geworden en dan verloor hij alweer meer "grip" op mij.' Letter from Henri van Booven to Hendrik de Vries, 25 August 1951, in Sander Bink (ed.), *Briefwisseling Van Booven – De Vries*, Baarn 2013, p. 52.
- 33 'een makkelijke term om alles af te doen waarboven [men] zich verheven voelde, maar met een plezierige ondertoon van objectiviteit'. Ileen Montijn, *Leven op stand 1890-1940*, Amsterdam 1998, p. 16.
- 34 'Karel dan zeer ijverig [zat] te schrijven aan een werk, waarin hij "de burger" op de korrel nam, naar het heette'. Sander Bink, 'Witte nachten: de artistieke vriendschap tussen Henri van Booven en Karel de Nerée tot Babberich', *Zacht Lawijd* 13 (2014), no. 2, pp. 2-27, esp. p. 7.
- 35 Fragments of what this novel could or should have been are in a folder with unpublished literary work by De Nerée in the family archives.
- 36 Recollections of Schuijlenburg (note 31).
- 37 Bink 2014 (note 34).
- 38 'Waarom hij mij nooit iets schonk (wie mijn portret *Henri van Booven als jonge Priester* heeft, weet ik óók niet) heb ik nooit begrepen.

- Eerlijk gezegd geloof ik dat hij wel voelde dat ik zijn eerste werk toch nog te weinig “van hem zelf” vond, vergeefs uitzien naar het gerijpte, eigene, dat ik helaas! helaas! nooit van hem mocht zien, ook op de komende tentoonstelling niet.’ Letter from Henri van Booven to Hendrik de Vries, 6 October 1951, in Bink 2013 (note 32), p. 62.
- 39 Karel de Nerée tot Babberich, *De Hoge-priester*, 1900-01, pencil, pen and brush and Indian ink, heightened with white, 607 x 313 mm, private collection.
- 40 This may have been the painter Jan van der Linde (1864-1945).
- 41 ‘O, rijkdom van het onvoltooid.’ J.H. Leopold, *Verzameld werk*, 2 vols., Amsterdam/Rotterdam 1951-52, vol. 1, p. 238.
- 42 ‘... een eigenaardigheid van de eerste tekeningen mag het wel heten, dat de meeste onaf schijnen, een indruk die met opzet werd gewekt en volgens een bepaalde wijze, waar het gold de aandacht onverdeeld op de hoedanigheid van zekere lijnen te vestigen.’ Van Booven 1911 (note 28), p. 7.
- 43 Rodolphe Rapetti, *Symbolism*, Paris 2005, p. 145.
- 44 ‘In eerstbedoelde tekening *Le Jardin des supplices* – althans zoals ik die gekend heb; het is zeer wel mogelijk dat De Nerée er later wijzigingen in heeft aangebracht – scheen de kunstenaar met de groepering van al de te verwerken, vreemde verscheidenheden geen raad te weten.’ Van Booven 1911 (note 28), p. 10.
- 45 Polak 2004 (note 1), *Catalogue raisonné J.H. Toorop*, nos. 88, 90, 104.
- 46 On the *Extaze* drawings see Bink 2014 (note 27); Karel de Nerée tot Babberich, *Two Women by a Tree-trunk with Sunflower*, 1899-1900, pencil, pen and Indian ink, 295 x 210 mm, The Hague, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, inv. no. T 140-1971; *ibid.*, *Female Figure*, 1899-1910, pen drawing in sepia over a pencil sketch, 216 x 140 mm, Leiden, Print Room Leiden University Library, inv. no. A.W. 3204; *ibid.*, *Claartje Rijnbende Triptych*, 1900, pencil and coloured chalk, passe-partout mounted with drawing, 495 x 705 mm, private collection.
- 47 Sander Bink, ‘A Juvenile Drawing by the Talented Symbolist Karel de Nerée tot Babberich’, Leiden Special Collections Blog, 29 January 2016, <https://leidenspecial-collectionsblog.nl/articles/a-juvenile-drawing-by-the-talented-symbolist-karel-de-nerée-tot-babberich>.
- 48 Dick Veeze (ed.), *Karel de Nerée tot Babberich: Uit twee particuliere collecties*, exh. cat. Laren (Singer Museum) 1974, note 72 (in typescript ‘Notenapparaat bij catalogus’, De Nerée documentation Veeze, on loan to the author).
- 49 Polak 2004 (note 1), fig. 76; Dick Veeze refers to these parallels in his De Nerée notes.
- 50 ‘Van de vier tekeningen, die hij voor mijn eerste werk vervaardigde er geen enkele ook slechts het minste verband met de inhoud vertoonde naar ik meende’. Van Booven 1911 (note 28), p. 16.
- 51 Mirbeau 1995 (note 6), p. 133. ‘Mélangés au sol, comme un fumier – car on les enfouissait sur place – les morts l’engraissèrent de leurs décompositions lentes, et pourtant, nulle part, même au cœur des plus fantastiques forêts tropicales, il n’existait une terre plus riche en humus naturel.’ Mirbeau 1899 (note 6), p. 187.
- 52 Cf. Polak 2004 (note 1), pp. 238-39.
- 53 ‘de jonggestorven kunstenaar is verwant met Odilon Redon. Zijn fantasie is rijk en dramatisch’. J.W., ‘Aanwinsten in het Arnhemse Gemeentemuseum’, *Arnhemse Courant*, 7 July 1955.
- 54 ‘Son âme n’eut aucune aspiration vers la nature, les fantaisies de son esprit le nourrissaient amplement.’ G.D. Gratama, ‘Exposition d’oeuvres de Charles de Nerée au Cercle de l’Art de La Haye’, *L’Art Flamand et Hollandais* 18 (1911), no. 1, p. 32.

