

# Emilio Castelar, Gustave Arosa and Paul Gauguin

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Fig. 1  
Félix Nadar  
Nadar's friend Gustave Arosa in  
a series of preparatory portraits  
for a sculpture, ca. 1865  
Albumen print  
14 x 12.8 cm  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

“En [su] casa, donde las paredes relumbraban a los toques metálicos de las fuentes hispano-arábigas y a los relieves mágicos de nuestros antiguos bargueños; con los versos de Racine y de Lope a la continua en los labios; ora dibujando los bajo-relieves de la columna troyana, ora componiendo las porciones maltrechas de un mueble viejo; dado a las letras y a las artes en aquel museo regocijante, como un sultán oriental en el harem se da entre las esencias de sus pebeteros a los ensueños de su amor ...”<sup>1</sup>

Emilio Castelar

These lines are taken from Emilio Castelar's *Historia del año 1883*, and the person described reciting couplets as he busies himself with his artworks and objects, surrounded by the many examples of Spanish ceramics and furniture displayed at his home in Saint-Cloud, is Gustave Arosa (1818-1883) [fig. 1], perhaps best-known today as Paul Gauguin's legal guardian in the years following the death of Gauguin's mother Aline in 1867. While scholars have long recognized that Arosa had a significant impact on Gauguin's development as an artist, seen in Gauguin's frequent artistic borrowings from the collotypes Arosa published and the paintings in his collection [figs. 2 and 3], he has never been properly documented, and a number of primary sources and texts on Arosa such as this one by Castelar have been largely ignored. This is unfortunate, since Arosa is an interesting personality in his own right—as a collector of paintings and drawings (primarily Delacroix but also Courbet, Daumier, Corot, Jongkind and Pissarro, among others) and ceramics, a pioneer of early photomechanical reproduction and host to numerous Spanish exiles and visitors who came to Paris—and the more we know about him, the better we can understand the ideas, culture and circumstances which helped set the stage for Gauguin's transition from young sailor to successful stockbroker to one of the most remarkable artists of his time [fig. 4].

Emilio Castelar [fig. 5] was a close friend of Arosa's son-in-law Adolfo Calzado, and travelled often to Paris, where he lived in exile for close to a year in 1866-67 and returned regularly over the following twenty years; he was a frequent visitor at Arosa's home in the *quartier Saint-Georges* and at his *casa museo*, as Castelar called it, in Saint-Cloud. Castelar repeatedly expressed his appreciation for Arosa in the letters he wrote over a number of years to Calzado as well as in these pages from his chronicle of the year 1883, written as an homage to Arosa who had died in April of that year; Gauguin, on the other hand—the great-grandson of a Spanish-Peruvian aristocrat and the grandson of the early socialist and author Flora Tristán, whom Castelar would have heard of but whose politics he most likely wouldn't have agreed with—is never mentioned and thus may not have made much of an



Fig. 2  
Paul Gauguin  
*Bouquet of flowers, fol. 1r*  
of the *Album Noa-Noa*  
(Album Gauguin Paul -1-)  
Graphite pencil, pen and grey  
ink, and watercolour on paper,  
315 x 232 mm  
Département des Arts  
Musée du Louvre,  
Paris



Fig. 3  
Eugène Delacroix  
*Still Life with Dahlias, ca.*  
1883  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 33 cm  
Philadelphia Museum of  
Art, Philadelphia. John G.  
Johnson collection, 1917  
This work was formerly in  
Gustave Arosa's collection.



Fig. 4  
Paul Gauguin  
*Self-Portrait*, ca. 1875-77  
Oil on canvas, 46.7 x 38.4 cm  
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge.  
Gift of Helen W. Ellsworth in memory of Duncan S. Ellsworth '22, nephew of Archibald A. Hutchinson, benefactor of the Hutchinson Wing



Fig. 5  
Eugène Pirou  
Emilio Castelar, ca. 1899  
Photograph  
New York Public Library, New York

impression on him, if in fact Castelar ever met him on any of his visits.

As a man of letters, it is not surprising that Castelar was drawn to this aspect of Arosa's personality and that he depicts him as someone whose literary inclinations were as passionate as his appetite for paintings, ceramics, photography and beautiful objects. Arosa, as one would expect, had a respectable library of books: an inventory of his belongings drawn up at his death lists approximately 4,000 volumes (and there were probably more) in library of the modest *hotel particulier* that he had built on the rue de Prony, close to the Parc Monceau, in 1879. These were modern editions of European literature for the most part, from Michel Lévy Frères, the Bibliothèque Charpentier, the Bibliothèque Elzevirienne, Editions Lemerre, just to cite a few.<sup>2</sup>

Further on in the text, Castelar more fully describes Arosa's literary preferences, and reveals something about his frame of mind following the Franco-Prussian War:

"Gustavo prefería entre los antiguos poetas a Lope, Calderón y Shakespeare, como entre los modernos a Victor Hugo y a Zorrilla; pero, a fuer de buen francés, tras la guerra franco-prusiana borró al gran poeta sajón de su calendario, diciendo que los triunfos y predomios de las razas germánicas eran debidos al continuo loor sin tasa prodigado a sus obras, aún la más imperfecta, por los heleno-latinos, verdaderos dispensadores de la inmortalidad, y llevado a ciegas de tal sentimiento patriótico, ponía las correctas, pero artificiosas tragedias romanas de Racine, como Germánico, sobre las profundísimas de Shakespeare que han resucitado a César, Antonio y Cleopatra."

There are two points that must be made in order to understand this passage. First, for most of the nineteenth century, the view that Shakespeare was Anglo-Saxon or Germanic in nature was rather commonplace.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it is hard to fathom that Castelar would qualify the tragedies of the great classical French playwright Jean Racine as "correct" or "contrived," and furthermore, Racine never wrote a tragedy based on the story of Germanicus Julius Caesar. Yet one of Racine's lesser-known rivals, Edmé Boursault (1638-1701), more closely fits Castelar's description and did write such a tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Assuming, therefore, that there is a mistake in printed text and that the intended reference is to Boursault, and not Racine, would Castelar have us believe that the otherwise highly discriminating Gustave Arosa, out of his great patriotism toward France, was so strongly affected by the Prussian invasion that he came to value the works of a second-rate, derivative French classical playwright over Shakespeare? Well,

perhaps; but more importantly, this anecdote illustrates how Arosa shared with many of his French contemporaries the belief that they had been victims of their own naiveté, and that Prussian imperialist ambitions and military capability had been facilitated by the candid, uncritical, even deferential attitude that the French had taken for decades towards German culture.

Soon after Mme de Stael published her *De L'Allemagne* in 1813-1814 as an alternate narrative to Napoleon's campaign of defamation against Germany, countless French intellectuals and artists of the Romantic generation began to extoll the virtues of their neighbors in contrast to their own flaws and shortcomings. If French morals had become corrupt, the Germans were a loyal, virtuous people of pure and simple values; where the French delighted in pleasure and lightness, German literature was by turns profound, learned and disciplined or the product of a nation of poets with their heads in the clouds, of suffering young Werthers more inclined to turn upon themselves rather than others and the clichés went on and on.

Even though by the 1830's figures such as Edgar Quinet and the German expatriates Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne began to question these assumptions and criticize French *Teutomania*, their warnings went largely unheeded, and decades later, in the wake of the Franco-Prussian conflict, unable to accept the trouncing that had taken place on French soil, in some quarters a *mea culpa* of sorts rose to the surface, where the French defeat was interpreted as a consequence of their own enduring willingness to believe in the idealized construct of German society and culture that they had nurtured for over fifty years.<sup>5</sup> From Castelar we can surmise that this was one of the ideas that was being voiced and debated in the Arosa household when Gauguin arrived in its midst, in the late spring of 1871, having avoided most of the conflict while he completed his military service in the navy.

The Prussian army had occupied the town of Saint-Cloud made it its *de facto* headquarters, and in mid-October 1870 French forces retaliated by shelling the town and palace from their stronghold on the nearby Mont-Valérien. The destruction was widespread, and is reflected in a series of haunting photographs that Arosa made of the ruined homes of his friends and neighbors in Saint-Cloud.

While the extent of the damage to Gustave Arosa's house and to his collection of ceramics must have been serious, it must not have come close to the total devastation depicted in these photographs.<sup>6</sup> Marie Heeregaard, the young, impressionable friend of Gauguin's future wife Mette Gad, wrote to her father that the Arosas had lost a lot during the war and as a result couldn't stand the Germans.<sup>7</sup> But by the spring of 1873 at the latest the family, accompanied by Gauguin, was once again spending weekends in Saint-Cloud and Gustave was busy adding to the collection of his *casa-museo* with the purchase and

commission of several works by Pissarro, who would later take Gauguin under his wing.<sup>8</sup> These were the years that relations between Gauguin and his former tutor were at their closest, and although he would later rebel against the bourgeois culture of that environment, the images of the works of art he encountered there accompanied him all the way to the South Seas.

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**Notes**

- 1 Emilio Castelar, *Historia del año 1883* (Madrid: Oficinas de la Ilustración Española y Americana, 1884), p. 249.
- 2 I am currently preparing a publication on the inventory and new aspects of Arosa's art collection.
- 3 See for example, Lynne Walhout Hinojosa, "Shakespeare and (Anti-German) Nationalism in the Writing of English Literary History, 1880-1993," in *English Literature in Transition*, no. 46, 2003, p. 228.
- 4 Boursault's *Germanicus* premiered in 1673 and was first published in 1694 by Jean Guignard. A play of the same title by Nicolas Pradon (1632-1698) premiered in 1694, but it was never published.
- 5 Much has been written about the French nineteenth-century fascination with Germany. See for example, Ian Allan Henning, *L'Allemagne de Madame de Staël et la polémique romantique. Première fortune de l'ouvrage en France et en Allemagne (1814-1830)* (Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1975), and Louis Reynaud, *L'influence allemande en France au XVIIIe et au XIXe siècle* (Paris, Hachette, 1922).
- 6 Gustave's mother apparently recorded in her diary on February 17, 1871, that news had reached them the house had burned and the collection of ceramics had been destroyed; Maurice Malingue, *La vie prodigieuse de Gauguin* (Paris, 1978), p. 26.
- 7 Victor Merlhès, ed., *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin* (Paris, Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984), no. 1, dated 21 November 1872 (translated into French) : "... une soirée chez des gens qui sont un peu espagnols et qui s'appellent A'Rosa, des gens que ont beaucoup perdu durant la dernière guerre et qui, pour cette raison, ne supportent plus de voir des allemands (...)" In a subsequent letter (*ibid.*, no. 5) she writes that the Arosa's house in Saint-Cloud "à été brulé durant la dernière guerre...."
- 8 J. Pissarro and C. Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro, Catalogue critique des peintures*, vol. II (Paris, Wildenstein, 2005), p. 142, no. 160; p. 178, no. 190; p. 180, no. 214, and pp. 195-198, nos. 238-241.