



CHARLES MALFRAY (1887-1940)

The Pain of Orpheus, also called The Poet's Song

Bronze, n°1/8

Sand cast by Alexis Rudier

Signed and dated: CH. MALFRAY 1914

H. 117; W. 40; D. 40 cm

Provenance

- Bellier Gallery, Paris
- Bemberg Foundation, Toulouse (1996-2015)

Bibliography

- Jacques de Laprade, *Malfray*, Paris, Fernand Mourlot, 1944.
- Françoise Galle, *Catalogue raisonné des sculptures de Charles Malfray*, mémoire de DESS, université de Paris I, direction de Robert Julien, 1971, n°11, 12, 13.

Exhibitions

- *Charles Malfray*, Paris, Musée du Petit Palais, juin 1947, n°4 (bronze, number unknown).
- *Charles Malfray 1887-1940*, Paris, galerie Edmond Guérin, 16 février-31 mars 1948, n°10 (bronze, n.1/8).
- *Formes Humaines*, deuxième biennale de sculpture contemporaine, Paris, musée Rodin, 29 avril-30 mai 1966, n°2 (bronze, number unknown).
- *Charles Malfray 1887-1940 sculptor*, exhibition catalogue, Paris Galerie Malaquais, April 5 - June 30, 2007, n°4 (bronze proof, n°2/8).

The Pain of Orpheus, also known as *The Song of the Poet*, belongs to the works of Malfray's youth. The artist created it for a student competition while he was at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, just before he was mobilized. With this work, he affirmed, through his choice of subject and aesthetic approach, the personal style that he had already developed.

I/ *The Pain of Orpheus*, the sculpture that Charles Malfray presented for the Chenavard Prize in 1914 at the École des Beaux-Arts of Paris

Charles Malfray seems to have always been a sculptor; he began his artistic studies in Orléans, in the studio of his father, who was a renowned stone-cutter, as well as in the studio of the sculptor and decorator Alfred-Désiré Lanson (1851-1898). Later, from 1901 to 1904, Malfray was a student at the École des Beaux-Arts of Orléans in the studio of Ernest Lanson (1836-1914), the brother of his first master.

In 1904, he moved to Paris to join his older brother, Henri, who was an architecture student, and he lived a bohemian life in Montmartre for several years. There he encountered Pablo Picasso, Jacques Lipchitz, and Pablo Gargallo. He also met Auguste Rodin and André de Segonzac at Isadora Duncan's studio, where he went to draw the dancer. He was admitted to the École des Beaux-Arts of Paris in Jules Coutan's studio, but was disappointed by the teaching he received, and so augmented it by drawing from life in the streets and, particularly, on the quais. He was, thus, an unfettered student, free to pursue his own education, though it was interrupted by military service between 1908 and 1910.

From 1912 on, he competed for the Rome Prize and, in 1914, submitted *The Pain of Orpheus*, called *The Song of the Poet*, for the Chenavard Prize. This annual competition^[1], open to the poorest students in order to help support them financially, left the choice of the subject open to the students. Malfray most likely started working on this piece in 1913, and the dimensions of the version he submitted to the jury are not known. It may have been the small version, such as the one presented here, or it may have been one twice as large, a monumental format, like the plaster held in the Beaux-Arts museum in Orléans. The story goes that "the original clay measuring 2.40 meters was barely finished in 1914 when Malfray was mobilized. His mother went every day to replace the damp rags so that when her son returned, he would find the piece in a condition that would allow him to return to work on it."^[2] As far as the competition went, however, he only tied for fifth place.

II/ A powerful stylistic affirmation

His disappointing ranking in the competition was no doubt based on the sculptor's stylistic choices. For, in fact, though he tried to bow to the academic canons, he couldn't quite do it.

In its overall attitude, *Orpheus* adopts the codes of classical sculpture. He's shown naked, standing on a rock in a posture that expresses his despair. With his face turned toward the sky, his gaze marked by a deep sadness, and his imploring arms raised in the same direction, the poet sings of the grief that overwhelms him. His stance has a distinct dynamic derived from the gestures of his arms and the angle of his hips, with one leg cocked backward and the other stretched outward.

Close examination of the surface of the work reveals a modeling full of character. While it conveys great fluidity, that is, in turn, counter-balanced by crisp accents, as in certain works by Émile-Antoine Bourdelle. Considering Bourdelle and his relationship to Malfray, Jacques de Laprade remarked: "To his taste for the archaic and his desire to express himself with emotional force, Malfray added an informed interest in architecture. He wanted to anchor his figures on masses that perfectly matched them. In his moving bronze *Apollon sur les cimes de l'Olympe* (*Apollo on the Summit of Olympus*) Bourdelle's influence on Malfray is clear. But Bourdelle would also put him on the path toward his own original solutions, which he would follow for a long time. From then on, his work showed a tendency that marked all of his art and that was natural to the son of a stone-cutter: Malfray respected the block ..."[\[3\]](#) In fact, Bourdelle's early influence on Malfray can be seen in his modeling, as well as in his architectural compositions. He was also inspired by masters who forged his observational methods, particularly Michelangelo, with his *Esclaves* (*Slaves*) and Rodin, with his *L'Âge d'Airain* (*The Bronze Age*).

Thus, though *The Pain of Orpheus* observes a number of academic codes, it's also marked by a distinct freedom that the jury, clearly, could not accept. Later, Malfray expressed the deep aversion he'd felt for the École and its teaching methods: "Academicism consists of copying and recopying models ... and thus a canon is established, and all that does not follow suit is condemned."[\[4\]](#)

III/ A prophetic subject?

With *The Song of the Poet*, Charles Malfray continued a series of works based upon mythological themes that he'd begun with *Apollo on the Summit of Olympus* (1912), *Leda and the Swan* (1912-13), and *Nymph and Satyr* (1913). The Orpheus myth, one of the most popular among artists, has been treated many times in both painting and sculpture since the Renaissance. The son of the muse Calliope and Oeagrus, the king of Thrace, Orpheus was a poet and a musician capable of charming any living being with his lyre and his voice. He

fell in love with the young nymph Eurydice, but she was bitten by a snake and died of the bite. And so, Orpheus began his long pilgrimage to the underworld, going as far as to charm Cerberus and Charon in order to bring his beloved back into the world of the living. Hades accepted this on the sole condition that Orpheus not turn around once he had crossed the threshold of the underworld with Eurydice. But, unfortunately, Orpheus was seized by doubt as to whether Eurydice was really behind him, and so he turned around, losing her forever.

Charles Malfray chose to present the poet stripped of all his usual attributes, which means that it's the title alone that identifies him, and it's impossible to tell the exact moment in the story that Malfray wanted to depict—is it before he descends into the underworld or after? Malfray concentrated exclusively on the lyrical configuration of pain, creating a work that constitutes a universal metaphor for sadness and grief. And yet, at that point in his life, Malfray had not yet personally experienced such emotions. They would come with the war, during which he sculpted *Silence* (1916-18), a symbol of the atrocities suffered by the infantry, of which he was a part. After the war, he again directly addressed the effects of battle, depicting a soldier killed by a bomb in *Monument aux morts de Pithiviers* (1920). After that, he ceased to represent suffering in his art, even though he himself went through a series of subsequent trials—the relentless struggle that he went through in order to finish his *Monument aux Morts (Monument to the Dead)* (1922-29) for his native city of Orléans, as well as financial difficulties and the mental illness that struck his brother Henri when he was still quite young. Charles Malfray had his own health issues as well; his lungs were extremely fragile because of the poisonous gas that he'd inhaled during the war, a cause of his death at the early age of 52.

The bronze proof presented here is a sand cast by Alexis Rudier. This foundry, which specialized in casting for goldsmiths, was run from 1874 to 1897 by its founder, Alexis Rudier. Later, from 1897 to 1952, it was run by his son, Eugène Rudier, who nonetheless retained the brand "Alexis Rudier."[\[5\]](#) Eugène Rudier managed to attract to his foundry some of the most noted sculptors of the day, in large part thanks to his affiliation with Rodin, who had begun using him as a founder in 1902. Eugène Rudier worked with, among others, Aristide Maillol, Antoine Bourdelle, and Paul Cornet.

As far as is currently known, there are only two remaining bronze proofs of *The Pain of Orpheus* in the 1m20 format, the one presented here and #2/8, which was cast by Marius Hohwiller. The original foundry model in plaster, made up of seven pieces and 1m20 high, was sold during the sale of works left in the artist's studio; the sale was held on December 22, 1958 at Drouot (#69 in the sale catalogue).

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sculptures & dessins

[1] 1912, École nationale des Beaux-Arts, art. 110 et 113: The Chenavard Prize is an annual competition "*to come to the aid of students in painting, sculpture, architecture, and engraving admitted to the School under the classification of 'poor,' and who have shown themselves through their work to be the most worthy of this encouragement.*"

[2] Charles Malfray, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Musée du Petit Palais, June 1947, n°4.

[3] Jacques de Laprade, *Malfray*, Paris, Fernand Mourlot, 1944, p. 17

[4] Malfray, manuscript letter addressed to the mayor of Orléans, April 23, 1925; a copy of the original is held in the municipal archives of Orléans and was consulted at the center for documentation at the library in the Beaux-Arts Museum of Orléans.

[5] Lebon, Elisabeth, *Dictionnaire des fondeurs de bronze d'art*, France 1890-1950, Marjon, 2003, p. 219.