

Honore Daumier, August 2011 OOM, D. Shatin

1. **The Fugitives, Oil on canvas, 1868, G353, 54.16**



2. **The Fugitives, Bas-relief, c. modeled 1850 (bronze casting later, date unknown, 1893 suggested by MIA), G353, 56.31**



Above is a plaster relief of *Les Emigrants* (1848) from the Musee d'Orsay since there is no image of the MIA bas-relief.

Gallery Label: Daumier's painting, *The Fugitives*, was his last and most dramatic rendering of the refugee theme and might refer to events surrounding the onset of the Franco-Prussian war, or to the insurrection of the commune in France in 1870. Daumier was less interested in depicting specific events than in responding to the depth of human suffering caused by these events. The bas-relief sculpture is one of Daumier's earliest expressions of the theme of exile, which he explored frequently between 1848 and 1870. Although possibly inspired by the Polish Revolution or the 1848 insurrection in France, the precise subject remains unknown.

Questions, based on the painting:

1. What mood does this painting evoke?
2. What figures do you see in this and what are their expressions?
3. How would you describe the colors?

4. What do you think is going on in this painting, given the title (The Fugitives)?

Key Points:

- Although Daumier was principally known as a caricaturist and illustrator his love was painting and he was a sculptor as well.
- A supreme caricaturist and satirist he worked for a number of political magazines offering commentary on the social and political life of 19th Century France. He was imprisoned for 6 months for his caricature of King Louis-Phillipe titled *Gargantuan* (portraying the King sitting on a bag of gold).
- A prolific draftsman who produced over 4000 lithographs, 1000 wood engravings, 1000 drawings, and 100 sculptures, he was perhaps best known for his caricatures of political figures and satires on the behavior of his countrymen.
- Although posthumously the value of his painting has been recognized, he died destitute, was blind and living in a cottage at Valmondois, provided by Corot who admired his oeuvre. Baudelaire declared him “One of the most important men, I will not say only of caricature, but also of modern art.”

Biography/Social Context (1808-1879):

Daumier was born in Marseille; his father was a glazier whose literary aspirations led him to move to Paris in 1814, seeking to be published as a poet. In 1816 the young Daumier and his mother followed him to Paris. Daumier showed in his youth an inclination towards the artistic profession, which his father vainly tried to check by placing him first with a law firm (bailiff), for whom he was employed as an errand boy, and later with a bookseller. In 1822 he became protégé to a friend of Daumier's father who was an artist and archaeologist. The following year Daumier entered the Académie Suisse. He also worked for a lithographer and publisher (Belliard) with his first attempts at lithography. Having mastered the techniques of lithography, Daumier began his artistic career by producing plates for music publishers and illustrations for advertisements.

In 1828 became a student at the Paris Academy and began to create drawings for popular magazines. Two years later he designed his first political lithographs. He believed in a republican form of government, had faith in the goodness of the common man, resented the injustices of monarchy, and was inspired by the French Revolution. He first joined the politically satirical illustrated weekly *Silhouette*, and in 1831 joined *La Caricature* that was inspired by promises of political freedom and an end to censorship by the “Citizen King,” Louis Philippe (after the Revolution of 1830). Ironically, in 1831 he earned a six-month prison sentence for his plate titled *Gargantua* that was a caricature of the king who grew fat at the expense of the French people. During his imprisonment he completed a watercolor series.

Upon Daumier’s release from prison he experimented with caricature sculpture, producing busts of parliamentarians originally modeled in terracotta and cast in bronze after his death. It has been surmised that he modeled small clay figures as aids in exploring individuals portrayed in his prints. Among other important sculptures was the bas-relief *The Emigrants* (at the Musee d’Orsay in Paris) – a forlorn procession of

unindividualized figures with grandeur and compassion (see photograph at the beginning of this OOM).

Political unrest of 1848 brought about a Second Republic, presided over by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte with an ominous threat to liberties. Soon Daumier could no longer openly attack the government. Daumier's love was painting and as early as 1832 he called himself an "artist/painter." He exhibited at the official salons in 1848, 1850-51, and 1861. In 1855 he painted with the Barbizon group, including Millet, Daubigny and Corot. Though his paintings attracted little attention, artist-friends such as Daubigny and Corot collected them. He painted for his own pleasure; his paintings were unknown to the public and remained in his studio until his death. Some of his paintings were ranked among the finest produced under the Second Empire, with observations of daily life (*Third-class Railway Carriage*, 1864), other sources from mythology and literature--especially Don Quixote and Sancho Panza). Both his paintings and lithographs were composed almost entirely of figures. His paintings, such as *The Fugitives*, favored themes that were broader in significance than his cartoons. His color and use of chiaroscuro to heighten dramatic interest and suggest three-dimensional mass, reminds us of Rembrandt, whom he greatly admired. He resented being considered merely a draftsman of cartoons so stopped this work in 1860 for several years. He underestimated his lithographs, calling them "pot boilers." Numerous drawings were reproduced by wood-engravers as illustrations.

Toward the end of his life his eyesight failed; Daumier was almost blind by 1873. Destitute, his friend Corot bought him a home in Valmondois in which he lived the remainder of his years. In 1878 friends organized a retrospective of his work at the Durand-Ruel gallery, the year before his death, which did not even cover the costs of the exhibition. Sadly, a large number of his works were taken from his widow for a piteous amount by an unscrupulous consortium of art dealers. He has since been recognized by an array of writers such as Balzac and Baudelaire, and artists such as Delacroix and Millet as well as Corot.

Bas-Relief: The Fugitives

Not only was Daumier a prolific lithographer, draftsman and painter, but he also produced a notable number of sculptures in unbaked clay. In order to save these from destruction, some of these busts were reproduced first in plaster. Bronze sculptures were posthumously produced from the plaster. Eventually Daumier produced approximately 36 busts of French members of Parliament in unbaked clay.

The Minneapolis Institutes of Art bronze bas-relief is closely related to the oil painting of the same title. The bronze, executed in moderately high relief, is a long, narrow panel 14 1/2" high and 30" wide. Although it cannot be exactly dated, it was most probably modelled about 1848 (according to the MIA Bulletin).

(Below from the MIA Bulletin and edited):

The arrangement of the figures is seen from the front in the right half of the relief and from the back in the left half. Along with the indistinct modeling of the figures on the extreme ends, there is the sense of a great sweeping curve moving toward the viewer on the right, then turning and disappearing into the distance on the left. While only about a dozen figures are defined with adequate clarity to be seen as individuals, the shadowy forms in the background and along the edges imply a horde moving forward. Although the atmosphere of the work is clearly somber; progress and hope are suggested by several compositional devices. The female figure in the center joins the two halves. The right group displays pathos and destitution; their heads are uniformly bent, their shoulders sag, the woman covers her eyes as she staggers forward in dejection. At the very center of the composition there is an open space. The central figure, a mother carrying a child in one arm and holding the hand of another, bridges the gap both physically and compositionally, with a strong diagonal mass. This figure is also the most heavily modeled and is in the highest relief. She appears to be a part of the left-hand group. The upward movement of the lines in this grouping suggests a greater vitality, perhaps implying a brighter future for these refugees. In that sense it becomes a positive expression of a strong and basic faith in man and in his future.

Painting: The Fugitives and a Comparison with the Bas-Relief

(Next paragraph from the MIA Bulletin and edited):

A comparison of the bronze relief with the Institute's painting of the same title reveals certain similarities and contrasts in conception as well as execution. The painting, thought to have been completed in the 1860s, is one of the same format and approximately the same size as the relief. It too depicts a large, anonymous mass of refugees or fugitives pushing forward in headlong flight from an unknown, turbulent destruction, but with a greater urgency and haste than the dejected mass of the bronze.

Daumier did not prime his canvases; they are often unfinished and retain a sketch-like appearance, as is the case with the MIA painting. In fact, often his paintings are undated. In this painting we see a dramatic flight of a mass of people. The brilliant orange of the sky suggests a fire with a turbulence as well. We see a few outstanding figures – a man on horseback, another man near the center of the scene who appears to be looking backwards, and a woman with her arms thrown upward in despair. The tension and tragedy of the situation are emphasized by the use of loose, energetic brushstrokes, somber colors, and strong contrasts of light and shade. A strong emotional power is presented by leaving out details of figures, drapery, landscape, etc. The theme of dispossessed refugees appears many times in his career, an expression of sympathy for human suffering.

However, unlike the relief, the painting relies more on purely sensory stimulation for its expression than on a precise organization of component elements. Again the composition is divided into two halves, but diagonally rather than vertically with the mob of people tightly unified and contrasted not with each other but with the dark and empty sky. In an interesting comparison the line of figures moves toward the right, whereas in the bas-

relief the movement across the art objects is to the left. The sculpture and painting represent different forms of expression with different emotional results.

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