The Paramour Plumbago

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Additional Information:

- This short article was published in the online literary magazine Danse Macabre, Issue 68: Cosmos. It is in the section Fictions, Erzählungen.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/12038

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Adam Henry Carrière / Lazarus Publishing LLC and the authors

Please cite the published version.
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The Paramour Plumbago

Phil Sawdon

Unearthed …

The journal entry for that day read …

‘… We gasped at the location!

We had struggled for almost seven years in these purlieus that local art folk call Une Fôret.

Theodor gestured to yet another void, a stain in black lead, mounted anonymously with barren bodies. Nevertheless, we descended and entered. Three lines traced across had somehow parcelled into twice the two intervals.

One was a whistle, and the other a testa, or perhaps the apprentice … two being draughtsmen, they had found various means to work a scratch in order to carry meaning out through the top, beyond the rim. Their tools lingered unassuming and wretched, some shipshape others callous and orthodox.

There was a table, various hats, and some shoes alongside a pair of parasols. Hanging from a scratch was a small basket of fresh flowers, whilst by and by we imagined we saw a dress serving a particular lineage.

We continued in the direction of the side where there were further smudges, the apertures of the voids where we can see the marks working without seeing; setting themselves upon hatched angles of each smear, like a hierarchy of difficulty tracing with ease and some care.

With all the archaeology about, we could see that the sketch, a clandestine portrait, was coarse, arrayed all in a line, dressed on vellum with a restraint devoid of rims and there were further callous tools in a box, Theodor noted that they burned nicely.

Each as spare as essential, pastel and mute, immersed in shadow, the tint of obscure ore, lead into light, the clandestine likeness, The Paramour Plumbago.

We sold it to Emily Blaireau erstwhile curator of The Fictional Museum of Drawing.

Ms Blaireau received a sponge from Madame Pipe, together with a curious excrecence from a tree and the skin of a large serpent. She used them to trade with the archaeological draughtsmen. The immense task began. There was no time to lose as the drawing had already started to fester. Furthermore it became critical to protect the artefact from researchers eager for mementos’.

Removed …

Several companionable donkeys accompanied by numerous agitated owners lugged the cartoon to a slipway, where Ms Blaireau unexpectedly addressed the crowd from inside the drawing. One week after its initial unearthing, the likeness had been cut into more practicable fragments. Ms Blaireau had carefully taken many photographs and thorough measurements, and following frequent and fervent curatorial consultations the main body of the drawing was opened to release the graphite gas pressure. The stench was unspeakable. Ms Blaireau made the first incision with her stiletto. The form was removed and the content lifted out and scoured with a hose.
Headlong … Constructed …

The fibres are hung out to dry on a timber structure once the ink had been drawn and rendered. They were stroked with bespoke brushes. The form had been steamed elsewhere, and was drafted in an inner courtyard whilst an artist fabricated wooden replicas of the content, which were then put inside the vellum. The construction on which the vellum was eventually mounted was meagre, actual size and engineered from mature pine. It was shaped like the Pesse dugout canoe and similar in construction, with no ribs or any outside planking.

Covering …

The cartoon was prepared alternately with vitriol and calcined Montpellier Tartar, and to finish with powdered Salt of Nitre. Next, it was purged at least three times and the inside was coated with the veritable Balm of Mercury and placed for a fifteen day digestion in a warm dung-hill. It was once more installed on the mature pine frames with some thirty thousand fingernails and a copious volume of phlegmatic grease and so by the Labours of the Months it was beginning to dry. Meanwhile sweet white oil began to seep and exude. It was feared that it might be alkahest, the universal solvent. Fortunately the oil was devoid of corrosive qualities and later proved ideal when combined with the Elixir of Aristeus. It was easily wiped off with spirit of turpentine. The outside is repeatedly covered in aqua tofana, calomel and several top coats of colourless amber varnish but as the drawing was being positioned on the final display frame, a problem ensued … Ms Blaireau’s original measurements were erroneous. They had been taken from just one side of the cartoon, which was impossible to circumnavigate at the time of her curatorial deliberations. Some argued that she had not allowed for precession. There was not enough to fit the drawing frame. The potentially terminal drawback was resolved by shifting the unsecured edge towards the deepest part of the frame, where it could be bridged with planking.

Exposing …

Cautiously packed and piled onto six indisposed donkeys, the drawing was taken to be displayed at The Agiad Art Fayre. Three fallacious drawings by René Hector that presented marks akin to heavy foxing were added to the installation, together with various artists’ statements detailing various distended fictions, and a life-size sketch of Ms Blaireau. Meanwhile art historians from within the canon of the cartoon surreptitiously drank warm ink laced with impotent words in the ratio of the sum of the quantities to the larger quantity and found to their delight that the drawing was in part equal to the ratio of the larger quantity to the smaller one. The Paramour Plumbago was by now arrayed with gold acid free tissue paper and furnished around with bleaching boards, folding chairs and occasional tables.

Sightseeing …

According to an entry in Ms Blaireau’s journal the intention was that the drawing should embark on a tour after its presentation at The Fayre, and indeed several cities were included on the itinerary before the cartoon is appropriated amidst critical and curatorial turmoil. Ms Blaireau had to adopt an alternative argument before The Plumbago is validated and taken ‘home’.

Home …

For a long time, the cartoon remained in crates in the House of Le Singe until eventually it was reconstructed and subsequently when the museum undertakes an exhaustive renovation and introduces a specialist gallery the form was finally suspended above the
content. Meanwhile a hole was made in the wall of the old museum and the fragments were drawn by horse. The form and content were hauled into the new atrium and bricked in for posterity.

*The Paramour Plumbago* is made available for viewing on *The Nameless Day*. On that day, which is unidentified, a person wishing to closely inspect or research any particular collection should make an appointment in advance with the keeper and the request will be denied.

It is worth noting that with all *The Agiad Collection’s* departments, the displays are subject to change. If anyone is keen to view particular items they are advised to confirm with the keeper that the items are on display and will remain on display when they are denied access to visit. If the items are not on display then it will be necessary to make an appointment to view said items and the request will be denied.