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Théodule Ribot (1823–1891)

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Catalogue: Carola Scisci

Théodule Ribot

Saint-Nicolas-d'Attez 1823–1891 Colombes

The art of Théodule Ribot is a study in contrasts: between the everyday and the remarkable, the quiet strength of ordinary people and the realities they face, the permanence of light and the passage of time.

Born in the provincial town of Saint-Nicolas-d'Attez in 1823, Ribot rose from humble beginnings to become a significant yet enigmatic figure in 19th-century French art. His legacy, defined by stark intimacy and a profound approach to his subjects, remains vital for understanding the nuances of French Realism. His painted and graphic work covers portraits, still lifes, genre scenes, and religious or mythological subjects. It focuses on the realities of life – its challenges, its passing moments, and the human emotions beneath the surface.

Ribot's works go beyond simple representation, as the careful observation and technical skill they reveal highlight the innermost reality of their subject matter. Ribot's œuvre presents a fresh perspective that reveals the real weight of light: its tangible power to reveal texture and its deeper force to unveil truth, allowing us to see *anyone* and *anything* without disguise.

The Artist

Théodule Ribot was born in 1823 in Normandy into a modest working-class family. His father, a surveyor and tax collector, provided a simple but stable livelihood that would deeply shape Ribot's view of the world and his artistic ambitions. After his father's death in 1843, he worked for a cloth merchant in Elbeuf, but continued painting in his spare time. The following year he moved to Paris, where he was employed by a tapestry decorator, and married Marie Clémentine Germain. After spending three years (1846–1849) in Algeria, employed as a foreman, Ribot returned to Paris and worked for the municipal water service. In 1849, he entered the studio of the painter Auguste-Barthélémy Glaize and began making frequent trips back to Normandy, where he became acquainted with Eugène Boudin. When in the capital, Ribot spent long hours in the Louvre, carefully copying 18th-century paintings for a Parisian dealer.

In the late 1850s, he endeavoured in the realistic depiction of everyday life, and developed the habit of painting by lamplight at night. A versatile artist, he worked in oil painting as well as drawing and etching. As a draughtsman, he was as talented as he was prolific: his graphic work ranged from fully finished drawings to fragmentary yet powerful preparatory studies for his paintings. Influenced by Rembrandt's etchings, he drew in ink, wash, black chalk, and charcoal – often on a small scale and with striking spontaneity –, as he put it, “to rest from painting.”

Artistic Influences

Though Ribot received some guidance from Glaize, he remained essentially self-taught. His true education took place in the Louvre, where he immersed himself in the works of the Old Masters. Caravaggio's bold chiaroscuro left a lasting impression on Ribot, while two painters above all shaped the core of his style: Rembrandt and José de Ribera.

From Rembrandt, Ribot absorbed the expressive force of light: for the Dutch master, chiaroscuro was never a mere technical device but a means of revealing inner mystery and spiritual presence. In his figures – drawn out of darkness into a tender radiance – Ribot found a model for how lighting could ennoble the everyday. He applied this lesson not to the representation of biblical heroes or monarchs, but to the faces of peasants, artisans, and working people, investing them with humanity and universal resonance. From Ribera, he inherited a taste for unvarnished truth and reinterpreted his meticulous impasto. The Spanish Baroque painter – renowned for his bold images of saints, martyrs, and beggars – depicted bodies with raw directness: weathered skin, gnarled hands, the weight of age and toil. Ribot admired this intensity; yet, where Ribera often emphasised harshness, Ribot accentuated a sense of empathy and appreciation.

By uniting Rembrandt's luminous inwardness with Ribera's earthy realism, Ribot forged a style in which light acts as a vehicle for truth. The influence of later masters reinforced these foundations. The haunting intensity of Francisco Goya's graphic series shaped his drawing, while the radical realism and uncompromising commitment to truth in Gustave Courbet's paintings resonated strongly with his artistic ideals.¹ From these encounters Ribot deepened his search for an art that could combine dramatic power with unflinching honesty.

The Salon and Beyond

His early submissions to the Salon – in 1852, 1853, and 1859 – were all rejected. However, after exhibiting alongside Alphonse Legros, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Henri Fantin-Latour, and Antoine Vollon in the exhibition organised for the Salon's rejected artists in François Bonvin's studio, Ribot was finally admitted in 1861. The four paintings of cooks and kitchen scenes that he presented attracted critical attention, and from that point onward he exhibited regularly at the Salon des Artistes Français, at the Société des Amis des Arts, and in major Parisian galleries, notably the Galerie Durand-Ruel and the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune.

Following the obtention of medals with his Salon submissions of 1864 and 1865, his reputation grew considerably and consistently, with prominent figures such as Émile Zola and Jules-Antoine Castagnary remarking the sincerity and force of his art. After the presentation of notable works at the Salon, notably *La Mère Morieu* in 1878, Ribot settled in Colombes, in the outskirts of Paris, where he continued to paint while maintaining close ties to his artistic community. His stature was further affirmed by two major solo exhibitions at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, first in 1887 and again in 1890, both of which placed his work prominently before the Parisian public.

Steeped in shadow and light, his paintings and drawings showcasing workers, children, elders, still lifes, and seascapes, emerged as iconic works, instantly recognisable and celebrated by the public.

Self Portrait

c. 1880

Oil on canvas
41 × 28.5 cm (16 1/8 × 11 1/4 in)

Throughout his career, Théodule Ribot produced only a few self portraits. Among these, the *Self Portrait* (fig. 1) executed in the 1870s and now in the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, and the later example held in the Musée d'Orsay (fig. 2), stand out for their contemplative expression and mastery of light. Our two *Self Portraits* are no less accomplished and provide valuable insights into Ribot's *modus operandi* in portraiture, across both painting and drawing.

On our canvas, the artist's gaunt face emerges from darkness under stark contrasts of light and shadow, while the loose, energetic brushwork lends the image a raw immediacy. At once minimalist and executed with an economy of means, the work heightens its expressive power through restraint. On our canvas, his distinctive moustache and velvet beret form a visual pair that underscores both his identity as an artist and his presence as a man marked by time and experience.

This work is preparatory for a more finished *Self Portrait* (fig. 3), whose location is currently unknown. The vigorous brushstrokes modelling the sitter's features – particularly the dimple of the right cheek – are characteristic of Ribot's preparatory studies, in which the artist experimented with dense layers of paint to achieve form and effect.



Fig. 1
Théodule Ribot
Self Portrait
Late 1870s
Oil on canvas
73.5 × 60 cm (29 × 23 5/8 in)
Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts



Fig. 2
Théodule Ribot
Self Portrait
Late 1880s
Oil on canvas
65.5 × 46.5 cm (25 3/4 × 18 1/4 in)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay



Fig. 3
Théodule Ribot
Self Portrait
Oil on canvas
Current location unknown



Self Portrait

Pen, black ink and wash on paper
220 × 150 mm (8 7/8 × 5 7/8 in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"

A prolific draughtsman, Ribot often treated his drawings as finished works rather than preparatory studies. Our *Self Portrait* from the late 1880s, drawn in ink is among the most captivating works on paper. Ribot's features emerge with force and immediacy against a plain background, the vigorous strokes of black and white wash giving the image intensity and dignity. The painter's pale face, confident beneath his beret, appears with striking clarity, concentrated into a commanding image.

Placed alongside Ribot's painted self portraits in Lille and Paris, this drawing enriches our understanding of the artist's self-representation. The same interplay of light and shadow is at work, but with a sharper emphasis on graphic directness. Together with the painted *Self Portrait*, our drawing demonstrates Ribot's ability to turn the unidealised observation of his own aging features into a broader statement of Realist truth: as Léon de Fourcaud observed, Ribot's art compels the viewer "to look at what he shows you, to endure his point of view, to feel what he felt".¹



The Artist's Hand

c. 1880

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper
90 × 120 mm (3 ½ × 4 ¾ in)

Provenance:
Galerie Paul Prouté, Paris
Private collection

Our work, executed in the early 1880s, belongs to a group of studies of hands – one of Ribot's favourite themes – to which he returned repeatedly throughout his career. Like the great masters of the Renaissance, the artist was fascinated by the pictorial possibilities offered by the human hand, which he depicted in various positions, with fingers bent or extended. Although the exact number of these studies is unknown, they provide valuable insights into Ribot's artistic practice.

For reasons of both economy and convenience, his family regularly served as models: the hands he drew were often those of his wife and daughter, as well as his own. Our drawing forms part of a series of studies executed in pen or pencil, based on his own hands. These sketches, true self portraits of a kind, demonstrate the artist's mastery in depicting himself with remarkable accuracy. On our sheet, the pose of the fingers and the movement of the hand suggest the grasp of a pencil or a brush.

Technically, the drawing is characteristic of Ribot's graphic production: the pen strokes are rapid yet precise, while the use of wash lends the composition with a heightened sense of volume and texture.



Name of the Artist

Pen, brown ink and brown wash on paper
110 × 167 mm (4 3⁄8 × 6 5⁄8 in)

Provenance:
Aizpiri Collection
Sale at J. P. Osenat, Fontainebleau, *Tableaux Modernes*, 22 Septembre 2019, lot 45
Galerie de Bayser, Paris
Private collection

Exhibited:
Colombes, *Exposition Rétrospective Th. Ribot. Peintre et Aquafortiste*, 1934, no. 51

Ribot's drawing of his name asserts his artistic presence through deliberate simplicity. The bold gesture of presenting his own signature as a work of art recalls Victor Hugo, who not only signed his name in large script but often turned it into a graphic motif in its own right (fig. 4). Similarly, on our sheet, by drawing his emblematic signature 'T. Ribot.' in imposing, bold letters, Ribot transforms his artistic identity into an iconic image. For an artist who came late to recognition, the act of inscribing his name in this way signals a conscious affirmation of identity and position. It is at once a personal declaration and an artistic statement that aligns with Ribot's broader pursuit of authenticity in both painting and drawing.

In the 20th century, Mr Aizpiri gathered one of the most important collections of drawings by Ribot. Aizpiri's studies of hands, portraits, genre scenes, seascapes, and vanitas were exhibited at the Hôtel de Ville of Colombes in May 1934 by the Société "Les Amis des Arts de Colombes", city in which the artist spent the last part of his life.



Fig. 4
Victor Hugo (1802–1885)
Victor Hugo
c. 1859-1861
Pen, wash, charcoal, gouache, watercolour and ink on vellum paper
147 × 194 mm (5 ¾ × 7 5⁄8 in)
Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo



Le Père Bresteau

Oil on canvas
76 × 56 cm (30 ¼ × 22 ⅝ in)
Signed (lower left): "t.Ribot"

Provenance:
Sale at Hôtel Drouot, Paris, *Vente Veuve Th. Ribot, aux enchères de tableaux études aquarelles et dessins par Théodule Ribot*, 20 May 1896, lot 21
Joss Hessel Collection
Sale at Hôtel Drouot, *Vente après décès de M. H. S.*, 15-16 December 1904, lot 32
Private collection
Saint-Honoré Art Consulting, Paris
Private collection

Exhibited:
Paris, Palais des Champs-Élysées, *Salon des Artistes français*, 1886, no. 1996
Paris, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, *Exposition T. Ribot*, 1887, no. 50
Bruxelles, Musée des Beaux-Arts, *Exposition générale des Beaux-Arts*, 1887
Toulouse, Musée des Augustins, *Théodule Ribot – Une Délicieuse Obscurité*, 16 October 2021-10 January 2022
Marseille, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Marseille, *Théodule Ribot – Une Délicieuse Obscurité*, 10 February 2022-15 May 2022
Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, *Théodule Ribot – Une Délicieuse Obscurité*, 11 June 2022-2 October 2022

Literature:
Raoul Sertat, "Exposition de l'œuvre de Théodule Ribot" in *Revue encyclopédique: recueil documentaire universel et illustré*, Paris, 1892, p. 1110
Théodule Ribot (1823-1891): Une délicieuse obscurité, exh. cat., 2021, p. 128

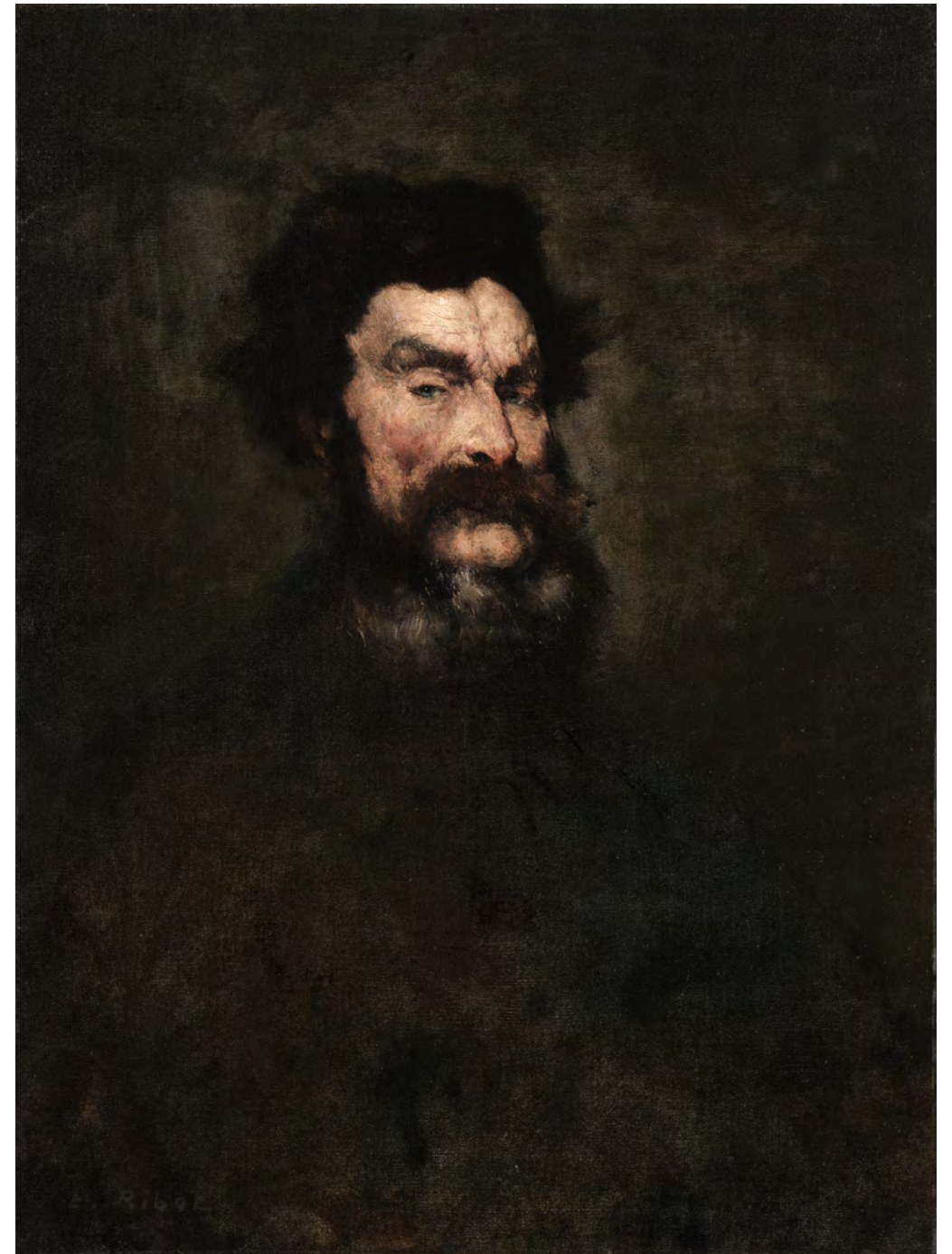
Ribot's ability – especially in the later stages of his career – to confer a sense of presence on even the most ordinary individuals distinguishes his work from that of more conventional portrait painters of the period. *Le Père Bresteau*, conceived in the manner of Ribera, exemplifies the psychological complexity and technical quality of his portraiture. An older man emerges from darkness, his rugged features lit to emphasise his physical and emotional gravitas. The dramatic chiaroscuro that invades the canvas recalls the Spanish Baroque masters Ribot admired while underlining the sitter's inner life.

Le Père Bresteau, a portrait of a fisherman from Brittany, was exhibited in 1887 at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune. His representation reappears in the group composition *Breton Fishermen and Their Families* (fig. 5), now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Shown alongside the portrait of his daughter *Marie en buste*, the painting revived one of Ribot's central themes, notably the contrast between youth and old age that lies at the heart of his double portraits and of many of his multi-figure compositions.



Fig. 5
Théodule Ribot
Breton Fishermen and Their Families
1880-85
Oil on canvas
55.2 × 46.4 cm (21 ¾ × 18 ¼ in)
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Although the work received little press coverage, the few notices it did attract commented on the unexpected vigour of the paternal figure, which took both the artist's admirers and detractors by surprise. In the *Journal des artistes* of 16 May 1886, Jean Lefurtec – a Breton critic sympathetic to Ribot's sitters – described the portrait of Père Bresteau as "an extremely characteristic figure. Here the master has departed from his usual model. His brush has extended its strokes in the direction of the line, obeying the artist's concern above all to render the character of the face, which is very strongly emphasised." *Le Père Bresteau* stands apart from the more restrained procession of Ribot's portraits. The catalogue of the 1887 Bernheim-Jeune exhibition, where the painting was displayed, also recorded that it had been lithographed by Camille Victor Vergnes.



La Mère Morieu

c. 1878

Oil on canvas
74 × 60.5 cm (29 1/8 × 23 7/8 in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"

Provenance:
Private collection, Netherlands

Exhibited:
Paris, Galerie Bernheim Jeune, *Exposition T. Ribot*, June–July 1890

Like *Le Père Bresteau*, *La Mère Morieu* reflects Ribot's power to confer dignity and psychological depth on humble sitters. The careful rendering of her countenance and clasped hands expresses endurance and quiet reflection without superficial sentimentality, while the concentrated light that falls across her features recalls the models of Spanish Baroque portraiture. Together, the two works form a pendant of sorts: one representing the rugged strength of a Breton fisherman, the other the touching austerity of an elderly woman.

Another painting also entitled *La Mère Morieu* was exhibited at the Salon of 1878, where it was met with enthusiastic reviews. Liésville described this frontal portrait of an old peasant woman as "magnificent". Ribot painted several portraits bearing the title *La Mère Morieu* – sometimes spelled Marieu.

Our painting corresponds to the version listed in the 1890 Ribot catalogue of the exhibition held at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery. On that occasion, two works titled *La Mère Morieu* were recorded, but only one was exhibited under no. 171 and described as follows: "*La Mère Morieu* is shown in bust-length, her hands crossed on her chest; a ray of light details every deformation of her emaciated neck, every feature of a face furrowed with countless wrinkles, characteristically topped with a high bonnet of white and blue cotton". This description matches perfectly our painting, which, until now, had been considered lost. A similar portrait – without the hands crossed on the chest, though seemingly also depicting *La Mère Morieu* (fig. 6) – is held in the Musée de Unterlinden, in Colmar.



Fig. 6
Théodule Ribot
Portrait of an Old Lady, or Mère Morieu
c. 1878
Oil on canvas
73.5 × 60.5 cm (29 × 23 7/8 in)
Colmar, Musée de Unterlinden



Two Cooks

Pencil, pen, black ink and wash on paper
310 × 230 mm (12 ¼ × 9 in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"

One of the most important strands of Théodule Ribot's œuvre is his genre scenes, which celebrate everyday life and the honour of humble professions. From the 1860s onwards, genre painting gained a central place at the Salon, and Ribot actively contributed to this development. His depictions of cooks, seamstresses, and craftsmen convey a profound respect for manual labour, presented without embellishment or idealisation.

Our drawing portrays two cooks wholly absorbed in their task of cutting a large piece of meat. Their concentrated gestures and almost solemn expressions underline the seriousness of their work. Executed in ink and wash, the composition is monochromatic, its restrained means reinforcing the intensity of the moment. Far from being a casual sketch, this drawing exemplifies Ribot's ability to merge the immediacy of genre scenes with the dignity of portraiture, transforming a simple kitchen task into a meditation on labour.

The austerity of the medium and the expressive force of the figures also recall Ribot's admiration for the graphic work of Rembrandt and Goya, whose chiaroscuro, grey wash, and psychological intensity find an echo here.



Woman Reading

Oil on cardboard
19 × 22 cm (7 ½ × 8 ⅝ in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"

Ribot's genre scenes often blur traditional categories, hovering between portraiture and depictions of everyday life. *Woman Reading* offers a glimpse into the quiet rhythms of ordinary existence. Modest in scale and intimate in tone, it presents the figure in full, emphasising the simplicity of her surroundings and the ordinariness of her task. Rather than being absorbed in symbolic meaning, Ribot honours the modest act of consulting household (or monastic) papers with austere concentration.

Although anonymous, our sitter is rendered with a presence that suggests individuality. Her plain attire lends her a monastic quality, aligning her with Ribot's broader commitment to depicting ordinary life with dignity and seriousness. In such works, Ribot's realism is imbued with ethical reflection, granting humble tasks what Winckelmann once described as "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur."



Family Deeds

Oil on canvas
73.7 × 61 cm (29 × 24 in)
Signed (lower left): "t. Ribot"

Provenance:
Mrs. Michel Collection, France, by 1890
Anonymous sale at Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 22-23 December 1896, lot 19
Anonymous sale at Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 5 April 1930, lot 93
Mr. & Mrs. Moïse Lévy de Benzion (1873-1943), Dravil, France (inv. no. LB 148)
Confiscated by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) from the above, Château de la Folie, Dravil, December 1940
Transferred to the Jeu de Paume, January 1941
Transferred to Füssen, Germany, 16 October 1941
Recovered from the 'Lager Peter' art repository at Alt-Aussee (inv. no. 891/7) and transferred to the Munich Central Collecting Point, 26 June 1945 (MCCP no. 1087/7)
Repatriated to France by the above, 18 April 1946
Restituted by the above to the heirs of Mr. & Mrs. Moïse Lévy de Benzion (1873-1943), Dravil, France, 29 May 1946
Private collection, France
Anonymous sale at Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 13 December 1993, lot 89, as "Portrait de femme"
Sale at Christie's, New York, *European Art Part II*, 15 October 2021, lot 12
Private collection

Exhibited:
Paris, Galerie Bernheim Jeune, *Exposition T. Ribot, Catalogue raisonné des œuvres exposées*, May-June 1887, no. 65, illustrated with an engraving
Paris, Palais de l'Industrie, Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, 1890
Paris, Galerie Bernheim Jeune, *Exposition T. Ribot, Deuxième Série*, June-July 1890
Saint-Nicolas-d'Attez, Église de Saint-Nicolas-d'Attez, *T. Ribot. Peintre et aquafortiste né à Saint-Nicolas-d'Attez*, 16-25 May 1982

Alongside more modest works such as *Two Cooks* and *Woman Reading*, Ribot conceived ambitious compositions that retained psychological intensity while acquiring new narrative weight. *Family Deeds* (*Les Titres de famille*) was first exhibited in 1887 at the monographic exhibition dedicated to the artist at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, and again in 1890 at the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune. That same year, an etching of the work by Fernand Desmoulin was published in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. Another version of the composition, today in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Reims, shows the woman in reverse profile (fig. 7).

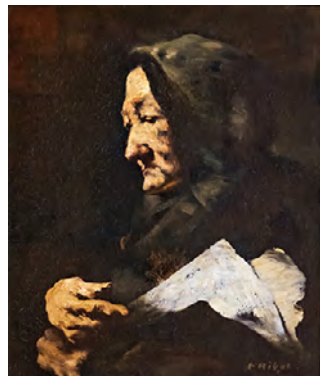


Fig. 7
Théodule Ribot
Les Titres de Famille
Oil on canvas
46.4 × 38 cm (18 1/4 × 15 in)
Reims, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Whereas *Woman Reading* treats a household activity with modest intimacy, *Family Deeds* transforms the motif of a woman with documents into a solemn meditation on responsibility and legacy. The figure is illuminated with a concentrated light that sanctifies the scene in the manner of Ribera. As Dominique Lobstein remarked of the Reims version, Ribot's maxim that "the eyes bring life to the face, the hands give spirit to the head" finds its fullest expression here: the painter directs the light to her face and hands while her body almost merges with the background.



Dernière Pensée

Oil on canvas
92.1 × 73 cm (36 ¼ × 28 ¾ in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"

Provenance:
Private collection, Netherlands, c. 1970s
Thence by descent
Gallery 19C, Westlake, Texas, 2022
Private collection

Exhibited:
Paris, Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, *Exposition Th. Ribot*, 2-8 February 1911, no. 15

Dernière Pensée brings together two of Ribot's principal painting genres: portraiture and still life. The canvas depicts three young women – possibly members of Ribot's own family – preparing a bouquet of pansies, anemones, and a white tulip. Set against an almost black background, their hair and clothing recede into shadow, so that only the illuminated faces, hands, and flowers stand out. This controlled use of light reflects Ribot's sustained dialogue with 17th-century Spanish painting, particularly his predilection for Ribera's chiaroscuro.

The interlacing of hands and the attention placed by the artist on the rendering of the white flowers, known as "pensées" in French, underscores Ribot's keen interest in the treatment of light and different textures. The tenebrist light illuminating their faces, which strikingly recalls Caravaggio's half-length framing, imbues the composition with narrative and symbolic resonance while maintaining the restraint that characterises Ribot's œuvre.



Saint Vincent

c. 1878

Oil on canvas
38 × 45 cm (15 × 17 ¾ in)

Ribot approached religious and mythological subjects with his idiosyncratic truthful and humanistic perspective. Our *Saint Vincent* depicts the martyr after torture, his dead body abandoned and exposed on the ground while a crow stands guard to protect it from desecration. Chiaroscuro heightens the heavy reality of suffering and mortality.

Our painting is a preparatory study for larger versions of *Saint Vincent*, one held now in the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille (fig. 8), and the other in the Musée de Blois. The final work is among Ribot's most rigorous and stripped-down compositions: its monochromatic palette recalls his washes and etchings, while the scale clearly signals its ambition as a Salon piece.

In our study, Ribot interprets the Legenda Aurea and the account of the martyrdom of Saint Vincent of Saragossa, tortured under Diocletian in 304.¹ Thrown into a ravine without burial, the deacon's body was said to have been protected by a crow that kept predators at bay. The face is not shown, nor is there a halo, only an abandoned corpse. The liquid brushstrokes, blurred outlines, and intense strokes of paint enhance the sense of anonymity and dissolution, drawing on Baroque precedents while affirming Ribot's own vision.

A preparatory drawing for the same composition is also preserved at the Musée d'Autun, further underlining the importance that Ribot placed on this subject. In this mature work Ribot's personal style is fully present, a style that would also shape his creation, in 1870, of the solitary version of *The Good Samaritan* (fig. 9) now in the Musée d'Orsay.



Fig. 8
Théodule Ribot
Saint Vincent
c. 1878
Oil on canvas
98 × 133 cm (38 ⅝ × 52 ⅜ in)
Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts



Fig. 9
Théodule Ribot
The Good Samaritan
c. 1870
Oil on canvas
112 × 145 cm (44 ⅛ × 57 ⅞ in)
Paris, Musée d'Orsay



Prometheus

Oil on canvas
21 × 40 cm (8 ¼ × 15 ¾ in)
Signed (lower left): "t. Ribot"

Provenance:
Paul Arthur Cheramy Collection
Frans Buffa & Sons, Amsterdam
Private collection, France
Sale at Grisebach, Berlin, *Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 1 June 2023, lot 246
Private collection

Exhibited:
Paris, Galerie Bernheim Jeune, *Exposition Th. Ribot*, June-July 1890, p. 25, as "Prométhée"

Ribot's *Prometheus* abandons stillness for visceral intensity: the titan's punishment is rendered with raw realism, his straining body and anguished expression evoking the immediacy of pain. In the tradition of Ribera, Ribot rejects the heroic ideal, portraying Prometheus not as a distant myth but as a profoundly human figure brought low by *hubris*.

Prometheus, punished for giving fire to humankind, was condemned to be chained while a bird fed on his liver for eternity. In Ribot's œuvre, this myth stands in stark contrast to his *Saint Vincent*: the passive, lifeless body of the martyr, watched over by a crow, conveys silence and resignation, whereas our *Prometheus* writhes in agony, his muscles tense, and his left wrist bound, as a large eagle tears at his ever-regenerating liver.

Ribot's *Prometheus* echoes Ribera's powerful depiction of *Tityos* (fig. 10), another mythological figure condemned to eternal torment. Both Prometheus and Tityos suffer the same gruesome punishment – having their livers devoured endlessly by birds – as a result of defying or offending the gods. Ribera's raw naturalism and chiaroscuro inspired Ribot, who concocted a fresh way of representing the myth. The quiet that characterises the religious canvas gives way, in our representation of *Prometheus*, to violent tension, intensified by Ribot's use of searing reds, pinks, and blacks.



Fig. 10
Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
Tityos
1632
Oil on canvas
227 × 301 cm (89 ¾ × 122 in)
Madrid, Prado Museum



Still Life with Fruit

Oil on canvas
46.5 × 55 cm (18 ¼ × 21 ⅝ in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"

Provenance:
Galerie Terrades, France
Private collection

Among the seventy-six paintings recorded in Ribot's studio at the time of his death – and sold five years later – no fewer than fifteen were still lifes. These works hold the key to the artist's painting practice. Ribot himself told the journalist Thiébault-Sisson: *"If you think I paint still lifes simply for the pleasure of depicting a cut of beef, an apple, or a fish, you are mistaken. What I find valuable is the infinite variety offered by the diversity of materials. For me, still life is the most instructive and profitable preparatory exercise."*¹

Ribot's still life production was fully in step with the mid-19th-century revival of interest in masters from the past Jean-Siméon Chardin,² in particular strongly influenced artists such as François Bonvin and Antoine Vollon, for whom the genre became a hallmark. Ribot, who found a steady market for his still lifes, approached the genre in a darker and more forceful manner than his Realist contemporaries: his compositions are less intimate and generally larger, his objects rougher and more rugged, ultimately reflecting the Spanish roots of his inspiration.

Our *Still Life with Fruit* exemplifies this conviction. The vivid green of the fruit stands out powerfully against the dark background, which recalls the minimalist still lifes set against dark backgrounds of Francisco de Zurbarán. Fresh fruit is placed next to decaying ones, half-eaten plums and apples, and a discarded pit. The earthy palette and focused lighting create a sombre, contemplative atmosphere, while Ribot's tactile brushwork lends substance to the bruised skins and dense shadows. In this attention to materiality, Ribot aligns himself with the Realist still lifes of Bonvin and Vollon, situating his work within a wider dialogue on the expressive and moral possibilities of humble objects.



¹ Thiébault-Sisson, F., 1891, "Théodule Ribot et son œuvre" in *Le Magasin pittoresque*, 30 September 1891, p. 306.

² Weisberg, G., 1979, *Chardin and the Still-Life Tradition in France*, Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Modern Art.

Vanitas

Pen, brown ink and wash on paper
138 × 132 mm (5 3/8 × 5 1/4 in)

Provenance:
Aizpiri Collection
Sale at J. P. Osenat, Fontainebleau, *Tableaux Modernes*, 22 Septembre 2019, lot 45
Galerie de Bayser, Paris
Private collection

Exhibited:
Colombes, *Exposition Rétrospective Th. Ribot. Peintre et Aquafortiste*, 1934, no. 51

Ribot's drawing of a *Vanitas* belongs to a small group of works in which he explored bones and skulls with uncompromising intensity. On our sheet, dense crosshatching builds volume with remarkable precision, the vigorous strokes and deep shadows lending the cranium both weight and fragility. Few of Ribot's works combine such mastery of execution with the intrinsic violence of the subject, making this one of his most powerful and accomplished drawings.

Vanitas are rare in his œuvre, yet our sheet resonates with his painted studies of animal skulls (fig. 11) and cuts of meat, where mortality is expressed through the raw materiality of flesh and bone. Our *Vanitas* was part of Mr Aizpiri's rich collection of drawings by Ribot, and was exhibited at the Hôtel de Ville of Colombes in 1934.

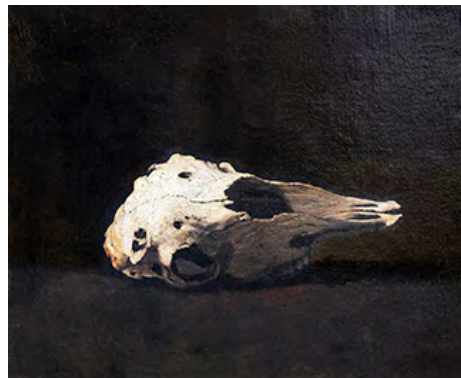


Fig. 11
Théodule Ribot
Sheep Skull
1855-1865
Oil on canvas
37.5 × 46 cm (14 3/4 × 18 1/8 in)
Beauvais, Musée départemental de l'Oise



Sailboat at Dusk

Pen, black ink and wash on paper
118 × 180 mm (4 5/8 × 7 1/8 in)

Provenance:
Aizpiri Collection
Sale at J. P. Osenat, Fontainebleau, *Tableaux Modernes*, 22 Septembre 2019, lot 45
Galerie de Bayser, Paris
Private collection

Ribot often spent time in Normandy and on the Breton coast, where he painted portraits of fishermen and produced a small body of seascapes. Although peripheral within his œuvre, the theme of the sea holds a significant place in Ribot's production: he illustrated a 1866 edition of Victor Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer* and, in 1878, wrote a short story entitled *La Marie-Henry. Hot. 25*, recounting the survival of fishermen after a storm in the English Channel.

Our *Sailboat at Dusk*, executed in ink and wash, reflects Ribot's fascination with the dialogue between people and the sea. With spontaneous yet controlled brushstrokes, he depicts sailing boats off Trouville, Normandy, at dusk. The fishing vessels themselves stand in for human figures, their quiet confrontation with the elements lending the scene a poetic resonance. The fluid wash spread across the low horizon, varied in tone and density, recalls Victor Hugo's graphic experiments on paper.

The tilted hulls and taut sails suggest unsettled waters. Yet Ribot's composition does not recall Courbet's dramatic seascapes, but rather his more contemplative views, and above all Boudin's evocations of coastal light, where serenity and transience prevail over spectacle. In this sensitivity to mood and shifting light, Ribot anticipates the Impressionists. His Trouville scenes reveal a poetic awareness of the balance between human endeavour and natural forces.

Sailboat at Dusk once belonged to Mr Aizpiri — a devoted collector of Ribot's works on paper — and was exhibited at the Hôtel de Ville of Colombes in 1934.



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Cover:
Théodule Ribot (1823–1891)
Dernière Pensée (detail)
Oil on canvas
92.1 × 73 cm (36 1/4 × 28 3/4 in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"

Inside cover
Saint Vincent (detail)
c. 1878
Oil on canvas
38 × 45 cm (15 × 17 3/4 in)

Next page:
Dernière Pensée (detail)
Oil on canvas
92.1 × 73 cm (36 1/4 × 28 3/4 in)
Signed (lower right): "t. Ribot"





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