

## At the Hunter's Gate – It's March 2019

I wouldn't say London was ever an especially erotic city but is surely even less so in the few weeks leading up to its departure from the EU. I won't agree that the city is becoming barren, and there is clearly great art being made but not much of it could be described as sensual or playful. Maybe it's not surprising that in bleak times, love and erotics seem unfashionable topics in art, but it feels like sitting in a Marie Condo flat and missing the mess. So, before the iron curtain falls and it is still easy to do so, we quickly board the train to Paris and go see an exhibition called *Jean-Jaques Lequeu - Bâtisseur de Fantasmies- (Builder of Fantasy)* at the Petit Palais.

The man, Jean-Jaques Lequeu, is not well known at all, and wasn't in his lifetime (1757-1826), either. He had ambition to become a grand architect but spent most of his life, during the great political turmoil of the 1789 French Revolution, in an administrative position at the land registry. Because of the huge political shift, a number of opportunities arose for unknown architects, but sadly not for him. Still, he went on obsessively drawing countless grandiose, fantastic buildings, designs, and ideas, none of which were ever realized. The year before his death, after some fruitless attempts to find an acquirer of his drawings, he bequeathed the decades of unseen works to the Bibliotheque Royale. A hundred years later they were discovered and re-examined. Now, another hundred years have passed, and the first large scale exhibition is being held. We go to see it.

The first work we encounter when entering is a self-styled certificate. Placed in the middle of the sheet is a bowed medallion for Jean-Jaques' profile with an overly large rendition of his head and underneath an inscription stating his name and qualifications. The inscription is surrounding a coat of arms that is both winged and topped with clouds on which a fire is burning from from where rays of light are emanating over the paper.

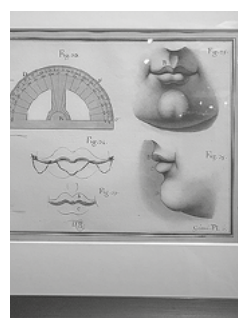
There are more portraits and self-portraits in the entrance area of the exhibition and we are told that to depict *unknown* people was a very new and controversial fashion in the late 18th century. Lequeu didn't seem to care; we see a series of self-portraits



depicting him pulling different faces in each one. One pouting, one with his tongue out, one winking, one screaming, and one comically sad version of himself, not unlike how people take pictures of themselves today.

When we proceed through the exhibition we notice it is staged in a long sort of hall with walls placed like dominoes through it, so that one can slalom or slither through the hung drawings. The lights are dimmed so as to preserve the drawings and the walls are painted in different shades of museum exhibition colours like dark green, bordeaux, beige, and a sickly greyish green. Some parts of the drawings have been printed large-scale and fitted to the sides of the display walls. Maybe because they are illuminated from the back, they are being photographed a lot by the visitors.

Now we can see the architectural drawings, and



whereas the portraits were shaded in black, white, and ochre, these have been colored in sweet yellow and orange (marble), blue (curtains and skies) or pink (backgrounds). We are being engulfed by absolutely meticulous renderings of neoclassical palaces, wooden huts,

gates for gardens and grounds, Egyptian imagery, temples with Greek gods, farming barns in the shape of an egg or decorated with utters, super romanticised bridges, chinoise-style pavilions. There are some rather technical drawings, instructive like blueprints, then others showing romantic topography, overgrown grottos, or a pavilion completely cut out of a hedge. He focuses as much into the details of nature as into the structure, every surrounding equally as important as the building. The wooden huts, gates, and bridges are so unbelievably gnarly, with monstrous hidden faces and arms everywhere. And even though some seem to be technical drawings, we are being informed by the exhibition placards that most of these designs wouldn't have been structurally feasible. But it's already obvious: it's all about the drawing.

There is an affinity for portraits and animals; even in the architectural drawings we spot a lot of mischievous human figures, gothic grimaces adorning the façade, and one *hunter's gate* has the heads of dogs, boars, and a stag looking at us impertinently and very much alive.

Another striking aspect of these sheets is that they are often crowded with many details and cross sections of one design or assemblages of completely

different projects. Others are neatly divided in two, pairing different ideas deliberately on one paper; one tower at night built into a stormy sea above and a windmill at dawn underneath with some elusive meaning implied like a game of tarot. More mythic clouding occurs because the drawings are covered with a layer of minute and precise writing that unnecessarily names the things we see, or adds a title or a reference. Certain titles are drawn as if carved in stone, with French words but in Greek lettering. There is more: In the last section the exhibition discloses the more explicitly erotic imagery, which has long been hidden away in some naughty forbidden part of the Bibliotheque Nationale. Mainly portraits of women with exposed breasts, some with a smile, some playfully hiding their faces, some looking provocatively at the spectator, all of them look alike. All of them look a bit like Jean-Jaques Lequeu himself. The breasts are very full, round globes patched onto the women's chests. It feels very appealing; the construction of desire without the frustration of any real life interaction. There are different tones to this erotic section; some, like a



depiction of a priestess of Bacchus holding a pipe to her ass, are light and funny. Others, namely close-ups of female genitalia, are strongly connected to the architectural drawings, with every part of the machinery exposed, numbered, and named. In the middle is stated: A. Clitoris, the only word that is underscored.

The exhibition is over, we have to go back. The Eurostar is delayed by hours in preparation for the new borders that are being established, and some people are getting rowdy. Standing in line for security for two hours gives us plenty of time to speculate over the life of an artist like Jean-Jaques Lequeu. The exhibition text put repeated effort into placing him in his time, excusing the oddness of his oeuvre as a mere mistranslation from his time to ours. This seems to me to be quite an unfair judgement, because doesn't Jean-Jaque Lequeu's lack of popularity during his life suggest that his work was before, or out, of his time? And haven't many of the more interesting artists taken the liberty of not solely being products of their time, of being more than reactionary to the things happening around them?

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## Like Drowning