

**Max Klinger's Nature:
Human Evolution in *A Life and Dramas***

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The etching series *A Life* and *Dramas*, by German printmaker Max Klinger, are not only both technically masterful and evocative, but are also excellent examples of evolutionary concepts in art. Through the narrative of a beautiful woman's fall and social condemnation because of her sexual desires, *A Life* exemplifies the process of sexual selection among humans, as well as presenting a critique of cultural evolution in 19th century Germany's negative view of female sexual expression. This social criticism is echoed in *Dramas*, which depicts various scenes of social issues and brutality as examples of the animal nature of man. Given that evolutionary theories began to emerge in earnest only shortly before the beginning of Max Klinger's career as a printmaker, his interpretations could have benefited from and in some cases been bolstered by the research that has taken place in the more than 100 years since Klinger's works were created.

In the years after Charles Darwin published *On The Origin of Species* (1859), few countries showed greater support for his theories than the newly unified Germany. Darwin himself spoke of the marked receptivity to evolutionary concepts, saying, "the support which I receive in Germany is my chief ground for hoping that our views will ultimately prevail."¹ Acceptance and knowledge of Darwin's works were complimented by those of Darwin's German counterpart, Ernst Haeckel, the author of many books including *The History of Creation* (1868) and *The Evolution of Man* (1874). The popularity of the theory of evolution among German citizens influenced many contemporary German artists and writers, and Klinger, born in

¹ Charles Darwin, in Francis Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 3 vols (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1896), vol. 2, 270.

1857, was familiar with Darwin's works by age 16.² It was around that time that Klinger executed a drawing entitled *Darwinian Theory*, which illustrates most prominently Darwin, accompanied by an ape holding a human child, seated at a table on which are placed the simian and human skulls considered proof of human evolution via comparative anatomy.³ This work proved to be an important starting point for the evolutionary concepts that would influence Klinger's art for the rest of his working life.

A Life, completed by Klinger in 1884, comprises 15 etchings focused mainly on one woman's sexual desire and activity, and her subsequent demise because of those actions. The series begins with two plates, *Prefacio I* and *II*, which present women in nature, unabashedly naked and free. However, in *Prefacio II*, behind the woman sits a shadowy male figure, whose features are reduced to those of a skull or demon, signaling the male condemnation of women to come. The next plate, *Dreams*, appears to foreshadow the specific woman's actions and the reactions of others. In *Temptation*, the woman's lust is consummated, which is symbolized through her and her lover's embrace astride two sea creatures diving to the ocean floor. The subsequent four plates (*Abandoned*, *The Proposition*, *Rivals*, and *For Everyone*) show her abandonment by her lover, another man propositioning her, a fight between her former lover and that man, and the woman as a dancer on stage in front of society at large. Her fall, shown in *On the Street* and *Into the Gutter!*, is aided by many common people with faces reminiscent of that of the man in *Prefacio II*, who sweep her into the gutter as though she were vermin. In *Chained*,

² Morton, Marsha, "Impulses and Desires: Klinger's Darwinism in Nature and Society", *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, <http://19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring03/223-excavating-greece-classicism-between-empire-and-nation-in-nineteenth-century-europe> (accessed 4 March 2011).

³ Morton, Marsha, "From Monera to Man: Ernst Haeckel, Darwinismus, and Nineteenth-Century German Art", in *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, ed. Barbara Larson et al. (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 68.

a prehistoric winged creature restrains the woman while a crowd of mostly male onlookers regards her with satisfaction and disgust. *Downfall*, *Christ and the Women Sinners* and *Suffer!* portray the woman drowning, a group of women huddled around Jesus as a man stones a woman to death in the background, and the woman hanging on a cross as two figures huddle in an embrace in the foreground. The last plate, *Back into Nothingness*, shows the woman dragged backward into a chasm by a large and commanding shadowy male figure.

The most obvious evolutionary theory represented in *A Life* is that of sexual selection. Darwin's theory that sexual partners are chosen partially for beauty, used as a takeoff by several German scientists and writers, such as Wilhelm Bölsche, who "regarded the erotic drive as the central unifying principle of the universe".⁴ The woman depicted in *A Life* is typical of artistic representations of women in the 19th century, a model of contemporary preferences in female beauty. Her physical beauty is reflective in part of thousands of years of preferential selection based on what characteristics were most sexually desirable.

In addition, most commonly in nature it is the males who compete for the attention of the females, be it through brightly colored feathers, offerings, or other elaborate displays. According to the authors of *Sex At Dawn*, "Darwin saw sexual selection as a struggle between males for sexual access to passive, fertile females who would submit to the victor."⁵ As much as human males groom themselves, acquire status symbols and give gifts to competitively show their desirability as a mate, so too do females. While Darwin's simplified version of sexual selection

⁴ Marsha Morton, "From Monera to Man: Ernst Haeckel, Darwinismus, and Nineteenth-Century German Art", in *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, ed. Barbara Larson et al. (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 66.

⁵ Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex At Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 42.

is relevant to much of the animal world, both human males and females play a part in active sexual selection, and this is reflected in *A Life*.

When considering *A Life*, it is also important to consider Klinger's critique of the way in which culture had evolved to demonize and condemn female sexual desire. Through religious and social stigmatism, females had been cast both as harmless, passive creatures and as temptresses, determined to doom society through their beguiling beauty and loose morals. Klinger's work, however, calls into question the validity of this stigmatization through his portrayal of society as wild, frenzied and demonic in their cruel rejection of a woman who sought to satisfy her primal sexual desires.⁶ The contorted, jeering faces are especially telling in the plate entitled *Chained*; the predominantly male crowd that condemns her are also responsible for her demise in society's double standard of male expression and female repression.⁷ A similar note of hypocrisy is echoed in *Christ and the Women Sinners*, for inasmuch as Jesus appears to comfort the women, Christianity has historically played a critical role in the oppression of women both sexual and otherwise. The denial of female carnal desire and her role in sexual selection was being challenged by several of Darwin's contemporaries, including Lewis Henry Morgan, who posited that, "a "state of promiscuous intercourse" was typical of prehistoric times", and called into question the definition of females as passive sexual participants.⁸

Although *Dramas* touches on many of the same issues, the scope of its social critique is broader. *Dramas*, a series of 10 prints completed in 1883, begins with *In Flagranti*, a plate

⁶ Morton, Marsha, "Impulses and Desires: Klinger's Darwinism in Nature and Society", *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, Vol 2, Issue 2, Spring 2003, <http://19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring03/223-excavating-greece-classicism-between-empire-and-nation-in-nineteenth-century-europe> (accessed 4 March 2011).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex At Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 43.

depicting a woman covering her ears while her husband shoots her lover from an upstairs window. The next plate, *A Step*, illustrates a woman making a deal in a back alley, and the series continues with *A Mother I, II, and III*, a set of plates based on a specific newspaper story in which a man beat his wife, after which she attempted suicide with their child.⁹ The themes of pointless death and violence are apparent in the following two plates, *In the Forest* and *A Murder*. The final three plates, entitled *March Days I, II, and III* illustrate another cultural event in which the people rose up violently in mob fashion against government forces.¹⁰

These works, while undoubtedly providing both general and specific social criticism, also reflect an interpretation of evolutionary theory common among Klinger's contemporaries. While progressive optimism about the continuity of evolution was common around the turn of the century, older artists such as Klinger and his contemporaries took a bleaker view of human evolution. "These artists...were receptive to a bleaker evolutionary narrative of competition, struggle, and death. For them, the presence of man "in", rather than "above," nature, evoked anxious, and frequently ironic, visions of human and animal parity in a world of violence, suffering, and carnality."¹¹ For Klinger, the struggle of man against his "ape nature" was a subject of fascination and of apprehension, and the upshot of the socio-economic stresses in the wake of the unification of Germany in 1871 provided strong examples for Klinger's prints.

Though evolutionary theories have progressed greatly since Klinger's time, his understanding of evolution as it stood in the mid to late 19th century was quite competent, and his

⁹ Marsha Morton, "Impulses and Desires: Klinger's Darwinism in Nature and Society", *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, <http://19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring03/223-qimpulses-and-desiresq-klingers-darwinism-in-nature-and-society> (accessed 4 March 2011).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Marsha Morton, "From Monera to Man: Ernst Haeckel, Darwinismus, and Nineteenth-Century German Art", in *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, ed. Barbara Larson et al. (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 61.

views on and understanding of cultural evolution as it pertained specifically to women is far ahead of its time. The topics of sexual selection and cultural evolution have been most notably discussed recently in Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá's book *Sex at Dawn*, in which, among other things, they call into question the structure of the nuclear family, positing that before the advent of agriculture and private property, humans shared sexual partners freely. While this research is highly controversial, it ties into Klinger's depiction of sexuality as a primal, natural drive needing fulfillment.

However, the concept of man's violent, uncontrollable animal nature is more questionable. It is true that humans are animals and apes in their own right, but what sets humans apart from other animals is the ability to think abstractly. Humans are able to assess the benefits and risks of behaving in specific ways. Therefore, the idea of one's animal self as the defining characteristic of humanity holds significantly less water. Though the basic reactions of humans may be violent and animalistic in some cases, human ability to synthesize ideas overall becomes more important in determining human behavior.

With these adjustments in mind, were Max Klinger alive and working today, he would do well to continue making print series based on these concepts, merely re-contextualizing them within contemporary culture and with current evolutionary theories in mind. A series like *Dramas* would, rather than examining social problems merely as the product of primordial nature, seek greater depth through the discussion of cause and effect-based thought. Also, concepts like the concepts in *A Life* could be adjusted to show sexual selection as it stands in the modern age, and to expand upon the continued sexual double standards that still plague Western cultures today. Klinger's prints were on the cutting edge of evolutionary theory in their time, and

a broader and more comprehensive knowledge of evolutionary concepts would only increase the power of Klinger's social critique.

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Ryan, Christopher and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010.

Appendix

A Life-1884



1. *Prefacio I*



2. *Prefacio II*



3. *Dreams*



4. *Temptation*



5. Abandoned



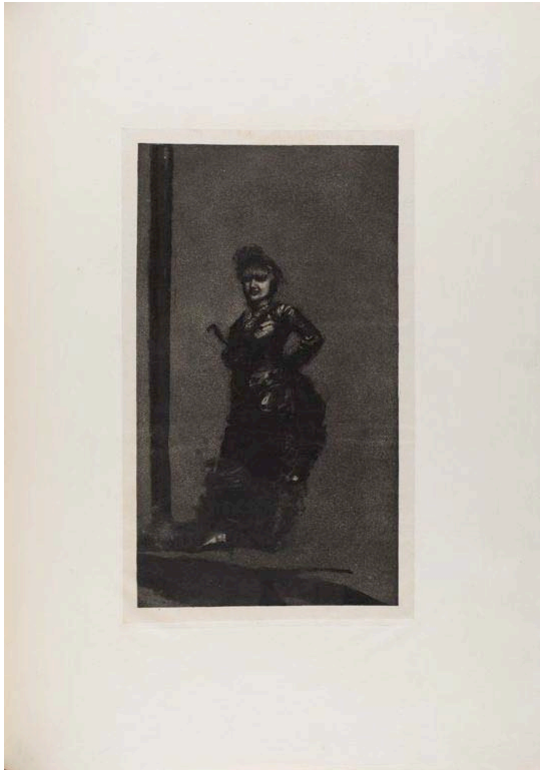
6. The Proposition



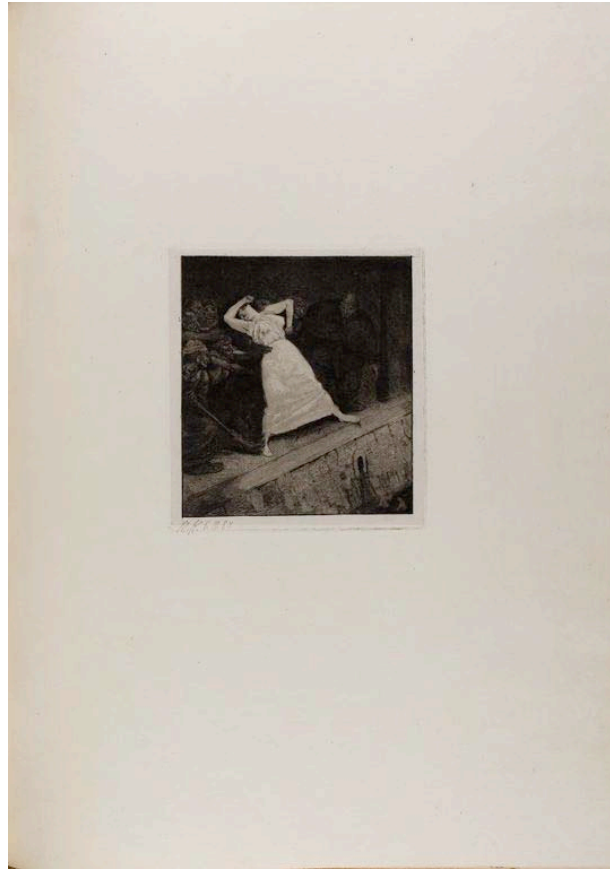
7. Rivals



8. For Everyone



9. *On the Street*



10. *Into the Gutter*



11. *Chained*



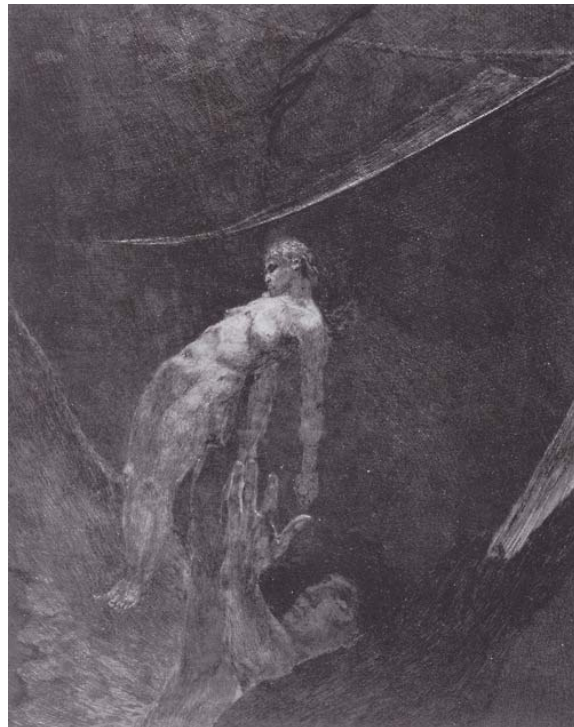
12. *Downfall*



13. *Christ and the Women Sinners*



14. *Suffer!*



15. *Back into Nothingness*

Dramas-1883



1. *In Flagranti*



2. *A Step*



3. *A Mother I*



4. *A Mother II*



5. *A Mother III*



6. *In the Forest*



7. *A Murder*



8. *March Days I*



9. *March Days II*



10. *March Days III*