

1833

Birth on 7 July, in Namur, of Félicien Joseph Victor Rops, only son of Nicolas Joseph Rops (1782-1849) and Marie Sophie Maubille (1794-1872). His father traded in calico, printed fabrics "in all the colours of the rainbow". He loved growing flowers and music.

1844

Having first studied with private tutors, Rops was registered with the Jesuits at the Notre-Dame de la Paix secondary school in Namur. The young Félicien shone in literary subjects and won first prize for epistolary style. At the same time, he joined and took an active part in the life of the Congrégation Notre-Dame des Anges, a Catholic religious community, until 1849.

1849

Upon the death of his father in February, Félicien was placed under the authority of a guardian, his cousin Alphonse Rops (1805-1870), an alderman in Namur, who did not understand the young man's artistic aspirations.

Rops left the Jesuit school to continue his studies in the secular system at the Athénée in Namur.

Unbeknown to his guardian, he registered at the Academy of Fine Arts in Namur, where he studied with the genre and

landscape painter Ferdinand Marinus (1808-1890).

1851

He registered at the Free University of Brussels to take a first degree in philosophy in preparation for law, which he soon abandoned.

There, Rops met up with a number of his friends from Namur, including Victor Hallaux (1833-1896) and Ernest Scaron (1835-1923), but he also made new acquaintances, one of whom was to prove vitally important, the writer Charles De Coster (1827-1879).

Rubbing shoulders with students leading a Bohemian lifestyle, he quickly carved out a niche for himself in one of the most active circles: the Société des Joyeux. He became its regular artist, taking up lithography for which he proved to have a gift and publishing his first work, *Le Diable au Salon*, under the auspices of this society.

1853

Rops attended the Atelier libre Saint-Luc in rue aux Laines, Brussels, a rallying point for a young generation of artists where avant-garde ideas were exchanged and the first shoots of realism developed. Here he met Louis Artan (1837-1890), Charles De Groux (1825-1870), Louis Dubois (1830-1880) and Constantin Meunier (1831-1905), future adherents of realism in Belgium.

He joined the Société des Crocodiles, which published the satirical paper *Le Crocodile*. Here Rops used his talents as a caricaturist under the pseudonym 'Young member'.

1854

Rops attained his majority and came into his father's inheritance.

1855

The young artist travels (probably) for the first time to Paris. He is very impressed in the Louvre by the painters of the French school.

1856

Together with Charles De Coster, he founded his own weekly, *L'Uylenspiegel, journal des ébats artistiques et littéraires* (1856-1863). In it, he published caricatures of society or leading figures of his time, before tackling politics, a field which the journal's subtitle initially appeared to rule out.

1857

On 16 February, Rops married Charlotte Polet de Faveaux (1835-1929), the daughter of a judge at the court of Namur.

In October, the French journal *Le Rabelais* published an article full of praise for *L'Uylenspiegel* and for Rops himself. The author was the famous French journalist and writer Alfred Delvau (1825-1867). He wrote: "Félicien Rops is

Belgium's Gavarni – a Gavarni combined with a Daumier [...]. Twice the merit that deserves twice the praise.” [\(1\)](#) (free translation)

From then on, Delvau was to take pains to introduce the young Belgian artist to “people who counted” in Paris.

1858

Rops produced his first illustrations for the novel *Légendes flamandes* by his friend and fellow contributor to *L'Uylenspiegel*, Charles De Coster, for the publisher Hetzel (1814-1886) in Paris. This marked the start of a major turning point in his career, as he moved from illustrating journals to illustrating books.

He produced works on politically committed topics such as those in *La Médaille de Waterloo* and the lithography of the same name.

His wife, Charlotte, gave him a son, Paul (1858-1928).

1895

Birth of his daughter, Juliette (1859-1865).

The family divided their time between Namur and Thozée castle, the property of the Polet de Faveaux family in the Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse region, before building a mansion in avenue Louise, in Brussels.

1862

Rops is fascinated by the city of light and visits Paris regularly. He gets acquainted with artcritics, writers and publishers.

In Namur, he founded the Royal Club nautique de Sambre et Meuse, a water sports club, serving as its president until 1866 before become vice-president until 1869.

He stopped contributing to *L'Uylenspiegel*.

1863

Rops produced one of his most famous lithographs: *Un enterrement au pays wallon* which was to be circulated in Paris by the publisher Alfred Cadart (1828-1875). This masterpiece of realism and caricature calls to mind *Un enterrement à Ornans* by his elder Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) with whom Rops had worked a year earlier on the illustration of the work *Histoire anecdotique des cafés et cabarets de Paris* by Alfred Delvau. Through the latter, he met the French publisher Auguste Poulet-Malassis (1825-1878), who was endeavouring to promote the reintroduction of etching in illustrated books.

Their collaboration was to prove fruitful: thirty-four frontispieces were to be created between 1864 and 1870, mainly for erotic works from the 18th and 19th centuries.

1864

“Baudelaire is, I believe, the man I most earnestly desire to meet, we encountered one another in a strange love, love of the first crystallographic form: a passion for the skeleton.” [\(2\)](#) (free translation), Rops had written to Auguste Poulet-Malassis. The meeting took place in May, in Namur, while Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) was in exile in Belgium. It was to prove vital for the work of the young Belgian artist.

Rops studies engraving techniques in Paris with Félix Bracquemond (1833-1914) and Jules Jacquemart (1837-1880).

1866

Poulet-Malassis published the *Épaves*, a compilation of the condemned poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Rops produced the frontispiece and during this period, within this same “space of the Baudelairean dream”, he created *La Mort au bal*, *La Mort qui danse* and other *Mors syphilitica*.

In Paris, he met Edmond (1822-1896) and Jules (1830-1870) de Goncourt, to whom the following year he was to dedicate his *Parisine* based on Manette Salomon, the heroine of the novel written by the two brothers. He increasingly immersed himself in the literary world of Paris, which captivated him. In just a few years, he became the city’s most sought-after illustrator.

1867

Rops illustrated a leading work of Belgian French-language

literature for Charles De Coster: *La Légende et les aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et d'ailleurs*.

1868

In Brussels, he participated actively in the foundation of the Société libre des Beaux-Arts, serving as its vice-president between 1870 and 1876. This group of artists did not uphold any clearly defined aesthetics but aimed to “react against the dogmatism that would negate all freedom, all progress” [\(3\)](#) (free translation).

Capable of galvanising friendships and energy, Félicien Rops drew to his home city of Namur the young artists and writers he met in the avant-garde circles of the capital. He was in fact one of the mainstays of the Colonie d'Anseremme painting school. He was to return here until the 1880s to meet his Belgian friends, enjoy rowing and paint numerous views of the Meuse valley ‘from nature’.

1869

Rops founded the Société internationale des Aquafortistes (1869-1871 and 1874-1877) in Brussels, This society aimed to revive etching in Belgium and create a chalcography.

He agreed to give engraving classes at Thozée castle, where he frequently lived with his family. This initiative was to result in the *Pédagogiques* series, which are fascinating from a technical point of view.

In Paris, he met two young sisters and fashion designers, Léontine (1847-1915) and Aurélie (1852-1924) Duluc.

Rops was to have numerous love affairs, but only his relations with these two women were to prove lasting, as they were to remain his companions until the end of his life. He produced many fashion sketches for their couture house.

1870

At the end of the Franco-Prussian war, Rops visited the battlefield of Sedan, making numerous drawings in his sketchbooks. He planned to produce an album of them and put on an exhibition entitled *Exposition Félicien Rops. Croquis de Guerre 1870-71*. These two projects never came to fruition.

1871

Léontine Duluc gave birth to Claire (1871-1944), who was to marry the Belgian writer Eugène Demolder (1862-1919) in 1895.

1873

He began the series of four *Dame au pantin* (1873-1890) in which he gradually turned towards an art form that was soon to become known as ... symbolism.

1874

Rops and Charlotte Polet de Faveaux separated following the

artist's many infidelities. He stayed in Brussels until the end of the year to take care of the Société internationale des Aquafortistes.

In August, he travelled in Norway and Sweden, bringing back many quick sketches and outlines.

1875

Rops left to settle permanently in Paris. The French capital was an inexhaustible source of inspiration for him: the bustling boulevards, the atmosphere at night, the prostitution, the excess of absinth,... Captivated by "the psychological impression of his age", Rops endeavoured to paint "what he felt with his nerves and saw with his eyes" [\(4\)](#) of modern vices and passions. Inspired by this 'realistic' approach of society, between 1875 and 1882 he was to create *Le Bouge à matelots*, *Le Gandin ivre*, *L'Attrapade* and *La Dèche*, as well as a startling *Buveuse d'absinthe*, the searing intensity of which he was to depict in several versions.

1876

The Parisian publisher Alphonse Lemerre (1838-1912) called on Rops to illustrate the complete works of Alfred de Musset (1810-1857). As was the case with many projects, this collaboration was to fail because two years later, Rops had produced only a frontispiece and one of the forty expected illustrations, which were eventually not used for the publication.

1878

This was a year of intense artistic creation when Rops explored new avenues in drawing. He worked on *Scandale* and produced two of his masterpieces: *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* and *Pornocratès*. The realistic and psychological paintings of the dregs of society on which he had concentrated until then gave way to an allegorical and ironic vision of the hold of sex over human reality.

For a Parisian bibliophile, Jules Noilly (18??-18??), Rops began work on a series of a hundred and fourteen drawings entitled *Les Cent Légers Croquis sans prétention pour réjouir les honnêtes gens* (1878-1881). In this series, the artist produced various versions of the famous 'modern half-nude', which he invented, and denounced contemporary bourgeois hypocrisy.

Start of his collaboration with the Belgian naturalist publisher, Henry Kistemaekers (1851-1934).

1879

He went to Hungary. He was to have published travel notes in *Le Figaro*, but all that remain of them are scattered sheets bearing texts and sketches: *Les Ropsodies hongroises*.

The artist and collector Maurice Bonvoisin (1849-1912), known as Mars, published the first catalogue raisonné devoted to the engravings of Rops.

1880

He explored Spain, bringing back views of Toledo, Seville, Madrid, Grenada and other places.

1881

He began working with the Belgian publishing firm Gay et Doucé (1877-1882) for which, in just over a year, he produced twelve frontispieces inspired by 'Cythera'.

Publication of the *Rimes de joie* by the Belgian poet and artist Théodore Hannon (1851-1976), with a frontispiece and three illustrations by Rops. The correspondence exchanged between the two men documents the progress of the frontispiece that Hannon ordered from the artist as of 1878.

1882

Rops created the *Sataniques* series: five watercolour drawings, the preludes to the series of engravings with texts by the artist to be commented on by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) in *Certains* (1889).

1884

First exhibition by Les XX, an avant-garde artistic circle that was to be widely talked about for ten years thanks to the organisation of an annual exhibition. Rops, seen as the leader

of the Belgian avant-garde movement, was invited to take part.

He purchased La Demi-Lune, a property in Corbeil-Essonnes, on the banks of the Seine, at the edge of Fontainebleau forest.

During the summer, Rops met the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917).

Publication in Paris of *Vice suprême* by the French writer and occultist Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), with a preface by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808-1889) and a frontispiece by Rops.

1886

Rops was named a 'vingtiste', a member of the artistic circle Les XX, during the third exhibition organised by the group. *Pornocratès* was unveiled to the public here, creating a scandal.

The artist was to exhibit with the group again in 1887, 1888, 1889 and 1893.

Publication in Paris of *Dix eaux-fortes pour illustrer Les Diaboliques de Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly*.

1887

He travelled in the United States with the Duluc sisters who were prospecting the American market for their couture house.

Among the places he visited were New York, Baltimore and Chicago, as well as Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec. Rops did not go ahead with plans for a guide entitled *Strange America*, despite mentioning it frequently in correspondence written during his tour.

He produced the frontispiece *La Grande Lyre* for the *Poésies* by Mallarmé.

Under the pseudonym érastène Ramiro, the lawyer and collector Eugène Rodrigues (1853-1911) published a *Catalogue descriptif et analytique de l'œuvre gravé de Félicien Rops*. The correspondence exchanged between Rops and Rodrigues bears witness to the artist's close cooperation on this publication, as well as other catalogues which the author was to devote to him.

1888

Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) asked him to design the frontispiece for *Parallèlement*. Rops responded to the request by producing *La Sphinge*, which was eventually not used until 1896 to illustrate *Chair*, a work published after the poet's death. Rops, whose health was breaking down, worked increasingly in the peaceful atmosphere of La Demi-Lune, his property in Essonnes near Paris. There, he gave free rein to his passion for botany, creating new varieties of roses. He saw painting as a refuge.

He became acquainted with the Belgian print dealer and publisher Edmond Deman (1857-1918).

Rops met the Liège engraver Armand Rassenfosse (1862-1934) and soon formed a friendship with him. Together, they were to carry out intensive technical research in the field of engraving which was to result in the creation of a new, soft varnish, 'Ropsenfosse'.

He made his last major journey, going to North Africa. Rops crossed Algeria, Tunisia and the Sahara.

1889

The artist was made a chevalier or knight of the Legion of Honour.

1891

Érastène Ramiro published *L'Œuvre lithographié de Félicien Rops*.

1892

Aurélié Duluc gave birth to a second son by Rops, Jacques (1892-1892), but the child only lived for a few hours.

While engraving, Rops had an accident and injured himself, getting potassium bichlorate in his eye.

1895

Publication of the *Supplément au Catalogue descriptif et analytique de l'œuvre gravé de Félicien Rops* by érastène Ramiro.

1896

Rops contributed to the third exhibition organised by the Libre Esthétique, the artistic circle that succeeded Les XX and whose first exhibition was held in Brussels in February 1894. His works were also to be presented at the exhibitions organised by the Libre Esthétique in 1897 and 1899.

Publication in Paris of a special 'Rops' edition of the review *La Plume* including previously unseen illustrations and texts signed by the most illustrious critics of the day. Around 10,000 copies of this issue were sold, in addition to the regular subscribers. The retrospective exhibition of the artist's work that was to have been held at the Salon des Cent at the same time was cancelled due to differences of opinion with the director of the review *La Plume*.

1898

Rops passed away on 23 August, at his property La Demi-Lune, surrounded by Léontine and Aurélie Duluc, Claire and his closest friends.

Sources

(1) Léon Fuchs [pseudonym of Alfred Delvau], 'Félicien Rops', *Rabelais*, Paris, 65 (Saturday, 17 October 1857), p. 5-6.

(2) Letter from Félicien Rops to [Auguste] Poulet-Malassis, [Namur], undated – ‘Dix-huit lettres de Félicien Rops’, *Mercure de France*, 01/10/1933, p. 48-50.

(3) ‘Notre Programme’, *L’Art libre*, from No 2 onwards (1 January 1872-1 December 1872).

(4) Letter from Félicien Rops to [Auguste] Poulet-Malassis, place unknown, 00/00/1866. – Maurice Kunel and Gustave Lefèbvre, *Correspondance de Félicien Rops*, Limal, publisher unknown, 1942, vol. VI, p. 130, only copy kept in the Archives of Contemporary Art at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, inv. 8813.