

# James Pradier (1790–1852) and the sculpture of French Romanticism. *Catalogue raisonné*

PAUL-ANDRÉ JACCARD and AGLAJA KEMPF

Early January 2010 saw the publication of a *catalogue raisonné* devoted to James Pradier and penned by Claude Lapaire. It offers insights into the versatility of this unjustly forgotten artist, who was adept at using the changing political circumstances of his time to further his career.

The author Claude Lapaire initially worked as a conservator at the *Schweizerisches Landesmuseum* in Zurich, then as director of the *Musée d'art et d'histoire* in Geneva, and he is regarded as one of the great experts on Swiss sculpture. He has published numerous essays and books in this field and compiled the *Catalogue raisonné Auguste de Niederhäusern-Rodo* (1863–1913) published by the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences in 2001. Now, nine years later, he presents us with a standard reference work on the œuvre of James Pradier. It is the 24<sup>th</sup> volume in the series of *catalogues raisonnés* on Swiss artists, and simultaneously the fourth published by SIK-ISEA's *Antenne romande*, preceded by those on Charles Gleyre (1996), the aforementioned Rodo (2001) and Félix Vallotton (2005). Incidentally

Ill. 1 and 2, pages 19/20

**Nyssia**, 1847–1848

Marble, originally partly coloured,  
height 176 cm

Montpellier, *Musée Fabre*.

Photo: Yves Siza, Geneva

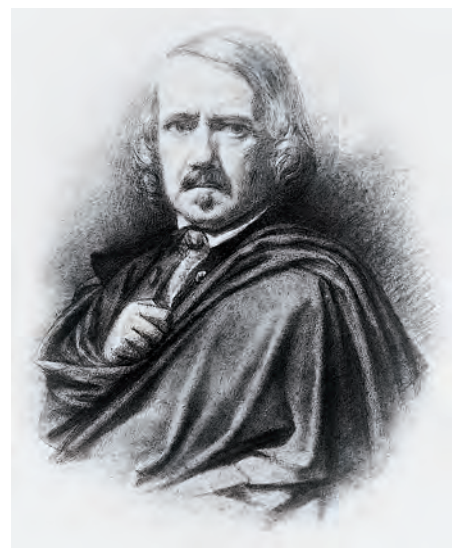




Pradier, like Gleyre after him, taught at the Parisian *Ecole des beaux-arts*. In this respect he also fits perfectly into another theme that interests our *Antenne romande*, the training received by Swiss artists in Paris during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The results of this research can soon be seen in print.

### A Genevan contribution to European Romanticism

James Pradier (Ill. 3) is one of the most significant Genevan artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one of the most important sculptors of the Romantic school in Europe. In 1808, aged 18, he emigrated to Paris and won the highly desirable *Prix de Rome* (Ill. 4), which brought him a five-year residence as *pensionnaire* of the *Académie de France* in Rome. As a member of the *Institut de France* and as a teacher at the *Ecole des beaux-arts*, Pradier was a ubiquitous presence in the world of art. He received numerous prestigious public commissions, such as the figures of Fame in the spandrels of the *Arc de Triomphe* on the *Place de l'Etoile*, the decoration on the façade of the *Palais du Luxembourg* and the twelve victory statues surrounding the grave of Napoleon in the dome at *Les Invalides*, not to mention the decoration for the fountain on the Esplanade at Nîmes. For Geneva, the city of his birth, Pradier created several busts of scholars and the famous statue of Jean-Jacques Rousseau for the island named after the philosopher. By reinvigorating small-scale sculpture, he also conquered private spaces, and by means of limited production, over which he exerted a degree of control, he carried the aesthetics of Romanticism into bourgeois salons and dressing rooms.



3

### The confidant of French Romantic writers

Pradier was a frequent visitor to the homes of Romantic painters, musicians and writers. His closest friends included Victor Hugo, who made no secret of his admiration for the sculptor. Alfred de Musset could not praise his talents highly enough, while Théophile Gautier saw in him a “poet of beauty, the king of form”.

Pradier’s sculptures are modelled on motifs and figures of Antique mythology. Consequently there is a great temptation to lump them in the Classical category. Yet his works are suffused with a different spirit: the *Trois Grâces* (Three Graces) in the Louvre are not so much goddesses as young women of his own day, and the fiery passion we see consuming the lovers in *Satyre et Bacchante* (Satyr and Bacchante) (Ill. 5) had never before been sculpted as so unambiguously promiscuous. The figures representing the towns of Strasbourg and Lille on the *Place de la Concorde* are not really allegories in the conventional sense, but Parisian ladies with the latest Romantic hairstyles, wearing their copings like hats from the most fashionable of milliners. His contemporaries certainly understood that Pradier’s statues, whatever bygone names and attributes they bore, mirrored the immediate present – sometimes, in fact, rather too carnally in the public view – and that they were making a stand for innovative tendencies in art. The same applies to his *Repasseuse* (Woman ironing) (Ill. 6), a young working-class girl holding her iron close to her face to test its heat. Today this sculpture is considered one of the works that paved the way in Paris for depictions of ordinary labour in high art.

### Time for revision

Although Pradier was admired and imitated until the end of the Second Empire, he gradually faded from memory. It was only with the major one-man exhibition at Geneva’s *Musée d’art et d’histoire* in 1985–1986, later repeated in Paris at the *Musée du Luxembourg*, that Pradier attracted attention once more. Since then, this artist has been accorded a place of honour in exhibitions and publications on the Romantic movement, and his statuettes put in a regular

Ill. 3

**Autoportrait** (Self portrait), 1850

Drawing in charcoal and white chalk, 23.5 x 20.5 cm

Pradier family collection



4



5

III. 4  
**Néoptolème empêche Philoctète de percer Ulysse de ses flèches**  
*(Neoptolemus prevents Philoctet from shooting Odysseus with his arrows), 1813*  
 Relief. Plaster of Paris, 121 x 150 cm  
 Donated to the City of Geneva by the artist, 1813.  
 From 1826 in *Musée Rath*, transferred in 1910 to the *Musée d'art et d'histoire*.  
 Damaged by fire in 1987.  
 Photo: MAH, Geneva

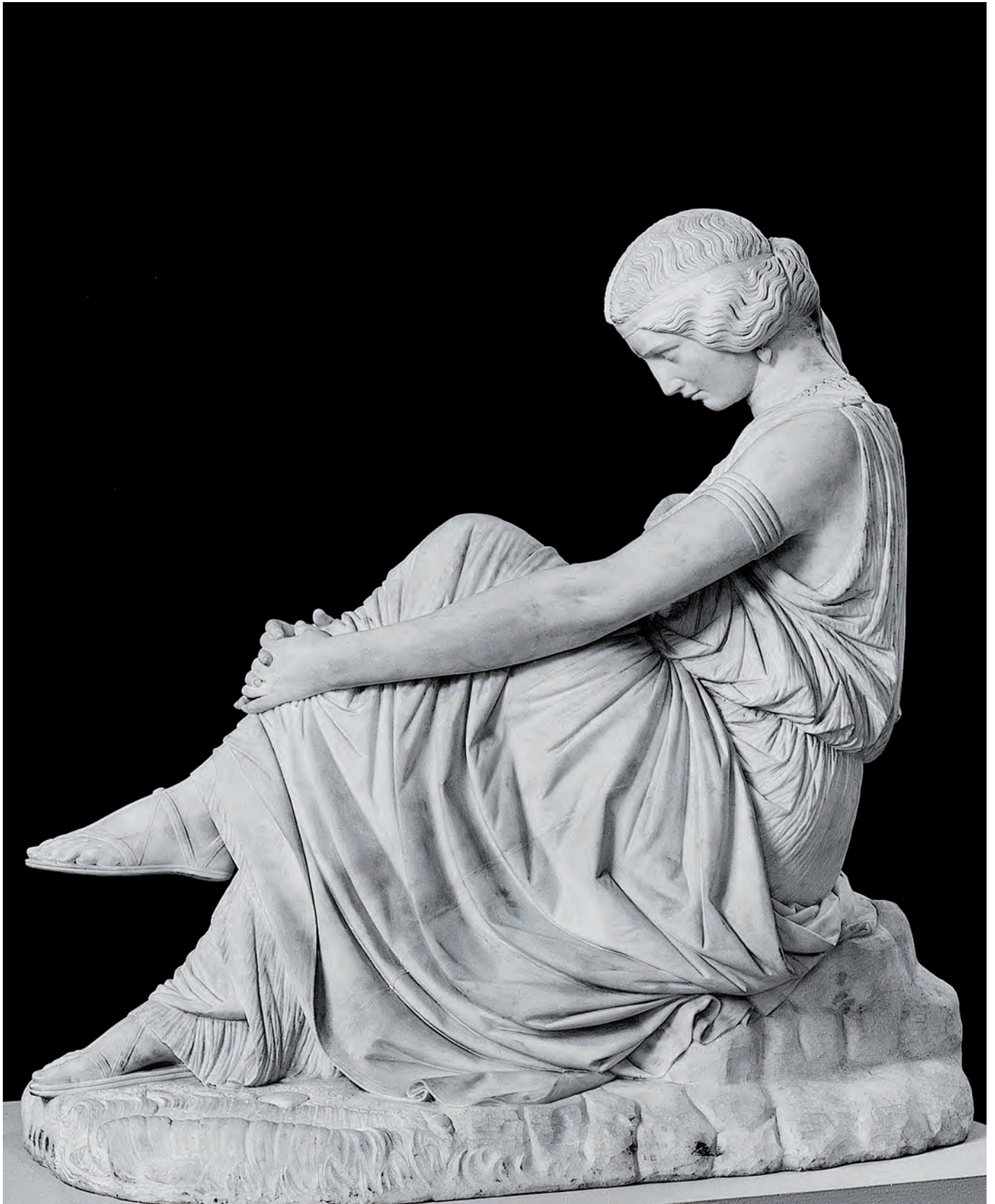
III. 5  
**Satyre et Baccante** (*Satyr and Bacchante*),  
 1830–1834  
 Group of sculptures. Marble, 125 x 112 x 78 cm  
 Paris, *Musée du Louvre*.  
 Photo: Yves Siza, Geneva

III. 6  
**La Repasseuse**, (*Woman ironing*), also known as  
*La Blanchisseuse* (*The Washerwoman*), c. 1840  
 Statuette. Plaster of Paris, height 34 cm  
 Geneva, *Musée d'art et d'histoire*.  
 Photo: MAH, Yves Siza

Abb. 7  
**Sappho assise** (*Sappho, seated*), 1851–1852  
 Marble, 118 x 120 cm  
 Paris, *Musée d'Orsay*.  
 Photo: *Réunion des Musées nationaux*, Paris



6



appearance in the international art trade. High time, then, for a *catalogue raisonné* that would finally provide a comprehensive overview of the artist's output.

Significant clusters of Pradier's works are currently located in the *Louvre* and the *Musée d'Orsay* (Ill. 5). Geneva has also gathered a considerable and constantly expanding stock of Pradier's sculptures, so that by now any study of the artist must begin in Geneva. Important lone works can be found in the great museums of Europe (Ill. 1 and 2), Russia and North America.

### **An important contribution to art history**

In the course of this research, facts have come to light which indicate how the artist advanced his career, secured commissions and organised his production, while simultaneously working on monumental decorations, great marble statues and dainty miniatures. We have learned about the everyday work in his studio, where Pradier was incessantly at work, trained his pupils and received the writers, musicians and politicians who came to watch him fashion the marble – and to admire his models. This new source material also permits precise chronological sequencing of his small sculptures and illustrates the relationship between the artist and his producers.

Finally, this investigation situates Pradier's work in the context of opposing aesthetic positions, with champions of neo-Classical traditions on the one hand and Romantics on the other staking out their ground. Although the sculptor felt indebted to Ingres, whom he considered the greatest painter of his generation, for his own collection he purchased oil sketches by Delacroix. Apart from this, he steered well clear of ideological debates, which were of little interest to him. Together with his friend Théophile Gautier, he indulged in art for art's sake and placed purity of form and perfection of craft above all else.

### **Detective work**

The catalogue itself lists 506 sculptures and 72 works whose classification is problematic. A few of them remain only in the secondary evidence: photographs, engravings or historical descriptions, while over a hundred hitherto unpublished sculptures are reproduced here for the first time. As far as possible, every work comes with an image in duotone and a historically substantiated legend, the usual headings with an index of exhibitions and bibliography, as well as detailed commentary.

Admittedly, the distinctive hallmark of a *catalogue raisonné* of sculptures is that it must render an account not only of the major works and their preparatory drawings (131 are included), but also of numerous variations – either in the material used or the format – and the casts that were still being produced, in some cases, long after Pradier's death. This aspect is covered under the heading "Other Copies", which acquires central significance. All in all, it includes no fewer than 942 numbered items, inflating the number of objects which the author had to record and localise to 1520. This means an enormous amount of detective work, which extended as far as searching out items in the international art market on the worldwide web. Witness catalogue numbers 317 (*Hébé assise sur un rocher [Hebe, seated on a rock]*) or 358 (*Danaïde [Danaid]*), of which there are 19 and 41 (respectively) versions in different museums, private collections or auction houses. Faced with the enormous scope of this work, the author imposed rigorous restraints on the choice of illustrations. That was sometimes hard, all the more so because sculptures are best represented by shots taken from different angles. For this reason, the principal works are nonetheless depicted by several images. Synopses of signatures and cast markings complement this monumental standard reference, which also contains an index of names and an alphabetical index of work titles.

**Technical data**

Claude Lapaire, *James Pradier (1790–1852) et la sculpture française de la génération romantique. Catalogue raisonné*, published by the Institut suisse pour l'étude de l'art (SIK-ISEA), Lausanne/Zurich, Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2010 (*Catalogues Raisonnés* of Swiss Artists, no. 24).

Linen in protective sleeve, 23 x 29.5 cm, 512 pages, 578 numbers, 838 duotone illustrations, French text, CHF 140.-, ISBN 978-88-7439-531-6

The project received financial support from the LOTERIE ROMANDE, the CANTON OF GENEVA, the HANS WILSDORF FOUNDATION, the LEENAARDS FOUNDATION, the SWISS ACADEMY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (SAHS), the YVES and INEZ OLTRAMARE FOUNDATION as well as a generous donor who wishes to remain anonymous. From 2004 Paul-André Jaccard, Head of SIK-ISEA's *Antenne romande*, was in charge of the project.