DONALD CRAFTON

Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film

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EMILE COHL, CARICATURE, AND FILM

Frontispiece. Emile Cohl, ca. 1895.

EMILE COHL, CARICATURE, AND FILM

DONALD CRAFTON

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To Marilyn

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ON SATURDAY mornings when our children turn on the television to watch the networks' two or three hours of cartoons, or when they (or we) pick up the comic section in the next day's paper, it is not likely to occur to us that these entertainments have a history. Since the chronological development of cartoons and comics and the causes and ramifications of that development have seldom been the subject of academic discourse—if we bother to think about it at all—it is easy to jump to the conclusion that these trifling, even juvenile, distractions and their histories are not worth studying. Yet, like all institutions, these media are the products (and not necessarily the end products) of many years of constant industrial and social forces. Visual humor is deeply embedded in the thicket of chronological, social, textual, artistic, psychological, ideological and technological tangles that make up the unexplored underbrush of modern culture.

This study seeks to trace one somewhat gnarled strand of this cultural network, typified in the life and work of the French artist Emile Cohl, who lived from 1857 to 1938. He was an innovative contributor to one institution—popular graphic humor—at a critical moment in its history when it changed from traditional caricature to narrativized visual exposition. He was also a progenitor of another institution—the animated film.

In some ways this book is a conventional biography; it attempts to assimilate all the retrievable pertinent facts about the artist's life into a chronicle and to set them within the context of his times. With Emile Cohl we are more fortunate than the academic protagonist of Robertson Davies's novel *Leaven of Malice*, who is faced with writing the biography of the obscure playwright Charles Heavysege. "I'll make it appear that little Heavysege hopped right into the middle of a very interesting time, which is a lie, but absolutely vital to any scholarly biography."[1] Not only was Cohl born into Paris, "the capital of the nineteenth century," but he was an active participant in its popular culture and was in turn an influence on his milieu. His life was amazingly varied, tinged with politics, art, invention, romance, duels, mirth, and tragedy—the stuff that biographers and authors of made-for-TV-movie scripts yearn for. Davies's would-be biographer continues, "What happened between 1816 and 1853, when Heavysege came to Canada, I don't know, but I'll fake up something." Again, we are lucky. Unlike Davies's fictional biographer, we do not have to fake up a record. Finding our way is facilitated by Cohl's own notes and clipping files, corroborated by the paper trail made possible by the rise of trade journalism in the early twentieth century and the guidance provided by Cohl's extant films. These provide the armature for his life story. Still there are gaps, but the portrait that emerges is that of a complicated, gentle but stubborn individualist pursuing whatever fanciful turn his fertile imagination took.

I have also tried to avoid the traditional role of the biographer who defends the subject as a Great Man; Cohl's works, though sometimes masterful contributions to film history, are not necessarily Masterpieces. Rather than insist on the artist's singularity, I have chosen to monitor more closely than usual the context of his various productions, pointing out how he was in sync with other artists and filmmakers of his time. Thus speculations concerning Cohl's social and intellectual milieu are augmented by analyses of popular graphics drawn by others who may or may not have influenced him, but whose works are part of his background, and by a discussion of the early film industry in France and the United States.

Since Cohl was prolific in popular graphic humor and cinema, the reader necessarily will learn about both domains as they were during the period between the mid-1880s and World War I. Therefore this can be regarded, using Robert C. Allen's useful phrase, as a study in media interaction, with Emile Cohl as the link between media.

It was Cohl's lot in life (shared by many at the turn of the twentieth century) to be directly affected by the dynamic technological changes that transformed virtually every Western urban environment at the time. Mass culture, then as now, was especially sensitive to the influence of new communications technologies. First lithographic, then photoengraved printing processes increased the manufacturing capacity for producing drawings. Rail lines and highways, and improved vehicles to ply them, made possible distribution on a national—even international—scale. New cameras, projectors, and emulsions made moving pictures possible, while receptive mass audiences for new media made them economically rewarding for entrepreneurs (though not necessarily for their workers). Cohl was deeply committed to the technologies of printing and cinema and attempted to adapt his own work habits and interests to them in a way that would satisfy his *bricoleur* instincts (his insatiable drive to tinker) while gaining a livelihood. He was one of the heretofore unsung pioneers of the comic strip. And he became the father of the animated cartoon, an epithet conferred upon him late in life by his appreciative professional colleagues, which he quickly appended to his developing biographical legend.

While Emile Cohl was exploring and contributing to these new technologies, to some extent he was also becoming their victim. The comic strip, which would eventually make the old style of caricature commercially obsolete, would become dominant in the United States rather than France. Films would quickly become studio-made mass-produced commodities, subordinating the role of the individual creator. The time of the lone genius gave way to the era of the assembly-line system.

Writing just after the animator's death in 1938, Jean Renoir remarked, "At first the Mélièses, the Cohls, then the Max Linders, the Rigadins, and the Joë Hammans occupied the screens of the whole world, from Siberia to Colorado, by way of Andalusia. Since then, dishonest industrialists have sold out the French cinema—piecemeal, wholesale and retail—to their rich foreign competitors."[2] Renoir's nostalgic looking

back to a golden age of prewar cinema was jaundiced by his pessimistic view of a national industry in disarray in the late 1930s, as he was about to embark on *Rules of the Game*. But in fact the industry of Cohl's epoch was every bit as insecure as later, although the specific threats were different. Competition was ruthless among domestic producers attempting to regulate the market to serve their own interests while resisting the invasion of foreign imports. The business in Cohl's time was also undergoing a change in artistic and economic conception (the two always being related) on the part of producers and audiences—a new orientation that was as cataclysmic as the coming of sound would be around 1930, or the failure of the great French studios in the late thirties.

Although it is commonplace to conceive of everything before 1915 as "early" or "primitive" cinema, without national distinction, the various film industries developed distinctive forms of production and exhibition in each country. Unlike the earliest dominant American viewing apparatus, Edison's Kinetoscope, which linked film conceptually to the peep show and its aim of attracting droves of individual spectators, French cinema from the start was an outgrowth of a much stronger tradition of audience-oriented projected spectacle. Furthermore, unlike the heterogeneous American market, French cinema was always aimed at a middle-class audience. The "lower class" depiction of early French cinema was generally a distortion, first by uplifters, then later by populist and socialist commentators. But French producers made their fortunes exploiting the crowds of families that flocked to the traveling fairs and carnivals sponsored by provincial church parishes and by filling the leisure hours of urban bourgeois families. Unlike the United States, France experienced no great waves of immigrants at the turn of the century (at least none that film producers wished to entertain), and the domestic audience for film throughout Cohl's period was much more homogeneous than in America.

Cohl's films illustrate the industry's desire to annex as much of this expanding middle-class market as possible. His producers' encouragement, or at least tolerance, of Cohl's experiments in animation reflects a desire to sustain the interest of an implied audience of literate bourgeois spectators. The market was not just theatergoers but also family consumers of mass-circulation humor magazines. From the producers' viewpoint, the value of Cohl's roots in caricature was obvious; the intertextuality of popular graphic humor and film was not fortuitous but rather the result of calculated experimentation. In the end, however, Cohl's work inevitably will be seen as unique, not fitting comfortably into any preexisting genre or within one model of reception such as "primitive" or "institutional." While this does give Cohl considerable authorial status for us retrospective historians, for him at the time, practically speaking, his position of marginality in the industry made it difficult to maintain employment. And eventually it led to his involuntary withdrawal from animation practice.

Chapters One and Two recount the particular biographical details of Cohl's early life

and formative years as a caricaturist when he worked with André Gill and then developed his own idiosyncratic style. The chief intellectual influences on his art as he grew into a kind of boulevard-culture jack-of-all-trades are discussed. Chapters Three, Four, and Five reconstruct Cohl's first film work, his position within a major French growth industry, and the influence of his work on the new art of the animated film.

In Chapter Six we see how Cohl attempted to create and bolster his own legend as his career ended and his life approached its tragic finale. His promotional efforts indirectly provided some of the earliest cogent writing on the techniques and generic definitions of animation. Chapters Seven and Eight are more theoretically oriented speculations on the aesthetic roots of Cohl's art and its intertextual fabric.

ONE wonders how scholars in Emile Cohl's day, armed only with a Waterman pen and a ream of foolscap, published anything at all. My work of tracing Cohl's life and career was aided by numerous highly technological aids yet still took a long time to complete. It would never have reached this state were it not for the experts and the artist's surviving relatives who assisted me. Most of the gathering of data was done in Paris with the warmth, generosity, and cooperation of Emile Cohl's daughter-in-law, Mme. André Courtet-Cohl, and his grandchildren, Pierre and Suzanne Courtet-Cohl. They gave me access to Cohl's papers and will find many of their family mementos reproduced in my illustrations. Michel Legros, Cohl's great-grandson, also provided me with valuable information.

At Gaumont, Messrs. Loubeau and Petiot allowed me to look through the old records of their company and gave me permission to use the corporate archive in Joinville-le-Pont, La Cinémathèque Gaumont-Actualités. At that time Mlle. Mathieu reigned as directrice, ably accompanied by her little white poodle. She allowed me to examine all the films that remain that were made by Cohl for Gaumont. I viewed these in the form of duplicate camera negatives that ran on a specially converted Steenbeck table equipped with a video system for reversing the polarity of the image, changing negative to positive. Later Laure Forestier of Gaumont struck new positives from these when they generously assisted me in the various retrospectives of Cohl's work in which I have participated. The quality of these new 35mm prints is astonishing. They capture the brilliance and clarity of Cohl's films as they appeared to audiences before World War I.

I owe a special and heartfelt debt to Jacques Deslandes, historian of the French cinema, who befriended me, loaned me rare original documents from his extensive collection, and pored over my catalogue in its earliest form. Frantz and Nicole Schmitt screened many films for me at the Archives du Film in Bois d'Arcy and provided me with important documentation. Raymond Maillet, director of the Association Française du Cinéma d'Animation gave me free access to his files.

My research began at the Cinémathèque Française during a low ebb in that institution's history. While I was attempting to work there, I resented Henri Langlois's apparent lack of interest and assistance. But since his death, and the publication of biographies of Langlois by Richard Roud and by Georges Patrick Langlois and Glenn Myrent, I have grown to appreciate Langlois's difficulties at the time I met him.

I will always be grateful to Lotte Eisner, who at last provided my "open sesame" to the Cinémathèque's treasures, and to Marie Epstein. Retrospectively I am also glad to have had the opportunity for many interesting discussions with Mary Meerson.

I benefited from the encouragement of Jean Adhémar (Bibliothèque Nationale), Mme. Charron (Cinémathèque Pathé-Journal), Charles Ford, A. Haigron (Société d'encouragement pour l'industrie nationale), M. d'Aubarède (Concours Lépine), the librarians of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal and the Bibliothèque de l'IDHEC.

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I am very grateful to the Swann Foundation for Caricature and Cartoon, Henry J. Goldschmidt, president, for continuing support of this project and for my first book on animation.

The dedication of this book to Marilyn Crafton is not just a sentimental gesture but a sign of her real contribution during the decade of support, research and writing that the book has entailed.

Madison, Wisconsin
April 26, 1988

PART ONE

The "Caricaturiste"

Va, frère, va, camarade,
Fais le diable, bats l'estrade
Dans ton rêve et sur Paris,
Et par le monde, et sois l'âme
Vile, haute, noble, infâme
De nos innocents esprits!

Grandis, car c'est la coutume,
Cube ta riche amertume,
Exagère ta gaieté
Caricature, auréole,
La grimace et le symbole
De notre simplicité

Paul Verlaine, from
"Pierrot Gamin," ca.1886

CHAPTER ONE

A Caricaturist's Life

EMILE COHL claimed to be the oldest Parisian. That impulse by itself indicates something about the person, his perception of his place in a particular culture, and his desire to let others know of it. To substantiate his claim he produced a meticulously researched genealogy showing that, since 1292, his family had been living in the vicinity of what eventually became the Bourse neighborhood.[1] There were some lacunae in the older branches of the family, but the post-revolutionary descendants were easily traced as far back as his paternal grandfather, Jean Eustache François Courtet (1795–1875), and his grandmother, Rosalie Elisabèthe Clotilde Aubert (1798–1830). Their son, Elie Courtet, was born in 1821 and married Emilie Laure Coulon in 1853. Four years later their only child was born on January 4, 1857, and was christened Emile Eugène Jean Louis Courtet. Later he called himself Emile Cohl, and he would grow up to be one of the best-known Parisian caricaturists of his day, one of the pioneers of the comic strip, and, even later in life, the creator of the animated cartoon film. At the time of his birth, the family lived at 20, rue Cadet in the ninth arrondissement (not far from the present site of the Folies-Bergères).

Emile Courtet's birthplace would have telegraphed essential information to his fellow Parisians in the nineteenth century. As inhabitants of the Faubourg Montmartre, his family would have been categorized as bourgeois with upwardly mobile aspirations. Elie Courtet, a stereotypical *faubourien*, was a salesman representing his great-uncle Alexandre Aubert's rubber-manufacturing plant in Grenelle. Mme. Courtet supplemented the family income as a linen seamstress. Their fortunes were linked, as were those of many others in the Industrial Revolution, to the fortunes of the plant and the fluctuating economy in general. Courtet's rising and falling resources necessitated many moves, first to rue Lamartine, then back to rue Cadet in 1859.[2]

As a baby, Emile was frail and overprotected by his mother. He suffered occasional convulsions and carried a permanent scar from an injury he received during one of them. Later in life, when he set down notes for an autobiography, his earliest memories were vivid images: the swallows departing in autumn, a horse pawing in the courtyard, soldiers marching down boulevard Poissonnière. He recalled attacking his mother's sewing table with a toy saw and could remember his older cousin dressed up as Pierrot. Once someone gave him some paints.

> I see myself sitting in a chair before a table, having before me a box of colors and a big glass of water and smearing drawings (?). I must have been desperate because I see vague forms agitating all around me.

He was first sent to school about 1861. There a magician with shiny copper instruments fascinated him on the first day, but the party ended and "I began my battle with the alphabet." At year's end there was a class play:

> It was in a little theater inside the elementary school in the rue de la Tour d'Auvergne. We were all over the stage and in the bleachers. The set represented a forest, or at least some foliage. At one point I started to cry. Everyone came at me: "What's the matter?" I peed, and continued to cry. There was wild laughter everywhere. It was the only time I ever provoked laughter in a theater. . . . Let's go on.

There were few recollections of his father, except for his Garde Nationale uniform, rifle, and bright buttons. But he had warm memories of his mother. Unfortunately she had never recovered from a fall during her pregnancy, and her condition grew worse. His worried father sent Emile to stay with his maternal grandmother Coulon in Montreuil-sous-Bois, then still a village outside Paris. He had become excessively shy and was teased at school. Once he was punished for falling into the public drinking fountain and again for pinching brussels sprouts belonging to the village constable.

Mme. Courtet died in 1863. Emile's father entrusted the six-year-old to the Parrotte family, tie manufacturers in Les Lilas (Romainville). Their next-door neighbor in this area, near what is now the nineteenth arrondissement, was Paul-Charles de Kock (1794–1871), the author of spicy romantic novels whom the neighbors regarded as a cranky old man, but who would reward Emile's stories of the day at school with two sous and laugh when addressed as "Monsieur Poil de Coq" (Mr. Rooster-Hair). Once he intervened on behalf of the young pupil when he was unjustly punished by a teacher "with a quick hand." De Kock was frequently the butt of caricaturists—Nadar was the most famous—and one naturally wonders whether the youthful Emile was exposed to any of these drawings.

In 1864 Courtet enrolled his son at the Ecole professionnelle de Pantin, a boarding school more commonly called the Institut Vaudron after its director. At first he was placed in the lower division because of his inability to perform during the initial examination, but soon it was realized that he was simply too timid and frightened, and by the third day he had moved up to the first division. Two days later there was another triumph when it was time for drawing lessons:

> They set before me a model taken from the notebooks of Monzocq (all the schoolchildren of my day will recognize it). It was a picture of a thatched roof and I sketched it in five secs flat, before the master returned. "He draws! Go get M. Vaudron." He arrived a few minutes later. "What, what, he knows how to draw?" You could say that

I was a phenomenon. "Yes, and he can read and count. . . ." "And can he do fractions?" That doused it. "No, Monsieur, not yet." And I put my head down on my desk.

Despite his ignorance of fractions, he was promoted, and the teacher, Vaudron's alcoholic son, let him draw in class as much as he wished.

Emile Courtet's early education at père Vaudron's, which apparently left him to his own devices, helped to channel his compulsive doodling into natural drawing talent. He had even more time to practice in 1865 when he was confined to his father's apartment (now on rue d'Enghien) with a serious cold. Drawing was his only distraction until the housekeeper gave him all the beautiful stamps from the letters of her relatives in Martinique. Little did she know that she was kindling a stamp-collecting passion that would burn all his life. His father encouraged this new interest by contributing stamps from the daily business mail and taking him to visit Arthur Maury's stamp shop, one of the largest, in the heart of Paris's stamp-trading district, across from the Théâtre Français.[3]

Cured and returned to school in Pantin, he was allowed to draw caricatures on the walls, a large map of France, and some pictures of locomotives. He easily became first in school in drawing and in 1869 earned the duty of teaching the "dolors of the alphabet" to younger children.

In 1870, still at Vaudron's, there were two candidates for the honor of singing the *Marseillaise* at the August awards ceremony. Emile won. (The loser, Lédart, later became the director of the Théâtre de Montmartre.) However, the declaration of war against Prussia dispersed the class, and the ceremony never took place. This time M. Courtet sent his son to live with the family of a cousin who owned a greengrocery on the avenue des Ternes.

He returned to live with his father after the fall of the Second Empire on September 4, 1870. One immediate result of the social turmoil following the war was brought home when Uncle Alexandre Aubert was forced to give up his interest in the rubber-manufacturing plant, leaving an uncertain future facing Elie Courtet and his young family.

Caricature: The Image of Opposition

The economic and political upheaval that formed the backdrop of Emile Courtet's youth coincided with the rise of what Richard Terdiman, in his account of journalism in the nineteenth century, has called "newspaper culture."[4] Emile's was in fact the second generation to grow up in the age of lithography—the process that enabled images drawn by the artist's own hand to be reproduced and disseminated by the hundreds or thousands only a few hours after being sketched on the printing stone. While the process had its utilitarian and decorative uses, it also made possible the spread of overtly

oppositional political imagery to an extent that would have been inconceivable in the previous century. It was Emile Courtet's fortune to grow up in the midst of an eruption of satirical cartooning. While important in its own right—Cohl would have warranted a biography as a caricaturist even had he not found the cinema—his involvement with caricature, with its connotations of marginality, will become especially pertinent during his later career in film.

As soon as he could afford it, Elie Courtet enrolled Emile in another school, the Ecole Turgot. There the boy quickly excelled in drawing, but he was still too distracted by events in the streets to be interested in anything else. During the Siege he picked up his allotted piece of horse meat and straw bread. His father could not stand the meat, so he gave his share to Emile and instead ate the bread, which had to be soaked in oil, rubbed with garlic, and fried to make it palatable. With no heat, Emile suffered frequently from colds and chilblains. When he was well, he played with his friends in the streets and watched the soldiers at the barricades. Once he saw Rochefort make an inspection of the lines while he was headquartered on rue Cadet. According to a biographical sketch written in 1886, it was during the Commune (March–May 1871) that he was first exposed to political caricatures.

> On March 17, the stripes of the Commune officers and the parades of soldiers held a disturbing fascination for him and distracted him from his school work. He took advantage of these troubled times when the teachers had other cats to skin besides their undisciplined pupils. Like a real Paris urchin, he spent his days hanging out in the streets, stopping for a long time in front of the bookstore windows where so many infantile caricatures were shown off during these feverish days.[5]

He was becoming aware, through these anarchic drawings, of an aspect of the visual environment that had been increasingly evident since the first third of the century. Two factors in particular stimulated his interest in the art of caricature.

The first was his physical proximity to rue du Croissant, the "Fleet Street of caricature."[6] The editorial offices of most of the satirical publications were centered around this narrow street, just across boulevard Poissonnière from the Courtets' Faubourg Montmartre. The electric atmosphere of the street on Saturdays when the latest issues of *Le Charivari*, *L'Eclipse*, and *Le Journal Amusant* were hawked was captured in a print by Régamey (fig. 1).

The second factor was the sheer quantity of caricatural images that covered the walls and saturated the streets and cafés in defiance of all attempts at control. Many commentators, such as Duranty, mentioned "the innumerable comic papers that abounded in Paris during this epoch."[7] Throughout most of the Second Empire Napoleon III had attempted to suppress all political caricature by enforcing strict censorship. When he was overthrown in 1870, the streets erupted with blistering posters and broadsheets

1. Félix Régamey: "La Rue du Croissant," 1868.

pillorying the regime. During the Franco-Prussian War, the Siege, and peaking during the Commune, there was an enormous outpouring of vicious and hateful imagery directed toward various rapidly changing enemies.[8] These were not the established illustrated papers, all of which had ceased publication during the turmoil, but crudely printed *feuilles volantes*. These broadsheets, literally "flying leaves," were often illustrated by anonymous hacks who wished to communicate their inflammatory messages directly to the public.[9] Albums of anti-Commune caricatures circulated freely and replaced the bitter anti-Prussian broadsheets.[10] It was this type of imagery that first caught the eye of the street urchin Emile Courtet.

After the boy finished his schoolwork at the Ecole Turgot, presumably around 1872, his father obtained a three-year apprenticeship for him with a jeweler. Emile tried to relieve the monotony of the job by joining a magician's act, but, according to an account apparently written by Cohl himself in 1890, "He only dreamed of drawing, or rather, of caricature, and sketched everything he saw."[11] He continued to caricature passionately after he had finished the dull apprenticeship and enlisted for voluntary service with a Cherbourg regiment.

Then the philatelist Maury hired him to work in his shop and design his albums, a sideline that would continue until 1889 when they argued over wages.[12] His father still hoped that his son would seek a commercial career and found him a fifty-franc-a-month position with a maritime insurance broker. But this, too, was intolerable.

> All of a sudden, one fine day, abandoning his appointments, our caricaturist made a clean break with his papa and declared that henceforth he would live off his pencil—an ultimatum that immediately introduced him to *la vache enragée*.[13]

The final phrase was slang for going hungry. But as Jerrold Seigel has noted, the term was also a contemporary euphemism that indicated to readers that Emile Cohl was venturing into the realm of Bohemia.[14]

The aspiring caricaturist was somehow able to obtain a letter of recommendation from Etienne Carjat, an important photographer who was best known for his portraits of the actor Frédérick Lemaître. But he was also a painter and a caricaturist. Carjat referred him to his close friend and former collaborator, André Gill, the best-known caricaturist of the day. Cohl's biographers, writing as "Pierre et Paul," described this momentous day in his life with florid and fanciful prose:

> On a beautiful morning in the month of October 1878—it begins like a novel by Montepin—a solid young blond man strode feverishly up and down the sidewalk of rue d'Enfer, since changed by an administrative pun into Denfert-Rochereau, finally stopping at number 89. The traces of violent interior emotions could be read on his juvenile face upon which long practice at living had not yet imposed the impenetrable mask of impavidity. And under the rule of this emotion that he was trying in vain to master, a little quiver agitated the upper lip of our hero, imprinting an undulating motion to his fine blond moustache, the points of which fluttered, musketeer fashion, while his right hand nervously crumpled the letter that was concealed in the pocket of his jacket.
>
> After a long hesitation which had already been preceded by two or three attempts, the young man plucked up his courage, lifted the heavy door knocker and let it fall back with a dull thud.
>
> "Enter!" responded a heavy voice from inside, which, far from reassuring our timid visitor, made him tremble all the more.
>
> However, in spite of the shivering that this imperative injunction had induced, he resolutely pushed open the door. He found himself at the foot of a steep staircase whose steps, quickly skipped, led to the half-opened door of a big room cluttered with easels on which were displayed canvases containing rough outlines. A drawing board hung from the ceiling and at it sat a man, a kind of Hercules in shirt sleeves, before a table overloaded with scraps and sketches. He was drawing and from time to time he would wipe the point of his pen on his fingertips which he would then run through his leonine hair, the jet black ink mixing with a few streaks of silver, then he would throw his mane back with a brisk movement of his head.
>
> This Hercules was André Gill.[15]

The young man displayed some natural talent and was admitted into the Gill atelier. Although the details of Gill's working habits are unknown, it seems certain that the large number of "pupils" who frequented the studio actually worked as Gill's assistants. Life there was a swirl of activity and excitement punctuated by the famous caricaturist's soirées. Emile Courtet was absorbed into the circle, and most of his new acquaintances

remained personal friends until their deaths. There was dramatist François Coppée, the actors Daubray and Gil-Naza (David-Antoine Chapoulade), Constant Coquelin cadet and âiné (junior and senior). The poet-politician Gustave Rivet recited there. Sculptor Jean Chapuy, musician Olivier Metra, and painter H. C. Delpy joined some of the best-known caricaturists, including Sapeck (Marie-Félicien Bataille), Paul Hellé, Adolphe Willette, and Georges Lorin. Ernest d'Hervilly, Cattelain ("engraver, furniture mover and pianist"), and the *café-concert* proprietor Théodore Bullier also attended.[16]

The central attraction was, of course, André Gill (born Louis-Alexandre Gosset de Guines). At this time, in 1878, he was the preeminent caricaturist of France, owing largely to his daring attacks in the illustrated press against the Second Empire, openly defying the censors and earning a reputation for personally revitalizing the underground art of political caricature.

The days of relatively free political expression enjoyed by Daumier's generation from 1830 to 1835 had vanished by 1859, when Gill's first drawing appeared in *Le Journal Amusant*. Hired in 1865 by the courageous publisher François Polo to illustrate his new satirical journal *La Lune*, Gill was frequently the target of attempts by Emperor Napoleon III to suppress political caricature. In spite of this, the paper had a circulation of 500,000 by 1867. Gill constantly tested the limits of a censorship apparatus that forbade not only unauthorized representations of the government but allegorical content as well. "The Masked Wrestlers" of November 3, 1867, was taken to be an antipapist statement, although it showed only two wrestlers, one wearing a red mask, the other in black. It was enough, in December when the case was tried before a magistrate, to send Polo to jail with a stiff fine and meant the end of *La Lune*. Meanwhile, the provocative skirmishes continued. On November 17, 1867, Gill attacked the emperor directly with his "Authentic Portrait of Rocambole." He gave the dandyish fictional character the unmistakable features of Napoleon III. The suppression of *La Lune* became a cause célèbre that contributed further to the swaying of public opinion against the Second Empire.[17]

Eight days after the last *La Lune*, Polo started a new paper to replace it and petulantly called it *L'Eclipse*. In the issue of August 9, 1868, he published Gill's "Monsieur X...?," a drawing of a melon with a slice removed. The features of a magistrate could be recognized among the bumps on its surface. When the issue was restrained from circulation, Gill was charged with obscenity instead of the expected grounds of unauthorized political caricature. The charge mystified everyone (and still does). Gill was livid and wrote in a front-page letter to the editor of *Le Temps*, "My drawings have often had a mischievous intention, but never an obscene intention. . . . If *L'Eclipse* must be prosecuted, let it be for the intentions that it has, not for those attributed to it."[18] We presume that the government felt that it could argue a case for the "slice" in the drawing as a vaginal image. But the ploy backfired. Hawkers scalped the issue in the streets

and a boisterous trial ensued that received extensive press coverage. The obscenity charge was dropped after Gill effectively argued that obscenity was in the eye of the beholder, but the paper was fined nevertheless. Once again, the empire was held up to public ridicule. Although seizures of *L'Eclipse* continued routinely, the growing weakness of the government allowed less stringent enforcement of the censorship laws. Eventually *Le Journal Amusant*, *Le Petit Journal pour Rire*, *La Vie Parisienne*, and *Le Charivari* all became bolder. Gill was generally credited with the new freedom of expression, and his name was familiar to those Parisians of Republican sentiment who browsed through the journals in the streets and cafés.

During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, Gill ceased drawing in order to join the defense against the Prussian Siege.[19] On April 17, 1871, he was elected to the Commune-endorsed Fédération des Artistes de Paris, chaired by Gustave Courbet, and was assigned the duty of protecting and organizing the Luxembourg Museum. One month later he was named its "provisional administrator."[20] After the bloody suppression of the Commune, Gill narrowly avoided the condemnation meted out to Courbet and others associated with it.

L'Eclipse resumed in June 1871. With the return of peace, the satiric press, despite censorship, continued the expansion that had begun in the final months of the Second Empire. Among the many new political papers was *La Lune Rousse*, founded by Gill in December 1876, in which some of his best work appeared. When Emile Courtet met him in 1878, Gill had become an almost legendary figure. Although not well known today outside of France, to his contemporaries and to later historians he was the heritor of Daumier's talent and social position of a generation earlier. Other artists respected Gill for his politics, his courage, and his art. When Camille Pissarro, for example, painted his *Portrait of Paul Cézanne*, he pictured his friend haloed by a little caricature of Courbet and a drawing by Gill from *L'Eclipse* (fig. 2).[21]

Gill's career is exemplary of the practice of "symbolic resistance," as discussed by Terdiman.[22] Like Daumier before him, Gill was profoundly committed to caricature as oppositional, not just to specific individuals but to what they stood for—the domination of society by conformist bourgeois values. Caricature then was primarily an ideological weapon, not merely a vehicle for the artist's style or wit. As Terdiman argues, "The nineteenth century is no doubt the counter-discourse's classic moment. The open and virulent anger felt by the antibourgeois for the bourgeois can rarely have been more evident or more focused."[23] Yet at the time when Cohl was entering the studio, the opposition was beginning to lose its unified front. The old issues were becoming blurred, and former enemies (such as Patrice de MacMahon, forced to resign as president of France in 1879) were not as menacing. Gill was frequently depressed and nearly penniless. *La Lune Rousse* went out of business in December 1879.[24]

Cohl's first works may be seen as typical of the period—transitional, moving away from the ferocity of old-style Republicanism (which he could not have known except

2. André Gill: "La Déliverance," *L'Eclipse*, August 4, 1874.

vicariously) and toward an increasing awareness of style and composition. At a time when Gill felt abandoned by his old friends, he became strongly attached to his new generation of admirers, of whom Cohl was by far the most ardent. It was around 1879 that the apprentice caricaturist adopted his foreign-sounding pseudonym. Why he chose "Cohl" has never been explained. Perhaps it had something to do with the pigment kohl, but more likely it was a pun that signaled his intention to stick to his master like glue ("colle").[25]

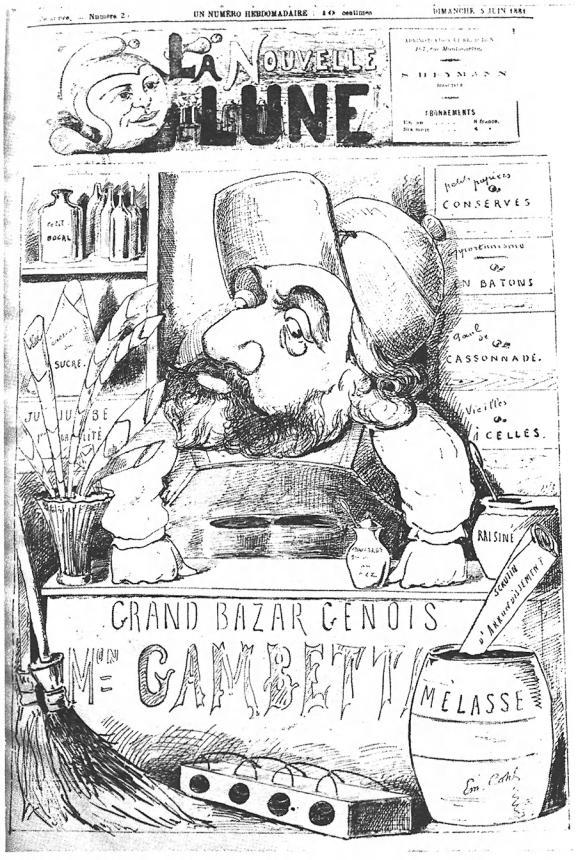
Not surprisingly, Cohl's first caricatures were closely patterned on Gill's style. Since the 1860s, Gill had mastered the *portrait-charge*, the practice of drawing a large caricatural head on a squat comic torso.[26] But he had transformed the stiff, repetitious forms of many of his predecessors into a highly refined mode of representation marked by individuality, life, and motion (fig. 3). Cohl learned his techniques firsthand in the atelier, where he was probably assigned the completion of the backgrounds and other finishing touches before the drawings were rushed off to the engraver Lefman. Some of the drawings signed by Gill may have been executed entirely by Uzès (A. Lemot), Georges Lorin, Bataille, or Cohl.

An 1881 caricature of statesman Léon Gambetta by Cohl shows that he was not

3. André Gill: "Bonjour! — Bonsoir!" *La Lune Rousse*, December 24, 1876.

extraordinarily precocious, but that Gill's lessons were learned well (fig. 4). The large head sits upon the stocky, disproportionately small body, modeled by quick cross-hatching strokes. The figure fits neatly into the space on the page, and the composition is enclosed by a rectangular frame. But Cohl's drawing lacks the balance and discipline visible in Gill's best work. There is a tendency toward clutter in the composition, and Gill's linear clarity is missing. Nevertheless, Cohl's caricature projects a strong sense of Gambetta's personality. Casting him as the proprietor of a boutique was ingenious and, on the whole, the drawing compares favorably with those by other artists of Gill's "school," such as Pépin (Edouard Guillaumin) or Alfred Le Petit.

Despite Gill's strong influence, Cohl began to show certain maverick tendencies that identified his personal style even in his earliest works. His figures often overstepped the boundaries of their frame, or the hair or a limb would extend past the margin. Usually this was done to introduce the idea of a figure in motion (fig. 5). Another unusual characteristic was that, more than any other caricaturist, Cohl was attracted to the puppet stage for inspiration. Occasionally, as in "Les Poupées de l'infante" (The Infante's Dolls, fig. 6), the *guignol* iconography is explicit. In other works, such as "Serment aujourd'hui, serrement demain" (Oath Today, Handshake Tomorrow, fig. 7), it is implicit in the doll-like figures, especially the sergeant.



4. Emile Cohl: "Grand Bazar génois," *La Nouvelle Lune*, June 5, 1881. (Hereinafter works for whom no other artist is cited are by Emile Cohl.)

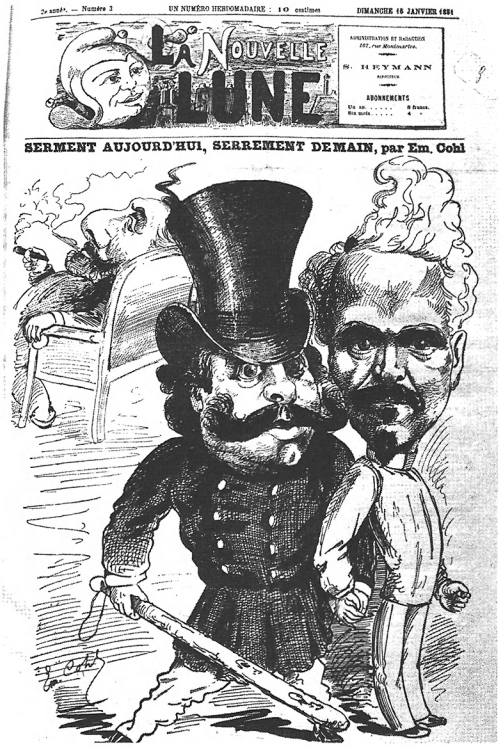
5. "Le Baron de San Malato contre Edouard Philippe," *La Nouvelle Lune*, March 6, 1881.

6. "Les Poupées de l'infante," *La Nouvelle Lune*, May 8, 1881.

5

6

Aux Folies-Dramatiques, par Em. Cohl.

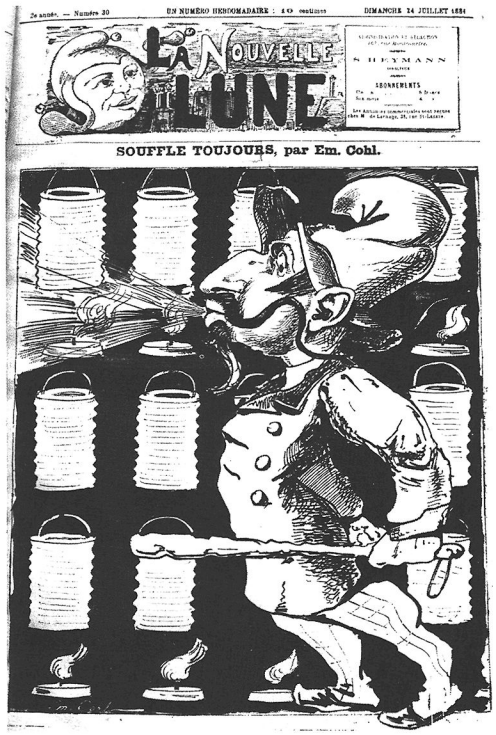


7. "Serment aujourd'hui, serrement demain," *La Nouvelle Lune*, January 16, 1881.

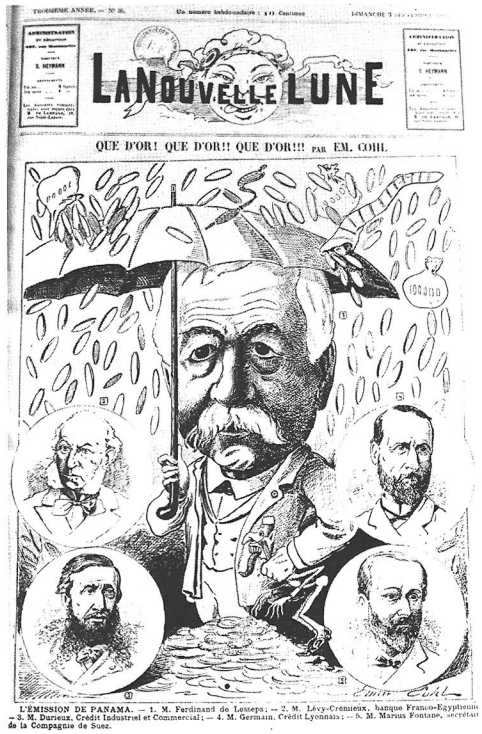
At first it seemed as though Cohl were trying to fill up the simplified backgrounds that had marked the best of Gill's work. "Souffle toujours" (Keep Blowing, fig. 8) has a bold black-and-white patterned background made from the arrangement of lanterns. "Que d'or! Que d'or! Que d'or!" (Gold! Gold! Gold!, fig. 9) also shows his readiness to fill backgrounds with decorative detail. He later reversed this tendency by eliminating the background altogether, as well as the "frame" (figs. 10–11). This style typifies some of Cohl's best graphic work, but ironically some of his least inspired in terms of wittiness of characterization.

Cohl was attempting to introduce some of his own innovations in the *portrait-charge* as defined by Gill. There are spontaneous and subtle humorous touches that one finds infrequently in the older caricaturist's more careful, restrained work. Once Cohl represented Gambetta by drawing only his famous silhouette and a beckoning hand (fig. 12). Little touches such as the faces on the fencing masks in "Le Baron de San Malato contre Edouard Philippe" (fig. 5) and the diva's caricature in the profile of the Gymnase Theater in "M. René Langlois" (fig. 13) add to the ingenuity of the drawings, though possibly distracting from the overall compositional impact.

There was also a marked propensity for grotesque physical distortion—over and above that to be found in other caricature of the time. Elongated noses were a favorite joke (fig. 14), and there were several distorted balloon-men (fig. 15).

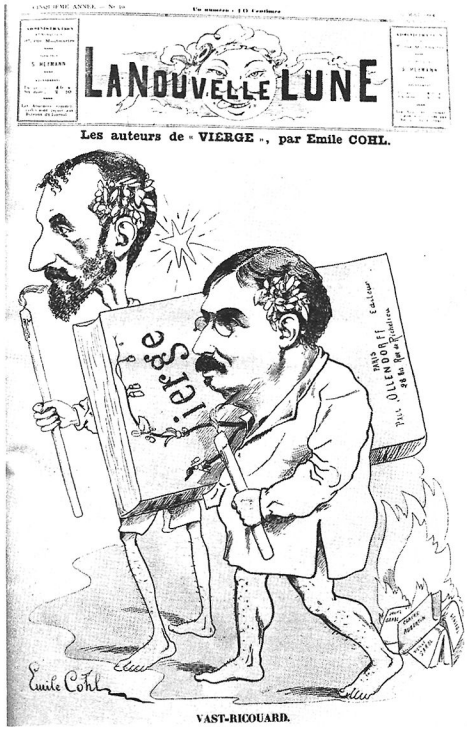


8. "Souffle toujours," *La Nouvelle Lune*, July 24, 1881.

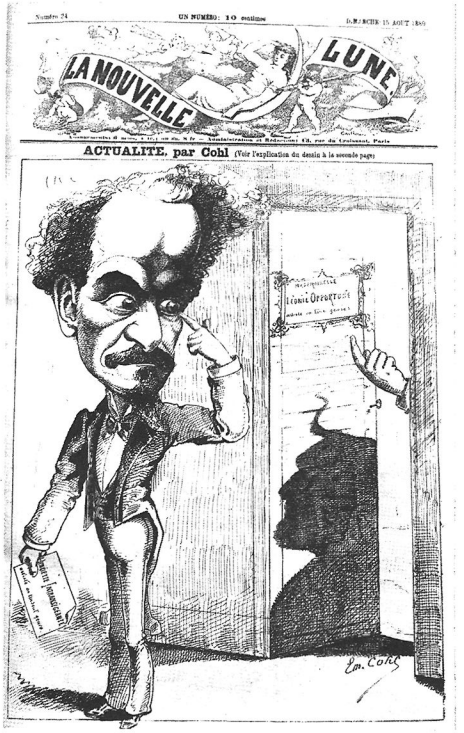


9. "Que d'or! Que d'or! Que d'or!" *La Nouvelle Lune*, September 3, 1882.

10. "Rentrée du grand Jules," *La Nouvelle Lune*, February 25, 1883.



11. "Les Auteurs de Vièrge," *La Nouvelle Lune*, May 31, 1884.



12. "Actualité," *La Nouvelle Lune*, August 15, 1880.

13. "M. René Langlois," *La Nouvelle Lune*, April 17, 1881.

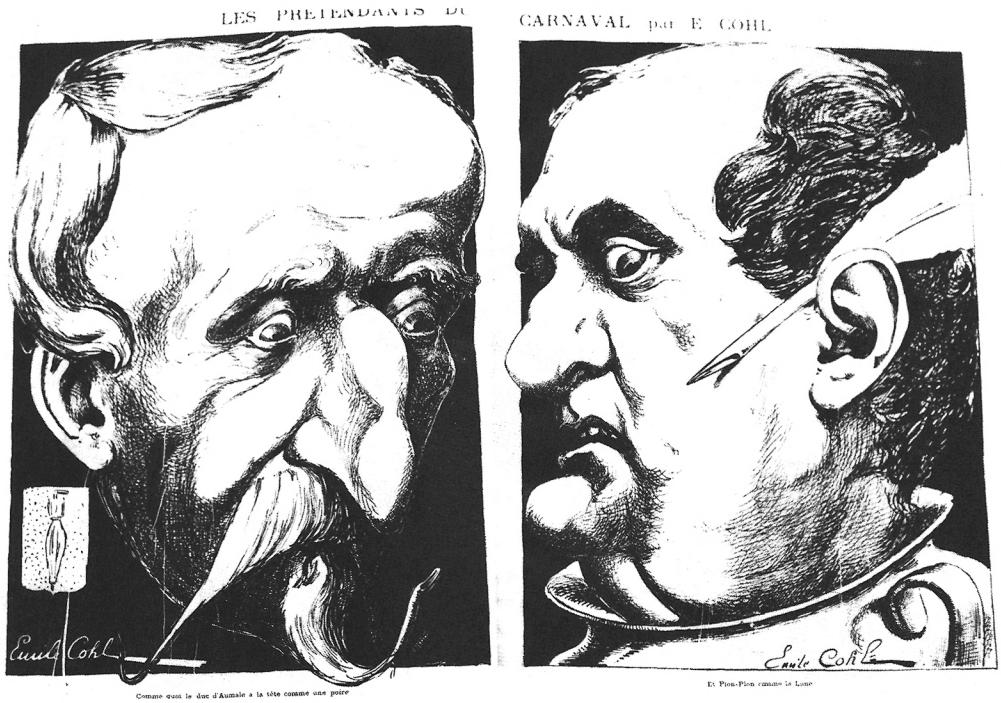
14. "Vêtement de saison," *La Nouvelle Lune*, August 28, 1881.

15. "Vue du Ministère Duclerc, de la lune," *La Nouvelle Lune*, August 20, 1882.

Cohl's most unusual experiments were some full-page facial portraits in which the heads were so large that they swelled over the margins of the folio-sized pages (figs. 16–17). The portrait of "Plon-Plon" transforms the subject's chin into buttocks and his shoulders into a chamber pot. The portrait of Gill's friend Clovis Hugues is especially effective because the open mouth and speech balloon suggest the Marseillais's garlic-laden breath. His pockmarks give the viewer the impression of uncomfortable proximity to the huge face.

Cohl's group caricatures show the same innovative approach. Instead of arranging the staff of *L'Indépendant* in a procession—standard since Nadar's *Panthéon*—he pictured them as five puppets on a stage against a backdrop emblazoned with sketches of the other contributors (fig. 18). "La Rédaction du *Tam-Tam*" (Staff of the *Tam-Tam*, fig. 19) caricatures some of the staff as puppets and others as childish sketches. In "Tapons dans le tas" (fig. 20) at a carnival boutique a hand offers the reader a ball to throw at the "dolls" representing journalists or papers. Cohl's most ambitious group caricature was "Le Ciel et l'enfer en 1881" (Heaven and Hell in 1881, fig. 21), in which he assigned over fifty political figures to heaven (presided over by Jules Grévy) or to hell (ruled over by the devil Henri de Rochefort). The two-page supplement to *La Nouvelle Lune* was intended to be sold separately for ten centimes.

In only a few years Cohl had become part of the "counter-discourse" of caricatural representation. His contributions to these Republican periodicals indicate that he



16. "Les Prétendants du carnaval," *La Nouvelle Lune*, January 28, 1883.