

Honoré Daumier

Mirror of Society

Exhibition Facts

Duration	6 February – 25 May 2026
Venue	Propter Homines The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Laura Ritter
Works	198
Catalogue	Honoré Daumier. Mirror of Society, Ed.: Ralph Gleis, Laura Ritter Available onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via https://shop.albertina.at/en/ , EUR 34,90 (English or German)
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Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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Honoré Daumier

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The political circumstances are unstable, a nefarious clique is abusing its power, the economy is in crisis, and the social situation is growing ever more complex and confused. Accounts describing the situation in France during the 19th century can seem oddly contemporary, and much the same holds true for the timelessly topical art of the great Honoré Daumier.

Daumier held up a mirror to his era, denouncing abuses of power and social injustices with a sharp quill and incorruptible humor. In his merciless radicality, he often ran afoul of the censors and once even went to prison for the sake of art's freedom. And as a keen observer, Daumier also depicted everyday life in the modern metropolis of Paris.

This year, the ALBERTINA is presenting the first major Daumier exhibition in 90 years, and his art seems no less relevant today than it did when it was created. Now, with support from works on loan from the Städelscher Museums-Verein, this French artist is to be presented in a new light. Alongside numerous lithographs and drawings, Daumier's famed paintings and sculptures will also feature prominently—as will an animated film based on an idea by Paul and Linda McCartney.

In cooperation with the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

Chapter Texts

Honoré Daumier. Mirror of Society

The French artist Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) fascinates as an astute observer, brilliant draftsman, and incisive narrator. Besides his paintings and sculptures, his more than 4,000 lithographs, which he designed for various Parisian magazines, are particularly well known. Through his committed caricatures, he became the conscience of an era of upheaval. Momentous events such as the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 shaped his century, as did profound social change. Daumier accompanied France's long journey from monarchy to republic with a critical yet deeply human view of the circumstances of the time. His focus lay on political events, the judiciary, and culture. With subtle humor, he also commented on modern urban life in a period of transformation and the everyday problems of the population.

In addition to his extensive body of prints, the artist created numerous sculptures and, from the mid-1840s on, an increasing number of independent drawings and paintings that testify to his enormous creative expressiveness and sensitivity. Daumier's examination of fundamental issues such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and individual political engagement makes his art relevant even today.

The exhibition presents a selection of about 200 works from his entire oeuvre and all artistic genres, with a substantial number of valuable loans complementing the Albertina Museum's own holdings. Numerous exhibits come from the outstanding collection of the Frankfurt-based Daumier expert Hans-Jürgen Hellwig, which he donated to the Museums-Verein of the Städel Museum in 2024. Together with selected paintings from other European lenders, these works convey the extraordinary inventiveness and wit of an artist whose work remains a timeless mirror of society.

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Daumier's Precursors

Political caricature was already very popular in France during the 1789 Revolution. However, under Napoleon Bonaparte's subsequent rule, critical pictorial satire was almost completely banned. It was not until after the emperor's fall in 1814/15 that a new wave of publications emerged. Individual motifs from these often anonymous sheets were taken up only a few years later in updated form by Honoré Daumier.

One etching depicts the Comte d'Artois, who would later become King Charles X, consuming Napoleonic medals and excreting them as royal Decorations of the Lily. Using the traditional metaphor of digestion, this image vividly criticizes the lack of loyalty and the authorities' favoritism. The opportunism of political actors and their followers was also addressed in the popular motif of the weather vane: a two-faced human «flag in the wind» simultaneously celebrates both the emperor and the king. Referring to a proverb, Napoleon's demise in 1815 is depicted as a falling pear, the leaf of which bears the profile of the regent. The fruit was to have a great career as a political symbol in the 1830s.

Of Pears and Kings

Daumier's career as a caricaturist reached its first peak in the years following the July Revolution of 1830, which resulted in the abdication of King Charles X and the reign of Louis-Philippe of Orléans. Initial hopes for a liberal change quickly gave way to disillusionment. Contrary to his reputation as the «Citizen King», Louis-Philippe acted primarily in the interests of the upper classes and pursued an increasingly authoritarian policy. In reference to his physical appearance, the pear became a symbol of the ruler. The fruit was soon ubiquitous in newspaper caricatures and as graffiti on Parisian house walls.

With his sketches of Louis-Philippe's head the publisher Charles Philipon popularized the image. Daumier also took up the motif, for example when he depicted an oversized pear being hoisted up, symbolically representing the king's hanging. In the famous lithograph *Gargantua*, a pear-headed giant—unlike the eponymous character in the sixteenth-century novel—does not eat culinary delicacies. Instead, he devours his impoverished subjects' money, only to excrete it in the form of laws and decrees for his favorites. The depiction vividly criticizes the ruler's greed and the dysfunction of his corrupt regime. Consequently, the censors banned the print, and the artist, publisher, and printer were sentenced to fines and imprisonment.

Freedom of the Press and Censorship

In the years following the July Revolution of 1830, there was a constant shift between tightening and slight easing of state censorship. Daumier commented on these developments in sharp caricatures that explicitly addressed freedom of the press and its restrictions. In 1832, the artist was sentenced to six months in the Sainte-Pélagie prison for his political agitation. One of his lithographs depicts the comparatively moderate conditions of imprisonment there.

The so-called September Laws of 1835, enacted after an assassination attempt on King Louis-Philippe, significantly restricted freedom of the press. Pictorial representations of the king and his family were banned. Before publication, a sample copy of each caricature had to be submitted to the state censorship authority, which noted its approval («oui» or «autorisé») or rejection («non» or «refusé») on the sheet in red pencil. As a consequence of these stricter regulations, the magazine *La Caricature* was discontinued. The daily *Le Charivari* ceased all political activities for the time being and began publishing genre motifs. It was not until the revolution in 1848 that these measures were temporarily lifted.

Accusation and Attack

Through his commitment to freedom of expression and freedom of the press, Daumier proved himself to be a scathing critic of King Louis-Philippe and his regime in the 1830s. With iconic works such as *Le Ventre législatif* (The Legislative Belly) and *Rue Transnonain, le 15 avril 1834* (Rue Transnonain, April 15, 1834), the artist participated in political discourse, sharply condemning those in power and their actions. Printed as separate sheets for the *Association mensuelle*, which was founded by the publisher Charles Philipon, the sale of these large-format lithographs was intended to finance the government fines imposed on his publications.

Daumier's best-known works also include portraits of various personalities from the «juste milieu», the «middle way». Among them are parliamentarians and other representatives of the political elite, whose exaggerated physiognomies were easily recognizable in lithographs and sculptures. In its dazzling variety, the originally literary figure of Robert Macaire ultimately became one of the artist's most successful pictorial inventions. Appearing as a stockbroker, insurance fraudster, or opportunistic miser, Macaire embodies the ruthless pursuit of profit by the July Monarchy.

1848 – Revolution in Vienna

In 1848, democratic demands for freedom of the press and freedom of expression spread from France throughout Europe. Austria had also been subject to strict censorship, the abolition of which following the March Revolution led to a flood of satirical images and new newspaper publications. One of the first uncensored caricatures of the year is by Anton Zampis and shows the resigned Chancellor of State Prince Klemens Wenzel Lothar von Metternich fleeing the country for Great Britain. The caption—«Every constitution requires movement»—refers with ironic double entendre to the constitution as the central concern of the revolution. Several sheets from the series *Komische Lebensbilder* (Comical Pictures of Life), which Zampis created together with August von Pettenkofen, are particularly close to Honoré Daumier's works. In various everyday situations, citizens ponder the most convenient ideology or observe the beginning of the political spring as seemingly uninvolved bystanders.

The end of Metternich's police state is also the subject of a fable-like lithograph by Carl Joseph Geiger. Here, a so-called charivari parades through Vienna creating noise with drums, ratchets, and whistles to drive away the police informers of the old system, who are playfully depicted as dogs.

New Beginnings and Repression

Social and political grievances, as well as a lack of participatory rights due to unequal suffrage, had led to revolution in February 1848. As a result, King Louis-Philippe fled into exile in England, and euphoria reigned in France for a short time. On February 24 of that year, the Republic was proclaimed. Programmatically, the first sentence in the following day's edition of *Le Charivari* read: «Paris, which woke up monarchical this morning, will go to bed republican tonight.» Daumier contributed to the general spirit of optimism with works such as *Dernier conseil des ex-ministres* (Last cabinet meeting of the exministers), which depicts the personification of liberated France as a beacon of hope. The artist reflected the central role of women in social change in series such as *Les Divorceuses* (The Women Fighting for the Right of Divorce).

However, disillusionment soon set in: Louis Napoleon Bonaparte came to power, initially as president of the Second Republic and, from 1852 on, as Emperor Napoleon III, ruling with an authoritarian hand. Fundamental democratic rights, including the right to vote and freedom of the press, were increasingly suppressed again. With Ratapoil, Daumier created a symbolic figure of a Bonapartist henchman. Dressed in tattered clothes, with a dented hat and a cane, he is a reference to the ruthless gangs of thugs that Napoleon had recruited to secure his power.

World Out of Balance

The balance of power shifted during Daumier's lifetime, making peace in Europe unstable. Starting in 1850, the series *Actualités* (News) was published continuously, with a few interruptions, in *Le Charivari*, which also provided a major platform for international politics. To vividly express the content of his images, the artist often invented personifications, such as the figure of Europe balancing on an ignited grenade, or the frail Lady Diplomacy. In addition, he repeatedly addressed specific nations and regions. For example, he depicted King Ferdinand II of Naples, known for his brutality, looking out from his balcony onto the city paved with corpses. The sheet was later given the ironic caption: «I see with satisfaction that everything seems to be calming down [...].» From a French perspective, Daumier also produced satirical depictions of other topics, such as the «question of the Orient», Prussia's quest for power, Japan's economic opening, and the national unification of Italy. Formally reduced to expressive lines and thus to a graphic minimum, these images are of monumental power and drastic pungency.

Ideal and Reality

While Daumier presented a diverse picture of society and political events in his lithographs, he increasingly chose literary themes for his paintings. Here, the often concrete depictions in his prints become universal allegories. The figures of the heroic knight Don Quixote and his pragmatic companion, Sancho Panza, are a recurring motif. Daumier used this contrasting pair from the pen of Miguel de Cervantes to reflect on idealism and realism, as well as the possibilities and conditions of art production. The restless Don Quixote, fighting in vain against injustice, thus reflects the artist's own efforts. Daumier also found occasion to explore true and lived values in the fables of Jean de La Fontaine: for example, when two thieves fight over a stolen ass while a third robber makes off with it. Daumier drew on his experience as a caricaturist to achieve maximum effect with minimal means. Strong chiaroscuro contrasts and emphatically drawn, dynamic outlines lend his paintings an extraordinary presence. The artist thus frees the literary scenes from the anecdotal and concentrates entirely on the essence of his protagonists. With great urgency, he raises the question of the disparity between ideal and reality.

Dying Monarchy

After the years 1860 to 1863, when Daumier did not work for *Le Charivari*, he once again devoted himself intensively to political caricature in the following decade. As censorship gradually relaxed from 1866 on, his creative freedom expanded considerably. In works such as *À droite ou à gauche?* (To the left or to the right?), the artist alludes to the hesitation and fickleness of specific government officials of his time.

Daumier's last political lithographs are the allegorically charged sheets of the early 1870s, in which France is symbolized as a bound figure or an oak tree struck by lightning: remaining steadfast despite adversity. His depiction of the dying monarchy in a simple coffin poignantly illustrates the end of Napoleon III's reign. After numerous upheavals, revolutions, and changes of government, the artist, who had always stood up for his democratic ideals, witnessed the proclamation of the Republic in 1870.

Reflections on Art

Daumier took a self-reflective approach to the subject of art, its creators, and its viewing. The motif of graphic lovers appears in several of his paintings, depicting art enthusiasts intently studying sheets, such as those created by himself. In contrast, his series *L'Exposition de 1859* (The Exhibition of 1859) satirizes the annual Paris Salon as the central institution of the cultural scene, where a jury with a reputation for conservatism decided which works would be accepted. In doing so, Daumier targeted not only the participating artists, but also the viewing habits of a bourgeoisie convinced of its own connoisseurship. By drawing on themes from antiquity, Daumier furthermore humorously addressed the rigid artistic norms of his time, reflecting a growing break with academic ideals.

The performing arts likewise provided him with numerous opportunities for satirical imagery, such as when a visitor nods off in the box at the *Théâtre Ventadour* or when the director is the only visitor to his own theater. Paintings such as *Comedy Scene*, the oil study *Crispin and Scapin*, and the drawings for Molière's plays draw on established characters from French theater tradition and focus on emotional states and the relationships between the depicted.

From Abundant Life

Far from being caricature, Daumier also depicted the everyday lives of ordinary people. Drinkers, chess players, musicians, and laundresses clearly had his sympathy. His works from the mid-1840s on demonstrate his powers of precise observation and enormous empathy. Without compromising his characters, he reveals their feelings, vices, and often all-too-human or futile actions. Daumier paid particular attention to the depiction of wrestlers, street musicians, and jugglers, who he addressed primarily in the media of painting and drawing. Through the restless performers, who stood in contrast to bourgeois ways of life, he also reflected on his own position as an artist. These works document his profound interest in monumentalizing the ostensibly trivial and finding greatness in small stories. By focusing on the countenances, gestures, and postures of his subjects, he shows us their individual emotional worlds and, at the same time, distills a human expression of lasting significance from the seemingly incidental.

Law and Justice

A recurring theme in the genre caricatures of the republican Daumier is his sharp condemnation of vanity and the abuse of power, to which he himself was repeatedly exposed. Over the course of several decades and in various media, Daumier addressed the justice system and its players: lawyers, judges, and defendants.

Between 1845 and 1848, *Le Charivari* published *Les Gens de justice* (The People of Justice), a series of thirty-eight lithographs. In it, Daumier reflects on the discrepancy between statutory law and morally perceived justice. Partly tongue in cheek, partly with great seriousness, he laments the failings of a corrupt judiciary. In a light watercolor, he delineates the peculiarity of this professional group as a close-knit community through the posture and facial expressions of the figures depicted. Wearing black robes and gazing sternly, judges and lawyers, on the other hand, are characterized as haughty, selfrighteous accusers. Through his haunting images, which focus entirely on the participants, the artist conveys the intimidating power of the judiciary and the helplessness of the individual.

Modern Times

Multiple upheavals in the political system, rapid industrial development, and technological progress radically changed everyday life in the nineteenth century. Among the most significant innovations were the invention of photography, the expansion of the newspaper industry, and the transformation of Paris into a modern metropolis under Georges-Eugène Baron Haussmann. With great wit, Daumier depicts, for example, the nocturnal disturbance of a citizen who is awakened from his sleep by the massive urban redevelopment taking place outside his window. Multipart series such as *Physiognomies des chemins de fer* (Physiognomies of the railways), first published in 1852, and *Les Trains de plaisir* (The Excursion Trains) examined the phenomenon of growing tourism and ridiculed the supposed comfort of traveling in increasingly crowded trains. The struggle for equality and the societal role of women, which had been kindled by the 1789 Revolution, was also addressed in satirical series such as *Les Bas-bleus* (The Blue Stockings). With his caricatures, Daumier always questioned the social implications of these achievements in a changing world.

Mirror of Society

Throughout his career, Daumier repeatedly devoted himself to genre caricature. Especially in times of heightened political censorship, he concentrated on innocuous observations of the social and cultural idiosyncrasies of the Parisian petty bourgeoisie. Extensive series such as *Croquis d'expressions* (Sketches of expressions), as well as *Les Baigneurs* and *Les Baigneuses* (The Bathers), present pointedly exaggerated depictions of everyday life, amusing viewers with the overstated gestures and facial expressions of the figures depicted. A frequent theme in Daumier's lithographs is the relationship between parents and their children. He pokes fun at both excessive paternal pride and the transmission of dubious values to the next generation. This panopticon of earthly life found a literary counterpart in Honoré de Balzac's novel *La Comédie humaine*, written around the same time.

Thanks to their great popularity, a large number of Daumier's motifs appeared not only in newspapers, but were also colored and published on high-quality paper, either separately or in thematically compiled albums. These caricatures humorously reflect nineteenth-century society and illustrate timeless truths that still make us smile today.

Press Images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.
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Honoré Daumier
The Legislative Belly
L'Association mensuelle, January 1834
Lithograph sur blanc
33,6 x 46,5 cm
ALBERTINA, Vienna



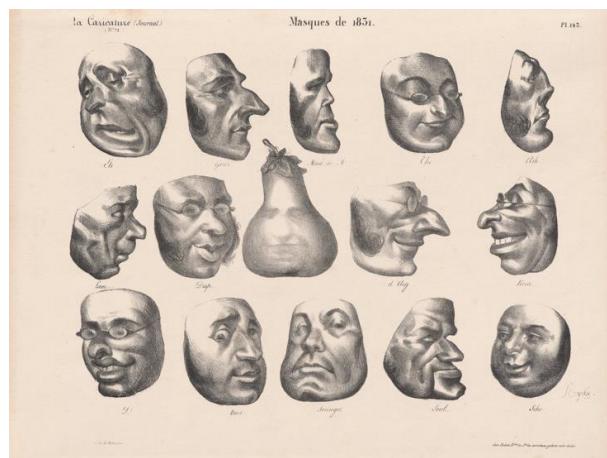
Honoré Daumier
The Print Collector
 ca. 1860/1862
 Oil on panel
 31,2 x 25 cm
 Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the
 Städelscher Museums-Verein e. V.



Honoré Daumier
The Imaginary Invalid
 n.d.
 Pen and ink and gray wash
 12,4 x 14,2 cm
 Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the
 Städelscher Museums-Verein e. V.



Honoré Daumier
Madame Greluche: Oh, Gustave, that's so good!
 1840-1842
 Lithograph, colored, sur blanc
 26,4 x 35,2 cm
 ALBERTINA, Vienna



Honoré Daumier
Masks of 1831
 La Caricature, 08.03.1832
 Lithograph sur blanc
 26,8 x 35 cm
 Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the
 Städelscher Museums-Verein e. V.



Honoré Daumier

European equilibrium

Le Charivari, 03.04.1867

Lithograph, newsprint

28,7 x 22 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the Städel Museum e. V.



Honoré Daumier

Gargantua

1831 (unpublished)

Lithograph sur blanc

27,4 x 36,6 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the Städel Museum e. V.



Honoré Daumier

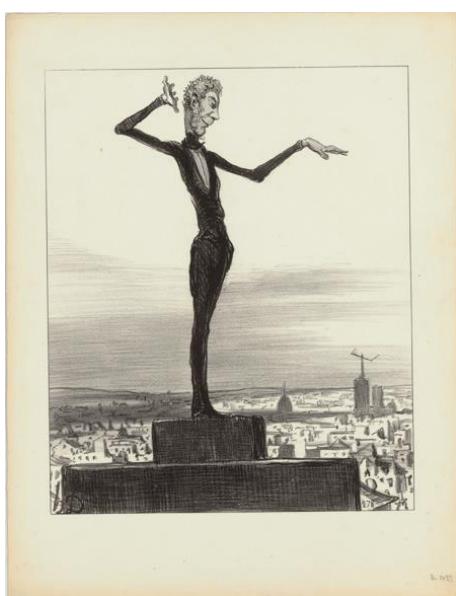
Lower the curtain, the farce is over

La Caricature, 11.09.1834

Lithograph sur blanc

26,5 x 35 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the Städel Museum-Verein e. V.



Honoré Daumier

A suggestion by Le Charivari to Mr. Léon Faucher ...

1851

Lithograph sur blanc

35,9 x 27,6 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the Städel Museum-Verein e. V.



Honoré Daumier

Nadar elevating photography to art

Souvenirs d'Artistes, 25.05.1862

Lithograph sur chine

44,5 x 31 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the Städel Museum-Verein e. V.



Honoré Daumier

Testimony of a minor

n.d.

Black wash over charcoal

27,3 x 40,5 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the Städel Museum-Verein e. V.



Honoré Daumier

Main staircase of the Palace of Justice. Front view

1848

Lithograph sur blanc

34,6 x 26,5 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, property of the Städel Museum-Verein e. V.