



CHARLES MALFRAY (1887-1940)

Cybele

Terra-cotta proof, unique
Signed (on the back): MALFRAY
H. 17, W. 47, D. 18 cm

Provenance

- United Kingdom, private collection

Bibliography

- Jacques de Laprade, *Malfray*, Paris, Fernand Mourlot, 1944.
- Françoise Galle, *Catalogue raisonné des sculptures de Charles Malfray*, thesis for a master's degree, University of Paris I, under the direction of Robert Julien, 1971, n°147.

Related literature

- *Charles Malfray 1887-1940 sculpteur*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, galerie Malaquais, April 5-June 30, 2007.

1/ Charles Malfray at the end of the 1930s

In 1939, not long before his sudden death the following year, Charles Malfray began work on his *Cybele*. In 1936, he entered into a period of great creativity, spurred and supported by official commissions; this creative surge followed a decade that had been very difficult for him; it had included a scandal around his

[Monument aux morts d'Orléans](#) (*Monument to the Dead of Orléans*)^[1] in the 1920s, then the death of his brother in 1932, followed by that of his mother in 1935; both deaths affected him deeply. But things began to change in the following year, when Jean Zay (1904-1944) became the minister of national education and fine arts in June of 1936. Zay instigated a program of great works as a way of re-establishing the central role of the French state as a sponsor of the arts, with an emphasis on contemporary creation. Supported by George Huisman (1889-1957), the chief director of the school of fine arts, and by Jean Cassou (1897-1986), chief director of the national museum of modern art in Paris, Zay commissioned numerous public works, which resulted in offering significant aid to artists. He also acquired works directly from various artists for national collections.

Charles Malfray benefited from the minister's support. In fact, "among the young painters whose works were bought, the sudden influx of Orléanais is simply spectacular. It is in the great tradition of the attributions of the deputies and the ministers of the Third Republic to be the ambassadors of their constituency, and Jean Zay followed suit."^[2] The politician and the sculptor, both natives of Orléans, had many things in common, and it was based on this affinity that, in November of 1936, Charles Malfray received the commission for *Printemps (Spring)*, a sculpture for the foyer of the Trocadéro theater, which was built for the Universal Exhibition. In 1937, Malfray received a second commission, this one for [Danse Debout](#) (*Standing Dancer*), designed for the central courtyard of the museum of modern art of the city of Paris, located on the quai de Tokyo. That same year, Jean Zay awarded Malfray the Legion of Honor as well as a promotion of the Éducation Nationale. In 1938, Georges Huisman gave him a third state commission, this one for *La Source du Taurion* (*The Source of the Taurion*), planned for a public garden in Limoges.

It was just as Malfray's universe seemed to be setting itself right again, and as he found himself in the foreground of the school of French sculpture, that he suddenly died. Though *Cybele* wasn't a commission, it is nonetheless related to them; they all reflect the sculptor's formal preoccupations at the time.

2/ *Cybele*, the sculptor's artistic testament

Cybele can be read as Malfray's artistic testament, or so Françoise Galle suggested it in her Master's thesis devoted to the artist in 1971,^[3] stating that it comprises all of the characteristics of the sculptor's art.

Cybele depicts a young woman seductively stretched out on a rock. Her legs are slightly bent and parted, her torso is delicately raised, and her right arm is folded behind her head in a distinctly casual gesture. With her eyes closed, she offers her entire body up to the viewer's gaze. The undulation of her body is one

with the rock on which she is lying.

She captures the viewer's attention through her powerful and compact forms, combined into a well-integrated geometry. Malfray began working with this particular composition during the First World War, and it initially shocked the public.^[4] *Cybele* also captured attention through its rich sensuality, as Patrick Elliot, specialist in sculpture from between the wars, underscored: "While the right side seems abandoned to a certain languor, which is revealed by the relaxed pose of the leg, the parted thigh, and the arm around the head, the left side, in contrast, is marked by the rigidity of the braced arm, the leg and foot placed firmly on the ground, and the extremities lightly tensed."^[5] Each of Malfray's sculptures was inscribed within an architectural framework; "he organized the body according to the mass to be sculpted rather than constructing a false architecture with no internal rationale ... he respected the block."^[6] When Charles Malfray left Orléans in 1904, he went to Paris in order to join his older brother, Henri, with whom he lived for several years. It's important to remember that Henri was an architecture student; the elder's vocation found a deep echo in the younger's sculpture. In his *Notes sur la sculpture (Notes on Sculpture)* from October 4, 1926, Malfray wrote: "The architecture in sculpture, in other words, the essential, in other words, that which counts in sculpture."^[7]

Other than its architectural qualities, *Cybele* offers a serenity marked by an archaism that Malfray had found and imported from Khmer sculpture, which was very much in vogue at the time and which could be found at both the Cernuschi Museum and the Guimet Museum. Jacques de Laprade, Malfray's official biographer, wrote in 1944, "This piece mixes his taste for archaism and his desire to express his architectural interests with a poignant force. He wanted to seat his figures on masses perfectly matched to them."^[8] The influence of the ancient art is also noticeable in the stylization of the massive bodies in his sculptures *L'Effroi (Fear)* (1921-1923), *Monument aux Morts (Monument to the Dead)* in Pithiviers, and *Danse Debout (Standing Dancer)* in the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Cybele testifies to Malfray's great admiration for the grand masters of sculpture, such as Rodin, Bourdelle, and Maillol, and more specifically for their works based on historical and mythological references. *Cybele* borrows compositional elements from Antoine Bourdelle's *Séléné couchée*, the figure of a naked young woman stretched out to her full length whose body, with its folded legs and her arms through over her head, creates a dynamic curve. Charles Malfray also, somewhat randomly, borrowed some of the titles that these artists had used in their earlier works. At the time, it was popular to consider a title as a pretext; it was not intended as a direct description of the

represented subject, which was often stripped of all the attributes that would allow it to be readily recognized. For instance, in a work of Rodin's, a man stretching was titled *The Age of Bronze*, and in Maillol's body of work, a naked woman folded over on herself was titled *Leda*.

Malfray, therefore, may well have identified his feminine figure reclining on a rock with *Cybele*, in the manner of other sculptors at the beginning of the 20th century, or even in homage to the nature that he so profoundly loved. Pierre Grimal, in his *Dictionnaire de la Mythologie grecque et romaine*, recalls that Cybele "is often called the Mother of the Gods or the Grand Mother. Her power extends over all of nature, and she personifies the power of vegetation. [...] She is usually represented with her head crowned with towers, accompanied by lions, or in a chariot drawn by animals."[\[9\]](#) Malfray's version breaks with these artistic conventions; with her back and her feet firmly anchored in the rock that envelops her, she reigns with great assurance as the mistress of nature.

3/*Cybele* and other feminine figures by Malfray constructed on a horizontal axis

Cybele is one of four figures that Malfray did between 1936 and 1940 that are oriented horizontally.

The first horizontal feminine figure in his œuvre is the *Torse de Nageuse* (*Torso of a Swimmer*) (1936). Jacques de Laprade describes this work as "the most beautiful piece that was ever issued from his hands."[\[10\]](#) It is at once audacious, vigorous, and sensual. As the limbs are cut at the thighs and the forearms, the figure seems immersed in water, angled toward the right as if diving. The simplified, integrated forms that make up *Cybele* are already apparent in the body of this swimmer. The *Torse de Nageuse* could almost have been marcotté-ed to create *Cybele*. Both sculptures present ample bodies with parted legs, well-rounded busts, and an arm raised above the head. A bronze proof of the *Torse de Nageuse* is held in the Beaux-Arts museum in Lyon, and a plaster of the same *Torse* is held in the collections of La Piscine in Roubaix ([Inv. n° D994.4.36](#)).

Malfray continued to explore horizontality with *La Source du Taurion* (*The Source of the Taurion*) (1938). This "rustic divinity with its voluptuous volumes strains to release herself from the rock, breaks away, and rises."[\[11\]](#) Presented at the Salon des Tuileries in May of 1939, the original plaster of *La Source du Taurion* received strong critical acclaim. Louis Vauxelles called the work "passionate and vigorous," and "torrential and romantic."[\[12\]](#) Half reclining, with her back raised and legs slightly parted, the naked young woman is extended on a watery bed with which she completely fuses as she looks straight ahead, her gaze heading beyond the horizon. The posture of this personification

of a small river in the Limousin foreshadows that of *Cybele*. The plaster of this work is held in the collections of the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris ([Inv. n°AM 941 S](#)).

The resemblance is even more striking in *L'Éveil* (*The Two Swimmers*) (1938). The back is arched, with slightly folded legs, as the figure raises its arms and hair in a languishing stretch that hides the face, which is, nonetheless, turned toward the viewer. "In this sharp, clear composition, the four faces of the block are brought together, with nuances slightly shifting across the planes and subtle movements propagating from the feet to the face, creating a play of dancing lines and volumes that reveals a softly sweet and mysterious life."[\[13\]](#) This composition is only different from that of *Cybele* in the form of the rock and the position of the young woman's arms.

And finally, there is *Les Deux Nageuses* (*The Two Swimmers*), which Malfray did between 1939 and 1940, at the same time that he was doing *Cybele*. This sculpture depicts the bodies of two swimmers, one overlapping the other. The first is lying out on her back, her torso facing the sky while under her, the second lies on her side on a small base shaped like a log. "Everything in this group is instability and motion. The audacious fusion of these two weightless bodies, interspersed with voids—fluid bodies built of extended, supple forms, with expressionless faces—forcefully suggests the almost tangible presence of Water, which surrounds them and carries them away in total abandon."[\[14\]](#) It's the body of the upper swimmer that particularly interests us; it bears a striking resemblance to that of *Cybele*: a massive and highly stylized body with legs folded and parted, a spherical bust, and the sense of having given over completely to the natural element.

These sculptures, in which horizontal motion dominates, emanate a sense of woman in communion with nature (water as well as earth) with which she becomes one. In addition, the dichotomy that characterizes Nature, both peaceful and violent, is also expressed through these feminine figures.

As far as is currently known, the model of *Cybele* was dispersed in the following manner: Malfray did an initial plaster,[\[15\]](#) which served as the basis for a sand cast done by Alexis Rudier (#1/8, private French collection) and a unique terra cotta proof, which is the one presented here. A careful comparison of the bronze proof cast by Alexis Rudier and the terra cotta proof reveals that the latter was slightly reworked by the artist. After Malfray's death, the terra cotta was shown at the 1941 Salon d'Automne and again in 1948 at the Guérin gallery as part of a retrospective exhibition honoring the sculptor. It appears in the catalogue for that show under the number 21, with the description "Terre cuite. Épreuve unique" ("Terra cotta. Unique proof"). The bronze edition was

cast posthumously by the founder Émile Godard.[\[16\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Even before the sculpture was finished, it had created a scandal because of the corpulence, the power, and the musculature of the figures. In January 1925, during a meeting that gathered together the committee, the mayor, several members of the Institute, and the sculpture himself, M. André Allar, professor of modeling at the Beaux-Arts academy, proclaimed: "You have dishonored our École des Beaux-Arts, and we, your former teachers, we blush for you." To which the artist replied, "Anatomy, M. Allar, does not exist in art. My good man, it is constructed geometrically, not anatomically." (Patrick Elliot, "L'Énigme Charles Malfray," in *Charles Malfray 1887-1940 sculpteur*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, galerie Malaquais, April 5 -June 30, 2007, p. 36).

[\[2\]](#) Pierre Girard, "Le goût du ministre" ("The Minister's Taste"), in *Le Front Populaire et l'Art moderne, hommage à Jean Zay, 1936-1939*, exhibition catalogue, Beaux-Arts museum of Orléans, March 11 - May 31, 1995, p. 69.

[\[3\]](#) Françoise Galle, *Catalogue raisonné des sculptures de Charles Malfray*, thesis for the Master's degree, University of Paris I, under the direction of Robert Julien, 1971, p. 98.

[\[4\]](#) "In turning his back on the classical style, Malfray divided opinion, and his name appeared the headlines of the newspaper; he caused a controversy that lasted almost a decade. This argument constituted a key moment in the history of modern sculpture, similar to the polemic incited by Rodin's *Balzac* (refused by the committee that had commissioned it in 1898) or by Brancusi's phallic *Princess X*, which was pulled from the 1920 Salon des Indépendants for indecency." Patrick Elliot, "L'Énigme Charles Malfray," in *Charles Malfray 1887-1940 sculpteur*, exhibition catalogue, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[\[5\]](#) *Ibid*, p. 98.

[\[6\]](#) Henri Mercillon, *Sculpture figurative au XXe siècle*, 1994-1995, volume 17, n°68, p. 981-982.

[\[7\]](#) Cited in *Charles Malfray 1887-1940 sculpteur*, exhibition catalogue, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

[\[8\]](#) Jacques de Laprade, *Malfray. Dessins, Sculptures*, Paris, Fernand Mourlot, 1944, p. 17

[\[9\]](#) Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la Mythologie grecque et romaine*, PUF, 2002.

[\[10\]](#) Jacques de Laprade, *Malfray. Dessins, Sculptures*, *op. cit.*, p. 27-28.

[\[11\]](#) *Ibid*, p. 28-30.

[\[12\]](#) *Charles Malfray 1887-1940 sculpteur*, exhibition catalogue, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

[\[13\]](#) Jacques de Laprade, *Malfray. Dessins, Sculptures*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[\[14\]](#) Françoise Galle, *Catalogue raisonné des sculptures de Charles Malfray*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[\[15\]](#) The current location of this plaster is unknown, and it may have been lost. However, it does appear in a photograph by the photographer Marcel Bovis (1904-1997) taken in the sculptor's studio in the rue de la Procession (Paris

15th arrondissement). The work is shown on a sculpture stand with a number of tools in front of it. It was among the things presented at the sale of the contents of the artist's studio on December 22, 1958.

[\[16\]](#) According to the *Dictionnaire des fondeurs de bronze d'art France 1890-1950* established by Élisabeth Lebon (Marjon éditions, 2003), Émile Godard's foundry began working between 1956 and 1962.