

9. Awakening

A moment of awakening is depicted in a fresco in the House of Meleager in Pompeii (fig. 154); it shows Ariadne rousing after Theseus has abandoned her (for the myth, see the commentary on chapter 4, fig. 64-67). The artist shows Ariadne wiping a tear from her eye while a winged figure stands behind her, one hand on her shoulder and the other indicating the treacherous Theseus sailing away in the distance. A third figure stands by, commiserating. This theme recurs in a number of patrician homes in Pompeii, largely destroyed following the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE.



*Figure 154.- Anonymous
(Pompeii, 1st century BCE or earlier).
The Awakening of Ariadne,
Mural painting, Fourth style (House of
Meleager) 76 x 70 cm.
Museo Archeologico Nazionale,
Naples - Italy.*

A Renaissance marble relief (Ariadne's Awakening, or the Awakening of the Nymphs; fig. 155), similar to a composition attributed to Francesco Primaticcio (1504-1570), takes up the same theme; it shows the abandoned Ariadne among a group of nymphs, a male figure sounding a horn behind her.



*Figure 155.- Anonymous
(Ile-de-France, mid-16th century,
circle of Primaticcio).
The Awakening of Ariadne or The
Awakening of nymphs.
Marble, 60 x 49 x 9 cm.
The Louvre, Paris – France*

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* furnishes an awakening scene that has become as famous as that of Ariadne on Naxos: Titania, Queen of the Fairies, is awakened from her sleep in the forest by Bottom's singing and, as a result of the machinations orchestrated by Oberon, her husband, immediately falls in love with a Bottom who has been endowed with an ass's head by Oberon's agent, Puck. Henry Fuseli painted several versions of this scene. Indeed, all Shakespeare's evocations of the supernatural delighted Fuseli, and in *Titania Awakes, Surrounded by Attendant Fairies* (fig. 156), he shows the beguiled Queen aroused by love clinging to the near-naked rustic transformed into a virile giant.



Titania's fairy servant Peaseblossom strokes the donkey-headed lover between his enormous ears, while her attendants, painted in contemporary dress, look on from the background. The small figures of the other fairies are depicted in highly-individualizing detail. The realism of Fuseli's rendering of the fantastical, disturbing in many of his other paintings, is here simply enchanting.

Figure 156.

*Johann Heinrich Fuseli (Switzerland, 1741 - Great Britain, 1825)
The Awakening of Titania, 1793 - 1794.
Oil on canvas, 169 x 135 cm..
Kunsthhaus, Zurich - Switzerland*

In 1864, on learning that the Salon had refused his painting *The Awakening* (*Venus Pursuing Psyche out of Jealousy*) (fig. 157) on the grounds of indecency, Gustave Courbet wrote to the art dealer Jules Luquet, "If this painting is immoral, then all the museums of Italy, France and Spain must be closed down".

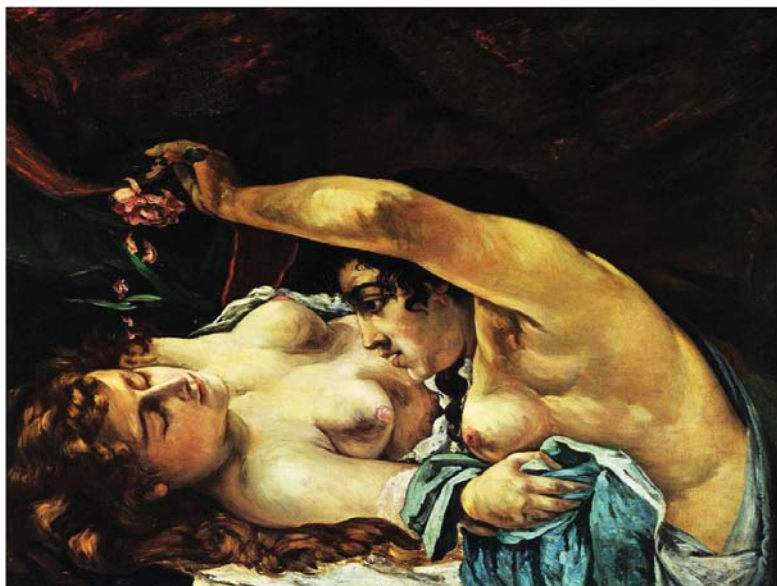


Figure 157.

*Gustave Courbet (France, 1819-1877). The Awakening (Venus and Psyche), 1866.
Oil on canvas 77 x 100 cm.
Kunstmuseum,
Bern - Switzerland.*

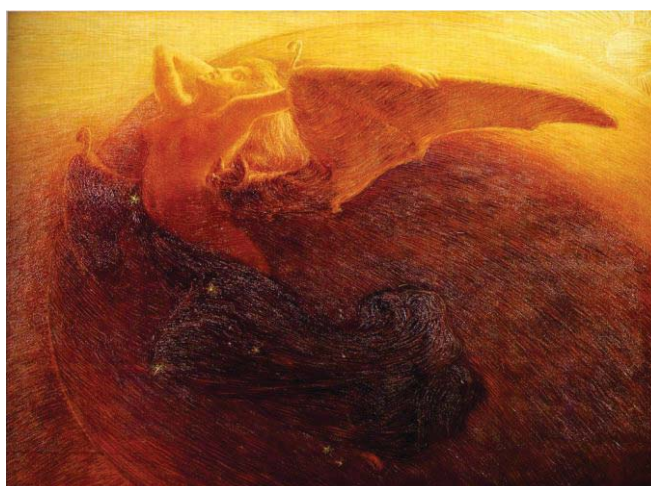
And indeed, in Second Empire France, the depiction of the female nude had become (as we have already seen; cf. chapter 7, fig. 119, 120) the locus of a battle between the Academy and its bourgeois-pleasing conventions, on one hand, and artists of independent mind, Manet and Courbet foremost among them, on the other. Indeed, still referring to mythological figures as a camouflage, Courbet paints two female nudes in an evidently lesbian scenario, and what's more, he paints them not in the idealized classical style of a Cabanel, for example, but with a technique that yields a much more realistic impression of the reality of human flesh. The jealous Venus, looking decidedly butch, leans over the femme beauty of Psyche; no longer content to be passively put on display, she is a subject who can seduce. To be awakened by the scent of roses, to fall into the arms of love: The scene is not so simple, for the mythological resonances lend an emotional complexity to the painting that defies easy reading.



Figure 158.
Eugene Robert
(France, 1831 - 1912).
The Awakening of the abandoned,
1894.
Marble, 50 x 130 x 85cm.
Musée de l'Assistance Publique,
Paris - France

Awakenings can also be moments of distress. Sculptor Eugène Robert (1831-1912), in his marble work, *The Awakening of the Abandoned Baby* (fig. 158), suggests the awake through the multiple folds of the blankets, and more subtly in the modelling of the expression on the baby's face and the movement captured in its left hand and foot. If it is not yet crying, one senses it might, in the instant it fully awakens, let out a cry for attention: It the sculpture touches us, it is because we know there will be no mother to hear the baby's appeal.

Figure 159.
Gaetano Previati
(Italy, 1852 - 1920).
The Day awakens the Night,
circa 1905.
Oil on canvas, 180 x 210 cm.
Museo Revoltella,
Trieste - Italy.



In Gaetano Previati's (1852-1920) *The Day Awakens the Night* (fig. 159), a nymph with winged arms bursts through the dark turmoil to bring a golden light that clarifies her features, sending the night to the nether realms while the day dawns.

In book IX of The Odyssey, Odysseus narrates before King Alcinous the episode involving the one-eyed pastoral giants, savage and inhospitable, living in caves on an island: the Cyclopes. In the cave of the Cyclops Polyphemus, Odysseus, imprisoned with his crew, devises a strategy to escape the man-eating monster. He offers him wine he had brought from his ship, and when Polyphemus is lying in his drunken sleep, Odysseus blinds him with the heated point of a stake. Sleep has thus proved fatal for the duped Polyphemus; Odysseus and his surviving crew make their way to their ships, embarking with the blinded giant's flock of sheep.

In Paris in 1938, while the Civil War was raging in his native Spain and premonitions of the world war to come were already a pall on people's spirits, Joan Miró (1893-1983) created the drypoint work *The Awakening of the Giant* (fig. 160). Here Miró's near-continuous line renders an open-mouthed monster raising an arm, threatening to remake the world in its own image, while the artist's archetypal moon and stars descend from the cosmos in chaos. Spontaneous, laconic, consistently fecund, Miró "graffiti" does not represent war, but expresses the anger and anguish it engenders.

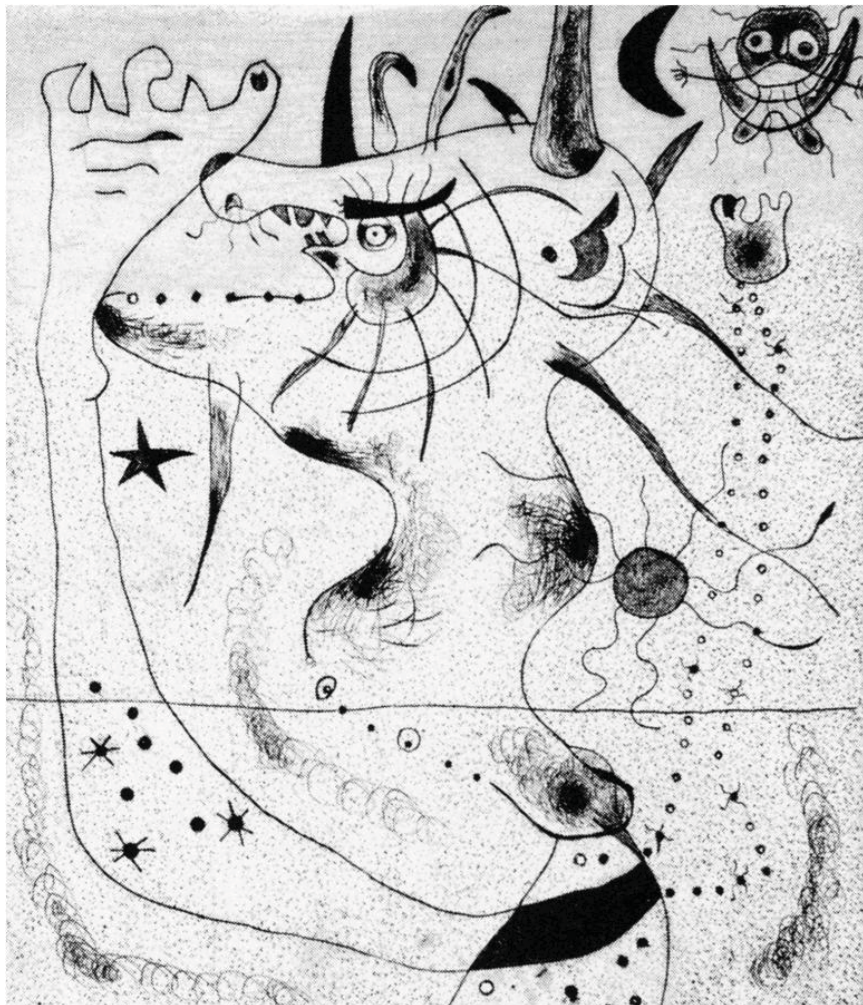


Figure 160. - Joan Miro (Spanish, 1893-1983). The Awakening of Giant, 1938. Drypoint. The Museum of Modern Art, New York - USA

Awakening at Dawn (fig. 161), one of a series of 23 gouache-on-paper works (1939-1941) collectively titled “Constellations”, is a playful, dream-like painting. Escaping the war, enclosed within himself, what kind of cosmos does the artist construct?



Figure 161. - Joan Miró
(Spanish, 1893-1983).
Awakening at Dawn, 1941
(the *Constellations* serie).
Gouache and petrol paint on paper,
46 x 38 cm.
Mr. and Mrs. Ralph F. Colin collection,
New York - USA.
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A very lyrical one in which an idiosyncratic music of the spheres is expressed in a kaleidoscope of cut-out shapes—circles, squares, birds, breasts, a phallus, moons and stars—echoing each other in whimsical harmony. The eye sees patterns in the heavenly bodies, every culture personalizes the constellations, but the only pattern in Miró’s universe is that of the unconscious and poetry. At once airy and ardent, vigorous and floating, it expresses the aspiration of an independent spirit to touch something deeper than social reality. Affirming the value of the individual spirit, it is a fundamentally humanist vision, but not something for which a world at war was prepared to pause.