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Deciphering Fernand Khnopff's Inscription – Rêve and Réalité Represented in
Des Caresses

Yaoi Ayumi's article reexamines *Des Caresses* (1896, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium) by the 19th century Symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff and provides a new interpretation of the painting via the deciphering of the inscription written in the composition.

The scene depicted in *Des Caresses*, in which two figures, a Sphinx and a seemingly androgynous figure, lean towards each other, has frequently been discussed in connection with the androgyny worship of the French Symbolist writer and mystical philosopher Joséphin Péladan who was a dominant influence in the late 19th century. Yaoi, however, focused on the puzzling inscription that had been as yet indecipherable, and through a comparison with other similar inscriptions on Khnopff's other works, clarified the characteristics of Khnopff's unique abbreviated letter forms, and thus succeeded at a convincing reading of the text on the painting. At the same time, she also discerned that the inscription on *Des Caresses* is the same as that used on another of his work's TITLE (hereafter referred to as *Un Ange*). She further ascertained that this one inscribed sentence "GET ORIGINAL FRENCH OR ENGLISH," is a slightly modified quote from Péladan's novel *Le vice suprême*. Given that research on a painter's major work very rarely elicits new knowledge, this can be considered a truly creative and astonishing

achievement.

In the second half of her essay based on her interpretation of the inscription, Yaoi considers the development from Khnopff's BOOK TITLE IN FRENCH OR ENGLISH, which introduced Sphinx imagery before the above-named two works and discussed the temptation and depravity offered by the femme fatale, and thus attempts a new interpretation of *Des Caresses* and *Un Ange*.

Khnopff's interest gradually shifted from temptation to the tempted's internal process. While *Un Ange* reveals the eager desire for the control of the bestial and self-restraint found in both Verhaeren's poem POEM TITLE and Péladan's *Le vice suprême*, conversely, *Des Caresses* contains more complex elements and expression. Yaoi goes on to indicate further connections to Péladan's play *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, offers Moreau's painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* as a compositional reference point, and indicates that Balzac's novel *Une passion dans le désert* contributed fundamentally to the two figures depicted in *Des Caresses*. In addition to this complex, combined influence relationship, she asserts that this work was painted as a type of allegory depicting mankind faced with the selection of desire, namely pleasure or power.

In that case, what does the inscription "INSCRIPTION ABOVE" suggest? The person who cannot select when confronted with desire, repairs "reality" by "dreams" and the act of "caress" is the means of such repair, and thus a fraught Balzac-ian state of equilibrium is shown. Namely we can say that Khnopff's creative act is a painting that gives visual form to "reality" amended by "dreams." This can be considered an appropriate interpretation.

As seen above, this article's interpretation of the lettering in *Des Caresses* and the identification of the source of that text can be considered first a great

achievement. In addition, this article can be highly praised for its reinterpretation of the changes and positioning of Khnopff's Sphinx imagery in *Des Caresses* and several other related works through their relationship with the philosophies OR thoughts of his day. While there are some relatively vague points in the details of her reasoning and room for argument and topics for later investigation remain, the article is extremely meaningful and clearly advances the study of Khnopff.

For these reasons we have awarded the *Bijutsushi* Article Prize to Ms. Yaoi.