

# THE HUMAN COMEDY & ITS CHARACTERS



*The vastness of a plan which simultaneously encompasses both the history and criticism of Society, analysis of its evils and discussion of its principles, permits me, I believe, to give my work the title under which it appeared today: The Human Comedy. Is this ambitious? Is it right? Once the work is done, this is what the public will decide.*

Balzac to Madame Hanska, Passy, around 10 June 1846.

## The Human Comedy

With a view to writing a general history of 19<sup>th</sup> century society, Balzac felt the need to unify his work from the beginning of his career, publishing different stories under common titles. In a letter to Madame Hanska on 26 October 1834, Balzac set out the plan of what would become *The Human Comedy*. He predicted that his work, *Social studies*, would be a masterpiece of three parts: *Studies of Manners*, which would represent social matters, *Philosophical Studies*, which would detail the causes of social manners and customs, and *Analytical Studies*, which would set out the principles of society. It was in a letter to the publisher Dutacq in the spring of 1839 that Balzac outlined a detailed schedule of his complete works and, for the first time, mentioned the title *The Human Comedy*, inspired by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Between 1842 and 1848, the seventeen volumes were published by Furne, Dubochet et Cie, Hetzel and Paulin (known as the Furne edition).

## Characters

There are no less than 573 recurring characters in Balzac's work, representing only a quarter of the 2500 characters that appear in *The Human Comedy*. Although he did not invent this practice, already made use of by Rabelais, Abbé Prévost and Beaumarchais before him, Balzac carried it to such a height of perfection that it has become closely associated with Balzac's work in collective memory.

The use of returning characters responded perfectly to Balzac's need to unify his fictional world. In 1833 he tested this idea in a new edition of *A Woman of Thirty*, replacing two names with those of two characters created for *Ferragus* a year earlier. Balzac applied this practice on a larger scale from the point of the creation of *Father Goriot* in 1835. Indeed, Balzac introduced an ever-growing number of recurring characters to the successive publications of his works and their constant revisions.

As noted by Marcel Bouteron, by adopting this practice Balzac successfully conferred a truly obsessional value on his work. The novelist assumed the active collaboration of his reader who would prove to be capable, or not, of recalling the story of a character at the time of reading a novel.

*By drawing up an inventory of vices and virtues, by collecting the chief facts of the passions, by depicting characters, by choosing the principal incidents of social life, by composing types out of a combination of homogeneous characteristics, I might perhaps succeed in writing the history which so many historians have neglected: that of Manners.*

Honoré de Balzac,  
*Preface to The Human Comedy*, Furne, 1842.

## PHYSIOGNOMY

Honoré de Balzac was fascinated by Johann Caspar Lavater's theories (1740-1801) who was known for his work on physiognomy in which the observation a person's physique, particularly the face, tells you about their personality, feelings and emotions. *Essays on Physiognomy* was written by Lavater between 1775 and 1778 and republished in 10 volumes by Jacques-Louis Moreau at Depelafol in 1835, edition owned by Balzac. Lavater's text was expanded by other theories by physiognomy enthusiasts such as the artist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) and scientist and alchemist Giambattista della Porta (1535-1615).

# Sculptures by Pierre Ripert

## A BALZACIAN WORLD

Marseille-born Pierre Ripert (1886-1967) was a qualified pharmacist, a partner in the Silbert et Ripert pharmaceutical firms. An art historian acknowledged for his work on Provençal art, “santons” (nativity figurines) and on the Marseille painter Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886), Pierre Ripert was also a passionate reader and great admirer of Honoré de Balzac’s work. In the 1930s, he expressed his passion for the writer by creating statuettes in terracotta, in plaster and in bronze of characters from *The Human Comedy*. Around fifty of them are portrayed by the sculptor, including the most well-known of Balzac’s heroes. By meticulously building on Balzac’s descriptions as well as on the novelist’s sources, persuaded that Balzac had been interested in the research which Lavater had undertaken on physiognomy, and immersed in the work of illustrators who had gone before him – Honoré Daumier, Georges Dupuis and Charles Huard, he intended to unveil the Balzac nature of the characters as precisely as possible.



A

### AT THE COURVILLE BOOK STORE

From 1932 to 1938, Pierre Ripert sent some forty-odd sculptures to the Parisian bookseller Georges Courville, including busts and full-length statuettes, terracotta, plaster and bronze. Valérie Marneffe was one of the favourite sculpturers of Balzac specialists and enthusiasts who, like the Director of the *Dépêche du Centre*, Albert Arrault, who acquired a plaster piece in 1934 (A), now conserved in the Balzac Museum in Saché. The works, showcased in the book store as well as in the store window, rapidly attracted customers’ attention. The sculptures in plaster which imitated terracotta appealed the most. Georges Courville, a member of the Balzac Community, admired Pierre Ripert’ work and would advise him and played an active role in ensuring his work became known. New characters like cousin Pons and colonel Chabert were commercialized from 1936, as well as another portrayal of colonel Chabert as of 1938. At least twenty-two different characters were exhibited at the Courville book store in the 1930s.

## THE EXHIBITIONS OF PIERRE RIPERT

Pierre Ripert exhibited his Balzac sculptures for the first time at the Galerie Charpentier (Paris), from 7 to 22 February 1931: twenty-six pieces in bronze and thirty-three different characters. After meeting eminent Balzac specialists like Marcel Bouteron and Pierre Abraham, his approach would become more methodical. Thus, whenever he had the opportunity to consign his sculptures to Georges Courville’s Balzac-dedicated book store in Paris, he would take time to revisit each figure and would only deliver his new sculptures as of April 1932.

By commercializing Pierre Ripert’s works, Georges Courville played a significant role in ensuring his work became known to Balzac specialists and enthusiasts in France and abroad. As such, the small exhibition which he organized in his book store to celebrate the Eugénie Grandet Centenary in September 1933 would be the starting point for Eugénie Grandet exhibitions in Angers, Saumur and Tours (in the lobby of the *Dépêche du Centre*). Horace Hennion, curator of the Museum of Fine Arts in Tours, then invited Pierre Ripert to showcase his works at the Town Hall in Tours during the exhibition *Les Hôtes de la Grenadière* (10-20 May 1935): twenty-three different characters were portrayed through thirty-one bronze and plaster sculptures. After this exhibition, Pierre Ripert bequeathed the original terracotta, and plaster pieces, to the museum in Tours (currently conserved in the Balzac Museum in Saché). Likewise, in 1937, he bequeathed a series of bronze, terracotta and plaster pieces to the Maison de Balzac in Paris.

## FATHER GORIOT, THE NOVEL

In his project to portray the key heroes of *The Human Comedy*, Pierre Ripert could not disregard the characters from *Father Goriot*, one of the pillars of the Balzac monument. From the moment he exhibited at the Galerie Charpentier (1931), he featured sculptures of Goriot, Vautrin and Rastignac. In April 1932, he sent Georges Courville two groups of plaster characters: Madame Vauquer and Vautrin (109), as well as Father Goriot and Rastignac (B). They would later be presented in the exhibition *Les Hôtes de la Grenadière* (1935), then bequeathed to the Museum of Fine Arts in Tours.



B

## EUGÉNIE GRANDET, THE NOVEL

As of the exhibition at the Galerie Charpentier (1931), Pierre Ripert would present two versions of Père Grandet. Yet, he would enrich his gallery with Saumur characters for the exhibition presented at the Courville book store in September 1933, for the Eugénie Grandet Centenary, with Eugénie’s mask, busts of Eugénie, of Felix Grandet and of Mrs Grandet, as well as statuettes of Felix Grandet and of President Cruchot. The servant, Nanon, would be created subsequently, in counterpoint to her master (C) in the exhibition *Les Hôtes de la Grenadière* (1935).



C