

Sarah Bernhardt

And the woman created the star

From 14 April 2023 to 27 August 2023



Petit Palais
Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

Tuesday to Sunday from 10:00 a.m to 6:00
p.m
Late opening on Friday and Saturday

Information and booking:
petitpalais.paris.fr



W.& D.Downey, *Sarah Bernhardt in close-up*,
1902, album card, Paris © BnF

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Press release

Sarah Bernhardt, (1844-1923), was an emblematic figure who spanned the 19th and 20th centuries. The “Divine Sarah”, who was an artist as well as an actress, takes centre stage at the Petit Palais in an exceptional exhibition to mark the centenary of her death. The museum holds important collections of works linked to the actress, including the spectacular portrait of her that was painted in 1876 by her friend Georges Clairin and donated by her son Maurice.



Georges Clairin, *Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Dona Maria de Neubourg, in Ruy Blas by Victor Hugo*, 1879, oil on canvas, Comédie-Française, Paris © Collections Comédie-Française

With near four hundred works, the exhibition traces the life and theatrical career of this “sacred monster”, as Jean Cocteau dubbed her. A legendary performer of the greatest roles from Racine, Shakespeare, Edmond Rostand and Alexandre Dumas fils, among others, Sarah Bernhardt went from triumph to triumph in theatres all over the world.

The exhibition evokes her greatest roles through the costumes she wore on stage, photographs, paintings, posters and other memorabilia. Her “golden voice” and her tall, slender figure – unusual in those days – held the public in thrall, as well as the artistic and literary world, who simply venerated her. She was the friend of painters such as Gustave Doré, Georges Clairin, Louise Abbéma, and Alphonse Mucha, but also of writers like Victor Hugo, Victorien Sardou and Sacha Guitry, as well as musicians and composers like Reynaldo Hahn.

She was an artist herself, and an entire section of the exhibition focuses on this lesser-known aspect of her life.

Photographs, paintings and even a film reveal the private side of her art, but also the publicity she sought for her work as an artist. A number of objects that belonged to her also illustrate Sarah Bernhardt's personal life and her taste for eccentricity: her various homes, her lavish, eclectic interiors and her wardrobe. Sarah Bernhardt can be regarded as a genuine star before her time, constantly on the look-out for new trends and using her image for her own publicity. The frenzy of popular emotion that greeted her death in 1923, at the age of 79, anticipated the cult following of the great film stars of the 20th century.

Head curator: Annick Lemoine, director of the Petit Palais

Curators: Stéphanie Cantarutti, curator for 19th century paintings at the Petit Palais,
Cécilie Champy-Vinas, Director of the Musée Zadkine,



Walford Graham Robertson, *The Actress Sarah Bernhardt in her Salon*
1889, oil on panel,
© Private collection/Jean-Louis Losi

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The exhibition

Section 1 – From the demi-monde to the stage

After a neglected childhood spent in provincial France, Sarah Bernhardt joined her maternal family in Paris in the late 1850s. Both her mother and aunt were popular and successful courtesans in the capital. Sarah Bernhardt soon became a demi-mondaine in turn. Amongst the important relations of the “seductive Sarah Bernhardt family”, to cite Edmond de Goncourt, we can mention the Duc de Morny, half-brother of Napoleon III. He was responsible for encouraging the young Sarah, who already displayed a rather strong temperament, to enter the Conservatoire. Sarah Bernhardt went on to play various small roles ranging from the classical repertoire to lighter productions. She rose to prominence in 1869 at the Théâtre de l’Odéon in *Le Passant* by François Coppée, where she played a transvestite. In 1872, she would triumph in this same theatre, in the role of the Queen in Victor Hugo’s *Ruy Blas*. Her acting career had been launched.



Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, *Sarah Bernhardt draped in white*, 1859, BnF, Département des Estampes et de la photographie, Paris, France © BnF

Section 2 – Mademoiselle Révolte at the Comédie-Française

Sarah Bernhardt’s success in Victor Hugo’s play *Ruy Blas* in 1872 was such that the administrator of the Comédie-Française offered to rehire her. Sarah Bernhardt agreed to re-enter the prestigious house of Molière. Nicknamed “Mademoiselle Révolte”, she made a name for herself both thanks to her talent as an actress and for her escapades that attracted the attention of the press. Sarah Bernhardt was named a member of the Comédie-Française in 1875. Although her fame continued to grow, the actress was unsatisfied with the roles assigned to her. She considered herself underemployed and quickly became bored. In 1880, upon her return from a triumphant tour by the troupe in London, Sarah Bernhardt suffered a bitter setback with *L’Aventurière* by Émile Augier, a mediocre play in which she did not want to perform. She then decided to resign with a bang and sent a copy of her resignation letter to the press. “This is my first failure at the Comédie-Française. It will be the last,” she wrote.

Section 3 – An artist amongst artists



Georges Jules Victor Clairin, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*, 1876, oil on canvas © Paris Musées/Petit Palais

During the 1870s, Sarah Bernhardt lived surrounded by artists, including the painters Alfred Stevens, Gustave Doré, and Jules Bastien-Lepage. Met in the early 1870s, Georges Clairin and Louise Abbéma held a special place in this circle of artists. Both were in love with and fascinated by Sarah Bernhardt and strove to represent the actress on stage and in her private life. At the 1876 Salon, they both exhibited a portrait of Sarah: Abbéma depicted her dressed for town, while Clairin showed her at home, in a sumptuous white negligee that showed off her supple and sinuous figure to perfection. Much noticed at the Salon, this large portrait, one of the jewels of the Petit Palais collection, is now one of the most famous ones of the actress. Influenced by her friends, Sarah Bernhardt herself began painting and sculpting. She demonstrated real talent as a sculptor and exhibited regularly at the Salon. She also did numerous portraits. The actress liked to stage her sculptures and often had a spectacular studio-living room built where Parisians from artistic and socialite circles could come and admire her creations.



Achille Mélandri, *Sarah Bernhardt sleeping in her coffin*, ca. 1880, Epreuve sur carte de visite, Paris
© Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand

Section 4 – Sarah Bernhardt: the private sphere

Throughout her career, Sarah Bernhardt paid particular attention to the decor of her homes. After having moved several times within Paris, in 1872, she had a private mansion built on the rue de Fortuny, in the fashionable district of the Plaine Monceau. In 1886, the actress, crippled with debts, was forced to sell this residence, and settled a few steps away, on the boulevard Pereire, in another private mansion where she partly recreated the decor of the rue de Fortuny. This decor reflected her personality: spectacular, bizarre, and exuberant. Sarah Bernhardt displayed works by her artist friends, as well as extra-Western objects collected during her tours in America and Australia. This decor was a source of great fascination. Throughout her career, writers, journalists, and photographers have left many descriptions of it. To evoke its atmosphere, certain works are presented here, along with costumes and personal objects belonging to the actress, thereby highlighting her eclectic tastes, characteristic of the 19th century.

Section 5 – Major roles

Sarah Bernhardt interpreted hundreds of roles throughout her career, but some have indelibly marked the collective consciousness. Her repertoire included Racine and Shakespeare, as well as 19th-century authors, like Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas fils, author of *La Dame aux Camélias*, one of her greatest roles. The playwright Victorien Sardou was one of the actress' preferred authors. He wrote tailor-made plays for her, some of which, like *Théodora* and *Tosca*, were veritable triumphs, combining historical reconstructions worthy of the peplums of Hollywood cinema with a plot full of twists and an often-tragic ending. The Divine Sarah was especially famous for her "death scenes". A selection of Sarah Bernhardt's most iconic roles is presented in this gallery, so as to evoke, from *Tosca* to *Phèdre*, the art of theatre as the actress conceived of it: a total art combining the magic of gesture and voice with sumptuous, historicist staging.



Alphonse Mucha, *Gismonda*, 1894, colour lithograph, Paris © BnF

Section 6 – The Divine Sarah

By the late 19th century, Sarah Bernhardt's image was everywhere. Hugely famous, she became more than an artist: a "sacred monster" to use the expression coined for her by Cocteau. She emerged as the first star in history, accustomed to autograph sessions. Many artists represented her, from Jules Bastien-Lepage who in 1879 showed her contemplating a statuette, to Alphonse Mucha who immortalized her in her great roles in the 1890s. Sarah Bernhardt's "s-shaped" silhouette, her sharp profile, and her cascading red locks corresponded perfectly to the aesthetics cherished by the Symbolists and Art Nouveau artists. The image of Sarah Bernhardt could be found on multiple supports, from postcards to advertising posters. The actress, who was not afraid of "advertising", did not shy away from associating her name with everyday consumer products, as may be seen in the poster designed by Mucha for Lu biscuits or that produced by Jules Chéret for rice powder. The countless caricatures, sometimes funny, sometimes cruel and offensive, even anti-Semitic, of which the actress was the target, testify in their own way to the unprecedented glory that surrounded Sarah Bernhardt circa 1900.

Section 7 – The “railway muse”: Sarah Bernhardt’s tours

From the late 1870s onwards, Sarah Bernhardt embarked on a series of international tours that took her to the five continents. In addition to the desire to promote French culture and luxury overseas, these tours enabled her both to escape from the sometimes hostile Parisian theatrical world, to ensure her financial independence, and to satisfy a perpetual need for discovery, aboard a legendary Pullman train specially fitted out for her. Her great American tour of 1880-1881 resulted in one hundred and fifty-six performances across fifty cities. She performed in French in front of an audience far from proficient in the language and chose excerpts from her best-known or most spectacular plays such as *La Dame aux Camélias* and *La Tosca*. While she was not the only star to undertake such extensive tours—the actress Rachel had preceded her and she also competed at the time with Italian star Eleonora Duse—, she was welcomed everywhere as a star.

Follow Sarah Bernhardt on her international tours thanks to the multimedia space in this room.

Section 8 – The Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt

“I made this theatre one of the most beautiful, and one of Paris’s leading stages, its fame is world-renowned.”

Sarah Bernhardt was an energetic businesswoman. After having directed the Théâtre de la Renaissance from 1893 to 1899, she took over the management of the vast Théâtre des Nations (formerly the Théâtre Lyrique, built by architect Davioud in 1862) and located on the Place du Châtelet in Paris. Upon her arrival, Sarah Bernhardt gave the institution her name and raised it to the rank of the great Parisian stages. She repainted the beautiful Italian salon an unusual “buttercup” yellow. She commissioned Georges Clairin, Louise Abbéma, Louis Besnard, and Alphonse Mucha to create new decor for the foyer. Tireless, she was at once a troupe leader, decorator, director, and programmer. Her grandiose shows were largely financed by the revenue from her international tours. From 1899 to 1914, she herself played almost forty roles and presented twenty-five new plays here. The venue, completely redesigned after her death, was given the new name Théâtre de la Ville in 1967-1968 under the direction of Jean Mercure.

Section 9 – “The queen of attitude and the princess of gestures” - Edmond Rostand

Sarah Bernhardt and Edmond Rostand met in 1894. Extremely taken with the talent of the young author, the following year she performed one of his plays, *La Princesse lointaine*, which earned her great success at the Théâtre de la Renaissance, followed by *La Samaritaine* written for her in 1897, the same year as *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Sarah Bernhardt was one of the writer’s close friends, invited to stay at Villa Arnaga in Cambo-les-Bains. The person he called “the queen of attitude and the princess of gestures” asked him to write a new text for her brand new theatre. The play, called *L’Aiglon*, was the triumph of the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt in 1900. At the age of fifty-six, she played the tragic role of Napoleon’s son, who was nicknamed *l’Aiglon*. The latter emigrated to Austria with his mother after the fall of the Empire, losing his title as King of Rome to become the Duke of Reichstadt, or for his supporters, a Napoleon II who never reigned. The number of performances exceeded one thousand and gave rise to a number of promotional items.



Charles Reutlinger, *Sarah Bernhardt as an exotic Princess*, c.1895, album card © BnF

Section 10 – A woman of conviction

All her life, Sarah Bernhardt was a civic-minded individual, committed to the struggles of the day. In 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War, she organized an ambulance (or small hospital) at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. At the time of the Dreyfus affair, she sided with Émile Zola when he published his open letter J'accuse. During the First World War, following the amputation of her right leg in 1915, she joined the "Théâtre aux Armées", with other theatrical stars of the time, performing at the Front to support the morale of the soldiers, referred to at the time as the "Poilus" (literally meaning "hairy ones"). In 1916, she embarked on an eighteen-month tour of the United States where she sought to sensitize public opinion to the fate of Europe. In theatres, she performed in patriotic plays such as Eugène Morand's *Les Cathédrales* or her own play *Du théâtre au champ d'honneur*. In the cinema, her films also reflected her political beliefs, as in *Jeanne Doré* (by Louis Mercanton based on the play by Tristan Bernhardt, 1915) where she played the role of the mother of a prisoner sentenced to death or in *Les Mères françaises* (Louis Mercanton, 1917) against the backdrop of the First World War.

Section 11 – Sarah Bernhardt, from stage to screen

Sarah Bernhardt began her film career at the age of fifty, participating in the Phono-Cinéma Théâtre programme at the World Fair in Paris in 1900. She then appeared intermittently in films for almost a quarter of a century until her last film, *La Voyante* or *The Clairvoyant* (now lost), filmed on the eve of her death. Her films were screened in the United States, the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and many other countries. At the time, silent cinema could not convey the mythical "golden voice" of the actress. Nevertheless, her highly expressive gestures inherited from the theatre, remained characteristic of her acting, endowing her films with a certain theatrical quality. Moreover, many of her roles in the cinema, where she still had the leading part, (*Hamlet*, *Tosca*, the *Dame aux Camélias*, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, *Daniel*), were first created for the stage. Louis Mercanton (1879-1932), her favourite director, was behind her greatest success, *Queen Elizabeth* (1912), which was first released on American screens, thanks to the influence of Adolph Zukor, one of the co-founders of Paramount. The success of the film generated huge profits that launched the reign of major American studios. Playing herself, Sarah Bernhardt also appeared in the documentary filmed at her Belle-Île-en-Mer residence by Louis Mercanton (1912), shown in the next room, as well as in Sacha Guitry's film *Ceux de chez nous* (1915). Newsreel footage of the time recorded her funeral, followed by huge crowds of admirers.

Section 12 – Belle-Île art

Sarah Bernhardt discovered Brittany in the 1870s when she travelled there with painter Gustave Doré. However, it wasn't until 1893 that she discovered Belle-Île, a rocky island located in Morbihan in southern Brittany. The actress was charmed by the beauty of the place, with its wild landscapes and steep hills. In 1894, she purchased an old disused military fort on the island. After significant restoration work, she had several bungalows built, intended for her family and friends. Sarah Bernhardt spent her summers on Belle-Île, where she holidayed in the company of her son and granddaughters, and select guests, like musician Reynaldo Hahn and painters Louise Abbéma and Georges Clairin. In Belle-Île, Sarah, who was forever active, engaged in multiple activities: hunting, fishing, reading, and especially sculpture. Inspired by the marine flora and fauna, she created unusual bronzes with refined patinas, moulded on seaweed and fish, which were presented to great success at the World Fair of 1900..



Sarah Bernhardt, *Algues*, 1900, sculpture en bronze © Paris Musées / Petit Palais



Digital mediation devices

PHOTO BOOTH

On leaving the Sarah Bernhardt exhibition, visitors will have the opportunity to photograph themselves as a souvenir of their visit. Thanks to the innovative technology of morphing, visitors will be able to embody Sarah Bernhardt by means of period photographs that highlight her singular personality and acting career. This filter allows visitors to put on one of the actress's most beautiful costumes for a fleeting moment: their face is inserted into the period photographs and replaces that of Sarah Bernhardt. The photographs can be printed for €3 or sent for free by email.

RAILWAY MUSE

The railway muse invites visitors to sit comfortably on board a train carriage. They discover Sarah Bernhardt's tours through photographs, press articles, posters and unusual objects that belonged to the artist nicknamed "La Divine".

You're in luck! You are one of the reporters selected to accompany Sarah Bernhardt on her tours. Alone or as a team, select the six destinations you wish to showcase on the front page of your newspaper. Choose your subjects carefully and your headline will be a sensation!

MIND-MAP

Alone or with others, visitors are invited to discover the personalities that surrounded the life of La Divine: family, lovers, partners, etc. Each card is accompanied by a photograph of the person, an identity card and an anecdote about their relationship with Sarah.

AUDIO TERMINAL MOUNET-SULLY - SARAH BERNHARDT LOVE LETTERS

This sound system offers visitors the opportunity to listen to four extracts from the love letters between Mounet-Sully and Sarah Bernhardt. The French extracts are read by actors from the Comédie française.

Press visuals



Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, *Sarah Bernhardt draped in white*
1859, albumen print, BnF, Département des Estampes et de la photographie, Paris, France © BnF

Sarah Bernhardt was not a well-known name when Félix Nadar took this series of three portraits. They date to either 1859 or 1864, depending on the collections where they are kept. This one is probably from the earlier date, judging from how young the actress is, her unruly hair, and sober setting, which is reminiscent of Nadar's earliest portraits. Indeed, the photographer turned his attention entirely on his models' faces; the decor was of little importance.



Georges Clairin, *Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Dona Maria de Neubourg, in Ruy Blas by Victor Hugo*
1879, oil on canvas,
Comédie-Française, Paris
© Collections Comédie-Française

In April 1879, Sarah Bernhardt took over the role of the Queen at the Comédie-Française, seven years after her triumph at the Odéon theatre. The painter Georges Clairin, Sarah Bernhardt's lover and later faithful friend, portrays the actress in the 1879 production, wearing a dress with a high collar that flatters her graceful figure. A small crown nestles in her curly hair: it recalls the «small open-work silver diadem» that enchanted Théodore de Banville in 1872 (*Camées parisiens*, 1875).



-Georges Jules Victor Clairin, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*
1876, oil on canvas, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-arts de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France © Paris Musées/Petit Palais

In 1876, Georges Clairin exhibited this large portrait of Sarah Bernhardt at the Salon. It was very well received. The actress, lounging on a couch, a greyhound at her feet, is represented in the studio-salon of her private mansion, easily recognisable by its sumptuous and abundant décor. Dressed in a luxurious white negligee, her sinuous pose shows off her shapely figure. This was one of Sarah Bernhardt's favourite portraits; she kept it all her life. In 1923, shortly after her death, her son bequeathed it to the Petit Palais.



Etienne Carjat, *Sarah Bernhardt as Dona Maria de Neubourg in Victor Hugo's Ruy Blas*

1872, photograph, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France
© Paris Musées/Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris

On 24 February 1872, shortly after the premiere of *Ruy Blas*, Etienne Carjat wrote to Félix Duquesnel, director of the Odéon theatre alongside Charles de Chilly: «Madame Sarah Bernhardt has kindly done me the honour of coming on Monday in the costume of La Reine. To do a good thing and avoid the ordinary banality of my commonplace accessories, I will be a thousand times grateful to you if you could lend me the table, armchair and cushion of the second act for that day. I will take the greatest care of them and I will pay - it goes without saying - the stage manager for all the transport costs. If you can grant my request, you will be doing me a real artist's service. To express my appreciation, I hope you will allow me to send you a proof of my photograph(s)».

W.& D.Downey, *Sarah Bernhardt in close-up*, 1902, album card, Paris © BnF



Anonymous, *the Queen's crown worn by Sarah Bernhardt in the role of the Queen in Ruy Blas*, 1879, Copper and silver alloy, tulle, pearls, rhinestone, Comédie-Française, Paris

© Collections Comédie-Française





Louise Abbéma, *Sarah Bernhardt and Louise Abbéma on the lake in Bois de Boulogne*
1883, oil on canvas, Comédie-Française, Paris
© Collections Comédie-Française

Louise Abbéma met Sarah Bernhardt in the early 1870s, when she was starting her career as a painter. She immediately fell under Sarah's spell: this was probably the beginning of a love affair with the actress, and the two remained close friends for the rest of Sarah's life. This large painting, which shows the two women in a rare moment of relaxation, during a boat ride in the Bois de Boulogne, is a discreet tribute to their relationship.

Louise Abbéma, *Le Déjeuner dans la serre*
1877, oil on canvas, Musée des Beaux-arts de Pau, Pau, France © RMN-Grand Palais/Thierry Ollivier

This painting, dated 1877, depicts the winter garden of the mansion that Sarah Bernhardt had built for herself in 1875 on rue Fortuny in the fashionable district of the Plaine Monceau. The young red-haired woman on the right, in her long white dress trimmed with fur, could be Sarah Bernhardt, captured in a rare moment of intimacy, while behind her is the severe profile of Louise Abbéma.



Louise Abbéma, *Sarah Bernhardt*
1885, pastel, Paris, Petit Palais musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France
© Paris Musées/Petit Palais

In this beautiful pastel, Louise Abbéma delivers a seductive portrait of Sarah Bernhardt in her private life. The actress is recognisable by her slim figure and «frothy» red hair, pulled up into a high bun. She wears an elegant city dress, trimmed with fur, which shows her taste for fashion and contrasts in its sobriety with the exuberance of her stage costumes.



-Anonymous, *Sarah Bernhardt and Louise Abbéma holding hands*

c. 1875, bronze, London, Daniel Katz Gallery © Daniel Katz Gallery

Sarah Bernhardt and Louise Abbéma first had their hands cast in plaster before having this rare bronze copy made. It was common practice in the 19th century for artists to cast certain parts of their body, particularly the hands. With this work, the two women wished to keep the memory of their relationship alive while at the same time asserting their talent as artists.



Achille Mélandri, *Sarah Bernhardt, sculptor*
photograph, Woodburytype © BnF, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/image BnF

Sarah asked Mélandri, a photographer, draughtsman and journalist, to photograph her in her studio at 2 Boulevard Clichy. She does not wear an artist's blouse but a white satin suit that evokes that of a Pierrot. Once again, she breaks away from the conventional poses of the time. The critic Albert Wolf reproached her for her multiple activities as an actress, painter and sculptor. Emile Zola defended her in the press in a humorous tone: «Let's make a law right away to prevent the accumulation of talent!»



Anonymous, *Sarah Bernhardt and Georges Clairin*
photograph, BnF, Département des Arts du spectacle,
Paris, France © BnF



André Gill, *Sarah Bernhardt as a Sphinx*, painter and sculptor

published in *La Lune rousse*, n°96, 6 October 1878, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France © Paris Musées/ Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris of the light in a more or less impressionistic fashion.

Sarah Bernhardt, *Le Fou et la Mort*

1877, bronze, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-arts de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France © Paris Musées/Petit Palais

This sculpture was inspired by the ill-fated hero of Victor Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*, a play written in 1832. Triboulet, a jester at the court of François I, cannot dissuade the king from seducing his own daughter. He tries to murder the king, but in the end, it is his own daughter that the jester kills in a tragic misunderstanding. Sarah Bernhardt depicts him with a haggard face, holding a skull in his hands, perhaps that of his daughter, and seeming to meditate on the vanity of existence and the horror of death. Created in 1877, the sculpture is a clear homage to Victor Hugo at a time when Sarah Bernhardt was triumphant in the play *Hernani*. Baudelaire's verses, taken from the poem «Une charogne» in *Les Fleurs du mal*, recall Sarah Bernhardt's fascination with death.



W.& D.Downey, *Madame Sarah Bernhardt*

c. 1900, silver print, Paris, Musée d'Orsay
© Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Alexis Brandt



Medici collar that belonged to Sarah Bernhardt with a border in ermine, trimmed in white lambskin and lined in satin.

1898 - 1900, Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris © Paris Musées/Palais Galliera-Musée de la Mode de Paris



Walford Graham Robertson, *The Actress Sarah Bernhardt in her Salon*

1889, oil on panel,

© Private collection/Jean-Louis Losi

In this view of Sarah Bernhardt's interior, one can see her famous portrait by Clairin, which she kept until her death.



Marie-Désiré Bourgoin, *L'atelier de Sarah Bernhardt*

1879, watercolour and gouache, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/image of the MMA

This magnificent watercolour depicts the studio-salon of Sarah Bernhardt's private mansion, built in 1875 by the architect Nicolas-Félix Escalier in the fashionable district of the Plaine Monceau. This spectacular studio, which also served as a reception room where the actress received guests, was at the heart of the mansion. Palm trees, animal skins and works of art are mixed together in an artistic bric-a-brac, typical of wealthy studios of the time.



Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, *Sarah Bernhardt at home*

c 1890, albumen print, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France © Paris Musées/ Petit Palais



Achille Mélandri, *Sarah Bernhardt sleeping in her coffin*

c. 1880, Paris © Ville de Paris/ Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand

As soon as it was published, this photograph caused a lot of people to talk. The origin of this white satin-covered coffin remains a mystery; was it a gift from one of Sarah's lovers, her mother, or did Sarah acquire it to get used to the idea of death? It reveals the morbid character of the actress. When she moved her sister, who was very ill at the time, to her home in the rue de Rome, Sarah gave up her bed and slept in the same room in her little coffin. People began to talk about the strange arrangement and Sarah took advantage of the situation by asking the photographer Mélandri to take a picture. The result was a great success and generated considerable income for both Sarah and the photographer.



Otto (Otto Wegener), *Sarah Bernhardt with a bat hat*

1899 or 1900, Albumin print, Paris © BnF

When Otto Wegener, a photographer of Swedish origin, moved to Paris in 1867, he dropped his last name and went by simply "Otto". A renowned portraitist and competitor of Nadar and Reutlinger, among others, he made several portraits of Sarah. Here, she is wearing an astonishing bat hat that evokes the collection of poems, *Les Chauves-souris*, that her very good friend, the Count de Montesquiou, had published in 1893. That year, she recited a few extracts from the work during a morning poetry reading. The work inspired the creation of new objects, letterhead, tie pins, crystal vases and women's fashion.



André Gill, *Sarah Bernhardt as a chimera*

c. 1880, oil on wood panel © Mutuelle nationale des Artistes/Hugo Rémusat



Anonymous, *Cleopatra pectoral*
c.1890, gilt metal, turquoise pearls and stones,
coral stones, white pearls © BnF



Napoléon Sarony, *Sarah Bernhardt in Cléopâtre*
1891, Musée d'Orsay © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée
d'Orsay)/Hervé Lewandowski



Charles Reutlinger, *Sarah Bernhardt as an
exotic Princess*
c.1895, album card © BnF



Paul Nadar, *Sarah Bernhardt in Pierrot assassin*
1883, silver print, Paris © BnF

On 28 April 1883, Sarah appeared as Pierrot at the Trocadero theatre with Réjane as Colombine in Richepin's play *Pierrot assassin*. The macabre pantomime did not last long. It was the photograph by Paul Nadar, the favourite photographer of Parisian theatres, that immortalised Sarah's powdered white face in this role, which was only moderately successful. The image inspired the painter and friend of Sarah, Giuseppe De Nittis. The mime Debureau, photographed by Adrien Nadar, had made the character widely known a few decades earlier.



Paul Boyer, *Sarah Bernhardt in Victorien Sardou's Théodora*
1902, gelatin silver bromide print
© Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris,
Roger-Viollet



-Anonymous, *Headdress for Theodora*
c. 1884, copper alloy, coloured glass cabochons,
Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de
Paris, © Paris Musées/Palais Galliera-Musée de la
Mode de Paris/Laurence Goupille



Théophile Thomas, *Sarah Bernhardt's stage coat for Theodora*
1884, fabric embroidered with silk thread and glass beads, Paris © BnF

Sarah's performance in *Theodora* was a highlight of her acting career. She was passionate about Byzantine art, and aligned it to the tastes of her day and age. The Byzantine historian Gustave Schlumberger let Sarah view his collections and the actress drew inspiration from the mosaics of the Basilica of St. Vitus in Ravenna for her costumes, keeping a watchful eye over every last detail. A profusion of rare fabrics and jewels, the dazzling outfits are the work of Théophile Thomas, who began his career as a theatre costume designer in 1871. From then on, he worked with most of the Parisian companies and collaborated with Sarah on several occasions in addition to *Théodora*, *Ruy Blas*, *Tosca*, *Cleopatra* and *Joan of Arc*.



Napoléon Sarony, *Sarah Bernhardt in Frou Frou*
1880, albumen print, BnF, Département des Arts du spectacle, Paris, France © BnF

Canadian-born Napoleon Sarony opened his first studio in New York in 1865. A renowned portraitist, he obtained the exclusive rights to take Sarah's portraits in America by offering her the sum of \$1,500. The actress poses in her Frou Frou stage costume, in a setting created in the photographer's studio. Curiously, she is standing in front of a photograph of a young woman placed on a stand. It is not clear if the portrait is one of the photographer's props or whether it had special significance for Sarah.



Paul Nadar, *Sarah Bernhardt as Macbeth*
1884, photograph, BnF, Département des Estampes et de la photographie, Paris, France
© BnF

Without enjoying any exclusive rights, Paul Nadar, Félix's son, built up a body of images between 1876 and 1894 that illustrates Sarah's social life and her repertoire in the theatre. In the role of Macbeth, he emphasised the expression on the actress' face which, in *L'art du théâtre*, reminds us that the actor «must give the audience the reality of a being who, for him, is only fiction. He must, with his own eyes, shed the tears of the other. With his own voice he must cry out the pain of the other. His own heart beats wildly, because it is the other's heart that beats in him. And when he comes out of a tragic or dramatic scene, the artist, if he has rendered his character with success, must be panting and spent.»



Skirt worn by Sarah Bernhardt in *Frou Frou*
BnF, Department of Performing Arts, Paris, France © BnF



Alphonse Mucha, *Gismonda*

1894, colour lithograph, BnF, Department of Performing Arts, Paris, France © BnF

At the end of 1894, the young Alphonse Mucha, still unknown, was commissioned to design a poster for Victorien Sardou's play *Gismonda*, in which the title role was played by Sarah Bernhardt. The poster, posted in Paris on 1 January 1895, was an immediate success and made Mucha famous. The artist became one of Sarah Bernhardt's favourites and produced a total of six posters featuring her in a monumental format. These six posters, collected for the exhibition, are all presented in this gallery.



Alphonse Mucha, *La Dame aux camélias*

Renaissance Theatre, 1896, colour lithograph, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France

© Paris Musées/Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris



Alphonse Mucha, *Lorenzaccio*

1899, colour lithograph, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France

© Paris Musées/Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris

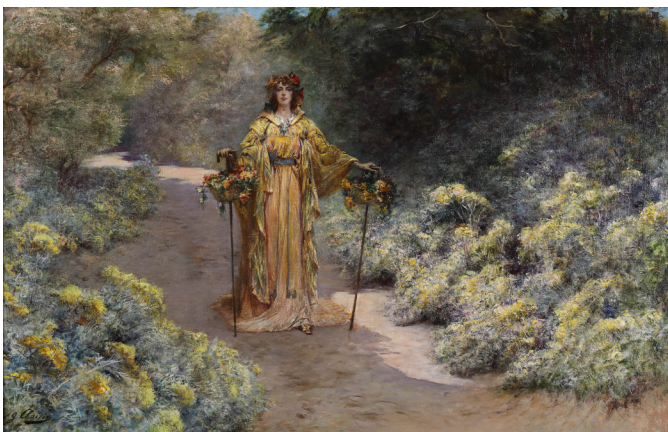


Sarah Bernhardt, *Algues*
1900, bronze, Paris, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris ©Paris Musées/Petit Palais

During her stays on Belle-Île, Sarah Bernhardt collected seaweed, fish and shells which she then had moulded in plaster and cast in bronze. She thus created spectacular sculptures, entirely in the spirit of Art Nouveau, which she exhibited at the 1900 Universal Exhibition. Several bronze seaweeds are presented here, along with photographs documenting some of her creations that are now lost - such as this strange fountain in the shape of an imaginary fish.



Sarah Bernhardt, *Algues*
1900, bronze, private collection
© Galerie Talabardon & Gautier, Paris / seven Square



Georges Clairin, *Sarah Bernhardt in her garden at Belle-Île-en-Mer*
1919, oil on canvas © Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours

In 1893, Sarah bought a ruined fort on Belle-Île, at the Pointe des Poulains, which was weathered by exposure to the elements. She spent a considerable amount of money to fit out this uninhabitable place where she now spent all her summers and took breaks between tours. There was constant coming and going, for Sarah loved to host guests. Although not very comfortable, people engaged in pleasurable activities there such as reading, fishing and tennis. To accommodate all her visitors, several buildings went up, including the villa known as the five parts of the world, the villa Lysiane, the villa Clairin, a pavilion for her studio, and a farm. In 1909, she acquired the more comfortable Château de Penhoët near the fort. In 1922, the Belle-Île property, which then covered almost 46 hectares, was sold in favour of a house in Garches, a leafy suburb of Paris.



W & D Downey, *Sarah Bernhardt and her young daughter*
1892, album card © BnF

Sarah Bernhardt was particularly attached to her two granddaughters, Simone and Lysiane, born in 1889 and 1896 respectively. Lysiane Bernhardt, who was especially close to her grandmother, whom she nicknamed «Great», accompanied her on her last tours in the United States and dedicated a book to her, published in 1945 under the title *Sarah Bernhardt: My Grandmother*.



Louise Abbéma, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*
1921, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris
©RMN-Grand Palais/Hervé Lewandowsky



Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*
1879, private collection © Christies's images / Bridgeman Images

Sarah Bernhardt *And the woman created the star*

A total artist - actress, painter, sculptor, writer, female activist and fashion icon - Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) was also a theatre director and helped launch the art of cinema. She understood very early on the importance of promoting and disseminating her image, and La Divine drew many poster artists, painters, caricaturists, theatre people and impresarii into the whirlwind of her life. A great ambassador for France, she played to full houses all over the world. An extraordinary personality whose eccentricity, taste for adventure and incredible audacity is still a source of inspiration today.

Under the direction of Stéphanie Cantarutti, chief curator at the Petit Palais and Cécilie Champy-Vinas, director of the Zadkine Museum, curators of the exhibition.

Prefaces:

Annick Lemoine, Director of the Petit Palais
Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota, Director of the Théâtre de la Ville
Juliette Deschamps, director, author of the Sarah Bernhardt Fan Club

Texts by Mathias Auclair, Gérard Audinet, Guy Ducrey, Claudette Joannis, Catherine Join-Diéterle, Joël Huthwohl, Hélène Pinet, Agathe Sanjuan and Jean-Claude Yon.

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*Except the archaeological Crypt under the forecourt of l'île de la Cité and the Catacombs.

The Petit Palais



© C. Fouin

Built for the Exposition Universelle de 1900, the Petit Palais building is a masterpiece by architect Charles Girault. In 1902, it became the City of Paris Museum of Fine Arts and presents a very beautiful collection of paintings, sculptures, furnishings and art objects dating from Antiquity to 1914.

Among the museum treasures are an exceptional collection of Greek vases and a very large group of Flemish and Dutch paintings from the seventeenth century, displayed around the famous Self-Portrait with Dog by Rembrandt. A magnificent collection of French paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries includes major works by Fragonard, Greuze, David, Géricault, Delacroix, Courbet, Pissarro, Monet, Sisley, Cézanne and Vuillard. The museum is also very proud of a very beautiful collection of sculptures by Carpeaux, Carriès and Dalou. The collection of decorative art is especially noted for objects from the Renaissance and the 1900s, including glasswork by Gallé, jewelry by Fouquet and Lalique and a dining room designed by Guimard for his private mansion. Finally, the museum has an outstanding graphic arts room featuring complete series of engravings by Dürer, Rembrandt and Callot and a rare collection of Nordic drawings.



© B. Fougérol

Since 2015, the collection presentation has been extensively reworked. It has been enriched by two new galleries on the garden floor level, one of which is dedicated to the Romantic period. In one gallery, restored large-format paintings by Delaroche and Schnetz are surrounded by works of artists such as Ingres, Géricault and Delacroix. In the second gallery, decorative paintings by Maurice Denis are interspersed with works by Cézanne, Bonnard, Maillol and Vallotton. In the fall of 2017, the collection of icons and Eastern Orthodox arts, which is the largest one in France, will benefit from a new museographic presentation. An area will also be dedicated to sketches of the major nineteenth-century Parisian settings. Early in 2018, these new presentations will be complemented in the North Gallery by collections of monumental sculptures from the nineteenth century.



© B. Fougérol

The program of temporary exhibitions at the Petit Palais alternates ambitious major subjects like *Paris romantic*, *Paris 1900*, *Les Bas-fonds du Baroque (Baroque Slums)* and Oscar Wilde with monographs that allow rediscovering forgotten painters such as Anders Zorn, Albert Besnard or George Desvallières. Since 2015, contemporary artists (Thomas Lerooy in 2015, Kehinde Wiley in 2016, Andres Serrano in 2017, Valérie Jouve in 2018, Yan Pei-Ming in 2019, Laurence Aëgerter in 2020 and Jean-Michel Othoniel in 2021) have been invited to exhibit in the Petit Palais permanent collections in order to create a dialog with these paintings and reveal links between their works and those of the museum.

petitpalais.paris.fr



Information

Sarah Bernhardt

And the woman created the star

From 14 April 2023 to 27 August 2023

Petit Palais

Avenue Winston-Churchill, 75008 Paris

+33 (0)1 53 43 40 00

Accessible to people with disabilities

Admission

Full rate : 15 euros

Reduced rate : 13 euros

Reservation of a recommended visit time on
petitpalais.paris.fr

Opening Hours

Tuesday to Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Late opening on Friday and Saturday until
7:00 p.m.

Access

Metro

Lines 1 and 13: Champs-Élysées

Clemenceau

Line 9: Franklin D. Roosevelt

RER

Line C: Invalides

Bus

Lines 28, 42, 72, 73, 83, 93.

Auditorium

Information on petitpalais.paris.fr

Café-restaurant *Le Jardin du Petit Palais*

Open from 10:00 a.m to 6:00 p.m

Late opening on Friday and Saturday until
8 p.m

Bookshop

Open from 10:00 a.m to 6:00 p.m,
Late closing at 7:00 p.m