



A series of caricatures in a study of Robert de Montesquiou created by Georges Goursat in 1891.

Montesquiou-Fezensac, Count Robert de (1855-1921)

by Michael D. Sibalis

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Count Robert de Montesquiou was a writer during France's Belle Epoque, but he is best remembered as a dandy and an aesthete, who inspired the literary creations of others.

Born in Paris on March 7, 1855, into a family that traced its nobility back to the early middle ages, Montesquiou boasted (quite truthfully) that he was "allied to the greater part of the European aristocracy."

Montesquiou was equally proud of his intellectual and literary achievements, which, at least in his own eyes, were considerable. He published eleven volumes of symbolist poetry, but contemporary critics found his verses overly "precious" and posterity has been no kinder. Montesquiou also wrote two novels, three volumes of memoirs, and a great deal of literary criticism.

He befriended, encouraged, and supported numerous artists: painters such as Gustave Moreau, Edgar Degas, and James McNeill Whistler; poets such as Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and François Coppée; and prose writers such as Adam Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Marcel Proust.

Montesquiou was one of the principal promoters of the Art Nouveau style in France, especially the work of the glassmaker Émile Gallé. He crammed his home with so much artistic bric-à-brac that fellow aristocrat Boni de Castellane remarked that he showed "less taste than imagination" as an interior decorator.

Montesquiou was a well-known figure in Parisian high society. He entertained lavishly, although, as he confessed, "I preferred my receptions to my guests, who may have noticed. . . . I gave parties for selfish reasons, less to satisfy my guests than to please myself."

In sum, Montesquiou's contemporaries generally considered him a dandy, an aesthete, and a snob. They admired his stylishness, but found him pompous and even ridiculous; they flattered his ego because they feared his savage wit, but they mocked him behind his back.

Montesquiou's homosexual tendencies were patently obvious, but he may in fact have lived a chaste life. He had no affairs with women, although in 1876 he reportedly once slept with the great actress Sarah Bernhardt, after which he vomited for twenty-four hours. (She remained a great friend.)

He had aristocratic women friends, but much preferred the company of bright and attractive young men. In 1885, he began a close long-term relationship with Gabriel Yturri (1868-1905), a handsome South American immigrant who became his secretary, companion, and possibly lover. After Yturri died of diabetes, Henri Pinard replaced him as secretary in 1908 and eventually inherited Montesquiou's much reduced fortune.

Montesquiou inspired the characters of Duke Jean Floressas des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *Against the Grain* (1884), Count de Muzarette in Jean Lorrain's novel *Monsieur de Phocas* (1902), and the peacock in Edmond Rostand's play *Chantecler* (1910), who pompously announces to the other barnyard animals: "I am pleased to represent that Good Taste of which I am . . . the guardian."

However, Montesquiou is most remembered as the principal model for Baron Palamède de Charlus in Marcel Proust's great novel, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27, recently translated as *In Search of Lost Time*). If Charlus's physical appearance and homosexual predatoriness belonged in real life to Baron Jacques Doasan, all Paris recognized Montesquiou in Charlus's arrogance and insolence, mannerisms, and voice inflections.

Montesquiou pretended not to notice and even praised Proust's work for its realistic treatment of homosexuality, but he was in fact mortified, writing to a friend: "I have taken to bed, sick from the publication of three volumes that have distressed me."

Montesquiou died in Menton on the French Riviera on December 11, 1921. He was buried in Versailles next to the faithful Yturri.

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