

A 21st Century word on Pierrot
By Galaudet Gallery curators Michael Milewski and Vicki Milewski

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One of the inspirations in working with art is learning its background, its own inspirations and any stories or histories connected to certain pieces. The story of Pierrot and his evolution from a 17th Century foil for Harlequin's love interest in Columbine to a soul-searching artist who is just now beginning to see unrequited love in a different light has been a delight for Galaudet Gallery curators as we learn more about him with each piece that passes through our galleries. One might have been able to forecast Pierrot's evolution from sad clown to soul searcher since Pierrot came up alongside Harlequin who is a character based on Medieval Italian morality plays where Harlequin works with demons to chase damned souls into hell. The symbolism of Columbine, the spirit guide for the United States, falling in love with Harlequin is either a statement on the souls of Americans or the triumph of a good woman taming a bad man. Both Harlequin and Pierrot are shades of a similar type of clown, a trickster, the historical court jester contemporarily seen as the sage distractor found in virtual worlds, politicians and of course comedians.

A mention of the four-fold character of Columbine is provides a further understanding of Pierrot as pantomime, clown, poet and artist. First Columbina is a woman, the love interest of Pierrot, the pantomime, sometimes represented as his unfaithful wife other times as the unrequited love which spurns Pierrot into soul searching. Second is the Columbine as a flower which in later costumes for Pierrot, the clown, was ever present as a reminder of what has created Pierrot's philosophical mode but also as the attachment he has with the earth—as if the flower could keep him from flying off into the sky, the flower keeps Pierrot grounded.



Then Columbia is associated with the moon who Pierrot, the poet, is inspired by, drinks with, personifies and then falls in love with or falls into a remembrance of love through gazing at the moon. It is through the poet Pierrot that the moon is often conflated as a blooming flower (referencing both the literal flower and the woman Columbia) and the moon is later seen as disguising the night sky from Pierrot since its light makes the stars harder to see.

Lastly Pierrot, as artist, has a love interest in Columbia who symbolizes the United States as a spirit many American artists have lifted from Greek and Roman attributions of Columbia in the goddesses Nike and Victoria respectively. That Pierrot, a 17th century Italian created pantomime then 18th century French portrayed clown turned poet, is in love with Columbia, a representation of the “New World” as seen in America has double symbolic functions. First showing a European recognition of seeking modernity and newness outside their borders possibly because of remembrances of times past when their lands were open and “free” for the usage of resources. The beginnings of many empires had promise as salvations on earth and other grandiose ideas which only became

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perpetuated in the demise of the very ideals first articulated. Second Pierrot's unrequited love of Columbia personifying a distinct country as seen in America that at the time, of the truly popular Pierrot, was still an upstart on the world stage is a bit of visionary work which supports ideas of artists being able to foretell the future through visionary practices in that even in this fragmented 21st century the "American way of life" and the currently unattainable "American Dream" are still gold rings the carousel riders of the world still try to grab at and attain. ¹ Something a writer or artist in the mid 1800's would not have been able to see if not for some artistic powers at work.

When we noticed the deep blues used for both the posters of Pierrot in our current archive, we knew it was a good way to bring the pantomime sometimes called clown, Pierrot, into an exhibit. Pierrot began as a character from Italian performing groups of the 17th Century usually characterized as a sad clown, often pining for love of Columbine, who is usually represented by the U.S., and who usually breaks his heart and leaves him for Harlequin. Interesting is that Pierrot was never developed as the opposite of Harlequin but instead he was developed with his own distinct personality and vision even though throughout the next few centuries he was usually played as one corner of the romantic triangle also including Harlequin and Columbine.

The two artworks we have included in our BLUE exhibit show Pierrot toasting the stars in one and a first quarter moon in another—both symbols of distance and possible inspiration from the heavens.



The latter poster was commissioned by Vermouth Distiller Claudius Comoz who commissioned famous poster artwork depicting Pierrot. One example of these commissions was subsequently featured on the label which is the poster art on offer here. The wonderful crescent moon hanging behind a church steeple is a symbol that in the early 1900's France would have been read into the continuing story of Pierrot.

Pierrot is seen toasting the sky, in this artwork the first quarter moon, with his guitar slung over his back. His exaggerated clothing and historical ruff collar ² around his neck (a commentary on the fashion of the last century's clothing choices) depict this Pierrot as a thoughtful clown, instead of reading as a sad clown, this Pierrot is seen more reflective and the upward turned moon into a smile shows some possible happiness for him. The placement of Pierrot's hand makes it seem that he is singing to the moon and as the story

¹ As a marketing ploy to urge riders onto the new carousels of the past, gold rings would be placed near the center of the carousel and riders were told they would gain a prize if they could catch hold of the ring and pull it to them. Of course there was a certain danger of falling when trying to grab the ring which many artists and writers saw as the risk one must take when trying to attain a dream.

² A ruff collar is a high standing pleated collar popular in the renaissance period made of starched linen or lace, or a similar fashion popular late seventeenth century and again in the early nineteenth century.

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for Pierrot goes, he may be lamenting his love for Columbine. Taken in symbolic terms this poster art from the early 1900's may also be a visionary aside of the dominance Columbine, representing the United States, would have over French and through historical connections Italy.

The other symbolism in this artwork is of course the first quarter moon setting behind a church steeple. The sliver of moon has been used in Christian art for many centuries in depictions of the Virgin Mary. "It is also one of the oldest icons in human history, having been known in graphic depictions since at least as early as the Babylonian period in Mesopotamia....Later the moon became a female deity, typified by the goddesses Artemis and Diana, who was celebrated as the moon-goddess in Roman times and depicted with a crescent on her brow. Islam may have been introduced to the crescent moon via the Seljuk Turks who dominated Anatolia in the 12th century, and was widely used by their successors, the Ottoman Turks, who eventually became the principal Islamic nation, and whose Sultan held the title of Caliph until 1922. In the late 19th century, the Pan-Islamic movement sponsored by the Sultan Abdul Hamid II used the crescent and star on a green flag as part of its propaganda, and from this were derived the flags of Egypt and Pakistan and many other Islamic states. ³ The use of the crescent moon on steeples in Islamic countries today may also be a but of visionary work done by the unknown artist of this poster.

It is thought that Comoz commissioned Pierrot for his Vermouth advertising campaign because of the influence of a group of poems called *Pierrot lunaire (Moonstruck Pierrot)* by the Belgian poet Albert Giraud published in 1884. One of the poems set to music by Arnold Schoenberg has Pierrot toasting the stars in the sky after the moon has set. Comoz also used a few lines from another Moonstruck poem on the Vermouth's bottle's label.

The J. Spring artwork is also thought to be inspired by the group of poems by Albert Giraud called *Moonstruck Pierrot*. One of the poems set to music by Arnold Schoenberg has Pierrot toasting the stars in the sky after the moon has set. The raised gold glass in Spring's artwork mimics the gold stars in the dark night sky. The dark green oversized shirt and pants is another signal that this is a clown. Spring creates a wide spread white lapel collar falling onto Pierrot's shoulders making another point toward the fashion choices of the past as this collar is a



³ William G Crampton, Director of the Flag Institute, Chester "There are stories that the Ottomans adopted the crescent to symbolize their conquest of Constantinople but this is probably mere legend since the crescent moon used as a symbol by the Turks considerably predates 1453."
<https://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,5753,-1411,00.html#:~:text=The%20emblem%20has%20been%20used,the%20Babylonian%20period%20in%20Mesopotamia.>

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modified Van Dyke collar popular during the 17th century and in the United States worn in the 1880's. All this shows that the reveler is none other than Pierrot the pantomime with his hand more dramatically raised than the Vermouth poster Pierrot, this one also seems to be singing and this time to the stars which appear to be in the Columb constellation that has fallen out of popularity but was quite popular to find in the night skies of the 17th century. The glass this Pierrot raises is a traditional Cognac glass versus the bottle the Vermouth Pierrot drinks from.



Spring captures the very white skin of Pierrot that was documented to be a symbol of the moon. Pierrot pantomimes and clowns would dust on white powder that sometimes held shimmering mica or other shinning material to mimic how white skin might look under moonlight. As in the case with Spring's artwork the whiteness of this Pierrot is as a stand in for the moon. Even the Van Dyke collar is shaped like a half-moon. The text for Shoenberg's Pierrot lunaire (a translation by Otto Erich Hartleben) speaks of Pierrot taking on the moonlight's rays, making himself up in them in an attempt to make the moon one with him.

The use of blue in both of these works is something to note. Spring's work shows Pierrot as if a part of the night sky. Pierrot also leans back in a gravity defying way as if he is fashioning himself into a constellation. His outstretched hand with the Cognac glass also become a part of a different blue for a different part of the sky. Spring's Pierrot stands in a much deeper almost indigo blue while his glass raised hand touches on a lighter part of the sky perhaps signaling the coming of dawn as the sky shifts from its deepest blues into a much lighter spectrum. The Vermouth Pierrot is more grounded with the cityscape behind him with the crescent moon setting behind the church steeple and other buildings all in a deep hue of blue. However, this Pierrot also stands in what seems to be a space fully connected with the sky just slightly lighter in color perhaps also suggesting that dawn is approaching as also seen in the shadow he casts into the foreground created by the light of the setting moon.

That both artworks were inspired by Giraud's group of Moonstruck Pierrot poems is not surprising given that this poetry collection has inspired many artists for centuries. It is this grouping of poems which evolved Pierrot into an alter-ego of the artist first used by Symbolists and Surrealists artists and then by Modern artists. Pierrot is seen particularly as a poète maudit (cursed Poet)—a poet living a life outside or against society. Poets like Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Verlaine all found inspiration from Pierrot. Many composers

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also set these poems to music as varied as Schoenberg's atonal orchestrations ⁴ and folk singers from the 1960's. "No doubt that Schoenberg found a soul mate in the character Pierrot, who, at the end of the nineteenth century was a symbol of the sensitive, lonely artist estranged from his surroundings, poorly appreciated or ridiculed by his contemporaries. His only friend is the mysterious night wanderer, the Moon, who follows Pierrot everywhere into the night looking for joy and adventure and finally turning sentimentally towards his homeland." ⁵ Pierrot decides to go home when the moon sets revealing the sky crowded with stars that remind him of his home and show him the way home is a common theme in the staged stories of Pierrot from the 17th century onward. "The poems draw their inspiration from the inner (often the darkest) depths of the human soul; they are poetic images creating associations with emotions such as desire, hopeless love, ecstasy, hatred, sorrow and sentimentalism." ⁶ The poems all use symbols as found in common items like knitting needles, basins and bottles. In creating a free-floating allegory of Pierrot moving from night to night, Giraud may have given a new life for Pierrot and in doing so worked with the visionary magic attributed to him to release time again to see into the future.

Giraud's collection is remarkable for the number of themes which artists have found inspiration in. Some of Giraud's themes are as follows the quotations are from a Wikipedia entry on this subject: ⁷ coupled with a translation of Giraud's Moonstruck Pierrot poems translated by Paul Amrod ⁸

--"The growing materialism and vulgarity of late-19th-century life, and the artist's flight into an interior world;" written in the mid 1800's this is a visionary view seeing as how the 21st Century seems to still be grappling with these qualities.

CROWDED WHITENESSES

XL.

The whiteness of the snow and the swans,
The whiteness of the Moon and the Lily,
You were, at the time abolished,
by Pierrot's Pale Panels!

It is dedicated to beautiful signs
with the buried fairies.
The whiteness of the snow and the swans,

⁴ "Pierrot Lunaire was written in the freely atonal period of Schoenberg's career. It was commissioned by the actress-singer Albertine Zehme, who intended to perform a German translation of the poem collection Pierrot lunaire: rondels bergamasques authored by the Belgian symbolist poet Albert Giraud." Tibor Kovács' blog <https://tiboresque.wordpress.com/2012/10/07/arnold-schoenberg-three-times-seven-poems-from-albert-girauds-pierrot-lunaire/>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierrot_lunaire_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierrot_lunaire_(book)) primarily from Palacio Lehmann's Storey (1985)

⁸ <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/pierrot-lunaire-from-albert-giraud-translated-by-paul-amrod/>

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The whiteness of the Moon and the Lily!

I have contempt for unworthy things.
You do not like softened hearts
are the precepts that I read
in the triumph of your lines.
Snow, Wounds and Swans.

--The artist quest for purity in a free soul, "often through a derangement of the senses (advocated most famously by Arthur Rimbaud) that in the late 1800's and 1900's meant an ecstasy of music or drugs like alcohol" but that in the 21st Century is seen more in the virtual worlds and as a person who seeks to change society by alteration of identities, partnering or purpose of life.

As in one of Giraud's poems translated by Paul Amrod

THE FLECK ON THE MOON

XXXVIII.

A white fleck from the bright moonlight
on the back of his black coat.
Thus Pierrot wanders on a balmy evening
searching for adventure and good fortune.

Abruptly he was bothered by something upon his clothing
He inspected himself all over and promptly found
a white fleck from the bright moonlight
on the back of his black coat.

He thinks that it is a stain from plaster
and wipes and cleans but it doesn't disappear.
So he continues to walk swollen with a venomous anger.
He scrubs and rubs until the lark announces morning.
A white fleck from the bright moonlight.

--"The deconstruction of romantic love, inspired in part by a skepticism" and most astutely described by Arthur Schopenhauer that a growing interest in the scientific method for arriving at conclusions or deciphering solutions which uncouples the intuition of love in favor of a rational approach. Now in the 21st Century we still have these two poles of science vs. intuition at work in our romantic considerations most notably in procreation which science has evolved so that romantic partners are not even needed in order to produce children which use to be the main reason people decided to be romantic with certain people. The archaic idea of "courting" a potential love interest has been replaced by other scientific means of coupling as in internet dating, virtual love affairs and the potential of robotics to be employed in companionship.

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Another poem from Giraud's collection using the "knitting needle" as the parody for romantic love. Still using Paul Amrod's translation.

PARODY

XLII.

Knitting needles
in her old gray wig,
The duenna, in her cherry casaquin
doesn't get tired of the marmot.

She waits in the vineyard,
She is painfully in love with Pierrot
Knitting needles
in her old gray wig.

Suddenly, he intends to burst
pointing at the whistle in the breeze.
The Moon is a spiteful mocker
and its rays seem to imitate
knitting needles that glitter and gleam.

--"The transmutation of art into a hermeticism (vide Stéphane Mallarmé, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Rainer Maria Rilke) through which it can be enriched with sacred value, spared the gaze of the masses, and engaged with the dissonant incongruities of modern life"-- all things the 21st Century artist still utilizes in order to create.

THE MIRROR

XLVII.

From a growing crescent of the moon
imagine the blue sky of the evening,
and by the balcony of the boudoir
it enters with its wandering light.

Opposite, in vibrant peace
the limpid and deep mirror,
from a growing crescent of the moon
unties the blue sky of the evening.

Pierrot, in a conquering way
reflects and unanticipatedly appears in the dark
laughing in smugness in silence to see,
separated by his white relationship,

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a growing crescent of the moon!

Giraud explores all these themes in his Moonstruck Pierrot poems which are symbolic fragments shored against Pierrot's ruins. Artists today have found an inspiration in Pierrot. In contemporary popular culture—in poetry, fiction, and the visual arts, as well as works for the stage, screen, and concert hall—Pierrot may be seen as a sad clown who is able to bring laughter from audiences because of his “failures” or pranks he pulls on himself, but it is his distraction that really causes these often seen as misfortunes. Pierrot is of course distracted by love and in the 21st Century he begins pursuing the idea of love in trying to understand why he was not able to be with the one he loves.

Just as we here at Galaudet Gallery see a new way of bringing the Arts and Crafts movement into the 21st Century we include a newly evolve Pierrot—who may still not win the heart of Columbine but who is learning that there may be love elsewhere. Some may say that reading so much from an artwork may obstruct the enjoyment of a piece but we believe that utilizing artwork for understanding our lives is one of its purest opportunities for enjoyment and that such knowledge can assist in having a more meaningful aesthetic experience. These Pierrot pieces clearly have something to say about life as lived in the past and as we are living it today. Knowing that artists are often in conversation with alternative realities, ways of being and other such dimensional attributes also means they may have connections with ways of representing time in a less linear fashion and in releasing time from the constraints of its usual flow from past to present to future, these artists may be visionaries who can see into the future because instead of it being at some far-flung point on a linear scale it is right there beside them as they work.

BOHEMIAN CRYSTAL

L.

A moon beam enclosed
in a beautiful bottle from Bohemia.
Such is the fairylike poem
that, in these rounds, I answered.

I'm dressed like Pierrot,
to offer what I like.
A moon beam enclosed
in a beautiful bottle from Bohemia.

By this symbol all is expressed.
O my very dear, all of myself
like Pierrot, in his pale head,
senses that under my thin mask
a beam of the moon is enclosed.

Paul Amrod Friday, September 1, 2017