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DESIRING THE SHORE

Adolphe Lalyre and the Sirens of Carteret

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Clarice M. Butkus

University of Technology Sydney <clarice_m2000@yahoo.com>

Christian Fleury

University of Caen Normandy <fleury.cote@wanadoo.fr>

Benoit Raoulx

University of Caen Normandy <benoit.raoulx@unicaen.fr>

ABSTRACT: Adolphe Lalyre was a high-profile French painter in the late 19th and early 20th centuries who has now largely fallen into obscurity. Seemingly unmoved by the series of movements in Modern Art that came to prominence during his lifetime – including Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism – he persisted with a style of painting derived from Symbolism, initially favouring religious themes before moving on to a series of works representing (human-form) sirens during an extended residency at Carteret, on the coast of Normandy. The French term *sirène* refers to both human-form female water spirits and fish-tailed ones of the type usually referred to in English as mermaids. This article explores the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of Lalyre's *sirène* paintings and discusses the pleasures and temptations they offered the viewer at an historical moment when Modernism, and Modernity more generally, was in its ascendancy. Our analysis examines Lalyre's work within the specifically local context of Carteret and, more broadly, with late 19th and early 20th Century France, focusing on the importance of the artist and visual representations in the process of place-making and especially with regard to shifts in the meaning of sea and shore, along with the rise of the tourism industry.

KEYWORDS: Adolphe Lalyre, Sirens/*Sirènes*, Normandy, Carteret

Introduction: Political, socio-economic and cultural context

Adolphe Lalyre was born in Rouvres-en-Woëvre, in eastern France, in 1848. He ranked first at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1875 and subsequently achieved a high-profile career in the French capital. As a member of the Société des Artistes Français, his association with Academic Art allowed him to enjoy prosperity and a degree of fame and notoriety. His workshop was located at La Place des Vosges, a prestigious square in central Paris. He exhibited each year from 1880 to 1929 at Le Salon de la Société des Artistes Français, was selected for the Anvers and Paris universal exhibitions and participated in many other exhibitions. He received several awards, including the Légion d'Honneur and was considered a fierce art critic. Particularly known for his series of siren paintings, he also

published a limited-edition book on the history of the nude in painting in 1910, consisting mostly of plates.

Between 1872 and his death in 1933, Lalyre spent a great deal of his time in Carteret, a small fishing village located in Western Normandy (Figure 1). This period is nearly co-extensive with that of the Third Republic (1871-1940), which operated between the end of the Franco-Prussian War and the beginning of the Vichy government. These years saw major political changes occur as the government of the Republic, which was initially a temporary one, became permanent and succeeded the monarchy. This was a time of tremendous tension in French society, including much debate over the place of religion. Lalyre himself reflected the contradictions of his time: accused of pornography in Paris for some of his paintings, he also created stained-glass windows for the Saint-Germain le Scot church in Carteret. Major socio-economic transformations also occurred, many of which impacted upon previously marginal, outlying areas of the country. The railway network rapidly expanded during the second part of the century, reaching many small coastal villages, particularly along France's north eastern coast. This transport infrastructure and the rise of an urban bourgeoisie with leisure time also fostered tourism development and the proliferation of seaside resorts.

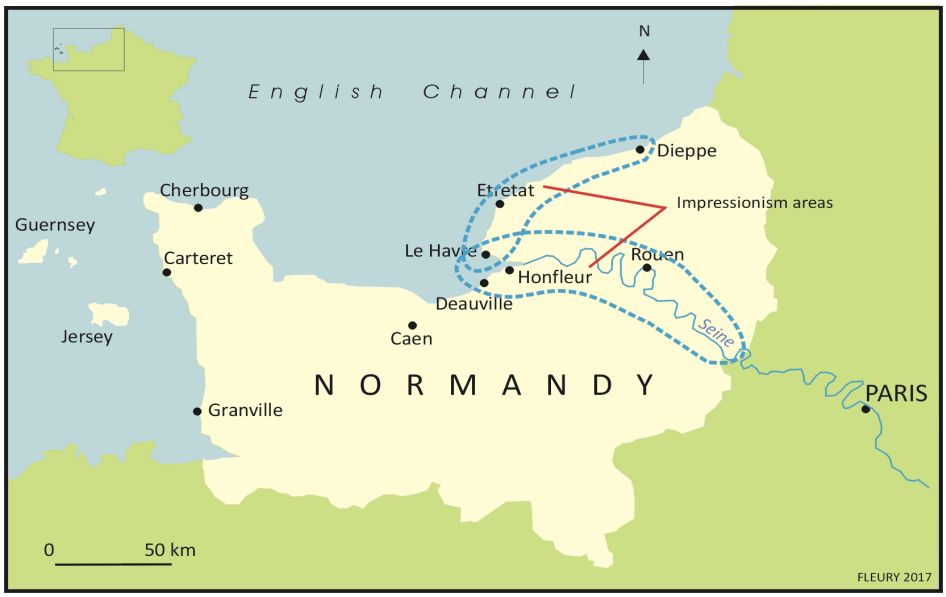

Figure 1 - Location of Carteret and the main areas in Normandy where Impressionist painting flourished (Fleury, 2017).

The pattern of development that transformed the seaside village of Carteret was typical of the time. It was common for a renowned individual to take up residence in a coastal town and influence others to follow him. In the case of Carteret, that individual was a novelist, Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, who was born in 1808, outside of Saint-Sauveur le Vicomte in Lower Normandy. After coming to prominence as part of the Dandyism movement in Paris he visited the village on numerous occasions. The presence of creative artists — especially painters such as Lalyre — contributed to the increased reputation and status of such areas. Parisian capitalists investing in coastal land further boosted the region's expansion. The railroad reached Carteret in 1889 and low-cost promotional train tickets from Paris to

Carteret (known as *des bains de mer*) were introduced and by 1913, there were 45 holiday villas in the area. Lalyre's first visit to Carteret was in 1872 and he frequently visited thereafter, usually staying at Le Grand Hotel de la Mer. In 1903 he bought a vacant lot on which he built a house containing large studio which he named Le Château des Sirènes. The pattern of attraction to and valourisation of coastal locations such as Carteret exemplifies the emergent social and cultural phenomenon of "desiring the shore," as referred to by French historian Alain Corbin in his pivotal work *Le territoire du vide: L'Occident et le désir de rivage (1750-1840)* (1988), published in English language translation in 1994 as *The Lure of the Sea*.

Figure 2 - The beach at Carteret at the beginning of the 20th Century (undated postcard)

As Corbin (1988) details, from antiquity the sea had been perceived as a space of fear framed within a theologically-based cosmology. Associated with the deluge and the Devil, it was considered a repulsive border, uncontrollable by humans and inhabited by monsters. The dramatisation of the sea as foreboding reached its peak around the middle of the 17th Century through the work of painters working in the Netherlands such as, most notably, Ludolf Bakhuizen. After this peak, however, cultural representation of the sea began to shift from intense fear to desire. The invention of shoreline tourism was a major factor in this transition. In the Netherlands, the town of Scheveningen became an obligatory tourist destination. With regard to Dutch artistic representation, the intertwining of land, sea and sky grew more prominent in visualisation of the landscape, replacing demonic forces with tranquil shores. Similarly, in the 18th Century Enlightenment period, European aristocrats found time to explore the beauties of the Mediterranean Sea — particularly around Naples — during ritual travels to Italy. Seaside sabbaticals also began to be recommended for health. In France, this coastal momentum strengthened in the 1820s as the aristocracy and bourgeoisie began to seek the shore. Dieppe became the first sea resort in Normandy. A range of seaside locales subsequently developed as tourism centres, ranging from prestigious resorts such as Dinard or Biarritz to modest villages like Carteret. At first visitors did not go to the seaside to bathe but to enjoy the fresh air and sociability. This shifted, however, and bathing became popular among the bourgeoisie. While the introduction of

paid vacations in the 1930s further disseminated this norm across classes, Lalyre's work (discussed in the next section) relates to the stage before the arrival of substantial numbers of working and middle-class tourists in villages such as Carteret.

Lalyre's aesthetic

Several French Modernist artists were motivated by a desire to cultivate their artistic practice away from the city. For Impressionists such as Monet, Pissaro, and Renoir, the visually rich, varied and luminous coastal landscapes of Brittany and Normandy exerted a particularly potent draw from the 1860s on. Claude Monet's iconic and initially controversial painting 'Impression, soleil levant' ('Impression, sunrise') (1872), which inspired the term Impressionism,[1] was begun at Le Havre in the same year that Lalyre first visited Carteret. Lalyre, however, chose the much more remote area of Carteret and his aesthetic also diverged considerably from the prominent avant-garde art movements emerging under the broad umbrella and impetus of Modernism. As an academic painter (or producer of *l'art pompier*), Lalyre was influenced by the Neo-classical and Romanticist movements. Impressionism challenged these traditions through novel painting techniques emphasising, among other aspects, the visceral qualities/perception of natural light and movement. The influence of this innovative artistic movement on Lalyre, however, was seemingly minimal and Bavay has asserted that it was only to "attain the 'colouring of tender and delicate feminine complexions'" that Lalyre added "some selected notes of Impressionism" to his works (2009: online — authors' translation). Lalyre's compositions greatly contrast with the typical subject matter of Impressionist seascapes. Renoir's 'La Plage de Varengeville' (c1880) (Figure 3), for example, presents a coastal landscape near Dieppe envisioned as a scene of middle-class respectability.[2] In the painting the female figures are formally dressed and carry parasols as they "take in" the sea while maintaining a careful distance from it. These detached female presences mark the landscape in a ritualised/'civilised' form of encounter.

By contrast, Lalyre's work pushes the boundaries of social acceptability by representing female nudes in highly sensuous encounter with the natural spaces/environs they inhabit (and frequently in implied sexual congress with creatures of the sea). Lalyre's early and enduring interest in the female nude led him to publish a book on the subject in 1910 with the ambitious title of *Le nu féminin à travers les ages, chez tous les peuples* ('The female nude through the Ages, among all peoples'). His paintings were at times labelled as pornographic (as in the case of his 1892 work 'Les Sirènes s'amusent'), a characterisation he strongly refuted.[3] In Lalyre's oeuvre, the seascapes of Carteret provide a backdrop that allowed him to explore representation of the eroticised female form. As Corbin (1994) notes, the search for erotic pleasures may have preceded health motives in the space of the seashore; as suggested by a 1796 guide to the southern English seaside town of Brighton:

> *indiscreet men were always on the look-out for women bathers, 'not only as they confusedly ascend from the sea, but as they kick and sprawl and flounder about its muddy margins, like so many mad Naiads in flannel smocks.'* (ibid: 79).

[1] Monet's painting was exhibited in 1874 and critical responses to it are often cited as inspiring the name of the Impressionist movement.

[2] Also see Monet's 'Promenade sur la falaise' (1882) for a similar scenario.

[3] In 1892 Lalyre's painting 'Les Sirènes s'amusent' was refused entry to the Salon des Artistes Vivants on the grounds that it was pornographic. While Lalyre protested and had the ban overturned, he subsequently withdrew it. (Bavay, 2009: online).

The image of "indiscreet men" and "mad Naiads in flannel smocks" offers a rich intermingling of visual eroticism along with the advent of public sea-bathing. With regard to the reference to the female bathers' "smocks," over the period of Lalyre's Carteret work, major innovations took place in modern women's swimwear, with the transition from heavy head-to-toe flannel garments to one-piece form-fitting suits with knee-length shorts that first came on the market in the early 1900s (see the figures at the bottom right of Figure 2. above, for example). Previously forbidden female flesh came to have more visibility on the beach. Although sea-bathing and such modern displays of female bodies were a phenomenon that only took hold among the masses toward the end of Lalyre's working life, the profound latent eroticism of sea and shore in association to female flesh were primary to his Carteret work. While some of Lalyre's paintings capture the frolics of swim-suited bathers at Carteret, his principal emphasis was on the nude female's encounter with the space of the seashore. Lalyre's 'Baigneuse sous les rochers du Grand Fort a Carteret' ('Bather under the rocks of the Grand Fort at Carteret') (date unknown)[4] (Figure 3), for example, foregrounds a single nude female figure, appearing diminutive against the jutting and jagged rocks of the landscape overhead. The woman's naked body is connected to the water and depicted in warm light that emphasises her sensual form. There is a sense of quiet repose around her, kept in tension with the sharp intensity of the landscape's textured rock formations, light sand and dark pools of water. She looks downward (rather than toward the land or horizon) and washes her unclad body naturally in the water. The distinctiveness of this vision of the female form by the seashore can be appreciated by comparing his bather, who is naturalised as part of the surrounding seaside environment, with Renoir's formally dressed beach figure at Varengeville (Figure 4).

Figure 3 – Lalyre's 'Baigneuse sous les rochers du Grand Fort a Carteret'
date unknown)

[4] Many of Lalyre's paintings are undated, as confirmed through the authors' discussions on with gallerist Pierre de Souzy in Carteret on May 16th, 2018.

Figure 4 – Auguste Renoir's 'La plage de Varengeville' (c1880).

Lalyre's *sirène*s

Lalyre gained his principal recognition and notoriety as a painter of *sirène*s, with his work interweaving aspects of symbolic mythological figures within a broader personal vision of the female nude and an eroticised seascape. As Myers notes, Greek mythological figures were a major preoccupation of late 19th Century Symbolist painters:

> *Wanting to imbue their works with spiritual value, these progenitors of Symbolism produced imaginary dream worlds populated with mysterious figures from biblical stories and Greek mythology as well as fantastical, often monstrous creatures. Their suggestive imagery established what would become the most pervasive themes in Symbolist art: love, fear, anguish, death, sexual awakening, and unrequited desire. Woman became the favoured symbol for the expression of these universal emotions, appearing alternately as wistful virgins and menacing femme fatales* (2007: online).

While Lalyre deployed specific mythological elements in some of his paintings, his female nude figures adhere only lightly to standard classical forms and conventions of the Greek siren and/or nereid (sea nymph). Equally, his depictions fail to fall neatly within Symbolist categorisations of Woman as, dichotomously, a "wistful virgin" or "menacing femme fatale" (ibid). The previously noted Brighton description — "they kick and sprawl and flounder about its muddy margins" — conjures up some aspects of Lalyre's imaginary. His emphasis is on the fantasy pleasures of female flesh located in the sea and along the shoreline; his nereids and *sirène*s appear in frenzied unity/intercourse with the erotic tussle and swirl of torrents, spraying foam, and the phallic eel-like creatures that surround them. Lalyre's work 'Le concert des sirènes' ('The Sirens' Concert') (Figure 5) exemplifies this aspect. In this painting, the female figures are fully human in form. The sirènes are depicted in two distinct

groups. The five at the rear are posed in concert, playing archaic classic instruments, while the two in the foreground tumble in the surf, as waves crest and foam in and around their soft, ample flesh. Two prominent large-mouthed sea creatures cavort proximately to their bodies in the foreground, suggesting their intimate caress of the sirens' breasts, pubic areas and posteriors. In this scenario female carnality is implicated in bestial desire. This type of configuration is typical of many of Lalyre's sirène paintings. Noticeably absent are the human male bodies of sailors, either being carried to safety or being seduced to their demise. Rather, as will be discussed in detail below, Lalyre's images appear to contemplate female amusement (and pleasure) as (at least partially) a circuit of desire between female bodies and the sea and the creatures that inhabit it — a scene frequently marked by orgiastic excess, engulfment and female gratification.

Figure 5 – Lalyre's 'Le concert des sirènes' (1922)

To some degree, Lalyre's sirènes resemble those represented in Charles Edouard Boutibonne's 'Sirènes jouant dans la mer' ('Sirens Frolicking in the Sea') (1883) (Figure 6). Like Lalyre, Boutibonne was a French painter of the academic classicist school. In his 1883 painting he presents a circle of sirens sea-bathing, with emphasis on their torsos and buttocks, as well as the floating hair of one of the figures. However, Boutibonne's sirènes are ambiguous in form. While the two central figures appear fully human, there is an ambiguity concerning the portion of the figure at right of image that is submerged, and the two figures at the left of the image are explicitly tailed. There is also an implied possibility of interaction with human mariners through the (very subtle) appearance of a ship at the left of the distant horizon. Boutibonne's seas are perceptibly calm and still, softly lapping at the sirens. His females emerge neatly from the water and bask unperturbed as two appear to eye the far away vessel.

Figure 6 - The seascape in Charles Edouard Boutibonne's "Sirènes jouant dans la mer' (1883).

Lalyre's painting 'Sirènes dans le surf' ('Sirens in the Surf') (Figure 7), reveals a rather different treatment of the sea, particularly evident in the dynamism of his waves. He unifies the curves of his *sirènes'* flesh and flowing hair with the rough, spraying, foamy undulation of the waters. The foreground figure is buffeted by the cresting seas as she grasps the eel-like creature that leaps gape-mouthed toward her breast. Such presentation underscores a powerfully constructed erotic threshold between female flesh and the aquatic.

Figure 7 – Lalyre's 'Sirènes dans le surf' ('Sirens in the Surf') (date unknown)

Lalyre's paintings often depict his *sirènes* in teeming multiplicities, emerging from the waters on their bellies or backs like large catches of fish. In these, his female figures are not individualised, but rather essentialised, nearly devoid of all artifice and modernity.

Lalyre's vision of the *sirène* departs markedly from the classic Symbolist version. Much Symbolist artistic exploration drew on siren mythological elements to emphasise the *femme fatale* and express elements of fear of, misogyny and/or identification with emerging female empowerment. The Modernist period has been described as ushering in "the heyday of the first wave of feminism" and "the protagonist of this movement was known as the "New Woman": independent, educated, (relatively) sexually liberated" (Dekoven, 2011: 212). The New Woman represented complex notions of feminine sexuality, given her desire/push to achieve greater sexual "autonomy" within the prevalent repressive mores of 19th Century western society. The prevailing culture confined feminine sexuality to marriage and submission to masculine pleasure. As Dekoven points out, contradictory responses to the notions of feminine power and "liberated" sexuality represented by the New Woman met with profound ambivalence by male Modernists. As she notes:

> *The radical implications of the social-cultural changes feminism advocated produced in Modernist writing an unprecedented preoccupation with gender, both thematically and formally. Much of this preoccupation expressed male Modernist fear of women's new power, and resulted in the combination of misogyny and triumphal masculinism that many critics see as central, defining features of Modernist work by men. This masculine misogyny, however, was*

> *almost universally accompanied by its dialectical twin: a fascination and strong identification with the empowered feminine* (2011: 212).

Two Symbolist paintings illustrate this type of response — Armand Point's 'Les Sirènes' (1897) and Cesare Viazzi's 'Sirene' (1901). Point draws from multiple elements of Greek mythology to create 'Les Sirènes' (Figure 8). For example, his central figure is winged in the classical tradition of the harpy but sits astride a hybrid equine/sea creature, a feature more consistent with Nereid myths. Nereids more commonly convey soft, positive connotations of the sea, including notions of a welcoming feminine beauty and safe aquatic passage. Additionally, Point gives an elaborate headdress to his siren featuring a seashell and coiled serpent, uncharacteristic of the classic siren or Nereid. The figure's wispy white transparent veil swirls around her risen arm forming a shape resembling another serpent. The serpent symbol can be interpreted as harkening back to several different female figures of classical mythology and religion, including Greek figures such as Medusa — the gorgon whose hair was formed of snakes — and Medea, the witch who rode a chariot pulled by two dragon serpents, as well as Christian symbolism associated with the figure of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Though Point's inclusion of Nereid elements may suggest a benevolent figure, several features of the work reinforce its overall sense of foreboding. The siren is cast within stormy clouds and dark waters. Her physique is drawn sharply (as compared with the fleshly abundance of Lalyre's *sirènes*). She is laden with symbolic adornments foregrounding her status as semi-deity, with wings and serpents associating her with figures of female cunning, treachery, and fury. With a stern expression, she appears a daunting and triumphant goddess-like figure. Combining these elements, 'Les Sirènes' is illustrative of a Modernist Symbolist femme fatale, evoking fear, admiration and ambivalence.

Figure 8 - The Symbolist femme fatale in Armand Point's 'Les Sirènes (1897).

Cesare Viazzi's painting 'Sirene' (1901) (Figure 9), meanwhile, presents his figures as more viscerally threatening. His sirens possess sharp, weapon-like, gun metal grey fish-scaled legs ending in fins and lurk at the surface of the still, dark water with poised lethalness. In the background right of the image, Viazzi returns to the motif of the seductive female pulling a male into the ocean depths. Landscape elements are minimal, the *sirènes* partially submerged. Both Point and Viazzi's representations draw strongly on (sometimes multiplicitous) mythological references symbolically and narratively conveying figures of fascination and deadly potency.

Figure 9 - The Symbolist femme fatale in Cesare Viazzi's 'Sirene' (1901).

Such depictions greatly differ from the playfully seductive form of Lalyre's Carteret *sirènes*, who typify heterosexual male fantasies of feminine beauty, warmth and sensuality, natural abundance and erotic availability. In 'Les Sirènes visitées par les muses' ('The Sirens visited by the muses') (Figure 10), for example, Lalyre's *sirènes* are nestled with cherubs in a dark morass of rocks, seabirds and coastal debris, anchored to the rocks and the carnal and earthly. In traditional Greek myth, the sirens enter and lose a singing contest with the heavenly muses and are punished by having their feathers plucked out. Rather than emphasizing classical narrative elements, Lalyre highlights the sexually inviting gaze of the far-left figure, his *sirènes'* seductive flesh and their dark erotic enmeshment with the rocky landscape, eel figure, and seabirds. The female muses (and their wrath) are barely perceptible, with the outline of these figures interwoven in the darkened misty skies. Though the *sirènes* appear startled by what they perceive, the focal point of the painting is around their nude bodies encircled by light and entangled in multiple sensual and maternal poses. Three cherubs feature prominently, one resembling an infant symbolically swaddled

in the flesh of the surrounding female figures. A pair of cupids is also depicted in the skies in embrace, enamoured of one another, and curiously serene in the face of the oncoming muses. Once again, mythological connotations serve secondarily to the overridingly sensual and fecund.

Figure 10 – Lalyre's 'Les Sirènes visitées par les muses' (date unknown)

The title of Lalyre's 1910 painting, 'Sirènes Lutinées par les Amours', which, in some translations, is expressed as 'Sirens Fondled by Love' (Figure 11) provides a curious (but fitting) descriptor for his enduring preoccupations. Though a later work, produced at a time when representations of the 'New Woman' had been in circulation for at least 15 years,[5] its purview remains feminine flesh and erotic pleasures. Unusual for Lalyre, this work features a male form in the water (at the lower left of the image) that appears to reach up to the *sirènes* for assistance. This potentially suggests an alternate aspect of the *sirènes* to Point's and Viazzi's depictions — in which they await their prey or actively pull male sailors into the sea. In the painting numerous winged cupids are depicted in various embraces and are represented kissing *sirènes*, signalling a panorama of amatory feeling, culminating in the depiction of a golden blonde cupid who leans forward to gently kiss the forehead of a *sirène* as she lies back fondling her own breast. Lalyre's configuration arguably implies the notion of ascendance to/salvation in the light-filled circle of erotic feminine pleasure - merging fleshly femininity, sensual self-pleasure and divine fertility/maternal grace and reinforcing a self-fulfilling feminine eroticism.

[5] Writers Sarah Grand and 'Ouida' (the pseudonym of Maria Louise Ramé) first used the term "New Woman" in essays published in the *North American Review* in March of 1894, with the "heyday of New Woman fiction" taking place in the mid-1890s (Buzwell, 2014: online).

Figure 11 – Lalyre's 'Sirènes Lutinées par les Amours' (1910)

Lalyre's 'Chansons des mer' ('Song of the Seas') (1912) (Figure 12) incorporates similar elements to 'Sirènes Lutinées par les Amours' in a modernised version of the story of Ulysses and the sirens in which the latter assail a fishing boat. Here the cupids are co-conspirators, attempting to arrest the ship by tugging at its sails. In contrast to other treatments of the Ulysses story painted in the period (for example, Herbert Draper's 'Ulysses and the Sirens' [1909]), which depicted Ulysses and his crew resisting the sirens' entreaties;[6] Lalyre's *sirènes* exercise an overpowering sensual charge. The *sirènes* that surround the ship's prow arch onto it on their backs: they are translucent and ethereal, dragging the prow down with the surge of their flesh. Their faces are blissful, nearly delirious with pleasure, with some figures resting their heads or holding their breasts. The undulant curves of the *sirènes'* bodies and hair become part of the sea, with partially obscured fish tails (that may or may not belong to the *sirènes)* writhing in undercurrents. A garland of flowers lies across the pubic area of the *sirène* arched across the front of the boat. The string of flowers (which also appears beneath the most prominently sexually splayed [and cupid-kissed] figure of 'Sirènes Lutinées par les Amours') further enmeshes the female nude figure in the natural world. While both the fishermen onboard are represented as contemporary figures (through their hair styles), the they are depicted differently with regard to their reaction to the *sirènes'* sensual onslaught. The man at the prow appears to have abandoned himself to the invasion and appears naked, gazing transfixed down the length of the central *sirène's* body. By contrast, the male at the stern remains clothed and has a more ambivalent relationship to the *sirènes* who are attempting to mount the vessel.

[6] With Ulysses bound to the mast, hearing the sirens' songs, and his crew rowing with their ears stopped with wax.

Figure 12 – Lalyre's 'Chansons des mer' (1912).

'Nereids' (date unknown) (Figure 13) provides a more elaborated representation of the marine forms suggested below the surface of 'Chansons des mer' and offers one of Lalyre's most vivid depictions of the sea creatures that occur as details in other works. While ambiguous as to whether there is a single entity or group of creatures in the waters, the sea gives forth a nest of tentacles that interweave in and around the intimate crevices of the nereids' bodies. While apparently enraptured, the nereids appear to have been abruptly thrown from their rock and into the swell. One redhaired nereid arches back into the waves, with an expression of serene pleasure, as tentacles and cresting waves surge between her legs. Another redhaired nereid is cast back against the body of the figure behind her in the thrust of the ocean spray. The background figure brandishes a small eel creature that appears as a phallic plaything. The figures laugh, intertwined with the creature(s), as a cupid points his bow and arrow, symbolically bestowing Eros to the totality of the scene.

Figure 13 – Lalyre's 'Nereids' (date unknown).

Lalyre's 'Nu aux dauphins' ('Nude to dolphins') (circa 1910) (Figure 14) pushes the *sirène's* association even further within an aesthetic that is almost surreal. The painting is an outlier in the artist's oeuvre, exploring the edges of Symbolism and can be interpreted in several ways. It presents an ambiguous scene between the nude figure and the two sea creatures with her. One interpretation suggests her as mother to the baby creature, positioning the larger sea creature as the paternal counterpart. Alternatively, she could be understood as providing maternal comfort to the baby in the presence of its piscine mother. Essentialised animalistic qualities of the feminine are intensified — presenting a familial arrangement in which the human female is minimally distanced from the natural world. At the same time, the eel-like creature resting between the *sirène's* thighs is markedly phallicised. The figure can thereby be interpreted as a stand-in for the male penis, with the purpose of either giving sexual pleasure to the female figure or as a form of traditional masculinised agency (akin to that sometimes associated with a mermaid's fishtail — Hayward [2016]). This painting most strongly manifests the recurring arrangement in Lalyre's work whereby the sea creatures are cast as the erotic counterparts of the *sirènes* in the absence of human male figures. Her calm presence in this space signals its naturalness to her, whatever the ambiguous relations between the *sirène*, the phallic other she nestles and the monstrous sea creature that looks on.

Figure 14 – Lalyre's 'Nu aux dauphins' (circa 1910)

Ultimately, the sea is not a zone of alien emptiness in Lalyre's work. Instead, its surface often shows a writhing mass of aquatic life that sometimes seems akin to the tentacles of a single (kraken-like) entity or, more often, that of a batch of large, eel-like creatures wriggling amongst each other. These creatures – whether simply unspecified details within broader canvases or, peculiarly identified in titles as *dauphins* (dolphins) — are in fact grotesque fantasy figures with cod-like heads and gaping maws and elongated tails. Their wriggling phallic forms bump against, curl around and interpenetrate groups of *sirènes.* The *sirènes'* responses to these advances are variously comfortable or rapturous. The scenes do not suggest unwelcome bestial predation but rather the opposite. In these scenarios the *sirènes* are not human creatures inhabiting the integrated terrestrial and aquatic space created by human livelihood activities described by Hayward (2014) and Suwa (2017) as an aquapelagic zone, but, rather, they appear as liminal "boundary riders" of the terrestrial zone, adhering to rocks and shallows but intrinsically integrated with the aquatic space and its agents.

Whether identified in paintings' titles as "*sirènes*", "nereids" or simply as "nudes", Lalyre's naked female figures are figures of the artist's imagination and the singular mythology constituted by his works rather than attempts to depict siren figures from mythology and/or art history with any degree of fidelity to previous traditions. While Lalyre borrows elements from tradition, such as his fondness for showing his *sirènes* in concert, singing and brandishing *sistrums*[7] and other instruments; they are personal fantasy figures. Lalyre is also liberal enough with his use of art historical traditions to introduce cupid-like cherubs variously interacting with the *sirènes* themselves or firing their love arrows towards them during their encounters with amorous "dauphins."[8] Lalyre is not concerned to enact particular scenes *from* mythology, he creates his own internal mythology in the form of

[7] Ancient shaken percussive instruments from the eastern Mediterranean (thanks to John Whiteoak for this identification).
[8] Akin to those featured in the upper portions of Raphael's famous fresco 'The Triumph of Galatea' (1514).

repeated vignettes/tableaux, such as those in which the *sirènes* writhe and tumble, constantly caught up in sensual libidinal flows.

The final painting considered in this article is Lalyre's self-portrait in his Carteret studio (Figure 15). In this work, he is depicted as turned away from the viewer, lost in contemplation of his models and paintings. He is encircled by three female figures, including one in the foreground seductively sprawled across an animal-skin rug. His female nudes are once again bathed in light to highlight their translucent flesh. Lalyre used Carteret as a place to turn away from many of the formal and philosophical concerns of the Modernist period. It was a retreat from the pressures of urban life but also from changing conceptions of gender. Lalyre's aesthetic style combined the academic religious and mythical elements of *l'art pompier*, Romanticist notions of personal expression, Impressionist elements and a Symbolist thematic focus on *sirènes*, touching on the surreal and the pornographic. In geographical and cultural terms, Carteret was slightly further afield than the well-worn paths of Le Havre and Dieppe. In this more sparsely inhabited (and thereby less scrutinised) space Lalyre's work was free to dwell in erotic decadence, out of the purview of tastemakers, in a sphere of arrested fantasy. The result is Lalyre's idiosyncratic vision of an eroticised liminal space where human meets nature and shore meets land. Lalyre makes of this space a desirous entanglement, equal parts Edenic realm and pornographic precipice.

Figure 15 - Lalyre's 'Auto-portrait dans l'atelier' (date unknown).

Carteret and the pleasures of landscape

In Lalyre's case, "desiring the shore" brings forth a complex and ambivalent set of associations around both the landscape of Carteret and the feminine. At times, the landscape elements of Lalyre's paintings seem to mirror masculine dominance over the (human) feminine, with jagged rock overhangs and the ambiguous (phallic) sea creatures that cavort with his *sirènes* underscoring the absolute availability of the feminine body to a dominant masculinised physical landscape. To a degree, this runs counter to the prevailing idea of the landscape as "conquerable" through scientific rationalism and its gaze, in which the land is more typically "feminised" — i.e. masterable, not mastering. Lalyre's approach greatly contrasts with the view of landscape represented by the Impressionist seascapes described earlier, wherein bourgeois mastery is conveyed through female subjects depicted in a more formal/structured relationship to the seascape under their purview. In the Impressionist example, in fact, there is an implied form of double mastery by the masculine bourgeois viewer who a) can "take in" the female subject through his gaze and b) align his mastering eye to her formalised detached view of the land.

In Lalyre's work, the same masculine bourgeois viewer is offered a deeply eroticised and essentialised view of the female subject that places her in the continuum of the natural/bestial and in erotic relation to land. Lalyre's valourised feminine flesh is presented at various times as passive, multiplicitous, enraptured and ecstatic; with the *sirènes* and their pleasures ready for masculine heterosexual consumption. However, in many of Lalyre's paintings, that landscape has agency – it is the force that drives erotic *urgency* in relationship to the female flesh on display. From this, an alternate set of relationships begins to unfold. In paintings such as 'Les sirènes s'amusent' those pleasures verge on an unbroken circle of eroticism between female flesh and the natural world, to which the masculine is secondary. The prospective masculine viewing position is voyeuristic, a witness to the circuit of feminine pleasure, or, alternatively, allied to and embedded in nature itself, crossing the stereotypical Nature (feminine)/Culture (masculine) divide. Further, Lalyre diverges from the Symbolist reaction to the (new) feminine, which "phallicises" the femme fatale figure herself (as exemplified in Point's angular, ascendant, heraldic form, or Viazzi's sirens with dagger-like, fish-scaled legs), within a context of fear and threat. Instead, Lalyre positions elements of the natural world as stand-ins for phallic/masculine force. This arguably reconfigures the masculine bourgeois' gaze in a more complex and ambivalent relationship to the pleasures of landscape. At this point it is pertinent to consider Johnson's characterisation of the (already) dual and potentially destabilising nature of masculine engagement with the land (explicated with regard to the work of Gillian Rose):

> *The pleasure and emotive force which landscapes may provide (Daniels, 1989), according to Rose, is an ambivalent pleasure which disrupts the construction of modern masculinity as scientific, rational and distanced. The pleasure of the text disrupts distanced, rational and scientific knowledge, producing a `tense oscillation between knowledge and pleasure' (Rose, 1993, p. 101). For her the male gaze moves between scientific viewing and a sexualised aesthetics, between voyeuristic distance and power and narcissistic identification with the image. Images of women or nature suspend fear of lack while distance from them supports masculine self-identification. Thus, men's relationship to landscape for Gillian Rose is mediated by desire for integration and fear of engulfment…* (Johnson, 2018: 161)

Broadly, this description points to some of the tensions created by Lalyre's Carteret seascapes, with the "tense oscillation between knowledge and pleasure" further intensified by the terms of his eroticisation. The complex viewing position established in relationship to the erotic space of the seashore opens up possibilities around liminal fantasies of integration/"fear of engulfment" (ibid). Instead of positing the classic masculine figure of the sailor who must fear submergence through the seductive and deadly call of the feminine (with engulfment narrativised or emblematised through the mythological siren figure), this constructs the masculine as both embedded in the landscape and associated with an externalised viewing position constituted in the ambivalence of arousal, power, desire and fear toward the natural world and its feminine inhabitants. Lalyre's evocations of the Carteret coastline linger, as it were, in a space between mastery and letting go, between stimulation and fears/fantasies of submission to the natural. Carteret as a discreet physical geography forms the backdrop, not the core, of Lalyre's paintings. Yet, as symbolic terrain, Carteret becomes a suspended curio, a fantasist's blending of academic, Symbolist, and even Surrealist aesthetics, that stands in illuminating contrast to the more well-recognised and canonised preoccupations of the period.

Conclusion: Lalyre's legacy and topicality

What then, is the legacy for Carteret of Lalyre's presence and vision? In fact, there are few traces of his work in the contemporary context of the town. The stained-glass windows of the Church of Saint-Germain le Scot were destroyed in an Allied air raid in the summer of 1944. Château des Sirènes, though still visible (see Figure 16), is no longer owned by the artist's descendents, nor is it heritage listed or featured as a landmark in tourist guides.

Figure 16 - A view of Carteret Harbour. Le Château des Sirènes is the third house from the left on the hill (photo: May 2017, Benoit Raoulx)

Several of Lalyre's paintings are visible either in public locations – such as Carteret's town hall – or in private houses. There is limited interest in Lalyre's work by Carteret's current

local officials or by residents at large, and there is no single location where a selection of his paintings may be viewed. A small circle of connoisseurs collects his paintings and drawings — which are sometimes sold through auction. Lalyre's use in promoting the tourist aspects of Carteret is similarly scant. The few attempts to give the painter visibility include inaugurating a street with his name (although not the street where his house is located) and an exhibition presented in 2008 in the Musée Thomas Henry in nearby Cherbourg. An exhibition project in Courbevoie, near where he once lived in Paris, has also been mooted, but has not yet come to fruition.

The siren motif borrowed from classical myth has been connected to the making of the coastal tourism industry in the 19th and early 20th centuries in France and elsewhere and is now a common motif and place marker in tourist areas. However, as far as we have been able to ascertain, there is no local folklore that specifically connects *sirènes* to Carteret. Relevant folk tales refer to other figures haunting the seashore, such as ghosts, including Criard and Dame Caroline, which appear the writings of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. The name "Grotte des Sirènes" ('Sirens' Caves') occurs in tourist brochures from the 1920s and in the postcard reproduced as Figure 17 (below) but there is no evidence of such a toponym in the area prior to Lalyre's activities and/or the development of coastal tourism in the area and it is not currently known to refer to any specific location in the area.[9]

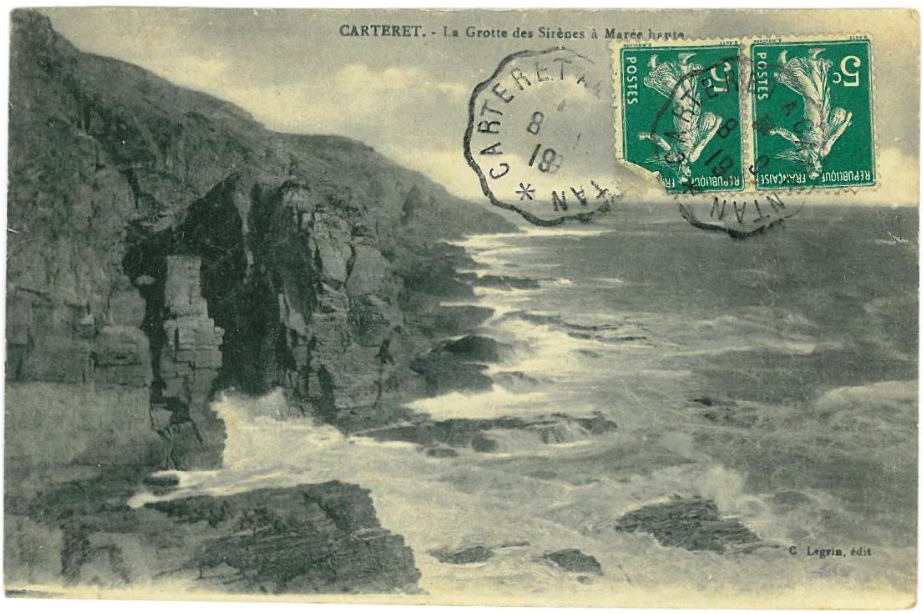

Figure 17 - Carteret postcard – 'La Grotte des Sirènes a Maree' (mid-1900s)

Lalyre understood his epoch's attraction to *sirènes* and mobilised the mainstream cultural and social imagination by depicting them in his paintings. The seashore became eroticised as a space of pleasures and fantasies. By combining *l'art pompier* with seaside appeal, he was

[9] By contrast, cave names like Grotte du Diable ('Devil's Cave'), which are mentioned in d'Aurevilly's novels, are older and do refer to the local folklore.

successful in catering for mainstream male bourgeois taste and earning a living as an artist. Ultimately, however, Lalyre's vision is not one that looms large in the town's touristic and commercial brand. The oblivion into which Lalyre has fallen is partially connected to Normandy's strong association with Impressionism. Normandy is regularly promoted as a tourist destination through exhibitions and cultural events displaying Impressionist painting, with several events taking place under the label 'Un été impressioniste' ('An Impressionist summer'). In this context, there is little space left for *l'art pompier* or for painters like Lalyre, who practiced a style that is now devalued. Furthermore, the western part of Normandy has not been a major destination for painters. The "geography of Impressionism" is concerned with the eastern part of the territory, which is more urban and closer to Paris: the mouth of the Seine River and its surroundings, including Honfleur, Le Havre, Étretat and the coast of the Pays de Caux and the city of Rouen. Ultimately, Carteret and Lalyre stand in the shadow of these prominent tourist locales and key representations framing Normandy through the lens of Impressionist landscapes and the more recognised (and demure) desires of the shore inspiring the contemporary collective imagination.

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