



Gaston Cervelli

Gaston Cervelli
(born in Compiègne in 1871)

Faust and Mephistopheles, 1908



Oil on canvas (not relined)

Signed and dated lower left: G. Cervelli 1908

Dimensions:

Canvas – 82.5 x 101 cm

Framed – 104 x 122.5 cm

This fiery and infernal depiction of Faust and Mephistopheles on horseback is the work of Gaston Cervelli, a French artist about whom little is known¹.

Gaston Cervelli



Very little is known about the life and artistic career of Gaston Jean Joseph Cervelli. He was born in Compiègne on September 7, 1874². Settled in Lyon³, he studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Lyon⁴. Married to Philippine Camille Dumoulin⁵, he had a son named Lucien in 1901, to whom he dedicated a sketchbook (*fig.1*).

These drawings, presented by the Somerset & Wood Fine Art gallery in Bradford on Avon, provide one of the rare insights into Cervelli's work and personality. They reveal a taste for caricature and the burlesque (*fig.2*). The works include pen drawings executed with a certain energy, as well as watercolors and charcoal sketches. While many of the compositions are original, one drawing is based on a Renaissance relief (*fig.3*). Another piece depicting soldiers from the First World War suggests that Cervelli may have participated in the conflict (*fig.4*).

The date of Gaston Cervelli's death is unknown, but records confirm that he was still alive in 1921⁶.

Faust and Mephistopheles

Our painting is the only known painted work by the artist that we have been able to locate. Painted in 1909, when Cervelli was 27 years old, it depicts Faust and Mephistopheles riding together through an infernal landscape. The composition is striking for its energy and gloomy detail. Yet, despite the dark subject, the work also conveys a certain degree of humor and

¹ Cervelli does not appear in the major artist dictionaries.

² **According to DUMAS.** Somerset & Wood Fine Art suggests he may have been born in 1875.

³ In 1921, he was living on **quai de Retz** (now **quai Jean Moulin**). His wife was then living in **Cannes**, which may imply the couple was divorced. This is based on an **archival document available on Geneanet**. According to Somerset & Wood Fine Art, a **Gaston Cervelli** was living in **Lyon in 1891** with a pharmacist named **Henri Deguilhem** and his wife **Appoline**.

⁴ According to DUMAS.

⁵ **Aida**, according to Somerset & Wood Fine Art

⁶ Based on an **archival document relating to Lucien Cervelli**, dated **1921**, available on **Geneanet**.

exaggeration, reminiscent of Cervelli's drawings. One might note the caricatured face of Mephistopheles, the fire-breathing nostrils of the horses, or the skeleton with outstretched arms in the foreground.

Cervelli's painting illustrates characters from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*, published in 1808. Inspired by a folk legend, this early 16th-century tragedy tells the story of a pact Faust makes with the devil—Mephistopheles—in exchange for the latter's help in fulfilling his desires. The scene shown is the moment when, after a vision of Marguerite dying, Faust and Mephistopheles gallop through the night to try to save her. Encountering a witches' sabbath—portrayed here more as Hell itself—Faust is terrified, while Mephisto, recognizable by his goatee and cap, remains unshaken, reassuring him.

This dramatic episode, which also inspired artists like Eugène Delacroix and Alphonse de Neuville (*fig.5*), as well as appearing in popular imagery (*fig.6*), fits into the broader Romantic taste of the 19th century for wild, supernatural rides. It calls to mind depictions of Death, Mazeppa, the Valkyries, or the ballad of Lenore (*fig.7*). The flaming horses may also allude to a work by Louis Cretey (*c.*1635–1713) depicting the prophet Elijah (*fig.8*), a painting that decorates the refectory of the former Abbey of Saint-Pierre in Lyon, which until 1936 housed the École des Beaux-Arts de Lyon attended by Gaston Cervelli.

Illustrations

In the text: Photograph of Gaston Cervelli, Bradford on Avon, Somerset & Wood Fine Art.



Fig.1 : Gaston Cervelli,
Sketchbook, Bradford on Avon,
Somerset & Wood Fine Art.



Fig.2 : Gaston Cervelli, Drawings, Bradford on Avon, Somerset & Wood Fine Art



Fig.3 : Gaston Cervelli, Drawing, Bradford on Avon, Somerset & Wood Fine Art.



Fig.4 : **Gaston Cervelli**, *Territorials: When One Felt Down*, 1914–18, Bradford on Avon, Somerset & Wood Fine Art.



Fig.5 : **Eugène Delacroix**, *Faust and Mephistopheles Galloping Through the Witches' Sabbath Night*, 1827, lithograph, Paris, BnF (Bibliothèque nationale de France).



Fig.5 bis : **Alphonse de Neuville**, *Faust and Mephistopheles*, published in *L'Illustration européenne*, 1871.



Fig.6 :
Chromo
Liebig.

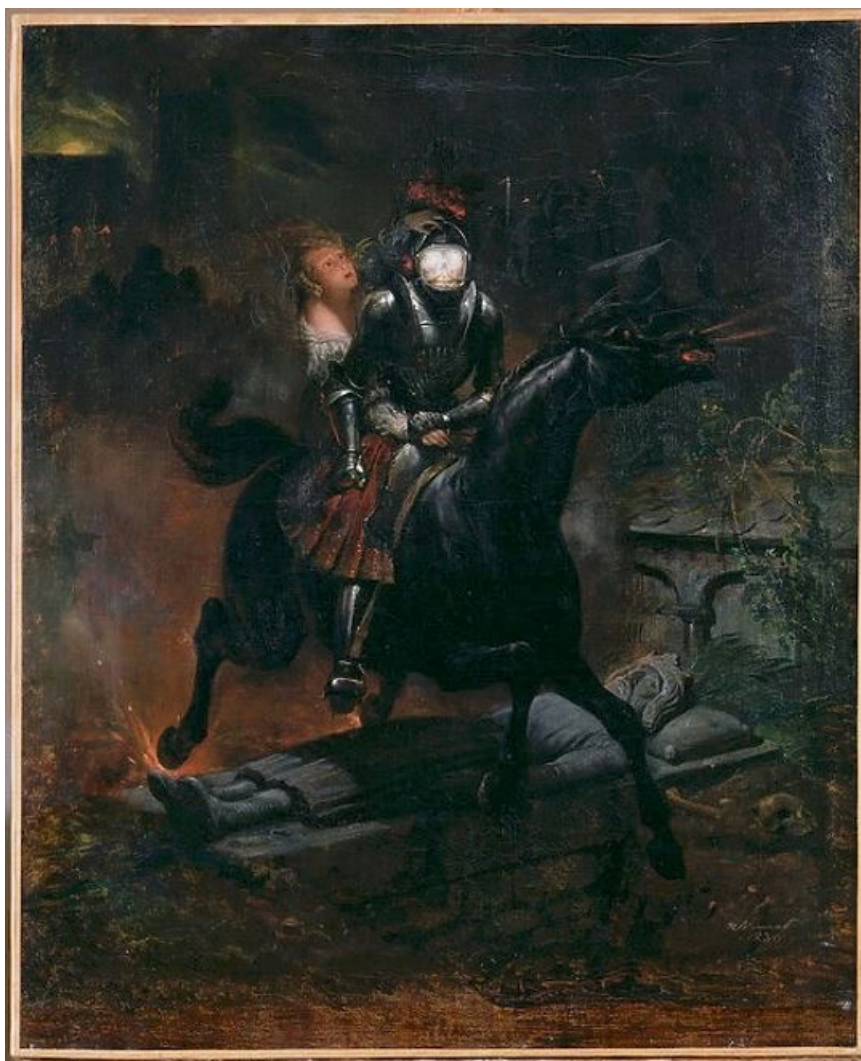


Fig.7 : Horace Vernet,
The Ballad of Lenore,
1839, Nantes, Musée
d'Arts.



Fig.8 : **Louis Cretey**, *The Prophet Elijah*, Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

Resources used

DUMAS (Dominique), *Les élèves de l'École nationale des Beaux-Arts de Lyon*, Index nominatif des registres d'inscription de l'école – 2210W/12-25, Lyon, Archives municipales, 2022.

Somerset & Wood Fine Art (somerseandwood.com).

Geneanet.

Iconography

Faust and Mephistopheles Galloping Through the Witches' Sabbath Night, in: BNF: Les Essentiels (essentiels.bnf.fr).

École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Lyon / Faust. Une tragédie, in: Wikipedia.



Galerie Uzal