

THE DON QUIXOTE OF BOHUSLAV REYNEK THE 1960 GRENOBLE ALBUM

*I found Jean Damien's exciting article about Don Quixote in the December 1959 issue of Pages libres. I've loved the Knight-Errant for decades and I've been working on a set of prints devoted to him for nearly ten years.*¹

I – In the beginning

In 1959, Grenoble bookseller Jean Damien wrote *Immortalité de Don Quichotte*² to mark the republishing of *Our Lord Don Quixote: The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*, Miguel de Unamuno's luminous exegesis of Cervantes' novel.³ ① Reading the article gave Bohuslav Reynek the idea of publishing his series of works about the Knight-Errant in France. This long-distance encounter “on the roads of La Mancha” led to the French album *Don Quichotte* and the Czech cycle *Don Quijote*.



①

The story of Alonso Quichano had long inhabited Reynek, who dreamed of Old Castile with its arid lands and fragrant spices, an atavism left to the engraver by distant Spanish ancestors who probably settled in Bohemia during the Seven Years' War. Several early works on the life of Don Quixote—a monotype drypoint⁴ from the second half of the 1940s and three recently discovered small glass prints (1952)—punctuated his quest. In 1954, Reynek revealed his inspiration in a set of engravings paying tribute to Cervantes' famous character: “a small testament, but not yet the last word,” he wrote to a friend on October 16 of that year.⁵

Reynek's correspondence with his friends in France is precious for tracing the genesis of what would become the French album *Don Quichotte* and establishing the timeline of his dreamed-of writing project.

¹ Letter from B. Reynek, January 23, 1960

² J. Damien: *Immortalité de Don Quichotte* in *Pages Libres des Écrivains dauphinois*, no. 63, December 1959, p. 13

³ Miguel de Unamuno: *La Vie de Don Quichotte et Sancho Pança*. Paris, Albin Michel, 1959

⁴ Sold in Prague on September 26, 2004. Catalogue raisonné A. Auzimour: *Don Quichotte au papillon/Don Quijote s motýlem*.

⁵ Based on this correspondence, the start of the cycle's conception can be advanced to 1954 instead of 1955, as indicated in previous inventories. It is worth recalling that 1955 marked the 350th anniversary of the publication of Cervantes' book.

By January 1960, Reynek had already made a series of about fifteen prints on the theme when he noticed the article by Damien, an avid reader of Cervantes. The engraver and poet of short, quiet verses and the bookseller, whose reading notes were without complacency, clearly shared a common vision of the hero, a poor *hidalgo* whose “story is none other than the drama of man in the presence of death.” It took at least a year for the slumbering plates to come to life in a fourteen-print album devoted to the Knight of the Sad Countenance.

Reynek enclosed three trial proofs in his January letter. Damien agreed to publish them as soon as they reached him. But there had long been a shortage of printing paper in post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia, so “around twenty sheets of good paper that swell in water (glueless paper)” was sent from France to Petrkov. As soon as he received the precious material—Japanese paper—Reynek printed thirteen *etchings*, in the artist’s words⁶, on his press. He sent them to Damien in April.

In June, Reynek “prepared another small print that, for the collection as it is, would serve as a ‘false title’” analogous to the frontispiece of *Job*, a collection of ten drypoints completed in 1950. To make them, he reused an old plate featuring a landscape with a wide-open sky and added Don Quixote’s silhouette on a proudly prancing Rocinante.⁷ Similarly, Reynek made the album’s last print by adding Don Quixote’s hearse to a plate showing the church of Svatý Kříž in a snowy landscape.⁸ The winter landscape was thus enlivened to create the plate *The Burial/Pohřeb*. Reynek would often go back over his work, amending and completing his etchings with drypoint, which explains the existence of several states of the same plate. It must also be kept in mind that he was dependent on the availability of the materials necessary to make the prints—plates, paper and ink—which could be lacking in his country for long periods of time. These shortages prompted him to reuse plates or to use certain metals for domestic use.

The *Don Quixote* prints were finished during the summer and exhibited at a show that opened at Damien’s bookstore on rue Montorge in Grenoble on November 7, 1960. They had a prominent place among a selection of other engravings by Reynek, accompanied by manuscripts and collections of his French wife, the poet Suzanne Renaud. The press announced an edition of twenty-five copies (the most that the plates could bear), which were probably offered as a subscription. Nevertheless, the project did not see the light of day. The only Don Quixote collection printed that year was bought by a collector. Five years later in Brno, the Czech public could admire the *Don Quijote* series in its final version.

⁶ Reynek commonly used the term *etching* for prints in general. It is what he called his earliest drypoints in the early 1930s.

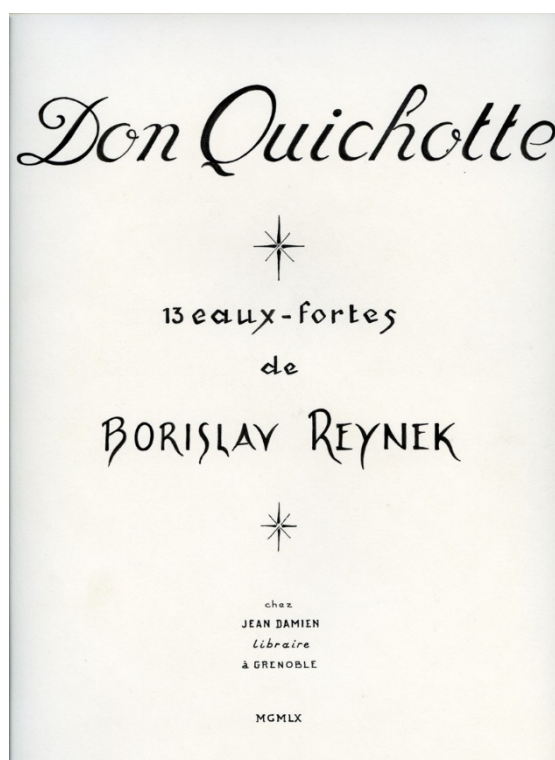
⁷ Catalogue raisonné A. Auzimour: *Two Magpies/Dvě straky* (Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble).

⁸ Catalogue raisonné A. Auzimour: *Winter/Zima* (private collection, France).

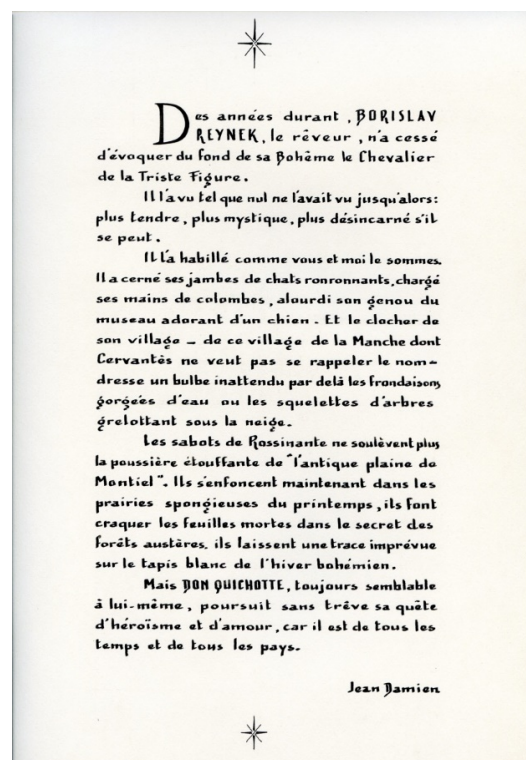
II – The composition of the Grenoble *Don Quichotte* album

Unknown in Czechoslovakia, where Reynek's work was never exhibited, the French *Don Quichotte* album has still not been described in detail.

The engravings selected by Reynek are in a portfolio with a title page ② and a short preface in French by Damien ③—a few lines that Reynek appreciated despite the misspelling of his first name as Borislav instead of Bohuslav, which could not be corrected in time. The term “etching”, used by Reynek himself, appears on Damien's title page. However, most of the *Don Quichotte* prints were made using the drypoint technique.



②



③

Each plate is signed “Reynek” in the lower right-hand corner under the line and, except for the frontispiece, bears the inscription “not in print” in the artist's hand on the left.

As Reynek advised Damien in a letter dated April 23, 1960, the fourteen compiled plates were slipped into white cardboard passes-partout after reaching Grenoble. “This keeps them safe and highlights the contrasts between blacks and whites, softened by the Japan paper's transparency,” he wrote. The passes-partout are numbered 1 to 13 in the lower right-hand corner; the one with the frontispiece is not. The engravings were not titled.



④

Reynek made his Don Quixote prints over a long period of time. The quest for stylistic unity while putting them together into a coherent series probably guided his choice of works. Thus, it is fair to assume

that the fifteen engravings mentioned above also included *Don Quixote at Night/Don Quijote v noci* and *Don Quixote and Rocinante/Don Quijote a Rosinanta*.⁹ Yet neither they nor the cycle as it is currently known in the Czech Republic since being exhibited in Brno in 1965 appear in the Grenoble album.¹⁰



⑤

A comparison between the album's prints ⑤ and the trial proofs sent in January 1960 ④ reveals the successive states of some plates and Reynek's continuous work before the final printing. States after the first album also appear on some proofs now in Czech galleries and museums.

A comparative table between the two series of engravings exhibited in 1960 and 1965, respectively, shows how their content changed. See below ⑧.

There is a notable difference between the composition of the Czech cycle and the Grenoble album. The print *Don Quixote and the Piglets / Don Quijote s prasaty* belongs to the complete series in the Czech Republic but does not appear in the French album. The reason for this is simple: the print was unfinished in 1960, perhaps not even created. It reached me five years later in a letter dated March 9, 1965, a month before the Brno exhibition. Several weeks earlier, Reynek asked friends in France to send him "good paper for printing (intaglio, glueless paper) and the color Le Franc sepia in tubes (also intaglio)," ¹¹ which suggests that he and his son Daniel were printing many engravings for the exhibition. There is a similarity between the sepia tint and the rendering in the stand-alone print *Don Quixote and the Piglets*, which came to France in Vltavou. The copy of *Don Quixote* that entered the gallery's collection in 1972 may therefore have been printed in 1965.

⁹ R. Bernardi inventory: *Don Quijote I* and *Don Quijote II*.

¹⁰ *Grafika Bohuslava Reynka* exhibition. Brno, Dům pánů z Kunštátu (kabinet grafiky), 02.04-02.05.1965. *Don Quijote s prasaty* was exhibited with the numeral 39.

¹¹ Letter from B. Reynek, February 8, 1965

Instead of *Don Quixote and the Piglets*, another print is in the French album, set in a passe-partout bearing the numeral 3: *The Knight-Errant* ⑥ pensively holding an animal



in the palm of his hand that appears to be whispering into his ear. Is it a cat, a porcupine, a little monkey or a squirrel? The only way to identify it is by stepping into Reynek's inspired world. Did Master Pierre's monkey have a little brother squirrel in Petrkov who jumped out of a tree in the park and into Reynek's hand? The tall trees in Petrkov's garden are home to many squirrels. A photograph by Daniel Reynek shows one nestling in a dish, its tail coiled around a bed of hazelnuts. The *Knight-Errant* print clearly stands out from the others by the way the figure is handled: the face is the main motif, while the scenes depicted in all of the album's other prints have a wider composition enhanced by a decor in the background.

⑥

The album's print number 3 was known only in France, where it was exhibited on several occasions. There is an explanation for this. A later print with the same format, *Don Quixote at Toboso*,¹² ⑦ has features from an older motif in the foreground: the hand, white collar, etc. A study of both engravings reveals that the same plate was reused to create a new subject, a variant of which is in the Pardubice gallery bearing the inscription "Toboso 1970" on the back. The red Dulcinea "is a very old memory (just Dulcinea, but it is a lot). You know her. You brought her chocolate one day in September 1963, when, after a long period of madness, she was sweeping the corridors of a castle that had become an old people's home," Reynek wrote to me on May 12, 1971.



⑦

¹² R. Bernardi inventory: *Don Quijote III*

III – Hidalgo and Blázen

*Blázen jsem ve své vsi,
znají mne smutní psi,
bílí psi ospalí,
plynoucí do dáli,
žádný z nich neštěká:
těší mne zdaleka,
jsou to psi oblaka,
běží a nekvílí.*

*Je suis le fou du hameau,
ils le savent les tristes cabots,
les chiens blancs et sommeillants,
qui voyagent au très loin,
aucun d'eux ne crie de rage:
ils me consolent de lointains parages,
ce sont les chiens-nuages,
ils courent sans un cri.¹³*

Like the rest of his graphic work, Reynek's images on the theme of Don Quixote reflect his familiar setting: the palisade gate at the entrance, the chickens pecking at the side of the dung heap on the west side of the yard, the onion-domed bell tower of the church in Svatý Kříž, etc. It should come as no surprise, then, that he captured a glimpse of Don Quixote lost in the snowy fields behind the fence of Petrkov's garden in a powerful, intimate vision.

But there is more to it than the merger of Bohemian and Castilian landscapes. The shepherd-poet of the Moravian highlands—the "hamlet madman"—and the Knight of the Sad Countenance share the same awareness of their destiny. Neither "accepts being among those who measure [their limits] so cautiously that they cannot undertake anything great."¹⁴ The adventures of the good, righteous and pious Knight acquire a deep, quasi-Biblical meaning and lend themselves to seizing "a metaphysics that will not suit the mediocre, an ethics that will repel cowards," Damien wrote in 1960. Some will recognize their friend from Petrkov, whose immense work was accomplished in self-imposed solitude, far from the world, far from the "tepid" in the sense of the Apocalypse.

"Those who love D. Q. always hope and have no fear of chimeras," Reynek wrote shortly before a windfall of Japanese paper allowed him to reap a harvest of prints for the Grenoble exhibition in November 1960.

Fortunately, Reynek's very beautiful *Don Quixote* was not just a chimera.

Annick Auzimour
in collaboration with
Nathalie Servonnat-Favier
March 31, 2012

¹³ B. Reynek: *Blázen/Je suis le fou...*, translated by Frère Élie in *Měsíc a jíní-La Lune et le givre*, Grenoble, Romarin & Literární čajovna Suzanne Renaud, 2004

¹⁴ Cf. op cit, note 2

Illustrations in the text

- ① Cover of M. de Unamuno's book, *La Vie de Don Quichotte et de Sancho Pança*, [Our Lord Don Quixote: The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho], Albin Michel, 1959.
 - ② *Don Quixote* album, 1960, title page
 - ③ *Don Quixote* album, 1960, J. Damien, preface
 - ④ B. Reynek: *The Departure*, first state, trial proof (private collection, Denmark)
 - ⑤ B. Reynek: *The Departure*, second state (private collection, France)
 - ⑥ B. Reynek: *The Knight-Errant* (private collection, France)
 - ⑦ B. Reynek: *Don Quixote at Toboso* (private collection, France)
- (Photographs: A. Auzimour archives. All rights reserved.)

⑧ Comparative table

Album 1960	Don Quijote Brno, 1965	Don Quixote/Don Quijote Catalogue raisonné A. Auzimour
	úvod (31)*	Frontispiece/titulní špička
1	Před odchodem (34)	Before the Expedition/Před výpravou
2	Doma (32)	At Home/Doma
3		The Knight-Errant/Potulný rytíř
4	Dulcinea (33)	Dulcinea of Toboso/Dulcinea z Tobosa
5	Odchod (35)	The Departure/Odjezd
6	Mlýny (36)	The Windmills/Větrné mlýny
7	V hospodě (37) ¹⁵	At the Inn/V hospodě
8	Loutkové divadlo (38)	The Puppet Show/Loutkové divadlo
	Don Quijote s prasaty (39)	Don Quixote and the Hogs/Don Quijote s prasaty
9	Stoupa (40)	The Fulling Mill/Valchová stoupa
10	Návrat (41)	The Homecoming/Návrat
11	Po návratu – rozbité zrcadlo (42)	After Returning/Po návratu
12	Před smrtí (43)	Before Death/Před smrtí
13	Pohřeb (44)	The Burial/Pohřeb

*Numbers in brackets indicate the number of the work in the exhibition *Grafika Bohuslava Reynka*. Brno, Dům pánů z Kunštátu (kabinet grafiky), 02.04-02.05.1965.

¹⁵ Previously exhibited in January 1957 (no. 90) at the Prague show *Nová grafika v Hollaru* [New Prints at Hollar's].