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“Mieux vaut goujat debout qu’empereur enterré !” : An Examination of the *Arts Incohérents* Movement and its place in French Artistic Canon

by Ashley Holt

Early one morning in 1882, Jules Lévy, a young journalist at the *Voltaire* newspaper, awoke in his Parisian flat with an idea: to put on an exhibition of drawings made by people who didn’t know how to draw. Many of his friends were on board with this wacky idea and within a couple of weeks they serendipitously managed to put together a show in Lévy’s tiny studio apartment that also served as his bedroom, kitchen, dining room and bathroom. Three years later, in a special edition of *Le Courrier Français*, he goes on to claim that this original show was not intended to cause a sensation. It was just a funny idea that he couldn’t get out of his head.¹ Thus, the *Art Incohérents* group was born.

If Lévy’s story sounds too farfetched to be true to modern readers, that’s because it quite simply was. It is not happenstance that *Le Courrier Français* accompanied the mentioned account of the Incohérents’ creation with an image of Lévy as a puppet master (Fig. 1). From the very first appearance of the Arts Incohérents, Jules Lévy proved himself to be someone with his finger on the pulse of both popular culture and politics. Helmed by this masterful manipulator of the press, it is not surprising that the group was wildly successful during its first four years in Paris. Their expositions and balls were, in fact, arguably better received than those of the Impressionists and

¹ Jules Lévy, “L’Incohérence: Son origine – son histoire – son avenir,” *Le Courrier français*, March 12, 1885, 3-4.

many other of their contemporaries. So why then, if they had both media support and the public's attention, is it that the names Jules Lévy and Arts Incohérents are so little-known to modern audiences? Why aren't they being included in the canon of "consecrated" art movements of the nineteenth century taught by Art History programs? There are no easy answers to these questions. However, one can better grasp the scope of both the impact and subsequent censorship of the Incohérents by examining the media portrayal of their fearless leader and "emperor" Jules Lévy, their artistic output, and the political climate of *fin-de-siècle* Paris.²



Figure 1 Jules Rainaud, *Jules Lévy as puppet master*, 1885. Newspaper illustration. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

L'Empereur des Incohérents: Fumisme and "con" artistry

One of many unanswered questions about the Incohérents that deserves investigation is: Why would a journalist found an art movement? Perhaps as could be expected for the times, Jules Lévy's journalistic pedigree was rather bohemian and thus intrinsically tied to Paris' young artistic community.

² Émile Goudeau, *Dix ans de bohème*, (Paris: La Librairie illustrée). 190.

According to Émile Goudeau, founder of the Latin Quarter literary club *Les Hydropathes* and future Incohérent, Lévy was a member of their group as well as a student of the *Conservatoire*, Paris' college of music and dance.³ After *Les Hydropathes* dissolved, he became a member of the even shorter-lived group *Les Hirsutes*. These *Rive gauche* groups and others like *Les Jemenfouistes*, *Les Décadents* were well-known at the time for their irreverential and satirical publications and performances. In his memoirs Goudeau takes credit for the creation of the concept of *fumisme*, a system of creating misanthropic hoaxes and pessimistic satire used to expose hypocrites and humble the pompous.

J'avais conçu le *fumisme*, une sorte de dédain de tout, de mépris en dedans pour les êtres et les choses, qui se traduisait au dehors par d'innombrables charges, farces et *fumisteries*... Ce fut une époque terrible et joyeuse.⁴

I had conceived *fumisme*, a sort of disdain of everything, of hate within for beings and things, that was translated on the exterior by innumerable charges, jokes and *fumisteries* [hoaxes].... It was a terrible and joyous time.

As the bohemian youth transitioned to gathering at clubs on the *Rive droite* like the *Chat noir*, Lévy adapted with the times but still kept the *fumiste* spirit alive and well in his work as editor and contributor to the *Chat noir's* newspaper and later in his one act plays and 1928 anthology of the *Hydropathes'* work.

With this in mind, Lévy's story of the Incohérents' genesis merits further investigation. The moment that he is awakened by the sunbeam with the idea of the Art Incohérents exposition already in mind almost directly echoed scenes from Henry Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* in which a young bohemian artist's eyes are opened, literally and metaphorically, by a sunbeam.⁵

³ Émile Goudeau, *Dix ans de bohème*, (Paris: La Librairie illustré). 189-190.

⁴ Goudeau, *Dix ans de bohème*, 95.

⁵A collection of short stories about young bohemians set in Paris' Latin Quarter. *La vie de bohème* was originally published independently by Murger in serialized form in the literary review *Le Corsaire*.

Taken as an isolated example, this does not signify much. Murger's text was extremely popular amongst the younger set⁶ and the bohemian lifestyle was, in general, romanticized. However, coming from the mouth of a journalist and fumiste, this proved to be a media-friendly smokescreen for the group's true aspirations. Lévy emphatically highlighted said incoherent aspirations in an 1886 letter addressed to the *Chat noir* newspaper in which he states: "*Nous ne faisons point de l'Art, ceci est une chose parfaitement entendue, et jamais nous n'avons voulu en faire.*" [*We aren't making any Art, this is perfectly understood, and never have we [ever] wanted to make any.*]⁷

As their leader had professed that the Incohérents were not interested in making art, one must dig a little deeper and analyze their actions in order to investigate some of the group's potential motivations for forming. The date of the Incohérents' first exposition, August 2, 1882, is an excellent place to start.⁸ While this date has often been conflated, not entirely erroneously, with its proximity to start of the Salon of 1882, it also happened to be the same day that the French parliament passed a new law pertaining to public morality. This law insured that all cases of offenses against morality, excepting those committed specifically through texts, became issues of common law.⁹ With the relatively fresh memory of the Second Empire's literary trials against such works as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Charles Baudelaire's¹⁰ *Les Fleurs du mal*, this new law better protected literature, for a time, by making it less likely that judicial authorities alone would rule on violations against public morality.

Henry Murger, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. (Paris: Librairie Garnier Frères, 1912), 2.

⁶ *La vie de bohème* inspired countless other works including Giovanni Puccini's famous opera *La Bohème*.

⁷ Jules Lévy, "Les Incohérents," *Le Chat noir*, Octobre 30, 1886, 793.

⁸ Corinne Taunay, "Incoherent arts and the practice of document (1882-1893)," *Sztuka I Dokumentacja* 20 (2019): 290-291.

⁹ Anne Urbain, "Le contrôle et la repression de la littérature licencieuse dans la France de l'entre-deux guerres," in *Les censures dans le monde: XIVe-XXIe siècle* (Rennes: Presse Universitaire de Rennes, 2016), 99-108.

¹⁰ Baudelaire's work is interestingly shown posthumously at the Incohérents' exposition of 1883, perhaps owing to his literary trial and or his friendship with Hydropathe and Incohérent Alphonse Allais.

As a lifelong member of literary groups, this law and, in fact, any political happenings regarding freedom of speech was something that a young writer like Jules Lévy could not ignore. However, it was not until 1883 that the Arts Incohérents group finds its true *raison d'être*: mocking the Salon de Paris. This was, of course, not a new occurrence by any stretch of the imagination. *Salons caricaturaux* and parodic vignettes of Salon expositions had already existed for decades in France. It could even be said that art criticism was something of a national pastime, much like people watching or the art of being a *flaneur*.

It just so happened that Lévy could not have found a better time to establish what was to be his anti-Salon, his art movement that preferred mocking the institution to making art. The year 1883 was only the second year in the Académie's storied history that there were two concurrent official Salons¹¹: the state-controlled Exposition Nationale Triennale, and the official Salon de Paris that had been turned over to the control of the artists themselves. Naturally, this state-run triennial exhibition took on a more conservative tone whereas the artists' Salon that year was treated as more or less a bazaar, or even a dumping ground, for everything else. This attempt by the Third Republic to create a new "official" Salon and to transform the old Salon into for "the rest" was seen as a clear attempt by the State to devalue art deemed as non-conservative, much like they had attacked revolutionary art and literature in the past.¹² The *Société libre des artistes* thus declared the triennale exhibitions to be "incompatibles avec les intérêts des artistes" and they formally expressed their desire that any such exhibitions be formally condemned.¹³ This was an opportunity rife for caricature for a politically engaged fumiste like Jules Lévy.

¹¹ Not to mention the second *Salon des Refusés* put on by the Impressionists

¹² Patricia Mainardi. "The Double Exhibition in Nineteenth-Century France," *Art Journal* Vol. 48, No. 1, 1989.

¹³ A. de L. "Les Artistes et le Salon Triennial," *La Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité*, March 18, 1882, 82.

Non-Art by non-artists

Although dubbed *les anarchists de l'art* by Jean-Léon Gérôme¹⁴ and heretical renegades by others, anarchy was not the Incohérents' professed goal. It was rather to explore *ennui*, and to attack the uniformity that birthed it. Lévy expounded on this in his 1885 article *L'Incohérence: Son origine – son histoire – son avenir* in *Le Courrier français*:

On fait maintenant profession d'ennui, l'ennui est à la mode et quoique l'*ennui naquit un jour de l'Uniformité*, l'Incohérence étant l'ennemie de l'uniformité, cela n'empêche point l'ennui d'être la *belle-mère* de l'Incohérence.

Nowadays one makes a profession out of ennui, ennui is in fashion and although *ennui was born one day from Uniformity*, Incoherence being the enemy of uniformity, that does not prevent at all the ennui of being the *stepmother* of Incoherence.¹⁵

According to Lévy, this *ennui* was the fault of intelligent and witty people who had abandoned the public sphere. His solution was to react. His *Incohérents* were thus a call to creative arms to Parisian intellectuals and comedians. “Le gaîté est le propre du Français, soyons Français, nom d'un petit bonhomme !!... Le ridicule envahit nos mœurs ; on paraît ridicule en costume, bravons le ridicule et costumons-nous !”¹⁶ [Gaity is characteristic of the French, let's be French, by god!!.. Ridicule invade our morals; we look ridiculous in a costume, let's brave ridicule and dress-up!]

By costuming the *Incohérents* as a satirical artistic movement, Lévy wrote that he hoped to rehabilitate the French spirit. “C'est pourquoi les Incohérents sont venus. Et, sans jamais être sales, ils font tout leur possible pour être gais.” [This is why the Incoherents have come. And, without ever being uncouth, they do everything possible to be gay.]¹⁷ The reason he chose to form an artistic, rather than another purely literary group, was likely that the Salon was one of the most well-known institutions of Paris and thus more or less constantly in the media's eye. They were

¹⁴ Jules Roques, “Comment on devient incohérent,” *Le Courrier français*, March 12, 1885, 2.

¹⁵ Jules Lévy, “L'Incohérence: Son origine – son histoire – son avenir,” *Le Courrier français*, March 12, 1885, 4.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Jules Lévy, “L'Incohérence,” 3.

also metaphorically low-hanging satirical fruit at this point in time. In keeping with their professed goal of mirth-making, a month before the second Arts Incohérents exposition opened (October 1883), the Incohérents posted thirteen articles fixing the terms and conditions of their new Salon. Many were essentially the same understood rules as those of the official Salon: the exposition will only be made-up of art work executed by the *exposants*, entries had to be framed, any transport fees were to be paid by the artists themselves, , etc... However, article six in particular stood out. “Toutes les œuvres seront admises, les œuvres obscènes ou sérieuses exceptées.” [All works will be admitted, with the exception of obscene or serious works.]¹⁸ In response to the Académie’s exhibitions that tended to bypass so-called radical art in favor of that of the *juste-milieu*, Lévy’s group turned their final honed satirical gaze to what they considered to be the pomposity and discriminatory adjudicatory practices of the Académie’s Salons.

In this vein, Lévy and his group committed themselves seriously to parodying the Salon in detail from 1883 until their eventual decline. They opened their anti-Salon at the same time as the original, they rented a public space, the Galerie Vivienne, created posters and illustrated newspaper announcements, and even bought or created their own frames and supports for their paintings, sculptures, and mixed-media art. Much like the Salon, the Incohérents welcomed the press and created a series of illustrated cards that ranged from invitations for private viewings, to cards for press service, to exhibitor’s cards. In keeping with their rules of avoiding creating an event that was too serious, they also created entry cards for Friday showings that were confined to artists who “competed with verve and with incoherence.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Jules Lévy, “Les Arts Incohérents,” *Lutèce* vol 2, no 84, September 7-14, 1883, 3.

¹⁹ Luce Abélès, “Naissance des Arts incohérents; une conjoncture favorable,” *Arts incohérents: académie du dérisoire*, 1992, 20.

While modeling themselves on the Salon, the Incohérents also created catalogues, with lists of *exposants* presented in alphabetical order, wherein each entry detailed the title of the work as well as the place of birth, address, and professor the artist had trained under. This set-up proved a wonderful excuse to slip in humorous nonsense, much like the credit reels of a Monty Python film. An excerpt from the catalogue of 1883 appeared as follows (Fig.2). In the years that followed (1884-1886), this catalogue, fortuitously or by design, was edited by the printers and editors E. Bernard and Cie who were the same people who put together the annual Salon's catalogue²⁰. It is thanks to them that the following year (1885) an advertisement for the *Catalogue illustré de l'exposition des Arts Incohérents* was inserted into the last page of the official Salon's booklet.

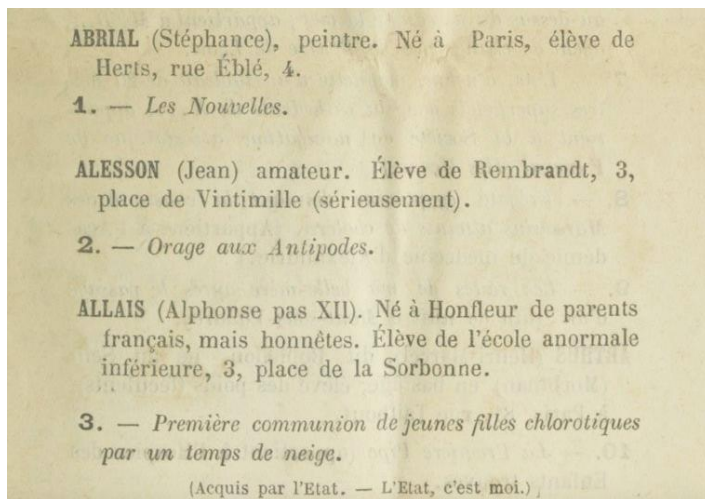
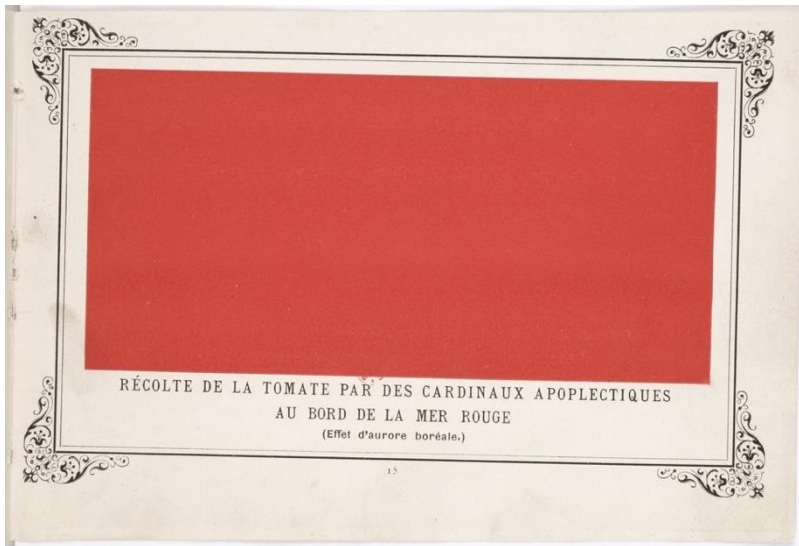


Figure 2 Jules Lévy (editor), *Excerpt from the Catalogue de l'Exposition des Arts Incohérents*, 1883. Print, Bibliothèque National de France, Paris.

By modeling themselves so closely on the Salon, but choosing to free themselves from the encumbering rules and classical training of the Académie, the art that the Incohérents created for their expositions was novel and inadvertently anticipated many genres of the early twentieth century such as: Monochrome painting, ready-made, assisted ready-made, collage, assemblage, installation, and eat art. With over a thousand pieces created by more than six hundred artists, there

²⁰ Luce Abélès, "Naissance des Arts incohérents; une conjoncture favorable," *Arts incohérents: académie du dérisoire*, 1992, 21.

are many examples of these anticipatory artworks to choose from: The writer and former *Hydropathe* Alphonse Allais created a monograph entitled *Album primo-avrilesque* in which he included a series of seven *monochroïdes* (monochrome) images with humorous titles (Fig. 3); Henri Gray, a writer, costumer and favorite illustrator of the *Folies Bergères*, illustrated for their



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

artworks are numerous.

newspaper pieces and sculpts a piece entitled *Les Pieds* out of gruyere cheese²¹; An anonymous artist enters “Bas-relief” a piece of *avant la lettre* assisted ready-made art that is a stocking nailed to a plank of wood (Fig. 4). The examples of creative, even ground-breaking, Incohérent

Figure 3 Alphonse Allais, *Récolte de la tomate par des Cardinaux apoplectiques au bord de la Mer rouge (Effet d'aurore boréale.)*, 1897. Woodblock print. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

²¹ Corinne Taunay, “Incoherent arts and the practice of document (1882-1893),” *Sztuka I Dokumentacja* 20 (2019): 290-291



Figure 4 Anonymous, *Bas-relief*, 1882, recreated in 1988.
Silk stocking nailed to wooden board, 120 x 30 cm.
Présence Panchounette collection, Bordeaux.

Not only did they create novelty in a city that hungered for it, but thanks to their eye for detail, and the press savvy Lévy, the Incohérents' early years were incredibly successful. Their month-long exhibition of 1883, they earned 6007 francs²² that they donated to France's *Assistance publique*, Paris' relatively newly established hospital system. The next year, owing perhaps to their increased notoriety and numbers of publications, they would earn even more (9010 francs 30 centimes).²³

However, part of the reason that their group has faded to obscurity over the years is that only about twelve out of their one thousand plus artworks still exist. As the Incohérents were not themselves serious artists by design, neither was their art made to last, nor was it regarded as serious art. The expositions themselves also began to spread out geographically. As the artwork and artists themselves spread across the cities of Paris, Nantes, Rouen, Bourgen-Bresse, Lille, Besançon, Nancy and Grenoble, the movement became more and more tenuous to hold together for its leadership. As such the final nail in the coffin, for the movement was in fact delivered by Jules Lévy himself.

Pre-war French Antisemitism

In 1886, Lévy announced in *Le Courrier français* that the group would no longer be hosting art exhibitions²⁴, even though members like Allais and Goudeau wanted to continue. This could

²² Jules Lévy, "L'Incohérence: Son origine – son histoire – son avenir," *Le Courrier français*, March 12, 1885, 4.

²³ Lévy, "L'Incohérence," 4.

²⁴ Lévy, 4.

have been for many reasons including, but not limited to, fear of the group becoming a redundant artistic fad or even because of financial difficulties tied to the group's expansion into other cities and their planned program of elaborate costumed balls that had started the previous year. Whatever the cause for Lévy's announcement, it immediately led to a fall-out between Lévy and his once friend Jules Roques, the editor of *Le Courrier français*. Within a month after they published their special praising Lévy and the *Incohérents*, Roques put out another issue condemning them and slandering Lévy for both his mismanaged leadership of the group and for being Jewish (Fig. 5). As a part of these anti-Semitic claims, he accuses Lévy of being money-grubbing and trying to turn a profit from his group, which is odd because the *Courrier français* had been gaining money from featuring the *Incohérents* for years. Furthermore, in a truly bizarre move, on page two of the paper, Roques even attempted to connect the act of putting on art exhibitions with that of being a good Christian and observing Lent.²⁵

²⁵ Jules Roques, "Chronique de la Semaine," *Le Courrier français illustré*, April 11 1886, 2.



Figure 5 Adolphe Willette, *Jules Lévy devenu fou!*, April 11, 1886. Print. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Naturally, Roques' anti-Semitism did not develop in a vacuum. While Paris' bohemian set and Montmartre itself has been often romanticized, and even mythologized over the years, it is important to realize that it was not as insulated from the political conflicts of the *Belle Époque* than some historians would have us believe²⁶. Like the rest of France, and much of Europe, there was an undercurrent of both xenophobia and anti-Semitism that had been developing since the Middle Ages. It

was a well-known fact that Lévy was Jewish, and, although they had been friends, Jules Roques and some of the *Incohérents* themselves had been publishing anti-Semitic work for years. In fact, the same month that *Le Courrier français* published their illustrated edition praising Lévy (March 1885), they also published a long virulently anti-Semitic poem by Émile Goudeau entitled *Israël à la Bourse* accompanied by one of Adolphe Willette's illustrations in which Israel, portrayed as an idolatrous golden-calf, was being guillotined (Fig. 6).

²⁶ Neil McWilliam, "Avant-Garde Anti-Modernism: Caricature and Cabaret Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Montmartre," *L'Art de la Caricature* (Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2011). 251-252.

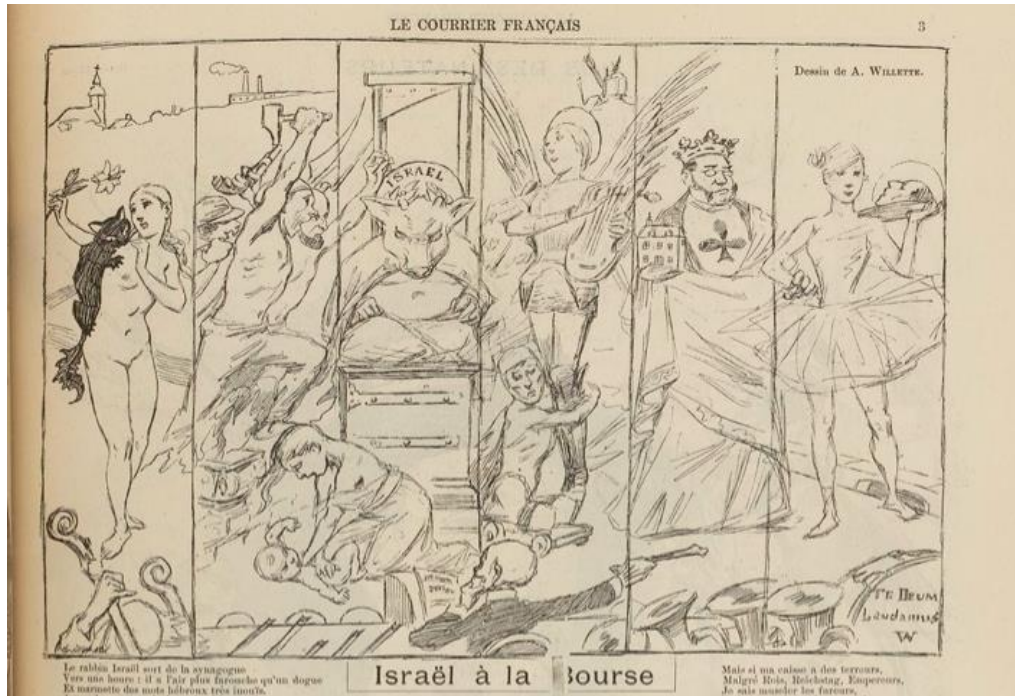


Figure 6 Adolphe Willete, *Israël à la Bourse*, 1886. Print.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

After the attacks by the *Courrier français*, the Arts Incohérents no longer sought to tie themselves to any newspaper in particular and they appeared to be trying to keep themselves afloat by becoming self-sufficient. Without the help of their once allies in the media, however, they eventually faded into obsolence after 1887, only briefly making a return in 1889 and 1893 to put on exhibitions when the World's Fair came to Paris: neither of which proved to be very successful. That being said, as they were a satirical organization, the Arts Incohérents was a group that was not designed to last. In 1883 after their second exhibition the art-critic Félix Fénon wrote, “[ils ne pouvaient] qu’échouer dans le rabâchage.” [[they could not] but fail in the rehashing [of

it]]²⁷ Without Lévy's tenacious and self-appointed leadership, there is little chance that the group, having been founded on the smoke and mirrors of *fumisme*, would have survived for long as it did.

Furthermore, because the fittingly nick-named *Empereur des Incohérents* was both forward-thinking and media-savvy, I argue that his call to end the group's exhibitions should not be seen as an act of defeat but rather as a prescient retreat into oblivion owing to the political climate of the times. Jules Rogues' anti-Semitic attack on Lévy was only a small manifestation of prevalent French anti-Semitism that would only increase in the following years with the commencement of Dreyfus Affair and the first World War. Even if he had disguised himself as a clown, Lévy was someone who was unwilling to be put on the ship of fools and cast out to sea or, better yet, to be made the scape-goat and be inevitably castigated and or made to atone for the sins of the group he created (Fig. 7)²⁸. As Goudeau wrote, "Mieux vaut goujat debout qu'empereur enterré!" [Better to be a standing prick than a buried emperor!]²⁹

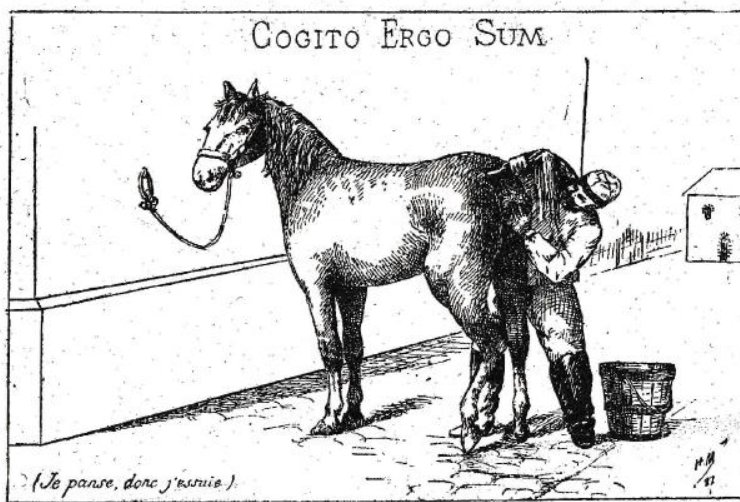


Figure 7 Henri-François Mène-Eau, *Cogito, ergo sum: (Je pense, donc j'essuie)*, 1887. Print. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

²⁷ Félix Féneon, "Les Arts Incohérents," *La Libre Revue*, November 1 1883, 69.

²⁸ This sentiment that you reap what you sow was a common theme of the later Incohérent works.

²⁹ Émile Goudeau, *Dix ans de bohème*, (Paris: La Librairie illustrée). 101.

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