

Charles Filiger, 1863-1928

An essay by Peter Brooke downloaded from <http://www.peterbrooke.org/art-and-religion/filiger/>



Charles Filiger as a young man in Paris, 1888

My main interest in painting is centred round Cubism - not particularly the Cubism of Picasso and Braque but the wider movement which I think goes far beyond what was done in the period just before the First World War. As an extension of this, I got interested in the Benedictine monk, Peter - or, using his monastic name, Desiderius - Lenz, who developed a geometrical-mathematical theory of pictorial construction in the nineteenth century in his monastery in Beuron, South Germany. Lenz's theories were introduced to France, shortly before Cubism appeared on the scene, by Paul Sérusier who was part of what might be described as a second circle of painters revolving round Paul Gauguin. They had little personal contact with Gauguin but were heavily influenced by him. As a result I got interested in Gauguin's immediate circle, and in particular noticed and liked the work of Charles Filiger.

More recently I got involved in a project of translating writings by Maurice Denis, a close associate of Sérusier's partly hoping to argue that Eastern Orthodox iconography had had a major influence on the beginnings of 'modern art' - the reaction against the highly developed academic realism of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately I was soon convinced that - though of course early Renaissance painting, especially the 'Italian primitives', had been very influential, and this style was in its own day greatly influenced by 'Byzantine' painting - the pioneers of 'modern art' in France in fact had very little direct knowledge of, or interest in, Eastern or Russian Orthodox iconography.

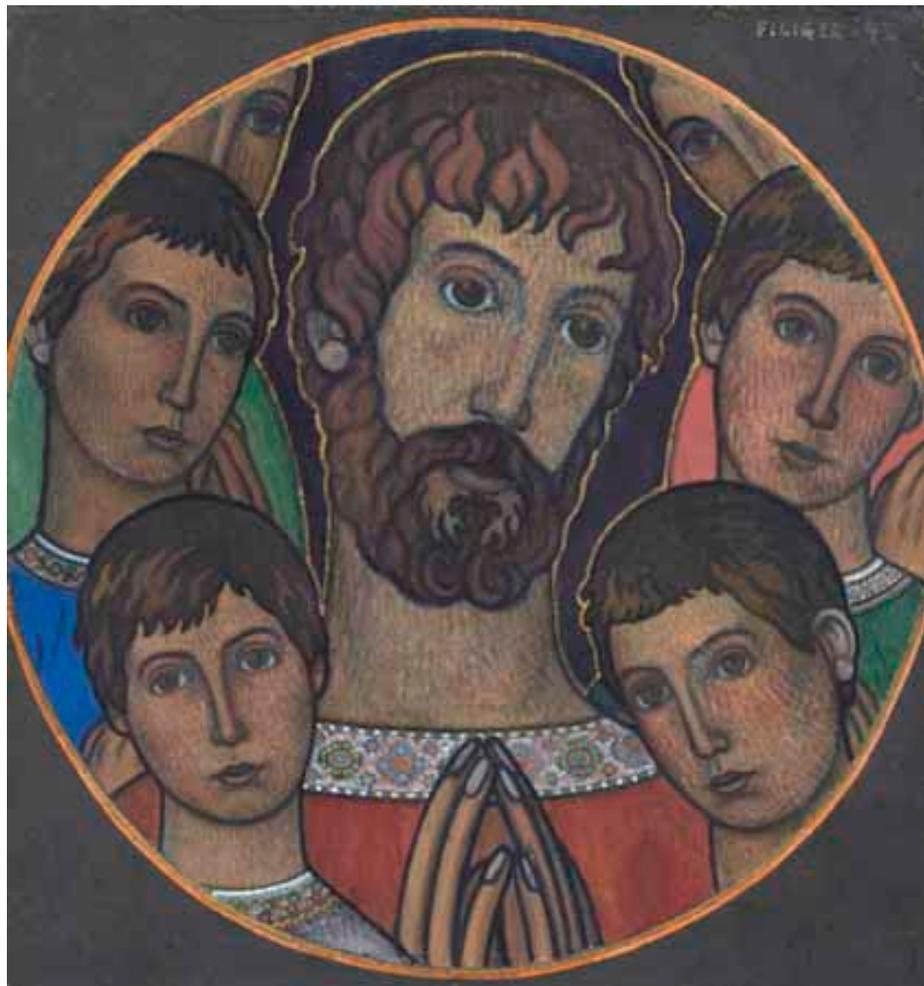
However, the painter whose work most resembled Orthodox iconography was Filiger, in the period when he was most closely associated with Gauguin and his circle. Most of Filiger's work throughout his life (his

later work, as we shall see, was very different - still very interesting but in a completely different way) was religious in inspiration and quite conventional in its subject matter. As in icon painting the people he shows are very still - he doesn't paint events or action of any sort. In the early paintings they look directly towards (though not exactly at) the viewer. Even the 'angels' and apparently subsidiary figures in the painting are looking out towards the viewer, not usually at the central figure, the saint, Christ or the Mother of God. They are, for the most part, boys, but they're not the silly little 'putti', or the self consciously beautiful adolescents of Renaissance or Baroque painting. They are very down to earth Breton peasant boys.

I say 'boys' and Filiger indeed had several models, but there is one particular face that recurs often, and this is important. The clue to Filiger's early painting I think comes in this comment by someone who knew him while he was living in Paris and studying to become a painter:

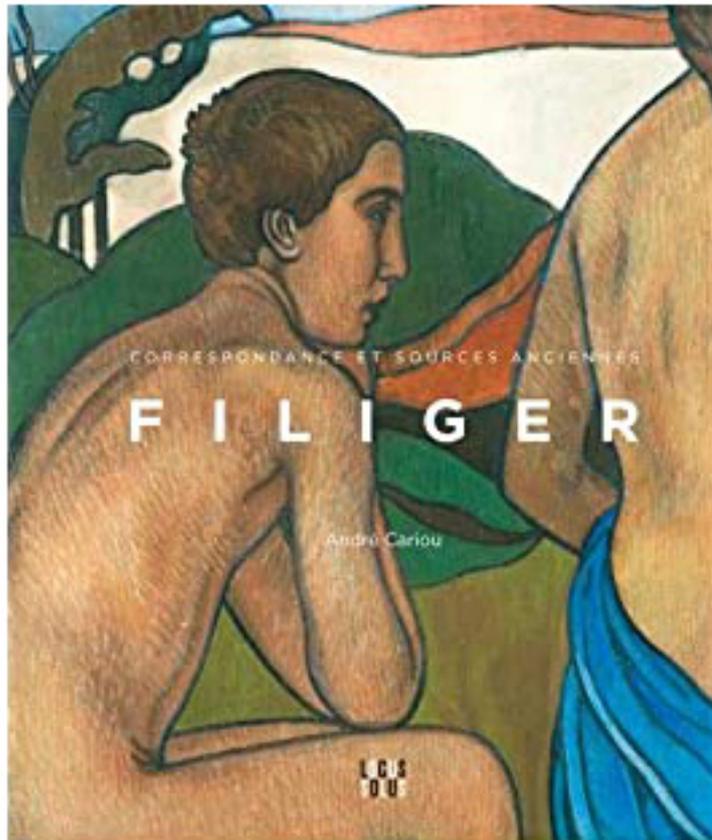
'We all knew in the Louvre that wonderful serene Virgin surrounded by angels by Cimabue. The angels, together with the Virgin, all resemble each other perfectly. We looked at it together, Filiger and myself. His eyes shining, he said to me "How Cimabue must have loved it, that head, to repeat it so many times and in such a way."





Charles Filiger: *Christ with Angels*, gouache on card, 27 x 25.5 cm, 1892

Although Filiger originally came from a comfortably off family in Alsace, he lived most of his life in poverty in Brittany, and André Cariou, former director of the Museum in Quimper, in Brittany, has put together an important collection of his work. Cariou has only recently published a major, well illustrated book - *Charles Filiger, Correspondance et sources anciennes*.



One of Filiger's correspondents was a Dutch painter called Jan Verkade. Verkade came from a family of Mennonites but like many people interested in painting or poetry in the late nineteenth century, he found himself strongly attracted to Roman Catholicism. He joined the Catholic Church in 1892 and in 1894 he became a monk, entering the monastery of Beuron to become a disciple of Father Desiderius.

Verkade wrote an autobiography - *Le Tourment de Dieu* - published in 1926 and in it he gives a description of Filiger under the fictional name Drathmann (Filiger was still alive in 1926 but living in near total obscurity and many of his earlier friends and colleagues thought he was dead). In Verkade's account, Filiger/Drathmann:

'was one of those unhappy beings who, sometimes, under the weight of heredity, cannot prevent themselves from doing what afterwards they regret deeply, reproaching themselves. More and more discontent and troubled over their weaknesses they end up taking vengeance on themselves and on society, giving themselves up to the worst excesses and seeking to drag along with themselves others to their fall, but this only contributes to their own suffering which grows continually. These are people who suffer terribly but in pure loss because their sense of their own dignity and their pride remain intact and often it is only in their last hour that, from the depths of their despair, they throw out to God that cry which, against all expectations, opens to them the doors of Heaven ... As they feel they lack strength they turn to drugs, to alcohol, to morphine, to opium because it is unbearable for them, after the exaltation they have experienced from the will to create, to feel so lacking in life, so poor in spirit. They want to feel life again and so they drink, shout, rage and quarrel ...'

This dramatic account seems to derive from a visit Verkade paid to Filiger shortly before he joined the Catholic Church, in the inn where Filiger was living, La Buvette de la Plage, in Le Pouldu. This was the

inn Gauguin stayed in and the walls were decorated with paintings by Gauguin and his friends. This 'Guardian Angel' was Filiger's contribution:



Charles Filiger: *Angel with garland*, gouache on plaster, 36x71cm, 1892

Verkade indicates that this visit was a last effort to find reasons for not joining the Catholic Church, reasons which Filiger was willing to provide. He says he went to visit 'Drathmann' without telling the priest whom he was consulting 'to once again pass eight days in Marie Poupée's Inn where there was always a good time to be had by everyone. "The desire to become a Catholic will surely end up going away", I said to myself.'

Drathmann's conversation seemed to be having the desired effect:

'For him, bourgeois and moral barriers didn't exist. He had only one concern - to create something beautiful. Drathmann's ideas tended, perhaps unknown to himself, to celebrate painting as a goddess, a goddess whom one thinks about day and night, for whom, at least from time to time, one will work to exhaustion, for whom one would be willing to die of hunger ...

'So, cigarette or pipe in my mouth, a bottle within reach, the stomach well satisfied and, most of the time, stretched out limply at length, my days passed very pleasantly [fort gaiement]. But something very serious nearly occurred. One day as we were plunged deep in conversation, temptation came upon us, but it was crude, it offended our aesthetic feelings, and that saved us ...'

We can, presumably, guess what the 'temptation' was. Much that has been written about Filiger assumes that he was homosexual and that this posed serious problems for him. For example, when, while he was still living in Paris, he was found lying in the street with knife wounds, was this the result of a homosexual encounter? or when, in the early twentieth century, he started moving from place to place, was he being chased away because of his homosexuality? But this rather indirect reference to a temptation successfully resisted is about as much as Cariou's book gives us by way of hard evidence. Beyond that there are frequent references in the correspondence to Filiger's 'vice', or his 'mal' (difficult to translate. In context 'evil' seems too strong. It could be 'illness'. I would like to say 'sin' - I haven't noticed much use of the word 'péché'.), usually presented by Filiger in terms that are as positive as they are negative, a necessity of his nature and a sort of springboard toward what he regards as the 'bien', the 'good', of his painting. Maybe he was referring to his sexual tastes but he could also have been referring to his

addictions. His dependence on alcohol and on drugs (mainly 'ether') is well attested and seems to have got worse as he got older.

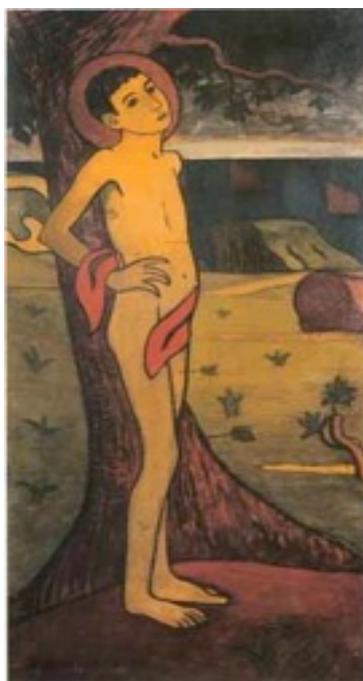
It seems very unlikely that he was a practising homosexual, or indeed that he had actual sexual relations with young boys. The very small tight knit and religiously conservative community of Le Pouldu was one in which keeping secrets would have been virtually impossible and in his correspondence as, increasingly, he withdrew from contact with other artists, he stresses his appreciation of the ordinary 'braves gens' of Le Pouldu. Like Cézanne his closest associates were people who usually don't get much of a mention in literary or artistic histories. Though it should be said that his liking for ordinary Bretons diminishes dramatically once he leaves Le Pouldu.

One of the very few references in the correspondence to his interest in young boys comes in his letters inviting Verkade to visit him. Referring to his painting *Christ with Angels* (reproduced above) he says:

'I have to tell you that this latest thing was made to the glory of a unique and very dear being - hence the intimate power of the work. My present poverty didn't allow me to do anything for the boy and the little model has gone off to the Mousses school in Brest, obedient to the wishes of his parents. I miss him but, what the hell, everything passes in this world, we have plenty of things to complain about during this life. And the memory remains - in the end - truer and more beautiful than the reality.'

Encouraging Verkade to visit he says: *'I'm sure you don't lack models where you are. You are in any case a charming enough boy to deserve everyones services. Since the kid's departure I often vary the heads I use and those whom I take - even the girls - do what I want them to, all willing to pose naked. When you come to Le Pouldu I will place all this little world at your disposition if that can be useful or agreeable for you ...'*

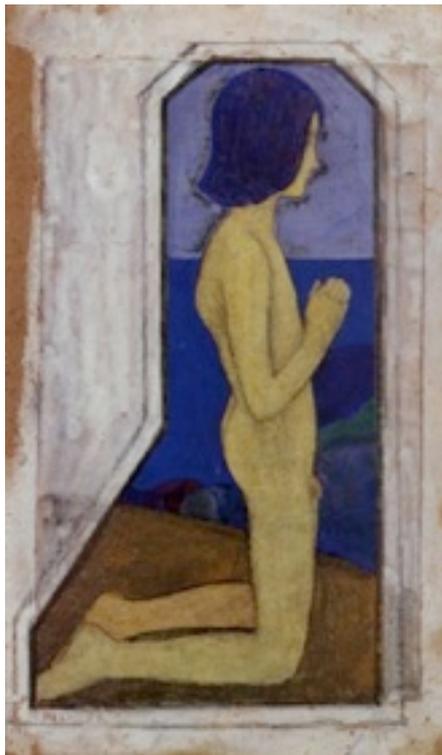
This painting by Verkade shows that he took advantage of the offer - he didn't spend all his time lounging about Filiger's room, smoking and drinking and resisting temptation ...



In another letter also written prior to Verkade's visit Filiger gives some idea of his feelings about the Catholic Church and its relation to his own painting:

'Religion is something beautiful and great, but the narrow and fanatical cult practised in the countryside - above all here in this mystical Brittany, still so savage - seems to me to belong more to barbaric tradition than to Christian love - the most beautiful thing in the world! The aim of these simpletons seems more to convert everyone to one single religion - their own - than to bring souls to the good [au bien] ... no father of a family in our day would want to have for his son a single one of those blessed men who remain the glory of the church - the Saints! Michelangelo didn't give a fig for the Pope - and he wasn't wrong, nor did he have any less religion for that. And Raphael? - it seems to me that he loved the beautiful Fornorina more than the holy Virgin, but there we can't complain: he loved something on this earth ... I see before me a little angel by Fra Angelico, this standing angel playing a musical instrument (do you remember?) and I find in it a passion that is more simply human than anything else - but the head and body are so beautiful that that becomes visibly religious. So I myself - little artist that I am - understand the most wonderful secret of the primitives, simply because I love it.'

I've quoted that at some length because I think it explains well what Filiger was trying to do. His earliest 'mystical' paintings are very ethereal and wishy washy. In my view they are almost completely without interest and don't in any way hint at what, very soon, he proved able to do. I think the change came when he met the 'unique and very dear being' he refers to in his letter to Verkade. He might have been the model for one of the early ethereal wishy washy paintings - a naked boy kneeling in prayer (Cariou gives an amusing account of what happened when the local priest, out for a stroll on the beach, came upon Filiger and his model in the course of doing this or a similar painting).



Charles Filiger: *Prayer*, gouache on paper and card, 13 x 8cm

The boy in question was called Joseph Pobla and I think there came a moment when Filiger realised that his actual fleshly existence was more holy, closer to his ideal of beauty, than the dematerialised 'spiritual' version. At the risk of getting carried away I think this is the message of Filiger's masterpiece of this period - his 'Last Judgment'.

Filiger had a patron, the Comte Antoine de la Rochefoucauld, who provided him with a small regular income and bought many of his paintings. Filiger met him, together with the writer and editor of the *Mercure de France*, Remy de Gourmont in 1891, during one of his increasingly rare visits to Paris. La Rochefoucauld was at the time a friend of 'Sâr' Péladan, founder (or he would say revive) in 1890 of the 'Ordre du Temple de la Rose+Croix'. In March 1892, with financial help from La Rochefoucauld, he held the first Salon de la Rose+Croix, proposing it as a revival of idealism in painting in opposition to the Academy and Impressionist (therefore realist) dominated official Salons. Filiger showed among other works his *Prayer*, *Christ with Angels* and *St John*.

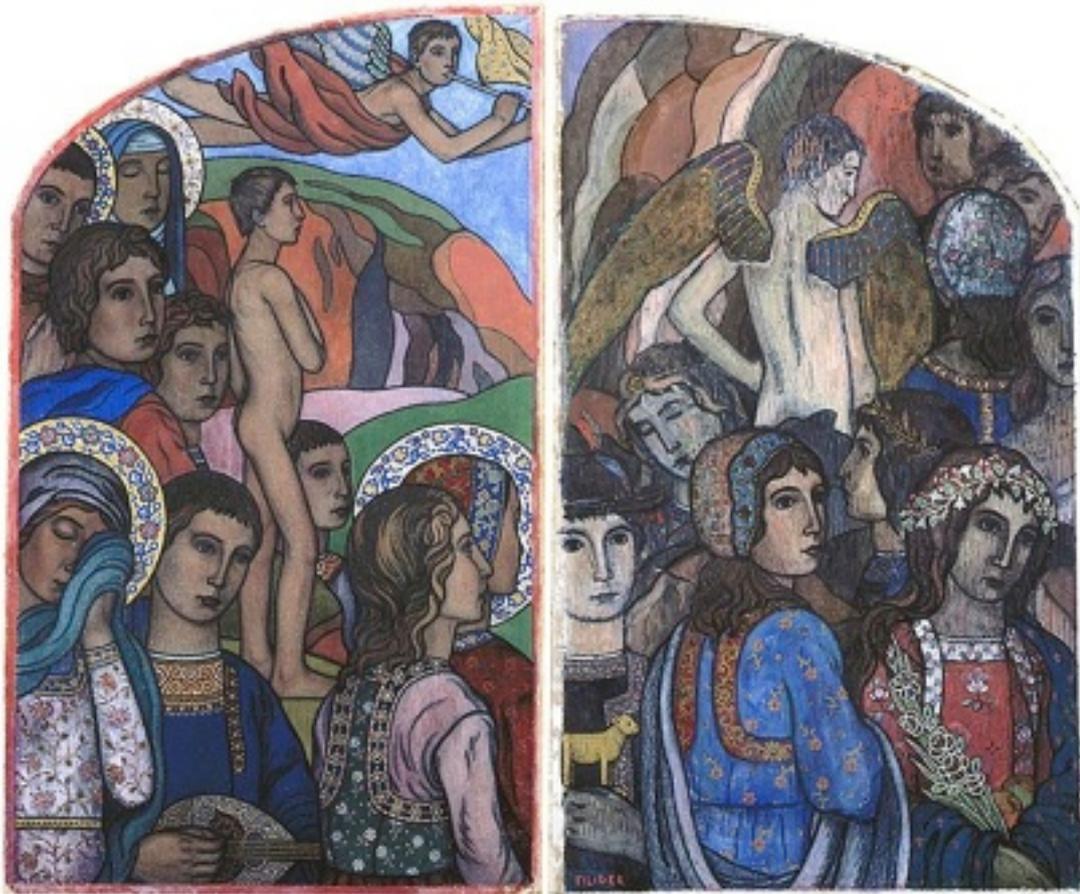


Charles Filiger: *Saint John the Baptist*, gouache on card, 1891-2

La Rochefoucauld and Péladan however, soon fell out and Filiger was at the centre of their quarrel. In an interview for the journal *Le Matin* published at the beginning of April, La Rochefoucauld explained: *'He [Péladan] doesn't understand Filiger, Bernard, Redon, he only likes finished things and doesn't acknowledge any flight towards the beyond [envolée vers l'au delà]. My own aesthetic is all to do with sensation ... When a work seizes you, you must stop looking for partial imperfections.'* Cariou incidentally tells us that Redon and Gauguin were the only contemporary painters for whom Filiger in his correspondence expressed admiration. Later in the month La Rochefoucauld said *'The disagreements between myself and Péladan had already begun when we were hanging the paintings and also considering them for inclusion. He held to the Florentines and I to the primitives. He didn't think much, for example, of the exquisite little paintings by Filiger which I love infinitely.'* La Rochefoucauld, originally appointed 'Archonte of the Fine Arts and Grand Prior of the Order', broke with Péladan and soon after started payment of Filiger's pension.

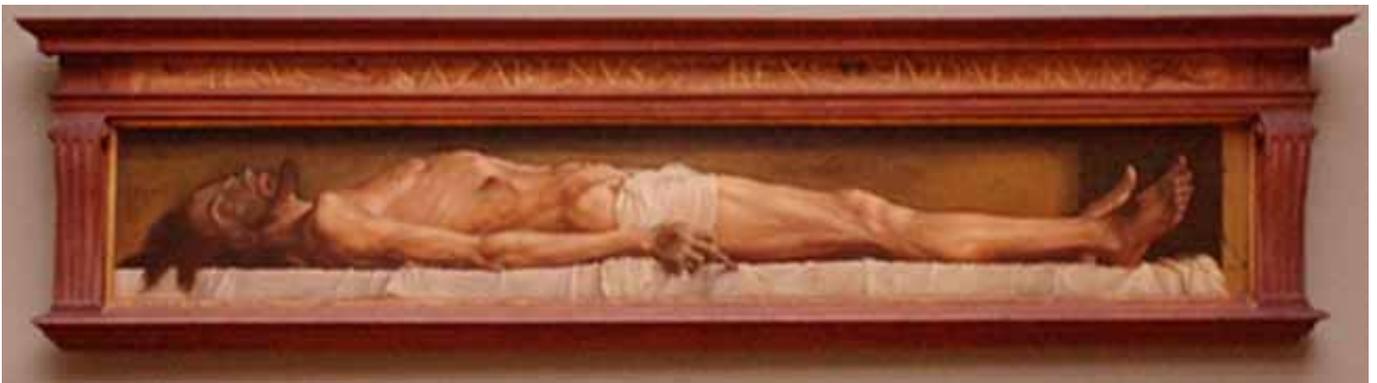
Filiger's letters to de la Rochefoucauld are full of apologies for his slowness in producing this *Last Judgment* which La Rochefoucauld had commissioned. In fact he worked on it for some seven years and never completed it. It was to consist of three panels - a large Christ, accompanied by two angels, in the centre (though 'large' is a relative term - all Filiger's paintings are very small), a panel to the left (to the Christ figure's right) showing the saved, and one to the right showing the damned. The two side panels were eventually completed but for some reason (it would be interesting to speculate why) he couldn't do the central panel. What is strange about the work is that there is no very obvious difference between the figures in the two panels. An array of beautiful faces, beautiful clothes and much the same expressions on the faces - Filiger's usual expression of slightly distracted solemnity. There is one woman who is weeping, but she is in the panel of the saved. The damned include a boy holding a toy lamb, a model, one would have thought, of innocence (he occupies the same place in the panel as the woman weeping in the panel of the saved and one could speculate that he is the cause of her grief).

The main difference I would see between the 'saved' and the 'damned' is that the saved are in full fleshly colour while the flesh of the damned is shown in washed out, greyish tints. One might be put in mind not of the eternal dramatic torments that are usually ascribed to 'Hell' but of something closer to the Greek concept of 'Hades'. The contrast seems to be between a full bodily humanity (Christianity teaches the 'resurrection of the body') and an incorporeal, one might say 'spiritual', phantom-like half life.

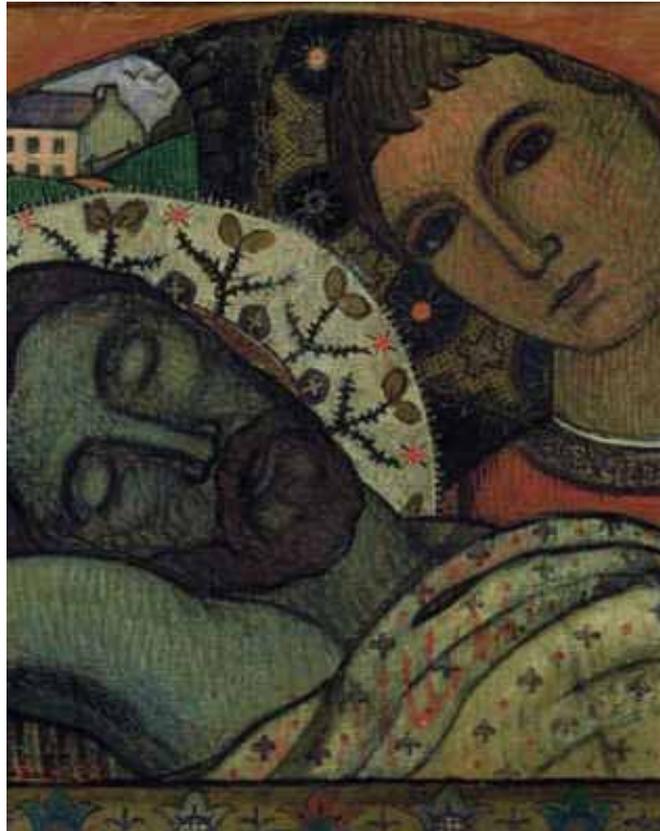


Charles Filiger: *The Last Judgement*, gouache on card, 42.2 x 26, 1891-8

I think something similar might be being said of another of Filiger's more well known paintings, his *Entombment*. Here the boy's face - still, I think, Joseph Poble - is placed next to the face of the dead Christ. I mentioned earlier that Filiger in his early days had been deeply affected by Cimabue's 'Virgin with Angels'. Another painting that had a big impact on him was Hans Holbein's terrifying 'Dead Christ' in the Art Museum in Bâle, Switzerland. The painting features in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* where it is presented as a symbol of everything that could be said in refutation of the teachings of Christianity.



Filiger's dead Christ is not terrifying but he is very dead. He has a colour similar to that of the damned in the Last Judgment (Christianity teaches that after the Crucifixion Christ 'descended into Hades'). The boy, on the other hand, is very much alive and has the full flesh colour of the panel of the saved.



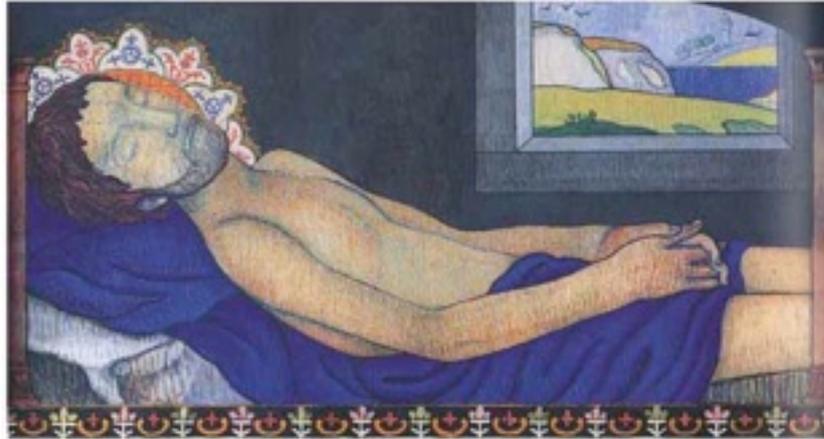
Charles Filiger: *Entombment*, Gouache on paper, 22 x 18.5 cm, 1894

I like this idea but I don't know if I can pursue it very far since there are other paintings in which figures one might have thought were living are shown in the greyer tints I've associated with the dead or the damned (or the spiritualised). For example this, in which there is little distinction between the dead Christ and the 'angels' (three Joseph Poblas) and mourning women.



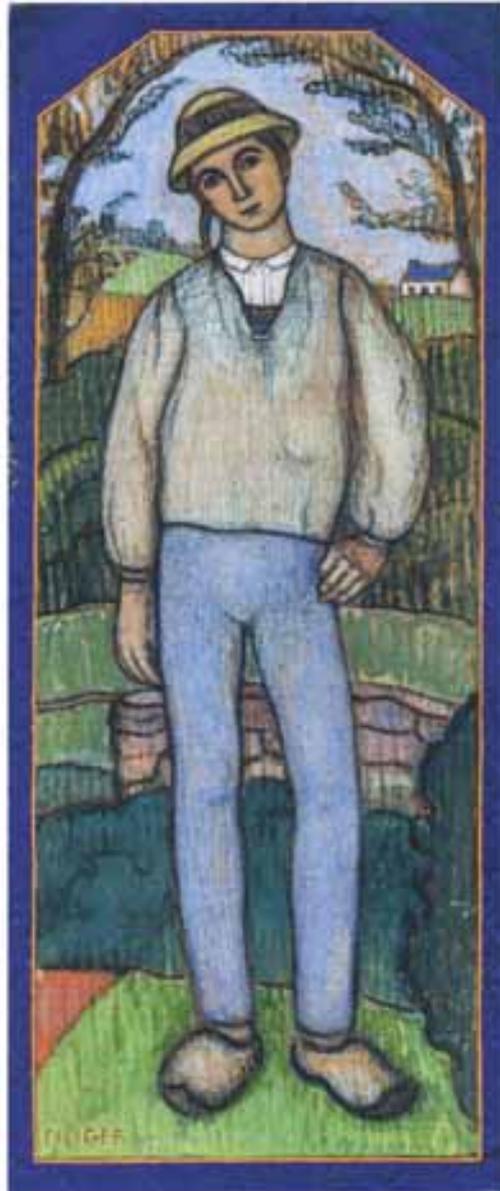
Charles Filiger: *Lamentation over the dead Christ*, gouache on card, 32.5 x 35 cm, 1895

There is even one 'Christ in the Tomb' in which the Christ figure appears to be alive and in fleshly colours - to the extent that Cariou comments: '*One doesn't know if Christ's death and suffering are more important than the desire felt for this half naked body.*' I don't read it like that at all. The main thing for me is that here Christ is sleeping peacefully and very much alive. It is the opposite vision to the vision of Holbein.



Charles Filiger: *Christ in the tomb*, gouache on card, 19 x 35, 1892-5

Filiger's career as a painter (laying stress on the word 'career') only lasted three or four years, from, say 1891 to 1895. After 1895 his output, never very great, declined dramatically. I think we can attribute this to Joseph Poble, the major source of his inspiration, growing older. This portrait of him was done (according to Cariou) in 1895 when he was thirteen (Cariou rather oddly says that they had met two years earlier, when he also suggests that Poble was the naked boy praying in the painting of 1891, when he was 9).



Charles Filiger: *Young Breton wearing clogs*, gouache on card, 39.5 x 16.5, 1895

There is a nice friendly letter from Filiger to Pobra, the only one we have, in 1901, when he was presumably 19 and had become a sailor. A *Virgin and Child* done according to Cariou after 1900 used a Renaissance painting by Angelo Bronzino for the boy's head but it lacks the power and conviction of the paintings that featured Pobra. Thereafter he abandoned this style of painting and seems to have sunk ever deeper into his alcoholism.



Charles Filiger: Virgin and Child, gouache and pencil on paper, 37.5 cm diameter, 1900-06

De la Rochefoucauld, quite understandably and with no bad feelings on either side, stopped his pension in 1900. However, Filiger's father had died in 1894. His brother Paul and sister Désirée seem to have decided even then that he couldn't be trusted with his part of the inheritance and got him to agree to receive it in the form of regular payments every three months. This eventually resulted in a long, anguished correspondence with Paul which makes for painful reading. He left Le Pouldu in 1901, beginning a long period of wandering from place to place, drunk and in poverty, staying in hotels but trying to find a care home ('hospice') or monastery that would be willing to take him in. Paul died in 1914 (apparently from suicide but Cariou tells us little about this) and Filiger's affairs were taken in hand by Désirée, who arranged for an innkeeper, Francine Le Guellec, in the Breton town of Tregunc, to provide him with food and lodging. When Désirée died shortly afterwards she divided her own inheritance between Charles and her niece, Paul's daughter, Anna, confirming the arrangement with the Le Guellecs. Filiger now had a certain level of security. The Le Guellec family moved in 1915 to the little town of Plougastel-Daoulas, taking Filiger with them as 'part of the furniture.'

During all this time he continued to paint, but his style changed radically and he refused to show his work or sell it except, it seems, when he needed money for drink. According to the Le Guellecs' son, Armand:

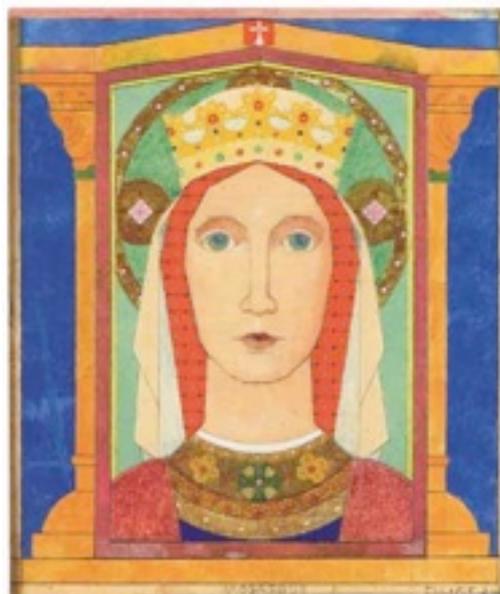
'If by chance an American client came to see Filiger and he sold one of his canvasses he never sobered up during the whole time that the money lasted and he gave great joy to the children of the village of Tregunc who fought each other for the loose change Filiger threw to them. I remember posing, dressed in a red sailor-fisherman's jumper with a red beret on my head. An American bought this portrait a few days later and the festival [la foire] lasted a good long time. There was one person who didn't enjoy this great circus, that was my mother who, I can assure you, was well able to bring him back to his senses.'

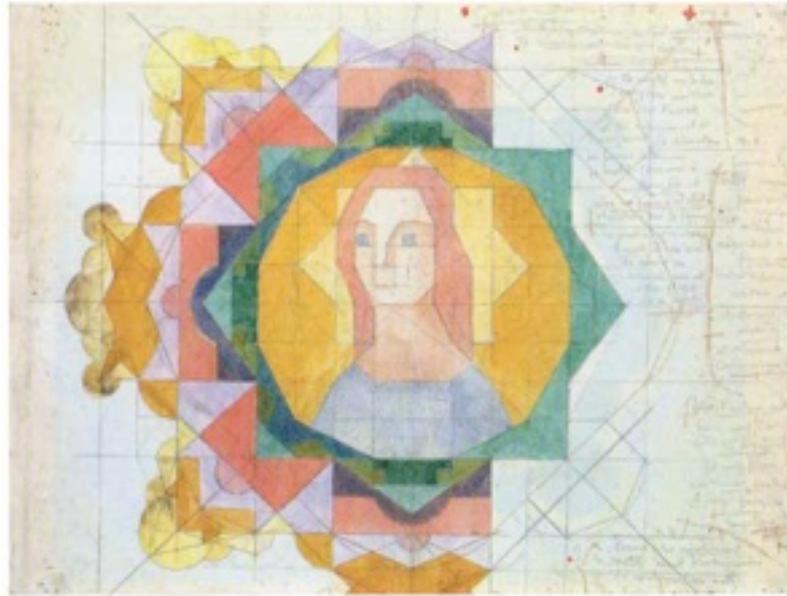
I don't know if this portrait of Armand Le Guellec still exists. Nothing like it from this period is reproduced in the book.

I think Armand is referring to the period in Tregunc. It seems that in Plougastel-Daoulas he closed himself up in his room, painting feverishly a series of very small watercolours, brightly coloured with complicated, precisely worked out geometrical patterns and numerous annotations commenting on what he was trying to do. A little girl, who sometimes brought him his food, was later to say: *'He hardly ever left his room ... He was always busy drawing or writing or, lying motionless on his bed, he stared at the emptiness of the ceiling. He had clear, terrifying, "demonic" eyes and a look of unbearable intensity that seemed to go right through you.'* A priest, Pierre Tuarze said on the basis of what he had been told: *'As he grew older he neglected the most elementary rules of hygiene and gave forth a nauseous smell, and the children kept as far away from him as possible.'* Armand Le Guellec said: *'Filiger couldn't abide the clergy or nuns, he shouted abuse at them on every possible occasion.'* There was, however, an exception, the abbé Henri Guillerm, a distinguished musicologist and collector of Breton folk songs with whom he had many long conversations and who either bought or was given a number of the late paintings.

Armand Le Guellec gives an interesting other side to this generally grim picture:

'He had his room with a sloped office desk on which he painted. When I was young I went in there many times to watch him. I never knew him doing anything other than studies for stained glass, [masculine] saints' heads, [feminine] saints, angels and geometry. Also lions' heads ... I stayed for whole hours next to his sloped desk, never tired of watching him manipulate ruler, compass, set square.'





These late works were discovered immediately after the war, in 1946, by the theorist of surrealism André Breton, at a time when, with Jean Dubuffet, he was beginning to celebrate what was called at the time 'art brut' - or more usually nowadays, 'outsider art.' They are as different as could be from the paintings of the 1890s inspired by the beauty of Joseph Pöhl. There is however one constant that binds them together. This savage old anticlerical drunk, in both his phases, produced some of the most serene, beautiful and gentle religious paintings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.