



CRIMSON PARADISE

In 1917, at the age of 27, Belgian artist Jean-Jacques Gailliard paints 'Crimson Paradise', a joyful and exuberant, almost monochrome red composition. A small tower can be detected in the top right corner on a canvas otherwise filled with trees, flowers and bushes. Jean-Jacques Gailliard (1890-1976) devoted his life to art, to spiritual and intellectual pursuits and to the city where he was born, Brussels.

In this early work, the artist draws on the numerous influences from his immediate environment. His father, an acknowledged artistic painter in the impressionist style, taught the young boy from an early age. One of his teachers at the Brussels Academy, Jean Delville, was a renowned symbolist artist with ties to France and the Idealist aesthetic. Both tutors were firmly anchored in the Fin de Siècle mentality with its inclination towards esotericism.

In contrast to the optimism of the Belle Époque as a result of progress, peace and prosperity, there was ever more uneasiness about the industrialization, rationalism and materialization of the world, starting with the Romantic movement during the first half of the 19th Century that sought escape in nature, a sentiment that became starker towards the end of the century with a desperate search for the spiritual side of life through religion, occultism and mysticism. The two world wars that followed confirmed this disenchantment and visions became increasingly macabre, absurd and cynical.

In 1912, Gailliard discovers the theological writings of the Swedish scientist, philosopher and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, beliefs he will adhere to for the rest of his life and that play a very important role in his art and its interpretation. He becomes a member of the General Church of the New Jerusalem and decorates its chapel in Brussels, inaugurated in 1915. During that same period, he paints Crimson Paradise.

Sébastien Clerbois in his article¹ on the true nature of Swedenborg's influence on the art of Gailliard, mentions a second painting, *Le Jardin Malade*, 1916, oil on canvas (private collection) that was originally exhibited as the second panel of a diptych with *Crimson Paradise*. Both works should thus be interpreted together. Both show stylized vegetation revealing a small building in the distance set in a landscape devoid of human presence. The artist refers to landscapes as portraits and this diptych presumably depicts the soul of a friend. It is not immediately clear how the titles were chosen but Gailliard's close friend, the well-known Belgian playwright and writer Michel de Ghelderode, uses again the concept of '*Le Jardin Malade*' 22 years later as the title of a

short story published in his collection 'Sortilèges' (1941), a macabre story about cruelty, death and destruction.

Crimson Paradise at first sight is a decorative work painted in bright color. In the forefront, one detects a path that, to the left, runs towards a dark opening between the trees, perhaps the entrance towards the sick garden? To the right, the path runs towards the tower with its dome upon which sits a shining star or a glowing spiked sphere, the New Jerusalem Church?

The work was first conceived in 1912 following lecture of Swedenborg's 'Heaven and Hell' (1758), in which the author terms the 'correspondences' between the spiritual world and its representation, the - less perfect - natural world. From this follows that the diptych may just as well represent the mental change in the artist himself when he discovers his own creed. As he wanders through a forest, so he recounts, he finds the road of life and wanders into a valley where he comes across a bejeweled tabernacle containing the flame of ardor that burns infinitely - a spiritual paradise.

As for the color red, does it stand for love, for strength, for energy and passion, for sacrifice, or more likely, for the alchemical stage of rubedo at which body and spirit are reunited? Gailliard's oeuvre was neglected for a long time by history and with it, its many interpretations that stem from a different era. Reading into his work opens up a whole world of ideas, mind sets, perceptions, and unconventional knowledge. To bridge the gap, a first monograph has been recently published (2014) under the guidance of his daughters, Geneviève and Isabelle Gailliard²

Jean-Jacques Gailliard
Crimson Paradise, 1917
Oil on canvas, 135 x 150 cm
Signed bottom right, Private Collection

¹Sébastien Clerbois, «Jean-Jacques Gailliard (1890-1976) peintre «swédenborgien». Un patrimoine d'avant-garde oublié au panthéon de l'art sacré?», *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 1 | 2013, 85-111.

²Jean-Jacques Gailliard. *Volume relié sous jaquette, 29 x 24,5 cm, 424 pages, 550 illustrations. texte de Alfonso Enriquez de Villegas Diaz. Sélection des œuvres par Xavier Canonne. Biographie, bibliographie, liste des expositions, listes des illustrations par Isabelle Gailliard.*

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