

“Easy, debonair and brisk”: Maxime Ingres at McGill, 1895–1900

by Robert H. Michel

French-born Maxime Ingres, like Régis Messac, taught French language and literature for five years at McGill and left discontented. No social critic, less scholarly than Messac, more dramatic, he personified French culture at McGill from 1895 to 1900. I chanced across him in a memorandum from McGill Principal William Peterson to University Librarian Charles Gould dated 10 November 1897:

I have only now been able to look at one of the two French books which I had the curiosity to borrow the other day—*Aphrodite*. It is of such a character that it should at once be removed from the catalogue (unless you are to keep a secret chamber in the Library). And if it was M. Ingres who selected it, I think he must be asked to explain on what principle he would justify his choice.

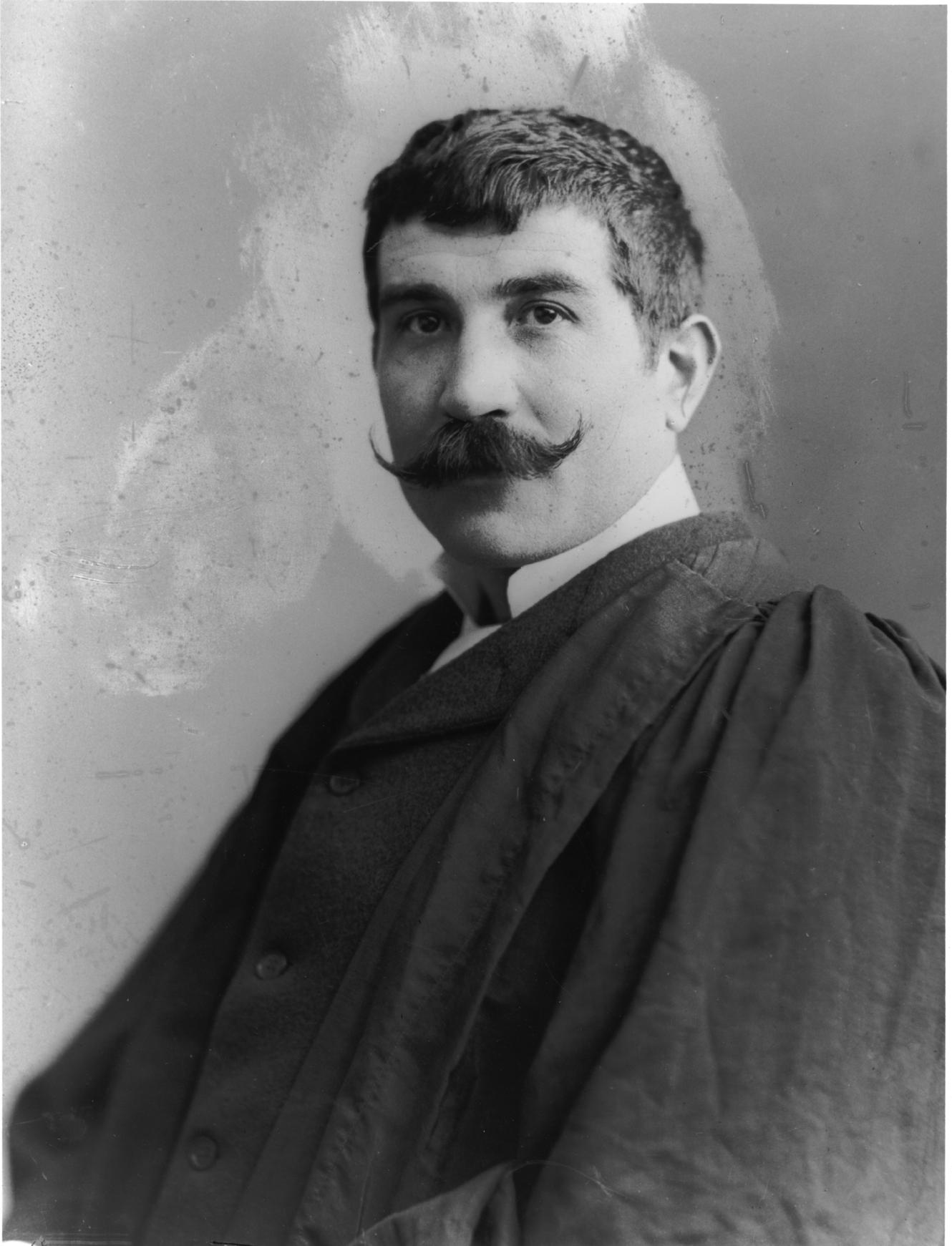
Aphrodite (1896), by Pierre Louÿs about a Greek courtesan, was one of those erotic novels about lurid, motiveless crimes at which French writers have excelled since de Sade. Its slaves, nudity, crucifixion and porno-historical frosting had made it notorious by the time Peterson found it in McGill's new gothic Redpath Library. Peterson's reaction that it was unsuitable for students was unsurprising. Ingres, as Messac would in the 1920s, requested the Library to buy numerous French classical and modern works. Among those arriving in October 1897 lurked *Aphrodite*. Ironically, the books were funded by Lord Strathcona, who had endowed women's education at McGill but demanded that women be taught chastely in separate classes from men. Gould removed *Aphrodite*; it disappeared; times changed; the book was reordered in 1934.

Ingres and Peterson both arrived at McGill in Fall 1895. Ingres had run a language school in Montreal since 1891 [he seems to have taught in the Maritimes previously] and was around 35 when a McGill Governors' committee hired him at the lecturer rank, for \$1800 a year, to “take charge of the French Department” for 1895–1896. He succeeded the higher ranked French-born Professor Pierre Darey, who retired after teaching since 1860. Ingres's subordinate was French-Canadian Protestant Rev. J.L. Morin, who in 1921 would be accused by Professor of German Hermann Walter of poisoning his well. Ingres introduced the conversational Natural Method (popularized by Berlitz since the 1880s), with instruction mainly or totally in French. While at McGill, Ingres published his own Natural Method textbook in

1899: *Methode Ingres pour l'enseignement de la langue française* (Renouf, Montreal). The introduction (in English) decried the memorizing of grammatical rules: “The organ by which we learn a language is the ear not the eye.” Students learned little from traditional methods: “Years are spent in blundering through two or three hundred grammatical rules, as tedious to him who does not know the language as would be a set of directions for the use of a complicated machine of which neither a specimen nor a design was before the eye.” He ridiculed traditional examinations: “They generally come with some crooked, tortured, insipid, treacherous single sentence, spiked with participles and subjunctives, as dangerous to handle as a dynamite bomb, and impossible to get correctly, if one is not familiar with the whole philosophy of the language.” In sum: “To speak any language is not a science; it is an art like dancing or simply walking. It cannot be acquired by rules.”

Innovative though the Natural Method was, McGill Calendars since 1857 had claimed instruction was exclusively in French. By the 1870s and 1880s, however, this claim was reduced to third and fourth year courses. In the Ingres years, the Calendars for 1896–7, 1897–8, and 1898–9 once more declared all instruction would be exclusively in French and by the “Natural Method.” In 1899–1900 this was downgraded slightly to apply only to the second, third, and fourth years. Presumably beginners kept lapsing into English. The course descriptions and examinations in the Calendars, 1895–1900, indicate that Ingres, assisted by Morin, taught the traditional curriculum of grammar and classical French literature but with an increased emphasis on oral examinations, slightly less on verse and more on 19th century prose. Exercises turning classical French passages into modern French were added to traditional dictation and composition. New courses were offered in philology, history of literature, and composition. The examinations resembled earlier ones, although in April 1897 students in some courses wrote in French for one hour of their three hour final on a topic of their choice; they could bring Larousse dictionaries. This seems freer than earlier and later exams.

Beside teaching and ordering books, Ingres proposed a French Club, apparently for both men and women students. The student journal *McGill Fortnightly* implied in November 1895 that the club was being delayed because the sexes, as in classes, might have to be (probably quoting Ingres) “séparés come des bêtes féroces.” Meanwhile, Ingres lobbied the Library for a meeting room. Finally approved by the Governors in 1897, the club promoted practical knowledge of French. Bi-weekly meetings could include games, conversations, debates,



B&W photograph of Maxime Ingres, 1896 (in academic robe)
Notman Photographic Archives Ref. II-114340

and recitations—all in French on the pain of fines. It may have been co-ed: in late November 1897, the *Fortnightly* claimed that nineteen (men) had joined and “and enjoy the company of the ladies very much.” This club, probably short-lived, anticipated McGill’s later *Cercle Français*.

In the small McGill of about 400 students, Ingres quickly became a campus character. The student journal *McGill Fortnightly*, and its successor after October 1898 the *McGill Outlook*, reveled in humorous campus news. They singled out Ingres as a likeable yet acerbic, slightly forbidding teacher who demanded promptness and participation from his students. He would threaten that latecomers would be marked absent; *Old McGill* 1899 reminded women students of: “Les chocolats et la classe avancée/ Of the Ingres voice of the figure gaunt/ Saying, ‘Je vous marquerai absente.’” One class took revenge in February 1899; they left before a tardy Ingres arrived. Other anecdotes reported a dog (possibly Ingres’s) coming into French class, and roughhousing by men students after class. *Old McGill* 1900, pastiching *Canterbury Tales*, wrote of one student, Mary Helena Dey (B.A. 1900): “And French she spak full fair and fetysly, After the scole of Ingres at McGill.” Annie Holiday (B.A. 1899) wrote her parents: “My appetite [for books] is rapidly increasing. Mr Ingres our professor finds that I am very well up in French & thinks for that Subject that I should be in the Second Year instead of the first.” She won a first class in January 1896 but suspected Ingres forgot to get the exam results published. The *Fortnightly* referred in 1895 to the “literary effusion” of students of French writing essays [by the Natural Method] “showing our independence of thought by disregarding those rules which we cannot quite remember.” In November 1895, women students (taught in separate classes from men) were assigned to write in French letters to their most intimate friend. Ingres made the students have fun while they learned. Occasionally, he offered prizes for recitations. The *McGill Outlook* reported in February 1899: “Our French Professor’s exciting fairy tales are evoking great interest. The attendance at lectures is increasing.” A member of Montreal’s Pen and Pencil Club, Ingres wrote verse and short stories; perhaps he read these to his class. His spooky story “Le Dolmen” appeared in the *Fortnightly* in January 1898. He also wrote a McGill drinking song, a story about the woes of a black francophone in Halifax, and a starvation story set during the Franco-Prussian War. Ingres was fiercely *revanchist*, as the *Fortnightly* reported in December 1895:

Student.—“Je voudrais être médecin chez les Allemands.”

French Professor.—“Il vous faut étudier la science vétérinaire.”

From 1891 to 1900 Ingres ran the Ingres-Coutellier School of Modern Languages, housed at the Fraser Institute (with branches in several Canadian cities). Fellow tenants included the portraitist Alphonse Jongers, close friend (and perhaps related) to Ingres. The Institute’s records show Ingres being

dunned frequently for rent, using the shared telephone too much, and having an employee who climbed into the Institute through a window while the building was shut for Dominion Day. One of Ingres’s private students was Amy Redpath (later Roddick), future donor of McGill’s Roddick Gates. French lessons gave this wealthy single woman of 29 an intellectual and creative outlet. Simultaneously she learned German from a Mrs. Gebhardt and ran her family’s large house for her brothers and widowed mother. Her diary, mainly in 1897, often refers to writing essays and studying for Ingres on historical and literary subjects, including: *La Chanson de Roland*; translating Ibsen’s *Doll House*; de Vigny’s poems; French medieval history; an essay on the recently performed play *Rudens* at McGill; and a fable by Napoleon. She also “learnt one of Mme Ingre’s [sic] letters, one of those affectionate outbursts to her daughter [Ingres was married]. Have now wended through the dawn & middle ages of French literature & stand upon the threshold of the renaissance.” Fascinated by her studies, she wrote a rondel and “tried my hand ballad writing with refrain sur les epaules de mont royale” [she later published poetry], studied Montaigne on education, and read Corneille and Moliere. Ingres showed her his portrait by Jongers in the studio next door.

After two successful years, things began to go wrong. While Ingres had been hired “to take charge” of French for 1895–1896 and was rehired on the same terms again for 1896–1897, by late November 1897 the Governors and Peterson were making it clear that Ingres would not be promoted to professor nor receive increased salary. This was in spite of Ingres’s initiative that November of offering a special course of fifteen lectures to local French teachers. (In 1900 he would propose French summer courses, anticipating McGill’s famous French Summer School). Peterson may have blamed Ingres for ordering *Aphrodite* but far more important he saw little place for Ingres in the stronger more scholarly Department of Modern Languages he was planning, which would unite the two lecturers in French with the two in German. Although he never criticized Ingres’s teaching or methods, by 1899, Peterson was whittling down Ingres’s hours and status. Ingres had only a bachelor’s degree (from Paris); since Ingres arrived, the chief German lecturer, Leigh Gregor, had earned a Ph.D. from Heidelberg (1896) and been given a vote in the Faculty of Arts (March 1897) unlike Ingres. Around 1899 Peterson made Gregor in effect acting head of the new Modern Languages Department. Gregor received a bonus for reorganizing the Modern Language courses for 1899–1900. Bitterly, Ingres described his rival as better fit to serve behind a counter than run a department. [Yet perhaps Gregor actually fitted in better socially: he even had McGill’s women students invited to see the art collections of Montreal millionaires.] Under Peterson McGill, like many universities, emulated the German model and aimed to hire staff with doctorates and scholarly publications.

Mid-May 1900, Ingres wrote Peterson from University of Chicago [a clue he was job hunting!] declaring he made only \$500 in his private teaching and most of his time went to McGill. [Perhaps Peterson looked down on Ingres and his school as too entrepreneurial and un-academic.] Ingres also suggested French and German revert to separate departments; his own ambitions aside, as an anti-German Frenchman he had no sympathy with the recent amalgamation. They corresponded in English, which Ingres wrote nearly flawlessly. Peterson, always careful in what he wrote, could point out he had never promised Ingres advancement. He declared that Ingres simply did not have the training to be head of French. He also may have feared Ingres was too feisty, too self-promoting to administer tactfully. Ingres's letters to Peterson were polite but increasingly reproachful, declaring himself disappointed, deceived and under-valued; Peterson's were appreciative of past service but unyielding. He offered part-time teaching. Demanding to the end, Ingres declared he would resign unless he was given the status and salary of a professor. In late May 1900 he indeed resigned, boasting Chicago had hired him for more than any McGill Arts professor was paid. Peterson rushed to find a short term replacement, Dr. Jacob B. Segall, for 1900–1901, while he decided how to configure Modern Languages. The changes of 1899 to 1901 would be echoed in reverse by the breakup of Modern Languages into Romance and Germanic Languages 20 years later, after the Morin-Walter poisoning episode. In 1901 Peterson stated his objective in the *McGill University Magazine*: “surely McGill ought to become one of the most notable centres on the whole continent of the study of French!” In the event, it would not be Gregor but a new man, another Ph.D., Hermann Walter, who became chief after 1901.

Ingres taught the Natural Method at Chicago, 1900 to ca. 1906. Involved in many university and civic matters, he became a director of the prestigious Alliance Française, which had close teaching ties with Chicago. He became “officier d'Académie,” a French government honour for educationalists. Later he may have moved to Buenos Aires. In 1931 McGill's Colonel Wilfrid

Bovey, reported that Ingres had died in Paris of a heart attack, aged about 70, and described him as “a staunch adherent and follower of Paul Déroulède, the patriot who urged that France take some revenge on Germany for the havoc played by the latter on the French people during the War of 1870. Professor Ingres was very violent on this subject... and never missed the opportunity of expressing his point of view on this matter. He was also a fencer of note and participated in many parries with other fine wielders of the rapier...” From his 1896 Notman photograph as a confident new McGill professor in academic gown, one might easily guess Ingres fenced, smouldered over Prussia's defeat of France—and wrote poetry and stories as well.

Ingres liked the students; he ordered books and founded a French Club for them. He wrote them a poem in *Old McGill* 1899, *Si Jeunesse Savait*, beginning and ending with: “Qu'il est doux d'avoir l'âge où l'on croit tout savoir” and regretting the loss of “Le bonheur des vingt ans qui ne peut revenir.” And the students liked him: when *Old McGill* 1901 gave professors captions, his was “—The Frenchman, easy, debonair and brisk.”

SOURCES

McGill University Archives: RG2, Principals' records, incoming (alphabetical) and outgoing (chronological) correspondence, 1895–1900; RG4, Board of Governors, Minute Books, 1895–1900; RG40, McGill Library records, alphabetical files, 1895–1900; University Scrapbooks of newsclippings, 1895–1900, 1931 (*Montreal Gazette*, obit., 8 Jan. 1931); Annie Holiday Fonds, MG 4222. McGill Library Rare Books and Special Collections: Library Accessions Register, Acc. 62,863, 7 Oct. 1897: *Aphrodite* (reordered in 1934, Acc. 290,564); Amy Redpath Fonds, MS 659. McCord Museum Archives: Pen and Pencil Club. Fraser-Hickson Institute: correspondence, 1890s. University of Chicago, Presidents' Papers, 1901–1906. Publications: Maxime Ingres, *Méthode Ingres* (Renouf, Montreal, 1899, xviii-xx; 2nd ed. Chicago, 1901), McGill University Calendars, 1894–1895 to 1900–01; *Old McGill*, 1898–1901; *McGill Fortnightly*, 1895–1898; *McGill Outlook*, 1898–1900; *McGill University Magazine*, 1 Dec. 1901. Thanks are due the staffs of McGill University Archives; McGill Rare Books and Special Collections; Cyndie Campbell, Archivist, National Gallery of Canada; Fernando Montserrat, Fraser-Hickson Library; and Jessica Westphal, Robin Anne O'Sullivan, University of Chicago Library.