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Paris Journal

In 25 Years, Pen Has Hit Ripe Targets

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

PARIS, Jan. 29 — More than one French chief of state has felt the felt-tipped sting of Plantu, a cartoonist who is one of the most powerful political institutions not found in the 1958 French Constitution.

Plantu got his nickname in the 1960's from teachers and friends at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris who found his real name, Jean Plantureau, too much trouble.

They didn't know what trouble was until after he went to work for *Le Monde* in 1972.

A quarter of a century later, President Jacques Chirac has to put up with seeing his pointy headed caricature almost every day on the newspaper's front page, usually with a drop of sweat — or is it spittle? — flying off his face.

"The editors tell me he complains about that little drop, and I don't always put it in," Plantu said. "It symbolizes his peevish side."

On the whole, Plantu insists, he himself is impervious to criticism.

Philippe Séguin, a Gaullist conservative, confessed that his wife once asked him to pluck his eyebrows after seeing his bushy-browed, corpulent figure caricatured in a Plantu cartoon. But the artist continues to have fun with his furry features, anyway, and Mr. Séguin has some of the drawings on display in his office.

François Léotard, a fellow conservative lampooned with Mr. Séguin in one of Plantu's cartoons, didn't protest but asked for an autographed copy of the original, which *L'Express*, the weekly, published last summer.

"I don't belong to any political party," the blue-eyed, somewhat baby-faced cartoonist said in his cartoon-



Plantu

One artist's view of the "peevish side" of President Jacques Chirac.

cluttered office in a back corridor of the newspaper's main office in the Latin Quarter, on the Rue Claude Bernard. "I've always felt close to the left. But when I look at my drawings, I think I've been harder on the left than on the right, perhaps because I've always expected better of it."

He has never been to the United States, often a juicy target, and makes less fun of President Clinton's features than of the trouble that the President got himself into with Monica S. Lewinsky.

"There are lots of other subjects that are more worth doing in America than this," he said. "I wish I could do more about America and its role in the world."

Plantu comes from a political tradition that started with Honoré Daumier in the 19th century and continued in the 20th with the Belgian creator of Tintin, Georges Rémi, who signed himself Hergé. Plantu has a good chance of leaving a mark on the 21st century, as well, because he will not reach his 48th birthday until March.

Where did he acquire his drawing talent? "My father has a talent for drawing, but he used it in industrial design for the French National Railways," Plantu said. "I had started medical studies in the early 1970's. But I wasn't doing well. So at the age of 20 I told my parents I was giving up medical school, going to Brussels to take up cartooning and getting married."

Both parents survived the shock, and young Plantu and his wife went off to Brussels, where he studied drawing at the Institut St.-Luc, whose patron was Hergé. "Hergé was a big influence on me, as was Asterix," Plantu said, referring to the pun-filled French comic book series on the Gauls in Roman times.

Still, the artist as a young man had to eke out a living for a while as an assistant locomotive engineer before his persistence in dropping off political cartoons at *Le Monde* finally paid off in 1972, when editors hired him part time.

The wit of his drawings and the mordant quality of the quips that Plantu plants in the mouths of his subjects finally persuaded the managing editor at the time, André Laurens, to make Plantu a full member of the staff and give his cartoons daily placement on the front page, to illuminate and explain the main news of the day. *Le Monde* now relies on



Valerie Winckler/Rapho

Plantu, rear, reviewing a cartoon in the art department at *Le Monde* in the Latin Quarter. He is given a subject at 8:30 in the morning. "I do a half-dozen or more sketches by 10," he said. "I have to wrap up at 10:45."

drawings for most of its illustrations and employs four full-time artists.

Because *Le Monde* publishes in the afternoon, Plantu's mornings are hectic. "They tell me what subject they'd like me to do at 8:30 or so, and I do a half-dozen or more sketches by 10," he said. "I have to wrap up at 10:45."

The day former President François Mitterrand's death was announced in January 1996 at 10:30, Plantu recalled, "the editor told me I had 15 minutes." That one showed Gen. Charles de Gaulle welcoming his successor at the pearly gates with, "Happy New Year for eternity."

More often, there's more bite. One memorable drawing last August, after the collapse of the ruble in Russia, showed President Clinton with President Boris N. Yeltsin in the Kremlin, both in their underpants, with the Yeltsin caricature apparently having just been stripped to his shorts by a herd of card sharks.

"An intern?" the Clinton character asked.

"No, a devaluation," replied the Yeltsin figure.

So far no complaints from Moscow or Washington. But in 1991 Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, summoned Plantu to his headquarters in the middle of the night in Tunis,

where the cartoonist had an exhibition of his work, to complain about the thuggish character of his portrait.

"I saw him three times, and he told me he was prepared to negotiate a peace plan with the Israelis," Plantu said.

Shimon Peres, the Israeli Foreign Minister, met Plantu the next year and sketched out for him the outlines of a peace plan 10 months before the secret talks resulted in an accord in September 1993.

"That taught me to stick to cartoons and not try to be a journalist," he said. "I came back here with the story, but nobody would believe me."