



Symbolism

Rodolphe Rapetti

Flammarion

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Fernand Knopff
Red Lips, 1897
Retouched photograph (platino-gravure),
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Symbolism

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Translated from the French
by Deke Dusinberre

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Cover
Fernand Knopff
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Page 6
Odilon Redon,
Paul Gauguin, c. 1903–1905

Oil on canvas, 26 × 21¹/₂ in.
(66 × 54.5 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

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Introduction

It has been largely forgotten that late nineteenth-century Europe enjoyed a brief period when a philosophical trend that challenged contemporary conventions came to dominate literary, artistic, and—more generally—intellectual life. Symbolism's status in 1893 was described by Remy de Gourmont: "At this time, idealist theory is still being contested only by a few old quacks inclined to remain content in their little ponds. Even the most stubborn and obtuse naturalists have given way to the energetic intellectual pressure that has weighed for the past four years, ever since the death of Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, on the world where ideas are developed into works of art."¹ The idealism to which Gourmont referred refuted the validity of material appearances, thereby placing itself outside the prevailing fascination with concrete reality. Symbolism emerged in a Western society that had been overwhelmed by technological progress and capitalist expansion since the mid-nineteenth century. Industrialization, secularization, and the abandonment of rural life meant a shift in cultural landmarks that made it seem as though the old order was passing away. On the level of the history of ideas, Symbolism was part of a wave of reaction against doctrinal positivism, whose backbone had been the scientific analysis of facts verified through experimentation. Positivism dominated thinking in the 1850s and 1860s, and remained the favored approach of the social sciences, while naturalist novels attempted to apply to literature the principles of experimentation and deduction derived from positivist sciences (which were also being applied to sociology). Yet positivism began to crumble as a philosophical doctrine in the 1880s; determinism progressively gave way to relativity and uncertainty. Symbolism corresponded to this trend. For the generation of artists born in the 1860s, the correlation between materialism and naturalistic styles of expression seemed obvious. They rejected the scientific principle of categorization based on distinction and difference by adopting a philosophical stance that embraced a quest for unity, as inherited from Romantic illuminism. The Symbolist period was gripped by a profound doubt over the ability of

Western society to create, as it had in the past, its own conceptual framework. The very notion of progress was challenged. Around 1885 Max Klinger, while elaborating a series of prints titled *On Death II*, produced an etching called *The Philosopher* (fig. 1, ultimately eliminated from the collection published in 1898).² It shows a man who, having scaled a peak from which he could contemplate the sublime landscape all around, has dropped his glasses in the snow a few yards below. Deprived of sight, a tragicomic death awaits him unless some providential rescue occurs. In the snow, a mysterious hand has written, “*Sciens nescieris.*” Western philosophy, condemned to cling to the summits even though almost blind, sought refuge in the dubitative pessimism expressed by the Symbolist movement.

Yet there would be no lack of rescuers, or saviors, or Art Nouveau-inspired utopias, ranging from *La Maison d'Art* founded in Brussels in 1894 by Edmond Picard to Siegfried Bing's Paris gallery, whose vagaries would be recounted by Camille Mauclair in *Servitude et grandeur littéraire*.³ Symbolism, like Romanticism, would have its heroes, but all of them belonged to the realm of intellect or art, not to the realm of action. Prime among those heroes were Charles Baudelaire and Richard Wagner, thanks to their respective theories of correspondences and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork). As Émile Hennequin would write, “Wagner's aesthetic is a doctrine of condensation. It makes a principle out of the need to encourage all arts to collaborate in generating a supreme genre, musical drama.”⁴ The Symbolist attitude would oscillate between pessimism and commitment to an initiatory quest for a visual or poetic expression that would incarnate the totality of the cosmos. This fluctuation between bitterness and a sense of wonder, between dismay and enchantment, between hatred of the contemporary world and a dream of Arcadia became ever greater as the First World War approached. *The Isle of the Dead* (fig. 2), which Arnold Böcklin painted on commission in 1880 for a patron who wanted a “painting to make him dream,”⁵ is an image whose power of fascination is probably linked to the assimilation of death with a return to the peace of maternal roots, to the liquid element in which everything dissolves and is recomposed. Here again we are dealing with a peaceful vision of death and an image that literally rests on the use of symbols. Twenty-five years later, the Austrian artist Alfred Kubin, whom Kandinsky felt was one of the main “prophets of the fall of the old world,”⁶ executed a drawing (fig. 3) that offered an acerbic comment on Böcklin's painting: coffins drift through

Fig. 1
Max Klinger
The Philosopher, 1885

Etching and aquatint,
11 ³/₄ × 7 ³/₄ in. (29.7 × 19.9 cm)
Kunsthalle, Bremen



water into the arching belly of a cruel maternal figure—a solitary, uncelebrated death is being pictured here, death from syphilis or the battlefield.

Ultimately, it is hardly surprising that Symbolism should display premonitory qualities that made it a pinnacle of Western culture prior to the ravages that various ideologies wreaked on the twentieth century. Its birth and growth were contemporary with the phenomenon of universal expositions, employed to assert military and economic might from a standpoint that combined technological progress with an appropriation of traditional culture, which was perceived as the specific expression of a given nation. Myth and legend would therefore play an important role in the development of national identities. The fusion of mythology, archaeology, and folklore that steadily took shape in the work of a painter such as Akseli Gallen-Kallela in Finland was emblematic of this modern conflation of mythology with history. The convergence of mythology and archaeological objectivity depoeticized legend by presenting it as a construction of the human mind based on foundations of historical truth. The progress of objective knowledge therefore led to a utilitarian conception of mythology harnessed to political goals, similar to the technological implementation of scientific discoveries. This certainly provided history painting with one of its final opportunities for reinvigoration. On an aesthetic level, however, the Symbolists rejected the validity of any depiction of historical deeds, and they imbued myth with an entirely different dimension. They were not interested in current events or topical issues. Distant heirs to stoic pantheism, they brought to the world a view that sought immanence. They were impervious to logic, preferring to bring humanity's pre-historical



qualities to the fore. They intended to deliver a fatal blow to almighty reason, thereby opening to the door to the subconscious creativity that Gourmont would celebrate in *La culture des idées*.⁷

In this context, a return to the sacred and a recognition of the importance of spirituality became crucial. “Breathing a theocratic essence into contemporary art and especially into aesthetic culture, that is our new path,” wrote Joséphin Péladan.⁸ Religious themes (even when mere simulacrum or satanic in tendency), along with the rhetorical conflict of good and evil, provided Symbolism with some of its most common imagery. Cycles of paintings or sculptures would attempt to depict human life in relation to the cosmos, or would evoke the rhythms of nature. Abandoning the teeming world of urban life and capitalist economics, along with the imagery of work and leisure that had so fascinated naturalist and Impressionist artists, Symbolists brought a timeless perspective to human affairs. Mankind was no longer viewed in everyday poses. The occasional eclogue was far outnumbered by solitary or melancholic figures (fig. 4), confined to silence and memories, conveying the dereliction of modern humanity in the face of a world that was overwhelming it. This thread led to the darker realms of the mind, shedding new light and lending new color to mythology and pagan antiquity. Gustave Moreau and Böcklin would invest gods and heroes with the dynamic violence that James Frazer detected below the various layers of civilization. Awareness of the subconscious slowly surfaced, putting a new face on humanity, one marked by angst or composed of masks. There where eroticism and morbid fascination converged—in the work of Félicien Rops and, later, Gustav Klimt—Symbolism sowed the seeds of disturbing imagery that



Fig. 2
Arnold Böcklin
The Isle of the Dead, 1880

Oil on panel, 29 1/4 × 48 1/4 in.
(74.5 × 122.5 cm)
Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig

Fig. 3
Alfred Kubin
Back to the Womb, c. 1902

Pencil and ink, 10 × 9 in.
(25.4 × 22.8 cm)
Private collection

continued to haunt minds in the following century and down to the present day. At its roots was a tension between sexual and religious yearnings, as underscored by Baudelairean modernity.

Although in the late 1880s some critics were applying the term “Symbolist” to artists who shared certain aesthetic criteria, as was the case with the Cloisonist painters in Paul Gauguin’s circle, right from the start the movement was defined by theoretical considerations that tolerated a great deal of indeterminacy in terms of form: at no time could Symbolism be defined according to a coherent set of stylistic features. On the contrary, its international expansion was largely based on the influence of two historically distinct models—late incarnations of the Pre-Raphaelite movement on the one hand, and the Cloisonist idiom on the other. The willfully archaic aspect of Pre-Raphaelitism might seem to contradict Cloisonism’s taut search for a new style, but that would mean overlooking the fact that the formal explorations carried out by Gauguin and Émile Bernard in France in the 1880s, although free of the “revival” feel of the earlier movement in England, constantly referred to the concept of tradition, as proclaimed in the early critical writings of an artist such as Maurice Denis. Symbolism comes across as an artistic movement that adopted various forms, shaped by idealism, the concept of a synthesis of the arts, and modernity. In certain respects, it remained wary of the aesthetic techniques then universally viewed in Western civilization as Renaissance accomplishments: perspective, modeling, chiaroscuro, and illusionism. In another vein, Symbolism would point the illusionist vocabulary of the late nineteenth century in the direction of oneiric imagery. Any references to historic forms tended to come from medieval and pre-Renaissance art, or the art of non-Western civilizations (except for those artists who adopted a nonobjective conception of the symbolic potential of line and color).

When Émile Zola defined an artwork as “a patch of creation as viewed by a specific temperament,” he was expressing the fundamental principle of naturalism, according to which the expression of an artist’s individuality derived from the observation of contemporary life.⁹ It is perhaps worth dwelling on the term “patch” in this famous definition. Artistic creativity was conceived here as a partitioning of tangible reality, even if the artist’s personality transformed that reality when elaborating a work. We might even define Symbolism as the antithesis of that conception, at the risk of reducing it to a simple movement of reaction. Indeed, a Symbolist artwork was not envisaged, but rather a transcription of what an artists “sees,” as

a projection of an abstract intellectual concept. Everything real—all of “creation”—functioned primarily as a medium for invoking an immaterial reality. That is why Symbolism was, in principle, antithetical to sculpture, whose three-dimensional nature has always been considered closer to the tangible world, which drawing and painting attempted to dematerialize. Yet even though use of the term “Symbolism” in art was initially applied to painting,¹⁰ it should not be forgotten that Rodin and several other sculptors deliberately played on a state of incompleteness that allowed an imaginary reconstitution of the missing sections to engender a conceptual vision. However, the interrogation of the reality of space would follow a special route, starting in the 1880s, via the search for a system of codification that would accentuate the allusive dimension that was an intrinsic part of painting. Hence the importance, in terms of Symbolism’s stylistic definition, of an oeuvre that might seem out of place here, namely that of Paul Cézanne. Cézanne represented a shared landmark for the likes of Gauguin, Bernard, and Denis, who found that his abstract formulation of space and color provided an equivalent of reality in the absence of that reality. Symbolist color is basically imaginary, and is unconcerned with visual verisimilitude. Any reference to objectivity is purely adventitious; indeed, Symbolist color preferred to take a metaphorical path, as Munch’s use of Prussian blue to outline some of his portraits, a color that Nietzsche identified as subversive because partly composed of vitriol.¹¹ Symbolist subjectivity had little in common with Zola’s “temperament.” It remained estranged from naturalism’s visual verisimilitude as well as from Impressionism’s reconstitution of the moment.

The idealist substrate from which Symbolism sprang has sometimes led it to be seen as a “literary” art, in the pejorative sense of the term. As an art of imagination, Symbolism obviously fed off literature. Numerous examples



Fig. 4
Edvard Munch
Melancholy, 1892–1893

Oil on canvas,
25 1/2 × 37 3/4 in. (65 × 96 cm)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo

nevertheless demonstrate that the opposite was equally true. Despite the close links established between painting and literature, it would be misguided to describe Symbolist art as a vassal of literature. On the contrary, there was an elegant reciprocity on this score—it was probably after seeing Moreau's *Apparition* at the Salon of 1876 that Gustave Flaubert decided to write *Hérodiade*, published the following year along with two other tales in *Trois Contes*.¹² Whereas the search for textual sources behind Moreau's theme of Salome has proved relatively fruitless, the repercussions of his Salome paintings on literature abound. Consequently, Symbolist idealism can not be conceived solely as the visual illustration of an idea. The parallel between art and literature can be clearly seen in an article published by Teodor de Wyzewa as early as 1886, which contains one of the earliest theoretical formulations of the Symbolist spirit as applied to art. It places unambiguous stress on painting as a symbolic language. "We have an ever increasing need to preserve the feelings produced by art, the impressions of life as rendered to us through art, through means other than real life. Painting fulfills this need. The artistic means it employs to impart feelings differ entirely from the means employed by reality, for they are merely conventional signs, deemed appropriate to what they signify as a result of associations between images; yet they also differ from real lines and color in the way a word differs from an idea or a musical sound from an emotion that it conveys."¹³

Symbolism was the intellectual trend that most profoundly marked the arts and literature of the period running from the mid-1880s to the early twentieth century. Even prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the avant-garde movements distanced themselves from Symbolism's aesthetic postulates, which nevertheless continued to survive much longer, notably within abstract movements and Surrealism. Furthermore, many of the protagonists of the Symbolist generation, such as Maurice Denis and James Ensor, would continue to produce, well into the twentieth century, work that never became repetitive or meaningless. As this book will show, although the broad lines corresponding to Symbolism's international dissemination can be broadly sketched, the resulting map would be much too fuzzy to be truly useful—it is impossible to reduce Symbolism to the concerns of a given national school, or even to a group of artists with a shared historic trajectory. Here we must be content to assert that Symbolism's realm of development coincided with the industrialized West, so that evidence of it can be observed across Europe and the United States.

Alongside the naturalist trend that affected various ways of conveying reality as previously practiced by European painting, from the 1860s onward a few artists revived concepts based on the notion of the Ideal, as well as advocating a return to literary subject matter. The appropriation of pictorial tradition thus constituted a situation different from the one witnessed earlier in academic tradition. In France especially, the shift from realism to naturalism was accompanied by a progressive abandonment of traditional models in the name of a convergence between art and current events, based on a direct grasp of contemporary reality. But the idea of an art deprived of historic references spurred various reactions that advocated a return to roots even as they remained opposed to the academic system. Yet of all the painters who exemplified this anti-naturalist typology, there were only a few mentors to whom the Symbolism generation would look. Why was it Böcklin who played a preeminent role for the younger generation in the Germanic world, and not Anselm Feuerbach? Why was Moreau, rather than Jules-Élie Delaunay, adopted as a model? Here the question of style finally becomes crucial. Although the artists viewed as guiding spirits by the Symbolists harked back to prior art, they interpreted tradition in one of two new ways—either through a revival of decorative, mural painting (which led from Pierre Puvis de Chavannes to Gauguin) or through a stylistic syncretism that generated a new strangeness that challenged the academic notion of unity of style. The archaism and heterogeneity with which critics taxed Moreau in the 1860s would become objects of fascination thirty years later. This situation remained the product, at least until the 1870s, of artists who worked in isolation. But the following decade witnessed greater shared awareness and the founding of the first groups to cohere around an art of ideas, in reaction to the reigning naturalism. This was the period of manifestos, including one published by Jean Moréas in *Le Figaro* on September 18, 1886, usually taken as Symbolism's birth certificate.¹⁴ Importance was placed on the role played by a few painters with varying backgrounds—Eugène Carrière (naturalism), Gauguin (Impressionism), Odilon Redon (late Romanticism)—as well as on the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites and William Morris (whose efforts on behalf of the decorative arts led to the founding, in 1888, of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society). The convergence of art and literature in forging a new model of aesthetics seemed clear to critics as the first theoretical formulations of the Symbolist system began to emerge. Two conjunctural developments became crucial at this point: the liberalization of exhibition systems and

the rapid increase in Symbolist publications. Parallel to official, government-sponsored exhibitions, there arose a series of private exhibition initiatives designed to circumvent the academy. The spread of artistic groupings and societies in the 1890s progressively rendered obsolete the traditional system of education and exhibition. In 1883 already, Brussels hosted the founding of a group called Les XX (The Twenty), whose members included Félicien Rops, Fernand Khnopff, and James Ensor. Les XX sought to recruit innovative artists into the new society, and it became a veritable European hub since its exhibition program extended regular invitations to foreign artists. Renamed La Libre Esthétique in 1894, the organization placed significant emphasis on Symbolism among the new stylistic trends. The Franco-Belgian core group, which proved to be of crucial importance in the emergence of Symbolism, sprang from artistic and literary links established between Paris and Brussels back in the mid-nineteenth century.

The end of the century witnessed the “secessionist” phenomenon in Germanic lands. In Munich, a hundred artists united in 1892 to form the first Sezession, soon followed by other separatist movements in Düsseldorf, Weimar, Dresden, Karlsruhe, and Berlin. Vienna founded its own Sezession. Aesthetic trends tended to cross boundaries with increasing swiftness, even as the critical perspective on contemporary art went international. Far from concerning Symbolism alone, this internationalism had also pertained to naturalism for at least a decade; if we abandon the history of key individuals in favor of a more statistical view of things, the dominant feature of the last twenty years of the nineteenth century was the international spread of naturalism, and more particularly the model represented by Jules Bastien-Lepage. As a reaction to that proliferation, Symbolist art allied itself to a major corpus of theoretical and critical writing, as well as to a literary output initially oriented toward poetry. The edifice being built rested on new periodicals and on social circles attentive to the latest aesthetic trends. Significantly, Symbolism began on the fringes, aloof from official organizations and the mainstream press. Its poetry and imagery, however, were disseminated throughout Europe via hundreds of little, often ephemeral, publications. Thus the founding of *Zycie* in Warsaw in 1887 marked the beginning of calls for Polish art to free itself from political authorities and historical narration. In France, meanwhile, compared to many Parisian reviews with limited readership, the *Mercure de France*, founded at the end of 1889, managed to achieve a relatively broad circulation. An advertisement of 1893 nevertheless

boasted that *Mercure de France* “had no connections, including material ones, with what might be called official literary reviews or art publications, all built around the same conventional model.”¹⁵ On the contrary, the agenda of this periodical, to which the greatest figures of Symbolism contributed, was focused exclusively on innovation. The columns devoted to literary and artistic events abroad reveal the existence of an authentically Europe-wide culture of which only a few traces survive today. In Germany, meanwhile, poet Stefan George founded *Blätter für die Kunst* in 1891, publishing translations of Baudelaire and the French Symbolists. Overall, these periodicals displayed an attempt to unify Europe through the arts and literature, at a time marked by the rise of nationalism and militarism. *Cosmopolis*, published in New York and London from 1896 to 1898, featured three sections—one in English, another in French, the third in German; in May 1897, it published Stéphane Mallarmé’s epoch-making poem “Un coup de dés” for the first time.¹⁶

In addition to the consecration of Impressionist artists such as Claude Monet, the period running from the mid-1890s to the First World War was marked by Symbolism’s emergence as a pictorial trend of equal importance to naturalism. At that point its fate was tied to that of Art Nouveau, a vector of profound transformation of the artistic scene that allowed for the emergence of new centers of innovation, notably in central Europe. The somewhat implicit internationalism of the previous decade was replaced by a clear affirmation of Symbolism as a trend that linked diverse cultures. The unchallenged reign of Paris as the capital of the art world began to show the first signs of its future decline, even though the formal innovations of the 1870s and 1880s were French (Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Cloisonnism). Paris and Munich would cling to their leading status in terms of the teaching and dissemination of art, but artists’ trajectories became increasingly diverse—Edvard Munch is an eloquent example in this respect, in so far as Paris and Berlin were of equal importance in the early years of his career. With hindsight, Vienna seems to have been a more important center than Paris at the very end of the nineteenth century. Political decline there coincided with the summits of culture, producing a convergence between the inner withdrawal of Europe’s largest empire and introspective tendencies specific to that period (soon to be typified by psychoanalysis), tendencies that would yield new and fertile forms of expressions. Not all the new centers were of equal importance in terms of the subject discussed here, however. Likewise, it is obvious that Symbolism arrived relatively late in Latin countries—Italy

and Spain—as well as in Russia and central Europe. A somewhat similar phenomenon could be observed in the Netherlands where, following the work of Jan Toorop and Johan Thorn Prikker, a “second Symbolism” blossomed at the turn of the century, one that was particularly original and notably focused on the graphic arts.

Such time warps would generate a complex situation at the start of the twentieth century, and more especially in the years just before the First World War. Indeed, avant-garde movements, in the forms they adopted outside the zone of French influence, presented themselves as a revival of the principles on which Symbolism was based. Abstract art, prior to being interpreted as part of the major break that occurred at the start of the twentieth century, initially had metaphysical and sacred aspirations. At the same time, the development of Fauvism would produce a formulation of issues related to color in terms that progressively shifted the subjectivity inherited from Moreau toward a definition that foregrounded purely formal questions. The metaphorical aspect of color that had typified Symbolism was thus drained of its meaning, giving way to a concept of chromatic freedom and to a new hedonism with regard to landscape.

Guiding Spirits

Most of the artists today identified with the Symbolist movement were born between the late 1850s and the early 1870s. This generation sought mentors who might guide it in its struggle against naturalism. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, and Arnold Böcklin were the names most frequently cited then, along with the English Pre-Raphaelites, whose international renown grew enormously in the last twenty years of the century. Yet apart from a few direct links between teachers and pupils, there was little real contact between these guiding spirits and the younger artists who more or less consciously adhered to Symbolism as an organized movement. By the time Symbolism reached its zenith, Puvis de Chavannes and Moreau had become famous, Böcklin had moved to Tuscany, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti had been dead for ten years. So while we are in the presence of a generational phenomenon, it must be recognized that once these great figures passed away—a moment that coincided with the passage from the nineteenth century to the twentieth—Symbolism would do little more than survive on its own, at least in the western part of Europe. And yet many of its protagonists would continue to play a role on the artistic scene long after the First World War.

The painters to whom the Symbolists looked had belonged to a generation still marked, at first, by the precepts of an academic training, and therefore by a conception of art based on the requirements of history painting—for Moreau, as for George Frederic Watts, the trip to Italy still played a formative role. The discursive nature of history painting, which threatened to lose its supremacy with the rise of outdoor landscape painting from the 1860s onward, remained present in these artists' work, at least in terms of the quest for a conceptual unity within an artwork, based on the relationship between form and meaning. Thus Böcklin would remain profoundly attached to the notion of historical landscape throughout his life, even though that genre progressively lost its functional value within the academic hierarchy.

Several other artists might be viewed as elder brethren to the movement in so far as their careers had begun under non-academic auspices, sometimes ten or twenty years beforehand. Their training often took place in an atmosphere different from the one experienced by the likes of Moreau and Böcklin. While that was certainly not the case of Belgian artist Xavier Mellery (1845–1921), who won the Prix de Rome in 1870, nor even of Eugène Carrière, who studied under Alexandre Cabanel at the École des Beaux-Arts until 1876, it was nevertheless true that neither Félicien Rops (who began as a satiric illustrator), nor Odilon Redon, nor Paul Gauguin (initially a landscape painter), truly bowed to academic training. The degree of unity that tended to result from such training therefore gave way to disparity. Meanwhile, following Impressionism's attempts to wipe the slate completely clean, there was an increasing desire to rediscover painterly forms that included a narrative, allegorical, or symbolic content. Hans von Marées (a friend of Böcklin's in Italy), Mellery (who would teach Khnopff and would produce intimist drawings as well as a decorative schemes for public buildings), and Henri Fantin-Latour (famous for his works on Wagnerian themes, widely disseminated through lithography) were some of these artists whose careers began in the 1860s and who subsequently participated in the rise of the Symbolist movement. In various ways they represented the resistance, which had begun in the mid-nineteenth century, to the dominant realist trends, at a time when the progressive extinction of history painting was accompanied by a political context notoriously devoid of glorious events. Thus in France during the Second Empire Fantin-Latour would employ the large format traditionally associated with history paintings for a series of works glorifying poets, painters, and musicians. When he showed his *Homage to Delacroix* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) at the Salon of 1864, only the figure of an artist henceforth seemed worthy of embodying French national pride. Reticence toward politics was therefore typical of this generation.

The Pre-Raphaelites and George Frederic Watts

In 1894, French critic Robert de la Sizeranne, who was familiar with the British scene, began to publish a series of articles on English art in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. The following year these articles were gathered into a book. It was probably the Universal Exposition of 1889 and the impression of novelty created by English painting that were behind this initiative. La Sizeranne's book opened with an assertion of incontrovertible foreignness. "There is a truly English painting," he wrote. "That is the first impression when visiting any international exposition of fine arts, regardless of the country in which it is held. When passing through the galleries devoted to Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Belgium, or Holland, indeed even the United States and Scandinavian countries, one always feels one is in France; and in fact, one is always among artists who live in Paris or who studied in Paris or who at the very least follow from afar either the discipline of a given school or the revolutionary trends of Parisian cliques. It would take many explanatory panels, when standing before Monsieur Sargent, to persuade us that the Atlantic Ocean separates him from the workshop of Monsieur Carolus Duran, or when before Monsieur Werenskiold that the Baltic Sea has been crossed and that Monsieur Roll failed to make the trip. In contrast, the moment one enters the English hall, we feel we are no longer among compatriots, perhaps not even among contemporaries."¹ La Sizeranne's comment reveals the insular situation of English painting in the nineteenth century, as well as the fascination that the Pre-Raphaelite movement eventually exerted over all of Europe, a fascination that combined a search for alienness with a taste for the archaic.

It could hardly be asserted that British artists remained totally unknown beyond their own borders until the end of the century, but points of contact were few and far between. International expositions and artist's voyages had given the Pre-Raphaelites a certain notoriety on the continent. Baudelaire, in his review of the Universal Exposition of 1855, mentioned the "most singularly fine" section devoted to English painters, but postponed closer study of it.² At the same time, other figures, such as Eugène Delacroix³ and Théophile Gautier,⁴ noted the emergence of Pre-Raphaelitism. In 1864, Henri Fantin-Latour, who had already made

three trips to London, accompanied Rossetti on a tour of several Paris studios. But it was really only during the last twenty years of the century that Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones became as famous as the continent's best-known artists, and that English art had any true influence, notably in Symbolist circles. Even in England, Rossetti—whom Europe would take to be the main figure of the Pre-Raphaelite movement—only became widely known after his premature death in 1882, thanks to retrospective exhibitions held the following year. Up until that point, his work had been known to a relatively limited group, his output acquired by just a few art lovers. The upshot of the belated dissemination of Pre-Raphaelitism was a certain confusion in the perception of the historical development of the movement, which was apprehended as a monolithic block even though the protagonists' work no longer perfectly reflected the artistic theories that had presided over its origins. This misconception has partly survived down to the present day.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in London in 1848 by a few young artists, most of whom were painters. They were reacting against the teaching at the Royal Academy and, more generally, to the situation of English painting at the time. Its existence as an organized group was fleeting, because by 1853–1854 it had already begun to unravel, as each member of the movement evolved in a personal direction, and as three dominant figures emerged: William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), and John Everett Millais (1829–1896).⁵ At the time the Brotherhood was formed, only Millais, who was particularly precocious, had received true academic training, and he is moreover seen as Hunt's master. The desire to make a break, which was at the heart of the movement, therefore implied the acceptance of a certain inexperience. Rossetti remained more or less self-taught, even though he took advice from Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893). The somewhat older Brown was closely linked to the



Fig. 5
William Holman Hunt
The Scapegoat, 1854

Oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 54 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
(85.7 × 138.5 cm)

Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight

Pre-Raphaelites without ever truly being a member; he was born in Calais, trained in Ghent, Bruges, and Antwerp, where he studied under history painter Gustav Wappers (1803–1874), and spent time in Paris in 1840 and then in Rome in 1845, where he discovered the German Nazarenes. His inquiring mind, independent spirit, extreme artistic talent, and unusual itinerant background made Brown one of the few links between various worlds in a nineteenth-century Europe that remained partitioned into national schools. It is tempting to credit Brown with introducing into England minute descriptive detail and intense coloring drawn from the fifteenth-century Netherlandish painter Petrus Christus, even though the truth is certainly more complex. Furthermore, Brown's strange and cruel vision of modern life, seen in a series of paintings begun in the 1850s (*Work*, 1852–1865, City Art Galleries, Manchester), brought an unusual pessimism to the depiction of English society.

These intellectual ambitions could also be found, combined with a discursive tendency, in early works by Rossetti, who led a twin career as artist and poet, contributing to the Pre-Raphaelite movement's deliberately literary slant. The Brotherhood's periodical, *The Germ*, only survived for three issues (the latter two subtitled *Art and Poetry*), but already provided a model for future Symbolist publications by closely linking poetry, literature, and art. The Pre-Raphaelites, although focusing on aesthetic issues and having chosen painting as their main platform, did not intend to confine themselves to a debate limited to painters only. Throughout his life, Rossetti, thanks to his extensive culture (he was a great reader of Dante), would draw inspiration from a medievalism that sprang from early English and Italian poetry. His interpretations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* attained a freedom and suggestive power that reinvigorated the idea of the "literary subject" as conceived during the Romantic era. It is important to stress the fact that this approach prefigured what would become one of Symbolism's main goals forty years later, namely a rejection of the compartmentalized specialization of artistic spheres.

Leaving aside the very first Pre-Raphaelite phase, marked by imitation of pre-Renaissance painters and the Nazarene group, the technique practiced by Hunt and Millais in the late 1840s can be defined as a total naturalism in so far as it meant the study of live models in daylight and a depiction of forms and atmospheric effects as frank and scrupulous as possible. Colors, worked directly into a wet white ground, acquired a special acidity, and the very quality of the paint itself conveyed a rigor that might be seen as the first step toward the myth of a pure gaze, which would run through the second half of the nineteenth century. The Pre-Raphaelites completely dismissed their immediate predecessors and painterly tradition as conveyed by academic training. Their allusion to

Italian primitives, which would later become a commonplace of Symbolism, implied a return to a certain fidelity to nature, the alleged prerogative of artists prior to Raphael. The upshot of perceiving painting through this filter of historical constructions was to insure that two aspects of an unresolved conflict coexisted right from the start of the Pre-Raphaelite movement: emulation of quattrocento masters on the one hand, and observation of reality—with modern eyes—on the other.

Indeed, the movement's singularity resides in this hesitation between a fertile exploitation of archaism and a quest for objectivity. The paradoxical appeal of the Pre-Raphaelite style certainly rests in the strangeness of images produced according to a method that claimed absolute faithfulness to observed reality. On seeing Hunt's *The Scapegoat* (fig. 5), the result of numerous studies done by the artist while in Palestine, the main impression is less a feeling of realism than the disturbing impression of a dreamlike image. The extremely precise detail advocated by the Pre-Raphaelite method primarily underscored the way in which it surpassed any natural gaze. An entire wing of Symbolism in the 1890s, generating hyperrealistic visions by the likes of Léon Frédéric and Jacek Malczewski, carried speculation on the aesthetics of ambiguity to the threshold of the fantastic. A precise source for this practice of tight drawing and lively, transparent color remains hard to identify. William Mulready (1786–1863), whose memoirs would be published in 1867 by one of the members of the group, Frederick George Stephens, had made some efforts in this direction. Traces of this trend can also be seen in those paintings by Stephens that escaped destruction (*Mother and Child*, c. 1854, Tate Gallery, London) after the artist abandoned painting for art criticism in the mid-1850s.

The theoretical underpinnings of this approach can be found in the writings of John Ruskin (1819–1900). The first two volumes of his *Modern Painters* were published in 1843 and 1846.⁶ Hunt had read them by 1847. The particularity of Ruskin's crucial text, especially taking into account its successive editions (leading to three additional volumes and numerous addenda), was its hybrid nature with a strong, overarching logic. Indeed, *Modern Painters* is simultaneously a work of art criticism that targeted contemporary English painting, a treatise aimed at artists (complete with numerous explanatory sketches on the geological structure of mountains and atmospheric phenomena), and a history of painting that featured personal, detailed analysis of masterpieces. Ruskin's theoretical ideas went hand-in-hand with a direct, thorough knowledge of his chosen examples, for he was himself an artist who executed extraordinary watercolors. His aesthetic system was, at least at first, oriented toward landscape painting, which proved significant in terms of his ideas on the relationship between artist and nature. Rejecting affectation and

theatricality in art, in search of references on which he could base the painting of his own times, Ruskin rejected the ideals of both the Renaissance (which he felt sacrificed too much to material beauty and thus lacked spiritual loftiness) and the classical period (which had frozen nature into a fixed style). The parallel that has often been made between the detailed precision of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and Ruskin's writings is only partly accurate. In certain respects, *Modern Painters* is a hymn of praise to Turner, and Ruskin was less concerned with detail than with truth. "In a tree," he wrote, "it is more important to give the appearance of energy and elasticity in the limbs, which is indicative of growth and life, than any particular character of leaf or texture of bough."⁷ According to Ruskin, the path that modern art should take was marked by the sincerity of the gaze that artists brought to nature—a respectful translation of beauty would produce the crucial quality of "truth." The moral conception behind this aesthetic pitched Ruskin's "naturalism" against nineteenth-century materialism: nature was perceived here as an expression of divine perfection, which artists must interpret with fervor. Ruskin's efforts at social reform, which occupied the end of his life, were marked by a vision of industrial society as creating an antagonism between mankind and nature. From this standpoint, an artist's observation of the world was designed not to imitate or reproduce it, but to assimilate its constituent principles. Illusionism therefore had to be banished. Dismissing English history painting, and criticizing the modern French school for its exaggerated penchant for pictorial effects, Ruskin posited imagination as the necessary condition for genius, its crucial function being "the intuitive perception of ultimate truth."⁸ By 1857, with his criticism of Millais's painting of *A Dream of the Past: Sir Isumbras at the Ford* (1856–1857, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight), Ruskin was



Fig. 6
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
*The First Anniversary of
the Death of Beatrice*, 1853

Watercolor, 16 1/2 × 24 in.
(42 × 61 cm)
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

moving away from the Pre-Raphaelites, whom he had supported right from the early 1850s.

Ruskin's reputation, however, did not really extend beyond England until the end of the nineteenth century. When La Sizeranne published *Ruskin et la religion de la beauté* in 1897, he was presenting the critic's ideas to a generation that was only remotely familiar with him.⁹ The revival of interest was linked to enthusiasm for the British "aesthetic movement," as recounted in a book by Gabriel Mourey, *Passé le Détroit*.¹⁰ The connection between the Pre-Raphaelite movement and Symbolism is problematic, due not only to the chronological gap but also to the way in which each movement was conceptualized through various commentaries. During the Symbolist era, what was known of Pre-Raphaelitism corresponded to the later development of that trend, as primarily manifested in the work of Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898). Although Hunt remained faithful to the minute detail of his early style, Rossetti, who had abandoned oils for watercolor in the 1850s (fig. 6), almost exclusively painted figures of women shown in half-length or bust-length, in a broad style with a deep, intense palette inspired by the Venetians. His saturated, unreal, deliberately archaic space, his sculptural construction of figures that veered between beauty and deformity, and his compulsive depiction of women with rounded forms, fleshy lips, and thick, undone hair ultimately placed Rossetti at the antithesis of Ruskin's precepts (fig. 7).

The decisive influence on Rossetti in this respect has now been shown to be George Frederic Watts (1817–1904), who adopted a Venetian palette after his trip to Italy in 1853. Watts, who was friendly with the Pre-Raphaelites although not one of them, was an artist whose place in the Symbolist universe has long been underestimated. Yet many aspects of his work prefigure the philosophical ambitions of fin-de-siècle artistic reactions against materialism. In an article written in 1872, entitled "The Present Conditions of Art," Watts posited the principle of the quest for an equivalence between music, poetry, and painting that would lead to an art corresponding to the highest literature both in terms of intention and effect.¹¹ Similarly, Watts's admiration for Turner, which from 1880 onwards translated into a more allusive handling, and his dark palette that led to the creation of ambiguous spaces made him a distant associate of the formal developments through which many painters cultivated mystery and indeterminacy in the 1890s. His *The Sower of the Systems* (fig. 8) is typical of this latter style: the pastel-like powderiness of the paint surface is dotted with brilliant sparks over sheaves of colors, alluding to the whirling gesture of a demiurge sowing cosmic worlds.

Watts's influence was not necessarily limited to Britain. He was the most widely noticed English artist at the universal expositions held in

Paris in 1878 and 1889, while in 1883 several of his works were shown at Galerie Georges Petit in the same city. From an early date, his output seemed to be marked by cyclical, monumental ambitions, notably in the decorative schemes he was commissioned to execute for the Houses of Parliament in London (1848–1853). He usually worked on a large scale, often orchestrating his canvases in series through which he could address the philosophical and religious questions facing humanity. Thus as early as 1848 he devised a never-completed plan for a monumental decoration that would depict the history of the world. This tendency toward the

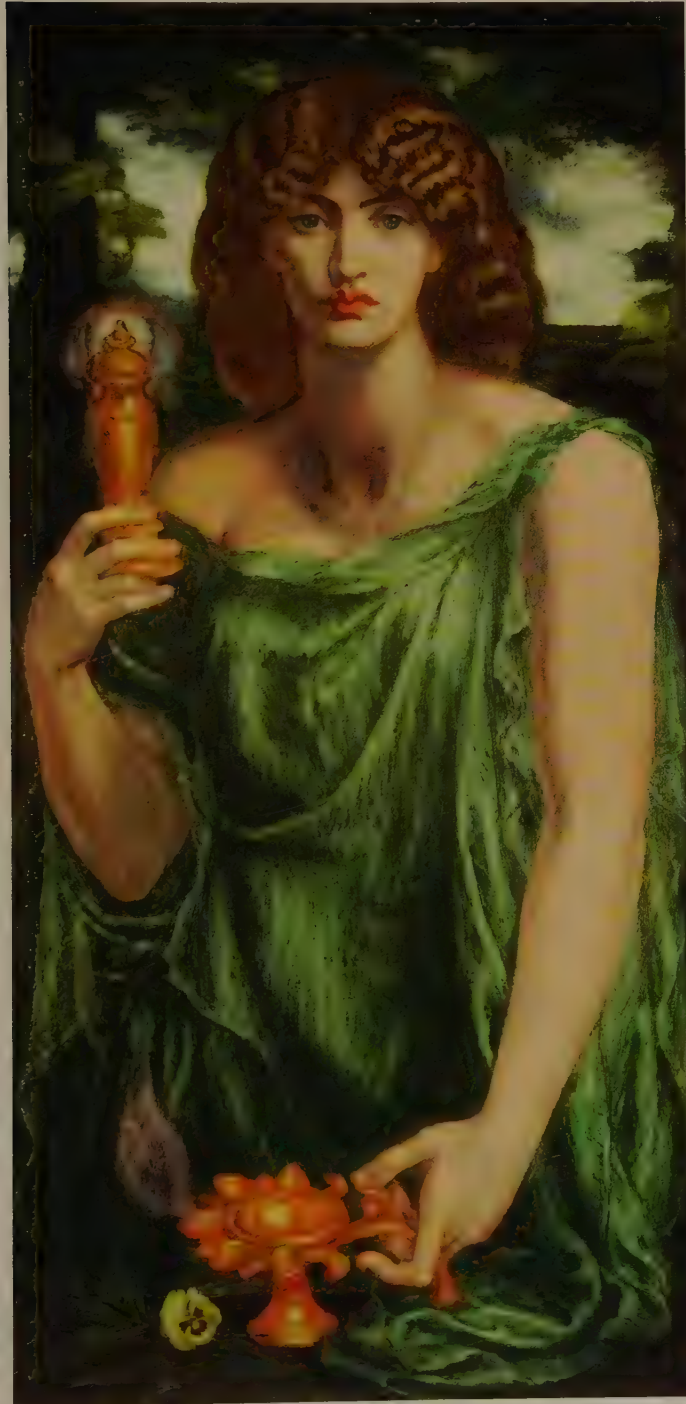


Fig. 7
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Mnemosyne, 1881

Oil on canvas, 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 23 in.
(122.6 × 58.4 cm)

Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft
Memorial Collection, Delaware Art
Museum, Delaware

colossal, along with an architectural approach to an initiatory type of painting, would subsequently be one of the major aspirations of Symbolist culture (even if largely through theoretical explanation rather than concrete projects).

Steeped in esoteric culture yet ultimately quite skeptical, Watts incarnated perfectly the intellectual speculations and uncertainties of his day. While he remained for the most part faithful to allegorical painting, he reinvigorated it through a personal approach that in no way sacrificed illustrative accuracy. Astonishingly precocious, he was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools as early as 1835 and lived in Italy from 1843 to 1847. His training under sculptor William Behnes and his study of the Elgin marbles at the British Museum made him sensitive to ancient art. Later in his career he would develop a style that combined a Venetian palette with Greek visual forms. His example certainly played a crucial role in the revival of the concept of the Ideal in painting in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this respect it bears repeating that, for a Symbolist generation on the continent seeking to shake off the hold of realism and naturalism, a return to the Ideal was inspired above all by the example of English painting. Artists born in the 1860s saw English art as an original expression of ideal beauty rooted in Greco-Roman sources yet distinct from the academic tradition that seemed so outmoded to them. Thus when Joséphin Péladan wanted to promote an Idealist revival in Paris, he thought first of Watts and the Pre-Raphaelites.

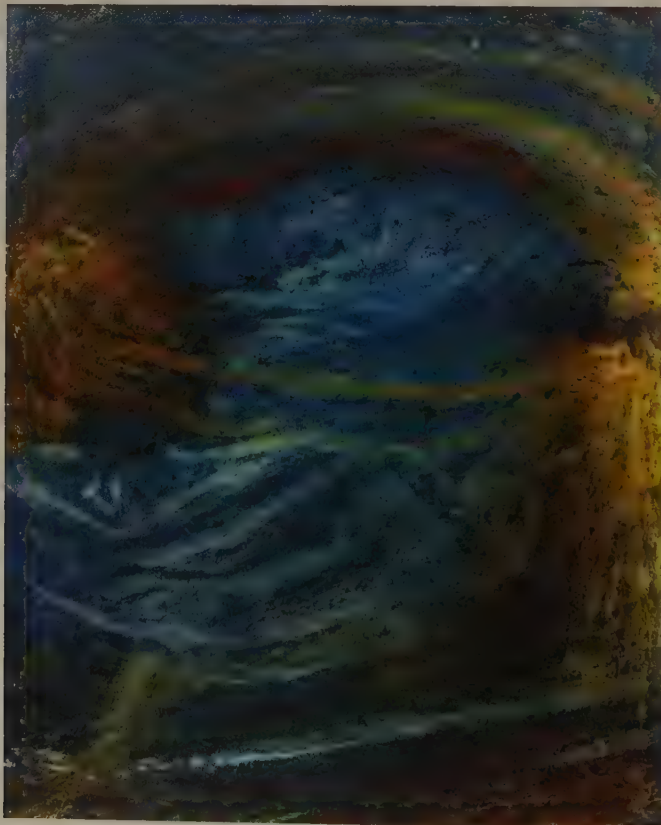


Fig. 8
George Frederic Watts
The Sower of the Systems,
c. 1902–1903

Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 × 20 3/4 in.
(60 × 53 cm)

Watts Gallery, Compton



In 1856, when Rossetti was moving very slowly away from the deliberately rigid medievalism of his early period, Burne-Jones and William Morris (1834–1896) decided to become his pupils. Burne-Jones (fig. 9), whose technical abilities soon outstripped those of his teacher, would subsequently accommodate the late Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic to the compositional and dimensional requirements of history painting. Like Watts and Moreau, he reinvigorated imagery and was open to subjects with a philosophical bent or concept, the most famous example of which is his *Perseus Cycle*, inspired by Morris's poem "Earthly Paradise"; furthermore, the paintings were initially supposed to be given decorative borders based on a motif by Morris himself (1877–1898, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, and Southampton Art Gallery, Southampton, fig. 10). During the Symbolist period, and more especially in the final decade of the nineteenth century, Burne-Jones's work was widely disseminated through prints and illustrations (fig. 11). It met with genuine international success and became a reference point for younger artists, who saw it as an art stylistically rooted in the past while raising intriguing issues of the relationship between literature and the fine arts. For example, Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) was strongly influenced by Moreau while studying in Paris, yet the paintings that first earned him fame display even greater

Fig. 9
Edward Burne-Jones
The Mirror of Venus,
1873–1877

Oil on canvas, 47 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
(1.22 × 1.99 m)

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon

influence from Burne-Jones. Rossetti, meanwhile, had forged his own style by progressively imbuing the quattrocento Pre-Raphaelitism with a Renaissance spirit. It was distinctly Renaissance feel that would seep into the Symbolism of the 1890s via Burne-Jones. In England in particular, many artists had adopted this aesthetic more or less belatedly (fig. 12), forming a clearly identifiable core who opposed the dominant values of naturalism, and whose example would be cited in militant Symbolist texts all across Europe.

The issue of literary subject-matter and the aspersions cast by Symbolism on depictions of the contemporary world obviously played a key role here, but it nevertheless remains to be seen whether there might be a connection, beyond strictly formal correlations, between certain fundamental features of Symbolism and some original principles of Pre-Raphaelitism that survived into its late expression. Ruskin was particularly wary of the pure expression of personality in painting. The determined quest for a new approach led the Pre-Raphaelites to unify the pictorial surface by abandoning the compositional technique that called for hierarchical differences in brushwork and impasto within a single painting depending on the item to be depicted. In Hunt's work, for example, hands, faces, garments, and distant landscapes are all handled in a similar, undifferentiated manner. While on the one hand this technique



Fig. 10
Edward Burne-Jones
*Perseus Cycle: The Doom
Fulfilled*, c. 1884–1885

Gouache on canvas, 61 1/2 × 55 1/2 in.
(1.54 × 1.39 m)

Southampton Art Gallery, Southampton

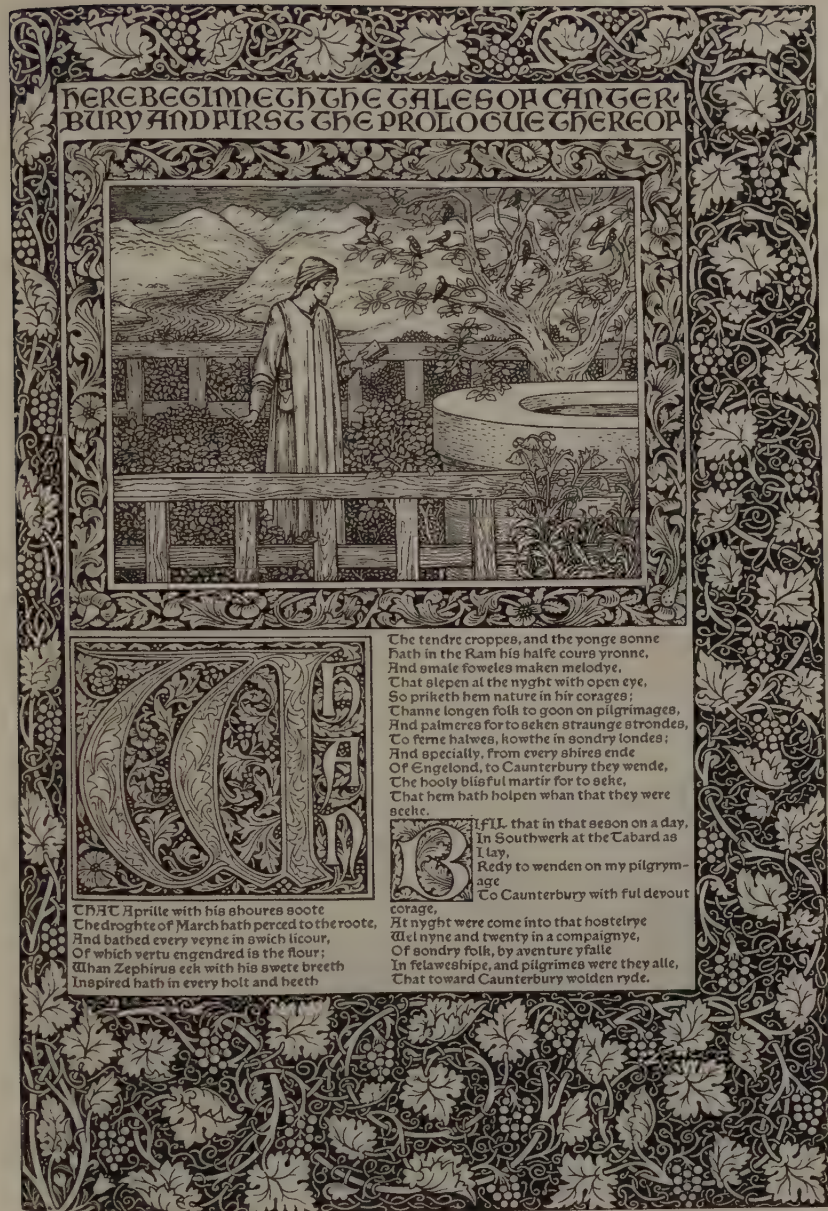


Fig. 11
 William Morris and
 Edward Burne-Jones
*The Works of Geoffrey
 Chaucer*, published by
 Kelmscott Press

Woodcut
 William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow
 Illustrations by Burne-Jones, decorative
 designs and typeface by Morris

produced details that generated an extraordinary impression of reality, it also resulted in a uniform pictorial surface that eliminated visible brushstrokes, thick paint, and any trace of the artist's physical gesture. On seeing Hunt's *Awakening Consciousness* (1852, private collection) in 1857, Prosper Mérimée expressed consternation, objecting that the uniformly detailed handling of every part of the work dispersed the beholder's attention and overthrew the perceptual code that usually made it possible to see the correspondence between composition and narrative content.¹²

This dispersal of the gaze, although attenuated, would survive in the work of Burne-Jones, whose large compositions also employed an extremely rich decorative vocabulary and a limited palette that, together, tended to homogenize a painting by drawing attention away from the figures. The cohesiveness of a composition went hand-in-hand with a uniformly smooth pictorial surface. Everything that might give body to a painting and simultaneously convey the physical presence of the artist—brushwork, impasto, density—was carefully maintained at a distance, for it too obviously signaled the manual nature of the artist's task. The great debate between naturalism and Symbolism thus concerned not only the issue of subject matter, but also the way that a highly sober technique could bring painting closer to the realm of the spiritual by becoming less tactile, consequently distancing itself from the allegedly less noble realm of the senses. On the other hand, as early as 1866 Émile Zola felt that the art exhibited in that year's Salon was too cerebral and visionary, dominated by moodiness.¹³ Just as Pierre Cabanis argued that thought was a secretion of the brain, so Zola was claiming that art was a secretion of the body and the intellect when he stressed the notion of "temperament." Even before the official emergence of Symbolism, then, all the elements of the battles to come had been mobilized. All opposition to naturalism would have to reject a love of painting's fleshiness. The Symbolist credo would thereby be summoned to adopt, in the name of a dematerialization of painting, one of the founding precepts of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.



Fig. 12
Robert Anning Bell
(1863–1933)
*Fortune-Telling (La Bonne
Aventure)*, 1898

Oil on canvas, 21 × 17 in.
(53.5 × 43 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898)

In 1881 or shortly after, Georges Seurat painted on one of the little wood panels that he used for his studies from nature a strange sketch of a landscape in the midst of which he included his version of *The Poor Fisherman* by Puvis de Chavannes (figs. 13 and 14). This composition, divided into two almost equal halves, seems to sum up the young artist's aspirations, which at that time he probably felt were contradictory. On the left there is a patch of Impressionist landscape showing a house and flowering trees, while on the right there is an easel with the Puvis de Chavannes painting copied from memory. The rectangular format of *The Poor Fisherman* is here rendered as square, which allows for a kind of illusionist scene to the right, in the form of a dark vertical line that depicts the edge of the canvas and confirms that we are dealing here with a painting within a painting rather than two compositions side by side. This sketchy *Poor Fisherman* stands out from the gray wall in the background, and Seurat made a point of signing it "Puvisse de Chavannes." Was it intended as a joke or a manifesto? Whatever the case, it suggests a double concern, directed simultaneously toward the luminosity of Impressionism and toward the sober, decorative style of an artist of the previous generation, whose late-acquired fame was then growing. Five years later, commenting on Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1886, The Art Institute of Chicago), Félix Fénéon would describe figures "invested with a hieratic, concise draftsmanship, systematically handled from the front, the back, or in profile, seated at right angles, stretched out horizontally, or standing upright: like a modernizing Puvis."¹⁴ An alliance between Impressionist coloring and mural-like composition was sought by several Symbolist painters in the later 1880s. That is what Gauguin and Charles Laval (1862–1894) would deliberately attempt to achieve in their Martinique landscapes in 1887. Similarly, it was a Puvis-like aesthetic around which the Nabis, especially Maurice Denis (1870–1943), would initially rally.

Unlike Gustave Moreau, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes was not a private artist. He showed regularly at the annual Salon, and then from 1891 onwards at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, of which he was a

founding member. After 1883, his public exhibitions were limited almost exclusively to large decorative canvases that would soon be installed in the buildings for which they were commissioned, thus confirming the dominance of monumental works over easel paintings in his oeuvre. His career and, to large extent, his life were bound up in the history of the vast decorative schemes he executed, from the stairway of the Amiens museum in 1864–1865 to the Panthéon in Paris, which remained unfinished at his death in 1898 (fig. 15).¹⁵ At the height of his fame, his work



Fig. 13
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
The Poor Fisherman, 1881

Oil on canvas, 61 1/4 × 75 3/4 in.
(1.56 × 1.93 m)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 14
Georges Seurat
Landscape with The Poor Fisherman, 1881

Oil on panel, 6 1/2 × 9 3/4 in.
(16.5 × 25 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 15
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
Saint Geneviève at Prayer,
1877

Oil on canvas applied to wall, 182 × 87 in.
(4.62 × 2.22 m)
Panthéon, Paris



Puvīs
de Chavannes
1877

DÈS SON ÂGE LE PLUS TENDRE, SAINTE GENEVIÈVE
DONNA SES MARQUES D'UNE PIÉTÉ ARDENTE
ET D'ADMIRATION TOUS CEUX QU'ELLE VOYAIT

could be seen fairly regularly. Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris hosted a one-man show of his work in 1887, and then again in 1894 (the latter following an earlier show in the gallery's New York branch). Along with Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes was the French artist most often cited by painters of the Symbolist generation. Alix d'Anethan (fig. 16),¹⁶ Alexandre Séon, and Alphonse Sobert in France, Serge Pahnke in Switzerland, and Albert Ciamberlani in Belgium were influenced to the point of imitating his work. This international fame had nevertheless been preceded by a long period of obscurity during the artist's youth, following a highly vagabond training. He was certainly influenced at first by the nineteenth-century Idealist school in Lyon, notably by the hieratic feel and architectural forms found in the work of Hippolyte Flandrin (1809–1864). Toward the end of his life, however, Puvis seemed to stress the importance of his second trip to Italy, undertaken in 1848 with artist Louis Bauderon de Vermoron (1809–1870), who would introduce Puvis to Delacroix that same year.¹⁷ As with Moreau, the pilgrimage to Italy once again became acceptable, after having been shunned by a generation of French Romantics. Puvis also declared that he had little interest in the painterly "craft" that Henri Scheffer (1798–1862) had taught him in the early days.¹⁸ Disappointed in the studio where Delacroix taught (which closed two weeks after Puvis arrived), and also disappointed in Thomas Couture, Puvis really only became part of the art scene starting with the Salon of 1859—his earlier submissions, from 1851 onward, had been systematically rejected.

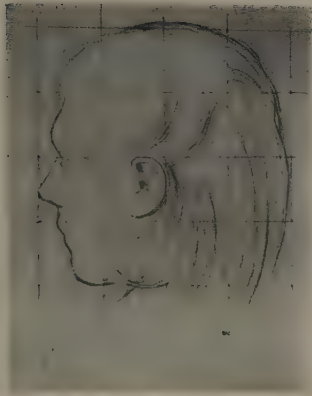
The frescoes that Théodore Chassériau had executed in the Cour des Comptes (1848) were the key influence on Puvis's decision to turn to mural painting. His original style, however, did not emerge right away; only progressively did chiaroscuro give way to flat surfaces of color, fully affirmed in the decorative scheme executed for the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon (exhibited in the Salons of 1884 and 1886) yet already perceptible



Fig. 16
Alix d'Anethan
*The Holy Women at the
Tomb*, 1892

Oil on canvas, 43 × 57 ³/₄ in.
(1.09 × 1.47 m)

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts
de Belgique, Brussels



in *The Poor Fisherman* of 1881 (bought by the government in 1887 for the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris). It would be pointless to scour the few surviving comments by Puvis for any indication that his aesthetic approach was related to a Symbolist state of mind—totally alien to him were the deliberate thematic elaboration and semantic ambiguity typical of Moreau. Legibility of composition and clarity of imagery—in traditionally allegorical decorative contexts as well as easel paintings—lent his oeuvre a special quality in so far as it perfectly suited its times even as it occupied a marginal place. Whereas his success prompted Joséphin Péladan in 1895 to dub him “the johnny-be-quick of municipal allegory,”¹⁹ the Symbolists had earlier viewed his monumental public décors as a reflection of his most significant easel paintings, namely the pessimistic trilogy of *The Prodigal Son* (1879, Bührlé Foundation, Zurich), *The Poor Fisherman*, and *Orpheus* (1883, private collection, Paris), all of which were well known in cultivated Parisian circles. Puvis de Chavannes was thus not perceived solely as an artist who reinvigorated mural painting based on strictly formal criteria. The themes of his most famous works alluded to a golden age and his style was always perceived

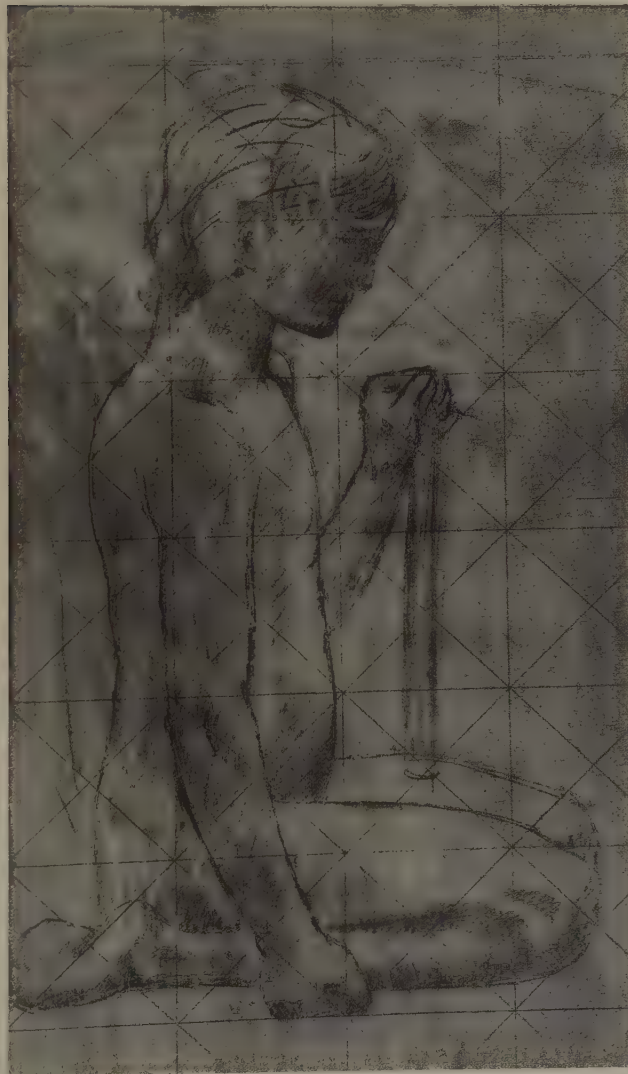


Fig. 17
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
Head of Young Girl, study for
*The Childhood of Saint
Geneviève*, 1876–1877

Pencil, 13 1/2 × 10 3/4 in.
(34 × 27 cm)

Musée Fabre, Montpellier

Fig. 18
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
Seated Youth (study for
Chemistry, allegorical mural,
Boston Public Library)
1895–1896

Charcoal on tracing paper,
37 3/4 × 22 1/2 in. (96 × 57 cm)
Private collection

as solidly linked to the idea of Apollonian calm. In a final incarnation, the serene vision of a timeless equilibrium between mankind and nature was conveyed by Puvis in a way that would nourish an entire wing of Symbolism: whereas Böcklin insisted on a tumultuous, anxious vision of paganism, Puvis produced the image of a timeless world, nostalgia for which would spawn the fin-de-siècle pessimism that considered the emergence of industrial society to be an unpardonable rupture with primordial harmony.

Thus before being viewed, from the early twentieth century onward, as the founder of a special kind of classicism, Puvis de Chavannes had developed the basis of a style in which linear deformation and an affirmation of the flatness of the canvas were seen as consequences of a mural approach. "I condensed, squeezed, packed," he would say at the end of his life in describing his method.²⁰ In 1896 he apparently exhibited seven to eight hundred drawings in the blue salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts.²¹ This should be seen less as a response to detractors who, starting with Jules Castagnary, criticized him for a certain awkwardness and even faultiness of draftsmanship, than as a demonstration of the role he had played in elaborating the formal vocabulary of the final years of the century: His drawing technique of implying volume without describing it led to a simplification that would be adopted by Gauguin, just as the division of the pictorial surface into a rectilinear pattern (dictated by a concern for balance between architecture and decoration) would influence Seurat, Ferdinand Hodler (fig. 19), and Émile Bernard—the latter radicalizing Puvis's vocabulary with a key Synthetist work such as *Madeleine in the Bois d'Amour* (fig. 20).

We know that Puvis never worked in fresco. His murals were painted on canvas that would then be affixed to the wall. However, the play of visual equivalencies between fresco technique and his own work—one of the features of his style—led to an aesthetics of transposition, an allusive approach to color that, independently of the requirements of a mural



Fig. 19
Ferdinand Hodler
The Good Samaritan, 1886

Oil on canvas, 28 × 43 in.
(71.5 × 109.5 cm)
Private collection



painting, became in itself a sign of rejection of the dominant realism, as was the Symbolists' bent toward abstraction. Henri de Régnier perceived a timeless quality to the pale hues employed by Puvis; in 1890 he exclaimed, "How extraordinary is this painting over which something invisible has passed, delightfully effacing it, pushing it into a serene distance, as though back into a mysterious era, giving the impression of having been otherwise, ridding itself of all brilliant, immediate sparkle in order to be more sacred through age and dream-like distance."²² This mental distancing was not merely Régnier's interpretation, since it was part of the artist's very method, which called upon recollection and involved recomposition based on selective memory. Referring to the background of *Ludus Pro Patria* (1881, Musée de Picardie, Amiens), executed from the memory of a local landscape glimpsed from the window of a train, Puvis declared, "The vision was so strong for me that it seemed any further observation on the spot would have weakened the impression, would have run the risk of later offering just a diminished, unclear, lifeless image."²³ Gauguin—who rehabilitated arbitrariness after seeking the objectivity associated with the Impressionist period—would adopt this underlying mental process when he elaborated his own Synthetist approach.

Fig. 20
Émile Bernard
*Madeleine in the Bois
d'Amour*, 1888

Oil on canvas, 54 1/4 × 64 1/4 in.
(1.38 × 1.63 m)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gustave Moreau (1828–1898)

Celebrated by the Surrealists and then rediscovered in the 1960s although never really forgotten, during his own lifetime Gustave Moreau was the object of a veritable cult that took on a special quality due to limited access to his oeuvre. Indeed, Moreau no longer exhibited at the Salon after 1880, being unhappy with the critics' reaction. Opportunities to see his work thus became quite rare. Only one painting, *Orpheus* (1865, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), bought by the government at the Salon of 1866, was on view at the Musée du Luxembourg; apart from the Universal Exposition of 1889, in which two of his paintings were included in the centennial show of French art, Moreau only exhibited twice more during his lifetime: twenty-five watercolors in 1881 at the Société des Aquarellistes, and another sixty-five watercolors, based on La Fontaine's *Fables* and commissioned by a collector from Marseille, at the Goupil Gallery in 1886. The imagery of the *Fables* was unrepresentative of his output, but the 1886 show nevertheless also included six watercolors on other subjects (fig. 21) and it constituted the only solo show organized during the artist's lifetime. Such parsimony was surprising on the part of artist who never abandoned the ambitiousness related to large-scale paintings, which were still associated with the status of history painting—Moreau clung to the idea that his oeuvre would suddenly appear all at once, after his death. That was why he bequeathed his studio to the nation, in order to found the Musée Gustave Moreau, as it is still known today. The reclusive life he led helped to spread the myth of a private, remote artist, even though engravings and photographs disseminated his most famous works fairly widely.

As a disciple of Théodore Chassériau (1819–1856), Moreau inherited the mantle of Romanticism, from which he retained a predilection for violent or disturbing subjects, already visible in a painting such as *Slaves Thrown to the Fish* (*Esclaves Jetés aux Murènes*, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris), a sadistic, Piranesian work for which some of the preparatory studies date from 1850. His early efforts were small paintings in the spirit of Delacroix, although right from the start the Delacroix-like dash seemed to congeal in more elaborate works as Moreau



attempted to fit the mold of history painting. After failing twice to win the Prix de Rome, and shaken by the death of Chassériau, in 1857 he embarked on a tour of Italy. Over a two-year period he visited Rome, Florence, Milan, Venice, Siena, Pisa, and Naples, executing numerous copies and acquiring an amazingly extensive formal vocabulary from old masters and from the vestiges of Pompeii. This period is dotted with watercolor landscapes inspired by Corot. Throughout his career Moreau would continue to employ this repertoire, constantly enriched with borrowings from a wide range of sources, culminating in a stylistic syncretism that ultimately ran counter to academic tradition.

Although he never achieved the coherence peculiar to history painting, it was history painting that provided the underlying structure to

Fig. 21
Gustave Moreau
*Péri (The Sacred Elephant,
The Sacred Lake)*, c.
1878–1882

Watercolor, 22 1/2 × 17 1/4 in.
(57 × 43.5 cm)

National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

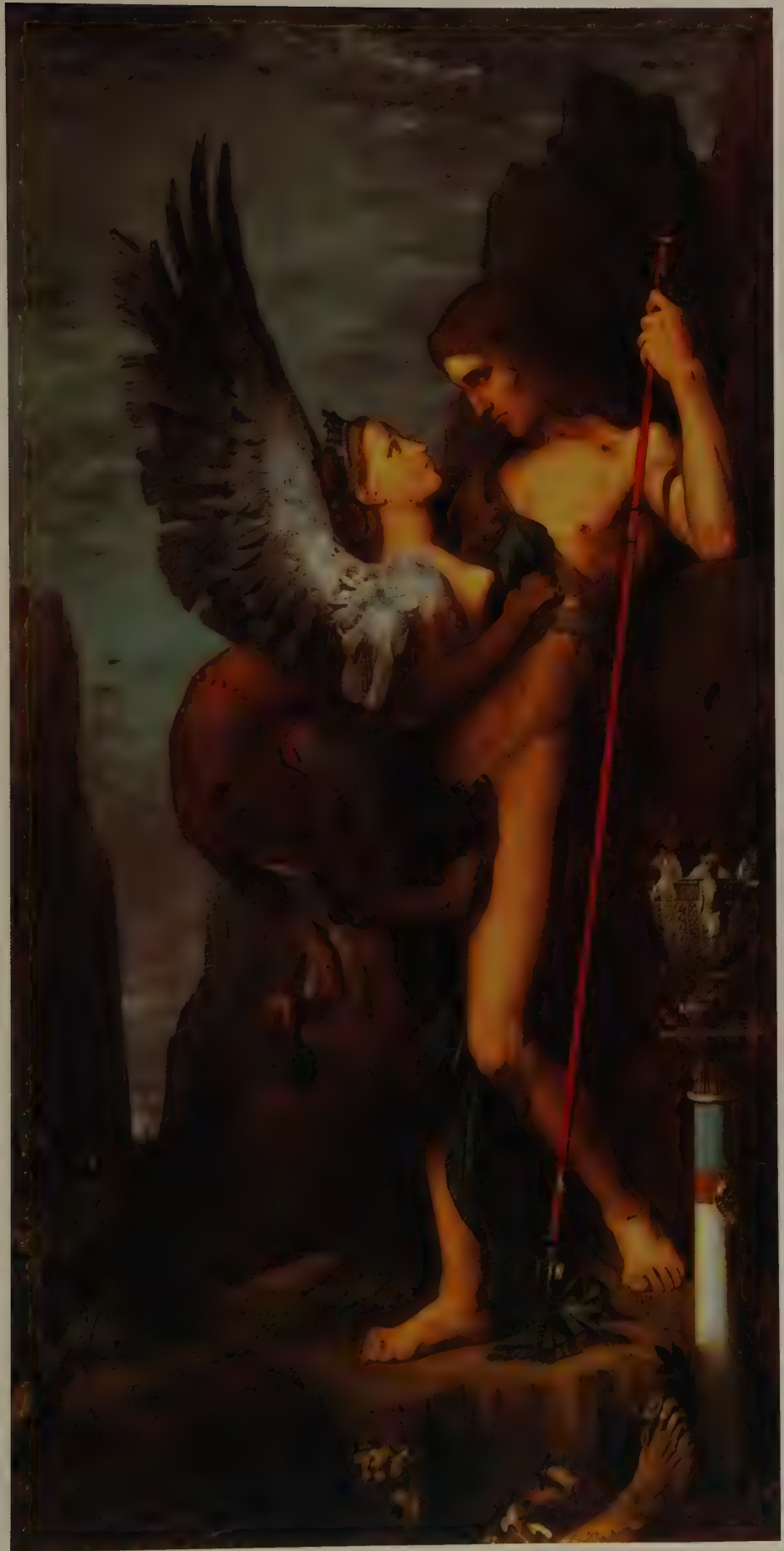
Moreau's oeuvre. His opposition to the trends that led to the overthrow of the hierarchy of genres in the last two decades of the nineteenth century never became an open battle, rather taking the form of an unusually tense determination to preserve a scholarly approach in which a subject, chosen on the basis of its moral significance, would be handled in terms of a staged composition based upon multiple visual and literary sources. Superficial analyses have always presented Moreau as a painter who quite simply ignored the developments of his own day; even Georges Bataille, lauding Moreau as a forerunner of Surrealism, could not prevent himself from describing the painter as "retarded."²⁴ Moreau's anachronism, if anachronism there were, lay above all in his loyalty to an approach that was henceforth associated only with totally sclerotic works of art.

Moreau's attention to subject matter is crucial—among the writings that fill his notebooks are many ideas for paintings. Some were quite concise, while others were more developed, testifying to research of a literary type. These ideas, whose fleeting nature he attempted to grasp by scrawling in haste, were visual in nature right from the start. They already indicate the mental existence of a painting as a preconceived image, fully conveying the expression of "motionless dream"²⁵ that he used to describe the ideal he sought. They also demonstrate that Moreau's point of departure was always the espousal of a theme via painting. The specificity of his oeuvre sprang from a tension between the flow of imagination—his "personal outpouring"²⁶—and the need to arrive at an intelligible expression of the subject with all its moral implications. The effusive notes, plans, and sketches therefore had to be channeled, at some point, into concrete expression—a painting—formulated according to accepted syntax. In *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (fig. 22), the space is basically narrative—the long trail along the mountain that leads Oedipus to the gates of the city starts far in the background. At the foot of a plinth topped by an antique vase (taken from Piranesi), royal attributes such as crown and purple cloak, combined with scattered bones, illustrate the political implications of the imminent ordeal. This rhetoric is nevertheless complicated by Moreau's new skill at horror: in the foreground, a hand clenched to a rock, stiff and already green with rot, is shown near the foot of another corpse with an anatomical coldness that sweeps from our minds any recollection of the languor of Romantic death. The position of these limbs, amputated by the frame, points to them as fragments of dismembered bodies and suggests cruel mutilation with icy, singular power.

The Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris has preserved a small collection of wax figures used by the artist as models for the key characters of certain paintings, such as Hercules, Salome, Prometheus. The figurines are modeled fairly roughly, since they served mainly for preparatory studies,

Fig. 22
Gustave Moreau
Oedipus and the Sphinx, 1864

Oil on canvas, 81 1/4 × 41 1/4 in.
(2.06 × 1.05 m)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York



helping to assess the effect of different spatial arrangements. Two paintings exhibited at the Salon of 1876, executed simultaneously, were prepared using these models. Like a stage designer, Moreau blocked out the movements of his protagonist within a preconceived space that was either purely mental or composed from a backdrop that might be a sketch of the canvas itself—in the different versions of *Salome* the painted figure of the dancer is always approximately the same size as the wax figurine. The goal here was not only to refine compositional details, but to find a bodily pose that most closely conveyed the culminating point of the drama and consequently corresponded to the instant when the moral import becomes clearest. Moreau was thereby respecting a tradition linked him to neo-classicism and early Romanticism, that is to say to David and Géricault. Strangely, this aspect only firmly entered in his oeuvre toward the middle of his career, precisely starting from the Salon of 1876, where he finally encountered success. The two versions of *Salome* that he exhibited there, an oil (Armand Hammer Collection, Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, UCLA, Los Angeles) and a watercolor (*The Apparition*, fig. 23), testify to his quest for maximum dramatic intensity via gestural expression. *The Apparition*, meanwhile, combines a magnificent imaginary reconstitution with Moreau's crucial choice of the critical instant, yielding an interpretation that violates the rules of plausibility specific to history painting: his idea of suspending the head of John the Baptist in space, conducting a silent dialogue with Salome, functions like a commentary that shifts the scene onto another plane, transcending the letter of the gospel.

Despite this liberty with respect to the subject, reality retained its weightiness in the few oils that Moreau actually completed, leading to a stylistic ambivalence that juxtaposes anatomical realism with ornamentation. The evolution of Moreau's oeuvre, which tended toward a process of perpetual incompleteness,²⁷ followed a progressive abandonment of the requirements of history painting to the benefit of canvases steeped in the artist's own mental universe. Previously, however, he had written of Oedipus as "a figure who must be slavishly copied from life, because here the more we approach the man as he is, the more we attain the noble and the ideal."²⁸ Indeed, certain details in the painting, such as the shadow of the spear on Oedipus's arm, display a disturbing verisimilitude. The apparent contradiction reflects a profound trait of Moreau's personality: when he defined the painter as a "workman who assembled dreams,"²⁹ he was using a technical vocabulary alien to the sphere of art, because it alluded to the assembly of the various parts of a machine. This extraordinarily modern image bears within it a definition of art in which the creative faculty rests less on conscious will than on an approach that

Fig. 23
Gustave Moreau
The Apparition, 1876

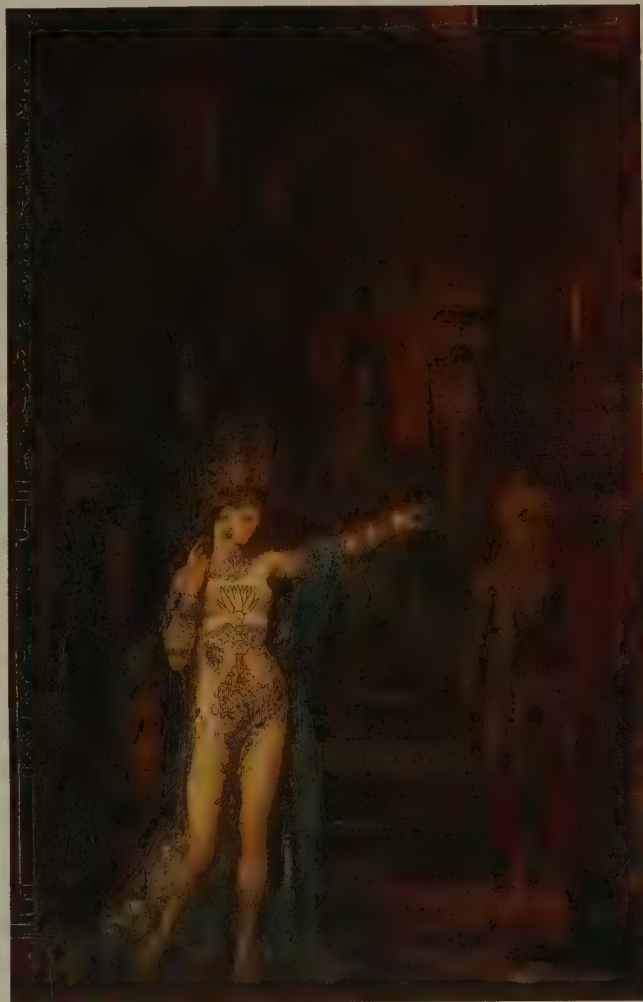
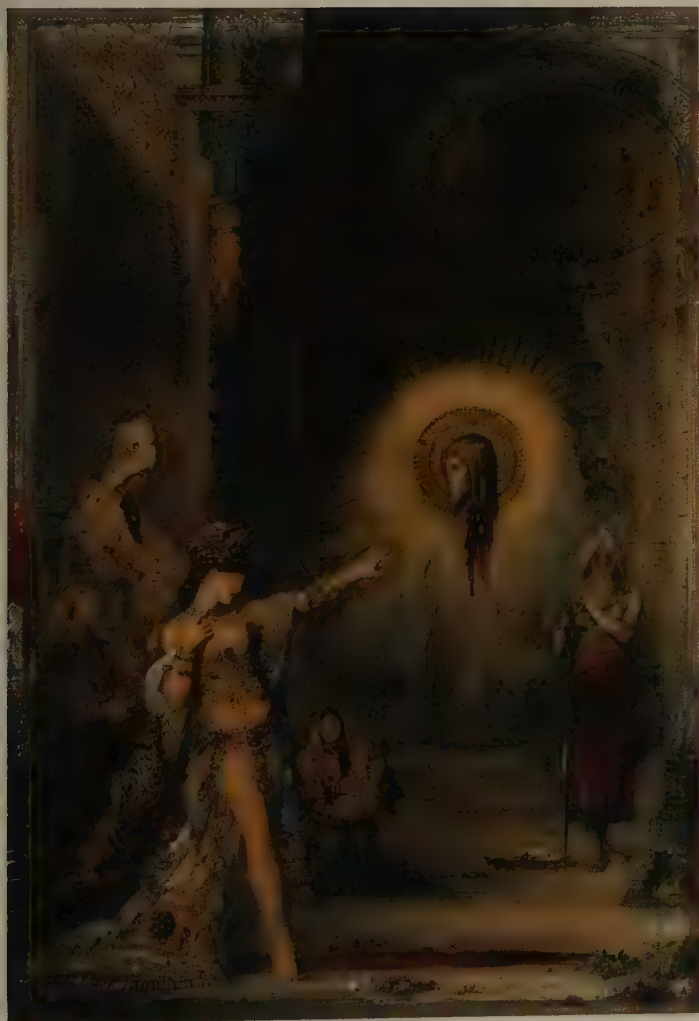
Watercolor, 41 3/4 x 28 1/2 in.
(106 x 72.2 cm)
Musée d'Orsay Collection, Department
of Prints and Drawings, Musée du
Louvre, Paris

Fig. 24
Gustave Moreau
Salome, known as
Salome Tattooed, c. 1874 (?)
and reworked later

Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 23 1/2 in.
(92 x 60 cm)
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

retains those aspects specific to the imagination. Moreau's pile of scribbles on potential subjects, his sketches, copies, and drawings (based on widely ranging publications from illustrated tales of travel to plates from zoological volumes), and his nature studies and recollected landscapes³⁰ all fed into a composite art. This art was all the more unsettling because it also mingled the most diverse allusions, including ones on painterly technique—passages from Mantegna, Venetian coloring, Corot's skies, Delacroix's Romantic energy, and so on. Several layers of history thus coexist within his oeuvre.

For *Salome*, we know that Moreau employed assistants who did the perspective drawing and sketched the setting. Georges Desvallières reported that when he entered the studio after Moreau's death, he discovered several dozen easels with half-completed paintings, featuring "ornamental details scrupulously traced onto wonderful impasto."³¹ A decorative pattern superimposed on a sketch comprising broad patches of well-blended colors is clearly visible in paintings of *Salome* such as the one known as *Salome Tattooed* (fig. 24). The surface of this canvas, whose color and perspective carve out a deep space, is reasserted



through graphic patterning that arose from a method not found in any academic tradition. In many instances toward the end of his life, Moreau added this ornamentation to works painted earlier, but the technique can also be detected in certain details in a watercolor such as *Péri* (fig. 21), which was exhibited and sold during the artist's lifetime. This unusual technique rendered visible the first, freer draft beneath a grid of black-and-white decoration, an "imprisonment of signs and scrolls" that Robert de Montesquiou described as "cabalistic meanders."³² Joris-Karl Huysmans, in his first article on Moreau—a review of the Salon of 1880—mentioned the poem "Parisian Dream" from Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, and pointed out that the poet dedicated his rocky, supernatural landscape to Constantin Guys, "the painter of modern life." Opium, catalepsy, and spirituality: the character of a "mystic caught in the midst of Paris," as construed by Huysmans, was imbued with Baudelairean modernity, thereby celebrating the aesthetics of artifice, the oneiric realm born of the artist's mind when confronted with the tumultuous life of the city.³³ According to Huysmans, Hippolyte Taine's theory of the importance of "milieu," or environment, could apply to nineteenth-century geniuses if it were reversed: great artists, far from being the product of their times, were a reaction to the decrepitude of an irredeemably ugly and immoral era.³⁴ Here myth became a refuge, and the use made of it took on a very different meaning from the one it might have had in history painting. Ary Renan, a friend of Moreau's, felt that this approach to myth reflected not only the contribution of modern archaeology but also a symbolic perception of things.³⁵ Indeed, Moreau wanted to attain the substance of legend by ignoring narrative convention, by "giving myths all the intensity they can hold, not trapping them in periods and molds or historical styles," as he himself put it.³⁶ The novelty of this conception was amply recognized during the artist's own lifetime. Jean Lorrain claimed that Moreau's art established a new link with humanity's timeless religious traditions in a world henceforth marked by decline. He called Moreau "a scholar, solely preoccupied with ethnographic sources and origins of myths, comparing and unraveling their searing roots."³⁷ According to Lorrain, Moreau forged his own personal syncretism. Hence Moreau's oeuvre was dominated by theogonic myth, whereas Arnold Böcklin would evoked the primordial energy and power of nature.

Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901)

Dismissed from the history of modern art by Julius Meier-Graefe, who virulently attacked him in a still-famous book,³⁸ Arnold Böcklin was to the German world what Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes were to France. At the turn of the century he was a veritable cult figure in Vienna and in the Symbolist circles that poet Stefan George created around his art review *Blätter für die Kunst* in Berlin. Although Böcklin kept away from Paris after 1870, given his aversion for France, his reputation was not limited to German-speaking lands. By 1883, Jules Laforgue, then lector to Empress Augusta in Berlin, cited Böcklin as a major artist; a little later, Péladan included him in a list of artists he hoped to exhibit at the first Salon de la Rose-Croix.³⁹ Critics throughout Europe considered Böcklin to be one of the greatest of contemporary painters, as witnessed by his presence among the main artists invited to the second Venice Biennale in 1897. Yet no important figure emerged from among his disciples except the Swiss artist Albert Welti (1862–1912). On the other hand, there is no doubt that he left his mark on an artist such as Franz von Stuck (1863–1928), who in the Munich of the 1880s must have absorbed the impact of Böcklin's presence there several years earlier (1871–1874). Similarly, the oeuvre of Hans Thoma (1839–1924) is full of echoes of Böcklin.

After taking drawing lessons in Basel, Switzerland, and studying in the Düsseldorf art academy under Johann Wilhelm Schirmer (1807–1863)—who pointed Böcklin in the direction of classical landscape—in 1850 the young artist went to Rome at the urging of the philologist and historian Jacob Burckhardt, also from Basel. Following this first trip, Böcklin constantly returned to Italy, which was then a haven for German artists who sought to reject both academicism and Courbet-style realism. Several of Böcklin's contemporaries, such as Anselm Feuerbach (1829–1880), Hans von Marées (1837–1887), and sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand (1847–1921) decided to move there permanently. After his Roman experience, Böcklin often found himself dissatisfied not only with his home town of Basel but also with Hanover, Munich, Weimar, and Zurich. In 1874 he moved to Florence where he stayed for over a decade—Tuscany would become his adopted country. The role of Burckhardt,

who was Böcklin's mentor until the late 1860s, was crucial in pointing him toward Mediterranean culture, toward an Italy peopled with ghosts of ancient Greece. Yet it was also to Burckhardt, a great specialist in antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, that Böcklin owed his love of sixteenth-century Venetian painters, as well as his interest in various European cultures.

Böcklin's hatred of modern civilization has often been stressed, and his choice of subject-matter based on Greco-Roman mythology seemed to be a refuge allowing him to ignore contemporary society. When his friend Gustave Floerke asked, "Where might a work of art draw inspiration these days?" Böcklin allegedly replied, "In antiquity it drew inspiration from life, but life as it is lived today is a hindrance to creativity. We hardly live at all. Look at our habitat—it barely suffices for survival. We are piled one upon the other in houses that don't belong to us, presented with a landscape cluttered with buildings, dark and airless. . . . From what can we draw inspiration? How can we light up our gaze, make it more joyful? How can we express ourselves with more gaiety?"⁴⁰ This attitude is revealing of the Germanic *Bildung*, or cultural approach, to antiquity. As distinct from a tour of Italy, which in French academic tradition stemmed from a conception dominated by a reference to the Renaissance model, here we are dealing with an approach that stemmed from archaeology and above all philology. Instead of visiting the places where vestiges of antiquity existed, taking notes in the aim of conserving classical forms, the Germanic soul harbored a desire to recreate the ancient spirit directly. This shift of the focus from form to expression was typical of Böcklin's own artistic transposition: his painting does not so much allude to antiquity as it transplants the beholder into the very heart of paganism. And his return to the cradle of civilization went hand-in-hand with an almost Nietzschean quest for Mediterranean light. Böcklin's 1869 rupture with Burckhardt, who remained enamored of classical equilibrium, marked a major aesthetic divergence. Having received a commission to decorate the Augustinerstrasse museum in Basel with a fresco depicting Apollo, Böcklin announced his intention to highlight with gold the god's cloak and the horses' harnesses, hooves, and genitals, to the disapproval of Burckhardt and the commissioning body. By inserting ornamentation into painting, Böcklin perturbed the homogeneity and conceptual unity expected, up until then, of artworks respectful of antiquity. Böcklin belonged to the last of the *Deutschrömer*—the Germanic artists whose sojourn in Rome coincided with intense archaeological excavations in Pompeii. Real examples of ancient painting—even in the decorative, provincial version uncovered in Pompeii—counted for a great deal in the development of Böcklin's style and subject matter. On beholding Roman

Fig. 25
Arnold Böcklin
Villa by the Sea, 1878

Oil on canvas, 43 1/4 × 63 in.
(1.1 × 1.6 m)
Kunstmuseum, Winterthur

frescoes and encaustic paintings with all the enthusiasm of discovery, an historical and critical approach gave way to the emotion stirred by accounts of the greatness of Greek painting during the Hellenistic period, which had served as inspiration to Pompeii's original decorators. While Marées's oeuvre more intimately conveys this communion with ages past, Böcklin certainly found there a pagan intensity that provided relief from the mediocrity typical, as he saw it, of his contemporaries. By way of example we need merely point out that one of the subjects with which Böcklin became identified, his various versions of a *Villa by the Sea* (fig. 25), was also a subject typically found in Pompeian painting.

Böcklin's view of mythology was radically original. His aesthetic conception of antiquity no longer granted sculpture the primordial place it had held since the Renaissance. He replaced it with a style of painting whose minute detail and anatomically physical presence breathed new, pagan-like life into a repertoire that had become frozen in formalism during the course of the nineteenth century. That is what Franz von Stuck, who remained stylistically closer to naturalism, took from Böcklin (fig. 27). Böcklin's antiquity was more painterly than sculptural, which was perhaps its great novelty, yet his painting still favored living volumes and movement. Böcklin literally gave body to mythology, bringing it to life, thereby revealing himself to be—despite his declarations to the contrary—a man of his times, attuned to reality. Natural forces were conveyed in two ways in his work: they were personified through allegory and were simultaneously depicted (a depiction inspired of course by





Fig. 26
Arnold Böcklin
Centaur Looking at Fish,
1878

Oil on canvas, 17 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 28 in.
(43 x 70 cm)
Kunsthau, Zurich



Fig. 27
Franz von Stuck
The Wild Hunt, 1899

Oil on canvas, 38 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
(97 x 67 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

traditional painting yet also governed by modern expectations of representation). This syncretism is precisely what Meier-Graefe so criticized. His book on Böcklin remains one of the key documents for anyone interested in the divorce between Symbolism and the historiography of modern art, since the terms of the fundamental rejection of Symbolism by mid twentieth-century critics were already expressed in it. Adopting a normative aesthetic position and describing French-style Impressionism as the purest expression of what he called “the painterly,”⁴¹ Meier-Graefe stigmatized Böcklin for a lack of stylistic unity and an absence of cultivation, faults typical of nineteenth-century German art, which Meier-Graefe felt was too exclusively concerned with issues of imagery.

Like Moreau, Böcklin favored the more violent aspects of mythology, to which he added a *vis comica* (comic thrust) unique in his day. Yet this approach, while it remained the most salient and novel aspect of his oeuvre, was not restrictive. Like a Renaissance artist, Böcklin displayed an extraordinary expressive range and sought to excel in every genre. The catalogue of his oeuvre includes allegories, classical landscapes, medieval scenes, and elegiac visions that follow one another after another, including striking works that became widely reproduced images right from the day they were completed. When it came to the substance of painting, a composition perhaps inspired by the Italian Renaissance might be combined with echoes of Lucas Cranach or Hans Holbein, profound sources for a painter who constantly harked back to the realism of the primitives. Yet he did not shirk at coarseness. In *Nessus and Deianeira* (fig. 28), the cramped composition contains figures in awkward positions; their grotesque ugliness unfolds before a stormy sky and a distant river landscape, which the centaur’s leg divides into little triangular windows. As though manhandling the myth even further, Böcklin depicts the mortal wound received by Nessus as a dribble of blood that seems to flow gently from a faucet or a wineskin that has just been pierced. There is no heroism,



Fig. 28
Arnold Böcklin
Nessus and Deianeira, 1898

Oil on panel, 41 × 59 in.
(1.04 × 1.50 m)
Pfalzgalerie, Kaiserslautern

but only fury in the Hercules who, down below, looks upon the rump of the dray horse of a centaur, the instigator of this unbeauteous abduction.

While painting ancient scenes and living in the hills of Fiesole may have served Böcklin as an antidote to the pessimism of his view of modernity, his oeuvre still poses the problem of the derision in which he cast mythology (sister to the irony that Heine blended into grand Romantic themes). It suggests a profound despair. The bliss associated with the sublime vanished with this immense artist, even though he was trained in landscape painting. Awareness of an inaccessible dimension of the universe and the finiteness of self—a contemplative distance—were annihilated by this highly personal way of existing at the heart of the tangible world in all its agitation and alarm. An entire side of Böcklin's oeuvre is devoted to a panic state, a regression to a pre-cultural status that triggers uncontrollable, chaos-producing reactions (fig. 29). But just as he refused to idealize bodies, so Böcklin remained wary of own his impulsive gestures and therefore painted, as Laforgue had pointed out, with "a patience that gives an icy air to these follies."⁴²



Fig. 29
Arnold Böcklin
*Pan Frightening
a Shepherd*, 1859

Oil on canvas, 30 ³/₄ × 25 ¹/₄ in.
(78 × 64 cm)
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung,
Kunstmuseum, Basel

A Subversive Idealism

Symbolism emerged in a relatively confused context. During the 1880s Impressionism was progressively moving toward a crisis, even as plein-air painting was invading naturalism (which would come to constitute a kind of international idiom and infiltrate what remained of academic tradition). With hindsight, the roots of Symbolism seem inalienably linked to a subversive attitude toward the image and its very structure, an attitude that would become increasingly widespread at the end of the century and beyond. It initially seems to have been the fruit of the relationship between image and text. Félicien Rops and Odilon Redon, the two most significant artists in this respect, worked in the sphere of printmaking: it was paper and ink that first hosted the destabilization that would allow Symbolism to sprout on terrain that the Baudelairean aesthetic had already fertilized. Rops, steeped in Romantic satanism, established a new allegorical vocabulary, while Redon revolutionized the economy of the image. The idea that art should account for the objective world was steadily eroded by effects of strangeness or mockery. In the name of idealism, tangible reality was alleged to be illusory.

The year 1886 saw not only the publication of a famous Symbolist “manifesto” by Jean Moréas but also the holding of the last Impressionist exhibition—in which Redon showed fifteen charcoal drawings. Clearly, the existence of Symbolism as a more or less organized movement coincided with the decline of realist forms of expression. In their combat against the supremacy of naturalism and Impressionism, the Symbolists made constant recourse to the notion of tradition. But this concept would itself be subverted, being susceptible to varying interpretations and subject to polemical readings, to individualism, and to pessimism. A major part of the Symbolist aesthetic, beginning in the 1890s with the spreading European scope of the movement, stemmed from this subversion.

Strange Beauty

“A combination of various juxtaposed elements, of transposed or transformed shapes bearing no relationship to contingencies, yet having its own logic,” is how Odilon Redon (1840–1916) defined his art, in terms that evoke the idea of a rebus.¹ We know that Redon’s posthumously published journal of writings “to himself,” *A soi-même*, from which this comment is drawn, must be read with a certain wariness, notably because his assertions concerning his working methods allowed Redon to mask as much as he revealed; he always refused to reveal his sources or to say how his imagery might convey personal turmoil. When André Mellerio, Redon’s friend and future biographer, questioned him about the origins of his inspiration, which had long been recognized as alien to the context of the times, Redon behaved as though someone were trying to steal his secret. “Is the starting point of my works all that important?” he exclaimed. “It would probably be better to hide it a little; birth should not be witnessed thus! . . . I would like to convince you that it is all just a little oily black liquid, transferred by grease pencil and stone onto white paper, in the sole goal of producing in the beholder a kind of vague and dominating attraction within the obscure world of *indeterminacy*. In predisposing the mind . . . it is appropriate to surround this genesis with mystery.”² Nor would Redon be any more explicit when it came to the circumstances surrounding some of the crucial decisions in his career. Concerning the motivations behind the 1879 publication of his first album of lithographs, *Dans le Rêve* (*In the World of Dreams*, fig. 30), he explained that at the time he felt a need to make his work more widely known by publishing drawings that were already old. While some charcoal drawings done in the same vein can indeed be dated to the early 1870s, recent research has demonstrated that only two of the eight plates produced for the collection were actually earlier work, the remainder having most probably been specially executed for this publication.³

Redon’s rise to fame coincided with the rise of an aesthetic attitude from which Symbolism would flow, and which was partly based on a quest for strangeness in the visual arts. This strangeness first appeared with Baudelaire, whose art criticism—with its appeal to the imagination and dreams—broke free from the formal nomenclature that had



structured debate up to that point. A new generation discovered and pursued Baudelaire's ideas starting in the 1880s (fig. 31). It was around the same time that Redon began to be acknowledged, first by a restricted audience linked to the literary scene, which partly overlapped with circles where new poetic trends were being developed. Although Redon probably never aspired to illustrate literary texts, his black-and-white prints known as *Noirs* were marked by an interaction between image and text right from the start, even when the text was no more than the title of a lithograph. The concepts he developed when he later wrote about his art—those of combination and transposition, as well as a demand for “logic”—could just as well be the declarations of writer.

Dans le Rêve functioned as a manifesto, if only by its very limited edition (twenty-five copies). Above all, it was an attempt by an already mature artist to finally gain recognition through new means, as a lithographer, after having begun his career in painting, exhibitions at the Société des Amis des Arts de Bordeaux (his home town) and at the Salon in Paris. Furthermore, published at the height of the naturalist trend

Fig. 30
Odilon Redon
Germination, plate II of
the album *In the World
of Dreams*, 1879

Lithograph, 10 ³/₄ × 10 ¹/₄ in.
(27.3 × 25.9 cm)

when a light palette and plein-air technique were becoming the dominant aesthetic, this album made a distinctive impact at the time. It asserted the expressive power of the contrast between black and white, stringing together oneiric images that were strikingly new yet resorted to no literary text as support. None of the attempts to discover a thematic foundation to this album, thereby giving it a narrative logic, has proven sufficiently convincing to efface its fundamental discontinuity. By alluding the world of dreams, Redon associated the most private of mental activities with darkness—he presented black as the color of the unconscious. And it appears that these drawings were done during the summers he spent at Peyrelebadé, the old Redon family property in the countryside of southwest France, a site of solitary retreat into childhood memories, propitious to the languor of meditation.

Redon and his oeuvre cultivated a series of complex relationships to text, in so far as they brought art criticism and poetic prose into play in a closely intertwined way, as well as raising an entire range of connections, from the standpoint of paraphrase and “illustration,” between a picture and its meaning. The ambivalent role of writing—whether art criticism or literature—is clear in an article on Redon’s *Hommage à Goya* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, initially published in *La Revue indépendante* and reprinted a year later under the title “Nightmare” in the second edition of Huysmans’ *Croquis parisiens* (Parisian Sketches).⁴ By thwarting analysis, Redon’s oeuvre encouraged a merging of criticism properly speaking with prose poem-like glosses, indeed with descriptions that could also be incorporated into a novel, as would be the case with Huysmans’ *A rebours* (variously translated as *Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*).



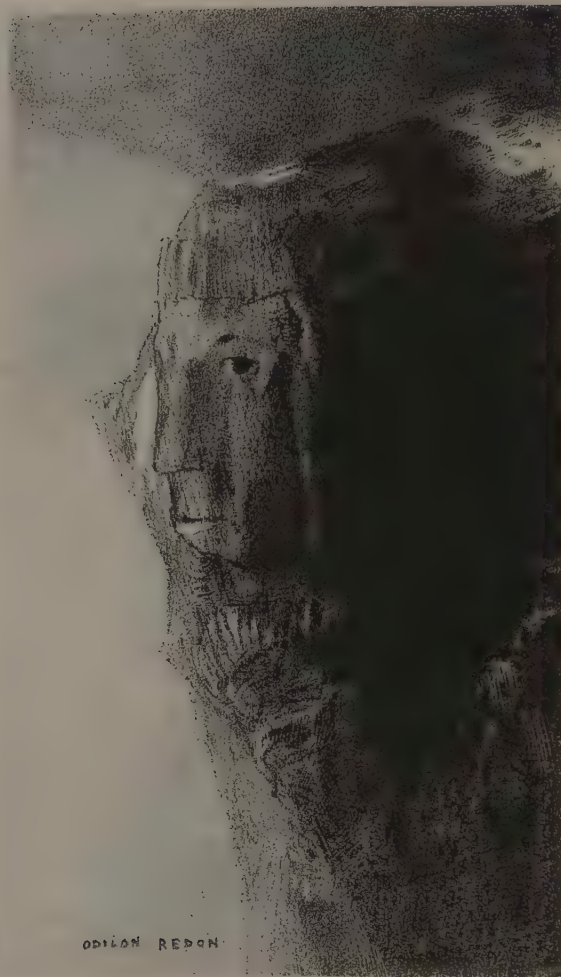
Fig. 31
Maurice Dumont
*I Would Have Liked to
Know Baudelaire*, 1891

Woodcut, 5 1/2 × 5 1/4 in.
(14.1 × 13.3 cm)
Private collection

This interaction in which rational critical discourse is elbowed out by the poetic expression of fascination—as performed by the character of Des Esseintes instead of Huysmans himself in his novel—was one of the channels through which naturalism and Symbolism secretly communicated. And it was contemporaneous with the shift in aesthetic direction by which Huysmans abandoned his prior loyalties. This new terrain, which Redon was one of the first major artists to stake out, would subsequently be further plowed with tools provided by Baudelaire and his concept of a Delacroix-inspired poetics. With Redon, however, the expression of space would lose its terrestrial coherence within a black infinity, becoming a “dominating” metaphysics. The conquest of this territory through an allegedly minor of means of expression—lithography—was one of the events that would mark the shift to a new conception of the image.

It is surprising that Redon, when concerned to establish himself primarily as the creator of the meditative, intimate *Noirs*, should have held his first two solo exhibitions in 1881 and 1882, devoted exclusively to charcoal drawings and lithographs, on the premises of newspapers such as *La Vie moderne* and *Le Gaulois*, whose spirit was so different from his own. Whatever the specific circumstance that dictated this choice (such as the presence of Élémer Bourges, a writer loosely associated with Symbolism, on the editorial board of *Le Gaulois*), Redon “stumbled onto Main Street”⁵ as part of an effort to disseminate more widely an output that had remained little known. The tactical choice certainly reflected a sense of urgency felt by Redon, related to his awareness of having spawned these new relationships to the image. From the mid-1880s onward, there was an overlap between the group of writers who lent Redon a certain notoriety and his circle of personal friends. Huysmans would play a significant role in disseminating Redon’s oeuvre both through his writings and his network of acquaintances. By the time Symbolism was on the verge of bursting forth as an organized movement, Redon had already attained notable recognition among a restricted but active circle stretching from France into Belgium, and he seemed exemplary of the links not only between text and image but also between literary and artistic milieus (who were the social vectors of the Symbolist enterprise). Thus right from Redon’s inclusion in the 1886 exhibition organized by *Les XX*, Émile Verhaeren devoted an article to his work. Redon would then produce frontispieces for Verhaeren’s poetic trilogy of spiritual crisis, *Les Soirs* (1887, fig. 32), *Les Débâcles* (1888) and *Flambeaux noirs* (1891), as well as for two anthologies by another Belgian Symbolist, Iwan Gilkin (*La Damnation de l’artiste*, 1891; *Ténèbres*, 1892).

The generic term *Noirs*, first used by Redon then adopted by critics to refer to his entire black-and-white output—drawings, works in charcoal, and prints—erected a partition between this sphere of work and his



painting, which for a long time enjoyed sole prerogative over color and the representation of reality. Although Redon, contrary to popular belief, never really stopped painting, it was his *Noirs* that won him recognition between 1877 and 1900. The few small landscapes that he exhibited in those years merely served to set off the charcoal drawings and lithographs on which Émile Hennequin in the early 1880s, followed by Huysmans, would construct a critical discourse on the artist's uniqueness. Subsequently, Redon has often been presented as an outsider. But the only marginal aspect of his career was the instruction he received early on from Rodolphe Bresdin (1822–1885) when the latter was living in Bordeaux; otherwise, Redon was, like many others, a disappointed former student of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, where he briefly studied under Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). Bresdin, an “inspired stray”⁶ who led an adventurous life, would influence Redon by pointing him in the direction of engraving and also by providing an example of a visionary art with meticulous, dense compositions populated with apparitions (fig. 33).

Fig. 32
Odilon Redon
The Idol, frontispiece for
Les Soirs by Emile Verhaeren,
1887

Lithograph, 6 1/2 × 3 3/4 in.
(16.3 × 9.5 cm)
Department of Prints,
Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels

Fig. 33
Rodolphe Bresdin
The Good Samaritan, 1861

Lithograph, 22 1/4 × 17 1/2 in.
(56.4 × 44.4 cm)
Musée Paul-Dupuy, Toulouse

When researching methods for reproducing his drawings, Rodin was briefly tempted by Adolphe Braun's photographic technique, which he finally rejected as being too expensive.⁷ On the technical level, the possibility of intervening on the image during the reproduction process probably interested Redon as much as its potential for wide dissemination. Caution should be taken when accepting Redon's assertions that he turned to lithography solely from the straightforward desire to "multiply"



his drawings. Bresdin's entrance into Redon's career as early as 1863 prevents us from seeing Redon as having discovered the appeal of graphic transposition by chance, on the path to reproduction. On the contrary, the back-and-forth tug between drawing and engraving, between the unique and the multiple as dictated by their respective technical natures, was crucial in forging the entity called the *Noirs*. The search for equivalencies between these two spheres led Redon to original discoveries, sometimes combining crudeness with subtlety. Charcoal drawings might also be worked with black chalk, black pastel, or Conté crayons, and here and there he might add imperceptible pale highlights (fig. 34). Engraving methods clearly lay behind the distinct planes that create a screen effect, as well as the use of reserve technique to reveal the paper, usually obtained through erasing or scraping.

The novelty evident in this crossing of technical borderlines was matched by an original orchestration of the image. Thus several of Redon's compositions contain a horizontal band in the lower section, establishing a zone



Fig. 34
Odilon Redon
Caliban on a Branch, 1881

Charcoal and black chalk, scraper,
stump on blue-fiber chamois paper,
19 ³/₄ × 14 ¹/₂ in. (49.9 × 36.7 cm)
Musée d'Orsay Collection,
Department of Prints and Drawings,
Musée du Louvre, Paris

that separates the subject properly speaking from exterior space. Sometimes handled as a stretch of water or as a perspective grid, this surface often presents no continuity with what is placed just beyond it. This pause on an inert foreground was already suggested in Redon's first self-portrait, executed at the age of twenty-seven (1867, Musée d'Orsay, Paris),⁸ and might also take the form of a frame or window through which the beholder must glimpse the essential. The recurrent use of this approach was a way of concretizing the transition from tangible reality into the autonomous space of the work, the need to push the gaze across a neutral surface, just as the title *In the World of Dreams* with its vertical typography on the cover was designed to signal the passage across the threshold of consciousness. Redon thereby underscored the alienness of the image.

Although for an artist like Delacroix the beautiful remained a timeless entity throughout the various historical forms it assumed, a shift occurred with Baudelaire. Even while making visual beauty one of the cardinal points of his system, Baudelaire did not define beauty on formal criteria alone. For that matter, the extraordinary fertility of his aesthetic theory partly resides in the fact that its conceptual coherence was matched by a critical practice open to highly diverse stylistic trends. For Baudelaire, the search for immaterial qualities merged with considerations that were strictly formal in so far as form was viewed not just as the result of an intentional approach but also as a total, immediate revelation of the psyche. Art thereby generated a multitude of hidden meanings. The end of Baudelaire's commentary on Delacroix in the *Salon of 1859* expounds this critical position even as it demonstrates the obstacle to the verbal expression of what the Symbolists

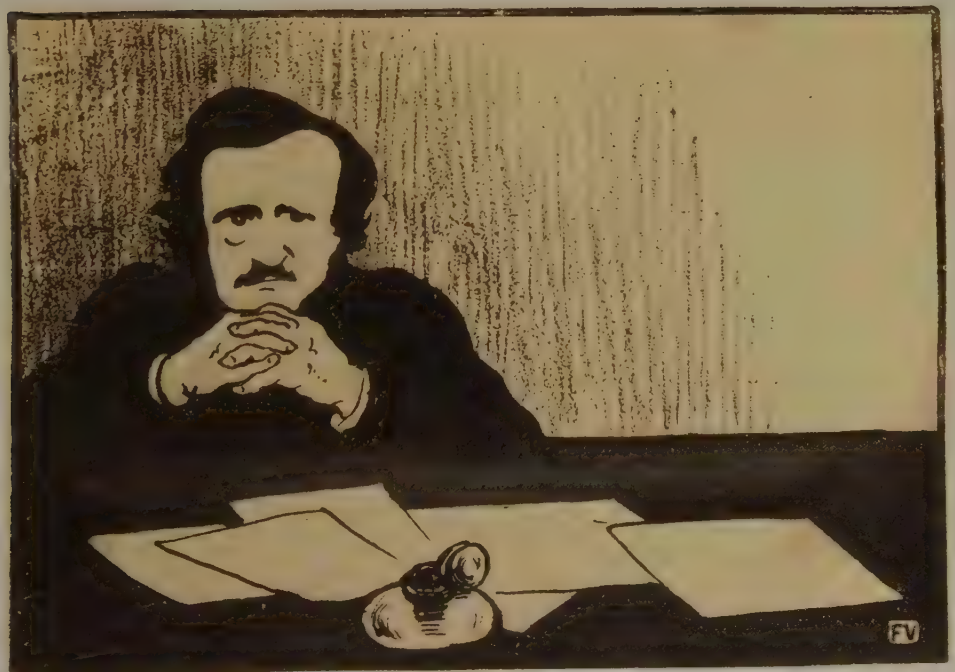


Fig. 35
Félix Vallotton
To Edgar Poe, 1897

Lithograph, 2 ³/₄ × 4 in.
(7.2 × 10.1 cm)

Illustration taken from
La Revue blanche, February 7, 1897,
published in *Le Cri de Paris*
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

sought to express: "I wrack my mind to draw from it some phrase that truly expresses the *specialness* of Eugène Delacroix. Excellent draftsman, stupendous colorist, fertile, ardent composer—all that is obvious, and has all been stated. But how does he manage to produce this impression of newness? Why does he give us more than just the past? A great among the greats, skillful among the skillful, why should he please us more? It might be argued that, endowed with a richer imagination, Delacroix expresses above all the intimate mind, the surprising aspect of things, so faithfully does his work retain the stamp and mood of his conception. It's infinity within the finite. A dream!"⁹ Baudelaire's critique reveals how artistic genius would henceforth be assigned the goal of exploring territories beyond the realm of the conscious.

It has often been stressed that the Baudelaire of *Curiosités esthétiques* was inspired by echoes of Hoffmann and especially Edgar Allan Poe

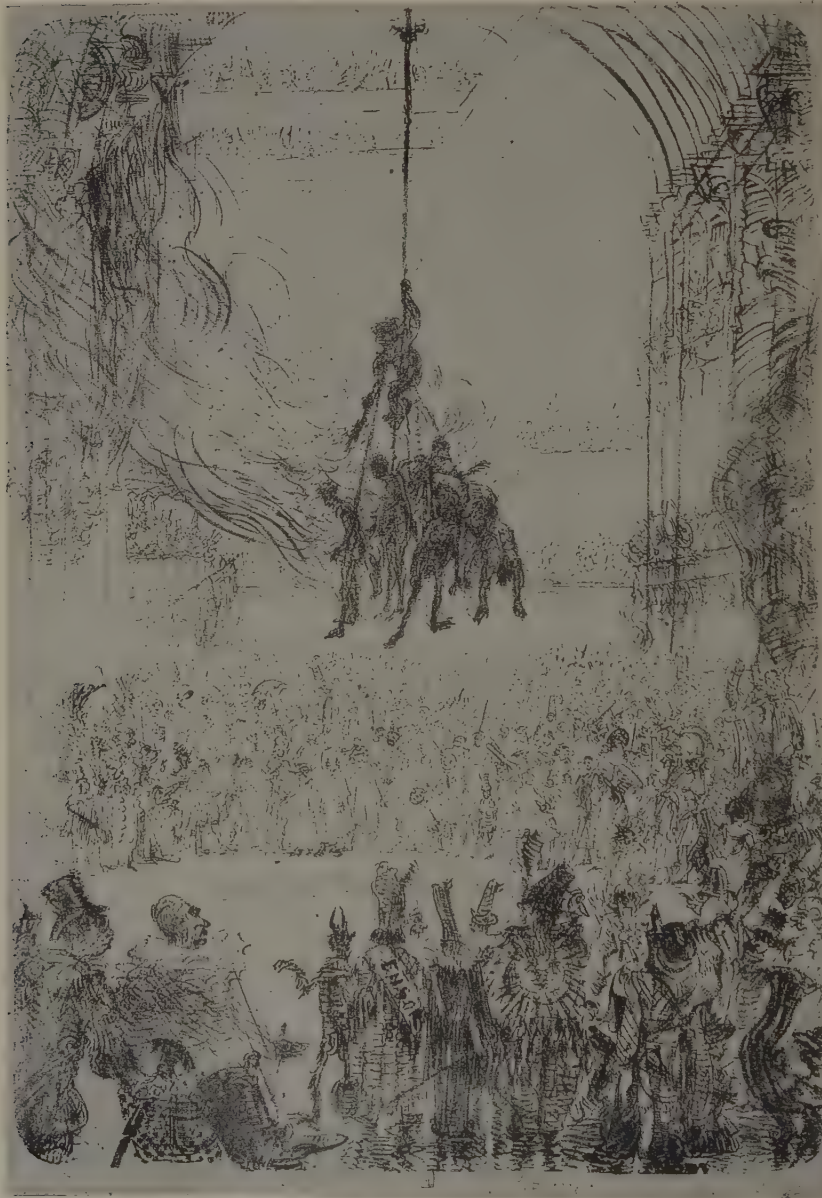


Fig. 36
James Ensor
The Vengeance of Hop-Frog,
1885

Lithograph, 14 ³/₄ × 10 ¹/₂ in.
(37.7 × 26.5 cm)

Department of Prints,
Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels

(fig. 35)—for whom Baudelaire was both translator and biographer. Odilon Redon would title his second collection of lithographs, published in 1882, *To Edgar Poe*.¹⁰ James Ensor was another attentive reader of Poe's work (fig. 36). Huysmans, in *A Rebours*, described his protagonist Des Esseintes as primarily being drawn to artworks that displayed "the quality of strangeness embraced by Edgar Poe."¹¹ Beyond the specific literary genre of horror tales, Poe had a considerable influence on the Symbolist generation, notably via two influential French writers who themselves belonged to the Baudelairean tradition, Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Stéphane Mallarmé. Although Poe was long perceived almost exclusively as an author of fantastic, macabre literature, in France right from the start there was a certain circle in which his aesthetic texts, poetry, and philosophical speculations—in short his literary oeuvre as a whole—were taken into account. According to Camille Mauclair, Mallarmé apparently often



Fig. 37
William Degouve de Nuncques
The Pink House (or *House
of Mystery*), 1892

Oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 17 in.
(63 × 43 cm)

Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo



Fig. 38
Louis Welden Hawkins
A Window, 1898

Oil on canvas, 72 × 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
(183 × 90 cm)

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes

commented on Poe's aesthetics during his famous "Tuesday gatherings" on Rue de Rome, trying to get beyond "the appearances of [Poe's] subjects . . . the terror, the madness, the fantastic."¹² Maurice Maeterlinck's plays represented another channel through which the American writer's ideas were able to resonate with the Symbolists. Maeterlinck even admitted his debt to Poe. "I owe to him the blossoming in myself of a sense of mystery and a passion for the other worlds in this life," he wrote in 1928.¹³ Here again, it was less a question of transferring Poe-like subjects to the stage than of translating metaphysical concepts into a pictorial handling of stagecraft and acting—long periods of silence, stillness, and anguish were associated with a latent danger. Above all, however, Maeterlinck initiated a conception of the theater in which the audience was confronted with supernatural presences in everyday reality. The expression of mystery henceforth supposed some new osmosis that would allow imagery to occupy the anguish generated by the empty stage or, notably in the case of Redon, by deserted landscapes.

Louis Welden Hawkins (1849–1910), a friend of Mallarmé's, was one of those minor painters who shifted imperceptibly from naturalism to Symbolism. Perhaps influenced by the naive and supernatural atmosphere found in the work of Belgian artist William Degouve de Nuncques (1867–1935, fig. 37), in 1898 Hawkins exhibited, in the Libre Esthétique show in Brussels, a painting that typifies the quest for strangeness within the apparently banal.¹⁴ Titled *A Window* (fig. 38), it features a mid-day glow coming through the blank window and falling on the green and purplish tones of the wall, casting reflections of some secret tragedy in the calm garden. Hawkins also authored a one-act play, *L'Impossible alibi* which could not be staged due to its anarchist content, but which Jean Lorrain summed up in an 1899 article that compared Hawkins to Poe.¹⁵ A few short pages of dialogue provided the argument for a theatrical event based almost entirely on the main actor and effects of lighting, a concept more related to pictorial theater than to classical dramaturgy. A modern feeling of the fantastic emerges from Hawkins's choice of a dilapidated setting—a ground-floor space at the end of alley in the outskirts of Paris, as well as from shifting levels of appearance, the use of a dummy, and the paradox of an allegorical figure of Anarchy incarnated by "a neat and tidy little lady with glasses and shopping bag." Then there was the indeterminacy of the exact time of the play, described as a twilight period that "piled shadows in the corners and strangely made the ceiling retreat."

In 1905 Alberto Martini (1876–1954), a draftsman and engraver from Treviso, Italy, influenced by Germanic graphic arts and Art Nouveau during a stay in Munich in 1898, began a series of Poe-inspired illustrations. In his ethereal visions, dark silhouettes are set against a play of abstract lines, waves, and beams, juxtaposed with more macabre imagery

(*The Plague King*, 1905, Pinacoteca, Oderzo). This project, which Martini would pursue into the 1920s, reflects the two poles between which Poe's text navigates—conjecture on the dreadful, and purity of the ideal. Martini probably read Poe in Baudelaire's translation, as suggested by the French titles he gave his drawings.¹⁶ *Puissance de la Parole* (*The Power of Speech*, fig. 39) illustrates a "Platonic" dialogue from Baudelaire's second volume of translations of Poe, in which two souls discuss divine creation and the immortality of mind which, manifested by speech, participates in the creation of the universe. The rhythm of the prose here converges with the principle of "pure poetry" that arose from Poe's theoretical writings and that was based on the idea of a beauty with no moral content or educational intent. The gaze that Poe brought to reality, designed to perceive only those things that testified to the beyond, and the way he imbued aesthetic feeling with an attraction for the strange, helped to define a new realm of expression in which horror and the macabre appeared to be counterpoints to idealism. The title *Tales of*



Fig. 39
Alberto Martini
The Power of Speech, 1906

Pen and India ink, 10 × 7 1/2 in.
(25.5 × 19 cm)

Pinacoteca Cirica Alberto Martini,
Oderzo

the Grotesque and Arabesque (translated into French as *Histoires extraordinaires*) combines two terms taken from the vocabulary of the decorative arts, erecting an aesthetic system on the opposition between fantastic caricature and nonfigurative ornament, between the deformation of the body and the pure abstraction of line, between what belongs to the metaphysical domain and what does not. The choice of this graphic metaphor as the title of a collection of stories posits a principle of equivalence between literary and artistic expression. A radical shift stems from the postulate that the aesthetic realm can have pertinence that empowers it, like a philosophical system, to generate a comprehensive conception of the world. The perspective opened by Poe and Baudelaire, given its metaphysical ambitions and poetic scope, pointed the way to a pan-aestheticism that would be incarnated by Symbolism.

As to form, Poe and his critical vision called for the construction of a cool Romanticism based on a compositional method that, employing obvious rigor, held impulsiveness and effusiveness at bay. That was the path followed by Mallarmé, who wrote on the subject of *The Raven* that “all chance must be banished from a modern work, and can only be feigned there.”¹⁷ Distinguishing Poe’s fantastic world from a magical one, Camille Mauclair felt that it commenced where “playfulness started becoming metaphysical,” that is to say once recourse to the incredible



was no longer necessary.¹⁸ The “subtle drift from the plausible to the amazing,” on which this poetics of strangeness was based, sprang from an idealism in which the world is perceived as a pattern of signs testifying to a higher reality.¹⁹ Redon’s idea of “transposition,” which he evoked when defining his art, was related to this idea. Symbolic structure was henceforth designed to favor a shift from naturalism to the fantastic, via a formal handling that, in Redon’s case for example, involved disruptions in scale, truncations, hybridizations, and microscopic investigations. With other artists, everyday imagery acquired a strange weightiness, a different presence. Artists would highlight empty, shadowy interiors with strange reflections (figs. 40 and 41). As scrutinized by Ensor’s eye, a familiar object triggers the anguish of a potential apparition (fig. 42). Léon Spilliaert (1881–1946), a Belgian artist who occupied the border between Symbolism and Surrealism, devoted part of his oeuvre to stagings of mirrors, furniture, and boxes in everyday arrangements that were nevertheless perturbed by infinitesimal disruptions (fig. 43). It is hardly surprising that such dream-like figures willingly arose from pencil and watercolor—more intimate than oil painting—in so far as they are images of introspection. When introspection takes place in front of a mirror, a simple play of light can bring to the surface the rot beneath the flesh and the familiar presence of death (fig. 44).

Fig. 40
Odilon Redon
I Saw a Big, Pale Gleam of Light, plate II of *La Maison Hantée*, 1896

René Philippon’s translation
of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s
The Haunted and the Haunters
Lithograph, 9 × 6 3/4 in. (23 × 17 cm)
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Fig. 41
Xavier Mellery
Antechamber with Mask,
c. 1890–1900

Oil on canvas, 19 × 122 3/4 in.
(48 × 32.5 cm)

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts
de Belgique, Brussels

Fig. 42
James Ensor
Bronze Pot and Apparitions,
c. 1880–1885

Black chalk on cardboard-backed
paper, 9 × 6 1/2 in. (22.7 × 16.7 cm)
Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent





Fig. 43
Léon Spilliaert
Interior—Beauty Parlor,
1909

Wash of India ink, watercolor, colored
pencils on paper, 25 1/4 x 19 1/4 in.
(64.1 x 49.2 cm)
Private collection

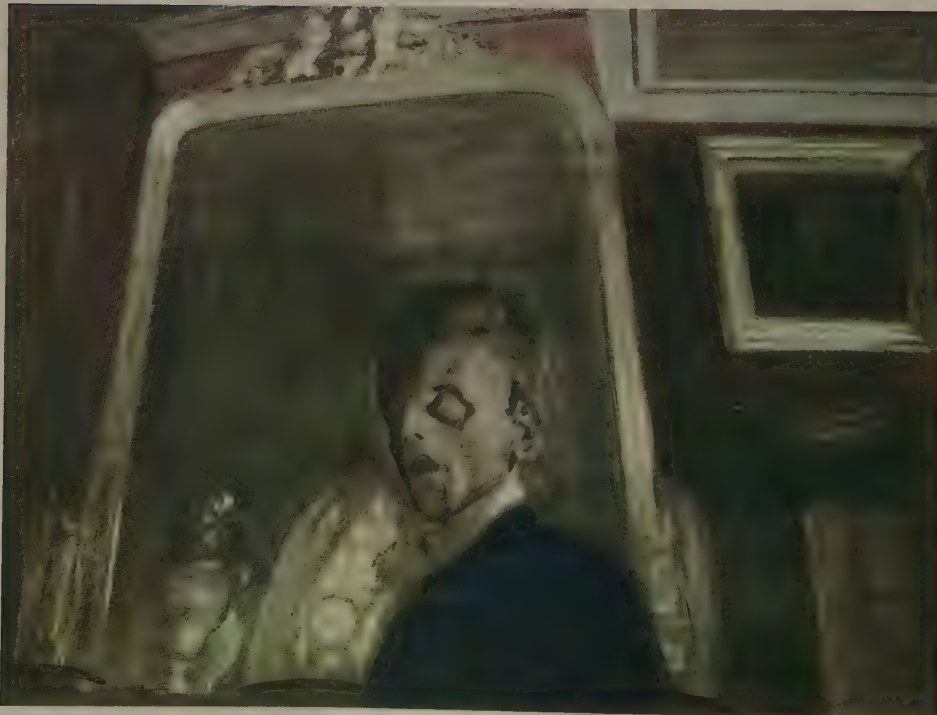


Fig. 44
Léon Spilliaert
Self-Portrait with Mirror,
1908

Wash of India ink, watercolor, colored
pencils on paper, 19 x 25 in.
(48.5 x 63.1 cm)
Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ostend

Satanism and Mockery

GUIGNOL
Hello, Fart!

DIRECTOR
What do mean, Fart!
Who are you to speak that way?

GUIGNOL
I thought you belonged to the family o' Farts ...
surely you're not an enema o' Fart?

Alfred Jarry, *Ubu sur la Butte* (1901)²⁰

Félicien Rops (1833–1898) moved to Paris in 1874 and would later be venerated by Symbolist literati as someone who was simultaneously a scandalous figure and an artist who did the frontispiece to Baudelaire's *Épaves*, which the poet found "excellent, especially full of *ingenium*."²¹ Described as a "phony idler,"²² Rops started out as a cartoonist. He was born in the quiet provincial Belgian town of Namur, where he studied at the art school, before founding in Brussels with Charles de Coster the satirical review *Uylenspiegel, Journal des ébats artistiques et littéraires*. At the time Rops was friendly with Charles Degroux (1825–1870) and Constantin Meunier (1831–1905), and his output would always be marked by a picturesque realism not entirely devoid of the supernatural, as found in Belgian literature of the mid-nineteenth century. Although Rops would always remain a realist painter, his engravings stirred the Symbolist imagination of artists ranging from Rodin²³ to Munch, reinvigorating entire realms of imagery. Invited to the first exhibition of Les XX in 1884, he became a member of the group two years later and showed with it regularly, if sparingly, until 1890. His fame largely rested on the frontispieces and illustrations done for some of the most famous writers of the days, such as Joséphin Péladan and Barbey d'Aurevilly, as well as two series of photogravures published under the title of *Sataniques*. Through his oeuvre, as well as through the character he devised for himself, Rops formed a bridge between two periods, two worlds: the Baudelairean world of dandyism and the fin-de-siècle world of Symbolism. The thematic idea underpinning this link was that Venus and the Devil were one and the same.

The figure of Satan followed a path from English "Gothick" novels of the late eighteenth century down to Symbolism, from Ann Radcliffe to

Stanislas de Guaita. Baudelaire's postulate of evil had little to do with pre-Enlightenment demonology: rather, the satanism of the likes of Barbey d'Aureilly and Rops was the latest incarnation of an image of rebellion from which arose a narcissistic demand for absolute freedom within society. Protestant theology's tendency to "demythify" culture, scientific rationalism's vision of a totally intellectual universe, and technical efficiency's increasing threat to spirituality all necessarily spurred, in reaction, a revival of the Biblical image of evil in multiple forms in which art and literature refused to be divorced from life—Hugues Rebelle reported that Rops actually cultivated a Mephistophelean image.²⁴ Satanism might be viewed merely as a mental disguise, a fin-de-siècle phantasmagoria, and yet the way in which imagery appropriated the Devil lent him the status of a modern myth, echoing literary incarnations in which Satan recovered his role as a effective force. According to Rebelle, Huysmans refused to look at anything other than the *Sataniques* when he paid a visit to Rops.²⁵ And when preparing to write his novel *Là-bas*, Huysmans thoroughly researched the black mass, a blasphemous imitation of the Catholic liturgy.²⁶ Satanic ritual was a concrete translation of the various expressions of the demonic

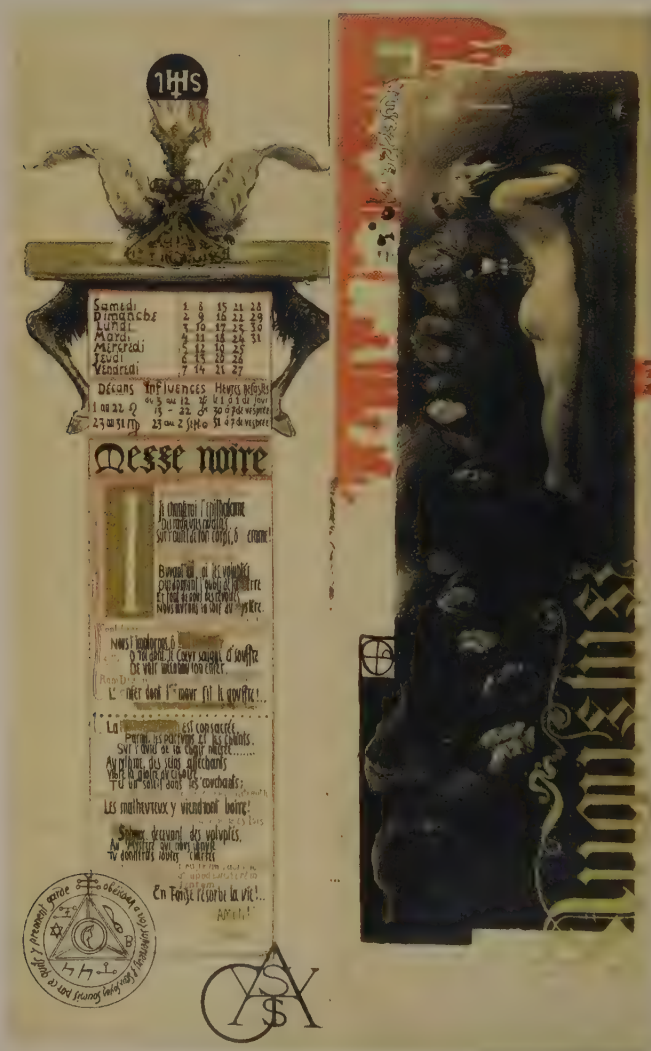


Fig. 45
Manuel Orazi
August, The Black Mass
from the *Magic Calendar* by
Austin de Croze and
Manuel Orazi, 1896

Lithograph, 20 × 12 1/4 in.
(50.7 × 31.4 cm)
Private collection

theme, and it was precisely this shift from allegory to mythic fiction that was embodied by Rops's oeuvre. It is striking to note that his most significant compositions come across as descriptions of an imaginary ritual, combining an invocation of Satan with obscenity, and displaying the symbolic condensation typical of all religious ceremonies. More precisely, Rops depicted the culminating point of ritual, the moment of apparition or of profanation (fig. 47). The hieratic verticality of the image, organized in a frontal, symmetrical arrangement, and the staging of an entire repertoire of tiny pagan temples that allegorically create a pornographic setting, are all the more troubling thanks to Rops's efficient mastery of anatomical accuracy and expressiveness. Although he was fundamentally a naturalistic artist, his naturalism remained ambiguous, as witnessed by his use of sculpture as a symbolic vector in his drawings—which abound in bas-reliefs—and in the morphological plausibility of the composite beings he invented—such as half-skeletal girls and cherubs, and tumescent freaks concocted from an assembly of genital organs.

The compositions that Rops produced for Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Diaboliques* bear the mark of this ritual nature.²⁷ They differ from



Fig. 46
Félicien Rops
The Temptation of Saint Anthony, 1878

Colored pencils on paper,
29 x 21 1/4 in. (73.8 x 54.3 cm)
Department of Prints,
Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels



narrative illustration by superimposing a symbolic structure on the tale, one that functions as a visual abridgment of the text. Thus, the drawing for *A Dinner of Atheists* (fig. 48) retains just a few element of the sinister story on which it is based; only the barely visible helmet and military satchel hanging on the wall recall the context of the Napoleonic wars, the setting for the tragic incident in which an officer takes revenge for his wife's unfaithfulness. A few slight hints enable the imagery to cling to the thread of the tale, such as the smashed closet door, on the right, from which the chevalier de Mesnilgrand has leapt. On the other hand, Rops has transformed the sexual assault on the female character into a sacrificial slaughter: on an altar-like table, this arched figure of *hysteria major* is shown in candlelight that evokes a divine glow and sacramental ambience. At the time very few images of sexuality harbored such violence, and this repertoire quickly spread throughout Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. There were soon countless variations based on Rops, numerous imitators of an artist whose influence was widespread. For instance, a watercolor titled *Sorcery* (fig. 49), begun in Paris in 1898 by

Fig. 47
Félicien Rops
The Sacrifice, from
Les Sataniques, 1882

Photogravure with soft-ground varnish,
9 1/2 x 6 1/2 in. (24.1 x 16.4 cm)
Musée Provincial Félicien Rops, Namur

the Russian artist Konstantin Somov (1869–1939), who was a member of the Mir Iskustva group, includes a medallion featuring entwined figures who recall Rops's illustration for Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le Bonheur dans le crime*. The Frenchman's imagery clearly conditioned the erotic imagination of an entire era and a social class.

A few extant photographs by Pierre Louÿs testify to the persistence of Rops's conception, although here the maniacal, erotic tension ultimately turns to parody (fig. 50). The altar has been replaced by a harmonium and the symmetrical organization of Rops's composition have given way to a dislocation in which the female figure takes on the vacancy of a doll. Her body goes from consenting victim in Rops's work to an automaton with lifeless eyes, waiting for someone to come along and pull all the stops that govern her movement. Eroticism is disembodied to the point where all that remains is a perverse fascination with what has become a mechanical



Fig. 48
Félicien Rops
A Dinner of Atheists,
illustration for
Les Diaboliques by Jules
Barbey d'Aurevilly, 1882

Graphite, soft pencil, colored pencils,
scraper, 9 1/4 x 6 1/4 in.
(23.6 x 16 cm)
Galerie Patrick Derom, Brussels

performance. Through voyeurism, Rops's satanism has ebbed into mockery, fantasy has become desanctified.

Rops's picture of sexuality was basically modern in so far as it involved risk and a certain technical skill, and eschewed metaphor. Its brutality had nothing whatsoever to do with libertinism. In Rops we almost find de Sade, that is to say we are never very far from a nihilistic existence whose favored terrain is the sex act. Although de Sade was not yet as famous as he would become in the Surrealist period, his oeuvre undeniably played a subterranean role in Symbolism and the literary trends that had immediately preceded it. Octave Uzanne, who had planned to produce a book in collaboration with Rops, titled *Le Diable et la Femme*, often referred to de Sade,²⁸ and we know that Swinburne's discovery of de Sade profoundly marked him at the start of his career.²⁹ The Sadean world recognized God only as a fiction that made blasphemy possible whereas, in



Fig. 49
Konstantin Somov
Sorcery, 1898–1902

Graphite, watercolor, gouache, gold
highlights, 19 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.
(49.5 x 34.1 cm)

The Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

contrast, the notion of sin played a key role in Baudelairean poetry and its quest for transcendence. Evil managed to invest sexuality with a ritual value once again, suggesting that the sacred could only survive—in decadent times—through profanation. As Baudelaire wrote, “The unique and supreme pleasure of love resides in the certainty of doing *evil*. And man and woman know right from birth that in evil resides all pleasure.”³⁰ An awareness of and quest for evil as a requirement of freedom are what set artists apart from the rest of society. Satanism and dandyism went together—both were modern inscriptions of myth. Baudelaire’s modernity was of course subject to current events, current fashions, and the shifting flow of social life; but his acute attention to the present, far from being cultivated as a value in itself, existed only as a function of a quest for timeless qualities. Meditation and self-interrogation therefore represented, in this conception of the poetic task, a realm where external reality assumed its true meaning in the light of symbolic decipherment, subsequently transmuted through writing. And if painting the modern world did not necessarily suppose that one was a realist, then it meant elaborating a system that made it possible to extract from contemporary history a poetic substance with universal significance. Constantin Guys and Edouard Manet, painters of modern life in the Baudelairean sense, supply the beholder with little objective data about their times. Rops, meanwhile, addressed the contemporary world in two distinct registers. One, employed for his satirical drawings, related to an ironic vision of society, observed with a scrutinizing eye. The other, found in his *Sataniques*, performed an allegorical transposition.

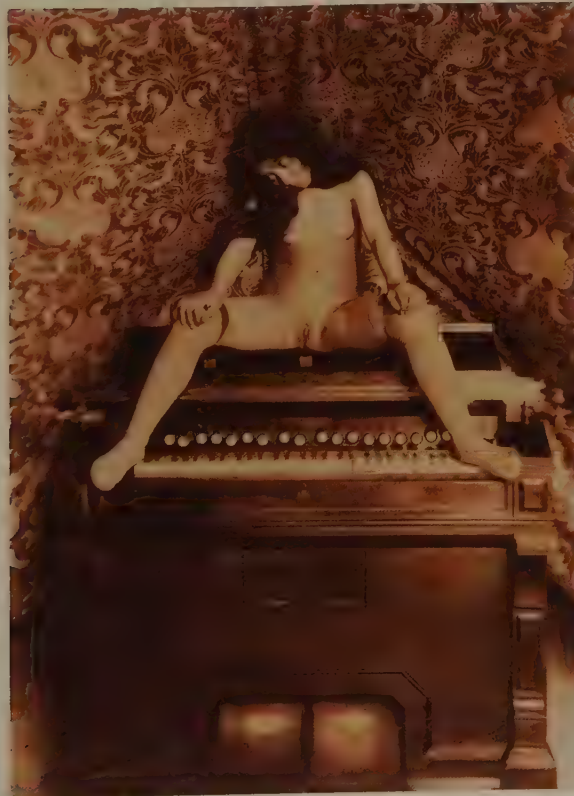


Fig. 50
Pierre Louÿs
Nude Girl on Harmonium,
c. 1895

Photograph
Whereabouts unknown

A comparable duality could be detected, in the mid-1880s, in work by James Ensor (1860–1949), who also came from a realist tradition. At first, Ensor painted his immediate surroundings—seascapes, still lifes, modest folk, middle-class interiors. Having studied at the art school in his native town of Ostend, Belgium, he went on to the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and by 1882 was a member of the Essor group. The following year he signed the founding charter of Les XX; he would show almost exclusively within Les XX, and later at the Libre Esthétique, up to the year 1898, when his work was shown at the Salon des Cent, organized in Paris by a review called *La Plume*, which devoted a special issue to him.³¹ Up until then, Ensor was little known outside Belgium, despite close links between the French and Belgian Symbolists. *The Masks* (fig. 51),³² exhibited with Les XX in 1884, somewhat disturbed Émile Verhaeren, who in an apologetic tone describe Ensor as “sometimes purblind in his choice of subject matter,” implicitly acknowledging the destabilizing effect of this painting even on a critic familiar with innovative trends.³³ Although the stylistic vocabulary and imagery of *The Masks* are, in part, realist, the painting sabotages the logical weave that should lend it a certain narrative coherence, thus marking a turning point in Ensor’s oeuvre. It is significant that Gustave Lagye viewed this incongruity as a fundamentally modern form of irony, in a metaphorical description of the new painting. “Masks.—The outcome is approaching. Already modern travesty has replaced the frippery of the past. The beauty of yore, driven into the bosom of the Academy, has given way to the sublime horrors of grand modernity. Like the Carnival in Binche, anyone unfortunate enough to lack a goiter under the chin or a polyp in the eye is forced to don a false nose of some sort. The bottle of gin grows smaller and smaller while victorious rotgut appears everywhere. Note how, on the threshold of the modest little room, Eternal Womanhead—also transfigured—makes her entrance dressed in a carnival mask. Let us draw the curtain on the gentle mysteries that attend the spawning of this regenerated world.”³⁴

Although the mask’s expression is frozen, it moves and lives. The unbearable presence of the unreality it lodges in the very heart of everyday life generates unease. Yet precisely to cultivate this unease, as well as to disrupt a complacent reading of his paintings, Ensor arranged the masks and skeletons in his studio into scenes designed to make undecipherable iconic puns, to create tragicomic little skits that propose a bold poetics of juxtaposition, somewhat like the souvenirs and shells found in the tourist shops of Ostend. These beings trapped between life and death—dummies to whom the artist has given a semblance of existence—were reflected in a painterly technique whose very substance sometimes indulged in travesty: several studies done in the late 1870s

were reworked around 1889 by Ensor, whose agile brush added animals, mask, and freaks in textures and colors that make no pretence of their adventitious nature. A mask subverts the typology of the imagery—say, the theme of a fisherman surprised by death (fig. 51)—all the better by foiling tangible appearances and eliminating natural expressiveness.

Significantly, this burlesque vein is associated with Ensor's most famous work, in the form of a large painting packed with unkind allusions to current events within Brussels' little artistic community. *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (fig. 52), submitted for the show organized by Les XX in 1890, was rejected, and would not become known to the public before 1929.³⁵ Ensor identified himself with a tiny Christ entering the modern Jerusalem on the back of an ass; this almost imperceptible Christ is lost among a composition teeming with carnival characters, caricatures of celebrities, and banners bearing inscriptions (some of which were apparently later erased). The vibrant, hatched brushwork, unevenly applied to various zones of the canvas, plus the shower of multicolored confetti, the dark stripes intersecting at right angles in the upper left, the abstract geometric shapes, and the "flat" silhouette-like figures on the left are all nasty allusions to Seurat and his followers. Seurat's *Sunday*

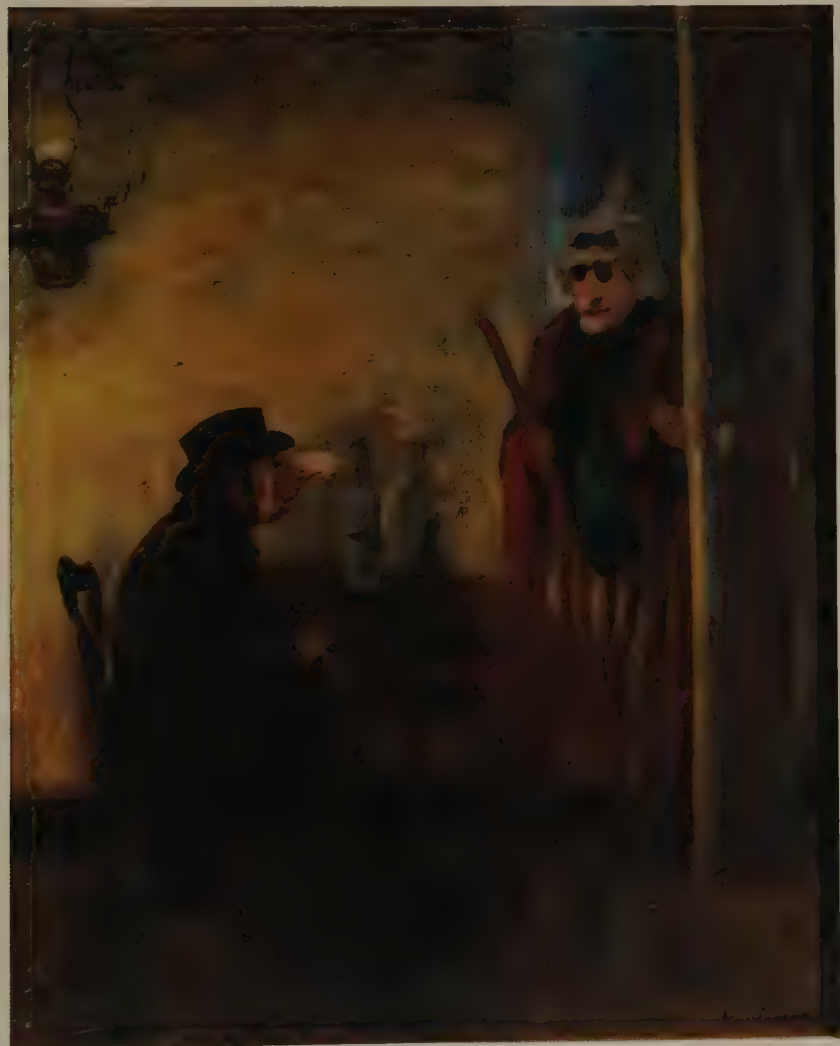


Fig. 51
James Ensor
Scandalized Masks
(originally *The Masks*), 1883

Oil on canvas, 53 × 44 in.
(1.35 × 1.12 m)

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de
Belgique, Brussels

Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (1886, Art Institute of Chicago), was exhibited at Les XX in 1887 and heralded the supremacy of the Neo-Impressionist trend among the Belgian group, a supremacy championed by Octave Maus; Ensor quietly disapproved, however, seeing it as the triumph of a “scientific” French spirit over the freer, more intuitive painterly tradition of Flanders. Ensor indicates his own executors by having Christ point an index finger to the left of the canvas: that is where a caricature of the new style adopted by Les XX is found, where a bourgeois man in the foreground kisses a mam’zelle wearing the French revolutionary cap, and where the French tricolor and the logo of Les XX decorate a tribune on which one buffoon ostensibly defecates while another vomits. The procession—preceded by a “doctrinaire marching band” of critics and theorists—heads in this direction, led by a drum major whose tiara is adorned with a triangle of prismatic colors (a didactic diagram often used at the time to demonstrate the laws of complementary colors). Eyes closed, the drum major seems to thrust the tip of his baton into the eye of an appalled character dressed in white; this figure belongs to the world of carnival masks—already recognized as Ensor’s own world at the time—because not far away are the artist’s signature (on the tribune to the right) and a few powerless maskers who watch the crowd march by. Ensor did not assign a central position to Christ. The central position is given to the eye of the figure in profile, just behind the mitered leader. This might be seen as a representation of the Neo-Impressionist eye, the “objective” eye depicted as the lens of a photographic camera. Although analysis of such clues, swamped by the vast canvas, is tricky today, there can be no doubt that the subversive nature of the painting—in which Ensor depicted himself as a rejected prophet doomed to death—was the reason for its exclusion.

In the 1887 salon of Les XX, Ensor had exhibited a set of six drawings that employed various techniques. They were grouped under the generic title of *The Haloes of Christ, or Sensitivities to Light*. Related to this series, an 1885 *Entry into Jerusalem* (Museum voor Schöne Kunsten, Ghent) already featured the overall economy of composition and the banners whose inscriptions set the Gospel scene in a modern context. Ensor’s mockery of large religious paintings stemmed from a specifically Belgian tradition, namely burlesque exhibitions called *Zwanze*, in which various artistic tendencies, notably academic painting, were parodied in various works, few of which survive today.³⁶ In the foreground of the drawing of *The Entry into Jerusalem*, Ensor placed a portrait of Émile Littré at the head of the procession. Littré, it might be recalled, was the French translator of the *Life of Jesus* by German historian David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874). Littré’s translation was done in

1839–1840, shortly after the original publication of a book that treated Christ as a mythical figure. This desanctification—which in certain respects prefigured the work of Ernest Renan—created a scandal at the time. The permutation effected between the figure of Littré, a leading light of positivism, and the masked figure who in *Christ's Entry into Brussels* leads a crowd of converts to the Neo-Impressionist aesthetic, posits the critical principle of an equivalence between the theoretical rationalization of color and the collapse of religious mystery. Yet the various keys to an interpretation of Ensor's position in the late 1880s—whether stemming from autobiographical events or the artistic context and ideas in the air—nevertheless fail to account for the irrevocable disturbance that the artist introduced into the codes governing an artwork's relationship to objective reality. The subversion of legibility—indeed in certain cases of all rational meaning that a painting might convey—and the dilution of narrative into something indecipherable challenged an entire historical heritage as well as the credibility of painting as a record of the reality of space (just as, for that matter, Ensor's style, oscillating between colorist rage and love of the substance of paint itself, overturned a tradition of which he nevertheless left sparse traces visible). Even the historical perception of—and recent developments in—the physical material of paint were called into question: perhaps in another irreverent dig at the “colors of the prism” and at Neo-Impressionist purity, Ensor allegedly painted *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* with standard colors straight from paint cans bought in an ordinary store.

The ironic faction of Symbolism thus proposed a mode of representation of the world in which everything was fictional. The idea must have been in the air, for although it is never very satisfactory to invoke the notion of *Zeitgeist* there were only very tenuous historical links between Ensor—a profoundly original artist—and other painters who, from the late nineteenth century onward, demonstrated this fictional relationship to reality, which itself would lead to a challenge the stability of the world and the ability of figurative representation to depict it. An assertion of incoherent space, for that matter, went hand in hand with the assault by Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) on theatrical conventions and chronology—his *Messaline*, a “historical” novel about Messalina, straddles the border between history and myth.³⁷ Jarry attacked the genre of the history novel by inserting an accumulation of symbols into a Roman setting, organized according to his own sensibility of motif and color. Through literary sabotage, historical truth and descriptive coherence gave way to a sumptuous style in which highly disparate elements, indeed anachronisms, merged. This principle of subversion, already at work when a prototype of Ubu made an appearance in Jarry's early album of prints, *Minutes de*



Fig. 52
James Ensor
*Christ's Entry into Brussels
in 1889*, 1888–1889

Oil on canvas, 99 1/2 × 169 1/2 in.
(2.57 × 4.30 m)

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



sable mémorial (Moments of a Monument in Sand), governed the entire *Ubu* drama cycle. Not only were dramatic content and text constantly subverted, but so was authorship—by pushing Ubu to the front of the stage Jarry tied his own literary fate to a character he inherited from schoolboy farces at the *lycée* in Rennes. The spatial convention of the theater itself was transcended through an escalation of codification and a deliberate downplay of drama that described a virtual world: “To represent the door of the prison, an actor stood on stage with his left arm out. I put the key in his hands as though in a lock. I made the sound of the barrel—‘click-clack’—and I pushed the arm as though opening the door,” recalled Firmin Gémier concerning the premiere of *Ubu Roi*.³⁸ Jarry’s transmutation of theater into a total artistic spectacle and a re-creation of the world was all the more significant in that he focused his efforts not only on literature but also stagecraft and illustration (fig. 53). For the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, he collaborated with Serusier, Bonnard, and Ranson, who produced the sets. The speech Jarry delivered at the premiere already bore the seeds of a redefinition of theatrical space. “Moreover, our set will be perfectly accurate, because just as it’s easy to set a play in eternity, that is to say to fire gunshots, for example, in the year 1000-and-something, so you will see doors that give on to snowy plains under a blue sky, mantle-pieces adorned with clocks that swing open to serve as doors, and palm-trees that blossom at the foot of beds so that the little elephants perched on the bookshelves can pasture ... As to the action, which will now begin, it takes place in Poland, that is to say, No Where.”³⁹



Fig. 53
Alfred Jarry
*Song of Brainlessness (La
Chanson du décervelage)*,
1898

Illustrated cover to one of nine scores
by Claude Terrasse to texts by Alfred
Jarry and Franc-Nohain for *Répertoire
des Pantins*, published by *Mercure de
France* between 1896 and 1898
Lithograph, 13 3/4 × 10 1/2 in.
(35 × 26.8 cm)
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Since the early 1890s the Nabis, inspired by Paul Ranson, had been toying with marionette theater, designing and executing sets and characters. They put on a few performances for a select audience, the first of which took place in 1892. They notably presented Maurice Maeterlinck's *Seven Princesses*. In the winter of 1898, composer Claude Terrasse founded the transient Théâtre des Pantins in a studio connected to his apartment, where several performances of *Ubu Roi* were given, with Jarry himself pulling the strings. Bonnard, Vuillard, Roussel, Ranson, and Valotton contributed to the settings of both studio and stage. Since *Ubu* sprang from both the legitimate theater and puppet theater, here he was rediscovering his roots. The continuity of the character enabled Jarry to carefully maintain, throughout *Ubu*'s career in Paris, a back-and-forth movement between marionettes and the stage, between minor and major theater, thereby conflating formal inventiveness with a threat to established values. Connections between the two realms of performance were established through the costume of the leading role (masked, and with a fictional anatomy) and the exaggerated acting of players subjected to the Punch-and-Judy dialogue and slapstick action associated with puppets. As Rachilde wrote to Lugné-Poe, "The wisest thing is to perform an outrageous piece, as long as you play the complete fool."⁴⁰ The Nabis's theatrical activity, and their work with Jarry around marionettes, was not a mere sideline to painting even if it left few visible traces. It was an integral part of their exploration of the relationship between tangible reality and various fictional forms that an artwork might adopt. The return to the Italian primitives and to noble forms consecrated by history thus also had a subversive counterpart, one that drew on a playful, lower-class tradition and that enjoyed a significant, if subterranean, heritage—it should be remembered that Ranson designed the costumes for Marinetti's play *Roi Bombance* (King Revel), which premiered in a performance directed by Lugné-Poe in 1909. As a theater of pure concepts, Symbolism thus conjured up a dramaturgy in which an author's inventiveness could forego flesh-and-blood actors. "The acting in such works . . . matters little. You can't find actors who can create states of mind," wrote A. van Bever on Maeterlinck.⁴¹ Ensor's fictional world and bodiless masks, like the marionettes carved by Bonnard and wielded by Jarry over one winter, shared on the unattainable urge to identify art with idea. A comment made by Heinrich von Kleist had already suggested this notion when, comparing dance and puppet theater, he said he saw that the line of movement traced by a marionette was "nothing less than the path of the dancer's soul."⁴²

Of course, few artists could excel in a sphere where an apparent social and ideological stability was challenged through the use of minor forms of theatrical performance or through recourse to masks and travesty. Yet the fact is, when it came to painting as a form of expression, those few

artists counted greatly in their respective cultural spheres. It was the world of children's games, disguises, and sad clowns that a late representative of Symbolism, Polish artist Witold Wojtkiewicz (1879–1909), would exploit to reveal his tragic vision of life (fig. 54). Starting in 1905, Wojtkiewicz's oeuvre took the form of cycles in which social ritual was parodied by beings whose bodies owed more to the artist's physical gesture than to anatomy. The shift of social conventions into the world of marionettes and dolls gave his work a bitter-sweet tone that retains nothing of the features that made his contemporary counterparts famous. Instead, a sneaky hostility invades his childish universe of outrageously conventional landscapes, populated with potted flowers and stereotypical faces that shoot dark looks through the holes in their masks. Although he enrolled in the school of fine arts in Krakow in 1903, Wojtkiewicz never forgot his beginnings as a satirical cartoonist. Even as he began to develop his early cycles of paintings, he continued to work for numerous magazines, notably turning out political cartoons. A few of his works can be read as parodies of some of the most famous paintings of Polish Symbolism, whose main figures he replaced with puppets—the pair of oxen pulling a plow in Ferdinand Ruszczyc's *Earth* (1898, National Museum, Warsaw) became a silly wooden horse bent under the strain in Wojtkiewicz's version (*Plowing*, 1905, National Museum, Warsaw). His tragicomic pantomimes mocked the aspiration toward patriotic and emotional lyricism, so typical of Polish painting of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 54
Witold Wojtkiewicz
The Rocking Horse, study for
Melancholy, 1907

Watercolor, 10 ³/₄ × 14 ¹/₄ in.
(27 × 36.5 cm)
National Museum, Warsaw

Tradition and Stylistic Vocabulary

Modern times are as adventurous
as old times—but we always imagine
adventure in the garb of yore.

Joséphin Péladan, *Le Nimbe noir* (1907)⁴³

Starting in the mid-1880s, the tenets of Impressionism came under challenge from its own leading protagonists, who began adopting more personal approaches to their painterly technique. At the same time, critical justification of the movement—which was barely ten years old—had consolidated around certain main creeds that long remained sacrosanct: adoption of the values of the modern world, faithfulness to natural light, total execution “on the spot,” and spontaneous reaction to atmospheric variations. The connection between swiftness of execution and profoundly personal expression—which was as clear in the abandonment of conventional rules of composition as it was in highly visible brushwork—was perceived as a challenge to painterly tradition and an affirmation of individual personality. This tension between objectivity and subjective expressiveness yielded a strange situation within Impressionism in terms of the nomenclature used to define the status of an artwork, in so far as “finished” paintings henceforth assumed the appearance of raw sketches, undermining the notion of “finish” (one of the crucial precepts of academic training ever since the days of Neo-Classicism). In executing a work, the deliberate minimization of rationality in favor of a spontaneous record of impressions was equivalent to abandoning the traditional methods of channeling an artist’s initial impulses, which were conventionally restricted to the private sphere of the studio. It is surprising that during a period so fascinated by everything related to the objective gaze of science, people felt no urge to point out the extent to which spontaneity in painting was itself an artifice. The fact is that Impressionism’s detractors—echoed by Symbolists of every stripe—saw this new trend above all as an individualistic denigration of all the accomplishments of tradition, for it notably affirmed the primacy of painting over draftsmanship and of impulse over rational elaboration. Impressionism’s accomplishments, partially recuperated by naturalism in the 1880s, were employed to describe a modern, urban world. Yet if we compare Parisian

street scenes by Renoir and Boldini in the late 1870s, it appears that Impressionist brushwork, even as it magnifies nature, muddies the urban landscape. Of all Impressionist painters, only Degas and Caillebotte produced images of the modern city that can now be compared to naturalistic novels, precisely because neither artist rejected a certain descriptive precision. The unresolved tension between a subject that still retained narrative elements and an execution that made it impossible to read those elements might well be seen as a failing of Impressionist painting. Yet giving and simultaneously withholding information remained a form of willful irreverence toward another cornerstone of academic tradition, namely the expected correspondence between pictorial conception and subject. At the very moment that Symbolism emerged, this internal conflict within Impressionism led to a kind of self-proclamation of the painted surface. In particular, Monet—probably reacting to Seurat's early work—elaborated several paintings around a very dense fabric of color built up from repetitive, relatively uniform brushstrokes, thereby limiting the effect of gestural dynamism (*Field of Poppies Near Giverny*, 1885, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). This particularity was reflected in comments made by the aging Eugène Boudin, who was stupefied at the public exhibition of Monet's *Rouen Cathedral* series in 1895 and who was puzzled by the material appearance of these works "of a truly strange nature," involving "something highly elaborate and intricate, pushed to the absolute limits of impasto."⁴⁴ The invasion of the canvas by the motif eliminated the descriptive necessity associated with situating an object in space, and therefore led to increased attention to the painterly surface, enlivened by the tactile quality of the paint itself. Thus starting in the mid-1890s, Monet's oeuvre was the object of critical analysis that claimed to perceive its convergence with Symbolism.⁴⁵ Prior to that point, however, Symbolist criticism had lumped Impressionism with naturalism in its rejection of materialist art. In the ongoing struggle, the notion of painterly tradition would play an important role in various and sometimes contradictory ways, being subjected to certain distortions, as we shall see.

Yet it is important to point out that references to the past could still hold academicism at one remove, for the official "academy" was no longer considered the sole repository of authentic learning. In France, the Institut de France and the École des Beaux-Arts, which through circuitous routes governed art education and enjoyed *de facto* authority over the annual Salon, began to lose their influence with the proclamation of the Third Republic in 1870. After that date, the Académie des Beaux-Arts progressively began accepting members from highly varied artistic trends, thus giving the impression of fissuring the very doctrine it was supposed to cement.⁴⁶ Artists born in the 1860s realized that academicism,

as an official art, was slowly being replaced by the naturalism that was seeping into art education and government institutions, even as it became a kind of international vocabulary.⁴⁷ In fact, the government's fine art ministry supported not only the academic art of, say, Delaroche's pupil Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) but also the naturalism of Alfred Roll (1846–1919). Symbolist criticism would consistently denounce academicism as representing superficial tradition, even while recognizing that naturalism constituted its true target, both fundamentally and in conjunctural terms. Thus when the young Maurice Denis published his famous "definition of neo-traditionalism" in 1890, academicism was presented less as a vector of a traditional heritage than as an official art that had been compromised by naturalism.⁴⁸ Denis notably attacked the teachings of William Bouguereau (1825–1905), based on direct observation of the model and a search for visual resemblance. "He photographs," complained Denis, going on to say that the youngest painters coming out of the French training system—"the students of these Masters"—had

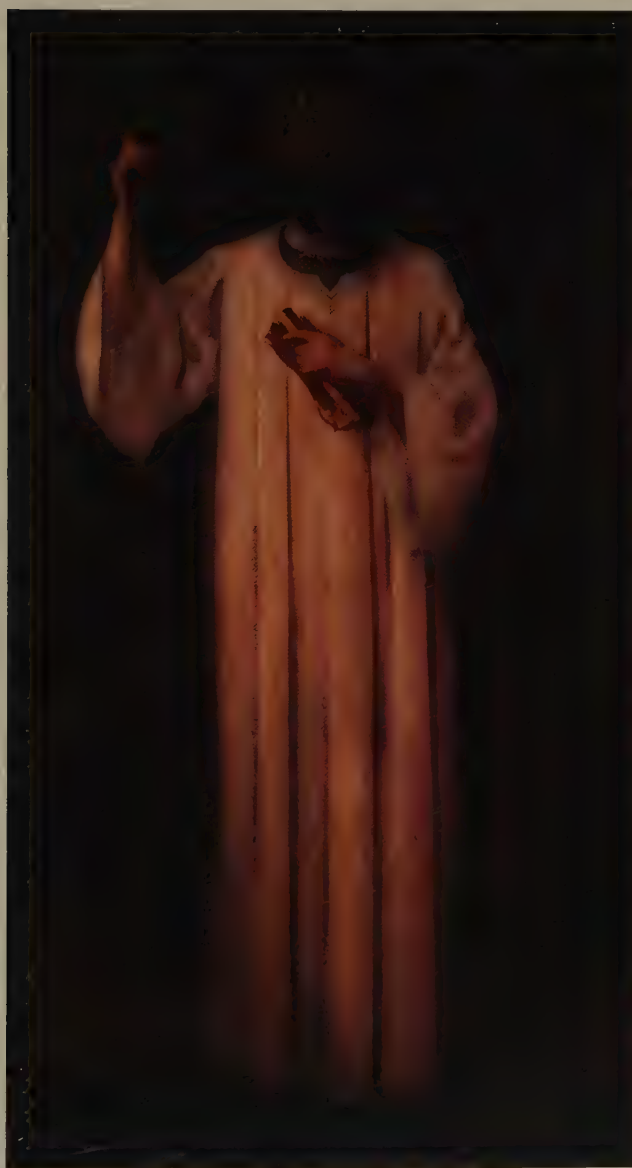


Fig. 55
Jean Delville
*Portrait of the Grand
Master of the Rose-Croix,*
1894

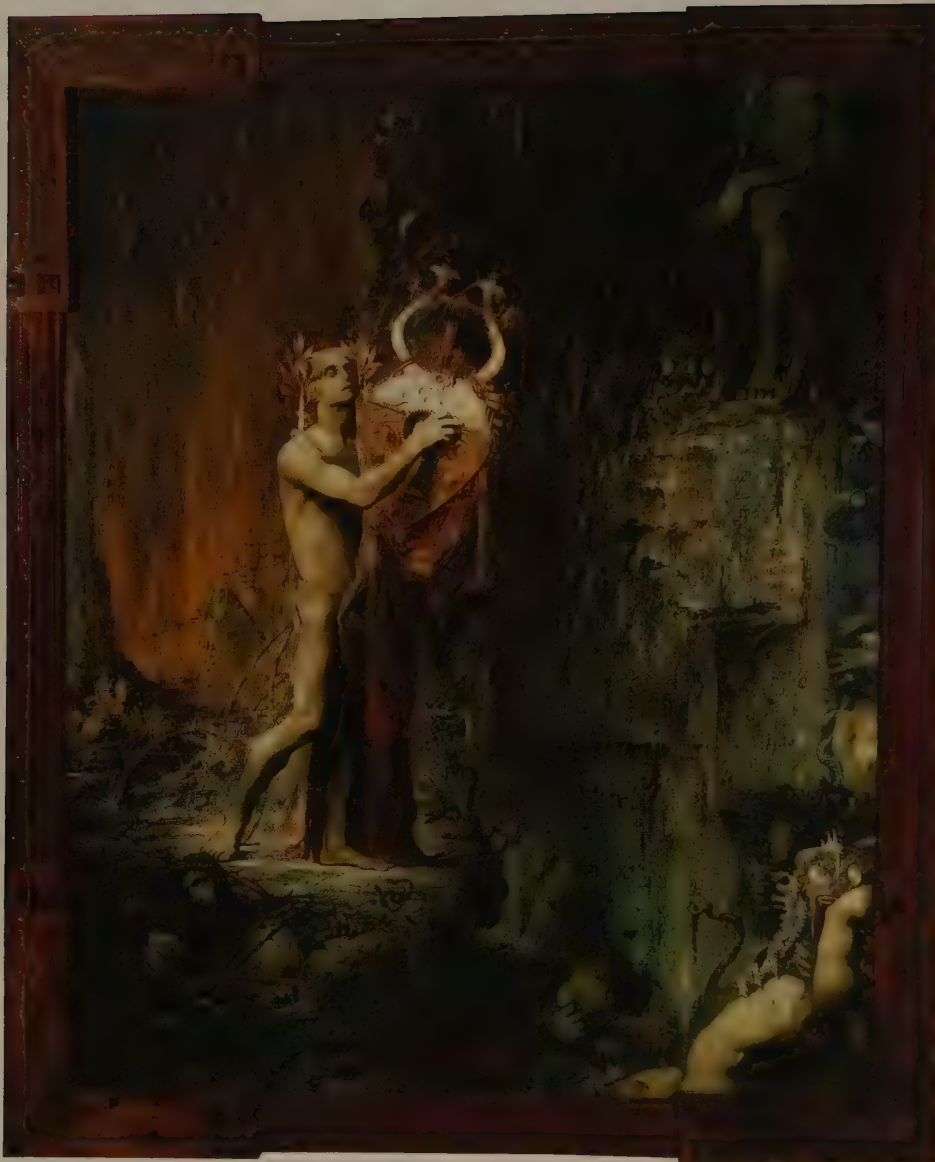
Oil on canvas, 44 x 95 1/4 in.
(1.12 x 2.42 m)
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nîmes

henceforth arrived at “pure naturalism, which means the end; there is nothing beyond that, you can go no lower, so we will certainly rise again.” Symbolism therefore defined itself in terms of a double rejection: spontaneous Impressionism and impersonal naturalism were both dismissed. But “rising again” implied restoring a sense of tradition, rebuilding a time-battered edifice, stone by stone. Many aspects of Symbolism can be explained if we appreciate the fact that its main protagonists, beyond stylistic choices that might diverge, shared the status of young painters who were by and large disappointed with the official system of art education. During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, artists banded together groups of various kinds: German art “colonies,”⁴⁹ esoteric societies such as the Nabis (founded in Paris in 1888 by fellow art students linked by friendship),⁵⁰ and alliances designed to outflank official regulations for public exhibitions (such as Les XX, founded in Brussels in 1884).

In his career as an art critic, launched in 1881, Joséphin Péladan (1859–1918, fig. 55) proved to be one of the most determined disparagers of naturalism. He painted a picture of contemporary art that portrayed his own era as one of decadence, and he proposed an esoteric vision that claimed to embrace art of all ages. Émile Bernard, in a major retrospective article published toward the end of his life, described the first Salon de la Rose-Croix, organized at Péladan’s instigation in Paris in 1892, as representing the launch of Symbolist painting, at least as far as “the official world” was concerned.⁵¹ In the early 1890s, Péladan was a celebrated writer and fashionable figure. First noticed by the literary world on the 1884 publication of his novel *Le Vice Suprême*—which Barbey d’Aureville honored with a preface—Péladan was a literary incarnation of a provocative mixture of social conservatism, idealism, mysticism, and perversity. Interested in the occult and in monarchist politics, he was first a member of Stanislas de Guaita’s Rosicrucian movement, the *Ordre de la Rose-Croix*, before going on in 1891 to found his own Catholic version, the *Ordre de la Rose-Croix Catholique* (of which he proclaimed himself grand master). Shortly afterward, he published the statutes of an “aesthetic Rosicrucianism,” announcing that an annual exhibition would be held under its auspices in order to encourage an idealist riposte. This activity seems to have been the aesthetic wing of a philosophy that, through various modes of expression (criticism, fiction, theater) sought to have an impact on social, political, and religious spheres. Later in his career Péladan would prove to be even more versatile author, but this eclecticism was already evident in the variety of his activities from the mid-1880s onward, when he managed to generate boisterous publicity around his own character, bolstering his literary image with a temperament that favored action.

As Péladan saw it, restoring tradition once more meant constituting a group that would form an artistic confraternity, even though his vision was ultimately more theoretical than practical. In *Le Vice suprême* he has one of his characters express the wish to found “a third, completely intellectual, order of poets, artists, and scholars, an Army of the Word, imposing the Catholic seal on all manifestations of human genius by the force of document and masterpiece.”⁵² Like Charles Blanc, who back in the 1870s had already expressed his concern about the situation of French art, Péladan articulated his doctrine around the Italian Renaissance. But whereas Blanc, a convinced republican, thought he could provide artists of his day with examples of great Italian art by founding a museum of copies in Paris,⁵³ Péladan’s philosophy was distinctly pessimistic and above all marked by his hostility to everything related to the state. According to Péladan, the erosion of French painting followed the general trend of society from the decline of the nobility in the eighteenth century to the days of the Third Republic, the decisive break having occurred with the French Revolution. The “secularization” of art by the government was the fruit of materialist philosophy, which led to various forms of realism. Like most Symbolist critics, Péladan perceived a kind of collusion between the aesthetic principles of naturalism and the teaching provided at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, based as it was on the observation of reality and the transcription of visual impressions. In a text devoted to the decorative arts, he attributed the decadence of style to the disappearance of guilds and the loss of the compositional and technical secrets that guilds had sustained.⁵⁴ Nostalgia for the *ancien régime* was here superimposed on a trait typical of the times, namely the call for an elaboration of art within an intellectual community, to which Péladan added a demand for a spiritual content.

The paradox is that the form of action adopted for the implementation of this philosophy was one primarily geared toward publicity, in the modern sense of the term. Instead of using his notoriety to actually found a confraternity where certain artists might work together, Péladan preferred to bring his choice of painters and sculptors together for exhibitions that he was determined to turn into society events. The *Salons de la Rose-Croix*, held in Paris from 1892 to 1897 (with offshoots in Brussels in the form of the *Salons d’Art Idéaliste*)⁵⁵ were designed to eradicate naturalism by taking a distinctly ideological approach. The criteria employed by Péladan for participation in these exhibitions were based largely on imagery: in his “rule and monitory letter on the *Salon de la Rose-Croix*,” Péladan first drew up a list of “rejected subject matter” that included not only still lifes but also “history painting, prosaic and textbook illustration” and “any depiction of contemporary life, private or



public,” and then he went on to declare that, “in the first instance the Order will favor the Catholic Ideal and Mysticism. Next comes Legend, Myth, Allegory, Dream, and Paraphrase of the great poets, and finally Lyricism, always preferring work of a mural-like nature as embodying a higher essence.”⁵⁶

The first of these Rosicrucian salons, which notably included artists Émile Bernard, Ferdinand Hodler, Fernand Khnopff, Gaetano Previati, Carlos Schwabe, Jan Toorop, and Félix Vallotton, made critics and the public aware of the existence of an idealist trend that cut across European borders, and that was immediately evident through what might be called

Fig. 56
Pierre-Amédée
Marcel-Beroneau
Orpheus, 1897

Oil on canvas, 76 ³/₄ × 60 ³/₄ in.
(1.95 × 1.54 m)
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille

the singularity of its imagery. Since the early 1880s, Péladan had constantly cited the names of the few living artists who represented his ideal. His review of the Salon of 1888 concluded with a “nod to the absent,” by which he paid tribute to Puvis de Chavannes—whom he still felt was the “most noble spirit of today’s art”—Gustave Moreau, and Félicien Rops.⁵⁷ None of these painters ever exhibited at Péladan’s Rosicrucian salons, any more than did Burne-Jones, whom he had approached—Péladan’s “tradition” thus failed to materialize. Several of Moreau’s students nevertheless showed paintings that sometimes broke with their master’s style, such as Edgard Maxence (1871–1954), Pierre-Amédée Marcel-Beronneau (1869–1937, fig. 56), Georges Desvallières, and Georges Rouault (1871–1958), not to mention Alphonse Osbert, a follower of Puvis de Chavannes. But while the works exhibited at the Rose-Croix satisfied Péladan’s restrictions on imagery, several of them seemed to have slipped through the net of his aesthetic principles (just as the strange modernity of his own novels may now appear incompatible with his conservative professions of faith). For example, a triptych titled *Dawn*, exhibited by Charles Maurin (1856–1914) in 1892, was an anarchistic homage to Baudelaire and Rimbaud in the form of a series of oneiric images painted “in flat tones,” but which bore no connection to the traditional examples so dear to Péladan.⁵⁸ Although the role of a painter and patron close to the Impressionists, Antoine de la Rochefoucauld (1862–1960?), was crucial to the inclusion in the first salon of artists from a Cloisonist background such as Émile Bernard and Charles Filiger (1863–1928), we should not underestimate the later hardening of Péladan’s aesthetic positions over time; back in the early 1890s, his theoretical reasoning still displayed a dichotomy that allowed less formally conservative works to find a place.

Between the early 1880s and the early 1890s, Péladan’s critical output was as subversive as it was reactionary. Claiming birth from the same womb as the Baudelairean art of imagination that rejected all realism, Péladan called for a return to the virginal vision with which the nineteenth century credited the artists who immediately preceded the Renaissance, linking the notion of a creative power freed from the contingencies of tangible reality to a glorious past marked by mysticism. Thus in 1881 he favorably contrasted the “awkwardly sublime works” of the Italian primitives to the painting of his own day, and he described as “a miracle” an artwork that “can rub shoulders with Raphael yet is, technically, inferior to a simple industrial print.⁵⁹ He was still wedded to this concept at the start of the 1890s. His plan for the “establishment” of a “Rosicrucian aesthetic” involved “destroying the concept that prizes fine execution, extinguishing the dilettantism of methods, subordinating *the arts* to *Art*,

that is to say returning to tradition, which means considering the Ideal as the sole goal of all painterly, plastic, or architectonic effort."⁶⁰ His quest for the naive was comparable to the attitude of Maurice Denis, who was just then looking to the primitives for expressive freshness, and who would be included in the initial list of artists drawn up in 1891 by Péladan and La Rochefoucauld for the first Salon de la Rose-Croix, alongside Redon and Louis Anquetin (1861–1932).⁶¹

As happened earlier with the English Pre-Raphaelites, this taste for Italian primitives would progressively be overlaid with a fascination for the formal beauty of Renaissance art. It is probable, given the later evolution of his position, that Péladan was less concerned with painterly tradition properly speaking than with its polemical depiction, thanks to a misappropriation in which his own conservative aesthetic preferences would be subverted from within. Significant in this respect was the attitude of several of the painters who showed most regularly with the Rose-Croix, in so far as their relationship to painterly tradition was deliberately artificial. Maxence, who had been a leading candidate for the Prix de Rome in 1893, showed at the Rose-Croix salon from 1895 to 1897. The paintings for which he became known, fictional assemblages of disparate historical elements, project an archaic feel both in terms of imagery (which abounded in allusions to medieval piety) and execution (which employed gold backgrounds and sometimes combined standard oil technique with relief effects obtained by the use of colored plaster). These composite works combined areas of flat wash, in which the paint was left very visible or applied in decorative stamping, with realistic hands, faces, and expressions that were typically naturalist. Their unsettling modernity resides in the way they flaunt the mystificatory principle on which they are based. *Concert of Angels* (fig. 57) reproduces the same figure three times in different light and in no way disguises the assembly techniques behind its composition. Maxence also made his own frames in a Renaissance or late Gothic spirit—here his pastiche-like allusion to tradition effectively posited falsification as a creative act.

The emergence of this new relationship to pictorial tradition owed much to the dissemination of works by Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelites—from whom many French painters drew inspiration (fig. 58)—in so far as their aesthetic claimed a link to the past not through academic affiliation but, on the contrary, through a break with academism spurred by quest for authenticity. The considerable popularity of the Pre-Raphaelites in the last decade of the nineteenth century, notably following the Universal Exposition held in Paris in 1889, would itself lead to a certain saturation and turn it into a banal fashion phenomenon. By the early 1890s James Ensor was reacting to this codified fashion by

producing several works that display a veritable stylistic schizophrenia. The linear style that had emerged somewhat earlier in a number of paintings (*Angels Watching over Christ*, 1886, private collection) subsequently evolved, in a few instances, into a parodistic allusion to the Pre-Raphaelites that was not devoid of fascination. *The Consoling Virgin* (fig. 59), exhibited with Les XX in 1893, plays on a certain ambiguity of imagery; an initial level of reference to Saint Luke painting the Virgin is overlaid with an Annunciation and a self-portrait as Pygmalion, Ensor

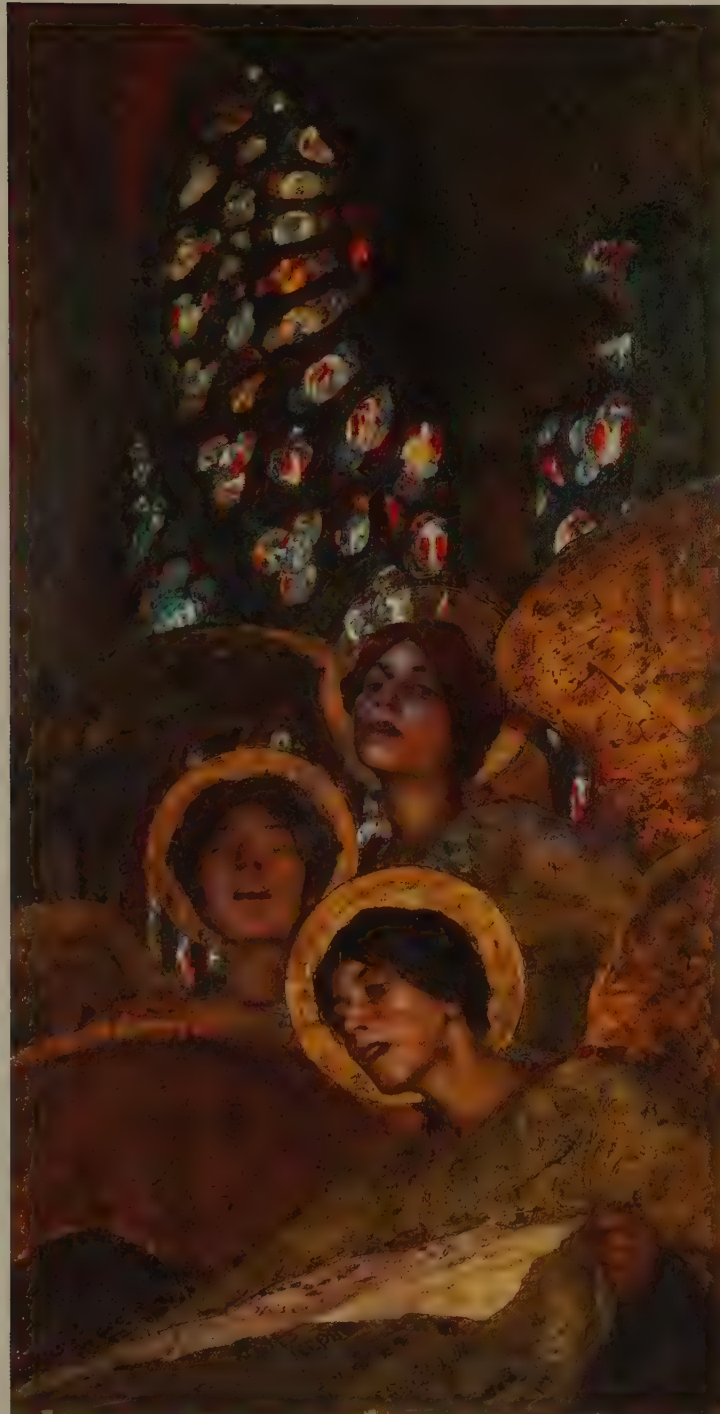


Fig. 57
Edgard Maxence
Concert of Angels, 1897

Oil on canvas, 65 1/2 x 30 1/2 in.
(164 x 85 cm)

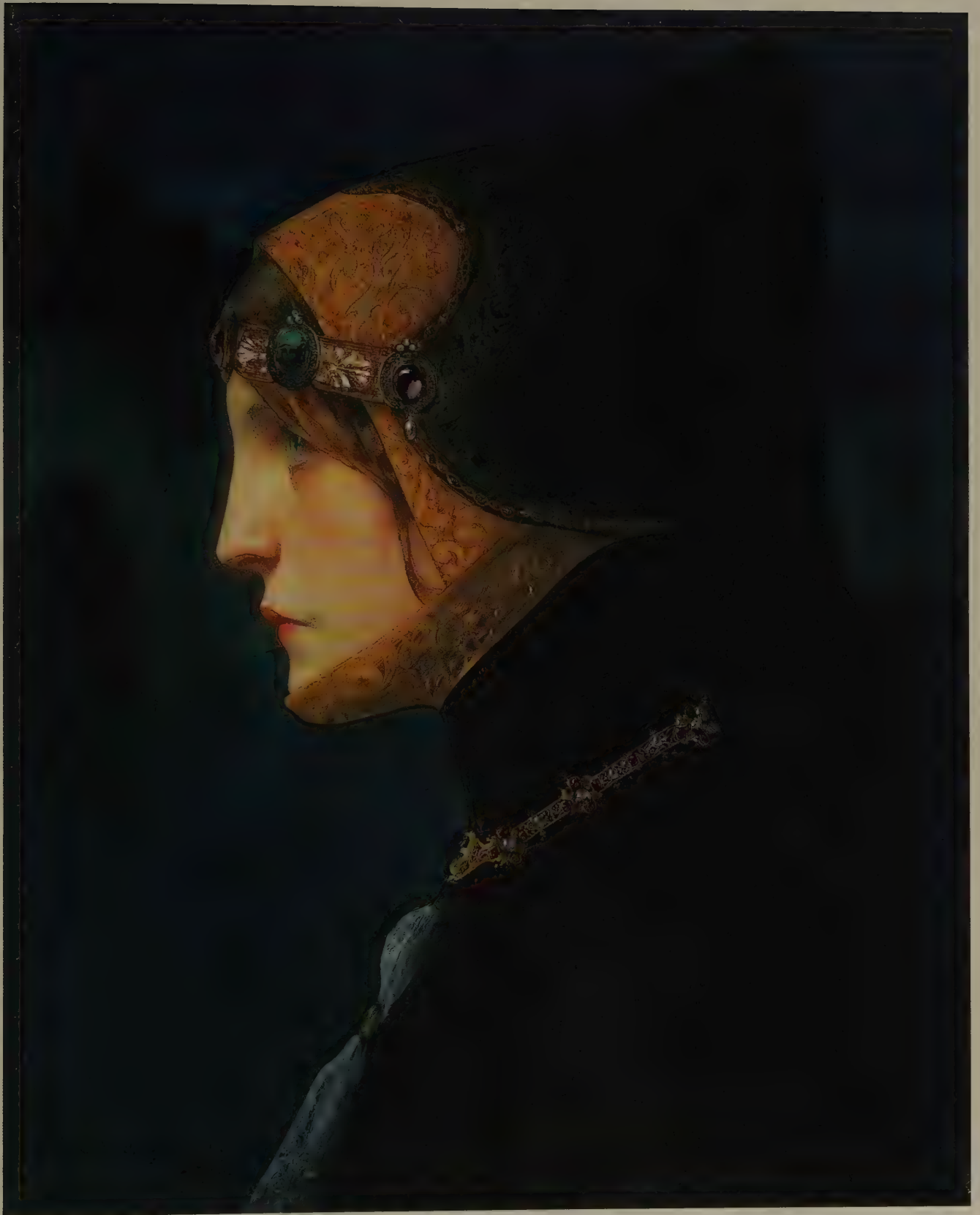
Musée Départemental de l'Oise,
Beauvais

having let fall his brushes and maulstick in order to kneel before the Virgin who appears before him lily in hand, resembling a Pre-Raphaelite beauty straight out of the Botticelli-like tondo on which the artist is working. Ensor, like some dandy who wandered into a quattrocento studio, lampoons the fashion for Italian primitives through drawn perspective, angular ornamentation, and deliberately naive floral patterning. Above a capital bearing the date of the painting and the artist's signature, a grotesque mask sticks out its tongue; below, by way of signature, a smoked herring lies near a half-eaten carrot and a ciborium, that Symbolist implement. In this small and precious-style painting, Ensor was alluding to the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic's infiltration of Belgian art, as notably demonstrated at the time by the religious paintings of Léon Frédéric, who was invited to show with *Les XX* that very year.

The 1893 exhibition also featured a screen by Émile Bernard (1868–1941), painted in distemper and still very Cloisonnist in spirit.⁶² Bernard was just then starting out on a path dogged by the question of tradition, one that would lead him away from the Synthetism he had largely helped to invent. In March 1893 he left for Italy, as Maurice Denis would do two years later. Bernard visited Genoa and Pisa, and then spent just five days in Rome before sojourning in Florence for over a month. There he met up with Sérusier and Jan Verkade⁶³ and ran into Edouard Schuré.⁶⁴ In a kind of Romantic pilgrimage, he then moved on to visit Constantinople, Smyrna, Samos, and Jerusalem. By November he was in Egypt. He saw Alexandria and Tantah, and at the end of the year finally settled down in Cairo—where he would remain for ten years, interrupted by voyages sometimes lasting several months, notably to Naples and Spain (1896), Venice (1900 and 1903), and Paris (1901). His withdrawal into a latter-day Baudelairean dream and his fascination with oriental magnificence (already threatened by modern dilapidation) were part of his determination to forget history, to lose himself in the contemplation of a new world even as he focused, intermittently, on the study of painting from earlier periods. Having explored various traditional artistic sources, Bernard would effect a stylistic turnaround in Egypt that led him, in the final years of the nineteenth century, to a Puvis-like monumentality inspired by Michelangelo and the Renaissance Venetians, through which he magnified the spectacle of street life in Cairo. This process was nevertheless complex and occurred progressively. Bernard incorporated into his new approach certain features of his early years, echoing Charles Blanc, whose “grammar” of drawing adopted a progressive stance that advocated the merger of modern theories of color with an approach to form inspired by the Italian Renaissance.⁶⁵ Thus in 1898 Bernard asked his mother to send him “Rood’s book on color

Fig. 58
Lucien Victor Guirand
de Scévola (1871–1950)
*Head of a Lady in Medieval
Costume*, c. 1900

Watercolor, gouache, and gold
highlights, 17 ³/₄ × 14 in.
(45 × 35.5 cm)
Musée Fabre, Montpellier



theory,” which he had left on his bookshelves when he quit France five years earlier.⁶⁶ “You’d be amazed to see my current paintings, which in no way resemble the ones you know, and which are dark rather than light, mat rather than shiny,” he wrote to his father that same year.⁶⁷ Although Bernard’s approach was based on a rejection of Symbolism’s most significant formal innovations, it was not yet marked by the radical tenor that would characterize his criticism of twentieth-century stylistic innovations after his return to France. In the early 1890s, Bernard’s unsettling position in fact illustrated a more general development, in which the order of the day, inspired by the stylistic explorations of the preceding decade, steadily gave way to an interrogation of the relationship between tradition and innovation. Louis Anquetin worked at reviving Rubens’s painterly technique from 1892 onward;⁶⁸ Armand Point (1861–1932), a Rosicrucian and an admirer of the Florentines, tried to resuscitate fresco painting and in 1896 founded the artistic community of Hauteclaire in Marlotte near Paris, designed to revive age-old techniques used in the making of objets d’art.⁶⁹

This return to Italy as a source of artistic culture represented a watershed in so far as artists had looked toward other horizons ever since the Romantic era. It was furthermore accompanied by a shift in the major frame of reference: just as Maurice Denis only visited Rome in 1898, three years after going to Tuscany and Umbria, so Bernard was initially interested mainly in the primitives.⁷⁰ Bernard’s artistic development

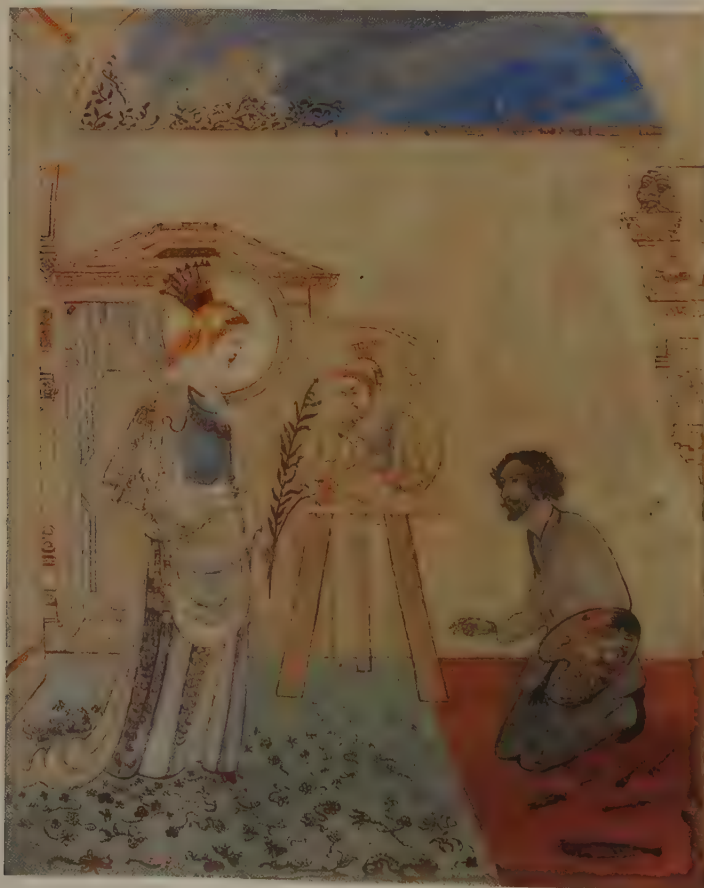


Fig. 59
James Ensor
The Consoling Virgin, "Hail Mary, Full of Grace," 1892

Oil on panel, 15 ³/₄ × 15 in.
(40 × 38 cm)
Private collection

during his ten years of exile began first with a religious primitivism inspired by Roman wall painting and medieval illumination, employing a decorative stylization derived from Cloisonnism and woodcut techniques, as demonstrated by the frescoes he did on Samos in 1893 (fig. 60), unfortunately no longer extant (also apparently lost is a set of wall decorations he executed for Catholic missionaries in either Tantah or Cairo). In an article he sent from Egypt to the *Mercure de France* in 1895, Bernard stressed the religious nature of art.⁷¹ This article presented the overwhelming figure of Michelangelo as marking the end of “naive” art, the culmination of a period in which the progressive integration of scientific knowledge led to the abandonment of a certain empiricism. As the summit of “sophisticated” art, Michelangelo cast a shadow on all his successors, which meant that artistic knowledge “would languish,” according to Bernard, who claimed “it was then necessary to turn to naive art to recover the cry of hope and ecstasy.” Retracing himself this intellectual development in the history of Western painting from naive art to sophisticated art, early in his Egyptian period Bernard explored highly instinctive approaches, as witnessed by the swift, sketchy watercolors done at the time. In an earlier article, Bernard had written, “All the great periods had their formulas—Greek, Egyptian, Byzantine, Gothic, Arabic. Old masters, as the representatives of an individual art following the abolition of artists’ guilds, found regeneration in them. Each man of genius has his own [formulas] that, once found, he employs tirelessly like the words of his own language. [Artists] who, on the contrary, lack these solid bases are destined to disappear or to appear progressively inferior after momentary fame or success. The reinvigoration of art therefore lies in the study of formulas that provide the keys to artistic language.”⁷² But a footnote in the same text contains the following consideration: “Rembrandt’s formless scribbles, and the clumsy rustic art of Brittany or Arabia will always tell us more than the Venus de Milo, despite the delight our eye takes in looking upon her whiteness against a dark ground of velvet.” We can therefore see how this quest for roots, based on a challenge to recent history, remained distinct from the academic tradition of the nineteenth century. But this voyage in the footsteps of old masters, which for Denis was reinforced by true piety, became bitter and pessimistic for Bernard. The idea of decadence in contemporary art, initially embodied by naturalism, was already pregnant in Bernard before his return to France, where he encountered the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. Not long before the separation of church and state became official in France in 1905, Bernard was already attributing the decline of art to a steady secularization imposed by government, which he dated back to the Renaissance. “It is pointless to stress what art lost

through this strange separation (in principle) of religion; from one man's fancy it will become everyone's fancy, and will wind up repudiating itself in this little game," he wrote in a review of the Cairo Salon.⁷³

In 1899 Bernard wrote to his mother, "I'm delighted with the new developments in my painting. I've got it down, *Venetian coloring*, and I'm striding ahead with the confidence of a guide."⁷⁴ From that date onward his painting would embody a synthesis of Italian Renaissance masters, bolstered by an abundant output as an art critic. His work was also underpinned by recollections of Cézanne, the object of unflagging fascination; on returning to France in 1904 Bernard would stay in Aix-en-Provence near Cézanne for a whole month, and would later attempt to respond to the latter's *Large Bathers* through his own monumental paintings (fig. 61). In Bernard's view, Cézanne was neither more nor less contemporary than Titian. This quest for an affiliation independent of recent history led Bernard to a stylistic reshuffle designed to rejected the evolution that led to modern art, an evolution in which Bernard himself had played an important role. He thus abandoned diachronic history for a kind of fictional time-frame that he associated with the temporality of tradition. As he asserted this position through increasingly polemical writings, Bernard became increasingly isolated. Whereas Denis skillfully tried to link the



Fig. 60
Émile Bernard
*Christ and the Evangelists—
The Annunciation*,
decoration for the French
missionary chapel on Samos,
1893



Symbolist theories of his early career to the “new classical order” he adopted after 1900, Bernard consummated a series of rejections that resulted in a return to a Renaissance style in his paintings. The perception of the nineteenth century as a decadent period culminating in naturalism led him to seek refuge in the melancholic interpretation and imitation of old masters, thereby converging with Péladan’s ideas once again.

Fig. 61
Émile Bernard
After the Bath, 1908

Oil on canvas, 55 x 75 in.
(1.4 x 1.91 m)
Musée d’Orsay, Paris

“Idealism”

Know that everything in this world
is but signs, signs, and more signs.

Marcel Schwob, *Le Roi au masque d'or*, 1892⁷⁵

In 1892, Octave Uzanne founded a review called *L'Art et l'Idée*, one of the short-lived publications that so intensely expressed Symbolist culture. In the opening text of the first issue, Uzanne declared the end of naturalism and the rise of a new era placed under the sign of a quest for beauty imbued with mysticism, stressing the concept of the ideal. “Poets, essayists, and novelists are all tending toward the ideal, mystical, religious quality of a *beauty* cloistered in the shade of artistic devotions. Painters and statue-makers are following a similar direction, as though the souls of these novices sense the gulf of disillusion and pessimism into which the thrust of their predecessors is about to push them.”⁷⁶ This declaration is typical of the state of mind of the generation that emerged in the late 1880s—a break with the reigning materialism, a call for aesthetic emotion similar to religious feeling, and an initiatory role for art, all of which converged in conceptions of art that contained, in varying proportions, notions of the ideal and philosophical idealism. At that time, the terms “idea,” “ideal,” and “idealism” were all fighting words, as witnessed by the frequency with which they surfaced in texts designed to undermine the foundations of naturalism. Yet on a deeper level they also revealed a crucial aspect of the intellectual underpinnings of Symbolism. Sticking just with writings on art and literature, it would appear that the Neo-Platonic origins of this mode of thought were explored right from early attempts to define Symbolism—in 1896 Bergson inaugurated his appointment to the chair of Greek and Latin philosophy at the Collège de France with a course on Plotinus. As we shall see, however, even prior to that date numerous critical writings claimed that Symbolism’s origins lay in an idealism that sprang either from Neo-Platonism or from more recent German Romantic thinking. Today it might be objected that the latest developments in German philosophy were scarcely known outside specialized circles, not to mention the fact that the artists themselves were hardly expected to be keen readers of philosophy. Doesn’t that make these Symbolist critics’ explanations therefore come across as artificial, post-facto justifications?

Sure enough, Jules Huret's "inquiry into literary developments," a basic reference work for all studies on late nineteenth-century literary trends, only cites Hegel, Kant, and Schopenhauer twice, while Fichte and Schelling are not mentioned at all.⁷⁷ Only Saint-Pol Roux alluded to Plato, without referring to Plotinus. Yet a literary figure as "encyclopedic" as Remy de Gourmont discussed the idealism of the young generation in terms of Kant and Schopenhauer. Similarly, Camille Mauclair⁷⁸ and Alphonse Germain⁷⁹ claimed allegiance to Hegel. Finally, G.-Albert Aurier adopted a Neo-Platonic perspective in his approach to Gauguin right from 1891, an approach that served as the basis for most definitions of the Symbolist aesthetic in painting.

The sometimes confused yearning for idealism obviously led to a good deal of approximation and second-hand knowledge in the urgent search for mentors in the struggle against materialism. Discussions of the various theoretical systems invoked here rarely take their diversity into account, which would be unavoidable in an authentically philosophical analysis. And yet there would appear to be a very real link between philosophical idealism and Symbolism's interiority and abstract leanings. Gourmont felt that Symbolism was an "ersatz" idealism,⁸⁰ while Émile Verhaeren wrote in 1887 that, "the French philosophy of Comte and Littré belongs to naturalism; [to Symbolism] belongs the German philosophy of the likes of Kant and Fichte . . . Here, fact and world become solely an excuse for ideas; they are treated as mere appearance, condemned to constant variation, and ultimately appear only as dreams within our brains. It is the Idea that defines them by adapting or evoking them, and just as naturalism accords a place to objectivity in art, Symbolism restores subjectivity all the more so. The Idea is thoroughly and tyrannically imposed—hence an art of thought, reflection, contrivance, willfulness."⁸¹ Nor should we overlook the role of transmission played by poetry and literature—the work of Poe (which Jules Lemaître discussed in terms of Plato)⁸² and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam betrays a literary conception in which the mind is central, being the point of departure and culmination, the only reality. In a key article on the links between Symbolism and idealism, Jean Thorel quoted a passage from Villiers's *Axel*. "Your pure will possesses the real being of all things . . . You are only what you think . . . You think you're learning, but you're only discovering yourself: the universe is merely an excuse for this development of all consciousness."⁸³ Teodor de Wyzewa, meanwhile, pointed out that Mallarmé and Villiers de l'Isle-Adams were "practically pure Fichteans."⁸⁴

This call for total subjectivity—which assumed that the only certainties were the ideas generated by the transcendental ego, whereas the existence of the physical world was mere appearance—was accompanied by

a certain freedom with regard to the objective world. More than a doctrine, idealism has become a theoretical orientation aiming to account for the ego's relationship to the external world. The term is used to describe several philosophical systems, all of which—notably Kant's—relativize objective knowledge by positing that the ego can not know the essence of things but only how they appear through the structuring faculty of human knowledge. These systems all question the effective existence of a reality outside consciousness—Kant's "thing-in-itself"—a point the Symbolists ignored in favor of the central issue of the primacy of ego over the external world in all literary or artistic creativity. Therefore, unlike materialism, Symbolist idealism rejected any relationship between art and objectivity. The Symbolists' position might be simplified as follows: since any attempt to gain knowledge of objective reality through the senses and reason is illusory (which is what exhausted naturalism), it is better to produce works free from the restraints of plausibility, ones that therefore function as signs not of consciousness but of the pure world of ideas.

The upshot was the demand for an aesthetics detached from objective reality, in which the artist's gaze espouses the world only in its symbolic virtuality—the objective world and its physical consistency did not interest the Symbolists. They attempted to free themselves from that world by violating apparent forms (the quest for style took on an urgent, crucial quality at that time) or by scrambling the legibility of specific artistic techniques. Not only did painting belong to the tangible world, but in those days it was also still expected to represent that world. Painting therefore had to adopt a particular form that showed it was not subject to the world; it had to attempt, as best it could, to get free of it. A profound contradiction then arose, which various critical approaches to Symbolism have unfailingly stressed ever since. In seeking to paint the idea, Symbolists overlooked the main thing—painting itself. That led Maurice Denis to formulate a distinct definition of the principle of artistic idealism. At the time the Nabi group was forming, he invoked the positivism of Spencer and Taine—whose work he had studied—in reacting against a "materialism" embodied, once again, by the Impressionists. According to Denis, the observation of objective reality should not intervene between consciousness and expression.⁸⁵ Perhaps the crucial point is that once again we encounter a determined effort to reject the common definition of "reality." Contrary to the theories of his contemporaries, however, Denis's theoretical demonstration took painting as its point of departure and then returned to it.

Neo-Platonic thought and its modern extensions view the tangible world as a degraded reality, of which we should remain wary but through which we can glimpse the divine. The world of pure forms, meanwhile, remains distinct and does not depend on any material existence.

According to Symbolist thinking, artistic forms and the expression of formal invention in the tangible world should remain distinct from material appearance. The postulate of the immateriality of painting is echoed by the “nausea” or disgust of the body that Pierre Hadot discusses in connection with Plotinus.⁸⁶ The Symbolist period was marked by a feeling of disgust toward painting, not only painting that pursued the truth of appearances but also painting that cultivated the glamour of the craft for itself. Instead, Symbolism favored a painting that disembodies itself, leaving its assigned path, through the impersonal brushwork of Neo-Impressionism or the use of “prismatic” colors, or a stress on color at the expense of pictorial substance, or a Cloisonnist stylization that eschewed all illusionism, or the allusions to fresco in the work of Puvis de Chavannes and later Gauguin, or simply subjective and imaginary coloring. “The main goal of our art is to objectivize the subjective (externalize the Idea) rather than subjectivize the objective (view nature through a temperament),” wrote Gustave Kahn in 1886.⁸⁷ The “Idea” mentioned here clearly relates to the Neo-Platonic concept of immaterial reality, of divine essence. This inversion of the naturalist proposition, far from applying only to literary or artistic techniques, carried within it an entire world view, one that would only find theoretical expression at a relatively late date, in the days of manifestos, when Symbolism became conscious of itself.

Symbolism in its Day

Symbolism has always posed a problem for art history in so far as it did not manifest itself as a style with clearly discernible features, but rather as a general tendency that cannot be defined by formal criteria alone. Studying it from the standpoint of visual expression means seeing it as a series of interactions between a new set of ideas and various stylistic options—those, on one hand, that emerged toward the end of the 1880s (without necessarily claiming to belong to Symbolism) and, on the other hand (if more marginally), naturalism. Thus, while Neo-Impressionism developed in the context of Symbolism, we could not claim that all Neo-Impressionist artists were Symbolists. What might be true of Seurat, Signac, or Cross at a specific point in their careers is not necessarily the case for Maximilien Luce (1858–1941). Furthermore, an extremely rigorous distinction between Symbolism and naturalism is really only valid within the specifically French context. There were many other places where, to varying degrees, Symbolist subject matter was handled through realistic imagery or, inversely, where strictly naturalist subjects were handled in an allusive way that occulted their meaning, for example in Belgium with Léon Frédéric, in Italy with the Divisionists, and in Finland with Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931).

Given this context, contemporary art criticism assumes key importance, since it provides us today with better insight into the intellectual background behind stylistic innovations whose meaning has generally been overlooked by formalist, twentieth-century analysis. The relationship between art and literature becomes crucial here, although we must also realize that the links between painting and text are sometimes more tenuous than one might think. The founding of Symbolism, with which G.-Albert Aurier credited Gauguin, may appear retrospectively as a highjacking of the recent style of Cloisonnism toward idealist ends. Yet on closer look, the birth of Cloisonnism itself probably corresponded to “a symbolic conception

of art,” to quote Édouard Dujardin. Although Cloisonnism and Symbolism are inextricably related, any opposition that might be established between scientific Neo-Impressionism and idealist Cloisonnism would nevertheless be fallacious, the important point here being the connection between two formally different approaches that shared a fundamental quest for chromatic purity. The polemic between Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard triggered by the famous article in which Aurier first defined Symbolism in painting well illustrates the competitive and urgent atmosphere in which formal innovations arose in those days. Once the issue of stylistic paternity became crucially important, chronology and temporal relationships inevitably became coercive. Gauguin’s escape to non-urban worlds have been linked to the early stirrings of mass tourism, but his motives went undeniably deeper than a temporary exoticism—above all, he was fleeing the tyranny of the present, he wanted to embrace time differently. Symbolism, as we shall see, defined itself as a reaction not only to current events and to naturalistic reporting, but also to the immediacy of light, the dictatorship of the moment and the flow of time—the very foundations on which plein-air painting rested. It is significant that about this time Carrière abandoned the use of color, thereby eliminating any possibility of establishing the time of day in his paintings, and that Dujardin defined Cloisonnism by evoking the feeling obtained by looking through colored glass. Recording time—and recording one’s own times—began to seem like an illusory goal in the late 1880s.

Inventing Symbolism

Gauguin went to Pont-Aven for the first time in July 1886. This five-month stay in Brittany did not radically alter his style, for his technique still largely rested on the division of colors inherited from Impressionism. His compositions, however, displayed increasing Japonism. According to a comment recorded by Charles Chassé, at that time, Gauguin often spoke of “synthesis.”¹ He was probably expressing, orally, the “synthetic notes” he had penned sometime earlier in Rouen or Copenhagen. Gauguin reportedly advocated a method of accumulating images of various types (sketches, copies, studies from nature) and combining them in the final work, a method completely opposed to the Impressionist approach his work had evolved out of. His goal was to produce a work that merged Impressionist coloring with the measured balance found in Puvis de Chavannes. That is what Gauguin sought in a little series of paintings done in Martinique, where he spent several months in 1887 in the company of Charles Laval (1862–1894). Both artists, during that brief period, constructed their paintings through the juxtaposition of strongly contrasting surfaces, in which shimmering stripes of color underscore the flatness of the canvas. Laval would subsequently stick with this style (fig. 62). Impressionism’s atmospheric unity was thus replaced by a discontinuous space in which the question of depth was borne by linear perspective alone. At the same time, a few young painters including Louis Anquetin and Émile Bernard were playing a key role by distancing themselves from their early, Impressionist- or Seurat-inspired efforts; they were trying to develop a new way of structuring space by handling the surface of the painting as areas of flat color delimited by strong outlines, not unlike stained glass. This technique would soon be dubbed Cloisonnism. On returning from Martinique in November 1887, Gauguin probably learned of these experiments by attending an exhibition called *Peintres du Petit Boulevard*, organized by Vincent van Gogh, which included works by Anquetin and Bernard. It was nevertheless Gauguin’s second encounter with Bernard, in Brittany the following summer, that led to his adoption of the style developed by artists distinctly younger than himself.

The respective roles played by Bernard and Gauguin in developing Symbolist painting has been the subject of much dispute, fueled largely

by Bernard himself. It is based on the confrontation of two now very famous paintings, identical in size. One is Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (fig. 63), the other is Bernard's *Breton Women in a Meadow* (fig. 64). In his unpublished biography, *L'Aventure de ma vie*, Bernard recounted the circumstances behind the painting of this canvas in August or September 1888.

I had just spent three months in Saint-Briac, from whence I brought my studies, and I headed to Pont-Aven. Gauguin was there, in wooden clogs, with Charles Laval . . . I went up to Gauguin, who welcomed me warmly this time. He came to my place to see what I'd brought from Saint-Briac, and he studied it attentively. He thought it showed much personality, and he like the rich color and straightforward execution. He then took me to his studio in Madame Gloannec's barn; I saw in his canvases a style that was more and more distinctive, but the division of hues to which he remained faithful was destroying the color, which produced a somewhat disagreeable overall feel. I politely pointed this out, all the while stressing my admiration for his talent. Sometime later, there was a celebration in Pont-Aven. I painted, from sketches, Breton women dressed in black, sitting in a deliberately yellow-green meadow. Gauguin was very impressed by this canvas, which demonstrated what I'd said about his color, and which was the result of my own studies on coloring. "The more you divide up the color," I told him, "the more intensity it loses. It becomes gray or dirty." He wanted to see for himself, and borrowed some of the colors I'd been using, such as Prussian blue, which had been banished from the Impressionist palette and which he didn't have. He produced the painting known as *The Vision After the Sermon* which earned him the title of the "inventor of



Fig. 62
Charles Laval
On Martinique, 1887

Oil on canvas,
25 1/2 x 36 in. (65 x 91.5 cm)
Private collection



Symbolism.” But all he did was apply not only the color theory I had explained to him, but also the very style of my Breton women in the meadow, after having laid down a decidedly red ground instead of the yellow-green background in mine. In the foreground he put the same large figures with their monumental hats. He was so happy with this painting that he continued down the path it indicated, abandoning the Divisionism he had learned from Pissarro.²

Bernard first published this assertion, in a less developed form, in December 1903—after Gauguin’s death.³ Its veracity has sometimes been questioned, as has the precedence of Bernard’s painting over *The Vision After the Sermon*, which represents a decisive watershed in Gauguin’s oeuvre. But regardless of whether *Breton Women in the Meadow* was painted for the feast of the Assumption on August 15 or for the procession known as the Pardon, held in Pont-Aven every year on September 16, Gauguin would have had time to see it before doing his own painting, which he described in a letter to Vincent van Gogh around September 22:

Grouped Breton women, praying, very intense black dress—very luminous yellow white hats. The two hats on the right are like freakish helmets—an apple tree traverses the canvas, dark purple, and the

Fig. 63
Paul Gauguin
*The Vision After the Sermon:
Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*,
1888

Oil on canvas, 28 ³/₄ × 36 ¹/₄ in.
(73 × 92 cm)

National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh



foliage is drawn in masses like emerald green clouds with sunny yellow-green interstices. Ground pure vermilion. At the church it declines and becomes red brown. The angel is dressed in strong ultramarine and Jacob in bottle green. Angel wings pure chrome yellow no. 1—Angel's hair chrome no. 2 and feet orange flesh—in the figures I think I've attained great simplicity, rustic and superstitious—all very severe—The cow underneath the tree, tiny compared to reality, is bucking—For me, the landscape and wrestling match in this picture exist only in the minds of the people praying after the sermon, that's why there's a contrast between the natural people and the wrestling match in a non-natural, disproportionate landscape.⁴

In 1891, G.-Albert Aurier (1865–1892) also described this painting, taking it as the starting point for the first definition of a painterly version of Symbolism, whose invention he attributed to Gauguin.⁵ Bernard, convinced he had been robbed of his discovery, would unflinchingly claim to have invented Symbolism, adopting a polemical stance that ultimately had an impact on his artistic output. While it is true that the overall organization of the composition and the surface handling *The Vision After the Sermon* proceed from Bernard and Cloisonnism, the use made of these elements nevertheless reflects Gauguin's own motivations. Whereas Bernard carried

Fig. 64
Émile Bernard
*Breton Women in a Meadow
or The Pardon of Pont-Aven,*
1888

Oil on canvas,
29 1/4 x 36 1/4 in. (74 x 92 cm)
Private collection

out a bold stylistic exercise, Gauguin strove to depict the vision that a sermon triggered in the minds of the congregation. The biblical incident from Genesis 32:23–31 is set in the same plane as the real people, although separated from them by the tree trunk that cuts across the canvas diagonally. The nearly uniform vermilion background betrays a subjective approach to color that, once again, may have been inspired by Bernard, whose canvas *The Buckwheat Harvest* (fig. 65), painted in Brittany probably during the harvest, features an orangy red ground on which figures stand out in sharp differences of scale. *The Buckwheat Harvest* was the same size as the other two canvases and was probably conceived by Bernard as a pendant to his *Breton Women in a Meadow*. It displays the same decorative spirit, while the dominant red ground acts as a counterpoint to the green—its complementary color—found in the *Breton Women*, thus forming a kind of diptych.

As just mentioned, Gauguin diverged from Bernard in the oneiric and religious dimension of his work, an aspect strongly stressed by Aurier's article, stemming from both formal description and narrative content. The theme of *The Vision* was a crucial factor in the major role that Aurier attributed to Gauguin's painting. For that matter, it would appear that the explicitly religious nature of the work emerged during its execution, Gauguin's conception of his subject having evolved during that process. Neither the preparatory drawing in the "Walter notebook" (fig. 66) nor the illustrative sketch attached to Gauguin's written description to van Gogh (fig. 67) include the priest seen on the right of the final work or the woman on the left who turns her face to the front (and whose expression suggests that she does not share in the vision). Similarly, in the otherwise detailed description he composed for van Gogh, Gauguin does not mention the figure of the priest at all. It is therefore likely that he added these two figures later, clarifying the religious significance of the painting. Indeed, while it is entirely likely that these two crucial protagonists were absent from the preliminary stage of the drawing in the Walter notebook, it is harder to explain why Gauguin, when describing the finished work for his friend, overlooked them in a sketch done a posteriori. *The Vision After the Sermon* must therefore have existed in two successive states, probably over a short span of time, in any case prior to Gauguin's departure for Arles on October 21, when he gave the canvas to Bernard to take to Paris. Through the priest, Gauguin introduced the figure of an intercessor, bearing the good word, while the pouting woman, facing outward (and similar in her frontal, caricatured simplicity to the one in the foreground of Bernard's *Breton Women in a Meadow*), symbolized disbelief—or at least a certain skepticism—of the mystery. Recent historiography argues that the priest is a self-portrait of the artist, which would thereby represent the first instance in which Gauguin deliberately set himself in a religious con-

text, an approach he would repeat the following year by giving his own features to the figure of Christ in *Agony in the Garden* (1889, Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach). It has often been stressed how important the turn to religious imagery was for both Bernard and Gauguin, starting in 1889. The genesis of *The Vision After the Sermon* reveals the extreme attention paid by Gauguin to his subject, and the inclusion of a self-portrait in a religious setting contains the seeds of imagery with double meanings that would become characteristic of an entire side of Gauguin's and Bernard's later output. Cloisonnism, initially associated with depictions of contemporary urban life in the work of Anquetin and Bernard, would subsequently borrow a primitive tension from medieval art and would erect part of its intellectual foundations on Catholic mysticism.

It was during the summer of 1888 that Aurier was introduced to Bernard, through whom he met Gauguin. Two years later, Aurier was a fashionable critic (fig. 68). He wrote for several magazines and already had one novel behind him, as well as an embryonic corpus of poetry. His 1891 article on Gauguin was destined to make a strong impact. At the heart of the text was a definition of Symbolism in painting; it has perhaps not been sufficiently stressed that Aurier was the first to employ, for the visual arts, a term that had previously been reserved for poetry and later extended to literature in general. The very title of his article, "Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin," presupposes an equivalence between the two distinct spheres of expression. Symbolism was presented as a cultural phenomenon, as a philosophical trend that could infuse creativity in all its forms. Aurier's articles sought to define, with precision, a recent trend in painting. His definition pinpointed the emergence of this new mode by identifying it with a



Fig. 65
Émile Bernard
The Buckwheat Harvest,
1888

Oil on canvas, 28 ³/₄ × 35 ¹/₂ in.
(73 × 90 cm)
Private collection

founding figure and an inaugural work. It addressed formal issues, strictly speaking, only indirectly. With Symbolism, then, for the first time this issue of the paternity of a style and its role in chronology was raised most sharply. Although the article was published in March 1891, Aurier dated it very precisely to February 9, as indicated at the bottom of the page (a rather unusual practice at the time). During that winter Bernard and Gauguin, whose relationship had been deteriorating, fell out. On February 22, on the eve of the sale organized by Gauguin prior to his departure for Tahiti, the two men had an altercation in front of the Drouot auction house. By appending the date to the bottom of his article, Aurier intended to show that its content was not dictated by polemical considerations. Nevertheless, the urgency apparent here betrays the state of tension. Both artists would leave France in search of a sense of time that allowed creativity to blossom freely outside the competitiveness triggered by Parisian aesthetic debate—Gauguin to the South Pacific, Bernard to Egypt. Aurier's article should therefore be viewed in a context in which the quest for stylistic novelty that had typified French art since Manet had steadily conferred an increasingly important role on art critics. His attempt to circumscribe with great precision the characteristics of a Symbolist artwork betray a normative approach, revealing an unprecedented interconnection between critical discourse and artistic creativity. Aurier's use of the future tense in his famous definition of Symbolism art therefore gave it a "prophetic" feel that heralded the artistic manifestos of the early twentieth century. As the consecration of the expression of the idea through symbolic means, Aurier's definition rested on five terms. He claimed that, in the future, a work of art would have to be:

1. "ideist," since its unique ideal is to express the Idea;
2. symbolist, since it expresses this Idea by means of forms;
3. synthetic, since it arranges these forms or signs in order to facilitate general comprehension;
4. subjective, since the object is not considered as a thing in itself but as the sign of an Idea apprehended by the subject;
5. it follows that it must be *decorative*—for what is decorative painting but a manifestation of art which is subjective, synthetic, symbolist, and idealistic? This is how the Egyptians understood it, and most probably the Greeks and Primitives also.⁶

Aurier's article represented a historic moment by constituting a theoretical framework that would guarantee the superiority—conceptual superiority, at least—of Symbolism over other contemporary trends. As an epigram to his text, Aurier quoted Plato. And he would quote Plotinus in a slightly later article in which Gauguin's work, "steeped in a deep, highly idealist philosophy," was compared to "a visual interpretation of Plato by a wild genius."⁷

Fig. 66
Paul Gauguin
Study for The Vision After the Sermon, 1888,
Walter notebook, fol. 3

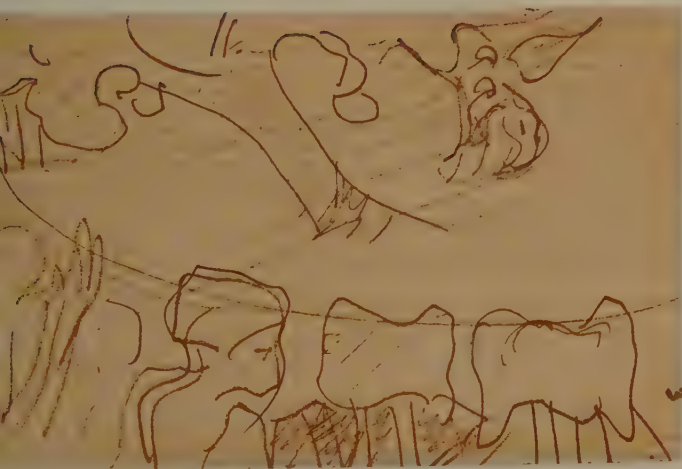
Graphite on squared paper,
3 3/4 × 6 in. (9.4 × 15 cm)
Musée d'Orsay Collection,
Department of Prints and Drawings,
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Fig. 67
Paul Gauguin
Sketch of The Vision After the Sermon, 1888.

Letter to Vincent van Gogh,
c. September 22, 1888.
Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh,
Amsterdam

There can be no doubt about the Neo-Platonic underpinnings of Symbolist idealism. Julien Leclercq reported that Aurier was “well informed in philosophy and science.”⁸ Charles Chassé noted that by November 1890 Gauguin and Sérusier had already been “anointed as the Symbolists of visual art,” pointing out that “long before he met the Symbolists, Sérusier was an old hand at philosophical discussion,” having taught Maurice Denis “the philosophy of Plotinus and then revealing the technique and aesthetics of Synthetist painting as received from Paul Gauguin.”⁹ A letter from Gauguin to Schuffenecker furthermore shows that by the late 1880s these issues were being debated by artists. Gauguin clearly indicated, despite some awkward phrasing, the line to be followed in the struggle to loosen external reality’s hold over art. “Explaining in painting is not the same thing as describing. That’s why I prefer a color suggestive of forms, and parable in composition rather than a painted novel.... In painting, a hand holding a handkerchief can express the feeling that gives it life, an entire past life as well as a future life. Since everything is conventional, and happiness and unhappiness are words in French that express a state of things; and black, mourning; why shouldn’t we manage to create various harmonies that correspond to the state of our innermost selves?”¹⁰

As pointed out above, the idealist core around which Symbolism developed was based on the principle of the unreality of the objective world. In the tradition of Neo-Platonic philosophy, tangible appearances were seen as the pale reflection of the divine ideal, the only true reality. Any reproduction of those appearances (by which Aurier meant naturalism and Impressionism) or their stylized translation (academicism and idealized beauty) merely constituted a degraded form of all the glorious things art had produced in the past, from antiquity down to the quattrocento. The sudden doubt cast on tangible reality, whose solidity and physical framework were challenged, also concerned the materiality of painting: since painting is merely a sign, the more its very texture signifies its relationship to the idea, the more it loses some of its pictorial substance and rejoins the pure sphere of intentionality. “Symbolist painting” was launched through



a play of visual and aural equivalencies between the vision of the faithful and the voice of the priest who has just delivered the sermon. This metaphor of painted sound, which immediately places the beholder in the midst of a world of synaesthesia, was rectified by Aurier just a few lines later by his use of the term hypotyposis, which precisely describes what Gauguin's painting intended to show: a vivid, striking description, a true "vision" evoked in listeners' minds thanks to speech, in a temporal framework shattered by that very description. His use of this term of rhetoric brings us back to Neo-Platonism, in fact, since *Hypotyposeis* was the title of a famous collection of exegetical texts by Clement of Alexandria. Gauguin produced hypotyposis through a staging that juxtaposed spectacle and spectators. In a way, he produced a religious version of a realist archetype in which Daumier and Degas had excelled: a theatrical stage seen from the orchestra. According to Aurier, however, the convergence between pictorial construction and textural structure went deeper than the mere use of rhetorical devices. If objective realities were just signs for ideas (which Aurier spelled with a capital "I"), then objects, in their materiality, were the "letter of a vast alphabet that only a man of genius can recite." Painting was an evocative idiom, therefore it must be an abstraction. For Plotinus, when the divine assumed material substance it became a "hypostasis"—the very theological term Aurier would use to incite artists to focus solely on the way the tangible world testified to an immaterial otherworld.

In his article for the *Revue encyclopédique*, Aurier referred to the work of Humbert de Superville and Charles Henry when advocating deeper study into "the significance of linear directions and chromatic combinations" that might yield a codified system. Forms would have to adopt the symbolic nature of language, and consequently avoid common appearances, although not via the simple paths of stylization or accidental intervention by an individual personality. They would consequently acquire the objectivity of writing, whose graphic content also conveys intangible meaning. This eradication of empiricism, however, would be systematically attempted only in the realm of poetry, by the Mallarmé-inspired poet René Ghil, whose *Traité du verbe* preached a doctrine of "verbal instrumentation."¹¹ Symbolism, according to Aurier, was the expression of the Idea through—and in—form. By emphasizing simplification, "deformation," and deliberate impoverishment of painterly substance—deliberately coarse or chalky, in reference to fresco—to the benefit of color and line, Aurier's definition converged with the immateriality of the colored prism evoked in Paul Adam's glosses on Neo-Impressionism.

Aurier's fifth term, "decorative," a condensation of all the other features of Symbolist art, advocated a mural vocation for painting, thereby freeing from its status as object. Materiality thus shifts to another location,

to the wall, to an absolute, architectural necessity. Similarly, the subjectivity that Aurier placed at the heart of the Symbolist process was entirely different from the expression of an artistic “temperament” through the body of a painting (a naturalist credo though which materialist philosophy could rejoin physiology). Nor was his subjectivity the expression of mind or soul via line—the subjectivity of idealist theories—which Charles Blanc saw as the goal of art. Aurier transcended this latter definition by completely evicting reality: in painting, an object was a simple support and should “never be considered as an object but as a sign of the Idea perceived by the subject.”

Aurier sought to return to a religious and symbolic conception of art, as indicated by his historical allusions (“the Egyptians . . . and most probably the Greeks and Primitives”). Art could thus no longer be grasped in its visual qualities alone. In his *Revue encyclopédique* article, Aurier wrote that “a work of art is a translation, into a special and natural language, of a spiritual given of variable value, which at the very least represents a fragment of the artist’s spirituality and at the best the artist’s entire spirituality plus the essential spirituality of various objective beings. A complete work of art is therefore a new being, we might say an absolutely living being, since it is animated by a soul, indeed is the synthesis of two souls, the soul of the artist and the soul of nature—I’m almost tempted to write paternal soul and maternal soul. This new being is quasi-divine, because unchanging and immortal, and must be deemed susceptible of inspiring special feelings, ideas, and emotions in anyone who communes with it under certain conditions, proportional to the purity and profundity of his soul.”¹² But this sacralization of art was born into a godless universe. Faced with a basically positivist world, the attempt to demarcate Symbolism in this way, although underscoring qualitative differences from realist systems, ultimately produced a fiction of the sacred. Pissarro was not far off the mark when he wrote to his son, in a letter dated August 20, 1891, “I don’t criticize Gauguin for having used a vermilion ground, nor for the two wrestling warriors nor the Breton peasant women in the foreground, I criticize him for having lifted all that from the Japanese and from Byzantine painters and from elsewhere, and I criticize him for not applying his synthesis to today’s modern philosophy, which is thoroughly social, anti-authoritarian, and anti-mystical.”¹³

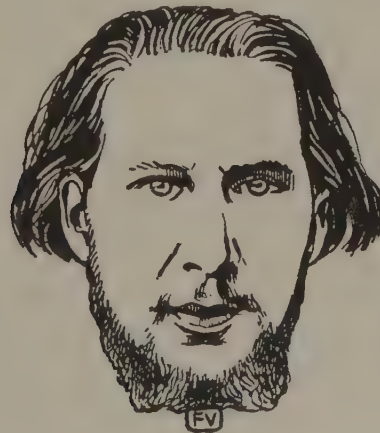


Fig. 68
Félix Vallotton
G.-Albert Aurier

Ink drawing; reproduced in the second volume of Remy de Gourmont's *Livre des masques*, Paris, 1898.

Cloisonnism

Artists of the Symbolist generation who were born in the mid-1860s grew up with Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism, both of which were the focus of an approach based on the relationship between painterly technique and visual experience, one that called for a certain coherence between an artwork and the perception of tangible reality. Since the early 1880s, Impressionism had been progressively distancing itself from its initial postulate of an objective relationship between observation and transcription (not that the connection was ever all that strict). One of the best examples of this trend was a series of paintings done by Monet in the winter of 1880, generally known as *The Break-Up of the Ice* or *Debacle*. Inspired by a very unusual and fleeting weather phenomenon—the break-up of the frozen Seine, which in no way allowed for a long session of painting from nature—Monet produced over ten fairly large canvases that were predominantly painted in the studio. Yet at this time Monet himself was still promoting the myth of plein-air painting, presenting himself to the press as its herald.¹⁴ At the risk of oversimplification, it might be said that from the mid-1880s onward the success of Impressionism was based on a notion of atmospheric verism even though the purely subjective part of the artist's task was assuming an increasingly important role at that very moment.

Equally contradictory was the position of Neo-Impressionism, whose theoretical justification was based on scientifically established optical phenomena, blithely overlooking any empiricism or discrepancies inherent in a painterly rendition employing brushes, pigments, and canvases. Artists of the younger generation were therefore keenly aware that objectivity in painting was a fiction. In contrast, Cloisonnism advocated recourse to willful distortion in the name of style and subjectivity, keeping painting at one remove from any direct analogy with visual experience. By breaking a painting down into areas of flat colors with distinct outlines, it underscored the absence of any illusionist aim. The very nature of its aesthetic attitude meant that Cloisonnism also kept its distance from Impressionism's gestural brushwork and all other forms of impasto technique that involved bravura execution. The new idiom cultivated a slow, deliberate approach; it was no coincidence that still life

played an important role in its development, notably in the work of Bernard (fig. 69). The unity and richness of his thick application of paint lends the work an impression of solid, patient construction, for which Gauguin would later tease Bernard by calling him a *nature-mortier* (“still-life plasterer”).¹⁵ By March 1888, Édouard Dujardin had proposed a definition of Cloisonnism and designated Louis Anquetin—a defector from “all Impressionisms, including the tiny-dot one”—as its inventor.¹⁶ As distinct from naturalism, Cloisonnism’s “point of departure is a symbolic conception of art,” wrote Dujardin. Subjective interpretation would allow an artist to restore “the private reality, the essence of the object he adopts.” A major shift thus occurred here. The notion of subjectivity was replacing the Neo-Platonic version of artistic mimesis, which since the Renaissance had relied on historical models that made it possible to transcend materiality and thereby attain the essence of forms. Although Dujardin expected the new style to avoid the mimicry of tangible appearances performed by various naturalist approaches, and although his goal for art was once again the creation of a link between form and idea, his definition nevertheless embodied, in the name of subjectivity, a rupture between this new artistic practice and tradition. Subjectivity, of course, had been a major theme of criticism ever since the eighteenth century. But the novelty here involved erecting an idealist aesthetic vision on the private foundations of the ego. Cloisonnism’s aesthetic of simplification inevitably yielded a certain spareness that might contain allusions not only to non-European traditions such as Japanese and “primitive” art but



Fig. 69
Émile Bernard
Still Life with Flowers, 1887

Oil on canvas, 24 × 19 ³/₄ in.
(61 × 50 cm)
Norton Simon Museum of Art,
Pasadena

also to lower-class media as typified by inexpensive industrial imagery. Cloisonnist outlines reasserted draftsmanship, a compositional element that Impressionism had dissolved into light and that Gauguin had revived in his Synthetist approach. Here we have again the conventional distinction between artists who favored “draftsmanship” and a “literary” approach on the one hand and, on the other, fans of “pure painting,” a distinction that Jules Laforgue had already employed in the early 1880s.¹⁷ What Dujardin called “that quasi-abstract sign, the line” allegedly reflected the artist’s rationality, whereas brushstrokes were more impulsive and therefore suspect. When it came to color, Dujardin claimed that Neo-Impressionism’s interplay of complementary colors



Fig. 70
Louis Anquetin
Mower, 1887

Paint on cardboard, 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
(69.2 × 52.7 cm)
Private collection

weakened the impact of coloring; in contrast, he advocated the idea of painting endowed with a dominant tone that would create an overall ambience. “An overall color creates the atmosphere, establishes the feeling,” he wrote in terms that betray a need for stability and a challenge to the visual dispersion of Impressionism. Dujardin’s description of Anquetin’s *Mower* (fig. 70) ignores all questions of optical veracity, even though the painting is a straightforward landscape. “[A] different feeling would be produced by a different coloring. It is the effect of a landscape seen through colored glass; through green glass, the feeling would be one of moonlight; through blue glass, one of snow; through yellow glass—which is the case of the *Mower*—a feeling of sunniness. It is moreover the impression produced at noon on a summer’s day, by the sudden opening of a window in a darkened room: all the details of coloring that would emerge on long examination do not appear here, overwhelmed as they are by the unity and power of the overall impression.” Clearly, feeling and impression—and therefore the perceptual moment, that crucial notion of Impressionism—are still essential here. Yet attention is now turned inward, the question being not so much a reaction to an objective phenomenon as a transcription of its apperception in the most private depths of one’s being. The time-frame is no longer one of observation, but instead corresponds to a kind of compression that entails the most extreme subjectivity.

Although Dujardin did not precisely spell out what he meant by a “symbolic conception of art,” it is obvious he felt that Cloisonnism represented a metaphorical mode of expression. Color, given its expressive nature and symbolic value, therefore played an intrinsic role in this conception, justifying its use in pure, unblended form. The pure vermilion of *The Vision After the Sermon* (fig. 63) is remarkable not only because it is so uniform and constitutes such a large mass relative to total surface area, but above all because this color can in no way be related to reality. Dividing the painting into two zones—a main patch that imbues the legendary wrestling match with the power of red, an the outer zone marked by the neutrality of black and white and the foliage—was a way of implementing Delacroix’s harmony of red and green, so dear to Baudelaire, in a conception in which the warm color symbolizes the energy of the struggle and indicates the unreality of the vision. The famous painting done by Paul Sérusier in October 1888 under Gauguin’s direction, which the future Nabis would later call *The Talisman* (fig. 71), was the result of a lesson during which Gauguin urged his student to celebrate pure color. Maurice Denis later recalled the incident. “‘How do those trees look to you?’ Gauguin said. ‘They’re yellow. So use yellow. That shadow? Pretty

blue, so paint it with pure ultramarine. Those red leaves? Use vermilion."¹⁸ In this landscape Sérusier learned to make daring use of color to express a vision based on the Impressionist approach of developing the work from nature. His colored sketch spurred several other young artists to employ flat areas of pure color, as notably seen the small studies done by Maurice Denis (fig. 72).

The elaboration of a Cloisonnist vocabulary, although proceeding from a quest for radical originality, was nevertheless based on recent developments in painting, including certain secondary features of trends that the Cloisonnists claimed to transcend—we should be careful not to exaggerate differences between movements that were reacting to one another. Anquetin and Bernard borrowed Seurat's composition of masses, expressive value of line, geometric simplification of volumes, and abrupt cropping of figures as seen in *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, which according to Émile Verhaeren evoked Gothic painters, "those old masters [who] made their figures hieratic even if it resulted in stiffness."¹⁹ Bernard's *Breton Women in a Meadow* (fig. 64) were literally posed against a ground of plain color like Seurat's figures, which themselves owed much to Puvis de Chavannes and his concern for orchestration and monumentality. Like Seurat, the early Cloisonnists displayed a desire to incorporate the teachings of Puvis into modern imagery. We should not forget that Cloisonnism viewed easel painting as a temporary measure—the movement aspired to decorative vastness. Aurier would later exclaim, at the end of his article on Gauguin, "Walls! Walls! Give him entire walls!"²⁰ Bernard employed fresco technique on the first opportunity that presented itself, and the issue of decorative setting, whether applied to a wall or to a stage set, was a fundamental one for the Nabis. Without actually speaking of direct fertilization by Puvis's aesthetic, it would seem that the flatness of murals subtended the Symbolist approach to painting.

Nor should another of Cloisonnism's major reference points be underestimated. The experimental nature of Cézanne's oeuvre fascinated Bernard and the handful of artists who, in the late 1880s, found themselves in the store run by "old Tanguy," a dealer in artist's colors who warehoused Cézanne's paintings. Although Cézanne stressed unity as the main formal quality of a painting in conversations held late in his life with Bernard, Denis, and Joachim Gasquet, the context in which his work was actually perceived in the early days of Symbolism was probably different. The preoccupation with volume and depth, central to any post-cubist exegesis of Cézanne, was not all that crucial. The brushwork of vertical strokes that appeared around 1886–1887 in paintings by Bernard and Gauguin was a sign of allegiance to the master from Aix-en-Provence as much as a formal mark of the artist's intervention, a way of imposing the



artist's presence on the spectator along with painting's function of representation. Nothing in reality, in fact, justified this arbitrarily vertical gesture, this abstract play of shading of colors. At the time, Cézannesque space seemed to be characterized above all by discontinuity and fragmentation.²¹ Some of Cézanne's landscapes in which abstract forms surge forth to mobilize the foreground in a somewhat violent way might have served as models for the Nabis. For that matter, Cézanne's still lifes, which Bernard adopted as his own models in the days when Cloisonnism was emerging, included many passages handled in flat zones of color. In 1892, Georges Lecomte criticized Cloisonnism's interpretation of Cézanne as being misguided. Denouncing the excessive distortion tolerated by this "idealist Renaissance," Lecomte referred to Cloisonnism's claimed links to Cézanne. "These canvases, devoid of ornamental beauty and character, which are justified by allusion to Monsieur Cézanne's work, look like an unsympathetic caricature," he wrote. "The constant invocation of his guiding spirit would have us believe that what appeals to these artists within Cézanne's oeuvre are not the beautiful canvases with logical composition and healthy, harmonious coloring, which display that grand painter's rare instinct and highly personal vision, but rather incomplete compositions that everyone agrees, with Cézanne's own assent, to be inferior, given their unbalanced arrangement and truly confused coloring."²²

Fig. 71
Paul Sérusier
The Talisman, 1888

Oil on panel, 10 ³/₄ × 8 ¹/₂ in.
(27 × 21.5 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 72
Maurice Denis
Patches of Sunlight on the Terrace, 1890

Oil on cardboard, 9 ¹/₂ × 8 in.
(24 × 20.5 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

On an entirely different level—and without there being any question of direct formal influence—it would seem that Cloisonnism's adoption of flat areas of color was a transposition into painting of the tendency to simplify aesthetic conventions as exploited by advertising imagery and popular entertainment. For some time already, on the larger scale of posters (notably those of Jules Chéret, 1836–1932), of Émile Reynaud's praxinoscope, and of shadow theater (which enjoyed a revival from 1886 onward thanks to Henri Rivière, 1864–1951), the public eye had become accustomed to flat, distinctly outlined surfaces. Painting's receptiveness to such minor media—which were highly limited by technical constraints—lent Cloisonnism a subversive edge. The more refined Japonism, a prime source of flatter compositional techniques, was thus part and parcel of a broader re-education of public's eye.

In rejecting illusionism, Cloisonnism abandoned realistic forms for signifying ones, without which it would have offered nothing more than decorative pleasure—a situation refuted by the movement's historical evolution. Painting henceforth entered another world. The forfeiture of volume opened the way to ideograms, that is to say marks that signified objects without direct depiction or physical consistency; the idea of a thing could be presented without literal figuration, a substance freed from its material carcass. The last twenty years of the nineteenth century witnessed numerous appeals to civilizations whose art was based on a system of symbolic convention. Japanese prints were an important source of inspiration for van Gogh right from his stay in Paris in 1886; the Nabis, in particular, developed pictorial techniques that incorporated ideogrammatic forms (in the early 1890s, foliate and wave imagery evolved into arabesques in Denis's work). Symbolism would cultivate this technique without, however,



Fig. 73
Paul Gauguin
The Beach at Le Pouldu,
1889

Oil on canvas, 28 ³/₄ × 36 ¹/₄ in.
(73 × 92 cm)
Private collection, Buenos Aires

merely erecting it into a code. Right from the emergence of Cloisonnism, the problem faced by artists nurtured in the modernist tradition—Gauguin, Bernard, Anquetin, and later the Nabis—was that of accommodating an intrinsically abstract painterly language to the flow of real appearances. The eminently graphic handling of nature's most fleeting phenomena only progressively came to reject realistic tradition. Gauguin, in *The Beach at Le Pouldu* (fig. 73), painted in the fall of 1889, treated a few tiny figures of swimmers as thin blue filaments slimmer than silhouettes, yet he still used impasto to represent the foam of waves that were nevertheless far from illusionist. Four years later, Georges Lacombe would convey a similar subject by employing only the play of pure graphic equivalents (fig. 74).



Fig. 74
Georges Lacombe
Cliffs at Camaret, 1893

Egg tempera on canvas, 32 × 24 in.
(80 × 60 cm)
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brest

Symbolism, Neo-Impressionism, Divisionism

In 1887 James Ensor put together six drawings in various media and exhibited them at the Salon des XX under the collective title of *The Haloes of Christ or Moods of the Light*.²³ The cycle presented a progression in the quality of light from “merry” in the scene depicting *The Adoration of the Shepherds* to “intense” in *Christ Ascending to Heaven*. Ensor’s intuitive conception of light as related to a psychological situation was a precocious rejection of the influence that Seurat’s Neo-Impressionism (fig. 75) would have on several Belgian artists; indeed, the previous year Octave Maus, the secretary of Les XX, had published an article on Seurat that presented him as “the Messiah of a new art.”²⁴ Yet here Ensor dealt with the problem of light without using color, even though artistic debate since Impression had assumed the two were indissolubly linked. Furthermore, by dissociating his vision of light from any observation of reality, he endowed it with a primarily emotive content. Finally, Ensor replaced the physics of light with an abstract notion of divine light (as conveyed in the French title by use of a capital L for *Lumière* [the Light]). His approach therefore ran counter to the scientific spirit of explanations of art based on optical theories, which were employed to establish a direct line from Impressionism to Neo-Impressionism.²⁵

Whereas the color theories invoked by Seurat were indeed based on recent scientific conclusions on the perception of luminous phenomena, Neo-Impressionism did not intend to limit its brief to retinal behavior but sought above all to exploit it for creative experimentation, freed from the physical contingencies of painting and Impressionism’s intuitive approximations of the nature of light. In short, Seurat’s use of physiological optics now seems less like an aid to the exact reproduction of luminous phenomena than as a vector of abstraction. Gustave Coquiot, quoting Charles Angrand, wrote that Seurat, when choosing the subjects for his paintings, “selected his subjects from among those he thought most suited to his range of colors.”²⁶ Hence it was nature that was expected to remain faithful to the artist, rather than vice versa. Seurat himself, drawing inspiration from Humbert de Superville when describing his

method in his famous letter of August 28, 1890, to Maurice Beaubourg, defined the organization of a painting in terms of a composition and coloring based on three dominant tonalities: “gaiety,” “serenity,” and “sadness.”²⁷ Warm hues were associated with diagonals that ascended “above the horizontal” and therefore generated an impression of gaiety, while cool tones were associated with descending—therefore inhibiting—diagonals. According to Seurat, “harmony” was the concept that presided over the elaboration of a painting, and all graphic and chromatic elements had to correspond closely to the pre-defined outcome.

We can thus see that although the means were radically different, the end sought by Seurat was not all that removed from Ensor’s in so far as that end entailed subjectivity—above all, a work should convey the artist’s sensibility. “They painted they way they wanted to feel,” wrote Paul Adam of the Neo-Impressionists, “they altered nature according to the quality of their desires.”²⁸

The dual nature of Neo-Impressionism, in which an artistic practice inspired by hard science was placed at the service of an artist’s subjectivity, generated a certain number of misconceptions, the most tenacious of which tended—at least until quite recent times—to present the movement as a pure and simple ally of nineteenth-century scientific and technological progress, as an example of a cognitive approach. This meant overlooking the fact that the Neo-Impressionists’ scientific credo coincided with a loss of faith in positivism. Furthermore, it can hardly be ignored that their painting techniques, with regard to the scientific laws



Fig. 75
Georges Seurat
The Strand at Bas-Butin,
Honfleur, 1886

Oil on canvas, 26 1/2 × 30 3/4 in.
(67 × 78 cm)

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai

they invoked, were rotten with approximations.²⁹ Yet it was precisely thanks to this contradiction that subjective creativity could assert its predominance over faithfulness to observed phenomena. An evolution toward certain forms of abstraction was common to numerous artistic trends in the late nineteenth century. The Impressionists themselves, starting in the mid-1880s, developed an interest in the pictorial surface that distanced them from the previous decade's apparent faithfulness to objective verisimilitude. In Neo-Impressionism, meanwhile, there was a patent conflict between the principle of abstraction and the need to depict. The "subject" would often be simplified, flattened, and geometrized, losing the body it had retained in Impressionism. Theorists, artists, and critics of this newer aesthetic advocated a gaze that was fundamentally different from the one that had preceded it: they cultivated a gaze that was more accurate even as it avoided concreteness. By referring back to a corpus of physiological laws of optics, Neo-Impressionism focused on the primordial functioning of the visual organ, ignoring human vision's atavistic or acquired traits in order to return to a virgin eye unsullied by intuitive experience and its accompanying intellectual reflexes. The Neo-Impressionist approach—a way of looking before being a way of painting—involved rejecting the "associated perception" described by Hippolyte Taine in his study *On Intelligence*,³⁰ in an effort to return to a pure gaze free of any associations. It was indeed a "new way of seeing," to use Paul Adam's phrase,³¹ something that Jules Laforgue had already sensed.³²

For critics such as Paul Adam and Gustave Kahn, this way of seeing was part and parcel of a conception of painting related to Symbolism. In articles published by Adam between 1886 and 1889, the Neo-Impressionist aesthetic paralleled the literary ambition of rendering visible a reality, namely a reality of the Idea, far from a "totally imaginary objective world."³³ Sensory evidence was thus held to be illusory. In 1889, Georges Vanor published a booklet titled *L'Art symboliste*, in which he attempted to analyze the principles of this new school of literature.³⁴ His brochure borrowed certain ideas from Adam, who contributed a foreword to it. In the final section, Vanor sought to establish a convergence between literature and other, related fields, and the first painters he cited were Pissarro, Seurat, Signac, and Luce. Of Signac, Adam would later write, "His art is closely correlated to contemporary philosophy, biology, and physics that refute the object, declaring matter to be the mere appearance of vibratory movement that gives birth to our impressions, sensations, and ideas."³⁵ Science was here invited to take its place in an idealist system. The goal of art could not be the simple transcription—even if subjective—of a sensory world as such, but should



encompass, in a way, a vaster entity. The interweaving of tiny brushstrokes of pure color, through which each section of the canvas was supposed to verify the laws governing luminous phenomena, theoretically affirmed itself, through its uniform nature, as a screen placed before the depicted object. As a system, this coded method of reading nature's spectacle became as important as the subject itself. The operative principle governed not only the totality of everything visible but also, to a different degree, the relationship between painting and a universal order. It established, in a way, a parallel between the constructive logic of a painting and the material unity detected in the world by science; the symbolic goal of art therefore corresponded to a conception in which the "human microcosm" was perceived as a "harmonic symbol of the universal macrocosm."³⁶ When it came to the landscapes that Signac exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in 1888, Adam wrote, "As far as I know, no one has better rendered, free of the common appeal of romance or the affection of physical drama, the peaceful, inevitable shapes of things, of rivers, of land masses, of seas; even as the Planet, that support of human

Fig. 76
Giovanni Segantini
Love at the Source of Life,
1895

Oil on canvas, 28 × 39 1/4 in.
(70 × 98 cm)

Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan

consciousness, vibrates and seethes with—engenders and absorbs—the spinning rhythm of heavenly bodies.”³⁷ In a matter of years the “tiny brushstrokes,” described in 1886 as “endlessly repeated, endlessly varied”³⁸ would become a key facet of Symbolist art, representing the intersection between painting and scientific speculation, where idealism could adopt a modern form. Thus Adam could write in 1889: “The period to come will be mystical. And the most amazing thing about the miracle is that science itself, the notoriously positivist, materialist science that rejected orthodoxy, that very science itself will humbly announce the discovery of the divine principle, found within its own crucibles, within the contrivance of its prisms, within the reverberations of its acoustic strings, within the spasms of its electric ether.”³⁹

Thus as soon as the Neo-Impressionist aesthetic is viewed in its true context, and not just as a specific painterly technique, the alleged antagonism between science and art is apparently transcended through the invocation of a special poetics. Some people—including those just cited—thought the future of art lay in this direction. In 1884, philosopher J. M. Guyau published *Problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine*, in which science played a determining role in his conception of art. His book had an important impact, and various parts of it were later reprinted in magazines such as the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and the *Revue philosophique*. Guyau sought above all to challenge philosophical conceptions that reduced art to a purely mental construct, thereby refusing to favor either Kant or Herbert Spencer. Guyau's aesthetic system, which might be compared to Nietzsche's philosophy, linked art to the notion of life. What concerns us here is that Guyau devised an aesthetics, based on the fusion of art and science, that went beyond positivist philosophy: “Not only does science inspire feelings in us similar to the divine, it allows philosophers and poets to generalize, in their hypotheses, the factual data that it supplies ... Science denies only the marvelous and miraculous, hence leaves us a world with a muted life similar to our own, with perhaps an indistinct consciousness or a vague aspiration to something better, in any case something human.”⁴⁰ According to Guyau, science would never dismiss “the metaphysical mystery,” where he felt the feeling of the sublime resided.⁴¹

Curiosity about physiological optics and color phenomena was not the sole prerogative of artists historically affiliated with the Impressionist heritage. From Goethe to Laforgue, the issue of color had been the object of speculation inspired by contemporary scientific research. Alexandre Séon, who was a friend of Seurat's, conducted personal research into colored spheres whose tonalities he recorded as a function of their distance from his easel. Séon's color theory, written down in an illustrated manuscript,

Fig. 77
Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo
Disappointed Hopes,
1892–1894

Oil on canvas, 43 1/4 × 67 in.
(1.1 × 1.7 m)

Private collection, Rome

advocated—among other things—reducing the size of the brushstroke as a function of shading, in order to avoid the effect of flatness produced in paintings by Seurat and Signac. Séon—like, for that matter, Alphonse Osbert, who adopted a similar, if much less rigorous approach—nevertheless restricted the application of these principles to certain areas of his paintings. Signac’s evolution toward an increasingly decorative conception of painting, whose surface began resembling a mosaic and whose color tended to display increasingly sharp and arbitrary contrasts, was symptomatic of the recuperation of Neo-Impressionism’s theoretical principles to ornamental ends, a trend that became more widespread from the mid-1890s onward. The size and nearly rectangular shape of Signac’s brushstrokes deliberately excluded the physical possibility of any “optical blending” of colors, which had been Seurat’s basic postulate. The practice of dividing colors became known throughout Europe by the early 1890s, based not only on French and Belgian models but also on Italian Divisionism, which had its own specific roots and first appeared at the 1891 Brera Triennial in Milan. In fact, there would seem to be no direct link between the French Neo-Impressionists and the Italian Divisionists, although the latter referred, among other sources, to the same scientific texts as the French. It was the artist, critic, and dealer Vittore Grubicy (1857–1920) who first introduced optical theories into Italian art. Traveling throughout Europe, notably in Holland, Grubicy was in touch



with the latest artistic developments. Compared to the relatively unified Neo-Impressionist trend in France, Divisionism was characterized by greater diversity in terms of both technique and imagery. In this respect, Divisionism displays a duality worth stressing: its main themes could be divided into an often politically committed naturalism, notably typified by Angelo Morbelli (1853–1919), and an oneiric Symbolism sometimes tinged with Christian mysticism, as seen in the work of Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899), Gaetano Previati (1852–1920), and Plinio Nomellini (1866–1943). Segantini's oeuvre, although split between alpine scenes that retain certain naturalistic features and purely imaginary subjects marked by Pre-Raphaelite influence (fig. 76), consistently raised the issue of human fate. Similarly, although Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo (1868–1907) regularly depicted the life of common folk on the outskirts of large cities or in the countryside, that life was always presented as a symbolic projection (fig. 77). This tendency was still apparent in later manifestations of Divisionism, for example in the early work of Giacomo Balla (1871–1958), who in 1904 painted a diptych titled *A Worker's Day* (private collection).

Nor was there any direct link between Neo-Impressionism and a fragmented handling of the colored surface as adopted by Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) and several artists in Austria, or by Vitezlav Karel Masek (1865–1927) in Bohemia. Variations in the shape and arrangement of brushstrokes—vertical lines or hatching (or even circles in certain paintings by Balla)—along with surfaces striped with colors that were no longer strictly primary, were all part of a broad stylistic idiom that would play a role in the birth of the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century



Fig. 78
Henri-Edmond Cross
Cap Layet, 1904

Oil on canvas, 35 x 45 ³/₄ in.
(89 x 116 cm)
Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble



in so far as it signaled, even if stripped of its theoretical foundations, an arbitrary recomposition of objective reality.

The later works of French Neo-Impressionists also elaborated the concept of decoration, notably reflected in landscapes painted by Henri-Edmond Cross (1856–1910) after 1903 (fig. 78). A quest for abstract harmony through a balance of lines and chromatic gradations of prismatic colors lent Cross's views of the Provençal coast an unreal tone that elevated them into Edenic landscapes in which the artist perceived "the glorification of an inner vision."⁴² The notion of "decorative" art had been employed by Vittore Grubicy as early as 1891 in defense of Previati, who showed his *Maternity* (fig. 79), one of the founding works of Divisionism, at the Brera Triennial; Grubicy's text repeated Aurier's definition of Symbolism almost word for word.⁴³ He described easel painting as derived from murals, and hailed *Maternity* as embodying a completely new aesthetic, which he labeled "mystico-ideist" and which he compared to Puvis de Chavannes and Gauguin. Previati was one of the Italian artists who most displayed—like Grubicy—a Europe-wide culture, and his correspondence reveals Symbolist leanings as early as 1890. He had already illustrated tales by Poe and was interested in Rops and Redon. However, the monumental aspect of Previati's work was partly inspired by Burne-Jones's decorative work for the church of San Paolo in Rome (1883–1884). Concerned throughout his career with the renewal of Christian iconography, Previati began favoring religious subjects in polyp-tychs where the Divisionist approach was diverted from its initial goals.

Fig. 79
Gaetano Previati
Maternity, 1890–1891

Oil on canvas, 68 1/2 × 161 3/4 in.
(1.74 × 4.11 m)
Banca Popolare, Novare

The organization of the overall pictorial surface into a fabric of colored threads, already present in *Maternity*, would later culminate in Previati in a dynamic aesthetic in which composition rests on broad, curvilinear movements that abolish depth to the benefit of lyrical tension and gleaming colors (fig. 80).



Fig. 80
Gaetano Previati
The Creation of Light, 1913

Oil on canvas, 80 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 85 in.
(2.05 × 2.16 m)
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome

Symbolism, Decadence, Naturalism

Right from the early manifestos, Symbolism defined itself in opposition to naturalism. Open war between the two trends occupied a large place in Europe's literary and artistic history from the mid-1880s into the early twentieth century. The most intense debate occurred in France, first limited to the literary sphere and then finding an echo in art criticism. For a long time, this clash between advocates of an art aimed at social reality and partisans of an idealist aesthetic remained the prevailing point of departure for critical approaches to that period. It would be impossible to deny the validity of that view without betraying historical veracity and without overlooking the sometimes violent polemics that the clash provoked, yet as soon as we shift our attention from the collective sphere to individual accomplishments, the binary nature of the picture seems hard to reconcile with the variety of artistic approaches actually employed. When it comes to figures as important as Carrière and Munch, for example, naturalist and Symbolist tendencies frequently coexisted at the conceptual stage of a work. The problem these artists faced was making art relevant to current events without employing forms that derived from naturalism.

On the thematic level, Symbolism and naturalism displayed various points of contact, most stemming from the crystallization that occurred around the aesthetic concept of "decadence" in the early 1880s. As Edmond Jaloux pointed out, a sarcastic contempt for the society of the day and a disgust with everything base and vulgar was already typical of certain naturalists when the decadents and Symbolists adopted these attitudes as their own.⁴⁴ With *À rebours* (*Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*), a naturalistic novel with a decadent theme, Joris-Karl Huysmans pursued the pessimism of his earlier books, all perfectly in tune with the naturalist spirit. In 1886, Jean Moréas used the term "Symbolism" for the first time to designate a new literary trend encompassing several major poets and writers. Moréas mentioned the name of Edmond de Goncourt, despite the latter's links to naturalism, as one of the prose writers who were moving "in a similar direction as that of poetry,"⁴⁵ that is to say who were close to the stylistic concerns of the Symbolist poets.

The so-called "decadent" period, dominated by Rimbaud and Verlaine, immediately preceded Symbolism and represented a phase of liberation from the rules of Parnassus-style prosody. The thread linking decadents and Symbolists, despite battles over terminology and cliques, is a historical fact.⁴⁶ Suggesting as early as 1885 that the poets Paul Bourde labeled "decadent" should be called "Symbolist," Moréas argued that "the alleged Decadents seek above all in their art the pure Concept and the eternal Symbol."⁴⁷

Symbolism was rooted in a double reaction: not only against naturalism but also against France's Parnassus school of poetry. While debate over these issues was initially limited to the realm of literature, and more especially poetry, the relationship between decadence and Symbolism on a broader level could not be overlooked in so far as decadent themes infused European art and literature until the end of the century, even though decadence vanished as an organized movement around 1889. By that time, the question of the decadence of French society was no longer a new issue.⁴⁸ Images of decadence abounded in French literature following the country's defeat by Prussia in 1870. Even prior to that date, the theme of languor and sensory fatigue combined with a certain morbid refinement had surfaced in poetry, notably that of Verlaine. Escape from the present, hesitation in the face of action, and a distaste for reality that favored fantasy, dream, and myth led toward a sacralization of art as a substitute for life. This cult of artifice, linked to a dread of the body and sexuality, and to hatred of nature, culminated in a turning inward typified by Des Esseintes, the main character in Huysmans's *À rebours*. The success of his novel, which incorporated all the main decadent themes, would turn decadence into an aesthetic myth. The turning inward of morbid drives is the main subject of such literature, which proliferated in many small magazines. The first issue of *Scapin*, published in December 1885, declared "Make room for those who throb with life, make room for hysteria, make room for neurosis!"⁴⁹

The decadent movement rested on the postulate that the end of the nineteenth century would be marked by an aesthetic assumed to be specific to periods of political decadence—namely, an extreme refinement prompted by the collapse of the formal structures in place. Parallels between contemporary Western civilization and Roman decadence were common at the time. Huysmans drew a clear analogy by placing Petronius and Apuleius alongside Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Verlaine on Des Esseintes's bookshelves. But "decadentism"—soon elbowed out by the "Symbolist" label—suffered from a certain conceptual vagueness, which could be conveniently remedied by stressing the struggle against naturalism. In 1888 Verlaine defined *décadisme* as "dazzling literature in a period of decadence, not

going with the flow of the times but rather 'entirely against the grain,' raging against things, using its delicate, lofty, and, if you will, refined tendencies to react against literary and other—ambient—platitudes and turpitudes, with no sense of exclusiveness and with avowed confraternity."⁵⁰

Hostility to the contemporary world and its dominant aesthetics would translate into the willfully marginal status of groups that expressed themselves through their little magazines. These reviews were a recurring feature throughout the history of Symbolism, sustaining the image—which some people found suspect—of an art for insiders. Neologisms, archaic and unusual expressions, and syntactic disruptions contributed to the swift, radical elaboration of a clubby idiom that irrevocably departed from the language of the day. In 1888, Paul Adam published his *Petit glossaire pour servir à l'usage des auteurs décadents et symbolistes*, complete with examples that transformed it into a kind of concise anthology.⁵¹ Adam's glossary represented an acknowledgment of and an attempt to define—not without humor—what claimed to be the future form of literature. Remy de Gourmont listed the titles of over one hundred little magazines published in French between 1890 and 1898.⁵² These were the days of periodicals that enjoyed a relatively wide circulation and addressed issues of both art and literature. Previously, cliquishness had been accompanied by a plethora of fleeting publications, whose existence would nevertheless be noted by the mainstream press. The growing importance of magazines in spreading new trends—compared to the old system of literary salons—was also a sign of a new attitude toward the integration of art into society. Several of the little reviews featured art criticism. The *Revue indépendante*, founded in May 1884 and initially edited by Félix Fénéon, was the first to adopt, in a significant way, an agenda that allotted an important role to art, thereby inaugurating a convergence that would prove capital for the theoretical evolutions that Symbolism would later undergo. Developments at the *Revue indépendante* were typical in so far as, starting with the second volume (May 1885), Symbolist authors became predominant, a tendency that was further reinforced when Édouard Dujardin (founder of the *Revue wagnérienne*) became the magazine's editor alongside Gustave Kahn. Thus by the late 1880s there existed a network of publications with multiple intersections, providing decadents with a battle-tested weapon directed against the naturalists. Offshoots of this network soon sprang up in other European countries.

In his famous "manifesto" on Symbolism, Moréas presented naturalism as an insignificant, marginal phenomenon, whereas Symbolism was introduced as a new literary Renaissance. Asserting the need for codification, and citing the expression of the "Idea" as the ultimate goal of poetry,



Fig. 81
Eugène Carrière
People's Theater, 1895

Oil on canvas, 86 1/2 x 193 in.
(2.2 x 4.9 m)
Musée Rodin, Paris



he called for a modernization of language. The notion of “subjective deformation,” with which he concluded his article, was accompanied by a quest for distancing and a phobia of descriptiveness. All expressiveness had to remain below a certain threshold, had to remain unstated. “The fundamental nature of symbolic art,” wrote Moréas, “means never going so far as to conceive directly the Idea itself.”⁵³ Although we must of course be careful not to make facile interpolations between poetry and the visual arts, there is nevertheless a clear relationship between this definition and the trends that would soon emerge in painting in the name of an aesthetics of deformation and allusion; Symbolism was undeniably a cultural phenomenon whose ramifications extended into numerous fields. Yet despite everything, no strict parallel or correspondence can be established here between crucial events in literary history and those in art history.

When it came to painting and sculpture, in the 1880s naturalism had acquired the status of an international visual language, to the extent of occasionally shaping, in part, the vocabulary of certain artists who were nevertheless closer to Symbolism, such as Eugène Carrière (1849–1906). Like Gauguin, Carrière belonged to a generation that had already produced a significant amount of work prior to the emergence of Symbolism. He began in a naturalist vein, marked by a quest for an intimate tone—as seen in *The Young Mother* of 1879 (Musée Calvet, Avignon)—and by a formal spareness. This spare quality would later intensify, culminating in an increasingly allusive stylization centered on the human figure, to the deliberate exclusion of any details that might inform the beholder of the time or place of the depicted scene. At a very early date, then, Carrière’s painting was characterized by a double rejection: it refused to provide a naturalist record and it refused to remain faithful to natural light.

Yet even if Carrière’s figures strive for timelessness, they still remain firmly anchored in their times. Carrière took a committed stance on contemporary political issues, and even after receiving official recognition he remained fond of the common people, as witnessed by the art training program he instituted in 1892, called L’École de la Rue—“the street school.” His ambitious, monumental painting of the *People’s Theater* (fig. 81) was to have been one of three large paintings. The other two, titled *Passersby* and *Thirst*, were to depict, respectively, crowds strolling in the streets of Paris and sellers of drinks at theater exits. The painting demonstrates how Carrière handled an urban, working-class subject directly inspired by a place he knew well, namely a theater in the neighborhood known as Belleville, inhabited by laborers and craftsmen. Carrière furthermore made studies of faces and numerous other sketches, some of them apparently done on the spot, prior to executing

this syncretistic painting in which a subject that initially seemed to be typically naturalist was handled in a way that gave it a strange, metaphorical feel that unsettled many critics. The cyclical organization of a series of paintings on a given theme had been adopted by a number of artists not long before, including not only purely naturalist painters such as Alfred Roll⁵⁴ but also Léon Frédéric, as typified by his *Ages of the Peasant* (1885–1887, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels). The idea of series would also structure part of Edvard Munch's oeuvre, as seen in his *Frieze of Life*. Within the context of the late nineteenth century, this attachment to a narrative or symbolic argument across several installments appeared to be similar to developments in the naturalist novel. Systematically analyzing contemporary life in its various aspects implied, in fact, a programmatic approach not unlike the one employed by historians. However, just as the *Frieze of Life* transcends narrative technique to address the issue of human fate from a metaphysical standpoint, Carrière's *People's Theater* provides little information about the theater or audience, for he eliminated all documentary material from his subject, which served as an excuse for a visual staging of emotion and vision.

Naturalism—or rather, “realism,” as understood by the group that formed the “Christiana bohemians”—was crucial to the young Munch, before he progressively encountered Symbolism through his contacts with Paris and Berlin. In 1891–1892, Munch was still vacillating between intimate compositions and Mediterranean landscapes inspired by recent developments in plein-air painting. Yet not long before he had announced that on completing *Spring* (1889, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo) he “took [his] leave of Impressionism and realism.”⁵⁵ In a letter to Danish artist Johan Rohde, written in February or March of 1893, Munch for the first time mentioned a “series of paintings” that would “deal with love and death.”⁵⁶ In December of that year, he exhibited a first group of six paintings given the overall title of *Study for a “Love” Series*,⁵⁷ the embryo of a shifting work, with no real formal unity, that would grow over time and become known as the *Frieze of Life*. Twenty-two paintings were exhibited in 1902 at the Berlin Sezession, all in identical frames designed by Munch, presented as a four-part frieze, one part per wall: *The Seeds of Love*, *The Blossoming and Fading of Love*, *The Angst of Life*, and *Death*.⁵⁸ The fundamental importance to Munch of Max Klinger's series of etchings, *Love* (1887), has often been stressed. It is probable that Munch derived from it the idea for a cycle of paintings on the theme of love, intermingled with scenes of everyday life and with purely symbolic imagery. But beyond this obvious connection—at the time, Munch considered Klinger, Hans Thoma, and Böcklin to be the three most

important living artists—the overall context of naturalism and the parallels it suggested between painting and literature probably also contributed to his decision.⁵⁹ In the view of a writer such as Hans Jaeger, to whom Munch was close early in his career, the new mission of art and literature was to conduct an introspective study into humanity's confrontation with modern life. In 1890, Knut Hamsun delivered a series of lectures in Norway in which he argued that the goal of literature was to describe "the entire subconscious life of the soul."⁶⁰ Munch would always remain attached to a type of "realism" in the sense that his oeuvre sprang from psychological autobiography. He in no way tried to depict the modern world, but rather transfigured it through a painterly technique that strongly asserted the artist's anguished presence—in 1891, his nocturnal views of Nice already displayed his brutal hatching and rubbing—a technique that also featured symbolic elements designed to disrupt the legibility of what might otherwise be a naturalist image of the modern world. *Evening on Karl Johan Street* respects the actual layout of Christiania and accurately conveys the dress habits of the day (fig. 82). But the faces of strollers are handled like anguished masks, while in the middle of the street a solitary figure—a hidden self-portrait—turns his back on the dense crowd. Here Munch is giving form not to the results of his observation of the external world, but rather to a *Lebensanschauung*, or "conception of life," that stresses society's coercive oppression of the artist.

The incongruity produced by the insertion of an intensely subjective vision into the contemporary world surfaced in a different, and perhaps still more radical, way in the early 1890s in the work of a few Paris-based artists: Frenchman Charles Maurin (1856–1914), Swiss artist Félix Vallotton (1865–1925), and Dutchman Georges de Feure (1863–1943), three figures who developed a profoundly modern imagery even though their artworks could not be described as illustrations of contemporary life. Maurin began offering advice to Vallotton in 1883, and the two painters initially favored an extreme realism that culminated in portraits of harsh precision, such as Vallotton's *Portrait of the Artist's Parents* (1887, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne). Charles Laurent would thus write of Maurin in 1889 that he "followed the traces of life down to the very weave of human skin . . . glimpsing the flow of blood in the network of veins."⁶¹ Clearly, exaggerated observation was here being used as a way to transcend naturalist description. Vallotton subsequently adopted a style—still in Maurin's footsteps although after having joined the Nabi group in 1892—that employed flat areas of frank color. In 1893, he wrote of *Summer* (fig. 83), shortly before sending the canvas to the Salon des Indépendants, that, "I did it my own way, and it's rather daring."⁶² Described in the artist's record book as "women bathing in a brick

pool in the open air,"⁶³ this composition comes across as a repertoire of private poses adopted by modern women. With a certain nastiness, Vallotton underscores the physical strangeness usually overlooked by art—here the artist cruelly forgives no wrinkle. The arrangement of figures—most of them truncated—and their caricatured anatomies bear the mark of resentment toward female sexuality and the power of modern women in late nineteenth-century society.⁶⁴

Feure's lithographs of that same period, several of which dealt with lesbian love, also adopted a cruel anatomy in which flat areas of color and strong outlines described—in addition to wonderful foliate ornamentation—the way of all flesh (fig. 84).

This graphic treatment of nudes had been preceded by Maurin's triptych titled *Dawn* (fig. 85), done in a spirit of protest.⁶⁵ One of the themes dear to the decadent spirit thus found its way into Symbolist stylization in a few works that converged with certain naturalist concerns, notably their contemporary feel.

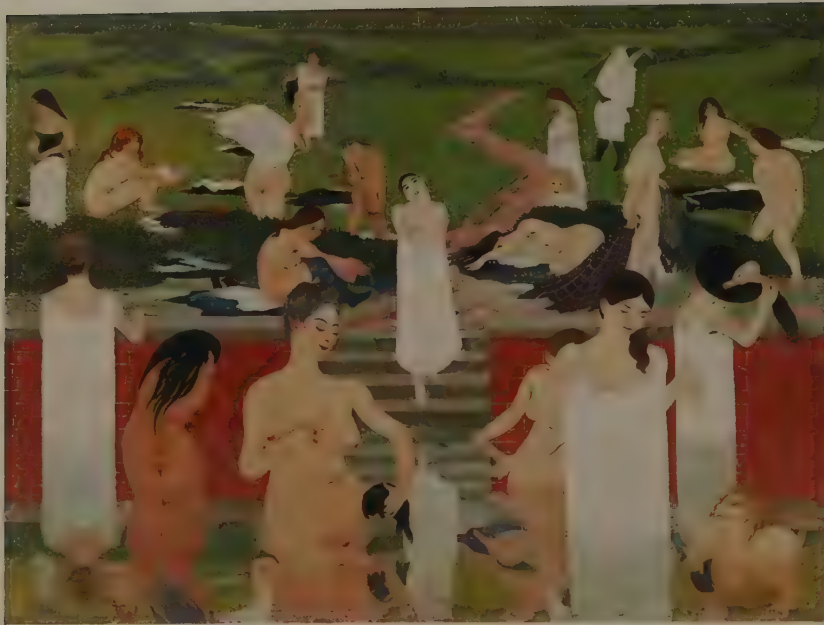
The appeal of naturalism clearly coincided with the decline of history painting, whose spirit naturalism sometimes sought to adopt in works characterized not only by contemporary relevance and narrative coherence but also by descriptive verisimilitude. The Symbolists therefore tried to cloud this legibility, perceived as the basis of traditional stability. Vallotton and Feure attacked a subject abundantly handled in realist novels—that of women's sexual liberation—yet in a willfully non-descriptive style culminating in an unintelligible, violent synthesis that entailed what might be called, to borrow Wölfflin's concept, the alienation of the sign from what it is supposed to represent. The precision required by the naturalist quest was here subverted into a formal simplification that violated the rules of painterly figuration—Feure was first of all a poster artist and press cartoonist, while Vallotton's own woodcuts and interest in the



Fig. 82
Edvard Munch
*Evening on Karl Johan
Street*, 1893–1894

Oil on canvas, 33 1/2 x 47 3/4 in.
(85 x 121 cm)

Rasmus Meyers Collection,
Kunstmuseum, Bergen



work of Henri Rousseau spurred him to seek a certain naiveness through use of uniform tones and compositions based solely on linear perspective.⁶⁶ Most critics were thrown by Vallotton's *Summer*, as well as by Feure's early gouaches, exhibited in 1892 and judged incomprehensible. These sibylline images neither depicted the modern world nor transformed it into myth. At the very most, they expressed its malaise. Although anchored in the contemporary world, their incongruity severed descriptive logic, thereby postulating the indecipherable. In this respect they consummated the end of naturalism, which had claimed allegiance to the demonstrative logic employed by scientific methodology.

Here we re-encounter one of the features defended by Remy de Gourmont when, in defining Symbolism, he claimed that a certain element of obscurity was a necessary component of an artwork.⁶⁷

The subversion of naturalist imagery was also apparent in the work of painters such as Léon Frédéric, who sprang from another tradition. In certain cases the subject becomes overwhelmed by the weave of details, drowned in a composition that has become primarily decorative. Paradoxically, the tactic of crushing realism by driving it into a corner resurfaced in Feure's arabesques, which frame the main subject in a foreground so overwhelming that it disrupts a straightforward reading of the picture—all trace of narrative gets lost in voluble ornamentation.

Now, illogic was one of the major complaints leveled against Symbolism. Max Nordau felt that Symbolism was one of the symptomatic examples that confirmed his diagnosis of the degeneration of Western

Fig. 83
Félix Vallotton
Summer, 1892–1893

Oil on canvas, 38 1/4 × 51 1/2 in.
(97 × 131 cm)
Kunsthau, Zurich

society in the late nineteenth century. In addition to a complaint about a mystical tendency that ignored scientific advances of the day, Nordau taxed contemporary writers and artists with basing their philosophy on the free association of ideas, thereby abandoning logical reasoning, which he felt was evidence—in many cases—of abnormal mental states. Published in German in 1893, Nordau's book on *Degeneration* appeared the following year in French and English,⁶⁸ and made a big impact. His analysis covered Pre-Raphaelite painting as well works by Ibsen, Nietzsche, Wagner, and Zola; he felt that the naturalists' indulgence in the sordid was unhealthy; Huysmans and Péladan were also put through the mill. Nordau was not alone in his opinions, since right from the emergence of Symbolist poetry the press in Paris echoed debates in which it transpired that the hermeticism of the poems, along with their rejection of the traditional rules of prosody, was a real obstacle to public acceptance.⁶⁹ According to Nordau, as soon as an artwork abandoned rationality, it lost the social role that made it relevant. He castigated the stylistic features of Symbolism and Art Nouveau as vectors of



Fig. 84
Georges de Feure
Damnéd Women,
illustration for *Les Fleurs
du mal* by Baudelaire (?),
1896–1898

Lithograph and gouache,
19 × 15 in. (48 × 38 cm)
Private collection



decadent subjects that he felt propagated harmful ideas; the relative success of these new trends was therefore the sign of a collective neurosis. To describe support for Symbolism as an illness was relatively common at the time—one early nineteenth-century viewpoint had already drawn an alarming contrast between Romanticism's emotiveness and the rational coherence of classical aesthetics. What was new about Nordau was that he not only presented the situation as a social phenomenon of considerable impact, but that he also considered the sphere of aesthetics to be a realm of experimentation and an object of observation whose methods and conclusions were not dissimilar to clinical investigation. In Nordau's view, this clinical approach was justified by his perception of recent aesthetics as rejecting the rationalism of modern Western society. The very virulence of Nordau's attacks indicate that by the early 1890s naturalism was being threatened by the emergence of new concerns.

Fig. 85
Charles Maurin
The Dawn of the Dream, left
panel of the triptych *Dawn*,
1892

Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 39 1/4 in.
(80 x 100 cm)
Musée d'Art moderne, Saint Étienne

Symbolist Art

There's an inevitable moment when an art transforms itself by adopting the qualities of related arts. That's the moment when small, narrow minds cry "decadence!"¹

Gustave Moreau

The body of Symbolist artists identified by historians immediately after World War II has grown considerably since that time. Both Charles Chassé's key reference work, *Le Mouvement symboliste dans l'art du XIX^e siècle*, published in 1947, and the exhibition *Visionaries and Dreamers* organized in Washington by Robert Goldwater in 1956, proposed an exclusively French group limited to the artists who had been cited by the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. It was only with the 1965 publication of Hans H. Hofstätter's book, *Symbolismus und die Kunst der Jahrhundertwende*, that Symbolism was explored in a Europe-wide context, a direction followed by exhibitions such as "Le Symbolisme en Europe" (1976) and "Paradis Perdu: L'Europe Symboliste" (1995). It should nevertheless be recognized that the early, relatively restrictive and historical definitions were progressively succeeded by surveys that were perhaps too broad: "visionaries," "depicters of the soul," and "dreamers" are labels that have made it possible to cover more or less shifting realities in the context of the recent rehabilitation of nineteenth-century art.

Yet despite the lack of a single coherent aesthetic, a Symbolist conception of art truly existed, a conception whose rejection of all realism was only the first element. Certain constants followed directly from the primacy of the subjective gaze on which that conception was based. We have already mentioned the aversion to time and immediacy that characterized the attitude of several of the movement's principal artists. The adoption of a subjective temporality and the refusal to accept the apparent certainty and demonstrability of a snapshot-like record testify to an aloof skepticism that went hand in hand with the quest for a reality distinct from appearances. In various ways, many artists cultivated a state of perpetual incompleteness, typified not only by the last two decades of Moreau's career but also by Rodin's oeuvre. This rejection of a "definitive" version suggested the mental possibility of extending a work beyond its physical limits, which would also lead to a redefinition of the technical characteristics of any given mode of artistic expression. Thus it can be seen that in 1898 Gauguin decided to exhibit *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where*

Are We Going? in a context that featured a set of smaller paintings related to it, thereby creating a situation in which the main painting was multiply reflected and conjugated in various ways. The same concept of extension explains the importance placed at the time on the notion of “decorative” art, on the quest for a monumentality able to yank painting from its restrictive frame, hence leading to the aesthetic supremacy of “mural” art, whether that art derived from Puvis de Chavannes or, notably with Klimt, from a duality that tightly juxtaposed the pictorial and the decorative.

This violation of the traditional boundaries of an artwork was accompanied by a certain number of new criteria concerning its structure, in which we once again encounter the key notion of subjectivity. This time, however, subjectivity appeared under the aegis of synaesthesia. In Symbolism, the sound-and-color theory that Baudelaire developed in *Correspondences* became the basis for a quest for pictorial unity able to echo as closely as possible to the sensorial unity experienced by human beings. Baudelaire viewed this unity—following Swedenborg and Hoffmann—as a vestige, as the recollection of a lost harmony buried in the most private recesses of human sensibility. From this standpoint, Symbolism becomes inseparably linked to the notion of modernity. Indeed, if modernity implies the destruction of a timeless order, for that very reason it is the necessary condition for a particular mode of perception of an irrevocably vanished golden age, and for its translation into a poetic realm that inevitably assumes a melancholy register. The nostalgic vision specific to Symbolism thus forged a link between sensorial experience and a pessimistic conception of history. The codification of shape and color, plus the employment of geometric laws to produce an abstract harmony, meant adopting a certain distance with respect to the contingencies through which an artwork might claim to invoke the myth of roots. The recourse to flat areas of nonobjective color, in which the signifying value of the line recovered its full impact, was based on the quest for a synthesis of the arts through which painting attempted to acquire the qualities of abstraction associated with music.

Dematerialization and Abstraction

Starting in the 1880s, in sculpture and engraving as well as painting, artists increasingly transgressed the technical boundaries of their particular field. The resulting practices were subsequently interpreted by formalist critics as an attempt to lay bare the materials and very act of artistic creativity, which they tended to affirm—in a kind of self-reflexive impulse—as the final goal of art. However, a closer look at the idealist foundations would suggest that these practices corresponded more to a determination to break the material consistency of the image relative to the meaning that its strictly technical features were traditionally assigned. This inventiveness went hand in hand with the new stylistic quest, becoming one of the components of a creative process that escaped the contingencies imposed by earlier artistic practice. The dissociation of creativity from the technical codes that defined it produced a relativization of the very substance of an artwork, a dematerialization through which it could be removed from the sphere of reality. This meant, on the one hand, the foregrounding of a certain honesty of execution and the use of materials that, by their nature, would thwart illusionism and converge with the search for stylization specific to Cloisonnism and its extensions, as seen for example in the woodcuts done by Gauguin. On the other hand, there were attempts to efface the legibility of the constituent elements of a work. This determination to escape the defining contingencies of an artwork thus originally linked what subsequent avant-garde movements would retain from the Symbolism of a Gauguin or Munch to another approach, which we might call the incorporeal, as represented in particular by the images of Fernand Khnopff, which merged photography, painting, and drawing into works of wonderfully ambiguous technique.

Wood engraving—discredited by the repetitive, mechanical use to which it was put for mass-produced imagery—began to be rejected in favor of simpler woodcuts by certain engravers starting in the mid-1880s. By combining woodcut technique with bright colors, Émile Bernard in 1886 and later Gauguin in 1893 on his return from his first stay in Tahiti, were able to achieve extremely powerful effects from a medium that use of a gouge brought closer to sculpture and that left the veins of the wood visible. Being inhospitable to any suppleness of forms, the woodcut technique favored clear oppositions between black and white, calling on a stylization that implied an almost total absence of modeling, thereby



Fig. 86
Paul Gauguin
*Auti Te Pape (Women at
the Riverside)*, 1893–1894

Woodcut, 8 × 14 in. (20.3 × 35.6 cm)
Musée Municipal Marcel Sahut, Volvic



Fig. 87
Edvard Munch
The Maiden and the Heart,
1896

Woodcut, 10 × 7 1/4 in.
(25.2 × 18.4 cm)
Munch Museet, Oslo

dovetailing with Cloisonnist aesthetics. Munch, who was perhaps aware of Gauguin's woodcuts, was probably taught the technique in Paris in 1896 by German printmaker Paul Herrmann (1864–1940), who on several plates during that period combined woodcut with lithography.² Munch devised the technique of cutting the wood-block like a puzzle, which meant that surfaces could be inked separately in different colors, producing chromatic contrasts of unequaled power (fig. 87). In 1894, Remy de Gourmont and Alfred Jarry founded *L'Ymagier*, a quarterly publication in large, quarto format that aimed to revive the graphic arts by publishing woodcuts from the Renaissance alongside clichéd commercial imagery and engravings by contemporary artists.³ Bernard, Charles Filiger (1863–1928), and Armand Seguin (1869–1903) contributed to *L'Ymagier*, and there were also a few prints produced by Gourmont and Jarry themselves. The general tone of the publication reflected a quest for a primitive naiveness, an archaic coarseness whose aesthetic value would be recognized for the first time.

During this time Gauguin was exploring image-transfer techniques to imbue them with a new import that transcended their initial function of reproduction. In December 1894, he exhibited in his Paris studio a set of Tahitian works notably including woodcuts and monotypes. He had begun using the monotype technique that summer; this hybrid medium entailed both drawing and printing, for it involved pressing a completed drawing or painting onto another support. During the operation, only the pigment used to produce the original image was transferred to the reproduction, with the aid of a solvent—printing therefore involved no physical plate in relief. A monotype is just a straightforward print that has no appeal in terms of broader dissemination because only an extremely limited number of copies can be made; it basically abetted the dematerialization of painting through printing, and its lack of precision introduced an additional element of chance. Gauguin had been preceded down this path notably by Degas, who executed a series of monotypes in 1890–1891. Gauguin's later generalization of this technique, which he transformed by creating drawing-prints in empirical fashion (fig. 88) or by making direct prints on paper from inked sculptures, gave rise to a kind of spontaneous creativity in which indecision and vagueness served as counterpoints to the sharp contrasts created by woodcuts. It can therefore be difficult to determine the exact technique employed on some of his watercolor drawings. Gauguin's graphic style was orchestrated around a back-and-forth play between the sometimes intensely "decorative" effect of his woodcuts and a more allusive approach that betrayed an attempt to unify painting, drawing, and printing.

This innovation occurred alongside a sculpted oeuvre that was evolving, during that same period, toward primitivism. The formal features

displayed in Gauguin's woodcuts, as well as the stylistic syncretism that drew on allusions from various non-Western sources, first appeared in his sculpture. He began to learn how to model forms in 1877, and in 1880 exhibited a marble bust at the fifth Impressionist show. Work in ceramics from 1886 onward, and above all his first stay in Tahiti (1891–1893) pointed Gauguin down the path toward archaic forms, whereupon woodcarving assumed decisive significance. Gauguin had clearly decided to pursue sculpture in Oceania, because he acquired the necessary material prior to departure. His flight from Western civilization reflected a desire to return to a primal art—sculpture, being three dimensional, was traditionally considered to be closer to the original roots of artistic creativity. The composite nature of Gauguin's sculpture, as it emerged right from his first stay in Tahiti, challenged the very notion of plastic composition. Favoring cylindrical shapes adorned with reliefs, in an animist spirit that evoked a tree trunk inhabited by deities, Gauguin usually gave his sculptures a main side and a secondary side, thereby adding formal ambiguity to the object's stylistic alienness: in a famous letter written to Daniel de Monfreid in 1892 he described the sculptures he was doing in Tahiti as



Fig. 88
Paul Gauguin
Rider, 1902

Black and gray drawing-print on vellum applied to a secondary support, 19 ³/₄ × 17 ¹/₄ in. (50 × 44 cm)
Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris

“ultra-primitive.”⁴ It is likely that *Idol with a Shell* (fig. 89) was one of the sculptures to which he was referring—the sculpture probably represents the deity called Taaroa, who according to Polynesian myth created the universe, symbolized by a shell. Here details borrowed from the art of the Marquesas Islands were combined with a pose derived from Indian art, since the god is shown in the posture of Buddha. On the back, two pairs of seated figures were inspired by the “tikis” that decorate the handles of Marquesan objects. Gauguin also combined high and low relief in the same work, along with incised ornamentation and incrustations of bone and mother-of-pearl. Although his Tahitian sculptures represent the culmination of this style, the evolution toward an irregular surface, toward an uneven quality typical of carved wood, and toward a cylindrical shape was already apparent in Gauguin’s *Bust of Meyer de Haan*, executed in Le Pouldu in 1889 (fig. 90). His example spawned a new approach to sculpture embodied not only by Auguste Maillol and Georges Lacombe but also by Czech artist Frantisek Bilek (fig. 91) who, like Gauguin, simultaneously worked on woodcuts and wood sculpture.

This quest for a “primitive” quality occurred in a context in which the mental status of the genius was associated with intellectual marginality, to which Gauguin intended to add a radical social marginality. The distinction between archaic and primitive was not entirely clear at the time, even in anthropological texts that, to the contrary, often concluded in one overarching myth of artistic roots that mingled tribal art, prehistoric art, and drawings by children and the mentally ill—everything, in fact, that markedly diverged from the canon established by classical antiquity. As Robert Goldwater demonstrated, a confusion between “primitive” and “native” art was inherent to Gauguin’s approach.⁵ According to criminologist Cesare Lombroso, whose work became widely known upon the 1863 publication of his book on genius and madness, formal archaism in artistic output was one of the criteria for diagnosing madness—as was, for that matter, a preponderance of symbolism.⁶ Modern anthropology’s assimilation of genius, madness, and “primitiveness” as derived from Lombroso’s theories, although contested, was never refuted with sufficient conviction to halt the spread of this idea. Primitiveness was thus linked to the development of psychiatric thought, constituting a symptomatic perversion of panaestheticism specific to the Symbolist mentality: archaism went from a clinical sign indicating an anomaly in mental makeup to a source of aesthetic feeling not unrelated to a challenge to the Western idea of mimetic art. Lack of coherent perspective or unreal colors—errors of depiction that Lombroso took for pathological symptoms—were considered in 1901 by Marcel Réja, a psychiatrist and poet, as the principles of stylization inherent in all artistic output, thereby following the line of Symbolism criticism that advocated “deformations”

and chromatic subjectivity. These “primitive” values, with which an artist like Gauguin intended to challenge the traditional criteria of Western representation, were suddenly imbued with a subversive, fundamental significance. (It was in reaction to this development that Émile Bernard would completely fabricate, in the early twentieth century, a traditionalist aesthetic.) Gauguin’s interest in the art of the Marquesas Islands was the first link in a chain that would lead to the enthusiastic discovery of African and Oceanic art by artists of the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, a discovery actively shared for that matter by former protagonists of Symbolism such as Félix Fénéon and the poet Charles Vignier. The crucial point here is the rejection of an evolutionary viewpoint on art and societies, which accompanied a rejection of realism and mimesis in favor of an abstract notion of ornamentation and stylization, along with a religious conception of art.



A tendency to cross the technical boundaries between artistic fields was not linked solely to a quest for primitivism, however. Indeed, it was a fundamental process that went beyond the mere question of formal similarities. Creativity outside the technical norms established by tradition was a characteristic trait of the end of the nineteenth century, one that converged with the realm of Symbolism. Thus sculptor and engraver Pierre Roche (1855–1922) invented a technique he called “gypsography,” combining the visual impression of a relief print with an engraving whose iridescent colors recalled ceramics (fig. 92). Halfway between sculpting and printmaking, this technique involved the printed transfer to paper of a motif that had been first drawn, then hollowed, and finally cast to convert it into relief. It resulted in an object whose material nature was fundamentally ambiguous. Similarly, from the 1890s onward Khnopff constantly sought to eliminate the

Fig. 89
Paul Gauguin
Idol with a Shell, 1892

Wood (toa), mother-of-pearl, bone
H: 10 ³/₄ in. (27 cm);
Diam: 5 ¹/₂ in. (14 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 90
Paul Gauguin
Bust of Meyer de Haan,
1889

Painted wood (oak),
H: 22 ¹/₂ in. (57 cm)
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Fig. 91
Frantisek Bílek
*An Interpretation of the
Word “Madonna,”* 1897

Relief in wood, 60 ¹/₄ × 36 ³/₄ in.
(153 × 93.5 cm)
National Gallery, Prague



difference between painting and drawing; he made extensive use of photography not only to develop imagery to be used in some of his paintings, but also in order to escape the normative character of artistic creativity and to achieve technical indeterminacy by retouching with a paintbrush either his own photographs of his drawings or Arsène Alexandre's photographs of his sculptures.⁷ In the different photographic versions of his *Red Lips* (fig. 93), he thus added touches of color to a photographic reproduction of one of his drawings. Not only does the creative process here escape traditional codification via the combination of two distinct techniques, but the work also seems to frustrate any visual search for a trace of the artist, given the confusion between drawing and painting, and between brushstroke and photographic print—the color remains deliberately immaterial, indecisive, as though in a sun-bleached watercolor that slowly fades over time. This trend toward dematerialization was apparent in other aspects of Khnopff's oeuvre, such as his polychrome plasters whose patina placed them halfway between sculpture and painting.

Similarly, the optical effects sought by Rops, whose interest in photoengraving techniques is well known, may have been inspired by something other than the search for an easy route, with which he has been taxed in the past. His extensive use of photogravure—which he tried to conceal for obvious commercial reasons—represents an aesthetic appropriation of



Fig. 92
Pierre Roche
Venus, 1915

Gypsograph (plaster-plate engraving),
4 1/2 × 4 1/2 in. (11.4 × 11.4 cm)
Private collection



Fig. 93
Fernand Khnopff
Red Lips, 1897

Retouched photograph
(platino-gravure),
11 × 7 3/4 in. (28.2 × 20 cm)
Private collection

what was initially a purely reproductive technique. Photogravure produces an incised metal plate from photographic action, and was employed by Rops to transfer his drawings to copper, after which he reworked the plate with drypoint, aquatint, or soft grounds.

As a peerless experimenter, Rops also devised several systems allowing for a play of visual equivalencies between photogravure and etchings or drypoint engravings, which constituted so many challenges to traditional engraving practices. He recorded his experiments in several manuscripts, gathered together under the title *Omniana artistique*, comparing craft techniques to mechanical reproduction. The paradox of his



approach was that it started from an original drawing and led to photochemical reproduction, which then became the basis for the re-creation of a work in which the artist's hand played a crucial role. Skills previously considered to be the prerogative of printing technicians, rather than artists, were thus incorporated into the creative process. When discussing the retouching rollers used by the Goupil printing firm, Rops ironically referred to photoengravings that "were nothing but retouches, *through and through*."⁸ Like Khnopff, Rops appropriated a reproduction of an original to create a work whose technical status and visual impression generate an ambiguous sense of materiality. Similarly, Polish artist Mieczyslaw Jakimowicz (1881–1917) employed techniques that remain unexplained even today in order to achieve extremely subtle tonal effects that lend strangeness to his images, which hover halfway between drawing and photography.

This subversive tendency also included a blurring of the difference between the graphic arts and painting. Symbolist painting's infiltration by a graphic aesthetic has been viewed as the result of the influence of poster art, in a context where traditional artistic forms were allegedly

Fig. 94
Mieczyslaw Jakimowicz
Foreboding, 1907

Pen and India ink, wash, and pencil
on photographic paper,
9 1/4 × 7 3/4 in. (23.5 × 19.5 cm).
Muzeum Narodowe, Krakow

seeking to appropriate certain features associated with the swift, public impact achieved by advertising imagery. Thus Arthur Symons, linking the oeuvre of Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) to a Baudelairean vision, evoked speed and the masses as aesthetic components of the modern world when he observed in 1898 that a new, very modern art was emerging, one that was both serious and exquisite, as published above all in *Le Courrier Français*, *Gil Blas illustré*, and posters. He argued that the new art was made of colors and shapes for people who walk quickly, that it had to compete with advertising, newspapers, and music halls.⁹ This notion, which is behind the oft-established relationship between painting and the decorative arts of this period, has sometimes been simplified into the idea that Art Nouveau graphics merely migrated into the realm of painting. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that this new presence of the line also represented a reaction to the popularity of naturalism. Indeed, the widespread adoption of plein-air aesthetics had encouraged a method of painting based on the dissolution of drawing, whose traditional primacy was therefore overturned in the name of atmospheric illusionism. Reasserting the role of linear technique here meant privileging subjectivity over verisimilitude once again. This conception of drawing as a vector of subjectivity would be reinforced by multiple considerations on the expressive and symbolic role of the line when cultivated for its intrinsic value. This idea surfaced, in various ways and historic contexts, in the work of Gauguin and Denis as well as Klimt, Hodler, and Munch. Justifying the preeminence of line over color for its immaterial qualities was a historical constant throughout the nineteenth century. On a theoretical level, such a conception was shared by the likes of Charles Blanc



Fig. 95
Gustav Vigeland
*Detail of decorative grille
around the monument to
Rikard Nordraak,
1902–1905*

Wrought iron
Oslo

and Baudelaire, who constantly stressed the role of draftsmanship in the work of Delacroix, an artist who was otherwise perceived as a champion of color. Linear expression was associated with the intellect and with the most abstract manifestation of a painter's ideas.

In this respect, the Symbolist position tended to be a radical one, without however always shunning tradition. In 1902, Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland (1869–1943) received a commission for a memorial monument honoring the composer Rikard Nordraak. The selection committee having rejected his initial proposals, Vigeland wound up producing



Fig. 96
Aubrey Beardsley
Siegfried, Act II, 1893

Pen, India ink, and wash
15 ³/₄ × 34 ³/₄ in. (40 × 88 cm)
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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1905
1906

a fairly conventional statue, but gave his imagination free rein when it came to the wrought-iron grating that surrounded the sculpture. He designed it as a linear weave of aggressive monsters, reinterpreting Nordic ornamental tradition to transform carved wooden scrollwork into dragons that mutually devour one another (fig. 95). However, apart from a few examples in which the reaffirmation of linearity involved an allusion to tradition, the search for subjectivity in drawing generally led to a volubility that eschewed historical references. The most significant representative of this approach was Aubrey Beardsley (fig. 96), whose early work was influenced by Burne-Jones and the ornamental idiom of the Kelmscott Press (illustrations for Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, London, 1893).¹⁰ Drawing on his profound knowledge of illustration, Beardsley dotted his compositions with motifs that were free interpretations of traditional ornamental figures. But his drawing obeyed above all a quest for abstraction dominated by scrolling, spiraling effects that encouraged multiple, sometimes paradoxical, readings in which flat areas of white and black were contradicted by the network of curves. Through the opposition of solids and voids, Beardsley seemed to be seeking a formal harmony based on the mobility of the eye, urged on by sinuous lines so fine in his work of 1892–1893 that they could be described as “hairline.” Beardsley would have considerable influence in the field of book illustration and decoration right from the

Fig. 97
Mstislav Dobuzhinsky
(1875–1957)
Title page for the periodical
Zhupel, no. 3, 1906

Zinc engraving, 5 ³/₄ × 7 ¹/₂ in.
(14.8 × 19.2 cm)
Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

early twentieth century; the artists affiliated with *Mir Iskustva*, the review founded by Sergei Diaghilev in Moscow (fig. 97), were inspired by Beardsley, as was Christophe Karel Henri de Nerée Tot Babberich (1880–1909), the illustrator of Dutch Symbolist writers (fig. 98).

This linear aesthetic originally derived from books—from the borders of texts and from title pages—yet drew on various sources depending on country of origin. It became an integral part of the work of artists such as Burne-Jones (fig. 99), Georges Lemmen (1865–1916), and Henry van de Velde (fig. 100). Having sprung from margins and illustrations, it would nevertheless become the object of explorations into the shared properties of abstract linearity and text, as witnessed by the graphical poems of Ernst Stöhr (1860–1917) published in the review *Ver Sacrum* (fig. 101), and by the borders that M. K. Ciurlionis drew around his notations of popular Lithuanian melodies with the intention of finding a

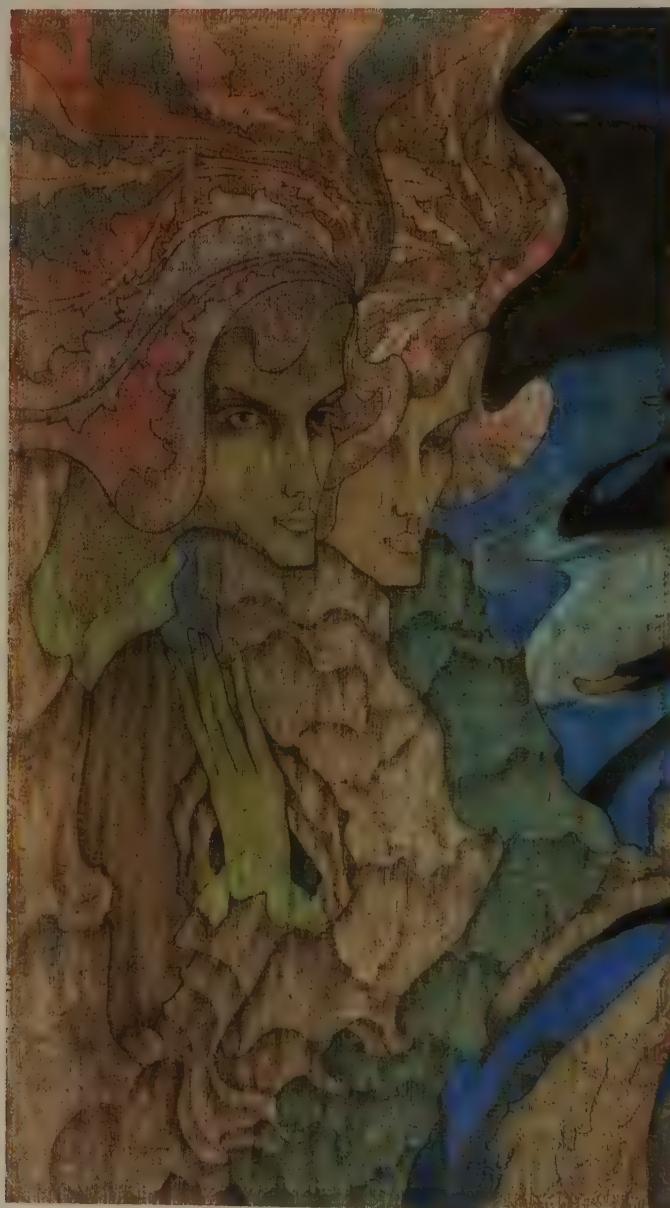


Fig. 98
Christophe Karel Henri de
Nerée Tot Babberich
Black Swans, 1901

Chalk and pastel on canvas,
38 1/2 × 21 1/2 in. (97.5 × 54.5 cm)
Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

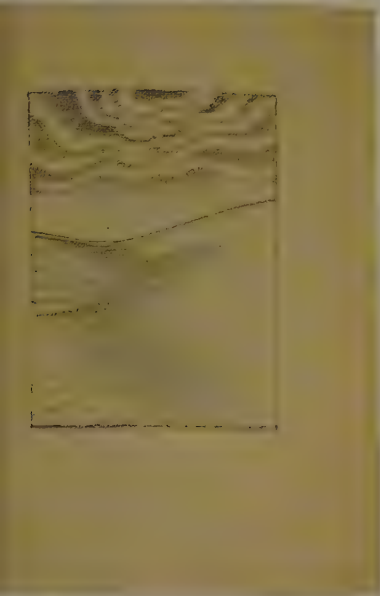


Fig. 99
Edward Burne-Jones
Waves, after 1885

Pencil, 7 × 5 1/4 in.
(17.5 × 13.3 cm)
British Museum, London

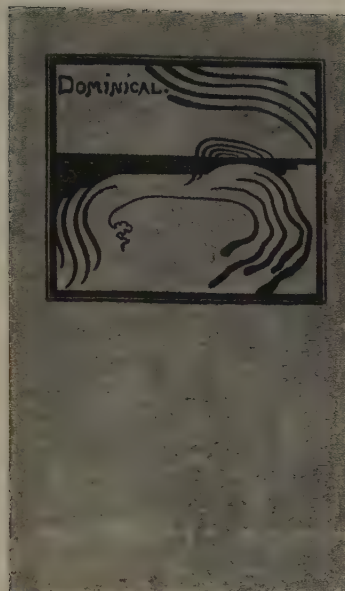


Fig. 100
Henry van de Velde
Cover for *Dominical* by Max
Elskamp, 1892

Woodcut, 8 3/4 × 5 1/4 in.
(22.2 × 13.1 cm)
Stedelijk Prentenkabinet, Antwerp

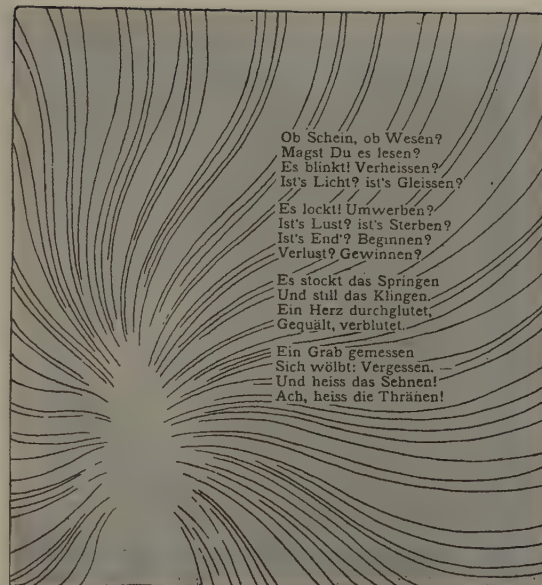


Fig. 101
Ernst Stöhr
*“Zeichnungen und
Gedichte,”* in *Ver Sacrum*,
1899, no. 2

graphic equivalent to song. Stöhr, who was one of the founders of the Vienna Sezession, was also, like Ciurlionis, a poet and musician as well as painter. The inflexion of the concept of linear harmony toward a concept of synthesis in the arts had been prepared by a long evolution in which the line gained increasing autonomy from objective reality. In his *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Émile Littré had accepted the noun “arabesques” only in the plural; the term was admitted solely in its architectural or decorative context, as an ornamental arrangement typical of a given cultural domain. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century there was a progressive shift in French from the plural to the singular—from arabesques to arabesque—conveying a move away from the concept of decorative pattern toward an abstract concept of “free-flowing line” that might equally apply to drawing, music, and poetry. Baudelaire, who still referred to “arabesque drawing,” associated this notion with spirituality and the ideal.¹¹ Later, Mallarmé would admire the “arabesque flourish” of Edgar Allen Poe’s signature.¹² The moment when this development reached Symbolist art coincided with the publication in Vienna of *Stilfragen* by the art historian Alois Riegl, an analysis of “questions of style” that had a major impact in the German-speaking world.¹³ For the first time, ornamentation was part of a vision that, far from accepting the positivist theory that the form taken by a motif depended on technical constraints, considered it as the fruit of an underlying artistic will.

The fusion of the notion of the decorative scheme with the more pictorial concept of painting equated to an equivalence between linear



rhythm and the expression of the abstract essence of an idea, independently of the material reality incarnating it. This became clear in the 1890s in the work of many artists from the Dutch and Belgian cultural world, such as Jan Toorop (1858–1928), Johan Thorn Prikker (1868–1932), and Émile Fabry (1865–1966). Toorop and Thorn Prikker were in contact, notably through *Les XX*. The two artists' development is all the more significant for following an almost perfectly parallel path, from a luminist painting similar to Impressionism toward a linear abstraction of mystical inspiration, via the temporary influence of Neo-Impressionism. A flow of curving lines, symbolizing spiritual energy, gives shape to the immaterial anatomy of Toorop's female figures. On the subject of *The Three Brides* (fig. 102), Toorop mentioned the "lines of sounds" linking his figures to the bells hanging from Christ's hands.¹⁴ In Fabry's *Gestures* (fig. 103), the curvilinear grouping of figures represents the eternal recommencement of a biological cycle linking human beings to nature and the cosmos. Meanwhile, Thorn Prikker's letters make it clear that he

Fig. 102
Jan Toorop
The Three Brides, 1893

Pencil, black and colored chalk, white highlights on brown paper,
30 ³/₄ × 38 ¹/₂ in. (78 × 98 cm)
Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo

sought to express concepts through form. Dismayed that the public did not always grasp the symbols inherent in his drawings, he commented on his religious compositions in the following terms in 1894: "I am not depicting the Christ or the Madonna from the Bible. For me, they are just simple characters of great purity. In my work, the face of Christ simply evokes something very pure, Christ is a pure man, that's all"¹⁵ (fig. 104). The cult of the expressive value of the line was part of a speculative aesthetic attitude that cut across various artistic fields. Thus Milanese sculptor Adolfo Wildt (1868–1931), who was in constant touch with the German-speaking world and the Sezession movement, blithely abandoned sculpture in the round for what might be called translucent screens, sculptures carved like drawings in which a cut replaced the line, once again producing works whose formal status tended toward indeterminacy (fig. 105).

It was nevertheless the sphere of color that remained the preferred domain for the dissociation between art and tangible reality. Already in the 1880s a shift had occurred in the theoretical justification of the new trends in painting. The notion of sensory impression as the foundation for the creative process in an artwork had steadily gained precedence over reference to external reality and objectivity. This shift in the criteria of aesthetic judgment was a significant development. Without yet abandoning the partnership between an artist and the tangible world that spurred his or her observation, sensory experience in itself would become the object of growing attention. The various theories of physiological optics that made the rounds in more or less simplified versions revived interest in the way



Fig. 103
Émile Fabry
Gestures or Autumnal, 1895

Oil on canvas,
35 1/2 × 39 in. (90 × 99 cm)
Private collection

the visual organs functioned. The discovery of phenomena relating to the perception of color certainly had the effect of suggesting that the painter's gaze was a tool for measuring optical sensations. But the paths taken by this development were not as straightforward as sometimes supposed. Although the scientific observation of color perception culminated, on one hand, in the codification of the way the nervous system worked, on the other hand any translation of sensory data magnified individual particularities and the relative accuracy of the gaze. This led above all to a shift of interest in the ultimate goal of art, mimesis being progressively abandoned in favor of the idea of depicting pure sensation. This new look at the artist's gaze favored the notation of color in all its subtleties. In his *Paradoxe sur la couleur*, Paul Bourget introduced a "semi-erudite" character who established a connection between Impressionism and the emergence of "artistic writing" that paralleled the recent shift from Huysmans's literary naturalism to a style that rivaled painting, notably in its ability to record sensations of color. This character claimed that "independent" artists "aggravate their eye by insisting on examining their impressions down to the tiniest detail, the



Fig. 104
 Johan Thorn Prikker
 Poster for *La Revue
 Bimestrielle pour l'Art
 Appliqué*, 1896

Lithograph, 52 1/4 x 38 1/2 in.
 (133 x 98 cm)
 Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld

way writers aggravate their own nervous system by the practice of relentlessly turning attention inward.” He went on to say of a descriptive passage by Huysmans that, “the writer saw objects no longer in their outline, but as a stain or kind of gaudy hole that they formed against the plain ground of the day . . . hence the almost barbaric disintegration of adjective and noun practically occurred by itself.”¹⁶ Although this “aggravation” of perceptual faculties turned attention from objective reality to the internal reality of the nervous system and personal sensations, it nevertheless supposed a certain dependence on the organism’s reaction to the outside world. Symbolism, in contrast, would shun any form of dependence on everything unrelated to a purely speculative aesthetic idea.

Neo-Impressionism had instituted an aesthetic system that left no room for empiricism, at least in theory. In his *Introduction à une esthétique scientifique*, Charles Henry—a scholar and mathematician who was a friend of Seurat—traced the genealogy of the relationship between



Fig. 105
Adolfo Wildt
*Mask of Sorrow or
Self-Portrait*, 1908–1909

Marble, $14\frac{1}{2} \times 12\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$ in.
($37 \times 31 \times 17$ cm), on gilded marble
ground, $15\frac{1}{4} \times 12\frac{3}{4}$ in.
($38.5 \times 32.5 \times 3$ cm)
Musei Civici, Forlì

art and science from ancient Greece through to Leonardo da Vinci and down to Poe and Baudelaire.¹⁷ His little book was designed to establish the foundations of a mathematical aesthetics whose principles would govern both music and painting. The elaboration of a referential system based on geometric and chromatic theories—notably that of Eugène Chevreul—made it possible to go beyond the random aspects of Impressionism and its observational approach. The reference to music was a cornerstone in the quest for an abstract system, structuring Henry's aesthetic thinking. The idea of an analogy between music and the visual arts was behind the introduction of nonfigurative elements into painting right from the middle of the 1880s. This was notably the case with Paul Signac (1863–1935), who during the period he leaned toward Symbolism would title his works with specifications of musical tempo and opus number (*Sardine Fishing, Concarneau: Adagio, Opus 221*, 1891, Museum of Modern Art, New York). Henry's treatise presented the arabesque, or free-flowing line, as a central concept, seeing it as an organic unit that generated its own development according to an internal dynamic based on formal analogy, symmetry, and repetition. The tendency to render a landscape or a figure through an abstract organization of space, although frequently perceived as musical at the time, was felt by the Neo-Impressionists to be an authentically revolutionary technique, since the relative uniformity of their brushwork and their exclusive use of primary colors broke with everything that had previously defined the specifically painterly nature of a painting. Anticipating that once his method was fully developed it would "extend beyond the sphere of aesthetics," Henry declared that his conclusion applied to both the sounds of nature and the language of poetry—he even offered to list the "changes in direction" in the metaphors in Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, a concept founded on the notion of contrast, whether a contrast of angles formed by intersecting lines (which Henry called by the more abstract term of "directions") or a contrast of hues based on the theory of complementary colors.¹⁸ For our purposes, the most important part of Henry's doctrine—which was not entirely free of a measure of totalitarianism—resides in his point of departure, in which the conception of an artwork was related to a determination to produce an abstract combination of quantifiable relationships based on fundamental laws that his method would ultimately reveal. Here we can see similarities with the Symbolist aesthetic, partly from the standpoint of a fusion of artistic fields (to which we will return), and partly from the creation of a myth that, although modern and anticipating further revelation in the future (hence expecting, at the moment of its creation, to ultimately escape history), nevertheless remained a fiction, a scientific utopia.

The new approaches to color that emerged in the mid-1880s all respected Impressionism's complete rejection of chiaroscuro and its exclusively chromatic conception of a painting. In contrast, the normative value of the colors of the external world lost much of its validity. Even after he had rejected Impressionism's basic principles, Gauguin declared to Bernard that in his paintings he disregarded shadows as "an explanation of light."¹⁹ Mimesis was replaced by a play of equivalencies between objective color and its pictorial transposition, one that stretched the relationship between a painting and a natural phenomenon. Gauguin's example in this respect is extremely significant. Having come to painting rather late, he started exhibiting with the Impressionists in 1879. Until the mid-1880s, he would be influenced successively by Degas and Pissarro, the latter having taught him plein-air landscape painting and the importance of visual memory. During this Impressionist period, Gauguin notably executed landscapes in rainbow-hued if sometimes dull colors, the surface being handled in comma-shaped strokes of juxtaposed hues (*The Market Gardens of Vaugirard*, 1879, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts). From 1884–1885 onward, his painting became more heavily influenced by Cézanne, and he pursued his sculpting activities. Gauguin's stylistic development, although fairly uneven, thus comes across as the progressive introduction of plastic form into Impressionist coloring. In this respect his attitude echoed the crisis experienced by Impressionism during the same period, motivated by the fear that exclusive attention to atmosphere and light would produce works that were poorly constructed and lacked solidity. This doubt concerning the possibility of basing painting on an aesthetics in which color was assigned the central role would remain with Gauguin over several years, until he managed to find the right balance following a relatively long period of instability that included sojourns in Copenhagen (1884–1885) and Martinique (1887). In 1888, his encounters with Bernard in Brittany and van Gogh in Arles led to his definitive rejection of the chromatic system inherited from Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism, which still characterized his paintings in the early part of that year (*Early Blossoms—Brittany*, 1888, on loan to the Kunsthaus, Zurich). The divorce was consummated with the exhibition of paintings from the "Impressionist and Synthetist Group" that Gauguin organized in collaboration with Bernard at the Café Volpini on the fringes of the Universal Exposition of 1889. Gauguin showed a set of paintings that included several examples of his adoption of Cloisonnism, as well as an album of ten zincographs printed in black or brown ink on lemon-yellow vellum, a decision that flaunted the new cult of pure color.

Awareness of the role of complementary colors spurred the Neo-Impressionists to adopt an extreme approach to the division of color;

the same awareness led van Gogh and Gauguin on a quest for decorative contrast. Influenced by the precepts laid down by Charles Blanc, who cited Delacroix's use of complementary colors as an example, van Gogh developed an approach in which a painting was divided into areas that juxtaposed dominants of almost pure colors, barely nuanced by a few shades. This version of chromaticism, without being totally arbitrary—since it was largely based on knowledge of visual phenomena—nevertheless rested on a desire to free painting from its relationship to objective reality. For that matter, van Gogh and Gauguin did not automatically organize their complementary colors according to the recommendations of the treatises on which their knowledge was based. When Félix Fénéon wrote of the “roar of a red roof among staid verdancy, as in any authentic Gauguin,” he was alluding to the contrast of two complementary colors, red and green.²⁰ However, the Baudelairean red-green pair was heavy with meaning that went beyond color-perception theories. In the context of Symbolism, a phrase like Fénéon's, which conveyed a synaesthetic conception of color (red “roar”) infallibly brought to mind Baudelaire's celebration of Delacroix's dramatic use of color. The emblematic content of color as codified by age-old tradition was appreciated here for its intrinsic value as well as for what it would spark in the beholder. This return to a pigmentary and symbolic conception of color broke with a tradition of color depiction that dated back to the Renaissance. In 1895, philosopher Paul Souriau wrote, “Goethe noticed that when we look through a colored glass we identify with that color, in a way, because our mind and eye work in unison. It is the same when we look at a painting whose very color is expressive; this color projects something that we don't assign to any specific object, a simple color sensation that slowly penetrates us, mingling with and adding to the feeling that the subject stirs in us; here again eye and mind work in unison.”²¹ Although this theory returns to the notion of sensation, it defines the term entirely differently than the previous discussion did. The reactive, immediate sensations of Impressionism were replaced by an all-encompassing, non-objective sensation of color. The psycho-physiological phenomenon produced by non-mimetic color was a transcendent one in so far as, free of any rational link, it was related to what Merleau-Ponty described as an original level of sensation prior to the division of the senses.²² The importance of this attribution of an imaginative faculty to color in late nineteenth-century painting has perhaps not been sufficiently stressed, for it can be seen in the work of artists with backgrounds as varied as those of Redon, Ensor, Munch, Willumsen, Previati, Vrubel, and Wojtkiewicz. Although Redon was known to the Symbolist generation for his black-and-white works, he painted with color throughout

his life. If mention has been made of Redon's "shift to color," that was because until the early 1890s painting was a fringe activity for him, limited to small studies from nature, landscapes or still lifes, which he exhibited only rarely and in small numbers. Two of them were shown at Galerie Durand-Ruel in 1894, labeled "Studies for the Author," underscoring the personal nature of these works.²³ The first subject that Redon directly addressed in both lithography and painting was *Closed Eyes* (fig. 106), several painted versions of which were done starting in 1889–1890. One of these canvases was shown in Brussels during the exhibition organized by Les XX in 1890. For the first time, Redon's contribution included two pastels in addition to a large set of *Noirs* and a painting of an imaginary subject.²⁴ Thus began a decade during which he continued to publish albums of lithographs yet progressively asserted himself as a painter, leading him moreover to redo some of his charcoal works in pastel (fig. 107). It is obvious that the new approaches to color that had recently emerged, notably in the work of Gauguin, represented a crucial stimulus. Gauguin and Redon had probably met prior to 1886, the year they both participated in the eighth Impressionist exhibition; they were certainly friends from 1889 onward. During the year 1892 the appearance of

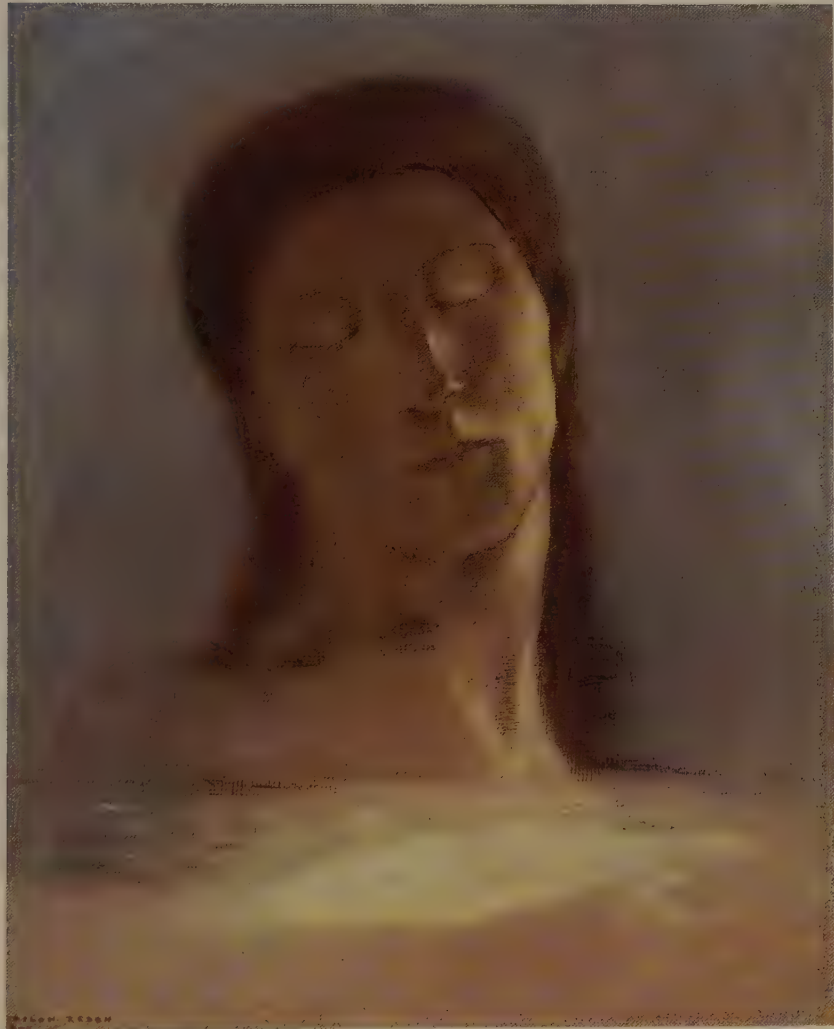


Fig. 106
Odilon Redon
Closed Eyes, 1890

Oil on cardboard-backed canvas,
17 1/4 × 14 1/4 in. (44 × 36 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

floral motifs and macabre themes in the work of Gauguin, then in Tahiti, was probably inspired by Redon. In return, the van Gogh retrospective organized by Émile Bernard in 1892 at Le Barc de Bouteville's gallery, followed the next year by a show of Gauguin's first Tahitian works (fig. 108) at Galerie Durand-Ruel, not only had a major impact on the art world but also played a role in Redon's development. In 1899, the year Redon published his last album of lithographs, entitled *Apocalypse*, Durand-Ruel hosted an exhibition that took the form of a tribute to Redon, flanking a set of his pastels with paintings by younger artists such as Bonnard, Vuillard, and Roussel. At the age of almost sixty, Redon seemed to have inspired a generation interested in liberating color. An evolution toward less sorrowful themes accompanied this development, in which "blackness" slowly began to disappear from his concerns. Redon's color, which owes much to pastel technique and the striking contrasts it permits, was henceforth different in nature from the color in the earlier studies in which he had conscientiously tried to transcribe the appearance of reality. It was the product of an imagination that generated a few large decorative schemes, notably one executed in 1910–1911 for the library of Fontfroide Abbey, at the request of his friend and patron Gustave Fayet. There, on two facing walls, Redon depicted *Night* and *Day* (fig. 109), incorporating portraits of a few friends and several of his favorite motifs: a Delacroix-like chariot whose four horses race toward the sky, botanical sproutings,



Fig. 107
Odilon Redon
The Beacon, 1883,
reworked c. 1893

Charcoal, black chalk, pastel, and stump on pale pink wove paper with reddish fibers altered to gold, mounted on cardboard, 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (51.5 \times 37.2 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago



winged heads floating in the air, wood sprites and a fallen angel straight out of his *Noir* lithographs. Redon's period of color coincided with a move away from the use of texts as a support. His work began to coalesce around several major visual themes, including emerging allusions to Greco-Roman myth; these themes are dominated by the evocation of inaccessible vastness and teeming natural life—the infinitely vast and the infinitely tiny. The invasion of his compositions by oneiric foliage in contrasting colors was designed to exploit abstract patterns of lines and marks.

The dawn of the twentieth century, which saw the emergence of a theory of painting based on unblended colors (notably explored by the Fauvists), was also a time when Cézanne was becoming better known. The very small circle of painters who had been interested in his work back in the mid-1880s—led by Gauguin, Bernard, and Denis—grew steadily, notably thanks to the efforts of Ambroise Vollard, who in late 1895 gave Cézanne his first retrospective show. Of course, not all the artists interested in Cézanne were part of the Symbolist movement; yet the theoretical writings and memoirs published by Bernard and Denis in the early twentieth century leave no doubt about the link between their understanding of Cézanne's oeuvre and Symbolism. Bernard, who went to see Cézanne in Aix-en-Provence in 1904 and 1905 in an effort to uncover

Fig. 108
Paul Gauguin
*Manao Tupapau (Spirit of
the Dead Watching)*, 1892

Oil on canvas, 28 ³/₄ × 36 ¹/₄ in.
(73 × 92 cm)

A. Conger Goodyear Collection,
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo



Fig. 109
Odilon Redon
Day, decoration for the library,
Fontfroide Abbey, 1910–1911

Distemper on canvas,
78 ³/₄ × 260 in. (2 × 6.5 m) each panel



the secret of his technique and his style, still viewed Cézanne, even at that late date, as the absolute reference, the only living painter who ranked with the masters of the past. In *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne*, Bernard scrupulously recorded the way Cézanne organized his palette from brilliant yellow to peach black.²⁵ Compared to the pure, lyrical color that was then emerging—in a straight tradition from Moreau, Gauguin, and Redon—Cézanne's color seemed ascetic. His landscapes often appeared to be constructed from an abstract gradation of colors—the eye skimmed over Cézanne's personal chromatic range, from the foreground to the sky, from ochers to blues. Although Cézanne himself could not conceive of this development independently of the direct observation of nature, his work, in which reality was reformulated according to a conceptual organization of color, was perceived at the time as a model of the abstract organization of painting. This is what Denis meant when he wrote, in an article stressing Cézanne's connection to Redon and the early Symbolists, that "the combination of shades, designed to effect a grand style, make perspective planes vanish and render values (in the fine arts sense) equipollent. The decorative effect and compositional balance appear all the clearer in that aerial perspective is heavily sacrificed."²⁶ Cézanne's color replaced the natural order—to which it nevertheless claimed fidelity—by an intellectual order. In this respect it explored the connection between world and idea as sought by the Symbolists.

A Synthesis of the Arts

Nature is a temple, where the living
Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech:
Man walks within these groves of symbols, each
Of which regards him as a kindred thing.

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,
Heard from afar, blend in a unity,
Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,
so perfumes, colors, sounds may correspond.

Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondences," *The Flowers of Evil*, 1857²⁷

Around the end of the nineteenth century, the theory of correspondences—through which Baudelaire established, right from the start of his career, a principle of equivalence between the various spheres of perception—found numerous outlets that in many respects would serve as points of departure for the avant-garde movements of the following century. Nor should we forget, when pointing out the threads connecting Symbolism to radical trends of the early twentieth century, that the aesthetic realm was closely related to an analogous world view in which the human microcosm was made in the image of the universal macrocosm. This philosophical principle of unity and continuity breathed life into Baudelaire's poetry. It also subtended the notion of synthesis in the arts, a primordial feature of Symbolist theoretical foundations. It stood at the opposite pole from the philosophy associated with the positivist sciences, in so far as the latter recorded an experience of the world based on differentiation and classification into categories. During the period under discussion, this antagonism was exacerbated. Baudelaire's poetic universe reflected the resurgence of a trend that, arising from stoicism, had survived the Renaissance only in the form of the hermetic tradition. That tradition would meet with renewed interest during the Romantic and Symbolist periods, born of anxiety triggered by the growth of industrial society and the consequences of humanity's new role in the world as a transforming power. Just then there also emerged the first signs of a poetic concept, synaesthesia, that reflected the unbounded scope of the macrocosm via an abstract correlation analogous to the one existing between the cosmos and humankind. Synaesthesia, defined here as the recognition of homologous relationships between all the human senses,

thereby manifested the principle of unity. The symbolic perception of the world spawned the idea of an artwork conceived as a device for completely restoring universal harmony, which implied breaking down the boundaries separating the various fields of art.

The idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork—now considered either a utopian notion or a dead end, depending on whether it is viewed from the standpoint of artistic theory or the works it actually generated—was present in the writings of Richard Wagner from the mid-nineteenth century (fig. 110). In Wagner's view, producing a total artwork meant reestablishing the links uniting all arts, which had cultivated their own respective formal specificities and ultimately distorted themselves through mutual attempts to appropriate their respective natures. This quest was itself based on an aesthetic and political model, ancient Greek theater, in which a union of the arts created a unity between play and audience similar to the one between the city-state and the people. Wagner's initial conception was in no way favorable to reciprocal contamination across the arts, a direction in which Symbolism would sometimes head. In the fin-de-siècle intellectual environment, and due to numerous misconceptions, Wagner's ideas would sometimes be confused with other theories, such as those associated with John Ruskin, aiming to combine painting and decorative arts into a single system. The *Revue wagnérienne*, published in Paris from 1885 to 1888, was a French-language vector for these ideas; Wagner was presented as a pillar of Symbolist doctrine, even though the logic of assigning him that role is not at all clear today. The review's conception of synthesis in the arts corresponded to the later period of Wagner's thought, which was influenced by Schopenhauer and which affirmed the predominant role of music over text in lyric theater. The ubiquitous presence of music in Symbolist aesthetic theories pointed the way to a growing dematerialization of the visual arts, which therefore meant pushing them to the limits of abstraction. The fluidity of Wagner's music, which Nietzsche had notably criticized for the tonal and rhythmic vagueness of its melodic development,²⁸ suggested the idea of an artistic expression that resonates to the pulse of nature and transcends conventional harmonic frameworks. However, the problem of actually producing a total artwork still remains unresolved today, as does that of historically identifying a corpus of works stemming from this concept. For the period under discussion here, attempts to produce a synthesis of the arts remained diffuse, and were limited to the modest scale of books in Mallarmé's case, or to sketches for a utopian theater ranging from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam to Edouard Schuré's "Dream Theater," via the Nabis's stage sets and the quasi-abstract theater advocated by Adolphe Appia (1862–1928; fig. 111). Nevertheless, the idea of a synthesis of the arts was

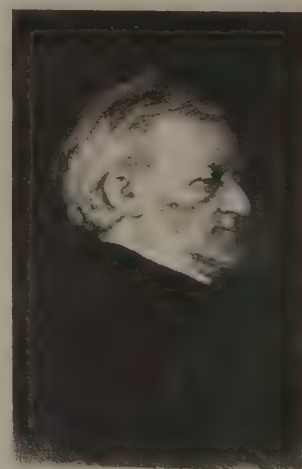


Fig. 110
Henry de Groux
Richard Wagner, 1897

Lithograph, 13 1/2 × 8 3/4 in.
(34 × 22 cm)

Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels



a constant backdrop to Symbolist thinking. The fecundity of Wagner's aesthetic system, regardless of the distortions it underwent, nourished the gaze that critics brought to a work. At the time, Wagner was cited as often as Baudelaire. Thus in the first book to attempt an overarching definition of Symbolism, Georges Vanor could write of Paul Adam's novels that "each character or group of characters enters the tale accompanied by a theme with a particular assonance, with matching propositions that are, or at least tend to be, substitutes for the musical themes commonly used by Wagner."²⁹ Although the comparison is pejorative, this parallel between musical composition and literary technique—a cautious parallel, it should be noted—illustrates the shift in perspective triggered by the idea of a synthesis of the arts. Here it involves the crossbreeding of distinct fields, even at the cost of sacrificing the coherence of the structures specific to each one.

Whereas Wagner harked back to Greek tragedy, Baudelaire's idea of correspondences betrays a hint of nostalgia for a golden age. Baudelaire felt that the modern world had somehow clouded symbolic perception of the cosmic order. The desperate quest for this lost harmony constituted the nineteenth century's own brand of heroism. Baudelaire's "groves of symbols" do not yield their secrets to the poet through a direct, intellectual, tangible message. Placed near the beginning of *The Flowers of Evil*, the famous sonnet "Correspondences" is one of the poems that form a kind of gateway heralding the main features of the Baudelairean aesthetic. A strict parallel between the human microcosm and the macrocosm (established in the second poem, "The Sun")³⁰ was followed by the poet's faculty of abstraction in his union with cosmic forces (third poem,

Fig. 111
Adolphe Appia
*Rhythmic Space:
Dependence*, 1909–1910

Graphite, charcoal, and stump
on pale brown paper,
18 1/2 × 26 in. (46 × 65 cm)
Collection Suisse du Théâtre, Berne

“Elevation”), leading to the affirmation of the symbolic substance of the world as manifested through correspondences (fourth poem, “Correspondences”). It has never been sufficiently stressed that, in a series where the themes logically follow one another, the poem that comes immediately after “Correspondences” is composed like a diptych that contrasts a golden age with ugly and depraved if fascinating modern times (fifth poem, “I love the thought . . .”). This linkage reveals Baudelaire’s pessimism and contains the seeds of the nostalgic nature of Symbolism—once the bond between humanity and the universe was broken, any return to the initial harmony became impossible except through the communion offered by poetry, which in essence is symbolic and religious. Correspondences represent the vestige of a lost unity, lodged in the very heart of human beings, in their sensory system. In his review of the Salon of 1846, Baudelaire invoked both E. T. A. Hoffmann and Heinrich Heine to defend his theory of symbols and correspondences.³¹ He thereby pulled subjectivity back to the heart of the creative process, in the sense that it was there that the intimate connection between microcosm and macrocosm took place.

Now, subjectivity and a synthesis of the arts were linked right from earliest descriptions of the Symbolist approach. To return to Vanor, in 1889 he defined the creative process as stemming from a double movement of abstraction: first, the perception of tangible form intuitively and intellectually rises to the level of the abstract principle from which it derives, and then, taking this general idea as a point of departure, gives it a new, artistic form distinct from its natural form. “The task of a Symbolist poet might be . . . to discover the idea through its figured representation; to grasp the relationships between the world’s visible, perceptible, tangible things and the intelligible essence of which they partake; to go from effects to cause, from images to prototypes, from phenomena and appearances to mysterious meanings; and, reciprocally, to present a thing in its exterior qualities, to garb the idea in a figurative meaning, and express truths through images and analogies.”³² In the end, this was merely a reformulation of Baudelaire’s subjective aesthetics, the theater of sensorial interrelations inherent in mankind’s timeless nature: art is simply an interpretation of the symbolic fabric formed by the world. When Baudelaire described the feelings that Wagner’s music produced in him, the notion of synaesthesia was everywhere present, just as it was in Huysmans’s later “paraphrase” of the overture to *Tannhauser*.³³ In Baudelaire’s writings, the idea of correspondences is constantly located near that of ecstasy, the final context for the unveiling of appearances, the revelation that Symbolism would invoke. Simultaneously culmination and annihilation, an “ecstasy made of sensuality and knowledge”³⁴

existed in a paradoxical equilibrium, a saturation of all the senses and a revelation through which the world suddenly loses its opacity, showing itself as symbol. In Baudelaire's day, ecstasy was still primarily associated with religious mysticism, and this probably represents one of the keys to the interconnection of beauty and religion in Baudelaire's aesthetics. Symbolism, however, emerged at the time that this term became associated with psychological pathology, first through Charcot and later Pierre Janet, referring to states of hysteria that had mystical aspects. Even when secularized, the static vibration of ecstasy would nevertheless retain its symbolic import, through the equivalence it allegedly triggered between the various sensory spheres. The mystery of the ecstatic state, as often depicted by the Symbolists, therefore remained intact.

Music constituted the privileged path for a revelation in which sensory enthrallment opened the way to a new form of knowledge. It constantly appeared as a uniting factor in the quest for a total art, which from a theoretical perspective proved indissociable from parallels between artistic form (conceived in musical terms) and natural harmony, therefore



Fig. 112
Mikalojus Konstantinas
Ciurlionis
Sonata No. 6, known as
Sonata of the Stars—
Allegro, 1908

Tempera on paper, 28 1/2 × 24 1/4 in.
(72.2 × 61.4 cm)

Mikalojus Konstantinos
Ciurlionis National Art Museum,
Kaunas, Lithuania

between aesthetics, earthly world, and cosmic order. For example, the biomorphism seen in paintings by Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis (1875–1911) went hand-in-hand with his ubiquitous depictions of the cosmos. After having aspired to a career in music as a young age, Ciurlionis became an amateur painter. Starting in 1903, he worked simultaneously as composer and artist, notably exhibiting his paintings in Warsaw (1905) and Saint Petersburg (1906) where he would live in 1908–1909. In the work of Ciurlionis, who embodied the transition between Symbolism and the nonfigurative art of the twentieth century, the cosmos was associated with the musical sphere—composing a painting was viewed in terms of rhythmic structuring. His imagery effaced the distinction between space and time by employing geometric shapes that create a superimposition of distinct spaces, similar to a polyphonic composition. His *Sonata No. 6*, or *Sonata of the Stars—Allegro* (fig. 112), is typical of a cyclical structure that he would adopt on several occasions from 1907 onward, in reference to the sonata form. By attempting to transpose a musical notion of development into the visual sphere, Ciurlionis was exploring a new modality in the relationships between—and within—the various parts of a multi-structured painting. The overall structure adopted here took the form of a sonata, with each canvas corresponding to a movement: *Allegro*, *Andante*, *Scherzo*, *Finale*. Through a play of repetition and variation of abstract motifs, Ciurlionis produced a spatial version of what in music would be the recurrence of a given theme. Only two of the panels for *Sonata No. 6* were completed, but a study for the entire four-part work is known,³⁵ in which the horizontal lines of a kind of astral bridge link the various paintings. *Allegro* contrasts the rigor of geometric shapes with the curves of nebula that propagate like waves, orchestrating the space in an alternation between the static and the dynamic. The upward thrust of the composition and the use of depth culminate in an impression of complete transparency, imbuing the work with the feel of a stage set (reinforced by the flat areas of colors and the strict symmetry so often employed by Ciurlionis). This Lithuanian artist's oeuvre, elaborated like a set of variations based on ideograms (see, for example, his cycle of twelve paintings of *The Signs of the Zodiac*, Mikalojus Konstantinos Ciurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas, Lithuania), effectively manages to dissolve objective reality's forms into subjectivity's multifarious space.

“Decorative” Art

One of Symbolism’s central concerns was the production of large decorative schemes—or at least the conception of a pictorial aesthetic linked to architectural space—even though no major works were actually executed until after the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, the years between 1900 and World War I saw the production of murals by major Symbolist artists such as Redon, Hodler, Munch, and Denis. Aurier’s famous definition of Symbolism as a “decorative” art,³⁶ beyond its literal meaning of painting designed for an architectural setting, also implied conditions that applied to the formal characteristics of painting in general, including easel painting. Nevertheless, dreams of murals and frescoes stirred Symbolist minds right from the 1890s. Thus the Nabi group, in the wake of Gauguin, felt that the issue of mural painting was fundamental, notably from the standpoint of a synthesis of arts in the spirit of the Pre-Raphaelites and the Art and Crafts movement spearheaded by William Morris. Few projects would actually be executed during Symbolism’s developmental period, however. The decorative aesthetic would therefore be applied initially to easel painting, apart from a few private interiors, notably by Bonnard and Vuillard (such as Vuillard’s decoration of Dr. Vaquez’s library, 1896, now in the Musée du Petit Palais, Paris). Maurice Denis, who attacked this problem right from 1891 (decoration of a little girl’s bedroom, 1891–1892, now in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, and Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo), had already completed several decorative ensembles for friends when, in 1898, he received his first commission for a religious work for the chapel of the Collège Sainte-Croix in Le Vésinet (fig. 113). Analysis of the evolution of the project from preparatory studies to final plan reveals a simplifying trend, for Denis notably eliminated several architectural features that burdened his composition. Although the landscape in the background underscores depth, it is nevertheless organized around a rectilinear system not unlike a series of sliding panels on a stage set. As to the angels and altar boys in the foreground, their verticality echoes the columns in the chapel as well as those painted immediately behind them. When it came to the folds of drapery, Denis referred to archaic Greek sculpture and spoke of the “architectural

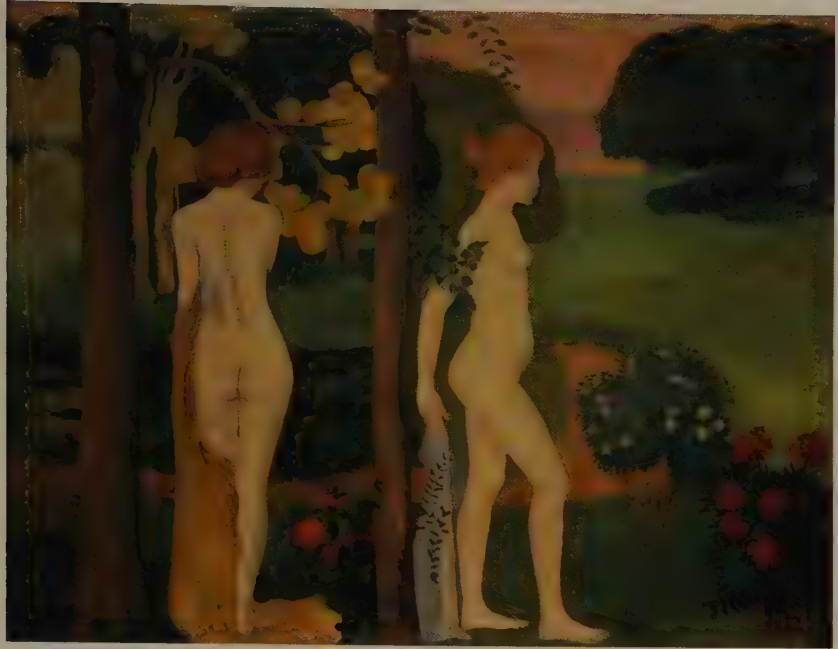
aspect” and “solid interlinking of surfaces and lines” that he had sought when doing studies from nature for these figures.³⁷ In those years the Nabis generally favored a wall-like flatness in their paintings, along with a regular division of the surface into vertical and horizontal lines that emphasized painting’s architectonic potential. For example, Aristide Maillol’s paintings of the 1890s display a rhythmic partitioning of space into a straightforward geometric diagram. Thus *Two Nudes in a Landscape* (fig. 114) establishes a counterpoint between the vertical trunks of two trees in the foreground (placed in such a way that they divide the canvas into the golden section) and the sinuous lines of the bodies and foliage handled as decorative curves. The figure seen in profile, implying movement toward the right, prompts a reading that suggests a progressive enlargement of the narrow rectangular surface of the left-hand side of canvas; a similar movement is implied by the curved hips and tilted head of the figure seen from the back. As with works by Denis, landscape and figures are handled here in terms that converge with decorative set design.

The primary model followed by these young painters was Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (fig. 115). It is hard to tell to what extent Puvis de Chavannes’s late works reflect an awareness of the role he played in the emergence of Symbolism. The execution of the first phase of his decoration



Fig. 113
Maurice Denis
*Glorification of the Cross:
Angels and Children with
Censors*, decoration for the
chapel of the Collège Sainte-
Croix, Le Vésinet, 1899

Oil on canvas, 88 1/2 × 88 1/2 in.
(2.25 × 2.25 m)
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris



of the Panthéon, in 1874–1878, represented the start of true fame for Puvis. The two last decades of the nineteenth century saw him win widespread popularity, notably due to the fact that all his decorative ensembles, even those destined for interiors in Paris, were first exhibited publicly in the annual Salon.³⁸ His work was largely disseminated through photographic reproductions, and it is probable that an artist like Ferdinand Hodler learned of Puvis through photographs prior to his own arrival in Paris. Puvis de Chavannes's easel paintings, however, were generally not appreciated by the critics, who were unhappy to find that they looked too much like mural paintings. Now, if we follow the artist's development in the latter part of his life, it is clear that he was developing a personal aesthetic designed to eliminate the boundaries between these two categories, making them converge by transferring mural tactics to easel paintings: use of a limited palette, uniform application of pale colors, and an affirmation of the flatness of the support. These features would steadily come to be seen by critics as inherent to the notion of a decorative aesthetic, which had its supporters and its detractors—Henri Escoffier charged Puvis with “pseudo-primitivism” in 1892.³⁹ The artist's tendency to handle forms in a more schematic way was clearly visible in the late paintings, prompting André Mellerio to write in 1896, “three characteristics of [the work of] Puvis de Chavannes opened a new path for innovative painters: the emendation of immediate impressions; simplification [*sic*] drawing; an ornamental tendency.”⁴⁰ *On the Heathland*

Fig. 114
Aristide Maillol
Two Nudes in a Landscape
c. 1890–1895

Oil on canvas,
38 1/4 × 48 in. (97 × 122 cm)
Musée du Petit Palais, Paris



(fig. 116), unlike some other easel paintings, was not a reduced version of a composition already employed in a decorative cycle.⁴¹ The tendency of Puvis to divide the pictorial surface into clearly defined areas of flat color and to implement a play of concordance between similar shapes is nevertheless obvious. The seascape opens in a way that echoes, even as it inverts and enlarges, the arch of the arm framing the face of the central figure (a pose also seen in the two versions of *Girls by the Sea*, 1879, Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

Bernard, Denis, and Sérusier (fig. 117) would be influenced by Puvis de Chavannes's organization of space, based on the repetition and variation of simple visual patterns, such as the partitioning of the pictorial surface by clearly defined vertical axes. This decorative approach would spread across all of Europe. Starting in the 1890s, there emerged a style of painting based on flat areas of distinctly different colors designed to create a formal equilibrium. This stylistic trend was notably detectable in early twentieth-century works by the likes of József Rippl-Rónai, Jan Preisler (1872–1918; fig. 118)—who executed major decorative projects in Bohemia—and Munch (fig. 119).

The generation that immediately followed Chavannes, however, differed in its theoretical aspirations and its mystical tendencies. These painters imbued decorative art with metaphysical considerations of an

Fig. 115
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
The Sacred Grove (detail),
1886–1887

Mural for the Grand Amphithéâtre
at the Sorbonne, Paris
Oil on canvas applied to wall,
18 ³/₄ × 85 ¹/₄ feet (5.7 × 26 m)



Fig. 116
 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
On the Heathland
(Nymphs), 1896

Oil on canvas,
 31 ³/₄ × 39 ¹/₄ in. (80.6 × 99.7 cm)
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago



Fig. 117
 Paul Sérusier
Breton Women Meeting in
the Sacred Grove,
 c. 1891–1893

Oil on canvas,
 28 × 36 ³/₄ in. (72 × 92 cm)
 Private collection

idealist kind, and some of them even attempted to find mathematical laws that governed the formal and symbolic content of a painting. This speculative quest and its putative codification meant that the very artists who sought to establish a new tradition based on Gauguin and Puvis de Chavannes ultimately went beyond these two mentors. Whereas the “neo-traditionalism” that led Denis toward his “new classical order” was largely based on a return to Italian sources (both Renaissance and pre-Renaissance), it was theosophy that inspired the science of numbers and mystical tension apparent in Sérusier’s output right from the days of Symbolism, even though he did not anthologize his theoretical and technical writings until later, with the publication of his *ABC de la peinture*. Dutch artist Jan Verkade (1868–1946), meanwhile, joined the Nabis in 1891, the year he arrived in Paris. His discussions with Denis and Sérusier pointed him toward a spiritual vision of art and he converted to Catholicism in 1892 during a stay in Brittany. The following year, after traveling through Italy, he visited a Benedictine abbey in Beuron on the upper Danube. There Father Desiderius Lenz (1832–1928) installed a monastic workshop designed to produce decorative art for Benedictine establishments. Lenz, who had studied at the academy of fine arts in Munich and then taught at the art school in Nuremberg from 1859 to 1862, perpetuated the tradition of the German artists known as the Nazarenes, who had notably revived fresco painting. Thanks to a recommendation from Peter Cornelius (1783–1867), in 1862 Lenz received a grant to travel to Rome, where he met the Nazarene Friedrich Overbeck (1789–1869). After having completed the construction and decoration of a chapel in Beuron, he became an oblate in the Benedictine order and was called to work on various sites, notably including the abbey of Monte Cassino. Becoming the head of a veritable school, right to the end of his life Lenz sought to establish the “canons” of a religious art in which architecture, frescoes, and liturgical furnishings were conceived in



Fig. 118
Jan Preisler
Youth Near a Lake, 1904

Oil on canvas, 17 ¹/₄ × 20 ³/₄ in.
(44 × 53 cm)

Západoseská Gallery, Plzeň [Pilsen],
Czech Republic



terms of an overall program. His sources included archaic Greek art and Egyptian art, as well as Byzantine art and basilicas from the early days of Christianity. Starting with perfect geometrical forms such as the circle and equilateral triangle, he employed mathematical relationships to construct a system of proportions that reflected numerical symbolism and included a canon of the human body conceived as a manifestation of divine harmony. His research was first published in German in 1898, then translated into French by Sérusier in 1905.⁴² Verkade worked alongside Lenz on several projects, notably participating in the decoration of the chapel of the abbey of Saint Gabriel, Prague, in 1895. Begun in 1891, the abbey was the first building in which the aesthetic principles elaborated at Beuron were implemented on a basilical scale and conceived as a religious *Gesamtkunstwerk* (fig. 120).⁴³ Giovanni Papini remembered Verkade as a young man who wanted “to revive the true sacred painting of the Christian era” while executing his first frescoes for the Franciscans in Fiesole in the summer of 1893.⁴⁴ Even after entering the monastery, Verkade remained in touch with the Nabis, notably exchanging letters full of aesthetic considerations with Denis and Sérusier (whom he introduced to Lenz in Beuron in 1903).

The spirit in which this overhaul of Christian art occurred—and above all the role played by references to the past—would be revealed much later in Verkade’s response to a query in which he expressed the desire to translate “Christian ideas and feelings by using forms perceived, understood, and studied in the nature that surrounds us, not by using forms poorly understood and completely unfelt because taken from the art of the past.”⁴⁵ Here the crucial thing was the process of re-creating a tradition rather than the idea of repeating models inherited from the past.

Fig. 119
Edvard Munch
Aasgaardstrand, panel from
the decorative frieze for Max
Reinhardt’s theater in Berlin,
1906–1907

Tempera on canvas,
35 ³/₄ × 62 in. (91 × 157.5 cm)
Nationalgalerie, Berlin

In this respect, the approach of Sérusier and Verkade can be distinguished from that of a Rosicrucian artist such as Armand Point who, although working to revive ancestral techniques including fresco, would remain strongly marked by references to the Italian Renaissance. Fresco, which texts of the day presented as the “original” painting technique, was perceived as representing a return to natural purity. Arguments favoring the revival of the lapsed practice of fresco were based on its decorative role and its reference to the legendary periods of the trecento and quattrocento, when the tradition of antiquity was still vigorous. René Piot (1866–1934), who was close to the Nabis and who was admitted to Gustave Moreau’s studio in the École des Beaux-Arts in 1892, learned fresco technique during travels to Italy in 1894–1895 and again in 1902. After a period of stylistic uncertainty, Piot established a link between Gauguin’s model and the Italian primitives and fresco technique; he argued that the quick decisions required by fresco’s limited execution time led to a healthy simplicity. Unlike Denis and Sérusier, however, Piot’s interest in reviving fresco was not linked to Christian sentiment. To the contrary, he cultivated pagan themes, as seen in the *Funerary Chamber* he exhibited at the Salon d’Automne in 1908 (now partially destroyed, surviving as *Requiescat*, Musée Départemental du Prieuré, Saint-Germain-en-Laye), and in *The Fragrance of Nymphs*, based on an Orphic poem⁴⁶ and painted the following year for André Gide.

Looking to yet another tradition, Hans von Marées, who had executed a fresco for a hall in the Stazione Zoologica in Naples in 1873, conducted many technical experiments in order to obtain a painterly texture similar to ancient examples. His dull, dark colors produced a saturated impression on top of which were created iridescent effects obtained through light hatching; his paintings, generally done on wood, thereby took on the appearance of works uncovered in Pompeii. These paradoxical efforts reveal an entire world of ambiguities and equivalencies between murals and easel paintings.

A melancholy paganism emerges from the static, balanced scenes painted by Marées. The resurgence of motifs of a golden age, of the garden of the Hesperides, and of the myth of peaceful humanity often occurred in the form of panels inspired by Christian art—late nineteenth-century artists produced many polyptychs, a form associated with religious artworks. In Marées’s preparatory drawings, the frame and its decoration—that perimeter often regarded as independent of the picture even though it heavily influences the visual impact—were incorporated into the composition right from the start (fig. 121). As an item of liturgical use, a polyptych conveyed the double notion of religious function and architectural context for painting. Thus the series of portraits of

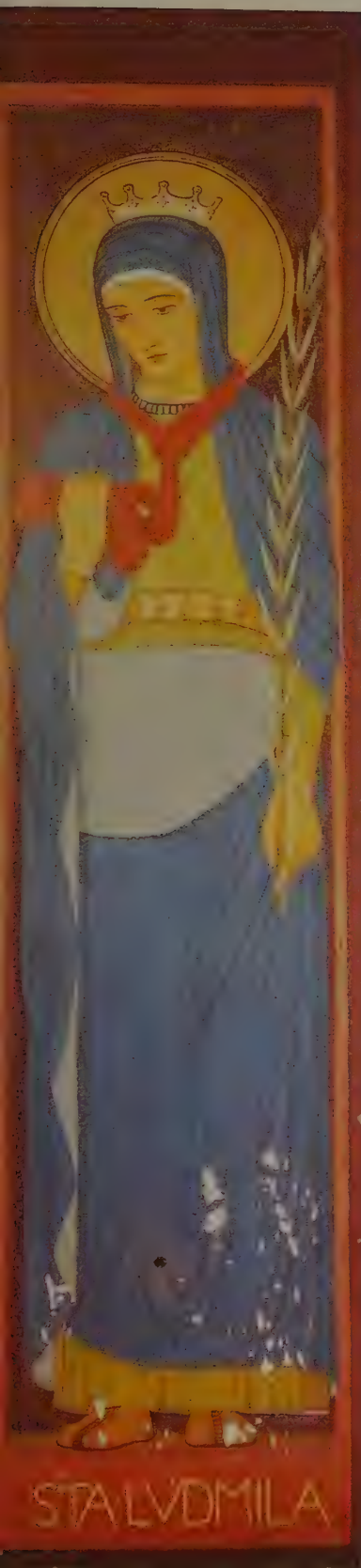


Fig. 120
Desiderius Lenz
Saint Ludmila, 1897

Fresco
Abbey of Saint Gabriel, Prague

Augustine Roulin cradling an infant, painted by van Gogh in 1889 and titled *La Berceuse*, would reflect the artist's own approach to the sacred by invoking multiple presentation. During his stay in Arles, van Gogh was preoccupied by the idea of gathering some of his paintings together on the same wall, in accordance with a decorative logic that involved polyptychs of varying configurations, as witnessed by sketches added to his letters. As early as the spring of 1888 he considered forming a triptych from some of the *Orchards in Blossom* that he had just painted. Early in the following year, he executed five portraits of Madame Roulin and thought about flanking one of them with a group of six to eight *Sunflower* paintings. In his letters to his brother, he described the portrait at the center of this cluster as a modern Madonna; there can hardly be any doubt about the simultaneously sacred and decorative impact sought by van Gogh.⁴⁷

It would nevertheless be a mistake to place excessive importance on the sacred element in the broader context of late nineteenth-century art. True enough, in so far as it was designed for public view, mural painting was related to the notion of religious art, which in Symbolist circles almost automatically implied a reference to Italian primitives, perceived as artists in an age of sincere faith when the symbolic meanings of forms were understood by all; this was the context that Maurice Denis tried to reestablish. But in the late nineteenth century there emerged other conceptions of decorative art rooted more closely to modern ideas on humanity and to a disenchantment that could no longer be remedied by putting oneself in God's hand. When Klimt borrowed themes from Greek pottery, his formal explorations offered a glimpse of a Dionysian, violent conception of antiquity, an agnostic vision of the world that reflected the private torment of a period whose anxiety surfaces beneath the sumptuous decorative schemes. Similarly, Hodler's use of the term "parallelism" as the guiding principle behind his work does not strictly relate to the realm of the sacred—even though it is not thereby limited to a purely formal register, because it implies a special vision of humanity—in so far as it addresses not only the issue of humanity confronting its fate or natural powers, but also political considerations.

Around 1884, Hodler's style began displaying a close correspondence with the metaphysical ideas with which early realism flirted, as typified by Courbet. The spareness of a painting like Hodler's *Pensive Carpenter* (1884, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva), which was still steeped in naturalism, comes across as a meditation on death. His sober compositions would be underscored by painting in which the pose of a nude or draped human figure, set against a landscape handled in flat areas of color, expresses the pantheistic idea of communion with nature (*Intimate*

Dialogue, 1884, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Berne). By the early 1890s this new vein would permanently overwhelm the remaining naturalism in Hodler's work; right from the start critics compared it that of Puvis de Chavannes. Even in his late paintings, expressive gestures in which the human body is handled in what might be called a choreographic way would remain a key element of Hodler's vocabulary (fig. 122). This development was accompanied by Hodler's adherence to Symbolism, culminating in his participation in the first Rosicrucian salon in 1892. The previous year, referring to a painting titled *Tired of Life I* (fig. 123), he had written to poet Louis Duchosal that, "by painting them in shades of white, I already placed them in the other world. I feel that color is an element heavy with meaning—this happens to be a Symbolist principle."⁴⁸ These developments coincided with Hodler's first successes outside his native Switzerland. Although he exhibited regularly in Paris, and although he had been taught French technique by his mentor, Barthélemy Menn (1815–1893), Hodler was constantly assigned to the Germanic world by the critics. Having become a member of the Berlin Sezession in 1900, it was his solo exhibition at the Vienna Sezession of 1904 that brought him true international recognition, while the only decorative commissions that he received outside Switzerland came from the University of Jena (1908–1909) and the town hall of Hanover (1912–1913). It was thus only at a relatively late date that Hodler could turn to mural painting on a monumental scale. Not until 1896 (for the Swiss national exhibition in Geneva) and especially 1900 (his polemical decoration of the armor hall in the national museum in Zurich) did he receive major commissions for such work. Earlier works—lesser, if by no means negligible—nevertheless reveal Hodler's consistent, long-term interest in murals. In 1881, alongside several other artists under the supervision of Édouard Castres (1838–1902), he had helped to paint a military panorama that not only constituted his first contact with art on a monumental scale but may also have had a more important impact on his future than might initially appear. Similarly, a decorative scheme executed in 1886–1887 for a tavern

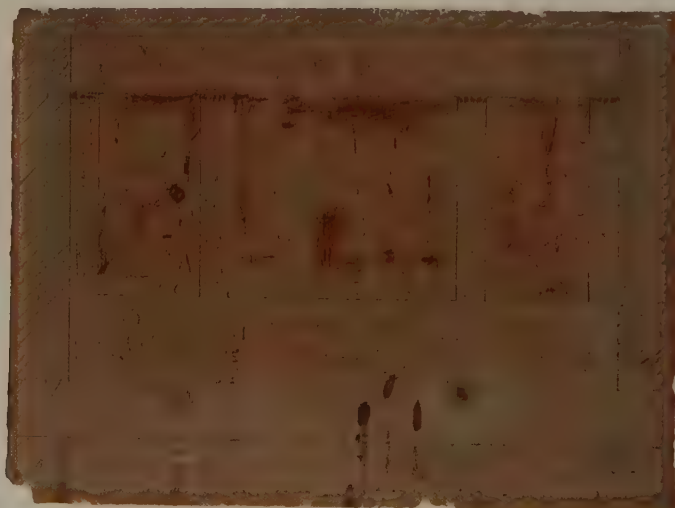


Fig. 121
Hans von Marées
Study for *The Hesperides II*,
1884–1885

Red and white chalk on paper,
17 1/2 × 23 in. (44.5 × 58.5 cm)
Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf

in Geneva but now dispersed (private collections and the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva) already displayed his tendency to group figures in parallel, incorporating them into a joint movement, as would later be seen in the paintings of his mature period.

In the early 1890s Hodler began elaborating a theoretical justification of the new direction his painting had taken. The term "parallelism," which he used to describe the principle behind his conceptions, was taken up during his lifetime by critics who only added to the confusion. It remains a concept that is relatively hard to pin down because it combines political and ethical considerations with visual ones, and has sometimes been described as an expression of democratic equality. Hodler's parallelism was a theory of Symbolist form and a method of visual construction based on the repetition and variation of similar motifs. He assigned a special meaning to this way of structuring space—the repetition of human figures in the same pose allegedly expressed the concerns of a group or of humanity as a whole. He thereby set the idea of universality against that of individualism. A quest for symmetry, balance, and simplified forms can be seen in his landscapes as well as his large compositions with figures. His palette reinforces the two-dimensionality of space, while any diagonals that might suggest depth are excluded. The horizon—often



Fig. 122
Ferdinand Hodler
Song of Remoteness, 1906

Oil on canvas,
55 × 47 1/4 in. (1.4 × 1.2 m)
Kunstmuseum, Sankt Gallen



curvilinear—leaves a narrow fringe of sky at the top of the painting. The figures are arranged evenly, in a frieze or along the curve of an apse. Péladan felt that Hodler's vertically structured compositions of figures reflected the influence of Burne-Jones, and suggested that his work was founded on a deep-seated contradiction between monumental balance and dramatic expressiveness.⁴⁹

Hodler would progressively imbue his figures with Michelangelo-like movement and an expressive line inspired by Dürer and Holbein. The emotional direction taken by his art and the vague angst provoked by certain paintings (*Night*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Berne) place him outside the Arcadian mood that ran through French painting from Corot to the early twentieth century. Symbolist writer and critic Mathias Morhardt explained Hodler's parallelism by invoking the notion of drama, thereby seeing unity where Péladan found only dichotomy. Morhardt wrote, "Whether he turns to nature, history, or the events of everyday life for the subjects of his paintings, Ferdinand Hodler is always motivated by the principle without which they would all remain lifeless—drama. Now, what is drama if not the clash of similar elements, opposing one against the other? Hodler calls this parallelism."⁵⁰ According to Hodler, parallelism referred to the principle of repetition, analogy, and contrast governing the natural order. He thus evoked the lateral symmetry of the human body, the bundle of parallel lines traced by tree trunks in a forest, the position of crowds attending a religious service or listening to

Fig. 123
Ferdinand Hodler
Tired of Life I, 1892

Oil on canvas, 59 × 1155 in.
(1.5 × 2.95 m)

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,
Neue Pinakothek, Munich

a speaker.⁵¹ Consequently, formal abstraction is tightly linked here to the symbolic potential of that abstraction. Once again we find a theoretical system whose modern source was Humbert de Superville, a system in which all pictorial practice participates in the figurative order as a metaphor for divine perfection, a perfection that should be reflected in each of its elements. Typically, this authentically Symbolist conception was soon swept aside by early formalist analyses, which probably originated with an essay by Alexandre Mairé that traced a direct line from Hodler all the way back to antiquity via Roman frescoes and Greek vases.⁵² Later, in a book that tried to highlight analogies between avant-garde movements and prehistoric art, Wilhelm Paulcke—invoking Heinrich Wölfflin—also posited a relationship between Hodler’s parallelism and children’s drawings or stone-age rock art; he thereby associated the tendency to repeat the same motif with primal expressions of the artistic urge.⁵³ This interpretation ripped the art from the context in which it was created, where the specifically decorative function of an artwork was meaningless without its symbolic significance.

Just as it subtended Hodler’s oeuvre, the question of monumental decorative schemes was crucial to Gustav Klimt, right from his early apprenticeship days. At the art school in Vienna Klimt studied under Ferdinand Laufberger (1828–1881), who notably produced the cartoon for the mosaic on the antique-style Minerva fountain next to the school itself. Klimt then became one of the many assistants to Hans Makart (1840–1884), before going on to form a trio of painters with his brother Ernst (1864–1892) and Franz Matsch (1861–1942). The team collaborated on several commissions, including staircases in Vienna’s Burgtheater (1886–1888) and Kunsthistorisches Museum (1891), the latter having been left unfinished by Makart at his death, with ceilings executed by Mihaly Munkacsy (1844–1900). In 1897 the Vienna Sezession was founded,



Fig. 124
Ferdinand Hodler
*Rhythm of Forms in
Landscape (Lake Geneva)*,
1906

Oil on canvas, 19 × 25 1/4 in.
(48 × 64 cm)
Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau,
Switzerland



electing Klimt as its first president; at that time he had not yet produced any works that heralded the later development of his style. It was only the following year, with his *Portrait of Sonja Knips* (1898, Österreichische Galerie, Vienna) and especially *Pallas Athena* (1898, Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna) that Klimt's use of flat decorative forms triggered the turning point that enabled him to abandon the historicism of his early career. Henceforth the leader of the *Sezession* movement, Klimt emerged as the most original decorative artist of his day, notably through the three major commissions of his career: a lecture hall at the University of Vienna (1899–1907, destroyed), the *Beethoven Frieze* for a side room of the *Sezession* pavilion (1902; fig. 125), and a mosaic for the dining room of the Stoclet Palace in Brussels (1905–1909), the latter two being the only examples in which his own painting was not closely connected to the work of other artists.

Fig. 125
Gustav Klimt
Beethoven Frieze (detail),
1902

Casein, gold, and various materials
on plaster and canvas
Sezession Hall, Vienna



In the 1890s, Klimt's style steadily moved away from the influence of the international Symbolism that derived from the Pre-Raphaelites and Khnopff, evolving toward a more linear aesthetic. The flying putti in the *Beethoven Frieze* are more evocative of Toorop and Thorn Prikker. The frieze already displays a conception of mural decoration that closely echoes the volumes of the architecture, the most significant example of which would be the Stoclet Palace. Initially designed to be temporary, the frieze was part of a set of paintings done for the fourteenth Sezession exhibition, flanking Max Klinger's polychrome statue of Beethoven on a throne (1902, Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig). Without employing a direct quotation from the traditional decorative repertoire, the reference to antiquity was obvious in the temple erected to the modern genius of music, as confirmed not only by architect Josef Hoffmann's ceremonial simplicity but also by the materials Klinger employed for his monumental sculpture: marble of various colors, bronze, ivory, mosaics,

gold, and so on. Klimt devised his accompanying decoration as a paraphrase of Schiller's "Ode to Joy," with which Beethoven's Ninth Symphony concludes. Conceived as a series of sinuous forms, like an ornament continuously turning around the room it caps, Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze* employed composite materials. Two coats of plaster applied to a support of wood and wire formed a chalky *intonaco* layer, most of it left bare. The parts that were actually painted, handled entirely in flat areas of color or gold, were studded with colored glass gems, pieces of mirror, buttons, and carpet tacks. The ambivalence of this surface, sometimes painted, sometimes etched or molded—thereby setting smooth patches against rough, shiny against dull—was unified through the handling of linear forms and ornamental drawing. The overall composition, orchestrated by a succession of solids and voids, groups the figures into compact clusters whose arrangement is irregular in appearance only, because in fact it closely corresponds to the architectural volumes.

A paradoxical organization of space was also typical of Klimt's landscapes. They arose from a complete symbiosis between the observation of reality and a decorative construction born of the artist's mural-painting experience; there was nothing else like them in their day. Klimt came to landscape relatively late—the first major examples date precisely from the stylistic watershed of 1898 and display a progressive waning of Khnopff's influence. Few painted studies for Klimt's landscapes survive, although it is still usually possible to identify the actual sites he depicted. However, we know that when he went for walks he usually carried an ivory plaque pierced with a rectangular hole through which he could look; although some of his paintings may have been begun outdoors, they subsequently underwent a long elaboration in the artist's studio. Klimt's practically undeviating choice of a square format as opposed to a panoramic view of nature favored a concentration of the gaze toward the interior of the composition, and simultaneously underscored the decorative artifice. The horizon, often placed very high or very low, creates a destabilizing effect that contrasts with the serenity of nature (fig. 126). In later landscapes, the sky sometimes disappears completely beneath an ornamental blanketing of the surface, geometrically divided into zones handled in a uniform way. In general, the notion of decoration pervaded Klimt's painting, and from 1898 his easel paintings developed pictorial equivalents of the diverse materials used in murals. The two layers of visual readings—one ornamental and one figurative, one decorative and one anatomical (which, despite its stylization, displays extreme realism and intense expressiveness)—never really interpenetrate but rather tend to slide over one another, thereby culminating in a fundamental ambiguity of imagery and a deliberate imbalance in density. Here the construction

of space is based on the fragmentation of pictorial unity, in a subversion directed at both the traditional cohesion of forms and the imagery itself; in vain would we seek in Klimt's painting of this period a provocation similar to his depiction of evil powers in the form of the huge, toothless orangutan seen in the *Beethoven Frieze*. In Klimt's oeuvre, this clash between graphic elegance and horror, between linear abstraction and the description of biological facts—from pregnancy to the decomposition of the body in its various phases—conveys much more than the Art Nouveau repertoire sometimes attributed to it. By introducing decorative elements into painting, it sabotaged the notion of homogeneity that underpinned the standard way of grasping artworks.



Fig. 126
Gustav Klimt
Attersee I, 1900

Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 × 31 1/2 in.
(80.2 × 80.2 cm)

Leopold Museum-Privatstiftung,
Vienna

Moment and Duration

At an early date, Gustave Moreau felt a desire to exhibit his work as an ensemble. In 1862, the year his father died, he wrote in the margin of a drawing, "I'm thinking of my death and the fate of my poor little works, all these compositions that I take pains to assemble; divided, they die, but taken together they offer some idea of what I was as an artist, of the world in which I liked to dream."⁵⁴ According to an account by Péladan, who visited Moreau in 1885, this tendency remained strong even after the artist's progressive withdrawal from the art scene. "I want," Moreau told him, "to accumulate evocative ideas in my works in such a way as the owner of a single work will find renewed stimulation; and my dream would be to create an iconostasis rather than mere paintings. Every year I add additional details, as the Idea comes to me, to two hundred works that will be posthumous, because I want my art to appear all of a sudden, entire, sometime after my death."⁵⁵ The juxtaposition of these two quotations reveals the ground that had been covered in twenty years, from the idea that seeing things together sheds light on the artist's intentions to the idea of a set of paintings seen as a totality, each part of that set testifying, in turn, for them all.

The founding of the Musée Gustave Moreau, to which the artist devoted the final years of his life, was designed to fulfill that goal; it called for major renovations to the town house in which he had lived since 1853. Work was begun three years before his death and required a great deal of energy. Thus there can be no doubt that certain paintings such as *The Argonauts* (1891–1897, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris), begun sometime earlier, were redone on a larger scale to suit the dimensions of the new rooms. Moreau himself drew up the plan for displaying his work, based on a logic that simultaneously offered a view of his concerns in terms of subject matter and revealed, on the technical level, a progression leading from sketch and drawing to painting. He thereby proceeded to orchestrate the public's vision of his private world of work—he designed a double system of presentation, in fact, in which some of the rooms housed the oeuvre itself while others were specially allocated to biographical items and a reminder of the original function of the building

as a place of work and residence. Moreau subsequently lived for several years on the site of his posthumous commemoration, while the staging of his entire oeuvre was being completed—in a space that literally represented, so to speak, an extension of his body and mind. We know how reluctant he was to stop working on his canvases; the state of the large studio as Georges Desvallières discovered it shortly after Moreau's death revealed “hundreds” of easels holding paintings that he reworked every day. Did he consider the easels permanent and the process unending? The most probable hypothesis is yes.⁵⁶

Yet it is obvious that Moreau was not interested in a painterly effect of *non finito*. On the contrary, his writings testify to his respect for academic tradition in which a painting should be undertaken, right from the initial stages, with a view toward a completed state that notably included a certain illusionist elaboration. This makes the attitude described above all the more significant: Moreau took care to frame his so-called “abstract” studies (fig. 127) so that they could be stored in cabinets specially

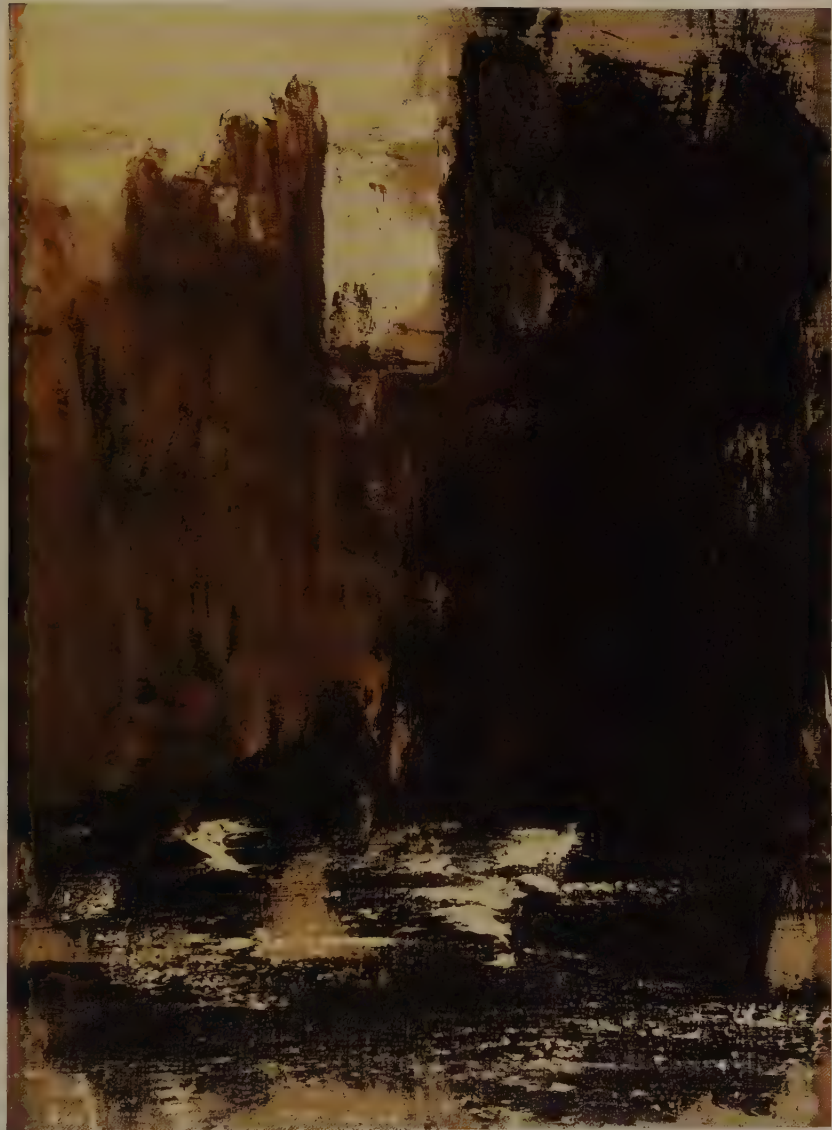


Fig. 127
Gustave Moreau
Sketch

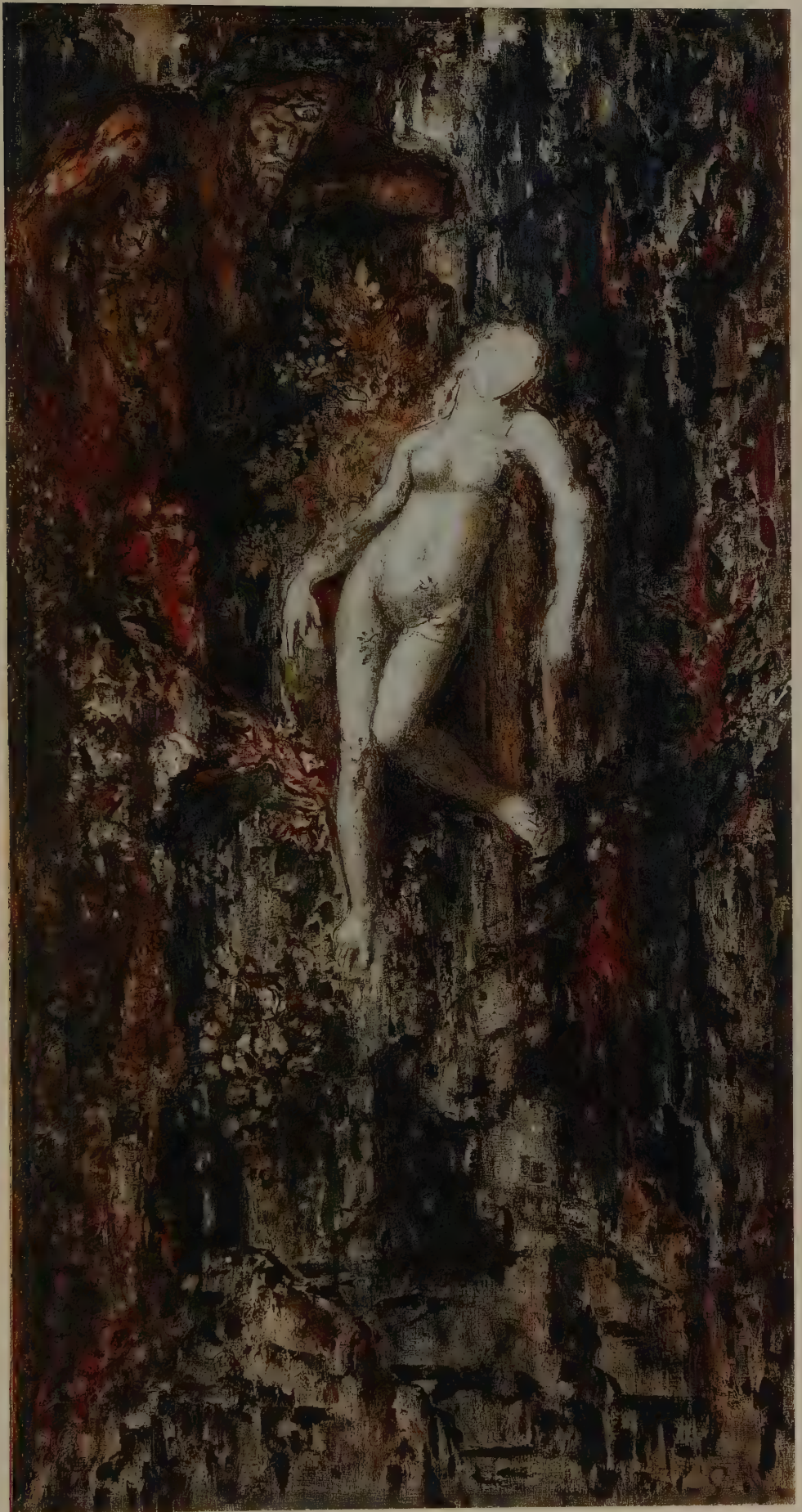
Oil on canvas, 10 × 12 1/2 in.
(25 × 32 cm)
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

designed to present small-scale works. These sketches corresponded to a preliminary stage of work, during which a simple juxtaposition of brushstrokes or areas of color created a spatial image, a background usually evoking a landscape, exploited as the starting point for certain compositions. Moreau fully intended that the beholder perceive these sketches as displaying technical versatility and the incorporation of chance into his creative approach. In a similar vein, the large version of *Galatea* (fig. 128), although obviously unfinished, still received the artist's monogram; it was one of the paintings begun at a late date for the future museum. The artist probably intended this loose sketch as a replacement for an earlier version, exhibited at the Salon of 1880 and then sold (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Despite his broad brushwork, Moreau defined space in a coherent way—the rock on which Galatea sits was handled by leaving the canvas blank, allowing it to show between strokes of flamboyant colors that suggest maritime flora and concretions. The difference in scale between Galatea's pale body, hanging in space, and the face of Polyphemus, set in a corner, creates a vacillating, dizzying effect underscored by the tall format of the canvas. Moreau included this subject in a list, drawn up in 1893, of six paintings that he still wanted to do "at all costs," describing it as "the *Galatea* with extensive underwater development."⁵⁷ That, indeed, is what this canvas displays above all—the simultaneous development of an idea and its pictorial elaboration, before potentially over-descriptive details take over. When planning his museum, Moreau hired several assistants who were given the task of preparing his large paintings, notably by doing the perspective drawing. This increase in artistic industry went hand in hand with a demiurge-like role of the painter within the space defined by his art. The process of saturating the environment with paintings thus became a key component of Moreau's working method, as well as a factor of additional tension in an oeuvre destined for perpetual incompleteness, for imprisonment in a subjective temporality whose boundaries could no longer be measured. A non-material temporality, whose emergence can be detected in many major artists of the late nineteenth century, led Moreau to alter profoundly the academic rules for developing a painting (to which he nevertheless remained attached).

The problem was slightly different for artists of the following generations. A similar obsession with incompleteness pursued Munch in his *Frieze of Life*—the cycle was characterized by continuous reworkings as new versions replaced paintings that were sold and new compositions were steadily added to the series. The coherence of the work is here related to the immateriality of the artist's conception. The constant recommencement on which the cycle was based and its overtly autobiographical nature—even though it dealt with general human issues on a symbolic

Fig. 128
Gustave Moreau
Galatea, c. 1893–1897

Oil on canvas, 90 1/2 × 47 1/4 in.
(2.3 × 1.2 m)
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris





register—make it seem like a living organism. Nothing separates it from Munch's own life, whose vagaries it shares; there is not even any typological unity that might lend it some autonomy (fig. 129). Despite the increasingly crude handling that Munch adopted for his large compositions—typified by the drips and deliberate negligence seen in his late works—he never really adhered to the “sketchy style” that spread throughout the painting world in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the Symbolist period some of the main Impressionist artists were already adopting a painterly approach that asserted art's autonomy from objective reality as effected by the gesture of painting. From the 1890s onward, Monet's work thus elaborated a temporality more related to pictorial illusion and visual mediation by putting a temporary halt to the flow of time or by abolishing the moment through the slow reconstruction—often involving modifications—of successive moments extracted from objective appearance. In this respect, the image of Monet in London surrounded by dozens of canvases, constantly moving from one to another, is highly significant. During the nineteenth century, painting had evolved from a conception that involved codified stages in which a composition steadily assumed its ultimate scope and *finish* to another, equally lengthy, approach that sought more to reconstitute the presence of the artist rather than the immediacy of perception (that prerogative of the fleeting Impressionist period).

Fig. 129
The Frieze of Life
in Munch's studio in Ekely,
c. 1927

Photograph
Munch Museet, photographic archives,
Oslo

The artistic development of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) also testifies to this conception of an oeuvre as an evolving entity in which every newly completed sculpture was summoned to join the rest of the artist's constantly mutating output. When in 1900 Rodin finally exhibited, for the first time, the *Gates of Hell* on which he had been working intermittently for twenty years, he showed them *without* most of the figures he had been progressively adding to the piece. Meanwhile, some of the sculpted groups initially destined for the *Gates* were exhibited alongside them as autonomous works. Thus Rodin ultimately exhibited only a sketch of his overall conception of the *Gates*, namely the architectural framework and main volumes (fig. 130).⁵⁸ Here again the fragmentary nature of the work and the simultaneous exhibition of sculptures initially designed to comprise part of a predefined structure testify to the way in which the ongoing flow of creativity was challenging the notion of completion. Similarly, Rodin's working methods involved a constant process of metamorphosis based on his technique of assemblage: he built up a repertoire of forms for himself, which he could then assemble or disassemble at will,



Fig. 130
Eugène Druet
*The Gates of Hell at the
Pavillon de l'Alma*, 1900

Gelatin silver photograph,
10 1/2 x 8 in. (26.7 x 20.2 cm)
Musée Rodin, Paris

an approach used for individual figures as well as groups. His repertoire constantly grew, and the cabinets of his studio filled up with multiple series of “limbs”—hands, feet, arms, torsos, legs and small-scale heads. By combining these elements in various ways, the sculptor’s role became one of construction and deconstruction; figures of his invention could be constantly altered, enlarged, mutilated, or transformed by being dipped in plaster and arranged within compositions that successively featured them in a new light. Thus the torso in *The Hand of the Devil* came from a complete figure titled *Dawn*. Cut above waist level, it was also incorporated into *The Gates of Hell*, and was furthermore included in several other assemblages. Rodin notably combined this same torso with an antique cup from his collection and later placed it in the palm of the hand of one of the *Burghers of Calais* (fig. 131). His initial maquettes betray a certain haste: Rodin grafted outsized hands onto the body and added two little arms to the thighs that give his creature’s feet the appearance of stumps.⁵⁹ Rodin’s systematic recourse to this creative technique allocated an important role to the assistant charged with producing the final version based on a small-scale maquette (fig. 132). Although the artist probably monitored things closely, completion became a delegated task, indeed an interpretative act of unusual scope for the day.

Charles Morice described Rodin’s own style of incompleteness in the following terms: “Here we have the only true meaning (if there is one, in art) of the verb ‘to finish.’ It means to merge with life, which never begins and never ends, which is in perpetual development.”⁶⁰ The process of assemblage was no longer visible in the sculptures Rodin exhibited, however. He made a point of unifying the forms. His volumes would acquire such natural fluidity during this phase that critics would compare his sculpture to painting, invoking a triumvirate of Carrière, Rodin, and

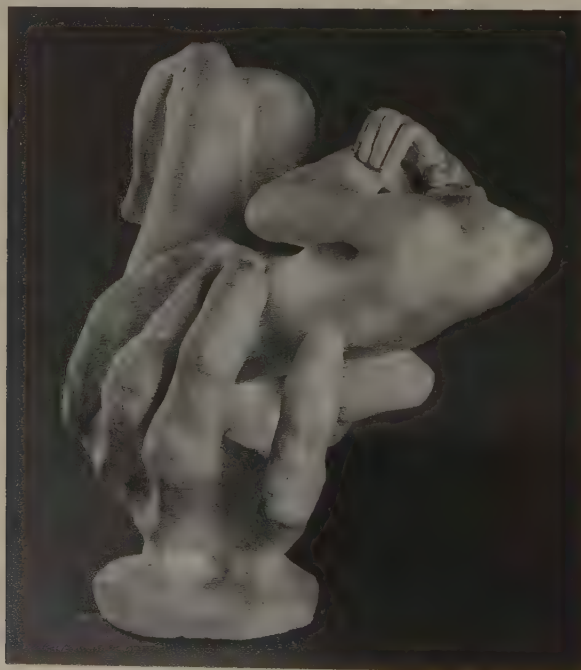


Fig. 131
Auguste Rodin
Maquette for *The Hand
of the Devil*

Plaster, 9 1/4 × 15 1/4 × 13 1/4 in.
(23.8 × 39 × 33.5 cm)
Musée Rodin, Meudon

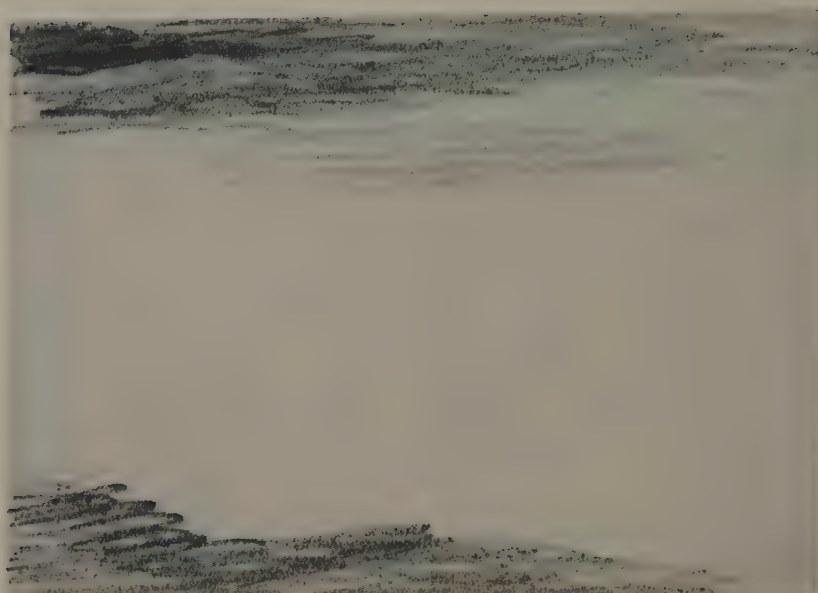
Medardo Rosso (1858–1928), who all broke down the barriers between painting and sculpture. Indeed, the three men admired one another—Carrière and Rodin had probably met as early as 1882, while Rosso abandoned his native Milan for Paris in 1889, having already exhibited there.⁶¹ Rodin and Carrière were very close, as witnessed by startling formal and thematic similarities. Carrière's oeuvre comes across as a steady progression toward the elimination of appearances. As Georges-Albert Aurier rhetorically asked, when discussing Carrière, "Of what import is the outer carapace of beings and things, even if dazzling? Of what import the buttons on gowns and the warts on skin, the magical settings, the pointless props, the silly, facile tricks of trompe l'oeil and picturesqueness?"⁶² Beyond this forthright rejection of descriptive trivia—which was also true of several other artists—Aurier perceived in Carrière's work a suggestion of the flow of time, a significant contrast to everything in art that stemmed from a snapshot-like record of life. "Is the current impression worth recording," he went on to ask, "since scarcely does it have time to exist than it flows into the gulf of memory?"⁶³ Carrière raised the question of the temporal status of his images through evanescent lines and fleeting colors that suggested an erosion of the overly salient aspects of immediate sensations.

It was poet and theorist Tancred de Visan who made the link between the work of Rodin and Carrière and the philosophy of Henri Bergson, although it should be noted that this was an a posteriori opinion. Bergson's *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of*



Fig. 132
Auguste Rodin
The Hand of the Devil, 1903

Marble, 15 × 25 1/4 × 20 3/4 in.
(38 × 64.3 × 53 cm)
Musée Rodin, Paris



Consciousness was published in 1889, when Carrière's shift toward monochrome was already well under way. Furthermore, Bergson's book was not easy going, and, despite their popularity, it obviously took a while for his ideas to filter down from philosophical and academic circles to a wider audience. We are thus led to explain this convergence in terms of the rather unsatisfactory concept of *Zeitgeist*, which has also been invoked to make the connection between Bergson and Cézanne.⁶⁴ There are nevertheless numerous accounts testifying to the influence of Bergson and his concept of subjective time on art in the early twentieth century. Even Julien Benda, when criticizing Bergsonian ideas, acknowledged the key role played by the notion of "vital impulse" in what he called the "cult of indistinctness" and the rejection of clarity in art.⁶⁵

But Aurier, being a critic, belonged to the enlightened circles that would have been aware of Bergson's *Time and Free Will* soon after publication. The relationship he established between the absence of precision typical of Carrière's style and the elaboration of a subjective temporality in which duration is contrasted to the instantaneous might therefore reflect a Bergsonian trend. Carrière was thus seen as painting not an image of reality, but the appearance or disappearance of this image on consciousness, within a subjective time frame. Similarly, the pencil strokes in certain drawings by Rosso (fig. 133) tend to efface rather than depict a landscape, leaving little more than a trace of mental activity on the surface of the paper. Here, time is neither a given instant nor the cumulative representation of various moments that comprise a duration, as depicted at the end of the century under the influence of photography.

Fig. 133
Medardo Rosso
Landscape, c. 1912

Pencil, 4 1/2 x 8 in.
(11 x 21 cm)

Museo Rosso, Barzio

Fig. 134
Medardo Rosso
Ecce Puer or *Impression of a Child*, 1906

Bronze, 26 x 14 1/2 x 10 3/4 in.
(66 x 37 x 27 cm)

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Fig. 135
Medardo Rosso
The Concierge, 1883–1884

Wax on plaster core,
14 3/4 x 12 3/4 x 7 in.
(37.5 x 32.5 x 18 cm);
mottled glass "cage,"
20 x 18 1/2 x 15 1/4 in.
(50.8 x 47.3 x 39 cm)
Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart



Morice employed similar terms when discussing Carrière, Rodin, and Rosso, referring to a notion of a movement in which the artist's gesture intuitively conveys a vital, universal principle, a flow in which created forms naturally inscribe themselves.⁶⁶ When Rosso declared that he wanted to "make [people] forget the material,"⁶⁷ he was implying a method based on at least two propositions: a refusal to handle the volumes of the human body in a spirit of physical analogy, and an attentiveness to effects of light that suggested a convergence between the visual qualities of a sculptural patina and those of a layer of paint. Louis Vauxcelles, who also stressed the connection between Carrière and Rosso, recalled the extreme care Rosso put into the patina on his sculptures (fig. 134).⁶⁸ In this respect, the softness of wax could retain clear traces of the sculptor's work without, in Rosso's case, leaving the activity of modeling discernible. Its transparency confers a lack of precision on volumes that reflects a quest for a fusion of form and space. "[...] nothing in sculpture, or in painting, can be taken separately," declared Rosso,



Fig. 136
Eugène Carrière
Maternal Kiss, 1898

Oil on canvas, 39 × 29 1/4 in.
(99 × 74 cm)
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau



“everything depends on the ambiance of the subject.”⁶⁹ This attention to surface rejected sculpture’s historic status and effectively drew it closer to immateriality, since it resulted in a back-and-forth play between two-dimensional and three-dimensional aspects, not unlike the way Carrière’s drawings and paintings evoke sculpture through their simple modeling and rejection of color. Rosso further encouraged indeterminacy by installing his wax sculptures behind a mottled glass partition that he himself called a “cage.” The veracity of the tangible world thus seems to fade away layer by layer (*The Concierge*, 1883–1884, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart; fig. 135). Some of Rodin’s sculpted groups (*The Wave*, c. 1898, Musée Rodin, Paris) include large masses of material handled in an abstract way, unifying the figures that emerge from it. Carrière arrayed his figures in a linear network that reduces them to primal forms (fig. 136). Munch, meanwhile, employed a similar manner of grouping several figures together, sometimes enclosing them in a shared outline that underscores the intensity of their psychological relationship and suggests a mutual mental state that deprives them of their individuality (fig. 137).

The can be no doubt that all these artists refused to view humanity within a rigid temporality. Even when it came to portraits, Carrière often handled the face as a fleeting apparition, so that features as robust as Rodin’s were transmuted into a kind of floating specter, the head detached from the body (*Portrait of Rodin*, 1896, Musée Rodin, Paris).

Fig. 137
Edvard Munch
Scene from Ibsen’s Ghosts,
1906

Oil on panel, 18 ³/₄ × 26 ³/₄ in.
(47.5 × 68 cm)
Munch Museet, Oslo

In the final two decades of the nineteenth century several artists would display a tendency toward soft, blurred images, such as the Dutch painter Matthijs Maris (1839–1917), who was highly esteemed by the Symbolists in the Netherlands. Residing in London, and initially influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, in the late 1880s Maris adopted an evanescent style in which ghostly figures emerged from gray monochromes, aloof from any sense of time or the material world (fig. 138). In a lecture given in 1901 at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, Carrière explained what he thought were the key aspects of this trend toward the non-corporeal, from which it emerged that the trend betrayed a desire to record the



Fig. 138
Matthijs Maris
The King's Children, c. 1890

Oil on canvas, 37 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
(94.5 × 65 cm)
Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden



fusion that unified diverse aspects of nature. The artist's mission, according to Carrière, involved interpreting forms in a way that revealed the vital principles governing them. The connection he posited between the animal, mineral, and vegetable worlds was one that the human imagination was able to perceive. "A total synthesis of the earth in a single creature is visible in every skeleton, a complete expression of true beauty," he declared.⁷⁰ Carrière argued that artistic creativity thereby converged with natural rhythms. The connection he made between a form and the flowing gesture that sketched the form reflected a universal principal of interdependence between the different tangible forms, art being the quest for a unique poetic expression of the cosmos perceived in its totality, an expression of its permanence beyond fleeting appearances glimpsed for a brief moment.

Fig. 139
Eugène Carrière
Skeleton, c. 1898–1901

Pencil, 13 ³/₄ × 8 ¹/₂ in.
(35 × 21.9 cm)

Musée d'Orsay Collection,
Département of Prints and Drawings,
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Myth and History

Although Symbolism undeniably had what might be called “preferred subject matter,” it would nevertheless be difficult to draw clear borders around imagery specific to the movement. To put it more precisely, trying to define Symbolism according to a set of themes would be a hazardous enterprise, and any conclusions that might be drawn would be necessarily very limited. In most cases, assigning a given work to the Symbolist trend must be based less on the subject matter itself than on the special light in which the artist cast his or her subject. A work’s capacity to create a particular ambiance from a subject, to generate ideas parallel to the theme, is more important than imagery itself, often linked to a broader context (except for the few artists who cultivated highly personal imagery that was detached from the major trends of the day, such as Redon).

Symbolism’s thrust partly rested on the revival of literary subject-matter in the visual arts. Such subjects had fallen into relative neglect after Delacroix, because they suffered from the notion—promoted by the realist trends of the mid-nineteenth century—that paintings should have a contemporaneous feel. The new symbiosis between art and literature, similar to the one that typified the Romantic period, led to a new focus on subject matter. The resurgence of mythology that occurred just then deserves special attention, since it revealed a profound shift in the ideas that sparked a certain soul-searching within Western civilization, even as philosopher Eduard von Hartmann was promoting the notion of a broad “human unconscious.” Symbolism brought to mythological subjects, which had been sidelined by the Romantics, an approach that minimized their strictly narrative aspect in favor of a vision that brought underlying aspects to light. As poetic playwright Alfred Poizat noted when recalling the Symbolist period, “We did not change the basic elements of myths; their roots went too deep in us, were too much a part of our inner lives. They were no longer Greek

myths, they were our own; they were no longer part of Greek legend, but of the legend of our own souls, taking place in our own souls' atmosphere and landscape... Everything occurred in the present. The tales were the same, but these same stories were experienced through a special sensibility, in the land of our imagination, back in the days when our inner world dawned, within cosmogonies whose meaning was personal to us, linked to our entire philosophy."¹ Schelling had already placed mythology in a context in which deciphering the tale would lead to the revelation of its underlying symbolic structure. Even before Freudian thought had been completely articulated—much less accepted—curiosity about the subconscious was growing. This late nineteenth-century curiosity looked to mythological tales for crucial support. Although James George Frazer's early work was just then offering an ethnological analysis of mythology and its role in Western society, literature nevertheless remained the channel through which mythology came to life in Symbolism, not only representing a timeless expression of philosophical and moral ideas, but also offering insight into humanity's psychic makeup.

If we look into the reasons for this reemergence, the first explanation that comes to mind is the predominance of the imagination in Symbolist art, where myths would obviously be right at home. Yet the very structure of mythological narrative also plays an essential role here. Based on a series of events that do not necessarily have a logical connection, this structure rests on a narrative system distinct from one based on cause-and-effect accounts, and therefore alien to the deductive rigor associated with positivist science. What is more, mythology contrasted with positivist history by recording a stage in human development when things were explained in symbols. It is worth recalling that during the period under discussion, positivism had not only triumphed in the physical and natural

sciences, but had also invaded history. After 1870 French historiography was profoundly influenced by the German school, which put facts and documents first. The revival of mythology therefore offered an antidote to the version of human evolution that relied solely on historical certainties; and above all, it also challenged the logic of positivist discourse. The stakes were all the more crucial in that this issue arose at a time when the question of history, posed in terms of concrete territorial control, was a conflictual one in many European countries. This opposition between myth and reality, between fictional space and historical space, therefore took on tragic overtones.

Symbolism was not descriptive. It was no more descriptive of the factual side of mythology—as academic art of the day could sometimes be—than it was of spatial realities. On the contrary, Symbolism was basically interpretative. The thematic vagueness often cultivated by Symbolist painting, then, stemmed from the gap between depicted subject and underlying theme, from the tension generated by a certain metaphorical drift.² The role of myth in Symbolism was therefore greater than one of mere “subject matter,” since it served as pivot on which all depiction of the world hinged.

Myth, History, National Territory

The importance of mythology as a Symbolist theme has often been described as symptomatic of a negative perception of contemporary society. By the time the Symbolist generation entered the picture, naturalism had long laid claim to the realm of contemporaneous expression. The Symbolists, for whom current history seemed to minimize the past, would avoid depicting a world shaped by emerging technology; more generally, they avoided alluding to modern society in any way. There were nevertheless striking exceptions to this rule. But even if an artist such as Max Klinger brought to bear a moral judgment on nineteenth-century society through a few series of engravings that could be compared to naturalist novels (*Dramas*, 1883, *A Life*, 1884), and even though he did not shirk at depicting contemporary reality, his realm remained that of an everyday—if strangely dramatic—strangeness. Furthermore, his series of prints combined imagery in the naturalist vein with purely symbolic figures. Thus *A Life* opens with an image of Eve accompanied by a quotation from the Bible and ends with an etching titled “Return to Nothingness,” in which the dead heroine’s body is returned to infinity by the hands of the demiurge. Here, once again, we encounter the issue of the relationship between naturalism and Symbolism, but this time from the standpoint of the quest for an epic grandeur that would restore late nineteenth-century mankind to a stature worthy of myth. This point of friction between Symbolism and certain forms of realist aesthetics yielded some singular works by painters who enjoyed great fame in their day. As a rule these artists were trained in the traditions of history painting and nineteenth-century realism, only to distance themselves by adopting concepts similar to allegory without, however, completely abandoning issues related to modern society.

Clearly, a mythological view of current events and an epic glorification of history were favored by the social and historic conditions experienced by countries then undergoing conflict, feeling threatened, or suffering recent reversal. With *Nec mergitur* (fig. 140), Ferdynand Ruszczyk (1870–1936) employed allegory to depict the contemporary fate of Poland: a ship on a stormy sea plunges into the darkness at full sail. The paradoxical sense of space and the dramatic coloring—blood-red

reflections on purplish waters—lend this painting an expressive power that evokes the fantastic. Epic grandeur could nevertheless be wed to social utopianism, as witnessed by the work of Belgian artist Léon Frédéric (1856–1940). The central panel of his triptych titled *One Day the People Will See the Sun Rise* (fig. 141) shows an immense wave towering over a modern crowd, in a contemporary version of the Crossing of the Red Sea. The left-hand panel, meanwhile, features three naked, bloody children scrambling through brambles in order to flee Brussels, glimpsed through a veil of smoke. The right-hand panel, titled *Toward Justice*, shows five children walking through an Edenic landscape. Early in his career Frédéric was influenced by Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884) and the English Pre-Raphaelites, and in 1878 he traveled to Italy where he became interested in the Italian primitives. A fervent Catholic, he was also concerned by the social issues that plagued Belgium under Leopold II. Indeed, Frédéric provides an example of an artist whose output was divided between, on the one hand, eminently naturalist subjects such as lower-class urban or rural life and, on the other, oneiric visions or allegories that immediately link him to Symbolism. Although he has been seen as distinct from the group called Les XX and the new trends sweeping Belgium, Frédéric had probably been invited by Octave Maus to join Les XX right from the start. Furthermore, he was invited to participate in the last exhibition held by the group, in 1893, as was Ford Madox Brown, with whom Frédéric's work displays clear similarities. The apparent precision of Frédéric's style manages to sabotage the descriptive function of naturalism, and the effect of assemblage and accumulation culminates in an ambiguity that becomes almost troubling. Excessive realism lends a dream-like impression to images that the presence of details would normally anchor to sensory experience. Acid colors whose transparency and harmonies are taken from Flemish primitives, combined with invasive draftsmanship, perturb our view of his polyptychs in which the tiniest blade of grass is handled in the same minute detail as the figures.

This overabundance of details does not serve to inform the viewer—Frédéric's style tends to hollow, rather than flesh out, reality. His polyptych on *The Ages of the Peasant* (1885–1887, Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) juxtaposes four generations of poor farmers with their sad, frozen faces turned toward the painter as toward a camera lens. This image is not a descriptive celebration of work. In *The Ages of the Worker* (fig. 142), Frédéric dots the urban landscape serving as background with perfectly identifiable buildings in Brussels that are heavy with significance: hospital, court house, prison. They are not all set in their true location in the city, however—the space is simultaneously recognizable and altered. The clothing of the workers of the title is scrupulously precise, yet this triptych could never serve as a document on the conditions

Fig. 140
Ferdynand Ruszczyk
Nec mergitur, 1904–1905

Oil on canvas, 80 1/4 × 87 in.
(204 × 221 cm)
Lithuanian Art Museum, Vilnius

of working-class Belgians of the day. Compositional arrangements derived from religious art abound in Frédéric's paintings, where the modern world is the object of unsettling visions, where both space and lighting are incoherent. The social message, tinged with Catholicism, is only one aspect of a protean oeuvre through which Frédéric addressed human problems. In his work modern life appeared in a recomposed form, riddled with religious symbolism.

A somewhat melancholy, if epic, feel characterized allusions to history in the work of Polish artist Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929), once again in paintings that combine precision with strangeness. Like Frédéric, Malczewski employed allegory, and although he hailed from a different tradition his painting was partly based on an illusionist handling of oneiric imagery. The political reality experienced by Malczewski was nevertheless significantly different, since at the time Poland was a dismembered





Fig. 141
Léon Frédéric
*One Day the People Will
See the Sun Rise.*
1890–1891

Triptych, oil on canvas. Central panel:
58 ³/₄ × 39 ¹/₄ in. (1.49 × 1 m)
side panels: 41 ³/₄ × 54 ¹/₂ in.
(1.06 × 1.39 m)
Belgian National Collection, Brussels

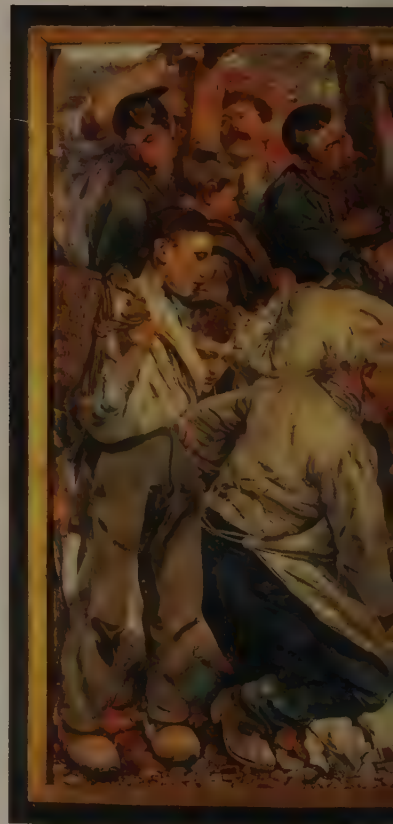


Fig. 142
Léon Frédéric
The Ages of the Worker.
1895–1897

Triptych, oil on canvas. Central panel:
64 ¹/₄ × 73 ¹/₂ in. (1.63 × 1.87 m)
side panels: 64 ¹/₄ × 37 ¹/₄ in.
(163 × 94.5 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



nation swallowed up by the major powers after the failure of its revolution of 1863. The Vistula region had been Russified, and the Polish language outlawed; meanwhile, the Prussians were persecuting Catholics. At the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow Malczewski studied under Jan Matejko (1838–1893), a widely respected history painter who dominated the art scene in Poland. Then, in 1867–1877, Malczewski completed his training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, under Henri Lehmann. In Poland, France, and Germany, the people that Malczewski frequented were intellectuals who defended the cause of Polish nationalism, and his tutor had been the writer Adolf Dygasinski, who had participated in the uprising of 1863.

In the early 1890s, Malczewski was still employing a naturalist verisimilitude to describe his country's sufferings (*Death of a Deportee in a Convoy*, 1891, Raczyński Foundation, National Museum, Poznan). From the early compositions up to his cycle on *Polonia*, begun after the start of the First World War, Malczewski's oeuvre was organized around one main theme: the fate of contemporary Poland. This theme was wedded to psychological autobiography—often handled in an allegorical way—involving eroticism, narcissism, childhood memories, and obsession with death.

On the back of *Melancholia* (fig. 143) is the following inscription: "an entire century." Although Malczewski's painting indeed covered a whole century of history, it did so in the form of a swirl of floating bodies that mingle with images stirred by memories of the past. Outside, a woman in mourning clothes opens the window that lights the studio. Her anxious gaze probably represents Poland looking toward the future. At the other end of the painting, the artist is shown seated, palette in hand, meditating in front of the canvas that he has barely begun yet from which emerge generations, from infancy to old age, that have worn themselves out in fruitless defense of their ideal. The weightlessness, employed as a metaphor for memory, is moreover employed in a second self-reflexive device: in the lower right-hand corner appear Malczewski's brushes and tubes of paints, set on a little table in a spatial ambiguity that makes it possible to see them as simultaneously belonging inside the painting and on the same plane as the room in which the viewer stands. The space of the past and the space of present thus merge, and we experience a present profoundly marked by history. We are indeed dealing with an immediate, real, and tragic history here, but what we are shown is the process of its transfiguration through the labor of an artist.

The epic translation of contemporary history could also take more hidden paths, as was then the case in Finland, where painting reflected a people seeking to assert its identity in the face of Russian domination. In 1835 Elias Lönnrot, an expert in Finnish folklore, published the first

Fig. 143
Jacek Malczewski
Melancholia, 1894

Oil on canvas, 55 × 94 1/2 in.
(1.39 × 2.40 m)
Raczyński Foundation,
Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan

version of *Kalevala*, an anthology of epic and lyric folk poetry he had compiled during his wanderings. Even before a final edition was published in 1849, Lönnrot's anthology was translated into French. In it an entire mythology based on oral tradition was codified, later playing an important role in the elaboration of Finnish nationalism. At a time when art was curbed by censorship, depictions of virgin nature assumed political significance: they symbolized a land still marked by its original roots, where nation and myth were one.

At the turn of the twentieth century this merging of Finnish myth into contemporary history yielded major artworks, notably in the oeuvre of Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931). Many naturalist painters of the day, such as Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937), seemingly used a panoramic format for landscape to represent the freedom of a gaze that could extend, unbounded, beyond the borders of the frame. But the same artists also commonly used a tall format, probably inspired by Japanese *kakemonos*, that conveyed the thrust of tall trees symbolizing the Finnish nation. Gallen-Kallela's *Broken Pine* (fig. 144) was probably a reflection of the political troubles plaguing the country in the early twentieth century, notably the major strike of autumn 1905 and the recent death of artist Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), considered the founder of the modern school of Finnish painting. Initially a naturalist, Gallen-Kallela had evolved toward an esoteric Symbolism from 1894 onward, due to the influence of writer Adolf Paul and to contact with Paris, which he had been visiting regularly for a decade. Gallen-Kallela's art conveyed not only the epic scope of the *Kalevala* anthology, but also its occult atmosphere (fig. 145). The preponderant role played by descriptions of nature





in the book, in particular the glorification of wild lands and seasonal rhythms, also seems central to Gallen-Kallela's oeuvre when viewed as a whole. In 1888 he decided that he wanted to flee the city, and he drew up his own plans for a house-cum-studio to be built in the remotest possible place. Right from his first sketches, the vernacular nature of his architectural ideas was clear; the dwelling that was finally built in Ruovesi in 1894 mingles volumes straight out of Art Nouveau with interpretations of local Karelian decorative vocabulary. Gallen-Kallela's tendency to seek a symbiosis between the closed world of creativity and the open exterior can be seen in his design for the studio (fig. 146). The large central window not only provides light, but also offers a view of the landscape and a gateway for nature to stream indoors. It extends along part of the roof, and in the center is a door that gives onto a large terrace surrounded by forest. The terrace makes it possible to go outside via a staircase in line with the window. Rigorous respect for symmetry of layout lends a kind of rustic monumentality to this part of the building, testifying to an interpenetration of microcosm and macrocosm—artistic activity is planted right in the heart of a symbolic landscape.

A return to roots, in which myth and reality allegedly merge, formed the core of Gallen-Kallela's oeuvre, as clearly seen in his decoration of the Finnish pavilion at the Universal Exposition of 1900. In this respect, he differed from Lönnrot, who had been above all a linguist who adopted a modern approach to local myths in so far as it was based more on ethnography than literature.

The Russian artist Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910) was also deeply rooted in his country's culture, although in a different fashion. First of all, his artistic output displayed stylistic links to a tradition that naturalism, by standardizing European painting, seemed to have rendered obsolete. Shortly after completing his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg, Vrubel began restoring frescoes in the church of Saint Cyril

Fig. 144
Akseli Gallen-Kallela
Broken Pine, 1906

Oil on canvas, 48 ³/₄ × 54 in.
(1.24 × 1.37 m)
Private collection

Fig. 145
Akseli Gallen-Kallela
Lemminkäinen's Mother,
1897

Distemper on canvas,
33 ¹/₂ × 46 ¹/₂ in. (85 × 118 cm)
Ateneum, Helsinki

Fig. 146
*Gallen-Kallela's studio in
Ruovesi*
Photograph



in Kiev, a task that occupied him from 1884 to 1889 and that he executed under the supervision of archaeologist and art historian Adrian Viktorovitch Prakhov. Prakhov hired Vrubel for his ability to mimic the Russo-Byzantine idiom and for his interest in archaeology. In Moscow from 1889 onward, Vrubel came into contact with educated circles that were just discovering the French Symbolist poets. Yet even before that date, he viewed his country through a prism of legendary, epic poetry. One poem by Mikhail Lermontov, "The Demon," would regularly surface in Vrubel's career between 1886, when he made his first sketch on the theme, and 1902, when he was committed to a psychiatric hospital.

Starting from Lermontov's poem, which recounts with Byron-like blackness the impossible temptation of a woman by an angelic spirit of evil, Vrubel elaborated multiple paraphrases of the subject. He echoed the metaphysical aspect of the protagonist, a figure symbolizing human fate. In an unfinished canvas called *The Demon in Flight* (fig. 147), Vrubel fragmented the figure and wrapped it in a play of geometric forms and angular drapery. Shaded by his wings, the demon's face detaches itself from the body tensed in flight, lit by a harsh light. The text on which



Fig. 147
Mikhail Vrubel
The Demon in Flight,
c. 1899

Oil on canvas, 62 1/2 × 169 1/2 in.
(1.59 × 4.31 m)

Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

the painting was based even mentioned a specific site where this event took place—the inhumanly beautiful demon soared over the mountains of the Caucasus, where Lermontov set his poem. The Caucasus has always been a land of marvels, mentioned in Persian and oriental legends, as well as in Genesis and the myth of Prometheus. For Lermontov, this landscape not only crystallized his feelings about nature, but was also the land of his disgrace—after having first visited it at the age of nine, he returned to it in 1837 when sentenced to exile for sedition after having provocatively recounted the death of Pushkin in *The Death of the Poet*. Here again, if differently, myth and landscape reflected political power and recent history: the Caucasus had only been won by Russia after a war that lasted nearly fifty years, and Lermontov himself would fight there in 1840. Vrubel of course would have been familiar with the biographical circumstances leading Lermontov to express angst and disenchantment with the world in his poetry of exile. Yet it was the poet's visionary aspect that Vrubel sought to depict. Vrubel's landscape is imaginary. Its rocky desolation conveys a profound pessimism. Here nature has lost its flesh, and the immateriality of the image reflects the symbolic nature of the tale.



Mythological Spaces

In 1903 Gabriele D'Annunzio published the first three books of *In Praise of Sky, Sea, Earth, and Heroes*, a collection of poems totaling twenty thousand lines that marked a return to classicism after a period influenced by Symbolism and Nietzsche. These praises, in the Franciscan sense of the term, drew on Greek myth and celebrated, in free verse, the beauty of the Mediterranean landscape and the Latin world. Several years earlier, in his novel *The Flame of Life*, D'Annunzio had already called for the development of modern Italian theater that could bear comparison with the Wagnerian drama.³ Back in France, a return to classical prosody by Henri de Régnier at the turn of the century, plus the earlier founding of a "Roman school" by Jean Moréas and Charles Maurras in 1891, also contributed to attempts to surpass Symbolism, or more precisely to forge its poetic principles anew in the crucible of Greco-Roman culture. This movement represented not only a reaction to the way that Symbolists had favored Nordic myth and legend for their sources, but also a celebration of Mediterranean clarity over northern mistiness. By 1896, Remy de Gourmont published an open "Letter to D'Annunzio" in which he described the "claim of a Latin Renaissance" as a "poorly made toy with which people want to amuse the public, thereby preventing it, if only for a few hours, from remaining wary of the strange feeling of the Idea tousling its hair."⁴ It was typical of a thinker of de Gourmont's stature to establish a principled opposition between the recent enthusiasm for idealism—Symbolism's battle-ax—and a culture stemming from classical heritage. Indeed, Symbolism had adopted Romanticism's anti-classicism as its own, being hostile to the classical repertoire of forms right from the start. What de Gourmont called "the culture of ideas" seemed to have permanently swept aside themes stemming from Greco-Roman culture, as though this latter culture were incapable of conveying a late nineteenth-century sensibility. The idea of a timeless landscape, a space where the fiction of the gods still survived, may have seemed anachronistic in a world where early industrialization had already threatened the notion of harmony between humankind and nature, where archaeology was adopting scientific methods that slowly destroyed, through unimpeachable discoveries, the idyllic vision of the pagan world. In 1887, in

a premonitory fashion, Jules Laforgue could mock, through a series of his own moral tales, the use that Symbolist literature would make of legends and biblical stories ranging from Lohengrin to Perseus via Salome.⁵ True enough, many of those themes had already been used by the Parnassian poets, so they were already shopworn by the time the Symbolists adopted them. Soon antiquity and myth would have to take on overtones of chaos in order to be acceptable, once Jacob Burckhardt and Arnold Böcklin had presented European culture with a picture of a violent, disorderly paganism where unconscious forces were given free rein. The anguish engendered—and constantly engendered ever since—by the modern idea of an irrevocable break between mankind and nature, with its accompanying conviction that any idyllic image must be laden with nostalgia, was clearly evoked in a passage from Strindberg’s novel, *By the Open Sea*. The author describes the coast near Dalarö, where he stayed during the summer of 1892, notably referring to a marker rising above the rocks (which he would also paint that same year). “The gleaming black diorite with the deathly white navigation mark called ‘The White Mare’ looked even more strikingly gloomy in the sunshine, which was vainly trying to bring into harmony the glaring extremes of black and white . . . This example of man’s handiwork, out here, where no man could be seen; this reminder of gallows, shipwreck, and coal; this crude contrast between the unblended colorless colors black and white of violent infertile nature, lacking organic life—for on the whole mass of rock there was no trace of moss or lichen—and this carpenter’s work, without the link of vegetation between primitive nature and human activity, seemed shocking, disturbing, and brutal.”⁶ Angst in the face of death, symbolized by a marker that resembles a skeletal thorax, shifts to the background because ultimately the author’s dread was triggered by direct contact between the natural world and a manufactured object with its brutally functional appearance. The straightforward juxtaposition of two types of matter—one testifying to the timeless natural order and the other, hard and symmetrical, artificially added by mankind—became a symbol of a world in which modernity steadily erodes the old magic. How, in this case, could people still speak of a golden age?

In an 1879 collection of engravings, *Deliverances of Sacrificial Victims Told in Ovid*, Max Klinger recast some of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: the myths of Pyramus and Thisbe, Echo and Narcissus, and Apollo and Daphne were given happy endings tinged with irony. But this was only the humorous side of a vision in which mockery generally took place against a pessimistic background. In 1886 Klinger began working on his sculpture of *Cassandra* (fig. 148), a figure in which a material allusion to archaeological artifacts takes a back seat to a powerful realism and an impression of



Fig. 148
Max Klinger
Cassandra, 1895

Marble, bronze, and amber.
H (with base): 45 in. (114 cm)
Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig

dereliction; the object itself only incidentally testifies to the fashionable enthusiasm for reconstituting polychrome sculpture, as notably seen around the same time in the work of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). A paganism imbued with Symbolist pessimism also surfaced in the music of the young Erik Satie, whose dissonant *Gymnopédies* (1888) posed as imaginary tunes from ancient Greece.⁷ Beyond a few isolated efforts, however, it was not until the turn of the century that Greco-Roman mythology would be significantly developed in European art, notably in Germany and central Europe, where Burckhardt's influence spawned a new appreciation of antiquity, tinged with a certain dread (fig. 149). In France, the reappearance of these myths in fact coincided with the end of Symbolism and the reassessment of the concept of Mediterranean culture. The insertion of pagan deities and an entire antique idiom into contemporary settings in painted works by Maurice Denis corresponded closely to what the artist



himself would call, in the early twentieth century, “a new classical order.” The changes of title that Aristide Maillol imposed on the statue known today as *The Mediterranean* (c. 1906, Oskar Reinhart Foundation, Winterthur) is symptomatic of this steady drift toward a Latin revival, because the artist successively named the figure *Woman*, then *Meditation*, then *Latin Meditation*. The plaster cast, when exhibited at the Salon d’Automne in 1905 was perceived as heralding a return to classicism, and Denis compared its sober forms to Rodin’s voluble style.⁸ It was only around 1900, when Maillol truly began devoting himself to sculpture, that his oeuvre progressively adopted the concepts of serenity and equilibrium traditionally associated with Greco-Roman culture. By way of comparison, when we focus on his output from the Symbolist period we can see that the modest amount of imagery drawn from mythology seems colored by a disturbing quality that in no way heralds the sculptor’s later development. Thus the woodcut that he executed in 1893, based on the tragic story of Hero and Leander (fig. 150), is traversed by the death-stiffened body of a woman, legs sticking into the void, whereas the corpse of Leander, tossed onto the rocks by the sea, was inspired by Gauguin’s *Nude Breton Boy* (1889, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne), with its ambiguous eroticism.

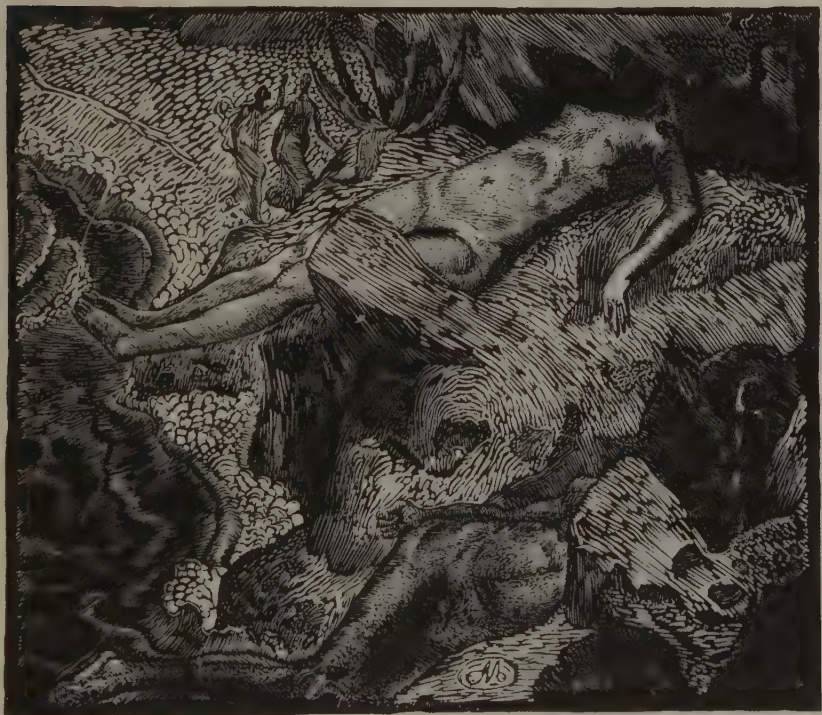
This was the period when the myth of Arcadia finally died. Even Hans Thoma, whose deliberately archaic idylls look like Romantic landscapes that mistakenly wandered into Symbolism, displayed a gravity in keeping with the pessimism of the day (fig. 151). One had to have been steeped in a family environment like the one experienced by Émile-René Ménard (1862–1930) to attempt—as Ménard would in the 1890s—to revive classical-style mythological landscapes by injecting them with the light of plein-

Fig. 149
Gustav Klimt
Pallas Athena, 1898

Oil on canvas, 30 × 30 in.
(75 × 75 cm); frame made
by Georg Klimt, the artist’s brother)
Historisches Museum
der Stadt Wien, Vienna

Fig. 150
Aristide Maillol
Hero and Leander, 1893

Woodcut, 6 3/4 × 6 in.
(17 × 15 cm)
Private collection



air technique.⁹ His eclogues, inspired by trips to Sicily (1898) and Greece (1902), with their flat colors and balanced compositions, nevertheless convey a melancholy air specific to modern disenchantment. Far from attempting to reconstitute antiquity—the temples in his paintings are invariably in ruins—Ménard's art evoked the idea of irreparable loss (fig. 152).

Symbolism brought with it a shift in cultural references, from south to north, that corresponded with its international character. Greek mythology would only survive when invested with multiple new meanings, as in D'Annunzio's writings, where it appears as a sign of the subconscious. In many respects, the forging of national identities in the nineteenth century was a reaction to the hegemony exercised by France in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. It had long been felt that the role of French culture, which had served to give Europe a certain intellectual unity, should finally give way to a more local heritage. The quest for new sources with which all levels of emerging societies could identify would pass via local languages,

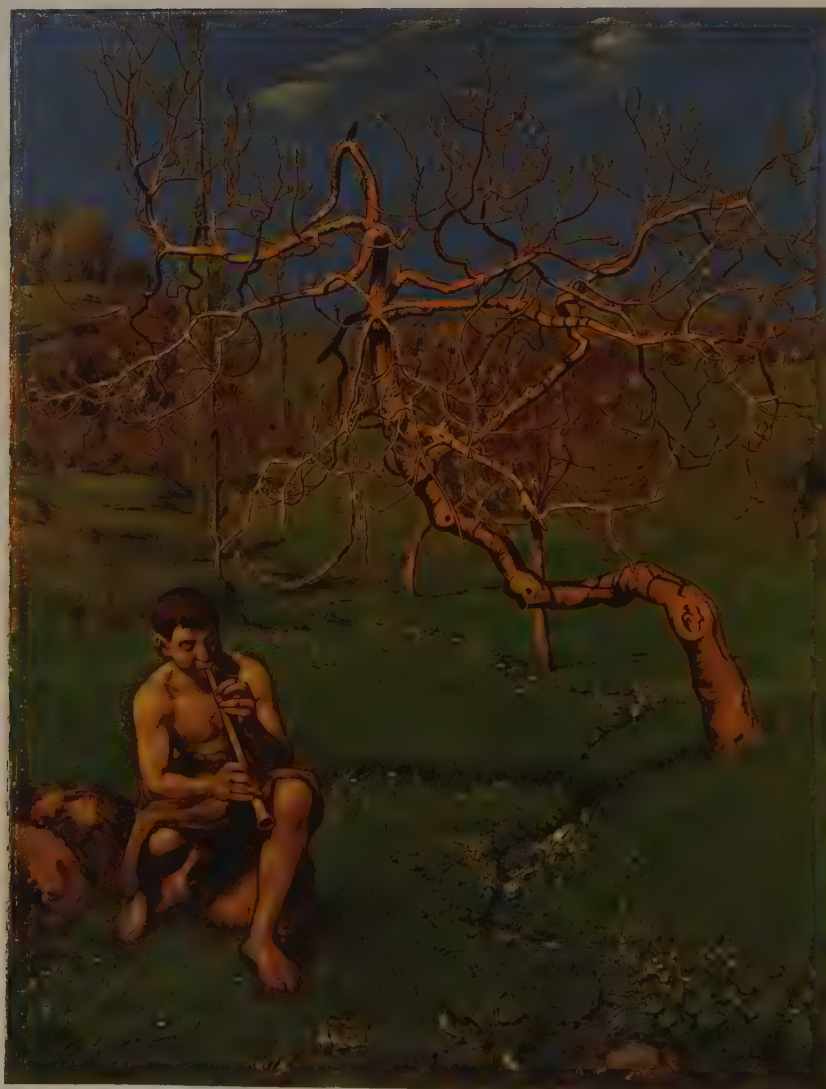


Fig. 151
Hans Thoma
Flute Player, 1901

Oil on cardboard, 35 1/2 x 29 1/4 in.
(90 x 74 cm)
Augustiner Museum,
Freiburg am Brisgau



founding myths, and veneration of great men—which sometimes meant establishing links with a history that predated the unifying role of the Roman empire. This was the period when popular traditions were ennobled through literature, when they were used in an ideological quest for pure roots. To counter Greco-Roman culture, which Europe had embraced even before the modern era, new systems were being put into place in which new mythologies were assuming a crucial role. Wagner's success with the legend of the Nibelungen must also be understood in this context—the *Ring* cycle lent dignity to a mythology that had been considered second-rank up till then. This mythology would find some of its most striking visual expression at the end of the nineteenth century, not only in the Germanic world with Hans Thoma, whose studio was visited by Cosima Wagner in 1888 and who designed costumes for Bayreuth on two occasions, but also in Belgium and France with Fantin-Latour and, later, Redon.

Fig. 152
Émile-René Ménard
Twilight, 1896

Pastel, 16 × 21 1/4 in.
(41 × 54 cm)
Château-musée, Dieppe

Landscapes

Fu come un sole immenso, senza cielo
e senza terra e senza mare, acceso
solo per sé, solo per sé sospeso
nello spazio. Bruciava e parve gelo.

[‘Twas like a huge sun with no sky,
no earth, no sea; lighting
itself alone, alone hanging
in space. Scorching yet ice-like.]

Sergio Corazzini, *L’amaro calice*, *Rime del cuore morto*, 1905¹⁰

There has been remarkably little inquiry into Symbolism’s treatment of landscape, even though it clearly turned landscape into a “theme” in the sense used here. Landscape, in fact, had been a key genre that hastened the “death” of “subject matter” in the latter half of the nineteenth century, notably through Impressionist painting. Yet Symbolism effectively converted landscape back into a thematic subject even as it stripped the genre of its descriptive function. Fictional space and real space became the site of a clash similar to the one between myth and history.

It is remarkable to note how faithfully the geographic expansion of Symbolism followed a line of economic development. In countries where technological progress came late—Italy and Spain—the movement did not emerge until the very end of the nineteenth century, when it assumed the form of intellectual speculation whose late-budding ideas sometimes blossomed into artworks that historians have a hard time fitting into established categories. Unquestionably, Symbolism arose in reaction to the modernization of society. It was needed only where a modernized society was clearly advocated or represented a real possibility; the new art either celebrated new national myths (as we have seen) or else it cultivated a space as alien as possible to the new alliance of politics and economics, which it perceived as a threat. That is why it might be said that, strictly speaking, Symbolism did not take the same form in Latin countries as in the rest of Europe.

Italy is exemplary in this respect, since it spawned a number of late versions of Symbolism in the years just prior to the Futurist movement. Between 1890 and 1895, painter Giulio Aristide Sartorio (1860–1932) made frequent stays in London, where he came under the influence of the

English Pre-Raphaelites, as did other, younger artists—notably Florentine painter Galileo Chini (1873–1956) and Adolfo De Carolis (1874–1928)—thanks to the important role played by a Roman art society called *In Arte Libertas*. Throughout this period, which lasted up to the First World War, the “Liberty” movement made Italy a crossroads of international trends ranging from Beardsley’s graphic style to recent artistic developments in Russia and central Europe. This phenomenon led to strange temporal discrepancies in terms of stylistic evolution—thus the Italian writers dubbed *crepuscolari*, or “twilight” poets, who belonged to the post-D’Annunzio generation, would mobilize their new idiom to express themes that the Symbolists were already discarding in the early twentieth century. Influenced by international Symbolism, these poets were reacting against D’Annunzio, against his sensual heroism and his taste for magnificence. Between the lavishness of D’Annunzio’s *Praises* and the emptiness conveyed by the poetry of, say, Sergio Corazzini or Guido Gozzano, there occurred a late shift—simultaneous with the Futurist destabilization—toward an aesthetics profoundly related to Symbolism: an inward-looking attitude, fascination with an ailing society as a gateway to a higher level of consciousness, and recognition of the emptiness of a Godless world. Space tended to close in on the self. In his “Rhyme of the Dead Heart,” written shortly after the publication of *Praises*, Corazzini depicted his heart as a sun in an icy, desolate landscape that was purely private and imaginary. The site where poetry could blossom was henceforth the stage of personal tragedy; landscape could flow back in, but it was a place “with no sky, no earth, no sea.” Physical territory, even when endowed with a genealogy that tied it to myth (as D’Annunzio did), generated a certain apprehension in so far as it was associated with a desire for power, a conquering boldness felt to be incompatible with the substance of poetry, which here sought to remain as aloof from myth as it was from history.

A corollary to this disenchantment was a disaffection with pictorial space as a straightforward image of the earthly world. In the 1890s, in various countries of Europe there arose new types of landscape painting in which it was clear that the artist’s main concern was to express a special mental state, accompanied by an increasingly abstract handling of forms. Symbolist landscape was primarily subjective. At the Salon des Indépendants of 1893, for example, artist and critic Alphonse Germain exhibited several canvases dubbed “an assay at psychic landscapes.”¹¹ The fin-de-siècle period also witnessed a striving for altitude, an aspiration for summits that, given the trend toward the picturesque and grandiose that emerged from Romantic mountain painters’ quest for otherworldliness, lent a new tone to the pantheism associated with this type of imagery. Mountains became a site of lofty meditation that left

behind not only down-to-earth land requiring conquest or defense but also the banal scenery of everyday life. Thus late nineteenth-century criticism, far from seeing Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899) merely as a mountain artist, would use his example to build a myth of the solitary artist detached from reality (and sometimes contrasted with Impressionist painters who had somewhat timidly chosen everyday scenes as their turf).

Later, Albert Camus claimed that “Nietzsche, after breaking with



Fig. 153
Giovanni Segantini
Evil Mothers, 1894

Oil on canvas, 47 1/2 × 88 1/2 in.
(1.2 × 2.25 m)

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Lou Salomé, went into permanent solitude, simultaneously crushed and excited at the idea of this immense oeuvre that he would have to build on his own, strolling at night in the mountains overlooking the gulf of Genoa, lighting large fires of leaves and branches and watching them burn.”¹² This image of the solitary creator, lighting fires in a nocturnal landscape viewed from on high, is one of the most admirable evocations of the Nietzschean quest for the summit. Zarathustra left his native land for a



mountain setting, not pictured but implied, whose peaks are visited a few pages later by the prophet's serpent and eagle—a place where the philosophical mind can escape mankind.¹³ An outlook that can embrace the world in its cosmic totality, reducing the universe to an aesthetic and philosophical conception, was the very one adopted by Segantini. He studied first at the Brera in Milan, and began executing plein-air painting in the region around Brianza, where he moved to in 1880. Ten years later, his fame had outgrown Italy and his work was associated with the Alpine landscapes he exhibited in Berlin, Munich, and Liverpool. Starting in 1894, he withdrew to the high Engadine, some six thousand feet in altitude, while continuing to correspond with some of the leading Italian intellectuals of the day. By this time he had become one of the most famous artists in Europe, but his life was clouded by his failure to obtain Italian citizenship—born an Austrian national in Trentino Alto Adige, he was caught by administrative quibbling between Italy, Austria, and Switzerland, where he resided. When he died, the question of his nationality had still not been resolved.

In 1897 Segantini wrote a letter to Vittorio Pica in which he described his grandiose plans for a *Panorama of Engadine* to be exhibited at the Universal Exposition of 1900; he referred to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would recreate the splendors of nature, would be “an Alpine work composed of sounds and colors, containing the various harmonies of the high mountains.”¹⁴ Some years earlier, his *Nirvana* cycle, inspired by a poem allegedly translated from Sanskrit by Luigi Illica, had marked Segantini's conversion to Symbolism even though his Divisionist technique and his vision of landscape retained their original qualities despite the new approach. In *Evil Mothers* (fig. 153), the mountains in the Maloja region were depicted quite accurately. The glorification of the purity and solitude of lofty peaks entailed an identification of the artist with his landscape, a kind of appropriation of a visual repertoire that Segantini himself had come to incarnate. The mountains are barely attached to the earth. They constitute the culminating point where mankind can gaze upon the “infinite expanse of blue,”¹⁵ and represent the aspiration for an absolute beyond human existence, for the extinction of desire—Nirvana.

Symbolist landscape oscillated between two poles: a vision of the totality of the cosmos and a total projection of the psyche. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (fig. 154) betrays a Synthetist-inspired approach in which the artist's trauma is inscribed in the landscape. The intense, throbbing expression of angst transforms local topography without, however, rendering it totally unrecognizable. The fjord and city of Christiania are perfectly discernible even though the thoroughly non-descriptive handling of this autobiographical landscape leads the beholder's gaze in a different

Fig. 154
Edvard Munch
The Scream, 1893

Oil, gouache, pastel, pencil, and
colored chalk on cardboard,
35 3/4 × 29 1/4 in. (91 × 74 cm)
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



direction. Furthermore, the vantage point chosen by Munch was the one conventionally employed for topographic depictions of the town. The artist stood at the very place where one takes a final look at the city before taking the road that heads northward. The transformation of this familiar site occurred in two separate phases, since it was in Nice on January 22, 1892 that Munch jotted in his notebook a recollection that indirectly led to *The Scream*. "I was walking with two friends—the sun was setting—I felt a wave of melancholy—Suddenly the sky lit up blood-red. / I stopped, dead weary, leaning on the balustrade—looked at the clouds glowing like blood and swords—above the dark blue fjord and the city—my friends moved off—I remained, trembling with dread—and I perceived a kind of long, endless scream cutting through the wilderness."¹⁶ The filter of memory masks not only the details of the landscape but also those of biography: the narrative account fades away in stages, and the character in the foreground, who started out as an artist leaning on a balustrade (as seen in several earlier studies), is transformed into a howling silhouette, an aural image of the merger of humanity with nature.

The cosmic unity displayed by Symbolist landscapes sometimes took the form of an identical handling of earth and sky, of foreground and background, thereby giving an identical texture to all levels of representation. This conception rejected the theatrical construction of landscape as practiced since the seventeenth century, just as it challenged the descriptive function of the landscape genre. Eliminated were the depiction of deep space, the cropping of nature via the selection of an isolated scene, and any atmospheric verisimilitude. In Klimt's oeuvre, the surface of the painting was overwhelmed by an excess of brushstrokes, marks, and patterns that abolished distinct planes by bringing them all to the surface of the canvas. The convention of deep space occasionally survived in the form of a simple indication, such as a sudden change in scale made evident through a lone tree in the background. Recalling Seurat and the problems he had in framing his paintings, Gustave Kahn wrote in 1924 that, "the white frame with big stripes that he first selected soon disgusted him. It was like placing a barrier, a circuit-breaker, around the painting. Rather than isolating, it disrupted and tore apart the harmonic chords that echoed the theme of the main motif in the background and the corners. He first tried to overcome this drawback by painting a border around the canvas, composed of ordered brushstrokes that repeated the painting's tonality, then he painted the frame. Once it was done, he still thought it inadequate. But what could he do? In the end, he detached a section from the whole thing, cutting arbitrarily. It hurt him to do so, being profoundly logical and feeling that the requirements of art should take precedence over the realities of the craft. But, well, a painting is just

Fig. 155
William Hamilton Hay
(1874–1916)
Seascape, 1897

Oil on canvas, 24 1/2 × 26 1/2 in.
(62 × 67 cm)
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brest

Fig. 156
Hans Emmenegger (1866–1940)
Flat Hill, 1906

Oil on canvas, 18 1/4 × 39 1/4 in.
(46.5 × 100 cm)
Municipality of Emmen, Emmen



a painting. Yet it was also a part of nature, and the conventions of painting sparked in Seurat some of the anxiety that disturbed Mallarmé when, faced with the structure of a book and its succession of pages, he disagreed with disjointed poems and forged unattached arabesques into a solid chain.”¹⁷ Understood in this light, treating the space of a painting as a metaphor for cosmic totality seems indissociable from the Neo-Impressionist conception of color. The individuation of a work through arbitrary cropping is here reduced to its most minimal expression.

This problematic was not restricted to Neo-Impressionism, however. On the contrary, it represented one of the points of contact between Symbolist art and the art of Seurat and his progressive, urban, scientific disciples. An increasingly allusive approach to landscape emerged in various countries in Europe from the 1890s onward, in which the picture of the world corresponded closely to a philosophy that held that art should eliminate everything descriptive (figs. 155 and 156). Landscape barely even defined a place—topography was obscured, orchestrated according to an abstract rhythm. The revolution of plein-air painting and Impressionism, much of which occurred in the realm of landscape, was thus outstripped by an aesthetics in which the primacy of sensation gave way to an intellectual expression of substance. In a comment that itself evoked the vibrant transposition effected by the Neo-Impressionists, Mallarmé asked, “What is the point of the marvelous transposition of a facet of nature into its vibrant absence through the play of words, if not to allow the pure notion to emanate without the burden of a close or concrete reminder?”¹⁸

In the work of Eugène Carrière (fig. 157), nature is depicted in a kind of continual metamorphosis in which it is reconfigured through an ascetic use of color and a quest for a gestural equivalent to primordial forms.



Fig. 157
Eugène Carrière
Landscape, c. 1898–1900

Oil on cardboard-backed canvas,
17 ³/₄ × 20 ¹/₂ in. (45 × 52 cm)
Peter Nahum Collection, London



Fig. 158
Jens Ferdinand Willumsen
Mountains in the Sun, 1902

Oil on canvas, 82 1/4 x 82 in.
(2.09 x 2.08 m)
Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm



Fig. 159
Romolo Romani
Image, c. 1908

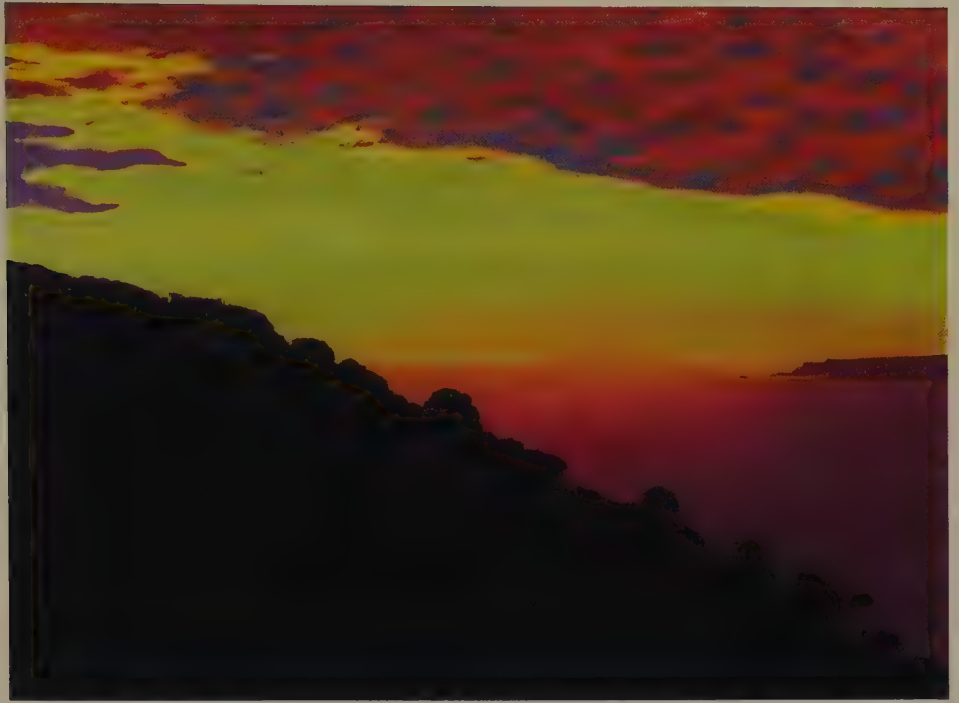
Pencils and distemper on backed
cardboard, 73 x 96 1/4 in.
(1.86 x 2.45 m)
Pinacoteca Comunale, Brescia

A tendency toward spareness is accompanied by a lyricism in which repetition, symmetry, curving lines, a homogeneous overall handling, and a distancing of the main subject (through the absence of a foreground) all distill landscape into a mnemonic presence. Meanwhile, the mystical artist Charles Marie Dulac explored the religious meaning of landscape in 1894 in a series of lithographs titled *The Song of Creatures*. “To idealize as much as possible, without denaturing real forms, is my goal,” he claimed.¹⁹ Urging natural shapes to adopt abstract forms symbolized cosmic harmony—Hodler’s landscapes, for instance, are often unified through the clouds in the upper part, drawn as a kind of curving roof that evokes the infinite. An extreme stage of this tension between visual perception and mental image was reached by a few artists who developed a system of codified, occasionally geometric forms within a space that still explicitly alluded to nature. This was the case notably with Mondrian, and also with Danish artist Jens Ferdinand Willumsen (1863–1958, fig. 158) and Italian painter Romolo Romani (1884–1916, fig. 159). It was also true of Wagnerian stage designs by Adolphe Appia (1862–1928), who banished props and who strove to unify the various visual elements of theatrical space. The fact that this approach arose at the intersection of different cultures makes it all the more significant.



Fig. 160
August Strindberg
Double Painting, 1892

Oil on panel,
15 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (40 × 34 cm)
Private collection



Inner, purely mental, unbounded space converged with fictional, theatrical space in a play by Rachilde, *Madame la Mort*. One act of “Madame Death” takes place *inside* the head of one of the protagonists. Another playwright, Strindberg, would paint an example—a unique example, it has to be said—of a literal superimposition of two landscapes, triggering a back-and-forth movement between a visible space and the world it hides, sowing unease and burdening an already unstable system of perspective with the unbearable hint of an indefinite elsewhere (fig. 160). An anxious tension between the world in which we are forced to live and the one in which we dream of living could also be detected, during those very same years, in the work of Gauguin, whose exile to what he imagined to be an earthly paradise assumed the form of a negation of historical identity in an effort to recover the mythical dimension of life.

With the advent of the twentieth century, the quest for—or even simple depiction of—a landscape where the gods might live became progressively outmoded. This ideal would be definitively ruined by the First World War, but even before 1914 there were hints of disenchantment. In the landscapes painted by Félix Vallotton after 1911 it is not quite clear whether or not a feeling of the sublime manages to rise above the artifices of composition and color (fig. 161). A similar coldness had already appeared in the *Paysage animés* by writer and journalist Gaston de Pawlowski, who cruelly transformed nature’s “animated landscapes” into ironic, nihilistic theater. Every individual becomes an actor in a show, all landscape becomes a mere set, resulting in the death of all mystery. Pawlowski concluded a description of the Swiss lakes at night with the following lines: “Tired of making a show of herself, Nature wanted the last strollers to go home to bed, so that she could relax as she had done in the unfettered days of prehistory.”²⁰

Fig. 161
Félix Vallotton
Sunset over the Sea, 1910

Oil on canvas, 30 ³/₄ × 39 ¹/₂ in.
(78 × 100 cm)
Private collection

A Magic Language

By treating an image as the projection of an “Idea,” Symbolism restored a religious dimension to images and updated the notion of sacredness specific to myth. The quest for a sacred feeling was a consistent feature of Symbolism. In 1898, after visiting the archaeological museum in Naples, Jean Lorrain discussed the frescoes in Pompeii in terms of Rembrandt, Piranesi, Corot, and Whistler. Yet after having made these formal comparisons, it was the name of Gustave Moreau that flowed from Lorrain’s pen when describing a fresco that showed a mask of Medusa. He argued that the ancient painting provoked a sense of mystery “like that of religious terror, maybe that of an ancient symbol,” which brought to mind the work of Moreau, whom he considered the primary modern portrayer of mythology.²¹ Given the resurgence of this sacred role for imagery, as attested by numerous examples, Gauguin’s attempt to merge myth and reality—in both his oeuvre and his life—assumes great significance. For him, the quest was conducted on a very real plane, since it required personal exile to a civilization where he thought he could find a thriving paganism. At the same time, Gauguin’s version of the quest turned its back on the myths hallowed by European civilization, and turned instead toward the religious syncretism typical of one fringe of the Symbolist movement.

In 1892, a few months after arriving in Tahiti, Gauguin executed his first paintings inspired by Oceanian mythology. He based his knowledge on everything he could learn from witnesses, but also and above all from a book by J. A. Moerenhout, *Voyage aux îles du grand océan*.²² Gauguin took an interpretative approach to myth right from the start.²³ While his attitude toward Tahitian art was clearly not an ethnographic one, he did not merely consider it a convenient repertoire of decorative forms. The religious quality of the objects he used as inspiration remains evident in the completed work, where they contribute to the meaning Gauguin sought to convey. Alongside works that might be considered more spontaneous, such as landscapes and depictions of everyday life on Tahiti, Gauguin’s mythical subjects entailed recomposing a narrative unity from multifarious “documents.” These materials were sometimes

alien to the context in which Gauguin found himself, for they included not only drawings and sketches but also photographic reproductions of Greek and Egyptian art, of the friezes at Borobudur, and of famous Western paintings. This approach took on greater scope during Gauguin's second stay in Tahiti and Hivaoa (1895–1903). Here again, several studies have shown that Gauguin's quotations were not mere formal borrowings, and that in certain cases they implied a semantic analogy—at least partial—between the painting and its source.

On many occasions Gauguin explained the reasons that spurred him to leave Europe. A rejection of capitalist society and moral conventions was accompanied by an aspiration for the earthly paradise traditionally associated with lands that had remained free of European influence. We know that the significant discrepancy between Gauguin's preconceptions about Oceania and what he actually found there—a world whose customs and religion had already been partly destroyed by colonizers—generated a disappointment probably greater than he let on; after abandoning Europe for good, he headed for increasingly isolated places where traces of the Western world would no longer be detectable. The accounts left by Gauguin alternate between resentful complaints about French civil and religious authorities and elated descriptions of native mores and landscapes. His determination to prolong the illusion of an earthly paradise is evident in the landscapes of 1891–1892, in which he projected a picture of extremely colorful, luxuriant vegetation even though the Tahitian landscape is in fact grayer and rockier. By the time Gauguin arrived in Polynesia, the Tahitians no longer carved idols and had officially become Christians. Although the discovery of a thriving pagan mythology could be considered one of the reasons for Gauguin's voyages, at the end of day he uncovered only rites on the verge of extinction. What was initially supposed to be a picture of Eden thus had to be transformed into a record of the death of the gods. This bitter realization is evident in the evolution that occurred between the manuscript in which Gauguin described a planned painting that he hoped would become his masterpiece,²⁴ and the painting he actually executed, with its enigmatic title of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (fig. 162). In subsequent letters to friends such as Georges-Daniel de Monfreid and Charles Morice, and also in response to an unfavorable article by André Fontainas, Gauguin attempted to clarify the meaning of this painting. When compared to the original idea, these texts reveal the shift from an Edenic vision toward a meditation that culminated in a figure of death, namely the old woman on the left of the composition, which Gauguin based on a sketch done in 1889 of a Peruvian mummy in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.²⁵



Right from 1886, Gauguin's first experiments in ceramics betray the influence of the Peruvian pottery he had seen, as a child, in his mother's collection. Exoticism was an early component in the construction of Gauguin's character in so far as it alluded to his mother's non-European roots. The passionate, absolute quality of Gauguin's search for roots went beyond the standard European infatuation for distant lands in the late nineteenth century. He became a sailor as a young adult, his first voyages taking him to South America. And he would often refer to the "wild" side of his own nature, incompatible with the civilized world. He cultivated an identification with non-European civilizations. To avoid having his personality stifled by society—whether in the form of bourgeois respectability or avant-garde art criticism—he cultivated a profound alienness as a

Fig. 162
Paul Gauguin
*Where Do We Come From?
What Are We? Where Are
We Going?*, 1897–1898

Oil on canvas, 54 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 147 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
(1.39 × 3.75 m)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



way of countering the reigning values in the circles he frequented. Thus Polynesian mythology, eradicated by Europeans, would take on a special meaning for Gauguin: the death of these gods—even though not his own—resonated with a personal, inner conflict, which is why he always evoked them with a kind of melancholy lyricism. In late 1893, Gauguin entrusted Morice with an illustrated manuscript titled *Ancien Culte mahorie* (Musée d'Orsay Collection, Department of Prints and Drawings, Musée du Louvre, Paris), with a view to revision prior to publication. The “ancient Maori cult” of the title suggests that this document was an ethnographic study of Oceanian religion. But the text was drawn from Moerenhout’s book, Gauguin having excerpted passages that recounted a legendary tale. Hence the manuscript, falsely documentary, recounted

above all Gauguin's fascination with the magical conception of the cosmos specific to primitive religions. The style of the illustrations and the appeal for help from Morice indicate that Gauguin intended to produce a literary work right from the start.²⁶

Gauguin felt that Christian dogma could not stand up to the onslaught of science. And yet the persistence of Christian imagery in some of his major paintings was part of a religious syncretism also seen in his Tahitian and Marquesan work. *Ia Orana Maria* (c. 1891–1892, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) combines figures of worshipers taken from Borobudur with a Madonna and Child based on a photograph of an Egyptian woman taken during a stopover in Port Said.²⁷ In a canvas called *The Great Buddha* (fig. 163), Gauguin included a Last Supper in the background, behind the central figure of a monumental, composite idol evoking the Maori cult. The base assumes the shape of a lotus bud, while the face of the deity was inspired by Pukaki, an ancestral ritual figure in New Zealand, an example of which Gauguin had been able to see the Auckland Museum in 1895.²⁸ The pensive figures in the foreground encourage the viewer to meditate on the meaning of religion. Such iconographic eclecticism betrays an underlying theosophical symbolism. Gauguin had become familiar with esotericism in the mid-1880s, and around 1888–89 he studied the work of Péladan, Éliphas Lévi, and Edouard Schuré.²⁹ One of Gauguin's acquaintances, Claude-Émile Schuffenecker (1851–1934), was close to theosophical circles with an interest in non-European religions. Thus the basic themes cutting across Gauguin's oeuvre from the early 1890s onward—fecundity and regeneration as well as sacrifice, with the ensuing identification of the artist as Christ—should be viewed from the standpoint of magic. In 1902, Gauguin transcribed and expanded a manuscript he had written in Tahiti in 1897–1898, which he titled *Catholicism and the Modern Mind* (Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis).³⁰ This fairly lengthy text addresses several issues, notably the relationship between religion and scientific developments. Harshly critical of the Catholic Church, Gauguin adopted a theosophical-type position by attempting a synthesis of various beliefs, including Polynesian mythology. He sought to demonstrate the existence of a unique sacred principle that had been steadily eroded by the dogmatism of the Christian religion, viewed as a tool of Western political domination of the rest of the world.

The incipit, or opening lines, of *Catholicism and the Modern Mind* are “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” In the first letter known to contain a description of the painting of the same title, Gauguin referred to it as a philosophical reflection on the fate of humanity. The terms behind this set of three questions were perhaps

inspired by Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*; a French translation of the famous British philosopher's autobiography was serialized in the *Mercure de France* from November 1895 to February 1897, and Gauguin must have been aware of it, for it contains, in different form, the question that the artist condensed into the title of his painting.³¹ Gauguin often obscured his sources, and he never cited Carlyle, whose ideas nevertheless provided some of the foundations for *Catholicism and the Modern Mind*. On the other hand, he commented on his imagery on several occasions, sometimes in a cryptic manner, thereby supplying a general framework for interpreting the painting that he considered to be his masterpiece. He stressed, however, that there was no point in seeking an overly literal meaning. When *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?* was exhibited in Paris in 1898, André Fontainas pejoratively compared Gauguin's obscurity with the allegorical clarity of Puvis de Chavannes, complaining of "forms poorly derived



Fig. 163
Paul Gauguin
The Great Buddha, 1899?

Oil on canvas, 52 ³/₄ × 37 ¹/₂ in.
(134 × 95 cm)

Pushkin Museum, Moscow

from an awkwardly metaphysical imagination whose meaning is desultory and whose expression is arbitrary."³² Gauguin would later write to Morice that Fontainas "cited Puvis de Chavannes as always being understandable, knowing how to explain his ideas. True enough, Puvis explains his ideas, but he doesn't paint them. He's a Greek, while I'm a savage, an untethered wolf in the woods."³³ Charles Chassé reported that "Gauguin remained ignorant of the Latins and Greeks, whom he despised, for lack of studying them."³⁴ Yet Greco-Roman mythology—which could only appear to Gauguin in the guise it had been given by its successive literary avatars—bore no comparison to the living, wild power that he saw in "Maori" religion.

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? is organized around a left-to-right sequence that retraces human development from birth to death, combining the theme of individual fate with the fate of all humanity. According to his explanations, Gauguin intended to contrast the figures in the foreground, symbolizing a carefree, simple life, with the two dressed figures set against a dark patch, who converse near "the tree of knowledge"³⁵ and who incarnate the pessimism associated with learning. Dante and Virgil in the inferno, one of the key themes of Romantic painting, provided the archetypal model for this strolling pair, absorbed in philosophical discussion. Knowledge here appears linked to the experience of evil. Several symbolic attributes are scattered throughout the painting, about which Gauguin provided few explanations. A bird holding a lizard in its claws, a figure that appears in another painting, might have a double meaning, evoking not only vital, animal energy as opposed to the resignation of the dying old woman, but also "the pointlessness of vain speech."³⁶ The goddess Hina, personifying fertility, is set on a mound, generating to her right an embryonic figure in a halo, recalling Redon. The barely discernible profile of the god Tefatu, near her left hand, blends into the trees on the island, while a woman with a meditative expression heads toward the two figures representing knowledge. The second level of symbolism in the painting, notably the role of the characters from Polynesian mythology, is harder to interpret.³⁷ There can be no doubt, however, that it entails a system of cross-references to figures seen in other paintings, creating a network of self-quotations that constitute a personal language.

The organization of space also is based on an antithesis between the right side—welcoming and cool, with a running stream—and the left—a harsh strip of light from the sun in an extremely bold contrast of colors. The background offers a verdant landscape, but the foreground is strewn with blackish trunks and almost devoid of vegetation. The "tree of knowledge" is given autumnal colors—if Eden ever existed, it is

henceforth a thing of the past. Gauguin painted a universe where the gods were on the verge of extinction; he predicts the decline of humanity. The following year he would produce a wilder version of the landscape seen in *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?* In this version the greens were replaced by a dominant red and Hina was replaced by the troubling figure of Oviri (*Rave Te Hiti Ramu*, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg).

Up until now, little importance has been accorded to the two upper corners of the painting, one of which bears the title, the other the date and artist's signature. Yet they are both integral parts of the composition, since they were included in a little sketch accompanying Gauguin's letter to Monfreid in February 1898, where he mentioned this painting for the first time (fig. 164). Right at the start of his description, Gauguin makes a point of mentioning "the two upper corners . . . chrome yellow with inscription on the left and signature on the right, like a fresco with worn corners applied to a gold wall."³⁸ They should therefore be seen as constituent elements of the composition, not just as simple cartouches designed to caption the image. As just noted, this device alludes to fresco painting, yet it also suggests a succession, over time, of a series of works on the same wall. In Gauguin's own words, the scene thus depicted is laid over a prior state, an old painting, testifying to a lost, golden age. Hence the significance of his choice of chrome yellow, a "gold" pigment whose color metaphorically conveys its very meaning. In the upper right corner, Gauguin signed and dated the work, just below a lamb lying at the foot of a leafy tree. The artist was clearly identifying himself with this early Christian symbol of Jesus Christ.³⁹ The trunk of the bush near the lamb provides a living shoot to the withered branch of the tree below—the artist's sacrifice, associated with the Lamb of God, permits hope for regeneration via a return to the golden age, after the death of the gods. It is worth mentioning that Gauguin allegedly tried to commit suicide shortly after finishing this painting.

This painting represents one of the most significant examples of polysemic Symbolism. In this respect it would be mistaken to overlook the Christian symbolism running through Gauguin's oeuvre, or the importance he placed on eastern religions. He took courses in biblical literature between 1859 and 1862 when he was a student at the Petit Séminaire in Orléans, and he would always recall "certain youthful theological studies" that had profoundly marked him.⁴⁰ He therefore had a solid religious background. And it so happens that the title *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?* corresponds to the existential questions raised by the Gnostics. Gnosticism considered cognitive excess—which Gauguin was apparently criticizing when he pitted the path of

knowledge against the path of life—to be a sin. It is striking to note that Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian writer whose philosophy was influenced by Gnosticism, raised questions very similar to those in Gauguin's title. Baptism, said Clement, tells us "who we are and where we come from, where we have been and where we have come to, where we are going and from what we have been freed, what is birth and what is rebirth."⁴¹ In the intellectual atmosphere of the Paris that Gauguin had known, religious and esoteric issues were more important than we might realize today. As previously mentioned, Aurier implicitly referred to Clement when discussing Gauguin.⁴² Thus an entire subtext of religious thought can be read between the lines of the painting; Gauguin was effecting a theosophical-type fusion between Oceanian theogony and a syncretic religious philosophy. Christian sources were accompanied by knowledge of certain Vedic texts to which Gauguin must have had access in translation or through popularizing articles—the esoteric doctrine of the Upanishads clearly influenced his religious thinking. Indeed, the question of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where are We Going?* might be considered the central issue raised by these epic and religious texts, which were just then sparking great curiosity in the wake of Schopenhauer.⁴³

Acknowledging the "enormous mathematical errors" scattered throughout his composition of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, Gauguin asserted that he would not change them "at any price." As he explained to Monfreid, "I sometimes hear people say, 'the arm is too long,' and so on. Yes and no. Above all, no, given that as you lengthen it you move further away from verisimilitude and closer to myth, which is no bad thing."⁴⁴ Somewhat later, Gauguin would return to this subject in a text he intended to publish. "The painter takes a model as representing a legend: it is not the attributes or the symbol held in the model's hand that point to legend, but the very style."⁴⁵ For Gauguin, taking license with visual credibility was therefore a visual equivalent of the discontinuity and irrational nature of mythological narrative—it transcended representation through an evocation of timeless forces. Even prior to Baudelaire, the idea that artistic spontaneity was preferable to respect for objective reality was finding acceptance in critical discourse. The novelty of Symbolism was the relationship it established between freedom of formal handling and a narrative mode associated with myth.

Fevrier 1898-

Mon cher Daniel.

Je ne vous ai pas écrit le mois dernier, je n'avais plus rien à vous dire, sinon répéter, puis ensuite je n'en avais pas le courage. Aussitôt le courrier ^{arrivé}, n'ayant rien reçu de Chaudet, ma santé tout à coup presque rétablie c'est à dire sans plus de chances de mourir naturellement j'ai voulu me tuer. Je suis parti dans un panier dans la montagne où mon caractère avait été d'abord si formé. Je n'ai eu pas de révolutions, mais j'avais de l'arsenic que j'avais thésaurisé durant ma maladie. D'essaims est ce la dose qui était trop forte, ou bien le fait des vomissements qui ont annulé l'action du poison en le rejetant, je ne sais. Enfin après une nuit de terribles souffrances je suis resté au logis. Durant tout ce mois j'ai été traqué par des pressions sur les reins, puis des étourdissements, des nausées à mes reins voisins. Je reçois ce mois-ci 700⁺ de Chaudet et 150⁺ de mon père; mais cela je paye les calmants les plus cherchés, et recouche sur le ventre quatre heures, de midi à six heures au moins, mais on ne peut pas savoir et vendre à un prix en un instant. entre autres mes tabacars. Enfin vous venez à cette époque à remémorer d'une autre façon. Il faut voir que ma résolution était bien prise pour le mois de Février alors j'ai voulu avant de mourir peindre une dernière toile que j'avais eu l'idée et durant tout le mois j'ai travaillé jours et nuit dans une fièvre éternelle. Cette toile n'est pas une toile faite comme les de Chaudet, elle est faite à la main, puis carbon préparatoire etc. tout cela est fait à la chic au bout de la brosse, sur une toile à sac pleine de nœuds et rugosité aussi l'aspect en est terriblement

est. D'un revers d'oreille } On dira que c'est l'écha' etc...



Fig. 164
Paul Gauguin
Letter to Georges-Daniel de
Monfreid, February 1898

Ink and wash, 10 3/4 x 8 in.
(27 x 20.4 cm)

Musée d'Orsay Collection,
Department of Prints and Drawings,
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Enamored of Instability, Wary of Rationality

Symbolism's revival of mythology revealed a skepticism toward positivist philosophy that led the movement to explore phenomena on the margins of rationality. Thus, even as an unreal space was being generated by the disjunction of landscape from history, Symbolism's visual approach to the human figure and its repertoire of expressive attitudes was being enhanced by radically new forms inspired by medical research. The choreography of hysteria, whose mystery stirred primal emotions, appeared modern in its very derangement. Of course, we should be careful not to overstate the importance of the discovery of hysteria as a direct source of Symbolist painting—many major artists never mentioned it. Yet the meaning assumed by the use of this new expressive register can not be treated as a mere side issue, so revealing is it of a new taste for psychic theatricality and an exploration of the subconscious.

Just as people came to perceive an artist's personality as being an integral part of his oeuvre, there emerged a redefinition of the ego that included registers ranging from self-mockery (in the case of a painter such as Ensor) to autobiographical myth (of which there are many late nineteenth-century examples). Questioning the substance of the ego generated doubt—in the conclusion to his *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, Bergson noted that modern psychology “holds that we perceive things through forms borrowed from our own constitution” and then inverted that proposition to ask whether “the most obvious states of the ego itself, which we believe that we grasp directly, are not mostly perceived through the medium of certain forms borrowed from the external world, which thus gives us back what we have lent it.”¹

A wariness toward rationality, which would subtend Symbolist thinking with increasing frankness as the twentieth century approached, would also push artists toward a primitivism fueled by the appeal of non-Western civilizations and by “naive” forms of expression as cultivated by Gourmont and Jarry in their review *L'Ymagier*. It also pointed them toward a chaotic conception of artistic practice, one that accepted the role of chance. Certain aspects of the oeuvre of Strindberg, who in the 1890s adopted an esoteric definition of art, would herald research into the roots of artistic creativity that accorded a large role to chance, as explored by several scholars in the early twentieth century. Georges-Henri Luquet, who was influenced by Bergson and would later publish a key book on primitivism,² advanced the hypothesis that the birth of art rested on “a progressive awareness of the figurative possibility of marks on bone or stone, which had long been accidental or at least involuntary.”³ Henry de Groux, who was perceived as a profoundly anachronistic artist because his subjects betrayed, with a few exceptions, a Romantic conception of history painting, nevertheless imbued his paintings with fulgurating images that fascinated an entire generation of critics, for whom they represented an authentic emanation of psychological instability. The alleged linearity of the historical evolution of art forms was thereby challenged, even in its most recent manifestations. Indeed, contrary to the process typified by the stylistic explorations of the 1880s—Neo-Impressionism and Cloisonnism—innovation no longer resided in the forging of a formal vocabulary that might be adopted by other artists, thus spreading and circulating, but rather in the pure and simple abandonment of pictorial syntax. Indeed, as far as Strindberg was concerned, this meant renouncing the artist’s total mastery over a work. Limited to a few individuals, this evolving, idealist perspective—which made it possible to discover the art of the insane—represented the outer limit of the Symbolist enterprise, one that twentieth-century theoretical constructs would carry in other directions.

Hysteria: A New Expressive Repertoire

Numerous examples confirm the emergence within Symbolist art of new ways of representing the human body, ones that constituted a break with historical tradition in many respects. The traditional, academic way of codifying the emotions was thus superseded by an expressive register that conveyed the modern stirrings of the unconscious. Symbolist artists thereby adopted an attitude that could be compared, *mutatis mutandis*, to the one that enabled certain painters of the 1880s to achieve the most significant developments in naturalism. In the work of Degas and Caillebotte, for instance, the imperatives of depicting the modern world and the use of compositional strategies based on photography led to new arrangements of the body in space, and consequently to the development of a new repertoire, stemming above all from a new level of intimacy—Degas's pastels of unvarnished views of women at their toilette were discussed in terms analogous to the naturalist discourse on the bleakness of sexuality.⁴ Symbolism responded to this apparent naturalism—which in fact masked subtle contrivances—by exploring new propensities for rigid stress, nervous tension, or even sexual ecstasy as displayed by a body whose motion was frozen at a significant moment. Here the body was being unambiguously sanctified in poses that might be compared, at a pinch, to Baroque religious art (whose revival they intimated). Overall, this imagery projected a sense of fascinated misogyny, linked to the early days of women's emancipation: indeed, these frenetic bodies are exclusively female, thus representing the flip side of that other aspect of Symbolist iconography, the one that abounds with figures of female saints and remote princesses as emblems of chastity or meditative serenity. Such figures of purity—mother, fiancée, wife—were thus countered by a perverse femininity that also enjoyed a special fate in literature of the day.

Of course it was not the first time that art exploited physiognomy to express mental states on the fringes of rationality. Yet the hysterical body as it appeared in Symbolism acquired the status of an authentic visual motif that varied infinitely as it spread abroad, moving further and further away from its roots in experimental medicine. This formal innovation indeed coincided with what has been called the "invention" of hysteria⁵

in the context of medical research carried out in the second half of the nineteenth century, notably by French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot.⁶ Charcot's work had become well known, even beyond medical circles, by the late 1870s. It shed new light on nervous illnesses, and above all was presented in a way that would guarantee a widespread impact, in so far as publications reporting work by Charcot and his assistants were abundantly illustrated with photographs. In addition, Charcot's experimental method included public demonstrations of certain pathological conditions exhibited by patients at La Salpêtrière Hospital. Such sessions were regularly attended by Parisian socialites as well as artists and writers. Over a period of years, then, hysteria—which since the Renaissance had been linked to the idea of a morbid female eroticism—enjoyed its own illustrated anthologies and its own theater. The theatricality of Charcot's method, applied to this specific realm of investigation, clearly conditioned its appropriation by artists in the Symbolist movement.

A “fit of hysteria,” which widespread use of neuroleptic drugs would later consign to a “fin-de-siècle” syndrome, was presented as a kind timeless ritual, a dance that culminated in the “grand arc” when the patient's body tensed, petrified, into the arc of a circle. Mysteriously associated with some earlier trauma, this dance testified to a kind of subconscious ritual. Photographs recording the various phases of a hysterical fit served as the source for several paintings from the early 1890s, notably by certain artists affiliated with the Rosicrucians, such as Alphonse Osbert (*Vision*, 1892, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and Alexandre Séon. Even earlier, one of the engravings in Max Klinger's 1884 *Life* series was clearly inspired by a plate from the photographic record of work at La Salpêtrière, published in 1877 (figs. 165 and 166). Klinger had been making frequent trips to Paris from 1883 onward, but it is possible that his curiosity about this kind of imagery was whetted by his 1882 meeting, in Berlin, with Jules Laforgue, whose literary oeuvre is peppered with allusions to hysteria. At that time Laforgue was working on his first anthology of poems, for which his sources of inspiration were “the morgue, the Dupuytren Museum, the hospital, love, alcohol, depression, massacres, Thebaic solitude, madness, and La Salpêtrière.”⁷ Yet apart from a small number of examples of direct use of pictures stemming from medical research, Symbolism's exploitation of clinical imagery was basically an indirect echo of the phenomenon: slight, often indirect source imagery gave rise to a new perception of the female body, notably seen in several significant works by Munch and Klimt. This phase of dissemination had been anticipated in literature—in Barbey d'Aurevilly's novels, for instance—by female characters endowed with all the features of hysteria.

As Huysmans wrote in an article on Rops, “In art this mental hysteria, or morose delectation, inevitably had to be translated into artworks that

forged the images it created for itself. There it could find a mental outlet, for a physical outlet would be ... a certain destroyer of art.”⁸ Here the link between hysteria and modernity was established, and the relationship between neurosis and artistic creativity was acknowledged—it took a touch of hysteria in order to be able to depict hysteria. Here Huysmans employed a definition of hysteria in which discoveries by modern medicine were linked to a more general social malaise, where hysterics were merely an extreme example of what was called a “nervosity” typical of decadence. It might be worth recalling, just to retain a Rops-like perspective, that back in 1866 when Baudelaire fell ill, one of his doctors



Fig. 165
Max Klinger
Shipwreck (plate twelve
of *A Life*), 1884

Etching and aquatint, 10 ³/₄ × 9 in.
(27.3 × 22.6 cm)

Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig

had diagnosed “hysteria.” As just mentioned, the body of a hysteric allegedly displayed—via a rite of primitive theatricality—some torment buried in the subconscious; the patient’s jerky movements could be read as a catalog of primal human postures. Exploration of all the psychic nooks and crannies they represented therefore converged with Symbolism’s curiosity for everything beyond the rational. While the repetitive, codified nature of fits of hysteria might be perceived as symbolic, the meaning of its choreography remained mysterious. As Théodule Ribot argued, the ecstasy of hysteria was equal to “a complete violation of the laws of the mechanisms of the conscious mind.”⁹ As a sign of the irrational, hysteria consecrated the break between the individual and the outside world, creating a metaphorical microcosm that drew other people to watch even as it kept them at a distance. Hysteria was just asking to be deciphered, all the while remaining obscure.

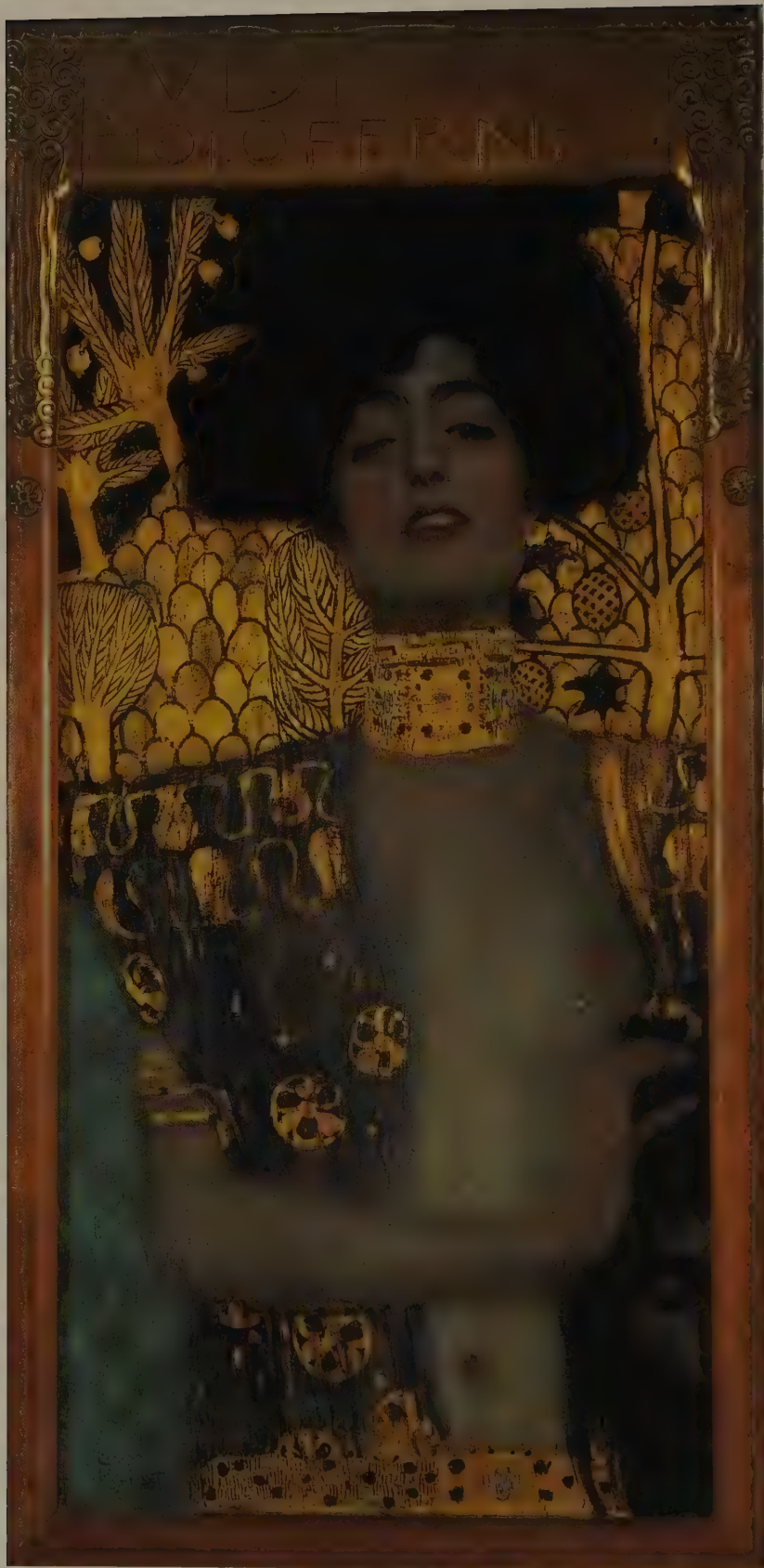
Symbolism’s characteristic fusion of religious or mythological themes with elements of modern neurosis would lead, when it came to imagery, to the extinction of old meanings and the construction of a new network of meanings that would update myth and the interpretation of origins in terms of modern psychological data. The task of transcending the traditional iconographic framework, based on the new perception of female sexuality, is clearly perceptible in the work of Klimt, especially in his approach to the subject of Judith. Although the history of art since the Renaissance is rife with examples of an erotic approach to this tale, Klimt’s *Judith I* (fig. 167) represents a veritable iconographic watershed. Here the artist creates a morbid vision in which the meaning that usually underlies this subject—a heroine who incarnates virtue and justice by opposing a brutal, lustful male who incarnates barbarity—gives way to a depiction that places the stress on the relationship between the sex drive and the death drive. Here the image of virtue is transformed into a reflection of the depths of the subconscious. Klimt’s Judith is not so much triumphant as perverse—her delight in her cruelty is nowhere to be found in the original biblical text. Eight years later Klimt would produce a second version of this subject (fig. 168). As well as illustrating the artist’s shift to a more decorative style, it shows a different approach. The figure of Judith has been turned slightly to one side, her neck stretched forward, knees bent. The only similarity is that Holophernes’ head still appears frontally, in the lower right, although now more visible and more realistic. The area of gold patterning in *Judith I* has been replaced by a proliferation of ornament against the dark ground of the biblical heroine’s dress.

The underlying constant between these two versions resides in Klimt’s particular conception of the subject, which stresses a violent vision of sexuality and a male fear of desire. In both cases, the expression on Judith’s



Fig. 166
Paul Regnard
***Hystero-Epilepsy:
Hallucinations, Anguish.***

Photograph from volume two of *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* by D. M. Bourneville and Regnard (Paris, 1877), plate XXIX



face evokes female organism. The half-closed eyes and parted lips of *Judith I*, the cropping of the composition at waist level, and the Art Nouveau curves of the frame all echo another picture inspired by hysteria, namely the *Madonna* produced by Munch in several versions, including a lithograph, between 1893 and 1902. Munch himself admitted that this composition depicted the ecstasy of a woman during sex, a meaning underscored by the sperm cells swimming around the edge of the composition in the color lithograph.¹⁰

Klimt introduced new tension in *Judith II*. The posture of the heroine's body dislocated by nervous motion, her vacant gaze, and above all her thin, clenched hands (placed in the center of the composition) lend this variation a convulsive feel typical of Symbolist imagery inspired by pictures of clinical studies of hysteria. The development between Klimt's two versions of *Judith* occurred during the period when Sigmund Freud's work was steadily filtering into cultivated circles in Vienna, including those not directly linked to the emergence of psychoanalysis. It is worth noting that Freud, who studied under Charcot in Paris, published German translations of two of the French neurologist's books.¹¹ The conclusions drawn from clinical observation, namely that a link existed between sexuality and the pathology of hysteria, provided scientific justification for the many variations of the theme of femme fatale then appearing in literature. Many critics of the day felt that Klimt was a main exponent of this new trend, one going so far in 1902 as to dub him "the painter of the unconscious."¹² Furthermore, certain traits indicating Klimt's interest in manifestations of hysteria have been noted on various occasions.¹³ While it is unlikely there was a direct link between Klimt and Freudian thought, it is clear that the perception of sexuality as the theater of a confrontation between man and woman, as asserted in *Judith I* and *II*, was indissociable from the intellectual climate that nurtured the birth of psychoanalysis. Now, as is well known, study of hysteria lay at the roots of psychoanalysis: unlike Charcot, who focused on the physiology of the nervous system, Freud sought a psychological explanation for hysteria. In this context, *Judith II* comes across as a key work, given its analogy with a picture published in 1891 in the *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* illustrating a case study of male hysteria (fig. 169). The photograph shows the torso and arms of a patient whose hands are clenched in a voluntary contraction. In order to make the forearms clearly visible, a piece of dark cloth was placed just below the chest, producing an effect of strong contrast between the black of the fabric and the flesh. Klimt used this image, reversing the direction of the wrists but retaining the dramatic tension and erotic charge of the clenched hands and the bare chest below the breasts, a visual motif that appeared here for the first time in his painting. Klimt was probably also thinking of Friedrich

Fig. 167
Gustav Klimt
Judith I, 1901

Oil on canvas, 33 × 16 1/2 in.
(84 × 42 cm); beaten copper frame
by Georg Klimt based on a design
probably by Gustav Klimt
Österreichische Galerie, Vienna



Fig. 168
Gustav Klimt
Judith II, 1909

Oil on canvas, 70 x 18 in.
(178 x 46 cm)

Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna
di Ca' Pesaro, Venice

Hebbel's play *Judith*, which was well known in nineteenth-century Vienna and which Freud would later discuss as an important text in so far as it revealed the erotic content of the biblical story.¹⁴

Taken as a whole, Klimt's oeuvre conveys the appearance of a new female paradigm based on awareness of the relationship between sexuality and psyche. Eros and Thanatos were intimately connected. The theme of *Judith* is so rich, however, that it bears interpretation beyond this initial stage. In Klimt's day, people associated Viennese history with sex, death, and political power—in particular, the double suicide of the archduke Rudolf, heir to the Habsburg throne, and Maria Vetsera in Mayerling in 1889 had a traumatic effect on the entire country.¹⁵ The anorexic skinniness of *Judith*'s face is another feature of the clinical diagnosis of hysteria. This image represented a transition between "religious" anorexia, typical of the fasting of exemplary Christian figures, and the postmodern syndrome of anorexia that tends to minimize sexual differentiation even as it makes a paradoxically erotic affirmation of the triumph of mind over body. It is worth recalling that mental anorexia was identified as a specific disease in the late nineteenth century, when it was associated with hysteria. Here again we find the connection between hysteria and modernity made by Huysmans, and it is hard not to think of the anorexia of the Austrian empress, Elisabeth of Wittelsbach, an emblematic figure of mental instability at the heart of government. The attitude of the empress, notably her excessive passion for the Hungarian cause, heralded the break-up of the empire.¹⁶ A figure of women's emancipation, who asserted her independence in terms of lifestyle and certain political choices, Elisabeth helped to undermine the fragile state that was still holding together the remnants of the largest empire Western history had ever known.

In Klimt's *Judiths*, the double function of the image with regard to the biblical story—on the one hand linked to a subconscious meaning and on the other to the contemporary context that made it relevant—is clear. The issue it raised was that of the end of both a political system and a world where power was exclusively male. The evolution, between the two canvases, from a lewd woman to a hysterical one is symptomatic of the way in which male/female sexual opposition became the object of a more radical presentation once psychoanalysis had emerged. *Judith I* was frequently called *Salome* and, after 1905, often linked to Richard Strauss's famous opera of that name, despite a copper frame that clearly bore the inscription *Judith and Holofernes*. The frame, made by the artist's brother, Georg, probably from a design by Klimt himself, reveals a desire to eliminate all doubt as to the subject being depicted. Perhaps Klimt thereby intended to distinguish his work from the many *Salomes* that sprang up in turn-of-the-century art. More probably, however, this



Fig. 169

Hysterical Contraction

Photograph from volume four of
*Nouvelle Iconographie de la
Salpêtrière*, edited by Jean-Martin
Charcot (Paris, 1891), plate XIII

attachment to Judith—who, unlike Salome, was a female figure of real political power—was linked to the intellectual climate and context in Austria in the years just before the First World War. This particularly significant example was not the sole instance of the appropriation of a medical image and its transformation into an icon. Figures of hysteria symbolized a shared situation, a new fragility experienced by humans in the modern world. The reconquest of religious meanings within artistic imagery took place thanks to a new expressive idiom for the human body, one that was closely linked to the subconscious.

The Subconscious and New Expressions of Ego

From underneath the chaos of appearances, among all the times and places, within the illusion of things that spawn and beget—one among them, one like them yet distinct from them, one related to them, one the same and yet one more—from the infinite potential of all possible existences, I surge forth...

Édouard Dujardin, *Les lauriers sont coupés* (1887)¹⁷

The Romantics had anticipated a redefinition of greatness based on heroism in the realm of ideas. In the art and literature of the first half of the nineteenth century, the celebration of genius steadily replaced classical antiquity's concept of a hero who incarnated a simultaneously ethical and patriotic ideal. Examples of virtue thus gave way to visionary geniuses. The 1841 publication of Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* marked a turning point, after which heroism tended to become primarily intellectual. On a broader level, Carlyle's philosophy would have a major impact. Rejecting the materialism of the early industrial era as it emerged in England, Carlyle would become one of the main advocates of Germanic idealism in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Opposed to the ambient utilitarianism, he offered a vision of humanity in which history was the result of action by great men. In France, meanwhile, Hippolyte Taine was promoting Carlyle's ideas by the 1860s.¹⁸ Carlyle's idealism would have an influence in France similar to that of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's Hegelianism, at a time when naturalism was focusing more on collective trends than on individual exceptions. Naturalism too had its religion of great men, but thoughts about the future of society were marked by a strong attraction to overall, shaping forces. Naturalism's individual, secular heroes were depicted with great simplicity, in an everyday context, as exemplified by an enormously popular painting by Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905) that showed Pasteur at work in his laboratory (*Louis Pasteur*, 1885, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). This image was the opposite of the misunderstood genius as cultivated by Romanticism and as revived by the Symbolists, often tinged by a tragic view of life. Hence the glorification of Edgar Allan Poe by the likes of Baudelaire and Mallarmé—who had had to rescue him

from calumnies spread by some of his biographers—remained strong throughout the Symbolist period, as witnessed by books on Poe published at a rather late date by André Fontainas and Camille Mauclair.¹⁹ Here the literary hero still reflected the tradition of martyrdom, unlike naturalism's secularized version of heroism.

In Symbolist imagery the typology of the hero thus took shape following a slack period. It corresponded to a need to forge guardian spirits from people whose ideas offered a radical alternative to the marriage of materialism and politics that seemed so unbearable to the generation of artists born in the 1860s. In this respect it is significant that this period also witnessed an increase in the frequency of anarchist attacks, testifying to a similar exasperation—some leading Symbolists also advocated libertarian ideas. In a strange novel titled *Le Soleil des morts* ("A Sun for the Dead"), Camille Mauclair presented the dilemma faced by the Symbolist generation that had to choose between direct political action under the aegis of anarchism or the private cult of art.²⁰ *Le Soleil des morts* ends with an apocalyptic vision of Paris devastated in a single night of terrorist attacks, and concludes with a pessimistic admission of a dual failure: the only possible heroism, that of propaganda through deeds, is always stifled, whereas idealist works of art always remain misunderstood. This deep-seated pessimism, although it celebrated heroism, had another facet that led to a feeling of impotence and cultivated neurosis. The desire to combat bourgeois society made it necessary to compose new pantheons that represented the aspiration of a new generation, and were therefore not populated exclusively by exemplary figures from the distant past. Although Rossetti's work was marked by Dante and Michelangelo, it could still be understood in the context of Romanticism, but the same could not really be said of the compulsive, career-long accumulation of heroic figures painted or sculpted by Belgian artist Henry de Groux (1866–1930), who had briefly flirted with anarchism in the late 1880s.²¹ Balzac, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Poe, Tolstoy, Beethoven, and Wagner were usually treated in the form of a sculpted bust, lending them a monumentality that sometimes transformed the sitter into a tragic mask (fig. 170), displaying an exaggerated fascination. The hero worship that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century occurred in a situation analogous to the one faced by French Romantics, when a young generation found itself lumbered with a political regime unable to stir or excite it. De Groux's choice of imagery therefore made him a transitional artist, since the works he showed with *Les XX* in 1880 under the overall title of *Waterloo: Three Dreams After the Battle* took up the Napoleonic epic begun by the Romantics yet recast it in a visionary mode.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the hero—be he poet, musician, actor, artist, or philosopher—started to become recognized

during his own lifetime, a phenomenon that became a characteristic of modernity. At a time when the advertising industry was beginning to emerge, new modes of communication swiftly created an international aura for outstanding individuals. Wagner, Sarah Bernhardt, and many other performing artists enjoyed fame throughout the Western world. At the same time, the ethnocentrism typical of Romantic heroes began to wane. When Wojciech Weiss (1875–1950) made a little sketch of Chopin at the piano, he was no longer only depicting a figure with which an oppressed Poland would identify, but also a vision sparked by the supernatural presence of genius. The hero was not depicted by Weiss according to the iconic process of deification specific to sculpture, but in the graphic immediacy of a spiritualistic trance, suggesting an independent invocation of the notion of historic memory, offering direct communication with a living spirit and physical presence—paradoxically immaterial—recorded in the time it took a pair of hands to move across the keyboard.

When preparing a decorative project for the lecture hall at the University of Christiania in 1909, Munch began a painting that he would ultimately abandon, the foreground of which featured a massive, frontal figure of Henrik Ibsen. Munch shyly approached Ibsen on several occasions, and would be haunted by the playwright's oeuvre all his life. Munch did two portraits of Ibsen from memory, seen sitting at his usual table in the Grand Café in Christiania (c. 1898, private collection, United States; 1906–1910, Munch Museet, Oslo). The composition varies only slightly from one portrait to the other, yet Munch carefully altered the urban landscape as it changed with time—in the later version, a yellow bus can be seen in the street. Apart from that detail, however, nothing remains of what might have been a naturalist portrait of a writer placed in a normal setting. In both portraits, the figure of Ibsen is handled as though already a legend. The greatness of the playwright is immediately underscored by the frontality of the figure with his somewhat stiff appearance, the high forehead that housed the imperious, sarcastic thoughts for which he was known, the tyranny of the penetrating gaze, and the formal simplification of facial features, not to mention the hank of hair that might be seen as the flame of genius. Here we have a contemporary hero, painful but overwhelming. In *Geniuses* (fig. 172), Munch made Ibsen a key figure, emerging from a cluster of embryonic forms at the top of which we see Nietzsche (also present is Socrates). Figures fly down from the clouds to bring divine inspiration to these superior minds, set in front of an endless landscape. Below, a barely discernible bell tower symbolizes the fading of religion before the intellectual prestige of philosophers who, eyes closed, incarnate the concentration of genius on the inner substance of thought. On the left, a frontal, bust-length figure of an anonymous individual reminds the viewer of his or her own condition.

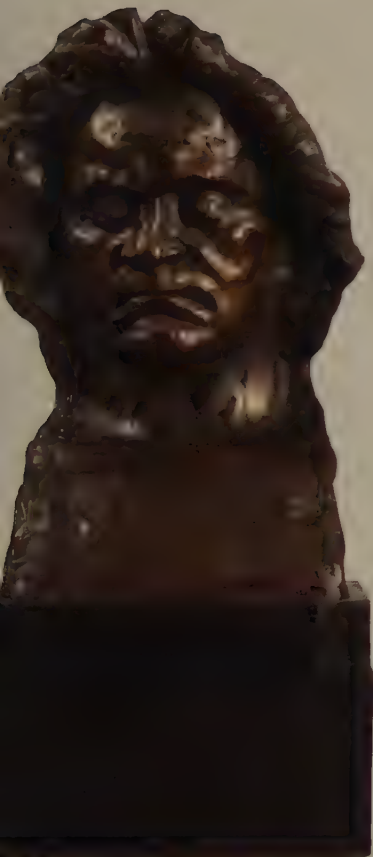
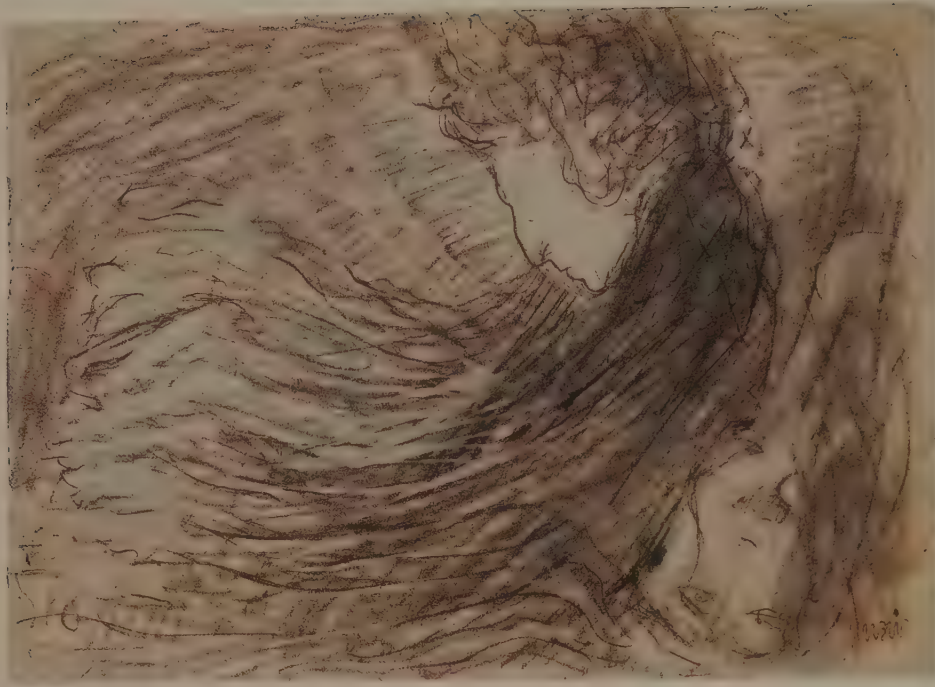


Fig. 170
Henry de Groux
Beethoven, c. 1907

Patinated plaster, $27 \frac{1}{4} \times 12 \frac{3}{4} \times 8 \frac{1}{4}$
(69.5 × 32.4 × 21 cm)
Private collection



The flip side of the impossibility of identifying with the hero, then, is an introspective interrogation that may lead to a retreat into inward uncertainty, to a more or less rational refusal to take action or to join battle. Gabriel Mourey viewed Burne-Jones as a fifteenth-century Italian, yet one “who also bore the legacy of suffering and moral distress that is the sad lot of nineteenth-century men, the obsession with the ideal we all share, the need to bleed under the claws of a chimera in order to escape, through dream, the horror of the same realities.”²² It was because Gabriele D’Annunzio incorporated the presence of the subconscious—where mythology appeared as the representation of the psyche’s innermost forces—into his lyrical vision of the world that he was able to occupy the border between two worlds. He reconciled the ancient conception of military hero with that of the literary idol of a generation obsessed with introspection. Starting in 1920, he began turning his villa on the edge of Lake Garda into the “Vittoriale degli Italiani,” making it both a private dwelling and a future monument to his own glory and that of the “victories” of all Italians. Conceived as a total if posthumous artwork, the villa combined the personal working environment of the poet with a commemorative staging of the great man’s life. It was designed to be a theater as well as a dwelling, incorporating elements ranging from Gaetano Previati’s Symbolism to the art of gardening and landscape in a project of self-celebration. This fabrication of the hero, however, came during a period of doubt and betrayed at least one sign of fragility: in the

Fig. 171
Wojciech Weiss
Chopin, c. 1899

Pencil, 9 × 1 1/2 in. (23 × 31.5 cm)
Private collection

writer's bedroom, at the very heart of this ostentatious staging, sat the cradle of his infancy, reconstructed on an adult scale to D'Annunzio's own specifications. This was just one of many examples of fascination with the protected world of childhood typical of this period, but it is undoubtedly one of the most paradoxical. The inward-looking ego, the periodic return to the protected shell of infancy before the world's coercive effects impinged, went hand-in-hand with an increased focus on the psyche and narcissistic observation of the subconscious. Even Maurice Barrès's action-oriented cult of the ego presupposed an attentiveness to the tiniest twitches of intellect and sensibility. In Symbolism, horror of the world—a horror shared by writers as diverse as Zola, Huysmans, and Léon Bloy—did not lead to a retreat into another world that merged with the most intimate substance of being.

Fluctuating desires and drives spurred anxiety over the very consistency of the self; a precarious sense of ego was accompanied by a spatial instability that would soon be exploited and explored as a vector of creativity. For example, Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershoi (1864–1916) painted many views of empty, luminous interiors. Crisp, tending toward monochrome, they encourage the beholder to seek traces of a fleeting presence. Hammershoi's wife sometimes appears, absorbed in some daily task, dressed in black. Doors are left ajar and windows filter daylight, creating an interior staginess that became a trademark of Hammershoi's work, even though he also painted landscapes and portraits. Whether set in London or Copenhagen, his variations on the theme of interior solitude resemble patient, serene studies in light that nonetheless contain disturbing elements. The handling of space, for instance, can be subject to

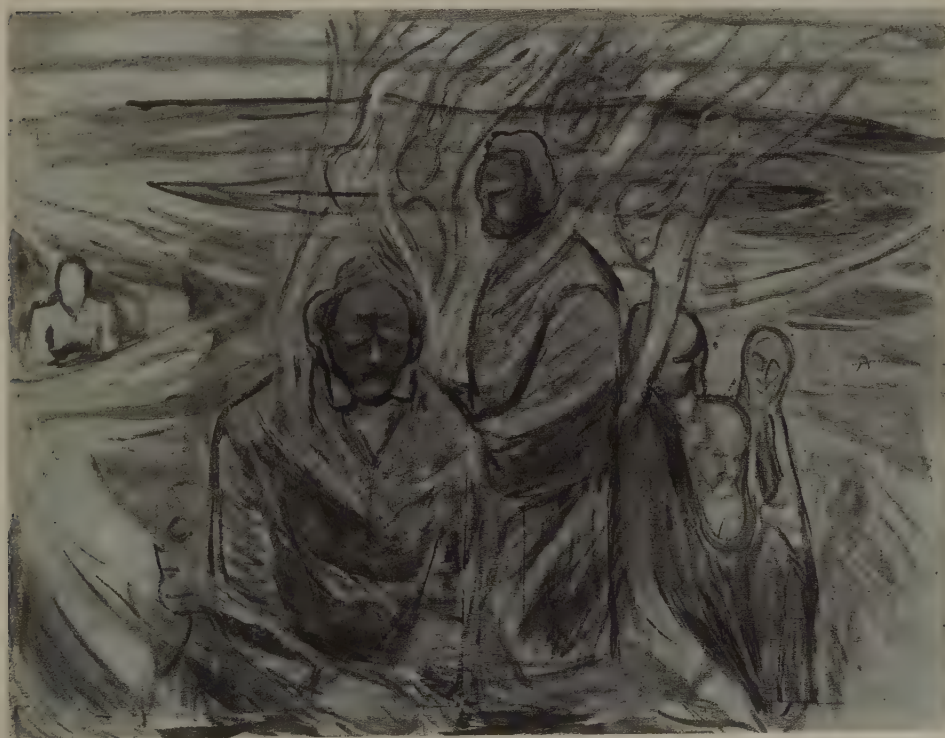


Fig. 172
Edvard Munch
*Geniuses: Ibsen, Nietzsche,
and Socrates*, 1909 (1906?)

Tempera on canvas, 53 × 69 in.
(134.5 × 175 cm)
Munch Museet, Oslo

subtle shifts. *Inner Courtyard, Strandgade 30* (fig. 173) looks down on a shady courtyard where a glow of winter light clings to the panes of the sole open window. The corner where the two walls meet in the upper half of the canvas, underscored by the linear perspective, is nevertheless handled on the painterly level as though it did not exist—at the top, the composition ends in a plain surface enlivened only by variations of gray. This handling represented an effective way of generating a feeling of instability and confinement from an apparently banal image.

Fernand Khnopff, meanwhile, took a poem by Christina Rossetti as the starting point for *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (fig. 174).²³ The foreground is orchestrated around three irises set before a black-draped



Fig. 173
Vilhelm Hammershoi
*Inner Courtyard,
Strandgade 30*, 1899

Oil on canvas, 26 x 18 1/2 in.
(66 x 47 cm)
Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo

piano; the middle flower is already withering, a traditional symbol of passing time and death. Near a head of Hypnos is a crystal vase containing a poppy. In the background, in a spatially incongruous arrangement, are two views, one of an old, desolate street with a single figure in mourning dress, the other of a gray façade with dark windows. Are these landscapes? Or reflections? On the left things seem to overlap, two visions bleed into one another as if in a dream, and a windowsill appears beneath the woodwork. A reading of this background no longer involves the realm of objective depiction. The vague nature of various reference points makes it impossible to connect them to the rest of the composition. The juxtaposed images behind this face with vacant stare are thus purely mental. They are connected only in the private, introspective mind of a young woman who is shutting herself away. The representational function of painting is here subverted to create a mental space, a projection of an ego sometimes transfigured through drugs, as Gabriel Mourey stressed when it came to Rossetti.²⁴ Khnopff was again inspired by this same Rossetti poem for a drawing that featured the same model (fig. 175). The figure seems to have no anatomy—a strip of black fabric separates face from bust, where a cameo reflects a cloud-studded sky: a reflection of ideal purity, housed within the breast and yet distant. Meanwhile, the vulgar presence of a gutter grate so close to the ethereal face evokes physical confinement, or perhaps abject desires. The extremely tight, incarcerating conception of space is accompanied here by a destabilizing chromatic uncertainty, which simultaneously underscores the immateriality of the black-and-white marks and the reality of the red hair.

On reaching the age of forty, Khnopff sought isolation despite his growing fame. He was a co-founder of the group called *Les XX* in 1883, a time when his painting vacillated between an intimist approach and a Symbolist one influenced by Moreau and the Pre-Raphaelites. By 1885 he was in contact with Joséphin Péladan, for whose books he produced several frontispieces.²⁵ The theme of a deserted city—the Bruges he knew in early childhood—resurfaced throughout his career. Péladan's extroverted narcissism found symmetrical expression in the fantasy of a dead city, a city-as-woman who was expiring, interminably, before the eyes of an aesthete living a timeless existence of reclusive contemplation. Just as the character of Durtal in Huysmans's *Là-bas* dreamed of living among the clouds, high in one of the bell towers on the church of Saint-Sulpice,²⁶ so the protagonist of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* lost himself in the desolation of a deserted world. Some places still created the impression of having remained completely aloof from the bustle of modern crowds. The first edition of Rodenbach's novel, before Khnopff designed a frontispiece in 1892, was simply illustrated by



Fig. 174
Fernand Khnopff
I Lock My Door Upon Myself,
1891

Oil on canvas, 28 1/4 x 55 in.
(72 x 140 cm)

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,
Neue Pinakothek, Munich



photographs of a Bruges that still seemed stuck in the past, overlooked. In 1900 Khnopff, having become an emblem of Symbolism and an international success, built himself a Brussels town house that he turned into the theater of a narcissistic cult, and where he would live for the rest of his life. He himself drew up the plans with the help of architect Édouard Pelseuer.²⁷ On paying a visit to Khnopff, Viennese artist Josef Engelhart reported that the white varnish covering the walls of the entrance hall immediately made him think of a health clinic, while a brass barrier



Fig. 175
Fernand Khnopff
Who Shall Deliver Me?
(Christina Georgina
Rossetti), 1891

Colored pencils, 8 ³/₄ × 5 in.
(22 × 13 cm)

Galerie Patrick Derom, Brussels

prevented access to the upper floor. "I instinctively thought of a train station or a theater," wrote Engelhart, "where crowds needed to be held back." He then learned, from Khnopff himself, the point of this arrangement: it was designed "to oblige visitors to meditate before entering [his] studio."²⁸ The orchestrating features of Khnopff's huge, esoteric temple included a golden circle on the floor (a magic ring where Khnopff would usually stand), an altar to Hypnos that included the head seen in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, the motto *On n'a que soi* ("You only have yourself"), and a pool evoking the rite of purifying waters, the whole thing coordinated by Sezessionist-style decoration (fig. 176).

As a response to doubts triggered by the overwhelming presence of towering geniuses, this premature celebration of posthumous glory helped to consolidate the ego, as did travel and accounts of that travel. Yet the ego was scattered and dispersed, even as it was being defined, by this accumulation of places and props, this series of metamorphoses. In the many drawings that Munch made from Ibsen's plays, he sometimes chose a compositional viewpoint that suggest he was among the characters on stage, pushing this process of identification to the point of replacing the face of Peer Gynt with a self-portrait.²⁹ Munch thereby penetrated not only the text, as Khnopff would do with his intensive use of literary supports, but also the fictional space of the stage, which profoundly structured his work even when there was no explicit thematic reference to theater.

It is rare for self-portraiture to testify as directly to the tragic grip of madness as it did in the case of Belgian artist Louis Baretta (1866–1928, fig. 177), whose reclusive life in Furnes was punctuated by periods of angst that alternated with mystic suffering. In one particular painting he combined the features of his own face with those of Beethoven (*Baretta as Beethoven*, Musée Baretta, Furnes). As a rule, victimized artists such as Gauguin, Ensor, and even Henry de Groux—who employed his friend William Degouve de Nuncques as the model for *Christ Tormented* (1889–1890)—tended to identify with the figure of Christ, or else, in a more realistic approach, they depicted their own depressive psyche. The Belgian Émile Motte (1860–1931), in a self-portrait titled *Autopsychic Study* (fig. 178), showed himself in a state of resigned, derisory suffering, thistle in hand—a neurasthenic version of *Ecce Homo*. As soon as portraiture abandoned the path of hero figures magnified through frontal monumentality, it wandered into unhealthy frailty, into tenuous, lethargic egos unable to confront the gaze, into ostentatious melancholy. In *Reminiscence* (fig. 179), Frédéric Lottin (c. 1865–1907) painted his sitter in a colorless light—the woman, in a white negligée, no longer seems



connected to life. Her body fades beneath the gray and white brushstrokes and scratches on which the canvas is built.

When this introspective gaze turned back toward objective reality, it reflected an image highly influenced by subjectivity. An angst-ridden view of a familiar environment could animate it, distort it, and bring it to life, as demonstrated by Polish artist Boleslas Biegas (1877–1954), whose buildings are crowned by hands and screaming faces (fig. 180). Klinger, meanwhile, in a series of engravings called *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove* mobilized a personal object—the glove of the title, lost by a secretly beloved stranger—to weave an entire world of oneiric visions. The drawings for the ten engravings were first exhibited in Berlin in 1878 and the album ran through five printings between 1881 and 1898, which proves that it met with fairly substantial success.³⁰ The first two plates set the scene in a naturalist context, namely a skating rink frequented by Berlin's high society. The second image shows Klinger discreetly picking

Fig. 176
**Fernand Khnopff in front
of the altar to Hypnos
in his studio**

Photograph,
Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts
de Belgique/Archives de l'Art
contemporain en Belgique, Brussels

up a glove that a female skater, now in the distance, has dropped. The glove is then magnified, animated, and obsessively repeated, this female accessory with its obvious erotic overtones being subverted to reveal all the suggestive possibilities of its shape. In the seventh plate, *Anxieties* (fig. 181), the glove leans against the wall of the bedroom flooded with monsters and succubae. The artist is shown in the grip of a nightmare, in a bed whose sheets are transformed into waves.

Klinger was one of those artists whose Europe-wide career would help to spread Symbolism. After studying in Karlsruhe, he completed his education in Berlin, then lived in Brussels, Munich, and Paris (1883–1886).



Fig. 177
Louis Baretta
The Visionary

Oil on canvas, 106 1/4 x 65 in.
(2.7 x 1.65 m)

Musée Baretta, Furnes



He also traveled in Italy, where he met Böcklin (1880–1890). In 1893 he settled in his home town of Leipzig, where he was later hired to teach at the academy of graphic arts. His influence was largely based on his albums of engravings, cyclical in conception, which masqueraded as philosophical meditations or literary conceits on a given subject. The play of contrasts between the various images in a series implies a narrative as well as visual development that, perceived as a whole, evokes a very special sense of rhythm. In Klinger's major cycles of prints, purely naturalist scenes alternate with fundamentally surreal ones in the same way that

Fig. 178
Émile Motte
***Autopsychic Study: Portrait
of the Artist***, 1895

Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.
(90 x 56.5 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

dream sequences combine acute detail with a totally illogical order of events. Klinger's precise draftsmanship and perfect mastery of engraving techniques fueled an imagination that drew on all the resources of allegory and ornamental detail to invest his images with a pantheism that largely stems from a special feeling for landscape.

Although diving into the subconscious was the favored device of the Symbolists, it was not the only path that was explored in the quest for a profound expression of the ego. A spontaneous record of a state of mind or awareness—without sinking into the torpor of a dream—could be another way of avoiding the truly rational realm, but it meant walking the



Fig. 179
Frédéric Lottin
Reminiscence, c. 1904

Oil on canvas, 72 1/2 × 38 1/2 in.
(184 × 98 cm)

Musée Fabre, Montpellier



tricky line separating spontaneity from logical thought. This could be done by conveying a primal state of mental activity. Referring to the color in Louis Anquetin's *Mower*, Édouard Dujardin wrote of "the impression produced at noon on a summer's day by the sudden opening of a window in a darkened room," and he stressed the extent to which color in this canvas no longer reflected a method in which relatively lengthy study of the landscape would have produced "all the details of color" but instead, in more immediate fashion, conveyed "the unity and power of the overall impression."³¹ Despite superficial appearances, we are a long way from Impressionist subjectivity, since Anquetin's approach entailed restoring a state of perception prior to any logical ordering, an attempt to grasp the moment when the mind is temporarily mobilized by pure sensation. Similarly Dujardin, in his novel *Les lauriers sont coupés*

Fig. 180
Boleslas Biegas
Enchanted Palace, 1902

Plaster, 18 ³/₄ × 10 ³/₄ in.
(47.5 × 27 cm)
Private collection

(We'll to the Woods No More), which was written in those same years, forged a prototype for interior monologue.³² By ignoring narrative conventions in passages that attempted to introduce readers to the thoughts of the protagonist at the very moment those thoughts arose, he sought to attain primal psychic activity, what Valéry Larbaud called “the most private, most spontaneous thoughts, the ones that seem to come to mind unaware, that seem to precede organized speech.”³³ A new expression of the ego inhabits this undifferentiated state between inner world and speech—the objectivization specific to narrative is absent. A few of Munch’s works were also composed in a way that places the viewer in the position of the artist recalling an event from his life; it is worth pointing out that these few works were personal ones, drawings whose composition would not be transferred to their painted versions—a sign of the distance that still separated autobiography from painting. In one of his sketches on the theme of *The Voice*, titled *Summer Night* (fig. 182), the image is cropped just below the eyes, violating the conventions for depicting a face. In the lower part of the image is a text in which Munch wrote down his private recollections of the moment when his gaze plunged into the eyes of a young woman who was about give herself to him. This drawing attempts to translate, as closely as possible, both a close-up view and a subjective vision, which together greatly magnify the eyes of the model even as the landscape is rendered as just a few schematic lines. Munch’s text is integrated into the drawing as far as possible. Although the two oil paintings based on this theme (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Munch Museet, Oslo) are characterized by an



Fig. 181
Max Klinger
Anxieties (seventh plate of
*Paraphrase on the Finding
of a Glove*), 1881

Etching, 5 ³/₄ × 10 ¹/₂ in.
(14.4 × 26.9 cm)

Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig



extremely bold and simple handling, and although Munch retained the overall composition of the scene, he did not attempt to amputate the face with the lower edge of the frame and instead depicted the figure in three-quarter length. Pictorial conventions and syntax might be pushed, but only so far. As with his *Scream* and the accompanying text, here again Munch created a climax of emotional intensity, a psychic instant that remains implacably distinct from everyday, shared experience.

Fig. 182
Edvard Munch
Summer Night, 1893

Pencil, 16 ¹/₄ × 19 ³/₄ in.
(41.5 × 50 cm)
Munch Museet, Oslo

Chaos and Chance

Twilight is descending upon the world.
Painting, along with everything else, is fading away.

Paul Cézanne to Joachim Gasquet³⁴

The autobiographical aspect of Munch's work was made clear through his staging of space. Using just a few clues akin to props in a simplified stage set, Munch alluded to moments in his life whose dramatic tension provided a symbolic focus for more general issues. These were themes to which he would regularly return, ones that dotted his oeuvre in multiple variants produced over time. Likewise, August Strindberg's oeuvre—both literary and artistic—also gravitated around notions of autobiography. His paintings, however, do not have the narrative elements found in Munch's work, because Strindberg painted only landscapes. He used the traditional structure of landscape only as a support—one employed with startling uniformity—designed to give free rein to chance. Painting was therefore still constrained by the conventions of a genre even though it had arrived at the exact point at which that notion began to lose all substance.

In 1901, Strindberg painted a canvas that he titled *Inferno*, referring to an autobiographical text he had published a few years earlier (fig. 183). Composed along Strindberg's usual lines, the foliage apparently surrounding the viewer includes a gap that offers a glimpse of a plain stretching as far as the eye can see. One of the first occasions on which Strindberg used this compositional technique was in *The Wonderland* (1894, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), which he painted during a particularly happy period of his life. He described the elaboration of this technique in what became a famous article on the role of chance in art.³⁵ Over time, *The Wonderland* seen through the branches became a plain pounded by torrential rain, a shower of gray representing the artist's sweeping gesture across the canvas, an empty horizon.

As we shall see, Strindberg remained skeptical about Gauguin's escape to the South Pacific—the inferno that Strindberg experienced and recorded was testimony to his disillusionment over the possibility of ever returning to Eden. Right from 1893, while in Berlin, where he made contact with Munch and Stanislaw Przybyszewski, Strindberg offered a clearly Symbolist interpretation of his own painting. *Inferno* marks the

start of a period when he took up painting again after a five-year halt, and it obviously corresponds to a look back at the past, a fusion between landscape and memory. The illusion of earthly happiness had vanished forever for the playwright, whose life was a wreck. During a period of recovery, when he was exploring the writings of Swedenborg, he wrote, "In *Arcana Coelestia*, the enigmas of the two past years are explained with such powerful precision that I, a child of the end of the famous nineteenth century, retain the unshakable conviction that hell exists. Indeed it exists here, on earth, for I've just been there."³⁶

Strindberg used canvas as a support for his painting on relatively rare occasions, mainly for works of rather large dimensions. On these canvases, from 1901 onward, he systematized an approach he had developed on more rigid supports—wood and cardboard—which were marked by his quest for total spontaneity. Strindberg's painting sprang entirely from his imagination, and represented the first significant example of a conception of art based exclusively on an inner vision. His skies bear no traces of the earnest studies of clouds found in a sketchbook containing his observations of weather phenomena; on the contrary, they are produced by the grinding application of color with a palette knife or with his fingers, as was the rest of the surface of the painting. To this very freely handled ground he would sometimes add a few details whose presence lent scale and representational significance to the image. So during the first stage of their execution, Strindberg's paintings did not *represent* anything. Quick sketches from a technical standpoint, but autonomous works in terms of format and status (Strindberg publicly exhibited them on a number of occasions)³⁷, his pictures were, because of the way he created them, on the fringes of the conventional system governing the relationship between painting and objective reality. His approach was basically very close to the one advocated by Redon, that is to say guided by the unconscious, except that Strindberg felt swift execution was essential to the elaboration of his works. In an article describing his methods, Strindberg alluded to palette-scraping periods, by which he meant the end of a working day when the artist turns away from the model to elaborate an imaginary scene by interpreting shapes produced by the chance convergence of gesture, support, and color.³⁸ This interplay of eye and shape, based on chance, was evident in the way irregular lumps of burning coal could trigger, in Strindberg's mind, a vision of a "rooster's head with superb comb but fairly human torso and twisted legs," or "two drunken gnomes or elves dressed in baggy clothes, embracing each other," or even "a Byzantine-style Madonna and child, with an incomparable line."³⁹ Sketches testifying to this inventiveness (fig. 184), along with his paintings based on similar principles, represented a truly new effort to systematize

such techniques, even though precedents might be found in drawings by Victor Hugo and Gustave Moreau. When he painted, Strindberg nevertheless initially conformed to a tried-and-true theme—landscape as universally understood at the time—and arranged his foreground, background, horizon line, and sky in conventional fashion. He also employed simple effects of aerial perspective. His improvisation occurred within this basic framework, following a purely intuitive approach.

When allowed to resonate with his literary oeuvre, Strindberg's painterly output, based as it was on a constant interplay between fortuitous occurrence and subsequent interpretation, displays a very special



Fig. 183
August Strindberg
Inferno, 1901

Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
(100 × 70 cm)
Private collection

conception of chance. Strindberg's most intense artistic activity came during a phase when he was writing relatively little, when he was distancing himself from the naturalism that characterized his mature literature. His famous article on "Chance in Artistic Production" was written in French and published in late 1894 just after he had moved to Paris (where he would be caught up in alchemy and occultism right to the end of his stay in 1898). During this psychologically fragile period, Strindberg relentlessly viewed life's tiniest events as signs—when seen from an esoteric standpoint—of the intervention of higher powers, as made clear in his texts *Inferno* and *Legends*.⁴⁰ The possibility of imitating nature's creative process through pictorial improvisation, theorized not long before, was here cast in the light of a search for correspondences that would reveal a universal order, via a system of symbolic meanings that would become more and more clearly religious. Deciphering chaos would produce a revelation, the unveiling of principles governing the world beyond appearances, taking paths alien to the positivist sciences. Strindberg clearly pointed in this direction when he referred to "the great disorder in which [he] nevertheless [managed] to discover infinite coherence."⁴¹ In Strindberg's seascapes, the disordered painterly surface is sometimes interrupted by a strictly rectilinear horizon line, cut into the still-wet colors, as though some absolute, geometric rigor was required in the midst of his improvisation (*Lighthouse III*, 1901, Universitetsbibliotek, Uppsala). The register of natural forms—perceived in their twin dimensions, visual and symbolic, even down to the level of the infinitely small—was one of the registers that provided Strindberg with the keys for understanding the world (alongside, in mandatory convergence, photography, chemistry, meteorological observations, and the natural sciences). The artist's eye was at the heart of this process of interpretation, tracking down every last formal analogy that could be linked not only to personal



Fig. 184
August Strindberg
**Drawing of a partly burned
piece of charcoal, included
in a letter to Torsten
Hedlund**

Paris, June 21, 1896
Charcoal, 3 1/2 x 4 3/4 in.
(8.9 x 12 cm)

Albert Bonnier Editions, Stockholm

biography but also biblical texts. This poetic conception of knowledge stemmed from esotericism, as expressed in 1891, for example, by Victor-Émile Michelet. “We have often heard it said that science and poetry are two enemy sisters, two irreconcilable antagonists. For anyone who has had a glimpse of the occult synthesis, for anyone who has dared to look upon the Divine world, this antagonism no more exists than the one allegedly existing between science and the various religions.”⁴²

Strindberg’s experimental approach was never rigorously scientific. His *Celestographs* of 1894 (Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm), produced by directly exposing photographic plates to the night sky, display a mistrust of the optical systems used in photography. They were supposed to record the nocturnal light of the stars without passing through a lens. The resulting images do indeed give the impression of constellations, even though they were probably produced by the simple interaction of chemical products on the plate, with no effect of light at all. In so far as astronomy was being invoked here in the absence of any reliable technique, this appropriation of scientific methods begins to look like a purely magical operation. Strindberg also made a certain number of “psychological portraits” in 1906 using a simple device of his own making, which he dubbed a “Wunderkamera.” The particularity of images now thought to have been produced with this “wonder camera” (*Self-Portrait*, 1906, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm) was that the sitter’s features were blurred. Strindberg probably considered them more loftily expressive than the conventional sharpness of ordinary photographs. For him, the essential condition for bringing an image to life was that it be produced according to a system in which the maker renounced the total mastery normally associated with the status of artist. This explains his fascination with the natural phenomena of germination and crystallization, that is to say the automatic development of forms whose beauty was viewed as the core of a web of analogies revealing the symbolic correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. A relationship existed between efflorescence, crystal, and partially random photographic image on the level of apparition, participating in a mystery in which the interplay of artist and nature yielded results that were themselves open to interpretation. “Chance” thus became part of a metaphorical system that could in no way be defined in purely concrete terms. Surrealism would later revive this connection between art and magic—this cosmic, esoteric vision of the world—along with the postulate that an artist’s spontaneous gesture is a direct translation of a subconscious state.

Unlike Strindberg, Henry de Groux had no dealings with the occult when he came to Paris, where his painting of *Christ Tormented* (fig. 185) made him very famous in 1892. De Groux’s interpretation of the world



was nevertheless basically a symbolic one. He conceived of the artist as a “seer” who remained outside any form of social constraint—for him, poetry and art were the flip side of a world full of horror.⁴³ For a while he considered placing his entire oeuvre under the aegis of comets,⁴⁴ to which he attributed a role comparable to the presence of stars in the unfolding of human dramas as seen in the plays of Maurice Maeterlinck, de Groux’s friend at the time.⁴⁵

Right from Zola’s day the materiality of painting and brushwork had been discussed in terms of physical gestures and movements that conveyed an artist’s mental activity. But starting in the 1890s, the relatively simple idea of swiftness of execution, which had been subjected to various interpretations throughout the history of art, began to be replaced in the work of several artists by what might be called an urgent transcription. The example of van Gogh was well known in Symbolist circles and played a distinct role in the emergence of a graphic idiom of sensibility. The young critic and poet Marcel Réja, who was also a psychiatric doctor, became interested in de Groux just when Réja was writing his own manuscript titled *Inferno*.⁴⁶ Around 1894, de Groux executed several large pastels of images of chaos (fig. 186)—volcanic eruptions or cataclysms in the style of John Martin (1789–1854). The unleashing of natural forces served as an excuse for a gestural frenzy that conveyed a sadistic aggressiveness toward the medium and pigments, even though de Groux paradoxically claimed to be following Flemish painterly tradition and later disagreed with Gourmont’s opinion that he was a “painter of violence.”⁴⁷ One of these compositions, which displays scientific knowledge of volcanic phenomena, combines drawing and writing and includes scraps of phrases in the midst of drips of color (*Burning Fleet*, c. 1894, private collection, Paris). The lack of differentiation between draftsmanship and painting, and the way that de Groux cultivates the intensity of his nervous drives, are revealing of a profound angst for which painting could serve as outlet, being the very locus where anxiety meets pleasure. In 1899 he wrote, “The mere sight of a freshly prepared palette disturbs me and brings a tight lump to my throat, as happens to hysterics who literally reel before the dread and attraction of some hideous crime, of some monstrous sacrilege, before whom nothing finds grace.”⁴⁸ Several years earlier, in a letter to William Degouve de Nuncques, de Groux described his own work as “the painting of a madman.”⁴⁹ Artistic activity was thus being defined here less in terms of its autonomy—which is a purely formalist criterion—than as a response to an intellectual, emotional flux. For de Groux, who sometimes orchestrated entire sections of his paintings around barely disguised quotations from old masters, emotion was in constant conflict with the need to compose.

Fig. 185
Henry de Groux
Christ Tormented,
1888–1889

Oil on canvas, 117 1/4 × 141 1/4 in.
(2.93 × 3.53 m)

Fondation Flandreysy-Espérandieu,
Palais du Roure, Avignon



On a technical level, this position resulted in the violation of pictorial conventions and a challenge to the alleged need to acquire “skills” prior to expressing oneself in painting. The inaccuracies of draftsmanship detectable in de Groux’s work in fact heralded an ambiguity that would later become crucial to spontaneous approaches to art in the twentieth century. Louis Gillet writes:

De Groux redoes his paintings four or five times, but he never studies a specific part. His conception comes as a whole, the parts are then filled in and grouped around the main motifs, on the canvas itself or on the stone.

The finest works contain sections of astonishing, almost childish, awkwardness. Who was his mentor, where did he study? Has he ever looked at a horse or donkey? Has he ever drawn a nude? Does he even know how to draw?

The inaccuracies alarm the beholder. But his lithographic portraits are executed with such care, such convincing draftsmanship, such delightful virtuosity in the rendering of hands, fabrics, and the tiniest wrinkles of skin, that you no longer dare doubt their maker’s skill.⁵⁰

The oblivion into which de Groux has fallen today seems amazing, given that his work inspired the greatest critics of the day, such as Aurier and Verhaeren, to pen articles that marked a historic turning point, with

Fig. 186
Henry de Groux
The Cyclone, c. 1894

Pastel, 28 1/2 × 40 1/2 in.
(72.5 × 103 cm)
Private collection



painterly technique henceforth being recognized as an expression of the anguished presence of the artist. This kind of anxious, gestural composition was practiced by just a few painters at the time. Within the Symbolist movement it took the form of a translation, indeed a celebration, of psychic instability as a primal creative force. This can be seen in the paintings of Swedish artist Ernst Josephson (1851–1906), who went mad at the age of thirty-seven and whose paintings sometimes resemble a writhing mass of colors only occasionally leavened by a decipherable sign (fig. 187). As Belgian poet Fernand Séverin wrote, once again concerning de Groux, “It looks like it was [done by] a child’s hand, guided by an invisible, supernatural hand—the child’s hand trembled, but it drew strange, unusual things.”⁵¹ Trembling and awkwardness, those signs of lack of control, here acquired a meaning free of pejorative connotation, since they now appeared to offer access to the supernatural. De Groux’s physical appearance often featured in articles on his work, which stressed his somewhat old-fashioned elegance, his strange behavior, and above all his unusual face—as though seeking to establish a relationship between the singularity of the man and the strangeness of his work. De Groux himself cultivated this ability to amaze, to the point where we might truly describe his oeuvre as one that was lived as well as painted and sculpted. The highly personal materiality of his painting was thus invested with biographical significance, even though de Groux was never directly inspired by specific events from his own life but instead remained faithful to literary and historical subject matter.

Fig. 187
Ernst Josephson
Rapid, 1884

Oil on canvas, 9 ³/₄ × 17 ¹/₄ in.
(25 × 44 cm)
National Museum, Stockholm

In 1895, Gauguin asked Strindberg to write a foreword to the catalogue for the sale of his work scheduled to take place before he left for Tahiti. Strindberg's letter of refusal was published in the press accompanied by comments by Gauguin, who compared his own "barbarity" to the "civilization" he felt was behind Strindberg's reservations about his painting and his obsessive attachment—as existential as it was artistic—to the idea of an earthly paradise.⁵² Of course Gauguin's alleged barbarity must have struck Strindberg as an aesthetic ploy. Rather than exile to distant latitudes and the abandonment of Western civilization's moral constraints, Strindberg proposed an initiatory conception of existence based on an exploration of the private roots of personal malaise and a plunge into the very heart of civilization's coercive effect on the individual. Such introspection presupposed the raising of religious issues and the difficult confrontation of moral problems linked to conflict between an individual and the established order. The desolate landscape seen in *Inferno*, painted by Strindberg after his psychic crisis, demonstrates the impossibility of ever recovering a golden age or a "wonderland."

At the same time, Gauguin in the Marquesas Islands was painting a fictional Eden, although we don't know to what extent it was contradicted by his everyday life. Strindberg's improvisations represented a challenge not only to the illusion of the idea of earthly paradise, but also to the illusion of the quest for style and balance through the elaboration of composition and drawing—perhaps they even decried painting as a snare and a delusion. Whereas Gauguin advocated turning to new sources whose primitive nature would allegedly restore art's virginity (even if those sources were incorporated into a reasoned elaboration of painting), the despair felt by several fin-de-siècle minds led to the consignment of painting to a kind of meaningful chaos, thereby making a clean break with the long-prevailing idea of thoughtful construction. It seemed as though the elaboration of a painting—or a fiction—had become irrelevant in the face of the pressing need to transcribe the innermost self.

The Absent Artist: Discovering the Art of the Mentally Ill

This new form of spontaneity in art emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, which was also a time when the question of the very origins of artistic creativity was being raised. Because it examined previously overlooked sources such as art by primitive peoples and the mentally ill, this question was initially viewed as an ethnographic one.⁵³ The picture generally presented today of the emergence of primitivism in the early twentieth century focuses on a historical triangulation between artists born after 1880, scholarly advances in ethnology, and an evolution in taste (which became more open to ethnic artifacts at the end of the nineteenth century). Although the pioneering role played by Gauguin has been highlighted, at least one important aspect of the link between Symbolist philosophy and the acceptance of primitive artistic forms has been overlooked, namely art by the mentally ill. We are not merely discussing a source of new forms here, but rather the intellectual underpinnings of certain artistic developments in the years leading up to the First World War. As we shall see, Symbolism's insistence on idealism would play a key role here.

Hans Prinzhorn, who published his *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*) in 1922, has long been credited as the first person to consider the art of mental patients from an aesthetic perspective.⁵⁴ Prinzhorn's book, however, devotes several pages to a writer whom he credited as the founder of this trend, a figure who has now been largely forgotten: Marcel Réja (fig. 188). Indeed, as early as 1901 Réja published a key article in the *Revue universelle* titled "Diseased Art: Drawings by Madmen." This text was incorporated into a chapter of Réja's 1907 book *L'Art chez les fous: Le dessin, la prose, la poésie*, which analyzed poetry and prose as well as drawings by the mentally ill.⁵⁵ Réja, in fact, was the nom de plume of a poet, essayist, art critic, and playwright who was also a psychiatrist practicing under his real name of Paul Meunier (1873–1956). His first love, in fact, was poetry, which he wrote in parallel with his studies. Before acquiring his doctorate in November 1900, he had already published two major collections of poetic texts with *Mercure de France*; one contained verse, the other

prose, but both entered the Symbolist orbit through their subject matter as well as their evident rhythmic and expressive concerns (fig. 189).⁵⁶ As a specialist in mental illness, he was a student and later colleague of Auguste Marie at the asylum in Villejuif just outside Paris. It was Marie who assembled the first publicly accessible collection of art by mental patients. Réja combined his medical investigations with reflections on art that led him to write a significant, if never published, treatise on the aesthetics of dance, and to publish articles on Eugène Grasset, Rodin, Munch, Redon, and Boleslas Biegas.⁵⁷ Between 1896 and 1898, Réja was among the very few people in Paris who regularly saw Munch; he was already friendly with Strindberg during that period. It was Réja who wrote a foreword to Strindberg's *Inferno* after having revised the manuscript, as he would later do for the first part of *Legends*.⁵⁸ (Réja later said that when he met Strindberg he was still ignorant of psychiatry, so the Swedish writer saw him as a young medical student steeped in the occult—a figure who would appear three times in Strindberg's *Legends*. Réja was probably never aware of this fact since the end of the book was written in Swedish rather than French and remained unpublished at his death.)

In his foreword to *Inferno*, Réja rejected ambient naturalism in favor of a demanding idealism, and he was probably interested in the way Strindberg's book conveyed a vision of art as perceived by an overexcited mind. The text seems to maintain the unconscious constantly on the surface even as it keeps all rational perception of the world at a distance. Furthermore, even though his own conclusions would ultimately be different in nature, the concern to recover the essence of artistic feeling within primal forms of expression—which had been Strindberg's concern for several years—must have had a distinct impact on Réja's intellectual development. It is unlikely, however, that Réja saw any of Strindberg's paintings at that time.

Michel Thévoz has shown that Réja's ideas ran counter to medical thinking of the day.⁵⁹ Indeed, right from his first article on art by mental patients, his reflections were basically aesthetic in nature—abstraction, an abandonment of formal coherence in favor of expressiveness, and the myth of a return to roots are the main lines of a scheme that fits right into the Symbolist outlook. The categories that Réja proposed in *L'Art chez les fous* arose from the works themselves, and were based on a qualitative assessment not unrelated to art criticism. For that matter, Réja was the first person to refer to “the author” of a work alongside the terms of “patient” and “madman.” Although he discussed correlations between a given stylistic trait and a patient's mental state, his goal was not at all to produce a diagnostic treatise nor even a strict nomenclature. It is moreover

significant that Réja published this book under the nom de plume he used for his poetry and criticism, rather than signing it Dr. Paul Meunier, who was elsewhere the author of many articles in medical reviews. Far from adopting a scientific perspective and trying to establish laws based on statistical observations, Réja saw art in what had been considered, at best, clinical documents—ones that were usually destroyed after analysis (fig. 190). He abandoned a symptomatological perspective in favor of critical appreciation, and his book features many passages revealing appeal for him of certain drawings and sculptures by patients, which he did not hesitate to compare with the work of known artists. It required both audacity and farsightedness to evoke comparisons, as Réja did here, with Fra Angelico, Jacques Callot, and James Ensor.

Such works have no aesthetic status prior to being the subject of commentary, for they are produced by socially marginal people who cannot claim the title of artist. It is the commentator who grants them that status on perceiving an artistic quality where no one has been accustomed to



Fig. 188
Edvard Munch
Marcel Réja, 1898

Woodcut, 16 × 12 1/2 in.
(40.7 × 32.1 cm)
Munch Museet, Oslo

seeing it, thereby challenging the viewpoint not only of the reader but also of posterity. Réja often pointed out that the creative activity of mental patients remained outside the normal context of artistic creativity and its dissemination, which meant that it offered a special terrain for the observation of what might be called, in its pure state, the urge to make art. Indeed, in the course of his analysis Réja was led to define an entire realm in which art was produced outside the normal conditions—right from his 1901 article, he announced that he would complement the main focus of his study, the art of mental patients, with drawings by spiritual mediums, children, and prisoners. *L'Art chez les fous* thus devoted twenty thoroughly original pages to the art of “uncivilized” peoples, which made his book a key source of the genesis of modern Western art’s relationship to tribal arts. Ultimately, Réja was interested in all manifestations of visual art produced outside a clearly identifiable social context.

Réja’s goals transcended his own specialty. He encountered the art of mental patients in an intellectual environment limited exclusively to a medical outlook on things. Yet beforehand—or perhaps simultaneously, the chronology not being sufficiently precise here—he became familiar with artists such as Munch and de Groux, whose work displayed not only psychic disorder but also unmistakable originality. Hence his introduction to *L'Art chez les fous* expresses the ambition of using pathological case studies to shed light on the larger issue of artistic creativity and genius. This profession of faith, however, just might be seen as a somewhat artificial justification of his interest. Whatever the case, although he accorded the medical and aesthetic registers two distinctly different social characteristics, they were closely related in his intellectual outlook, since during his demonstrations Réja constantly confessed the pleasure he drew from the works under discussion, however naive they might be. He was



Fig. 189.
Henri Héran
Illustration for the back cover of
Ballets et variations by
Marcel Réja, 1898

thereby expressing the crucial criterion in assessing quality—for Réja, the most interesting work was one “that communicates either an idea or an emotion.” This way of thinking was related to Symbolism’s insistence on idealism, such as Réja saw it in the work, say, of Rodin. “Despite overly simple appearances,” he wrote, “the sculptor does not produce forms, which is the work of the caster, but rather vivid ideas that declare themselves directly, without the need for a label or literary description in a catalogue.”⁶⁰ In another article, devoted to his friend the painter and engraver Henri Héran, whom he compared to Munch and Redon, Réja wrote, “The secret of art’s prestige is the occult rhythm that puts us in touch with deep analogies—sensed rather than recognized—between the highly disparate elements affecting us. At which point, reconstituting a given shape or color taken from surrounding reality is not the ultimate goal but rather the means by which we can grasp, beyond all sensation, the feeling. It is a weapon, not the target.”⁶¹ When it comes to the art of mental patients, objective reality is inevitably subjected to a vision that alters it—the act of representing material reality is immediately sabotaged by the inability of the mind to submit to that exercise. Form and idea thus merge completely, whatever the nature of the execution. Réja did not hold skill and craft in great esteem. In 1925, he wrote: “The only characteristic shared by these works is the technical ignorance and clumsiness of their self-taught makers, which furthermore gives them a truly special flavor, a simplicity that sometimes carries grandeur.”⁶² Réja was seeking qualities of an entirely different nature. When discussing drawings of children as well as mental patients, he referred several times to what he called “ideographic inscription,” a form of visual expression whose function was essentially symbolic. His fascination with an unmediated language also surfaced in his ideas on dance, which he contrasted to the “vanity of words and sentences”; as an art, dance “employs procedures of exaggeration or effacement, of varied relationships to the material on which it exerts itself.”⁶³ As we can see, Réja’s position on art’s relationship to objective reality flowed from the call for “distortion” made by Symbolist critics from the late 1880s onward. In a way, abandoning tangible resemblance—the goal of a specific quest among Symbolist painters—was an automatic process for the mentally ill.

In 1901 Réja had written: “The history of a disordered organism sheds much new light on the way that same organism functions when healthy; the history of diseased art is interesting in the same way as humanity’s infantile artistic wailings when trying to carve crude pictures on an auroch horn or deer bone, which we might find silly but whose interest we have no right to deny.”⁶⁴ The idea of a similarity between the artistic expression of mental patients and primitive humanity is related, for that matter,

to a parallel that Réja had already perceived between genius and madness: it was part of an investigation into the primal drives behind artistic creativity, then being carried out by specialists in various fields. The conclusion to *L'Art chez des fous* contains a passage on the issue of the origins of the artistic impulse, linked to an affirmation of the essentially idealist nature of art and expressed in terms halfway between a scientific register and a poetic one. "It would seem that these spontaneous artists are recommencing, on their own behalf, the road traveled by humanity. That is because the main specific features we have discussed in their work, idealism and Symbolism (understood in the special way intended), are also tangibly present in the embryonic expression of the human mind (children, feral, and primitive peoples)."⁶⁵ Réja was thus taking the path—also on his own behalf—of the quest for origins, which Symbolism viewed as a poetic or initiatory one.

During the same period, Alois Riegl focused on similar concerns, even if conducted on a different level of analysis. He, too, employed stylistic analysis in the search for a generative principle behind artistic creativity. Riegl's work, however, was based more rigorously on the study of form properly speaking, as applied to examples drawn from art history, all of which displayed an approach based on an acquired artistic culture. His coining of the concept of *Kunstwollen*, or "artistic will," conveys this thrust by evoking deliberate mental volition. Although Réja was keen to show that visual realism was not inherent to artistic creativity distinct from ornamentation, the search for spontaneity nevertheless led him to conceive of art beyond the scope of any artistic goal. "Art," he wrote, "seems to be the expression of a kind of *obscure awareness* on the part of the individual; it expresses, along with the satisfaction that the practice of every activity brings, the current state of mental accomplishments; it is a kind of concrete diagram in which an individual takes pleasure in synthesizing acquired notions without having to employ the rational, logic procedure of *abstraction*."⁶⁶ In his investigations, Réja sought a mental situation as close as possible to the primal impulse leading to artistic creativity, independent of rational abstraction. In two late texts, he recalled that an Egyptologist and psychiatrist named Ameline had one day shown him drawings that a mental patient, locked naked in his cell, had made on the walls with his excrement. Réja described them as "clumsy but decorative frescoes," and viewed them as a concrete illustration of the theme of the origins of art, via the distress of nudity and the use of fecal matter as pigment.⁶⁷ He spelled things out in the conclusion to *L'Art chez des fous*: the point of departure of all artistic creativity, for both the madman and the genius, should be sought outside what is formally defined as art—"Artistic concerns were originally alien to the production of Art."⁶⁸

Conclusion

Poetries are like languages and religions—they never die a natural death, you have to kill them.

Henri Mazel¹

The intellectual courage required, in a period dominated by rationality and positivist philosophy, to stick to a religious and poetic conception of the world—one that views all matter as mere appearance—has been retrospectively underestimated. Meanwhile, other people have criticized Symbolism for its inability to formulate an aesthetic suited to modern society.² Art historians were still uneasy with Symbolism in the mid-twentieth century, long after the movement had died. Despite the fact that it had spawned no dearth of utopias inspired by anarchist ideas, Symbolism appeared suspiciously *passé* from the politico-aesthetic perspective that many historians brought to bear on the late nineteenth century when they automatically associated artistic *avant-garde* with social progress. The spirit that had attended the birth of Symbolism was never able to evolve into a broader attitude. Hence its posterity was unable to offer a sufficiently powerful antidote to twentieth-century ideologies.

And on closer inspection, it would even appear that this antagonism dates to an earlier period. Right from the early 1890s, Symbolism was criticized for its individualism, its elitism, its concern for tradition, and its obsession with the irrational. The positions adopted by Octave Mirbeau and the evolution displayed by a minor writer like Anatole Baju provide a good illustration of the shifting situation. First a “decadent,” Baju felt in 1886 that art was destined to become “the exclusive privilege of the aristocracy and the literate class,” only to refute these very ideas five years later in his “socialist” manifesto, which disavowed all literature not devoted to society and its future.³ In 1892 Baju published a denunciatory brochure titled *L’Anarchie littéraire* where he stated that, “literature will be less and less individualist; new ideas tend to manifest themselves in special groupings. Thus whether we like it or not, there will be schools, and every literary author who refuses to join one—due to claims of independence—will have no influence on his contemporaries.” This militant

call for group authority and this vision of a future devoid of introspection prefigure Lenin's comments of 1905. "[Literature] cannot be an individual affair, independent of the proletariat's broader cause. Down with literary writers who have no party! Down with literature's supermen! Literature must become an *element* of the proletariat's broader cause, a 'little gear' in the larger social-democratic mechanism, one and indivisible, set into movement by an avant-garde aware of the working class."⁴

The drift toward conservative positions by numerous Symbolist figures, notably after the First World War, was a reaction to collectivist ideologies perceived not as dream-building but as Idea-demolishing systems. Valid links could be established between Symbolism's pan-aestheticism and the far-right philosophy that, right from the early twentieth century, would turn its back on morality in the name of a state conceived as an aesthetic absolute, D'Annunzio's drift from neo-paganism into fascism being one of the most significant examples of this connection. (Yet it should not be forgotten that Symbolism's standard-bearers were already a long way back at that point.) Unlike naturalism, with its tradition of a literature that directly confronted society, Symbolism remained completely utopian when it came to politics. Symbolist groups were not unlike the religious fraternities of yore or the Areopagi of antiquity. The tone was still a long way—even in the manifestos of the 1880s and Aurier's article of 1891—from the one adopted when certain aesthetic positions were assimilated with a revolutionary discourse in the early twentieth century. The next generation, born in the 1880s, was undoubtedly disappointed by Symbolism's divorce from action; the transition to a new era was characterized by the expectation that art would have a direct impact on society, as preached by the Futurists, for example. Yet Symbolism was not "killed" so much by artistic innovation—where it was still possible to observe its influence, even if remote—than by the twentieth century's exegesis of the development of the visual arts. Although numerous source texts—notably including Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*—attest to the links between Symbolism and the artistic innovations that immediately followed it, mid-twentieth-century art historians, with only a few exceptions, remained strangely deaf to them, occasionally to the point of adopting an autistic silence.

In the two realms of the visual arts and poetry, Symbolism entailed not only the invention of new formal possibilities, but also a reflection on the role of the image. The revenge of imagination over reality, such as it occurred, incorporated the harbingers of mass communication as observed in advertising and the press, with their resulting explosion of imagery. At the same time, the naturalist dogma based on the celebration of current events produced an artistic phenomenon of repetition and

amplification of contemporary life: the present day was swamped by the present. In a reaction of disgust, Symbolism generated imagery full of depictions of a legendary past. In this respect, it is important to realize that, far from limiting debate to the realm of arts and letters, the Symbolist edifice was built on a comprehension of the contemporary world in its totality, including what Jean Lahor would describe in 1901 as, "these days of obsessive advertising."⁵ Excessive consumption of images stripped them of their religious significance forever. Symbolism tried to reinvest imagery with its sacred function. The scope of this project clearly transcended the strict field of art, since the concern that the world was forever losing the ability to express itself symbolically, and that images were no longer being used to depict an immaterial reality, dovetailed with the concern that the world was losing its mystery.

The issue of the dissemination of imagery becomes crucial here. Symbolism owed its relatively rapid internationalization to the circulation of illustrations and photographic reproductions as found in reviews of the day. The movement spread further on paper than it did through exhibitions. Although Toorop's painting of *The Three Brides* is now a famous work, it was never exhibited in Paris during the lifetime of the artist (who was little known in France, for that matter). Yet writer and critic Octave Uzanne had a photograph of it pinned to the wall of his apartment in Paris no later than 1896.⁶ Gustave Moreau's major paintings, which are now often described as having remained hidden and out of sight, were accessible through photographs made by the Lecadre firm in Paris, circulating as abundantly as reproductions of works by the Pre-Raphaelites and Burne-Jones. Paper was also the vector of multiple encounters between text and illustration, encounters crucial to the development of Symbolism.

Yet until relatively recent times the history of that period rested on a fiction that held that the transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth was played out on the restricted field of painting, and more specifically painting that more or less intentionally raised a pictorial problematic. From this formalist standpoint, Symbolism could only be incorporated into the history of art through its protagonists who, on the level of style, could be inserted into a linear demonstration of an evolutionary logic that inevitably resulted in the avant-garde movements. That is why discussion of Symbolism meant revealing the hidden face of art, at least up until the 1970s when the movement was progressively rediscovered. The selective process behind the formalist criticism that initially sought, let us not forget, to insert abstract expressionism into a lineage going back to Manet,⁷ was obliged to eliminate all obstacles to the demonstration of that thesis. Yet once Symbolism is pictured in the protean, shifting reality

of its international context, it in no way displays an unequivocal link between artistic intention and formal innovation, a link that has been transformed into the cornerstone of twentieth-century art. On the contrary, the stylistic diversity characterizing Symbolism implies that its idealist wellsprings fed multiple streams that, far from converging on a single issue, would irrigate various landscapes. Some of them were considered to be dead-ends by a formalism that rejected all spirituality, an ideological stance that often served as the basis for dismissing any debt to Symbolism. But this hasty dismissal was based on debatable postulates. In the name of an aesthetic stress on the present (that of naturalism), then of a stress on the present as a sign of the future (that of early twentieth-century manifestos), Symbolism was considered to be an art steeped in backwardness and archaism. Strangely, the history of modern art has often adopted these stresses as its own, occasionally in an incantatory fashion, employing them as criteria for draconian distinctions between “major” and “minor.” Although such distinctions are legitimate on an aesthetic level, they often lead to misrepresentation of historical data by taking into account only those figures responsible for the most startling formal innovations, placed along the evolutionary line of modern art.

Symbolism died very slowly, like an endless dusk that refuses to merge into night. However distant the period that saw its emergence, its lights are still discernible. It is becoming easier to see today that abstraction as it emerged with Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, and Kupka was based on a spiritual background that drew its source from the Symbolist intellectual environment and the determination to produce an art detached from tangible reality.⁸ The heritage of Symbolism’s idealist foundations were still there, as was the link between art and spirituality. This raises the issue of how to present the birth of abstraction, either by magnifying the formal break that was perceived with hindsight or, on the contrary, by seeking the thread of an artistic continuity that linked the two centuries.

For the Surrealists, and for André Breton in particular, painting was a language whose power rested on the imagination. As often emphasized, the “dictation of thought” independent of any rational control, promoted by Breton in his famous manifesto, directly descended from Redon’s deliberate reliance on the unconscious.⁹ Automatic writing, based on the postulate of a conflation between thought and language, thus participated in a radicalization of the subconscious creativity that had occurred on certain fringes of Symbolism. “She began by copying my face and wound up drawing a dream,” wrote Gourmont in his “novel of mental life,” *Sixtine*.¹⁰ Similarly, the Surrealists’ constant allusions to the art of the mentally ill as a non-objective vision of the world were based on a poetic philosophy stemming from Symbolist idealism and from a

deliberate perversion of medical research, as inaugurated by Marcel Réja. This subversion would be taken to its ultimate aesthetic limits by the Surrealists, who adopted Symbolism's mistrust of science as their own. Beyond these well-known examples, other incarnations and multiple vestiges of Symbolism remain to be explored. The movement will surely provide modern art history with the main sources for its own reinvigoration in the years to come.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Remy de Gourmont, *Le Chemin de velours* (Paris, 1911), 210.
- 2 See the exhibition catalog, *Max Klinger* (Bielefeld: Kunsthalle, 1976), 189 (no. 151) and 300 (no. 139).
- 3 See Camille Maclair, *Servitude et grandeur littéraire* (Paris, n.d.), 176ff., and the exhibition catalog, *The Origins of L'Art Nouveau: The Bing Empire* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, 2004).
- 4 Émile Hennequin, "L'Esthétique de Wagner et la doctrine spencérienne," *Revue wagnérienne* (November 1885), 282.
- 5 Franz Zekker, *Arnold Böcklin, Die Toteninsel: Selbsttheorisierung und Abgesang der abendländischen Kultur* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1991), 8.
- 6 See note 1 on pages 80–81 of Philippe Sers's edition of Kandinsky's *Du Spirituel dans l'art et dans la peinture en particulier* (Paris, 1989).
- 7 Remy de Gourmont, *La Culture des idées* (Paris, 1900).
- 8 Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence latine, Éthopée X, Le Panthée* followed by *Acta Rosae Crucis, Lettre à l'archevêque de Paris, Règle et monitoire du Salon de la Rose-Croix* (Paris: n.p., 1892), 317.
- 9 Émile Zola, *Écrits sur l'art*, edited by Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine (Paris, 1991), 44.
- 10 Notably by G.-Albert Aurier, as discussed later, although initially in an article by Alphonse Germain, "Du symbolisme dans la peinture," *Art et Critique* 58 (July 5, 1890), 417.
- 11 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Paris, 1974), 84.
- 12 Gustave Flaubert, *Trois Contes*, edited by Raymond Decesse (Paris, 1975), 132.
- 13 Teodor de Wyzewa, "Notes sur la peinture wagnérienne et le Salon de 1886," *Revue wagnérienne* (May 1886), 104.
- 14 Jean Moréas, "Le Symbolisme," *Le Figaro* (September 18, 1886); reprinted in *Les Premières armes du symbolisme* (Paris, 1889), 31.
- 15 See the exhibition catalog, *Cinquantenaire du Symbolisme* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 1936), 58 (no. 281).
- 16 See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 1:391.

GUIDING SPIRITS

THE PRE-RAPHAELITES AND GEORGE FREDERIC WATTS

- 1 Robert de la Sizeranne, *La Peinture anglaise contemporaine* (Paris, 1895), 1.
- 2 Charles Baudelaire, "Exposition universelle-1855," *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Yves Florenne (Paris, 1966), 621.

- 3 *Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, edited by André Joubin (Paris, 1932), 2 [1853–1856]: 339.
- 4 See Théophile Gautier, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe – 1855* (Paris, 1855), 7; see also 31ff. concerning Millais and Hunt.
- 5 The other members of the group were painters James Collinson (1825–1881) and Frederick George Stephens (1828–1907), sculptor Thomas Woolner (1825–1892), and poet and author William Rossetti (1829–1919).
- 6 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters by a Graduate of Oxford*, vol. 1 (London, 1843) and vol. 2 (London, 1846); the quotations used here are drawn from the complete, five-volume edition published in New York (American Publishers Corporation, n.d.).
- 7 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 1:136.
- 8 Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 2:383.
- 9 Robert de la Sizeranne, *Ruskin et la religion de la beauté* (Paris, 1897).
- 10 Gabriel Mourey, *Passé le Déroit: la vie et l'art à Londres* (Paris, 1894).
- 11 "The Present Conditions of Art," *The Nineteenth Century* (February), 1880: 235; reprinted in M.S. Watts, *George Frederic Watts: Annals of an Artist's Life* (1912), 180.
- 12 Prosper Mérimée, "Les Beaux-Arts en Angleterre," *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 15, 1857), *Oeuvres complètes. Études anglo-américaines*, edited by Georges Connes (Paris, 1930), 163ff.
- 13 Émile Zola, "Mon Salon. Le moment artistique," *Écrits sur l'art*, edited by Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine (Paris, 1991), no. 107.

PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES (1824–1898)

- 14 Félix Fénéon, "Les Impressionnistes en 1886," reprinted in Félix Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, edited by Joan U. Halperin (Geneva, 1970), 1:37.
- 15 Some of the decorative paintings in the Amiens museum were monumental pieces exhibited at the Salons of 1861 and 1863 before they had a final destination—they were bought by the government and later placed on permanent loan at the museum. The chronology of projects for which Puvis de Chavannes was commissioned to execute the decoration is as follows: 1864–1865, Musée d'Amiens; 1866, Hôtel Vignon, Paris; 1867–1869, Palais de Longchamp, Marseille; 1870–75, Hôtel de Ville, Poitiers; 1874–1877, church of Sainte-Geneviève (Panthéon), Paris; 1880–1882, Musée d'Amiens (completion of cycle); 1882, Hôtel Bonnat, Paris; 1883–1886, Musée de Lyon; 1886–1889, La Sorbonne, Paris; 1888–1891, Musée de Rouen; 1889–1892, Hôtel de Ville, Paris; 1891–1894, Hôtel de Ville de Paris (second phase);

- 1893–1896, Boston Library; 1893–1898, Panthéon (second phase).
- 16 Alix (or Alice) d'Anethan was born in Brussels, Belgium, but spent most of her career in France, where she studied under Puvis de Chavannes.
- 17 On Bauderon de Vermoron, see Aimée Brown Price, *Puvis de Chavannes: A Study of the Easel Paintings and a Catalogue of the Painted Works* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1972), 36, note 7.
- 18 See Thiébauld-Sisson, "Puvis de Chavannes raconté par lui-même," *Le Temps* (January 16, 1895); reprinted in *Puvis de Chavannes au musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon* (Paris, 1998), 49.
- 19 Sar [Joséphine] Péladan, "Gustave Moreau," *L'Ermitage* (January 1895), 34.
- 20 Thiébauld-Sisson, "Puvis de Chavannes . . .," 53.
- 21 See Léon Riotor, *Puvis de Chavannes*, Paris (n.d. [1914]), 16. The exhibition catalog lists no. 1569 as a "series of drawings" (*Exposition de 1896*, illustrated catalog, Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, reproduced in *Modern Art in Paris*, edited by Théodore Reff, vol. 18, *Salon de Chavannes: Panneau pour le Musée de Rouen*, *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* (1890), 88.
- 22 Marius Vachon, *Puvis de Chavannes* (Paris, n.d.), 167, quoted in Dominique Viéville *Collections: Amiens, Musée de Picardie, Les peintures murales de Puvis de Chavannes à Amiens* (Amiens, 1989), 28–29.

GUSTAVE MOREAU (1828–1898)

- 24 Georges Bataille, "Gustave Moreau l'attardé précurseur du surréalisme," *Arts* (June 7, 1961), 18.
- 25 Gustave Moreau, *Écrits sur l'art*, edited by Peter Cooke (Fontfroide, 1984), 1:117.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 2:236.
- 27 See page 198ff.
- 28 Moreau, *Écrits sur l'art*, 1:74.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 30 See Geneviève Lacambre, "Documentation et création: l'exemple de Gustave Moreau," *Usages de l'image au XIX^e siècle (1848–1914)*, proceedings of a symposium at the Musée d'Orsay, October 24–26, 1990 (Paris, 1992), and Yukiko Oki, "Gustave Moreau and the Travel Magazine *Tour du Monde*," *Bulletin of Musashino Art University* 31 (2000), 17.
- 31 See Geneviève Lacambre's catalog entries, nos. 63 to 65, in *Gustave Moreau 1826–1898*, published for the traveling exhibition hosted by the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, the Art Institute, Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998–1999.
- 32 Robert de Montesquiou, "Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave

- Moreau," in *Gustave Moreau*, exhibition catalog (Paris: Galerie Georges Petit, 1906), 18.
- 33 Joris-Karl Huysmans, "Le Salon officiel en 1880," in *L'Art moderne*, edited by Hubert Juin, (Paris, 1975), 132. This article was first anthologized in 1883.
- 34 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Certains*, edited by Hubert Juin (Paris, 1975), 256. *Certains* was first published in 1889.
- 35 Ary Renan, "Gustave Moreau," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (May 1886), 377 and (July 1886), 35.
- 36 Moreau, *Écrits sur l'art*, II:231.
- 37 Jean Lorrain, "Chronique de Paris – Un maître sorcier," *L'Événement* (November 29, 1888).

ARNOLD BÖCKLIN (1827–1901)

- 38 Alfred Julius Meier-Graefe, *Der Fall Böcklin und die Lehre von den Einheiten* (Stuttgart, 1905).
- 39 "Initial list (August [1891] / of artists to be exhibited / at the Salon de la Rose-Croix Catholique / on April 1, 1892," Ms 13205, Fol. 584. Fonds Péladan, Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, Paris.
- 40 Gustav Floerke, *Zehn Jahre mit Böcklin* (Munich, 1901), 14. Quoted in Robert Kopp, "Böcklin, Buckhardt et l'Italie," 48-14: *La revue du Musée d'Orsay* 13 (Autumn 2001), 48.
- 41 Meier-Graefe's analysis was based on two aesthetic categories, "linear" (*Zeichnerisch*, typical of works in which draftsmanship dominates) and "painterly" (*Malerisch*). See Dieter Horisch, "Der Fall Böcklin," in the exhibition catalog *Arnold Böcklin 1827–1901* (Matildenhöhe, Darmstadt, 1977), 1:14.
- 42 Jules Laforgue, "Le Salon de Berlin," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (August 1, 1883). See Jules Laforgue, *Textes de critique d'art*, edited by Mireille Dotin (Lille, 1988), 60.

A SUBVERSIVE IDEALISM

STRANGE BEAUTY

- 1 Odilon Redon, *A soi-même: Journal (1867–1915, Notes sur la vie, l'art et les artistes*, with an introduction by Jacques Morland (Paris, 1992), 28.
- 2 Letter from Redon to André Mellerio, July 21, 1898, published in *Lettres d'Odilon Redon 1878–1916. Publiées par sa famille avec une préface de Marius-Ary Leblond* (Paris and Brussels, 1923), 30–31.
- 3 See Douglas Druck and Peter Kort Zegers, "In the Public Eye," in the exhibition catalog *Odilon Redon* (Chicago: The Art Institute; Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum; London, Royal Academy, 1994–1995), 130.
- 4 Joris-Karl Huysmans, "Le nouvel album d'Odilon Redon," *La Revue indépendante* (February 1, 1886), 291; reprinted as "Cauchemar" in Huysmans, *Croquis parisiens* (Paris, 1886), 147.

- 5 See Dario Gamboni, *La Plume et le pinceau: Odilon Redon et la littérature* (Paris, 1989), 58ff.
- 6 The expression "génial égaré" was employed by Clauder Roger-Marx in his essay, "Odilon Redon ou le visible au service de l'invisible," in the exhibition catalog *Odilon Redon* (Paris, Orangerie des Tuileries, 1956–1957), xvii.
- 7 See Druick and Zegers, "In the Public Eye," 157.
- 8 It is nevertheless possible that this horizontal band at the bottom of the painting was added later.
- 9 Charles Baudelaire, "Salon de 1859," *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Yves Florenne (Paris, 1966), 3:390.
- 10 The cover of Émile Hennequin's translation of Poe, *Contes grotesques* (Paris, 1882) featured a reproduction of a charcoal drawing by Redon.
- 11 See Louis Seylaz, *Edgar Poe et les premiers symbolistes français* (Lausanne, 1923), 170ff.
- 12 Camille Mauclair, *Le Génie d'Edgar Poe* (Paris, 1925), 278.
- 13 Letter from Maurice Maeterlinck to Léon Lemonnier, June 22, 1928, quoted in Léon Lemonnier, *Edgar Poe et les poètes français* (Paris, 1932), 207–208.
- 14 This painting is known today by the title of *Le Foyer* (The Hearth).
- 15 Jean Lorrain, "Histoire de masques: L'Impossible alibi," *Le Journal*, March 11, 1899. Subsequent quotations are translations of Lorrain's text.
- 16 In Paris in 1907, Martini met Gabriel Mourey, who in 1889 had published a complete French translation of Poe's poems. Martini's illustrations of Poe would remain largely unpublished, although he exhibited eight of them at the Venice Biennale of 1909. George E. Woodberry's *Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, published in Boston and New York that same year, was illustrated by Martini.
- 17 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Les Poèmes d'Edgar Poe," *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 2:772.
- 18 Mauclair, *Le Génie*...., 51.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 50.

SATANISM AND MOCKERY

- 20 Translation of an extract from Alfred Jarry, *Ubu sur la Butte* (Paris, 1906), 6.
- 21 Letter from Baudelaire to Rops, February 21, 1866. See Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Yves Florenne (Paris, 1966), 3:1568, and Charles Baudelaire, *Les Epaves* (Bruxelles, 1866).
- 22 Edm. P. [Edmond Picard], "L'infâme Fély," *L'Art moderne* 43 (October 24, 1886), 338.
- 23 In his diary entry for May 15, 1890, Edmond de Goncourt

noted, "Rodenbach this evening . . . chatted about Rodin's mental obsession with Rops's erotic compositions. He portrayed Rodin as living close to the print-maker for several years, becoming familiar with his most private works and remembering them—remembering them only too well. And he said that, having one day reproduced one of Rops's most original creations, a crouching woman who seemed to be baying at the moon, in the form of a statuette of a female sphinx. . . . Rodin first claimed he didn't remember it, then, given recognition of the fact by people here and there, finally admitted one day that it had entered his home despite himself, and that he just couldn't prevent himself from reproducing it." Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, edited by Robert Ricatte (Paris, 1989), 3:426.

- 24 "Rops liked and sought to give the impression of a Mephistopheles." Hugues Rebelle, *Trois Artistes Étrangers* (Paris, 1901), quoted in Francine-Claire Legrand, "Rops et Baudelaire," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, December 1986, p. 198.
- 25 Hugues Rebelle, "Félicien Rops," *Mercure de France* (December 1898), 650.
- 26 See Pierre Cogne's introduction to Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Paris, 1978), 13.
- 27 Jules Barbey d'Aureville, *Les Diaboliques* (Paris, 1882).
- 28 See notably Octave Uzanne, *La Chronique scandaleuse: Documents sur les mœurs du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1879). Uzanne wrote the preface to a book by German author Eugen Dühren [Iwan Bloch] *Le Marquis de Sade et son temps: Etudes relatives à l'histoire de la civilisation et des mœurs au XVIII^e siècle*, translated into French by Dr. A. Weber-Riga (Berlin and Paris, 1901). See also Scott Carpenter, *Acts of Fiction: Resistance and Resolution from Sade to Baudelaire* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1996). The Symbolist generation's interest in de Sade was clear: in 1887, Charles Henry—a poet who was also a popularizer of scientific theories on color and was a friend of Seurat—authored a little booklet, published by Dentu, titled *La Vérité sur le marquis de Sade* (The Truth about the Marquis de Sade).
- 29 On Swinburne's "diabolical" and its importance for Symbolism, see André Barre, *Le Symbolisme: Essai historique sur le mouvement symboliste en France de 1885 à 1900* (Paris, 1911): 1:11.
- 30 Baudelaire, "Fusées," *Oeuvres complètes*, 3:1214.
- 31 *James Ensor: Peintre et graveur*, special issue of *La Plume*, 1899. The exhibition

on the premises of *La Plume* ran from December 15, 1898, to January 15, 1899. See Dominique Morel, "James Ensor et La Plume: Histoire et fortune critique de la première exposition personnelle d'Ensor à Paris," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (November 1991), 205. Ensor sought recognition in Paris, as witnessed by his dispatch of roughly ten paintings and etchings to the Salon des Indépendants of 1901. See Gustave Coquiou, *Les Indépendants. 1884–1920* (Paris, 1920), 19.

- 32 When exhibited with *Les XX* in 1884, the painting was titled *Les Masques*. Ensor later changed it to *Scandalized Masks*, the title by which it is known today.
- 33 Émile Verhaeren, "Chronique artistique: L'exposition des XX," *La Jeune Belgique* III: 15 (February 1884), 197–198. Quoted in the exhibition catalog, *Les XX, La Libre Esthétique: Cent ans après* (Brussels: Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 1993), 228.
- 34 Gustave Lagye, "L'art jeune: Exposition des XX. La levée de Piques," *La Fédération Artistique* (March 1, 1884), 157. Quoted in *Les XX, La Libre Esthétique*...., 228.
- 35 See Paul Fierens, *James Ensor* (Paris, 1943), 21.
- 36 See Jacques van Lennep, "Les expositions burlesques à Bruxelles de 1870 à 1914: l'art zwanze—une manifestation pré-dadaïste?" *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, (1970), 2–4:127; Jacques van Lennep, "Les expositions burlesques à Bruxelles de 1870 à 1914: compléments," *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Miscellanea Philippe Roberts-Jones* (1985–1988), 1–3:313. A French equivalent of such mocking exhibitions were the shows called *Arts Incohérents*. See the exhibition catalog, *Arts Incohérents, Académie du Désiroire* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 1992).
- 37 Alfred Jarry, *Messaline. Roman de l'ancienne Rome* (Paris, 1901).
- 38 Interviewed by Roger Valbelle in *Excelsior* (November 4, 1921), quoted in "Trois textes peu connus relatifs à Ubu: Gauguin, Tailhade, Gémier," *Alfred Jarry*, special issue of *Europe*, 623–24 (March–April 1981), 142.
- 39 Alfred Jarry, "Discours à la première représentation d'*Ubu Roi*," *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Michel Arrivé (Paris, 1987), 2:400.
- 40 Quoted in Henri Behar, *Jarry, le monstre et la marionnette* (Paris, 1973), 88.
- 41 A. van Bever, *Maurice Maeterlinck* (Paris, 1904), 15.
- 42 Heinrich von Kleist, *On the Marionette Theater*, translated by Robert Lonoke, <http://www.texaschapbookpress.com/kleistmilburn.htm>.

TRADITION AND STYLISTIC VOCABULARY

- 43 Translation of an extract from Joséphin Péladan, *Le timbre noir*, Paris, 1907), 11.
- 44 Quoted in Daniel Wildenstein, *Monet* (Cologne, 1996), 1:308.
- 45 See Elisabeth Puckett Martin, *The Symbolist Criticism of Painting. France, 1880–1895* (Dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, 1948; republished Ann Arbor, 1991), 126ff.
- 46 See Pierre Vaisse, *La Troisième République et les peintres* (Paris, 1995), 66ff.
- 47 Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse in European Art 1860–1905* (New York, 1992).
- 48 Maurice Denis, "Définition du néo-traditionnisme," *Art et critique* 65 and 66 (August 23 and 30, 1890), 540 and 556. Reprinted in Maurice Denis, *Le Ciel et l'Arcadie*, edited by Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris, 1993), 5.
- 49 See the exhibition catalog *Deutsche Künstlerkolonien 1890–1910: Worpswede, Dachau, Willingshausen, Grötzingen, Die »Brücke«, Murnau* (Karlsruhe: Städtische Galerie, 1998–1999).
- 50 The Nabis (Hebrew for "prophets") were founded in Paris in the summer of 1888 by Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Henri-Gabriel Ibels, Paul Ranson, and Paul Sérusier—all of whom studied at the Académie Julian—along with René Piot, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Édouard Vuillard, students at the École des Beaux-Arts. They were later joined by Mögens Ballin, Georges Lacombe, Aristide Maillol, Jozsef Rippl-Ronai, Félix Vallotton, and Jan Verkade. The last exhibition generally considered to be a group show was held in April 1900 at the Bernheim Gallery, and featured works by Bonnard, Denis, Ibels, Maillol, Ranson, Roussel, Sérusier, Vallotton, and Vuillard, plus Hermann Paul.
- 51 Émile Bernard, "Le Symbolisme pictural 1886–1936," *Mercure de France* (May 1936), reprinted in Émile Bernard, *Propos sur l'Art*, edited by Anne Rivière (Paris, 1994), 1:283.
- 52 Joséphin Péladan, *Le Vice suprême* (Paris, 1884), 287.
- 53 See Albert Boime, "Le Musée des copies," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (October 1964), 237.
- 54 Joséphin Péladan, *Le Secret des corporations: la clé de Rabelais* (Paris, 1905), 7ff.
- 55 See Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, "Les artistes belges et la 'Rose + Croix,'" *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Miscellanea Henri Pauwels* 1–3 (1989–1991), 433. Also see Michel Draguet, "Idée, Idea, Idéal," in Michel Draguet (ed.), *Splendeurs de l'Idéal: Rops, Khnopff, Delville et leur temps* (Liège, 1997), 61ff.
- 56 Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence latine: Éthopée X*,

- Le Panthée*, suivi de: *Acta Rosae Crucis. Lettre à l'archevêque de Paris. Règle et monitoire du Salon de la Rose-Croix* (Paris, 1892), 292–93.
- 57 *Le Salon de Joséphin Péladan: Cinquième année* (Paris, 1888), 91.
- 58 See the exhibition catalog, *Polyptyques: Le Tableau multiple du moyen-âge au XX^e siècle*, (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1990), 188 (no. 42).
- 59 Joséphin Péladan, "L'Art mystique et la critique contemporaine," *Le Foyer* 313 (November 20, 1881), 387.
- 60 *Le Salon de Joséphin Péladan: Dixième année, Avec instauration de la Rose-Croix esthétique* (Paris, 1891), 56.
- 61 "Initial list (August [1891] / of artists to be exhibited / at the Salon de la Rose-Croix Catholique / on April 1, 1892," Ms 13205, Fol. 584. Fonds Péladan, Bibliothèque de l'arsenal, Paris. Péladan later disapproved of artists that Antoine de La Rochefoucauld had included in the first Salon de la Rose-Croix; see Péladan, "Salon du Champ de Mars," *La Rose+Croix. Organe Trimestriel de l'Ordre*, n.d. [1893], 4 and 13, where it would seem that works exhibited in that show by "Bernard and the others" were henceforth considered the "worst [kind of] painterly iunacy."
- 62 The screen was titled *Les Bûcherons misérables – Les Saisons* (The Wretched Woodcutters—The Seasons), 1891. See the exhibition catalog, *Émile Bernard 1868–1941. A Pioneer of Modern Art* (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle and Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, 1990), 359 (no. 168).
- 63 Letter from Émile Bernard to Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, 1893. Bongor Archives (829 V/1962), Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam.
- 64 See Jean-Jacques Luthi, *Sur les Pas d'Émile Bernard en Égypte* (Alexandria, 1985), 9.
- 65 See Claire Barbillon's introduction, "L'esthétique pratique de Charles Blanc," in Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (Paris, 2000), 15.
- 66 Letter from Émile Bernard to his mother, Cairo, March 1898. MS. 374 (5,1), fol. 59 Bibliothèque Centrale des Musées Nationaux, Paris. The book in question was *Théorie scientifique des couleurs et leurs applications à l'art et à l'industrie*, (Paris, 1881), being the French translation of the book published two years earlier by Ogden Nicholas Rood, *The Elements of Color* (New York, 1879).
- 67 Letter from Émile Bernard to his father, Cairo, August 1, 1898. MS. 374 (5,1), fol. 11, Bibliothèque Centrale des Musées Nationaux, Paris.
- 68 Anquetin's writings on this question were not published, however, until 1912, in the magazine *Comœdia*.
- 69 Point traveled to Italy in 1894. At the 1896 Salon de la Rose-Croix he exhibited an egg tempera painting and a fresco done in the tradition of the Italian primitives. See Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix* (New York, 1976), 111.
- 70 "In Florence I devoted myself primarily to the oldest painters, my preference going to the Byzantine mosaics. I had dreamed of an art free of all reality, an art of pure spirituality, and I found it there. Then came Giotto, Simone Menini [sic, perhaps Memmi, for Lippo Memmi], Simone Martini, Taddeo Gaddi, etc., whom I went to see enthusiastically. I stopped at Angelico, already finding him too objective." Émile Bernard, *L'Aventure de ma vie*, unpublished typescript, private collection, Paris, 46.
- 71 Émile Bernard, "De l'art naïf et de l'art savant," *Mercure de France* (April 1895), 86, reprinted in Émile Bernard, *Propos sur l'art*, 2:55.
- 72 Émile Bernard, "Ce que c'est que l'art mystique," *Mercure de France* (January 1895), 28, reprinted in Émile Bernard, *Propos sur l'art*, 2:22.
- 73 Émile Bernard, "Le Salon du Caire," unidentified press cutting probably published in *L'Arte*, saved by Bernard with a view to later republication. Private collection. See also Émile Bernard, *Réflexions d'un témoin de la décadence du Beau* (Cairo), 1902.
- 74 Letter from Émile Bernard to his mother, Cairo, late March 1899. MS. 374 (5,1), fol. 92, Bibliothèque Centrale des Musées Nationaux, Paris.

"IDEALISM"

- 75 Translation of extract from Marcel Schwob's preface to *Roi au masque d'or*, (Paris, 1917), xi.
- 76 Octave Uzanne, "Sensations d'art et expressions d'idées," *L'Art et l'Idée* 1 (January 1892), 8.
- 77 Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*, edited by Daniel Grojnowski (Vanves, 1984). The first edition was published in 1891. Even these few references include a comment by Verlaine, who only mentioned Hegel, Schopenhauer and Kant in order to criticize their "Germanic" influence on contemporary French thought.
- 78 Camille Maclair, "Notes sur l'idée pure," *Mercure de France* (September 1892), 45.
- 79 Alphonse Germain, *Pour le Beau*, special issue of *Essais d'Art libre* (February–March 1893), 5.
- 80 See Gourmont's comment in Huret, *Enquête...*, 130. See also Remy de Gourmont, "Le symbolisme," *La Revue blanche* (June 1892), 321,

- and "L'idéalisme," *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* (1892), 145. Both articles were reprinted, in slightly different form, in Remy de Gourmont, *Le Chemin de velours: Nouvelles dissociations d'idées* (Paris, 1911), 213 and 219. Gourmont would return to this subject later in "Les racines de l'idéalisme," *Mercure de France* (October 1904), 5.
- 81 Émile Verhaeren, "Le symbolisme," *L'Art moderne* (April 24, 1887), reprinted in *Impressions: Troisième série* (Paris, 1928), 115–16.
- 82 See Camille Maclair, *Le Génie d'Edgar Poe* (Paris, 1925), 295.
- 83 Jean Thorel, "Les romantiques allemands et les symbolistes français," *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* (1891), 100.
- 84 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 85 See Jean-Paul Bouillon, "Denis, Taine, Spencer: Les origines positivistes du mouvement Nabi," *Bulletin* [1999] de la Société de l'Histoire de l'art français (2000), 291.
- 86 See Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard* (Paris, 1997), 26.
- 87 Gustave Kahn, "Réponse des symbolistes," *L'Événement* (September 28, 1886).

SYMBOLISM IN ITS DAY

INVENTING SYMBOLISM

- 1 Charles Chassé, *Gauguin sans légendes* (Paris, 1965), 24. It was artist Henri Delavallée who made the comment.
- 2 Émile Bernard, *L'Aventure de ma vie*, unpublished typescript, private collection, 38–39.
- 3 Émile Bernard, "Notes sur l'école dite de Pont-Aven," *Mercure de France* (December 1903); reprinted in Émile Bernard, *Propos sur l'art*, edited by Anne Rivière (Paris, 1994), 1:66.
- 4 *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin*, edited by Victor Merlhes (Paris, 1984), 232 (no. 165).
- 5 G.-Albert Aurier, "Le symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France* (March 1891), 155; reprinted in G.-Albert Aurier, *Oeuvres posthumes*, edited by Remy de Gourmont, (Paris, 1893), 205.
- 6 *Ibid.*, From the English translation by P.S. Falla in the exhibition catalog *French Symbolist Painters* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1972), 165.
- 7 G.-Albert Aurier, "Les peintres symbolistes," *Revue encyclopédique* (April 1892); reprinted in Aurier, *Oeuvres posthumes*, 305.
- 8 Julien Leclercq, "Albert Aurier," *Essais d'art libre* (1892–1893), 2:201.
- 9 Charles Chassé, *Le Mouvement symboliste dans l'art du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1947), 70.
- 10 Around December 20, 1888. *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin*, 306 (no. 193).

- 11 René Ghil, *Traité du verbe* (Paris, 1886).
- 12 Aurier, "Les peintres symbolistes," *Oeuvres posthumes*, 303.
- 13 *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, edited by Janine Bailly-Herzberg (Paris, 1988), vol. 3 [1891–1894]: 66 (no. 654).

CLOISSONISM

- 14 See Rodolphe Rapetti, "Débâcles," in the exhibition catalog *Monet: I luoghi della pittura*, (Trévise, Casa dei Carraresi, 2001), 67.
- 15 Paul Gauguin, "Exposition de la Libre Esthétique," *Essais d'art libre* (February/March/April 1895), 30.
- 16 Édouard Dujardin, "Aux XX et aux Indépendants: Le cloisonisme (1)," *La Revue indépendante*, (March 1888), 10.
- 17 See Jules Laforgue, *Textes de critique d'art*, edited by Mireille Dottin (Lille, 1988), 25.
- 18 Maurice Denis, "Paul Sérusier," in Paul Sérusier, *ABC de la peinture* (Paris, 1942), 42.
- 19 Émile Verhaeren, "Le Salon des Vingt à Bruxelles," *La Vie moderne* (February 26, 1887), 135.
- 20 G.-Albert Aurier, "Le symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France* (March 1891), 165.
- 21 See Richard Shiff, "La touche de Cézanne: Entre vision impressionniste et vision symboliste," proceedings of the symposium *Cézanne aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1997), 117.
- 22 Georges Lecomte, "L'art contemporain," *La Revue indépendante* (April 1892), 1.

SYMBOLISM, NEO-IMPRESSIONISM, DIVISIONISM

- 23 The exhibition catalog listed the original French titles as follows: *VISIONS. Les auréoles du Christ ou les sensibilités de la Lumière*. a. *La gaie. L'adoration des bergers* [Merry Light: The Adoration of the Shepherds]. b. *La crue. Jésus montré au peuple* [Harsh Light: Jesus Shown to the People]. c. *La vive et rayonnante. L'entrée à Jérusalem* [Lively and Radiant Light: The Entry into Jerusalem]. d. *La triste et brisée. Satan et les légions fantastiques tourmentant le crucifié* [Sad and Broken Light: Satan and the Fantastic Legions Tormenting the Crucified Christ]. e. *La tranquille et sereine. La descente de croix* [Calm and Serene Light: The Descent from the Cross]. f. *L'intense. Le Christ montant au ciel* [Intense Light: Christ Ascending to Heaven]. Begun in 1885, the cycle was completed in 1886.
- 24 Octave Maus, "Les Vingtistes parisiens," *L'Art moderne* (June 27, 1886), 201.
- 25 See Félix Fénéon, "Les impressionnistes en 1886" in Félix Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, edited by Joan U. Halperin (Geneva, 1970), 27.

- The brochure that Fénéon published under that title in December 1886 included several articles and was the basis of his reputation. It represented a key document in disseminating the principles of the Neo-Impressionist aesthetic. Coming quick on the heels of Paul Adam, then, Fénéon argued the continuity between Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism.
- 26 Gustave Coquirot, *Seurat* (Paris, 1924), 234.
 - 27 Letter in a private collection. See Michael F. Zimmermann, *Les Mondes de Seurat* (Paris, 1991), 299.
 - 28 Paul Adam, "Les impressionnistes à l'exposition des Indépendants," *La Vie moderne* (April 15, 1888), 229.
 - 29 See notably Alphonse Germain, "Théorie chromo-luminariste," *La Plume* (September 1, 1891), 285, who stressed the impossibility of any scientific use, in painting, of the law of the simultaneous contrast of colors, an opinion shared by Charles Henry. Paul Adam felt, with hindsight, that the Neo-Impressionists should have taken their experiments in the division of color even further. See Paul Adam, *Dix Ans d'art français* (Paris, 1909), 278.
 - 30 Hippolyte Taine, *De l'Intelligence* (Paris, 1870). In the second chapter, Taine analyzed perceptual mechanisms and discussed the mediating role of the "underlying mental work" performed by memory. His concept of "associated perception," inspired by Alexander Bain (1818–1903), took the form of a "visual correction" when it came to the phenomena of vision. See *De l'Intelligence* (Paris, 1883), I: 191–194, 313, and II, 10, 156, 361.
 - 31 Adam, *Dix Ans d'art français*, 38.
 - 32 Jules Laforgue, "L'impressionnisme," in *Textes de critique d'art*, edited by Mireille Dottin, (Lille, 1988), 171. Laforgue's text, written in 1883, was only published in 1903 in *Mélanges posthumes*.
 - 33 Paul Adam, "Peintres impressionnistes," *Revue contemporaine* (May 1886), 542.
 - 34 Georges Vanor (Georges Richard van Ormelingen), *L'Art symboliste* (Paris, 1889).
 - 35 Adam, *Dix ans d'art français*, 38.
 - 36 Paul Adam, Foreword to Vanor, *L'Art symboliste*, 10.
 - 37 Paul Adam, "Les impressionnistes à l'exposition des Indépendants," *La Vie moderne* (April 15, 1888), 229.
 - 38 Adam, "Peintres impressionnistes," *Revue contemporaine* (Paris), 548.
 - 39 Adam, foreword to Vanor, *L'Art symboliste*, 11.
 - 40 J. M. Guyau, *Les Problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* (Paris, 1935), 134.
 - 41 Ibid., 129.
 - 42 Quoted by Émile Verhaeren, preface to the exhibition catalog, *Henri-Edmond Cross* (Paris: Galerie Druet, 1905).
 - 43 "Infatti io sono convinto che nelle civiltà avanzatissime degli antichi Egizi, dei Greci e dei nostri primitivi, la pittura non doveva essere stata concepita altrimenti che come una manifestazione d'arte soggettiva, sintetica, simbolica ed ideista, destinata a decorare con dei pensieri, con dei segni, con delle idee le murali banalità degli edifici umani. Il quadro da cavaletto, o quanto oggi si intende per pittura, non è che una raffinata trasformazione sopravvenuta dippoi, per adattare l'arte alle esigenze particolariste ed al comfort delle civiltazioni successive, e soprattutto moderne." Vittore Grubicy de Dragon, *Prima Esposizione Triennale, Brera 1891: Tendenze evolutive delle arti plastiche* (Milan, 1891), 51.
- SYMBOLISM, DECADENCE, NATURALISM**
- 44 Edmond Jaloux, preface to the exhibition catalog, *Cinquantenaire du Symbolisme* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1936), vi.
 - 45 Jean Moréas, "Le symbolisme," *Le Figaro* (September 18, 1886); reprinted in Jean Moréas, *Les Premières Armes du symbolisme* (Paris, 1889), 38.
 - 46 See André Barre, *Le symbolisme* (Paris, 1911), 1:96ff.
 - 47 Jean Moréas, "Les Décadents," *XIX^e siècle* (August 11, 1885); reprinted in Moréas, *Les Premiers Armes...*, 27.
 - 48 See Markus Winkler, "Décadence actuelle," *Benjamin Constant Kritik der französischen Aufklärung* (Frankfurt, 1984).
 - 49 Quoted in Bonner Mitchell, *Les Manifestes littéraires de la Belle Epoque. 1886–1914. Anthologie critique* (Paris, 1966), 16.
 - 50 Paul Verlaine, *Le Décadent* (January 1–15, 1888). Quoted in Barre, *Le Symbolisme*, 1:100.
 - 51 Jacques Plovert (Paul Adam), *Petit Glossaire pour servir à l'usage des auteurs décadents et symbolistes* (Paris, 1888).
 - 52 [Remy de Gourmont], *Les Petites Revues: Essai de bibliographie* (Paris, 1900).
 - 53 Moréas, "Le Symbolisme," 34, 39.
 - 54 In the 1880s Roll executed several paintings that constitute a portrait of contemporary French society, an intention made clear by the titles of the works, such as *Roubey the Cement Worker* (1884, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva), *Marianne Offrey, Hawker of Produce* (1884, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau), and *Manda Lamétrie, Farm-Wife* (1887, Musée d'Orsay Paris).
 - 55 Edvard Munch, *Livfrisen tilblivelse*, n.d. [1929?], 10; quoted in Ragna Stang, *Edvard Munch: The Man and His Art* (New York, 1979), 67.
 - 56 Reinhold Heller, *Edvard Munch's Life Frieze: Its Beginnings and Origins* (Ann Arbor, 1969), 35. See also Stang, *Edvard Munch*, 103.
 - 57 *Studie zu einer Serie "Die Liebe."* See Jan Kneher, *Edvard Munch in seinen Ausstellungen zwischen 1892 und 1912* (Worms, 1994), 32.
 - 58 See Kneher, *Edvard Munch...*, 150.
 - 59 During Munch's first stay in Paris, in 1885, James Tissot exhibited a series of fifteen canvases on the theme of *Women of Paris*. It is not known whether Munch saw the show but the theme and quality of social investigation suggested by the title were congruent with the concerns of the "Christiania bohemians." See the exhibition catalog, *Exposition J.-J. Tissot* (Paris, Galerie Sedelmeyer, April 19–June 15, 1885).
 - 60 See Heller, *Edvard Munch...*, 68.
 - 61 Charles Laurent, *Paris* (May 1, 1889), quoted in Gilbert Guisan and Doris Jakubec, *Félix Vallotton: Documents pour une biographie et pour l'histoire d'une oeuvre* (Lausanne, 1973), 1:285.
 - 62 Letter from Félix Vallotton to his brother, January 1893; see Guisan and Jakubec, *Félix Vallotton...*, 88.
 - 63 See Hedy Hahnloser-Bühler, *Félix Vallotton et ses amis* (Paris, 1936), 278.
 - 64 Sasha M. Newman (editor), *Félix Vallotton* (New York/London/ Paris, 1991), 128ff.
 - 65 See the entry on this work in the exhibition catalog, *Polyptyques: Le tableau multiple du moyen-âge au vingtième siècle* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1990), 188.
 - 66 As a critic, Vallotton was one of the first people to take an interest in Rousseau, whom he mentioned in a review of "L'Exposition des artistes Indépendants," *Gazette de Lausanne* (March 25, 1891). See the exhibition catalog, *Henri Rousseau* (Paris: Grand Palais, 1984), 109.
 - 67 Remy de Gourmont, "Le symbolisme," *Revue blanche* (June 1892), reprinted in Remy de Gourmont, *Le Chemin de velours: Nouvelles dissociations d'idées* (Paris, 1911), 222–23.
 - 68 Max Nordau, *Dégénérescence* (Paris, 1894); *Degeneration* (New York: Appleton, 1895).
 - 69 See André Barre, *Le Symbolisme* (Paris, 1911), 101ff.
- SYMBOLIST ART**
- 1 Moreau, *Écrits sur l'art*, edited by Peter Cooke (Fontfroide, 1984), II:258.
- DEMATERIALIZATION AND ABSTRACTION**
- 2 Paul Herrmann was active in Paris under the pseudonym of Henri Heran. He combined woodcutting with lithography no later than 1896.
 - 3 The periodical ceased publication in 1896.
 - 4 *Lettres de Paul Gauguin à Georges-Daniel de Monfreid*, edited by A. Joly-Ségalen (Paris, 1950), 70 (no. XIII).
 - 5 See Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Random House, 1966).
 - 6 Lombroso's study of the art of the mentally ill was only published in 1882; it was incorporated into the new edition of *L'Uomo di genio* published in Italian in Turin in 1889, in English in 1891 (*The Man of Genius*, New York and London) and in French in 1896 (*L'Homme de génie*).
 - 7 Fernand Khnopff, *Un Masque de jeune femme anglaise*, c. 1893, a retouched photograph by Arsène Alexandre (29 x 19.6 cm., Department of Prints and Drawings, Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels). The sculpture itself is now in the collection of Belgium's Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts.
 - 8 Letter from Rops to Armand Rassenfosse, 1893 (II 6957 [19] 1893 5, Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels).
 - 9 Arthur Symons, *Aubrey Beardsley*, page 31 of the French translation and adaptation by Jack Cohen, Édouard and Louis Thomas (Paris, 1906) of the original 1898 edition.
 - 10 Founded by William Morris in 1893, the Kelmscott Press was behind the modern small-press movement, which promoted a new concept of book production in which the various elements (paper, lettering, illustration, binding) would all contribute to greater aesthetic unity. Between 1891 and 1898, Kelmscott Press published fifty-three titles, including a famous edition of the works of Chaucer, illustrated with woodcuts by Burne-Jones. Also crucially influential at the time was Walter Crane's *Decorative Illustration of Books, Old and New* (London, 1896).
 - 11 See Charles Baudelaire, *Fusées*, reprinted in *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Claude Pich, (Paris, 1976), I: 652.
 - 12 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Les Poèmes d'Edgar Poe* reprinted in *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Bertrand Marchol (Paris, 2003), II: 772.
 - 13 Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen* (1893).
 - 14 See the exhibition catalog, *Le Symbolisme en Europe* (Paris: Grand Palais, 1976), 230 (no. 242).
 - 15 Ibid., 224 (no. 234).
 - 16 Paul Bourget, *Paradoxe sur la couleur*; reprinted in *Études et*

- portraits (Paris, 1889), 1:255, 257.
- 17 Charles Henry, *Introduction à une esthétique scientifique* (Paris, [1885]).
- 18 *Ibid.*, 28–29.
- 19 Undated letter [November 1888] in Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis*, edited by Maurice Malingue (Paris, 1992), 150.
- 20 Félix Fénéon, "Calendrier de décembre 1887-V: Vitrites de marchands de tableaux," *La Revue indépendante* (January 15, 1888), reprinted in *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, edited by Joan U. Halperin (Geneva, 1970), 1:91. Fénéon already stressed this contrast of colors in *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*: "This artist consistently contrasts rust-colored roofs and livestock to his greens" (*ibid.*, 1:30). On this subject, see Georges Roque, *Art et science de la couleur: Chevreul et les peintres, de Delacroix à l'abstraction* (Nîmes, 1997), 295ff.
- 21 Paul Souriau, "Le symbolisme des couleurs," *Revue de Paris* (March–April 1895), 868.
- 22 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris, 1945), 262.
- 23 See Roseline Bacou, *Odilon Redon* (Geneva, 1956), 1:119, note 2.
- 24 See Robert L. Delevoy (ed.), *Les XX. Catalogues des dix expositions annuelles* (Brussels, 1981), 208.
- 25 Émile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne et lettres inédites* (Paris, 1907); reprinted in *Propos sur l'art*, edited by Anne Rivière (Paris, 1994), 1:147.
- 26 Maurice Denis, "Cézanne," *L'Occident 70* (September 1907); reprinted in *Le Ciel et l'Arcadie*, edited by Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris, 1993), 147.
- A SYNTHESIS OF THE ARTS**
- 27 Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, translated by James McGowan (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 19.
- 28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Le Cas Wagner*, followed by *Nietzsche contre Wagner*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, translated from German into French by Jean-Claude Hémary (Paris, 1974), 108ff.
- 29 Georges Vanor, *L'Art symboliste* (Paris, 1889), 29–30.
- 30 "The Sun" was placed in second position only in the first edition of 1857; in the 1861 edition it was shifted to the eighty-seventh position.
- 31 Charles Baudelaire, "Salon de 1846," *Oeuvres complètes*, II:425 and 432.
- 32 Vanor, *L'Art symboliste*, 38.
- 33 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *L'Ouverture de Tannhäuser*, reprinted in *Croquis parisiens* (Paris, 1886), 155. This text was placed with two others at the end of the volume under the heading "Paraphrases." One of the texts ("Nightmare") was inspired by Redon and the other ("Similitudes") by Baudelaire's correspondences, as the title suggests.
- 34 Charles Baudelaire, "Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris," *Oeuvres complètes*, II:785.
- 35 See Vytautas Landsbergis, *M. K. Ciurlionis: Time and Content* (Vilnius, 1992), 98.
- "DECORATIVE" ART**
- 36 See page 112.
- 37 Maurice Denis, *Journal 1884–1943* (Paris, 1957), 1:107.
- 38 In 1890 Puvis de Chavannes quit the Société des Artistes Français and began showing at the salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts, of which he was a founding member.
- 39 Henri Escoffier, "Le Salon de 1882," *Le Petit Journal*, May 5, 1882. Quoted by Michael Marlais, "Puvis de Chavannes and the Parisian Daily Press," *Apollo* (February 1999), 3.
- 40 André Mellerio, *Le Mouvement idéaliste en peinture* (Paris, 1896), 16.
- 41 See John H. Neff, "Puvis de Chavannes: Three Easel Paintings," *Museum Studies, The Art Institute of Chicago* 3 (1968), 66.
- 42 Desiderius Lenz, *Zur Ästhetik der Beuronner Schule* (Vienna, 1898); Desiderius Lenz, *L'Esthétique de Beuron*, translated by Paul Sérusier (Paris, 1905).
- 43 See Helena Cizinska, *Die Beuronner Kunstschule in der Abtei Sankt Gabriel in Prag* (Prague, 1999).
- 44 Giovanni Papini, *Passato remoto* (Florence, 1948), 193; quoted in Caterina Zappia, *Maurice Denis e l'Italia* (Perugia, 2001), 15.
- 45 Louis Dimier, *Faits et idées de l'histoire des arts* (Paris, 1923), 227. This book included earlier texts by Dimier, including an "investigation into Christian art," published in *L'Action Française* in 1912–1913, from which this quotation is drawn. Verkade's reply to Dimier's questions was signed "Dom W. V. of the Order of Saint Benedict, student of Gauguin and the Beuron school."
- 46 See Leconte de Lisle, *Hymnes Orphiques: Parfum des nymphes, Les Aromates*, in *Derniers poèmes* (Paris, 1895), 12.
- 47 See Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York, 2000), 330–58.
- 48 See the exhibition catalog, *Le Symbolisme en Europe* (Paris, 1776), 79 (no. 61).
- 49 Joséphin Péladan, "L'art suisse et M. Ferdinand Hodler," *L'Art décoratif* (October 1913), 157.
- 50 Mathias Morhardt, "Ferdinand Hodler," *Catalogue des Oeuvres de Peinture, Sculpture, Dessin, Gravure, Architecture et Art Décoratif exposés au Grand Palais des Champs Élysées, 15 novembre 1913–5 janvier 1914* (Paris: Société du Salon d'Automne, 1913), 264.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 264–66.
- 52 Alexandre Mairet, *A propos de Ferdinand Hodler* (Geneva, 1913).
- 53 Wilhelm Paucke, *Steinzeitkunst und Moderne Kunst* (Stuttgart, 1923), 41–43 (also plates 49–52 and 57–58).
- MOMENT AND DURATION**
- 54 Gustave Moreau, *Écrits sur l'art*, edited by Peter Cooke, (Fontfroide, 2002), 1:159.
- 55 Sâr [Joséphin] Péladan, "Gustave Moreau," *L'Ermitage* (January 1895), 30.
- 56 See the exhibition catalog, *Maison d'artiste, maison-musée: L'exemple de Gustave Moreau* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 1987), 29.
- 57 See the exhibition catalog, *Gustave Moreau, 1826–1898*, 240 (no. 131).
- 58 See the exhibition catalog, *Rodin en 1900: L'exposition de l'Alma* (Paris: Musée du Luxembourg, 2001), 134ff. (no. 143), and J. Adolph Schmolgen, Eisenwerth, "Neue Aspekte zu Rodins Höllenpforte," *Rodin-Studien, Persönlichkeit-Werke-Wirkung-Bibliographie*, (Munich, 1983), 215.
- 59 See the exhibition catalog, *Rodin sculpteur: Oeuvres méconnues* (Paris: Musée Rodin, 1993), 41ff.
- 60 Charles Morice, *Rodin*, lecture given at the Maison d'Art in Brussels on May 12, 1899 (Paris, 1900), 16–17; quoted in Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, "L'atelier d'un grand artiste," in *Rodin en 1900: L'exposition de l'Alma*, 69.
- 61 It is generally thought that Rosso and Rodin became friends in 1894, but they probably met as early as 1889. See Elda Felzi, *Medardo Rosso: Scritti e pensieri 1889–1927* (Cremona, 1994), 135–36.
- 62 G.-Albert Aurier, "Les isolés: Eugène Carrière," published in *L'Action Française* in 1912–1913, from which this quotation is drawn. Verkade's reply to Dimier's questions was signed "Dom W. V. of the Order of Saint Benedict, student of Gauguin and the Beuron school."
- 63 *Ibid.*, 281.
- 64 See Jane R. Becker, "Carrière, Bergson, la durée et l'élan vital," in the exhibition catalog *Eugène Carrière, 1849–1906* (Strasbourg: Musées de Strasbourg, 1996–1997), 27; George Heard Hamilton, "Cézanne, Bergson and the Image of Time," *College Art Journal* 16:1 (1956), 2.
- 65 Julien Benda, *Belphegor. Essai sur l'esthétique de la présente société française* (Paris, 1924), 23. In his introduction, Benda pointed out that most of this book had been written prior to 1914.
- 66 See notably Charles Morice, *Eugène Carrière: L'homme et sa pensée. – L'artiste et son œuvre – Essai de nomenclature des œuvres principales* (Paris, 1906), 125, 156–57; Edmond Claris, *De l'Impressionnisme en sculpture: Auguste Rodin et Medardo Rosso* (Paris, 1902), 116–121.
- 67 Claris, *De l'Impressionnisme en sculpture...*, 51.
- 68 Louis Vauxcelles, "Au Salon d'Automne – Le sculpteur Medardo Rosso," *Gil Blas* (October 31, 1904).
- 69 Quoted in Vauxcelles, "Au Salon d'Automne..."
- 70 Eugène Carrière, "L'Homme visionnaire de la réalité," lecture delivered at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, in March 1901; reprinted in *Écrits et Lettres choisies* (Paris, 1907), 27.
- MYTH AND HISTORY**
- 1 Alfred Poizat, *Le Symbolisme* (Paris, 1919), 152.
- 2 Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London, 2002).
- MYTHOLOGICAL SPACES**
- 3 Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Laudi del cielo del mare della terra degli eroi: Maya* (Milan, 1903); *Electra* (Milan, 1904); *Alcyone* (Milan, 1904); *Merope* (Milan, 1912); *The Flame of Life*, conceived as early as 1896, was first published as *Il Fuoco* in 1900 and translated into English that same year.
- 4 Remy de Gourmont, "Lettre à M. D'Annunzio," reprinted in *Épilogues – Réflexions sur la vie – 1895–1898* (Paris, 1903), 36.
- 5 Jules Laforgue, *Moralités légendaires* (Paris, 1887); *Six Moral Tales from Jules Laforgue*, translated by Frances Newman (New York, 1928).
- 6 August Strindberg, *By the Open Sea*, translated by Mary Sandbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 82 and 56. For a reproduction of the painting called *The White Mare*, see the exhibition catalog *Strindberg peintre et photographe* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 2001), 41.
- 7 See Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (Boston, 1988), 41.
- 8 See Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, "La genèse de *La Méditerranée*" in the exhibition catalog *Maillol: La Méditerranée* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 1986), 12.
- 9 The artist's uncle, Louis Ménard (1822–1901), was a versatile scholar who advocated a syncretism that combined Christianity with ancient polytheism. His numerous books included *Rêveries d'un païen mystique* (1876) and *Études sur les origines du christianisme* (1894). Meanwhile, the artist's father, René Joseph Ménard (1827–1887), was a writer on art and notably published in 1876 *La Mythologie dans l'art ancien et moderne*. Both Ménards, father and uncle, were also painters who exhibited at the Salon. In addition, Louis taught at the École des Arts Décoratifs.

LANDSCAPES

- 10 Sergio Corazzini, "L'Amaro Calice, Rime del Cuore Morto," *Gozzano e i crepuscolari*, edited by Cecilia Ghelli (1999), 200.
- 11 *Essais de paysages psychiques*. See Gustave Coquiou, *Les Indépendants 1884-1920* (Paris, n.d.), 16.
- 12 Albert Camus, "Conférence du 14 décembre 1957," *Discours de Suède* (Paris, 1958), 68-69.
- 13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, edited by Geneviève Blanquis (Paris, 1969), 1:53 and 81. Cf. Thus Spake Zarathoustra, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1978).
- 14 Letter from Segantini to Vittorio Pica, November 4, 1897, quoted in Annie-Paule Quinsac, *Segantini. Trent'anni di vita artistica europea nei carteggi inediti dell'artista e dei suoi mecenati* (Oggiono-Lecco, 1985), 645.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 See the exhibition catalog, *Munch et la France* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay / Oslo: Munch Museet, 1991-1992), 361.
- 17 Gustave Kahn, "Au temps du Pointillisme," *Mercure de France* (April 1, 1924), 14.
- 18 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Avant-dire au *Traité du verbe* de René Ghil," reprinted in *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 2:678. Ghil's *Traité du verbe* was first published in 1886.
- 19 Quoted in Taube G. Greenspan, "Charles Marie Dulac: The Idyllic and Mystical Landscape of Symbolism," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (April 1982), 165.
- 20 Gaston de Pawlowski, *Polochon. Paysages animés. Paysages chimiques* (Paris, 1909), 197.

A MAGIC LANGUAGE

- 21 Jean Lorrain, "Pall-Mall Quinzaine," *Le Journal* (April 11, 1898).
- 22 J.-A. Moerenhout, *Voyage aux îles du grand océan* (Paris, 1837).
- 23 See Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed: An Interpretation of Gauguin's Polynesian Symbolism* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 46-47.
- 24 "Diverses Choses: Le tableau que je veux faire," in Paul Gauguin, *Oviri, Écrits d'un sauvage*, edited by Daniel Guérin (Paris, 1974), 165.
- 25 Gauguin depicted this mummy, which figured in one of his sketchbooks, several times. See Wayne V. Andersen, "Gauguin and a Peruvian Mummy," *Burlington Magazine* (April 1967), 238.
- 26 Paul Gauguin, *Ancien Culte mahorie*, facsimile edition by René Huyghe (Paris, 1951). Gauguin's manuscript served as the basis of *Noa Noa*, published in collaboration with Charles Morice in 1901.
- 27 See Bärbel Küster, "Eine Fotografie im Gepäck Gauguins auf der Reise nach Tahiti," *Kunstchronik* (May 1999), 181.

- 28 Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed...*, 124-25.
- 29 See Vojtech Jirat-Wasiutynski, "Paul Gauguin's 'Self-Portrait with Halo and Snake': The Artist as Initiate and Magus," *Art Journal* (spring 1987), 22.
- 30 The manuscript was published by Philippe Verdier as "Un manuscrit de Gauguin: L'Esprit moderne et le catholicisme," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* (1985-1986), 273.
- 31 See Mary Lynn Zink Vance, *Gauguin's Polynesian Pantheon as a Visual Language*, dissertation (University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983), 57ff. and H.R. Rookmaker, *Gauguin and Nineteenth-Century Art Theory* (Amsterdam, 1972), 39ff. See also Richard S. Field, *Paul Gauguin: The Paintings of the First Voyage to Tahiti* (Cambridge, Mass. / New York, 1977), 289, who suggests another source, namely *The Perfect Way or The Finding of Christ* by Anna Kingsford and Charles Maitland (Boston, 1888), published in French as *La Voie parfaite ou le Christ ésotérique* (Alençon, 1891), which contains the following statement: "Humanity has always and everywhere asked itself these three supreme questions: - Whence come we? what are we? whither go we?" (rendered in French as "d'où venons-nous? que sommes-nous? où allons-nous?"). Finally, the most recent overview of this painting and its critical reception can be found in George T. M. Shackelford "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" in the exhibition catalog, *Gauguin Tahiti* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 167ff.
- 32 André Fontainas, "Art Moderne," *Mercure de France* (January 1899), 237.
- 33 Letter from Gauguin to Morice, July 1901. See Paul Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis*, edited by Maurice Malingue (Paris, 1992), 304.
- 34 Charles Chassé, *Gauguin et son temps* (Paris, 1955), 68.
- 35 Letter from Gauguin to Morice, July 1901. See Paul Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme...*, 305.
- 36 Letter from Gauguin to Monfreid, February 1898. See *Lettres de Paul Gauguin à Georges-Daniel de Monfreid, précédées d'un hommage par Victor Segalen* (Paris, 1930), 92.
- 37 See Vance, *Gauguin's Polynesian Pantheon...*, 264ff.
- 38 Letter from Gauguin to Monfreid, February 1898. See *Lettres de Paul Gauguin à Georges-Daniel de Monfreid...*, 91.
- 39 See Wayne Andersen, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost* (New York, 1971), 246.
- 40 Paul Gauguin, *Avant et après*, edited by Jean-Marie Dallet (Paris, 1994), 166 (also see

- page 245). When Gauguin was a student in the seminary, the bishop of Orléans himself, Monseigneur Dupanloup, did some of the teaching. The young lad was probably impressed by this leading religious figure, an advocate of liberal Catholicism who later played a political role and became a celebrity. Dupanloup was known as one of the greatest catechists of his day.
- 41 Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Thodoto* 78:2. Although the *Excerpts from Theodotus*, from which this passage is drawn, had not been translated into French in Gauguin's day, it is possible that the artist knew of Clement through popularizations or through conversation. It is perhaps significant that the complete works of Clement of Alexandria were published in a new edition in 1890-91 as part of J. B. Migne's famous *Patrologiae (Patrologiae Cursus Completus... Series Graeca* 8, 9 (Paris, 1890-1891).
- 42 See page 114.
- 43 Thus André-Ferdinand Hérold's French translation of the *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*, published in 1894, contained the following passage that is not too dissimilar from Gauguin's title. "What is above . . . heaven, what is below the earth, what is between this heaven and this earth, what one calls the past and present and future: of what is all that woven and knitted?" *L'Upanishad du Grand Aranyaka traduit pour la première fois du sanskrit en français par A.-Ferdinand Hérold* (Paris, 1894), 76. It is significant that the translation was published by the Librairie de l'Art Indépendant rather than a university press.
- 44 Letter from Gauguin to Monfreid, March. 1898. *Lettres de Paul Gauguin à Georges-Daniel de Monfreid...*, 205, 206. See also a similar comment on Bouguereau on page 207.
- 45 Paul Gauguin, *Raconteurs de Rapin* (Monaco, 1993), 61. Gauguin sent this text to the *Mercure de France* in 1902 but it was rejected. Madame Joly-Ségalen published it for the first time in 1951.

ENAMORED OF INSTABILITY, WARY OF RATIONALITY

- 1 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, translated by F.L. Pogson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1910), 222-23.
- 2 Georges-Henri Luquet, *Idées générales de psychologie* (Paris, 1904); *L'Art primitif* (Paris, 1930).
- 3 See Michel Lorblanchet, *La Naissance de l'art. Genèse de l'art préhistorique dans le monde* (Paris, 1999), 9.

HYSTERIA: A NEW EXPRESSIVE REPERTOIRE

- 4 See Félix Fénéon, *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*, reprinted in *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, edited by Joan U. Halperin (Geneva, 1970), 1:30.
- 5 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris, 1982). See also the pioneering publication by Jacqueline Carroy-Thirard, cited below.
- 6 Rodolphe Rapetti, "De l'angoisse à l'extase: le symbolisme et l'étude de l'hystérie," in the exhibition catalog *Paradis perdu: L'Europe symboliste* (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1995), 21.
- 7 Jules Laforque, "Pensées et paradoxes," quoted in Jules Laforque, *Les Complaintes, L'imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune, Derniers Vers*, edited by Claude Pichois, (Paris, 1959), 302.
- 8 Joris-Karl Huysmans, "Félicien Rops," *L'Art moderne: Certains*, edited by Hubert Juin (Paris, 1975), 291-292.
- 9 Quoted in Jacqueline Carroy-Thirard, "Possession, extase, hystérie au XIX^e siècle," *Psychanalyse à l'Université* (June 1980), 511.
- 10 See Rodolphe Rapetti, "Munch face à la critique française: 1893-1905" in the exhibition catalog *Munch et la France* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay and Oslo: Munch Museet, 1991-92), 25.
- 11 *Neue Vorlesungen über die Krankheiten des Nervensystems insbesondere über Hysterie*. Von J. M. Charcot (Leipzig and Vienna, 1886); *Poliklinische Vorträge. Von Prof. J. M. Charcot. I. Band. Schuljahr 1887-88* (Leipzig and Vienna, 1892). See Michèle Pollak-Cornillot, "Freud traducteur: Une contribution à la traduction de ses propres œuvres," *Revue française de Psychanalyse* (1986), 1235.
- 12 Quoted by Bruno Bettelheim, "La Vienne de Freud" in the exhibition catalog *Vienne 1880-1938. L'Apocalypse joyeuse* (Paris: Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, 1986), 43. The original English version of Bettelheim's article is anthologized in *Freud's Vienna and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1991).
- 13 Deborah Silvermann, for instance, noted that a female figure in *Medecine*, one of the three compositions that Klimt painted on the ceiling of the University of Vienna, unveiled in 1901, adopted the precise pose that Charcot labeled as the second stage of hysteria (catalepsy), between hypnosis and acts triggered by suggestion. See Deborah Silvermann, "Sigmund Freud, Jean-Martin Charcot," in the exhibition catalog *Vienne 1880-1938: L'Apocalypse joyeuse*, 583.

- 14 Sigmund Freud, "Le tabou de la virginité (Contributions à la psychologie de la vie amoureuse III)" *Oeuvres complètes: Psychanalyse*, edited by André Bourguignon and Pierre Cotet (Paris, 1996 [1916–1920]), XV:78. This text was first published in 1918.
- 15 See Bettelheim, "La Vienne de Freud," 30.
- 16 See Ginette Raimbault and Caroline Eliacheff, *Les Indomptables: Figures de l'anorexie* (Paris, 1996), 13ff. and 73–109.
- THE SUBCONSCIOUS AND NEW EXPRESSIONS OF EGO**
- 17 Édouard Dujardin, *Les lauriers sont coupés* (Paris, 1924), 17.
- 18 See Guy Michaud, *Message poétique du symbolisme* (Paris, 1947), 200ff. In 1864, Taine anthologized his articles on Carlyle in a volume titled *L'Idéalisme anglais: étude sur Carlyle*.
- 19 André Fontaines, *La Vie d'Edgar A. Poe* (Paris, 1919); Camille Mauclair, *Le Génie d'Edgar Poe* (Paris, 1925).
- 20 Camille Mauclair, *Le Soleil des morts* (Paris, 1897).
- 21 The anarchist nature of several works by Henry de Groux is clear. See Henry de Groux, unpublished diary, Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Paris. The entry for December 6, 1910, cites lithographic works published in the 1890s with titles such as *La Vigne abandonnée*, *Le Chambardement*, *Ploutocratie*. See also Rodolphe Rapetti, "Un chef-d'œuvre pour ces temps d'incertitude: *Le Christ aux outrages* d'Henry de Groux," *Revue de l'Art* 96 (1992), 48, note 7.
- 22 Gabriel Mourey, *Passé le détroit: La vie et l'art à Londres* (Paris, 1895), 198–1999.
- 23 "Who Shall Deliver Me?" in *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti* (London, 1904), 238.
- 24 See Mourey, *Passé le détroit*, 166 and 319.
- 25 Khnopff produced the frontispieces for *Istar* and *Femmes honnêtes* in 1888, and for *Le Panthée* in 1892. His own work was inspired by Péladan's writings as of 1885.
- 26 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-bas*, edited by Pierre Cogny (Paris, 1978), 61.
- 27 See Catherine De Croës and Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, "La maison de Fernand Khnopff" in the exhibition catalog *Fernand Khnopff et ses rapports avec la Sécession viennoise* (Brussels: Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 1987), 106.
- 28 Josef Engelhart, "En visite chez Khnopff" in *Fernand Khnopff et ses rapports...*, 88.
- 29 Edvard Munch, *John Gabriel Borkman*: "Erhardt's Departure," c. 1930, charcoal, 25.5 × 40.8 cm (OKK T 215–42 r., Munch Museet, Oslo), *Peer and the*
- Button Molder*, wash and watercolor (OKK T 1634, Munch Museet, Oslo). See Ingrid Junillon, *Le Théâtre d'Henrik Ibsen dans l'œuvre d'Edvard Munch: scénographie, "illustration" et variations graphiques*, dissertation, Université Lumière-Lyon II (2001), 283ff.
- 30 First published in 1881 under the title *A Glove*, the album was republished in 1882, 1893, and 1898. Right from the second edition it was retitled *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove*.
- 31 Édouard Dujardin, "Aux XX et aux Indépendants: Le Cloisonnisme," *Revue indépendante*, (March 1888), 491.
- 32 Édouard Dujardin, *Les lauriers sont coupés* (Paris, 1887).
- 33 Valéry Larbaud, preface to the definitive version of *Les lauriers sont coupés* (Paris, 1924), 6.
- CHAOS AND CHANCE**
- 34 Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne* (Paris, 1926), 156.
- 35 August Strindberg, "Du Hasard dans la production artistique," *La Revue des Revues* 15 (November 1894), 265. The original version of Strindberg's text (manuscript, Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm) is reproduced in the exhibition catalog *Strindberg peintre et photographe* (Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 2001–2002), 149.
- 36 August Strindberg, *Inferno*, in *Oeuvre autobiographique*, edited by Carl Gustaf Bjurström (Paris, 1990), 2:382.
- 37 His showed his work as early as 1892 in Stockholm and Lund, in 1893 at Turku, and in 1894 in Göteborg. Some of his post-1900 works, often of larger dimensions, were exhibited at the Intimate Theater that Strindberg founded in Stockholm. Strindberg also painted a number of canvases in Paris in 1894 for an exhibition planned by Danish artist and dealer Willy Gretor, although the show was never held.
- 38 See the exhibition catalog *Strindberg peintre et photographe*, 149.
- 39 Strindberg, *Inferno*, 245–46.
- 40 August Strindberg, *Légendes*, in *Oeuvre autobiographique*, 2:403.
- 41 Strindberg, *Inferno*, 208.
- 42 Victor-Émile Michelet, *De l'Ésotérisme dans l'Art* (Paris, 1891), 11; quoted in Guy Michaud, *La Doctrine symboliste: Documents* (Paris, 1947), 16.
- 43 "L'oiseau qui passe en chantant sur l'abîme. Le chant du cygne: conception sublime de la poésie. / Plus l'horreur effroyable du monde se manifeste évidente, sensible à mes yeux, à mon esprit, à mon cœur, à mes sens, plus s'exalte en moi l'idée, le sens et le désir du beau – avec passion, avec fureur, avec frénésie, avec fureur!" [The bird flies into the abyss, singing. Swan song: a sublime conception of poetry / The more the dreadful horror of the world becomes obvious and evident to my eyes,
- my mind, my heart, and my senses, the more I glory in the idea, the meaning, and the urgent need of beauty—with passion, frenzy, rage!], Henry de Groux, unpublished diary, June 24, 1898, Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Paris.
- 44 Henry de Groux, unpublished diary, recapitulation of the month of May, June 1, 2 and 8, October 27, annual recapitulation and notes, 1892; September 7, 1897.
- 45 Henry de Groux, unpublished diary, October 19 and 26, 1892. In Maeterlinck's *Princesse Maleine* (1889) a comet crosses the sky at the start of the first act, and the people read evil omens into the stars and clouds. See Maurice Maeterlinck, *Serres chaudes, Quinze chansons, La Princesse Maleine*, edited by Paul Gorceix (Paris, 1983), 100.
- 46 Henry de Groux read *Inferno* the year it was published. Réja probably gave him the book. See Henry de Groux, unpublished diary, November 14, 1898.
- 47 "De Gourmont blithely calls me a 'painter of violence.' Why violence? Although many of my works my in fact give that impression, it is merely one outcome, and has never been a goal. In any case, I have never sought violence; my main aim, when I really did what I wanted to do, was *mouvement*." Henry de Groux, unpublished diary, May 5, 1901.
- 48 Henry de Groux, in response to an article by Édouard Gérard, *L'œuvre d'Henry de Groux*, special issue of *La Plume* (1899), 87.
- 49 Letter from Henry de Groux to William Degouve de Nuncques, June 19, 1893 (M.L. 2169, Bibliothèque Royale Albert I, Brussels).
- 50 Louis Gillet, "Sur Henry de Groux," *L'œuvre d'Henry de Groux*, 76.
- 51 Quoted by Buet, *L'œuvre d'Henry de Groux*, 58.
- 52 See Jean de Rotonchamp, *Paul Gauguin* (Paris, 1906), 131–34.
- THE ABSENT ARTIST: DISCOVERING THE ART OF THE MENTALLY ILL**
- 53 On this subject, see William Rubin (ed.), *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002).
- 54 Hans Prinzhorn, *Bildnerlei der Geisteskranken* (Berlin, 1922); *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (New York: Springer, 1995 [1972]).
- 55 Marcel Réja, "L'art malade: dessins de fous," *Revue universelle* (September 28, 1901), 913, and *Revue universelle* (October 5, 1901), 938; *L'Art chez les fous: Le dessin, la prose, la poésie* (Paris, 1907).
- 56 Marcel Réja, *La Vie héroïque* (Paris, 1897); *Ballets et variations* (Paris, 1898).
- 57 Marcel Réja, "Eugène Grasset,"
- Eugène Grasset et Son *Oeuvre*, special issue of *La Plume* XI (1900), 144; "Symbolisme Pictural: H. Héran – E. Munch – O. Redon," *La Critique* (January 20, 1900), 9; "Le baiser dans l'œuvre de Rodin," *La Critique* (November 20, 1900), 169; "Biegas, Sculpteur," *La Plume* (August 15, 1902), 998.
- 58 August Strindberg, *Inferno* (Paris, 1898). See Marcel Réja, "Quelques souvenirs sur Strindberg," *Le Progrès Civique* (1930), 1451, as well as August Strindberg, *Inferno* (Paris, 1966), 262 and August Strindberg, *Oeuvre autobiographique*, edited by Carl Gustaf Bjurström, (Paris, 1990), 2:1217ff. and 1459ff.
- 59 Michel Thévoz, "Marcel Réja, découvreur de l'art des fous," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1986), 200; *Art Brut, psychose et médiumnité* (Paris, 1990), 87ff.
- 60 Réja, "Le baiser dans l'œuvre de Rodin," 169.
- 61 Réja, "Symbolisme pictural..." 9.
- 62 Marcel Réja, "L'art chez les fous," *Le Progrès civique* (1925), 1093.
- 63 Marcel Réja, "La danse et l'art," *Mercure de France* (August 1898), 390.
- 64 Réja, "L'art malade: dessins de fous," 913.
- 65 Réja, "L'Art chez les fous," 232–33.
- 66 Réja, *Ibid.*, 233–34.
- 67 Réja, *Ibid.*, 1093, and "L'art chez les fous," *Paris-Soir* (December 27, 1927).
- 68 Réja, "L'Art chez les fous," 231.
- CONCLUSION**
- 1 "Les Temps héroïques du symbolisme," *Mercure de France* (1903): 666.
- 2 This view served as a point of departure for numerous commentators. See in particular Stephen F. Eisenman (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London, 1994), 304ff.
- 3 See Bonner Mitchell, *Les Manifestes littéraires de la Belle Époque 1886–1914: anthologie critique* (Paris, 1966), 13ff and 35ff.
- 4 Lenin, "L'organisation du parti et la littérature de parti," *La Nouaia Jian* 12 (November 13, 1905); reprinted in *Écrits sur l'art et la littérature* (Moscow, 1978), 20.
- 5 Jean Lahor, *L'Art nouveau* (Paris, 1901), 70.
- 6 See Jean Lorrain, "Pall-Mall Semaine," *Le Journal* (February 8, 1896).
- 7 See Antoine Compagnon, *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité* (Paris, 1990).
- 8 See Alain Bonfand, *L'Art abstrait* (Paris, 1994).
- 9 André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924); reprinted in *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris, 1965), 28.
- 10 Remy de Gourmont, *Sixtine* (Paris, 1890), 154.

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Symbolism

Rodolphe Rapetti

The Symbolist movement prefigured numerous offshoots of modern art, from Abstractionism to Surrealism, and wielded significant influence over the arts and literature between the 1880s and World War I. In deliberate revolt against an era marked by Positivism, the Symbolist movement—essentially an art of the idea and of subjectivity—combined the quest for modernity with a purposeful return to archaism. Grounded in the philosophical ideas of the German Romantics, the Baudelairian theory of correspondences, and the Wagnerian idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork), Symbolists renewed the timeless harmony that had been lost between man and the world and that could only be revived through the evocation of myths. The Pre-Raphaelites, Gustav Moreau, and Puvis de Chavannes are key figures of this movement, which also includes some of the most innovative artists of the period, from Gauguin, Redon, Ensor, Munch, and Hodler, to Burne-Jones, Böcklin, Knopff, and Klimt. This volume, the culmination of over a decade of research, brings together a number of rare and previously unpublished archival documents, and presents a groundbreaking analysis of the Symbolist movement in its entirety. *Symbolism* places the movement within its historical and intellectual context, examines its famous and lesser-known artists and works, and sheds new light on the fundamental issues raised by art at the end of the nineteenth century—from Cloisonnism to the non-objective use of color.

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