

NORBERT WOLF

# symbolism

TASCHEN



## the author

**Norbert Wolf** graduated in art history, linguistics and medieval studies at the universities of Regensburg and Munich. He took his doctorate in art history in 1983. In 1992 he wrote his professorial thesis in Munich on carved 14<sup>th</sup>-century retables. Subsequently he held visiting professorships in Marburg, Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig, Düsseldorf, Nuremberg-Erlangen and Innsbruck. He has written extensively on art history, including the following titles for TASCHEN: *Diego Velázquez*, 1999; *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 2003; *Caspar David Friedrich*, 2003; *Expressionism*, 2004; *Romanesque*, 2007; *Landscape Painting*, 2008.

**“... the essential character  
of symbolist art consists in  
never going so far as the  
conception of the idea in itself.”**

Jean Moréas, *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 1886

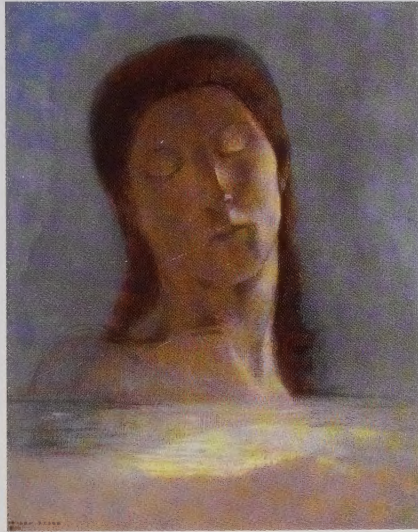
Cover

**FRANZ VON STUCK**

*Sin (detail)*, 1893

Oil on canvas, 95 x 59.7 cm

Munich, Neue Pinakothek







FRANZ STUCK

1909



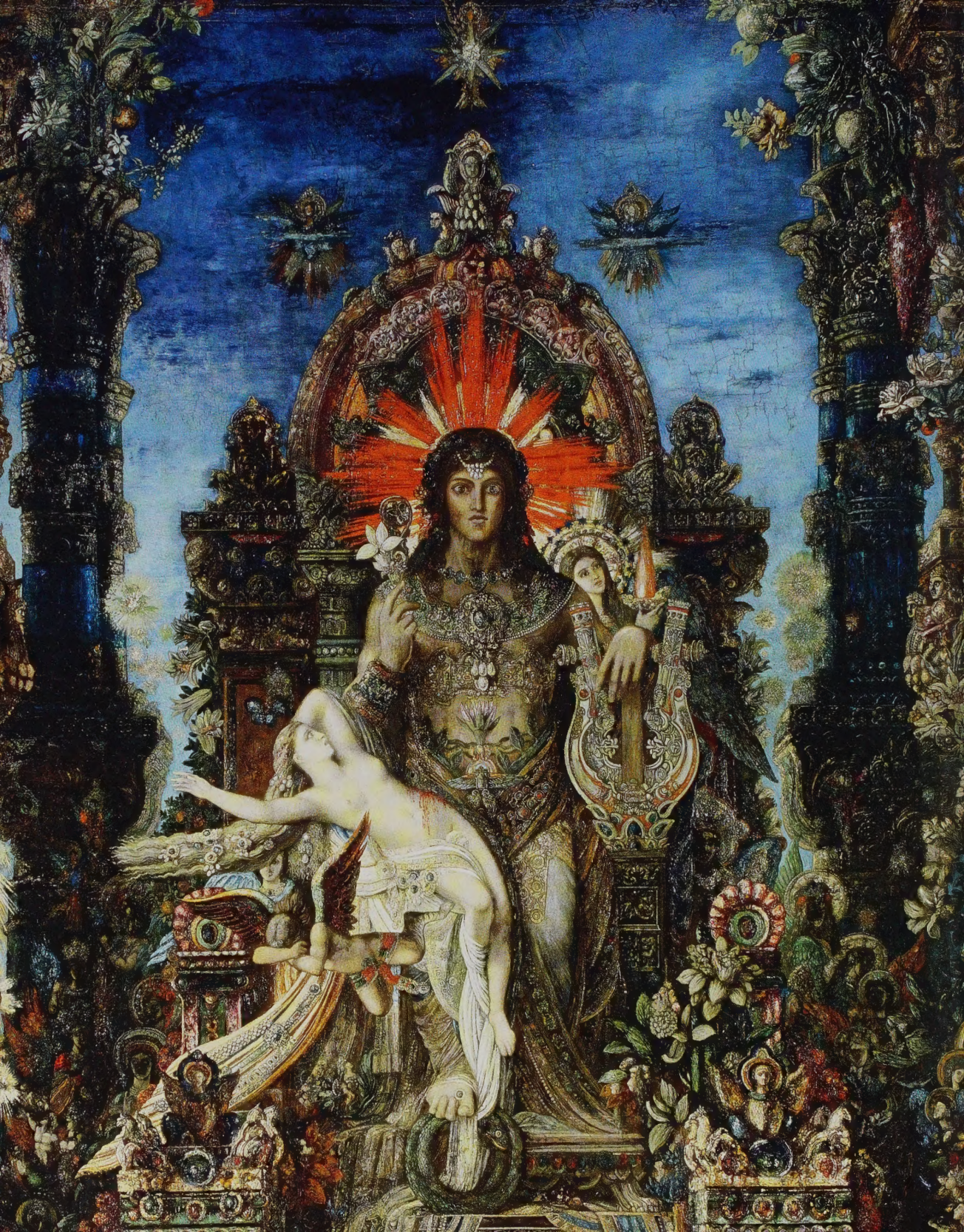
# symbolism

NORBERT WOLF

**TASCHEN**

HONG KONG KÖLN LONDON LOS ANGELES MADRID PARIS TOKYO







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# Faced with the sphinx

In 1884 Paris saw the publication of a cult *fin-de-siècle* novel, one that would create a sensation little short of perverse in the art scene in France and rapidly, too, in the whole of Europe. Its title: *A rebours* (translated both as *Against the Grain* and as *Against Nature*). Its author, Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), the son of a Dutch painter and a French mother, wrote it as a seductive textbook of decadence, as an antidote to the prevailing naturalism of the day. Fleeing the banality of everyday life, the “hero” Floressas des Esseintes withdraws to his country estate, where he creates an artificial world of art embracing all conceivable forms of aesthetic pleasure and morbid sensory stimuli and wallowing in colours, perfumes and fantasies. Realism remains excluded from the artificial sultriness of this extravagant “paradise”.

In 1897 the Italian Giovanni Boldini (1842–1931) painted the *Portrait of Count Robert de Montesquiou* (ill. p. 13 right). Boldini, who had lived in Paris since 1872, was not a decidedly Symbolist painter, but in the over-bred elegance of his sitter’s appearance he created the definitive portrait of the dandy of his day. Montesquiou, interested in painting, music and literature, was a cruel and eccentric satirist of so-called good society. He served Marcel Proust (1871–1922) as the inspiration for the character of Baron de Charlus

in Proust’s novel *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). Even more, however, Montesquiou seems to have provided a basis for Huysmans’ protagonist, Des Esseintes.

Des Esseintes, who redesigns his bedroom to look like a monk’s cell and has his maidservant dress as a nun, is the last scion of an ancient noble house, sickly and neurotic. (Who can fail to think at this juncture of corresponding tales of horror by the American author Edgar Allan Poe [1809–1849]?). He is not a man of action but a voluntary recluse, a hermit for reasons not of faith but rather of taste. For page after page he holds forth on the aesthetic forms of refuge taken by one who has despaired of the trivial world and describes fantastical universes of scents and colours. Within the sphere of painting, he considers Odilon Redon (ill. p. 1) and Gustave Moreau (ill. p. 4) – two of the chief representatives of Symbolism – the supreme embodiment of aesthetic sophistication. Moreau had already attracted the admiring attention of the critics in 1864 with his painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (ill. p. 36). The winged beast, barely the size of a cat and with the face of a pubescent girl, appears less to be sinking its claws into the man’s classically handsome body than to be clinging to him in mid-air (an arrangement that involuntarily strikes the modern viewer as slightly comical): the monster has surrendered not to physical

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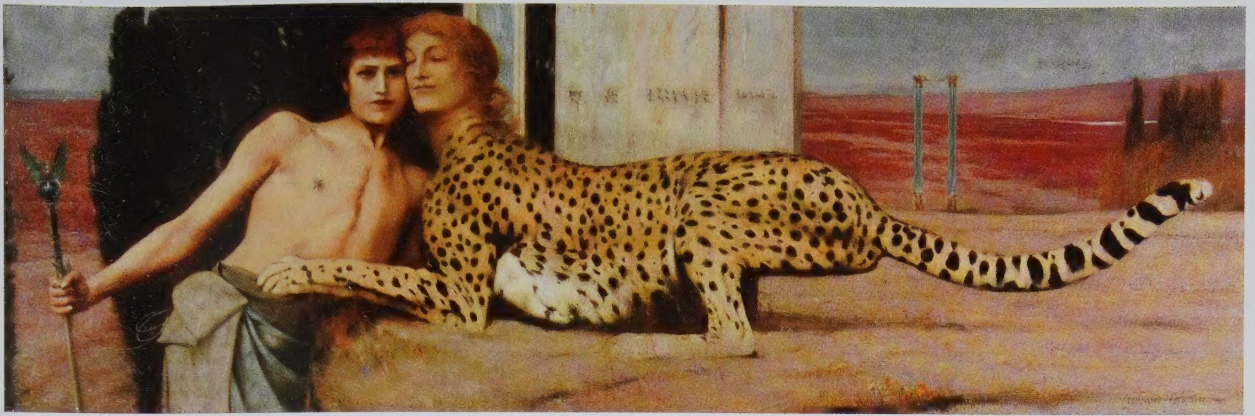
1848 — Abdication of the “Citizen King” Louis Philippe in France; proclamation of the Second Republic

1849 — Death of Edgar Allan Poe

1852 — Start of the modernization of urban Paris by Baron Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine

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**1. FERNAND KHNOPPF**

The Sphinx

1896, oil on canvas, 50 x 150 cm  
Brussels, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts

aggression but to rapt contemplation of Oedipus's face. Active deeds were not the stuff of a Des Esseintes, and depicting action was evidently not the stuff of Symbolist art. Instead it favoured the meditative, a timelessness that stirred the soul, and the symbol cloaked in magnificent surfaces of colour.

**the face of the unpaintable**

If Symbolism found its "Bible" in the novel *A rebours*, in 1886 it was also given a manifesto. On 18 September of that year, the editors of the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro* invited the poet Jean Moréas (1856–1910) to set out the innovative principles of the literature that was stirring contemporary emotions. He entitled his article "Le Symbolisme". According to Moréas, poets such Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) and Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) (in the line of Gautier and Baudelaire) were no longer concerned with external nature for its own sake, but with the "Idea" concealed within and behind concrete phenomena. The artistic form was used by the Symbolists only as a vehicle through which to reveal the metaphysics and the emotional impact of the Idea.

Since the work of those authors whom Moréas called as chief witnesses was governed by morbidity and exaggeration, Symbolism was immediately equated by its contemporaries with Decadence, with the obsessive exploration of the depths of the soul. At the same time, it was judged to be a specifically French manifestation, even when the term was expanded to include music and painting. Today, on the other hand, Symbolism is recognized as a tendency found across the whole of European art of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, albeit to differing degrees depending on geographical area.

Symbolist poetry, music, painting and sculpture claimed no more and no less than to fill an intellectual and spiritual vacuum. Ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and Copernicus, the world, the home of humankind, had no longer been the centre of the cosmos; ever since Darwin's theory of descent (his *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859), man no longer appeared to be sovereign over a divine Creation designed around him, but a chance product of evolution. Modern psychology, meanwhile, was increasingly negating the idea of man even as master of his own ego self. Art historian Jean Clair consequently sees Symbolism as a last great rescue attempt by Western humanism, whose goal was to transform the cultural crisis that had reached its peak in the *belle époque* to a culture of crisis.

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1855 — Courbet mounts an exhibition of his pictures in Paris under the title "Le Réalisme"

1857 — Publication of Baudelaire's collection of poems *Les Fleurs du mal*  
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## 2. WILLIAM BLAKE

### Hecate

c. 1795, colour print on paper, 43.9 x 58.1 cm  
London, Tate Gallery

## 3. HENRY FUSELI

### The Nightmare

1790/91, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 63.5 cm  
Frankfurt am Main, Freies Deutsches Hochstift –  
Frankfurter Goethe-Museum

## 4. FRANCISCO DE GOYA

### The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Capricho 43)

1797/98, etching and aquatint, 21.6 x 15.2 cm  
Private collection

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Against such a background, Symbolist art offered many intellectuals and aesthetes a kind of alternative religion, a spiritually charged cult of beauty that stood in opposition to the prevalent materialism and utilitarianism of the day. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), probably the most important English-language lyricist of the *fin de siècle*, summarized this creed in an essay on the “Symbolism of Painting”, published in his *Ideas of Good and Evil* in 1898: “All art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic ... If you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and their effects ... it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence.”

Symbolism is not a style in the strict sense. It is more an “open” intellectual position which deploys the most diverse stylistic means, depending on which seem the best suited to clothing the intended symbolic message in visual form. Or to put it another way: a Symbolist picture, a Symbolist sculpture remains deliberately enigmatic; in place of intellectual understanding, the work demands an empathetic response and wishes the viewer to experience its mysterious profundity in the manner of an inner vision. Those unwilling or unable to do so will judge the painting or sculpture, the piece of literature or music, as incomprehensible or – worse still – as pure sensationalism.

It is only natural, therefore, that scholarly studies of Symbolism – which have only become sustained over the past 25–30 years – should pay tribute to the variety of its forms and the difficulties surrounding its definition. Art historians have not infrequently succumbed to the temptation to classify as Symbolist virtually every work of art since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century carrying a psychological, dreamlike or hidden content. Frequent overlappings with other stylistic categories were impossible to avoid, as were disputes – at times fierce – over the circumstances and centres within which Symbolism arose, and indeed over the dates between which it flourished and the individual artists who belonged to it. There remained nothing else to do but to acknowledge the “openness” of this movement: to present it as one of the major intellectual and cultural trends of the modern era, whose emphasis fell in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and which fascinated many artists across the whole of Europe, including Russia, and to a lesser extent also in America. Symbolism implies various part tendencies, trends in art that identified with it for a while but then went their own way again, such as the Pre-Raphaelites in England, the Nabis in France and the German mysticism of an Arnold Böcklin or a Max Klinger (who, like artists elsewhere in Europe, showed himself strongly influenced by the philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche). It

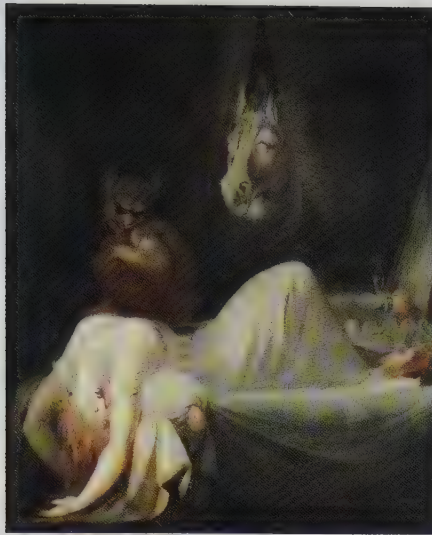
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1859 — Japanese prints reach the West in ever increasing numbers; Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species*

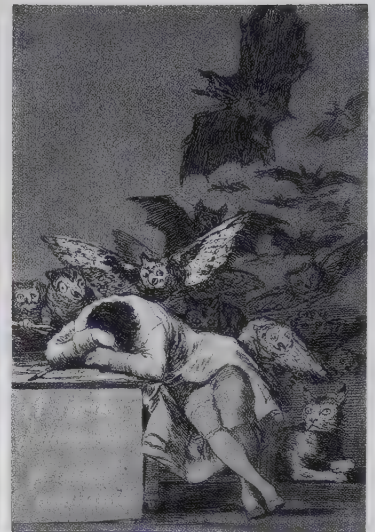
1860 — In *Les Paradis artificiels*, Baudelaire pronounces the states of intoxication induced by opium and hashish to be false means of creativity

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extends to the symbolically charged Jugendstil of the Austrian Gustav Klimt, the existentialist psychology of the Norwegian Edvard Munch, whose pictures incorporated vehemently expressive elements, right up to the early works of certain members of the avant-garde, artists whose names today stand for the beginnings of abstraction.

### The historical Janus-face of symbolism

Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) originally intended to open his *Caprichos* series of etchings, published in 1797/98, with the sheet *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (ill. p. 9 right), in which the figure of a man asleep and dreaming can be made out against a gloomy background filled with a swarming mass of ghostly, winged apparitions – the nightmares that are haunting him. In the words of a contemporary commentary: "The imagination, abandoned by reason, brings forth impossible monsters." Symbolism, too, enthusiastically surrendered itself to the imagination and to the fascinating and – once the rational mind was switched off – dangerous dimensions that it probed. It thereby stood in contrast to the academic style and to the opinion that art functioned according to clear rules and could therefore be taught.

Such a fundamental difference of principle might lead one to suspect that Symbolist art was the programmatic antithesis of all classical "perfection". In truth, this was only partly the case. There was also much common ground: Classicism, too, wanted to give shape first and foremost to an idea, an ideal that was elevated far above everyday banality. In essence, however, this ideal was to be accessible to the intellect and rooted in nature. It was here that Symbolism and Classicism parted company: the former was profoundly convinced that the deeper meaning underlying existence could ultimately never be penetrated by reason and that it would never be discovered through a surrender to nature. Such a conflict explains why many Symbolists continued to deploy formal elements of Classicism but infused them with a pronouncedly Romantic "obscurity" and a patent ambivalence of meaning.

No wonder, therefore, that many of those tracing the genealogy of Symbolism start from artists in whose work classicism exhibits a heightened state of symbolic intoxication – artists such as Johann Heinrich Fuseli (1741–1825; ill. p. 9 left), known under his anglicized name as Henry Fuseli, or William Blake (1757–1827; ill. p. 8), or Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), whose *Imaginary Prisons* series of etchings dates from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. No won-

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1861 — The performance of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opera is surrounded by scandal

1863 — The future Impressionists attract attention at the first Salon des Refusés in Paris

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**“He had selected for the diversion of his mind and the delight of his eyes works of a suggestive charm, introducing him to an unfamiliar world, ... stirring the nervous system by erudite phantasies, complicated dreams of horror, visions of careless wickedness and cruelty.”**

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, 1884

der, it thus also follows, that Symbolism is hard to differentiate from Romanticism, which of course continued to flourish until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The maxim formulated by the outstanding painter of German Romanticism, namely Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) – “The painter should not merely paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. Should he see nothing within himself, however, he should also forebear from painting what he sees before him” – could later have served equally well as the motto of Symbolism.

The “modern” spirit, opposed to the materialism of the day, signified not just the mysterious, the melancholic and the occult, but for many Symbolists also the embrace of unbridled libido, the abnormal and the gruesome, of monstrous products of the imagination, of lust and violence, of the shady sides of existence, whose artistic expression was admired: be it in the “black paintings” of Goya, the sado-masochistic tales of the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), the horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe or the poems and sinister, surreal drawings of Victor Hugo (1802–1885).

In its search for new paths leading into the artistic future, Symbolism thus frequently looked back to the past, to art’s history. Striking formal analogies are correspondingly apparent between Symbolism and earlier styles, such as the Mannerism of the 16<sup>th</sup> cen-

ture, the “fantastical art” of around 1800 and the Romanticism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – to name just the most important. It would of course be fundamentally mistaken to conclude that these formal parallels also implied similarities in artistic thought and intention. While Symbolism may have been related to various other epochs by a certain mood of crisis, “what divides them ... is their specific situation, which historically does not repeat itself” (Hans H. Hofstätter). A major reason for Symbolism’s difference lay in the fact that it saw itself as a counter-movement to a middle-class system of aesthetic and moral values that had previously never existed as such.

Art history likes to shoehorn the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a canon of stylistic development. Apart from Late Romanticism, in which the revolutionary genius of Early Romanticism devolved into self-sufficient simplicity, and apart from Realism, which may be understood not least as a painting of 19<sup>th</sup>-century middle-class life, the spotlight thereby falls primarily upon those “anti-bourgeois” acts of liberation along the road to an independent, modern work of art “freed” from content. These are embodied by the achievements of artists such as Edouard Manet (1832–1883); by the Impressionists, who stripped the picture to a large extent of its narrative function and emphatically transformed it into a symphony of colour; and lastly by the bold excursions into

1865 — At the Paris Salon, Manet’s *Olympia* is greeted with outrage

1869 — Eduard von Hartmann’s *Philosophie des*

*Unbewussten (The Philosophy of the Unconscious)* promises access to dreams, mystical visions and other such irrational forces



## 5. FIDUS (HUGO HÖPPENER)

### The Prayer to Light

1924, oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm  
Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum

## 6. PIERRE CÉCILE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

### The Dream

1883, oil on canvas, 82 x 102 cm  
Paris, Musée du Louvre



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new territory undertaken by the Post-Impressionists and “fathers of Modernism” Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) – all of whom were viewed with suspicion by the middle-class art market as Bohemians or outsiders. This art-historical model leaves no or only marginal room for the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s many so-called minor masters, its worthy landscape painters and ingenuous narrators with the brush, but also its many practitioners of pathos-laden *art pompier*, i.e. the academic Salon painters. Such artists were even relegated to below the level of “genuine” art and considered to border upon kitsch. All of this regardless of the fact that it was they who, in practice and in terms of their numbers alone, dominated the artistic life of the century and lent expression to the (upper) middle-class tastes that had replaced those of the *ancien régime*.

On the one hand, the belletristic dictates of the academies, the belief in an absolute beauty that spanned the ages and in a morally “edifying” function to art, and the desire to escape from the harshness of daily life and its many political disasters into an “unspoiled” world; on the other, the modern hymn to science and industrialization, to a pragmatic and economic “appropriation” of the world, to a statistically measurable reality – these were the ideas and expectations being brought to art by the largely conservative and convention-oriented bourgeois public.

Symbolism felt challenged to mount a defiant resistance. It responded to these socially approved standards with the explosive power of imponderable cosmic and mythic forces. But the revolutionary act ran out of steam. For this spirited opposition to the middle-class canon gave rise to a paradox: apparently so radical and anti-bourgeois, Symbolism in fact remained closely tied to bourgeois problems and to a certain extent presented simply the other side of the coin. “The daydreams, wishful fairytale worlds and barely determinable complexities into which the bourgeois himself occasionally retreats – these embody, in other words, a facet of the same bourgeoisie that they [the Symbolists] think to overcome” (Hans H. Hofstätter). When Des Esseintes, in Huysmans’ novel *A rebours*, goes so far as to systematically ruin all the nerves of his stomach in order to “replace” the natural ingestion of food by artificial feeding through enemas, he demonstrates the Symbolists’ rejection of anything to do with contemporary bourgeois life – and for this purpose resorts to an instrument that was otherwise used for general health care!

From the second half of the 1850s, Gustave Moreau’s Romantic, historical style of painting – inspired above all by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) – converged inexorably upon a Symbolist position (ill. p. 4). It was in France that Symbolism

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1870 — Outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in July. The defeat of Napoleon III in 1871 is followed by the founding of the French Third Republic and the constitution of the German Empire in Versailles

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### 7. ALEXANDRE SÉON

#### Portrait of Péladan

1891, oil on canvas, 132.5 x 80 cm  
Lyons, Musée des Beaux-Arts

### 8. FÉLIX VALLOTTON

#### Interior

1904, oil on cardboard, 61 x 56 cm  
St Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum

### 9. GIOVANNI BOLDINI

#### Portrait of Count Robert de Montesquiou

1897, oil on canvas, 166 x 82.5 cm  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

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was given its first theoretical justification and apology. Moréas penned the movement's (belated) manifesto in 1886, as we have already seen. Writing even more to the point was Gustave Kahn (1859–1936), author, critic and editor of the avant-garde periodical *La Revue indépendante* and a contributor to the journal *La Revue wagnérienne*, a central organ of Symbolism in France. He declared that the Symbolists were tired of the mundane and that they were obsessed with objectifying the subjective (which revealed itself in particular in dreams and fantasies), rather than with chasing after the natural model or some academic convention.

The theoretical discussion surrounding Symbolism was next taken up in England in the late 1890s. From 1895 onwards, the poet and critic Arthur Symons (1865–1945), who edited the *Savoy* periodical together with Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), began writing essays on literature under the overall heading of *Decadence*. His friend William Butler Yeats was unhappy with this term and argued instead for *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. The book subsequently published under this title in 1900 was devoted to both French and English writers and defined Symbolism as an attempt to spiritualize art, to make it a religious drug, as the desire to replace organic naturalness with the abnormal.

## symbolism as a substitute religion

Art as a spiritual “drug” and a substitute religion, and the abnormal as a poisoned dart aimed at all that was natural – that was the holy/unholy alliance that explains the primary origins of many of the artistic products of Symbolism.

The lean towards the abnormal resulted not least from a consciousness that had settled upon part of European society since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely a sense of Decadence and a fear – expressed euphemistically in the term *fin de siècle* – of belonging to a culture that was in the process of decline. Not without reason did the history painting of the day experience an increase in images of the moral decay of Ancient Rome and – thus the intended warning – the resulting fall of the Roman Empire.

On 10 April 1886 the first issue of the periodical *Le Décadent* was published in Paris. Readers were informed that religion, morality and justice were in a state of degeneration. Attendant symptoms included not only the hypersensitivity of exalted taste, infinitely refined luxuries and pleasures, but also neurosis, hysteria, hypnotism, morphinism, academic charlatanism and “Schopenhauer-ism”. In England around 1895, too, Decadence had already become the name for a

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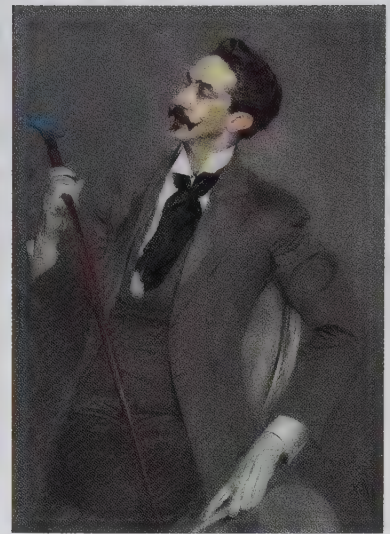
1874 — Flaubert publishes the definitive version of *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (*The Temptation of St Anthony*), which exerts an enormous influence upon Symbolism; first exhibition by the Impressionists

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phenomenon, a “fever” that had been caught from France. In Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings for the play *Salomé* (ill. p. 18 right), written in French by Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), the “sickness” of Symbolism seemed more than clear. This impression was further reinforced when Wilde – poet and supreme dandy – was sentenced to two years’ forced labour for homosexual practices in a highly publicized court case in May 1895.

Decadence mania, which fed on its anti-bourgeois and anti-Naturalistic mood of impending doom like a hummingbird sucking nectar from an orchid, inevitably sailed into the aesthetic waters of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who certified that all great art was predicated upon the world of symbols; mention should also be made of the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), who equally held so-called objective reality and its rational knowability to be wrong tracks. A decisive contribution to the intellectual mood of the *fin de siècle* and Symbolism was also made by the thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), the German philosopher of Romanticism, whose profoundly pessimistic treatise *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Representation*) of 1819 enjoyed international acclaim as from the 1860s and in particular after 1886 and 1889, when it was published in French translations. “A

new truth has recently appeared in literature and art,” wrote the novelist and magazine publisher Rémy de Gourmont in his remarks on Schopenhauer in his book *Le Livre des masques* (*The Book of Masks*) published in 1896. Gourmont summed up the core of Schopenhauer’s philosophy thus: “With regard to man, all that is outside him exists only in the idea that he forms of it. We know only phenomena, we base our reasoning only upon appearances; all truth in itself escapes us; the essence is unassailable.”

Under the impact of contemporary 19<sup>th</sup>-century studies of mythology, however, the concept of the symbol had also categorically changed. The symbol no longer served as a means of communication between man and the supernatural, but rather as the medium through which the mythic forces that had “sunk” into the unconscious depths of human existence could once more be felt. Symbolist art needed symbols in order magically to invoke this deep-lying stratum: through words and pictures that still preserved their original mythical meaning and therefore deserved to be freed from all conventional cultural wraps.

In his monumental work *The Golden Bough*, published between 1890 and 1910, Sir James Frazer (1854–1941) investigated the many commonalities shared by the various mythologies, the connections between knowledge and belief that can be found in the rites of all

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1876 — Launch of the Bayreuth Festival with the *Ring of the Nibelungs* place for many of the writers and artists associated with Symbolism, including Stefan George, André Gide, Emile Verhaeren and Paul Verlaine

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1883 — Mallarmé’s apartment becomes a meeting-



#### 10. JAN TOOROP

##### The Three Brides

1893, pencil, black and coloured chalk with white heightening on brown paper, 78 x 98 cm  
Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum

#### 11. FÉLICIEN ROPS

##### The Temptation of St Anthony

1878, pastel drawing, 73.8 x 54.3 cm  
Brussels, Bibliothèque royale Albert I<sup>er</sup>,  
Cabinet des Estampes

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the world's cultures. In his view, which corresponded to the convictions of most of the Symbolists, the ancient symbols should be understood not just as cultural archetypes but as the "vocabulary" of an elementary "language" of fear, longing and the desires of the instinct.

The ambiguity, indeterminacy and obscurity of meaning that characterize the symbol became leitmotifs of Symbolist art and found expression not just in its cryptic contents but also in its formal means of design and in the execution of the composition as a whole. The Symbolist painters, for example, adopted the indefinable pictorial space established by Romanticism, one that renounced rational mathematical perspective and provided an unreal setting for their complex ideas. The relationships between the figures and the proportions of the human body are frequently "disjointed" in order to irritate the eye or indeed entirely to negate normal visual conventions.

The elevation of art to the status of substitute religion paralleled the yearning for a new religiosity, something that manifested itself in the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the founding of sectarian communities. These included the esoteric Rosicrucian movement in France, which attached great value to an aestheticized culture and was very closely linked with Symbolist artists. Probably originally dating back to the Middle Ages, Rosicrucianism was revived in 1888 in

Brussels and Paris by Sâr Mérodack Joséphin Péladan (1859–1918). With his pale features, black beard, long black hair and full-length caftan, Péladan cultivated the image of a grand magician (Sâr was the obscure "professional term" for a sorcerer) and gathered around himself a circle of spiritualists, cabbalists and necromancers (leading Huysmans to dismiss him as a "magician of tripe"). In the portrait painted by Alexandre Séon (1855–1917), co-founder of the French Rosicrucians and a pupil of Puvis de Chavannes (ill. pp. 11, 21, 43), Péladan – who had initially preached an extremely sensual libertinism – cuts a correspondingly solemn figure against a mysteriously undefined background (ill. p. 12).

The members of the "Order", most of them artists, called themselves magicians or aesthetes and embraced an orthodox Catholicism. On 10 March 1892 they opened their first art exhibition, the famous Salon de la Rose-Croix, in the gallery run by the Parisian art dealer Durand-Ruel. Despite the high entrance price, it drew 11,000 visitors on the very first day! In the foreword to the catalogue, Sâr Péladan set out the Salon's aesthetic programme: all representation of pure nature, uninhabited landscape, animals and plants, in other words all realism was to be rejected. Artistic technique was to be entirely subordinate to a work of art's mythical content, idea

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1884 — Publication of Huysmans' *A rebours* (translated both as *Against the Grain* and *Against Nature*), a key novel of Symbolism; founding of the Brussels association of artists Les XX

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“certain it is that there passes not a day but the soul adds to its ever-widening domain.”

Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, 1896



11

and mystical composition. According to one of Péladan's maxims, art was a mystery and the artist its high priest; when the latter's efforts were rewarded with a masterpiece, a divine ray shone down as if onto an altar. This programme briefly fascinated artists such as Paul Gauguin, Emile Bernard and the Nabis, to whom we shall return below.

The Nabis established links with a group of artists in Germany who had nothing to do with occult sectarianism but much to do with an intensive spiritualization of art. In 1894 the Dutch-born Jan Verkade (1868–1946), a pupil of Paul Sérusier (ill. p. 17 left), travelled to the Benedictine monastery of Beuron in southern Germany, where he sought out Father Desiderius Lenz (1832–1928), in whose theories of art he was greatly interested. Lenz believed that spiritual values could be expressed in art through universal symbols. He founded a school of art that aimed at a liturgical art based on Catholic theology and a new approach to the altarpiece. Lenz laid down a canon based on the "sacred proportions" of ages past, namely on the geometrical laws of the Golden Mean and strict symmetry. Verkade himself entered Beuron abbey that same year, but kept in regular touch with his Symbolist-oriented Nabis friends in Paris about his artistic activities. In 1907 he discussed the Beuron programme and Symbolism in general with Sérusier and other avant-garde painters such as the

Russian Alexei Jawlensky (1864–1941) in Munich, before emigrating to Palestine in 1909.

In Germany, a reformist movement with sectarian traits and permeated by Symbolist mysticism is linked with the name of the painter Hugo Höppener, known as Fidus (1868–1948). He became the artistic spokesman for what was known as the Life Reform movement, an attempt to eschew life in the metropolis and instead to cultivate nudism, a looser style of dress and vegetarianism, and to make contact with free-thinking communities, back-to-nature *Wandervogel* youth groups and narrow-mindedly "national" associations. In their kitschy glorification of an "Arian" solar religion, paintings such as *The Prayer to Light* (ill. p. 10) demonstrate why Fidus was later co-opted without difficulty into the racial ideology of the National Socialists, with its cult of blonde, "jubilant", healthy, naked men and women.

### parallels in literature and music

In its early days, as already mentioned several times above, Symbolism drew its intellectual nourishment chiefly from literature. The tales of Edgar Allan Poe, for example, exerted a decisive influ-

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1886 — Appearance of two programmatic texts on Symbolism: the "Manifeste littéraire" by Jean Moréas, printed in *Le Figaro*, and the "Notes sur la peinture wagnérienne et le Salon de 1886" by Teodor de Wyzewa, published in *La Revue wagnérienne*

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**12. EDVARD MUNCH**

Winter's Night

c. 1900, oil on canvas, 120 x 180 cm  
Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich

**13. PAUL SÉRUSIER**

The Talisman

1888, oil on wood, 27 x 21 cm  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

**14. WASSILY KANDINSKY**

Moonlit Night

1907, woodcut and watercolour, 20.8 x 18.6 cm  
Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery

12

ence upon the new aesthetic and literary theory in France long before their author's discovery and recognition in the United States and Britain. Poe's fame in Europe was spread in particular by Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867). The dream, the extravagant art of imagination in contrast to bourgeois banality; beauty as a weapon against weariness of life – these are the favourite themes of the great French poet, as found in his *Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), the most famous volume of poems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In his novel *A rebours*, Joris-Karl Huysmans not only created the supreme incarnation of Decadence in the aristocratic personage of Des Esseintes, but also demonstrated in exemplary fashion the compositional principles of Symbolism. In a description of precious stones and their effects of light and colour that runs for page after page, his lavish stream of exotic phrases ultimately loses all concrete meaning for the reader, so that the text becomes a bizarrely proliferating pattern of words. Similar formal strategies are also found in *Salammbô* by Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), published in 1862, and in the texts of German-language Decadence. In Huysmans' second novel, *Là-bas* (*Down There*), which appeared seven years after *A rebours*, the author drew upon the sum of his occult studies and focused amongst other things upon Satanism. At the same time he

showed himself to be on the road to faith and Catholicism – in 1900 Huysmans entered the Benedictine Order as a lay monk.

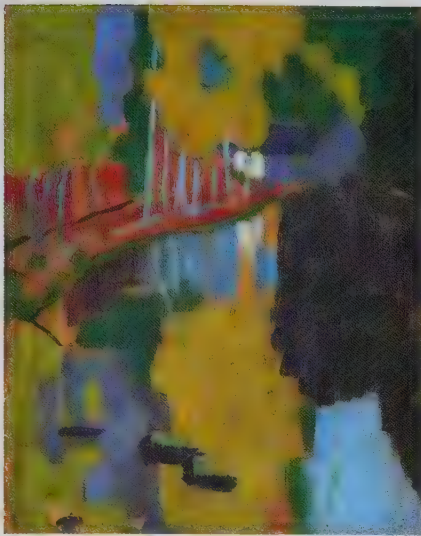
There were particularly close contacts, too, between Symbolist fine art and the writings of Victor Hugo, Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855), Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), Stéphane Mallarmé, the Irish-born Oscar Wilde and the Flemish Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), to name but the most important. In Germany, too, a literary scene devoted to Symbolism and in lively exchange with the fine arts was also flourishing in the figures of Stefan George (1868–1933), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and Richard Dehmel (1863–1920), and in Austria in the writings of Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931) and Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929).

In Germany and Europe Nietzsche was also appreciated and admired for the literary power of the language in which he clad his philosophical ideas. The influence of his *Geburt der Tragödie* (*Birth of Tragedy*) of 1872 upon the artists known as the *Deutschrömer* (the "German Romans") – painters such as Arnold Böcklin and Hans von Marées (of whom more in the main section) – cannot be overestimated. In this treatise, Nietzsche revises the classicist image of Greece as a joyful culture shaped by the light of harmony and a rational spirituality and claims instead that the music and tragedy of

1888 — Gauguin meets Sérusier in Pont-Aven; *The Talisman* (ill. p. 17 left), a painting that Sérusier

executed under Gauguin's guidance, becomes the point of departure for Les Nabis





13



14

antiquity arose above all out of the cruel and demonic imagery of ancient myths, with their mixture of desire and death.

It is impossible to speak of Symbolism without speaking of music! The music, for example, of Richard Strauss (1864–1949), Claude Debussy (1862–1918), Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915) and of course first and foremost of Richard Wagner (1813–1883).

Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the "total work of art", first formulated in 1850, reached one of its apotheoses in conjunction with Max Klinger's monumental *Beethoven* sculpture of 1902 (ill. p. 22 right). Wearing a clouded expression, the composer is seated on a mighty throne like a new Prometheus and at the same time like a majestic new Jupiter, a heroically stylized nude figure of compact stature whose lower body is swathed in lavish draperies. On the rocky plinth at his feet Beethoven is confronted by the powerful figure of an eagle, less as an instrument of torture as in the legend of Prometheus than as the symbol of an unfettered genius that knows no earthly chains. As the attribute of St John the Evangelist and visionary, the eagle is also the herald of divine inspiration. Klinger invokes further such symbolic references in the reliefs on the back and arms of the throne: in the central field on the throne back, for example, he juxtaposes the Crucifixion of Christ with the Birth of

Venus and has the striding figure of St John the Evangelist rain curses upon the goddess arising from the waves. Venus and the Crucified Christ – the two might signify that the creator of the Ninth Symphony, in *conformitas Christi*, is seeking to unite the religion of this world with that of the hereafter. In his Beethoven statue Klinger celebrates the titanic artist-god. The naked white body of the composer, sculpted from insular Greek marble, is embedded within a polychrome setting of various stones and metals. Onyx is used for the draperies, black marble for the rock and the eagle, with the eagle's wings studded with agate, jasper and polished antique glass paste; the angelic heads on the bronze throne are carved in ivory with opals as their background. The nude figure is lent a restless surround by the shimmering gleam of exquisite materials, in a contrast that effectively emphasizes its pale spirituality. The degree to which Klinger's Beethoven sculpture fulfilled the requirements of the *fin-de-siècle* cult of the artist, pursued with such enthusiasm after 1880 not least due to the influence of Richard Wagner and Nietzsche's concept of the "superman", is witnessed by its installation in the Vienna Secession of 1902, which was transformed into a shrine for the occasion: surrounded by a frieze of paintings specially created by Gustav Klimt and accompanied by the music of Gustav Mahler, the Beethoven sculpture rose to become a total work of art.

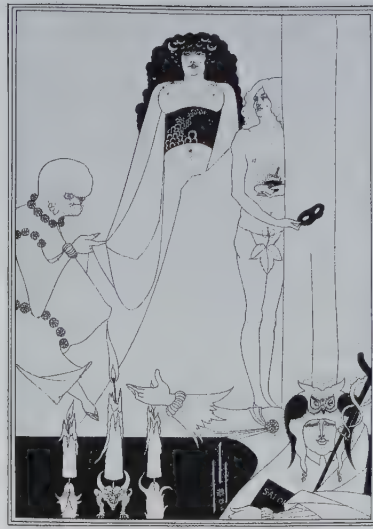
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1889 — An international congress of spiritualists is held during the Exposition Universelle in Paris; the first issue of the Symbolist journal *La Revue blanche* is published in Paris

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15



16

Wagner's musical dramas unleashed a fresh wave of enthusiasm after the composer's death in 1883 and were in heady accord with Symbolism. Among the first to praise Wagner to the skies in Paris had been Charles Baudelaire, in as early as the 1860s. In 1887 there were nevertheless fierce protests at the attempt to perform *Lohengrin*, an opera by the "arch enemy" – the Franco-German War lay only 15 years in the past. Soon however, enthusiasm for Wagner and admiration for his ecstatic music won the day even in the French capital. Wagner was celebrated for his adaptation of myths that matched the doctrines of the Symbolists, and the mid-1880s saw the launch in Paris of *La Revue wagnérienne*, a literary meeting-place for poets, fine artists and musicians working in a Symbolist vein.

Another centre of Wagner worship outside Germany constituted itself in Belgium. Not without reason did the Brussels opera house, the Théâtre de La Monnaie, stage Wagner operas for over 40 years, starting in 1870. The performance of the first act of the *Valkyrie* and the second scene of *Twilight of the Gods* in the studio of the famous sculptor Constantin Meunier (1831–1905) on 15 March 1886 by the Association Wagnérienne universelle demonstrates more than clearly the fascination that the composer and his notion of the total work of art exercised not least upon the country's fine artists.

Music and Symbolism repeatedly attempted to go beyond a mere marriage of their two genres to arrive at an absolute symbiosis. One of the most revolutionary figures in this field was the Lithuanian Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911): having started out as a composer, at the age of 30 he also became a painter, studying at the Warsaw Academy. Drawing upon an extensive knowledge of art history, he created a cosmos of powerful Symbolist imagery (ill. p. 22 left). He understood colour – embodying the "Promethean spirit" – as the link between the individual arts, and within painting specifically as the link between contrapuntal motifs. In the same way, he perceived music as a sort of reflection of the divine world order, in an echo of Pythagorean philosophy. Čiurlionis' "synthetic" programme propelled him to an impressive modernity, to a proto-abstraction that paralleled if not preceded the early works of Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), who was also operating in an abstractive and Symbolist vein (ill. p. 17 right). Whatever the case, with the advance into abstract dimensions, the musicalization of avant-gardist painting would further increase after the turn of the century!

Synaesthesia, the experiencing of a sensation through one sense as a result of the stimulation of another, and in particular the stimulating interplay of colour, light and sound, was understood in

1890 — Suicide of Vincent van Gogh

1891 — Gauguin's first trip to Tahiti; influenced by

a visit to Bayreuth, Péladan founds the Ordre de la Rose-Croix (the Rosicrucian Order)



## 15. ALFRED KUBIN

### The Snake God

1902/03, pen, ink and watercolour, sprayed on cardboard, 20.8 x 21.2 cm

Linz, Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum, Grafische Sammlung

## 16. AUBREY BEARDSLEY

### Enter Herodias

c. 1893, ink drawing, 23.2 x 17 cm

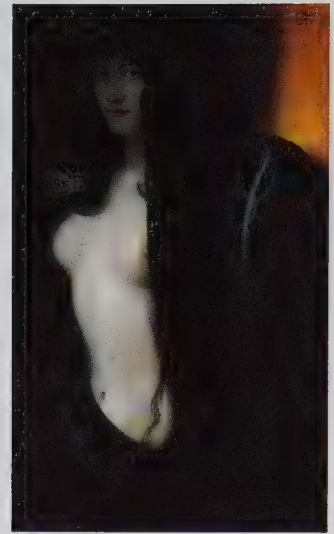
Los Angeles (CA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art

## 17. FRANZ VON STUCK

### Sin

1893, oil on canvas, 95 x 59.7 cm

Munich, Neue Pinakothek



17

Symbolist art as a means of expanding consciousness. Significantly, in 1902 the French anthropologist and poet Victor Segalen (1878–1919), who was in contact with Gauguin and Debussy, contradicted the view that synaesthetic experiences were symptoms of degeneracy. On the contrary, they were indicators of intellectual progress: “Les synesthésies ne sont pas symptômes de dégénération, mais de progrès.”

## preferred motifs

In examining Symbolism's range of themes (a range it is impossible to cover here in full), a distinction may be made between traditional subjects that are given a characteristic new interpretation, and those that can be judged as new (take the astonishing, surreal works of Alfred Kubin [1877–1959], ill. p. 18 left, for example) or at least unusual inventions. The first category includes classic fairytales and legends, which were re-interpreted in the hands of the Symbolists as intuitive ciphers of individual and existential experiences such as loneliness, yearning, love etc., as well as landscape painting and portraiture.

A portrait can be “treated” in a Symbolist manner if the artist evokes, in the guise of a face, the psychic depths that surface within it, the inner being, the “secret” of a personality. This secret can be housed in particular in the eyes, those great and “unfathomable” mirrors of the soul (to invoke a time-honoured topos), and in the case of female portraits in flowing hair. Baudelaire compared the eyes of a woman with cold jewels combining steel and gold; he celebrated her thick tresses, issuing their magnificent symphony of scents, as a billowing sea. For Dante Gabriel Rossetti (ill. p. 39), the eyes set in the pale face are the mirror of a melancholy soul full of yearning. The mouth – and again this applies above all to female portraits – is either shown with full lips “opening” like a rose as a symbol of love and sexuality, or – as often the case in the portraits of Fernand Khnopff (cf. ill. pp. 7, 72, 73) – with lips that are pressed shut as the physical sign of stillness and silence.

The bulk of Symbolist portraits are characterized by a strange ambivalence. On the one hand, the physiognomy is surrendered to the moment and forces of introspection, to a self-withdrawal from the world, while on the other hand it is bathed in an aura intended to exert an irresistible force of attraction upon this same world. To this must be added the synthesis of a detailed realism, in places overly acute, and a

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1892 — Moreau is appointed a professor at the Paris Académie des Beaux-Arts

1894 — The group La Libre Esthétique, whose members include Ensor and Beardsley, succeeds Les XX

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18

**18. AXEL GALLÉN-KALLELA**

Lemminkäinen's Mother

1897, oil on canvas, 85 x 118 cm

Helsinki, Ateneum Art Museum/Antell Collection

**19. PIERRE CÉCILE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES**

The Poor Fisherman

1881, oil on canvas, 155.5 x 192.5 cm

Paris, Musée d'Orsay

formal and colouristic stylization that underlines the artificial nature of the scene of which the portrait forms part. The primary aim is to capture the sitter utterly absorbed in his or her own psyche, his or her own existence. The face as medium of reflection and narcissistic self-admiration! As a rule, the self-portraits of Symbolism attest to the concept of the artist as a visionary, a prophet, but also as an exponent of experiences on the outer perimeters of existence.

Landscape painting, too, saw itself adapted to Symbolist principles. Following on from Romanticism, it revealed a preference for "melancholy" regions forsaken by people, for broad horizons, for planes and lines stretching away into infinity, pared of everything non-essential, freed from all economic utility. Human access naturally continues to exist insofar as the landscape transforms its motifs into sensual enigmas that become projection screens for our psychic moods, daytime reveries and above all for night-time dreams.

In his book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* of 1873, the English historian Walter Pater wrote of the portrait of a woman: "All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative

loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias." No, Pater was not referring to one of the female models of the Symbolists or Pre-Raphaelites. He was talking about Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, painted between 1503 and 1506! Such lines betray the massive extent to which Symbolist thinking had altered the image of the feminine. The Symbolists perceived woman's sexuality as an enigmatic and dangerous power. Their indulgent wallowing in naked female flesh and glittering jewellery on sinful skin was triggered, as it were, by the tale of Salome, which Flaubert took up in his novel *Salammô* in 1862.

Symbolism, while not alone, was nevertheless the chief amongst the art movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to employ distinctive symbols for man-eating "woman". These included the sphinx, the female vampire and the biblical figure of Salome, who rose to become the archetypal *femme fatale*. She had other embodiments, of course, in the figures of Messalina, Judith and Cleopatra, or quite simply in the many paintings of young girls with yearning in their eyes, their lips parted in a lascivious manner and long-flowing hair.

Sin, incarnated in male fantasies of the era in the biblical figure of Eve and in every woman demonstrating her sensuality, found its way into one of the most famous "icons" of Symbolism, created by the Munich painter Franz von Stuck (ill. p. 19). Sin, the Fall of Man, was

1903 — Redon is made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour

1905 — Matisse and the Fauves exhibit at the Paris Salon d'Automne; the Expressionist group Die Brücke forms in Germany

1904 — Picasso moves into a studio in Montmartre



“O Fantasy, bear me away  
on thy wings to dispel my  
sadness!”

Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of St Antony*, 1874



19

one of the most frequently treated pictorial motifs of the age – as was the temptation that preceded it, and its psychology.

The subject of temptation was associated first and foremost with the theme of the Temptation of St Anthony. It is no coincidence that the favourite reading of the hero in *A rebours* should be Flaubert's *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, an anti-Catholic, nihilistic novel which was published in 1874 after Flaubert had worked on it for some 30 years. St Anthony served ultramontane propagandists – whose ranks included painters such as Gustave Moreau – as a weapon against the modern “heresies”, against democracy, Marxism, materialism, philosophical positivism, Darwinism etc., which were condemned one and all in the *Syllabus errorum* (“syllabus of errors”) that accompanied the *Quanta cura* encyclical promulgated by Pope Pius IX in 1864. Félicien Rops (whose nickname, revealingly, was “Pornocrates”) responded on behalf of the opposition with a satire on the same Temptation theme (ill. p. 15). Significantly, in the *Scène de la Tentation de saint Antoine* by the theosophist Paul Elie Ranson (1861–1909), the hermit receives the tiara from the hands of the devil. In the painting *Les Tribulations de saint Antoine* (1887; New York, The Museum of Modern Art) by James Ensor, “Anthony himself is deformed into a zombie-like monster who dissolves into blood red” (Ursula Harter).

## the most important centres and artists

Symbolism is first and foremost a European phenomenon of the *fin de siècle*. It failed to find the same resonance in the US, although in the work of Thomas Cole (ill. pp. 26, 27), the founder of the Hudson River School, the influence of Romanticism inspired a landscape painting that in the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century favoured a palette of largely unnatural luminosity and sweeping panoramic effects that almost call to mind the subsequent wide-screen projections of Hollywood cinema. While these landscapes certainly lay claim to a deeper inner meaning, to qualify them as Symbolist would be to overstretch the term. Of course, American art history nevertheless boasts two of the great names of Symbolism in Whistler (ill. p. 29) and Elihu Vedder (ill. pp. 34, 35).

In Europe, however, Symbolism developed in an unadulterated manner, with only Italy largely resisting its impact. We have already mentioned that art historians in the past considered France as the true birthplace of Symbolism and its most influential sphere of activity. The fact that this view has since broadened naturally does not diminish the country's significance for the movement. French Symbolism – whose “founding fathers” also included Puvis de Chavannes (ill.

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1907 — In an encyclical Pope Pius X warns against modernism in the Church and against libertarianism in the arts

1908 — The term Cubism is coined

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20



21

pp. 11, 21, 43) – is guaranteed its enduring importance by such outstanding names as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon alone. Moreau's œuvre is ambivalent: in the last decade of his career, in particular, large-format paintings, sumptuously overlaid and frequently bombastic, stand alongside watercolours and oil sketches distinguished by their exquisite palette and experimental, expressive character. Although Redon himself objected to being bracketed with Symbolism, the artist – who was part of the circle around the poet Stéphane Mallarmé – is rightly considered one of the movement's most important exponents.

Having created his fantastical beings and mysterious figures almost exclusively in charcoal drawings and black-and-white lithographs up till around 1890, in the final decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he cultivated colour, which he carried to a maximum degree of luminosity. A part in this development was played not least by the Nabis, a group of young artists initially clustered around Gauguin (ill. p. 57). Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Maurice Denis (ill. p. 67) and Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940) in particular who venerated Redon as their model: it was Redon who took over the role of mentor for them following Gauguin's departure for Tahiti in 1891. From 1889, the year in which the group was founded, until around 1900, the Nabis (the name is

derived from Hebrew and means "prophets" or "illuminated ones") showed their works at the art exhibitions mounted by the Symbolists. This is understandable, since they too practised esoteric initiation rites and strove towards a religious or, more accurately, spiritual renewal of painting.

In Great Britain, it is almost impossible to distinguish the Symbolists from the Pre-Raphaelites. More recent authors, or at least some of them, have therefore tended to label painters such as Millais (1829–1896; ill. p. 25), Rossetti (ill. pp. 24, 39), Burne-Jones (ill. p. 47) and Watts (ill. p. 55) not simply as Pre-Raphaelites but more broadly as Symbolists, amongst whom Beardsley (ill. p. 18 right) and the sculptor Leighton (ill. p. 71) may also be numbered.

Large-scale exhibitions of recent times have drawn fresh attention to a fact of which connoisseurs have long been aware, namely the central position of Belgian Symbolism. In Belgium in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a pronounced nostalgic reflection upon the "mystical" pictorial worlds of the *primitifs flamands* (as the Early Netherlandish masters were known) paved the way for Symbolism. This was accompanied by the attempt to harmonize Catholicism and Modernism. In Belgium, Symbolism did not simply serve as a counter-movement to Realism, but was concerned with a broadening of the

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1909 — In Italy, Marinetti composes the *Futurist Manifesto*

1910 — Sigmund Freud publishes *On Psychoanalysis*

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## 20. MIKALOJUS KONSTANTINAS ČIURLIONIS

### Sonata No. 6 (Sonata of the Stars) Allegro

1908, tempera on cardboard, 72.2 x 61.4 cm

Kaunas, The M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art

## 21. MAX KLINGER

### Beethoven (detail)

1902, stone of various colours and bronze inlaid with glass, metal, ivory and precious stones, height 310 cm (monument), 150 cm (figure)

Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste

## 22. GEORGE MINNE

### Fountain of Kneeling Youths

c. 1898, plaster, 168 x 240 cm

Ghent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten



22

concept of reality *per se* in order to bring about a psychological expansion of consciousness.

Particular mention must be made in this context of the Brussels group Les Vingts (also commonly written Les XX), which from 1886 onwards stood in close contact with the Parisian avant-garde and in particular with Neo-Impressionism, but which nevertheless adhered to Symbolist tendencies. In a climate of international synthesis, connections were established with the Europeanized American Whistler as well as with Redon, Gauguin and Edward Burne-Jones.

Naturalism is systematically placed in doubt in Belgian Symbolism, and to an extreme extent by James Ensor (ill. p. 41), Constantin Meunier, Félicien Rops (ill. pp. 15, 31), Fernand Khnopff (ill. pp. 7, 28, 72, 73) and a number of other artists whose works will be discussed later. These artists also included many sculptors, George Minne (1866–1941) amongst them. Combining the language of Symbolism with a reduction of form and composition to essentials, Minne (ill. p. 23) expressed such an unprecedented existential angst that he anticipated, even before the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, much of Expressionism. Outside Belgium, his ascetic, almost over-aestheticized figures of youths with their arms ecstatically clasped, recalling Gothic linearity, impressed first and foremost the artists of Viennese

Art Nouveau – Jugendstil and Expressionism would ultimately come together in Austria in the pictures of Egon Schiele (1890–1918).

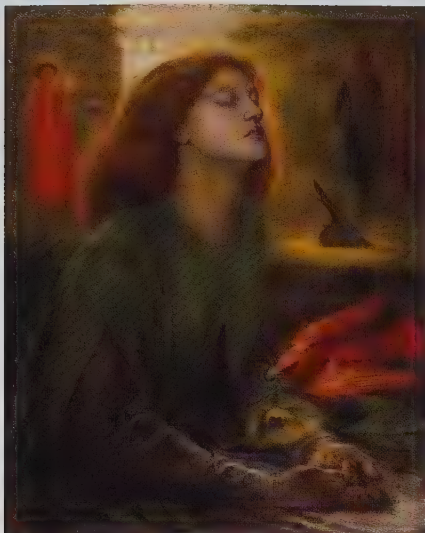
The Brussels–Vienna axis was cemented via another channel, too: intensive communications were established between the two cultural centres at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the participation of Belgian Symbolists in the exhibitions mounted by the Vienna Secession. Rops, Minne, Meunier, Delville (ill. pp. 64, 65), Degouve de Nuncques (ill. p. 61) and above all Fernand Khnopff were amongst those invited to show in Vienna. Khnopff made contact with Gustav Klimt (ill. p. 83), who would be much influenced by his work, and with the editors of the periodical *Ver Sacrum*; his pictures were also much sought-after amongst Austrian collectors.

In Germany, too, the term Symbolism conjures up a wealth of celebrated names: Franz von Stuck (ill. pp. 2, 19, 95), for example, then the painter and sculptor Max Klinger (ill. pp. 22 right, 68, 69) and the Deutschrömer, amongst them Hans von Marées (ill. p. 33). Alfred Kubin, the graphic artist and author of the macabre novel *The Other Side*, who was born in Austria but who made his breakthrough in Germany, arrived at his profoundly Symbolist art, infused with its horrifying visions and sexual obsessions (ill. p. 18 left), in the city of Munich, where he was a student at the Academy. Here Kubin saw

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1912 — A group of artists under the direction of Kandinsky und Marc publish the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*  
in Munich; Rudolf Steiner founds the Anthroposophical Society

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23

**“soon there shall not be a single household of cultured people amongst us in which reproductions of his works are not to be found.”**

Fritz von Ostini in his monograph on Arnold Böcklin, 1904

works not only by Franz von Stuck, also based in Munich, but also by the Belgian Rops and the French Redon and naturally also by the Leipzig artist Max Klinger, who had meanwhile attached himself to the Deutschrömer. The advanced degree to which the Munich art scene shortly after the turn of the century was intoxicated with Symbolism is documented not least by the early œuvre of Wassily Kandinsky (ill. p. 17 right).

A leading representative of the Deutschrömer was the Swiss Arnold Böcklin (ill. pp. 44, 45, 48, 62), undoubtedly one of the most famous Symbolist painters. Indeed, Swiss artists played an outstanding role within Symbolism – we need only think of such other major names as Segantini (ill. pp. 52, 53) from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, Hodler (ill. p. 87) and Vallotton (ill. pp. 13 left, 89).

We could also point to many other Symbolist individuals and schools across Europe, amongst them the Czech František Kupka (ill. p. 81), painter of the occult in his early works and later a pioneer of abstract painting; or the Dutch artist Jan Toorop (1858–1928; ill. p. 14). It is impossible to list them all. Instead I shall briefly sketch only the situation in Scandinavia and Russia.

Amongst the Scandinavian artists, the most famous is the Norwegian Edvard Munch (ill. pp. 16, 50, 51). His artistically outstand-

ing œuvre takes up Symbolist archetypes, landscapes, and above all female roles of contemporary relevance – woman as virgin or as whore, woman as man-eating vampire. Munch thereby charges these aspects with existentialist significance and lends them powerfully expressive formal characteristics. But Munch was by no means the only artist representing this direction in the North; mention should also be made of the Finnish painter Akseli Gallén-Kallela (1856–1931), who with his *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (ill. p. 20) – a subject taken from the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic – created an icon of Scandinavian painting on the threshold of Modernism.

The profound extent of Symbolism's influence upon the Russian art of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior to the arrival of the avant-garde with geometric abstraction and Suprematism, is demonstrated not only by Kandinsky in Munich but also by the early work of Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935), which betrays the incisive influence of Maurice Denis. As from around 1912, of course, Malevich would advance to become a cult international practitioner of pure non-objectivity, bringing us by way of conclusion to a reflection upon the relationship of Symbolism to the artistic avant-garde, with which – in chronological terms – it repeatedly overlaps.

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1913 — The Armory Show in New York introduces America to artists from the European avant-garde; amongst those exhibited is Redon, a large proportion of whose works will enter US collections

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### 23. DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

#### Beata Beatrix

c. 1864–1870, oil on canvas, 86.4 x 66 cm  
London, Tate Gallery

### 24. JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS

#### Ophelia

1851–1852, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 111.8 cm  
London, Tate Gallery



24

## At the interface with modernism

In the art theory of more recent times, Symbolism has been regularly interpreted as the opposite of the avant-garde and Modernism. In the wake of Postmodernism, which has entirely destroyed the philosophical claims of non-representational art, Symbolism's adherence to a figurative manner of representation and to literary impulses is played off against abstraction and its supposed abandonment of the "human" element and meaningful content. The "melancholy" that informs the mood of so many Symbolist works is interpreted as mirroring a grief at the loss of these values, a loss that had started to make itself felt much earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to some extent, indeed, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

We may not make an ethical judgement about the relationship between Symbolism and the non-representational avant-garde, but we can acknowledge the historical evidence for their differences. It is true that the Symbolists sought above all to communicate a message to their public, even if its content was formulated in enigmatic terms, and were doing so at a point in time when – from a superficial point of view – the protagonists of Modernism were already focusing their attention upon purely formal visual experiments. The situation was not

quite that clear-cut, however, for Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich and other early abstract artists by no means sought to eliminate a profound symbolic dimension from their works. Unlike the Symbolists, however, they no longer believed that this dimension needed to be tied to identifiable themes and naturalistic imagery! Why, then, did the great leading figures of modern painting – Picasso (ill. p. 85), Kupka, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich – all start out from Symbolism or at least from Symbolist tendencies? This fact proves that Symbolism, in its search for a means of expressing the essential, not seldom stylized its formal repertoire in such a way that abstraction became conceivable and possible, namely as a continuation of this simplification of form.

Only after the triumphal advance of abstraction was interrupted in the 1920s by New Objectivity, and above all by Surrealism, did Symbolism's heritage truly resurface once again, be it in the work of the founder of Pittura Metafisica, Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), who was influenced by Böcklin and Nietzsche, or in individual pictures by Max Ernst (1891–1976) and Salvador Dalí (1904–1989; ill. p. 90), or in the figures of the Belgian Surrealists René Magritte (1898–1967; ill. p. 60) and Paul Delvaux (1897–1994).

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1914 — Outbreak of the First World War

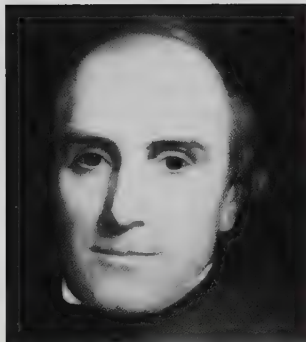
1917 — Lenin and Trotsky pave the way for the Communist Revolution in Russia

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# The titan's goblet

Oil on canvas, 49.2 x 41 cm

New York, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Samuel P. Avery Jr., 1904*



\* 1801 Bolton-le-Moor  
† 1848 Catskill (NY)

Although Symbolism never rose to great heights in the United States, American art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century nevertheless contained a current of visionary and fantastical themes that can be assigned to the prehistory of Symbolism. Corresponding examples make it clear that the roots of Symbolist thinking, with its love of mystery and enigma, can be traced a considerable way back into the past, long before the official "founding manifesto" was published towards the end of the century. Probably

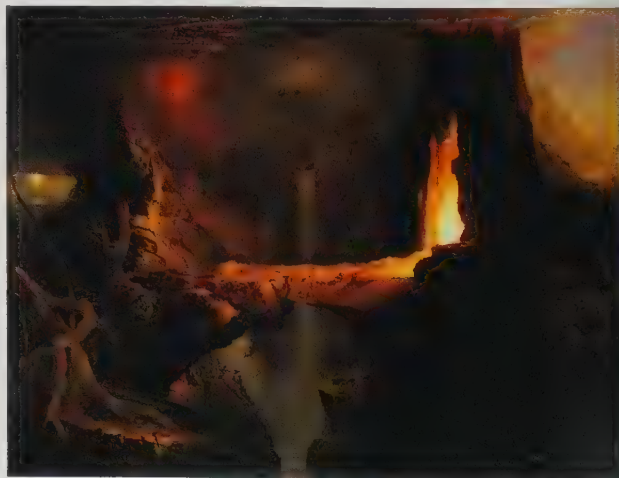
the most important American pioneer of Symbolist ideas was the painter Thomas Cole.

Cole was born into an Anglo-American family who returned to the United States from Europe in 1818. After completing his artist's training, Cole settled in Catskill on the Hudson, where he became a co-founder of the Hudson River School that introduced an emphatically Romantic style of landscape painting into the United States. Cole thereby initiated a pictorial genre described as a symbolic, moral landscape and characterized by strong literary implications and allegorical references, as illustrated by his painting *Expulsion. Moon and Firelight*, which demonizes and "sensationalizes" the biblical subject of the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise.

Much better known today is Cole's small canvas entitled *The Titan's Goblet*: as if seen from the position of a giant towering high above his surroundings, the viewer's gaze sweeps across a landscape of mountains, plateaus and coastal bays stretching away into the dis-

tance and beyond both edges of the canvas. Almost lost at the foot of the cliffs beside the sea is a small town, dwarfed by the grandiose wildness of the panorama.

The formal composition recalls the European tradition of the universal landscape, dating back to the Middle Ages – an impression contradicted, on the other hand, by one confounding factor: rising above the cliffs that jut out like a slab across the picture is an immense goblet hewn out of stone. The shaft is provided by a gigantic primeval tree, while the edges of its foot and rim are overgrown with vegetation. Antique ruins are also dotted around the rim, while the water within the goblet itself serves a number of tiny sailing boats as a lake. The goblet seems a remnant from the age of the Titans, who according to Greek myth lived on earth before men and the gods of Olympus.



*Expulsion. Moon and Firelight*, c. 1828

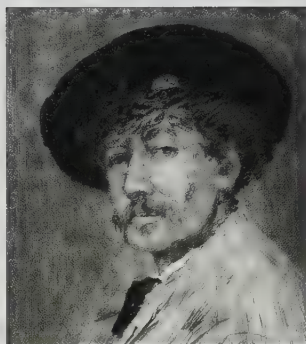




# symphony in white no. 2: The Little white girl

Oil on canvas, 76.5 x 51.1 cm

London, Tate Gallery



\* 1834 Lowell (MA)  
† 1903 London

The relatively small-format painting reproduced here represents the second, fundamentally different version of a subject that Whistler had already treated in 1861/62 in a considerably larger painting (today in the National Gallery of Art in Washington). In both compositions the viewer's gaze falls upon Jo Hiffenan, the young Irishwoman who was the artist's lover. In the present case she is portrayed in three-quarter view. Her figure is cut off by the edge of the picture on the left-

hand side, lending the whole scene the character of a snapshot – were it not for the left arm resting on the mantelpiece, which anchors the young woman firmly within the tectonic lines of the room in which she is standing (in the house in Lindsey Row, Chelsea, where the couple were living).

Jo is holding a Japanese fan in her right hand. In the mirror above the fireplace we see a reflection of her face, so that the *profile perdu* afforded by the angle of her head is "complemented" by a portrait in three-quarter view in the mirror. It is complemented in a strange way, however, as the features of Whistler's pretty companion seem to take on a somewhat tired, older look in her reflection: a premonition of transience? A ghostly confrontation with her own future?

The portrait is surrounded by an inexpressible feeling of secrecy and ambiguity, as if it could relate a long and sad story but prefers to remain silent. The painting inspired Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) to compose the enigmatic poem *Before the Mirror*,

whose verses were written on sheets of gold paper and pasted onto the original frame, which sadly no longer survives.

The title *Symphony in White* given to this painting and to the version that preceded it – two pictures that count as key works of Symbolism – refers in each case to the young woman's magnificently painted dress, whose gauzy, tumbling folds indeed call forth musical associations. The tonal painting went against the visual conventions of the day to such an extent that Whistler's colleagues and critics refused even to acknowledge the two works. The extravagance that lies in the very simplicity of the dress; the white that evokes the ethereal aura of feminine beauty; the painterly sophistication needed to achieve such an affect – all of this would only find its artistic resonance a considerable time later. We owe probably the most exquisite example to Fernand Khnopff and his portrait of *The Artist's Sister, Marguerite Khnopff* of 1887.



Fernand Khnopff, *The Artist's Sister, Marguerite Khnopff*, 1887





# Death at the Ball

Oil on canvas, 150.8 x 84.9 cm  
 Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum



\* 1833 Namur  
 † 1898 Corbeil-Essonnes

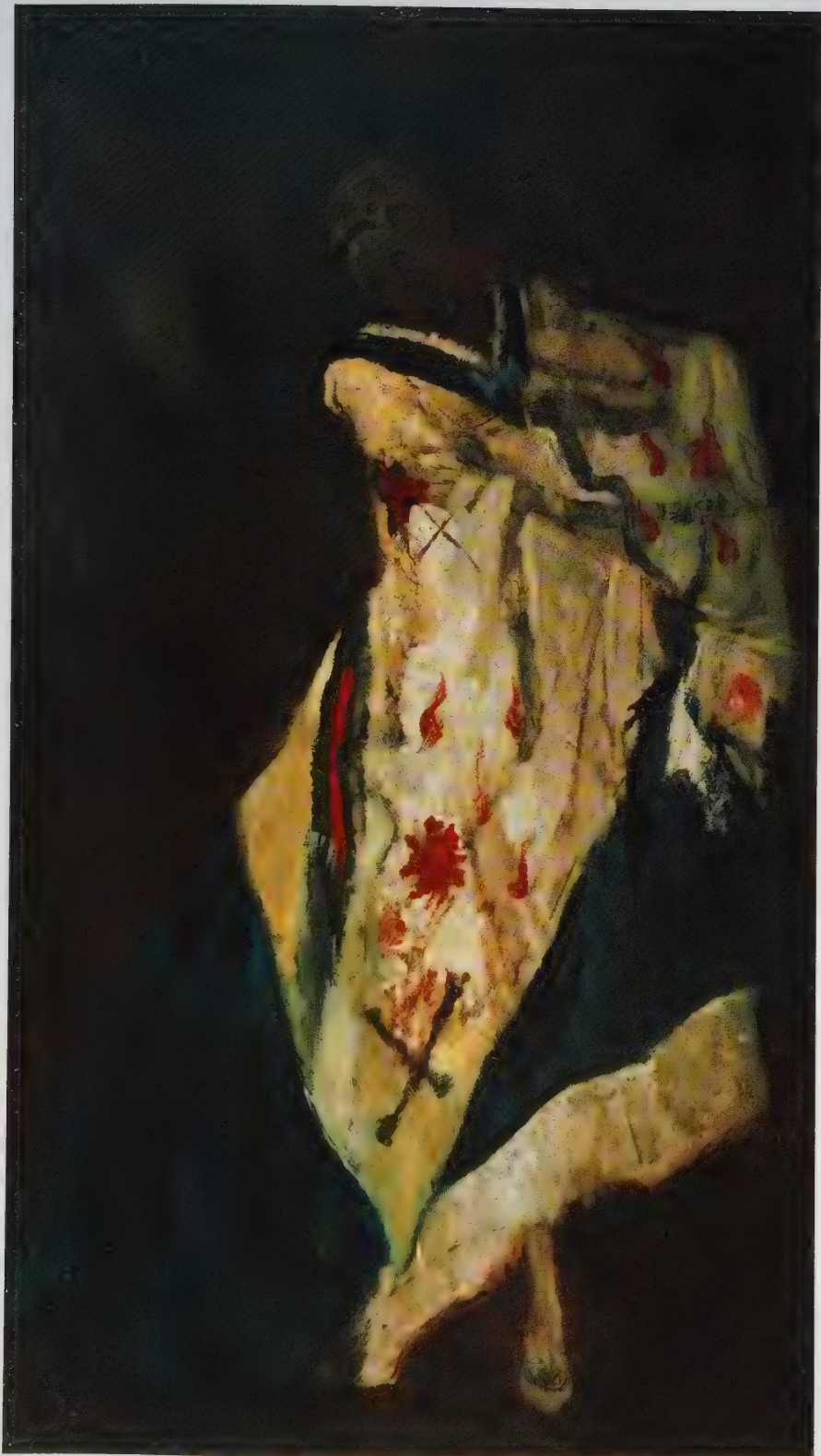
The Belgian Félicien Rops was at his artistically most dazzling in the medium of graphic art. He started out as a caricaturist and worked for the satirical weekly magazine *Uylenspiegel*, which he himself had founded in 1856. In the etchings, lithographs and drawings of his later oeuvre, as also in his oil paintings, the iconographical repertoire of Symbolism is staged with abandon and total creative virtuosity: Death; woman as *femme fatale*, as a creature whose voracious sexuality spells calamity for man; and lastly even Satan, who turns the world and even heaven into a single Walpurgis night. To all of this, Rops adds in most cases an appropriate dash of irony and sarcasm that lends a cynically burlesque note to his themes.

Rops drew much of his inspiration from literature, whereby he followed the path signposted by the poet Charles Baudelaire, author of *Les Fleurs du mal*. A path trodden by a society wracked by dissoluteness, by an eroticism as pleasurable as it was depraved. As in the case of Baudelaire, of course, beneath the cryptic, rationally incomprehensible, deliberately demonic surface of Rops' work lies a realistic dimension that allows a strong social engagement to shimmer through. The manner in which Rops plumbed the depths of bourgeois society and its sham morality later attracted the particular interest of Viennese intellectuals: the libidinous expressiveness of the Belgian artist's *Temptation of St Anthony* (ill. p. 15), a blasphemous sheet of 1878 depicting a naked woman bound to the Cross, made an evident

impression upon Sigmund Freud, for example. The literary figure Karl Kraus was also impressed by Rops' work and purchased some of his graphic works.

In the oil painting *Death at the Ball*, on which Rops worked for over ten years, the artist did not – as in the majority of his other works – base himself upon a literary source, but followed the directives solely of his imagination. Death, who is parading in female dress (a foot wearing a dainty lady's slipper is visible beneath the hem of the dress), twists its bony skull in a repulsively coquettish manner towards an elderly, well-dressed, bearded man, who is almost swallowed up by the dark background. Life is here confronted with Death in a far more dramatic manner than in the work of James Ensor, for example (ill. p. 41). Behind the colourful gaiety of Death's dress – albeit already invaded by large areas of ill-omened black – lie the dread and certainty of the coming end. The infernal, the instinctual and the sexual here assume the expressive and horrifying shape that finds permanent form in the work of another Austrian, Alfred Kubin (ill. p. 18 left). At the same time, the painterly handling of colour values and the nervous, dabbing handling of the brush are proof that Rops undoubtedly ranks amongst the great masters of colour within the sphere of Symbolist art.





# Rider picking oranges and naked woman

Oil on canvas, 109 x 77 cm

Halle a. d. Saale, Stiftung Moritzburg, Kunstmuseum des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt



\* 1837 Elberfeld  
† 1887 Rome

Forming a loose group in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were a number of artists linked both with Munich and with Italy, and who consequently became known in German as the *Deutschrömer*, the “German Romans”. They included the sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand (1847–1921) and the painters Arnold Böcklin (ill. pp. 44, 45, 48, 62), Anselm Feuerbach (1829–1880) and Hans von Marées. Rather than succumbing to the fascination of the throbbing me-

tropolis, as the Impressionists had done, they were bound together – for all their differences – by the common belief that the sources of western culture were to be found on Italian soil. What they sought in Italy was not formative experience, however, but an unspoiled way of life and an original landscape not yet ruined by tourism – a “theatre” of demonic myths, shepherds and the cloven-hoofed Pan. The metaphysical needs of these artists were met by the philosophies of such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche – and by a regular meditation upon German Romanticism. In their stylistic orientation towards classical antiquity, the *Deutschrömer* artists consequently avoided all that was merely prettified in the spirit of academic theory, all that was costumed and anecdotal, and through this act of restriction arrived at the essential.

This search for the essential in art, for “pure” form, is demonstrated in particular by Hildebrand and Marées. Beneath the surface of the *Deutschrömer*’s refined forms, however, elements of Symbolism and depth psychology can also be seen straining towards the light, as

evident first and foremost in the work of Böcklin but also in that of Marées. It is for this reason that Marées’ oeuvre has been classified in the more recent literature for the most part as a variant of Symbolism characterized by a strict observance of form.

Hans von Marées, whose style – if we are to trouble ourselves with such labels at all – falls between Late Romanticism and Romantic classicism, had a particular preference for the theme of the “Golden Age”. Through it, he evoked the visions of Paradise that Greek mythology inspired in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century imagination.

It is against this backdrop that we may view *Rider Picking Oranges and Naked Woman*, which is dated around 1869/70. It is likely that Marées painted the picture while staying at Crostewitz, the country estate belonging to the art critic Conrad Fiedler, where he was a regular visitor during these years.

The protagonists of this harmoniously balanced composition – the figure of the naked rider seen in rear view plucking a fruit from an orange tree, the naked woman seated on the edge of a fountain in the foreground (the drawing of whose legs is entirely wrong when measured against the academic standards of organic “correctness”) and, between the two adults, the naked boy – are absorbed in their being and their simple actions as if in a solemn state or ritual. It is difficult to imagine them anywhere else but in an ideal, Arcadian landscape – even if Marées has steeped their location in a melancholy atmosphere, using a palette that is neither cheerful nor even flooded with light. This mysterious gathering in the open air is accompanied by a sense of archaic timelessness, an enigmatic atmosphere that is fully in line with the Symbolist ideal of rendering visible the inexpressible concealed behind concrete phenomena. In a collection of writings issued posthumously in 1946, art historian Heinrich Wölfflin observes of the work of this important German painter: “Within the pictures there dwelled a power to touch the soul that was so great that one forgave the errors.”







# Memory

Oil on mahogany panel, 51.2 x 37.47 cm

Los Angeles (CA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection



\* 1836 New York  
† 1923 Rome

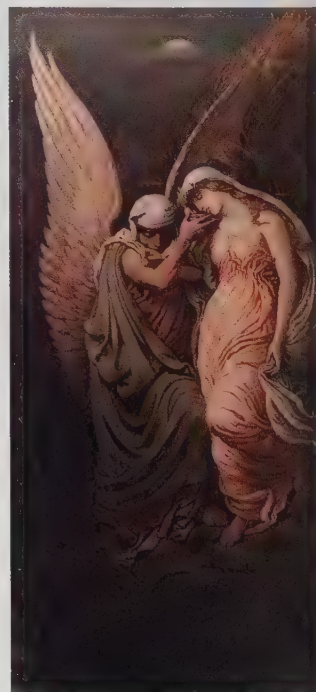
Stylistically close to the Pre-Raphaelites and strongly impressed by the works of Odilon Redon (ill. pp. 1, 58, 59), the American artist Elihu Vedder rightly occupies a prominent place within the multifaceted kaleidoscope of Symbolism with his paintings and drawings. Vedder achieved celebrity above all with the fantastical and allegorical scenes with which he illustrated the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a collection of verses written by the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Per-

sian scholar and poet Omar Khayyam. Vedder's 1885 painting of *The Cup of Death* represents probably the most famous example of his *Rubaiyat* illustrations: a dark angel is guiding the cup containing the lethal drink to the lips of a young woman, whose figure betrays how very much Vedder owed to the Pre-Raphaelites, chiefly Edward Burne-Jones (ill. p. 47) and George Frederic Watts (ill. p. 55), but also Lord Frederic Leighton (ill. p. 71).

Vedder may be classified as a European just as much as an American artist, since he studied in Florence, amongst other places, and spent a large part of his life in France and England, and latterly in Italy. The religious and historical subjects that he favoured in his early oeuvre became increasingly informed by an alienated, Symbolist iconography and quality of expression.

Elihu Vedder was always an impressive and productive landscape painter as well – a facet of his talent demonstrated by *Memory*, a small panel painting executed in 1870. The portrait format – an

unusual choice for the artist – serves to reinforce the sense of vast depth, whereby the lack of internal verticals allows the panorama to stretch away into infinity on either side. The viewer is intended to feel himself transported to a deserted stretch of beach where he is the sole sentient being. Rolling gently towards him in a never-ending rhythm are the waves of the ocean, whose greenish hue darkens into a sombre greenish-black on the horizon, where it is cast into shadow by a violet bank of cloud. Appearing like a vision within the cloud is the head of a woman. Unlike an earlier chalk drawing of the same subject, the phantom is not at the very centre of the picture but has been shifted slightly to the left, so that it is only perceived at second glance and in that instant appears all the more eerie. Eerie, too, because the apparition – analogous to the waves of the sea – is moving towards the viewer and will soon swallow up the last patches of brighter sky still visible along the top of the picture. What "memory" does this threatening face wish to call to mind? Typically for Symbolism, this question remains unanswered.



The Cup of Death, 1885



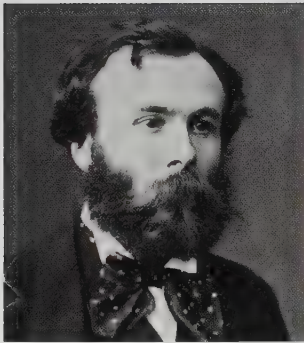


Edith Vreder  
1876

# The Apparition

Oil on canvas, 142 x 103 cm

Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau



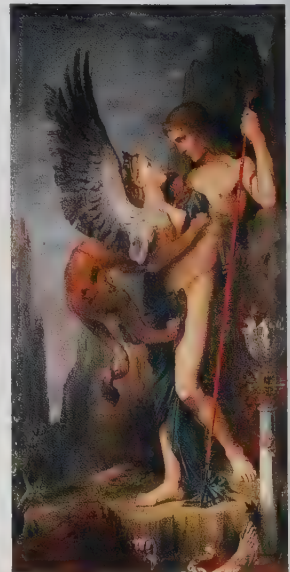
\* 1826 Paris  
† 1898 Paris

Moreau, who advanced to become one of the most famous of the early Symbolists through paintings such as *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, explored the subject of Salome from 1870 onwards in life drawings, studies and a number of paintings. In each case the lascivious dancer is allowing her veil to fall within a palace chamber of extravagant oriental splendour. Her graciously extended leg and the alabaster eroticism of her body are skilfully emphasized by filigree ornament.

In the version reproduced here, the interior – soaring to a vast height – is partially bathed in golden light, which allows details of the architecture to shimmer in schematic outline. Herod's throne, decorated with emblems of Indian deities, is situated on the left, above and behind the seductive young woman, who has enthralled the king with her charms and for whom he has ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. Between the two colossal columns on the left lies an altar, on whose back wall it is possible to make out the drawing of a Christ in Judgement beneath the cosmic symbols Sol and Luna (sun and moon). Salome has almost reached the end of her dance; just one last transparent veil reveals rather than conceals her lower body. In her raised right hand she holds a lotus blossom, the flower of desire; her other arm is pointing dramatically towards the right (her index finger tangent to the central vertical of the portrait format), to where the head of the murdered saint is hovering above her, like an apparition summoned during a spiritualist séance, surrounded by a radiant aura

of light and a cruciform nimbus. This latter motif might signify that, by John, Christ is also implied, since from a Christian point of view the martyrdom of John the Baptist was considered to be a forewarning of the death of the Saviour. Herod has become an entirely marginal figure; it is Salome herself – the personification of the *femme fatale* for the *fin-de-siècle* viewer – who desires the death of the man to whom she appears to be offering the charms of her wonderful body!

The lavish interior that Moreau constructs before the viewer's eyes in such sumptuous detail and in such a symphony of colour ranges between Symbolist fantasy and archaeological reconstruction, between aestheticism, erotic voyeurism and morbid fascination. Huysmans was fascinated by this Salome in his novel *A rebours*: "No longer was she merely the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and concupiscence from an old man by the lascivious contortions of her body; who breaks the will, masters the mind of a King by the spectacle of her quivering bosoms, heaving belly and tossing thighs ...; she was now revealed in a sense as the symbolic deity of indestructible Lust ..."



Oedipus and the Sphinx, 1864





# Proserpina

Oil on canvas, 119.5 x 57.8 cm

London, private collection



\* 1828 London  
† 1882 Birchington-on-Sea (Kent)

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, also famous as a poet, was a co-founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and one of its outstanding figures. Of all the Pre-Raphaelite artists, it was Rossetti who carried their goals and their mystery-laden aestheticism most enduringly into the era of European Symbolism and thereby oriented his art towards literary themes that equalled a deep, dark "well" of unfathomable, timeless symbolism.

He did a total of eight versions of the mythological subject of Proserpina. The painting reproduced here was completed in 1877 and is today housed in a private collection in London. It depicts the half-length figure of a captivatingly beautiful young woman seen from the side, who represents Proserpina, queen of the underworld in Roman mythology. She was kidnapped by the god Pluto, king of the dead, but after her mother Ceres had addressed many pleas to Jupiter, Proserpina was granted permission to return to the world of the living – on condition that she had eaten none of the fruits of Hades. Since she had eaten a single seed of a pomegranate, however, she was only allowed to return to the earth for half the year, spring and summer, and had to spend the remaining months in the underworld.

Rossetti saw in this subject a symbol of his own fate, for Jane Burden – the woman who provided the model for Proserpina and for whom he felt a strong attraction – was married to fellow artist and art theoretician William Morris (1834–1896), and was thus tied and

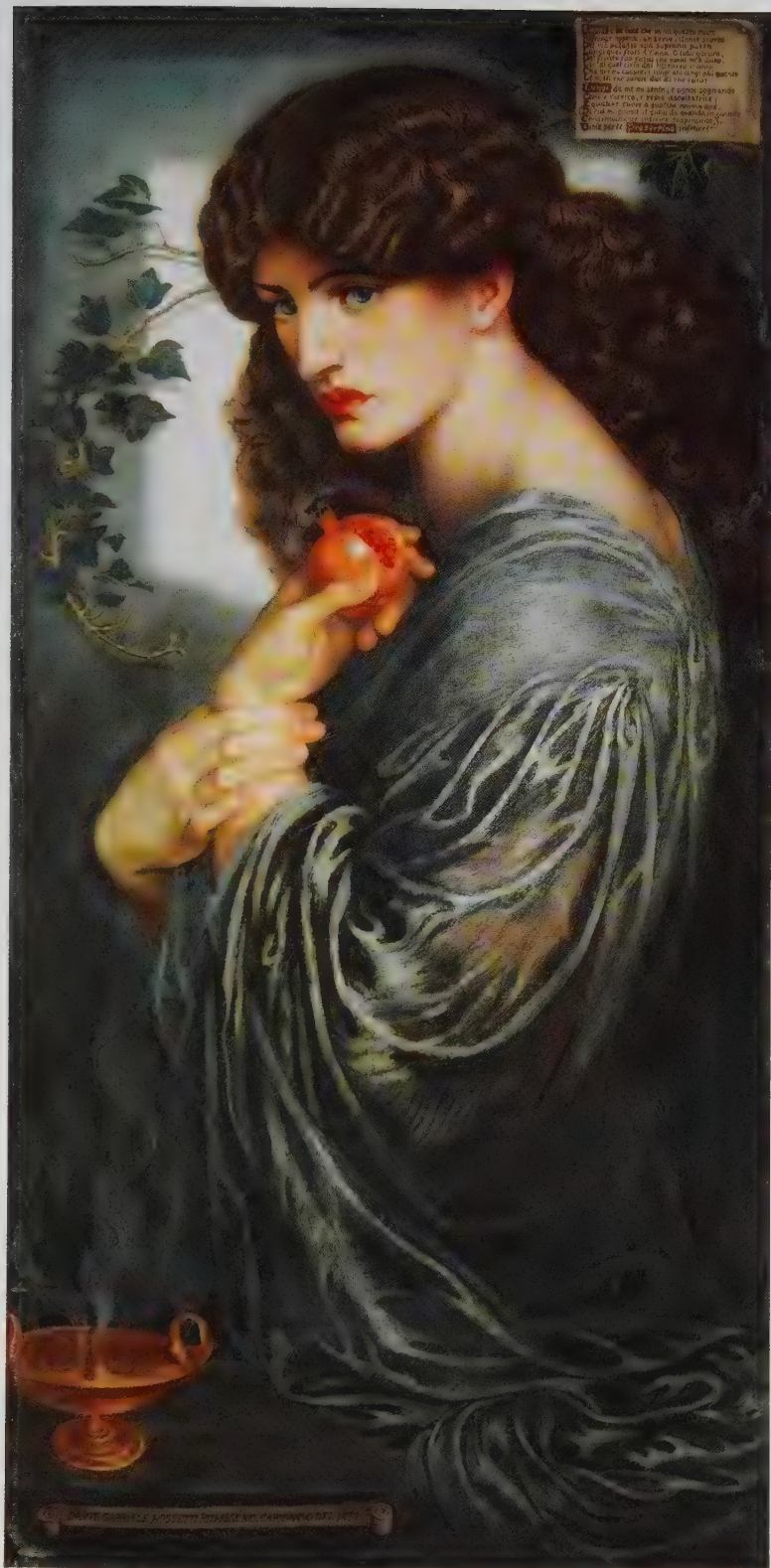
hence "trapped" and ultimately unobtainable, even though William Morris, Jane and Rossetti lived in the same house from 1871 to 1874. The artist composed an elegiac sonnet to accompany the picture, which is included in the top right-hand corner.

Proserpina is seen in a gloomy corridor of her palace, holding the fateful fruit in her hand and lost deep in thought. The opulent oval of her face corresponds to the ideal of female beauty held by many Pre-Raphaelites, to the Decadent image of woman so frequently chosen by Symbolism, namely one combining *femme fatale* with Virgin. The incense burning in a dish beside this alluring beauty is a reference to her divinity; the ivy creeper in the background is a symbol of the memories that choke her. Patterned by gleaming folds, her thin, dark-green dress in a deliberately antique style tumbles with decorative sumptuousness onto a marble ledge at the bottom of the picture, which serves to separate the composition from the real world occupied by the viewer.

Seen against the backdrop of the typical male fantasies of the *fin de siècle*, the woman's full red lips, her flowing hair and her large eyes, in combination with the rosy flesh of the pomegranate, convey an atmosphere of sultry sensuality. With her right hand Proserpina holds the wrist of her left hand, as if to restrain it from performing the act that will spell her ruin. In vain, for like a second Eve she raises the pomegranate – an age-old symbol of sexual desire – to her mouth.

For this Proserpina painting, Rossetti cut out the face and hands from a previous version, mounted them onto a fresh canvas and incorporated them into a new variation.





Il non è de' suoi che in se stesso  
S'è fatto, e non è de' suoi che in se stesso  
S'è fatto, e non è de' suoi che in se stesso  
S'è fatto, e non è de' suoi che in se stesso  
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S'è fatto, e non è de' suoi che in se stesso

PAOLO VERONESE. INCENSERE. 1877.

# masks watching a negro minstrel

Oil on canvas, 115 x 96 cm

*Private collection*



\* 1860 Ostend  
† 1949 Ostend

The work of James Ensor took a decisive turn in the years around and shortly after 1886, when the Belgian painter and draughtsman reworked a group of 31 drawings that he had made over the preceding years. The subject and its formal presentation thereby underwent an abrupt shift from the real to the unreal. The world of concrete objects gave way to fantasy figures, to a mob of bizarre and monstrous apparitions that recall the Flemish tradition of earlier

centuries and the demonic elements and grim humour infusing the paintings of artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder.

This shift saw the young Ensor turning away from his academic beginnings and a painting in dark tones in order to embrace his own distinct style, one that anticipates Modernism in many of its features and cannot be easily classified under any of the conventional stylistic headings. If we accept Ensor as a Symbolist, as seems most plausible, he was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant and progressive of the artists working in this vein.

From this said point in time, Ensor bade farewell to the imitation of reality and invoked instead a fantasy world. Conceived as a mirror of human depths, it was populated by grotesque figures, masks and walking skeletons whose eccentricity – but also whose delicate colouring – made the Belgian famous even in his own lifetime.

Ensor has been assigned his place in the history of art as a “painter of masks”. An inadmissible simplification, in actual fact, for his vast oeuvre – which comprises around 900 paintings, 4,000 drawings and 133 etchings as well as a number of lithographs – is characterized right from the start by the most diverse subjects. Nevertheless: alongside Ensor’s skeletons, it is his equally macabre masks that rank amongst his most distinctive creations.

Masks have also crowded into the painting whose the title role is played by a black minstrel. The picture was commenced while Ensor was studying in Brussels and exhibits many of the components of academic tradition: a tonal painting, a setting constructed in spatial perspective and a “model athlete” posed by an (exotic) life model. The minstrel is evidently miming a tightrope act and is holding in his hands a balancing pole, whose diagonal dominates the composition. At the far end, a parrot is “demonstrating” the art of balancing on the rod with innate sovereignty.

Around 1890 Ensor subsequently added the turtle and the paraffin lamp in the foreground, as well as the colourful, grimacing masks that “intrude” upon the interior from the right. As if looking through a window, they seem to focus like grotesque hecklers upon the minstrel – i.e. upon the academic motif that once provided the nucleus of the painting. These artificial creatures, these masks also offered the opportunity to employ colour in an artificial (garish, unmixed) and independent manner, in a liberated way that was no longer tied to representational valence – colours that, unlike the usual “gallery tone”, become a theatre of light (hence, too, the prominent role played by pale white in Ensor’s innovative palette)!

The contrast between naturalistic Academy piece and radical break with the conventional rules of painting lends the composition a shocking alienation effect.





# Young girls by the seaside

Oil on canvas, 61 x 47 cm

Paris, Musée d'Orsay



• 1824 Lyons

† 1898 Paris

Puvis de Chavannes was a pupil of the salon painter Thomas Couture (1815–1879), a conservative artist even if he issued from the Romantic School that was progressive in his day, and Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), the brilliant head of French Romanticism. It was upon such contradictory foundations that Puvis based his style, one with which he aimed to reinvent mural painting and which made him an early representative of Symbolism. Or at least so he is

seen today. While Gustave Moreau's works, with their overladen opulence, lent expression to the sensual and darkly mysterious side of Symbolism, Puvis – so it is argued – preferred an idealistic, as it were spiritualized tranquillity. In his pale, chalky palette and his harmonious compositions dominated by sculptural figures, it is as if the world has become the dematerialized setting for the most subtle forces.

Puvis differed substantially, in other words, from the prevailing Symbolist style. And he flatly refused to be classified as a Symbolist artist. It is also true that many of the Symbolists in turn thought little of his art. The novelist Huysmans took particular offence at his painting, criticizing the monotony of its pale palette and fresco-like atmosphere, its hard and angular handling of line, its affected simplicity, in short its "boringness"!

The aura of mystical timelessness that Puvis strove to achieve is manifested in an unforgettable manner in the present portrait-format painting of three tender, semi-naked girls beside the sea. The fig-

ure seen in rear view standing more or less in the centre and arranging her magnificent chestnut hair combines with the two girls reclining in the foreground (the one on the right, although cut off by the frame, not unlike a mirror image of the girl on the left) to form a "classical" triangular composition. Directly above the high horizon of the ocean, the sky is striped with red clouds announcing either sunrise or sunset. This atmospheric, pastel-like lighting contrasts with the saturated blue of the water, toned down in places into black, and the ochre tones of the steep bank of earth on the left. The qualities of the light are graduated with extreme subtlety across the canvas. In his later works, Puvis would prefer a smooth application of paint with no pronounced shading.

The "puzzle" that Puvis sets the viewer in the present painting surrounds the question of whether the three young women are in fact all the same person in different poses and seen from different angles. This would be an artistic device familiar since the Renaissance, one through which the medium of painting sought to demonstrate its ability to compete with sculpture by providing a view of its subject in the round. It is more likely, however, that with this triad of mysteriously introspective girls Puvis was visualizing three different physical and mental states: one active, one passive and one contemplative. This would place him in the Romantic line of succession and lend expression to a typically Symbolist iconography.

Puvis was already considered to be one of the greatest artists of the century even just a few years after his death. His works were admired in particular by the Nabis, but were also appreciated and studied by artists such as Henri Matisse (1869–1954).

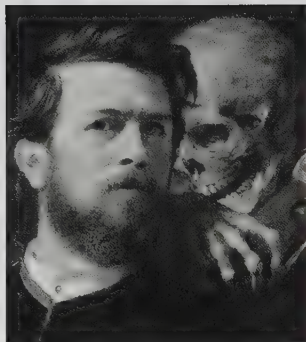




# The Roar of the sea (The sound)

Oil on panel, 121 x 82 cm

Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie



\* 1827 Basle  
† 1901 Fiesole

The Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin was one of a group of artists known as the *Deutsch-Römer*, the "German Romans", who found the country of their yearnings fulfilled in Italy. Böcklin became one of the most celebrated painters of the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a favourite with the general public. Present and past, dream and reality, fantastical vision and a naturalistically-oriented style of representation triumphantly combine within his paintings into a singular

whole. Demonic creatures of the woods and the water, often an androgynous mix of beast and man, and mythical figures inhabit a nature of elemental power which is characterized both as archaic and timeless. With the painting *The Isle of the Dead*, of which he produced five versions over the course of his career, Böcklin created an icon of Symbolism. As the woman who commissioned it had requested, it became "a picture to dream by", a post-Romantic landscape of melancholy which the artist himself demanded should exude "such stillness that a knock at the door would make one start". It expresses in masterly fashion the Symbolist ideal that every "true", profound work should purvey an aura of the indefinable, should point to an infinite number of different things. The painted enigma is thereby also handed over to the personal world of the viewer, who responds to the "call" of the picture with a reply that rises from the depths of his being.

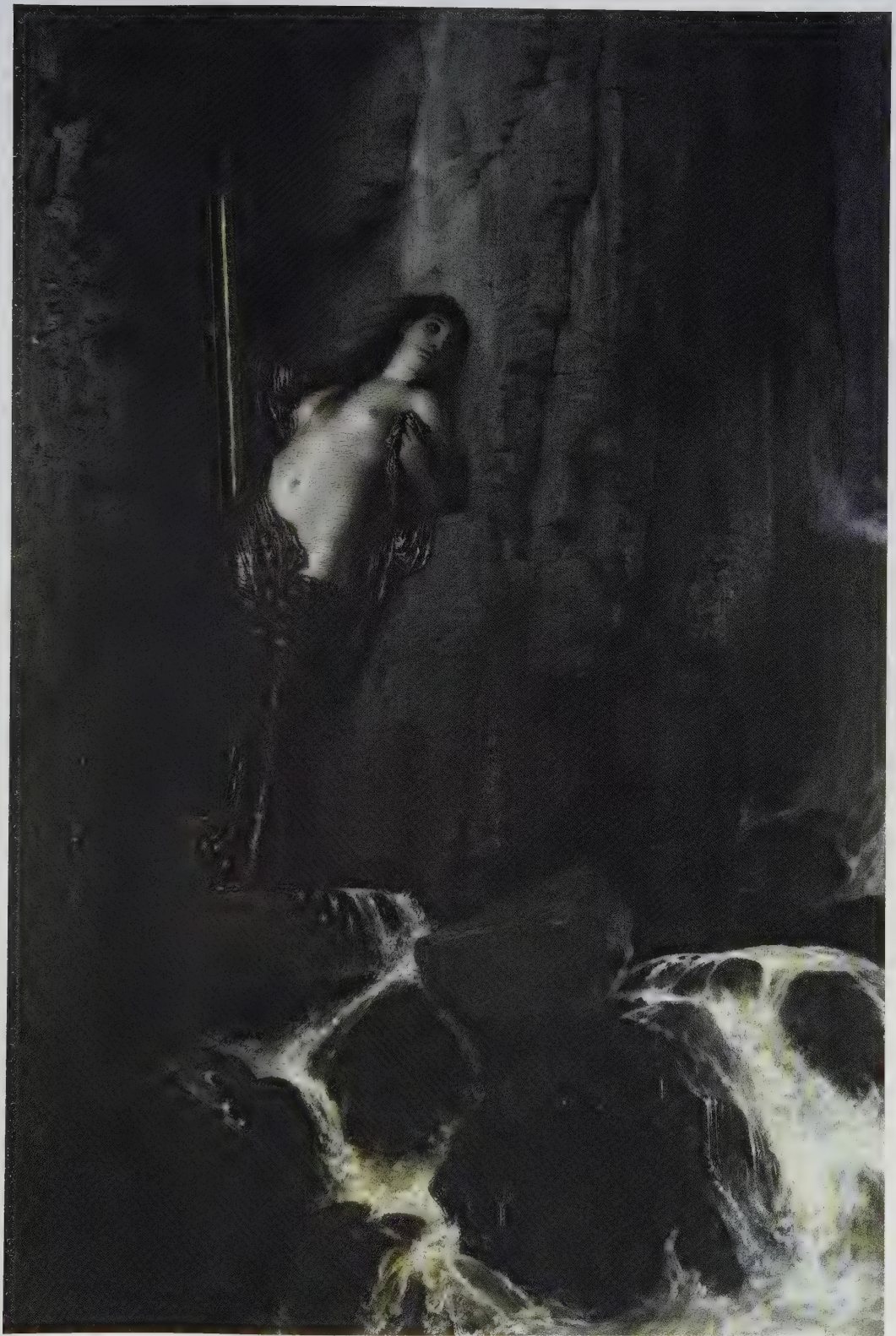
The same is unreservedly true of the painting *The Roar of the Sea*, of which the second version is reproduced here. Within this com-

position in blue-black and white, our eye is drawn to a semi-naked woman who is leaning alone against a rugged cliff, listening to the roar of the waves. In comparison with the first version, her pose is here less mannered and she instead appears lost in thought. Does the half-clad young woman represent the title character of the poem *Die sehrende Melinda (Pining Melinda)* by the Swiss prose-poet Salomon Gessner (1730–1788)? Or – as has been suggested more recently – a motif from Romantic German folklore, namely the Loreley, here introduced into an alien context? Whatever the case, the determining factor remains the consonance between the thunder of the surf and the "roaring" sound of the lyre (the colossal stringed instrument held by the demonic being is probably an Aeolian harp). At the same time, the lyre evokes associations with the singers and bards of myth and serves as a symbol of poetry.



*The Isle of the Dead*, 1880





# The golden stairs

Oil on canvas, 269.2 x 116.8 cm

London, Tate Gallery, Bequeathed by Lord Battersea 1924



\* 1833 Birmingham  
† 1898 London

A member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Edward Burne-Jones continued even in his late works to evolve the Pre-Raphaelite style, which was hallmarked by a clear handling of line. In contrast to the glowing, jewel-like colours of his teacher Dante Gabriel Rossetti (ill. pp. 24, 39), he employed a palette influenced by Renaissance painting and operating with more muted values. He thereby sought to oppose the design principles of his Impressionist contemporaries,

whom he condemned as undisciplined.

His first designs for *The Golden Stairs* date back to the year 1872. The finished painting subsequently marked a high point within those compositions in which Burne-Jones transports the viewer into a non-narrative scene that is steeped solely in the surreal atmosphere and the mystery of an obscure ceremony. The fact that Burne-Jones considered a number of other titles for this painting – such as “The Marriage of the King” and “Music on the Stairs” – testifies to the “openness” of its subject, in a composition brought to life above all by its decorative rhythms created by formal relationships.

The artist allegedly painted each of the 18 young women to be seen on the canvas after a different model. But all the beauties look alike and adhere to an “ideal of sweetness” that the Pre-Raphaelites adopted from the Italian Early Renaissance and rediscovered in certain female types in their circle. The girls themselves, who are moving down a curving flight of stairs, thereby seem to form an endless spiral.

The impression of a flowing continuum pointedly modulated in its train of movement is reinforced by their antique-style dresses falling in narrow pleats, and there are correspondences, too, between the draperies, poses and leg positions of these ethereally descending figures: the human image passes into the continuous repetition of ornament.

Where are these graceful girls coming from, who are they, where are they going? In what (palatial?) setting do they find themselves, what is their function? For what audience is their music intended? To such questions there are no real answers. Some descriptions of the large-format vertical composition, a work of exquisite technical skill, interpret the virginal figures, these slender, linearized “Muses”, as spirits in an enchanted dream. And as in a dream all movement seems to have been strangely frozen, does not really seem to “get off the ground” – like an amplitude that is reproduced as a “static” dynamic pattern.

The – if you like – abstract principle of infinite formal repetition and subtle variation to which the Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist Burne-Jones lends such potent expression, especially in the arrangement seen here, would inspire a whole series of avant-garde artists after his death. In the early 1890s these included one Paul Gauguin, and around the turn of the century also Pablo Picasso, who had admired the Englishman’s paintings as a young artist in Barcelona. It has also been suggested that Marcel Duchamp may have seen a print reproduction of *The Golden Stairs* before painting his famous Cubo-Futurist *Nude Descending a Staircase* of 1912 (Philadelphia, PA, Philadelphia Museum of Art).





# The nix (The water sprite)

Oil on canvas, 144 x 114 cm

Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

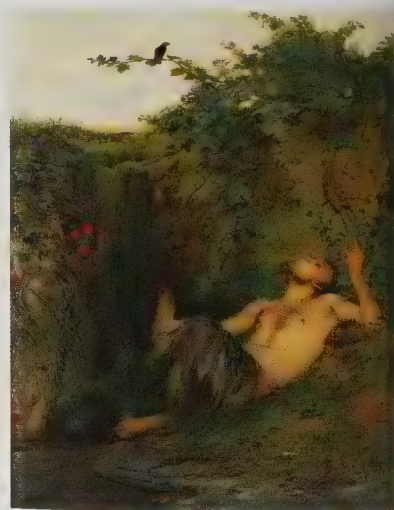
How difficult it can be to place a stylistic label on certain works of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is demonstrated not least by the production of the Swedish painter Ernst Josephson. Trained at the academy of art in Stockholm, in 1880 he exhibited at the Paris Salon d'Automne for the first time. He made his name with history and genre subjects that are distinguished by a realistic wealth of detail in both their form and content. As such they went against academic tradition – and Josephson and his comrades-in-arms consequently organized a movement in Stockholm opposing the conventional nature of academic teaching. Up to this point, his biography smacks of none of the "eccentricities" of Symbolism.

The fact that, starting in 1881, Josephson began to exhibit signs of a persecution complex is naturally not enough in itself to be a stylistic classification. It is true, however, that his mental illness, which was accompanied by hallucinations (Josephson was convinced that he was able to communicate with the soul of the Swedish natural scientist and mystic Emanuel von Swedenborg, who had died in 1772), served to encourage a latent tendency within his art towards mystification. This same tendency led him towards typically Romantic subjects depicted with a Symbolist intensity. A prime example was the fantastical realm of the water sprite known in Nordic saga and fairy-tale as the nix, who bewitches people with his song and lures them into his deadly waters.

From the 1880s onwards Josephson explored this subject in numerous works, of which the painting reproduced here – completed in 1882 and today housed in the Stockholm Nationalmuseum – ranks amongst the best. It also documents that the artist was willing (or, after the outbreak of his illness, "forced") to switch from a realistic style to a freer, more expressive handling of his creative media. In a pose of exalted animation, the naked, youth-like nix is seated in the foreground of the portrait-format composition, his head thrown back

against the dark foil of a rock, sweeping the bow across his violin in an ecstatic gesture as he draws a wild melody from its strings. The flow of the elemental being's hair, like the motion of the grasses dancing in the wind around the body of this nature spirit in human shape, is expressed through sweeps and scratches of the brush; these correspond in turn to the "turbulence" of the music, which lends "sublimated" expression to the rushing and pounding of the waterfall in the background.

Josephson's *Nix* is the Nordic pendant to the nature god of Mediterranean antiquity, the goat-legged half-man, half-beast who has come down to us under the name of Pan or faun, and who was portrayed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century not least by Arnold Böcklin in order to illustrate the dialogue between nature and music. In the search for personifications intended to demonstrate "Dionysian" (Nietzsche) approaches to existence, both the nix and Pan could be held up in contrast to a present robbed of its magic by technology and rationalism.



A. Böcklin, *Faun Whistling to a Blackbird*, 1863







# The sick child

Oil on canvas, 119.5 x 118.5 cm  
Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet



\* 1863 Løten/Hedmark (Norway)  
† 1944 Ekely

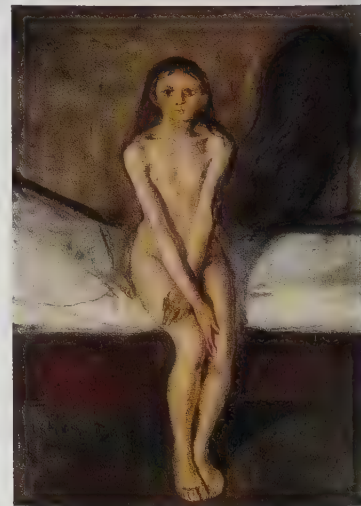
The Symbolist preoccupation with love and sexuality reflected the search for experiences that preferably lay outside the accepted moral norms. The Symbolists equally sought their dreams in meditative contemplation and ultimately in the confrontation with the ultimate. So too Munch, who visualized love, death, sexuality – a classic example of this being the painting *Puberty* from the period around 1893 – and the battle between the sexes in an almost obsessive

manner until well into the 1890s. In the work of this brooding artist, tortured by life's fears, the withdrawal of God from the nature and world of Romanticism is complete. This statement is also true of the heart-wrenching painting *The Sick Child*, which Munch executed in 1885/86 and subsequently reworked on several occasions in the 1890s. It was a subject that from now on would never leave him, and he returned to it approximately every ten years, not counting the several versions that he made in graphic media.

The compositional parameters to which Munch would adhere in subsequent versions are laid down in this very first treatment of the theme. The precipitous diagonals established by the chest of drawers cut off by the frame on the left and the small table on the right serve to funnel the viewer's gaze towards a chair in which a red-haired girl is sitting, her upper body and head supported by an enormous pillow, her right hand lying limp on the blanket, her whole figure confined within the narrow passage left free to her by the props of the interior. At the

very centre of the composition, her left hand – reduced to an abstract smear of paint – blends into that of an older woman, seated beside the sick child with her head bowed, offering comfort but herself full of hopeless despair. The girl has turned her face – the pale flesh already seems to be dissolving into the white of the pillow – towards her mother; at the same time, however, she looks past her towards the right, where a curtain suggests the presence of a window, although astonishingly no light falls in from this direction. The window blocks the girl's desire to see outside: the "blind" window becomes a metaphor of death.

Munch subsequently resorted to extremely bold formal means so as to render the motif of physical decline even more visible – namely by scoring the thick layers of paint with the handle of the brush, leaving countless scratch marks. The destructive force of these representational elements speak, as the artist himself declared, of the hopelessness of the picture's existential theme.



*Puberty*, c. 1893

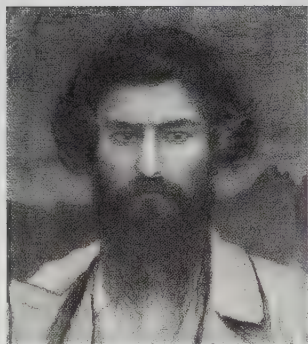




# Ave Maria during the crossing

Oil on canvas, 120 x 93 cm

St Moritz, Segantini Museum (on deposit from the Otto Fischbacher/Giovanni Segantini Foundation)



\* 1858 Arco  
† 1899 Pontresina

Giovanni Segantini cannot be slotted neatly into the canonical history of art, whose "streamlined" course runs apparently without deviations from Neoclassicism via (Late) Romanticism and Realism to Manet and Impressionism, and from there continues on to formal autonomy and finally to the abstract painting of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How are we to categorize a painter like Segantini, whose handling of paint was "modern" and Neo-Impressionist in manner but

whose themes were still those of Symbolism? His eventual sources of inspiration – the Pre-Raphaelites amongst them – have no more been explored than the extent of his impact upon Gustav Klimt (ill. p. 83) and Egon Schiele, upon Paul Klee and ultimately upon a number of Futurists. Uncertainty vis-à-vis Segantini's meditative and enigmatic subjects has frequently led art historians to place overly imaginative interpretations upon his work: in his most famous painting, for example, *The Evil Mothers*, which exists in two versions, the woman trapped in the withered tree has been compared with a Christian *Mater dolorosa*, or Sorrowing Madonna, whereby the infant's little head is supposed to correspond to the arrow piercing the Virgin's heart! A theory that is altogether too far-fetched. It is undoubtedly better to stick to a thesis that bases itself upon a poem of the same epoch, and according to which the unnatural mothers have rejected pregnancy and hence fertile Nature and are being made to do penance on the icy plateau for their sterile lust.

Segantini also painted two versions of his *Ave Maria* composition, dating from 1882 and 1886 respectively, whereby the first is today more or less ruined. Both pictures make the Lago di Pusiano, north of Milan, the setting for a lake crossing: an elderly oarsman at the stern of a small boat is shown sunk in a moment of silent prayer as he ferries a young mother, who is cradling her small child tenderly in her arms, and a flock of sheep to the far shore. In the clear light of the low-lying sun, the boat's reflection plays across the gently rippling surface of the lake, while its two wooden hoops – over which a canopy can be stretched – stand out in striking silhouette against the "empty" sky. The boat's occupants are heading for the distant village almost bathed in darkness, whose church rises a little above the horizon.

The sagacious introspection of old age and the maternal love for the child, the evening of life and the certainty of the coming morning fuse into an idyll as poetic as it is religious, one that Jörg Traeger convincingly situates within the tradition of the Christian devotional picture and interprets as a reflection of the divine amidst a world growing ever more profane.



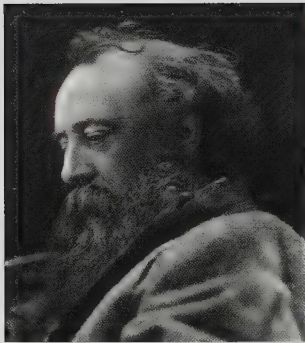
The Evil Mothers, 1894





# Hope

Oil on canvas, 142.2 x 111.8 cm  
 London, Tate Gallery



\* 1817 London  
 † 1904 Compton (Surrey)

Watts took part in the 1878 Exposition Universelle in Paris with nine paintings and one sculpture and was thereby represented by an above-average number of works compared with his fellow British artists. He was propelled by this success to instant celebrity on the European art scene. He aimed in his pictures "at poetry painted on canvas" and – as he himself regularly stated from 1880 onwards – at a mysterious, "symbolic painting" whose basic tenor displayed

close links with the works of such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti (with whom he maintained a close friendship over many years; ill. pp. 24, 39), Edward Burne-Jones (ill. p. 47) and Fernand Khnopff (ill. pp. 7, 28, 72, 73). In his formal language and use of colour, Watts also drew inspiration from the great masters of earlier centuries, including such different geniuses as Titian (1485/90–1576) and William Turner (1775–1851).

Watts' interest in the mystical and the other-worldly also expressed itself in a series of writings composed at the end of the 1870s. He postulated the ideal congruence of poetry, music and fine art and called for compositions that, using visionary themes, would appeal to the finest feelings and loftiest sentiments in a manner that had eternal validity. He ultimately wished not to paint beautiful pictures for the eyes but to lend visibility to great ideas.

This aim is encapsulated in a positively exemplary fashion in the painting *Hope*, which – in addition to the canvas in the Tate

Collection – also exists in a slightly earlier version in private ownership. As one of the three theological Virtues, the allegory of Hope looks back over a long history in art. Omitting her attribute of an anchor, Watts has personified Hope as a young woman seated on a globe in an elegant, almost somnambulant pose (whereby art historians have compiled an entire catalogue of possible sources for her figure, drawn from the sphere of the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolists and including last but not least the influence of Elihu Vedder; ill. pp. 34, 35). At the same time, however, the artist has secured the figure within a "geometric" complex of horizontals and diagonals, into which the area of her head and shoulder, her right arm and the lyre are incorporated.

The blindfold wound around the figure's eyes serves as a reference to her blindness and to the mental state that she embodies. Details such as the lyre, all but one of whose strings are broken, the enigmatic expression on Hope's face, and the background bathed in diffuse tones of bluish grey evoke a mood of melancholy (in the Tate Gallery version, Watts has obliterated the symbol of hope present in the first version in the shape of a star gleaming high in the sky). This led one author in the artist's own day to propose that the picture should be rechristened "Despair". The foggy mist floating around the base of the Earth-like sphere reinforces the sense of ambiguity, of vacillation between hope and resignation.

Contemporary voices in England commented in particular upon the "delicate shimmer" conveyed by the palette, lighting and atmosphere and even more so upon the overall effect of the painting, which was compared with a "musical poem".





# The vision after the sermon

Oil on canvas, 74.4 x 93.1 cm

Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland



\* 1848 Paris

† 1903 Atuona (Hiva Oa, Marquesas Islands)

In terms of its content, *The Vision after the Sermon* is one of Gauguin's most ambitious paintings. As its alternative title of *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* makes clear, it takes up a subject from the Old Testament, namely an episode from the life of the Patriarch Jacob. According to the account in the Book of Genesis, an angel of the Lord appeared to Jacob in the night and wrestled with him until he dislocated Jacob's hip. Even then, Jacob called out: "I will not

let you go unless you bless me." Together with this blessing he also received the name Israel, meaning "one who struggles with God".

Following the compositional structure of Japanese woodcuts, a tree trunk divides the pictorial surface diagonally and separates the women in Breton dress in the foreground from the two ornamentalized figures wrestling in the right-hand background, namely the angel with his great wings outspread and the future Patriarch, who is bracing himself against his opponent. Concepts such as "foreground" and "background" become largely meaningless in this painting, however, as the dominant impression is one of a composition organized into flat planes. The dark violet oblique of the trunk (of an apple tree) does not in fact divide phenomena existing in three-dimensional space, but two different spheres of reality: on the one hand the women, their figures simplified in the manner of folk art, who have apparently just come out of church and are reflecting devoutly upon the subject of the sermon, and on the other the metaphysical vision of the subject of that same ser-

mon, namely Jacob and his battle with the angel. This latter takes place against an "unreal" red ground, which may be interpreted as a successor to the gold ground of medieval art. It is the setting for a scene existent only for faith, an event that the women in the picture comprehend as a mental image and the viewers of the painting as a vision.

With his *Vision after the Sermon*, at the latest, Gauguin advanced to become the head of the Pont-Aven community of painters. The dominance of the two-dimensional plane, the suggestive handling of outline, the palette liberated from naturalism and the symbolic expressiveness of pictures such as this also made Gauguin the revered figurehead of the Nabis. In 1889 he was invited to show twelve works at the exhibition mounted by the important Symbolist group Les Vingts (also written Les XX) in Brussels, and during this same period was introduced to the circle around Mallarmé in Paris. It was no later than here that he made the acquaintance of Odilon Redon.

Even before this, however, in his key picture of 1888, Gauguin had already affirmed his conviction that the role of art was not simply to describe nature or recount a literary episode word for word, but rather to seek, with the simplest means, symbolically effective lines and colours so as to lend expression to feelings and passions. The artist thereby becomes a kind of priest or magician who – in the case of the work discussed here – causes a vision to appear before the eyes of people rooted in everyday life. Gauguin's search for primal instinctual forces in rituals linked him very closely with the corresponding wishes of the Symbolists. Indeed, *The Vision after the Sermon* inspired Albert Aurier to write an article, published on 2 March 1891 in the *Mercur de France*, entitled "Le Symbolisme en peinture. Paul Gauguin", in which he elevated Gauguin to the head of the Symbolist movement. The vicar of Pont-Aven, on the other hand, to whom Gauguin originally wished to make a gift of the picture, would not accept it.





# The Golden Cell (The Blue Profile)

Oil on paper, 30.1 x 24.7 cm  
 London, The British Museum



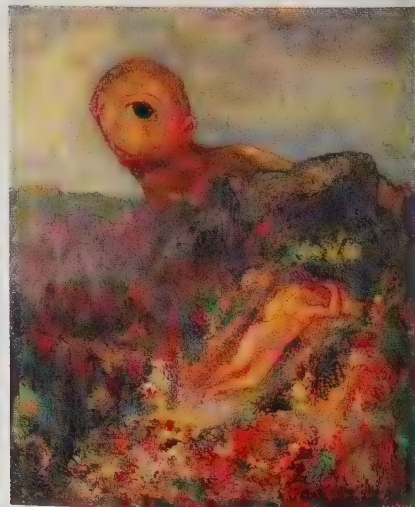
\* 1840 Bordeaux  
 † 1916 Paris

The name of Odilon Redon, the brilliant French graphic artist, draughtsman and painter, a poetic visionary of mysterious, dream-like themes, tends to be discussed even today only amongst a small circle of specialists: the same Redon who stood at the zenith of the Symbolist movement in art, who with works such as *Closed Eyes* (ill. p. 1) created icons of Symbolist painting, who to a certain extent paved the way for the Surrealists' exploration of the unconscious; the same

Redon who with pictures such as *The Cyclops* and its bold formal freedom – comparable with the Nabis in this regard – already had abstraction in his sights.

The small work reproduced here, executed in oil on paper, presents a female profile of almost icon-like simplicity inside a medallion form within the composition. It was shown from 29 April to 14 May 1894 under the title *La Cellule d'or* together with 134 other works by Redon in an exhibition devoted to the artist in Durand-Ruel's gallery in Paris. In his use of pigments of intense luminosity from the 1890s onwards, Redon seems to have proceeded more or less intuitively. To his contemporaries, even those who were well-meaning, this was for the most part highly suspect. The fact that Redon did not deploy colour for its representational value meant that he "opened" it up to a host of possible associations. Just like the gold ground, the luminous dark blue belonged to the tradition of Christian mysticism and also to the colour symbolism of Romanticism. As so often the case in

Redon's oeuvre, it is impossible to assign a single or even a clearly delimited meaning to *The Golden Cell*. Critics spoke instead of a general impression of an otherworldly, spiritual quality, of a transcendence that was connected not exclusively with the Christian religion (and in the case of the present picture, with an eventual reference to the Virgin Mary) but equally with other, not least Buddhist conceptions of the world. A number of authors have also wondered whether the word *cellule* chosen by Redon for the title is not intended to recall a monastic cell. In Redon's eyes, artists were the most important "seers" of the beyond – and precisely for this reason were cast out from society and exiled to the "seclusion" of solitude!



The Cyclops, c. 1898–1900







# The pink house (The blind house)

Oil on canvas, 63 x 43 cm  
Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum

Degouve de Nuncques was born into an old French aristocratic family who settled in Belgium in 1870. After initially wanting to make a career as a musician, he turned to painting – in which he was self-taught – and until about 1900 attached himself to Symbolist circles, both literary and artistic. Within the latter sphere he was fascinated first and foremost by the Dutch painter Jan Toorop (ill. p. 14), with whom he also shared a studio in Malines for a while. The Belgian made a name for himself with his night landscapes bathed in blue light and veiled in mystery, inspired by Whistler (ill. p. 29), in which swans, peacocks and even angels go about their unfathomable business.

Degouve was a melancholic *par excellence*, who did not believe in “plain-as-day” facts but transformed his nocturnal worlds into “existential enigmas” (Michel Dragnet), lending them the quality of a dream. These aims brought Degouve into contact with Symbolist poets such as Emile Verhaeren, who in 1894 became his brother-in-law.

A night-time scenario is also offered by the small painting *The Pink House* of 1892. No bluish moonlight picks out details against the dark ground; instead, the overall composition is dominated by the unnaturally bright pink of the façade and the yellow of the illuminated windows, in contrast to the dark green of the lawn and the black of the trees and the starry sky. The house’s warmly glowing windows promise the viewer security, a “homecoming” – and yet remain a “blind” enigma, since it is impossible to make out what is going on behind the panes. Nor does any form of path invite the viewer to draw closer to the light.

By clothing all its visible forms in a simplicity that seems almost naïve, Degouve de Nuncques lends the scene the suggestion of an ordinariness reduced to its elemental components, comparable with the product of a dream or childish fantasy. On the other hand, the vast stillness that can be felt in this picture, and which lies like a “fixative” across the canvas, also evokes the mood of a nightmare and the

overwhelming, spellbinding sight of an object that has suddenly taken on animal life.

No wonder that the surreal quality that shines magically out of the familiar in this important picture by Degouve would later find its echo in the work of the Surrealist artist René Magritte, namely in his painting *Empire of Light*, of which numerous versions exist.



René Magritte, *Empire of Light*, 1954





# mysteriarch

Polychrome plaster, 91.4 x 63 cm

Liverpool, Board of Trustees of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool)



\* 1860 London  
† 1928 London

The bust of a so-called *Mysteriarch* belongs to a series of female busts that Frampton executed between 1889 and 1900. The English sculptor submitted this piece to the opening exhibition of *La Libre Esthétique*, an association of artists and literary figures that had evolved out of *Les XX* and which served as an exceptionally important forum of European Symbolism. Frampton was a champion of the polychrome sculptures that were so tremendously popular during the

Symbolist era. In a manner typical of Symbolist thinking, *Mysteriarch* elevates the idealized figure of woman to mysterious priestess and ruler over life. Forming the background to her noble, harmoniously proportioned head and face, as a kind of a pagan halo, is a golden disc ornamented with flames or cosmic rays. This motif might be a pointer to the practice of sun worship, which would carry the female figure into the sphere of Isis, the Ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility. In a broader sense, however, the *Mysteriarch* probably embodies the handmaiden of every conceivable secret cult. The clasp of her dress is adorned with a bat and a Medusa's head.

The latter was a very popular motif amongst the Symbolists: it was also treated by Arnold Böcklin, for example, who in 1887 modelled a shield bearing the head of the Medusa as a plaster relief (Zürich, Kunsthaus) and around 1878 made a painting of the same terrifying head wreathed in snakes (ill. p. 62). Such subjects testify in each case to a characteristic aim of Symbolism, namely the sublim-

ation of the fearsome and the ugly to a somewhat morbid but nevertheless fascinating aestheticism.

The winged helmet worn by Frampton's *Mysteriarch* is linked by most authors with the attribute of Hermes, the Greek messenger of the gods, but may also interpreted in a more universal sense, namely as a symbol for the free flight of the imagination.

The bust is characterized in formal terms by a solemn, hieratically frontal pose, which is perfectly complemented by the figure's mysterious aura and mystical, seemingly inward-looking gaze.



Arnold Böcklin, *Head of the Medusa*, c. 1878





MYSTERIARCH

# Dead Orpheus

Oil on canvas, 82 x 103 cm

Brussels, Région de Bruxelles-Capitale (on deposit with the *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels*)

Delville, today classed as one of the most important exponents of highly-influential Belgian Symbolism, was closely associated with the esoteric teachings of the Rosicrucian Order. An opponent of Impressionism, his true aim was to make art the equivalent of a substitute religion, the vehicle of an idealism whose new "liturgy" would be the elevation of life to the status of cult and the artist to the rank of visionary. The artist would now become the prophet of this "higher" knowledge, with Orpheus and the Sibyls, the female seers of old, as his chosen spiritual guides.

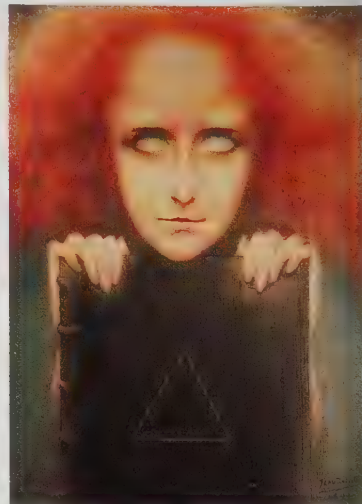
Amongst a series of major paintings all executed in the same year – 1893 – and embodying Delville's idealistic aesthetic in exemplary fashion, *Dead Orpheus* occupies an outstanding position.

Orpheus, according to Greek myth, was a Thracian singer and musician, the son of a Muse and a river god (or a king), perhaps even of Apollo himself. His soothing music was able to cast a spell even upon the wild beasts and the monsters of the underworld. As a consequence, Orpheus managed to persuade Hades, the god of the Underworld, to release his dead wife Eurydice – but because he turned round to look at his beloved Eurydice on the way back to the upper world, he lost his wife for ever. It is not this, the most famous episode from the legend of Orpheus that Delville depicts here, however; instead, he takes up the end of the story, according to which the singer was torn to pieces by a group of frenzied Thracian women, for reasons unknown. Orpheus's head – and probably also his lyre – are being carried along a river to the sea; the Muses subsequently raised the lyre into the starry skies as the constellation Lyra.

Delville allows his subject to remain in the realm of the non-specific. Formally fused with the lyre, Orpheus' head – his face a metaphor for youthful beauty even in death – is floating in an indeterminate space, whose blue transforms it into the sea crowned with foaming waves and possibly also the celestial sphere. Only the shells

in the bottom right-hand corner and a few details point to the fact that the head has reached the end of its journey at the bottom of the ocean. Orpheus, the musician and poet (Delville himself was also a poet, having published the volume of poems *Les Horizons hantés - Haunted Horizons* in 1892), is the source of a spiritual light.

The metaphysics of beauty that speak out of the painting *Dead Orpheus* correspond in the case of this artist with the metaphysics of the occult and the mysterious. Delville's *Portrait of Madame Stuart Merrill - Mysteriosa*, completed one year earlier, clearly demonstrates the extent to which Delville believed in the existence of a divine aura and in the possibilities of bewitchment and ecstasy.



Portrait of Madame Stuart Merrill – Mysteriosa, 1892





# The muses

Oil on canvas, 171.5 x 137.5 cm

Paris, Musée d'Orsay



\* 1870 Granville  
† 1943 Paris

The artists who worked in France under the group name of Les Nabis perceived themselves to be the prophets of a new painting. On the one hand, they sought to achieve modernity through formal means, by liberating themselves from the conventional bounds of perspective, the illusionistic modelling of the body and the usual laws of proportion in favour of an ornamental, two-dimensional surface structure and powerful, undiluted colours with an independence of their

own. Programmatic of their art is Maurice Denis' revolutionary maxim of 1890: "It is well to remember that a picture – before being a war-horse, a nude woman or an anecdote of some sort – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order". Denis, together with Paul Sérusier (ill. p. 17 left), the group's chief theoretician, tirelessly stressed the liberating influence of Paul Gauguin (ill. p. 57), whose guidance had set the Nabis on their path. On the other hand, however, the Nabis did not practice a pure formalism. While it is true that they avoided literary and allegorical subjects, some of their number were drawn to the mystical and religious concepts of theosophy and the esoteric "sciences" – in a movement away from the materialism and naturalism that they saw represented not least by the Impressionists. Even the work of Denis up till around 1895 did not escape the influence of such Symbolist tendencies, as his painting *The Muses* clearly demonstrates.

What at first sight has the air of a Sunday outing reveals itself to be a mythological scene imbued with mystery. Beneath ancient

chestnuts whose towering trunks exceed the bounds of the portrait-format canvas, several young women are gathered. Despite their contemporary clothing and hairstyles and despite their lack of attributes, they assume the role of the Muses of classical antiquity. They have either seated themselves in the foreground of the sacred grove or are strolling quietly in pairs. Each of the figures is delineated within a subtle, simplified outline. The resulting stylization reduces each body to a decorative pattern of planes and to impressive silhouettes. The gentle curves of the internal drawing, the undulating hems of the dresses, the trees rising in rhythmical parallel and the leaves scattered on the ground like the pattern on a carpet – all of these details also conjure up the Oriental ink drawing that was another important source of inspiration for the Nabis.

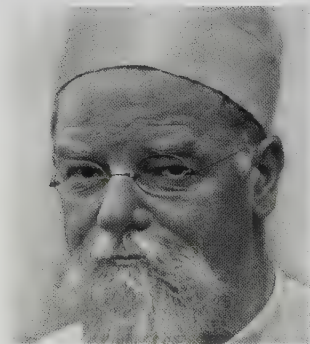
The fundamental character of the composition, which is executed in a subdued palette, is one of measured ceremoniousness, even solemnity. This is heightened by the fact that Denis has located the scene within a wood and has thus invoked the topos of solitude used since Romanticism and once again by Symbolism to stir the viewer's capacity for spiritual feelings. The tree trunks converge to become – in the words of Charles Baudelaire – a "temple de vivants pilliers" (a "temple of living pillars"), in line not only with the aura of the whole but also with the concept of the wood as a place of ritual and prophesy by women with the gift of vision (female druids), as described by Edouard Schuré in his 1889 book *Les Grands Initiés*, a widely-read history of esoteric doctrines. In the background, at the very centre of the picture, Denis places a mysterious, almost weightless "tenth Muse", who is facing towards the bright sky with one arm raised: outside the gloom of the wood, she is communicating with higher powers.





# The new salome

Marble, amber, 88 x 55.5 x 43.5 cm, total height 104 cm  
 Leipzig, *Museum der bildenden Künste*



\* 1857 Leipzig  
 † 1920 Grossjena

The combination of superb technical skills with an overflowing imagination and pronounced empathy for music (Klinger was a friend of Johannes Brahms) can be seen even in Klinger's early works. He translated the world of his fantasy into graphic cycles that ranked amongst the most important of their day and exercised a strong influence upon the art of Surrealism. Klinger's significance as a graphic artist, art theoretician and sculptor overshadowed his role as a painter,

even if he regularly produced remarkable results in this sphere, too. *The Blue Hour* of 1890, for example, with its mysterious atmosphere based primarily upon colour, belongs to his best achievements in this regard. Difficult to classify under any one stylistic heading (Gründerzeit, Impressionism, Symbolism and Art Nouveau have all been suggested), Klinger's oeuvre embodies in an exemplary fashion the Janus face of art at the turn of the century. And the homage subsequently paid to him by Giorgio de Chirico reinforces his status as a forerunner of some of the central artistic positions of Modernism.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, the classical ideal of a marble-white antiquity came under debate within European sculpture. The painter Arnold Böcklin, for example, whom Klinger regarded very highly, seems to have turned his attention to polychrome sculpture around 1880. The French sculptors whom Klinger met during his stays in Paris had been doing the same thing for quite some time. Klinger was by no means the only German sculptor – albeit certainly the most

important – to raise polychrome sculpture to the level of fascination. It is of course better to speak of polyolithic sculpture, i.e. of works made out of different sorts of marble of varying colours, often complemented with other materials – as lavishly illustrated by Klinger's *Beethoven* monument (ill. p. 22 right). Klinger thereby sought to bring about the correspondence of eye and emotion that would integrate the lone sculpture into a three-dimensional, total work of art.

Inspired by Gustave Flaubert's novella *Herodias* and probably also by a poem in Joséphin Péladan's novel *Le Vice supreme*, published in 1884, Klinger embarked on studies for *Salome* while staying in Paris in 1886; the multicoloured marble sculpture was subsequently carved in Rome on the basis of a painted plaster model (other plaster models have also survived, as well as a version in white marble and several bronze casts). In his treatment of the Salome theme, Klinger responds to the *fin*

*de siècle's* reinterpretation of the biblical vamp as the incarnation of the *femme fatale*, at the interface of myth and modern, psychologically encoded Symbolism. Resting on the plinth are, on the right, the head of the prophet John and, on the left, the head of an older man, possibly a portrait of Richard Wagner.



The Blue Hour, 1890

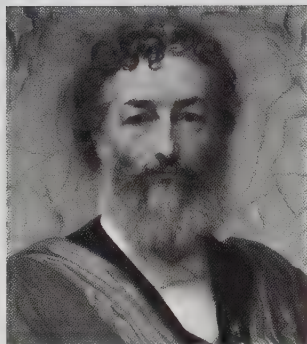




# The spirit of the summit

Oil on canvas, 198.7 x 101.6 cm

Auckland, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Gift of Mr Moss Davis, 1926



\* 1830 Scarborough  
† 1896 London

Leighton was a painter, graphic artist and sculptor. Academy trained, he infused his technically flawless works with such enigmatic significance and emotional ambiguity that they rapidly rose to become paradigms of Symbolism. Leighton won praise early on with his particularly sensual portraits, executed in 1859, of a well-known Roman female model: it had been a long time, a contemporary critic effused, since one had seen such charm, sentiment and cool beauty. These

categories are almost stereotypical when it comes to Symbolist painting in the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even in the work of the most different artists.

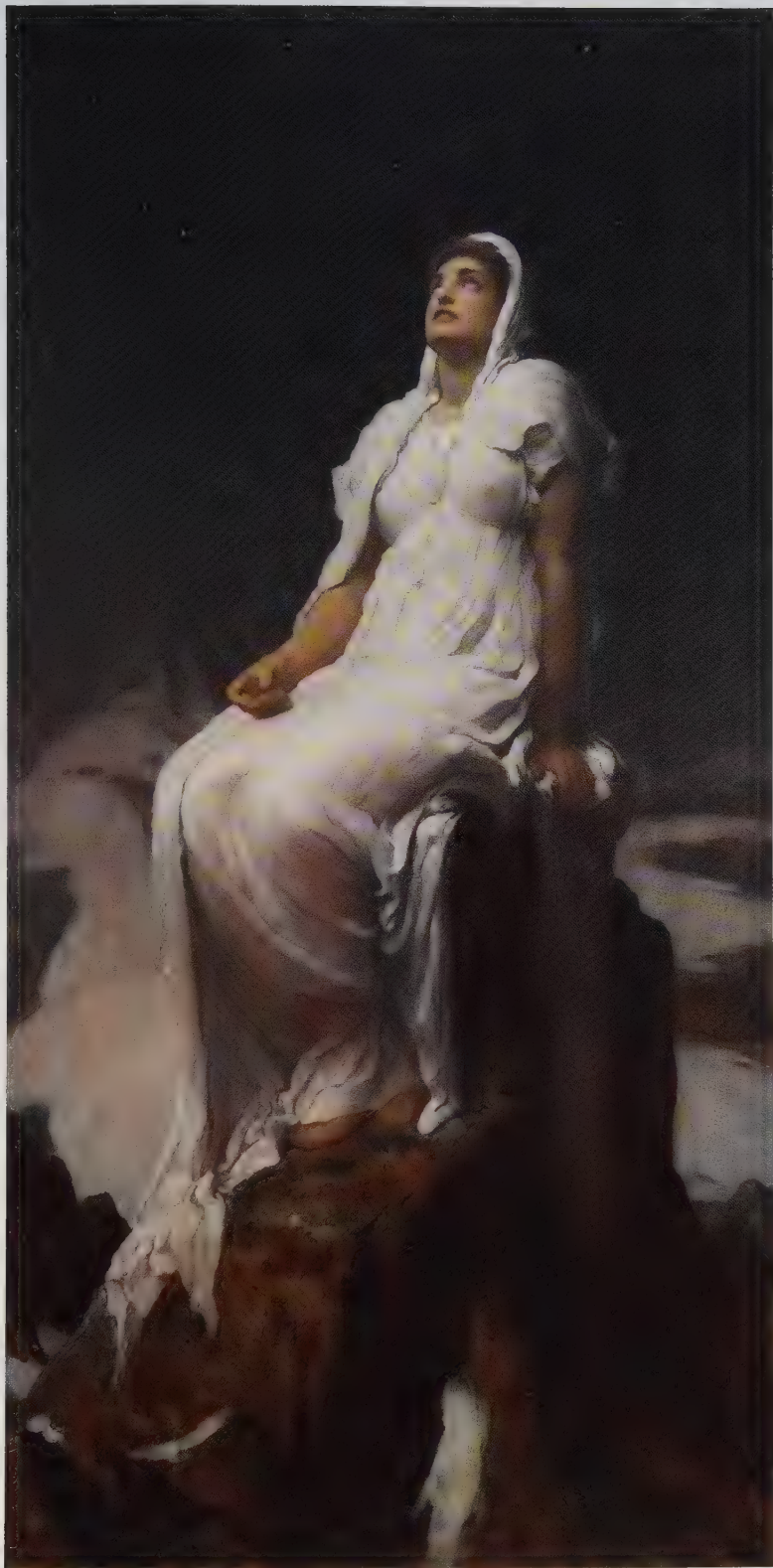
*The Spirit of the Summit* was one of five paintings that Leighton, his career long since successfully established, submitted to the Royal Academy in London in 1894. The artist, so it is reported, allegedly drew his inspiration for this nocturnal subject after once staring for a long time at a theatre curtain that was strewn with dots.

Many contemporaries admired the portrait-format canvas – impressive in its dimensions alone – as a key work in the oeuvre of an artist famed in his own lifetime but much less well-known today. They attested to the exquisite beauty of the protagonist of the painting, a blonde maiden clad in a spotlessly white, antique-style dress, the ample forms of her body attractively emphasized. Like the heroine or queen of a mythical age, she is seated upon the highest pinnacle of a snow-capped mountain peak, as if upon an eerily removed throne.

And here, her countenance turned upwards, the barefoot young woman is gazing up into the heavens, where a few stars are sparkling amongst the blackness. Does hope dwell on high, in view of those cosmic lights? A higher being that looks down upon the loneliness of a world frozen into an alpine wasteland? Or is everything up there, too, barren and empty? Or were those contemporary voices correct when they interpreted the female figure dominating the composition as both a symbol of achievement, i.e. of victorious art, and equally as a symbol of what had yet to be achieved, namely of art's constant striving to reach ever new heights? If so, the message of the painting can be linked not least to Leighton's own personal ideal and the lofty aim of his own art. In his opinion, in a world that was desolate because it was profane, every idealistic artist had to search for truth and beauty far beyond the normal mortal dimension, alone in the cold and lonely heights into which he was thereby transported. Seen from this perspective, the central female figure would have to be interpreted as an allegory of creative genius.

Whatever the case, *The Spirit of the Summit* falls into a series of pictures dating from the end of the 1880s, in which Leighton depicts monumental women who are almost sculptural in their form. Presented outside a narrative context, these female figures most likely represent the pure embodiment of an idea. The note of solitude that is repeatedly sounded calls to mind similar motifs by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and the English Romantic artist Francis Danby (1793?–1861) – comparisons which also cast into relief the sickly sweetness of Leighton's palette and the smooth polish of his surfaces, and which ultimately expose the pathos of solitude to be no more than a glib mannerism.





# A Blue wing

Oil on canvas, 88.5 x 28.5 cm

*Private collection*



\* 1858 Grembergen (Flanders)  
† 1921 Brussels

Alongside James Ensor (ill. p. 41), Fernand Khnopff was Belgium's most important Symbolist. A founder member of the groups Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, he was inspired by Gustave Moreau (ill. pp. 4, 36, 37), took part in the Salons de la Rose + Croix from 1892 onwards and even before this date was in regular contact with the Pre-Raphaelites in England. Esoteric, mystical and hallucinatory fantasies full of morbid elegance and sensuality lie at the centre of

the sculptor Skopas. Furnished by Khnopff with blue feathered wings, this quotation from antiquity resurfaces again, amongst other places, in *A Blue Wing* of 1894. Magnificently painted, this important composition shows Khnopff consciously choosing to carry melancholy to the point of isolation.

The female figure playing the main human role in this extremely tall and narrow composition – Khnopff favoured such elongated portrait formats – reflects the artist's ideal of femininity and at the same time serves as a strange Muse. As the priestess of the divine Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep, perhaps, which the artist declared was the most perfect thing in life! The woman is Khnopff's sister, Marguerite, wearing a white dress of pastel delicacy and with a transparent scarf draped over her flowing reddish hair. Behind her, a veiled view (or a picture within a picture?). Her figure is cut off on the right by an upright, which makes her position within the interior unclear: if she has just entered the room from outside, what is she turning her face to look at? Whatever the case, not at the white head of Hypnos that is standing in front of her.

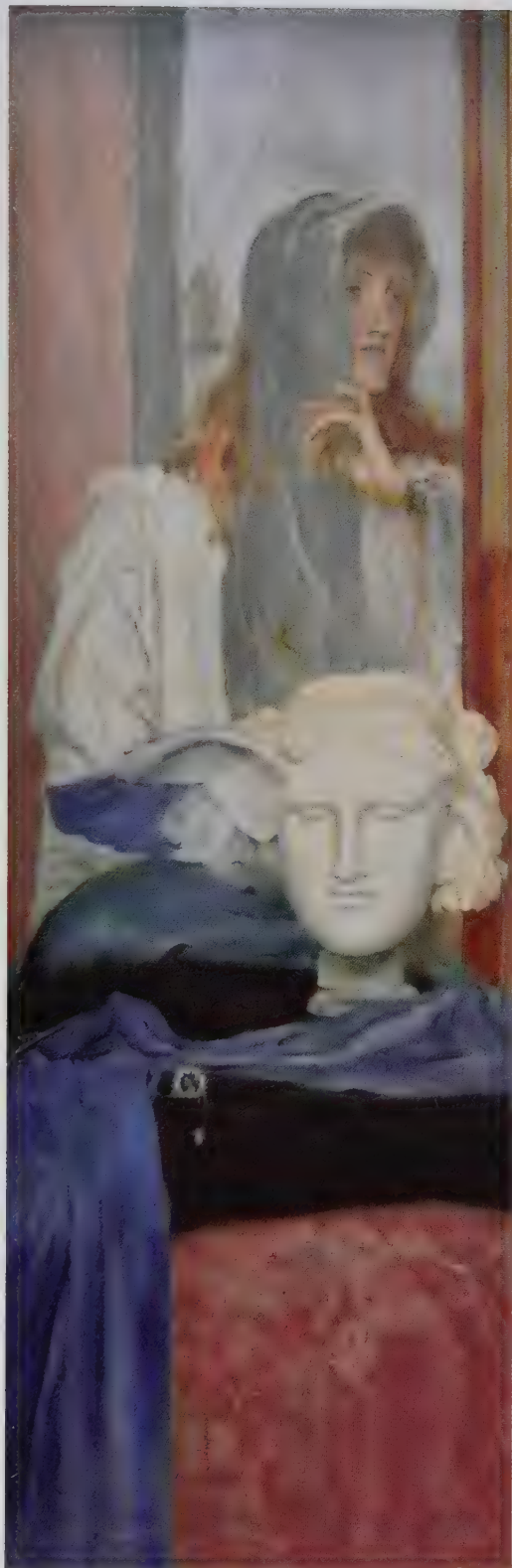
his art. His power of stylization and his sublime, "decadent" palette were influential upon Art Nouveau, and in particular upon the Vienna Secession, with which Khnopff exhibited on a number of occasions, as well as upon the Munich artist Franz von Stuck (ill. pp. 2, 19, 95), who was intoxicated by the Belgian's chimeras and sphinxes.

In 1891, following a trip to England, Fernand Khnopff was inspired to paint a picture with the English title *I Lock my Door upon Myself*, a line he took from a poem composed in 1864 by Christina Georgina Rossetti, the sister of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He thereby created one of his most important paintings and one of the most significant works of Symbolism. A host of symbols add depth to its meaning: in the foreground, the lilies symbolize the woman's purity, the arrow lying across the table on the left stands either for love or pain, the poppy for sleep and death; the sculpted head on the right cites a bronze statue of Hypnos housed in the British Museum in London, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and attributed to



*I Lock my Door upon Myself*, 1891





# The mysterious sphinx

Ivory, silver and bronze, 56 x 46 x 31 cm  
 Brussels, *Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire*



\* 1843 Sint-Joost-ten-Node  
 † 1910 Brussels

Charles van der Stappen is testament to the fact that in the sphere of sculpture, too, Symbolism in Belgium produced works of an impressive suggestive power. Examples such as the bust illustrated here confirm the impression that – with Brussels serving a meeting-place for the international avant-garde – the Belgian art scene had also become a geographical centre of the Symbolism that occupied the border area between dream and reality and between mystical

hopes of redemption and melancholy resignation. Indeed, this was so much the case that in the catalogue to the exhibition "Lost Paradise. Symbolist Europe" staged in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1995, the focal point of the widely branching Symbolist movement was identified as lying not in France, as claimed in the earlier literature, but in Belgium.

Precious materials, formal elegance, an emphasis upon line and a fundamental mood of melancholy characterize Stappen's masterpiece, *The Mysterious Sphinx*. With its combination of bronze, silver and ivory and the enigmatic gesture of its raised hand, the bust belongs to a group of works marking the zenith of the career of this Belgian sculptor, who had trained in Paris and Rome and who worked in a style that lay between Symbolism and an allegorical Art Nouveau.

Chryselephantine sculpture – a technique which combined the materials of ivory and gold or other metals – enjoyed enormous popularity in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in many parts of Europe. In

Belgium, however, it had a historical background of a very particular kind. King Leopold II, who from 1885 to 1908 steered the fortunes of the Belgian colony of the Congo with an authoritarian and unscrupulous hand, did all in his power to boost the ivory trade that was so lucrative for his royal privy purse. As part of this strategy, he also supplied the expensive raw material to artists at home – for commercial purposes under the guise of aesthetics, so to speak. This privilege was extended to van der Stappen as well as to Fernand Khnopff and Philippe Wolfers (1858–1929), chief representative of the applied arts in Belgium, a sphere in which the country at that time dominated the European market.

The combination of different and valuable materials evoking the overall impression of a delicately polychrome sculpture made an impact not least upon the Vienna public of the *fin de siècle*. Symptomatic of this response was Ludwig Hevesi's 1906 review of the Secession exhibition, in which he spoke of *The Mysterious Sphinx* and its heroine taken from an operatic scene, its coquettishly armed and helmeted child-woman: "The ivory Jeanne d'Arc (which in fact she is not) is also included [amongst the other exhibits by Stappen], ... When it comes to such marriages of two materials, van der Stappen is a virtuoso." Hevesi's words express not only his aesthetic enthusiasm for *The Mysterious Sphinx*, but also the fact that its subject remained multi-layered and indecipherable – qualities that show it to be a true product of Symbolism.





# Thanatos I

Oil on canvas, 134 x 74 cm  
 Poznan, Muzeum Narodowe



\* 1854 Radom  
 † 1929 Kraków

The *fin de siècle* saw Symbolism establish a significant presence in the Slavic countries, namely in Russia, in the geographical area of the modern-day Czech Republic and Slovakia, and also in Poland. It was here that Malczewski, having started out as a Realist (his early oeuvre is characterized by portraits, historical and genre paintings with tragic nationalistic and social themes), rose in the 1890s to become the most important representative of Polish Symbolism.

Amongst Malczewski's numerous self-portraits, a substantial number show the artist wearing a historicizing style of dress, while others present him in a dialogue with Death, who frequently takes the form of a beautiful woman.

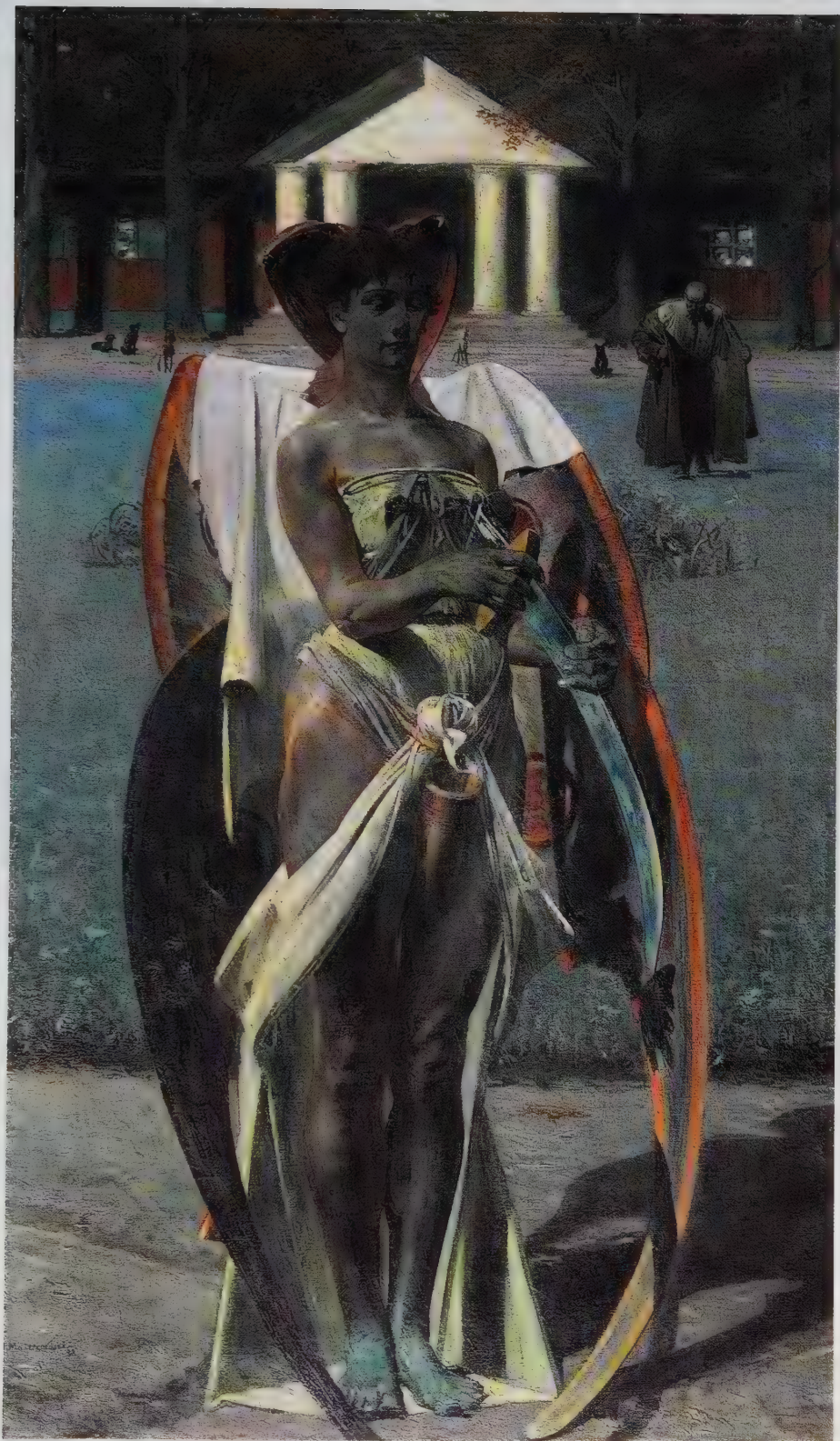
Death – under its Ancient Greek name of Thanatos – is also the protagonist of the present, eponymous painting of 1898. And here, too, the stage of this portrait-format composition has been taken by Death incarnate as a woman. She stands in the immediate foreground, her monumental figure reaching almost the full height of the canvas, as solemn as an epitaph, seen more or less from the front. Were it not for the colour of her skin, its livid to blackish hue recalling rotting flesh, the scantily clad female personification might call to mind a heroine of antiquity, standing like a statue before our eyes. "Armed" with mighty wings whose metallic sharpness seems to evoke the poetic notion of "bronze pinions", this feminine Thanatos prompts associations with other creatures of Ancient Greek mythology: with

the deadly Sirens familiar from the Odyssey, or – along "related" lines – with the Harpies and Lamiae thirsty for blood and the pleasures of love; most sources describe these bewitching monsters as winged female figures. Thanatos' wings in this picture might also recall the Stymphalian birds who feature in the legend of Hercules, and who fired their bronze feathers like arrows to slay man and beast.

In Malczewski's painting, Thanatos is equipped not with arrows but with the traditional attribute of the scythe. Wearing an impassive expression, the reaper is sharpening the blade of the scythe on a whetstone. She is about to test the keenness of its edge!

For, summoned either by the noise or by a premonition, an elderly man is hurrying across a wide lawn in the upper right-hand background towards his deadly fate – strangely pulling on his coat even as he takes this final walk. On the basis of a certain resemblance to his portrait, it may be surmised that this man is Malczewski's father, who died a few years before the picture was painted. The wooden house out of which he is hurrying, and which is largely hidden by trees, is lent a regal character by its stone aedicule, reminiscent of the front of a temple. In its cool, marble paleness, this aedicule stands out strikingly against the sombre palette of the composition and can probably be interpreted in symbolic terms: as the gateway to another "world", as the entrance to a sepulchre as not uncommonly found in cemeteries of the day. It is probably no coincidence that the head of the Angel of Death (another association evoked by the figure's wings) should rise directly in front of this aedicule.





# The Golden Isle

Oil on canvas, 106 x 121 cm

Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz – Nationalgalerie



\* 1877 Waldheim  
† 1947 Berlin

Better known as a sculptor than as a painter, around 1900 Georg Kolbe rose to fame for his mastery of an idealistic type of nude sculpture. Turning his back on the prevailing "academic", neo-Baroque style of Wilhelminian Germany, he at first sought to carve out his own path between the far-reaching relaxation of form practised by such as Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and the Neoclassical control of form exercised by Adolf von Hildebrand (1847–1921), one

of the *Deutschrömer* ("German Roman") artists. After 1927 Kolbe devoted himself to a project for a monument to Friedrich Nietzsche, which led him towards a heroicizing sculptural language in which he believed he had found a means of expressing a "higher" humanity. Slowly but surely, the muscular male nude made its way to the forefront of his oeuvre – where it was rapidly and inevitably seized upon by the National Socialists for propaganda purposes, even if Kolbe never numbered amongst the Nazis' favourite sculptors.

What a contrast to his early work, and not least to the paintings of his youth! A phase in Kolbe's career which owes its impressive sensitivity to the Symbolist influences to which the German artist succumbed in 1898 in the Paris of the Nabis and the esotericism of the Rosicrucians grouped around Sâr Péladan. Following his return from what was at that time the global metropolis of art, he withdrew for several months to the seclusion of the Bavarian Forest, in order to further cultivate his mood of artistic contemplation. The flight from urban

civilisation to the tranquillity of nature was a Late Romantic trend pursued by numerous painters and artist colonies in the Germany of the day. "Life", an authentic and profound style of existence, was thereby intended to prove its worth by comparison with soulless materialism. "Life" as a Symbolist ocean of inner possibilities, as a departure for distant shores, as a "drunken" battle cry directed at the sobering philosophy of rationalism.

The prospect of new shores, or more specifically the utopian vision of a new and better world also characterizes the painting *The Golden Isle*, executed in 1898, an important year in Kolbe's career. It is true that it is not about the joy of discovery in view of innovative possibilities; on the contrary, in the spirit of Schopenhauer's philosophy, the figures in the shadowy foreground, positioned along the sea shore in rear view and, on the right, in profile, embody the melancholy sadness that is born of the knowledge of the futile search for redemption on earth. Sitting, lying, even squatting in despair, the naked figures yield to their emotions. The isolation of the standing woman – her figure dominant even though slightly to the right of the central axis – answers the intimacy of the couple leaning against one another on the left: but even love can alter nothing of the hopelessness of the human desire for a better world. This last remains a golden vision against an infinite sky, illuminated by a light falling from nowhere; a dream island in an ocean that is charted on no rational map; an insular Arcadia attainable only in our yearnings, not in real life! A golden isle yearned for by the figures standing like silhouettes in the foreground, whose conception owes a great deal to Caspar David Friedrich and Arnold Böcklin.





# money (the woman and the money)

Oil on canvas, 81 x 81 cm

Prague, Národní Galerie



\* 1871 Opočno  
† 1957 Puteaux

Not a few of the outstanding pioneers in the history of Modernism started out as adherents of Symbolist art, amongst them Pablo Picasso (ill. p. 85), Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky (ill. p. 17 right) and also František Kupka, who in 1895 moved to Paris, where he worked as a fashion designer and illustrator. Around 1910/11 he turned to abstract painting, with compositions of rhythmical forms and colours evoking a world of musical sounds and taking up the

challenge, too, of Italian Futurism. Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) counted Kupka's works as examples of the Orphism founded by Robert Delaunay (1885–1941). Prior to these ground-breaking achievements, however, Kupka's graphic works and oil paintings fell clearly into the stylistic sphere of Symbolism. Early on in his career, in fact, the Czech earned his living amongst other things as a spiritualist medium. Kupka was born in eastern Bohemia, which together with Slovakia and the modern-day Czech Republic formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918. The influences that reached him from western art were correspondingly broad and were joined by ideas garnered from his reading, which ranged from Greek philosophy to esoteric writings, from the Hindu Vedas to the philosophical systems of Schopenhauer, Bergson and Nietzsche.

Kupka's Symbolist works, which deploy decorative mysticism, dramatic fantasy and blatant irony alike, are always distinguished by one thing: a supreme mastery of technique. This is also true of the

painting *Money*, in which the background is rendered as a nervous mass of broad brushstrokes (the canvas structure is visible in many places) and thereby calls to mind progressive styles of painting in which form is dissolved – as demonstrated for example by the work of Edvard Munch (ill. pp. 16, 50, 51).

In terms of its theme, *Money* is a reminder that Kupka distinguished himself for many years as a political caricaturist, penning satirical drawings of merciless directness. It should be said, however, that such artistic exposure of unpleasant truths, with its implied social criticism, has here been largely eliminated in favour of a typically Symbolist statement. The left half of the composition is dominated by the female nude seen from behind in mid-turn. The rosy-cheeked "beauty", who with her coquettish contrapposto seems to have been drawn from the reservoir of poses employed in contemporary brothel and boudoir pictures, turns her face towards a doddering old man wearing a lecherous and foolish gaze who is kneeling before her in the right-hand middle ground. Also naked, he holds before him the "temptation of the world", a transparent "sphere" filled with coins: there is nothing that money cannot buy – and that includes not least carnal love. This piece of advice may be issuing from the spectral figures, led by a horned devil, appearing behind the old man in a fury of red tongues of paint and blackish shadows. They emerge out of the ominous wall of colour that serves as the backdrop to the golden – money-coloured – hues of the front of the stage, where the main action is set. Here, although only at surface level, the traditional subject of the Temptation of St Anthony seems to be reversed, with the man apparently becoming the one seducing the woman. In truth, however, it continues to be the woman who dominates the man – for all his money – with her sexual charms, who holds up his lustful urges to ridicule and condemns him to Hell here on earth.





# Judith I

Oil on canvas, 84 x 42 cm

Vienna, Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere



\* 1862 Baumgarten (today part of Vienna)  
† 1918 Vienna

Gustav Klimt was markedly influenced by Fernand Khnopff (ill. pp. 7, 28, 72, 73), the Belgian Symbolist who also rose to become a leading light within early Austrian Jugendstil. Klimt's work bears strong affinities with that of Khnopff, for example in the bold fragmentation of the figures by the edges of the picture. Common to both artists in particular, however, is a specific view of woman. In her book *Geist und Geschlecht. Karl Kraus und die Erotik der Wiener*

*Moderne (Intellect and Sex. Karl Kraus and the Eroticism of Viennese Modernism)* published in 1982, Nike Wagner, a great-granddaughter of Richard Wagner, summarizes this view when she writes of the "seemingly endless variety of incarnations [of the feminine], from witch, whore and siren to saint, virgin and mother".

In 1901 Klimt painted the first version of his *Judith*, a showcase Symbolist subject. His model was probably Adele Bloch-Bauer, a lady from Viennese society with whom he was having an affair and who both fascinated and frightened him. For Klimt, she was the embodiment of the *femme fatale*. By masking her in an Old Testament disguise in his picture, Klimt found a suitable alibi for her transformation into a sexual being.

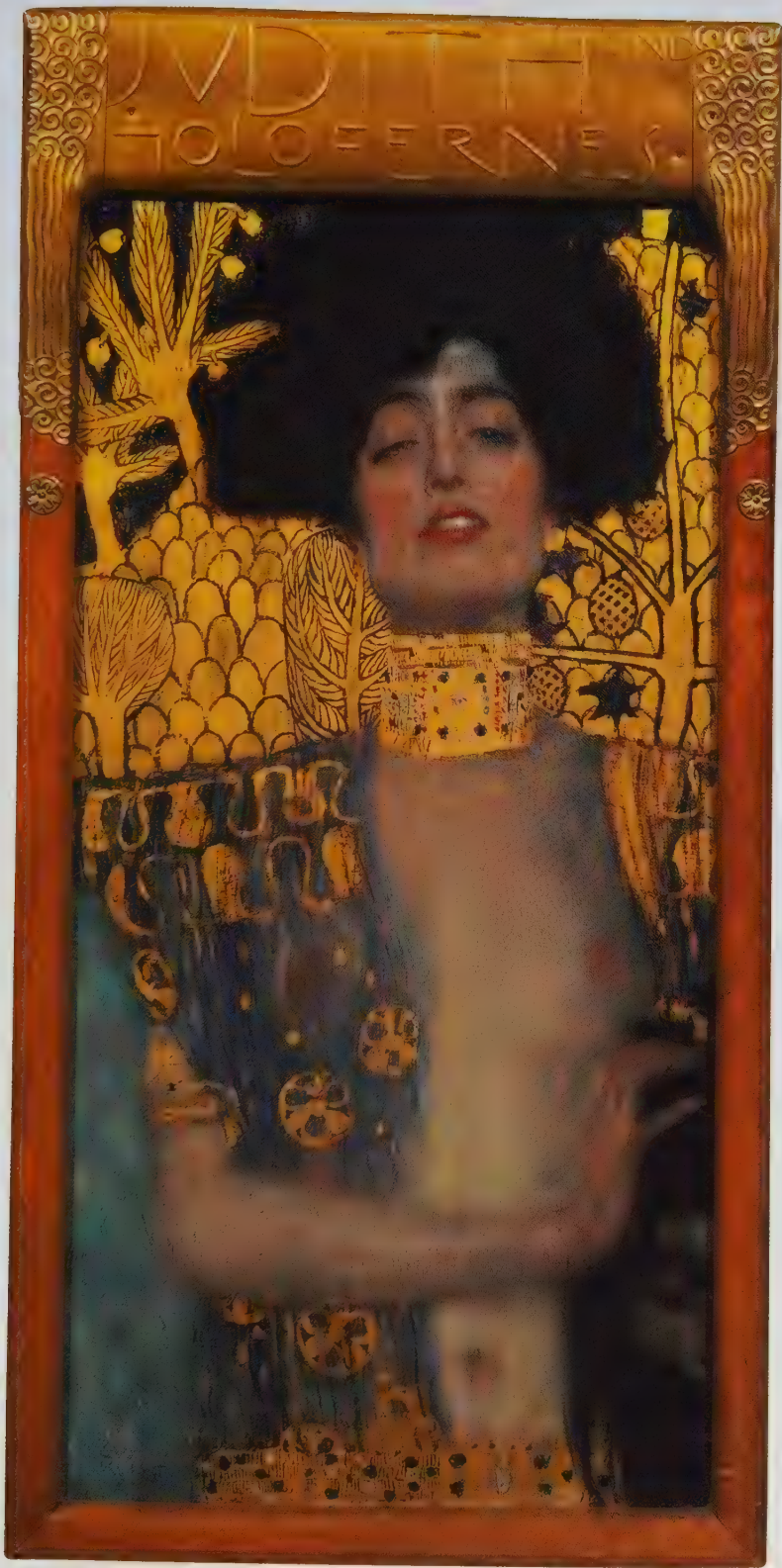
Like a saint in a religious icon, Klimt presents the woman frontally against an ornamentalized background of golden trees and scale patterns. Accompanying the lower left-hand edge of the picture is a diffusely structured stripe of greenish blue – like the gloomy

underlying mood of a motif superficially dressed in opulence. From beneath half-closed eyelids, the woman addresses her lascivious gaze at the viewer, the red lips of her mouth sensuously parted. A richly decorated but nevertheless almost transparent scarf falls over one breast, while the other remains uncovered. Her naked upper body terminates below the belly button in a horizontal gold belt. The woman's magnificent head of curly, jet-black hair is cut off along the top by a gilt strip of chased metal, embossed with the words "Judith und Holofernes". Despite this title, the painting was and remains regularly known and interpreted as Salome (another of Symbolism's classic themes). This has been explained in the literature as an act of displacement, i.e. as the exchange of one biblical murderess, Judith – who cut off Holofernes' head by her own hand, albeit for noble motives – for another, Salome, who "indirectly" killed John the Baptist by having him decapitated – for unlawful reasons – by the hand of an executioner.

When all is said and done, this line of argument is pointless, since Klimt was in fact concerned with sublimation, with stylizing his relationship with Adele Bloch-Bauer into a timeless allegory of the "battle of the sexes". For the woman's head is visually severed from her body by her wide golden necklet – in contrast and correspondence to the head of the man that has already been cut off and which appears almost incidentally in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture!

Klimt does not recreate the drama of the murder act in a blood-thirsty manner, but illustrates the role reversal resulting from sex and death: passion and the demands of sexual desire have turned the woman into perpetrator and the man into victim, forced to the edge, replaceable, delivered to destruction.

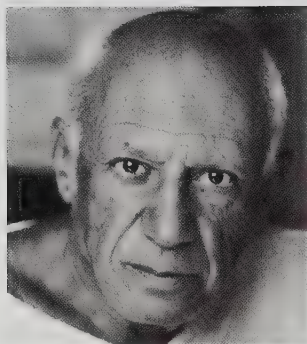




# Life

Oil on canvas, 196.5 x 123.2 cm

Cleveland (OH), *The Cleveland Museum of Art*



\* 1881 Malaga  
† 1973 Mougins (near Cannes)

and misery, isolation and the existential suffering of humankind in and on account of this world. Picasso clothes these fundamental human issues in an exemplary, almost emblematic manner in family groups, and hereby in particular in the leitmotif of the mother-child relationship.

The large, portrait-format composition *Life*, dating from this Blue Period and today housed in Cleveland, may be interpreted neither as a picture of despair nor as one expressing an optimistic outlook upon the world, but rather as striking a balance between these two opposites. In formal terms, Picasso has drawn some of his inspiration from the thin figures, the pathos of loneliness and the palette found in the few early works by Emile Bernard (1868–1941), a member of the Nabis.

In this masterpiece from 1903, set within an indeterminate interior with a greenish floor and a background in various nuances of blue, Picasso has worked with the device of the "picture within a picture". Standing on the left is a naked young couple (the man wearing only a sort of loincloth), the woman draped tenderly against the man's

Picasso loved and made a practice of permanent stylistic change. At the beginning of his career, over the subsequent course of which he would become the most famous artist of Modernism, his personal, subjective feelings were combined with a markedly Symbolist *Weltschmerz* – namely in his Blue Period (1901–1904). In the literary and painterly tradition of Romanticism, he created ciphers and symbols of human affection, but even more so of misfortune

body but casting her eyes downwards in a dejected manner, while her partner, completely distracted, looks towards the right (from the viewer's perspective). Standing opposite them, directly parallel to the upright of the frame, stands a dressed albeit barefoot woman cradling a sleeping infant in her protective arms. It is hard to judge the age of this female figure, who is seen in profile, but in comparison to the naked woman on the left, she appears substantially more mature in years. The caesura in the centre of the picture, between the lovers on the left and the mother and child on the right, is filled by paintings: above another couple, albeit clinging to each other more out of despair than physical affection, and below a figure huddled in obvious despondency.

The statement at the heart of the composition remains enigmatic. Does maternal love, as an "enduring" moment, replace sexual love, whose pleasures will fade? Does the silent grief that overshadows the features of the figures in the foreground (with the exception of the sleeping baby) contain a premonition of the moments of loneliness and mental crisis that dominate the "pictures within the picture"? To what extent do biographical references play a role? X-ray investigations have revealed that Picasso executed this picture over an existing painting, namely the composition *Final Moments* (I) that the artist had contributed to the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris. When he embarked on the new subject, Picasso originally intended to give the young, almost naked man his own features, but in the end he portrayed his former friend Carlos Casagemas, who had committed suicide in 1901 to the horror of his friends following a tragic love affair. Its infinite melancholy and existential symbolism make this work a masterpiece both within Picasso's oeuvre and in the context of Symbolist art.





# Day (2<sup>nd</sup> version); night

Oil on canvas, 163 x 358 cm; 116 x 239 cm

Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich; Berne, Kunstmuseum Bern



\* 1853 Berne  
† 1918 Geneva

Alongside Arnold Böcklin, Ferdinand Hodler advanced to become the most important Swiss artist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As has been recognized and increasingly stressed in recent times, from an international point of view he ranks amongst the most individual "stylists" of his age and amongst the most remarkable prophets of Modernism and the great innovators of European painting around 1900.

Hodler, who came from the *plein air* painting of the Bar-

bizon school and the Impressionists, subsequently embarked along a more expressive path characterized by a hard, angular manner of painting, a rigorous draughtsmanship and a strongly rhythmical composition. From the late 1880s onwards, line began to assume an ever more prominent role, with the result that Hodler in places approaches the linearity of Art Nouveau; for the most part, however, his works remain more realistic, weightier in their forms and often, too, gloomier in their palette. The solidification and simplification of his late works, which are often characterized by an extreme formal "parallelism" (his own word), look forward to the future abstractions of early Modernism. From 1891, moreover, the Swiss artist's previously sombre palette reveals the impact of the bright, "poster-like" colours of Paul Gauguin (ill. p. 57), set into unmodelled planes.

The idealistic and symbolic references full of pathos that characterize the themes of Hodler's art make him one of Symbolism's chief masters and most striking personalities. Hodler was possessed

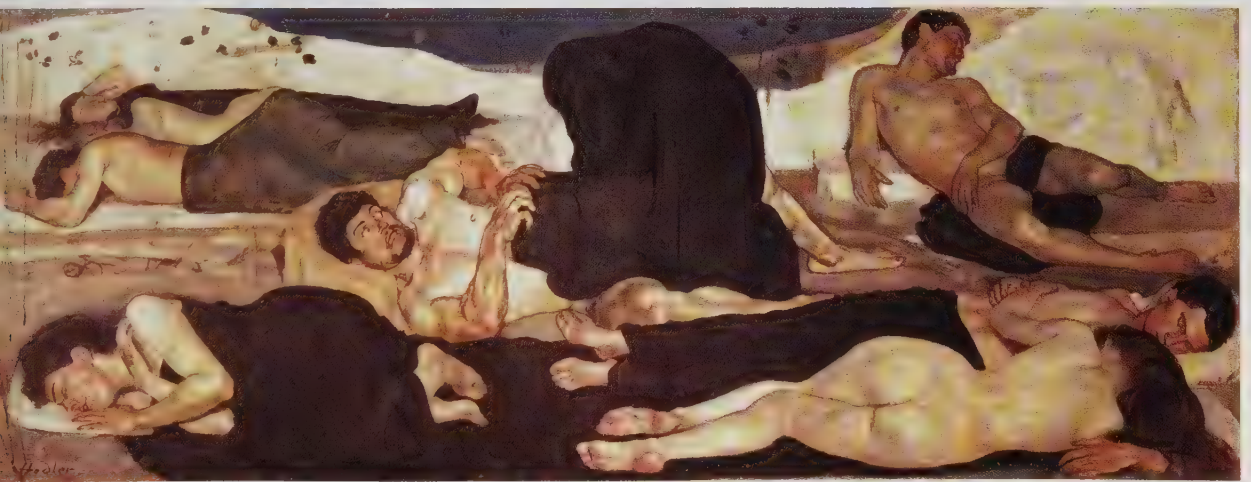
of the pantheistic conviction that the same spirit permeated all objects and appearances, and he saw an elemental expression of this spirit in the phenomenon of natural parallel orders and rhythms.

Rhythm! The design principle of a paratactic arrangement, relieved by slight deviations so as never to become monotonous, is also the determining criterion in the two paintings reproduced here. In both cases the composition is based on the expressive power of a rhythmical, "musical" sequence and therefore suppresses spatial depth in favour of the plane.

The artist himself considered *Night* to be his most important Symbolist composition. In the middle of the frieze-like arrangement of naked figures lying asleep (their complementary body positions being typical of rhythmical balance *à la* Hodler), one man has just opened his eyes in terror, because a faceless figure swathed in black has settled on his body like a nightmare. This is the dark side of sleep and dreaming, the side that resembles death and nothingness. In contrast, the other figures – stretched out, like the man waking up, on the ground of an unreal setting, alone or in pairs – lend expression to the peaceful side of sleep in their poses and relaxed physiognomies.

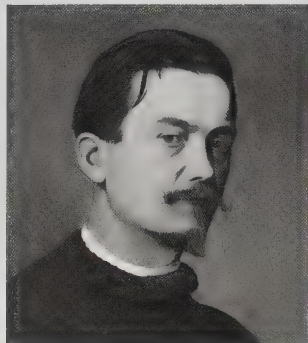
*Day* exists in two versions: the first, dating from 1899–1900, is housed like *Night* in the Kunstmuseum in Berne, while the second – shown here – hangs in the Kunsthaus in Zurich. The two versions are relatively identical, especially with regard to the five seated naked women. The viewer is struck in particular by the coherence of their composition and the symmetry of their ritualized gestures, oriented towards the raised hands of the central figure seen from the front. Their ornamental relationship sets off a train of movement, a motion of drawing up and unfolding: the taut unity that results corresponds symbolically to the course of the day, its dawning and passing.





# woman in a black hat

Oil on canvas, 71 x 65 cm  
 St Petersburg, State Hermitage



\* 1865 Lausanne  
 † 1925 Paris

The Swiss painter and graphic artist Félix Vallotton may be classified within French art. Not just because he took French nationality in 1900, at a point in time when he was enjoying increasing international recognition, but also, and most especially, because for many years he was one of those spearheading the aims of the French Nabis. He thereby rose in Paris to become the most important artist contributor to the *Revue blanche*, a mouthpiece for the avant-garde.

The history of the Nabis represents just one strand within the much broader, multi-faceted history of Symbolism. Significantly, during the period 1889 to around 1900, years which marked the chief activity of the Nabis, members of this group also took part in exhibitions by the Symbolists. There would consequently be no difficulty in finding works from both the early and the mature phase of Vallotton's career that not only convey the artistic aims of the Nabis, but also communicate Symbolist ideals, such as the dominance of the imaginary and a dream-like atmosphere.

The fact that I have nevertheless chosen to present a work from Vallotton's late oeuvre naturally raises the fundamental question of whether, in view of the coolly objective manner of the portrait of *Woman in a Black Hat*, one can even assign such a composition to the category of Symbolism.

Let us return to the Nabis. Within the framework of a history of art that likes to trace direct lines of evolution from tradition to

Modernism, the Nabis serve a relay function between Naturalism and the beginnings of abstraction, due to the seeming radicalism of their theoretical insistence upon the flatness of the picture. In practice, however, the majority of their works are not in fact laid out in a purely two-dimensional manner, but continue to contain perspective foreshortening and projections of plastic volumes onto the plane. Vallotton was always a particularly enthusiastic supporter of this tendency. And in his late paintings (executed after his Nabis period), he proceeded to cultivate realistic and three-dimensional values to such an extent that he may be seen as a forerunner of New Objectivity and as one of the pioneers of the Neoclassicist *retour à l'ordre*.

The portrait in the Hermitage is painted with an unerring precision that nevertheless should not cause us to overlook the artistic gradations of the various flesh tones (the paleness of the bared breast, which contrasts with the darker value of the right hand and the slightly reddened cheeks of the face). No more should we forget the colouristic sophistication with which the young beauty's bare skin is set off against the material properties of the black, transparent scarf that has slipped off her shoulder, and against the "impenetrable" black of the fashionable hat. All these charms are presented like a tactile pattern in front of a neutral olive background painted in an unforgettable manner.

The cult of objective presentation ultimately conjures a presence that can be almost bodily felt by the viewer. The "reality" of what is shown seeks to be more real than nature. The unsettling quality of enigmatic appearance (and erotic "close-up") is passed on, as the heritage of Symbolism, to New Objectivity and Magic Realism!





# Night, “Atlantic Poem”

Oil on canvas, 126 x 126 cm

Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Museo Néstor



\* 1887 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria  
† 1938 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Between 1904 and 1907 Néstor made trips to France, Belgium and England, where he devoted himself enthusiastically to an exploration of Symbolist tendencies, as represented in particular by the Pre-Raphaelites and Whistler. After initially enjoying celebrity in Spain, he was forgotten after his death; it would be Salvador Dalí, recognizing the Surrealist aspects of the pictures of his countryman, who re-discovered Néstor and once again drew wider public attention to his name.

Néstor's specialities included fantastical marine worlds, featuring combinations of monstrous giant fishes and mythical water sprites with naked ephebic bodies, the latter playing dangerously acrobatic games with the creatures of the deep. It is patently clear in the painting *Night, “Atlantic Poem”* that the beings more like monsters than fish are to be understood as the incarnation of gigantic waves, as elemental forces that can only be mastered with great effort and which often enough have the upper hand. The composition as a whole is bathed in hues of greenish-black, whereby a vast pale moon dominates the night sky as a manifestation of cosmic light. With its virtuoso execution and dynamic composition, *Night, “Atlantic Poem”* might be seen as an amplification and demonization of the fantastical maritime figures that appeared in the work of Arnold Böcklin a generation earlier – only that this and other pictures by the Spaniard do not match up to the works of the Swiss artist in terms of their painterly quality and are elaborated into a grotesque scene of horror laden with deliberate effect.

From this reservoir Dalí drew many of the details found in *Tuna Fishing*, his famous monumental painting from the 1960s, and in particular the suggestive giant fishes and some of the naked youths who are gathered together for the vehement rhythm of killing and being killed.

Of course, the aura of the indefinable that infuses the underlying mood of Symbolist painting is also found in the pictures by Néstor. But it is formulated in the latter's case in a superficial pictorial language. Néstor thereby ran the risk of descending into kitsch, a danger to which Symbolism – by its very nature aiming for atmospheric effects – was also often exposed. But Néstor also anticipated the mechanisms of a mass culture that the Postmodernism of the closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would make its principle.



Salvador Dalí, *Tuna Fishing*, c. 1966–1967





# Judas Iscariot

Oil on canvas, 131 x 84 cm

Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Galerie Neue Meister

After the founding of a Secession by modern-minded artists in Munich in 1892, one year later the same step was taken in Dresden. Conceived as a riposte to the academic establishment and its dominance of the art market, the Dresden Secession only remained in existence until 1900. From amongst its ranks, however, there issued Impressionist and also notable Symbolist works.

One of the most interesting – albeit today sadly too little known – representatives of Dresden Symbolism is Sascha Schneider, an artist of German descent who was born in St Petersburg and who studied at the Dresden art academy from 1889 to 1893. He was given his first one-man show in as early as 1894. Referring to Schneider's pictures, reviews emphasized their stirring combination of native traditions with the mysterious symbols of foreign and ancient cultures, in particular those of the East. Schneider's works were viewed as lending shape to ideas that "moved the world" at the same time as doing battle with the unfathomable and demonic in the human soul.

Schneider was considerably influenced in his development by the Symbolist art of Max Klinger (ill. p. 22 right, 68, 69). In the early part of his career he concentrated upon drawings, which made a forceful impression not least upon the author of *Steppenwolf*, Hermann Hesse (1877–1962): speaking of one such drawing in 1897, Hesse attested that he had never before been "so suddenly and powerfully seized" by a work of fine art. In 1902 Schneider subsequently met the novelist Karl May (1842–1912), whose adventure stories are still read in Germany today. May commissioned the artist to create 25 title-page illustrations for his collected works, a task that Schneider accomplished in 1904–1905. Although far surpassing their literary starting-point in quality, the resulting illustrations were couched in an enigmatic, Symbolist pictorial language that was disliked by the public. After a lengthy phase of stylistic re-orientation, at the start of the First World War Schneider returned to his Symbolist origins, at least in part.

Amongst the works of this late period is the fascinating painting *Judas Iscariot*.

The artist had already executed a drawing of this subject in as early as 1894, employing an almost identical composition: within a fantastical, unreal setting, the arch-traitor Judas – "chained" by blood-red brambles that encircle his naked body with its powerful, antique-style physique – is walking with his head bowed across 30 pieces of silver which, glowing hot, scorch his feet. Appearing out of nothingness before him is a vision of the Cross, whose stem diaphanously passes in front of Judas's outstretched leg. Standing sentinel like an idol in the background is the Angel of Justice, armed with a sword.

When Schneider transferred the subject of his early drawing into the medium of oil painting some three decades later, he changed only the age of the protagonist. Just as the figure of the traitor in the earlier work probably conceals a portrait of the artist himself (as suggested both by the face and by Judas's hump – an accident had left Schneider with a deformed back), so this same identification is retained in the oil painting and points to the idea that betrayal and regret accompany human life through all its phases, right up to old age and death.

Despite its essentially sombre tenor, a typically Symbolist reversal of values takes place in the present painting: evil assumes a singular power of fascination and the "negative hero" evokes sympathy, since he is presented as one manipulated by fate, as a "tragic" hero in the antique sense. This pictorial statement is delivered in an Old-Master style employing layers of glaze, a technique that Schneider embraced in around 1920; he was thereby probably inspired by Otto Dix (1891–1969), who was working in a similar manner during this period.





# Judith and Holofernes

Oil on canvas, 157 x 83 cm  
*Schwerin, Staatliches Museum*



\* 1863 Tettenweis  
 † 1928 Munich

In Munich, which at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had established itself as an international city of art, Franz von Stuck was the "prince of painters". He did a great deal for the development of Jugendstil in Munich and within the history of art has consequently been associated chiefly with this style, not least due to the decorative tenor of his many female portraits. When speaking of his work, however (and in more recent publications this is increasingly the case),

one can equally apply the term Symbolist in order to characterize his pictorial cult of the mythical, of sexuality clad in mythical dress and of allegories seemingly outside time.

Already a celebrated painter, Stuck rose to the height of stardom with his 1893 painting *Sin* (ill. p. 19), which exists in several versions. From now on his pictures would be dominated by an emphasis upon single islands of colour of jewel-like brilliance, "sacredly orgiastic effects of lighting, the magical glow of anaturalistic, and Bengal colours" (Hans H. Hofstätter), together with a classically academic but decoratively stylized language of form.

Such characteristics are also found in the painting *Judith and Holofernes*. Completed in 1926, it is one of altogether six versions by Stuck on the same theme, which numbers among the most popular subjects of Symbolism. The story is taken from the Old Testament Book of Judith, which in the Catholic view belongs to the canonical literature and in the Protestant view forms part of the Apocrypha.

Holofernes was the commander-in-chief of the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar. While he was laying siege to Bethulia, an outpost of Jerusalem, a devout and beautiful widow by the name of Judith resolved to rescue the Jews trapped inside the city. She boldly made her way into Holofernes' tent, where her beauty enthralled him. As Holofernes lay drunk on the bed, the woman whom he had hoped to seduce struck off his head with his own sword.

The *Schwerin* painting employs a strikingly tall portrait format, which underlines the verticals of the naked female body and the male body seen from above. The heroine Judith has become a modern *femme fatale*: she resembles a Variété dancer routinely used to showing off her naked body and at the same time the fashionable female type of the 1920s: tall, as slim as a boy, her hair cut in a bob, her oriental head-dress fitting close to her head. Her victim, too, is lent an exotic touch by his golden bracelets and ear-ring. Stuck has staged his subject of "the battle of the sexes" not along the lines of the biblical narrative but like a dramatic piece of theatre full of erotic innuendo. For the raised, over-large sword corresponds in compositional terms to the man's raised and bent upper leg, swathed in a shimmering blue cloth; and while this latter resembles a monumental phallic symbol, the woman conscious of her sexual power and looking down triumphantly upon her "booty" is already holding the instrument of castration. Red areas of colour on the left and right-hand edges not only evoke the draperies of a bed chamber filled with sultry thoughts but also the blood that is about to flow.

The painting is skilfully executed, even if its emphasis falls upon superficial effects. It thereby makes itself susceptible to attractive clichés and crude sexual fantasies. By giving these an artistic alibi, it wanders dangerously close to kitsch. Because Symbolist pictures by their very nature must positively seek for stimulating effects, not a few of them have fallen into this trap.







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Hohenzollernring 53, D-50 672 Köln  
[www.taschen.com](http://www.taschen.com)

**Project management:** Ute Kieseyer, Cologne

**Editing:** Christine Fellhauer, Cologne

**Translation from German:** Karen Williams, Rennes-le-Château

**Production:** Ute Wachendorf, Cologne

**Design:** Sense/Net, Andy Disl and Birgit Eichwede, Cologne

Printed in Germany  
ISBN 978-3-8228-5482-2

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##### Closed Eyes

1890, oil on canvas, 44 x 36 cm  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

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##### Innocentia (detail)

1889, oil on canvas, 68 x 61 cm  
Private collection

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1894–95, oil on canvas, 212 x 118 cm  
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*International Herald Tribune, Paris*

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**“Artist, you are a priest: art is the great mystery, and when your efforts lead to a masterpiece, a divine ray shines down as if onto an altar.”**

*Manifesto of the Rose-Croix, 1892*

In 1884 Paris saw the publication of *A Rebours* (translated both as *Against the Grain* and *Against Nature*), a cult *fin-de-siècle* novel that would create a sensation little short of perverse in the European art scene. Its author, Joris-Karl Huysmans, wrote it as a seductive textbook of decadence, as an antidote to “banal” naturalism. Symbolism, whose influence would endure well into the Modernist era, was an artistic substitute religion, a spiritually-charged cult of beauty. A Symbolist picture or sculpture remains deliberately enigmatic: in place of intellectual comprehension, the work wishes the viewer to experience its mysterious profundity in the manner of an inner vision. It is no wonder that Symbolists created some of the most fascinating artworks of their age.

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ISBN 978-3-8228-5482-2



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