

Symbolism Essay

The beginning of the Symbolist movement in art is regarded as having begun in the late 1880's, in the city and country, which had been for centuries the art and culture capital of the western world, Paris. Many young artists were striving to find ways of escape the ideas and fashions of their dominant Impressionist 'predecessors' and their objective naturalism. Artists in France such as Redon, Moreau, and Puvis de Chavannes, as well as those such as Khnopff, Hodler, Segantini, Klimt, and Munch in the rest of Europe therefore turned to imagination and fantasy for inspiration. These Symbolists rejected objectivity in favour of the subjective, and turned away from the direct representation of reality in favour of a synthesis of many different aspects, aiming to suggest ideas by means of ambiguous yet powerful symbols. They combined religious mysticism with an interest in the perverse and the erotic, an interest in what seemed 'primitive', yet with a sophisticated cult of decadence.

Much earlier artists and writers of the Romantic period, such as Delacroix, Edgar Allan Poe, and later, Baudelaire were key in the development of the symbolist ideology of the late nineteenth century, as did the Pre-Raphaelites to some extent.

Delacroix, who was the court painter to the king, developed the concept that colour might have a directly expressive rather than a merely descriptive function.

The most official recognition of symbolism as a form of art was first identified by Jean Moréas in the Symbolist manifesto called "Le Symbolisme", published in 1886 in *Le Figaro*, and also was very much made more popular and 'à la mode' by Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *Against Nature*, that same year. Moréas rejected the work of the popular writer Emile Zola and his pseudoscientific theory of Naturalism, which held such statements as 'Art is nature seen through a temperament'¹, and other writers who upheld such philosophies. Instead, Moreas favoured a totally new school, whose aim was "to clothe the idea in the sensual, perceptible form".

The artist that inarguable bridged the gap for the transition into Symbolism, however, was Paul Gauguin, the 'post-impressionist' painter born in Paris. His painting of 1888 (*Vision after the Sermon*) is one key to the symbolist concepts of the symbolic properties beyond the "retinal", of colour and paint, as well as crucially developing the style called *synthetism*, or "cloissonisme". Gauguin also worked closely with the artist Emile Bernard, who explicitly and intentionally rejected his former neo-Impressionist style of painting in 1886, after visiting another fellow artist's studio, in order to obtain the latest scientific theories and "chromatic researches of the theoreticians of optics", and experienced a sudden change of heart, realising that all his former work was wrong, and destroyed it, later admitting that this "to allow ideas to dominate the technique of painting". After moving from Paris to a remote rural village in Brittany, he set up the Pont-Aven school in the village of the same name. There, inspired by Gauguin's painting *Vision after the Sermon*, the two artists developed this style of painting referred to as *synthetism*, sought to express an idea or emotion through formal correspondences of line and colour. It was also known as "cloisonnisme", since its use of rich unmodulated colour contained within thick black contours resembled cloisonné enamelwork, as well as the Japanese prints that were so important to the modern artists of the time. They proposed that an image could combine, hence synthesize, thoughts with material appearances of objects, through colour theory, symbol, sensitivity and "dreaming before nature"². This style of painting greatly influenced many artists, such as the symbolist Nabis group, but also other post-impressionist artists such as the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh, who refers to this effect of the accumulation of senses from the painting as smelling of "bacon smoke", in regard to his *The Potato Eaters* of 1885.

¹ Emile Zola 1870

² Gauguin *Notes Synthétiques* 1888.

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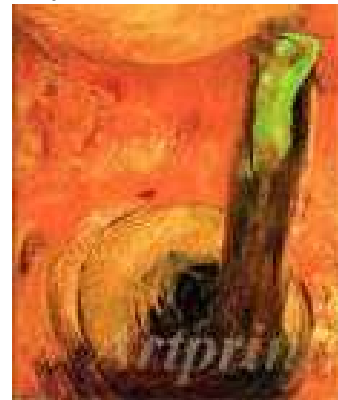
Another artist who is much more clearly categorised as a Symbolist was another French born painter called Gustave Moreau. He began painting in the style of the Symbolists much earlier however, combining a mixture of mythical, biblical, and literary imagery in the painting entitled The Apparition / Salome in 1876. This painting presents what is referred to as an archetypal 'femme fatale' figure of Salomé, set in a scene that derives from the novelist Flaubert's short story called *Herodias*. This is one of the most celebrated of Moreau's works despite being much earlier than the Symbolist movement conventionally began, and is described by Joris-Karl Huysmans once again in his novel *À Rebours*;, who admired it for its "decadence" of mood. This painting evokes the 'musicality' concept in art invented by Baudelaire of the aesthetic and emotional effect of colour and shape, which was also linked to one called 'Synaesthesia'. Once promoted in music it was consequentially taken up in art by the Symbolists, especially Moreau and Redon. It is described by the Symbolist Norwegian artist Munch: "By painting colours and lines and forms seen in quickened mood I was seeking to make this mood as a phonograph does." The Apparition takes on the synaesthetic equation of image and dance, music and scent, evoked in the incense smoke present strongly in the left side of the painting and also in its misty atmosphere. The decorative and evocative 'musicality' of line & colour is equally present here in the paint itself. Dabs of paint have been applied on a monotone background that look like jewels, and it is also very visible in the linear patterns of architecture, and very subtly, veils of brown paint in background and lack of detail give a dream-like 'vagueness' to this work. The extreme flatness of the space that is so typical of later Symbolists is also presently visible in this painting, denying space to deny the illusion of reality, and using line, pattern, colour and texture to create feeling, mood, and this 'vagueness'.

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Also standing outside the trends and movements of the Impressionists and such other artists, Odilon Redon, a native of Bordeaux, was concerned with the realities of the imagination, in opposition to the visual emphasis of Impressionism. Although until about 1878, he painted landscapes in oil and pastel under the influence of Realist artists such as Courbet and Corot, later he turned to charcoal drawing and lithography and produced a rich and enigmatic corpus, and was known to have said 'like music drawings transport us to the ambiguous world of the indeterminate.' Apart from the Realists, Redon also drew a lot of his inspiration, as many other Symbolist artists of the time, from Delacroix, even once saying that he felt "tremors and fevers" on standing before the artist's work at an early age. He worked closely with another Symbolist at the beginning of his career: one Rodolphe Bresdin, who had almost as weird and sinister an imagination as Redon himself, visible in such paintings as *The Comedy of Death* (1854), one of his two most famous works. He remained



virtually unknown to the public before the publication of Huysmans's celebrated novel *A Rebours* in 1884 and until after 1886, Redon was not so renowned an artist as the previously mentioned Moreau, yet his reputation began to grow, in France, but even more so in countries such as Belgium and Holland, where the Symbolist movement had firmly established itself during this time. In 1885, during the period when Redon was working solely in black and white, he made the lithograph entitled *Homage to Goya*, another one of his long admired artists. By the next year Redon's reputation began to rise in Paris as well, and he at one point exhibited with the very Impressionists that the other Symbolists tried to reject, but soon he became friendly with Gauguin and Bernard, and through their impact, his art works once again began to change. In these he developed a highly distinctive repertoire of weird subjects such as strange amoeboid creatures, insects, and plants with human heads and so on, influenced by the writings of Edgar Allen Poe. Despite being a key figure in the development of Symbolism, Redon voiced different theories to his art, and especially nature, to others such as Moreau. "I am repelled by those who vicoce the word 'nature', without having any trace of it in their hearts" is a telling quote by the artist concerning this subject, which unlike Moreau, he did not consider to be about fidelity or take from it to construct his compositions a great deal. Instead, Redon's sources for his paintings were mainly to do with books and other media of the scientific sort; for example his latest work until his death, *The Green Death* (1905-16), which links back to a child's zoology book that he looked at depicting a boa-constrictor.



Despite an overwhelming concentration on France as the centre and only focus of art at the turn of the century, following the Impressionists and their sprouting branches, which in turn begat Symbolism, the Symbolist movement, unlike its predecessors, spanned a greater region than this country and Paris. Very talented and inspirational artists followed in this style all over Europe, yet are often missed out in writings about this topic. Artists such as the

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norwegian Edvard Munch, who was interested in the portrayal of allegories of modern life. Despite moving to Paris to study in 1889, Munch's background due to coming from a dark, northern world of brooding introspection and neurotic obsessions, and the deeply pessimistic qualities can be seen in many of his prints and paintings. One that is impossible not to mention as regards to this artist is *The Scream* (1893), depicting feelings of despair and terror through the visible lines and streaks of arbitrary colour of the landscape and sky.

It is undeniably difficult to talk about all the artists and figures that held important roles in the Symbolist movement and those around it, due to their sheer numerosity and complexity. The accomplishments of the artists mentioned, as well as those not, are all relative to their backgrounds and aims, yet are immensely astounding as well as very *avante garde* and spearheading the drive into the twentieth century and its further movements of Expressionism and Abstraction. Despite all being unavoidably diverse and firmly sticking to their own ideas and philosophies, the 'painting of ideas'³ was what entitled this group to be called the Symbolists.

1,735 words

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³ Aurier, 1886