



Symbolists

by Kieron Devlin

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The Symbolist movement in painting and literature flourished from 1886 to 1905. It was the first self-consciously queer movement in Western art history. Characterized by strange mythological or mystical themes, it evinced a preoccupation with (and sometimes even celebration of) death, dreams, evil, decadence, *femmes fatales*, androgyny, perversity, and the occult.

The roots of the Symbolist movement were in Romanticism and it shared some features of Mannerism, while anticipating such later movements as Art Nouveau, Expressionism, and Surrealism.

The Cult of the Diva, however, with its attendant homoerotic impulse, was central to the ethos of the Symbolists, who were also called Decadents--a term more or less interchangeable with homosexuality in the public mind at the end of the nineteenth-century.

Symbolism is hard to define since it embraced different media and its practitioners were highly idiosyncratic. Strictly speaking, unlike the Impressionists, Symbolists leaned more to darkness than light, judging by the recurrence of perverse, morbid, or supernatural themes.

The movement was a reaction against an increasingly industrial society and against the perceived limits of Impressionism. Symbolists differed from Academic painters in their more experimental use of paint, tone, and color and their lack of regard for socially acceptable themes.

In their work, animals were often fantasy hybrids: unicorns, chimeras, griffins, and sphinxes, with the occasional peacock or swan; and figures tended to be androgynous, cruel, or erotic.

Gustave Moreau

Symbolism's finest exemplar is French painter Gustave Moreau. His work attempted to reach beyond the real, to depict emotionally charged states that he thematically elaborated with leitmotifs as in Wagnerian operas. He continually retouched his paintings, never regarding them as finished. For example, he worked on *The Suitors* intermittently from 1852 to 1872.

Moreau's paintings are suffused with eroticism. They feature languid, jewelled, or epicene figures in ceremonial poses. His male figures are usually passive, frail, and semi-naked. He wanted these figures to be emblematic of what he termed "ideal somnambulism," neither active nor inactive. He believed only in what he did not see and drew on a system of almost Cabbalistic correspondences and personal allusions to make vivid his feverish inner world.

The use of symbols did not originate with the Symbolist movement. Indeed, symbols are prevalent in the work of old masters, yet Moreau pioneered by fusing symbol with technique. He experimented with



Top: *Salomé* (1871) by Gustave Moreau.
Above: *The Silver Crown, Tondo* (1900) by Fernand Khnopff.

watercolor and with thickly applied paint in the manner of Delacroix, and thereby foreshadowed Abstract Expressionism.

Moreau lived with his mother for most of his adult life. He was an intensely private person, and from this distance his sexual orientation is impossible to determine with certainty. His work, however, profoundly influenced other painters and writers who were homosexual or bisexual.

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes

In addition to Moreau, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes was also a prominent member of the French Symbolist movement. Chavanne's work echoes the frescoes of Piero Della Francesca and Odilon Redon. He was a fine illustrator of macabre subjects, some inspired by Edgar Allen Poe.

Chavannes liked to think of himself as more traditional than Moreau and the other Symbolists, yet the influence of his restrained, disconcertingly static compositions on painters matched that of Moreau's.

J.-K. Huysmans

Symbolist artists were particularly enamored of the *poètes maudits* (accursed poets), especially as exemplified by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud. But novelist J.-K. Huysmans wrote the bible of the decadents in *À Rebours (Against Nature, 1884)*, a work much admired by Oscar Wilde.

The protagonist of *Against Nature* is Des Esseintes, a man so disillusioned with the normal that he retreats into a hermetic world and becomes an obsessive collector--of all sorts of objects, including clothes, rare works in Latin, décor, spangled jewels, paintings, liturgical music, and sins. Eventually Des Esseintes has a homosexual encounter. Interestingly, the novel includes a gushing, ecstatic description of a painting of *Salome* by Moreau.

Cult of the Diva

Salome was vital to Moreau and all Symbolists because she represented to them the ultimate castrating female. Moreover, her story has clear hints of male Oedipal anxieties, and even sadomasochism. Salome became a metaphor for the new man troubled by his gender role.

Symbolist artists tended to be fastidious aesthetes, dandies, reclusive hermits, or mystics, and they were frequently attracted to the priesthood. Most were what we would now classify as homosexual or bisexual; they were certainly not traditionally heterosexual.

They were, however, obsessed with the female muse in her various guises. Figures such as Eve, Lilith, Judith, Medusa, Pandora, and Jezebel recur in their works, usually as wicked divas. Whereas in Baroque art, female figures tend to be the victims of male cruelty and sexual assault, in Symbolist art men are more often sexual victims.

The Pont-Aven School

Although Paul Gauguin defined himself as an Ideist or Synthetist artist rather than a Symbolist, he was adored by many Symbolist artists, some of whom influenced his own work. His followers formed the school of Pont-Aven in Brittany.

Among them was Charles Filiger, whose primitive, naïve style in the depiction of farm boys in Brittany and of Christ figures attests to his struggle with homosexuality and religion. His work also provides an example of Symbolist sacred or mystical art.

Influence of Symbolism

Gauguin himself became Symbolism's chief disseminator and frequently evinced the influence of Symbolism in his own work. He achieved an astonishing subtlety and unity of feeling in *The Vision after the Sermon* (1884) and *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897), which is at once exotic, symbolic, and philosophic.

After Gauguin left for Tahiti, a small group of artists gathered around Paul Sérusier and called themselves The Nabis (*prophet* in Hebrew). This group included Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, and Edward Vuillard.

Even Picasso flirted with Symbolism before moving on to Cubism. In this sense Symbolism is best seen as not so much a style as a thematic approach, a cult of self that led artists to produce their weirdest, most visionary paintings.

The English Aesthetic Movement

The Aesthetic movement in England paralleled many of the doctrines of French Symbolism. It too was a revolt against vulgarity and increasing industrialization. It also manifested the same longing for deeper meaning and the same idealistic temperament and drew heavily on Medieval and early Renaissance art.

Edward Burne-Jones

Edward Burne-Jones, whose outstanding body of work is radiant and harmoniously composed and reminiscent of Mantegna or Botticelli, did not subscribe to a decadent aesthetic and was happily married.

He did, however, produce many resonant images of anatomically indeterminate or androgynous figures. For example, his multiple female figures in *The Golden Stairs* (1880) have the musculature of beautiful adolescent boy clones. This androgynous image was considered a utopian ideal, a pre-sexual state or a union of the sexes into a kind of third sex. It was the idealized transgender of its time.

Aubrey Beardsley

The supreme English decadent artist was Aubrey Beardsley, whose career was as brief as it was brilliant. His work is strikingly original: once seen, it is never forgotten. His illustrations of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (1896), featuring ill-concealed phalli and stylized pubic hair, and of Wilde's *Salome* (1894), in which he caricatured Wilde's plump face in the moon, are benchmarks of witty provocation.

Beardsley's freeing of the Arabesque line almost certainly triggered the decorative excesses in Art Nouveau. His expert draftsman's skills perfectly suited the expanding medium of print.

Beardsley's personal motifs included erections and sexual fetishes for such objects as shoes, feathers, scissors, powder puffs, and curling locks of hair. He drew these objects with a frankness that seems the antithesis of realism and bourgeois Victorian values.

His nearest equivalent on the Continent was Belgian artist Félicien Rops, whom many regarded as the lowest, most vulgar of Symbolists, for his frank depiction of Satanic cults and demonic erections.

The Salon des la Rose+Croix and The Salon de XX

Among the most eccentric of French Symbolists was the self-styled Sâr ('*magus*' in ancient Persian) Joséphin Péladan, a man who believed hermaphroditism would save Europe from decline. He wore a dress, but kept his beard. Péladan is crucial more for the force of his public persona than for his writings or art. He was a kind of proto-hippie spin master.

In 1892 Péladan formed the *Salon de la Rose+Croix*, a quasi-Occult order, whose mission in art was "to ruin realism." These salons provided a public space for Symbolists, the Pont-Aven group, and the Nabis to exhibit. Péladan entrusted much of the running of the salons to Jean Delville, a neo-Platonist, whose *Satan's Treasures* (1895) is a typical expression of the Symbolist aesthetic: it depicts a swarm of violently enflamed naked bodies going to hell.

In Belgium, Symbolism found unique expression in the work of Fernand Khnopff, one of Péladan's favorite artists. Khnopff along with Carlos Schwabe formed a faction among *Rose+Croix* painters. They belonged to the *Salons des XX* (The Twenty).

The titles of Khnopff's works are intriguing: *I Lock the Door Upon Myself* (1891), *The Caresses of the Sphinx* (1896), and *Silence* (1896), for example. His paintings are asymmetrical, meticulously and purposefully composed, like the work of Burne-Jones. They are moody and enigmatic, thus reflecting the artist's taciturn, introspective temperament.

A celibate, reputedly in love with his sister, Khnopff depicted female figures who either are her, or, perversely, look like her. Among his trademark motifs are the winged head, representing Hypnos, the god of sleep. He is doubtless the model for the artist in Allan Hollinghurst's novel *The Folding Star* (1994), set in Khnopff's famously melancholy home city of Bruges, which Baudelaire once called "Venice in black."

Conclusion

By 1898 the Symbolist esthetic was all but sidelined by other movements. Critic Octave Mirbeau, in the aftermath of the Wilde scandal of 1895, castigated the Symbolist movement as being only for "snobs, Jews and pederasts." During the late twentieth century, however, Symbolists enjoyed a new popularity. To Phillipe Jullian, they were "the dandies of the soul."

Symbolists shrank from bright lights in order to make the ineffable manifest. In the process, they revealed their homosexual orientation or other minority erotic interest. They tried to make a kind of subtle, ambiguous music for the eye. Although their work varies enormously in quality, it still manages to fascinate and enthrall.

Bibliography

Dorra, Henri, ed. *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Gibson, Michael. *Symbolistes*. Michael Gibson, trans. New York: Abrams, 1988.

Jullian, Phillipe. *The Symbolists*. Mary Anne Stevens, trans. New York: Phaidon, 1973.

Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Symbolist Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1972.

Théberge, Pierre, ed. *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*. Montreal, Canada: Museum of Fine Arts, 1995.

About the Author

Kieron Devlin studied Art & Design at Manchester Art School, England. He holds a Master's degree from Leicester University and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York City's New School. He is working on a novel and a collection of short stories.