

BETWEEN MORBIDITY AND DECADENCE

Belgian Symbolism

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“Some call it decadence, as if it were the last escape of desires from a dying culture and the sensation of death. Others call it Symbolism.” This is how Hermann Bahr summed up the different assessments of the new artistic avant-garde in his *Studien zur Kritik der Moderne* (Studies on the Critique of Modernism), published in 1894.¹ The categories of morbidity and decadence thus seem to provide an outline for a new artistic development at the end of the nineteenth century that responded to the challenges of modernism.

A world in upheaval – this was the fundamental experience of the people at the fin de siècle. Never before – so it was believed – had the fundamental categories in economy, technology and science, as well as in society and culture, changed so rapidly and so substantially. The search for an adequate form of expression for the associated attitude to life marked by rapid change determined many tendencies of artistic modernism. While some paid homage to progress and shifted completely to the present, others perceived this development as a crisis in an ambivalent situation between the urge for the new and the pain of parting from the old.

The dissolution of traditional ties was accompanied by a strong sense of insecurity. Not infrequently, the individual

found himself confronted and exposed to a completely new reality. By the end of the century, the optimism of progress linked to industrialisation had been crushed and the proclaimed and expected total control of nature by science and technology exposed as an illusion, prompting the emergence of a broad front against materialism and positivism. The unveiling of the external secrets of the world and the loss of the inner magic through scientification and rationalisation had turned against metaphysical approaches to explanation and omitted transcendent fixed points,² radically thought out to the end in a statement coined by Friedrich Nietzsche: “God is dead”.³ In a reflex to this crisis of faith, numerous attempts were made at a new interpretation of the world, which often led to a new kind of spirituality. The enigmatic, the mystical and the occult unfolded their greatest attraction, whereby art was given a new meaning and a special role. In Symbolism, the world of appearances was now interpreted – also picking up on the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer⁴ – as a symbol of a deeper reality, and art as a mediator between the various levels. In what amounted to artistic escapism, individual fantastic dreamworlds emerged as counter-images to the real world. Contemporary criticism attested: “Go on, get away at



Fig. 1 Fernand Khnopff
The Caresses (detail), 1896, oil on canvas, 50 × 150 cm,
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

all costs from clear reality, into the dark, the foreign and the hidden – that is the acknowledged slogan for numerous artists today.”⁵

The late nineteenth century was a typical age of transition and decadence. For many, the erosion of old traditions and social conventions through industrialisation and social conflicts led to the fragmentation of society, and also of the individual himself, and aroused fears about the challenges of the future. Orientation was sought in a panoramic view, whereby not only were nostalgic glances cast in the direction of the past, but there was also a longing for a vision for the future. Like a motto for the fin de siècle, one of the greatest Belgian Symbolists, Fernand Khnopff, had the words “Passé – Futur” inscribed above the entrance to his villa in Brussels.⁶ His art also understood the present as a transitory moment, as a mixture of wistful past experience and anxious expectation of the future. The loss of traditional certainties within a world that had previously been experienced as static was described by some as decline and moral decay, but by others

as liberation from the burden of tradition and norms, particularly in the realm of art. At the same time, this evoked a sense of a final act of resistance, of sensual pleasure and exuberance before the presumed collapse. The appeal of the dance on the volcano – *l’apocalypse joyeuse*⁷ – became the guiding principle, the Symbolists elevating the crisis to cult status. The feeling of belonging to a sinking world, to the last generation in a long sequence of pasts, and the simultaneous departure for something new found its sublimation in an aesthetic exaggeration of the eerily beautiful. The prurient gaze into the abyss of a saturated society, which meanwhile believed itself to be in a crisis, the morbid attraction between Eros and Thanatos: these are thematic fields in art which found their expression in the late nineteenth century, especially in Symbolism.

Brussels and the emergence of the avant-gardes

Symbolism developed as an international art trend with several centres, of which Paris and Brussels were the first and

Fig. 2 Paul Gauguin
Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel), 1888, oil on
canvas, 74.4 × 93.1 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh



arguably the most influential. In Belgium, the early days of Symbolism coincided with the secessionist aspirations of the group Les XX (Les Vingt), founded in 1883, and its annual exhibitions from 1884 onwards. Likewise in 1884, Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*,⁸ the *roman-à-clef* of Decadent literature, was published in Paris. In numerous text passages, it contains descriptions of the most important forms of expression of Symbolism in the fields of literature, music and the visual arts. In the novel, painters such as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon are just as central as the literature of Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé and Jules Barbey d'Aureville. It is hardly surprising that Huysmans had anticipated the analysis and attempts at a theoretical version of this trend, since he was already known as an art critic before he began his literary work. But it was Jean Moréas, with his article "Le Symbolisme", published in the Parisian *Figaro* in 1886,⁹ who would be the first to present a programmatic definition of Symbolism. Whereas this referred essentially to literature, the Belgian Émile Verhaeren applied the term to painting in an article on Fernand Khnopff in 1887.¹⁰

The close exchange between the art metropolises of Paris and Brussels was already conspicuous at the time of the initial formation of Symbolism. This bond was strengthened by literature as the basis of the new current: writers such as Georges Rodenbach, Maurice Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, often not identified as Belgians because they wrote in French, were of enormous importance for the international spread of Symbolism.¹¹ Nevertheless, at the end of the cen-

tury, on the occasion of an exhibition at the gallery of the art dealer Gurlitt in Berlin, the magazine *Die Kunst für Alle* declared: "The true home of Symbolism in poetry and painting is Belgium."¹²

As the first industrialised country on the European continent and as a colonial power in Central Africa, Belgium experienced considerable economic growth and prosperity during the course of the nineteenth century. The social reality in Belgium, however, was marked by extreme contrasts between the proletarian coal-mining areas of Wallonia and the poor rural regions of Flanders on the one hand, and elegant, sophisticated cities such as Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp on the other.¹³ Brussels' rise to become a European art metropolis was due above all to its multi-layered, intensive connections to the neighbouring countries of France, England, Germany and the Netherlands.¹⁴ Equally decisive were the Belgian capital's liberality and an open-minded attitude towards the new.¹⁵

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a wide variety of artists' groups and associations were founded in Brussels, the common aim of which was to establish artistic avant-gardes.¹⁶ A vibrant environment of cross-genre and interdisciplinary experimental set-ups facilitated a great plurality of possibilities and forms of expression and allowed artists to develop their individual styles and to find novel, self-organised platforms for marketing their works. The most important group in this context was Les XX, with its Salon for contemporary Belgian and international art. As a proto-

secessionist group, it was open to any form of new art and influenced the coming development of art far beyond the country's borders.¹⁷ The twenty members, predominantly Belgians such as Khnopff, James Ensor, Félicien Rops and Théo Van Rysselberghe, but also Auguste Rodin and Jan Toorop, invited further colleagues from Europe to participate in each exhibition. Among these were artists as diverse as Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Paul Gauguin (fig. 2), Walter Crane and James McNeill Whistler. The financially strong marketplace of Brussels was definitely lucrative as an exhibition venue for the international participants. Already established painters such as Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir and other Impressionists took part often and gladly; Redon, "considered an outsider in Paris, became one of the most sought-

after illustrators of the avant-garde in Brussels's literary circles",¹⁸ and Vincent van Gogh succeeded in selling his only work during his lifetime at the Salon of Les XX in 1890 (p. 45, fig. 1).¹⁹ In 1894, *La Libre Esthétique* continued the efforts of Les XX and further increased its internationality. At the fin de siècle, Brussels thus became an important hub of European artistic development and a meeting place for Symbolists.

Brussels, for its part, also provided many impulses of its own. Khnopff's work can be regarded as exemplary for the mutual inspirations, since he functioned as a crucial link along the London – Paris – Brussels – Vienna axis. He impressed the Vienna Secession with his elegant extravagance and influenced, among others, Gustav Klimt, who in turn made his mark in Brussels, together with the architect Josef



Fig. 3 Xavier Mellery
Autumn, c.1890, mixed media on paper,
mounted on cardboard, 92 × 59 cm, Musées
royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Hoffmann, through his work on the Palais Stoclet (1905–11). Although the Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, from whom Khnopff received great inspiration, refused to participate in the exhibitions of Les XX,²⁰ Khnopff was keen to increase the fame of these artists in Belgium.²¹ He showed his own works in London as early as 1886, was in close exchange with Burne-Jones (p. 128)²² and, conversely, reported from Brussels as a regular correspondent for the English magazine *The Studio* from 1895 onwards. His sculptural work was oriented towards that of the Englishman George Frampton, for example his *Mysteriarch* (pp. 166–

67), which was presented in 1894 at the first exhibition of La Libre Esthétique. In Paris, where his reputation as the “supreme mystic of Brussels”²³ preceded him, Khnopff also became the artistic ideal of Joséphin Péladan (p. 273). At the influential occultist-esoteric Salons de la Rose + Croix, organised by the self-proclaimed “Sâr” Péladan in Paris between 1892 and 1897, the participation from francophone foreign countries in particular stands out: Ferdinand Hodler and Carlos Schwabe from Switzerland, for example, and especially Belgian artists such as George Minne, Émile Fabry, Jean Delville and Khnopff. Delville intensively oriented himself towards the Christian esoteric mysticism of Péladan’s syncretistic world-view sect. The “Sâr” declared the artists to be priests of an elitist cult of the beautiful, which at times, however, also escalated into decadent exaggeration, including Satanism. Yet not all artists were overly convinced of the matter; many were simply interested in gaining access to the Parisian art market and achieving international recognition.²⁴

Cultural exchange with the German-speaking countries was also very intensive.²⁵ Among those participating in the exhibitions in Brussels were Hodler, Hans Thoma, Fritz von Uhde, Max Liebermann, Dora Hitz, Käthe Kollwitz and Max Klinger. The last of these had already found inspiration in Brussels with the older Rops and through works by Antoine Wiertz during a stay there in 1877 lasting several months. For their part, the Belgians were strongly represented at German exhibitions, culminating in the major survey show *Ausstellung Belgischer Kunst* (Exhibition of Belgian Art) at the

Fig. 4 Giovanni Segantini
The Evil Mothers, 1896/97, pastel on
cardboard, 40 × 74 cm, Kunsthaus Zürich



Fig. 5 Jan Toorop
Two Women, 1893, mixed media on
paper, 24.5 × 37.5 cm, private collection



Berlin Secession in 1908,²⁶ which also included works by the most important Symbolists: from William Degouve de Nuncques, Eugène Laermans and Rops to Delville, Khnopff and Fabry, as well as Léon Frédéric, Ensor and Henri Evenepoel. Also represented were sculptors such as Paul Dubois, Victor Rousseau and Charles van der Stappen.²⁷

How close the exchange between Symbolist artists may have been through participation in exhibitions, illustrated books and their own travels²⁸ is demonstrated by many almost obvious associative kinships and formal references. Although it is not always possible to prove personal relationships, the today lesser-known Belgian artists often have “brothers in spirit” in other European countries, where Symbolist tendencies can be identified in many forms that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, when one thinks of some of Rops’s erotically inscrutable prints, Klinger, who fol-

lowed him, inevitably comes to mind, as do Alfred Kubin and Aubrey Beardsley. Léon Spilliaert’s hollow-eyed portraits reveal affinities to the works of Edvard Munch (pp. 286–87) and Ludwig von Hofmann, and one immediately associates Xavier Mellery’s silent interiors with those of Vilhelm Hammershøi (pp. 208–09), while his allegorical works evoke motivic associations with Giovanni Segantini and Toorop (figs. 3–5). Degouve de Nuncques’s landscapes reveal a fascinating proximity to the work of Whistler (pp. 194, 168/69), whereas the works of Frédéric are reminiscent of paintings by Arnold Böcklin, whereby his realism also references Jules Bastien-Lepage. Given his artistic eccentricity, Ensor seems unsuitable when it comes to comparisons and pointing far into the twentieth century; a parallel can, nonetheless, be found in Kubin’s fantastic visions (fig. 6). In this sense, the list could go on much further.



Fig. 6 Alfred Kubin
The Funeral March, c.1910, mixed media on paper,
 24.5 × 37.5 cm, Leopold, private collection

Alternative paths to modernism

The exhibitions of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique in Brussels brought together all the various trends in current artistic development since the 1880s. Here, the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists on the one hand and the Symbolist-inspired artists on the other can be identified as two essential groups that developed in parallel. The fact that different currents of modern art existed side by side was not unusual in the nineteenth century; in fact, it is virtually a sign of that age. However, the understanding of modernism not in the sense of a singular opportunity but rather as simultaneous possibilities is not a recent discovery. Art critics and writers such as Huysmans and Baudelaire admired Edgar Degas and the Impressionists as painters of modern life and, at the same time, the Symbolists as discoverers of dream-

worlds. Capturing the fleeting sensation of light and colour in everyday life appears to be a fundamentally different approach from that of the other-worldly search for the extraordinary and the enigmatic, yet the two currents of modernism are not to be understood as their respective antitheses.²⁹ On the contrary, there were indeed points of contact between Impressionism and Symbolism, for example in the innovative use of the pastel technique and in the concept of *décadence*. In this, the observed fragmentation of the world could be evaluated and artistically interpreted according to one's point of view.³⁰ Examples of this proximity are Rodin as a sculptor in his own category, whose works could, in part, be attributed to both Impressionism and Symbolism, or Van Rysselberghe and Klimt, who integrated Impressionist stylistic features into their art. What clearly distinguishes Sym-

bolism from the other avant-gardes of the time is the special interest in the inner, spiritual processes of man and the expression of emotions and thoughts as the goal of their art. This basic idea was also shared by artists such as Gauguin, who was represented at the Salons of Les XX in 1889 and 1891. His aspirations are clearly expressed in a letter containing advice to his friend Émile Schuffenecker: "Do not copy nature too closely. Art is an abstraction. As you dream amid nature, extrapolate art from it."³¹

Artistic excursions into the life of the soul

Symbolism had a predilection for themes in the border zone between dream and reality, between the subconscious and the conscious. Here, one sought to connect with the artists of so-called Black Romanticism,³² who had made the ominous and uncanny the subject of their painting, that is to say, with

masters such as Francisco de Goya and his sinister *Caprichos*, with Henry Fuseli and his erotically eerie *Nightmare* (fig. 7) and with Eugène Delacroix and his obscenely morbid *Death of Sardanapalus*.³³ Convinced that the mystery of the world lies in one's own ego, fear of the monsters of the imagination lurking there also forced itself upon them.³⁴ These dark dreams were complemented by the findings of scientific research into the human psyche. Sigmund Freud assumed "that dreams are interpretable, that is, they have a hidden meaning".³⁵ His *Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899, brought together and scientifically clarified many of the considerations that already existed in the nineteenth century and also developed enormous influence in cultural history. According to Freud, the subconscious is the realm of repressed contents and drives not permitted by the conscious mind, from which emotional disorders can also originate. He

Fig. 7 Henry Fuseli
The Nightmare, 1790/91, oil on canvas,
 76.5 × 63.6 cm, Frankfurter Goethe-Haus –
 Freies Deutsches Hochstift, Frankfurt
 am Main





Fig. 8 Caravaggio
Narcissus, c.1600, oil on canvas, 113.3 × 95 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome

examined “the symptomatic power of repression and the origins of the moral control system, the anatomy of fear and delusion, the tension between reason and sexuality, between life and death instincts”.³⁶ As a result, the instincts were recognised as the motor of human action. Freud diagnosed a triad comprised of the subconsciously driven and desire-controlled id, the consciously acting ego, which is aligned with reality, and the controlling moral authority of the super-ego. This division of the subject fitted well into the overall picture of a fragmented world. Alongside the dethronement of man in the mid-nineteenth century by Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, this was probably the second great

disappointment of modernity. Man, a being alienated from himself: such was Freud’s finding at the end of the century.

Dealing with the abysmal depths of the human psyche and the nervous disorders they explained was one of the central themes of the time and of Symbolist art in particular. The Symbolists’ delight in exploring concealed traces and signs, their particular closeness to the mysterious and the hidden found confirmation – as well as interpretation – in the work of Freud.³⁷ Freud’s teacher, the Parisian neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, devoted himself, among other things, to the fashionable disease hysteria, which he attempted to treat with hypnosis. It is no coincidence that Hypnos, the god of sleep,

occupies a central position in Khnopff’s paintings and appears in many of his works (pp. 174–77).³⁸ Contemporary art critics interpreted this specific preference of the artist accordingly: “He is a modern romantic in his own class. This is what they look like in the age of hypnosis.”³⁹ The winged head enables the mind and the imagination to soar. It stands for the mysterious realm of the subconscious – be it trance as a special psychological state or sleep as the brother of death. The possibilities of association contained within it stimulated the imagination of numerous artists. Spilliaert’s somnambulistic figures executed in ink refer to nightmares and herald delusional states of mind, as in his dizzying vision *Vertigo* (p. 183). Hodler found an ambiguous pictorial translation of the dream experience. His painting *The Dream* (p. 184) confronts the viewer with the questions: Which of the worlds depicted and clearly separated from each other is the real one, and which is the dream? Is the girl picking flowers daydreaming about the young man, or is she part of the sleeping man’s vision? This play with ambiguity, the oscillation between possible explanations, can be considered a typical Symbolist principle. It is equally evident in Ensor’s demonic portraits, which can no longer be distinguished from the masks depicted in those very works (pp. 292–93), and in Mellery’s diffuse interiors, which question the ensouled nature of the objects depicted (p. 206). In the end, the motivation for dealing with dreams and the awakening subconscious seems to be introspection in a mixture of fascination with the unknown and the sense of horror at the evil that lies within ourselves.

Nervous Romanticism

The text “Zur Psychologie der Dekadenz” (On the Psychology of Decadence, 1904) by the German neurologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps was also based significantly on his observations of hypnosis. He recognised in the progressive differentiation of society the cause of “individual and social nervousness and disintegration”.⁴⁰ He classified this increased nervousness as decadent and pathological. With reference to art, he spoke of the “cult of the ugly, the rotting, the perverse”,⁴¹ which was used as a stylistic device “for stimulation, for zest, for whipping lackadaisical nerves”.⁴² Lipps’s description, which was meant to be derogatory, could presumably also have been found in contemporary feuilletons – albeit with positive connotations – for nervousness was often interpreted as creative restlessness. In artist circles, it was considered almost chic to “show nerves”, as it was called at the time. Hermann Bahr, for example, explained that the goal of Decadent artists was “*modeler notre univers intérieur* [design our inner world]. In this, they are like new Romantics”, and a “romanticism of nerves” could emerge through their pathological introspection.⁴³

The preoccupation with the life of the soul often began with the artistic ego, for example in the *Autopsychological Study. Portrait of the Artist* by Émile Motte (p. 282); and Khnopff characteristically gave his 1881 self-portrait set in front of an expansive landscape the title *A Crisis*.⁴⁴ While these titles are programmatic in themselves, Spilliaert’s obsessively repeated self-observations appear like documentations of physical



Fig. 9 Gustave Moreau
Salome Dancing (Salome Tattooed), c.1874, oil on canvas,
92 x 60 cm, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

decay, whereby, in their expressiveness, the increasingly haunting images of the respective moment tend to turn the inside to the outside, making them indicative of the artist's mental state (pp. 283–86). In an essay from 1885, Ernst Mach described the identity of the subject, which had fallen into crisis and was thus unstable, as “the irrecoverable ego”.⁴⁵ This dissolution of the individual seems to have found an equivalent artistic expression in Ensor's depiction of himself as a skeletal painter in a blue suit (pp. 280/81).

Art as a mirror of the soul

The art of the fin de siècle is, not least of all, an expression of heightened subjectivism and egocentricity; one need think only of Oscar Wilde's decadently snobbish novel *The Picture*

of *Dorian Gray* (1891). It is hardly surprising that narcissism in particular was one of the most popular motifs of these self-indulgent Symbolists. The motif of self-admiration in still water is taken up in a major work by George Minne – *Fountain with Kneeling Youths* (p. 117) – and linked to the notion of a torn-apart ego, expressed here through the fivefold repetition of the kneeling youth. By focusing on the centre, and in turn on the reflection of the youth himself, the fountain is an epitome of introspection. The fragile beau – such as the one captured in marble by the sculptor Juliette Samuel-Blum (p. 303) – is oriented in his posture to the figure in Caravaggio's famous painting *Narcissus* (fig. 8). Frédéric's reception of the great baroque master is even more overt, although he placed his Narcissus in heavenly spheres, above the rainbow (p. 302). His introspection thus led him, as it were, to a new view of the world.

The mirror or the water's surface always doubles reality and suggests the border to another, mysterious world (p. 243). Kubin's fantastical novel *The Other Side* (1909) also alludes to this. The “in front of” and “behind” – the place beyond – made the mirror image a favoured motif among the Symbolists, whether in the interior (p. 212) or as water in the numerous depictions of lonesome landscapes (p. 191) and sinking cities (p. 195). The meditative and contemplative power of the dark surface may have reinforced this preference.⁴⁶ The ambiguity and transitory nature of the motif finds perhaps its greatest mental density in Böcklin's famous *Isle of the Dead* (pp. 144/45), which lies in the middle of the completely motionless surface

of the water. What the artist intended in this depiction is symbolic depth rather than the reproduction of nature.

The philosophical approach taken by Schopenhauer, that the world is merely a subjective concept, is also reflected in Symbolist landscape painting. Rarely is it only about nature as we see it; the focus is instead on the individual world of emotions. Nature is understood as an echo of the artist's own emotional state, and the landscape as a representative of, and catalyst for, introspection. In addition to experiments in painting techniques, the landscapes can thus also be seen as an externalisation of the artist's own world of thoughts and feelings at the moment of creation.⁴⁷

Similarly, the predilection for visual puzzles revolving around everyday objects and situations within interior spaces references the principle of Symbolism, which assumes or recognises a different, unknown reality behind every manifestation. The artificial uneasiness and agitation of the nerves, as contemporaries called it, was similar to the pleasant fright offered by the much-read Gothic novels of the time, which explored the possibilities of horror from a safe position. Maeterlinck's play *L'Intérieur* (1895) is about two men standing in front of a window and looking through it to observe a family idyll, which they will destroy with the news of the daughter's death. Viewed from outside, the interior refers to a mental state; the observer of the event becomes an eyewitness, a confidant of something extremely intimate. Conversely, it can be said of the paintings by Mellery, Ensor and Hammershøi that the “interior is the exterior of the soul”.⁴⁸ The depictions

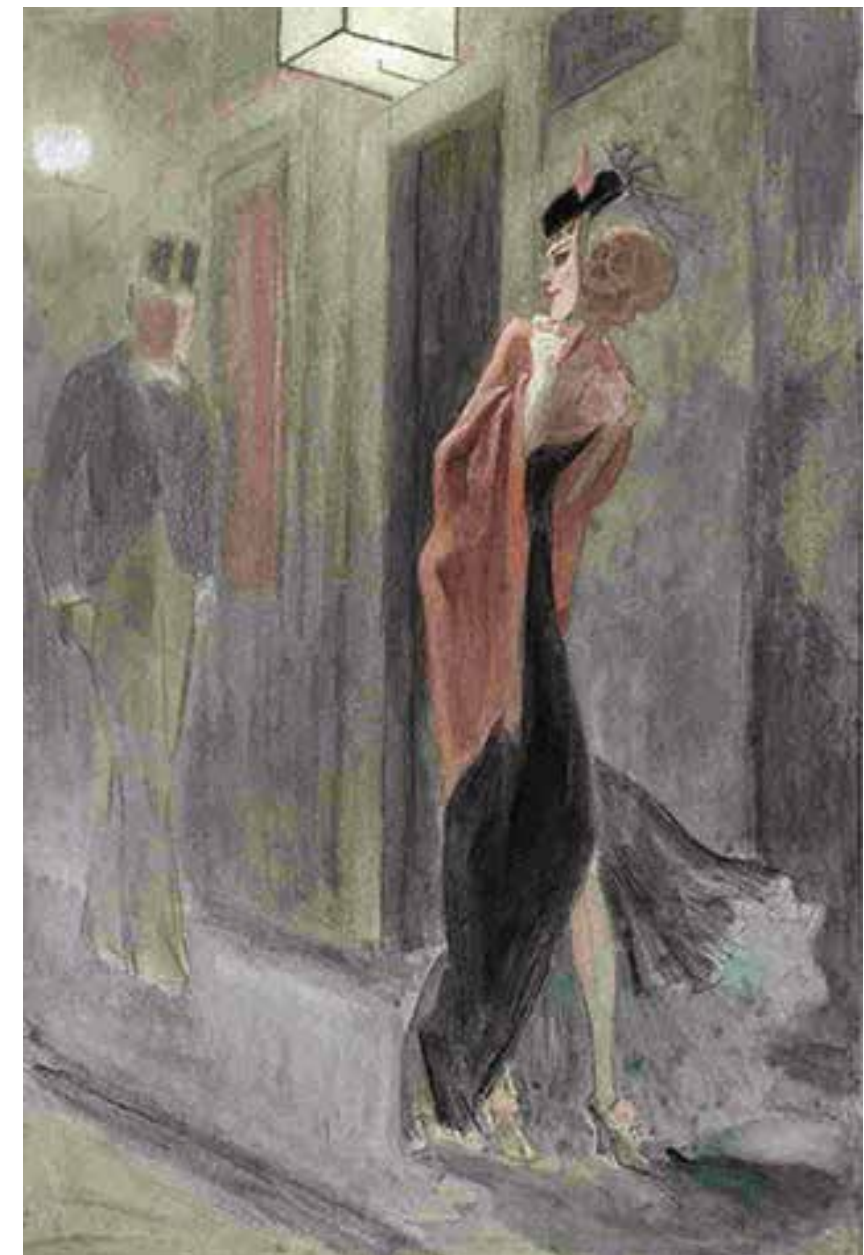


Fig. 10 Félicien Rops
Human Parody, 1878/81, pencil and chalk on paper,
watercoloured, 22.5 x 15.5 cm, private collection

correspond with the astonishment at the self, which becomes an object through introspection. The horror of the supposedly familiar has its parallel in the neurotic view towards the interior. Against this background, the image of the interior can be seen as a symbol of the loss of absolute certainties.

Eros and Thanatos

Only the realisation that the conscious mind is merely the surface of the being made it possible to delve into the subconscious as the seat of suppressed drives and dark desires. The sinister mental mixture of the ideas of Freud, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer shattered bourgeois moral concepts and fuelled the arts. Rops can be regarded as a prime example of the artistic transgression of taboos. His works, which are devoted

mostly to the dark side of human nature, to amorality and subversion, were often considered scandalous at the time of their creation. This is hardly surprising, since they hold up a mirror to society and its strict norms and secretly tolerated vices and debauchery and expose its inherent bigotry (p. 256). As with Ensor, Rops's artistic means include exaggeration in the form of satire, black humour and the absurd, celebrated as the cult of irrationality. Schopenhauer's interpretation of the world based on the principle of the unreal and his subjective idealism were once again of great influence here.

Time and again, "woman" serves as a projection screen for desires. She is depicted as a sinful and libidinal being, culminating in the seductively threatening figure of the femme fatale. This ambivalence of sensual temptation and destruction is fully expressed in Franz von Stuck's personification of *Sin* (p. 141), with which the biblical Eve has become a sensual, murderous beauty. Beginning with Moreau (fig. 9), this phenomenon is expressed by Khnopff and others as the legendary figure of Salome. The subtle mixture of lust and cruelty is particularly evident in the motif of the Medusa (pp. 134–35). "This severed female head with glassy eyes, this gruesome, fascinating Medusa becomes the object of dark passions among the Romantics and Decadents of the entire century."⁴⁹ A no less dangerous, man-devouring hybrid being is the Sphinx, which was depicted frequently by Moreau, Rops and Khnopff (pp. 120–25). In 1894, Khnopff was already associated with the motif to such a great extent that, in an exhibition review, Hugo von Hofmannsthal lamented the lack of the "fantastically eerie technique of Fernand Khnopff with its unfathomable sphynx-like women."⁵⁰ The enigmatic nature of the Sphinx as laid out in Greek mythology reinforces the doom-laden and hopeless nature of the situation. The depictions, based on a fateful confinement of instincts, originated for the most part in the male fantasy and reflect the relationship between the sexes of the time. In the figure of the femme fatale, Eros collides with the death instinct as described by Freud. The great lethal temptress behind a lurking mask, which Rops depicted in his *Human Parody* and elsewhere (fig. 10), is reminiscent of the "cathedral figure of 'Frau Welt' [the World as a Woman], whose front appears intact and pleasing, while her back is littered with worms and toads."⁵¹ Here, a macabre theme of love and death unfolds between Eros and Thanatos.

It was from the great existential questions in the cycle of life that the motifs of Symbolism emerged. Morbidity as one of the main categories of Belgian Symbolism in particular

has many facets, whereby death can indeed have a certain erotic attraction. Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-morte* (1892) is a literary treatment of the longing for death that inspired numerous artists to create paintings (pp. 244/45). The protagonist experiences the city as a mournful symbol for his deceased wife: "The closed houses exhaled a funereal atmosphere, window-panes like eyes clouded in death throes, crow-steps tracing stairways of crepe in the water. [...] he felt more than ever the desire to have finished with life and impatience for the tomb."⁵² Although the land of longing of the Symbolists, fascinated as they were by death, seems to be the hereafter, the ultimate goal remains the magic of beauty.

The experiment of Symbolism

The European dimension of this artistic trend reveals itself through the contemplation of Symbolism in Belgium, which can be seen as a laboratory for this experiment in modernism. As if under a magnifying glass, the view focuses on a fantastic, sensuous and associative art and the possibilities this offers. In this way, the exhibition *Decadence and Dark Dreams. Belgian Symbolism* makes a contribution to the understanding of modernism as a multifaceted, heterogeneous process with many different varieties. In addition to Impressionism and its Post-Impressionist successors, which have already been the subject of extensive scholarly research, Symbolism is rightly moving back into the focus of art history. It can be regarded as an experimental set-up in the development of Art Nouveau, Expressionism and Surrealism, and thus forms one of the most important starting points for art in the twentieth century. Its essential role is that of a mediator in the conscious recourse to earlier art epochs and their further development into a vision of the future that does not omit the experience of the present. The resumption and transformation of Romanticism with a tendency towards irrationalism, which was carried over into what was to become Surrealism, and the return to the so-called Flemish Primitives or Early Netherlandish painting⁵³ led to, among other things, modern "Gothic" tendencies of Expressionism. Symbolism is a radically aesthetic phenomenon, which cannot, however, be regarded solely as egocentric and detached from the world, but in its fundamental doubt contains what is indeed a socially effective, critical potential. Despite the intensive processing of historical models, Symbolism can therefore be understood as complementary to the other progressive artistic currents of the second half of the nineteenth century and as an alternative modernism.

- 1 Hermann Bahr, „Symbolisten“, in Bahr, *Studien zur Kritik der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main 1894, pp. 26–32, here p. 27 [translated].
- 2 Max Weber's "disenchantment of the world" was intended to present this analytically in retrospect; see Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Munich 1919, p. 16.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [1882/87], ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge 2001, § 108, p. 109.
- 4 See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* [1819], 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne, Indian Hills, Colorado 1958.
- 5 Bahr 1894 (see note 1), p. 27 [translated].
- 6 See Dominique Morel, "Le 'Castel du Rêve'", in *Fernand Khnopff. Le Maître de l'énigme*, exh. cat. Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Paris 2018, pp. 23–24, here p. 23.
- 7 See *Vienne 1880–1938. L'Apocalypse joyeuse*, ed. Jean Clair, exh. cat. Centre Pompidou, Paris, Paris 1986.
- 8 The first German edition was not published until thirteen years later: *Gegen den Strich*, trans. M. Capsius, Berlin 1897.
- 9 Jean Moréas, "Le Symbolisme", in *Le Figaro. Supplément littéraire*, 18 September 1886, pp. 150–51.
- 10 [Émile Verhaeren], "Un peintre symboliste" [Fernand Khnopff], in *L'Art moderne* 7 (24 April 1887), pp. 129–31.
- 11 See Patrick Laude, "Belgian Symbolism and Belgian Literary Identity", in Patrick McGuinness (ed.), *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle. French and European Perspectives*, Exeter 2000, pp. 194–208, here p. 194.
- 12 Dr. R., "Kunstaussstellung bei Gurlitt. Ausstellungen und Sammlungen. – Vermischte Nachrichten", in *Die Kunst für Alle* 9 (1893/94), p. 156 [translated].
- 13 For more on the social situation in Belgium, see the contribution by Michel Draguet in this catalogue, pp. 56–65.
- 14 See Alexander Murphy and Carl Strikwerda, "Brussels and the Belgian Avant-Garde in Historical and Geographical Perspective", in *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde. Prints, Drawings, and Books ca. 1890*, exh. cat. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas/Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent/Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts/Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, Kansas 1992, pp. 18–27, here p. 24–25.
- 15 At the time, the liberal city of Brussels was the European location where political refugees and dissidents of all sorts – from Karl Marx to Auguste Rodin – met; see Murphy/Strikwerda 1992 (see note 14), p. 25.
- 16 For more on this topic, see the contribution by Jane Block in this catalogue, pp. 44–53.
- 17 Les XX can be considered the inspiration for the artists' group Vereinigung der XI in Berlin, the predecessor of the Secession there.
- 18 Michel Draguet, "Brüssel. Drehscheibe des Symbolismus in Europa", in *Kuss der Sphinx. Symbolismus in Belgien*, exh. cat. BA-CA Kunstforum, Vienna, Ostfildern 2007, pp. 11–30, here p. 16 [translated].
- 19 See Dietrich Schubert, "Vincent van Goghs Gemälde in der Ausstellung bei Les Vingt in Brüssel im Januar 1890", in *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 3 (2004), no. 55, pp. 195–209.
- 20 See Draguet 2007 (see note 18), p. 17.
- 21 At Khnopff's suggestion, Burne-Jones and Rossetti exhibited at least photographs of their works at the Dumont Gallery in Brussels in 1890; see Mary Anne Stevens, "Der Symbolismus – ein französisches Monopol?", in *Der Symbolismus in England 1860–1910*, ed. Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone, exh. cat. Haus der Kunst, Munich, Munich 1998, pp. 47–64, here p. 56. See also the contribution by Hans Körner in this catalogue, pp. 34–41.
- 22 In 1894, he exchanged drawings with Burne-Jones; see Stevens 1998 (see note 21), p. 58.
- 23 Ludwig Hevesi, "Fernand Khnopff. Ausstellung der Secession" [24 April 1898], in Hevesi, *Acht Jahre Secession (März 1897 – Juni 1905). Kritik – Polemik – Chronik*, ed. Otto Breicha, Vienna 1906 (reprint Klagenfurt 1984), pp. 30–35, here p. 30 [translated].
- 24 See Valentina Anker, *Der Schweizer Symbolismus und seine Verflechtungen mit der europäischen Kunst*, Berne 2009, p. 53.
- 25 For more information, see the contribution by Inga Rossi-Schrimpf in this catalogue, pp. 80–89.
- 26 *Ausstellung Belgischer Kunst, unter dem Protektorat der Belgischen Regierung veranstaltet durch die Gesellschaften Art Contemporain, Antwerpen, und Société Royale des Beaux-Arts, Brüssel*, exh. cat. Berliner Secession, Berlin 1908.
- 27 For more on Belgian Symbolist sculpture, see the contribution by Yvette Deseyve in this catalogue, pp. 92–99.
- 28 For more on the cultural exchange in the field of Symbolist literature and book art, see the contribution by Maja Brodrecht in this catalogue, pp. 102–11.
- 29 See Richard Schiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, Chicago/London 1984, pp. 7–8, 39–52.
- 30 See Markus Fellingner, "Dekadenz und Zersetzung als formale Konzepte in der Kunst des Symbolismus", in *Dekadenz. Positionen des österreichischen Symbolismus*, exh. cat. Belvedere, Vienna 2013, pp. 10–27, here pp. 18–19.
- 31 Letter dated 14 Aug. 1888, in Paul Gauguin, *Briefe*, ed. Maurice Malingue, trans. Hermann Thiemke, Berlin 1960, pp. 79–80, here p. 79 [translated].
- 32 Mario Praz was decisive in coining this term and had already linked it with Symbolism. See Praz, *The Romantic Agony* [1930], trans. Angus Davidson, Oxford 1978.
- 33 Francisco de Goya, *Los Caprichos* (of particular importance here is the forty-third of the eighty etchings: *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*), 1799; Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- 34 Christina Rossetti expressed this fear in her poem "Who shall deliver me?", in particular in the verse "I lock my door upon myself", which prompted Khnopff to create the eponymous enigmatic painting (pp. 130–31). The poem was first published in *The Argosy* 1 (mid-summer 1866), p. 288.
- 35 Harald Leupold-Löwenthal, "Sigmund Freud, Die Traumdeutung, Wien 1900", in *Traum* und *Wirklichkeit*. Wien 1870–1930, exh. cat. Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna 1985, pp. 242–48, here p. 243 [translated].
- 36 Peter-André Alt, "Sigmund Freud und die Psychoanalyse. Aus dem Souterrain der Psyche", in *Der Tagesspiegel*, 9 October 2013, p. 24 [translated].
- 37 See *ibid.*
- 38 See Michel Draguet, *Fernand Khnopff*, Brussels 2018, pp. 119–44.
- 39 Hevesi 1906 (see note 23), p. 32 [translated].
- 40 Theodor Lipps, "Zur Psychologie der Dekadenz", in *Deutschland. Monatszeitschrift für die gesamte Kultur* 2 (January 1904), no. 16, issue 4, pp. 397–422, here p. 420 [translated].
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 414 [translated].
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 415 [translated].
- 43 Hermann Bahr, "Die Décadence", in Bahr 1894 (see note 1), pp. 19–26, here p. 20 [translated].
- 44 See Jeffery W. Howe, "Fernand Khnopff's Landscapes. Nature as Mirror", in *Nature's Mirror. Reality and Symbol in Belgian Landscape*, exh. cat. McMullen Museum of Art, Boston, Boston 2017, pp. 63–80, ill. p. 68.
- 45 Ernst Mach, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen* [1885], 9th edn, Jena 1922, p. 20 [translated].
- 46 See Howe 2017 (see note 44), p. 70.
- 47 See *ibid.*, p. 67.
- 48 Volker Adolphs, "Die Orte der Angst", in *Unheimlich. Innenräume von Edvard Munch bis Max Beckmann*, ed. Adolphs, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Bonn, Munich 2016, pp. 10–31, here p. 13 [translated].
- 49 Praz 1978 (see note 32), p. 34 [translated].
- 50 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Internationale Kunstaussstellung 1894. I: England, Amerika, Holland, Belgien", in *Neue Revue* 5 (14 March 1894), pp. 409–11, here p. 411 [translated].
- 51 Werner Hofmann, *Das irdische Paradies. Motive und Ideen des 19. Jahrhunderts* [1960], 3rd edn, Munich 1991, p. 211 [translated].
- 52 Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte* [1892], trans. Mike Mitchell and Will Stone, Cambridgeshire 2009, unpaginated (ch. II).
- 53 See the contribution by Johan De Smet in this catalogue, pp. 68–77.