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| Symbolism | | | | |
| Russian Symbolism, Symbolism (Visual Arts) | | | | |
| Symbolism is a late-nineteenth-century literary movement centred mostly around the work of poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Philippe Villiers de L’isle-Adam, and the later Maurice Maeterlinck, as well as novelists like Joris-Karl Huysmans and Edouard Dujardin. Although Tristan Corbière died in 1875, he is an important figure associated with the movement thanks to his image as a ‘poète maudit’ (‘poet of the damned’) and to this poetic style. A broad term that occasionally extends to early twentieth-century modernists like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Ezra Pound, Symbolism is traditionally dated from circa 1870 to 1900. (The term ‘Symbolist’ was coined by Jean Moréas in the review *La Vogue* in 1886.) The movement became more international in the 1890s with the emergence of European symbolism such as Russian Symbolism, German Symbolism etc., and with poets such as Emile Nelligan in Canada. Of equal importance is its influence as an artistic movement. Symbolism reacted to broader cultural tendencies related to scientific and literary positivism such as Realism and Naturalism, and the language of the popular press, particularly as it appeared in the form of best-sellers. Where popular language informs the public with moral narratives, symbolist language tries to avoid such a reduction. | | | | |
| Image: Symbolism\_Mallarmé.jpg  Figure 1 Portrait of Stéphane Mallarmé by Edouard Manet (1876)  Symbolism is a late-nineteenth-century literary movement cantered mostly around the work of poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Philippe Villiers de L’isle-Adam, and the later Maurice Maeterlinck, as well as novelists like Joris-Karl Huysmans and Edouard Dujardin. Although Tristan Corbière died in 1875, he is an important figure associated with the movement thanks to his image as a ‘poète maudit’ (‘poet of the damned’) and to this poetic style. A broad term that occasionally extends to early twentieth-century modernists like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Ezra Pound, Symbolism is traditionally dated from circa 1870 to 1900. (The term ‘Symbolist’ was coined by Jean Moréas in the review *La Vogue* in 1886.) The movement became more international in the 1890s with the emergence of European symbolism such as Russian Symbolism, German Symbolism etc., and with poets such as Emile Nelligan in Canada. Of equal importance is its influence as an artistic movement. Symbolism reacted to broader cultural tendencies related to scientific and literary positivism such as Realism and Naturalism, and the language of the popular press, particularly as it appeared in the form of best-sellers. Where popular language informs the public with moral narratives, symbolist language tries to avoid such a reduction.  Image: Symbolism\_RimbaudVerlaine.jpg  Figure 'Rimbaud et Verlaine' by Henri Fantin-Latour (1872)  Symbolism can lend itself to confusion because of its name. Far from being restricted to symbols *per se* (though the symbol, especially as it pertains to the visual, had an important role in its aesthetic development), Symbolism attempted instead to raise language (in the broader sense, including the fine arts) to expression as opposed to explicit communication of ideas.  Its chief poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, described the language of symbolism as suggestive, indirect and evocative (‘peindre non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit,’ ‘to paint not the thing, but the effect it produces’), and was preoccupied primarily with form over content. Symbolism uses any literary figures available and, through allusive language, creates impressions to evoke mysterious and subjective feelings. There was also a sense of the musicality of language, as with Mallarmé’s ‘Music and Letters,’ or Verlaine’s ‘music above all,’ and indeed the connection of poetic language to all the senses, such as in Rimbaud’s poetry of synaesthesia which would lead to the discovery of newness that requires the poet be a seer through the derangement of all the senses (an idea inherited and modified from Charles Baudelaire). The symbolist language was the expression of a poetic ‘Idea’ that came about through an effect of language rather than through the straightforward communication of information or emotions. For Verlaine, music trumped thought, and suggestion, statement.  Image: Symbolism\_RimbaudCaricature.jpg  Figure Caricature of 'Rimbaud and vowels' by Luque  Broadly speaking, Symbolists were influenced by Baudelaire (and through him, Edgar Allan Poe) and ‘art for art’s sake.’ Thus, Symbolism shares in the later 19th-century tendency of dissonant Romanticism, a ‘deromanticised Romanticism’ (Friedrich) or ‘Romantic Agony’ (Paz), and the movement is tied closely to the figure of the ‘poète maudit’ [‘poet of the damned’], which has its early manifestations in Romanticism. At the same time, Symbolism is an extension of the aesthetics of ‘art for art’s sake’ (Théeophile Gautier, later Oscar Wilde) which favoured beauty over utility, and in which language is its own purpose and self-sufficient, without external reference except that which the reader/viewer brings. It is thus concerned with allowing language to speak for itself. In this latter sense, the movement also reacted to the utilitarianism that characterised the nineteenth century. The Symbolist focus on the technical and artificial nature of artistic production anticipates T. S. Eliot’s notions of influence, tradition and ‘objective correlative,’ insofar as his theory of poetic production reacts to Romanticism’s ‘inspiration’ in favour of depersonalisation and technical mastery.  An important debate about Symbolism occurred between Marcel Proust and Mallarmé in 1896. Proust wrote ‘Against Obscurity’ in the symbolists’ poetic language, arguing in favour of clarity of vision as opposed to the obscurity of images and ideas on the one hand and of grammar on the other. In a sort of reversal, Proust reproaches the symbolists for the very vulgarity they are trying to escape in their desire to distance themselves from common sentiments through ‘obscure’ language; yet those sentiments, expressed in their individuality, are the only way to anything unique or profound. Mallarmé’s response in ‘The Mystery of Letters’ argues that language is itself the image and the idea to be aspired to, and that a common perspective of it takes away all of its specificity and force. Common language implies a ‘communication’ with ready-made or ‘presupposed’ meanings, whereas symbolist language brings out the full potential of language as a form of recuperation of the uniqueness hidden by ordinary language.  Symbolist verse represents a crucial moment in the history of versification. On the one hand, it is characterised by uncanny innovations of verse, which often include experiments in meter, rhythm, and rhyme scheme with rare rhythmic combinations (especially Verlaine), with the prose poem, with the novel in poetic form (Huysmans), or with free verse, and ultimately with the exploded verse of Mallarmé’s *Coup de Dés* (1897). Furthermore, poets like Rimbaud are characterised by dissonance, which conveys the derangement of the senses through irregular uses of standard verse forms, dissonant sounds and clashing images. On the other hand, pets like Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Maeterlinck, to name a few, were strong innovators of traditional forms such as the sonnet. Indeed, one could argue that the tension between innovation and tradition went hand-in-hand, especially in the 19th century, which saw the emergence of literature as a discipline with an unprecedented awareness of verse forms from a historical, technical, and aesthetic perspective.  Politically, Symbolism’s epoch was disillusioned by the failures of the French left and the Paris Commune, in which Rimbaud was active. Though on the surface it seems as if the Symbolists retreated into the rarefied sanctuary of aesthetics, they produced works of art that challenge aesthetic norms and put into question the status of social and ideological discourse such as found in the popular presses, and very much reflect the political anarchism of the late 19th Century. Many Symbolists were Dreyfussards, a falsely accused Jewish army captain, and tended to be on the political left. | | | | |
| Further reading:  (Friedrich)  (Olds)  (Paz) | | | | |
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| Russian Symbolism | | | | |
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| Russian Symbolism was a national branch of the international post-Romantic movement that originally appeared in France during the second half of the nineteenth century. Russian Symbolism emerged in the final decade of the nineteenth century with the first generation of writers (Valery Briusov (1873-1924, poetry & prose), Konstantin Balmont (1867-1942, poetry), Zinaida Gippius (1869-1945, poetry, prose), Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865-1941, philosophical essays, poetry and historical novels), and continued into the first decades of the twentieth century with the ‘younger generation’ led by Aleksander Blok (1880-1921, poetry), Andrei Bely (1980-1934, poetry, prose, philosophical essays), Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949, poetry and philosophical essays), Mikhail Kuzmin (1872-1936, poetry and prose), Fyodor Sologub (1863-1927, prose and poetry) and Maksimilian Voloshin (1877-1932, poetry and essays). Origins Russian Symbolism was a major current of Russian modernism, largely parallel to the congenial European cultural models. Scholars commonly define ‘Symbolism’ in Europe as a literary and artistic activity hailing from late 19th century French poetry and subsequently spreading to influence painting, theatre, and literary history of the twentieth century to varying degrees.  European Symbolism was rather late in coming to pre-modernist Russia. It was in 1894–95 that the poet Valery Briusov (1973-1924), who was an enthusiastic adherent of Symbolism, edited and published anthologies of Russian and French Symbolist poems. Most of the poems in these anthologies were his own texts and free translations. The new revival of ‘experimental’ poetry in Russia stemming from this movement listed the philosopher and mystic poet Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900) as its philosophical predecessor and spiritual authority. His metaphysical poetry professed a coherent religious doctrine that endeavoured to contemplate the world as a unique system of symbols relating to certain non-empirical realities. After his death (in the year of 1900 that was also the year of Nietzsche’s and Oscar Wilde’s death) Soloviev was succeeded by yet another principal theoretician of the Symbolist movement, Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), who was a well-versed expert in Greek and Roman cultural history and philosophy (like Soloviev) and was much interested in Plato and the Neoplatonic ideas. In this context we may also note the interesting cultural fashion in Russia that advocated a certain degree of imitation of the lifestyles and famous gestures of influential Western cultural icons. Many Russians in the late nineteenth century, and then in the silver age, fashionably copied the life-practices of cultural icons from the immediate past of Western Europe. The culture of this period in Russia was overloaded with life-creational post-Romantic behaviour.  Symbolist literary and cultural practice can be traced to the youthful rebellion of a number of French poets, who opposed the traditional tastes and regulations that had thereto dominated in mainstream poetry (especially the ‘Parnassian’ type). Symbolism as a movement initially strived to emancipate art (and poetry in particular) from the burden of the out-dated regulative norms by propagating the revolutionary agenda of inner experience and metaphysical existence. This post-Romantic approach resulted in subject matter replete with many bizarre myth structures and all kinds of obscure mysteries, metaphysical speculations, and playful fantasies introduced to buttress the perception of supernatural reality. Aestheticism is the quintessential factor responsible for the eventual embodiment of Russian Symbolism in all its specific fashions and configurations. The major thrust of Aestheticism was to redefine the relationship between art and life. As the work of Leon Chai has clearly shown, Aestheticism sought to transform multiple aspects of physical life into a work of art.  The timeline of the modernist Symbolist activity in Russia spans two decades between 1895 and 1915. This period embraces the early writings of the elder or first-generation Russian Symbolists (Merezhkovsky, Gippius, Balmont, and Briusov) at the one end, and those of the younger Symbolists Bely and Blok, at the other. The pre-modernists of Russian Symbolism, as well as the canonical modernists of the Russian avant-garde were interested in ‘creating life’ by means of their art and aesthetic programs. Symbolist artists sought to express individual emotional experience through the subtle and suggestive use of symbolic, hyperbolised mythical and utopian language and artistic devices.  One may use the term ‘decadent’ along with ‘Symbolist’ to denote the entire fin-de-siècle cultural atmosphere, particularly intensive during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Decadence can be grasped as a transgressive phenomenon that aspires to move beyond all traditional boundaries. According to this view, decadence (and Symbolism) may be perceived as a transitional phase between pure Romanticism and Modernism of the Avant-Garde. The period from the 1890s to 1917 was characterised by an intellectual ‘overflow’ in which mysticism, Aestheticism, dandyism, eroticism, Marxism, apocalypticism, Wagnerism, Nietzscheanism, and other trends effectively merged with each other. Most important was Friedrich Nietzsche, a poet among philosophers and a philosopher among poets, who was one of the major influences for Russian Symbolist life-creators. According to Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche, as a life-creator, was shaping his life as a literary text par excellence, as an actual ‘novel’ that bore many of the features of an ‘artefact’ (consider Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*). In his extensive study of Russian mythopoetical symbolism, Aage Hansen-Löve asserts that the figure of Nietzsche established the paradigm for the symbolist myth of life. On the one hand, Nietzsche was seen as a typical representative of the Decadent movement, praised as the true founder of symbolist ‘life-creation’ (or even its mythic hero).  Apart from literature, Russian Symbolism left a notable impact on painting: the work of Mikhail Vrubel (1856-1910) testifies to that. The movement also extended to Russian music (Alexander Skriabin, 1872-1915). Major Themes of Symbolist Works Russian Symbolism arose out of a profound dissatisfaction with the positivist and realist outlook of the preceding decades. As a consequence, its major literary works were related to metaphysical panaesthetism, a belief that consciousness may be present in all matter. Many works of Russian Symbolists are in pursuit of an Ideal Beauty as counterpart to mundane life in the corporeal world (Alexander Blok, Fedor Sologub). Russian Symbolists’ thematic interests encompassed a wide range of issues: historical, mythical and life-creational. Most notable among the themes were those that romanticised Classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. These historical topics are prominent in the writings of Valery Briusov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, and Maximilian Voloshin. Another major theme of Russian Symbolism was suggestive eroticism as developed in the poetry and prose of Fedor Sologub, Mikhail Kuzmin, Valery Briusov, Konstantin Balmont, and some others. Political themes of the turbulent revolutionary period in Russian history also occupy a central place in the writings of AndreI Bely, Alexander Blok, Maximilian Voloshin, and Valery Briusov. Slavic folklore is another important inspirational topic for Russian Symbolism; it features prominently in the essays of Alexander Blok, Viacheslav Ivanov, and subsequently, in Alexei Remizov’s abundant prose. Finally, Russian Symbolism is strongly influenced by religious mysticism. This latter aspect is extensively present in the works of Alexander Blok, Viacheslav Ivanov, Maximilian Voloshin, Alexander Dobroliubov, and Andrei Bely. All of the above topics directly or indirectly correspond to Symbolism’s overall preoccupation with life-creational ideas that seek to aestheticise life and to make art an inspirational pathfinder leading people to hidden truths of existence. Major Works of Russian Symbolism in Chronological Order:Dmitry Merezhkovsky *Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky* (1901)  *The death of the gods* (1901)  *Peter and Alexis: The Romance of Peter the Great* (1906)  *The Romance of Leonardo Da Vinci* (1908) Valery Briusov *Chefs d’oeuvre* (1895)  *Me eum esse* (1897)  *Tertia Vigilia* (1900)  *Urbi et Orbi*, (1903)  *Stephanos* (1905)  *The Fiery Angel* (1908) Konstantin Bal’mont *In the vastness of the Darkness* (1896)  *Silence. Lyrical Poems* (1898)  *The burning buildings. The lyrics of a modern soul* (1900)  *Let us be like the Sun* (1903)  *Only love. A magic seven-petal flower* (1903) Alexander Blok *Verses about the Beautiful Lady* (1904)  *Inadvertent Joy* (1907)  *Snow Mask* (1907)  *Faina* (1906-1908)  *Earth in Snow* (1908)  *Night Hours* (1911)  *Poems about Russia* (1915)  *Motherland* (1907-1916)  *Retribution* (1910-1921)  *The Twelve* (1918)  *The Scythians* (1918) Fedor Sologub *Bad Dreams* (1895)  *The Petty Demon* (1905)  *The Created Legend* (1907-1914)  *Drops of Blood* (1907-1913)  *Queen Ortruda* (1907-1913)  *Smoke and Ash* (1907-1913) Andrey Bely *Second Symphony, the Dramatic* (1902)  *The Northern, or First* – Heroic Symphony (1904)  *Gold in the Azure* (poetry) (1904)  *The Return* – Third Symphony (1905)  *Goblet of Blizzards* – Fourth Symphony (1908)  *Ash* (1909)  *Urn* (poetry) (1909)  *Symbolism* (criticism/theory) (1910)  *The Silver Dove* (novel) (1910)  *1916 Petersburg* (Revised edition published, 1922)  *Kotik Letaev* (1922)  *Christ Has Risen* (poem) (1918) Viacheslav Ivanov *Guiding stars* (1903)  *Transparency* (1904)  *Eros* (1907)  *Cor ardens* (1911-1912)  *By the stars* (1909)  *Furrows and boundaries* (1916)  *The native and the universal* (1917) Mikhail Kuzmin *Toils* (including Alexandrian Songs) (1908)  *Wings* (1906)  *Tender Joseph* (1909)  *Autumn lakes* (1912)  *A dead woman at home* (1913)  *Clay pigeons* (1914)  *Trout is breaking the ice* (1925) Alexander Skriabin *Symphonic Poem* in D minor (1896)  *Reverie, Op. 24* (1898)  Symphony No. 1 in E major, Op. 26 (1900)  Symphony No. 3 in C minor, *Le Divin Poème* [*The Divine Poem*], Op. 43 (1904)  *The Poem of Ecstasy*, Op. 54. (1908)  *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, Op. 60 (1910)  *Mysterium* (unfinished) (1915) Mikhail Vrubel *Hamlet and Ophelia* (1883)  *The Virgin and Child* (1884)  *Angel with Censer and Candle* (1887)  *Demon seated in the garden* (1890)  *Fortune teller* (1895)  *Flight of Faust and Mephisto* (1896)  *Portrait of Savva Mamontov* (1897)  *Bogatyr* (1898)  *Pan* (1899)  *Six-winged Seraph* *(Azrael)* (1904) | | | | |
| Further reading:  (J. D. Grossman)  (J. D. Grossman)  (Nehamas)  (Paperno and Grossman)  (Pyman) | | | | |
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| Symbolism in the Visual Arts |
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| Although it has its origins in the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Symbolism proper in art began to fully develop from the late 1880s as a consequence of Positivism and Industrialism in society and Naturalism in art. Another early source of inspiration for Symbolist art could have been seventeenth century *vanitas* still life paintings. *Vanitas* (Latin for ‘emptiness’) paintings incorporated specific symbolic objects to illustrate the mortality of life, popular symbols were candles, clocks, hour-glasses and skulls. Symbolist artists chose to represent the problems of society figuratively and indirectly. In the Symbolist Manifesto ‘Le Symbolisme,’ published by Jean Moréas in *Le Figaro* 18 September 1886, the author revealed that Symbolism would not subscribe to naturalism but would instead seek to communicate an Ideal through suggestion as opposed to direct description. The three major themes of Symbolism — death, mythology and sex — were developed with the work of early Symbolist artists such as Gustave Moreau and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Another early Symbolist artist, Félicien Rops favoured the supernatural over the mythological and frequently depicted the idea of death through his representations of the Devil and his use of the human skull. These early artists paved the way for the development of many later Symbolist painters. |
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Symbolism, however, arose from a need for something more spiritual than naturalism. Symbolist art is subjective rather than objective; a Symbolist artist would have focused on an idea or the ‘Ideal,’ which was a particular truth or story that they wished to convey to the audience, and then would have sought to express this idea through the use of their own symbolic references. It is therefore important to take into consideration the social context that would have surrounded the artists when analysing a Symbolist work of art.  Moreau (along with Puvis de Chavannes) was academically trained at the École des Beaux-Arts and his paintings are a combination of classical figures set within mythological surroundings, inspired by the stories of ancient Greek mythology and the Bible. Moreau particularly favoured the depiction of sex and mythology together; a popular theme of his was the story of Salomé, which can be found within the Gospels of Mark (6:21-29) and Matthew (14:6-11) from the New Testament of the Bible.  A useful and comprehensive definition of what Symbolist art should encompass was written by Albert Aurier in March 1891, for the Parisian publication *Mercure de France* entitled ‘Le Symbolisme en Peinture (Symbolism in Painting), Paul Gauguin’ and intended as a five-point description of how Gauguin’s works were an example of Symbolist art. Below is a translation of this text taken from Edward Lucie-Smith’s book ‘Symbolist Art’:  1. Ideative - since its sole aim should be the expression of the Idea  2. Symbolist - since it must express this idea in forms  3. Synthetic - since it will express those forms and signs in a way that is generally comprehensible  4. Subjective - since the object will never be considered merely as an object, but as the indication of an idea perceived by the subject  5. (in consequence) Decorative - since decorative painting, properly speaking, such as it was conceived by the Egyptians, very probably by the Greeks and the Primitives, is nothing other than an art at once synthetic, symbolist and ideative. (Lucie-Smith, 1972: 59).  ‘The Loss of Virginity’ (1890-1891; oil on canvas) by Paul Gauguin exemplifies modern symbolist painting. In 1888 Gauguin was living in Pont-Aven in Brittany, France. Gauguin had moved to Brittany in order, partly, to escape the Belle Époque culture of Paris and its capitalist values, to which he was very much opposed. Gauguin, like many Symbolists, believed in promoting a simpler existence and ‘The Loss of Virginity’ could be symbolic of Gauguin’s frustration once the signs of the Industrial Revolution had begun to creep through into the Breton way of life. In this instance, if one assumes that the young, naked girl is representative of Brittany and Breton culture then the ‘loss of virginity’ may refer to Brittany’s loss of innocence as it evolved from a primarily agricultural town to a more industrial town. The girl is also clutching a flower that looks very similar to a lily; the lily is the flower most commonly associated with death, thus this could be another reference to the ‘death’ of the innocence of Breton culture at the hands of the Industrial Revolution. One should notice also the fox by the girl’s throat, which may suggest the power of the Industrial Revolution and the way it has overpowered the urban values of the Breton culture.  Image: Gauguin\_LossOfVirginity.jpg  Figure Paul Gauguin's 'The Loss of Virginity' (1890-1891; oil on canvas)  Source URL: <http://collection.chrysler.org/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/220/414/displayDate-asc;jsessionid=B15213390771C5C8BAF5465D87C55B34?t:state:flow=aab81055-2b1b-493b-95f4-9166ee173cb9>  Gauguin also uses the form of his painting to express his ideas. This painting is deliberately simplistic in technique; block colours have been used, the landscape is very two-dimensional, the mid-ground and horizon in the background are almost child-like in their execution. This abandonment of the Academic style of painting in favour of a more primitive approach could be symbolic of Gauguin preferring a simpler society over the complexities that came with a modern, industrial, class-based society. Symbolism was a wide-spread artistic, and literary, movement that used all aspects of art, from content and form, to express the thoughts and feelings of the artist creating the work. List of Key Symbolist Artists:France Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898)  Gustave Moreau (1826-1898)  Odilon Redon (1840-1916)  Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) Belgium and the Netherlands Félicien Rops (1833-1898)  Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921)  Jan Toorop (1858-1928)  James Ensor (1860-1949) Austria Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) Britain Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) |
| Further reading:  (Baudelaire)  (Delevoy)  (Facos)  (Gibson)  (Lucie-Smith) |