**Symbolism**

Symbolism is a world-wide artistic and literary phenomenon that began in France and filtered through the rest of Europe, the Mediterranean and the Americas. It has its origins in the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but 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. On the 18th of September 1886, the Symbolist Manifesto (Le Symbolisme), written by Jean Moréas, was published in the Parisian Newspaper *Le Figaro.* In the manifesto Moréas 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.

From approximately 1830 the French philosopher Auguste Comte developed his philosophical theory of Positivism which rejected the spirituality of religion in favour of the facts of science. The Industrial Revolution accompanied Positivism within Europe and introduced the dynamic pace of a modern, capitalist city, complete with class divisions. Impressionist artists used naturalism as a direct approach to highlighting the social inequality between the upper and lower classes. Symbolism, however, arose from a need for something more spiritual than naturalism. Symbolist art is subjective rather than objective; a Symbolist artist would have focussed on an idea or the ‘Ideal’, which was a particular truth or story that they wished to convey to the audience, and then 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. A fox can be symbolic of many different things in many different cultures. In Brittany at the time the fox was a symbol of a sexual nature and a symbol of power, in Japan the fox signifies the presence of supernatural being, in British culture the fox is symbolic of guile. Perhaps in this painting Gauguin is using the fox to represent the power of the Industrial Revolution and the way it has overpowered the urban values of the Breton culture.

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.

Key Symbolist artists from the differing Symbolist movements throughout the world:

*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, C., (1964) ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in Baudelaire, C., translated by Mayne, J. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, London: Phaidon.

Delevoy, R. L., (1978) *Symbolists and Symbolism*, London: MacMillan London Limited.

Facos, M. (2009) ‘Beginnings’ in *Symbolist Art in Context*, California: University of California Press.

Gibson, M., (1999) *Symbolism*, Köln: Taschen.

Lucie-Smith, E. (1972) *Symbolist Art*, London: Thames and Hudson.

*Image of ‘The Loss of Virginity’ accessed from the Chrysler Museum of Art website: <http://collection.chrysler.org/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/search$0040/3/title-asc?t:state:flow=4f9fbef9-eee7-45ea-8937-afdefe77d18d>*

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