

Redefining European Symbolism, c.1880-1910

Nabis Seminar:

Amsterdam 26 November 2010

Van Gogh Museum, Library

Network Director: Professor Richard Thomson, *University of Edinburgh*

Network Facilitator: Craig Landt, *University of Edinburgh*

Attendees:

- Chris Stolwijk, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Belinda Thomson, *University of Edinburgh*
- Catherine Meneux, *University of Paris*
- Merel van Tilburg, *University of Geneva*
- Allison Morehead, *Queen's University* (Toronto)
- Cathérine Verleysen, *Museum of Fine Arts* (Ghent)
- Felix Krämer, *Städel Museum* (Frankfurt am Main)
- Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Marije Vellekop, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Nienke Bakker, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Frances Fowle, *University of Edinburgh/National Galleries of Scotland*
- Willem Russell (Amsterdam)
- Fred Leeman (Amsterdam)
- Isabelle Cahn, *Musée d'Orsay* (Paris)
- Sylvie Patry, *Musée d'Orsay* (Paris)
- Laurence Madeline, *Musée d'Orsay* (Paris)
- Rodolph Rapetti, *Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art* (Paris)
- Jean David Jumeau-Lafond (Paris)
- Maryanne Stevens, *Royal Academy* (London)
- Christopher Riopelle, *The National Gallery* (London)
- Katia Poletti, *Fondation Felix Vallotton* (Lausanne)

The second meeting of the Research Network entitled 'Redefining European Symbolism, c.1880-1910' took place in Amsterdam. This was a seminar made up of six papers given to an invited audience. The seminar topics related to the study of the Nabis, and each paper was 30 minutes

long with 15 minutes of discussion following. Below are the précis and abridged points of discussion.

As Principal Grant Holder, Richard Thomson (RT) opened the seminar by welcoming all those who could attend and continued by outlining the objectives of the seminar and Network funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

Maurice Denis, *La Définition du Néo-traditionnisme* and Anti-Naturalism

Richard and Belinda Thomson

Born in November 1870, Denis was still 19 when *La Définition du Néo-traditionnisme* was published in *Art et critique* in August 1890. It was undoubtedly an intellectual tour-de-force for a student, brilliant in both its rhetorical language and its forceful ideas. As with any writer, and especially a young one, Denis had his intellectual debts. He knew his ideas had sources and stimuli, and he graciously acknowledged them. In the *Définition* he refers to the writings of Charles Henry, Herbert Spencer and Alexandre Bain. Elsewhere Denis writes that “Paul Sérusier expliquait...” suggesting that some of the ideas he was articulating originated in conversation with his friend, six years older.

Hitherto scholarship has neither adequately acknowledged Denis’s inexperience nor attempted to assess how that inexperience defined what Denis published. When he wrote about artists and works of art, he had only the limited range of reference of a 19-year old Parisian. He started to visit the Louvre and other metropolitan museums such as the Luxembourg in his mid-teens. By 1890 he also had a few years’ knowledge of the annual Salons, and probably a shorter experience of the Indépendants and various dealers. He would have seen the 1889 Exposition Universelle, where he visited the Café Volpini exhibition. His actual experience of looking at art was brief and limited.

What was the art that he knew? At times in the *Définition* Denis is very specific, right down to mentioning works of art by name. Some of these were in Paris public collections, such as Puvis’s *Pauvre Pêcheur*. The evidence of specifically cited works in the *Définition* makes it clear that the 1889 Exposition Universelle made a powerful impact on the young Denis. The *Définition* cites no fewer than six works from its Décennale exhibition by title, artist or both. Other references may allude to work shown there. He did not cite so many works from the 1889 Centennale exhibition. Denis also mentioned two specific works from the 1890 SNBA, which opened three months before the publication of the *Définition*.

With few exceptions the contemporary works to which Denis alluded were, despite their varied subjects and execution, essentially naturalist images, founded on close observation and description of objective reality. The argument of the *Définition* is fundamentally anti-naturalist, and the images he selected as his targets prove that.

Denis’s ideas in the *Définition* reacted against naturalism with their emphasis on *synthèse*, arabesques, rhythm, but they were by no means as revolutionary as one

might think. In 1890 such ideas were quite commonplace in art criticism. We find them in reviews of the spring Salon des Indépendants in the writings of critics as different as Gustave Geffroy and Alfred de Lostalot. In May 1890, three months prior to the appearance of the *Définition* in *Art et critique*, Félix Fénéon had published an extended appreciation of Signac and his work in the series *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui* which also used similar language. This is ironic as the one of the subtexts of the *Définition* was to score points against the Neo-Impressionists.

The special circumstances in which Denis formulated the *Définition* are detectable from the tenor of a number of letters exchanged with Sérusier in Brittany, working alongside Gauguin and interpreting his ideas. While the importance of Sérusier's methodical analysis of the problematics of art – undertaken in the immediate aftermath of the Volpini show - is demonstrable, the urgings of his former school friend, the actor and débutant theatre manager Aurélien Lugné-Poe were also crucial. It was Lugné's persuasive desire to promote his artist friends and his contacts with Jean Jullien, the editor of *Art et critique*, a predominantly theatrical journal, that facilitated Denis's article appearing when and where it did.

The *Définition* can also be seen in terms not just of its anti-naturalism, but of its promotion of an alternative decorative, synthetic concept of art. Thus Denis, following Sérusier, linked the art of the Egyptians, the Gothic period, the 'primitive' artists of the quattrocento such as Fra Angelico, the eighteenth century, and great individual figures such as Rembrandt, Velasquez and Delacroix with more recent exemplars, Puvis de Chavannes and, in particular, the 'dominant personality of neo-Traditionism', Paul Gauguin. Denis argued that even when, by choice of subject, artists such as Gauguin and Emile Friant pursued ostensibly similar goals, what differentiated them was their deployment of lines and forms, governed in the latter case by the effort towards naturalism and in the former by the impetus to convey feeling through expressive form. Denis went on to promote a new anti-naturalist form of illustration, in the process immodestly referencing his own as yet unpublished *Sagesse* drawings, a tactic he could use thanks to writing under the pseudonym Pierre Louis. Denis's own artistic experimentation around 1889-91 shows clearly where his new stylistic allegiances lay.

The publication of the *Définition* had an impact on Denis's future career. Gauguin encouraged Denis in continuing to write on behalf of his fellow artists – a precedent he himself had set the previous year; moreover he seemed, from some of his own later exchanges with André Fontainas regarding Puvis de Chavannes, to have been more than casually conversant with what Denis had to say.

Discussion

- WR: Where does religion fit into Maurice Denis' *Définition*? RT – Much of the work Denis set up in opposition to modern naturalism was religious art.
- AM: What is the correlation between Denis's anti-naturalist discourse and his academic experience? RT- Denis conflates them; his teacher Bouguereau was at once academic and increasingly descriptive in his representation. RR points to the evolution of academic art at the end of the 19C when Bouguereau becomes closer to naturalism. RT- this can be also seen in the 1880s with the appointment of 'naturalist' professors (Bonnat, Laurens) at the Ecole des Beaux-arts.
- CR: Was Denis aware of Ruskin? Apparently not, but Signac was in the 1890s.

- SP: What about Impressionism? RT – Denis may not have known a lot about it, although he possibly saw the 1889 Monet-Rodin show). He might have seen Impressionism as another branch of landscape paintings, and so was not very interested.
 - MS following from SP: Why is Denis side-stepping Impressionism? RT - Perhaps Impressionism was not seen as so central in 1890 as we consider it today.
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Pour une libre esthétique

Catherine Méneux

L'histoire de la réception critique des Nabis pose des questions spécifiques. Ces artistes ont débuté leur carrière en exposant notamment leurs œuvres chez Le Barc de Boutteville et ils sont considérés pendant la décennie des années 1890 comme des symbolistes. Néanmoins, au tournant du siècle, alors que le symbolisme s'est désagrégé en de multiples chapelles, une partie de la critique les identifie comme un groupe spécifique qui échappe aux anciennes classifications. Ce groupe fluctuant et mouvant n'est pas pour autant perçu comme celui des Nabis puisque la critique ignore ce mot signifiant « prophètes ». Et il faudra attendre les morts des principaux protagonistes de cette aventure pour que cette étiquette leur soit associée à partir des années 1940. Bien au contraire, dans les années 1890, les Nabis s'insèrent dans une large communauté, celle des « Expositions des peintres impressionnistes et symbolistes » de Le Barc de Boutteville, et comme l'atteste le titre même de ces expositions, ils montrent leurs œuvres dans un espace qui brouillent les catégories forgées par la critique. Ils semblent donc avoir surtout affirmé leur volonté d'indépendance, à l'instar de leurs aînés impressionnistes.

Cette configuration spécifique dans l'historiographie de la période contemporaine mérite d'être examinée. En effet, l'ensemble des mouvements du XIXe siècle, qu'il s'agisse du romantisme, du réalisme, de l'impressionnisme ou du néo-impressionnisme, sont aujourd'hui désignés par les néologismes forgés par la critique d'art. De même, dans la carrière de Matisse, les historiens distinguent toujours une période fauve. Si la catégorie « Nabi » n'a pas à être remise en cause et appartient pleinement à l'histoire, elle mériterait donc d'être interrogée plus largement. Il serait par exemple intéressant de savoir quelle résonance particulière a pu avoir le mot « Nabi » dans le contexte de la guerre et de l'après-guerre. La réponse à ses questions semble également se trouver dans l'analyse de la structure particulière qui se met en place dans les années 1890 et dans le rôle qu'a pu jouer l'historiographie de l'impressionnisme en tant que paradigme. En effet, le « nabisme » paraît calqué sur une configuration propre à l'impressionnisme qui émerge dans les années 1874-1877 au sein d'un groupe éclectique, sur une scène artistique dominée par un seul Salon. Or, contrairement à leurs aînés, les symbolistes ont exposé longtemps au sein de groupes disparates sur une pluralité de cimaises et ils ont volontairement brouillé les catégories forgées par la critique. Au lieu de privilégier l'exposition individuelle, à l'instar de Monet par exemple, ils ont joué le jeu d'une chapellisation inspirée par la scène littéraire et encouragée par la multiplication des Salons et salonnets, ainsi que le développement du système « marchand-critique ». Dans une telle configuration, les critiques ont eu du mal à cerner la cohérence du mouvement symboliste. A ce propos,

il faut alors peut-être citer Remy de Gourmont qui écrivait en 1896 : « le symbolisme, c'est, même excessive, même intempestive, même prétentieuse, l'expression de l'individualisme dans l'art » (Préface à : *Le Livre des Masques. Portraits symbolistes*). Dans cette perspective, le « nabisme » apparaît alors comme une ultime marque d'indépendance de la part d'artistes qui ont affirmé dès 1891 leur droit à une libre esthétique.

Discussion

- KP: Vallotton was at the 1894 exhibition at Le Barc de Boutteville, 'un noyau de symbolisme'. 1893 was the first 'Nabis' exhibition when at this time the Nabis were without definition.
 - WR: What about the critics? And Le Barc de Boutteville's own opinions? CM – By selecting and organising exhibitions he gave coherence to the group, although his own views are not known.
 - RT: The term 'caractériste' came from Raffaëlli's text for his 1884 one-man-show, and was used by some critics in the early 1890s. When Arthur Huc used the term 'néo-réaliste' in 1894 he borrowed it from Jules Huret's *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire*.
 - FL: We should be careful how we interpret Gauguin's interventions.
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The Nabis and Symbolist Theatre in Paris:

The off-stage, the *au-delà*, and the unconscious

Merel van Tilburg

The underlying red thread of my presentation was the question of how the symbol functioned in symbolist theatre, and in what ways the visual 'evidence' of symbolist theatre can shed light on this question. The hypothesis followed is that, within the development of symbolist theatre between 1891 and 1896, a gradual shift occurred, from a theatrical project with multiple symbols and meanings on stage to a 'stripped-down' theatrical project that rather cultivated the indetermination, ambiguity or non-defined aspects of the symbol.¹ The first project, that of polysemy, would correspond more to performances in the *Théâtre d'Art* and to a form of Wagnerism; and the second phenomenon, that of a non-defined symbol, would correspond more to performances of the *Théâtre de l'Œuvre*, and to its project of a nearly-immobile, transcendent theatre, with specific psychic preoccupations.

The focus was on four different works or groups of works.

Firstly, a *vignette* designed by Edouard Vuillard to accompany the performance of *Le Concile féerique*, written by Jules Laforgue, at the *Théâtre d'Art* in December 1891. The *vignette* was printed in the *Livre d'Art* in 1892, accompanying the theatre programme of the season 1891-1892. In the performance, the main characters were not individuals but a man and a woman representing the eternal feminine and masculine – in parallel with Wagnerian characters, who were not presented as individuals, but as types or symbolic figures, eternal beings, akin to the Leitmotiv; as personifications of an idea. In Vuillard's *vignette*, a sinuous, organic and even

primitive play of lines framing two nondescript figures, indeed does not seem to depict a scene connected to a specific moment of the play. The primitivist quality of the drawing could be seen to evoke an atmosphere of timelessness or of the eternal dynamics between the sexes.

Secondly, a drawing and a painting by Edouard Vuillard, related to the performance of Maurice Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* in the *Théâtre d'Art* in May 1891. The symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck applied a technique similar to that of Wagner's 'voice-off' of the orchestra, suggesting the infinity of a mysterious *au-delà* not in music but in text. His characters frequently refer to the space off-stage, where the action takes place while the figures on stage remain mostly immobile. Where Wagner employed music to suggest the *au-delà*, and Maeterlinck used language, another way of suggesting the infinite world beyond the picture, and also beyond our frame of vision, was, I think, developed by Vuillard, who also designed the stage sets for Maeterlinck's play *l'Intruse*. The marked presence of the support in Vuillard's depictions of *L'Intruse*, and in some of his other works, could be interpreted as a suggestion of the presence and continuation of the world outside the picture frame.

Thirdly, a lithograph by Maurice Denis, printed on the theatre programme for Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea*, performed by Lugné-Poe and *Les Escholiers* in December 1892. Denis's illustration seems to incorporate the tensions between the codified thematic use of the 'classic' symbol, and the formal manipulations that were to characterize the 'new' pictorial symbol. A parallel can be made between the plot and interpretation of the play on the one hand, and Denis's choice of depiction both on a thematic and on a formal level, on the other hand. The highly stylized female figure in the drawing, with her angular, raised arm, firstly emphasizes the way in which the figure is closed in by the picture frame (formal device); and secondly, her bodily position evokes the iconography of the sleeping Ariadne. This last, thematic use of the symbol parallels descriptions of the symbolist acting style, in which stylized bodily poses were to express inner 'states' (Saint-Pol-Roux's *idéoréalisme*). In addition, the reference to a sleeping figure is in line with the Symbolist's interest in the unconscious.

Lastly, Toulouse-Lautrec's two 'curious' drawings - as Maurice Beaubourg referred to them -, handed down in the form of lithographs, after a performance of Beaubourg's play *L'Image* by the *Théâtre de l'Œuvre*, in March 1894. In this performance, the stylized symbolist acting style as developed by Lugné-Poe seems to have resonated willy-nilly with the gestures and attitudes of Parisian mental patients of the Fin de Siècle. This 'naturalist' aspect of symbolist acting can be reconstructed from written sources, and especially from the drawings by Toulouse-Lautrec, documenting the performance of *L'Image*. These works testify how the symbolist aesthetics seeking a combined entrance to the unconscious and to the *au-delà*, actually relied heavily on Fin de Siècle pathos formulae of mental illness.

¹ This division is discussed for Symbolism in general in: Dario Gamboni, "Le 'symbolisme en peinture' et la littérature", *Revue de l'art*, Vol. 96, No 1, 1992, p. 16. Gamboni emphasizes that the two interpretations of the symbol are not opposed to each other, but are rather to be seen as complementing each other, as interdependent.

Discussion

- SP: It might be of interest to look at to look at the dances involved (rhythm, choreography).
 - RT: Lugué-Poe in Beaubourg's *L'Image* (1894) has the top half of his head shadowed. This was a common trick of the light to bring out the grotesque/disturbed, also seen in Delacroix's *Medea*.
 - RT: The flowing lines in Vuillard's vignette are very much like a Eugène Carrière or Jan Toorop, where the border between the heads and background become blurred, suggesting the flow of consciousness.
 - FK: Theatre designers used gauze in front of the stage to create a similar effect. Actors would appear as shadows.
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A Well-kept Secret: Nabis Prints in the Van Gogh Museum

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho

One could call the very rich collection of prints housed in the Van Gogh Museum a well-kept secret. Hardly anyone knows that the museum owns more than a thousand prints dating from the 'era of the print' (1890-1905). It was in 2000 that the Museum acquired - with support from the Vincent van Gogh Foundation - this extraordinary collection from a private collector. The fortunate man had amassed this important group from the 1940s until the 1990s. In the collection, you can find, among other things, the complete *L'Estampe Originale* (only 2 prints missing), the important Nabis suites, published by Vollard, the brightest posters from the era, almost all the avant-garde theatre programmes, song sheets by Ibels and livres de peintres. From 2000 onwards, the Van Gogh Museum has been busy building on this collection by acquiring additional Nabis prints, other important suites, and even a painting, as well as trial proofs and preparatory drawings.

Now, we feel the time has come to share the collection with our colleagues and the public. In the coming four years the collection will be photographed, registered and documented, as well as researched and contextualized. Our colleagues from around the world are always very welcome to come and look at the objects, enabling us to learn from them in exchange.

For any requests please email: vellekoop@vangoghmuseum.nl or roosrosadecarvalho@vangoghmuseum.nl

Dialogues on *Déformation* and Nabi Nudes

Allison Morehead

In 1916, Pierre Bonnard engaged with – perhaps said farewell to – an iteration of Nabi form that had been part of his visual landscape for nearly 25 years. In 1892, Maurice Denis had given his painting *Décor* to Bonnard after exhibiting it at the 1891 Salon des Indépendants, and in 1916 Bonnard included the work in *La Cheminée*, reflected in a large mirror, behind a nude female torso striking the pose of the Dying Niobid. Bonnard's version of Denis's painting shows us a large, elongated, reclining

female nude determined by the rectangular format of the canvas, body tilted towards the picture plane, head crooked at an almost impossible ninety-degree angle. The whereabouts of Denis's painting are today unknown, but two studies for the work, as well as two pastels by Vuillard, from circa 1891, give some sense of what Denis intended with a painting he would also refer to as his "femme-serpent."

This paper argues that Denis's *Décor* attempted to visualize the *Définition du néo-traditionnisme*, literally demonstrating that a painting of a nude woman was just that, painted, an arrangement of colours on a flat surface. The anti-academic rhetoric of the *Définition* also inhered in Denis's working process, especially in a study of a nude woman made on the back of a drawing after the antique which had won Denis his third and final *mention* at the École des beaux-arts in November 1890. Flipping over his prize-winning academic drawing to deliberately deform the female nude into a serpentine form, Denis enacted – or perhaps re-enacted – the self-conscious break with modes of art-making that he had argued for in the *Définition*.

But *Décor* was a problematic painting, a *note à part* among the other works Denis exhibited at his *Indépendants* début and it provoked hostile reactions among critics. In a letter to the poet and critic Adolphe Retté, published in 1891, Denis justified *Décor* as an "étude de déformation subjective," picking up the language of Jean Moréas, who had staked his claims for the symbolist novel upon an insistent *déformation subjective*. But Retté argued that *Décor* failed as a symbolist painting because the nude was so distorted as to be ugly and moreover that the explanation that Denis had provided, which insisted on three levels of signification (for the "simples," the "spirituels" and the "sages"), neglected the artist's self and was "un peu trop littéraire."

In declaring *Décor* a study in *déformation subjective*, Denis emphasized that "Déformation, bien entendu, n'implique laideur..." and went on to distinguish between two types of *déformation*. But this, a nascent theory of *déformation subjective* and *déformation objective*, then lay dormant for another four years, while other critics, including Alphonse Germain and Yvanhoé Rambosson, sympathetic to both symbolism and Denis, came to decry *déformation* as quite literally pathological.

In 1895, Denis would begin to recoup *déformation*, tentatively advancing his theory of double *déformation* and countering his critics by insisting that an artist could have both a "conception très pur et...classique de la forme" as well as a "sens très juste de la déformation." That same year, however, Denis would still apologize for Nabi *déformations* as the not yet mature manifestations of individual effort and sincerity. These hesitations and the relatively late emergence of Denis's theory of *déformation*, only in definitive form in 1909, stemmed, at least in part, from these early debates on *déformation* within symbolist milieux.

Vuillard's c. 1891 female nudes and Bonnard's *La Cheminée* remind us that such dialogues were not confined to discussions with critics. Vuillard's playful and critical engagements with *Décor* underline Denis's painting as a manifesto on *déformation*, coinciding and to a certain extent paralleling the theoretical grappling that Vuillard undertook in his journals around the publication of the "Définition." Much later, Bonnard would subsume the logic of Denis's painting to the decorative and thematic logic of his own work; further distorting *Décor* and more radically

undermining its facticity with the use of multiple mirrors. As such, Bonnard's painting both indexed the early years of Nabi *déformation*, but also presented Bonnard as surpassing those experiments.

Early Nabi practice, however, did not come to hinge upon the female nude. Its displacement in 1891–92, I argue, occurred in part because of the critiques of *Décor* and through the recognition that the very thing that made the female nude ripe for subversion – its manifest rootedness in discourses of the beautiful – made it too freighted with the weight of previous practices and thus an unlikely candidate on which to stake claims for the realization of “neo-traditionnist” form.

Discussion

- FL: Does the Denis *Studies for Décor* not represent a semi-successful academic work which was later taken up and re-worked? AM - On the reverse side there is an image of a Faun with a stamp from the Ecole des Beaux-arts.
- BT: It may be possible that the beads of flesh represent the serpent.

The Mask Discarded. Bonnard's *Farniente*

Felix Kraemer

“Blonde yellow flooding light”, Pierre Bonnard “magically cast onto the sheets”, Thadée Natanson commented on the painting *Farniente*, dating from 1899. With that same title the work was presented a few weeks later at an exhibition held in honour of Redon at Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris. There Natanson acquired it. At the breaking up of his collection in 1908, Thadée's brother Alexandre purchased the work at auction as *L'indolente* [*The Indolent*]. When he died in 1929 the painting, now called *Nu allongé* [*Reclining Nude*], passed into the ownership of Fénéon, before it was finally acquired by the French state in 1947 so that it now forms part of the Musée d'Orsay's inventory.

Bonnard's depiction offers a glimpse of a bedroom. His partner Marthe is sprawling on the bed. The scene is dimly lit. From above, the gaze of the onlooker glides over her body onto the wide mattress that is reaching into the room. With her legs wide apart the woman is offering a view of her pubic area. It is striking how her big toe is claw-like, clamping into the flesh of her thigh. The bed is covered with a light sheet; a heavy woollen blanket is positioned at the end of the bed. From it exudes a strange white mist, drawing in between the woman's legs. The woollen blanket itself is of an unusual consistency, too, and it seems strangely animated, almost as though it were moving towards the nude, as well.

The composition of *Farniente* is based on a preparatory drawing, which Bonnard completed in 1897, for Verlaine's volume of poetry *Parallèlement* published by Vollard. The left page shows a woman in a position similar to that in *Farniente*. In the painting the mattress is cut off by the edge on the right hand side, in the book, however, it stretches on to the opposite page, turning into a massive place to sleep from which exits a figure at the very right. Its back is turned towards the viewer. It is

unclear where the back of the figure begins and where the mattress ends; figure and furniture appear to have merged, an idea which Bonnard included in his painting by use of picture puzzles.

Marthe's hair initially seems long and voluminous; looking more closely the viewer must realise that he is not dealing with the woman's hair, but with a brown cat, curled up right beside her head. Given the colour of the fur and that of Marthe's hair is identical, the pet with its barely visible blue collar is easily confused with the woman's braid. Another example is the brown blanket in the right half of the painting: If considered independently from its three-dimensional effect, visually pressed back into two dimensions, a figure appears, which seems to fixate Marthe. A left arm, the shoulder and the profile of the figure's face can be made out.

It can be assumed that Redon, who was Bonnard's close acquaintance, inspired the use of picture puzzles. Among his contemporaries Redon was well known for the use of ambiguous structures. As in the example by Redon, Bonnard seems to motivate the viewer to look intensively – internalized, so the recipient becomes a witness to the mysterious meeting of Marthe and the daemons. The general intention of finding a confidante in the perceptive onlooker is evident in Redon's and Bonnard's use of picture puzzles, which call on the power of human imagination. By evidently demonstrating the power of looking, picture puzzles paradoxically also prove its impotence. No matter how intensively the confidante looks, the overlying and changing pictorial impressions will remain and will deprive the viewer of certainty.

At first Bonnard's *Farniente* suggests to the recipient sensual pleasure. But instead the play of illusion and disillusion, deception and disappointment dominate the visual experience. At first Marthe appears to be an organically intact figure; at a closer glance the desiring gaze encounters her physical anomalies and doubt is aroused as to whether she truly is a person of flesh and blood. Siren-like Marthe lures the visitor into her realm, which suddenly turns into a threatening scenario where reality and unreality, consciousness and unconsciousness, the homely and the uncanny are inseparably entwined. Thus Bonnard turned the bourgeois idea of any home being complete only with the female on its head. In *Farniente* the woman becomes the destructor of just such an order. Bonnard turns the notion of the protective interior into a terrifying phobia, inspired by Redon.

Discussion

- RT: What about Marthe and Bonnard, what do we know of their relationship? FK – it is difficult to decipher their personal lives from only paintings, and we have little direct evidence. RT - Can we see a gradual downward spiral of their relationship, with the first paintings (1893) showing them as a fresh, sensual couple, whereas later on (1899) there is an obvious alienation?
- CR: Bonnard's hidden images in the painting reflect the work of various of Degas's pastel landscapes.
- MvT: The open sexuality and nakedness of the painting is very 'un-Nabis'. This was not seen as a scandal at the time and the flaunting of his wife's nakedness is another tool to further detract from the hidden faces and images in the painting
- CS: This type of trickery is often used in Asian art, especially Japanese landscapes.

Maurice Denis et la Belgique

Catherine Verleysen

L'origine de l'accueil que la Belgique réserve à Maurice Denis se situe à l'aube des années 1890. Pour replacer le peintre dans un contexte belge, il importe cependant, en premier lieu, de mettre en évidence l'affinité spontanée que l'artiste sent avec une certaine sensibilité belge : bon nombre de ses compositions sont inspirées par l'ambiance mystique et intemporelle de l'œuvre de Maurice Maeterlinck et, à un degré moindre, de Georges Rodenbach. Cette relation avec les lettres belges se prolonge, au cours des années 1890, dans la formulation de projets d'illustration de livres, notamment pour *Sagesse* et *L'Imitation de Jésus-Christ*, deux éditions que Denis a voulu publier à Bruxelles chez Edmond Deman.

En 1892, le cercle des Vingt offre, le premier, l'occasion à Denis d'exposer à Bruxelles. L'ensemble exposé suscite l'attention dans la mesure où il s'inscrit pleinement dans l'essor des arts décoratifs, inhérent à la genèse de l'Art nouveau. Sans être trop catégorique, on peut même avancer que ces œuvres ont contribué à cet essor, au moins par l'influence qu'elles ont exercée sur Henry Van de Velde, dont la tapisserie *Veillée d'anges*, réalisée pendant l'hiver 1892-1893, présente une composition imprégnée du souvenir des peintures de l'artiste français.

Maurice Denis participe ensuite à douze reprises aux salons annuels de la Libre Esthétique. Ses envois réguliers donnent lieu à l'exposition d'un ensemble d'œuvres qui illustre la diversité de son art. Denis se présente comme décorateur, illustrateur, peintre de la vie familiale, et de surcroît, et de façon très convaincante, comme peintre religieux. Le cercle de la Libre Esthétique se montre par ailleurs attentif aux écrits théoriques de l'artiste français qui sont régulièrement publiés dans *L'Art moderne*. Enfin, la présence de Denis dans le cénacle bruxellois se manifeste également par l'acquisition de ses œuvres par plusieurs amateurs d'art et artistes belges, dont Edmond Deman, Octave Maus, Thomas Braun, Alphonse Stoclet, Théo Van Rysselberghe ou encore Eugène et Anna Boch.

Grâce à cette présence fidèle et continue au sein de la Libre Esthétique, Denis se fait remarquer par les jeunes cénacles catholiques, impatients d'associer l'artiste français à la stimulation de l'expression artistique du catholicisme. Dès le tournant du siècle, ces cercles ambitionnent d'établir une rencontre, de préférence un (ré)conciliation, entre la foi et les arts marqués par une nette volonté de modernité, tout en condamnant le recours aux styles « néo » ou aux bondieuseries. C'est ainsi que *Le Spectateur catholique*, mensuel anversois, ouvre ses pages à l'identité artistique de Denis en tant qu'artiste et théoricien. La revue *Durendal* suit également, avec une attention soutenue, les réalisations du peintre français, présentées en Belgique aussi bien qu'en France. Le mensuel organise, durant l'hiver 1899-1900, un Salon d'art religieux auquel Denis est invité. En décembre 1898, déjà, le *Journal* de l'artiste témoigne du vif intérêt que son auteur manifeste pour ce salon. Denis éprouve la nécessité d'y donner une conférence sur la décadence de l'art chrétien. Bien que cette conférence n'ait pas eu lieu, les œuvres envoyées à l'exposition en sont certainement une sorte d'écho. La participation de Denis au salon est décisive, au point que l'artiste se voit progressivement adopté par le cénacle belge, ce qui constitue un encouragement pour sa propre production religieuse. Celle-ci culmine, en hiver 1911, à l'Exposition

internationale d'art chrétien moderne de Paris, et surtout à l'Exposition internationale d'art religieux moderne, organisée au printemps 1912 dans la capitale belge. Les œuvres que Denis y envoie s'y harmonisent avec les tableaux d'artistes belges aux aspirations identiques : George Minne, Constant Montald, Albert Servaes, Jacob Smits. Avant la Première Guerre mondiale, l'apogée de la réception de l'œuvre religieux de Denis se situe assurément dans l'acquisition de *La Vierge à l'école*, en 1911, par le Musée de Bruxelles (aujourd'hui les Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique).

Ce premier volet de la réception de Maurice Denis en Belgique démontre la vitalité de l'artiste dans un champ culturel. Elle alimente un débat et une recherche en perpétuel mouvement. En filigrane, la réception de Denis illustre – et illustrera au cours des années 1920 – à livre ouvert tout le problème de la présence de l'art chrétien au sein de la modernité. Du point de vue du créateur d'abord, puisqu'on s'aperçoit que ce qui intéresse Denis dans le contexte culturel belge, c'est la possibilité de faire valoir en même temps les deux paradigmes majeurs de son œuvre, l'inspiration chrétienne et la modernité, mais aussi du point de vue de la religion catholique et plus particulièrement de la manière dont celle-ci envisage la création artistique au sein de l'époque moderne.

Discussion

- RT/BT: Although Denis had many collections and exhibitions in France it seems he was more appreciated in Belgium, and also in Germany, Russia and Britain. CM - Denis was very ambitious and took on much of the work that an art dealer would do such as networking and selling.
 - CR: In Belgium he found a new wave of interest in religious art which was his main interest (much like Léon Frédéric).
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Concluding discussion

Where are Nabis studies going? What other areas are there for new research?

RR: There appears to be a new viewpoint on the Nabis from 20 years ago. Before they were considered as an elite club with little interaction with the outside. Now research seems to focus on single members and that individual's interaction with other cultural spheres.

New fields of study which would allow us to further re-think the Nabis would include:

- The Nabis and the theatre: There are two potential angles of exploration. First, the Wagnerian influence: the effects played on the audience to create the complete art work. Second, in the Parisian theatre the use of the void, the absent and the simple, as well as the use of silence and how to evoke these pictorially.
- The critical reception of the Nabis: close analysis of changing reputations and definitions, within the wider context.
- The Nabis and science, for example in relation to contemporary psychological theory.
- After 1895, what happened to the artists and why. Why did they diversify into other areas and what were the reasons behind this shift?
- The Nabis and Dreyfus affair: contrasting and shifting allegiances.
- Redefining the name 'Nabis': some artists drift in and out of the definition. Does this umbrella label have validity?

