

Redefining European Symbolism c.1880-1910

Introductory Workshop: Edinburgh, 1-2 July 2010

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

Network Facilitator: Craig Landt, *University of Edinburgh*

Attendees:

- Edwin Becker, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Fleur Roos-Rosa de Carvalho, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Peter Dayan, *University of Edinburgh*
- Frances Fowle, *University of Edinburgh/National Galleries of Scotland*
- Riitta Ojanperä, *Ateneum Museum* (Helsinki)
- Chris Stolwijk, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Belinda Thomson, *University of Edinburgh*
- Merel Van Tilburg, *University of Geneva*
- Anna-Maria Von Bonsdorff, *Ateneum Museum* (Helsinki)

Apologies:

- Dario Gamboni, *University of Geneva*
- Françoise Heilbrun, *Musee D'Orsay* (Paris), paper submitted
- Rodolphe Rapetti, *Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art* (Paris)

The first meeting of the Research Network entitled 'Redefining European Symbolism c.1880-1910' took place in Edinburgh on July 1st and 2nd 2010.

This was an initial meeting between network partners to discuss the direction research should take, as well as practical issues surrounding the future conferences and seminars, their links with specific exhibitions, and the planned database.

Six 20-minute papers were presented and discussion followed each paper.

Richard Thomson (RT), as Principal Grant Holder opened the meeting by explaining the structure and objectives of the Network funded by the Leverhulme Trust and the necessary outcomes for the research project.

RT then began proceedings with a short paper outlining some of the questions surrounding the title of the research project.

Paper by Richard Thomson

Redefining European Symbolism, 1880-1910

Opening Questions for the Introductory Workshop

As an introduction to the introduction, let's unpack the title of the project. The emphasis seems to be on the first word, the verb, the active element: re-definition, an intellectual task, a job to be done. I will come back to defining, and re-defining. But let us not take the other two words as givens, either separately or together.

Symbolism sounds like an established, accepted, indeed definable term. But is it, and was it? In the period under consideration, 1880-1910, how widely was the word used, let alone understood? It was coined in France in the mid-1880s, and became part of French cultural discourse from Jean Moréas's 1886 manifesto. The word was common in francophone parlance – taken up in Belgium, for instance – and translates simply (at least in phonetic terms) into English, so was taken up by poets such as Arthur Symons. But how widely was it used across the rest of Europe? How was it understood in different cultural communities, and how did those understandings differ and shift? Was the term symbolism disputed – and where, and when and why? And was it simply not used, even by creative figures whom today we might consider underneath the convenient style label symbolism has become?

Can we usefully talk about 'European' symbolism? Were there shared cultural currents from Portugal to Russia, Finland to Italy? If there were, how might we describe them, and find intellectually credible links between countries whose political structures, languages, social organization, religious traditions, etc. were so much more diverse than they are today?

The question of definition is also crucial. Style labels are notoriously tricky, at once convenient, facile, flawed and frequently a-historical. We do not have the latter problem with symbolism, which was a contemporary term. But it was much disputed. Different historical, let alone current, definitions of symbolism, might form a useful part of the Network's discussions. One aspect of the Network that I am determined to establish from the outset, and which was explicit in the application to the Leverhulme Trust, is interdisciplinarity. One of the most crucial characteristics of symbolism, it seems to me, was its importance across a range of media and disciplines: the visual arts (though perhaps not architecture), poetry, prose, the theatre, and music. This differentiates it from contemporary cultural currents; we can surely not talk coherently about naturalist music or impressionist theatre. So, while this Network may have the visual arts at its centre, and has crucial connections with exhibitions, it will – it must - reach out to literature, music and other disciplines.

Another crucial aspect of any definition is the historical and cultural context, because creative movements – even one as occasionally so exclusive as symbolism – do not develop in vacuums. Symbolism needs to be seen in relation to different histories, to the varied and interlocking histories of the period. One of these is the history of science and medicine. Would, for example, symbolism have taken on the identity it did had it not occurred at the same time as psychology burgeoned as a discipline? I am going to have something to say in a minute about Darwinism, another crucial formative influence. But such medical and scientific currents, which may have had a quite general influence, co-existed also with social and political trends which were more national or regional. To what extent was what we might call symbolism shaped or tinted by the historical processes of this or that nation? Yet again, we might draw back and consider the meta-

historical shifts of the period, and try to place the broad patterns of symbolism within the broad patterns of historical change?

It seems to me that over the three years of this Network we might find ourselves talking about symbolisms, rather than symbolism. We might be seeking several, or shifting, definitions, rather than some chimerical unified account. There is the danger of making any definition too thin, if it has to cover too much. But perhaps the thin – inclusive, malleable - is good? Or is the dense, more limited but rigorous, better? Perhaps we need to dilute, or even dispense with, some of the words in the Network's title. It might be possible to define symbolism, but the European element might jeopardise any credence such a definition might achieve, by trying to be too elastic, too inclusive. These are some of the many rich and diverting questions with which we are going to engage ourselves.

In her 2009 book Symbolist Art in Context, Michelle Facos posits that “a Symbolist work of art is characterised by 1) an artist's desire to represent ideas and 2) a manipulation of colour, form and composition that signals the artist's relative indifference to worldly appearances.” (University of California Press, 2009, p.1) These are fundamentals of a definition, we might agree. But the positive assumptions of those characteristics also assume negatives. The emphasis on the Idea, thus on the immaterial and the spiritual, suggests the a-social. Non-descriptive means repudiate the mimetic, the naturalist. The notion of the Idea, originating with Moréas in 1886, is evidently central to symbolism.

Let us carry these questions into the field of the visual arts, looking cursorily but specifically at European painting. To what extent was descriptive art of this period, representing the legible and social, without ideas or emotion? Two paintings, dating from 1886, the Norwegian Kitty Kjeland's After Sunset and the Swiss-Italian Giovanni Segantini's Ave Maria on the Lake, are examples of apparently descriptive paintings laden with emotive associations. Landscape painting in particular could be suggestive as well as naturalistic; a good example of this, heightened by its title, is Isaac Levitan's Peace, 1893. The point here is that it is not always easy - or necessary? - to separate symbolism and naturalism.

Just as there were many symbolisms, there were many naturalisms. It is often assumed that naturalism was geared to the representation of modernity, dealing with modern and progressive subjects such as urbanism and industry, as one can trace in the work of artists as different as Adolf von Menzel or Giuseppe de Nittis. But naturalism was also concerned with continuities, notably of landscape and rural life. Otto Hesselbom's Our Country (1902), a great vista of unspoilt Sweden, is an excellent example, as are the scenes of changeless peasant life by many artists, of whom Léon Lhermitte was one model. It can be argued that naturalism dealt with anxiety – fear of changing identity and threatening progress – as well as modernity and optimism.

This brings us to social change. There was a massive population shift at this period, from country to city. In 1870 there were 70 cities in Europe with a population of over 200,000; by 1900 there were 200. The causes of this were agricultural crisis (brought about by imports from outside Europe) and the growth of industry (stimulated by colonialisation which brought in more raw materials and provided wider markets). This was the beginning of globalisation. However, such processes were not uniform all over Europe. These social changes had very substantial effect on lower-class lives, bringing unemployment, disruption of deep cultural continuities, displacement. At the same time there were also substantial scientific and technological changes – the telephone, bicycle, motor car, the illustrated periodical – which largely affected the middle classes. These offered new possibilities for travel and exchange, but again disrupted old certainties and continuities (disruption of heimat, pace of change, etc.). We need to ask if there was an identifiable – and European? – educated and leisured upper- and perhaps middle-class stratum which was shaped by these social processes and formed the producers and consumers of symbolism.

There is certainly a current in symbolism which deals with cultural loss, the transitory character of civilisations. This can be found in the work of painters of different generations and cultures, for example Arnold Böcklin and René Ménard. There are also works which attempt to secure continuities. Ménard's decorative works ought to fuse Hellenic culture and French territoire in continuing conjunction, while

Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Wassily Kandinsky, from Finnish and Russian perspectives, explored folk culture and ethnography. Artists reached out to different levels of culture, seeking various kinds of continuity for different publics. Another reaction to modernity was to reject it, a tactic found in landscape – such as the Finn Albert Edelfeldt's Kaukola Ridge at Sunset (1889-90) – or in the untouched cityscapes of medieval Bruges by Fernand Khnopff.

If we see works of art in relation to social processes, we need to see artists in that way too. The creative identity is central to symbolism. Gallen-Kallela promoted himself as a national, visionary figure, Finnish in the face of Russian cultural encroachment. In Munich Franz von Stuck presented the paradigm of the modern, socially upward-moving artist.

The embrace of science is a crucial dimension of symbolism. Here the modern acted as a creative motor. Science, as a body of constantly developing knowledge, challenged conventional thinking and broke continuities, thus opening up new creative dimensions. An apparent paradox is that scientific concepts spawned fantastic imagery, as in the varied cases of Böcklin, Max Klinger and Odilon Redon. Science and modernity were by no means necessary opponents of symbolism; there could be vital stimuli. An exceptional artist, at the end of this period was the Czech Frantisek Kupka. With Kupka we get an inventory of creative stimuli and intellectual engagements, among them sun worship, anarchism, geography, Darwinism, astronomy and science: a package of idealisms. These led Kupka to abstraction. In visual form, Kupka made a new world, in parallel to his social aspirations. He serves as an example of the complexity symbolism opened up for the creative mind, and the optimism it could engender.

Discussion:

Chris Stolwijk (CS): Artist as the priest, (romantic notion), need/duty to uncover the 'hidden' for the public → becomes God (creator)

Paper by Peter Dayan

A view of symbolist painting from within the literary history of symbolism

This is an abbreviated version of the paper I wrote for the workshop. I have tried to centre it around the questions: what is the view from within literary symbolism of symbolism in painting? It remains rather colloquial in tone (and diffuse at times), and not properly referenced; but I hope I will be forgiven for this, if it is taken as a record of proceedings, rather than an academic article

*The first problem when it comes to presenting the views of literary symbolism is that there are two very different definitions of what literary symbolism is. And that has always been the case, from the 1880s up to the present day. On the one hand, there is the symbolist movement which, in the 1880s and 1890s, invented the term, and explicitly defined itself as symbolist. On the other hand, there are the great poets who never called themselves (and often refused to be called) symbolist, but whom literary history has retrospectively recruited under the symbolist banner. That dichotomy is summed up beautifully in the table of contents of a book called *Le Symbolisme* published in 1919 by one Alfred Poizat, a now-forgotten author who was in the thick of the symbolist revolution. It has seven chapters. The first is 'Charles Baudelaire'; the second is 'Mallarmé'; the third is 'Paul Verlaine'. None of these poets called himself a symbolist; Verlaine and Mallarmé rejected the label (Baudelaire died before it was formulated, so had no opportunity to reject it). The fourth chapter of Poizat's book is 'L'école symboliste et ses doctrines'. So you only get to the actual 'école symboliste' half way through the book. Most of the book is quite explicitly about poets who never called themselves or considered themselves symbolists; and it is precisely those poets, the poets who were never part of the symbolist school but who were recruited a posteriori, in spite of their objections, who are seen as the great and famous symbolist names. The real symbolists, the symbolists*

who called themselves symbolists, don't merit naming in the titles of Poizat's chapters; they simply aren't important enough.

One finds exactly the same in Guy Michaud's 1947 book on symbolism; and almost exactly the same in the latest book I have with the same title, *Le Symbolisme*, published in 2004 by Jean-Nicolas Illouz. In his chapter headings and subheadings, you find all the usual suspects among the great poets retrospectively recruited by symbolism: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and so on. They considerably outnumber the symbolists who actually called themselves symbolists. At the same time, Poizat and Illouz do both carefully chronicle the rapid rise and fall of the symbolist school itself in the 1880s and 1890s. So they don't try to hide from the fact that symbolism has both, if you like, a proper and an extended sense, and their books locate the proper within the extended. That has, as I said, always been the case in books on symbolism.

Which gives us three ways to approach the question: What is the view from within literary symbolism of painting?

One: what did the actual symbolist school think of painting?

Two: what do literary historians of symbolism have to say about painting?

And three: what do the extended-definition symbolists, especially Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, think of painting?

That third question is perhaps the most interesting, but it is also the most diffuse and difficult. Baudelaire and Verlaine certainly did not think in the same way about painting. And it doesn't really make sense to ask a bunch of highly diverse and strongly individual characters to produce a symbolist view when they never considered themselves symbolist anyway. So if we want a view that is actually connected to our keyword 'symbolist', I think we should begin not from them, but either from the proper-definition symbolists, or else from the literary historians, in other words, from people who actually used the word 'symbolist' and tried to give it some kind of coherent meaning.

Fortunately, my preliminary research suggests that the literary historians of symbolism and the actual members of the actual symbolist school are not difficult and awkward to deal with like the extended-definition symbolists, because they all saw painting in much the same way. Which, to put it simply and bluntly, is: very little and with blinkers firmly in place.

In a way that is not surprising. Perhaps the best-known literary-historical definition of symbolism is the one proposed by Valéry in 1920: what unites all symbolists is the ambition to 'reprendre à la musique leur bien'. Music, not painting, is the art towards which literary symbolism looks. That is a general tendency whenever literary people are defining symbolism in an abstract and theoretical sense. Unless they specifically say that they are going to talk about symbolism in painting (e.g. 'Le Symbolisme en peinture - Paul Gauguin' by Albert Aurier, 1891), they don't generally talk about painting at all; music, not painting, is the reference point. Which isn't to say that they think of music as a symbolist art. In fact, the natural tendency of the literary symbolist is to think of symbolism as an artistic movement as purely poetic, limited to poetry alone. As Poizat puts it: 'Ce ne fut qu'une école de poésie'. The parallels that they constantly imply between music and poetry don't mean that music can be symbolist; they mean that poetry becomes symbolist when it does with words what music does without words. Symbolist music isn't needed, because symbolist poetry will do the job for it. Painting, on the other hand, remains not only not needed, but not wanted. It is not only an irritant: it actually represents the Enemy – and it represents the Enemy because it represents. Which music doesn't.

Let me give you some examples dating from the core symbolist period of symbolism defining itself by rejecting painting. This is a certain Saint Antoine in 1894, in an article entitled 'Qu'est-ce que le symbolisme?':

L'expression musicale est toujours en quelque sorte symbolique, l'expression plastique ne l'est jamais. Le symbolisme est étranger à l'art plastique parce qu'il est aussi indépendant que possible de la réalité. (Quoted in: Guy Michaud, La Doctrine symboliste (Paris: Nizet, 1947), p. 50.)

That is untypically direct. More typical is this, from René Ghil in 1886, in an article entitled 'Notre école':

Symboliser est évoquer, non dire et narrer et peindre [...] (Ibid., p. 74)

That is in a sense ambiguous. 'Peindre' can mean to paint, in other words to do what painters do. But it can also mean to depict, to give a clear image of something. One can see why symbolists should object to the latter sense, to 'peindre' as representation. After all, their school certainly was founded in opposition to naturalism, in opposition to what they called the positive, to the idea that what matters is what you can represent. That is clear enough in Mallarmé and Verlaine, too. But you might ask: does painting have to depict? Is there any real reason why painting can't do what poetry has done, and revolt against the positive tendencies of its own material tradition? In many ways, that was exactly how Apollinaire, twenty years later, would describe cubism; he used to this end the musical analogy for painting just as the symbolists had used the musical analogy for poetry, to suggest that painting, like poetry, doesn't have to work by representing. But the literary symbolists themselves never, it seems to me, tried to envisage this possibility. In fact, they did their best to ignore it. When poets or critics at the time write about symbolism, they are careful to reject 'peindre' in the sense of 'depicting', but they never try to ask whether in principle that should be taken as a general handicap for the art of painting. I had a little trawl through anthologies of symbolist writings, and checked articles and manifestoes by Kahn, Vielé-Griffin, Morice, Merrill, Moréas, Gide, and so on and so forth. All these writers are happy to echo the sentiment expressed by Merrill in 1892:

La Poésie, étant à la fois Verbe et Musique, est merveilleusement apte à cette suggestion d'un infini qui n'est souvent que de l'indéfini. (ibid., p. 32)

And they never stop to ask whether painting can join in the game, alongside words and music. They almost seem to pretend that painting doesn't exist as an art.

*One thing that might seem odd about this shying away from painting is that Mallarmé was among the movement's generally recognised gurus, and everyone knew that he liked painting and painters. If Mallarmé could take painting seriously, you might think, shouldn't the symbolists follow his lead? But the problem there is that in the symbolist period, i.e. roughly the decade starting in 1885, Mallarmé was not obviously giving that lead. In *Divagations*, which came out in 1897, there is one little text on Whistler, another on Manet, and a longer one on Berthe Morisot. None of them are what you might call symbolist artists, but in any case, 1897 was after the literary symbolist period. Mallarmé had written an article on Manet and the impressionists in 1876, but that article was published in England and in English, and the symbolists doubtless didn't know it existed. In the following twenty years, i.e. until 1895 or 1896, when he published his essay on Berthe Morisot and his sonnet to Puvis de Chavannes, Mallarmé published, I think, nothing about painting or painters. The Mallarmé that the symbolists knew and adored wasn't the admirer of Manet, Morisot, and Whistler; it was the author of the great series of 'poèmes critiques' published in the years from 1885 to 1893; those essays are full of discussions of poetry, theatre, music, and dance, but painting is completely absent from them. In fact, in those works of the 1880s and early 1890s, Mallarmé tends to do exactly what Merrill did in my last quotation: he says that the new literary tendency is towards suggestion (see *Mallarmé, Œuvres complètes vol 2 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2003), p. 210*) rather than description, and equates this with musicality; but he doesn't ask how painting might fit in to this.*

The one publication of Mallarmé's middle years that certainly is connected with painting is his translation of Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock', which appeared in 1888. The symbolist poets seem to have managed to ignore it. If you want to understand the late Mallarmé's attitude to painting, his interactions with Whistler are the way to do it. But I don't think the symbolists took any interest in that.

In short, the Mallarmé that the literary symbolists knew seems to avoid thinking about the connections between the aesthetics of painting, and the aesthetics of poetry. And the symbolists inherited that reluctance. I'm suggesting, then, that as far as the symbolists themselves were concerned, the answer to the question 'what is the view, from within literary symbolism, of painting?', the answer is 'dim, distant, and chronically undertheorised, in marked contrast to their view of music'.

What about literary historians of symbolism? Do they have more to say than the symbolists themselves about painting? I have looked at half a dozen books on 'le Symbolisme', ranging from 1917 to

2004, and the answer to that question seems to be: not much. *Le Mouvement symboliste* published in 1917 by Mme Osmont manages not to mention painting at all. So does *Le Symbolisme* of 1919 by Alfred Poizat. The monumental three-volume *Message poétique du symbolisme* by Guy Michaud (1947) is equally unconcerned with the visual arts. The same is true of *Symbolisme from Poe to Mallarmé* by Joseph Chiari, first published in 1956, with a preface by T. S. Eliot in which Eliot doesn't mention painting either. Skipping over half a century or so, we come to the excellent book *Le Symbolisme* by Jean-Nicolas Illouz. Unlike its predecessors, it does have four pages, out of three hundred, on painting, in which it concentrates on Gauguin and the Nabis. Otherwise, however, it generally avoids the subject of painting, except in a chapter on symbolist iconography, where it draws parallels between the favourite myths and images of the poets, and the favourite myths and images of certain painters, especially Gustave Moreau and the English Pre-Raphaelites. This is certainly convincing enough. But Moreau, Rossetti, and so on are actually one generation older than the symbolists. They were using those images before the poets invented the symbolist movement. So those painters cannot be (and Illouz does not suggest they are) symbolists in the proper sense. In short, Illouz makes two different kinds of connection between symbolism and painting. One is a connection of ideas and influence going from poetry to painting, and that is Gauguin above all (and also Redon); the other is a connection of iconography, and that flows the other way, from painting to poetry, with Moreau as the main figure. But neither of these connections really seems to be essential to the literary history of symbolism. They are epiphenomena, outside links rather than a central part of the development of the movement. To take the obvious counterexample: there is no painter who forms an essential reference point for symbolist poetics in the way that Wagner does.

That all sounds terribly negative. It might seem to imply that a literary historian would have very little to contribute to a project that is centred on symbolism in the visual arts. Nonetheless, I would like to hope that the contrary is the case. My idea is that having established how literary symbolism likes to see painting as rather external to its movement, two interesting questions remain to be answered. **Question one: why does symbolist poetry tend to marginalise painting?** And I suspect that the more carefully one asks that question, the more one will see that this is not an innocent symptom. It is a technique for keeping at a distance some awkward questions about the relationship between the two senses of the word 'peindre'; awkward questions which actually tell us a lot about the reasons for which the symbolist school was at once such a failure at producing poetry that lasted, and such a success at defining an articulation in aesthetic history. And by probing the writings of the symbolists to see exactly how and why they avoid those awkward questions, we could learn a lot about what painting means to literary symbolists, in spite of or even because of their refusal to discuss it. **Question two: if symbolist poets and literary theorists refused to think much about painting, why were the painters interested in the movement?** And my suspicion is that the answer to that one will turn out to be parallel to the first. In other words, the reason for which literary symbolism tries not to look painting in the eye is precisely the reason for which literary symbolism is valuable for painters.

Discussion:

CS pointed out that many, if not most, Art History texts about Symbolism rarely give much attention to literary symbolists. Usually a few quotations are given at the beginning but they are not closely discussed, paralleling the behaviour of the literary symbolists towards the visual arts.

This point was supported by Merel van Tilburg (MvT): there was limited engagement between the literary and visual art world. "Poets cannot believe that the art world can be abstract." In order to overcome that gap, Albert Aurier had expressed an intention to 'infiltrate' the world of the painters.

Paper by Merel van Tilburg

Merel van Tilburg presented a paper prepared in collaboration with Dario Gamboni.

Summary of propositions for the network Redefining European Symbolism

Looking at the research on symbolism that has already been done, three points of focus seem to come to the fore.

The first concerns the heterogeneity of the term symbolism. Various researchers have expressed scepticism with regards to the usefulness of the term. Symbolism as a term in an expanded cultural field (and not just as a literary notion) groups various and even opposed realities – such as the neo-idealism of the painters of the soul opposed to the ‘ideism’ of the Nabis. But pragmatically, the notion symbolism can be a useful instrument. Romanticism for example is a notion that is equally bound up with heterogeneity – and one that has been questioned as such far less than the term symbolism. Also, the term has the positive effect of not following the absurd divisions that are current in the field of art history, i.e. the practice to divide history up in centuries.

Scholars have proposed different ways to approach the heterogeneity of what the term symbolism refers to. Jean-Paul Bouillon proposes to speak of a ‘symbolist moment’ rather than of a clearly circumscribed group of symbolist characteristics or producers; Pierre-Louis Mathieu introduced the term ‘symbolist generation’. Whichever terminology is chosen, heterogeneity would seem to be a key point of symbolism.

A second area of focus would be the expansion or even globalization of symbolism. With regards to the idea of an artistic landscape, we should widen the geographic map of symbolism. Firstly, symbolism itself was a cosmopolitan movement. Secondly, research itself should move away from a eurocentric, even francocentric approach. Areas of particular interest and where much (international) research remains to be done include, but are not limited to:

- Eastern Europe (a good example of integrative research would be the exhibition Prague 1900)
- Russia
- Hispanic world, including Latin America (but this falls outside the perimeters of the network)

An excellent example of integrative research, both geographically and on a disciplinary level, was the symposium organised and published by Anna Balakian in 1973: Transformations littéraires au tournant des XIXe et XXe siècles.

The third area of research is the interdisciplinarity of symbolism. Various arts were included in symbolism: literature, music, arts of the stage, applied arts, visual arts. Research on interdisciplinarity in the arts could help us to rethink the outlines and borders of symbolism and to study its complex and hybrid output (objects and projects), and the multiple competences of the ‘symbolist generation’. This interdisciplinarity, by the way, is probably the main reason why purist modernism rejected symbolism.

Among the interdisciplinary extensions and possible new areas of research for studies of symbolism, are the fields of collection, architecture, and interior design, of ‘display’, with the questions of gender that they bring along. This type of study would be related to studies of ‘material culture’ and the history of collections and museums. New research in the field of material culture around 1900 was published on the website of the AHNCA, the Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art (www.ahnca.org).

Another field of interdisciplinary research is that of science. It would be interesting to include in the network scholars from outside the fields of the arts, working on issues related to biology or psychology of around 1900 or right after, in relation to art historical questions. Inside art history, these questions have been central to the work of Filiz Eda Burhan, Barbara Larson, and, more recently, Allison Morehead.

Discussion:

A large research group has been working in Switzerland, involving five universities, on the correlations between art and science. PhDs have been geared towards this. An example being MvT's own PhD, 'Staging the Figure: Psychology and Form in Symbolist Theatre and Painting.'

RT had recently attended the Ecole de Printemps, a network which stages an annual conference for postgraduate students in art history. He had proposed to the Ecole that our Network would ensure that PhD students would have a chance to present papers at each of the three 2-day conferences in 2011-12.

There was discussion of the notion of gesamtkunstwerk.

Paper by Frances Fowle

Van Gogh to Kandinsky: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Europe, 1880-1910

This exhibition, scheduled to open in February 2012, is a collaboration between the National Galleries of Scotland, the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam and the Ateneum Museum, Helsinki. The guest curators are Rodolphe Rapetti (formerly Direction des Musées de France, now INHA) and Richard Thomson (Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art, University of Edinburgh).

This will be the first exhibition dedicated to symbolist landscape painting in Europe and will present a wide range of poetic and suggestive paintings of nature from the period c.1880-1910. It will focus on major artists of the avant-garde such as Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch but will also introduce the public to a group of less well known artists from Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. Symbolist Landscape will cover a wide chronological trajectory, from progenitors of symbolism such as Böcklin and Whistler through to Mondrian and Kandinsky, whose variations on landscape themes just before the First World War helped push their work into abstraction. In addition, the selection and grouping of the works will suggest how landscape engaged with issues such as nationalism, science and modernity.

The exhibition will provoke ideas about what was meant both by 'symbolism' and 'landscape' at the fin-de-siècle. The inclusion of apparently descriptive paintings by artists such as Cazin, Hammershøi and Thoma brings into play the landscape of suggestion, conjuring up moods of nostalgia or serenity. Other paintings show the artists' use of landscape motifs to develop stylistic repertoires which are far from descriptive, using colour, touch and surface to evoke emotion or a novel sense of pictorial harmony. The formation and reaffirmation of national identities is another major aspect of late nineteenth century culture that the exhibition will highlight. It also strongly suggests links with music: it begins with a painting which inspired a composition by Rachmaninov and will close with works associated with music, by Ciurlionis, Kupka, Kandinsky and others. We hope that concerts of appropriate music of the period will be arranged in the three cities while the exhibition is taking place.

STRUCTURE OF THE EXHIBITION

Symbolist Landscape is orchestrated, both thematically and pictorially. It commences with death, decay and the closing of things - generally represented quite conventionally - and comes to a climax with brightly coloured, uplifting motifs - and the threshold of abstraction. Necessarily, the exhibition contains works of very different style. However, throughout paintings have been chosen which, in their groups and pairings, relate or rhyme in subject, mood or pictorial identity. The paintings have been selected to maximise the idea of landscape, with the artists' treatment of natural features - rather than the human figure - as the primary characteristic of the works.

The show will be divided into five sections, intended to elucidate the very complex ideas behind symbolism in general – and symbolist landscape in particular – to a broad public.

1. Arcadia

Symbolism provided an antidote to the industrial development and materialism of late 19th century Europe. It rejected the real world in favour of an alternative world of dreams and visions. The first section of the exhibition will focus on the notion of arcadia and its passing, and opens with Böcklin's Isle of the Dead. Böcklin's influence will be demonstrated by a group of dark, brooding and dramatic images by Ménard, Klimt, Leighton, Moreau and Bakst. The section then moves into more lyrical images centred on variations on the classical notion of Arcadia, represented by a group of French artists, among them Puvis de Chavannes, Osbert, Cross, Signac and Gauguin.

2. Dreams of Nature

The focus of the second section is the mystical landscapes of northern, central and eastern Europe. This section includes a number of Scandinavian artists and addresses the theme of nationalism: evoked in the work of Norwegian artists such as Sohlberg and Munch and the Finnish artists Gallen-Kallela and Simberg. There will also be several works – by Millais, Hodler, Khnopff and Grubicy de Dragon – that defy definition, hovering 'between naturalism and symbolism'. There will be a group of 'suggestive' landscapes by Monet under the subtitle 'Silent Nature' and another section devoted to 'Landscapes of the Mind', dreamscapes by the likes of Segantini, Malczewski, Weiss and Kupka.

3. Silent Cities

In the nineteenth century artists painted a whole series of paintings of uninhabited cities which express a sense of desolation, withdrawal and other-worldliness. The pictures that will feature in this section are dream-like cityscapes by artists such as Khnopff, Hammershøi, Spilliaert and even more modern artists such as De Chirico. The medieval city of Bruges was evoked by Rodenbach in his Bruges-la-Morte and became a familiar motif in symbolist art, since it represented the opposite of the modern city. Venice, too, captured the imagination of artists such as Whistler and Le Sidaner, who evoked the contrast between dream and reality through images of the city reflected in its canals.

4. Rhythms of Nature: Forms of the Cosmos

Room four takes as its theme the Cosmos and the rhythms of nature. There is a profoundly expressive and metaphysical undercurrent to some of the works in this section. Many of the pictures give the sense of man aspiring towards a spiritual realm, or of nature reflecting the profound workings of the soul. Some of the pictures we hope to include – by Watts, Strindberg and Ensor, for example – have a specifically Christian dimension to them. This section will also include several works of 'reapers' and 'sowers' by Van Gogh, as well as more obviously 'cosmic' paintings by Pelliza de Volpedo, Mir and Willumsen.

5. Towards Abstraction

The last section explores the ways in which symbolism anticipated more modern movements. This section will include a selection of Neo-Impressionist seascapes by artists such as Cross, Toorop and Signac. In 1891 Signac produced a series of works at Concarneau which appear to imitate the rhythm of music, its repetitive beat, as well as its harmony. The link between colour and sound was a central concern of symbolist art and poetry and had an important impact on later artists such as Kupka and Kandinsky, who also feature in the final section, where music is an underlying theme. Ciurlionis, for example, was a composer in his own right, and Kandinsky admired the work of the Symbolist composer Scriabin, whose experiments with musical and colour tones were compatible with his own desire to find equivalencies between colour and emotion in painting. Many of the works in this section have an upward movement, leading the exhibition towards a triumphant climax.

Edwin Becker presented images from exhibition on the Nabis & photography (Van Gogh Museum, autumn 2011).

This was in place of Françoise Heilbrun, who was unable to attend. FH's paper is given below.

Françoise Heilbrun

I was at first surprised at the idea of talking about the exhibition project for 2011 - previously called Painters and the Kodak and now more appropriately titled Private View - in the context of symbolism. The images that come to my mind when one speaks of symbolist photography are those taken by English or American pictorialists such as Edward Steichen or Clarence White, obviously influenced by symbolist paintings or sculpture in the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

But, of course, the subject of this Network is not symbolism, but Redefining Symbolism. The major group of artists to be dealt with in the 2011 exhibition, namely the Nabis, were closely linked to symbolism; they had admired Gauguin since the 1889 Café Volpini exhibition, they read and illustrated Verlaine and the early texts of André Gide, and they worked for Lugné-Poé's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. But, to be frank, symbolism is not the angle from which we wanted to study of amateur photographs of these painters, even if symbolism is not unconnected to the exhibition project. The exhibition that the Brooklyn Museum originally planned with the Musée d'Orsay will eventually be shown at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, at the Phillips Collection in Washington and at the Museum of Indianapolis. The idea of this show was initiated by Elizabeth Easton, a specialist on Vuillard who wrote an essay on Vuillard's photographs for the major retrospective on the artist in 2003-2004. In 1987 Philippe Néagu and myself had organised a show on Bonnard's photographs. Our purpose was to show the links between the amateur photographs he took of his surroundings with some related paintings and prints. Another show of Rivière's photographs and prints was organised with François Fossier. In 2006, with Nathalie Bondil and Saskia Ooms, I staged a show of Maurice Denis's photographs in parallel with the retrospective of Denis's paintings at the Musée d'Orsay.

The original plan for Painters and the Kodak was to show the similarities between the amateur photographs taken by a group of painters and their paintings and prints. These links are clear as far as the Nabis are concerned, especially with Bonnard, Vuillard and Denis. The case of Vallotton is less certain. We decided to include not only the Nabis but also Evenepoel and Breitner. Why? Because those two artists treated the same subjects in their paintings and their photographs as the Nabis: private life for Evenepoel and for Breitner often street-life. And we chose them primarily because their photographs had a vivid quality of their own. Why did these painters take photographs? They were never 'photographers' and did not pretend to be so. The technique of manufacturing cameras had so improved and their operation so simplified by the 1890s that there was no need anymore to spend money, time and energy on its practice. It was as usual then to have a camera as it is now to have a cell-phone, i-pod or blackberry. The glass plates or roll of films for the camera could be bought ready for use; the cameras were light and small, particularly the Kodak put on the market by George Eastman that Bonnard, Vuillard and Maurice Denis used from 1895, which could be held in one hand. The films or plates could be developed and printed commercially.

This new generation of amateur photographers did not value craftsmanship as in their predecessors had in the 1850s or '60s. The papers were cheap and one could take photographs without knowing anything of photography. These artists never spoke of their photographs, which were rediscovered by chance by their heirs, generally in the 1970s. One of the first photography historians to publish these amateur photographs taken by painters was Erika Billeter in 1977. Previously Annette Vaillant had published in the L'Oeil in the 1960s an article on Vuillard and his Kodak. In the exhibition we did not want to prove that these painters were influenced by their photographs but, on the contrary, that because of their style and their culture, notably their familiarity with Japanese prints but also their imagination and rejection of description, they were more able other amateur photographers to understand the esthetic of instantaneous vision and private relations. The characteristic of their photographs is the fluidity of construction and asymmetry, with figures cropped in the foreground or cut, or seen from afar and without clear definition, thus giving an impression of mystery and encouraging interplay between the viewer and his subject. When they took very close-up shots of their models, they obtained blurred images, and apparently they liked this because they consistently practised it. The comparison between their photographs and those taken by Henri Lemoine, an amateur working at the same time, is revealing : his are static and plainly descriptive.

Bonnard used photographs of his lover Marthe as the basis of illustrations for texts such as Verlaine's Parallèlement. Denis's photographs are close to the subjects of his paintings, for example representing his wife Marthe in roles as lover or mother. It is difficult to speak of symbolism when one looks at the photographs of Vuillard, one of the most gifted of these amateur photographers, but he had a wonderful understanding of the possibilities of the instantaneous camera. Some of his photographs, for example of the garden at Amfreville seen from a high window, are related to paintings. There is no symbolism either, I think, in the way Henri Rivière interpreted the heritage of Degas and of Japanese prints. Rivière photographed the Eiffel Tower in 1889 during a private visit for the team of the Chat Noir. Like Bonnard he quoted some of his photographs for his album of lithographs Les Trente-six vues de la Tour Eiffel, an homage to Hokusai. The bold compositions are closely linked to his own creation of the 'Théâtre d'ombres' for the Chat Noir, composed of black metal silhouettes shown on a white screen. The Belgian Henri Evenepoel lived in Paris from 1892, with his already married cousin, Louise de Mey, who gave him two children, Charles and Sophie. The photographs of his family give a great sense of intimacy. Later photographs, taken in 1897 when Evenepoel spent months in Algeria to try to restore his health, are plain documentary photographs like any tourist could have done: there was no longer the magic of his private life! Georg Hendryk Breitner was a very good photographer, using also glass plates to photograph subjects that interested him: the studio, models nude or in costume, street scenes.

The role played by vernacular art - like amateur photographs or popular engravings - should neither be underestimated nor overestimated. And if often I am shocked by the way historians of painting ignore or despise photography, I am not happier when historians of photography over-emphasise photography's importance for painting.

Day 2: Summary of Discussion

Key themes for discussion and future planning were quickly identified:

- Slippage between literature and the visual arts in symbolism (especially in France)
- Symbolism and theatre
- Symbolism and music
- Naturalism & symbolism
- Nationalism & symbolism
- Historiography: changing definitions

The issue of definition was discussed. One needs to re-define the definitions. Any definition suggests having a clear idea of what constitutes symbolism, itself a risky and contested assumption.

If in literature there is a distinction between those who called themselves symbolist and those who did not but have since been considered symbolist, does this apply to other arts? How was the symbolist appellation earned or claimed? Who actually called themselves symbolists, and why? Definitions given by artists and writers at the period, definitions by literary historians and by art historians are all different.

We need to look closely at what was claimed to be symbolist at the time, how those who used the term defended it. To cross reference definitions; to compare and contrast between the arts. We need to open up the cultural boundaries of symbolism at that period. Perhaps we need to admit that it may be indefinable?

Historical approach:

Symbolism's complex relations with modernity need to be closely studied; past notions that symbolism was escapist are simplistic. Key issues are the relationships between symbolism and the history of science, Darwinism, psychology, etc. To what extent can symbolism be considered escapist and elitist, essentially anti-modern, and to what extent should it be understood as engaging with very modern ideas of a fragmented or fluid world? Does the cultural environment of symbolism need to be recalibrated against economic changes, if – for example – increasing taxes reduced the leisure class that might have provided a public for symbolist work (RT)?

CS: This can be viewed as the infrastructure of symbolism. It would be valuable to analyse the circles of production and distribution of work, cultures of collecting, systems and institutions of display. To what extent did artists 'market' themselves? How was work disseminated? Who constituted its publics? Was its demographic exclusive or broad-based? The diverse centres of symbolism need acknowledgement.

Naturalism:

The complex relationship between naturalism and symbolism is relatively under-studied. Was naturalist art more democratic, aimed at a wider 'cultural base', whereas symbolist art was aimed at a more elitist cultural base? Is there a more nuanced position? Some evidence of large turnouts to exhibitions (naturalist?) but must be wary of sources for this information.

Discussion then centred round the dissemination of symbolist work and how it was viewed and spread to publics across Europe from Paris. CS: possibly look at an artist exchange model to study this.

Nationalism/Internationalism:

Discussion focused on artists shifting from naturalism to symbolism – and the interplay with nationalism - when returning to their home country from study abroad. Was ideology more effectively articulated via mimetic or symbolist formal means? To what extent were national values comprehensible to international audiences? For example, *The Forging of the Sampo* by Akseli Gallen-Kallela was misunderstood by international audiences (RO).

MvT drew attention to the internationalism of the period, seeing symbolism as an international movement, not an international style. '*The internationalism is in the cosmopolitan intention but not in the reception*'. Symbolism needs to be viewed in relation to the rise of nationalist tendencies across Europe, with their fear of change and destruction of continuities.

Further discussion touched on whether symbolism was anti-democratic and also the role of women artists in symbolism.

Interdisciplinarity:

It was the unanimous view that symbolism needed to be seen across disciplines, and their interrelationships will be a key factor in redefining symbolism.

Practicalities: Future Events and the Database

A steering committee was agreed with one representative from each partner institution. As it stands the committee will include Richard Thomson, Chris Stolwijk and Dario Gamboni.

Representatives from the *Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art* and one from the *Musée d'Orsay* will be recruited. The steering committee will ease communication between the partners.

Seminar on the Nabis (26 November 2010)

It was agreed that the Van Gogh Museum would host the one-day seminar in the autumn of 2010 on the subject of the Nabis. This is to take place in November, on a Friday to allow those attending extended time to visit the Museum. The Van Gogh Museum will kindly provide the space and along with CL will organise the particulars. (The date has since been set for Friday 26 November. With thanks to CS.)

The format will be a day-long seminar with 6 invited speakers and an invited audience of about 20 people. The library would be a suitable venue. (Research Network funds will be used to cover the expenses of the invited speakers only). This number was chosen to have a large enough audience to promote interest in the research project without losing out on effective intellectual discussion. Each paper will last for 30 minutes on a predetermined topic and discussion will follow.

This format will be duplicated for the March 2011 seminar, which will widen further participation in the Research Network.

RT would like this to be a forward-thinking, interdisciplinary event with scholars from other fields able to tackle issues around the Nabis from new approaches. Points of discussion were then proposed and names provided. CS was quite keen to have the opening speaker provide a critical overview of the Nabis and symbolism looking at current and past lines of research. MvT will present a paper on the theatre, and RT/BT can give a joint paper on Maurice Denis's *Définition*. A number of names and connections were put forward, from fields such as psychology, literature and music. Invitations to speakers will be sent ASAP. Invitations to the audience will be sent by September.

FdC will begin a 4-year research project on the Van Gogh Museum's print collection focusing mainly on the Nabis artists. The collection was acquired in 2000/2001 as a whole but has yet to be documented properly. FdC will in the first instance catalogue the collection and secondly undertake research on Henri-Gabriel Ibels. During the Nabis seminar in November 2010 FdC will present the print collection to the group, and she will give a paper at the 2011 conference on the Nabis.

Seminar on Symbolist Landscape (March 2011)

RT will negotiate a Paris location for this event. (The date has since been set as Saturday 26 March 2011, at INHA, Paris. With thanks to Antoinette le Normand-Romain and Alain Madeleine-Perdrillat.)

RT proposed that nationalism would be a leading theme; Scandinavian or Scottish scholars to might be among those useful to discuss this. Other interdisciplinary themes could include science and geography, the 'silent city' (for example, Rodenbach and Bruges), landscape and music, landscape and spirituality/interiority (for example Segantini).

Future Conferences:

The Nabis (Autumn 2011, Amsterdam); European Symbolism (Spring 2012, Paris); Symbolist Landscape (Autumn 2012, Edinburgh)

The Research Network will provide funds for the invited speakers (potentially 8 speakers) at conferences, but it is expected that partner institutions will help out for the cost of publicity, space etc. Languages will be English and French.

Database

- The database will hold information on established scholars (academics and curators) and PhD researchers all over the world working on symbolism. Discussion centred on the type of data to be held and how it will be categorised. Ideally the information stored will contain (but is not limited to):

Name and Title

- *Institution (University, museum...)*
- *Geographical area (country)*
- *Field of study (categories to be discussed, would need to be sub-categorised)*
- *Contact information (email or institution contact details)*
- *Short Bibliography (relevant publications and research titles)*

The current proposal is that a user will be able to search the database for a number of different elements (for example, search for PhD researcher working in Germany on Gustav Klimt). This brings into question how this information is stored, as it will be necessary to make categories that individuals will have to label themselves against. This needs to be refined before going ahead.

FdC brought up the idea of a network group (ex LinkedIn) so that members can create discussion and contact each other. The database element must take precedence, but this idea could be further explored at a later stage. Also social networks could be used to promote the network (ex Facebook, Twitter)

CS highlighted the need to determine the function of the database. RT believes the database can be used to bring together various research groups that already exist around the world, to link isolated individuals, and also to explore what research has already been done. MVT brought up the model of H-NET, an academic network in the Humanities. This network allows for the dissemination of scholarly information and ideas around the world through newsletters which members subscribe to.

The database will be promoted through word of mouth and the use of e-flyers which can be sent relatively easily to institutions around the globe. Those wishing to join will be sent a questionnaire to fill in which will give us an indication of what information people would be happy to provide and promote. A template of categories can be provided for people to fill in when submitting information to allow for the information to be searched properly. CL will be setting up and managing the database. All applications to join will be validated by CL to protect the database.

The database will be accessed through the Research Network website. The website will also be able to promote not only the database but also other events and programmes engaging in researching Symbolism. This would then open up contact between different sectors (museums, universities, etc). The network will need to reach out as far as possible by contacting national research institutions and also across disciplines, but also it must be careful not to overcomplicate the database and website. This will not be a database of journals; we will have contact details of possibly the largest journals dealing with relevant research.

On the subject of sustainability, the database will need to be built using software and applications that can be easily transferred for future management. The question of where the database will be hosted (online or offline) after 3 years is still open.

To create the database itself CL will seek help from the University of Edinburgh's IT Applications division and also CS's contact from the Van Gogh Letters project. Data protection and other legal issues will also have to be considered and help will be sought.

RT/CL.

4 August 2010