

## Introduction

As the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century got under way, naturalism predominated French art and literature. Figures such as Emile Zola and Edouard Manet exemplify the philosophical impulse upon which naturalism was founded. Referring to Manet's work, Zola wrote, "Our art's essential aim is to objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of the idea); instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through a temperament)." With its roots in the century's earlier Romanticism and influenced by the sensibilities of the midcentury Pre-Raphaelites, the Symbolists arose in direct opposition to the concrete objectification underlying naturalism.

The Symbolists diverged from their contemporary Impressionists such as Monet, Cezanne and Seurat. As the two movements moved away from naturalism, the latter was influenced by the awakening of scientific discovery, while the former embraced the religiously motivated resurgence of hermeticism, myth and allegory. The Symbolists had a mutually influential relationship with the Pont-Aven School. Gauguin gave the Symbolists color and an expanded capacity for expression, while the Symbolists influenced Gauguin by elevating the importance of signifiers within his work.

The official beginning of the Symbolist movement is marked by the publication of the Symbolist manifesto by Jean Moréas in the Literary

Supplement to *Le Figaro* on September 18, 1886. “Romanticism,” wrote Moréas, “after having sounded every tumultuous alarm of revolt, after having had its days of glory and battle, lost its strength and its grace, abdicated its heroic audacities, made itself orderly, skeptical and full of good sense.” His manifesto heralded the establishment of a new poetry that sought “to clothe the Idea in sensual form which, nevertheless, would not be its goal in itself, but which, while serving to express the Idea, would remain exposed.”\*

“The Idea,” Moréas continued, “in its turn, must not be deprived of the sumptuous simars of external analogies; because the essential character of the Symbolic art consists of ever going until the concentration of the Idea in itself.” For Moréas “concrete phenomena” did not arise of their own accord, but were, rather, “the sensual appearances intended to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideas.”



Poster, Carlos Schwabe,  
1892, Lithograph,  
Picadelly Gallery, London

Important Symbolist poets included Charles Baudelaire, whose *Les Fleurs du Mal* is considered the first literary expression of the movement, Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé. Symbolism was most influential in the visual arts, however, and included painters such as Gustave Moreau, Fernand Knopff, Odion Redon, Edvard Munch and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes.

It took only a few years before the movement founded on Moréas’s manifesto merged with the growing interest in hermeticism, Gnostic Christianity and the

occult that arose as the fin de siècle approached. Sâr Péladan and others founded a Rosicrucian-styled order whose public face was the Salon de la Rose+Croix. Their first exhibit opened in March of 1892 and included more than seventy-five exhibitors. The Salon began with an overture especially composed by Eric Satie and followed a mass at St. Germain l'Auxerrois that included excerpts from Parsifal. Carlos Schwabe designed the poster for the inaugural salon. The first Salon included the notable Symbolist artists Jean Delville, Knopff, Alexandre Séon and Alphonse Osbert.

In his accompanying book, Péladan declared his goal to be nothing less than “to restore the cult of the IDEAL in all its splendour, with TRADITION as its base and BEAUTY as its means [and] to ruin realism, reform latin taste and create a school of idealist art.”†



Sâr Péladan

\*Translation by Eamon Graham, *Bobème Magazine*, 2004, II(6).

†Quoted by Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 186-7