

The Museum of Modern Art

50th Anniversary



NO. 69
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT IS REPRESENTED AT
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"All art is at once surface and symbol." Oscar Wilde

THE SYMBOLIST AESTHETIC, an exhibition of some 95 drawings, prints, paintings, sculptures and examples of decorative art drawn from The Museum of Modern Art's Collection, will go on view in the third-floor Sachs Galleries on December 23, 1980. Directed by Magdalena Dabrowski, Assistant Curator of the Department of Drawings, it will run through March 10, 1981.

As a movement, Symbolism flourished in Europe during the last two decades of the 19th century, first in French prose and verse, and soon thereafter in the visual arts as well. In painting, Symbolism derived its inspiration from the work of such poets as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé, whose verse was highly charged with emotion rather than empirical and anecdotal. The music of Richard Wagner, too, was an important influence on the ideas of this movement. "The musicality of the pictorial composition was considered one of the major qualities of a work.... Symbolism represented the search for new form and new content based on emotion," states Dabrowski.

The birth of Symbolism corresponded to a reaction against the philistinism which dominated so much of the latter half of 19th-century life-style and taste. Widespread dedication to material pursuits, industrialization and technology engendered disappointment among artists and left them eager for

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new spirituality and a sense of mystery in their lives. One of the central principles of Symbolism -- "suggest, never describe" -- was adopted by those French painters who sought to express their emotions and attitudes in subjective terms, through the use of the image as symbol, and through exploration of color and line to generalize emotion. "To infuse painting with meaning," explains Dabrowski, "Symbolists strove to rid it of its anecdotal quality. They aimed instead at the portrayal of various states of feeling which would convey universal truth." Themes common to Symbolist expression included isolation, unrequited love, the artist's position in society, solitude, jealousy, destiny, death: themes of internal drama rather than external reality.

Originating in France, Symbolism in its myriad forms soon spread throughout Europe and encompassed all the art of that time: music, literature, painting, the decorative arts, sculpture, architecture.

The first public formulation of the principles of Symbolism came in 1886 with the publication by Jean Moréas in Le Figaro of the "Manifesto of Symbolism." In that document, the basic tenets of literary Symbolism, such as "clothing the Idea in a sensitive form," were outlined. These theories coincided with those already evolving among the Symbolist artists, partly as a reaction to Impressionism, Naturalism and Positivism. Symbolism in painting "embraced a number of diverse trends and individual efforts which shared the will to transcend the phenomenal world through the spiritual," states Dabrowski. "Pictorial manifestations of Symbolism could not be identified with a single unified style. They were found, in France, in the

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synthetism of Gauguin and his Pont-Aven followers, the work of the Nabis, the pointillism of Seurat; in England in the Pre-Raphaelites; in Belgium "Les XX"; the Sezessionists in Vienna; and in Russia, Victor Borisov-Mussatov, Mikhail Vrubel and the Blue Rose Group."

Just as the roots of Symbolism reach as far back as the early 19th century to such sources as the German and French Romantic movements, so the Symbolist aesthetic itself does not end with the 19th century. The Symbolists, in stressing the decorative quality and liberating the ornamental line, emphasized the importance of the surface of a work of art. Affinities can be found in the work of such diverse artists as Vuillard and Klimt "where the profusion of decorative pattern dissolves the subject of the painting, creating an abstract surface mosaic," Dabrowski explains. The continuing growth of the ornamental style associated with Symbolism extended increasingly to the decorative and applied arts and to architecture. "Known as Art Nouveau in France, Belgium and Britain, Jugendstil in Germany and Sezession in Austria, it affected the taste in decoration, book illustration and typography for a long time after the turn of the century," states Dabrowski.

Symbolism, in its attempts to represent the inner states of emotion through composition and synthesized form, "resulted in art which demanded the viewer's participation. It required the spectator to relive the emotions experienced by the artist," says Dabrowski. The aim was to reach what Gauguin termed "the mysterious centers of thought." Dabrowski continues: "Symbolism, Art Nouveau and Jugendstil together can be considered to have provided the foundations of such modern 20th-century movements as Fauvism, Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism and Abstract Art."

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THE SYMBOLIST AESTHETIC establishes the link between the Symbolist movement and modernism by showing how the movement stressed the abstract image as the language of art, the translation of thought or idea, rather than as reality. Among the artists represented in this exhibition are Delville, Denis, Ensor, Gauguin, Hodler, Khnopff, Klimt, Munch, Redon, Seurat and Vuillard.

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