The Artist's Dream: Works of French Symbolism

Guest curated by Dr. Amy C. Wallace

To describe the unusual monochromatic paintings of Eugène Carrière (1849–1906), the French writer Jean Dolent (1835–1909) likened the artist's canvases to "realities having the magic of a dream."[1] Characterized by a dream-like evanescence, Carrière's paintings were part of the Symbolist movement in France. Originating as a literary movement with the publication of Charles Baudelaire's (1821–1867) book of poetry *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) (1857), Symbolism flourished during the 1880s and 1890s in the visual arts. Symbolist artists reacted against the empiricism of nineteenth-century movements like Realism and Naturalism. Rather than recording observable phenomena in nature, the Symbolists were drawn to the invisible realm of subjective ideas. In their quest to visually express subjective ideas, Symbolist artists drew inspiration from dreaming in the development of their imagery and style. This exhibition explores dreaming as a metaphor for artistic vision in the Symbolist movement in France and features works by Eugène Carrière, Auguste Rodin, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Jean-Jacques Henner, Édouard Vuillard, Sarah Bernhardt, Henri Fantin-Latour, Jeanne Jacquemin, Camille Claudel, and other leading Symbolist figures.

[1] Jean Dolent, *Amoureux d'art* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1888), 240, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k146545m.

The altered states of consciousness associated with sleeping and dreaming were enduring areas of interest for the Symbolists. Often these states were literally represented, such as in Eugène Carrière's *The Sleep* (before 1897). In other instances, they were evoked figuratively through subject matter or style. The discipline of psychology was formalizing as a field of academic study with events in Paris such as the First International Congress on Physiological Psychology in 1889. That same year the physician Jules Héricourt (1850–1938) published an important article on the notion of the unconscious, in which he alleged that "the unconscious activity of the mind is a scientific truth established beyond any doubt…. Even in daily life, our conscious mind remains under the direction of the unconscious."[2] Meanwhile, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot's (1825–1893) research into hypnosis also contributed to the belief that individuals operate according to conscious and unconscious impulses. While these developments originated in the scientific sphere, they provide a wider intellectual context in which to situate the Symbolists' interest in the psychic realm.[3]

The dream-like quality of Carrière's style is apparent in *Painting* (c. 1899). Carrière uses his typical monochromatic

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[2] Jules Héricourt, "L'Activité inconsciente de l'esprit," *Revue scientifique* 44 (1889): 257–68, quoted in Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 75.

[3] On the intersection of Symbolism and fin-de-siècle scientific theories, see a special issue of *RACAR* edited by Serena Keshavjee, "The Visual Culture of Science and Art in Fin-de-Siècle France," special issue, *RACAR: revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 34, no. 1 (2009). See also Filiz Eda Burhan, "Visions and Visionaries: Nineteenth Century Psychological Theory, the Occult Sciences and the Formation of the Symbolist Aesthetic in France" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1979), and Serena Keshavjee,"'L'Art inconscient' and 'L'Esthétique des esprits': Science, Spiritualism and the Imaging of the Unconscious in French Symbolist Art" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2002).

palette and *non-finito* technique—the intentional creation of an unfinished effect—to render an allegory of painting. The figure of Painting holds a palette as she gently positions her model's head, while the model gazes into the distance. Carrière used his daughters as models for this painting; he frequently depicted members of his family as we can also see in *The Artist with his Wife and their Son Jean-René* (c. 1895) and *Madame Eugène Carrière* (c. 1895). Carrière enjoyed a close friendship with sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). Although the artists worked in different media, one can observe a formal continuity between their painting and sculpture. Like the models in Carrière's paintings, the figures in some of Rodin's sculptures, such as *Danaïd* (1889), appear to emerge from the material of their creation. While Rodin admired Michelangelo (1475–1564) and emulated the Renaissance artist's treatment of the human form, imagination was also integral to Rodin's artistic process, and he believed that "in representing the universe as he imagines it, the artist articulates his own dreams."[4]

Although Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) did not identify with a particular artistic movement, he was an important precursor to Symbolism. His proto-Symbolist murals and paintings left an indelible mark upon a younger generation of artists, including Odilon Redon (1840–1916), Félix Vallotton (1865–1925), and Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940). Puvis's paintings frequently portray what can be described as an Arcadian dream—an idealized vision of civilization existing in

[4] Auguste Rodin, "Conversation with Paul Gsell (1911)," in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dorra (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 76.

harmony with nature. *The Benefits of Peace (Study for "Inter Artes et Naturam")* (1890) portrays the French city of Rouen—where the mural based on this study is located—as a modern-day Arcadia. Puvis combines classicizing elements, such as fragments of classical architecture and a frieze-like composition, with modern details, namely the contemporary dress of the figures. *Study for "Saint Genevieve Provisioning Paris"* (c. 1897–98) was created in preparation for one of Puvis's most important decorative schemes: his mural cycles for the Panthéon, previously the church of Sainte Geneviève, in Paris. This preparatory work depicts an episode during the siege of Paris by the Franks, when Genevieve (c. 422–512) delivered grain to the city at a time of famine. A kneeling figure embraces a starving child and looks upwards towards Genevieve, who stands outside the picture plane of this study and appears in the mural as an otherworldly figure dressed in white. Puvis's paintings were described as possessing "the power to suggest dreams that complete themselves in thoughts."[5] It was precisely this suggestive power that attracted the Symbolists to Puvis.

Along with Puvis de Chavannes, Jean-Jacques Henner (1829–1905) was a proto-Symbolist whose paintings had a significant impact on younger artists like Carrière. Henner frequently used religious iconography to explore the theme of death, as is evident in *The Levite of Ephraim and his Dead Wife* (1895), based on the gruesome biblical story. Henner employed

[5] Ferdinand Brunetière, "Discours de M. Brunetière," *La Plume*, no. 138 (January 15, 1895): 49, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k15599n.

dramatic *chiaroscuro*—the use of strong tonal contrasts—to focus attention on the lifeless body, which appears to glow as if illuminated from inside. His style is also characterized by the use of *sfumato*, the subtle blending of colours to produce softened outlines. The otherworldly quality of light and hazy contours imbue Henner's paintings with a dream-like effect, one that led a contemporary viewer to describe Henner as "all dreamy simplicity."[6] Henner painted a series of red-haired women in profile, a subject he returned to with such frequency that it was said that "almost all the red-haired models in France are known as Henner's models."[7] The women gaze into the distance, an expression suggestive of being lost in reverie but that was also associated with entering a hypnotic state. In other paintings depicting nymphs and naiads, Henner regularly portrayed these mythological figures with red hair. The red-haired sitters in these paintings lack the individualized features of Henner's commissioned portraits and more closely resemble otherworldly beings than identifiable figures.

While the origins of Symbolism were literary, the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of the movement shaped important developments in theatre. The early 1890s in France were marked by theatrical reform, and the Nabi painter Édouard Vuillard was integral to these changes. Vuillard was involved in founding the experimental Théâtre de L'Oeuvre in 1893 with the director Lugné-Poe (1869–1940) and the poet

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[6] François Thiébault-Sisson, "Jean-Jacques Henner and his Work," *Arts and Letters: An Illustrated Review* 1 (January 1889): 66, http://books.google.ca/books?id=uD89AQAAMAAJ.

[7] "In Henner's Studio," *Current Literature: A Magazine of Contemporary Record* 19, no. 6 (June 1896): 552, http://books.google.ca/books?id=OI9vgl7qomEC.

Camille Mauclair (1872–1945). Théâtre de L'Oeuvre was opened as a venue for Symbolist theatre, which shared many of the principles that defined Symbolist art and was defended by one proponent as "a pretext to dream."[8] In addition to designing stage sets, Vuillard created playbill covers for ten theatrical productions, including Gerhart Hauptmann's (1862–1946) *Âmes solitaires*. Vuillard's continued interest in the theatre is evident in *Jeanne Raunay in "Iphigenia"* (1899), which depicts a scene from the eighteenth-century opera *Iphigénie en Tauride (Iphigenia in Tauris)* (1779) that was performed at the Théâtre de la Renaissance in December 1899. The artist has likely captured an episode from the opera's first act, when Iphigenia recounts a disturbing dream.[9]

In addition to her theatrical career, the actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) was accomplished as a painter and sculptor and exhibited regularly at the Salon. Bernhardt was prolific in her diverse roles as an actress, artist, and writer. From 1893 to 1899, she was the artistic director of the Théâtre de la Renaissance, where Vuillard saw *Iphigénie en Tauride.* As an actress, Bernhardt was accustomed to transforming herself on the stage. In *Self-Portrait as a Sphinx* (1880), she transforms herself into a mythological creature. Hybrid animals recur throughout Symbolist art due to their mythological associations. In this decorative inkwell, Bernhardt has undergone a metamorphosis not unlike the ones she enacted

[8] Pierre Quillard, "De l'inutilité absolue de la mise en scène exacte," *Revue d'art dramatique* 22, no. 129 (1891): 182, http://books.google.ca/books?id=gRsbAAAAYAAJ.
[9] Antoine Salomon and Guy Cogeval, *Vuillard: The Inexhaustible Glance* (Milan: Skira and Wildenstein Institute, 2003), 1:212.

to embody her dramatic personas. The French title of this sculpture is *Autoportrait en chimère*. In addition to denoting the mythological creature, *chimère* means an illusion or dream. This fantastical portrayal of Bernhardt might equally be interpreted as the artist's vision of herself in a dream.

While he is primarily known for his still lifes and portraits, Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904) also frequently portrayed mythological and allegorical subjects that were Symbolist. For these subjects, the artist adopted a more painterly approach, manipulating the paint on the canvas after it had partially dried.[10] Fantin's paintings in this style have been called his imaginative scenes since they depict fantastical subjects as though seen through a dream-like haze. Reflecting on the range of Fantin's oeuvre, the writer René-Marc Ferry (1864–1912) observed after the artist's death that "when he found realism too limited and stifling, he lost himself in dreams."[11] *Bather* is an example of Fantin's imaginative style and likely depicts the mythological figure Ondine, a water nymph. Partially obscured by shadow, the figure turns towards the viewer as she wades through the water. From 1890 until his death, Fantin exhibited only his imaginative works—paintings executed in the manner of *Bather* or *The Dance*—at the annual Salon, which attests to their significance for the artist.[12]

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[10] Barbara A. Ramsay, "A Note on Fantin's Technique," in *Fantin-Latour* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1983), 59.
[11] René-Marc Ferry, *L'éclair*, 12 May 1906, quoted in Michel Hoog, "Fantin-Latour and His Contemporaries," in *Fantin-Latour* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1983), 28.
[12] Douglas Druick, "The Late Imaginative Works," in *Fantin-Latour* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1983), 343.

The Symbolist prints and drawings of Jeanne Jacquemin (1863–1938) were praised by her contemporaries. However, the full extent of Jacquemin's contributions have been obscured through history. In 1894, the writer Edmond Pilon (1874–1945) situated Jacquemin within the Symbolist movement and expressed the utmost admiration for her art: "I would like to write several long chapters on the beautiful, poignant rhythm that is always displayed in her painting. This enchantress, who comes centuries after Botticelli and Ghirlandaio and lives as a contemporary of Gustave Moreau, has had the amazing audacity to reveal the divine mysteries of her garden of dreams to us."[13] Jacquemin's *Saint George* (before March 1898) depicts the Christian knight who saved the King of Libya's daughter by slaying a dragon. Rather than depicting the climactic moment when Saint George thrusts his lance into the dragon, as Émile Bernard (1868–1941) shows in his illustration for the July 1895 issue of the Symbolist art magazine *L'Ymagier*, Jacquemin portrays the saint in a state of calm contemplation. The attributes normally associated with Saint George—such as his white horse and lance—are eschewed in favour of presenting a psychological portrait of this Christian martyr. Due to the figure's androgynous appearance, it has been suggested that Jacquemin may have depicted herself as Saint George.[14] If indeed Jacquemin intended *Saint George* to be a disguised self-portrait, it is a powerful counterimage to the trope of the female seductress that pervades Symbolist art.

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[13] Edmond Pilon, "Peintres impressionnistes et symbolistes (6e Exposition chez le Barc de Boutterville)," *La Plume*, no. 118 (March 15, 1894): 116–17, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k155989.

[14] Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, "Jeanne Jacquemine, peintre et égérie symboliste," *Revue de l'art*, no. 141 (2003): 64.

The sculptor Camille Claudel (1864–1943) prodigiously captured a spectrum of emotions in her figurative works, which together stand as a testament to the human condition. *The Implorer* (modelled 1898, cast c. 1905) is one of three figures depicted in Claudel's monumental *The Age of Maturity*, which is widely considered to be a masterpiece of French sculpture and represents the height of Claudel's artistic achievement. The supplicant gesture of *The Implorer* conveys the conflicting states of hope and despair and typifies the Symbolists' interest in human psychology. The reception of Claudel's work has been informed by the fact that she studied with Rodin and that they were later in a romantic relationship. Two sculptures in this exhibition, however, challenge the ordinary narrative of influence from teacher to student that has shaped our understanding of Claudel's talent: Claudel's *Young Girl with a Sheaf* (modelled 1887, cast 1983) and Rodin's *Brother and Sister* (1890). The correspondence between the pose and features of the female figures, as well as the earlier date of *Young Girl with a Sheaf*, bespeaks the influence of Claudel upon Rodin.[15]

Rather than searching for subjects in the external world, the Symbolists probed the depths of human psychology. Dreaming was believed to open a window to the unconscious and thus to the human psyche. In their imagery and style, the Symbolists exploited the aesthetic potential of dreaming. They also drew upon collective symbols found in mythology and

[15] Reine-Marie Paris and Arnaud de La Chapelle have dated Claudel's *Young Girl with a Sheaf* to 1887. See Reine-Marie Paris and Arnaud de La Chapelle, *L'Oeuvre de Camille Claudel: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1990), 111.

religion to create art that was imbued with specific cultural meanings. By the turn of the twentieth century, the movement of Symbolism was fading into darkness. The fin-de-siècle interest in dreaming culminated with the publication of Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). In this famous book, Freud elaborated a theory of the unconscious and its relationship to dreaming—a relationship that had, in the preceding decades, been explored in the art of the Symbolists.

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