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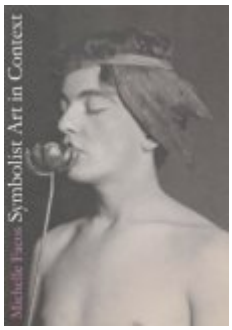
Michelle Facos. *Symbolist Art in Context.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. x + 264 pp. Illustrations $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-25582-1.



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Of all modern art movements, symbolism remains the least studied and the most elusive. High modernist art historical narratives are partially to blame; they treat symbolism's retrograde concern with subject matter over form and obsessions with the literary, the occult, and the femme fatale as embarrassing aberrations in an otherwise neat, lockstep progression toward pure abstraction. But another portion of the blame surely lies with the nebulous, often willfully obscure writings of symbolist critics themselves. To read the manifestos of Jean Moréas and Albert Aurier, to name only the most widely known, is to emerge just as confused, if not more so, as to what exactly constitutes symbolist art. While scholarly interest in symbolism has revived over the last four decades, the lingering effects of modernist disdain and *fin-de-siècle* mystification are reflected in a continuing dearth of introductory texts, particularly in English. The last English-language survey, Robert Goldwater's *Symbolism* (1979), has been supplemented only by translations of Robert Delevoy's *Journal du symbolisme* (1982) and Rodolphe Rapetti's *Le Symbolisme* (2006), the latter particularly disappointing in its failure to provide a genuine reevaluation of the movement that takes into account the scholarship of the last twenty years. Michelle Facos's new survey is therefore especially welcome. Written with refreshing clarity, it provides a more comprehensive and accessible overview of this notoriously difficult movement than any of its predecessors and should prove invaluable in the teaching both of symbolism and nineteenth-century art in general.

In light of the many ambiguous and conflicting definitions of symbolism posited by its creators and original commentators, it has become all but compulsory for any overview to begin by wrestling with what exactly falls under its rubric--a task further complicated by the problem that literary definitions of symbolism (Aurier's manifesto on symbolism in painting only appeared five years after Moréas's on literature) seldom dovetail perfectly with the visual arts. Facos, while taking care to address the importance of literary theories to the formulation of a symbolist pictorial

aesthetic, provides a simple and extremely useful framework for looking at symbolist art. Rather than defining it solely in terms of content or in terms of technique, she considers both equally significant. In other words, a work that addresses the inexpressible or intangible by way of either, or both, of these elements can be considered symbolist. Crucially, she couches the book as a study of symbolist works of art, rather than symbolist artists, thus circumventing the vexed question of what makes a symbolist artist. Some who were promoted as such, like Odilon Redon, refused the label themselves, while others, such as Maurice Denis, did not adhere to a symbolist aesthetic for the duration of their careers.

As the title indicates, Facos's aim is to firmly ground symbolist art in the intellectual, social, and cultural ferment of late-nineteenth-century Europe. Rather than fall into the trap of treating it as a collective flight into ivory-tower isolationism, she pinpoints two different strands of symbolist art and thought--pessimistic and optimistic--which can be further divided into introverted and extroverted expressions. While this schema risks oversimplification, it underscores the movement's multifaceted and frequently contradictory nature and provides a useful framework for the novice. Following in the footsteps of recent social histories of symbolism--Sharon L. Hirsh's *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (2004), Barbara Larson's *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon* (2005), and Patricia Mathews's *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (1999)--a strong emphasis is placed on symbolism's relationship to and interaction with the debates and concerns of its time: urbanization and scientific progress, the specter of decadence and degeneration, the increasingly contested role of religion, and the politics of gender. Perhaps because of Facos's background as a scholar of Nordic art, the present text largely avoids the Francocentrism of previous surveys, although the importance of French art and theory is certainly given its due; symbolism is presented as very much an international movement, its borders taking in Poland, Italy, and Scandinavia as well as the more frequently discussed Belgium, Germany, and Austria. The treatment of Britain, confined primarily to brief discussions of William Blake, James McNeill Whistler, and the Pre-Raphaelites in the chapter on "precursors," could have been more thorough, and the absence of George Frederic Watts from this chapter is unfortunate. Particularly welcome in this vein is a chapter on the phenomenon of National Romanticism, a topic often absent from surveys of symbolism and one that, given the lucid treatment it receives here, clearly deserves further attention. While the stress on social history arguably outweighs coverage of the literary and theoretical aspects of symbolist art, these themes have been treated frequently enough elsewhere that this is a relatively minor criticism. Indeed, the chapter on the promotion of symbolist art through literary networks, dealers, and exhibits is exemplary in its integration of the literary and sociocultural aspects of the movement.

The concern with context also informs an illuminating chapter on symbolist currents in twentieth-century art. Symbolism has all too often been presented as a dead end, a vestigial branch on the tree of modernism, although its significance to surrealism has long been taken for granted. In addition to addressing the debt of surrealism and metaphysical painting to symbolist art, Facos presents a convincing case for considering the art of such modernist giants as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Constantin Brâncusi, Vassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and František Kupka as an outgrowth of symbolist aesthetics and philosophies. This emphasis on symbolism's enduring vitality and relevance should go some way toward reinstating it not only into the teaching of nineteenth-century art, but also--and crucially--into the teaching of modern art.

A few words should be said about the bibliography. In keeping with the book's status as an introductory text, Facos has chosen to reference translated, reprinted, and anthologized texts wherever possible. That she is compelled to rely upon such heavily edited collections as Henri Dorra's *Symbolist Art Theories: a Critical Anthology* (1994) and must sometimes direct the reader to translated texts only available online is not a reflection of her scholarship, but rather of the continuing lag in Anglophone study of symbolism. It is to be hoped that the present book, by introducing a new generation of students to symbolist art, may help begin to close this gap.

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