

THE FENRIS WOLF

Light and color are used in non-realistic ways and this was primarily meant to stir the emotions, create a vagueness and a sense of uncertainty and confusion in the viewer. The image is dominated by an opening flanked by two pillars. These pillars are decorated with skulls, and behind each skull shines a yellow circle. On the other side of the opening there is a naked woman on the floor. Again, we can't really tell where she's looking as her gaze is veiled and dreaming. That's all Knopff shares, and this is significant of both his own and the general Symbolist art of the late 19th century. Khnopff never wanted to give any answers. The answer lies within the viewer. In this sense, Khnopff was a precursor of much of 20th century art, in which the perspective of the viewer becomes a co-creating force.

In this essay, we have wanted to share some reflections, points of entry and attitudes to the rich artistic world of Fernand Khnopff and the late 19th century Symbolism. We have not, as is common within academic, scholastic art criticism, tried to explain every detail of each artwork in question. We think that would decimate both the work and the individual apprehension of it. Symbolist art is vague in itself and that has always been one of its main traits. You could even go so far as to say that here, even symbols become redundant. In the 1880s Jean Moreau wrote a Symbolist manifesto in which he put forth that the Symbolist art is about hinting. Khnopff's art should not be precised, limited or defined. It should live on in an ambiguous twilight. It should suggest rather than define. His art is to a great extent about getting away from rational thought and preconceived notions. That one consciously central element in his paintings is *silence* is totally in line with this attitude. The silence never explains. It merely suggests and hints.

REFERENCES:

- k www.peladan.org (2014-02-18)
- k Cornell, Peter (1981), *Den hemliga källan. Om initiationsmönster i konst, litteratur och politik*, Gidlunds bokförlag, 1988 (1981)
- k Ehrhardt Ingrid & Reynolds, Simon (ed), *Kingdom of the Soul: Symbolist Art in Germany 1870-1920*, Prestel, 2000
- k *Fernand Khnopff*, Lebeer Hossmann, 1987
- k Gibson, Michael & Nerret, Gilles, *Symbolism*, Taschen 2006 (1996)
- k Goldwater, Robert, *Symbolism*, Harper & Row, 1979
- k Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art*, Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1972
- k Rapetti, Rodolphe, *Symbolism*, Flammarion, 2006
- k Wilton, Andrew & Upstone, Robert (ed), *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts, Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910*, Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Péladan's Artistic Revolution Meets the 21st Century

Sasha Chaitow

Where Religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for Art to save the spirit of religion by recognising the figurative value of the mythic symbols which the former would have us believe in their literal sense, and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation.

– Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art*.¹

INTRODUCTION:

OF SYNCHRONICITY, INSPIRATION, AND MAGIC IN THE MUNDANE

I write these lines in deep midwinter, from a medieval village by a river, on the cultural crossroads that is Corfu, a historically distinctive island in Northwestern Greece known for its long artistic tradition. In this small corner of Europe a sequence of events is unfolding that seems nothing short of miraculous, which reminds us that the impact of history should not be sought in the short term, and which demonstrates the wonder of modern communications technology. It is a tale worth sharing, and a prime example of how culture can be driven, and what it means to apply scholarship to the mundane world. Though Péladan's life and work are the topic of my doctoral research, I maintain that scholarship should serve culture and not remain enclosed in the hallowed halls of academia. A series of serendipitous events led to what is rapidly turning into quite a cultural happening, and it seems fitting that before explaining the background and sharing the source of the inspiration, the story should be recorded first.

It all began when I received an invitation to write an article for the catalogue of a bold new art exhibition that was being organised in Madrid, Spain. The cultural collective behind *Semana Gotica de Madrid*, together with Mentenebre Cultural Association and supported by the Autonomous University of Madrid, were planning a month long sequence of cultural happenings and events. This

¹ Richard Wagner, "Religion und Kunst," *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen : Volume X*. 211-252, 1880.

THE FENRIS WOLF

year's programme included a month-long Neo-Symbolist Salon based on the Rosicrucian Salons of Sâr Péladan. In their call for art submissions, they noted that this exhibition had been inspired by the original Symbolist movement, and spoke of the recontextualisation of key Symbolist motifs within contemporary art, which incorporates "Neo-Symbolism, new artists of the soul". The brief ended as follows:

We look to Decadent Paris, where the Salons were the main way of presenting new artistic developments to the public. But we do not try to emulate the grand salons of the Louvre, or even the Salon des refusés where the Impressionists made their mark; rather we look to the adventure of a visionary, the self-proclaimed Sâr Péladan who founded the Salon de la Rose + Croix which involved mainly the current Symbolist artists. While somewhat removed from Péladan's eccentricity, but following some of the principles that inspired its aesthetic taste, over a century later we present this Neo-Symbolist Salon. Artistic proposals for exhibition should be based on Symbolist iconography but reinterpreted within the parameters of counter-culture, anti-art, in opposition to the market and the establishment. For the true essence of the art of our time is quite far away and must be found in the underground.²

After an exciting brainstorming session with the organisers, I wrote the catalogue article on Péladan's aesthetics and sent three of my recent illustrations of his work for inclusion in the exhibition. Synchronicity being what it is, within the same week I received a call from a Greek publisher asking me if I'd consider writing a book on Péladan for the general reader, while my editor at the Greek newspaper gave me a weekly art column in which I promptly began to develop a series of articles on the value of the arts in the context of the economic and social crisis currently plaguing Greece.

The weeks and months rolled by, the exhibition in Madrid was mounted to international acclaim, the book had been published, and a few weeks ago I began planning one of several book launches from my medieval hideaway in Corfu. Some of my Greek colleagues began to think it would be a nice idea to pair the book launch with a weekend break in Corfu... And thus the idea for a one-day symposium was born. Being a native, the task of organising the event fell to me, and since my associates and I all have very different areas of interest within the broad sphere of arts, letters, esoteric research and philosophy, I had to find a way of stream-lining the event to give it a central focus. The one, striking common

² The original call to artists (in Spanish) may be found at <http://www.herejiaybelleza.com/convocatoria-a-artistas-i-salon-neo-simbolista/hayqueponerindex.php/convocatoria-a-artistas-i-salon-neo-simbolista/>

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

thread was our determination and passion for driving culture forward in spite of the crisis that has stunted the arts and letters across Europe, but particularly in Greece.

So I asked the speakers to focus on the practical value and applications of the arts and letters within this sociocultural context: one in which the world around us is experiencing rapid, vertiginous change to which circumstance calls us to either adapt, or be caught up in a vortex of confusion, and often despair. Further creative brainstorming resulted in a three-day event, which has now taken on the character of a miniature Salon after Péladan's example, incorporating a group art exhibition featuring local Corfiot artists, poetry readings and string quartets, Platonic dialogues unravelling Péladan's vision, and a series of talks on the practical, applicable value of studying and communicating through and about the arts, philosophy, history, culture, and indeed, occulture at times of sweeping cultural change. The lecture topics range from poetry inspired by archival discoveries to Nietzschean thoughts on the re-enchantment of the world, with all the arts – and several of the humanities being well represented.

As I write, the event is less than a month away, yet it seems to have captured the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of Corfu and beyond. Announcements have already begun circulating in the local and national media – without a single press release having been sent out– art submissions are pouring in, and I am already being asked whether it will become an annual fixture. All of which would suggest that Péladan's vision for igniting a social renaissance through the arts is just what the doctor ordered for this embattled corner of Southern Europe. Though Péladan remains a complete unknown outside specialist circles, his idea is being revived and embraced by the very people for whom he conceived it: by artists, poets, philosophers and art-lovers. There is tragic irony in the fact that Péladan was ridiculed and vilified during his life-time, yet over a century later, it may yet be that his grand vision becomes a vehicle for the very dialogue that he so desperately sought to incite.

It is the historian's curse to be constantly mindful of the antecedents and influences weighing on our time, and the similarities between the *fin-de-siècle* and our own time – at least as it is experienced in Southern Europe – are quite stunning. The lived experience of the Greek crisis is quite different to the way in which it is portrayed in the international news alongside info-graphics of wanton spending and accusations of tax evasion, but there is no need for an in-depth account of the harrowing reality faced by the population. Suffice it to note that this is a society being forced to ask itself some hard questions, a nation at the crossroads between east and west still struggling with its own identity and cultural narratives while being subjected to overpowering geopolitical and economic forces. In essence, it is experiencing what anthropologist Victor

Turner has aptly termed “moments when common traditional meanings of life and history have become indeterminate”, and in such moments, it is to myth and its many modes of expression that societies turn in order to “remake cultural sense”.³ This is the common point of reference between the French *fin-de-siècle* and Greece today, and this is what underpins the rationale behind the decision to introduce and attempt to implement Péladan’s idea of a creative crossroads where the arts become a locus for dialogue: for remaking cultural sense.

Our history has yet to be written, and the success or failure of this creative experiment will be judged by others in years to come. When viewed in the here and now, the role of the arts and letters is, among other things, to bear witness. This act of recording this endeavour as it unfolds is just that: to bear witness to an attempt at using scholarship to produce something of real, practical – perhaps delightfully subversive – use to culture as it is created: on street corners, in dusty bookshops, and in the minds and hearts of fellow citizens.

THE INSPIRATION: LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The *fin-de-siècle* was a time when French society was coming to terms with the multiple endings and beginnings witnessed in the wake of the French Revolution. As industry, technology, and science propelled the Western world into the modern era, the multiple rifts within the uneasy French Republic began to heal, new freedoms began to be explored and social boundaries torn down. This was a brave new world where anything might have seemed possible, but apart from these new beginnings, it also marked the end of an era for which Romantic poets and painters had already grieved in the wake of the Enlightenment. Traditionalists mourned the order and security of a world apparently lost to materialism and rampant decadence, and yearned for the romantic notion of a re-imagined glorious past where God was in his heaven, the Pope ruled the Holy Roman Empire, social order was maintained by divine mandate and Catholicism provided both the ritual and the rulebook for aristocrat and pauper alike.

Today this sequence of events may echo as some distant narrative of little relevance, but the inhabitants of the *fin-de-siècle* represented a generation poised on a threshold, many of whom were perhaps prepared to shed their forefathers’ dreams of restoring the *ancien régime*, prepared to embrace the idea of creating a new society, but not all of them were prepared to do so at the expense of powerful aspects of their cultural identity; the wounds were perhaps still too fresh, the changes still too radical. To borrow a remark from historian Michael Burleigh, ‘eighteen centuries did not disappear from men’s characters just by

³ Victor Turner, ‘Social Dramas and Stories about them,’ in *On Narrative*, ed. by W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 164.

declaring it to be’ so, ‘the psychological legacy of the *ancien régime* did not simply vanish,’ and people were not ‘empty glass vessels’ to be ‘filled with the content of [the revolutionaries’] choice.’⁴ This sentiment held true for those circles of intellectuals and visionaries in the following generations, for whom letting go of their past was one sacrifice too many – even though, ironically, it was the Revolution itself that gave them the opportunity to re-imagine it in the ever-more fantastical forms that they did.

It was a mercurial world where established order turned to quicksand; where one had to adapt or be damned. Yet we cannot underestimate the impact on the sensibilities of devout traditionalists faced with the rejection of royal authority by the National Assembly that was to bring a century of political strife, nor that of the abrupt weakening of the Catholic church through the imposition of *laïcité* in what has been read as an echo of the Protestant reformation,⁵ whereby the emblematic motto “sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gracia” was replaced by the enduring battle cry of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*.⁶

Within this context, Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918) represented a generation standing on the cusp of modernity, fighting it in name, yet inexorably ushering it in. By his time the internal religious and political turmoil had begun to subside, and the decadent period – literary and literal – coexisted alongside a period of unbridled creativity in many spheres. Where the previous generation – typified by Péladan’s father – had reached out to the primordial past to re-enforce the values of the *ancien régime*, Péladan transmuted them into a new *legendarium* for his generation. He revived the archetypal concept of the androgyne, lauded as the ideal to which men and women should strive for harmonious relationships, by extension, harmonious societies, and above all, the way back to reintegration with the divine source. Through his novels and dramas, his tales of fallen angels and lonesome mages, forbidden love and tortuous redemption, he sought to redeem the Great Adversary himself – for Péladan’s theology had no place for eternal damnation, only for Promethean self-sacrifice and self-redemption.⁷ His invitation, expressed through his Salons, called Paris to rise out of the swamp of decadence and to reach for the light through beauty. It didn’t matter if they understood, he thought, if his artist-priests inundated them with ensouled art, they had only to look, and keep on looking until the symbols worked their magic. He took into account that not everyone had the intellectual, educational,

⁴ Burleigh, *Earthly Powers*, pp. 92-93; David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism 1680-1800* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁵ Piers Paul Read, *The Dreyfus Affair: The Story of the Most Infamous Miscarriage of Justice in French History* (London: Bloomsbury 2012), pp. 8-9.

⁶ Ibid. p. 9.

⁷ See Sasha Chaitow, “Legends of the Fall Retold”, *The Fenris Wolf* 6 (Stockholm: Edda, 2013), pp. 228-269 for a detailed article on Péladan’s Promethean Luciferianism.

THE FENRIS WOLF

or other capacity to explore occult thought in the same way, and selected as democratic a medium as he could: the language of myth and the medium of art – all the while railing against high-minded academic art that he considered overrated and soulless. His grand vision was no less than a spiritual revolution with beauty as his supreme weapon and art as the *coup de grâce* against the ‘disenchantment of the world’ so prevalent as first the scientific world-view and then the industrial revolution completed their conquest of the Western mind, in an age he regarded as characterized by rampant materialism and futile decadence.

It went disastrously wrong in the end, and the reasons for that are quite another story. Nonetheless, Péladan and his opus represent both the end of an era, and the start of one, where he took the old and turned it into something in tune with his time, where he embraced the democracy of his era even as he strived to raise his compatriots to a new spiritual level. Where his father had tried to use myth to revive the past, Péladan used it to remake the present, and even though he failed in his own objectives, his influence – reaching as far afield as South America, Russia, and Greece, suggests otherwise.

THE SALONS DE LA ROSE-CROIX

In the spring of 1892, the Paris *gendarmerie* were perplexed at the sight of a flood of crowds and carriages on their way to the Galeries Durand-Ruel, where they were met by a curious bearded man wearing purple velvet robes and answering to the name of a Babylonian mage. The exhibition catalogue welcomed them with the lines:

Artist, you are a priest: Art is the great mystery and, if your effort results in a masterpiece, a ray of divinity will descend as on an altar. Artist, you are a king: Art is the true empire, if your hand draws a perfect line, the cherubim themselves will descend to revel in their reflection... They may one day close the Church, but [what about] the Museum? If Notre-Dame is profaned, the Louvre will officiate... Humanity, oh citizens, will always go to mass, when the priest will be Bach, Beethoven, Palestrina: one cannot make the sublime organ into an atheist! Brothers in all the arts, I am sounding a battle cry: let us form a holy militia for the salvation of idealism....we will build the Temple of Beauty ...for the artist is a priest, a king, a mage, for art is a mystery, the only true empire, the great miracle...⁸

Péladan proceeded to organise a further five Salons between 1893 and 1897,

⁸ Josephin Péladan, *Catalogue du Salon de la Rose + Croix* (Paris: Galerie Durand-Ruel, 1892), pp. 7-11.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

under the auspices of his organisation, *The Order of the Rose + Croix of the Temple and the Grail*. His purpose was to expose the general public to a form of symbolic art that would “rip Love out of the Western soul and replace it with the love of Beauty, the love of the Ideal, the love of Mystery.”

For the organisation of this first, spectacular Salon, he had issued a call to artists some months earlier, with the aim of contravening the academically accepted art of his time, which he despised and frequently railed against in his articles in the French press. The invitation to artists to send their work for consideration for the first *Salon de la Rose + Croix* had the tone of a manifesto:

The Order forbids any contemporary representations, rustic, military, flowers, animals, genres such as history, and portraits or landscapes. But it welcomes all allegories, legends, mysticism and myth, as well as expressive faces if they are noble, or nude studies if they are beautiful. Because you must make BEAUTY to enter the Rose + Croix Salon.⁹

The result was an immense impact on the Parisian art world, and eventually, on the whole Symbolist movement. The first Salon welcomed over fifty thousand visitors, intrigued by the curious poster depicting three women at various stages of initiatory revelation that had covered the walls of Paris a few weeks earlier, as well as by regular articles, announcements, and controversies printed in *Le Figaro* over the preceding year. The Salons included musical and theatrical performances alongside the exhibitions, giving an unparalleled impetus and unity to the Symbolist movement. Yet, the Salons and their instigator were as notorious as they were intriguing, and following numerous public controversies, within a few short years, both Salons and Mage were forgotten, to be recalled only as a utopian fantasy of an eccentric buffoon.

This curious man who in the 1890s went by the name Sâr Merodack and claimed an ancestry of Babylonian royalty, left a spectacular legacy of over one hundred books, several thousand articles, and was responsible for inspiring a generation of artists and authors as far afield as Russia and South America. Today his works are all but forgotten, encountered only within treatises on the Decadent movement or in brief references in academic studies of *fin-de-siècle* French Occultism, and the majority of these references tend to perpetuate the sense of his eccentricity and peculiarity.

I first encountered Péladan’s name in an academic study of Rosicrucianism; one of the few to acknowledge, albeit briefly, that there was more to the man than the tarnished reputation that had survived in most references to his name.¹⁰

⁹ Péladan, “Le Salon de la Rose + Croix”, *Le Figaro*, 2 September 1891, p. 1.

¹⁰ Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*

THE FENRIS WOLF

Initially, I was sceptical, especially since apart from some rare works by his loyal followers, the vast majority of the existing biographies of Péladan are deeply disparaging, dismissing him as an eccentric fool. His *oeuvre* is vast, and can be disheartening on account of the florid lyricism of his novels, and the turgidity of his theoretical prose. Yet, if one makes the effort to read Péladan on his own terms, what emerges is a man with a clear and coherent vision, whose life's work was an attempt to "build the Temple of Beauty" of which he wrote, and whose every action was tuned to a conscious attempt to disseminate this vision.

INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

After an unconventional childhood and education, by the age of 26 Péladan had already formulated a complex, coherent cosmology of his own, based in part on world mythology, which he had studied from a young age, and deeply influenced by a tradition of pansophy and "philosophical" history that was eclipsed during the Enlightenment, but which remained a significant element in esoteric thought; a complex of cultural currents that enjoyed a significant revival in the second half of the nineteenth century. Pansophy is understood as a way of combining all human knowledge according to analogical principles, and viewing human history through a form of allegorical hermeneutics, whereby events are interpreted as part of a larger narrative in which events within the human microcosm reflect the celestial macrocosm, and can be revealed through myths, legends, and their correspondences.

This form of historiography, or *Mythistory*, was popularised and brought into mainstream culture by the Romantics in particular, and remained popular among certain traditionalist circles in Péladan's time. In conjunction with an emergent quest for a new understanding of human civilization and origins that led to fierce debates over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a kaleidoscope of fantastical philosophical and metaphysical theories provided rich sources of inspiration that fuelled, first Romantic, and later Symbolist creativity. Thinkers and writers such as Protestant Freemason and polymath Antoine Court de Gébelin (1725-1784), and later, Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776-1847), Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767-1825) and Delisle de Sales (Jean-Baptiste Izouard, 1741-1816), were the main "allegorical mythographers" who sought to discover universal, eternal "truths" through the allegorical analysis of all human knowledge, from the emerging sciences and observation of nature, to world mythology, Scriptural teachings, and exciting new archaeological discoveries which would lead to a host of new debates regarding Biblical history.

These ideas were keys to Péladan's early education, and a large part of the

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

cosmology he adopted rested on the ideas put forward by Fabre d'Olivet, an erudite polymath who rewrote the book of *Genesis*, claiming he had discovered the "true", hidden interpretation of the Hebrew language. His conclusions were replete with theological implications that would fuel a particular brand of Luciferianism in occult circles, and were central to Péladan's work.

THEOLOGY AND THEODICY: REWRITING GENESIS

In his subversive rewriting of *Genesis* Fabre d'Olivet tackled the question of the Fall; one which troubled Péladan greatly, since he did not believe that original sin could truly be an immutable curse on mankind. Following Fabre d'Olivet, Péladan came to believe that the world had been created, not by God, but by the angels (whom he named *Elohim*), and that primordial man was androgynous and immortal. The only thing this creature lacked was self-awareness. On seeing their "most perfect" creation, the angels were so spellbound by its potential, that they sought to give it the opportunity to commune with the divine mysteries. However, this was forbidden by God, because the primordial androgyne belonged to a different order of being, and thus, allowing it access to higher spiritual knowledge through self-awareness contravened natural law. The story of the snake and the apple from the Tree of Knowledge is thus reinterpreted, not as an encounter with a cunning force of evil, but as an act of mercy and love on the part of the angels. Nonetheless, they were punished along with their creation, since the androgyne had received a small glimpse of the immensity of the macrocosm, and the first stirrings of self-awareness had begun.

This is the moment when time began, according to this retelling. The androgyne was separated into two, unequal beings, male and female each receiving different attributes and qualities, while those angels who, like Prometheus, had dared to try to share the "sacred fire", were sentenced to live out all eternity on earth, mating with humans and, in a twist of divine irony, charged to guide humanity and to help them to evolve spiritually, so that through the generations, they would achieve enough self-awareness and knowledge of the mysteries to be able to reunite into their original, androgynous form, and by extension, to reintegrate with the Divine.

This theory is the motive force for all of Péladan's work, and the metaphysical principles underlying this premise form the entire basis for his aesthetics. His fixation on the arts, and visual representation in particular, derived from his belief that humans were created by angels casting their shadow, and then tracing its silhouette in order to shape the human form.

The beings delegated by Being (Elohim) conceived their creative oeuvre by decreeing that humanity would be manifested (delineated) according to

(New York: Weiser, 1998), pp. 93-96.

THE FENRIS WOLF

*their shadow. The Elohim were spirits, individualised emanations of the essence. Since the shadow is a decreased form of light, the shadow of essence is substance, and the shadow of substance can be nothing other than matter ... The prototype of man, king of the sensible world, is the angel ... One can define beauty by looking at angelic forms ... We know the Greek legend of the origins of the art of Drawing. On the eve of their parting, the daughter of Butades, the potter of Sicyon, delineated the shadow of her lover with charcoal on a white wall. So, for the fervent memory of our angelic origins to remain in our soul, we must maintain our understanding and our sense of the desire to return, some day, to those who gave us perfect love, as they gave us reality and life. Some must do this by creating works of art, others by understanding them.*¹¹

ART AS RELIGION

To this end, Péladan saw the creative process as the ultimate sacred act, whereby through emulating the act of creation, humanity could move back towards a reintegration with their divine origins. Artists had been gifted with the talent to create those works of art that could spark the spiritual evolution he believed necessary for this process, and his mission was to inspire them to do so, while also attempting to attract the general public, and helping them to understand the content of this sacred art. He proclaimed art to be a religion in the sense of a process “mediating between the physical and the metaphysical”¹² and defined it as follows:

*Art is the totality of the methods of realising Beauty. Beauty is the essence of all expression through form. Techniques are nothing more than the means to an end. If Beauty is the objective, and art the means, what is the rule? The Ideal. Therefore Idealist art is that which reunites within a work all the perfections that the spirit can conceive on a given theme.*¹³

As Péladan saw it, the heart of this process was the act of giving form to intangible Essence, based on the Platonic notion of the world of Ideas, so in his vocabulary the “Ideal” is the sublime, ethereal aspect of creation, which needs to be given a shape, a body to inhabit, if it is to become perceptible in the material world. These “bodies” are nothing other than works of art, and a “perfect work” would also be an ensouled work – like religious icons, it would be inhabited by the Idea that it represented. Péladan was quick to specify that not all works of art are

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

reflections of the Ideal; rather, they must conform to specific rules, and he wrote many long explanations arguing the philosophy of this point, summarised in his axiom that “A work that is real in form, and unreal in expression, is perfect”.

IDEAS AND FORMS

For Péladan, a perfect work had to conform to the two characteristics of idealism and mysticism. He defined Idealism according to the dictionary definition: “that which reunites all the perfections that the spirit can conceive”.¹⁴ To achieve this goal, the idea had to be clothed within a form. Péladan stated that the content could, and should use a recognisable and realistic form to express the Idea it housed, but this was not all. It also had to express something of “the beyond”, something ineffable that could tell the viewer that the apparently mundane object, or figure they observed in a painting, was something more than it appeared. This, he suggested, was to be achieved by a combination of three aesthetic principles: Intensity, subtlety, and harmony, combined in such a way as to hint at their symbolic nature, symbolism being a mode of expression that is subtle by definition. In the words of Jean Moréas, author of the *Symbolist Manifesto*:

*The Idea, in its turn, should not be allowed to be seen deprived of the sumptuous lounge robes of extraneous analogies; because the essential character of symbolic art consists in never approaching the concentrated kernel of the Idea in itself. So, in this art, the pictures of nature, the actions of human beings, all concrete phenomena would not themselves know how to manifest themselves; these are presented as the sensitive appearance destined to represent their esoteric affinity with primordial Ideas... For the precise translation of its synthesis, it is necessary for symbolism to take on an archetypal and complex style.*¹⁵

In other words, the artist should create embellished, complex forms to house an idea, precisely because it must keep a certain distance from the “kernel of the Idea in itself”. This obliges the viewer to engage intellectually with the work in order to begin to decipher it, and the use of archetypal and allegorical imagery, subjectively deployed but based on a shared frame of reference, should help the viewer to translate apparently mundane representations into their Ideal forms. Péladan’s teachings are entirely in line with this perspective, his definitions of idealism and mysticism respectively expressed through the use of realism and the “unreal” perfectly mirroring Moréas’ description.

¹¹ Péladan, *L’art idéaliste et mystique* (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), pp. 41-44.

¹² Ibid., p. 36.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 36-7.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁵ Jean Moréas, “Le Symbolisme”, *Le Figaro* 18 September 1886.

THE FENRIS WOLF

By adjusting and balancing the relationships between the content (Idea), the form, and the technical rendering, one could create Péladan's notion of a "perfect work" that would serve as an aesthetic springboard to awaken the soul out of materialism and decadence, and if the public were exposed to this on a grand scale, then the cumulative effect, he thought, could only be a spiritual renaissance.

To support his arguments, and to inspire the artists (in all the arts) who understood his cause, Péladan reached to the art and architecture of ancient civilisations, selecting and highlighting specific symbolic elements to illustrate his philosophy. One such telling example is the Assyrian Sphinx, or *Lamassu*, a hybrid, protective deity with the body of a bull, wings, and a human head.



This motif appears repeatedly in many aspects of his work, from the frontispieces of his books and the emblem of his organisation, to the numerous reiterations of his philosophy:

*What is Art? Human creation. God made the universe (macrocosm), man made the temple (microcosm), from where arts emerged.... What is a monument, if not a calculation of lines and volumes for the expression of spiritual will? From the forest path and from the cavern to the cathedral, human work appears colossal. What is a figure such as the sphinx or the winged bull with a human face, if not a philosophical combination of natural motifs for the manifestation of an idea? From the cat to the sphinx, from the savage bull to the genius that guards the temple threshold, through quasi-divine operations the artist raises himself to the level of creator.*¹⁶

¹⁶ Péladan, *Les Idées et les Formes: Antiquité Orientale, Egypte – Kaldée – Assyrie – Chine – Phénicie – Judée – Arabie – Inde – Perse – Aryas d'Asie Mineure* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1908), pp.9, 10-11, 13.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

He explained the significance of this symbolic entity as follows, in one of the several theoretical handbooks that he wrote as guides to self-awareness designed to help his contemporaries achieve their spiritual potential:

*That which the intelligence has conceived, the soul executes... Study this symbol; the human head wears the royal crown with three rows of horns, a privilege of the gods, and signifies, initiate, [that you should] no longer obey, for you are a king, if you think. A king does not seek to reign, the triple horns have destined you for the sole conquest of eternity. The wings show you that you must be inspired by the superior world, without ceasing, to manifest light on earth by the power of the bull's hooves.*¹⁷

This layering of symbolism demonstrated the kind of "idealism and mysticism" that Péladan preached; expressed through a deceptively familiar "real" form (in the sense that it is not an abstract composition of colour), but the form encapsulates the "ineffable", "unreal" notions that cannot be expressed satisfactorily by other means. While the verbal description is linear by necessity, the visual depiction retains its stratified nature, and allows us to perceive the meaning that it houses in a flash of insight, complete rather than in stages. Thus, each line and detail becomes an ideogram to be deciphered by the viewer:

*The line in itself is as abstract as the alphabet, it does not exist in nature; literally it is an ideogram, a hieroglyph which, for human intelligence, translates the sensible world; it is, therefore, in its highest form, the only thing that is independent of technique and where genius can show itself; all the rest belongs to talent.... Drawing is the art of writing by means of living forms treated by the abstract process of the line, augmented by the contours.*¹⁸

Other key recurrent motifs that Péladan gave prominence to in his work included the androgyne, the Sphinx in all its forms, and motifs from the myth of Orpheus. The androgyne reflected, first and foremost, Péladan's understanding of the origin of humanity, the unification of opposites and the ideal to which mankind should strive. A symbolic figure that has appeared in various philosophical and esoteric works since antiquity, Péladan's use of this symbolic motif is grounded in a Platonic, yet worldly context, and his treatises written for men and women explain in fine detail how human relationships should strive to achieve a perfect balance between the two sexes so as to create an androgyne from their union, since this held the key to unification with the divine.

¹⁷ Péladan, *Comment on Devient Mage*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Péladan, *L'art idéaliste et mystique*, p. 102.

THE FENRIS WOLF

Péladan's Sphinx is a mystagogue and mnemonic of the creative potential within man, and, like Orpheus, takes on an almost talismanic role as a patron and guide inspiring Symbolist expression. Comprehension and use of these symbols in artistic compositions (whether poetic, theatrical, figurative or literary), was the mark, privilege, and duty of the artist-initiates; whom Péladan exhorted to place their talent at the service of a supreme purpose; the awakening and raising of mankind to their divine potential.

In his treatise *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886), deeply influenced by various Theosophical theories and other occult practices of his time, Nietzsche outlined the notion of Dionysian-Orphic ecstasy and possession that were the motive force of Symbolist art, and a supreme form of initiation into the invisible forces of man and universe. This idea of initiation was at the heart of occult thought of the time, and it refers to awakening, discovery, and the development of dormant human faculties which are available to all, but are in a state of dormancy.

According to Orphic cosmogony, humans were the progeny of the ash of Dionysus' body and the blood of Titans, and it was this dual nature that made good and evil an intrinsic part of the human condition. To evolve spiritually and purify themselves from their evil, Titanic elements, humanity was bound to live through many incarnations until they achieved full self-awareness. As the legend has it, when they died, humans were obliged to drink from the Well of Oblivion (Lethe), and forget their mortal life before they reincarnated, and so in their next incarnation they would begin afresh, with no memories to guide them. Initiates, however, may drink from the spring of Mnemosyne after death, so that they may evolve spiritually, but only if they spoke the password to the guardian of the spring: "A Child of Earth I am, and of the Starlit Sky", which denoted that they knew of their dual, earthly and celestial origins. Orphic cosmology and theology is reflected in much of Péladan's work, particularly with regard to the initiatory capacity of art – for both artist and viewer.

In the greatly influential work *The Great Initiates* (1889), Edouard Schuré discusses the notion of initiation in depth, and presents the initiatory journeys of various great figures in human history and legend. Among them, Ram, Moses, Jesus... and Orpheus. Regarding initiation, he says the following:

Modern man seeks happiness without knowledge, knowledge without wisdom... For someone to achieve mastery, the ancient sages tell us, man must fully reconstruct his physical, ethical and spiritual existence. Only then can an initiate, initiate [another]... Therefore, initiation was, then, something very different from a hollow dream, and something far greater than a simple scientific theory: it was, then, the creation of a soul out of itself, its evolution on a higher level, and its flowering on the divine plane.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Orpheus stands for creative genius and initiatory tradition, and his lyre symbolises human existence itself, whereby, according to Edouard Schuré, a contemporary of Péladan's: "every chord corresponds to a mood of the human soul and contains the laws of one science and one art," thus 'proving' Orpheus to be "the great mystagogue, ancestor of poetry and music, which reveal eternal truths."¹⁹ This "religion" of initiatory and creative genius was the motive force of the Symbolists, for whom Orpheus was the archetypal artist-priest, who, in Péladan's vision, would collectively initiate society through their exposure to the mysteries hidden within symbolic artwork. Hence the repeated motif of Orpheus' head and lyre, are no less than sacred icons, talismans encapsulating their whole *raison-d'être*. And Orpheus is their patron saint.

RECONTEXTUALISING PÉLADAN'S TEACHINGS

One might question the extent to which Péladan's vision, expressed in often quaint or bombastic terms, is something that can be of any interest in the 21st century. Can it be of any use to neo-symbolist artists?

As both a scholar and an artist, I believe that Péladan was ahead of his time, and that his aesthetic principles with regard to Symbolism in particular, are both timeless and a potential source of inspiration.

Regardless of whether or not we espouse his spiritual and religious perspectives, Péladan's priority was that art should fulfil a social role, and not simply exist as a hollow imitation of reality, or as a tool for the self-aggrandisement of the artist. The Symbolist art of which Péladan spoke was an educational tool, which could be used to transmit the history of civilisation and perceptions of the human condition through line and form, and through the use of a symbolic language which brings both artist and viewer into a constant dialogue that continues long after the gallery lights have gone out – and that in itself is the ultimate act of animation, or ensoulment. Whatever the subject matter selected by a given artist, the particularity of Symbolism is that it must have a meaning, and that it is first and foremost, a mode of communication that bypasses linear thought processes. In order to effectively express such meanings and to translate abstract philosophical concepts in visual forms, one truly takes on the role of creator. It is possible that Péladan's ideas can serve as a springboard for inspirations and directions that might take us on some surprising journeys, allowing (Neo)-Symbolist artists, like their predecessors, to explore those difficult, timeless questions about the meaning of life – and indeed of art – in such a way that can help to shine a light (or indeed, cast a shadow) on those perpetual human

¹⁹ Edouard Schuré, *The Great Initiates: A Sketch of the Secret History of Religions*, trans. by F. Rothwell (London, 1913; originally published 1889), p. 92.

THE FENRIS WOLF

questions that know no time, nor religion, nor space, but which remain a form of language that transcends both time and place. As such, it may yet prove to be of use to us.

A translation of excerpts from Péladan's "manifesto": *L'Art Idealiste et Mystique (Doctrine de l'Ordre et du Salon Annuel du Rose + Croix)*, 1894:

[17]

EXHORTATION

Artist, you are a priest: Art is the great mystery and, if your effort results in a masterpiece, a ray of divinity will descend as on an altar. Artist, you are a king: Art is the true empire, if your hand draws a perfect line, the cherubim themselves will descend to revel in their reflection. Spiritual design, a line of the soul, form of understanding, you make our dreams flesh. Artist, you are a mage: Art is the great mystery, it only proves our immortality.

[18]

Who still doubts? Giotto touched the stigmata, the Virgin appeared to Fra Angelico, and Rembrandt demonstrated the resurrection of Lazarus. [This is] the absolute rejoinder to pedantic quibbles: we doubt Moses, but here is Michaelangelo; we misunderstand Jesus, but here is Leonardo; we secularize everything, but immutable, sacred Art continues its prayer.

Unspeakable and sublime serenity, ever-shining Holy Grail, ostensorium and relic, unvanquished sacred banner, all-powerful Art, the God Art, I adore you on my knees, you, the final reflection from on High over our putrescence.

....

[19]

All is rotten, all is finished, decadence has cracked and shaken the Western edifice... You, old Dante, get up from your throne of glory, you Catholic Homer, and join your anger with Buonarrotti's despair.

Yet a glimmer of Holy Light, a pale glow appeared, and grew... And thus on the gallows of the holy torment, there blossomed a flower.

A miracle! A miracle! A rose emerges and opens as it grows, endeavouring to grip the divine cross of salvation in its pious leaves: and the cross, consoled, is resplendent: Jesus has not cursed this world, Jesus receives the adoration of

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Art. The Mages, the first ones, came to the divine Master.

[20]

The last Mages are their sons. Pitiful moderns, your course into nothingness is fatal; fall then, under the weight of your worthlessness: your blasphemies will never erase the faith of works of art, you sterile ones!

[21]

You may one day close the Church, but [what about] the Museum? If Notre-Dame is profaned, the Louvre will officiate... Humanity, oh citizens, will always go to mass, when the priest will be Bach, Beethoven, Palestrina: one cannot make the sublime organ an atheist! Brothers in all the arts, I am sounding a battle cry: let us form a holy militia for the salvation of idealism. We are a few against many, but the angels are ours. We have no leaders, but the old masters, up there in Paradise, guide us towards Montsalvat... This precious Church, the last august thing in this world, banished the Rose and believes its perfume to be dangerous. Next to it then, we will build the Temple of Beauty; we will work to the echoes of prayers, followers, not rivals, different,

[22]

not divergent, for the artist is a priest, a king, a mage, for art is a mystery, the only true empire, the great miracle... Jesus has not cursed this world. Jesus receives the adoration of art. The noble enthusiasm of the artist will survive beyond extinct, erstwhile piety.

....

[33]

Theory of Beauty

A. I. There is no other reality than God. There is no other Truth than God. There is no other Beauty than God.

God alone exists, and any word that does not express this is a noise, and every path that does not seek him leads to nothingness. The only end of mankind is the quest for God. He must perceive Him, conceive Him, hear Him, or perish in ignominy.

A. II. The three great divine names are: 1. Reality, the substance or the Father; 2. Beauty, life, or the Son, 3. Truth or the unification of Reality and Beauty, which is the Holy Spirit.

THE FENRIS WOLF

These three names govern three ways to the same end,

[34]

three quests for God, three religious modes. [You should] understand “religion” in the sense of [that which] connects the creature to the Creator.

A. III. Science, which seeks God through Reality. Art, which seeks God through Beauty. Theodicy, which seeks God through Thought.

What, then, is Beauty? If not...

A. IV. The quest for God through Life and Form.

But, even as the three divine persons are all present in each other, thus Beauty is specified in three rays, forming the triangle of Idealism.

A. V. The Beauty of the Father is called Intensity. The Beauty of the Son is called Subtlety. The Beauty of the Holy Spirit is called Harmony.

[35]

If one calls something ideal, that is to attribute conceivable intensity, subtlety and harmony to it; and art, considered in its essence, is that which defines it.

A. VI. The esthetic point of a form is the point of apotheosis, which is to say the realisation that it is approaching the perceivable absolute.

A. VII. Manifest intensity is called the sublime. The sublime is achieved by an excess of one of the proportions, and it operates on the aesthete through surprise/wonder: as in the lowering of temples in the Orient and the elevation of arched cathedrals; or Michaelangelo in both his arts.

A. VIII. Manifest Subtlety is called Beautiful; Beauty is achieved by weighting and the equilibrium of the most immediate relationships [of form], such as Raphael's School of Athens.

A. IX. Manifest Harmony is called Perfection,

[36]

and it is achieved through weighting and balancing all relationships, even the most asymptotic, such as in the work of Leonardo da Vinci.

The Rose + Croix class all the categories of understanding as subdivisions of

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

a unique science: theodicy... The reader should never forget, over the cause of these pages, that Art is presented here as a religion or, if you will, as that part of religion that mediates between the physical and the metaphysical.

The Rose + Croix class all the categories of understanding as subdivisions of a unique science: theodicy...

The reader should never forget, over the course of these pages, that Art is presented here as a religion or, if you will, as that part of religion that mediates between the physical and the metaphysical.

That which distinguishes a religion from a philosophy, is the dogmatic absolutism and canonical ritual: it is the subordination of individualism to a collective harmony.

What dogma is applicable to all the design arts? What is the essence of Art? And how could one define Art itself, if not thus:

A. X. Art is the totality of the methods of realising Beauty.

A. XI. Beauty is the essence of all expression through form.

[37]

Techniques are nothing more than the means to an end.

If Beauty is the objective, and art the means, what is the rule? The Ideal.

Open a Littré dictionary at this word: “Ideal; that which reunites all the perfections that the spirit can conceive”.

THEREFORE IDEALIST ART IS THAT WHICH REUNITES WITHIN A WORK ALL THE PERFECTIONS THAT THE SPIRIT CAN CONCEIVE ON A GIVEN THEME.

One may already understand that there are themes which are too low to sustain any idea of perfection, and that I have reviled, with absolute logic, from the Salons of the Rose + Croix [...]

[38]

....

Wagner says in one of his theoretical writings:

“Art begins where life ends”. Because the same woman, whom lust greets with desire, does not solicit admiration through her reproduced image. This is why, after the first adjective: idealist, I had to add another: mystical.

THE FENRIS WOLF

For “mystical” means that it holds mystery, and a mystic is an initiate.

It is not therefore enough for a work to satisfy the idea, it must also determine an impression of the beyond, it must be a springboard of enthusiasm, a determinant of thought. Generally, Titian is ideal, but never mystical; the opposite appears among the *Trecentisti*, always mystical, rarely ideal.

[39]

A. XII. The Beauty of a work is made from sublimated reality.

A. XIII. The mysticism of a work derives from the depiction of the unreal.

A. XIV. A work that is real in form, and unreal in expression, is perfect: Leonardo. These antique principles, forgotten today, disdained, presided over ancient genius.

Plato alone dared to consider Beauty as a spiritual being that existed independently from our conceptions: and an unjustly forgotten thinker, Maximus Tyrius, showed in the second century (he lived in Rome under Commodus) that the tradition lived on:

“Ineffable beauty – he said – exists in the sky and in the planets. There, it remains unadulterated. But in coming to earth, it is obscured by degrees...”

[40]

He who maintains the essential notion of Beauty in his soul will recognise it when he sees it: like Ulysses recognised the smoke rising from his ancestral home, the aesthete quivers, joyful and moved. A majestic river, a beautiful flower, a fiery horse certainly offer some snippets of Beauty, but they are very crude.

If Beauty descends, to some degree, into matter, where would we see it if not in man, whose soul follows the same principle as Beauty?

...

Beauty is something that is more alive, it does not spend time on games, it brings ecstasy. Our souls exiled on earth, enveloped in thick slime, are condemned to an obscure life, disorderly, full of troubles and bewilderment, they cannot contemplate ineffable Beauty with energy and fulfillment. But our soul leans perpetually towards order and towards beauty. Moral or spiritual order, just like physical, or natural order, constitutes the beauty with which [our souls] are in eternal sympathy. Therefore, here is a philosophy that validates my use of the terms “idealist and mystical”:

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

[41]

A. XV. The ideal, is the pinnacle of a form.

A. XVI. And the mysticism of a form is its nimbus, its countenance of the beyond. The beautiful form in itself, the ideal, is susceptible to two augmentations, as told by Maximus Tyrius in his 25th thesis:

“The beauty of the body cannot be beauty par excellence, it is none other than, in some way, the prelude to a more complete beauty.”

In each of the three formulae of Beauty, there three further degrees, just as there are three elements in man.

Intensity, subtlety and harmony give way to three aesthetic results.

The sublime may be physical, like the torso palpated by a blind Michaelangelo; animistic, like Laocoon; spiritual, such as the Genius of eternal rest (Translator’s note: this is a reference to the Hellenistic statue known as “Hermaphrodite Mazarin” or “Génie du repos éternel”).

[101]

Writing of forms, or, drawing.

After *Genesis*, art began with drawing; the Oelohim appeared projecting their shadow so as to elaborate the human form. Art began with a line, this abstract, and I will immediately reach the greatest secret.

[102]

A. XXIX. The line is the philosophy of art, it must not depend on the artist’s temperament; the line is dogmatic: it is the immutable theology of the form.

[... 102]

The line in itself is as abstract as the alphabet, it does not exist in nature; literally it is an ideogram, a hieroglyph which, for human intelligence, translates the sensible world; it is, therefore, in its highest form, the only thing that is independent of technique and where genius can show itself; all the rest belongs to talent.