

The Museum of Modern Art

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SYMBOLISM, SYNTHETISM AND THE FIN-DE-SIECLE

SYMBOLISM, SYNTHETISM AND THE FIN-DE-SIECLE, an exhibition of 72 drawings, posters, prints and illustrated books, primarily from the Museum collection, presents a visual perspective of the ideas and contradictory styles which emerged in Europe during the late 19th century and will be on view in the third floor Paul J. Sachs Galleries through October 2.

Directed by Donna M. Stein, Assistant Curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, the exhibition distinguishes between the formal and interpretive ideas of the Symbolist and Synthetist artists as best seen in their prints, and shows how the artists of each country incorporated the symbolist principles in the development of a unique vision. The works on view are organized chronologically and thematically to show the stylistic evolution of individual artists. Included are works by Aman-Jean, Bonnard, Denis, Gauguin, Hodler, Khnopff, Munch, Redon, Seguin, Toorop and Vuillard, among others.

Toward the end of the 19th century, says Miss Stein, Europe's newly industrialized and materialistic society gradually began to alienate certain artists who rejected bourgeois values and sought a new realism. They worked in many conflicting styles which have since been misleadingly labeled as Post Impressionism and art of the fin de siècle. According to Miss Stein, "These terms do not indicate the diverse formalistic, literary, philosophical, and psychological tendencies evolving in the work of these artists from approximately 1885 to 1900, which nurtured simultaneously the development of Symbolism, Synthetism, Art Nouveau, the intimistes, and such groups as Les Vingts, the Rosicrucians, and the Nabis."

The Symbolists attempted to incorporate the ideas and express the moods of

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the literary movement of the same name, while the Synthetists deformed nature, objectively and subjectively, through the flattening of perspective, the heightening of color and the outlining of forms with a dark, expressive line. Other prevailing influences on the art of the period were Japanese decorative patterning, mystical and religious themes and the revival of Italianate taste with its medieval and occult sources.

In her notes on the prints, Miss Stein explains that in the 1890's, renewed interest in the woodcut and in lithography revitalized printmaking in Europe. Lithography permitted large-scale designs and colorful painterly effects while the importation of exotic Japanese woodcuts awakened artists to the possibilities inherent in the use of the wood block to achieve the simple, bold images, the essential "primitive" forms with which they were preoccupied.

By reworking motifs they had previously explored in painting, artists such as Odilon Redon, Eugène Carrière, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Edvard Munch made their most significant and technically innovative contributions in the graphic arts. Much favored were the dramatic effects of black and white and chiaroscuro; the use of subjective color added another dimension to the interpretation of subject matter.

With the spread of Art Nouveau, artists began to frame their compositions with geometric or irregular patterned borders, and added gold and silver paint to their prints and drawings. Illustrated books and posters of the period integrated text and image in single, fluid compositions, which did not necessarily depict actual sequences in writing.

Many of the prints in this exhibition were commissioned by art dealers and publishers, such as André Marty, Ambroise Vollard and the Nathanson brothers for their publications: L'Estampe originale, L'Album des peintres-graveurs, and La Revue Blanche. The enthusiasm of these men encouraged painters to become involved with the graphic media and their publications were instrumental in furthering the

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artists' reputations and in setting the scene for fin-de-siècle expression.

The art of this period must be read on many levels because pictorial components were given multiple meanings, according to Miss Stein. Among the themes which preoccupied these artists were fantasies of the mind, historical worlds peopled with bizarre creatures, permanence and change, evolution and the cycle of human life, death and its related physical and emotional manifestations, religious conversion and apotheosis, the disparity between social behavior and psychic disturbance, and the role of women in 19th-century society.

"The philosophical and practical questions raised concerning the meaning of art by artists at the end of the nineteenth century influenced the early work of many modern masters, and it can be said, laid the basis for the concepts of Cubism and Surrealism, and the growing trend toward abstraction in the twentieth century," says Miss Stein.

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