

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## WALL LABEL - SYMBOLISM, SYNTHETISM AND THE FIN-DE-SIECLE

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Europe's newly industrialized and materialistic society gradually began to alienate certain artists. The more progressive of them determined to reject the bourgeois values which they considered had taken over in art. They sought a new realism and worked in many contradictory styles, which have since been misleadingly labeled as Post Impressionism and art of the fin-de-siècle.

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.

During the 1890s the distinction between academic and radical art blurred, and the artists formulated work based on similar aesthetic ideals and goals. Artists acknowledged the influence of masters of the preceding generation: Pierre Puvis de Chavannes' static, neo-classical mural compositions, Gustave Moreau's visionary mythologies, and the hallucinatory complexities of Rodolphe Bresdin's nightmarish scenes, as well as Odilon Redon's allegorical dreams. Homage was paid similarly to the English Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, who, with introspective intensity, dealt with legends of a medieval past.

Each stylistic school was concerned with expounding a theory. In 1886, two years after the appearance of *Des Esseintes*, the decadent, dandified hero of J. K. Huysmans' novel, A Rebours (Against Nature), the poet Jean Moréas published his "Symbolist Manifesto," which was the first attempt to interpret the content of the new literature being created by the French writers Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and the American Edgar Allan Poe. Symbolist art was an attempt to incorporate the ideas and express the moods, emotions, and the dreams of this literary movement.

In 1888 at Pont-Aven, Brittany, Paul Gauguin, with Emile Bernard, were flattening perspective, heightening color, and outlining forms with a dark, expressive line in a combination that resembled the effects of cloisonné enamel and glass work. Their objective and subjective deformation of nature they termed Synthetism.

Another artist, Paul Sérusier, returned to Paris from Pont-Aven to overwhelm his friends at the Académie Julian with a painting done under the tutelage of Gauguin. They determined to explore the possibilities of the new style and formed themselves into the Nabis (a Hebrew word meaning "prophet"). In 1890 a member and spokesman, Maurice Denis, defined their work as a combination of Synthetist formalism and mystical, religious themes.

The iconography of Edouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard - originally members of the Nabis - relied more on Japanese decorative patterning for the anecdotal portrayal of intimate scenes of everyday life, which became their preferred subject matter.

Concurrently, Joséphin Peladan, an art critic and novelist, who wished to revive Italianate taste with its medieval and occult sources, in 1888 founded with the mystic Stanislas de Guaita the Ordre de la Rose+Croix Catholique Kaballistique. Three years later, when the ideologies of the two men were no longer compatible, Sâr Peladan announced, in his rules for the Order, the first Salon de la Rose+Croix (1892) to which many prominent artists of the time submitted work, regardless of their other affiliations.

The prevailing aesthetic contradictions of the period affected the choice and treatment of subject matter. The art must be read on many levels because pictorial components were given multiple meanings. Artists sought stimulus in fantasies of the mind and in historic worlds peopled with bizarre creatures. They were obsessed with the disparity between social behavior and psychic disturbances, with permanence and change, with the theories of evolution and the cycle of human life from birth to old age. In contrast to the optimism of the bourgeoisie, these artists were fascinated with death and its related manifestations of hunger, sickness, sorrow, and fear. Their self-portraits reflect a constant striving for individuality and self-awareness. In the 1890s many artists experienced religious conversion and apotheosis, which was expressed by figures taken from Christian iconography or signs and symbols derived from Oriental beliefs and the occult.

Artists questioned the place of women in nineteenth-century society. They characterized her role as evil and seductive, or beautiful and spiritual. Sometimes she is seen in terms of her conflicts with man and the torments of their love, and at others as a sexually ambiguous, androgynous figure.

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.

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