

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Sébastien Clerbois

In Search of the *Forme-Pensée*: The Influence of Theosophy on Belgian Artists, Between Symbolism and the Avant-Garde (1890–1910) [A la recherche d'une *forme-pensée*. L'influence de la théosophie sur les artistes en Belgique, entre symbolisme et avant-garde (1890-1910)]

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 1, no. 2 (Autumn 2002)

Citation: Sébastien Clerbois, “In Search of the *Forme-Pensée*: The Influence of Theosophy on Belgian Artists, Between Symbolism and the Avant-Garde (1890–1910) [A la recherche d'une *forme-pensée*. L'influence de la théosophie sur les artistes en Belgique, entre symbolisme et avant-garde (1890-1910)],” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 2002), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn02/in-search-of-the-forme-pensee-the-influence-of-theosophy-on-belgian-artists-between-symbolism-and-the-avant-garde-1890-1910>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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In Search of the *Forme-Pensée*: The Influence of Theosophy on Belgian Artists, Between Symbolism and the Avant-Garde (1890–1910)

[A la recherche d'une *forme-pensée*. L'influence de la théosophie sur les artistes en Belgique, entre symbolisme et avant-garde (1890-1910)]

by Sébastien Clerbois

Assuming that there are points in common between Symbolism and the avant-garde, little interest has been shown to date in studying these connections. From the point of view of historians of the nineteenth century, this disinterest is a matter of chronology, as the period shared by these two styles falls at the turn of the twentieth century, between 1890 and 1905–10. In theory, this specificity does not really present a problem, for historians of nineteenth-century art traditionally include in their research the first years of the twentieth century, often until World War I. In reality, the study of the relationship between Symbolism and the avant-garde poses a methodological problem. If we accept that modern artists, from Picasso to Mondrian, experienced a Symbolist phase, the proximity between the two styles nevertheless seems to clash, as if it is difficult to imagine that Gustave Klimt painted *Danaë* (1907) the same year Pablo Picasso painted *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* or that certain versions of *Nymphéas* (1914–18) by Claude Monet were modeled after the well-known *Danse* (1910) by Henri Matisse.

Despite this difficulty, one can legitimately inquire whether there are points in common between Symbolism and the avant-garde, shared areas in which research would permit a better understanding of how these two movements are structured in relation to each other and at what point there was continuity or rupture between them. This article does not pretend to present an exhaustive answer to such a complex question. Our ambition is simply to study one of these points of continuity—the theosophy that between 1898 and 1910, in Belgium, brought together Symbolist and modern artists. Hitherto unexamined in Belgium, this study nevertheless takes place under the scientific tradition established nearly fifteen years ago by the exhibition catalogue *The Spiritual in Art*, which employed the "spiritual" as the key to a discussion on art history from 1890 to the present.^[1] This approach, though largely unrecognized, remains very useful for a study of the nineteenth century since, with the creation of theoretical schemas, such as Post-Impressionism, the preference has been to study the phenomena of influences well-anchored in the historical complexity of the era. Using this approach, an analysis of the influence of theosophy on artists in Belgium throws new light on the connections between Symbolism and the avant-garde during the years these two movements overlapped.

The Birth of the Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society was founded in the United States in 1875 by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and Helena Petrovna Blavatski (1831–1891). Introduced through two founding works by Helena Blavatski, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and, especially, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), theosophical thought saw rapid success, spreading as far as India, where the society established its center in Adyar, near Madras. The society had few ties with the theosophical tradition of "spiritual alchemy" that goes back to the Renaissance and particularly to the seventeenth century. The Theosophical Society was first and foremost an organization

preoccupied, from a doctrinal point of view, with syncretism—that is, the fusion of religious traditions in a common system, similar to, from a social point of view, fusing such diverse current issues as peace, feminism, and antimilitarism.[2]

From the viewpoint of the art historian, interest in theosophy centers on the fact that its influence on painters occurred at a turning point in the evolution of Belgian art, just before 1900. For reasons that are complicated to define, theosophy was the last esoteric movement to influence Belgian painters. At the end of the 1880s and through the 1890s, it was the Rose+Croix brotherhood of the Temple of the Grail that influenced Belgian Symbolists. The origins of this influence are to be sought in the dynamism of Josephin Péladan (1858–1918), a charismatic figure, son of a family of occultists from Lyons, a writer, art critic, and esoterist. It was Péladan who, in restoring an ancient brotherhood from the seventeenth century, created the Rose-Croix Order in 1887 with Stanislas de Guaita and Doctor Gérard Encausse, also known as Papus. In 1891 Péladan left the group to create the Rose+Croix brotherhood, which quickly had an influence on painters. As an art critic, Péladan chose to concentrate the efforts of his circle on the art world, organizing, between 1892 and 1897, six "salons de la Rose+Croix," where the majority of French, Belgian, and Swiss Symbolists, among them Fernand Khnopff, Jean Delville, and Émile Fabry, were introduced.[3]

Chronologically, the Rose-Croix Order, created in 1887, was the second esoteric trend to influence painters. About 1896 several Symbolist painters turned toward the order, run by Papus after Péladan left. Together, these two occultist bodies had a significant influence on Belgian painters. In Paris, the two branches of the Rose-Croix clashed over doctrinal differences in what was called the *guerre des deux roses*. In Belgium, on the other hand, notably within the Masonic lodge of the Brussels occultist Kumris—a subsidiary of the Rose-Croix Order that organized Symbolist expositions in 1892 and 1894—this "war of the two roses" did not have a direct impact on artists influenced by occultism, implying that the works of Belgian Symbolists were frequently inspired by the two doctrines in a united manner. In general, Péladan is recognized for influencing artists through his theory of the androgyne, a mythic figure who reunites the two sexes—split because of original sin—in one perfect individual, detached from passions and radiant with a spiritual purity. Iconographically, a number of Belgian Symbolist works were bound to this theme—for instance, *Circle of the Passions* (1889) by Jean Delville and *Human Passions* (1899) by Jef Lambeaux—that denounces the surrender to urges, or, as in many works by Jean Delville, Fernand Khnopff, and Émile Fabry, presents ideal figures with androgynous traits.

The Rose-Croix Order, on the contrary, had a more pragmatic influence on painters. Jules de Jardin, Edgar Baes, and art critic Francis Vurgey formulated an aesthetic based on numerological theories put forward by the lodge of Kumris, of which they were members. The goal was, in creating a series of criteria linked by a subtle network, or connections, to inspire painters to make the corpus of art support the expression of the invisible that the cabalists thought could be defined by scholars of mathematic theory.

In Belgium, these two doctrines were often associated with Symbolist works. The triptych *Isolation* (1891–94) by Fernand Khnopff is a good example, as iconographically it symbolizes Péladan's androgyne, and, from a formal point of view, its use of the triptych (the number 3 signifies perfection, the central scene signifies the unity of opposites) and of colors (a

progression from white to blue, the color of spirituality) links the work with the numerological theories of Papus.[4]

Theosophy did not inspire Belgian Symbolists until after these first two esoteric trends, just before 1900. In France, certain painters were influenced by theosophy well before this, in the 1890s, through the work of French writer Édouard Schuré (1841–1929). Schuré was a member of the Theosophical Society, which he quit in 1886, only to return to it in 1907. His oeuvre is infused with theosophy and notably with the idea of syncretism. It was in following this idea that Schuré wrote his successful book *Les grands initiés* (1889), which recounts the lives of the great prophets, from Krishna, through Orpheus, and up to Christ, presented as a historical "relay" of the same revelation continuing across the centuries.

Read with fervor, Édouard Schuré's book met with great success among certain French painters, notably the Nabis. Strongly influenced by *Les grands initiés*, the Nabis found in it the source of several of their works, among them the famous *Nabi Landscape* (1890) by Paul Ranson. Certain Nabis also affiliated themselves with theosophy—Ranson was the first, followed by Paul Sérusier, who had rejected Catholicism for theosophy and who, later, also initiated Jan Verkade to the ideas of Helena Blavatski.[5]

In Belgium, traces of the first direct influence of theosophy in artistic circles did not appear until 1898.[6] The first work known to be inspired by theosophy was an almost expressionist portrait of Helena Blavatski (fig. 1), done in 1898 by the painter Ferdinand Schirren (1872–1944), who, several years later, became one of the most illustrious subscribers of *fauvisme brabançon*. In 1898 a second work bore witness to the influence of theosophical thought, *Plato's Academy* (fig. 2) by Jean Delville (1867–1953), obviously also inspired by Schuré's *Les grands initiés*. [7] Through the figure of Plato, the work of Jean Delville represents the two principal ideas of theosophical thought. The first, as already noted, is syncretism; if the canvas evokes Plato's teaching to his disciples, the number of students—twelve—evokes the apostles, which allows this work to be read like a scene from the life of Christ. The second idea expresses the human dimension of the divine message; for theosophists, the sacred is more a human reality, revealed by the prophets, than a thought coming from a god outside humankind.



Fig. 1, Ferdinand Schirren, *Portrait de Madame Helena Blavatski*, 1898. Plaster. Private collection, Brussels

[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jean Delville, *L'École de Platon*, 1898. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Copyright SABAM 2002
[\[larger image\]](#)

This late characteristic of theosophical influence is difficult to explain, as a theosophical branch already existed in Charleroi in 1894 and there are references to branches in Auvers, Liège, and Brussels in 1897–98.^[8] Writer Ray Nyst asserts that the first theosophical circle was created within his salon, frequented by the majority of Symbolist painters, such as Jean Delville, Fernand Khnopff, Emile Fabry, and Albert Ciamberlani.^[9] This circle likely began in the early 1890s since it counted among its members Alexandra David-Neel,^[10] spiritualist, writer, then great traveler, who had been initiated to theosophy on June 7, 1892.^[11]

Theosophy: Source of Influence on Belgian Symbolism

Despite its precocious beginnings, it was not until the end of the century that theosophy had a direct influence on Belgian painters. The great stylistic difference separating *Portrait of Helena Blavatski* by Schirren from *Plato's Academy* by Delville shows that, since the beginning, theosophy inspired artists of very diverse styles. It is nevertheless in the Symbolist circles that theosophical thought found a privileged reception.

In 1899, one year after completing *Plato's Academy*, Jean Delville approached Édouard Schuré, whom he had met through a conference the writer gave at La Libre Esthétique. Immediately, a friendship was born between the two men, as witnessed by the preface that Schuré wrote for Delville's book, *La mission de l'art* (1900). At the time of this encounter, Jean Delville had just launched the publication of a small Symbolist magazine entitled *La lumière*, which appeared in 1899–1900. Sponsored by Schuré, the magazine adopted a clearly theosophical editorial policy after Annie Besant's visit to Brussels in August 1899.^[12] Won over by the new director of the Theosophical Society, *La lumière* notably published a veritable manifesto entitled *L'idéal théosophique*, in which Besant explains the main principles of her belief, destined to build "la société des hommes dont les idées sont grandes, pures et sublimes" (a society of mankind in which ideas are great, pure, and sublime).^[13]

The number of Belgian theosophical affiliations began to grow rapidly. Theosophical publications multiplied; after *La lumière* came *Le petit messenger*, published from 1901 to 1908; *En art*, published from 1904 to 1906; and *Théosophie*, issued from 1905 to 1909. The Belgian branches of the Theosophical Society organized themselves on the heels of this growth. Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to determine with precision the genesis of these branches—the magazines were often discreet concerning the circumstances of the founding of the lodges as well as the names of their members. The Belgian branches were created between 1900 and 1905, as Colonel Olcott found them fully active during a visit to

Brussels in July 1905.[14] In 1909 there were six branches: four in Brussels, one in Anvers, and one in Liège.[15] Two more lodges were created between 1909 and 1910; the Belgian Theosophical Society arranged a central branch, of which Jean Delville was secretary, between 1909 and 1913 as well as a periodical, the *Revue théosophique belge*, which began publication in April 1909.

The rapid expansion of theosophy in Belgium reflected the growing success of this trend of thought at the beginning of the twentieth century. Secretive in the early years, theosophy became a social phenomenon, attracting numerous new members from widely diverse backgrounds.[16] By virtue of its syncretistic philosophy, theosophical thought had no trouble establishing itself in all the European countries, in Asia, and in the United States, where its success was considerable. Theosophists soon became embroiled in the great debates of the era—Annie Besant, for instance, was one of the first to fight for social rights in England. Theosophy attracted defenders of social issues, from vegetarianism, feminism, and antimilitarism to spirituality and problems of public health.

About 1900, as it expanded, the Theosophical Society seduced an increasing number of Belgian artists—almost exclusively Symbolists. Its influence doubled. It emanated first of all from artists for whom theosophy was a source of inspiration. One can cite several examples, such as Xavier Mellery (1845–1921), whose allegorical compositions are close to the idea of divine wisdom—*theo sophia*—researched by theosophists. There is also Eugène Smits (1826–1912), a painter whom Fernand Khnopff particularly admired. Unfortunately, it is difficult to point to a direct theosophical influence on Smits's oeuvre, which is as little known now as it was then. Nevertheless, statements he wrote in 1912 demonstrate a distinct theosophical influence, notably in the idea of attaining wisdom by "[la] recherche de la vérité" (searching for the truth) and in the particular attention he pays to all forms of life, infused with Buddhist philosophy, which is very much a part of theosophical thought.[17] But the most revealing example is without a doubt Émile Fabry (1865–1966) and his decorations for the villa of Philippe Wolfers (1858–1929), built at La Hulpe by Paul Hankar (1900–1906) (fig. 3). Even if there are no sources to attest to some kind of tie between Philippe Wolfers, Émile Fabry, Paul Hankar, and theosophy, in light of their syncretic iconography, the decorations produced by Émile Fabry for the hall and the stairwell of Wolfers's house were clearly inspired by theosophy.[18] Whereas the central panel represents the Masonic triangle, the lateral panels evoke the rural life of an ideal society, symbolically associated with the Greece of Orpheus, evoked by the lyre held by a young woman; the stairwell is decorated with mythic landscapes taken from the *Ramayana*, one of the founding texts of Hinduism, particularly in vogue with the theosophists.



Figs. 3, a–c, Émile Fabry, decorations for the villa of Philippe Wolfers, built at La Hulpe by Paul Hankar.
Photographs courtesy of author [\[larger image\]](#)

Besides its influence on painters, theosophy had an equal influence on the members of the society who commissioned Symbolist artists to design decorations inspired by theosophy. Such was the case with Arthur Craco (1869–1955), who, though a stranger to the Theosophical Society, was employed by Willem Vogel, an important member of the society and author of several theosophical books.^[19] About 1900 Vogel asked Arthur Craco to decorate his hotel (fig. 4) in Schaerbeek (Brussels), which was one of the meeting places of theosophists and masters of spiritualism.



Fig. 4, Arthur Craco, decorations for Willem Vogen's hotel in Schaerbeek (Brussels). Photograph courtesy of author [\[larger image\]](#)

The Meeting of Symbolism and the Avant-Garde around the Theme of Prometheus

If at the beginning it inspired the Symbolist artists above all, over time theosophical thought equally attracted avant-garde artists during the height of the movement, around 1900 to 1905. We have already mentioned the case of Ferdinand Schirren, who completed a portrait of Helena Blavatski in 1898. Of course, after this first work, Schirren evolved toward Fauvism and it is without a doubt more difficult to detect a theosophical influence; however, it is legitimate to ask at what point the serene and colorful ambiance of his Fauvist works comes close to the ideas of wisdom and inner serenity characteristic of theosophy.

Another example, more revealing of this mix of styles within theosophical thought, is that of a group of theosophical artists that Jean Delville united in Brussels about 1905, including several Symbolists, such as Russian musician Alexandre Scriabine (1872–1915) and Swiss sculptor Auguste de Niederhausern (1863–1913), but also avant-garde artists, such as Séraphin Soudbinine (1870–1944), a sculptor, ceramist, and collaborator of Auguste Rodin, and Lithuanian painter Mikolajus Konstantinas Curlionis (1875–1911).^[20]

Unfortunately, few of the rare archival documents shed light on the discussions and exchanges between these artists gathered around their shared interest in theosophy.^[21] The only tangible trace are the works that Delville, Scriabine, and Soudbinine created on the theme of Prometheus. Apparently, it was Soudbinine who, introduced within the White Order of Brussels, presented Scriabine to Delville and to Émile Sigogne so as to initiate him to theosophy. For the first time, Scriabine collaborated with Sigogne, who then wrote an article dedicated to the aesthetics of the spoken word. Together, the two men attempted to create a new language, more musical than verbal. As Kelkel rightly emphasized in his biography of Scriabine,^[22] these works prefigured the avant-garde poetic studies of Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who, with his famous *Mots en liberté*, sought a primitive language with a direct relationship to the sacred.

Progressively, these projects evolved. After having read the books of theosophist Leadbeater, Scriabine and Delville dreamt of creating an all-encompassing work of art that would combine colors, shapes, and sounds. After a number of fruitless investigations, the two men mirrored each other in studying the writings of Père Castel, designer of the ocular harpsichord (never built), which would have produced sounds associated with colorful light projections. At the same time, they studied a work recently published by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (1905).^[23] From a theoretical point of view, this book is essential for understanding the collaboration between theosophical artists. In and of itself, the idea was not new. Throughout the nineteenth century—from Goethe to Richard Wagner, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud—intellectuals had imagined a general system of correspondences between sounds, colors, and shapes. Ultimately, the hope was to produce a comprehensive oeuvre that, beyond its aesthetic qualities, would resonate, from an esoteric point of view, with the arcane, thanks to a network of correspondences between the elements of the oeuvre. Rather utopic and often reduced to a simple game of analogies, this project was realized in theosophical theories and particularly in the work of Besant and Leadbeater. The book furnished artists with easily used tables of correspondence between colors, emotions, and sounds (fig. 5). At the same time, the authors left the artists great liberty. In general, the plates in the book were limited to presenting examples of shapes, often abstract and colored, corresponding to musical themes (fig. 6). These recall the abstract compositions that Klee and Kandinsky created in later years. In this manner, the book by Besant and Leadbeater stimulated theosophical artists to collaborate—the Symbolists found in it an extension of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the avant-garde artists saw the possibility of treating the correspondences within an abstract perspective.



Fig. 5, "Notes pour la signification des couleurs." Illustration from Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Les formes-pensées* (Paris Publications Théosophiques, 1905) [\[larger image\]](#)

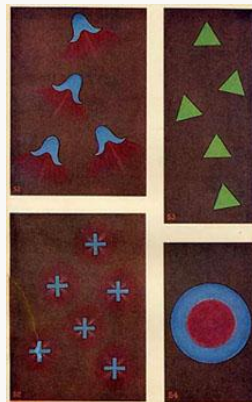


Fig. 6, "Formes-pensées musicales." Illustration from Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Les formes-pensées* (Paris Publications Théosophiques, 1905) [\[larger image\]](#)

At this time, Jean Delville was occupied with the creation of a monumental canvas representing the Prometheus of Aeschylus, a work begun in 1904–5 and finally completed in 1907 (fig. 7).^[24] Delville made great efforts to find theosophical significance in the theme of Prometheus. For example, the star taken by Prometheus is also the symbol of the White Order of Brussels. In 1907 the work suddenly took on increased importance with the publication in French of the fourth volume of *La doctrine secrète*, in which Helena Blavatski had dedicated an entire chapter to Prometheus. No longer the *voleur du feu* (thief of fire) of ancient mythology, Prometheus was from this point on assimilated into theosophy as a prophet—*porteur de lumière* (a light bearer)—revealing with his theosophical flame the suffering of humanity.^[25]



Fig. 7, Jean Delville, *Prométhée*, 1907. Oil on canvas. Université Libre de Bruxelles. Copyright SABAM 2002
[\[larger image\]](#)

As of this moment, Prometheus became for theosophical artists the object of intense aesthetic scrutiny. In this spirit, Séraphin Soudbinine created in 1908 a work entitled *Vers la lumière* (fig. 8), which, parallel to the scene by Jean Delville, represents a human head roughly expunging itself in order to reach the light. Around this time Alexandre Scriabine, influenced by the work of Delville, composed a "symphonic poem" entitled *Prométhée; ou, Le poème du feu*, completed in 1909. Published in 1911, the score of *Poème du feu* was decorated with a frontispiece designed by Jean Delville representing the union of form and music through the figure of Prometheus, surging out of the shadows like a note emerging from the silence (fig. 9).



Fig. 8, Séraphin Soudbinine, *Vers la lumière*, 1908. Bronze. Private collection, Paris [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 9, Jean Delville, frontispiece for the score of *Le poème du feu* by Alexandre Scriabine, 1911. Conservatoire Royal de Musique, Brussels. Copyright SABAM 2002 [\[larger image\]](#)

Taking a closer look at these creations intersecting around the theme of Prometheus, it becomes apparent that many of these works share characteristics of both form and content. Prometheus was an extension of the ideal of creating an encompassing work of art, such as the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, for example. Romantics from Charles Baudelaire to Richard Wagner sought to produce an absolute work of art, combining all forms of artistic expression. In this regard, the works of Delville, Scriabine, and Soudbinine clearly belonged to the Symbolist vision. At a certain point, however, these works were also very modern. In the case of the works of Scriabine and Delville, which were designed to be presented together, the music of the composer accompanied the *Prometheus* of Jean Delville during a performance augmented with light projections corresponding to notes played by Scriabine. This synthesis is totally foreign to the Symbolist aesthetic, which remains attached to the individual characteristics of each artistic expression in viewing the rapport between the arts. It recalls the avant-garde attempts to fuse the arts, notably the famous "simultaneity," researched between 1912 and 1914 by the poets—Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and Marinetti—rather than by the Cubist and Futurist painters.[26]

In reality, these works witnessed a subtle balance between two traditions: one Symbolist, typical of the nineteenth century, the other belonging to the avant-garde of the twentieth century. It is essential to emphasize the novel character of this relationship, as, at the same time, the aesthetic of the avant-garde was evolving in reaction, sometimes violent, to the past and particularly to the aesthetic of Symbolism and of Art Nouveau. Within the theosophical group active in Belgium, the situation was very different. These painters were indifferent to one trend or the other; if Jean Delville is a purely Symbolist painter, Mikolajus Ciurlionis is a modernist artist, close to abstraction. The creations of these artists around the theme of Prometheus produced a union between the two styles so that they became as much the fruit of Symbolist research as the realization of a simultaneity of artistic expressions, typical of the avant-garde ideal. The work of Séraphin Soudbinine mentioned earlier, *Vers la lumière*, constitutes a revealing example of this union of styles. In form, it is clearly unlike the Prometheus of Delville and Scriabine, as these two works were based on a shared performance. The work of Soudbinine does not have a counterpart; it stands alone yet witnesses an equal unity between the Symbolist aesthetic and that of the avant-garde.

The inferior part of the work, forming the neck of the figure, is worked in a totally abstract manner. Of course, as an assistant of Rodin in Paris, Soudbinine used, as his master did, the *non finito* in order to better bring out the human form. Yet his intention was quite different. First, the neck of the figure is worked with tongues of crushed earth, which creates a very different effect than *non finito*—a texture that is tormented, shapeless, and frequently abstract, contrasting with the Symbolist polish of the face. Of equal note is that, in leaning the head of the figure to the right, Soudbinine divided his sculpture into distinct two parts, as if the emergence of the figure out of brute matter found its equivalent in the tension between the abstract part and the figurative.

Theosophical Aesthetic at the Crossroad of Styles

The method of "cohabitation" of the figurative and the abstract within these theosophically inspired works has several explanations. One of these—possibly the most convincing—is that the Theosophical Society itself, conscious of the great diversity of artists it had attracted, adopted a position of compromise in aesthetic matters so as to manage the various sensibilities.

It must also be said that the society was somewhat out of step with the artistic activities that took place late in its history. It appears that the first modest expositions were not organized until after 1905 and were only systemized upon the nomination of Annie Besant as the president of the society in 1907. The first evidence can be found in August 1905, when an exhibition of art and applied art was organized in London for the second Annual Congress of the Federation of European Branches of the Theosophical Society. Without great pretence, the exhibit displayed the works of both theosophical artists and "d'artistes non membres sympathisant" (sympathetic nonmember artists). Jean Delville was charged with selecting and preparing the entries for the Belgian branch.^[27] From this time on, an exposition was organized on the occasion of each international congress of the society that maintained its identity as an order consecrated to art in addition to fraternity, philosophy, and occultism. But in reality, aside from a "theosophical art circle" founded in Manchester by theosophical artists of London,^[28] one finds little trace of artistic preoccupation in the structure of the Theosophical Society.

In the wake of these developments, the theorists of the society began to explore questions of aesthetics in relation to theosophical thought. For the first time, conscious of the fact that the society contained as many Symbolist artists as avant-garde practitioners, these theorists attempted to preserve the diversity of artists inspired by theosophy. And, in fact, when reading the articles on aesthetics published in theosophical reviews, it is possible to pick out a systematic verbal ambiguity that leaves artists great liberty for inspiration. For Belgium, one of the best examples is perhaps that of a response to a questionnaire launched in 1907 by the review *Théosophie* entitled "Que faut-il comprendre par art mystique":

Mystical art can be understood in different fashions. In the most *primitive* sense, art is mystical when it expresses, in differing degrees of clarity, the pantheistic life of beings considered on an intellectual plane. . . . In the comparative sense, art is mystical when it acquires a spiritual influence, when, serving as a symbol for expression, it supports itself by its own idea, without bringing attention to the vehicle that transmits it.^[29]

In other words, the abstract and the figurative are left to their places, expressing together, to different degrees, the theosophical message. Nevertheless, this position was not held by all theosophists. Progressively, it seems that certain theorists voiced doubts about the capacity of Symbolism to transmit the message of theosophy. In an article entitled "Le but d'art," Ward defined painting as an abstraction "that is not that which the artist borrowed from external sources but that which is communicated by its own existence: the expression of itself in its work."^[30]

Over the years, the proximity between the abstract and the figurative evolved toward a more marked split, precipitated by the resignation in 1913 of Rudolph Steiner, who, exasperated by the anti-Christianity of the Theosophical Society, founded anthroposophy, attracting a great number of theosophists in his wake, such as Édouard Schuré, and many abstract painters, including Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky.^[31] This schism within the society indicates that theosophy hardly escaped the split between abstraction and the figurative, and that when asked to align themselves with one trend or another, artists would choose a theosophical option in harmony with their aesthetic principles.^[32]

Even so, the work of numerous theosophical artists demonstrates a very particular manner of articulating tradition and modernity, the figurative and the abstract, as if the hesitation of the Theosophical Society between these two tendencies would in the future become a veritable issue of aesthetic identity. Refusing to choose an exclusive experience, be it figurative or abstract, these painters seemed to want to reunite these two aesthetic options in the same practice. This articulation, however, is very different from the tension that could exist between the figurative and the abstract in the works of Cubists or Futurists, for example. As in the work of Soudbinine, discussed above, it is more a matter of juxtaposition between the figurative and the abstract, which cohabit while remaining distinct. This feature is found in the works of a good number of theosophical artists, from the Russian painter Nikolaj Roehrich to Mikolajus Ciurlionis and Rudolph Steiner, whose drawings bear witness to this strange union between abstraction and the figurative, producing a form balanced between the two.

Belgium is also very revealing of this characteristic. We have already discussed the group of painters assembled around Jean Delville whose works could be read either from a Symbolist perspective or as perfectly modern. Also worth mentioning is the example of two avant-garde painters who, in the 1910s, were influenced by theosophy, Jean-Jacques Gailliard (1890–1976) and Josef Peeters (1895–1960). A student of Jean Delville, Gailliard had been close to his master when he completed his *Prometheus*; he himself executed *The Child Oedipus* in 1913 in a style close to the plasticity of Delville. In 1912 Gailliard became an adept of the Swedenborg Church. Distinct from theosophy, Swedenborgianism was similar in its ideas, to the extent that theosophists were strongly influenced by the illuminism of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), most notably by the idea of a universal religion in which everyone could perceive the message of the Gospel individually, defined not as a body of doctrine but as a means of personal edification. In 1915 the painter decorated a Swedenborg chapel in Ixelles (Brussels), about which Fernand Khnopff gave an enthusiastic lecture in the *Bulletin de l'Académie de Belgique*. Like other theosophist artists, Gailliard sought knowledge of a specific union between the figurative and the abstract. This characteristic became a distinctive sign of his work, and until his death in 1976 he refused to choose one option over

the other, practicing instead an art form that situated the two styles midway between reality and pure plasticity.

The same is true of Jozef Peeters, who completed several works inspired by theosophy in 1914–15, notably a series of self-portraits as well as a grand canvas entitled *Trinity*, painted in 1915 (fig. 10). This work combines the techniques of pictorial modernity with the values of theosophy in a spectacular manner. The canvas essentially consists of the futuristic decomposition of a face—no doubt that of the painter—who wilts within a space of juxtaposed planes. The originality of the work lies in the fact that the futuristic process serves here to support a theosophist iconography. In splitting it into three parts, the face comes to represent the Trinity, as if through a simple avant-garde process the decomposition of the planes transforms them into the individual's process of edification in the search for spirituality.



Fig. 10, Jozef Peeters, *Trinité*, 1915. Oil on canvas. Collection Van Hoeylandt-De Voghelaere, Tems
[\[larger image\]](#)

With the works of Gailliard and Peeters, we certainly exceed the scope of our initial proposal centered around the relationship between Symbolism and the avant-garde among Belgian artists inspired by theosophy. Their works nevertheless permit us to comprehend that this unstable balance between Symbolism and the avant-garde, far from being an "accident of history," survived well after the years 1890 to 1905. With Gailliard or Peeters, it also became the basis of a true style, playing on the ties between the abstract and the figurative. This style was rather novel, as these two systems tended to be mutually exclusive through the 1950s, at which point artists exploited the plastic possibilities of a combination between the abstract and the figurative.

This particular rapport between these two aesthetics, as we have shown, is founded in the historical ties between Symbolism and the avant-garde, as they coexisted within the theosophical movement. Theosophy, a vast corpus of esoteric thought that tended to attract diverse interests and was strongly appreciated at the turn of the century, had the particular ability to feed the reflection of artists first belonging to Symbolism, then to the avant-garde. In this, theosophy contributed to the linking of ties between artists who, without it, would never have worked as closely together. Together, these artists quickly produced works of

theosophical inspiration in which Symbolism and avant-garde coexisted, as seen in the series created in Belgium around the theme of Prometheus.

The influence of theosophy on these artists invites us to take a new look not only at the history of Symbolism but also at the relationship between the latter and the avant-garde. We have a tendency to think that Symbolism was eradicated by modernity, as we also tend to see the ties between Symbolism and the avant-garde—and, in a broader sense, between the figurative and the abstract—too often only in terms of rupture or tension. The study of the influence of theosophy on Belgian painters at the turn of the century demonstrates, to the contrary, that these two styles have coexisted and, at times, in surprising harmony.

Sébastien Clerbois holds a Ph.D. in the History of Art. Formerly a researcher at the Université libre de Bruxelles, he is now Chargé de Recherches at the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique, Brussels. He is the author of several publications devoted to Belgian symbolism and modernism.

Email the author [seclerbo\[at\]ulb.ac.be](mailto:seclerbo[at]ulb.ac.be)

Notes

[1] See Tuchman et al. 1986.

[2] For a history of the Theosophical Society, see Faivre 1977.

[3] On the salons of the Rose+Croix, see Da Silva 1991.

[4] For an in-depth analysis of the influence of numerological theories on Belgian Symbolists, see the author's doctoral thesis, Clerbois 1999. Khnopff's work is based on the theories of critic Francis Vurgey, director of the Kumris lodge and affiliate of Papus's Rose-Croix order. Vurgey wanted to create an encompassing work of art entitled *Pantaxe*, based on a triple creation, the number 3 being, in numerology, the symbol of perfection in the union of opposites. Vurgey entrusted the musical aspect of his work to Jules Massenet and the plastic construction to Fernand Khnopff, of whom he requested a tripartite composition, which explains the use of the triptych for *L'Isolement*. Too constrained from a theoretical point of view, the work was never finished. Other artists used similar processes, notably Jean Delville, even though he did not create triptychs but rather series of works around the occultist theme of initiation, notably *Parsifal* (1894) and *L'ange des splendeurs*, which formed a diptych, and *Orphée aux enfers* (1896), which was a response to *Orphée mort* (1893). It is important to mention that the use of the triptych by Belgian artists does not by itself define this "occultist" dimension. In the works of Léon Frédéric and Constantin Meunier, for example, this usage is for the most part of a social nature, since through returning to a format typical of religious imagery these artists intended to sanctify the representations of the people. Rapetti 1990, pp. 136–45.

[5] Verkade 1926, p. 71.

[6] The first recorded witness to the influence of theosophy in Belgium is Marc Haven, a member of Papus's Rose-Croix order, who, in a letter written in 1899, deplored the leaning toward theosophy of the Martinist lodges of Brussels; see André and Beaufile 1995, p. 221.

[7] Through its ties with the book by Schuré, *L'École du Platon* essentially reveals a theosophist influence that demonstrates his syncretistic iconography. Fernando Savater, in a small volume dedicated to this work by Delville, linked *L'École du Platon* to Neoplatonism; see Savater 1991. While he studied it, Delville seems to have evinced only a minor interest in Neoplatonism; in any case, he was hardly close to the Neoplatonic circles formed around Henri Bergson.

- [8] See *Bibliographie de Belgique* for the years 1894–98.
- [9] Nyst n.d., p. 1404.
- [10] Alexandra David-Neel (1972, p. 104) recounts her memories of the salon hosted by Ray Nyst.
- [11] Désiré-Marchand, Peyronnet, and Tréguir 1997.
- [12] Annie Besant held a conference in the capital of Belgium dedicated to *sagesse antique*; Jean Delville summarized the talk in the review *Le thyrse*: "Dans l'histoire des doctrines humaines, la sagesse antique est celle qui brille du plus inaltérable éclat. Les générations successives d'initiés orientaux et occidentaux, le transmirent, inaltérée, à travers les alternatives séculaires d'obscurité et de lumière, aux temps modernes sous le nom de Théosophie—Sagesse de Dieu—" (In the history of human doctrines, ancient wisdom is that which shines with the most unalterable brilliance. Successive generations of Oriental and Western initiates have transmitted it, unchanged, through the secular alternatives of darkness and light to modern times, under the name of Theosophy—the Wisdom of God—.) Delville 1899, pp. 65–66.
- [13] Besant 1899, p. 2.
- [14] "Visite du Président Fondateur," *Théosophie*, no. 5 (August 1905), p. 55.
- [15] "Appel aux théosophes belges," *Revue théosophique belge*, no. 1 (April 1909), pp. 1–2.
- [16] Witness to this success, a report in the review *Théosophie* announced that fifty-four theosophical branches were created in 1904 alone ("Nouvelles," *Théosophie*, no. 1 (April 1905), p. 5.
- [17] For example: "Le salut de l'humanité et dans la recherche de la vérité; combien d'hommes la cherchent sincèrement" (The salvation of humanity lies in the search for truth; how many men sincerely search for it), or better yet, "Il ne suffit pas d'aimer l'humanité; il faut aimer les bêtes, les fleurs, les oiseaux, les plantes, tout ce qui vit" (It does not suffice to love humanity; one must also love creatures, flowers, birds, plants, all that lives); Smits 1913.
- [18] Concerning the relationship between Philippe Wolfers and theosophy, it is important to clarify that Raphaël Petrucci, the father-in-law of Marcel Wolfers (Philippe's brother), was himself a theosophist. In 1906, thanks to the Association des Écrivains Belges, Petrucci, who was close to Jean Delville, published the book by Xavier de Reul *Le peintre mystique*, for which he wrote a preface situating the work within a theosophical perspective.
- [19] Vogel 1912; Vogel 1929.
- [20] Jumeau-Lafond 1996, pp. 22–24.
- [21] At present, these documents boil down to the archives of musician Alexandre Scriabine, included in the 1999 biography by Kelkel. The archives of the Belgian branches of the Theosophical Society regarding this subject were destroyed by occupying forces during World War II.
- [22] Kelkel 1999, p. 152.
- [23] Besant and Leadbeater 1905.
- [24] "Notre éminent ami Jean Delville travaille depuis quelques temps à un Prométhée que ses très nombreux admirateurs, dont nous sommes, attendent avec la plus compréhensible impatience" (Our eminent friend Jean Delville has been working for some time on a Prometheus that a great number of admirers, including ourselves, await with understandably, with impatience); "Chronique," *En art*, June 1905, p. 207.
- [25] Kelkel 1999, pp. 153–77.
- [26] On simultaneity, see Orlandi Cerenza 1987; see also Bergman 1962.
- [27] Van Manen 1905, pp. 16–19.
- [28] "Les activités théosophiques d'art," *La revue théosophique belge*, no. 5 (August 1909), pp. 117–20.
- [29] "L'art mystique peut être compris de différentes façons. Au sens le plus *primitif*, l'art est mystique quand il énonce, à différents degrés de clarté, la vie panthéistique des êtres considérés au plan intellectuel. . . . Au sens *comparitif*, l'art est mystique quand il acquiert une influence spirituelle quand, se servant du symbole comme expression, il se soutient par l'idée propre, sans éveiller l'attention sur le véhicule qui le transmet"; "Que faut-il comprendre par art mystique?" *Théosophie*, no. 7 (October 1905), pp. 73–75.
- [30] "n'est pas ce que l'artiste à emprunté des sources externes, mais ce qu'il y a communiqué de sa propre existence: l'expression de lui-même dans son travail"; Ward 1907, p. 41.
- [31] On this subject, see Ringborn 1986.

[32] Moreover, it can also be proposed that the varied social impact of works by theosophist artists helped accentuate the rift. Formalists by nature, the abstract works of Klee and Mondrian, while inspired by the ideas of theosophy, had less of a social impact than works by Symbolist painters, often created within the school that has been known as *l'art social* (social art) since the end of the nineteenth century. Also worth mentioning is the cycle that Jean Delville created for the Palais de Justice in Brussels, which constitutes the successful realization of a theosophical art that, beyond the formal, aspired above all to educate the people. Initially planned for the headquarters of the Société des Nations in Geneva, this cycle is composed of a decoration for the Cour d'Assises as well as *Génie vainqueur* (1914) and *Forces* (1924), installed in the lost Salle des Pas. These works were resolutely committed to social issues, such as the necessity of humanist justice and the maintenance of peace to permit individual growth. *Le génie vainqueur* represents the victory of the Allies over Germany, while, painted in the context of political troubles, *Les forces* invites the population to oppose the emergence of obscurantist "forces"—in this case, Fascism.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Ferdinand Schirren, *Portrait de Madame Helena Blavatski*, 1898. Plaster. Private collection, Brussels [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jean Delville, *L'École de Platon*, 1898. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Copyright SABAM 2002 [\[return to text\]](#)



Figs. 3, a–c, Émile Fabry, decorations for the villa of Philippe Wolfers, built at La Hulpe by Paul Hankar. Photographs courtesy of author [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Arthur Craco, decorations for Willem Vogen's hotel in Schaerbeek (Brussels). Photograph courtesy of author [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, "Notes pour la signification des couleurs." Illustration from Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Les formes-pensées* (Paris Publications Théosophiques, 1905) [\[return to text\]](#)

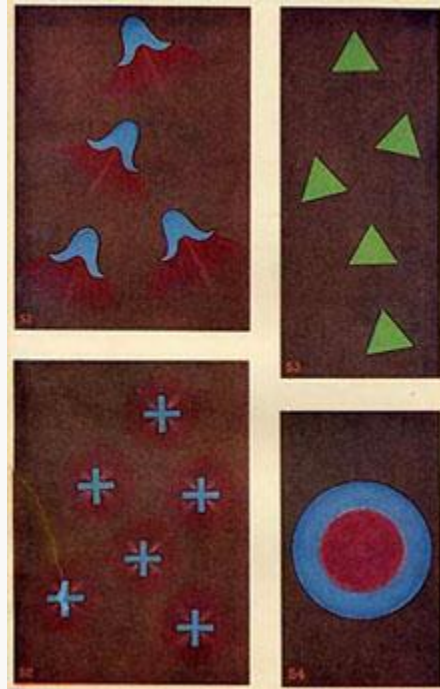


Fig. 6, "Formes-pensées musicales." Illustration from Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Les formes-pensées* (Paris Publications Théosophiques, 1905) [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Jean Delville, *Prométhée*, 1907. Oil on canvas. Université Libre de Bruxelles. Copyright SABAM 2002 [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, S raphin Soudbinine, *Vers la lumi re*, 1908. Bronze. Private collection, Paris [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Jean Delville, frontispiece for the score of *Le po me du feu* by Alexandre Scriabine, 1911.
Conservatoire Royal de Musique, Brussels. Copyright SABAM 2002 [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Jozef Peeters, *Trinité*, 1915. Oil on canvas. Collection Van Hoeylandt-De Voghelaere, Tems
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