Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Laura Morowitz

book review of

Symbolist Objects: Symbolism and Subjectivity in the Fin de Siècle edited by Claire I. R. O'Mahoney

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010)

Citation: Laura Morowitz, book review of *Symbolist Objects: Symbolism and Subjectivity in the Fin de Siècle* edited by Claire I. R. O'Mahoney, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn10/symbolist-objects-symbolism-and-subjectivity-in-the-fin-de-siecle.

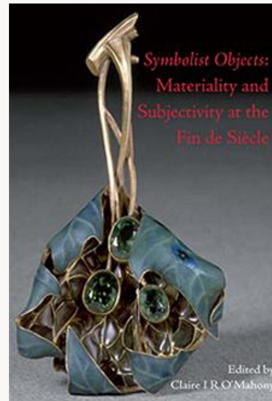
Published by: Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License Creative Commons License.



Symbolist Objects: Symbolism and Subjectivity in the Fin de Siècle.
Edited by Claire I. R. O'Mahoney
High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire: Rivendale Press, 2009.
444 pp; 97 b/w illustrations
$65.00 (cloth)
ISBN: 978-1-904201-15-1

"The predilection amongst Symbolist writers and artists to be collectors of exquisite, esoteric and everyday objects underlines how material culture lies at the heart of Symbolist subjectivity." So begins the fascinating new collection of essays, edited by Claire I. R. O'Mahoney, which proposes to restore the materialist concerns of the Symbolist generation to their rightful place, to once again make *the* object *an* object of study. As Mahoney points out in her introduction, early scholars of Symbolism, following in the footsteps of the artists themselves, favored the "idealist" and Platonic side of the movement, its concern with things abstract and elevated. Only relatively recently have art historians and literary scholars begin to chart the Symbolist fascination with materialism, both in the works themselves and in the larger sense of their connection with the broader consumer culture of the fin de siècle.[1] In exploring this subject, Mahoney and her contributors have revealed the intriguing paradox at the heart of Symbolism: a movement obsessed with suggestion, symbol, and the realm of the ideal was also the first one to elevate form, the very *thingness* of the object, to the highest realm. Some of the most divinely material works of art ever made—the sensuous, burnished paintings of Moreau, the achingly detailed descriptive pages of Huysman, the encrusted, iridescent surfaces of Gallé pottery—were forged in the crucible of Symbolism, and resist, in the end, any attempt to theorize them away. In this new exploration of the topic, Symbolist materialism becomes base: not only in the sense of returning these works down to earth, but as the very basis, the source, for the creations themselves.

The book, published by the Rivendale Press, is an impressive object in itself: heavy in the hand and bearing a cover photo of a stunning Lalique brooch. The essays are grouped into sub-themes that highlight varying contexts and manifestations of the object: interiors and interiority, talismans, trinkets and fetishes. One group of essays considers the fin-de-siècle book from the point of view of its 'objectness': its typography and calligraphy, its material and

matter. A final section, entitled "Legacies" explores the continuing link between objects, subjectivity, and artistic creativity. The objects in question range from exotic masks, to Oscar Wilde's blue china, to Ernst Haeckel's drawings of microscopic species, a dazzling range, if not quite the breadth implied in Alfred Jarry's apt reference to "merde et diamonds" (the title phrase of contributor Jill Fell's essay on the playwright and provocateur, "Merde and Diamonds: Alfred Jarry's *Les Minutes de Sable Memorial and César Antichrist"*). The cumulative effect of these essays forces us to realize that for all their proto-modern concerns, the Symbolist generation remains a world apart from us. While we now see all things as texts, for these earlier artists even texts were *things*, souls and symbols encased in real bodies.

The essays open, fittingly, with Elizabeth Emery's excellent study of Comte Robert de Montesquiou's *maison d'un artiste*, for the Count himself served as the prototype of the object-worshipping Symbolist aesthete. In earlier published works, Emery has brilliantly tracked the overlapping worlds of Symbolist withdrawal and consumer frenzy that characterized the period and left its mark on writers such as J. K. Huysmans and Marcel Proust, along with many of their characters.[2] Here Emery examines how the highly subjective quality of Montesquiou's decorated interiors, deprived of a coherent narrative and the animating force of the Count himself, were virtually unreadable to many of his contemporaries. His art of amassing objects, an activity he saw as the most creative artistic act, was misconstrued as yet another "symptom" of the decadence that drove many to seek retreat from modern urban life. Indeed, escapism is a potent ingredient in Symbolist art, from Paul Gauguin's flight to a not-so-idyllic Tahiti, to the many Symbolist literary protagonists who take refuge in Gothic cathedrals or medieval castles, to Odilon Redon's recourse to dream imagery. Emery argues instead that Montesquiou's *maison d'un artiste* was a kind of text, in which he wrote the self: he becomes the model for the ways in which materiality and subjectivity intertwine during the period.

In Katherine Shingler's study of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* in "Potential images in Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*," she offers an intriguing exploration of the way in which the hide and seek of the poet's imagery—glimpsed or grasped momentarily only to slip away again—finds its counterpart in the "visuo-spatial arrangement of the poem," its physical existence on the page. Even in the act of de-materializing the world, its sensual reality returns; the poems are very much intended to be *seen* as well as read. However, Shingler's argument is difficult for the reader to follow fully without more reproductions of the original page layouts. While Shingler specifically links Mallarmé's strategies to currents in the visual arts, especially the paintings of the Impressionists, an even stronger parallel exists between the vague "potential" imagery of Mallarmé and the fully Symbolist art of Eugène Carrière or the little studied sculptor, Henri Cross. Like the poet, these visual artists evoked rather than described their imagery as diaphanous and elusive, as if the objects themselves were either in the process of emerging, or returning to formlessness.

Cross, along with the Belgian symbolist Fernand Khnopff, is labeled an "archaeologist of the dream" in Rachel Sloan's essay on the Symbolist use of the Greek mask. It's a wonderfully apt description of the way in which Symbolist subjectivity was embodied in objects, while the objects themselves opened up the realm of the transcendent. For the Symbolists, the mask's power was in its ability to simultaneously hide and reveal; it is an object that is at once surface, but hints at an almost terrifying depth. Sloan argues that although the precise, classical mask

of Hypnos beloved by Khnopff, which appeared often in his art, bears little resemblance to the weathered, slightly primitive masks forged by the glass sculptor Henri Cross, both artists aimed to "...re-inject a sense of the terrible, the mysterious and the poetic into the sculpture of Antiquity" (172). Both artists were drawn to polychromy, to evocative materials, and to particular antique sources, notably heads of both Hypnos and Medusa; part of their fascination, Sloan argues, for the "uncanny and liminal." Fragmented, mysterious, suspended between present and past, living and dead, such masks would later haunt the Surrealists.

The rich interplay between the Symbolist object and the scientific object in the fin de siècle is explored in Robert Proctor's essay on Réne Binet's Porte Monumentale at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. As scholars such as Barbara Larson have established, the teeming world of the microscopic and invisible was a revelation to the Symbolist generation. Based closely on Erich Haekel's drawings of the microscopic creature radiolarian, the Binet gate encapsulated the entire worldview of the Exposition:

"If the Porte Monumentale made a statement about the capacity of nature to stimulate artistic creativity, it could also imply such a relationship between nature and industrial innovation. More importantly, it could suggest that, since man himself was also produced by evolution and was part of a continually evolving world, the technical and artistic innovations of individuals in society were equally the results of the evolutionary force of nature" (229).

Surely the emergence of the esoteric—and often mystifying—Symbolist object at precisely the same moment as the sudden increase of mass produced merchandise (and the institutions that maintain them, such as advertising agencies and department stores) deserves further study. At times the two worlds collide, most notably in the posters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, which draw as much on the whiplash line of Art Nouveau as on the graphic imagery of the popular press; or in the overstuffed interiors of Edouard Vuillard with bric-a-brac swallowed up by a mysterious and poetic silence. "Destruction and the Gift," a superb essay by Genviève Sicotte frames the central questions and concerns of this book: "how do they (Symbolist objects) compare to other objects; what sort of materiality or décor do they form; what is their use, their circulation, their value?" As Sicotte notes, the Symbolist obsession with objects exists in a dialectical relationship with the explosion of consumer culture, contesting and challenging the function of such commodities, while caught in their nexus. Sicotte argues that the Symbolists "criticize the emergent dominance of a culture of economic transactions" (248) through numerous strategies: through the production of precious, rare objects to be consumed by a select, elite consumer; through the creation of "anti-merchandise," or objects marked by sickness and death, and, therefore, unable to function as commodities; and through the creation of luxury objects that exist only to be given away or destroyed. Was the employment of such strategies enough to rescue the Symbolist object from the world of consumer capitalism?

Claire Mahoney asks the same question in relation to the jewelry of René Lalique: "Could a piece of jewelry, no matter how artistically imagined, ever sever the Gordian knot to material value and the display of status?" (295). As she goes on to show, Lalique's jeweled designs, with their serpentine curves, brazen scale and often morbid symbolism, conveyed far more about their wearers than simply financial position. "What makes these objects such evocative receptacles of the *fin-de-siècle* subjectivity is precisely their oxymoronic nature, incorporating

modernity and traditionalism, aesthetic artistry and unvarnished luxury, high art and commodity culture" (315).

Despite the high quality of this collection, some conceptual problems arise. The introduction might have more carefully defined the different categories of Symbolist objects. Was the term "fetish," for example, one embraced by the artists themselves? Is the reference here to Freud's fetish, to Marx's fetish or to both? The term "talisman" is equally ambiguous. Given that the word is the title for Paul Sérusier's 1890 painting, *Talisman*, a brief history of the term, and its contextual usage, may have shed further light here. What justifies the use of the term in Erika Schneider's essay, "Talisman for the Symbolist Movement: Puvis de Chavannes' *Hope*?" While the painting was deeply influential on many artists within the Symbolist generation, the specifically magical or supernatural implication of the term *talisman* seems out of place here. Might some of these objects have functioned in multiple ways for the artists or owners—as both trinkets *and* talismen, for example?

The final section of the book, devoted to "legacies" – an interesting attempt to bring the issues to bear on more contemporary works – is the least successful one. If the very nature of the Symbolist object is dependent on the larger *zeitgeist* of the fin-de-siècle, how could such objects function similarly in another context? As Mahoney notes in her introduction, William Perthes' essay explores how Robert Motherwell's "theoretical bases and technical processes … emerged from a nuanced engagement with Symbolist poetry and the aesthetic writings of Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé." While Symbolist aesthetics surely impacted Motherwell's painting in a profound way, it is difficult to argue for either poetry or writing as "objects" per se. Marjan Groot's essay is entitled "Insects, Design and Illusion: Symbolism and Subjectivity," but seems far more concerned with the first half of the equation. Although the aim of the essay was to "demonstrate how the notions of Symbolism and subjectivity can link works of art from such different fields and periods," Groot's focus is the way in which Plato's theory of *mimesis* can be applied to various works. Her essay is also strangely out of place with the rest of the collection in its insistent theoretical tone; the final pages rely on the reframing and quotation of not only Plato, but also Jean Paul Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Rancière, Günther Gebauer, Christophe Wulf, and Iris Murdoch.

Convincing and thought provoking as many of the essays are, more copious and better quality images would surely have strengthened several of the arguments. (The problem is particularly pressing in Shingler's close analysis of the spatial layout of Mallarmé's poems, and in the rather poor black and white reproductions of the delicate and exquisite masks discussed by Rachel Sloan). In some of the more detailed discussions of color, texture and imagery, this reader was at times frustrated not to be able to examine the objects myself or themselves; high quality reproductions might have helped alleviate this somewhat. While this is certainly in part an economic issue, it seems particularly vexing in a book dedicated to objects not to have a least a glimmer of what they looked like.

Indeed, while the book reveals how myriad objects were deeply intertwined with Symbolist art, one type of glimmering object emerges as the *objet Symboliste* par excellence: the gem. From the jewel-encrusted tortoise that crawls upon des Esseintes' carpet to the monumental structure of the Porte Binet, which "resembled an inflated piece of jewelry almost more that it did a work of architecture," the gem occupies pride of place in the Symbolist cosmos. From

Jarry's "diamond between turds," to the captivating jewelry of Gallé, to the glittering treasures at the heart of Rachilde's story of "The Marquis de Sade," the jewel is ubiquitous. Rarified and ornamental, yet tied to the forces of nature that produced it, dredged from the deep and bearing its secrets, the gem may stand in for the Symbolist work itself, glittering with possibility and beautiful to behold. As both aesthetic object, and object of study, Mahoney and her contributors prove these works remain multifaceted and spellbinding to contemplate.

Laura Morowitz
Professor of Art History, Wagner College
lmorowit[at]wagner.edu

Notes

[1] Pioneering studies include Rémy Saisselin, *The Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984); Janell Watson, *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: the Collection and Consumption of Curiosities* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Rosalind Pepall, "Cette Enchanteresse Matière," in Jean Clair, et. al., *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe* (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts, 1995), 406-427; Françoise Lucbert, "Le Corps de peinture ou les transpositions d'art de Huysmans sur Gustave Moreau," *Au Balcon 1871-1914* 7 (July 1995).

[2] Elizabeth Emery, "J.K. Huysmans and the Middle Ages," *Modern Language Studies* 29:3 (2002); "Bricacracomanis: Zola's Romantic Instinct" *Excavatio* 12 (1999); "Perpectual Adoration: Proust and the Art Spirit," chapter four in *Romancing the Cathedral: Gothic Architecture in Fin de Siècle French Culture,* (Albany: State University Press, 2001).