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book review of

The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art edited by Michelle Facos and Thor J. Mednick

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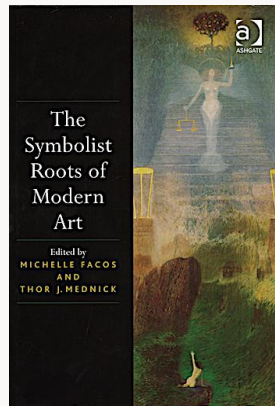
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Michelle Facos and Thor J. Mednick, editors,
The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art.
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As early as 1912, French art critic Roger Allard raised the thorny question, “what’s avant-garde art?”^[1] Almost two decades before, in 1893, the prominent Symbolist poet, critic, and co-author of Paul Gauguin’s salacious *Noa Noa* (1901) Charles Morice had wryly answered this rhetorical query: the avant-garde, he lamented, had become a market gambit, a sharper’s crude tactic with which to lure bourgeois speculators looking to make a quick franc by buying and then selling the work of an up-and-coming artist, a machination by which art critics declared artists (and their own criticism) central to understanding modern art’s evolution.^[2] Yet, despite Allard’s supposed confusion and Morice’s pronounced cynicism, the study of nineteenth- and twentieth- century art has continued to be dominated by the rhetoric of the avant-garde and, with it, the formal vocabulary of modernism.

That dominance becomes readily apparent in Michelle Facos and Thor J. Mednick’s book, *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art*, which traces Modernism (notably here with a capital “M”) back to Symbolist theories and practices. At the outset, it is important to note that Facos and Mednick and their fellow authors use the terms “Modernism” and “Modernist,” to refer to the artistic developments and ideas associated with critic Clement Greenberg’s definition of Modernism—in which art, starting in the early-twentieth century, self-critically interrogates its technical and formal properties. The use of Modernism with a capital “M” throughout this review is used to indicate the authors’ reference to the Greenbergian definition of the term. In line with the title’s double reference to the natural and to the linguistic (or better, the semiotic), Symbolism here serves as the knotty roots from which twentieth-century Modernism, in all its colorful varieties, bloomed.

To follow Symbolism forward to Modernism, or alternately Modernism back to Symbolism, *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art* includes seventeen essays split into two sections, “Structure” and “Theory”. “Structure” surveys Symbolism’s theoretical implications for Modernism; “Theory” analyzes the effects of applying Symbolist ideas to artistic practices. For both sections, Facos and Mednick have commendably assembled an international coterie of art historians affiliated with institutions across Europe and North America, thereby ensuring a spectrum of approaches to the topic. Their volume, which would best be read by those already familiar with Symbolism, details lesser-known artists, such as Nikolaos Gyzis, Karol Hiller, and Leon Koen, as well as better known ones like Henri Matisse, Edvard Munch, and Vasily Kandinsky. These artists worked both in places often considered Europe’s artistic peripheries, such as Belgrade and Kiev, and in its centers, namely Paris and Munich. A strategy many of the essayists employ is to concentrate on one or two Symbolists and then connect them to later artists, movements, and styles already firmly planted in the story of twentieth-century Modernism: Cubism, Surrealism, and Minimalism among others.

Rather than discuss Symbolism as the fateful conclusion of the nineteenth century or the indelible decline of earlier artistic practices—a narrative Facos and Mednick attribute to the Symbolists’ own discourses—*The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art* pushes back Modernism’s start to 1886, when the Symbolist manifesto first circulated. The volume thus insists that:

[W]hile it is generally accepted that the legacy of Symbolism can be traced into the modern period, the specific character of this influence deserves to be more fully considered. As one of the dominant cultural movements in fin-de-siècle Europe, Symbolism is often subsumed under a pall of implied closure: the final, decadent stage of Renaissance aesthetics in which the edifying lessons of representational art lost their instructive power and the creative gesture, in and of itself, became sacrosanct (1).

And so, instead of the dusk of the nineteenth century, Facos, Mednick, and their co-essayists persuasively posit that Symbolism is in fact the dawn of Modern art, rather than an anti-Modernist moment as it has so often been described.

The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art proves to be a studied reflection on Symbolism’s reappraisal of both the material and the natural, which, in turn, connects it to Modernism’s interrogation of art’s object-ness and disruption of conventional semiotic structures. The Symbolists, as Facos and Mednick summarize in their introduction, looked to escape, both from the ugliness of modern manufacture, with its ramshackle mills and sooty factories that blighted the landscape, and from the literal depiction of that landscape (and more broadly, nature). Many circles in this period, artistic or otherwise, perceived nature to be “somehow more true, more organic, and thus more likely to hold unifying lessons for humanity than man-made, industrial matter” (3). Heretofore, Symbolism has tended to be cast as a “sacrifice [of] realistic representation to access the eternal truths residing beyond the visible and the concrete” (2). What is important for this volume is that Symbolism scrutinized the representation of both the material and the natural to meditate on the processes and practices by which artworks came to be inflected with meaning. In their reassessment of the expectation that art have a strict coherence between the visual and its meaning, the Symbolists ruptured sign from signified—a rupture that Facos and Mednick are right to note as concurrent with Ferdinand de Saussure’s contemporaneous critical lectures on semiotics, and as foreshadowing later

ruptures like those of Marcel Duchamp and the Futurists.^[3] Following the volume's argument, these ruptures make Symbolism a fundamental precursor to Modernism: the Symbolists' early realization of "the freedom of both expression and representation that a semiotic model made possible for art" led them (and those after them) to understand that the sign carried "constructed and contingent" significance (5).

The "Structure" section opens with four essays that each explain how Eastern European artists employed the polysemy of Symbolist-cum-Modernist formal visual language to inscribe their works with layer upon rich layer of significance—artistic, cultural, and personal as well as local, regional, and national—in such a way that their paintings attempted to achieve a universal visual language à la Schopenhauer. The visual language used by these artists—Nikolaos Gyzis, Konstantinos Parthenis, Leon Koen, and Karol Hiller (many of whom will be new to Anglo-American readers)—enabled art-objects to hold multiple meanings that metamorphosed with artist and audience over time and space. Later artists, for whom the Symbolists under consideration here served as role models, understood the Symbolist practice of synthesizing multiple artistic and cultural traditions as a fundamentally Modern pursuit.

The Greek painter Nikolaos Gyzis, for instance, determined to rescue the Byzantine past as a proud part of his national identity via his adaptation of Byzantine art's flatness and religiosity, and in so doing, attempted to produce an eternal Greek art (11–22). In a similar way, Davor Dzalto discusses how Serbian artist Leon Koen "developed singular artistic styles that combined new tendencies influenced by the European art of [his] time with traditional forms of Serbian painting" (23). Like Koen, whose art explored his complicated identities as a German-educated Jew working in a "region marked by migration and multiethnicity" Polish painter and printmaker Karol Hiller relocated from a "multicultural and multiethnic textile center" to Moscow and then Kiev (27, 33). After studying Kiev's local Neo-Byzantinists, together with the Paris-based Nabis, Vasily Kandinsky's synaesthesia, and Kasimir Malevich's Suprematism, Hiller settled on Surrealism as a "universal visual language to stir the emotions of a viewer regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, or social status" (35). Finally, Russian Mikhail Vrubel, rather than mimetically imitate nature, embraced an abstract formal language that synthesized Symbolist forms with Old Russian and Byzantine icons and Venetian mosaics. In this way, Vrubel aimed to author "his own artistic language" that could express the "inner substance of objects" (48). Symbolist artists like these nurtured visual languages at once "international and local, both modern and quintessentially Greek [or their specific nationality]," and ultimately Modernist (18).

Following these initial discussions around the confluence of cultural and national identity, Symbolism, and Modernism, several essays proceed to examine how Symbolist and Modernist artists interrogated art's object-ness through their engagement with realism/naturalism as a style. Mednick's own essay explores how Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi's meticulously rendered domestic scenes defied viewers' expectations that deciphering the elements within the artworks would lead to a moral or ethical lesson. Hammershøi's attention to detail comes with no edification, however. Rather, his works frustrated viewers who were familiar with Danish and Dutch Golden Age painterly conventions and looked for the picture plane to reveal some "significant meaning beyond [those paintings'] simple object status" (131). From Hammershøi's realistic genre scenes, then, Mednick demonstrates that Symbolism disrupted how art had traditionally operated in terms of the sign and signified. Where Hammershøi

eschewed symbolism in his illusionistic imagery, an artist such as the German Max Klinger, discussed by Marsha Morton, in his equally realistic graphic works conveyed “states of mind, metaphysical ideas, and critical social perspectives”—an embrace of realistic representation that, in Klinger’s case, facilitated suggestion (212).

Katie Larson and Marja Lahelma use their essays to discuss Symbolist practices that reveal the materiality of art. In the case of Gustave Moreau, Larson convincingly describes how the artist did not dissolve the material so much as he encrusted his canvases with thick layers of impasto paint and symbolic content, lending both a physical materiality and spiritual weightiness to his works. Larson compares Moreau’s molding of the picture plane into an object with the stripped down surfaces of his student, Georges Rouault, whose works’ simplicity demonstrate a Modernist transcendence of the material. Unlike his instructor’s accretion of symbols, Rouault arrived at the spiritual through simplified forms and thick but graceful sweeps of paint. In her analysis of self-portraits by Edvard Munch and Ellen Thesleff, Lahelma applies Dario Gamboni’s theory of “potential images” to show how technique—in this case, sketchiness opposed to Moreau’s buildup—exposes these artists’ creative processes while liberating their “artwork[s] from the constraints of materiality” thus defying art’s “object status” (59, 62).

While these essays scrutinize Symbolism’s commentary on art’s object-ness and materiality, others underscore its semiotic openness, as shown in the paintings of James Ensor, Fernand Khnopff, and Henri Matisse, all of whom are tied here to the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Ensor’s *Skeletons Warming Themselves* (1889), with its darkly absurd portrayal of two skeletons warming their bones before a stove, literally flays the flesh off these figures to expose and strip away viewers’ expectations of art as theatrical performance. Ensor, who held longstanding interests in burlesque theatre, puppets and satire, has here laid bare art’s ability to “destabilize the material world of things” so that he might speak to more universal themes beyond the picture plane (70).

The three essays that discuss Khnopff by Rachael Grew, Andrew Marvick, and Nicholas Parkinson all agree that his art “render[ed] meaning uncertain by opening symbols to interpretation” (181). The ambiguous “hybrid, transitional states,” and subversion of binary oppositions in Khnopff’s work are precursors to Modernist art, which was no longer required to be readable or legible (73). In large part, what made his paintings so ambiguous and expressive was his translation of Mallarméan poetics to the visual. Mallarmé’s poetry, as several essayists recall, used *les blancs* (void, empty, and negative white spaces) within the text to direct the viewers’/readers’ attention to what is not expressed as much as what is expressed (87–88, 119–121).^[4] As Marvick emphasizes, the interpretive undecidability of Khnopff’s work can be found in his formal “inversion or subversion of negative and positive space through a deliberate confusion between light and dark”—a visual translation of Mallarmé’s poetic technique (85).^[5] Inspired by the poet, then, Khnopff’s painting thus exemplifies the central conceit of Symbolism: “the visual does not signify all that is intended” (89).

Mallarmé’s poetics also can be used as a lens through which to understand the aesthetics of Matisse in the 1910s. As Margaret Werth writes, the field has produced a potted interpretation of Matisse’s art in this period by focusing on its supposed “analytic and the collage-like aspects of Cubism and the mediating role of Cézanne, and of the war period and its privations” (191). Interested in an alternative analysis, Werth compellingly asserts that Matisse, like the

Symbolist poet, employed forms that intimated association and suggestion (not description). And Matisse, once more like Mallarmé in his “pictorial poetics,” erased, effaced, or otherwise eliminated elements of his work to underscore their capacity for suggestion (126). His *Bathers by a River* (1909–10), for example, with its scraped away, partially erased forms, relies upon suggestion through the reduction, abstraction and negation of those forms.

Perhaps the most striking contribution to the field comes in Anne Bryski’s adept and eloquent essay on art criticism’s shift from technically-based values towards ethically-based values, including “seriousness of purpose, selfless dedication, sincerity, and authenticity” (144). That shift, she contends, made possible the development of an art historical narrative privileging Modernism and the avant-garde as its primary protagonists. Bryski, through her examination of the lexical similarities between Symbolist and Modernist critical discourse, provides the volume’s best evidence that Modernism was indeed birthed in Symbolism. Importantly for her, the Symbolists divided “pseudo art” from “true art.” By the latter, they meant their own art and design, non-western objects and European folklore, and art that anticipated theirs. For the Symbolists, as for the Modernists, “true art” possessed “transcendent and universal ideals” (143). It was therefore firmly separated from most late-nineteenth-century art, which the Symbolists and Modernists alike denounced as “pseudo-art”: mainstream, market-based, and, ultimately, under Clement Greenberg, kitsch (143). Even as the Symbolists’ notion of “true art” starts to seem remarkably similar to academic artists’ derision of “market obligation, constraints and demands,” Bryski shows how the values those academics upheld—autonomy, innovation, and universalism—were turned against them by Modernist practitioners and critics. Thus, for the Symbolists and for Greenbergian Modernists, the avant-garde acted as a preserve against the middle-brow, the commodified, and the academic.

In spite of *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art*’s deft analysis of how Symbolism launched the Modernist interrogation of art’s object-ness and semiotics, some prickly issues trouble any story of roots and origins such as this one. Not least is that however much Modernism may have sprung forth from Symbolism, the latter surely has its own roots. Symbolism’s start, and so Modernism’s, can forever be unearthed in earlier movements such as romanticism, and though art history has rightly strived to make connections between movements, one wonders why those stories so often privilege the centrality of Modernism. *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art* has certainly succeeded in its collective efforts to author a “wide-ranging, kaleidoscopic examination of the relationship of Symbolism and Modernism” (6). But why this persistent imperative to lash artists, ideas, and practices, Symbolist or otherwise, onto this particular Modernism? Why does Modernism remain the story of nineteenth and twentieth century art when there are more complicated, and possibly more compelling, stories? Perhaps we should consider whether, for all *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art*’s truly perceptive analysis, its integration of Symbolism into the Modernist record may have the unintended side effect of robbing Symbolism of its own rich identity, and art history of a more diverse, multilinear narrative.

In a discipline concerned with “close-looking” and “object-based analysis,” the subfield of nineteenth-century art history has tended towards questions of social and cultural history, or towards questions informed by theory; *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art*’s examination of how artists critically interrogated art’s object-ness and semiotics, therefore, could be championed as a return to art history’s own roots. At a time when the boundary lines separating art

historical subfields (as reflected in academic employment postings and departmental reorganization) have started to be redrawn, broken down, or even abandoned, Facos and Mednick's volume adroitly traverses the slipperiness between subfields. Yet the pressing of late nineteenth-century Symbolism into the realm of twentieth-century Modernism may also be understood as a reflection of our subfield's shifting place in the overall history of art. What was once a distinct subfield within the discipline, the nineteenth century seems as though it may be split in two, with those working on the first half of the century pushed back to the "early modern" and those working on the second half pulled forward to the "modern and contemporary." But the vitalism of nineteenth-century art and of our discipline lies in the very fact that the stories of both remain forever in flux; therefore, such a potential split should be less feared than embraced as a manifestation of the subfield's real dynamism. *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art's* work to recast Symbolism, and with it, Modernism, thus alternately reflects uncertainty and excitement over nineteenth-century art history's future direction—which will be sure to spark lively discussion, much as *fin-de-siècle* anxieties about an equally unforeseen future did a century ago.

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Notes

[1] To my knowledge, David Cottington was the first to point out this important quote: "...qu'est qu'un art 'avant-garde?'" See Roger Allard, *La Cote*, no. 22 October 1912 in David Cottington, *Cubism and the Politics of Culture in France, 1905–1914* (PhD diss., University of London, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1985).

[2] Charles Morice, "Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France*, December 1893, 289–300.

[3] Facos and Mednick see the Symbolists' interests in semiotics as part of a wider intellectual current in this period. Saussure's lectures on structural linguistics, given in 1895, were only published posthumously in 1916. See Charles Bally and Albert Séchehaye, eds., *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916).

[4] The volume supposes a knowledge of Stéphane Mallarmé's aesthetic and philosophical influence. Those unfamiliar with Mallarmé would do well to consult outside sources such as Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

[5] As Marvick makes evident, Mallarmé and Khnopff knew one another. Khnopff illustrated Mallarmé's *A la nue accablante tu*. Together, the illustration and poem were published in the April–May 1895 issue of the Berlin periodical *Pan*. Mallarmé also wrote about the illustration in his letters. See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance, VII, juillet 1894-décembre 1895*, ed. H. Mondor and L.J. Austin (Paris: Gallimard-Nouvelle Revue Française, 1982).