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Laurinda S. Dixon

exhibition review of

*Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897*

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*Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

June 10–October 4, 2017

Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

October 28, 2017–January 7, 2018

Catalogue:

Vivien Greene.

*Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897.*

New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2017.

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“We all know what nonsense there was in Paris over a revival of interest in this apparently vanished sect . . . Besides picture exhibitions, lecture courses were given—dull, of course; and plays also.” So wrote Alice Morse Earle in her popular book of 1902, *Sundials and Roses of Yesterday*.<sup>[1]</sup> Mrs. Earle was certain that these curious events would never be forgotten, but over a century later, we struggle to identify the object of her derision. Our memories scan the canonical timeline of art history—art nouveau Postimpressionism? Perhaps Neoimpressionism? The object of Mrs. Earle’s disdain was Ordre de la Rose+Croix, a medieval sect briefly revived in the late nineteenth century as a mystical sect of artists and intellectuals, led by the charismatic critic and tastemaker Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918). Péladan’s chief purpose was the restoration of spiritualism and idealism to culture, which he and his followers believed had been cheapened by materialism and Realism. The Ordre de la Rose+Croix set about achieving this goal in six public gatherings or “salons,” held in Paris between 1892 and 1897. They are the subject of the Guggenheim Museum’s show *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897*. Though small, containing only thirty-six works, it is the first ever museum exhibition devoted to this important fin-de-siècle movement.

Péladan’s sect took its name from seventeenth-century Rosicrucianism, an occult movement that provided an aura of obscurity and ritual to which fin-de-siècle mystics were strongly attracted. Rosicrucianism, in turn, owed its emblems and symbols to alchemy, an even older philosophy with eastern origins. Alchemy, or early chemistry, had ceased to function as a legitimate science in the nineteenth century, but remained powerful as a philosophy. The Rose+Croix found inspiration in the museums and archives of Paris, which were rich in holdings of ancient texts, illustrated in the bizarre, esoteric visual language of a long lost, arcane science. The late nineteenth century, preoccupied with spirit photography and séances, was ripe for the Rosicrucian revolution. Fin-de-siècle France was all too ready to return to its glorious medieval past, before industry, capitalism, and Realist painting degraded the French national spirit. Spiritualism and medievalism allowed escape from grim reality: the devastating aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war, economic collapse, and pandemic outbreaks of syphilis, cholera, and tuberculosis. Despite their well-documented popularity, current mainstream scholarship perpetuates the erroneous belief that the Salons

de la Rose+Croix were a flop. In reality, they were the most fashionable events of the decade, drawing an international roster of at least 231 participants, thousands of attendees, and extensive critical response. The Salons de la Rose+Croix were, in fact, among the most well attended and thoroughly documented events in the history of art.

Enter Jason Farago, art critic for the *New York Times*. His short blurb announcing the Guggenheim's show makes Alice Earle seem enlightened by comparison. In a dazzling display of cultural condescension, Farago denounces the exhibition as "brilliantly tasteless," maintaining that it represents a "let's say it, tawdry—Parisian collective of the last decade of the 19th century." The work is "sordid; some is simply gross." In a lethal coup de grace, he reduces the exhibition to a degrading collection of "lovesick Orpheuses, busty femmes fatales and virginal shepherdesses," while shame-facedly admitting "it's all weirdly compelling."<sup>[2]</sup> Farago's opinion is far from unique among those whose knowledge is limited to the major monuments in their college art history survey texts. The traditional view of modernism as having triumphed over the crass, irrational excesses of the fin-de-siècle is widely held by most of the museum-going public. In fact, twentieth-century abstraction evolved logically from the principles held by the Salons de la Rose+Croix. Nonetheless, the idea that abstraction, an art of pure form, freed from all literal subject matter, might have origins in Rosicrucian religious revivalism and esoteric spiritualism causes extreme discomfort to advocates of modernity. Big questions remain. Despite the compelling beauty and substance of much of Rosicrucian art, why does it inspire such withering scorn, even from experts in the field? Why has the Rose+ Croix been thoroughly misunderstood, systematically ignored, and virtually excised from the art historical canon?

The Guggenheim's exhibition does not address these questions, nor does it present the full depth of the mission of the Salons de la Rose+Croix. This is not the fault of the curator, Vivien Greene, whose abilities are evident in her important catalogue essay "The Salon de la Rose+Croix: The Religion of Art." It is not possible to address the multiple historical contexts and arcane iconographical elements of individual works via inadequate wall texts and labels. For answers, it is necessary to consult the exhibition catalogue, which contains substantive essays and entries devoted to the history of the Rose+Croix order (Vivien Greene), its critical reception (Jean-David Jumeu-Lafond), and its contributions to twentieth-century abstraction (Kenneth E. Silver). This slim volume, opulently bound in faux red velvet, is the first serious examination of the Salons de la Rose+Croix since Robert Pincus-Witten's seminal dissertation, *Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose+Croix*, published forty-one years ago.<sup>[3]</sup> As such, the catalogue is a landmark of art historical scholarship, and an essential companion to the exhibition.

Upon arriving at the Guggenheim Museum, I found the galleries decked out in plush velvet, like the catalogue. The walls were painted a rich, dark red hue (fig. 1). The decorative scheme lent an aura of fin-de-siècle opulence to Frank Lloyd Wright's modernist interior. During my visit, young people, more interested in their cell phones than the images on the walls, occupied the comfy velvet sofas. But what was clearly evident, even to the most jaded and exhausted critic, was the sheer variety of artistic styles being represented in this intimate gathering. The Rose+Croix's *Manifesto* maintained that artistic style and medium were irrelevant, as long as contributors limited themselves to certain subject matter. History painting, genre scenes, portraits (with the exception of Péladan and the "super human"

Richard Wagner), landscapes, animals, still life, and “all humorous things” were banned, in favor of “the Catholic ideal, mysticism, legend, myth, allegory, the dream, the paraphrase of great poetry and finally all lyricism.”<sup>[4]</sup> Péladan issued an open call for artists sympathetic to the goals of the order.



Fig. 1, Installation view, *Mystical Symbolism, The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. [\[larger image\]](#)

Today’s museum exhibitions tend to focus on a retrospective collection of an artist’s work, a clearly defined chronological era, or a specific artistic style. These topics require minimal preparation and knowledge from audiences. By contrast, the fin-de-siècle public would have come to the Salons de la Rose+Croix armed with arcane history, myth, and allegories fresh in their minds as part of the popular wisdom embedded in their history and culture. To Rose+Croix attendees, a “lovesick Orpheus” would have represented the triumph of artistic inspiration over the finality of death; a “bustly femme fatale” recalled the lure of crass capitalism and the dangers of syphilis; and a “virginal shepherdess” was a chaste Saint Agnes, intent on upholding conservative Catholic dogma in the wake of the first Vatican Council of 1870. To modern viewers, a little historical knowledge goes a long way, when confronted with images, which may appear obscure or even repugnant at first sight.

The primacy of message over medium in the Salons de la Rose+Croix is convincingly demonstrated by a series of portraits of Joséphin Péladan, the charismatic, handsome, outrageously enigmatic leader of the order. Think Michael Jackson with an Ivy League degree and thirty-five books to his credit. Adopting the title of “Sâr,” an ancient word for a ruler/priest, Péladan wore his voluminous dark hair in an upswept coif and adopted an Assyrian forked beard. His admiration for France’s lost past is suggested in a portrait by Marcellin Desboutin, which shows Péladan as an earthbound celebrity in the manner of John Singer Sargent (fig. 2). Dressed in a black silk doublet and white ruffled cravat, the Sâr appears as a Renaissance prince, confronting the present day from the hindsight of history, one gloved hand on his hip. Alexandre Séon’s portrait of Péladan, painted in the manner of Puvis de Chavannes, depicts him as a Symbolist aesthete (fig. 3). It is easy to believe that this delicate, pale man, attired in a flowing violet robe, wrote a book on “How to Become a Fairy.”<sup>[5]</sup> A third portrait, by Jean Delville, places Péladan in yet another role, that of priest (fig. 4). With his right hand held upright in the manner of a Byzantine pantocrator, the Sâr is glorified and godlike. The placement of these three portraits at the exhibition’s entrance provided a fitting introduction to the range of artistic styles on view throughout the galleries. Little known minor painters claimed space next to those who went on to achieve acclaim, differences in style and method notwithstanding. Some, such as Jean Delville,

Charles Filiger, Ferdinand Hodler, Fernand Knopff, and Carlos Schwabe, are even represented in canonical art history survey books (figs. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9).



Fig. 2, Marcellin Desboutin, *Portrait of Sâr Méroclack Joséphin Péladan*, 1891. Oil on canvas. Musées d'Angers, Angers. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 3, Alexandre Séon, *The Sâr Joséphin Péladan*, 1891. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon. [\[larger image\]](#)

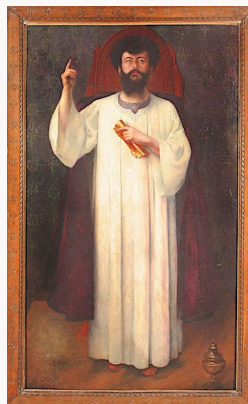


Fig. 4, Jean Delville, *Portrait of the Grand Master of the Rosicrucians in Choir Dress, Joséphin Péladan*, 1895. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nîmes. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Jean Delville, *The Death of Orpheus*, 1893. Oil on canvas. Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Belgium.  
[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Charles Filiger, *Madonna and Two Angels or Madonna of the Fireflies*, 1892. Gouache and gilding on cardboard. Collection Olivier Malingue. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 7, Ferdinand Hodler, *The Disappointed Souls*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Kunstmuseum Bern, Staat Bern.  
[\[larger image\]](#)





Fig. 8, Fernand Khnopff, *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, 1891. Oil on canvas. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 9, Carlos Schwabe, *Poster for the First Salon de la Rose+Croix*, 1892. Lithograph. Museum of Modern Art, New York. [\[larger image\]](#)

A conspicuous aspect of the Guggenheim's exhibition was the presence of music in the galleries. Some visitors disliked the sonic aspect of the show, complaining that it was distracting. During my two-hour visit, I listened intently, trying to identify the background music of the exhibition. Though it was barely audible above the din of conversing crowds, I could make out a lilting Chopin mazurka, a Beethoven violin sonata, part of Eric Satie's "Sonneries de la Rose+Croix," a selection from Wagner's "Meistersinger von Nuremburg," and a Renaissance choral piece, all once featured on the official concert programs of the Rose+Croix salons. The large selection of music represented composers whose compositions and biographies placed them within the pantheon of Rosicrucian initiates. Some, such as Beethoven, Chopin, and Mozart, were dead by the 1890s. Others, like Eric Satie, were actively involved in the mission and spirit of the Rose+Croix salons.

To most of the public, for whom music and art are distinct entities, music has no business competing with art in a traditional museum setting. A trained musician would have no problem recognizing the components of the exhibition soundtrack. However, many Americans lack familiarity with music, which is no longer taught in public schools. The music and art of the Salons de la Rose+Croix were intimately related by means of shared values and mutual ideals.<sup>[6]</sup> Péladan, echoing the Symbolist poets of his day, believed that music possessed the incantatory power to reveal the unconscious and the occult. Catalogues of the salons indicate that concerts were part of the exhibitions, and that artistic contemplation was

always accompanied by sound. Péladan intended visual art as a backdrop for music, not vice versa. It is this crucial aspect of the Rose+Croix salons that the Guggenheim exhibition fails to acknowledge. How is it possible to recreate Péladan's seamless synesthetic integration of sound and image in a traditional museum hanging of framed art on walls? This is a matter for future curators to ponder.

The importance of music in the Salons de la Rose+Croix cannot be overstated. The guiding star of the movement was the German composer-philosopher Richard Wagner, who is firmly ensconced within the musicological pantheon. Wagner's revolutionary concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, which integrated music, text, and image by means of the *leitmotif*, or musical symbol, was a touchstone of the Rosicrucian aesthetic. Péladan worshiped Wagner as a fellow "magus," and wrote the manifesto of the Rose+Croix movement in a flurry of inspiration after attending a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. Among the ideas shared by the Rose+Croix and Wagnerian music dramas were the evocative power of the symbol, the concept of a union of the arts, sexual ambiguity, ambivalence toward women, the notion of ancient racial pride, social and intellectual reform, religious fervor, and, above all, the glorification of the artist in society. Eric Satie, official composer of the Rose+Croix, declared that it was his mission to present French culture with a Wagnerian model, but "sans chou croute" (without sauerkraut).

Among the most important parallels between Péladan and Wagner was the belief that decadence heralded the demise of European culture. Péladan intended the salons de la Rose+Croix to be vehicles for the staging of a final brilliant demonstration before the doomed Latin race immolated itself in an orgy of materialism and banality—a scenario shared by Wagner's music drama *Twilight of the Gods*. This millennialist mindset is echoed in Jan Toorop's *The Young Generation*, one of the gems of the Guggenheim exhibition (fig. 10). The work depicts an infant playing blissfully in the midst of frightful surroundings. A ghastly blood-red tree hovers menacingly over the innocent child, while other sinister forms lurk in the dark background shadows. In startling contrast to the organic peril of the surrounding landscape, yet overwhelmed by it, are a railroad track and an electric light pole in the foreground space. These represent the pride of the industrial age, yet they seem as fragile and threatened as the child. Toorop portrayed the young generation as victims of the carnivorous jungle of life, lacking the spiritual and intellectual skills required to survive. The painting echoes Péladan's warning, "We believe neither in progress nor salvation for the Latin race which is about to die. We prepare a last experience in order to dazzle and soften the barbarians who are coming."<sup>[7]</sup>





Fig. 10, Jan Toorop, *The New Generation*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. [\[larger image\]](#)

The Rose+Croix and Wagnerian philosophy also shared beliefs about the roles and capabilities of women in fin-de-siècle society. True to its medieval monastic model, membership in the Rose+Croix was forbidden to women, though exceptions were made for humble female servants who wished to contribute financially to the order. The salon exhibitions were populated with images of inspiring muses, spotless virgins, and embodiments of abstract ideals. Wagner's Brunhilde and her Valkyrie sisters appeared alongside numerous female muses, saints, and holy women as examples of the "femme fragile." (figs. 11, 12) Brunhilde's opposite, Kundry, represented another favorite Rosicrucian leitmotif, the malevolent femme fatale. As an earth spirit bent on destroying the high resolve of the grail knights, Kundry embodied instinct and emotion—threats to the Rose+Croix's ideal. Delville's large graphite drawing, *Idol of Perversity*, is one of the more powerful expressions of negative femininity in the exhibition (fig. 13). She is a modern Eve-Medusa, whose sensual body is marred by sores, her thin, parted lips and cold, half-closed eyes cast in shadow. A snake writhes from between her breasts to the top of her forehead, where rays of light assume the form of twisting snakes. This image reinforces both Péladan's and Wagner's beliefs that the greater the power of the female in society, the greater the decadence.



Fig. 11, Armand Point, *The Annunciation or Ancilla Domini*, 1895. Tempera on panel. Private collection.  
[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 12, Installation view, showing Alphonse Osbert, *Vision*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.  
[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 13, Jean Delville, *The Idol of Perversity*, 1891. Graphite on paper. Museum Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

The exhibition's catalogue and press release mention the influence of Wagner. Yet I searched in vain for a trace of the primary inspiration behind the movement in the galleries, which

were organized loosely into sections devoted to religion, medievalism, Orphic transcendence, the femme fragile, and the femme fatale. There was little to suggest the misogynist, racist, xenophobic, elitist underbelly of the French fin-de-siècle, which was embedded in both Wagnerian and Rosicrucian philosophies. The choice to censure Wagnerian subject matter must have been a conscious one on the part of the exhibition's organizers. In fact, the conventional wisdom of the twenty-first century offers powerful justification for this glaring omission, as well as for excising of the Salons de la Rose+Croix from the art historical canon. In our own time, the world is struggling to resist the dark forces of human nature, which threaten to overwhelm us as never before. Well, perhaps once before. Though the music of Richard Wagner has been rehabilitated, every student of history knows that it served as the soundtrack of the Third Reich, and that Wagner's descendants openly collaborated with Hitler. How would a museum-going public, still repelled by the atrocities of World War II, receive the acknowledgement of a Wagnerian "French Connection"? Perhaps wisely, the museum chose not to court controversy.

All things considered, the Guggenheim exhibition is an art historical landmark. Despite sensitive underlying historical issues and the real difficulties of locating and identifying works, languishing in storerooms and attics all over the world, the exhibition is a valiant first step toward a more complete examination of an important artistic phenomenon.<sup>[8]</sup> The Salons de la Rose+Croix celebrated fantasy, idealism, and dream imagery. Without them, Freud may not have been inspired to investigate the unconscious mind, and the surrealist art movement may never have coalesced. J. R. R. Tolkien's hobbits and fairies may never have been imagined, and perhaps neither would the medievalism, murder, and misogyny of *Game of Thrones*.

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## Notes

- [1] Alice Morse Earl, *Sun-Dials and Roses of Yesterday, Garden Delights which are Here Divulged in Every Truth and are Moreover Regarded as Emblems* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 376.
- [2] Jason Farago, "Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897," *New York Times*, July 21, 2017, C18.
- [3] Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1976).
- [4] Joséphin Péladan, *Salon de la Rose+Croix, Règle et Monétaire* (Paris, 1891), IV.
- [5] Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des Sciences Mortes, II. Comment on Devient Fée (Erotique), avec une couverture symbolique d'Alexandre Séon et portrait gravé inédit du Sâr* (Paris: Chamuel, 1893).
- [6] For examinations of music at the Salons de la Rose+Croix, see Laurinda S. Dixon, "Art and Music at the Salons de la Rose+Croix, 1892–1897" in *The Documented Image: Visions in Art History*, eds. Gabriel P. Weisberg and Laurinda S. Dixon, with the assistance of Antje Bultmann Lemke (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 165–86; and Roland van der Hoeven, "L'Idéalisme musical: Musique et musiciens autour de Sâr Péladan" in *Revue de la Société liégeoise de musicologie* 2 (1995): 5–34.
- [7] Joséphin Péladan, *Salon de la Rose+Croix* (Paris, 1896), 6.

[8] For an account of the art historical sleuthing involved in locating and acquiring these works, see Vivien Greene, “In Search of the Rose+Croix Artists,” *Apollo*, June, 26, 2017, accessed August 31, 2017, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/in-search-of-the-rosecroix-artists/>.

## Illustrations

*All photographs courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.*



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