

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Andrea Truitt

book review of

Symbolist Art in Context by Michelle Facos

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014)

Citation: Andrea Truitt, book review of *Symbolist Art in Context* by Michelle Facos, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn14/truitt-reviews-symbolist-art-in-context>.

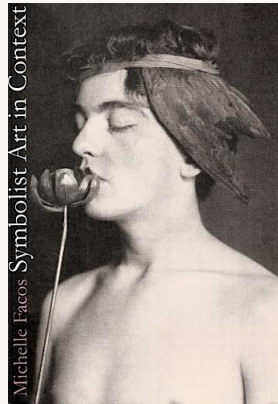
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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](#).



Michelle Facos,
Symbolist Art in Context.
Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.
280 pp.; 86 b&w illustrations; 16 color plates; notes; select bibliography; index.
\$33.95 (paperback)
ISBN 9780520255821

As the title suggests, Michelle Facos provides myriad contexts—historical, political, and cultural—through which to study this loosely aligned yet recognizable phenomenon in late-nineteenth century European art. By providing so many contexts, though, the overall product is a general, easy-to-read text that efficiently introduces readers to Symbolist art. The author immediately offers a working definition, one in which a) the representation of ideas is paramount and b) the composition and manipulation of materials show an “indifference to worldly appearances” (1). This formalist definition allows Symbolism to be broadly construed, given its lack of a monolithic political agenda or aesthetic. Facos, though, moves beyond the formalist approach, which focuses solely on technique and composition, by analyzing artistic intent, thus placing the artwork into an artist’s individual context as well as the political, national, and cultural environments in which the artist found himself. This broadened scope expands the history of Symbolist art by acknowledging that artists strived to create a context *for* their art, in order to define it *and* themselves: “Just as individuals and nations struggled to define their singular identities during the final decades of the nineteenth century, Symbolist artists sought to discover the special identity of art” (4).

Chapter one, “Beginnings,” and chapter two, “Precursors,” set up the Symbolist impulse by describing its tenets as set forth by artists and critics, and the intellectual environment that influenced these artists. In the first chapter, Facos explains the importance of the ‘Idea’ to the Symbolists, as their artistic goal was to cloak an Idea in a physical form that the senses could interpret. She clarifies that images are not narratives: Symbolists sought to evoke, not explain, and their works acted as “thought-bubble[s]” (27). The rest of the chapter provides the contemporary intellectual environment that surrounded the Symbolists. Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies noted the shift from a predominantly rural life of familial networks to an

urban life of industrialization and impersonal interactions, while philosopher Karl Albert Scherner understood the subconscious dream world as a realm of symbols that could be decoded. These discourses—urbanity as a new and impersonal set of social relations to navigate and the psyche as something to be explored—ran through Symbolist artwork in one way or another as artists sought to express their personal responses to modern life. This chapter also contextualizes the Symbolist artist's understanding of himself as a creator and genius, employing various media through which to provide insight into the world.

The second chapter exposes the roots of Symbolism in previous intellectual and artistic movements, mentioning the eighteenth-century theologian Emmanuel Swedenborg and the early-nineteenth-century intellectuals William Blake and Edgar Allan Poe. Other figures included: Charles Baudelaire, Ludwig von Beethoven, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Richard Wagner. These precursors addressed similar themes, subject matter, tone, and mood, giving the Symbolists a base from which to work while simultaneously rooting them in various intellectual and artistic milieu. The author used this chapter to show that the impetus for Symbolist art, while distinctive in an art world that still focused on traditions of the Academy or on modern art that depicted everyday life, was found in previous iterations; borrowing from the intellectuals and artists that the Symbolists admired only legitimized their expressions of an Idea.

In the introduction, Facos defined these two main groups as pessimistic Symbolists (e.g. James Ensor, Edvard Munch, and Félicien Rops) and optimistic Symbolists (e.g. Jean Delville, Hugo Höppner, and Paul Signac). These two groups form the subjects of the next two chapters, respectively. This organizational strategy helps to reconcile the broad range of intellectual themes and the visual treatments covered by these artists, before moving on to look at specific themes. In chapter three, "Decadence and Degeneration," the author analyzes art that addressed the negative experiences of modern life, which were associated with urban growth and industrial capitalism. Facos begins the chapter with a discussion of Max Nordau's book, *Degeneration*, which expressed the feeling that modern life, enervated people through decadent moral, sexual, and social behaviors, as well as new technologies. Symbolists visualized this enervation through depictions related to public health (or a lack thereof) and sexual perversity. Urban life, shown this way, contrasted sharply with the pastoral idealism that people attached to the agricultural and rural life of previous centuries. Other Symbolists, dubbed optimistic Symbolists, took up new forms of pastoralism.

This group commented upon contemporary life through reform politics and spiritual exploration. The religious and political tendencies presented in chapter four, "Idealism, Religion, and Reform" (anarchism, Catholicism, individualism, and social welfare) may seem too disparate to discuss in one chapter, yet the combination works. All political and spiritual models described here concern the search for greater social meaning and the means by which to counteract the negative experiences of everyday life outlined in the previous chapter. In presenting artistic tendencies in these two ways, Facos reconciles the spectrum of subject matter with which Symbolist artists grappled. From here, the next two chapters move from Symbolist 'personalities' to two large themes found across Symbolist art: women and nationalism.

After wondering about the lack of representation of female artists, Facos addresses this seeming oversight in chapter five, "Contested Gender." The implicit answer is simply that there were no female Symbolists, given the group's rampant misogyny. Women, for these male artists, were either virgins or whores; Facos does not analyze this misogyny too deeply or discuss it in reference to the concept of the New Woman. She does, however, provide the political context for such an understanding of women, noting political and papal laws that advised husbands to protect their wives by controlling them. Her treatment of gender, though brief, works better than Rodolphe Rapetti's approach in *Symbolism* (reviewed [here](#)). For example, although he discusses hysteria, its rising popularity as a medical diagnosis, and images of it within the movement, he does not assess it in reference to women, with whom it was deeply associated, or consider its use as a strategy for control and domination. This subtle difference in writing about Symbolist representations of women is also shown in the way Facos takes inventory of female types: angels, mothers, femme fatales, sphinxes, and androgynes, all understood as dreams or nightmares, or as allegories of deep-seated social fears. Gathering the types together in one chapter helps to make readers aware of the many guises in which artists cloaked women, while also showing that all served to present a very skewed, nineteenth-century understanding of gender.

In the sixth chapter, "National Romanticism," the author draws upon artists from all over Europe in order to demonstrate the approaches taken to create and emphasize their respective national identities. She contextualizes this production of national identity against the political struggles happening across Europe, pointing to the French Revolution, national displays at world's fairs, and the newly-unified nations of Germany and Italy in order to express the desire for nationhood; and the struggles of Poland, Sweden, France, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Scotland to represent cohesive national identities. The imagery created to do this, as already stated, varied from artist to artist, but two main types of subject matter occur: the use of legend and lore, and the depiction of landscape. In doing so, she says, artists deployed historical and vernacular subjects known to all citizens in order to evoke emotion and nostalgia. Some of the artists she discusses are: Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Stanislaw Wyspiański, and Karel Mašek. The subject matter of this chapter is familiar territory for the author, whose first book, *Nationalism and the Nordic Imagination: Swedish Art of the 1890's*, focuses on Swedish National Romanticism, and the way that the movement made its way into fin-de-siècle culture.^[1]

The last two chapters, much like the second and third, assess the Symbolist movement as a whole, looking at the ways in which artists exhibited their work and thus created a movement of sorts, followed by an assessment of Symbolism's legacy in the early twentieth century by asserting that Symbolism was a precursor to Modernism. Chapter seven, "Promoting Symbolist Art," begins with a discussion of the practical conditions that informed the ways in which these artists organized themselves and promoted their work. As religious organizations and nation states reduced their patronage, the increasingly educated middle class purchaser became a significant consumer in the art market. This changing market fueled the creation of artists' organizations: "the twin necessities of camaraderie and developing a market fostered the creation of artists' associations" (167). The free-market economy, as Facos notes, shaped these activities and the need for artists to organize themselves. These organizations took multiple forms, including the well-known Belgian Les XX, as the Parisian Nabis group, poet Stéphane Mallarmé's salons, and a burgeoning café culture that gave artists a place to gather

and socialize. This chapter provides descriptions of the various groups, as well as artists' colonies, major exhibitions, and the journals through which Symbolist artists disseminated their intentions and manifestos.

The final chapter, "Symbolist Currents in the Twentieth Century," assesses the impact of Symbolism on various modern art movements, noting younger artists carried on the ideas and practices into the twentieth century, with Symbolist currents manifesting in such styles and movements as Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, abstraction, non-objective art, Dada, and Surrealism. The main influences that carried through into the twentieth century were the impetus to express an *idea*, the aversion to narrative, and the interest in, and hope for, youth. These characteristics are the organizing principles of this chapter and form the main subsections. Many of the most famous modern artists engaged with Symbolism in one way or another, and Facos describes the works of Pablo Picasso, Vassily Kandinsky, Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian in terms of their commitment to expressing ideas, not subject matter. Perhaps most important here is her discussion of Surrealist Leonora Carrington, as the author could finally incorporate the work of a female artist into this volume, breaking the boy's club mentality necessitated by the book's subject matter. Given the previous chapter on the problematic representations of women, more discussion of female artists in the early twentieth century might have been a way to incorporate more women into this book, while showing how women adapted Symbolist methods in their art-making.

Despite the generality of *Symbolist Art in Context*, this volume is an informative, if not exciting, read. What may have helped to mediate this impression would have been the employment of case studies in each chapter. This strategy may have focused the text and provided more depth of analysis on specific objects, while simultaneously allowing the author to bring in overarching trends, topics, and contexts. In doing more with less, the book would have been a more compelling read. However, Facos provides an efficient text that thoroughly places Symbolist art into the broad social, political, and historical contexts of the nineteenth century; by formulating these discussions as subtitled sections, she allows the reader to pick and choose what to read, depending on what may be most useful to each individual reader. This book is best used as a primer for Symbolist art, a place in which to become familiar with the intellectual strains that one could pursue: the philosophies influential to the movement, specific artists, or themes within the movement. The notes and bibliography, then, become an important source, an area of the book of which to take full advantage, given the richness and diversity of primary and secondary sources, drawn from a range of disciplines.

Andrea Truitt
University of Minnesota
truitt01[at]umn.edu

Notes

[1] Michelle Facos, *Nationalism and the Nordic Imagination: Swedish Art of the 1890s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).