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Félicien Rops, *Pornocratès*, 1878, Musée Félicien Rops

31-01 SYMBOLISM

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- This is Section 31 on Symbolism. I cover the major Symbolist artists include Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Arnold Böcklin, Edvard Munch, and Gustav Klimt.
- This early work by Rops symbolising corruption and lust was one of the most scandalous works of Symbolism and I will be talking about it is a few minutes.

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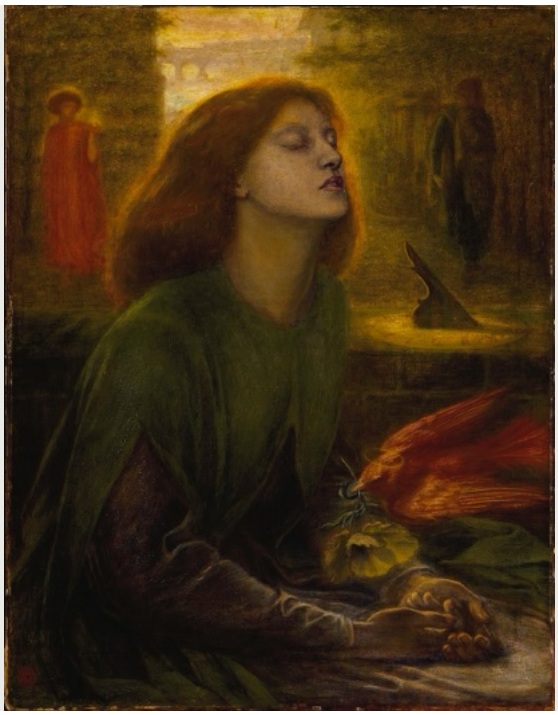

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), Beata Beatrix, c.1864–70, 86.4 x 66 cm, Tate Britain, London

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), *Beata Beatrix*, c.1864–70, 86.4 x 66 cm, Tate Britain, London

- But first I start with a work that is arguably not a Symbolist painting but a Pre-Raphaelite painting. However, I think it is **on the cusp**.
- Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* **strongly anticipates** many Symbolist themes and can be argued as a precursor or influence on Symbolism.
- It is **deeply symbolic and allegorical**, depicting a transcendental moment between life and death through the figure of **Beatrice** (modelled after Rossetti's deceased wife). The imagery—the **red dove as the Holy Spirit** and **messenger of death**, the **white poppy representing opium and death**, the **sundial marking time of death**, and the mystical glow—are rich with layered symbolic meaning rather than naturalistic depiction.[1][2][4][6]
- It evokes a **spiritual, emotional, and visionary** atmosphere intended to represent inner states and transcendence rather than external reality, which aligns with **Symbolist** interests in expressing the **unseen, the mystical, and the psychological** through symbolic form.[3][7][9]
- He focuses on medieval themes, **literary inspiration** (from **Dante Alighieri's "La Vita Nuova**"), and blending of poetry with visual art is in harmony with the Symbolist movement's literary and mythological affinities.[4][1]
- However, Symbolism is typically dated from the 1880s to 1920 and is more abstract, dreamlike, and often decadent. [2][5][6][1][4]

NOTES

- Rossetti was obsessed with red-haired women, famously painting multiple portraits of his wife and muse Elizabeth Siddal with flowing coppery hair, which became a Signature of his work and inspired his sister Christina's poem "In an Artist's Studio".
- After Elizabeth Siddal died from a laudanum overdose (thought to be suicide), Rossetti buried an unpublished manuscript of his poems with her, only later to have her exhumed secretly seven years later to retrieve the poems for publication—a macabre and poignant episode in his life.
- He co-founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 when he was just 20 years old, aiming to reform art by rejecting the academic standards of the day and looking back to medieval Italian art and literature for inspiration.
- Beyond painting, Rossetti was also a poet who intertwined imagery and verse, writing sonnets inspired by and accompanying many of his paintings, integrating literary and visual Symbolism intimately.
- Rossetti's lifestyle was famously bohemian and controversial, involving intense, often turbulent relationships with models and muses, and struggled with laudanum addiction in his later years, which affected his mental health and artistic output.

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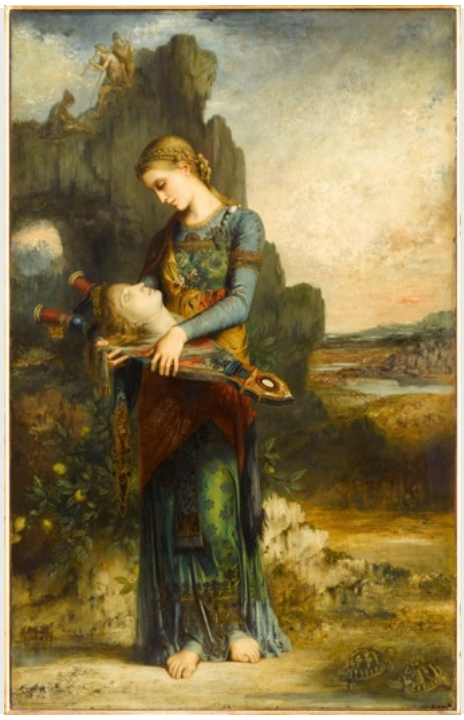

Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), Orpheus, 1865, 99.5 x 154 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), *Orpheus*, 1865, 99.5 x 154 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- Gustave Moreau painted *Orpheus* at a stage when he was moving beyond **academic training** toward the **visionary style** that would **define Symbolism**. Trained at the **École des Beaux-Arts** under **Paul Delaroche**, he mastered technique, but myth, literature, and allegory were where his imagination turned.
- The painting centres on Eurydice, standing in a silent, almost ghostly presence. The story behind it is tragic: Orpheus had descended to the underworld to reclaim her, only to lose her again, and was later killed by frenzied Maenads. Moreau captures the aftermath—grief, loss, and the lingering power of myth—through dense, intricate details: twisting foliage, draped fabrics, and theatrical architectural elements. Every visual choice is loaded with narrative and symbolic meaning.
- At the time, critics were divided. Some admired his technical skill and imaginative reach; others found it overly ornate. Today, Orpheus is recognized as a turning point, linking Romantic storytelling with the psychologically rich, symbolic approach that would influence Redon and other Symbolists.
- Moreau's sketches and studies reveal his meticulous preparation: myth as a laboratory for emotion, composition, and imagination.

NOTES

- Moreau painted over 15,000 works including paintings, watercolours and drawings in his lifetime, showing a prolific output beyond his best known

pieces. Due to his reluctance to sell his work, when he died he still owned 1,200 paintings and watercolours and 10,000 drawings which he left to the state.

- Though associated with Symbolism's decadence and mysterious atmosphere, Moreau lived a relatively reclusive life, rarely selling his works and often refusing exhibition invitations, including a professorship at the École des Beaux-Arts.
- Moreau had a 25-year long close relationship with a woman named Alexandrine Dureux but left the nature of their connection ambiguous, even burning their correspondence after her death, which has sparked speculation.
- His characters—especially his femme fatales—are often described as pale, androgynous, and encased in luxurious gems and embroidery, likened metaphorically to scarab beetles, symbolising transcendence and decadence.
- Moreau's legacy includes a unique artistic museum in Paris, his former studio and home, where he carefully arranged his works and belongings before bequeathing them to the French state as an artistic sanctuary.

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Félicien Rops (1833–1898), *Pornocratès*, 1878, 75 x 45 cm, Musée Félicien Rops, Namur

Félicien Rops (1833–1898), *Pornocratès*, 1878, 75 x 45 cm, Musée Félicien Rops, Namur

- A bit of background first.
- The Symbolist movement had its roots in **Charles Baudelaire's poetry** collection ***The Flowers of Evil*** (*Les Fleurs du mal,* 1857). Towards the end of the century, the fin-de-siecle, ideas of decadence and mysticism appeared in French literature and in 1886 Jean Moréas wrote a manifesto of Symbolism and the ideas quickly spread to the visual art. It was a direct **reaction against the prevailing scientific rationalism and materialism** embodied by Realism and Impressionism. Artists and writers felt alienated by industrial society and sought refuge in the spiritual, the occult, dreams, and the subconscious. They believed art should express an idea or emotion rather than simply depict objective reality, using suggestion and metaphor.

- The Belgian artist Félicien Rops (1833–1898) was a provocateur. Born into a bourgeois family, he initially studied law in Brussels before dedicating himself to art. He excelled in printmaking, becoming an innovative master of etching and aquatint. His move to Paris in the 1870s solidified his position at the heart of the Decadent and Symbolist movements. He was a close friend of **Baudelaire** and illustrated his work, directly absorbing these early Symbolist and Decadent influences accounting for the early date of this painting.
- Rops's work, often erotic and satirical, challenged the hypocrisy of 19th-century society. *Pornocratès* (1878), or The Lady with the Pig, is his most famous image.

Executed in watercolour, pastel, and gouache, it is an allegorical nude. The title translates as "The Ruler of Fornication". The painting shows a tall, blindfolded woman walking on a marble frieze. She is almost nude but for black stockings, long gloves, and a hat—suggesting a contemporary courtesan or femme fatale.

- She is led by a pig with a golden tail, symbolising lust and irreverence. Rops often used the modern female nude in place of classical ideals. The marble pedestal features relief sculptures of the four arts: Painting, Music, Poetry, and Sculpture—all subjugated by the figure above. Above her, three tiny, winged putti, the 'ancient loves', fly away in horror.
- Rops pioneered mixing traditional etching with new techniques like photogravure. He used these precise methods to reproduce his drawings, lending a clean, graphic quality to his often shocking subjects. Critics were predictably split. The piece shocked many contemporaries but cemented Rops's reputation among Symbolist poets and writers like Charles Baudelaire. It perfectly embodies the era's fascination with the seductive, destructive power of the modern woman.
- Pornocratès stands as Rops's definitive statement on fin-de-siècle decadence, capturing the unsettling transition from academic art to modern, psychological symbolism.

NOTES

- Rops was a pioneer of erotic and satanic themes in art, often shocking his contemporaries with explicit depictions blending sensuality and death.
- Before becoming an artist, he studied law but soon abandoned it for a bohemian lifestyle focused on art.
- He was a prolific printmaker and is considered a pioneer of Belgian comics, creating satirical comic strips with recurring characters.
- Rops illustrated works of famed writers like Baudelaire and Verlaine, blending provocative visuals with decadent literature.
- Despite controversy, he was engaged in philanthropy and supported local culture in his hometown Namur later in life.

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Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), *Isle of the Dead*, Third Version, 1880, 80 x 150 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), *Isle of the Dead*, Third Version, 1880, 80 x 150 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

- The Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) was a giant of German Symbolism. His training included the Düsseldorf Academy and travel to Rome, where he absorbed the influence of Classical antiquity and the Romantic landscape tradition. He rejected the Realism and Impressionism of his contemporaries, favouring dreamlike, mythical allegories that explored mortality and the subconscious.
- Isle of the Dead (Die Toteninsel) is his masterpiece, painted in five versions between 1880 and 1886. The third, finished in 1883, resides in Berlin's Alte Nationalgalerie. It is not a real place, but an invented, dramatic seascape.
- The composition is stark and solemn. Across still, dark water, a small, rocky island rises precipitously. Its cliffs are carved with crypt-like necropolises, reminiscent of Etruscan tombs or Mediterranean cemeteries like San Michele in Venice. A dense grove of tall, dark cypress trees, ancient symbols of mourning, dominates the island's centre.
- In the foreground, a small rowboat approaches the island's entrance. An oarsman, often compared to the mythological ferryman Charon, guides the vessel. Standing in the bow is a solitary, shrouded figure, dressed in white, positioned next to a white, coffin-like object. The scene is one of final arrival—the journey from the world of the living to the realm of the dead. Böcklin himself simply called it a "picture for dreaming over," a work to produce such stillness that "one would be awed by a knock on the door."

- The third version was commissioned by art dealer Fritz Gurlitt, who gave it its definitive title. Its widespread reproduction as a photographic print made it an icon of fin-de-siècle culture, resonating deeply with the era's fascination with death and the spiritual. It famously inspired a symphonic poem by Sergei Rachmaninoff and was collected by figures from Freud to Adolf Hitler.
- Isle of the Dead is the definitive statement of Symbolism's preoccupation with mystery and the inner life, transforming landscape into a deeply moving psychological space.

NOTES

- Böcklin's Isle of the Dead series stirred fascination and fear in contemporary audiences, influencing popular culture including films, literature, and music.
- He reportedly painted the same "Isle of the Dead" several times with different colour schemes, reportedly reflecting his moods or phases of life.
- A self-described "dream painter," Böcklin sought to express the spiritual and mythical rather than realistic impressions of nature.
- His works were often met with confusion or criticism early on, considered morbid or too unconventional for his time.
- Böcklin's influence extended beyond painting to surrealism decades later, admired by artists like Dalí for his fantastical moods.

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Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898), *The Poor Fisherman*, 1881, 154.7 x 192.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898), *The Poor Fisherman*, 1881, 154.7 x 192.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) was a crucial figure, bridging Classicism and Modernism. He was self-taught for a time after a trip to Italy, then briefly studied in the Parisian studios of Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix and academic painter Thomas Couture. His early work was rejected by the Salon, leading him to develop his unique, distinctive style.
- The Poor Fisherman, completed in 1881, shows a solitary figure tending a small net by a desolate, flat expanse of water. The figure of the fisherman is often read as an allegory of Christ, the faithful, or humanity's fate. A mother and child gather flowers in the middle distance, and a simple wooden boat rests near the shore. The figures have a stillness and flattened, fresco-like quality, rendered in soft, chalky colours. This evokes a timeless, melancholic atmosphere. The scene is not a narrative but a mood—a pictorial poem of poverty and resignation. There is no specific myth, but it carries the heavy symbolism of endurance and human frailty.
- This painting is Symbolist as it rejects objective reality. It uses simplified forms and evocative colours to suggest an inner truth and feeling over mere depiction. Puvis was admired by younger artists like Gauguin and Seurat, who adapted his flat planes and clear outlines. His process often involved detailed studies for figures, but for this work, he deliberately chose an unadorned, sparse aesthetic, stripping away decorative elements for emotional impact. The finished painting caused controversy at the time for its bleakness and

unconventional composition.

- Critics initially denounced the painting for its perceived lack of realism and described it as dull or flat. However, younger artists and intellectuals—such as Seurat, Gauguin, Denis, and even Picasso—admired its poetic bareness and symbolic depth. ***The Poor Fisherman*** was the **first painting by Puvis bought by the French State** (in 1887), marking a critical point in his career and underscoring his role as a pioneer of a new poetic, Symbolist-inspired style.
- *The Poor Fisherman* is one of Puvis's most famous paintings and is most significant contributions to Symbolist art, establishing him as a pioneering figure for the next generation of modern painters.

NOTES

- Puvis de Chavannes (pronounced "Pierre Poo-vee de Che-van")was sometimes called the "painter of the silence" because his works often evoke a serene and timeless atmosphere.
- His murals are known for simplified forms and muted colours, anticipating modernist styles decades before their time.
- He was influential in shaping the French mural painting tradition and taught many younger artists.
- His serene allegorical works contrast sharply with the more intense and emotional Symbolists, showing the movement's diversity.
- Puvis had a reticent personality and rarely gave interviews or expressed strong opinions publicly.

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Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888, 73 x 92 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888, 73 x 92 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

- Paul Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, painted in 1888 is a striking and symbolic work that marks a pivotal moment in his artistic career. The painting depicts a biblical episode from Genesis in which Jacob wrestles an angel, not shown literally but as a vivid vision experienced by Breton women clad in traditional costume after attending a church sermon. Gauguin divides the composition with a bold diagonal tree trunk, separating the grounded women from the spiritual vision on a dramatic red background that evokes passion and mysticism.
- Painted during his stay in the artist colony at Pont-Aven in Brittany, Gauguin was seeking a departure from Impressionism and its focus on light and naturalism. Inspired by Japanese woodcuts and driven by a desire to express religious and mystical themes through colour and flat, simplified forms, he created this work as an embodiment of **Synthetism** — combining the real and the imagined. In a letter to Van Gogh, Gauguin described the painting as achieving "**a great rustic and superstitious simplicity**."
- *Vision After the Sermon* was revolutionary for its time, rejecting conventional perspective and natural colour in favour of emotional and spiritual expression. Although initially controversial, it established Gauguin as a leading figure in post-Impressionism and Symbolism. His bold use of colour and form would profoundly influence modern art, making this painting a key manifesto of his new artistic ideals. Anecdotes from Gauguin's life highlight his tumultuous break

with earlier careers and family life, as well as his deep fascination with primitive and mystical themes that culminated in works like this.[1][2][3][4][8]

NOTES

- Gauguin abandoned a successful career as a stockbroker to become an artist and famously moved to Tahiti seeking "primitive" inspiration.
- His vivid, flat colour planes and symbolic iconography were revolutionary and influenced post-Impressionism and Symbolism.
- Gauguin's life was dramatic, with conflicts, legal issues, and a late exotic alienation from Western society.
- He experimented with mysticism and spiritual themes, incorporating mythic and metaphysical subjects.
- Gauguin was a key figure for artists like Picasso and Matisse, passing the torch for modern art's symbolic depths

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Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), *The Demon Seated*, 1890, 112 x 211 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), *The Demon Seated*, 1890, 112 x 211 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

- Mikhail Vrubel's The Demon Seated (1890), displayed at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, is a haunting and **introspective Symbolist** masterpiece. The painting shows a **half-naked, winged demon** sitting on a rock against the background of a **vibrant scarlet sunset** and a flowering field. The demon's figure is monumental yet constrained within the canvas—a psychological portrayal of inner torment and existential solitude. His hands cling together mournfully as his gaze looks into the distance with a sorrowful yet majestic expression, indicating a being caught between hope and despair.
- This work was Vrubel's **first major canvas** during his **move to Moscow** and reflects his fascination with Mikhail Lermontov's 1839 poem ***The Demon***, which tells of a tragic, Byronic demon longing for love but doomed to rejection and suffering. Vrubel described this demon as "**a spirit uniting masculine and feminine qualities**," more suffering and sorrowing than evil, embodying the human soul's struggle and disillusionment.
- The painting's unique style, **resembling stained glass** or crystal facets, was achieved with **palette knife strokes** and flat brushwork, emphasising a mosaic-like surface. This technique visually reinforces the fractured, conflicted nature of the demon's existence.
- *The Demon Seated* was met with **harsh criticism** but also **established** him as the **leading Russian Symbolist**. The demon theme became a central motif in his later works, resonating with his own life marked by psychological struggles and

mental illness. Friends noted his intense obsession with perfecting the image, which some interpret as a manifestation of his psychosis.

NOTES

- Vrubel's style blends Symbolism with Art Nouveau and Russian folklore, creating unique mystic and dreamlike imagery.
- He was diagnosed with schizophrenia later in life, which influenced the dark themes and intensity of his works.
- Vrubel worked on multiple versions of the "Demon Seated," merging torment and beauty in haunting compositions.
- His decorative approach extended to church murals and stained glass, reflecting eclectic cultural influences.
- Vrubel's work was initially misunderstood in Russia but later hailed as pioneering for Russian Symbolism[

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Franz von Stuck (1863–1928), *The Sin*, 1893, 94.5 x 59.5 cm, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

Franz von Stuck (1863–1928), *The Sin*, 1893, 94.5 x 59.5 cm, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

- Franz von Stuck was a **leading figure in turn-of-the-century Munich**. He trained at the **Munich Academy**, emerging as a painter, sculptor, and designer with a commanding vision. In 1893, von Stuck unveiled ***The Sin***—his best-known masterpiece. The painting is striking for its simplicity and potency: a nude woman, head turned away, stands with a great serpent coiled around her shoulders. Intense blue-black shadows envelop the figure as she meets the viewer's gaze with defiant calm.
- Von Stuck painted *The Sin* during his rise as a **co-founder of the Munich Secession** and while he was gaining acclaim through his dramatic mythological and allegorical imagery. The painting exemplifies his fascination with **femme fatale figures** — **beautiful but destructive women** who embody both allure and moral peril.
- His work and a lot of Symbolist painting reflects broader **fin-de-siècle preoccupations with decadence, eroticism, and symbolic meanings** rooted in mythology and religion.
- *The Sin* earned von Stuck widespread critical and public success, **propelling him to a royal professorship** and corresponding artistic renown. He was also renowned for his meticulous craftsmanship across painting, sculpture, and decorative art, even designing furniture for his own villa.
- In von Stuck's life, the painting reflects a tension between moralistic themes and aesthetic eroticism—traits exhibited in his complex personal style and public

image, which was both celebrated and controversial. There are stories of **how the painting scandalised some viewers** yet fascinated others with its provocative use of mythic symbolism.

NOTES

- Von Stuck often painted himself as a Satanic or demonic figure in his works, playing with personal mythology and self-mythologising.
- He co-founded the Munich Secession movement, an avant-garde group rebelling against academic limitations.
- Von Stuck's home was designed as a Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art), decorated in detailed murals, sculptures, and furniture that reflected his Symbolist aesthetic.
- His 1893 painting *The Sin* was criticised for its eroticism and was once hidden in a private collection due to alleged scandal.
- He was also a respected architect and designed notable villas, blending architectural symbolism with his painting.

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Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899), *The Evil Mothers*, 1894, 105 x 200 cm, Belvedere, Vienna

Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899), *The Evil Mothers*, 1894, 105 x 200 cm, Belvedere, Vienna

- Giovanni Segantini was born in **Arco, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire**—endured **poverty and tragedy** early, even spending time in a **Milan reformatory**. Yet his **gift for drawing** got him into **Milan's Brera Academy**, where he absorbed academic tradition and, later, the **heady influences of Symbolism and Divisionism**. By the 1890s, Segantini had settled in the Swiss Alps, blending a deep pantheistic love of nature with experimental painting techniques.
- ***The Evil Mothers*** (1894) explores themes of **motherhood, nature, sin, and redemption**. The painting shows **women entangled in barren tree** branches amid a stark snowy landscape. These figures are interpreted as **mothers who rejected their supposed natural destiny**—either by **refusing to conceive or through aborting pregnancies**. Despite their beauty and sensuality, the women appear **trapped and tormented**, embodying a kind of punishment within a frozen, lifeless wilderness.
- Segantini painted this work as the **culmination of a series** inspired by Luigi Illica's poem ***Nirvana***, which explores **spiritual emptiness and suffering**. The poem's imagery of cold, desolate nature and agitated figures is powerfully visualised here. The barren trees symbolize both death and the cyclical nature of life, with some interpretations reading the stark branches as the Tree of Life. One figure, caught in the branches but tenderly nursing an infant, suggests a surrender to motherhood and an overcoming of torment—a form of

redemption.

- This painting marked a **departure from Segantini's earlier pastoral scenes** notable for lush summer light; instead, the cold palette and modernist composition foreground psychological and symbolic depth. It was well received for its emotional intensity though also criticised for its 'morbid' theme. Segantini's interest in Alpine landscapes and nature's transcendence pervades the work, embodying both punishment and spiritual transformation.
- Although it's **hard to see** in this reproduction, He uses a **Pointillist technique**—breaking up colour into **dots and strokes**—gives the composition an **icy, shimmering light**, amplifying its psychological unease. He regularly sketched outdoors in extreme conditions to capture real Alpine light, using studies of trees and human figures to integrate symbolism and sensation.
- It remains a striking example of fin de siècle art linking beauty, sorrow, and profound moral questions.[1][4][5][7][8]

NOTES

- An Italian-born Symbolist who worked in the Alps, Segantini's works often explore nature's spirituality and Alpine life.
- His painting technique involved divisionism, a method using dots and strokes of pure colour, anticipating Pointillism.
- Segantini's pastoral allegories celebrated rural life yet embedded profound symbolic meaning about life and death.
- He had a tragic early life, losing his mother and living in poverty before artistic success.
- Segantini died young at 41 from accidental pneumonia, cutting short a promising Symbolist career.

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Carlos Schwabe (1866–1926), *La Mort du fossoyeur* (*The Death of the Gravedigger*), 1895, 170 x 195 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Carlos Schwabe (1866–1926), *The Death of the Gravedigger (La Mort du fossoyeur*), 1895, 170 x 195 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

- Carlos Schwabe (1866–1926) was a Swiss-German Symbolist painter and illustrator. Born in Altona, Holstein (now Germany), he **trained in Geneva before moving to Paris** in 1887. He **quickly became a key figure in the Symbolist movement**, particularly through his association with Joséphin Péladan's Salon de la Rose+Croix. Schwabe even designed the poster for the first Salon in 1892, establishing his eerie, mystical style.
- ***The Death of the Gravedigger*** (1895) is one of his most important canvases, exhibited at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars that year.
- The work is a meditation on death and social struggle. It depicts the grim reality of a gravedigger's demise. The central figure, his tools abandoned, lies on the edge of the pit he dug. Crucially, Schwabe infuses the scene with Symbolist allegory. **A figure often interpreted as Death, or perhaps a guardian angel, hovers above**, ushering the soul away. The palette is dominated by sombre blues and cold light, highlighting the bleakness of poverty and mortality. It reflects the era's fascination with the **macabre and the mystical**, moving beyond mere realism.
- Schwabe's studies for the work focused intently on anatomy and expression, giving the figures a **haunting, almost photographic quality**. His illustrative background gave his paintings a linear precision uncommon in Symbolism. The painting's empathetic yet unsettling subject earned it significant attention, aligning with a fin-de-siècle mood of melancholy and spiritual yearning.

- *The Death of the Gravedigger* is a pivotal work for Schwabe. It encapsulates his mastery of Symbolist themes and solidifies his reputation as a principal painter of death, mysticism, and social allegory within the movement.

NOTES

- Schwabe's works often combine lyrical melancholy with mythological and mystical themes.
- He was part of the Vienna Secession circle, linking French Symbolism with Central European currents.
- Schwabe illustrated important Symbolist literature and was engaged in the broader Decadent movement.
- His monumental works mix allegory with a spiritual quest, often celebrating death and rebirth.
- Schwabe taught and influenced younger Symbolists, contributing to continuity of the movement.

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Jean Delville (1867–1953), *The Love of Souls*, 1900, 268 x 150 cm, Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels

Jean Delville (1867–1953), *The Love of Souls*, 1900, 268 x 150 cm, Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels

- Jean Delville was born Jean Delville was born **illegitimate** in Louvain in 1867. His mother Barbe Libert was a **canal worker's daughter**. He never knew his father, a Latin and Greek lecturer from a bourgeois family. He took his stepfather's name when his mother remarried. **School bored him**, so at fifteen he enrolled at **Brussels' School of Arts**. He proved **extraordinarily gifted**, winning **most major prizes** whilst still a student.
- By the mid-1890s, Delville was married with a **growing family**, struggling as an artist in Brussels. He won the prestigious Belgian Prix de Rome in 1895. This caused controversy. Fellow avant-garde artists saw it as betrayal. But the prize brought money and time to study Renaissance masters in Italy—art he deeply admired.
- Delville believed art should **express higher spiritual truth** based on **Ideal Beauty**. He was influenced by **occultists** including Joséphin Péladan, **Helena Blavatsky**, and Annie Besant. He founded the Salon d'Art Idéaliste in 1896, **promoting Symbolism infused with freemasonry, Neoplatonism, Rosicrucianism, and Theosophy**. From 1911 to 1913, he served as first General Secretary of Belgium's Theosophical Society.
- ***The Love of Souls***, painted in 1900 won the **silver medal** at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition. The work portrays the **union of female and male aspects of humanity**, which together create the perfect being. This reflected Delville's occult beliefs about **spiritual evolution and androgyny**.

- From 1900 to 1906, Delville taught at Glasgow School of Art with great success. He returned to Brussels in 1907, finally securing his dream position teaching at the Brussels Academy until retirement in 1937. During World War One, he fled to London with his wife and four younger children. His two eldest sons were conscripted—both survived.
- His son Olivier described him as **strict with his six children**, a **man of courage** and probity who continually painted and wrote to spread his ideals. But the story was more complex. Around **1930, aged sixty-seven**, Delville **left his family for Émilie Leclercq, a young student at the Academy**. Their relationship lasted **fifteen years**. He **returned to his family** in 1947. Arthritis forced him to stop painting in the late 1940s. He died on his eighty-sixth birthday, 19 January 1953.
- The Love of Souls represents Belgian Symbolism at its peak: spiritual idealism rendered through classical technique. Delville's fusion of occult philosophy with academic skill positioned him as a key figure bridging nineteenth-century tradition and twentieth-century mysticism.

NOTES

- Delville was both a Symbolist painter and a theoretician, publishing extensively on the philosophy of art and esotericism.
- He founded the Salon d'Art Idéaliste to promote Symbolism's spiritual and idealist aims.
- His work is characterised by a mystical use of light and symbolism, deeply influenced by occult traditions.
- Delville was an accomplished writer and professor, blending academic discipline with visionary artwork.
- He believed art had a transformative, almost magical power to elevate humanity's consciousness.

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Odilon Redon (1840–1916), Buddha, 1904, 159.8 x 121.1 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Odilon Redon (1840–1916), *Buddha*, 1904, distemper on canvas, 159.8 x 121.1 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

- Odilon Redon was born in Bordeaux in 1840. His childhood was **isolated and melancholic**. He trained briefly as an architect, then studied etching with Rodolphe Bresdin, a visionary eccentric. **Academic painting bored him**. Instead, he created charcoal drawings and lithographs—**his noirs**. These dark works featured floating eyeballs, spiders with human faces, and spectral figures. Critics found them incomprehensible. Symbolist writers adored them.
- He married Camille in 1880. Their first son died young, but their second son became a visual artist. He wife handled the business side of his life enabling him to focus on his art.
- **In 1894-95 he suffered a serious illness, possibly epilepsy,** and his recovery brought new optimism. In 1900 he experienced a religious crisis. He read **Schopenhauer and Eastern philosophy** voraciously. The Buddha represents his search for inner peace through visual means.
- Then colour arrived. Around **1890, Redon discovered pastels**. His entire practice transformed. ***Buddha***, painted in 1904, shows this shift completely. Redon used distemper, a water-based medium that creates a matte, velvety surface.
- The **Buddha sits in meditation**, surrounded by radiating colour. Reds, oranges, and golds pulse around the figure. Flowers bloom at the edges. The face remains serene, almost abstract. **This wasn't a religious commission**. Redon encountered Buddhist art at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. He was

fascinated by its spiritual calm.

- This painting marked Redon's maturity. **He'd abandoned darkness entirely**. Critics began taking him seriously. His flower paintings and mythological scenes found collectors across Europe.

NOTES

- Redon was originally trained as a lithographer and used that medium extensively before his paintings gained fame.
- His favourite colour was black, believing it contained all colours and could evoke deeper emotion; he called his black work "noirs".
- Redon kept to himself much of the mystical and fantastical imagery for many years, fearing general misunderstanding.
- Later in life, he was inspired by Buddhism and Eastern philosophy, which influenced the serenity and symbolism in his later works.
- Despite his dark early works, Redon had a famously gentle personality and was greatly respected by contemporaries like Monet and Matisse.

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Odilon Redon (1840–1916), The Cyclops, c.1914, 65.8 x 52.7 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Odilon Redon (1840–1916), *The Cyclops*, c.1914, 65.8 x 52.7 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

- ***The Cyclops***, painted around 1914 when Redon was in his **seventies**. He'd become a **respected elder of French Symbolism**.
- The painting depicts **Polyphemus watching Galatea sleep**. Polyphemus is the one-eyed giant from Homer's Odyssey and he is gazing down at the naked nymph Galatea. She lies amongst wildflowers, completely unaware. His massive head dominates the upper canvas. His single eye expresses tragic longing, not menace.
- The myth is brutal. Polyphemus **loved Galatea** hopelessly. She loved the shepherd Acis. The Cyclops **crushed his rival with a boulder**. Redon transforms this violence into tenderness. The giant becomes **vulnerable, almost childlike**. His expression suggests melancholy desire.
- Redon's late style reached full bloom here. **Non-naturalistic colour** floods the canvas. The flowers glow with impossible hues—purples, blues, pinks. He applied paint in loose, dreamlike patches. Japanese prints influenced his flat compositions. So did the Post-Impressionists he'd befriended.
- **Redon died in 1916**, during the First World War. His reputation grew posthumously. The Surrealists claimed him as a precursor. André Breton called him "**the master of the imaginary**". His influence touched Miró, Ernst, and Masson. Museums began acquiring his work systematically.
- The Cyclops represents Redon's final achievement: mythology reimagined through colour and emotion. It proves his complete evolution from the darkness

of his noirs to radiant, chromatic fantasy.

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Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), The Maiden, 1913, 190 x 200 cm, National Gallery Prague

Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), *The Maiden*, 1913, 190 x 200 cm, National Gallery Prague

- Gustav Klimt trained at Vienna's School of Applied Arts and began as a conventional decorator. Everything changed and by 1897, he'd founded the Vienna Secession and rejected academic painting entirely.
- ***The Maiden*** shows six women tangled together in sleep. Their bodies interweave like a floral tapestry. Klimt uses spirals, circles, and blooming patterns across their dresses and the surrounding space. The figures float in an undefined realm—no ground, no sky, just ornamental abundance.
- There is a twist. The painting was originally called ***The Girlfriends*** and some scholars read it as depicting lesbian love. Obviously the women are closely entwined by Klimt left it deliberately ambiguous, he wanted to explore female sexuality outside conventional narratives.
- The work came after his so called Golden Phase. He'd moved beyond gold leaf by 1913, but he kept his love of pattern and a flat. Decorative approach influenced by .Japanese prints and the Byzantine mosaics he'd seen in Ravenna.
- Critics initially found Klimt's eroticism **scandalous**. His 1902 **Beethoven Frieze caused outrage**. By 1913, Vienna had grown more accepting, though debates continued. After his death in 1918, his reputation **soared internationally**.
- ***The Maiden*** represents Klimt's mature vision shows how he transformed portraiture into decorative art whilst maintaining psychological depth. The work stands as a pinnacle of Viennese modernism's challenge to nineteenth-century realism.

NOTES

- Klimt's famous "Golden Phase" was marked by the innovative use of gold leaf, inspired by Byzantine mosaics and Byzantine art he saw on trips to Italy.
- He was scandalous in his time—not only for erotic and sensual themes but also for a bohemian lifestyle and rumored affairs.
- Klimt's portraits of women often faced criticism but also earned him patronage from Vienna's upper class and intellectual elite.
- He was a founding member of the Vienna Secession, a group breaking from academic traditions to promote modernism.
- Klimt never married but maintained a long-term companionship with Emilie Flöge, a fashion designer and socialite.

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Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897–98, 139.1 × 374.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897–98, 139.1 × 374.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- Paul Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897–98), a **monumental work** widely regarded as the **last great Symbolist painting**. Gauguin created it during his **second stay in Tahiti**, a time marked by **personal crisis**, existential reflection, and **financial hardship**. Intending it as **his artistic testament**, he painted it in about a month, asking **profound questions about human existence**.
- The painting is a complex and enigmatic allegory presenting **the cycle of life**. The composition **flows from right to left**: beginning with a **sleeping infant** and **young women**, symbolising **birth and innocence**; moving to a group of **adults representing daily life**, desire, and conflict; and concluding with an **old woman contemplating death**. In the background, a **blue idol** with raised arms suggests the **spiritual,** Gauguin's palette of rich blues, greens, and oranges creates a dreamlike landscape, reinforcing the notion of life's mystery.
- Gauguin described his work as a **philosophical gospel**, seeking to represent the **universal human condition** beyond Western conventions. The painting reflects his synthesis of **Polynesian imagery**, **Christian symbolism**, and **personal mythology**. After completing this canvas, **he attempted suicide**, underlining the work's emotional intensity.
- Critically, *Where Do We Come From?* polarized opinion, hailed by some as visionary and poetic, while others found its symbolism obscure. It stands as **Gauguin's greatest achievement**, embodying Symbolism's mystical and

existential aspirations while paving the way toward modern art.[1][2][3][4][5]

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Edvard Munch (1863–1944), The Scream, 1910, 83.5 x 66 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo

Edvard Munch (1863–1944), *The Scream*, 1910, 83.5 x 66 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo

- Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1910, one of five versions), housed in the Munch Museum, Oslo, is a pivotal work marking the transition from Symbolism to Expressionism. The painting powerfully conveys existential angst and inner turmoil, symbolising modern humanity's anxiety in a rapidly changing, uncertain world. The work shows a ghostly, skeletal figure standing on a bridge under a tumultuous blood-red sky, holding its head with hands pressed to the ears as if trying to block out an overwhelming scream vibrating through nature itself. The swirling sky and distorted landscape reflect emotional chaos rather than physical reality.
- Munch's inspiration reportedly came from a deeply personal experience walking near Oslofjord, when the sky suddenly turned "blood red" and he felt a "**great infinite scream passing through nature**." His early life was marked by **familial tragedy, with multiple deaths** from tuberculosis and mental illness, which profoundly influenced his preoccupation with themes of death, despair, and psychological suffering.
- The painting's simplicity — with stark, almost abstract forms — intensifies its emotional impact, using bold colours and curving lines to visualise subjective feelings. While rooted in Symbolism's interest in inner states, *The Scream* points ahead to **Expressionism's** focus on raw emotion and psychological depth. Symbolism uses poetic symbols to hint at ideas or spiritual states, requiring interpretation by the viewer; **Expressionism** uses distortion, colour, and

energetic technique to directly thrust strong emotion onto the canvas and the audience. **Expressionism** as a formal movement emerged in Germany around 1905, with artists like **Ernst Ludwig Kirchner** and groups such as **Die Brücke** and **Der Blaue Reiter**, and Munch's emotionally charged and distorted imagery was a key source of inspiration.

- *The Scream* quickly became iconic, a **universal symbol of human anxiety and isolation**. Despite acclaim, the painting's unusual style and haunting mood **initially perplexed critics**. Today, it remains one of the most **recognizable images in art history**, encapsulating Munch's vision of the fragile, troubled human condition in an era of upheaval.

NOTES

- Munch suffered from anxiety and mental illness throughout his life, which profoundly influenced his moody and psychological paintings like The Scream.
- He destroyed many of his paintings in fits of emotional turmoil, leaving fewer works than he likely could have.
- Munch was fascinated with themes of death, love, and illness, reflecting his family tragedy (his mother and sister died young).
- He experimented with prints and lithographs extensively, making multiple versions of The Scream.
- Munch was once expelled from the Norwegian Academy of Fine Arts for rejecting traditional techniques and embracing avant-garde style.

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31-01 SYMBOLISM

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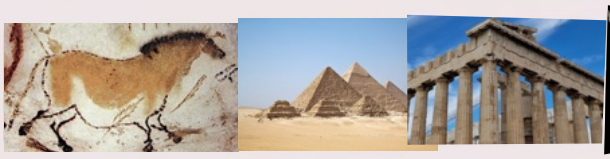
Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1910, Munch Museum, Oslo

- Symbolisms **peak was around 1890.** It began to decline as a unified movement around 1900, giving way to early 20th-century movements. It became seen by some as **overly refined and precious**.
- **Symbolism's legacy** was the way it explored the inner world of dreams, myth, and the subconscious rather than depictions of the visible world.and **this paved the way for Expressionism and Surrealism**.
- That brings me to the end and thank you once agin for your time and attention.



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