The Three Brides
A drawing by Jan Toorop

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Introduction

In the international literature dealing with Symbolism and Art Nouveau, Jan Toorop's drawing entitled The Three Brides (1893) is frequently mentioned. This interesting and complicated drawing has also been widely exhibited in recent years, both in The Netherlands and beyond its borders, throughout Europe and North America. Its artistic beauty and intriguing iconography have led to several attempts at interpretation, in Holland and elsewhere. However, the last extensive Dutch interpretation, by Bettina Polak, is already more than twenty years old. And until now no extensive, documented analysis, based on available source materials, has been published.

In this study the existing sources are presented in a new light. I will offer an analysis of The Three Brides and will endeavour to explain its deeper meaning. I hope that this will contribute to an understanding of this important work of the last decade of the previous century.

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Background

On April 22, 1890, Jan Toorop (1858—1928) and his English wife Annie moved to isolated Katwijk aan Zee, on the Dutch coast just to the west of Leiden. He arrived from Ixelles near Brussels, after an absence from Holland of nearly a decade. Somewhat earlier, in March of the same year, the poet Albert Verwey (1865—1937) and his young wife Kitty 1 moved into the 'Villa Nova' in Noordwijk, also located on the coast, but slightly further to the north. From the beginning contact between the two couples was friendly and intensive. Their homes were about an hour's walk apart and could be reached by a path which led through the dunes. It is not known precisely where and how Toorop and Verwey first met, but they had numerous mutual friends who could have brought them together. Among these friends was Jan Veth (1864—1925) who in 1893 published the first analysis of The Three Brides.

The first encounter of Toorop with Henriëtte van der Schalk (1869—1952), the future poetess, took place on March 10, 1892. 2 She had already
been a friend of Kitty van Vloten for some time and had known Verwey himself since June 1890. Miss van der Schalk was the daughter of the notary public of Noordwijk. As will become clear, it is important to establish the time of the first encounter between the painter and the poetess with as much precision as possible, in order to ascertain the dates of the preliminary studies of The Three Brides (fig. 1), for Miss van der Schalk is represented in the earliest of these. After further visits to his studio, the emotional impact which the work of Toorop made on the young woman caused her to write a cycle of sonnets which she dedicated and presented to him in May.¹

Toorop responded with a very emotional letter which begins:

I thank, I thank you for all the beautiful sonnets which I received from you the day before yesterday, dedicated to me. Many thanks, a thousand times, many thanks.⁴