SYMBOLIST SPIRITUALITY: RELIGIOUS THEMES IN THE ART OF FERNAND KHNOPFF

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In 1896 the Belgian Symbolist artist Fernand Khnopff addressed the central question which confronts anyone questioning whether meaning or value is inherent in works of art:

Can it be true, as sceptics say, that in any work of art there is nothing but what we ourselves find in it; that we admire it, not for its intrinsic merit, but because it answers to certain feelings of our own, and that we seek in it only a reflection of our soul? After all, it is quite possible.¹

His undogmatic answer foreshadows postmodern art theory, which places ultimate responsibility for finding meaning on the viewer. Khnopff could not rest with such an equivocal answer, however, for he immediately followed with a profession of his faith in the role of inspiration:

But this, at any rate, is certain: the study of masterpieces proves that the greatest artists of all ages have expressed themselves simply, deriving inspiration from a deep feeling for all that surrounds them; this inspiration no erudition can ever counterfeit.

Khnopff concludes with a Romantic appeal to self-expression and emotion as the key aspects of aesthetics. His own art is richly nuanced with emotional complexity. This is nowhere more evident than in images which evoke religious or spiritual themes, where the drive to self-expression which typified Symbolist art contests with traditional codes of meaning.

Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) has been described as the “perfect Symbolist.”² Khnopff developed his art in a highly intellectual milieu, which had an ancient heritage, but was on the vanguard of modernism. Belgium, in the late nineteenth century, was at the forefront of industrialization and European economic development, and Brussels became a leading international center for art through the groundbreaking exhibitions of Les Vingt (1883–1893) and La Libre Esthétique (1893–1914).


Khnopff’s personal motto was “On ne a que soi” (One has only one’s self). Very often the themes and iconography of his works are so obscure and so personal that they are not accessible to the ordinary viewer, either then or now. This was fine with him—he stressed that he worked only for himself, and mystification of the public was part of his strategy as an artist. On one level, his images can be appreciated purely as beautiful objects, which they most certainly are—Khnopff’s craft was of the highest order. Yet they are so clearly based on codes of meaning that it is difficult to resist trying to interpret them. Khnopff’s use of religious themes offers many interpretive challenges and invites various methods, as different issues emerge at different points in his career. Early in his life, a skepticism about orthodoxy and a inclination to private mysticism was evident, in keeping with the tone of the Decadent era. Yet despite his affectations, Khnopff was as much bourgeois as “Decadent,” and he maintained a certain distance from the most flamboyant aspects of the career of the Sâr Joséphin Péladan, the leader of the Salons de la Rose + Croix. In the late 1880s and 1890, Khnopff cultivated an image of isolation, wherein his personal mysticism seemed to lead to a cult of spiritualism. After the turn of the century, he returned to traditional themes and symbolism, though with a distinct twist. Despite the prevalence of religious imagery in Symbolist painting, it is seldom the topic of study. The more decadent aspects of the era have overshadowed this central issue. Studies of nineteenth century religious art have been few, with the recent exception of studies of Van Gogh and Gauguin—perhaps because it has proved difficult to be unequivocal even concerning these well known artists.

Art is frequently said to be the new religion in the fin-de-siècle, but that is only partly true; art is a vehicle for religious sentiment, and the making of art becomes a devotional act, but art is seldom the object of worship itself. Art is an incitement to religion, and not a substitute for it, as Ellis Hanson underscores in his recent book Decadence and Catholicism. The parallels between art and religion were frequently expressed in Romanticism, and given a renewed vigor through the music and writings of Richard Wagner. Emile Verhaeren stressed the link between art and meditation even in one of Khnopff’s earliest works, Listening to Schumann (1883); The Symbolist critic G. A. Aurier found the Wagnerian mysticism of art to be the only remaining choice in the modern world: “One love alone is still allowed us, that of works of art. Let us, therefore, fling ourselves upon this last plank of salvation. Let us become mystics of art.” Aurier’s call was echoed by Joséphin Péladan, who dedicated himself to being a mystic of art. His annual Rosicrucian