

Topic Page: [Symbolism \(Art movement\)](#)

Definition: **Symbolism** from *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms*

An influential movement, both in European literature and in the visual arts, from c. 1885 to c. 1910.

Symbolism rejected objectivity in favour of the subjective, and turned away from the direct representation of reality in favour of a synthesis of many different aspects of it, aiming to suggest ideas by means of ambiguous yet powerful symbols. It combined religious mysticism with an interest in the perverse and the erotic, an interest in what seemed 'primitive' with a sophisticated cult of decadence. Among the artists associated with the movement were Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes in France, Fernand Khnopff in Belgium, Jan Toorop in Holland, Ferdinand Hodler in Switzerland, Gustav Klimt in Austria, and Giovanni Segantini in Italy. See also Nabis, Rosicrucians, Synthetism.

Summary Article: **Symbolism**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

In the arts, the use of symbols to concentrate or intensify meaning, making the work more subjective than objective. In the visual arts, symbols have been used in works throughout the ages to transmit a message or idea, for example, the religious symbolism of ancient Egyptian art, Gothic art, and Renaissance art. Symbolism also refers to the **Symbolist movement** in art and literature, which flourished between 1885 and 1910. Symbolist painters rejected realism and Impressionism. They felt that art should not simply depict, but should suggest ideas, moods, and psychological states through colour, line, and form. Their subjects were often mythological, mystical, or fantastic. Gustave Moreau was a leading Symbolist painter. Others included Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Odilon Redon in France, Arnold Böcklin in Switzerland, Edward Burne-Jones in Britain, and Jan Theodoor Toorop in the Netherlands.

Gauguin and his disciples of Pont-Aven give the clearest pictorial interpretation of what was described as an 'ideational, synthetic, subjective, decorative' aim. Local colour was emphasized and given an emotional value, and was substituted for the Impressionist use of light. Black outlines stressed the decorative and symbolic character of such a work as Gauguin's *Le Christ Jaune*.

Originating in France in the 1880s, Symbolism developed after Romanticism and before surrealism in its exploration of the world of imaginative, dreamlike fantasy. Deliberately nonrealistic, many Symbolist painters followed their literary counterparts in using macabre, gruesome, or erotic themes; for example, the Bible story of Salomé, who requested the beheading of John the Baptist, was a favourite subject of artists and writers during this period. Gauguin and his followers used more commonplace imagery such as peasant scenes, inspired with a sense of mystical intensity.

In addition to shared subject matter, Symbolist critics identified formal similarities between the visual, literary, and musical arts; just as the Symbolist poets felt that meaning could be expressed through the sound and rhythm of their verse, so the artists saw colour and form as capable of embodying ideas.

The influence of Symbolist ideas on European art has proved far-reaching, and can be traced in the work of artists such as Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Georges Seurat, James Ensor, Edvard Munch, Gustav Klimt, Ferdinand Hodler, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Vasily Kandinsky.

essays

Symbolism – as in William Blake (Songs of Innocence and Experience)

didyouknows

Redon, Odilon

images

Baudelaire, Charles

APA

Chicago

Harvard

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Symbolism. (2018). In Helicon (Ed.), *The Hutchinson unabridged encyclopedia with atlas and weather guide*. Abington, UK: Helicon. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/symbolism_art_movement



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