Symbolism began as a literary movement in France. Its ideas quickly spread following the publication of Jean Moréas's MANIFESTO ‘Le Symbolisme’ in the 18 September 1886 edition of Paris's largest circulating daily NEWSPAPER, Le Figaro. Symbolism arose in response to the perceived superficiality of the movements dominant in the mid-nineteenth century – NATURALISM and REALISM – whose purposes were to record rapidly changing land- and cityscapes in an era of unprecedented urbanisation, industrialisation and demographic shifts. To some, this neglected both the most significant transformations occurring at the time – the psycho-emotional states and physical health of individuals – as well as the spiritual truths and universal laws that lay beyond sense perception. Symbolism, then, sought to redress the incomplete expression of modern life presented by naturalism, realism and IMPRESSIONISM (an outgrowth of naturalism) by conveying interior states of mind, products of the imagination and perceived universal truths. Just as socialism sought to dismantle boundaries in the social sphere, Symbolism sought to dissolve boundaries in the aesthetic sphere: between consciousness and unconsciousness, imagination and reality, the physical world and what lies beyond. In his article ‘A Symbolist Painter’ published in the April 1887 edition of L'Art moderne, Belgian art critic Emile Verhaeren asserted that symbolism's goal was to repair naturalism's ‘FRAGMENTED’ portrayal of the world.

Moréas's manifesto responded to the recently published article by the Polish literary critic Téodor de Wyzéwa in the first symbolist LITTLE MAGAZINE, La Vogue, in which Wyzéwa declared that 'Everything is a symbol, every molecule contains the handwriting of the universe ... and art, the expression of all symbols, ought to be an idealized drama, summarizing and annulling the naturalistic representations whose deepest meanings are found in the soul of the poet.' Thus artist-poets (choreographers, composers, painters, performers, sculptors, writers) had a special ability (genius) to discern the truths underlying the physical world and should present them in their work. Genius was considered by some a curse, because of the inability of average individuals to understand the cryptic expressions of the symbolists. Others considered genius a divine gift enabling artist-poets, like God, to create objects from the raw materials of insight and imagination. For some, this singular ability entailed an obligation to use it for the general good, for others it simply designated them as an elite superior to their fellows.

Symbolist ideas first emerged in the 1857 poetry collection of Charles Baudelaire Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil), which glorified erotic fantasies, self-indulgence and synaesthetic experiences. Baudelaire's poems, along with Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, which Baudelaire TRANSLATED into French in the 1850s, formed a bridge from Romanticism's more straightforward descriptions of emotion and spirituality to the often more disillusioned and mystical character of symbolist suggestion and ALLUSION that is found in the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé or the art of Edvard Munch, James Ensor and Odilon Redon.

Scientific advances in the late nineteenth century confirmed the fact that unaided human senses could perceive only a fraction of reality and sparked an interest in the mind. Recent developments in physics – the debut of Thomas Edison's telegraph and phonograph in the 1880s and Wilhelm Röntgen's
discovery of X-rays in 1895 – as well as Robert Koch's germ theory of disease and escalating investigations into DREAMS and mental states, instigated a broad general interest in intangible entities, SPIRITUALISM and the occult. After all, if sound waves and microbes were real yet invisible to the naked eye, who was to say that the souls of departed loved ones weren't also circulating beyond the reach of sense perception or that dimensions of reality existed that were inaccessible to normative perception, as THEOSOPHISTS like Madame Blavatsky maintained? Perhaps the non-Western cultures that believed in the fluidity between wakefulness and dreaming or between life and death were right.

Symbolism was a fundamentally neo-Platonic movement that assumed that natural objects were signs denoting ideas; it was influenced by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose writings were translated into French in the 1870s. In The World as Will and Representation (1818) Schopenhauer argued that there were as many realities as people to imagine them – an idea attractive to symbolists. His conviction that music was superior among the arts because of its intangibility and direct appeal to the emotions and imagination inspired artists and writers to devise similarly suggestive strategies. With art liberated from the shackles of description, symbolist artists EXPERIMENTED with a broad range of imagery and visual languages in order to best embody their divergent goals. Paul Gauguin, for instance, experimented with ceramics, mixed-media sculpture and printmaking techniques. Similarly, the symbolist plays of Henrik Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, August Strindberg, W. B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde experimented with costume, diction, gesture, lighting, sound and staging to emphasise the dreams, fantasies, feelings and thoughts of their protagonists. The Théâtre de l`Œuvre, founded in Paris by Lugné-Poe in 1892, was a key venue for symbolist theatre, with most tickets distributed for free in order to popularise experimental drama.

Symbolists fell into two broad categories: optimists and pessimists. Symbolists pessimistic about the state of human society resigned themselves to the DEGENERATION of Western civilisation and tended either to wallow in and celebrate hedonistic behaviour or to take refuge in escapist fantasies. Symbolists optimistic about the future produced works intended to inspire and reform and were often affiliated with progressive political movements such as ANARCHISM and socialism. Symbolist ideas circulated widely and rapidly in the media-rich milieu of the late nineteenth century. The Parisian La Revue indépendante, founded in 1887, was particularly energetic in promoting symbolism; it retained foreign correspondents (for instance, Octave Maus, the Brussels-based founder of the artists’ group Les XX [The Twenty]) and held exhibitions of Auguste Rodin, Georges Seurat and Vincent van Gogh.

The twin necessities of camaraderie and developing a market for their art works inspired many symbolists to create groups. Some groups, such as that meeting at Mallarmé's Paris apartment on Tuesday evenings, were informal in nature, while others such as Les XX in Brussels or the Nabis and Rose+Croix in Paris were highly organised, with exclusive membership and collective statements of purpose. Some groups were ideologically cohesive while others concerned themselves primarily with attracting customers and patrons. In Scandinavia and Central/Eastern Europe, symbolism often merged with national Romantic movements in order to generate national ‘schools’ of art dedicated to the articulation and promotion of generic national identities. Significantly, symbolist imperatives to express ideas and experiment with technique influenced a broad range of twentieth-century art movements: EXPRESSIONISM, CUBISM, ABSTRACTION, DADA and SURREALISM.

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