Symbolism
∽ and Modern Urban Society

Symbolism and Modern Urban Society is the first social history of the Symbolist movement. Sharon Hirsh adopts a variety of methods, including gender theory, biography, visual analysis, and medical and literary history, in order to investigate this esoteric movement and ground it firmly in fin de siècle issues of modernity and the metropolis. Hirsh argues that Symbolism, often associated with notions of individualism, nostalgia, and visual reverie, offers an engaging critique of urbanity. Providing new definitions and theories for Symbolism and Decadence, she also addresses issues such as spatial and street confrontations with the crowd, the diseased city, the New Woman as "should-be mother," as well as the ideal city of Bruges and its social upheaval in the 1890s. Focusing on works by well-known artists such as Van Gogh, Munch, and Ensor, Hirsh also considers the works of artists who contributed in important ways to the Symbolist movement and the cities – Amsterdam, Brussels, Geneva, Oslo – in which they worked.

Sharon Hirsh is Charles A. Dana Professor of Art History at Dickinson College. A scholar of nineteenth-century European art, she is the author of a number of books, including *Ferdinand Hodler,* and served as coeditor of the volume *Art, Culture and National Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*.

SYMBOLISM ∽ AND MODERN URBAN SOCIETY ∽

SHARON L. HIRSH

Dickinson College

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ᐱ CONTENTS

∾ ILLUSTRATIONS

COLOR PLATES *(appear following page 172)*

FIGURES

viii

Illustrations

x

❧ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments

respective duties, of Maria Fernanda Meza and Julie Scaillet, who so cheerfully responded to my endless questions about collections with prompt and practical answers.

Friends and colleagues at Dickinson College were, as usual, extraordinarily helpful. My gratitude is extended to Peter M. Lukehart; also to Bob Cavenagh, Pierce Bounds, Karen Glick, Joanne Gingrich, Stephanie Keifer; also to Tina Maresco and her Interlibrary Loan staff. My colleagues in the Art and Art History Department, Ward Davenny, Barbara Diduk, and Melinda Schlitt, deserve special mention for their unflagging support of all my research and writing, and for this project in particular. Finally, I thank my wonderful teaching and research assistants and Dana Research assistants who have, over such a long time, offered enthusiastic and much needed help with the seemingly endless details of manuscript editing and preparation: Amy Biasotto, Kathleen Clawson, Adrienne Deitch, Nora Mueller, Shannon Rutherford, Marnie Shimp, Katie Sikes, Shannon Temple, Laura Turner, and Kathy Zupulla.

This book is dedicated to my two favorite men, Neil and Michael.

∽ PREFACE

The topic of this book – the shaping of Symbolist artists by urban culture and the views of urban society in Symbolist art – proposes a point of departure for the study of Symbolist images that in the past have been read as the expression of a completely inner world of ideas and ideals. This study is not intended as a survey of Symbolist art, but rather as a reframing of Symbolist theory and of many Symbolist works in light of their references to life in the late-nineteenth-century metropolis. Because Symbolist art has traditionally been considered asocietal, and its artists asocial beings, I have used a variety of methodologies to approach the art and the artists of this movement. Some biography has been introduced, for example, in an effort to retrieve Symbolist artists from a mythology that has placed them into an esoteric, often even mystical realm disengaged from their own society. In some ways, therefore, this study is an attempt to see the Symbolist artists as more "normal" and to place their art within a timely arena of social relationships and concerns. The artists on whom this study focuses – Vincent Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, James Ensor, Jan Toorop, Xavier Mellery, and Fernand Khnopff, and to a lesser extent Giovanni Segantini and Ferdinand Hodler – were all considered for much of their lives to be absolutely aberrant. They were labeled, by admiring and condemning critics alike, as decadent and degenerate; they were called isolated, strange, and in some cases mad. Yet their response to the detrimental aspects of the new metropolis – to which they were among the first generation exposed – is, although predictably conflicted, a measured, intelligent, and quite reasoned reaction. Although they espoused radical and liberal policies regarding art, they also exhibited numerous conservative concerns typical of their own times. Although adamantly rejecting established art that was commercial, illustrative, or technically brilliant, the Symbolists simultaneously used their own radical art to portray the most entrenched conservative views of gender and class. Of singular importance is the fact their response was neither avoidance nor complete despair. Quite the opposite, they contrived an art that would positively seek to remedy one of the city's worst deleterious effects, one which was not on socialist activists' list of urban ills (such as poverty, crowding, or poor air and water): the loss of the inner life of the individual.

Only since the 1970s have studies of Impressionism offered social interpretations of works once considered to be related only in style; these have established Impressionism's Paris as a city revamped by Baron von Haussmann to accommodate a new middle class,[1] the so-called spectacle society.[2] In works from the mid-1860s through the mid-1880s, Impressionist views of the societal shift that

led from family to café life and from private to public sites imply a tacit acceptance of the new urbanization. In Impressionism, Paris is seen as a setting for the people who dominate it; it is the backdrop against which they are grouped as individuals, interacting with one another. Social histories have also been offered for Neo-Impressionism, suggesting that Seurat's iconography and perhaps even his new style reflected negative opinions of this same Parisian public.[3] Finally, recent studies of certain Symbolist and Art Nouveau artists in fin de siècle culture have sought to frame the art of the late nineteenth century in relation to current social discourses. These have begun to establish Symbolism's key role as one of several movements that were deeply concerned with the complex social upheavals of their day.[4]

The majority of the literature on Symbolist art, however, continues to address the "creative imagination"[5] of the artists rather than the everyday society in which they lived and worked.[6] It is also true that Symbolist art is rarely considered important to studies of the city. While major exhibitions and studies have focused on city views[7] and included a widespread selection of various media, almost no Symbolist works have been included.[8] Perhaps this is because so many studies of the late-nineteenth-century city focus on Paris, and most major Symbolists were not Parisians. Instead, with the notable exception of Gauguin and Segantini who did flee the city, they lived in other major European cities (for example, Oslo, Geneva, Ostend, and Brussels, on which this book focuses), which were at that time undergoing rebuilding as modern metropolises, in direct emulation of the model set by Haussmannian Paris.[9] Exclusion of Symbolist views in city studies is also due, however, to the fact that the Symbolists are generally considered escapists – from life in general and from the city in particular – and thus it is assumed that they never addressed the new metropolises in which they lived. As I hope this study will establish, this presumption could not be further from the truth.

This book presents a rethinking of Symbolist theory in which Symbolism is viewed as an attempt in the visual arts to attain a conduit for regaining what was perceived to be a loss of individuality and "inner being," brought about by the wholly new social pressures and ways of living in urban centers.[10] This concern became the dominant issue of fin de siècle philosophy and sociology.

Since the Enlightenment, the ideal of a balanced, harmonious, developed character that could deal with outer pressures while maintaining an inner, spiritual life had seemingly held sway. This notion of a true individual was the basis of revolutionary constitutions and philosophical proclamations. The rise of a new society of the city, however, with its public crowds, rushed sense of time, and overregulation, threatened to be the demise of the individual, who would instead become an anonymous cog in the machine of urban progress.

At the same time, treatment of gender differences in the nineteenth century also threatened to deny this same sense of the individual by taking the two "sides" that formed a balanced personality and separating it, with increasing stringency,

XIV

into the so-called characteristics of sex, delineated as opposites for men and women. Whereas men were considered to be external types, actively working outside in a competitive business world, women were retreating, perceptive but passive figures who were relegated to domestic life. Characteristics that in the past had ideally belonged to the same individual (independence as well as dependence, intuition as well as intellect, bravery, and modesty) were over the course of the century divided and assigned to the separate spheres of men and women. This conflicted arena of distinct and repressive gender identities, as well as the confusion of the two (effeminate men and dangerous women, for example), and its repercussions in Symbolist works are discussed. Furthermore, it is readily apparent that all of the Symbolists discussed in this book are men. Despite recent efforts to enlist women artists of the fin de siècle into the ranks of Symbolism,[11] this study, with its emphasis on both the theory (based on male identification of creativity) and the social goals (based on the dominant male view of gendered society at that time) focuses exclusively on well-known (and therefore male) artists. The fear of women on the part of these male artists resulted in the imaging of specific types of women, such as the well-known femme fatale as well as the not-yet-addressed city woman who engaged in a "flight from maternity" (a type that I here term the "should-be mother"). These types of women, newly recognized as dangerous and on the rise in urban centers, required complicated reconstructions of both masculinity and femininity on the part of the artists as well as their audience.

In addition, I hint at issues of nationalism throughout the book without making them a major emphasis. At times, the role of nostalgia and the past so important for Symbolists coincided with a surge of nationalistic fervor encouraged politically by imperialism and culturally by the phenomenon of World's Fairs. Thus the Belgians' attention to primacy of place and especially siting of interiors has been seen as a nationalistically driven selection of symbols.[12] In the last chapter of this book, I discuss a novel by the Belgian writer Georges Rodenbach; underlying this story is a strong commitment to keeping the old Flanders city of Bruges "intact," not only as a "dead city" of Symbolist spaces but also as a reminder of past Flemish (as opposed to French) Belgian glory. By the same token, Swiss artists discussed here, such as Hodler and Albert Trachsel, allowed nationalistic considerations to affect their attention to city (at times deliberately antiurban) images and even their development of style.

Concurrent with these pan-cultural issues was one that struck each Symbolist personally: living in the "sick city" was a challenge that affected one's response to crowds, nature, body types, and even, as we shall see, self-image. Late-nineteenth-century constructions of illness combined notions of historic epidemics (cholera, for example) with newly recognized and public diseases (syphilis), recent psychological diagnoses (agoraphobia, claustrophobia), as well as socially constructed pathologies (neurasthenia) that engendered a model of cultural sickness, called degeneration. Furthermore, this notion of an entire race

PREFACE

in decline held a special fascination for the Symbolists because both they and their art had been held out as examples of degeneracy in their own time.

Finally, the sensorial world – to which artists are so attuned – had changed radically in the metropolis of the fin de siècle. City streets, the new site of the bourgeoisie and "the crowd," were a tangle of electric and telegraph wires, garish lights, and jarringly loud, alarmingly fast trams. Mapping the city had become almost impossible from any vantage point, but especially from street level, where the usual hierarchies and order of signage had been dislocated, even deconstructed. Not only this disruptive sense of place but also the irregular and disorienting sense of time assaulted the Symbolists, changing their traditional approaches to space and temporal reconstruction in art as well as in their lives.

Into this confusing, conflicted world of the modern metropolis were born the Symbolists. Of primarily middle-class parentage, they approached the problems of their native cities – overcrowding and overstimulation, impersonality, as well as the slippage of gender roles and class identities – with intelligence and creativity. Throughout, they remained very much of their own time. It is no wonder that this approach to modernity was highly equivocal, but absolutely engaged.

In this book, I introduce evidence from a variety of sources – visual and written, popular and scholarly – and from a variety of disciplines. This is not because I have presumed each of these to be analogous or even equally significant or weighty in their evidential support, but rather to show the ubiquity of the concerns discussed in all ramifications of society in which the Symbolists lived. Each chapter focuses on a different artist and on selected works. All of my examples were admittedly chosen as the best representatives of each chapter's theme arising out of the Symbolist city, but they are representative nonetheless. There is also a certain emphasis on the "great masterworks" of western European Symbolism, works that have often been interpreted (some might contend overinterpreted) in prior literature. But this is my point: many of these works do have a strong historical background of life in the metropolis, which only augments the richness of their Symbolist evocations as they might already be known.

As a primary perception of these transitional and conflicted times, I use the writings and ideas of Georg Simmel, one of the earliest urban sociologists. Simmel, whose work has become much more well known in humanities studies of the past few years (and, in fact, since I began research for this book), was a crucial member of the turn-of-the-century generation of intellectuals who took on the task of trying to culminate the thought developed throughout the nineteenth century but also to formulate clear and different directions for the future. Reviewing the basic optimism that underlay most nineteenth-century progressivism, this generation introduced a strong subtext of pessimism as it faced the negative aftereffects of industrialization and urbanization. At the same

time that they rejected positivism and progressivism, however, they were not yet ready to give up on individualism: a great part of their work was devoted to the analysis of modernity's struggle with individuation. In his particularly sensitive and astute understanding of this struggle as well as in his underlying optimism about its resolution in future society, Simmel was, I believe, closest to the basic beliefs and ideals of the Symbolists. Like the Symbolists, Simmel clearly saw the dangers of urbanity, modernity, and the crowd; like the Symbolists, he also maintained, despite such threats, a belief in the potential for a new urban individuality, and the consequential inner identity that might be achieved. Like the Symbolists, Simmel was a thoroughly modern, at times biting, critic of his own time who nonetheless hoped to restore meaning to society and culture. Furthermore, as one of the most insightful of the Symbolists' generation, Simmel was also bound by the same inherent conflicts of those times: wanting to critique current life in order to help the future, he was inevitably constrained by the conservative and conflicted past that he had inherited.

Comparison to Simmel's search for a positive outcome to the potential ills of fin de siècle life can be found, for example, in the Belgian Symbolist Emile Verhaeren's so-called social trilogy, two collections of poems and one play published in the 1890s that together described the destruction of the traditional country (*Les Campagnes hallucinées,* or *The Hallucinatory Countrysides,* 1893), the strangling metropolis (*Les Villes tentaculaires,* or *The Tentacled Cities,* 1895), and the hoped-for resolution of *Les Aubes,* or *The Dawns,* 1898. Despite the overarching imagery in these works of a wicked city spreading its dark and dirty factories as tentacles throughout the countryside, Verhaeren's hope for a healthier future is not a reversion to the rural past nor an acceptance of an inevitably evil metropolitan existence. Rather, his conclusion comes in the form of a compromise, whereby the country can once again prove fertile, while the city can regain its vitality. Like so many other Symbolists who are horrified by the suffocating power of machines and the masses, Verhaeren does not so much reject modernity as seek to reform it.[13]

Thus Simmel and his intellectual cohorts have been identified as heroic in their efforts to be so inclusive yet frustrated in their final efforts, their deliberate universalism failing; but in its attempt they "pav[ed] the way intellectually for the dispersed and specialized thought of the twentieth century."[14] Intriguingly, much the same criticism has been leveled at Symbolism, the universalism and idealism of which immediately identifies its inherent conservatism.

As I demonstrate in this study, the Symbolists were in an ideal situation to take this problem of modernity to task for a variety of reasons, but primarily because of their self-determined "outsider" status in society. In this respect also, they relate to Simmel, who identified a new notion of "The Stranger" in his essay of that title.[15] According to Simmel, being the stranger allows for an objectivity that is special – and implicitly balanced – because the stranger shares enough in common to be informed yet will always remain separate from that being

observed. Simmel, like the Symbolists, proposed this "stranger" as a fin de siècle replacement for the earlier *flaneur*, who always remained one of the observed crowd. Simmel himself, it should be noted, was also a "stranger" in Berlin at the very time he was making the groundbreaking observations about the new metropolitan society: as a Jew, he lived there, belonged there, and yet was always separate. It is significant that in his essay Simmel ends by noting that what stands out about the stranger is what is not common, and that therefore the stranger is always seen as a subgroup rather than as an individual. His example is the Jews of the Middle Ages who, relegated to and punished as a subnormal group, were taxed as Jews rather than being taxed on an income and property basis like everyone else. His point thus seems to be that the stranger, like those medieval Jews, is in an excellent position as one of a group already "set aside" from his society to be the perfect knowing yet outside observer of his own society.[16] As noted earlier, this kind of isolated or even outcast designation was also applied to the Symbolists. Furthermore, Symbolist artists often began their work as decadents, who perceived themselves to be different from the crowd and who produced images imbued with the highly personal, idiosyncratic vision of the hypersensitive outsider. This made them "strangers" who were better able to witness and reflect on the complex strife – what Munch called "Life Anxiety"– of the city. Symbolists shared not only this identification of the outsider seer with Simmel; they also believed as he did in the potential good of the city's impersonal behavioral codes, if only it could allow for private, inner strengthening of the individual. For Simmel and the Symbolists, critique of current society was undertaken to contribute to the great tradition of seeking the meaning of life.[17] For Simmel, this purpose led from sociological analysis to philosophy; for the Symbolists it grew from the experience of modernity to evocative works of art.

My comparisons to literature in this study focus on three books that might serve as motifs throughout; these are introduced in the next chapter. Although it is likely that some of the artists knew of or actually read at least some of these books, I do not want to limit myself with these examples to what historians Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal have termed "humanist" scholarship, by which every historical link between an artist and his or her sources is established or at least suggested.[18] Rather, I use these literary discussions of the city in the same way that I use Simmel's sociological analyses: as sensitive critical perceptions that tell us how the new metropolis was viewed at this time and offer insight into the intellectual and emotional reactions of the Symbolist artists.

The survey in the next five chapters focuses on major issues of urban society in the late nineteenth century: city society as "crowd," the loss of order and structure in the city, disease, and the city woman. The last two chapters investigate two of the favorite Symbolist retreats from these concerns: interiors and the dream of an ideal city (neither of which, ironically, would prove viable). I analyze only a few of the hundreds of appropriate Symbolist works (and limit

them, in this study, to mostly two-dimensional examples) in which these issues are addressed.

Finally, I have not attempted an in-depth analysis of certain aspects of late-nineteenth-century life that were critical, if deeply conflicted; recent publications have addressed two of these. Patricia Mathews's *Passionate Discontent,* about theories of creativity and gender in French Symbolist art, offers a much-needed elucidation of the complicated notions of artistic genius, especially as critiqued by French artists and writers. She also introduces the possibility of women artists who, despite the masculine basis and bias of the movement, "did what they could" within the Symbolist aesthetic.[19]

In addition, there is the issue of Symbolist artists' religious backgrounds and beliefs. We know, for example, that Munch's view of society was partially informed by his father's austere interpretation of biblical text. His psychological and perhaps also his visual interpretation of the newly public and seemingly liberated fin de siècle society that he witnessed was certainly influenced by the clash of his father's strict Protestantism with the bohemian antireligious tenets of the fellow decadent artists who he encountered in Berlin and Paris. Jan Toorop's oscillation between his Dutch Protestant background and the Neo-Catholic revivals of Parisian art finds its reflection in the inconsistent visual references to religion that were only partially resolved by his belief that all faith was in decline. The excellent recent study by Debora Silverman, offering an extended comparison of the diametrically opposite training and views of religion between the Dutch Protestant "modern theology" of Van Gogh and the lapsed, spiritualizing Catholicism of Gauguin, has contributed fresh understandings of their works, including their visualization of each religious mode of thought in their different styles and techniques.[20] A recent study by historian Stephen Schloesser explores the context of nineteenth-century considerations of spiritual "wonder" (rather than institutional religion) for the work of Edvard Munch.[21] I did not attempt to include personal religious backgrounds for every artist addressed in this book, however, to keep the focus of my investigation on secular societal contexts.[22]

Viewing Symbolist art from the standpoint of our own "free-floating and impersonal" times, it is often the hyperbole of such art that strikes us first, and most. This assessment of postmodernism as impersonal is that of theorist Fredric Jameson, who has argued that work by modernists (and his art examples are two Symbolists, Van Gogh and Munch) represent a "waning of affect" that has now been lost. For Jameson, the Symbolists' "age of anxiety" expressed themes of "alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation" that would epitomize some of the last of the "psychopathologies of ... ego," but also represented the end of style, "in the sense of the unique and the personal." If we now have a sense of liberation from this anxiety, in our culture and our art, he argues, it may well be because we share a "liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling."[23]

PREFACE

In Symbolist art, we are reintroduced to art as affect, born of fears that now appear valid, and a desperation that is now palpable. In Symbolist art, the "symptoms" of a fin de siècle societal malaise are evident, but so also is the mind-expanding and visually captivating suggestion of consolation that they offer. Faced with the real threat of metropolitan life on the future of the individual, the Symbolists sought an art that would reinstate the idea, and the ideal, of inner life to their metropolitan world. In an artistic tour de force, they used visible images of the external world to evoke an invisible interior realm. Wanting to "make visible the invisible," they bravely, and even audaciously, turned to their own city streets.