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Review: *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose + Croix in Paris, 1892–1897*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 30 June – 4 October 2017, and Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 28 October – 7 January 2018

**Hieronymous La Plume**

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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

*Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose + Croix in Paris, 1892–1897*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York  
30 June – 4 October 2017

Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice  
28 October – 7 January 2018

Hieronymous La Plume

‘oh! oil, oil, quel snobisme!’<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City is the first by a major museum (or any museum) to present those works displayed in the several salons staged by Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), the decadent symbolist eccentric who styled himself Sâr Merodack, leader of L’Ordre de Rose✠Croix du Temple et du Graal, the secret fraternal society Péladan established after a falling out with the occult poet Stanislas de Guaita, head of a Rosicrucian sect.<sup>2</sup> It is probably best not to ask how the esoteric system of the R✠C differs from ‘orthodox’ Rosicrucianism. Historically, the Rosicrucian Brotherhood dates from 1614, when *Fama Fraternitatis, dess Löblichen Ordens des Rosenkreutzers* [The Declaration of the Worthy Order of the Rosy Cross] was published at Kassel, Germany. This book claimed that one Christian Rosenkreuz, whose life spanned the *fin-de-siècle* period between the 14th and 15th centuries, founded the secret order after a journey to the East. Two more books about the secret adventures of Herr Rosenkreuz appeared, the last and weirdest being *Die Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosenkreutz* [The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz] (1616). As everyone knows, whenever one combines chemicals and nuptials high times are bound to follow, and the alchemical ceremony in this case does not disappoint, with some wedding guests dying and being brought back to life through magical operations.<sup>3</sup> How much of this tradition wound up in the R✠C is hard to say, but some of it doubtless did, along with the usual syncretic mélange of hermeticism, occultism, and orientalism so typical of *fin-de-siècle* cults generally, such as

Theosophy, Visionism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and many others. A special interest of the Sâr Merodack (the name combines the Assyrian word for ‘leader’ with the name of an ancient Babylonian king) was androgyny, a well-known attribute of angels, whose gender is nothing if not fluid. This interest likely proceeds from the yonic associations of the Rose and the phallic implications of the Cross, making the cryptic abbreviation R✕C a neat little emblem of androgyny. Less cryptically, the Rose is a symbol of the Virgin Mary, the Cross a symbol of the crucified Christ – basic religious meanings that need to be kept in mind in assessments of Péladan’s cultural placement, which is somewhere at the nexus of symbolism, decadence, and late romanticism. Unlike the more republican, atheist British variant, French Romanticism remained largely Catholic and, usually, politically conservative, however rebellious it might have been in both social and artistic terms. The socially non-conforming, avant-garde monarchist Péladan is therefore typical of his romantic forebears, with the difference that he comes to the game rather late in the day. This belatedness is one thing that perhaps makes him decadent, as well as his general abhorrence of bourgeois modernity.

The Guggenheim exhibition makes available for the first time almost all of the art that was exhibited in Paris at the six R✕C salons, each at a different venue, over the years 1892–1897. The exhibition is not organized chronologically, however, but mostly by artist, with certain thematic strains included as well. For example, even though Péladan preferred not to exhibit portraits, he had no objection to representations of himself, usually in full hieratic regalia. Hence the modern viewer is treated at once to the three life-sized portraits of the Sâr that were originally spread over three salons: the master appears in a plain mauve robe, looking aloof and aloft, in the portrait by Alexandre Séon, from the first salon of 1892; a dandified version from the second salon of 1893 by Marcellin Desboutin shows Péladan as more of a squire than a Sâr, dressed in a black velvet suit with puffed sleeves and a lacy white ruffle spilling from the collar, one gloved hand on hip and the other, ungloved, holding a cane at a rakish angle; in the last, from the fourth salon of 1895, Jean Delville gives us a Péladan who is at once medieval and magisterial, a high

priest of the religion of art dressed in a pure white choir robe, his right hand raised in benediction and the left clutching a golden scroll. In a way, these three portraits capture, respectively, three essential attributes of Péladan's character: the mystical *symboliste*, the dandified decadent, and the magus of rarified, occult aesthetics.

Strictly speaking, the prohibition against portraiture (the Sâr himself excepted) evidently did not apply at the first salon of 1892, since Péladan accepted three small black-and-white woodblock prints by Félix Vallotton of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Richard Wagner. Baudelaire and Verlaine face the viewer, the former looking disconcertingly cheerful and the latter appropriately mordant. Wagner is shown in three-quarter profile looking to his right and wearing his trademark beret. In context, the three images might be read as representations of the three secret masters of *symbolisme*, though, truth to tell, there is little of *l'idéal* in any of them. Still, few composers capture as well as Wagner did the fugitive association of music and emotion so critical to the indirect discourse of symbolist poetry, so it is almost surprising that no additional images of the bard of Bayreuth appeared in subsequent salons. What we have instead are several works by different artists that evoke music by visual means, as in Armand Point's painting from the fifth salon of Saint Cecilia, patron of music, undertaken in his best Pre-Raphaelite style (Péladan was an admirer of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and was inspired by the PRB abbreviation to adopt R~~X~~C as shorthand for his own fraternal order.) Other works evocative of music include Edmond Aman-Jean's lithograph *Beatrix*, used as a poster to advertise the second salon, which pictures Dante's muse Beatrice floating in space and holding a lyre in one hand, the other held by an angel, possibly leading her from heaven to aid her chaste lover on his pilgrimage. But, obviously, the symbolist image of choice for the mysterious power of music is Orpheus with his lyre.

Over the several salons Péladan selected three paintings by three different artists depicting Orpheus at various stages in his mythic career. Curiously, the order of exhibition shows that career in reverse chronology, beginning with Jean Delville's *Orphée mort* [*The Death of Orpheus*]

from the third salon of 1894, followed by Séon's *Lamentation d'Orphée* [*The Lament of Orpheus*], from the fifth of 1896, and, finally, Pierre Amédée Marcel-Béronneau's *Orphée*, showing Orpheus strumming his lyre in Hades, from the sixth of 1897. In addition, Séon exhibited another painting at the fifth salon titled *Le poète* [*The Poet*], showing a figure atop a small mount reaching up with his right hand into the night sky, appearing to grasp a handful of stars while his golden lyre lies at the base of the mount. The image is not explicitly one of Orpheus, but it might as well be, and, for that matter, so might Séon's dreamy portrait of Péladan, since the mauve robe the Sâr wears there is just a shade shy of the purple tunic draped over Orpheus lamenting on the strand.

Of these different representations of the mythic figure who became a symbolist amalgam of music, dream, *l'idéal*, and, indeed, the artist at odds with an uncomprehending, bourgeois audience, none is more arresting or evocative than Delville's *Orphée mort*. The artist shows the severed head of Orpheus fused with his lyre, drifting on the sea, with shallow waves and submerged seashells suggesting, perhaps, that the head has arrived at the shore of Lesbos. The azure water is dotted with stars reflected from the sky, their pattern presaging the constellation Lyra, at once completing the myth and, possibly, alluding to Stéphane Mallarmé's seminal symbolist poem of 1864, 'L'Azur' [*The Sky*]. But the primary symbolist allusion is to Gustave Moreau's *Orphée* (1865), in which a woman in Thracian dress gazes mournfully down at the head of Orpheus fused with his lyre as she cradles it in her arms. Delville borrows the image of head and lyre, reverses it, and simplifies the composition. He is also said to have used the face of his wife as the visage of Orpheus, thereby satisfying the inclination toward androgyny on the part of Péladan and the R&C generally. As for Moreau, he received an invitation to exhibit at the salon but declined, as did other artists Péladan admired, such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Edward Burne-Jones.

The refusal of these older artists to participate likely amounts to nothing more significant than a reluctance to subordinate their established reputations to Péladan's cultish megalomania.

But their refusal did ensure that the R&C salons would put new artists on view; indeed, while declining to participate themselves, the established artists encouraged their students and protégées to exhibit (Séon, for example, had been Puvis's student, and Béronneau was a disciple of Moreau). The forced choice to exhibit new art by what we would today call 'emerging talent' may lie behind the Guggenheim's insertion of the R&C into the tired narrative of triumphalist modernism, namely, that these *fin-de-siècle* symbolists anticipated such modernist masters as Vasily Kandinsky, Frantisek Kupka, and Piet Mondrian, whose 'purely abstract art', in turn, 'pointed the way to the future for most of the twentieth century'.<sup>4</sup> The wall text, catalogue, and website of the exhibition all stress the R&C artists' departure from realism and naturalistic technique, together with their investment in occult, syncretic mysticism, as pathbreaking maneuvers on the road to the kind of modernist abstraction on display in, for example, Kandinsky, who was also inspired by the esoteric syncretism of Theosophy, the bogus blend of Buddhism, Hinduism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and other belief systems founded by that P. T. Barnum of theology, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. The Guggenheim Museum in New York, together with its sister museum in Venice, boasts one of the premier collections of modernist art in the world, so there is a certain institutional imperative toward making the R&C part of the modernist narrative. No doubt this art would be given a rather different cultural inflection had the exhibition appeared at, say, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

To this viewer, the curatorial interpretation of the work as pre-modernist is more evident in the apparatus accompanying the exhibition (catalogue, etc.) than in the exhibition itself. Take, for example, Delville's impressively disturbing *L'Idole de la perversité* [*The Idol of Perversity*], exhibited at the first salon. The image is well-known in reproduction and in descriptions like those of Bram Dijkstra, who sees a 'livid-eyed, snake-encircled, medusa-headed flower of evil, whose aggressively pointed breasts were as threatening as the fangs of a devouring animal'.<sup>5</sup> For my part, looking at the imperious woman in the drawing (about a foot and half wide and almost three feet tall), the near life-sized figure with her firm, thrusting breasts, rounded belly, and wide

hips seems less threatening than alluring. She is, after all, an idol of perversity, which can easily be taken to mean that she invites the worship of perverts. Count me in. But regardless of whether the viewer finds the image threatening or alluring, neither impression would be possible without Delville's scrupulous naturalistic technique. And while it may be true that most attractive young women veiled in see-through gowns do not have snakes writhing between their breasts and in their hair, this is what they would look like if they did. The point here is simply that Delville does not so much eschew naturalistic technique in Guggenheim-approved proto-modernist fashion as re-purpose that technique to spectacular aesthetic effect, making perversity attractive. The Delville drawing helps to show that the modernist optic is not the only lens through which to view the art of the R<sup>XC</sup>; in truth, the dark vision of decadence might be more enlightening.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *Le côté de Guermantes, À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1919), p. 63.

Some duchess or other comments on a play titled Maeterlinck's *Les Sept Princesses*, but no one seems to know that, only that it is incomprehensible and fashionable, so fashionable, in fact, that the historian character thinks it is by 'Sar Péladan'.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, information about Péladan and the R<sup>XC</sup> is taken from the catalogue accompanying the exhibition by Vivien Greene, *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose X Croix in Paris, 1892–1897* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order* (Boston: Weiser, 1997), pp. xviii–xix.

<sup>4</sup> Greene, *Mystical Symbolism*, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 325.