
Symbolism, the vaguely-defined art, musical, and literary movement that emphasizes ideas over appearances in importance (in opposition to Naturalism), is examined here from several angles in contrast to most scholarly approaches which generally focus on content or technique as defining factors. Michelle Facos gives an ample grounding in the origins of Symbolism in the 1880s, discussing the artists, writers, and musicians that created the foundations of the movement. She also summarizes the various contributions to the establishment of Symbolism by many different figures of the time including critics, sociologists, and politicians.

Artists’ experimentations with media, techniques, composition, as well as their references to influential literary works (Dante’s Inferno, Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy, et al.) and religious influences all contributed to the shaping of the movement. Facos’ chapter on “Decadence and Degeneration” is a valuable overview of some of the factors contributing to the more pessimistic works that were created during this period; rapid progresses in technology, transportation, and production had surprisingly detrimental effects on the mental and physical health of many. Some artists responded to these overwhelming changes and the sense of hopelessness they produced with dark illustrations of disease, greed, and loneliness.

Those already familiar with the Symbolists won’t be surprised by the major figures discussed here. As would be expected, the prominent artists that Facos examines in the genesis of Symbolism are Klimt, Gauguin, Redon, Denis, Whistler, and Munch. Musicians represented include Schopenhauer, Beethoven, and Wagner. Facos also includes writers that were particularly linked to Symbolism, such as Baudelaire, Freud, Blake, Poe, and Nietzsche.

Symbolist Art in Context is illustrated throughout with many excellent black and white figures and a section of color plates. The illustrations depict artworks of varied media, including some lesser-known works by major artists. There are 86 black and white figures and 16 color plates. The text is attractively presented on heavy matte paper.

Michelle Facos is Associate Professor of Art History at Indiana University, Bloomington. She writes with a clarity that makes this book accessible to scholars of different levels. This book is recommended for undergraduate libraries with a strong art history curriculum, and also for graduate students studying the art of the late nineteenth century. The interdisciplinary nature of the content expands beyond art history, and would be of interest to humanists studying the era, particularly those interested in music, philosophy, and literature.

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