

Christian Images in French Late Nineteenth Century Art; Separation of the visual arts from the Church in Western society in late nineteenth century Europe.¹

by Daniel Deyell

At that point in time when the western European church experienced its rupture of homogeneous theology, in the century of Renaissance/Reformation, the visual arts experienced a cataclysmic break with the Holy Christian Church. Over just a few centuries the splinters grew to drive artists away from the churchly subject matter of biblical and religious legends. The beginnings of the nineteenth century saw great flourishes of the Baroque and the Rococo gave way to the Classical stylistic period. Romanticism, exalting the mysterious, the stunning, the terrifying, and giving visual expression to the Sublime, followed¹ and then Realism on the heels of gory revolutions and continent-wide wars.²



Figure 2. *Mass at the Madeleine, Paris,*

Later in the nineteenth century the Roman Catholic Church in France turned

its energy toward missionary work. Revival of the Church in France came



Figure 1. Raphael Urbino (1483 - 1520). *The Transfiguration of Christ*, 1518-20. Oil on wood, 405 x 278 cm. Vatican, Pinacoteca.

after Vatican Council in the turmoil of the Franco-Prussian War and resulted in groups like the Roman Catholic l'Action

¹ (Galitz 2004)

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² More and more, as the 19th century moved on, "progressive" art decomposed realism and naturalism in its search for the mystical heart of its subject matter.

Française. The faithful expressed renewed concern about the “true spirituality.” A large number of them were simply confirming the faith they had been brought up in, some were formerly prominent in other sects and cults which flourished in the same climate of religious fervour.



Figure 3. Giotto (1267-1337). *The Crucifixion*, 1315-20. Fresco, ca. 200 cm high. North transept, Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi.

The predominance of Rationalism produced Occidental cynicism with its false hopes of a totally logical world. Westerners were looking back to the “good old days” before the Baroque, some before Raphael, back to the Middle Ages. The West was also re-discovering the magic and the beliefs of Oriental cultures. The changes to ideologies and technologies of the nineteenth century were given innovative boosts by the import of ideas, images, and objects through the widely popular international exhibitions that continued to draw crowds into the twentieth century. Large scale exhibitions hosted by Paris (five of which were held in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900), by England (its Great Exhibition in 1851) and even by the United States (its international exhibition in Chicago in 1893) brought exotic cultures from around the world including India, the Pacific, and Mainland Southeast Asia. With the cultural expositions



Figure 4. Hippolyte (1844-1924). *Gardens*. A car dealer before a wine kiosk, 1889. Platinotype from glass negative Gelatin silver, 21 x 16.5 cm

came new ways of thinking and new ways of seeing to bourgeois Europeans and Americans.



Figure 5. Eugène Delacroix (1798 - 1863), *Christ on the Cross*, 1846. oil on canvas, 80 x 64.2 cm; Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

Religious revivals made their mark also upon the arts. Their art reflected either the commitment or the reaction to the revivals. Increased spiritual activity, in contrast to earlier concerns about materialism/empiricism, was embraced



Figure 6. Paul Gauguin, graphic, *La Revue Blanche Oc/No* 1897.

across the art world; except for a few, artists reacted against the scientific materialism of Impressionism and its predecessors by looking into the non-empirical elements of life. More and more, as the 19th century moved on, “progressive” art decomposed realism and naturalism in its search for the mystical heart of its subject matter. Using the words of the painter Eugene Delacroix, “it is necessary to give form and life to the innate feelings of man’s soul,” the Symbolists, a late nine



Figure 7. Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). *The Apparition*, c. 1876. Aquarelle, H. 106; W. 72.2 cm. Grand Palais (Musée d’Orsay).

³ (Verkade 1923)

⁴ (Denis, *Du symbolisme au classicisme*, Theories 1964)

teenth century group of writers and artists, called for the expression of true reality, i.e., the world of ideas, that which cannot be seen. A well-defined, although heterogeneous, religious framework is suggested by the writings and alluded to in paintings of some of the artists, for example, Jan Verkade,³ Maurice Denis,⁴ Paul Serusier,⁵ and Paul Gauguin.⁶ Many other artists and writers were affected by this religious re-awakening and reflected their new zeal in the content of their work. As just one example, Gustave Moreau, produced numerous works on the theme of Salome.



Figure 8. Sir John Everett, (1829-1896). *Christ in the House of His Parents (The Carpenter’s Shop)*, 1849-50. Oil on canvas, 864 x 1397 mm. Tate.

In many cases specifically Christian themes were convoluted by philosophies divergent from dogmatic Christian theology but still based on some vestiges of biblical and extra-biblical writing. While Academicians were content with sentimentality and pseudo-Christian tales, the non-academicians looked more at Jesus’ lifestyle and the spiritual values outlined by the Gospels, abstracting the mystical “truths” out of the history. For the most part, they ascribed Jesus as a misunderstood and rejected prophet of his age. The non-academicians tended towards sectarian doctrines, for example theosophy and Rosicrucianism, and they, more than

⁵ (Serusier 1942)

⁶ (Gauguin, *L’Esprit moderne et le catholicisme* 1928)

the Academics, wrestled with the principles of the Christian religion. Artists produced mystical works, Gnostic reproductions, or equated Jesus with themselves and other well-known personalities.



Figure 9. Paul Ranson (1864 -1909). *Christ and Buddha*, 1890-92. Oil on canvas, 73 x 51 cm. M/M Arthur G. Altschul, NY.

The theosophists came to French society, more or less formally, by the work of Edmond Schuré. He published *Les Grands Initiés* in 1889, in which he traced the development of spiritual enlightenment from the earliest days of humans through the lives of great spiritual leaders, including the prophet Jesus. Although its ideas circulated before the end of the century, its impact appears especially in artists' works of the early twentieth century.

Joséphin Peladan [Sar Peladan] high priest of the Rose+Croix saw artists as priests, kings, and magicians. Rather



Figure 10. Alexander Seon (1855 - 1917). *Portrait Of Josephin Peladan*, 1891, oil on canvas, 32.5 cm (52.17 in.) x 80 cm (31.5 in.). Musee des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.

than following the objectification or even the eradication of pictorial representation by contemporary movements like the Naturalists and the Impressionists, he urged an art filled with imagery and symbols, citing the works of Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes. Peladan called for revival of



Figure 11. Jean Delville (1867 - 1953). *The Portrait of Mrs. Stuart Merrill*, 1892. colored chalk on paper, 36 x 28 cm. Brussels Museum of Fine Arts.

Italianate art of linear values, full of mystical and moral values and a rejection of the modernism of Courbet and Manet.⁷

The Salons of the Rose+Croix which exhibited many of the Symbolists' and Decadents from Paris did not only die because of the diminution of talent of its adherents but it also suffocated under the sheer pressure of imitation.⁸ J.K. Huysmans



Figure 12. Cimabue (Cenni Di Pepe c. 1240 - c. 1301), Crucifix, 1287-1288. Tempera on wood panel, 448 cm x 390 cm (176.4 in x 153.5 in). Basilica di Santa Croce, Florence.

who had been involved with Paris' Satanism referred to the nineteenth century search for the Philosophers' Stone as nothing more than magic, "magic is magic is witchcraft - they're all the same."⁹

By the nature of its structure the Renaissance picture space tended to exclude

⁷ (Pincus-Witten 1968)

⁸ (Pincus-Witten 1968)

⁹ (Huysmans 1974)

¹⁰ (H. R. Rookmaaker 1972), p. 3. "In reality academism was merely the acceptance of one single dogma, viz., that there are fixed rules for art,



Figure 13. William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825 - 1905). Pietà, 1876. oil on canvas, 148 x 230 cm. Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, TX

any non-naturalistic portrayal which would otherwise seriously damage the integrity of the painting. Consequently, it also avoided portrayal of any specifically theistic or mystical existence. The formula of the Pre-Renaissance Byzantine icon no longer provided an aesthetically satisfying answer to Occidental eyes. Pictorial attitudes, the way "Westerners" read paintings, demanded canvasses constructed with chiaroscuro and trompe l'oeil.

The historically established and recognized Instituts des Beaux-Arts set its own boundaries based on the history of the Renaissance standards. Those who would not conform to its rules lay outside the official art of France.¹⁰ Those who remained a part of the Academy continued the principles of art established and/or modified

particular technical precepts that ought to be observed – especially as regards the method of drawing – and that this method can be learned.



Figure 14. François Baillaigé (1759-1830). *Christ-on-the-Cross-w-Mary-and-John*, 1797. polychromed and gilded white pine, cross: 186 x 123 x 23; The Virgin: 137 x 55 x 47; St. John: 137 x 55 x 47. Ottawa, NGC, orig. St. Jean Baptiste RCC, St. Jean Port Joli, QC.

by their predecessors. Their art reflected the complacent bourgeois society which had settled in after the disruptive French Revolution, the succeeding counter revolutions that oscillated the French people between Republic, Empire, Kingdom, and the Franco-Prussian war. Rather than



Figure 15. Heinrich Ferdinand Hofmann, *Christus in Gethsemane*, 1890. Oil on canvas. Riverside Church, New York.

disrupt or disturb the people, art sought to appease them and flirt with their senses. It was expected to reinforce a security in the values emerging in the Republic which had grown out of the Enlightenment. Religion and art were means



Figure 16. Eugène Delacroix (1798 - 1863), *The Good Samaritan*, 1849. oil on canvas, 37 x 30 cm. private collection.

for maintaining the satisfaction of life style that the people had established and for reinforcing a security in the hearts of the people of the Republic. It shied away from any soul-searching or critical self-evaluation. Christianity became a necessary crutch not to be depended on but full



Figure 17. Edouard Manet (1832 - 1883). *The Dead Christ with Angels*, 1864. oil on canvas, 179.4 x 149.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.



Figure 18. Georges Seurat (1859-1891). *A Sunday afternoon on La Grande Jatte*, 1884, 1884-86. Oil on canvas, 81 3/4 x 121 1/4 in. (207.5 x 308.1 cm). Chicago Art Institute.

of pleasant memories and illustrations which could be applied to the rational Humanist's life. When these Christian attitudes were applied to art they were expected to relate to the "pleasantness" of the age. Rather than reflect the basic tenet of Christianity (Christ dying for the sins of people), academic art built upon the mythologies of the Romantic Republic.



Figure 19. Paul Cézanne (1839 - 1906). *Bathsheba*, c.1890. oil on canvas, 32.1 x 23.5 cm. Private Collection.

There were, though, already in the mid-nineteenth century, those who wanted art to inject "life" or rather more importantly here, art with subjective meaning, with elements which they thought were the more truthful matters of

existence than Positivistic criteria. The late nineteenth century arts reacted against the naturalistic art of the Classicists, Romantics, and the Realists who worked earlier in the century. It would seem that art was coming to its logical conclusions within a process that had started with the Renaissance/ Reformation, *i.e.*, the development of a picture-space providing an illusion a window sill that offered a naturalistic/realistic view of the world beyond its frame. The

culmination of the process was driven, or maybe a better term, was splattered by artists onto Impressionistic canvases. The viewing public was assaulted with surface dabs of scientifically constructed paint, following the writings of Michel Eugène Chevreul and Charles Blanc, that effectively destroyed the view of a world beyond the frame.

By the late nineteenth century French art separated into two camps: those sanctioned by the State through the Institute des Beaux-Arts, the Academy; and those who refused to play according to the rules set up by that Academy. It seems that those who stayed within the Academy also played the rules of society as a whole



Figure 20. James Tissot (1836-1902). *What Our Lord Saw from the Cross*, between 1886 and 1894. opaque watercolor over graphite on gray-green wove paper, 24.8 x 23 cm (9.8 x 9.1 in). Brooklyn Museum.

and did very little to upset the status quo.

James Tissot is significant here. He paints academically his style never left home. His conversion, however, led him away from French society, to the Holy Land, where he could faithfully capture the atmosphere of his subject matter on his canvases. His religious subject matter was more subjective than that of the Academicians, although theatricality of biblical subjects sometimes produced superficiality in his work. Like other Academicians Tissot painted the childhood of Jesus or the life of Jesus of Nazareth in the carpentry shop. One exception was the Scapegoat, although it was safely couched in allegory and exoticism.



Figure 21. James (1836-1902). *Agnus-Dei: The Scapegoat* (*Agnus-Dei. Le bouc émissaire.*), 1886-1894. Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper, Image: 10 1/16 x 6 3/4 in. (25.6 x 17.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum.

Nineteenth century painters who struggled to bring subjective meaning back into their paintings either could not overcome the mimesis of historical construction or found their compositions twisting away from a Renaissance visual language. For the academics, pretty



Figure 22. Auguste Rodin (French, 1840-1917), *The Burgheers of Calais*, modeled 1884-95; this bronze cast 1985. Bronze; H. 82 1/2 in. (209.6 cm). MetropolitanMA, NY.

paintings assumed the air of triteness. For the non-academics, figures lost anatomical accuracy, colours jumped off the surfaces, and paint swelled above the canvas. A figure, if present at all, could exist without being fixed in its space. The picture surface could be more manipulated. Pictures could become more decorative. Cloisonné, for instance, could be introduced visually or actually, without inter



Figure 23. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 1882). *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1848-9. Oil on canvas, 832 x 654 mm. Tate, London.

fering with pictorial space in fact reinforcing the preoccupation with the surface of the picture.



Figure 24. William Holman Hunt (1827-1910). *The Scapegoat (Le Bouc émissaire)*, 1854. oil on canvas, 33.7 x 45.9 cm (13.3 x 18.1 in). Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool.

It was the rebels of society, those who exhibited in the Salons des Independents, others who felt that even the Salons des Independents was “bourgeois,” who attacked the problems basic meanings of Christian images. They also challenged the basic meaning of Christianity itself. Who Jesus was, who Christ is, including any attempt to establish this historical figure as the Saviour of human beings. While the established Church, the Holy Roman Catholic Faith, concerned itself in France with the governing of the country and with political action, the intellectual populace scrutinized the spiritual reality or the sham of a group basing itself on a leader who lived two thousand years earlier. These artists, as nineteenth century intellectuals pondered the questions of faith and dogma in images exploring the heart of the Christian message. Often these images are tainted by the numerous sects and cults prevalent during revivals, yet art works still dealt with issues integral to the Christian message.

Among the small groups that formed in Paris was a loosely collected group of individuals who had studied together at one of the Academie Julian studios calling themselves the Nabis. Although their “re-



Figure 25. Maurice Denis (1870-1943). *Calvary*, also called *Road to Calvary*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 41 x 32.5 cm. Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay).

ligious doctrine” was an eclectic compilation of liturgies many of the members of the group developed strong faiths commitment: Jan Verkade joined the Benedictine monastery at Beuron; Paul Sérusier joined the Catholic faith and remained a close friend of Verkade; Maurice Denis continually allied himself to the French Church. Other members included Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Ranson, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Aristide Maillol.

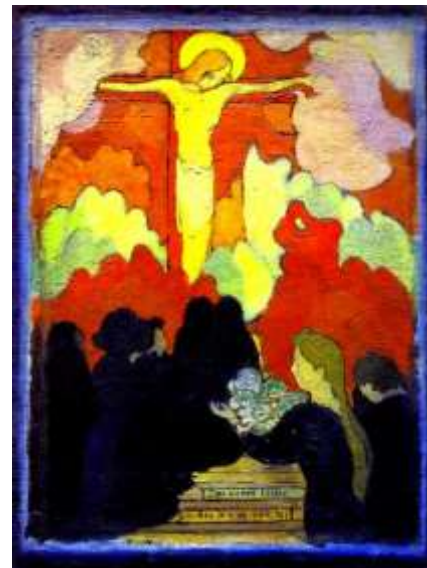


Figure 26. Maurice Denis (1870-1943). *The Offertory at Calvary*, c.1890. oil on canvas, 32 x 23.5 cm. Private Collection.



Figure 27. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). *Still Life with Bible*, 1885. Oil on Canvas, 65.7 x 78.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

The individualistic and expressionistic Vincent van Gogh, who had worked as a missionary for a short time, also painted Christian content. Van Gogh's misdirected "confession of faith" yielded to the "passion of conviction" that released its frustration in his emotive and emotionally filled painting. His work reflects the drive of his personality in its content and its raw method of execution.



Figure 28. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). *The Good Samaritan*, after Delacroix, 1890. oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Netherlands.

¹¹ (Anderson 1971), p. 7.

¹² Nietzsche's works were already translated into French by the end of the nineteenth century in H.D., "Fragments de Nietzsche," *La Revue Blanche*, contains excerpts from « Au-dela Bien et Mal. » Some of Schopenhauer's works were widely read and discussed in Paris as noted by (H. R.

Even Gauguin, perhaps the most outspoken rebel of the Church, reflected Christian themes in his paintings and prints. Gauguin's religious attitude was one which rebelled against the organization of Church and State. He was guided by one principle – to return to the state of the noble savage, what he thought was the natural man.¹¹ It was a thought reflected by his society since the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Gauguin lived



Figure 29. Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903). *The Vision after the Sermon (Jacob wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888. oil on canvas, 74.4 x 93.1 cm. National Galleries of Scotland.

out this Romantic dream by moving farther and farther from Paris.

Although Gauguin was self-styled as an illiterate, he was conversant with modern philosophies and writings¹² and he was concerned with them in his writings. His visual works and that the work of other artists reflected those concerns.¹³ Gauguin wrote in three major works, *Noa Noa*, *Avant et Après*, and *L'Esprit moderne et catholicisme*,¹⁴ reflect a century old concept to blame society's ills on that

Rookmaaker 1972), p. 36ff. Gauguin certainly reflected both these authors works in his own writings.

¹³ Particularly e.g., Emile Bernard and Meyer de Haan who associated with Gauguin.

¹⁴ (Gauguin, *Noa Noa* 1897); (Gauguin, *L'Esprit moderne et le catholicisme* 1928)



Figure 30. Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903). *The Yellow Christ*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 91.1 cm x 73.4 cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

persistent mythology of a resurrected Messiah in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. The real Jesus was seen in Gauguin's so

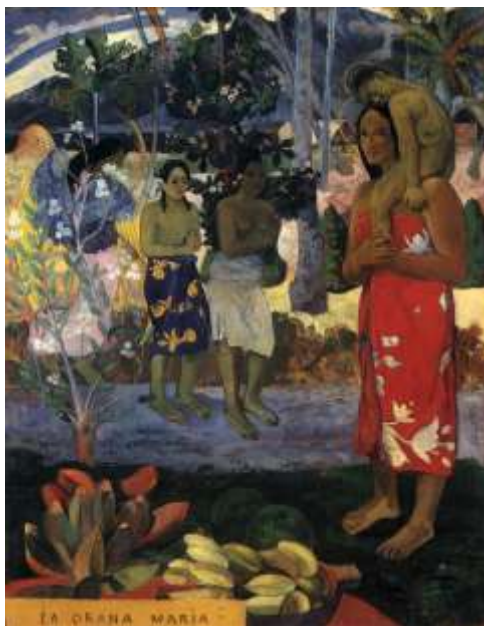


Figure 31. Gauguin, Paul (1848 - 1903). *Ia Orana Maria* (Hail Mary), 1891. Oil on canvas, 114 x 88 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

ciety as a figure who had been misused by the first and second century Christians.¹⁵

Curiosity of Bretons' faith provided Gauguin with an early stimulus for his quest for purity, as can be seen in the first of a series of "religious" paintings, *Jacob Wrestling With the Angel*. Succeeding pictures, such as the *Yellow Christ* and the *Green Calvary* reflect the saturation of religious imagery all throughout his life into his Tahitian works. The transitional works of the *Eves* and the *Ia Orana Maria* are especially around him in Brittany. Surprisingly, considering Gauguin's disgust with civilization, this religious imagery continues noteworthy of this period. It is also significant that Gauguin integrated these images into "secular"



Figure 32. Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903). *Symbolistic self portrait with holy light*, 1889. oil on wood, 72.9 x 51.3 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (was Bibliotheque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France.).

paintings, e.g. *Self-Portrait Before the Yellow Christ* and *Agony in the Garden*.

Christian images were not an uncommon theme in late nineteenth century paintings. A surprisingly large amount of non-academic concepts included themes of spirituality and extended beyond rendering of Christian themes or simple illustration of Bible stories.

¹⁵ (Anderson 1971), p. 9.

The five underlying impulses within the spiritual-abstract nexus – cosmic imagery, vibration, synesthesia, duality, sacred geometry – are in fact five structures that refer to underlying modes of thought.... These five impulses appear in the work of the Symbolist artists and writers at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶

Their enduring foundational positions still appear in both figurative and non-figurative art today.

On the other hand, the influence of academic artists upon the established order continues into this century as well. Popularly, science continues to hold the world's interest. People still put their trust in and expect an approach to the world charac-

terized by measurement and objective recording of sensorially available existence. Scientifically constructed pictures of nature are still painted, even in vogue. And some of the academic styles continue today even in church publications (but that's another presentation!).



Figure 33. Warner Sallman, *Head of Christ*, 1941. Sallman Archives, Anderson University, Ft. Wayne, IN.

¹⁶ (Tuchman 1986), p. 32.

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