

Nationalist speeches on art during the 19th century

Belgian Symbolism and Nationalist Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Since its creation in 1830, the young country of Belgium has sought a cultural identity. At the turn of the twentieth century, critics and art historians consequently established the nationalist notion of *Flemish art*, meant to encompass all of the country's artistic production within the fold of realism. Symbolism, which was held somewhere between ostracization and assimilation, had a considerable impact in Belgium, and was also the subject of this identity-based construction.



Auguste LeVêque, *Hymne d'amour*, undated, oil on canvas, H. 1.82, L. 2.35 m., Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.

The symbolist “moment”—a European artistic movement of the late nineteenth century, whose practitioners called for an art able to express a higher reality through form—had considerable impact in Belgium in both literature and the visual arts. It continued to fit closely with the profound intellectual changes taking place in the country at the time, notably the quest for an identity in which the entire Belgian intelligentsia took part. Since its creation in 1830, the young country of Belgium has sought a cultural identity, a search that intensified in 1880 during the country's semicentennial and the *Historical Exhibition of Belgian Art (1830-1880)*. Critics noted on this occasion the many instances in which an aesthetic heritage was imposed on the country through foreign influence. Others designated certain French artists as the initiators of modern Belgian art, while expressing regret. In reaction to this event, some intellectuals attempted to delimit and define the artistic atavism of this country, which was exposed to aesthetic movements that were as varied as they were contradictory. As pointed out by Sébastien Clerbois, it

was “to this end that art critics conceived what was called *Flemish art*,” a concept that at the time was specific to the cultural debate. The purpose of this term was to gather different artistic expressions around a common denominator connected to the country's pictorial tradition of realism. Numerous essays from the turn of the twentieth century demonstrate this attempt to write a history of *Flemish art*, including Jules du Jardin's *L'art flamand* (1896), Gustave Van Zype's *Nos peintres* (1903), Camille Lemonnier's *L'école belge de peinture 1830-1905* (1906), and Albert Croquez's *Les peintres flamands d'aujourd'hui* (1910).

Symbolism and its reception did not escape this search for an identity. The role of Belgian symbolism in this history, which was somewhere between total rejection and inclusion, is difficult to define. Even though symbolism was favourably received when it involved French artists, such as Odilon Redon (1840-1916), some actors firmly rejected the movement from its earliest manifestations in Belgium, doing so with a discourse already tinged with nationalism, as can be seen in James Ensor's (1860-1949) criticism of Jean Delville's (1867-1953) nomination for the *Prix de Rome* in 1895. Denouncing the “epileptic contortions” of the new *Prix de Rome*, Ensor points to Delville's brutal stylistic transition from realist painting toward an idealist oeuvre—arising from the overly French discourse of Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), the initiator of an esoteric symbolism in the arts—as well as toward an Italianization that rejected “Flemish qualities”: “We see [...] the painter of 'La Terre' and of 'L'Accouchée' kiss the dress of the Botticellian virgins and attach himself to the tail of the Magi [...]. Of course the pleasant symbolists are gorging themselves on Botticellian droppings. [...] Swollen characters, absolute negation of colour, complete lack of Flemish qualities.”

Parallel to the discourse of certain artists, the art history that was established at the turn of the twentieth century also tried to legitimize the rejection of symbolism by invoking nationalism. The book by Camille Lemonnier (1844-1913) entitled *L'école belge de peinture 1830-1905*, which appeared in 1906, is the most probing example, and can be read as the manifesto of realism as a national identity in the arts. Many later works did little more than follow the path taken by Lemonnier by opposing realist and Flemish—and therefore national—art with symbolist art, which was French and Latin, and thus foreign to the cradle of Belgian culture. Nevertheless, symbolism's success with Belgian artists most certainly helped resist this systematic ostracization. From the esoterism advocated by Delville or Émile Fabry (1865-1966) to the ambiguities of artists receptive to both realist and symbolist values, such as Léon Frederic (1856-1940) or Auguste Levêque (1866-1921), the diversity of pictorial production continues to surprise. How then to forge a national art while taking into account these reputed Belgian artists who related to symbolism? Some minimized the impact of this movement in their art, and spoke willingly about a momentary errancy, as was the case for example with Gustave Vanzype (1869-1955), who in discussing Frederic's art, spoke of “defeats—those half-defeats” or “confused works” when “he happened [...] to move too far away from reality”. With regard to the painters who were inseparable from French symbolism, they were dismissed with a sweep of the hand as followers of an art “accessible only to a few”, with no connection to the national tradition. At the same time, an art history developed that was more open to different movements, and was based on the reception of certain Belgian literary works, notably those by Lemonnier. It was called naturist thought, an artistic neologism initiated in France by the writers Georges de Bouhélier (1876-1947) and Maurice Le Blond (1877-1944), the latter of whom perfectly summed up this philosophy in the introduction to his book *Essai sur le naturisme*: “Our elders have recommended the cult of the unreal [...]. We are not moved by the beyond, we believe in a gigantic and radiant pantheism. [...] We are returning to Nature.” The rejection of esoteric symbolism by the cult of the real and nature that was asserted by naturism had a considerable impact in Belgium, probably because it partially responded to the questioning of identity that was stirring the national debate. It was Jules Du Jardin (1863- circa 1940) who, in his *L'art flamand* of 1896, evoked the possible symbiosis of symbolism with national artistic identity. The author attempted to reflect on symbolism in connection with the tradition of the Flemish Primitives. He based this interpretation on a number of works, notably those by Edgar Baes (1837-1909), including his *L'Allégorie et le Symbole* (1898), which won an Académie prize in 1899. Baes glorified the allegory as the source for the harmony between symbolism and realism, thus making it more discernible and less hermetic. Numerous artists such as Frederic and Levêque fall firmly within this context. In his book, Maurice Le Blond demonstrates the impact that this notion had on artistic discourse in Belgium: “[...] did not a young thinker from Flanders, M. Edgar Baes, cry out: ‘Our atavistic art, illuminated by a single beam of this lively and pure light, would suddenly come back among us, a force, and would once again find what we hope to bring fully to the light, the sublime inspiration of transfigured reality’”.

Alternately scorned and distorted, and sometimes assimilated, the symbolist moment took firm root in Belgium,

where it found fertile ground. The discourse concerning it reflects the search for an identity inherent to the young Belgian nation, which was preoccupied with protecting itself from any kind of foreign control and with founding a national art.

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