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Brooklyn Rail

Lost in a Dream Masquerade
Strange Realities: The Symbolist Imagination

Hélène Andersen's charcoal drawing *Study of a Plaster Mask* (1885) and Vincent Van Gogh's chalky graphite sketch *Weeping Woman* (1883) frame the entryway to the exhibition *Strange Realities: The Symbolist Imagination.* Jointly curated by Jay A. Clarke (Rothman Family Curator, Prints and Drawings) and Jamie Vaught-Karasek (collection manager, Photography and Media), and on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through January 5, 2025, the show brings together a motley selection of more than 85 works on paper from the museum's formidable permanent collection of prints and drawings.

While a tableau of familiar nightmarish landscapes from the usual Symbolist suspects—think Odilon Redon, Edvard Munch, and James Ensor—configure much of the exhibition, it is the two small enigmatic pictures from Andersen and Van Gogh that ceremoniously set the stage. Kindred spirits (at least *in situ*), their drawings initiate viewers into the spectral penchants of the exhibition.

Hélène Ander's, *Study of a Plaster Mask*, c. 1885-1895, Charcoal on cream wove paper, 22 11/16 × 17 5/8 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Established originally in 19th century France (soon-thereafter in Belgium and elsewhere) Symbolism was a literary movement that would eventually find analog in the visual arts. Quasi-precursor to both cubism and surrealism, the Symbolist creed took umbrage with the reverie and rationale of light-soaked Impressionist pictures. Rhapsody displaced realism. Psychic conjuring replaced the pragmatics of naturalism. With aesthetic roots in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, gothic tales

from Edgar Allan Poe, and lyricism f Stephen Mallarme, Symbolism professed to explore the interior world of dreams and darkness. Maurice Maeterlinck, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine and myriad others would soon follow the prophetic, albeit apprehensive, artistic template. And as art historian Andrei Pop reminds us in *A Forest of Symbols* (2019, Zone Books), it was Jean Moréas's 1886 retrospective manifesto that only later defined the movement.

Returning to Andersen and Van Gogh, to blithely call these two modest works on paper symbolist portraiture would be wrong, perhaps even misleading. Yet for visitors, the paired drawings—replete with ambiguous personhood and emotive tactility—indeed act as sentinel forces. Call them guardians of grief, effigies of the uncanny.

The downcast eyes and apparitional stare of Hélène Andersen's *Study of a Plaster Mask* omnisciently guard the exhibition hall. An inscrutable icon, the drawing is likewise heraldic, a cream woven paper idol. As if emerging from both an impenetrable space of darkness and stony sculptural fissure, the consummately molded visage exists in some state of in-betweenness: at once a graphic death mask and vivid wax model. From this void the artist's hand even appears to do a disappearing act. It is as if the Danish Symbolist has forged to life both shield and shell, some external surface and inward cast mold. Beholden to this auratic allure, *Study of a Plaster Mask* hovers amidst Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures and the photographic ruins of Giorgio Sommer's plaster casts from Pompei. Ghosts and hauntings alike have been notified.

Vincent Van Gogh, *Weeping Woman,* 1883, Black and white chalk, with brush and stumping, brush and black and gray wash, and traces of graphite, over a brush and brown ink underdrawing on ivory wove paper, 19 13/16 × 12 3/8 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Whereas Andersen's talismanic pendant reveals an immaculately chiseled face suspended in some charcoal sea of blackness, Van Gogh's rustic figure crumples with pathos. Composed with graphite, ink, wash, and various colored chalk, *Weeping Women* is both inconsolable and inaccessible. Overwrought cross hatched lines construct the women's blocky, all-consuming frock; taut and trembling hands grip an all but absent forehead; and a crown of neatly pleated hair bristles in its

own stillness—two sharpened bands of light along the backside of her head electrify the bowed posture. Withdrawing into space and self alike, even the abrasive flock of rocks-strewn at her feet appear severed in their own separateness: silence in spatial solitude. Van Gogh's brilliance has scratched to life an emblem of sorrow.

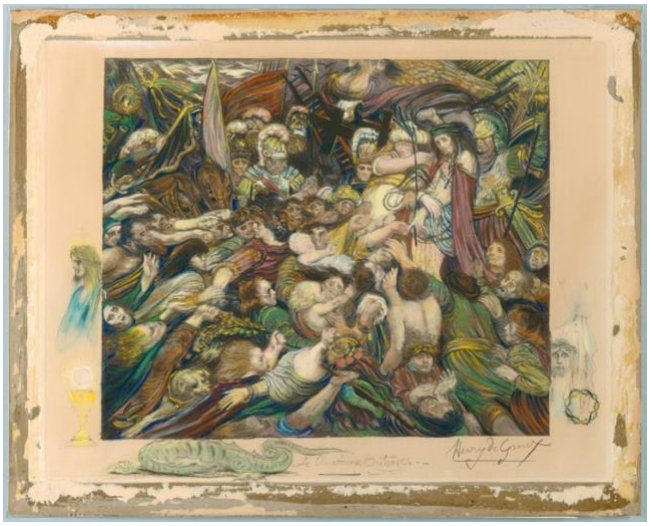
Odilon Redon, *The Beacon,* 1883-1893, Pastel, with various charcoals and touches of black chalk, stumping and erasing, on pale-pink wove paper with red fibers altered to a golden tone, laid down on cardboard, 20 5/16 × 14 11/16 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.

As we enter the main chambers of the show, Odilon Redon's inflated Symbolist presence begins to emerge. A group of drawings reveal the artist's idiosyncratic aesthetic world. Composed in pastels and charcoal, conte crayon and colored chalk, Redon's bobbing orbicular forms—with their mysterious expressions and sinuous limbs—drift along weightless planes.
Inside this miniature cosmos, spiritual crests like *The Beacon* (1883, reworked 1893) simultaneously announce a kind of haloed inspiration and calmed spirit. In this celestial scene, a gilded medallion shimmers atop an azure sky and golden cloudy veil. The atmospheric pictures are diffident mystical cyphers. Albeit often isolate in their own sequestered settings, when seen together the fragmentary icons form an armada of creaturely prophets.

As one continues to zigzag through *Strange Realities*, three unusual pictures stand out: Max Klinger's *The Isle of the Dead* (1890), Henri de Groux's *Christ Among His Tormentors* (1894-1898), and Kathe Kollwitz's *Inspiration* (1908). Despite the gloom and solitude of Klinger's aquatint print, the image became one of the most reproduced across Europe in the late 19th-century. Based on an Arnold Bocklin painting(s) with the same name, the Chekhovian-like drama of flattened rock surfaces and an all-too-smooth waterway was ostensibly some kind of relatable panorama. It seems the white impending figure of death—and dreary references to both Hades and the River Styx—was not received in renunciation. If Van Gogh's melancholia commence the show, Klinger's ashy cypress trees remind us that the epiphanic shine and wonder of the Dutch master's sapphire paintings were always too imbued with spears of darkness. Swirling phosphorescence no more—Klinger shows us instead a pallid arboreal graveyard lodged into the lone rocky shore.

Max Klinger, *The Isle of the Dead,* 1890, Etching and aquatint in black ink on ivory wove paper, laid down on ivory wove plate paper (chine collé), 26 5/8 × 34 7/16 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.

And summoning these neon-like groves makes sense when we consider the rainbow palette of Henri de Groux's *Christ Among His Tormentors* (1894-1898). Possibly the most visceral picture in the exhibition, the kaleidoscopic setting shows a prostrate and persecuted Jesus under siege by a demonic group of bullies. Hunted back to the corner of the picture, the savior is swarmed by a molten hieroglyphic wave of bloodlust: arms and heads—clutching and clawing, grasping and grabbing—form a macabre cynosure of aggression. Think the voluptuousness of Rubens gone mad, or Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* contracted to consume the frame. Vestiges of the ravaged redeemer—the veil and grail alike—float along the picture edge to remind us of our faithless demise. Nietzsche's death of god and our twilight of the idols tremble inside this wasteland.



Henri de Groux, *Christ Among His Tormentors,* 1894-1898,
Pastel over lithograph in black ink with additions in crayon and graphite on cream wove Canson & Montgolfier paper, 22 7/8 × 29 7/16 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Whereas de Groux garishly portrays the masses feasting on flesh—cannibalistic devouring the messiah—Kathe Kollwitz's *Inspiration* contributes to an alternative discourse of the show. Defiantly anti-heroic, the crowds have evacuated the room. Instead, an elderly woman drudgingly scours the ground with an axe; her feeble hand is offered guidance by some faceless angel of burden behind.

The divine spheres of providence transformed into the mere muscular role of might. Here in this isolate genre scene, the lonesome and toiling world of labor is given a human face—albeit downtrodden and hopeless.

Kathe Kollwitz, *Inspiration,* 1908, Etching, soft ground etching, and aquatint, with drypoint, on cream wove paper, 22 3/8 × 11 3/4 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.

It is, alas, precisely this sense of disparate assemblage that mark the limitations for both Symbolism as a movement and the current show at the Art Institute. Although tendentiously connected (through their emotive language and affective pathos?), the three incongruent artists make clear the exigent difficulties of Symbolism's coherency. What is a shared visual vocabulary? Should genre, method and praxis define a manifesto or movement? Why do all of these pictures belong together? While in some sense this may be mere minor criticism—even an orthodox line of questioning—it seems to me this degree of aesthetic ambiguity runs the risk of further reifying the very programmatic forms under attack by the avant-garde Symbolists.

Yet still, it is the mystery and not-knowing that most entice me. I'm left with dream logic traces and some foreign dialogue between myself and an incongruous universe: orphan picture-worlds. And maybe this is enough.