

Video Transcript

Title: *But What is Symbolism?*

Summary:

An innovative literary and artistic movement, Symbolism looked to the world of dreams and the imagination. In this video, explore the origins of Symbolism, some of its key artists and discover what effect the movement has on future generations of artists.

Duration: 04:25

Transcript

Narrator

The 19th century was an era of great change for much of the Western world. Symbolism was in many ways a response to the rapid industrialisation and scientific advances that were affecting society. It began in literature, an expression of disenchantment with modern society but spread quickly to music and fine arts.

The *Symbolists* were *Avant-gardes*, a diverse group, often working independently in different styles and mediums. They sought escape from an increasingly grey reality by expressing dreams, visions and spirituality. Symbolist fine artists are identified by use of colour and flat, often abstract forms. Their work was often emotive with recurring themes: love, fear, anguish, death, sexual awakening and desire. Very different from the type of romantic or academic art that was favoured by the art establishment of the day.

Odilon Redon was a forerunner of the Symbolist movement. His lithographic prints - lyrical and sinister - typify Symbolism by emphasising dreams and the imagination. Illustrating Gustave Flaubert's poem '*La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*' - The Temptation of St. Anthony, he showcased the move away from naturalism with his use of dream imagery and strange, imaginary figures. Redon was an important influence on many later artists including his friend: Paul Gauguin.

Gauguin's iconic painting *Vision of the Sermon* was described by a critic in 1891 as "the first defining Symbolist painting". It illustrates a biblical story in which Jacob wrestles with an angel. The flat forms and broad use of red emphasises the unreal and dream-like image. They are seeing Jacob and the angel not physically, but as a vision. The tree represents the division between the real world and the interior space of the mind.

Symbolism and its artistic rejection of the everyday spread far beyond France. The Scottish artist Frances Macdonald McNair produced experimental designs across a range of media. In *Sleep*, her gaunt stylised figures inhabit an unreal space - the place of dreams. McNair's work exhibits some of the decorative traits of Art Nouveau a movement that, like Symbolism emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Symbolism influenced artists like Picasso, Dali, Mondrian and Kandinsky. It also paved the way for a wide range of artistic movements such as *Expressionism*, *Surrealism*, *Abstraction* and more.

The Symbolist influence can still be seen today. Michael Armitage is an artist currently living and working between London and Nairobi. His paintings too are stories woven between different spaces historical and contemporary news internet gossip and memory.

Armitage is by no means a symbolist, but in his 2016 painting *Nasema Nawe* he makes direct reference to Gauguin's *Vision of the Sermon*. In place of the Bretons and angels his composition shows spectators to women performing the *Baikoko* dance, a popular dance in Africa; but their stance, and the energy of the work the flat colours and synthetic, dream-like quality is the same.

Perhaps the lasting influence of symbolism should be no surprise. Symbolism was a rejection of scientific and industrial advances and their impact on society. As we move in to a new technological age, what will the art world's next response be?