

## Video Transcript

**Title:** but what is Symbolism?

**Duration:** 04:22

### Summary:

Symbolism was an innovative literary and artistic movement which originated in late nineteenth-century France and quickly spread to the rest of Europe. Symbolist artists looked to the world of dreams and the imagination for inspiration, rather than trying to create direct representations of nature. Where did the term come from, and what effect did Symbolism have on future generations of artists?

### Speakers:

Narrator

## 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 their 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.

Paul 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 Breton's 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?