

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

Antoinette Hewitt

University of Essex

Abstract

The use of symbols in art has been popular for centuries. It is a way for artists to convey their messages to the viewer. This article clarifies the main differences between how symbols were used during the Renaissance and how Symbolist artists, specifically Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh, employed symbols in their work. I shall focus on what Symbolism is, the key features of the movement and the different ways Gauguin and Van Gogh utilise colour, form and motifs to explore individual meaning. Artworks of both artists will be closely analysed to determine how, and why, the artists have chosen certain characteristics of Symbolism. Knowledge of the artists' intentions helps the viewer read the painting and also elucidates the artwork.

Keywords: Symbolism, art, Van Gogh.

Essay

To understand the diverse art of Gauguin and Van Gogh in terms of the Symbolist movement it is essential to have a concept of what the main characteristics of this movement are. An explanation of the key features of this movement and how it can be related to the work of these artists will be necessary. The subjectivity of Gauguin and Van Gogh, and the way each of them employ their imagination to establish their ideas, needs to be addressed. Particular artworks will be studied, these will be: *The Spirit of the Dead Watches* (1892) and *Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888) by Gauguin with *The Sower* (1888) and *Starry Night* (1889) by Van Gogh. Each will be analysed carefully to determine how the artists convey their individual messages to the viewer.

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

The use of symbols to convey meaning is not a new idea. Renaissance artists would use attributes to signify the saints and motifs in order to clarify doctrine (Lucie-Smith, 1972). Lucie-Smith feels these qualities 'fascinate[d] the Symbolist painters and sculptors of the nineteenth century' (Lucie-Smith, 1972, p.7). However he continues that the relationship of, 'one-for-one equivalence between the symbol used and the meaning intended' changed (Lucie-Smith, 1972, p.8). Instead of each motif having a specific meaning, understood by the majority, the symbol develops into something which is personal for the individual artist. Each artist employs their own imagination to depict their message in the way they wish and through their chosen emblems. These symbols did not have to be universally known and were often esoteric, bringing the subjectivity of the artist and the viewer to the fore.

The Symbolist movement arose in the late nineteenth century as a response to the generally accepted standards of the bourgeois (Little, 2004). Beginning in France, it is seen as a counteraction to Realism, a reaction to Impressionism and an extension of the mystical side of Romanticism. Some of the main themes explored by the artists are 'spiritualism, anarchy, perversity and the uncanny' (Little, 2004, p.92). However, the themes of anarchy and perversity, while they appear in many Symbolist paintings, do not feature in the artwork which will be discussed. Therefore, it will be the spiritual, or religious, and the uncanny, or that which is beyond the power of explanation or understanding that will be explored, as they are most prevalent.

The intellect becomes unimportant and takes second place to the emotional response that arises in artist and viewer. The feelings the artist wants to portray and those he wants to evoke in the viewer become paramount. Therefore, it is not just a pictorial symbolism that is illustrated but an emotional and spiritual one. Furthermore, the reality of an object, landscape or person is not the over-riding element for the artist. The essential aspect is the artist's idea of the representation of it. Little argues 'the artist must paint on the basis of his intuition and imagination rather than observation and description' (Little, 2004, p.92). Along with this, the art relates to another reality; one of 'dreams, nightmares and altered states of mind' (Little, 2004, p.92). To clarify these points it is essential to look at the artwork of Gauguin and Van Gogh to see how they both made use of these ideas in their paintings.

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

The first painting to be discussed is *The Spirit of the Dead Watches*. Gauguin painted this after a night away from his young Tahitian wife, Teha'amana. On returning he found her scared and afraid because of the 'tupapaus' [spirits of the dead] (Dorra, 2007, p.217) which she felt were in her room. Gauguin says, she 'lay motionless' (cited by Dorra, 2007, p.217). This can be seen in the pictures as the figure of the girl is prostrate on the bed. Her body is straight and her lower legs and feet are protruding off the end. She is not relaxed but is stiff and in an awkward pose as if caught in the moment of distress. Along with this, she has her hands up near her face in a gesture of fright.

Moreover, Gauguin states 'her eyes [were] wide with fear' whilst she retold the story to him (cited in Dorra, 2007, p.217). In the picture, when the event is depicted as taking place, her eyes are half closed as she looks out to the viewer. Gauguin's suggestion that the young girl is too scared to look implies how terrified she is. She peers apprehensively through fractionally opened eyes, adding to the sense of distress. This juxtaposition with Teha'amana's eyes almost shut in the picture, but wide open when telling Gauguin, shows how scared she feels not just at the time of the incident, when she cannot bear to look, but also when reliving it and retelling the story to Gauguin. Furthermore, the young girl has her legs crossed at her feet as she lays face down, as if to protect herself, and her head is turned away from the impending danger.

At the foot of the bed is a figure clothed in black. This contrasts with the bright bed covering, the pink pillow and the white flowers on the wall to give him a menacing aura. His face peers out towards her and his one white eye pierces the picture. As he rests his back against the post his arm lays on the covers of the bed. The connection between him and the girl is shown as a physical one – they are both attached to the material – but the correlation is also a mental and emotional one, through Teha'amana's vision or dream. To her it is a real event and Gauguin has depicted it as such.

It is evident here that Gauguin is exploring the supernatural, the unspeakable and what could be termed as another reality. This is his interpretation of her nightmare as he envisions the uncanny episode. He has explored the uncanny nature and illustrated it with the strange and eerie atmosphere present. Instances of this kind often happened in the dark, at night or in a bedroom environment. The subjectivity of the artist, his ideas of how things should be represented, is apparent as he depicts the spirits as flowers on the wall from his own imagination. However, he chooses to portray the main spirit as a human to coincide with Teha'amana beliefs and customs

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

(Spence, 2003). This juxtaposition of ideas shows the diversity of meaning that can be deciphered from one small aspect of the picture. Gauguin clarifies complex ideas of imagination in other works.

In Gauguin's painting *The Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* it is again another's dream or apparition that is the subject matter he is translating. This time the experience is not threatening or menacing but rather uplifting and edifying. The account is a biblical one, which was uncommon for artists at this time (Buser, 1968). However, Silverman (2000) suggests that Gauguin's selection of topic was not a coincidence but rather a reflection of the heightened religious activity at that time when people were thought to be experiencing visions and apparitions. This would then become a topic of interest for the viewer as one they may have witnessed themselves or been familiar with.

Gauguin has used the biblical text in Genesis and merged it with the ideas of the day. Instead of depicting the encounter between Jacob and the angel on its own he chooses to show the Breton women partaking of the experience along with them. Many are on their knees with their hands clasped and heads bowed in the attitude of prayer. They are creating a semi-circle around the action. The viewer sees from a strange angle, standing behind and above the women, which serves to draw them in so they partake in the vision along with the women. Furthermore, it can be suggested that Gauguin has more contemporary ideas here. Delouche contends it was not uncommon to see Breton boys wrestling in fields as the figures in the painting are doing and Gauguin himself had painted this many times before (cited in Dorra, 2007, p.112). He has taken things from nature and used his imagination to construct something new and original.

Gauguin wanted to express not only the external truth of things but a deeper, internal and personal truth, as this was a major concern for the symbolists. His own interpretation is reflected onto the scene. Individual meaning was very important for Gauguin. For example, he used the colour red to show that what was happening was a vision, as he felt that red was the colour of the imagination. The action is separated by the large tree trunk positioned diagonally across the painting. This signifies the division between the real worlds of the women from the separate reality of their illusion (Dorra, 2007).

Another characteristic of Symbolism was the artist's employment of colour and form. Paint was used straight from the tube, in its pure form, and unmixed (Little, 2004). This gives a strong contrast especially with light and dark colours. The white of the women's bonnets, against their black

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

dresses and the deep, red background illuminates that brightness of the white and clarifies the darker colours. The same thing happens with the orange angel's wings, outlined in black, next to the red space of the action. Both these colours become sharper, deeper and more defined.

The simplistic form of the people, their features and clothing, are traits of Gauguin's. Dorra states that the 'peasants and the wrestlers are both distorted because their forms are depicted in a synthetic manner' (2007, p.112). This coherence of form makes the two halves unified. For Gauguin a true representation of events was not what he sought but a 'rustic simplicity' along with his personal truth (Dorra, 2007). By elucidating the colours and shapes Gauguin has put more emphasis on the emotional response and the feelings he wants to evoke from the painting, rather than the action taking place (Sund, 1988). Consequently, placing a religious episode in a modern setting draws the viewer in and helps them connect more fully.

Gauguin was not the only artist with the idea of portraying religious and spiritual narratives in a contemporary setting; Van Gogh was also preoccupied with the notion of individual interpretation of the scriptures stories. He was a very religious man who had tried to forge a career as a clergyman and in his letters to his brother, Theo, he said 'a sower of the word' as I hope to become' (1887). As he was unable to become a preacher, Van Gogh communicated his message to the people through his art. Sund remarks 'Van Gogh's pad of paper became the pulpit denied him' (Sund 1988, p.663). Hearing the parable of the sower 'made a deep impression' on him and the way, 'Jesus went through the corn fields' inspired him to create art (Gogh). This is significant for Van Gogh as 'his aim was to communicate meaning within mundane contexts' (Sund 1988, p.660). Just as Jesus taught his people the things he would have them know with stories of their everyday activities, so Van Gogh wanted to illustrate a deeper spiritual meaning within familiar, everyday life.

Furthermore, Druick suggests that Van Gogh was expressing a personal desire to 'follow in the footsteps' of Millet' (Druick, 2001, p.116). Van Gogh's inspiration for his subject matter of *The Sower* comes from Millet and is a direct reference to the latter's work of the same name. Van Gogh felt that Millet lacked vibrancy and energy with his drab browns and greys, used to emphasise the rough terrain and hard work of the sower. Instead Van Gogh infused his picture with bright colours, which changes it completely. The yellow sun, as it beats down over the corn and the sower, shines so brightly that its rays cover the whole horizon. There are tinges of complementary colours, orange and blue, which serve to make the rays stand out and penetrate the whole composition. He has

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

accentuated the struggle of the sower's toil with the blazing rays and the viewer can sense the heat and burning from the sun beating upon his back.

Millet's sower has an expressive face which shows the hard work undertaken. Van Gogh has chosen to express the labour with the ground, making it undulating. This gives a sense that the soil is hard to till and navigate. Furthermore, the placement of the sower, with his head just above the horizon line, contains the figure within the land. This makes him at one with it, with no distinction between the importance of the earth and the people; every aspect of the painting has equal significance.

Colour was so crucial to Van Gogh that he wrote about it in his letters often. He says that 'the breaking of the colours' (1885) was important, red with green, blue with orange and yellow with violet. Using these colours together concentrates and animates them. This can be seen in the foreground where blue, orange and tinges of white have been worked together to give a sense of movement. Furthermore the way they are applied creates action. The brushstrokes are obvious and the viewer can visualise the ground changing as the sower walks and plants his seeds with the sun's rays pulsating across the sky. The blue of the foliage on the right above the wheat and house pull the picture together and unify it. The three colours stand out against one another and the clash that could occur does not. Furthermore, the black shadows of the sower and the crows, although small, give a heightened, structural density to the piece. Van Gogh's subjectivity in colour is apparent here. His ideas, which connect strongly with the symbolists' theory of the bold colours and simplistic form, are evident.

Van Gogh painted many versions of *The Sower*, always looking to improve and never feeling he had quite captured and conveyed the authenticity he wanted. This desire to create a perfect rendition of a scene, even if was just his version or concept of that perfection, is manifest with his representation of a starry night. Soth states that two artworks, *The Cafe Terrace at Night* and *Starry night Over the Rhone* (1888), were Van Gogh's first attempts at this venture but that neither 'match[ed] the conception in his imagination' (L.Soth, 1986, p.302). Moreover, it is Van Gogh's search for spiritual meaning and his need for religious paintings that drives him to strive for his perfect concept - 'an imaginative work, not a descriptive one' (L.Soth, 1986, p.302).

The painting *Starry Night* is not explicitly religious. It is not based on a biblical narrative or on a spiritual leader nor guide. Instead it is a landscape, a view from near the hospital he stayed at, in the town of St-Remy (L.Soth, 1986). However, towards the bottom of the painting is a church, set

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

almost in the middle of the picture. It is light blue, tinged with white so it stands out against the background. The spire is long and thin and points straight up past the mountains, towards heaven to puncture the sky. Apart from this one building there is nothing else religious, but many have argued that it has a deeper devotional meaning (L.Soth, 1986).

Soth feels that citron-yellow had a spiritual association for Van Gogh. Furthermore, she feels that it was Van Gogh's mission in life to 'give comfort...and to console his fellow men' (L.Soth, 1986, p.308). She says that this consolation comes as the result of 'being in tune with the deeper forces of nature' (L.Soth, 1986, p.308). This is evident in the painting. The stars in the sky illuminate past their natural capacity. The swirling brushstrokes are reminiscent of the wind blowing the clouds in the heavens. The rolling hills on the landscape narrate the action of creation. The cypress tree which bends slightly to the left, outlines that nature is a strong force as it punctuates the picture and looms large in the corner. This would be a formidable image if it was not for the yellow and blue of the sky softening the effect. The crescent moon is the brightest object and this is significant as it would have been the brightest object in the night sky that people would have seen.

Van Gogh's subjectivity is completely exposed. The night sky would not look this way in reality. For him the stars signified his need for religion and the crescent moon is a symbol of faith (cited in L.Soth, 1986). It is symbolic and mystical, or supernatural, with an intrinsic meaning known only to Van Gogh. He uses the ideas from nature and depicts another reality, one which is personal to him and his audience. Soth feels 'he exalts nature' and makes it 'more serene and pure than reality' (Soth, 1986, p.307). Van Gogh did not draw or paint according to classical tradition as he was deliberately deskillling himself to create something different and something new.

Gauguin and Van Gogh were preoccupied with the themes and ideas of the Symbolist movement. The spiritual and mystical are clearly shown, along with the artists' subjectivity when displaying religious concepts. The use of colour to symbolise moods and feelings is evident. Their original portrayal of another reality – one of the mind – is expressed forcefully. Both paint what they see in their consciousness not what is actually before them in the natural world. They employ their intuition and imagination to give a new and intrinsic meaning to their artwork, one which is personal to them and the viewer.

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

References

Books

- Dorra, H. *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin* (California, University of California Press, 2007).
- Druick, D. W. et al *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2001).
- Jirat-Wasiutynski, V. *Paul Gauguin in the Context of Symbolism* (New York and London, Garland Publishing, inc. 1978).
- Little, S. *...Isms: Understanding Art* (London, Herbert Press, 2004).
- Lucie-Smith, E. *Symbolist Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1977).
- Pickvance, R. *Van Gogh in Arles* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984).
- Silverman, D. *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The search for Sacred Art* (New York; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).
- Spence, D. *Gauguin: Escape to Eden* (ticktock Entertainment Ltd, Great Britain, 2003).
- Thomson, B. *Post-Impressionism* (London, Tate Publishing, 2009).

Journals

- Buser, T. "Gauguin's Religion" *Art Journal* Vol.27, No.4 (Summer 1968), pp. 375-380.
- Jaworska, W. "'Christ in the Garden of Olive Trees' by Gauguin, *The Sacred or the Profane*" *Artibus et Historiae* Vol.19, No.37 (1998), pp. 77-102.
- Lindberg-Hansen, J, *Discovering Paul Gauguin*, *The Woodcarver College Art Journal* Vol.12, No.2 (Winter 1953), pp. 117-120.
- Raskin, R. *On the 'Vincent' Signature and the Values Embodied in 'The Potato Eaters'*, *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte* 53Bd, H.3, (1990), pp. 391-396.
- Soth, L. *Van Gogh's Agony* *The Art Bulletin* Vol.68, No.2 (Jun 1986), pp. 301-313.
- Sund, J. *The Sower and the Sheaf: Biblical Metaphor in the Art of Vincent Van Gogh*, *The Art Bulletin* Vol.70, No.4 (Dec 1988), pp. 660-676.

The Symbolist Movement Portrayed in the Art of Gauguin and Van Gogh

Websites

<http://huntfor.com/arthistory/c19th/symbolism.htm> (Accessed 5/11/2010).

<http://www.vangoghletters.org> (Accessed 12/11/2010).

©Antoinette Hewitt. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY).