FINDING THE IDEAL: CLOTHING AND GENDER IN SYMBOLIST ART

by

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Abstract

This Major Research Project explores the role of clothing in Symbolist visual art at the end of the nineteenth century. Through a formal visual analysis of clothing in a selection of Symbolist artworks from the 1870s until the early 1900s, this research project specifically examines how clothing in Symbolist art communicates fin-de-siècle notions of gender identity. From a feminist art historical and fashion-based lens, this project investigates the female nude, the femme fatale, women in nature, and the androgyne in Symbolist visual art. Combining the analysis with Symbolism’s theories of correspondences and synthesis, this project concludes that these Symbolist representations of clothing figures communicate ideals that complicate the popular modern understanding of gender.
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Introduction

Humans are frequently represented in Symbolist visual art. The clothing of represented figures has often been only indirectly acknowledged by those who study Symbolist art as a part of the whole image. The presence of clothed bodies in Symbolist art demands further discussion; this MRP (Major Research Project) will investigate how the clothed body communicates meaning in the context of fashion studies, art history, and feminist theory. In particular, I examine clothing in Symbolist art in relation to the representation of gender through specific depictions of femininity and androgyny. This project explores the use of clothing in Symbolist art to represent a Symbolist-specific feminine ideal. The study includes investigating the representation of femininity by female Symbolist artists, the female nude in Symbolist art, the clothed female body and the theme of the androgyne. The Symbolist concepts, *synthesis* and *correspondences*, are key to understanding the negotiation of idealized gender in Symbolist art. I reference Symbolist theories to ask what clothing in Symbolist visual art evokes that gives a clue to the fantastical, metaphysical world valued by Symbolist artists. It becomes evident throughout each section that the clothed subject does indicate the Symbolist feminine ideal. According to a study of a range of Symbolist artworks, Symbolist artists imagine the ideal woman as natural, submissive, and separate from the modern world. Symbolist artists also imagine a future where gender is erased, and divisions in society are united.

A clear understanding of the role of clothing as represented in the Symbolist movement requires a contextual understanding of the movement itself. In this paper’s sphere, Symbolism refers to the Symbolist movement that occurred across various artistic disciplines in Europe in
the second half of the nineteenth century. The Symbolist movement emerged in literature, and spread to music, theatre, and the visual arts. Symbolism as a term thus covers a vast swath of art and artists. For this project, I will focus on Symbolism in French visual art during the second half of the nineteenth century. My study focuses on this context for two reasons. In the 1800s, France was viewed as an epicentre of visual art as well as fashion. The depiction of clothing in French Symbolist visual art therefore has the element of being painted in a context in which fashion was a prominent part of the culture. I therefore focus on artworks by French Symbolist artists, but I also include the work of Ferdinand Knopff, who was a significant Belgian Symbolist artist who worked in France. Furthermore, by studying a smaller subset of Symbolist art I am able to investigate the original french context in greater depth, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis.

Symbolism initially began in France and Belgium as a counter-culture literary movement.¹ Symbolist writers that aimed to record truths, knowledge, and consciousness in the material medium of human-made art. Symbolism was a response to its artistic contemporaries Realism and Naturalism, that sought to represent the reality of daily life and the natural world. Notably, the term Symbolism was first coined in the critic Jean Moréas’ Symbolist Manifesto of 1886, in which he called for poetry which “seeks to clothe the Idea in tangible form.”² Namely, the Symbolist goal was to “communicate an unknown and very personal ideal” that resulted in art that did not share similar stylistic characteristics but that attempted to convey a similar

interior message to the exterior world.\(^3\) So, initially, Symbolist writers conveyed their intentions through prose as poetry and works of fiction were the written mediums most suitable to the imagery of the Symbolist message. Symbolist ideas spread to other mediums however, and are also found in Wagner’s music and anti-naturalist/realist plays in the nineteenth century. Aside from Moréas, other prominent French Symbolist writers include Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine. Baudelaire and helped popularize Emmanuel Swedenborg’s theory of correspondences, which connect the visible world with the invisible.\(^4\) A correspondence is a symbol that effectively fulfills Moréas’ direction to clothe the idea in a tangible form; correspondences are made to present the artist’s individual inner state and a larger, natural truth in material form.\(^5\) In Mallarmé’s work, Symbolist tropes like ambiguity, imagination, the psyche and synthesis are frequent.\(^6\) Ambiguity features prominently in Symbolism because it portrays a sense of mystery without necessarily portraying a mysterious subject.\(^7\) Ambiguity also helped prompt imagination, which was, according to Symbolist where the psyche recorded the invisible world.\(^8\) Synthesis in symbolist art was preferred over analysis, as it linked together “material and metaphysical order of reality.”\(^9\)

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3 Hirsh, 96.
4 Emmanuel Swedenborg was a 17th century scientist, who was heralded by the Symbolists as a “mystic and visionary” due to his theory of correspondences that they adapted to their own cause. Marja Lahelma. “The Symbolist Aesthetic and the Impact of Occult and Esoteric Ideologies on Modern Art.” *Approaching Religion*, vol. 8, no. 1 (April 2018): 37.
5 Lahelma, 33.
7 Lahelma, 43.
8 Lahelma, 37, 43.
Symbolist visual art developed out of the literary movement and similarly used

correspondences, ambiguity, and synthesis to materially depict that which is inwardly seen or

known. Symbolist visual art—like Symbolist literature—was avant-garde, as it was outside the

established artistic institutions of the time and strove to create a type of art according to

Symbolist ideas. Significantly, Symbolism was dissatisfied with other artistic movements of the

mid-to-late nineteenth century, including Impressionism, which portrayed that which was

outwardly observed and focused - to the derision of Symbolists - on appearances.¹⁰

Impressionism itself is intimately linked to fin-de-siècle modern French fashion, and this

connection has been explored recently in an exhibition shown in Chicago, New York, and Paris.¹¹

Symbolism meanwhile differs vastly from Impressionism, for while it has a recognized

connection to modernity, it is not connected to fashion. As a visual medium, Symbolist sketches,

paintings and even statues convey symbolic imagery inspired by mythologies, religions, dreams

and the imagination. Yet, visual Symbolism is different from literary Symbolism. Literary

Symbolism was a concise movement that had strongly defined boundaries. Symbolist visual art

is more loosely defined. For instance, Symbolist visual art did not adhere to a published

manifesto. Through visual art, Symbolists attempt to destabilize established artistic iconography

and synthesize established cultural ideas in order to portray a new, total art.¹² The Symbolist style

is thus multi-layered and complex, and there is no distinct or consistent visual aesthetic to

Symbolist artworks due to the individualism of artists' personal ideals.¹³ For instance, while at a

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¹¹ see the exhibition catalogue: Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity, ed. Gloria Groom (Chicago: Art

Institute of Chicago, 2012).

¹³ Hirsh, 96.
glance the work of both artists seems drastically different, the bright, colourful work Gauguin, and the more subdued palette and classical influence of Puvis de Chavannes artworks both fall under the category of Symbolist art. It is partly due to the difficult legibility of Symbolist visual art that it is not as popularly recognized as its nineteenth-century compatriots Realism, Impressionism, Aestheticism and the Decadent Movement.

Two art critics whose writings helped clarify the aesthetics of Symbolist visual art for the viewing public at the time as well as for scholars today are Albert Aurier and Remy de Gourmont. Aurier defined Symbolist art in painting in two articles in 1891 and 1892 respectively. According to Aurier, one main purpose of Symbolist art can be understood as *idéisme*. Idéisme in Symbolist art is the process of illustrating ideals as “unconditional, virtual signs” that are not illustrative, but are evocative signs. Illustrative signs are descriptive illustrations that directly signify an idea; they are evident in allegorical Symbolist works. Evocative signs serve as a symbolic catalyst that urge the viewer’s imagination to make whatever connections it may from the initial representation. Furthermore, to Aurier, Symbolist art is not only aesthetic signification, it is the signification of an intrinsic creativity that connects back to humankind’s ‘primal’ state. Aurier’s idéisme relates to correspondence insofar that it connects the mind and the material. Gourmont helped establish the *Mercure de France* in 1890, and this magazine became a mouthpiece for Symbolist art. He himself sought to link Symbolism back to concrete

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16 Lucie-Smith, 55.  
reality.\textsuperscript{18} Gourmont also framed Symbolism as a form of absolute freedom.\textsuperscript{19} Gourmont argues that Symbolism is a conduit for the individual to freely interpret and represent the world/worlds as they see fit.\textsuperscript{20} Reality, therefore, much like art, is subjective, and subjective representations of ‘reality’ have the potential to evoke, similarly to what Aurier suggests, the true invisible reality of shared consciousness.\textsuperscript{21} Symbolism is simultaneously nothing and everything, it is the intangible made tangible. In one sense, it is the representation of imagined ideals and ideas, and of the unreal. In another sense, Symbolism expresses something very real about the collective and the individual human mind.

Symbolist visual art does not imitate the real world, and thus, the figures painted in Symbolist artworks are not dressed in the contemporary fashions of the day. Nevertheless, there are some tangential connections between Symbolist writers and nineteenth-century French fashion that are worth mentioning. Charles Baudelaire famously observed fashion to be a key component of modernity and believed the clothed body was an expression of the zeitgeist.\textsuperscript{22} For his part, Stéphane Mallarmé started a fashion magazine called \textit{La Dernière Mode} in 1874. In the magazine’s short run, Mallarmé used various (largely female) pseudonyms to publish articles, poems, and essays on contemporary French fashion. Baudelaire thought painters should depict modern fashions and Mallarmé did not, but both men clearly had a keen interest in the worn fashions of their time and both men were also influential Symbolist writers. However, neither

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Burne, 163.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Burne, 165.
\end{itemize}
man’s interest in fashion and Symbolist literature corresponds to a direct connection between Symbolist visual art and fashion—that connection remains to be drawn. Baudelaire discussed fashion as it connected to his observations to modernity, and he discussed Symbolism as an avant-garde modern art movement. Mallarmé meanwhile couched himself in female pseudonyms when he directly discussed fashion. I suggest that it was appropriate for nineteenth-century men to philosophize about modernity and art as these disciplines were in the male domain. Yet, to talk about fashion was too feminine a pursuit, and perhaps a consequence of this stereotype has been a disregard for fashion in Symbolist art, a highly intellectualized art movement. The signification of clothing in Symbolist art is overlooked in favour of other symbols in Symbolist paintings. Yet, if one turns to the guiding principles of Symbolism like correspondence and synthesis, as well as to the leading critical interpretations of Symbolist art, it is clear that the clothing depicted in Symbolist art has a lot to tell us. Symbolist art depicts the consciously known in visual form. Therefore, if we assume Symbolist art does so successfully, it is worthwhile to question what the visual representation of clothing signifies about the intangible, imagined worlds according to nineteenth-century French Symbolist artists.

My research questions centre around this main query: What can clothing in Symbolist visual art communicate about cultural ideas held in nineteenth-century France. With this question as the starting point, my interest expands to more specific questions about the role of clothing as a symbol of meaning in Symbolist art and what it signifies about gender. I will approach my research questions from an interdisciplinary perspective in order to offer a more rounded analysis of the meaning of clothing in Symbolist visual art. Symbolist art was avant-garde, and so it
provides an alternative point of view to more mainstream contemporary artistic movements and it offers a unique lens through which to ask and answer these questions.

The analysis of clothing in Symbolist painting begins with fashion theory. Firstly, the depictions of clothing in Symbolist art need to be placed in the context of a fashion system. I use Joanne Entwistle’s modern social theory about fashion to understand fashion’s role in society. Anthropologists and fashion theorists have firmly established that adorning the human body is a universal practice.\(^{23}\) However, the meaning of bodily adornment is dependent on the social and cultural context in which it takes place. Furthermore, to dress, or adorn a body simply refers to the act of clothing or covering the body in an aesthetic manner. Fashion, on the other hand, refers to the specific socio-cultural system in which dress is enacted, and this system is defined through its propensity for constant change.\(^{24}\) I briefly apply Georg Simmel’s theory of what causes fashion styles to change to explain Symbolism’s rejection of modern fashions in its visual representations. In the context of nineteenth century France, the dress practices I am analyzing are within a specific system fashion, but they are also within a system Symbolist visual art. I couple Anne Hollander’s ideas about the nude body and the clothed figure in painting with Kenneth Clark and John Berger’s notions of seeing art to guide my formal visual analysis. The system of Symbolist art invests unique qualities into fashion in art, and following Hollander, I argue that the manner in which the lack of dress, and dress has been depicted offers unique insight into the system in which it was created.\(^{25}\)


\(^{24}\) Entwistle, 60.

Mainly, I will discuss what clothing signifies in Symbolist art in terms of gender. Despite being a progressive movement, Symbolism follows the art historical trope that places artistic creativity is in the hands of the white, male, and European artist. Jeanne Jacquemin is included at the beginning of this project not only to reinsert a female artist into the Symbolist movement specifically, and the nascence of modern art in general, but to also provide a counterpoint to the artworks under analysis later in this work that were all created by male Symbolist artists. Female Symbolist artists such as Jeanne Jacquemin whose work involved depictions of female figures. However, records of Jacquemin’s artwork and contributions to the field have been largely lost and forgotten.\(^26\) The depiction of the female figure in Symbolist art is largely represented therefore by male artists. I use the seminal works of feminist art historians Griselda Pollock and Linda Nochlin to note how the Symbolist male gaze skews gender representations in Symbolist art.\(^27\) Jacquemin was the only female Symbolist artist I could find in my research, and while she offers a female gaze, since she is largely written out of the Symbolist school of visual art, the main perspective offered on gender in Symbolist art is from white, European men.

After my section on Jeanne Jacquemin, I look at the representation of the nude in Symbolist art. In fashion studies and art history alike, the nude body has been understood as a site of meaning, and it is worth exploring the meaning of the nude as it reappears in Symbolist visual art. I apply Hollander, Clark and Berger’s positions on how information is communicated through the nude body, to the female nude body in Symbolist art. I apply fashion theories


surrounding the abject and the connection between fashion and practices of femininity to inform how the female body is mediated as a Symbolist subject. I also connect the nude figure to art historical practices and concepts of modernity, which also allows me to position the female nude in the Symbolist tradition of art.

Symbolist art is full of gender imagery that is produced mainly by men, so, studying clothing on the bodies in Symbolist paintings provides the opportunity to analyze what imagined or subconscious ideas were held about female bodies by creatives in positions of authority. What does the clothing of women represented in Symbolist art communicate about femininity and fin-de-siècle feminine ideals? The female figure is ubiquitous in Symbolist visual art and many male Symbolist artists had female muses or models. Since the aim of Symbolism was to portray the unreality of the shared imagination in material form, I argue the material covering the female form as depicted in Symbolist art communicates something about what the shared white male imagination thinks about femininity. To support my argument, I turn to Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, who frame the modern feminine figure through her relationship to adornment, and address how clothing marks gender difference and feminine identity.28

Building off my discussion of femininity, I will look at the androgynous figure in Symbolist art. What type of clothing is worn by androgynous figures in Symbolist painting and why? As I mentioned above, one thread that runs throughout Symbolist art is the attempt to synthesize ideas as well as create an ambiguous and mysterious, yet comprehensive whole.29 Often, the unification of opposites was explored in order to evoke synthesis and ambiguity.30

29 Lahelma 43. Cole, 327.
30 Cole, 325.
This can be seen, for instance, in the use of the Sphinx in Symbolist art, which has a lion’s body, a human’s head, and sometimes bird’s wings and therefore combines animals and humans in one cohesive creature. This theme is further manifested in the recurring appearance of androgynous figures in nineteenth century Symbolist art - both in Symbolist literature and art respectively. In the androgyne, the ideal spiritual and natural balance is found in the enmeshment of opposing male and female genders. Androgyny in Symbolist art is connected to the tumultuous state of society in the nineteenth century. At a time when society and politics were rapidly fracturing, changing and evolving, the ideal of unity as symbolized by the androgynous figure was enticing. I explore androgyne in Symbolist art as it specifically relates to clothing and the representation of gender. In this final section, I myself synthesize ideas about androgyne in fashion studies (Entwistle and Wilson), in Symbolist ideology (Péladan), and in modernity to propose how clothing in Symbolist art helps create a utopian androgynous figure that transcends gender boundaries.

There are intersections between the female nude, clothed women and the clothed androgynous subject in Symbolist art. In each section, clothing and accessories are either used as correspondences or as a means synthesis. Symbolist ideology runs as a thread throughout this project as it uses clothing to negotiates nineteenth century Symbolist feminine, and gender, ideals.

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31 Lahelma, 33.
32 Cole, 341.
33 Péladan’s theory of ideal androgyne is explained in Lahelma, 33-34.
The Female Symbolist Artist: A Forgotten Perspective

To begin the analysis of the clothed female body in Symbolist art we must first contextualize women in the Symbolist movement. Were there female Symbolist visual artists? How did female Symbolist artists depict the clothed female body?

Throughout the history of art, female artists have been less renowned than male artists for multiple reasons. In her seminal 1971 essay, Lynda Nochlin directly investigates why no great female artists have been lauded in the art historical canon. The long-standing myth of the great artist has focused on the inherent genius of the male artist. Famous modern male artists such as Courbet, Monet and Picasso have been singled out for their display of a natural artistic ability from a young age and have thus been accepted as Great Artists. The same mythic narrative does not surround female artists, nor does the mythos of the great white male artist take into account the social structures in which art is produced. When the socio-cultural factors of art and artists are studied, it is clear that there have been no great female artists not because of a lack of individual talent, but because the social structures that create the great white male artist simultaneously suppresses female artists and others who do not fit that mold.

For one, women have not historically been in a privileged social position that allows them to learn how to become artists. Visual art was long viewed as a male-only occupation as it was appropriate for men to take the time and space to focus solely on their artistic skill and production. Meanwhile, although it was acceptable for (middle-class) women to paint as a hobby,

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34 Nochlin, “No Great Women Artists?” 7.
their main focus was to be their husband, children, and marriage.\textsuperscript{37} The Symbolist painter Paul Gauguin, for example, was able to leave his wife, children, and a stable job to pursue his artistic career—a liberty a woman would not be able to easily take in the late-1800s. Additionally, access to traditional pathways to become a successful, professional artist were blocked to women. Art academies such as the École des Beaux-Arts in France did not allow women to attend until 1897, and life-drawing classes at many European, state-sponsored institutions specifically prohibited female students.\textsuperscript{38} For women, not learning how to render nudes was particularly restrictive as it was a necessary skill to have in order to produce historical painting, which was viewed as the most prestigious category of visual art at the time. Female artists who garnered success despite such restrictions were connected to successful male artists more often than were male artists, and therefore had greater access to the art world than the average woman as well. Into the nineteenth century, such female artists trained in studios, at home, or at private institutions, and produced less elite artworks according to the established hierarchy of art in the portraiture, genre, still life and landscape categories.\textsuperscript{39} Jeanne Jacquemin herself produced mostly pastel drawings, which was a feminized medium. At the end of the nineteenth century when art academies eventually opened their doors to women, the academic artistic tradition that placed historical art at its peak lost importance as it was being dismantled by the emergence of modernism.\textsuperscript{40}

The Symbolist art movement occurred at the end of the nineteenth century when it—and other modern art movements—pushed against established art practices at the time. However the

\textsuperscript{37} Nochlin, “No Great Women Artists?” 29.
\textsuperscript{39} Nochlin, “No Great Women Artists?” 25.
\textsuperscript{40} Nochlin, “No Great Women Artists?” 43.
practice of discounting female artists remained. As Griselda Pollock points out, in the art historical canon, the artists heralded as the creators of modern art are all men.\textsuperscript{41} Like Nochlin, Pollock emphasizes that this is not due to a lack of female artists, it is instead the result of social and gender biases that privilege the narrative of the male artist.\textsuperscript{42} This narrative that Pollock highlights in the canon of modern art as a whole, is exemplified in the Symbolist visual art movement. The recognized figureheads of Symbolist art are men like Stéphane Mallarmé, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Women’s role in Symbolist visual art was frequently relegated to that of muse; women were the inspiration for the male creators, not the creators themselves. Male Symbolist artists depicted their wives, lovers, models and friends in their works. The one female Symbolist artist, Jeanne Jacquemin, was objectified by male critics as a muse to male artists and to herself. They said she depicted a version of herself in her female figures, and then described her figures in a highly sexually suggestive manner.\textsuperscript{43} Jacquemin eventually became a muse for the critic Jean Lorrain, who saw her as a quintessential femme fatale - a significant Symbolist trope.\textsuperscript{44} If Jacquemin’s works are largely self-portrait, however, they offer a different interpretation of the female form and the female muse than that described by the male artist or critic.

Jacquemin is included at the beginning of this chapter not only to reinsert a female artist into the Symbolist movement specifically, and the nascence of modern art in general, but to also provide a counterpoint to the artworks under analysis later in this work that were all create by

\textsuperscript{41} Pollock, 245.
\textsuperscript{42} Pollock, 247.
\textsuperscript{43} Curtis, 32.
\textsuperscript{44} Curtis, 31-32.
male Symbolist artists. Jacquemin’s story and legacy is shaped by the social dynamics surrounding gender that have plagued art production as well as the telling of art history. For one, Jeanne Jacquemin personifies Pollock’s argument that women’s roles in the beginning of modern art have been erased. She was likely trained in an artist’s studio and became a prominent artist in the Symbolist visual art movement at the end of the nineteenth century in France; Jacquemin exhibited up to 40 pastel works at various Symbolist exhibits in the 1890s. The critic Rémy de Gourmont claimed her work “produces something that is full of the new” and equals the quality of her art to that of Moreau and Redon. So, she was clearly not an unknown, and while she was not universally praised, her artworks made an impact. Nonetheless, of her many pastels, only a few have survived, and she is rarely mentioned alongside Moreau and Redon today. While the pastel medium is more fragile than say, oil paintings on canvas, in terms of the history of Symbolist art, Jacquemin’s voice has been notably silenced.

A whole research project could be devoted to Jacquemin’s impact on Symbolism and modern art. In the context of the analysis of clothing in Symbolist art, does an overview of (what remains) of Jacquemin’s artworks tells us something different than the work of male artists? A distinctly ‘feminine’ quality does not link the works of female artists—it would be simplistic to think this would be the case. However, the works of Jacquemin, and other female artists are painted from “gender-specific conditions” that are worth considering. At first glance, Jacquemin’s work fits the more well-known collection of Symbolist artworks by male artists.

45 Curtis, 27.
46 Curtis, 29.
47 Nochlin, “No Great Women Artists?” 3.
48 Pollock, 246.
Jacquemin’s pastel *Rêverie* (Fig. 1), for example, depicts a pensive female figure sitting in nature, and this same type of portrait reappears in many more of her works. Similar dreamlike images of female bodies also appear in works by her male contemporaries. Additionally, Jacquemin’s 1898 lithograph, *Saint-Georges* (see Fig. 14), presents an androgynous portrait of St. George in armour that fits with the appearance of androgynous knights in Symbolist visual art that I will discuss in a later section. Therefore, on the surface there is nothing in Jacquemin’s surviving artworks that indicates a distinct female perspective.

However, what is notable about the content of Jacquemin’s work is that it lacks representations of female nudes. As mentioned above, learning to draw from a nude model was inaccessible to women until almost the end of the nineteenth century. This fact needs to be taken into consideration when pondering why all of the female figures in Jacquemin’s surviving artworks are adorned or clothed in some way while most of her male counterparts have representations of nude women as part of their oeuvre. The lack of nude forms in Jacquemin’s collection of works reflects her position as a female artist in nineteenth-century France. Also of note, the (one) article I found on Jeanne Jacquemin is the source that described in most detail the clothes in the Symbolist works as Curtis specifically addresses the embroidered sleeve, gown, and flower crown the figure wears in *Rêverie*.\(^{49}\) None of the other articles, books, or chapters read about Symbolist artworks go into such detail over clothing, nor, it should be stated, do they discuss a female Symbolist artist. The significance of this observation is certainly debatable, but it is worth questioning how the connection between women and clothing influences the discourse surrounding art and culture.

\(^{49}\) Curtis, 27.
In the nineteenth century female artists like Jeanne Jacquemin were belittled while they were active creative producers by the male artists and critic in their field. They were also forgotten as members of the art historical canon. This continued to be the case for female artists into the twentieth century, when women were still expected to stay in a domestic domain, removed from the male public sphere. Only in feminist art movements of the 1960s and 1970s is there a push for long forgotten female artists of old to be celebrated. The reinsertion of female artists into the history of art remains an ongoing process. The question of gender in Symbolist art therefore cannot be considered only through how femininity is represented in Symbolist art; it must also consider how gender produces Symbolist art and the images therein.
The Female Nude: Hair, Care and Bare

The female nude is a recurring motif in Symbolist works by many of its main male artists. Before entering a more in-depth discussion of clothing and the female form in Symbolist art, I would first like to further explore the lack of clothing on female bodies.

The study of art history ascribes importance to the nude or the naked figure, and argues it connotes a specific meaning in a specific cultural context. The terms the nude and the naked are used here because the distinction between the two has been debated. Kenneth Clark argues the naked body is the material reality, literally the body deprived of clothes; the nude body on the other hand is the ideal body—a body that has been formed by its position as a work of art.\textsuperscript{50} John Berger redefines Clark’s dichotomy between the naked and the nude. Berger proposes that the nude is constrained by pictorial conventions, but he frames the naked body as a medium through which one can be oneself.\textsuperscript{51} Berger’s thoughts on the naked and the nude in art also align with Anne Hollander’s, as Berger argues the nude is represented according to social conventions and aesthetic systems of representation.\textsuperscript{52} What persists in both Clark and Berger’s definitions of the naked and the nude is the notion that the naked body is a sort of immutable physical state that is released from social and cultural conventions due to its biological or scientific permanent existence. The meaning of the nude body, conversely, is a changeable guise that is informed by the socio-cultural context in which it is found. The nude body is of interest to this study of gender in Symbolist art because the nude female body in art is already idealized.

\textsuperscript{50} Kenneth Clark, \textit{The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art} (London: John Murray, 1956), 1.
\textsuperscript{51} John Berger, \textit{Ways of Seeing} (Penguin UK, 2008), 54.
\textsuperscript{52} Berger, 52-59.
In social contexts, the human body is dressed, it is clothed, it is fashioned in a certain way that is acceptable to the situation and thus the body is enrobed—both literally and symbolically—in meaning. The idea that the fashioned body connotes meaning is fundamental to fashion studies. Furthermore, the fact that a body is not clothed does not mean it is not adorned, embellished or accessorized following social conventions. The way the nude body is both presented and seen is influenced by a culture’s social conventions surrounding the dressed body. Art plays a key role in the presentation of the nude since an unclothed body is not acceptably presented in most societies in everyday public life, and certainly not in the Western context. So, the public depiction and consumption of a denuded form occurs through visual art, photography, video and sculpture, and it is through these mediums that the nude body gives socially specific meanings. As Ann Hollander argues, “art proves that nakedness is not universally experienced and perceived any more than clothes are. At any time, the unadorned self has more kinship with its own usual dressed aspect than it has with any underside human selves in other times and other places.” Following fashion theories, therefore, the nude body in art should be considered comparably to the clothed body and is of interest to this study because the nude body in art reflects society and culture just like the fashioned body.

Both the male and female nude is persistent throughout Western art history, but the female nude in particular is a significant image in the history of art. While masculinity and thus the male body signifies culture, rationality, order and civilization, the female body has signified

53 Entwistle, 6-7.
54 Entwistle, 6-7.
55 see Anne Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes
56 Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes, xiii.
the opposite: nature, physicality and sensuality. This dichotomy places femininity inferiorly, and as a threat to stable masculinity. From a feminist point of view, the female nude has been portrayed in art as a means of containing and controlling the sexuality and unruliness of the female form. The defined boundaries of the female nude that Western art dictates can be challenged through representations of female nudes that differ in age, race, ability, size, etc. from the young, shapely, white, pure image of femininity that is often represented. The female nude in Symbolist art will be looked at due to this project’s focus on representations of fashioned femininity.

In terms of the female nude in Symbolist visual art, I would like to explore the recurring scene of a group of nude women bathing and grooming. The nude bather is a common icon in modern artworks and can be found in paintings by Degas and Cézanne. In Symbolist artworks, the tradition of the female nude in art is not challenged, instead the association between femininity and the body or caring for appearances is reinforced. Symbolist depictions of the female nude thus mythologize notions of the feminine fashioning of the body. The images of nude women bathing are seen in artworks by two Symbolist artists: Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Émile Bernard (Figs. 2-5). In *Young Girls by the Sea* (Fig. 2), there are three women in degrees of undress. The cloth that covers around the bottom half of the women’s bodies is a swathe of fabric that has been wrapped around their waists like a towel. The women all also have very long hair that is being stroked or brushed by the two central figures. Puvis de Chavannes’ other work, *La Toilette* (Fig. 3), presents a nude female figure with extremely long hair whose

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58 Nead, 2-6.
59 Nead, 33. Entwistle, 8.
legs are similarly draped in a large expanse of material. Her hair is being brushed out by the female attendant behind who is wearing an off the shoulder, low-cut dress of an otherwise indistinct shape and style. Bernard’s After the Bath, Nymphs (Fig. 4), again depicts three nude women in nature lounging amongst one another. They are surrounded by discarded pieces of cloth. These women are not actively caring for their hair, which is tied back, but the arm position of the woman in the foreground echoes the hand placed on the head by the woman in the foreground in Young Girls by the Sea. Finally, in Bathers (Fig. 5), the nude female bodies are almost all standing. These women have less defined forms; their bodies are curvier, and are shaped like round peaches. Two of them are brushing, or caressing their long hair, and two other women are carrying towel-like pieces of clothing material.

When considered in terms of the fashioning of the female body, these works emphasize the connection between femininity and the body, and, more specifically, femininity and superficial bodily maintenance. The Western woman has been characterized as having a preoccupation with beauty, adornment and clothing.60 In fact, the connection between the changeable fashioned body and femininity solidifies at the advent of modernity.61 This stereotype has been negatively framed as a natural feminine weakness and labels women as narcissistic and superficial.62 Aligning femininity with the desire for beautiful material objects helps construct women as beautiful objects themselves that can be consumed by a male gaze.63 We see this occurring in these Symbolist artworks depicting nude women. The viewer is allowed to

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63 Craik, 45.
intimately see these moments of self-care. The women also allow themselves to be seen as they bathe publicly outdoors where they are free to be seen, and have thrown aside or pushed down their clothes to expose their bodies. Women’s hair is a central part of these paintings, and in all cases it is either pinned back or extraordinarily long and in the process of being tamed. These instances of haircare indicate either controlled hair or hair that needs attention due to its abundance. So, the stereotype of feminine self-absorption with beauty and the body is shown through the emphasis in these artworks of female haircare. Additionally, hair and skin are abject parts of the body. According to Julia Kristeva, the abject is “something that signifies an unstable boundary between the inside and outside of the body” and consequently is unnerving since it represents a lack of order and regulation.64 The abject is in-between, and it is thus ambiguous. Symbolists deliberately used ambiguous imagery, as will be shown in the forthcoming section on androgyny. The vast amount of hair and skin in Symbolist images of the female nude is an instance of ambiguity in Symbolist synthesis that places the tangible—in this case hair and skin—alongside the intangibility of inner human anatomy. Lastly, in the Western tradition of art, as mentioned above, the female nude has been constrained and framed to present a specific image of femininity. And, this representation of women has been fuelled by a fear of the unconfined female body.65 Not only is the female hair under control in Puvis de Chavannes’ and Bernard’s paintings, but so too is the body as a whole. The four deceptions of the female nude are remarkably similar in style, and they do not directly challenge the established category of the female nude in the history of Western art. All four artworks show white, young, attractive, 

65 Tseëlon, 167.
healthy bodies. Namely, they all depict bodies that have been painted before in art history and fit the established definition of female physicality that is allowed to be exhibited.

Finally, the female nudes in Symbolist art do not link modernity to the representation of modern fashions. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, instances of the female nude in painting diminished in favour of the depiction of the fashionably dressed woman. The nude woman still signified the physical body and the natural, and in the nineteenth century there was a shift away from that toward the artificial as technology, industry and manufacturing grew in importance. The female nude, in this context, was seen as antiquarian, and had no place in modern culture. Baudelaire argued in 1863 that the clothed body reflected modernity because it indicates creativity and imagination, and the art critic Théophile Gautier heralded the clothed above the nude; fashion was equated with the excitement of modernity, the nude with stale tradition. The privileging of the clothed body in art above the nude body in art is seen in Impressionist works wherein an interest in the presentation of the public figure was a key inspiration.

Significantly, despite being old-fashioned, the nude appears frequently in Symbolist art. As a modern art movement, why did Symbolism use the outdated figure of the female nude so frequently? Also, if the nude body conveys equal meaning in art as the clothed body, why are bodies clothed in Symbolist art? To answer these questions, I refer back to Symbolist ideology and its key concepts. Symbolism’s defiance of modern practices and preference for older subject matter is what made it avant-garde, and, ironically, ahead of its time, since Symbolism’s goal

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66 Lilley, 60.
67 Lilley, 62
68 Lilley, 60-62.
was to create an ideal society.  

By using the démodé female nude in visual art, Symbolists employed a synthesis of ideas of old and with their ideas of the new. In the Symbolist depictions of women bathing, the interior and exterior body is ambiguously defined, thus the mystery of what lies below skin is synthesized with the reality of what lies above. The nude female figure is a symbol that corresponds to the Symbolist idea of contained female beauty practices. I propose the nude female was used so often in Symbolist art because it aptly symbolized a natural, innocent, and less maintained feminine identity that opposed the artificial modern woman that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. I have a more tentative answer as to why bodies are clothed in Symbolist art if nude bodies convey equal meaning. Symbolist visual art does not have coherent stylistic features. The movement heavily promoted a personal idea that reflected universal ideals and Symbolist creations were consequently individualistic in nature. Some Symbolist communicated feminine ideals through the nude figure in artworks, and some chose to communicate the same ideals through the clothed.

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69 Williams, 48.

70 Hirsh, 96.
Clothed Femininity: The *Femme Fatale* and the Natural Woman in Symbolist Art

Female figures in Symbolist artworks are frequently clothed. It is perhaps easiest—as I have done thus far—to contextualize female dress in Symbolist art through what it is not. The better known, more popular modern art movement in the second half of nineteenth century France, Impressionism, generally privileged depicting female figures in urban spaces and dressed in contemporary fashions. Symbolist artists meanwhile looked to art, fashion, culture, and stories beyond their contemporary environment for inspiration when clothing the female bodies of their art; they nonetheless reflect the modern state of culture and society in their paintings. As Anne Hollander argues, artists use clothing in art as “an expressive device and [clothing] represents a formal decision with as much importance as…the faces and the setting.” By investigating two themes of clothed femininity that appear throughout Symbolist art, this section will explore how Symbolist depictions of the female form in visual art still enforce a distinctly modern and French feminine ideal through they clothes the women are shown to wear.

The first theme of clothed femininity in Symbolist art that will be explored in this project is the *femme fatale*. The femme fatale is a feminine trope that characterizes the female as a dangerous, mysterious, and seductive woman that poses a threat to men who are susceptible to being harmed by her charm. Such women exist in religious and mythological histories and figures like Eve, Pandora, Lilith and Delilah are precursors to the archetypal femme fatale familiar in visual culture, literature, music, and theatre to this day. The femme fatale in Symbolist

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71 Again, see exhibition catalogue for *Impression, Fashion and Modernity*, ed. Gloria Groom.
72 Entwistle, 8.
art appears as a nude subject in the form of Eve, such as in Henri Cros’ *Eve and the Snake at the Tree of Knowledge* (Fig. 6) and Odilon Redon’s *Eve* (Fig. 7). Once more with Eve, a female nude appears in Symbolist art where a modicum of clothing may otherwise be placed. These images connect the theme of the nude in Symbolist art to that of the femme fatale, which deserves further attention than this project can give. However, the intersection of clothing and the femme fatale in Symbolist art provides an added dimension to the representation of femininity in fin-de-siècle France.

Visual culture in France at the end of the nineteenth century was full of femme fatale imagery; in fact, the modern woman earned the nickname of the ‘new Eve.’ The leading Symbolist artist Gustave Moreau frequently depicted historic femme fatales in his paintings. An 1876 painting by Moreau depicts Salomé dancing before Herod, and he painted Samson and Delilah in 1882 (Figs. 8, 9). Salomé and Delilah are both biblical figures who cause the downfall of great men. Salomé danced before King Herod, who consequently granted her wish of the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Delilah for her part sapped Samson of his great strength by cutting off his hair. Both women use their sensuality to seduce men and cause their downfall. Moreau is not the first artist to paint Salomé and Delilah. Salomé as been painted countless times since the early modern period of art in the 15th century, by artists such as Cranach the Elder. Delilah also figures prominent in art history, and was painted by the likes of Rubens and Rembrandt in the 17th century. However, the clothing in Moreau’s artworks reinforce concerns specifically surrounding the depiction of the femme fatale in nineteenth century France.

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74 Steele, “*Femme Fatale,*” 319, 323.
In Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, a new, more modern woman became the face of fashionability and femininity. However, this new woman provoked male anxieties surrounding female sexuality. The new modern and fashionable woman posed a dangerous threat as mass-produced fashion eliminated the visual clues clothing holds that helped distinguish between women of high-society and lower class women like courtesans and actresses who were more sexually dangerous. Georg Simmel theorizes that modern fashion is the great social equalizer because groups in lower social classes are able to imitate the dress of the upper classes. He further proposes that change occurs in fashion styles when upper classes reject an old style in order to differentiate themselves from those beneath them on the social hierarchy, and fashion is thus also a marker of individual difference. Following Simmel, I posit that Symbolist artists depicted women in anti-modern clothing to distance femininity from the homogeneity of nineteenth-century fashions. In so doing, the clothing on female bodies in Symbolist art reflect anxieties surrounding femininity in the nineteenth-century. As Valerie Steele notes, in France, “[b]ehind the image of the femme fatale, the irresistibly attractive woman who leads men to destruction, lurked the fashionable Parisienne.” Gustave Moreau’s Symbolist paintings of Salomé and Delilah are therefore fitting subject matter when one considers the socio-cultural context in which they emerged.

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76 Steele, “Femme Fatale,” 318-319.
78 Simmel, 543.
79 Steele, “Femme Fatale,” 316.
So how does the clothing worn by Salomé and Delilah in Moreau’s artworks reinforce the anxieties surrounding the dangerous sensuality of the femme fatale? In nineteenth-century France, the non-Western world was viewed as a fantastical, almost utopian place. Baudelaire, for instance, viewed the Near East as an antithesis to modernity that could fix the problems of modern France. Some painters in the first half of the nineteenth century couched romantic depictions of the East in realist terms, while others emphasized the Western man’s power over the East in their artworks. Other artists, Nochlin argues, enforced the “contemporary Frenchmen’s power over women, a power controlled and mediated by the erotic [Other].” Orientalist painting in the latter half of the nineteenth century became less popular as art moved toward Realist depictions of everyday and familiar life. As stated, Symbolist artists were against the realist trend their contemporaries favoured, and the dress of Salomé and Delilah connects the works more readily to works of the earlier part of the century as Non-Western clothing is worn by both Salomé and Delilah. Resultantly, not only do the women’s stories characterize them as threateningly sexual femme fatales who use their charms at the expense of men, but their clothing enforces that they are exotic, alluring, and thusly dangerous.

As a not altogether unrelated aside, it is interesting to note that after the Symbolist art movement, in the early decades of the twentieth-century, Orientalism became integral to women’s fashion and was used by feminists at the time as a tool to construct a modern and

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82 Nochlin, The Politics of Vision, 42.
83 Benjamin, 34.
political identity. The use of Orientalist dress as a tool to moderate non-Western femininity cannot be discounted and as fashion is globalized is still significant today.

The women in Moreau’s two images are sumptuously dressed. Salomé is wrapped in layers of gauzy sheathes of fabric, she is wearing a head scarf and she has bangles on her wrists. Delilah is similarly dressed in a rich blue skirt and white top with jewelry around her waist, up her arms, and atop her head. In the painting of Salomé, she is dances the dance of the seven veils, which salaciously alludes to the removal of her many layers of clothing. Salomé clothing therefore directly alludes to female sexuality. The extensive attention bodily adornment and beauty by both Salomé and Delilah is linked to femininity. The negative association between femininity and fashion effectively paints women as vain and immorally superficial, which works to position women as harmless dolls that need to be dressed up. The relationship between fashion and femininity was increasingly established at the end of the nineteenth century, in part as a mollifying response to the femme fatale. Consequently, depictions of frivolously dressed dangerous women, like Moreau’s of Salomé and Delilah, helped neutralize the perceived danger of female seduction. To be fair, the other figures in both paintings with Salomé and Delilah respectively are also elaborately dressed and adorned in flowing fabrics and bright jewels, however the prominence of the figures of Salomé and Delilah in the images forces them to be the first encounter the viewer has with fashionable abundance and the message is thus sent that Salomé and Delilah cannot be terrifyingly threatening when so lavishly dressed.

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85 Tseëlon, 166.
86 Steele, “Femme Fatale,” 322.
87 Steele, “Femme Fatale,” 319-322.
Oriental and opulent clothing show while femme fatale imagery in Symbolist art do not portray women in contemporary clothing, the clothing worn still reflects contemporary notions about femininity. This is also the case in a second theme of clothed femininity apparent in Symbolist art: women in nature. Many Symbolist artworks depict women placed in natural settings in simple dress. For example, take Pierre Puvis de Chavannes’ *Hope* (Fig. 10), and Maurice Denis’ *The Ladder in the Foliage* (Fig. 12). In the nineteenth century, as the city became the site of activity, beauty became less connected to nature, which explained trends in art like the decreased use of the female nude at the time. Symbolist artists viewed nature as a key conduit of the imagination; replete with symbolic imagery, and as a material reality not created by humans, it afforded a means of mediating a connection to that which lies beyond physical reality. Therefore, it is of note that Symbolist artists defied trends and repeatedly portrayed women in natural settings, for it places women in an environment they viewed to be imbued with shared human consciousness. Women placed in nature in Symbolist art can consequently communicate Symbolist ideas about womanhood. The clothing worn by women in nature helps further convey these ideas.

Puvis de Chavannes’ *Hope* portrays a solitary female figure sitting on a stone wall in the foreground of the image. At her feet, flowers bloom, and behind her lies a landscape of fields and stone. The woman wears a simple, empire-waist, short-sleeved white dress, her hair is pinned back and her feet are bare. As an allegory of *Hope*, Puvis de Chavannes’ painting is untraditional insofar that the figure is not dressed either in drapery or peasant clothing, and it garnered a

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88 Wilson, 130.
89 Carluccio, xii.
negative reaction from the Paris Salon for this very reason.\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Hope} was painted after the siege of Paris and the loss of the Franco-Prussian War. It consequently presents a more sombre, passive image of hope than was painted beforehand.\textsuperscript{91} The white dress accentuates the figure’s thinness and unreality, and points to a French future that has been shaken by replacing an image of the French female aggressor that has been lost.\textsuperscript{92} There is another, smaller painting by Puvis de Chavannes also title \textit{Hope} that was created around the same time as the larger version (Fig. 11). This piece portrays the same allegory of Hope using the same woman, but in this image she is nude. The allegorical female nude is intriguing in this case, the female body is not superficially maintained, nor is it being contained through said maintenance. Instead, the figure is de-eroticized because she is an allegory; she is an abstract idea, not a real woman, and is therefore untouchable.\textsuperscript{93} The nude woman in Chavannes’ \textit{Hope}, is an externalized idea, and thus conceptually inline with the Symbolist notion that art reflects an intellectual state.\textsuperscript{94} Both hope and the female body in this painting are the concept being portrayed. To return back to the clothed female body, the white chemise dress in this clothed \textit{Hope} painting marks a shift in French femininity that is established again in Denis’ painting twenty years later. Denis’ \textit{The Ladder in the Foliage} portrays four women standing on a ladder in front of a wall of green leaves. The women are yellowed, in contrast to the green background, but, like the woman in

\textsuperscript{91} de Young, 133.
\textsuperscript{92} de Young, 133-134.
\textsuperscript{93} Elise Lawton Smith, \textit{Evelyn Pickering de Morgan and the Allegorical Body} (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 111.
\textsuperscript{94} Hirsh, 96-97.
Hope, they too wear empire-waisted, short-sleeved white gowns. While their feet are covered by the skirts of their dresses, their hair is similarly pulled back into buns.

The empire-waisted, white gowns the women in Puvis de Chavannes’ and Denis’ paintings wear recall the white dresses worn in the Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century to which Symbolism is related. Such simple gowns in Aestheticism signify pastoralism and anti-modernism. The high-waisted, white gowns also reference neoclassical dress of the eighteenth-century. Idealized neoclassical fashion was used in studio portraiture to signify the wearer’s natural beauty, and by the 1780s, classical white dress was an established artistic practice.95 Take Angelica Kauffman’s Self-Portrait as the Muse of Painting (Fig. 13) as an example of this type of portraiture and there are clear parallels with the subject, dress, posture, and even landscaped background of Puvis de Chavannes’ Hope. By the nineteenth century, it was a known artistic practice that a simple white dress that shows women in a certain state of undress, aligns the wearer with “‘nature and truth’ rather than worldly artifice.”96 Symbolists rejected artificiality and materiality, so it is sensical that they painted women in natural environments in simple white, neoclassical fashioned gowns in order to signify a pure, greater truth. This clean, virginal aspect of women is emphasized by the clothing's allusions to Aestheticism and neoclassicism. Neoclassical dress in eighteenth-century art also regulated the eroticism of the female form because it encased the body in a dress that pointed to the moral and pure.97 In Symbolist artworks, the white dress worn by a woman in nature could also therefore be a response to the increased male anxiety surrounding the sexuality of the new woman at the end

95 de Young, 11, 19.
96 de Young, 14.
97 de Young, 29.
of the nineteenth century. In *Hope* and *The Ladder in the Foliage*, therefore, women are consciously dressed in white in order to purify and desexualize the female body.

Like depictions of the female nude in Symbolist art, the clothed female body also uses the Symbolist notions of correspondences and synthesis to communicate a feminine ideal. The image of the femme fatale in Symbolist art uses clothing as a symbol that corresponds to modern ideas of excessive female adornment. The clothing Salomé and Delilah wear also synthesizes Western stories with non-Western dress in order to eroticize feminine identity. With respect to the Symbolist representation of clothed women in nature, the clothing functions as a symbol that corresponds to the idea virginal, pure and unadulterated femininity. Again, the correspondences and synthesis of clothing worn by women in Symbolist art helps delineate the Symbolist feminist ideal.
The Androgyne: A Symbolist State of Wholeness

Androgyny is approached from multiple disciplines as it pertains to philosophy, religion, sociology, biology, literature, the visual arts and fashion. The last two disciplines on this list will inform this final section’s analysis of the androgyne in Symbolist visual art as it connects to representations of gender and femininity in the art movement.

In fashion, the androgyne is traditionally associated with the cross-dresser: a woman who dresses as a man, or a man who dresses as a woman.98 The androgyne goes further than simply borrowing clothing styles from the opposite gender and actually dresses to the extent that gender is indiscernible.99 To a certain extent, the androgyne defiantly resists the social construction of gender, however, the notion of an androgynous figures still relies on the male/female gender binary. Peter Ackroyd suggests that fear of the “chaos of androgyny” actually solidifies gender distinctions, for although the androgynous figure was once sacred, that is no longer the case.100

It is therefore unsurprising that androgyny was an appealing concept for Symbolist artists to explore. The chaos of androgyny gave Symbolist artists room to play with its mysterious ambiguity. The Symbolist inspiration for this idealized androgyne hails from various nineteenth-century thinkers. As a unified figure, Baudelaire declares the androgyne as the perfect being.101 Most significantly however, Joséphin Péladan—who held Symbolist salons and exhibitions—held the view that androgyny was the ideal unification of opposites.102 To Péladan, the androgyne

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98 Wilson, 118-122.
99 Wilson, 118-122.
100 Wilson, 121-122.
102 Lahelma, 33.
was not just representative of ideal synthesis, it embodied the Ideal as he believed “the androgyne transports us beyond time and place, beyond the passions, into the realm of the Archetypes, the highest reaches of our thoughts.” Symbolist artists were immensely interested in the notion that through unification, two opposing ideas could come together to have greater meaning as a whole. The androgyne thus aligns with the Symbolist trope of synthesis, as it is itself the synthesis of binary concepts. Therefore, as a symbol, the androgyne in Symbolist visual art signifies perfected synthesis and fulfils the Symbolist desire to physically represent a synthesized subject. What is more, the androgyne was able to symbolize the mysterious world of the mind which Symbolists attempted to portray in material form. As a figure of ambiguous gender, the androgyne hints at, and is thus further able to synthesize the material and immaterial.

The androgyne does not only symbolize the unified ideal and the metaphysical world in Symbolist visual art. In some instances, the androgynous figure is a defence against the threat of femininity. For example, in Gustave Moreau’s *Samson and Delilah* (see Fig. 9), the androgyny of both depicted figures confounds the viewer’s ability to identify Delilah—the female castrator of Samson’s masculine prowess—based on gender cues alone. In other cases, the androgyne references the creative producer whose artistic ability transcends the restrictions resultant of gender binaries. In the androgyne, masculinity and femininity merge, but elsewhere in

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103 Cole, 331.
104 Cole, 330.
105 Cole, 327.
106 Singletary, 305.
107 Singletary, 305.
Symbolist art other opposing notions, such as humans and animals in the form of a Sphinx, are similarly unified in symbolic imagery.

There are two intersecting androgynous figures in Symbolist visual art that I would like to specifically discuss. The first is the androgynous knight; the second is the androgynous angel. While a knight conjures masculine connotations, the knight in Symbolist art has been feminized by a variety of Symbolist artists to create an image of balanced androgyne. Jeanne Jacquemin herself provides an androgynous take on St. George (Fig. 14). Odilon Redon, for his part, has a charcoal drawing of an almost completely covered androgynous figure in Armour (Fig. 15). The androgynous knight can additionally be found in Ferdinand Knopff’s sketch for a frontispiece (Fig. 16), as well as his Avec Verhaeren, Une Ange (Fig. 17), and Guirand de Scevola’s The King’s Daughter (Fig. 18). These five images present various types of androgynous figures in a variety of artistic mediums.

Jacquemin’s work’s title, Saint-Georges, denotes this painting is a portrait of the knight Saint George, whose story is imbued with traditionally masculine characteristics of courage, intelligence, and prowess; he slays a dragon to save a village and the life of a young princess. Jacquemin’s depiction of the saint, however, presents the knight as being “sweet as a virgin but strong as a lion,” and in so doing balances feminine purity with male ferocity.108 This painting was one of the many works by Jacquemin that was considered to be a self-portrait of the female artist, which explains the figure’s delicate facial features.109 In Jacquemin’s piece, Saint George’s shoulder length waved hair is covered by a metal helmet, on top of which hangs a golden halo.

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108 Curtis, 28.
109 Curtis, 28.
that signifies the subject’s sainthood. Saint George’s torso is suited in medieval armour, complete with shoulder pauldrons and a bejewelled collar design. The feminine facial features of Saint George in Jacquemin’s portrait are balanced through the knightly armour that clothe the figure and reference the manly mythology that surrounds the famous historical character.

Redon’s figure is unique in this group as it depicts the side profile of a figure whose face and torso is completely clothed in black except for their eyes and nose. There is a halo of needles, similar to porcupine quills projecting out from the helmet, tight to the figure’s skull. The Metropolitan Museum of art describes this drawing as an image of a helmeted woman.\textsuperscript{110} The only visible features of the woman’s body are her eyes. All other skin—her face, mouth, nose, neck, and shoulders—as well as her hair are covered by the tight black fabric. This female figure is thus rendered mute by her masculine clothing.\textsuperscript{111} This figure’s dress significantly contributes to the ideal synthesis between masculinity and femininity occurring in this drawing, for it is the male clothing that neutralizes the body’s feminine physicality. As discussed above with respect to the femme fatale and women in nature, Symbolist artists attempted to depict a docile version of the feminine ideal.

Next, Knopff’s sketch for a frontispiece is similar to Jacquemin’s painting as it pairs an armoured body with a feminized visage. The facial features in this drawing are in fact modelled after Knopff’s sister, and this is not the only depiction by Knopff of androgynous armoured bodies.\textsuperscript{112} This is the only full-length image in the quartet named here, and the figure’s body is

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{111} “Armour,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
\end{footnotes}
covered by a metal collar and breast plate partnered with a floor length skirt. The person pictured also has a thin, wiry crown, just barely visible across their forehead. This image is replete with gendered contradictions. Masculine armour accentuates a feminine waist and is also worn with a pleated fabric skirt. The facial features are soft and feminine, but the curled hair is cropped short. Finally, a long sword stands plunged into the earth before the figure, yet in their left hand they grasp a floral arrangement. The sword is phallic in shape, while the bunch of flowers recalls a more yonic, feminine form. Therefore, the figure in Knopff’s image balances both the male and female gender in body, accessory, and dress.

The second androgynous, knightly artwork by Ferdinand Knopff is *Avec Verhaeren, Un Ange*. In this black and white drawing, an armoured angel is positioned with their hand on the head of a sphinx. The angel and the sphinx both have a spectral quality as they glimmer against the starry nighttime background. The unification of opposites in this image is aplenty. The vertical line of the angel is physically connected through the angel’s touch to the horizontal sphinx.\(^{113}\) The sphinx itself is the unification of woman and wild beast. Finally, the angel is represented as an androgynous spirit. The noun ‘ange’ in French is masculine, which can be seen in the artwork’s title (‘un’ not ‘une’ ange); from the first therefore the angel is gendered male. Like Knopff’s frontispiece sketch however, this angel wears medieval armour atop an ankle-length skirt. A medieval knight’s helmet tops the angel’s head and covers their hair; just as in Redon’s painting, the helmet disguised the length of the figure’s hair and thus obscures a bodily feature that commonly signifies a male or female gender. Furthermore, like the armoured figures

\(^{113}\) Cole, 327.
already mentioned above, armour connotes masculinity but it also stiffens and flattens the body, thus effectively hiding gender-specific bodily features.

Lastly, Scevola’s image presents the most feminized figure of the group. For one, the painting is entitled *The King’s Daughter*, and so is meant to depict a female subject. The figure has long blond hair with a prominent fringe that indicates femininity, and although the portrait stops mid-chest there is the curve of a breast at the base of the painting, which contrasts the flattened chest visible in the artworks described above. However, the clothing complicates the initial supposed feminine gender. The figure is not solely wearing armour. There is a steel collar around the figure’s neck, but the rest of the torso is wearing a heavy black and red dress that matches an embroidered cap atop the sheet of blond hair. Once more, the seeming femininity of the figure is neutralized through knightly garments.

The androgynous figures that appear in Symbolist art are not radical by themselves. The androgyne is represented at multiple points throughout art history. The androgynous angels in Renaissance art are popular artistic imagery to this day, and another of the Symbolists’ contemporaries, the Pre-Raphaelites, explored androgyny in art as well. At the end of the nineteenth century the androgynous motif was actually a significant artistic trend. The five Symbolist artworks discussed above reference religion, mythology, and art history. Religion and mythology is referenced through subject matter and the multiple haloes throughout the works. The medieval armour suggests romantic tales of heroism and courtly love that were told in collections such as the *Lais of Marie de France*. The idea of a feminine knight even recalls Joan of Arc, a medieval French heroine and saint. Knopff references the Symbolist art movement in

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his nod to Émile Verhaeren, a Symbolist art critic and poet. In the same artwork, Knopff also alludes to the androgynous angel archetype of Renaissance art. Finally, many of the images discussed portray the profile of the subject in a three-quarter length portrait. This stages the imagined androgynous figures in the tradition of portraits of real people painted throughout art history. The androgyne is not a figure unique to Symbolist art and in Symbolist art the androgyne alludes to a variety of historical and contemporary points of reference. Yet, Symbolism distinctly explores how androgynous clothing—like knightly armour—corresponds to a larger cultural mythology that has surrounded androgyny for centuries. The titles of Symbolist artworks combine with the pieces’ contents to stimulate the viewer’s imagination and point the viewer toward a greater truth about androgyny and gender. The androgynous knight thus not only synthesizes gender and the metaphysical with the physical, it also unites a bounty of cultural narratives into one complete subject.

In terms of fashion, dress has always been linked to representations of gendered identity and fashion styles helps define gender boundaries.\textsuperscript{115} However, how gender is defined through dress depends on the social context in which clothing is worn.\textsuperscript{116} At the end of the nineteenth century, appearance and clothing become firmly linked to feminine identity. Simultaneously, urbanization and industrialization are linked to masculinity. The city—itself a symbol of modernity—was both feminine in its allure, and masculine in its bleak power.\textsuperscript{117} While fashions were increasingly gendered, gender lines were also being blurred. Universally accessible female fashions were also obliterating the class lines and specific female identities were more difficult to

\textsuperscript{115} Entwistle, 66.
\textsuperscript{116} Entwistle, 66.
\textsuperscript{117} Wilson, 128.
discern. Along these lines, social idealists of the nineteenth century viewed the androgyne as the goal of society.\textsuperscript{118} The androgyne embodied equality between men and women, and the erasure of social hierarchies for progressive nineteenth-century thinkers.\textsuperscript{119} Therefore, the androgyne reflects the blurred lines found in French culture during the Symbolist movement, and the androgynous knight smoothly blends feminine features with masculine armour, and is forward-thinking symbol of ideal synthesis.

\textsuperscript{118} Cole, 330.

\textsuperscript{119} Cole, 330.
Conclusion

The role of female artists in the production of Symbolist art, the bathing female nude, the femme fatale, portrayals of women in nature and the knighted or angelic androgyne have been investigated in the previous pages with respect to how clothing included in Symbolist imagery of these figures helps reinforce ideas surrounding gender, and specifically feminine, identity held by male artists in fin-de-siècle France. Fashion is a means of constructing identities. According to Craik, the body is the site upon which “feminine cultural ideals can be literally manufactured.”

The feminine identity represented in visual art is not as self-constructed as it is when a woman dresses herself for the day. Yet, in art, clothing is still a tool used to communicate cultural ideals that surround feminine identity. Symbolism as a whole attempted to address an intangible psyche that exists in an ephemeral realm accessible through human imagination. This psyche lay in the imagination of mostly male Symbolist artists. Symbolism’s own doctrine therefore suggests visual representations of femininity in its artworks would reflect male-held feminine ideals in the nineteenth century.

How does clothing in Symbolist art reflect the feminine ideal at the end of the nineteenth century in France? The definition of femininity in this period was changing drastically but also remained stagnant and largely was mediated through the vision of a male artist. Female Symbolist artists were still relegated to the male artist’s gaze as muses, and they did not necessarily offer a contrasting female gaze themselves. This is understandable because in the nineteenth century women who wished to become cultural producers did so following the

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120 Craik, 45.
established social codes in order to be accepted similarly to their male counterparts.\footnote{Reina Lewis, \textit{Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation} (New York: Routledge, 2017), 22.} The feminine ideal in Symbolist art is therefore mediated through a male gaze or through a female-moderated male gaze. When that gaze depicts the female nude, the version of femininity portrayed is healthy, white, tidy, and linked to the natural as well as to bodily maintenance. The association between women and adornment attaches negative adjectives to femininity, like frivolous, vain, and narcissistic. Subsequently, in order to contain and control the sexually alluring and dangerous modern woman, excessive fashioning is seen in Symbolist representations of the \textit{femme fatale}. Symbolist representations of clothed women in nature connect to Symbolist representations of the female nude. Both relate femininity to the natural—the opposite of materiality. Also, women in nature in Symbolist art are dressed in white dresses, which themselves signify an unblemished, mystical and pure natural truth. The androgyne meanwhile, moves away from representing femininity, and uses clothing to augment gender duality and erase gender difference.

In each section of this project I also show how Symbolist ideology in the form of correspondences and synthesis enhances gender ideals. The female nude, clothed women and the androgynous figure all present a correspondence between a metaphysical idea and a physical form.\footnote{Cole, 327.} The female nude connects the female body to vanity. The women placed in natural settings relate artistic and allegorical allusions to female chastity. The androgyne, meanwhile presents a different, more progressive take on the feminine ideal. As a symbol of the synthesis of
opposites, the androgyne signifies an all-encompassing ideal. In this overarching ideal, masculinity and femininity are merged, and the gendered stratification of society is erased.

Following this, the feminine ideal at the end of the nineteenth century in France according to Symbolist artists prioritized femininity that was—ironically considering the male gaze of the Symbolist artists—in opposition to the man-made. Jeanne Jacquemin, a female Symbolist artist, was undermined as a creator by her male peers and male art critics as a sexual symbol herself. As much as she was named an artist she was also named a muse, a position in which her male counterparts did not find themselves. Femininity is naturalized in Symbolist artworks; to be feminine is to be docile, non-threatening, and to reject the superficial. The female nude appears frequently in Symbolist art although it was seen as antiquated by contemporary modern thinkers and artists. And, Symbolist artists did not depict women in contemporary modern fashions, but preferred to reference clothing trends from a prior century. In effect, the Symbolist feminine ideal rejects the emerging modern woman. However, while the Symbolist fantasy of the feminine clings to the idea of a more submissive woman, the androgyne simultaneously presents an idealistic fantasy of gender elimination. Perhaps gender in Symbolist art overall contrasts submissive femininity with a romantic notion of non-gender to provide an ambiguous, and thus fully Symbolist, message about the gendered body.

My study of the representation of gender in Symbolist art offers an alternative perspective to the feminine ideal at the end of the nineteenth century. This is, however, a preliminary and exploratory look into the use of clothing in Symbolist art. The significance of clothing in Symbolist art has not been thoroughly studied, possibly due to fashion’s connection to femininity.

123 Curtis, 33.
or because Symbolist art does not reflect modern clothing worn by real people at the time.

Nevertheless, as this project discovered, clothing in Symbolist art communicates meaningful messages surrounding gender and the feminine ideal that reflect nineteenth century socio-cultural ideals as well as Symbolist ideology.

That said, gaps in research remain. My foray into the territory of female Symbolist artists is definitely incomplete. Since I could not uncover documentation of more female Symbolist artists, a sole focus on Jacquemin lacks the depth that comes from diverse sources. Furthermore, due to the destruction of a lot of Jacquemin artworks, there is the question of what the lost pictures depict. From a feminist perspective, these gaps may have arisen due to female art and artists getting overlooked. Whatever the cause, the study of femininity, clothing and Symbolist art will always be incomplete as a consequence of this lack of information. I also briefly touched upon the use of orientalist clothing in the Symbolist visual representation of the femme fatale. How the non-Western body is represented and gendered, and how that reflects nineteenth-century norms would deepen the understanding of the role of orientalism and primitivism in Symbolist art. Artworks by Symbolist artists like Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Paul Gauguin, and Émile Bernard could be looked at further in this context. Also, the female nude in Symbolist art deserves further attention as to its role in expressing cultural values beyond gender. The recurrence of a nude image of Eve in Symbolist art specifically deserves attention due to Eve’s relationship to the advent of clothing. In accounts of the history of clothing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Adam and Eve are spoken of as the first people to don clothing.\footnote{For example, see Auguste Racinet, \textit{The Historical Encyclopedia of Costumes} (New York: Facts on File, 1988).}

The moment Adam and Eve cover their naked bodies, is symbolic of the loss of innocence, when
clothing is a necessity because the unclothed body is laden with shame. The nude Eve in Symbolist art may signify a return to innocence, however, further analysis of the topic is justified. In summary, this project hopefully serves as a baseline study of clothing in Symbolist art, and introduces Symbolist art as a conduit to supplementary research on fashion and art in this context.
Appendix: Figures

Fig. 1. Jeanne Jacquemin, *Rêverie*, 1892-94. Pastel, 32 x 21.6 cm. Private Collection, Paris, France.
Fig. 2. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Young Girls by the Seaside*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 61 x 47 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France.

Fig. 3. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *La Toilette*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 74.5 x 62.7 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France.
Fig. 4. Émile Bernard, *After the Bath, Nymphs*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 121 x 151 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lille, France.

Fig. 5. Émile Bernard, *Bathers*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 47 x 57.2 cm. Private Collection.
Fig. 6. César-Isidore-Henri Cros, *Eve and the Snake at the Tree of Knowledge*, ca. 1890-1900. Bas relief in *pâte de verre*, 28 x 13.3 cm. Private Collection.

Fig. 7. Odilon Redon, *Ève*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France.
Fig. 8. Gustave Moreau, *Salomé Dancing Before Herod*, 1874-76. Oil on canvas, 143.5 x 104.3 cm. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, United States.
Fig. 9. Gustave Moreau, *Samson and Delilah*, 1882. Watercolour, 15.8 x 21.3 cm. Musée de Gustave Moreau, Paris, France.
Fig. 10. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Hope*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 102.5 x 129.5 cm. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, United States.

Fig. 11. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Hope*, 1871-1872. Oil on canvas, 70.5 x 82 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France.
Fig. 12. Maurice Denis, *The Ladder in the Foliage or Poetic Arabesques for the Decoration of a Ceiling*, 1892. Oil on canvas, mounted on cardboard, 172 x 235 cm. Musée Départemental Maurice Denis "Le Prieuré," St.-Germain-en-Lay, France.
Fig. 13. Angelica Kauffmann, *Self-Portrait as the Muse of Painting*, 1787. Oil on canvas, 128 x 93.5 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy.

Fig. 15. Odilon Redon, *Armour*, 1891. Charcoal and conté crayon, 50.7 x 36.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States.
Fig. 16. Ferdinand Knopff, *Project for a Frontispiece for the Works of Villiers de l’Isle Adam*, ca. 1891. Graphite on *papier calque*, 34.6 x 21.6 cm. Private Collection.
Fig. 17. Ferdinand Knopff, *Avec Verhaeren, Un Ange*, 1889. Retouched and tinted photograph, 29.5 x 18.4 cm. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium.

Fig. 18. Guirand de Scevola, *The King’s Daughter*, 1902. Watercolour on paper, 62.2 x 52 cm. Private Collection.


