

Joséphin Péladan: Occultism, Catholicism, and Science in the *Fin de Siècle*

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Article abstract

Joséphin Péladan voyait le matérialisme scientifique comme la cause première de la décadence de la culture française. Il estimait qu'il encourageait la démocratisation et la laïcisation de la société ainsi que le goût pour le naturalisme dans les arts, des tendances qu'il détestait toutes. En accord avec sa philosophie rosicrucienne de la science occulte, formulée dans ses essais critiques et promulguée dans ses salons artistiques, il proposait à la place une idéologie hiérarchique et traditionnelle dont il espérait qu'elle ramènerait la culture française à l'état idéal pour lui, soit catholique et pré-républicain.

Joséphin Péladan: Occultism, Catholicism, and Science in the *Fin de Siècle*

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Résumé

Joséphin Péladan voyait le matérialisme scientifique comme la cause première de la décadence de la culture française. Il estimait qu'il encourageait la démocratisation et la laïcisation de la société ainsi que le goût pour le naturalisme dans les arts, des tendances qu'il détestait toutes. En accord avec sa philosophie rosicrucienne de la science occulte, formulée dans ses essais critiques et promulguée dans ses salons artistiques, il proposait à la place une idéologie hiérarchique et traditionnelle dont il espérait qu'elle ramènerait la culture française à l'état idéal pour lui, soit catholique et pré-républicain.

In 1892, the Roman Catholic art critic and novelist Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918) inaugurated a series of artistic salons sponsored by his occult Ordre de la Rose+Croix.¹ The salons and Péladan's Rosicrucian revival were one part of his larger campaign to combat what he saw as the degeneration of French society under the influence of secularism and its supporting philosophy of scientific materialism. Materialism, fueled by positivist epistemology's foundation on sense experience and its rejection of the possibility of truth based on metaphysical inquiry, was for Péladan the philosophical root of the worst aspects of French culture.² At its feet he laid the taste for extreme naturalism in art and literature and the decline of the Roman Catholic faith. In addition, Péladan, a dedicated monarchist, linked the egalitarian nature of scientific materialism, naturalism, and secularism to the triumph of the republican form of government.

Péladan's position as a devout Roman Catholic who was anti-republican and anti-positivist was not unusual during the *fin de siècle*. From his youthful arrest while protesting the 1880 law limiting religious associations to his mature novels and art criticism, Péladan was a proponent of the Catholic anti-republican sentiment that has been well documented.³ The case of Péladan earns greater significance, though, from his particular notions of science. While he condemned strictly materialist science, Péladan was not opposed to science per se, and his writings and theories provide a useful exemplar of the malleable ways in which science was interpreted in the *fin de siècle*. In his battle against the democratization of French culture, Péladan used a specialized rhetoric of science based in the occult to advance his cultural and artistic agenda.

Péladan's career as an author, art critic, and occult revivalist was a unified attempt to remedy the decline he saw in French culture by encouraging a revival of distinctly hierarchic institutions and traditions, including the Catholic Church, a monarchic government, and idealist religious painting. In his quest to undo the damage caused to French culture by positivism, Péladan recognized that occult epistemology was ideally suited to his purpose. First, like many members of the occult revival, Péladan believed that the occult offered a link between science and religion through a union of intellect and spirituality, and

thus was a valid alternative to positivist science.⁴ Second, occult science served a symbolic political purpose. Péladan's occult epistemology was based on the notion of the hidden nature of truth, both scientific and spiritual, and the elite status of those with access to that truth. His theory of knowledge was hierarchic by its very nature, in contrast to the democratic quality of materialist and positivist methods.

Péladan's public life at the end of the nineteenth century can be divided into two parts. Between 1881 and 1888, he wrote art criticism in various journals and composed a series of novels, in which he described and criticized France's aesthetic and cultural democratization. From 1888 to 1898, he set out to create solutions to the problems he had isolated by reviving the occult Rosicrucian order and inaugurating the Salon de la Rose+Croix, an annual art exhibition juried by Péladan and intended to promote artists whose works ascribed to his aesthetic agenda. Also during the 1890s, he wrote *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes*, a series of volumes in which he clarified his philosophical agenda. In his use of the phrase "sciences mortes" to describe his occult ideas, he positioned himself directly in opposition to contemporary scientific practice. The culminating work of the series, *L'Occulte catholique*, codified the guiding principles for the aesthetic and social reforms that were his goal.

Péladan clearly articulated his disdain for French art and culture in 1888 in *L'Art ochlocratique*. He formed the word "ochlocratic" from the Greek root *ochlos*, referring to the rule of the mob, and used the word to set this discussion of the crisis of French aesthetics in political terms.⁵ The word *ochlocratique* was born of Péladan's contention that French artists tended to cater to the tastes of the lowest common denominator. Thus he accounted for the prevalence in French art of naturalism, in which the loftier goals of idealism are sacrificed to the sole end of accurate replication of visual data. While Péladan focused on the fine arts in *L'Art ochlocratique*, he made it clear at the outset that art is a direct reflection of the spirit of the society that creates it. He wrote, "A parallelism exists between the ideas and the works of an age, its thoughts and its acts, its art and its philosophy, its poetry and its religion."⁶ Thus, whatever faults he found with the painting of his age could be traced to core cultural attitudes. Accordingly, Péladan linked the taste for naturalism

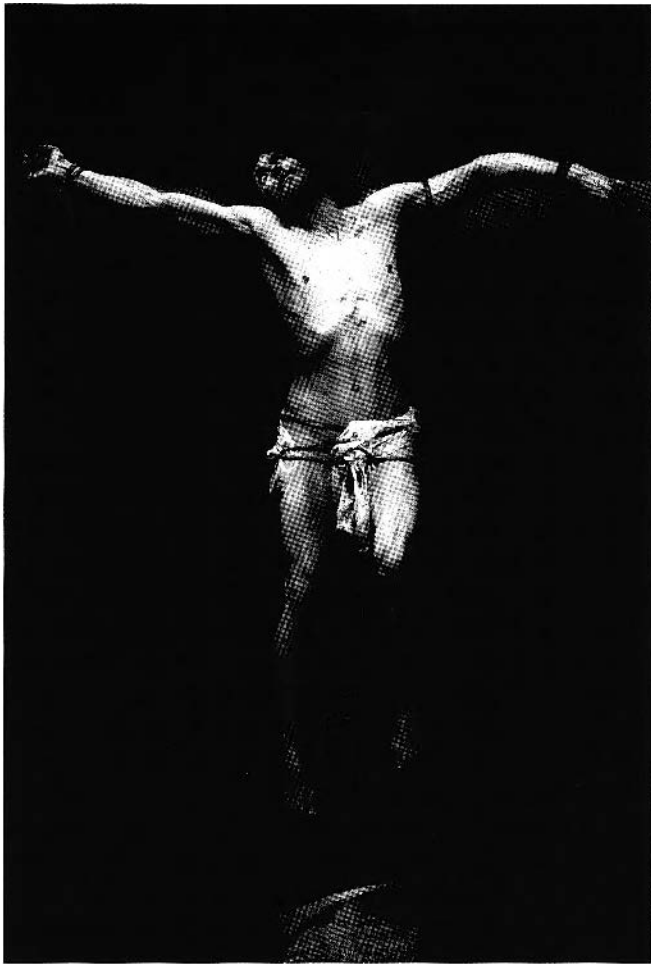


Figure 1. Aimé-Nicolas Morot. *Le Martyre de Jésus de Nazareth*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 322.5 x 215 cm. Nancy, Musée des beaux-arts (Cliché: Claude Philippot).

to the triumph of positivism in French culture, likening “the literary materialism” of Émile Zola to the “scientific materialism of [Charles] Darwin.” Naturalism was an aesthetic defined by the admonition “only the exterior form matters.”⁷

For Péladan, there was no worse exemplar for the misuse of materialist science than Ernest Renan’s 1863 volume *Vie de Jésus*. This was a common sentiment among Catholics of the period, and Péladan’s own father, Adrien Péladan, also directly challenged Renan’s work, as is discussed further below. To its critics, Renan’s controversial study had demonstrated the application of materialist principles by assessing the figure of Jesus not as the son of God, but as a remarkable man rooted in the context of archaeological, anthropological, and historical data.⁸ It does not come as a surprise, then, that in *L’Art ochlocratique* Péladan made the link between contemporary modes of paint-

ing and the materialism of Renan. In the naturalism of pictures exhibited at the Salon of 1883 he found evidence of the influence of that materialism on painting, and most disturbing of all for the devoutly Catholic Péladan, on religious painting. When that materialist influence succeeded, as in the religious painting of the Salon of 1883, the resulting works exemplified the loss of what he saw as the three great attributes of French art: “the ideal, Tradition, [and] Hierarchy.”⁹

These three qualities of idealism, tradition, and hierarchism were very important to Péladan, and the words and variations of them appear often in his writings on art. He used them to help define more clearly what he disliked about certain kinds of avant-garde and academic art of the period: naturalism and extreme attention to detailing the exterior, visible qualities of subject matter. For Péladan, ideal, traditional, and hierarchichal qualities were achieved in art that strove to depict more than material appearance by eliminating excessive naturalistic detail and relying on the pictorial traditions of the art of the past that he favoured, especially Byzantine art. Péladan’s response to a particular work at the Paris Salon (Société des artistes français) of 1883, Aimé-Nicolas Morot’s *Le Martyre de Jésus de Nazareth* (fig. 1), illustrates what he meant by calling on artists to uphold the values of the ideal, tradition, and hierarchy.

Aimé-Nicolas Morot (1850–1913) had been a student of Alexandre Cabanel and Jean-Léon Gérôme and had won the Prix de Rome in 1873, the year of his Salon debut. *Le Martyre de Jésus de Nazareth* earned him the medal of the Legion d’honneur and was subsequently purchased by the state.¹⁰ Péladan found the work particularly offensive, perhaps in part because it had been directly linked to Ernest Renan. In a companion book to the Salon of 1883, the critic Philippe Burty reported that the work was being interpreted as a visual translation of Renan’s book.¹¹ The details of Morot’s work do correspond to Renan’s description: ropes anchor Christ’s body on the cross, and the cross itself, made of rough tree trunks, is T-shaped. Burty assured the viewer, “No matter how you look at it, this is not a holy picture.”¹²

Péladan chose Morot’s painting as the very first work he discussed in *L’Art ochlocratique* to support his identification of the materialist aesthetic. In his discussion of it, he detailed how, in this one painting, Morot struck at the heart of Péladan’s guiding artistic values of the ideal, tradition, and hierarchy. The very title of the painting must have alarmed Péladan. By identifying the scene with the general, more impersonal term “martyrdom” rather than “Crucifixion,” Morot demotes the scene from the realm of the ideal to the realm of the real. Indeed, Péladan accused Morot of rendering a Christ so ordinary that his face expresses neither his “resplendent divine nature nor his human suffering.”¹³ Furthermore, Morot’s treatment of the details of the Crucifixion departs markedly from pictorial tradition and

reinforces what Péladan saw as the vulgarization of the sacred event. He denounced Morot's "pride in archaeology and realism," citing the very details highlighted by Burty, including the T-shaped cross and the rope tying Christ to it. Finally, while Renan himself made no mention of this detail, Péladan pointed out that in Morot's picture the nails pierce Christ's body through his wrists and ankles rather than palms and soles, altering the traditional placement of his holy wounds.¹⁴

All of these deviations from compositional tradition contributed to what Péladan described as the picture's lack of hieratism, or the use of a pictorial vocabulary of frontality, formal compositional arrangements, and established types to reinforce the sacred content of a picture. To rob the picture of its hieratism was to rob it of its sacred authority. In his Salon review he explained: "Free-thinkers and idiots look down on hieratism, but every time they try to challenge it they are, like M. Morot, severely led astray." He noted that among such "free-thinking" artists as Morot, Byzantine art, one of the most typical exemplars of hieratism, was "unknown or derided."¹⁵ In Péladan's writings, the ideas of artistic hieratism and more general notions of hierarchism were intimately linked, and he was not alone among French artists and critics of this period in making this connection.¹⁶ Consequently, a hieratic pictorial vocabulary was well suited to Péladan's ideal Catholic and monarchic society, and served as a foil to the artistic naturalism that he associated with republican secularism.

Michael Driskell has provided vital context for Péladan's notion of hieratism. As Driskell pointed out, by incorporating individual, unique, and particular details described in Renan's text, Morot's naturalism endowed the picture with a factual quality that mediates or even negates the mystical, timeless nature of the scene that is vital to its hieratic nature.¹⁷ Christ's arms are twisted in agony, one facing up and the other down, and his bound and pierced legs seem to struggle to find purchase on the vertical support of the cross. As a result, the formal and symmetrical image of Christ the savior is replaced by a view of a man grounded in a moment of physical suffering. Péladan had a name for this effect: *contemporanéité*. The term describes a literal transcription of visual data that lacks what he called "imagination," that is, a faculty beyond the senses that transports the work into the realm of art.¹⁸ Péladan's stylistic triumvirate of idealism, tradition, and hierarchy/hieratism provided that mechanism through which imagination could be expressed and direct observation had to be filtered.¹⁹

In explaining the alternative to *contemporanéité*, Péladan again chose highly charged, political language. He explained that the artist of a work that exhibits *contemporanéité* "translates...the text of reality word for word instead of making... 'un bon français.'"²⁰ This archaic expression, used to describe something of truly French character, exhibits the switching of



Figure 2. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *La Princesse Marie Cantacuzène*, 1883. Oil on canvas. 78 x 46 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon (© Studio Basset).

the letters "o" and "a" in the fashion of old French, and thus provided Péladan with the perfect means to summarize his feeling about Morot's naturalism. His conscious use of the archaic spelling reflects the belief held by some French Catholics that the regularization of the French language was a tool of the Republican government to secularize the population. *Le Martyre de Jésus de Nazareth*, with its rejection of idealism, tradition, and hieratism, was born of an attitude completely separate from the hierarchic, pre-Revolutionary spirit that for Péladan was the true nature of Frenchness.²¹

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, who exhibited both *La Rêve* and *La Princesse Marie Cantacuzène* (fig. 2) in the 1883 Salon, offered Péladan a perfect foil for Morot's *contemporanéité*. In *L'Art ochlocratique*, Péladan quoted from his own previous writings on the artist to suggest what set Puvis apart: "What he paints has neither time nor place; it is from everywhere and always." Indeed, he noted, "Puvis de Chavannes is the only great abstract master."²² Burty's discussion of Puvis's paintings at the Salon once again provided a useful reference point for Péladan's comments. Regarding *La Rêve*, Burty wrote that he would have advised Puvis to not send the work to the Salon: "For the public, this composition is too subtle and of an almost summary execution." Burty noted the same "abstract" aspect in Puvis's portrait of his companion, Marie Cantacuzène, a work that displays the frontal pose and generalized physiognomy of Byzantine icons. The work, though Burty deemed it to a certain extent the best of the Salon, created its effect "at the price of visible sacrifices in execution. Our tumultuous society is not satisfied with these observations condensed to the point of austerity. Something too abstract envelops this subject."²³ With that comment, he confirmed Péladan's theory of the link between the decline of French culture and the public's preference for Morot's naturalism.

In his discussion of the portrait of Marie Cantacuzène, Péladan took up both the issue of Puvis's abstraction and the incomprehensible quality of that abstraction for the debased tastes of contemporary viewers. Of the timeless quality of the portrait, he wrote, "Madame M.C.... is not a widow, she is the widow; he has raised the individual to a type. There is no more certain mark of his genius.... He remains the *abstractor*."²⁴ For Péladan, this ability makes Puvis the "greatest painter of our time." Following Burty's lead, however, he noted that the degree of abstraction in *La Rêve* is even greater, to an extent that it rendered the work a failure in the public venue of the academic Salon. Indeed, among viewers confronted with *La Rêve*, "only initiates can understand it. M. de Chavannes was wrong to exhibit for lay people a painting destined for poets and thinkers."²⁵ The members of this uninitiated public reject Puvis and turn instead to works like Morot's *Le Martyre*, which fulfills the debased materialist tastes of the "mob." Under these circumstances, Péladan sounded almost mild when he summarized his opinion of *Le Martyre de Jésus de Nazareth* with the single word "detestable."²⁶

Because Péladan saw the popularity of positivist-inspired naturalism and *contemporanéité* as a reflection of larger cultural deterioration, he stated in his critique of Morot's naturalism that it was not just the quality of French art that was at stake, but also the health of French society. He described the crisis in very particular political terms:

Art is nothing but an Aristocracy: a Feudality, and, around several great barons to whom I pledge my liege, there [is too much] rabble. Art, a vocation like the priesthood, becomes a career like a notary...[I]f the present path is maintained... we are at the end of art, and at the end of the race.²⁷

In one sweep, Péladan implied a link between naturalism and democratic political forms while likening his own aesthetics of idealism and hieratism to hierarchic social structures. Leaving no doubt what social forces were to blame, he wrote, "Latinness is in peril, in metaphysical peril, thanks to M. Renan and his gang."²⁸ Péladan hoped French art might be saved and returned to what he called its Latin character, and as such be a vehicle to help return France to her true Catholic, monarchic roots.

In targeting positivist science as the source of France's decline, Péladan was responding to its democratic associations, both practical and symbolic. Positivist science was closely linked to republican politics. Auguste Comte himself had noted that "the proletariat were the most disposed of all the classes to accept Positivism on account of their common sense [and] their freedom from the taint of metaphysical...speculation."²⁹ Republican educational reformers including Émile Littré and Jules Ferry made the link explicit in their campaign to replace Catholic-sponsored education in France with a free and egalitarian system based on positivist epistemology. In addition, Littré's and Ferry's Masonic affiliations would have for Péladan reinforced their association with positivism, because by mid-century French Freemasonry had officially adopted a completely secularized positivism as its guiding philosophy.³⁰ Beyond these practical links between republican politics and positivist science, the very nature of positivist epistemology would have been offensive to Péladan's aristocratic mentality. Positivist method, based entirely on the individual's sensual experience of phenomena, is by its nature democratic.

By the start of the 1890s, Péladan had begun his active quest to repair the cultural decadence he had defined. Central to the plan was his revival, aided by Stanislas de Guaita, of Rosicrucianism. The order, first established in the seventeenth century, initiated members into a society that claimed to be a keeper of esoteric secrets, including alchemy and symbology. In its revived nineteenth-century manifestation, the order fostered a mingling of Eastern philosophy and religion with traditional Christian beliefs and acted as a promoter of general public interest in the occult.³¹ Péladan took pains to give his Rosicrucianism a distinctively Roman Catholic character by defecting from a more general Rosicrucian revival to form his own *Ordre de la Rose+Croix catholique*. When Péladan made the break, he was anticipating the eventual papal indexing in 1891 of several of the authors associated with the Rosicrucian revival (nevertheless, his own writings were censured by the Church as well in

that year). As leader of the new Catholic Rosicrucians, Péladan gave himself the title of “Sâr.” This ancient Hebrew and Assyrian term for chief, prince, or leader reinforced his control and the hierarchic structure of the order. Thus he hoped to downplay the excessively individualist elements that the Roman Catholic Church found especially objectionable in much occult theory of the *fin de siècle*.³² By gathering this group of devout Catholics to become the new keepers of the Rosicrucian tradition, Péladan aimed to foster an intellectual religious sensibility that could act as an alternative to positivism and as a healing force against the decline of French society. His series of essays *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes* endeavoured to define the Catholic, hierarchic, and scientific nature of his occult revival.

The principle volume in the series, *L'Occulte catholique*, reveals the philosophical basis of Péladan's Rosicrucian revival and the salons associated with it.³³ Péladan's ideas provided a direct epistemological challenge to positivist science. His theory of knowledge was based on the union of occult intellect and Catholic faith, rather than on the data of physical experience. While Péladan acknowledged man's essential physicality, he stressed that truth can only be reached by a transcendence of the physical.³⁴ Thus he contrasted the occult's dual basis in reason and metaphysical inquiry with positivism's privileging of physical experience.

The union of Catholicism and occultism in his Rosicrucian order stands as Péladan's version of the reconciliation of religion and science, which was promoted by many figures in the occult revival as a means of reintroducing a metaphysical component to modern theories of knowledge. Édouard Schuré, author of *Les Grand Initiés* (1889), asserted that occult knowledge “constitutes the primordial link between science and religion, and the final unity of the two.”³⁵ In *L'Occulte catholique*, Péladan presented his Rosicrucian revival in similar terms. In addition, Péladan's interest in uniting religion and science should be seen as part of larger efforts among Roman Catholics who hoped to combat the perception of the Church as anti-scientific during the second half of the nineteenth century in France. Catholics from diverse disciplines made widely varying efforts to reconcile their faith to scientific practice, while attempting to avoid what were perceived as the errors of strict positivism and materialism.³⁶ Such ideas were common among the intellectuals who often visited the Péladan family home during Joséphin's youth, attracted by the presence of Adrien Péladan *père*, and Joséphin's elder brother, Adrien *fils*, who were engaged in the study of both science and the occult. In their company he would have been privy to discussions that included an eclectic mix of natural science, occult science, and devout Roman Catholicism, all in the context of strictly monarchist politics. Adrien *père* was particularly invested in the battle against Renan. His 1866 response to Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, entitled *Histoire de Jésus-Christ d'après la*

science, defended scriptural truth with evidence gleaned from mythological and literary sources.³⁷ From a very early stage, Péladan was encouraged to champion this alternative “scientific” method, inflected with occult and Catholic metaphysics, in the face of materialist science. For all the members of the Péladan family, the occult provided a realm in which scientific data and metaphysical truth could be combined, and this notion is at the heart of Péladan's positioning of his Catholic occult as an alternative to positivism.

The esoteric machinations of Péladan's theories manifest what he intended to be the exclusive, intellectual character of his Catholic occult. It was this kind of intellectual hierarchy that he believed was crucial to his success in restoring France to her pre-republican, Catholic nature. Only a select few were capable of initiation into such philosophical complexities. Thus, in *L'Occulte catholique*, Péladan emphasized the exclusive character of his philosophy. He reminded his reader that while all humanity needs religion, the occult is necessary only “for those who want to augment the intelligent life in themselves.” He summed it up with this admonition: “it is necessary that some think, it is necessary that all pray.”³⁸

The rejection of the naturalism he associated with positivism and the establishment of a strict hierarchy are two of the defining characteristics of Péladan's Salon de la Rose+Croix. He conceived of the exhibition as a way to showcase art that embodied the theories he had been writing about through the 1880s. The Salon de la Rose+Croix was held yearly from 1892 to 1897, with the first exhibition taking place at the gallery of Durand-Ruel. In 1891 Péladan published a series of statements that heralded the manifestation of his vision, in which he dictated the rules of the salon with papal-like power and asserted his authority to act as the final, infallible arbiter of the works that merited inclusion. In the rules for potential exhibitors, he focused primarily on subject matter, encouraging art of a religious character.³⁹ He called for artworks that exhibited strict idealism, the triumph “of the Dream against the real,” as an antidote to naturalism, and he encouraged traditional religious subjects and compositional hieratism that emphasized formality.⁴⁰ He underscored the hierarchic nature of his aesthetic endeavour further when he called on artists to act as priests performing a sacramental act in painting: “Artist, you are priest: Art is the great mystery, and when you succeed in creating a masterpiece, a divine ray descends as on an altar.”⁴¹

If Péladan saw the works of the artists he advocated as sacramental, then he had a very particular idea of the grace that they bestowed. He maintained that the purpose of his salons was to reform taste and thereby reverse the degenerative effects of positivist decadence in French culture. One of Péladan's compatriots, writing a history of their order, described the cultural implications in this way:



Figure 3. Carlos Schwabe, Poster for the First Salon de la Rose + Croix, 1892. Lithograph, 198 x 80 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France (Photo: BnF).

We easily agreed that the time was not favorable for the constitution of a group of occult metaphysics, but that the fine arts, on the contrary, offered to our efforts a vast and useful arena, and that by aesthetic means we could make our spiritualist theories penetrate the frivolous brains of our contemporaries.⁴²

In this conception, Péladan and his artists became the priestly ministers of a cultural conversion.

Péladan set the rules of his aesthetic and the salon so narrowly that it is difficult to isolate a work that completely fulfills them. For the first manifestation of the salon, Péladan commissioned the Swiss artist Carlos Schwabe to design a poster (fig. 3), which reflects many of Péladan's ideas.⁴³ The image has nothing in common with the "detestable" naturalism exemplified for Péladan by Morot's painting of the Crucifixion. In Schwab's poster, the elongated figures, linear design, and floral patterns emphasize decoration over imitation of nature. Furthermore, the subject matter quite literally depicts the journey from physical existence to metaphysical truth. The female figure below remains trapped in the mire of physical experience, while the two upper figures ascend the steps, gradually shedding the darkness of the physical world for an existence of light and purity. Schwabe here addresses Péladan's theme of the triumph of idealism over materialism and, as Robert Pincus-Witten has pointed out, the process of initiation to an elite status, another important element of his aesthetic and philosophical agenda.⁴⁴

Charles Filiger's *Christ aux Anges*, 1892 (fig. 4), was exhibited in the first Salon de la Rose + Croix that year.⁴⁵ The work reflects Péladan's notions of hieratism, even as it exhibits the spatial and colouristic innovations that would eventually have no place in Péladan's salons. Filiger's Christ has radically simplified facial features, and the artist's inspiration in Byzantine art is overt in the iconic tilt of Christ's head and the frontal poses of all the figures. There is no background to anchor the scene in a narrative, and the tondo shape and close perspective unite to give the picture the quality of a devotional image. Thus it presents a vision of Christ that is wholly idealized and without a vulgarizing link to the reality of the historical past or the secularized present. Péladan must have been struck by the similarity in composition, technique, and spirit of this work and Puvis's portrait of Marie Cantacuzène.

Other artists who were accepted by Péladan for exhibition in his salons include Antoine de la Rochefoucauld, Alexander Séon, Alphonse Osbert, and Jean Delville. They represented a range of styles of the *fin de siècle*, but all their work embodied Péladan's call for an art that would repudiate the naturalism of artists like Morot. Péladan was not successful in attracting the most celebrated and avant-garde figures to his exhibitions,

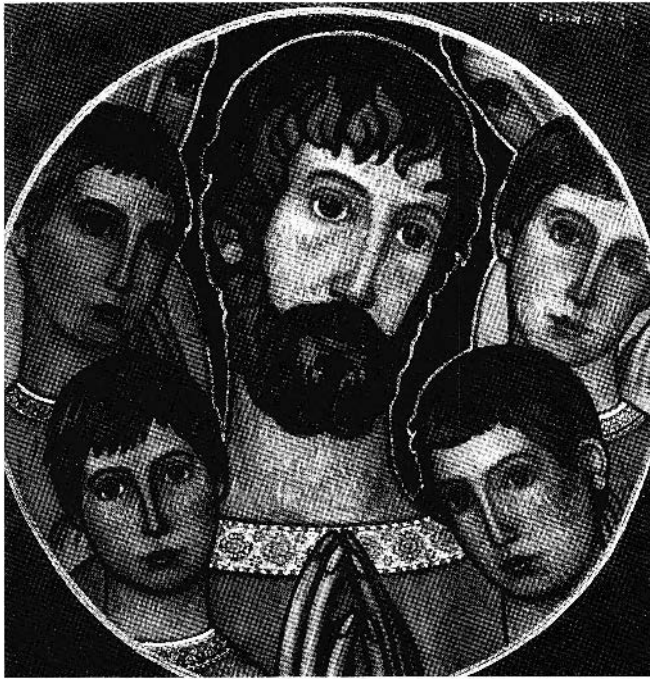


Figure 4. Charles Filiger, *Christ aux Anges*. 1892. Formerly Altschul Collection, location unknown. Reproduced from *Charles Filiger: 1863–1928*, exh. cat., Strasbourg, Musée d'art moderne, 1990, fig. 54.

in part because of the extremity of his views. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Gustave Moreau, who were among the most respected and well-known artists in France in 1892 and who hardly needed the exposure of another exhibition venue, opted not to participate.⁴⁶ Even some young artists could not reconcile themselves to Péladan's aesthetic agenda. Maurice Denis, one of the leading members of the Nabis and a devout Catholic, took serious issue with Péladan's occultism and his complete rejection of naturalism.⁴⁷ Even Antoine de Rochefoucauld, one of Péladan's collaborators in the Rosicrucian revival, eventually found his own impressionist-inflected works out of place among the Rose+Croix painters, and he subsequently broke with Péladan. The degree of individualism in Denis's and Rochefoucauld's style rendered their work unsuitable to Péladan's hierarchic ideal, and in later manifestations of the salon, exhibitors had very few links to the avant-garde.

The initial 1892 Salon of the Rose+Croix was a *succès de scandale*. It was well attended and much discussed among critics,⁴⁸ but Péladan's inability to attract (or his alienation of) the most well-known artists of his time, marginalized him, his salon, and his theories. His aesthetic break with Rochefoucauld, who had been a major financial backer as well as participating

artist, contributed further to the decline of the salon. Though the salon continued on for five more years, the quality of its contributors steadily waned, the prestige of its venues declined, and its hold on the public interest dissipated. Péladan continued to write into the twentieth century, promoting the ideals of the Rose+Croix Salons, but by this time his bombastic anti-modern criticism and his flamboyant public persona rendered him somewhat ridiculous.⁴⁹

Indeed, in the early twentieth century, Péladan's notions of politics and art seemed, as they do now, to be disconnected from modern life. Nevertheless, his history is an important part of the story of art and science in the Symbolist era. Péladan's artistic, intellectual, and political goals were linked through his desire to promote the establishment of a France cleansed of its democratic, secularist, and positivist characteristics. Despite his distaste for scientific materialism, Péladan recognized the pervasiveness and power of the rhetoric of science in *fin-de-siècle* culture, and his Rosicrucian theories offered him a means to use that rhetoric in the service of his singular artistic and cultural goals.

Notes

- ¹ The most complete sources on Péladan's life and work are Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix* (New York, 1976); Christopher Beaufile, *Joséphin Péladan: Essai sur une maladie du lyrisme* (Grenoble, 1993); and Jean-Pierre Laurant and Victor Nguyen, eds., *Les Péladan* (Lausanne, 1990).
- ² I use the term positivist here as a general reference to modes of thinking that privilege empirical inquiry rather than to indicate the philosophical framework developed by Auguste Comte, although certainly Comte's contrasting of theological and metaphysical forms of inquiry with his positivist method must have contributed to Péladan's notion of the philosophical ills he described.
- ³ On the Péladan family's politics, see Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 9–25. On the context of the defensive Catholic nationalism of the 1870s, see Joseph F. Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever: Religious and National Identity in Modern France* (University Park, PA, 2005), esp. 95–109; and Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870–1914* (New York, 1965).
- ⁴ On the relationship of science and Catholicism in *fin-de-siècle* France, see Maria Di Pasquale, "La Crise catholique: Avant-Garde Religious Painting in France, 1890–1912," PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1999, 20–25, 107–11.
- ⁵ Michael Marlais suggests that the sentiments contained in *L'Art ochlocratique* were shared to a varying degree by several critics of the *fin de siècle*. See Michael Marlais, *Conservative Echoes in Fin-de-Siècle Parisian Art Criticism* (University Park, PA, 1992), 139–46.

- ⁶ Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence esthétique I, L'Art ochlocratique, Salons de 1882 et 1883* (Paris, 1888), 13. The criticism in this volume first appeared in 1882 and 1883 in the journals *Le Foyer* and *L'Artiste*, respectively. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- ⁷ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 15.
- ⁸ On the perception of Renan as an exemplar of positivist secularism, see Alan Pitt, "The Cultural Impact of Science in France: Ernest Renan and the 'Vic de Jésus,'" *The Historical Journal* 43 (2000): 80–81.
- ⁹ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 45. See Péladan's direct references to Renan, 15 and 59.
- ¹⁰ On this work, see Paul Michael Driskell, *Representing Belief: Religion, Art, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park, PA, 1992), 14–15.
- ¹¹ Philippe Burty, *Salon de 1883* (Paris, 1883), 42. On the life and career of Burty (1830–90), see Gabriel P. Weisberg, *The Independent Critic: Philippe Burty and the Visual Arts of Mid-Nineteenth-Century France* (New York, 1993).
- ¹² Burty, *Salon de 1883*, 42–45. Indeed their descriptions are very similar; see Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (Amherst, New York, 1991), 208–12.
- ¹³ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 59. Here again his comments are similar to Burty's, who noted that the head of Christ was the main failing of the picture; see Burty, *Salon de 1883*, 42.
- ¹⁴ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 59.
- ¹⁵ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 59. On the revival of Byzantine art, see Gretchen Krehling McKay, "An Eastern Medieval Revival: Byzantine Art and Nineteenth-Century French Painting," *Studies in Medievalism* XVI (2008): 46–66; and J.B. Bullen, "Byzantinism and Modernism, 1900–1914," *The Burlington Magazine* CXLI, 1160 (1999): 665–75.
- ¹⁶ Driskell, *Representing Belief*, 6.
- ¹⁷ Driskell, *Representing Belief*, 14–15.
- ¹⁸ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 86–87.
- ¹⁹ These qualities of hieratism and timelessness are also important components of the contemporary movement of art founded at the Benedictine Abbey in Beuron, Germany, by Desiderius Lenz. Though Péladan makes no reference to Beuron, it was well known among the Nabis. On Beuronic hieratism, see Michael Paul Driskell, *Representing Belief*, 248. See also Cordula Grewe's discussion of Lenz's dogmatic formulation of his aesthetic, which has a great deal in common with Péladan: Cordula Grewe, "Historicism and the Symbolic Imagination in Nazarene Art," *Art Bulletin* LXXXIX, 1 (March 2007): 102.
- ²⁰ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 87.
- ²¹ I am indebted to James Housefield for his insight into Péladan's use of this phrase. See Joseph F. Byrnes's discussion of the political associations of regional dialect, *Catholic and French Forever*, 121–45.
- ²² Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 48, emphasis his. This notion of Puvis's "abstraction" was shared by many critics and expressed a variety of meanings. See Jennifer Laurie Shaw, *Dream States: Puvis De Chavannes, Modernism, and the Fantasy of France* (New Haven, 2002), 8 and throughout.
- ²³ Burty, *Salon de 1883*, 92 and 95.
- ²⁴ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 103, emphasis his. Puvis objected to this interpretation of the work, which he meant to be a very particular depiction of Marie and her character. Aimée Brown Price, *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes* (Amsterdam, 1994), 176.
- ²⁵ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 102.
- ²⁶ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 87.
- ²⁷ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 211–12.
- ²⁸ Péladan, *L'Art ochlocratique*, 212.
- ²⁹ Auguste Comte quoted in Tom Steele, "The Role of Scientific Positivism in European Popular Education Movements: The Case of France," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* XXI, 5 (September–October 2002): 399.
- ³⁰ Steele, "The Role of Scientific Positivism," 405.
- ³¹ On Rosicrucianism and Péladan's revival, see Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 69–72.
- ³² On Péladan's break with Stanislas de Guaita and his founding of his own Ordre de la Rose+Croix catholique, see Jean da Silva, *Le Salon de la Rose+Croix (1892–1897)* (Paris, 1991), 33–35; and Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 78–81. For the meaning of the term "Sâr," see Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich, 1979), 644. The term also can mean adversary or one who defies, a meaning that would have underscored Péladan's combative theories; see Bromiley, 59–60.
- ³³ Although the volume *L'Occulte catholique* was not published until 1898, critics agree that it is the most complete summation of the ideas that defined this phase of his career. See Beaufrils, *Joséphin Péladan*, 335; and Nelly Emont, "Le Mythe de l'androgynie dans l'oeuvre de J. Péladan," in Laurant and Nguyen, *Les Péladan*, 33.
- ³⁴ Péladan, *L'Occulte catholique, mystique, Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes* V (Paris, 1898), 61–62; see also my discussion of Péladan's conception of the relation of body, mind, and spirit in Di Pasquale, "La Crise catholique," 126–30.
- ³⁵ Édouard Schuré, *The Great Initiates: Sketch of the Secret History of Religions*, trans. Fred Rothwell (Philadelphia, 1922), xxi.
- ³⁶ On Catholics' attempts to reconcile faith and scientific progress in the *fin de siècle*, see Di Pasquale, "La Crise catholique," 40–51; and Richard Thomson, *Troubled Republic*, 117–27.
- ³⁷ Jean-Claude Drouin, "Un Legitimiste mystique du XIXe siècle: Adrien Péladan 1815–1890," in Laurant and Nguyen, *Les Péladan*, 15. Adrien Péladan's response to Renan was reissued in 1878 by Victor Palmé under the new title *Preuves éclatantes de la Révélation par l'histoire universelle*. On the Péladan family's involvement in the occult revival, see Gerard Gautier, "Le Rose+Croix de Toulouse," in Laurant and Nguyen, *Les Péladan*, 50.

- 38 Péladan, *L'Occulte catholique*, 42–49.
- 39 Péladan, “Rules of the Salon de la Rose+Croix,” reprinted and translated in Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 211–12.
- 40 “The Manifesto of the Rose+Croix,” 1891, reprinted and translated in Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 207.
- 41 Péladan, *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique: Doctrine de l'Ordre et du Salon Annuel des Rose+Croix* (Paris, 1894), 17.
- 42 Léonce de Larmandie, *L'Entr'acte idéale: Histoire de la Rose+Croix* (Paris, 1903), 10.
- 43 For a full treatment of this work, see Marla H. Hand, “Carlos Schwabe’s Poster for the Salon de la Rose+Croix: A Herald of the Ideal in Art,” *Art Journal* XLIV, 1 (Spring, 1984): 40–45.
- 44 Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 102–03.
- 45 Filiger had been a protégé of Gauguin in Le Pouldu. See Charles Chasse, *Charles Filiger 1863–1928* (Paris, 1962); and Mira Jacob, *Charles Filiger 1863–1928* (Strasbourg, 1990).
- 46 Robert Pincus-Witten, *Les Salons de la Rose Croix, 1892–1897* (London, 1968), 2.
- 47 On Denis’s attitude toward Péladan, see Di Pasquale, “La Crise Catholique,” 140–42.
- 48 Pincus-Witten, *Les Salons de la Rose Croix, 1892–1897*, Introduction, n.p.
- 49 Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, chapter one.