

# At the Altar of Hypnos

Alexei Parshchikov

The Belgian painter Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) impresses me as a recognisable artistic character whose traits in various ways are manifest in the psychological make-up of our contemporaries. He is both a cosmopolitan and an introvert, an accomplished professional with a few works of genius to his name. At the same time, because of the wide range of his talent, he is an explorer of art's frontiers, a provocateur who mixes together painting, photography, and architecture. Being an introverted neurasthenic, a dandy and a mystic, Khnopff sought unity with the commonplace in his attempts to give tangible forms to the transcendental. In that respect he differed from those of his contemporaries who, in an attempt to express the universal, gave preference to mass media, ideology, and the like. But it is precisely in his case that we see no clear-cut counter-position in the choice of the means: Khnopff used postcards – the output of mass reproduction – as the original material with which he worked. Turning around the well-known dictum of Walter Benjamin, to the effect that an image loses its aura once it is mass-produced, one can say that Khnopff sought to return its aura to the matrix image.

Khnopff is regarded as a symbolist. He took part in the first exhibition of the Vienna secession in 1898, had an impact on Gustav Klimt, and was accepted by the young. However Khnopff chose not to follow that route. He created hundreds of faces which were variations on the female ideal originated by the Pre-Raphaelites – determined jaw, abundant wavy tresses, wide eyes, full, well-shaped lips and adornments of floral design. This image, introduced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morrison, and further developed by Gustav Klimt, Alphonse Mucha, Franz von Stuck, and Aubrey Beardsley, became the defining image of art *nouveau*. That image portrayed a wide variety of roles, symbolising the overt sensuality of the *femmes fatale*, the froideur of muses holding the scales of justice, awe-inspiring harpies and medusas. Khnopff's *Sleeping Medusa*, however, violates the canon of secession, staying in a deeper relation to the myth, if only because the painting does not follow the myth very closely (in Khnopff's version there are no snakes in the creature's hair, her body is covered with feathers, the eyes are half-closed, and she is depicted half-turned away). This is an elaborated symbol, an interpretation with a new riddle to it, rather than the use of a conventional image.

In 1886 the poet Jean Moreas published in *Le Figaro* the manifesto of Symbolism. Declared a successor to the demised Decadence, Symbolism became a subject of passionate debate: arguments around “art for art's sake” did not cease even after they led to pistols at dawn. There was, for example, a duel between Emon Picard, a playwright and critic of socialist leanings, and Albert Geer, an advocate of “pure art”; neither adversary was harmed in the incident. Such clashes of theories were, perhaps, best summed up by Gustave Kahn, a French critic and historian of literature: “Symbolism seeks to turn the subjective into the objective (embodiment of an idea), instead of turning the objective into the subjective (nature seen through a character) “. Emile Verharn wrote: “Ultimately he [Fernand Khnopff] treated

symbol as the highest expression of the unity of perception and feeling". Today, when society has tentatively developed an immunity to artistic manifestoes, we are prone to say that the history of symbolism is inseparable from Khnopff's aesthetics. And while we do not intend to restore consistently what the author himself meant to say, we can enjoy a considerably greater freedom when we turn to the potential of the language he used in his works.

With Fernand Khnopff we enter the era of art nouveau, the world of the bourgeoisie, which resembles the illustrations in the recently issued album of photographs by Paul Nadar who looked through his camera at the real prototypes of Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. There is not a single standard face in Nadar's collection, for the reason that they all seem to be marked by some obvious defect and by the mystery of their dislocation from their environment. Perhaps Khnopff saw similar characters around him (assuming poses, well dressed, stiff) and, judging by his self-portrait, he resembled them in appearance: a buttoned-up lover of hoax and idealism, with the looks of a punctilious engineer, who frequented "The Rose and Cross" (Rosicrucian) salons of Josephin Peladan, at that time the most celebrated occult guru in Paris. Khnopff systematically shrouded his daily life in secrets.

I would not claim that he did so in a carefully calculated manner, because all his rationalism seems to have gone into the fine detail. This is precisely the trait that gave his images not only duplicity of meaning, but also the power of amazing conviction. According to Verharn, Knopf's output is governed by humility, precision, and rationale.

Some biographical myths appear to be naive and hackneyed, based as they are on the model "my brother the famous pilot". Being an anglophile, Khnopff laid claim to British ancestry, despite a total absence of Anglo Saxon roots in his genealogy. He never sought to refute the myth of his personal acquaintance with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, even though his first visit to England took place some ten years after the painter's death, and his only contact had been with Rossetti's sister. Khnopff's father was a judge in Bruges, and belonged to an aristocratic Austrian family which had settled in Belgium in the sixteenth century. The family tomb can still be seen in the municipal cemetery bearing a coat of arms embellished with a gryphon. That mythical creature was Khnopff's personal symbol, and he included it among the decorations of his Altar of Hypnos. In 1900 he built that strange mini-altar in his studio as a temple of individualism, with the slogan "We rule only ourselves". The altar included a white bust of Hypnos on a pedestal, a creature with a blue wing at its temple: a copy of a bronze sculpture from the fourth century B.C.; the original is on display in the British Museum. Khnopff claimed that Hypnos was the only god whose reality he accepted. It is a known fact that Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century saw a widespread fascination with hypnosis and the techniques of spiritualism (witness Blavatsky, W. B. Yeats). The Belgian aristocracy chatted in whispers with Napoleon the Third; Charcot and Freud resorted to hypnosis in their psychotherapeutic practices. But to Khnopff Hypnos was also a symbol of oblivion, of a unique state, of a peculiar way of seeing and perceiving the nature of time.

Throughout his lifetime Khnopff avoided visiting Bruges: he believed the memories of his childhood might be sullied by the changed appearance of the city. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century the city of Bruges was indeed already turning into a tourist attraction, allowing less and less space for the atmosphere that had once permeated the house of the Khnopff family. As his biographer puts it, life in that household “ran its course in two or three rooms, while the salons were used only once a year for an official reception; the rest of the time they remained locked up until the following year”. The three-storey house was surrounded by water, its windows opening almost level with the sluggishly flowing canal: a view that was conducive to meditation and melancholic moods. In about 1907 the painter was nevertheless obliged to visit Bruges. The story has it that upon his arrival he hired a cab at the railway station, and traversed the city wearing glasses with specially prepared black lenses that prevented him from seeing anything. For forty years he had been reproducing, from memory and photographs, views of Bruges in numerous series. Frequently he depicted absolutely desolate groups of houses, neat and well kept, with no human figures in view, and no sign of animals or vegetation: buildings immersed in silent counting of their bricks and adornments. *An Abandoned City* (1904) is the best work in the series of imagined views of Bruges.

Some of Khnopff's canvases, realistic at first glance, contain symbols or, more exactly, outlines of symbols, echoes which merely “seep through” and die out at the axial compositional points of a painting. The symbolic nature of the surroundings is not necessarily transformed into a conventional symbolic sign. The painting entitled *I Shall Shut the Door behind Me* is an example of an almost mathematically precise compositional balance; its title comes from a line in a poem by Christina Rossetti, sister of the Pre-Raphaelite painter, who, before her marriage was Khnopff's model. The combined fragments of a landscape, esoteric signs and decorative forms are subjugated to a certain order, which creates an expectation of meaning. But what kind of meaning? Khnopff found it difficult to answer such questions. In addition to general geometrical images associated with the ideas of Plato, the space of the painting contains specific, individual forms. A young woman rests her head on her hands which are clasped on top of a pile of manuscripts lying on the table. Three individual lilies create vertical divisions of the painting. There are two windows, and the viewer can tell with certainty that the window on the right faces a street, but it is more difficult to determine whether the left portion of the painting shows an interior or exterior space, or the interior of some part of another building. Several possible perspectives end up being unrelated to each other. Frederic Lin, author of an article in the catalogue, believes Khnopff used the technique of montage when he arranged individual symbols, and thus introduced elements of collage, as well as methods characteristic of Cubism and cinematography.

Evidence of the montage technique can also be found in another well-known pastel on paper, entitled *Remembrances. Tennis* (1889). The economy of means is generally admired, but not everything is reducible: for example, the number of players on a football field cannot be reduced. Art, however, can resort to exaggeration: on a green court with a high horizon seven female tennis players form a figurative composition; in reality there was only one woman, Margaret, the painter's sister

and muse. All the cloned figures are rendered with the exactitude of realistic photography, and are clad in subdued, tobacco-coloured thin dresses; six figures with headgear, one bare-headed. The women are looking in different directions, unaware of one another. The absence of colour contrast absorbs and “guides” the eye, underscoring the alienation of the characters. A seven-fold exposition? The operative human memory which can retain only seven bits of information (even though Khnopff could not have been aware of this fact)? Or is this a technique adopted from familiarity with the studies of Leonardo? (The old master was in the habit of drawing human heads or hands, or horses, in different positions, and strewing them on a sheet as if they all belonged to the same body.) Or are these the seven stars of the Big Dipper? The astral symbolism is clearly present here. Tennis is a game that requires a ball, the centre of the Universe. Six Characters in *Search of an Author*? And “six” here is of no consequence, nor does it matter that Luigi Pirandello and his play came later, though in a general sense he and Khnopff were contemporaries. Both Pirandello and Khnopff had anticipated the twentieth century psychologists’ treatment of personality as a multitude of characters who act subconsciously. Time is perceived as something disrupted and non-linear; this is the way our memory moves, by associations.

In *Caresse*, one of Khnopff’s most famous works (which Matthew Barney used in his *Cremaster 4*), a sphinx with the face of a woman (modelled on Khnopff’s sister Margaret) and the body of a leopard (the medieval symbol of lust) is clinging to an androgynous youth who holds a spear. The sphinx’s eyes stare into infinity; in the background one sees an ancient parched Mediterranean landscape and a wall with cabbalistic writings on it. The androgynous youth is an Oedipus, again with the features of Khnopff’s sister Margaret. This scene is open to a variety of interpretations from the sublime to the most pedestrian. For example: only an androgyne, i.e. vanquished sexuality, can safely stay in the proximity of feminine beauty whose soul belongs to the devil. Khnopff’s treatment is simpler and more practical: the painting contains the allegory of choosing between power and pleasure.

The Belgian Royal Museum of Fine Arts took several years to prepare the exhibition of Fernand Khnopff’s works. Periodically the project was put in doubt because of budgetary difficulties. No assistance whatever was provided by the government. It is all the more amusing, therefore, to learn from the painter’s biography that in the period between 1903 and 1914 he had been engaged in decorating the municipal Registry Office and, despite insistent offers, had refused to accept payment for his work.