

Fairies, Passive Female Sexuality, and Idealized Female Archetypes at the Salons of the Rose + Croix

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Article abstract

Les Salons de la Rose-Croix (1892–1897) intégraient des éléments catholiques et occultistes, et visaient généralement à présenter un art idéaliste qui saurait élever la société à une époque perçue comme dégénérante. Les salons incluaient une grande variété d'images représentant des archétypes féminins idéalisés, dont des fées, des muses et des vierges. Le meneur du groupe, l'écrivain Joséphin Péladan, rédigea un guide pour les femmes dans lequel il dépeignit la fée type comme un exemple positif, parce qu'elle pratiquait uniquement une sexualité passive et charitable. Les oeuvres exposées rompent avec les hiérarchies et les types de Péladan en incorporant une gamme de références sur le rôle de la sexualité, les liens à la littérature et l'adoption de doctrines religieuses particulières. Malgré l'objectif idéaliste que partagent ces oeuvres, des variantes dans le modèle féérique mettent en évidence la présence de divergences au sein du groupe et d'écart par rapport aux publications de Péladan.

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1. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted. This article developed out of portions of the author's dissertation: Mary Slavkin, "Dynamics and Divisions of the Salons of The Rose-Croix: Statistics, Aesthetic Theories, Practices, and Subjects" (PhD diss., City University of New York, Graduate Center, 2014).

The Salons of the Rose + Croix (1892–1897) included a wide range of images of idealized female archetypes.¹ One stated goal of these events was to create social improvement in a time of perceived degeneration by exhibiting Catholic and occult idealist art. While the Salons never clarified exactly what this social reform would entail or how it would occur, it would certainly have included a rejection of secularism, feminism, and positivism. The Salons of the Rose + Croix were founded by the writer Joséphin Péladan and displayed more than a thousand works by over two hundred artists across six years of exhibits. Some artists displayed images of femmes fatales and other dangerous women, but the exhibited works mostly reflected Péladan's call for idealism as a means of promoting social improvement.² Often these images focused on female ideals, reflecting many contemporary theories in which improving fin de siècle women would combat degeneration and the horrors of modern life. Rather than depicting their female contemporaries, most artists exhibiting at the Rose + Croix turned to historical and mythological figures, creating archetypes to model idealism for women.³ These artists turned to literature, history, and religion, seeking stable categories and forming archetypes to differentiate between the ideal and dangerous, the spiritual and material, and the asexual and lustful appreciation of women. Nevertheless, instead of creating fixed categories of female figures with clearly delineated boundaries, artists elaborated on and conflated these varied, complex archetypes, producing a range of interpretations of fairies, muses, and visionary saints. In their images of fairies, the artists built on a variety of contemporary ideas tied to literature, sexuality, and nature, while sometimes deviating from the founder's specific conception of the idealized, sexually passive fairy.

In developing their positive female archetypes, these artists struggled with a variety of issues, including: how to depict sexuality, the roles of specificity and stylization, and the importance of feminine passivity. They tended to avoid references to contemporary life, creating idealized, stylized types and suppressing individualism—even when depicting specific historical figures. Sexuality was a key issue, as a variety of popular theories, including Rosicrucian ones, associated sex with the physical, natural, feminine realm, in opposition to the higher, spiritual, asexual, male plane. Building on their idealist principles, these artists generally believed that physical beauty was tied to spiritual purity, so their ideal archetypes needed to be beautiful, in addition to being asexual. However, reflecting Péladan's theories, they occasionally incorporated passive

2. Although artists exhibited many images of femmes fatales and androgynes at the Salons of the Rose + Croix, a full consideration of these types is beyond the scope of this article. For more on femmes fatales and androgynes at the Salons, see: Slavkin, 217–47.

3. The term archetype is used here to highlight the fin de siècle Neoplatonic belief in enduring gendered types from history, myth, legend, and religion, that revealed underlying character traits and tensions within all of society. For more on various archetypes in art, music, and psychology, see: Oreste F. Puciani, "The Universal Language of Symbolism," *Yale French Studies*, no. 9 (1952): 27–35; Cristina Santarelli and Peter W. Christie, "Female Archetypes in Belgian Surrealist Painting," *Music in Art* 36, no. 1/2 (2011): 31–26; Leo Treitler, "History and Archetypes," *Perspectives of New Music* 35, no. 1 (1997): 115–27; Mary Jo Meadow, "Archetypes and Patriarchy: Eliade and Jung," *Journal of Religion and Health* 31, no. 3 (1992): 187–95.

4. Patricia Townley Mathews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1, 86.

5. Mathews, 86, 90.

6. Mathews, 107.

7. In contrast to much of the scholarship on this group, this article focuses on the exhibiting artists and how their works diverged from Péladan's directives. Robert Pincus-Witten's dissertation (published in 1976) on Péladan and the Rose + Croix set the tone for scholarship on the group and remains an essential source, though the author's focus on Péladan and the chronology of the movement minimizes the importance of the artists and their production. While this key work filled an important gap in the literature at the time, the author devotes more attention to the founder than the group dynamics, the exhibited works, and the themes and artists. Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de La Rose-Croix* (New York: Garland, 1976). For other examples of this emphasis see: Jean da Silva, *Le Salon de la Rose Croix: 1892-1897* (Paris: Syros-Alternatives, 1991); Rodolphe Rapetti, *Symbolism*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 88–91. Similarly, while Vivien Greene notes that discussions of the Salon should not focus solely on Péladan, she still frames her essay around Péladan, his theories,

sexual availability into these types, especially in the case of images of fairies. In general, the group's positive archetypes usually placed women in a supportive role, highlighting their position as aids to masculine transcendence and spiritual improvement. These ideal feminine archetypes generally functioned as passive, meditative figures located at the beginning of the path to transcendence, helping the male poets along on their spiritual journeys.

As Patricia Mathews discusses in *Passionate Discontent*, Symbolists perceived a breakdown of clear gender divisions in their society and anxiously responded by seeking to categorize gendered types.⁴ She argues that three extreme types developed at this time: the femme fatale, the pure woman, and the male androgyne.⁵ Mathews ties the development of these tropes to masculine anxieties regarding women's increasing public roles, the New Woman, and feminist rejections of traditional gender roles.⁶ Within the Rose + Croix, these types developed even more complex subdivisions. Rather than exhibiting only one type of pure woman, the participating artists further categorized ideal women into specific types, including the fairy, the muse, and the visionary saint. Even within the category of fairies, the artists diverged in terms of their specific characterization of the archetype's sexuality, passivity, and idealism.

Of the extant works shown at the Rose + Croix, religious scenes and images of muses, pure women, and other ideal female archetypes outnumbered the femme fatale and the male androgyne. While this article focuses on the varied depictions of fairies, images of dangerous women and asexual men do highlight some key conflicts and divergences among the artists and between the exhibitors and Péladan.⁷ These multivalent pieces promoted specific gendered types for general consumption while also disseminating esoteric imagery that initiates could experience in a more nuanced and varied fashion. The androgyne was generally tied to Idealist concepts while the femme fatale was more closely associated with ideas of decadence and degeneration.

During the late nineteenth century and in recent scholarship, artists focusing on idealism and social improvement have often been framed in opposition to those emphasizing decadence.⁸ While many artists aligned themselves with only one of these tendencies, others treated decadence and idealism as dialectically opposed concepts that worked in concert because of their opposition. Thus, artists who exhibited with the Rose + Croix such as Jean Delville and Fernand Khnopff regularly responded to both extremes instead of choosing one. While Péladan often stated that the goal of the Rose + Croix was to improve society, he also wrote that society was beyond salvation and the Salons existed purely to create one last spectacle of the Latin Race.⁹ He referred to this pessimistic view less frequently, yet such a major divergence reveals a broader divide in terms of the group's theories.¹⁰ The main purpose of the Salons was certainly reformist and redemptive, but Péladan's nebulous attitude actually wavered between extremes; he alternately argued either that art would redeem society or that it could not be saved. Exhibited works at the Salons reflected these theories, with some images depicting idealized female archetypes or the pure asexual male androgyne, while others included decadence, degeneration, and the femme fatale.

Many of the exhibited images of positive female ideals were located within landscapes. Fairies were traditionally situated outdoors and muses generally

and his rules. Vivien Greene, "The Salon de La Rose + Croix: The Religion of Art," in *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de La Rose Croix in Paris, 1892-1897*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017), 16–24, 30.

8. For example, Michelle Facos writes that: "Whereas pessimistic Decadent artists believed humanity to be in the final, desperate throes of its inevitable obsolescence, optimistic Idealist artists saw salvation in the natural and supernatural world. ... Idealist artists believed in the power of art to stimulate improvement; unlike Decadents, who were content to watch the world collapse, Idealists sought to reverse the bleak state of contemporary affairs." Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 91. For another discussion of Symbolist art and Decadence, see: Rapetti, *Symbolism*, 133–43.

9. Joséphin Péladan, *Salon de la Rose-Croix: règles et monitoires* (Paris: Dentu, 1891), 7; Joséphin Péladan, "Le Salon de La Rose + Croix," *Le Figaro*, no. 245 (September 2, 1891): 1. Péladan's divergent positions regarding social change are also apparent in his literary output, in which he tended to vacillate between focusing on a celebration and an idealist reformation. Péladan's *Latin Decadence* is a series of fifteen novels which incorporates autobiographical characters, astrological elements, and a wide variety of plots and subjects, all within his larger project of depicting the downfall of the Latin Race by showing the depths to which French society had fallen. Laurinda S. Dixon, "Art and Music in the Salons de La Rose + Croix, 1892-1897," in *The Documented Image: Visions in Art History*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg et al. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 172.

10. Further complicating the fact that Péladan framed the group in opposition to contemporary degeneration, Max Nordau actually discussed Péladan and his mysticism as examples of this tendency in his influential *Degeneration*. Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 220–24. Péladan generally focused on issues of Idealism, but degeneration was a widespread fear at the fin de siècle, as addressed in the extensive literature on it, including: Fae Brauer and Serena Keshavjee, eds., *Picturing Evolution and Extinction: Regeneration and Degeneration in Modern Visual Culture* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015); Anthea

provided male viewers with a connection to the ideal natural realm. In her book, Mathews argues that the pure woman was regularly tied to uncontrolled nature and contrasted with the masculine ideal and his higher, spiritual plane.¹¹ However, in images exhibited at the Rose + Croix, artists usually depicted these ideal archetypes as silent, meditative figures in stylized, beautiful natural landscapes. These surroundings certainly tied women to the lower material realm, while male poets were able to ascend to higher spiritual planes. However, nature was rarely depicted as truly wild or uncontrolled. Instead, the artists regularly depicted these ideal archetypes as muses who could connect men to the higher realms through their inherent relationship with an idealized version of nature.

In addition to these varied images of women, the role of female artists at the Salon was also a divisive issue. Péladan specifically prohibited the exhibition or creation of artworks by women artists, writing in the group's rules: "Following Magical Law no work by a woman will ever be exhibited or executed by the Order."¹² However, at least five women showed works at the Salons: Maggie Boehmer-Clark, Delphine Arnould de Cool, Héléne Cornette, Judith Gauthier, and Antoinette de Guerre.¹³ Yet, the Rose + Croix's strict prohibition against any exhibitions by female artists was written in the group's manifesto, added as a postscript to its twenty-seven fundamental rules, and included in the renewal rules each year.¹⁴ As with their restriction against female exhibitors, the topic of the artists' female archetypes was actually highly complex and deviated from some of the principles and concepts laid out by the founder.

Fairies and Passive Sexuality

Several artworks exhibited at the Rose + Croix depict fairies and Péladan regularly referenced the type. Generally, these figures are more sexualized than a muse or saint, but less aggressive than a femme fatale. Images of them tend to be positive, but unlike the other idealized archetypes, these figures often display a high degree of sexual availability. The fairy is a complex and unusual type because she is often simultaneously characterized as both sexual and pure, since she is passive. While femmes fatales aggressively attack or use their sexuality to entrap men, fairies only passively allow poets to engage in sexual acts. The exhibited works specifically featuring fairies all illustrate stories, novels, or legendary tales. This highlights the literary source of this type, as well as the artists' reliance on references to written narratives to explain the fairies' combination of purity and sexuality.

Fairies were a common trope in Victorian England, but they became less common by the end of the century and they were significantly less widespread in late nineteenth century France. In England, the prevalence of fairies was certainly tied to a resurgent interest in the supernatural and a fear of increasing secularism.¹⁵ In a time of industrialization, fairies served as an escape, evoking a beautiful, natural, erotic dreamland.¹⁶ Fairies were often associated with medieval legends and folklore, as well as being tied to an interest in science and natural history.¹⁷ In contrast to the larger, more humanoid fairies associated with the Rose + Croix, the Romantic fairy was typically a small, melancholy, winged magical creature.¹⁸ Victorian fairies certainly included erotic elements and critiqued the social and political roles played by contemporary women.¹⁹

Callen and Fae Brauer, eds., *Art, Sex and Eugenics: Corpus Delecti* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-1918* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman, *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). c.1848-1918 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993

11. Mathews, *Passionate Discontent*, 92-95.

12. "P.S.—Suivant la loi Magique aucune œuvre de femme ne sera jamais ni exposée ni exécutée par l'Ordre." Péladan, *Salon de la Rose-Croix: règles et monitoires*, 14.

13. For more on these artists, see: Slaykin, "Dynamics and Divisions of the Salons of The Rose-Croix," 202-17. Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond has previously noted that two women exhibited at the events, building on research by Christophe Beaufils on de Guerre and by Laure Stasi on Gauthier. Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, "Female Metamorphoses in the Artistic Imagination," in *Myths and Mysteries: Symbolism and Swiss Artists*, ed. Valentina Anker and Carole Perret (Paris: Somogy Art Publishers, 2013), 79-80; Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, "Jeanne Jacquemin, Peintre et Égérie Symboliste," *Revue de l'Art* 3, no. 141 (September 2003): 74 n53.

14. The format and numbering of the rules changed from year to year—for example, in the second year, this statement was included as rule seventeen, out of a total of nineteen—however, the wording generally remained the same. Joséphin Péladan, *l'ème geste esthétique: catalogue du salon de la Rose Croix: Catalogue officiel: Illustré de 160 dessins: du second Salon de la Rose Croix, avec la Règle esthétique et les constitutions de l'Ordre* (Paris: Librairie Nilsson, 1893), XLV; Joséphin Péladan, *Ordre de la rose + croix du temple et du Graal: VIème geste esthétique: sixième salon: catalogue* (Paris: Imp. Georges Petit, 1897), 35.

15. Nicola Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

16. Bown, 96.

17. Bown, 5-6, 8; Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-5.

The larger and wingless fairies exhibited at the Rose + Croix were often visually indistinguishable from humans and can only be identified as fairies by the titles and subjects of the artworks. In contrast to the Victorian imagery, these artists often more directly situated the fairy as a sexually available role model for women, while emphasizing that her correct place was within nature.

Péladan's system included complicated explanations and rankings regarding the role of sexuality and the various specific gendered types.²⁰ The most positive figure was the androgyne, who was based on the unified male and female figure from occult and alchemical theories. The androgyne was generally considered a complete synthesis of male and female, so that it could be identified as neither a masculine woman nor a feminine man. Eliphas Lévi included this figure as the frontispiece for the second volume of his *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*.²¹ He wrote that it represented the synthesis of good and evil, a combination of various animals, and the unification of male and female.²² In contrast to these dual-gendered types, the male androgyne played a key role in Péladan's theories—he argued that androgynous male figures were superior to overly masculine ones and even wrote: "I propose this aesthetic theory: *The androgyne is the plastic ideal*."²³ Yet despite Péladan's emphasis on the androgyne, the Salons focused on images of women, including only a comparatively small number of androgynous male figures, as well as some portraits of men.

In Péladan's system, androgynes have to be virgins, since they focus on spiritual transcendence and not material concerns.²⁴ Although they renounce sex, Péladan's androgynes are often highly sexual. Explaining this, A. J. L. Busst wrote that, in Péladan's novels, androgynes engage in "cerebral lechery," since they are disillusioned by the exterior world and their refined sexual tastes are more completely fulfilled by their fantasies than by reality.²⁵ Thus, "although fully aware that reality cannot satisfy his craving, [he] does not cease to desire. On the contrary; continually unsatisfied and continually solicited, his desires only become stronger."²⁶ Thus, Péladan's ideal beings are physically pure, but often engage in more intense imaginary sexual activities. Péladan's novels incorporate a high degree of sexuality, despite the author's idealism. However, this sexuality can often be termed as highly refined, imaginary, or not explicitly tied to the physical sexual act, so that it remains within the ideal, cerebral realm.

For Péladan, the female equivalent of an androgynous male was a gynander, a negative form of a masculine woman. On the other hand, his concept of a fairy could serve as a positive ideal for contemporary women. In *How one becomes [a] fairy*, a guidebook for women, Péladan identified the fairy as both physically and spiritually beautiful and framed her as the panacea for the evils afflicting contemporary women.²⁷ Since he also wrote that male group members should no longer engage in sexual activity in order to focus on transcendent ideals, the group could "open to women the way of the fairy in compensation for amorous activity."²⁸ (While it reveals the group's theoretical concerns, this policy would only have applied to full group members, and not to the exhibiting artists.) For Péladan, in order to become a fairy, a woman did not need to forgo sex entirely, but she needed to form her own "sexual personality" around charity, focusing on male desire and renouncing any

18. Bown, *Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, 5–6, 8.

19. Bown, 18–24, 96.

20. Notably, Péladan's views are not necessarily representative of larger occult concepts and practices. For an overview of the history and development of occult approaches to gender, see: Jay Johnston, "Gender and the Occult," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher H. Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2016), 681–91.

21. Eliphas Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Paris: H. Baillière, 1861).

22. Eliphas Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, vol. 1 (Paris: H. Baillière, 1861), vi–vii.

23. "Je propose ce theorem esthétique: L'androgynie est l'idéal plastique." Joséphin Péladan, "L'Esthétique à l'exposition Nationale Des Beaux-Arts (3^e et Dernier Article)," *L'Artiste*, December 1883, 433. Another important figure is the gynandre. Jonathan Krell argues that two of Péladan's novels, "*L'Androgynie* and *La Gynandre* treat the two usual incarnations of the androgynie—on the one hand the ephébe or the young effeminate man, who has a positive value for Péladan, on the other the virile woman, [a] cheater [who is] always negative." Jonathan Krell, "Une Mélusine Décadente: La Fée Selon Joséphin Péladan," in *Mélusine: moderne et contemporaine*, ed. Arlette Bouloumié and Henri Béhar (*L'Age d'Homme*, 2001), 99. Pincus-Witten considered the androgynie "one of Péladan's principal esthetic obsessions" and described Péladan's androgynie as neutral, divine, and the "least imperfect definition of God." Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 43–44.

24. "L'Androgynie n'existe qu'à l'état vierge: à la première affirmation du sexe, il se résout au mâle ou au féminin. Cette aurore de la beauté et de l'âme n'est que l'indication terrestre de l'angélique splendeur: cela nous aide à concevoir la série spirituelle." Joséphin Péladan, *L'androgynie* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1891), 38.

25. A. J. L. Buust, "The Image of the Androgynie in the Nineteenth Century," in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. Ian Fletcher (New York: Routledge, 1990), 44–45.

26. Buust, 46.

27. "Lorsque la femme officie d'une façon permanente le rite de la double beauté physique et morale, non vis-à-vis d'un être mais de tous les êtres, elle est fée." Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. Comment on devient fée: érotique* (Paris: Chamuel, 1892), 96.

personal sexuality.²⁹ This combination of purity and sexuality complicates both Péladan's theories regarding fairies and the associated artworks, which display a range of interpretations of this type.

In his guidebook, Péladan explained the hermetic principle behind the idea that only men were capable of a deep understanding of immortal truths. According to Péladan, the angels split apart the androgynous being Adam-Eve in order to create two individuals and two sexes. In the process, they had to divide three elements among the two new beings—corporeality, the soul, and the immortal spirit. The spirit could not be split, so Adam retained all of this, while the angels allowed the corporeal element, including beauty, to predominate with Eve. Thus, men are a ternary form with an immortal spirit alongside their soul and corporeal being, while women remain binary creatures who are more focused on passion and are incapable of understanding the eternal.³⁰

Alexandre Séon exhibited at least two depictions of fairies at the Salons, one showing the fairy Mélusine and the other depicting the Fée des Grèves (Fairy of the Shores).³¹ Breaking from Péladan's view of the fairy, Séon did not depict her as an improved version of a contemporary woman. Instead, in his *Fée des Grèves*, | **fig. 1** | the female figure serves as a fairy whose non-human nature releases her from social restrictions, allowing her to become a seductive siren.

Séon's *Fée des Grèves* highlights some of the contradictions in Péladan's system. If this figure offers her breasts out of charity instead of personal desire, then she has transformed into Péladan's epitome of femininity, who has evolved beyond her bodily, sexual desires to become more spiritual and magical. This is presumably the principle that Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond builds on when he argues that, in this work, the fée "appears as the quintessence of a spiritual femininity."³² However, Péladan claimed that full group members would not engage in sex and that men could only achieve the highest rank, that of the androgynie, by remaining virgins.³³ Thus, within Péladan's system, the fée should remain sexually available but also modest and demure, thus escaping her animalistic, sexual nature and allowing the poet to attain his transcendent goals.

In contrast to Péladan's conception of the fairy, Séon did not depict the *Fée des Grèves* as a super-human figure who had evolved beyond her bodily, sexual desires to become more spiritual and magical. Séon's fée is not the role model Péladan suggested for contemporary women. She does not forgo her sexual, physical nature to focus on supporting the mage in his quest for the eternal. Rather than looking down, she gazes expectantly at the poet. She does not modestly support his focus on immaterial ideas. Instead, she distracts him, so that he gazes downward, away from eternal ideas and toward the flesh. She frames her breasts with her hands, offering them to him. In addition to her immodest offering, Séon highlights her animality by depicting the scales on her legs, revealing her animal essence. While she does not aggressively attack him like a femme fatale, she entraps him with her offering, thus keeping him focused on the base, material world. Séon's fée is neither a femme fatale nor Péladan's spiritual, supportive fée. Instead, she is closely aligned with the animal, material world.

Figure 1. Alexandre Séon, *Fée des Grèves*, 1896. Chalk and graphite on paper, 36.5×25.6 cm. Saint-Etienne Métropole, Musée d'art moderne. Photo: reproduced from *Alexandre Séon: La Beauté Idéale*, Milan, 2015.

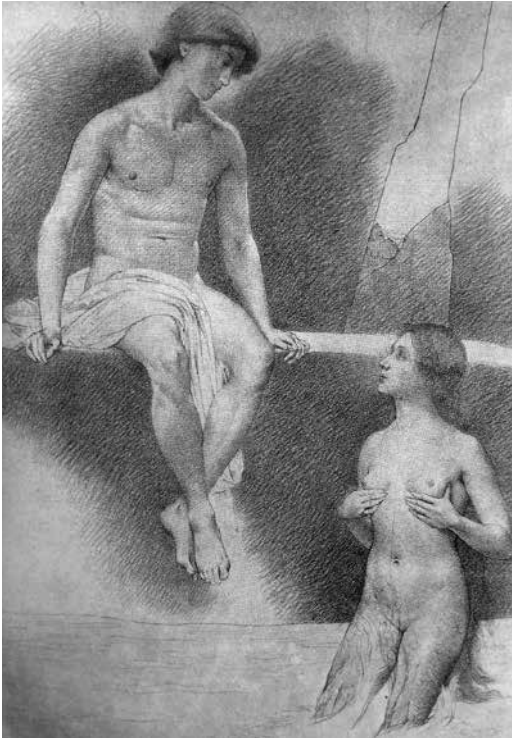


Figure 2. Alexandre Séon, *La Sirène*, 1896. Oil on canvas, 90×71 cm. Musée d'Art Moderne-Saint-Etienne. Photo: reproduced from *Alexandre Séon: La Beauté Idéale*, Milan, 2015.



This work is not the only instance when Séon depicted a sexually available female type. The artist used a very similar pose in his *La Sirène*. | **fig. 2** | As in *Fée des Grèves*, this woman reveals her animalistic nature with her barely-visible scales. As a non-human figure, she is immodest and does not attempt to hide her nudity. In this work, she offers pearls and coral instead of her breasts. Both offerings are tied to the natural, uncivilized, female world, and both offerings trap poets as they strive for transcendence. In discussing this work, Jumeau-Lafond characterizes the siren as a positive, elevated symbol set in a contemporary setting. He argues that the artist reversed the traditional meaning of this myth, so that the siren saves travelers. He bases this argument on the facts that Séon used a vertical composition and that this specific type of boat was associated with the artist's favored Isle of Bréhat, so that, "the seductions deployed by his character to attract the traveler, her nudity, her singing, the pearls and coral that she exhibits, embody the attractions of a wild and mysterious nature, opposed to civilization and its illusions..."³⁴

As Jumeau-Lafond argues, Séon's boat design situates the work outside of mythological times. However, the artist's love of the Isle of Bréhat allows for a multitude of readings beyond the argument that the artist intentionally inverted the myth. Additionally, while Séon sometimes used a vertical composition to symbolize idealism, he also sometimes situated negative, animalistic portrayals of female figures in a vertical composition.³⁵ In addition to the historical moral message of the myth of the siren, in Symbolist and Rosicrucian thought, the wild and mysterious nature associated with the uncivilized feminine generally symbolized a negative future for the man who steered his boat toward those shores. Thus, in both *Fée des Grèves* and *La Sirène*, Séon's women serve as warnings that, because of their sexual natures, these idealized beings are threats to the mage's quest for spiritual focus.

Séon's title clearly references Paul Féval's 1850 novel *Fée des Grèves*.³⁶ This work is set during the Hundred Years War and incorporates a Breton legend of a fairy of the shores. In this novel, however, the fairy does not actually appear—the woman who is repeatedly conflated with the fairy is actually a veiled sixteen-year-old noblewoman, Reine de Maurever. When the townspeople retell the legend, the fairy is specifically identified by her blue cloak and crown with stars.³⁷ According to this legend, if a man was able to capture the fairy, she had to give him whatever he asked for. For Féval, the fairy served a positive, asexual role, since the men in the story did not ask for sexual favors.³⁸ While viewers would certainly have associated Séon's work with Féval's well-known novel, the fairy in Séon's image does not clearly reference the clothed princess from the story and serves a completely different function, tempting the man instead of aiding him.

Another exhibited depiction of a fairy is André des Gachons' *Après la chair point désirée*, | **fig. 3** | which illustrated a story in which the fairy is a chaste, nude vision of a saint. The tale was written by the artist's brother, Jacques des Gachons, and dedicated to Péladan. The full title—*Après la chair point désirée, mais seulement admirée* (After the flesh, nothing desired, but only admired)—highlights the moral that this beauty is only for the purpose of asexual admiration. The story incorporates beauty as a key attribute of fairies/female saints. The main character, a prince, is dedicated to Saint Cecilia and has respectful

28. "Ouvrir aux femmes la voie de féerie en compensation de l'activité amoureuse qu'on arrête." Joséphin Péladan, *Constitutions de la Rose-Croix, le Temple et le Graal* (Paris: Secrétariat, 1893), 25.

29. "En face du monde, la femme doit être une coquette, qui ne sourit qu'aux idéalités, et, gardienne du goût, combattre tout le vulgaire, afin que sa personnalité sexuelle s'entoure de prestige et le rende apte à donner du bonheur aux simples selon la loi de charité qui ne contredit point à la bienfaisance de la beauté et à la faculté curative de grâce extérieure." Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. Comment on devient fée*, 83–84.

30. Joséphin Péladan, "Comment on Devient Fée," *L'Ermitage*, 1893, 35–37.

31. Mélusine was a legendary water spirit or fairy and featured in Péladan's novel of the same title. Séon created two extant images of Mélusine, including a frontispiece for Péladan's novel. Joséphin Péladan, *Mélusine* (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1895).

32. "...la fée dessinée par Séon apparaît comme la quintessence d'une féminité spirituelle." Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, "Catalogue Des Œuvres Exposées," in *Alexandre Séon (1855-1917), La Beauté Idéale* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2015), 184.

33. Péladan, *L'androgynne*, 38.

34. "les séductions déployées par son personnage pour attirer le voyageur, sa nudité, son chant, les perles et le corail qu'elle exhibe, incarnent les attraits d'une nature sauvage et mystérieuse, opposée à la civilisation et à ses illusions..." Jumeau-Lafond, "Catalogue Des Œuvres Exposées," 222.

35. See, for example, Séon's *La Province*.

36. Paul Féval, *La fée des grèves: œuvres de Paul Féval soigneusement revues et corrigées* (Paris; Brussels: V. Palmé; G. Lebrocqquy, 1877); Jumeau-Lafond, "Catalogue Des Œuvres Exposées," 184.

37. Féval, *La fée des grèves*, 42.

38. In the novel, the legendary fairy is described as able to give money and in one legend, she gives a man a trip across quicksand. Féval, 44.

Figure 3. André des Gachons, *Après la chair point désirée*, 1894. Photo: reproduced from *L'Album Des Légendes*, Paris, 1894.



visions of her as a nude fairy. Specifically, the prince has a vision in which: “Suddenly ... a radiant form that he had not imagined: a nude fairy with long golden hair ... passed him, graceful and chastely immodest ...”³⁹ Later, despite the prince’s respect for the saint, he is troubled by his own attachment to the flesh. A heavenly voice tells him that beauty is divine and instructs him to go back to the lake, where he sees St. Cecelia and a castle, in which he is initiated into unspecified musical and coloristic mysteries.⁴⁰ Here, the Christian fairy-saint aids the poet in developing a greater aesthetic and spiritual sensibility.

Rather than directly illustrating the narrative, André des Gachons combines elements, situating the nude, blonde, fairy in the foreground, leading the way through the lake toward the abandoned abbey-castle. In both the image and the text, chaste feminine beauty is situated at the beginning of a path of initiation. The beautiful fairy directs the initiate towards a greater knowledge of art and religion, which is located in the historical castle set in nature.

Deviating from the story, Gachons did not depict a cross on top of the castle. The written text clearly identifies the fairy as Saint Cecelia and notes the cross before even identifying the castle itself, stating that the prince saw the cross on top of the castle, knelt, and then walked toward the cross. Gachon’s illustration removes the clear Christian references from the narrative. In this image, the castle is not clearly topped by a cross or identified as an abbey. Here, inspiration is more closely aligned with history than with religion.

39. “Tout à coup, il se détacha de l’arbuste, quintessence de songes, une forme radieuse qu’il n’avait point imaginée : une fée nue aux longs cheveux d’or, et qui passa devant lui, gracieuse et chastement impudique... Elle alla vers le bois, vers la lac...” Jacques des Gachons, “Après La Chair Entrevue Point Désirée Mais Seulement Admirée,” in *L’Album Des Légendes* (Paris: Edmond Girard, 1894), 79.

40. Gachons, 79–82.



Figure 4. Armand Point, *Au bord de l'Eurotas*, 1892. Oil on Canvas, 80×100 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Wikimedia.

Gachons' characterization of this fairy is not as straightforward as the idealized, positive role she plays in the story. She is not clearly depicted as chaste, as she has a forthright gaze and self-consciously touches her hair. As argued by Delphine Durand, despite the woman's youthful innocence and lack of pubic hair, her provocative gaze highlights the role women played in Symbolist theories as temptresses.⁴¹ In addition to being a traditional means of depicting chaste nudity, the lack of pubic hair, when combined with the elision of a belly button, could be interpreted as a reference to her non-human status. Finally, in the story the nude saint/fairy clearly directs the prince toward the castle. In this illustration, the fairy could be interpreted as vaguely gesturing toward the lake that will lead the prince onward to the castle. However, a more straightforward interpretation of this pose is that the fairy serves to block the path of initiation and points downward, toward the material plane, rather than directing the male upward, toward the castle and transcendence.

Gachons' work references the concept of an initiatory pathway with the lowest, material level situated at the bottom, with water lilies growing out of the mud, and a series of obstacles keeping the viewer from reaching the uppermost level of mystical and religious knowledge. Rosicrucian, theosophical, alchemical, and many other occult practices are based in systems of initiation, in which upward progression often symbolizes the path initiates take from lesser to greater knowledge.⁴² As with Gachons' work, the exhibited artworks regularly depicted symbolic initiatory pathways or initiated figures, building on the occult idea of constant, lifelong revelations leading to the discovery of hidden knowledge. An emphasis on the vertical is key to many Rosicrucian doctrines—theories that Péladan personally built on when arguing in favor of verticality and in opposition to the horizontal. For Péladan, the horizontal referred to instinct, the movement of animals, and the negative

41. Delphine Durand, *André des Gachons et la modernité fin-de-siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 130–34.

42. For one recent discussion of the history and ideas of Rosicrucianism, see: Hereward Tilton, "The Rosicrucian Manifestos and Early Rosicrucianism," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher H. Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2016), 128–44.

feminine focus on love instead of elevation.⁴³ Many of the exhibited artworks incorporate these concepts, with a focus on pathways, vertical movement, and levels of progression.

As with Séon's *Fée des Greves*, Gachons' fairy is not an aggressive femme fatale. Instead, she combines a variety of references to idealized archetypes with sexual elements and temptations. In Séon's image, the fairy distracts the poet from focusing on transcendent ideals. Jacques des Gachons' fairy plays a more positive role, leading the initiate toward greater understanding. However, by removing references to religion, by sexualizing the fairy's gaze and pose, and by placing the fairy in the middle of the initiate's path, André des Gachons complicates a straightforward reading of this fairy. Without the title, the fairy's sexuality is not clearly read as serving a transcendent purpose. Though Péladan framed this archetype as the key goal for contemporary women, it was only occasionally exhibited at the Salons and the artists varied in terms of the extent to which they framed the fairy as positive, sexual, and pure.

Significantly, these images of fairies are not set within realistic or uncontrolled nature, but in stylized and simplified natural surroundings. Many of the idealized archetypes exhibited at the Salons showed women situated in nature, often contemplating its beauty while mirroring its forms, colors, and shapes. In fact, images of women walking through forests were so widespread at the Salons that in 1896, one anonymous reviewer wrote that at the Salon: "The majority of paintings represent shadowy forests [in which] walk angels, priestesses of mystical cults, women inspired to play the harp."⁴⁴ These women serve as muses since they help the poet or male viewer connect to nature and reach a higher spiritual state. These muses are often associated specifically with uncultivated and unsettled landscapes, but rarely to a truly uncontrolled wilderness.⁴⁵

One example of an exhibited work that breaks from this trope is Armand Point's *Au bord de l'Eurotas*. | **fig. 4** | In this work, the women cannot be considered idealized muses who connect the male viewer to nature, since the artist incorporates too much specificity into both the figures and the landscape. The women do represent the stages of life, showing the feminine progression from child to woman, yet the younger girl is too active to serve as a contemplative muse. In fact, Péladan criticized this work, precisely for its overabundance of specific detail, writing that an artist:

must be wary of the outdoors and the landscape, and he may learn to sacrifice his background to his figure. *Au bord de l'Eurotas* is an exquisite naked female figure ... but it would still be preferable if the substantive values and especially the importance given to the oleander [were] decreased. The grove has no interest in itself; not even technically.⁴⁶

For Péladan, paintings of muses should lead men to a higher natural plane. Thus, both the figures and their natural surroundings must appear as idealized types instead of specific individuals.

In *Au bord de l'Eurotas*, Point built on theories that tied women to a specifically uncontrolled nature.⁴⁷ While other exhibiting artists incorporated elements of these theories, they usually connected female archetypes to controlled, stylized natural settings instead of detailed, specific, and uncontrolled ones. This choice highlights the concept that women's ideal role was not just to

43. Joséphin Péladan, *L'art idéaliste et mystique: doctrine de l'ordre et du salon annuel des Rose + Croix* (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 68.

44. "La majeure partie des tableaux représente des forêts ombreuses où se promènent des anges, des prêtresses de cultes mystiques, des femmes inspirées jouant de la harpe. Cela est signé Chabras (sic), Osbert, Séon. Il faut croire que les forêts hantées sont très demandées." N.A., "Petits Salons," *Le Petit Parisien*, no. 7083 (March 19, 1896): 2.

45. Blumstein argues that in Osbert's works, nature is the main subject and the type of nature that the artist depicts is one tied to ancient times, without any buildings or labor. Neil Blumstein, "Le Peintre symboliste Alphonse Osbert et son époque" (Master's thesis, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1982), 48–49.

46. "...mais il faut qu'il se méfie du plein air et du paysage, et qu'il apprenne à toujours sacrifier son fond à sa figure. *Au Bord de l'Eurotas* est une exquise figurine de femme nue et que la lumière frappe à travers un dernier voile; forme, ligne, couleur, tout est à louer; mais ce serait encore préférable si les valeurs du fond et surtout l'importance donnée aux lauriers roses se diminuaient. Le bosquet n'a aucun intérêt en lui-même; pas même techniquement." Joséphin Péladan, *La rose + croix: organe trimestriel de l'Ordre. 2e trimestre* (Paris: Commanderie de Tiphereth, 1893), 8–9.

47. See Mathews for a broader discussion of theories regarding how the pure woman was tied to uncontrolled nature and contrasted with the masculine ideal. Mathews, *Passionate Discontent*, 92–95.

connect men to nature but, specifically, to aid them in contemplating stylized, beautiful natural forms, which were as close as possible to the higher astral planes. In *Au bord de l'Eurotas*, the figures are surrounded and overwhelmed by a profusion of varied natural elements. Compositionally, as noted by Péladan, the oleander overwhelms the human figures, revealing them to be no more significant than the plant life around them. For Péladan, this created an inappropriate emphasis on nature over the human figure. In contrast, in *Fée des Greves*, *Après la Chair*, and a host of other works exhibited at the Salons, the artists chose to merely suggest a stylized, simplified view of nature, using an outline to substitute for leaves and a few flowers to hint at the larger natural setting. These artworks set women in an open natural space, rather than the more controlled setting of a planned garden. Yet, the artists simplify the landscape to highlight the greater significance of human beings and to reference the ties between these natural forms and the ideal, underlying Forms.

Ranging from fairies to muses and virgins, artworks exhibited at the Rose + Croix incorporated a variety of ideal female archetypes. While some works included common types, like the *femme fatale* and the androgynous male figure, many of the exhibitors repeatedly showed artworks incorporating other, more nuanced idealized tropes. Images depicting these archetypes normally incorporated the same themes—including literary references and natural settings, and visionary elements. Despite these ties, the tropes varied widely as each artist sought to categorize and explain these female figures while negotiating the dangerous waters of idealism and decadence, spirituality and materialism, and lust and aestheticism.

These variations between the artists highlight the presence of schisms within the group and deviations from Péladan's published platforms. Generally, the exhibited pieces responded to Péladan's broad idealist goals. However, Péladan was a writer leading a group of artists and he produced few specific stylistic or aesthetic guidelines. While scholarly accounts of the Rose + Croix often focus on Péladan's published doctrines, the exhibited works actually reveal a range of varying themes and approaches. These female archetypes responded to the Rose + Croix's idealist platform, yet the images of fairies incorporate a range of variations in terms of the role of sexuality, literature, and specific religious doctrines. ¶