

Introduction to Kilpin's Symbolist Works

By Tusa Shea

Symbolism began in the 1880s as a literary movement in France which subsequently found expression throughout Europe in both music and the visual arts. As an international movement that encompassed more than one style of art, Symbolism can generally be seen as a response to a feeling of uncertainty which was aggravated by science and rationalism's increasing fragmentation of the world. Symbolism positioned itself on the intersection of reality and imagination, and focused on a mystical union between the visible and the invisible; between that which is secret and that which can be communicated; and between human beings and their place in the world.

In the tradition of William Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites, Symbolist painters often drew their imagery from poetry, myth and dreams. The Symbolists perpetuated the romantic image of the artist, which accentuated individuality, originality and creative inspiration. The artist became a spiritual conduit through which the mysterious and interior realms of dreams and the imagination could be tapped.

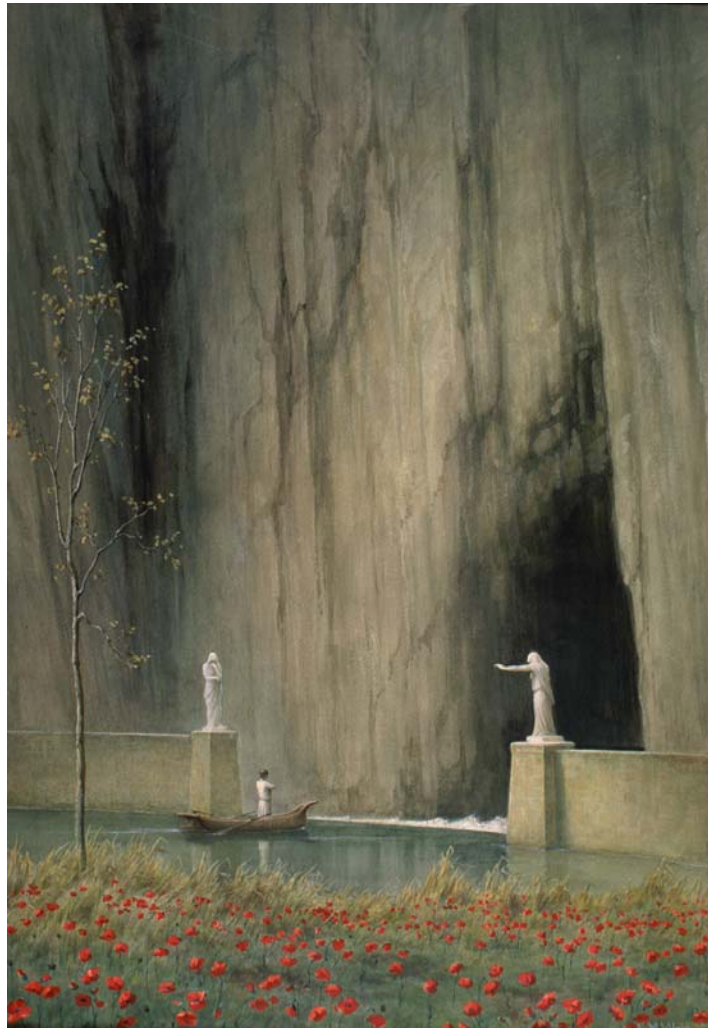
Lekh Kilpin occasionally turned to Symbolist themes for subject matter in his own paintings. Although there were other artists in Canada like Ozias Leduc who produced deeply spiritual and personal Symbolist paintings, Kilpin appears to have drawn less on personal symbols and looked more towards the abundant eclectic imagery that rose to popularity during the fin-de-siecle. In particular, Kilpin's work borrows freely from the nostalgic themes of Victorian Classicism and the Pre-Raphaelites.

Inspiration, 1915, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 cm



Though, for the most part, he worked as an art teacher, far from the realm of theorizing, Legh Kilpin appears to have believed in the romantic vision of the artist as the interpreter of elusive themes. In one of his most enigmatic paintings, entitled *Inspiration* he used personal and shared symbols to depict the intangible. In this painting, first shown at the Art Association of Montreal's spring exhibition in 1915, a shrouded figure kneeling in a field of flowers parts her veil to allow the diminutive levitating form of a nude man to reach out and touch her lips. There are a number of ways such a painting could be interpreted, however, central to its meaning is a belief in Ruskin's philosophy that nature is the place where inspiration can be found. It suggests that, although inspiration is mysterious and hidden, when the veil is finally parted, one can experience a transcendence of all materiality. The idea of one world opening onto another is a major theme in Symbolist art which figures prominently in Kilpin's work, and he often used the conceptual "parting veil" as a symbol of transcendence. Kilpin repeatedly addressed this intersection of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds through the depiction of imaginary landscapes and idealized women.

Gate of the Infinite, c. 1910, watercolour on paper, 72 x 52.5 cm



In an earlier painting entitled *Gate of the Infinite*, Kilpin constructed an imaginary landscape in which a portal opens to another world. Like an alternate view of Arnold Böcklin's *Island of the Dead*, *Gate of the Infinite* features a standing figure in a boat, silhouetted against sheer cliffs. The cliffs themselves are treated much like a drapery, which parts to reveal an infinite darkness into which the figure appears to be heading. Kilpin's painting is not simply derivative of Böcklin's, however, and it can be more accurately understood as an allusion to a popular quote from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* which states: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is – Infinite." More than just a shared emphasis on the word "infinite" makes Kilpin's painting a likely allusion to Blake's prose, for the previous passage is followed by the less quoted phrase: "For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

Two female statues stand as guardians on either side of this mysterious cavern. With their downcast and shrouded forms they resemble the central kneeling figure of the later *Inspiration*. These kinds of mysterious draped figures were popular in Victorian classical painting, especially in the work of George Frederick Watts and Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer. Like personifications of the anxieties plaguing society at that time, one figure contemplates, lost in an interior world, while the other alternately hails or warns with one arm outstretched in a strangely ambiguous gesture.

The Crystal Gazer, n.d., Oil on canvas, 81 x 60 cm, Langley Centennial Museum, 5892



The female figure, as either somnolent innocent or volatile force, dominated the art of the fin-de-siecle period. While he steered clear of the erotic femme-fatale, Kilpin often used images of serene, young women in his Symbolist and design works. *The Crystal Gazer*, which is undated, depicts a young girl in a white dress transfixed by a crystal ball. Her downcast, almost closed eyes emphasize her deep immersion in a hypnotic reverie. Behind her, a curtain parts to reveal the glowing flame of a lamp in the darkness. The lamp is a traditional Judeo-Christian symbol of the Church, which was also adopted by mystics as a symbol of spiritual awakening. As the curtain parts to reveal the lamp in the darkness, one world gives way to another.

The triangular shape of the parting curtain is echoed in the parting of the young girl's hair as it reveals the tranquil beauty of her face. This adolescent girl with her white dress and flowing hair is also poised on the brink of two worlds, between childhood and adulthood. She is a direct descendant of the PreRaphaelite heroine, and with her flowing silky hair and frontal pose, bears more than just a passing resemblance to Millais' popular painting *The Bridesmaid* of 1851. As many scholars have pointed out, the representation of women's hair features prominently in the art of the late 19th century. From the work of the PreRaphaelites to Art Nouveau poster designs, women's hair became a symbol of the dual feminine ideals of purity and sensuality.