
UOT 7.04

Olga SOSIK

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University

(Ukraine)

olhasosik@gmail.com

ICONOGRAPHY OF FEMALE IMAGES IN THE ART OF DECADENCE

Abstract. In the decadence painting of the second half of the XIX – early XX centuries, there is an entrenched iconography of female images, which combined the work of artists from different countries. It should be noted that the source of these images was English Pre-Raphaelites art, which had significant impact not only on European art but also on the works of some American artists. The mentioned artists laid the foundation for a new iconographic tradition of depicting female images that the Pre-Raphaelites began to impart to masculinity to emphasize their power and break the stereotype that existed in Victorian society. It implied the existence of only two types of female hypostasis – the pure and innocent guardian of the hearth or temptress, *Femme Fatale*, which was the epitome of sin and vice. The article reviews two foundational motives: a female androgyne, embodying the ambivalence of decadence concerning beauty, and the cult of a dead or immersed in a state of an occult trance female body, which was a concentration of eschatological fears of the unknowability of death.

Key words: decadence, *fin de siècle*, occultism, Pre-Raphaelite artists, Ophelia.

Introduction. When apocalyptic sentiments and sensations of the inevitable death of the familiar world began to grow among the artists of the second half of the 19th century, some of them rejected the romantic mythologema. It implied that “our world is only a faint reflection of that ideal world, which is beyond perception and which we can only dream of in our imperfection” (Maiorova, Skokov 2009, 59). Thus, the idea of Art for art’s sake, or “*l’art pour l’art*,” generated by romanticism, was transformed

by the decadents into a cult of artificial forms that personified beauty not only in virtues but also sang out the most hard-hitting personal aspects of human nature. This decadent opposition to nature was especially evident in the image of an androgynous woman who “becomes an absolutely artificial, barren and icy-erotic” creature that causes not sexual attraction, but “painfully contemplative adoration” (Kabanov 2009, 171).

Also, decadent art was characterized by “a close look at the psychology of a person, his unconscious desire to put an experiment on the human soul” (Kabanov 2009, 169). It served to raise the theme of death into an act of getting rid of imperfections in the real world.

Main research material

The emergence of a new iconographic canon of the image of a woman, which later became an integral component of fin de siècle art, is marked by the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, such as *Venus Verticordia* (Fig. 1) and *Astarte Syriaca* (Fig. 2). Female figures in the mentioned paintings represented a new type of woman, both sensual and indifferent. The features of androgyny, an absent gaze directed inwardly, and not at the viewer, deprived them of frank eroticism and signs of absolute virtue and innocence. Another characteristic feature of these works was the syncretism of pagan and Christian mythology, blurring the boundaries between sin and righteousness. It created an atmosphere of distinct mysticism that filled the gap that had arisen when the development of the natural sciences shook the position of religion but did not become a steady point of support. The heroines of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, full of inner grotesque, embodied the dichotomy and nihilism inherent in the worldview of people in the second half of the 19th century. So, in the painting “*Venus Verticordia*”, the artist skilfully beat the symbolism, creating a connecting thread between the image of the antique goddess and the biblical Eve. One of the elements that emphasize the dualism of the canvas is an apple - a fruit that seduced Eve, and at the same time was a matter of contention in ancient Greek mythology. The halo above the head of a half-naked woman eliminates the concept of holiness, and the arrow in her hand, considered a traditionally male symbol with phallic meaning, demonstrates the duality of her nature and superiority over the opposite sex.



Fig. 1. Venus Verticordia by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1864–1868.

Another classic example of the decadent art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Astarte Syriaca”, depicts a goddess who, in Phoenician mythology, was identified with her husband Baal as a single whole, as a result of which she personified both feminine and masculine. Besides, in the pre-Christian period, this goddess appeared in the image of the Mother Goddess, who, with the advent of monotheism, gradually transformed into a demonic entity D.G. Rossetti emphasized the ambivalence of nature of his heroine not only by her androgynous appearance but also by the image of two pagan priestesses accompanying her in the form of angels and a precious embellishment encircling Astarte in the form of a snake. It has two diametrically opposite characteristics - the embodiment of Devil in Christianity and a symbol of wisdom and fertility in antiquity.



Fig. 2. Astarte Syriaca by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1877.

The continuity of this iconographic exodus can be traced in the 1893 painting by German artist Franz von Stuck "The Sin" (Fig. 3). The artist portrays Eve, who had committed a lapse from virtue, succumbing to the temptation of the tempting snake which wraps around her body, merging together. Like Astarte, in the work of D. G. Rossetti, Eve's opinionated, almost repulsive look indicates the absence of remorse. Franz von Stuck rethought the traditional biblical storyline in a manner typical of the art of decadence and presented Eve not in the role of the victim, but from the standpoint of the winner. The acquired knowledge made her free and omnipotent.



Fig. 3. "The Sin" by Franz von Stuck. 1893.

This image of the "new woman" not only violated the existing boundaries of gender stereotypes but challenged accepted moral and social norms. According to the American scholar Camille Paglia, the dominant decadent art was "the reproduction of forms of female power. <...> response to the moral reappraisal of women in the culture of the 19th century <...>" (Paglia2006, 635).

As for the enthusiasm of decadent artists for depicting a dead female body, it was another attempt to resist wildlife, subject to inevitable withering and decay, and therefore not able to embody the ideal of eternal beauty. Thus,

the beauty in their paintings reached its climax precisely in death. Also, the icon of a beautiful dead woman was directed at the suppressing the fear of the finiteness of being, turning the death into the way of liberation from the shackles of the imperfect world. According to American researcher Professor Jonathan Stone, the unhealthy tendency of decadents to make bodies of the dead as their fetish was due to the desire to root death in the sensual reality of this world, to present it not as a frightening secret, but only as a subtle shift in being. “What is terrible in and attractive in <...> the living dead is precisely his physical presence in the world of the living” (Stone2018, 75).

This motif of the art of the fin de siècle era also originates in the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, who were the forerunners of decadence in painting. Thus, the images of three literary heroines – Ophelia, the Lady of Shalott and Elaine from Astolat were the main iconographic versions of women the deceased.

One of the first works that laid the foundation for a decadent obsession with the theme of death and nonexistence was Ophelia (Fig. 4), written by pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millet in 1851–1852. Ophelia's motionless, pale body contrasts with the bright, scrupulously written landscape, creating an atmosphere of the antinomy of life and death. An expression of ecstatic peace imprinted on her face creates an elevated, almost solemn atmosphere.



Fig. 4. “Ophelia” by Sir John Everett Millais. 1851–1852.

The same serenity and tranquillity are present on the canvas of the same name by the Dutch artist Antoon van Welie. In his work, Ophelia depicted in a

moment before death, but she is not frightened of her near demise. She seems to enjoy the moment and is looking forward to an immersion in non-existence.

The Belgian artists Albert Ciamberlani (Fig. 5) and Constantine Meunier (Fig. 6) approached the interpretation of the death of the mentioned heroine in another way. In their highly decadent paintings, they elevated to the cult not only death itself but also the suffering that preceded it. However, these works differ in composition and colour.

Albert Ciamberlani depicted a close-up of Ophelia's head with an unnaturally arched neck and a twisted suffering face, which indicates her dying agony. Fiery red strands of hair resemble flames that symbolize eternity, and a wilted flower on the chest illustrates the fragility of the beauty of all life.

Constantine Meunier, on the contrary, used a dark colour scheme, representing Ophelia's body cast ashore in a black mourning dress. Her deathly pale colour of skin almost merges with the grey-green shades of the sky reflected in the water, and fingers of the right hand deformed by the last cramp hint at a painful death. There are no flowers and plants traditional for this plot in the picture, which creates a feeling of emptiness and doom.



Fig. 5. "Ophelia" by Albert Ciamberlani, 1900. Fig. 6. "Ophelia" by Constantine Meunier, 1878.

Besides Ophelia, among the artists who stood at the origins of decadence, the images of two more deceased people floating on water – the Lady of Shalott from the eponymous ballad of Alfred Tennyson and her prototype, the heroine of Thomas Malory's novel "Le Morte d'Arthur", Elaine from Astolat. The stories of these heroines are mostly similar and tell of unrequited love for the knight Lancelot, for the sake of which they neglected their duty. Both heroines embodied the idea of "a modern man <...> experiencing the triumph of passions over spiritual nature" (Sokolova 2011, 28).

Besides, the fates of Elaine and the Lady of Shalott for artists of that time were a symbol of protest against the existing norms of public morality which

defined the role of a woman as the guardian of the hearth, depriving her of the right to self-determination. Death, which in the literary plots of Alfred Tennyson and Sir Thomas Malory is a punishment for trying to go beyond the prescribed limits, has acquired a different context in painting - an award that gives freedom. It should be noted that almost identical finals, in which the boat carries the lifeless bodies of the heroines through the water in Camelot, are distinguished by only one detail - a male figure is always present in the image next to Elaine's body. These images are found in the works of the English Pre-Raphaelites John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Arthur Hughes, Walter Crane, their followers John Atkinson Grimshaw, John La Farge, Peter Macnab, Sophie Gengembre Anderson, as well as artists from other countries and continents such as Paul Gustave Louis Christophe Doré (France), Toby Edward Rosenthal (USA), Homer Ransford Watson (Canada).

So, in the works of John Everett Millais (Fig. 7) and Arthur Hughes, the symbiosis of ancient and Christian mythopoetics is seen. Over the boat with the body of a dead woman, there are branches of willow, which according to Hellenic mythology is considered the tree of Death, because its fruits "fall off before they ripen" (Impelluso 2009, 58). It was a hint of prematurely torn life. The loose hair, an attribute of remorse in Christianity, immersed in water symbolized the rite of ablution and spiritual purification.



Fig. 7. The Lady of Shalott by John Everett Millais, 1857.

The more mysterious atmosphere is inherent in the works of John Atkinson Grimshaw (Fig. 8), John La Farge and Peter Macnab depicting the dead Lady of Shalott. The figure of a woman as if dissolved in a cloudy haze against the background of

blurry contours of the coastal landscape. The dim rays of light illuminating her already pale body create an oppressive impression of the nearness of death.



Fig. 8. “The Lady of Shalott” by John Atkinson Grimshaw, 1877.

Reproducing the last path of Elaine from Astolat, artists often turned to chthonic motifs. In Sophie Anderson and John Atkinson Grimshaw (Fig. 10) works, the sterns of the boats are decorated with the head of a dragon, who is believed to be the guardian of the underworld. The figure of the boatman personifies the mythical Charon transporting the souls of the dead to the kingdom of Hades. At the same time, artists Homer Watson and Toby Edward Rosenthal depicted Elaine, a barque with a motionless body, among the gathering twilight, decorated with garlands of white flowers, which created an eerie and at the same time solemn atmosphere cultivating the beauty of death.



Fig. 10. “Elaine” by John Atkinson Grimshaw, 1877.

In addition to depicting a dead female body, the scope of this iconographic tradition, includes characters surrendered in a state of trance or somnambulism. In Europe of the latter half of the 19th century, the popularity of meditative and spiritualistic practices was associated with the loss of the church's leading positions in understanding the essence of human nature, giving way to metaphysics and psychoanalysis. In his book "Madame Blavatsky and her "Theosophy", 1895, Arthur Lilly wrote: "Spiritism is a science. It has a fundamental character. This distinguishes him <...> from current religions based on authority <...>" (Lilly 1895, 201). Thus, occultism opened up the possibility of a change in social paradigms, "proposed a "new" religiosity" (Owen, 2004, 87), which, unlike the patriarchal culture of Christianity, did not devalue the status of women. Spiritual sessions were a kind of freedom territory where a woman, along with men, could "radically violate social norms by drinking alcohol" (Tromp, 2006, 5) while avoiding condemnation, as she was in a trance state. Also, at that time, the occult sciences were closely intertwined with the new methods of psychological research based on phenomena that "were on the verge of norm and pathology" (Wolffarm 2009, 35).

Images of somnambulist women immersed in a trance were represented in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Fernand Khnopff (1891), Albert von Keller (1887), John Everett Millais and Gabriel von Max.

So, in "Beata Beatrix" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Fig. 11), the heroine of the book by Dante Alighieri is depicted in the lethargic dream, between real and afterlife. This ambivalence is emphasized by the poppy flower, which is a symbol of sleep and death, as well as two figures - the angel and Dante himself, who personified the other world and the earthly world. The colour scheme of the picture is quite limited. A muted tan palette creates a sublime mystical atmosphere, and the dove and angel figure painted in red - the colour of blood and suffering, form a diagonal line contrasting with Beatrice's green robe, as green colour symbolizes appeasement and rebirth.



Fig. 11. Beata Beatrix by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1870.

The same meditative motive is present in the picture of the Belgian artist Fernand Edmond Khnopff “I will close the door for myself” (Fig. 12) of 1891. Like his predecessor, the master, creating his work, relied on poetry, using as a title a line from the poem of D. G. Rossetti’s sister, Christina. In the centre of the canvas, there is a motionless female figure, with an absent, cold gaze plunged into itself.

The fact that she is in a state of altered consciousness is indicated by a sculptural portrait of the sleeping god Hypnos in the background, as well as a barely noticeable silver chain hanging in the centre of the picture, on the end of which a shiny pendant is attached.

The last element resembles a pendulum used in hypnotherapy, “with the help of which a person is brought into a state of trance”, and the viewer is thus invited to “take the place of an invisible hypnotist” (Kliushina2016, 526-527). Unlike D. G. Rossetti, whose work is dominated by green, giving hope for a new life, decadence-typical combinations of violet and orange dominated in F. Khnopff’s works, symbolizing gloom, wilting, painful condition and decline.



Fig. 12. “I will close the door behind myself” by Fernand Edmond Khnopff, 1891.

Another example of the cataleptic women is represented on the canvases of Albert von Keller’s “Spiritualist Telekinesis of a Bracelet” (Fig. 13) and Gabriel von Max’s “The White Woman”. These are occult images of seers who protrude from the darkness, dressed in white robes, staying in a borderline state between the world of spirits and matter. Endowed with the opportunity to know the truth beyond reality, they embody power and strength, defying patriarchal views on the secondary and subordinate position of women in society.



Fig. 13. Spiritualist Telekinesis of a Bracelet by Albert von Keller. 1887.

Conclusion. Summing up, it should be noted that the iconography of female images in the painting of the second half of the 19th – the early 20th centuries originates in the work of the English Pre-Raphaelites. They created a new, ambivalent type of female beauty, which culminated in the hypertrophied aestheticism of decadence. The image of the female androgyne corresponded to the decadents' desire to suppress the vital force of nature. They combined sexual pleasure and aesthetic contemplation as the highest form of hedonism with an element of exhibitionism.

Besides, the image of a dead female body was assigned the role of a kind of mediator in the process of understanding and overcoming the fear of the unknown death. It should be noted that many works depicting female death in the fin de siècle art were based on three major iconographic versions: the images of Ophelia, the Lady of Shalott and Elaine from Astolat, which were the primary source of inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelite artists.

Along with dead women, the images of insomnia and mediums immersed in a cataleptic trance dominated in the paintings of decadence. A woman in such a borderline state created a feeling of inaccessibility and involvement in the specific sacraments, inaccessible to the world of average men. Thus, giving a privileged position for women in their art, the decadents defied gender attitudes of a patriarchal society.

REFERENCES:

1. Impelluzo, L. (2009). Nature and its symbols. Plants. Flowers Animals. Moscow: Omega. 238 p.
2. Kabanov, A. A. (2009). Female Icon in the Decadence Art // Knowledge. Understanding. Skill. Vol. 3, pp. 246–250.
3. Klyushina, E. (2016). Fernand Khnopff's Logographic Method: a Case Study of "I Lock my Door upon Myself" // Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art: Collection of articles. Vol. 6, pp. 523–531.
4. Maiorova, N. and Skokov, G. (2009). The history of world painting. XIX century. New styles. Moscow: Belyi Gorod. 128 p.
5. Paglia, Camille (2006). Sexual Personae. Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriia. 870 p.
6. Sokolova, N. (2011). Tennyson's Lady of Shalott in Pre-Raphaelite Art:// Philological Regional Studies. No. 2, pp. 23–28.
7. Lillie, A. (1895). Madame Blavatsky and her "Theosophy:" A Study. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. 228 p.
8. Owen, A. (2004). The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 384 p.
9. Stone, J. (2019). Decadence and Modernism in European and Russian Literature and Culture: Aesthetics and Anxiety in the 1890s. 219 p.
10. Tromp, M. (2006). Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism. Albany: SUNY Press, 260 p.
11. Wolfram, H. (2009). The Stepchildren of Science: Physical research and parapsychology in Germany. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi. 342 p.

Olqa Sosik (Ukrayna)**TƏNƏZZÜL İNCƏSƏNƏTİNDƏ QADIN OBRAZLARININ
İKONOQRAFİYASI**

XIX əsrin ikinci yarısı – XX əsrin əvvəlinin tənəzzül rəssamlığında müxtəlif ölkə rəssamlarının əsərlərini birləşdirən qadın obrazlarının ikonoqrafiyası tədqiq edilir. Qeyd etmək lazımdır ki, bu bədiiliyin mənbələri öz başlanğıcını ingilis prerəfaelitlərinin yaradıcılığından götürmüşdür, bu isə yalnız Avropa incəsənətinin böyük təsir etməmişdir, həm də bəzi Amerika rəssamlarının əsərlərində öz əksini tapmışdır.

Adı çəkilən rəssamlar qadın obrazları təsvirinin yeni ikonoqrafik ənənələrinin əsasını qoydular, beləliklə prerəfaelitlər onların əzəmətini qeyd edərək, cəmiyyətdəki iki tip qadın rolu – təmiz və məsum ev qadını və ya

insanı yoldan çıxaran əxlaqsızlıq təcəssümü olan afətin – mövcud olduğunu nəzərdə tuturdu.

Bu məqalədə iki əsas motiv nəzərdən keçirilmişdir: gözəlliyə münasibətdə tənəzzülün ambivalentliyini özündə təcəssüm etdirən qadın-androgin həmçinin ölümün dərkedilməzliyi qarşısında esxatoloji qorxunun cəmləşdiyi qadın bədəninin fəvqəltəbii trans vəziyyətinə düşməsi.

Açar sözlər: tənəzzül, findesiècle, okkultizm, prerafaelitlər, Ofeliya.

Ольга Сосик (Украина)

ИКОНОГРАФИЯ ЖЕНСКИХ ОБРАЗОВ В ИСКУССТВЕ ДЕКАДАНСА

В живописи декаданса второй половины XIX – начала XX веков прослеживается устоявшаяся иконография женских образов, которая объединяла работы художников разных стран. Следует отметить, что истоки этой образности берут свое начало в творчестве английских прерафаэлитов, которое оказало огромное влияние не только на европейское искусство, но и отразилось в работах некоторых американских художников.

Упомянутые художники положили начало новой иконографической традиции изображения женских образов, которым прерафаэлиты стали придавать черты маскулинности, чтобы подчеркнуть их могущество и сломать, бытующий в викторианском обществе стереотип, который подразумевал существование всего двух типов женской ипостаси – чистой и невинной хранительницы домашнего очага или искушительницы, *Feme Fatale*, которая была воплощением греха и порока.

В данной статье рассмотрены два основополагающих мотива: женщина-андрогин, воплощающая собой амбивалентность декаданса по отношению к красоте, а также культ мертвого или погруженного в состояние оккультного транса женского тела, которое выступало сосредоточением эсхатологических страхов перед непознанностью смерти.

Ключевые слова: декаданс, findesiècle, оккультизм, прерафаэлиты, Офелия.