

**NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN**

**FINE ART PAINTING**

**STATE OF DECAY**

**By**

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**Figure 1: "Chimaera" 1896**



# INTRODUCTION

*Some scents can permeate all  
Substances – even glass seems  
Porous to their power.  
Opening an oriental chest  
Once the reluctant locks are  
Pried apart,*

*Or an armoire in some  
Abandoned house acrid with  
The dust of time itself, may  
Yield a musty flask that  
Keeps the faith: out of it  
Leaps a returning soul  
Alive!*

(Baudelaire, 1982, p.53)

The vision of an old man, peeping from behind the curtains of a horse-drawn carriage, making its way along the dirty cobbled streets of fin de siècle Paris, is a fitting one of the poet and arch-decadent, Charles Baudelaire. The same streets had nurtured the appetites of a younger man urged by the passion of his own desires.

This is the setting of fin de siècle decadence. The Latin Quarter of Paris, bustling with brothels and burlesques became the haunt for decadent artists. The movement which spoke of an “*all new hedonism*”, however took its inspiration from classical antiquity. Decadence placed itself in firm revolt against the age of science and naturalism, to which it favoured artificiality and fantasy.

The novel by J.K. Huysmans entitled Against Nature or Against the Grain is possibly the most potent and influential of all decadent literature. The original French title A Rebours does not find a simple English translation, which adds further to the spectrum of revolt carried in the title.

It stood against religion, the state, academic art, celebrated history and all institutions. It favoured the grotesque, subterranean world of mysticism, occultism and the obscene.

The decadent world is nocturnal, oriental and exotic. It is filled with morbid intrigue and Gothic shadows, findings its roots deep in the pagan caves of antiquity.



## **CHAPTER 1**

# **CULT OF PASSIONS**

The hero of Against Nature, Des Esseintes, is introduced as the perfect dandy. He is the fallen aristocrat at the end of his bloodline. Des Esseintes symbolises fin de siècle decadence as he delights in the absurd and the grotesque.

His preference of artificiality and sensation to the natural world of humanity are revealed in the first glimpses of Des Esseintes' world.

At his home, called Fontenay, he created a virtual museum where he completely absorbed himself in the process alienating him from the outside world.

This inner world invoked the mystery of the orient and all the carnal excesses of pagan antiquity. His bedchamber was designed like an Indian harem with scented furniture and artificial lighting. His "*misspent nights*" were reflected through an infinite series of mirrors to enhance a never-ending sea of bodies, reminiscent of the Roman orgy.

*"It was celebrated among the prostitutes, who loved to soak their nakedness in this bath of rosy warmth."*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.10)

Intoxication through lust was accompanied by intrigue with death. Des Esseintes would host banquets with funerary themes, where items on the menu would be meticulously chosen in order to create a black buffet. The garden paths were covered with charcoal and the pond dyed with black ink. To

complete this illusion of the macabre, Des Esseintes has his guests waited on by black women wearing only slippers.

His carefully constructed world omits the banal suffering of everyday existence. He is only concerned with artifice and the fantasy of his darkest desires. Huysmans makes this clear, when he describes God as repeating himself in nature and soon to be redundant.

*“The moment has come to replace her, as far as that can be achieved with artifice.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.20)

Man is doing just as well, he assumes, in likening the structure of a dazzlingly new steam engine to the body of a beautiful woman.

Des Esseintes is appalled at how art has imitated nature to the extent that it has now been stripped bare, forcing artists to search inwards to the unconscious, a defining notion of art for art's sake.

His constant revolt against the outside world is emphasised through his disgust with his fellow man. Brief encounters with strangers inflict nausea and disgust. Their mannerisms, transparent and pathetic, force him to recoil further into his solipsistic world.

The books in his library were mainly from the decadent period, referring in particular to the history and demise of the Latin language. What is defined as

decadent he even finds loathsome and pretentious. He dismisses the entire Canon of Latin literature as plagiaristic with the exception of Petronius who:

*“Laid out before the reader the everyday existence of the common people, with its incidents, its savagery, its lusts.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.25)

The literature of decadence has been described as over-absorbed in detail. This focus on detail allows the narrative to drift away from specific events and people. It is necessary somehow to the character of Des Esseintes to be described in such detail.

The incident concerning the tortoise is one of such over-load, that it is both humorous and oppressive. This act of gilding the shell of a living tortoise, then having it meticulously encrusted with jewels, in order to have it blend more sympathetically with his Oriental rug is an absurd attention to detail.

*“The creature blazed like a sun, shining triumphantly over the subjugated tones of the carpet, radiant as a Visigoth’s shield inlaid with scales by an artist of barbaric tastes.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.36)

Whilst Des Esseintes sits watching this marvellous array of colours from the tortoise, he sips a whiskey and feels content.

In the context of extremes that one would go to, in order to gratify the senses, there existed at the epoch a concept called synaesthesia, which was based on hallucinations induced via the sense of smell. This would allow a vast area of

sensory pleasure to exist, although the side effects contribute further to his chemical imbalance.

For the palette of taste he had a carefully constructed device for serving certain liqueurs. The exotic taste of each liqueur would induce the experience of a particular musical instrument. Through careful selections of drinks one could compose “symphonies on the tongue”. (Huysmans, 1998, p.39). He called this devise “The Mouth Organ”.

*“Des Esseintes would drink a drop of this or that, playing interior symphonies to himself, and thus providing his gullet with sensations analogous to those which music affords the ear.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.39)

Due to the excess of the tortoise he settles for an Irish whiskey as he continues to admire the scene. It is only later that he realises that the creature has died, possibly resulting from the shock of such intensity.

Des Esseintes is both capricious and masochistic. He meets a young boy, Auguste Langlois and introduces him to a luxurious brothel:

*“There, crumpling up the cloth of his cap, Auguste had gazed in utter amazement at a troop of women whose painted mouths all opened simultaneously.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.59)

Naturally this is well beyond the young boy’s means. Des Esseintes informs the Madame to accept payment for the boy over the next three months. He

then ceases payment leaving the boy distraught at the cessation of this new vice.

His intention is to lead the boy to steal, in order to maintain visits, in the hope that one day, if discovered, he may even kill. If Des Esseintes was to contribute further to the underworld of murderers and thieves, he would triumph over a world he hates.

In discussing the plans for a new bedroom, Des Esseintes states that it should either be a place of pleasure and suitably designed or else a place of prayer, resembling the monk's cell.

The cave has always been associated with the bedroom. It is also associated with the pagan underworld, the female genitalia and the anus. Also used as temples and tombs, the cave recreates the orgiastic image of the underworld of dark hidden desires.

In comparison caves were also the dwelling places of early Christian monks, such as the ascetic Saint Anthony. The cave was essential for the Saint, as it was here that his darkest desires became manifest, he then focused on his desires, "*hammering them out like cold metal work from a life time of asceticism.*" (Harpham, 1987, p.24).

Des Esseintes this time chooses the ascetic design over his previous boudoir.

The bedroom, also the symbol of the womb, has created the stage for the struggle between virtue and vice.

The ever-present illness and nausea that Des Esseintes experiences are associated with the memories remaining from his bachelor days.

These feelings of self-disgust are accompanied by desires for a monastic and spiritual life, to be transported to a higher spiritual place, where the fragmented memories of his theological studies could reform him, through a life of studious solitude.

As Des Esseintes yearns for this state of grace, his mind is filled with glorious visions of esoteric Christianity. This soon disintegrates as he ponders the Catholic Church. His mind is filled with the desire for sacrilege, for ultimate destruction and blasphemy, and the excesses of the Black Mass. His thoughts end as he realises that he lacks the courage to enact such terrible sins.

This difficult struggle with the question of faith is indicative of a greater inner struggle at the centre of his neurosis. Try as he may to invite some faith into his life, he is only left with the company of his twisted memories which consume his prayers.

*“In the face of an omnipotent God there now arose a rival full of vigour, the Devil, and it seemed to him that a terrible grandeur must result from a crime carried out within the very walls of a Church.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.68)

The condition of spleen was common among fin de siècle decadents, especially the poet Charles Baudelaire. The spleen or abdomen was supposedly the seat of all passions, particularly lowness of spirits and melancholia. These passions or emotions are constant in the life of Des Esseintes.

His “*ill-nature*” is further emphasised by the arrival of his collection of rare and exotic plants. These plants are chosen in favour of their ugliness. Not only are the plants obnoxious and grotesque but they also resemble flesh, rotten, deformed and diseased. The pitiful ugliness of such hybrid freaks of nature is indicative of his fascination with disease and corruption.

*“It all comes down to syphilis, thought Des Esseintes, his eye drawn towards, mesmerised by, the dreadful striations of the caladiums, upon which a shaft of daylight was resting.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.77)

Des Esseintes has a refined malady for every cultivated sense that he possesses. The recurring side effects from his over-indulgence in synaesthesia often leave him feeling faint and delirious.

The refined fragrances from these exotic perfumes have affected him so profoundly that not only has he an acute sense of smell, but a particular smell can induce its own illusion.

His nausea is sparked by the smell of “*frangipani*” in the room:

*“He rang for his servant: ‘Can’t you smell anything?’ he asked. The man sniffed the air and declared he could not smell any kind of flower;”*



*there could be no doubt about it, the neurosis was returning once again, in the guise of a fresh delusion of the senses.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.92)

He promptly begins to concoct new perfumes to remedy the smell. He proceeds in creating a summer meadow, filled with fresh haystacks and swarming with flowers.

In a momentary state of bliss, he realises that this artificial nature could be infinitely better than retiring to southern provinces, where he would be exiled from the pleasures of Paris. A move like that would bore him to death.

As he opens a window for some fresh air, a breeze carrying with it all the smells from the village below assaults his nervous system. He is so transfixed that he believes himself to be possessed. The situation results in the return of the smell of “*frangipani*”:

*“Discomposing afresh his ruined nerves, and throwing him into such a state of prostration that he collapsed in a faint, close to death, on the wooden sill of the window.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.102)

Des Esseintes is constantly searching for new experience to combat his boredom. On such an occasion he decides to visit London. This is inspired by his fantasies about Charles Dickens’ novels. These books that spoke of the fresh-faced innocence of country living filled him with dreams of a happy simplistic life. However, this is just another one of his whims. He settles for a

visit to an English tavern in Paris, where all the customers are English, and dressed, like him, in the styles of London. Typically, he favours artifice to the real thing and returns home feeling fulfilled.

*“What’s the point of moving, when one could travel so splendidly just sitting in a chair?”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.114)

Artificiality is a common theme in fin de siècle culture. It reflects the boredom and apathy, with the familiar natural world and the uncertainty of the future. It would seem natural that a society facing its own moral decline should choose a fabricated world to the real. These symptoms have revealed themselves again in our own fin de siècle culture, where the Internet and virtual reality are constantly expanding the boundaries of sensation.

Des Esseintes, who is no stranger to stimuli, is most at home in his library. Absorbed in his love of literature, he consults books on theology and the occult. He wishes that great works of literature could be condensed into one awesome phrase that only the intellectually elite, like him, could interpret. His most prized books are the works of Charles Baudelaire and Barbey d’Aurevilly. Both writers represent the decadent’s constant struggle with Catholicism, especially d’Aurevilly who:

*“Went whoring through literature and brought his half-dressed women into the sanctuary.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.129)

The study of Catholic literature has a strange function in decadent practices. It would seem that it exists only to be despised. As Des Esseintes considers the Marquis de Sade, he realises that the Catholic religion is the most arcane of all. Its persecutions and burning at the stake, have throughout history, associated it with profound visions of suffering and sadism.

The moral decline of fin de siècle Paris was reflected in the return of the Black Mass from the Middle Ages. This perversion of the Holy Sacraments was usually conducted by a former priest.

*“For a man would experience no delight in profaning a law which he did not care about, or of which he was unaware.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.131)

All the theory and practice behind the Catholic Church were meticulously studied, so that they could be completely inverted, to fulfil the deeds of the Black Mass.

This concept is articulated further in the works of Barbey d’Aurevilly. He was obsessed with the belief that one is permanently torn between serving two opposing forces. This stems from his involvement with the Church and its connection with sadism. He further believed that the soul eventually submits to one influence only, to good or to evil.

It is also within the confines of such theory that the carnal excesses of decadence are justified. Without the rules of the Church, he would simply be a

lustful and sensuous person, a Satyr of Dionysius, but in the light of the Church he delves into original sin, a deliberate perversion of the Catholic faith.

It is d'Aurevilly and Baudelaire who generate the aura of occult mysticism around Des Esseintes when his neurosis is at its strongest he is drawn towards an ascetic life, but then in the darkness of such literature, his mind is consumed by the frenzied blasphemy of the Witches' Sabbath.

As his mind continues to darken, his consumption of literature is affected. He can no longer tolerate anything that suggests the modern world. As a result of his ever-increasing neurosis he is unable to take laudanum, opium or hashish. He always considered such drugs to be crude, as they frequently caused him insomnia and vomiting.

*“He had been obliged to stop using them immediately and to ask his brain alone to carry him, far from real life into the world of dreams.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.140)

He finds further solace in the writings of Paul Verlaine and Edgar Allen Poe. Immersed in the delirium of the nightmare, Poe, “working within the sphere of morbid psychology,” (Huysmans, 1998, p.155) was able to occupy his mind with exquisite darkness, complementing his increasing neurosis.

Verlaine, on the contrary, suggests the romance of exotic gods and angels, the redemptive dream of a Byzantine muse.



In the final chapter of the novel, Des Esseintes' health reaches such a state of decline that his doctor insists he sells Fontenay and returns to Paris. If he remains he has only insanity and tuberculosis to live for.

Des Esseintes holds out until the bitter end. The minuscule concoctions of protein and iron, that are all his ruined stomach can tolerate, give him a final sense of pleasure. Its artificiality, by replacing the act of eating a meal, is his final reference to artifice.

*“To take nourishment in this manner was unquestionably the ultimate deviation from the norm that anyone could realise.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.171)

The thoughts of returning to Paris, to live among the people, infuriates him. His appetite, refined to exquisite excesses and pleasures, could surely not find satisfaction in the common world.

His final contemplation is with the Church. He expresses total dismay at its decline, its rituals and Sacraments having been diluted with the arrival of the modern age.

*“The monasteries had transformed themselves into places of manufacture for apothecaries and liqueur makers.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.176)

What we are left with is a bewildered Des Esseintes, desperately searching the recesses of his soul for a glimmer of faith. As he abandons pessimism and ennui, he is consumed with the hope of a new life in Paris.

*“He finally realised that the arguments of pessimism were incapable of giving him comfort, that only the impossible belief in a future life would give him peace.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.180)

As Des Esseintes had mocked his fellow dandies for retiring to the southern provinces, his own departure is faintly triumphant, as he returns to his old pleasure gardens of Paris, in his newly found state of aloofness and resignation.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE LOWER RELIGION**



To return to Des Esseintes, it could be deduced that the most inspirational literature on his life was the work of Barbey d'Aurevilly. He possessed a very rare copy of Les Diaboliques. A collection of six short stories. The content was of such an astonishing and explicit nature, that the book was banned upon its first release in 1874. The Belgian artist Felicien Rops later reissued it with nine illustrations.

Rops is possibly one of the most defining artists of the decadent period. The majority of his work was based on the female nude, but in a manner that appeared destructive and highly erotic. His major concern was that his subjects appeared in the present day condition. Not concerned with the classical nude, he wanted his subjects to resemble 'Tatta', the contemporary prostitute.

The world of these self-involved women was depicted through scenes of witchcraft and the occult, or among the hazy dens and brothels of Bruxelles and Paris. His illustrative work was usually lithography or engraving with exceptional graphic qualities.

His fascination with the macabre revealed itself quite early in his work, although the drawing is more naïve. His main connection with Huysmans is through an etching from 1892 entitled "Mors Sypilitica". The etching depicts a prostitute leaning against a wall. Her face is ugly and grotesque, her eyes staring and her teeth, sharp and protruding. Appearing behind her is a scythe, the symbol of death.

Venereal disease, especially syphilis, was blamed on the common prostitute.

As the trade was rife, its spread could not easily be controlled, and fear among the clientele was ever present.

This fear was evident in a particular dream of Des Esseintes. Triggered by the sight of his exotic plant collection he descends into a syphilitic nightmare. He is set upon by a horrific woman.

*“The dreadful gaze was fixed on Des Esseintes,  
boring into him, chilling him to the marrow,  
while the bulldog woman, now in even greater  
panic, clung to him with her head thrown back on  
her rigid neck, screaming blue murder.”*

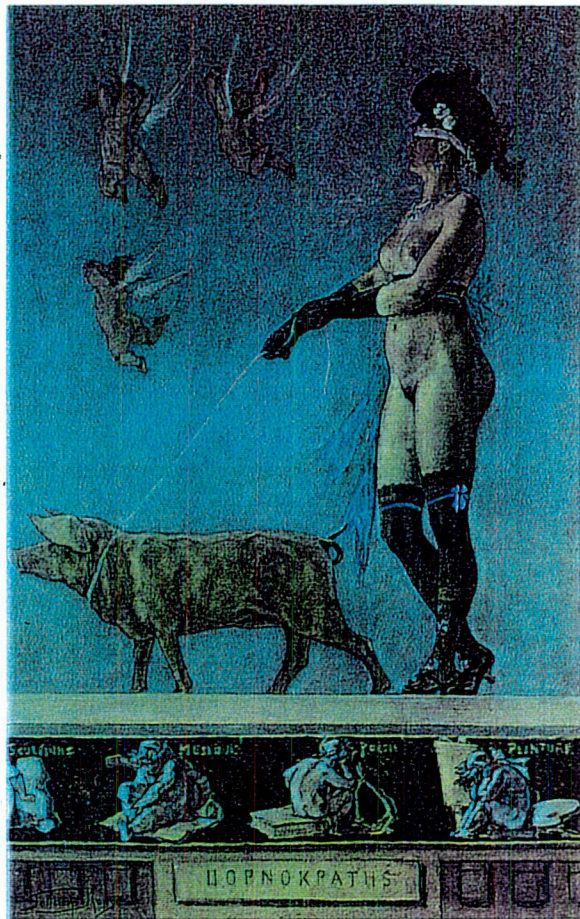
(Huysmans, 1998, p.79)

Her skin is stained and tainted, however he is still attracted to her. As he falls helplessly to the ground, she covers him with her haggard belly, the stench of death and decay overwhelming him; he sees her innards in the form of a repulsive blossom, symbolising the horror of syphilitic death.

Possible the most famous of all Rops' work is a piece called *“Pornocrates”* (Fig. 2). This engraving depicts a prostitute, blindfolded and being led by a pig.

This theme is suggestive of the myth of Circe, who seduced all before her and in doing so, turned them into swine. This also recalls the myth of Ulysses,

**Figure 2: "Pornocrates", 1878**



whose team of men were seduced by her. She appeared through the sea, thus poisoning it with all the lust and desire imaginable to the lost sailors.

This image of women became more popular towards the end of the century. Any woman who did not comply with the domestic image was depicted as bestial and primal; who preferred the company of animals to the company of men.

*“Woman, in short, had come to be seen as the monstrous goddess of degeneration, a creature of evil who lorded it over all the horrifically horned beasts which populated man’s sexual nightmares.”*

(Dijkstra, 1986, p.325)

The animals employed were typical of witchcraft and evil and were usually depicted in images of the Black Mass. The pig is a typical symbol of carnality, the goat connected with lust, was often the symbol of the pagan god, and the serpent was traditionally associated with the phallus.

The use of the blindfold in *“Pornocrates”* articulated the idea of a blind and faithless perversity; her dependence on the pig surrenders the prostitute to all the bestiality of the pagan underworld.

Not only were women described as the very symbol of bestiality by the decadents, but they were also associated with the vampire. The vampire certainly appeared as lustful, but was also attracted to the world of money and ownership.

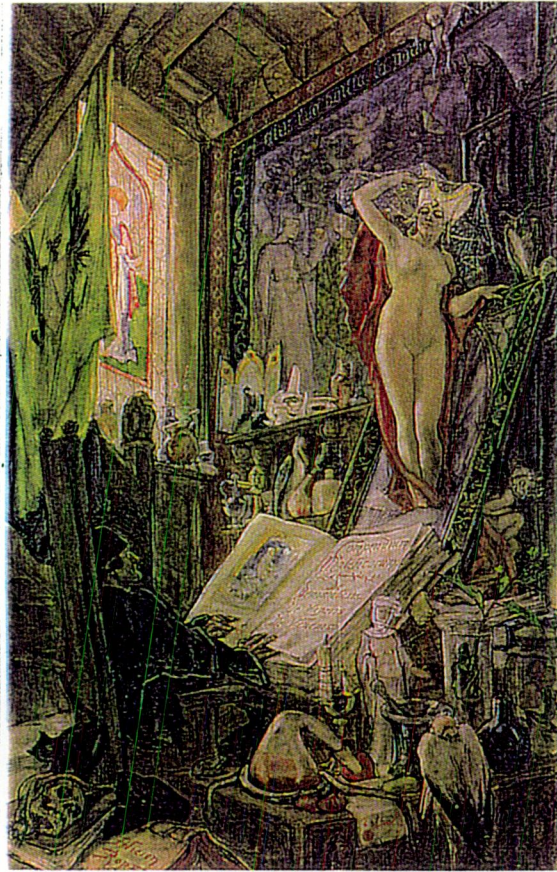
According to Baudelaire, these women had strayed from the world of motherhood through seminal addiction, to drain the very marrow from men. This included his vitality and his money. "She was the woman cloaked in darkness who beckoned man to his death." (Dijkstra, 1986, p.351).

One such depiction of the vampire is "the absinthe drinker" which portrays a young woman soliciting. She gazes at the viewer through glazed and lucid eyes. Although she has a youthful complexion, she is obviously an addict and furthermore looks as though she could crush or destroy a man by her embrace or by luring him into the shadows behind her.

It is quite evident that Rops was predominantly a literary illustrator, however his work was a major influence on other Belgian artists such as James Ensor, who was often accused of copying him. The crowded drawings of Rops depicting flying angels and satanic sexuality are echoed in the paintings of Ensor. Unlike Odilon Redon, who conveyed subtlety of mood among the most archaic of themes, Rops distinguished himself further in communicating the macabre and the erotic.

His career had already been established before the arrival of symbolism, and he has become celebrated in the literary world, having illustrated, among others, the work of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé. His engravings seemed to exploit the symbolist nature of decadent literature, visualising some of the darkest themes of the occult.

**Figure 3: “The Incantation” 1878**





The abusive and misogynistic treatment of his female subjects were extremely relevant to the author of Les Fleurs du Mal, (The Flowers of Evil), and although his exotic world inhabited by a never-ending procession of prostitutes, it also fuelled the underlying fascination with death, depravity and Satanism.

In the painting known as “*The Incantation*”, (Fig. 3), he contrives a large room where a demonologist has just invoked a succubus. The overall theme of this image is concurrent with Huysmans’ second novel Las Bas (Down There), which deals extensively with the occult and the Black Mass.

*“Consider the incubi as masculine demons which couple with women and the succubi as demons who consummate the carnal act with men.”*

(Huysmans, 1992, p.134)

The magician stares in awe at the female entity he has just invoked. The surrounding furniture is littered with tools of alchemy, potions and concoctions.

This subject of invoking spirits was rampant in fin de siècle Europe, a renaissance of witchcraft from the Middle Ages. This intrigue was prevented from vaporising into Dionysian myth also, by its constant reference to the Catholic faith.

These atrocities could not have been contrived by the uninitiated; they required a firm knowledge of the Scriptures, the rigours of the Sacraments and a direct desire for sacrilege. The possibility that most high priests of the Black Mass were “*defrocked*” Catholic priests was, of course, irresistible to the decadent imagination.

Any priest or bishop sufficiently versed in the Scriptures, to be able to create such perversions, must also know that he would be inevitably duped by the evil god that he was praising.

This play for possession over the soul is central in the work of Huysmans and d’Aurevilly. It is also inevitable that there can only be one outcome. What ensues is the long and difficult road to redemption. The souls of these priests debauched beyond the limits of humanity still cower pitifully in the presence of the Christian God.

This theme of transgression is most potent in the piece entitled “*The Temptation of St. Anthony.*” In the painting St. Anthony is tormented by the apparition of a naked prostitute on a cross, his saviour, Christ has fallen to one side and a pig curiously occupies the rear. The return of the symbol of bestiality confirms the scene’s surrender to perversity.

“*The Temptation of St. Anthony,*” (Fig. 4) is a fundamental theme throughout fin de siècle decadence. One of the earliest hermetic monks, Anthony confined himself to live in a cave, away from the follies of mankind. This was

**Figure 4: "The Temptation of St. Anthony" 1878**



the labour of all ascetics, through repression of desire, the monk or holy man, hoped to achieve a state of divinity, which was essentially a movement of desire itself.

The figure of St. Anthony is similar to Christ, when he went away to fast in the desert; they were both tempted by Satan. The destructured world of desire revealed itself through lucid hallucinations and attacked the soul to obstruct its evolution. It was a common fantasy of fin de siècle decadents to withdraw themselves through this process.

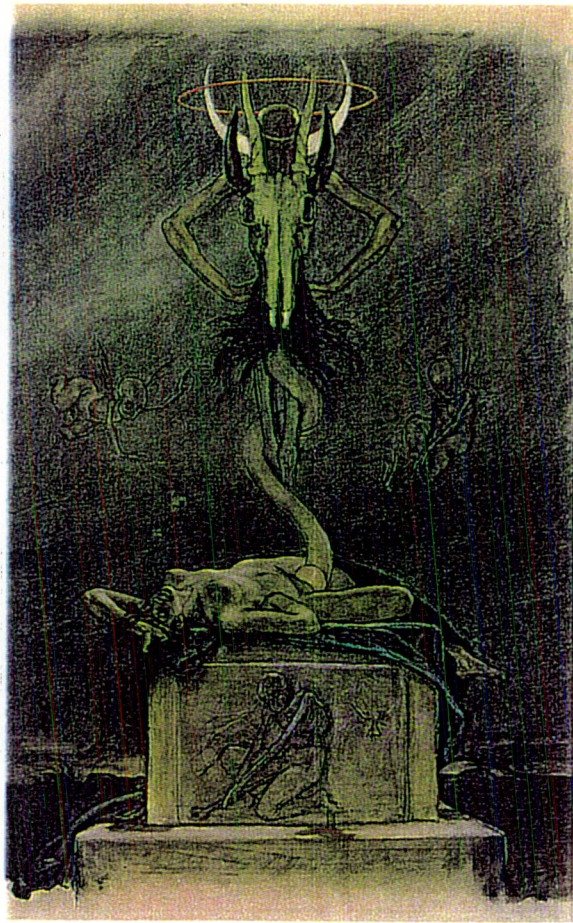
*“It is historically probable at all events, that allegiance to occultism at this period was for some merely a stage on their return to the fold of orthodox religious practice.”*

(Pierrot, 1981, p.113)

In this sense the decadent ethos is a struggle projected inwards. Freud referred to the concept of repression as: *“The internal prohibition”*. For a person like Des Esseintes, who constantly reflects over his lustful youth, all the moral codes and boundaries of society have been broken, the only remaining rules to break are esoteric, indicated by the wilful decline of his soul.

The sheer boredom and apathy associated with giving up the ghost and returning to normal society appalled him. His life was so accustomed to luxury that *“existing”*, as a monk would have destroyed him. What Des Esseintes seemed destined for was a life in the suburbs of Paris, as a pious Catholic.

**Figure 6: “The Sacrifice” 1882**



In Huysmans second novel Las Bas, the underworld of the occult is exposed.

The anti-hero of the novel, Durtal, is a writer, researching an infamous Satanist from the Middle Ages, called Gilles De Rais. De Rais was notorious for murdering thousands of children. Durtal becomes so obsessed with this arcane monster, that he eventually visits a Black Mass.

Again it is Felicien Rops who deals with such extreme and satanic themes in his work. As Péladan wrote:

*“He has conjured up the devil once more, in this age when belief is dead, even in God, and he shows him triumphing over all ridicule, all laughter.”*

(Pierrot, 1981, p.90)

A Series of works entitled “Les Sataniques”, were the most shocking and explicit of their time. They were inspired by d’Aurevilly although they were not produced to illustrate text. They portray ultimate sacrilege and blasphemy and invoke visitations that venture far beyond the pomp and madness of the Black Mass.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **VISIONS OF ANTIQUITY**

The most prominent and possibly the most relevant works of art in Des Esseintes collection are “Salomé” (Fig. 6) and “The Apparition” by French artist Gustave Moreau.

*“He had acquired Moreau’s two masterpieces and spent night after night pondering over one of these, the painting of Salomé.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.44)

After the death of his mother, Moreau literally locked himself away in his Parisian apartment to work obsessively on this theme. It would appear this project was the most successful of all his work, as certain critics proved he was not entirely suited to monumental painting. He left a large number of paintings unfinished that were treated in this manner.

It is not surprising that Des Esseintes was devoted to such work. The overt use of oriental symbolism was irresistible to the decadents. Furthermore, scenes of exquisite luxury were essential to the decadent ethos.

Moreau’s delicate use of watercolour succeeded in articulating the world of romanticism. The subject matter lies at the very core of fin de siècle immorality, but it was his ability to contrive the oriental splendour of the scene that won him so much acclaim.

A master of painting from L’École de Beaux-Arts, Moreau was also the typical classical artist. In his youth he was deeply inspired by Delacroix, but after a

**Figure 6: “Salomé Dancing before Herod” 1876**



visit to Italy, he embraced in his own style, the subjects of mythology and classic antiquity. The adoption of such themes opened his work to free-flowing styles of ornament and arabesques. It is also the consequence of dealing with such themes that the romantic style of his work reveals itself.

It is easy to imagine Des Esseintes delight in such work. To neglect the subjectivity of the modern world along with its styles and dogmas was to complement the oriental décor of Des Esseintes solipsistic world. He expresses amazement at the fact that an artificial substance, such as paint, can convey such magical presence.

*“Never again at any period, had watercolours been capable of achieving that same brilliancy of hue.”*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.49)

These paintings of Salomé define the entire fin de siècle ideal. The works that Moreau exhibited at the Salon after this project went almost entirely unnoticed.

The portrayal of women as destructive and fatal was highly fashionable. As in the work of Rops who regarded the subject from every conceivable angle, Salomé embodied the entire concept. She “represented the archetype of a terrible femininity and fin de siècle femme fatal.” (Kurylut, 1987, p.189). She was also a symbol of profanity that stood in firm opposition to the Christian Church.

Moreau's attention to detail carries the subject perfectly. As was typical in decadent literature to almost obliterate the narrative by constant reference to detail, Salomé is depicted against an abyss of architectural concoction. The fantastic and the obscene exist all around her. This oriental haze also contributes to Salomé's own background that is both opaque and charged with meaning.

It is not just the symbol of voluptuousness that Salomé personified; her presence stretched the whole way back to pagan antiquity. Her actions sought to preserve the pagan past, by demanding the murder of Christ's precursor.

It is also a contributing factor that Salomé's existence relies on the artists who cultivated her myth. She exists unchallenged in the imaginations of fin de siècle artists, but her background is highly illusive. In the Old Testament she is simply referred to as the daughter of Herodias. She depends on the existence of her surrounding characters for her own definition.

Herodias and Salomé become associated with Black Magic. It is relevant that the head of John the Baptist is brought in on a silver platter in the middle of a banquet. Its resemblance to the other plates of food refers to cannibalism and even necrophilia. The perversity indicated through such an act as devouring the head of a saint is highly explanatory of the Black Mass. The presence of blood involves the sexual act of defloration or castration, invoking a scene of carnal excess and unhinged desires.

Heron, on the other hand, is aware of the Baptist's divinity and knows that he is a righteous man. He is reluctant to grant Salomé her wish but in the presence of the company, decides to comply. Herod was given the chance to redeem his life, but in choosing between good and evil, he weakens in front of sensuous beauty and commits his greatest sin yet.

Salomé and Herod are alike, in the sense that they both play out the desires of Herodias. Herodias personifies Hecate, the ultimate black witch of Greek mythology. Salomé also represents innocence and chastity, but in the context of the chimera, is elevated to the stature of a goddess, through her fame in Christian literature.

Herod is more closely linked with St. John, as the banquet is in celebration of his birthday; thus the celebration of one's birth marks the death of the other.

The Church's interpretation considered the women to represent all that was evil, sensuous and pagan, and that Herod's downfall was to be an example to all men unable to control the lustful urges of the body.

However, in order to fully appreciate Moreau's Salomé it is important to regard her outside of the Christian context. There are several references to eastern antiquity, particularly the lotus flower that she holds in front of her.

*“Des Esseintes speculated about the meaning of this emblem. Did it have the phallic significance with which it is endowed by the primeval religions of India, or did it represent the allegory of fertility, the Hindu myth of life, an existence held between a woman's palms whence it is torn*

**Figure 7: “Salomé Dancing before Herod” 1876 Detail**





*and crushed by the quivering grasp of men  
overpowered by madness, deranged by a frenzy of  
the flesh?"*

(Huysmans, 1998, p.47)

By removing Salomé from the occidental world of Christianity, she assumes an original identity. She remains unchallenged, shrouded in Eastern mysticism, an East that Christianity never reached, thus preserving a paganism unimaginable to the conditioned mind of the occidental thinker.

This image was irresistible to Des Esseintes. *"He would turn his eyes compulsively towards her, picking her out by the well-remembered lines of her body, and she would live once more."* (Huysmans, 1998, p.159).

It was the imagination of Moreau that brought such visions of antiquity to fin de siècle Paris, to fulfil the role of decadent art, by making explicit the unthinkable.

## CONCLUSION

If decadence was a celebration of the fantastic and the obscene, it did so with a dramatic sense of irony. The notorious practice of hedonism inevitably found its end in either insanity or a return to the Christian fold. The romantic backdrop of antiquity provided the stage every abomination imaginable.

*The island of fantastic dreams embraces all the forms of passion, fantasy and caprice in women, in her primal essence, a being without thought crazed by the unknown, for mystery, in love with evil in the form of perverse and diabolical seduction. Childish dreams, sensual dreams, monstrous dreams, melancholy dreams, dreams that bear the mind and soul out into the nebulousness of space, into the mystery of shadowy deeps, everything should exude the influence of the seven deadly sins, everything is contained within that Satanic ground, within that circle of vices and burning, guilty impulses. ... They are the theory of queens under a curse, their ears still filled with the serpent's beguiling instruction, they are beings with souls annihilated by the wayside for that lascivious goat, straddled by lust, whom they will worship as he passes by; lonely beings dark with their dreams of envy and unassuaged pride, in their bestial isolation, women mounting on chimeras that bear them off into space, then hurtling headlong again, destroyed by horror and by vertigo."*

(Pierrot, 1981, p.128)

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