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Moreau's Materiality: Polymorphic Subjects, Degeneration, and Physicality

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MOREAU’S MATERIALITY:

POLYMORPHIC SUBJECTS, DEGENERATION, AND PHYSICALITY

By

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For David.
Thanks for all the tea.
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore the concept of materiality in Gustave Moreau’s oeuvre. For Moreau, this was an important concept, which influenced his art in a variety of different ways. Looking at three interpretations of the concept, I show how Moreau reconsidered this concept in many practical and theoretical ways throughout his career. I look at Moreau’s repeated depictions of the same subjects, showing how he saw the subject as a suggestion with many possible material interpretations. In addition to considering Moreau’s widely-varied conceptions of the subject of Salome, I also show how the writers who described his paintings saw the works themselves as similarly suggestive, elaborating on what they saw in the paintings. Next, I look at how Moreau responded to contemporary theories of degeneration, showing women and animals as physical and sexual threats to man’s transcendence. I consider three themes he explored in this process: flesh-eating animals, combined human and animal body parts, and bestiality. Finally, I look at Moreau’s focus on the physical surfaces of his paintings. Moreau struggled with the problem of how to depict immaterial ideas using the material medium of paint, and as a result, he used four different techniques to emphasize the surface of his canvases. I consider his use of smooth, realistic surfaces combined with elaborate details, as well as his technique of layering designs over his canvases. I also look at his use of a stained-glass-inspired technique, and his looser, more expressionistic sketches.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Seeking to transcend the material world, the Symbolists focused on discovering the pure essences beyond the corporeal world. They built on the Romantic Movement’s focus on subjective experience, believing that through this emphasis, artists could find objective forms hidden from the rest of society. Gustave Moreau incorporated these ideas into his paintings, serving as a transitional figure between the Romantic Movement and the Symbolists. His paintings featured traditional mythological and biblical subjects, and he incorporated Romantic and Symbolist themes into his works throughout his long career. In my thesis, I focus on the theme of materiality, which is closely aligned with Symbolist art and theory. I use the term materiality to represent Moreau’s dilemma over using the material medium of paint to represent immaterial concepts. Although he valued the immaterial and transcendent over the physical, he could not depict these ideas without utilizing a material substance, creating a predicament that he worked through in a variety of different ways. Throughout his life, Gustave Moreau incorporated the ideas of discovering essential forms and transcending the material world into his paintings. When Gustave Moreau wrote about his own art, he described his works as translating grand eternal myths in new ways, saying that he sought to escape the material and reach a higher truth, rather than getting caught in the mire of the specifics of time and place.¹ In my thesis, I focus on the idea of materiality as key to understanding Gustave Moreau’s painting. I look at materiality as a multivalent topic, showing how Moreau explored different theoretical interpretations of this concept throughout his career.

State of the Literature

Although Moreau and his contemporaries wrote about their art and literature in terms of materiality, art historians have not adequately explored how this idea relates to Moreau’s paintings. While some art historians have mentioned the rift between spirit and matter in Moreau’s work, they have only looked at this concept superficially, not

considering the deeper meanings of materiality to the artist. Rather than looking at one simple interpretation of the term materiality, I consider the multifaceted concept in three different ways. By looking at these different aspects of materiality, as well as considering the far-reaching relevance of this idea in contemporary literature, theory, and art, I show that the concept of materiality is the key to understanding Moreau’s art.

In addition to overlooking the concept of materiality when discussing Moreau’s paintings, art historians have generally portrayed him as separate from his time, often emphasizing biographical approaches to his work. Moreau was not a member of a group like the Rosicrucians, and he often refused to exhibit his works publicly, choosing instead to sell them to a small circle of collectors. His use of mythological subjects, and his ornate, detailed surfaces have led many historians to view him as an isolated artist. Additionally, Moreau had a long career, and because he reworked many of his canvases years after painting them, many are undated.

In _The Art of Gustave Moreau: Theory, Style, and Content_, Julius Kaplan discusses Moreau’s theoretical writings in depth. Kaplan also provides a useful chronology of Moreau’s works, dividing the artist’s career into three phases. Kaplan identifies the division between spirit and matter as an important concept for Moreau. Nevertheless, he does not go far enough in relating this concept to Moreau’s paintings throughout his career, and he does not consider more theoretical interpretations of the concept of materiality. Additionally, Kaplan only discusses works Moreau exhibited publicly during his lifetime, which allows the author to look at these works in greater detail. However, it also distorts the artist’s career, since Moreau refused to exhibit at the Salon for many years. Rather than looking at the artist’s career chronologically and forcing his career into phases, I focus on themes that he explored throughout his life. Although he developed more complex and varied responses to these themes at different times in career, I do not attempt to create a progression or development, but rather focus on the theoretical concepts that he reinterpreted in a variety of ways at different times throughout his life.

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Peter Cooke has explored a new method of interpreting Moreau’s works in recent years. Rather than focusing on the artist’s connections to the Symbolists, he has emphasized Moreau’s choice of subject matter and the artist’s desire to be accepted as a history painter. In his “Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting” from 2008, Peter Cooke writes that “[a]rt historians are now beginning to recognize an essential fact that was self-evident to Moreau himself, as well as to his contemporaries: the author of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* and *Salome* was, above all, a history painter.”

Cooke argues that Moreau wanted “to create a nonacademic kind of grand-manner history painting.” However, in this article, Cooke bases his argument on works from before the 1870s, neglecting the rest of the artist’s career. Moreau did paint mythical and biblical subjects for his entire life. Nevertheless, he moved away from attempting to be accepted as a history painter later on in his career, since he rarely exhibited at the Salon at this time. In my thesis, I look at a broad variety of works, seeing how Moreau approached the same themes throughout his life, rather than focusing on only one phase of his career.

In his “Interrogating Gustave Moreau’s Sphinx: Myth as Artistic Metaphor in the 1864 Salon,” Alan Scott focuses on Moreau’s *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (Fig. 1), from 1864, arguing that the painting is more complex than previous scholars have recognized. He contends that this canvas references a contemporary metaphor from art criticism in which mastering the sphinx is equated with mastering one’s art. In this way, according to Scott, the sphinx is both the poet’s corporeal enemy and an ideal figure. Scott argues that this reading builds on what he sees as the more simplistic idea that the sphinx represents the dual concepts of spirit and matter. At the same time, he claims that Moreau’s interest in the themes of spirit and matter was a sign of his interest in “fundamental religious and philosophical oppositions,” and as a result, argues that Moreau “emerges as a staunch proponent of a traditional humanist, academic paradigm of painting (in which the material element of art was subordinated to the spiritual) at a time when that paradigm

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4 Ibid., 394.

was coming under assault.” Scott’s reference to a new assault on spiritual art most likely refers to the Naturalist movement that developed during the middle of Moreau’s career and focused on illustrating contemporary urban life. One problem with definitively connecting Moreau’s interest in spirit and matter to contemporary trends is the fact that the artist had such a long career, which spanned many varied artistic developments. Ideas that could be seen as current during the Romantic Movement became outdated during the middle of Moreau’s career when the Naturalist movement developed. Nevertheless, the same concepts shaped the Symbolist movement and became popular at the end of the artist’s life. Additionally, none of these approaches developed in isolation. Just as the Romantics built on earlier philosophical and religious beliefs, the Symbolist movement later developed out of Romantic ideas. In my thesis, I situate Moreau as a transitional figure between Romanticism and Symbolism, rather than attempting to label him definitively as an academic painter, a Romantic, or a Symbolist. Although he incorporates all of these themes, I focus in particular on the theme of materiality, which most closely corresponds with Symbolist theories. Nevertheless, the artist also incorporated themes and subjects related to history painting and the Romantic Movement, so he cannot be easily categorized.

**Methodology**

I approach the idea of materiality using a variety of different methods to achieve a more nuanced view of Moreau’s oeuvre. In my thesis as a whole, I explore the discourse on materiality and transcendence. In each chapter, I look at a different way that Moreau articulates this discourse. By exploring a different definition of the term materiality and using a different set of methods in each chapter, I achieve a more complex approach to this concept. In the first chapter I focus on Moreau’s depictions of Salome, considering his many interpretations of the same subject and the literary responses to these paintings. Using an iconographical approach, I consider the textual source and written responses, as well as the images themselves. Then, in the second chapter, I connect Moreau’s paintings of women to contemporary theories of degeneration, and look at similar themes in contemporary literature. In this chapter, I extend the iconographic study into a discursive

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6 Ibid., 13.
approach, looking at the discussion on degeneration as part of the broader discourse on materiality. Finally, in the third chapter I consider Moreau’s surfaces in connection with those of contemporary artists. In this chapter, I use formal analysis to identify signifiers representing the contemporary discourse on materiality.

Précis of Chapters

In my thesis, I explore the concept of materiality in Moreau’s paintings, and, at the same time, I connect these works to the theories, art, and literature of his time. Just as the concept of materiality is multivalent, this thesis explores several different aspects of and approaches to his work in order to develop a more nuanced picture of his oeuvre. I consider Moreau’s relationship to the idea of materiality from three positions: in terms of the artist’s subjects, his depictions of degeneration, and his varied stylistic choices.

In my first chapter, I focus on Moreau’s repeated use of the same mythological and biblical subjects. His repetition of the same themes shows that, like many of his contemporaries, he felt the idea was in the method of expression, not in the subject itself. Moreau believed that although paintings begin with the subject, they should not serve as mere illustrations of it. In addressing this point, I focus on Moreau’s paintings of Salome, including *Salome Dancing Before Herod* and *The Apparition* (Figs. 2, 3), both from 1876. At the same time, I also look at the literary responses to these works. Moreau painted the same subjects hundreds of times, with slight variations in the style, the composition, and the exact moment depicted. Significantly, rather than simply repainting the same subjects many times, he actually interpreted the events in different ways in each image. For example, in these paintings, he characterizes Salome in a variety of different ways. At the same time, when contemporary writers responded to these paintings, their descriptions show that they also saw the subjects as suggestive. When writers such as J. K. Huysmans and Jean Lorrain described these paintings, they viewed the works through their own experiences, elaborating on the visual images as well as on the movements, the smells, and the sounds they found within Moreau’s paintings. Following the idea that a work should be suggestive, rather than an exact record of nature, and that a symbol should have multiple meanings that could not be expressed in words, Moreau’s subject matter was similarly suggestive. Moreau, as well as those describing his images, saw the
subject not as a material concept with a single interpretation, but rather as an immaterial idea that artists and writers could translate in many different ways.

My second chapter focuses on how Moreau connects women to animals, materiality, and degeneration. In these images, he responds to contemporary ideas on degeneration and the bestial nature of women. Moreau often painted heroic men transcending the fleshly, material forms around them in order to focus on the transcendent realm beyond the physical world. His paintings usually connect women to animals and portray women as threats to the male body in three different ways. The artist depicted animals eating male flesh in works such as *Diomedes Devoured by Horses* (Fig. 4), from 1865, characterizing animals as beasts that literally endanger the whole male body. He illustrated a more metaphorical threat when he showed human and animal body parts fragmented and combined in images such as *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Finally, he also painted works that threaten the human race with degeneration, by incorporating the theme of bestiality in images such as *Leda* (Fig. 5) from 1865-75. Although Moreau included the themes of degeneration and materiality in these later images of bestiality, these works reveal a more ambiguous attitude towards women, where they are sometimes characterized as pure and transcendent.

In my third chapter, I explore some formal aspects of Moreau’s focus on the material. In this chapter, I build on Reinhold Heller’s discussion of how other nineteenth-century artists, including Paul Gauguin and Edgar Degas, emphasized the materiality of their works in a variety of different ways. Although Heller does not discuss Moreau’s paintings, I build on his argument that the Symbolists used a wide variety of techniques to flatten their picture planes. As the theorist Albert Aurier explained, one of the five defining characteristics of Symbolist art was that it was decorative. Rather than creating realistic, mimetic works, Symbolist artists painted decorative works that emphasized the picture plane and the materiality of their paintings. Moreau’s use of a range of different stylistic techniques shows that, like many of his contemporaries, he grappled with the

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problem of how to depict the ideal and the immaterial using the material medium of paint. Focusing on four different techniques Moreau used in his paintings, I explore how he interacted with the surfaces of his own works, sometimes building upon, and sometimes breaking from, the stylistic techniques used by contemporary artists. In some of his works, such as Salome Dancing before Herod, the artist utilized a smooth, detailed technique, which I describe using the term “grandiose complexity,” which derives from J. K. Huysmans’ description of this work in the novel A Rebours, from 1884. Moreau detracted from the realism of these works by denying the transparency of the picture plane, building up layers of paint and adding elaborate details in order to make the viewer aware of the artifice of the image. In several other works, including his Tattooed Salome (Fig. 6) from 1874, Moreau emphasized the materiality of the picture plane to an even greater extent, by patterning over realistic works with thin black and white lines. In 1906, in his preface to an exhibition catalogue on Moreau, Robert de Montesquiou referred to these designs as “mysterious tracings and cabalistic meanderings,” a phrase which I will use to describe this section of Moreau’s oeuvre. Moreau painted some works that were influenced by enamel work and stained glass. Moreau painted brightly-colored shapes, adding very little shading, in images such as his Jupiter and Semele (Fig. 7) from 1895. Describing this work in a letter to Moreau from 1891, Charles Éphrussi used the evocative phrase “tonalities of an ideal dream.” Finally, Moreau’s painted sketches of many subjects, including Hercules and the Lernean Hydra from c. 1869-76 (Fig. 8), explore yet another approach to his subjects. In these works, the artist connects the means of expression to the emotions and ideas involved. Here, he uses color and loose brushwork to emphasize the material surface and the physicality of the paintings. This


interest in the brushstrokes and the use of color has led me, following Robert de Montesquiou, to refer to these works as “flows of color.”  

Each chapter in my thesis explores a different aspect of Moreau’s art in the context of materiality, as well as considering different ways that these images connect with contemporary trends. Many art historians have mentioned that Moreau’s male heroes strive for the ideal and the immaterial, and they have stated that the concepts of spirit and matter arise often in his art and writings. Yet, they have not looked at materiality in a more theoretical way, and this is how I look at the concept, as the key to understanding Moreau’s approach to his subjects, to degeneration, and to stylistic techniques.

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CHAPTER TWO
POLYMORPHIC MYTHS: THE SUBJECT AS SUGGESTION

Walking through the Musée Moreau or leafing through a monograph on Gustave Moreau, one sees the same faces and the same subjects repeated over and over again in a variety of ways. In a painting of the mythical Leda, the swan gently rests his head on Leda’s in a possessive, yet intimate gesture (Fig. 5). In another painting of the same subject, the swan rubs his head against her neck (Fig. 9). And in yet another image, their bodies intertwine in a passionate embrace (Fig. 10). Similarly, Moreau depicts the Sphinx in a number of different ways: in one image, the Sphinx stares down at Oedipus; in another she holds a man in her grip at the top of a cliff; and in a famous oil painting she clings to him (Figs. 11, 12, 1). Another subject, Salome, also appears in a wide variety of paintings. In four different paintings, she dances before Herod, has a vision of the Baptist’s head, witnesses the Baptist’s execution, and holds his severed head in her arms (Figs. 2, 3, 13, 14). All of these compositions incorporate the themes of spirit and matter. They depict the lustful, corporeal world in a negative light and connect avoiding material concerns and passions to gaining purity and transcendence.

Moreau and his contemporaries saw contemporary society as decadent and degenerate and sought to escape this corporeal world and reach a higher state of being. At the same time, Moreau also incorporated the theme of materiality into these canvases in another more complex way. His many paintings of the same subjects demonstrate that he created these works as depictions of immaterial essences or ideas, rather than as mere illustrations of myths and biblical tales. These stories served as suggestions that he translated in various ways, expressing different facets of the underlying ideas. His conception of the subjects as immaterial, and therefore, translatable in many different ways, built on Romantic ideas of individual perceptions of nature and was also connected to Symbolist preferences for multidimensional symbols rather than simple allegories. In this chapter, I look at Moreau’s many depictions of the subject of Salome, which derive from the biblical story in which Salome had Saint John the Baptist killed. According to the biblical text, John the Baptist called Salome’s mother incestuous because she had married her dead husband’s brother, King Herod. Salome’s mother, Herodias, told her
daughter to dance seductively before King Herod, who offered Salome anything she desired. At her mother’s request, she asked for John the Baptist’s head on a platter, and Herod had the Baptist executed. In the discussion that follows I will look at how Gustave Moreau repeatedly translated the theme of Salome in a variety of different ways, as well as considering the literary responses to these paintings which show a similar notion of the power of suggestion.

It is important to note that while Moreau’s themes and approaches to his canvases are often connected to Symbolist ideas, the artist culled his subjects themselves from mythical and biblical sources. Especially in the beginning of his career, he followed an older academic tradition and sought to gain acceptance as a history painter. Art historians Alan Scott and Peter Cooke have both discussed these earlier goals, focusing on how the artist built on his predecessors, rather than connecting him to the late-nineteenth-century Symbolists. Moreau did consider himself a history painter, yet he approached his mythological and biblical subjects in a new way. He sought to show the deeper essences or ideas behind these subjects by translating them in many different ways. Thus, with subjects like Salome, Moreau painted and exhibited many images, exploring the idea that myths are multi-faceted and have many viable material interpretations. Significantly, when Moreau created these paintings, he reconceived the subject each time. Rather than merely painting the same subject over and over again, he approached it from different perspectives, highlighting different figures and different emotional responses in each image.

**Romantic and Symbolist Notions of the Suggestive and the Material**

Moreau built his attitude towards the suggestive power of subjects on the ideas of earlier artists, especially the Romantics. The Romantics focused on personal, individual responses to nature, believing that everyone would respond to and depict a scene in their own personal way. German philosophers such as Friedrich Schelling and Arthur Schopenhauer and artists like Caspar David Friedrich developed many of these ideas. Writing in 1830, Friedrich emphasized how each individual would feel and interpret a scene in his own subjective way when he wrote: “Nature does not give everything to everyone, but something to each. In each individual subject there resides an infinity of
interpretations and different forms of presentation.” The poet Charles Baudelaire acted as a conduit for these ideas on imagination and subjectivity. He integrated them into his own theories and passed them on to other French artists, including the Symbolists. In addition to focusing on individuality like earlier Romantics, he also “wanted something more; without giving this up he also wanted to attain to something that had universal validity, revealing a fixed and permanent truth and reality.” By building on German theorists such as Schelling and Schopenhauer, Baudelaire was able to focus on individuality while retaining an interest in reality since “Schopenhauer declared art to be an eminent means to reveal deeper ideas of reality. It could penetrate deeper than the exact sciences without loosing any of its certainty, and without loosing sight of reality.” In this way, Baudelaire focused on discovering deeper truths and made the imagination key to discovering the “essence of reality.” Thus, Moreau’s interest in finding the essences behind material forms shows the influence of the German and French Romantics and reveals his belief that there was some “fixed and permanent truth and reality.”

Although the Symbolists viewed personal responses as significant, they conceived their works as starting with the idea, rather than with nature. Two important Symbolist theorists, Albert Aurier and Gustave Kahn, both wrote about the importance of subjectivity. In 1891 Aurier wrote “Symbolism in Painting,” explaining that art must be subjective in the sense that “the object will never be considered as an object but as a sign of an idea perceived by the subject.” Gustave Kahn wrote his “Response of the Symbolists” in 1886 in reply to Jean Moréas’ “Symbolist Manifesto,” also from 1886. In this work, Kahn wrote: “The essential aim of our art is to objectify the subjective (the externalization of the idea) instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through the


15 Ibid., 38.

16 Ibid., 26.

17 Ibid., 25, 30.

The Romantics started with nature, or the objective, and painted it as they personally saw it, altering it to fit their emotions and ideas. The Symbolists, on the other hand, started with their own personal subjective idea or feeling, and used art to bring it to a wider audience. In this way, they began with their own personal (subjective) idea and made it more universal (objective) in the process of representing it.

One important concept for the Symbolists was the difference between allegories and symbols. They defined the term allegory as a direct correlation, where one object refers to only one idea or concept. For example, rejecting allegories, they favored more suggestive symbols with multiple meanings. These multivalent, mysterious symbols could not be simply explained in words, and were thought to be interpreted using intuition, rather than reason. In an interview in 1891, Stéphane Mallarmé discussed the importance of keeping art mysterious and suggestive when he said:

To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which derives from the pleasure of step-by-step discovery; to suggest, that is to dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery that constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object little by little, so as to bring to light a state of the soul or, inversely, to choose an object and bring out of it a state of the soul through a series of unravelings.\(^{20}\)

Just as the Symbolists felt that every detail of their work should have multiple meanings and interpretations, Moreau saw his subjects themselves as multifaceted. Just as the Symbolists connected each symbol to many different mysterious meanings, Moreau translated each subject into many material representations, elaborating on different facets of the subject’s meaning in different canvases.

The Symbolists believed in the Neo-Platonic idea of underlying essences. For them, the specific subject of their work was never as important as this idea. In his book Symbolism, Robert Goldwater explains that there was always “a subordination of specific subject to a wider purpose so that the theme or object shown is invested with an

\(^{19}\) Gustave Kahn, “Response of the Symbolists,” in Art in Theory, 1017.

emotional idea and stands for something other than itself.” However, the Symbolists felt this idea should only be suggested, rather than fully expressed. As Jean Moréas explained in his “Symbolist Manifesto” in 1886, “Symbolist poetry seeks to clothe the Idea with a sensible form,” adding:

the essential character of Symbolist art consists in never going as far as the conception of the Idea itself. Thus, in this art, the scenes of nature, the actions of human beings, all concrete phenomena cannot manifest themselves as such: they are sensible appearances destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideas.

Moréas also wrote about the importance of “mythical phantasms” for the Symbolists. With this phrase, he connected these mythical subjects to the idea of “subjective deformation,” wherein the artist must alter the subject to fit his own particular viewpoint. Thus, rather than simply illustrating myths, the Symbolists sought to alter the mythic subjects to fit their own personal perspective. Historian Pierre Brunel explains that the Symbolists viewed ideas and myths as mysterious and symbolic. According to Brunel, for the Symbolists, myths, like symbols, were suggestive, and they referred to multiple meanings. Additionally, just as the Symbolists did not desire to explain ideas fully, they also wanted to keep myths mysterious. Brunel argues that in order for a myth to remain alive and meaningful it must remain mysterious. A living myth can only refer to the infinite when it has not been fully explained. If over time, a myth can be explained or comes to have only one meaning, then it will die. This explains how a myth can be relevant in one time, yet at another time become a dated cliché when it is assigned only one meaning.

The idea was important to the Symbolists because they sought to escape the lowly, corporeal world and reveal a higher meaning by depicting underlying essences. In

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23 Ibid., 1016.
his “Notes on Wagnerian Painting,” from 1886, Teodor de Wyzewa argued that although artists sought to create scenes of a superior life, they had to take subjects from the material world since that is all that people could perceive. Wyzewa suggested creating a new type of realism, which broke from the old idea of realism as a method of “transcribing with no other goal, the vain appearances we believe real.” 25 Wyzewa wanted to replace this old form with a new type of realism, which he defined “as an artistic realism extracting these very appearances from the false, materially oriented reality in which we perceive them and turning them into a superior reality that is not materially oriented.” 26

Gustave Moreau focused on the concepts of materiality and immateriality throughout his career in many different ways. His repeated translation of the same subjects shows his belief that the subject was a suggestion with many material interpretations. At the same time, some of his paintings also express the need to focus on the transcendent and avoid the decadent, corporeal world. This attempt to transcend the material world will be addressed in this chapter as it relates to the theme of Salome, and in Chapter Three as it is connected to Moreau’s depictions of degeneration, women, and animals.

**Moreau’s Interpretations of Salome**

Gustave Moreau painted Salome many times, focusing on a variety of different moments from the biblical narrative, as well as creating new scenes. Like the subject of Salome, Moreau also painted many images of several other subjects, including Hercules and the Lernean Hydra, Leda, and Moses. All of these paintings show Moreau’s interest in translating the same subject into a variety of works, elaborating on different facets of the myth. Moreau created and exhibited many paintings of Salome, showing different events and widely-varied interpretations of the subject. The artist’s many depictions of Salome show that he created multiple material interpretations of what he saw as the immaterial essence of this myth.

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26 Ibid.
During the nineteenth century, history paintings of ancient and mythological subjects gradually became less popular and were replaced by scenes of contemporary everyday life. With this move away from academic, traditional subjects, biblical stories like Salome lost prominence. However, Gustave Moreau returned to this tradition, and he revived interest in stories like Salome, which became the subject of numerous visual and literary works toward the end of the century. Most of these works portray Salome as a *femme fatale*, characterizing her as a dangerous, decadent figure that used her body to seduce her stepfather/uncle and to have a saint killed. However, it is important to note that Moreau’s repeated depictions of Salome are more ambiguous. Although Moreau characterizes Salome as a remorseless *femme fatale* in some works, in others she appears to suffer from guilt or doubt. In many of his images, the artist depicts her fully dressed, choosing not to highlight her sexuality. The differences between Moreau’s depictions of Salome are important because they emphasize the fact that rather than simply painting the subject many times, he re-interpreted it each time, focusing on different facets of the story and considering the psychological and emotional impact on the figures. Although Moreau re-interpreted many subjects, he found the subject of Salome particularly fertile because of its potential for multiple interpretations. While Salome did use her body to seduce the king and thereby have the Baptist killed, it is important to note that she was not the mastermind behind the plot. Writers and artists approached the subject in many ways in the nineteenth century, and the level of blame they assigned to Salome is essential to how they interpreted the scene. This makes it especially significant that Moreau choose to create so many different works, laying the blame on different characters in each image.

The subject of Salome is also important because of the many ways the theme of materiality enters into Moreau’s depictions of her. This chapter focuses on how Moreau’s repeated depictions of the same scene show his approach to the subject as suggestive, rather than having only one interpretation. However, it is also important to note how the images integrate the theme of spirit versus matter. In his images of the subject, Moreau explored different ways to depict the theme of a lustful woman using her body to seduce a family member in order to kill a Saint. This is significant because many of Moreau’s other paintings incorporate the theme of lustful women threatening men’s purity with
pain and pleasure. This theme will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, but it is important to note here that the theme of Salome is also connected to Moreau’s critique of his contemporary culture as decadent and too focused on the body. As scholar Genevieve Lacambre writes in *Gustave Moreau: Magic and Symbol*: “One may interpret these innumerable variations on the theme [of Salome] as symbolic representations of the events that [had] just subjugated France, as well as of the decadence and discord that Moreau perceived around him in the early 1870s.”

Moreau’s most famous painting of this subject is *Salome Dancing* (Fig. 2), which was exhibited to much critical acclaim in the Salon of 1876. In this oil painting, the dance is disconnected from the later events. Rather than focusing on the gruesome execution, Moreau depicted the beautiful woman hovering over the carpet during her dance before King Herod. In the silent scene, where even the air seems heavy and motionless, Salome’s gesturing arm is one of the few signs of movement. She stares coyly down, holding a lotus before her eyes, as she hovers between the viewer and the king. The king and the executioner next to him appear as still as statues or furniture. Both seem less animated than the female statue above them and Herodias and the musician to their right. While Moreau characterized Salome as a seductress in this image, he disconnected her from the murder. He also depicted the figure of Herodias in this composition. Here, she serves to remind the viewer that Salome was merely a pawn in her mother’s plot to murder the Baptist.

This canvas also shows how Moreau used symbols, rather than allegories, to create layers of meaning in his compositions. As Julius Kaplan explains, Moreau derived symbols like the lotus, the panther and the open eye from different cultures, studying them and using their symbols to make his works more evocative. On the one hand, these symbols can be connected to specific meanings or definitions, and the contemporary audience would have made some of these connections. However, Kaplan notes that the possible meanings for symbols like the lotus are only conjecture, since they were not meant as simple allegories and their meanings were always supposed to remain


indeterminate.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, for Moreau, as for the Symbolists, the specific symbols incorporated into each composition had suggestive value and were connected to a variety of elusive meanings, rather than to simple definitions.

In addition to re-interpreting the subject of Salome’s dance many times, Moreau also depicted other moments from the same story. His \textit{Salome in the Prison (Salome with a Rose)} (Fig. 13) from 1872 shows the moment just before the execution. Here, the artist pared down the composition. Only three figures remain on the canvas: Salome, the Baptist, and the executioner. Moreau placed Salome on the left side of the canvas, in approximately the same place as she appears in \textit{Salome Dancing}. Compositionally, the painting references \textit{Salome Dancing} and some of Moreau’s other depictions of Salome, including his \textit{Tattooed Salome} (Fig. 6) from 1874. The archway on the right side is similar to those included in the background of his other compositions, although here it functions as the stairwell leading down into the dungeon. In this image, Salome leans against the wall, fully clothed, deep in thought. While she dances seductively in Moreau’s other paintings, here she is calmer and more sedate in both manner and dress. Moreau focused on the execution in this scene, rather than the dance, and he emphasized Salome’s feelings, rather than her actions. Although Salome does not do anything to stop the execution, her body language shows her guilt over the Baptist’s death. Leaning against the wall, contemplating the smell of the rose, she has turned her back on the scene of the execution. Rather than watching the execution with a look of excitement or satisfaction, she turns away from it. While in many of Moreau’s paintings the hero looks away from the violence out of stoicism, here Salome stoops forward and, rather than looking off into the distance, she looks down at the flower. Instead of appearing stoic, like Moreau’s heroic men, or alternatively, cold and unfeeling, like some of his women, Salome is shown at an emotional, poignant moment. Here she is characterized as a woman caught between her mother’s instructions and her guilt over having John the Baptist killed.

In contrast to this emotional scene, Moreau’s watercolor from 1878 titled \textit{Salome in the Garden} (Fig. 14) shows Salome as cool and disinterested in the face of the gruesome death. Like her counterpart in \textit{Salome in the Prison}, she is not associated with

\textsuperscript{29} Kaplan, \textit{The Art of Gustave Moreau}, 67.
Moreau’s depictions of stoic male figures. Nevertheless, here she appears cold, rather than emotional. In this image, Moreau disconnected Salome from the seductive dance and from the execution itself, focusing on the moments just after the Baptist is killed. He also moved the execution outdoors in this image. Here, Salome stands next to the Baptist’s slumped, headless body, holding his bleeding head in her arms. In this scene, the contrast between her reaction and that of the executioner characterizes her as a dangerous *femme fatale*. While the hardened executioner flees in terror after killing the Saint, Salome stands calmly in the garden, showing her disregard for the human life has been taken.

Although Moreau’s other depictions of Salome derive from the biblical narrative, his watercolor of *The Apparition* from 1876 features an invented scene (Fig. 3). In this image, Salome stands horrified, pointing at the head of the Baptist, which levitates before her. The disembodied head stares into her eyes and drips bright red blood on the floor. The scene behind Salome remains similar to those that Moreau depicted in many of his compositions, especially *Salome Dancing* and the *Tattooed Salome*. This non-biblical scene is not clearly set in time. The scene may occur while Salome is dancing for Herod and may represent a premonition. However, it may take place after the Baptist’s execution and she may be haunted by a vision of what she has done. While the musician, the executioner, and Herod do not notice the head, Herodias, like Salome, appears aware of it. Although Herodias’ facial expression does not register a response, her clenched fists imply that she is privy to this vision. The ambiguity of when the event takes place and of who can see the vision adds to the mystery of the scene. For the viewer, as for Salome, the head appears as real and as tangible as anything else in the room. The blood staining the floor creates another mystery, since it could be real blood from the execution, or it could be part of Salome’s vision of the levitating head. Moreau added a psychological component to this image, depicting Salome haunted by this vision of either past or impending death. In contrast to Moreau’s characterization of her as calm and unemotional in *Salome in the Garden*, here Moreau depicted her in a completely different way. In this image, Salome appears inhuman, ignoring the body slumped at her side and the blood pouring through her fingers. Yet here her intense vision shows a human response to the execution—it shows real guilt at her role in the plot. This wide divergence between Moreau’s depictions of the same subject shows his complex interest in this
subject and his ability to translate the same theme in many different ways. Rather than creating one subjective interpretation of Salome, Moreau painted many different compositions, each time taking a different approach to the same subject. He worked out his complex reactions to the subject on each canvas, building on each facet of the myth and exploring each of the many meanings in his paintings.

Responses to Moreau’s Interpretations of Salome

Moreau’s depictions of the subject of Salome are important not only because they show his many interpretations of the same subject, but also because of the many literary responses to these works. As André Fontainas explained in his *Souvenirs du Symbolisme*, published in 1929, Moreau’s paintings of Salome influenced young Symbolist writers in a suggestive way. Fontainas wrote: “As the painter intended, our emotion sprang from his studied evocations, from allusions to legends and myths, from the concerted consequences of emblematic or archaeological or enigmatically hazardous parallels, much more than from his purely pictorial or graphic means.”

Just as Moreau saw the subject of Salome as an idea that could be translated in a variety of material forms, many authors saw his compositions in the same way. These authors elaborated on the paintings, incorporating smells, sounds, and events that are not apparent in the artist’s own images. These responses show how the authors built on Moreau’s ideas as well as his images. Like him, they saw the subject as more than just a story, and created their own varied responses and interpretations of the subject, building on different facets of the myth.

The most famous description of any of Moreau’s paintings comes from Huysman’s *A Rebours*, which was published in 1884. One of the most famous Symbolist novels, it made both Huysmans and Moreau famous. This novel focuses on the character Des Esseintes. Rather than emphasizing action, Huysmans concentrated on description. Many chapters of the work are entirely devoted to describing Des Esseintes’ decadent house and his elaborate decorations, which include copies of Moreau’s *Salome Dancing* and *The Apparition*. Huysmans’s descriptions of these works gave Moreau worldwide renown and introduced the artworks to many who would not have otherwise known them.

One of the most important aspects of Huysmans’ description of these works is how he

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builds on the images themselves, describing not just what appears in the compositions, but also the events, smells, and sounds that he imagines accompanying them. Huysmans also discusses how Moreau built on the biblical description of Salome in his paintings, adding much that was not in the original text:

But neither St. Matthew, nor St. Mark, nor St. Luke, nor any other of the Sacred Writers had enlarged on the maddening charms and the active allurements of the dancer. She had always remained a dim, obliterated figure, . . . she had always eluded the grasp of fleshy painters, such as Rubens who travestied her as a Flemish butcher's wife; always baffled the comprehension of writers who have never yet succeeded in rendering the delirious frenzy of the wanton, the subtle grandeur of the murderess. In the work of Gustave Moreau, going for its conception altogether beyond the meagre facts supplied by the New Testament, Des Esseintes saw realized at last the Salomé, weird and superhuman, he had dreamed of.31

Significantly, Huysmans not only describes the process by which Moreau built on the story, but he also connects the image to Des Esseintes’ dreams, a common Symbolist motif. Huysmans’ descriptions of the images of Salome thus reference the original biblical story at several removes, altered first by Moreau, and then by Huysmans, when he distorted them in his own descriptions and in Des Esseintes’ dreams.

In Huysmans’ description of *Salome Dancing*, the author describes the elaborate details, as well as the actions he imagines are connected to this image:

Her face wore a thoughtful, solemn, almost reverent expression as she began the wanton dance that was to rouse the dormant passions of the old Herod; her bosoms quiver and, touched lightly by her swaying necklets, their rosy points stand pouting; on the moist skin of her body glitter clustered diamonds; from bracelets, belts, rings, dart sparks of fire; over her robe of triumph, bestrewn with pearls, broidered with silver, studded

31 Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, 52-3.
with gold, a corselet of chased goldsmith's work, each mesh of which is a precious stone, seems ablaze with coiling fiery serpents, crawling and creeping over the pink flesh like gleaming insects with dazzling wings of brilliant colors, scarlet with bands of yellow like the dawn, with patterned diapering like the blue of steel, with stripes of peacock green. In this novel, Huysmans also describes Moreau’s watercolor, the *Apparition*, but he sees this incarnation of Salome as nightmarish and describes the smell as: “reeking with heady fumes, dripping with balms and essences, alluring with scents of incense and myrrh.”

To Huysmans, even more than to Moreau, Salome became two different, contrasting creatures, one who was beautiful and solemn, and one who was a nightmare. In *Salome Dancing*, Moreau separated the dance from the execution, and in the *Apparition*, he showed her human feelings of guilt and terror. While Moreau approaches the subject in different ways, the images became even more divergent when Huysmans described them. To Huysmans, these scenes became two depictions of the variable nature of Woman. Thus, just as Moreau built on and considered different facets of the myth, Huysmans reinterpreted these images, exploring the facets that most intrigued him, including the subject of the *femme fatale*.

Several other authors also wrote responses to Moreau’s paintings, creating their own descriptions that began with the paintings, much as Moreau began with the biblical story of Salome. Like Moreau, these authors built on the subject, creating something new. Henri Cazaliz published the poem “Salomé” in *L’Illusion* in 1875 as an homage to Moreau. In it, he focuses on Salome’s changing emotions before and after the execution. He begins by describing the painting and the event itself, adding only a few suggestive elements. As he starts the poem, he connects Salome to a snake and at the same time emphasizes her sexuality and her coldness:

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32 Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, 51.

33 Ibid., 55.

34 Ibid., 53.

Salome, the dancer, is pale with desire;
She, the beautiful snake of love, the savage flower

... Saint John is brought in the room of festival;
The ecstasy of death illuminates his head;
The torturer close to the throne went to place himself;
And, half-naked, with the sounds of the drums and of the harps,
Voluptuously between opening its scarves, the grass snake rises and starts to dance.
The triumphing animal believed to overcome the Spirit,
The blood of the Precursor spouted out under the sword;
And, sinuous, around the severed head,
Slow, Salome dances and coldly smiles.
Blood dyes her ivory feet and they bloom.36

As he concludes the poem, Lorrain proceeds to describe later, imagined events. At this point, he focuses on Salome’s psychological and emotional response to the execution. Like her counterpart in Moreau’s *The Apparition*, in this poem Salome appears haunted by the eyes that continue to gape at her the next morning:

At dawn, she accepted the wrapped head,
And left the palace, suddenly worried,
By the large dead eyes whose peace surprised her.
Since then, her tired and unappeased flesh

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36 Salomé, la daneuse, est pâle de désir;
Elle, le beau serpent d’amour, la fleur sauvage

... Saint Jean est amené dans la salle de fête;
L’extase de la mort illumine sa tête;
La bourreau près du trône est allé se placer;
Et, demi-nue, aux sons des tambours et des harpes, Voluptueusement entr’ouvrant ses écharpes,
La couleuvre se lève et commence à danser.
La bête triomphante a cru vaincre l’Esprit,
Le sang du Précurseur a jailli sous l’épée;
Et, sinuose, autour de la tête coupé,
Lente, Salomé danse et froidement sourit.
Le sang teinte ses pieds d’ivoire et les fleurit
Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.
Has taken a strange dislike for its life,
And her heart has choked on unknown dreams;
And always, and always, she sees the head,
And, full with peace, these eyes, these large eyes of the ascetic,
Who formerly scorned the flowers of his naked senses.  

Jean Lorrain, a poet who corresponded with Moreau for many years, also wrote a poem in response to Moreau’s paintings. His poem Salome with the Arbor from 1886 is related to Moreau’s Salome in the Garden. In this work, like Huysmans, Lorrain added scents and emotions to the scene. He chose to focus on Salome’s violence and lust, themes which reappear often in his poems. Like Moreau and the other authors, he found his own personal way to explore this myth:

Floating around the woman a perfume of carnage:
An odor of benzoin and pepper and blood.
She has a hollow in her breast, she permeates the nape of the neck
While in the distance an abrupt eunuch escapes
All the red of the fire escapes from the incandescent evening,
The hard obsession of rut and massacre
Rises at the bottom of the garden powerfully and bitterly.

37 À l’aube, elle reçut la tête enveloppée,
Et sortit du palais, soudain préoccuppée,
Par les grands yeux du mort dont la paix la surprit.
Depuis lors, sa chair lasse et jamais assouvie
Fut prise d’un dégoût “étrange de sa vie,
Et son âme étouffait de rêves inconnus;
Et toujours, et toujours, elle voyait la tête,
Et, pleins de paix, ces yeux, ces grands yeux de l’ascète,
Qui jadis dédaigna les fleurs de ses seins nus.


39 Flotte autour de la femme un parfum de carnage:
Une odeur de benjoin et de poivre et de sang.
Elle est au creux des seins, elle impregne la nuque
Et tandis qu’au lointain s’évade un brusque eunuque
Tout rouge dans l’ardeur du soir incandescent,
La rude obsession de rut et de massacre
Monte au fond du jardin plus puissante et plus âcre. Lorrain, Jean Lorrain-Gustave Moreau, 53.
Rather than focusing on Salome’s emotions or her psychological state, like many authors and artists at the end of the nineteenth century, Lorrain chose to characterize Salome as a dangerous woman. He incorporated the sexual and physical fears of the *femme fatale*, describing her as obsessed with both sex and death.

Moreau’s depictions of the subject of Salome show his interest in the mythic subject as a suggestion. Rather than simply illustrating the story, he explored a variety of facets of this myth. In the many paintings he created of this subject, he interpreted different events from the story in many ways, exploring the full potential of the subject. He approached the subject as a suggestion based on the belief that many visual interpretations were possible. This approach built on the Romantic conception of subjectivity and was connected to Symbolist notions of the suggestive power of the symbol. Those authors who paid homage to Moreau’s paintings of Salome saw the works as powerful suggestions, which they built on in their own personal interpretations. Many of these poems and descriptions characterized Salome as a dangerous *femme fatale*.

Moreau focused on the transcendent rather than the corporeal world and he saw powerful women as a threat. Yet his paintings show a more complex attitude towards women than the poems do. In this way, his depictions of Salome do show his fear of lustful, corporeal women, but they also show his interest in exploring different facets of a subject, and considering the various motives, feelings and psychological dimensions that can be explored in any myth.
In the nineteenth century the French became increasingly concerned with what they viewed as the increasing decadence and degeneration of their society. They blamed the problems of urban life on social degenerates and saw the depravity of women, minorities, and the lower classes as the result of centuries of degeneration. They connected this development to the rise of urban centers and their growing distance from an innocent, primitive state. Even though the Symbolists sought to escape from what they saw as an evil, materialistic society by focusing on the eternal and transcendent, many of their contemporaries saw the Symbolists as foremost degenerates. In his paintings and his writing, Gustave Moreau elaborated on contemporary ideas of degeneration by connecting degenerate women to animals and to concerns over materiality, showing how women threatened man’s focus on the transcendent by trapping him in the material world. Although Moreau depicted these themes throughout his career, his later works, especially those featuring bestiality, show a more ambiguous attitude towards women and materiality. In this chapter I look at contemporary theories of degeneration, as well as their widespread relevance in art and literature. Later, I explore how Moreau wove these themes into works featuring three different themes. Moreau’s images of flesh-eating animals show heroic men ignoring corporeal pain to focus on transcendent ideals. Other works feature human female and animal body parts separated and combined to directly connect women to animals and show the threat these base creatures pose to heroic men. Moreau’s depictions of bestiality are more ambiguous. Although some women are concerned with physical pleasure, others appear pure, and while some men turn into animals to satisfy their corporeal desires, others have more transcendent motives.

At the end of the nineteenth century, many artists and writers, including the Symbolists, responded to the increasingly prominent contemporary theories of social degeneration. These positivist theories emphasized the perceived threat that degenerates posed to white males. The authors of these theories expressed fears that base, lustful women and the degenerate lower classes would bring down civilization. In 1858 Pierre-
Joseph Proudhon expressed the fear that if women were given more rights and became men’s equals, they would destroy humanity, writing:

Equality of civil and political rights would mean that the privileges and grace that nature has bestowed on woman would become bound up with man’s utilitarian faculties. The result of this would be that woman, instead of being elevated, would become denatured and debased...This would mean the end of the institution of marriage, the death of love and the ruin of the human race.\footnote{Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, \textit{Selected Writing of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon}, ed. Stewart Edwards, trans. Elizabeth Fraser (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 256.}

Additionally, Proudhon blamed civilization for the rise of poverty, adding that the further nations move “away from their primitive state—which is one of abundance—and progress by means of labor toward WEALTH, the poorer they become.”\footnote{Ibid., 257.} For Proudhon, as for most of these theorists, this degeneration was the result of increasing civilization and the rising position of women.

In 1896, Max Nordau published a famous tome on the subject, appropriately titled \textit{Degeneration}. In this work, Nordau blamed civilization and women for the evils of society. Nordau described the lower classes and women as degenerate: “If this organic deficiency appears in a man of the lower classes, he becomes a vagabond; in a woman of that class it leads to prostitution; in one belonging to the upper classes it takes the form of artistic and literary drivel.”\footnote{Max Nordau, \textit{Degeneration} (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 102.} He also attacked contemporary artists, including the Symbolists. Nordau devoted an entire chapter to the Symbolists, whom he derided for their focus on mysticism and their rejection of science:

All of them were profoundly ignorant, and being unable, through weakness of will and inability to pay attention, to learn anything systematically, they persuaded themselves, in accordance with a well-known psychological law, that they despised all positive knowledge, and
Nordau claims that civilization diseases society, and that as society becomes more and more industrialized, it becomes more pathological and degenerate. In his book, Nordau uses scientific terms and ideas in his attempt to discredit the Symbolists, as when he writes: “The Symbolists...can think only in a mystical, *i.e.*, in a confused way. The unknown is to them more powerful than the known; the activity of the organic nerves preponderates over that of the cerebral cortex; their emotions overrule their ideas.”

While Nordau accused many contemporaries, including the Symbolists, of degeneration, other theorists and artists, including Moreau, took a more measured approach to the concept. While Moreau did see degeneracy as an increasing threat, he generally wrote about it in more theoretical terms then Nordau. Rather than accusing specific groups of causing the downfall of society, he warned of the general threat of women and the danger of focusing on the physical body. Although Nordau’s theory of degeneracy is significant because it shows the increasing importance of these ideas to Moreau’s contemporaries, in this chapter I focus on Moreau’s more theoretical model, rather than Nordau’s precisely detailed system.

Proudhon and Nordau argued that even as society was becoming more and more degenerate, certain white males were able to progress forward, escaping the threat of degeneration. While positivists like Nordau saw science as the explanation, other contemporaries, including many Symbolists, argued that science did not have the answer. They claimed that men were able to develop only by focusing on the transcendent and ignoring the corporeal world. Although they disagreed with the positivists on how to solve the problem of degeneration, Moreau and the Symbolists built on such models of degeneration and used some of the same language in their writing.

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43 Nordau, *Degeneration*, 101

44 Ibid., 118. Nordau takes the Symbolists to task for their rejection of positivism, arguing that science has never claimed to offer explanations for the unknown, and that it focused on improving and explaining man’s life on earth, rather than considering anything beyond it. Further, he says that “Theology and metaphysics have never fulfilled this demand” (Ibid., 109). For the Symbolists, a cultural obsession with scientific ideas and proofs amounted to a focus on the material, the known and the earthly. For them, explaining man’s life on earth was not enough, and explanations themselves were not desirable, only mystical ideas, focusing on that which was unknown were worthy of their attention.
Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity* details the extent to which late nineteenth-century culture was concerned with these theories of degeneration. He specifically focuses on the subject of dangerous women, looking at a multitude of images from the *fin-de-siècle* which show women as lustful, bodily-focused creatures. In chapters such as “Clinging Vines and the Dangers of Degeneration,” “Gynander and Genetics; Connoisseurs of Bestiality and Serpentine Delights; Leda, Circe, and the Cold Caresses of the Sphinx,” and “Gold and the Virgin Whore of Babylon; Judith and Salome: The Priestesses of Men’s Severed Head,” Dijkstra tirelessly compiles many examples of the *fin-de-siècle* obsession with women, animals, and degeneration. Dijkstra notes that “Like so many of the fin de siècle’s [sic] central fantasies of perverse sexuality, the story of Salome was given its initial impetus by Gustave Moreau.” Nevertheless, his survey of the period does not allow an in-depth consideration of Moreau’s depictions of these themes. In this book, Dijkstra looks at famous examples of the *femme fatale*, degeneration, and bestial women, including Gustav Klimt’s *Salome* (Fig. 15) from 1909 and Félicien Rops’ *Pornokrates* (Fig. 16) from 1879, as well as a multitude of lesser known works, like Fernand Khnopff’s *The Meeting of Animalism and an Angel* (Fig. 17) from 1889, Auguste Matisse’s *In the Gold of the Evening* (Fig. 18) from c. 1905, and Gabriel Ferrier’s *Salammbô* (Fig. 19) from c. 1881. I focus on Moreau’s depictions of these themes, but it is important note that his works are connected to a broad cultural discourse on bestial women threatening men’s bodies and their spiritual development.

In addition to the widespread depiction of these themes by contemporary visual artists, writers throughout the nineteenth century also described lustful women as threatening. Like Moreau, they sometimes demonstrated the extent of this feminine degeneration by equating women with animals. One early example of this, from 1862, is Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô*. In this novel, Flaubert characterizes all of his figures as barbarian Others, as minorities suffering from the debilitating effects of decadence and degeneration. Throughout the novel, Flaubert compares these characters to animals, and

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even describes animals eating them. On other occasions, the barbarians reach an even lower level of degeneration, when they actually turn into cannibals, consuming the flesh of other humans, and in many cases, becoming addicted to the taste. Flaubert also includes women’s degeneration in this novel, as when he describes a sexualized encounter between Salammbô and her snake:

Salammbô wound it round her waist, under her arms, between her knees; then taking it by the jaw she brought its little triangular mouth to the edge of her teeth, and half closing her eyes, bent back under the moon’s rays. . . it tightened round her its black coils striped with golden patches. Salammbô gasped beneath this weight, too heavy for her, her back bent, she felt she was dying; and with the tip of its tail it gently flicked her thigh; then as the music ceased, it dropped down again.

Significantly, Gustave Moreau owned copies of several of Flaubert’s other novels, including Madame Bovary and The Temptation of Saint Anthony. Salammbô also draws on the themes of flesh-eating animals and bestiality, which Moreau utilized in connecting the themes of women, animals, degeneration, and materiality.

Many Symbolist authors incorporated the same themes in their own works. Jean Lorrain, a poet who corresponded with Moreau for eleven years, wrote poems and stories incorporating these themes, including the story “The Unknown Lady,” first published in 1891. The main female character in this work is a nymphomaniac whom Lorrain repeatedly characterizes as either a devouring animal or a snake. In addition to utilizing many of the same themes as Moreau, Lorrain also compares the nymphomaniac to


48 Flaubert, Salammbô, 174-5.

49 His copies of the novels still remain at the Musée Gustave Moreau.


51 They met in 1882, and that year Lorrain used Moreau’s Orpheus from 1866 as the frontispiece to his book Le Sang des Dieux. The two corresponded regularly from 1882 through 1893. See Lorrain, Jean Lorrain-Gustave Moreau, 7, 22, 77.
mythological figures such as Pasiphaë and Messalina, two women Moreau painted repeatedly.\textsuperscript{52} A female author, Marguerite Vallette-Exmery, who went by the pen-name Rachilde, knew Lorrain. She wrote the novel \textit{Monsieur Venus}, published in 1884, which exploits fears of gender reversal.\textsuperscript{53} This work shows a more complex attitude toward ideas of degeneration, since both the male and the female characters are connected to animals. However, it is important to note that the male, Jacques, only becomes a submissive, cowering animal after the bestial, devouring female, Raoule, draws him into her web of lust and sex. Rachilde also incorporates the theme of the fragmented human body, since after Jacques dies, Raoule attaches parts of his body to a mechanical wax mannequin.\textsuperscript{54} Like these authors, Moreau characterized his female subjects as bestial, threatening, degenerate, and base. Like many Symbolist authors, Moreau also emphasized the possibility that these women could cause the downfall of heroic, transcendent men. In this way, Moreau placed women on a continuum between animals and men. However, this hierarchy was not static—rather, women were a threat because they could force men to slide down into degeneracy. Like Rachilde, who characterized some of her male characters as animals, Moreau also showed a more ambiguous attitude toward these themes in some of his later works, when he portrayed bestiality in a more positive light.

Some early art-historical discussions of the women in Moreau’s paintings equate the artist’s work with his biography, questioning whether Moreau was a misogynist or a homosexual. For example, in his \textit{Gustave Moreau}, Jean Selz connects Moreau’s varying depictions of women to his personal attitudes:

\begin{quote}
Inasmuch as it is permissible to conclude that Moreau’s attitude toward woman can be defined by the manner in which he portrays them in his paintings, his attitude appears ambivalent. On the one hand, he was
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} Lorrain, “The Unknown Lady,” 904, 905, 906, 918.
\textsuperscript{53} Rachilde, “Monsieur Venus,” in \textit{The Decadent Reader}, 269.
capable of a tender admiration of women’s beauty... On the other hand, he was an unbending moralist who, in the spirit of the most fanatic religious traditions, saw in women the incarnation of sin and the everlasting source of evil.  

Although Selz accurately addresses the variance in Moreau’s depictions of women, he only connects this to issues of the artist’s feelings towards women and not to contemporary ideas of social degeneration and the threat of bestial women.

One theorist who addresses Moreau’s connections to contemporary attitudes is Douglas Druick. He mentions that Moreau addressed France’s humiliating defeat by Prussia in 1870 in the work *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra* from 1869-76 (Fig. 20). Druick writes that:

> Widely regarded as both the result of—and judgment upon—the immorality and materialism of the Second Empire, the Franco-Prussian War was readily incorporated within Moreau’s larger thematic: a meditation on ‘modern decay’ encompassing history, contemporary science, and the idealist thinking that flourished in the post-war climate.

Druick notes that in this work Hercules is a pure hero, battling against the vile and savage forces, and “his elemental enemy, female nature.” However, his short chapter does not allow for a deeper exploration of these themes. In the following discussion, I build on this description of Moreau’s attitude towards modern degeneration and decay. At the same time, I also address the artist’s changing depictions of women and his inclusion of the theme of women degenerating into animals.

In *The Art of Gustave Moreau*, Julius Kaplan provides a useful chronological development of Moreau’s career, dividing it into three phases, the first of which spans the 1860s and includes the paintings *Oedipus and the Sphinx* and *Prometheus*, from 1864 and 1868 (Figs. 1, 21). Kaplan states that during this time, Moreau focused on: “the contest

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57 Ibid., 37.
between man's ideals and physical matter—represented by woman.” Kaplan also addresses the philosophical background for these theories, noting that:

Moreau's writings and the first phase of his mature style adhere to this Neo-Platonic mode of thought. His disgust with the real world made appealing a philosophy that turned its back upon material considerations in favor of spiritual ones. Eclecticism, the French variant of Neo-Platonic Idealism, offered him a philosophical basis for his art and theory.

Kaplan accurately states the importance of materiality to Moreau in the early phase of his career. However, he does not address the continuing relevance of these themes throughout the artist’s career. Additionally, since Kaplan only focuses on Moreau’s major works, he does not consider many other subjects that the artist depicted. Choosing to study only the works that received a great deal of contemporary critical attention, Kaplan is able to look at these works in detail, but he neglects important subjects like Leda and Pasiphaë. Additionally, like the other authors who explore Moreau’s depictions of women, Kaplan does not address the important connection between women, animals, and degeneration in these paintings.

Moreau’s paintings of degenerate women are connected to contemporary discourses on theories of degeneration and are discursively connected to the images of femme fatales and the descriptions of bestial women. Moreau often connects women to animals and portrays them as threats to the male body, depicting flesh-eating animals, recombined body parts, and bestiality. In works such as Prometheus from 1868 and Diomedes Devoured by Horses from 1865 (Figs. 21, 4), Moreau depicted animals eating male flesh, creating images that literally endanger the male body, as well as threatening the heroic male focus on larger eternal ideas. In other works, he illustrated a more metaphorical threat when he showed human and animal body parts fragmented and combined in images such as Oedipus and the Sphinx. In these paintings, the creatures threaten the male body, as well as directly connecting degenerate, lustful women to animals. Finally, Moreau also painted images where women threaten the entire human race with degeneration. The artist represented this threat by depicting bestiality in images.


59 Ibid., 12.
such as the undated Pasiphaë (Fig. 22). In many of these images, Moreau showed progressive men ignoring the pains and pleasures of the material world, while degenerate women and animals threaten his staid resolve. Nevertheless, his later images of bestiality show a more nuanced, ambiguous attitude to sexuality, where it can become positive and pure, rather than merely degenerate and bestial.

**Flesh-Eating Animals**

Moreau incorporated the theme of degeneration in some of his works by painting mythical scenes featuring degenerate animals eating human flesh. By choosing these particular subjects, he was able to integrate contemporary fears and theories in his depictions of ancient mythological subjects. The animals in these paintings threaten the male figures, yet the heroes in works like *Prometheus* ignore the physical pain and the possibility of dying to focus on the eternal and transcendent. Paintings like *Prometheus* and *Diomedes Devoured by Horses*, as well as Moreau’s descriptions and contemporary responses to these works show the influence of theories on degeneration.

*Prometheus* features the Greek Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to the mortals. Zeus condemned him to be bound to a rock and have an eagle eat his liver every day. This scene incorporates several important themes: the hero ignores material pain to focus on the unknown and eternal, and at the same time, flesh-eating animals threaten man’s physical body as well as his focus on transcendence. As Kaplan writes: “*Prometheus* is a symbolic representation of Moreau’s philosophic belief that man is an ideal figure who must combat the sensuousness and brutality of matter.”

In the canvas, the chained hero sits on a cliff, surrounded by a desolate landscape. A dead vulture is draped over the ground in front of him, while another peers around the hero’s side, following the sitter’s gaze. Prometheus ignores the bird and his own physical pain, staring forward, looking beyond the picture plane and beyond the physical world. Above his head, a small flame serves as a marker to identify him and his deed. According to Moreau, as Prometheus stares into the distance: “Like a pilot waiting on the bow of a boat, he looks at the distant icy spaces, surveying the entire horizon, smiling at his dream,

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while his flank bleeds under the distortions of the beak of a vulture that is always unappeased.”61 In this short description of his own work, the artist emphasizes Prometheus’ gaze, showing that for Moreau, the most important aspect of the painting was the hero’s ability to focus on his dreams, ignoring his physical pain. Thus, the hero’s ability to overcome the material world is a key to understanding this work.

_Diomedes Devoured by Horses_ is an uncommon subject that has only been depicted a few times in the history of art. Moreau chose Hercules’ eighth labor as the subject of one of his earliest paintings. This dramatic canvas is unusual because it shows the hero, Hercules, in a moment of victory. Rather than enduring pain and violence, he is the instigator of this violence, and remains coolly disconnected from it, sitting on a wall watching, rather than suffering through a torment like Prometheus. To complete this labor, Hercules had to capture the four flesh-eating horses owned by King Diomedes. In order to tame the horses, he killed the king and fed the corpse to the beasts. Moreau chose to depict the four violent, rabid horses, surrounded by their earlier victims, tearing into their master’s flesh. Although in the original story, the horses ate the king after Hercules killed him, in this painting, the corpse is reanimated, and Diomedes raises his fist and his knee, his eyes wide in shock, as he screams in pain.

_Diomedes Devoured by Horses_ is an unusual work for Moreau. Here, he created an active, violent scene, focusing on the movement, rather than the motionless exchange of gazes he depicted in works like _Prometheus_ and _Oedipus and the Sphinx_. Moreau usually depicted either the moment before or after a dramatic scene, rather than the flurry of violence and aggression he portrayed in _Diomedes Devoured by Horses_. In images like _Prometheus_, Moreau’s generally heavy, detailed technique lends weight to scenes that emphasize the tense stillness of a moment. However, this same technique detracts from the sense of violence and motion depicted in scenes like _Diomedes_. In this painting, the central figure, Diomedes, struggles in pain, succumbing to material concerns. Here, the hero is not the victim of violence, but is actually the aggressor. Significantly, although Hercules is not in pain, he does stare into the distance, ignoring Diomedes’ screams. Moreau’s contemporaries focused on the importance of Hercules’ detached gaze when

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61 “Semblable au pilote veillant à la proue du navire, il regarde au loin les espaces glacés, sondant les horizons, tout entier, souriant à son rêve, tandis que son flanc saigne sous le bec altéré u vautour toujours inassouvi.” Gustave Moreau, _Écrits sur l’art_, 77.
describing this work. Théophile Gautier emphasizes both the gaze and the sense of justice in the work, explaining that Hercules is “the trainer of the monsters, the great righter of wrongs, the knight-errant of Antiquity[.] . . . [H]e looks impassively at the culprit punished with the torment that he inflicted on others.” 62 Although Moreau incorporated certain elements in this early work that he did not depict in later paintings, such as the aggressive hero and the highly active scene, he did incorporate the threatening animals and a hero ignoring physical pain to stare off into the distance.

Both *Prometheus* and *Diomedes* include animals literally threatening the wholeness of the male body and degenerate creatures distracting men from their focus on the unknown. In these paintings, Moreau incorporated the themes of animals threatening the male body and men ignoring the material world. In addition to including flesh-eating animals in works like *Prometheus* and *Diomedes Devoured by Horses*, Moreau also painted male bodies in various stages of death and decomposition in works like *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, and *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra*. Like the inclusion of flesh-eating animals, these bodies warn the viewer of the physical threat of women and animals and remind him to ignore the corporeal concerns of lust and pain in order to focus on the transcendent and the unknown. In this way, in *Prometheus* the hero ignores not just his physical pain, but also the dead bodies around him, just as Oedipus and Hercules ignore the reminders of their possible fate littered on the ground around them.

**Reconstituted Body Parts**

Moreau connects women to animals in a variety of ways, depicting what he conceived to be their base, degenerative nature which threatens male progression. In some cases, Moreau physically attaches women to animals by depicting fragmented and recombined body parts. These combined forms threaten the human body with fragmentation, like the paintings discussed in the previous section which show animals eating the human body. Additionally, by physically combining women and animals in paintings like *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, Moreau illustrates their similarities. Two of

62 “le dompteur des monstres, le grand redresseur de torts, le chevalier errant de l’Antiquité... impassible il regarde le coupable puni par le supplice qu’il infligeait aux autres.” Claude Pétry, “1866, Gustave Moreau face à la critique,” in *Gustave Moreau: Diomède Dévoré par ses Chevaux*, ed. Gilles Fage (Rouen: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000), 16.
Moreau’s paintings, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* and *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra*, feature recombined body parts and male figures ignoring physical pain and death, to focus on larger spiritual concerns. Moreau also incorporates this theme in his written descriptions of several other works, including *Salome in the Garden* from 1878 (Fig. 14).

One of Moreau’s earliest and most famous works is *Oedipus and the Sphinx* from 1864. This painting shows a young man accosted by a creature that is part woman and part animal. The disjointed creature is grafted together from a woman’s head and breasts, a bird’s wings, and a lion’s body. As the beast attacks the man, claws constricting, the woman’s face stares forward, eyes glazed over. Her vacant expression appears surprised and fearful, rather than violent or aggressive. Neither the woman nor Oedipus registers the drama of the scene in their facial expressions. The sphinx’s face seems disconnected from and unaware of the actions of her body, as though she is not cognizant of her true nature. The hero, on the other hand, disregards his physical body because of his heroic nature. He ignores the pain of her claws digging into his flesh, the breasts protruding in his direction, and the scent and sight of death around him. He focuses on a distant dream world, gazing at the unknown and ignoring pain, fear, and the temptation of the female body.

When describing *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, Moreau elaborates on the contrasts between men and women, the transcendent and the earthly, and progression and degeneration that appears in many of his paintings. Describing the sphinx, Moreau writes: “It is an earthly Chimera, vile like all matter, attractive like it, represented [by] this charming woman’s head, with the still promising wings of the ideal and the body of the monster, the carnivore that tears and destroys.”

with his foot, the man walks confidently, with his eye on the ideal.” When he describes the work using these terms, Moreau makes it clear that his reinterpretation of this classical subject is related to contemporary theories regarding degeneration and the lustful nature of women.

Painted more than half a century earlier, in a different cultural context, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ *Oedipus and the Sphinx* of 1808 (Fig. 23) is a completely different interpretation of the subject, even though it features a similar style and level of finish. Ingres also included a creature that is part woman, part animal, threatening Oedipus, surrounded by the bodies of her victims. Yet in his painting he does not exploit the same fears of materiality and degenerate women that became a major cultural concern in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In Ingres’ painting, the sphinx is not clawing at Oedipus. In fact, the figures are not even touching. This lack of physical contact is a key difference between the two works since Oedipus is not in pain in Ingres’ work, and his distance from the sphinx allows him to solve his riddle in relative peace. Moreau removed this distance and layered another meaning onto the work by connecting it to contemporary fears and theories on degeneration. Rather than standing deep in thought, contemplating a riddle, Moreau’s Oedipus must overcome the material world, the bestial, beautiful woman’s painful claws, and the threat of death to focus on deeper concerns.

In 1883, Jean Lorrain described this work in his *Le Sphinx*, elaborating on Moreau’s images, and showing yet another way to interpret this scene. Here, Lorrain focuses on the woman’s base corporeality rather than the transcendent hero who is essential to Moreau’s interpretation of the scene.

At the foot of the huge rock, where its sharp claw
Continues to draw their blood:
There are the king’s sons, the itinerant singer and the shepherd
And the sphinx, squatted on their lacerated flesh,
Slowly devours them.
Its eyes dart into the distance, committing the traveler
To the sour and prompt death and, king of vain efforts,

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64 “l’homme rencontre l’enigme éternelle qui le presse et le meurtrit. Mais l’âme (forte) et ferme défie les atteintes enivrantes et brutales de la matièr et, la foulant au pied, l’homme marche confiant, l’oeil sur l’idéal.” Ibid.
It sees and knows how to foresee;
And the cruel heap smoking in redness
Of daybreaks and evenings, human cluster of deaths,
Raises its power.\textsuperscript{65}

In this passage, as in most of Lorrain's poems, the poet focuses on the fear of woman's base materiality. Unlike Moreau, he does not contrast degenerate feminine nature with the transcendent nature of man.

Another of Moreau's paintings, \textit{Hercules and the Lernean Hydra}, also includes a reconstituted body, although in this case it is a hydra, which he created by grafting together the heads of many snakes. While Moreau depicted a fragmented animal rather than a human, he still focused on the male hero overcoming the material monster. The hero ignores the death around him and the disfigurement before him to focus on his goal. Like \textit{Oedipus and the Sphinx}, this painting features two combatants staring at each other in a dramatic, pregnant moment. Significantly, for Moreau, the gaze itself was an essential part of the work. Rather than focusing on the composition or the heroic muscular body when describing this painting, he wrote: "Nothing is more beautiful than this man and this animal contemplating each other before combat."\textsuperscript{66} Even though Moreau did not directly incorporate the theme of women degenerating in this image, he did emphasize the male gaze, the bestial threat, and the hero’s detachment from material concerns. It is also important to note that even though the creature is formed only from animal parts, some theorists connect this image to Moreau’s depictions of degenerate

\textsuperscript{65} "Au pied du roc énorme, où sa griffe acérée
Les fait saigner encore:
Là sont les fils du roi, le rapsode et le pâtre
Et le sphinx, accroupi sur leur chair lacérée,
Lentement les dévore.
Il darde au loin ses yeux, vouant le voyageur
Aux trépas surs et prompts et, roi des vains efforts,
Il voit et sait prévoir;
Et le cruel monceau fumant dans la rougeur
Des aubes et des soirs, grappe humaine de morts,

\textsuperscript{66} "Rien n’est plus beau que cet homme et cette bête se contemplant avant le combat. C’est bien autrement terrible." Écrits sur l’art, 100.
women. For example, Druick argues that in this image, the hydra is woman “in her most primal incarnation.” 67

Moreau connects female figures to animals in his written descriptions of some paintings that do not feature combined human and animal forms. One example is Salome in the Garden. Moreau describes her as not just bestial, but also supremely violent and terrifying:

This bored, temperamental woman, with an animal nature, gives herself some pleasure, not very much for her, to see her enemy on earth, so much that she is repulsed from any contentment of her desires. This woman goes for a walk nonchalantly, in a vegetal and bestial manner in the marvelous gardens which...have just been soiled by this horrible murder which frightens the torturer himself who escapes distraught....When I want to render these nuances, I find them not in my subject, but in the nature of woman in life, who seeks unhealthy emotions and who, stupidly, does not even understand the horror of the most dreadful situations. 68

In this description, Moreau incorporates the themes of women degenerating into animals and killing men for pleasure. Additionally, the artist writes that this description applies to all women, not just Salome, connecting his painting to ideas of contemporary social degeneration.

These images of combined female and animal forms and the descriptions of women as bestial highlight Moreau’s focus on women as degenerate, material creatures. At the same time, from his images and descriptions, as well as the responses to his paintings, it is apparent that both Moreau and his contemporaries saw men as capable of escaping this degeneration and of progressing towards an ideal. In these works, Moreau depicts women as threatening and tempting men, so that men must fight their desire for


68 “Cette femme ennuyée, fantasque, à nature animale, se donnant le plaisir, très peu vif pour elle, de voir son ennemi à terre, tant elle est dégoûtée de toute satisfaction de ses désires. Cette femme se promenant nonchalamment, d’une façon végétale et bestiale dans des jardins admirables qui...d’être souillés par cet horrible meurtre qui effraie le bourreau lui-même, qui se sauve éperdu...Quand je veux rendre ces nuances-là, je les trouve non pas dans mon sujet, mais dans la nature même de la femme dans la vie, qui cherche les émotions malsaines et qui, stupide, ne comprend même pas l’horreur des situations les plus affreuses.” Moreau, Écrits sur l’art, 101-2.
the flesh and their fear of death in order to focus on the transcendent. However, even though his description of *Salome in the Garden* implies that this degeneration applies to all women, some of his later works which feature the subject of bestiality portray women and sexuality in a more positive light.

**Bestiality**

Moreau’s completed paintings of bestiality were generally painted toward the end of his career. However, he created hundreds of undated sketches of many of these subjects, which he could have produced during an earlier phase of his career. Some of these scenes, and the artist’s descriptions of them, show a more ambivalent and, in some cases, even positive attitude towards women. Nevertheless, because these images show people succumbing to the pleasures of the flesh and engaging in sexual acts with animals, they demonstrate that the themes of materiality and degeneration were relevant concepts throughout Moreau’s career. Significantly, the images included in this section threaten men in a new way. These sexual acts are more than an immediate danger, since the act of bestiality threatens the entire human race with degeneration. These scenes include men, women, and gods giving in to material pleasures rather than focusing on the eternal and transcendent. Although Moreau describes some of these acts as horrible crimes, he sees others as pure, showing an ambiguous attitude towards the idea of women degenerating into animals and men succumbing to material pleasures.

Moreau depicted the subject of Pasiphaë many times, exploring the topic in a variety of different mediums and experimenting with many different compositions. Pasiphaë was the queen of Crete and the Minotaur’s mother, who lusted after and mated with a white bull because of a curse laid on her by Poseidon. Significantly, in this story, Pasiphaë mates with a real bull, not a god appearing as a bull, so the act is a true act of bestiality. One of Moreau’s unfinished and undated paintings shows the woman and the bull locked in an embrace, bodies twined together, merging into a single passionate unit as both participants succumb to their physical desires (Fig. 24). Another undated painting features a naked Pasiphaë in the foreground, displaying her body before the audience and the small white bull, using her sexuality as a source of power (Fig. 25). These images show Pasiphaë alternately as a victim of her own lustful desires and as a seductress. Just
as Moreau’s depictions of the subject vary, his description of the scene vacillates between
describing this act as pitiful and as criminal:

Pale and great faces, terrible, solitary, dark and sorry, fatal lovers,

mysterious, condemned to titanic shames, which will you become, which
destinies will be yours, where will you be able to hide your formidable
loves? What terrors, what pities you inspire, what huge sadness, and
astounded you wake up at the human being called to contemplate such an
amount of shame, horror, crime and misfortune!  

While he shows some degree of pity and does not simply condemn the couple, Moreau’s
depictions of this subject and his descriptions portray the act as a shameful scene of a
woman giving in to her desire for pleasure.

Moreau’s painting of Europa from 1868 (Fig. 26) shows a women and a bull with
a man’s head. In Greek mythology, Zeus abducted Europa as a bull, but then turned back
into his own form before copulating with her. As with many of Moreau’s other works, the
action in this scene appears suspended in time. Rather than charging towards the viewer,
both the bull and the floating woman appear frozen in space. Europa’s facial expression
registers some emotion, yet she seems unaware of her body’s movement. In the figure of
the bull, Moreau combines an animal’s body with a man’s head, creating a new creature.
However, in this work he complicates the idea of the animal as a degenerate form, since
here, the bull is the embodiment of a god. The god’s reason for appearing as a bull is
physical, material pleasure, yet Moreau does not focus on this sordid detail in his
description of the work, concerning himself instead with the problem of depicting a god
in material form.  

Although an undated watercolor of the subject emphasizes the act of
bestiality by showing the bull with an animal head, in his completed oil painting the bull
has a human head (Fig. 27). From Moreau’s description of the oil painting, it is apparent
that he had trouble deciding how to render a god. Instead of focusing on the bestiality,
Moreau emphasizes the fact that he could never come close to painting the god as

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69 “Pâles et grandes figures, terribles, solitaires, sombres et désolées, fatales amantes, mystérieuses,
condamnées aux hontes titaniques, que deviendrez-vous, quelles destinées seront les vôtres, où pourront se
cacher vos formidables amours? Quelles terrors, quelles pitiés vous inspirez, quelles tristesses immenses
et stupéfiées vous éveillez chez l’être humain appelé à contempler tant de honte, d’horreur, de crime et
d’infortune!” Moreau, Écrits sur l’art, 92.
70 Moreau, Écrits sur l’art, 80.
sufficiently beautiful and divine.\textsuperscript{71} Although Moreau expresses a great deal of concern over the god’s head in his description, in a response to the critic Laverdant he focuses on what he sees as the moral nature of the work. Responding to Laverdant’s argument that the work is vulgar, Moreau writes that he has taken a subject that many would have portrayed in a crass way and elevated it, making it into a lesson for the “materialist and anti-spiritualistic youth” by showing them something beautiful.\textsuperscript{72}

Like the subject of Pasiphaë, Moreau depicted Leda in a variety of paintings, reinterpreting the subject in many incarnations, varying from the passionate to the chaste (Fig. 10, 9, 5). Like Europa, Leda’s lover was actually Zeus, yet in this story Zeus remained in his animal form when the two copulated. According to the myth, this union either produced an egg that hatched Helen of Troy, or Leda later cared for the egg that was hatched by another of Zeus’s lovers. Although Moreau sketched many different negative interpretations of this scene, his final painting and his description of it both interpret the subject in a positive light:

The swan-king, his head posed on that of the elected woman, in a sovereign attitude, embodied in his whiteness and his divinity. She! attentive leaning on his dream, remains motionless under this divine incantation. It is the majestic sleep which precedes transfigurations. All in grace in its power and its force….Further, the victorious and triumphant love, the tense and open hands as a sign of taking possession, flies away with the conquest of the world. The average divinities, fauns, satyrs, dryads, hamadryads, nymphs of the water and the wood, come to communicate with this to this altar of whiteness and beauty. And towards the horizon, the grand Pan, kneeling in a gesture of worship, comes to consecrate with all of nature this apotheosis of eternal beauty.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{72} “une jeunesse matérialiste et anti-spiritualiste,” Ibid., 78-79.

\textsuperscript{73} “Le cygnet-roi, sa tête posée sur celle de la femme élue, dans une attitude souveraine, incarne en elle sa blancheur et sa divinité. Elle ! attentive penchée sur son rêve, demeure immobile sous cette incantation divine. C’est l’auguste sommeil qui prédéce les transfigurations. Toute en grâce dans sa puissance et dans sa force...Plus loin, l’amour victorieux et triomphant, les mains tendues et ouvertes en signe de prise de possession, s’envole à la conquête du monde. Les divinités moyennes, faunes, satyres, dryades, hamadryades, nymphes des eaux et des bois, viennent communier à cet autel de blancheur et de beauté. Et
Although in some of his illustrations he depicted the two figures intertwined in a passionate embrace, in the final scene he introduced more distance between the figures. In this painting he included a silent, calm swan resting his head on Leda’s as she gazes off in a daze. Rather than creating a threatening scene, where the man stands fast against the degenerate bestial woman, here Moreau incorporated the themes of women, animals, and sexuality in a positive way. In this image and description, the sexual act appears to be a step towards the unknown and transcendent, rather than a sign of degeneration.

Nevertheless, although Moreau interpreted these themes in a different way in this image, it is significant that he was still grappling with the same themes when he created this work, and that he painted a variety of sketches focusing on this as a scene of degeneration before he arrived at this more ambiguous interpretation.

Although a few of Moreau’s works show physical love as pure, most of his paintings connect women, animals, and degeneration, showing how materiality and sexuality threaten men. When he connected these themes, he built on the work of many theorists, artists, and writers who addressed these themes in a variety of ways throughout the nineteenth century. Moreau depicted women and sexuality as threats to male idealism and spiritual transcendence and as physical threats to the wholeness of the male body and the continuation of the human species. Some of his works feature flesh-eating animals, highlighting the physical threat of base creatures to male transcendence. Other works literally connect women and animals, as the artist depicted combined body parts and emphasized both the physical and sexual threats of degenerate creatures to heroic men. Moreau’s images of bestially incorporate the same themes, but some of his paintings and descriptions show a more ambiguous attitude. In these works, women and sex occasionally become more than a threat, and appear as pure and transcendent. While these images show a more ambivalent attitude toward physical pleasure, other works by the artist explore another form of materiality: that of focusing on the physical canvas itself.

-vers l’horizon, le grand Pan, agenouillé dans un geste d’adoration, vient consacrer avec la nature entière cette apothéose de la beauté éternelle.” Moreau, Écrits sur l’art, 75.
A striking woman floats slightly above a red carpet, dancing in front of an enthroned king. Swathed in layers of jewels and clothing, she coyly gazes with heavily lidded eyes at the white flower in her hand, seemingly oblivious to her sumptuous surroundings and the eyes staring at her body. A small form in the vast, cave-like expanse of a luxuriously decorated palace, Salome stands out as the brightest and nearest figure. In Gustave Moreau’s *Salome Dancing Before Herod* from 1876 (Fig. 2), this woman exudes an air of mystery, hovering in the air that appears simultaneously crystal clear and shrouded with fog and mist. Despite all the elaborate details, the mysterious subject, the incestuous scandal, and the extravagant decorations, the surface of the painting continually asserts itself to the viewer as the work’s subject.

Looking at this painting, the viewer does not see a mimetic image or imagine that this frame serves as a window onto a different world. The entire surface is cluttered with details that all rise to the forefront, denying any illusionistic perspective that would serve to create a clear progression into space. The artist uses a technique that brings the entire image to the painting’s surface, forcing the viewer to see the work as two dimensional and to recognize the scene as representation, rather than reality. In addition to elaborating every small detail of the painting, Moreau emphasizes the work’s materiality by focusing the viewer’s attention on the palpable, jewel-like canvas.

Like many of his contemporaries, Moreau aspired to depict the ideal form but struggled with the problem of representing immaterial ideals using the physical medium of paint. His oeuvre shows that he explored four different stylistic avenues while attempting to solve this problem. Painting in one of his most commonly employed styles in *Salome Dancing Before Herod*, Moreau produced smooth, realistic surfaces that were so heavily over-wrought with details as to refuse mimesis. I refer to this style as a type of “grandiose complexity,” using a term derived from J. K. Huysmans’ description of this painting in the novel *A Rebours*, from 1884. Moreau also layered linear patterns over the surface of some works, such as his *Tattooed Salome* of 1874 (Fig. 6), interrupting the

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74 Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, 53.
viewer’s gaze and detracting from the illusionism of the work. In 1906, Robert de Montesquiou referred to these designs as “mysterious tracings and cabalistic meanderings,” a phrase which I will use to describe this section of Moreau’s oeuvre. Moreau also used a stained-glass-inspired technique in works like Jupiter and Semele (Fig. 7) from 1895. Describing this work in a letter from 1891, Charles Éphrussi used the evocative phrase “tonalities of an ideal dream.” Moreau also used an expressionistic style in many studies and sketches, especially those of Hercules and the Lernean Hydra both from c. 1869-76 (Figs. 8, 28). Due to the artist’s focus on brushstrokes and his use of color in these works, following Robert de Montesquiou I refer to these works as “flows of color.” Although these four techniques are widely varied, each style incorporates a different approach to emphasizing the surface and the materiality of the work, as well as denying the illusionism of conventional perspectival works.

In his “Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface,” Reinhold Heller argues that other art historians focus on Symbolist theory too much without taking Symbolist style into account. In order to find formal correspondences between the Symbolist painters, he shifts the discussion to their techniques, arguing that neither their associations with literary Symbolists, nor their use of similar iconography is enough to definitively label them as a separate movement. Heller focuses on the role that the surface plays in Symbolist art, writing that Symbolism was “a manner of painting that accentuated the pictorial surface and the autonomous existence of the work of art.” Heller considers a variety of different paintings to show how the Symbolists emphasized the flatness and material surface of their works, creating non-mimetic spaces that viewers perceived as representations. Heller looks at Paul Gauguin’s use of chalky primers and thin oil paint, which the artist used to create oil paintings on canvas that looked like frescoes. According to Heller, Gauguin did this in order to draw attention to the creative

75 Robert de Montesquiou, “Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave Moreau,” 162.
77 Montesquiou, “Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave Moreau,” 177.
78 Heller, “Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface,” 147.
79 Ibid., 148.
Like Gauguin, Edvard Munch did not follow contemporary illusionistic practices. Instead, he chose to leave either the texture of his canvas or his cardboard support visible and to use a variety of different media in order to draw attention to his representational practices. Fernand Knopff focused on the surface of his works in a different way by covering the oil paintings in glass, creating a second surface that also acted as a mirror. I build on Heller’s method, applying it to Gustave Moreau’s paintings. In this way, I examine Moreau’s theory as well as the variety of styles he utilized to emphasize the flatness of his paintings.

I also consider how Moreau’s various styles are related to the techniques used by other contemporary artists. Just as Moreau utilized several different techniques, Symbolist artists explored a variety of ways to emphasize the surface. As Félix Fénéon wrote of several contemporary artists: “Each of them imperiously stresses his disparity... through his own interpretation of the emotional meaning of colors and the degree of sensitivity of his optical nerves... but never through a monopoly of deft studio tricks.”

Thus, the Symbolist artists used a variety of formal styles as each sought to recreate his own personal sensations while avoiding the conventional academic forms of modeling and perspective.

Although the Symbolists sought to depict the ideal, they did not strive to explain it fully, but preferred to merely suggest it, retaining an air of mystery. In his “Symbolist Manifesto” from 1886, Jean Moréas expressed this need to keep the idea mysterious and to focus on the resplendent surface:

The enemy of teaching, of declamation, of false sensibility, of objective description, Symbolist poetry seeks to clothe the Idea with a sensible form which, nevertheless, would not be a goal in itself, but which, at the same time as expressing the Idea, would remain subject to it. The Idea, in its turn, must not be seen to be deprived of the sumptuous trappings of exterior analogies; for the essential character of Symbolist art consists in

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81 Ibid., 149.

82 Ibid., 150-1.

never going as far as the conception of the Idea itself. Thus, in this art, the scenes of nature, the actions of human beings, all concrete phenomena cannot manifest themselves as such: they are sensible appearances destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideas.

As Pierre Brunel explains in his “The ‘Beyond’ and the ‘Within’: the Place and Function of Myths in Symbolist Literature,” Symbolism focuses on leading the viewer towards an unknown that can never be fully known, since once the symbol or myth is known, it will die.

In this chapter I build on the ideas expressed by Symbolist artists and theorists, and developed by art historians including Heller, in order to show how deeply the concept of materiality resonated for Moreau. I look at how Moreau focused on the material in order to draw attention to his works as representation and to highlight the tensions inherent in attempting to depict the eternal in physical form. As stated above, Moreau used four different styles to emphasize the surface of his canvas. These styles include his use of smooth, intricate detail in a kind of “grandiose complexity,” as well as his layered patterns, featuring “mysterious tracings and cabalistic meanderings.” Additionally, Moreau also used a stained-glass-inspired technique that resembles the “tonalities of an ideal dream,” and created more expressionistic sketches featuring “flows of color.” His experimentation with these styles demonstrates that Moreau struggled with and reinterpreted the problem of materiality throughout his career.

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85 Brunel, “The ‘Beyond’ and ‘Within,’” 404-5.
86 Huysmans, Against the Grain, 53.
87 Montesquiou, “Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave Moreau,” 162.
89 Montesquiou, “Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave Moreau,” 177.
“Grandiose Complexity”

Moreau is best known for the smooth, almost burnished paintings he created without visible brushstrokes. These paintings feature intricate details spread all over the canvas. Most of the works he exhibited at the Salons were created using this technique. As a result, many art historians focus on just these works rather than looking at all of the different methods he employed throughout his career. Additionally, art historians do not adequately address the extent to which Moreau used this particular technique to emphasize the surface. In these works, the smooth surface acts similarly to Knopff’s addition of glass to the surface of his oil paintings. In both cases, the shiny surface acts against illusionistic representation by calling attention to the painting as representation. In addition to Moreau’s shiny surfaces, his layers of detail also emphasize the flat surface of the works and the representational nature of painting.

Moreau often used conventional illusionistic devices, especially atmospheric perspective. Although this does give some of his paintings a certain appearance of mimeticism, Moreau did not apply this technique in a uniform enough manner to create a believable illusion. For example, in works such as Salome Dancing Before Herod, Moreau created an effect of space by adding foggy or misty areas in the background. Nevertheless, he detracted from this illusion of distance by painting intricate details on the walls and columns. Thus, by both building up surface detail and creating a shiny surface, Moreau refused the appearance of mimeticism. Many Orientalist painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Moreau’s close friend, Eugène Fromentin, created smooth, shiny surfaces and highly detailed, ornate compositions. Art historian Linda Nochlin argues that as a result of using this technique “in his own time, Gérôme was held to be dauntingly objective and scientific” when he painted works such as The Snake Charmer.

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90 Huysmans, Against the Grain, 53.

91 Art historians such as Kaplan do note the richness of these surfaces, such as when Kaplan states that in Salome Dancing Before Herod a “rich play of light reinforces the evocative effect of the scene. Optical rendering and gleaming color create a sense of opulence within the firm linear structure of the painting.” Kaplan occasionally mentions the focus on materiality such as when he identifies that the surface of this work is emphasized more than Salome’s physical beauty, as he states: “[Moreau] transferred Salome’s physical sensuousness into pictorial richness and thus infused the painting with a mysterious feel.” Nevertheless, Kaplan and other art historians have not effectively integrated these issues into their discussions of Moreau’s style. Kaplan, The Art of Gustave Moreau, 58, 67.
in 1870 (Fig. 29). Nochlin says that the Orientalist painters attempted to give an air of realism and mimeticism to their biased depictions of other cultures by adding a multitude of minute details and by creating shiny surfaces, with no apparent brushstrokes as signs of the works’ creation. At the same time, Nochlin also stresses the tactile nature of these works, since in these paintings, the surface itself becomes a tactile pleasure for the viewer to possess. This technique acts in both ways, convincing the viewer that the scene is mimetic, and simultaneously emphasizing the palpable surface. However, these responses counteract each other so that neither technique is as effective. Although the details and smooth surface give the appearance of mimeticism, the lack of many conventional illusionistic devices and the shiny surface simultaneously serve to remind the viewer that this is a representation. Significantly, Moreau’s paintings incorporate even more details than The Snake Charmer, and thus, the flatness of these works is even more apparent.

In Salome Dancing Before Herod Moreau utilizes modeling, shading, and atmospheric perspective to give the painting a certain air of mimeticism. This work functions similarly to the way Orientalist paintings do. As in The Snake Charmer, Salome’s body is spread before the viewer’s eyes, placed in a realistic scene. The use of conventional techniques can serve to convince the viewer that the body is there before him, available for him to possess. But the shiny surface of this painting continually asserts its significance to the viewer, disrupting the illusion. Moreau, like Gérôme, created a highly detailed, ornate surface, with a jewel-like finish. This allows the viewer to take a tactile pleasure in looking at the work of art itself, rather than merely the subject of the painting. This serves to remind the viewer that this is a work of art, a representation, rather than an actual scene.

The elaborate details Moreau included in the background do more than just create a tension with the illusionistic use of atmospheric perspective and fog. The detailed lines and colors, the ornaments on the columns, the ceiling, the sculptures, and the throne all distract the viewer from the subject of Salome. The details all over the surface of the

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93 Ibid., 37, 47-8.
94 Ibid., 43-5.
painting rise to the foreground, refusing to fall back into an illusionistic creation of perspective. While some elements drop back to their proper perspectival distance, the overall composition clamors for the viewer’s attention as details appear to rise to the surface, emphasizing the materiality of the painting and the fact that it is created and not natural.

In other paintings, including *The Daughters of Thespius* from 1853 (Fig. 30), Moreau utilized traditional one-point perspective in creating the architectural setting. He placed the vanishing point in the center of the composition, so that all of the lines are either parallel to the picture plane, or they recede to meet at one point. Although this perspectival device creates the illusion of space, Moreau added so many detailed ornaments to the building that it refuses to recede into the background and, rather, competes with the foreground for the viewer’s attention. Additionally, the painting features different light sources in the foreground and mid-ground. This makes the figures in the foreground glow white while those in the mid-ground appear tinged with a golden glow. This variation is not consistent with conventional depictions of space. Rather than creating the illusion of a gradual recession into the distance, this lighting makes the foreground appear as a two-dimensional framing device around another scene. In *The Suitors* from 1852 (Fig. 31), Moreau created a deeper recession into space and a steady, slight change from white light to yellow light, creating a more conventional illusionistic depiction of space. Nevertheless, he still emphasized the surface of this work by painting a multitude of details in the background. Thomas Couture’s *Romans during the Decadence* from 1847 (Fig. 32) shows a more traditional use of one-point perspective and the elimination of background detail in order to create a sense of recession into space. When painting this work, Couture utilized conventional atmospheric perspective, depicting fewer details in the background, which appears hazier than the foreground. Thus, in *The Daughters of Thespius*, and to a lesser extent, *The Suitors*, Moreau avoided using conventional depictions of space and he simultaneously depicted intricate details all over the picture plane to emphasize the smooth surface of the canvas.
“Mysterious Tracings and Cabalistic Meanderings”95

In some of his works, Moreau superimposed a layer of intricate lines over his smooth realistic technique. In these works, the painted lines interrupt the viewer’s gaze and detract from any realism in the underlying image. Many art historians have referred to these works as incomplete, saying the lines are sketches that would have been filled in when the work was completed. Nevertheless, the fact that Moreau lined over many works that were otherwise complete makes this possibility less likely. The artist did occasionally use painted outlines around areas of color with the intention of filling them in later, as he did with The Chimeras in 1884 (Fig 33). But he painted these outlines on blank canvas, not on a modeled and shaded work like the Tattooed Salome (Fig. 6). Even more significantly, Moreau used such painted lines over the surface of watercolors, such as The Peri (The Sacred Elephant; The Sacred Lake) from 1881-2 (Fig. 34), which is significant since the medium of watercolor does not allow for the same type of layering as oil painting. Thus, even if Moreau never completed these works, it is clear that he explored this lined technique as a more finished style and not just as preparatory work. Just as he refused to allow the viewer to see some works as mimetic by painting detailed, over-wrought surfaces, in other works he created overlays of details and lines. He did so in paintings like the Tattooed Salome in order to emphasize that these were not three-dimensional objects, but two-dimensional artworks. This layered technique interrupts the viewer’s gaze, cutting off his direct connection to the subject. Just as Moreau’s over-worked surfaces refuse to allow the viewer to imagine that he is looking at an actual three-dimensional scene, this layering reinforces the tactile surface of the paintings. It cuts off the viewer’s easy identification with, and viewing of, the subject.

Symbolist theorist Albert Aurier argued that art should be decorative. He did not believe that art should be a mimetic representation of the world, but rather that it should focus on the material surface. Aligned with his theories, the Symbolists emphasized flatness and decoration to such an extent that in some cases their work bordered on the Art Nouveau style, which also aimed at emphasizing the surface. However, while Art Nouveau focused on decoration for its own sake, the Symbolists emphasized the surface

95Montesquiou, “Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave Moreau,” 162.
in order to express the tension between the object and the idea. Thus, while the Symbolists focused on the materiality of their works, they used this emphasis to express their theoretical ideas about materiality and decorative art, rather than to make flatness and sensuousness the subject of their paintings. Symbolist artists like Jan Toorop and Aubrey Beardsley emphasized the tension between the material and the immaterial in their work by creating stylized lines and symmetrical compositions. Images such as *The Three Brides* and *The Climax* both from 1893 (Figs. 35, 36), show how these artists emphasized the decorative aspects of their works, occasionally allowing the lines to dissolve and take over the forms. Klimt was another artist who focused on the decorative aspect of Symbolism. Like Moreau, when he painted works like *Salome* from 1909 (Fig. 15), he refused to create an illusionistic representation of space. Rather, he painted decorative shapes and patterns covering the outlines of the bodies and backgrounds in many of his works. In contrast to these Symbolist artists, Art Nouveau artists like Alphonse Mucha took this focus on the decorative to the extreme, allowing the lines to take over the subject in posters like *Zodiac* from 1896 (Fig. 37).

Gustave Moreau painted several images that feature a lined pattern over a shaded and modeled background. One example is his *Tattooed Salome*. Like many of his other paintings of Salome, this work shows the young woman standing, arm outstretched, before Herod. Herod appears enthroned in the background, staring at the semi-clothed form of his stepdaughter/niece as she dances before him. She appears before the viewer mostly naked, leaving her body open to the male gaze. Additionally, she looks to the side, allowing the viewer to see her body without the interruption of returning the viewer’s stare. Nevertheless, the viewer is not permitted to see the figure in an illusionistic sense, or to easily objectify her body. Between the viewer and the body is a superimposed pattern of shapes. These shapes disrupt the normal process of objectifying the female body. While the viewer can still gaze on the female form, he cannot see the work as three dimensional and must focus on the material surface in addition to the forms depicted in the image.

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97 Ibid., 23.

98 Ibid., 242-4.
Another of Moreau’s paintings, *The Peri* (*The Sacred Elephant; The Sacred Lake*) (Fig. 34), similarly refuses to allow the viewer to see an illusionistic space, forcing him to focus on the decorative surface instead. Like the *Tattooed Salome*, this image refuses to appear as a three-dimensional space. Rather, the decorative, lined drawings of plants in the foreground create a separate layer that interferes with the viewer’s reading of the image and forces him to recognize the artificiality of the work. Other works, such as *The Triumph of Alexander the Great* and *Leda* from c.1885 and 1865-75 (Fig. 38, 5), utilize a similar technique. *The Apparition*, which Moreau showed at the Salon of 1876 (Fig. 3), shows that even some canvases which the artist exhibited as finished works retain this decorative overlay. Although the pattern superimposed onto this work appears more detailed and complete than in the *Tattooed Salome* or *The Triumph of Alexander the Great*, it retains the same separation from the more realistically modeled background. Here Moreau painted over his first layer with decorative line drawings and then filled in some sections and added highlights so that the overpainting retains a decorative, linear quality and seems distant from the rest of the scene. Since he included highlights and filled-in sections, however, the pattern is also connected to the rest of the scene.

“Tonalities of an Ideal Dream”99

Moreau created some works that utilized an entirely different technique which was inspired by stained glass and enamel work. These paintings still incorporate the elaborate details Moreau added to most of his works, but he also included some patches of bright unmodeled color. At the same time, he added darker outlining around some patches of color, emphasizing the surface of the works and the representational nature of painting. One example of this technique is Moreau’s *Jupiter and Semele* (Fig. 7), which features the ornate decorative look of many of the artist’s other paintings, but also incorporates darker outlines, as well as several patches of bright, unmodeled color.

In terms of their source material, works like *Jupiter and Semele* are connected to those produced by one group of Symbolist artists, the Synthetists. These artists were influenced by both stained glass and Japanese art. They produced flattened paintings

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using a technique referred to as Cloisonism, referencing the cloisonné enamel work that also inspired them. Despite their similar source material, Moreau and the Synthetists developed widely varying techniques. Although they both used bright patches of unmodeled color and dark outlines, the Synthetists simplified their compositions while Moreau creating elaborately detailed works. Although Moreau and the Synthetists based their technique on the same sources and both sought to show the essences of the objects they depicted, their works diverged widely because Moreau incorporated much more detail into his paintings. For example, Louis Anquetin’s *Avenue de Clichy* from 1887 (Fig. 39), with its large patches of bright, unmodeled color and its thick black outlines around each shape, shows how the Synthetists diverged from Moreau’s more elaborate stained-glass-inspired technique. Nevertheless, despite the differences between their final works, due to the similarity of their goals and sources, written descriptions of these pieces are often very similar. For example, Édouard Dujardin’s description of Cloisonist painting aptly describes the effect of Moreau’s *Jupiter and Semele*:

> At first sight, these works look like decorative paintings: solid outlines and violent color in distinct patches that inevitably remind one of folk imagery and japanism. Then, under the generally hieratic character of the drawing and color, one perceives a truth of sensation emerging from the romanticism of frenzied execution; and, above all, something deliberate, reasoned out, intellectually and systematically constructed, that requires analysis.¹⁰⁰

In *Jupiter and Semele* a few elements, such as the dark wings and the complex throne, appear to jut out into the viewer’s space, creating a certain amount of depth in the work. Nevertheless, the convoluted details that literally cover the entire surface of the painting work against this, as they all appear to rise to the surface, clamoring for the viewer’s attention. At the same time, the only areas of the work that are not highly wrought are the patches of stridently bright unmodeled color. The blue sky behind Jupiter’s throne and the red halo around his head appear disjointed from the rest of the canvas because of their lack of detail. Rather than serving as resting points for the eyes,

these areas actually create more tension on the surface of the work, as they draw the viewer’s attention due to their brightness and disjointedness from the rest of the painting. In addition to his use of bright areas of color, Moreau also incorporated the dark outlines utilized in stained glass and enamel work. In this work, Moreau painted darker outlines around many of the ornamental details to draw attention to their complexity (Fig. 40, 41). At the same time, because they are outlined, these arabesques emphasize the flatness of the work because they appear to be elaborate patterns rather than three-dimensional ornaments.

With this technique, Moreau broke from his earlier styles by incorporating patches of bright color and darker outlining that developed out of stained glass and enamel work. At the same time, he also built on his earlier works by incorporating elaborate details and emphasizing the surface and the materiality of the painting. Although Moreau utilized the same sources as Cloisonist artists, he did not simplify his paintings in the same way and as a result, his works appear far more intricate.

“Flows of Color”¹⁰¹

Many of Moreau’s paintings cannot be authoritatively labeled as complete. This is because he often reworked the same canvases for many years, most often during the last decade of his life. As a result, even the images that appear to be complete cannot always be definitely labeled as such. Thus, unlike other artists, one cannot clearly separate Moreau’s works into the distinct categories of sketches and finished works. On the other hand, some of his paintings were completed in a style that he never exhibited and that in many ways resembles a sketch. While these works cannot arguably be considered finished, they do show that the artist experimented with an expressionistic technique where the means of expression, especially the colors and the brushstroke, are connected to the emotions and effects of the painting. Moreau’s experimentation with this technique is especially interesting since his drawn sketches are rarely done in a loose or unplanned manner. Like many of his exhibited paintings, his drawings are usually done in a detailed, tight style. Thus, this expressionistic technique does not seem to be just a part of his planning process, but rather, a foray into a different type of technique.

Theorists like Aurier expressed the importance of not just emphasizing, but also exaggerating the means of expression in painting. Aurier felt that artists should take the visible attributes of an object and exaggerate them in order to show the essence of that object. Like other Symbolist theorists, he argued that only artists could see these essences, or underlying forms. Many of the theorists who felt that artists should amplify the means of expression believed in the theory of correspondences. They felt that particular colors and lines corresponded to particular feelings and states. For example, Charles Henry felt that the color red corresponded to pleasant emotions and the color blue to unpleasant feelings. Charles Henry and Georges Seurat also focused on the value of certain types of curved or straight lines and the emotions attached to certain directions. They believed that by intensifying these colors and lines in the painting, the artist would be able to express a particular emotion or state and to show their audience the essence of the subject. In 1890, Maurice Denis emphasized the importance of highlighting the material surface of the canvas when he wrote: “We should remember that a picture—before being a war horse, a nude woman, or telling some other story—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a particular pattern.”

Some of Moreau’s contemporaries showed an interest in the use of loose brushwork and expressive color. In paintings like *Talisman*, from 1888 (Fig. 42), Paul Sérusier used a combination of bright colors and abstract forms to express the subject. Other Symbolists, such as Edvard Munch, used heavy impasto and loose brushstrokes to emphasize the surface of the canvas. In 1893-4, with *Despair* (Fig. 43), the artist used the disjunction between the deep perspective and the flattened picture plane to emphasize the theme of the man’s psychological tension. Although Munch depicted a deeply receding shoreline, he used the broad patches of color and the expressive brushstroke to emphasize

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105 Maurice Denis, “Definition of Neo-Traditionalism,” in *Art in Theory*, 863.
the picture plane and the materiality of the painting.\textsuperscript{106} Artists like Van Gogh connected the means of expression to the subject matter in other ways. Van Gogh used both his colors and his lines to express himself more forcefully, and to depict the emotions he saw in nature.\textsuperscript{107} As Aurier said, Van Gogh was continually pressed by the need to give his ideas precise, palpable, tangible forms; dense, fleshy, physical envelopes. In almost all his canvases, under this form, this fleshy flesh, this material matter, there lies, for whoever knows how to see it, a thought, an Idea, and this Idea, the essential substratum of the work, is at once its determining and final cause.\textsuperscript{108}

In works like \textit{Starry Night} from 1889 (Fig. 44), Van Gogh related the swirling brushstrokes to the subject, showing the underlying essences and energies within the world by focusing on and exaggerating the colors and the brushstroke.\textsuperscript{109} Although Moreau and these artists showed a similar interest in the means of expression, Moreau never exhibited these works as finished pieces. Nevertheless, according to Lacambre in her entry for the \textit{Sketch of an Interior} (Fig. 45) from 1875-8, Moreau “thought highly enough of many of these nearly abstract oil sketches to have them framed for display in his future museum.”\textsuperscript{110}

Even more than his connections to contemporary artists, Moreau’s sketchy technique is significant for its influence on the next generation of artists. Moreau only taught for the last six years of his life, after he was appointed to the École des Beaux-Arts in 1892. “Moreau’s stress of the importance of the interior order and the expression of individual temperament was a fundamental lesson he passed on to his students.”\textsuperscript{111} While Moreau did not pass on his interest in literary subject matter, he emphasized the

\textsuperscript{106} Goldwater, \textit{Symbolism}, 220-1.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 128-9.


\textsuperscript{109} Goldwater, \textit{Symbolism}, 68, 129.

\textsuperscript{110} Lacambre, ed. \textit{Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream}, 175.

importance of personal expression and individualism, as well as the need for "technical and intellectual discipline." Moreau emphasized the importance of expressive color and of imagination. It was in this light that he critiques a student’s sketch, saying:

you have caught nothing of the grain of that skin, greenish in certain passages, then red, blue and that lovely gray, which are all contained there and which give the whole so intense a poetry and make that flesh truly exciting. No, there is not profundity in your tone, note that well: you must think color, and imaginatively. You must copy nature imaginatively, that is what makes the artist...Believe me, the only painting that will endure is that which has been dreamed about, thought about, reflected on, created in the mind and not simply from manual facility.

Another example of Moreau’s focus on color and feeling comes from a letter that one of his students, Henri Evenepoel, wrote to his father in 1894: “Moreau told me that there are always very interesting patches of color in what I am doing at present, but that I am still unable to capture the arabesque of a composition,” adding that Moreau said the student’s lines needed to be “deeply felt.” According to another student, Georges Rouault, Moreau felt his students were building on his ideas. As Rouault wrote: “Gustave Moreau could only have been a precursor. I have heard him say with tender melancholy: ‘I am the bridge over which some of you will pass.’”

Although Moreau’s students developed widely varied styles, many of them retained and expanded on his focus on expressiveness and the importance of color. Just as Moreau painted many finished works on the same subjects, he also created a multitude of interpretations of the same subjects using an expressionistic technique. Moreau painted the subject of Hercules and the Lernean Hydra hundreds of times, often using different color palettes and loose brushstrokes. Two paintings on this subject both show different representations of the same composition (Fig. 28, 46). With these two works, Moreau

112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 94.
explored the interactions between the colors, determining how best to use color to represent this particular subject. Both compositions utilize mostly drab earthy colors, punctuated with bright red highlights. Moreau used the same color pattern of mostly grays and browns, with red highlights, in the final version of the work. Thus, even if the artist did not choose to utilize the varied brushstrokes in his exhibited works, these paintings show his concern with color as an essential means of expression. Significantly, these works and other similar ones, such as his paintings of Moses, emphasize the means of expression in a way similar to that used by other contemporary artists (Fig. 47, 48). At the same time, in these paintings, Moreau also used broad brushstrokes and an overall loose technique to emphasize the surface and the build-up of paint, in a way similar to the other three techniques the artist used.

Materiality was more than an abstract concept to Moreau, it was a fundamental basis of his art. He did more than just illustrate subjects connected to the duality of spirit and matter. He integrated this concept into his stylistic and formal choices, grappling with the question of how to depict transcendent, ideal forms using canvas and paint. Gustave Moreau utilized a variety of techniques in considering this problem. Moreau painted works that feature a “grandiose complexity,” creating smooth surfaces and painting elaborate details all over the canvas, as well as producing works with linear patterns layered over the backgrounds like a series of “mysterious tracings and cabalistic meanderings.” He also used a stained-glass-inspired technique which resembles the “tonalities of an ideal dream,” and emphasized the means of expression in sketches featuring “flows of color.” All four of these techniques are significant because they show that throughout his career, Moreau explored different ways to emphasize the surface and materiality of his works in order to draw attention to the fact that they were artistic creations and not representations of reality.

116 Huysmans, Against the Grain, 53.


CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have demonstrated that Gustave Moreau explored the concept of materiality throughout his career. Moreau felt that art should focus on transcendent, eternal ideas, rather than depicting the corporeal world. As Moreau considered multiple forms of the concept of materiality, I have explored three different ways in which this idea influenced his oeuvre.

Gustave Moreau painted many of the same themes hundreds of times, showing that he saw the mythical subject as an eternal idea that could be translated in many material ways. Moreau saw the myth as suggestive, and in my thesis, I have shown that he interpreted the subject of Salome in many different ways. He did not simply repaint the subject over and over again, but rather, he completely reconceived it in different works. While some of his paintings show Salome as a seductive, dangerous woman, in other works, she is emotionally and psychologically affected by her actions. At the same time, I have also shown how Moreau’s conception of the subject influenced authors who wrote descriptions of his paintings. When describing Moreau’s paintings of Salome, these authors re-conceived the images, describing the events, sensations, and feelings they imagined accompanying them.

For Moreau, women usually represented a threat to heroic men. While men were able to focus on the eternal and transcendent, degenerate women could only focus on the corporeal world. In his paintings, Moreau interwove the themes of materiality and degeneration with images of women and animals, portraying women as physical and sexual threats to men. In my thesis, I have explored three different ways Moreau explored these concepts. In some of his canvases, he depicted flesh-eating animals, showing how beasts physically threatened man’s focus on the ideal. Moreau incorporated depictions of combined human and animal body parts in other paintings, characterizing women as primitive animals. Finally, I have shown that in his later depictions of the concept of bestiality, Moreau continued to focus on the concept of materiality, although his attitude towards it was more ambiguous. In these images, women and sexuality are sometimes characterized as positive and pure.
Finally, I have looked at Moreau’s interest in the physical surfaces of his works. Moreau struggled with the problem of how to depict the immaterial ideal using the physical medium of paint. Throughout his career, he focused on the surface in four different ways in order to draw attention to the material surface and deny illusionism. In most of his finished paintings, Moreau created smooth, detailed surfaces with a “grandiose complexity.”\(^{120}\) In these works, the shiny surface and the elaborate details all over the image call attention to the works as representations. Moreau also created paintings using a similar technique with linear patterns painted over the surface as a series of “mysterious tracings and cabalistic meanderings.”\(^{121}\) These patterns deny the illusionism of the background, creating a barrier between the viewer and the modeled forms. Moreau painted some works with bright colors and elaborate details that resemble stained glass or enamel work and have the “tonalities of an ideal dream.”\(^{122}\) In these paintings, the details are so overwhelming and the patches of color are so uniformly bright that the viewer is constantly reminded that these are painted works. Finally, Moreau also created many sketches focusing on the means of expression that appear as “flows of color.”\(^{123}\) In these works, the thick impasto emphasizes the materiality of the paintings.

In my thesis, I have explored three different theoretical ways Moreau interpreted the concept of materiality. Rather than seeing the divide between spirit and matter as a purely academic idea, Moreau considered many theoretical interpretations of the concept, and explored many different ways of emphasizing it throughout his career. Rather than exploring only one aspect of this concept, I have developed a multi-faceted approach, which has created a more nuanced picture of Moreau’s interaction with the idea of materiality. This approach sets the stage to look at other artists and theoretical concepts in this multi-faceted way. At the same time, this exploration of the concept of materiality

\(^{120}\) Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, 53.

\(^{121}\) Montesquiou, “Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave Moreau,” 162.


\(^{123}\) Montesquiou, “Un peintre lapidaire, Gustave Moreau,” 177.
raises questions of the various ways Symbolist artists integrated this concept into their works.
Fig. 1: Gustave Moreau. *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. 1864. Oil on Canvas. 81.25 x 41.25 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 2: Gustave Moreau. *Salome Dancing Before Herod*. 1876. Oil on Canvas. 56.7 x 40.7 in. The Armand Hammer Collection, Los Angeles.
Fig. 3: Gustave Moreau. *The Apparition*. 1876. Watercolor on Paper. 41.7 x 28.4 in. Musée du Louvre.
Fig. 4: Gustave Moreau. *Diomedes Devoured by Horses*. 1865. Oil on Canvas. 54.25 x 33.25 in. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.
Fig. 5: Gustave Moreau. *Leda*. 1865-75. Oil on Canvas. 86.61 x 80.71 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 6: Gustave Moreau. *Tattooed Salome*. 1874. Oil on Canvas. 36.2 x 23.6 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 7: Gustave Moreau. *Jupiter and Semele*. 1895. Oil on Canvas. 83.5 x 46.5 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 8: Gustave Moreau. *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra*. c. 1869-76. 31.5 x 25.6 in. Oil on Canvas. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 9: Gustave Moreau. *Leda*. c. 1875-80. Watercolor. 13.39 x 8.27 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 10: Gustave Moreau. *Leda*. N.d. Oil on Cardboard. 15.75 x 11.81 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 11: Gustave Moreau. *The Sphinx*. 1887-8. Watercolor on paper, with gouache and varnish. 10.9 x 11.7 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Fig. 12: Gustave Moreau. *The Sphinx.* C. 1886. Watercolor on Paper. 12.4 x 7 in. Clemens-Sels Museum, Neuss.
Fig. 13: Gustave Moreau. *Salome in the Prison (Salome with a Rose)*. 1872. Oil on Canvas. 15.7 x 12.6 in. National Museum of Western Art, Matsukata Collection, Tokyo.
Fig. 14: Gustave Moreau. *Salome au Jardin*. 1878. Oil on Canvas. 28.25 x 16.88 in. Private Collection.
Fig. 15: Gustav Klimt. *Salome*. 1909. Oil on Canvas. 70.1 x 18.1 in. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Venice.
Fig. 16: Félicien Rops. *Pornokrates*. 1879. Watercolor, Pastel, and Gouache on Paper. 29.5 x 17.7 in. Private Collection.
Fig. 17: Fernand Khnopff’s *The Meeting of Animalism and an Angel*. 1889.
Fig. 18: Auguste Matisse. *In the Gold of the Evening*. c. 1905.
Fig. 19: Gabriel Ferrier. *Salammbô*. c. 1881.
Fig. 20: Gustave Moreau. *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra.* 1869-76. Oil on Canvas. 69 x 60.25 in. Art Institute of Chicago.
Fig. 21: Gustave Moreau. *Prometheus*. 1868. Oil on Canvas. 80.7 x 48 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 22: Gustave Moreau. *Pasiphaë*. N.d. Oil on Canvas. 76.77 x 57.87 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 23: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. *Oedipus and the Sphinx.* 1808. Oil on Canvas. 74.41 x 56.69 in. Louvre.
Fig. 24: Gustave Moreau. *Pasiphaë*. N.d. Oil on Canvas. 77.17 x 35.83 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 25: Gustave Moreau. *Pasiphaë*. N.d. Watercolor. 10.24 x 20.08 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 26: Gustave Moreau. *Europa*. 1868. Oil on Canvas. 68.9 x 51.18 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 27: Gustave Moreau. *Europa*. N.d. Watercolor. 10.63 x 7.48 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 28: Gustave Moreau. *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra*. c.1869-76. 7.5 x 7.1 in. Oil on Canvas. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 29: Jean-Léon Gérôme. *The Snake Charmer.* 1870. 13 x 18.9 in. Oil on Canvas. Clark Art Institute, Williamstown.
Fig. 30: Gustave Moreau. *The Daughters of Thespius*. 1853. 101.5 x 100.4 in. Oil on Canvas. Private Collection.
Fig. 31: Gustave Moreau. *The Suitors*. 1852. 151.5 x 135 in. Oil on Canvas. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 32: Thomas Couture. *Romans during the Decadence*. 1847. 185.8 x 303.9 in. Musée d'Orsay.
Fig. 33: Gustave Moreau. *The Chimeras*. 1884. 92.9 x 80.3 in. Oil on Canvas. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 34: Gustave Moreau. *The Peri (The Sacred Elephant; The Sacred Lake)*. 1881-2. 22.4 x 17.1 in. Watercolor on Paper. National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.
Fig. 35: Jan Toorop. *Three Brides*. 1893. 38.6in x 30.7 in. Pencil, Chalk on Paper. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Netherlands.
Fig. 36: Aubrey Beardsley. *The Climax*. 1893. Line-Block Print. From *Salome* by Oscar Wilde.
Fig. 37: Alphonse Mucha. *Zodiac*. 1896. Color lithograph. 25.9 x 19 in. Mucha Museum, Prague.
Fig. 38: Gustave Moreau. *The Triumph of Alexander the Great*. c.1885. 61 x 61 in. Oil on Canvas. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 39: Louis Anquetin. *Avenue de Clichy*. 1887. Oil on Canvas. 27.2 x 20.9 in. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.
Fig. 40: Detail of Fig. 7.
Fig. 41: Detail of Fig. 7.
Fig. 42: Paul Sérusier. *Talisman*. 1888. Oil on wood. 10.6 x 8.5 in. Musée d'Orsay.
Fig. 43: Edvard Munch, *Despair*. 1893-4. Oil on canvas. 36.2 x 28.5 in. Munch Museum, Oslo.
Fig. 45: Gustave Moreau *Sketch of an Interior*. 17.7 x 15 in. 1875-8. Musée Gustave Moreau. Moreau
Fig. 46: Gustave Moreau. *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra*. c. 1869-76. 31.5 x 25.6 in. Oil on Canvas. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 47: Gustave Moreau. *Moses Exposed on the Nile*. N.d. 10.6 x 8.7 in. Oil on Wood. Musée Gustave Moreau.
Fig. 48: Gustave Moreau. Moses. Oil on Canvas. N.d. 68.1 x 50.4 in. Musée Gustave Moreau.
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Mary Slavkin grew up on a boat and traveled to every continent except Antarctica before she turned sixteen. She went to high school in Jacksonville, Florida, where she met David Slavkin, who she married nine years later in Australia. Mary studied at New College of Florida, receiving her bachelors degree in art history and writing her undergraduate thesis on the transition from ancient and mythical subjects to progressively more and more contemporary and everyday subjects in nineteenth-century French history painting. After finishing her undergraduate education, Mary taught English in Seoul and Prague, and traveled to England, Tanzania, South Africa, Japan, Australia, Slovakia, and Germany. Mary received a University Fellowship to study art history at Florida State University, traveled to France on a Penelope E. Mason Travel Grant, and presented a paper at the annual SECAC conference in New Orleans.