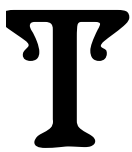


## The Prophets of Montmartre

*Alamantra*



here are places of great power. On the right bank of the Seine, Montmartre gazes down over the rest of Paris. It is this place that has long been a crucible of creativity, and a refuge for the visionaries that have come to us from time to time. It is said that Montmartre was once a sacred site for the Druids. Beneath Rue La Vieuville traces of two temples built during the Roman occupation have been discovered. One temple dedicated to Mercury, the god of trade and travel and the other dedicated to Mars, the god of war and a chief deity of an occupying force.

Christened with the blood of a Saint, Montmartre literally means “Mountain of the Martyr”. Saint Denis, (also known as Dionysius), the Bishop of Paris was said to have been beheaded there around 272 EV. Later, another Denis, the visionary artist Maurice Denis, would emerge as ‘a prophet’ and noted theoretician of the symbolist school.

It has been told in “The Golden Legend” by Jacobus de Voragine that, upon being beheaded, St Denis picked up his head and carried it for several miles; all the while preaching a sermon. His journey ended at what is now called St. Denis, and a shrine was erected at the spot where he was buried. Here the Abbey of Saint Denis was founded sometime around 630 by Dagobert I, the most powerful of the Merovingian kings; and is where Dagobert and other French Royalty have been interred ever since.



Peinture (Scène extérieure), Maurice Denis, 1897,  
Metropolitan Museum of Art

That Montmartre had been the site of Denis’ beheading was considered more legend than fact until 1611 when Marie de Beauvilliers, the residing abbess, discovered a crypt beneath the martyr’s chapel.

Though this led to the founding of a priory there, the buildings fell prey to the French Revolution when they were auctioned off in 1794. They were demolished to make way for plaster quarries.

Louis the VI was persuaded by his wife to found a Benedictine convent at Montmartre. This was itself built on the site of an 11<sup>th</sup> century monastery. In 1147, Louis also built the church of Saint-Pierre and bequeathed large grants of land to the nuns. The rich harvest from the vineyards and fields enabled the abbey to become one of wealthiest in the kingdom. These vineyards would also fuel the birth of a bohemian renaissance.

The vineyards and windmills of Montmartre made for a pastoral setting in contrast to the worn Parisian landscapes. The poet Gerard d Nerval described it as the “finest panorama in the vicinity of Paris” in 1846 and Renoir moved into the area in 1875.

If history is to call Paris “The City of Light”, then Montmartre is that light’s beacon. On the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, August 15, 1534, a group of six students met with Ignatius of Loyola there to make a mutual vow of poverty and chastity, and so create the Society of Jesuits. It has been held by scholars that Ignatius’ exposure to humanism at the College of Sante Barbe was fundamental to the teaching philosophy propagated by the Jesuits. Over the years, circumstance along with a unique passion long tempered by this humanistic influence would also take shape in the emerging art, literary, and theatrical expression for which Paris has achieved such renown.

The rebuilding of Paris during the Second Empire of Napoleon III caused the original inhabitants to move outward from the city center. The nunnery of Montmartre had long been known for the plentiful and inexpensive wine it produced. This combined with the fact that Montmartre was officially outside of the city of Paris and therefore exempt from its taxes made the area quite attractive to the artistic and free spirits who gravitated there.

After the Second Empire was defeated in the Franco-Prussian war, all of the revolutionist trends that had germinated in that city for a hundred years ignited in a general uprising, which culminated in the Paris Commune of 1871. That the Prussians would occupy Paris had been negotiated in the Terms of Peace at the conclusion of the war. However, the citizens of Paris remained defiant and confined the Prussian occupation to a small area of the city. Out of a concern that the citizens would arm themselves and provoke the Prussians, the Government of the Third Empire sent troops into Paris to disarm them. The National Guard refused to surrender their weapons and so the French Army fled to Versailles to declare war on Paris. On March 28<sup>th</sup> the Paris Commune was proclaimed. Proscription was ended and the army disbanded in favor of a National Guard wherein all capable citizens would bare arms in mutual support and defense. Church was separated from state and all church property was declared state property. They postponed all debts and abolished the collection of interest for debts.

The revolutionists represented a varied and diverse palette of philosophy and disposition. These anarchists, socialists and republicans were collectively known as communards and were attacked by the Army from Versailles on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, and by May 21<sup>st</sup> they had been suppressed. The French Army was ruthless in putting down the uprising and slaughtered unarmed citizens. Hundreds of communards hid in the chalk mines of Montmartre and were forever imprisoned when the Army of the Third Republic dynamited the exits.

In 1875 the foundation stone was laid for the Basilica of the Sacré Cœur (*Sacred Heart*) to commemorate the constitution of the Third Republic and as a monument for the Parisian citizens who had died during the overthrow of the Paris Commune. This was built on the butte of Montmartre and sits over Paris as a crowning tribute to Republican thought. Its architecture is based on the Roman-Byzantine style, and two

bronze equestrian statues of France's national saints surmount the triple-arched portico: Joan of Arc and King Saint Louis IX.

Many in history have regarded the brief Commune of Paris as a triumph for the principles of self organization and have commended the courage of the citizens of Paris who, disappointed with their government for failing them in the war with the Prussians, asserted their right of self-governance and their spirit of defiant independence. This sense of liberty was bound to express itself as an impetus for a rapid evolution in all of the arts: Visual, Musical, Literary and Theatrical; and is one of the defining characteristics of the mood of the Fin de siecle.

In May of 1885, Victor Hugo, the celebrated writer of *Les Miserables*, died, and with him passed the end of an era. In his final will the great humanist, who had been revered by Republican and Socialist alike, left fifty thousand francs to the poor and refused the prayer of all churches. He stated, "I ask for a prayer from all living souls. I believe in God."



Children clad in Grecian costumes kept a vigil over his remains, which lay in state beneath the Arc de Triomphe. Over two million people turned out into the streets as the procession carried him to his final entombment in the Panthéon. The church had been especially unconsecrated for the event and was, instead, re-dedicated to the memory of famous men.

Victor Hugo's death paralleled the end to the Romantic period, which his work had defined. This gave way as the Symbolists led an Avant Garde toward Art Nouveau, Impressionism and simultaneously Post Impressionism. The occidental art traditions began to be influenced by the oriental, and the tradition of the artist at the easel gave way to an

earnest attention to other mediums such as textiles, glass and lithography. Montmartre would become a breeding ground for the amalgamation of political, mystical and artistic influences. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to wind down, this quaint hillside district would become the focal point of decadent art and entertainment and the most famous artists and personalities would mingle at popular attractions like Quat'z'Arts and Le Chat Noir.

Le Chat Noir first opened its doors in November of 1881, when the artist Rodolphe Salis convinced poet Emile Goudeau to relocate the Hydropathes from the Latin Quarter café.

The Hydropathes were an eclectic society of writers, artists, and performers who had been meeting twice a week regularly since 1878. They had succeeded in publishing their own bimonthly journal, *L'Hydropathe* for a year and a half, and had been able to introduce standards that formalized the relationship between the artists and the use of the café as a venue for their works. Within two months of opening its doors, La Chat Noir was publishing its own journal.

This was illustrated principally by Adolphe Willette, Caran d'Ache and Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, who combined macabre and infantile themes in a format of “a story without words.” This Rabelaisian approach was matched by the décor of the club itself. In addition, the journal created another medium for shameless self-promotion: *"The Chat Noir is the most extraordinary cabaret in the world. You rub shoulders with the most famous men of Paris, meeting there with foreigners from every corner of the world."* The club prospered and within three and a half years they were able to move from their humble two room beginnings to a much larger and more elaborate space.

The bawdy, Rabelaisian air of the establishment was inspirational when artists George Auriol and Henry Somm constructed a small puppet theater at the Chat Noir in the fall of 1885. Somm had written a one act play called, *Berline de l'émigré* which was set in a ‘family run public

lavatory.’ The focus of the play was on toilet habits and its sequence of buffoonery, puns and in-jokes calls to mind some of the stylistic characterizations of ‘Gargantua and Pantagruel’. Within a few months this novel approach gave way to the shadow theatre that was to become La Chat Noir’s greatest legacy and a favorite public attraction until the club closed its doors in 1897.

Another favorite Montmartre hangout of the emerging bohemian culture was Quat’z’Arts. Established by François Trombert in 1893, this ‘cabaret artistique’ is considered to have represented the cutting edge of the Avant Garde. Quat’z’Arts created an interdisciplinary atmosphere that brought together artists, composers, musicians, performers, poets, and illustrators; and where the artists enjoyed a unique and more direct relationship with the public.

The audience themselves became active participants in the event which itself became an artistic expression. Quat’z’Arts continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in November of 1901 began to run the first of 64 performances of Ubu Roi. This had originally been staged at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre in 1896, with live performers and contributions to the set by both Paul Sérusier and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Still its author, Alfred Jarry, preferred to see it performed with marionettes and persuaded Trombert to host the marionette performance at Quat’z’Arts. The production, featuring the debauched antics of ‘King Ubu’ was a success and events like this, as well as such novel attractions like the club’s collage wall-journal “Le Mur,” attracted the likes of Pablo Picasso.

During much of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the artists lived and worked in a Montmartre commune called “Le Bateau-Lavoir” (meaning: “The Laundry Boat”). Picasso lived and worked there from 1904 to 1909—where he is said to have invented ‘cubism.’ The tenement was a gathering spot for such figures as Guillaume Apollinaire, Henri Matisse, Jean Cocteau, and Gertrude Stein; and a celebration

banquet for Henri Rousseau was organized there at Picasso's studio in 1908.

Other famous names took inspiration from Montmartre and the unique spirit manifest there during the fin-de-siecle: Van Gogh, Renoir, Degas, Matisse, Redon ...the list is as extensive as it is 'impressive'. However, there is a more sublime and esoteric aspect that emerged among the artists during this emphasis of the Avant Garde. One group in particular emerged from this environment that was strongly influenced by the "synthesist" approach advocated by Paul Gauguin. They are known to history as...

### Le Nabis:



Portrait of Paul Ranson in Nabi Costume,  
Paul Serusier, 1890.

“It is well to remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plain surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” Maurice Denis (French, 1870-1943)

(Note: The metaphysical implication of the above addresses the interpretation of meaning in the universals schemata as well. Before an object is defined as any particular thing it is a cluster of random elements arranged in

a unique order. All else is an imposition of a learned or artificial categorization.)

In October of 1888 artist Paul Serusier returned to the Academy Julian. With him he brought a painting done on the lid of a cigar box that he created at Point Aven under the guidance of Paul Gauguin. It was to become known among those it brought together as “the talisman.” It was a landscape, but one that departed from the naturalist or imitative style.

Gauguin had encouraged the young painter to exaggerate his impressions, ...to use pure, flat colors and to use his own symbolic, decorative logic. This was an instruction in Gauguin and Emile Bernard’s new artistic style they called Synthetism. Synthetism stressed an



The Talisman, Paul Serusier, 1888.

emotional interpretation of a subject over a mere imitative depiction or re-creation. It emphasized color, line and form as an independent aesthetic value. It also taught a conscious effort to rely more upon memory and characterize bright, flat two-dimensional shapes as well as apply symbolism to explore abstract concepts. In other words, no longer would a piece of art be a simple depiction of a subject, but the subject would itself become an expression of the artist’s own visionary experience. How this begins to introduce a new sort of mystical element

through the projection of the artist's will or vision should be readily apparent.

Serusier enthusiastically showed the painting to his friends at the Academy Julian and shared the new ideas and technique he had learned in Brittany. This caused an excitement among the more progressive minds at the Academy and inspired vigorous debate. Four of his friends came together with Serusier to explore the new techniques, and they informally named themselves Le Nabis ('The Prophets', or more properly: 'The Inspired'.) Initially, Le Nabis was composed of Serusier, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Henri Ibels and Paul Ranson although they would eventually number a dozen or so and be associated with other artists such as Cézanne and Redon.

Although Serusier has been credited with naming the group, it was actually given its moniker by his friend, Henri Cazalis, who is remembered as a writer, poet, mystic, critic and also a close friend of Mallarme (who was also to be a major influence on the Nabis). Cazalis had a deep interest in topics like the Kabbalah, oriental philosophy and eastern religions and had himself been dubbed: *Hindou du Parnasse contemporain*.

( \Par\*nas"sian\, One of a school of French poets of the Second Empire (1852-70) who emphasized metrical form and made the little use of emotion as poetic material; -- so called from the name (Parnasse contemporain) of the volume in which their first poems were collected in 1866. Thus this title indicated that he was the eastern influence in that group. Add as footnote, when laying out)

That there was a mystical influence to this group is certain, but the degree of influence such topics as mysticism, the occult, spiritualism and so on had over the group as a whole has been an issue of speculation. Of the dozen or so artists that one finds within the group there is a variety of spiritual and political beliefs ranging from Theosophy to orthodox

Christianity, Buddhism and anarchism. There were two basic inclinations in the group. There was the mystical esoteric side of art as represented by Ranson and Serusier who were theosophists and then there were the others like Vuillard and Bonnard who remained aloof from the group's theoretical discussions and quasi-mystical pretense. They found work in creating sets for the emerging cabaret scene at Chat Noir and illustrating periodicals such as *Revue Blanche*.



Nabi Landscape, Paul Ranson, 1890, Oil, Josefowitz Collection.

What united Les Nabis was their belief that the most important function of art is to provide a sense of unity or continuity. Their credo was "the simplification of form and the exaltation of color." To this end they worked in a variety of mediums believing that even functional day-to-day accessories should be stylized and imbued with the artistic vision.

They viewed themselves as initiates of a brotherhood devoted to exploring and portraying the pure sources of art, primitive feeling and sincere emotion. They used devices such as heavily decorative borders to enclose and partition the subject of their works and define them as expressions of the artist's vision rather than a mere recreation. The goal was to 'seek beauty outside of nature' and so they were interested in not corrupting the sense of wonder or mystery contained in any given thing including 'the ordinary,' which they felt could be and should be transformed. They made it their purpose to integrate art into all walks of life and created wallpapers, fabrics, tapestries, stained glass, pieces of furniture, folding screens and stage sets, reuniting artistic vision with daily craft. Their abilities reflected a wide range of visual interpretation as well, employing Japanese color woodblock prints with modern printmaking techniques.

The group was loosely organized around dinners that occurred at fairly regular monthly intervals between 1888 and 1896. These dinners originally started at "l'Os à Moëlle", a café in the Brady Passage and were later also held at Paul Ranson's Montmartre apartment. At these events, the attendants would dress in 'oriental costume' or long white tunics and each artist would bring an 'icone,' a piece that he had recently done and they would discuss their work, theatre, literature and other topics of social interest. They would often read aloud authors such as Mallarme, Maeterlinck and Baudelaire.

At the beginning of the dinner, the presiding Nabi would raise a staff that resembled a bishop's crozier and intone:

"Sounds, colors, and words have a miraculously expressive power beyond all representation and even beyond the literal meaning of the words."

In addition to the monthly dinners Paul Ranson and his wife, Marie-France, who was known as 'the light of the temple,' began to host Saturday afternoon gatherings for the group where Gauguin was known

to make an appearance from time to time. Their apartment on Boulevard du Montparnasse was known as “Le Temple” and was also referred to by the Nabis, along with George Lacombe’s Versailles studio, as one their two ‘ergasteriums’. (a Greek word meaning: a place where work is done.)

They would sign their correspondence to each other with the phrase:

D.T.P.M.V.E.M.P. Dan ta paume mon verbe et me pensee. *In your palm my word and thought.*

It was through such arcane and archaic phrases and gestures that they created and ritualized their endeavors. Ranson would bestow upon each new member a "picturesque soubriquet" or name by which he would be known within the group. Serusier was known as ‘Le Nabi ‘a la barbe’, Bonnard was ‘Le Nabi-Japonard,’ and Denis known as ‘Le Nabi aux belle Icones,’ Lacombe as ‘Le Nabi Sculpteur’ and so on, each member having a name that reflected how he was seen within the group.

The fruit of their association created a general styling that submerged the artist’s particular personality though not his vision. This was initially successful although in an 1894 letter to Jan Verkade, Serusier wrote that Vuillard, Roussel, Bonnard were relying on themselves and that personality was destroying the style created by the Nabis.

In fact, Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Bonnard later renounced the Nabis doctrines in favor of their own unique styles whereas Ranson, Serusier and Lacombe continued to hold to the Nabis aesthetic which carried its influence toward the opening of Academie Ranson in 1908. When Ranson died in 1909, the other Nabis, especially Marie-France (Ranson’s wife), Denis and Serusier kept it open and it is where Serusier began to expand on his interest in employing the golden ratio in his artwork.

The Prophets remain an excellent example of the variety and evolution of creative thought, which has become a primary tradition of the Montmartre district; a school embracing all schools whether they be

mystical, mythological or purely aesthetic. This is the story of a place and of a time where genius rubbed shoulders with genius and created a legacy of inspiration for those who embrace the human condition and its endeavors. They are the fruit of a moment where time meets itself, where the death of one age gives birth to a new one. I would like to close this article by serving you a brief quote from Hillel Schwartz's "Century's End: A Cultural History of the Fin De Siecle From the 1990s through the 1990s:

The new phrase insisted Berlin journalist and philologist Fritz Mauthner in his 1890/91 essay on on fin de siecle as adjective and presumptive noun, had begun as a rather empty reference to some vague anticipations of the century's end, but the very act of giving a name to those anticipations had made possible a way of thinking about one's time that had been unavailable before. Originally an allusion to indeterminate feelings, fin de siecle had become an active agent for historical thought. Mauthner was developing philosophy of language, of which Ludwig Wittgenstein would soon be the peerless exponent, that knowledge and perception are tightly interlaced with language, and that their horizons expand only and conjointly with new acts of naming. Himself beset with inescapable feelings of culmination and threshold, Mauthner was impressed that fin de siecle had arrived a decade in advance of the next century. He was eager to 'outfit for the twentieth century' by rethinking the common

past, which meant reconsidering the language in which that past had been cast. (Hillel, 165-166)

Le Nabis were truly the prophets of this rethinking of the application of symbol and aesthetic and, driven by the impetus of being alive in an age that has been called “the best of times and the worst of times,” they were able to bring forth light from the midst of an otherwise perceived encroaching darkness that lingered through the dawn of a new century and gave birth to both world war and global connectivity. Their legacy was passed on through the other artists and creators, who knew them personally or through their work and who used this perch on a quaint Parisian hillside to cast their light into the world.

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Cactus Man, Odilon Redon, 1881, Charcoal, 49 x 32.5 cm,  
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