

**The Plastic Ideal:  
The Androgyne In *fin de Siecle* Occulture**

*Sven Davisson*

**A** preoccupation with fundamental duality is rooted deeply in the philosophical history of Western civilization. This notion of dual existence, or binary opposition, most commonly manifests as a tension between male and female, masculine and feminine, but extends to a greater force-relation of humans and the external world. In one-way or another, metaphysicians have long sought a means of reconciling or escaping this dualism. Often, historically, the solution has been resulted in a configuration of the androgyne as a spiritual ideal—an ideal being that exists outside of the split domain of the male and the female. Below, I will examine three modern mytho-religious traditions that centered on this search for a solution to this proto-duality.

Most of the Western mystical tradition rests on myths that humanity developed out of a primal void. The Bible begins, “In the beginning of creation, when God made Heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void.” (Genesis I:1-2) Medieval alchemists portrayed this void as the *prima material* given form by Mercurius, who was often

depicted as a hermaphrodite. (Singer, 131) Qabalistic cosmology rests on the concept of Ain Soph, the veils of chaos (nothingness) that exist before the first emanation of the Divine (Kether on the tree of life). Within these three creation myths, division is a necessary precondition of creation. Organizing the chaos of the void depends upon the



Silence, 1890

Pastel; 85 x 41.5 cm

Musees Royaux des Beaux-  
Arts de Belgique, Brussels,  
Belgium

development of a binary system. Nothing coalesces into the point, creating tension between the form and the formless, which, in turn, splits the point into two forming a dynamism. The search for an escape from this dualistic state has formed one of the great pursuits of philosophers, mystics and occultists alike. This current manifested strongly in the fin de siècle occulture, with the Symbolist artists of the Salon de las Rose+Croix, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley and the futuristic philosopher William S. Burroughs.

In his analysis of early man, Arthur Evans sees the sexes as living very separate lives. Stone age people lived apart from each other in sexually segregated houses and, at times, even villages. (Evans, 15) According to Evans research, the sexes only came together for procreative purposes, while recreational sex was primarily same-sex. Although several religious artifacts from

this period depict hermaphrodites, within the practical levels of religious ceremony, there generally appeared to be room for only one mystery and that female. There is evidence from numerous cultures that the first male shamans were transgendered, being initiated as female. In some cases, male shamans even underwent ritual castration in order to receive the mysteries of the cult.(Evans, 17)

Medieval Qabalists were among the early proponents of androgyny as a solution to the problem of an existence based on duality. The Qabalists describe three levels of ‘negative existence’ preceding the first emanation of the Divine. Crowley poetically described these three states as “The Ante-Primal Triad That Is Not-God: Nothing is. Nothing Becomes. Nothing is not.”(Crowley, 10) Out of this chaos God created pre-Edenic man, Adam Kadman, the archetypal androgyne. Rabbi Simeon writes in *The Zohar* that “the man of emanation [Adam Kadman] was both male and female from the side both father and mother for he was all light.”(Singer, 87) The human became complete, with the second creation of man in the Garden and his split into male and female. *The Zohar* explains that a person in this nonwhole form is not capable of receiving diving blessing:

Therefore we know: what is only masculine or only feminine is called only part of the body. But no blessing rules over a faulty or incomplete thing, but only over a complete place, not one that is divided, for divided things cannot long endure or be blessed. (Singer, 161)

The Kabalists’ solution to this “faulty” state is the androgyne, a careful combining of the male and female natures within each person. This action thus creates a unified being worthy of the blessings given over a complete place.” The apocryphal gospel according to Thomas, utilized

by many contemporary Gnostics, exemplifies this requisite for benediction:

When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter [the Kingdom]. (Lambdin, 129)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the artists of the Symbolist movement exalted the androgyne image as the human ideal. The Symbolist artists attempted to break from the cult of realism, which they felt incapable of finding meaning, due to intentional limitation. Des Hermies, in J.K. Huysmans' *La Bas*, outlines the faults the Symbolists found in Emile Zola and his associates:

The fault I find with realism is not the dull monotone of its ponderous style, it is the uncleanness of its compositions; the fault I find is its having embodied materialism in Literature, and having glorified the democracy of Art! . . . What a low-minded theory, what a petty, narrow system! Voluntarily to limit oneself to the off-scourings of the flesh, to reject the suprasensible, to deny the visionary not even to realize how the mysticism of Art

begins at the point where the senses cease to  
help us! (Huysmans, 1)

The movement away from realism toward a new religious art manifested clearly within the artists of the Salon de la Rose+Croix. For the Salon's founder, Sar Joséphin Péladan, and artists such as Jean Delville, Georges Minne, Armand Point, Fernand Khnopff, and Jean Dampé the androgyne played a fundamental role in their idealized mythic configuration. The androgyne, as differentiated from the hermaphrodite employed by others of the period, represents no less than the absolute goal of human spiritual evolution. By depicting the androgyne, the artists of the Salon de la Rose+Croix were creating/recreating a form of mystical art that served, at least in the mind of Péladan, to reestablish the role of religious art in intellectual society. Sar Péladan proclaimed categorically, "the androgyne, is the plastic ideal!" (Pincus-Witten, 44)

In 1884 with the collaboration of several prominent occultists including Stanislas de Guaita and Papus (Gerard Encausse), Péladan formed the Rosicrucian order le Ordre de la Rose+Croix+Kabalistique. The intent of this organization was to strip the system of Kabalistic magic of the frivolous accumulations of centuries and revitalize the Western mystical tradition. Péladan soon became uncomfortable with the Eastern influences within the ideology of the order, and in his Salon of 1890, announced his departure from the order. On 23 August 1891, article 9256 in *Les Petite Affiches* made the schism legal, with the formation of the Association de l'Ordre de la Rose+Croix du Temple et du Graal—otherwise known as the Rose+Croix+Catholique. With the financial backing of Count Antoine de la Rochfoucauld, Paladan wished to move away from the former order's Orientalism and return to the Papist church. (Pincus-Witten, 77) On a more practical level, the break with Guaita allowed Péladan to embody explicitly his religious ideals in

the order structure and gather together a collection of artists with similar views toward the primacy of the androgyne archetype.

Throughout his involvement with the Rose+Croix+Kabalistique and the Rose+Croix+Catholique, Sar Péladan experimented with the theme of androgyny in his literary works. The androgyne plays an important role as the ideal within his 1884 novel *Le Vice Supreme* as shown in Leonora's dialogue with Antar. She advises the artist to "make an angel, without sex, the synthesis of a young man and a young woman." (Olander, 118) In 1888 Péladan's *Istar* was published, with a frontispiece by Khnopff, depicting a woman, head thrown back in ecstasy and completely devoid of surrounding except for an extremely phallic flower that grows toward her groin. Péladan described Khnopff's frontispiece as "the emotional nude, that is to say, the expression of the model apart from its surrounding." (Pincus-Witten, 68) The hint of muscles and wide jaw that Khnopff gave the model evoke a haunting, androgynous tone. They strengthen her without reinforcing her femininity. While the frontispiece of *Istar* is an example of the way in which Khnopff's women differ from the traditional androgyne, the angle of the head and the inclusion of the florabunda suggest a subtle cross between the androgyne and the femme fatale, containing glimpses of other thematic depictions prevalent in the Symbolist movement. Jean Delville, also an exhibitor at the Salon de la Rose+Croix, noted in his comment on Khnopff's work:

Khnopff has created a type of ideal woman. Are they really women? Are they not rather imaginary feminines? They partake at the same time of the Idol, of the Chimera, of the Sphinx and of the Saint. They are rather plastic androgynes, subtle symbols, conceived

according to an abstract idea and rendered visible. (Howe, 48)

This passage shows that Delville saw in Khnopff's work a combination of several precursors of the androgynous form: the Greek hermaphrodite, the Babylonian Tiamat, and da Vinci's saints.

Eighteen-ninety saw the publication of Péladan's *L'Androgyne*, the plot of which centered around the androgyne Samas. Alexandre Seon drew the frontispiece for this work. It depicts, in the words of Péladan: Above the strange rocks of the Brehat, licked at by the waves, there rolls in the sky in piece of the moon, the head of the androgyne Samas, stupefied by the sexual enigma. (Pincus-Witten, 71)

Since *L'Androgyne* is an autobiographical depiction of Péladan's childhood in a Jesuit school, Péladan is equating himself with the androgyne. By presenting Samas' head in the place of a celestial body, Seon's drawing exalts Samas, and through him Péladan to the role of divine being. This representation also strengthens Péladan's view of himself as magus, since the moon symbolizes, in its relationship to the tides, the power over the flow of nature.

Following the legal establishment of the Rose+Croix+Catholique, Péladan began preparations for the first exhibition of the Salon de la Rose+Croix scheduled for the following year. Fernand Khnopff was among those exhibiting in the first Salon and continued to exhibit in the Salons of 1893 and 1894. His work embodies two of the major themes within the Rose+Croix movement, the androgyne and the mage. Péladan felt that Khnopff's philosophy was closely aligned to his own, which led him to proclaim in *Salon de Champ de Mars* of 1893 that Khnopff was an "Admirable and Immortal Master." (Pincus-Witten, 153) In the Salon of 1893, Khnopff exhibited "L'Offrande" and "I Lock My Door Upon Myself," both of which contain references to the androgynous nature of their subjects. Khnopff created this androgynous

feeling by giving his women a massive jaw, “a jaw so massive,” in the words of art historian Micheal Gibson, “that Mussolini himself, with his ham-sized howl might have envied them.” (Gibson, 109) The over emphasizing of the model’s jaw gives her an atypical female face.

In “I Lock My Door Upon Myself” Khnopff used the model’s clothing to create her sexual ambiguities through de-sexing her body. Her long hair and a subtle softness of the features are the only elements that outwardly denote her sex. The female in L’Offrande possesses even fewer clues that allude to her gender” since unlike the model in I Lock My Door Upon Myself, the model has her hair back, forcing her face to stand alone and appear all the more ambiguous.



I Lock My Door Upon Myself, 1891, Oil on canvas; 72 x 140 cm,  
Neue Pinakothek, Munich, Germany

The inclusion of the arum lily in “I Lock My Door Upon Myself” serves to reinforce the androgynous interpretation of the painting. Khnopff employed this particular lily throughout his work to allude to androgyny, it reappears in “Arum Lily,” “The Secret Reflection,” and “Le Reflet Bleu.” The arum lily belongs to the class Gynandric, which is distinguished by having both male and female characteristics, and is thus the floral embodiment of Khnopff and Péladan’s ideal. These women also embody the chaste ideal of Péladan’s androgyne. It is impossible for

these women to satisfy sexually, since both are ‘removed from sexual physicality into a moment of isolation and introspection. This looking inwards displays the role of the magus, since magic is a search for internal union, especially when coupled with the depiction of the androgyne. The model in “I Lock My Door upon Myself” rests her arms on a table which has a coffin like appearance. This particular use of death imagery is more than a reference to suicidal contemplation; it represents the power that the magus has gained over the mysteries of life and death. The lilies in the paintings foreground can be viewed as a further reification of the magus’s harmonious understanding of life’s progression. They move from birth to death reflecting the magician’s acceptance of natural laws.



Des Caresses, 1896, Oil on canvas; 50 x 150 cm, Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium

Through the iconography of his work, Khnopff linked the androgyne and the magus with the internal search of the artist. He drew the comparison between himself and the magus most strongly in his depiction of Oedipus in “Des Caresses” (1896). Like Gustave Moreau in “Oedipus and the Sphinx,” Khnopff depicted the victorious Oedipus as an androgyne. In both paintings, Oedpus carries a staff symbolizing his newly gained dominance over the physical world. In Khnopff’s depiction, he wears a wreath of flowers in his hair drawing on the image of the laurel wreath, serving to establish further that the Oedipus of “Des

Caresse” is indeed Oedipus the victor. He has answered the Sphinx’s riddle and gained the wisdom of the magus. This knowledge has taken him outside the world of opposites and recreated him as the androgyne. For the Symbolists, Oedipus is both prototype and allegory. He exists simultaneously as the mage and the archetypal androgyne. For Khnopff he represented more than the androgyne and the mage. He equated these two with the artist. Péladan echoed Khnopff’s visual idealism in his religious/artistic rhetoric, when he exclaimed, “Artist thou art priest.”(Howe, 53)

Knopff’s painting and Péladan’s writing attempted to explore other levels of reality perceived by the initiate. As Charles Morice points out, “Art is not only revelator of the infinite, it is also the very means to penetrate into it.”(Howe, 53) Since Khnopff considered all nature but reflections of higher realities, it was through this search, both internal and external, that he derived the androgyne as ideal. Art became the means of attaining the desired state of androgyny.

For Péladan art’s most important role was that of transcendence. In *L’Art Idealiste et Mystique* he wrote, “I believe I have seen in the aesthetic emotion a luminous and heightened equivalent of the emotions of passion; and at a certain attitude of impression, art averts sin.”(Howe, 49) In Péladan’s conception sexual desire formed the greatest enemy to spiritual growth. Article VII of the Rose+Croix+Catholique’s constitution reads “The order has one single motivating goal: to ruin sexual love, passion and to substitute the abstract and aesthetic rites,”(Howe, 141) This “motivating goal” stemmed from the androgyne’s perceived, dependence on initial realization of sex or sexual potential would destroy the androgyne by bringing it down to the material realm of physical desire. Péladan explained, “the androgyne exists only in the virgin state; at first affirmation of sex, it resolves to the male end the female.”(Olander, 120) This split caused by sexual awakening draws greatly on Péladan’s background. In *The Symposium*

Plato points to the sin of the Hermaphrodites as the trigger to their split “for our sins, God has scattered us abroad.” (Hamilton & Cairsis) Within the Kabalistic structure, the fall of Adam Kadman is precipitated by his corruption into physicality.

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