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***On n'a que soi* : Introspection and self-absorption
as themes in the art of Fernand Khnopff**

God strengthen me to bear myself;
That heaviest weight of all to bear,
Inalienable weight of care.

All others are outside myself;
I lock my door and bar them out
The turmoil, tedium, gad-about.

I lock my door upon myself,
And bar them out; but who shall wall
Self from myself, most loathed of all?

(Christina Rossetti, "Who shall deliver me?")

Although Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) was one of the most celebrated Belgian artists of the late nineteenth century, by the time he reached his early forties his influence had already begun to wane. As one of the leading artists of the Symbolist movement, his reputation and the contemporary taste for his work were particularly vulnerable to the gathering forces of Modernity, which began overtaking Western art even as he was at the peak of his artistic abilities and career. Within the changing stylistic context of the early twentieth century, the personal themes and realistic painting style of his enigmatic canvases were dismissed as self-indulgent, even decadent, *fin de siècle* kitsch. Although he remained a highly regarded artist within official circles, his art and ideas essentially

belonged to a bygone era. By 1914 his reputation was largely forgotten and his artistic legacy relegated to the attic of art history.

On some level, Khnopff must have been aware of the growing dissonance between the ideals of his art and the changing times. After the turn of the century he withdrew more and more into the rarefied atmosphere of the house and studio he designed and built for himself in Brussels. Isolated from the avant-garde artistic circles of which he had once been a leading member, Khnopff lived physically and psychologically in the mysterious and beautiful world of his art, a world of his own design.

The irony of this later phase of Khnopff's career is its seeming fulfillment of the ideas and imagery which had long preoccupied his art. Beginning at least as early as his first significant canvases of the early 1880s, he seems to have become fascinated with certain aspects of individual introspection and its associated iconography. Most of the figures which populate the mysterious world of his art are characterized by an attitude of wilful withdrawal from reality into the remote and private world of their own thoughts. For

Knopff, the distinction between the real world, the inner world of the human mind, and the world envisioned in his art, became increasingly vague. Introspection, which is a central theme of his art, became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Surrounding himself with the symbols he used in his art to evoke the inner world of the human mind (isolation, solitude, silence, stillness, and beauty), he spent the remainder of his life devoted to the cult of the inner self which is at the centre of his art.

I will focus on Khnopff's artistic exploration of certain states of mind through a series of theme works within his *oeuvre*. Like many late nineteenth-century artists, he worked in a number of creative media including sculpture, photography, and interior and set design. While his fascination with individual introspection is a consistent and recurring image in his art in general, my discussion will focus on his most significant canvases and drawings created in the 1880s and 1890s. These mysterious and beautiful works evoke his longing for escape into a personal inner world. My discussion will close with a brief description of his house and studio, built in 1900 near the Bois de la Cambre in Brussels, which was the concrete expression of the central themes of his art.

In order to appreciate the source of Khnopff's obsession with certain themes and imagery, it is important to consider the larger forces at work during this period and their impact on contemporary consciousness. The period of the late nineteenth century is characterized by enormous social, political, economic, and philosophical turmoil. In France, there was the hugely destructive German invasion of Paris in 1871, followed by the trauma of the Commune.¹ Across Europe there was the

quickening pace of technological change and unfettered industrialism. Emerging political movements such as socialism and anarchism were challenging the legitimacy of the existing social order. The breakthroughs in scientific knowledge and theory, including the emerging fields of psychology and social Darwinism, profoundly affected Western man's perception of the world and his place in the scheme of the universe.

Under the pressure of a rapidly changing and increasingly fragmented world, it is hardly surprising that the artistic monolithism of previous stylistic periods tends to disintegrate during the late 19th century. The period is characterized by an almost schizophrenic eclecticism featuring such widely disparate yet co-existing styles as Realism, Pre-Raphaelitism and Impressionism, whose artistic aims were often in direct opposition to each other.

This breakdown of stylistic cohesion becomes a distinguishing feature of one of the period's most dynamic artistic movements. Symbolism is a complex and multi-faceted artistic development which influenced many of the arts of late nineteenth-century Europe. In literature, writers became increasingly interested in ideas, sentiment and emotion, rather than description, reality or externals. In the visual arts, the Symbolist ideal became an evocative or emotionally resonant work. Symbolist artists rejected the traditional use of iconography and allegory for the expression of ideas beyond the literal objects being depicted. While some artists evoked mood by narrative or specific imagery, others turned to style or formal means. The movement is characterized by an enormous range of artistic expression, from Gustave Moreau to Odilon Redon.

The emphasis on artistic individualism which is so characteristic of the movement is a reflection of the restless mood of the period.² It is not a coincidence that Symbolism tends to take a particularly strong hold in industrializing countries whose population was predominantly Catholic.³ As the influence of the church and other traditional political and social institutions began to wane, science, technology and industry became the new driving forces of Western society. The positivist philosophy of the age seemed to justify the changing world order, offering a world view which was free of religious superstition and in which man was the shaper of his own destiny⁴ - but conversely, alone in a godless universe. This sense of isolation, an awareness of living in an age adrift and floating into the unknown void of the future, is fundamental to understanding the motivation behind much of the art and literature of the Symbolist movement.

While the national manifestations of this Europe-wide movement were often as distinctive as the work of individual artists, this sense of unease with the modern world is a recurring theme crossing many national borders. Belgian Symbolism, however, seems to have become particularly preoccupied with themes of isolation and the desire to escape the starkness and rationality of the real world. During a fifteen-year period following Waterloo, Belgium became part of the predominantly Calvinist Netherlands. This experience enhanced the importance of Catholicism among all social classes in Belgium.⁵ Established only in 1830, Belgium was at the end of the century still a relatively new political entity. The often tense cultural relationship between the Flemish and the Walloons, with their different languages, had hindered the development of a single distinct

sense of national identity.⁶ The political, cultural, and social tensions of the period seem to have had a profound impact on the national psyche. Belgian arts of the period reveal an almost obsessive self-consciousness and a fascination with aspects of introspection and its associated imagery.⁷

Fernand Khnopff's deep personal sympathy with the brooding tendency of the Belgian *fin de siècle* consciousness would prove to be a determining factor in the direction of his art. His adoption of what is essentially a pessimistic view of the world seems somewhat ironic, however, when considered against the privilege and advantages of his upbringing and lifestyle. He was born near Termonde in 1858 into a wealthy well-connected family. Earning an income does not seem to have been a primary motivation in his career.⁸ His birthright allowed him both the luxury of pursuing a career as an artist and the freedom to explore themes and subject matter which were significant and meaningful to him personally. Photographs of him in the later years of his life show him posing in his studio surrounded by many of his most famous works, as if he neither intended nor needed to sell his personal treasures.

Another important consideration regarding Khnopff's background is his alignment with the values and concerns of Belgium's increasingly affluent middle class. Money from colonies such as the Belgian Congo, as well as Belgium's rapid industrialization, had created a powerful middle class with the wealth and interest to patronize art. In the absence of a distinctly artistic heritage such as France enjoyed, the upwardly mobile Belgian middle class was eager to embrace the art of Belgian Symbolists whose elitism reflected well on the pretensions of their tastes.

Khnopff's own predispositions are particularly evident in the numerous society portraits he painted during the 1880s, which reveal an abiding sympathy with the lifestyle and priorities of the rich. His elitist tendencies appear throughout his work, even informing the exploration of his most personal themes.

The most direct and visible impact of Khnopff's childhood experience on his later ideas and art may be seen in the many images of the city of Bruges which recur in many of his works. When he was two years old, his father took a position in Bruges, where the family lived until 1864. Following this brief period the family moved to Brussels, and he lived and worked there until his death in 1921. While he only lived in Bruges until he was five or six years old, this town, with its well preserved medieval architecture and picturesque waterways, would become (as I shall discuss in detail) an eloquent personal symbol evoking many of the themes which obsessed him throughout his career.

During the middle ages, Bruges was one of the major commercial centres of western Europe. When its port began to silt up during the sixteenth century the town entered a period of slow but inevitable decline, and did not flourish again until its rebirth as a tourist destination in the mid-nineteenth century. For many contemporary Belgians in search of emblems of a national identity, Bruges represented a glorious page from the nation's history. For others, however, the story of Bruges' rise and decline, and the commercialism of its contemporary incarnation, contained an ominous metaphor for the modern age. Belgian Symbolism became fascinated with Bruges as a poignant symbol of a remote and idyllic age before the rampant commercialism of their own time.⁹

The abandonment of Bruges after the sixteenth century, and its fortuitous near-perfect state of preservation into the modern age, shrouded the town in the spectral aura of a vision from the netherworld.

For Belgian Symbolist artists and authors alike, Bruges came to embody many of their most important themes, including isolation, loneliness, and an escape from the real world into an ideal and irretrievably lost past. Georges Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892) is a conspicuous example of how closely Bruges became linked with Symbolist themes, and especially their obsession with the imagery of death.¹⁰ Khnopff's illustrations for the novel demonstrate the kind of imagery which developed around the town. His frontispiece shows a young woman who lies dead. Behind her, a river flows towards Bruges in the distance. Reminding us of Ophelia, her lifeless body seems to be floating on the river towards the ancient town. Death and its inevitability are pervading themes here. Bruges' ancient architecture is contrasted with the youth and beauty of the figure and adds a special poignancy to the untimeliness of her death.

Khnopff's deeply personal identification with Bruges and the mythology which developed around it became a constant and vital feature of his art. On a psychological level, Bruges became an almost sacred place which provided an escape and refuge from the harsh reality of the modern world. Khnopff refused to visit Bruges as an adult, insisting that his childhood memories of Bruges were so intense as to need no refreshing.¹¹ He seems to have been unable to face the modern reality of Bruges as an increasingly popular tourist destination because of the threat this reality posed to his treasured childhood memories.

His personal connection to this place gives his use of Bruges as a symbolic vehicle an added resonance. Views of Bruges often appear in the background of his works, allowing their main subject or theme to be understood on several different levels.

The lasting importance of Bruges in Khnopff's art and mind may be seen in one of his later important works, *An abandoned city* (1902). This drawing depicts the main square of Bruges abandoned to the rising tide which has silently begun to engulf it. The buildings have been closed up and the entire scene is deserted. As well as alluding to the usual themes associated with Bruges, the deceptively simple cityscape depicted here may be understood to symbolize the artist's own feelings. One poignant clue to his intentions may be seen in the empty pedestal in the centre of the town square. The real pedestal at that time carried a statue of Hans Memling, the much honored Bruges artist of the fifteenth century, and its absence is probably an allusion to Khnopff's own feelings of having been abandoned by the ruthless progress of time.¹²

Khnopff's transformation of Bruges into a personal emblem of his inner world is one of several examples of the intensity and clearness of vision which characterize his *oeuvre*. Almost from the beginning of his career, he seems to have aligned himself enthusiastically with the artistic aims and spirit of the Symbolist movement. In 1875 he abandoned law school to study literature and art, and came into contact with the work of leading members of Belgium's literary avant-garde, including Rodenbach, Émile Verhaeren and Maurice Maeterlinck. Each was influential in Khnopff's work and the development of his ideas. His frequent use of still water as a

metaphor of death, memory and the irretrievable passage of time, for instance, closely parallels Maeterlinck's use of the same image.¹³

Khnopff's lifelong fascination with literature of all periods, and the erudition he displays in his choice of subject matter and in his interpretation of its symbolism and meaning, place him in one of the major currents of the Symbolist movement. The ability of literature to evoke another world of experience in the mind of the reader remained an important inspiration to Symbolists working in the visual arts. Khnopff's interest in the ideas and imagery of literature in general, and Symbolist literature in particular, reveals his identification with the intellectual stream which runs through much Symbolist art.¹⁴

This aspect of the movement is especially visible in the work of such leading Symbolist artists as Gustave Moreau and of the English artists associated with the PreRaphaelites such as Edward Burne-Jones. Both Moreau and Burne-Jones had a lasting impact on Khnopff's art after he saw their work at the Exposition Universelle of 1878 in Paris. Through Moreau's art, he was introduced to the perverse, even frightening aspects of the Symbolist psyche; in the art of Burne-Jones, he was exposed to the Pre-Raphaelites' longing for a beautiful world as embodied in their ideal of human beauty. His developing conception of the secret world of the human mind would draw on the vision of both artists.

Of the two, the English artist seems to have had the more immediate impact. The androgynous facial features of Khnopff's square-jawed figures with exaggerated chins are reminiscent, in both their outward appearances and remote spirit, of Burne-

Jones's passive and expressionless figures. Khnopff's personal admiration for contemporary English art would become an important factor in his own work. In reaction against the inevitable influence of France, nationalistic Belgian artists such as Khnopff tended to align themselves with English and Germanic Symbolist aesthetic currents. Khnopff spoke English fluently, traveled to England frequently, enjoyed personal friendships with many English artists (especially Burne-Jones), and even became a noted expert on contemporary English art.¹⁵ However, while a distinctly Pre-Raphaelite longing for a world of rarefied and pure beauty is reflected in much of his work, so is an awareness of the darker aspects of human desires, as embodied in the visionary art of Moreau. An uneasy balance between the beautiful and the perverse becomes a distinguishing and evocative feature of Khnopff's emerging conception of the human mind.

Even as Khnopff was gaining exposure to the international currents of Symbolism during the late 1870s, he had already begun his formal training with the Belgian artist Xavier Mellery. Latent in the quiet and sober realism of Mellery's art are several key tendencies of Belgian Symbolism. Following a visit early in his career to the Dutch island of Marken (at the time a quiet fishing community), Mellery became increasingly interested in *l'âme des choses*,¹⁶ that is, the invisible behind the visible in the familiar day-to-day world of his house and garden. A later work, *My Hallway, Light Effect* (ca. 1889), exemplifies the Symbolist tendencies of Mellery's art. His internalized perception of the real world transforms this otherwise ordinary scene into an evocation of the secret life of the mundane material things and spaces of his home.

Mellery's fascination with a private world of silence and stillness would leave a lasting impression on Khnopff and his art.

Mellery's influence may also be discerned in the limited palette which Khnopff tended to prefer throughout his career. Many Belgian Symbolists rejected such painterly tendencies as the use of brilliant colours or dynamic brushwork so typical of Impressionism. Such effects distracted the viewer's attention from the all-important image or idea which was central to the work. Mellery's statement, "He who manages to make us forget colour and form in favour of emotion will achieve the highest goal of all,"¹⁷ reveals his sympathy with this particular aspect of Belgian Symbolism. In such monochromatic drawings as *My Hallway, Light Effect*, Mellery evokes considerable feeling with minimal formal technique. Working on paper rather than canvas enabled many Symbolist artists like Mellery to avoid the painterly tendencies associated with oil painting.¹⁸

Reflecting the influence of these artists, Khnopff's oeuvre includes a large body of nearly monochromatic works on paper. A somewhat limited palette and restrained way of handling his medium become important features of his art, even when he is working in oils. The tendency towards monochromy in his work, especially in his depictions of Bruges, becomes an essential element in creating the remote and silent atmosphere of the scene. Another factor in this aspect of his art, however, is the growing influence of the photograph. If he didn't visit Bruges as an adult, the only plausible explanation for the accuracy of his later renderings of the town is the use of photography.¹⁹ In public he disparaged the artistic merits of this growing medium, but judging from extant

photographic studies of figures and props, he seems to have used it extensively in developing the imagery of some of his most significant works. By its very nature, the photograph, and especially the monochrome photograph of the late nineteenth century, distorts the image of reality it has captured. Khnopff's creative process, especially when based on photographs, produced an image which was removed one more step from reality.²⁰ The result is a remote, dreamlike effect, rendered in the shades and shadows of near monochrome which is perfectly attuned to conveying the ideas and themes of his art.

After leaving Mellery's studio, Khnopff enrolled at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Between 1876 and 1879, he combined his training with frequent visits to Paris museums, familiarizing himself with the work of old masters as well as contemporary artists. In 1879, he studied at the Académie Julian in Paris under Jules Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger. His artistic debut came in 1881 when he exhibited at the Brussels salon held by the group L'Essor. We can see at this time a development from rather traditional allegories such as *Painting, Music, Poetry* of 1880, to works such as *On the Boulevard du Régent* of 1881 which demonstrate an increasing awareness of atmospheric effects.

By 1882, Khnopff was beginning to establish a name for himself as a dynamic young artist. *The Crisis* is still a tentative work in several ways, yet it embodies many of the themes and concerns which would preoccupy him for the rest of his career. Ostensibly, it depicts a single male figure, dressed in the black "uniform" of the fashionable late 19th-century gentleman, wandering aimlessly along a misty cliff ledge. The absence of any clear meaning in the painting was somewhat startling to his

public. What actual crisis has brought this proud and solitary figure to this place, remains unstated. The painting works through suggestion: the viewer comes to understand the figure's melancholy state of mind through the brooding atmosphere of the setting. The figure recalls Shakespeare's self-absorbed Hamlet, pondering the very meaning of life in a world in which he feels alienated and alone.²¹ He has rejected the emptiness of the real world in favor of the reality of his own inner world. And again, like Hamlet, this introspection isolates him from the comfort of his fellow man, leaving him unable or unwilling to escape his destiny.

But *The Crisis* also admits of autobiographical interpretation. Throughout his life and career, Khnopff deliberately cultivated the persona of the sophisticated aesthete who dedicated his life to art. The type was epitomized in the public pose and the teachings of Oscar Wilde. Both Wilde's character Dorian Gray, in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Joris-Karl Huysmans' des Esseintes from the novel *À Rebours* (Against Nature, 1884) would become literary archetypes of the isolated aesthete for whom life and art are inextricably and tragically linked. Khnopff's later withdrawal into a house whose design he personally oversaw parallels the example of des Esseintes, who secluded himself in a veritable temple of art. The blurring of the line between life and art, which characterized so much of the artistic milieu of the late nineteenth century, is particularly relevant in understanding Khnopff's work. This cult of self-absorption was a conscious artistic choice for him, an essential aspect of the creative process. The price of the aesthete's heightened awareness was isolation from the less developed masses. The introspection of the figure in *The Crisis* suggests Khnopff's own

awakening sensibility and direction as an artist.

His next major work, *Listening to Schumann*, exhibited in 1883, examines similar themes to those in *The Crisis*, only handled in a more subtle and sophisticated manner. His skillful interpretation of the subject matter is especially evident when compared to James Ensor's *Russian Music* of 1881. In Ensor's painting, the figures are psychologically linked by their sharing of the music. Khnopff takes a different but characteristic approach to an almost identical scene. He isolates the central figure by placing her with her back to the pianist, who is all but concealed on the left of the picture. Once again, this painting is all about suggestion, an evocation of the reverie of the listener who is lost in her private contemplation of the music. She shields her eyes to defend herself from the intrusion of the real world. Like the experience of the aesthete, her isolation is a conscious choice, providing an escape from the material world which Khnopff has carefully rendered about her. Émile Verhaeren, writing in the Brussels periodical *L'Art moderne* on October 10, 1886, describes the central figure in this way:

She is the embodiment of concentrated attention, impression materialized, aesthetic anguish made reality. Through her we feel passion, and experience the nature of musical life; her attitude, fraught with tension, has about it something indefinably austere and painful.²²

The painting manages to explore, in a situation which would seem to exclude them, many of the themes which had already begun to obsess Khnopff: isolation, stillness, and even silence. While his painting owes

something to Ensor's earlier version (the uncharacteristic brushwork of the carpet seems reminiscent of Ensor's technique²³), his conception is on an entirely different level. Khnopff's ability to evoke the mood associated with these themes transforms an otherwise ordinary genre scene into an intense evocation of the emotional and psychological experience of art.

In a second major work from 1883, *At Fosset. The guard waiting*, Khnopff avoids the drama of the previous paintings in order to explore a more subtle state of mind, that of expectancy.²⁴ Like *The Crisis*, this work depicts a solitary figure set in an otherwise deserted landscape. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, the man seems oblivious to the landscape around him. The almost photographic realism with which Khnopff renders the figure emphasizes the psychological isolation from the real world so that it becomes almost physical. The empty foreground plain and the single tree trunk leading up to the figure establish an unbridgeable distance between him and the viewer. The title identifies the figure's state of mind without explaining it. What the guard is waiting for remains unknown and unknowable to the viewer, who is left to search through the various elements of the composition to resolve its riddle. In this way, Khnopff provokes in the viewer the possibilities and uncertainty felt by the waiting figure.

This exploration of certain states of human consciousness removed from reality takes on a new dimension in his major portrait of his sister Marguerite. The monumental *Portrait of the Artist's Sister* (1887) is considered one of his most successful paintings and demonstrates the complexity of his use of personal symbols and the many layers of

meaning associated with them. While it was probably inspired by Whistler's *The White Girl* (1862), Khnopff's translation of the subject matter has transformed the image. Marguerite appears sheathed in a constricting, high-collared dress. Even her hands are covered by tight gloves. The stiffness of her posture is emphasized by the strict verticals of the door frame. Everything in her environment seems to hold her in check. The closed door behind her shuts her off physically from the real world, and her deliberately averted gaze makes it impossible for the viewer to connect with her psychologically.²⁵ At the same time she is in control, towering over the viewer.

In fact, Khnopff has created two parallel domains. Through Marguerite's image, he transforms Whistler's example into a militant high priestess, the protective guardian of both the inner sanctum of her physical surroundings and the private world of her own thoughts. Like his handling of these themes in *Listening to Schumann*, the stillness and palpable silence of her physical setting evoke the parallel reality of the thoughts and feelings of her inner world.

Much like Bruges, images of his sister Marguerite are prominent in Khnopff's art. Her face and figure are featured in some form or another in most of his significant works. The actual nature of his obsession with his sister's image remains a matter of some conjecture.²⁶ On his death, Marguerite seems to have discarded or destroyed most of his personal papers and given away much of his remaining art. As a result, we have little surviving documentation concerning the private thoughts and feelings of an artist who was so fascinated with conveying these very things. At all events, Marguerite's image becomes one of the key symbols of Khnopff's

enigmatic art. Her self-imposed isolation in *Portrait of the Artist's Sister* suggests Marguerite's real as well as symbolic role as the guardian of the closed door to Khnopff's own personal inner world.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Marguerite's image in Khnopff's thematic agenda. Even in a work specifically designated as a portrait, it is difficult to know how far this is an actual portrait of his sister and how far it is an idealized symbol. Like all his personal symbols, Marguerite's physical existence became a mere shadow of her symbolic life in Khnopff's artistic agenda. In accordance with the aims of Symbolism, his use of her image is almost never purely allegorical. Rather, it is used to evoke multiple layers of interrelated meanings, many of which are otherwise inexpressible.

At times, Symbolist art could be more revealing of the artist's own subconscious than he might have foreseen or intended. Khnopff's fascination with his sister's image, for instance, reveals one of the predominant undercurrents in late nineteenth-century art: a pervasive and complex obsession with sexual desire and with women. His co-option of Marguerite's image expresses the entire range of this contemporary fascination. She is alternately the cruel seductress of his nightmares and the remote and angelic beauty of his dreams. Khnopff would have been aware of examples of both types in the art of the period. The influence of Moreau's vision of woman as a threatening presence, and the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of the redemptive qualities of ideal feminine beauty, often form an uneasy balance in Khnopff's art.²⁷ Even in *Portrait of the Artist's Sister*, there is something disquieting in the interpretation of Marguerite's remote beauty and the self-

conscious purity.

She appears again in one of his boldest compositions, *Memories* (1889). Memories are a particularly evocative symbol of the inner world of the mind, and, as we see in Khnopff's fascination with images of Bruges, they form an recurring theme in his art. To some degree, his efforts to render the unseen memory state are comparable to Whistler's efforts to render music pictorially. Khnopff, however, never abandoned the realist tradition in which he was trained. As Goldwater says, "his yearning for a world of higher things is contained almost entirely in the associations of his representations, and very little in the expressive form of his compositions."²⁸ The evocation of this higher world so electrifies Khnopff's representations that reality pales in comparison to his symbolic world with its layers of meaning.

The question of what is real is central to much of Khnopff's art. It is an essential aspect of the meaning of Khnopff's monumental *Memories*. This large scale pastel was first exhibited in London in 1890 under the deceptively trite title, *The Tennis Party*. Seven female figures, all but one in tennis dress, stand motionless in a field at twilight. Scenes with more than one figure are very rare in Khnopff's *oeuvre*. As the preparatory photographs indicate, his sister Marguerite was once again the model for all the figures.²⁹ The sense of incommunicability between them, which was apparent in *Listening to Schumann*, is so pronounced here that the silence is almost palpable. Each of the figures seems unaware of the others; one of them is looking right through another. Frozen and ghostlike, they stare unseeing into the indeterminate distance.

Once again, the process of translating photographs has removed the various images of figures out of the real world from which they originated, making it impossible for the viewer to connect with them psychologically.³⁰ The static arrangement of the figures emphasizes their remoteness and seems likely to have been influenced by Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* (1884-6), which Khnopff would have seen exhibited at Les XX.³¹ Like Seurat's influential painting, Khnopff's pastel monumentalizes the mundane events of everyday life. Unlike Seurat, however, Khnopff's focus is the inner world of the human mind, portrayed in the same heroic and substantial terms as objects in the real world.

The key to understanding this complex and mysterious scene seems to lie in the figure on the far left, who is significantly the only one for which we have no photographic precedent. She is the only figure not carrying a tennis racket. She is wearing a dress which is similar to that of the figure in the portrait of Marguerite, and it is the layered memories of her experience which we see represented here. She reflects upon her memories in a field of vague borders and a limitless vista. The twilight setting, the fleeting moment between day and night, evokes the magic nature of memories as a bridge between reality and the inner world of the mind. It is memory that unites the otherwise isolated figures, making possible such a unity of time and place.³² Through the act of remembering, the main figure is able to escape the present and transcend the material world.

The importance of silence as the primary thematic milieu in Khnopff's art has been touched on in the discussion of previous works. In *Silence* (1890), another pastel

drawing, Khnopff examines the idea of silence as a theme in and of itself and not just as a background setting. Once again, a photograph of Marguerite in the same costume and pose is the likely source of this pastel. The translation between photograph and drawing, however, reveals his intentions.³³ He has brought the figure right up to the front of the foreground plane. Now in three-quarter view, she dominates the picture plane, heightening the intimacy and immediacy of the image. Dressed in an indeterminate costume, perhaps a nightgown or even a priest's alb, she raises her gloved hand to her closed lips.³⁴ Her eyes are open, the left focused on the viewer while the right is glazed over and tends to focus upward. Her head is surrounded by a blue aura while the background suggests a mural or mosaic decoration. This otherwise vague setting implies a spiritual context for the enigmatic figure.

While it is tempting to understand *Silence* as a straightforward allegory, a deeper exploration of this drawing's symbolic sources reveals how complex and interdependent Khnopff could make such themes. The gesture which the figure makes, for instance, raising her fingers to her lips, has ancient precedents of which the erudite Khnopff would have been aware. One of the first known references to silence appears in the person of the Egyptian child-god, Horus. His gesture of finger touched to lips was associated with creative speech. When Horus was incorporated into the mythology of the Greeks, the gesture was understood to mean silence, and this interpretation became the accepted one.³⁵

The symbolism of silence has evolved through time. It has come to be associated with both the prohibition of speech and a meditative state. In certain hermetic texts, silence is often

linked symbolically with inspiration and rebirth. In the sixth century B.C., Pythagoras imposed a discipline of silence on his followers to condition the mind through self-control and to prevent the divulging of secret doctrines to the uninitiated. With the advent of Christianity, the admonitory sense of this gesture was linked to blasphemy. In this context, the finger placed to the mouth in certain fresco paintings implied that only words of praise to God may pass the lips of a believer.

Scholars have identified possible models for the pose and gesture of the figure in *Silence*. One of these is Angerona, the female personification of Silence among the Romans. She is represented in emblem books in a similar pose to Khnopff's and carries both the admonitory and the meditative associations. Another likely source, this one contemporary, is the figure of an angel in Burne-Jones's 1888 mural for St. John's Church in Torquay. In this work the finger on the lips implies that silence is the proper state for meeting with God. Still a third possible source is an illustration by Charles Ricketts where this same gesture, again made by an angel, implies that earthly love can only be fulfilled in an ideal world of silence.³⁶

Consistent with the principles of Symbolist art, *Silence* eludes a single definitive interpretation. Rather, this figure with its enigmatic gesture seems to resonate with the accumulated layers of meaning and subtext which had come to be associated with the concept of silence over the centuries. She embodies aspects of each of the three possible sources I have mentioned, transformed by Khnopff's particular understanding of them. She is gesturing for silence but also inviting the viewer to enter the secret world of silence.

Khnopff retains the cautionary tone of the gesture without its overtly religious associations. He implies an atmosphere of meditation but conceives of it as a state of active awareness rather than a passive one. As in Khnopff's other works which evoke incorporeal states of mind, an otherwise intangible condition here takes on an almost physical presence.

As demonstrated in works such as *Silence*, the deliberate selection and transformation of existing symbols according to Khnopff's personal thematic agenda becomes the guiding principle of his art. *I lock my door upon myself* (1891) is the consummate expression of this aspect of his art. It is replete with symbolic objects, each forming part of his personal iconography. The title is drawn from an 1876 poem by Christina Rossetti entitled "Who Shall Deliver Me?" Rossetti's poem became important to the literary-minded Khnopff, inspiring another work by him in the same year with the same title. The sense of wistful longing which characterizes Rossetti's work speaks to many of the most pervasive themes of Khnopff's art, such as the desire to escape the heavy burden of the modern world and seek solitude, and a preoccupation with death. Most significant of all, Rossetti's poem conveys a sense of the oppression of self-absorptive introspection and the resulting need to escape from oneself.

Rossetti's work was an important starting point for this painting, but like all of Khnopff's artistic sources, it has been carefully woven into his personal thematic program. At the near centre of the composition is another rather androgynous incarnation of his sister Marguerite. She is, however, no longer the virginal priestess of the portrait or of *Silence*. Rather, this is the

beguiling creature of instinct who represents the other extreme of Khnopff's conception of woman. The loosely falling hair, glowing eyes, and obvious self-absorption surround her with an air of sexuality and danger. Leaning languidly on her hands, she stares past the viewer, unseeing, indifferent to everything but her inner world. Adding to the viewer's feeling of unease is the spatially vague setting of the scene.³⁷ Not only is the figure separated psychologically from the viewer, Khnopff has left the foreground plane ambiguous and undefined by placing three upright lilies in it. We also have no clear indication of what the figure is leaning on. The background space is equally ambiguous, constructed of a series of panels and openings which may be windows, doors, mirrors or paintings of outdoor views.

Each of these unsettling aspects of the composition echo and enhance our sense of the figure's state of mind. One explanation of the layers of meaning associated with this enigmatic work is the symbolic representation of the three stages of time.³⁸ The past is symbolized by the scene of Bruges on the viewer's right. A lone figure, shrouded in black, possibly representing death, walks the deserted streets of the ancient town. The lily in this part of the scene is poignantly past its bloom. In the centre the corresponding lily is in full bloom, evoking the present. The left side is filled with mystic references to foreseeing the future, and here the lily is still a budding blossom.

Khnopff has strategically placed in the picture a bust of Hypnos, the ancient god of sleep and dreams (and also the twin brother of Thanatos, the god of death), so as to act as an intermediary between the past and the present. His obsession with this particular artifact and its symbolic associations has been well

documented. He is known to have made several copies of an original bust in the British Museum. Dreams were a major interest of his, and he kept a pen and paper by his bed to record his own when he awoke. In his home, a veritable temple to art, a bust of Hypnos was enshrined on its own altar. In *I lock my door upon myself*, the figure is placed under the protective wing of Hypnos and the dream world which is his domain. She has been thought by some scholars to represent a young widow leaning on the black-draped coffin of her recently departed husband.³⁹ Her left elbow overlaps the panel symbolizing the present while she leans towards the future.

In *I lock my door upon myself*, Khnopff explores one of the most complex and isolating tendencies of the human mind. Humans are the only form of life we know of that are not only conscious of their own mortality but even dwell on thoughts of their own death. Such an awareness seems to preoccupy the young woman in this work. The scene contains many of Khnopff's favorite symbols of death, Bruges for instance, as well as many mystical references. The late nineteenth century was fascinated with the occult and with the possibility of communicating with the dead. The small golden ornament suspended from a chain hanging down in front of the figure is probably a reference to this contemporary interest.

Death is the central theme of the painting, and Khnopff's conception of death as little more than an end to our physical lives informed his selection and interpretation of the symbolism of the various objects in the scene. Beside the bust of Hypnos, Khnopff included a single poppy,⁴⁰ suggesting his belief in death as a state of profound and hypnotic sleep. The

trancelike expression of the young woman embodies the ambiguity of Khnopff's conception. Her unfocused gaze reflects both the sadness associated with death and a longing for release from the grief which weighs so heavily on her, a release only death can provide. Isolated from the world around her by the consideration of her own mortality, she seems to accept the inevitability of death and to welcome its passage to the eternal world of dreams.

The self-absorption and introspection which mark most of the figures in Khnopff's art finds its most personal and concrete expression in the design of his house and studio. The Villa Fernand Khnopff, now destroyed, was erected in 1900 in an English-style suburb of Brussels on the Avenue des Courses. Although the design of the building was a collaboration with the Brussels architect Édouard Pelseneer, Khnopff seems to have encouraged the popular misconception that it was a work entirely of his own hand. He was probably motivated by his wish to live up to his own artistic ideals as well as the esteem of contemporary reviewers. After visiting the Villa in 1912, Helene Laillet described it as the expression of his own personality which he has built for his own satisfaction; it is his immutable "Self" which he has raised in defiance of a troubled and changing world.⁴¹

In fact, most of the construction details and the organization of the interior spaces were left to the expertise of Pelseneer.⁴² The striking design of the building's facade, however, was Khnopff's own. The austerity of its rectilinear design reflected the influence of such Viennese architects as Joseph Hoffman (1870-1956), with whose work Khnopff was familiar. The starkness of the building's white facade, decorated with subtle mystical

ornaments such as golden circles, evoked the mood of ancient sepulchral architecture. Over the black front door, the legend *Passé Futur* conveyed the idea of escaping temporal reality which is at the heart of so much of Khnopff's art. Standing on guard at the top of the facade was a statue of Artemis, the virgin huntress.

The impression of the building's facade was that of a vault or tomb, and this idea was carried through to the conception of the interior space. Regardless of Pelseneer's involvement, the furnishings and rarefied atmosphere of the interior were clearly in accordance with Khnopff's own tastes. His fascination with silence and stillness became an integral part of the building's interior design. Contemporary visitors commented on the palpable silence which reigned throughout the building. Describing the sense of seclusion she felt inside the walls of Khnopff's house, Laillet observed:

For here no sound from the outside world troubles the mind, no window placed too low brings you into contact with life; your imagination carries you away, and you feel yourself to be far from all that is low, petty, mean, and worthless: you are in the kingdom of the beautiful and in this purified atmosphere you feel a compelling need of silence in order that you may attain for a moment something of the ideal.⁴³

Within this carefully orchestrated atmosphere, Khnopff became the high priest of a cult dedicated to himself. The Dandy's obsession with precision was reflected in every detail of the building's design. Like his art, nothing about the design elements of his house and studio were accidental. The spaces were sparsely furnished. Even the dining room table was removed after each meal. *Objets d'art*

which appealed to him were arranged carefully around the rooms, which were painted according to theme colours. There was a blue room where he went at the end of the day to dream and plan new works. The walls were hung with the art of his favorite artists, including a reproduction of Burne-Jones' *Wheel of Fortune* of 1882.

Examples of Khnopff's own work hung throughout the building. Over a smaller replica of *A Blue Wing* (1894), which hung in the entrance, he inscribed the three letters of the word "Soi" (Self).⁴³ His remarkable portrait of Marguerite became an important part of the decorative and thematic scheme of the interior. The whiteness of the walls on which it hung recalled the glacial white of her dress. Her portrait was placed within what one scholar has described as a family altar, a tribute to the beautiful muse who became the inspiration of so much of his art.⁴⁴ On a table near her portrait he placed a vase of flowers and a tennis racquet, a reference to his monumental pastel *Memories* and the role Marguerite had played in it.

Khnopff's atelier formed the central shrine of the building. Inside its entrance he constructed another altar, this one dedicated to Hypnos, the presiding god of his art and household. The symbolic significance of Hypnos as the god of sleep, and thereby an intermediary between the material world and the world of dreams, required this altar to be located at the entrance to the chamber where Khnopff created his art. On this altar stood a replica he had made of a fourth century B.C. bust of Hypnos and other objects which carried a symbolic significance for him. On the wall behind the altar, he inscribed the words of his personal motto, *On n'a que soi*, which in the context of the altar, took on a

prophetic significance. Here his life and art became poignantly and inexorably intertwined. The fascination with the self which was central to his art, was at its core a highly developed form of aesthetic narcissism. His escape into a beautiful world of his own design became a prison of the self from which there would be no escape but death.

On n'a que soi.

Khnopff's art epitomizes the brilliance and complexity of the intellectual strain of Symbolist art. The complex of symbols he used in his art included images of Bruges, feminine beauty, and certain significant artifacts. These symbols evoked layers of erudite meaning as well as the personal significance he associated with them. Introspection and self-absorption are major themes in his art. Through them, he suggests, the human mind can escape the weight and tedium of the material world. The conditions essential to this psychological liberation are silence, stillness, and solitude. While these are recurring concerns in the art of Belgian Symbolism during this period, Khnopff became fanatically devoted to them and the ethereal world of the mind that they suggested. His interest in the world of dreams was distinct from, and pre-dated, the work of his Austrian contemporary Sigmund Freud, but it extended only as far as their denial of the real world. His house and studio at 41, Avenue des Courses, became the concrete realization of the fondest longings he expressed in his art. Here he withdrew into the splendid isolation of the Self, living the remainder of his life in the rarefied and

beautiful atmosphere of his art.

NOTES

¹ Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism*, p. 7.

² Howe, *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*, 1982, p. xii.

³ Gibson, *Symbolism*, p. 7.

⁴ Howe, *The Symbolist Art ...* p. 81.

⁵ Gibson, p. 87.

⁶ A more detailed discussion of Flemish versus Walloon identity is given on p. 27 of MaryAnne Stevens and Robert Hoosee: *Impressionism to Symbolism: The Belgian Avant-Garde 1880-1900*.

⁷ Gibson, p. 87.

⁸ Howe, *The Symbolist Art...*, p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 25.

¹⁰ Stevens and Hoosee, p. 144.

¹¹ Howe, "Fernand Khnopff's Depictions of Bruges: Mysticism, Medievalism and Socialism," *Arts Magazine* 1980, p. 126.

¹² Howe, *The Symbolist Art...* p. 33.

¹³ *Fernand Khnopff and the Belgian Avant-Garde*, (exh. cat by J. Howe and others), p. 16.

¹⁴ Delevoy, p. 12.

¹⁵ Howe, *The Symbolist Art...* p. 8.

¹⁶ *L'âme des choses* became the title of a well known series of drawings by Mellery.

¹⁷ Stevens and Hoozee, p. 160.

¹⁸ Palmer, *From Ensor to Magritte: Belgian Art 1880-1940*, p. 92-3.

¹⁹ Howe, *The Symbolist Art...* p. 23.

²⁰ Delevoy, p. 173.

²¹ Legrand, "Fernand Khnopff - Perfect Symbolist," *Apollo*, n.s. 85, April 1967, p. 279.

²² Quoted in Stevens and Hoozee, p. 140.

²³ Legrand, p. 279.

²⁴ Morrissey, "Exploration of Symbolic States of Mind in Fernand Khnopff's Works of the 1880s," *Arts Magazine*, February 1979, p. 89.

²⁵ Legrand, p. 283.

²⁶ Howe, *The Symbolist Art...* p. 47. [However, Geoffrey Simmins has stated in this Journal (IX ii - X i, Fall 1988 - Spring 1989, p. 41) that the three daughters of a Glasgow family called Marquet, who lived in Brussels, are now believed to have also been "the sources of his [Khnopff's] depictions of red-haired women." Simmins quotes (n. 38) Delevoy: *Khnopff*, p.423. - Ed.]

²⁷ Goldwater, *Symbolism*, p. 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 211.

²⁹ Howe, *The Symbolist Art...* p. 79.

³⁰ Palmer, p. 97.

³¹ Morrissey, "Isolation and the Imagination: Fernand Khnopff's *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*," *Arts Magazine*, Dec. 1978, p. 95.

³² Legrand, p. 283.

³³ Canning, "Fernand Khnopff and the Iconography of Silence," *Arts Magazine*, December 1979, p. 170.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 171.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.173.

³⁷ Morrissey, "Isolation...", p. 94.

³⁸ Howe, *The Symbolist Art...* p. 108.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 107.

⁴⁰ Morrissey, "Isolation...", p.95.

⁴¹ Laillet, "The Home of an Artist: M. Fernand Khnopff's Villa at Brussels," *The Studio*, vol 57, 1912, p.201.

⁴² Howe, *The Symbolist Art...*, p. 143.

⁴³ Laillet, p. 201.

⁴⁴ Howe, *The Symbolist Art...*, p. 149.

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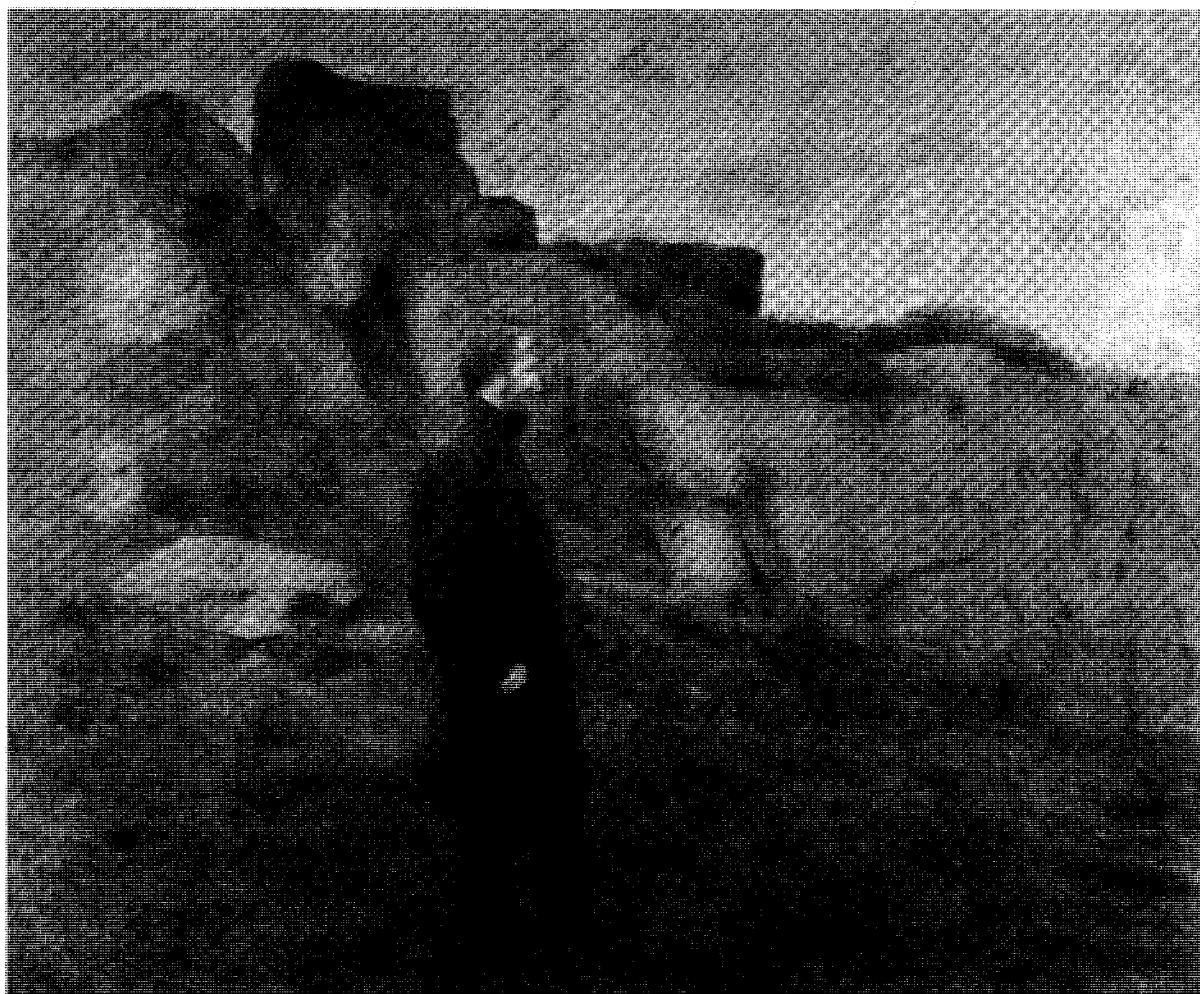
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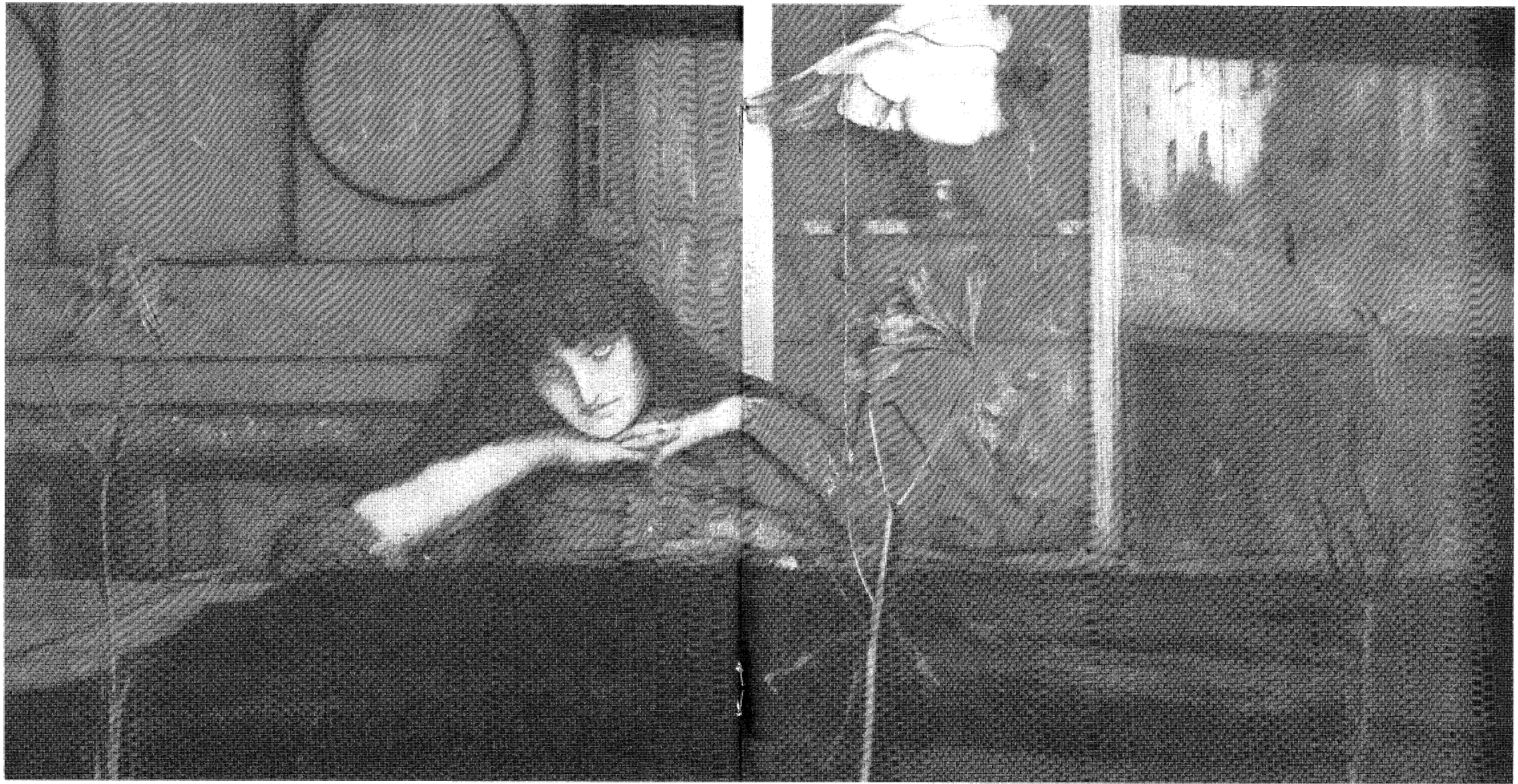
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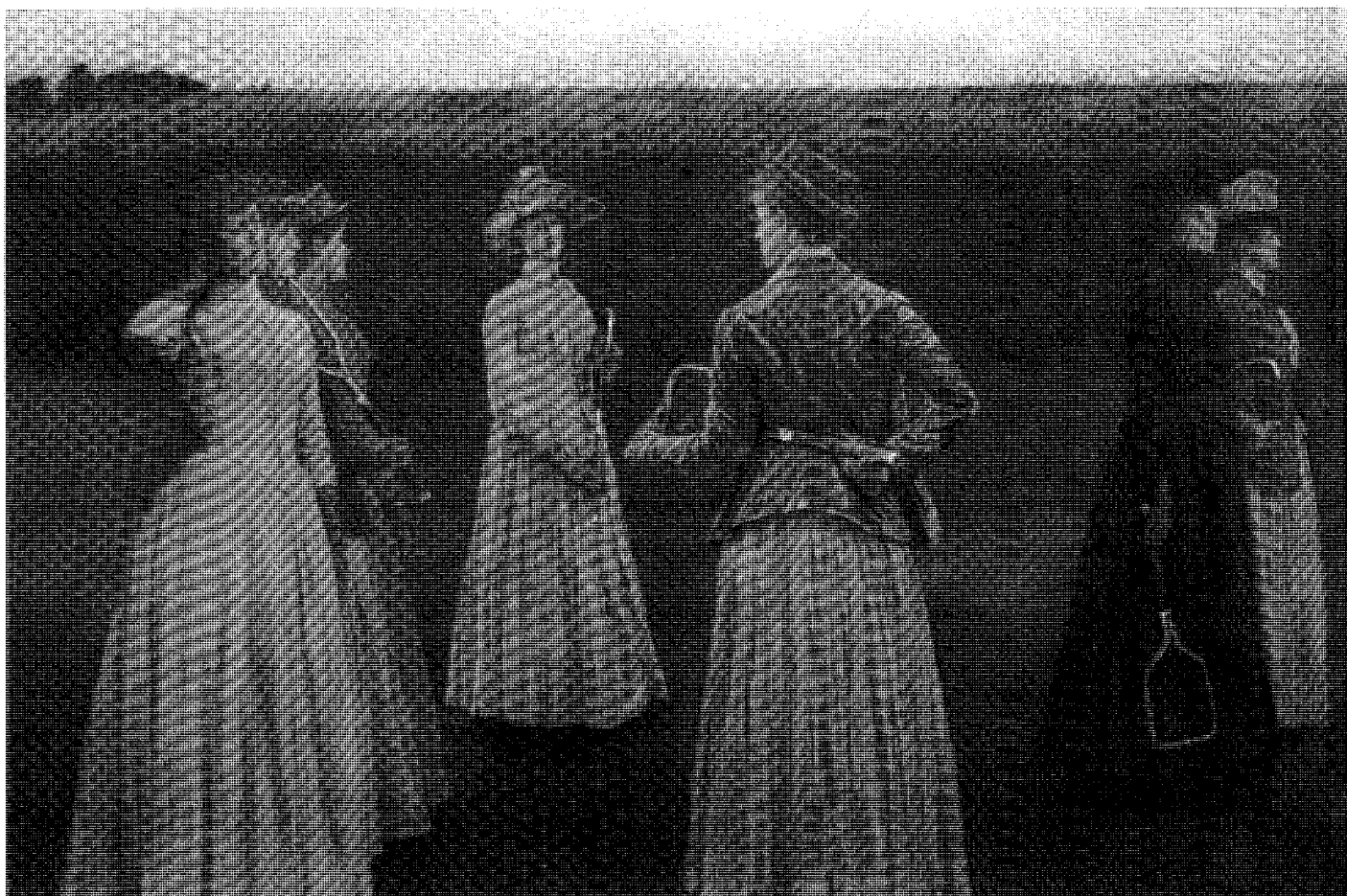


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