



SYMBOLISM

OLLI Sketchy Abstractions Class 4



Victor Vasnetsov, The Knight at the Crossroads, 1878

PUBLIC DOMAIN

OLLI Sketchy Abstractions Class 4 – Symbolism

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Sketchy describes a rapidly executed freehand drawing that is not usually intended as a finished work.

Abstraction describes art that is unconcerned with the literal depiction of things from the visible world—it can, however, refer to an object or image which has been distilled from the real world.

Symbolism:

Follow this link for information on Symbolism. In painting, Symbolism can be seen as a revival of some mystical tendencies in the Romantic tradition which rejected the social conventions of the time in favor of individualism. The symbolist painters used mythological and dream imagery. We will discuss this for about 15 minutes in class.

[1800 – 1890s Symbolism Gallery](#)

See the entire “Academy to Abstract a timeline” on my website, www.CW4SP.com | [Art](#).

Core Characteristics of Symbolism (per MS Copilot)

1. Subjectivity over realism

Symbolist artists rejected the objectivity of Realism and the optical immediacy of Impressionism. Instead, they aimed to **visualize inner states of mind**, emotions, and ideas. Their works often feel introspective, poetic, and psychologically charged.

2. Dreamlike, mystical, and occult imagery

Symbolist art frequently incorporates:

- Dreams and visions
- Mythology and ancient legends
- Mysticism, spirituality, and the occult
- Macabre or morbid themes
- Allegories of death, melancholy, evil, or transcendence

These subjects were used not literally but as **vehicles for emotional or metaphysical meaning**.

3. Emphasis on suggestion rather than direct symbolism

Unlike traditional iconography, Symbolist imagery is **nuanced, ambiguous, and personal**. Symbols are not one-to-one references; they are evocative, half-stated, and open to interpretation. This aligns with Symbolist literature's preference for mood and atmosphere over plot.

4. Decorative, highly descriptive visual language

Because Symbolism grew out of literature, its visual style often includes:

- Elaborate detail
- Rich ornamentation
- Saturated or jewel-like colors
- Dark backgrounds creating suspense or gloom
- Static compositions with little implied movement

Paintings feel like **self-contained worlds**, limited to the canvas and not extending beyond it.

5. Fusion of the erotic, the decadent, and the spiritual

Symbolist artists often blended:

- Sensual or erotic imagery
- Decadent themes
- Religious or spiritual symbolism

This mixture reflects the movement's fascination with the tension between earthly desire and transcendence.

6. A reaction against modernity and industrialization

Symbolism expressed **disillusionment with contemporary society**, turning away from modern life toward imagination, myth, and introspection. It was a conservative reaction to the progressive, outward-looking movements of the time.

Representative Symbolist Artists

- [Gustave Moreau](#) — mythological opulence, jewel-like color, exotic eroticism.
- [Odilon Redon](#) — mystical, macabre, dreamlike figures; delicate color harmonies.
- [Pierre Puvis de Chavannes](#) — muralist of idealized, timeless allegories.

Suggested project - Tarot:

Some figures closely associated with Symbolism and related movements were directly involved with Tarot and occult studies. For example, **Pamela Colman Smith**, illustrator of the famous Rider–Waite Tarot deck, moved in artistic and literary circles influenced by Symbolist aesthetics.

[\[theguardian.com\]](http://theguardian.com)

[Meet the Forgotten Female Artist Behind the World's Most Popular Tarot Deck \(1909\) | Open Culture](#)

The Secret Landscape of the Waite-Smith Tarot

In 1903, Pamela Colman Smith painted "The Hill of Heart's Desire" based on a poem by the Irish poet, Rafferty. In 1909, when she was asked to draw a tarot deck, she re-visited that land and, like a dream-world, drew the figures and scenes of that one place.

She often drew the Tower Gate of Winchelsea, the old port and ship-building town into her landscapes. This is where she stayed (near to Smallhythe Cottage with Ellen Terry) whilst she co-designed and painted the deck.

© Tali Goodwin & Marcus Katz, 2017 & 2019.
Authors of "Secrets of the Waite Smith Tarot".
* About 30% of the Minor designs are from plays.

Whilst the landscape is the Hill of Heart's Desire, the characters are mainly drawn from Shakespeare.*

The Seal of Winchelsea appears as the Cattle, Ship & three flags (Red Lions) on the 10 of Pentacles.

This is the secret landscape of the Waite Smith Tarot. It is both an inner and a real world drawn in 78 illustrations.

www.tarotassociation.net

Try this:

As an exercise draw a composition of fear or sadness, or great sorrow, quite simply, do not bother about details now, but in a few lines tell your story. Then show it to any one of your friends, or family, or fellow students, and ask them if they can tell you what it is you meant to portray. You will soon get to know how to make it tell its tale.

- Pamela Colman-Smith, "Should the Art Student Think?" July, 1908

Suggested project - Tattoo (per MS Copilot)

Symbolist art from roughly 1880–1900 *has* influenced contemporary tattoo design, though the influence is indirect and shows up more in themes, mood, and iconography than in strict stylistic replication. The Symbolists’ focus on dream imagery, myth, esoteric meaning, and emotional atmosphere maps cleanly onto the kinds of tattoos people choose today.

Below is a structured breakdown grounded in what current tattoo sources say about mythic symbolism, classical art influence, and printmaking aesthetics — all of which intersect with Symbolist concerns.

Tattoo examples.

Try this:

Draw your own tattoo design based on Symbolist themes.

How Symbolism’s core ideas show up in modern tattooing

Symbolism emphasized **inner states**, **myth**, **spirituality**, and **allegory** — themes that are extremely common in tattoo culture today.

- **Mythical symbols** (dragons, phoenixes, ouroboros, kitsune, Celtic knots, protective eyes) are widely used in modern tattooing, and Symbolist artists like Redon, Moreau, and Rops drew heavily on similar mythic and esoteric imagery. Modern tattoo guides emphasize how these motifs carry layered meanings and require careful integration to preserve symbolic intent.
- **Dreamlike or spiritual motifs** — mandalas, lotuses, hybrid spiritual symbols — echo Symbolism’s interest in inner vision and transcendence. Modern tattoo sources highlight these as meaning-driven designs rather than purely decorative.
- **Allegorical figures** — angels, demons, personifications — appear frequently in tattooing and align with Symbolist fascination with metaphysical subjects.

Symbolism’s “art as emotion, not realism” ethos fits naturally with tattooing’s role as personal narrative and psychological expression.

Stylistic connections: where Symbolist aesthetics overlap with tattoo techniques

While Symbolism was not a unified style, several of its visual tendencies resonate with current tattoo practices:

- **Fine-line engraving and etching aesthetics** Many Symbolist works (especially those by Odilon Redon and Félicien Rops) used lithography, charcoal, and etching-like textures. Modern tattooing has a thriving engraving-inspired style rooted in historical printmaking — strong lines, subtle shading, dramatic narratives — which parallels Symbolist graphic work.

- **Medieval, gothic, and mythic iconography** Symbolists often borrowed medieval and gothic motifs. Modern tattoo artists frequently draw from medieval woodcuts, gothic arches, and mythic creatures — a lineage that overlaps with Symbolist thematic sources.
- **Narrative intensity and emotional atmosphere** Symbolist paintings often feel theatrical or visionary. Contemporary tattoo artists similarly use dramatic composition, chiaroscuro, and emotional intensity — techniques also rooted in classical art traditions.

 Where the influence is *not* direct

Symbolism is less visible as a **distinct visual style** in tattooing compared to:

- Renaissance realism
- Baroque drama
- Japanese ukiyo-e
- Engraving/woodcut traditions

These styles have clearer technical pathways into tattooing (linework, shading, composition). Symbolism's influence is more **conceptual** — in the imagery people choose and the meanings they attach to tattoos.

 Summary

Symbolist art has influenced modern tattoo design primarily through shared themes — myth, spirituality, dream imagery, and emotional symbolism — rather than through direct stylistic adoption. Modern tattooing's use of mythic symbols, allegorical figures, and engraving-like aesthetics aligns strongly with Symbolist concerns, even though tattoo artists more often cite classical, medieval, and printmaking sources as their technical foundations.