

Maurice Denis (1870-1943) and the Sacred Grove:
Temporality in *Fin-de-Siècle* France

Lucile Cordonnier

A Thesis in the Department of Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Art History)

Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada
July 2021

© Lucile Cordonnier, 2021

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Lucile Cordonnier

Entitled: Maurice Denis (1870-1943) and the Sacred Grove: Temporality in *Fin-de-Siècle* France

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art History)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

Dr. Steven Stowell Examiner

Dr. Nicola Pezolet Thesis Supervisor

Approved by _____
Dr. John Potvin, Chair

2021 _____
Dr. Annie Gérin, Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts

Abstract

Maurice Denis (1870-1943) and the Sacred Grove:
Temporality in *Fin-de-Siècle* France

Lucile Cordonnier

This thesis explores the temporalities of three of Maurice Denis' paintings from his Nabis period: *April*, or *The Anemones* (1891, private collection), *The Muses* (1893, Orsay Museum), and *The Green Trees*, or *Beech Trees in Kerduel* (1893, Orsay Museum). All three paintings represent scenes set in forests or woods populated by ethereal figures engaged in processions along paths delimited amid the trees. I have chosen to name this natural setting "sacred groves." In the "Definition of Neo-Traditionalism," Denis defined his artistic practice as the "sanctification of nature." He wrote: "Art is the sanctification of nature, of that nature found in all the world, which contents itself to live." To Denis, art has the ability to make nature sacred. Denis' use of natural environments in his works, such as the woods and the forest, holds a particular meaning that goes beyond mere landscape painting. In this thesis, I argue that *April*, *The Muses* and *The Green Trees* are three paintings that synchronize multiple levels of temporality within them: spiritual, decorative, and mythical. Temporal synchronicity is made possible by the subject of the sacred grove that ties these levels together and grants their homogeneity and integrity within the works. My approach is inspired by art historian Giovanni Careri's concept of the revival of the work of art in the "Now-Time." As works meant to decorate modern interiors or to be kept private for spiritual contemplation, their purpose is revived in the viewer's time, the "Now-Time." Thus, this thesis questions the way this revival functions with mythical times, how a work can connect private spaces with linear and public time, and how the spatiotemporality of the decorative, central to Maurice Denis' art, is articulated around the paintings' spiritual purpose.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank Dr. Nicola Pezolet, my supervisor. The quality of this thesis is due to his countless comments, suggestions, and corrections. I am grateful for his expertise on religious art and practices which was especially helpful while working on the first section of my thesis. Dr. Pezolet taught me academic rigor and research methodology. I will carry his advice throughout my academic journey.

My gratitude also goes to Dr. Stowell, the reader of this thesis. His insightful comments and suggestions helped me to clarify my thoughts and my prose.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Mary Hunter, Associate Professor at McGill University, for her teaching on temporality and the arts from the end of the nineteenth century. The seminar I took with her in the Winter of 2020 was foundational to this thesis.

This research was made possible by the accessibility and support from the Musée d'Orsay's documentation centre. Thank you to the team of documentalists who helped me browse through an immense fund of documentation.

And finally, my gratitude goes to Julian for our rewarding discussions on time and for his meticulous proofreading. Je tiens également à remercier ma famille qui m'a tant soutenue par-delà l'océan Atlantique.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. THE TIME OF THE SPIRITUAL.....	8
II. THE TIME OF THE DECORATIVE	21
III. THE TIME OF MYTH	33
CONCLUSION	44
FIGURES	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY	53

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Maurice Denis, *Avril*, or *Les Anémones*, 1891, oil on canvas, private collection.

Figure 2. Maurice Denis, *Les Muses*, 1893, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 3. *Les Arbres verts*, or *Les hêtres de Kerduel*, 1893, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Figure 4. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Bois sacré cher aux arts et aux muses*, 1884-86, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 5. Suzuki Harunobu, *Hagi no tamagawa*, 1766-68, color woodcut, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Figure 6. Édouard Vuillard, *Causerie chez les Fontaine*, 1904, oil on panel, private collection.

INTRODUCTION

“We need the courage to resist our exacerbated sensibility, our public who wants artistic impressions executed in five minutes! and our dealers. Who knows if life would not appear longer, instead of seeming so desperately short; wouldn't the dimension of our works grow exponentially?”¹

In a *Diary* entry of 1898, Maurice Denis called upon his fellow painters to resist the public's appeal for “artistic impressions executed in five minutes.”² As a result, life would appear longer and the intensity of painting would grow exponentially. This statement contrasts with the fast-paced Impressionist paintings and implies a preference for an art that engages with slowness, if not stillness. Time thus appears to play a pivotal role in his art as both a reaction against Impressionism and as a reflection on the status of the work of art.

Denis was born in 1870 in Granville, in Normandy, where his middle-class family took refuge during the siege of Paris and the Commune.³ After the return of relative calm and political stability in the country with the establishment of the Third Republic, Denis grew up in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, in the suburbs of Paris, a once royal escape filled with an immense forest which bore an intimate significance for him throughout his life.⁴ At the Lycée Condorcet and the Académie Julian, a private art school, he met fellow artists who together founded the Nabis group, which gathered painters, sculptors and decorators between 1888 and

¹ Maurice Denis, *Journal, Tome I : « 1884-1904 »* (Paris: Éditions du Vieux Colombier, 1957), 130. “Il faudrait le courage de résister à notre sensibilité exacerbée, à notre public qui veut des impressions d'art en cinq minutes ! et à nos marchands. Qui sait si la vie n'en paraîtrait pas plus longue, au lieu de nous paraître si désespérément courte ; est-ce que la dimension de nos œuvres ne semblerait pas grandir ?” All English translations from French are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

² Ibid.

³ Thérèse Barruel, “Chronologie,” in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Guy Cogeval (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 356.

⁴ The first mention of the Saint-Germain-en-Laye forest appeared in his *Diary* on August 1st, 1885, in which entry he related his admiration for “[les] grands arbres crochus, tordus, grands, touffus, espacés, les uns jaunes, les autres verts, les autres gris.” Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 37.

1900.⁵ Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Paul Sérusier, Édouard Vuillard, and others met regularly to discuss matters of art and contemporary culture and organized exhibitions to showcase their avant-garde works. Each artist followed their individual route; Denis pursued the representation of mythical and spiritual scenes. Moreover, his peers recognized him as the group's theoretician.⁶ He extensively published articles in artistic magazines in which he proposed a new terminology for the art produced by his group, called “Neo-Traditionalism.” In the “Definition of Neo-Traditionalism” published under a pseudonym in the magazine *Art et Critique* in 1890, he formulated his notorious phrase: “Remember that a painting—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or an anecdote of some sort—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours, put together in a certain order.”⁷ While the formula is now celebrated as the first step toward the dissolution of form and content in painting, it is important to note that Denis never departed from the tradition of the figurative subject at the core of painting.⁸ His “Definition” is rooted in an attachment to various artistic landmarks and figures, such as ancient Greek temples, medieval churches, the Italian Primitives, the vault of the Sistine Chapel, and the art of Paul Gauguin. By creating a lineage along this multitude of emblems populating the canon of Western art history, Denis recognized in his “Definition” the value of the past and positioned himself as its inheritor.

In this thesis, I explore the temporal tension between modernity, religion, and tradition in three of Denis’ paintings, composed between 1891 and 1893: *April*, or *The Anemones* (1891, private collection), (Fig. 1) *The Muses* (1893, Orsay Museum), (Fig. 2), and *The Green*

⁵ Barruel, “Chronologie,” 356.

⁶ Jean-Paul Bouillon, “Le théoricien,” in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2006), 33.

⁷ Maurice Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionnisme,” *Art et Critique* (August 1890): 545. “Se rappeler qu’un tableau, avant d’être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue ou une quelconque anecdote, est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées.”

⁸ See: Richard Thomson and Belinda Thomson. “Maurice Denis’s ‘Définition du Néo-traditionnisme’ and Anti-Naturalism.” *The Burlington Magazine* 154, no. 1309 (April 2012): 260-267; Kerstin Thomas, “Maurice Denis et l’Exemple de Puvis de Chavannes: Vers une Nouvelle ‘Valeur Sentimentale’ dans l’Art,” *48/18 La Revue du Musée d’Orsay*, no. 23 (Fall 2006): 34-45.

Trees, or *Beech Trees in Kerduel* (1893, Orsay Museum) (Fig. 3). I have chosen these three paintings to unveil the temporal significations of trees and processions in Denis' art.

Moreover, accessibility was an important factor. I have admired *The Green Trees* and *The Muses* on the walls of the Orsay Museum in Paris a countless number of times and had the chance to discover *April* during an exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2020.⁹

All three paintings represent scenes set in forests or woods populated by ethereal figures engaged in processions along paths delimited amid the trees. I have chosen to name this natural setting "sacred groves." In the "Definition of Neo-Traditionalism," Denis defined his artistic practice as the "sanctification of nature." He wrote: "Art is the sanctification of nature, of that nature found in all the world, which contents itself to live."¹⁰ To Denis, art has the ability to make nature sacred. Denis' use of natural environments in his works, such as the woods and the forest, holds a particular meaning that goes beyond mere landscape painting. Denis' fascination with trees is part of a longer history. For example, in the study of Christian iconography, the tree, as a symbol of life, is commonly considered as the only living element that takes part in both the earthly world with its roots and trunk, and the celestial world with its foliage.¹¹ The term "sacred grove" is therefore fitting for naming this specific setting.

Sacred groves originate from Greek mythology and are the home of the nine muses of the arts

⁹ The exhibition "Signac and the Indépendants" displayed exceptional artworks loaned by a private collector. See the exhibition catalogue: Gilles Genty and Mary-Dailey Desmarais, eds., *Signac and the Indépendants* (Paris: Hazan, 2020).

¹⁰ Denis, "Définition du Néo-traditionnisme," 548. "L'Art est la sanctification de la nature, de cette nature de tout le monde, qui se contente de vivre!"

¹¹ The concept of the *arbor vitae* closely relates to this idea. See: Gaston Duchet-Suchaux and Michel Pastoureau, *La Bible et les Saints. Guide iconographique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 13. See also: Suzanna B. Simor, "The Tree of the Credo," *Analecta Husserliana* 66 (2000): 45. The sacred grove also appears in the Old Testament under the term "Asherah." "The Vulgate [...] understood Asherah to mean 'grove,' translating it as *lucus*," 'wood' or 'grove.'" It designates a place where the trees were worshipped. However, theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contested this interpretation. While some "equated Asherah with the goddess Astarte or her symbol," some claimed "that Asherah always denoted a wooden pole, but some others thought in terms of an image, a tree, or a phallic symbol." See: John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *The Society of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (September 1986): 397-398.

and sciences, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, led by the god Apollo. Religions since Antiquity have used the sacred grove as the holiest location of their faith.¹²

The subject of the woods in Denis' works is inspired by *The Sacred Grove, Beloved of the Arts and the Muses* that the artist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes painted in 1886 for the décor of Lyon's Fine Arts Museum's grand staircase.¹³ (Fig. 4) Denis repeatedly voiced his admiration for the painter throughout exhibitions of Puvis de Chavannes' works. Denis had the chance of discovering his study for Lyon's Fine Arts Museum at the Salons of 1884 and 1886, during the Universal Exhibition of 1889, and in an exhibition at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in 1887.¹⁴ Following this last exhibition, he wrote that he appreciated the painting's "calm and simple decorative aspect," its "enchancing harmonies of pale tones," "wise, grand and ethereal compositions," where originates this "soft and mysterious impression that calms and elevates."¹⁵ Denis borrowed these elements from *The Sacred Grove* and transposed them onto his three paintings. The similarities in terms of composition and setting are palpable: the trees punctuate the picture in a rhythm that echoes the position of the muses, monumental figures who blend in harmony with the surrounding nature. While Denis' paintings allow for contemporary signifiers such as the dresses in *April* and *The Muses* and the pieces of furniture in *The Muses*, Denis and Puvis de Chavannes both infused their scenes with stillness and timelessness rooted in the ancient Greek imaginary. Additionally, with the depiction of angels and veiled women, Denis instilled his paintings with a Christian dimension. The three

¹² Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abr. ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1922), 126. It is important to note the relevance of Frazer's anthropological research for Denis and his time. *The Golden Bough* is a historic source, and as such some of its analyses and factual content is outdated.

¹³ Thomas, "Maurice Denis et l'Exemple de Puvis de Chavannes," 41

¹⁴ Sylvie Patry, "Il y avait en Puvis de Chavannes l'étoffe d'un grand orateur chrétien," in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2006), 39.

¹⁵ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 42. Cited in Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Maurice Denis* (Geneva: Skira, 1993), 66. "J'ai trouvé très beau l'aspect décoratif, calme et simple de ces peintures : couleur murale admirable : il y a des harmonies merveilleuses de tons pâles. Les fonds sont très intéressants comme décoration : de tels fonds sont bien préférables aux fonds d'or de certaines fresques. La composition sage, grande, éthérée, m'étonne : elle doit être prodigieusement savante. C'est elle sans doute qui produit sur l'âme cette impression douce et mystérieuse qui repose et élève."

paintings from my corpus are filled with a spirituality that has meaning beyond the unraveling processions in the woods. While the locations represented exist—the Saint-Germain-en-Laye forest and woods near Kerduel, a hamlet in Brittany—the process of the sanctification of nature transports the locus of the woods and the forest into the realm of the spiritual “sacred grove.”

My approach is inspired by art historian Giovanni Careri’s concept of the revival of the work of art in the “Now-Time.”¹⁶ Careri has questioned the anachronism of certain elements from Caravaggio’s seventeenth-century painting *The Calling of Saint Matthew*. He concludes that the scene represented in the painting is active in the “Now-Time.”¹⁷ This means that it is revived in the viewer’s time and not exclusively limited to the “Then,” the temporality of the scene. Careri argues that “the interaction of times is being replayed by the viewer in a Now-Time that might belong to any moment in history.”¹⁸ Similarly, the three paintings from my corpus combine several temporal levels that engage with the “Then” and the “Now-Time,” at the end of the nineteenth century. The “Then” comprises of the elements Denis represented on canvas, the contemporary setting in the forests and woods, the references to myths and beliefs rooted in common imaginaries, and the intimate recollections from his own consciousness. In Denis’ case, the “Then” itself draws from various temporal sources and blurs the lines of time’s linearity.¹⁹ Furthermore, in the “Now-Time” of the nineteenth-century viewer, the works’ decorative and spiritual purposes revive the representations. In this context, “to revive” in the “Now-Time” means “to restore to a used state” and “to renew in the mind.”²⁰ As works meant to decorate modern interiors or to be

¹⁶ Giovanni Careri, “Heterochronies: The Gospel According to Caravaggio,” in *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, eds. Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey (New York: Routledge, 2018), 152.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ On the subject of linearity in literary and graphic arts, see: C.D. Keyes, “Art and Temporality,” *Research in Phenomenology* 1 (1971): 63-73.

²⁰ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, “revive,” accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revive>.

kept private for spiritual contemplation, their purpose is revived in the viewer's time, the "Now-Time." While every work of art is concerned with revival in time through the eyes of its contemporary viewers, Denis' paintings combine this revival with an ambiguous presence in other temporalities. Thus, my thesis questions the way revival functions with mythical times, how a work can connect private spaces with public and linear time, and how the decorative aspect, central to Maurice Denis' art, is articulated around the paintings' spiritual purpose.

My thesis also approaches the subject of the sacred grove and its temporalities through the scope of cultural history. Cultural history focuses on one period, the interconnectedness of its artifacts, attitudes, events, and how people at the time perceived and interpreted themselves.²¹ My thesis encompasses the many contextual aspects of the *fin de siècle* and ties them together to explore the meaning of the three paintings from the corpus. Time is the subject that allows me to understand the way Denis perceived and understood the historical period he lived in. Time is furthermore at the heart of the cultural historian's project: they "arrest time at one specific moment, most likely one particular stylistic period, and trace the gossamer threads through the complex knot they regard as the cultural configuration of the age."²² Art historian Michael Ann Holly argues that the temporal focus of the cultural historian is a synchronic one.²³ I combine the multi-layered temporalities from Denis' paintings and argue that they work together at the same speed to convey the representations of the sacred grove.

In my thesis, I argue that *April*, *The Muses* and *The Green Trees* are three paintings that synchronize multiple levels of temporality within them: spiritual, decorative, and

²¹ Alessandro Arcangeli, *Cultural History: A Concise Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 6.

²² Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 44.

²³ *Ibid.*

mythical. Temporal synchronicity is made possible by the subject of the sacred grove that ties these levels together and grants their homogeneity and integrity within the works.

The time of the spiritual is the first temporal level that I explore. Through the process of the sanctification of nature—a spiritual purpose that the painter embedded in the representations—Denis portrayed religion in multi-layered temporalities that are ideally located within the space of the sacred grove. With the mystical procession in *The Green Trees*, nature implements the time of the spiritual into the revived “Now-Time” of the viewer. *April*, on the other hand, demonstrates the way Denis viewed the cycle of spiritual life.

The decorative time is the subject of my second section. I argue that in the decorative, a prominent component of his works, Denis complicates the mere representation of groves to situate the scenes in temporalities outside of this setting. With the formal features of the groves in *The Muses*, Denis put his theories on the decorative into practice and transposed the grove onto the spatiotemporal level of the decorative. Moreover, in this painting, the decorative elements draw the scene into the temporality of the private through the transposition into a domestic interior. In *April*, the figures, following a defined choreography, evolve before a flat and decorative background that evokes the backdrop of a stage representation. The decorative transposes the procession outside the temporality of the scenes Denis represented.

My third section centers on the time of myth. I argue that in his representations of sacred groves, Denis located the scenes in the temporality of myth while maintaining strong links with the end of nineteenth century’s modern temporality. *April* is rooted in a collective imaginary that responds to a need from society at the time, while in *The Muses* Denis anchored his references within Greek mythology to reflect on his creative process. In *The Green Trees*, he presented an idiosyncratic vision of Breton myths embedded in the quest for a national primitivism.

I. THE TIME OF THE SPIRITUAL

Maurice Denis' "sanctification of nature"²⁴ is at the heart of his representations of sacred groves. This process transports the artworks into the realm of the spiritual by imbedding them with spiritual purpose. The paintings are not only decorative pieces for modern interiors; they are objects of spiritual contemplation. As such, the nature represented on canvas gains spiritual value. The sacred grove is the ideal location for this process and allows for the conception of multi-layered temporalities. In *The Green Trees*, (Fig. 3) the representation of a mystical procession in the woods mediates the revived "Now-Time" of the painting. In *April*, (Fig. 1) Denis' figures, wandering along the path of life, symbolize the way the artist considered the cycle of spiritual life.

It is important to first situate Denis' work in its specific historical and national contexts. The tense political climate in France at the end of the nineteenth century, especially surrounding the place of religion in the public sphere, stems from anticlericalism. Under the Third Republic, established in 1870, many liberal politicians expressed strong anticlerical views. Prime Minister Léon Gambetta and Minister of Public Instruction Jules Ferry put forward policies in favor of the secularization of the French Republic. They culminated in the Law Combes in 1904, prohibiting religious congregations to teach in schools, and in the Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State of 1905, instituting the secularism of the State. These policies targeted the school system and the management of Church properties to place them under the direct control of the Republic.²⁵ They received the approval of a large part of the population who had lost interest in the politics of the Roman Catholic Church. However, a spirit was arising against the expungement of the Catholic tradition. Moderate

²⁴ Maurice Denis, "Définition du Néo-traditionnisme," 548.

²⁵ Jean Leduc, *L'Enracinement de la République : 1879 – 1918* (Paris: Hachette Éducation, 2014), 31-32.

Republicans capitalized on the situation and sought the support from Conservative politicians. A new political class emanated with the State's secularization achievements and united a portion of moderate Republicans, conservative defenders of the Catholic Church, and right-wing Monarchists.²⁶ The coalition earned acceptability and soon found its way in the National Assembly, due in part to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Au milieu des sollicitudes* (1893). The Pope encouraged the acceptance of Republican institutions to better fight against anti-clericalism. The political climate of the time with regards to religion led to an increase of Christian iconographies in the arts at the turn of the century, as a response to the fight unfolding during the period.²⁷

Maurice Denis' involvement in this climate was more religious and intellectual than purely political. His faith extended beyond the realm of the private to infuse most of his art, as he proved in an early *Diary* entry of 1886: "Painting is an art that is essentially religious and Christian. If this character is lost in our unholy period, it must be found again."²⁸ At the beginning of the twentieth century, the artist started to follow Charles Maurras' Action Française, a nationalist and royalist political movement. He joined the movement in favor of his faith and his strong link with the imaginary of a traditional society, "harking back to an idealized pre-revolutionary society rooted in mutuality and organic, craft-based communities,"²⁹ as opposed to "the dizzying whirlwind of modern life."³⁰ With the political climate following the Dreyfus affair, Denis was further inclined to join the far-right movement. His coverage of the affair in his *Diary*, however, focused on a psychological and

²⁶ Kenneth E. Silver, "New Spirits and Sacred Springs: Modern Art in France at the Turn of the Century," in *Voyage Into Myth: French Painting from Gauguin to Matisse from the Hermitage Museum, Russia*, eds. Nathalie Bondil and Francine Lavoie (Paris: Hazan/Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2002), 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 62. "La peinture est un art essentiellement religieux et chrétien. Si ce caractère s'est perdu dans notre siècle impie, il faut le retrouver."

²⁹ June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam, "Introduction," in *Nationalism and French Visual Culture, 1870-1914*, eds. June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 11.

³⁰ Edouard Drumont, *Mon vieux Paris* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 1878). Cited in Hargrove and McWilliam, "Introduction," 11.

metaphorical reading and did not let through any antisemitic allegation.³¹ As such, Denis' involvement with the politics of the time remained largely hidden behind his aspirations as an artist.

The strategies of secularization during the second half of the nineteenth century enhanced the individual practice of the Catholic faith and led to a particular current of mysticism.³² Mysticism allows to approach the mysteries of existence, to experiment self-renunciation and the unity between nature and the cosmos.³³ One searched the answers to the mysteries of life and faith on an individual level rather than relying solely on the dictate of the religious institutions. Theologian and philosopher Michel Despland sees during the second half of the nineteenth century a practice of religion that was anchored in modern times, whose focus on individuality and intimacy favored religious autobiographical writings.³⁴ He asserts that the “religious experience in the nineteenth century is more overtly anchored within the life of the subject.”³⁵ Furthermore, the specific political and cultural context of the *fin-de-siècle* led to a “reactionary” type of mysticism.³⁶ According to literary scholar Robert Ziegler, *fin-de-siècle* mystics substantially opposed “Auguste Comte’s Positivist assertion of mankind’s progress toward scientific enlightenment” in order to gain knowledge “obtainable only from divine sources, insights that were yielded only by non-rational intuition.”³⁷ While authors and critics such as Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly and Joris-Karl Huysmans revisited the writings of canonical mystics Teresa of Ávila and Angela of Foligno,³⁸ contemporary mystics

³¹ Jean-Paul Bouillon, “Politique de Denis,” in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Guy Cogeval (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 99.

³² Guy Cogeval, “Haute Solitude,” in *Au-delà des étoiles: Le paysage mystique de Monet à Kandinsky*, ed. Guy Cogeval (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux/Grand Palais, 2017), 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ Michel Despland, “L’expérience religieuse au XIXe siècle : II. La vie représentée et les deux types de modernité,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 51, no. 1 (February 1995): 157.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁶ Lydie Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” in *Crises de vers*, eds. Maire Blaise and Alain Vaillant (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2000), 289.

³⁷ Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 116.

³⁸ Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” 279.

emerged during the period. Eugène Vintras, who claimed he received visits of saint Michael the archangel and was the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, professed for a heterodoxy that connected the worshipper directly to God without the sanction of the Church.³⁹ Following his Order of Mercy, some *fin-de-siècle* Decadents, “wishing to reformulate an Eternal Gospel delivered to them directly, [...] were resolved to heed, not the pronouncements of the Vatican, but the voice of Christ himself.”⁴⁰ Vintras’ mysticism also merged with eschatological beliefs, seeing in the period the “signs of the world’s end [...] found in the triumph of capitalism over faith, in the decay of morals, in the institutional corruption of the Church.”⁴¹ This example of extreme heterodoxy does not necessarily apply to all the proponents of mysticism during the period, but illuminates how religion took a turn toward the individual and the intimate as opposed to an orthodox and doctrinal practice of faith.

Mysticism, as an inexpressible experience,⁴² was favored by artists and writers during the period. Joséphin Péladan, writer and mystic, bridged the literary and artistic circles with his Rosicrucian Salon that he opened in 1890 to present the works of Symbolist artists.⁴³ Undoubtedly, this trend of mysticism enlarged the visionary power of the artist. While Despland considers God, in this context, as “imagination’s regulator,”⁴⁴ literary scholar Lydie Parisse analyzes in the period a redefinition of the artist’s status in a materialist society.⁴⁵ Mysticism, she argues, allows for the “expansion of artistic perception and creative possibilities” by disrupting society’s order and materialism.⁴⁶ This trend of mysticism seduced

³⁹ Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France*, 119

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 137.

⁴² Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” 281.

⁴³ Maurice Denis always refused to display his works in the Salon due to his distance from the “soul painters” or allegorical painters. Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Maurice Denis. Le Spirituel dans l’Art* (Paris: Gallimard; Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2006), 31. On the subject of the “soul painters” and idealist Symbolism, see: Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, *Les Peintres de l’âme. Le Symbolisme idéaliste en France* (Antwerp: Pandora, 1999).

⁴⁴ Despland, “L’expérience religieuse au XIXe siècle,” 158.

⁴⁵ Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” 276

⁴⁶ Ibid., 290.

many artists in pursuit of a renewed spiritual art.⁴⁷ The artists, sensible to the constructions and the harmony of nature, could access the world's beauty and its truth via the device of the work of art.

The Absolute in *The Green Trees* entails the attainment of pure and unconditional faith in God.⁴⁸ I argue that *The Green Trees* represents the mystical quest of the Absolute through the process of initiation, close to Denis' personal experience. In Latin, *mysticus* stands for the "initiated."⁴⁹ Although profoundly Catholic, the mystical current of the period infiltrated Denis' faith and art. Denis mentioned the mystical influence that instilled his faith at that time in a reflective recollection in 1909 in the magazine *L'Occident*: "Our [the Nabis] aspirations to mysticism were not, to tell the truth, always orthodox."⁵⁰ The procession in *The Green Trees* encapsulates the mystical meaning of the scene. I further argue that the procession in the woods depicted in *The Green Trees* symbolizes this quest after which an isolated figure, the initiated one, distinguishes herself from the others and joins the angel, through whom she can attain the Absolute.⁵¹ The procession leading to the Absolute, through the angel, calls for several interpretations which Denis combined all together.

Firstly, the procession is the spiritual journey through devotion, after which the isolated woman at the center of the composition can finally attain the Absolute. Since

⁴⁷ Katharine Lochnan, "Introduction : « Là où l'univers chante », Le paysage mystique des années 1880 aux années 1930," in *Au-delà des étoiles: Le paysage mystique de Monet à Kandinsky*, ed. Guy Cogeval (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux/Grand Palais, 2017), 24. Furthermore, it is important to note that the influence of Asian religions (such as Buddhism and Hinduism) permeated mysticism in a variety of ways, notably leading to the fascination for esoteric principles. The esoteric teachings of the Theosophical Society influenced the Nabis group's beliefs, as manifested by the peculiar liturgy and rites that the group members took part in during their gatherings. See: George Mauner, "The Nature of Nabi Symbolism," *Art Journal* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1963-1964): 99.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Maurice Denis, "De Gauguin et de Van Gogh au classicisme," *L'Occident* (May 1909): 187-202. Cited in Maurice Denis, *Le Ciel et l'Arcadie*, ed. Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris: Hermann, 1993), 172. "Nos aspirations au mysticisme n'étaient pas, à la vérité, toujours très orthodoxes."

⁵¹ This interpretation is also shared by the iconographical file of *The Green Trees* from Orsay Museum's documentation centre. The iconographical file gathers iconography and curatorial commentary on the artworks from the museum's collection. Musée d'Orsay, "Maurice Denis, *Paysage aux arbres verts* ou *Les Hêtres de Kerduel*." RF 2001 8, Iconographical file, Orsay Museum, Paris.

childhood, processions of young women inspired Denis. They were either communicants about to receive Holy Communion, or partaking in a religious ceremony, for instance in the honor of the Virgin Mary. They are a recurring subject in Denis' oeuvre. However, the figures in *The Green Trees* are completely deindividualized. A clue as to where this fascination started can be found in his *Diary*, where he wrote in 1884, after watching a procession for the Virgin in celebration of the Assumption: "Procession of young girls for the Virgin; these children of Mary are charming with their white veils: candor, modesty, angels."⁵² Since the age of fourteen, Denis reiterated his obsession for the theme of processions on canvas, which he meshed with a mystical spirit.

Secondly, the procession symbolizes the path towards artistic creation. Denis portrayed the religious ideal the Christian artist aspires to reach. Following her spiritual journey, the isolated figure reaches the Absolute in faith, a goal Denis, as a deeply devout Christian painter, was aspiring to reach himself.⁵³ His model was Fra Angelico, whose level of sanctity he continually aspired to attain. He worshipped him as a saint, thought about writing his biography,⁵⁴ requested his beatification⁵⁵ and painted a pseudo relic of his head.⁵⁶ Denis considered the *Coronation of the Virgin* as the absolute masterwork in the Louvre,⁵⁷ and dreamed of dedicating his first painting presented at the Official Salon to him.⁵⁸ He admired the painter's profound faith as much as his works, from which he borrowed several formal features, namely the box-like composition and the division of the composition into defined sections which each corresponds to a secular or sacred space. By embracing Fra

⁵² Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 16. "Procession des jeunes filles de la Vierge ; c'est charmant, ces enfants de Marie avec ces voiles blancs : c'est la candeur, la modestie, les anges."

⁵³ Musée d'Orsay, "Maurice Denis, *Paysage aux arbres verts* ou *Les Hêtres de Kerduel*." RF 2001 8, Iconographical file, Orsay Museum, Paris.

⁵⁴ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 53.

⁵⁵ Pronounced by Pope John Paul II in 1982. Office of Papal Liturgical Celebrations, "Beatifications by Pope John Paul II, 1979-2000," vatica.ca, last accessed July 1st, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_list_blesseds-jp-ii_en.html.

⁵⁶ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 40.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

Angelico's legacy, as manifested in this representation of the spiritual journey toward the Absolute in faith, Denis materialized his ambition of becoming a Christian painter.

Thirdly, I consider the isolated figure as representing a newly married woman. Allegorically, absolute faith holds the potential to be attained through the sacrament of marriage. This last interpretation has a personal meaning for Denis. He painted *The Green Trees* during his honeymoon in Brittany after his wedding with Marthe Meurier, a woman he adored in an almost religious way. From their engagement earlier in the year 1893, she became his ultimate muse, the main subject of his paintings, and his main source of inspiration.^{59 60}

Denis intertwined these three interpretations (the spiritual journey, artistic creation, and marriage) in *The Green Trees*. They all entail a spiritual and personal signification through the mystical quest, the idea of the initiated one, and the attainment of absolute faith. The sacred grove, through which the procession is taking place, accentuates the spirituality of this journey towards faith.

Denis elevated the grove to the level of a "metaphysical sanctuary"⁶¹ that hosts the subjects of revelation and election in the course of a mystical meeting.⁶² The seven women are dressed in pink veils and what can be described as vestments, which add to the spiritual meaning of the scene. While the pink color is traditionally worn by the clergy during Gaudete Sunday in Advent and Laetare Sunday in Lent to bring a sense of joy during a season of

⁵⁹ This interpretation was brought forth by Jean-Paul Bouillon *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)* (Geneva: Skira, 1993), 48, and Ursula Perucchi-Petri, "Maurice Denis," in *Nabis. Bonnard, Vuillard, Maurice Denis, Vallotton. (1888-1900)*, eds. Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perucchi-Petri (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1993), 36.

⁶⁰ Additionally, the image of Jesus as the groom and the Church as his bride is recurrent in the Bible (for instance, see: Eph. 5:22-33; 2 Cor. 11:2-4). This analogy could have influenced Denis in his religious portrayals of brides.

⁶¹ Gilles Genty, "The Muses in the Woods: The Symbolist Forest as a Place for Revelation," *Le Serment des Horaces, International Art Review* 3 (Fall 1989-Winter 1990): 124.

⁶² Guy Cogeval, ed., *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, 151.

penance,⁶³ Denis might have used this color solely for a decorative purpose to complement the green of the trees. The trees punctuate the procession, dividing the group into two clusters of four and two figures. The initiated woman leading the procession stands at the center of the composition. The background on which the figures are painted consists of further woods, making a clear distinction between the earth and the sky, the location of the holy. The hedge which passes between the angel and the leading figure serves the symbolic function of a delimitation between the secular world and the sacred realm. This spatial distinction adds to the distinction between the earth, populated by the trees and the angel created by God, and the heavenly realm of the sky that God only can access. Not even the angel's silhouette stands against the sky. Only the trees, rooted in the ground and raising to God, make the spatial connection between these two realms.

Denis crystallized *The Green Trees* into eternity, not only by the mere act of applying pigments on canvas to form a perennial narrative object, but also by the process of the sanctification of nature. As mentioned before, this process emerged in Denis' "Definition of Neo-Traditionalism" published in 1890. A year earlier, in his *Diary*, Denis included the first reference to the sanctification of nature: "I believe that Art ought to sanctify nature; I believe that Vision without Spirit is vain; and that it is the aesthete's mission do erect beautiful things into unfading icons."⁶⁴ The passage includes a temporal reference to the process of sanctification making objects permanent. Through it, Denis turned *The Green Trees* into a spiritual object that holds even more enduring value than a regular painting. Nature, too, holds a deeper spiritual meaning than the one embedded in the sole representation of the mystical scene. Nature reinforces its spiritual force by becoming an everlasting power on canvas. By

⁶³ Catholic Church, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (Washington: Office of Pub. Services, United States Catholic Conference), no. 346.

⁶⁴ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 36. "Je crois que l'Art doit sanctifier la nature ; je crois que la Vision sans l'Esprit est vaine ; et que c'est la mission de l'esthète d'ériger les choses belles en immarcescibles icônes."

sanctifying nature, Denis presents the painting with a temporal potential that expands beyond the restrictions of the subject.

The sanctification of nature pushes further the temporality in *The Green Trees*. This process locates the scene into Denis' time. Denis revived the purpose of *The Green Trees*, a spiritual object, every time he contemplated its spiritual meaning, as the painting invited him to engage in contemplative prayer. Denis kept this work close to him his entire life. It stayed in his house in Saint-Germain-en-Laye from 1893 until his death in 1943. His son stated that *The Green Trees* was the painting which Denis was the most deeply attached to and that it represented a synthesis of his life and aesthetic.⁶⁵ Its symbolism revolves around his own marital and artistic ambition. Therefore, the painter himself regularly revived and renewed the purpose of the painting by contemplating this initiatory quest. As stated previously, this complexifies the temporality of the work. Denis revived the aura of the work every time he used it as a spiritual object, while the sacred space that is represented is located beyond the tangibility of Denis' world. Maurice Denis scholar Jean-Paul Bouillon stated that "the icon has a theoretical dimension that ensures its immutability, inscribing in the visible the essence of the invisible, love, and faith."⁶⁶ I do not necessarily agree with the assumption that a painting such as *The Green Trees* is a traditional Christian icon, hence I would rather call it a spiritual painting that leads to religious contemplation. However, Bouillon's mention of a sense of permanence in the painting's materiality as well as in the representation of the essence of things that are represented reinforces that idea of the spiritual image's everlasting time. At this stage, I can assert that with regards to temporality, *The Green Trees*, as a spiritual painting, is as much embedded in the time of the spiritual as it is in the "Now-Time" of the late nineteenth century.

⁶⁵ Musée d'Orsay, "Maurice Denis, *Paysage aux arbres verts* ou *Les Hêtres de Kerduel*." RF 2001 8, Iconographical file, Orsay Museum, Paris.

⁶⁶ Bouillon, *Maurice Denis. Le Spirituel dans l'Art*, 36.

In Denis' sacred groves, and especially in *April*, time additionally materializes in the representation of the cycle of life. With marital symbolism close to Denis' heart, *April* portrays the sacred grove populated by four figures walking or halting along paths that meander between the trees. The figures, I argue, are representations of the same individual on different stages in her life. Denis bends linear time to represent the same figure several times as she progresses through the spiritual path of life.

The young woman in the foreground, positioned at the beginning of the path as it crosses the canvas, is a newly engaged woman. She is bent over and picking up anemones which she gathers in a bouquet in her right hand. She is dressed in a contemporary fur-lined cloak and wears the traditional engagement tiara on her head.⁶⁷ Below her, near the edge of the painting, rises a thorn bush, symbolizing the thorns of evil that she managed to avoid during her youth on her way to betrothal.⁶⁸ She stayed pure and chaste despite the temptations. Above her on the path a shrub counterbalances the thorn bush's evil forces; the shrub, newly planted, enclosing future blooms, is the young betrothed's natural counterpart, and represents the good that she relied on her path to marriage. The shrub, at the center of the composition and its signification, announces the growing bliss in faith and love.⁶⁹

Backwards along the path, a newly married woman dressed in a white gown signifies the second stage of the spiritual life. She replicates the position of the young betrothed in the foreground. Kneeling, she too is picking up anemones. In the absence of an anemone bouquet in her hands, she is bending her right arm toward her chest, as if she were touching her heart. A circular shape envelops the newly married woman's silhouette, positioned between the shrub's branches with perspectival effect. Her face and hands matching the orange taint of the

⁶⁷ See Thérèse Barruel's analysis of Denis' *Figures dans un paysage de printemps* which shares a similar iconography to *April*. Thérèse Barruel, "Le bonheur classique," in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Guy Cogeval (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 240.

⁶⁸ Fabienne Stahl, "*Avril (Les Anémones)*," in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2006), 134.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

shrub, she appears with her gown to be a new white bloom growing on the shrub, finally growing to be a woman of faith in marriage. The act of picking up flowers evokes the bride's flower bouquet on her wedding day. Her bright green eyes and the strokes of green on her gown show how she is blending into the sacred grove's natural landscape, whereas the young betrothed woman in the foreground, with her brown cloak, merges with the path itself. The evolution between the two women is that of the faith the married woman dedicated her life for, in the act of marriage. While the young betrothed has only recently arrived on the path of spiritual life, brave survivor of the thorn bush of temptations, the married woman is a fruit of the shrub of faith and love.

The spiritual path then leads to two walking figures in the background. The couple, dressed in black overcoats and hats, holds an umbrella and progresses leftward on a path that is not as clear and notable as the one presented with the two young women along it. This couple, assuming that it is apparently constituted by a woman and a man, is the married couple that has resulted from the betrothal and the marriage of the two previous figures. The woman, central character of *April*, has now fully entered her married life. Her figure merges with her husband's by way of their black attire, and the shared umbrella that encloses both their heads signifies their belonging to a single household. Faith has fully united them in their spiritual journey and they now wander along the path of life jointly. However, a sinister connotation looms over the pair. Dressed in black, turned not to the right as the two previous women are but to the left, they follow a direction that is not identical from the previous stages of life. They are now heading toward the end of their lives, toward the left side of the painting where only the sky is visible in the background. Denis situated the sky, of a dusk color between orange and pink, above a dark mass of trees. Therefore, the aging couple is heading toward the dusk of their lives already peaking in the distance before they embark on their eternal life together. Painted during the early days of his relationship with Meurier, *April*

introduces the symbolism of matrimony, a subject he continued to paint throughout his career.

April's time is not only linear, but also sequential. The main character of the painting, the woman in the foreground, follows the journey of spiritual life that starts with her betrothal and slowly leads to marriage. Denis then portrayed her at the turning point of aging where, indissociable from her husband, she is heading to another stage of her spiritual life upon her death. However, Denis chose to encapsulate this linearity of life into three specific temporal points, one of which is marriage, one of the Seven Sacraments. The Catholic Church agreed on the definition and the number of sacraments during the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. The Council stated that through the sacraments "all true justice either begins, or being begun is increased, or being lost is repaired."⁷⁰ The chronology of some of the sacraments parallels the stages of natural life.⁷¹ The sacraments are points in time which divide the Christian's life into defined moments that connect them closer to their faith. The figure in *April* embodies each moment and its spiritual signification in the painting. She is seen growing older and older, as her attire evolves to accommodate the stages of life. Only the path itself remains as a marker of the linearity of life.

Denis gave no indication regarding the identity of the woman represented thrice—nor did he for her husband. She is faceless, deindividualized. Her only characteristics are her clothing, her position, bent over, and her demeanor walking alongside her husband. These traits do not relate to any sort of individuality. They are rather what Denis could think of as the prerequisites for a spiritual life. Denis did not represent a particular woman as she enters the different stages of her spirituality; he represented womanhood along its spiritual journey. He did not only represent the linear life of a woman, but the ever-going process of life that cyclically and endlessly runs. This woman solely exists in the painter's imagination and the

⁷⁰ J. Waterworth, ed. and trans., *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Œcumenical Council of Trent* (London: Dolman, 1848), 53.

⁷¹ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, date missing), 1210-1211.

canvas where her role is to offer a didactic model encapsulating the spirituality one must follow on the journey of life. The thorn bush, the anemones, and the shrub signify what one should tend to or avoid, and the trees serve as the spiritual foundation of this contemplative work in which Denis sanctified nature. In *April*, the grove, populated by its “soul figures,” shows the way Denis viewed the cycle of spiritual life.

The painter, in *April* and *The Green Trees*, through the process of the sanctification of nature, portrayed religion in a multi-layered temporal manner that is ideally located within the space of the sacred grove. As a Christian painter, Denis located religion in the “Now-Time” and in a sequential vision of time. Thus, various temporal levels draw their force from the sacred grove.

II. THE TIME OF THE DECORATIVE

The decorative is a prominent component of Maurice Denis' paintings during his Nabis period. The formal elements of the compositions make his paintings decorative pieces intended to adorn modern interiors. In *The Muses*, (Fig. 2) Denis formally used the sacred grove as a constitutive part of the decorative. This results in a spatiotemporal level in which the formal elements of the painting acquire meaning in their own right. Moreover, in this painting, the decorative elements draw the scene into the temporality of the private through the transposition into a domestic interior. Finally, in *April*, (Fig. 1) the plane of the representation recalls the backdrop of a symbolic theater stage where the figures evolve in a defined choreography. With this, Denis complicated the subject of groves and created new temporalities in the representations.

The decorative—a work's formal elements in connection with its purpose to ornament—is at the center of the Nabis' art. The artists placed themselves under Paul Gauguin's guidance, whom some had met in person and previously worked with, while others, such as Denis, only knew from the 1889 exhibition of his works at the Café Volpini. Denis commented about the Café Volpini exhibitions: "What an amazement (...) Instead of windows open to nature, such as in impressionist paintings, these were highly decorated surfaces, heavily colored, and contoured with a sharp line."⁷² The *cloisonnisme* style was a central formal feature of Nabis paintings and drawings, as was the particular interest for decorative elements inspired by Japanese woodblock prints. As noted by art historian Laura Auricchio: "Their works celebrate pattern and ornament, challenge the boundaries that divide

⁷² Cited in Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Maurice Denis* (Geneva: Skira, 1993), 17. "Quel éblouissement d'abord, et ensuite quelle révélation ! Au lieu de fenêtres ouvertes sur la nature, comme les tableaux des impressionnistes, c'étaient des surfaces lourdement décoratives, puissamment colorées, et cernées d'un trait brutal, cloisonnées, car on parlait aussi, à ce propos, de *cloisonnisme*, et encore de *japonisme*."

fine arts from crafts, and [...] complement the interiors for which they were commissioned.”⁷³

The group considered Paul Sérusier’s painting *The Talisman* as their relic and visual manifesto. It embodied the decorative purpose, the flatness and the vibration of the colors established as the Nabis’ formal canon.⁷⁴

The trees and their environment offer Denis the suitable subject to put his theories on the decorative into practice. In a *Diary* entry from 1885, Denis described one of his excursions into the Saint-Germain-en-Laye forest with an emphasis on the decorative aspect of the trees: “I am reaching a delightful part of the forest where there are tall and crooked trees, twisted, bushy, disposed apart, some yellow, some green, others grey. To an artist’s eye, this is so beautiful one could feel faint, but we ought to study it with a brush in hand, to render the effects of the sun, the light, the *plein air*, the shadows, the chiaroscuro.”⁷⁵ In this early example, Denis was already interested in rendering the forest’s decorative effects on canvas. The decorative is at the heart of his first artistic period and is one of the main subjects he theorized about. In his “Preface to the 9th Exhibition of Impressionist and Symbolist Painters” of 1895, Denis reiterated the celebrated phrase from the “Definition of Neo-Traditionalism” of 1890 concerning the flatness of the surface with colors assembled in a certain order, and added that this order aimed at “the pleasures of the eyes.”⁷⁶ Thus, for the purpose of delighting the viewer, the structural elements of the flat canvas and the white surface on which colors will be compiled to form an intelligible representation compose the decorative.

⁷³ Laura Auricchio, “The Nabis and Decorative Painting,” The Metropolitan Museum, published October 2004, last accessed May 15th, 2021, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dcpt/hd_dcpt.htm.

⁷⁴ Claire Frèches-Thory, “Constitution du groupe,” in *Nabis. Bonnard, Vuillard, Maurice Denis, Vallotton... (1888-1900)*, eds. Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perucchi-Petri (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1993), 13.

⁷⁵ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 37. “J’arrive à une délicieuse partie de la forêt où il y a de grands arbres crochus, tordus, grands, touffus, espacés, les uns jaunes, les autres verts, les autres gris. Pour un œil d’artiste, c’est beau à se trouver mal, mais il faudrait étudier cela au pinceau, rendre les effets de soleil, de lumière, de plein air, d’ombre, de clair-obscur.”

⁷⁶ Maurice Denis, “Préface de la IX^e exposition des Peintres impressionnistes et symbolistes,” 26.

In *The Muses*, Denis made use of the formal elements of the grove to offer a decorative scene. I argue that the formal elements, which comprise the decorative, acquire meaning of their own on a metaphorical spatiotemporal level. To the viewer in the Now-Time who contemplates the formal elements, they appear in their own distinct temporality. The formal elements do not gain full autonomy from the subject. However, while they are still connected to the subject of the scene, Denis granted them substantial significance.⁷⁷ Since the formal elements evolve in their own spatiality, they acquire a temporality that is separate from the subject of the scene. Both fuel each other and bond with one another, however they operate on different levels. While the temporality of the subject in *The Muses* comprises of the time of the action represented, the temporality of the formal elements and the decorative works with spatiality. On the spatiotemporal level of the decorative, the formal elements evolve over the space of the canvas, a “flat surface covered with colours, put together in a certain order.”⁷⁸ They create meaning through the way Denis used lines, colors, and forms. Thus, the decorative has its own temporality that is embedded into the spatiality of the canvas.

The Muses represents the nine muses of the arts and sciences, joined by a tenth one in the background, sitting leisurely on chairs in the foreground or wandering amid the trees of the sacred grove. The entirety of the painting’s formal elements falls within the decorative. Denis first exhibited it in 1893 under the name “Panneau décoratif” after its commission by Arthur Fontaine, a senior bureaucrat in the French government, and one of the Nabis’ wealthy patrons.⁷⁹ Many devices convey the decorative in the painting. Instead of a representation in traditional perspective, Denis opted for the horizontal stacking of the composition’s planes,

⁷⁷ Denis’ “Definition of Neo-Traditionalism” corroborates my argument. The phrase “Remember that a painting—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or an anecdote of some sort—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours, put together in a certain order” emphasizes the formal elements of the decorative as a separate entity in a painting. Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionnisme,” 545.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jane Kinsman, “*The Muses (Les Muses)*,” in *Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Beyond: Post-Impressionist Masterpieces from the Musée d’Orsay*, eds. Stéphane Guégan and Sylvia Patry (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco/New York: Prestel, 2010), 107.

thus enhancing its flatness. The figures' silhouettes, despite shrinking in the background for an illusion of depth, nonetheless seem that they have been pasted onto the canvas' flat surface. The forest's ground rising from the foreground to the background in an even way up to the horizon line over the top half of the painting intensifies this impression. Denis contoured the silhouettes and all the elements with a dark line that distinguishes the forms from one another. The viewer is drawn to consider them as single forms pasted on a background, rather than mimetic figures realistically placed in a surrounding environment. The monumentality of the figures in the foreground participates in troubling the composition. Since they are the only three figures whose silhouettes are entirely outlined on the forest's ground—the others partly emerge on the sky in the background—they are visually processed as a unified group that set them aside. Moreover, in the foreground, over the forest's ground, there is no room for blank spaces or gaps. Smooth coats of paint cover every inch, reinforcing the decorative aspect of the work as Denis did not modulate the representation with variations of strokes or thickness. All these elements participate in making the decorative a subject of its own in the painting.

The influence of Japanese woodblock prints infuses the decorative in *The Muses*.⁸⁰ The arabesque, the sinuous line found in the patterns of the muses' dresses, their folds and in the trees' foliage, is a typical motif of *ukiyo-e* prints from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.⁸¹ The arabesque is central to Denis' visual language as he favoured it instead of traditional and mimetic forms in the representations of nature. To Denis, the arabesque reproduces the movement and the sentiments of the interior self.⁸² It becomes an autonomous visual device that bears meaning of its own. The folds of the muses' dresses resemble the

⁸⁰ The influence of Japanese decorative arts and prints triumphed in Europe with the international exhibitions held in London in 1862 and in Paris in 1876, 1878, and 1889. It started in the 1850s with the trade agreements between Japan and Western countries that allowed the exportation of Japanese goods after two centuries of isolation. On the history and the characteristic of Japonisme in Western art, see: Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western art since 1858* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1981).

⁸¹ Ursula Perucchi-Petri, "Maurice Denis et le Japon," *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 4 (1982), 261.

⁸² *Ibid.*

folds of the kimonos in Suzuki Harunobu's print *Bushclover at Tamagawa* created around 1765, showing the embrace of two women on the banks of the Tama River. (Fig. 5) In Harunobu's art, representations of folds on fabric are a form of expression that characterizes the character's emotion.⁸³ The undulating hem at the bottom of the kimono worn by the woman in the foreground recreates the character's internal feelings in the print. Denis replicated the same motif in *The Muses* on the dress worn by the woman on the right in the foreground, and at the bottom of the black dress on the far left. Moreover, the merging of the figures in Denis' paintings is an evocation of Harunobu's print. The two characters, standing next to each other, are bending forward in a comparable manner, the fabrics of their kimonos indissociable and their hand gestures impossible to attribute to one or the other. The mirroring of the same gesture has the effect of intensifying the expressivity of the print as well as the unity of the two figures.⁸⁴ Denis made use of a similar decorative motif in *The Muses*: the figures are not merged together as in Harunobu's print, however the positions of their bodies echo one another. The muse on the far left, dressed in black, parallels the head's position of the muse in black in the foreground. Similarly, the muse turning her back at the viewer in the foreground echoes, with the position of her head, the muse across her standing more deeply into the woods. The repetition of the movements and poses, as well as the expressive folds of the dresses worn by the muses is a direct reference to Harunobu's print, presumably displayed in 1890 at the Exhibition of Japanese woodblock prints at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Denis was known to be an avid collector of Japanese prints,⁸⁵ and it seems probable that he visited this exhibition and directly took his inspiration from the decorative motifs of Harunobu's *Bushclover at Tamagawa*.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 264.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 260.

The line as a stylistic element is central to *The Muses* and is critical to promote the subject of the sacred grove as the vector for the decorative. Additionally, the line participates in making the decorative a subject of its own in the painting. The decorative line plays a role in unifying the entire picture and uses the formal features of the sacred grove and its muses to achieve the purpose of this “Decorative panel:” the graphic and sinuous line Denis reiterated throughout the picture creates the visual association between the muses and the forest. *The Muses* was painted in the midst of the Art Nouveau taste which was spreading in the decorative arts across Europe since 1890. Art Nouveau found in the association between nature and the female body its highest form of decorative.⁸⁶ It is the decorative line that conveys this association. The sinuous forms carved in the foliage of the trees onto the sky on the upper half of the painting resemble the patterns on the muses’ dresses in the foreground. These forms, comparable to the fabric, play with the positive-negative effect of the colors: the leaves create patterns in their aggregation on the trees. On the sky, the space made by these patterns’ silhouettes outlines the sinuous forms. This decorative device is used on the fabric of the dresses: the pattern on the collar of the dress worn by the muse on the left in the foreground is easily understandable as yellow arabesques arranged on a red background. However, down the arms and the bust, the red of the dress becomes less legible: it recreates patterns of flower petals and arabesques. The muse’s dress is a copy of a natural effect that Denis must have witnessed himself when examining the decorative presence in nature. The positive-negative device can also be found on the forest ground and its bed of leaves. Alternating between red and orange—similar colors to the dresses—the ground complicates the distinction of the leaves that fell on it.

A second example of the association between the muses and nature is situated around the verticality of the trees. The trees, sparsely arranged in the picture, delimitate specific areas

⁸⁶ See: Jan Thompson, “The Role of Women in the Iconography of Art Nouveau,” *Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (Winter 1971-1972): 158-167.

for the position of the muses who congregate around them in clusters of two or three. The two muses on the left side of the painting, dressed in black and brown gowns, parallel the two trees that surround them through the verticality of their silhouettes and their consistent broadness from the shoulders down to the feet. Moreover, the tree trunks' irregularities and surface bumps are mirrored by the dresses' movements in their folds. The brown gown's train, touching the ground in the back, is extremely similar to the roots of the tree on its right side. Similarly, these elements approach the ground vertically to gradually grow horizontally upon reaching it. Furthermore, the pale hand and fingers, emerging on the black gown worn by the muse of the left, outline a circular form that resembles the knot on the lower level of the tree trunk, in the foreground. Thus, the formal features of the grove in *The Muses*—the trunks, the leaves, the ground—allow Denis to put his theories on the decorative into practice. The decorative brings forth a spatiotemporality in the painting that entangles the subject of the muses in the woods, as well as the formal features which have become subjects in their own right in the representation.

It is also worth noting that, in the second half of the century, there emerged a plurality of theories of time and space that challenged the establishment of the universal public time that the International Meridian Conference established in 1884 in Washington. The idea of a private time distinct from the public time culminated in the work of Henri Bergson who questioned whether the fixed public time “was really time at all” or some metaphysical interloper that disguised a multitude of times.⁸⁷ Thus, two conceptions of time opposed one another during the period: the short time inherent to the modern world, and the long time, the

⁸⁷ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 33. Bergson treated this question in: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris, Félix Alcan, 1889), *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1896), and *L'Évolution créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907).

time of Darwinian evolutionism and old myths that Symbolist painters revisited.⁸⁸

Furthermore, the traditional idea of space was challenged by the levelling of aristocratic society, the rise of democracy, and the dissolution of the distinction between the sacred and profane space of religion.⁸⁹ These reconsiderations resulted in the blurring of the established temporal and spatial markers. Consequently, a culture of pessimism developed, which opposed the value and the safety of technological progress with regards to speed, time-measuring techniques, and communication device further encouraged. As another challenge to public and universal time, search for meaning in the private, enclosed spaces of domestic apartments took place during the period.⁹⁰ The home was detached from its sole familiar functions and was “reinvented as a space for rêverie and contemplation.”⁹¹ This quest for privacy and intimacy was related to the reaction against the rationalization of public time. The diffusion of the pocket watch, the worldwide standardization of time to simplify railroad schedules and communication by telegraphs all indicate the rationalization of time at the end of the nineteenth century.⁹² The domination of the individual and their own private time and mental space over the exterior’s balances this rationalization of time in public spaces.

The time of privacy in the decorative propels *The Muses* into a complex temporal level outside the subject of the scene: the “Now-Time.” The scene is set in the forest, however several elements hint at a transposition into a domestic interior. The bed of leaves covering more than half of the background simulates an interior carpet that could coat the flooring of a home during the *fin-de-siècle* period. Édouard Vuillard’s *Causerie chez les Fontaine* (Fig. 6) shows such an interior, where the pattern of the carpet is composed of a dense bed of leaves.

⁸⁸ This idea was expressed by Stéphane Guégan in the chapter “Temps court, temps long !” taken from his book on nineteenth-century painting at the Orsay Museum. Stéphane Guégan, *Peinture. Musée d'Orsay* (Paris: ESFP, 2011), 15.

⁸⁹ Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 8.

⁹⁰ Katherine M. Kuenzli, *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 1.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 6.

As aforementioned, the ground' positive-negative effect of the leaves on the ground in *The Muses* imbeds nature with the decorative. It recalls Art Nouveau's inclination for natural motifs in interior décors. Moreover, the three muses in the foreground are sitting on wooden chairs that do not belong in a forest or a public park. These are modern chairs whose bottom part and legs evoke French Art Nouveau, and especially Hector Guimard's furniture style.⁹³ The costumes that two of the three muses are wearing recall clothing modern to Denis' time. The figure on the right is elegantly turning her back on us, only to reveal the start of her neck and her shoulders. She is wearing an evening dress, accompanied by a mauve shawl placed on the back of her chair. The muse on the left is dressed in the aforementioned two-colored gown, a day-time dress far less revealing than the evening dress worn by the other muse. The visual connection between the tree leaves, the ground and the patterns of the dresses' fabric evokes the homogeneity of the Art Nouveau interiors with the repetition of the same motifs. The leaves attached to the trees on the upper half of the composition could even resemble the decorative moldings carved along the edges of ceilings in bourgeois décors, such as in the interior in Vuillard's *Causerie chez les Fontaine*.

The fact that Denis painted *The Muses* as a home décor accentuates the impression of a decorative interior. No precise details concerning the specificities of the commission are available; however, a view of the Fontaines' apartment tells us more about the setting of the painting. Édouard Vuillard painted *Causerie chez les Fontaine* in 1904, three years after the Fontaine couple moved out of their apartment of the eighth arrondissement of Paris to settle in the seventh arrondissement, in 2 avenue de Villars. Vuillard's painting represents the Fontaines' living room where *The Muses* is hanging on the wall above the sofa where Mrs. Fontaine is sitting, across Mr. Fontaine who is resting on a chair. This apartment is not the initial one for *The Muses*, however I presume that this second living room was intended as the

⁹³ Philippe Thiébaud, *Guimard: L'Art nouveau* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 367.

ideal frame for the presentation of the couple's art collection. *The Muses* is the centerpiece of the room, from what Vuillard allows us to see. The bed of leaves recreates the patterns of the Persian carpets and its colors, the tree leaves evoke the house plants dispersed around the room as well as the moldings on the ceiling. The chairs on which the muses in the foreground are sitting recalls Mr. Fontaine's chair, and the vertical tree behind the muse on the left of this cluster parallels the wall beside Mr. Fontaine's chair. Thus, the decorative elements from the Fontaines' time and the setting of the modern home revive *The Muses* in the "Now-Time."

In *April*, Denis adds another temporal level through the decorative as the figures evolve before a flat and decorative background that evokes the backdrop of a symbolic stage representation. During the last decades of the twentieth century, Denis was closely associated with the theatrical avant-garde milieu and maintained relationships with playwrights such as Alfred Jarry and Maurice Maeterlinck.⁹⁴ *April* exhibits similar compositional features as *The Muses* with regards to the lack of perspective. The horizon line is set even higher, and with the absence of traditional perspectival devices, the forest ground seems to be elevated from the foreground to the background. This effect recalls the backdrop of a theater stage. Just like in *The Muses*, the only hint to the depth of the scene is the shrinking of the figures in the background. The flatness of the background is emphasized by the motif of the path that starts at the bottom of the picture and reaches the horizon line. The vertical motifs of the trees, bushes and shrubs add to the flatness as they accentuate the decorative aspect and the picture's fabrication. Moreover, the blooming of the anemones on the forest ground spreads throughout the majority of the picture plane and creates a decorative effect which flattens the composition and unifies it.

This unified plane is the backdrop for the characters who take on hieratic poses, infused with stillness and calm. Their gestures look as if suspended in time. Emancipated

⁹⁴ Guy Cogeval, "Le ciel ne peut pas attendre : Maurice Denis et la culture symboliste," in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Guy Cogeval (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 22.

from reality's temporality, the figures in *April* progress through the grove as in a precise and measured choreography.⁹⁵ The meaning of the path through life is expressed not only by the iconography of the grove and the repetition of the figure; it is conveyed by the slowness of the gestures, the slow bending forward to pick the flower, the slow pace of the walking couple in the background. Just like on a stage, the figures progress along a defined path and carry out the anticipated journey through life, whose stages are clearly illustrated in the painting.

Denis anchored his visual universe into the suggestions exposed in Maurice Maeterlinck's plays. In *Pelléas and Mélisande*, a play first performed in 1893 at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, the symbolist obsession with particular locations is revealed through the locus of the forest, evoking Mélisande's doubt and introspections with regards to her love for Pelléas. The natural setting is a place of revelation on which the characters project their sentiments. The play centers around the forest, where most of the narration takes place. Setting *April* in a forest connects it with Symbolist theater. Moreover, the Symbolist influence is evident in the setting of the scene in the forest. All the different stages of the action—the “acts” of the spiritual journey through life, represented in the different stages of the life of this figure—take place in the forest, the locus of meaning transposed into the spiritual locus of the sacred grove. The trees, pillars of the scenography, are the center of the decor where the narration begins and whose end is hinted by the path of life leading to the sky in the top half of the painting. Musical order and movement also infuse the scene. The same figure repeated three times, to which Denis adjoined a companion in the background echoes the themes of a musical piece whose motifs are repeated and modulated in variations throughout the composition.⁹⁶ Denis' incorporated his figures into his pictures just as a composer such as Debussy, his close friend, infuses his pieces with recurring themes.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Similar to a stage backdrop, *April* embraces its flatness and its essence as pure décor. *April* was bought by the art critic Arsène Alexandre in 1891 and then joined the collection of Alphonse Stoclet, Belgian engineer and financier, in Brussels.⁹⁷ He commissioned a palace designed by Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann in the Viennese Art Nouveau style. *April* was placed in a small salon in this decorative palace, next to a portrait of Mademoiselle Stoclet by Théo Van Rysselberghe and near Gustav Klimt's mosaic décor *The Tree of Life* in the dining room.⁹⁸ The setting of the painting therefore echoes the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project whose ambition, following Richard Wagner's ideology, was to incorporate painting, sculpture, music, and theater into the interior decoration of the home.⁹⁹

With *April*, Denis transposed the scene outside the "Then" onto a fictional stage where a choreography is taking place. As in *The Muses*, the decorative aspect of *April* locates the representation in complex temporalities: the spatiotemporality of the decorative, with the all the formal elements of the representation bearing embedded meaning themselves; the private, with the decorative mediating the space of the home and the space of the representation; and the temporality of the stage representation, for which the decorative serves as the backdrop to a defined choreography.

⁹⁷ Fabienne Stahl, "Avril (*Les Anémones*)," 134.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁹⁹ On the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its legacies, see: Juliet Koss, *Modernism After Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2010). Members of the Wiener Secession, including Gustav Klimt, appropriated Richard Wagner's program for their projects in interior décor and museography. On this subject, see: Anna Harwell Celenza, "Music and the Vienna Secession: 1897-1902," *Music in Art* 29, no. 1/2 (2004): 203-12.

III. THE TIME OF MYTH

April, (Fig. 1) *The Muses*, (Fig. 2) and *The Green Trees* (Fig. 3) are three paintings that locate the sacred grove in existing forests, namely the Saint-Germain-en-Laye forest for the first two and the Kerduel forest for the latter. Concerning the locations of these representations, the temporality of the scene—the figures wandering in processions through existing forests—is complicated by the mythical temporality infusing the representations and de-individualizing the forests. Denis did not only set the paintings in his beloved forests; he set them in sacred groves rooted in ancient myths. As opposed to Denis' defined practice of Catholic faith, I argue that myths here do not relate to devotion but to collective references shared by society. *April's* sacred grove originates from a mythical imaginary, and responds to common needs from an increasingly secularized and fragmented society during the *fin de siècle*. Moreover, Denis anchored *The Muses* within Greek mythology to reflect on his creative process. Finally, *The Green Trees* presents a distinctive vision of Breton myths embedded into the quest for a national primitivism.

According to philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, an imaginary (*un imaginaire*) is a set of productions, mental or materialized in works, based on visual (painting, drawing, photograph) and linguistic images (metaphor, symbol, tale).¹⁰⁰ It forms coherent and dynamic ensembles that fall within the symbolic function as they modify or enrich the reality, perceived or conceived.¹⁰¹ Thus, an imaginary has the symbolic function of replacing the present with a concrete representation of what is absent, what is no more, or what is not here yet.¹⁰² An imaginary can manifest through the representation of memories and anticipations from variations of the reality, or it can project desires onto this newly-formed reality.¹⁰³ At the

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14.

level of society as a whole, a collective imaginary responds to a general need for a new—or renewed—reality. Through an imaginary, society escapes its present reality and dives into a fantasized past, present, or future. Art is the medium through which this realization is materialized.

An imaginary is never entirely situated in a timeless temporality, referring to immemorial times: it is a contemporary answer to a contemporary need to escape. Collective imaginaries are tied with the concept of time. When a group needs an escape from reality, it is because of current matters which the population struggles to deal with on an individual level. An imaginary is a fantasy that may never manifest into reality, but that nonetheless refers to the past, to myths, to ideals. Therefore, collective imaginaries belong to a specific period in time as it is the result of a need from this period's society. Moreover, collective imaginaries are tied with the ideals of previous generations. Individuals are influenced by imaginaries accumulated, from generation to generation, by humankind as a whole from the most remote of times.¹⁰⁴

In *April*, Denis manifests his own personal imaginary as much as society's—or *at minima* his circle's. The transposition of the sacred grove onto his beloved Saint-Germain-en-Laye forest is a response to the *fin-de-siècle* need of nature and mythical roots. The setting of the sacred grove bears ancient signification. In *The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion*, anthropologist James George Frazer mentioned the meaning of the forest in the history of Europe. The continent used to be covered with immense primeval forests, “in which the scattered clearings must have appeared like islets in an ocean of green.”¹⁰⁵ The natural component of the continent's geography has played a major role in the worship of trees since pre-historical times. In Denis' time, the rapid urbanization and motorization led to attacks

¹⁰⁴ Arcangeli, *Cultural History*, 40.

¹⁰⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 126.

against Paris in the context of immediacy and “here-and-now” mentality.¹⁰⁶ The city no longer exerted the strong hold on the artistic imagination that it had a decade or two earlier. This, too, is related to how time was perceived and conceived during the period. Prussian philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel associated the intensification of nervous stimulation of urban life with the temporal exactitude of pocket watches and universal time.¹⁰⁷ According to Simmel, “the technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and natural relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule.”¹⁰⁸ This hyper-nervous stimulation resulted in the flight from the city.¹⁰⁹ Artists of the Parisian avant-garde were mostly en route “to places [...] in which only nature herself could provide the assurance of authenticity.”¹¹⁰ Nature is the guardian of this exodus.¹¹¹

In *April*, the flight from the city is more mental than physical. This is where myths are significant. *April* does not refer to a specific myth that Denis would have attempted to portray following his own iconography. It is rather an amalgam of the myths of the Elysian Fields, the Earthly Paradise, and the Garden of Eden rooted in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian systems of beliefs. The reference to myths is a distinct recourse of a collective imaginary. According to art historian Gilles Genty, the myth is “the guardian of symbolic stability in the group for whom it stands at the center of cosmogony.”¹¹² The meaning of the myth therefore

¹⁰⁶ Bondil and Lavoie, *Voyage Into Myth*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt Wolff (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1950), 410.

¹⁰⁹ Pessimist sociological analyses from the period contributed to the disavowal of the modern capitalist system and the revival of interest for nature, which holds a reactionary undertone. For instance, Max Weber considered the effect capitalism and industrialization have on the human psyche and diagnosed that the machine “has changed the mental face of the human race beyond recognition and will continue doing so.” Max Weber, “Methodologische Einleitung für die Erhebungen des Vereins für Sozialpolitik,” in Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 14. Cited in Andreas Anter, “Max Weber's Concept of Nature and the Ambivalence of Modernity,” *Max Weber Studies* 11, no. 2 (July 2011): 228. Additionally, on the relationship between French Catholicism and technology during the period, see: Michel Lagrée, *La Bénédiction de Prométhée: Religion et technologie, XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

¹¹⁰ Bondil and Lavoie, *Voyage Into Myth*, 37.

¹¹¹ On the relationship between the arts and the romanticization of nature during the period, see: J. P. H. House, “Post-Impressionist Visions of Nature,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 128, no. 5289 (1980): 568-88.

¹¹² Genty, “The Muses in the Woods,” 123.

lies in its social function within the group as much as in the group's collective system of beliefs. The Garden of Eden and the earthly paradise, Umberto Eco argues, are places of nostalgia that everyone would like to bring back but that are objects of endless quests.¹¹³ Upon the origin of the world, they were the places where people used to live in a state of bliss and innocence which humankind has lost. Representing the Garden of Eden and the earthly paradise therefore means to enter a universe before the Fall located outside of reality's temporality. The Elysium, in Greco-Roman beliefs, symbolizes a similar imaginary. The Elysian Fields were the location of the afterlife for heroes and highly regarded mortals. While the poet Horace conceived them as a form of escapism from an unpleasant reality following the worries caused by civil wars in Roman society,¹¹⁴ Virgil focused on the description of the idyllic setting.¹¹⁵

In *April*, Denis blended these myths to create a distinctive representation of the escape from reality. In the sacred grove, the ideal location for the portrayal of a collective imaginary, Denis represented a fantasized journey through a life which avoids dangers and follows faith until death. The scene's timelessness mitigated by the contemporary clothing worn by the characters, belongs to a golden age that never existed, and that Denis did not believe would ever manifest. The need to escape from the city and to attain a golden age of peace and pure faith expands human duration to an infinity. *April* encapsulates "all the virtualities of a former life on which our present being would retain the memory."¹¹⁶ Art historian Gilles Genty further argues that "through an aesthetics of synthesis, of subtraction, of clarification, the Sacred Wood via the suggestion of a dreamlike Arcadia seems to reactuate a mythical past, a Golden Age."¹¹⁷ Thus, in a period in which traditional values and Catholic faith were

¹¹³ Umberto Eco, *Histoire des lieux de légende*, trans. Renaud Temperini (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 45.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹⁵ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 6.660-679. Trans. by Henry Rushton Fairclough (London: Heinemann, 1916).

¹¹⁶ Gilles Genty, "The Muses in the Woods," 120.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

reclaimed, Denis rooted *April* in a collective imaginary that takes the form of a timeless scene and responds to *fin-de-siècle* society's need to flee the urbanized environment and to escape in nature.

Denis anchored *The Muses* within Greek mythology. According to Homer, the muses were the goddesses who inspired his songs. After Homer, however, they lost their precise attributions. It is Hesiod who, in his *Theogony*, substantially defined the muses. They are the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. They live on Mount Olympus and distract the gods with their songs. However, their location of choice on earth is Mount Pierus in Macedonia. The muses ordinarily move through the sacred groves, in processions led by the god Apollo *Musagetes*, "Leader of the muses."¹¹⁸ The muses are the inspirational goddesses of the liberal arts and are usually represented with their attributes in an iconography set since the Classical period, such as the compass, the parchment, the tragic mask, or the lyre. The nine muses are: Calliope (epic poetry and eloquence), Clio (history), Euterpe (lyric poetry), Thalia (idyllic poetry), Melpomene (tragedy), Terpsichore (dance), Erato (love poetry), Polyhymnia (sacred poetry), and Urania (astronomy).

In *The Muses*, the goddesses are hardly identifiable and individualized. Only two muses in the foreground could be recognized with their attributes: the book, the sketchbook, and the pencil. However, these attributes are not included in the canonical iconography. The second muse to the right, in the background, turning her back and her face to the viewer, dressed in a green and lilac gown, is the only muse who could be identifiable as Terpsichore, the goddess of dance, due to the graceful movement of her back and her bent arm placed on her hip. Claire Denis, Maurice Denis' granddaughter, tried to identify the nine muses in the painting without however sustaining her arguments with iconographical proof.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Joël Schmidt, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* (Paris: Larousse, 1996), 187.

¹¹⁹ Claire Denis, "Identification *Les Muses*," RF 1977 139, AM 1887, Iconographical file, Orsay Museum, Paris.

The tenth muse represented in the background, on the painting's central axis, remains the most significant iconographical issue of *The Muses*. Jean-Paul Bouillon, with whom I concur, hypothesized a tentative explanation.¹²⁰ Considering the painting as a sort of allegory of Denis' inspiration is, in my opinion, the most meaningful way to decipher it. The ten muses synthesise Denis' inspiration which culminates in the figure of Marthe, his wife. Denis painted *The Muses* during his engagement with Marthe Meurier, whom he met in 1890. He interpreted their first encounter as "God's calling to become better and stronger and complete."¹²¹ A year later, in 1891, he described her physical characteristics in a way that predicted the subject of most of his paintings after their engagement: "the childish roundness of her arms, the moist scent of her flesh, her smile, the strange kindness of her eyes."¹²² The only figure recognizable in *The Muses* is Meurier herself, whose face and silhouette Denis represented in each muse. Just like in *April*, he duplicated the same figure to deindividualize her and to emphasize a sense of unity. However, while in *April* the woman he duplicated three times was not a reference to anyone in particular, here the women are evidently Meurier.

In *April*, with regards to temporality, each occurrence of the figure is the manifestation of a sequential partition of the journey through life. In *The Muses*, the journey unravels along a path similarly, however the muses along this path do not symbolize the several stages that would lead toward the absolute, the tenth muse. The muses are rather representations of the multiple facets of Denis' artistic inspiration, without a concrete development from the foreground to the background. At the end of the path, however, sitting directly against the sky, is the tenth muse. Meurier's last occurrence is the symbol of an Absolute that Denis is led to after his journey through the woods.

¹²⁰ Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Maurice Denis* (Geneva: Skira, 1993), 47

¹²¹ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 82. "C'est encore un appel de Dieu à devenir meilleur et plus fort et complet."

¹²² *Ibid.*, 86. "Pour la rondeur puérile de ses bras, pour le parfum moite de sa chair, pour son sourire, pour l'étrange bonté de ses yeux !"

This journey with the muses is of the artistic and spiritual in nature. The muse sharpening a pencil with a sketchbook laying open on her lap is an apparent symbol of his passion for drawing. As aforementioned, Meurier is Denis' most intimate source of inspiration, through whom he can achieve his most spiritual representations. Meurier represents his ideal of love and faith. In her study focused on Denis' drawing practice, Agnès Delannoy revealed that drawing is not only the first stage of artistic creation, but also Denis' closest link with the nature that surrounds him.¹²³ Meurier about to draw in the sacred grove is evidently the allegory of his own artistic practice, of Meurier being his own artistic tool that leads to creation. The muse in black in the foreground, holding a book, could be the symbol of the faith that inspires him. Meurier is touching the pages of the book—presumably the Bible—with the palm of her right's hand, absorbing the sacred meaning of the holy book. Here, the black dress and veil are the symbols of devotion in a particularly pious period of the liturgical calendar, such as All Saints' Day.¹²⁴ Meurier is therefore the guardian of his faith from which he drew inspiration.

Even though the second muse in the background is identifiable as Terpsichore, I believe that none of the other muses are meant to symbolize a specific aspect of Denis' artistic inspiration. They are rather a compendium of his inspiration as a whole, at the forefront of which his faith and the drawing of nature are the leaders. The nine muses finally lead to the absolute source of inspiration, in the background, perhaps Meurier herself, nude, sitting, presumably lifting her right arm up to her head. She appears to be, in the distance, a sculptural Venus who presides over Denis' oeuvre. Situated at the heart of a resurgence of Classicism, the myth of the "primitive's" purity was connected to the perception of the Classical taste as a return to origins, during a period in which the uncertainty of the future brought anguish and

¹²³ Agnès Delannoy, *Maurice Denis dessinateur. L'Œuvre dévoilé* (Paris: Somogy Éditions d'art, 2006), 9.

¹²⁴ See the costumes in Émile Friand's painting *La Toussaint* from 1888. <http://collections-mba.nancy.fr/fr/search-notice/detail/1399-la-toussai-86cc6>.

reactionary ideals. Thus, Denis used the myth of the muses in the sacred grove to reflect on his creative process. With *The Muses*, Denis intended to materialize the complex sources of his artistic inspiration and attempted to facilitate intellectual discussions in the Fontaines' living room, home of their famous artistic salon where they received Claude Debussy, André Gide, Francis Jammes, Paul Claudel and many others.

In *The Green Trees*, in addition to its spiritual significance, the painting falls within the time of myth. With it, Denis offered a distinctive vision of Arthurian and Celtic myths infused with the quest for a national primitivism. As aforementioned, nature became during the period a haven against the dangers of city life. Brittany was a region of choice for artists in need of finding inspiration in a place located outside of modernity. Artists fled to Brittany to draw inspiration from the raw forces of nature manifested through landscapes and seascapes. As the hegemonic and centralized French Republic had not mitigated traditional customs and beliefs yet, the population still engaged in rituals that looked fascinating to the Parisian artistic scene. Throughout the nineteenth century, Brittany had a large appeal for artists and thinkers. However, it is with Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard that the village of Pont-Aven in the Finistère department rose to fame.¹²⁵ The artists from the School of Pont-Aven searched in Brittany the essence of the “primitive” that was no longer accessible in France, due to urbanization and industrialization. Nature was seen as an “antidote”¹²⁶ for the damages modern society did to humankind, and Pont-Aven was the ideal place to recapture what once was. The “primitive” nature and culture of Brittany were the guarantee of the authenticity of an “initial truth unadulterated by progress.”¹²⁷ Although the term “primitive” has a vague and problematic meaning, Nathalie Bondil proposes, for Western art, the synonyms

¹²⁵ Bondil and Lavoie, eds., *Voyage Into Myth*, 36.

¹²⁶ Brauer and Keshavjee, eds., *Picturing Evolution and Extinction: Regeneration and Degeneration in Modern Visual Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), xxx.

¹²⁷ Bondil and Lavoie, eds., *Voyage Into Myth*, 83.

“immemorial,” “authentic,” “genuine,” and “unperverted.”¹²⁸ The “primitive,” entangled with colonialism, therefore goes back to the origins of man’s harmony with nature, interlaced with the idea of an untainted faith. Paradoxically, Brittany epitomized the quest for a “primitive” land and almost bore an exotic connotation, while at the same time being the token of French culture.¹²⁹ In Brittany, artists looked for the essence of a culture that used to belong to them but got lost with the progress of society.

Brittany not only appealed to modern art, but also conservative politics. In his study on the critical reception of the painter Dagnan-Bouveret’s Breton paintings, art historian Michael Orwicz observes that conservative critics emphasized a particular narrative on Brittany’s faith and customs.¹³⁰ They saw in depictions of Breton religious ceremonies an “overtly Catholic character”¹³¹ that deviated from progressive discourse on superstition and fanaticism.¹³² To conservatives, Brittany’s people engaged deeply in a pure and national practice of their Catholic faith. Orwicz argues that conservative criticism did not emanate from a specific partisan association, but rather that these critics “accommodated a right-wing political ideology” rooted in an “unproblematic continuity between the principal points of the right’s political strategy in Brittany throughout the 1880s: a strategy that meant defending the Monarchy and the Church and preserving traditional social relations.”¹³³ This type of criticism spread the idea that Brittany was located “well within the province’s traditionally patriarchal and conservative stereotype, producing a Brittany that was Catholic, conservative, and

¹²⁸ Ibid. On the subject of the tension between primitivism and modernity, see: Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 199-244; Timothy Mitchell, “Introduction,” in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xii-xvii; Michael R. Orwicz, “Paul Gauguin et la dialectique spatio-temporelle de la modernité,” in *L’Impressionnisme: Du plein-air au territoire*, ed. Frédéric Cousiné (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 2013), 39-54.

¹²⁹ Laura Kathleen Hoeger, “Iconographies of Faith and Doubt in the Painting of Maurice Denis, the Nabis and their Contemporaries,” PhD diss. (University of California, San Diego, 2013), 35.

¹³⁰ Michael R. Orwicz, “Criticism and Representations of Brittany in the Early Third Republic,” *Art Journal* 46, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 291.

¹³¹ Ibid., 292.

¹³² Ibid., 293.

¹³³ Ibid., 295.

counter-revolutionary.”¹³⁴ Thus, a large conservative part of the French population saw in depictions of Brittany’s rituals and ceremonies the manifestation of a longing for a now lost rural and Catholic France. This fantasized version of the country’s past is rooted in an illusion that does not properly account for the reality of Brittany’s past. The fantasy is “a nostalgia for the remains of an illusory past [...] whose authenticity was absorbed by [...] the modern hegemony.”¹³⁵

The Green Trees represents as much a mystic procession as the influence of local legends. In the forest of Kerduel was erected between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries the Château de Kerduel, one of King Arthur’s alleged residences. The legend recounted that the king haunted on his white horse the castle and the forest around it.¹³⁶ In the painting, the influence of the legendary Celtic tales that haunt the sacred wood in which the procession is taking place is distinguishable. The painting’s mysterious atmosphere results from the colossal nature that surrounds the figures, the secret ceremony that is taking place in the woods, the apparition of an angel. The practice of religion recalls a distant past in which legends were attached to it. To art historian Guy Michaud, “the return to the fabulous settings, primitive legends and ancient traditions of folklore marks a deliberate effort towards deeper truths, a surer awareness of hidden realities. [...] In the depths of these forests, in which our reason seems to lose its way, there lies the Sleeping Beauty, in other words our soul.”¹³⁷ *The Green Trees* represents the quest for a “primitivism” that engages with a type of exoticism, but which still very much shares the values of the *fin de siècle* in need for traditional and national ties. Myths, in *The Green Trees*, are attached to a collective imaginary that intertwined Celtic legends and Catholic resurgence.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Orwicz, “Paul Gauguin et la dialectique spatio-temporelle de la modernité,” 40.

¹³⁶ Gilles Genty, “The Muses in the Woods,” 126.

¹³⁷ Guy Michaud, *Message poétique du symbolisme* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1947), 406. Cited in Philippe Jullian, *Dreamers of Decadence*, trans. by Robert Baldick (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 56.

From an early age, Denis was in contact with Celtic culture due to his summers spent in Brittany with his family. He then met with Anatole Le Braz and Charles Le Goffic, Breton authors who promoted the transcription of regional myths. In 1891, Le Goffic published *Chansons bretonnes*, a collection of songs from the Breton folklore.¹³⁸ In *La Légende de la mort en Basse-Bretagne*, Le Braz transcribed oral stories about ghosts, souls, and Ankou, the servant of death.¹³⁹ Denis appreciated the *Barzaz Breiz*, another collection of Breton popular songs collected by Hersart de la Villemarqué in the early nineteenth century.¹⁴⁰ About Breton customs, Denis wrote in his *Diary* in 1901 that “such customs are as old as our race, that they perpetuate the first religious emotions of our ancestors.”¹⁴¹ As a follower of reactionary politics, Maurice Denis kept the illusionary idea about Brittany’s past in mind when sojourning and painting *The Green Trees*.¹⁴²

Denis located *April*, *The Muses*, and *The Green Trees* in the temporality of myth. His scenes are rooted in Christian, Greek, and Breton myths and iconographies. However, the temporalities of the paintings are ambiguously connected to Denis’ time through the collective imaginary in *April*, his own creative process in *The Muses*, and his quest for national primitivism in *The Green Trees*.

¹³⁸ Charles Le Goffic, *Chansons bretonnes* (Paris: Éditions de La Lyre Chansonnière, 1891).

¹³⁹ Anatole Le Braz, *La Légende de la mort en Basse-Bretagne* (Honoré Champion: Paris, 1893).

¹⁴⁰ Gilles Genty, “The Muses in the Woods,” 126.

¹⁴¹ Denis, *Journal, Tome I*, 171. “Et quand on songe que de telles coutumes sont aussi vieilles que notre race, qu’en elles se perpétuent les premières émotions religieuses des ancêtres, vraiment on n’aperçoit plus que la crasse de banalité que la littérature, la musique et la peinture ont accumulé sur ce noble sujet.”

¹⁴² For a thorough study of Denis’ political views, see: Jean-Paul Bouillon, “Politique de Denis,” in *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*, ed. Guy Cogeval (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 95-113.

CONCLUSION

“By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable... In short, for any ‘modernity’ to be worthy of one day taking its place as ‘antiquity’, it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it.”¹⁴³

In *April*, *The Muses*, and *The Green Trees*, Maurice Denis encapsulated multiple temporal levels that he sought to coordinate homogeneously. He embedded the levels of the spiritual, the decorative, and the mythical into each painting and articulated them around each other; the works entail temporal synchronicity. During the period which saw the rise of the universalization of public time, the constant speed of the means of communication, and in turn the progressive confinement of individuals into their private spheres, these three paintings indicate Denis’ interest in bringing these diverging temporalities together and form synchronicity in art. The sacred grove is the unifying tool with which Denis could complete his endeavor. Bearing a strong spiritual meaning, the sacred grove is more than the mere representation of woods and forests.

Since Antiquity, the sacred grove was the holiest location of some religions.¹⁴⁴ Through the process of the sanctification of nature, that emerged as one of Denis’ most central theory in his “Definition of Neo-Traditionalism,” the representations of the sacred grove hold a spiritual purpose.¹⁴⁵ With the sacred grove’s sanctity, Denis granted his paintings the status of spiritual works, infused with the time of the religion while being revived in the “Now-Time.” The power of nature is central to this sanctity. Denis made use of the woods’ formal elements to emphasize this decorative potential. The trees’ silhouettes, colors, their visual relation with the ground and the figures inhabiting it, all participate in the decorative

¹⁴³ Charles Baudelaire, “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonatha Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press, 1964), 13-14.

¹⁴⁴ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 126.

¹⁴⁵ Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionnisme.” 548.

potentiality of the woods. To this, Denis added the Nabis' *cloisonnisme* style which is apparent with the flatness of the picture plane and the silhouettes contoured with a dark line. The sacred grove's formal aspect is set on the spatiotemporal level of the decorative as formal elements bear embedded meaning in themselves. The paintings' purpose as decorative works which complement modern interior décors introduces the "Now-Time" and private time. Furthermore, the sacred grove is rooted in Greco-Roman and Christian myths. While the ancient time of myths instills Denis' paintings, the myths emerge from common imaginaries. Common imaginaries necessarily materialize as an answer to society's needs at a specific moment in time. Here, the imaginaries of the earthly paradise, the Garden of Eden, and the Elysian Fields illustrate the *fin-de-siècle* determination to return to a "primitive" nature in harmony with its inhabitants. Denis represented the collective imaginaries from a deeply personal perspective. He animated the time of the myths with his own iconographies, whether it be the deindividualized figures, his wife Marthe Meurier, or the idealized mystical procession. He combined his private temporality with the collective imaginaries and myths. Through the subject of the sacred grove, Denis homogenized in a synchronous manner timelessness, ancient times, and the "Now-Time," connected private spaces with collective time, and articulated the decorative with the spiritual.

My thesis explored three of Maurice Denis' paintings in depth and closely examined the modalities of the representation of time. Making use of the research published in the field of cultural history, my thesis remained focused on the three works to avoid generalizing a period's conception and perception of the concept of time. Time is a fruitful approach for the study of *fin-de-siècle* artistic production. It allows the art historian to uncover the complex situation of the subject in Symbolist painting, so often balancing timelessness and reaction to modernity. With Symbolism, time is materialized through the way the artists modulate the repetitions of figure, the merging of background and characters, or the immediate reference to

supernatural elements. Studying Symbolism and the art of the Nabis through the lens of time introduces the *fin-de-siècle* period into Modernism.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Maurice Denis, *Avril, or Les Anémones*, 1891, oil on canvas, private collection.



Figure 2. Maurice Denis, *Les Muses*, 1893, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Figure 3. *Les Arbres verts*, or *Les hêtres de Kerduel*, 1893, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Figure 4. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Bois sacré cher aux arts et aux muses*, 1884-86, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 5. Suzuki Harunobu, *Hagi no tamagawa*, 1766-68, color woodcut, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Figure 6. Édouard Vuillard, *Causerie chez les Fontaine*, 1904, oil on panel, private collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anter, Andreas. "Max Weber's Concept of Nature and the Ambivalence of Modernity." *Max Weber Studies* 11, no. 2 (July 2011): 217-229.
- Antliff, Mark. *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Arcangeli, Alessandro. *Cultural History: A Concise Introduction*. London; New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Auricchio, Laura. "The Nabis and Decorative Painting." The Metropolitan Museum. Published October 2004. Last accessed May 15th, 2021. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dcpt/hd_dcpt.htm.
- Bergson, Henri. *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. Paris, Félix Alcan, 1889.
- Bergson, Henri. *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit*. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1896.
- Bergson, Henri. *L'Évolution créatrice*. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London/New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Bondil, Nathalie, and Francine Lavoie, eds. *Voyage Into Myth: French Painting from Gauguin to Matisse from the Hermitage Museum, Russia*. Paris: Hazan; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2002.
- Bouillon, Jean-Paul. *Maurice Denis*. Geneva: Skira, 1993.
- Bouillon, Jean-Paul ed. *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2006.
- Bouillon, Jean-Paul. *Maurice Denis. Le Spirituel dans l'Art*. Paris: Gallimard; Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2006.
- Brauer, Fae, and Serena Keshavjee, eds. *Picturing Evolution and Extinction: Regeneration and Degeneration in Modern Visual Culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.
- Catholic Church. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. Washington: Office of Public Services, United States Catholic Conference.
- Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Washington: Office of Public Services, United States Catholic Conference.
- Celenza, Anna Harwell. "Music and the Vienna Secession: 1897-1902." *Music in Art* 29, no. 1/2 (2004): 203-12.
- Cogeval, Guy, ed. *Maurice Denis (1870-1943)*. Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994.
- Day, John. "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature." *The Society of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (September 1986): 385-408.
- Delannoy, Agnès. *Maurice Denis Dessinateur. L'Œuvre Dévoilé*. Paris: Somogy Éditions d'art, 2006.
- Denis, Claire. "Identification *Les Muses*." RF 1977 139, AM 1887. Iconographical file. Orsay Museum, Paris.
- Denis, Maurice. "Définition du Néo-Traditionnisme." *Art et Critique*, August 1890.
- Denis, Maurice. "De Gauguin et de Van Gogh au classicisme." *L'Occident*, May 1909.
- Denis, Maurice. *Nouvelles théories sur l'Art Moderne, sur l'Art Sacré, 1914-1921*. Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1922.
- Denis, Maurice. *Journal, Tome I : « 1884-1904 »*. Paris: Éditions du Vieux Colombier, 1957.
- Denis, Maurice. *Le Ciel et l'Arcadie*. Edited by Jean-Paul Bouillon. Paris: Hermann, 1993.

- Despland, Michel. "L'expérience religieuse au XIXe siècle : II. La vie représentée et les deux types de modernité." *Laval théologique et philosophique* 51, no. 1 (February 1995): 141-158.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Duchet-Suchaux, Gaston, and Michel Pastoureau. *La Bible et les Saints. Guide iconographique*. Paris: Flammarion, 1994.
- Eco, Umberto. *Histoire des lieux de légende*. Translated by Renaud Temperini. Paris: Flammarion, 2013.
- Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Abridged Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1922.
- Frèches-Thory, Claire, and Urusula Perucchi-Petri, eds. *Nabis. Bonnard, Vuillard, Maurice Denis, Vallotton... (1888-1900)*. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1993.
- Genty, Gilles. "The Muses in the Woods: The Symbolist Forest as a Place for Revelation." *Le Serment des Horaces, International Art Review*, no.3 (Fall 1989-Winter 1990): 119-129.
- Genty, Gilles, and Mary-Dailey Desmarais, eds. *Signac and the Indépendants*. Paris: Hazan, 2020.
- Guégan, Stéphane and Sylvia Patry, eds. *Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Beyond: Post-Impressionist Masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay*. San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco/New York: Prestel, 2010.
- Guégan, Stéphane. *Peinture. Musée d'Orsay*. Paris: ESFP, 2011.
- Hoeger, Laura Kathleen. "Iconographies of Faith and Doubt in the Painting of Maurice Denis, the Nabis and their Contemporaries." PhD diss. University of California, San Diego, 2013.
- Holly, Michael Ann. *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- House, J. P. H. "Post-Impressionist Visions of Nature." *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 128, no. 5289 (1980): 568-88.
- Howard, Jeremy. *Art Nouveau: International and National Styles in Europe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Jullian, Philippe. *Dreamers of Decadence*. Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971.
- Jumeau-Lafond, Jean-David. *Les Peintres de l'âme. Le Symbolisme idéaliste en France*. Antwerp: Pandora, 1999.
- Karlholm, Dan, and Keith Moxey, eds. *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Keyes, C.D. "Art and Temporality." *Research in Phenomenology* 1 (1971): 63-73.
- Koss, Juliet. *Modernism After Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2010).
- Kuenzli, Katherine M. *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle*. Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010.
- Lagrée, Michel. *La Bénédiction de Prométhée : Religion et technologie, XIXe-XXe siècle*. Paris: Fayard, 1999.
- Le Braz, Anatole. *La Légende de la mort en Basse-Bretagne*. Honoré Champion: Paris, 1893.
- Le Goffic, Charles. *Chansons bretonnes*. Paris: Éditions de La Lyre Chansonnière, 1891.
- Lecomte, Vanessa, and Fabienne Stahl, eds. *Maurice Denis. L'Éternel Printemps*. Paris: Hazan, 2012.

- Leduc, Jean. *L'Enracinement de la République : 1879 – 1918*. Paris: Hachette Éducation, 2014.
- Maunder, George. "The Nature of Nabi Symbolism." *Art Journal* 23, no.2 (Winter 1963-1964): 96-103.
- Michaud, Guy. *Message poétique du symbolisme*. Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1947.
- Mitchell, Timothy. "Introduction." In *Questions of Modernity*, edited by Timothy Mitchell, xii-xvii. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Moréas, Jean. "Le Symbolisme." *Le Figaro*, September 18th, 1886.
- Musée d'Orsay, "Maurice Denis, *Paysage aux arbres verts* ou *Les Hêtres de Kerduel*." RF 2001 8. Iconographical file. Orsay Museum, Paris.
- Myerson, Joel, ed. *Transcendentalism: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Nordau, Max. *Entartung*. Berlin: C. Duncker, 1896.
- Office of Papal Liturgical Celebrations. "Beatifications by Pope John Paul II, 1979-2000." vatica.ca. Last accessed July 1st, 2021.
https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_list_blesseds-jp-ii_en.html.
- Orwicz, Michael R. "Criticism and Representations of Brittany in the Early Third Republic." *Art Journal* 46, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 291-298.
- Orwicz, Michael R. "Paul Gauguin et la dialectique spatio-temporelle de la modernité." In *L'Impressionnisme : du plein-air au territoire*, edited by Frédéric Cousiné, 39-54. Mont-Saint-Aignan: Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 2013.
- Parisse, Lydie. "Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle." In *Crises de vers*, edited by Maire Blaise and Alain Vaillant, 275-295. Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2000.
- Perucchi-Petri, Ursula. "Maurice Denis et le Japon." *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 4 (1982): 260-265.
- Pick, Daniel. *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Schmidt, Joël. *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine*. Paris: Larousse, 1996.
- Simor, Suzanna B. "The Tree of the Credo." *Analecta Husserliana* 66 (2000): 45-54.
- Thiébaud, Philippe. *Guimard : L'Art nouveau*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992.
- Thomas, Kerstin. "Maurice Denis et l'Exemple de Puvis de Chavannes: Vers une Nouvelle 'Valeur Sentimentale' dans l'Art." *48/18 La Revue du Musée d'Orsay*, no. 23 (Fall 2006): 34-45.
- Thompson, Jan. "The Role of Women in the Iconography of Art Nouveau." *Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (Winter 1971-1972): 158-167.
- Thomson, Richard. *Framing France: The Representation of Landscapes in France, 1870-1914*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.
- Thomson, Richard, and Belinda Thomson. "Maurice Denis's 'Définition du Néo-traditionnisme' and Anti-Naturalism." *The Burlington Magazine* 154, no. 1309 (April 2012): 260-267.
- Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Henry Rushton Fairclough. London: Heinemann, 1916.
- Waterworth, J., ed. and trans. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Œcumenical Council of Trent*. London: Dolman, 1848.
- Wichmann, Siegfried. *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western art since 1858*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1981.
- Wunenburger, Jean-Jacques. *L'Imaginaire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013.
- Ziegler, Robert. *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.