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

Lucile Cordonnier

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?

—Maurice Denis, *Journal*

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."¹ 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 Denis's art as both a reaction against Impressionism and 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.² 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 former royal retreat filled with an immense forest that bore an intimate significance for him throughout his life.³ 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 1900.⁴ 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 an individual route; Denis pursued the representation of mythical and spiritual scenes. Moreover, his peers recognized him as the group's theoretician.⁵ He extensively published articles in artistic magazines in which he proposed a new terminology for the art produced by the 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 colors, put together in a certain order."⁶ While the formula is now celebrated as the first step toward the dissolution of form and content in painting, Denis never departed from the tradition of the figurative subject at the core of painting.⁷ 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 essay, I explore the temporal tension between modernity, religion, and tradition in three of Denis's paintings, composed between 1891 and 1893: *The Green Trees*, or *Beech Trees in Kerduel* (1893, Musée d'Orsay); *The Muses* (1893, Musée d'Orsay); and *April*, or *The Anemones* (1891, private collection). 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 these natural settings "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."⁸ To Denis, art has the ability to make nature sacred. The process of sanctification transports the artworks into the realm of the spiritual by embedding them with devotional purpose. The paintings are not only decorative pieces for modern interiors; they are objects of spiritual contemplation. As the paintings are sanctified, the nature represented on canvas gains spiritual value. Here, spirituality is conceived as a religious practice that does not depend on the traditional structure of the church. In Denis's case, it is a more private and intimate practice of his Catholic faith. A large component of this spiritual practice for Denis was the contemplation of some of his artworks on display in his house.

The sacred grove is the ideal location for the sanctification process and allows for the conception of multilayered temporalities. Denis's use of natural environments in his works, such as the woods and the forest, holds a particular



Figure 1 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Sacred Grove, Beloved of the Arts and the Muses*, oil on canvas, 93 × 231 cm. Art Institute Chicago, 1884–89.

meaning that goes beyond mere landscape painting. Denis’s 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 the only living element that takes part in both the earthly world, with its roots and trunk, and the celestial world, with its foliage.⁹ 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 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.¹⁰ Denis therefore symbiotically complemented the Christian iconography of trees with the mythological sacred grove.

The subject of the woods in Denis’s 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 decor of Lyon’s Fine Arts Museum’s grand staircase (fig. 1).¹¹ Denis repeatedly voiced his admiration for the painter throughout exhibitions of Puvis de Chavannes’s works. Denis had the chance to discover 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 1887.¹² After this last exhibition, he wrote that he appreciated the painting’s “calm and simple decorative aspect,” its “enchanting harmonies of pale tones,” and its “wise, grand and ethereal compositions.”¹³ For him, the work emitted a “soft and mysterious impression that calms and elevates.”¹⁴ 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’s 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. From their

fin de siècle perspective, the Greek imaginary encompasses a particular suspension of time. Additionally, with the depiction of angels and veiled women, Denis instilled his paintings with a Christian dimension fused with a deeply intimate form of mysticism. The three paintings examined in this essay are filled with a personal 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 the art historian Giovanni Careri’s concept of the revival of the artwork in the “Now-Time.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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 the elements that 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’s case, the Then itself draws from various temporal sources and blurs the lines of time’s linearity.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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. While every work of art is concerned with revival in time through the eyes of its contemporary viewers, Denis’s paintings combine this revival with an ambiguous presence in other temporalities.

Making use of the research published in the field of cultural history, this essay focuses on three works to avoid generalizing a period’s conception and perception of the concept of time. Thus, this essay 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 Denis’s art, is articulated around the paintings’ spiritual purpose. I combine the multi-layered temporalities from Denis’s paintings and contend that they work together at the same speed to convey the representations of the sacred grove. I argue that *The Green Trees*, *The Muses*, and *April* 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, which ties these levels together and grants their homogeneity and integrity within the works.

The Time of the Spiritual

Denis's "sanctification of nature"²⁰ is at the heart of his representations of sacred groves. In *The Green Trees* (fig. 2), Denis transposed the representation of the Breton landscape into the spiritual realm. As such, the grove grows into divine grace and the canvas becomes an object of intimate and spiritual contemplation. With the sanctification of nature, the representation of a mystical procession in the woods mediates the revived Now-Time of the painting.

It is important to first situate Denis's 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.²¹ 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 new political class emerged in response to the state's secularization achievements and united a portion of moderate Republicans, conservative defenders of the Catholic Church, and right-wing Monarchists.²² The coalition earned acceptability and soon found its way to 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 anticlericalism. The political climate led to an increase of Christian iconographies in the arts as a response to the unfolding fight.²³

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Denis started to follow Charles Maurras's Action Française, a nationalist and royalist political movement. Denis 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,"²⁴ as opposed to "the dizzying whirlwind of modern life."²⁵ The group was known for its Far Right and anti-Semitic politics, but Denis has not been documented



Figure 2 Maurice Denis, The Green Trees, or Beech Trees in Kerduel, oil on canvas, 46.3 × 42.8 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 1893. Photograph taken by author and used with permission.

as an active participant in political events of this nature (e.g., anti-Dreyfus protests).²⁶ Arguably, Denis's involvement with the politics of the time was primarily expressed through 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.²⁷ Mysticism allows one to approach the mysteries of existence, to experiment with self-renunciation and the unity between nature and the cosmos.²⁸ One searched for the answers to the mysteries of life and faith on an individual level rather than relying solely on the dictate of religious institutions. The 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.²⁹ He asserts that the "religious experience in the nineteenth century is more overtly anchored within the life of the subject."³⁰

Furthermore, the specific political and cultural context of the fin de siècle led to a “reactionary” type of mysticism.³¹ According to the 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.”³² 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,³³ contemporary mystics also emerged during the period. Eugène Vintras, who claimed he received visits of St. Michael the archangel and was the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, professed a heterodoxy that connected the worshipper directly to God without the sanction of the church.³⁴ 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.”³⁵ Vintras’s 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.”³⁶ This example of extreme heterodoxy does not necessarily apply to all the proponents of mysticism during the period, but illuminates how religion turned toward the individual and the intimate as opposed to orthodox and doctrinal practices of faith.

Mysticism, as an ineffable experience,³⁷ 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.³⁸ Undoubtedly, this trend of mysticism enlarged the visionary power of the artist. While Despland considers God, in this context, as “imagination’s regulator,”³⁹ the literary scholar Lydie Parisse analyzes a redefinition of the artist’s status within a materialist society in this period.⁴⁰ Mysticism, she argues, allows for the “expansion of artistic perception and creative possibilities” by disrupting society’s order and materialism.⁴¹ This trend of mysticism seduced many artists in pursuit of a renewed spiritual art.⁴² 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 mystical concept of the Absolute entails the attainment of pure and unconditional faith in God.⁴³ In Latin, *mysticus* stands for the “initiated.”⁴⁴ Although Denis was profoundly Catholic, the mystical current of the period infiltrated his faith and art during the two last decades of the nineteenth century. 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.”⁴⁵ I suggest that *The Green Trees* represents the mystical quest of the Absolute through the process of initiation, close to Denis’s personal experience. The procession

in *The Green Trees* encapsulates the mystical meaning of the scene, a 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.⁴⁶

The procession leading to the Absolute, through the angel, calls for several interpretations that Denis combined all together. First, 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 childhood, processions of young women inspired Denis. They were communicants about to either receive Holy Communion or partake in a religious ceremony, for instance, in honor of the Virgin Mary. They are a recurring subject in Denis's 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."⁴⁷ Since the age of fourteen, Denis reiterated his obsession for the theme of processions on canvas, which he meshed with a mystical spirit of deindividualization.

Second, the procession symbolizes the path toward artistic creation. Denis portrayed the religious ideal that the Christian artist aspires to reach. At the end of her spiritual journey, the isolated figure reaches the Absolute in faith, a goal that Denis, as a deeply devout Christian painter, was aspiring to reach himself.⁴⁸ His model was Fra Angelico, whose level of sanctity he continually aspired to attain. Denis worshipped him as a saint, thought about writing his biography,⁴⁹ requested his beatification,⁵⁰ and painted a pseudo relic of his head.⁵¹ Denis considered the *Coronation of the Virgin* as the absolute masterwork in the Louvre,⁵² and dreamed of dedicating his first painting presented at the Official Salon to him.⁵³ He admired the painter's profound faith as much as his works, from which he borrowed several formal features, namely, the boxlike composition and the division of the composition into defined sections that each correspond to a secular or sacred space. By embracing Fra 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.

Third, I consider the isolated figure to represent a newly married woman. Allegorically, absolute faith may 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. Beginning with their engagement earlier in 1893, she became his ultimate muse, the main subject of his paintings, and his primary source of inspiration.⁵⁴

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 toward faith. Denis elevated the grove to the level of a “metaphysical sanctuary”⁵⁵ that hosts the subjects of revelation and election in the course of a mystical meeting.⁵⁶ 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 pink 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 penance,⁵⁷ 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 distant woods, making a clear distinction between the earth and the sky, the location of the holy. The hedge that passes between the angel and the leading figure symbolically delimits 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 only God 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, which first emerged in his “Definition of Neo-Traditionalism” 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.”⁵⁸ The passage includes a temporal reference to the process of sanctification making objects permanent. 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 sanctifying nature, Denis presents the painting with a temporal potential that expands beyond the restrictions of the subject.

The sanctification of nature extends the temporality in *The Green Trees*. This process locates the scene in Denis’s 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 that Denis was the most deeply attached to and that it

represented a synthesis of his life and aesthetic.⁵⁹ Its symbolism revolves around his own artistic and marital ambition. Therefore, the painter himself regularly revived and renewed the purpose of the painting by contemplating this initiatory quest, complicating 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 it represented is located beyond the tangibility of Denis's world. The 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."⁶⁰ Rather than sharing the assumption that a painting such as *The Green Trees* is a traditional Christian icon, I view it as a spiritual painting that leads to 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 reinforces the idea of the spiritual image's everlasting time. With regard 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.

The Time of the Decorative

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 the guidance of Paul Gauguin, 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."⁶¹ The *cloisonnisme* style was a central formal feature of Nabis paintings and drawings, as was the particular interest in decorative elements inspired by Japanese woodblock prints. The art historian Laura Auricchio notes: "Their works celebrate pattern and ornament, challenge the boundaries that divide fine arts from crafts, and . . . complement the interiors for which they were commissioned."⁶² 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.⁶³

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



Figure 3 Maurice Denis, *The Muses*, oil on canvas, 171 × 137.5 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 1893. Photograph taken by author and used with permission.

apart, some yellow, some green, others gray. 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*.”⁶⁴ 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. In his “Preface to the Ninth 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, adding that this order aimed at “the pleasures of the eyes.”⁶⁵ Thus

the decorative is composed of the structural elements of the flat canvas and the white surface on which colors are compiled to form an intelligible representation for the purpose of delighting the viewer.

In *The Muses* (fig. 3), Denis made use of the formal elements of the grove to offer a decorative scene. The formal elements constituting 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.⁶⁶ 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 each other; however, they operate on different levels. While the temporality of the subject in *The Muses* relates to 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.”⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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, thus enhancing its flatness. The figures’ silhouettes, despite shrinking in the background for an illusion of depth, nonetheless seem to have been pasted onto the canvas’s flat surface. The forest’s ground rising evenly from the foreground to the background to the horizon line over the top half of the painting intensifies this impression. Denis contoured the silhouettes and all the elements with dark lines that distinguish 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 is set 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*.⁶⁹ 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 and nineteenth centuries.⁷⁰ The arabesque is central to Denis's visual language, as he favored it above traditional and mimetic forms in the representations of nature. To Denis, the arabesque reproduces the movement and the sentiments of the interior self.⁷¹ It becomes an autonomous visual device that bears meaning of its own. The folds of the muses' dresses resemble the 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. 4). In Harunobu's art, representations of folds on fabric are a form of expression that characterizes the character's emotion.⁷² The undulating hem at the bottom of the kimono worn by the woman in the foreground re-creates the character's internal feelings. 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's paintings is an evocation of Harunobu's print. In *Bushclover at Tamagawa*, 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.⁷³ Denis made use of a similar decorative motif in *The Muses*: the figures are not merged 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 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 standing across from her 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,⁷⁴ and it seems probable that he visited this exhibition and directly took his inspiration from the decorative motifs of Harunobu's *Bushclover at Tamagawa*.

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



Figure 4 Suzuki Harunobu, Bushclover at Tamagawa (Six Jewel River), woodcut, 27.7 × 20.8 cm. Washington, DC, Library of Congress, 1766–68.

uses the formal features of the sacred grove and its muses to achieve the purpose of this “Decorative panel.” The graphic and sinuous line that 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 trend that had been spreading in the decorative arts across Europe since 1890. Art Nouveau found its highest form of the decorative in the association between nature and the female body, conveyed by the decorative line.⁷⁵ 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 re-creates 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 contrast with the leaves that fall 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 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 and 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 with the formal features that have become subjects in their own right.

In the second half of the century, a plurality of theories of time and space challenged the establishment of the universal public time that the International Meridian Conference had 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.⁷⁶ Thus, two conceptions of time opposed each other during the period: the short time inherent to the modern world, and the long time, the time of Darwinian evolutionism and old myths that Symbolist painters revisited.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the traditional idea of space was challenged by the leveling of aristocratic society, the rise of democracy, and the dissolution of the distinction between the sacred

and profane spaces of religion.⁷⁸ These reconsiderations resulted in the blurring of established temporal and spatial markers. Consequently, a culture of pessimism developed that opposed the value and the safety of technological progress with regard to speed, time-measuring techniques, and communication devices. Another challenge to public and universal time was the search for meaning in the private, enclosed spaces of domestic apartments.⁷⁹ The home was detached from its sole familiar functions and “reinvented as a space for rêverie and contemplation.”⁸⁰ This quest for privacy and intimacy was related to the reaction against the rationalization of public time. The diffusion of the pocket watch and 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.⁸¹ 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 might coat the flooring of a home during the fin de siècle period. Vuillard’s *Causerie chez les Fontaine* shows such an interior, where the carpet pattern is composed of a dense bed of leaves.⁸² The ground’s positive-negative effect of the leaves on the ground in *The Muses* embeds nature with the decorative and recalls Art Nouveau’s inclination for natural motifs in interior decors. 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, especially Hector Guimard’s furniture style.⁸³ The costumes that two of the three muses are wearing recall clothing modern to Denis’s time. The figure on the right elegantly turns her back on us, only revealing the start of her neck and her shoulders. She wears an evening dress, accompanied by a mauve shawl placed on the back of her chair. The muse on the left is dressed in a two-colored gown, a daytime 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 tree leaves 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 decor 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. Vuillard painted *Causerie*

chez les Fontaine in 1904, three years after the Fontaine couple moved out of their apartment in 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* hangs on the wall above the sofa where Mrs. Fontaine is sitting, across from Mr. Fontaine resting on a chair. This apartment is not the initial one for *The Muses*, but perhaps this second living room was intended as the 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 re-creates the patterns of the Persian carpets and its colors, and 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 recall 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.

The Time of Myth

April (fig. 5) locates the sacred grove in an existing forest, the Saint-Germain-en-Laye forest in the Parisian suburbs. Concerning the location of this representation, the temporality of the scene—figures walking along a wooden path—is complicated by the mythical temporality infusing the representation and deindividualizing the forest. Denis not only set the painting in his beloved forest; he also set it in a sacred grove rooted in ancient myths. Furthermore, the forest allows him to meditate on the spiritual cycle of life as he idealizes it. Adding to Denis's defined practice of Catholic faith and to his ideal vision of life from betrothment to marriage, myths here do not relate to devotion but to collective references shared by a society in need of an escape from modernity. *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. The cyclical temporality represented in the painting also responds to society's—or more so Denis's—need to return to an imagined simplicity of life. *April* displays this escape from modernity through a mythical imaginary as well as the painter's Christian ideal.

In *April*, time materializes in the representation of the cycle of life. With marital symbolism close to Denis's 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 in different stages in her life. Denis bends linear time to represent the same figure several times as she progresses along the spiritual path. The young woman in the foreground, positioned at the beginning of the path as it crosses the canvas, is



Figure 5 Maurice Denis, *April, or The Anemones*, oil on canvas, 65 × 78 cm. Private collection, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1891. Photograph taken by author and used with permission.

a newly engaged woman, as the anemones she is picking up and the traditional engagement tiara on her head suggest.⁸⁴ She has successfully stayed pure and chaste despite the temptations. 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.⁸⁵ Backward 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 anemones. 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. The evolution between the two women is that of the development of the faith the married woman dedicated her life to 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 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, the central character of *April*, has now fully entered her married life. 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, 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. 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 Marthe Meurier, *April* introduces the symbolism of matrimony, a subject he continued to paint throughout his career.

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 bent-over position, 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 a generic vision of womanhood along its spiritual journey. He represented not only the linear life of a woman but also the ongoing process of life that runs cyclically and endlessly. This woman exists solely in the painter's imagination and on the 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.

Beyond the representation of Denis's Christian ideal, *April* displays fin de siècle society's need for mythical imaginaries. According to the 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).⁸⁶ It forms coherent and dynamic ensembles that fall within the symbolic function as they modify or enrich perceived or conceived reality.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ At the level of society as a whole, a collective imaginary responds to a general need for a new—or renewed—reality. Through an imaginary, society attempts to escape its present reality and dive into a fantasized past, present, or future. 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. It 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 they are the result of a need from this period's society. Art is the medium through which this realization is materialized.

In *April*, Denis manifests his own blend of Christian and mythical imaginaries as much as society's—or at a minimum 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 desire for nature and mythical roots. The setting of the sacred grove bears ancient signification. In *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, the anthropologist James George Frazer discusses 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.”⁹⁰ The natural component of the continent's geography has played a major role in the worship of trees since prehistorical times. In Denis's time, rapid urbanization and motorization led to attacks against Paris in the context of immediacy and “here-and-now” mentality.⁹¹ 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. The 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.⁹² 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.”⁹³ This hyper-nervous stimulation resulted in the flight from the city.⁹⁴ Artists of the Parisian avant-garde were mostly en route “to places . . . in which only nature herself could provide the assurance of authenticity.”⁹⁵ Nature is the guardian of this exodus.⁹⁶

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 rooted in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian belief systems: the Garden of Eden, the Earthly Paradise, and the Elysian Fields. The reference to myths is a distinct recourse to a collective imaginary. According to the art historian Gilles Genty, the myth is “the guardian of symbolic stability in the group for whom it stands at the center of cosmogony.”⁹⁷ The meaning of the myth therefore 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 many would like to bring back but that are objects of endless quests.⁹⁸ Upon the origin of the world, they were the places where people used to live in a state of bliss and innocence that humankind has lost. Representing the Garden of Eden and the

earthly paradise therefore means to enter a universe before the Fall located outside 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,⁹⁹ Virgil focused on the description of the idyllic setting.¹⁰⁰

Denis blended Christian and Greco-Roman 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 that avoids dangers and follows faith from betrothment to marriage and 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."¹⁰¹ Genty further suggests 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."¹⁰² Thus, in a period in which traditional values and Catholic faith were 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 idealized nature.

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.

—Charles Baudelaire, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne"

In *The Green Trees*, *The Muses*, and *April*, 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 one another; the works entail temporal synchronicity. During the period that saw the rise of the universalization of public time, the increasing speed of the means of communication, and in turn the progressive confinement of individuals in their private spheres, these three paintings

indicate Denis's interest in bringing diverging temporalities together to 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.¹⁰³ Through the process of the sanctification of nature that emerged as one of Denis's most central theories, the representations of the sacred grove hold a spiritual purpose.¹⁰⁴ With the grove's sanctity, Denis conceptualized his paintings as 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, and visual relation with the ground and the figures inhabiting it all participate in the decorative potentiality of the woods. To this, Denis added the Nabis' *cloisonnisme* style, which is apparent in 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. The paintings' purpose as decorative works that complement modern interior decors 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 permeates Denis's paintings, the myths emerge from common imaginaries that 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 through the deindividualized figures; his wife, Marthe Meurier; or the idealized mystical procession. He combined his private temporality with 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 spiritual through the decorative.

This essay explored three of Maurice Denis's paintings in depth and closely examined the modalities of the representation 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 function of the subject represented in Symbolist painting, so often balancing timelessness and a reaction to modernity. Adding to the study of fin de siècle temporalities, the focus on the representation of woods and forests unveils the period's need to "sense place." By situating forests at the heart of his artistic production in the 1890s, Denis embedded the rituals of processions and spiritual contemplation into what was then generally considered fleeting and disappearing: nature untouched by man. As

an emblem of the return to origins, through Denis's characteristic blend of Christian and Greco-Roman imaginaries, the forest left the fin de siècle to enter eternity.

* * *

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Notes

¹ Maurice Denis, *Journal, Tome I: 1884–1904* (Paris: Éditions du Vieux Colombier, 1957), 130. All English translations from French are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

² Thérèse Barruel, "Chronologie," in *Maurice Denis (1870–1943)*, edited by Guy Cogeval (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 356.

³ The first mention of the Saint-Germain-en-Laye forest appeared in his diary on August 1, 1885, where he related his admiration for "[les] grands arbres crochus, tordus, grands, touffus, espacés, les uns jaunes, les autres verts, les autres gris" (Denis, *Journal*, 37).

⁴ Barruel, "Chronologie," 356.

⁵ Jean-Paul Bouillon, "Le théoricien," in *Maurice Denis (1870–1943)*, edited by Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2006), 33.

⁶ Maurice Denis, "Définition du Néo-traditionnisme," *Art et Critique*, August 1890, 545.

⁷ See Richard Thomson and Belinda Thomson, "Maurice Denis's 'Définition du Néo-traditionnisme' and Anti-Naturalism," *Burlington Magazine* 154, no. 1309 (2012): 260–67; 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.

⁸ Denis, "Définition du Néo-traditionnisme," 548.

⁹ 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; and 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,” *Society of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (1986): 397–98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260509>.

¹⁰ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abr. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 126, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-00400-3>. It is important to note the relevance of Frazer’s anthropological research for Denis and his time. *The Golden Bough* is a historical source, and as such, some of its analyses and factual content are outdated.

¹¹ Thomas, “Maurice Denis et l’exemple de Puvis de Chavannes,” 41.

¹² Sylvie Patry, “Il y avait en Puvis de Chavannes l’étoffe d’un grand orateur chrétien,” in Bouillon, *Maurice Denis (1870–1943)*, 39.

¹³ Denis, *Journal*, 42, quoted in Jean-Paul Bouillon, *Maurice Denis* (Geneva: Skira, 1993), 66.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Giovanni Careri, “Heterochronies: The Gospel According to Caravaggio,” in *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, edited by Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey (New York: Routledge, 2018), 152, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229409>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ On the subject of linearity in literary and graphic arts, see C. D. Keyes, “Art and Temporality,” *Research in Phenomenology* 1 (1971): 63–73, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916471x00046>.

¹⁹ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “revive,” accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/revive>.

²⁰ Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionnisme,” 548.

²¹ Jean Leduc, *L’enracinement de la République: 1879–1918* (Paris: Hachette Éducation, 2014), 31–32.

²² 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*, edited by Nathalie Bondil and Francine Lavoie (Paris: Hazan; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2002), 18.

²³ Ibid., 24.

²⁴ June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam, introduction to *Nationalism and French Visual Culture, 1870–1914*, edited by June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 11.

²⁵ Edouard Drumont, *Mon vieux Paris* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 1878), quoted in Hargrove and McWilliam, “Introduction,” 11.

²⁶ Jean-Paul Bouillon, “Politique de Denis,” in Cogeval, *Maurice Denis*, 99.

²⁷ Guy Cogeval, “Haute Solitude,” in *Au-delà des étoiles: Le paysage mystique de Monet à Kandinsky*, edited by Guy Cogeval (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Grand Palais, 2017), 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ 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 (1995): 157, <https://doi.org/10.7202/400898ar>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

³¹ Lydie Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” in *Crises de vers*, edited by Maire Blaise and Alain Vaillant (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2000), 289, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pulm.131>.

³² Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic, and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 116, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137006615>.

³³ Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” 279.

³⁴ Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic, and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France*, 119.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁷ Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” 281.

³⁸ Denis always refused to display his works in the Salon due to his distance from the “soul painters” or allegorical painters. See 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).

³⁹ Despland, “L’expérience religieuse au XIXe siècle,” 158.

⁴⁰ Parisse, “Ésotérisme, modèle mystique et littérature à la fin du XIXe siècle,” 276.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁴² 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*, edited by Guy Cogeval (Paris: Réunion des Musées

Nationaux / Grand Palais, 2017), 24. Furthermore, the influence of Asian religions (such as Buddhism and Hinduism) permeated mysticism in a variety of ways, notably leading to the fascination with 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 (1963–64): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1964.10794492>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Maurice Denis, "De Gauguin et de Van Gogh au classicisme," *L'Occident*, May 1909, 187–202, quoted in Maurice Denis, *Le ciel et l'Arcadie*, edited by Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris: Hermann, 1993), 172.

⁴⁶ This interpretation is also shared by the iconographical file of *The Green Trees* from the Orsay Museum's documentation center. The iconographical file gathers iconography and curatorial commentary on the artworks from the museum's collection. See Musée d'Orsay, "Maurice Denis, *Paysage aux arbres verts* ou *Les Hêtres de Kerduel*," RF 2001 8, Iconographical file, Orsay Museum, Paris.

⁴⁷ Denis, *Journal*, 16.

⁴⁸ Musée d'Orsay, "Maurice Denis, *Paysage aux arbres verts* ou *Les Hêtres de Kerduel*."

⁴⁹ Denis, *Journal*, 53.

⁵⁰ Pronounced by Pope John Paul II in 1982 (Office of Papal Liturgical Celebrations, "Beatifications by Pope John Paul II, 1979–2000," vatican.va, last accessed July 1, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturg/saints/ns_lit_doc_list_blesseds-jp-ii_en.html).

⁵¹ Denis, *Journal*, 40.

⁵² Ibid., 42.

⁵³ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁴ This interpretation was brought forth by Bouillon in *Maurice Denis*, 48; and Ursula Perucchi-Petri, "Maurice Denis," in *Nabis: Bonnard, Vuillard, Maurice Denis, Vallotton (1888–1900)*, edited by Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perucchi-Petri (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1993), 36. Additionally, the image of Jesus as the groom and the church as his bride is recurrent in the Bible (see, e.g., Ephesians 5:22–33; and 2 Corinthians 11:2–4). This analogy could have influenced Denis in his religious portrayals of brides.

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ Cogeval, *Maurice Denis*, 151.

⁵⁷ Catholic Church, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (Washington, DC: Office of Pub. Services, United States Catholic Conference, 2002), no. 346.

⁵⁸ Denis, *Journal*, 36.

⁵⁹ Musée d'Orsay, "Maurice Denis, *Paysage aux arbres verts* ou *Les Hêtres de Kerduel*."

⁶⁰ Bouillon, *Maurice Denis: Le spirituel dans l'art*, 36.

⁶¹ Quoted in Bouillon, *Maurice Denis*, 17.

⁶² Laura Auricchio, "The Nabis and Decorative Painting," Metropolitan Museum, published October 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dcpt/hd_dcpt.htm.

⁶³ Claire Frèches-Thory, "Constitution du groupe," in Frèches-Thory and Perucchi-Petri, *Nabis*, 13.

⁶⁴ Denis, *Journal*, 37.

⁶⁵ Maurice Denis, "Préface de la IXe exposition des Peintres impressionnistes et symbolistes," quoted in Denis, *Le ciel et l'Arcadie*, 26.

⁶⁶ Denis's "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 colors, 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).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jane Kinsman, "The Muses (*Les Muses*)," in *Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Beyond: Post-Impressionist Masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay*, edited by Stéphane Guégan and Sylvia Patry (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco; New York: Prestel, 2010), 107.

⁶⁹ 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* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).

⁷⁰ Ursula Perucchi-Petri, "Maurice Denis et le Japon," *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 4 (1982): 261.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 264.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 260.

⁷⁵ See Jan Thompson, “The Role of Women in the Iconography of Art Nouveau,” *Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (1971–72): 158–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1972.10792994>.

⁷⁶ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: 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).

⁷⁷ 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 (*Peinture: Musée d'Orsay* [Paris: ESFP, 2011], 15).

⁷⁸ Kern, *Culture of Time and Space*, 8.

⁷⁹ Katherine M. Kuenzli, *The Nabis and Intimate Modernism: Painting and the Decorative at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Surrey and Burlington, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 6.

⁸² This painting can be found in the Vuillard catalogue raisonné under the entry VII-310. Antoine Salomon and Guy Cogeval, *Vuillard. Le regard innombrable. Volume II* (Paris: Skira/Seuil, 2003), 692.

⁸³ Philippe Thiébaud, *Guimard: L'art nouveau* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 367.

⁸⁴ See Thérèse Barruel's analysis of Denis's *Figures dans un paysage de printemps*, which shares a similar iconography to *April*, in “Le bonheur classique,” in Cogeval, *Maurice Denis*, 240.

⁸⁵ Fabienne Stahl, “*Avril (Les Anémones)*,” in Bouillon, *Maurice Denis*, 134.

⁸⁶ Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'imaginaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁰ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 126.

⁹¹ Bondil and Lavoie, *Voyage into Myth*, 36.

⁹² Doane, *Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 4.

⁹³ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited by Kurt Wolff (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1950), 410.

⁹⁴ 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

that 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” (“Methodologische Einleitung für die Erhebungen des Vereins für Sozialpolitik,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988], 14), quoted in Andreas Anter, “Max Weber’s Concept of Nature and the Ambivalence of Modernity,” *Max Weber Studies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 228, <https://doi.org/10.15543/mws/2011/2/4>. 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).

⁹⁵ Bondil and Lavoie, *Voyage into Myth*, 37.

⁹⁶ 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.

⁹⁷ Genty, “Muses in the Woods,” 123.

⁹⁸ Umberto Eco, *Histoire des lieux de légende*, translated by Renaud Temperini (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 45.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Henry Rushton Fairclough (London: Heinemann, 1916), 6.660–679.

¹⁰¹ Genty, “Muses in the Woods,” 120.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 126.

¹⁰⁴ Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionnisme,” 548.