FRENCH 42: The Development of the Arts during the Belle Époque

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Belle Epoque (1880-1914) saw the rapid transformation of society and the arts. In this period of significant cross-fertilization and collaboration among artists in different media, elegant audiences enjoyed the last flowering of Romantic theatre and opera, while Symbolists and Decadents, as well as Post-Impressionists in art, signaled the end of an era. At the same time, ebullient and iconoclastic young poets, painters, composers and choreographers worked intensely together to elaborate a new sensibility through their art, in tune with a modern world transformed by industrialization. We will trace the waning of the 19th century and the rise of this new spirit in the arts.

OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the social, cultural, and artistic aspects of the Belle Epoque in Paris, 1880-1914.
2. To familiarize students with the major literary and artistic movements of the period and the important personalities who created them.
3. To explore the interplay and cross-fertilization among the creators working in different media.

TEXTS


COURSEWORK

-- Response Journal: to be submitted three times during the summer session.
   -- Your reactions to and reflections on the materials we are studying in the course. It is best done in the flow of the assignments, hence to be submitted in fragmentary form, not as a continuous, structured essay.
   -- Include: commentary on or analysis of passages from the readings or on artistic works
   -- Do not include: Reading or class notes without amplifying them with your own reflections.

Length: Journal 1: 4-5 pp., about 1500 words, typed, double spaced
        Journal 2: 7-8 pp., about 2500 words
        Journal 3: 6-7 pp., about 2100 words

-- Poster project: Choose an artist from the list below. Research his or her works, prepare a poster illustrating:
   - the major features or elements of style of his/her works
   - the principal contributions he/she made to the evolution of painting during the Belle Epoque
   - include the dates of the works illustrated on your poster
   - prepare a 3-4 page presentation summarizing the essential features of the art to be turned in, along with an annotated bibliography of the sources you consulted.
   - during the poster session, be ready to justify with pertinent details your choice of the works illustrated on your poster.

(List of Artists you may select:)

Pierre Bonnard  Robert Delaunay  Hector Guimard  Henri Rousseau
Georges Braque  André Derain  Henri Matisse  Paul Sérusier
Paul Cézanne  Maurice Denis  Gustave Moreau  Georges Seurat
Mary Cassatt  Paul Gauguin  Odilon Redon  Paul Signac  Edouard Vuillard

( Others can be added if needed.)

GRADING

Response journal, submitted in three sets  50%  (10%, 20%, 20%)
Poster project (poster and a 3-4 page analysis, summary)  30%
Attendance, class participation, informal oral presentations  20%
Syllabus, French 42 : The Evolution of the Arts in France during the Belle Epoque

**Class 1:** Introduction to the course. What is the Belle Epoque? What made it "belle" and perhaps not so "belle?"  
  Historical and social background.  
  - Read: "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (in Trunk, Resources)

**Class 2:**  
  Positivism, Realism, Naturalism  
  - Read Guy de Maupassant, "My Friend Patience" (in Trunk, Resources) and answer the questionnaire at the end.  
  - See the videos Masters of Illusion and Part I of Impressionism, a visual revolution (link in Trunk, Resources).  
  What were the standards of painting taught in the Ecole des Beaux Arts and used by the Salon juries? Which of these conventions did the Impressionists contravene? By doing what? To what degree did the Impressionist painters conform with or deviate from the principles of realist art?  
  - In class: Discussion of the videos, Realism, Naturalism, Maupassant; analysis of paintings of Courbet and some Impressionists.

**Class 3:**  
  Satire of the bourgeois life  
  - Read Georges Feydeau, A Fitting Confusion, in A Flea in her Rear or Ants in her Pants.  
  - In class: Discussion of the play: How does the play reflect bourgeois life, its values and hypocrisies, its inconsistencies, which lend themselves to comedy? Entertainment in the Belle Epoque; images of Manet, Degas, Monet, Renoir, Béraud, Tissot.  

**Class 4:**  
  Reaction to bourgeois materialism and a changing world: Fin-de-siècle Decadence  
  - Read Joris-Karl Huysmans, Against the Grain (in French, A rebour), the introduction and Chapters 1-3 (online, see Trunk, External Links). As you read, make a list (included in your Journal) of the various references to physical and spiritual decline, decay, weakening, corruption. If Des Esseintes epitomizes the decadent hero par excellence, how can Decadence be defined? What is the narrator's attitude, his relationship to the world? What might have caused such a mental and spiritual state?  
  - Read, summarize and present one chapter of Against the Grain (assigned in advance).  
  - In class: Discussion of the reading and presentations. Paintings of Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon.  
  **Hand in Journal 1.**

**Class 5:**  
  Rejection of materialism and bourgeois pragmatism: Aestheticism and Symbolism  
  - Read the poems by Charles Baudelaire, Correspondences, La Beauté, and Hymne à la beauté and the poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, L'Après-midi d'un faune (Afternoon of a Faun, document in TRUNK). Write a prose outline of what you think happens in Mallarmé's poem to be handed in. When unsure, define/describe the problem.  
  - View the video of Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, a tone poem by Claude Debussy (in Trunk, Resources). Is there any imitation or mimicry in the music suggested by the words of the poem?  
  - In class: Discussion of the poems, Wagner and Gesamtkunstwerk, Debussy's music, the dance of Nijinski.

**Class 6:**  
  Symbolism in theater and painting  
  - Read Maeterlinck, Pelléas and Mélisande, Acts I-II. What does the reader/spectator know about each of the characters? In what ways does the presentation of characters in this play differ from a Realist approach?  
  - List the recurrent images that appear to be important. How do they acquire a metaphorical or symbolic dimension? How do they relate to the creation of mood in the play? Look up one of the following images in an online dictionary of symbols and apply the information to one or more scenes in Pelléas and Mélisande: water, ocean, well, gold, sunlight, the hand, darkness, enclosure or closed spaces.  
  - In class: Discussion of the reading and the function of imagery in the play; Symbolism in art: Moreau, Gauguin.

**Class 7:**  
  - Read Pelléas and Mélisande, Acts III, IV, V. How does the action develop? How are emotions evoked? To what degree does the play reflect the theories of the Symbolists?  
  - In class: Discussion of the play and the images you have chosen to study. Passages from the music of Debussy.  
  Symbolism in the visual arts: Redon, Puvis de Chavannes.

**Class 8:**  
  Gide, The Immoralist  
  - Read Part I and Part II (to the end of the protagonist’s stay on the farm in Normandy).  
  - In class: Setting, plot, characterization. How different from Realist/Naturalist narrative? Nature as a source of metaphor. The search for the old Adam, the original, underlying reality? Presentation of Art Nouveau.
Class 9: Gide, The Immoralist

- Read the rest of Part II and Part III of The Immoralist.
- In class: Discussion of the play and the images you have chosen to study. Presentation of Cézanne.

Class 10: The Rise of the Avant-garde and the revolt against tradition

- Read poems by Rimbaud (handout) and Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years, pp. 3-45. What are the four traits that characterize the Avant-garde? In what ways do they break with literary and artistic traditions?
- View the video Fauvism (in TRUNK).
- In class: Discussion of the reading and the video. Art of Henri Rousseau.

Class 11:

- Read and Alfred Jarry: Suicide by Hallucination," pp.187-223; and Acts I, II, III of Ubu Roi. Study characterization, parody and other forms of humor. What is the central conflict announced in Act I? How is it developed?
- In class: Discussion of the reading. Presentation of Fauve painters.

Class 12:

- Read Ubu Roi, Acts IV and V. Identify comic scenes and analyze one for how the humorous effects are achieved. Is the play pure burlesque comedy or a satire of contemporary France? If the latter, what is being satirized? Does the play conform to the definition of either comedy or tragedy? Explain.
- In class: Discussion of the play.

Hand in Response Journal 2.

Class 13: Apollinaire and Cubist poetry

- Read "The Impressario of the Avant-Garde" in Shattuck, The Banquet Years.
- Read/look at some of the Calligrammes in Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire.
- Find on the Internet images of Belle Époque posters by Toulouse-Lautrec, Mucha, Chéret, Steinlen. Do their works have any common features? Find 3-4 words to characterize each one.
- In class: Discussion of the reading and the poster art.

Class 14:

- Read and STUDY: the long poem "Zône" : How do the themes in the poem evolve? What emotions are evoked or suggested in parts of the poem? Does the imagery function in the same way as in the Symbolist plays we read?
- See the video New Ways of Seeing, Picasso, Braque and the Cubist Revolution (link in TRUNK, Resources. In what ways do the Cubist painters deviate from the principal conventions of Western painting since the Renaissance?
- In class: Discussion of the works.

Class 15:

- Read Colette, The Vagabond, Part I (pp.5-63). Prepare responses to the questionnaire in TRUNK. Select two comparisons from different chapters and be prepared to explain and justify your choice in class.
- In Class: Discussion of the reading and poster art and circus images (Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat, Picasso).

Class 16:

- Read Colette, The Vagabond, Part II, pp. 64-145. Prepare responses to the questionnaire in TRUNK.
- In Class: Discussion of the reading; feminism in the Belle Époque.

Class 17:

- Read the end of Colette, The Vagabond, prepare responses to the questionnaire in TRUNK.
- Read "Erik Satie, Montmartre Piano Player" in Shattuck, The Banquet Years and Cocteau's plot outline for Parade (Trunk, Resources);
- Listen to Satie, Parade (Trunk, Resources); Instrumentation? What features make it resolutely modern?
- In class: Discussion of The Vagabond; Presentation of Parade, a Cocteau/Satie/Picasso/Diaghilev collaboration; humor in the music of Erik Satie; the apotheosis of Gesamtkunstwerk; Parade as a metaphor for the Modernist's conundrum.

Class 18: Poster session – Art Exhibit

- In class: Bring your posters and papers to class; be prepared to introduce your artist, say a few words about the dominant traits of his or her art works, and explain your choice of illustrations.
- Tour the exhibit, listen to the presentations, trace the affinities among the painters.
- Hand in Response Journal 3.