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MAURICE DENIS

JOURNEYS

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“Illustration is the decoration of a book ... without excessive fidelity to the text, without making the subject correspond exactly to the writing, but on the contrary an embroidery of arabesques over the pages ... an accompaniment of expressive lines.”

MAURICE DENIS, 1890¹



Lithograph from
André Gide, *Le voyage
d'Urien*, 1893 [1]



Woodcut from
Paul Verlaine,
Sagesse, 1911 [4]

THE ARTIST MAURICE DENIS was a reader, writer and illustrator of books. His observation on the subject of book illustration, quoted on the back flap, may stand beside the quotation on art in general for which he is best known: “remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.”² In other words, the accurate representation of reality, whether the outside world being depicted in a painting or the content of the text being pictured in a book illustration, was not the artist’s primary concern.

Maurice Denis was born in 1870 in Normandy, France, and was a member of the Nabis group of painters who were inspired by the example of the painter Paul Gauguin. While the careers of the Nabis artists travelled in different directions, Denis’ youthful Symbolist leanings reflected an intense and lifelong religious affiliation. His Roman Catholicism influenced the strongly personal choice of books that he illustrated, and provided the imagery and narratives that he explored in book illustration and other media. Personal motifs also recur in his book illustrations, including portraits of his children and of his first wife, Marthe, who shares her distinctive profile with Queen Haiatelnefous in *Le voyage d’Urien* (1893, cat. 1). Denis was also a passionate traveller to Italy, sometimes in pursuit of illustration projects such as the lives of St. Francis or St. Dominic. In 1925, he published his own *Carnets de voyages en Italie*, and Italian scenes and landscapes populate many of his illustrations. The influence of Renaissance artists such as Fra Angelico, of whom

¹ “Définition du néo-traditionnisme,” *Art et Critique*, no. 66, 30 August 1890, p. 557.

² “Définition du néo-traditionnisme,” *Art et Critique*, no. 65, 23 August 1890, p. 540.

he made a special study, is evident, for example, in *Charmes et leçons de l'Italie* (1933, cat. 7).

In 1889, while still in his teens, Denis designed illustrations for the volume of poetry *Sagesse* (1880) by Paul Verlaine and visited the poet to show them to him. Although Verlaine was touched, permission for a publication was not granted. The designs were nevertheless exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants, where they were seen by the novelist André Gide. Enthused, Gide commissioned Denis to illustrate his Symbolist novel *Le voyage d'Urien*. The title is a play on words: *le voyage du rien*, the journey of nothingness. Both Gide and Denis are equally credited on the title page, and Gide himself referred to the project as “this journey truly made together.”³

³ Handwritten dedication by André Gide to Maurice Denis, in Denis' copy of the book *Le voyage d'Urien*, Musée départemental Maurice Denis, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France.

Le voyage d'Urien was produced on a modest scale using lithography for the illustrations. Wood engravings by professional wood engravers, not by artists, were preferred by conservative French book collectors of the period. Consequently, the publisher Ambroise Vollard steered Denis towards the use of the woodcut in his next major illustration projects. At the same time as working on designs for *Sagesse*, Denis had conceived illustrations for another of his favourite books, *L'imitation de Jésus-Christ* (1903, cat. 2). His attentive study of this fifteenth-century devotional work raised eyebrows among his fellow-commuters on the suburban Parisian trains, according to a contemporary eyewitness account. Vollard also introduced him to the Beltrand family of wood engravers. The father, Tony Beltrand, executed the 216 woodcuts from Denis' watercolour designs for *Imitation*, which appeared in 1903; while the son, Jacques Beltrand, collaborated on many subsequent projects, right up to Denis' last production, an illustrated edition of the poems of the sixteenth-century poet Pierre de Ronsard, which was published in 1944 after Denis' death the preceding year.

Denis had produced his own woodcuts for the designs for *Sagesse* by Verlaine, who had died in 1896. Now, Vollard persuaded him to hand the designs over to the Beltrands, with the result that the volume was published in 1911, with a suite of unbound hand-coloured engravings (cat. 4). The addition of colour marks a transition from Denis' dreamy, introverted earlier works to the sunnier and more open later ones. Back in 1898, André Gide had accompanied Denis on a visit to Rome and had encouraged his interest in classicism. A more classical breadth can likewise be seen in the illustrations to *Éloa* of 1917 (cat. 5). The poem by Alfred de Vigny describes an angel who falls in love with Lucifer. Towards the end of his life, Denis reverted to the use of lithography, the medium he had employed for *Le voyage d'Urien*, in order to illustrate the poems of the

English poet Francis Thompson in a French translation by Denis' second wife, Élisabeth Graterolle (cat. 8). Thompson's most famous poem, "To a Snowflake," sees proof of the existence of God in the designs found in Nature.

Maurice Denis visited Canada in September 1927 as part of a North American lecture tour, and there met the Canadian painter Ozias Leduc. Later, Leduc's protégé Paul-Émile Borduas studied with Denis in Paris at Les Ateliers d'Art Sacré, as did, for an even shorter time, another Canadian artist, Jean Dallaire. The art of Maurice Denis then seemed conservative to these younger painters, whose own paths would lead them back to Canada and in a very different artistic direction.

JONATHAN FRANKLIN

CHECKLIST

Unless otherwise stated, all volumes are from the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

- 1 André Gide (1869–1951), *Le voyage d'Urien* (Paris: Librairie de l'art indépendant, 1893).
- 2 Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), *L'imitation de Jésus-Christ* (Paris: A. Volland, 1903). Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, University of Alberta, Edmonton.
- 3 Jean Schlumberger (1877–1968), *Épigrammes romaines* (Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Occident, 1910). University of Ottawa Library, Ottawa.
- 4 Paul Verlaine (1844–1896), *Sagesse* (Paris: A. Volland, 1911).
- 5 Alfred de Vigny (1797–1863), *Éloa, ou la soeur des anges. Mystère* (Paris: Le Livre contemporain, 1917). William Colgate History of Printing Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal.
- 6 Adrien Mithouard (1864–1929), *La majesté du temps. Poèmes* (Paris: G. Grès, 1922). University of Ottawa Library, Ottawa.
- 7 Maurice Denis (1870–1943), *Charmes et leçons de l'Italie* (Paris: A. Colin, 1933). University of Ottawa Library, Ottawa.
- 8 Francis Thompson (1859–1907), *Poèmes*, translated by Élisabeth M. Denis-Graterolle (Paris: Ambroise Volland, 1936).

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