

# ***Fernand Khnopff: Writings on Art and Artists***



Fernand Khnopff, c. 1900

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Boston College  
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## About this project

This compilation includes all the published writings on art by Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921), the noted Belgian Symbolist painter, that I have been able to locate. He wrote extensively for Belgian and English publications, and was also translated into German for journals in Berlin and Vienna. An invaluable guide to Khnopff's writings is the extensive bibliography in the catalog raisonné of his works published in 1987: Robert Delevoy, Catherine De Croës, and Giselle Ollinger-Zinque. *Fernand Khnopff. Catalogue de l'œuvre* (Brussels: Lebeer Hossmann, 1987). A significant number of articles has been added to their list. Some of Khnopff's public lectures were extensively reported in the press, and these summaries have been included also.

Fernand Khnopff will be one of the featured artists in the exhibition at the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College, "The Spirit of the Land: Tradition and Innovation in Belgian Landscape Painting" in the fall of 2017. Khnopff's writings are a valuable source of information about many of the artists included in this exhibition.

An introductory essay by the editor, "**The Artist as Critic: Fernand Khnopff on Art and Artists**," introduces the major sections of this compilation.

Articles originally in French and German have been translated by the editor; the translations are marked with a different font color, and follow the transcribed articles. The editor cheerfully admits to not being a professional translator, so the reader is encouraged to consult the original texts.

Careful readers may wish to verify the accuracy of transcription and study the original typography in the layout of the pages, which often reflects the aesthetics of Art Nouveau. Many of these journals are now available online. A list of sources is provided on the next page.

Thumbnail images are included in the transcribed articles for the convenience of the reader. Some have been replaced with color images in the public domain.

The **index** of names mentioned in Khnopff's essays is extensive, and should be useful to scholars of the art of this era.

I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to my undergraduate research assistant, Jean Bower, for her industry and acumen in transcribing many of these articles, some of which were scanned from decades-old photocopies that I made as a student.

The digital specialists at Boston College's O'Neill library, particularly Anna Kijas and Emily Toner, have been invaluable in the process of creating this online publication.

### Sources for original scanned images of Fernand Khnopff's writings on art:

The growing digitization of historic journals has revolutionized the study of late nineteenth century art. Online access has made even rare journals accessible to all.

The full series of *l'Art Moderne* is available on the web site of the Université Libre de Bruxelles:

<http://digitheque.ulb.ac.be/fr/digitheque-revues-litteraires-belges/periodiques-numerises/index.html#c11373>

The University of Heidelberg has made available high resolution images of the complete run of *The Studio*:

<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/studio?sid=a36d95b2472af15d6e3ab03d944aca14>

A high resolution scan of *Ver Sacrum* can be found at the University of Heidelberg; the December 1898 issue designed by Khnopff is here:

<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/vs1898/0379?sid=952b005516dfee98c7359264d15d9876>

The Hathi Trust has digitized copies of the *Bulletin de la Classe des beaux-arts* of the Académie Royale de Belgique:

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008881434>

The Hathi Trust also has digitized copies of *The Magazine of Art*:

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000049695>

and the *Wiener Rundschau*: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000506111>

and *Le Flambeau*: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000497539>

The Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) has digitized many periodicals of the era, including *La Jeune Belgique*:

<http://digitheque.ulb.ac.be/fr/digitheque-revues-litteraires-belges/periodiques-numerises/index.html#c12716>

## The Artist as Critic: Fernand Khnopff on Art and Artists

Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) is one of the most fascinating and enigmatic of late-nineteenth century Symbolist artists.<sup>1</sup> Born into a wealthy family at Grembergen-lez-Termonde, near Brussels, he lived for several years in Bruges as a child, then resided in Brussels for the rest of his life. At this time, Brussels was one of the most vibrant international centers of experimental art and literature, with a flourishing cohort of journals dedicated to the new art.

Knopff was exceptionally well educated in the history of art and culture, and this is amply demonstrated in the reviews and commentaries on art that he published for over thirty-five years. He was active in many of the leading avant-garde art associations in Brussels, such as Les XX (1883-1893) and La Libre Esthétique (1893-1914). The breadth of his artistic interests is astonishing—he wrote on everything from English art to street decorations, the history of printmaking to theater. He was particularly fond of Shakespeare, and lectured on Hamlet a number of times in the 1890s, and wrote two long commentaries on that play for a Viennese publication (*Die Zeit*) in 1899.

Although often mistakenly characterized as an isolated aesthete, Khnopff was eminently social. He knew everyone, and had an opinion on everything. Sometimes he was harshly critical, as in his denunciations of the private organization devoted to *l'Œuvre Nationale de l'Art applique à la Rue* in 1896.<sup>2</sup> Mostly, however, he chose to be an enthusiastic proponent for the flourishing art movements in Belgium, devoting extensive articles on artists quite different from himself, such as Constantin Meunier and Léon Frederic. Quality was his primary focus, as well as art which engaged with the social currents of the day.

This was an era of great vitality, with significant artistic movements in painting, sculpture and the decorative arts. Khnopff critiqued them all, from German and Viennese architecture and interior design to sculpted medals and even lace-making. His

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<sup>1</sup> Monographs on Khnopff include: Michel Draguet, *Fernand Khnopff ou l'ambigu poétique* (Ghent and Brussels: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 1995), Jeffery W. Howe, *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), and Louis Dumont-Wilden, *Fernand Khnopff* (Brussels: G. Van Oest & Cie., 1907). Major exhibition catalogs include *Fernand Khnopff 1858-1921* (Paris, Brussels, Hamburg, 1979), and Frederik Leen, Dominique Marechal, Sophie van Vliet, et al., *Fernand Khnopff 1858-1921*, (Brussels: Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> To encourage artistic improvements of the urban context, the organization *l'Œuvre Nationale de l'Art applique à la Rue* was founded in 1894 by Eugene Broerman in Brussels. The group organized competitions for new signage in the city, architectural restorations, and lighting in public squares. Khnopff, along with other artists, responded skeptically to a questionnaire about this group in 1896. For more on the activities of this group, see Charles Mulford Robinson, "Belgium's Art Crusade," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 104 (February 1902), 443-452.

own house reflected Viennese design principles, and during the first World War he provided designs for lace manufacturers.<sup>3</sup>

Khnopff was deeply interested in the history of art in Belgium, and he lectured and wrote about the great artists from the Burgundian and Baroque eras, including Jan van Eyck and Peter-Paul Rubens.

Khnopff's first published comments on his art were occasioned by a sensational controversy involving the popular French opera singer Rose Caron (1857-1930). In 1884-85 Khnopff created several designs for the self-styled Sâr Joséphin Péladan's novel *Le Vice Suprême*, one of which was titled *la Sphinge*. Khnopff tore this up and threw it at the feet of Mme. Caron, who was incensed by what she perceived as a libelous portrait of herself when she saw the picture at the exhibition of Les XX in 1885. This incident was widely discussed in the Belgian press; the story was so sensational that at first *L'Indépendance Belge* accused *La Réforme* of having invented the story to boost circulation.<sup>4</sup> A glance at a contemporary photograph of Rose Caron suggests that Mme. Caron may well have perceived a resemblance to herself in the *Sphinge*, for she shares the type of English beauty which had become Khnopff's decided preference. Mme. Caron was not satisfied with Khnopff's explanation; a letter recently sold in Brussels expressed her continuing anger and demand for an apology.<sup>5</sup>



Rose Caron, postcard c. 1905.

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<sup>3</sup> See Marguerite Coppens, "Les Commandes dentellières de L'Union patriotique des femmes belges et du Comité de la dentelle à Fernand Khnopff," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art*, 64 (1995), 71-83.

<sup>4</sup> This incident was widely reported in the Belgian press: Jacques Champsal, "Incident Khnopff-Caron," *La Basoche*, (Brussels), vol. 1, 1855, 202; Gustave Lagye, "Au XX," *La Fédération Artistique*, (Brussels), 20 (Feb. 28, 1885), 157; Gustave Lagye, "Encore l'incident Khnopff," *La Fédération Artistique*, 21, (March 7, 1885), 165-166. Madeleine Octave Maus recapitulated the event in *Trente Années de Lutte pour l'Art, 1884-1914*, (Brussels, 1926), 35-36.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bibliore.com/products/khnopff-caron-rose-lettre-autographe-avec-signature-datee-du-25-fevrier-1885-adressee-au-docteur-max-au-theatre-royal-de-la-monnaie-bruxelles-2-p-8-enveloppe-timbree-jointe-petit/>



Fernand Khnopff: *D'après Joséphin Péladan: Le Vice Suprême*, 1885. Private collection.

His next publications were letters in *l'Art Moderne* in 1890, the art newspaper first associated with Les XX and later La Libre Esthétique.

Inspired by the efforts of British Arts and Crafts pioneers such as William Morris and John Ruskin to improve society and the plight of the workers through artistic endeavors, Khnopff participated in the Section d'Art of the Brussels Maison du Peuple in Brussels. The Section d'Art was an educational branch of this workers' association.<sup>6</sup> Khnopff was one of the directors of the Section d'Art of this organization and lectured to the workers on English and early Flemish art; see the report in *L'Art Moderne* (1893) transcribed elsewhere in this document. He also wrote and lectured about William Morris (1896) and Walter Crane (1894), leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement. The conclusion of his lecture on Walter Crane, an extended description of a pageant of flowers, reveals his passion for allegory and symbolic imagery. It was repeated in translation in 1898 in the Viennese journal *Ver Sacrum*.

Khnopff's passion for British art is particularly evident in his long memorial articles on Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1898, reprised in 1915) and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1915).

In 1895 Khnopff became a regular reviewer for the British art journal *The Studio*, and until the first World War he published many feature articles and an almost monthly column for their "Studio-Talk" section.<sup>7</sup> He was a tireless champion of contemporary

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<sup>6</sup> The activities of the *Section d'Art* are discussed in Eugenia W. Herbert, *The Artist and Social Reform in Belgium and France, 1885-1898* (New Haven, 1961) 31; and in Donald Drew Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts* (New York, 1970), 604-9.

<sup>7</sup> *The Studio* was founded in 1893, and was a leader in introducing photomechanical reproductions in its articles. See Gerry Beegan, "The Studio: Photomechanical Reproduction and the Changing Status of Design," *Design Issues*, 23, 4 (Autumn, 2007), 46-61.

Belgian art, and generously supported his fellow artists, as can be seen in his many feature articles and reviews. He was particularly eloquent in his tributes to Alfred Stevens (1906), Léon Frederic and Victor Rousseau (1907), and Constantin Meunier (1905), among others. His "Studio-Talk" reviews are very straightforward, but his writing style could be elliptical in some of the longer features. He frequently quoted other authors to lend an air of authority to his opinions, and often revealed a droll and sometimes sarcastic sense of humor.

Although his articles focus on other artists, he also discussed his own art on occasion, and some revealing statements are found in these articles. A short essay on his own house, a major work of art itself which was tragically demolished in 1939, is particularly important.<sup>8</sup>

Khnopff was very cosmopolitan; he published important articles in *The Magazine of Art* (London). He had a major impact on the experimental art in Austria. In 1898 he was asked to design the December issue of the new Viennese journal *Ver Sacrum*, which was richly illustrated with his art.<sup>9</sup>

Fernand Khnopff was elected a member of the Classe des Beaux-Arts of the Académie Royale de Belgique in 1907, and contributed motions and articles to their *Bulletin* from 1912-1920. Publication of this journal was interrupted during WWI, but a supplement published in 1919 included numerous works written between 1915-18. Among them is a passionate argument for artistic reparations for the damage caused to Belgian cities by the German occupation, including the return of the missing panels from the Ghent Altarpiece from the Berlin Museum.

His last published article was in 1921 on the works of art inspired by Dante, tracing the artistic representation of the major texts of the Italian writer by artists from Botticelli to Rodin. This gave him ample opportunity to praise one of the British Pre-Raphaelites whom he most admired, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

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<sup>8</sup> Fernand Khnopff, "Mein Haus," *Die Zeit*, 37-38, 483 (2 Jan. 1904), 9. This article was identified by Clément Dessy, "La maison d'artiste en portrait, manifeste et sanctuaire. L'exemple de Fernand Khnopff," in *The Aesthetics of Matter: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and Material Exchange*, ed. By Sarah Posman, Anne Reverseau, David Ayers, Sascha Bru, Benedikt Hjartarson (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2013). 235-248. Professor Dessy has announced a publication of Khnopff's complete writings, but it has not yet appeared. It should make a useful complement to this study. See <http://difusion.ulb.ac.be/vufind/Record/ULB-DIPOT:oai:dipot.ulb.ac.be:2013/171823/Details>

<sup>9</sup> See Geoffrey Simmins, "Fernand Khnopff and *Ver Sacrum*," *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies. Revue canadienne d'etudes néerlandaises*, 17, 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1996), 75-98.