

How to Use Colonial Discourse Against Colonialism: Strategies of Research-Creation in French Symbolist Art, ca. 1890

Marco Deyasi

Cet article propose d'examiner l'art symbolisme en France vers 1890, plus précisément certains artistes ayant utilisé un savoir colonial imprégné de racisme dans leurs productions, sous l'angle de caractéristiques liées à la recherche-création et aux théories postcoloniales. Cette perspective permettra d'éclairer et d'identifier certains éléments de la production symboliste, associés à l'occultisme et à la théosophie et influencés par la mise en place d'une institutionnalisation du colonialisme. Des artistes, tels que Paul Ranson, impatients de découvrir l'art de l'Asie du Sud-Est, ne pouvaient le faire que par le biais de la propagande présentée lors des expositions universelles, ou au sein des sciences dites coloniales. La recherche-création combinée aux théories postcoloniales permet ainsi de révéler de quelle manière le travail de ces artistes a su s'approprier et subvertir cette propagande raciste et coloniale de la fin du XIX^e siècle.

Marco Deyasi is an instructor in the School of Art at Arizona State University, Tempe.
—marco.deyasi@asu.edu

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

2. Pol-Neuveu, "Le Village Tonkinois," *Revue de l'exposition universelle de 1889* (1889): 16–24.

Introduction¹

The 1889 Universal Exposition presented an overwhelming spectacle to the citizens of Paris. Underneath the Eiffel Tower, built as a demonstration of France's industrial and technological superiority, elaborate pavilions from nations around the world were arranged for the enjoyment of visitors. France's colonies were also presented as spectacles, with art, religion, and people put on display. Several pavilions were built to celebrate the art, life, and culture of French Indochina: a theatre, a temple, and a restaurant staffed with over 200 Vietnamese colonial subjects.² A village was recreated with personnel playing roles characteristic of everyday life. An entire Buddhist shrine built in Vietnam was transported to Paris and reassembled piece by piece as the "Pagoda of Great Tranquility."³ Simultaneously, a new museum of Indochinese art opened across the river from the Eiffel Tower in the Trocadero Palace, alongside the ethnographic museum later made famous by Picasso.⁴

The exposition was one of a series of World's Fairs held across the Euro-American world into the mid-twentieth century. These were sites where both national identity and representations of colonized peoples were enunciated, developed, and promoted. Scholars have highlighted how these were not simply propagandistic and triumphalist displays, but were also efforts to *convince* metropolitan audiences to support the creation and maintenance of empire.⁵ As Dana Hale, Lynn Palermo, and others have demonstrated, displays like these were designed to encourage French audiences to move away from simple racist chauvinism and to see colonial subjects as hard-working and intelligent, "junior partners" in a supposedly-mutually beneficial relationship where they would be taught modern production and social principles through French rule.⁶

On his visit to the Exposition, the occultist Gérard Encausse (1865–1916), better known by his pseudonym Papus, was *thrilled* to meet actual Buddhist monks. He considered himself an expert on Buddhism and eagerly sought out the Vietnamese monks brought over to perform ceremonies for the staff of the Indochina section. Papus was one of few Europeans invited to the ceremonies and enthusiastically wrote about his experience in his occultist magazine, *L'Initiation (Initiation)*.⁷ Over the next three months, Papus would write a series of articles entitled "The Orient at the Universal Exposition,"

highlighting his occultist interpretation of what he saw. In contrast to the propagandistic purposes of the exposition, Papus dissented from the imperial messages that the exposition was attempting to convey.⁸ In one article, he contrasted a French pavilion with an Indian pavilion facing it: “The Palace of War, bristling with machine guns, cannons, and cannon-balls, the only church that the self-proclaimed civilized West, could erect to face the Hindu pagoda [sic].”⁹ He asserted that his goal was to bring Eastern and Western civilizations and their complementary forms of knowledge closer together. One way that he tried to do this was by promoting a new occultist theory called Esoteric Buddhism which claimed that Christ and the Buddha were not merely similar or parallel in their religious and social messages, but actually manifestations of the same divinity: they were the same person. Thus, Europeans needed to humbly learn from Asian culture because neither the East nor the West had a monopoly on truth or wisdom. Among the notable proponents of this idea were Edouard Schuré in *The Great Initiates* (1889) and Alfred Percy Sinnett, a prominent Theosophist in India.¹⁰

At about the same time, the painter Paul Ranson (1861–1909), an avid occultist and member of a youthful group of Symbolist artists who called themselves the Nabis, painted an odd picture: *Christ and Buddha* (1889–90) [fig. 1]. The painting lifts the stylized crucifixion from Gauguin’s (1848–1903) work, *The Yellow Christ* (1889) and puts it together with a seated Buddha and a Buddha head in the foreground, each rendered in grey tones as though they are sculptures. Two lotus flowers appear between the Buddhas. The relatively unmodulated colours and dark outlines subvert perspectival space and demonstrate the influence of Emile Bernard (1868–1941) and Gauguin’s *cloisonnisme*. The figures hover over a flattened red and orange background. What appear to be clouds around Christ take on the shape of praying figures. As Robert Welsh has indicated, these Buddhas are of a Thai or Cambodian type and Ranson must have seen them at either the Universal Exposition or the new Indochinese Museum opposite the exposition grounds.¹¹ Welsh identified the source of Ranson’s unusual imagery in Sinnett’s book, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), noting that the painting is effectively an illustration of the author’s occultist beliefs.

This paper argues that Ranson and Papus’ engagement with Southeast Asian art can be usefully explored in relation to the idea of research-creation. There are two interrelated foci: the first is that research-creation holds promise for elucidating historical works of art. The second stems from the first; the idea of research-creation has helped me to reframe a thorny issue around Ranson’s artwork and similar Symbolist works of the late nineteenth-century: how to address artists like Ranson who relied on pseudoscientific ideas like occultism as well as both colonial propaganda like the exposition and the mainstream scientific texts which were suffused with racism? Would this art be irretrievably tainted by its reliance on colonial discourse? Or was it possible to make art that subverted or transgressed the colonial ideologies that otherwise permeated daily life? This essay’s secondary focus is to nuance our understanding of the cultural politics of Symbolist art

3. Maurice Montégut, “Le Temple Bouddhique à l’Esplanade,” *Revue de l’exposition universelle de 1889* (1889): 269–72. Also Hippolyte Gauthier, *Les Curiosités de l’exposition de 1889* (Paris: Ch. Delgrave, 1889), 112.

4. Gilles Genty, in Brigitte Ranson Bitker and Gilles Genty, *Paul Ranson 1861–1909, Catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Somogy éditions d’art, 1999), cat. no. 6, 52.

5. The literature on this subject is too vast to list. Some representative examples include David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Alexander Geppert, *Fleeting Cities, Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Robert Rydell, *All The World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire in American International Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

6. Dana S. Hale, *Races on Display: French Representations of Colonized Peoples, 1886–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Lynn Palermo, “Identity Under Construction: Representing the Colonies at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889,” in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 285–301.

7. Papus, “L’Orient à l’Exposition Universelle: Le temple Bouddhique de Paris,” *L’Initiation* 4, no. 12 (September 1889): 279–82.

8. Papus, “L’Orient à l’Exposition Universelle,” *L’Initiation* 4, no. 10 (July 1889): 94–95.

9. Papus, “L’Orient à l’Exposition Universelle,” *L’Initiation* 4, no. 11 (August 1889): 188.

10. Alfred Percy Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (London: Trübner, 1883); Edouard Schuré, *Les Grands Initiés: esquisse de l’histoire secrète des religions* (Paris: Perrin, 1889).

11. Robert Welsh, “Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman and Judi Freeman (New York: Abbeville Press; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), 66.



Figure 1. Paul Ranson, *Christ and Buddha*, ca. 1890. Oil on canvas, 51.4 cm × 66.7 cm. The Hague, Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Photo: reproduced from Brigitte Ranson Bitker and Gilles Genty, *Paul Ranson, 1861–1909: Catalogue raisonné: japonisme, symbolisme, art nouveau* (Paris: Somogy, 1999).

in the colonial period. While scholarship has begun to move away from the polemical debates of an earlier generation, work remains to be done to fully elucidate the ways that artists like Ranson and the occultist Nabis were *both* implicated in colonial discourse and simultaneously attempting to transgress and transcend it. This essay uses Ranson and the occultist Nabis as a case study for adapting and applying the framework of research-creation to historical art. It represents my effort to use research-creation to unpack these issues.

The concept of research-creation emerged out of the uneasy fit between the practices of artmaking and art teaching in university contexts, where they have been housed since the mid-twentieth century. It highlights the ways that academic priorities, competition, and funding distort the material practice of artmaking and its accompanying intellectual work, especially in the modern neoliberal university which values quantitative measurement and external funding. For example, Natalie Loveless in her recent monograph/manifesto argues that art pedagogy is incommensurate with Canadian universities.¹² She emphasizes that research-creation can help to overcome the persistent divide between writing and making.¹³ She highlights how even supportive institutions like SSHRC continue to separate written or intellectual work from the creative work of making art.

Advocates of research-creation are drawing on the powerful and transformative legacy of the 1960s, especially the efforts by conceptual and performance artists to challenge the dominant culture and its philosophical foundations. Like the political tumult and activism of the era to which it was tied, the rise of contemporary art included a great many experimental forms and efforts that held the potential for liberation. One consistent theme in the literature on research-creation is that it challenges the dominant forms and structures of knowledge, especially as those forms are created and validated by institutions like universities.¹⁴ Scholars like Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk seem to be extending earlier 1960s practices and debates when they argue that research-creation can present “alternative frameworks for understanding, communicating, and disseminating knowledge. This is also what defines research-creation as an epistemological intervention on the level of academic methodology.”¹⁵ Indeed, Chapman, Sawchuk, and Loveless have each emphasized the ways that research-creation can resist the homogenizing pressures of modern universities and inspire political change, perhaps ultimately enabling a profound transformation of Canadian society.¹⁶ This emphasis is significant because it suggests that artmaking might be able to transcend the context from which it emerged and the oppressive discourses upon which it relies, rather than be trapped by its origins in neoliberal and neo-colonial discourses. Loveless and other supporters of research-creation seem to hold open the possibility that thinking and making differently might point the way to a liberatory transformation of society.

Chapman and Sawchuk, along with Loveless, have emphasized the importance of not applying a single definition to research-creation, of not

12. Natalie Loveless, “Introduction: Art in the Expanded Field,” in *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 1–18.

13. Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 12–13.

14. Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis, and ‘Family Resemblances,’” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37 (2012): 5–26.

15. Chapman and Sawchuk, “Research-Creation,” 23.

16. Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 19–37. Also, Natalie Loveless, “Introduction: Short Statements on Research-Creation,” *RACAR* 40, no. 1 (2015): 41–42. Owen Chapman, “Foreword,” in Natalie Loveless, *Knowings and Knots: Methodologies and Ecologies in Research-Creation* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2020), xxiv.

restricting it to a single method or seeking to understand it in exclusive terms.¹⁷ In that spirit, I intend this argument to be a gesture of solidarity and support for my art professor colleagues and comrades. I agree that their efforts to resist the structures and pressures of the modern academy are not simply the narrow concern of a few professors of studio practice. I believe that their struggle has both broader implications and a much longer history in the visual arts. As we know, conceptual and performance artists in the 1960s and 1970s were not the only ones who attempted to transform their culture through new art practices tied to new forms of thinking and making. The assimilation of modernist painting into museums and textbooks, along with decades of formalist criticism, has made it hard for us to appreciate just how much the radical formal experiments of modernism were embedded in a larger project of cultural transformation. In contrast, this paper seeks to elucidate some of the ways that Symbolist artists in Paris attempted to both resist the colonial culture around them and formulate new art practices that might have held the potential to transcend it.

The Symbolists that are the subject of this paper followed the intellectual path pioneered by occultists like Papus and his circle who—much like practitioners of research-creation—appropriated dominant forms of knowledge for their own purposes, thereby intervening in the regime of truth supported by the French colonial state while dissenting from its values and—again, like research-creation—seeking alternative frameworks for knowledge. Central to these efforts was the conviction, shared by Theosophists, occultists, and Symbolists alike, that mainstream knowledge and religious doctrine obscured the real truths of nature and the divine. The occultist milieu of France around 1890 might broadly correspond to what Sawchuk and Chapman call research-for-creation. Occultists and their allies believed that only through alternative methods of recognizing and assembling knowledge could the universal Ideal be discovered, hidden as it was behind superficial appearances and the dogma of established religions like Christianity. Theosophy in particular emphasized that the real truths of religion needed to be decoded by searching for correspondences between different faiths, thereby combining elements from Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, as well as Christianity.

Symbolist artists like Ranson and his colleagues extended these occultist approaches to research and knowledge, fusing them with artmaking. Overall, Symbolist painting was a kind of experimental practice where artists were figuring out how to represent the deep and hidden truths of the world. Recently, Allison Morehead has established that the intellectual model of experimentation, drawn from the natural sciences, directly inspired Symbolist painters and shaped how they understood their efforts to radically reimagine visual form.¹⁸ As Michelle Facos describes, Symbolism was a rejection of the naturalism and realism characteristic of Impression and earlier art movements.¹⁹ Some interpreted this rejection as a call to focus on their own inner states and emotions while others looked to the divine. In both cases, Symbolist discourse consistently used the trope of looking

17. Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, "Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments," *RACAR* 40, no. 1 (2015): 49–52. Loveless, *Knowings and Knots*, xix.

18. Allison Morehead, *Nature's Experiments and the Search for Symbolist Form* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

19. Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

past the appearances of the natural world to find a deeper and more meaningful truth. In so doing, Symbolist artists sought visual forms that could reveal these hidden truths to viewers. Representation was not the goal. Instead, artists aimed to evoke the universal Ideal through compositions of forms and colours.²⁰ As Emile Verhaeren put it, “In Symbolism fact and world become mere pretexts for ideas: they are handled as appearances, ceaselessly variable, and ultimately manifest themselves as the dreams of our brains.”²¹ The milieu of Symbolist painting in France was similar to that of occultist thought and writing: a quick-moving collection of groups that emerged from restless attempts to find forms of creative and intellectual practice that succeeded at their mystical goals.

However, Symbolism was a diverse artistic movement even within France. Ranson and the Nabis represent only a portion of the French artistic milieu and their goals were not shared by all adherents, much less by all Symbolists across the continent. Other Parisian Symbolists like Joséphin Péladan, who organized some of the first exhibitions of Symbolist art, turned towards the politically reactionary end of the political spectrum.²² Péladan, who was originally on the masthead of *L'Initiation*, acrimoniously broke with Papus and his group in 1889 over how central a role Christianity should take in occultism.²³ Likewise, Ranson’s friend and colleague Maurice Denis aligned himself over the course of the 1890s with the extreme right through his partnership with Adrien Mithouard’s antisemitic and monarchist journal *L’Occident*.²⁴ His histories of Symbolism were published by Mithouard’s press and he later joined the notorious proto-fascist *Action Française*.²⁵ This paper focusses on a small segment of the otherwise diverse Symbolist movement, even though it has implications beyond it.

Despite the value that research-creation has when applied to Symbolist art, other lenses are also required. Examining Ranson’s painting and Papus’ interest in Southeast Asian art through the frame of research-creation enables me to position occultist and Symbolist discourse in radical opposition to the mainstream of colonial culture in France at the end of the nineteenth-century. However, this frame does not provide an explanation of exactly *how* occultists and Symbolists could draw on and work with colonial sources for their research and, at the same time, avoid being merely complicit with colonial ideology and the racism that underpinned it. Earlier scholars have argued that primitivism in modern art is fatally tied to colonial discourse and thus to colonial oppression.²⁶ Many of these arguments have centred on the myriad ways in which primitivist modern artists demonstrated profound ignorance of the non-Western art and culture which fascinated them. One consistent perspective within this scholarship is that, because these artists drew on colonial discourse and propagandistic presentations of colonized cultures, their art necessarily reinscribed, rather than resisted, the racism inherent to colonial culture.

While I acknowledge a debt to this earlier work, I seek to move beyond a generalized condemnation of Euro-American artistic interest in non-Western art and culture. I am inspired by more recent work like that by Elizabeth

20. Michelle Facos and Thor J. Mednick, “Introduction,” in *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art*, ed. Facos and Mednick (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 2.

21. Verhaeren, quoted in Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, 16.

22. Maria Di Pasquale, “Joséphin Péladan: Occultism, Catholicism, and Science in the Fin De Siècle,” *RACAR* 34, no. 1 (2009): 53–61.

23. See Péladan’s public letter, published in *L’Initiation* (June 1890): 282–84. Péladan’s conservative politics are indicated by the full name of his group, the Catholic Order of the Rose and Cross, in contrast to Papus and Stanislas de Guaita’s *Kabbalistic Order of the Rose and Cross*.

24. Mark Antliff, “The Jew as Anti-Artist: Georges Sorel, Anti-Semitism, and the Aesthetics of Class Consciousness,” *Oxford Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (1997): 66; Katherine Kuenzli, “Aesthetics and Cultural Politics in the Age of Dreyfus: Maurice Denis’s *Homage to Cézanne*,” *Art History* 30, no. 5 (November 2007): 683–711.

25. Jean-Paul Bouillon, “The Politics of Maurice Denis,” in Guy Cogeval, Claire Denis, et al., *Maurice Denis, 1870–1943* (Ghent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 1994), 99.

26. A representative sample of these works might include: Marianna Torgivnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (Autumn, 1985): 45–70; Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); David Lomas, “In Another Frame: *Les Dames d’Avignon* and Physical Anthropology,” in *Picasso’s Les Dames d’Avignon*, ed. Christopher Green (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104–27.

Childs, who has compellingly expanded the scholarly discussion of Gauguin and highlighted how his paintings *both* drew on colonial imagery and tropes and yet departed from them in significant ways, challenging colonial representations and discourse.²⁷ Using archival research and insights from postcolonial theory, I will argue that far from being a condescending and derogatory primitivism or a colonial appropriation of subaltern culture, occultist-inspired Symbolist art in France was inflected by the egalitarian and utopian politics of Esoteric Buddhism and related occultisms like Theosophy, which also suffused Symbolist painting in France around 1890. Indeed, these esoteric and occultist ideas dovetailed with the Idealism characteristic of Symbolist anti-naturalism and thereby infuse egalitarian and anti-colonial cultural politics into the Symbolist art at the centre of this essay. Overall, we can say that artists like Ranson were both *of* and *against* this world.²⁸

How Might We Approach Art and Research that Relies on Colonial Propaganda?

The visual and scholarly sources that Papus, Ranson, and others used were, undoubtedly, deeply implicated in colonial discourse and white supremacy. As Nélia Dias, Alice Conklin, and others have demonstrated, scientific racism saturated the social sciences at this time.²⁹ Sometimes called Social Darwinism, this view claimed that there was an evolutionary hierarchy of humans. Adherents like Francis Galton, Herbert Spencer, and Cesare Lombroso asserted that both cultural and individual characteristics, even personality, were determined by heredity.³⁰ I have argued elsewhere that the scholarly study of Cambodian and Vietnamese art was shaped by these same forms of pervasive and embedded racism.³¹ Anthropologist Susan Bayly has established that the École Française de l'Extrême-Orient (the EFEO, the colonial archeological and anthropological organization which stills exists today) was directly influenced by the notion that historically and artistically significant cultures emerged only from "vigorous" racial groups.³² Their categorization of historical periods in ancient Cambodia was based on assertions that changes in architecture and urbanization corresponded to the dominance of different racial types, starting with ethnically Chinese peoples, and later an ethnically "Hinduized" society. Bayly further argues that French concerns with the racial health of the metropole were exported to the colonies, for instance in a focus on Southeast Asia as a site where the races and biological heritages of India and China came together, causing division. These concerns about social division were especially prominent in moments where the transition to modernity was accompanied by profound ruptures, issues that characterized France itself around the turn of the twentieth century.

But artists always necessarily rely on the scholarly knowledge of their own time. Insights from postcolonial theory and recent historical studies can help us understand how research-creation might draw on colonial discourse while simultaneously subverting it. A key idea comes from the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who argued that colonial discourse is contradictory.³³ Instead of being a kind of master discourse or ideology that unidirectionally exerts its

27. Elizabeth C. Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

28. This phrase is Patricia Leighton's in "Colonialism, l'art nègre, and Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," in Green, *Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 77.

29. Nélia Dias, *La mesure des sens: Les anthropologues et le corps humain au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Editions Aubier, 2004). Alice Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

30. For example, Cesare Lombroso, *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*, trans. Henry P. Horton (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), 366–69.

31. Marco Deyasi, "Le colonialisme français: la discipline de l'histoire de l'art et l'Asie du Sud-Est," in *L'historiographie française de l'art, 1890–1950*, ed. Neil McWilliam and Michela Passini (Strasbourg: Institut national d'histoire de l'art/Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, forthcoming), 358–71.

32. Susan Bayly, "French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina," *Modern Asian Studies* 34 no. 3 (2000): 581–622.

33. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). See also John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 61–67.

influence upon us, colonial discourse actually presents contradictory positions—simultaneously. As he describes it, colonial discourse asserts that the colonized are fundamentally alien, destined to be persistently unknowable and mysterious, Other. At very same time it also asserts that the colonized can be fully understood by Euro-American science and social science, that they can be assimilated into capitalist markets and production, and they can be taught to be modern and civilized, like “us.” Influenced by Bhabha, Patricia Morton argued that at the Colonial Exposition of 1931 in Paris, the “norms, rules, and systems of French colonialism both emerged and broke down, unsustainable because of their internal contradictions.”³⁴ Morton’s statement is a useful summary of Bhabha’s perspective and its implications for understanding how colonial propaganda like universal exhibitions actually functioned.

An insight by the sociologist Hannah Botsis intersects very helpfully with Bhabha’s claims.³⁵ In arguing against the concept of a master discourse in general, she highlights the work of Judith Butler and how it shows that both oppression and resistance are made possible by the same discursive structures.³⁶ As Botsis describes, human agency is constructed by the structures of oppression of society. However, once that agency has been created, the limitations that the oppressive discourse seeks to impose on human action and thought can never fully succeed. This is a key origin for resistance. As the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas put it, “colonialism is not domination, but the effort to produce relations of dominance...”³⁷

The implications of these ideas are elaborated by Thomas, who points out that, in a desire to condemn colonialism, scholars and critics inadvertently assume that colonial culture *does* function as a kind of master discourse.³⁸ In this condemnation, they (and we) tend to describe colonialism as a metaphorical bulldozer inevitably sweeping away opposition by Indigenous peoples. Paradoxically, this framing situates colonized people as nothing but passive victims. As Thomas argues, taking this intellectual stance thus forecloses the opportunity to acknowledge Indigenous agency and resistance, as well as the cracks or fissures in colonial systems that Indigenous people made or within which they acted. Further, this kind of condemnation implicitly situates ourselves as moral exemplars for renouncing the violence our ancestors did, as though we bear no other connection to it or responsibility for it. Such a gesture rhetorically places colonialism in the distant past and makes it harder to address its continuation into the present. Recent scholarship by Antoinette Burton embodies Thomas’ perspective.³⁹ Instead of writing a history of British colonialism that teleologically assumes that England was somehow fated to colonize the globe, she uses the voices of historical actors on the front lines of empire to show that imperialism often seemed to be on the verge of collapse, *precisely because* of unrelenting Indigenous resistance that has continued into the present.

34. Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 14.

35. Hannah Botsis, *Subjectivity, Language, and the Postcolonial: Beyond Bourdieu in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2018), 66–68.

36. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

37. Nicholas Thomas, “Colonizing Cloth: Interpreting the Material Culture of Nineteenth-century Oceania,” in *The Archeology of Colonialism*, ed. Claire L. Lyons and John K. Papadopolous (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2002), 182. Emphasis added.

38. Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially chapter 1.

39. Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Research-for-Creation by Theosophists and Occultists

While we might identify Theosophy and occultism as eccentric pseudosciences, historians have reconsidered them, demonstrating that they were efforts to mediate the rapid pace of technological change and accompanying social disruption. Occultism was a way to reconnect the spiritual and the religious with science, especially new scientific discoveries like radioactivity, x-rays, and atomic theory, that dramatically changed our understanding of the universe around the turn of the twentieth century. Rather than see occultism and spiritualism as irrational holdovers from the pre-scientific past, many historians now interpret them as an important part of modern culture, sometimes even a formative influence within particular types of aesthetic modernism.⁴⁰ A 2009 issue of this journal presented an important discussion of these topics.⁴¹

In late-nineteenth-century France, Theosophy and occultism were insurgent intellectual pursuits that encouraged practitioners to interrogate the dominant discourses and structures of knowledge in ways that correspond with what is today called research-creation. Theosophy, esotericism, and occultism continued the politicized thrust of Spiritualism, which Lynn Sharp has identified as a democratic religious practice that undermined the centralizing authority of the Catholic church.⁴² In precisely the same way as they read traditional religious doctrine against the grain for their own ends, esotericists in Paris also appropriated the most advanced contemporary knowledge of Asia from scholarly journals and state-owned museums like the Musée Guimet, the national museum of Asian art. They deliberately read colonial propaganda “against the grain,” using it for their own ends. At least one contemporary scholar overtly ridiculed occultist interest in Buddhism, disparaging the entire concept of “Esoteric Buddhism.”⁴³ Just as contemporary research-creation is a process that transgresses and subverts institutional and academic knowledge, creating alternative structures of knowledge that rely on novel forms of evidence that are not acknowledged by the dominant discourses and research centres, occultism, Theosophy, and esoteric Buddhism were intellectual communities created by outsiders that transgressed and rejected the colonial and racist meanings of the research sources that they used. Instead, they appropriated colonial propaganda like the Universal Exposition in ways that subverted its political messages, absorbing it into their own radically egalitarian and anti-imperial cultural politics. Ultimately, their anti-colonial and anti-racist orientation led occultists to both celebrate Asian culture and to directly and unambiguously condemn racism and colonial oppression.

Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), the most influential of the founders of Theosophy, claimed the world’s religions were fundamentally the same and that universal precepts could be revealed through wide-ranging study of religion and science. Theosophists held the conviction that mainstream knowledge and religion obscured the real truths of nature, the world, and the divine.⁴⁴ One of the most prominent ideas in Theosophy was the claim that all peoples around the world and all individuals are equal. This was one of

40. A selection of this literature includes: John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Mark S. Morrisson, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

41. See RACAR 34, no. 1 (Spring 2009), “The Visual Culture of Science and Art in Fin-de-Siècle France,” ed. Serena Keshavjee.

42. Lynn Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-century France* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

43. Philippe E. Foucaux in *Annuaire de la société des études japonaises, chinoises, tartares et indo-chinoises* 6 (1887): 192.

44. Bruce Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

its fundamental goals: “to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color.” The second fundamental goal was “to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.” However, this second goal was translated into French with some important differences. On the inside front cover of Blavatsky’s official journal in France, *Le Lotus bleu*, it read: “To study religions and philosophies, especially those of Antiquity and the Orient, in order to demonstrate that same Truth is hidden under their differences.”⁴⁵ This point was affirmed as fundamental to Theosophy inside every issue. In the context of late-nineteenth-century France, this egalitarian vision of uniting East and West was a minority position affiliated with the radical left. For instance, *Le Lotus bleu* acknowledged that Theosophy overlapped with socialism and supported its goals.⁴⁶

The 1880s and 1890s saw a mania for Buddhism among occultists. Writers like Schuré and Sinnett became hugely popular in occult circles. Many of the articles that appeared in occultist journals took great care to introduce the specific doctrines and sects of Buddhism as they were understood in Asia, country by country. The authors often showed sophisticated knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, which they gleaned from a variety of mainstream and scholarly sources. Just as Papus visited the 1889 exposition for information on Vietnamese Buddhism, other occultists appropriated and reinterpreted academic and museum sources in their quest to learn about Asian religion and culture. *Revue théosophique* encouraged its readers to attend an international congress of ethnography, specifically so that they could learn about Buddhism from important scholars such as Georges Maspéro and Léon de Rosny, whom they mentioned by name.⁴⁷ Maspéro was a colonial governor in French Indochina and would be a founder of the EFEO. De Rosny was the first president of an early scholarly society dedicated to Asian culture, art, and literature; he was quoted in Papus’ magazine, *L’Initiation*. Another of Papus’ journals, *Le Voile d’Isis*, advertised his book on Buddhism.⁴⁸ Similarly, the opening of the Musée Guimet in Paris was eagerly anticipated by occultists, who saw it as an opportunity to engage directly with Buddhist culture.⁴⁹ They read the museum’s publications.⁵⁰ So when the 1889 exposition opened, occultists were already primed to seek out the Asian culture on display.

Articles from this period reveal that at the same time as occultists were eagerly learning about Asia and Buddhism, Theosophical and occultist journals were condemning colonialism not only in general, but by citing specific policies and events. *Le Lotus*, a different journal with a similar name to Blavatsky’s, criticized French missionaries in Asia as poor representatives of French civilization because of their racism and ignorant dismissal of Asian culture.⁵¹ *L’Initiation* published a long and detailed series of articles on colonial issues that were harshly critical of imperialism and specific imperial policies. For instance, one article condemned France’s role in causing a contemporary famine in Northern Vietnam through trade policies with China. Starvation “is how we colonize, how we export free trade to ‘barbarian’ countries, the great principles of European civilization!”⁵² The author

45. *Le Lotus bleu* 3 (May 7, 1890), inside cover. Emphasis added.

46. *Le Lotus bleu* 10 (December 7, 1890): 137.

47. *La Revue théosophique* 8 (September 1889): 96.

48. Sédir, “Sur la Morale Boudhique,” *L’Initiation* 27, no. 8 (May 1895): 107–19; also *Le Voile d’Isis* 32 (June 23, 1891).

49. *Revue théosophique* 2, no. 10 (December 1889): 188–90. See *La Revue spirite* from no. 3 (March 1, 1890) to no. 6 (June 1, 1890). Augustin Chaboseau, “Offices boudhiques à l’Exposition,” *La Revue spirite* 24 (December 15, 1889): 737.

50. Jules Doinel, “La Gnose Çivaïte,” *L’Initiation* (June 1891): 222.

51. Anonymous, *Le Lotus* (April 1888): 56.

called the arguments of colonial authorities specious because the colonizers neither understood nor appreciated the differences between Chinese and French civilizations. In precisely the same way as they read mainstream religious doctrine against the grain, occultists appropriated the most advanced knowledge of Asia from scholarly sources like these, rejecting the racism embedded within them and integrating them into their insurgent and transgressive critiques of mainstream knowledge.

Ranson's Paintings and the Nabis

In calling themselves the Nabis, Paul Ranson and his friends were creating an exclusive artistic group modelled after secretive occultist societies.⁵³ The word “nabi” was based on the Hebrew and Arabic words for “prophet.” The exact same word was also being used by Blavatsky and Schuré in their publications of the same time.⁵⁴ Most of the group’s members were personally immersed in Theosophy and esotericism, with Ranson and Paul Sérusier being the most passionate devotees.⁵⁵ According to Janine Méry, Blavatsky’s *Revue Théosophique* was an important source for the group, most of whom read it avidly.⁵⁶

Maurice Denis, one of Ranson’s compatriots in the group, wrote a manifesto that reveals the Nabis’ connections to occultist forms of knowledge.⁵⁷ According to Denis, great art was the two-dimensional and decorative art of the ancient past, such as medieval European art, alongside some ancient traditions that continued into the present, as in Middle-Eastern and Asian art. He argued that this art was superior to illusionistic classicism because it expressed the eternal and universal mystery of the divine. In conflating these diverse cultures, he was implicitly claiming that the mystical Ideal behind each of them was universal and not the property of any one people or nation. He was also celebrating the European Middle Ages and the early Renaissance on equal terms with ancient Assyria and modern Asia. According to him, they were not merely similar in their aesthetic power, they came from the same source: beneath superficial differences they were *the same*.

The great art—which we call decorative—of the Hindus, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the art of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance, and the works clearly superior to modern art, what is it other than the clothing of vulgar sensation—natural objects—as sacred icons, hermetic and impressive?

The hieratic simplicity of Buddhas? Monks transformed by the aesthetic sense of a religious race. Compare the lion in nature with the lions of Khorsabad; which demands genuflection?⁵⁸

In making this extraordinary claim, Denis was echoing the intellectual framework of occultism, that is: hidden knowledge uncovered through correspondences. Facos traces this focus on correspondences back to Baudelaire’s influential poem of the same name, noting how the poem introduced the idea of “the coded symbol of an idea that the artist-genius could decipher and interpret for others.”⁵⁹ It should therefore not be surprising that some Symbolists would be drawn to occultist and Theosophical ideas, since these esoteric ideas also described the nature of truth and the world in the same way.

52. *L’Initiation* 31, no. 8 (June 1896): 283.

53. Claire Frèches-Thory and Antoine Terrasse, *The Nabis: Bonnard, Vuillard, and Their Circle*, trans. Mary Pordoe (Paris: Flammarion, 2002).

54. Helena Blavatsky, “Le Phare de l’Inconnu,” *Revue Théosophique* 3 (1889): 8. Marcel Guicheteau, *Paul Sérusier* (Paris: Editions Side, 1976), 47, note 63.

55. Charles Chassé, *The Nabis and Their Period*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Lund Humphries, 1969), 13. Also Welsh, 63. Despite Ranson and the Nabis’ involvement with esotericism, Brigitte Ranson-Bitker maintained that her grandfather’s interest in spiritualism and Theosophy was never serious, only in fun (personal communication, February 25, 2004). Méry disputes this: Méry, “Le Mysticisme chez quelques peintres Nabis,” *Mémoire de D.É.A., Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne*, 1991, 35. See also Patrick Waldberg, *Paul Ranson*, ex. cat. Galleria del Levante (Milan, 1967); also Welsh, 68; and Boyle-Turner, 76.

56. Janine Méry and Brigitte Ranson Bitker, “Paul Ranson, un nabi ésotérique?,” in *Paul Ranson, 1861–1909*, ed. Gilles Genty and Hélène Moulin-Stanislas (Valence; Paris: Musée de Valence; Somogy Editions d’Art, 2004), 29.

57. Maurice Denis, “Définition du néo-traditionnisme,” in *Du Symbolisme au classicisme: Théories*, ed. Olivier Revault d’Allonnes (Paris: Hermann, 1964), 33–45.

58. Denis, “Définition du néo-traditionnisme,” 45.

59. Facos, 46.

The Nabis' aesthetic innovations were controversial even among Symbolist audiences in 1889. Sympathetic critics would sometimes reject the prominent deformation of visual form, citing the necessity of objective form for any significant art.⁶⁰ In this way, the Nabis were demonstrating, at least occasionally, a profound denial of the cultural values of academicism and its claim to objective truth—which was part of the superiority of French culture that supposedly justified colonialism. Like twenty-first century practitioners of research-creation, they transgressed and repudiated both the dominant forms of knowledge and the institutions that validated it. Instead, they sought to develop new frameworks for understanding what kinds of deformation were valuable and how and where to apply them. Although few letters by Ranson survive, correspondence between Denis and his fellow Nabi Edouard Vuillard gives us a window into the concepts that drove the Nabis and their art.⁶¹ As Morehead has demonstrated, Denis and Vuillard were deeply influenced by contemporary concepts of experimentation and scientific reasoning. Vuillard, in particular, seemed to understand his painting as “theory-method,” a kind of praxis where the material practice was inseparable from the theories that he struggled to develop.⁶²

Ranson made a number of works with themes and subjects that combine Theosophical and occultist ideas with Symbolist abstraction. The paintings include eclectic combinations of symbols and references to the visual and religious traditions identified by Denis in his manifesto. For example, *Paysage nabique* (or *Le Nabi*, 1890) |fig. 2| shows a bearded figure in an imaginary landscape rendered with flat planes of brilliant, unmodulated colour. The “nabi” squats on the lower left, surrounded by a kind of irregular *mandorla*; the other two figures are the bird in the centre and a woman riding a large fantastical bird in the upper right. Méry and Bitker identify the imagery as drawn directly from Schuré’s texts.⁶³ They indicate that the main figure is the Hindu god Rama, rather than a generic “nabi,” who wears an ouroboros bracelet on his wrist (the image of the snake that eats its own tail, a symbol of infinity). According to them, the female figure is the goddess Sita, wife of Rama. Each figurative element is rendered with little shading, surrounded by a black outline, and seems to float over the background. The man seems to sit on a ground line that also delineates a separate visual register below, filled with abstract, almost two-dimensional floral decoration that repeats left-to-right. The rhythmic curves of the distant mountains, combined with the flat horizon line immediately below them, gives the impression of a second decorative register at the top of the painting. The effect thus evokes the kind of hieratic representation divided into separate visual fields characteristic of ancient Mesopotamian, Babylonian, or Medieval European art.

Yet there is a tension between this level of abstraction and other perspectival devices: Ranson has suggested recession into space through the varied size of the trees in the mid-ground; further, the man and the woman undermine the implied registers by intruding into the top and bottom fields, crossing the dividing lines: she flies into the sky and blocks our view of some of the mountains while he picks a naturalistic flower from among

60. Morehead, 84.

61. Morehead, 89.

62. Morehead 109.

63. Méry and Bitker, “Un Nabi ésotérique?”

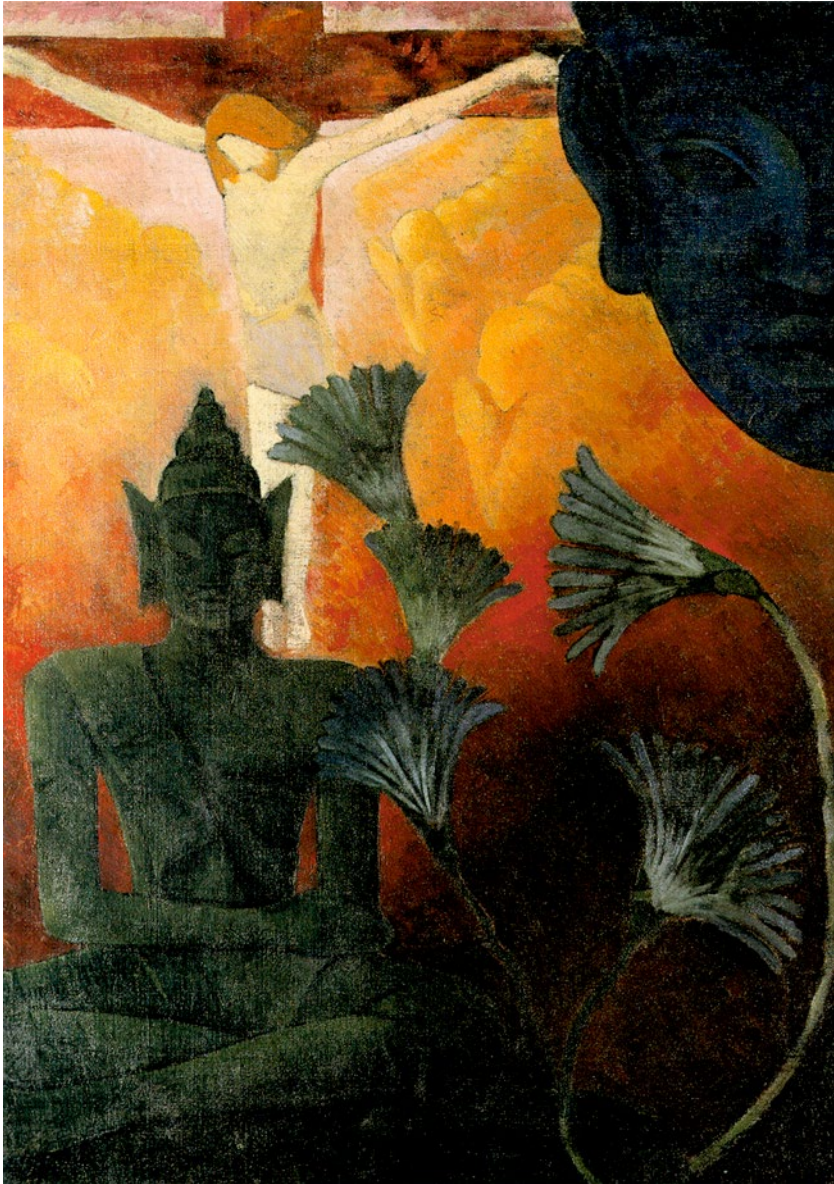


Figure 2. Paul Ranson, *Nabis Landscape or The Nabi*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 89 × 115 cm. Private collection. Photo: reproduced from Brigitte Ranson Bitker and Gilles Genty, *Paul Ranson, 1861–1909: Catalogue raisonné: japonisme, symbolisme, art nouveau* (Paris: Somogy, 1999).

the abstracted ones below, his hand breaching the boundary between his three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional one beneath. In so doing, the male figure demonstrates the goals and claims of the Nabis and their Symbolist art: that via the study of ancient, largely abstract visual traditions, they could gain a superior understanding of the deep truths of nature. The naturalistic flower emerging from the flattened forms of the register below seems to show that the hieratic traditions of ancient cultures were the real source of any truth that might be contained within the illusionism of conventional art. The painting thus depicts how such truth only emerges thanks to the insight and action of a person with a higher consciousness, one informed by occult and Theosophical knowledge.

The visual forms of the painting highlight the curving line of the arabesque, seen in the figure of the nabi/Rama on the left, visible in the neck and tail the bird in the center, but especially prominent in the goddess on her flying mount. There, the wings, tail, and neck all curl around the body, creating the impression of powerful, swirling forms. Even the plants that dot the mid-ground are rendered with the irregular curves of arabesques. The form of the arabesque corresponds directly to the ideas of Denis' manifesto. For him, it was a link to the primordial Art: it echoed those first marks that the earliest artists made on rock faces, and it thereby connected Nabis painting to the most profound and universal forms of art. For Vuillard, the arabesque demonstrated a rejection of chiaroscuro, thus repudiating the illusionism of academism and its values.⁶⁴ The painting demonstrates a kind of visual syncretism, pulling eclectic forms into one image: flat decorative patterns, a *cloissonisme* that denies illusionism, hieratic division into separate registers, in addition to stylized exaggeration of naturalistic forms. Ranson's painting is a visual and intellectual crossing of boundaries, an experimental effort to figure out how to make paintings that embody his Theosophical and occultist ideals.

Christ and Buddha, ca. 1890 | **fig. 1** | was made at the height of occultist interest in Asian Buddhism, at the same time that the Universal Exposition was presenting Vietnamese and Cambodian art and culture to Parisians. Not only did Ranson have the opportunity to see Southeast Asian sculptures, he would have been primed by *L'Initiation* to seek them out. A critique could be levelled at this work for the way that it presents Southeast Asian art as fragments, isolated from any context, the metaphorical violence of visual fragmentation echoing the physical violence enacted when the art was looted from its setting. However, I contend that the painting ultimately embodies the anti-racist and anti-colonial politics of occultism and Esoteric Buddhism around 1890. The crucifixion is almost overshadowed by the Buddhist sculptures that dominate the composition. The artist has not put these two religious and artistic traditions next to each other to indicate that they are parallel, but—as Esoteric Buddhism asserted—to show that they are fundamentally the same. While they might look different, they are merely varying manifestations of the same truth, both in religious and aesthetic terms. This implied equality between Asia and France corresponds to the universalizing

64. Morehead, 116.

and anti-racist emphasis of occultism. Further, the choice to visually quote Gauguin's rural French art communicates that it is not simply Christianity in general that should be linked to Buddhism, but Symbolist and occult interpretations of Buddhism. On the back of the canvas, Ranson wrote the words "Confrérie nabie" or "Nabi Brotherhood" in Arabic letters; this inscription seems to say that, despite the disdain of established scholars of Buddhism, it is Theosophical Symbolists like Ranson who comprehend the real meanings of these two traditions.

Conclusion

Although research-creation has been most prominently theorized as a contemporary phenomenon, it holds promise for those of us who study earlier historical art movements. I suggest that the study of Symbolism, occultism, and colonialism is enriched through the use of research-creation. Consistent with research-creation, occultists attacked the disciplinary complex that shaped institutionally validated knowledge, developing their own intellectual networks and creating new forms of scholarship and evidence that were not valued by any mainstream institution. Instead, they substituted alternative understandings of the world, ones that we would today call pseudoscience. Regardless of the scientific validity of their beliefs, these alternative understandings had powerful political resonances in the colonial period: by rejecting racism and the discourses of racial hierarchy, occultists posited the radical equality of all people and imagined fundamentally egalitarian forms of culture, ones that celebrated Asian traditions as equal to those of Europe. In the context of 1890s France, we can identify these politics as anti-racist and anti-colonial. Like occultism, Parisian currents of Symbolism aimed to reveal the abstract, universal truth behind the appearances of everyday reality. We can see this in the art of Paul Ranson, whose paintings were deeply infused with occult meanings. Like the occultists, Ranson selectively appropriated and reconfigured the colonial discourses around him, creating novel creative responses that were tied to alternative ways of understanding the world, ones theorized by his Nabis friends and vastly different from those of the government-funded artistic apparatus of his time. Ranson and the Nabis were not simply trying to apply occult concepts in their art, they were attempting to theorize and develop new modes of making art.

Nevertheless, in studying Asian art and culture in the colonial metropole, the occultists and Symbolists had to draw from sources—social-scientific texts, photographs and other images, as well as universal expositions—that were suffused with colonial ideology, including the racism at its core. The only way that Parisians could learn about Asia or Asian people was filtered through and distorted by the discourses produced by the disciplinary complex of sciences imbricated with the colonial state. Earlier scholarship on primitivism in modern art powerfully condemned this linkage between art and colonialism. However, in doing so, it often flattened the historical context and voided the agency of artists and others. Ranson's paintings may

represent only one part of a very diverse pan-European Symbolist movement but they demonstrate that the cultural politics of European interest in non-Western art and culture could be more than an arrogant appropriation of colonized culture. The paintings analyzed here were attempts to challenge colonial culture, but in terms that only a select few would have understood. Occultism, as we know from later history, would never become a transformative mass movement.

In bringing the framework of research-creation to bear, I insist that we read it alongside postcolonial theory in order to appreciate how Nabis paintings and other art subverted the colonial discourses of their time. Postcolonial theory has shown that colonial discourse can never be a unitary thing. It is always composed of contradictory elements that do not fit together. It is in the fissures and the gaps that both Indigenous people and metropolitan citizens can begin to resist, seizing on the contradictions or appropriating and subverting aspects of the culture that was used to oppress. Is there a parallel here between research-creation and the efforts of occultists and Symbolists to dissent from colonialism? Artists and art professors are part of the modern university and academic systems, but research-creation argues that they do not have to remain limited by them. They can be part of a restrictive academic framework while yet building towards more inclusive possibilities. Similarly, perhaps artists today who are forced to rely on mainstream scholarship shot through with the colonial legacy of white supremacy do not have to remain complicit with it. They can point the way to a better future. ¶