

The Garden of Death by Hugo Simberg

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Abstract—According to this theme of the Garden of Death twice — in a separate work and in the painting of the church in Tampere, Hugo Simberg portrays death as good-natured skeletons engaged in watering flowers in tubs against a forest, which is very unusual. Also, the interpretation of the garden itself only to some extent echoes the typology of campo santo, alchemical and philosophical gardens, gardens of meditation and desecrated gardens. Not finding Simberg's direct succession of the theme of the garden of death in the paintings of Constable, Kuvasseg and Böcklin, we can nevertheless fit his interest in the theme of gardens and images of death into the context of the art of the turn of the XIX-XX centuries, finding parallels in graphics, poetry and music of that time.

Keywords—*Garden of Death; death studies; macabre; Hugo Simberg; philosophical garden; symbolism; Finnish art*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the image of the garden of death is reflected in visual culture with numerous films, games, detectives, novels and musical works about the horror of death. For example, compositions in music on the theme of the garden of death were created in Finland in the 1910s, 1930s, 1960s, 1970s, and 2000s. All of them, one way or another, bear the name of the garden of death. But only the Finnish artist Hugo Simberg (1873-1917) and the space of the garden, and death itself doesn't cause cold on the back, drowsiness and habitual fear, as we usually used to feel, but they are calm and desire to admire.

In the context of juxtaposing life and death, Simberg's symbolist works are quite interesting for their multi-valued interpretation. Among the artist's legacy are mainly graphics and painting. But the theme of the garden of death appears to him almost once, which is an interesting task for reflection on the features of his iconography among works on the theme of the gardens of death.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

It's worth mentioning right away that most of the studies of the master, who lived most of his life in the imperial Vyborg, were nevertheless written in Finnish and not translated into other languages, so to study our topic, first of all, we had to rely on visual sources, English- and Russian-language studies. Nevertheless, I would like to take some

excursion into the works of art, as interest in Hugo Simberg has been flourishing in recent years.

If we look at the timeline of publications about Hugo Simberg, we will see that the interest of researchers after the Second World War appears in the late 1940s, and then in the 1980s. In 2000, several editions devoted to the artist were published at once. And finally, the latest work in Finnish is related to 2019.

What are the topics and aspects that interest researchers? A restrained approach and formal-stylistic analysis distinguishes only a few monographic works on Hugo Simberg of 1948 [1], 1991 [2] and the 2000s [3]. Already in 1989 [4], two publications appeared that considered the identity of Hugo Simberg as a big mystery, interesting not only to art critics, but also to psychologists.

They are continued by the 2000 with editions of the uniqueness of the world of Hugo Simberg. This world consists of gardens and forests with characters from the underworld. Therefore, in 1969 [5], 1985 [6], studies appeared that articulated the landscape of this unusual world created by the artist in his works. Since, in addition to drawings on the theme of the Garden of Death, Hugo Simberg included a fresco with such a plot in the cathedral in Tampere. In 1986 [7] a separate book was published on the cathedral as an art monument. If we continue to talk about Simberg's imaginary landscapes, it is extremely important what real landscapes and architecture he relied on. His life in the Vyborg family estate, the architecture of which he was inspired by, is dedicated to the 2011 [8] edition, prepared with the help of the recollections of heir Jan Simberg.

Finally, the characters who inhabit the world of Simberg are devoted to publications about death, angels and devils in the 2000s [9], which are based on the artist's epistolary and photographic heritage. The staging of these images in a religious and folklore context, Christianity, paganism and new religiosity takes place in the works of 2010 [10], 2013 and 2019 [11].

It is clear that it is pointless to consider the work of Hugo Simberg in isolation, so the next body of texts about him concerns Finnish art and the study of the period of symbolism in the history of art. Of course, no general publication on symbolism can do without mention of

Simberg. For example, in Russia this is the work of D.V. Sarabyanov "Modern Style. The origins. The Story of the Problem" 1989[12], in Europe this is a book by Michael Gibson and Gilles Néret "Symbolism" 1999[13]. The work of Simberg belongs to the golden age of Finnish art, which was published by Markku Valkonen in 1992[14] in English.

In Russia, one can recall the book of M.I. Bezrukova on Finnish art as a national art school in 1986 [15]. Since Simberg worked at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the appearance of his name is natural for the 2005[16] edition of *Modernism awakening in Finland*. Although the landscape is not the main genre of Simberg, without his *Garden of Death*, a conversation about the landscape painting of Scandinavia would not be complete in the book of Torsten Gunnarson [17]. Moreover, Victoria Charles indicates that the *Garden of death* is one of the main reasons for visiting the Athenaeum in Helsinki in the book "Art in Europe. Museums and masterworks" [18].

The theme of thinking about death in Simberg's symbolic works is also helped by the 1989 work of Aage Hanzen-Leve "Russian Symbolism. The system of poetic motives" [19], where structuralist methods are used to study the diverse shades of dialectic discourse. Reflections on the philosophical implication of the work in symbolism helps to understand the book of Olga Davydova "Conceptual modernism: word — image — place" in 2014 [20]. And finally, one of the most recent works in Russia on the theme of symbolism in art can be called Sergei Nikonenko "Eidos and the concept: epistemological foundations of symbolism in metaphysics, history, art" in 2017 [21].

The theme of death as a contrast between life and the search for meaning in both of them is one of the important parts of philosophy. There is, of course, the temptation to interpret Simberg in the sociology of the death of his contemporary E. Durkheim, who published in 1912 "Elementary forms of religious life" [22].

But still refrain from the schematic drawing of the relationship between the work of Simberg, who did not like comments, and Durkheim's interpretations. Note that we can talk a lot about the iconography of death in art. Among such studies, mention can be made of "Death and Resurrection in Art" by Enrico de Pascale in 2009 [23], as well as 2 completely new books of 2018. This is the Russian edition of Sergey Mokhov "Birth and death of the funeral industry. From medieval graveyards to digital immortality" [24] and Ferdinand Schöningh "The living dead: Ecclesiastes through art" [25].

Finally, the theme of the garden of death forces us to turn to the art studies of gardens and parks in the history of art. In fact, Simberg depicts beds in the foreground and, in fact, we can't talk about the landscape and the specifics of the garden.

Therefore, here we will mention only 3 publications, thanks to which we can study not so much the shape of the garden as its symbolism. This is Lucia Impeluso "Gardens in art" [26] 2007, Olga Davydova "Iconography of modernity. Images of gardens and parks in the works of artists of Russian Symbolism" [27] 2014 and an article by Taina

Huhtanen in Finnish about ritual groves for burials in Finnish folklore of 1985 [28].

It is explaining all the difficulties and features of the study of Simberg, we can explain the choice of methods for research. This will be a cultural-historical analysis, a formal-stylistic method, iconology and death studies.

Simberg's death garden is conveniently interpreted in the context of two themes - the image of the garden and the image of death. But without resorting to the tragic biography of Hugo Simberg, we will lose a lot in the interpretation of his images.

Hugo Simberg, who lived in Vyborg almost from his very childhood, early began to turn to the theme of landscape in his work. After studying at two art schools, Simberg took lessons from Axeli Gallen-Kallela, who influenced him greatly. Gallen-Kallela, who himself praised the northern landscapes, actively introduces them not only as an independent topic for paintings, but also gives them the important role of surrounding the main characters.

In addition to the harsh world of images of Gallen-Kallela, Simberg is influenced by Arnold Böcklin, in whom landscapes and gloomy plots filled with Thanatos and the danger of death form an important part of creativity. In addition, two works could directly affect the young Simberg. This is the "Island of the Dead" of the 1880s. Böcklin, which exists in several versions, a self-portrait of an "artist from God" with death playing the violin near Böcklin right behind his left shoulder, and his 1873 *Magdalene*, reminiscent of Titian.

Simberg travels a lot in Europe, America and Russia in 1896-1907, collecting impressions from the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, Italian primitives, medieval miniatures and luboks.

In 1897 his mother died, and after a few years he suffered a serious nervous breakdown, which ended with hospitalization. After treatment in the hospital, he creates his most famous work, "The Wounded Angel" (1903). He will repeat it, slightly changing the landscape, in the *Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist* in Tampere in 1904-6. The depiction of the garden of death on the fresco is also a repetition of the composition, made in pencil and then engraving, as well as watercolors and gouache in 1896-7.

III. IMAGE OF DEATH

At Simberg, the first images of death appear in the mid-1890s, which coincides with the period of travel. During travels, he could see the vast body of works with skeletons.

And this is not only the image of Chronos and macabre, but also the skull of Adam in paintings, engravings, drawings, anatomical atlases, tombstones, sculptures, ossuaries and much more. In particular, in addition to meeting the image of death in folk culture (street theaters, etc.), perhaps Simberg could see photographs in France or, more broadly, traveling around central Europe, the celebration of the Day of Dead in Mexico, where death is portrayed as fun and beautiful.

The very gesture of addressing the theme of death in the era of fin de siècle is not original, it is enough to cite contemporary works. Of course, it is worthwhile to conduct a separate study comparing the work of Odilon Redon and the Vienna Symbolists with the works of Hugo Simberg. We only note that Redon always depicts terrifying death, making the main emphasis on the skull and blurring the background around this image, including landscape.

About the influence of the images of death in Boeklin, we spoke above. One can also recall the graphic work "Girl and Death" (1895) by Gallen-Kallela. We see a girlish silhouette in a dress with her back to us on a thin stalk of a flower. Death is depicted as a frightening skeleton with Hugo paws protruding from behind trees.

The anatomical skeleton, suspended by the head, depicted against the backdrop of the urban landscape in a self-portrait of Louis Corinth in 1896. Playing on the theme of still life and pessimistic vanitas vanitatis, he gave the skull an expression of melancholy skepticism, such a characteristic mood for the Decadence.

In general, the frequency of the appearance of the image of death is highest in the satirical journal chart of the time, that of European, that of Russian. Death is depicted either in the form of a skeleton that sits tiredly in a desert landscape with lying skulls, then rides on a white horse with a scythe to nowhere with the most unhappy expression of empty eye sockets on its face, then stands, bored, waiting for the black horses to get drunk, then hang skulls on a Christmas tree among the public from representatives of the army and the church at the holiday. The skeleton or skull, as it were, loses its strong semantic load and becomes a participant in genre sketches and everyday scenes, replacing the image of the body.

It looks especially witty in English-language medical advertising. As an example, we can recall the New Year calendars of the Antikamnia Chemical Company (1897-1901) with funny skeleton sketches by Dr. Louis Crusius. The skeleton chooses medicine at the pharmacy as a pharmacist, walks around the mushrooms like a peasant, plays the banjo like an African-American, or stands in front of a scientist among the skulls as an anatomical skeleton, smiling sarcastically, as if a patient could stand, proud that all attention was paid on his body and personality.

Of course, the animated skeleton goes back to the theme of the dance of death. Best of all, from the 15th century, part of the mural from the Slovenian church of the Holy Trinity in Chrastovle is preserved from the frescoes. On it we see skeletons that gracefully lead to the skeleton on the throne through one person of all ages (from a child to an old man) and social strata — from a pauper and a peasant to a king and pope. But the most famous work with the death dance of the 15th century is in Tallinn in the church of St. Nicholas. Skeletons, bashfully half-covered by white shrouds, dance cheerfully, grabbing the hands of the royal family, the pope and the cardinal. Difficulties of origin connect this work with the German city of Lübeck, where we also know about another lost example of the death dance from the church of St. Mary in the middle of the 15th century. Also destroyed is

the original Dance of Death from Wismar of the 16th century. This listing can be continued, but we note that of these examples, only the death dance from Tallinn is depicted against the backdrop of the landscape. We can also find a hint of landscape in the alphabets of death. For example, this is the letter W with the hermit of Hans Holbein in the printed alphabet of 1524. We see that the skeleton sympathetically leads an old man from a hut past a bush into the realm of the dead.

In Old Art, death is most often depicted mainly as a horrifying mackerel or skull, and only in the 19th century did its pathos decrease to an ordinary object, a material thing from the window of a museum of natural history, or the image of a business citizen or peasant engaged in a busy life. That is, death in the form of a skeleton "plays into life" of a person, such as "mors ludens" on All Saints Day or the spring Carnival.

Simberg's skeletons in the garden of the dead are dressed like monks. There are only three of them and they are depicted in perspective distance from left to right. The leftmost skeleton in the foreground pours flowers from a watering can into the beds. The skeleton in the center in the background presses a twig with blue flowers to the chest (perhaps due to Swedenborg's perceptions of the sensual otherworld), and the third skeleton on the right is busy with something in the distance at the beds with tubs. There is an inscription of Simberg, despite the fact that he did not like to explain his stories, that here is "the dead end up before going to Heaven".

Death is not portrayed as threatening. A skeleton with a twig bowed to the side causes tenderness. There is no fear of death, no mockery of her. The main mood is rather calm. This allows associations with spiritualism and the occult to be held in the context of understanding death as a good friend performing certain home rituals.

The same skeletons in black clothes are in the drawings of 1895-1900. The artist places them in compositions with peasant life - death knocks on the door of paradise with the peasant, skates, accompanies the children as a nanny, listens to the boy with the violin, dances with the women in pairs, silently admires the landscape for company, strokes the cat, looking at how old woman peeling potatoes. Death is depicted as a good neighbor. With her, Simberg also depicts himself, hinting that she asked to decorate her braid. The skeleton sits cross-legged, opening its jaw from curiosity like a child, and watches as the artist scratches something on the metal.

But it must be said that in 1898 Simberg created the composition *Post festum*, also performed in several versions. On it we see a skull under a vine of grapes, which uselessly opens the jaw to taste the fruits. Here the skull causes both fear and ridicule over the image of death.

The theme of devouring is also illustrated by the "Autumn" drawing of the same year, where a terrible skeleton, strongly reminiscent of Simberg's image of the devil, hangs around the trunk of a slender tree with its eyes buried, clinging to it with hands and teeth. So some skeletons

water flowers and cacti, while others gnaw trees. Thus, in the framework of the new religiosity, Simberg approaches the image of both the garden and death ambivalently.

IV. IMAGE OF GARDEN

The garden, inhabited by skeletons, echoes the alchemical and philosophical gardens, the gardens of meditation and especially the defiled gardens, if you try to integrate it into the typology of artistically designed gardens. If we turn to the classification of Lucia Impeluso, then the garden of death will belong to religious gardens, which are opposed to profane gardens.

But we understand that the image of death as a gardener in this case is a mixture of Simberg's typology. It is interesting to note that the idea of violated gardens, although Simberg does not cause negative associations, belongs to a group of sacred gardens, which include the Gardens of Eden, the Garden of Christ, the Garden of Mary, the Garden of Virtues, Feelings and so on.

Perhaps this is also, in turn, the heritage of campo santo, a holy field, a field of the dead, known since antiquity.

On the other hand, the theme of the garden of death is extremely controversial. Impeluso sets off a landscape with a grave or cenotaph. An example is the painting of John Constable from 1833-36 with the Reynolds cenotaph and the picturesque landscape of 1845 Karl Joseph Kuwasseg with the grave of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on an island in Ermenonville. In both works, the graves are shown in the distance, they are as if lost in the landscape. Simberg's garden is depicted as close as possible, it seems that there is absolutely no space between the beds in it.

Simberg's works are stylizations of a primitive, extremely decorative and almost kitsch. They do not cause direct associations with the texts of Kalevala, where in the gloomy afterlife of Manala there are forests and fields with rivers and lakes inhabited by animals as well as the world of the living. It also seems to me a straightforward analogy of Simberg's *The Garden of Death* with the *Saga* (1892) of his contemporary, Scandinavian musician Jan Sibelius. But, it is likely that Simberg inspired the composer Leevi Madetoja to the 1918 musical composition "The Garden of Death".

But Simberg's death garden echoes the poetic poems of Russian poets — Valery Bryusov about "delirious, (...) in the magic garden. Chestnuts are blooming "of 1896¹ and Marina

¹ Valerii Briusov, "In the magic garden". Send, Lord, your joy// To one who has a life path.// //Like a poor beggar, past the garden// Wanders on the sultry pavement. F. Tyutchev, quote by V. Briusov. To the bench at the marble tank// I directed my wrong step // But I did n't reach, I was exhausted// And in the distance I fell on moss.// There by the pool in a bickering// Slender Greek women stood// I called to them; my moan for them// He was too alien and too quiet.//Here the pain subsided in a fresh wound ...// But the whole hell burned in the larynx!// A shrine to me then// It would be cold water!// I tried to get up, but in vain.// Moaned - everything was blank ...// And I dreamed of delirium// That I'm in a magic garden.// Chestnuts are blooming, roses are beckoning// Light dragonflies flutter// Over the vivid luxury of curtains// Balsam is breathing impassively.// And, well, not a drop of water anywhere!// The fountains fell silent and ran out// And, revealing the channels of their own,// Stonework

Tsvetaeva, when " the grave hump — by a rose ..." is justified of 1918². Bryusov is too pretentious and tragic in his intonation compared to Simberg, and Tsvetaeva wrote her poem after the death of the artist.

Again, when Simberg copies the fresco in Tampere Cathedral, he introduces the positive image of death into the rest of the cathedral's paintings, where there is a formidable serpent with an apple, a wounded angel, young men raising a wreath full of roses, stained glass with doves and the work of his colleague Magnus Enkel. Such a mixture of negative and positive characters, which were not a direct illustration of biblical texts, provoked irritation and questions among church authorities. And it was only thanks to luck that the garden of death and other works were still allowed to be left, not destroyed.

V. CONCLUSION

Since Simberg himself did not like to explain his work, any interpretation of the garden of death will be only partially true. Yes, it is possible that death in the form of skeletons looks after plants in the garden, emphasizing the fragility of souls, which symbolize dry flowers and cacti, and the place itself is an image of purgatory in front of paradise.

It can be assumed that, on the one hand, the theme of the garden is a legacy of manuscripts depicting a herbarium from the pharmacy garden, or the garden of the alchemist. On the other hand, in such images of death, its tragic component, the horror of the chthonic and demonic is replaced by a laugh at the awkward skeleton, which was pulled out of a toy box for a fair booth and made it awkward to jump in front of children.

streams.// I'm tormented by a ruthless thirst// I rush to the streams, the keys eagerly// Grab stones, exhausted -//And again fell on soft moss.//What am I to all the splendors!// Magic garden - tougher than the steppe!//Water! water! - and a vain groan// Cold echo repeated. Valerii Briusov, "V magicheskom sadu". Poshli, gospod', svoyu otradu// Tomu, kto zhiznennoy tropoy.// Kak bednyy nishchiy, mimo sadu// Bredet po znoynoy mostovoy. F. Tyutchev. No skam'ye u mramornoy tsisterny//Ya napravlyal svoj shag nevernyy.// No ne doshel, no iznemog// I vdaleke upal na mokh.// Tam u basseyna v perebranke// Stoyalı stroynnye grechanki.// Ya k nim vzyval; moy ston dlya nikh// Byl slishkom chuzhd i slishkom tikh.// Vot bol' zatikhla v svezhey rane...// No tselyy ad pylal v gortani!// Svyatyney dlya menya togda// Byla b studenaya voda!// Ya vstat' pytalsya, no naprasno.// Stonal, — vse bylo bezuchastno...// I mne prigrezilos' v bredu.// Chto ya v magicheskom sadu.// Tsvetut kashtany, manyat rozy.// Porkhayut svetlyye strekozy.// Nad yarkoy roskosh'yu kurtin// Besstrastno dyshit bal'zamin.// I, vse zh, nigde vody ni kapli!// Fontany smolkli i issyakli.// I, rusla obnazhiv svoi.// Plenyayut kamnyami ruch'i.// Ya, muchim zhazhdoy besposhchadnoy.// K ruch'yam, klyucham brosayus' zhadno.// Khvatayu kamni, iznemog —// I vnov' upal na myagkiy mokh.// Chto mne do vsekh velikolepiy!// Volshebnyy sad — zhestoche stepi!// Vody! vody! — i tshchetnyy ston// Kholodnym ekho povtoren. in *Russian* -[Electronic resource] // URL: <http://www.stihi-rus.ru/1/Bryusov/24.htm> (circulation date - 01.09.2019)

² Marina Tsvetaeva. ***A snake is justified by star// Shy baseness — by the sky.// Marsh — by a waterfall, stone — by bread.// A mob — by Marseillaise, a king — by trouble.// Unbending camp - by hump// Of grave, — the grave hump — by a rose ... Marina Tsvetaeva. ***Zmeya opravdana zvezdoy.// Zastenчивaya nizost' — nebom.// Top' — vodopadom, kamen' — khlebom.// Chern' — Marsel'yezoy, tsar' — bedoy.// Stan nesgibavshiy — gorbom// Mogil'nyy, — gorb mogil'nyy — rozoy... in Russian — [Electronic resource] // URL: <https://www.tsvetayeva.com/poems/zmeja> (circulation date — 01.09.2019)

The death of Simberg, a contemporary of the Swede Ivar Arosenius from the Travels of a Cat series, published posthumously in 1909, behaves in a similar way.

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