The Artist’s House
Symbolism and Utopia

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At the turn of the 19th century, a number of painters around Europe built houses for their own use, extending their experience as artists into the field of architecture. There had been previous examples of prominent figures – particularly writers – who, despite their absence of architectural knowledge, had their own houses built. Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill, near London, is generally considered to be the first of its kind to have been built in the Gothic style during the second part of the 18th century, and it provided a suitable backdrop for his novel *The Castle of Otranto*.

This phenomenon gained unprecedented importance during the Symbolist era, when Richard Wagner’s concept of the Total Work of Art, or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, combined with William Morris’s revival of the medieval guilds, guided the creation of multi-talented artists. In my research, I consider the artist’s house as a Symbolist artwork *per se*, whereby the architecture and interior design, the celebrations that took place at them, and at times even the cuisine served and the clothing worn in them, were in perfect correspondence to the artist’s oeuvre. The house was a recurrent motif in Symbolist literature and painting, portraying or revealing the inner visions of the artist. I propose that, with essential differences between themselves and contemporary Art Nouveau, the Symbolist artist’s house supports the definition of a Symbolist architecture.\(^1\)

To reach this conclusion, I have analysed artist’s houses that were built at the turn of the 19th century, and selected experimental examples executed by Symbolist artists who did not necessarily know each other. The purpose was to underline certain similarities, which may not have otherwise surfaced. In this paper, I also wish to address the significance of the political context, which has been considered problematic in connection to Symbolism. How would politics and a rejection of the real world, which was seen as a prerequisite for Symbolism, be expressed

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\(^1\) This essay is based on my post-graduate research thesis: *Les maisons d’artistes en Europe à la fin du XIXe siècle et au début du XXe siècle: Symbolisme et Utopie*. František Bílek, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Sándor Nagy, Santiago Rusiñol, defended at Ecole du Louvre in 1998 under the direction of Mr Guy Cogeval. Later publications have been taken into account.
in these artists’ houses? I have therefore selected four artists belonging to the European Symbolist art movement, in countries that were striving for their independence: František Bílek (1872–1931) in Bohemia, Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931) in Finland, Sándor Nagy (1868–1950) in Hungary and Santiago Rusiñol (1861–1931) in Catalonia.

When studying the artist’s house, I have taken the viewpoint of the artist and have replaced the analytical tools used to describe architecture with those used in art history and iconography. Similar themes, motifs, and intentions that are evident in these artists’ paintings, sculptures and writings can also be identified in their houses. Architecture appears not as a goal, but as another means to express their artistic and intellectual vision of the world. It has become evident that these houses encompassed a political viewpoint – they were manifestos for a new way of life on a private, national and spiritual level. In this respect, I have analysed artists’ houses as utopias, expressions of ideas and ideals that challenged the existing society and aimed at its revival, or reinvention.

Forerunners

From a biographical perspective, certain houses are considered as marking a turning point in an artist’s career. William Morris2, Henry Van de Velde3 and Peter Behrens4 were all painters when they decided to build a house of their own. But I have realised that designing and furnishing their house warranted far more than just a brief mention in their biography; it was the very start of their understanding on how to shape their ideas. They addressed architecture as painters, and construction as composition. Seen from a painter’s viewpoint, everything had to match: lines, colours, textures; the relationship between the interior and the exterior of the house. The importance of this experience reflected in their careers, as they continued with architecture and design, and interestingly enough with book design, which I see as another space for their art.5

The notoriety of these iconic houses has extended beyond their original countries. In Finland, it was two foreign artists who introduced these modern developments to the local scene. The Swedish painter Louis Sparre (1863–1964) was the correspondent in Finland for the English magazine The Studio, whose publisher...
Charles Holme at that time owned William Morris’s Red House in Bexleyheath near London. Sparre tutored the trio of young Finnish architects Eliel Saarinen, Herman Gesellius and Armas Lindgren to design their projects in watercolour in the same fashion as the renowned British architect Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott. Sparre also created an opportunity for his friend Akseli Gallen-Kallela to visit Red House during his trip to England in 1895. The Finnish painter was then completing the construction of his first house, Kalela, which involved a similar artistic discourse. Gallen-Kallela clarified in later days the difference he saw between the emotional and conceptual approaches that painters and architects have towards architecture:

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7 Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Kalela, 1894–95, Ruovesi, and Tarvaspää, 1911–13, Espoo, Finland.
And now that we are in 1928, I return to this wonderful cabin as a discovery of ancient times. It is then so tender and so fragile that I put myself at work with trembling hands ... For an architect, it is usually only a matter of finding a subject ... For me, it is quite another thing. For me, there are deeper feelings; I see the essence of my people at the beginning of time. Often an old house like this can be a synthetic image, a symbol.8

When he was invited to Finland by Louis Sparre, the Belgian painter Alfred William Finch (1854–1930) introduced the young architect Sigurd Frosterus (1876–1956) to his friend Henry Van de Velde.9 The Bloemenwerf, built in 1895–96 for his family in the suburb of Brussels, had been the catalyst for a career change, and Van de Velde had become a renowned architect and interior designer in Germany. At Van de Velde’s studio in Weimar in 1903–04, Frosterus grasped the importance of painting and colour. Besides his architectural practice, Frosterus became an important art critic, art collector and theoretician of colour in Finland.10

These personal contacts facilitated the discovery of Red House before it was publicised in the German-speaking countries by Hermann Muthesius in his book Das englische Haus11 in 1904–05. They added to the far-reaching circulation of ideas in Europe at the turn of the 19th century by the elitist distribution of avant-garde publications. At a time when artists were broadening their field of competence and erasing the traditional boundaries between the different arts, the artist’s house was offering a new experimental model and opportunity. Drawing this conclusion, I realised that the house designed by artists was built on utopian ideas.

The closed space

A common feature among those artists involved in the design of their house was their disdain for their own time, in favour of a glorified vision of the past and the future. They rejected the Industrial Revolution and its inherent disenchantment and instead initiated a revival of the traditional ways and means. In countries ruled by foreign governments, the revival of ancient times echoed with a ‘young’ yearning for independence. Indeed this ‘modern critic of modernity’12 has been noted as a progressive, as much as a regressive, movement. Within its walls, the house was meant

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11 Hermann Muthesius, Das englische Haus (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1904–05).
to offer a refuge against the outside modern world. It became a protective shell, allowing for the free development of an interior space. At Charles Baudelaire’s injunction to leave ‘Anywhere out of the world’\textsuperscript{13}, Symbolist artists found no escape unless privileging their interior world, answering together with the Pre-Raphaelite poet Christina Rossetti ‘I locked the door upon myself’\textsuperscript{14}.

Symbolist literature developed the motif of the closed space as a protective shell for poetry and dream. The Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck, for instance, designated the glasshouse\textsuperscript{15} as a distinctive refuge, the modern iron and glass structure offering a fragile and marginal protection to the self. The street was perceived as antagonistic, polluted and trivial, while the interior a safe and silent shelter. The French novel \textit{A Rebours}, published in 1884 by Joris-Karl Huysmans, typified the house as an aesthetic retreat from the modern world,\textsuperscript{16} and became a guidebook for Symbolist artists. In the novel, Gustave Moreau personified the solitary artist withdrawn in the secrecy of his studio, remote yet located in the heart of Paris.

The monastic model prevailed all through the 19th century as a secluded place where artists would answer the call to implement their artistic vision. The abandoned monastery of Sant’Isidoro in Rome, occupied by the German Nazarene painters in 1810, had paved the way forward. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood effected a similar religious tone in England, interestingly combined with a socialist ideology. William Morris considered his Red House, situated on the pilgrimage road to Canterbury, as a first stop away from London, a monastery where his friends from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood could gather.\textsuperscript{17}

Soon enough, artists retreated into the outskirts of capital cities, or further away into the nature.

**Into the wilds**

I realised during my visits to these distant locations, that leaving the urban artistic scene, with its cafés and patrons, was not necessarily a logical choice for young artists who were trying to make a name for themselves. Ignoring the city and returning to the wilds was nevertheless considered a prerequisite for a genuine start. A few kilometres outside Barcelona, in the little fishing village of Sitges, Santiago Rusiñol set his Cau Ferrat (Iron Tanner, Fig. 2)\textsuperscript{18} originally to protect his collection of antique


\textsuperscript{14} Ferdinand Khnopff titled in 1891 a painting \textit{l lock the door upon myself} (Neue Pinakothek, Munich) after a verse from a poem by Christina Rossetti ‘Who shall deliver me?’, \textit{The Argosy} (London: Strahan & Co., 1866).

\textsuperscript{15} Maurice Maeterlinck, \textit{Serres chaudes} (Brussels: Léon Vanier, 1889).

\textsuperscript{16} Joris-Karl Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours} (Paris: G. Charpentier & Cie, 1884).

\textsuperscript{17} J. W. Mackail, \textit{The Life of William Morris} (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1898).

\textsuperscript{18} Santiago Rusiñol and Francesc Rogent (arch.), Cau Ferrat, 1893–94, Sitges, Catalonia.
ironware from his grandfather’s disapproval. His opposition to his grandfather, the head of an important textile firm, typified the artistic fight against the bourgeoisie. In Sitges, Rusiñol had no interest in painting seascapes, contrary to the former generation of Naturalist painters in the village. He enjoyed the sea views from his windows, taking a rejuvenating ‘bath of poetry’ to wash away the ‘prosaic disease’.19

The desire to be at one with nature led a number of Symbolist artists to experiment with naturism, encouraged by the hygienic recommendations of the time. Nudity was considered part of the refusal of the city and a token of sincerity.20 The Hungarian painter Sándor Nagy practised naturism in his garden with his friends and family21 at the Gödöllő artist colony (Fig. 1)22. In a cycle of four drawings titled The Human Pilgrimage23, he portrayed himself leaving the city with his wife Laura, walking across a splendid garden, and continuing his spiritual path for finally reaching nature where, naked in a paradise regained, the couple start a new life.

In several descriptions of artists’ houses, the intuitive affinity with nature has been noted as a precondition for selecting the site for the house. Trying to preserve the existing nature in its original condition and not cutting down any trees are recurrent themes. For the house designed by the Czech sculptor František Bílek in his childhood village of Chynov24, special attention was paid to preserving the garden.25 During my visits to various artists’ houses, I realised that the longing to be close to nature was, however, often softened by a garden surrounding the house, creating a new barrier between the house and the outside world. Solitude required seclusion, rather than disintegration into the wilderness.

Vernacular

Protected from human civilisation, being in nature reconnected the artists with a feeling of permanence. In a national revival context, the natural heritage was also seen as evidence of national rights against later invaders. For example, the Hungarian word, ‘haz’ designates both the home and the homeland,26 stressing the identity value of houses built in the country.

The search for authenticity and primitivity led Symbolist artists to take an active part in the local Folklorist movements,
collecting and documenting traditional objects and motifs; the founding of artist colonies in remote villages and their fascination for vernacular architecture suggests an interest in nature-based production. In Zakopane (Poland), Worpswede (Germany), Tuusula (Finland) or Gödöllő (Hungary), the merging of the vernacular into Art Nouveau motifs constituted the basis for a style of architecture and interior design in their houses, as well as for their art. As a frame for their paintings, the artist’s house offered a proper environment for the free reign of their imagination.

The high value placed on nature flavoured the appreciation of everything that was natural, or produced using natural elements. Wood in particular, but also bare brick were praised as building materials. According to Hermann Muthesius in his study on the English house, brick was regarded as a...
humble and inexpensive material and chosen for the Red House for its simplicity and authenticity, rather than the stucco villas and neo-gothic castles constructed in artificial stone. Both of the houses that František Bílek built in Chynov and Prague respectively use brick, as do those built by Sándor Nagy and Leo Belmonte in Gödöllő.

In Finland, where industrial brick was an expensive imported material, the log architecture helped to fill a conceptual gap, as the identification of historical models proved complex; artists paved the way before architects followed suit. Vernacular farms from Karelia, in eastern Finland, offered a ‘natural’ architectural model that was perfectly suited to the climatic conditions, integrated into the natural surroundings, and also used local knowledge. Furthermore, Karelia was the land where the Kalevala mythology had been collected and rooted in the Finnish identity, which in turn promoted the national revival. Following in the ethnographers’ footsteps, artists drew their inspiration from its local peasant culture, which was considered as being preserved from modern civilisation. The log houses built by the Finnish painters Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Pekka Halonen, the sculptor Emil Wikström, and the conductor Robert Kajanus, were meant to recreate these enchanted surroundings that were necessary for their art. Built in dark wood, in regions where log architecture was not customary, these Symbolist houses reinforced the natural and supernatural presence of the surrounding forest. When Akseli Gallen-Kallela invited Jean Sibelius and Robert Kajanus to Kalela to celebrate the christening of his children, he asked his distinguished guests to cut down a pine tree. This revived pagan ritual was performed to wipe out all signs of present times and to initiate a fresh start, reinforced by the placement on the altar of Gallen-Kallela’s painting Ad Astra, a work that was imbued with Theosophical meaning.

**Artist colonies**

Isolation and solitude, although necessary as a first step in dissociating from contemporary society, soon proved unsustainable. Escaping the grey city and returning to the wilderness, opposing industrial production and reviving traditional handicrafts, was a political act addressing society. In
their protected shelters, artists pretended not only to ignore the illegitimate rulers of their nation, but to invent a new world. Being eager to replace the existing society with another one supposed that they would prepare an alternative model.

Nothing from the execrated modern world was to remain, which meant that artists had to involve themselves in all fields of art and techniques to express their own vision of the world. Although they were opposed in political terms, the ideologies upheld by Richard Wagner, William Morris and Leo Tolstoy emphasising the importance of working collectively, were still revered by Symbolist artists. Wagner insisted:

*The Art-work of the Future is an associate work and only an associate demand can call it forth. This demand, which we have hitherto merely treated theoretically, as a necessary essential of the being of each separate branch of art, is practically conceivable only in the fellowship of every artist; and the union of every artist, according to the exigencies of time and place, and for one definite aim, is that which forms this fellowship.*

Communities that had been located in the country during the plein-air era had gone out of fashion and the circles artists had joined during their studies abroad had dispersed once they returned home, not without a certain nostalgia. The Symbolist artist’s house produced an alternative model that was centred on a new lifestyle. Art for art’s sake had been proscribed, whereas art was resumed in everyday life in the form of the applied arts. Together with William Morris, artists living in houses of their own design admitted that ‘the true secret of happiness lies in taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life, in elevating them by art’.

Appreciated for their functional and aesthetic integration in the house, the applied arts were opposed to decorations designed to mask a certain modern vacuity. The production of handicrafts under the supervision of Symbolist artists led to their move to the outskirts of the industrial towns. Tapestry was the ferment of the Gödöllő colony in Hungary; František Bílek tried to bring Czech artists to Chynov to produce ceramics, recalling the Hauteclaire ateliers created by the painter Armand Point that Bílek had visited.
in Marlotte, on the outskirts of Paris. Akseli Gallen-Kallela had also considered bringing together an artists’ colony based on arts and crafts:

My modest dream is to gather around me several different arts workshops, which would make gobelins and stained glass, carve furniture, print wallpaper, produce ceramics, embossed work, and so forth. There I would rule absolute, employing as many of my fellow artists as possible. It really pains me to see how many of them wander about, wasting their time and talent on endless oil picture paintings.\textsuperscript{44}

Many of Gallen-Kallela’s artist friends were installed on the shore of Lake Tuusula, where they built individual artist’s houses. Schooled in the ideas of Morris and Tolstoy, they involved their families and friends in progressive child raising but did not commit to a joint artistic programme.\textsuperscript{45} The tentative Iris workshop, run in Porvoo by the artist couple Louis and Eva Sparre in 1897–1902, intended to invite friend artists to collaborate. Ceramics and furniture were produced in a factory and sold together with imported textiles in a gallery based in Helsinki.\textsuperscript{46} Inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement Iris, however, related more closely to the Art Nouveau project to reform interior design, rather than to an artist colony project.

Utopia

Being distant from the cities, and in natural and vernacular surroundings, the artist’s house was intended to play an active part in the recreation of a new world. Conceived as an isolated and complete microcosm, the house became a laboratory for the future society, reviving supposedly genuine and non-corrupted values.

Utopia – the isolated island far from all civilisations where new forms of human societies were tried out, resulting in a permanent golden age – had defined a literary genre at the intersection between philosophy and politics since Thomas More in the 16th century. When Robert Owen left Great Britain with 800 people to build New Harmony in Indiana (1825–27), the Utopian ideal took a new step towards actual experimentation. The American New World was chosen for its promise of a new...


\textsuperscript{45} Riitta Konttinen, Onnellista asua maalla. Tuusulanjärven taiteilijayhteisö (Helsinki: Siltala, 2013).

\textsuperscript{46} Marketta Tamminen, ‘The Dream of the Home as a Total Work of Art’, in Now the Light comes from the North. Art Nouveau in Finland (Berlin: Bröhan-Museum, 2002), 95.
beginning, just as the French Etienne Cabet started an Icarian Colony in Illinois (1840–98) or the Italian Giovanni Rossi a Colônía Cecilia in Brazil (1890–94). ⁴⁷

The goal of establishing a utopian society based on free love was intensely debated among the Kristiania Bohemians in Norway, and the topographer Nils Johan Schjander was sent to Patagonia to prepare for the artists and writers’ coming. In 1905, a deal was eventually discussed with an Indian tribe concerning the cession of some land. The Norwegian writer Hans Jaeger was a driving force behind the project, trying to raise funds in Paris to start the colony. ⁴⁸ The prominent position within the Nordic colony in Paris he had held since 1886, as mentioned by the

Footnotes:
Finnish Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Eero Järnefelt with a smile\textsuperscript{49}, leaves little doubt as to the knowledge Nordic artists had of the utopian project.

Based on libertarian or socialist ideologies, utopian theoreticians granted a decisive role to artists, whose creativity was recognised as a powerful asset.\textsuperscript{50} Art was trusted with a sacred mission that was meant to serve societal change. The tight limitations of such doctrines failed to attract artists, however, but instead drew them to produce their own utopias.

The revolutionary discourse among the European nations that were striving for their independence, incorporated utopian accents. At the end of the 19th century, comments on the decline and fall of civilisation often ran parallel to those hoping for a new dawn. Entrusted with the mission to foresee and shape the future of their independent country, artists assumed the role of prophet, often deriving some exalting inspiration from the concept of the Nietzschean superman.\textsuperscript{51}

The Symbolist artist’s house and its development within artists’ colonies became the centre of the utopian experiment. Searching for harmony, painters realised that architecture and the decorative arts could support their new lifestyle and vision. William Morris, describing his utopia in\textit{News from Nowhere} (1890), wrote of a golden age in line with the goal stated with and at the Red House with his friends. Rather than submitting painting to an educative and illustrative role, as required from Academic painters, Symbolist artists found better prospects in involving themselves in the arts and crafts. As the Hungarian artists involved in the Gödöllő colony declared:

\textit{We know, and cultivate and seek a greater treasure, the greatest treasures of all: the joy of life. – This is the flame we fan with all of our strength, in ourselves and in each other. Our only aid in this is the love we bear for ourselves and for others. – We show love for ourselves by living a pure life, by listening to the heavenly voice within us. – We show love for others by regarding ourselves as small shoots, leaves, flowers of the great universal Tree of Life, all of us sharing the nourishment of the same single root. Our lives are minuscule in the nourishing warm lap of eternity. – What we produce with our two hands in the wake of this}


joy of life as the result of our daily labours – this is our art! We accept no other artistic programme.\textsuperscript{52}

Conceived as an experimental model, I conclude that the artist’s house had turned into a Total Work of Art: the saturation of the space with an art production meeting their requirements intended to conceal unpleasant reality, and to offer an alternative. The exclusion of all exogenous elements likely to endanger the overall harmony, points out the risks of confinement as well as the perverse effects underlying these utopian and nationalistic dogmas.

The Temple of the Arts

Calling for the destruction of the existing world, artists prepared individually or collectively for the world to come. Symbolist artists took upon themselves what they considered their mission with some eschatological undertones; they took on a messianic role, becoming self-proclaimed prophets and priests, and transforming the artistic creation into a rite and their house as its temple. Paul-Elie Ranson’s Nabi Temple\textsuperscript{53}, Fernand Khnopff’s Temple of the Self\textsuperscript{54}, Emil Wikström’s Temple of Work and many others serve the metaphor. Distancing from traditional churches and adopting a Nietzschean perspective, Symbolist artists diverted the Christian signs of faith\textsuperscript{55} towards their utopian beliefs.

In this respect, the comparison between the artist’s house and the church occurs as a recurrent theme in the literature dedicated to Santiago Rusiñol’s house in Sitges (Fig. 2).

\textit{The Cau [Ferrat] resembles nothing else, but looks most like a church, wrote the art critic Angel Ganivet, one of these churches there will be when religion will be commonplace and fathers will be priests, having altars next to the kitchen and the bedroom.}\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{I saw the Cau!} exulted the writer Manuel de Montoliu. \textit{I kneel, prayer to the lips and faith in the heart, in the temple you have built for Holy Poetry. And from this cosy nest of your dreams, hung between sky and sea, you have given a tremendous impulse to my soul who has just spread its wings.}

\textsuperscript{52} Elek Petrovics, ‘A gödöllői telep kultúrtörvényéiről’, Magyar Iparművészeti, Budapest, 1909, quoted in English by Judit Szabadi, \textit{Art Nouveau in Hungary} (Budapest: Corvina, 1989), 84.


\textsuperscript{54} Fernand Khnopff and Edouard Pelseneer (arch.), The Temple of the Self, 1902, Brussels, Belgium.

\textsuperscript{55} Nina Kokkinen, \textit{Totuudenetsijät. Esoteerinen henkisyys Akseli Gallen-Kallelen, Pekka Halosen ja Hugo Simbergin taiteessa} (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2019).

\textsuperscript{56} Angel Ganivet, ‘Cau Ferrat’, \textit{España Filosófica Contemporánea}, Sitges, 8, 1897, in Ramon Planes, \textit{El Modernisme a Sitges} (Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1969, App. 3).
to rise to the heights, seeking with delectation the infinity that attracts me with an irresistible force.  

The strong spiritual permeation and the dissemination of Theosophy among Symbolist artists at the end of the 19th century were noticeable in the use of a religious vocabulary. For the French Catholic writer Léon Bloy, it was self-evident that František Bílek’s art was heretical, closer to Symbolism than to Christianity, while for the Czech poet and painter Zdenka Braunerová, sincerity and purity prevailed in Bílek’s art and lifestyle.

The Czech sculptor František Bílek was born in Hussite land in South-Bohemia, near the city of Tabor. The Christian pre-Reformation movement from the 15th century had left a strong mark in the region, and its tragic rebellion against the Holy Roman Empire had nourished the national revival movement at the end of the 19th century. Inspired by Decadent Symbolism, Bílek chose not to illustrate the historically rebellious counter-power, but a contemporary Bohemia exhausted and abandoned by God, having lost all hope and humbly praying for its resurrection. The fall of the Habsburg Empire was considered inevitable, and the resurrection of an independent Bohemian Kingdom was hoped for.

Both houses built by the sculptor were grounded on his religious beliefs and his own Symbolist interpretations. Ornamental reliefs and quotations, some taken from the Gospel of John, were applied to walls and furniture, creating a unique ‘talking architecture’. The house was conveying a message, and in doing so was charged with meaning. ‘We are covered’ was the inscription next to the relief on the façade of František Bílek’s first house in Chynov. The relief depicted a mother covering the naked body of her child, echoing the protective role played by the house for the vulnerable artist. ‘Earth speaks to us’ was illustrated by a woman in profile whispering to a young man’s silhouette.

There are certain men in certain times to which the Earth speaks. They are pure, holy and poor in spirit. What does she tell them? She tells them about the terrifying rumours that were in the world; they are the elect of God, looking at the clear sky, but never smiling on the ground. – It is the cause of the painful and sad expression of the head, the painful half-

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open mouth and the look full of regret that she sends to the man who tenderly presses against her.\textsuperscript{61}

The second house Bílek built for himself, on the outskirts of Prague, developed further the temple metaphor, leaving behind the vernacular references seen in Chynov (Fig. 3). Publicised in the magazine \textit{Styl}, after its completion in 1912, the architecture of the villa was said to have expressed the artist’s spiritual concerns. At the same time it was the first building with a flat roof ever to be constructed in Prague, and this design revealed an unexpected approach to modernity. The liturgical motif of the daily bread pervaded the entire house, referring to the mystical communion that was central to the Moravian Church. The semi-circular house was designed to represent a wheat field cut by a scythe, and the columns evoked the wheat stalks. The wheat motif repeated in the dining-room was emphasised by scriptures: ‘The movement of the Earth when she gives bread, There was a field full of wheat offering the brothers’ daily bread.’ This stressed the religious dimension of the Christian meal. Both the interior and exterior of the house featured carved doors and door handles with the countryside theme of ears of wheat and wild birds.\textsuperscript{62}

A statue of Moses\textsuperscript{63} provided the axis of the construction. The Old Testament prophet, who would have borne the artists’ own features\textsuperscript{64}, was interpreted after Edouard Schuré’s influential book \textit{Les Grands Initiés}\textsuperscript{65}, as an Egyptian initiate preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ. The papyrus columns standing for the wheat stalks on the façade of the villa developed the Egyptian reference further. The repetition of the semi-circular shape of the architecture in the desk Bílek designed for his own use\textsuperscript{66} also carried a symbolic meaning. In correspondence with the house, the axial position of the artist at his desk suggested that he had become the new Moses and prophet of the time to come.\textsuperscript{67}

The mystical aesthetic culminated in the artist’s studio, which was ornamented with decorative stones. The studio, which also functioned as a gallery presenting his sculptures, looked like a chapel devoted to his art, and it elevated its creator, imbuing him with divine powers. The wedding celebration of Bílek’s daughter that took place among his sculptures, confirms the liturgical intention of the studio\textsuperscript{68}, and reminds us of the christening of Gallen-Kallela’s children in his house\textsuperscript{69}.

\textsuperscript{61} This quote from Zdenka Braunerová is in the large essay she devoted to the sculptor after her visit to Chynov, see Braunerová, ‘František Bílek’.

\textsuperscript{62} František Bílek, \textit{Styl}, IV, 1912, 42.

\textsuperscript{63} František Bílek, Moses, 1905, bronze, melted during Second World War. A new cast of the statue is now placed next to the Old New Synagogue in Prague.


\textsuperscript{66} František Bílek, Desk, 1900–12, oak, 100cm x 120cm x 70cm, Prague City Gallery – Villa Bílek.

\textsuperscript{67} I would like to note that the motif of the couple sitting on a throne under a starry sky resembles a similar motif, although inverted, published by Akseli Gallen-Kallela in the German magazine \textit{Pan} in 1895. The original source for the motif was Félicien Rops \textit{La Lyre}, which illustrated a rather discreet publication of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poems in 1891. Gallen-Kallela’s illustration was further disseminated in German-speaking countries, and the Hungarian ceramic factory Zsolnay also produced a coloured tile with it.

\textsuperscript{68} Vybíral, ‘L’innovation architecturale dans l’œuvre de František Bílek’, 120.

\textsuperscript{69} See note 37.
Other celebrations of the cult of art confirm the sacralisation of the Symbolist house. A remarkable example took place in Sitges, where Santiago Rusiñol had his house, Cau Ferrat. He organised a spectacular procession of two paintings by El Greco, which belonged to his collection, leading to his house, where they were hung on the wall. The description given by Josep Pla was powerful enough to create a myth around the event. The journalist recalled how the morning train brought celebrities from Barcelona to the village; two artist friends parading on horses were following the two paintings of St Peter and St Magdalena that were carried on tabernacles by other artist friends. The villagers believed that the procession was heading for the church, but as Josep Pla reported in the papers on the following day, this was a civic ceremony, which ended with a banquet on the nearby terrace.70

All five of the Modernist celebrations that took place at Cau Ferrat consecrated the religion of art. With the exception of the first exhibition, in which the landscape paintings of the Luminist school of Sitges71 were displayed, the importance of painting diminished in the subsequent celebrations. Contemporary literature and music took priority; for example, Maurice Maeterlinck’s play, L’Intruse, was performed in Catalan translation72 and a Serpentine Dance73 inspired by Loïe Fuller, introduced the Symbolist aesthetic in Catalonia.

During these celebrations art was present in all forms, yet it was nevertheless played down, and instead a feeling of taking part in a collective moment was foregrounded. The Total Work of Art was accomplished, and the individual expectation merged with that of their generation, striving towards a common goal. With artists celebrating art, the Symbolist utopia reached its peak but at the same time it had exhausted its concept. Once the golden age was reached, only the repetition of the same was possible.

**An interior space**

Designed by artists, the artist’s house eluded the prevailing architectural paradigms and replaced them with concepts that were present elsewhere in their art. In an *Ex Libris* bookplate from 1904 (Fig. 4), Akseli Gallen-Kallela represented himself alone, smoking a pipe and seated by a log house. The house is on the top of a hill above a deep forest, an eagle flying high in the sky.

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73 During the night of 29 August 1895, the dancer Pilar Arcas performed a *Serpentine Dance* on a boat at sea, lit from the Cau Ferrat windows. Originally created by the American dancer Loie Fuller, this veil dance inspired by paintings on Greek vases and by Botticelli’s *Venus* resumed a Mediterranean identity. *Planes, El Modernisme a Sitges*, 101.
Fig. 4. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Ex libris Axel Gallén, 1904, linocut. Gallen-Kallela Museum, Espoo
Photo: Gallen-Kallela Museum / Jukka Paavola
The meditative figure, the majestic eagle and the house can all be considered aspects of a self-portrait, all insisting on escape and transcendental elevation.

Solitary and surrounded by nature, the house in this bookplate conveys the parallel iconography of the heights, or of the island that was also thematised by Akseli Gallen-Kallela. For Santiago Rusiñol it was expressed in the painting of a walled garden. This protective envelope surrounding the house drew particular attention to the interior of the house. Entering the house symbolised penetrating the most intimate and fragile part of the artist’s psyche.

The escape out of the world prompted Symbolist artists to investigate their inner world. Behind walls, in the privacy of their studio, artists felt secure enough to delve into the self. Indeed, the heart of the artist’s house was the studio, with the living spaces distributed around it. And in the studio was the artist, communing with his visions. Progressing inside Fernand Khnopff’s house, one journalist wrote that he reached the acme when entering the studio, where the Belgian painter had drawn a circle around his easel to designate the holy of holies, the inner sanctuary of creation. The magic circle reinforced the walls in resisting the disintegration process endured by the artist.

Turning inward, Symbolist artists even referred to their own bodies as mere envelopes protecting their inner selves. The Symbolist house was therefore materialising an extension of the artist’s body. The anthropomorphic house was apprehended as a living body, encompassing the most frightening nightmares, as well as the most ecstatic visions. Charles Baudelaire, after Edgar Allen Poe, had popularised the idea of the house endowed with life, which impressed Belgian Symbolists, such as Xavier Mellery, who surreptitiously depicted The Soul of Things, or Léon Spilliaert, whose distorted self-portraits were reflected in a mirror.

Considering the artist’s house as an extension of the body tended to project the house from the inside out; the house seemed built from the interior, continuing out towards nature. When I first visited Halosenniemi, the log house that the Finnish painter Pekka Halonen built for himself and his family in Tuusula, I realised how exceptionally well the house functioned in that respect. The numerous windows, all with different shapes, framed...
the landscape in the same way as a painting. Embracing the view from a dominant position, the house seemed to look out through its windows.79

The open layout of the interior space, with minimal interior divisions, was not only guided by an intention to merge functions, or by the meeting between artistic practice and everyday life; it was also intended to free the artist’s psyche, and to allow the expression of the wildest ideas. This fluidity of space was a feature that was inspired as much by the vernacular farmhouse as it was by Art Nouveau architecture magazines. The farmhouse served the purposes of the artist’s house surprisingly well, gathering the extended family and all activities in a central open volume. The Finnish log houses, the house built by Bílek in Chynov, and the traditional Hungarian farmhouse, were all based on such models:

What I mean by the heart of the house is this space, which could work like the human heart. The whole life of the house could be there, there would be enough space for the family to work in common, for the creative activity in common, for the social life in common, for the dinners in common. That’s where we would paint, where we would eat, it would be the children’s room, where we would read, where we would gather around the stove in winter, refresh in the summer. All this in one space, thanks to the artistic and ingenious interpretations of the interior, in the heart of the house.80

The Symbolist utopia developed in the artist’s house intended to reverse the imposed powers and to create a new world in perfect correspondence with the artist’s ideals. Stripped of the perversions related to modern civilisation, the artist demiurge believed that he could outline a new genesis with collective pure intentions. Transgressing the categories of architecture, the artist’s house was a home, a studio, a gallery and a temple in which to celebrate the new world to come. It was built with materials found in the nature or produced following an ancestral tradition, considering everything original and genuine as good, and everything industrial as corrupted. The Symbolist artist’s house embodied spiritual ideas, with the intention to make the inner world accessible and the artist’s soul visible. This concept belongs to a certain moment in the history of ideas, when at the

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turn of the 19th century the possibility to progress backwards was imagined, and the capacity to build a better world was considered a matter of goodwill. In the seclusion of their house, artists hoped to witness a new dawn.

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