Symbolism in Turn-of-the-Century Irish Art

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Symbolism was a late 19th-century style of French, Russian and Belgian origin in poetry and other arts. In literature, the style had its beginnings with the publication of Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil), by Charles Baudelaire, in 1857. The works of Edgar Allan Poe, which Baudelaire admired greatly and translated into French, were a significant influence and the source of many stock tropes and images. The aesthetic was developed by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine during the 1860s and '70s. The femme fatale reappeared in Symbolist art, and it was nothing short of obscene. From the perspective of artists (or many men of that era), women were dangerous and deceptive, sexually deviant and insatiable. They could even turn ruthlessly violent. Artists used that theme as a cautionary tale against submitting to their allure. They didn't need to make up new subject matter because they were able to reuse familiar scenes from ancient mythology (e.g., Medusa) or the Bible (Eve or Salome).

Symbolism vs. Pre-Raphaelite art: Contrast the ideal, virginal beauty of Pre-Raphaelite women with their Symbolist art had strong connections with the Pre-Raphaelites and with Romanticism, as well as the Aestheticism movement. Like all these movements, Symbolism was in large part a reaction against naturalism and realism, and became closely associated with mythological painting of all kinds. Symbolist painters and sculptors were inspired by literature and poetry of the day, as well as the history, legends, myths, Biblical stories and fables of the past. In expressing themselves, symbolist artists endowed their subjects (e.g., women, heroic males, flowers, landscapes, animals), with mythological or other esoteric meanings. Many artists turned to stimulants like alcohol and drugs to fuel their imagination. The first of the non Celtic symbols in this guide is the Harp. The Irish Harp is the national emblem of Ireland and is still widely used today. Look for it on Irish Euro coins as well as on the label of every can and bottle of Guinness. The meaning of the Irish harp symbol embodies the spirit and essence of the Irish people and is said to represent the immortality of the soul. In fact, it was so revered that the British banned all harps (and harpists!) in the 16th century in an effort to break the symbolic tie. Other trios in Celtic symbolism include humankind being made up of mind, body and spirit. FAQs about Celtic symbols and their meanings. Photo left: Bjoern Alberts (Shutterstock) Right: via Tourism Ireland.