

**Orpheus and Eurydice, by Maurice Denis, French, Oil on Canvas, 1910, 68.1, G351**



### **Gallery Label**

In Greek mythology, Orpheus is portrayed as a poet and musician from Thrace whose lyre playing could charm all who heard his seductive music. In this representation, Eurydice, the wood nymph who became Orpheus's wife, kneels transfixed by his song. Like many Symbolist artists, Denis explored the power of music as a theme in his art, hoping to make the visual arts as lyrical and suggestive as sound itself.

### **Key Ideas**

1. The Greco-Roman story of Orpheus tells us of the power of poetry and music to enchant all natural things.
2. Orpheus and his mythology appealed to the symbolist artists who sought an ideal synthesis of music, poetry and, visual arts
3. The colors, lines, and forms in Denis's painting of Orpheus and Eurydice convey a sense of rhythm and harmony.

### **Artist/Biography**

Maurice Denis (November 25, 1870 – November 1943) was a French painter and writer, and a member of the Symbolist and Les Nabis (The Nabis) movements. His theories contributed to the foundations of cubism, fauvism, and abstract art.

*“Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.”*

This short statement, written when Maurice Denis was just 20 years old, would have a great influence on the above art movements of the early 20th Century.

Maurice Denis was born November 25, 1870, in Granville, Manche, a coastal town in the Normandy region of France. Waters and coastlines would remain favorite subject matter throughout his career, as would material drawn from the bible. For such an avant-garde figure, Denis had a surprisingly broad religious

streak, writing in his notebook at age fifteen, "*Yes, it's necessary that I am a Christian painter, that I celebrate all the miracles of Christianity, I feel it's necessary.*" As a Catholic teenager, he often visited churches and cathedrals: seeing such beautiful examples of religious art would have had a strong effect upon him.

The Denis family was affluent, and young Maurice attended both the *École des Beaux-Arts* and the *Académie Julian*, where he studied with the French figure painter and theorist Jules Joseph Lefebvre. At the *Académie* he met painters and future Nabis members (see below under Art History Context), including Paul Serusier, Pierre Bonnard, and Edouard Vuillard. After *The Nabis*, Denis focused on religious subjects and murals. In 1922 he published an influential historical and theoretical work titled "New Theories of Modern and Sacred Art" ("*Nouvelles theories sur l'art moderne, sur l'art sacré*"). As a critic and theorist he influenced artists from a number of countries, including Canada. His mature works included landscapes and figure studies, although his primary interests were religious subjects such as "The dignity of labour" in 1931 for the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions.

Denis married his first wife, Marthe, in 1893 – the worlds of mysticism, religion, and love combined in the form of Marthe. She was his muse and model, providing a serenity to his life and bearing seven children. As he stated in his journal, which he kept throughout his life: "*The first period of painting was love, amazement in front of the beauty of the woman and the child.*" Marthe was a gifted musician and shared his love of music. They had the same tastes in music, as well as in avant-garde literature and theater. Their friends included the composers Debussy, Chausson, and Vincent d'Indy and writers Mallarmé, Valéry, and Gide. Although he had a large family, Denis was able to provide for them and after his wife died in 1919 married again two years later and had two more children. Denis died in Paris from injuries suffered from an automobile accident in 1943. (See the end of this OOM for his self-portrait.)

Similarly to Art Nouveau artists, as well as being a painter, Denis was an illustrator, artist decorator, and photographer. He was concerned about the interior decoration of "the modern house," and created patterns for wallpaper, designs for stained glass, tapestries, and ceramics. His work transcended the distinction between architecture, writing, and painting.

Among his interdisciplinary projects was a 1912 – 1913 series of paintings on the history of music, including an image of Orpheus, in the *Theatre des Champs-Elysees* in Paris.

### **Art History Context**

Maurice Denis became known as the Le Nabi aux Belles Icônes, “The Prophet of Beautiful Icons,” due to his love of symbolism in painting.

Les Nabis were formed in 1890 and consisted of a dozen artists and school friends including Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Ranson, Edouard Vuillard, and Paul Sérusier. Nabi is a Hebrew word meaning “prophet;” as they wished to create new forms of art and expression, they thought Nabis (Prophets) would be a suitable title for the group. The artists referred to themselves using this term to state their common willingness to renew painting.

The aim of the Nabis was to render in comprehensible signs the inexpressible ideal, the secret language of God, of love of emotion. The Nabis rejected the Renaissance ideal of easel painting, disavowing illusions of depth, abandoning linear perspective and modeling. Under the leadership of Paul Sérusier, who had kept alive Gauguin's aesthetic message of Symbolism in Pont-Aven in the form of a painting entitled “The Talisman” (1888, Musée d’Orsay; see end of OOM), these young pupils formed a coherent group in Paris over a short period of time, from 1888 to 1900.

### **Style and Influences**

Denis was introduced to Gauguin’s style by Paul Serusier, whose ideas related to symbolism and its offspring, synthetism. Symbolism expressed the intellectual and poetic concept that a picture not only should be a material representation of the external world but also should express and suggest thoughts or states of mind. The symbolists challenged naturalism as an artistic goal. Instead they generally used bright and often arbitrary colors, curving lines, flat form, and unusual compositions to transform the real world into personal symbolic statements. As Denis succinctly stated: *“And so we realized that every work of art was a transposition, a caricature, the impassioned equivalent of a sensation experienced.”* Denis believed, as in synthetism, that painting could have musical qualities and that color, line, and form were inherently musical and could convey a sense of rhythm and harmony. The Nabi incorporated the use of unmixed colors directly from the paint tubes. Denis also was attracted to the work of Puvis de Chavannes and his use of linear simplicity. He was influenced by de Chavannes’s friezelike compositions set against flattened landscapes and painted in muted tones. In 1895 and 1897 he traveled to Italy, where he acquired a more traditional use of perspective.

Further, his unmodeled forms and subtle contours reveal the influence of the Art Nouveau style of the late 1800’s. His art also was inspired by the broad planes of color and bold patterns that characterized Japanese prints, although Nabi paintings often created textured surfaces by varied brushstrokes. The Nabis stressed

continuity between art and design in both their artistic production and theoretical writings. Similarly to members of the Arts and Crafts movement they maintained an egalitarian attitude toward materials and collaborated on decorative projects ranging from set designs to wallpaper, textiles, ceramics and stained glass – as noted above for Maurice Denis. Initially the artists considered small wall paintings as elitist and bourgeois, whereas their “decorations” were intended to serve as a link between art and daily life. The 19<sup>th</sup> century decorative painters foreshadowed 20<sup>th</sup> century art that looked to interior spaces and to artist’s internal thoughts and experiences as refuges from the modern world. Examples include Monet’s water lily paintings and Matisse’s decoration with colorist abstraction.

Interestingly, in 1900 Denis painted “Hommage à Cézanne,” “Homage to Cézanne;” the careful composition in this painting reflected his desire for classical order, harmony and clarity (see image at the end of this OOM). According to the Musee D’Orsay where the painting is located, “this painting rings out like a manifesto. Maurice Denis has assembled a group of friends, artists and critics, in the shop of the art dealer, Ambroise Vollard, to celebrate Paul Cézanne, who is represented by the still life on the easel. This painting, Fruit Bowl, Glass and Apples had belonged to Paul Gauguin, who is also evoked among the tutelary examples to whom Denis is paying homage. A painting by Gauguin and another by Renoir can be made out in the background. Odilon Redon is also given pride of place: he is shown in the foreground on the far left and most of the figures are looking at him. He is listening to Paul Sérusier who is standing in front of him. From left to right, we can recognise Edouard Vuillard, the critic André Mellerio in a top hat, Vollard behind the easel, Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Pierre Bonnard smoking a pipe, and lastly Marthe Denis, the painter's young wife.”

### **The Painting**

The painting, “Orpheus and Eurydice,” was executed in 1910 to be shown at the Salon that year. Orpheus was the son of the god Apollo and Calliope, the muse of epic poetry. His voice was more melodious than any of his fellow-mortals; the songs he sang and the tunes he played on his lyre enchanted gods, mortals, and beasts alike. He married the beautiful wood nymph Eurydice, but on their wedding day a poisonous snake bit her and she died. In hopes of being reunited with his beloved, Orpheus journeyed to the Underworld to beg the king and queen to return Eurydice to him. Singing his pleas and playing his lyre, even the Underworld wept and the couple was granted permission to leave together on the condition that Orpheus must not look back at Eurydice. However, at the opening to the world, Orpheus turned and looked at her and she slipped back into the darkness. There are several versions of how Orpheus died, but all feature women so affected by his music that they fall upon him, tearing him from limb to limb.

His spirit returns to the Underworld where he is happily reunited with Eurydice. The Orpheus myth warns that death is inevitable, but also reconciles life and death, suggesting that death is actually the beginning of a new life.

The setting appears to be a picturesque grove on a warm spring day. In this painting Denis uses rich and pale greens, purples, browns, whites and blues to evoke an idyllic moment of humans in harmony with nature. Interestingly, green, purple and blue and contain the color blue. No single figure dominates the painting. Rather, Orpheus stands to the right, playing his lyre and charming all who are gathered. He wears a laurel crown, a prize in ancient Greece awarded to the best poets and musicians.

Denis achieves balance in this painting; the white-clad audience of Orpheus form an open-ended circle around him. By gradually reducing the size of the figures Denis guides the viewer back to the forest. Eurydice, kneeling beneath an arched bower in the middleground, raises her hands in approval of his song. The figures create a gentle rhythm in the painting, and even the vertical trees curve gently contributing to the harmony. Denis only hints at the future tragedy of the lovers, by isolating Eurydice under the hedge.

Orpheus and his mythology represented the synthesis of poetry, music, and the other arts, so critical to Denis and other Symbolists. As noted above the theme of this painting relates not only to mythology but also to music. Orpheus's reputation as a religious and artistic teacher added to his importance to Denis and other artists of this era who were interested in the spiritual qualities of art.

### **Questions and Discussion Points**

1. What would it feel like to you to be in the setting that is portrayed? What emotions does it evoke for you?
2. How would you describe the brush strokes of this painting? How would you describe the use of color?
3. How do the figures interrelate in this art work?
4. What elements unite the foreground, middleground, and background?
5. What statement do you think the artist was making in his portrayal of Orpheus and Eurydice? What type of music do you think inspired Denis as he created this painting?

## **Bibliography/Sources**

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5. Montreal Museum of Art  
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6. Docent File Notes



**Talisman, by Serusier, 1888, under the tutelage of Gauguin**



**Homage to Cezanne, 1900, by Maurice Denis**



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**Self-Portrait, by Maurice Denis**