

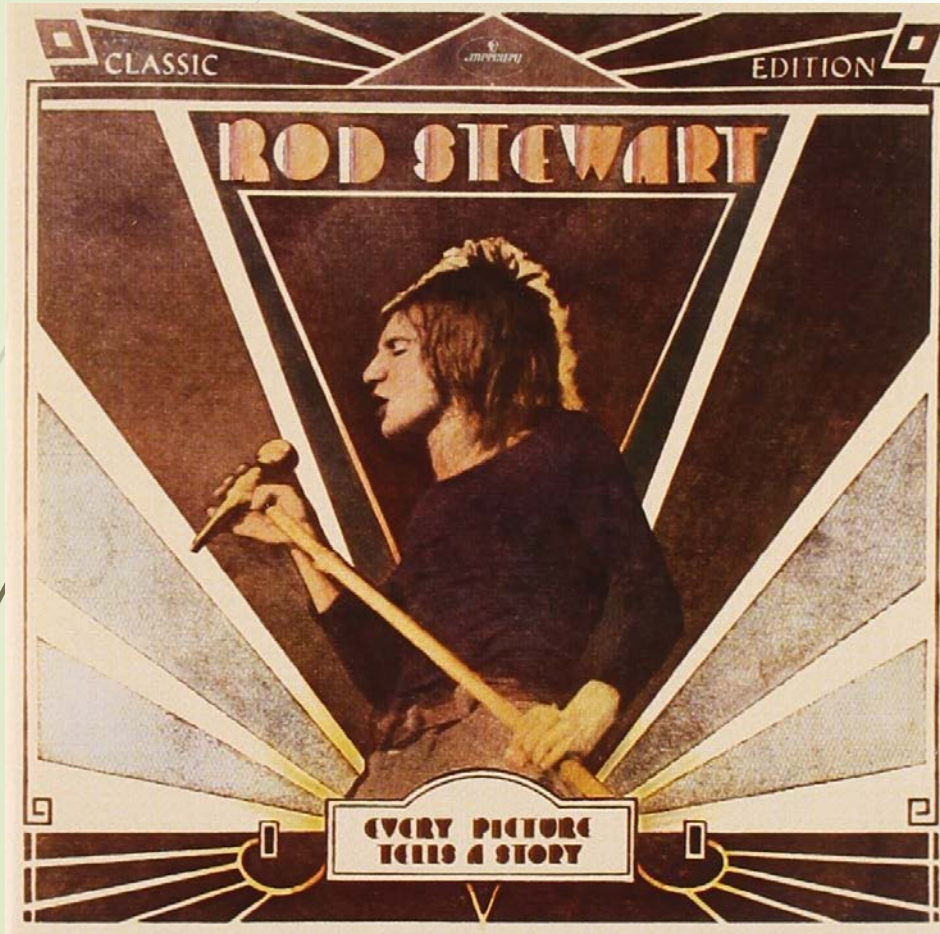


Every Picture Tells a Story

Édouard Schuré's *The Great Initiates*: Theosophy, Text, Context, and Influence on the Visual Arts

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«Every Picture Tells a Story»



- «Paris was a place you could hide away if you felt you didn't fit in So remember, every picture tells a story, don't it» - Rod Stewart, *Every Picture Tells a Story*, 1971
- Well before Rod Stewart, Theosophist author Édouard Schuré (1841-1929) believed that both in music and the visual arts each work should «tell a story» rather than merely entertaining

Kandinsky and Schuré

- «Rama, Krishna, Hermes - Moses, Orpheus - Pythagoras - Plato – Jesus». This genealogy of spiritual masters was annotated in his notebook for 1909-1911 by Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944, right) with a reference to «Edouard Schuré – 1907 - Leipzig», the date and city of edition of the German translation of Schuré's *The Great Initiates*



Mondrian and Schuré



- Piet Mondrian (1872-1944, left, as a young man) abandoned Calvinism for Theosophy under the influence of *The Great Initiates*, that he read around 1900. The book remained crucially important throughout all his life

A Forgotten Prophet

- Before World War II, *The Great Initiates* had 450 French editions and was translated into two dozen foreign languages. Today, however, Schuré is almost forgotten
- The paper will discuss
 1. Who was Édouard Schuré (right)
 2. His influence on the visual arts





1. Who was Édouard Schuré?

Marguerite Syamour (1857-1945),
Édouard Schuré

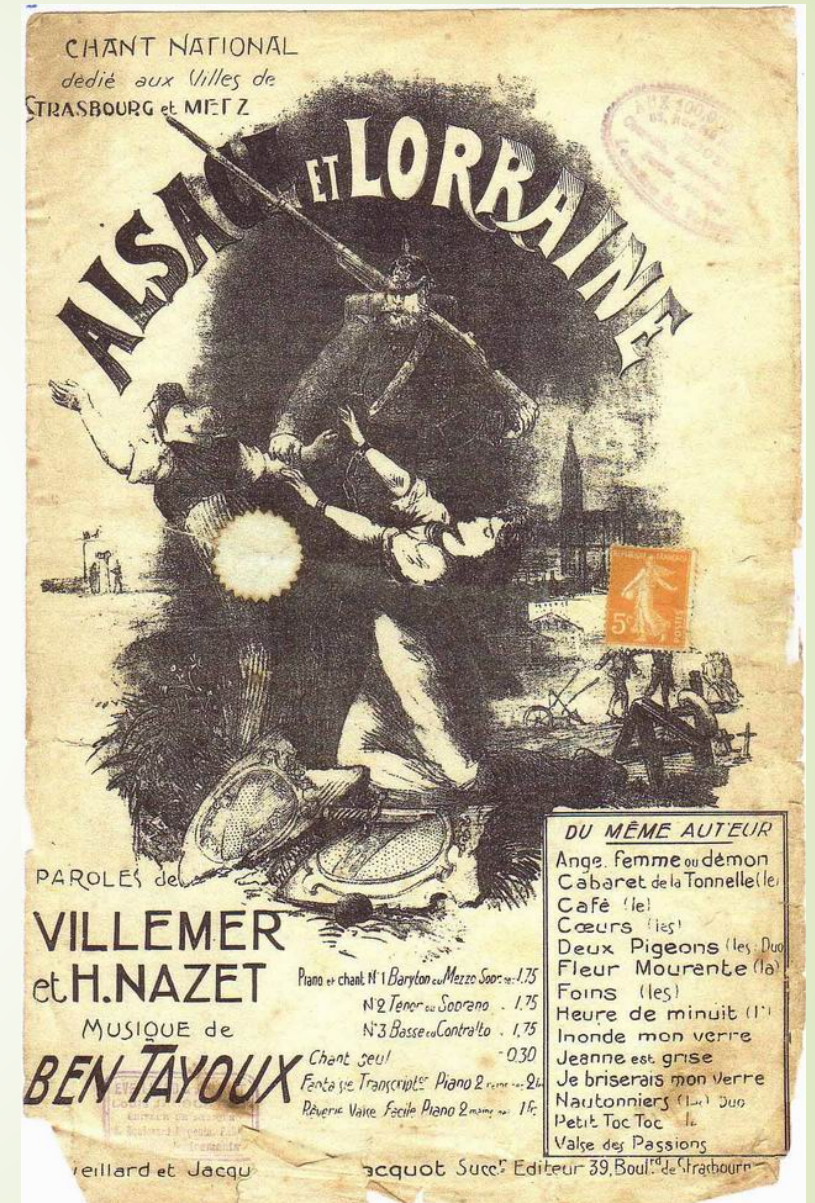
A Protestant Family



- Édouard Schuré was born on January 21, 1841 in Strasbourg, Alsace, in a Protestant family including several pastors. He married in 1866 Mathilde Nessler (1836-1922), the daughter of the Protestant pastor of Barr, Alsace. The local high school is now named after him. His Alsatian Protestant origins are important for understanding Schuré's anti-Catholicism

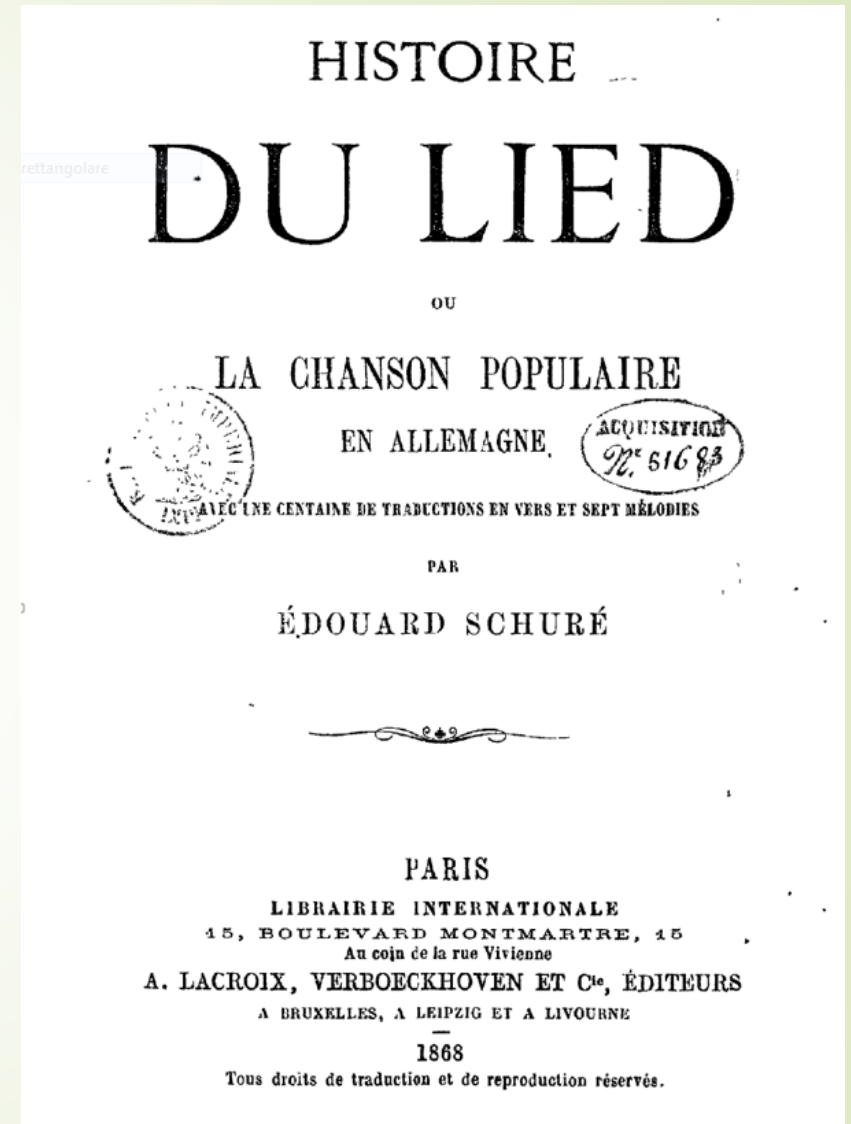
An Alsatian Writer

- Alsatia was at the center of the border disputes between France and Germany. Schuré was perfectly bilingual and felt part of German culture. On the other hand, he believed that Alsace belonged to France and became an ardent French nationalist. This tension between a German and a French identity explains several incidents in Schuré's life

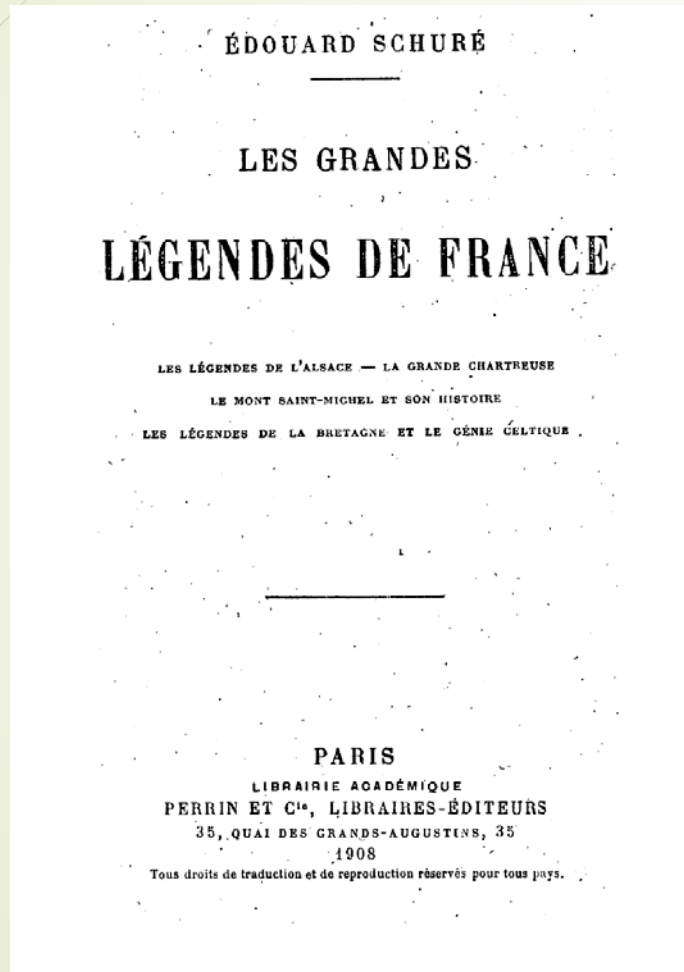


Histoire du Lied (1868)

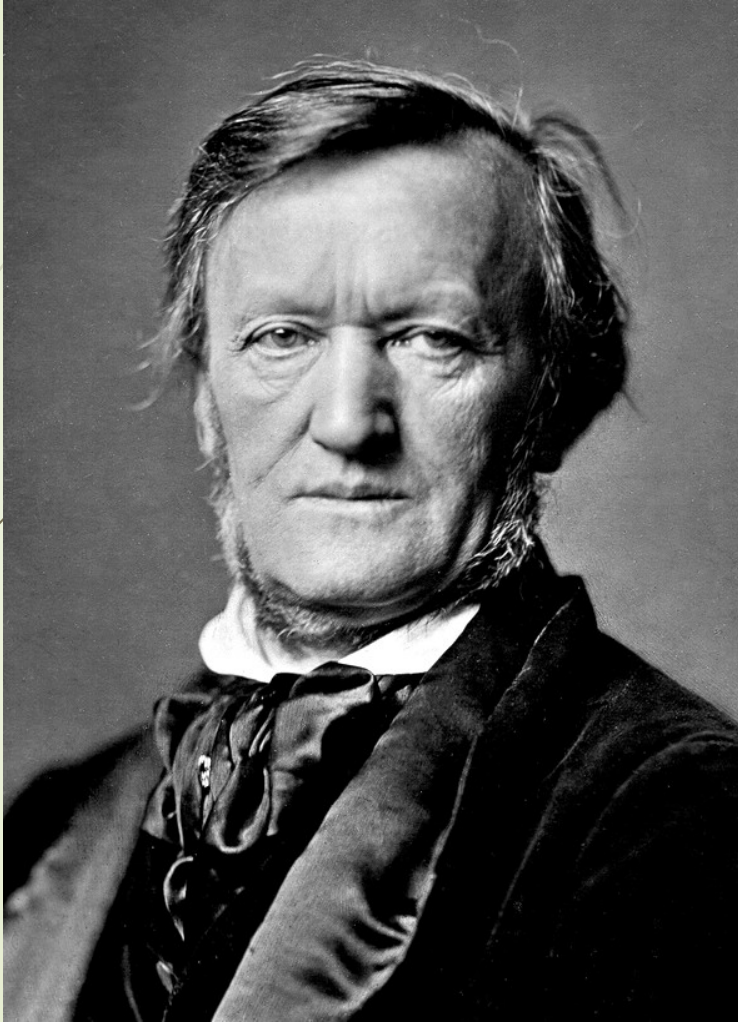
- Schuré is often regarded as the author of only one book, *The Great Initiates*, but when he published this text, at age 48, he was already well-known. He took courses in leading German and French universities, although he never graduated, and at an early age became a prominent, if self-taught, musicologist
- He believed that the soul of a nation is revealed in folk songs. He applied this thesis to Germany in his first book, *Histoire du Lied*



Schuré's «Celtism»



- As for the soul of France, Schuré sought it, beyond Catholicism, in the old «Celtic» roots. The search for «Celtism» in old traditions and legends preoccupied Schuré for most of his life



Schuré and Wagner

- In 1869, Schuré visited Richard Wagner (1813-1883, left) in Germany. He became the leading advocate of Wagner in France. Both Wagner and Frederic Nietzsche (1844-1900) considered Schuré's book *Le Drame Musical* (1875) as one of the best interpretation of the musician's ideas. Schuré became part of Wagner's inner circle, and their friendship was shortly interrupted only during the French-German war of 1870

Margherita Albana

- In 1875, Schuré met in Florence Margherita Albana (1827-1887, above), the wife of Greek painter Giorgio Mignaty (1823-1895, below). While not divorcing the respective spouses, Schuré and Margherita started an intense and passionate relationship, which lasted until the woman's death in 1887. Margherita introduced Schuré to Theosophy and esotericism, and encouraged him to write a book on the fundamental unity of the great religions



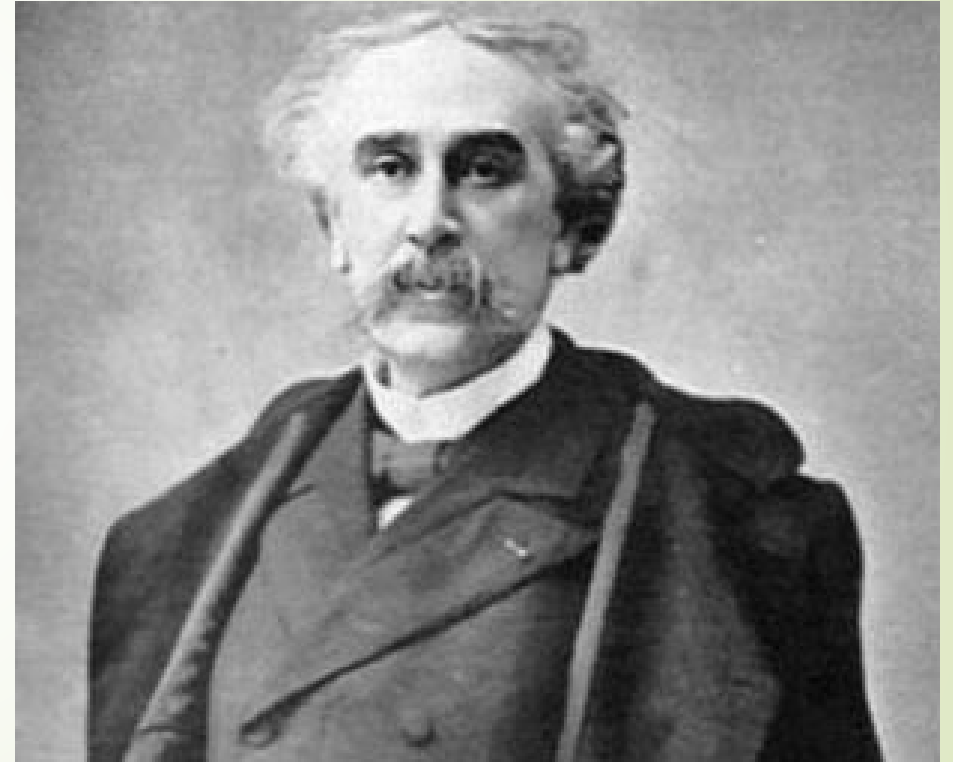
Schuré and Blavatsky

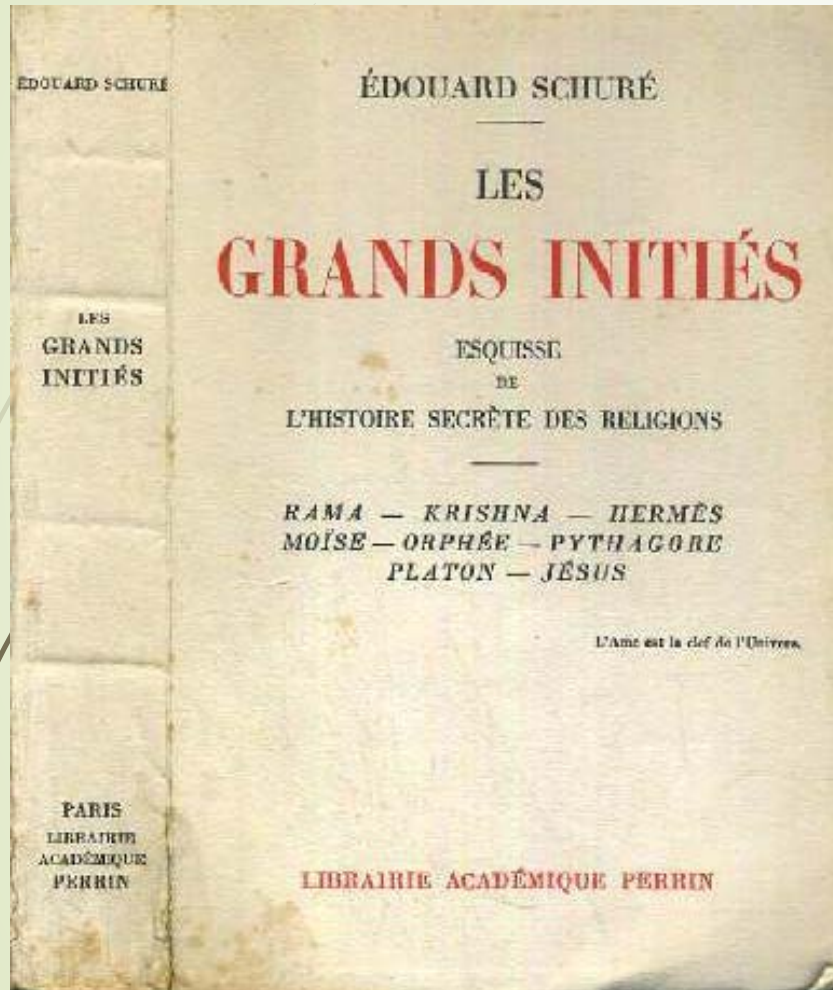


- In his later years, Schuré romantically exaggerated Margherita's role in introducing him to esotericism. Not less important was Swiss feminist writer Émilie de Morsier (1843-1896, left), who will become Schuré's new muse upon Margherita's death. She was the secretary of the Société Théosophique d'Orient et d'Occident, the first French branch of the Theosophical Society, and introduced Schuré in 1884 both to its president, Lady Caithness (1830-1895) and to Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891). Although he left an unflattering portrait of the latter as «the Slavic hippopotamus», Schuré did join the Theosophical Society

Saint-Yves d'Alveydre

- In 1886, disturbed by the Coulomb scandal and the accusations of fraud against Blavatsky, both Morsier and Schuré left the Theosophical Society. Schuré had met in 1885 Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842-1909, right) and for a couple of years regarded him as his spiritual master. He broke with Saint-Yves, judging him too harsh and authoritarian, in 1887, and eventually returned to the Theosophical Society in 1907





The Great Initiates

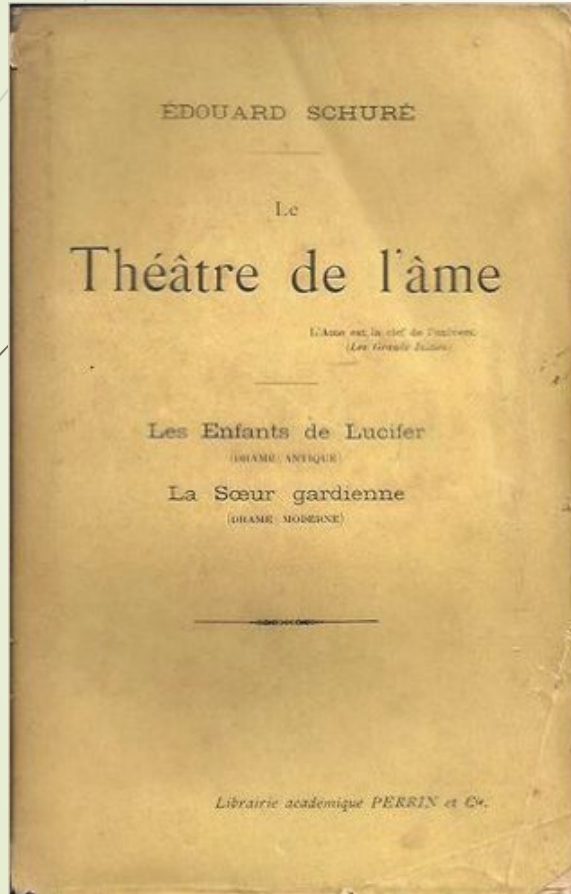
- Theosophical influences are obvious in Schuré's magnum opus *The Great Initiates*, published in 1889. Buddha was discussed in a separate article. The chain of initiates went from Rama to Krishna, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Jesus. The phenomenally successful book claimed that there was a continuum in the chain and that, at their esoteric level, the teachings of all these Great Initiates were one

Schuré and Jules Bois

- While primarily interested in Theosophy, Schuré experimented with Spiritualist séances and occult rituals, and was in contact with a wide European esoteric milieu, including Papus (1865-1916), Stanislas de Guaita (1861-1897), Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), and Anna Kingsford (1846-1888). He shared his eclecticism with journalist Jules Bois (1868-1943, right), who was among his closest friends between 1892 and 1904. Bois even tried to organize a secret society around Schuré's ideas



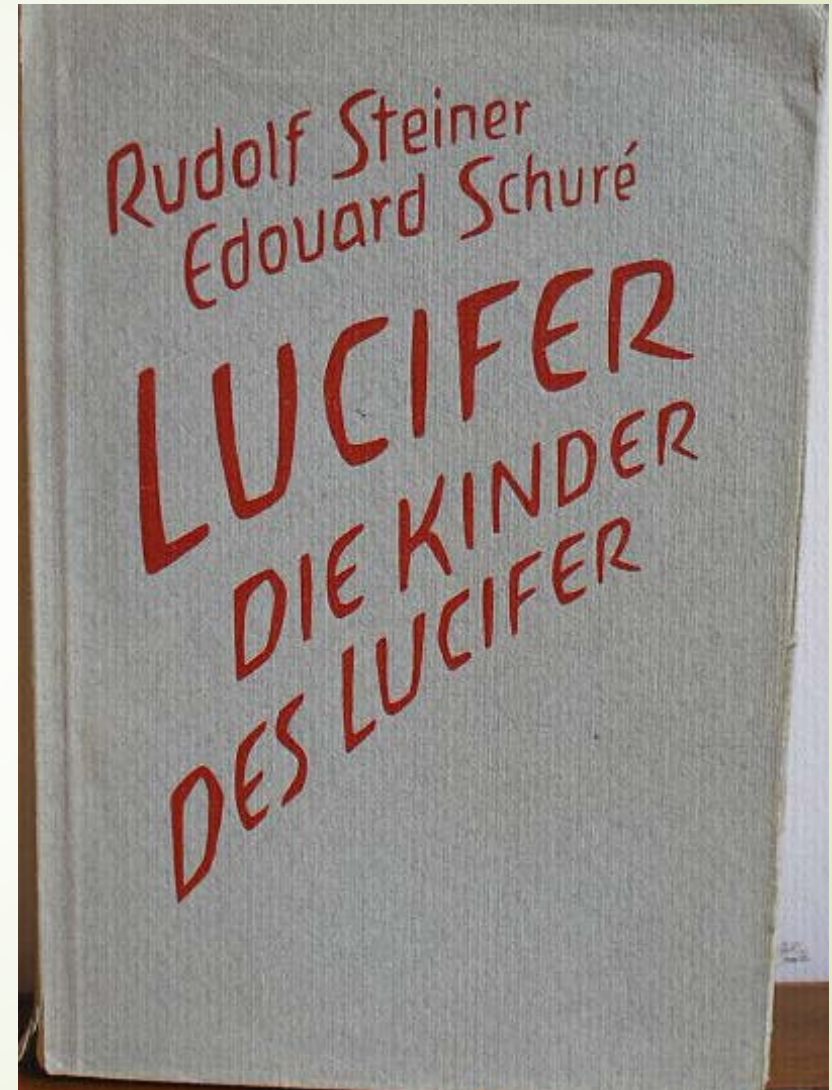
Schuré's Secret Doctrine



- Bois was among the select few who knew of Schuré's confidential teachings about Lucifer. The 1900 play by Schuré *Les Enfants de Lucifer* was ostensibly about Lucifer as a symbol of freedom, which was common in a certain «romantic Satanism» of these years. In fact, Schuré experienced no less than three apparitions of Lucifer as a guiding spirit of humanity, the first time in 1872, in Assisi, Italy. When he died in 1929, Schuré's last words might have been a call to Lucifer, although an alternative version maintained he was seeing his long-deceased father

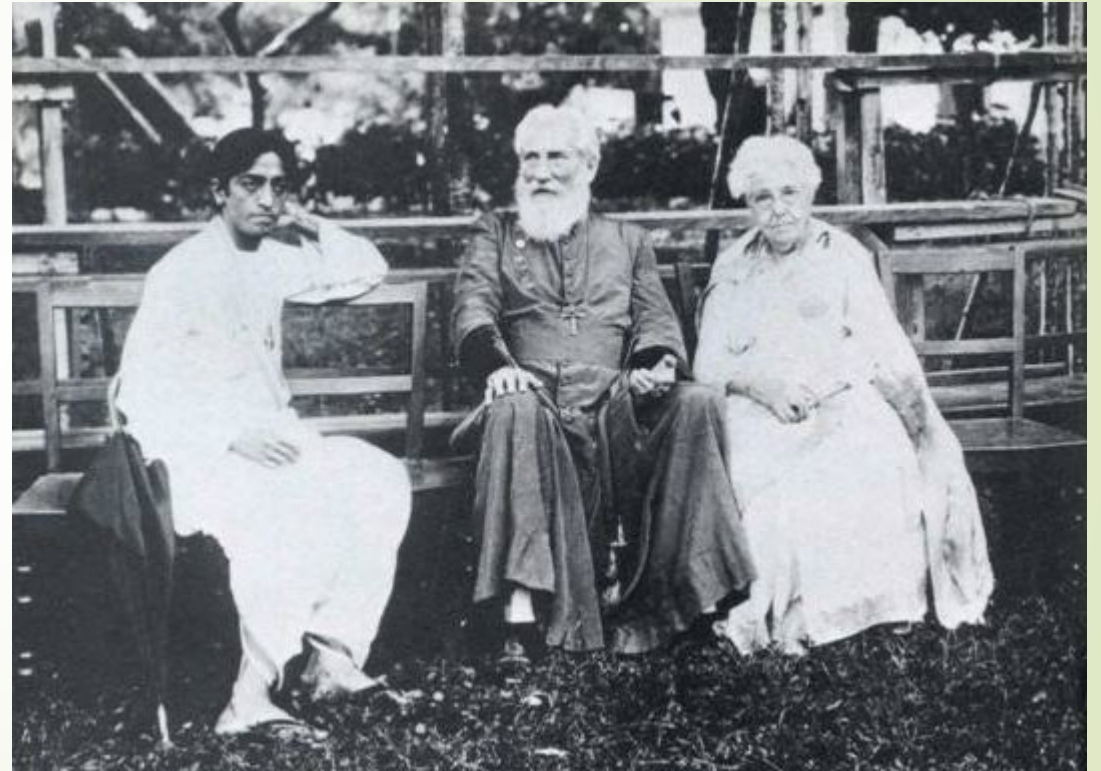
Rudolf Steiner

- Schuré's theories on Lucifer caught the attention of Marie von Sivers (1867-1948), close associate and future second wife of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). They met in 1900 and Sivers introduced Schuré to Steiner in 1905. In 1909, Steiner's theatrical group represented Schuré's *Les Enfants de Lucifer* in Munich. Steiner and Schuré became close friends



Schuré and Annie Besant

- Schuré had a good opinion of Annie Besant (1847-1933) but, like others, he ended up breaking with her. He left the Theosophical Society in 1913 over the controversies surrounding Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934), whom he called «a learned occultist, but of an unsettled disposition and doubtful morality», and Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986), «this passive young prodigy, who has not yet given the world the least proof of having any mission at all»



Left to right: Krishnamurti, Leadbeater, Besant

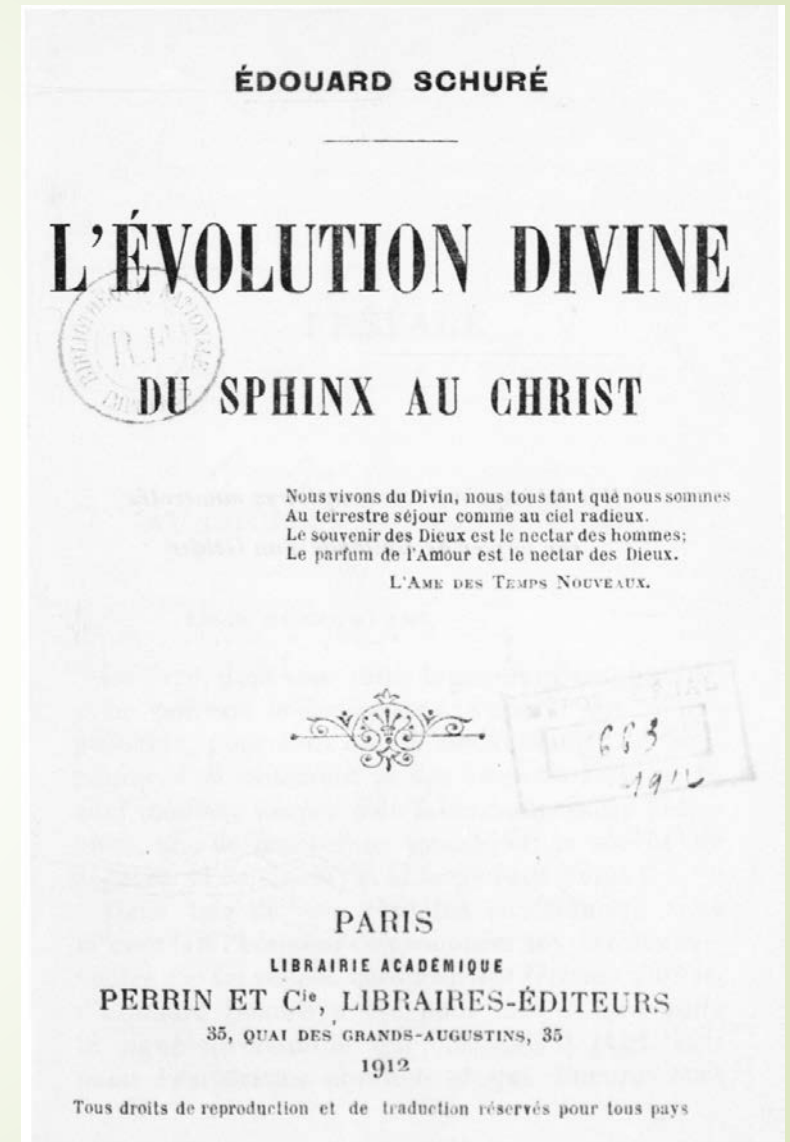
Schuré and Anthroposophy



- In 1908, Schuré had published *Le Mystère chrétien et les Mystères antiques*, the first translation of Steiner (left) into French. Schuré was among the leaders of French Anthroposophy until World War I, when his French nationalism led him to break with Steiner as he had with Wagner in 1870. The two men reconciled in 1922, but by that time Schuré believed that Anthroposophy was too Christ-oriented for achieving the necessary equilibrium between Christ and Lucifer

L'Évolution divine

- Schuré's last esoteric treatise is *L'Évolution divine, du Sphinx au Christ* (1912). He had the intention of continuing with a book *De Christ à Lucifer, la religion future*, where he would have clarified his idea that the main feature of human history was the parallel development of two currents inspired by Christ (love) and Lucifer (freedom). The future religion should be based on their convergence. After the Great War, illnesses prevented him from completing the project, although he was still a revered and well-known figure when he died in Paris on April 7, 1929



2. Schuré and the Visual Arts



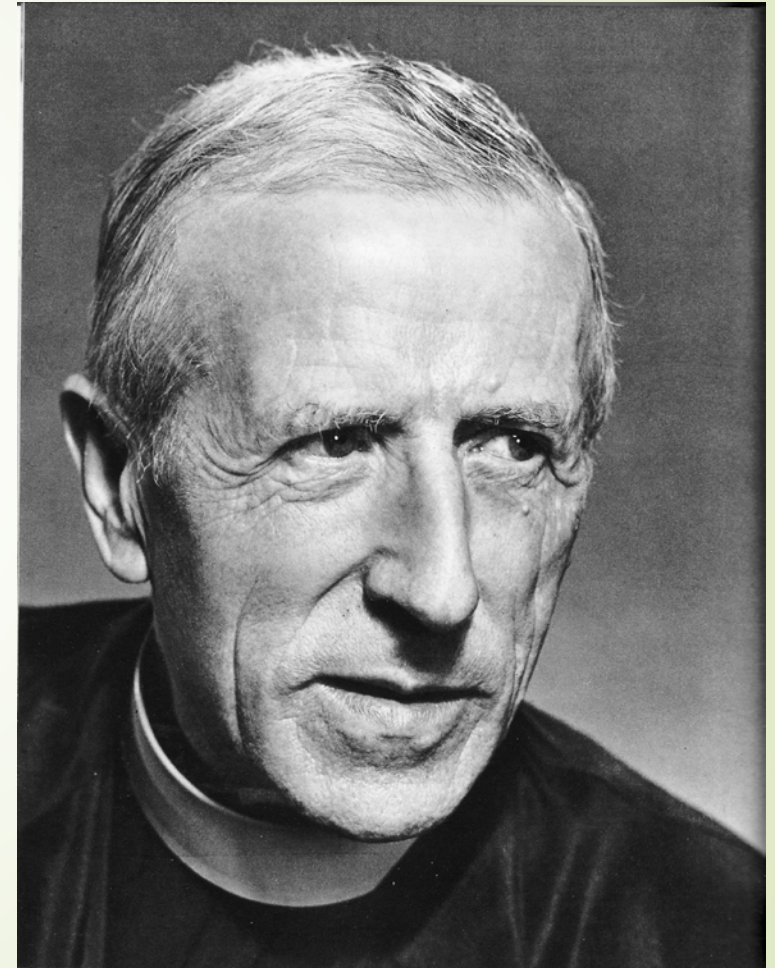


A Wide Influence

- Schuré was extremely influential both as a literary and musical critic and as an esoteric master. As a young intellectual, he was taken seriously by philosophers such as Nietzsche, and historians such as Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Ernest Renan (1823-1892, left), who met with him several times. Later, he was for decades a central figure in Parisian literary salons

Schuré and Teilhard de Chardin

- Notwithstanding his anti-Catholicism, Schuré even influenced liberal Catholic theologians. The Jesuit scientist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955, right) wrote in 1918 that *The Great Initiates* persuaded him that a new universalistic theology was possible «without altering the Christian dogma». This later allowed conservative Catholic critics of Teilhard such as Louis Salleron (1905-1992) to accuse the Jesuit of following an esoteric «Gnosticism» inspired by Schuré





Fantin-Latour

- Schuré wrote frequently as an art critic. His influence on the visual arts began before his esoteric period. In 1877, French painter Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904), a Wagner enthusiast, met Schuré and confessed that he had closely followed the latter book's *Le Drame musical* in his celebrated Wagnerian engravings (left)

Klinger's *Christ on Olympus*



- The monumental *Christ on Olympus* (1890-1897) by German symbolist painter Max Klinger (1857-1920) predates *The Great Initiates* and has been variously interpreted. At that time, both Schuré and Klinger were part of Wagner's circle and the work shows that certain ideas on the unity of religions were «in the air» there

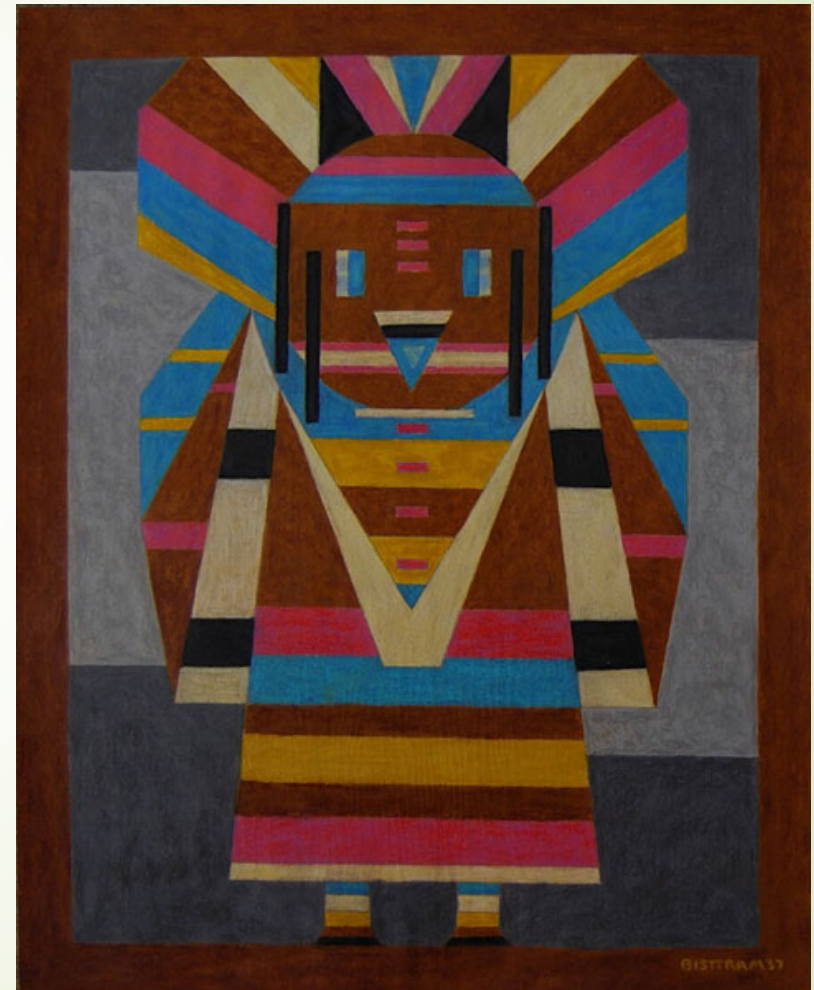
The Esoteric Schuré and the Artists



- It is impossible to account for all the multiple influences of *The Great Initiates* on the arts. It offered a template for an interpretation of all religions and traditions, which could be extended beyond the text itself. In Finland, artists such as Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931, *The Ajno Tryptich*, above), Pekka Halonen (1865-1933) and Väinö Blomstedt (1871-1947) read Schuré and saw Väinämöinen, the hero of Kalevala, as part of the chain of the Great Initiates

Bisttram, Schuré, and Native Americans

- ▶ A continent apart, American artist Emil Bisttram (1895-1976) read *The Great Initiates* and found there how to integrate his fascination for New Mexico's Native Americans (*Kachina with Headdress*, 1937, right) into his Theosophical worldview. Native Americans, Schuré argued, were survivors of the «red race» of Atlantis



The Delphic Circle



- Bisttram learned about Schuré in New York's Delphic Circle, a branch of the Greek Delphic Movement founded by poet Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951). Sikelianos and his American wife Eva Palmer (1874-1952 – left) were Schuré enthusiasts. They even tried to persuade him to come to Greece and become the leader of their movement, intended to revive the ancient Delphic mysteries. The Delphic Circle also hosted the leading Mexican muralists and introduced them to Schuré, although at least José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) may have already read *The Great Initiates* in Mexico

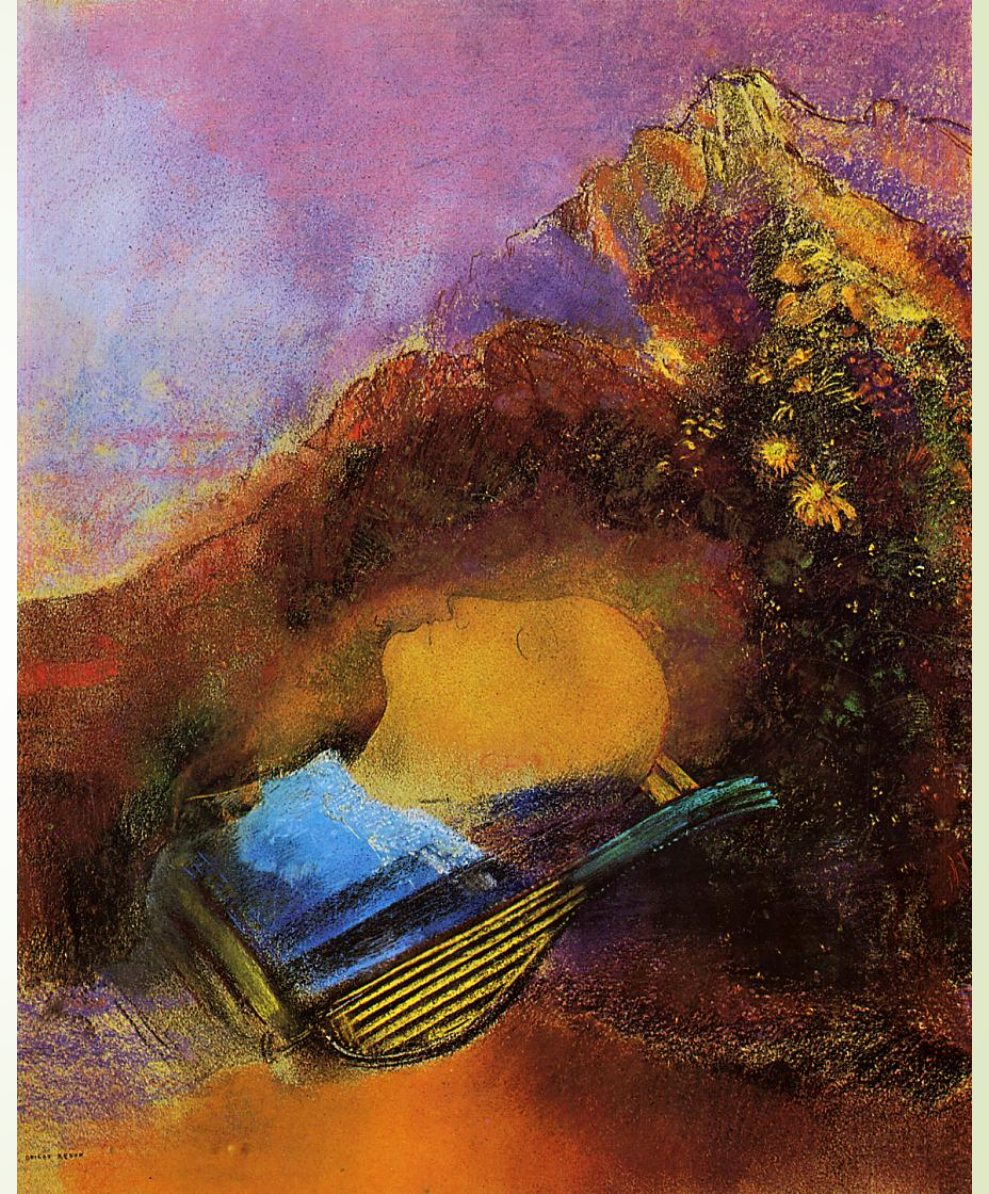
Schuré and Italian Futurism

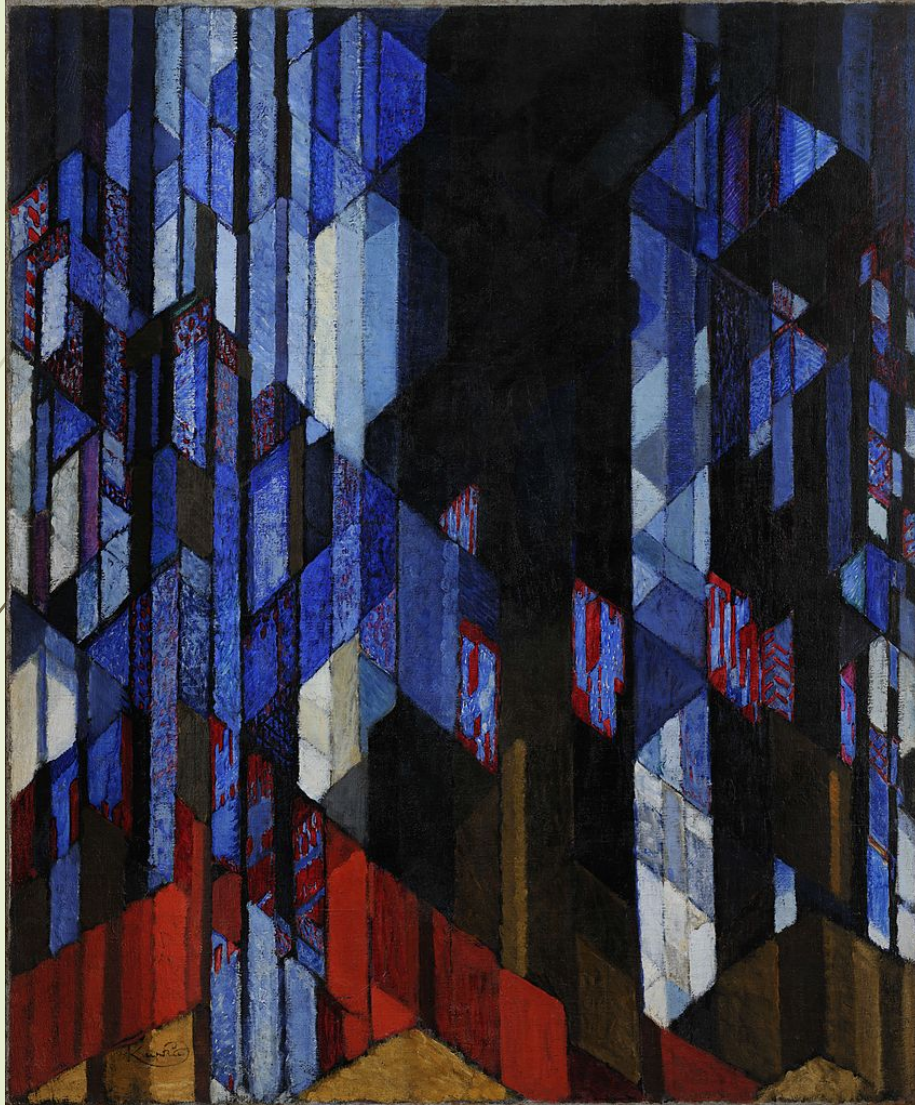


- Perhaps more unexpectedly, Schuré befriended in Paris Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) and influenced Italian Futurists, as confirmed by Arnaldo Ginna (1890-1982: *Neurasthenia*, 1908), himself a member of the Theosophical Society

Schuré and Symbolism

- Anticipating modern art historians, Schuré had its doubts on the category of symbolism, although he never completed the book he wanted to write on the subject. He counted as friends various «symbolists», including Odilon Redon, whose *Orpheus* (1903-1910, right) was indebted to *The Great Initiates*, and Carlos Schwabe (1866-1926), who called himself a disciple of Schuré. In turn, Schuré was influenced by the ideas and works of Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), whom he however never met



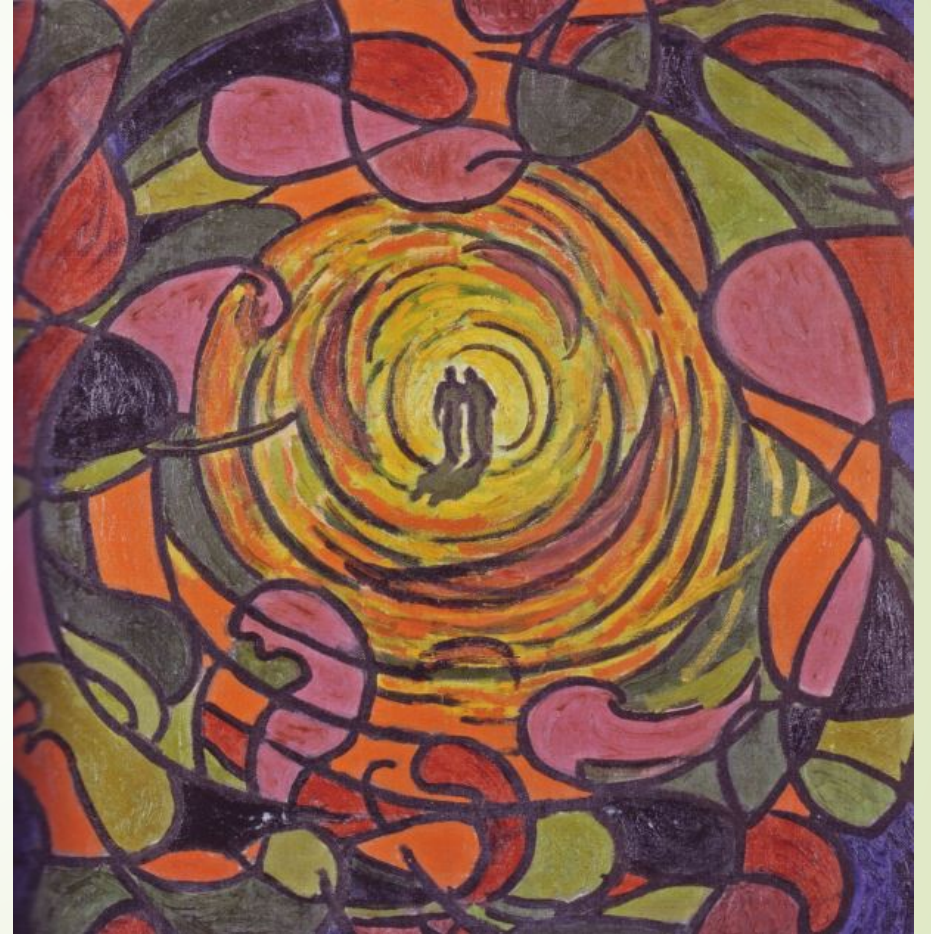


Orphic Cubism

- Schuré was read by abstract artists interested in Theosophy such as Kandinsky and Mondrian. Linda Dalrymple Henderson also noted the influence of *The Great Initiates'* Orpheus on Orphic cubism. František Kupka (1871-1957: *The Cathedral*, 1912-13, left), the Czech artist often associated with the somewhat elusive concept of Orphic cubism, was also familiar with Schuré's ideas

Maurice Chabas

- Schuré's living room in Paris was decorated with four paintings by Maurice Chabas (1862-1947). In the first decades of the 20th century, Chabas (*Marche à deux*, right), an eclectic symbolist who experienced with various styles and went from Christian Science to Theosophy and Catholicism, converted his studio in Neuilly into a salon patronized by such diverse characters as Schuré, Péladan, esoteric author René Guénon (1886-1951), and Dominican theologian Father Antonin Sertillanges (1863-1948)



Jean Delville



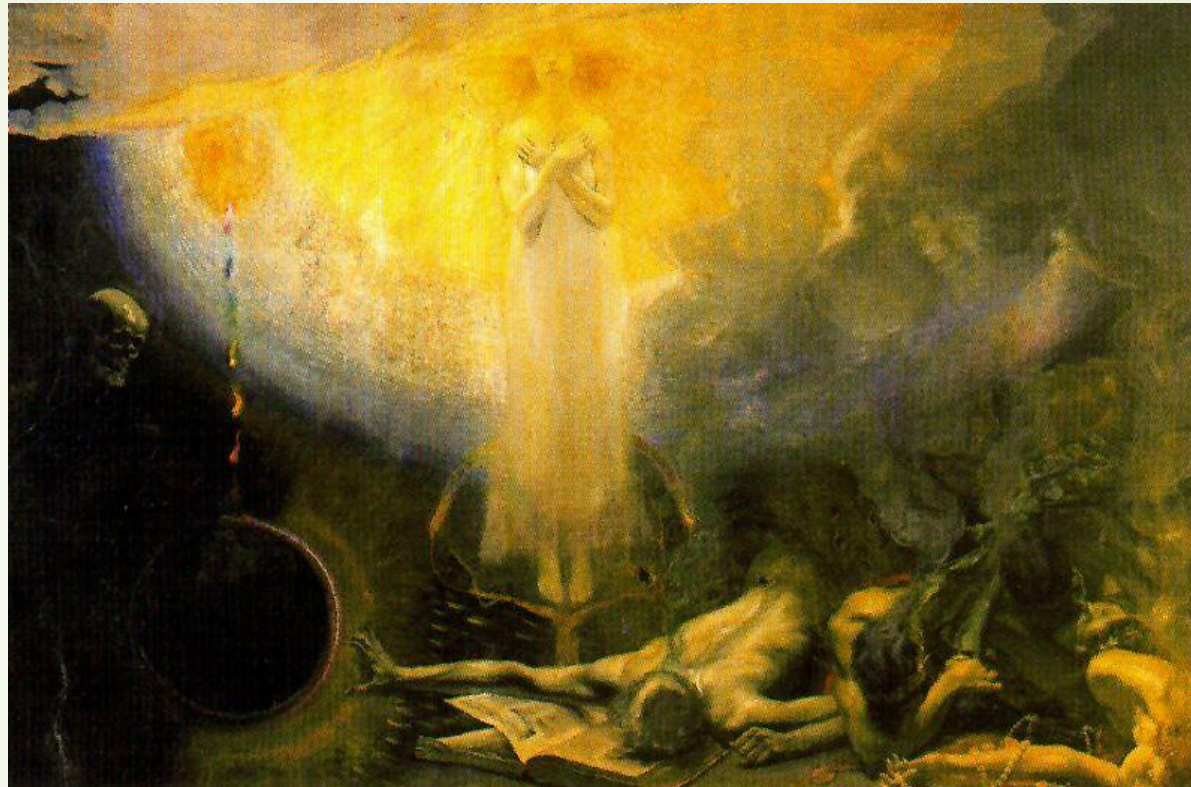
- Schuré's idea of an art that should tell stories rather than simply entertaining emerges from his preface to *La Mission de l'Art* (1900) by Belgian painter Jean Delville (1867-1953). Although Delville and Schuré met only in 1899, the Belgian artist's masterpiece *L'École de Platon* (1898), where Plato and his twelve disciples represent at the same time Jesus Christ and the apostles, typically expressed Schuré's idea that all great religious leaders are part of the same chain

A Long-Lasting Friendship



- Delville and Schuré shared common concerns and ideas, as evidenced by the «Luciferian» *Angel of Splendor* painted by the Belgian artist in 1894 (left). They remained friends for years. Through Delville, who was also the leader of the Theosophical Society in Belgium, Schuré became influential on a larger circle of Belgian artists

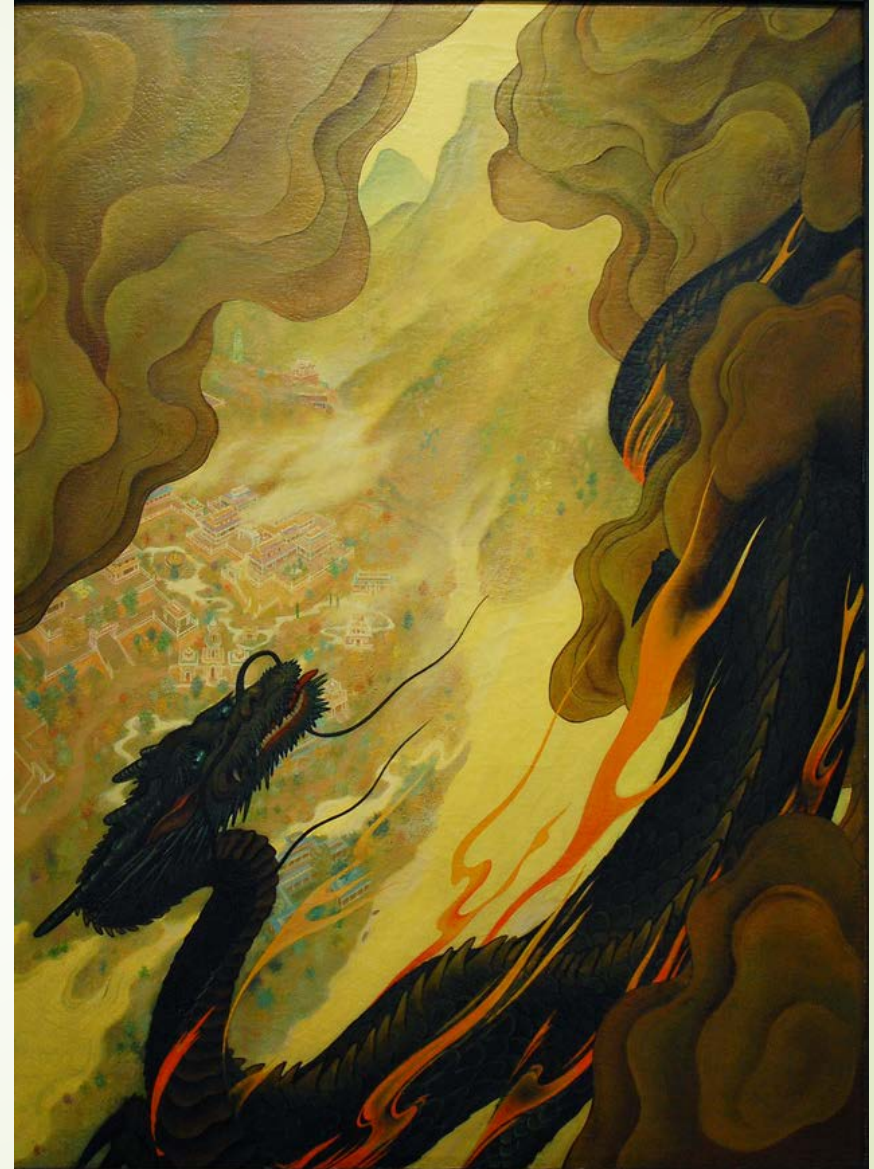
José Villegas Cordero



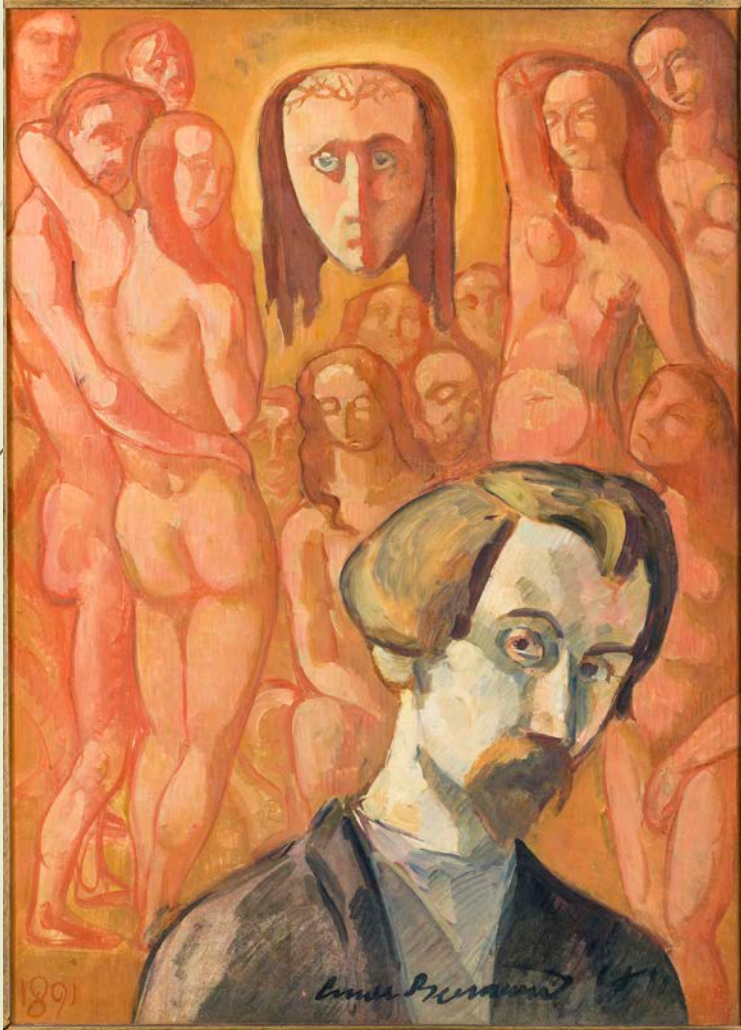
- Schuré's influence went beyond the French-speaking countries. Spanish painter and Theosophist José Villegas Cordero (1844-1921), who became the influential curator of the Prado Museum in Madrid, asked Schuré to preface the catalogue of his 1916 exhibition on the Decalogue (*Matter Dies, not the Spirit*, above), acknowledging his debt to the French writer

Louise Janin

- An American artist who lived in Paris Schuré tried to promote was Louise Janin (1893-1997: *The Dragon*, 1924, right), whose orientalism was deeply influenced by *The Great Initiates*. Anticlerical and feminist sculptor Marguerite Syamour was in turn among Schuré's best friends in the last years of his life



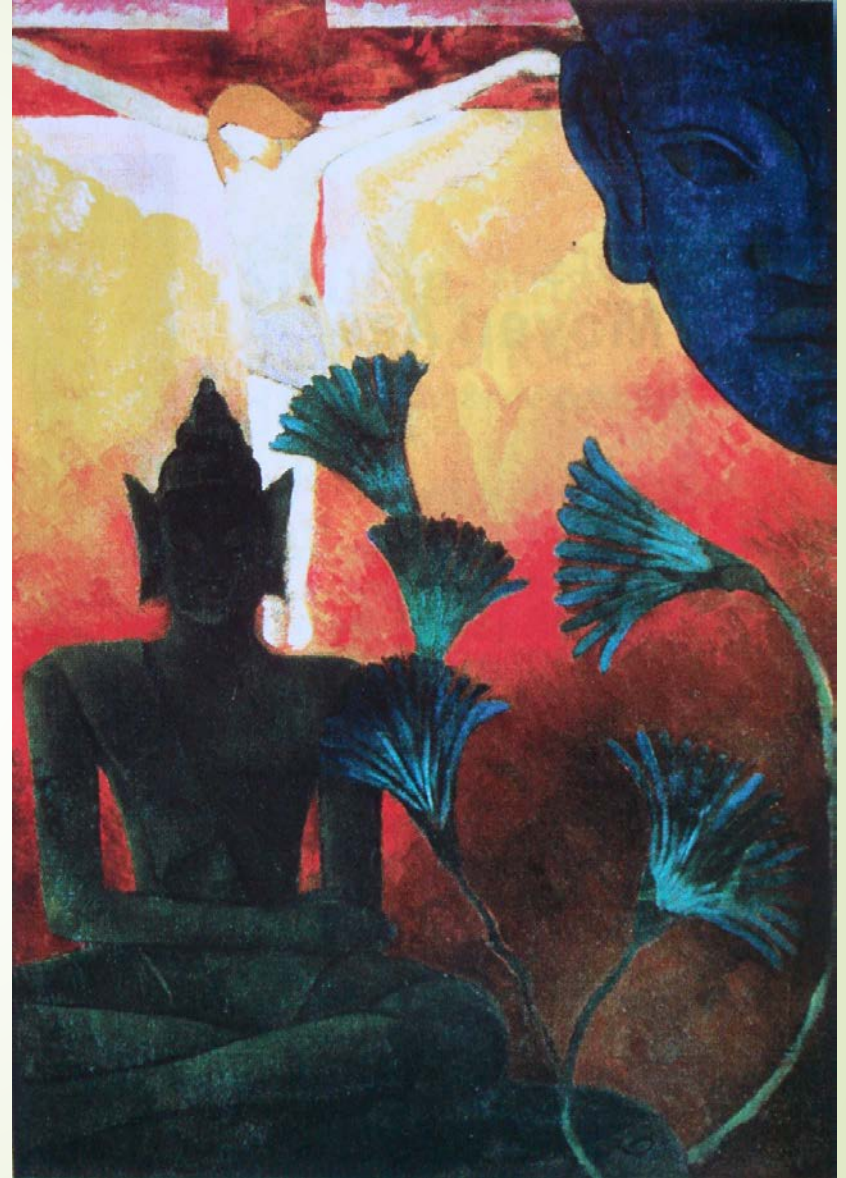
Émile Bernard and Gauguin



- In 1893, French post-impressionist painter Émile Bernard (1868-1941: *Autoportrait avec allégorie*, 1891, left) met Schuré. He was influenced by the esoteric writer, although Bernard's spiritual quest finally led him to Catholicism. Bernard was a friend of both Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). It is unclear whether Gauguin read Schuré, although he was certainly introduced to Blavatsky and Theosophy by his Polynesian neighbor Jean Souvy (1817-1913)

Paul Ranson

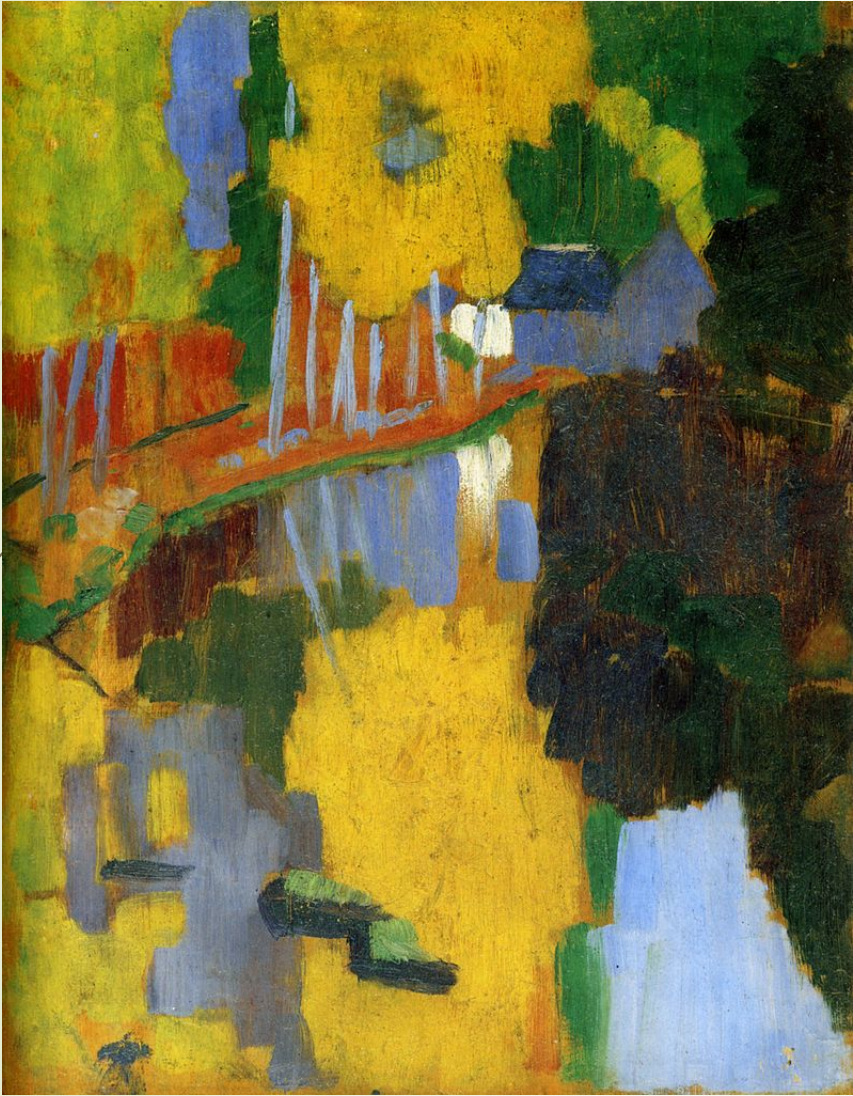
- Both Gauguin and Schuré were crucial influences on Paul Ranson (1864-1909: *Christ and Buddha*, 1890, right), in whose home the group of the Nabis («Prophets») met for several years



Paysage Nabique (1890)



- Ranson's *Paysage Nabique* (1890) was painted immediately after *The Great Initiates* and the figure on the left has been interpreted as Schuré's Rama picking the flower of knowledge



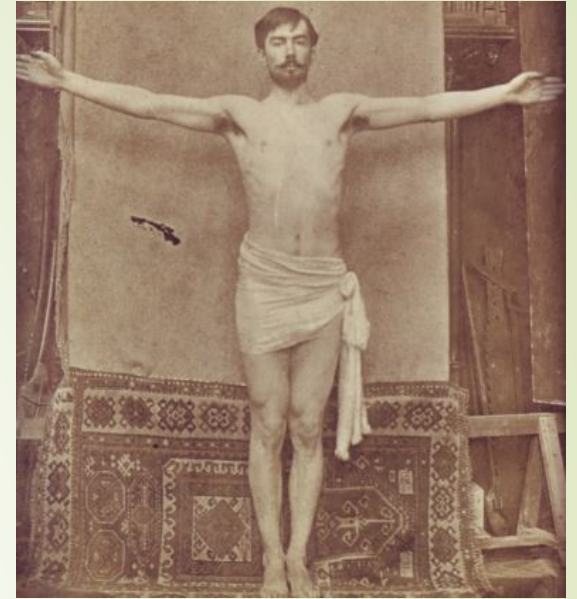
Birth of the Nabis

- The Nabis group originated in 1889, when the unfinished *The Talisman* (left), painted by Paul Sérusier (1864-1927) following a suggestion by Gauguin, was exposed in Paris. Most of the Nabis were in contact with Schuré



Georges Lacombe

- The short-lived experiment of the Nabis involved several notable artists with esoteric interests, including painters Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) and Felix Vallotton (1865-1925) and sculptor and painter Georges Lacombe (1868-1916; in a Christ-like pose, right). Lacombe's Egyptian sculptures (*Isis*, 1894, left) were inspired both by Gauguin and *The Great Initiates*. He also painted a well-known portrait of Sérusier (right, below)





Paul Sérusier, *The Incantation* (1898),
painted at Huelgoat, Brittany

Brittany

- Just as Gauguin and Bernard, several Nabis spent time in small villages in Brittany. They read local legends through the lenses of Schuré's collections of folklore

The Nabis as a Secret Society



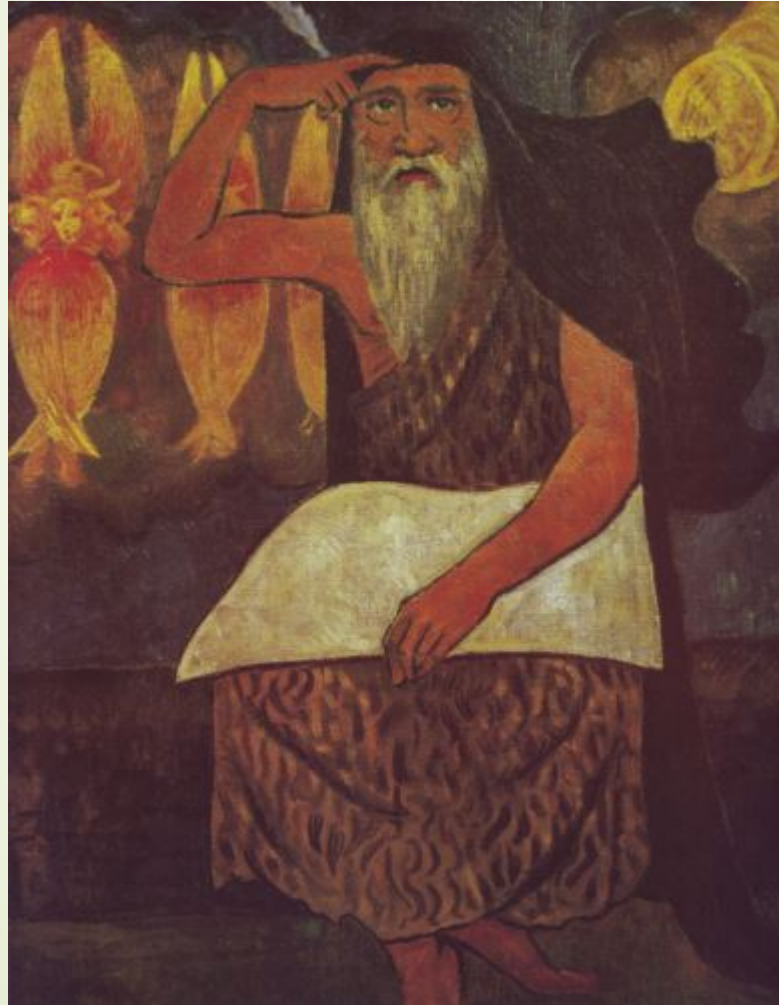
- ▶ The Nabis were more than an artist group. French Catholic painter Maurice Denis (1870-1943), who was a member for a time, called it «a secret society of mystical inclination». They had a ritual and might have had costumes and scepters – although the latter perhaps existed only in Sérusier's paintings, including his portrait of Ranson (right). The ritual included playful elements but was also seriously based on Schuré's *The Great Initiates*

The Light of the Temple

- Ranson's wife France (in a portrait by Denis, right) had the title «the Light of the Temple», also derived from *The Great Initiates*. She was however not admitted to participate in the all-male Nabi ritual



Sérusier the Prophet



- In 1906, Sérusier painted himself as *Le Prophète inspiré* (left), probably based on a vision in *The Great Initiates* where Osiris shows the inner structure of the universe to Hermes

The Krishna Cycle



- Between 1910 and 1915, Sérusier produced three paintings illustrating the chapter on Krishna of Schuré's *The Great Initiates*, starting with *La Méditation du Mouni Vasichta*

Krishna's Victory



- The second painting, *La Victoire de Krishna sur le Dragon-Serpent*, was among those Sérusier later claimed were influential on Cubism

Nanda's Daughters



- The third painting depicted Nanda's daughters Sarasvati and Nichdali. Sérusier also illustrated other parts of Schuré's *The Great Initiates*

Sérusier and Theosophy



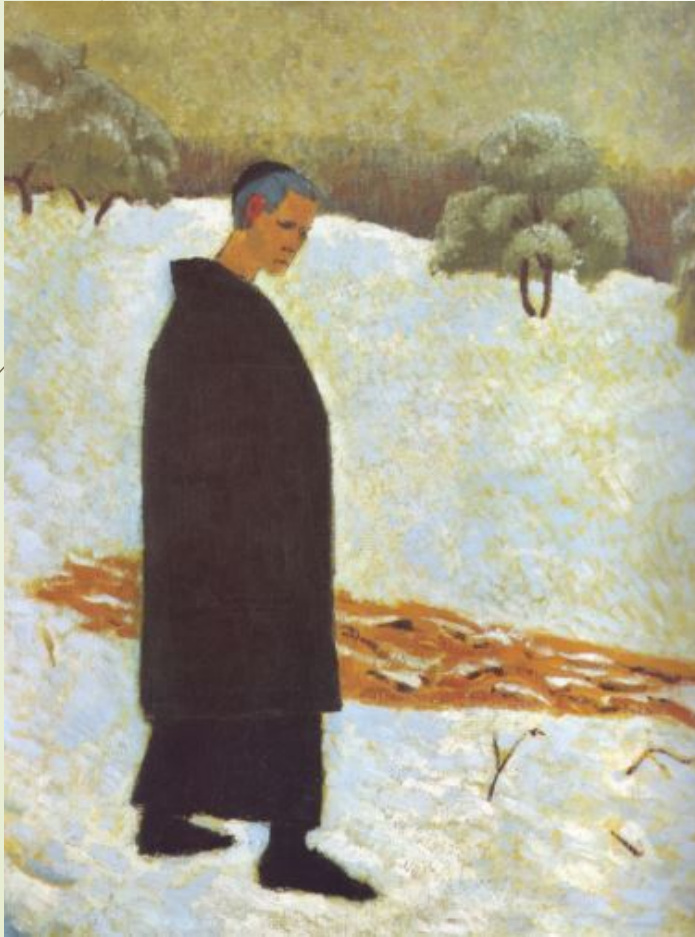
- Sérusier scholar Caroline Ross Boyle claims that, after he discovered it in the Nabi period, «Theosophy would govern the rest of his life». It also influenced his theoretical writings, including *ABC de la peinture*, which he illustrated with paintings such as *L'Origine*, depicting the pyramid as the origin of all other forms

The Catholic Connection

- Sérusier was very impressed when one of the Nabis, Dutch painter Jan Verkade (1868-1946, right) converted to Catholicism in 1893 and eventually became a monk in the Benedictine Abbey of Beuron. Verkade claimed that *The Great Initiates* had led him to Catholicism. Sérusier discussed the matter with Schuré, who was quite astonished that his book could have led anyone to the Church of Rome. Another Nabi, Danish painter Mogens Ballin (1871-1914), also converted to Catholicism



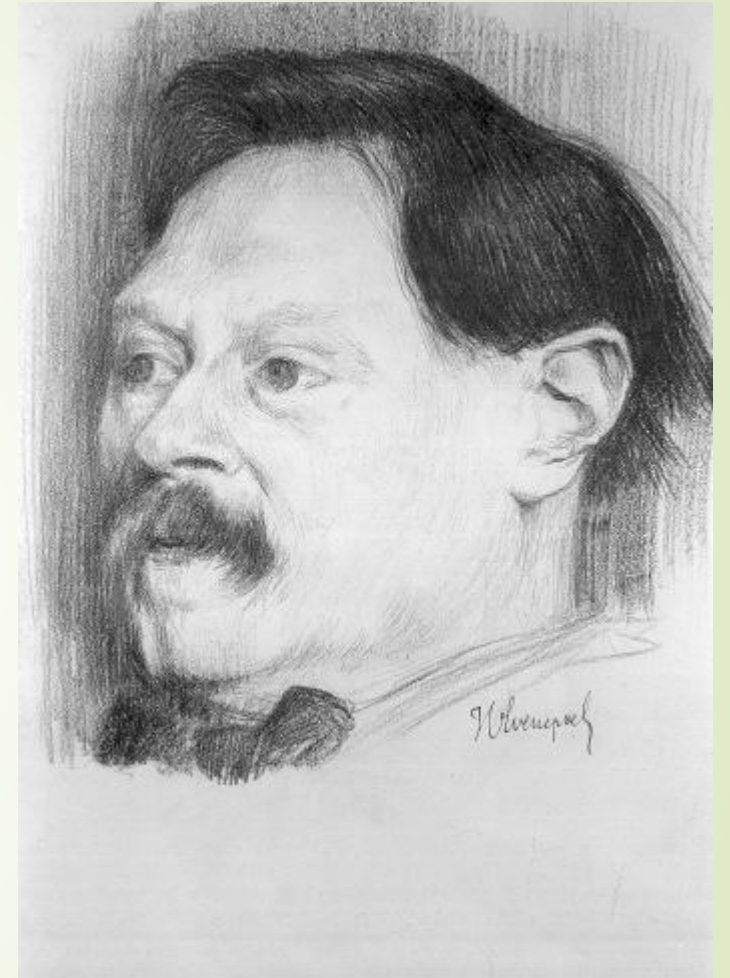
Sérusier and Verkade



- ▶ Verkade told his friend that his conversion had led to an «occult relationship» with Christ, something Sérusier accepted as «très nabique». Eventually, Sérusier painted a portrait of Verkade as a monk (left), visited his Benedictine abbey of Beuron, and for a time promoted the ideas of its leading artist, Father Desiderius Lenz (1832-1928), in France. He even considered conversion, although in the end returned to Theosophy

In Conclusion

- Schuré was a leading figure in the European Theosophical and, later, Anthroposophical subculture. He came to esotericism in his forties, when he was already well-known as a leading Wagnerian musicologist. With *The Great Initiates* and his esoteric teachings, he exerted a very important influence on the visual arts. Some artists even tried to establish secret societies and rituals based on his teachings. While he did not promote or endorse a single specific artistic style, Schuré's religious ideas were crucial for the approach to spirituality of a large portion of Belle Époque's visual arts



Schuré portrayed by Belgian artist and Wagnerian, Henri Evenepoel (1872-1899)



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P. Sérusier, *La cueillette des pommes* (1891)