

JEAN DELVILLE



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Art between Nature and the Absolute



By

Brendan Cole

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To my parents, Cecilia and Barry



J. Deville

1896

CONTENTS



List of Illustrations	x
Acknowledgementsxii
Introduction	1

PART I – History

Chapter One. Delville’s early years and the avant-garde	19
Early life and artistic training	19
Delville, the Academy and the Avant garde	25
The fin-de-siècle avant-gardes: <i>Les XX</i> and <i>L’Art Moderne</i>	30
Delville and Avant-garde Journalism	35
The Avant-garde, Belgian society and political change during the fin de siècle.	36
The Avant-garde and Symbolism	38
Delville’s polemical advance: ‘this beautiful gesture of the swan’	40
The Salons d’Art Idéaliste: ‘the cult of pure Beauty’	49
Marketing modernity: Idealist art versus avant-garde commodity?.	52
Chapter Two. L’Essor, Pour l’Art and the Prix de Rome	59
L’Essor, 1887-91	59
Pour l’ Art: 1892, 1894 and 1895	80
Delville’s defence of Péladan	85
Pour l’ Art 1894	90
Pour L’ Art 1895	94
La Coopérative artistique	98
Prix de Rome (1895)	99

Fig. 1. (opposite title page) Jean Delville in his studio in front of *Prométhée*, after 1907, photograph. Private collection.

Fig. 2. (opposite) *Self-portrait*, 1896, oil on canvas, 47 x 33 cm. Private collection.

Chapter Three. The Salons D'Art Idéaliste	115
Salon d'Art Idéaliste 1896.	115
Salon d'Art Idéaliste 1897.	122
Salon d'Art Idéaliste 1898.	134
Delville's <i>Esthétique Idéaliste</i> and Péladan's 'École d'art Idéaliste' .	138

PART II – Theory

Chapter Four. 'L'Indéfinissable Frisson de L'Infini' – Delville's Occult Aesthetic.	149
Occultism's 'glimpse of the Unknown'	154
'The Spiritualisation of Art' – Art in search of the Ideal	157
'Les Trois Mondes de la Magie' – foundation principles of Ideal Beauty	162
Idealist art as an expression of Equilibrium.	164
The Absolute – the Occult source of Beauty	166
Unity, God and the expression of Beauty	168
Art as a expression of Divine Harmony, Symmetry and Number. .	170
Nature and Matter – The Idea, Correspondences and the Symbol .	170
The Idea	172
Correspondences	174
The Symbol	179
The Spiritual role of the Artist.	187
<i>L'Esthétique Idéaliste</i> , Classicism and Occultism – The Great Tradition	191
<i>L'Esthétique Idéaliste</i> and Nineteenth century Occult Aesthetics .	200

PART III – Practice

Chapter Five. To Hell and Back – the Initiate's way in Delville's Art .	207
The Initiate and 'the Great Magical Agent'	208
<i>Les Trésors de Sathan</i> : 'the ravages of carnal love'	215
The Decadents and the Devil	238
<i>L'Idole de la Perversité</i> : The 'bride of the devil'	245
An initiatory figure	257
The serpents of Light	260

<i>Tristan et Yseult</i> : ‘the marriage of sibling souls with the soul of the world’	267
Love and Death in the fin de siècle	273
The Soul and Death: ‘le papillon de Psyché’	276
<i>L’Ange des Splendeurs</i> : ‘Man emanates from God and returns to God’.	280
Spiritual Evolution and Reincarnation	291
<i>L’Amour des âmes</i> : Love – the Way to the Absolute	293
The Nude: Expression of the Metaphysical	300
Unity through spiritual love	302
Chapter Six. <i>L’Ecole de Platon</i> – Delville’s Occult sermon on Love, Beauty and Androgyny	307
Plato’s <i>Akademias</i> , the Androgyny and Spiritual Beauty	314
The Hermetic myth of Original Unity.	325
Péladan and the Androgyny: ‘the dogma of Art’	328
The Androgyny and the theory of Equilibrium; the ‘Threefold Law’.	334
Delville’s Platonic sermon concerning ‘Equilibrium in the Universal Order’.	339
<i>L’Ecole de Platon</i> and the fin de siècle cult of Ideal Beauty	344
Ideal or Spiritual Love.	347
Responses to <i>L’Ecole de Platon</i>	351
Conclusion	354
Bibliography	363
Notes	383
Index	495

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS



- Fig. 1. Jean Delville in his studio in front of *Prométhée*, after 1907, photograph. Private collection; p. ii
- Fig. 2. *Self-portrait*, 1896, oil on canvas, 47 x 33 cm. Private collection; p. vi
- Fig. 3. *Self-portrait* (detail), 1942, oil on canvas, 50 x 33 cm. Private collection; p. xiv
- Fig. 4. *Self-portrait*, 1887, oil on canvas, 40 x 32 cm. Private collection; p. 16
- Fig. 5. *Woman with rose*, 1898, blue pencil on paper. 54 x 44 cm. Private collection; p. 18
- Fig. 6. *Academic Nude*, graphite on paper. Brussels, Royal Academy of Fine Art; p. 21
- Fig. 7. *Les Forces*, (in situ) 1924, oil on canvas, 500 x 800 cm. Brussels: Palais de Justice; p. 24
- Fig. 8. *La Ligue Artistique*, 7 July 1895; p. 41
- Fig. 9. *Salons d'Art Idéaliste*, poster for the second exhibition in Brussels at La Maison d'Art, 1897, lithograph; p. 50
- Fig. 10. *Steel workers*, (detail) c. 1886-7, graphite on paper. Private collection; p. 58
- Fig. 11. *La Terre*, preparatory drawing, 1888, charcoal on paper, 45.5 x 63.5 cm. Private collection; p. 62
- Fig. 12. Drawing after *La Mère*, 1887-88, illustration in *Catalogue de l'Essor*, Brussels, 24 March 1888, pp. 14-15; p. 64
- Fig. 13. *Asile de nuit* (1), 1885, pencil on paper, 20.5 x 30 cm. Private collection; p. 66
- Fig. 14. *Asile de nuit* (2), 1885, pencil on paper, 20.5 x 30 cm. Private collection; p. 67
- Fig. 15. *L'Affamé*, 1887, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Private collection; p. 68
- Fig. 16. *Le Dernier Sommeil*, 1888, charcoal on paper, 44 x 57 cm. Private collection; p. 68
- Fig. 17. *La Coulée d'Acier*, 1886, oil on canvas, 45 x 54 cm. Private collection; p. 71
- Fig. 18. *Le Cycle Passionnel*, 1890. Photograph of the work destroyed in August 1914; p. 74
- Fig. 19. Study for *La Symbolisation de la chair et de l'esprit*, 1890, oil on canvas, 64 x 39 cm. Private collection; p. 77
- Fig. 20. *Pour L'Art*, poster for the first exhibition in Brussels, from November 12th to December 4th 1892, lithograph, 122 x 98.2 cm; p. 81
- Fig. 21. *La Mort d'Orphée or Orphée Mort*, 1893, oil on canvas, 79.3 x 99.2 cm. Brussels: © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / photo : J. Geleyns / Ro scan, inv. 12209; p. 92
- Fig. 22. *Mysteriosa or Portrait of Madame Stuart Merrill*, 1892, pencil, pastel and coloured pencil on paper, 40 x 32.1 cm. Brussels: © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / photo : J. Geleyns / Ro scan, inv. 12029; p. 94
- Fig. 23. *Portrait of Madame Delville, or La Muse*, 1893, coloured pencil and ink on paper, 27 x 18 cm. Private collection; p. 96
- Fig. 24. *Le Christ glorifiée par les enfants*, 1894, oil on canvas, 222 x 247 cm. Antwerp: Académie des Beaux-Arts; p. 101
- Fig. 25. *Le Christ glorifiée par les enfants*, (detail) 1894; p. 103
- Fig. 26. *Le Christ glorifiée par les enfants*, (detail) 1894; pp. 104-5
- Fig. 27. *Le Christ glorifiée par les enfants*, (detail) 1894; p. 107
- Fig. 28. *Le Christ glorifiée par les enfants*, (detail) 1894; p. 109
- Fig. 29. *Le Christ glorifiée par les enfants*, (detail) 1894; p. 111
- Fig. 30. *Le Christ glorifiée par les enfants*, (detail) 1894; p. 111
- Fig. 31. *L'Ange des splendeurs*, (detail) 1894. p. 114
- Fig. 32. *L'Oracle à Dodone*, 1896, oil on canvas, 118 x 170 cm. Private collection; p. 125
- Fig. 33. Title page, *Le Frisson du Sphinx*, Brussels: Henri Lamartin, 1897; p. 132
- Fig. 34. *L'Art Idéaliste*, front page, 13 October 1897; p. 145
- Fig. 35. *Self-Portrait*, 1904, pencil and charcoal on paper, 57 x 38 cm. Private collection; p. 146
- Fig. 36. *L'Homme-Dieu*, (detail) 1905, oil on canvas, 550 x 500 cm. Musea Brugge © Lukas-Art in Flanders vzw, photo Hugo Maertens, inv. 0000. GR00662.1; p. 148
- Fig. 37. Jean Delville in front of *L'Homme-Dieu*, c. 1903, photograph. Private

- collection; p. 202
- Fig. 38. Delville in his studio working on *Orphée aux enfers*, c. 1895, photograph. Private collection; p. 204
- Fig. 39. *Parsifal*, (detail) 1890, charcoal on paper, 70.7 x 56 cm. Private collection; p. 206
- Fig. 40. *L'Extase de Danté*, (detail) 1932, oil on canvas, 159 x 53.5 cm. Private collection; p. 212
- Fig. 41. *Les Trésors de Sathan*, 1895, oil on canvas, 258 x 268 cm. Brussels: © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / photo : J. Geleyns / Ro scan, inv. 4575; p. 215
- Fig. 42. *Les Trésors de Sathan*, (detail) 1895; pp. 216-7
- Fig. 43. *Les Trésors de Sathan*, (detail) 1895; p. 218
- Fig. 44. *Les Trésors de Sathan*, (detail) 1895; p. 220
- Fig. 45. Gustave Doré, *Dante's Inferno VIII, 40, 41* 'The Styx – Filippo Argenti', engraving; p. 222
- Fig. 46. Gustave Dore, *Dante's Inferno XXXII, 128. 129* 'Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri, engraving; p. 222
- Fig. 47. Study for *Les Trésors de Sathan*, (detail) c. 1894-5, charcoal on paper. Private collection; pp. 224-5
- Fig. 48. Gustave Doré, 'Paolo and Francesca' (*Inferno V, 106, 107 and Inferno V, 141, 142*), engraving; p. 229
- Fig. 49. Study for *Le Cycle Passionnel*, c. 1890, pencil on paper, 29.8 x 39.4 cm. Private collection; p. 230
- Fig. 50. *Les Trésors de Sathan*, (detail) 1895; p. 235
- Fig. 51. *l'Idole de la Perversité*, 1891, lead pencil on paper, 98.5 x 56.5 cm. Private collection; p. 246
- Fig. 52. *Tristan et Yseult*, 1887, pencil, black chalk and charcoal on paper, 44.3 x 75.4 cm. Brussels: © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / photo : J. Geleyns / Ro scan, inv. 7927; p. 268
- Fig. 53. *L'Ange des splendeurs*, 1894, oil on canvas, 127 x 146 cm. Brussels: © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / photo : Bruno Piazza, inv. GC179; p. 280
- Fig. 54. *L'Ange des splendeurs*, 1894, (detail); p. 282
- Fig. 55. *L'Ange des splendeurs*, 1894, (detail); p. 284
- Fig. 56. *L'Ange des splendeurs*, 1894, (detail); p. 286
- Fig. 57. *L'Ange des splendeurs*, 1894, (detail); pp. 288-9
- Fig. 58. *L'amour des âmes*, 1900, tempera and oil on canvas, 258 x 150 cm. Brussels: Musée d'Ixelles, inv. 1942; p. 294
- Fig. 59. *L'amour des âmes*, (detail) 1900; p. 296
- Fig. 60. *L'amour des âmes*, (detail) 1900; pp. 298-9
- Fig. 61. Study for *L'amour des âmes*, before 1900, pencil on paper, 21 x 13 cm. Private collection; p. 305
- Fig. 62. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 306
- Fig. 63. *L'Ecole de Platon*, 1898, oil on canvas, 206 x 605 cm. Paris: Musée d'Orsay, RMN-Grand-Palais, inv. RF1979-34; pp. 308-9
- Fig. 64. Study for *L'Ecole de Platon*, 1898, drawing on paper, 60 x 108 cm. Private collection; p. 310
- Fig. 65. Study for *L'Ecole de Platon*, 1898, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 91 cm. Private collection; p. 311
- Fig. 66. Study for *L'Ecole de Platon*, 1898, pencil on paper. Private collection; pp. 312-13
- Fig. 67. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 315
- Fig. 68. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 317
- Fig. 69. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 319
- Fig. 70. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 320
- Fig. 71. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 321
- Fig. 72. The alchemical androgyne, or Rebis, illustrated in Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae*; p. 326
- Fig. 73. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 329
- Fig. 74. 'Bouc du Sabbat', or Goat of Mendes, frontispiece to the second volume of Eliphas Lévi's *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*; p. 340
- Fig. 75. *L'Ecole de Platon*, (detail) 1898; p. 353
- Fig. 76. *L'Allégorie de l'enfer*, 1899, pencil and black chalk on paper, 77.9 x 53.5 cm. Private collection; p. 360
- Fig. 77. *L'Extase de Danté*, 1932, oil on canvas, 159 x 53.5 cm. Private collection; p. 506

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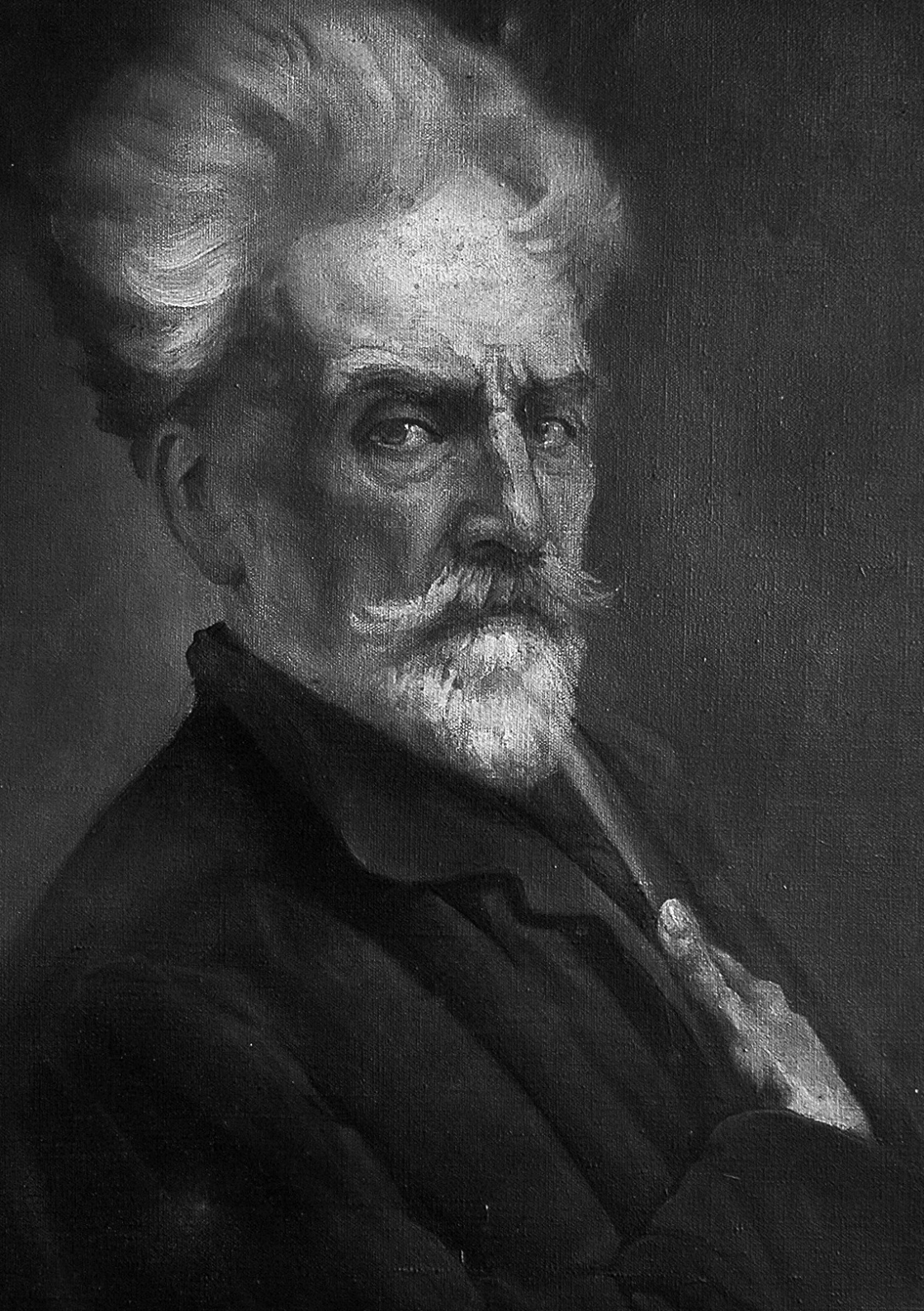
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INTRODUCTION



WHEN JEAN DELVILLE DIED in 1953 at the age of 86 he was largely forgotten, in spite of an extensive and highly productive artistic career that spanned over 60 years. One of the more personal portraits from this time is recorded by the journalist Paul Caso, who remembered visiting Delville in July 1951, at his home in what is now the suburb of Forest in Brussels. He sketched an arresting, if distressing, record of the elderly artist, surviving in a Modernist age that had progressed in a direction diametrically opposed to the spiritually optimistic aesthetic he had supported. Caso recalls: 'I was sitting on the great white bench. Jean Delville was opposite me, his crippled hand resting on the garden table. He had a solemn face, deeply lined, and almost tragic. I understood at that moment how ungrateful and unjust society could be towards an old master who had in some sense out-lived his visionary dream. What a huge gap there was between the painter of *L'Amour des âmes* and the invasion of abstract art!'¹

This neglect at the end of his life is a pitiful dénouement to an artist's career that began prodigiously and which was marked, from the very beginning, by exceptional talent. Despite working largely on the periphery of the official avant-garde throughout his life he was energetically devoted, through his painting and extensive writings, to establishing a central place for his Idealist art amongst the competing tendencies in avant-garde painting during that time. This he achieved, not without considerable struggle, by the close of the nineteenth century largely by dint of a powerful belief in the value of his artistic and hermetic vision, as much as through his sense of intellectual and creative independence and energetic individualism. Delville stood alone amongst his peers: he was intelligent, articulate and talented; a polemicist, poet and painter. He was unique in this regard; an anomaly during the fin de siècle, but someone whose independent ideas, artistic programme and widespread interests outside the artistic sphere left him somewhat isolated and largely misunderstood in relation to the fervent developments in avant-garde art at the time. Although he was artistically and intellectually active until his death – continuing to publish poetry as well as books on Theosophy, in addition to numerous articles and on art and political journalism to the end – his presence in mainstream artistic movements waned rapidly during the course of the twentieth century and

his reputation has remained more or less doubtful ever since. Were it not for at least half a dozen striking paintings that are represented in various anthologies of the period, his contribution to the art of the fin de siècle might have been entirely obliterated. One is, therefore, naturally curious about Delville's exact contribution to his time: how does he fit into the tradition of non-realist – or Symbolist – art of the fin de siècle? What was his position vis-à-vis the contemporary avant-garde; how and why did his aesthetic programme differ from theirs? What was his contribution to the development of avant-garde art during the early decades of the twentieth century? Does he deserve a place in the canon?

Delville's art can be categorised as a form of hermetic Idealism, fundamentally intellectual in approach and concerned with metaphysical ideas that are expressed through ideal forms and articulated in a polished classical-idealist technique. This he formulated in a threefold system articulated as: *la Beauté spirituelle* (idea), *la Beauté plastique* (form) and *la Beauté technique* (execution). Delville's triple schema – with its emphasis on the expression of Ideal Beauty through the perfection of idea, form and technique – he termed *l'Esthétique Idéaliste*. This book is concerned fundamentally with an examination of this system: its history, development and expression in his art during the Belgian fin de siècle, from 1887 to 1900.

Delville's artistic career began effectively in 1887 after he left the Academy in order to work independently while exhibiting in contemporary avant-garde exhibition Societies. As was the custom at the time his initial efforts were created in a naturalist style, and these were mostly social-realist depictions of the underclasses: beggars, peasants and down-and-outs. He soon abandoned this approach, however, in favour of a more non-realist idiom which he began to develop towards the end of that decade when he started producing work of extraordinary imagination, intellectual depth and visual intensity. Although his considerable artistic talent was recognised from the very beginning, his non-realist art, in terms of its style and content, was initially seen to be too atypical to be readily accepted as a serious avant-garde tendency amongst the leading fin-de-siècle circles. Moreover, his new artistic approach was criticised for being too outlandish, even obscure, for the more conservative and parochial naturalist school that emerged out of the Academic tradition, and to which he originally belonged. As a result of this he was isolated from the artistic epicentre in Belgium for a fairly extended period. It was not until the mid 1890s with works like his *L'Ecole de Platon* (1898) and *L'Amour des âmes* (1900) that he really enjoyed universal praise – and to a large extent acceptance – from even his harshest critics. From

then on his efforts were decorated with many awards and honours, and this was sustained for some time just after the Great War. However, Delville's presence in the Belgian artistic scene declined when he set up home in Mons from 1933 to 1947, despite the fact that he was still very productive and managed to produce several works of considerable visual power, as well as writing extensively in journals and newspapers to the very end of his life.

Delville thought of himself principally as a painter, but throughout his long life he was passionately committed to writing as well. He continued to publish essays right up to the year of his death in 1953, and we can get a fairly comprehensive view of his artistic beliefs and theories from his written *œuvre*. As a poet, journalist, playwright, essayist and author, he was prolific and accomplished. He is certainly unique amongst his peers in this regard, publishing at least half a dozen books and writing innumerable essays on art, Theosophy and politics. He also authored a play and published four volumes of poetry in which he propagated his Theosophical and aesthetic ideals, which he upheld consistently throughout the six decades of his active career.² His vast output of published works is now largely out of print, long forgotten and hard, if not impossible, to come by.³ But throughout his life he maintained a remarkably consistent intellectual perspective on the power of art to enlighten and instruct, as well as to exercise a significant, if not transformative, impact on individual experience.

In one of his last essays, published in the Bulletin of the Belgian Royal Academy in 1953, the year of his death, he concentrated on the relationship between art and politics. Although meant for an exclusive fraternal readership, his ideas echoed some of the larger debates taking place in post-war Europe and the United States at the time. His final essay was directed specifically against Stalin's totalitarian regime and he argued passionately against the use of art as an instrument of political propaganda or as a means of serving the materialistic ends of an authoritarian political system. He defended instead, quite unequivocally, the notion of artistic freedom and creative independence. There is a hint of Greenberg and the Abstract Expressionists in his idea that art can only live and prosper if it is guaranteed individual freedom of expression, as well as freedom of (or separation from) politics.⁴ Delville insisted here, as he had always done from the very early phase of his career, that art is a manifestation of the inner life of the painter; of the subjective life of the mind and the spirit. He therefore makes it clear that this crucial freedom of expression constitutes the freedom to convey in physical form a transcendental idea inspired by (and conveyed through) the material and spiritual forms inherent in nature: 'In essence, art is a concept of the mind ... nature's forms contain both a material and spiritual aspect. It is

through this material aspect and through the power of this spirituality that the artist exercises his talent or, if he can, his genius'.⁵ He goes on further to remind his readers that the origins and the vitality and life of a work of art lie in its internal expression of the divine, which is itself aligned with 'la puissance créatrice de l'univers' [the creative power of the universe].⁶ It is revealing that these ideas, written as they were at the very end of his life, express identically his original artistic principles for which he fought so hard in order to secure a place in the turbulent and combative arena of Belgian artistic culture during the fin de siècle. Although not readily recognised, the essential framework of his ideas was very much a product of the modernist avant-garde that emerged during the early 1880s in Belgium, founded upon a shared ideology of romantic individualism that reacted against the more egregious cultural and social effects of bourgeois industrialism.⁷ The interpretation of reality through an individual temperament was the essential starting point for artistic activity amongst the avant-garde, and Delville's place in this perspective cannot be contested, but his relationship to the avant-garde was, and always remained, problematic. He was, from an early point in his career, uniquely committed to a hermetic Idealist aesthetic, which he defended with relentless energy to the very end of his long life. His opposition, during the late nineteenth century, to the ideologically inspired *l'art social*, favoured by the liberal avant-garde of the time, was based on his belief in the spiritual purpose of art: an art, in other words, that was independent of ideological tendencies. It has to be emphasised, however, that he also defended passionately the idea that art has a social role, an educative function, leading to individual liberation and social emancipation through a spiritual transformation.⁸ This is a unique feature of his thinking, for unlike many of his non-realist contemporaries who appeared to withdraw from social commitments, Delville was, from the very beginning of his career, committed to maintaining a link between art and society, and here we have another key aspect of his art which he in fact shared with contemporary avant-garde circles. The vigorous efforts which he directed towards creating ambitious large-scale works for display in important public buildings were a cornerstone of these artistic commitments. There are many immediate echoes in his belief in the transformative role of art – that it can change individuals and society as a whole – in the ideas of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich later on. Delville is undoubtedly a precursor to this influential – if failed – tradition of spiritually inspired artists seeking to elevate society through art.

That Delville remained active for such an extended period is remarkable given that many of his contemporaries had faded from active participation

in creating contemporary art decades before. The real question, however, is why Delville was sidelined in mainstream narratives of the period in which he worked and to which he contributed with such vigour, skill and artistic imagination. Perhaps the short answer is that he remained an artist who worked against the cultural and commercial grain, and whose metaphysical ideas, difficult and challenging as they were, ran counter to the more fashionable avant-garde tendencies during the fin de siècle and afterwards. Delville's aesthetic interests – centred on the primacy of the 'idea' as the foundation of artistic activity and founded on esoteric and hermetic philosophy – drew him to the leading occultists of his day including Joséphin Péladan, Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre and Papus ('physician' alias Dr Gérard Encausse). His artistic writings and imagery are heavily indebted to these, as well as to Eliphaz Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant), Stanislas de Guaita and Edouard Schuré. The focus of his aesthetic polemic, however, was the importance of the expression of Ideal Beauty as the essential purpose of art, an emphasis which he maintained throughout his life. In his aesthetic, the Parnassian resonances of this idea were grafted onto his notion of Beauty as the physical manifestation of the spiritual and the Divine. He was, moreover, committed to the importance of the figure as the most important subject of art (above landscape or genre) as well as an art founded principally on line, drawing and composition (above colour and 'sur le motif'). And so from a formal point of view he appeared, on the surface at least, still to belong partly to the Academic tradition, which to some extent made his standing somewhat equivocal in an avant-garde age that celebrated formal innovation and experimentation and which, moreover, held the Academy and its artistic principles in opprobrium. This was certainly a criticism levelled against him by his more resistant critics, and one of the fundamental misunderstandings concerning his artistic beliefs that initially ensured his exclusion from avant-garde circles. But his art was far from reactionary and can be seen, on the contrary, to be part of a general Classical revival during the fin de siècle expressed in various permutations in the work and writings of Maurice Denis, Cézanne, Armand Point and others. Although it is hardly noted in the literature, it is not difficult to see how this tendency can be identified as one of the foundational threads of early Modernism – manifesting in 'primitivist' or abstractionist tendencies amongst the early Modernists.⁹

Delville's aesthetic, therefore, can be seen to be a combination of several, seemingly diverse, influences that give his work a unique historical character. What he attempted ultimately to achieve in his art was a synthesis of two opposing tendencies: on the one hand the controlled technique

of the Classical tradition with its emphasis on line, form, harmony and beauty and, on the other hand, the self-expressive heroic individualism of the Romantic tradition with its emphasis on the subjectivity of the inner life of feelings, affective states and spiritual experience conveyed through expressive colour and compositional dynamism. The Classical heroes of Academic art were supplanted in Delville's painting by the heroism of the initiate's attempt to overcome the illusions of matter and reach a state of spiritual transcendence. In other words, his art is about the expression of spiritual ideas and subjective feeling articulated through the linear purity of ideal forms and vivid and expressive colour. In this regard he could be regarded as a preeminent pre-Modernist, attempting the marriage of two opposing forces that dominated nineteenth-century aesthetics and which were personified in the artistic polarisation originally encountered between Delacroix and Ingres earlier in the century. In the final analysis, the style and content of his works were uniquely his own and, coupled with an extraordinarily powerful and vigorous imagination, as well as a highly accomplished technical facility, his paintings are not easily reducible to a specific style or school.

Delville's Romantic individualism is evident in the fact that he consistently advocated freedom of expression in art, or at least he strongly supported the idea that art should be a matter of individual expression, rather than the exposition of a certain stylistic tendency or school. For him, it is up to the individual to discover a personal style and form of expression that is contingent upon his temperament and individuality. This, ironically, is the reason he supported the Academic system of training – commonly criticised by the avant-garde for producing featureless artistic clones – which he believed, on the contrary, provided one with a precise technique that allowed artists to express themselves more freely and more precisely according to their own creative temperament:

A work of art is created in the mind of the great artist before his technique. Before he enters the School of Fine Arts, where he learns his craft, the seed of the artist is already present within him. That is why it is commonly said that "one is born an artist". If art is, in effect, a value of the spirit, one should learn to admire works where the spirit is most keenly manifested, which is something that certain materialist critics don't do, ignorant as they are, in general, of the psychology of the artist and his work. On this psychology depends the aesthetic value of the work of art, be it painted or sculpted, architectural or musical.

Each School – Classical, Romantic, Naturalist, Symbolist or Surrealist, has

its own idea of Art. Whatever the subject chosen by the artist, his work will inevitably reflect his own aesthetic tendency. The value of his work will depend on the way in which he has brought into reality, through his technique, the idea contained by the subject, as well as on how much the total work conveys an impression of beauty.¹⁰

Delville was committed to an art that played a social role, although his perspective was not that of the dominant left-wing avant-garde, which subscribed to ideals of socialist utopianism. Rather, his beliefs were rooted in a tradition of individual liberation through spiritual enlightenment and transformation. Art, for him, was a catalyst that initiated the awakening of the spirit within. In this regard Delville was most certainly an outsider. Neither the instrumental materialist conservatism of the Belgian establishment on the one hand, nor the liberal, progressive socialism of the avant-garde on the other hand, would have any sympathies with the spiritual commitments of Delville's artistic perspective.¹¹ Delville, for his part, adopted an openly combative stance against contemporary materialist trends in art, which as a result drew a great deal of hostile criticism from influential members of the avant-garde as well as the Belgian establishment. In his memoir on Delville, his close friend, the journalist Clovis Piérard, noted that: 'He had to maintain a real struggle against the proponents of Belgian "pictorial materialism", which had the official protection of a number of important high functionaries.'¹²

Studying Delville's career and artistic achievements makes for a compelling case study and reveals many of the problems associated with a more general understanding of the fin de siècle. Non-realist tendencies during that epoch tend to be viewed as a monolithic phenomenon, gathered under the banner of Symbolism. It is immediately evident – and especially when studying a talented exponent of the non-realist movement like Delville – that from an historical point of view, there is very little that connects the large number of artists of the time in anything like a homogenous 'movement'. They seem connected only by their disdain for Impressionism and their shared interest in subjective states of mind as a starting point for artistic expression. Beyond that there is an enormous diversity of interests expressed in their writings and their work that kept many of these individuals and groups separate from each other. Delville's criticisms of his contemporaries for example, which will be reviewed in some depth on the first chapter, reveals a specific instance of the fault lines that existed at the time amongst the new generation of artists who were exploring alternative possibilities for art. By

looking closely at Delville's art and writings, in terms of their historical context, theoretical background and artistic practice, this present study has an underlying ambition to develop the understanding of this complex artistic era in general as well as to promote a more accessible understanding of Delville's work in particular.

Symbolist scholarship is still something of a specialist niche and the art of that epoch does not lay itself open easily to critical interpretation. There are many problems in the historiography of Symbolist painting. First, there is no homogenous movement called Symbolism in the figurative arts; this will always be a serious obstacle to a unified understanding of this tendency in fin-de-siècle culture. In fact the very use of the label 'Symbolist' for the diverse, non-realist tendencies in the visual arts during the fin de siècle suggests that there was some centrally organised movement with a unified artistic agenda – which is, of course, far from historic reality. As already suggested, the only idea that unites the many artists who expressed this tendency is their vehement stance against the dogmatic materialism of that era, and its attendant naturalism in science and realism in art. It is, of course, not entirely that simple as most naturalists and anti-naturalists actually shared many points of common interest – both aesthetically and ideologically; their desire to relate to the modern world, to influence change in the social sphere and to express some aspect of one's individual experience of that world, was widely shared. Even on the level of actual practice there was a blurring of identity; the work of Monet and Seurat was highly regarded by non-realists for the ambiguity and displacement of reality through the expression of 'mood' – a quality that was of great interest to subjectivist painters.

Moreover, painting and the visual arts followed a more diversified course from literary Symbolism and demands to be examined apart from that tradition. The ideas of Baudelaire and Mallarmé are routinely cited in the context of the interpretation of Symbolist painting, but the relationship between text and image remains elusive. Perhaps this is due to the fact that references to literary sources in Symbolist paintings are oblique – they are seldom literal descriptions of literary texts; Fernand Khnopff's artistic association with Péladan whose novels he illustrated is a good case in point.¹³ To the end, Symbolist art had its own formal and iconographic agenda. The diversity of art expressing this tendency is one of the most exciting features of this epoch, but one has to approach it with caution. Whatever the theoretical interests of these non-realist artists (and there were obvious differences), the one binding feature of their art is its deliberate allusiveness. Even when one is aware of the sources and influences, the resulting image seems always able to hover above them, maintaining an

air of ambivalence and indeterminacy. This probably has a lot to do with the drive in non-realist painting to create imagery, its actual subject-matter aside, that works through equivalence rather than description. This requires an 'intuitive' (rather than reductive) reconstruction of the original idea or 'feeling' that concerned the artist, but this raises a problem regarding the interpretation of 'expressive' art generally. One is, therefore, left with few alternatives other than to fall back on generalisations or to leave the imagery to linger quietly in some sort of historical cabinet of curiosities.

Despite this, one of the areas that this epoch does have to offer modern scholarship is its relationship to Modernism. Modernism, like Symbolism, is inevitably also concerned with ideas, which underscored the developments in formal innovation that came to characterise the styles of the early twentieth century, much of which was driven by so-called Symbolist innovations, notably those derived from Sérusier, the Pont-Aven group, Munch, Ensor and Gauguin. From Matisse's *Notes of a Painter* to Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* painters were keen to articulate their ideas and were committed to asserting the intellectual foundations of their art. Their writings cannot be seen to be a secondary epiphenomenon of their formal praxis; historical evidence suggests just the opposite. The formalist framework of art's 'autonomy' does not account for their interest in exploring inner states and giving expression to subjective experience of the world – intellectual, emotional, affective or imaginary. Modernists, like Symbolists, attempted to integrate the intellectual (or conceptual) with the perceptual through theory.

That the Modernists derived their fervent interest in artistic theory and conceptual approach to art from the 'Symbolist' milieu is hardly a radical assertion. The innovative formal language used by most 'Symbolist' artists was a primary consideration of their art that fed into the practice of early twentieth-century painting. As their art was not only about form, but about content as well, Symbolist experimentation in new painterly forms was always modified and developed by their interest in art as a vehicle for the expression of ideas. For many, the integration of form and content – fundamental to the notion of *idéisme* – was a vital aspect of their artistic practice. The experimentation and innovation of many of these artists was as vital as any currently considered as part of the bona fide avant-garde. Most 'Symbolists' adopted the new tropes of visual representation derived from Impressionists, post-Impressionists and Pointillism – most notably the visual ambiguities inherent in Impressionist painterly syntax – to suit their own expressive purposes. Their adoption of Seurat as one of their own, with his highly precise 'scientific' method of constructing images, is symptomatic

of this cross-over. On the other hand, the connections between Matisse, early Picasso, Kandinsky and Malevich with ‘Symbolism’ is convincingly asserted, as are the main ideas underlying their art: Kandinsky’s debt to Theosophy and the esoteric is well established. Matisse was trained by Gustave Moreau (one of the great inspirations for the ‘Symbolist’ generation) and his *Notes* can be viewed as a rationalised articulation of the basic principles of many non-realist strands explored amongst the ‘Symbolist’ writings from Aurier onwards.¹⁴

In the course of this book I hope to reveal how Delville’s art is connected to many of the issues outlined above. One has to examine first in what sense Delville’s art is in fact ‘Symbolist’. Given that Delville openly opposed, on intellectual and aesthetic grounds, many of his contemporaries’ work which is now commonly considered ‘Symbolist’ (especially Gauguin and Ensor) suggests that the artistic identity of fin-de-siècle non-realist painters is more complex than is commonly realised; very few, if any, actually used the term ‘Symbolist’ to characterise their art, least of all Delville. Painting in the nineteenth century is not, after all, about movements but rather about talented individuals who evolved new tendencies in art that reflected both inner and outer ontological necessities – political, spiritual or otherwise – in response to modernity. It is on the basis of this that we can map a continuing trend during the twentieth century as an effort towards emancipation from perverse pressures placed on society through technology, industry and oppressive economic forces resulting from industrial capitalism – either through individual emancipation from a subjective foundation (expressiveness or spiritual development) or collective social emancipation through the union of social realities with artistic praxis. These centripetal and centrifugal tendencies are neatly traced by modernist critics, Greenberg and Burger respectively. The fin de siècle is a microcosm of this split, particularly so in Belgium where, as we shall see, Delville plays a pivotal role in attempting to draw together the emancipatory role of art in a social context with an emphasis on specific formalist artistic concerns.

The issue that is raised in dealing with an articulate artist like Delville in the context of the Symbolist era is to wonder to what extent he fits the Symbolist tag and, further, to begin to question the actual validity of that tag in painting and the visual arts generally. The ‘Symbolist’ tag is, in reality, a literary projection. Moréas’s manifesto of 1886 set the tone and aims of literary Symbolism; it was a statement of a literary artistic identity as much as a rallying cry for intellectuals disenfranchised by contemporary naturalism. It also served as a focus for a literary movement which was

already under way, and this formal declaration of its purpose was eagerly accepted by poets and writers. In painting, as I have already suggested, the situation is entirely different. Non-realist artists often pursued dissimilar paths from their literary peers. They worked alone or in loose affiliations (Rose+Croix, *Pour L'Art*, *Als Ik Kan*) or small, usually isolated artistic groups (Pont-Aven, Nabis, L'Art Idéaliste and the various Germanic Secessions). Contrary to common understanding, in the figurative arts, there was no unifying movement with a predetermined artistic agenda or even a unified style, let alone one collectively recognised amongst figurative artists as 'Symbolist'. Whereas naturalism was constructed and recognised as a monolithic movement in contemporary literature and criticism, non-realist art was conspicuously heterogeneous, dispersed and did not share a unifying communal sense of a 'school'. The attempt to identify a school of Symbolist painting was generated, it has to be said, by contemporary writers including Albert Aurier (on Gauguin) and Emile Verhaeren (on Khnopff).¹⁵ This could be interpreted as their effort to demonstrate a legitimate claim for the universal occurrence of the Symbolist movement in literature. On closer inspection one has to admit that, up to a point, there is some truth in that claim. Aurier's attempt to colonise Gauguin as a Symbolist, when analysed more closely, is problematic. Aurier, applying a formalist aesthetic approach, simply 'theorised' Gauguin's painting in the context of contemporary literary praxis.¹⁶

Nonetheless, Aurier's theoretical statement has subsequently been taken up, almost entirely uncritically, as a de facto declaration of the purpose and intentions of 'Symbolist' art generally and of Gauguin's work in particular, without examining it in relation to the statements by other artists, writers and critics. This did not, however, stop contemporaries – or the market-driven canon-making institutions that followed – from questioning his interpretation of Gauguin's work, and its appropriateness as a general paradigm of 'Symbolism' in contemporary figurative art. So the problem here, effectively, is that if modern scholarship seeks to advance in this field, we have to begin to question these historical links and cease uncritically to accept these constructs and their underlying assumptions. The reason for this is obvious: Aurier's ideas (or Verhaeren's for that matter) are not universally applicable across the range of figurative art that was produced in the post-naturalist era from about 1885 onwards and, in far too many instances, is inappropriate or misleading. To suggest, as is sometimes the case in the literature, that Symbolist art is only that which pertains to Aurier's statement, and the rest is some sort of anomaly, is simply an evasion.

In this regard, there is still a great deal of work to be done in determining

the exact relationship between artists and writers of the period; especially where a direct connection can be established between the painters and authors. Generally, the evidence strongly suggests that painters were not simply imitating writers but were pursuing their own artistic agendas specific to their medium. The instance of Joseph Péladan and his Salons de la Rose+Croix is a good case in point. As we shall see, Péladan wrote a great deal, and many artists participated in his Salons; does it follow then that they were influenced by his writings and submitted unquestioningly to his proscriptive aesthetic agenda? Or, further, can we assume that there is an unequivocal case to be made to interpret these paintings only through an understanding of his writings? Despite assertions to the contrary in the literature, I think that for both these questions the answer has to be ‘no’. Péladan gathered together a wide variety of artists who were related in so far as they were generally not pursuing a realist aesthetic programme; and it is on that basis alone that they were welcome at his Salons – not because they signed up to an exclusive Rosicrucian artistic contract. So even though Séon, Aman-Jean, Osbert, Khnopff and Delville were very closely allied to Péladan, and exhibited at his Salons, their art still retains an individuality that is in no sense derivative of Péladan’s aesthetic. In the case of Khnopff and Delville, this is borne out further in view of their divergent career paths in their home country, Belgium. In fact, their professional artistic paths never crossed – Delville was not associated with the main avant-garde exhibition societies such as *Les XX* or *La Libre Esthétique*, and Khnopff, for his part never exhibited at *Pour l’Art* or at Delville’s *Salons d’Art Idéaliste*. These groups had widely differing artistic objectives and it is therefore immediately clear that it would be wrong not to identify these differences. At most they may be seen to share certain ‘tendencies’ – but that does not sustain an argument for a causal connection or even of direct influence by literary peers such as Péladan or any other contemporary figures outside their artistic sphere of influence. So, is it right to infer therefore that the Rose+Croix, or any other ‘grouping’ (*Les XX*, Pont-Aven or *Pour l’Art*) for that matter, constituted an homogenous ‘movement’ in fin-de-siècle culture? This is clearly not the case.

Delville created his own Salons d’Art Idéaliste, which were seen as imitations of Péladan’s Salons, but his ideas and artistic agenda were fundamentally more sophisticated than Péladan’s and aligned with a different intellectual tradition, namely, Theosophy; a tradition that Péladan rejected. Reducing Delville’s work, therefore, to Péladan’s Rosicrucian aesthetic is simply wrong. Moreover, even where iconographic links can be established, closer examination indicates that artists were working

from a widely-spread intellectual foundation and not simply illustrating a single literary perspective. The example of the image of the androgyne is particularly apposite here. It is ubiquitous in the work of Péladan as well as in Khnopff's graphics and paintings. Delville too takes recourse to the symbol in his *L'École de Platon* (Musée D'Orsay, Paris). In neither case can it be unequivocally determined that their works simply adopt Péladan's understanding of this symbol. As I will demonstrate in the final chapter of this book, this image is used in a highly complex and nuanced manner that echoes the widest range of intellectual sources, including Plato, Schopenhauer, Hegel and the esoteric tradition. This raises the issue of interpretation of non-realist art which, together with the problem outlined above regarding its overall allusiveness, constitutes one of the obstacles in gaining some leverage on this art, the period as a whole and the circumstances in which it was created.

The temptation to interpret non-realist art through the filter of the substantial body of contemporary writings regarding literary Symbolist aesthetics is overwhelming and has been the standard practice since the re-emergence of scholarly interest in this epoch in the 1970s. Perhaps it is time to put this aside and go back to the source of non-realist art and start again. This is, anyhow, the *raison d'être* of this book. Delville is a particularly good case study in this regard given his prolific artistic and literary output. However, a detailed study of all his writings and works of art is far beyond the reach of one volume. The scope of the present book, therefore, is largely confined to his work of the 1880s and 1890s – Delville's formative years. This in no way limits our understanding of his work or artistic significance as a whole as his ideas and theoretical perspective did not waver much in later years from the intellectual foundation he established during this period. In fact, much of his writings published during the twentieth century simply develop and expand on the work he produced during the *fin de siècle*, most notably his *La Mission de L'Art*. The analysis of the writings and paintings covered in this book should therefore provide a substantially useful framework within which to approach his works created during the rest of his career.

This study therefore provides a fairly detailed analysis of his art and writings produced during the *fin de siècle* and covers the reception of Delville's work by his contemporaries. Unfortunately this research has been limited by the conspicuous absence of documents from his personal archives – letters, notes and memos – that are usually useful in understanding an individual's private and personal motivations. Most of this has been destroyed – particularly from the period focussed on in this volume.

Although this is unsatisfactory and will leave many questions unanswered, or only answered in part, there is still much to be gained from the material in the public domain that has survived. In view of this, a dominant aim of this book is to generate a deeper, more detailed understanding of Delville's art and career as recorded in public documents published during his lifetime. Since his practice as a painter is so intimately linked to his activities as a writer and entrepreneur of artistic causes, an understanding of his painting has to be approached through a detailed knowledge of his life and activities beyond the studio.

This book is therefore divided into three sections. The first aims to provide a useful overview of the historical details of Delville's career during the 1880s and 1890s. During these years he was fully engaged in the fervent avant-garde culture of his time and – unlike many of his artistic contemporaries – he fought virulently for an unique place among the competing tendencies that defined the fin de siècle in Belgium. What emerges from this is a somewhat startling revelation of Delville's aggressive nature in the way he confronted many of the influential and powerful contemporary cultural entrepreneurs, such as Edmond Picard and Octave Maus, in order to carve a niche for his Idealist art as a viable avant-garde alternative to the mainstream that was largely defined and controlled by Picard and his circle. Delville's active stance in this regard sets him apart from his contemporaries. But what I hope to highlight here is that Delville was seriously concerned to distance himself from the commercially orientated nature of the mainstream avant-garde at the time, in order to promote a more spiritually orientated artistic practice that was not cynically contracted to the market and its networks. Delville's artistic and intellectual development went through several phases – each defined by the groups with which he was associated such as *L'Essor*, *Pour L'Art* and his *Salons D'Art Idéaliste*. The details of his involvement in these, including the critical reception of his efforts during this period, will form part of the discussion in Chapters Two and Three.

The second part of this book is concerned with Delville's theoretical ideas, and here an in-depth analysis of his writings is undertaken in order to lay the foundation for the interpretation of his paintings. Delville's main books on aesthetics (*La Mission de l'Art*) and the occult (*Dialogue entre Nous*) provide a detailed statement of his intellectual orientation, captured in what he referred to as his *Esthétique Idéaliste*. Delville's aesthetic is not simply a derivation of traditional western Idealism but is an expression of the western esoteric tradition, which saw a massive revival in the late nineteenth century. Key elements of this as well as a detailed exposition of his ideas will be presented in Chapter Four.

I offer a detailed analysis in Chapters Five and Six of a selection paintings by Delville. I have confined the discussion to no more than half a dozen of his key works. This might not seem adequate in order to understand his visual output, but the choice of works here is deliberate and represents part of a larger intellectual framework within which Delville was working that was concerned principally with the notion of initiation. Delville refers to the notion of initiation frequently in his writings and most of his paintings can be seen to represent some aspect of the initiatory path. A detailed analysis of this notion therefore forms the principle focus of the interpretation of these works. In this regard, the final chapter is devoted to one painting alone, namely, his *L'Ecole de Platon* – undoubtedly the masterpiece of his career, and a work of great beauty and enigma.



