



## **Zöllner's Knot: Jean Delville (1867-1953), Theosophy, and the Fourth Dimension**

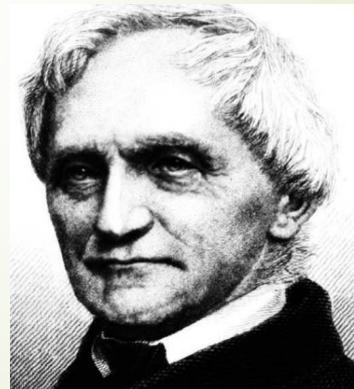
Massimo Introvigne (UPS, Torino, Italy)

The CESNUR 2014 Conference – Baylor University, Waco, Texas

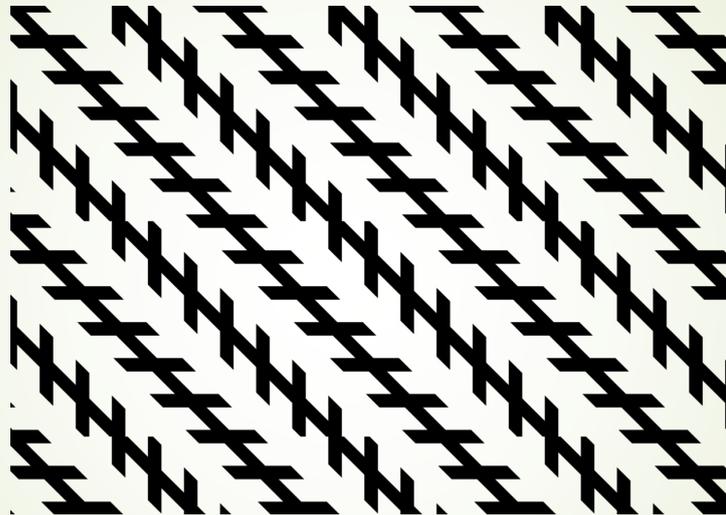
# Johann Karl Friedrich Zöllner (1834-1882)



- On March 11, 1900, Belgian painter Jean Delville (1867-1953) published in his Theosophical periodical *La Lumière* an article about Zöllner's knot (left). Zöllner (below) was a respected Leipzig professor, interested in non-Euclidean geometries and in how the observer influences the observed phenomena



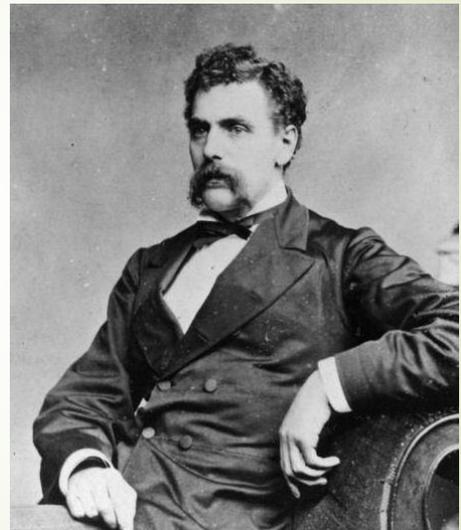
## The Zöllner Delusion



- ▀ The «Zöllner delusion» shows how parallel lines in fact do not appear parallel to our eyes when crossed by smaller lines at angles

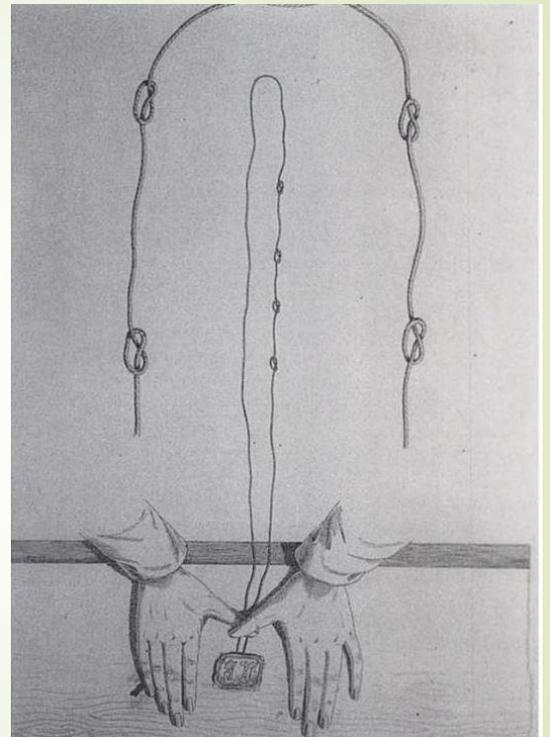
## Zöllner and Slade

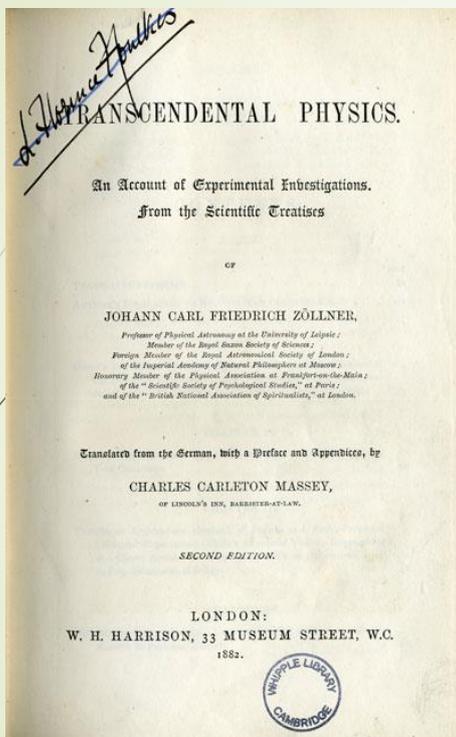
- ▶ Zöllner created «Transcendental Physics» in order to explain miracles, including those of Christianity, and the phenomena of Spiritualist séances
- ▶ In 1877, he conducted experiments with American medium Henry Slade (1835-1905, right), sent to Europe by the founders of the Theosophical Society to be tested in Russia. He had just been arrested in England as a fraud



## Zöllner's Knot(s)

- ▶ Zöllner deposited on a table a rope, whose two extremities had previously been sealed with wax to pieces of paper. Then he placed a handkerchief on the rope, and Slade put his hands on the handkerchief
- ▶ When the handkerchief was removed, four knots appeared on the rope, with the seals untouched



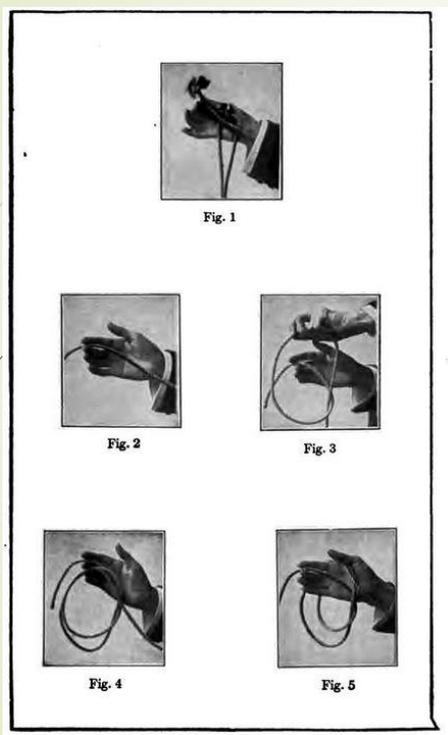


## The Fourth Dimension

- For Zöllner, the only scientific explanations was that mysterious beings located in the fourth dimension (not necessarily spirits of the dead) created the knots in our third dimension, while remaining invisible to three-dimensional beings like us
- His writings became so well known that, with some exaggeration, «a number of later authors have credited Zöllner with the single-handed popularization of the fourth dimension» (L. Henderson)

## Fraud?

- ▶ Psychic researchers such as Hereward Carrington (1880-1958) will explain the tricks performed by Slade (left), while Zöllner's colleagues concluded that the professor had «gone crazy». He was defended only by Spiritualists such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930, below)...



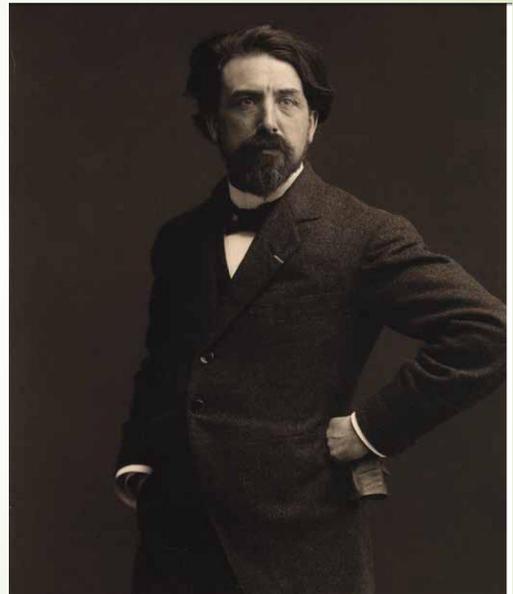
## Kandinsky and Zöllner



- ....and by artists, such as Delville and Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944, left), who quoted Zöllner in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* among these brave men who dared the explore the occult «facts that can no longer be denied»

## Jean Delville

- ▶ Jean Delville was born in Louvain in 1867, the illegitimate son of high school professor Joachim Thibaut (1833-1887). He never met his father, and took the last name of the employee of Belgian railways his mother later married
- ▶ In the Belgian society, strictly divided between the linguistic French and Flemish communities, and the Catholic and secular «pillars», he had a bilingual (his mother was Flemish) and mostly secular education



## L'Essor



- His family managed to finance his studies at the Royal Academy in Brussels. At age 20 he joined the group L'Essor, which experimented with naturalism and Impressionism, and produced «social» paintings appreciated by critics

## Turning to Symbolism



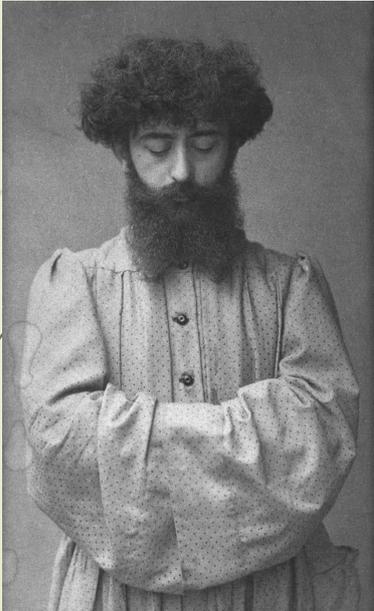
- In 1887, Delville had son «virage symboliste» (F.-C. Legrand) with his drawing *Tristan et Iseult*, where the lovers reconstitute the original androgyny through death



## Androgyny

- Androgyny will always remain a favorite theme of Delville. In 1932, he will paint *Séraphitus-Séraphita* (left), the perfectly androgynous being born to parents who mastered the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) in the 1834 novel *Séraphita* by Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850)

## Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918)



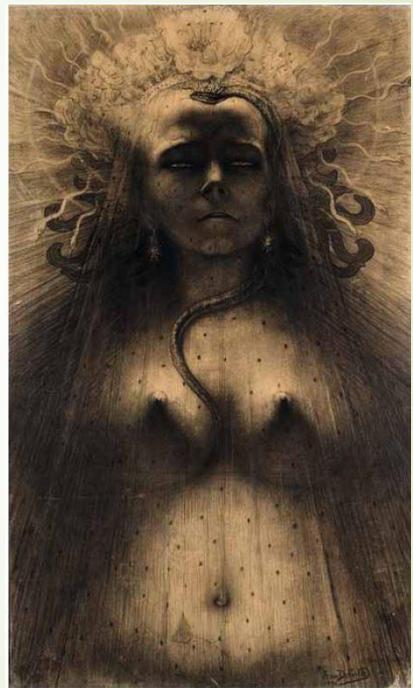
- In 1887 or 1888 Delville met Péladan (photo, left, and portrait by Delville, right), a French poet and founder of several occult orders. It was, and is, easy to dismiss Péladan as a poseur because of his bizarre antics. He had, however, a crucial role in promoting a Symbolist art rooted in esotericism through his Salons de la Rose+Croix



## A Follower of Péladan



- The lost *Cycle des Passions* (above), of which only drawings remain, on the *Divine Comedy* by Dante (1265-1321), and the *femme fatale* of *L'Idole de la Perversité* (1891, right) mark Delville's separation from *L'Essor* under the influence of Péladan



## Orphée mort (1893)



- When he exhibited *Orphée mort* at the 1893 Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, Delville was recognized as one of the main voices in Péladan's transnational artistic and esoteric movement

## Pour l'Art

- In 1892, Delville and journalist Raymond Nyst (1863-1948), who with his feminist wife Elise Soyer (1862-1953) kept an important esoteric salon in Brussels, created Pour l'Art, an artistic circle and the Belgian official branch of Péladan's Catholic Order of the Rosy-Cross of the Temple and the Grail



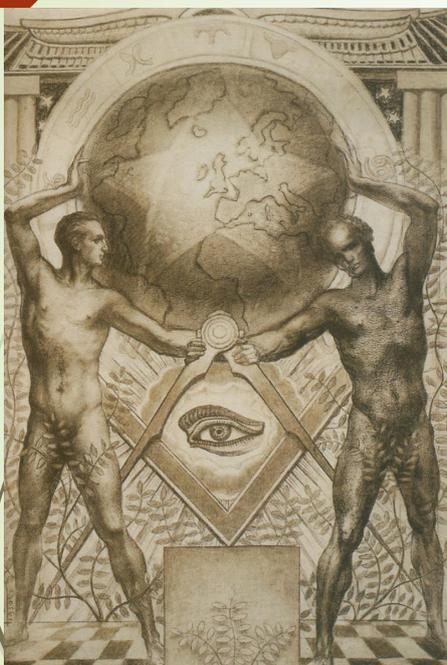
## The War of the Two Roses



- ▶ Péladan had created a Kabbalistic Order of the Rosy-Cross together with Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865-1916, left) and Stanislas de Guaita (1861-1897), who were also busy with another occult order known as Martinism
- ▶ Péladan was anti-Masonic and claimed to remain a loyal (if not entirely orthodox) Roman Catholic. Papus was an anticlerical Freemason. The unavoidable schism in French Rosicrucianism was nicknamed by the amused French gazettes «the War of the Two Roses»



## Delville as Freemason



- Later, however, Delville joined Freemasonry (and created Masonic emblems: left). He even became the Venerable Master of the leading Brussels lodge (right), although he always promoted an esoteric Freemasonry against a «political» and rationalist one



## KVMRIS



- In 1890, Papus created the Independent Group for Esoteric Studies, whose Brussels branch was called KVMRIS, from the name of an ancient Celtic population. Delville left Pour l'Art and joined KVMRIS' artistic «Section plastique», although he tried to remain friend of both Papus and Péladan

## KVMRIS and the Arts

- KVMRIS, better known for his interests in theurgy and sexual magic, had an important role in the arts. His exhibitions attracted leading artists such as Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) with his triptych *Isolation* (right)





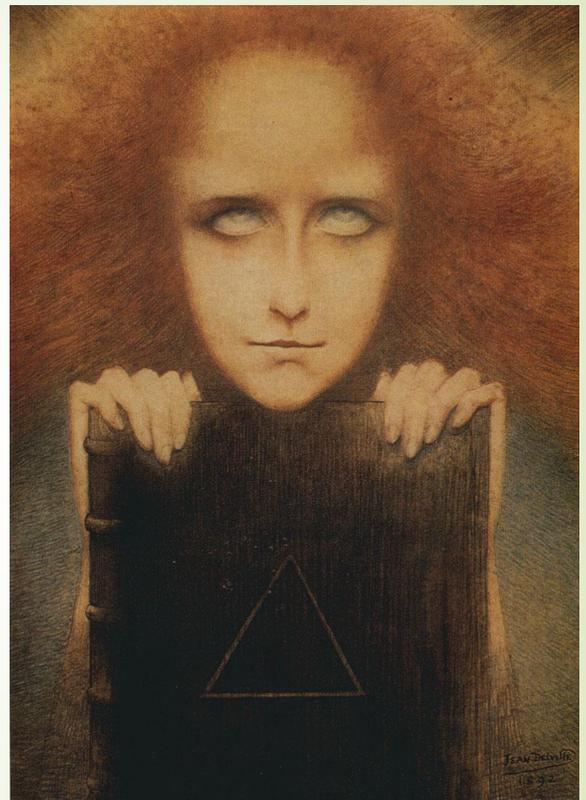
- In his KVMRIS period, Delville created some of his best paintings, including the Wagnerian *Parsifal* (above) and *L'Ange des splendeurs* (right)

## Delville's KVMRIS



## Mysteriosa

- KVMRIS also had a Spiritualist section, and Delville participated in séances. They influenced his masterpiece *Mysteriosa* (1892). Later retitled *Portrait de Mme Stuart Merrill*, i.e. Claire («Bob») Rion (1890-1970), the wife of the American Symbolist poet Stuart F. Merrill (1863-1915), it was probably originally intended as the portrait of a spirit



## Satan's Treasures

- *Les Trésors de Sathan* (1895) ideally concluded Delville's KYMRIS period. Psyche shows to Satan the beauty of divine love and the shortcomings of human love, the latter represented by Adam, Eve, Cain, Mephistopheles, Faust, and Helen of Troy



## The Prix de Rome



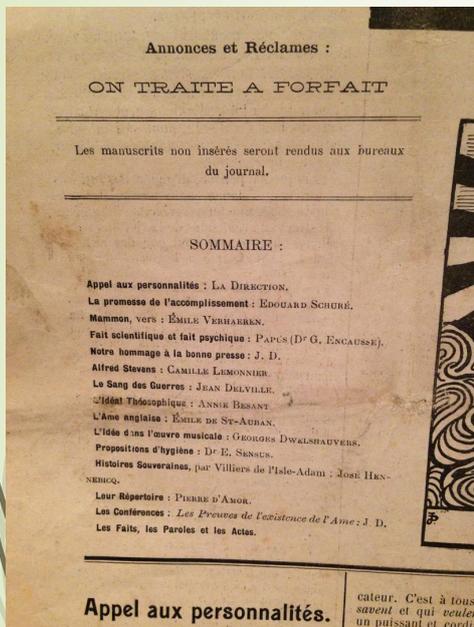
- In 1895, while KVMRIS collapsed because of Papus' quarrels with the Belgian group, Delville decided to compete for the prestigious Prix de Rome, awarding to the winner a generous monetary prize and the possibility of residing for several months in Italy. Delville won with *Le Christ glorifié par les enfants*, but was criticized by fellow occultists for having produced a «Catholic» work

## L'Art Idéaliste



- Emboldened by the Prix of Rome, Delville launched his own movement, l'Art Idéaliste. The first salon in 1896 was a fiasco but the following in 1897 and 1898 were great successes, and Delville's huge *L'École de Platon* (1898, above) secured the artist's fame

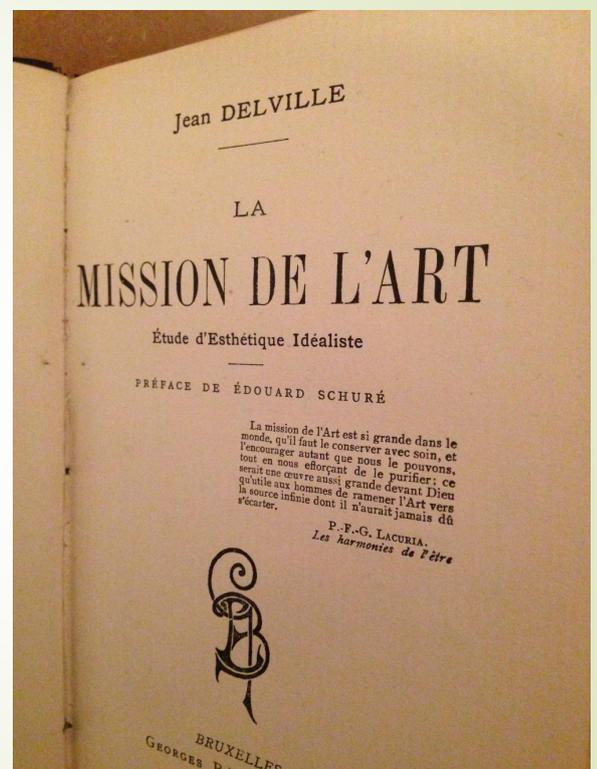
## Schuré and Theosophy



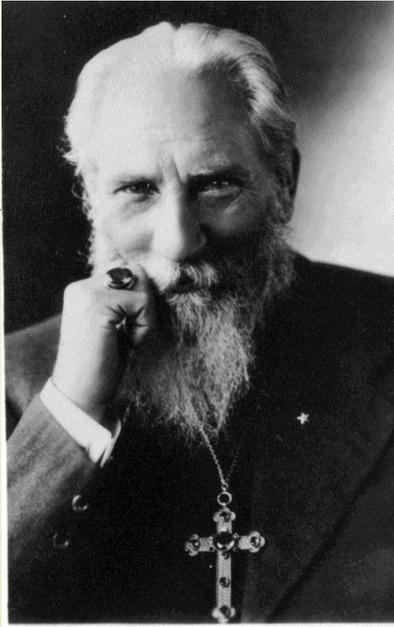
- *L'École de Platon* shows the influence of Édouard Schuré (1841-1929, above) and his theories of the esoteric unity of all religions
- Although Schuré has its ups and downs with the Theosophical Society, through his friendship with the writer Delville became a member, then a leader of the Theosophical Society, started a lifelong friendship with Annie Besant (1847-1933) and launched a Theosophical journal, *La Lumière*

## La Mission de l'Art

- ▶ Schuré prefaced in 1900 *La Mission de l'Art*, Delville's main theoretical work. Inspired by the aesthetics of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), it opposed realism, Impressionism and landscape painting, and suggested that the artist should penetrate the hidden essence of things, the fourth dimension



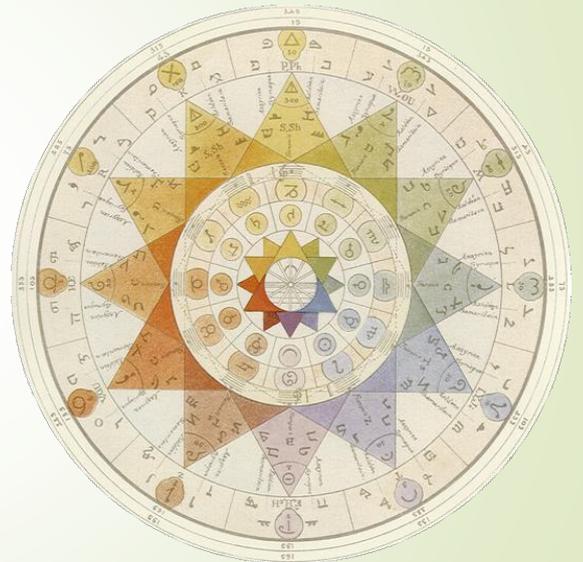
## Leadbeater's Occult Chemistry



- *La Mission de l'Art* is a Theosophical book, arguing that «Buddha is the *Christ* of the East as Christ is the *Buddha* of the West» and that true Martinism and Theosophy are «perfectly united in their teachings»
- Delville also relies on the occult chemistry of Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934, left), claiming that the initiate – and the artist – sees the atomic structure of reality and penetrates its inner essence by clairvoyance, in a much better way than the average scientist

## Lacuria and Saint-Yves d'Alveydre

- The esoteric references of the book are quite eclectic. It opens with a quote from the prophet and numerologist Father Paul Lacuria (1806-1890) and mentions the Archéometre (right), invented by French esoteric master Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre (1842-1909), a tool showing the occult correspondences between colors, musical notes, the planets and the letters of several different alphabets



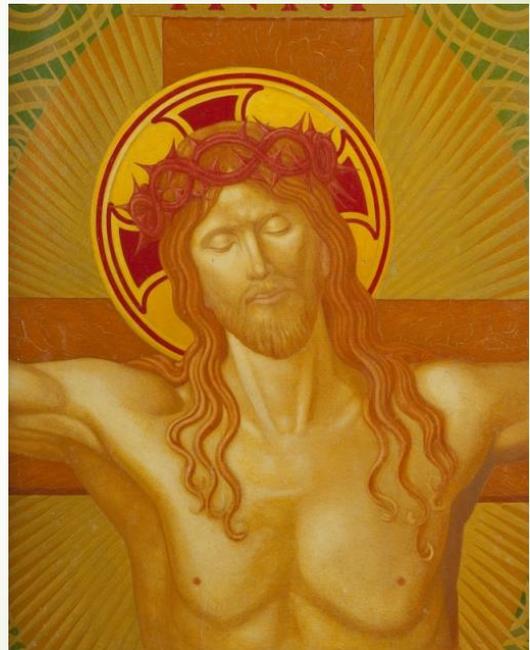


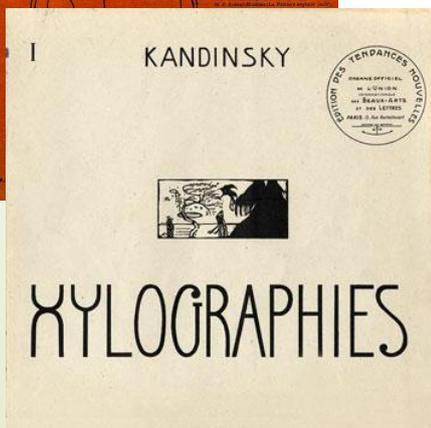
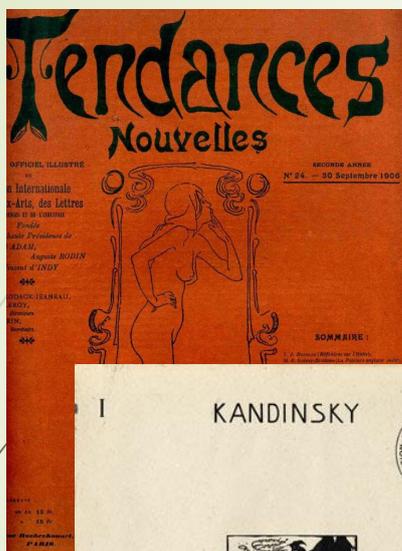
## The Benedictine Connection

- Although Delville was generally critical of the Catholic Church and its art, he still tried to keep a foot in the Catholic pillar, and praised in the book the Benedictine artists of the German Abbey of Beuron (Gabriel Wüger O.S.B., 1829-1893, *Stabat Mater*, 1868, left)

## The Confrérie de la Rosace

- As late as 1911, Delville will still cooperate with the Catholic esoterists of the Confrérie de la Rosace, established in 1908 by Frère Angel (Jacques Brasilier, 1883-1965: *Christ*, date unknown, right), whose exhibitions will include very orthodox Catholics such as sculptor Henri Charlier (1883-1975)





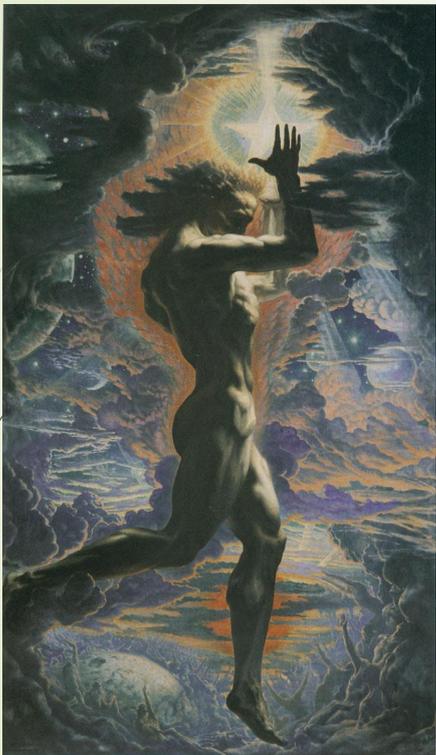
## The Glasgow Years

- From 1900 to 1906 Delville was a professor at the Glasgow School of Arts, and developed an important relationship with British Theosophical and Spiritualist circles
- He kept visiting continental Europe, and participated in the French exhibitions and journal *Les Tendances Nouvelles*, together with fellow Theosophists such as Maurice Chabas (1862-1947) and Ethel Carrick (1872-1952) and with Kandinsky

## *L'Homme-Dieu* (1903)

- In Glasgow Delville painted *L'Homme-Dieu*, hoping to see it exposed in a church. But there were just too many male naked bodies for the contemporary Catholic taste, and it ended up at the Groeningemuseum in Bruges

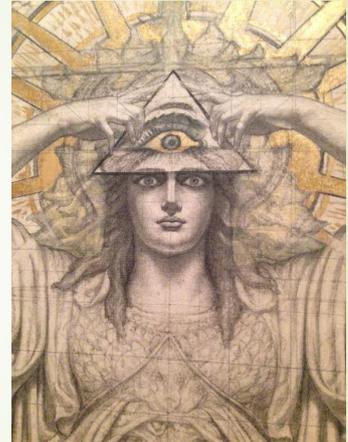




## The Prometheus Project

- Back in Brussels, Delville started in 1909 a project within his White Lodge of the Belgian Theosophical Society centered on Blavatsky's interpretation of Prometheus. He produced a large painting with the emblem of the Lodge, the White Star, while two Russian Theosophists, sculptor Seraphim Sudbinin (1867-1944) and composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), also created works related to Prometheus. Scriabin also recruited to the project Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911), who in the end could not contribute due to ill health

## Monumental Art



- Delville was now recognized as a national artist. He was commissioned to decorate the Cour d'Assises in Brussels' Palais de Justice with panels (above), destroyed in 1944 and later replaced by the preparatory studies the artist had kept, and later to oversee the mosaics in the Hémicycle du Cinquantenaire

## World War I

- During World War I Delville went into exile in Britain, where he kept alive an independent Belgian Freemasonry, renewed Theosophical friendships, and supported the Belgian war efforts. When the war ended, he painted *Les Mères* (1919), influenced by British Pre-Raphaelite Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), who had participated in Delville's Idealist Salon in 1897



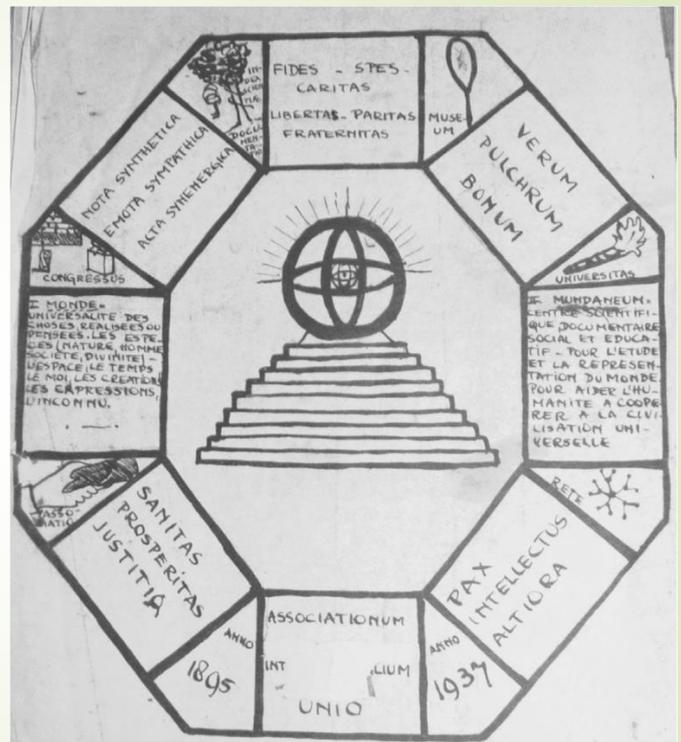
## Krishnamurti



- Delville's public image deteriorated because of his enthusiastic embrace of the young Indian Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986), «discovered» by Leadbeater and promoted by Besant (left) as the vehicle for the future World Teacher. Delville devoted his best energies to the promotion of Krishnamurti for more than 15 years, going to extremes that compelled him to resign as secretary of the Belgian Theosophical Society and Venerable of his Brussels Masonic lodge

## The Mundaneum

- Delville involved in his Krishnamurti activities Belgian philanthropist Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and participated in his project of the Mundaneum (right), a complex of buildings designed by Le Corbusier (1887-1965) that should have hosted all the world information, and is seen today as a paradoxical precursor of Google



## The Fall of the Mundaneum

- When the esoteric connections of the Mundaneum were revealed by a Catholic opponent, Swiss historian Gonzague de Reynold (1880-1970, right), a member of the international committee that evaluated the project, the League withdrew its support



## Delville vs Le Clément de Saint-Marcq



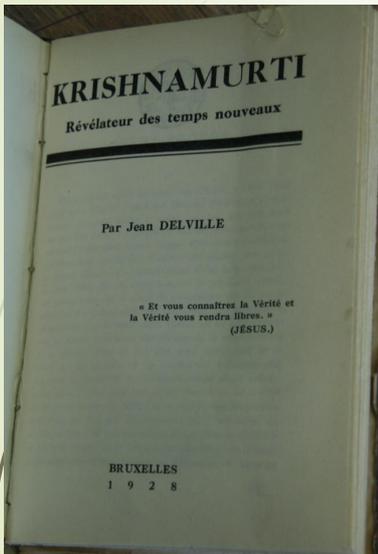
- Belgian Spiritualists, led by old KVMRIS leader Georges Le Clément de Saint-Marcq (1865-1956), used Krishnamurti as an argument to attack Theosophists as reactionary and dogmatic
- Delville, however, knew that Saint-Marcq was the author of *L'Eucharistie*, at first published anonymously, arguing that both Jesus Christ and 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Church secretly offered male semen to their followers in the Eucharist (spermatophagy). When Saint-Marcq was revealed as the author of the brochure, he first answered that Theosophists also secretly practiced spermatophagy, but in the end had to leave in disgrace the presidency of the Spiritualist Federation and launch his own movement, Sincerism

## The Great Occult Hierarchy (1925)

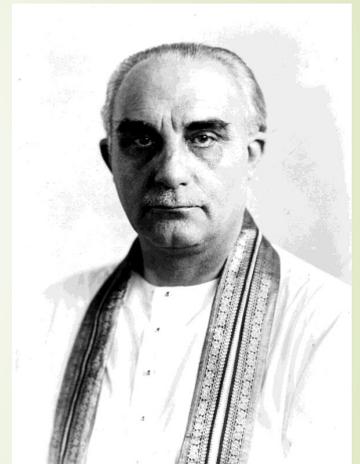
- In 1925, Delville announced that «in Tibet there is in these very days the Central Government of the World», a secret organization that presides over both human beings and angels. This Great Occult Hierarchy «exists from more than 18 million years» and will soon be revealed when the Christ, Buddha and the Master of all Masters will all take Krishnamurti as their vehicle



## The Krishnamurti Crisis



- ▶ In the 1920s, Krishnamurti grew increasingly disillusioned with Theosophy. In 1929, he announced that no World Teacher existed and each seeker should find the truth through a «pathless path» of the heart
- ▶ Delville was among those who defended Krishnamurti's role to the bitter end, arguing that this was his paradoxical way to become the messiah in a brochure strongly criticized by the future president of the Theosophical Society George Arundale (1878-1945, right)



## Failure

- In the end, however, Delville had to admit the failure, although he remained friend with Annie Besant until her death in 1933 (a rare photograph, right, shows the two of them during Besant's last years)



## The Mons Years



- The disillusionment about Krishnamurti was part of a crisis leading Delville to abandon his family, friends and esoteric activities in order to live in Mons with his former student Émilie Leclercq (1904-1992). To his lover Delville dedicated his 1933 triptych *Le Rêve d'amour* (above)

## Vision de la Paix



- In 1947, Delville left Émilie and returned to his wife and family. At that time, or perhaps shortly before, he painted *Vision de la paix*, a highly symbolic work, with an «idealized Krishnamurti» at its center
- In the last years, he still wrote brochures but felt too weak to paint. He died on January 19, 1953, the very day of his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday

## Delville Today

- The first exhibition devoted only to Delville had to wait for more than half a century after his death: it opened at the Musée Félicien Rops in Namur, Belgium, in 2014



## Reactionary or Modernist?



- There is an ambivalence in Belgium about Delville and his esoteric friends: leading Belgian scholar (and secular humanist) Michel Draguet (above) denounced them as reactionary, crypto-Catholic and even «pre-fascist», yet as director of the Brussels museums he capitalized on the public taste for this art when he opened in 2013 the successful Musée Fin-de-siècle in Brussels

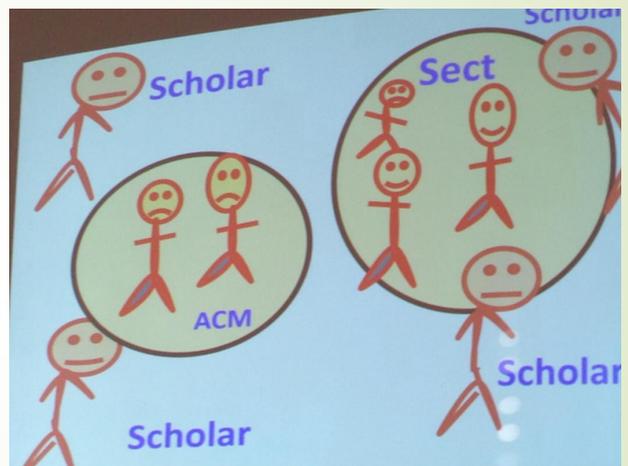
## Zöllner's Knot Revisited



- We may regard Zöllner and, by implication, Delville as gullible victims of self-styled occult masters. Yet, as Linda Henderson (above) persuasively demonstrated, pseudo-scientific premises about ether, occult energies, and the fourth dimension actually generated some of the most interesting developments in modern art

## The Journey Continues....

- CESNUR continues to explore in its Web site ([www.cesnur.org](http://www.cesnur.org)) and conferences the relationships between modern art and new religious movements, including in its most recent and mysterious incarnations (right)\*
- The conversation will continue at CESNUR 2015 in Tallinn, Estonia, June 18-20, 2015



\* For those less familiar with CESNUR conferences, this is a typical illustration of one of Eileen Barker's sociological papers – a true work of modernistic art