

# Das Unheimliche: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Art of Introspection

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## Project Description:

‘Das Unheimliche’, while promulgated as a scientific concept by the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud during the early twentieth-century, transcended this temporal boundary as a state of mind. Throughout the preceding century, both Romantic and Symbolist writers and artists had been similarly fascinated by the obscurities of human psychology: the irrational, the inexplicable and the ‘uncanny’. In the aftermath of the First World War, the Surrealists responded to Freud’s ideas on the subconscious, and their works celebrating the irrational in man were largely in conversation with their Symbolist predecessors. I will be exploring the points of similarity, but equally discrepancy, between the respective literary and visual works of both movements in their treatment of the ‘uncanny’. Science sought to explain the ‘uncanny’; art wanted us to *feel* it.

## Research Proposal:

This programme would offer me the unique opportunity to pursue an area of personal interest in History of Art, develop my research skills and promote my scholarly abilities. My project, ‘Das Unheimliche: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Art of Introspection’, would approach the Freudian concept of ‘The Uncanny’ through an interdisciplinary lens, exploring the symbiotic interface between the respective movements’ literature and art. However, why ‘The Uncanny’ held such prominence in Symbolist, and even Romantic, art (both of which preceded the publication of Freud’s ideas) and, secondly, how subsequent Surrealist artworks compared in their treatment of ‘The Uncanny’, are questions I am keen to address. I was inspired by certain parallels I had drawn between my studies in History of Art and English Literature, notably how Symbolist artists and writers employed canvas and paper in response to contemporary French scientific developments. Scientists, artists and writers alike sought to

uncover the obscure depths of human psychology. Yet many artists, through their innovative visual discourse, reacted to the positivist age by challenging the empiricists' rationalisation of the mind. Employing this comparative and concept-oriented method, I aim to carry out this project in six weeks. My approach would provide me with the invaluable experience of marshalling extensive source material in a precise and informed manner, mindful that self-discipline is critical for successful leadership. The scholarship's rewards and challenges are numerous, but not inimical. For me, the two are in conversation; true rewards will derive from being challenged. Having been awarded the St Andrews O.E Saunders Prize for outstanding achievement in Art History in 2020, I would now like to demonstrate my academic capabilities by participating in this programme. Through the Laidlaw initiative, I aspire to strengthen my skills by reaching beyond course requirements, thereby advancing my aspirations as a scholar and leader.