



GAUGUIN



AND



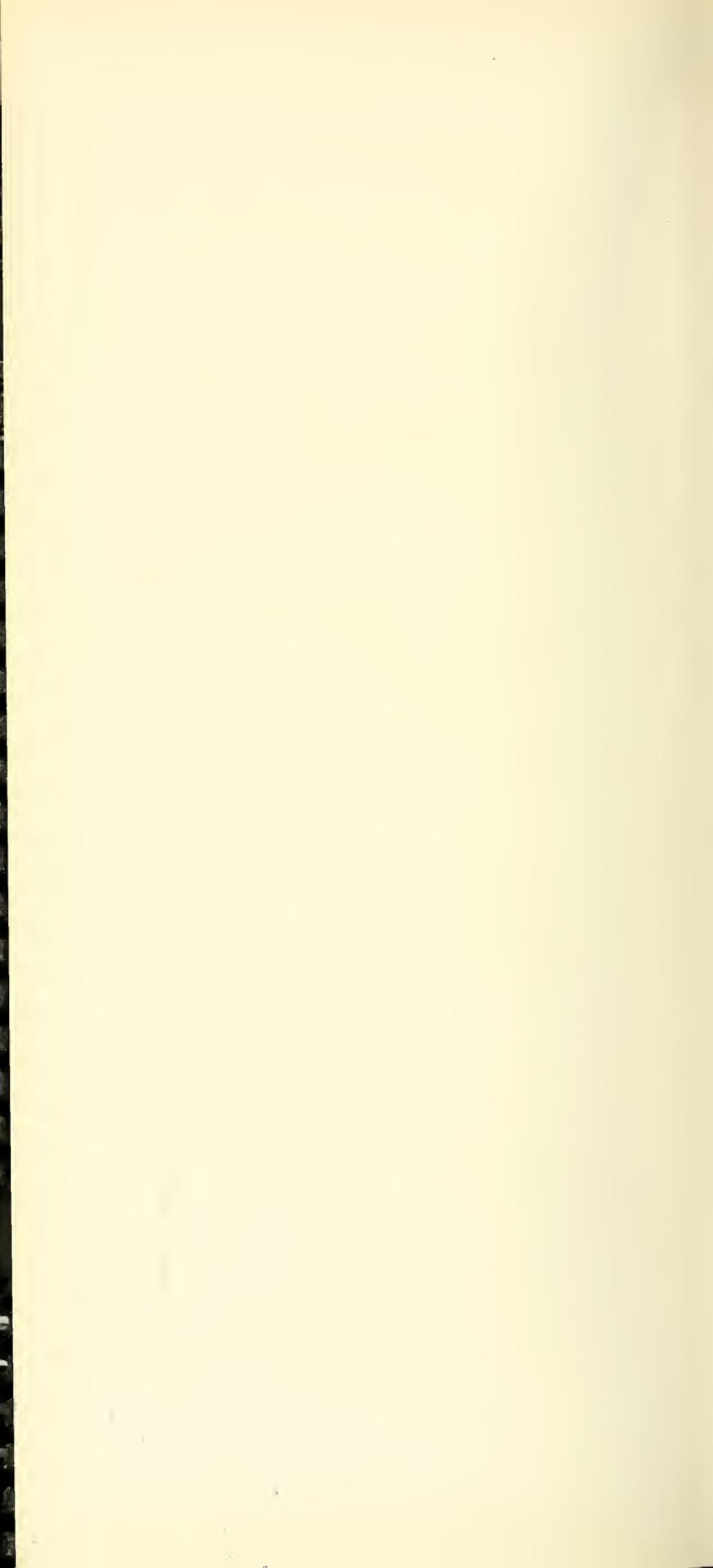
THE



DECORATIVE



STYLE





GAUGUIN
AND THE
DECORATIVE STYLE

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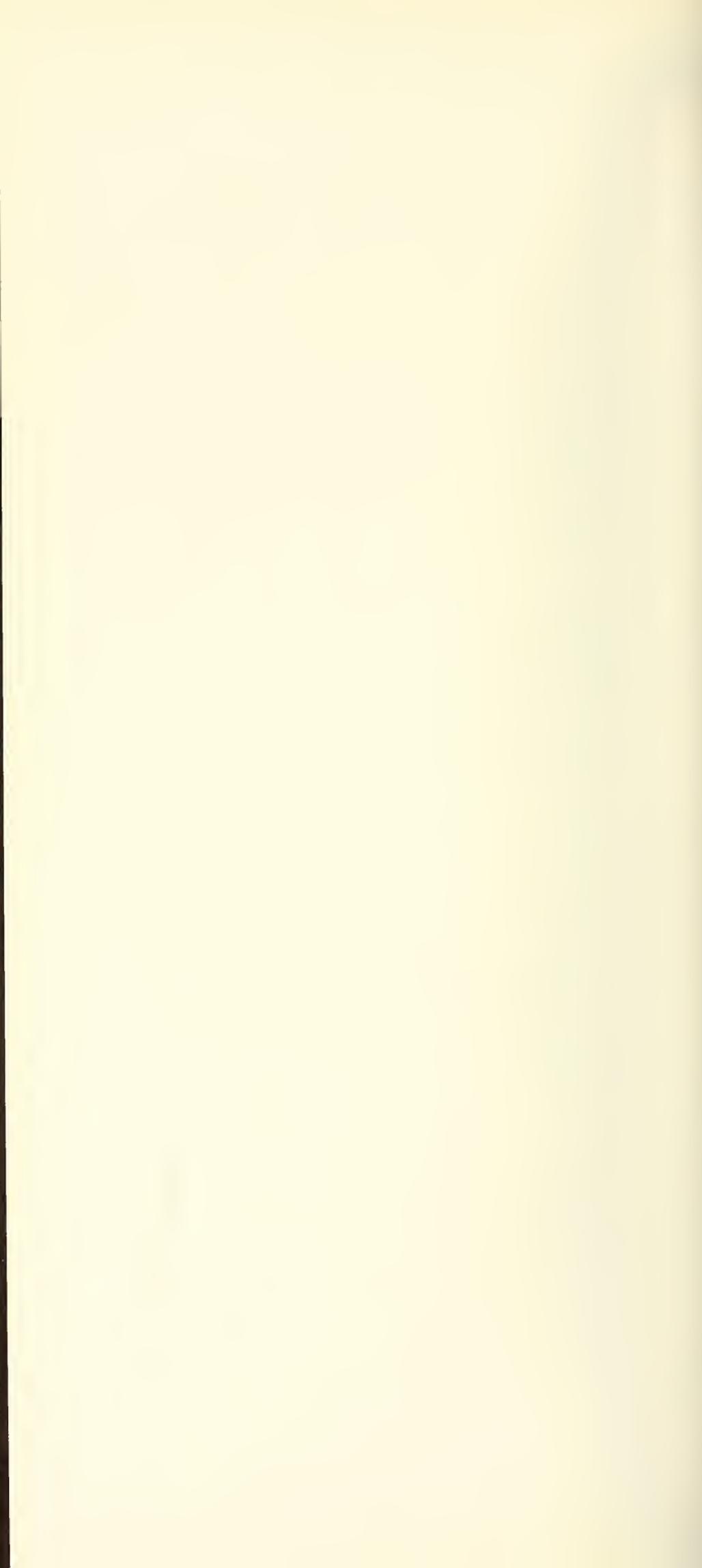
Gauguin and the Decorative Style is the third in a series of didactic exhibitions held at the Guggenheim Museum in which the originator of a discernible current is linked to his stylistic progeny. Cézanne and van Gogh at previous occasions served as points of departure for the elements of construction and expression in modern art.

The decorative component does not, of course, stand alone. It may, however, be sufficiently emphatic in some works to become a visually identifiable feature that determines, more than other elements, our response. Because of the pejorative connotations that "decoration" has acquired in modern critical vocabulary, it should be pointed out that it is used here as an identifying term free from qualitative implications.

Broad stylistic categories are not definable with precision in exhibition form. The concepts as here presented may therefore be taken as a convenient framework for the gathering of enjoyable and rewarding works in a congenial relationship to one another.

The exhibition has been gathered by William B. Stevens, Ford Foundation Intern assigned to the Guggenheim Museum. Members of the Museum staff under the editorial guidance of Dr. Louise Averill Svendsen have contributed the signed essays on the following pages and Lawrence Alloway the introduction.

Thomas M. Messer, Director



INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Alloway

The influence of one artist on another is usually discussed from the receiving end, as, for example, in the study of Gauguin it is necessary to discuss Pissarro's influence on his early work. In this exhibition, however, an artist's influence is presented centrifugally, beginning with the initiating artist and proceeding outwards to the artists whom, in various ways, he influenced. This exhibition is neither comprehensive nor fully consistent but, taken as a whole, it reveals major aspects of Gauguin's art and influence. By stressing what the Museum has called "the decorative style", it is possible to trace the expansion of an artist's power, first to his friends, later to strangers: first to his contemporaries and later to their descendants.

An artist's work exists not only as a unique personal configuration, but also in terms of what is transmittable, what can be learned and adopted by other artists. The dimension of reputation and cultural influence supplements the autonomous structure of the individual work. Gauguin is an apt figure for such an approach because of the extensive distribution of his work and ideas. There is even an echo of the commanding personality that impressed his contemporaries, in the glamour of the legend that survived him, in which he appears, simultaneously, as personally ruthless and society's victim. Gauguin was exceptionally influential, not only because of his temperament, but because of predisposing historical factors. The excellent communications of the late nineteenth-century avant-garde (personal letters in the improved mails, freedom to move and the greater speed of travel, the increase of public exhibitions, the emergence of magazines) apprised people of current topics and celebrated the individuals who contributed most

to the argument. Thus a man like Gauguin could respond to the current state of knowledge in art and be well known as soon as he could add to it.

To discuss Gauguin's influence we might propose a schematic arrangement of circles of influence around a center.

1. Personal contact; intimate discussion and sharing with other artists, such as occurred with Émile Bernard and other artists of the Pont-Aven group.
2. The influence of Gauguin transmitted by his friends to their contacts; for example, Paul Sérusier involved artists that he knew in Gauguin's esthetics.
3. There is the influence spread by Gauguin's original works in the absence of either the artist or his personal contacts. The Gauguin exhibitions in Paris, in 1903 and 1906, which influenced Picasso, are typical examples.
4. In the '90's the magazine *La Revue Blanche* carried news of Gauguin far beyond France. The circulation of graphic works or reproductions is an important factor in the late 19th century: the impact of Gauguin's rugged woodblock prints on Munch and on the artists of Die Brücke can be cited here.
5. Another kind of influence is by verbal tradition or example; it is impossible to think of Nolde's journey to New Guinea in 1913-14, for instance, without recalling Gauguin's journeys. As they move through a process like that sketched here, ideas and works of art get separated from their originators and stretched or mixed into new forms and obviously such diffusion cannot be covered by an exhibition. However, Gauguin's role as a disseminator of the ideas of color symbolism that early abstract art inherited from the 19th century cannot be doubted. In addition to his theory of color as enigmatically expressive, he is present in subsequent developments of primitivism, and as a contributor to the solidification of the picture plane in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh are all linked by the term Post-Impressionism (coined by Roger Fry in 1910), as if the fact that they were all beneficiaries and rejectors of Impressionism conferred an historical unity upon them. It is a cohesion that was not felt by the artists themselves, who developed divergently and even with hostility to one another; to Cézanne "Gauguin was not a painter: he only made Chinese pictures" (1) (that is to say, they were too flat).

Van Gogh wrote to his brother, from St. Rémy in 1889, "I have written to Bernard and Gauguin too, that I considered that to think, not to dream, was our duty, so that I was astonished looking at their work that they had let themselves go so far" (2). (It is worth noting here, apropos 19th century communications, that he knew their recent work from photographs.) The year before van Gogh had told Theo: "I have no doubt that I could work at Pont-Aven" (3), but by the time of the later letter he had recoiled from Gauguin's subjectivity. The differentiation of the Post-Impressionists is mandatory if each one is to be seen with any clarity. An important distinction was made by Maurice Denis, in an article *De Gauguin et de van Gogh au classicisme*, 1909 (4). Considering the courses open to a non-naturalistic art, he proposed the idea of "two deformations", an objective deformation (which he identified with Gauguin) and a subjective deformation (represented by van Gogh's work). Denis, by identifying the objective deformation with the decorative, links it with "the eternal laws of beauty", which has the result of making Gauguin (to quote another article of Denis) "a kind of Poussin without classical culture" (5). Although Poussin would hardly have recognized Gauguin's color coding [for example, to quote Gauguin: "general harmony—somber, sad, frightening—resonating in the eye like a death knell, violet, dark blue, orange-yellow" (6)], the belief in law which underlay it would not have seemed alien.

Gauguin's "classicism" took the form of a belief in universal laws that art embodied or reflected. Whereas Impressionist painters had freed art from many of its traditional absolutes, Gauguin revived them, though covertly. Ideals of permanence and mystery replaced the flux and clarity of Impressionism. Gauguin's symbolic colors, for example, were supposed to act directly upon the spectator's senses, and each spectator was expected to feel the same thing.

Primitivism has been defined, by Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, as "the belief of men living in a relatively highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or in all respects is a more desirable life" (7). Gauguin fits the definition exactly, both in his reasons for leaving Paris for Brittany and for abandoning Europe for the Pacific. "Oh, the old European

traditions. The timidities of expression of degenerate races" (8), he exploded in *Noa Noa*; in Tahiti. on the contrary, "I have escaped everything that is artificial, conventional, customary" (9). Lovejoy and Boas distinguish between chronological and cultural primitivism; the former is nostalgic for the past, the latter for geographical distance. Gauguin demanded both types for, as he wrote, "it was the Tahiti of former times which I loved. That of the present filled me with horror" (10). When he lived with the girl Tehura he records that under his influence "the old national divinities gradually reawaken in her memory" (11).

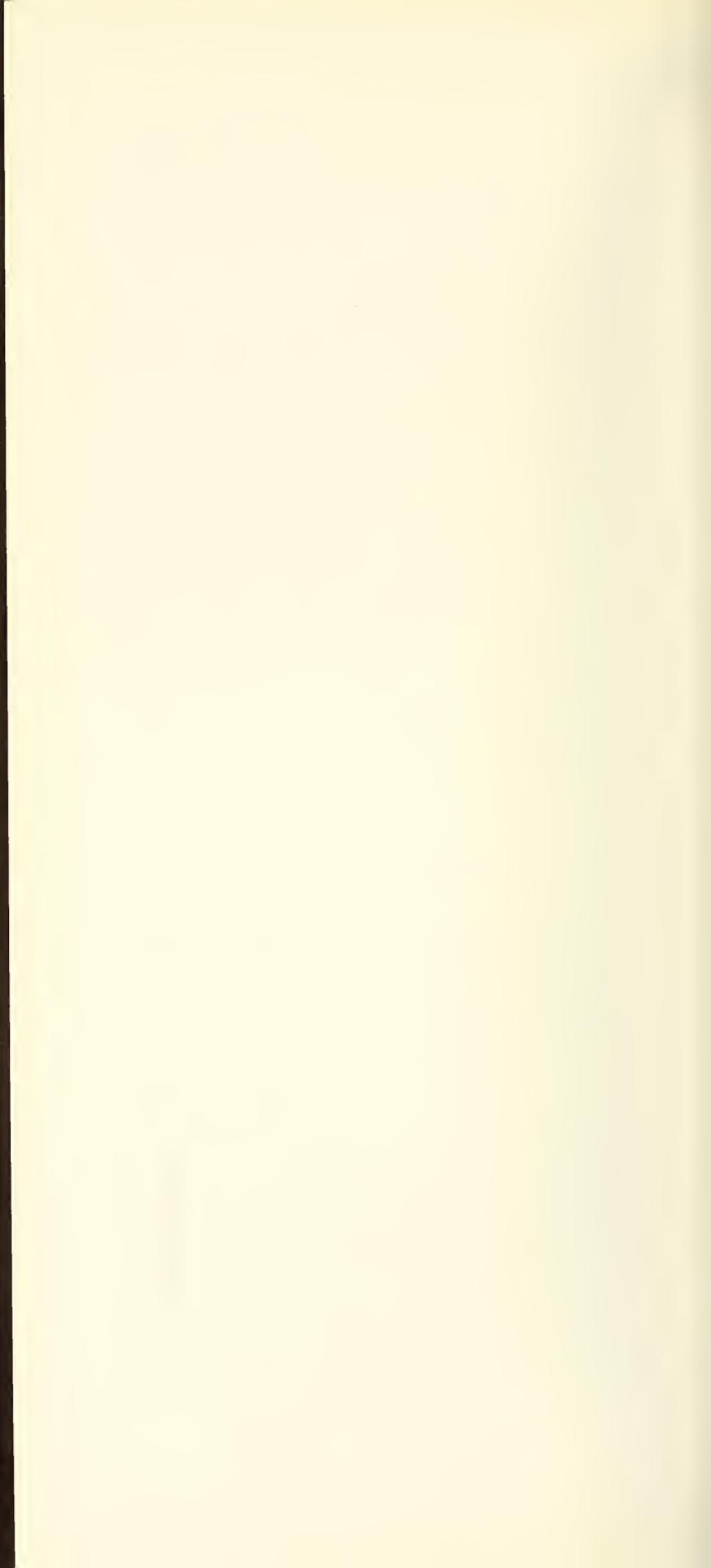
The fact is that Gauguin is, inescapably, a European in origin and in many of his reflexes and memories. He notes that a native girl "was not at all handsome according to our esthetic rules", but then goes on to describe her as "a Raphaellesque harmony of the meeting of curves" (12). On the wall of his hut he pinned photographs of Manet's *Olympia* and Italian primitives. His own religious paintings, like *We Greet Thee, Mary*, 1891 (Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which transpose Christian subjects to tropical settings, show a similar cultural overlap.

Gauguin, in a famous letter to Strindberg, compared "a civilization from which you are suffering" with "a barbarism which spells rejuvenation to me" (13). The experience of rejuvenation for which Gauguin searched, in Brittany and in the Pacific, was fundamental to his life and his esthetics. As he used exotic or primitive sources to increase the coloristic and patterned nature of painting, he was also, metaphorically, evoking the vigor of a primal geometry. Decoration to Gauguin, and to those influenced by him, though in opposition to 19th century realism, never excluded meanings beyond the purely visual display. To quote *Noa Noa*: "on the purple soil long serpentine leaves of a metallic yellow make me think of a mysterious sacred writing of the ancient Orient" (14). Writing about an 1892 painting, *The Spirit of the Dead Watches* (Collection Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo), he observed: "my decorative sense leads to my strewing flowers on the background. The flowers are Tipapaou's flowers, phosphorescences, and are a sign that the spirit has you in mind" (15). Either by viewing the landscape as a great hieroglyph of natural myster-

ies or by sharing Polynesian folklore, he invests the decorative with meanings. (According to him it was by accepting the Polynesian belief in omens that he discovered his mistress' infidelity.)

In the later 19th century the words decoration and decorative take their full meaning only as one term in a pair of opposites: decoration and realism. It is this usage that can be applied to Gauguin and to the artists who, in one way or another, he reached. The terms decoration and realism summed up antithetical positions which divided the field of art, from the avant-garde to the study of primitive art. In the history of the art of primitive man, it was assumed either that stylized, geometric design came first and led progressively to realistic art, or that geometric, decorative art was the degeneration of an original realism. To Gauguin, whose paintings are flat and stylized (compared to contemporary realistic art), the evolution of art must certainly have begun with basic patterns that had become overlaid and blurred by "civilized" elaboration and refinement. Thus, the concept of decoration means, in relation to Gauguin's ideas and influence, a reaffirmation of primal truths. The compactness of his paintings acts both to revive barbaric authenticity in art, and, at the same time, be in accord with the "modern" esthetic of flat-pattern art.

Robert Goldwater, in his book on Gauguin, discusses most of the ramifications of his influence that are touched on in this exhibition but also proposes another area of relevance. He considers that the "fluid forms and abstract organic shapes of Miró and Arp" reveal his influence. However, it is likely that their source is the continuum of Art Nouveau form as a whole, with its fund of organic linearism, rather than any one artist specifically. The Art Nouveau elements in Gauguin, and the artists associated with him, recall Salvador Dalí's description of Matisse as the "painter of seaweed", an observation that stresses the presence of 1890ish contours in his work. Gauguin is an artist deeply involved with forms and themes of Art Nouveau, but his own art is not strongly biomorphic. There may be a *technical* anticipation of Miró, however, as in Gauguin's description of working with "a coarse brush, on a piece of sacking full of knots and wrinkles" (16).



GAUGUIN AND HIS CIRCLE

Marilyn Hunt

GAUGUIN

Gauguin clearly envisaged his artistic objectives and consistently developed the means to attain them. In 1885, before his style had progressed appreciably beyond his Impressionist beginnings, he wrote of the evocative power of color and line to a friend:

Look around at the immense creation of nature and you will find laws, unlike in their aspects and yet alike in their effect, which generate all human emotions. . . . Whence I conclude there are lines that are noble and lines that are false. The straight line reaches to infinity, the curve limits creation, without reckoning the fatality in numbers. . . . Colours although less numerous than lines, are still more explicative by virtue of their potent influence on the eye. . . . You will find in graphology, the traits of candid men and those of liars; why should not lines and colours reveal also the more or less grand character of the artist (17).

In the same letter he asserted that "the artist is synonymous with the greatest intelligence; he is the vehicle of the most delicate, the most invisible emotions of the brain". In accord with the Platonic "Idea", he believed that the artist was the individual most perceptive of the higher reality behind shifting appearances. He rejected Impressionism's preoccupation with change in nature in favor of what he called "the mysterious center of thought". His principles are also to be differentiated from Expressionist art in that he does not wish to convey a violent emotion, but a more general, one might say, poetic meaning. It is natural then that formally this Symbolist program does not involve the heavy brushwork of Expressionism, but rather the decorative style of flat areas of color defined by a curvilinear outline.

Symbolism represented a reaction against the realism of the preceding period in its return to the older Platonic idealism. In its emphasis on the significance of the formal

elements of line and color, however, Symbolism looked forward to early twentieth-century art in which style gained even greater importance at the expense of subject matter as the vehicle of meaning. Another statement of Gauguin's is worth recalling:

There is an impression resulting from any certain arrangement of colors, lights, and shadows. It is what is called the music of the picture. Even before knowing what the picture represents . . . frequently you are seized by this magic accord . . . this emotion addresses itself to the most intimate part of the soul(18).

Gauguin's break with conventional society, his rejection of traditional family life and the world of finance in the mid-1880's, became legendary in his own time. His transformation from a prosperous Sunday painter to a committed artist despite great physical hardships made him a symbol of the growing disillusionment with the materialist doctrine on which society seemed to be based.

Born in 1848, Gauguin was already in his thirties when he became a serious painter. He was able to evolve quickly, however, because working with Camille Pissarro in 1879, he adopted the Impressionist style without prior academic training. His sojourn in Martinique in 1887 brought advances toward his mature decorative style, but the greatest development occurred between 1888 and 1890 in the little towns of Pont-Aven and le Pouldu in Brittany. This peninsula of north-western France was congenial to Gauguin's primitivistic leanings because it was isolated from industrialism and contemporary culture, and preserved its traditional ways of life and dress and its religious faith. In this setting his style took inspiration from Japanese woodcuts and the early Italian masters, such as Fra Angelico, and became increasingly flat and curvilinear while the symbolic content also grew. The young Émile Bernard with whom he worked contributed to Gauguin's evolution by his own stylistic experimentation along similar lines. The benefits were in fact reciprocal. An exhibition which he and his friends organized at the Volpini Restaurant next to the World's Fair in Paris in 1889 helped to make him known among artists there. He spent the winter of 1890-91 in Paris. At that time a group of Symbolist poets and critics who habitually gathered at the Café Voltaire, including Paul Verlaine and Jean Moréas, proclaimed him their counterpart in painting.

Gauguin's first trip to Tahiti began the following spring. He hoped to paint more freely in a primitive culture, for he felt that the materialist bourgeois society he despised infected the whole of contemporary European culture. He identified himself as completely as possible with primitive peoples, and returned to France only once more before his death in the Marquesas in 1903. After about 1892 in the landscapes especially, his brushwork became more noticeable and the forms lost their dark outlines while generally retaining their curvilinear shapes.

Although Gauguin's stay in Martinique in 1887 was marked by sickness and deprivation, the paintings of the period are characterized by buoyant feeling in color and line, matching the relaxed grace of the people he depicts. Van Gogh said of these works: "That is high poetry, those Negresses, and everything his hands make has a gentle, pitiful, astonishing character" (19). In *Conversation in the Tropics*, 1887, the supple postures of the two women pausing with their washing and the boy herding a goat lend themselves to the rhythm of long slowly undulating curves seen also in the trunks and branches of the foliage. Dark outlines are present, but they appear and disappear in a manner closer to Cézanne than to Gauguin's later work. The clear tones are those of the Impressionists, but the bold harmonies of his later work are scarcely foreshadowed. Like Cézanne, whose work had an important early influence on him, he systematizes the individual brush strokes of the Impressionists in one direction, vertical in this case, without regard for the shape of the objects. This is in fact the principal means of unification in the picture.

The picture plane is emphasized by the brushwork and by the arrangement of the three main figures in a typical frieze-like effect, supported by the high viewpoint which cuts off the distance and eliminates the horizon.

The figures are partly obscured by the vegetation so that they seem submerged in their natural surroundings. The uniformly handled paint, which gives the same texture to everything, and the over-all rhythm add to the portrayal of primitive man at one with nature.



PAUL GAUGUIN 1848-1903

CONVERSATION IN THE TROPICS. 1887. Oil on canvas, 23⁵/₈ x 28³/₄".

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. Eisner, New York.

The full power of Gauguin's decorative style becomes apparent in the painting *Siesta*, 1893. The containment of the figures by the smoothly flowing outlines reinforces the sense of self-absorption of the Tahitian women, each deep in her own reverie. An air of mystery, perhaps of silent expectation, pervades the painting but does not disturb the serenity which is basic to the decorative style. Contrary to earlier art, facial expression is not relied on for the creation of this atmosphere. The face of the most important figure remains invisible and the other faces are almost mask-like in their simplification.

The clear colors tend away from the primaries toward mauves, oranges, violets and yellow-greens. Juxtaposed colors are usually related rather than opposed, for example, the orange of one of the dresses and the mauve of the floor both contain red. The resulting harmonies were considered audacious at the time, and the fact that they seem less so now is due in good part to Gauguin's influence. Shadows are almost completely absent, except for one compositional device in the background.

The viewer's attention is fixed on the picture plane by means of the decorative elements of line and color. Depth in the picture space is reconciled with the picture surface in Gauguin's typical manner. The parallel lines of the boards of the porch floor are a reminder of traditional perspective, but they are obscured so that they do not really lead the eye back. As in *Conversation in the Tropics*, the high view-point cuts off deep space. Although the largest figure is foreshortened, its planes are generally rendered in a flat manner. The crouching figure is smaller and so seems farther away than it would be in reality, but its light color and lack of atmospheric perspective bring it forward toward the picture plane.

The simplification of the forms into a few color areas recalls Gauguin's dictum: "A strong emotion can be translated immediately: dream on it and seek its simplest form" (20). He directed art away from over-refinement and elaboration of detail toward large strong forms, for he believed that complexity of meaning could best be conveyed by formal simplification.



PAUL GAUGUIN 1848-1903

SIESTA. 1893. Oil on canvas, 35 x 46½".

Collection Mrs. Enid A. Haupt, New York.

BERNARD

During Gauguin's stays in Brittany the artists who came to be known as the Pont-Aven group gathered around him. Taking inspiration from his work and ideas, such painters as Jacob Meyer de Haan were influenced toward a decorative style, while others modified Impressionism with Gauguin's emphasis on compositional organization.

Although Émile Bernard was only twenty when he joined the Pont-Aven group in Brittany, he already participated in the ideas of the Paris avant-garde. He had been one of the leaders of the dissident students who rebelled against restrictive academic rules of "good drawing", acclaiming the Impressionists and Cézanne, and he was expelled from art school for doing an Impressionist painting. In late 1886, he and a fellow student, Louis Anquetin, began experimenting with a decorative style of flat color areas and thick black or blue outlines derived in part from stained-glass windows. From its relation to cloisonné enamel they took the name *cloisonnisme*. Articulate on the theoretical aspects of art and on philosophical and theological matters, Bernard became close friends with Vincent van Gogh and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec during this period.

When Bernard joined Gauguin in Brittany in 1888, both artists were already working along similar lines and a

friendship based on mutual esteem quickly developed. A rare collaboration resulted in which each benefited from the other's talents and enthusiasm. The most tangible evidence of Bernard's contribution involved Gauguin's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1888 (Collection National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh), whose vivid monochromatic background and flattened rendering were inspired by a Bernard painting, *Breton Women in the Meadow* (Collection Maurice Denis' family) of the same year.

By 1890, however, they began to fall out. Bernard became bitter over the acclaim given Gauguin as the originator of Symbolist painting while his own contribution was ignored. By the mid-1890's Bernard's interest in Old Masters was reflected in his work. About that time he travelled to Egypt where he spent a good part of the next ten years, for like Gauguin he felt the need to escape Europe, whose materialism and decay of moral values he deplored.

Although discouraged by lack of recognition, he continued to paint and to write on art. He was instrumental in making known the work of Cézanne, van Gogh and Redon by writing about them and publishing letters he had received from them. For many years he was better known as a friend of great artists than as an artist in his own right.

Bernard painted *Buckwheat* in 1888, the year that his collaboration with Gauguin began. The brilliant red ground against which the figures are set recalls Gauguin's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*.

The subject of the painting, Breton peasants harvesting buckwheat, reflects the interest of Gauguin and the Pont-Aven artists in the people of Brittany, whose *mores* they often depicted, relishing even the shapes of the headdress as in this painting. The pictorial unification of the peasant figures with the stacks of buckwheat, by means of line and the similarity of their forms conveys the oneness of primitive man with nature just as Gauguin does by different means in *Conversation in the Tropics*. The intense color of the painting is used as an equivalent or symbol of sunlight. This kind of symbolism is reminiscent of Baudelaire's theory of *correspondances* in which, for example, a vowel sound may stand for a color.

The decorative emphasis on the picture plane is as great as in the most spatially flattened works of Gauguin, such as *Still Life with Ham* (The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.). Bernard stresses line even more than Gauguin does. The heavy black outline is paralleled in many places by a faint bluish "shadow". At the top right corner, the Art Nouveau-like curves of the tree silhouette provide a decorative framing.



ÉMILE BERNARD 1868-1941

BUCKWHEAT. 1888. Oil on canvas, 28¼ x 35½".

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Josefowitz, Switzerland.

SÉRUSIER

The circle of artists around Gauguin in Brittany included Paul Sérusier whose enthusiasm for Gauguin's painting led him in 1888 to form a new group in Paris called the "Nabis". The name means "prophets" in Hebrew, and they considered themselves the prophets of a new art whose Messiah was Gauguin. Among the group were Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Jan Verkade and later Aristide Maillol (who was a painter and tapestry designer at that time). Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard were also members, although less zealous admirers of Gauguin. For the next decade, they all adopted Gauguin's decorative style in individual ways. The term "prophet" suggests the mystical overtones of the group. For some, Gauguin's Symbolist ideas became mixed with an explicit preoccupation with Catholicism and other religions, theosophy and numerology. In this realm however Bonnard, Vuillard and Maillol did not share their friends' enthusiasm.

Paul Sérusier himself, the only member of the Nabi group to know Gauguin well, combined a propensity for mysticism with a desire to systematize the words and practices of Gauguin, who had "awakened" him from academic painting. In his art and later also in his teaching at the Académie Ranson, founded in 1903 by his fellow Nabi, he expounded style, by which he meant the decorative elements of art, as the vehicle of universal meaning. He explained his theory in his book

ABC de la peinture, first published in 1921. In it he stated that absolute beauty would be accessible only to perfect beings; the imperfect beings that we are can aspire to beauty only through style. There exists, he continued, a style or language made up of preferred forms belonging to the individual artist. A time or race also has its style, and most important of all is style as a language common to all people. This universal style, in which all true works of art participate, is inherent in all men, but best exemplified by primitive peoples. Others have lost this sense through bad education, presumably because they are taught to call appearances reality, whereas the art of primitive people deals with schematized mental images. Once lost, the universal style can be regained only through abstraction, generalization and mathematics. For this reason his book then took up in detail the significance of numbers, proportions and geometric figures, and the results of his research on color.

Sérusier went beyond Gauguin's position in a sense. He rejected natural appearances as the basis of painting to a greater extent than Gauguin had. Painting in front of the subject would, he believed, disturb the mental image on which the painting should be based. His technical research on proportion, color and line is more allied with the Neo-Impressionists' scientific approach than with Gauguin's intuitive method.

In *Breton Women on the Coast*, 1892, the decorative style is seen in its more sober, strictly disciplined aspect. The brightness of the orange and yellow is balanced by dark blue and black, and the number of important colors is restricted. Curvilinear line is preserved as the sharp edge of objects rather than as outline. The liveliest shapes—such as the seashells and the abstract patterns in the rock—are held back from visual prominence by their dark colors. The flatness of the color planes is complete except in the faces.

The Breton peasants constituted one of Sérusier's main subjects, with their timeless costumes removed from changing contemporary fashion. He spent a part of every year in Brittany. Because of the decisive meeting with Gauguin there, he considered Brittany the land of his spiritual birth, and only there, he said, could he feel "the preoccupation with the eternal".

Three women, the sky, water, beach, a rocky eminence and two large seashells in the foreground—the very simplicity suggests the elemental forces of air, earth and water. The still ocean and the sunset casting an orange glow on the beach give a sense of peace, and the rocks seem to be in place for eternity.

These effects are not achieved simply by rendering the appearance of beach, rock and water: as Sérusier intended, the meaning is dependent on the formal qualities of the work. The firm structure and balance of the composition are important in this regard, with the clear horizon line (not seen in Gauguin's and Bernard's works discussed here) and the three long gently curved lines indicating the terrain of the beach, each slanted further from the horizontal than the one above it. Sérusier considered straight lines to belong to the realm of the spirit since they do not exist in nature (the earth and its oceans being curved) and called the horizontal line the symbol of equilibrium of inanimate objects.



PAUL SÉRUSIER 1864-1927

BRETON WOMEN ON THE COAST. 1892. Oil on board, 20 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 26".

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Arthur G. Altschul, New York.

GAUGUIN'S FURTHER INFLUENCE

Rose-Carol Washton

MATISSE

Between the departure of Gauguin for Tahiti in 1891 and the Salon d'Automne of 1905, the Nabis had constituted the principal avant-garde in Paris. At the Salon d'Automne, a new group led by Henri Matisse, who were soon to be called *Fauves* (Wild Beasts), challenged the hegemony of Gauguin and of his Nabis followers. While the critics raged, calling the newcomers "maniacs" and their art "a bad joke", the older artists recognized that a new force stood in their midst. The Nabi theoretician and painter Maurice Denis, for example, called the school of Henri Matisse "the most alive, the newest, the most debated" (21). At the same time, Denis withheld complete approval. Feeling his prestige and that of his artistic generation threatened, Denis was unable to realize that Matisse was actually painting according to his own theories and those of Gauguin.

Similar to Gauguin and the Nabis painters, Matisse was not interested in reproducing nature but in representing feelings through the evocative use of color and line. If he were to paint an autumn landscape, for example, he would not, he wrote, try "to remember what colors suit this season" but would "be inspired only by the sensation" (22) that the season gave to him personally. Matisse did not, however, follow Gauguin's interest in Symbolist theory nor Sérusier's inclinations toward Theosophy. Instead of an occult or religious subject matter, Matisse chose to base his paintings on the human figure or landscape and to express the feelings these simple subjects evoked in him.

Despite Denis' criticisms, Matisse actually followed Denis' admonition to objectify the subjective. In an essay, "The Influence of Paul Gauguin", written in 1903, Denis had stated that he and his fellow Nabis were completing the instructions of Gauguin by adding the idea of "objective deformation" to Gauguin's theory of equivalents. Denis emphasized

that feelings should be transformed not only in terms of the emotion but with a regard for "the eternal laws of beauty" (23). A few years later, he further explained that "from the objective point of view, the decorative, esthetic and rational composition would become the counterpoint, the necessary corrective of the theory of equivalents . . . objective deformation would oblige all artists to transpose everything in terms of the beautiful" (24). In Matisse's famous essay, "Notes of a Painter", written in 1908, the voice of Denis is clearly heard.

Expression to my way of thinking does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. The place occupied by figures or objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything plays a part. Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at the painter's disposal for the expression of his feeling. . . . A work of art must be harmonious in its entirety (25).

In Matisse's Fauve paintings, the decorative arrangement of the surface pattern is used to counterbalance the subjectivity of the intense color areas.

It was not Denis' paintings, however, but those of Gauguin which marked the turning point of Matisse's career. Prior to his Fauve developments, Matisse had explored most of the avant-garde possibilities. Born in 1869, he was destined for an honorable career as an academic painter, but in the summer of 1896 a trip to Brittany had led him to discover Impressionism. There he lightened his palette, simplified his drawings, and abandoned the academy forever. By 1899 he was so captivated by the works of Cézanne and Gauguin that he exchanged his own works through the art dealer Vollard for a small Cézanne *Bather* and for Gauguin's *Head of a Young Man*. Evidence of Gauguin's influence can be seen in *The Seine* of 1900-01 (Collection Wright Saltus Ludington, Santa

Barbara, California) where all traces of Impressionism have been rejected in favor of the Gauguinesque broad flat color areas. But it was not until the summer of 1905 after thoroughly exploring first Cézanne and then Signac's Neo-Impressionism that Matisse returned to the lessons of Gauguin. During that summer Maillol, who was associated with the Nabis, had taken Matisse and his friend Derain to see the collection of late Gauguins owned by the painter Georges-Daniel de Monfried, Gauguin's correspondent.

In the progressive sketches for Matisse's *The Joy of Life* (Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania), the transition from the broken color areas of the Neo-Impressionists to the large flat bands of color of the final 1906 version seemed so influenced by Gauguin that Signac disparagingly wrote of the completed painting:

Upon a canvas of two and a half meters he has surrounded some strange characters with a line as thick as your thumb: then he has covered the whole thing with flat well-defined tints which however pure seem disgusting... It evokes the worst Ranson (of the 'Nabi' period), the most detestable 'cloisonnismes de feu Augustin' (26). [Gauguin, Bernard, Louis Anquetin]

The Joy of Life is more of a departure from conventional representation than anything Gauguin had painted. Compared to Gauguin's symbolic painting, *The Loss of Virginity* (Collection Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., New York), where some modeling is still retained in the young girl and the fox, the curved arabesques of the nudes in *The Joy of Life* seem quite abstracted and two-dimensional. Matisse later wrote that his use of large flat color areas achieved a more direct and expressive feeling and at the same time a more tranquil and harmonious effect: "I painted flat, seeking to obtain my quality through an accord of all the flat color. I attempted to replace the vibrato by a more expressive, more direct accord, whose simplicity and sincerity would give a more tranquil surface" (27).

Matisse's continued interest in the reality of the picture plane is reflected in *Seated Odalisque* of 1928. Although the large unbroken color areas of the earlier Fauve works have been replaced by smaller colored patterns, the decorative use of line and color to focus attention on the surface of the painting remains the same.

While the position in which the figure is placed suggests a woman sitting on a raised platform in the corner of a highly ornate room, the decorative patterns which cover the canvas tend to negate this illusion of spatial depth. The criss-crossed lines of the pink floor pattern continue onto the sides of the platform, making no concession to depth perspective. Only a yellow stripe serves to separate the two areas. At the same time, the large red, yellow, and black curved motifs of the brown background wall tend to bring this traditionally recessive area forward. The use of intense color — pink and yellow, aqua and purple, orange and brown — to cover the entire composition also makes each section of the painting come forward at once.

Only the angle of the woman, the modeling of her skirt and legs serves as a reminder of the three-dimensional spatial tradition. But even here, Matisse has worked to integrate the woman with the rest of the painting. While the curves of the background motif repeat the undulating lines of the woman's hair, the folds of her skirt recall the panels of the drapery. Essentially, the painting is a still life and the odalisque, clothed in Near Eastern costume, is used as a formal device to unify the painting.

A comparison of *Seated Odalisque* with Gauguin's *Siesta* reveals how much more disruptive of traditional notions of space Matisse can be. Although the parallel lines of the floor boards in *Siesta* converge unrealistically, the figures are clearly sitting in a shallow space. In the *Seated Odalisque*, on the other hand, the picture plane is a strong element in an ambiguously articulated space. Matisse has taken a further step in following Maurice Denis' famous proclamation of 1890: "Remember that a picture before being a battle horse or a nude, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." (28) In Matisse's terms, the decorative style becomes a means of resolving the inherent two-dimensional quality of the canvas with the illusionistic tradition of Western painting.



HENRI MATISSE 1869-1954

SEATED ODALISQUE. 1928. Oil on canvas, 21⁵/₈ x 15".

Collection The Baltimore Museum of Art, Cone Collection.

KANDINSKY

Vasily Kandinsky, writing from Munich in 1910 to the Russian Symbolist magazine, *Apollon*, paid tribute to the new French artists, citing "Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, after them above all Matisse and Picasso. One grew out of the other." (29) While calling attention to Gauguin's "painterly genius", the Russian born painter stressed weaknesses in Gauguin's work, criticizing him for too much concern with "the appearance of nature." For this leader of Munich's avant-garde, the founder of the New Artists' Association of 1909 and the Blue Rider group of 1911 and 1912, Matisse was the greatest living French artist.

Kandinsky seemed unaware of Gauguin's contribution to his own development. This is understandable perhaps, since Gauguin's influence had been so widely disseminated and had come to Kandinsky indirectly from other sources—from the Art Nouveau phase of the Nabis and the Gauguin-inspired Fauvism of Matisse. Nonetheless, the parallels between Kandinsky and Gauguin are striking. Both considered the artist to have a special link with the divine—with the spiritual forces that lie behind the world of appearances. Although sharing Gauguin's intense dislike for bourgeois philistines, Kandinsky did not flee Europe for a primitive culture but, influenced by theosophical ideas, he believed he could directly influence the spiritual climate of mankind through a revolution in the arts. In 1911 he and Franz Marc established the Blue Rider group and published in 1912 the *Blue Rider Almanac*, hoping "to create through their work a symbol for their time which will belong upon the altar of the coming spiritual religion." (30)

Equating materialism in thinking with naturalism in painting, Kandinsky envisioned an age in which colors and forms unconnected with the delineation of an object would transmit thought. But, although Kandinsky's belief in the communicative power of color alone went far beyond Gauguin's rudimentary color symbolism, he did not consider the climate at the time of the Blue Rider ready for purely abstract painting. Instead Kandinsky recommended as a third force in the creation of a painting the use of the object, stripped of its direct connection with the physical. Encouraged by the aesthetic theories of the Symbolist dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck, Kandinsky expressed in his famous essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1912, the belief that objects, like words, could have an evocative effect other than a directly associative one. As early as 1909, Kandinsky had begun to veil, but not completely obscure, the physical presence of his

motifs beneath layers of color and ambiguous shapes. By 1911, he had further stripped his motifs into linear hieroglyphs. Even in 1913, when Kandinsky felt he was on the threshold of purely abstract art, he did not entirely abandon the concept of the hidden object.

Born in 1866, Kandinsky left a promising legal career to become a painter, and in 1896 arrived in Munich, the city then considered by the Russians as the cultural center of the West. By 1900 he had come under the influence of the Jugendstil, the German counterpart of that international reaction against naturalism and academic realism, known as Art Nouveau in France. As president of a Jugendstil exhibition group—the Phalanx—he was in contact with all sections of this movement and in 1903 exhibited the works of Denis, Vallotton, Bonnard and Vuillard whose flatly patterned areas of delicate color are reflected in Kandinsky's own prints such as *Summer* and *Moonrise*. Kandinsky's Jugendstil works, with their sharp deviations from the direct observation of nature represent the first step toward his more abstracted paintings.

In 1906 Kandinsky left Munich for Paris with his former student and now constant companion Gabriele Münter. The year spent in Sèvres, an outlying district of Paris, was crucial for Kandinsky's development. There he was able to see firsthand the paintings of Matisse and the other Fauves and to come more closely in contact with the theories and paintings of Denis. By 1908 Kandinsky resettled in Munich and became associated with Alexej Jawlensky, whose own connections with the former Nabi, Jan Verkade, in addition to Matisse, reinforced the ideas Kandinsky had been exposed to in Paris. Kandinsky's paintings from 1908-1910, many from the summers spent together with Jawlensky, Münter and Marianne von Werefkin in Murnau, a small town in the Bavarian Alps, represent another step toward the semi-abstract works of 1911 and 1912. The Fauve influenced *Study for Landscape with Tower*, of 1908 (Collection The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), with its broad areas of bright blue and green, its free strokes of the brush, leads directly to Kandinsky's later use of pure color areas unconnected to objects. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky acknowledged Matisse's experiments in color by writing, "He [Matisse] 'paints pictures' and in these 'pictures'...endeavors to render the divine. To attain this end he requires nothing but the subject to be painted...and means that belong to painting alone, color and form."(31)

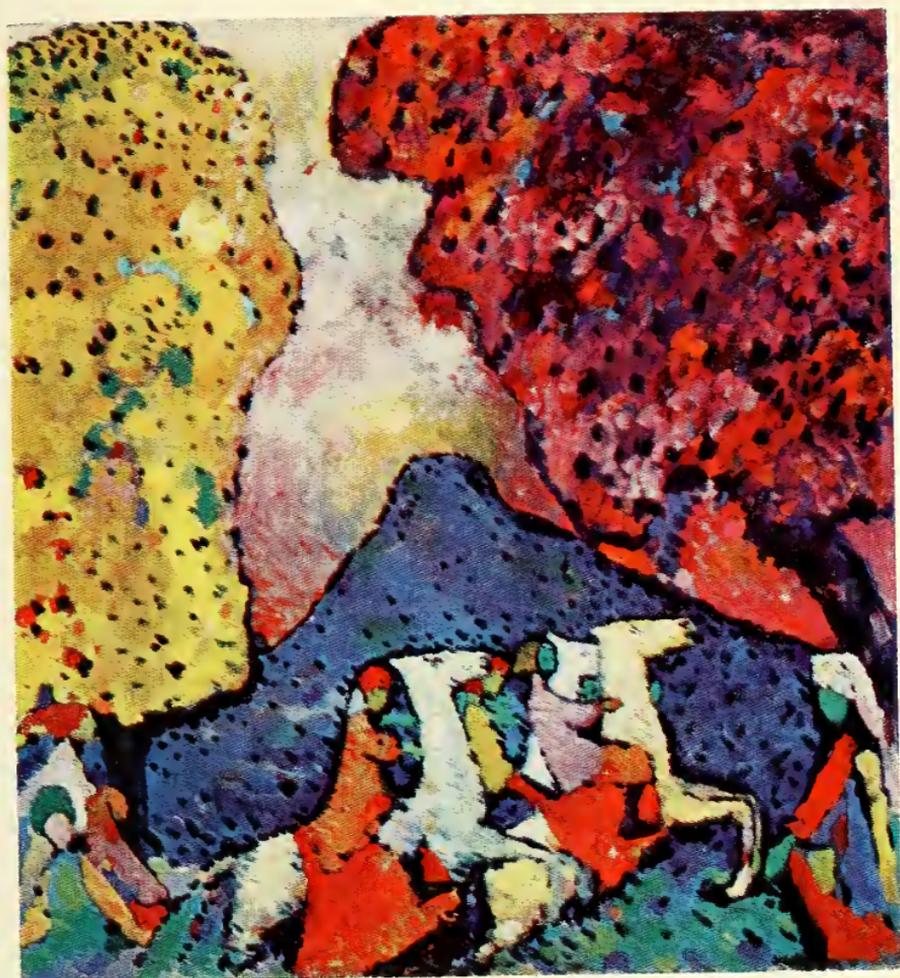
Blue Mountain, completed upon Kandinsky's return to Munich in 1908, is one of his first works to show the influence of Matisse. The large bright areas of primary color—red, blue, and yellow—distinctly recall the vivid palette of the Matisse paintings in the Salon d'Automne of 1906.

The folkloristic treatment of the three horses and riders and the four women in Russian costume recalls not Matisse however but Gauguin who shared with the Nabis an interest in the peasant art of Brittany. While Kandinsky was sympathetic to the primitive, writing, "like ourselves, these pure artists sought to express only inner and essential feelings in their works." (32) he considered those paintings derivative which were too closely based on the art of another age. In his search for an alternative to naturalism, he found Gauguin's and Sérusier's adaptation of the primitive no more satisfactory than his own earlier Jugendstil explorations of fairy tale and folk art. Discussing the dangers of using highly stylized forms to replace naturalistic ones, Kandinsky explained:

Unnaturalistic objects may have a 'literary' appeal in a picture; the composition may have the effect of a fairy tale. The spectator is in an atmosphere which does not disturb him because he accepts it as imaginary; he tries to follow the 'story', remaining relatively indifferent to the various effects of color; . . . We must find, therefore a form which excludes a fairy-tale effect and which does not hinder pure color action. To this end, form, movement, color, natural and imaginary objects must be divorced from any narrative intent (33).

In *Blue Mountain*, Kandinsky begins to move away from clearly defined, highly stylized forms, using equally intense colors for both foreground and background to flatten and consequently diminish the figurative aspect. He shapes the figures with a thick, broad brushstroke, not clearly distinguishing the human forms from the ground area. So ambiguously delineated are the three women on the left, one standing and two sitting, that the individual shapes do not immediately emerge.

In Kandinsky's works of 1909-1913, the motifs still clearly visible in *Blue Mountain*—the horses and riders, the women in folk dress, the mountain, the rounded trees on stem-like trunks—will reappear but in an entirely different order, much more obscured by the use of pure color and pure form. In this sense, *Blue Mountain* provides a key to many of Kandinsky's semi-abstract and abstract works.



VASILY KANDINSKY 1866-1944

BLUE MOUNTAIN, NO. 84. 1908. Oil on canvas, 42 x 38½".

Collection The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

JAWLENSKY

Kandinsky's friend and compatriot, Alexej Jawlensky, had a much closer contact with the circle of Gauguin and also with Matisse than did any other member of the New Artists' Association of Munich. Gabriele Münter wrote of Jawlensky's contact with French painters, "[He] had many friends in Paris and had spent, with Marianne de Werefkin, almost more time in France than in Munich. He was a great admirer of Matisse, of van Gogh, and especially of Gauguin." She added: "like many great painters of the School of Paris, he was a consummate craftsman and artist rather than theorist." (34)

Born in 1864, Jawlensky left Russia at the age of 32 accompanied by Marianne von Werefkin, with whom he had painted in St. Petersburg, and the young Helene Nesnakomoff, a ward of the von Werefkin family. Arriving in Munich in 1896, he soon met Kandinsky, but a close friendship did not develop until later.

In 1905, almost 14 years after Gauguin had left for Brittany, Jawlensky along with von Werefkin, visited Carantec, a village in the Breton province. From there he traveled to Paris and displayed, in the same Salon d'Automne of 1905 which brought Matisse to fame, his Breton paintings with their thickly painted but brilliantly colored Neo-Impressionist surfaces.

Jawlensky's first contact with a member of the circle of Gauguin took place, not in Paris, however, but in Munich, when in 1907 he was introduced to Jan Verkade, who had been called the "Nabi obeliscal" before his ordainment as a monk. Verkade later wrote of his initial visit to Jawlensky's studio: "I duly turned up, and received a most agreeable surprise upon entering the studio. . . . We soon became fast friends; and from that day on, I worked often in his atelier." (35)

Through Verkade, Jawlensky met the Polish painter Wladislaw Slewinsky, who had worked with Gauguin in Brittany. Slewinsky, who owned two Gauguin's — a self-portrait

and a Tahitian landscape, willingly discussed the theories of Pont-Aven with the Russian. During this time, perhaps on one of his trips to Paris, Jawlensky himself acquired a Gauguin gouache, *Négrerie Martinique* of 1890.

Whether as a result of his friendship with Verkade or through a direct absorption of Gauguin's work, Jawlensky's paintings began to reflect in 1907 a more decorative and symbolic arrangement of color and form. In *Yellow Sounds* (Collection Dr. Heinrich Hehman, Aachen) for example, the small Neo-Impressionist brushstrokes of earlier works have been replaced by large flat areas of even color. The curvilinear blue outline and the delicate shapes recall such paintings of Verkade as *Farmyard at le Pouldu* (Collection Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Josefowitz). At the same time, however, Jawlensky's use of primary colors applied in full intensity and his painterly treatment of the surface area suggest a knowledge of Matisse's work, whom Jawlensky is said to have met in 1905 and 1907. Eventually Matisse was to be the stronger force in the Russian's development.

The renewal of friendship with Kandinsky in 1908 appears to have been mutually profitable and for a few years the two men followed parallel developments in their explorations of color. Less theoretical by nature, Jawlensky did not involve himself until later with the semi-abstract and abstract experiments of his friend.

While Jawlensky reflects the influence of Matisse more strongly than the other members of the New Artists' Association, the group as a whole presents a strong link with the circle of Gauguin. The works of Münter, for example, often recall those of the Nabi, Charles Filiger, while the paintings of von Werefkin bring to mind Sérusier and Denis. Although the painters of the New Artists' Association have often been called the German Fauves, their philosophy as expressed in the following program note, probably written by both Jawlensky and Kandinsky, expresses a mysticism foreign to the French group: "Artists, besides receiving an impression from the external world—nature, collect an experience from the internal world, which should be expressed by artistic forms freed from all imitation. Then the striving after artistic synthesis will be reconciled with the artistically spiritual." (36)

Helene with Red Turban, a portrait done in 1910 of Helene Nesnakomoff, who eight years earlier had borne Jawlensky's only son and whom he was finally to marry in 1922, points to the strong influence of Matisse. The painting is very likely based on Matisse's *Red Madras Headdress* of 1907-1908 (Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania), a portrait of the artist's wife wearing a red turban. If Jawlensky had not seen the painting when he visited the Frenchman's studio in 1907, he might very well have discovered it in the exhibition of Matisse's works at Paul Cassirer's Berlin gallery during the winter of 1908.

A comparison of the two works forces one to assume that Jawlensky was familiar with *Red Madras*. Helene is placed in the almost identical three-quarter pose of Mme. Matisse. The shoulders are curved in a similar manner — with her right higher than the left. While the position of the hands is reversed, their elegant lines are retained. The repetition of Helene's pointed oval face in the deep V of the dress also appears in the portrait of Mme. Matisse. The Frenchman's choice of bright red and yellow colors is maintained in the turban although the pattern is changed from madras to paisley.

More than just borrowing, however, Jawlensky learned from Matisse to simplify form into a strong monumental image. By eliminating unnecessary detail and juxtaposing large areas of contrasting color, Jawlensky has flattened the figure and brought it into line with the picture plane. Only Helene's head with the magnificent turban is drawn to give an illusion of space, but this is then offset by the flat ornamental pattern of the arm rest.

Despite the many similarities, the more emotional approach of Jawlensky is apparent in the angular dislocations of the body and the meditative appearance of Helene's face. The closing of the eyes and the slight tilting of the head gives to this painting a mystical quality not found in the portrait of Mme. Matisse. Comparing *Helene* with Matisse's *Girl with Green Eyes* of 1909, one feels that Matisse is more interested in the problem of relating figure to ground than in the personality of the sitter. For Jawlensky the resolution of spatial illusion with the two-dimensional surface of the painting is secondary to the problem of personal expression. Rather than explore the formal nature of a painting, Jawlensky used the decorative style to clothe his subjective interpretation of the world.



ALEXEJ JAWLENSKY 1864-1941

HELENE WITH RED TURBAN. 1910. Oil on board, 36½ x 31¼".

Collection The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

FOOTNOTES

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