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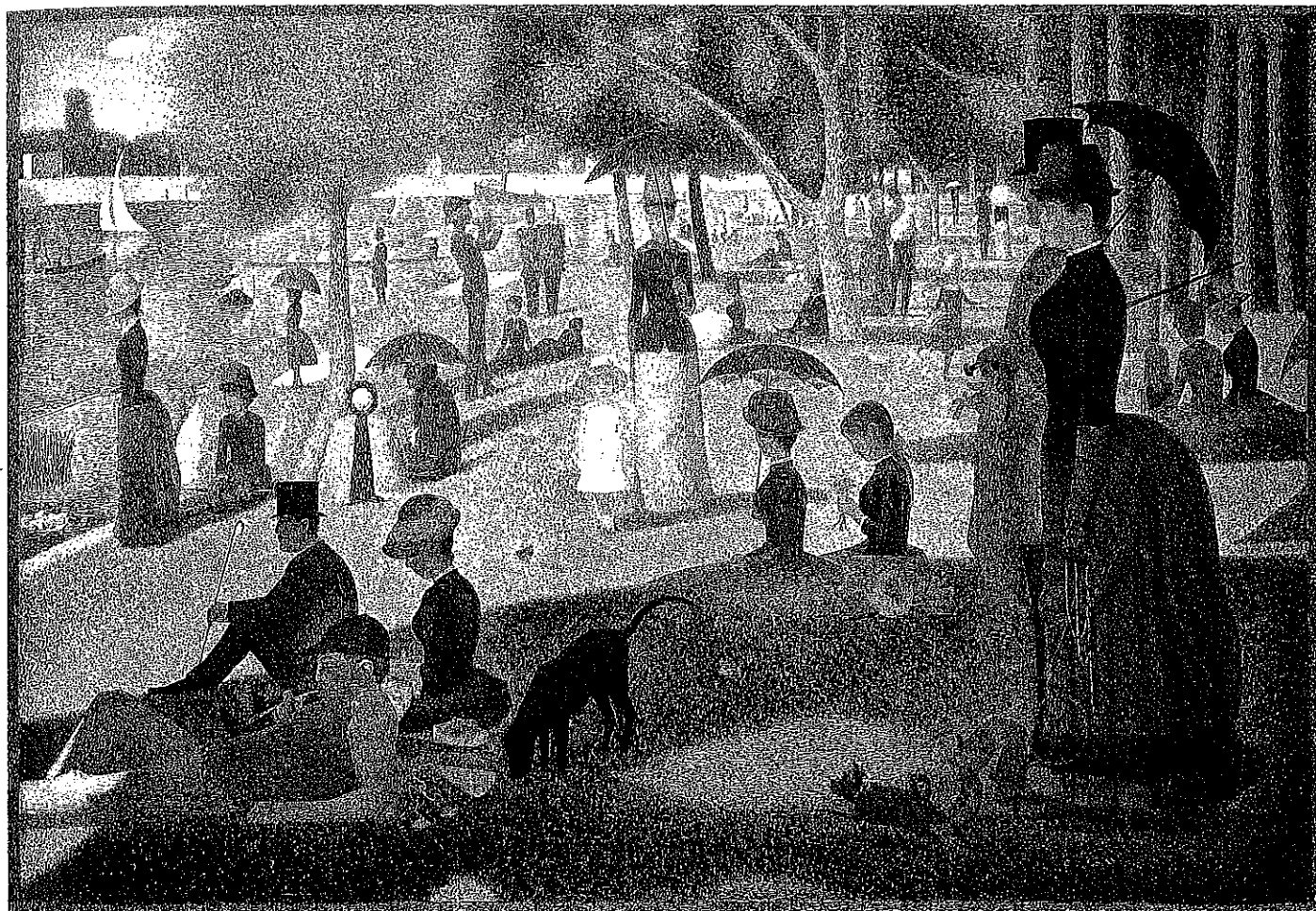
Post-Impressionism

So various and distinctive were the reactions against the largely sensory nature and supposed formlessness of Impressionism that the English critic Roger Fry, who was among the first to take a comprehensive look at these developments, could do no better than sum them up, in 1910, with the vague designation “Post-Impressionism.” The inadequacy of the term is borne out by the fact that, unlike Impressionism, it did not become widely used until a quarter-century after the first appearance of the artistic phenomena it purported to describe. Among other things, it implies that Impressionism was itself a homogeneous style, when in fact it covered a highly diverse range of artistic sensibilities. In reality, the Post-Impressionists were schooled in Impressionism and many of them continued to respect its exponents and share much of their outlook. Cézanne, for example, who could not abide the paintings of Paul Gauguin, always admired the work of Monet. Gauguin, on the other hand, learned to paint in part from the Impressionist Pissarro and, like most of those in his circle, came to regard Cézanne as an almost legendary figure, even collecting his paintings. Yet both artists are considered key Post-Impressionists. Despite its shortcomings as a term, Post-Impressionism has become a convenient label for an innovative group of artists working in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And it does highlight the one element that Seurat, Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh all had in common—their determination to move beyond what they regarded as the relatively passive rendering of perceptual experience practiced by the Impressionists and to give expression to ideas and emotions.

By the 1880s numerous schisms and ideological differences had surfaced within the Impressionist ranks as the artists set about organizing their independent exhibitions. Renoir, Monet, and Degas, as we have seen, were all beginning to reconsider their painting in the light of their own altered consciousness. The Impressionists were far from mindless or uncritical portrayals of bourgeois ease and pastoral pleasures, as they have sometimes been called; these artists were all vibrantly in tune with their times and

capable of highly subjective interpretations of their world. By the 1880s, that world had begun to change rapidly in ways that could only distress a Europe imbued with the nineteenth-century positivist belief in ever-accelerating progress driven by science and industry. Change was rapid indeed at this time, but not always progressive. As industrial waste combined with expanding commerce to destroy the unspoiled rivers and meadows so often painted by Monet, the master withdrew ever deeper into his “harem of flowers” at Giverny, a “natural” world of his own creation that was inextricably bound up with his late painting. As rising socioeconomic expectations throughout industrialized Europe met with conservative backlash, the clash of ideologies brought anarchist violence. As scientists broke down the theories of classical science, a new physics, chemistry, and psychology emerged. The radical philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of God and sharply criticized the moral outlook associated with traditional religion. This in turn provoked new debates concerning the role of religion and religion-inspired morality. The most advanced artists of the period found little to satisfy their needs in the optimistic utilitarianism that had dominated Western civilization since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Gradually, therefore, they abandoned the Realist tradition of Daumier, Courbet, and Manet (see chapter 2) that had opened such a rich vein of aesthetic exploration, culminating in the Impressionism of the 1870s. Instead, they sought to discover, or recover, a new and more complete reality, one that would encompass the inner world of mind and spirit as well as the outer world of physical substance and sensation.

Inevitably, this produced paintings that seemed even more shocking than Impressionism in their violation of both academic principles and the polished illusionism desired by eyes now thoroughly under the spell of photography. And so, just as Monet and Renoir were beginning to enjoy a measure of critical and financial success, the emerging painters who inspired the term Post-Impressionist reopened the gap—wider now than ever before—that



3.1 Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884–86. Oil on canvas, 6'9½" × 10'1¼" (2.1 × 3.1 m). The Art Institute of Chicago.

separated the world of avant-garde art from that of society at large. Whatever their differences, the Post-Impressionists all brought heightened tension and excitement to art by reweighting their values in favor of the ideal or romantic over the real, of symbol over sight, of the conceptual over the perceptual. Less and less were perception and its translation into art seen as an end unto themselves; rather, they became a means toward the knowledge of form in the service of expressive content. In arriving at the antinaturalism that followed, artists depended upon and counterbalanced the dualities of mind and spirit, thought and emotion.

The Poetic Science of Color: Seurat and the Neo-Impressionists

Trained in the academic tradition of the Paris *École des Beaux-Arts*, Georges Seurat (1859–91) was a devotee of classical Greek sculpture and of such classical masters as Piero della Francesca (see fig. 1.3), Poussin, and Ingres (see fig. 1.13). He also studied the drawings of Hans Holbein, Rembrandt, and Millet, and learned principles of mural design from the academic Symbolist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (see fig. 3.13). He early became fascinated by theories and principles of color organization, which he studied in the writings and paintings of Delacroix, the texts

of the critics Charles Blanc and David Sutter, and the scientific treatises of Michel-Eugène Chevreul, Ogden Rood, and Charles Henry. These researches in optics, aesthetics, and color theory studied, among other phenomena, the ways in which colors affect one another when placed side by side. According to Chevreul, for example, each color will impose its own complementary on its neighbor: if red is placed next to blue, the red will cast a green tint on the blue, altering it to a greenish blue, while the blue imposes a pale orange on the red. Although the rational, scientific basis for such theories appealed to Seurat, he was no cold, methodical theorist. His highly personal form of expression evolved through careful experiments with his craft. Working with his younger friend Paul Signac he sought to combine the color experiments of the Impressionists with the classical structure inherited from the Renaissance, employing the latest concepts of pictorial space, traditional illusionistic perspective depth, and recent scientific discoveries in the perception of color and light.

It is astonishing that Seurat produced such a body of masterpieces in so short a life (he died at thirty-one in a diphtheria epidemic). His greatest work, and one of the landmarks of modern art, is *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (fig. 3.1). Known as *La Grande Jatte*, it was the most notorious painting shown in the last

of the eight Impressionist exhibitions, in 1886. Seurat worked for over a year on this monumental painting, preparing it with twenty-seven preliminary drawings (fig. 3.2) and thirty color sketches. Seurat's hauntingly beautiful conté crayon drawings reveal his interest in masters of black and white from Rembrandt to Goya. He avoided lines to define contours and depended instead on shading to achieve soft, penumbral effects. In the preparatory works for *La Grande Jatte*, ranging from studies of individual figures to oils that laid in most of the final composition, Seurat analyzed, in meticulous detail, every color relationship and every aspect of pictorial space. His unique color system was based on the Impressionists' intuitive realization that all nature was color, not neutral tone. But the Impressionist painters had generally made no organized, scientific effort to achieve their remarkable optical effects. Their technique involved the placement of pure, unblended colors in close conjunction on the canvas, which are actually perceived by the eye as glowing, vibrating patterns of mixed color. This effect appears in many paintings by Monet, as anyone realizes who has stood close to one of his works, first experiencing it simply as a pattern of discrete color strokes, and then moving gradually away from it to observe all the elements of the scene come into focus.

Building on Impressionism and scientific studies of optical phenomena, Seurat constructed his canvases with an overall pattern of small, dotlike brushstrokes of generally

complementary colors—red and green, violet and yellow, blue and orange—and with white. Various names have been given to Seurat's method, including Divisionism (Seurat's own term), Pointillism, and Neo-Impressionism. Despite their apparent uniformity overall, on close inspection the "dots" vary greatly in size and shape and are laid down over areas where color has been brushed in more broadly. The intricate mosaic produced by Seurat's painstaking technique is analogous to the actual medium of mosaic; its glowing depth of luminosity gives an added dimension to color experience. Unfortunately, some of the pigments he used were unstable, and in less than a decade oranges had turned to brown and brilliant emerald green had dulled to olive, reducing somewhat the original chromatic impact of the painting.

In *La Grande Jatte* Seurat began with a simple contemporary scene of middle-class Parisians relaxing along the banks of the Seine River. What drew him most strongly to the particular scene, perhaps, was the manner in which the figures could be arranged in diminishing perspective along the banks of the river, although delightful inconsistencies in scale abound throughout the composition. At this point in the picture's evolution the artist was concerned as much with the recreation of a fifteenth-century exercise in linear perspective as with the creation of a unifying pattern of surface color dots. Broad contrasting areas of shadow and light, each built of a thousand minute strokes of juxtaposed color-dot complementaries, carry the eye from the foreground into the beautifully realized background. Certainly, Seurat was here attempting to reconcile the classical tradition of Renaissance perspective painting with a modern interest in light, color, and pattern. The immense size of the canvas gives it something of the impact of a Renaissance fresco, and is especially dramatic since it is composed of brushstrokes smaller than a pea. The painting's scale also shows avant-garde art asserting its status relative to the academic tradition (and thus, paradoxically, developing a new "grand tradition" of its own).

More important in the painting than depth or surface pattern is the magical atmosphere that the artist was able to create from the abstract patterns of the figures. The art historian Meyer Schapiro notes that Seurat depicts "a society at rest and, in accord with his own art, it is a society that enjoys the world in pure contemplation and calm." Seurat's figures are like those of a mural by Piero della Francesca in their quality of mystery and of isolation. By placing the figures in strict profile or frontal views, he flattens their forms and endows them with the immobility of stage flats, producing a static atmosphere critics have often described as "Egyptian." In the accumulation of commonplace details, which are filled with amusing vignettes of social caricature, there is an effect of poetry that makes of the whole a profoundly moving experience. Seurat's paintings anticipate not only the abstraction of Piet Mondrian but also the strange Surrealist stillness and space of Giorgio de Chirico and René Magritte (see fig. 15.31). The most



3.2 Georges Seurat, *The Couple*, study for *La Grande Jatte*, 1884. Conté crayon on paper, 12¼ × 9¼" [31.1 × 23.5 cm]. The British Museum, London.



3.3 Georges Seurat, *Study for Le Chahut*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (55.6 × 46.7 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.

scientific and objective of all the painters of his time is, curiously, also one of the most poetic and mysterious.

In a preparatory oil for a later painting, such as the study for *Le Chahut* (fig. 3.3), the color dots are so large that the figures and their spatial environment are dissolved in color patterns that cling to the surface of the picture. The painting depicts a provocative and acrobatic dance, then popular in Parisian cafés, which Seurat beautifully orchestrates into a series of decorative rhythms, giving form to a then-current theory that ascending lines induce feelings of gaiety in the viewer. For his imagery Seurat was clearly inspired by the colorful posters that were placed around Paris to advertise the dance halls. Around the study for *Le Chahut* he painted a border of multicolored strokes (as he had for *La*

3.4 Paul Signac, *Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (73.5 × 92.5 cm). Private collection.



Grande Jatte) and he probably painted the wooden frame around the work as well. Van Gogh and Gauguin also expressed interest in the way their works were framed, preferring solutions much simpler than the ornate, gilded frames usually placed on their paintings.

Seurat's chief colleague and disciple was **Paul Signac** (1863–1935), who strictly followed the precepts of Neo-Impressionism in his landscapes and portraits. Like his colleagues, Signac regarded his revolutionary artistic style as a form of expression parallel to his radical political anarchism. This movement was closely associated with other Neo-Impressionists in France and Belgium who believed that only through absolute creative freedom could art help to bring about social change. In his later, highly coloristic seascapes, Signac provided a transition between Neo-Impressionism and the Fauvism of Henri Matisse and his followers (see chapter 7). And through his book, *D'Éugène Delacroix au Néo-impressionisme*, he was also the chief propagandist and historian of the movement. His portrait of the critic Félix Fénéon (fig. 3.4), who had been the first to use the term Neo-Impressionism, is a fascinating example of the decorative formalism that the artists around Seurat favored. The painting, with its spectacular spiral background inspired by patterns Signac had found in a Japanese print, contains private references to the critic's ideas and to those of the color theorist Charles Henry, with which Signac was very familiar.

In the hands of other painters, Seurat's Neo-Impressionist technique too often declined into a decorative formula for use in narrative exposition. This was also the fate of Impressionism; as it gradually became accepted and then, much later, immensely popular throughout the world, its color and light, quotidian subjects, radical

cropping, and photographic immediacy—initially so shocking—were all too quickly discovered to be charming, endearing, and capable of every kind of vulgarization. Seurat's Neo-Impressionism, on the other hand, affected not only Fauvism and certain aspects of Cubism in the early twentieth century, but also some Art Nouveau painters and designers.

Form and Nature: Paul Cézanne

Of all the nineteenth-century painters who might be considered prophets of twentieth-century experiment, the most significant was **Paul Cézanne** (1839–1906). Cézanne struggled throughout his life to express in paint his ideas about the nature of art, ideas that were among the most revolutionary in the history of art. Son of a well-to-do merchant turned banker in Aix-en-Provence in southern France, he had to resist parental disapproval to embark on his career, but once having won the battle, unlike Monet or Gauguin, he did not need to struggle for mere financial survival. As we view the splendid control and serenity of his mature paintings (two qualities that, in particular, became touchstones for modernist art), it is difficult to realize that he was an isolated, socially awkward man of a sometimes violent disposition. This aspect of his character is evident in some of his early mythological figure scenes, which were baroque in their movement and excitement. At the same time he was a serious student of the art of the past, who studied the masters in the Louvre, from Paolo Veronese to Poussin to Delacroix.

Early Career and Relation to Impressionism

Cézanne's unusual combination of logic and emotion, of reason and unreason, represented the synthesis that he sought in his paintings. Outside of Degas, the Impressionists in the 1870s largely abandoned traditional drawing in an effort to communicate a key visual phenomenon—that objects in nature are not seen as separated from one another by defined contours. In their desire to realize the observed world through color, with both the objects themselves and the spaces between them rendered in terms of color intervals, they tended to destroy objects as three-dimensional entities existing in three-dimensional space. Instead they recreated solids and voids as color shapes functioning within a limited depth. Because it did not make a clear distinction between three-dimensional mass (objects) and three-dimensional depth (spaces), Impressionism was criticized as formless and insubstantial. Even Renoir felt compelled to restudy the drawing of the Renaissance in order to recapture some of that “form” which Impressionism was said to have lost. And Seurat, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, each in his own way, consciously or unconsciously, was seeking a kind of expression based on, but different from, that of the Impressionists.

Certainly, Cézanne's conviction that Impressionism ignored qualities of Western painting that had been

important since the Renaissance prompted his oft-quoted (and frequently misunderstood) remark that he wanted to “make of Impressionism something solid like the art of the museums.” By this he clearly did not mean to imitate the old masters. He realized, quite correctly, that artists like Veronese or Poussin had created in their paintings a world that was similar to but quite distinct from the world in which they lived—that painting, resulting from the artist's various experience, created a separate reality in itself. It was this kind of reality, the reality of the painting that was neither a direct reflection of life, like a photograph, nor a completely separate entity, which Cézanne sought in his own work. And he felt progressively that his sources must be nature and the objects of the world in which he lived, rather than stories or myths from the past. For this reason he expressed his desire “to do Poussin over again from nature.”

Cézanne arrived at his mature position only after long and painful thought, study, and struggle with his medium. Late in his life, the theoretical position that he tried to express in his idiosyncratic language was probably achieved more through the discoveries he made painting from nature than through his studies in museums. In the art of the museum he found corroboration of what he already instinctively knew. In fact, the art of his mature landscapes is in many ways anticipated by such an early work as *Uncle Dominic as a Monk*, which depicts his mother's brother in the white habit of the Dominican order. The sources in Manet and Courbet are evident, but the personality revealed by the portrait—the forceful temperament of the artist himself—is different from that in the work of either predecessor. Modeled out from the blue-gray ground in sculptured paint laid on in heavy strokes with the palette knife, the painting is not so much a specific portrait as a study of passion held in restraint. It exemplifies Cézanne's use of the matrix of paint to create a unified pictorial structure, a characteristic of all his work.

Throughout the 1860s, Cézanne exorcised his own inner conflict in scenes of murder and rape and, around 1870, he attempted his own *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in a strange, heavy-handed variant on Manet's painting. After his exposure to the Impressionists, he returned to the violence of these essays in his *Battle of Love* (fig. 3.5), a curious recasting of the classic theme of the bacchanal. Here he has moved away from the somber tonality and sculptural modeling of the 1860s into an approximation of the light blue, green, and white of the Impressionists. Nevertheless, this painting is remote from Impressionism in its subject and effect. The artist subdues his greens with grays and blacks, and expresses an obsession with the sexual ferocity he is portraying that is notably different from the stately bacchanals of Titian and even more intense than the comparable scenes of Rubens. At this stage he is still exploring the problem of integrating figures or objects and surrounding space. The figures are clearly outlined, and thus exist sculpturally in space. However, their broken contours,



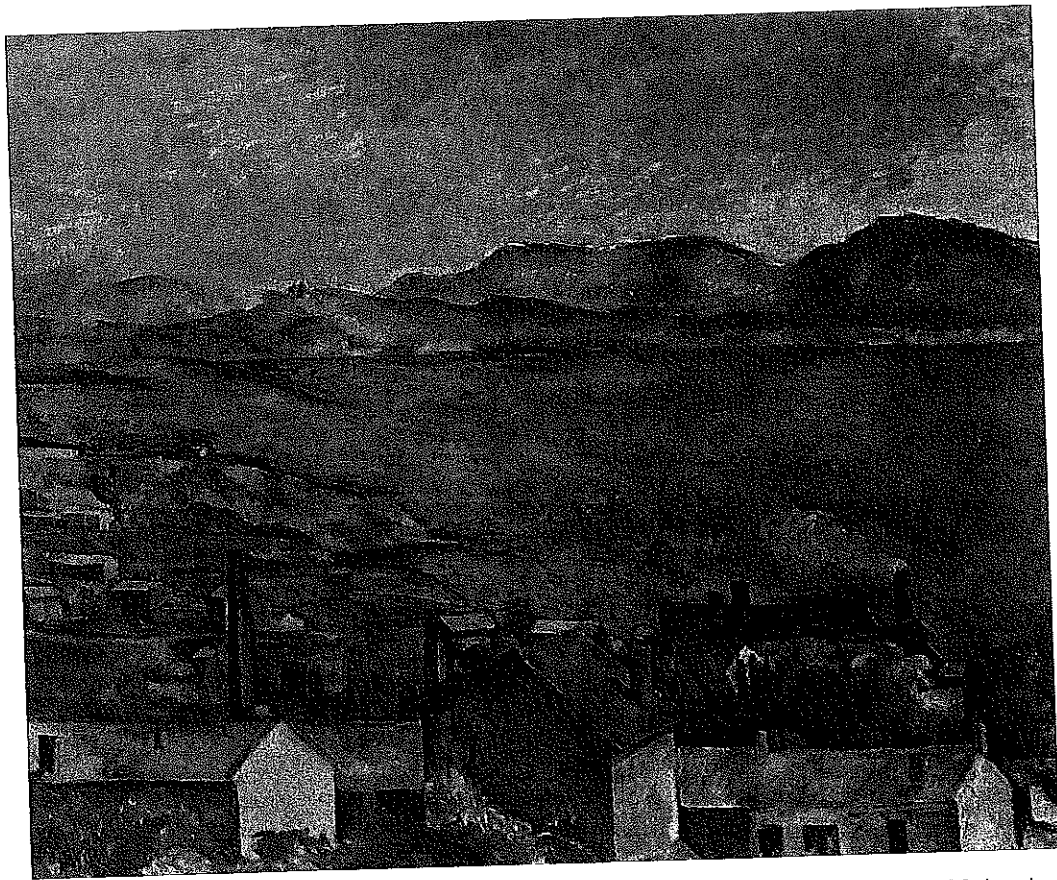
3.5 Paul Cézanne, *Battle of Love*, c. 1880. Oil on canvas, 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (37.8 × 46.2 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

sometimes seemingly independent of the cream-color area of their flesh, begin to dissolve solids and integrate figures with the shaped clouds that, in an advancing background, reiterate the carnal struggles of the bacchanal.

In the 1880s all of Cézanne's ideas of nature and painting came into focus in a magnificent series of landscapes, still lifes, and portraits. During most of this period he was living at Aix, largely isolated from the Parisian art world. *The Bay from L'Estaque* (fig. 3.6) is today so familiar from countless reproductions that it is difficult to realize how revolutionary it was at the time. Viewed from the hills above the red-tiled houses of the village of L'Estaque and looking toward the Bay of Marseilles, the scene does not recede into a perspective of infinity in the Renaissance or Baroque manner. Buildings in the foreground are massed close to the spectator and presented as simplified cubes with the side elevation brightly lit. They assert their fluctuating identity, both as frontal color shapes parallel to the picture plane and as the walls of buildings at right angles to it. The buildings and intervening trees are composed in ocher, yellow, orange-red, and green, with little

differentiation as objects recede from the eye. Cézanne once explained to a friend that sunlight cannot be "reproduced," but that it must be "represented" by some other means. That means was color. He wished to recreate nature with color, feeling that drawing was a consequence of the correct use of color. In *The Bay from L'Estaque*, contours are the meeting of two areas of color. Since these colors vary substantially in value contrasts or in hue, their edges are perfectly defined. However, the nature of the definition tends to allow color planes to slide or "pass" into one another, thus to join and unify surface and depth, rather than to separate them in the manner of traditional outline drawing. The composition of this painting reveals Cézanne's intuitive realization that the eye takes in a scene both consecutively and simultaneously, with profound implications for construction of the painting and for the future of modern painting.

The middle distance of *The Bay from L'Estaque* is the bay itself, an intense area of dense but varied blue stretching from one side of the canvas to the other and built up of meticulously blended brushstrokes. Behind this is the



3.6 Paul Cézanne, *The Bay from L'Estaque*, c. 1885. Oil on canvas, 31½ × 39¾" [80 × 100.6 cm]. The Art Institute of Chicago.

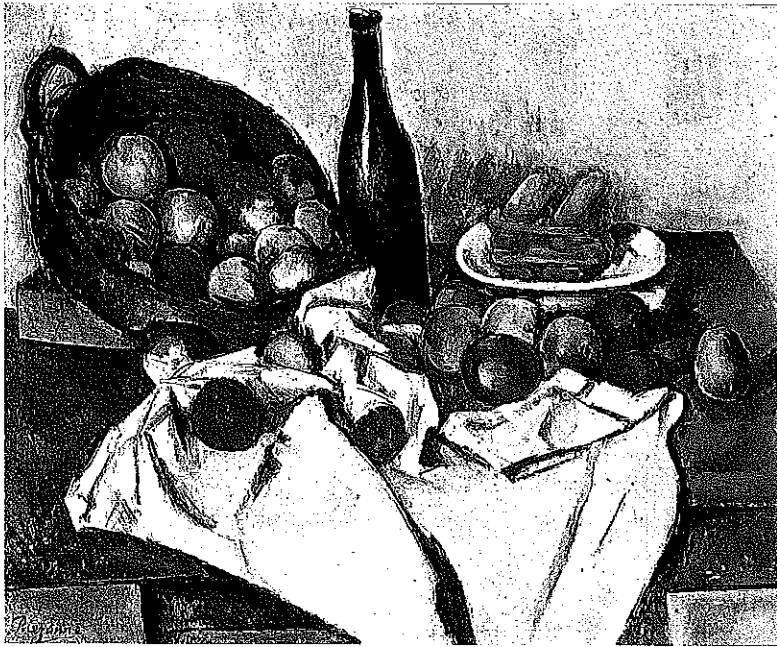
curving horizontal range of the hills and, above these, the lighter, softer blue of the sky, with only the faintest touches of rose. The abrupt manner in which the artist cuts off his space at the sides of the painting has the effect of denying the illusion of recession in depth. The blue of the bay asserts itself even more strongly than the ochers and reds of the foreground, with the result that space becomes both ambiguous and homogeneous. The painting must be read simultaneously as a panorama in depth and as an arrangement of color shapes on the surface.

Even at the end of his life, Cézanne never had any desire to abandon nature entirely. When he spoke of "the cone, the cylinder, and the sphere" he was not thinking of these geometric shapes as the end result, the final abstraction into which he wanted to translate the landscape or the still life, as has sometimes been assumed. Abstraction for him was a method of stripping off the visual irrelevancies of nature in order to begin rebuilding the natural scene as an independent painting. Thus the end result was easily recognizable from the original motif, as photographs of Cézanne's sites have proved, but it is essentially different: the painting is a parallel but distinct and unique reality.

Later Career

Few artists in history have devoted themselves as intently as Cézanne to the separate themes of landscape, portrait,

and still life. It is important to understand that to him these subjects involved similar problems. In all of them he was concerned with the recreation, the realization, of the scene, the object, or the person. The fascination of the still life for Cézanne, as for generations of painters before him and after, lies in the fact that its subject is controllable as no landscape or portrait sitter can possibly be. In *Still Life with Basket of Apples* (fig. 3.7), he carefully arranged the wine bottle and tilted basket of apples, scattered the other apples casually over the tablecloth, and placed the plate of biscuits at the back of the table, thus setting up the relationships between these elements on which the final painting would be based. The apple obsessed Cézanne as a three-dimensional form that was difficult to control as a distinct object and to assimilate into the larger unity of the canvas. To attain this goal and at the same time to preserve the nature of the individual object, he modulated the circular forms with small, flat brushstrokes, distorted the shapes, and loosened or broke the contours to set up spatial tensions among the objects and unify them as color areas. By tilting the wine bottle out of the vertical, flattening and distorting the perspective of the plate, or changing the direction of the table edge under the cloth, Cézanne was able, while maintaining the appearance of actual objects, to concentrate on the relations and tensions existing among them. As Roger Fry observed, the subtleties through which Cézanne



3.7 Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Basket of Apples*, c. 1895. Oil on canvas, 24¾ × 31" (61.9 × 78.7 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago.

gained his final result "still outrage our pictorial apprehension." However, we can comprehend that he was one of the great constructors and colorists in the history of painting, one of the most penetrating observers, and one of the most subtle minds.

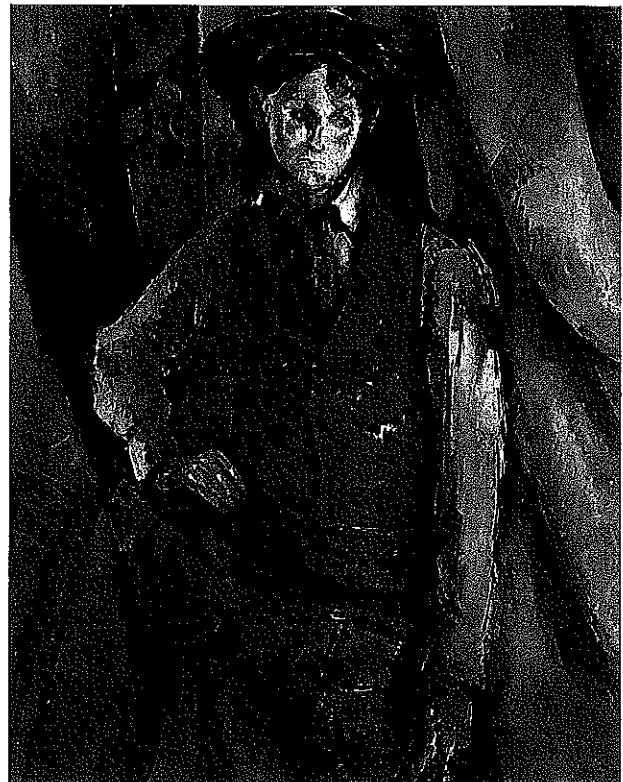
Cézanne's figure studies, such as the various versions of *The Card Players* (fig. 3.8), remind one in their massive, closed architecture of his paintings of quarries. The artist brings great solemnity to this genre subject by his grandly balanced composition, by the amplitude of the figures, who solidly occupy their space, and by discarding the usual narratives included in older paintings on this theme, such as the card-shark subjects of Caravaggio. Although the sitters were local farmhands with whom the artist was

probably long acquainted, there is little sense of particularized portraiture in *The Card Players*.

Cézanne usually relied on friends or family members as models, most frequently his patient wife, Hortense Fiquet, but for *Boy in a Red Waistcoat* (fig. 3.9) he hired a young



3.8 Paul Cézanne, *The Card Players*, 1890–92. Oil on canvas, 25¾ × 32½" (65.4 × 81.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



3.9 Paul Cézanne, *Boy in a Red Waistcoat*, 1888–95. Oil on canvas, 35¼ × 28¾" (89.5 × 73 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Italian boy as a model. During a residence in Paris between 1888 and 1890, he painted four portraits of the seemingly melancholy boy in the same white shirt, blue cravat, and brilliant red waistcoat. Only in this composition, however, did the artist situate his subject frontally, to maximize the relaxed contrapposto of the boy's lanky torso. He is centered against a large swag of drapery so variegated by patches of color that its local hue is indeterminate. The painting is constructed as much by its network of broken lines as by the all-over tessellation of its flat, planar strokes. At the same time that the lines contour forms and endow them with an unmistakable fullness, they also intersect and continue from edge to edge, across figure and ground alike, thereby integrating the whole of the field into a kind of asymmetrical armature. A similar equilibrium of volume and plane occurs in the brushwork, where the squarish, "constructive" strokes build up forms while articulating the surface as a mosaic pattern of translucent, painterly slabs.

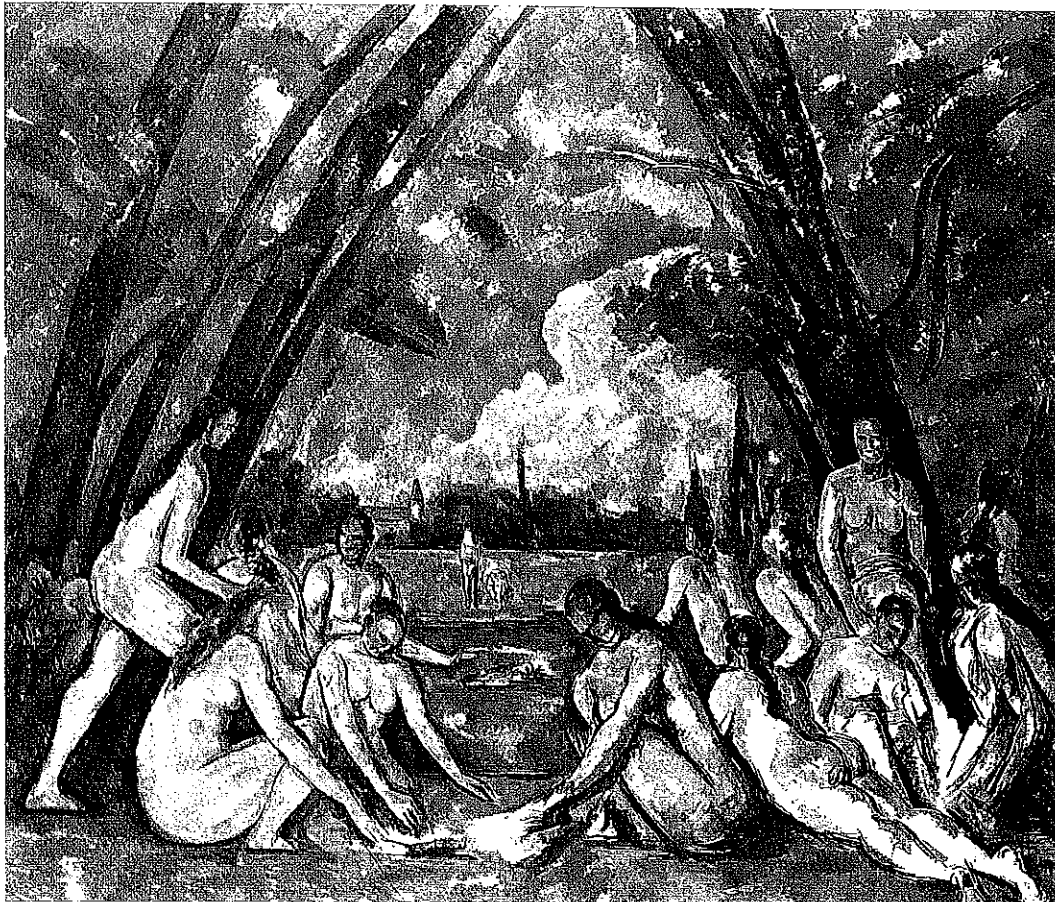
After 1890 Cézanne's brushstrokes became larger and more abstractly expressive, the contours more broken and dissolved, with color floating across the canvas, sustaining its own identity independent of the objects it defined. These tendencies were to lead to the wonderfully free paintings done at the very end of the artist's life, of which

Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves of 1902–6 is one of the supreme examples (fig. 3.10). Here the brushwork acts the part of the individual musician in a superbly integrated symphony orchestra. Each stroke exists fully in its own right, but each is nevertheless subordinated to the harmony of the whole. This is both a structured and a lyrical painting, one in which the artist has achieved the integration of structure and color, of nature and painting. It belongs to the great tradition of Renaissance and Baroque landscape, seen, however, as an infinite accumulation of individual perceptions. These are analyzed by the painter into their abstract components and then reconstructed into the new reality of the painting.

To the end of his life, Cézanne held fast to his dream of remaking Poussin after nature, continuously struggling with the problem of how to pose classically or heroically nude figures in an open landscape. For the largest canvas he ever worked, Cézanne painted as Poussin had done—that is, from his imagination—and relied on his years of plein-air experience to evoke Impressionist freshness. *The Large Bathers* (fig. 3.11), in many ways the culmination of thirty years of experiment with the subject of female bathers in an outdoor setting, was painted the year of Cézanne's death and is unfinished. In it the artist subsumed the fierce



3.10 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves*, 1902–6. Oil on canvas, 25½ × 32" (64.8 × 81.3 cm). Collection Mrs. Louis C. Madeira, Gladwyne, Pennsylvania.



3.11 Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1906. Oil on canvas, 6'10" × 8'2" (2.1 × 2.5 m). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

emotions expressed in the earlier *Battle of Love* (see fig. 3.5) within the grandeur of his total conception. Thus, while the figures have been so formalized as to seem part of the overall pictorial architecture, their erotic potential now charges the scene. It can be sensed as much in the high-vaulted trees as in the sensuous, shimmering beauty of the brushwork, with its unifying touches of rosy flesh tones and earthy ochers scattered throughout the delicate blue-green haze of sky and foliage. *The Large Bathers*, in its miraculous integration of linear structure and painterly freedom, of form and color, of eye and idea, provided the touchstone model for Fauves and Cubists alike, as well as the immediate antecedent for such landmark, yet disparate paintings as Matisse's *Bonheur de vivre* (see fig. 7.6) and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (see fig. 10.6).

A Visual Language of the Heart and Soul: Symbolism

The formulation of modern art at the end of the nineteenth century involved not only a search for new forms but also a search for new content and new principles of picture-making. This search was meaningful in itself; it was not simply a continuation of outworn clichés taken from antiquity, French history, or mythology. It became, as we

shall see, a conscious program in Gauguin's paintings, first in the small artists' colony of Pont-Aven in Brittany and later in the South Seas. In both places the subjects he pursued were those of the Romantic tradition: the exotic, the otherworldly, the mystical. In this, Gauguin and the artists who were associated with him at Pont-Aven and later at Le Pouldu in Brittany, as well as very different painters like Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau, were affected by the Symbolist spirit.

Symbolism in literature and the visual arts was a popular—if radical—movement of the late nineteenth century, a direct descendant of the Romanticism of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries that stemmed from a reaction against Realism in art and against materialism in life. In literature, its founders were mainly poets: Charles Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval; the leaders at the close of the century were Jean Moréas, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine. In music, the German Richard Wagner was a great force and influence, as was Claude Debussy the outstanding French master. Baudelaire had defined Romanticism as “neither a choice of subjects nor exact truth, but a mode of feeling”—something found within rather than outside the individual—“intimacy, spirituality, color, aspiration toward the infinite.” Symbolism arose from the intuitive ideas of the Romantics; it was an

approach to an ultimate reality, a pure essence that transcended particular physical experience. The belief that the work of art should spring from the emotions, from the inner spirit of the artist rather than representing observed nature, dominated the attitudes of the Symbolist artists and was to recur continually in the philosophies of twentieth-century Expressionists, Dadaists, Surrealists, and even of Mondrian and other makers of abstract art.

For the Symbolists the reality of the inner idea, of the dream or symbol, was paramount, but could be expressed only obliquely, as a series of images or analogies out of which the final revelation might emerge. Symbolism led some poets and painters back to organized religion, some to mysticism and arcane religious cults, and others to aesthetic creeds that were essentially antireligious. During the 1880s, at the moment when artists were pursuing the idea of the dream, Sigmund Freud was beginning the studies that were to lead to his theories of the significance of dreams and the subconscious. In the visual arts Symbolism was manifested in a diverse range of styles. Paul Gauguin, one of the movement's leading exponents, sought in his paintings what he termed a "synthesis of form and color derived from the observation of the dominant element." He advised a fellow painter not to "copy nature too much. Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, but think more of creating than the actual result."

In these statements may be found many of the concepts of twentieth-century experimental painting, from the idea of color used arbitrarily rather than to describe an object visually, to the primacy of the creative act, to painting as abstraction. Gauguin's ideas, which he called "Synthetism," involved a synthesis of subject and idea with form and color, so that his paintings are given their mystery, their visionary quality, by their abstract color patterns.

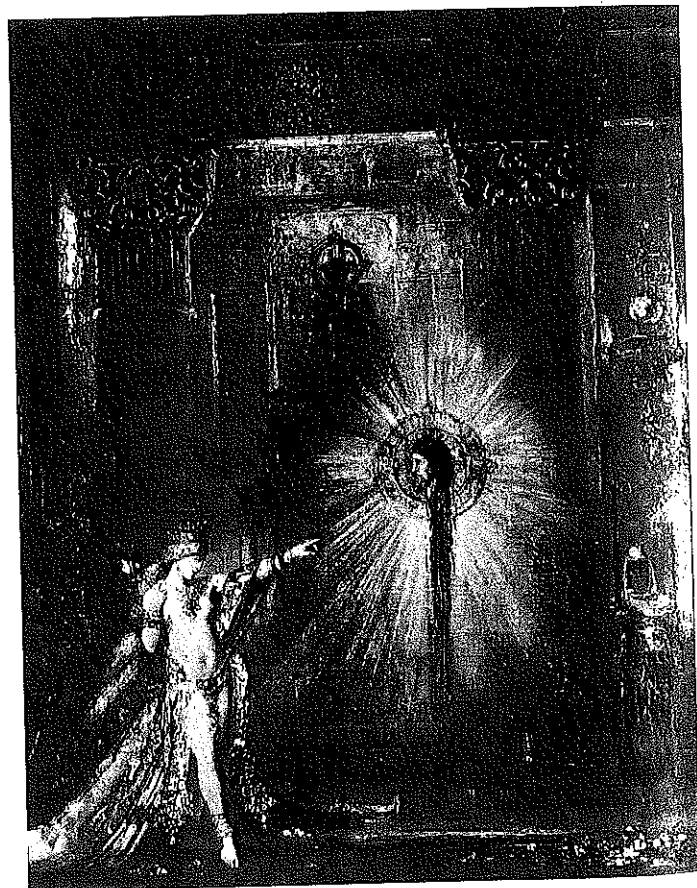
Symbolism in painting—the search for new forms, anti-naturalistic if necessary, to express a new content based on emotion (rather than intellect or objective observation), intuition, and the idea beyond appearance—may be interpreted broadly to include most of the experimental artists who succeeded the Impressionists and opposed their artistic goals. The Symbolist movement, while centered in France, was international in scope and had adherents in America, Belgium, England, and elsewhere in Europe. These artists had a common concern with problems of personal expression and pictorial structure. They were anticipated, inspired, and abetted by two older academic masters—Gustave Moreau and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes—and also by Odilon Redon, an artist born into the generation of the Impressionists who attained his artistic maturity much later than his exact contemporaries.

Moreau and the Fin-de-Siècle

Gustave Moreau (1826–98) was appointed professor at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1892 and displayed remarkable talents as a teacher. His students included Henri

Matisse and Georges Rouault, as well as others who were to be dubbed the Fauves, or "wild beasts," of early modern painting. Inspired by Romantic painters such as Delacroix, Moreau's art exemplified the spirit of the *mal-du-siècle*, an end-of-the-century tendency toward profound melancholy or soul sickness, often expressed in art and literature through decadent and morbid subject matter. In several compositions around 1876, Moreau interpreted the biblical subject of Salomé, the young princess who danced for her stepfather Herod, demanding in return the execution of Saint John the Baptist. The bloody head of the saint appears in Moreau's painting as if called forth in a grotesque hallucination (fig. 3.12). He conveys his subject with meticulous draftsmanship and an obsessive profusion of exotic detail combined with jewellike color and rich paint texture.

Moreau's spangled, languidly voluptuous art did much to glamorize decadence in the form of the *femme fatale*, or "fatal woman." The concept of woman as an erotic and destructive force was fostered by Baudelaire's great poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) (1857) and the mid-century pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Among scores of male artists in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Salomé frequently served as the archetype of a castrating female who embodied all that is debased,



3.12 Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, c. 1876. Oil on canvas, 21¼ × 17½" (54 × 44.5 cm). Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

sexually predatory, and perverse. The *femme fatale* also played a central role in the work of such composers as Wagner and Richard Strauss, writers including Gustave Flaubert, Joris-Karl Huysmans (who admired Moreau's painting enormously), Stéphane Mallarmé, Oscar Wilde, and Marcel Proust, and a great number of artists, ranging from Rossetti and Moreau to such *fin-de-siècle* figures as Redon, Aubrey Beardsley, Edvard Munch, and Gustav Klimt. Moreover, the deadly temptress thrived well into the twentieth century, as she resurfaced in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (see fig. 10.6), the paintings and drawings of Egon Schiele, and the *amour fou* ("mad love") art of the Surrealists (see chapter 15).

Although Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98), with his simple, naive spirit, bleached colors, and near-archaic handling, would seem to have stood at the opposite pole from the elaborate, hothouse art of Moreau, the two painters were alike in a certain academicism and in the curious attraction this held for the younger generation. In Puvis, the reasons for such an anomaly can be readily discerned in his mural painting *Summer* (fig. 3.13). The allegorical subject and its narrative treatment are highly traditional, but the organization in large, flat, subdued color areas, and the manner in which the plane of the wall is respected and even asserted, embodied a compelling truth in the minds of artists who were searching for a new idealism in painting. Although the abstract qualities of the mural are particularly apparent to us today, the classical withdrawal of the figures—as still and quiet as those in Piero della Francesca and Seurat—transforms them into emblems of that inner light which the Symbolists extolled.

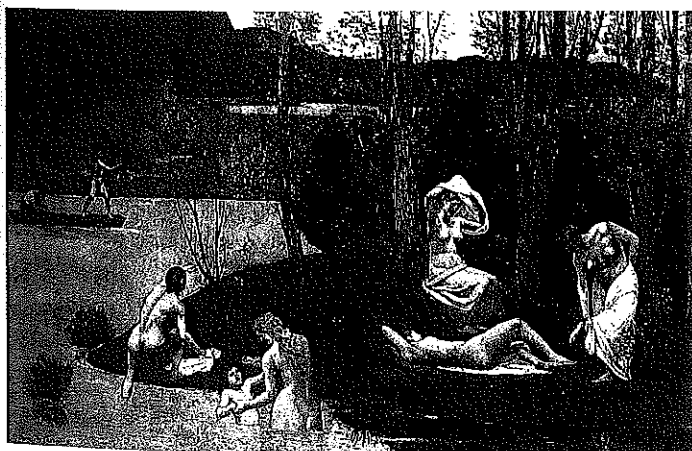
Symbolism in painting found one of its earliest and most characteristic exponents in Odilon Redon (1840–1916), called the "prince of mysterious dreams" by the critic and novelist Huysmans. His artistic roots were in nineteenth-century Romanticism, while his progeny was the twentieth-century Surrealists. Redon felt Impressionism lacked the ambiguity that he sought in his art, and though he

frequently found his subjects in the study of nature, at times observed under the microscope, they were transformed in his hands into beautiful or monstrous fantasies.

Redon studied for a time in Paris with the painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, but he was not temperamentally suited to the rigors of academic training. He suffered from periodic depression—what he called his "habitual state of melancholy"—and much of his early work stems from memories of an unhappy childhood in and around Bordeaux, in southwest France. Like Seurat, Redon was a great colorist who also excelled at composing in black and white, and the first twenty years of his career were devoted almost exclusively to monochrome drawing, etching, and lithography, works he referred to as his "*noirs*," or works in black. His activity in printmaking contributed to the rise in popularity of etching in the 1860s, prompted in part by a new appreciation in France of Rembrandt's prints, which Redon especially admired for their expressive effects of light and shadow. Redon studied etching with Rodolphe Bresdin, a strange and solitary artist who created a graphic world of meticulously detailed fantasy based on the work of the northern European masters Dürer and Rembrandt. Redon later found a closer affinity with the graphics of Francisco Goya, the greatest printmaker of the early nineteenth century (see fig. 1.14). Redon himself became one of the modern masters of the medium of lithography, in which he invented a world of dreams and nightmares based not only on the examples of past artists but also on his close and scientific study of anatomy.

Redon's own predilection for fantasy and the macabre drew him naturally into the orbit of Delacroix, Baudelaire, and the Romantics. In his drawings and lithographs, where he pushed his rich, velvety blacks to extreme limits of expression, he developed and refined the fantasies of Bresdin in nightmare visions of monsters, or tragic-romantic themes taken from mythology or literature. Redon was close to the Symbolist poets and was almost the only artist who was successful in translating their words into visual equivalences. He dedicated a portfolio of his lithographs to Edgar Allan Poe, whose works had been translated by Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and he created three series of lithographs inspired by Gustave Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony*, a novel that achieved cult status among Symbolist writers and artists in the 1880s. Huysmans reviewed Redon's exhibitions enthusiastically at the same time that he was himself moving away from Émile Zola's naturalism and into the Symbolist stream with his novel of artistic decadence *Against the Grain*, in which he discussed at length the art of Redon and of Gustave Moreau.

After 1890, Redon began to work seriously in color, almost immediately demonstrating a capacity for exquisite, original harmonies, in both oil and pastel, that changed the character of his art from the macabre and the somber to the joyous and brilliant. Gone are the nightmarish visions of previous decades, replaced by a new enthusiasm for religious and mythological subjects. Yet in *Roger and*



3.13 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Summer*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 4'11" × 7'7½" (1.5 × 2.3 m). The Cleveland Museum of Art.



3.14 Odilon Redon, *Roger and Angelica*, c. 1910. Pastel on paper on canvas, 36½ × 28¾" (92.7 × 73 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Angelica (fig. 3.14), the subject—the rescue of Angelica by the hero Roger, based on a Renaissance poem—seems almost incidental. We can hardly decipher the two tiny figures, Roger on a winged horselike hippogriff, at left, and Angelica at right, naked and chained to a rock. They are lost amid clouds of brilliant, amorphous color, where nothing is fixed in space and everything is subsumed in an atmosphere of overpowering sensuality.

The Naive Art of Henri Rousseau

Although **Henri Rousseau** (1844–1910) was actually four years older than Paul Gauguin, his name tends to be linked with a younger generation of artists, including Picasso and Robert Delaunay, because of the remarkable artistic circles with which he associated, sometimes unwittingly, in Paris. Though Rousseau shared many formal concerns with his Post-Impressionist contemporaries, such as Gauguin and Seurat, he is often regarded as a phenomenon apart from them, for he worked in isolation, admired the academic painters they abhorred, and was “discovered” by several younger avant-garde artists. In its rejection of traditional illusionism and search for a poetic, highly personalized imagery, his work partakes of concerns held by many Symbolist artists at the end of the century. For younger artists, however, his work chimed with their

growing interest in “primitive” art—whether the prehistoric or folk art of Europe or the art of other cultures and peoples whose works were untouched by what they saw as the dead hand of Western academic tradition.

In 1893, Rousseau retired from a full-time position as an inspector at a municipal toll station in Paris. He is known as the “Douanier” because he was thought to have been a customs inspector, one of many myths about this self-taught painter. Once he turned his full energies to painting, Rousseau seems to have developed a native ability into a sophisticated technique and an artistic vision that, despite its ingenuousness, was not without aesthetic sincerity or self-awareness.

Rousseau was a fascinating mixture of naïvety, innocence, and wisdom. Seemingly humorless, he combined a strange imagination with a way of seeing that was magical, sharp, and direct. In 1886, he exhibited his first painting, *Carnival Evening* (fig. 3.15), at the Salon des Indépendants. The black silhouettes of the trees and house are drawn in painstaking detail—the accretive approach typically used by self-taught painters. Color throughout is low-keyed, as befits a night scene, but the lighted bank of clouds beneath the dark sky creates a sense of clear, wintry moonlight, as do the two tiny figures in carnival costumes in the foreground, who glow with an inner light. Despite the laboriously worked surface and the naïvety of his drawing, the artist fills his painting with poetry and a sense of dreamy unreality.

By 1890 Rousseau had exhibited some twenty paintings at the Salon des Indépendants. His work had achieved a certain public notoriety, due to the constant mockery it endured in the press, but it also increasingly excited the interest of serious artists and such important writers as the poet and playwright Alfred Jarry and, somewhat later, Guillaume Apollinaire. Redon had already seen something unique in the art of Rousseau, and during the 1890s his admirers included Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and even Renoir. Despite such recognition, Rousseau never made a significant living from his painting and spent most of his post-retirement years in desperate poverty. His self-portrait, entitled *Myself: Portrait Landscape*, extols the great 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris and shows the Eiffel Tower, a hot-air balloon, a flag-decked ship, and an iron bridge over the Seine, the Pont des Arts. In the foreground stands the bearded artist, dressed in black and with a black beret. He holds his brush and palette, inscribed with the names of his past and present wives. Rousseau, whose confidence in his own talent bordered on the delusional, unabashedly presents himself as a master of modern painting.

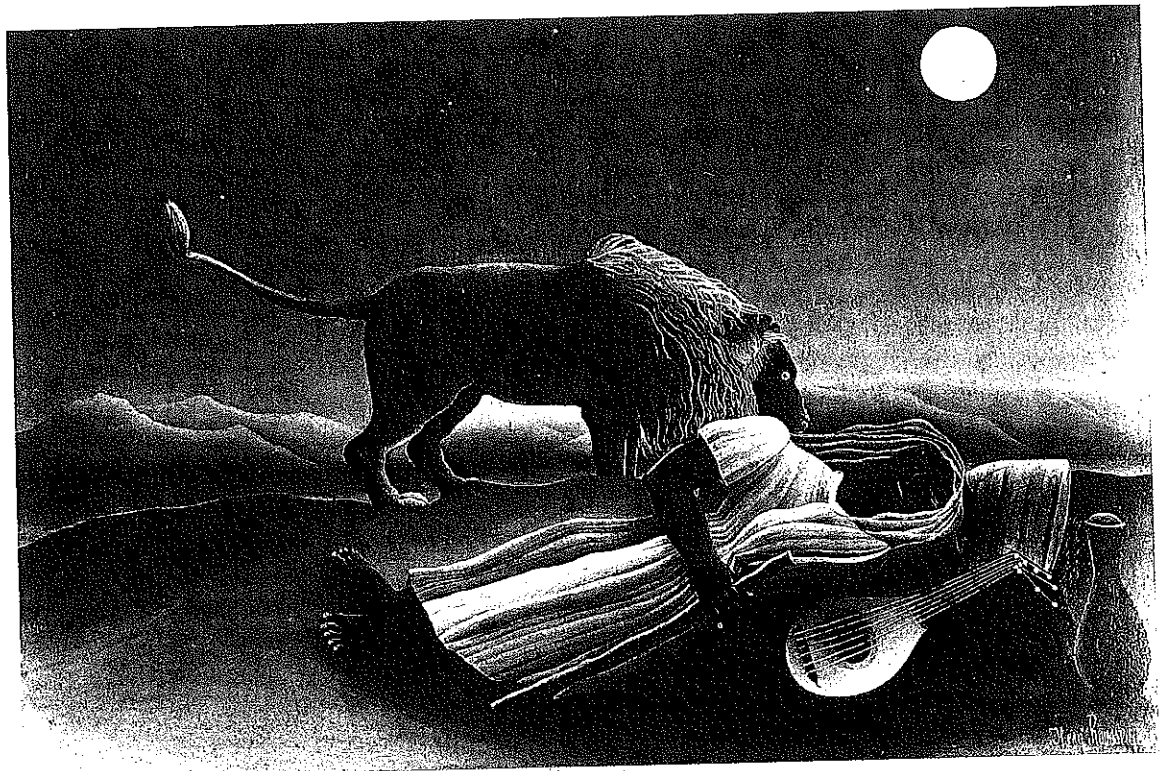
With painstaking care and deliberation, Rousseau continually painted and drew scenes of Paris, still lifes, portraits of his friends and neighbors, and details of plants, leaves, and animals. His romantic passion for jungles filled with strange terror and beauty recurred in several of his best-known canvases. While such subjects had precedents

in Salon painting, Rousseau's tropical paintings are worlds away from the clichéd academic scenes of North Africa or other exotic locales. Yet to the end of his life Rousseau continued his uncritical admiration for the Salon painters, particularly for the technical finish of their works. *The Sleeping Gypsy* (fig. 3.16) is one of the most entrancing and magical paintings in modern art. By this time he could create mood through a few elements, broadly conceived but meticulously rendered. The composition has a curiously abstract quality (the mandolin and bottle foretell Cubist studio props; see figs. 10.17, 10.26), but the tone is overpoweringly strange and eerie—a vast and lonely

landscape framing a mysterious scene. In this work, as in others, Rousseau expressed qualities of strangeness that were unvoiced, inexpressible rather than apparent, anticipating the standard vocabulary of the Surrealists. This painting was lost for years until it was rediscovered in 1923 in a coal dealer's shop by Louis Vauxcelles, the art critic who had created the term "Fauves." In fact, it has been suggested that the term, meaning "wild beast," occurred to Vauxcelles because one of Rousseau's jungle paintings was exhibited very near the works of Matisse and his colleagues at the notorious 1905 Salon d'Automne (see chapter 7).



3.15 Henri Rousseau, *Carnival Evening*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 46 × 35 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (116.8 × 89.2 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art.



3.16 Henri Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 4'3" × 6'7" (1.3 × 2 m). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The last series painted by Rousseau, and the acme of his vision, also present scenes of the jungle. The animals and plants he observed in the Paris Zoo and Botanical Garden were transformed in his paintings into scenes of tropical mystery. The setting in each is a mass of broad-leaved jungle foliage, gorgeous orchids, exotic fruits, and curious animals peering out of the underbrush. The climax of such scenes is *The Dream* of 1910, Rousseau's last great work, painted not long before he died. In the midst of a wildly abundant jungle, with its wide-eyed lions, brilliant birds, pale moon, and dark-skinned flute player, a nude woman rests incongruously on a splendid Victorian sofa. Rousseau's charmingly simple explanation of this improbable creation was that the woman on the couch dreamed herself transported to the midst of the jungle.

During his later years, Rousseau became something of a celebrity for the new generation of artists and critics. He held regular musical soirées at his studio. In 1908 Picasso, discovering a portrait of a woman by Rousseau at a junk shop (though he no doubt knew Rousseau's work already), purchased it for five francs and gave a large party for him in his studio, a party that has gone down in the history of modern painting. It was half intended as a joke on the innocent old painter, who took himself so seriously as an artist, but more an affectionate tribute to a naive man recognized to be a genius. In 1910, the year of his death, Rousseau's first solo exhibition was held in New York at Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291, thanks to the efforts of the young American painter Max Weber (see fig. 18.12), who had befriended Rousseau in Paris.

Innocence and Experience: Gauguin and Van Gogh

Gauguin

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) was unquestionably the most powerful and influential artist to be associated with the Symbolist movement. But while he became intimate with Symbolist poets, especially Mallarmé, and enjoyed their support, Gauguin deplored the literary content and traditional form of such artists as Moreau and Puvis. He also rejected the optical naturalism of the Impressionists, while initially retaining their rainbow palette and then vastly extending its potential for purely decorative effects. For Gauguin, art was an abstraction to be dreamed in the presence of nature, not an illustration but a synthesis of natural forms reinvented imaginatively. His purpose in creating such an anti-Realist art was to express invisible, subjective meanings and emotions. He attempted to free himself from the corrupting sophistication of the modern industrial world, and renew his spirit by contact with an innocence and sense of mystery that he sought in non-industrial societies. He constantly described painting in terms of an analogy with music, of color harmonies, of color and lines as forms of abstract expression. In his search he was attracted, to a greater degree even than most of his generation, to so-called "primitive" art. In his art we find the origins of modern primitivism, the desire to discard the accumulation of Western culture and the results of industrialization and urbanization. Gauguin turned away from these corrupt forces to what were regarded as the

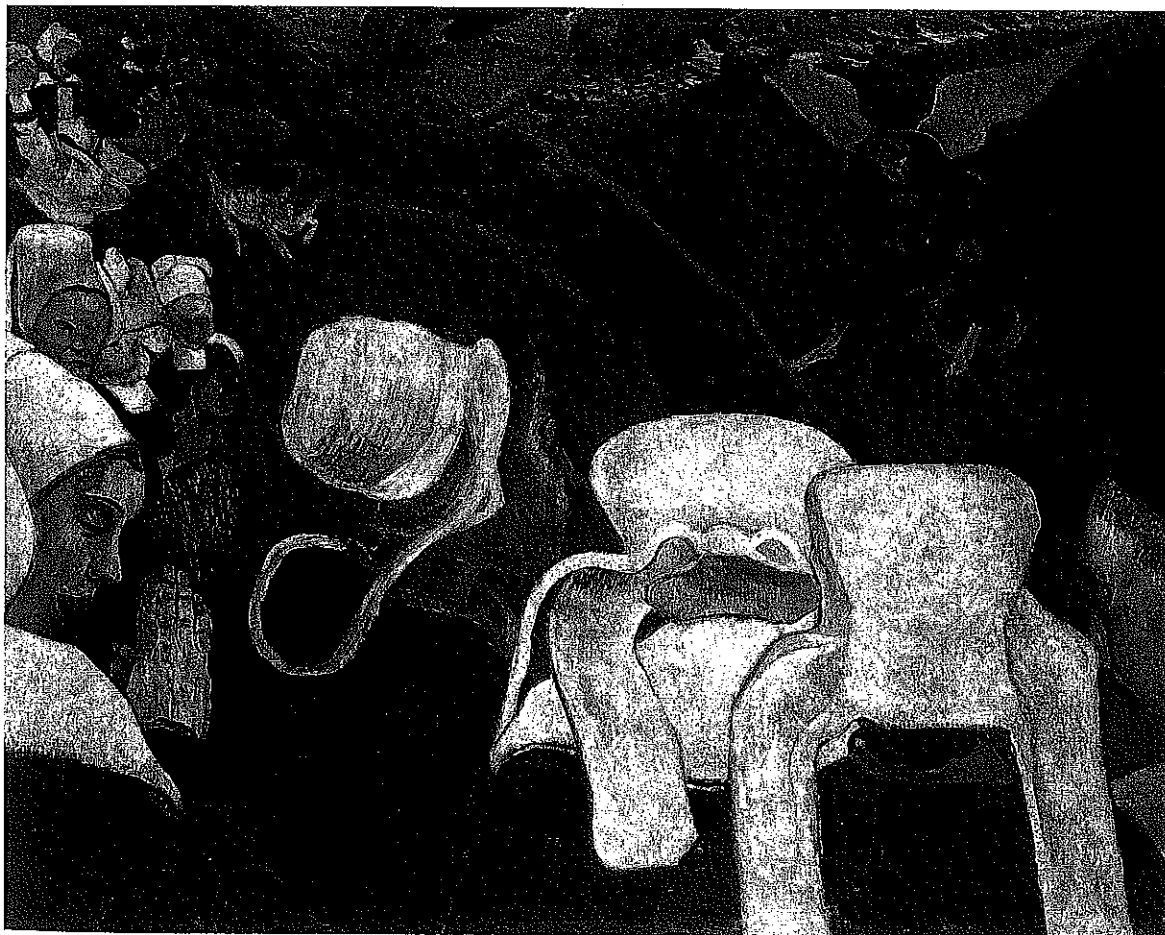
elemental verities of “primitive” societies, whether the religious art of Breton peasants in northwest France or the traditions of the Maori peoples in Polynesia. By establishing contact with supposedly “uncivilized” cultures, so the myth went, the enlightened artist could be in touch with the primitive side of his or her own nature and express it through art. Of course, such notions were forged at a time when European countries were aggressively colonizing the very societies Western artists sought to emulate.

In searching for the life of a “savage,” no French artist traveled farther from the reaches of Western urban life than Gauguin. He has become, sometimes to the detriment of a serious consideration of his art, a romantic symbol, the personification of the artist as rebel against society. After years of wandering, first in the merchant marine, then in the French navy, he settled down, in 1871, to a prosaic but successful life as a stockbroker in Paris, married a Danish woman, and had five children. For the next twelve years the only oddity in his respectable, bourgeois existence was the fact that he began painting, first as a hobby and then with increasing seriousness. He even managed to show a painting in the Salon of 1876 and to exhibit in four Impressionist exhibitions from 1879 to 1882. He lost his job, probably due to a stock-market crash, and by 1886, after several years of family conflict and attempts at new

starts in Rouen and Copenhagen, he had largely severed his family ties, isolated himself, and become involved with the Impressionists.

Gauguin had spent the early years of his childhood in Peru, and he seems almost always to have had a nostalgia for far-off, exotic places. This feeling ultimately crystallized in the conviction that his salvation, and perhaps that of all contemporary artists, lay in abandoning modern civilization to return to some simpler, more elemental pattern of life. From 1886 to 1891 he moved between Paris and the Breton villages of Pont-Aven and Le Pouldu, with a seven-month interlude in Panama and Martinique in 1887 and a tempestuous but productive visit with Van Gogh in Arles the following year. In 1891 he sailed for Tahiti, returning to France for two years in 1893 before settling in the South Seas for good. His final trip, in the wake of years of illness and suffering, was to the island of Hivaoa in the Marquesas Islands, where he died in 1903.

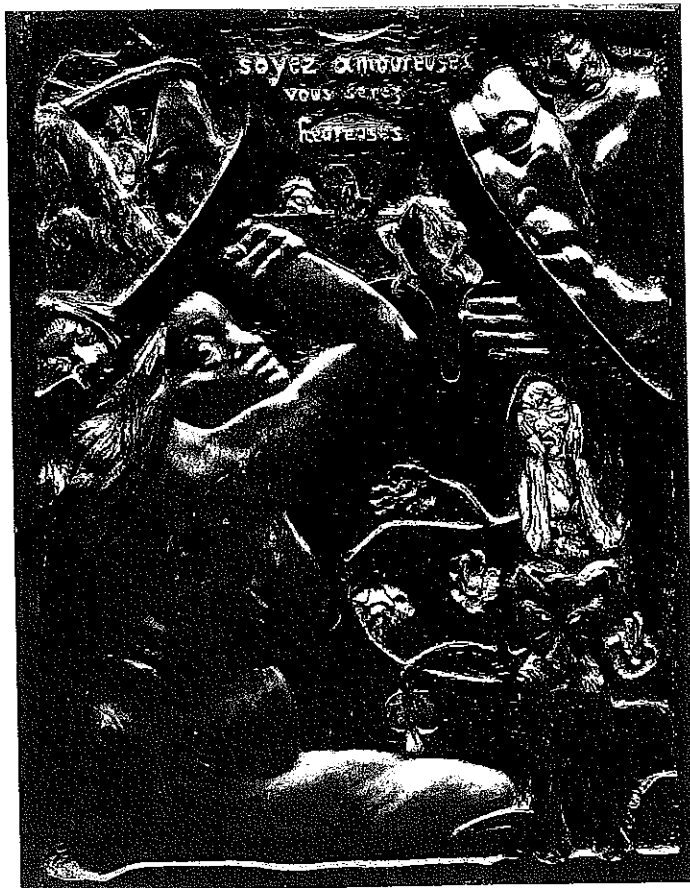
The earliest picture in which Gauguin fully realized his revolutionary ideas is *Vision after the Sermon*, painted in 1888 in Pont-Aven (fig. 3.17). This is a startling and pivotal work, a pattern of red, blue, black, and white tied together by curving, sinuous lines and depicting a Breton peasant’s biblical vision of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. The innovations used here were destined to affect the ideas



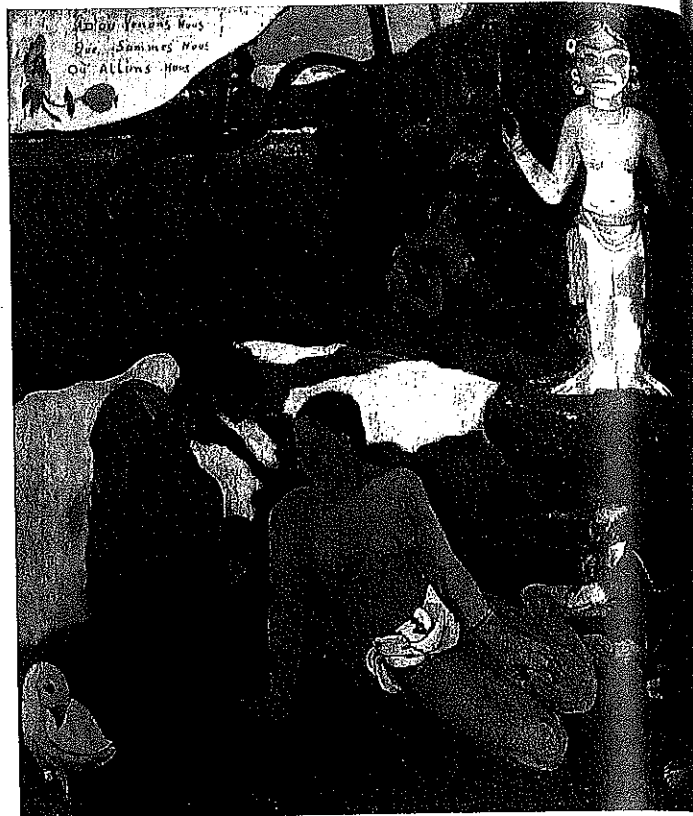
3.17 Paul Gauguin, *Vision after the Sermon*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (73 × 92.1 cm). National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

of younger groups such as the Nabis and the Fauves. Perhaps the greatest single departure is the arbitrary use of color in the dominating red field within which the protagonists struggle, their forms borrowed from a Japanese print. Gauguin has here constricted his space to such an extent that the dominant red of the background visually thrusts itself forward beyond the closely viewed heads of the peasants in the foreground. Though the brilliant red hue may have been stimulated by his memory of a local religious celebration which included fireworks and bonfires in the fields, this painting was one of the first complete statements of color as an expressive end in itself.

From the beginning of his life as an artist, Gauguin did not restrict himself to painting. He carved sculptures in marble and wood and learned the rudiments of ceramics to become one of the most innovative ceramicists of the century. (It is a feature of modern art in general that artists, including Picasso, Matisse, and many others, have been less constrained by the boundaries between the academic disciplines of painting and sculpture, or between so-called fine-art and craft practice, than artists of earlier post-Renaissance generations.) By the late 1880s Gauguin had ventured into printmaking, another medium to which he brought all his experimental genius. One of his most enigmatic works, made in Brittany during an especially



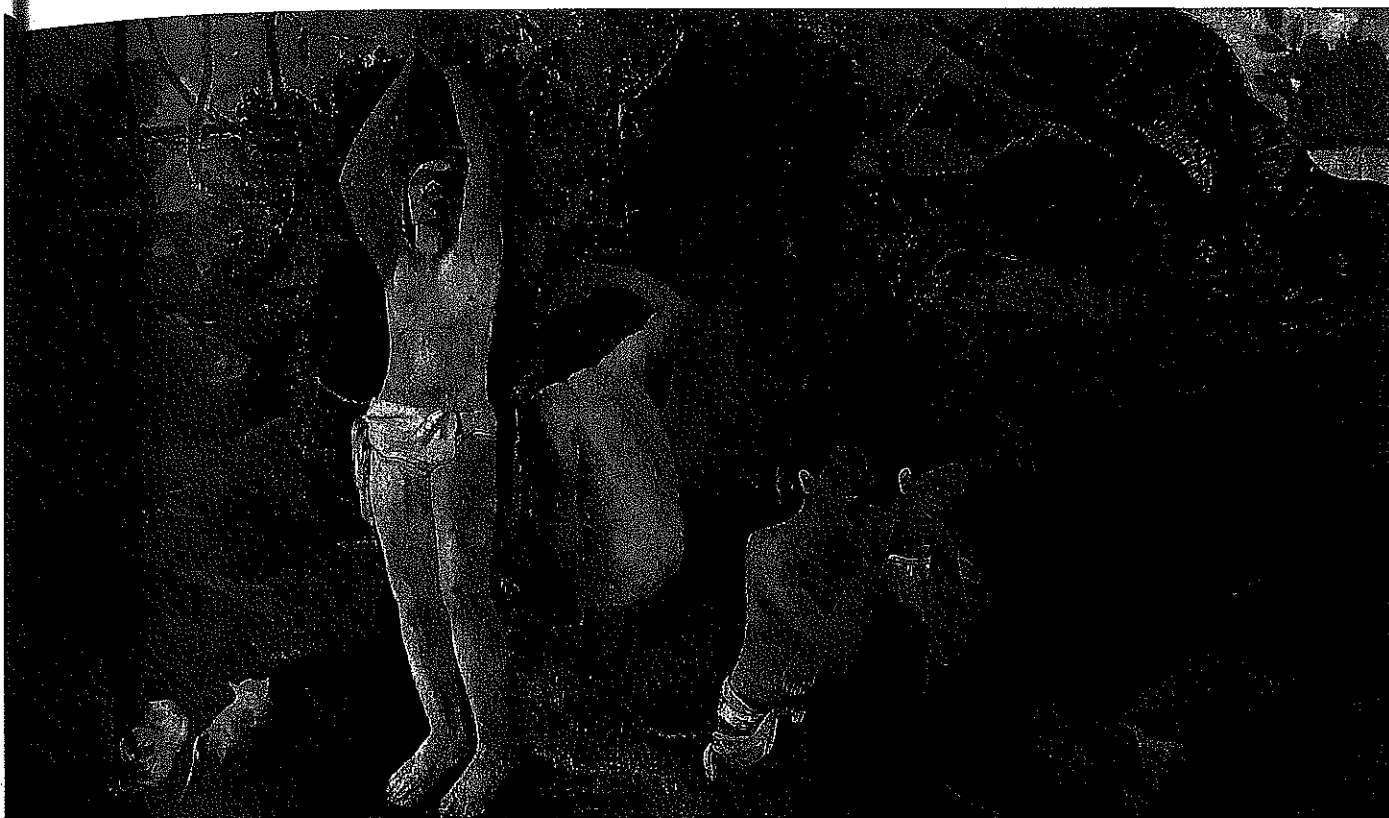
3.18 Paul Gauguin, *Be in Love and You Will Be Happy*, 1889. Painted wood relief, $37\frac{1}{2} \times 28\frac{1}{2}$ " (95.3 \times 72.4 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



3.19 Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 1897–98. Oil on canvas, $4'6\frac{3}{4} \times 12'3"$ (1.4 \times 3.7 m). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

despondent period for the artist, is a wooden panel that he carved in low relief, painted, and titled with the cynical admonition *Be in Love and You Will Be Happy* (fig. 3.18). Here a woman, "whom a demon takes by the hand," faces the forces of temptation, symbolized in part by a small fox. Such themes, the struggle between knowledge and innocence, good and evil, life and death, recur in Gauguin's Tahitian compositions. Among the faces in the relief, the one with its thumb in its mouth, at the upper right, is the artist himself.

Gauguin was disappointed, upon his arrival in Tahiti, to discover how extensively Western missionaries and colonials had encroached upon native life. The capital of Papeete was filled with French government officials, and the beautiful Tahitian women often covered themselves in ankle-length missionary dresses. Nor was the island filled with the indigenous carvings of ancient gods Gauguin had hoped for, so he set about making his own idols, based in part on Egyptian and Buddhist sculptures he knew from photographs. One such invention can be seen at the left in his grand, philosophical painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (fig. 3.19). Over twelve feet (3.5 m) long, this is the most ambitious painting of Gauguin's career. It presents a summation of his Polynesian imagery, filled with Tahitians of all ages situated at ease within a terrestrial paradise devoid of any sign of European civilization. "It's not a canvas done like a Puviss



de Chavannes,” Gauguin said, “with studies from nature, then preliminary cartoons etc. It is all dashed off with the tip of the brush, on burlap full of knots and wrinkles, so that its appearance is terribly rough.” The multiple forms and deep spaces of this complex composition are tied together by its overall tonalities in green and blue. It was this element—color—that the artist called “a mysterious language, a language of the dream.”

Van Gogh

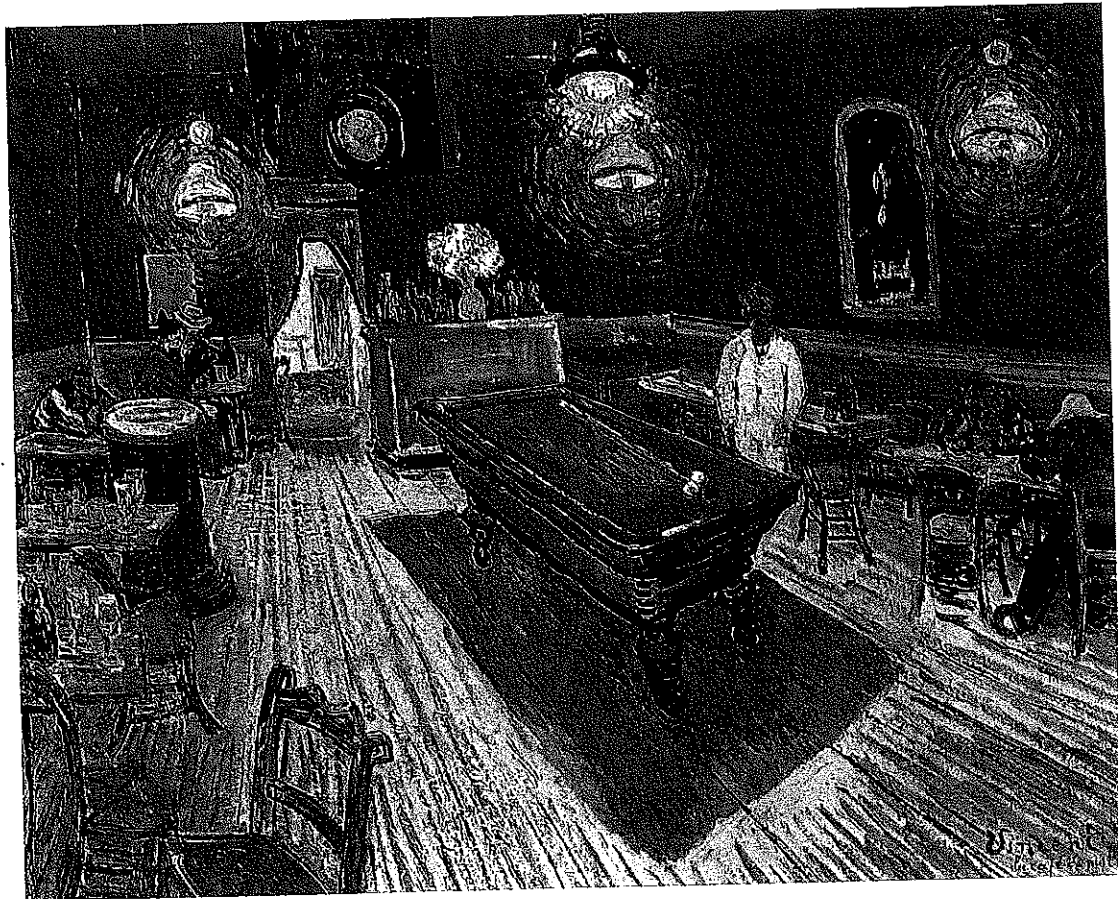
Whereas Gauguin was an iconoclast, caustic in speech, cynical, indifferent, and at times brutal to others, **Vincent van Gogh** (1853–90) was filled with a spirit of enthusiasm for his fellow artists and overwhelming love for humanity. This love had led him, after a short-lived experience as an art dealer and an attempt to follow theological studies, to become a lay preacher in a Belgian coal-mining area. There he first began to draw in 1880. After study in Brussels, the Hague, and Antwerp, he went to Paris in 1886, where he met Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat, Signac, and Gauguin, as well as members of the original Impressionist group.

In his early drawings, Van Gogh revealed his roots in traditional Dutch landscape, portrait, and genre painting, using the same perspective structures, and depicting the broad fields and low-hanging skies that the seventeenth-century artists had loved. Van Gogh never abandoned perspective even in later years, when he developed a style with great emphasis on the linear movement of paint over the surface of the canvas. For him—and this is already

apparent in his early drawings—landscape itself had an expressive, emotional significance.

After his exposure to the Impressionists in Paris, Van Gogh changed and lightened his palette. Indeed, he discovered his deepest single love in color—brilliant, unmodulated color—which in his hands took on a character radically different from the color of the Impressionists. Even when he used Impressionist techniques, the peculiar intensity of his vision gave the result a specific and individual quality that could never be mistaken.

The passion in Van Gogh’s art arose from his intense, overpowering response to the world in which he lived and to the people whom he knew. His mental troubles are, though not well understood, a famous part of his larger-than-life reputation as it developed during the twentieth century. Such episodes as the incident in which he sliced off part of his ear during Gauguin’s visit have overshadowed a reasoned understanding of his work. More than any other artist, Van Gogh has come to typify the figure of the lone artist-genius, spurned and misunderstood by society. This legend is only partly borne out by the more complex reality of his life and work. Van Gogh may have suffered from a neurological disorder, perhaps a severe form of epilepsy, that was no doubt exacerbated by physical ailments and excessive drinking. He was prone to depression and suffered acutely during seizures, but he painted during long periods of lucidity, bringing tremendous intelligence and imagination to his work. His letters to his brother Theo, an art dealer who tried in vain to find a market for Vincent’s work, are among the most moving

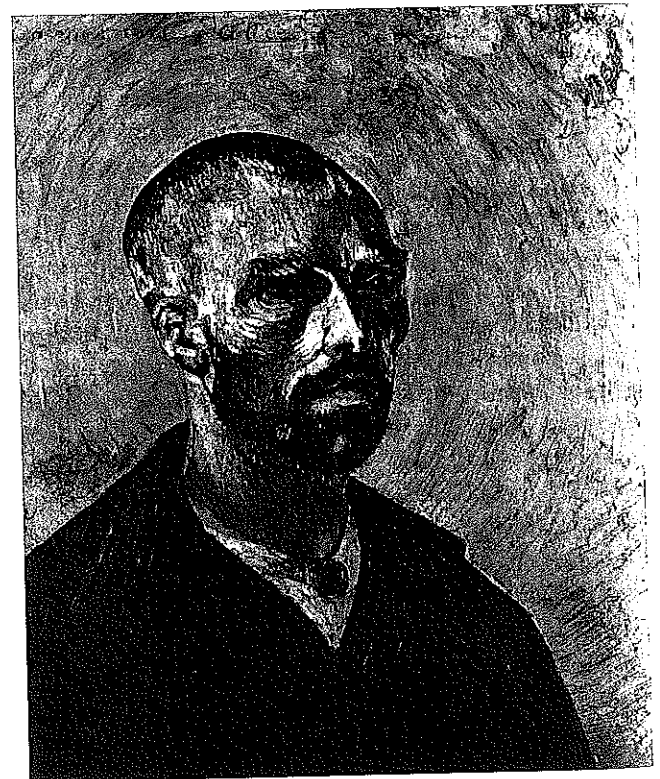


3.20 Vincent van Gogh, *The Night Café*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 27½ × 35" (69.9 × 88.9 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

and informative narratives by an artist that we have. They reveal his wide knowledge of art and literature, and a highly sensitive perception that is fully equal to his emotional response. He was sharply aware of the extraordinary effects he was achieving through his expressive use of color. "Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily," he wrote, "in order to express myself forcibly." Echoing the Symbolist ideas of Gauguin, Van Gogh told Theo that he "was trying to exaggerate the essential and to leave the obvious vague."

Van Gogh could also present the darker side of existence. Thus, of *The Night Café* (fig. 3.20) he says: "I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green." *The Night Café* is a nightmare of deep-green ceiling, blood-red walls, and discordant greens of furniture. The perspective of the brilliant yellow floor is tilted so precipitously that the contents of the room threaten to slide toward the viewer. The result is a terrifying experience of claustrophobic compression that anticipates the Surrealist explorations of fantastic perspective, none of which has ever quite matched it in emotive force.

Vincent van Gogh carried on the great Netherlandish tradition of portraiture, from his first essays in drawing to his last self-portraits, painted a few months before his suicide in 1890. The intense *Self-Portrait* from 1888 was made in Arles and was dedicated to Gauguin (fig. 3.21). It formed part of an exchange of self-portraits among Van Gogh's artist friends to support his notion of an ideal



3.21 Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 24½ × 20½" (62.2 × 52.1 cm). Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

brotherhood of painters. The beautifully sculptured head (which Van Gogh said resembled that of a Buddhist monk) and the solidly modeled torso are silhouetted against a vibrant field of linear rhythms painted, according to the artist, in "pale malachite." The coloristic and rhythmic integration of all parts, the careful progression of emphases, from head to torso to background, all demonstrate an artist in superb control of his plastic means. "In a picture," he wrote to Theo, "I want to say something comforting as music. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to give by the actual radiance and vibration of our colorings."

The universe of Van Gogh is forever stated in *The Starry Night* (fig. 3.22). This work was painted in June 1889 at the sanatorium of Saint-Rémy, in southern France, where he had been taken after his second breakdown. The color is predominantly blue and violet, pulsating with the scintillating yellow of the stars. *The Starry Night* is both an intimate and a vast landscape, seen from a high vantage point in the manner of the sixteenth-century landscapist Pieter Brueghel the Elder. In fact, the peaceful village, with its prominent church spire, is a remembrance of a Dutch rather than a French town. The great poplar tree in the foreground shudders before our eyes, while above whirl and explode all the stars and planets of the universe. Van

Gogh was intrigued by the idea of painting a nocturnal landscape from his imagination. Scholars have tried to explain the content of the painting through literature, astronomy, and religion. Though their studies have shed light on Van Gogh's interests, none has tapped a definitive source that accounts for the astonishing impact of this painting, which today ranks among the most famous works of art ever made. When we think of expressionism in painting, we tend to associate with it a bravura brush gesture, arising from the spontaneous or intuitive act of expression and independent of rational processes of thought or precise technique. The anomaly of Van Gogh's paintings is that they are supernatural or at least extrasensory experiences evoked with a touch as meticulous as though the artist were painfully and exactly copying what he was observing before his eyes.

A New Generation of Prophets: The Nabis

Neo-Impressionism, the quasi-scientific handling of color created by Seurat and Signac, made its appearance in 1884, when a number of artists who were to be associated with the movement exhibited together at the Groupe des Artistes Indépendants in Paris. Later that year the Société des Artistes Indépendants was organized through the



3.22 Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 × 36¼" (73.7 × 92.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

efforts of Seurat, Henri-Edmond Cross, Redon, and others, and was to become important to the advancement of early twentieth-century art as an exhibition forum. Also important were the exhibitions of Les XX (Les Vingt, or "The Twenty") in Brussels. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Cézanne exhibited at both the Indépendants and Les XX. James Ensor, Henry van de Velde, and Jan Toorop exhibited regularly at Les XX and its successor, La Libre Esthétique, whose shows became increasingly dominated first by the attitudes of the Neo-Impressionists and then by the Nabis.

The Nabis, who took their name from the Hebrew word for "prophet," were a somewhat eclectic group of artists whose principal contributions—with some outstanding exceptions—lay in a synthesizing approach to masters of the earlier generation, not only to Seurat but also to Cézanne, Redon, and Gauguin, particularly the last, for his art theory as well as the direct example of his painting.

Gauguin had been affected by the ideas of his young friend Émile Bernard when the two were working together in Pont-Aven in the summer of 1888. He may well have derived important elements of his style from Bernard's notion of *cloisonnisme*, a style based on medieval enamel and stained-glass techniques, in which flat areas of color are bounded by dark, emphatic contours. Certainly, the arbitrary, nondescriptive color, the flat areas bounded by linear patterns, the denial of depth and sculptural modeling—all stated by Gauguin in *Vision after the Sermon* (see fig. 3.17)—were congenial to and influential for the Nabis as well as for Art Nouveau decoration (see chapter 5).

Paul Sérusier (1863–1927), one of the young artists under Gauguin's spell at Pont-Aven, experienced something of an epiphany when the older master undertook to demonstrate his method during a painting session in a picturesque wood known as the Bois d'Amour: "How do you see these trees?" Gauguin asked. "They are yellow. Well then, put down yellow. And that shadow is rather blue. Render it with pure ultramarine. Those red leaves? Use vermilion." This permitted the mesmerized Sérusier to paint a tiny work on a cigar-box lid (fig. 3.23), which proved so daring in form, even verging on pure abstraction, that the artist and his friends thought it virtually alive with supernatural power. And so they entitled the painting *The Talisman* and dubbed themselves the "Nabis." The group

included Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Ranson, and later Aristide Maillol, Édouard Vuillard, Félix Vallotton, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Armand Séguin. The Nabis were artists of varying abilities, but included three outstanding talents: Bonnard, Vuillard, and Maillol.

The Nabis were symptomatic of the various interests and enthusiasms of the end of the century. Among these were literary tendencies toward organized theory and elaborate celebrations of mystical rituals. Denis and Sérusier wrote extensively on the theory of modern painting; and Denis was responsible for the formulation of the famous phrase, "a picture—before being a warhorse, a female nude, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a particular order." The Nabis sought a synthesis of all the arts through continual activity in architectural painting, the design of glass and decorative screens, book illustration, poster design, and stage design for the advanced theater of Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, Strindberg, Wilde, and notably for Alfred Jarry's shocking satirical farce *Ubu Roi* (King Ubu).

La Revue Blanche, a magazine founded in 1891, became one of the chief organs of expression for Symbolist writers and painters, Nabis, and other artists of the avant-garde. Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, Vallotton, and Toulouse-Lautrec (who was never officially a Nabi, although associated with



3.23 Paul Sérusier, *The Talisman* (landscape of the Bois d'Amour), 1888. Oil on wood cigar-box cover, 10½ × 8¾" (26.7 × 21.3 cm). Private collection.

the group) all made posters and illustrations for *La Revue Blanche*. The magazine was a meeting ground for experimental artists and writers from every part of Europe, including Van de Velde, Edvard Munch, Marcel Proust, André Gide, Ibsen, Strindberg, Wilde, Maxim Gorky, and Filippo Marinetti.

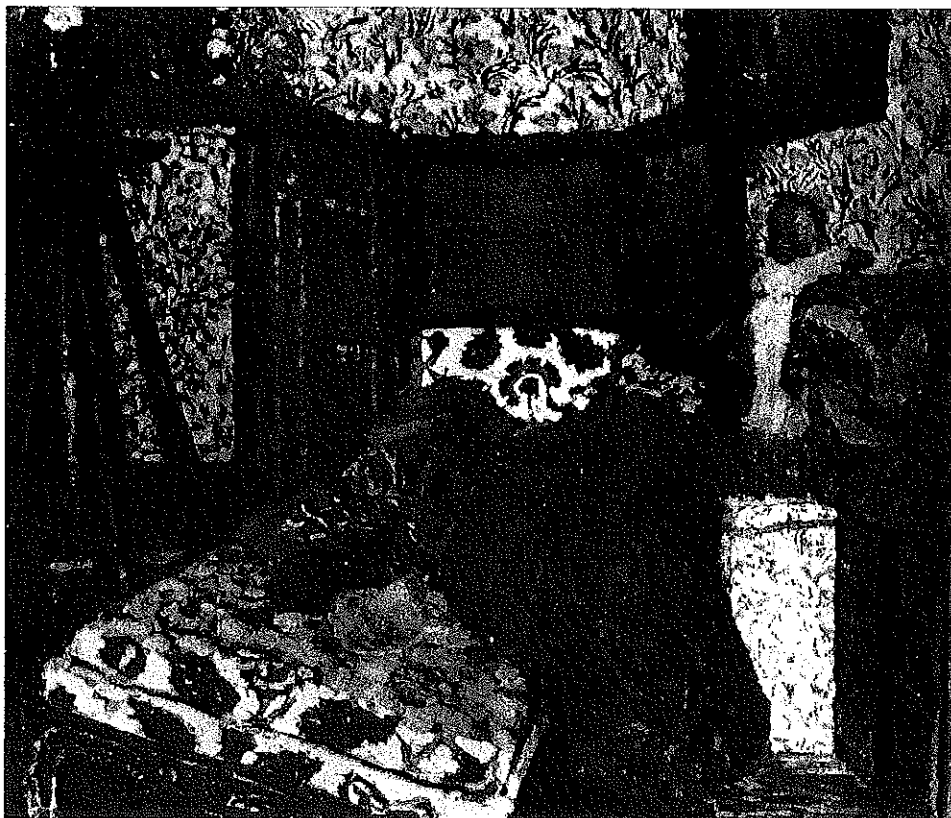
Vuillard and Bonnard

The Nabis produced two painters of genius, Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) and Pierre Bonnard, whose long working lives linked the art of *fin-de-siècle* France to the mid-twentieth century. Both were much admired; their reputations, however, were for a long time private rather than public. Their world is an intimate one, consisting of corners of the studio, the living room, the familiar view from the window, and portraits of family and close friends. In his early works Vuillard used the broken paint and small brushstroke of Seurat or Signac, but without their rigorous scientific methods. In *Woman in Blue with Child* (fig. 3.24) he portrayed the Parisian apartment of Thadée Natanson, cofounder of *La Revue Blanche*, and his famously beautiful and talented wife, Misia, who is depicted in the painting playing with her niece. As was often his practice, Vuillard probably used his own photograph of the apartment as an *aide-mémoire* while working up his composition. It is a typical turn-of-the-century interior, sumptuously decorated with flowered wallpaper, figured upholstery, and ornaments. In Vuillard's hands, the

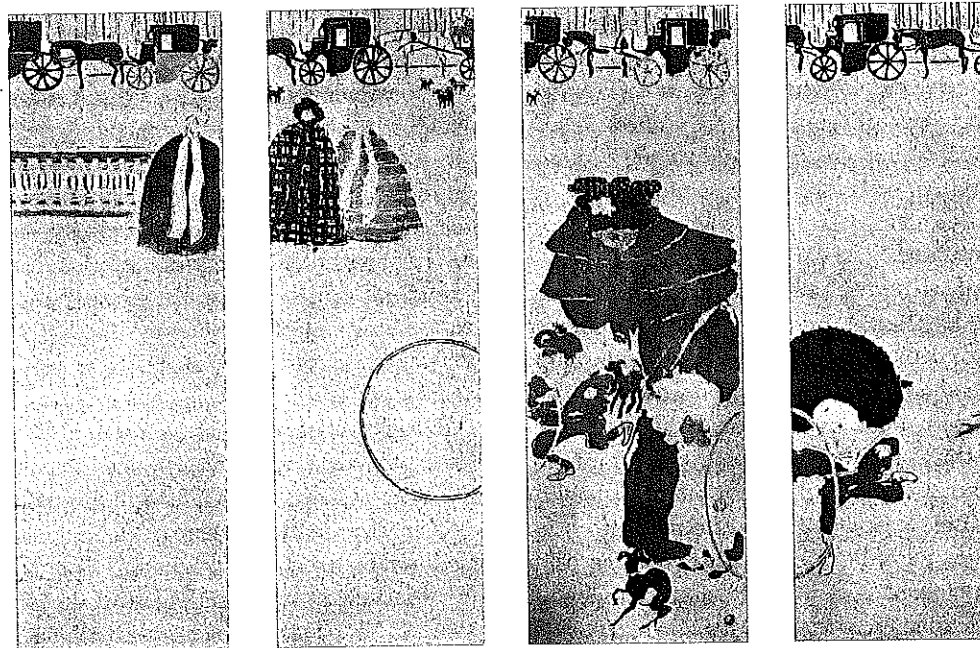
interior became a dazzling surface pattern of muted blues, reds, and yellows, comparable to a Persian painting in its harmonious richness. Space may be indicated by the tilted perspective of the chaise longue and the angled folds of the standing screen, but the forms of the woman and child are flattened so as to be virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding profusion of patterns. Such quiet scenes of Parisian middle-class domesticity have been called "*intimiste*"; in them, the flat jigsaw puzzle of conflicting patterns generates shimmering afterimages that seem to draw from everyday life an ineffable sense of strangeness and magic.

Of all the Nabis, Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) was the closest to Vuillard, and the two men remained friends until the latter's death. Like Vuillard, Bonnard lived a quiet and unobtrusive life, but whereas Vuillard stayed a bachelor, Bonnard early became attached to a young woman whom he ultimately married in 1925. It is she who appears in so many of his paintings, as a nude bathing or combing her hair, or as a shadowy but ever-present figure seated at the breakfast table, appearing at the window, or boating on the Seine.

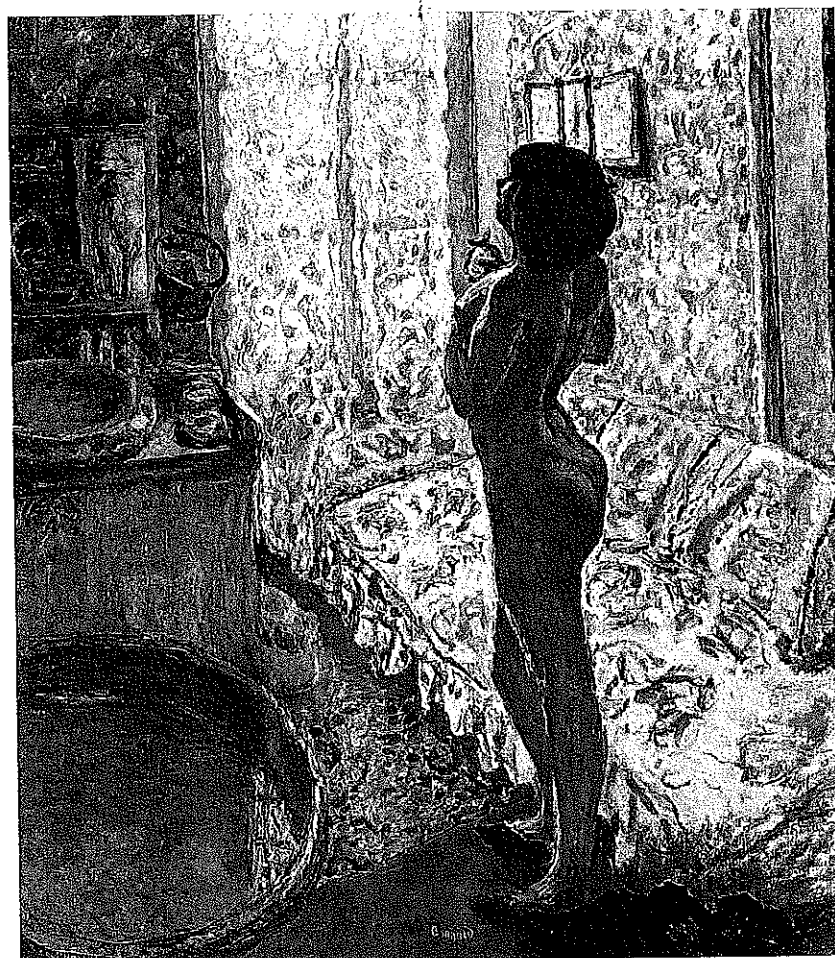
After receiving training both in the law and in the fine arts, Bonnard soon gained a reputation making lithographs, posters, and illustrated books. His most important early influences were the work of Gauguin and Japanese prints. The impact of the latter can be seen in his adaptation of the *japoniste* approach to the tilted spaces and



3.24 Édouard Vuillard, *Woman in Blue with Child*, c. 1899. Oil on cardboard, 19½ × 22½" (48.6 × 56.5 cm). Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove.



3.25 Pierre Bonnard, *Promenade of the Nursemaids, Frieze of Fiacres*, 1899. Color lithograph on four panels, each 54 × 18¾" (137.2 × 47.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



3.26 Pierre Bonnard, *Nu à contre jour (Nude against the Light)*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 49 × 42½" (124.5 × 108 cm). Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.

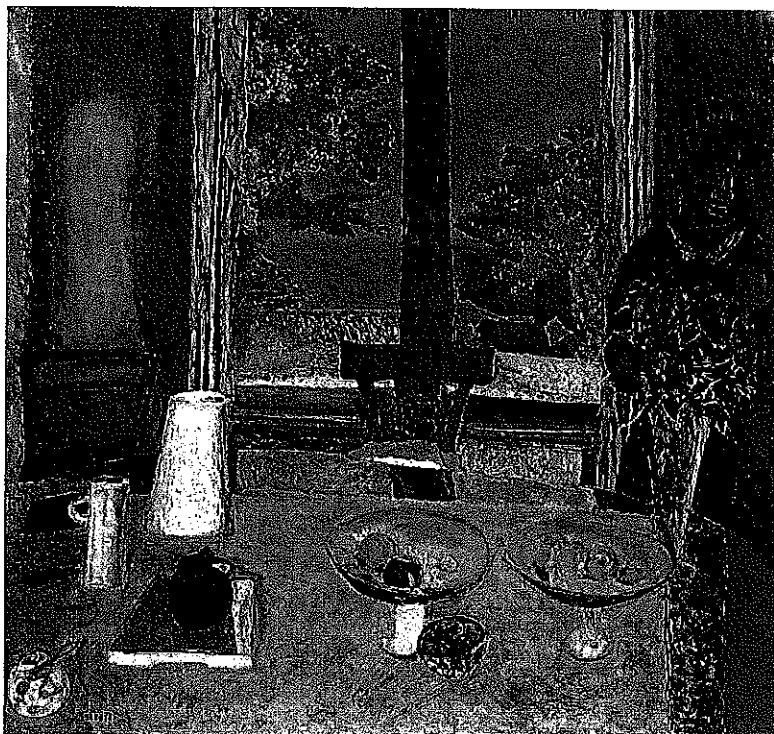
decorative linear rhythms of his paintings. But from the beginning Bonnard also evinced a love of paint texture. This led him from the relatively subdued palette of his early works to the full luminosity of high-keyed color rendered in fragmented brushstrokes, a development that may well owe something to both the late works of Monet and the Fauve paintings of Matisse.

The large folding screen *Promenade of the Nursemaids, Frieze of Fiacres* (fig. 3.25) is made of four lithographs, based on a similarly painted screen. With its tilted perspectives and abbreviated, silhouetted forms, it shows Bonnard at his most *japoniste* and decorative. At the same time, the figures of mother and children, the three heavily caped nurses, and the marching line of fiacres, or carriages, reveal a touch of gentle satire that well characterizes the penetrating observation Bonnard could combine with a brilliant simplicity of design. Like his fellow Nabis, Bonnard believed in eliminating barriers between the realms of popular decorative arts and the high-art traditions of painting and sculpture. He envisioned an art of "everyday application" that could extend to fans, prints, furniture, or, in this case, color lithographs adapted to the format of a four-part Japanese screen.

In *Nude against the Light* (fig. 3.26), Bonnard has moved from the public sphere of Parisian streets to the intimate world of the nude in a domestic interior, a subject he exploited throughout his career as a means to investigate light and color. Bonnard silhouetted the model, his ever-youthful wife, Marthe, against the sun-drenched surfaces of her boudoir. Light falls through the tall French windows, strongly illuminating the side of the woman turned from our view but visible in the mirror at left. This use of reflections to enlarge and enrich the pictorial space, to

stand as a picture within a picture, became a common strategy of Bonnard's as well as Matisse's interiors (see fig. 7.18). But in its quiet solemnity and complete absence of self-consciousness, Bonnard's nude is deeply indebted to the precedent of Degas's bathers, even to the detail of the round tub (see fig. 2.35). Like those of the older artist, Bonnard's composition is disciplined and complex, carefully structured to return the eye to the solid form of the nude, which he surrounds with a multitude of textures, shapes, and colors. But Bonnard creates an expressive mood all his own. As she douses herself with perfume, the model seems almost transfixed by the warm, radiant light that permeates the scene.

Bonnard's color became progressively brighter. By the time he painted *Dining Room on the Garden*, in 1934–35 (fig. 3.27), he had long since recovered the entire spectrum of luminous color, and had learned from Cézanne that color could function constructively as well as sensually. In this ambitious canvas Bonnard tackled the difficult problem of depicting an interior scene with a view through the window to a garden beyond, setting the isolated, geometric forms of a tabletop still life against a lush exterior landscape. Now the model, his wife Marthe, is positioned to one side, an incidental and ghostly presence in this sumptuous display. By the mid-thirties, virtually all the great primary revolutions of twentieth-century painting had already occurred, including Fauvism, with its arbitrary, expressive color, and Cubism, with its reorganization of Renaissance pictorial space. Moreover, painting had found its way to pure abstraction in various forms. Perfectly aware of all this, Bonnard was nonetheless content to go his own way. In the work seen here, for instance, there is evidence that he had looked closely at Fauve and



3.27 Pierre Bonnard, *Dining Room on the Garden*, 1934–35. Oil on canvas, 50% × 53½" (127.3 × 135.9 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

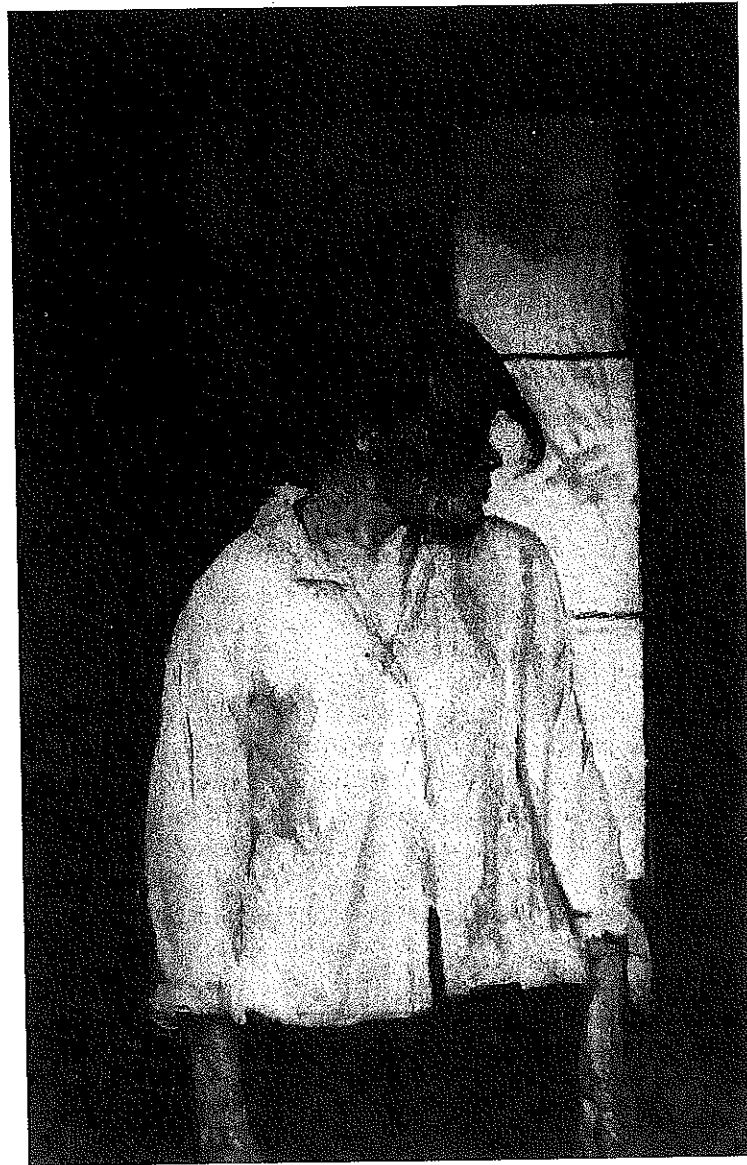
Cubist paintings, particularly the works of Matisse—who was a devoted admirer of his—and had used what he wanted of the new approaches without at any time changing his basic attitudes.

Toulouse-Lautrec

Although **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec** (1864–1901) may be seen as the heir of Daumier in the field of printmaking, he also served, along with his contemporaries Gauguin and Van Gogh, as one of the principal bridges between nineteenth-century avant-garde painting and the early twentieth-century experiments of Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse. Lautrec was interested in Goya and the line drawings of Ingres, but he was above all a passionate disciple of Degas, both in his admiration of Degas's draftsmanship and in the disengaged attitude and calculated formal strategies he brought to the depiction of his favorite subjects—the theaters, brothels, and bohemian cabarets of Paris.

Due to years of inbreeding in his old, aristocratic family, Lautrec was permanently disfigured from a congenital disease that weakened his bones. Against his family's wishes, he pursued art as a profession after receiving an education in the private Parisian studios of Léon Bonnat and Fernand Cormon, painters who provided students with a more open and tolerant atmosphere than that found in the *École des Beaux-Arts*. In Cormon's studio Lautrec met Bernard and Van Gogh, both of whom he rendered in early portraits.

Lautrec is best known for his color lithographs in the 1890s of performers in Montmartre dance halls, but in the previous decade he had proved himself to be a sensitive portraitist with paintings and drawings of a colorful cast of characters, including Carmen Gaudin, the woman portrayed in "*À Montrouge*"—*Rosa La Rouge* (fig. 3.28). The artist was drawn to the simple clothes, unruly red hair, and tough look of this young working-class woman, who, arms dangling informally, averts her face as she is momentarily



3.28 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, "*À Montrouge*"—*Rosa La Rouge*, 1886–87. Oil on canvas, 28½ × 19¼" (72.4 × 48.9 cm). The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania.



3.29 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin Rouge—La Goulue*, 1891. Color lithograph, 6'3¼" × 4' (1.9 × 1.2 m). Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

silhouetted against the lighted window. Lautrec creates this simplified composition out of his characteristically long strokes of color in warm, subdued tonalities. But the somber mood of the painting has also to do with its subject. Lautrec's painting was inspired by a gruesome song written by his bohemian friend, the famous cabaret singer Aristide Bruant, about a prostitute who conspires to kill her clients.

The naturalism of Lautrec's early portraits gave way in the 1890s to the brightly colored and stylized works that make his name synonymous with turn-of-the-century

Paris. His earliest lithographic poster, designed for the notorious dance hall called the Moulin Rouge (fig. 3.29), features the scandalous talents of La Goulue ("the greedy one"), a dancer renowned for her gymnastic and erotic interpretations of the *chahut*, the dance that had attracted Seurat in 1889 (see fig. 3.3). Lautrec's superb graphic sensibility is apparent in the eye-catching shapes that, albeit abbreviated, were the result of long observation. Their snappy curves and crisp silhouettes were born of an Art Nouveau aesthetic (see chapter 5) that dominated the arts across Europe at the time.