26

IN SEARCH OF NEW STANDARDS

The late nineteenth century

Superficially, the end of the nineteenth century was a period of great prosperity and even complacency. But the artists and writers who felt themselves outsiders were increasingly dissatisfied with the aims and methods of the art that pleased the public. Architecture provided the easiest target for their attacks. Building had developed into an empty routine. We remember how the large blocks of flats, factories and public buildings of the vastly expanding cities were erected in a motley of styles which lacked any relation to the purpose of the buildings. Often it seemed as if the engineers had first erected a structure to suit the natural requirements of the building, and a bit of 'Art' had then been pasted on the façade in the form of ornament taken from one of the pattern books on 'historical styles'. It is strange how long the majority of architects were satisfied with this procedure. This public demanded these columns, pilasters, cornices and mouldings, so these architects provided them. But towards the end of the nineteenth century an increasing number of people became aware of the absurdity of this fashion. In England in particular, critics and artists were unhappy about the general decline in craftsmanship caused by the Industrial Revolution, and hated the very sight of these cheap and tawdry machine-made imitations of ornament which had once had a meaning and a nobility of its own. Men like John Ruskin and William Morris dreamt of a thorough reform of the arts and crafts, and the replacement of cheap mass-production by conscientious and meaningful handiwork. The influence of their criticism was very widespread even though the humble handicrafts which they advocated proved, under modern conditions, to be the greatest of luxuries. Their propaganda could not possibly abolish industrial mass-production, but it helped to open people's eyes to the problems this had raised, and to spread a taste for the genuine, simple and 'homespun'.

Ruskin and Morris had still hoped that the regeneration of art could be brought about by a return to medieval conditions. But many artists saw that this was an impossibility. They longed for a 'New Art' based on a new feeling for design and for the possibilities inherent in each material. This banner of a new art or *Art Nouveau* was raised in the 1890s. Architects

experimented with new types of material and new types of ornament. The Greek orders had been developed from primitive timber structures, *page 77*, and had provided the stock-in-trade of architectural decoration since the Renaissance, *pages 224, 250*. Was it not high time that the new architecture of iron and glass that had grown up almost unobserved in railway stations, *page 520*, and industrial structures should develop an ornamental style of its own? And if the Western tradition was too much wedded to the old building methods, would the East perhaps provide a new set of patterns and new ideas?

This must have been the reasoning behind the designs of the Belgian architect Victor Horta (1861–1947) that made an immediate hit. Horta had learned from Japan to discard symmetry and to relish the effect of swerving curves that we remember from Eastern art, *page 148*. But he was no mere imitator. He transposed these lines into iron structures that went well with modern requirements, *figure 349*. For the first time since Brunelleschi, European builders were offered an entirely new style. No wonder that these inventions became identified with *Art Nouveau*.

For this self-consciousness about 'style' and this hope that Japan might help Europe to get out of the impasse were not confined to architecture, but the feeling of uneasiness and dissatisfaction with the achievements of nineteenth-century painting which took hold of young artists towards the end of the period is less easy to explain. Yet it is important that we should understand its roots, because it was out of this feeling that there grew the various movements which are now usually called 'Modern Art'. Some people may consider the Impressionists the first of the moderns, because they defied certain rules of painting as taught in the academies. But it is well to remember that the Impressionists did not differ in their aims from the traditions of art that had developed since the discovery of nature in the Renaissance. They, too, wanted to paint nature as we see it, and their quarrel with the conservative masters was not so much over the aim as over the means of achieving it. Their exploration of colour reflexes, their experiments with the effect of loose brushwork, aimed at creating an even more perfect replica of the visual impression. It was only in Impressionism, in fact, that the conquest of nature had become complete, that everything that presented itself to the painter's eye could become the motif of a picture, and that the real world in all its aspects became a worthy object of the artist's study. Perhaps it was just this complete triumph of their methods which made some artists hesitate to accept them. It seemed, for a moment, as if all the problems of an art aiming at the imitation of the visual impression had been solved, and as if nothing was to be gained by pursuing these aims any further.

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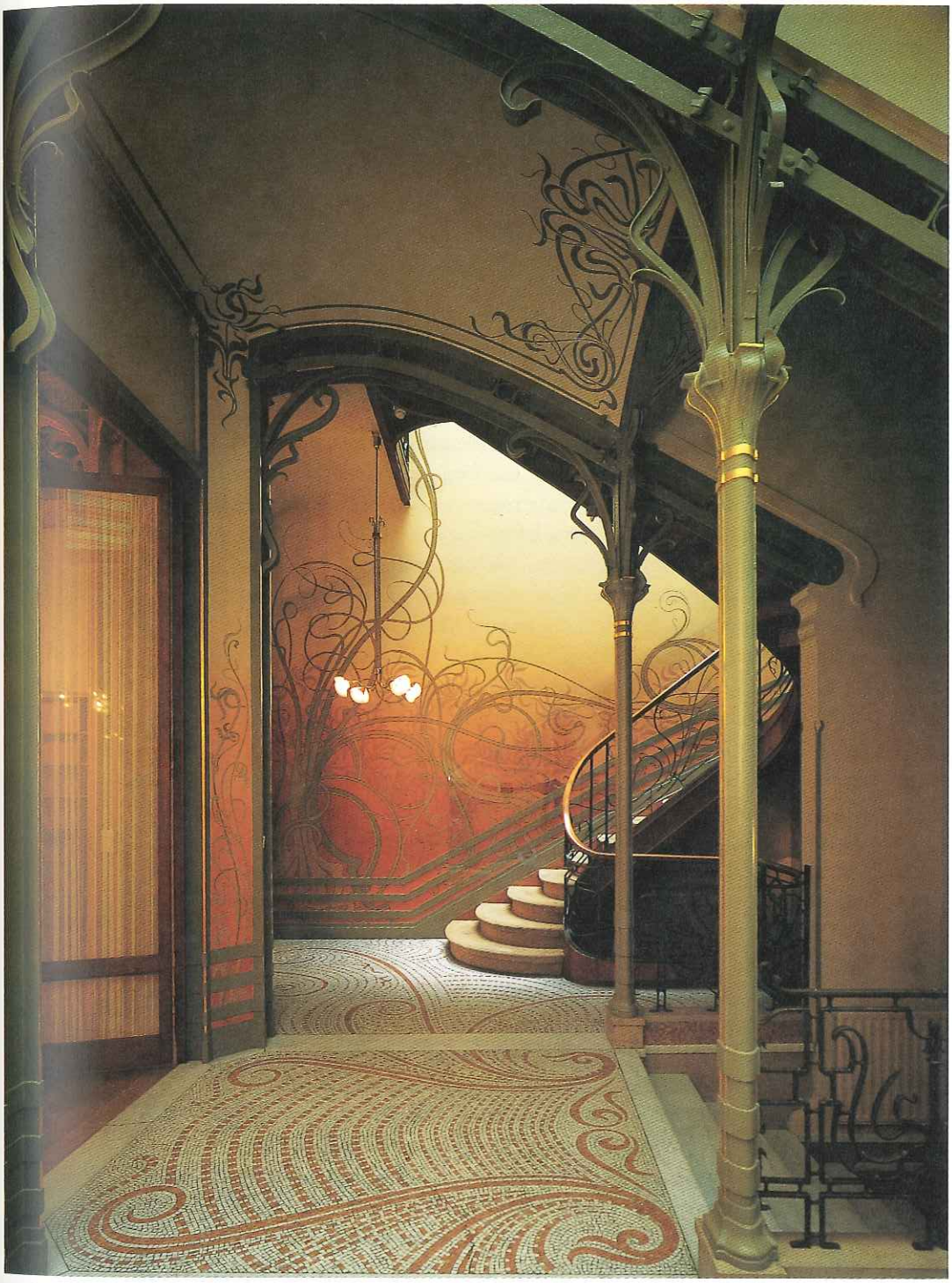
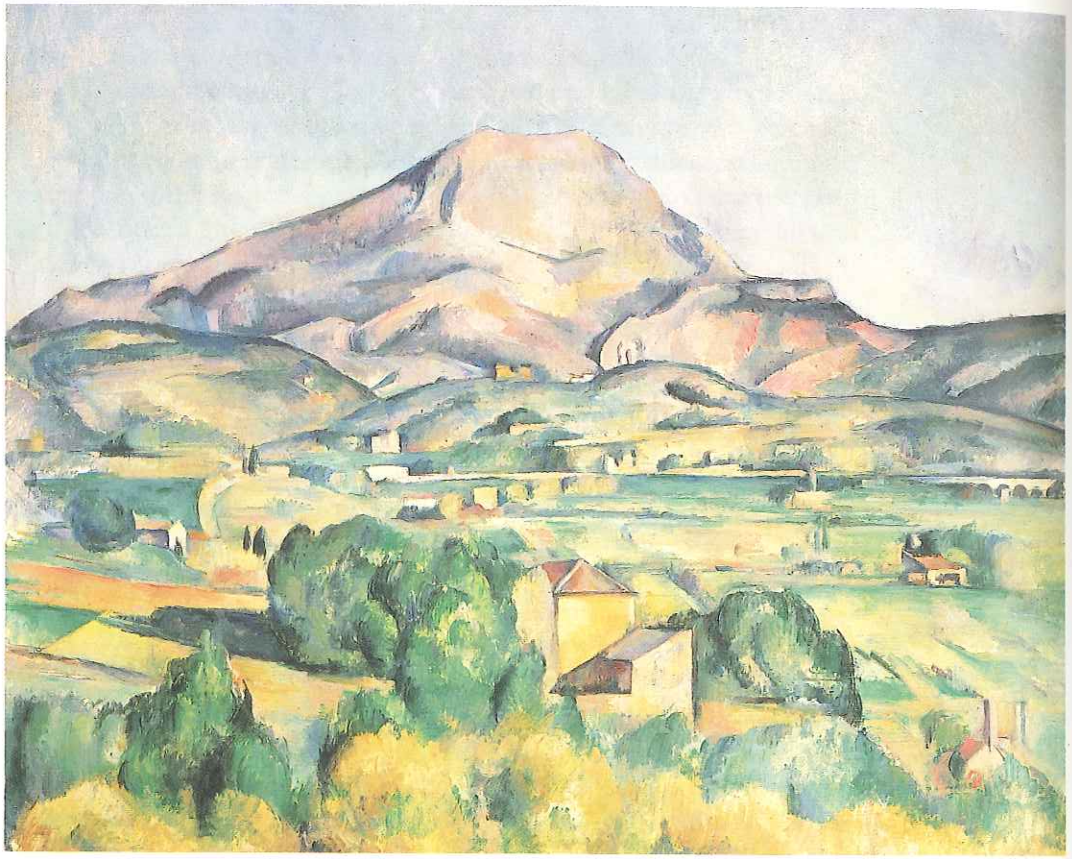
Victor Horta
Staircase, Hôtel Tassel, rue Paul-Émile Janson, Brussels, 1893
An *Art Nouveau* house



But we know that in art one problem need only be solved for a host of new ones to appear in its stead. Perhaps the first who had a clear feeling of the nature of these new problems was an artist who still belonged to the same generation as the Impressionist masters. He was Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), who was only seven years younger than Manet, and even two years older than Renoir. In his youth Cézanne took part in the Impressionist exhibitions, but was so disgusted by the reception accorded them that he withdrew to his native town of Aix-en-Provence, where he studied the problems of his art, undisturbed by the clamour of the critics. He was a man of independent means and regular habits, and was not dependent on finding buyers for his pictures. Thus he could dedicate his whole life to the solution of the artistic problems he had set himself, and could apply the most exacting standards to his own work. Outwardly, he lived a life of tranquillity and leisure, but he was constantly engaged in a passionate struggle to achieve in his painting that ideal of artistic perfection after which he strove. He was no friend of theoretical talk, but as his fame among his few admirers grew he did sometimes try to explain to them in a few words what he wanted to do. One of his reported remarks was that he aimed at painting 'Poussin from nature'. What he wanted to say was that the old classical masters such as Poussin had achieved a wonderful balance and perfection in their work. A painting like Poussin's 'Et in Arcadia ego', *page 395, figure 254*, presents a beautifully harmonious pattern in which one shape seems to answer the other. We feel that everything is in its place, and nothing is casual or vague. Each form stands out clearly and one can visualize it as a firm, solid body. The whole has a natural simplicity which looks restful and calm. Cézanne aimed at an art which had something of this grandeur and serenity. But he did not think that it could be achieved any longer by the methods of Poussin. The old masters, after all, had accomplished that balance and solidity at a price. They did not feel bound to respect nature as they saw it. Their pictures are rather arrangements of forms they had learned from the study of classical antiquity. Even the impression of space and solidity was achieved through the application of firm traditional rules rather than through looking at each object anew. Cézanne agreed with his friends among the Impressionists that these methods of academic art were contrary to nature. He admired the new discoveries in the field of colour and modelling. He, too, wanted to surrender to his impressions, to paint the forms and colours he saw, not those he knew about or had learned about. But he felt uneasy about the direction painting had taken. The Impressionists were true masters in painting 'nature'. But was that really enough? Where was that striving for a harmonious design, the achievement of solid simplicity and perfect balance which had marked

the greatest paintings of the past? The task was to paint 'from nature', to make use of the discoveries of the Impressionist masters, and yet to recapture the sense of order and necessity that distinguished the art of Poussin.

In itself the problem was not new to art. We remember that the conquest of nature and the invention of perspective in the Italian *Quattrocento* had endangered the lucid arrangements of medieval paintings, and had created a problem which only Raphael's generation had been able to solve, *pages 262, 319*. Now the same question was repeated on a different plane. The dissolution of firm outlines in flickering light and the discovery of coloured shadows by the Impressionists had once again posed a new problem: how could these achievements be preserved without leading to a loss of clarity and order? To put it into simpler language: Impressionist pictures tended to be brilliant but messy. Cézanne abhorred messiness. Yet he did not want to return to the academic conventions of drawing and shading to create the illusion of solidity any more than he wanted to return to 'composed' landscapes to achieve harmonious designs. He was faced with an even more urgent issue when he pondered the right use of colour. Cézanne longed for strong, intense colours as much as he longed for lucid patterns. Medieval artists, we remember, *pages 181–3*, were able to satisfy this same desire freely because they were not bound to respect the actual appearance of things. As art had returned to the observation of nature, however, the pure and shining colours of medieval stained glass or book illuminations had given way to those mellow mixtures of tones with which the greatest painters among the Venetians, *page 326*, and the Dutch, *page 424*, contrived to suggest light and atmosphere. The Impressionists had given up mixing the pigments on the palette and had applied them separately on to the canvas in small dabs and dashes to render the flickering reflections of an 'open-air' scene. Their pictures were much brighter in tone than any of their predecessors but the result did not yet satisfy Cézanne. He wanted to convey the rich and unbroken tones that belong to nature under southern skies, but he found that a simple return to the painting of whole areas in pure primary colours endangered the illusion of reality. Pictures painted in this manner resemble flat patterns and fail to give the impression of depth. Thus Cézanne seemed to be caught up in contradictions all round. His wish to be absolutely faithful to his sense impressions in front of nature seemed to clash with his desire to turn – as he said – 'Impressionism into something more solid and enduring, like the art of the museums'. No wonder that he was often near despair, that he slaved at his canvas and never ceased to experiment. The real wonder is that he succeeded, that he achieved the apparently impossible in his pictures. If art were a



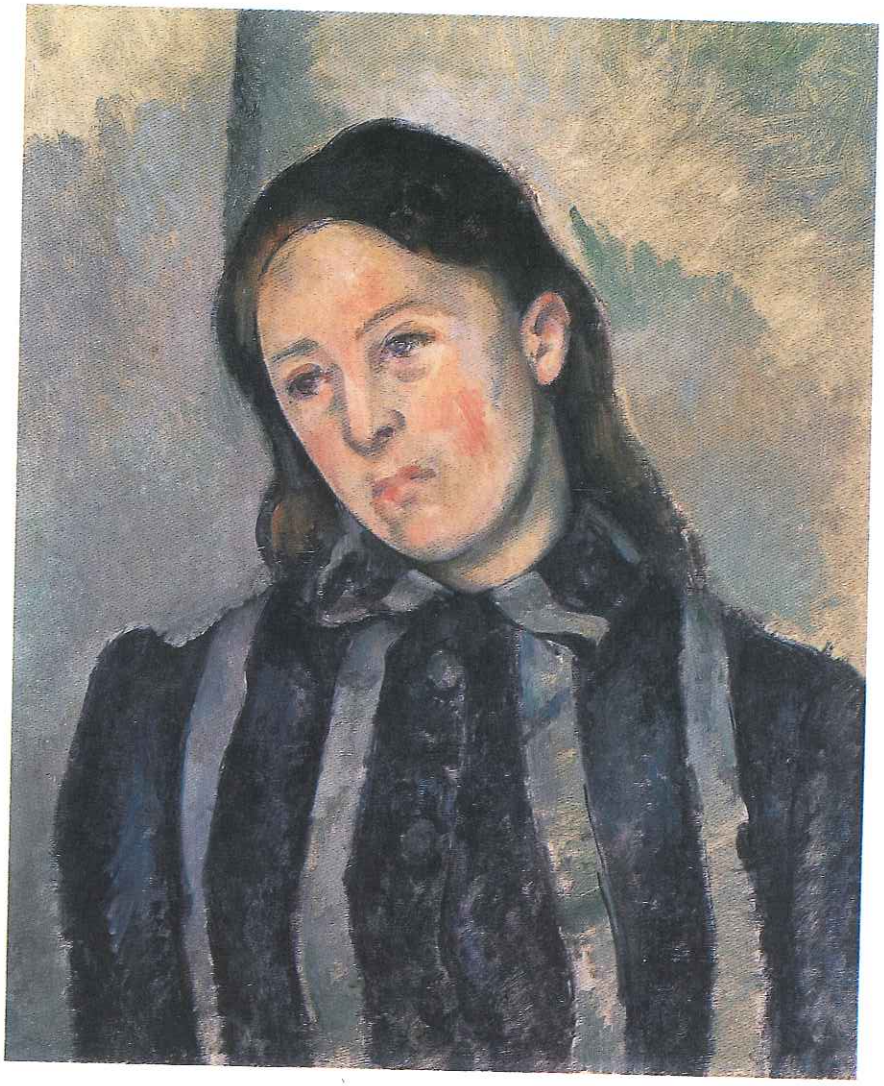
350
Paul Cézanne
Mont Sainte-Victoire seen from Bellevue, c. 1885
Oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm, 37½ × 51¼ in; Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania

matter of calculation it could not have been done; but of course it is not. This balance and harmony about which artists worry so much is not the same as the balance of machines. It suddenly 'happens', and no one quite knows how or why. Much has been written about the secret of Cézanne's art. All kinds of explanations have been suggested of what he wanted and what he achieved. But these explanations remain crude; sometimes they even sound self-contradictory. But even if we get impatient with the critics, there are always the pictures to convince us. And the best advice here and always is 'go and look at the pictures in the original'.

Even our illustrations, however, should at least convey something of the greatness of Cézanne's triumph. The landscape with Mont Sainte-Victoire

351
Paul Cézanne
Mountains in Provence, 1886–90
Oil on canvas, 63.5 × 79.4 cm, 25 × 31¼ in; National Gallery, London

in southern France, *figure 350*, is bathed in light and yet firm and solid. It presents a lucid pattern and yet gives the impression of great depth and distance. There is a sense of order and repose in the way Cézanne marked the horizontal of the viaduct and road in the centre and the verticals of the house in the foreground, but nowhere do we feel that it is an order which Cézanne has imposed on nature. Even his brushstrokes are so arranged as to fall in with the main lines of the design and to strengthen the feeling of natural harmony. The way in which Cézanne altered the direction of his brushstroke without ever resorting to outline drawing can also be seen in *figure 351*, which shows how deliberately the artist counteracted the effect of the flat pattern which might have resulted in the upper half by emphasizing the solid tangible forms of the rocks in the foreground. His

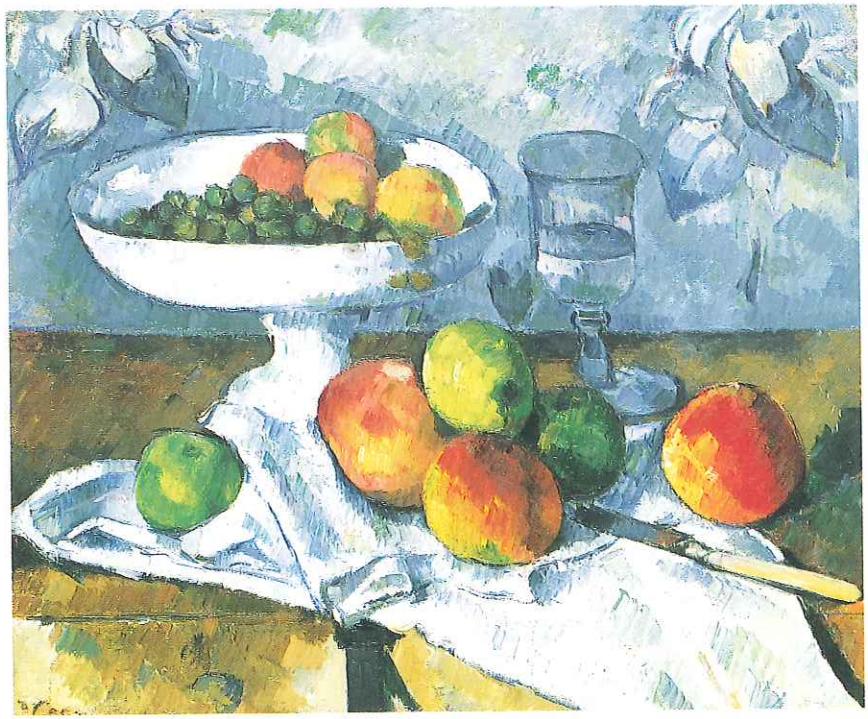


352
Paul Cézanne
Mme Cézanne,
1883–7
Oil on canvas, 62 × 51 cm, 24⅜ × 20 in; Philadelphia Museum of Art

wonderful portrait of his wife, *figure 352*, shows how greatly Cézanne's concentration on simple, clear-cut forms contributes to the impression of poise and tranquillity. Compared with such calm masterpieces, the works of the Impressionists such as Manet's portrait of Monet, *page 518*, *figure 337*, often look like merely witty improvisations.

Admittedly there are paintings by Cézanne which are not so easily understood. In an illustration, a still life such as *figure 353* may not look too promising. How awkward it seems if we compare it with the assured treatment of a similar subject by the Dutch seventeenth-century master Kalf, *page 431*, *figure 280*! The fruit-bowl is so clumsily drawn that its foot

does not even rest in the middle. The table not only slopes from left to right, it also looks as if it were tilted forward. Where the Dutch master excelled in the rendering of soft and fluffy surfaces Cézanne gives us a patchwork of colour dabs which make the napkin look as if it were made of tinfoil. Small wonder that Cézanne's paintings were at first derided as pathetic daubs. But the reason for this apparent clumsiness is not far to seek. Cézanne had ceased to take any of the traditional methods of painting for granted. He had decided to start from scratch as if no painting had been done before him. The Dutch master had painted his still life to display his stupendous virtuosity. Cézanne had chosen his motifs to study some specific problems that he wanted to solve. We know that he was fascinated by the relation of colour to modelling. A brightly coloured round solid such as an apple was an ideal motif to explore this question. We know that he was interested in the achievement of a balanced design. That is why he stretched the bowl to the left so as to fill a void. As he wanted to study all the shapes on the table in their relationships he simply tilted it forward to make them come into view. Perhaps the example shows how it happened that Cézanne became the father of 'modern art'. In his tremendous effort to achieve a sense of depth without sacrificing the brightness of colours, to achieve an orderly arrangement without

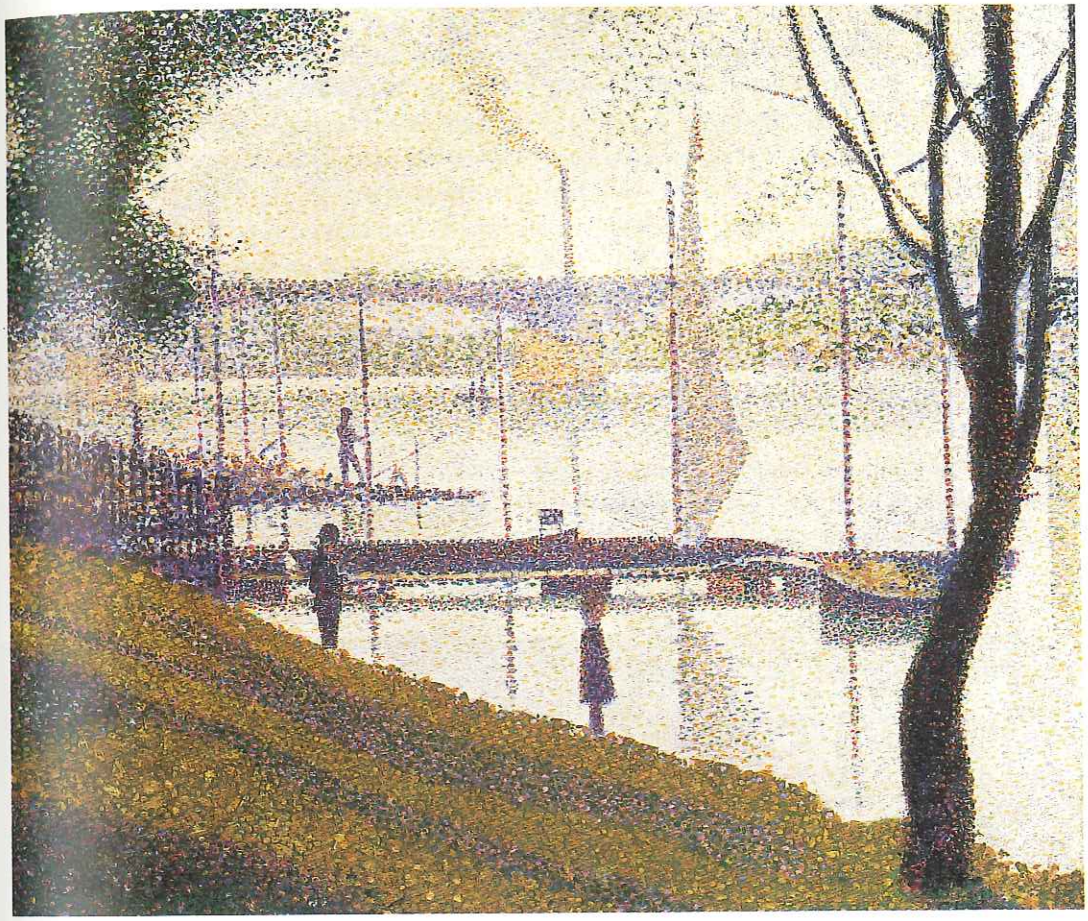


353
Paul Cézanne
Still life, *c.* 1879–82
Oil on canvas, 46 × 55 cm, 18⅛ × 21⅝ in; private collection

sacrificing the sense of depth – in all the struggles and gropings there was one thing he was prepared to sacrifice if need be: the conventional 'correctness' of outline. He was not out to distort nature; but he did not mind very much if it became distorted in some minor detail provided this helped him to obtain the desired effect. Brunelleschi's invention of 'linear perspective', *page 229*, did not interest him overmuch. He threw it overboard when he found that it hampered him in his work. After all, this scientific perspective had been invented to help painters create the illusion of space – as Masaccio had done in his fresco in Sta Maria Novella, *page 228, figure 149*. Cézanne did not aim at creating an illusion. He wanted rather to convey the feeling of solidity and depth, and he found he could do that without conventional draughtsmanship. He hardly realized that this example of indifference to 'correct drawing' would start a landslide in art.

While Cézanne was groping for a conciliation of the methods of Impressionism and the need for order, a much younger artist, Georges Seurat (1859–91), set out to tackle this question almost like a mathematical equation. Using the Impressionist painting method as a starting point, he studied the scientific theory of colour vision and decided to build up his pictures by means of small regular dabs of unbroken colour like a mosaic. This, he hoped, would lead to the colours blending in the eye (or rather in the mind) without their losing in intensity and luminosity. But this extreme technique, which became known as pointillism, naturally endangered the legibility of his paintings by avoiding all contours and breaking up every form into areas of multicoloured dots. Seurat was thus driven to compensate for the complexity of his painting technique by an even more radical simplification of forms than anything Cézanne had ever contemplated, *figure 354*. There is something almost Egyptian in Seurat's emphasis on verticals and horizontals which led him increasingly further away from the faithful rendering of natural appearances and towards an exploration of interesting and expressive patterns.

In the winter of 1888, while Seurat was attracting attention in Paris and Cézanne was working in his seclusion in Aix, an earnest young Dutchman left Paris for southern France in search of the intense light and colour of the South. He was Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh was born in Holland in 1853, the son of a pastor. He was a deeply religious man who had worked as a lay preacher in England and among Belgian miners. He had been deeply impressed by the art of Millet, *page 508*, and its social message, and decided to become a painter himself. His younger brother, Theo, who worked in an art-dealer's shop, introduced him to Impressionist painters. This brother was a remarkable man. Though he was poor himself, he always gave ungrudgingly to the older Vincent and even financed his journey to Arles in southern France. Vincent hoped that if he could work there undisturbed for

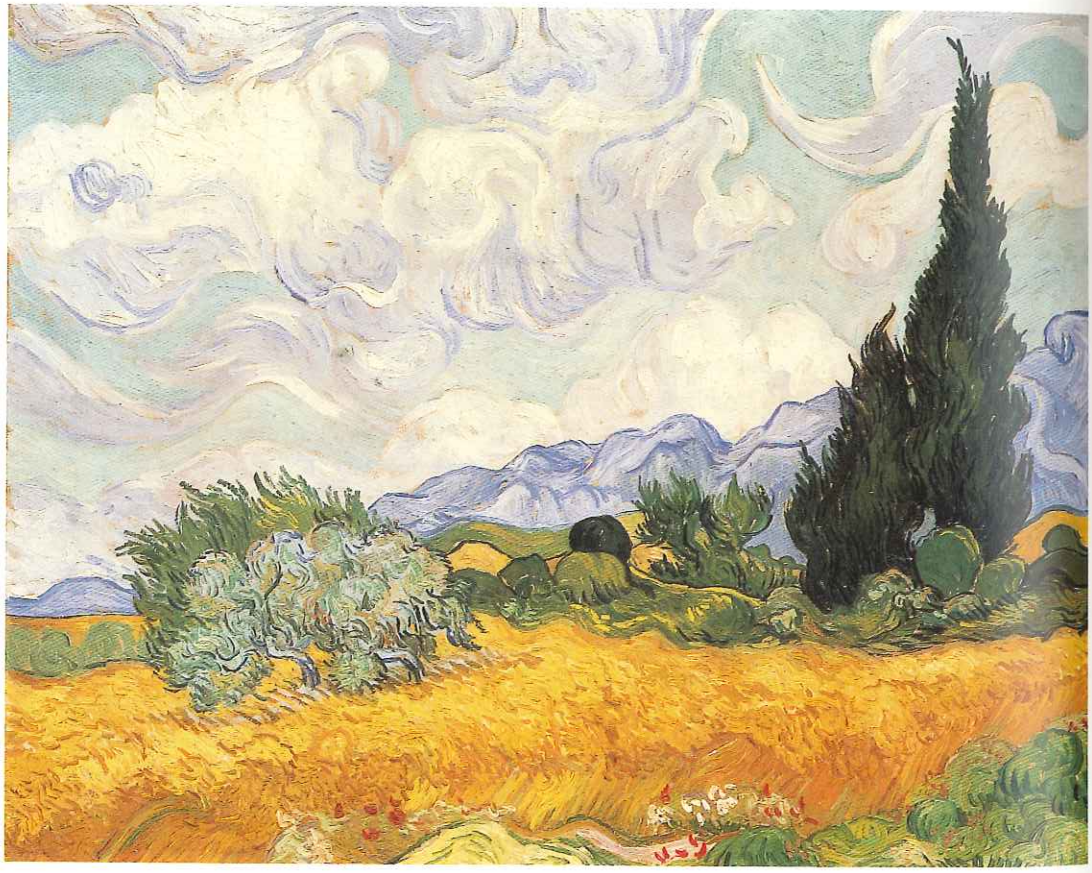


354
Georges Seurat
The bridge at Courbevoie, 1886–7
Oil on canvas, 46.4 × 55.3 cm, 18¼ × 21¾ in; Courtauld Institute Galleries, London

a number of years he might one day be able to sell his pictures and repay his generous brother. In his self-chosen solitude in Arles, Vincent set down all his ideas and hopes in his letters to Theo, which read like a continuous diary. These letters, by a humble and almost self-taught artist who had no idea of the fame he was to achieve, are among the most moving and exciting in all literature. In them we can feel the artist's sense of mission, his struggle and triumphs, his desperate loneliness and longing for companionship, and we become aware of the immense strain under which he worked with feverish energy. After less than a year, in December 1888, he broke down and had an attack of insanity. In May 1889 he went into a mental asylum, but he still had lucid intervals during which he continued to paint. The agony lasted for another fourteen months. In July 1890 Van Gogh put an end to his life – he was thirty-seven like Raphael, and his career as a painter had not lasted more than ten years; the paintings on which his fame rests were all painted during three years which were interrupted by crises and despair. Most people

nowadays know some of these paintings; the sunflowers, the empty chair, the cypresses and some of the portraits have become popular in coloured reproductions and can be seen in many a simple room. That is exactly what Van Gogh wanted. He wanted his pictures to have the direct and strong effect of the coloured Japanese prints, *page 525*, he admired so much. He longed for an unsophisticated art which would not only appeal to rich connoisseurs but give joy and consolation to every human being. Nevertheless this is not quite the whole story. No reproduction is perfect. The cheaper ones make Van Gogh's pictures look cruder than they really are, and one may sometimes tire of them. Whenever that happens, it is quite a revelation to return to Van Gogh's original works and to discover how subtle and deliberate he could be even in his strongest effects.

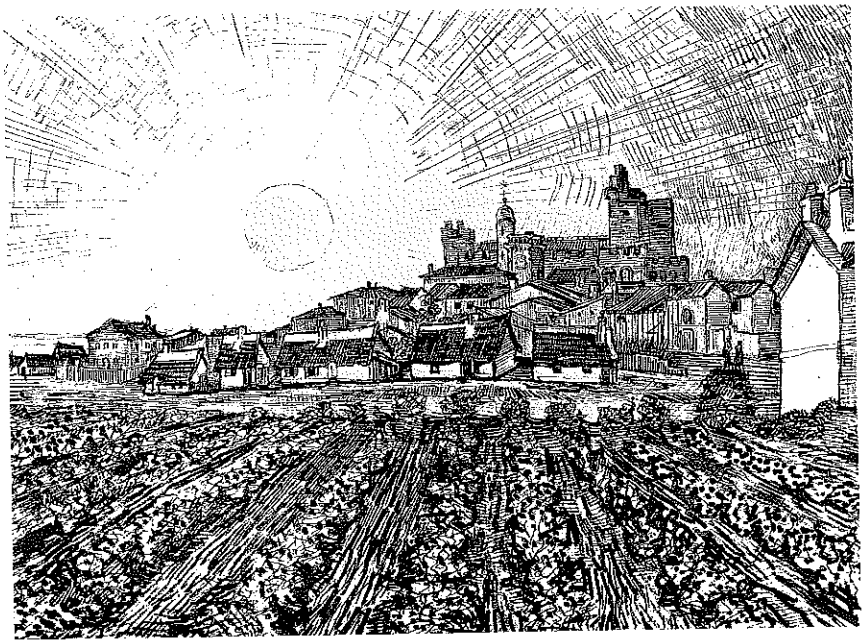
For Van Gogh, too, had absorbed the lessons of Impressionism and of Seurat's pointillism. He liked the technique of painting in dots and strokes of pure colour, but under his hands it became something rather different from what these Paris artists had meant it to be. Van Gogh used the



355
Vincent van Gogh
Cornfield with cypresses, 1889
Oil on canvas, 72.1 × 90.9 cm, 28¾ × 35¾ in; National Gallery, London

individual brushstrokes not only to break up the colour but also to convey his own excitement. In one of his letters from Arles he describes his state of inspiration when 'the emotions are sometimes so strong that one works without being aware of working ... and the strokes come with a sequence and coherence like words in a speech or a letter'. The comparison could not be clearer. In such moments he painted as other men write. Just as the appearance of a handwritten page, the traces left by the pen on the paper, impart something of the gestures of the writer, so that we feel instinctively when a letter was written under great stress of emotion – so the brushstrokes of Van Gogh tell us something of the state of his mind. No artist before him had ever used this means with such consistency and effect. We remember that there is bold and loose brushwork in earlier paintings, in works by Tintoretto, *page 370*, *figure 237*, by Hals, *page 417*, *figure 270*, and by Manet, *page 518*, *figure 337*, but in these it rather conveys the artist's sovereign mastery, his quick perception and magic capacity for conjuring up a vision. In Van Gogh it helps to convey the exaltation of the artist's mind. Van Gogh liked to paint objects and scenes which gave this new means full scope – motifs in which he could draw as well as paint with his brush, and lay on the colour thick just like a writer who underlines his words. That is why he was the first painter to discover the beauty of stubble, hedgerows and cornfields, of the gnarled branches of olive trees and the dark, flamelike shapes of the cypress, *figure 355*.

Van Gogh was in such a frenzy of creation that he felt the urge not only to draw the radiant sun itself, *figure 356*, but also to paint humble, restful



356
Vincent van Gogh
View of Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, 1888
Quill pen and indian ink on paper, 43.5 × 60 cm, 17¼ × 23¾ in; Sammlung Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur

and homely things which no one had ever thought of as being worthy of the artist's attention. He painted his narrow lodgings in Arles, *figure 357*, and what he wrote about this painting to his brother explains his intentions wonderfully well:

I had a new idea in my head and here is the sketch to it … this time it's just simply my bedroom, only here colour is to do everything, and, giving by its simplification a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here of rest *or of sleep in general. In a word, to look at the picture ought to rest the brain or rather the imagination.*

The walls are pale violet. The ground is of red tiles. The wood of the bed and chairs is the yellow of fresh butter, the sheets and pillows very light greenish lemon. The coverlet scarlet. The window green. The toilet-table orange, the basin blue. The doors lilac.

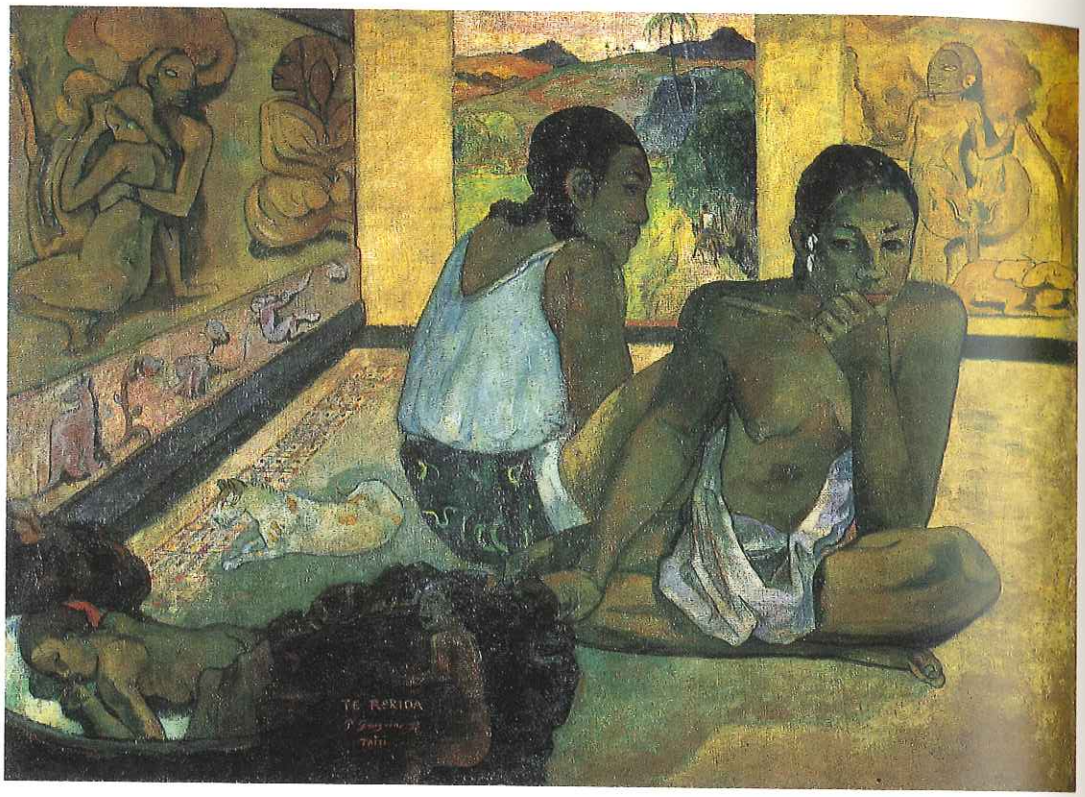
And that is all – there is nothing in this room with closed shutters. The broad lines of the furniture, again, must express absolute rest. Portraits on the walls, and a mirror and a towel and some clothes.

The frame – as there is no white in the picture – will be white. This by way of revenge for the enforced rest I was obliged to take.

I shall work at it again all day, but you see how simple the conception is. The shading and the cast shadows are suppressed, it is painted in free flat washes like the Japanese prints …

357
Vincent van Gogh
The artist's room in Arles, 1889
Oil on canvas, 57.5 × 74 cm, 22⅝ × 29⅛ in; Musée d'Orsay, Paris

It is clear that Van Gogh was not mainly concerned with correct representation. He used colours and forms to convey what he felt about the things he painted, and what he wished others to feel. He did not care much for what he called 'stereoscopic reality', that is to say, the photographically exact picture of nature. He would exaggerate and even change the appearance of things if this suited his aim. Thus he had arrived by a different road at a juncture similar to that at which Cézanne found himself during these same years. Both took the momentous step of deliberately abandoning the aim of painting as an 'imitation of nature'. Their reasons, of course, were different. When Cézanne painted a still life, he wanted to explore the relationship of forms and colours, and took in only so much of 'correct perspective' as he happened to need for his particular experiment. Van Gogh wanted his paintings to express what he felt, and if distortion helped him to achieve this aim he would use distortion. Both of them had arrived at this point without wanting to overthrow the old standards of art. They did not pose as 'revolutionaries'; they did not want to shock the complacent critics. Both of them, in fact, had almost given up hope of anybody paying attention to their pictures – they just worked on because they had to.



358
Paul Gauguin
Te Rerioa (Day-dreaming), 1897
Oil on canvas, 95.1 × 130.2 cm, 37½ × 51¼ in; Courtauld Institute Galleries, London

It was rather different with a third artist who was also to be found in southern France in 1888 – Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). Van Gogh had a great desire for companionship; he dreamed of a brotherhood of artists such as the Pre-Raphaelites had founded in England, *pages 511–12*, and he persuaded Gauguin, who was five years older, to join him in Arles. As a man, Gauguin was very different from Van Gogh. He had none of his humility and sense of mission. On the contrary, he was proud and ambitious. But there were some points of contact between the two. Like Van Gogh, Gauguin had started painting comparatively late in life (he had been a well-to-do stockbroker); like him, he was almost self-taught. The companionship of the two, however, ended in disaster. Van Gogh, in a fit of madness, attacked Gauguin, who fled to Paris. Two years later, Gauguin left Europe altogether and went to one of the proverbial 'South Sea Islands', Tahiti, in search of the simple life. For he had more and more become convinced that art was in danger of becoming slick and superficial, that all the cleverness and knowledge which had been accumulated in Europe had deprived men of the greatest gift – strength and intensity of feeling, and a direct way of expressing it.

Gauguin, of course, was not the first artist to have these qualms about civilization. Ever since artists had become self-conscious about 'style' they felt distrustful of conventions and impatient of mere skill. They longed for an art which did not consist of tricks which can be learned, for a style which was no mere style, but something strong and powerful like human passion. Delacroix had gone to Algiers to look for more intense colours and a life of less restraint, *page 506*. The Pre-Raphaelites in England hoped to find this directness and simplicity in the unspoilt art of the 'Age of Faith'. The Impressionists admired the Japanese, but theirs was a sophisticated art compared with the intensity and simplicity for which Gauguin longed. At first he studied peasant art, but it did not hold him for long. He needs must get away from Europe and live among the natives of the South Seas as one of them, to work out his own salvation. The works he brought back from there puzzled even some of his former friends. They seemed so savage and primitive. That was just what Gauguin wanted. He was proud to be called 'barbarian'. Even his colour and draughtsmanship should be 'barbaric' to do justice to the unspoilt children of nature he had come to admire during his stay in Tahiti. Looking at one of these pictures today, *figure 358*, we may not quite succeed in recapturing this mood. We have become used to much greater 'savagery' in art. And yet it is not difficult to realize that Gauguin struck a new note. It is not only the subject-matter of his pictures that is strange and exotic. He tried to enter into the spirit of the natives and to look at things as they did. He studied the methods of native craftsmen and often included representations of their works in his pictures. He strove to bring his own portraits of the natives into harmony with this 'primitive' art. So he simplified the outlines of forms and did not shrink from using large patches of strong colour. Unlike Cézanne, he did not mind if these simplified forms and colour-schemes made his pictures look flat. He gladly ignored the centuries-old problems of Western art when he thought that this helped him to render the unspoilt intensity of nature's children. He may not always have fully succeeded in his aim of achieving directness and simplicity. But his longing for it was as passionate and sincere as that of Cézanne for a new harmony, and that of Van Gogh for a new message; for Gauguin, too, sacrificed his life to his ideal. He felt himself misunderstood in Europe and decided to return to the South Sea Islands for good. After years of loneliness and disappointment, he died there of ill-health and privation.

Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin were three desperately lonely men, who worked on with little hope of ever being understood. But the problems of their art about which they felt so strongly were seen by more and more artists of the younger generation who found no satisfaction in

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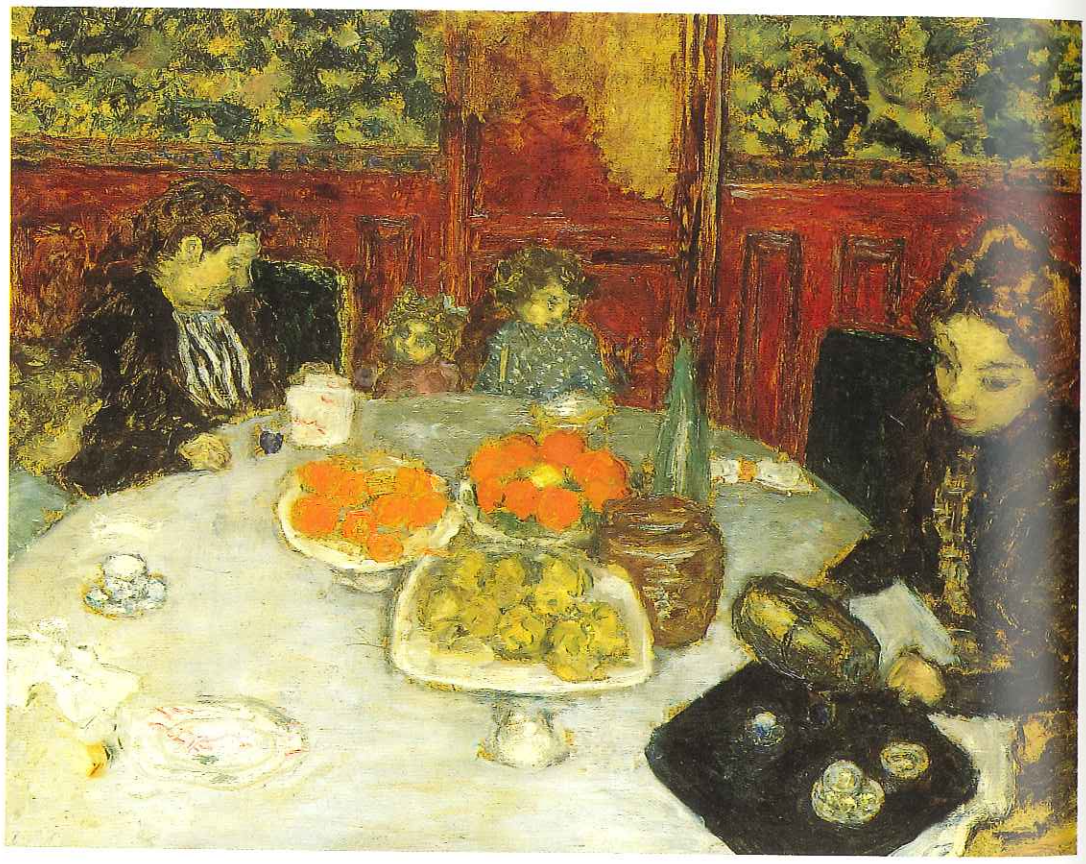
Pierre Bonnard
At the table, 1899

Oil on board, 55 × 70 cm, 21¾ × 27⅝ in; Stiftung Sammlung E.G. Bührle, Zurich



360
Ferdinand Hodler
Lake Thun, 1905
Oil on canvas, 80.2 × 100 cm, 31⅝ × 39⅜ in; Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva

the skills they acquired at the art schools. They had learned how to represent nature, how to draw correctly and how to use paint and brush; they had even absorbed the lessons of the Impressionist Revolution and became deft in conveying the flicker of sunlight and air. Some great artists indeed persevered along this path, and championed these new methods in countries where resistance against Impressionism was still strong, but many painters of the younger generation searched for new methods to solve, or at least to bypass, the difficulties that Cézanne had felt. Basically these difficulties arose from that clash (discussed earlier, *pages 494–5*) between the need for tonal gradation to suggest depth and the desire to preserve the beauty of the colours we see. The art of the Japanese had convinced them that a picture could make a much stronger impression if modelling and other details were sacrificed to bold simplification. Both Van Gogh and Gauguin had gone a certain way along this road, enhancing their colours and disregarding the impression of depth, and Seurat had gone even further in his experiments with pointillism. Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) showed particular skill and sensitivity in suggesting a sense of light and colour flickering on the canvas as if it were a tapestry. His painting of a spread table, *figure 359*, illustrates how he avoided a stress on perspective and depth in order to make us enjoy a colourful pattern. The Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918) boldly simplified his native scenery even further to achieve a poster-like clarity, *figure 360*.

It is no accident that this painting reminds us of posters, for it turned out that the approach which Europe had learned from the Japanese proved particularly suited to the art of advertising. It was before the

turn of the century that the gifted follower of Degas, *page 526*, Henri de Toulouse–Lautrec (1864–1901), resorted to such an economy of means for the new art of the poster, *figure 361*.

The art of illustration profited equally from the development of such effects. Remembering the love and care which earlier ages had bestowed on the production of books, men such as William Morris, *page 535*, would not want to tolerate badly produced books or illustrations that merely told a story regardless of their effect on the printed page. Inspired by Whistler and the Japanese, the young prodigy Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) rose to immediate fame all over Europe with his sophisticated black and white illustrations, *figure 362*.

The word of praise much used in this period of *Art Nouveau* was 'decorative'. Paintings and prints should present a pleasing pattern to the eye long before we can see what they represent. Slowly, but surely, this fashion for the decorative thus paved the way for a new approach to art. Fidelity to the motif or the telling of a moving story no longer mattered so much, provided the picture or print made a pleasing effect. And yet, some artists felt increasingly that in all this search something had gone out of art – something they desperately tried to retrieve. We remember that Cézanne had felt that what had been lost was the sense of order and balance; that the Impressionist preoccupation with the fleeting moment had made them neglect the solid and enduring forms of nature.

361
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Les Ambassadeurs: Aristide Bruant, 1892
Lithograph poster; 141.2 × 98.4 cm, 59¼ × 38¾ in

362
Aubrey Beardsley
Illustration to Oscar Wilde's 'Salome', 1894
Line-block and halftone on Japanese vellum; 34.3 × 27.3 cm, 13½ × 10¾ in

Van Gogh had felt that by surrendering to visual impressions, and by exploring nothing but the optical qualities of light and colour, art was in danger of losing that intensity and passion through which alone the artist can express his feeling to his fellow men. Gauguin, finally, was altogether dissatisfied with life and art as he found them. He longed for something much simpler and more direct and hoped to find it among the primitives. What we call modern art grew out of these feelings of dissatisfaction; and the various solutions after which these three painters had been groping became the ideals of three movements in modern art. Cézanne's solution ultimately led to Cubism, which originated in France; Van Gogh's to Expressionism, which found its main response in Germany; and Gauguin's to the various forms of Primitivism. However 'mad' these movements may have seemed at first, today it is not difficult to show that they were consistent attempts to escape from a deadlock in which artists found themselves.

Van Gogh painting sunflowers, 1888

Painting by Paul Gauguin; oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm, 28¾ × 36¼ in; Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam