

that otherwise would certainly collapse. Yet this is not the sort of thing that Degas' contemporaries were much concerned with.

Nevertheless, Degas' late work shows that same simplification and concentration that we find in Monet and Cézanne. After the 1870s he progressively limits his subject-matter until finally his exclusive concern is with his female model, whom he paints performing certain basic actions – washing and drying herself, stepping in and out of a tub (Ill. 83). Even the actual movement matters less and less, and though the presence of the figure is essential, Degas is now so emotionally detached that the woman's only function is to make the creation of a picture possible.

Figures tend to fill the paintings, excluding all other elements. One gets closer and closer to them, and this is perhaps a consequence of Degas' failing eyesight, as if he needed to reassure himself of their physical existence. Difficulties of vision also encouraged Degas' interest in sculpture; he had for long been in the habit of making three-dimensional studies to help in the preparation of pictures. But it would be a mistake with Degas, as with Monet, to attribute too many facets of his late work to a visual defect.

Degas was always interested in the craft of painting, and his ability as a draftsman was outstanding. Increasing dissatisfaction with oil paint led him to constant experiment, and he diluted the paint until it flowed across the canvas as easily as watercolour. He revived the use of pastel, sometimes in conjunction with thin oil washes, and the light and bright colour range of pastel dominates his later work. His final preference was for charcoal, often supported by pastel, and the lines are repeated and the emphasis on the form shifts within the painting much as it does in late portraits of Cézanne – the *Old Woman with the Rosary* (Ill. 41) for example.

Degas' best work, like Cézanne's and Monet's, was done at the end of a long career, at a time when younger generations had already surpassed it in invention and daring. Yet all three men approached the ultimate mysteries of painting, leaving behind pictures that silence us by their depth and profundity. On the threshold of the 20th century, it is the old men of the 19th who provide us with the touchstone to which we must constantly revert.



1 PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906)  
*Old Woman with the Rosary*, c.  
 1908. Oil on canvas, 31¾" x 25½"  
 (1 x 65.5). By courtesy of the  
 masters of the National Gallery,  
 London

from  
 Modern European Art  
 by  
 Allen Rosenberg

Inevitably the dissatisfaction with their own work that all the impressionist painters felt in the 1880s was reflected in the next generation. For Seurat, Van Gogh and Gauguin, the painting of Monet and his friends represented a final phase of naturalism which was inadequate to the demands of the time. They all became critical of a certain rivalry in the matter and manner of the new painting of the 1870s, and were convinced that something more fundamental, more profound, should take its place.

It was not clear, however, what the alternative should be, and in the later 1880s the avant-garde divided into two sometimes very hostile factions. Seurat and Gauguin were the respective leaders: neo-impressionist (or divisionist, or pointillist) and synthetist (or symbolist, or cloissonist) were the labels attached to them and to their followers and associates. But the antagonism was essentially one of personal antipathy and rivalry, and in some respects the two men had common ground. The greater artist of this generation, Vincent van Gogh, refused to commit himself entirely to the practices or beliefs of either.

The short career of Georges Seurat (1859–91) has the same kind of logic and precision that his own painting possesses. In place of the disorder and untidiness of the art of his time, whether academic or avant-garde, Seurat offered a carefully worked out alternative. At first he shared the confidence in scientific method of many of his late 19th century contemporaries, and seems to have believed it possible to put the art of painting on a quasi-scientific footing. He, like Courbet, was convinced that the final solution to all pictorial problems was near at hand. His preparation for implementing his ambition, on both theoretical and practical levels, was thorough, comprehensive and rapidly achieved. Born in Paris, he began with a conventional academic training at the

CHAPTER THREE  
 Post-Impressionism

Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where Ingres, though he had been dead for a decade, was still the dominant influence. Here Seurat drew male nudes and casts of Praxitelean and Hellenistic sculpture in an unmodelled, highly linear style: he copied paintings and drawings by Ingres, and by the Old Masters – Raphael, Poussin, Holbein – whom Ingres had so greatly admired. His own first paintings were unoriginal exercises in the tradition of Ingres and the then half-neglected, half-revered mural painter, Puvis de Chavannes (1824–98).

Once out of art school, and after a year's military service, Seurat very quickly extended his range of interest. He was undoubtedly deeply influenced by the great French peasant painter, Jean François Millet (1814–75), and adopted both his subjects and his manner of drawing. Seurat also learnt from Millet's contemporaries – Daubier, Courbet, Corot, Delacroix. By the time of the seventh impressionist exhibition in March 1882, Seurat was ready for impressionism, and the landscapes by Monet and Renoir and especially Pissarro encouraged him to paint a series of small oil studies of men at work, which are perhaps his first mature works (Ill. 42).

At the same time, Seurat had not been neglecting his theoretical training, for which, unlike most artists, he had developed a taste. As a student he had read Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, which had become a standard text since its first publication in 1867. In Blanc's book he found a discussion of Delacroix's views on colour, and a summary of an earlier treatise, Eugène Chevreul's *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (On the law of simultaneous contrast in colours), originally published in 1827. This was just a beginning: in 1880, many young artists felt that it was essential to bring the new scientific knowledge about colour and optics to the art of painting, and Seurat read everything he could find. Of particular importance to him were the articles by David Sutter on the phenomena of vision in the magazine *L'Art* of 1880, and the French translation in 1881 of an American book, Rood's *Modern Chromatics*.

Seurat organized his own artistic development like a military campaign, setting himself a succession of objectives to be achieved. At first he concentrated on drawing, experimenting with different methods of recording tonal values – long, diagonal, pencil hatching, with lines of varying densities; then the broader forms of



42 GEORGES SEURAT (1859–91) *Man with a Hoe*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 18" x 22" (47 x 56). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York



43 GEORGES SEURAT (1859–91) *Head of a Young Man* (detail of Ill. 46)

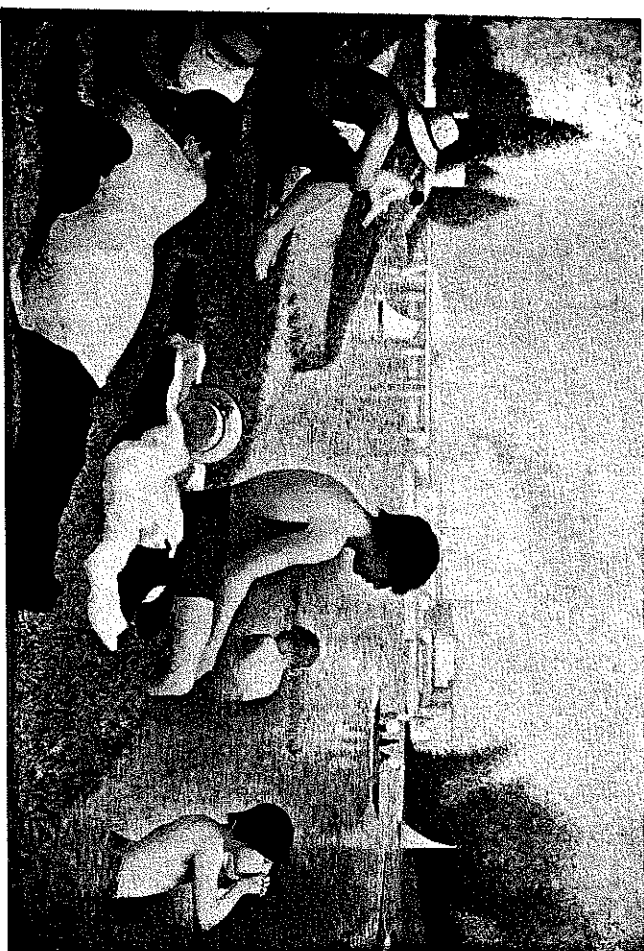
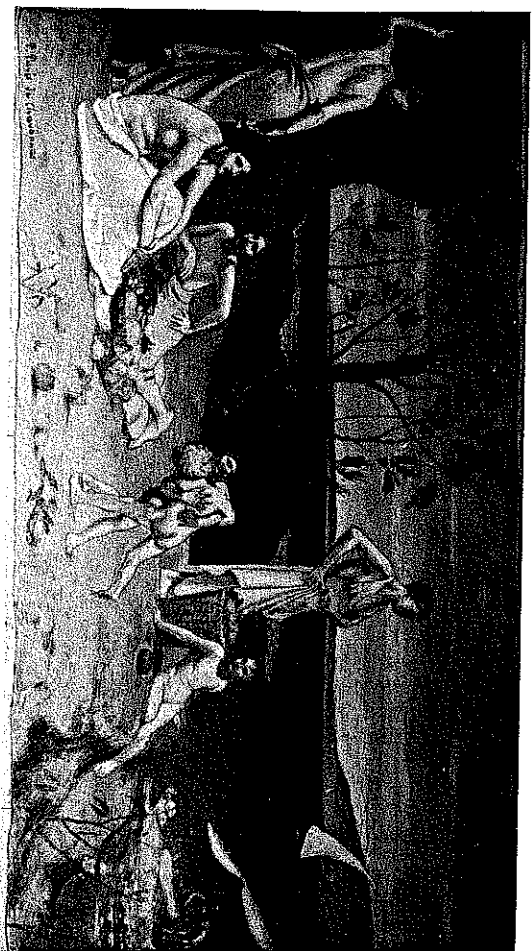


44 GEORGES SEURAT (1859-91)  
*The Artist's Mother*, 1882-83.  
 Conté crayon on paper, 13" x 9 1/2"  
 (32.5 x 24). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Joseph Pulitzer Bequest)

chiaroscuro shading, obtained by the use of the soft conté crayon. In his early drawings Seurat displays subtle gradations of tone, and a mastery over the balance of dark and light masses, observing dark haloes around light areas, and the reverse phenomenon (Ill. 44).

Once he had achieved control of tone, Seurat was ready to examine, systematically and exhaustively, the role of colour in painting. The approach of Monet or Renoir was an empirical one: they added touches of colour until the desired effect was realized. Such a procedure was too imprecise for Seurat. He gradually eliminated earth colours from his palette, believing that any colour could be achieved by a combination, or better still, by a juxtaposition of primaries and their complementaries. Colours were divided and kept separate so far as possible – hence the term divisionism – and in certain cases Seurat seems to have expected them to merge optically and give the impression of another colour. He experimented with his brushstrokes, at first adopting the kind of handling found in impressionist paintings of the early 1880s, but later systematizing it. He first adopted a lightly brushed-in, criss-cross stroke, for which the French term 'balayé' has been adopted, and then, around 1883 he began to use tiny dabs of colour – the dots of the final 'pointillist' technique.

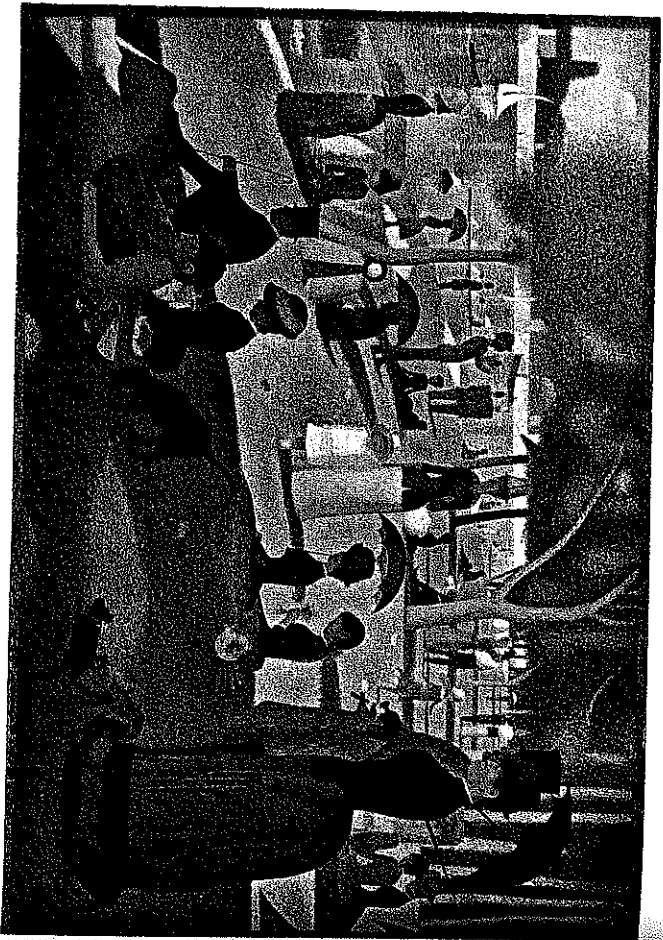
Seurat's first great masterpiece was *Une Baignade* (Ill. 46), which he began in the spring of 1883 and completed early in 1884. It is a much larger work than any impressionist picture, and he painted it to show at the official Salon; Seurat's model was *Le Doux Pays* (The Happy Land)



46 GEORGES SEURAT (1859-91)  
*Une Baignade à Asnières*, 1883-84.  
 Oil on canvas, 6'7" x 9'11" (200.5  
 x 301). By courtesy of the Trustees  
 of the National Gallery, London

(Ill. 45) by Puvis de Chavannes, which he had seen there in 1882. Only when the Salon jury refused to show Seurat's enormous picture did he turn to the rival exhibiting societies, and characteristically became a most active organizer of one of them, the *Société des Artistes Indépendants*.

*Une Baignade* was most carefully planned. Seurat first decided on the landscape setting of his composition, then made a dozen or more small oil sketches on the spot, and a similar number of figure drawings in the studio. He was then ready for work on the big canvas. From the start of his career Seurat had adopted certain ancient compositional devices to give him general guidelines. The most notable of these is the golden section – said to be the most harmonious and aesthetically satisfying way of dividing a line (and by extension an area) into two parts; expressed in terms of proportion, the shorter section is related to the longer section as the longer section is to the whole. Reference to the golden section helps explain why the most prominent young man on the grass is sitting in precisely that spot in the picture, and why he seems to epitomize the air of calm and balanced monumentality that characterizes the whole picture. We feel at once the stillness of a hot summer day.



47 GEORGES SEURAT (1859-91)  
*Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte*,  
 1884-85. Oil on canvas, 6'11" × 10'  
 (203.5 × 305). Courtesy the Art  
 Institute of Chicago (Helen Birch  
 Bartlett Memorial Collection)

In other respects, too, *Une Baignade* is the sum of this remarkable young artist's pictorial knowledge. We can easily observe the light tonal haloes around dark forms. Because Seurat touched the picture in 1887 the development of his painting technique is observable – the grass is painted, appropriately enough, in the early criss-cross, 'balayé' manner, but other areas – around the head of the young man, for example (Ill. 43) – show the tiny dots of Seurat's mature style. The colour of the sunlit grass is a demonstration of Seurat's artistic principles. Green – the local colour of grass – is mixed with yellow and orange (sunlight); then blue, reflected from shady areas, is added; finally touches of complementaries heighten the effect. Seurat used the colour wheels he found in such books as Rood's *Modern Chromatics* as guides to the proper hues.

Seurat's seascapes are of exceptional serenity and beauty, but the development of his pictorial thinking can best be followed in the succession of half a dozen major figure compositions. After *Une Baignade* came the even larger, grander, *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte* (Ill. 47). The relaxed working-class boys of *Une Baignade* have here found a pendant in this picture of the Parisian

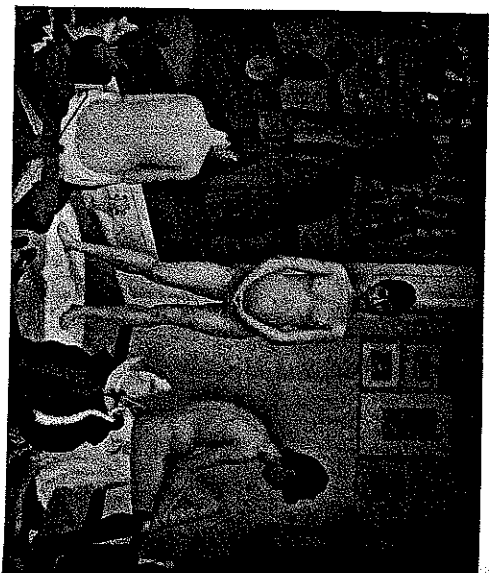
bourgeoisie dressed up in their Sunday best: Seurat intends, perhaps, a deliberate social comment on modern urban life, though we cannot be sure about this.

Because of the greater complexity of *La Grand Jatte*, Seurat made even more small oil sketches and detailed drawings, though he was probably at work on the big canvas from the very beginning. The earth colours that may still be seen in places in *Une Baignade* have now disappeared, and the basic colour contrasts of red-green, yellow-purple and blue-orange are now dominant. Though the picture was essentially painted in the winter of 1884-85, Seurat reworked it in the following winter in a more strictly pointillist style, and this gave him the opportunity of emphasizing the colour programme.

The numerous figures of *La Grande Jatte* lack the solidity of the boys in *Une Baignade* – they are flatter, and exist in a more puzzling, irrational, spatial relationship to one another. Most of them do not overlap, or even touch, but instead of diminishing in size only as they recede into the distance, they also appear to diminish from right to left. There now clearly appears for the first time Seurat's willful, perhaps comic, rather disconcerting touch – consider the use he makes of umbrellas, hats and animals' tails to set up a pattern of straight and curved lines, or the way he will shift his viewpoint in different parts of the picture – high in the foreground, at eye-level in the back. It is the same kind of device that occurs in Manet or in Cézanne, but Seurat's use of it excites a suspicion that this clever young man is clowning about and teasing the viewer.

This may partly explain the extreme annoyance of Monet and of Renoir in particular, when *La Grande Jatte* dominated the eighth (and last) impressionist exhibition in May 1886. A young critic, Félix Fénéon, made matters worse by coining the term 'neo-impressionist' in his review of the exhibition, with its obvious implication that this new approach had eclipsed the old impressionist manner. Seurat, it must be said, preferred the epithet 'chromo-luminarist' for his kind of painting, but for obvious reasons this term never caught on. Fénéon also argued that Seurat was simply providing a scientific systematization of impressionist technique: this was convincing enough to bring Seurat the converts he seems never to have wanted, like old Pissarro, or young Signac. Paul Signac (1863-1935) had been working in a Moner-

48 GEORGES SEURAT (1859-91)  
*Les Poseuses*, 1888. Oil on canvas,  
6' 6" x 8' 3" (188 x 251). Copy,  
right 1972, The Barnes Foundation,  
Merion, Pa.



derived manner and went on, after Seurat's premature death, to become the great champion and leader of the neo-impressionist school.

As for Seurat himself, he was immediately off in another direction. For *La Grande Jatte* also has a private, obscure, dream-like quality; it captures a moment of absolute stillness, and there was something about Seurat's disengagement from the subject that appealed to the symbolists. The discovery beneath the surface of the bourgeois Sunday afternoon outing of some more profound and mysterious significance was precisely in tune with the ideas of the new young generation of poets and critics who assumed prominence on the Parisian literary scene after the appearance of Moréas's symbolist manifesto in 1886.

Seurat in fact became in November 1886 the close associate of one of the most remarkable figures of this generation, the mathematician Charles Henry. In 1884 Henry had begun to give lectures at the Sorbonne to a fascinated audience: he had already written a thesis demonstrating biological function by the use of mathematical curves, and in 1885 published *Une esthétique scientifique*. In his lectures, concerned with the emotional values of colours and lines, Henry claimed that every direction had symbolic significance — that lines rising to the right, for example, suggest pleasure — and he associated colours with each linear direction. Henry attempted to

reduce everything to mathematical formulae — not only physical movement, which he related to the magnetism of the earth, but also metaphysical propositions, like the existence of God.

Henry did not presume to tell painters what to do, but that his ideas are reflected in Seurat's work is evident in the next two major paintings, *Les Poseuses* (Ill. 48) and *La Parade*, both painted for exhibition in March 1888. The umbrellas of *Les Poseuses*, for example, point precisely in the direction that Henry associated with their colours; and the many horizontal and vertical divisions of *La Parade* probably conform to the kind of mathematical progression in which both Henry and Seurat were interested.

The subject of *Les Poseuses* — front, back and side views of the same nude model — pays an indirect homage to such Ingres paintings as *La Source* (Ill. 49); it seems to have been chosen by Seurat primarily to demonstrate that his new style was as appropriate to an interior as to an outdoor setting. But with *La Parade* Seurat also confesses his passion for popular entertainments, especially fairs, cabarets and circuses, and this was to inspire the last two great pictures, *Le Chahut* and *Le Cirque*. In them the flames of *La Parade* become extreme: the design of *Le Cirque* (Ill. 50) is kept entirely on the surface, as in the posters of Chéret and Laurec which Seurat admired. The eye-level moves up and down the picture, giving a curious multi-perspectival effect. The figures are cartoon-like grotesques, the colours strident and artificial, the complex composition overlaid with linear patterning.

*Le Cirque* was exhibited in March 1891, though it was not quite finished. Later that month, very suddenly, Seurat caught pneumonia and died. He was only 31. In August 1890 he had explained in a letter his system of painting: art is a harmony of contrasts, he declared, and to the contrasts of tone and colour that he had early established, he now added contrasts of line. Within each formal division, a distinct mood could be expressed — dark tones, cool colours, descending lines suggesting sadness and despair; light tones, warm colours, ascending lines suggesting gaiety and excitement. Seurat was aware of the nativity of this conclusion, but he remained convinced that somehow a more expressive language of painting might be developed if only the abstract qualities of art were recognized as the most meaningful ones.



49 JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE  
INGRES (1780-1867) *La Source*,  
1856. Oil on canvas, 5' 4" x 2' 8"  
(163 x 80). Musée d'Orsay, Paris



50 GEORGES SEURAT (1859-91)  
*Le Cirque*, 1890-91. Oil on canvas,  
6' 1" x 4' 11" (185.5 x 150.5). Musée  
d'Orsay, Paris

This was a conviction which Seurat shared with his erstwhile rival, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Long before he was able to make any practical use of his ideas, Gauguin too was thinking about the abstract significance of lines, numbers, colours and shapes. He wrote to his friend Emile Schuffenecker on 14 January 1885: 'All five senses, on which a multiplicity of things have impressed themselves in such a way as to be indelible, communicate directly with the brain. From this fact I conclude that there are lines which are noble, others which are misleading, etc., a straight line creates infinity, a curve limits creation, not to speak of the fatality of numbers. Have we talked enough about the numbers 3 and 7? Colours, though less diverse than lines, are nevertheless more explanatory by virtue of their power over the eye. There are tonalities which are noble and others which are vulgar, harmonies which are calm or consoling, and others which are exciting because of their boldness.'

As everybody knows, Gauguin was in his middle thirties when he became a full-time painter, having been both sailor and businessman in the early part of his career. But although his lack of formal training remained a considerable disadvantage to him, his preparation was in its way as thorough as Seurat's. He was a dedicated and accomplished Sunday painter, and as early as 1876 had had a landscape accepted at the Salon. He was also wealthy enough to pursue his studies of modern art by buying the paintings he wanted to study.

Gauguin was much more thoroughly immersed in impressionism than Seurat ever was, contributing to the exhibitions of 1880-82 landscapes that were not unjustly called a 'dilution of Pissarro'. Pissarro was a tremendous help and support to Gauguin, as to so many others, although Gauguin realized very quickly that Pissarro's friend Cézanne was the more original and important painter. When they met in 1881 Gauguin was fascinated, later in the year we find him writing to Pissarro: 'Has M. Cézanne found the exact formula for a work acceptable to everyone? If he discovers the prescription for compressing the intense expression of all his sensations into a single and unique procedure, try to make him talk in his sleep by giving him one of those mysterious homeopathic drugs, and come immediately to Paris to share it with us'. It is perhaps hardly surprising that Cézanne remained mistrustful of Gauguin, whom he

suspected of wanting to steal his ideas. Gauguin's landscapes of 1884 (*Ill. 51*) unquestionably pay explicit homage to Cézanne.

This same accusation of stealing his ideas was brought against Gauguin a few years later by Emile Bernard (1868-1941). There is no doubt whatever that in the summer of 1888 this young painter had shown Gauguin certain pictures that had a revolutionary impact on the older artist's style. But the important point about any artistic controversy of this sort is not who had the ideas first, but who painted the best pictures. Here the answer is not in doubt, for compared with Gauguin, Bernard is a very minor artist indeed.

His place in the history of art is assured only by the picture, *Breton Women in a Meadow* (*Ill. 52*), which he painted in August 1888, and at once showed to Gauguin. Its unmodelled, heavily outlined, simplified figures, placed irregularly on a flat, abstract ground were exactly what Gauguin had been looking for. He acquired Bernard's picture by exchange of one of his own, and then, using a similar palette, immediately painted his own version of it - *The Vision after the Sermon* (*Ill. 56*), which is possibly the most important picture in his entire oeuvre.

Gauguin's problem in the months immediately preceding August 1888 had been to find a manner of painting that would accord with his conception of art. This is a by no means uncommon situation, especially among painters of the more reflective, intellectual cast of mind; Mondrian and Kandinsky were to find themselves in a similar position some twenty years later. Gauguin knew that art must move away from the 'error of naturalism', and become more abstract. 'A word of advice,' he told his confidant Schuffenecker on 14 August 1888. 'Don't paint too much from nature. Art is an abstraction. Extract it from nature by meditating in front of it, and think more of the creation which will result.'

In *The Vision after the Sermon*, Gauguin tries to put these principles into practice. The subject is anti-naturalistic, and Gauguin brings back into modern art the angels which had been firmly banished by Courbet, on the grounds that, although he had never seen an angel either, the intensity of a simple religious faith impressed him (even if, unlike Bernard, he did not share it). Accordingly he felt justified in painting the vision seen



51 PAUL GAUGUIN (1848-1903) *Blue Roofs, Rouen*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 29" x 33½" (74 x 60). Collection Oskar Reinhart am Römerholz, Winterthur



52 ÉMILE BERNARD (1868-1941) *Breton Women in a Meadow*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 29" x 36¼" (74 x 92). Collection Denis, St Germain en Laye



53 PAUL GAUGUIN (1848-1903)  
*Christ in Gethsemane*, 1889. Oil on  
canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 36" (72.5 x 91.5).  
Norton Gallery and School of Art,  
West Palm Beach, Florida

by the credulous Breton women, so moved by the story of Jacob and the Angel that on coming out of church they seemed to see the struggle taking place before their very eyes. In order to remove the wrestling figures from the everyday world, Gauguin copied them from a Japanese colour-print that he owned; and he painted the meadow red instead of green, to emphasize that the landscape, as he told Van Gogh, 'is not real and is out of proportion'.

Colour was in fact the first element in painting that could be treated abstractly. Gauguin was quite confident about this. When a few weeks later a young art student from Paris, Paul Sérusier (1864-1927), came to see him, Gauguin gave him a painting lesson: 'How do you see these trees? They are yellow. Well then, put down yellow. And that shadow is rather blue. So render it with pure ultramarine. Those red leaves? Use vermilion.' From such an arbitrary procedure, it is only a small step to the use of colour for its emotional connotations, rather than for any descriptive reason, and this was the path that both Gauguin and his friend Vincent van Gogh were taking.

The two men spent an uneasy two months together in Arles at the end of 1888, with consequences that are well known. Gauguin arrived on 20 October, bringing with him Bernard's painting as well as his own recent work, and feeling certain that he was now on the right track. Though his influence over Vincent was considerable, the visit was of little benefit to Gauguin himself. He didn't like Arles and, after spending the cold winter months in Paris, was glad to get back to Brittany.

Gauguin felt at home in Brittany, because of its wildness and primitiveness. 'When my wooden shoes ring on the granite, I hear the muffled, dull and powerful tone that I try to achieve in painting,' he told Schuffenecker early in 1888. He was sure that to break with naturalism and find a more abstract art, a primitive environment was necessary. It was this conviction that made him want to leave Europe, and drove him to Martinique for several months in 1887, and finally to Tahiti in 1891.

For the moment, however, Brittany provided what his art needed. He began to tire of painting mainly landscapes, as he had on earlier visits, and chose instead religious subjects. Gauguin's two *Crucifixions* and his *Christ in*

*Gethsemane* (Ill. 53), however, are religious paintings with a difference: the blasphemous identification of the artist with Christ. This can be partly explained by Gauguin's conviction that the artist was the sole creator of a meaningful universe, an idea that derives from Manet and Mallarmé, both of whom he particularly admired. But Gauguin also came to regard himself as a Messiah figure, the prophet of a new morality as well as of a new art. In this way the post-impressionist generation differed sharply from their impressionist elders: they regarded art and life as inseparable, so that artistic research was pursued not for its own sake alone, but as a means to universal ends. Gauguin took to making wood carvings



54 PAUL GAUGUIN (1848-1903)  
*The Loss of Virginity*, 1891. Oil on  
canvas, 211" x 43" (90 x 130).  
Christyler Museum at Norfolk, Vir-  
ginia



55 PAUL GAUGUIN (1848-1903)  
*Mataeo Tupapaa*, 1892. Oil on  
canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (73 x 92).  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo

on which he inscribed 'Be in Love, and you'll be Happy', or 'Be Mysterious'; in 1891 he attempted to paint *The Loss of Virginity*, also known as *Spring's Awakening* (Ill. 54).

This curious picture is like no other Gauguin work. It probably represents a deliberate attempt on his part to find a pictorial counterpart for the symbolist dramas and poems which his young Parisian friends were producing. The forms and colours of the Breton landscape are considerably abstracted; in the distance is the sea, and a Breton wedding procession. The nude adolescent girl reclines, surrounded by flame-like foliage: her feet are crossed, as in Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*; one hand holds a flower, the symbol of innocence, the other rests on the fox which places its paw on her heart. The fox was a symbol of perverseness – Gauguin had a Satanic streak which led him to accept evil as the necessary concomitant to innocence.

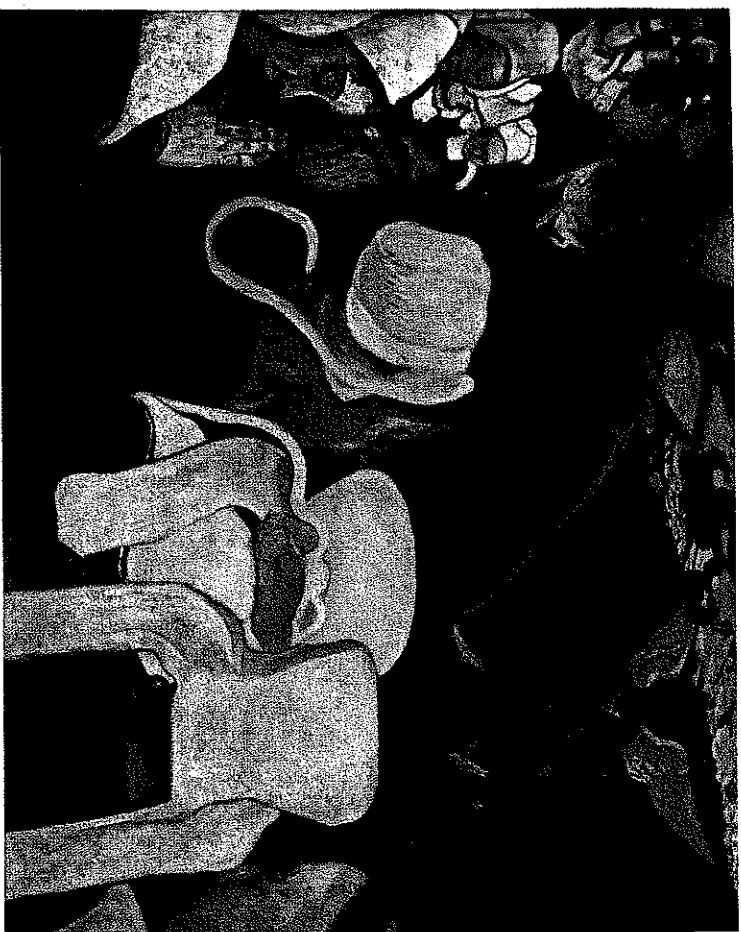
To appreciate the contrivance of *The Loss of Virginity* one has only to compare it with a Tahitian picture of a similar subject, *Mamao Tapapanu*, 1892 (Ill. 55). The correct literal translation of the title is 'Thought Spirit'; Gauguin's interpretation, 'She thinks of the spirit of the dead', is inexact, as Bengt Danielsson points out, but it does indicate what Gauguin considered his painting was about. He had returned home late at night to find his Tahitian mistress lying terrified in the darkness: he painted her to express man's fear of darkness and of death, symbolized by the gnome-like spirit which keeps watch in the background of the picture.

Gauguin often wrote about *Mamao Tapapanu*; on one occasion he summed up his description as follows:

'the musical part: undulating horizontal lines, blue and orange harmonies tied together with yellows and purples (which are their derivatives) and lit by greenish sparks.

'the literary part: the spirit of a living soul united with the spirit of the dead. Day and Night.'

In today's parlance, we would speak of the abstract rather than the musical part, but Gauguin's words do express clearly his conviction that the message of his pictures could be conveyed as much through line and colour as through a more literary symbolism. The musical analogy is a particularly important one, because music provides the example of an art which, though

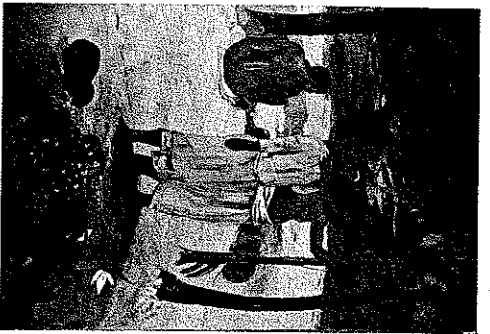


56 PAUL GAUGUIN (1848–1903)  
*The Vision after the Sermon*, 1888.  
Oil on canvas, 28¾" × 36¼" (73 ×  
92). The National Gallery of Scot-  
land, Edinburgh

abstract, cannot be called meaningless. Profound human emotions can be expressed in music without recourse to any descriptive functions: why should this not be possible in painting? The question was to exercise many of Gauguin's contemporaries and successors, to whom it seemed that the answer must lie in the imaginative use of colour. In 1899 Gauguin wrote to a friend: 'Think of the musical role which colour will henceforth play in modern painting. Colour, which vibrates just like music, is able to attain what is most general and yet most elusive in nature – namely its inner force.'

And it was the search for the essence, the inner force, that sustained Gauguin. He had rejected the painting of the impressionists because 'they seek around the eye, and not at the mysterious centre of thought.' So he was driven back upon himself, and in a quite explicit sense, because there is little doubt that his flight to the South Seas was an attempt to recapture certain infantile experiences of his fatherless babyhood in Peru. For Gauguin regression became both a personal and an





57 PAUL GAUGUIN (1848-1903)  
*The Call*, 1902. Oil on canvas,  
 43" x 31" (130 x 90.5). The Cleve-  
 land Museum of Art (Gift of Hanna  
 Fund and Leonard G. Hanna Jr.,  
 1943)

artistic necessity. He turned to the primitive and the exotic as the only way of liberating art from the great classical-Renaissance-naturalist tradition which he thought had come to an end. And he accepted the privations and disappointments of life in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands where he lived, apart from an unproductive short spell in France, from 1891 until his death in 1903.

Unfortunately, the South Seas did not provide him with the primitive environment he sought. Gauguin was a century too late: civilization had got there before him. The ancient myths and gods had all been forgotten; they had disappeared, as had the naked bodies beneath the missionaries' shifts. Gauguin's Tahiti is a dream world, an imaginative reconstruction of something that did not exist. In the last pictures he painted, *Conites Barbiers* and *The Call* (Ill. 57), for instance, the presence is abandoned. What we see is Gauguin's version of the Golden Age. This, one of the great myths of art, obsessed him, just as it did Ingres, or old Cézanne, or the young Matisse.

In Tahiti, sick with syphilis and often hungry, Gauguin attempted suicide. His survival (because he vomited the poison) must have seemed to him an ironic joke. But in 1898 he wrote: 'The martyr is often necessary for a revolution. My work has little importance compared to its consequences: the freeing of painting from all restrictions.'

The third member of this extraordinary post-impressionist triumvirate was the Dutchman, Vincent van Gogh (1853-90). The eldest son of a Protestant pastor, he always remained a preacher at heart, a man with a message of Christian love and charity eternally frustrated by an inability to communicate with others. In early manhood Vincent faced a succession of humiliating failures - as art dealer, as ordinand, as evangelist. At the age of 26 he was reduced to a state of misery and total helplessness, familiar enough among the depressed mining families of the Borinage to whom Vincent had unsuccessfully tried to preach. And in this moment of darkness he realized that his personal salvation lay through painting.

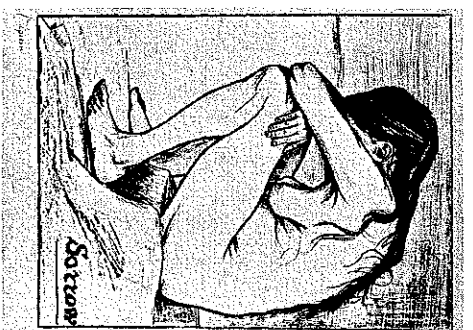
Vincent's career as a painter lasted eleven years, six and a half of which were spent in Holland. In the Dutch period, Vincent taught himself to draw and to paint

learning as much from copying and instruction manuals as he did from any teacher. His early progress - in fact his whole life - is documented in a way unparalleled among great artists. Thanks largely to the devotion of his art-dealer brother, Theo (and to the total indifference of the general public in his lifetime), almost every work he executed survives, even the earliest drawings. And there are extant almost a thousand letters, the most moving and revealing ever written by an artist; these give us a detailed knowledge of Vincent's day-to-day existence, and a remarkable insight into the way he felt about his own work.

At first he was not even sure that he wanted to be a painter. He had been tremendously impressed by the English illustrators of *The Graphic* magazine, who had used their art to draw attention to the plight of the urban proletariat in mid-Victorian London. This seemed to Vincent a noble ambition for an artist. He gave his lithograph *Sorrow* (Ill. 58) an English title, and added a quotation in French which asks, 'How can it be that there is a lonely, desperate woman upon earth?' Vincent's model was a prostitute from the Hague whom he was trying to reform: unfortunately, like every other personal relationship, even the one with his saintly brother, Theo, this ended sadly. The tragedy was that life was impossible for Vincent; everything had to go into the paintings.

Vincent did a drawing of tree roots in dry ground to make a pair with *Sorrow*. I tried to put the same sentiment into the landscape as I put into the figure', he told his brother, 'the same passionate clinging to the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm.' Such a comment helps to explain why Vincent proclaimed that 'all reality is at the same time symbolic', and why he so admired Millet, 'who painted Christ's teaching.' The symbolism of the *Sower* (Ill. 59) had haunted Van Gogh's imagination from the moment he began to draw and paint.

Jean François Millet (1814-75) was a very great artist who has yet to regain the esteem in which he was once held. His paintings are dull in colour in comparison with those of the impressionists, and some have in fact deteriorated considerably. He suffers too, from his historical position as a pre-modern artist, yet his powers as a visual image maker were remarkable. Abandoning Paris in 1848 at a moment when the rise of capitalism



58 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-90)  
*Sorrow*, 1882. Lithograph,  
 15¼" x 11½" (38.5 x 29). Gem-  
 entmuseum, The Hague

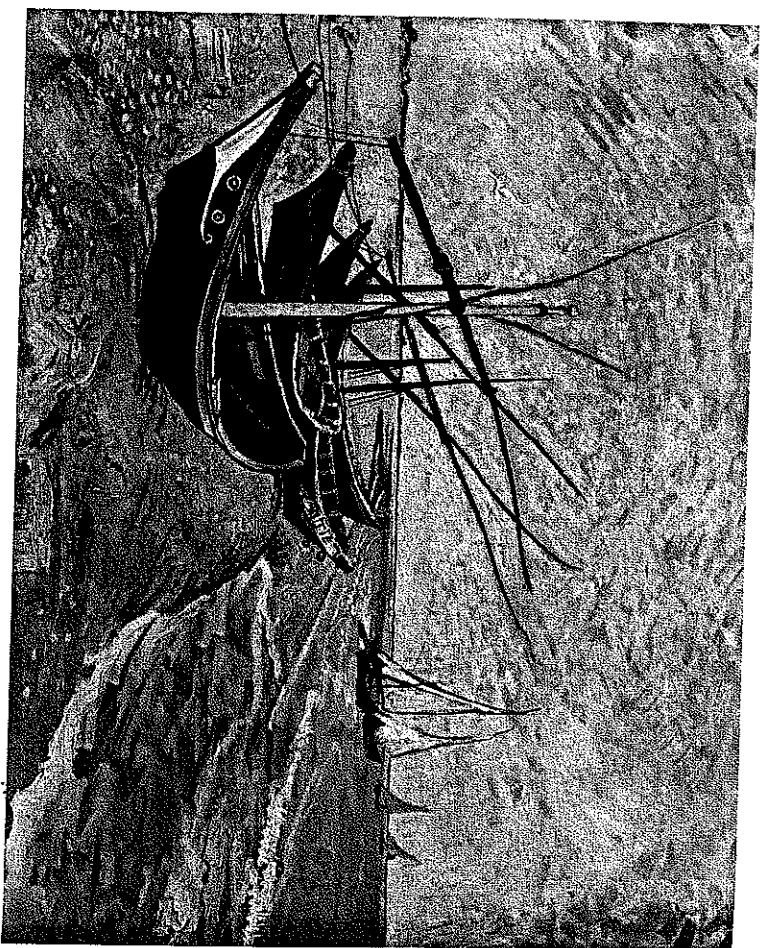


59 JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET  
 (1814-75) *Sower*, 1850. Oil on  
 canvas, 39¾" x 32½" (101 x 87.5).  
 Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts,  
 Boston (Quincy Adams Shaw Col-  
 lection)

60 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853–90)  
*Portrait of an Artist Friend (Eugene Bock)*,  
 1888. Oil on canvas, 23¼" × 17¾" (60 ×  
 45). Musée d'Orsay, Paris



61 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853–90)  
*Boats on the Beach, 1888*. Oil on canvas,  
 25½" × 32" (64 × 81). Van Gogh Museum,  
 Amsterdam



and the industrial revolution were beginning to affect people's lives, Millet chose instead to paint a rural existence in which human values were paramount, and commercial ones non-existent. Millet's realities were birth, marriage, procreation and death: he was not a Christian, as is often believed, and he tempered his humanism not with optimism but with stoic resignation.

The relevance of Millet's art in the mid-19th century was obvious. Not only did he gather around him in the village of Barbizon a circle of devoted friends and followers, but his ideas were carried beyond France to every country in Europe. The argument that such pictorial innovations as those proposed by Manet and the impressionists are trivial in comparison with the issues raised by Millet is one that has continued to recur, *mutatis mutandis*, up to the present day. But without formal renewal, new ideas cannot be expressed, and Millet's true followers were men like Pissarro and Seurat and Van Gogh and the young Picasso, rather than his more unimaginative imitators.

Vincent's masterpiece of the years in Holland, *The Potato Eaters* (Ill. 62) is a picture entirely in the Millet tradition: he seems almost completely ignorant of the whole development of modern art up to that date. The idea for the picture may have come from a very similar subject, *The Frygal Meal*, painted in 1883 by Josef Israels (1824–1911), the founder and leader of the Hague School, the Dutch counterpart of Millet's Barbizon. But the hushed, sacramental atmosphere of *The Potato Eaters*, the clumsy strength of the figures, and the sure suggestion that we are not looking merely at a representation of Dutch peasants – these are qualities that only Vincent (and Millet) could have given such a picture.

In certain respects Vincent was none too happy about *The Potato Eaters*. He was over-sensitive to a friend's criticism that concentration on the heads and hands had led him to neglect the bodies of the peasants. And he was aware that the colour – that 'of a very dirty potato', as he said – was unadventurous: he was still working within the tradition of tonal painting, where subtle gradation of tone is all-important, and colour tends to be monochromatic. We know from the letters that Vincent wrote to his brother Theo in the summer and autumn of 1885 how keenly he was feeling the need to leave this Dutch backwater and see some modern painting.

62 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-90) *The Potato Eaters*, 1885. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4" x 45" (82 x 114). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



Vincent arrived in Paris on 27 February 1886, and for almost exactly two years lived there with his brother. Vincent could have had no more perceptive guide than Theo to the complexities of modern painting. Theo also helped with introductions, and the gauche, intense and humourless Dutchman found himself in the company of such artists as Pissarro, Gauguin, Laurec, Bernard and Signac, none of whom could have had much sympathy, let alone admiration, for his still somewhat immature painting. But these contacts taught Vincent a great deal, because, like many painters, he was often more impressed by the work of an artist he knew personally than by someone he had never met. He greedily absorbed all there was to see in Paris, taking what he could from one painter after another, working his way through the development of modern art. First, it was Delacroix and Monticelli; then the impressionism proper of Degas and particularly of Monet; finally the alternative avant-gardes of neo-impressionism and synthetism, represented respectively by his friends Signac and Bernard.

By the time he painted the *Wheatfield with a Lark* (Ill. 63) in June or July of 1887, Van Gogh had arrived at that personal interpretation of impressionism which marks his mature style. His composition was simplicity itself, with a tendency towards symmetry. Light fills the picture; the colours are high in key and blend together, showing that Vincent has observed local colours and their complementaries, and has painted sunlight and shadow. The brushwork has an immediately evident

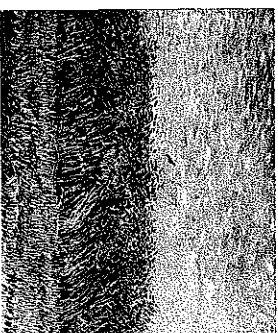
nervous intensity. And although Vincent has painted directly from nature, putting down exactly what he saw, he cannot avoid the symbolic associations evoked by such an image.

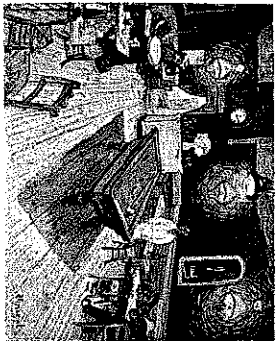
Vincent left Paris for Arles in February 1888, and in the Provençal sunshine his art blossomed with a new richness. No painter had yet used colour so uninhibitedly; no painter had ever left his brushmarks so plainly visible on the surface of his canvas. In rapid succession one memorable picture follows another — the orchards, the drawbridge, the harvest, the haystacks, the boats on the beach (Ill. 61); the portraits of the postman, the poet and the *mouse*; the sunflowers, the yellow house, the café interior, the bedroom, and many more. In Paris, Vincent had stopped painting peasants and workers, humble objects and familiar landscapes, and had turned instead to the more impersonal and anonymous subject-matter of impressionism. Alone in the South, he was himself again, and cast his spell over the Arles landscape and the people who inhabited it.

He felt confident and free to improvise, so that the boats he saw on the beach at Saintes-Maries have the bold design and bright colours of the Japanese woodblock prints that he admired so much. He wrote to Émile Bernard: 'On the beach, quite flat and sandy, were a number of smallish green, red, and blue boats, so delightful both in shape and colour that they made me think of flowers.' In the summer of 1888 a single colour tends to dominate the individual paintings: blue in the seascapes and the nightpieces, yellow in the harvests and the sunflowers. Vincent associated particular emotions with each colour. 'I have become an arbitrary colourist', he tells his brother, explaining that in the *Portrait of an Artist Friend* (Ill. 60), 'instead of painting the matter-of-fact wall in a trice room behind the head, I paint infinity, a simple background of the richest most intense blue that I can contrive'.

The blue background was intended to set off the orange-yellow colour of the poet's fair hair, exaggerated by Vincent because 'I want to paint men and women with that eternal something about them which the halo used to symbolize of old, and which we now try to express by the actual radiance, the vibrations of colour.' He was fascinated by the emotional impact created by the juxtaposition of complementary colours. He wrote

63 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-90) *Wheatfield with a Lark*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 21 1/4" x 25 1/2" (54 x 64). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam





64 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-90) *The Night Café*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 27½" x 35" (69.5 x 89). Yale University Art Gallery (Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark)

to Theo: 'I am always in the hope of making a discovery - to express the love of two lovers by a marriage of two complementaries, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred lovers.'

But the opposition of complementaries could also be exploited to give the opposite effect, as Vincent tried to demonstrate when he painted *The Night Café* (Ill. 64). 'I have tried to express the terrible passions of mankind... the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad, commit crimes.' The café becomes a place where the powers of darkness are at work, an ante-room of Hell, filled with sulphurous vapours. We may go further and suspect that for Vincent it was an arena of human struggle, a picture of what life was really like for someone with an increasingly tenuous grip on reality. One wonders, however, whether *The Night Café* can in fact bear such an interpretation? That it is a more ugly, agitated and disturbed picture than, for example, the *Boats on the Beach* is apparent, but is not this because Vincent, who was awaiting Gauguin's arrival with excitement and apprehension, was in an agitated and disturbed state of mind? The dilemma that faces the painter who wants his work to transmit such emotions as 'the terrible passions of mankind' is that a picture can only convey the emotions the artist himself feels. However hard Vincent tried to make the paintings of his bedroom in the Yellow House 'suggestive of rest and of sleep in general', they convey only the same tension and unease (formally expressed by the perspective of the floor and the enclosing function of the walls) that we find in *The Night Café*.

Perhaps Vincent appreciated the difficulties of making painting more expressive, and looked to Gauguin for help and advice. Artistically it was a master-pupil relationship. Psychologically too, Vincent was dependent on the older man, who already had a reputation as a painter and had only come to Arles to please Theo and escape penury in Paris or Brittany.

Gauguin brought with him, not *The Vision after the Sermon* (Ill. 56) which had been sent to Theo Van Gogh in Paris, but Bernard's *Breton Women in a Meadow* (Ill. 52). Vincent was most impressed. He took up his favourite subject of the sower once more, but Gauguin made him adopt a close-up view which cut the figure at the waist, and introduced a strong diagonal across the picture

surface, exactly as in *The Vision after the Sermon*. The two men painted the same subjects, but neither seemed at ease. Vincent couldn't understand why Gauguin should have introduced Breton women into a painting of a vineyard at Arles. Gauguin found himself increasingly irritated by Van Gogh: he wrote to their mutual friend Bernard: 'He likes my paintings very much, but when I do them he always finds faults. He is a romantic and I am rather drawn towards the primitive. In regard to colour, he likes the accidental quality of impasto... and I detest messiness of execution.'

In a number of paintings Vincent tried very hard to adapt himself to the new style. Perhaps the most successful was the *Promenade at Arles: Souvenir of the Garden at Eten* (Ill. 65). The setting is the public garden at Arles, opposite the Yellow House, but the women promenading remind Vincent of his mother and sisters walking in the garden at Eten where he had grown up. He wrote about this work to Theo: 'Gauguin gives me courage to work from the imagination, and certainly things imagined take on a more mysterious appearance. Unfortunately, Vincent was trying to paint in a manner alien to his personality. Gauguin's insistence that he should work from memory and not from nature was making the very act of painting impossible, and his constant emphasis on the bold cutting of forms in a picture upset Vincent's natural desire for a central, near-symmetrical placing of any figure or object. Even worse perhaps, Vincent was being urged to abandon that characteristic expressive brush stroke and adopt instead heavy contour lines around flat areas of colour. This was altogether too artificial a way of painting for Van Gogh. As he later wrote to Bernard: 'When Gauguin was in Arles, as you know I once or twice allowed myself to be led to abstractions. At the time this road to the abstract seemed to me a charming track. But it's an enchanted land, my dear friend, and soon one finds oneself up against an insurmountable wall.'

Vincent's 'insurmountable wall' was of course a mental breakdown, and from Christmas Eve 1888 until his suicide on 29 July 1890 his life was darkened by a long succession of collapses, some of them much more severe than others. The cause seems to have been an inherited epileptic condition, aggravated by Vincent's self-neglect and the events of his life, but breakdown was



65 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-90) *Promenade at Arles: Souvenir of the Garden at Eten*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 28¾" x 36¼" (73 x 92). The Hermitage, St Petersburg

probably his inevitable fate, whatever he might have chosen to do. It would be as wrong to pretend that Vincent's illness did not affect his painting as to dismiss all his work as that of a madman. At times painting became a kind of therapy for him, occupying his hands and thoughts and staving off the next crisis. As soon as he was well enough to work again he began to make copies of the picture he had been painting at the time of the first breakdown – *La Berceuse* (Ill. 66) – the portrait of the postman's wife, Madame Roulin, rocking a cradle. She had become for Vincent an archetypal mother figure, a consolation for those isolated and in danger, like the Icelandic fishermen in Pierre Loti's contemporary novel of that name, which both Van Gogh and Gauguin read with such enthusiasm. As Vincent said: 'the idea came to me to paint such a picture that sailors, who are at once children and martyrs, seeing it in the cabin of their boat, should feel the old sense of cradling come over them and remember their lullabies . . .'. As it had been for Gauguin, regression was necessary for the regeneration of Vincent's art.

Vincent made five versions of the red and green *Berceuse* and still more of the yellow and blue *Sunflowers*. He envisaged the pictures all hanging together as a decorative whole, serving the function of stained glass windows in a church. Like Monet in the 1880s he had begun to feel a dissatisfaction with easel painting, and a longing for some more all-embracing monumental context for art, a longing that he was never to realize.

Life in Arles had become impossible for him, and on 8 May 1889 he moved twenty miles eastwards to the hospital at Saint Rémy, where he stayed for exactly a year. At first the change of landscape was a stimulus; in the new motifs that he painted Vincent found an equivalent for his turbulent emotions. The flame-like forms of the cypress trees and the undulations of the corn swept by the wind combined to make an irresistibly poignant image; no other modern art has rivalled the popular appeal of Van Gogh's.

But things were literally closing in on him, and a note of resignation creeps into his work. He no longer had faith in his artistic destiny; just to stay alive and sane was difficult enough. After another breakdown in the summer, Vincent wrote to Theo: 'I am struggling with a canvas begun some days before my indisposition, a



66 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853–90) *La Berceuse*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4" x 36 1/2" (72 x 93). Rijksmuseum Kröller Müller, Otterlo

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67 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853–90) *Wheatfield with a Reaper*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 23 1/4" x 28 1/2" (59 x 72). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

*Reaper* (Ill. 67): the study is all yellow, terribly thickly painted, but the subject was fine and simple. For I see in this Reaper – a vague figure fighting like a devil in the midst of the heat to get to the end of his task – I see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping. So it is, if you like, the opposite of that sower I tried to do before. But there's nothing sad in this image of death, it goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold.'

Often Vincent did not feel well enough to go out of the hospital in search of subjects to paint. It was difficult and depressing to find models among his fellow patients. He took instead black and white reproductions of prints by artists he admired, Millet and Delacroix in particular, and copied them, using the colours that he thought best suited the subject. He justified this practice in a letter: 'We painters are always asked to *compose* ourselves, and be *nothing but composers*. So be it, but it isn't like that in music. If some person or other plays Beethoven, he adds his personal interpretation. I let the black and white by Delacroix or Millet . . . pose for me as the subject. And then I improvise colour on it, not, you understand, altogether myself, but searching for reminiscences of *their* pictures. But the memory – that vague consonance of colours that are at least right in feeling – that is my own interpretation . . . I started (copying) accidentally,

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and I find that it teaches me things, and above all it sometimes gives me consolation.'

Van Gogh's improvisations after Millet led him to explore strangely beautiful combinations of colour, subtler than the complementaries of the Arles paintings. The range is muted and muffled: ochres, browns, dull purples; very pale greens and pinks; lilac, saffron, turquoise. Often the colour is chalky, with a great deal of white mixed with the pigment; sometimes it becomes almost pallid and insipid. But the effect is exactly what Vincent intended: when he copies the peasant family seated by the child's bedside at evening (*Ill. 68*) he reinterprets Millet's subject for our own time. This picture too is a 'parable, as in the teaching of Christ'. Art, to Van Gogh, was a moral force for the betterment of man; he needed some such justification for having devoted his life to it.

Both his life and painting testify to the courage and endurance of a man who created something against all possible odds, in the face of every disadvantage, and with the absolute minimum of encouragement. Small wonder that Van Gogh and Gauguin should have been such an inspiration for the young painters who came after them. It took a little time to understand the significance of their art, but the impact that it ultimately made was all the greater.



68 VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-  
90) *La Veille* (after Millet), 1888,  
Oil on canvas, 28½" x 36¾" (72.5 x  
92). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Symbolism

Up to this point the story of modern painting has been largely told in terms of the activities of a dozen men whose art, like their lives, interlocks. Each extended the body of art as he found it in some new direction, and each extension changed that art irrevocably, so that young painters in 1900 confronted a very different situation from that which faced those in the 1860s.

There can be no doubt that the line already described from Courbet, Manet and the impressionists to Gauguin, Seurat and Van Gogh is the central stream of modern artistic development and that nothing can challenge its overriding importance. Yet a great deal of interesting painting was being done in the later 19th century, and not only in France. The wide influence of Millet's peasant painting has already been mentioned, but other realist and naturalist and early impressionist manners attracted adherents in every European country. By a kind of dialectical necessity, the realists always seem to be accompanied by idealist (or symbolist) painters, as if every Holman Hunt needed a Leighton, and every Menzel a Feuerbach. The manifold complexities of this general tendency for art to divide may depend on certain basic temperamental differences among artists — on, for example, the degree to which the painter or sculptor can envisage the finished work of art before he starts to make it. Does creation reside in the idea or in the action?

This chapter is devoted to artists of many nationalities working in several different countries; the evident common ground cannot, however, be explained by any such idea as the *Zeitgeist*, or the spirit of the age. The art of the immediate past will look much the same to artists wherever they may be, allowing, of course, for the local bias. The possible paths open to artists at any one point in time are limited, and it is no surprise to find painters in widely separated places producing similar work. But