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# The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism, and the Arabesque of Observation

Roger Benjamin

## Staging Place

I prefer looking at the backdrop paintings [*décors*] of the stage where I find my favorite dreams treated with consummate skill and tragic concision. Those things, so completely false, are for that reason much closer to the truth, whereas the majority of our landscape painters are liars, precisely because they fail to lie.

—Charles Baudelaire, “Le Paysage,” *Salon de 1859*<sup>1</sup>

The dominant discursive turn of art history in the 1980s, that of a revitalized social history of art, has produced analyses of Impressionist landscape that make the notion of the geographical site the focus for a new method of reading paintings.<sup>2</sup> In it scholars undertake historical research on the place represented in order to characterize its specific social resonance, and to reconstruct its spatial or architectural constitution. In the work that best exemplifies this site-specific method, an emphatic enrichment in the connotative reading of the image accompanies its placement, for the first time, in the overall tissue of social relations. The reader is provided with an articulation of the social sphere in the picture at hand.

The most subtle of such accounts understand the work as an articulation of intersecting extra-aesthetic and aesthetic discourses. But not all commentators are committed to the task of juggling what is extrinsic to the work of art with its specific aesthetic constitution (previously the focus of most art-historical accounts). The result is a vice of the new site-specific methodology: a reading of the place represented as the singular referent of the picture, with no account being given of the transformative work that the painting performs. The painting becomes, as it were, transparent to the eye obsessed with the status of its geographical referent.

Two problems with this approach to landscape need amplification. Site-specific interpretations tend to provide too simplistic a model of the complex process of imaging

landscape, which is mediated by a variety of practices that constitute its particularity as a mode of communication. One of these, of some importance in this account, is the way landscape practice inflects a history of seeing by means of the forms of landscape painting itself. Landscape as a scheme of representation, no less than the cartographic scheme of map-making, is an artifice that is entangled in a forest of codes. Historically speaking, however, landscape has not existed primarily to convey pragmatic information, as has the map; it inscribes a complex series of desires and decisions of an aesthetic order, whose point of reference is quite often less the thing represented (geographical site) than a series of painterly protocols provided by contemporary or previous practitioners of the genre (as will be seen in the cases of Derain and Matisse).

The second risk run by exponents of site-specific methodology is that of failing to distinguish the fine grain of documented discursive concerns at specific art-historical moments. The geographic site was the principle of interpretation that organized the recent exhibition “The Fauve Landscape” and its accompanying catalogue.<sup>3</sup> Here is a good example of how the site-specific method can cast new light upon the iconography of the work (and the findings were relatively rich) while obscuring elements of its historical particularity.<sup>4</sup> By dint of being organized along lines developed for the analysis of Impressionist landscape, the exhibition assimilated Fauve art to a model of positivist transcription that Fauve artists themselves had sought fundamentally to contest.

The Fauve artists’ rejection of Impressionism and their contempt for its ideal of direct empirical transcription have been thoroughly documented.<sup>5</sup> In discussions of the day, the marker of that rejection was often the terminology of the decorative. So the critic François Crucy at the Salon des Indépendants of 1906 distinguished two groups of landscapists, “those who ask of the spectacle of nature pretexts to realize decorative compositions, and those who try and directly fix . . . the impressions the spectacle makes them

Initial versions of this paper were read in 1991 at the Center for the Study of Modernism, University of Texas at Austin, and the Royal Academy of Arts, London. I am indebted to seminars on landscape conducted by Steven Z. Levine and the late James E. Snyder at Bryn Mawr College in 1980. I would like to thank Richard Shiff, James D. Herbert, Gill Perry, Kathy Adler, and John House for comments on earlier versions of this text. To these I must add the anonymous readers for *The Art Bulletin*, and the many colleagues who have made productive suggestions. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. All works by Matisse ©1993 Succession H. Matisse/ARS, New York.

<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire, 338.

<sup>2</sup> Among the books I allude to here are T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, London, 1985; R.L. Herbert, *Impressionism*, New Haven and London, 1988; and P. Tucker, *Monet at Argenteuil*, New Haven and London, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> To which I contributed a study of the site of the reception of Fauve landscape, rather than that of its production; see R. Benjamin, “Fauves in the Landscape of Criticism: Metaphor and Scandal at the Salon,” in *The Fauve Landscape*, 241–266.

<sup>4</sup> On the problems of exhibiting Fauve painting solely by means of landscape, see J. Flam, “Taming the Beasts,” *New York Review of Books*, xxxviii, Apr. 25, 1991, 40–42.

<sup>5</sup> See E. Oppler, *Fauvism Reexamined*, New York, 1976, 71–82, and Benjamin, 171–178. The Fauves, like the Post-Impressionists, attacked the reductive model of early Impressionism; so Signac had written of Monet’s *Cathédrales*: “We can no longer be satisfied with the picture that . . . made Duret [in *Les Peintres impressionnistes*, 1878] write: ‘The Impressionist sits down by the river-bank, sets up his easel, paints what he has in front of him, without any care for arrangement or composition . . . and produces a masterpiece’” (Rewald, Pt. 1, 123).

experience.”<sup>6</sup> In the first group are the Fauves, in the second the many late Impressionists still practicing at this time. This perceived split between Impressionist and Post-Impressionist with regard to the decorative captured an important historical difference between what was considered direct observation and the act of plastic elaboration in the making of landscape paintings. It is this difference that the site-specific methodology of “The Fauve Landscape” exhibition managed thoroughly to elide, in so doing both distorting the historical record of the Fauve painter’s intellectual interests, and offering a reductivist account of how Fauve paintings come to signify with respect to concepts of place.

It is time for a more nuanced account of what in fact does constitute *place* in landscape painting, and in that of the Fauves in particular.<sup>7</sup> What is needed is a view of landscape conceiving place as achieved through a process of *staging* rather than transcription. The term “staging” suggests landscape as a play of artifice more than an engagement with brute fact. In its pictorial meanings, including those redolent of place, are manufactured through a process of suggestive imaging in which the motif is manipulated in a milieu of enacted or invented painterly marks. The idea of the motif itself needs more careful definition: it would be wrong to insist that the motif is a visual particle that has necessarily been studied by the painter directly before nature. Motifs in most landscape painting were more flexible than that, and their role in constituting an image relied upon their ability to be coded for recognition by the viewer. However, “recognition” often pertained less to the precise geographical sense (although topographical painting did bring features of specific places to the memory of travelers) than to the construction of landscape as a scheme for embodying place as a locus of public desires about nature and the idyl of country life.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of “staging place” will be used here as an interpretative tool, but one with a certain historical legitimacy due to the tradition of relating the activities of stage design and landscape painting. As will be seen below, treatises on the art of landscape might encompass the construction of theatrical sets, while the composition of theater décors was held to follow principles parallel to that of good landscape. In Baudelaire’s text of 1859 cited above, the kinship of the two arts was provocatively expressed as a bias against the landscape of observation.

Certain landscapes fulfilled this concept of a décor in which the evocation of place was not shackled by topographical or naturalist determinations: those falling within the discursive and historical category of the *paysage décoratif*. The “decorative landscape” was one in which putative transcription from a specific site gave way to pictorial practices wherein imagery could be arrived at by processes of invention and internal staging, that is, by a system of self-referring

plastic elaboration. As an aesthetic category, the decorative landscape (like the decorative itself) is elusive and complex; yet it exists by virtue of the efforts of artists and critics to isolate the specific qualities of form in landscape that intrigued them.

The attempt to reconstitute the category involves a commitment to the meaningfulness of form, to reading design, color, and the arabesque in Fauve and other paintings in ways that, to have any vitality, must take their place in a critical discourse on form whose genealogy would return the reader to the essays of Matisse, Lhote, or Denis. To admit as much is not to deny the salutary critique of formalist, decontextualized art history conducted during the 1980s. Yet form is not the property of any one previously hegemonic critical discourse; it is a property of paintings, to be interpreted in new ways. The exemplary impulse for historical contextualization among social historians of art can be harnessed in new histories that continue to valorize form. One can read pictures in terms of new parameters provided by a more detailed scrutiny of their critical and institutional context than formalists were ever inclined to undertake.

So in this essay, the visual character of Fauve landscape painting is allied to three axes of interpretation that have been little investigated (just as the very notion of the site itself has yet to be theorized in historical terms). Through such structures, an effort is made to historicize Fauve painting in a way that admits more of the plenitude of interpretative play than does the site-specific model of landscape analysis.

The first axis is an environmental one, treating the spatial environments that act as the containers for paintings. I speak here of decorative painting proper (determined by the exigencies of placing the work in an architectural setting), and its Fauve corollary, the easel decorative landscape. These limits to the category have been observed, since the larger discursive category of “the decorative,” a complex designation weaving through architectural and ethical as well as art-critical literatures, has recently been given admirable treatment by Jacques Soulillou.<sup>9</sup>

The second axis concerns the classical landscape tradition, to which I shall argue Fauve painting may be assimilated, in so doing implying parallels between the “idealizing” of classical landscape and the abstraction of the Fauves. I argue that the Fauve modernists recuperated classicism (mediated in part by academic instruction) as a means of resisting Impressionist culture. Along this primarily diachronic axis, the dimension of cultural memory is active, being embodied in specific compositional structures like that of the *paysage composé*. Establishing such uses of history by the Fauves necessarily revises dominant accounts of their “forward-looking” experimentation as being anarchic with regard to the past.

The final axis—that of the arabesque—moves outside the confines of European visual culture to the area of intercultural play, where a mode of visual organization proper to Islamic art is appropriated in the service of boosting the decorative element in Fauve landscape painting. The usage

<sup>6</sup> F. Cracy, “Le Salon des Indépendants,” *L’Aurore*, Mar. 22, 1906.

<sup>7</sup> Concepts of place, map-making, and topographical description have been investigated in P. Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*, London, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> On the last point, see N. Green, *The Spectacle of Nature*, Manchester, 1990, and the essays in S. Pugh, ed., in *Reading Landscape: Country, City, Capital*, Manchester, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> See Soulillou, 1991.

of the arabesque is not merely contemporary, as the term designates much older features of figurative art in the Western tradition. In this essay, the arabesque becomes a hermeneutic device for describing the relationship between figure and landscape, figure and “ground,” in painting tending expressly toward abstraction around 1906. For the Fauves “booted up” the image beyond the empirically derived data in their visual screen, subjecting it to an insistently artificial twist that seemed called for by their decorative enterprise—a twist that I will refer to, in the last section of this paper, as an arabesque of observation.<sup>10</sup>

### Decorative Landscape

In a way that corresponds to the idea of a decorative staging of place, critics of the day detected an apparent indifference to the geographical site in the overall project of Fauve painting. So Louis Vauxcelles could add his voice to Cruçy’s in 1906 with this Baudelairean comment: “Our young landscapists see truthfully ‘because they see decoratively.’ The site is for them a pretext, a décor in which the figures are to be enclosed by arabesques.”<sup>11</sup> In viewing the site as a pretext, Vauxcelles goes beyond the conventional view that the subject in landscape is of only passing interest,<sup>12</sup> to a more potent modernist indifference in which “seeing decoratively,” rather than reproducing nature “faithfully,” is the main point. Vauxcelles provides a clue to what “seeing decoratively” means: it is to be “preoccupied with balancing volumes and masses,” with “enclosing figures in an arabesque”—a “pursuit of the decorative” that implies a considerable degree of abstraction away from the observed site in favor of what was considered the purely pictorial, and hence more truthful.<sup>13</sup>

The role of nature in this discourse of the decorative was often described by artists of the Fauve generation via the precept of Delacroix (popularized by Baudelaire): that nature is but a “dictionary” in which the artist seeks materials to furnish his or her painting.<sup>14</sup> The resultant attitude was well formulated in 1907 by Matisse’s friend, the painter Simon Bussy:

I draw from nature the elements necessary to my composition, I reassemble them, I simplify them . . . I transform and twist them until they are fixed in my thinking. I am not particularly concerned to render effects of light and atmosphere [in contrast to the Impressionists] nor with aerial perspective; I seek above all the equilibrium of

volumes, the rhythm of lines. . . . By an act of will . . . I impose harmony.<sup>15</sup>

This conception of a willfully constructed landscape had its precedents in the historical genre of the *paysage décoratif*, about which it is time to become more specific. According to both academic theory and studio parlance in the nineteenth century, decorative painting was primarily that intended for particular architectural locations: murals painted directly onto plaster (in the Italian tradition), or else on canvas glued or impaneled onto the wall (in France). The ancient Roman precedent, extant at Pompeii and Herculaneum since the eighteenth century, had been discussed in Vitruvius’s influential *Ten Books on Architecture* in a way that set key elements on the agenda for subsequent decorative painting. The chief of these was the logic of decorum, the ancient scheme governing architectural propriety. As all architecture was to be governed by a matching of the status of the client with the purpose of the specific building, so Vitruvius held that the decoration of a room should accord with its function.<sup>16</sup> He recommended landscapes as mural subjects not for the important rooms in a building, but rather for “walks,” which, “on account of the great length, [the ancients] decorated with a variety of landscapes, copying the characteristics of various spots. In these paintings are harbors, promontories, seashores, rivers, fountains, straits, fanes, groves, mountains, flocks, shepherds” (p. 211).

Vitruvius found a quotient of observation desirable in decorative landscape painting, although by nineteenth-century standards the attitude to topography typical of these jocose Roman sketches, founding instances of landscape in the West, was highly capricious. It is perhaps appropriate that Roman wall paintings came to be referred to by French academicians, through an etymological curiosity, as “arabesques.”<sup>17</sup> In this usage, the etymological inference of the term fixes upon the flat, ornamental element in the panels of interweaving rinceaux and brushwork curlicues that accompanied landscape views. Such rhythmical and non-imitative aspects of wall paintings had reminded Renaissance Italian viewers of flat Arabic pattern-work,<sup>18</sup> marking on a linguistic plane an association of the sensuality of an abstracting art inspired by the organic with the cultures of the Orient. At the same time, the term secures the recurrent discursive linkage of the decorative to the arabesque.

The association persisted in the eighteenth century, an era in which much of the landscape produced in France served specifically decorative purposes, being set directly into the

<sup>10</sup> The reader will recognize a terminological flavor indebted to J. Cray, *Techniques of the Observer*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990.

<sup>11</sup> See Vauxcelles.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Bouyer, Pt. 1, 32, described landscape as “an art where the *subject* almost counts for nothing” (“où le *sujet* n’est presque rien”).

<sup>13</sup> Vauxcelles.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Derain’s letter of 1909 in A. Derain, *Lettres à Vlaminck*, Paris, 1955, 176: “It is difficult to possess a landscape properly; it’s easier to create a plastic harmony that one draws from one’s own heart, with the affections that one has in the physical world. Delacroix’s phrase is right: ‘Nature is a dictionary; from it one draws the words.’” For a sense of how widespread this metaphor was, see C. Morice, ed., “Enquête sur les tendances actuelles des arts plastiques,” *Mercure de France*, LVI–LVII, Aug.–Sept. 1905.

<sup>15</sup> S. Bussy, “Note d’auteur: Au Salon d’Automne,” *La Grande Revue*, XLV, Oct. 10, 1907, 743–744.

<sup>16</sup> See Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, trans. M. Morgan, New York, 1960, 14–15.

<sup>17</sup> See P. Quatremère de Quincy’s review of J.B. Deperthes’s *Théorie du Paysage* in the *Journal des savans*, Oct. 1819, 611: “Many antique paintings, that are called *arabesques*, present us with landscape employed in the compartments of this kind of ornament” [i.e., wall decorations].

<sup>18</sup> The Italian term *rabesco* was used during the Renaissance to designate newly unearthed Roman wall decorations whose interlacings were likened to Islamic art: hence the famous “arabesques” Raphael painted in the loggia (O.E.D.); see further “Arabesques,” *Dictionnaire de l’Académie des Beaux-Arts*, II, Paris, 1868, 82–86 (principally a discussion of antique wall painting).



1 Maurice Chabas, *Le Lac Daumesnil*, 1902, detail. Paris, Mairie de Vincennes (photo: Mairie)

paneled walls of apartments.<sup>19</sup> Framing such views were carefully designed *rocaille* surrounds where arabesque forms were dominant: Watteau's designs for such ensembles were indeed called "arabesques" in the above sense. In the decorative landscapes of Boucher or Fragonard, caprice and the imagined site outweighed observation in the formulation of landscape scenes, even if they had once made nature studies in the open air.<sup>20</sup> Where decorations existed, those based closely upon specific sites can usually be tied to the logic of particular commissions, such as Jean Cotelle's earlier Grand Trianon decoration (four views of the Versailles grounds, whose purpose was presumably to display the king's accomplishments in landscape design), or the Ports of France series that C.-J. Vernet painted at royal request.

A century later, the Rococo revival of the 1880s—partly a reaction against a half-century of naturalist art—again placed such considerations on the aesthetic agenda. The Goncourts' writings helped precipitate the fashion for installing landscapes, while Art Nouveau artists' treatment of the entire wall and the furniture of a room as a decorative ensemble consciously reinvoked a decorative tradition considered to be specifically French.<sup>21</sup> The status of the site as an element in decorative landscape continued to vary according to the nature of the project. Certain official decorative commissions continued to require a programmatic linking of landscape

murals to specific geographical sites. At the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, decorated in the 1890s, several of the grand salons featured *paysages décoratifs*, framed and attached to broad pilasters at head height (that is, subservient to the ceilings, which were reserved for allegorical figure paintings). Painted in muted colors with at times a timidly Impressionist touch,<sup>22</sup> the works offered perspectives of Paris and the Seine replete with notable monuments, their titles emblazoned on gilt escutcheons: "La Fontaine Médicis," "Le Jardin du Luxembourg." This imagery of local landmarks selected for the promotion of civic consciousness continued after 1900 in suburban Town Halls like that of Vincennes, whose commissioners suppressed allegorical figures altogether and opted for a series of panels commemorating nearby monuments and parks (Fig. 1).<sup>23</sup>

Not even for official projects did all practitioners of decorative landscape subscribe to such desiderata. In the case of "advanced" decorative painting of a Symbolist strain, topographical precision seemed inimical to the achievement of its ends. A case in point is Puvis de Chavannes's pair of giant landscape murals at the Paris Hôtel de Ville, entitled *L'Hiver* and *L'Été*. The latter (Fig. 2) evokes a distant Golden Age where Gaulish, yet togate women bathe on the verdant banks of an antique Seine. Locale is so generalized, however, that it could as easily be Greece or the Roman Campagna. Puvis himself "smiled when one spoke to him of his 'Hellenic' landscapes," explaining to the critic Camille Mauclair that for the preparation of his decorations, "the Bois de Boulogne and the turf at Longchamps have always been sufficient for me." In the critic's view, Puvis's ability to generalize and skillfully organize landscape was linked to his absorbing the example of Poussin, and to his own decorative tendency: "His decorative sense ennobled everything, and without working from nature, with just a few drawings and studies of planes and of objects, he would reconstruct a landscape that was at once stylized and real."<sup>24</sup>

In respect to such topographical indeterminacy, the decorative landscapes of Puvis are related to those of Post-Impressionists of Symbolist tendency. Edouard Vuillard, for example, diminishes the sense of exact location through his treatment of scale and color in *The First Fruits* (Fig. 3), one of two enormous *paysages décoratifs* inspired by the country of the Île de France and painted for the study of Adam Natanson's townhouse in 1899.<sup>25</sup> Only intimates of the family were able to recognize in these scenes the surroundings of the Natanson house at L'Étang-la-Ville.<sup>26</sup> In Vuillard's case, reducing the referentiality of the picture abets the development of a decorative aesthetic in a way closely tied to

<sup>19</sup> See P. Conisbee, *Painting in Eighteenth-Century France*, Oxford, 1981, 30–32, 173–178.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; see also I. Lockhead, *The Spectator and the Landscape in the Art Criticism of Diderot and His Contemporaries*, Ann Arbor, 1982, 23–47.

<sup>21</sup> See D.L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989, Pt. 3, on the Rococo revival and its cultural significance.

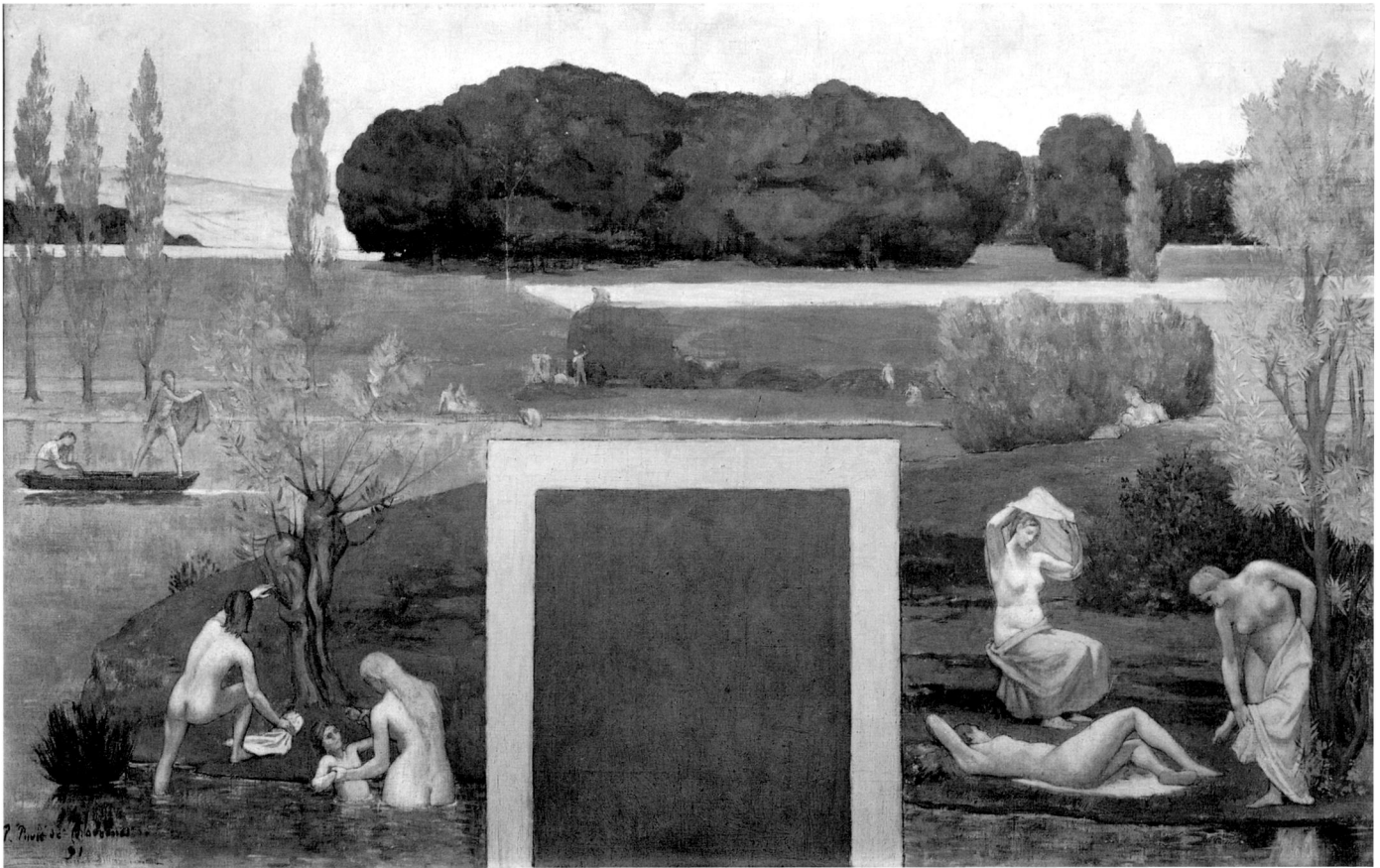
<sup>22</sup> By painters like Guillemet and Raffaëlli (see J.-J. Lévêque, *L'Hôtel de Ville de Paris*, Paris, 1983, 166–175). Signac decried this landscape program, suggesting it would have been extraordinary if accorded to the major Impressionists (see *Le Triomphe de Mairies. Grands Décors républicains à Paris, 1870–1914*, Paris, 1986, 63).

<sup>23</sup> *Le Triomphe des Mairies* (as in n. 22), 60.

<sup>24</sup> C. Mauclair, "Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898)," *La Nouvelle Revue*, cxviii, 1899, 671.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed discussion, see G. Groom, "Landscape as Decoration: Edouard Vuillard's Île-de-France Paintings for Adam Natanson," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, xvi, 1990, 147–183.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 151, 163.



2 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *L'Été*, reduced version, ca. 1895. Paris, Petit Palais (photo © RMN)

the function of such a painting—here, to provide a kind of therapeutic idyl for the occupant of the study. This is explicit in Achille Ségard's commentary of 1914 on *The First Fruits*: "It is the *décor par excellence* for a study, that sanctuary for meditation. . . . M. Vuillard offers us a vision of nature as the potential reward for the intellectual work one pursues in front of it."<sup>27</sup>

The old Vitruvian idea of a decorum of purpose regulates this view of mural decoration as a therapeutic reward. Matisse's position was much the same in his famous 1908 justification of his painting as "an art of balance, purity and tranquillity, devoid of troubling subject-matter . . . which will be for every mental worker . . . a kind of soother, a cerebral calmant."<sup>28</sup> The texts by both Ségard and Matisse give shape to an ideology of decoration as a social restorative, but one that was specifically bourgeois in that it required, in economic terms, "businessmen and men of letters" (in Matisse's phrase) like Natanson who had the means to decorate private domestic interiors with paintings. The ethic was articulated in didactic texts on decorative art of the 1890s which themselves had links to William Morris's widely dissem-

inated ideas on the social utility of ornament.<sup>29</sup> In the case of the socialist Morris, ornament was to be an evocation of nature capable of transforming the more specifically working-class home. But both Morris and Matisse were artists for whom the basis of decoration was to be the memory of nature, in itself considered a positive good. This attitude contrasted strongly with the later "anti-decorative Utopias" promulgated by architectural theorists like Adolph Loos and Le Corbusier, who came to regard ornament as almost criminal excess, exiling it in a Purist functionalism that became central to mid-twentieth-century modernist aesthetics.<sup>30</sup>

The decade of the 1890s, however, was the period in which, as Maurice Denis put it, the word "decorative" was becoming "the *tarte à la crème* [buzzword] of discussions among artists and even among fashionable laymen."<sup>31</sup> Gauguin was considered by his supporters to have expanded the specialism of the painter into that of the *décorateur* who would design, paint, or ornament all materials that came to his hand; they called for Gauguin to be given walls on which to express his decorative genius.<sup>32</sup> The "call for walls" was a protest against the Beaux-Arts administration's policy of

<sup>27</sup> A. Ségard, *Peintres d'aujourd'hui. Les Décorateurs*, II, Paris, 1914, 258–260.

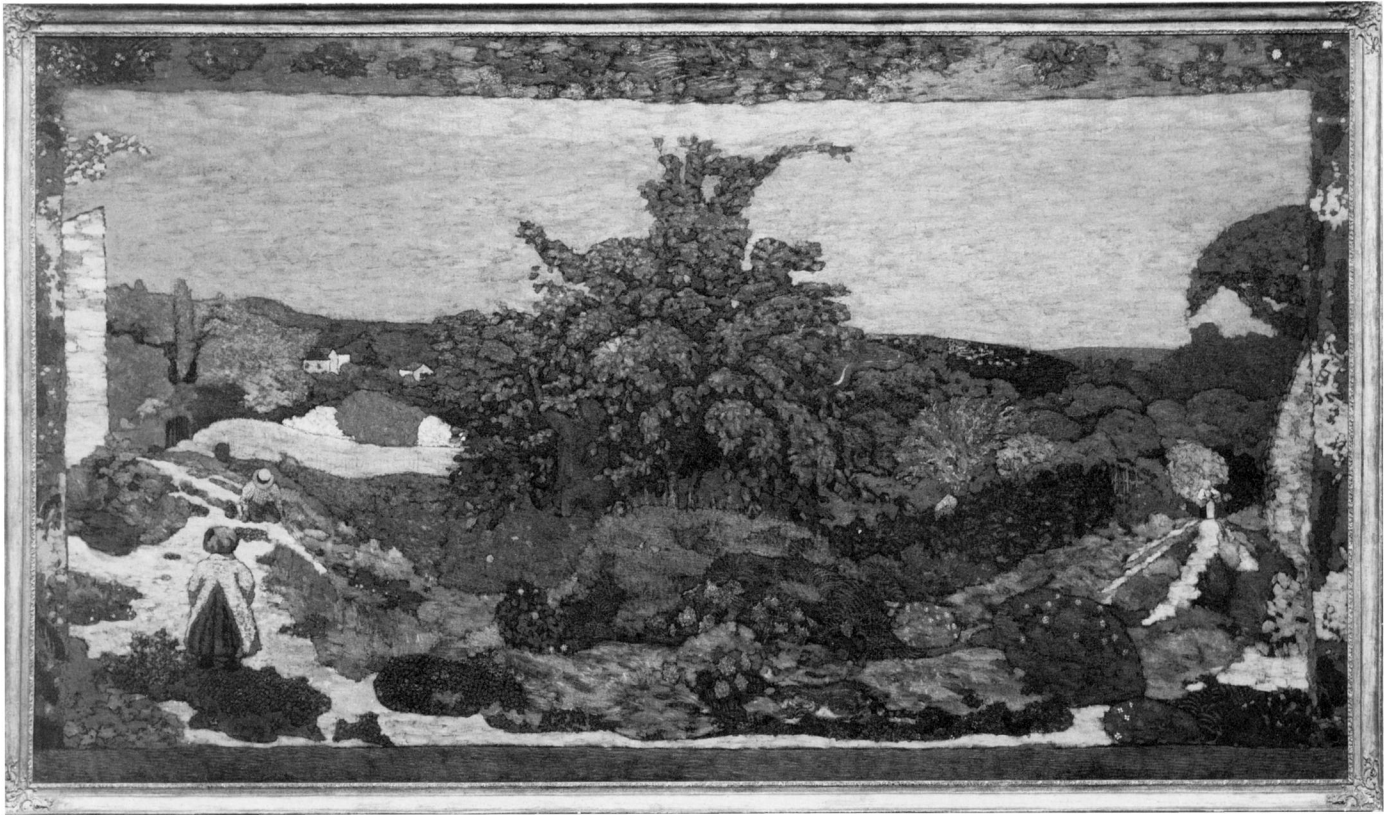
<sup>28</sup> Matisse, "Notes d'un peintre," *La Grande Revue*, LVII, Dec. 25, 1908, in Matisse, 50; for a discussion of the Baudelairean precedents of this passage, see Benjamin, 208–209. Jane Lee has pointed out in conversation that Saint Thomas Aquinas's aesthetics, still familiar in France in the 1920s, stressed the therapeutic value of art.

<sup>29</sup> For the 1890s texts, see J. Neff, "Matisse and Decoration," *Arts Magazine*, XLIX, May 1975, 59–61; on the French reception of Morris's theories see Silverman (as in n. 21), 138–139.

<sup>30</sup> See Souillou, esp. 53–75 (the phrase in quotation marks is his).

<sup>31</sup> M. Denis, "L'Influence de Paul Gauguin," *L'Occident* [1903], repr. in *Théories*, Paris, 1920, 170.

<sup>32</sup> Denis (as in n. 31), citing G.-A. Aurier.



3 Edouard Vuillard, *The First Fruits*, 1899. Pasadena, The Norton Simon Foundation, F.73.33.1.P. (photo: Museum)

commissioning only “pompier” muralists. The Nabis, like the officials, recognized the prestige of this most public of genres (it is worth recalling that Vasari had considered fresco painting “the most masterly and beautiful” of all painting methods, ascribing to it a specifically masculine character on account of its level of difficulty).<sup>33</sup>

Among the Nabis and Art Nouveau artists, the room was considered with respect to its decorative ensemble, as an environment to be aestheticized; and the immovable elements of mural paintings needed to establish visual relations with this environment. Ségard’s further commentary on Vuillard’s *First Fruits* brings this out:

From the decorative viewpoint the work takes effect in its perfectly organized composition, in the way the panel integrates itself, so to speak, into the wall against which it is placed. . . . It is almost a backdrop in colored grisaille, whose aim is to pull together the interior to be decorated and not to prolong it beyond the wall with an illusion. . . . It does not attract the eye, it relaxes it.<sup>34</sup>

Ségard moves from an *ethic* of decoration to a specific *aesthetic*: development of harmonious composition, avoiding

the perspectival penetration of the wall, employing muted colors related to those in the room,<sup>35</sup> and the use of painted ornamental frames. Even if given extreme development by Vuillard, such precepts were familiar from the example of Puvis, and had even passed into contemporary painting manuals. That of Ernest Hareux, for example, specified in regard to “panneaux décoratifs” whose subject was landscape: “Decorative landscapes . . . require an emphatic sobriety of detail, great unity of effect, and a tonal scale appropriate to the ensemble of the decoration of which they form part.”<sup>36</sup>

Increasingly, neither the aesthetic nor the ethic of the *paysage décoratif* was confined to mural painting alone: in the later nineteenth century, a semantic transference occurs whereby concepts of the decorative normally associated with mural practice migrated to discussions of easel painting. This transference was not just linguistic, for the practice of painting itself was adjusted by artists to the broader frame of reference that the decorative example provided. Puvis and Vuillard employed devices derived from their decorations in easel paintings, while certain radical voices called for the abolition of any distinction between the two: “Away with easel-pictures! Away with that unnecessary piece of furniture!

<sup>33</sup> Vasari on *Technique*, trans. L. Maclehorse, New York, 1960, 221–222: “The most manly, most certain, most resolute and durable of all the other methods.” This masculinization of a decorative enterprise runs counter to the modernist trope of the decorative as feminine in its excess, its masking of structure with ornament, and its alliance to arts practiced by women (see Soullou, 44–46, and Silverman [as in n. 21], 186–193).

<sup>34</sup> Ségard (as in n. 27), 262–263.

<sup>35</sup> Signac wrote admiringly of a Vuillard decoration seen *in situ* where “the painter has taken his lead from the dominant tints of the furniture and dyed cloths, which he has repeated in his canvases and harmonized with their complementaries” (Rewald, Pt. 3, 35).

<sup>36</sup> E. Hareux, *Paysages. Cours complet de peinture à l’huile*, Paris, n.d. [ca. 1890], 134. The manual also stressed that the decorator should avoid modeling, and emphasize the contours of forms like trees.

... No more perspective! The wall must remain a plain surface, and must not be broken by the presentation of limitless horizons. There are no paintings, but only decorations."<sup>37</sup>

This collapse of the distinction between easel and mural art also appears in Paul Signac's *From Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*, 1898, a text well known to the future Fauves Matisse and Marquet. Signac concludes his section on the relevance of the Neo-Impressionist "divided touch" to mural decoration in this way:

Even the Neo-Impressionists' canvases of small dimensions can be presented as decorative. They are neither studies nor easel pictures, but "exemplary specimens of an art of grand decorative development, which sacrifices anecdote to the arabesque, the catalogue to synthesis, the fleeting to the permanent, and confers upon nature . . . an authentic reality," as M. Félix Fénéon wrote. These canvases that restore light to the walls of our modern apartments, that embed pure colors in rhythmical lines, that share the charm of Oriental rugs, of mosaics and tapestries, are they not also decorations?<sup>38</sup>

Signac's attempt to define the decorative here depends upon coloristic and compositional qualities internal to the image, irrespective of its scale. He promotes pictures with this character by analogy with those arts—Oriental rugs, mosaics, and tapestries—whose function was by definition decorative (i.e., ornamenting wall or floor surfaces). The Oriental arts appear in the passage as archetypes of the decorative, the rug, for example, being an ancient case of an art that itself "embeds pure colors in rhythmical lines."<sup>39</sup> Fénéon's formulation, that Neo-Impressionist pictures would "sacrifice the anecdote to the arabesque," captures the substitution of rhythmical pictorial values for "literary" ones, as (to foreshadow the final section of this paper) might also have been claimed for the many modes of Islamic decorative art where the figure was avoided.

The archetype, however, for modern easel landscape that was placed under the discursive sign of the decorative was that of Claude Monet. Steven Levine has shown that from the 1880s on Monet's canvases were consistently praised for their "decorative effect," in a terminology that invokes both the décors or colored environments of the theatrical stage, and their aspect as *décoration*, that is, again, potentially attachable architectural ornaments of the kind hinted at in the *Series* and later realized in the *Waterlilies* murals.<sup>40</sup> The core of the decorative in Monet lay in his purifications of

color, light, and design in landscape. This sense is present in a key text by Raymond Bouyer relating the *paysage décoratif* to the case of Monet: "Already brightness revives the décor, and décor leads to style; style evokes the symbol. Increasingly the orientation is toward the *paysage décoratif*, that is to say toward composition, full of attractions, nobility, and dangers" (Pt. 5, 117).

### The Composed Landscape

In its call for an elevated style and an art of "composition," this passage returns my argument on the easel *paysage décoratif* to the staging of place within classical landscape painting. Two leading critics of the 1890s, Bouyer of the distinguished but ailing *L'Artiste* and Camille Mauclair of *La Nouvelle Revue*,<sup>41</sup> elaborated a concept of the *paysage décoratif* that looks to the tradition of Poussin and Claude as embodying a set of stylistic values and compositional options that could redress the widely felt shortcomings of the Impressionist landscape as too radically naturalist, too little composed. In some respects, their view approaches the critique of Impressionism offered by Signac, Fénéon, and Cézanne and taken up by the Fauves in the next decade.<sup>42</sup>

The nineties' case for the relevance of classical landscape to contemporary painting is best presented in Bouyer's book-length "Le Paysage dans l'art," which appeared during 1893 (while Matisse was a student of Gustave Moreau at the École des Beaux-Arts).<sup>43</sup> Bouyer begins it with an exhortation: after the mastery of the impression given us by Claude Monet, we must return to the study of style, and to the composition of *tableaux*—students of landscape should post engravings after Poussin in their studios. Bouyer follows a scheme of history in which Poussin is the great exponent of the elevated genre in landscape, the *paysage historique*, where figures in heroic action perform in an idealized landscape setting. Learning from Titian and the Carracci, Poussin and Claude perfect a vision of the *paysage composé*: "A fine landscape . . . possesses an intrinsic beauty—geometric and picturesque—which it draws from the cadenced eurhythmy of lines, from the harmonious marriage of tones" (Pt. 2, 117). Poussin's painting *Diogène jetant son écuelle* in the Louvre (Fig. 4) incarnates that tendency for Bouyer, who praises it for reconciling the two contraries, "la ligne noble et la chose exacte," aspects of the Beau (the ideal) and the Vrai (the observed) that would have to come together in any landscape elevated enough to provide a materially convincing setting for the Greek philosopher (Pt. 2, 118–119).

The critic's nomenclature displays his knowledge of academic landscape theory.<sup>44</sup> The French academic tradition

<sup>37</sup> J. Verkade, *Yesterdays of an Artist-Monk*, trans. J. Stoddard, New York, 1930, 88 (cited in Groom [as in n. 25], 149). See also Aurier's comment, "Decorative painting is, strictly speaking, the true art of painting. . . . The easel-picture is nothing but an illogical refinement invented to satisfy the fantasy or the commercial spirit in decadent civilizations" ("Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France*, II, 1891, trans. in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. H.B. Chipp, Berkeley, 1968, 92).

<sup>38</sup> P. Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme*, Paris [1898], 1911, 89.

<sup>39</sup> On such issues, see J. Masheck, "The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness," *Arts Magazine*, L, 1976, 82–109.

<sup>40</sup> See S.Z. Levine, "Décor/Decorative/Décoratif in Monet's Art," *Arts Magazine*, LI, Feb. 1977, 136–139; also R.L. Herbert, "The Decorative and the Natural in Monet's Cathedrals," in *Aspects of Monet*, ed. J. Rewald and F. Weitzenhoffer, New York, 1984, 160–179.

<sup>41</sup> In addition to Bouyer's "Le Paysage dans l'art," see C. Mauclair, "Critique de la peinture," *La Nouvelle Revue*, xcvi, Sept. 15, 1895, esp. 319–325.

<sup>42</sup> See n. 5 above.

<sup>43</sup> Bouyer kept his theses on classical landscape before the public after 1905 with his "Nicolas Poussin" and "Claude Lorrain," in F. Benoît et al., *Histoire du paysage en France*, Paris, 1908, 100–116, 117–135, and "Poussin, paysagiste et novateur," *L'Art et les artistes*, IV, Jan. 1907, 385–390.

<sup>44</sup> Bouyer's categories and history broadly correspond, for example, to J.B. Deperthes, *Théorie du paysage*, Paris, 1818, and *Histoire de l'art du paysage, depuis la renaissance des beaux-arts jusqu'au dix-huitième siècle*, Paris, 1822.





4 Nicolas Poussin, *Diogène jetant son écuelle*, 1648. Paris, Louvre (photo © RMN)

had long before named Poussin and Claude as the twin founts of its teaching and the source for all precepts of style in landscape. At the end of the eighteenth century, Pierre-Henri Valenciennes of the Academy codified its teaching on landscape in a treatise whose prestige helped found a Prix de Rome for *paysage historique*, awarded every four years from 1817 until its demise under the onslaught of naturalism in 1863. In the treatise by Valenciennes, incorporated into a larger study of perspective, the landscape becomes, as it were, a mechanism for the optical organization of elements of nature enclosing the mythic protagonists of the story. Valenciennes indeed offers the rudiments of a formal analysis of the *paysage historique* as a construction in terms of lights and shadows, of planes and dominant lines.

The vitality of this mode of understanding was still evident a century and a half later, in the *Treatise on Landscape* by the Cubist-inspired painter and teacher André Lhote, who expounds the formal analysis of landscape painting with great finesse.<sup>45</sup> Such a teaching enables one to anatomize any *paysage composé* in something like the following terms: in the example of Poussin's *Diogenes*, one sees in the foreground a dark diagonal or *répoussoir* whose compositional function was to merge with the space of the observer and throw the brightly lit perspective beyond into depth; this effect is continued by the dark vertical masses or *coulisses* (in this case trees) which further focus on the center view: a series of graduated screens or planes describing ground, water, buildings, hills, and eventually sky, the perspectival continuity of which is given in a series of disguised internal diagonals. Lhote himself writes of the function of "screens" in the composed landscape: "This mechanical system of light on dark, dark on light, animates all the great traditional landscapes. . . . If a light plane pushes forward the dark plane in front of it . . . a succession of waves is started up . . . an incessant to and fro move-

ment of values which cancel each other out only after they have given the spectator the sensation of depth" (1950, 14).

Such a system of staging the landscape is evidently a consummate contrivance of artifice, yet it needed a basis in observation: Valenciennes, an early proponent of nature studies *en plein air* and of learning to discriminate among the motifs observed, considered that "it is absolutely necessary to make a choice and following it a combination of several beautiful objects in order to compose a picture."<sup>46</sup> Notwithstanding Valenciennes's insistence on studying nature, for Bouyer in the 1890s it was Valenciennes and his followers who had turned the classicizing *paysage historique* into an art of stale convention, to be duly pushed aside by the Romantic naturalists of 1830 who proposed a new vision of the specifically French country: the *paysage rustique*.

As the *paysage de style* was Italianate and drew its inspiration from what Bouyer called "the summery and decorative brightness of the antique Midi" (Pt. 5, 125), so the *paysage rustique* was of northern parentage. Again borrowing his critical terms from proto-Romantic theorists like Deperthes, Bouyer linked the *paysage rustique* (or *paysage champêtre*) to seventeenth-century Dutch landscape and in particular to Ruisdael.<sup>47</sup> This was an art of the Vrai, not the Beau, and

<sup>45</sup> Lhote's 1950 book (1st ed. Paris, 1939), a major theoretical text on landscape, couples the ideas of an articulate participant in Cubism with two decades of later practice as an art critic and professor at his own influential academy.

<sup>46</sup> Valenciennes, 419.

<sup>47</sup> Deperthes, although a former student of Valenciennes, sets out the northern "culture" of the *paysage champêtre* as exemplified by Ruisdael, an artist he came close to considering the supreme landscapist; see Deperthes, 1822 (as in n. 44), 180–181 and 436–449. For the incipient romanticism of Deperthes, see C.M. Puppin, "The Critical Response to Landscape Painting in France, 1830–1851," Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1986, 63ff.

while it had been stigmatized by Neoclassical painters as vulgar in its contingency, the Romantics reveled in its specific vision of places and the elements, which in the French situation could be connected to a lyrical identification with nature specific to the urban imagination, as well as to feelings of national identity enshrined in specific climes, landforms, and sites.<sup>48</sup> Bouyer extended the lineage of the *paysage rustique* from Théodore Rousseau through Courbet to the modern *plein-airism* of the “prismatic and *campagnard*” Claude Monet (Pt. 4, 30), whose art was by the logic of this scheme remote from the “elevated” sense of style and topographical generality that the southern tradition required.

For Bouyer (as for others before him), only one painter was capable of reconciling these two impulses for exactitude and style, observation and imagination, North and South: Camille Corot. Corot was trained by the academic disciples of Valenciennes, yet became an indefatigable *plein-airist* in both rural France and Italy. The role of his sketch-like finish in preparing the ground for the Impressionist touch is better known to modern historians<sup>49</sup> than the continuing importance of his art as a repository of classical artifices of composition. Late works like Corot’s *Souvenir de Mortefontaine* of 1864 are based on notes made *sur le motif* long before, and recombined in artful décors which pay homage to the flats and the coulisses of the Paris Opéra stage (in 1861 he had produced a series of works based on Gluck’s *Orphée*).<sup>50</sup>

The relation between Corot’s highly composed landscape and theater design exemplifies a kinship of scenographic construction that had a long history in France. In the eighteenth century, there were several notable painters of architectural caprices who worked as stage designers,<sup>51</sup> while a painter-decorator like Boucher designed sets for the Paris Opéra for nearly a decade.<sup>52</sup> Among the popular spectacular entertainments of the day, the *Eidophusikon* of the landscapist P.-J. de Louthenburg, set up in London late in the century, was remarkable for using candlelight and moving screens to create a series of illusionistic landscape décors.<sup>53</sup>

A formalized sense of what the arts of theater and landscape shared is available in the section of Valenciennes’s treatise devoted to the art of constructing décors for the stage. In it he makes clear that painting and manipulating the coulisses, the flats, the drops, and the wings for the production of perspectively convincing theatrical settings required of the “décorateur” all of the skills in composition and *ordonnance* of the professional landscape artist.<sup>54</sup> Both arts require that the spectator (either in the auditorium or before a picture) be placed in a limited range of positions

for the illusion to work.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand (and this is where the theater could serve as a model when landscape moved toward abstraction), the conditions of poor visibility in an auditorium required emphasizing forms and contours, and generalizing details—the same aesthetic desiderata that became a component of the agreeably “decorative” landscape. So an 1890s entry in the *Dictionnaire* of the Académie des Beaux-Arts (a technical discussion of constructing theatrical décors) refers to the model of landscape and the laws of good composition: “The composition of a décor follows approximately the same principles as those guiding the composition of such a picture as would represent a given site in a desirable way: strong lines, pronounced effects, well-drawn planes.”<sup>56</sup>

In the light of the discursive and technical rapport between landscape and the theater, Corot’s pictures exemplify a staging of the natural that could both produce the illusion of truth to nature, and yet please the critics by their decorative tracery of tonal and melodic ensembles. Corot’s balance was not easy to achieve, however: progressive landscapists who employed decorative artifices after 1900 could suffer criticism when held against the measure of naturalism. So in 1908 the young André Lhote (at the time a follower of Gauguin, Cézanne, and the Fauves) was taxed by Jacques Rivière with a kind of inversion of Baudelaire’s ideal: “I don’t like your pictures . . . for me all three of them . . . are too much like décors; the whole thing is ‘en décor’ . . . The landscapes are—I’m sorry—made of cardboard: they are ‘portants’ and ‘frises’ . . . It seems to me their very simplicity has the summary character of rapidly brushed decorations.”<sup>57</sup>

### Place in Fauve Painting

In painting a landscape you choose it for certain beauties—spots of color, suggestions of composition. Close your eyes and visualize the picture; then go to work, always keeping these characteristics [as] the important features of the picture. . . . One must stop from time to time to consider the subject (model, landscape, etc.) in its ensemble.

—Matisse to his students, 1908,  
quoted in Stein, 551–552.

The landscape practice of Fauve painters with regard to decorative artifices varied markedly, both within the work of an individual and across the loosely constituted group. So Matisse’s work could encompass a series of quasi-Impressionist oil sketches<sup>58</sup> as well as the grandly transformative tableaux of *Luxe, calme et volupté* or *Le Bonheur de vivre* (Figs. 8, 16). Albert Marquet was consistently reliant on the evocation of site (his representational legibility was one of the reasons his work found critical favor). The high quotient of abstraction in Derain, however, was the despair of critics like Vauxcelles, who in 1906 decried him as an artist whom “form leaves almost completely indifferent. He dreams of

<sup>48</sup> For an account of concepts of nature, urbanization, and imaging the landscape in mid-19th-century France, see Green (as in n. 8).

<sup>49</sup> The key text here is C. Baudelaire, “Salon de 1846,” in Baudelaire, 53–55.

<sup>50</sup> See A. Robaut, *L’Oeuvre de Corot*, 1, Paris, 1905, 181–185, 200–203.

<sup>51</sup> See Conisbee (as in n. 19), 174.

<sup>52</sup> E. and J. de Goncourt, *French Eighteenth-Century Painters*, Oxford, 1948, 75.

<sup>53</sup> See Lockhead (as in n. 20), 84–86.

<sup>54</sup> See Valenciennes, 301–332 (“De la perspective des théâtres”).

<sup>55</sup> The debt here is to M. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley, 1981.

<sup>56</sup> “Décors de théâtre,” *Dictionnaire de l’Académie des Beaux-Arts*, v, Paris, 1896, 99.

<sup>57</sup> In Lhote, 1986, 1, letter of Mar. 27, 1908, 50–51.

<sup>58</sup> Ill. in *The Fauve Landscape*, 23, 313.

'pure decoration.' . . . He plunges into the abstract and turns his back upon nature." The critics may have been equally uneasy with the places staged in Vlaminck's multicolored canvases, but Vlaminck nevertheless had a strong attachment to local particularities, specifically those of the Chatou *banlieue* from which he seldom strayed.<sup>59</sup> The much better-traveled Derain accused Vlaminck of referring all places he painted back to his old stamping-ground, saying after a rare visit by Vlaminck to the South, "To paint the Midi, you wait until it looks like Chatou."<sup>60</sup>

It is not my purpose to study here the discourse on specific place such an anecdote articulates, beyond giving the following indications. The generation of the Post-Impressionists and Fauves shared an aestheticized appreciation of locale of a kind present in the thinking of nineteenth-century artist-travelers from Delacroix on. The conception drew on geographical polarities of a broad grain, reinterpreting the traditional division between North and South (northern, naturalistic, and topographically specific—the *paysage rustique*—versus southern, decorative, and idealized—the *paysage composé*) in terms of a more positivist problematic of the perception of changes in color and light as modified by latitude. The vitality of this discursive trope, fine-tuned by the Impressionists, is evident in the extent to which Fauve artists still spoke of rendering the distinctive light and color of particular (especially unfamiliar) locales. So Derain could accuse Vlaminck of misrepresenting the Midi, or Matisse could complain of an inability to adapt to the conditions of illumination while visiting Biskra in Algeria during 1906.<sup>61</sup> The point is most clearly expressed by Signac, commenting in 1897 on the critic Retté's dismissal of his pictures as failing to render the "colors" of the Midi as Van Gogh had done:

In this country [the Midi] there is nothing but white. The light, which is reflected everywhere, eats up all the local colors and turns the shadows grey. . . . Now, on the contrary it is the North—Holland for example—which is "colored" (local colors), while the Midi is "luminous." . . . Huysmans wrote that I "Marseillify" the [Parisian] suburbs . . . Retté finds that I "suburbanise" the Midi.<sup>62</sup>

Signac's language captures the complexity with which place, in the sphere of art, could be understood. On the one hand, the name denoting a city or region is potentially charged with the loyalties of a regionalist fixation, yet

<sup>59</sup> On Vlaminck's attachment to Chatou and use of postcards as sources, see J. Klein, "New Lessons from the School of Chatou" in *The Fauve Landscape*, 123–151; on the issues of criticism in this paragraph, see Benjamin (as in n. 3).

<sup>60</sup> Derain quoted in Klein (as in n. 59), 148.

<sup>61</sup> "Because of the sun, and it's like that almost all of the time, the light is blinding. . . . One is quite aware that one would have to spend several years in these countries in order to derive something new from them, and that one can't take up one's palette and system and apply them." Letter to H. Manguin, May–June 1906, quoted in P. Schneider, *Matisse*, Paris, 1984, 158. The issue of the exotic site cannot be treated here; for a beginning, see R. Benjamin, "Matisse in Morocco: A Colonizing Aesthetic?" *Art in America*, LXXVIII, Nov. 1990, esp. 164.

<sup>62</sup> Rewald, Pt. 1, 106; see esp.: "Huysmans écrivait que 'j'emmaraisillais' les banlieues . . . Retté trouve que je 'banlieuse' le midi."

<sup>63</sup> Letters to Matisse in J. Freeman, "Documentary Chronology 1904–1908," in *The Fauve Landscape*, 84, 86.

through a play on words the name undergoes a radical grafting of such identities ("suburbanizing" the Midi"). On the other hand, place in the domain of painting is uniquely modified by the "vision" of preceding artists—so Signac has been unfaithful to the Midi of Van Gogh. This latter complication of the idea leads to a "geography" of differing positions, both spatial and aesthetic, labeled with artists' names. Derain's series of London landscapes cries out for description in such terms: enough of his London motifs are derived from Monet's celebrated 1899–1904 London series that one could argue that the principal referents of these pictures are less geographic entities, like Westminster or Charing Cross Bridge, than the artistic identity Claude Monet (Figs. 5–6).

Elements of this "aesthetic geography" would have been comprehensible at the time, shifting according to the range of associations that specific representations had for specific viewers. Among the public who came to see Derain's works at the Galerie Vollard, an informed viewer would see the reference to Monet's pictures, and might even see the precursive constitutions of place available to the art historian today: Whistler's *Nocturne of Old Battersea Bridge*, and behind that Hiroshige's views of bridges at Edo and Tokaido. In addition, the task of rendering effects of color characteristic of the Thames was bound up with the example of the local genius, Turner, whom it is known Monet, Derain, and (since Neo-Impressionism must also figure here) Signac studied and admired in London. In letters home to Matisse from London, Derain recorded his preoccupation with the Turners and Claudes at the National Gallery from the standpoint of tone, color, and construction.<sup>63</sup>

Derain's relationship to Monet could be described in agonistic terms, as a contest beginning with the younger painter's act of submission to Monet's London, and progressing to a critique of the older master evident in Derain's effort to conceive his pictorial subject anew.<sup>64</sup> Similar arguments for the involuted status of place within high modern landscape could be made for Derain, Braque, or Friesz painting the landscapes of Provence in the wake of Cézanne.<sup>65</sup> A reading of both the production and the reception of such works ought to recall their embeddedness in a projection of the landscape that is a history of artifices. Part of the social meaning of the whole is the way the aesthetic effect involves a layering of encounters with specific art-historical identities for viewing constituencies of different credentials.

This is equally clear in the relationship of Fauve landscape to classical precedents, to which my argument now returns.

<sup>64</sup> See H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford, 1973. Derain's comments of April 1906 on Monet mix admiration with refusal, documenting his attempt to forge an aesthetic in opposition to Impressionism: "As for Claude Monet, in spite of everything I adore him, because of his very errors which for me are a precious lesson. But finally, is he right to use his fleeting and insubstantial color to render natural impressions that are nothing more than impressions and do not endure? Can't he heighten the distinctive character of his painting? Personally I would look for something else: that which on the contrary is fixed, eternal and complex" (Derain [as in n. 14], 188).

<sup>65</sup> For example, Derain commented on cycling through the Midi around Vienne: "One sees the whole series of Gauguins, of Van Goghs from Arles and finally, on arriving, the most beautiful Cézannes" (Derain [as in n. 14], 184).



5 André Derain, *Charing Cross Bridge*, 1906. Private collection (photo: Charles Uht, New York)



6 Claude Monet, *Charing Cross Bridge, London*, ca. 1904. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Given by Janet Hubbard Stevens in memory of her mother, Janet Watson Hubbard (photo: Museum)



7 Claude Lorrain, *Le Débarquement de Cléopâtre à Tarse*, 1642. Paris, Louvre (photo © RMN)

For the Fauves' decorative conception of landscape derives in part from an absorption of classical models, and a tendency to abstraction that parallels the move away from mimetic particularity found in both classical painting and painting for the stage.

Any claim that Fauve painters employed classical schemata of painting requires a clarification of their attitudes to pre-Impressionist landscape. The evidence is not abundant, but always telling. Matisse repeatedly invoked the name of Corot, and once wrote to Charles Camoin favorably comparing the "grand style" of Corot to that of Gauguin—a preference he shared with Paul Signac.<sup>66</sup> In a revealing anecdote, Matisse recalled that when as a student he and his colleagues began going to Durand-Ruel's, it was more to see El Greco's "celebrated *View of Toledo*" than the Impressionist pictures.<sup>67</sup>

But the crux of the matter lies in copying. In the 1890s the four future Fauves Matisse, Marquet, Manguin, and Camoin encountered classical landscape as students at the *École des Beaux-Arts* atelier of Gustave Moreau, a teacher passionately engaged in grafting the arcana of the Old Masters onto the stimulus of modern experience. They made numerous oil copies in the Louvre, where, as one recalled, Moreau would explain "the skill in composition, the subtle gradations of the atmosphere" visible in the *Débarquement de Cleopatra à Tarse*

by Claude (Fig. 7).<sup>68</sup> Marquet made an important series of pastel interpretations of this picture in 1896, while Matisse copied it in 1899. Among various other landscape copies made, all four future Fauves worked extensively after Poussin (whom Derain also studied in sketches made around 1905).<sup>69</sup>

To claim the persistence of memories generated by such copying of classical models would appear to affiliate the Fauves with the broader move to reincorporate a sense of classical culture that swept sectors of the Parisian art world around 1905.<sup>70</sup> Regarding this question, one must recognize the differences between historical individuals and avoid reducing each to totalized ideological positions. A Fauve painter like Matisse was no Maurice Denis, with a developed ideological platform of Catholicism and nationalist politics, and a classicizing, Italianate pictorial practice to accompany it. Even among the Fauve group, Matisse's particular interest in classical formulations of landscape was idiosyncratic, coupled as it was with a consuming professional engagement with the radical questioning of representation. Matisse's stance is best read as bespeaking a politics of aestheticist

<sup>66</sup> Matisse, 95; Signac wrote caustically of Gauguin but admired the model Corot could provide for painters (see Rewald, Pt. 1, 116–117; 2, 283; 3, 54).

<sup>67</sup> Matisse, 197. The place of the *View of Toledo* in the modernist canon is further confirmed by Lhote's analysis of it in the caption to Lhote, 1950, pl. 54.

<sup>68</sup> G. Rouault, *Souvenirs intimes*, Paris, 1926, 23.

<sup>69</sup> See Benjamin, 33–34, and R. Benjamin, "Recovering Authors: The Modern Copy, Copy Exhibitions and Matisse," *Art History*, xii, June 1989, 179–183, 190; for Derain's drawing of Poussin's *L'Été (Ruth et Boöz)* see M. Parke-Taylor, "André Derain: Les Copies de l'album fauve," *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, v, 1980, 371.

<sup>70</sup> See the dissertation by D. Cottingham, "Cubism and the Politics of Culture in France 1905–1914," University of London, 1985, *passim*; J. Lee, *Derain*, Oxford, 1990, 19–49; and J.D. Herbert, *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics*, New Haven and London, 1992 (not available to me at the time of writing).

disengagement.<sup>71</sup> His attachment to the classical landscapes of Poussin or Claude is bound up with his need to go beyond the mimetic element in Impressionist art, to find a new application for the museum art he admired. In addition, the supposedly Mediterranean but preeminently generalized and utopian “no-places” proposed by classical landscape corresponded with Matisse’s cosmopolitan and peripatetic sensibility. To that extent, his case differed from that of Vlaminck, the localist from the “School of Chatou,” or from Cézanne, whose regionalist bias for the country around his native Aix-en-Provence provided for a highly determined discourse on place, at the same time as a strong binding with the “classical” example of the Frenchman Poussin.<sup>72</sup>

Cézanne’s work is important to the rise of easel painting in which a decorative and abstracting tendency partly inspired by classical models leads to a reformation of the Impressionist landscape of observation. The burden of Cézanne’s critique of Impressionism was to forgo the snapshot view for a more deliberative forming of a scene. The artist who had proposed “redoing Poussin after nature”<sup>73</sup> made the following admonition to his admirer Camoin, who passed it on in a letter of December 1904 to Matisse: “You see, one must make *pictures* [*tableaux*], compose pictures like the Masters used to do, not like the Impressionists who cut out [*découpent*] a piece of nature at random; one must put in figures. Look at [Claude] Lorrain.”<sup>74</sup>

Cézanne’s advice, favoring the active *composition* of the Old Masters over the *découpage* of the Impressionists, corresponds to precepts that critics of different complexion had already linked directly to the *paysage décoratif*. Mauclair in 1896 had written: “The *paysage décoratif* is a rational correction of nature . . . [a] concentration of the multiple aspects of life in a model which summarizes them all,” while the Impressionist landscape was merely an “adroit copy” founded on “the notation of aspects . . . on a useless struggle with the infinite variability of exterior life.”<sup>75</sup> Signac’s views on landscape, while motivated by a progressivist agenda foreign to the conservative Mauclair, further reinforced the dichotomy of the nineties between the necessity for staging a composition decoratively, and the practice of Impressionist landscape. A constant theme of Signac’s *Journal* was the futility of attempting, like the Impressionists, a direct copy of nature while painting. The point of working before nature, he insisted, was to provide oneself with “documents” on the basis of which one could compose freely. So Signac described his method in painting the *Pin des Cannoubiers* (1897): “For this landscape I act as if for a large composed canvas—fixing in advance my subject, my arrangement, and going to seek

before nature the necessary information. . . . I almost cover my canvas without needing to return to Cannoubiers . . . which I do if I am missing details of branches, flowers, and the terrain.”<sup>76</sup>

The fact that Matisse worked alongside Signac at St.-Tropez in 1904 helps explain why so much of Signac’s method can be found in *Luxe, calme et volupté* (Fig. 8), at once a Neo-Impressionist experiment and the first major painting associated with Fauvism. In making the well-known series of drawings and oil sketches that added figures to his landscape (Fig. 9), Matisse undertook a discipline of study that immediately separates him from Impressionist spontaneity and harks back both to his academic training, and to the Neo-Impressionist preference for deliberate planning and compositional purification. Yet the final conception of the multi-figured scene is equally reminiscent of Cézanne’s advice of just this moment (late 1904): “One must compose *tableaux* like the masters used to do . . . one must put in figures.”<sup>77</sup>

Of all the Fauves, Matisse seemed least willing to undertake large-scale landscapes in which figures did not dominate; indeed, he subordinated the landscape motif to the figure in paintings that approach applied *décoration* in scale. In this sense, a memory of Puvisian decoration is present, but equally the example of Cézanne’s own *Bathers* paintings (Fig. 10), where the rhythmic disposition of the figures is at every point cross-referenced with the directions visible in the massed forms of enclosing vegetation. If Matisse in *Luxe, calme et volupté* (Fig. 8) does not match Cézanne in integrating his figures with the décor of landscape (a point to which I will return), he exceeds him in promoting the arabesque or serpentine element formed by the women’s silhouettes. Given Matisse’s compositional adjustment of the site and his forceful introduction of totally imagined figures, one recognizes the historical validity of Vauxcelles’s judgment of the Fauvist tendency in landscape, “the site is for them a pretext, a décor in which figures are to be enclosed by arabesques.” This may once have been a beach at St.-Tropez,<sup>78</sup> but a process of technical and imaginative abstraction has made of it a less empirically specific, yet more thematically and decoratively sufficient work, largely because of the arabesque borne so forcefully by the introduced figures.

### The Arabesque of Observation

The ways in which advanced painters in the years 1904–08 were actively reconstruing the image of landscape can be described with reference to the “arabesque of observation”—a metaphorical term by which I seek to capture the process of the artificial structuring of landscape along willfully distorting lines. In so doing, I hope to indicate how the Fauves, going beyond the classical system where the arranged took precedence over the observed, developed an emphatic rhythmic interpretation of the seen, a reinvigoration of the

<sup>71</sup> I use “aestheticist” in the sense of P. Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis, 1984.

<sup>72</sup> On these questions, see Joachim Gasquet’s *Cézanne, a Memoir with Conversations*, trans. C. Pemberton, London, 1991, esp. R. Shiff, “Introduction,” 18–23.

<sup>73</sup> See R. Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, Chicago, 1984, 175–186; and J. House, “Cézanne and Poussin: Myth and History,” forthcoming.

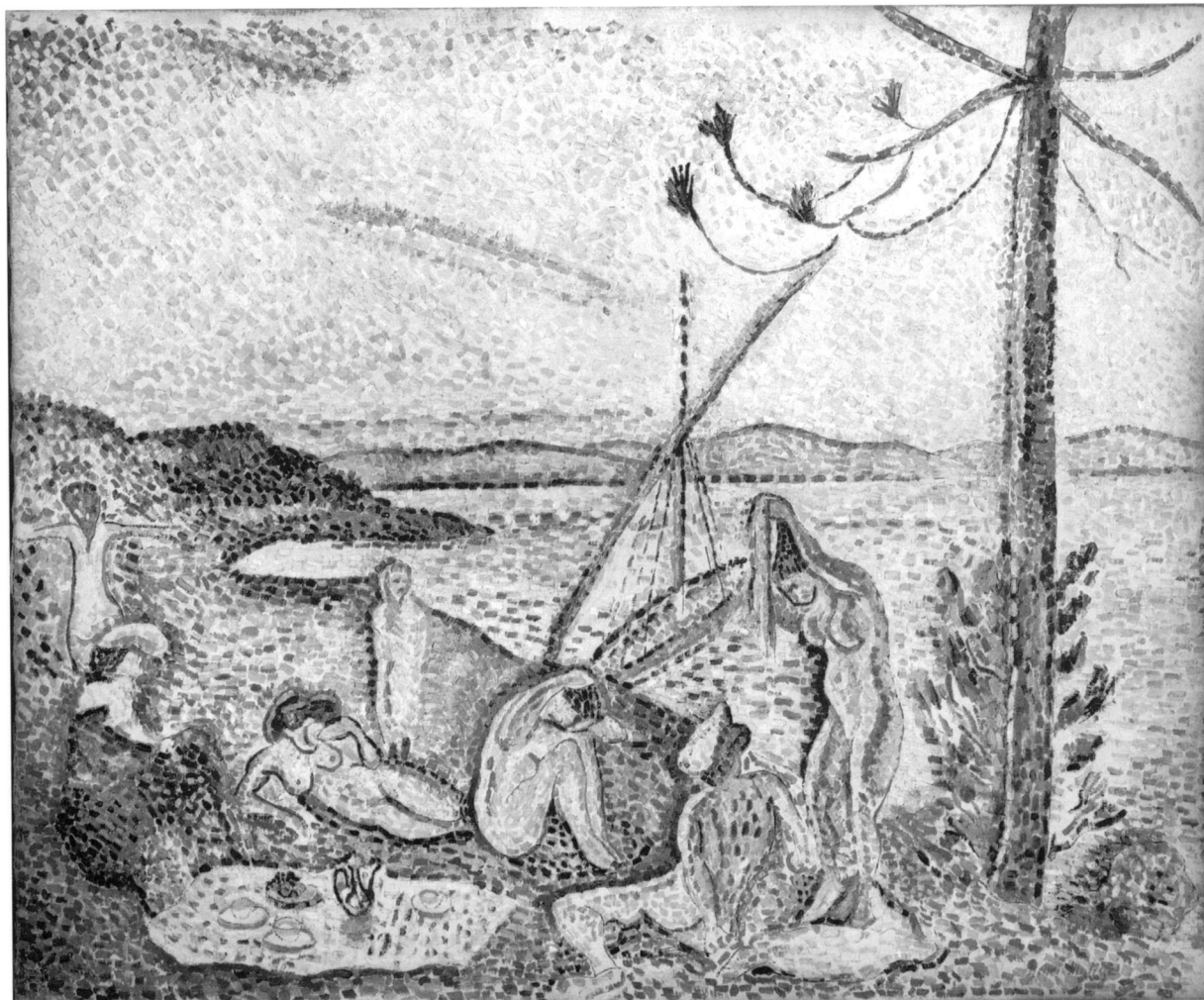
<sup>74</sup> See D. Giraudy, “Correspondance Henri Matisse—Charles Camoin,” *Revue de l’art*, xii, 1971, 10.

<sup>75</sup> C. Mauclair, “L’Art de M. Félix Ziem,” *L’Ermitage*, vii, Oct. 1896, 188.

<sup>76</sup> Rewald, Pt. 2, 269. My thanks to John House for indicating the relevance of this passage.

<sup>77</sup> See n. 74 above.

<sup>78</sup> For an argument on St.-Tropez as a site redolent with the associations that the Mediterranean seaboard had for the visiting Northern artist, see J. D. Herbert, “Painters and Tourists: Matisse and Derain on the Mediterranean Shore,” in *The Fauve Landscape*, 153–162.

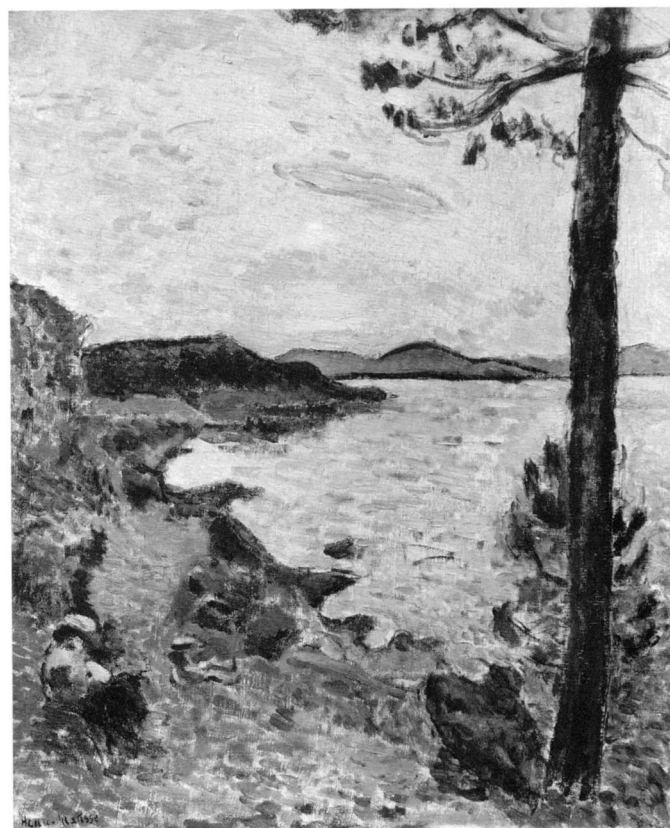


8 Henri Matisse, *Luxe, calme et volupté*, 1905. Paris, Musée d'Orsay (photo © RMN)

9 Henri Matisse, *Le Goûter (Golfe de St.-Tropez)*, 1904. Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (photo: Museum)

palette along non-normative lines in a determined, expressionistic manner.

To utilize the term "arabesque" for such an application is to continue the tradition, indicated at the outset, of defining general compositional phenomena of cursive interrelation. The etymology of the term indicates it initially denoted a Western form inspired by the Arabic, that is, a species of cultural borrowing, transferring an "authentic" Arabic idiom into a Western one. Similarly the work of eighteenth-century chinoiserie is not primarily that of the Chinese (though it may very well have been produced by Chinese artisans working under instructions for the European market). So the arabesque is a kind of hesitation, a mimicking of the Arabic that reclaims its forms for the parent culture, in part by relying on marked differences of coding that prevent the arabesque product from being mistaken for the Arabic other.<sup>79</sup>



<sup>79</sup> See H. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, xxviii, Spring 1984, 125–133; for examples see P. Ward-Jackson, "Some Mainstreams and Tributaries in European Ornament 1500–1750. Pt. 2: The Arabesque," *Bulletin of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, iii, 1967, 90–103.



10 Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1898–1905. Merion, The Barnes Foundation (photo © The Barnes Foundation, 1992)

The complexity of the “origins” of the arabesque should not be underestimated: as Riegl was the first to show, arabesque ornament can be traced back to sources in classical antiquity, and in particular to Greco-Roman and Byzantine stem ornament which the Saracens found in the territories they conquered in North Africa and Asia Minor. As the Arabs drew from an existent decorative idiom, so in the heyday of Islamic power the stylized, abstracted forms of Kufic (the early Islamic script preferred for Koranic inscriptions and calligraphy), now widely integrated into ornament, were often taken over into articles and surfaces ornamented for Christian use.<sup>80</sup>

Such appropriations indicate that at certain moments when trans-cultural borrowings led to the proliferation of new styles, the situation of power had opened vectors along which goods could travel and new media develop. So in the era of Matisse, colonial politics and history had a determining influence on the conditions of visibility and availability of Islamic and African art, which could in turn modify the practice of an artist attuned to the visual culture of other peoples.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> See A. Riegl, *Questions de style*, trans. H. -A. Baatsch and F. Rolland, pref. H. Damisch, Paris, 1992, chap. 4, and A.H. Christie, “The Development of Ornament from Arabic Script,” *Burlington Magazine*, XL, 1922, 287–292, and XLI, 1922, 34–41.

<sup>81</sup> So, for example, the first major exhibition of Islamic art held in France (in 1893) was arranged by scholars allied with the leaders of the French Colonial Party (see my forthcoming “The Société des Peintres Orientalistes: An Institutional Sketch”); on the African case, see P. Leighton, “The White Peril and *L’Art nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism and Anti-Colonialism,” *Art Bulletin*, LXXII, 4, 1990, 609–630. For new

Within the earlier Western tradition, however, phenomena that came to be characterized as “arabesque” were already fixed upon by theorists of the plastic arts. So Italian Mannerist sculptors promoted the *figura serpentinata*, the figure whose rhythmic visual continuity from all points of view could be assured by the adoption of a turning, flame-like line.<sup>82</sup> Two centuries later, William Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty* perpetuated this aesthetic by stressing composition in terms of “waving lines” and “serpentine lines,” S-shaped linear abstractions carefully graded for their curvature. The “Line of Beauty” was a principle of plastic design guaranteed, according to Hogarth, to give the most pleasing aspect to the thing represented, be it animate or inanimate. Thus it could be applied equally to the design of ornaments and the turnings of the human figure in painting or sculpture.<sup>83</sup>

It is fair to consider the arabesque as a metaphorical scheme for describing compositional relations of various kinds. As such, it has had currency across a variety of the arts. In late nineteenth-century France, it was evoked by Mallarmé to describe the effect of sonority in musical composition,

... y éveillant, pour décor, l’ambiguïté de quelques figures belles, aux intersections. La totale arabesque, qui

evidence of Matisse’s knowledge of Islamic art, see F. Daftari, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse and Kandinsky*, New York and London, 1991.

<sup>82</sup> See D. Summers, “*Maniera* and Movement: The *Figura Serpentinata*,” *Art Quarterly*, xxxv, 3, 1972, 269–301.

<sup>83</sup> W. Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. J. Burke, Oxford, 1955, 65–82. Margaret Manion kindly indicated the relevance of this text.



les relie, a de vertigineuses sautes en un effroi que reconnue; et d'anxieux accords. . . . Nulle torsion vaincu ne fausse ni ne transgresse l'omniprésente Ligne espacée de tout point à tout autre pour instituer l'idée.<sup>84</sup>

For Mallarmé, the arabesque is an elusive sinuosity of notes serving to evoke the Idea available through musical form. In an art that relates music to the human body, that of choreography, the arabesque attains perhaps its most concrete application: designating a series of postures standard to classical ballet in which the four limbs are splayed out in graceful counterpoints of differing degrees. The balletic arabesque both invokes the physical shapes that give form to theatrical space, and relates closely to the question of sculpture in that the body itself is the bearer of the arabesque movement.

It was in such a connection that Matisse's teacher Gustave Moreau developed an appreciation of the arabesque as an abstract plastic and pictorial energy, writing in his notebooks that "one cannot imagine what may be awakened in the mind . . . by a beautiful arabesque, a fine expressive movement of lines."<sup>85</sup> For Moreau's discussions of the arabesque usually employed examples derived from sculpture, and it is clear that Matisse himself recognized the precedents of Michelangelo and Giambologna when studying the arabesque silhouette in a series of bronze female figures, from his *Madeleine* of 1901 to the significantly titled *La Serpentine* of 1909.<sup>86</sup>

The relevance of the arabesque to a discussion of Fauve painting, however, goes beyond the confines of the depicted body (to which I will return). The arabesque was capable of infusing the whole field of pictorial relations, whether that represented was body, tree, or indeterminate colored form. The concept of the arabesque addresses the ubiquity of material to be designed, and herein lies its relevance for landscape tending toward abstraction. Given the academic scheme of things, the problem with painting landscape is that it lacks the human element, those bodies which are automatically saturated with significance. The task of landscape painting is to approximate the density of meaning that the body provides, using the givens of the natural scene. The *paysage historique* proposed a compromise: retain the figure as a kernel of meaning within a décor of nature. The Dutch or Barbizon *paysage rustique* offered an alternative—a kind of heroism of the elements, ratified by the intrinsic fascination of illusionistic naturalism. Monet brought new means to the struggle for significance in landscape, including a specialized language of the brushstroke, and indeed stepping outside the individual work as the semantic unit (in the *Series*). Matisse and Derain, I would argue, found a strong vision of landscape by composing with intense color that interacted with and itself constituted an arabesque of form. I would claim the arabesque substituted for the absent figure—or, rather, the *arabesque is figure* in these paintings.

Littré's nineteenth-century definition had linked the Arab practice of ornamentation based on vegetable form to the observance of the Islamic interdiction of depicting humans and animals.<sup>87</sup> Extending the suggestion, one could say Islamic decorative art is itself energized by a substitution of plant for body. Plant forms, reduced to schematic sections seen in plan and usually avoiding hints of the third dimension, are disposed in matrixes that are often repeating patterns with a hidden geometrical basis. To that extent, Islamic pattern is highly artificial, removed from observable nature. But the system of whiplash curves and writhing tendril forms that it subjects to the grid encode the most organic of energies. The arabesque is above all an ordered voluptuousness. As Matisse remarked to the students at his school around 1908, one needs a strong sense of the vertical to make curved lines tell.<sup>88</sup>

The great arabesque device in Derain's decorative landscapes like *The Turning Road, L'Estaque* (Fig. 11) and *Les Arbres* (Fig. 12), both of 1906, is the frieze of trees. Derain brings the viewer in among trees conventionally seen from a distance, and heightens the sinuosity of their trunks before the foliage interferes. The naked trunk becomes an elongated torso of form, like the olive trees of Van Gogh seen up close. To call Derain's screen of sinuous trees "arabesque," then, is to recall, as Signac had implied, the plant stalks and blooms that are the figures in Persian textiles so productive of decorative effect.

Arbitrariness of color gives further life to these serpentine bodies (critics complained of his "blue trees"): Derain divides them in segments, changing hues but preserving consistency of value so the line is not disturbed. In a work like *Les Arbres*, Derain has a second arabesque behind the frieze, of interlocking planes colored in segments like a rug, but they are non-repeating and may indeed give rise to illusionistic space. This ground is a heteromorphous, coloristic décor promoting strong sensations of spatial movement produced by fields of unlike value, by the ranking behind one another of colored screens, and by their writhing, brushed outlines. One could link both effects, arabesques of line and of plane, with a cryptic phrase Matisse used late in life to describe his own move into Fauvism: "Henceforth I composed with my drawing so as to enter directly into the arabesque with color."<sup>89</sup>

The direct brushing with color that Matisse alludes to here was not the procedure by which several of the major Fauve *paysages décoratifs* were arrived at. That Derain's very large *Turning Road* was a *tableau* resulting from several studies makes its formal decorative status more pronounced: Neo-Impressionists and academics alike accepted that a series of sequential studies could best guarantee the sense of control the *paysage de style* should exhibit. In one such study,<sup>90</sup> the broken brushstrokes hinder the development of perspectival

<sup>84</sup> S. Mallarmé, "La Musique et les lettres" [1892], in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1945, 647–648.

<sup>85</sup> G. Moreau, *L'Assembleur des rêves*, ed. P.-L. Mathieu, Paris, 1984, 188.

<sup>86</sup> See further R. Benjamin, "L'Arabesque dans la modernité: Henri Matisse sculpteur," in *De Matisse à aujourd'hui: La Sculpture du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle dans les Musées et le Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain du Nord-Pas de Calais*, Cambrai, 1992, 15–22.

<sup>87</sup> E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Paris, 1877.

<sup>88</sup> Stein, 551; for a later statement on the relationship between the plumb-line and the arabesque, see Matisse, 237.

<sup>89</sup> Comment to G. Diehl, quoted in Matisse, 93, n. 40. On the relation between line and color in Matisse, see Y.-A. Bois, "Matisse and 'Arche-Drawing,'" in *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, 3–63.

<sup>90</sup> Four studies are illustrated in color in *The Fauve Landscape*, 40–43; the work discussed here is pl. 47.



11 André Derain, *The Turning Road, L'Étaque*, 1906. Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, John A. and Audrey Jones Beck Collection (photo: Museum)



12 André Derain, *Les Arbres*, 1906. Buffalo, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Gift of Seymour H. Knox in memory of Helen Northrup Knox, 1971 (photo: Museum)

depth and produce an effect of patternization or ornament—again, a component of the decorative. The threat of decomposition is mitigated, however, in the very large *tableau*, where color becomes dense and objects like the sweeping arc of the road are precisely defined. The road serves both as horizon and as the diagonal coulisse of entry into the composition; it performs a kind of arabesque twisting of “normally” observed space within the picture, a decorative distention of perspective.

This effect is equally pronounced in Matisse’s contemporary decorative landscapes (Fig. 13). Unlike Derain, who employed a wide variety of compositional formats, most of Matisse’s landscapes are centralized in a way that affiliates them with the classical *paysages composés* he had long studied in the Louvre. If one follows the limits of each fan of multi-colored brushstrokes in this small landscape, one can make out the succession of diagonally disposed screens or “flats” that defines the composed landscape.<sup>91</sup> But here of course the resemblance ends: the effect of Matisse’s handling of paint is to explode the materiality of the observed site in an array of cursive plastic equivalents to what he called his “colored sensations.” This is surely “drawing so as to enter directly into the arabesque with color.”

If the pronounced separation of the painted sign from its fictive referent in this work has been encouraged by Cézanne’s example, the form of Matisse’s brushstrokes and their whirling design is closer to the expressionist effect of Van Gogh’s painting. The late Van Gogh would dramatically augment the arabesque properties of landforms and vegetative elements in his pictures, whether they are designed along lines derived from Dutch models or utilize centralized compositions that owe more to classical precedents (Fig. 14). The debt of Vlaminck and the generation of the Fauves to the painting of Van Gogh is well known; by mid-century André Lhote could retrospectively name Van Gogh’s work as the chief influence on twentieth-century landscape, partly because its “curvilinear pattern of lines . . . possesses to a much greater extent than the straight line the property of moulding itself to the impulses and reactions of the unconscious” (1950, 41).

Already in 1907, however, the young Lhote had been able to articulate a way of envisioning landscape painting according to an empathetic, Van Gogh-like study of rhythmic structure, in which the term “arabesque” had an important role to play:

When I am before a given spectacle, I sense everything as being in harmony, in happy liaison, in composition. But to express this harmony I must perceive its law, analyze the movement which determines the union of lines and of planes. The general rhythm of nature . . . I will express in a fictional way, by arabesques that intertwine, that bisect one another harmoniously, that divide up musically, and upon which “I will build my landscape anew.”<sup>92</sup>

<sup>91</sup> It is possible to detect the same generic format in the archetypal classical composition of Poussin’s Louvre *L’Hiver—Le Déluge*, even down to the identical positioning of the apex in each image: the off-center waterfall in Poussin corresponds to Matisse’s lozenge of dense blue pigment.

<sup>92</sup> Lhote, 1986, I, Dec. 8, 1907, 29–30.

The passage seems a good evocation of much advanced landscape painting of the immediately pre-Cubist years; in it the arabesque emerges as the principle upon which landscape itself is to be based. Lhote, despite his subsequent adventures with the geometric style of the Cubists, continued to hold this mode of composition in high regard. In one of the most remarkable passages in his *Treatise on Landscape*, he envisages the landscapist as a conductor upon the stage, a virtual Action painter:

Like those conductors who mime a symphony with their hands . . . the painter, responsive to the hidden rhythm of a landscape, dances with it, brush and pencil in hand, and registers movements which voluptuously interflow. At such moments he must no longer think about what he knows of this landscape: ground, trees and houses . . . but have eyes only for the secret thread that binds them together. . . .

Having worked out the balanced movements, the curves and arabesques [*serpentements*], the leaps and explosions of form suddenly unified by this rhythm . . . (instinct must be given free play, not the brain), you will then have the irrational and living framework of the landscape which will be unfolded like a human form stretched out, and the outcrops, the flowing hair, will take their place as if by magic as the artist gives the required twist of expressive distortion (1950, 40–41).

There is no better evocation of the arabesque of observation at work in landscape painting. In Lhote’s model, the activity of the artist is not based on rational planning and analysis, but on the “voluptuous,” on “instinct” which gives rise to a dynamic interpretation of form. In this, he is consistent with the ideas on expression present in Matisse’s “Notes of a Painter,” which argued for instinctively felt relations between the painter and the organic sources of his sensations.<sup>93</sup>

Lhote’s closing metaphor reads the painting of the landscape in terms of the human body. While his exaltation of the “irrational” within the simile of the landscape-body seems to address Surrealism (and perhaps even the paintings of Dalí), Lhote activates an old Renaissance trope in claiming that the human figure gives the measure of all painterly activity: “The whole landscape is modeled like a human body, for man remains the prototype of artistic creation.”<sup>94</sup> Analogies between the human figure and the landscape had appeared in French criticism well before this: Baudelaire, for example, invoked it in reference to Corot, writing, “he is one of the rare ones, perhaps the only one, who has kept a profound sense of construction . . . and, *if one may compare the composition of a landscape to the human frame*, who always knows where to place the bones, and what dimension they should be given” (my emphasis).<sup>95</sup> A suggestive aspect of identifying the figure with the land is the possibility, implied in Lhote’s

<sup>93</sup> See Benjamin, 184–188, 193–195, 203–209.

<sup>94</sup> Lhote, 1950, caption to pl. 25 (Cuypp, *Landscape with Horsemen and Flocks of Sheep*).

<sup>95</sup> Baudelaire, “Salon de 1859,” in Baudelaire, 329–330.



13 Henri Matisse, *Landscape at Collioure*, 1905. New York, Museum of Modern Art, Fractional Gift of Mrs. Bertram Smith (photo: Museum)

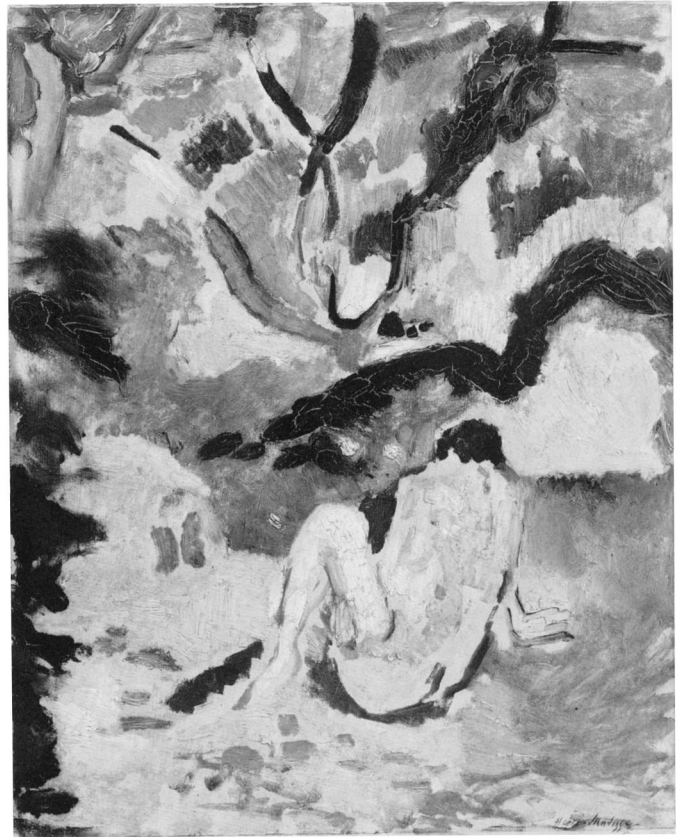


14 Vincent van Gogh, *Ravine*, 1889. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Bequest of Keigh McLeod (photo: Museum)

remarks quoted above, that the landscape is gendered female relative to the activity of the (male) painter. The corollary here is a transference of the artist's desire between the female body as the archetypal object of painting, and the landscape (Woman evidently being figured, according to the patriarchal metaphor, as forming the body of Nature). Romantic critics of landscape had indeed written of male artists as "lovers of landscape" in a deliberately eroticized sense.<sup>96</sup>

Around the turn of the century, texts invoking the landscape/figure analogy replace this metaphorical plenitude with a more formalist problematic. The young Lhote wrote, for example: "I would like to be able to model my landscape like a figure, manage to transform the succession of silhouettes and their ranking by means of contours. It's all in establishing the continuity of the planes. All of Cézanne's efforts aimed at that."<sup>97</sup> Cézanne himself apparently read the key relationship between the figure and the landscape as being the potential for their endless mutual inflection, which he evoked in Poussin: "Ah, Poussin's arabesque! He knew all about that. In the London *Bacchanal*, in the Louvre *Flora*, where does the line of the figures and the landscape begin, where does it finish. . . . It's all one. There is no center."<sup>98</sup>

Part of Matisse's contribution to the elaboration of the decorative landscape lay in the direction Cézanne indicates. In his teaching, Matisse recognized the utility of analogies between the human form and other images, and actively sought to revise conventional relations between the figure and the landscape.<sup>99</sup> He seldom chose to forgo the figure, at times adopting the strategy of giving it little more definition than the vegetative elements that dominate his rhythmic landscape composition (Fig. 15). Lhote's friend Rivière regarded such initiatives with distrust,<sup>100</sup> while reactionary critics were scandalized by the attack on the primacy of the figure genre they implied. So Mauclair in his 1908 "Dilemma of Painting" bewailed the "ultra-Impressionist desire to reduce the figure to the role of an ornamental element inseparable from its milieu and signifying no more than it does," while Péladan denounced painters who "conceive of the composition as an arabesque where only the global contour is important."<sup>101</sup> Such a de-hierarchization, itself a dissolution of the figure/ground distinction, nevertheless served Matisse's purposes: he argued the other side of the same point, in various places insisting on painting as an



15 Henri Matisse, *Nude in a Wood*, 1905. New York, Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mr. George F. Of (photo: Museum)

organism all of whose parts must have an equivalent decorative necessity.<sup>102</sup> Equating the body with the landscape is another way of realizing the set of expanded functions I have attributed above to the arabesque.

The arabesque sensibility was capable of infusing Matisse's work in any medium, and the lesson of his sculptural investigation of the silhouette is evident in his *Bonheur de vivre* (Fig. 16). Here figures are outlined to excess, making of many a curve signs for feminine sexuality in the elaboration of a scene whose erotic character is pronounced.<sup>103</sup> The classical model that has been convincingly offered as a source for the *Bonheur* is Agostino Carracci's print *Love Reciprocated* (Fig. 17).<sup>104</sup> As important for my purposes as the shared figure groupings is the disposition of Carracci's landscape, which shows again how much Matisse owed to the classical *paysage composé*: as in an elaborate stage décor, the eye is led along a first diagonal onto the open plain, where figures disport like so many *figurantes* in *Swan Lake*. Above them rise canopies of pure color, flats defined by curving edges orchestrated to meet in an arch above the horizon. In the resultant *paysage décoratif*, the figures act as an explicit and erotically charged concentration of the overall arabesque

<sup>96</sup> Puppin (as in n. 47), 76, 80–94.

<sup>97</sup> Lhote, 1986, II, May 18, 1910, 88.

<sup>98</sup> Cézanne as quoted by Gasquet (as in n. 72), 78.

<sup>99</sup> "Everything must be constructed—built up of parts that make a unit: a tree like a human body, a human body like a cathedral"; Stein, 550. The present text was finalized before I had read J. Elderfield's related discussion of the body in the painted field in *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective*, New York, 1992, esp. 25, 28, and 32.

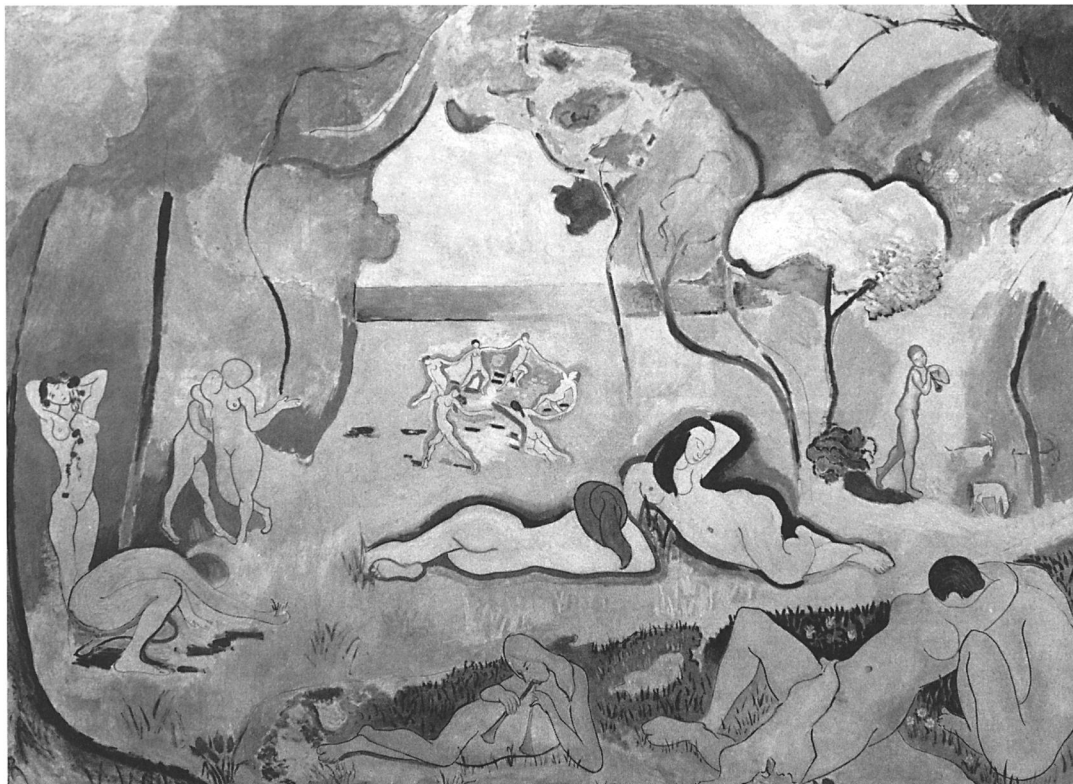
<sup>100</sup> Rivière in Lhote, 1986, I, Dec. 6, 1907: "Rhythm is natural; it must not be invented or imagined. . . . No arabesques applied to the canvas à la Othon Friesz, no schematic or abstract constructions into which one inserts the figures *a posteriori*. . . . The interest and the peril in the experiments of Matisse and others is to project onto *anything at all* a rhythm that has been abstractly conceived in the mind."

<sup>101</sup> C. Mauclair, "Le Dilemme de la peinture," *Revue bleue politique et littéraire*, IX, Feb. 1, 1908, 149; J. Péladan, "Salon d'Automne," *Revue hebdomadaire*, X, Oct. 1906, 225.

<sup>102</sup> The definitive phrase from "Notes d'un peintre" is "Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's disposal for the expression of his feelings" (Matisse, 42); see further Benjamin, 197–198, 201–202.

<sup>103</sup> For related issues, see M. Werth, "Engendering Imaginary Modernism: Henri Matisse's *Bonheur de Vivre*," *Genders*, IX, Fall 1990, 50–74.

<sup>104</sup> J.B. Cuno, "Matisse and Agostino Carracci: A Source for the *Bonheur de Vivre*," *Burlington Magazine*, CXXII, July 1980, 503–505.



16 Henri Matisse, *Le Bonheur de vivre*, 1906. Merion, The Barnes Foundation (photo © The Barnes Foundation, 1992)



17 Agostino Carracci, *Love Reciprocated*, ca. 1589–95. Baltimore, Museum of Art, Garrett Collection (photo: Museum)



18 Georges Braque, *Les Arbres*, 1908. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, J. Rump Collection (photo: Museum)

conception, in terms of which the whole canvas is rhythmically defined. The scene is staged in the kind of generic no-place beloved of classical landscape, now become a utopia that responds well to Matisse's particular version of restorative bourgeois hedonism.

I would argue that a good deal is owed by the early Cubist landscapes of Braque (Fig. 18), Derain, or even Picasso to the best of the Fauve *paysages décoratifs*, where images of nature abstracted away from the merely contingent allow the spectator the better to be drawn into the pleasures of a picture by the centralized vortex of its lines, by the staging of its surfaces. The more familiar prototype of Cézanne's landscape remains relevant here: Cézanne often configured his forest scenes with a restrained arabesque, developing an inward-turning pressure of lines and tonal modulations that target a central apex; in panoramic views the framing devices undulate quietly in accord with the central motif. The arabesque element is more brazen in Fauve landscape, but both examples helped provide the structure of objects visible in such Cubist work as Braque's *L'Étaque* landscape. Historians need to recognize the continuity of Cubist landscape, so loosely bound to any topographical object, with the tradition of the staged, decorative landscape. Lhote saw in the Cubist landscapes of Gleizes, Metzinger, Villon, and de la Fresnaye certain continuities of method he associated with decorative landscape: the selective screening of data, the deliberate composing, and the bending of images to the rhythmic and

contrapuntal demands of the now "simultaneous" picture (1950, 2). Such is the Cubist *paysage composé*, and one of its features is a Cubist version of place (be it riverbank or cityscape) that is stagier still than the Fauve, since it is more playfully artificial.

To that extent, the Cubist landscape may seem an extrapolation from the Baudelairean stage décors with which this essay began. But this, after all, need not be surprising, if the effort of modernist aesthetics has been to insist upon the very factitiousness of representational acts, and to resist the allure of transparent referentiality. According to the formalist version of such aesthetics, the decorative landscape would be an impure art, linked as it is to the architectural environment, the stage, the classical tradition, and the ornaments of other cultures. Yet surely its interest lies precisely in that failure of proper definition, in that bittersweet arabesque of reference, and the challenge this offers in releasing landscape from the parameters of normalized art scholarship, be they formalist or socio-historical.

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