

and rearrange the characteristics of ancient bygone schools, whether continental or exotic, or they adapt for easel paintings forms previously reserved for such disparate art forms as stained glass, manuscript illumination, old tarot cards or theatrical décors.' A friend of the Nabi artists, actor-director Aurélien-Marie Lugné-Poë, commissioned programmes and set designs for experimental shows, and they also contributed to the Paris productions of works by Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg and Oscar Wilde. In 1896 they were involved with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, which was a precursor of the Theatre of the Absurd, an important influence on the genesis of *Dada and *Surrealism.

The Nabis exhibited together until 1899, after which point they separated. A devout Catholic, Denis turned his attention to religious subjects and mural paintings for religious institutions, and founded the Studio of Sacred Art. Sérusier also turned to religious imagery and religious symbolism. Bonnard and Vuillard, the best known of the Nabis, were in many ways the least characteristic of the group. Bonnard acquired fame through a poster he designed for a champagne company in 1891 (which also inspired Henri de

Toulouse-Lautrec to begin designing his own well-known posters). Bonnard's work depicts one of his favourite motifs, the elegant Parisienne, and a definite Japanese influence can be felt in his work, for which he was named *Nabi très japonard*. The flat, strongly patterned style of Vuillard's work of this period points to the two-fold influence of Japanese prints and Gauguin. Each continued to define his own individual style and to concentrate on intimate domestic interiors, which eventually led the artists to be called 'Intimistes'.

Key Collections

Aberdeen Art Gallery, Aberdeen, Scotland
 Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan
 Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota
 Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Quebec
 Musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper, Quimper, France
 State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Key Books

C. Chassé, *The Nabis and their Period* (1969)
 G. Mauner, *The Nabis, their History and their Art 1888-96* (1978)
 P. Eckert Boyer, *The Nabis and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (New Brunswick, 1988)
 C. Frèches-Thory, *Bonnard, Vuillard and their Circle* (1991)

Opposite: **Edouard Vuillard, *Misia and Vallotton*, 1894**

Like Bonnard, Vuillard excelled at psychologically delicate interior scenes, often of friends, such as, here, Misia Godebska, hostess and muse to many contemporary artists, and fellow Nabi, the Swiss painter Félix Vallotton.

Synthetism

Some advice: do not paint too much after nature.

PAUL GAUGUIN, LETTER TO EMILE SCHUFFENECKER, 1888

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Emile Schuffenecker (1851–1934), Emile Bernard (1868–1941) and their circle in France coined the term 'synthetism' (from *synthétiser*: to synthesize) to refer to their work of the late 1880s and early 1890s. Painted in a radical, expressive style, in which forms and colours were deliberately distorted and exaggerated, their pictures synthesized a number of different elements: the appearance of nature, the artist's 'dream' before it and the formal qualities of form and colour. Gauguin, the leader of the group, felt that direct observation of nature was only a part of the creative process, and that the input of memory, imagination and emotion intensified those impressions, resulting in more meaningful forms.

Gauguin had exhibited with the *Impressionists in the early 1880s, but by 1885 was disillusioned with their

insistence on describing only what they saw in front of them. He sought new themes and a new painting technique to achieve 'the translation of thought into a medium other than literature.' His aim was to paint not so much what the eye saw, but what the artist felt, and consequently he eschewed both the naturalism of Impressionism and the scientific preoccupations of the *Neo-Impressionists, instead creating an art in which colour is used for dramatic, emotional or expressive effects.

Gauguin drew on many different sources for his inspiration. Like the Pre-Raphaelites in England, he studied medieval tapestries for their boldness and drama; like the Impressionists, he learned about line and composition from Japanese woodcuts. He became passionate about folk art, the stone sculptures of Breton churches and prehistoric art.

During a crucial period for Gauguin in the late 1880s he worked in Brittany, where he became familiar with the work of the Pont-Aven painters Bernard and Louis Anquetin (1861–1932), who were developing the *Cloisonnist style, an important contemporary influence on Gauguin's Synthetist work. Gauguin's key early work, *The Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888), painted while he was in Pont-Aven, reads like a visual manifesto of his revolutionary ideas. The line and spatial organization of the picture are indebted to Japanese woodcuts (the wrestling figures were even taken from a drawing by Hokusai), and the large areas of unmodulated colour and the heavy outlines relate closely to the Cloisonnist style. But the result is uniquely Gauguin's, and synthesis is the key to its success.

In 1889 Gauguin and his new friends Bernard, Charles Laval (1862–94) and Schuffenecker organized an exhibition to show their progressive work in opposition to the official art exhibition at the fourth Paris Universal Exhibition, of

which the star attraction was the Eiffel Tower. 'L'Exposition de peintures du groupe impressioniste et synthétiste' was held at the Café Volpini in Paris and included both their work and that of others with whom they had worked in Brittany, such as Anquetin and Daniel de Monfried (1856–1929). Reviewing the show, sympathetic critics, such as Albert Aurier and Félix Fénéon (see Neo-Impressionism), praised Gauguin's simplification of means and premeditation. Gauguin was launched as a leading figure of avant-garde art, to rival Georges Seurat and the Neo-Impressionists.

Gauguin was also embraced as a leader by the *Symbolist poets and artists. In later works, such as *Day of the Gods (Mahana No Atua)* (1894) or *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going To?* (1898), both painted while he was living and working in Tahiti, the symbolic content was increasingly important, though the symbols remained private, provoking questions, not providing answers. In fact, Gauguin deplored literary content,





preferring the mysterious and elusive universe of sensations. In 1899 he wrote:

Think also of the musical role colour will henceforth play in modern painting. Colour, which is vibration just as music is, is able to attain what is most universal yet at the same time most elusive in nature: its inner force.

Gauguin's art proved deeply influential to following generations of artists. During his lifetime, the example of Synthetist work provided important inspiration for the *Nabis, the Symbolists, the international *Art Nouveau and the *Fauves. Subsequently, the *Expressionists, along with

various abstractionists and the *Surrealists were to credit Gauguin in the development of their work. In rejecting the idea of the artist's fidelity to the represented world, Gauguin helped pave the way for the abandonment of representation altogether.

Above: **Paul Gauguin, *Day of the Gods (Mahana No Atua)*, 1894**

Recently returned from Tahiti, and living up to his reputation as an exotic traveller, Gauguin produced a fantasy of ancient Tahitian ritual in which he further abstracted his decorative patterning, and intensified his colours.

Opposite: **Paul Gauguin, *Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1888**

Gauguin asserted that colour and line can be expressive in themselves. The inner world of the vision and the outer world of the Breton peasants, divided by the branch, are uncompromisingly – and mysteriously – united by the red ground.

Key Collections

Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester, England
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
National Gallery, London
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Key Books

W. Jaworska, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School* (Boston, 1972)
H. Rookmaaker, *Synthetist Art Theories: Gauguin and 19th Century Art Theory* (Amsterdam, 1972)
P. Gauguin, *Intimate Journals* (Minneapolis, NY, 1987)
B. Thomson, *Gauguin* (1987)
R. Kendall, *Gauguin by Himself* (Boston, MA, 2000)