

## PRIMITIVISM AND THE 'MODERN'

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by Gill Perry

### *Introduction: Primitivism in art-historical debate*

In this chapter, I want to focus on the shifts that took place around the turn of the century in the aesthetic and cultural associations of art works designated 'modern'. Increasingly, forms of representation that were explicitly or implicitly *opposed* to urban Western culture co-existed with and displaced those nineteenth-century notions of modernity that were concerned with the aesthetic potential of urban themes. Many artists whom we now label 'modern' were in fact opposed to the processes of modernization (by which I mean the forces of industrialization and urbanization in Western capitalist society).

This opposition often took the form of a positive discrimination in favour of so-called 'primitive' subjects and techniques. In his seminal book *Primitivism in Modern Art*, first published in 1938, the art historian Robert Goldwater wrote:

The artistic interest of the twentieth century in the productions of primitive peoples was neither as unexpected nor as sudden as is generally supposed. Its preparation goes well back into the nineteenth century ...

(*Primitivism in Modern Art*, p.3)

Goldwater argues that long before artists like Picasso began to incorporate 'primitive' elements in their canvases around 1906–7 (Plate 1), many nineteenth-century artists, among them Gauguin, had already sought out 'primitive' sources and societies, identifying in them an artistic culture that paralleled the interests of modern Western artists. Goldwater's notion of 'preparation' helps to establish an artistic root for the interests of many twentieth-century avant-gardists. According to this view, Picasso, for example, was building on an innovative tradition anticipated in the work of Gauguin's generation. Such an account focuses on the technical aspects of the artists' works, and it implies a kind of continuum of formal affinities with a wide range of supposedly 'primitive' or non-Western sources.

This argument in its various forms is now well established in the art-historical writings on the period. But there is a crucial assumption which often underlies it: the idea that the 'primitive' artefacts were invested with value at the same time as – or even *after* – similar technical innovations appeared within Western art practices. The characteristics of 'primitive' sources were thus seen to *conform to*, rather than simply to *inspire* the changing interests of modern artists. In other words, a 'primitive' tendency was already being produced from *within* modern art, and in fact was to become a distinguishing feature of the 'modern'. As we shall see, this idea also had important implications for the artist's self-image, in that it contributed to the myth that avant-garde artists such as Gauguin and Picasso were somehow in touch with a pure, direct mode of artistic expression.

Much ink has been spilled on this subject. It raises some difficult questions about the definitions of innovation and assimilation in modern art works, and the relationship between them when the artist borrows from, or is influenced by, 'primitive' works. How, for

example, can we understand Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (Plate 1), long seen as a canonical work of modernist primitivism, in relation to these questions?

Through its distorted faces and bodies (which recall some of the conventions of African and Iberian masks) and its broken space, does this work represent a radical breakthrough, an assault on the conventions of bourgeois art? If, on the other hand, these conventions are borrowed from or inspired by other sources, does this reduce the work's innovatory status? Does Picasso's use of African and Iberian artefacts represent a Western misappropriation of alien objects? And how does the subject-matter of female nudes, based on the theme of a Barcelona brothel, function in relation to these issues? Picasso claimed to have painted *Les Demoiselles* before he made his mythologized first visit to the Trocadero Ethnographical Museum in 1907.<sup>1</sup> If Picasso was relatively unaware of specific African sources, is this a work of some kind of intuitive primitivism? If, on the other hand, Picasso consciously assimilated 'tribal' objects into this work, did he do this because he perceived some disruptive or socially transgressive potential in the associations of African objects (traditionally used for the exorcism of spirits and other ritualistic functions)? Given Picasso's left-wing views at the time, could his use of African motifs be seen as a deliberate challenge to Western colonialist views of Africa? What do these motifs from African objects contribute to the meanings of *Les Demoiselles*?

These issues have all been hotly debated in the writings of modern art history. The glossy two-volume catalogue of an ambitious and influential exhibition of 1984, *'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, edited by William Rubin, placed considerable importance on *Les Demoiselles* as a work of modernist primitivism. The emphasis, as the title suggests, is on formal affinities between modern Western and 'primitive' art and artefacts. Following the debate on the sources Picasso might have seen when he painted *Les Demoiselles*, it is argued that he did not copy directly from individual African masks, and was therefore producing a more *intuitive* form of primitivism. Underlying this argument is the assumption, set out in a preface by Kirk Varnedoe, that 'modernist primitivism depends on the autonomous force of objects – and especially on the capacity of tribal art to transcend the intentions and conditions that first shaped it' (p.x).

In recent years this approach has been debated and qualified by art historians and critics from many different positions. One theoretical approach that has greatly influenced the study of primitivism is 'discourse theory', an approach indebted to the work of the philosopher-historian Michel Foucault.<sup>2</sup> This has meant exploring the political and cultural ramifications of primitivism through a theory of discourse, rather than focusing on formal affinities and the 'autonomous' meanings of objects. Foucault uses the term 'discourse' to mean a set of statements and interests inscribed in (that is, 'written into') a whole range of texts. By 'texts', he means all kinds of cultural products, including documents and publications, from books and newspapers to advertisements and letters; some art historians have extended this notion of 'text' to incorporate images.

According to this approach, 'primitivism' is seen as a complex network of sociological, ideological, aesthetic, scientific, anthropological, political and legal interests (that is, 'discourses'), which feed into and determine a culture. As a discourse, it involves, according to Foucault, a relationship of power; he means, for example, that those within Western society who analyse, teach, paint or reproduce a view of the 'primitive' would, by this activity, be dominating, restructuring and having authority over that which they define as 'primitive'. Around the turn of the century, that which was described as primitive

<sup>1</sup> The issue of Picasso's first 'experience' of African art has obsessed his contemporaries and his biographers. As Goldwater (among others) has shown (*Primitivism in Modern Art*, p.144 and following), contemporary reports suggest different dates for Picasso's first viewing of African works. See also T.A. Burgard, 'Picasso and appropriation', and P. Leighton, 'The white peril and *l'art nègre*: Picasso, primitivism and anti-colonialism'.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said employs Foucault's notion of 'discourse' as expounded in *The Archeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*.

often included the products of a recently colonized country. Put very simply, a reading of *Les Demoiselles* indebted to discourse theory would play down the meanings associated with the style and intentions of the individual artist and with the surface of the painting, because it would see them largely as effects of the broader political discourses of colonialism, including contemporary Western discourses on Africa, which are inscribed within the painting. My own approach will be to acknowledge some of the analytical tools provided by this notion of discourse, but I will be looking closely at how the meanings of paintings are also affected by the concerns and processes of painting. I want to focus on the problem of how ideas, beliefs and values are actually 'inscribed' in paintings: how do causes become effects, and how are they mediated through the painting?

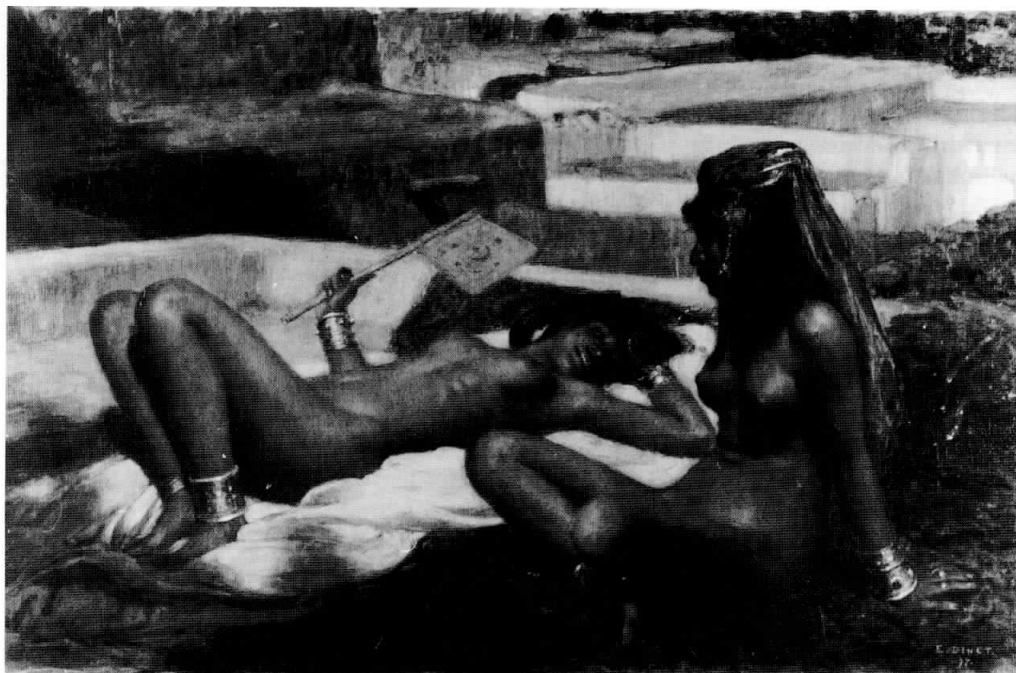
This short discussion of *Les Demoiselles* already suggests that the labels 'primitive' and 'primitivism' are deeply problematic. Broadly speaking the label 'primitive' has been used since at least the nineteenth century to distinguish contemporary European societies and their cultures from other societies and cultures that were then considered less civilized. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, the term was also used to describe Italian and Flemish works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But by the turn of the century its scope was extended to refer to ancient Egyptian, Persian, Indian, Javanese, Peruvian and Japanese cultures, to the products of societies thought to be 'closer to nature', and to what many art historians have called the 'tribal' art of Africa and Oceania (the islands of the Pacific Ocean). The label 'primitivism', on the other hand, has generally been used to describe a Western interest in, and/or reconstruction of, societies designated 'primitive', and their artefacts. Primitivism, then, is generally used to refer to the discourses on the 'primitive'.

In the late twentieth century, the term 'primitive' has been described as Eurocentric, as revealing a Western-centred view of an alien culture (hence my use of inverted commas). It has been argued that merely by using the word 'primitive', rather than one which gives a geographical designation of the culture in question (such as 'African', 'Egyptian', 'Polynesian'), we are defining that culture as different from our own, as 'primitive' according to our Western notion of what is civilized. To use the term is to make an implicit value judgement, even though that judgement can assume different disguises. Similar criticisms can be made of the terms 'l'art nègre' ('negro art') and 'tribal' art.<sup>3</sup> While the term 'l'art nègre' presupposes a broad racial category, and is indifferent to different cultures within the category, 'tribal' involves the Eurocentric construct of the uncivilized tribe, the opposite, or 'other' to Western society.

The category of the 'other' has also dominated recent writings on 'the primitive'. It is a critical category (derived from postmodern theory) which describes a tendency to *misrepresent* another culture, society, object or social group as different or alien, as somehow 'other' to the writer or speaker's own culture and experiences. The category implies a self-image, a vantage point, from which relations of difference are incorrectly perceived or represented. As a category, then, the 'other' is often used to refer to those Western myths and fantasies through which the 'primitive' or non-Western has been represented in art and literature.

Within this European frame of reference, concepts of the 'primitive' have been used *both* pejoratively *and* as a measure of positive value. During the late nineteenth century, a range of cultural assumptions and prejudices contributed to the discourses on the 'primitive'. For the majority of the bourgeois public at this time the word signified backward, uncivilized peoples and their cultures. At a time when the French, like the British and Germans, were extending their colonial conquests in Africa and the South Seas, and establishing ethnographic museums and various forms of institutionalized anthropological study, the artefacts of colonized peoples were widely seen as evidence of their

<sup>3</sup> The term 'l'art nègre' was given prominence by Jean Laude in his *La Peinture française et l'art nègre*, published in 1968.



**Plate 2** Alphonse-Étienne Dinet, *Sur les terrasses, Clair de lune à Laghouat* (*On the Terraces, Moonlight at Laghouat*), 1898, distemper on canvas, 46 x 73 cm. Musée des Beaux Arts, Reims.  
© DACS 1993.

'barbaric' uncivilized nature, of their lack of cultural 'progress'. This view was reinforced by the increasing popularity of pseudo-Darwinian theories of cultural evolution.

At the same time, more positive views of the essential purity and goodness of 'primitive' life, by contrast with the decadence of over-civilized Western societies, were gaining ground within European culture. Such views were influenced both by notions of the 'noble savage' (derived, often in distorted form, from the writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau) and by well-established traditions of pastoralism in art and literature. A so-called 'primitivist' tradition evolved, which associated what were perceived as simple lives and societies with purer thoughts and expressions. Following certain Romantic notions developed by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Herder (among others), this tradition assumed that there was a relationship between 'simple' people and more direct or purified expression; it exalted peasant and folk culture as evidence of some kind of innate creativity. In Modernist revaluations of 'primitive' art and artefacts, these ideas were reworked and modified. Gauguin (as we have seen) is often identified as the first modern artist for whom this myth of the 'savage' became the touchstone of his philosophy of art and life.

Despite his avant-garde status, Gauguin was one of a host of contemporary artists, many of them working in more traditional contexts, for whom a 'primitive' or oriental subject-matter was a fashionable and marketable option.<sup>4</sup> Academically successful artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Alphonse-Étienne Dinet and Jules-Jean-Antoine Lecomte du Nouÿ were producing works on oriental themes (Plates 2, 3) that were attracting wide-

<sup>4</sup> Broadly speaking, the terms 'the Orient' and 'the oriental' are more geographically specific than 'the primitive'. Despite some historical shifts, they have been used since the nineteenth century to refer to the countries of Asia and North Africa. But as Said has argued in *Orientalism*, Western doctrines and theses about the Orient have helped to define Europe (or the West) as its cultural opposite: 'Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"' (p.2).



**Plate 3** Jules-Jean-Antoine Lecomte du Noüy, *L'Esclave blanche* (*The White Slave*), 1888, oil on canvas, 146 x 118 cm. Musée des Beaux Arts Nantes. Photo: Patrick Jean.

spread interest at the annual Salon des Artistes Français and the slightly more liberal Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux Arts, at approximately the same time that Gauguin was painting his Tahitian works (although he was having little success selling them). The themes of Lecomte du Noüy's *White Slave* in the Salon of 1888, and Dinet's *Clair de lune à Laghouat* (probably) in the Nationale of 1898, are both bound up with French Imperial conquests in the Near East and North Africa. Gauguin's Tahitian works are also related to a French expansionist culture which had led to the colonization of areas of Polynesia. There are other parallels between Tahitian works like *la Orana Maria* (Plate 4) and the Dinet or the Lecomte du Noüy. In all three paintings a 'primitive' culture is represented through the image of naked or semi-naked women, although it is (presumably) Arab consumption of a white woman which is the theme of the Lecomte du Noüy. In the Dinet and the Gauguin, sensual, dark-skinned women are themselves represented as symbols of a 'primitive' life.

The main differences between these works lie in the techniques and the conventions employed. But these can also affect the kinds of meanings which we read out of the paintings. Gauguin's simplified and distorted style and his complex combination of pagan and Christian imagery and sources help to produce an image which is less 'transparent', that is, less easily read as an illusion of life itself, and was certainly less easily read by his contemporaries. (We will return to this point in a later section.) On the other hand, the apparent naturalism of *Clair de lune à Laghouat* allowed, even encouraged, contemporary critics to construct around it a Western myth, in this case of a 'primitive' Algerian woman with an animal-like sensuality and a 'wild musky scent', an object of male desire. In 1903,

L. Léonce Bénédicte described the painting as follows:

This artist's brush has a quite exceptional ability to create the illusion of life itself. These little feminine bodies the colour of fine golden bronze, firm and rounded, moist like porous amphora – he knows them all. These little quivering bodies, elegant, supple, catlike and agile, making you think of all sorts of graceful animals, tame and wild – he knows their every languid, seductive and impatient gesture, every evocative and characteristic pose. He sees into their passionate and childlike hearts, with the jealousies of little pampered beasts, greedy like young monkeys. Their candid and primitive souls are revealed in abrupt and expressive physiognomic variations and in a vocal range which can encompass the most fluid inflections of birdsong and the furious and raucous barking of young jackals. It seems that he can even make us pick up the wild (*fauve*) and musky scent of these young and savage bodies.

(quoted in *Équivoques: Peintures françaises du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, translated by the author)

Bénédicte's reading of this image is replete with voyeuristic symbolic associations. He implicitly represents Algerian woman as the 'other' of repressed Western society: she is animal-like, child-like, savage, primitive and lascivious; she even gives off wild odours!

I am not suggesting that Gauguin's work actively resists such readings; in fact many of his works can be seen to reinforce similar ideas. But I do want to suggest that this type of reading becomes less clear cut in relation to Gauguin's work, because the technique itself came to be read as a sign for the 'primitive'. Some of the oppositions implicit in the term 'primitivism' are opened to question when we look closely not just at the subject-matter, but at the complex pictorial language which Gauguin employed.

### Part 1 'The going away' – a preparation for the 'modern'?

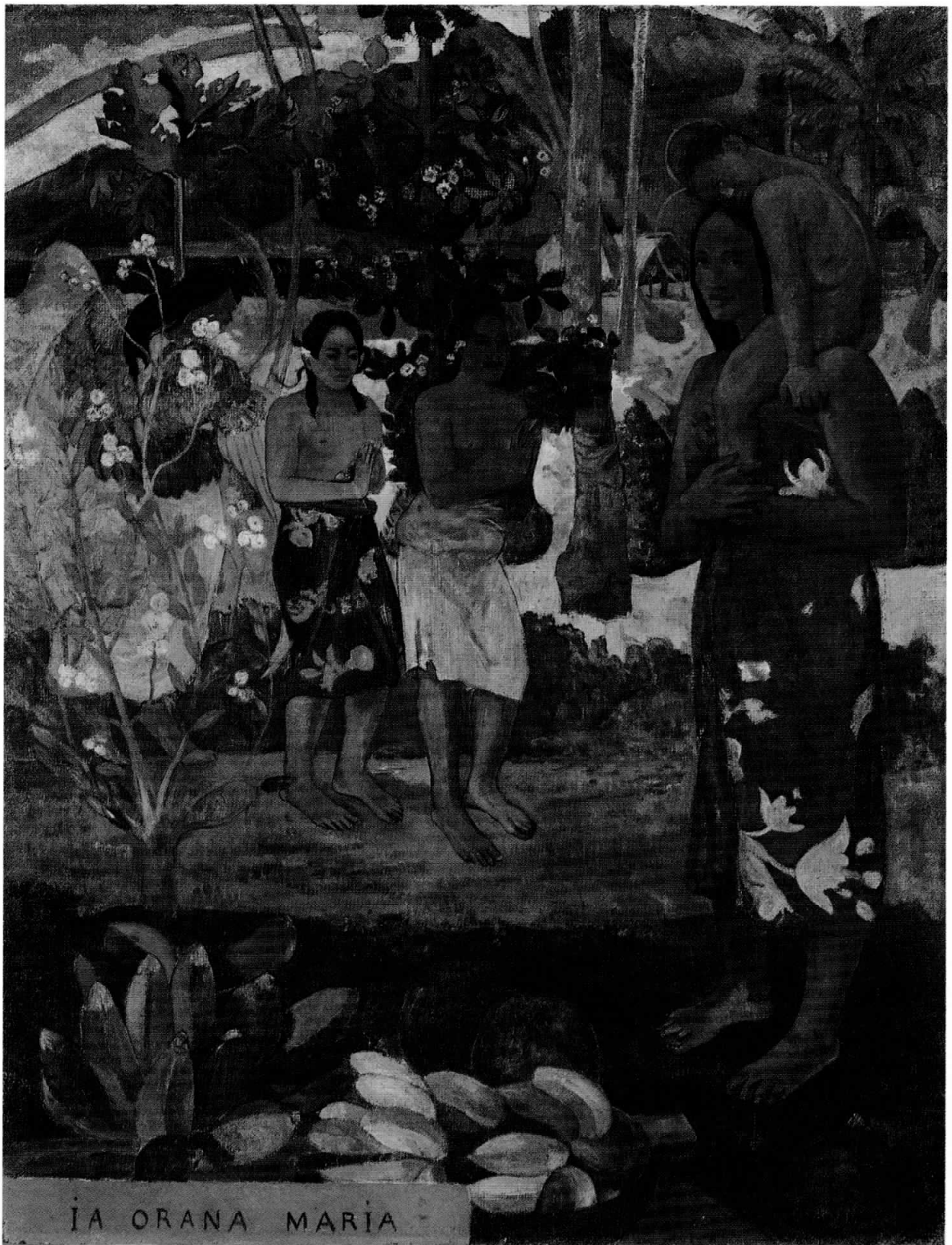
Gauguin's primitivism – that is, his tendency to seek to represent, and to idealize, a supposedly uncivilized culture – was already clearly in evidence during the years he spent living and working in Brittany in the mid-1880s. By the late 1880s the village of Pont-Aven in Brittany, where he stayed, was well established as an artistic centre, a community of artists (many of them English and North American) who had come in search of cheaper rents and a remote peasant culture which was seen as a source of artistic inspiration. In this Breton community Gauguin believed he had found a context for artistic production which was at odds with the civilized urban culture of metropolitan Paris. Or at least this is what we are encouraged to believe, by his much-quoted statement, made in a letter to the painter Émile Schuffenecker in February 1888:

I love Brittany. I find something savage, primitive here. When my clogs echo on this granite earth, I hear the dull, muffled, powerful note that I am seeking in painting.

(M. Malingue, *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis*, pp.321–2)

As we shall see, Gauguin's image of Brittany as an ideal source of 'savage' imagery, which both inspired and paralleled the expressive powers he sought in his painting, was rooted in contemporary assumptions about the avant-garde artist's role as a rediscoverer or prophet of some more direct, 'primitive' mode of expression. Given these assumptions, 'the going away' to the remote rural provinces – or to the supposed margins of civilization – came to be seen as a crucial feature of late nineteenth-century avant-gardism. But the actual act of 'going away', of seeking out a 'primitive' culture, was often conflated with the production of work in a 'primitive' style, though the latter did not necessarily follow from the former. Both aspects of artistic production were often identified as evidence of 'originality', a point which I will take up later in this essay.

The cult of 'the going away' was by no means exclusive to French avant-gardism and the circle around Gauguin. Throughout Europe as a whole, including Russia, Scandinavia and Britain, and in Germany in particular, the vogue for forming artists' communities and



**Plate 4** Paul Gauguin, *Ia Orana Maria (Hail Mary)*, 1891–92, oil on canvas, 113 x 87 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Sam A. Lewisohn, 1951.

colonies away from urban centres had been established in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Despite national differences, there were some common causal factors which underlay the formation of so many rural artists' communities in different parts of Europe at around the same time. The contemporary European obsession with the myth of the rural peasant as a figure of great moral worth, uncorrupted by the sophistication and materialism of the modern world, was a crucial shared interest, although (as we shall see) the idea took on different associations in different national contexts. We could also single out a widespread dissatisfaction among young artists and art students with the conventional Academic training still offered in many major European art academies, and the fact that by the 1890s many young artists in different European countries had taken to painting 'en plein air', following the example of the mid-nineteenth-century French Barbizon community. And there were usually crucial material factors involved. Rents were generally much lower in the country and these rural communities formed cheap working bases for artists during the summer and early autumn. Many artists left Paris or other urban centres in the early summer with the closure of the art schools and, in France, the official government sponsored Salons, returning for the winter and the opening of the Salons in the spring.

In the following section, I want to consider these and other possible causes for the formation and artistic practices of two of the better-known European communities: Pont-Aven in the 1880s, and the German colony of Worpswede in the 1890s. I also want to focus on a related set of issues which underpinned the formation of such groups, which will involve closer examination of the art practices involved: that is the shifts and reformulations in contemporary ideas of what constituted the 'modern' in art.

These issues will also be considered in relation to Gauguin's Tahitian works. Gauguin's move to Polynesia and the cult of 'the going away' of which it was a part, reveals the construction of other myths of the 'primitive', particularly in association with the contemporary discourses of colonialism, and related notions of the exotic and the pagan.

### *'Clogs and granite': Brittany and Pont-Aven*

From the mid-nineteenth century, Brittany became a popular place of pilgrimage in the summer months, for artists and tourists alike. With the building of new roads and the spread of the railways the area had become more accessible. By 1886 when Gauguin first visited the Breton village of Pont-Aven, the place had already attracted large numbers of artists, including a substantial group of North American and English painters. The local landscape, its people and their customs had already been the subject of a range of painted representations which appeared on the walls of the French, British and North American salons and annual exhibitions (Plates 5, 6, 7), many of which had helped to consolidate the urban bourgeois view of Brittany as a remote picturesque part of France, rich in local superstition and unusual religious customs. As Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton have argued in their essay 'Les Données bretonnantes', the discourses and practices of tourism informed a range of artistic representations of 'Bretonness', many of which misrepresented aspects of the economic and social developments which had taken place in Brittany in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s, changing farming methods, increased cultivation of land, farming of the sea, and the growth in tourist revenues had rapidly transformed Brittany from the backward rural community of earlier decades into a prosperous region of the modern agricultural industry. Although many of the old religious rituals and local customs had remained, they had lost some of their original meanings and had increasingly become part of a tourist spectacle.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Jacobs has documented, in *The Good and Simple Life*, some of the better known communities formed in France, Germany, Scandinavia, Britain, Russia and Hungary. This cult was not exclusive to Europe. Colonies were also formed in the USA, Canada and Australia. See also Norma Broude, *World Impressionism*.





**Plate 5** Stanhope Forbes,  
*A Street in Brittany*  
(painted at Cancale), 1881,  
oil on canvas, 104 x 76 cm.  
Walker Art Gallery,  
Liverpool. Reproduced by  
permission of the Board of  
Trustees of the National  
Museums and Galleries in  
Merseyside.



**Plate 6** Marianne  
Preindlsberger (Stokes),  
*Tired Out*, c.1881–82,  
oil on canvas, 32 x 40 cm.  
Private collection, illustrated by  
permission of Whitford and  
Hughes Gallery London.

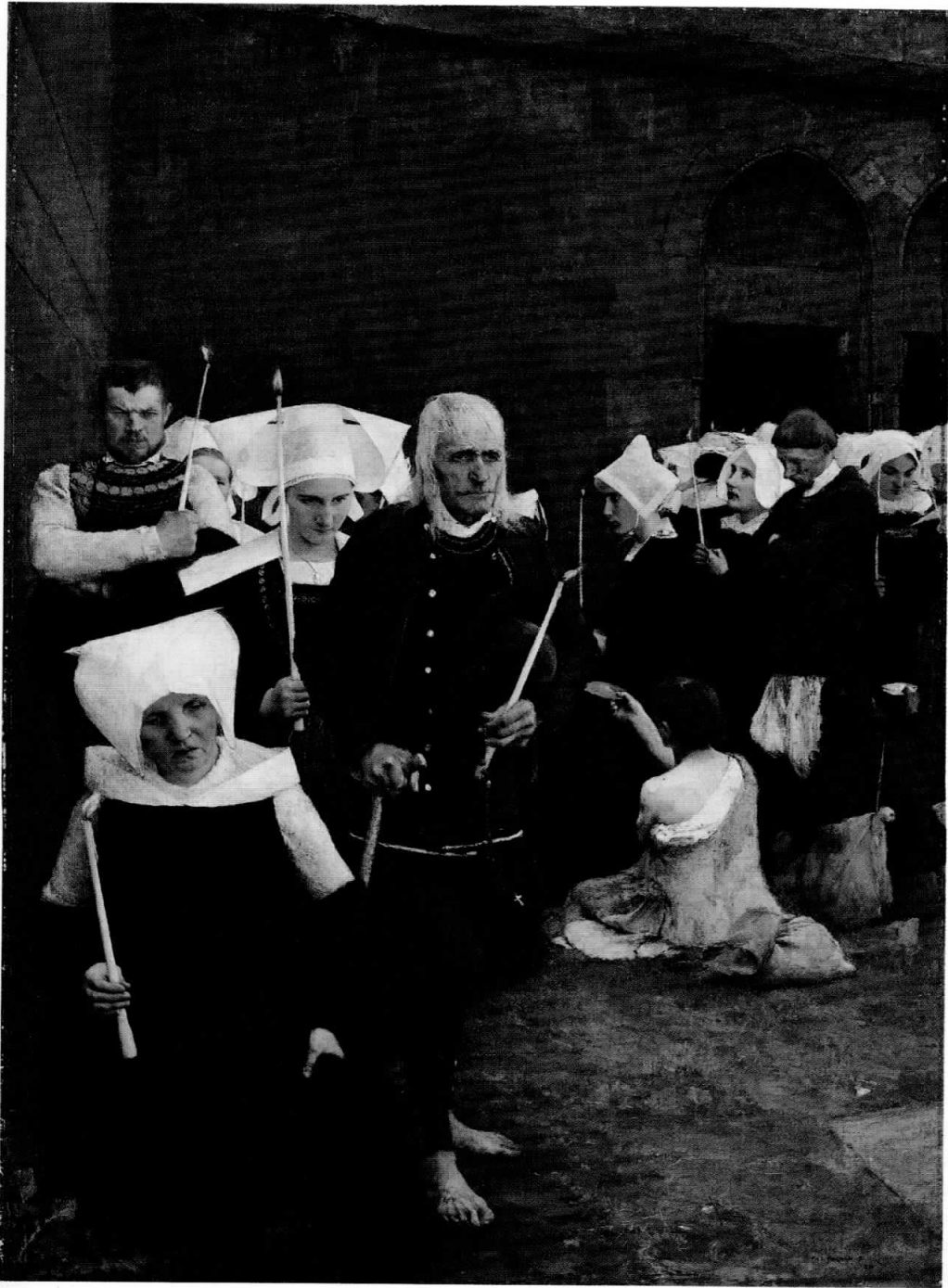


**Plate 7** William Lamb Picknell, *Pont-Aven*, 1879, oil on canvas, 78 x 115 cm, Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona; purchase with funds provided by COMPAS and a friend of the museum.

Through their representations of local rituals and customs, the visiting artists, like the urban bourgeois class to which they generally belonged, helped to develop or reconstruct various prevailing notions of the primitiveness and piety of the local community – notions that were already evident in contemporary tourist literature. Dagnan-Bouveret's *Pardon in Brittany* and *Breton Women at a Pardon* (Plates 8, 9) both depict a local Catholic custom, a religious ceremony held on particular saints' days, when pilgrims and locals dressed in Breton costume, formed processions to receive religious indulgences (*les pardons*). In the earlier picture, the artist depicts the procession, while in *Breton Women at a Pardon*, he has painted a group of Breton women in costume, seated on the grass praying and passing the time between mass and vespers.

These two paintings appeared in the Paris Salon, in 1887 and 1889 respectively, and the naturalistic style and anecdotal detail of both encouraged a contemporary audience to read in various narratives – narratives which went beyond simple description of the aspect of the Pardon depicted in each. The paintings were well received by critics of varying political persuasions. But critics with different interests to promote represented differently their religious meanings, and the implications of these meanings for a supposedly 'primitive' culture. Many conservative critics read both images in terms of the pious and simple, yet profound, Catholic faith purportedly revealed. The more liberal critics, however, identified *various* types of Breton religion in these paintings, including a more sceptical curiosity among the young (as suggested by the less pious expressions of more youthful faces in *The Pardon*). Michael Orwicz has shown, in his article 'Criticism and representations of Brittany in the early Third Republic' that some liberal critics actually played down the issue of the specific nature of the peasants' religious faith, seeing their piety as one element of the region's picturesque customs, rather than as an affirmation of Catholic practice. According to this sort of reading, these two paintings are primarily representations of the quaint and picturesque culture of rural Brittany, rather than of Catholic religious fervour. In fact several of these critics identified the essence of a race, its

'Bretonness', in the faces of Dagnan-Bouveret's peasant subjects. Paul Desjardins wrote in *La République française*, in 1889, that the Breton subjects revealed signs of 'the soul of a race, which is read on the faces' ('Criticism and representations of Brittany', p.294).



**Plate 8** Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret, *Le Pardon en Bretagne* (*The Pardon in Brittany*), 1886, oil on canvas, 114 x 84 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1931, New York.

**Plate 9** Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret, *Les Bretonnes au Pardon* (Breton Women at a Pardon), 1887, oil on canvas, 125 x 141 cm. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Museum, Lisbon.



Religion, then, is seen as one of many features of a localized Breton race with its own 'soul' or essential character, which had still survived despite the invasion of civilized culture. Despite the apparent distinctions between conservative and liberal views on religion, notions of the 'soul' of a race – of some kind of 'primitive' essence – appear in the writings of critics of both the right and the left, and can be found to underpin Gauguin's idea of a 'savage, primitive' Brittany, symbolized for him in the echo of 'clogs on this granite earth'. And in the German context, as we shall see, notions of the rural peasant as the 'soul' of a race, which influenced the formation of many German artists' colonies around 1900, contribute to various mystical and nationalist discourses.

So far in this discussion of the Dagnan-Bouveret paintings, I have focused on some of the interpretations of these two images of Breton customs, and the qualities of 'Bretonness' which they were seen to represent. But there are some other levels of meaning which can be read out of closer study of the paintings themselves, of the technical aspects, their relationship to the subject-matter and the contemporary standards of Academic competence to which these could be seen to conform – or otherwise.

What's interesting about Dagnan-Bouveret's two paintings is that the conventions and techniques he adopted allowed them to be appropriated by critics of *both* sides of the political spectrum. Liberal critics could interpret the naturalism of these works and the contemporary subject-matter as aspects of a post-Courbet anti-Academic art. And by the 1880s, the annual Salon des Artistes Français, in which both these works were exhibited, was by no means the exclusive preserve of traditional Salon pieces on historical or mythological themes exhibiting noble sentiments. In fact there was increasing demand among the Salon-going public for works on modern urban or rural-life themes, executed with a naturalism full of anecdotal detail. The more conservative critics were easily able to accommodate Dagnan-Bouveret's paintings in this light. Their naturalism allowed them to be seen as images with a readable narrative or story-line, in the way that a work by Gauguin, for instance, could not. Thus they were easily redefined in terms of their representation of either a 'primitive' Breton race, or Catholic faith and piety, or both.

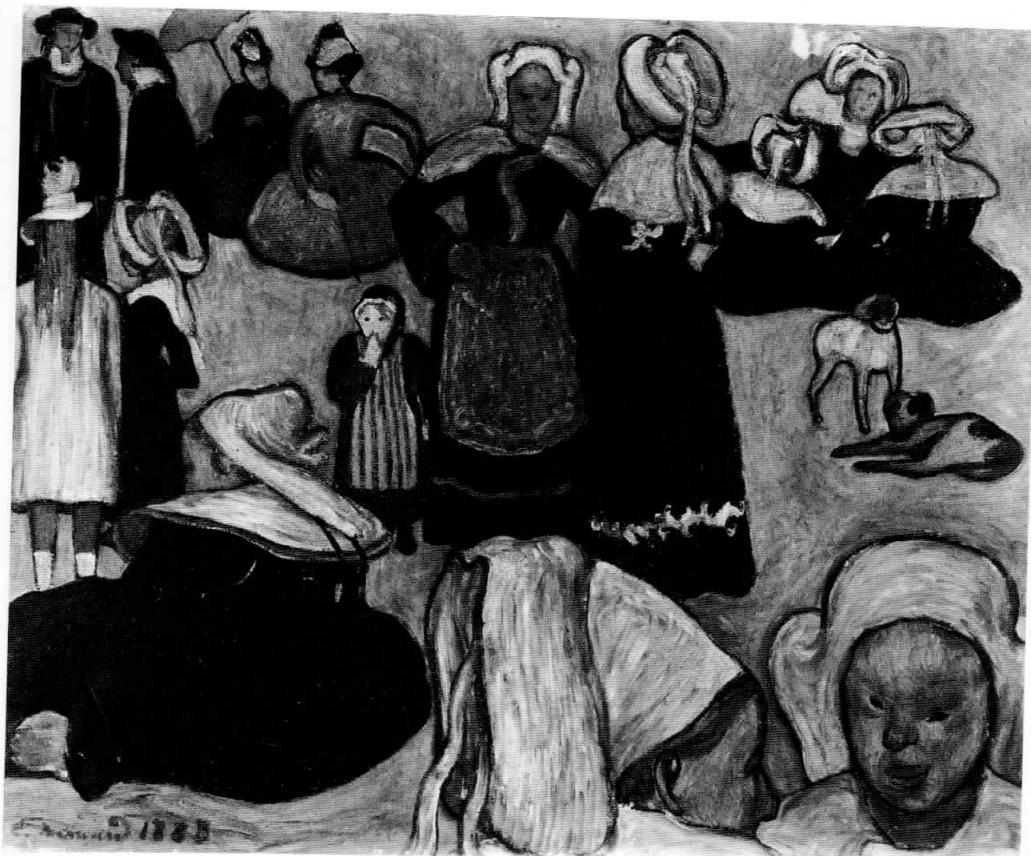
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What's interesting about Dagnan-Bouveret's two paintings is that the conventions and techniques he adopted allowed them to be appropriated by critics of *both* sides of the political spectrum. Liberal critics could interpret the naturalism of these works and the contemporary subject-matter as aspects of a post-Courbet anti-Academic art. And by the 1880s, the annual Salon des Artistes Français, in which both these works were exhibited, was by no means the exclusive preserve of traditional Salon pieces on historical or mythological themes exhibiting noble sentiments. In fact there was increasing demand among the Salon-going public for works on modern urban or rural-life themes, executed with a naturalism full of anecdotal detail. The more conservative critics were easily able to accommodate Dagnan-Bouveret's paintings in this light. Their naturalism allowed them to be seen as images with a readable narrative or story-line, in the way that a work by Gauguin, for instance, could not. Thus they were easily redefined in terms of their representation of either a 'primitive' Breton race, or Catholic faith and piety, or both.



**Plate 10** Émile Bernard, *Bretonnes au Pardon* (Breton Women at a Pardon), formerly known as *Bretonnes dans la prairie* (Breton Women in the Meadow), 1888, oil on canvas, 74 x 92 cm. Private collection. Photo: Giraudon. © DACS 1993.

A year after Dagnan-Bouveret exhibited his *Breton Women at a Pardon*, two artists residing at Pont-Aven, Émile Bernard and Gauguin, also worked on paintings of the Pardon (Plates 10, 11). If we compare these two pictures with those by Dagnan-Bouveret, we can see how the latter would have fitted more easily with conventional notions of Academic competence. We can also try to understand what Gauguin meant when he claimed that he was seeking a parallel in his painting to the 'primitive' life he had found in Brittany. Of course, this artistic intention could not guarantee a fixed *meaning* for his work, but it does provide us with information on how Gauguin and his contemporaries understood the function of artistic techniques. What sort of techniques and subject-matter could constitute a 'primitive' style? How could these constituents of a style match with – or represent – the supposedly 'primitive' life?

Bernard and Gauguin met in Pont-Aven and worked closely together during the period 1888–91. Bernard's *Breton Women at a Pardon* was painted during the first few weeks of his arrival at Pont-Aven in August 1888, and Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon* was completed the following month. Gauguin's work is generally seen to mark a break from the pseudo-Impressionism of his earlier Breton subjects – and thus to be innovative. The rather schematic decorative style of both paintings has generated a good deal of controversy among art historians about the nature of Bernard's relationship with Gauguin, and the issue of who influenced whom. However, I am less interested in this issue than in how these works could – or can – be read as 'primitive' equivalents.



**Plate 11** Paul Gauguin, *La Vision après le sermon. La Lutte de Jacob avec l'ange* (*The Vision after the Sermon. Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*), 1889, oil on canvas 73 x 92 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

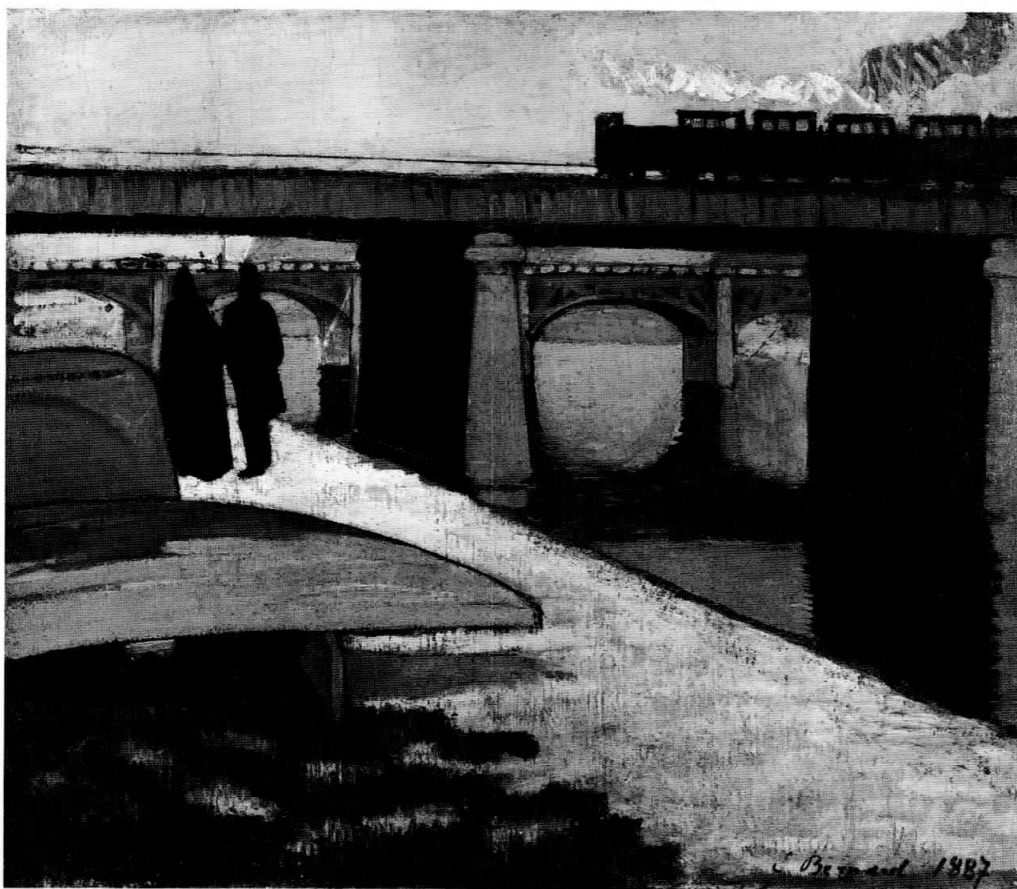
### A visual language of the 'primitive'?

According to statements by Bernard and Gauguin from the period, both artists saw themselves as depicting 'primitive' *subject-matter*. Bernard saw Brittany as a land characterized by a simple poverty and religion. He wrote: 'Atheist that I was, it [Brittany] made of me a saint ... it was the gothic Brittany which initiated me in art and God' (*Post-Impressionism*, p.41). Like many contemporary artists, he believed he had found a culture radically different from that of urban Paris, a culture which could directly inspire a more 'primitive' art.

Yet the visual language through which Bernard reconstructs this primitivism has a complicated pedigree. His schematic handling of the figures, which are organized across a flattish green background, distorts both scale and conventional three-dimensional space. This distortion echoed the Symbolist principles which Bernard had already adopted in works executed in 1887 (Plate 12). Formally christened in 1886 with the publication of a manifesto by the writer and poet Jean Moréas, this was an Idealist movement which championed a revolt against traditional conventions in poetry, literature and art in favour of the expression of the artist's individual perceptions and feelings. Broadly speaking, a Symbolist art (as opposed to a Symbolist literature) was one in which the artist conveyed ideas and emotions, rather than observations, through the use of lines, colours and forms.

These could be employed to reveal 'inner meanings', to abstract from nature, rather than seek to record it, as, it was argued, the naturalists had done. Such techniques are also influenced by the decorative qualities of Japanese prints, with which Bernard and Gauguin were familiar at the time (see Plate 13). It is also possible that the stylized shapes of the seated figures echo the design of Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, a work which had come to symbolize an urban avant-garde practice. It was Van Gogh who actually called Bernard's work 'a Sunday afternoon in Brittany', thus identifying the Breton motif as similar to Seurat's image of the urban bourgeoisie congregating on the Grande Jatte on a Sunday afternoon. Study of the costumes of Bernard's Breton women reveals that, paradoxically, this was a group of relatively affluent peasants. Orton and Pollock have argued that 'Bernard travelled to what was considered to be a social system different from that to which he was accustomed, to a province which, it was thought, retained much of the character of a bygone civilization. But what Bernard, the vanguard artist, painted in *Breton Women in a Meadow* was a set of social relations very similar to those he knew in the capital' ('Les Données bretonnantes', p.298).

Thus the primitivism of Bernard's work is rooted in a set of contradictions. As part of a culture of 'the going away', Bernard pursued interests which he believed to be opposed to those of urban painting, but both the motifs and the conventions which he adopted revealed sophisticated interests and associations which were close to those of urban vanguard painters. While the technical conventions do not automatically signify 'primitiveness', they do signify a break with the forms of naturalism employed by artists



**Plate 12** Émile Bernard, *Bridge at Asnières*, 1887, oil on canvas, 46 x 54 cm.

Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Grace Rainey Rogers Fund. © DACS 1993.



**Plate 13** Katsushika Hokusai,  
*The Cultivation of Rice.*  
 Hokusai Mangwa III.5.R.  
 Tokyo National Museum.



such as Dagnan-Bouveret. In so doing, they focus our attention as much on the actual processes of painting – on the surface of the canvas – as on the illusion created. And this in its turn could be construed as some kind of primitivism, for the artist has left a visible trace of the physical activity of picture-making, suggesting a more direct, unmediated mode of expression.

Gauguin, in an account of his painting on the same theme – *Vision after the Sermon* – provided a full explanation of how *he* sought to express the 'primitive' in his work:

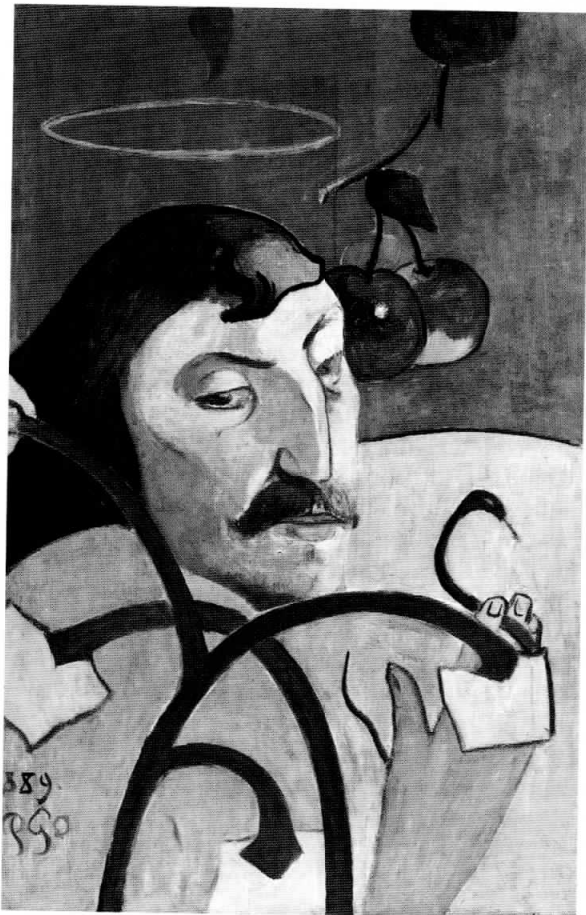
I believe that I have achieved a great rustic superstitious simplicity in these figures. Everything is very severe. The cow under the tree is very small relative to reality ... and for me in this painting, the landscape and the struggle exist only within the imagination of the praying people, the product of the sermon. This is why there is a contrast between the 'real' people [*les gens natures*] and the struggle in the landscape devoid of naturalism and out of proportion.

(quoted in *Gauguin and the School of Pont-Aven*, p.41)

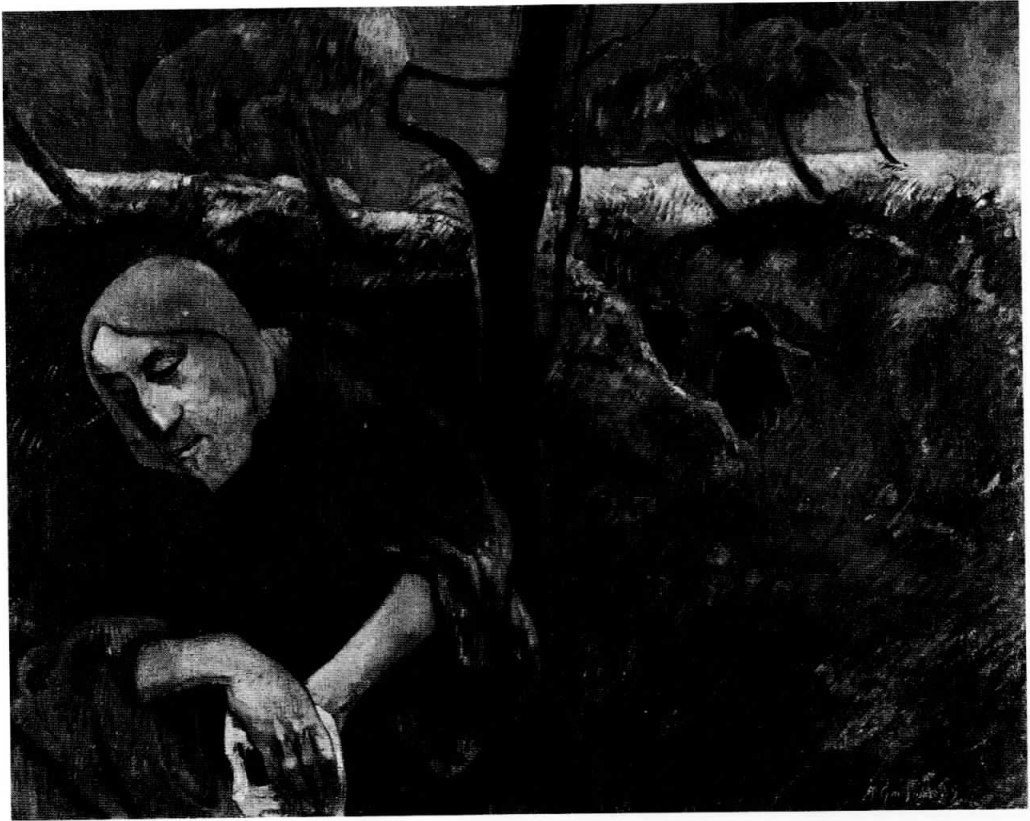
Gauguin defines his primitivism, then, in terms of the 'simplicity', severity and lack of naturalistic scale which characterize his style of painting in *The Vision*. He suggests that his formal simplifications are themselves symbolic of the 'primitive' culture which they represent. In this respect he was following a primitivist tradition which linked 'simple' people with 'purer' thoughts or modes of expression. But he is also making an implicit association between an 'unsophisticated' mode of artistic expression and the creativity – or creative potential – of the modern artist.

Gauguin's writings show that his self-image as a specifically *modern* painter involved some idea that the artist did not merely seek inspiration from a peasant culture and, occasionally, its religious rituals. Rather, he – and this was a notion that rarely included the female artist – used his creative instincts to produce pictorial *equivalents* of the 'primitive'. In other words, the artist saw himself as a direct communicator, a kind of innate savage, for whom the objects and stimulus within an unsophisticated culture *enable* rather than simply inspire the expression of what is thought to be inherent in the artist. The artist is self-defined as a superior being, as creatively endowed. In Gauguin's paintings, such self-deification was often expressed in the combination of self-portraiture and pseudo-religious imagery, as in the Breton *Self-Portrait*, and in self-depiction as Christ, as in *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (Plates 14, 15). Thus the artist's belief that he is somehow spiritually endowed is represented in the image by means of literal and symbolic associations.

The sources of Gauguin's style in *The Vision after the Sermon* are complex, as they are in Bernard's *Breton Women in a Meadow*. *The Vision* has been widely represented as a 'breakthrough' painting in which Gauguin throws off his diluted Impressionism and



**Plate 14** Paul Gauguin, *Self-portrait*, 1889, oil on wood, 79 x 51 cm. Reproduced with permission of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection. 1963.10.239 (A1708).



**Plate 15** Paul Gauguin, *Le Christ au jardin des olives* (*Agony in the Garden: Christ in the Garden of Olives*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm. Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach Florida.

demonstrates a more radical primitivism. While there is little evidence to suggest that he borrowed directly from the conventions of Breton folk art, neither is it the case that the simplifications and distortions employed in *The Vision* came to him in a flash of 'primitive' inspiration. As in Bernard's painting, the flattened areas of rich colour, the use of dark outlines and the distortions and simplifications are in part influenced by Symbolist ideas and practices. Gauguin was particularly impressed with Bernard's so-called '*cloisonniste*' (or 'synthetist') style, in which dark outlines were used to surround and separate areas of rich colour. This technique had the effect of counteracting any suggestion of three dimensional space or depth and contributed to a pictorial system that was already being described by contemporaries as 'abstracting' from nature – an idea that was central to the aims of the Symbolist movement in art, literature and philosophy.

Several contemporary critics were quick to identify a Symbolist element in *The Vision*, seeing it as a measure of the artist's originality. The Symbolist critic George Albert Aurier wrote a long review in the *Mercure de France* in 1891, in which he cast Gauguin in a key role within an alternative artistic tradition, an art opposed to the 'realistic' aspects of Impressionism (i.e. those dependent on appearances), which was 'more pure and more elevated'. According to Aurier, the central components of this art were its 'Ideist, Symbolist, Synthetist, Subjective and Decorative' aspects, which were closer to those of 'the Primitives' – by which he meant the art of the Middle Ages, the Italian Quattrocento, the Greeks and the Egyptians – than to recent naturalist art.<sup>6</sup>

Aurier thus makes an important set of associations between his concepts of the Primitive, the Symbolist and the Decorative. In fact, the 'Decorative' emerges in Symbolist-

<sup>6</sup> By 'ideist', Denis means based on ideas rather than empirical observations.

influenced thought as a pivotal and value-laden concept. Aurier's belief that the artist had the right to exaggerate or deform lines, colours and forms according to the needs of the idea behind the painting was based on his understanding of various 'primitive' traditions of wall painting:

for decorative painting in its proper sense, as the Egyptians and, very probably, the Greeks and the Primitives understood it, is nothing other than a manifestation of art at once subjective, synthetic, symbolic and ideist.

(quoted in H.B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, p.92)

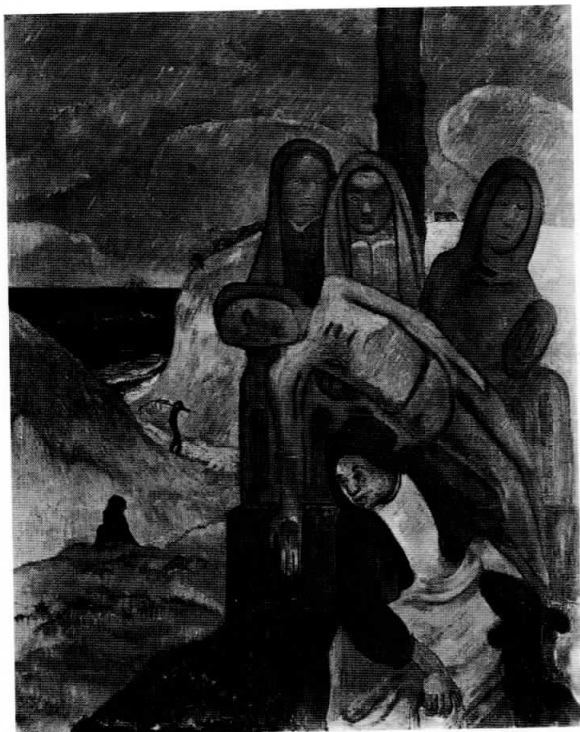
Although Aurier's concept of the decorative derives from his representation of mural art, the term does not simply mean ornamental or pretty, a merely superficial quality, but rather the quality through which the 'purity' and expressive potential of a work can be measured. We will return to this association between the 'primitive' and decorative with reference to the work of Matisse.

It is important to note that although *The Vision* was an easel painting, it fulfilled at least a part of Aurier's criteria for the decorative. But I mentioned another source, which also contributed to its decorative effects – the Japanese print. The influence of the Japanese print can be seen in the way the figures are cut off by the frame, in the stylized patterns of the Breton head-dresses and the lack of perspective. For many contemporary artists the conventions of Japanese art, like those of Aurier's 'Primitives', were signs of a more direct mode of artistic expression. Their inherent value depended on what was seen as their radical *difference* from more illusionistic forms of Western art. Within nineteenth-century Japanese culture the conventions employed by artists such as Hokusai were seen as skilled, sophisticated and highly taught. Gauguin's writings and his use of certain pictorial conventions suggest that he subscribed to the notion of Japanese art as 'primitive', as evidence of 'simpler means' and 'honesty'.<sup>7</sup> In these terms Japanese art qualified for Aurier's categories of both the 'Primitive' and the 'Decorative'.

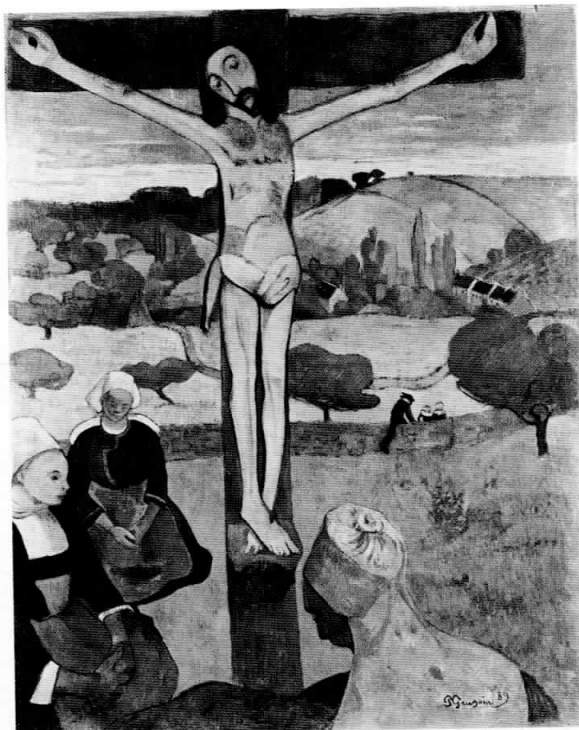
In our discussion of the Dagnan-Bouveret paintings we saw how the religious activities of the Breton peasantry became the focus of contemporary debates about the 'essence' or 'soul' of a race. *The Vision* is one of several Breton works in which Gauguin, too, depicts a religious activity or theme. Others include *Green Christ – Breton Calvary* and *The Yellow Christ* (Plates 16, 17). While the calvary and crucifixion subjects are relatively straightforward in their biblical references, the religious implications of *The Vision* are more difficult to sort out. It combines the biblical theme of Jacob wrestling with the angel with that of a local Breton Pardon. But the wrestling takes place as if observed by the Breton women, and may also be a reference to the wrestling matches and dancing which often accompanied Pardons in lower Brittany. The possible religious meanings are confused with what we might call the '*Bretonisme*' of this work – that is the reconstruction of Breton life and rituals as superstitious and primitive.

The technical devices employed by Gauguin, the distortions and stylizations, also help to confuse our reading of the religious theme. While the naturalism of Dagnan-Bouveret's *Pardon in Brittany* allowed contemporary critics to invest it with various readable strands of meaning to do with the religious piety – or otherwise – of the peasants depicted, Gauguin's critics (among them Aurier), tended to focus on the supposed 'inner meanings'. The formal elements could thus be read as expressive equivalents for this culture of '*Bretonisme*', rather than depictions of it. Although *The Vision* is often seen as a religious painting, I would argue that it is as much a manifesto of Gauguin's primitivism. It depicts a religious theme, yet it is not promoting religion or a piety.

<sup>7</sup> As described in Gauguin's manuscript *Diverses Choses*. Kirk Varnedoe has shown that Gauguin's representation of Japanese art as 'primitive' was also qualified by the parallels which he draws with Western forms of caricature, in particular the work of Daumier and Forain. According to Gauguin, Western caricaturists share a tendency to distort and to use pictorial idioms. The simplifications and distortions of both forms of art are seen as evidence of a purer, innate mode of expression. See Varnedoe's essay 'Gauguin', in *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, p.185.



**Plate 16** Paul Gauguin, *Calvaire breton, le Christ vert* (*Breton Calvary, Green Christ*), 1889, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts.



**Plate 17** Paul Gauguin, *Le Christ jaune* (*The Yellow Christ*), 1889, oil on canvas, 90 x 74 cm. Albright Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York; general purchase funds, 1946.

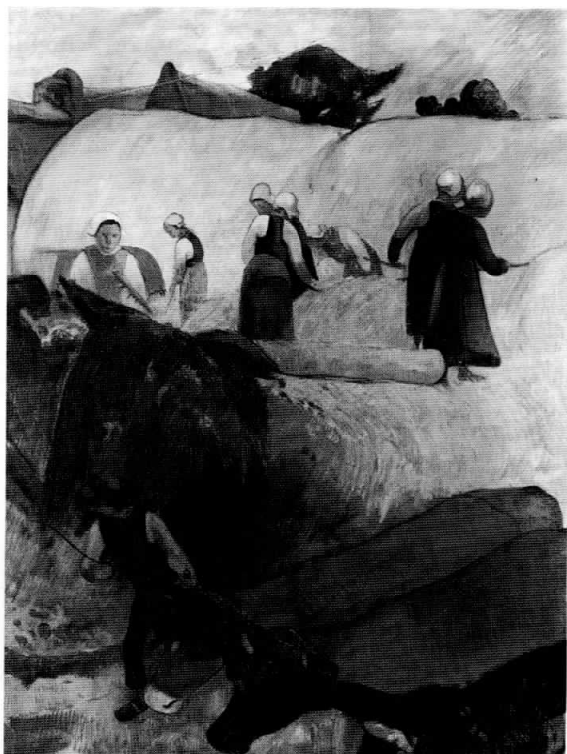
### The feminine 'other'

Nearly all Gauguin's Breton paintings discussed so far include, or are constructed around, images of local peasant women. In Gauguin's work many aspects of rural and religious life in Brittany are signified through the representation of women. In this respect he was following a well-established convention within Post-Enlightenment European art and culture, epitomized in France by the work of Jean-François Millet and Jules Bastien-Lepage, in which the rural female was represented as close to nature, as a symbol of the 'natural' peasant life.<sup>8</sup> Breton women are often shown tending sheep, harvesting or relaxing in nature (Plates 18, 19, 20). In these representations, their roles and activities seem to be at one with the natural cycle of things. And in *The Vision* and *The Yellow Christ*, the religious piety of the Breton peasantry is represented through kneeling, praying women. In all these works the 'Bretonisme' of Gauguin's subjects is clearly signified through their local costumes, their clogs and elaborate headdresses. In *The Vision* it is through the depiction of women and their local costumes that the process of distortion appears most pronounced. The ornate head-dresses dominate the foreground of the composition, and they allow us to confuse Gauguin's primitivized image with the actual local Breton culture that it represents. At the same time, they are clearly images of women's costumes. Gauguin's 'Bretonisme', then, is frequently, though not exclusively, associated with the feminine,

<sup>8</sup> This historical identification of Nature as 'Other' to culture, in which Nature is often (though not exclusively) identified with woman has been explored in aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, in Ludmilla Jordanova's *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.



**Plate 18** Paul Gauguin, *Bergère Bretonne (The Breton Shepherdess)*, 1886, oil on canvas, 60 x 68 cm. From the collection at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne, reproduced by permission of Tyne and Wear Museums.



**Plate 19** Paul Gauguin, *La Moisson en Bretagne (Haymaking in Brittany)*, 1889, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Courtauld Institute Galleries.

**Plate 20** Paul Gauguin, *Ramasseuses de varech (Seaweed Gatherers)*, 1889, oil on canvas, 87 x 123 cm. Essen, Folkwang Museum.



the 'other' of civilized masculine culture. As I suggested earlier, the notion of the 'primitive' as the 'other' of Western culture sometimes carried with it a set of gendered oppositions, of 'feminine' Nature against 'masculine' Culture. Such symbolic oppositions are implicit in the imagery of many of Gauguin's Breton works, as they are in some of his written comments.

While women's costumes feature prominently in many of Gauguin's Pont-Aven works, in many later Breton works (from around 1889), it is naked women who come to symbolize the opposite of a civilized urban life. His images of naked women executed during this period become increasingly sexual and include a series of naked women in the waves (Plates 21, 22), adolescent nudes, such as *The Loss of Virginity* (Plate 23), and the Eve theme (Plate 24). In a letter to the Symbolist writer Auguste Strindberg in 1895, Gauguin actually defines his own 'barbarism' in terms of the Eve theme. He describes

a shock between your civilization and my barbarism. Civilization from which you suffer, barbarism which has been rejuvenation for me. Before the Eve of my choice whom I have painted in the forms and the harmonies of another world, your memories have evoked a painful past. The Eve of your civilized conception nearly always makes you, and makes us, misogynist; the ancient Eve, who frightens you in my study might some day smile at you less bitterly.

(quoted in Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p.67)

Gauguin adopts the theme of Eve – the first woman – as a metaphor for his own primitivism, opposing his uncivilized Eve to Strindberg's more civilized conception. But Eve does not merely function as a metaphor. She is, as he suggests, both the symbol and the subject of his primitivism, 'painted in the forms and harmonies of another world'. Gauguin's series of naked women in the waves from 1889 seem to reinforce these intended literal and symbolic meanings. The women are depicted naked in nature, thus reinforcing the well-established association between woman and nature. The theme of Ondine, the water nymph, on which both these works are based, was popular in contemporary art and literature. The mythical associations implicit in these two works also reveal that Gauguin had absorbed Wagnerian ideas about women, which were popular among Symbolist writers and poets. While staying at the auberge Gloanec in Pont-Aven, Gauguin had transcribed some Wagnerian ideas into the '*livre d'or*' (an annotated guest book) of the hotel.