

# Paul Gauguin's Paintings, 1886-91 Cloisonism, Synthetism and Symbolism

Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński

Volume 9, Number 1-2, 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074970ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074970ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

## ISSN

0315-9906 (print)  
1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Jirat-Wasiutyński, V. (1982). Paul Gauguin's Paintings, 1886-91 Cloisonism, Synthetism and Symbolism. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 9(1-2), 35–46. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074970ar>

## Article abstract

*La Vision après le sermon : lutte de Jacob avec l'Ange* est une oeuvre charnière dans l'oeuvre de Paul Gauguin. Dans ce chef-d'oeuvre de septembre 1888, l'artiste adopte un langage anti-naturaliste et produit un manifeste du symbolisme en peinture. Des études récentes ont à nouveau soulevé le problème du rôle de Gauguin dans la genèse du symbolisme en peinture et en particulier de ses rapports avec Émile Bernard et le Cloisonnisme. La *Vision* témoigne d'une connaissance des expériences cloisonnistes de Bernard et de Louis Anquetin. Gauguin était déjà familier avec ces expériences dès l'hiver de 1887-1888. Dans les cinq ou six mois qui précèdent l'arrivée de Bernard à Pont-Aven (mi-août 1888), Gauguin chercha à synthétiser les leçons de Degas, Puvis de Chavannes, Millet, Cézanne et des gravures japonaises, pour créer des images poétiques de la vie rustique des paysans bretons. Déjà au début de juillet, son art évoluait, systématiquement dans le sens de la *Vision*. Mais Gauguin avait besoin d'une perspective nouvelle de son sujet et d'audace pour être aussi radical que l'étaient ses sources, les gravures japonaises. Dans la *Vision après le Sermon*, il franchit cette étape, sans doute sous l'influence directe d'Émile Bernard. Néanmoins, le Cloisonnisme comme tel s'est, avéré de courte durée, dégénérant vite en un maniérisme décoratif. Dans sa grande oeuvre symboliste, *Vendanges à Arles : misères humaines*, Gauguin a cherché à employer un langage fait de signes conventionnels pour rendre son sujet. Comme van Gogh, il croyait que les harmonies de couleurs pouvaient constituer un langage pour exprimer des émotions. Son approche symboliste a atteint son sommet dans *Le Christ jaune* et *Le Calvaire breton*. Cette étude définit en conclusion, en les distinguant clairement, le Cloisonnisme, le Synthétisme et le Symbolisme.

---

# Paul Gauguin's Paintings, 1886-91

## *Cloisonism, Synthetism and Symbolism*

---

VOJTECH JIRAT-WASIUTYŃSKI

*Queen's University, Kingston*

---

Paul Gauguin's masterpiece *The Vision of the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (Fig. 1), painted in September 1888, marks a clear turning point in his work. Gauguin here unequivocally adopts an anti-naturalistic visual language and produces a manifesto of 'le symbolisme en peinture.' Recent scholarship has again raised the issue of Paul Gauguin's rôle in the genesis of pictorial symbolism. Most particularly has his relationship to Émile Bernard and to Cloisonism, the style of painting developed by the latter with Louis Anquetin in 1886-87, become the focus of discussion.<sup>1</sup> The full and fair elucidation of Gauguin's rôle requires a close look at his painting in the crucial two years which prepared the way for the

summer of 1888. We must also analyse and assess critically the works of Bernard, Anquetin and Vincent van Gogh in relation to Gauguin's. Finally, we must clarify the meaning of the art-critical terms Cloisonism, Synthetism and Symbolism in relation to the major works of these artists.

<sup>1</sup> I am thinking particularly of MaryAnne Stevens, 'Innovation and Consolidation in French Painting,' in *Post-Impressionism Cross-Currents in European Painting* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1979-80), 19-25, and Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, 'From Cloisonism to Symbolism,' in *Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism* (Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 24 January - 22 March 1981), 17-61. The present study grew out of a paper presented at the symposium held in conjunction with the latter exhibition on 14 February 1981.



FIGURE 1. Paul Gauguin, *The Vision of the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland.



FIGURE 2. Émile Bernard, *Breton Women in a Meadow*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 74 × 92 cm. France, Private Collection.

Gauguin's *Vision of the Sermon* shares many visual characteristics with Emile Bernard's *Breton Women in the Meadow* (Fig. 2) from the same months, a work traditionally cited as a source for Gauguin's. The *Vision* very definitely reflects knowledge of the Cloisonist experiments of Bernard and Louis Anquetin, with which, as Welsh-Ovcharov points out,<sup>2</sup> Gauguin was acquainted from the winter of 1887-88. However, this is only one of the sources of this Symbolist painting, and certain critical differences of style and quality must not be overlooked. Bernard arrived in Pont-Aven during the second week of August 1888.<sup>3</sup> This time he was well received by Gauguin, who had largely ignored him in August and September 1886, during his previous stay in Pont-Aven, because, it seems, Bernard was then painting in a manner related to Neo-Impressionism and Gauguin had just quarrelled with Seurat in June 1886.<sup>4</sup> Bernard's *Breton Women in the Meadow* clearly continues his and Anquetin's Cloisonist experiments

of 1887 in its dominant use of largely flat, unmodulated areas of green and the creation of forms by strong outlines.

According to MaryAnne Stevens,<sup>5</sup> Bernard and Anquetin had developed 'cloisonism,' as it was dubbed in Edouard Dujardin's review of Anquetin's showing at Les Vingt in Brussels (January 1888), in order to realize an anti-naturalistic, conceptual style of painting. Bernard's *The Ragpickers: Iron Bridges at Asnières* (Fig. 3) and Anquetin's *The Street, Five O'Clock in the Evening* (Fig. 4) both date from 1887. Anquetin's work is dominated by the deep blue of the evening sky applied uniformly across the canvas as an abstract sign for the time of day; the figures and the street setting are boldly drawn in simplified outline. The combination of simplified drawing and symbolic use of colour suggest a mature Cloisonist work from late 1887, post-dating such pieces as the *Mower*.<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite these bold devices, *The Street* remains in most ways a naturalistic image: the space is deep and consistent, and the unified blue cast 'recreates' the time of day. No symbolic content, beyond a general 'mood,' is conveyed. In later works, Anquetin used more radical formal devices, although his goal remained the recreation of physical reality and his experience of it. The results are often decorative and suggestive of contemporary Art Nouveau.

<sup>2</sup> Welsh-Ovcharov in *Cloisonism*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis*, ed. Maurice Malinque (Paris: Grasset, 1946), 134 (Letter LXVII, dated 14 August 1888).

<sup>4</sup> John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism. From Van Gogh to Gauguin* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Stevens in Royal Academy, *Post-Impressionism*, 20 and 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Cloisonism*, 239 (cat. 76).

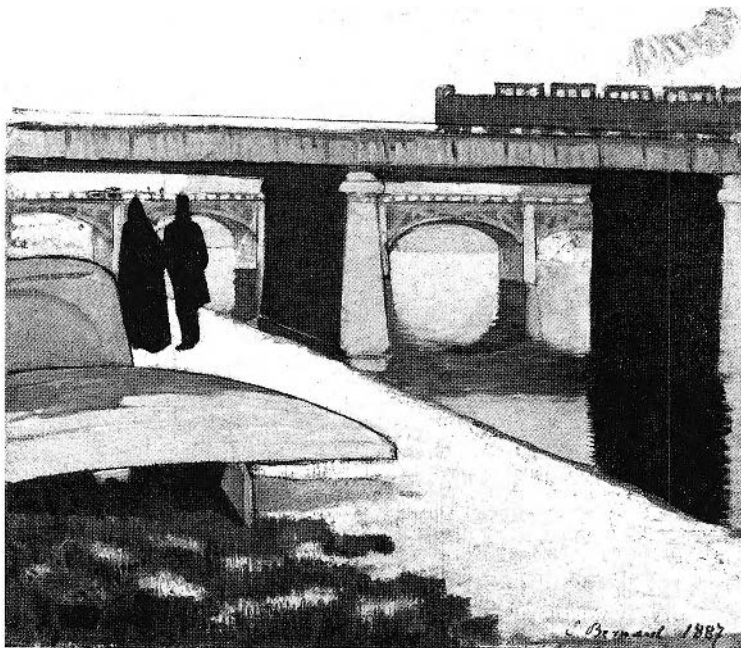


FIGURE 3. Émile Bernard. *The Ragpickers: Iron Bridges at Asnières*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 45.9 × 54.2 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, Grace Rainey Rogers Fund.

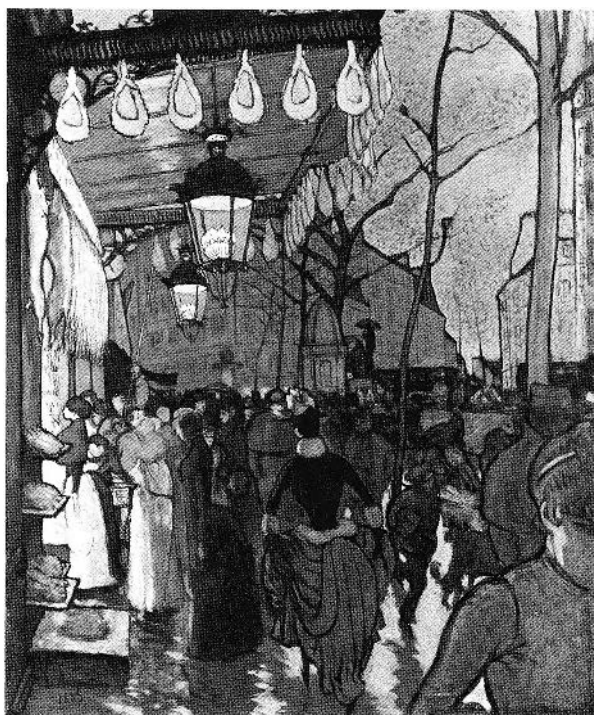


FIGURE 4. Louis Anquetin. *The Street: Five O'Clock in the Evening*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 69.2 × 53.5 cm. Hartford, The Wadsworth Atheneum, Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection.

Bernard's painting of the *Iron Bridges* is a more complex, though less fluent, work; it was surely painted late in 1887 and is one of the experiments in 'geometric abstraction' mentioned by Bernard.<sup>7</sup> Like Anquetin's *Street*, it is indebted to the Japanese print and employs a schematic form of drawing. Bernard has followed this precedent to a more radical transformation of space, in keeping with the simplified drawing, the silhouetted 'shadows' of the ragpickers, and the flat or otherwise artificial treatment of colour areas. Bernard's painting deliberately rejects naturalism and compromises any accompanying illusionism by making use of an 'ideographic' approach: the sign images formed by line and colour have been juxtaposed in a schematic composition and stand for the viewed scene. In the words of Dujardin, which almost apply better to Bernard's works than to his friend Anquetin's, their actual reference,

the starting point is a symbolic concept of art. In painting, as well as in literature, the representation of nature is an impossibility ... On the contrary, the goal of painting, of literature, is to give the *feeling* of things by using the means special to painting or literature ... the

<sup>7</sup> Émile Bernard cited by Welsh-Ovcharov, in *Cloisonism*, 28; and 286 (cat. 96) for the dating.

painter ... will only strive to capture the intimate reality; the essence of the object chosen, using the fewest possible number of lines and characteristic colours.<sup>8</sup>

Dujardin here used the word 'symbolic' to underline the artificial nature of the visual language used by the artist. MaryAnne Stevens has suggested that Bernard's painting was probably done from memory: he made important changes in the view, as a comparison with Vincent van Gogh's painting of the same motif shows, in order to present a simplified, forceful eidetic image.<sup>9</sup>

As Dujardin's review made clear and as Stevens has pointed out, Bernard's and Anquetin's new approach to painting was, of course, indebted to the example of Symbolist literature<sup>10</sup>; but it was developed above all, it seems to me, in reaction and answer to the major precedent of Georges Seurat's Neo-Impressionism, after both Bernard and Anquetin had adopted pointillist techniques for a time in 1886.<sup>11</sup> *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* reveals Neo-Impressionism, as used by Seurat, to be a symbolic language and a model for Cloisonism. Bernard's image is more radically anti-naturalistic; but, at the same time, it is seriously flawed by his inability to control the tension between depth and surface. Seurat's image, too, is a synthesis of the natural scene; the artist has simplified forms, exaggerated scale and rearranged space, and orchestrated colour for the sake of a still and luminous harmony. 'To synthesize the landscape in a definite aspect which perpetuates the sensation – this is what the Neo-Impressionists try to do.'<sup>12</sup> Synthesis is the term most commonly used ca. 1886 to denote the new approach to painting: it refers to the process of rendering the essential

character of a visual experience by emphasizing the dominant traits. While not necessarily anti-naturalistic, the synthetic approach clearly puts a premium on 'production,' rather than 'reproduction,' to use Dujardin's terminology of 1888.

According to the painter Delavallée, Paul Gauguin had been preoccupied with 'synthesis' during the summer and autumn of 1886 in Pont-Aven.<sup>13</sup> Gauguin's desire to create a new language of painting dated back to the *Notes Synthétiques* which he wrote either in Rouen in 1884 or in Copenhagen in 1885.<sup>14</sup> His move to Pont-Aven was part of a campaign of protracted painting calculated to achieve a breakthrough. Gauguin had gradually abandoned the Impressionist practice of painting from the motif (he had announced this in letters to Pissarro as early as 1881 and 1882) for a process of gathering documents, i.e. drawings, in the field and using them in the studio to build up his compositions. By 1886 the resulting works are 'synthetic images' of Breton peasant life. This procedure clearly left its mark on the more complex Breton figure paintings of 1886, such as the *Four Breton Women* (Munich).<sup>15</sup>

Provoked no doubt by Seurat's ambitious *Island of La Grande Jatte*, Gauguin was searching for a synthetic style capable of capturing the essential traits of scenes from Breton life. Having rejected Seurat and Neo-Impressionism, he turned to Degas' ballerinas and bathers for poses and gestures. His search centred in particular on the development of a synthetic drawing style. Merete Bodelsen has rightly pointed to the important contribution of Gauguin's *ceramic work* during the winter of 1886-87 to the firming up and simplifications of contour lines and the consequent increase in their power to characterize forms.<sup>16</sup> The development of Gauguin's synthetic drawing – and its corresponding emphasis on shape and the flattening of space – continued, even accelerated, in the tropical light of Martinique. This can be seen in such paintings as *Among the Mangoes* (Amsterdam). Here the figures are strongly characterized through 'drawn' shape; at the same time, forms are flattened and combined with a shallow spatial setting in an increasingly decorative structure reminiscent of Japanese prints. Gauguin was quite clearly moving away from Impressionism.

After his return from Martinique to Paris (November 1887), Gauguin saw the exhibition of the 'petit boulevard' painters organized at the DuChalet Restaurant by Vincent van Gogh, which included Anquetin's and Bernard's

8 Edouard Dujardin, 'Aux xx et aux Indépendants. Le Cloisonisme,' *Revue Indépendante*, n.s. vi, n° 17 (mars 1888), 489; the translation is my own.

9 Royal Academy, *Post-Impressionism*, 31 (cat. 12).

10 Stevens in Royal Academy, *Post-Impressionism*, 21.

11 Welsh-Ovcharov in *Cloisonism*, 31, emphasizes the rôle of Neo-Impressionism.

12 Felix Fénéon, 'Le Néo-Impressionnisme,' *L'Art Moderne* (Brussels) (1<sup>re</sup> mai 1887), in his *Œuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin (Geneva: Droz, 1970), 1, 74.

13 Charles Chassé, 'De quand date le synthétisme de Gauguin,' *L'Amour de l'Art* (avril 1938), 127-134; also his *Gauguin et son temps* (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1955), 44.

14 *Carnet de Croquis*, ed. R. Cogniat and J. Rewald (Paris: For the Hammer Gallery, New York, 1962), 2-12.

15 See my dissertation *Paul Gauguin in the Context of Symbolism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), 51 ff. for a detailed discussion.

16 Merete Bodelsen, *Gauguin's Ceramics* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 50-53.

FIGURE 5. Paul Gauguin, *Breton Women with a Calf*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 91 × 72 cm. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek.

Cloisonist works.<sup>17</sup> Theo van Gogh became Gauguin's dealer, purchasing and showing his works in December 1888 and January 1889, and Gauguin seems to have been in close contact with Vincent and Bernard before his departure for Pont-Aven in early February 1888.

Important developments in the painting of Vincent and Gauguin took place in the summer of 1888. Both artists consolidated their gains and pushed ahead, partly stimulated by a dialogue of letters, one half of which (Gauguin to Vincent) has been preserved, albeit not made readily available to scholars.<sup>18</sup> Two works by Gauguin indicate the direction he was pursuing: *Breton Women with a Calf* (Fig. 5) and *Wrestling Boys* (Fig. 6). The first, painted in the early spring of 1888 (March/April), continues the stronger contours, flattened forms and tilted, Japanese space of the Martiniquan works; the dull colours and sombre mood, however, are clearly Breton. The poses and compositional placement of the figures remain dependent on Degas' precedent, for example, *The Dance Lesson at the Opera*, 1873 (Louvre). Spatial arrangement, however, has become more radical; Gauguin seems to be reaching beyond Degas to his Japanese sources in order to create a dramatic and subjective space. He uses the reversed perspective found in many Japanese prints and holds the steeply receding pathways close to the picture plane in a V-pattern. The resulting tension helps underline the sombre, expectant mood of the image; the monstrous shadow cast by the women effectively creates a sense of mystery. (Here, even before *The Vision of the Sermon*, Gauguin exploits the 'monstrous' symbolism of Breton coifs.) Gauguin has focused the attention of the staring women, the poised dog, and the calf descending the hillside, just beyond the edge of

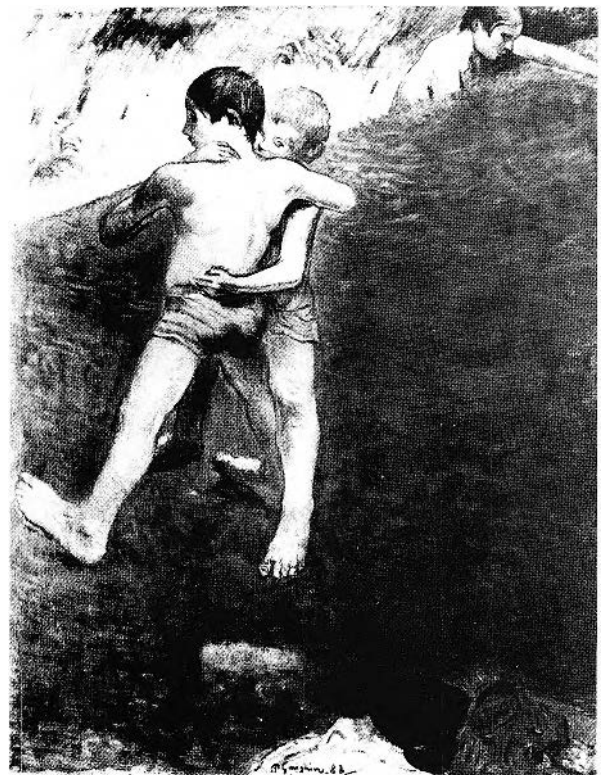
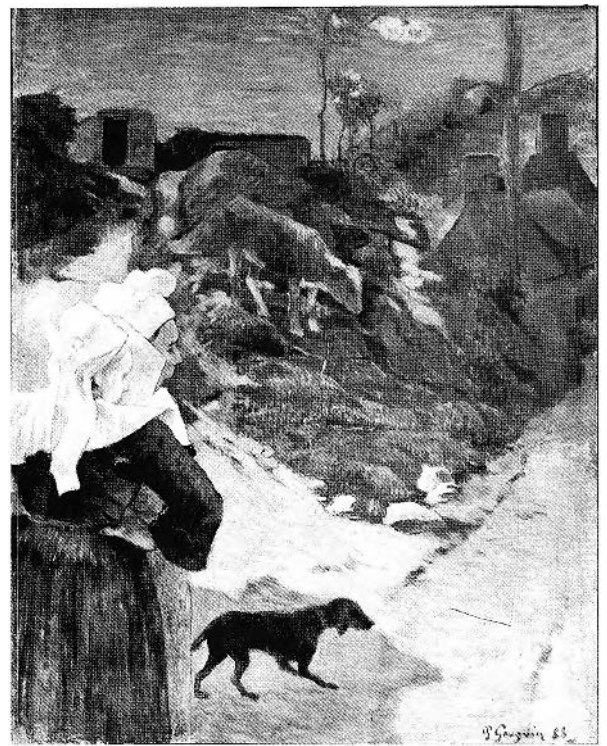


FIGURE 6. Paul Gauguin, *Wrestling Boys*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 93 × 73 cm. Switzerland, Private Collection (Photo: Fogg Art Museum).

<sup>17</sup> Welsh-Ovcharov, in *Cloisonism*, 28, identified the DuChalet Restaurant showing as a third exhibition organized in Paris by Vincent.

<sup>18</sup> I am citing from the fragments which have appeared in print so far in John Rewald's *Post-Impressionism*, and from those which were transcribed in Ziva Maisel's doctoral thesis, *Gauguin's Religious Themes* (Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 1970).



the canvas, on the invisible intruder – for such he must be – thereby quite effectively recreating the sense of apprehension that these figures seem to have felt. In Mallarmé's words he has begun to paint 'non la chose mais l'effet qu'elle produit.' (Letter to Cazalis, 1864)

The second work, *Wrestling Boys*, shows Gauguin's further assimilation of Japanese print influences; it was painted in late June or early July 1888, presumably on the basis of carefully drawn studies from the nude.<sup>19</sup> In a contemporary letter to Vincent, he wrote:

I have just finished a Breton wrestling match, which you will like. I am sure. Two kids, in blue and in vermillion shorts. Another top right, who is climbing the bank leaving the water. A green lawn (pure veronese green modulated to chrome yellow) without trace of execution like the Japanese prints. At the top, a cascade of water boiling and white, pink and rainbow coloured at the edge near the frame. At the bottom a white spot, a black hat and a blue blouse (Letter n° 6).

Continuing the development he had initiated in the autumn of 1886 and the subsequent winter with the *Four Breton Women* (Munich) and *Two Breton Bathers* (Buenos Aires), Gauguin here strove to produce a monumental, evocative image of Brittany and its primitive life style. The suggestive simplification of Japanese prints seemed particularly amenable to Gauguin's search for a primitive style. The composition of the *Wrestling Boys* is dominated by the large, radically tilted plane of the grassy bank, executed in a modulated but unified green; the resulting spatial tension reinforces the image of struggle. The reduced space, schematic composition and flat colour areas reflect study of Japanese prints: in this respect, by the spring and early summer of 1888, Gauguin had reached a stage comparable to Bernard's *Ragpickers: Iron Bridges at Asnières*, of late 1887. Gauguin has attempted to integrate into this format monumental figures by emphasizing their contours and distorting their proportions. Still indebted to Degas despite his

disclaimer in the letter to Schuffenecker, he seems also to have recalled the primitivism of Millet's peasants and the simplifications of the mural style of Puvis de Chavannes in works such as *Le Doux Pays*, 1882, which he could have seen at the Durand-Ruel retrospective of November and December 1887.<sup>20</sup>

A radical postscript to the *Wrestling Boys*, a small variant on wood panel now in a private Swiss collection (Fig. 7), was first discussed in 1955 as an important milestone in Gauguin's development by Henri Dorra, in an article in which he carefully examined and clarified the relationship of Gauguin's and Bernard's art.<sup>21</sup> This second version of the *Wrestling Boys* is flatter and more ambiguous in its handling of space than the larger version, suggesting that it postdates it, as Merete Bodelsen has suggested – by how long we do not know.<sup>22</sup> The shaded green glade fills the panel, with no horizon or flight line visible to indicate spatial recession; only the implied diagonal linking wrestling boys and vertical tree trunks suggests a sharply tilted ground plane. The greens are modulated within a narrow range: changes of hue (blue-green through yellow-green), value and intensity make the surface vibrate spatially. The paint is applied in regular strokes, vertically aligned in a technique reminiscent of Cézanne's 'constructive' stroke. These paint strokes, as well as the blue outlines of figures derived from Cézanne and Japanese prints, hold the image in the picture plane.

During the five or six months preceding Bernard's arrival in Pont-Aven, in mid August 1888, Gauguin worked to synthesize the lessons of Degas, Puvis de Chavannes, Millet, Cézanne and the Japanese print, in order to create poetic images of the rustic peasant life of Brittany. In early July he reached a turning point which he discussed in letters to Vincent van Gogh in Arles. Ziva Maisels pointed out in her 1970 thesis on *Gauguin's Religious Themes* that Vincent van Gogh was the crucial outside catalyst in this development, basing her argument on the letters from Gauguin to Vincent during that summer. Gauguin began Letter n° 6, presumably in reply to a comment by Vincent in a previous letter, by stating: 'I have just read your interesting letter and I am entirely in agreement with you that accuracy adds little of importance in art. Art is an abstraction.' Gauguin then proceeded to describe the *Wrestling Boys* (large version) (Fig. 6) as we have seen, stressing its relation to Japanese prints and clearly intending it as an example of 'abstraction' in his most

19 *Lettres*, ed. Malingue, 133 (LXVI, dated 8 July 1888). This letter does not refer to the second version of the *Wrestling Boys*, as Dorra (n. 2) and Mark Roskill, *Van Gogh, Gauguin and Impressionist Circle* (Greenwich [Conn.]: New York Graphic Society, 1970), 79 and 80, assume.

20 *Exposition de Tableaux, Pastels, Dessins par M. Puvis de Chavannes* (Galerie Durand-Ruel, Paris, 20 novembre - 20 décembre 1887), 20 (cat. 10).

21 Henri Dorra, 'Émile Bernard et Paul Gauguin,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XLV (avril 1955), 227-246.

22 Bodelsen, review of the Wildenstein-Cogniat œuvre catalogue of Gauguin's paintings, in *Burlington Magazine*, CVIII (January 1966), 31.



FIGURE 7. Paul Gauguin, *Wrestling Boys* (second version), 1888. Oil on wood panel, 33.5 × 24 cm. Switzerland. Private Collection.

recent work. Vincent's letters to Gauguin have not been preserved, but we know from his letters to Émile Bernard that this corresponds to Vincent's approach to painting that spring and summer in Arles. In April, he wrote:

I try to grasp what is essential in drawing – later I fill in the spaces which are bounded by contours – either expressed or not, but in any case *felt*, with tones of colour which are also simplified.<sup>23</sup>

In mid June he explained again to Bernard, 'the simplification of colour in the Japanese manner,' making it clear that the source of this approach to painting was the Japanese print: 'The Japanese artist ignores reflected colours and puts the flat tones side by side, with characteristic lines marking off the movements and forms.'<sup>24</sup> Gauguin's use of the term 'abstraction' evidently referred to a synthetic approach in painting, involving a simplification of forms and colours based on the model of the Japanese print, and intended to express the essential and the characteristic. Gauguin was, during the summer of 1888, part of the pictorial experimentation based on Japanese prints which had produced Cloisonism and which was further spurred by Vincent's 'École du Petit Boulevard' exhibition at the DuChalet Restaurant (Boulevard de Clichy) in November and December 1887, and by his continuing championship of the Japanese print.

The momentum of his experimentation pushed Gauguin to increasingly bold, even radi-

cal, visual solutions in the summer of 1888. It is only a slight exaggeration to suggest that Gauguin needed only to combine work such as *Breton Women with a Calf* (Fig. 5) with the *Wrestling Boys* (second version) (Fig. 7) in order to produce *The Vision of the Sermon* (Fig. 1). Stylistically he was clearly and systematically moving in that direction. All he needed was a new perspective on his subject matter and the daring to be as radical visually as were his source – the Japanese print – and his theoretical statements to Vincent. Both daring and a new perspective were provoked by the arrival of Émile Bernard in Pont-Aven, it would seem. 'The little Bernard is here and has brought interesting works from St. Briac,' Gauguin wrote to Schuffenecker on August 14. 'Here's someone not afraid of anything.'<sup>25</sup> It was at Vincent's urging that Bernard once again joined Gauguin in Pont-Aven. This time the encounter was fruitful: Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard were ready to collaborate.

Bernard's knowledge of Symbolist poetry, his ability to theorize, and his religious, almost mystical, view of Breton life must have stimulated considerable discussion which had repercussions in the actual production of paintings. Certainly discussion turned to Cloisonism and the new concept of artistic creation that it reflected. In the August 14 letter to Schuffenecker, quoted above, Gauguin repeated his belief, shared with Vincent as we have seen, that art is an abstraction. But he also added a religious analogy:

Some advice: do not copy nature too much. Art is an abstraction; extract it from nature while dreaming in front of it and think more of the creation which will be the result. That's the only way of ascending toward God, by imitating our divine Lord and creating.

In commenting on his latest works, Gauguin also pointed out that 'you will find in them a new quality or better the affirmation of my previous research, i.e. synthesis of a shape and of a colour while considering only the dominant.'<sup>26</sup> The terminology and formulation clearly reflect Cloisonist theory transmitted by Bernard.

Both Gauguin's *Vision of the Sermon* and Bernard's *Breton Women in the Meadow* (Fig. 2) are synthesized in form and colour to emphasize the essential character and feeling of the scene; in both images certain forms and colours dominate.

23 *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), III, 478 (B3).

24 *Complete Letters*, 490 (B6).

25 *Lettres*, ed. Malingue, 134 (LXVIII).

26 *Lettres*, 134-135.



The *Breton Women in the Meadow* was, according to Bernard's 1903 account in the *Mercure de France*, painted in Pont-Aven after a pardon held on 16 September. Gauguin's *Vision* was also painted in the second half of September 1888.<sup>27</sup> In the *Breton Women* Bernard has produced one of his largest and strongest works to date; such a Cloisonist demonstration piece presupposes the challenge of Gauguin's company and the example of his figure painting. Gauguin's *Vision of the Sermon* is as much indebted to Bernard's ideas as it is to the visual precedent, if such it be, of the *Breton Women in the Meadow*. Its chief Cloisonist feature, the unified red ground, parallels the green ground of the Bernard, while the bold collaging of clusters of kneeling women, seen from different viewpoints against this ground, parallels the arbitrary scale and anti-perspectival placement of the figures in Bernard's work. Both devices are anti-naturalistic and the result of a synthetic approach: the artists are working from memory, that is, using their imagination and 'thinking more of the resulting creation' than of copying nature.

There are, however, also important differences, as Henri Dorra noted in 1955. *The Vision* establishes visual and iconographic tensions which are totally absent from the *Breton Women*; as a result, Gauguin's work has a compelling, exciting quality, while Bernard's appears pleasantly decorative. The differences are, to some extent, the reflection of different temperaments. More importantly, they reflect different levels of emotional and artistic maturity. Gauguin was forty years old; Bernard, only twenty.

The *Breton Women in a Meadow* is an evocation, a memory image of a colourful Breton genre scene doubtless observed at a fair or pardon. In style and subject it is wonderfully 'modern'; it comes close to the harmony of Seurat's work in clarity and decorative order. In fact, as it has often been remarked, Bernard's *Breton Women in the Meadow* is, despite the difference in scale, a Cloisonist reply to Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the*

*Island of the Grande Jatte*. Through stylized drawing and simplified colour, Bernard emphasized the rustic grace of the Bretonnes; probably he intended a contrast between their timeless beauty and the rather plain, even awkward, appearance of the modern dress of the 'tourists' present in the painting. Such is the extent of his symbolic use of line, form and colour; Seurat's approach in *La Grande Jatte* is very similar, even though he used a different technique. *Breton Women in a Meadow* is in no sense a religious painting, nor does it involve the use of Symbolism.<sup>28</sup>

*The Vision of the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* is primarily an image celebrating the power of Breton peasant faith, stimulated by the preaching of a sermon, to transform reality and evoke a vision, as Albert Aurier noted in 1891.<sup>29</sup> Surely an analogy with the power of the artist's imagination to create symbolic works of art is also intended: this is underlined by the personal dimension of the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel. This theme is traditionally interpreted as a parable of the testing of Jacob's faith: Maisels pointed out that Gauguin here alluded to himself as 'wrestling with his inspiration' and 'grappling with a new art'<sup>30</sup> and Mark Roskill has suggested Zola's *L'Oeuvre* (1886), much discussed among the Impressionists, as the immediate source of this romantic image of creation.<sup>31</sup> *The Vision of the Sermon* is built on a counterpoint of public and personal, religious and artistic imagery. Visually Gauguin has set up a strong tension between stylized, but still sculptural, foreground figures and the more distant field, treated as a unified area of colour with silhouetted tree and figures on it. The division of the painting into spectators and arena calls to mind, as noted by Roskill, such paintings by Degas as *Musicians in the Orchestra* (1872).<sup>32</sup> How different is Gauguin's use of the device of head and shoulders cropped by the edge of the painting and silhouetted on the field of red to Bernard's! The saturated, vibrant vermillion field advances strongly toward the viewer like luminous stained glass; it immediately establishes the visionary intensity of the image:

Yes, you are right to wish for a painting with a colour scheme suggestive of poetic ideas ... Forms and colours treated harmoniously produce poetry of themselves. Without recognizing the motif, I feel, before the painting of another painter, a sensation which leads me to a poetic state insofar as the intellectual forces of the poet emanate from it ... (Letter n° 7).

In *The Vision*, Gauguin used a Cloisonist device – a large area of luminous vermillion – to convey the poetic idea of visionary struggle at first glance,

<sup>27</sup> *Cloisonism*, 300–301, n. 6 (cat. 104).

<sup>28</sup> As MaryAnne Stevens maintains, in Royal Academy, *Post-Impressionism*, 21 and 42 (cat. 15).

<sup>29</sup> Albert Aurier, 'Le Symbolisme en peinture. Paul Gauguin,' *Mercure de France*, 11 (mars 1891), 155–56. An actual sermon preached on 5 August may have been Gauguin's starting point; see Mathew Herban III, 'The Origin of Paul Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888),' *Art Bulletin*, LIX (September 1977), 420. For critical comments on the article, see my Letter to the Editor, *Art Bulletin*, LX (June 1978), 397–98.

<sup>30</sup> Maisels, 1, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Roskill, 132.

<sup>32</sup> Roskill, 105.

before the viewer even recognized the image. Cloisonism is here used in the service of Symbolism.

Gauguin's breakthrough in *The Vision of the Sermon* was, as we have seen, indebted to Bernard's presence in Pont-Aven in several ways. It nonetheless immediately revealed the limitations of Bernard's and Anquetin's Cloisonist works as essentially formal exercises. As a stylistic experiment, based on formal experimentation without corresponding emotional content, Cloisonism proved to be shortlived, soon degenerating into decorative mannerisms. As one of several visual languages available to the Post-Impressionist or Symbolist artist, however, it did have an important rôle to play in the hands of more mature artists such as Vincent van Gogh and Gauguin. Henri Dorra has pointed out that 'the comparatively rigid *cloisonisme* of the *Vision* is but one of the aspects of Gauguin's style through 1888 and 1889.'<sup>33</sup>

Gauguin joined Vincent van Gogh in Arles on 23 October 1888. His sojourn there had been arranged as early as June; but Gauguin was unable to leave Pont-Aven until October because of ill health, financial difficulties<sup>34</sup> and, one suspects, because his Breton works were going so well in July and August. Then Bernard arrived. Finally, from 23 October to 27 December, Gauguin was able to continue the dialogue that he had begun with Vincent that summer and, although the stay in Arles ended in tragedy, a great deal was ac-

complished there. Too often the disagreements and conflict between the two artists are stressed at the expense of their mutual influence.<sup>35</sup> But the situation did not deteriorate significantly until late November; by then Gauguin had painted such important works as *Vintage at Arles* (Fig. 8) in which he responded to Vincent's impastoed technique, his poetic use of colour, and his ideas about symbolic content in a work of art. Unlike Vincent in his contemporary *Red Vineyard* (Moscow), Gauguin was not concerned with the realistic depiction of the vintage at Montmajour. Working from memory in the studio, he has included Breton women in an Arlesian setting. 'So much the worse for accuracy,' he wrote to Bernard.<sup>36</sup>

The *Vintage at Arles* was clearly intended to convey a symbolic message for it was shown at the Café Volpini 'Exhibition of the Impressionist and Synthetist Group' in 1889 with the title *Misères Humaines*. Gauguin has used a flattened, shallow space divided into bands and areas of colour; against this patterned ground were set synthetically drawn figures. Gauguin has used space,

<sup>33</sup> Dorra, 236.

<sup>34</sup> *Lettres*, ed. Malingue, 139 (LXX, probably early August) and *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, II, 605 and 607 (n° 507), 607 (n° 508), 618 (n° 513), 622-23 (n° 515), 625 (n° 517); III, 12 (n° 522), 12-13 (n° 523), 18-19 (n° 526), 27-28 (n° 532), 32-34 (n° 535), 34-35 (n° 536), 35-36 (n° 537), 39-40 (n° 538), 41-42 (n° 538a), 49 (n° 541), 56-57 (n° 543), 59-62 (n° 544), 65 and 67 (n° 545), 72 (n° 549).

<sup>35</sup> For example, in Roskill, chapter 5 and coda; for a different view, see Maisels, I, 35-37 and my *Paul Gauguin in the Context of Symbolism*, 97-109.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Rewald, *Post-Impressionism*, 252.

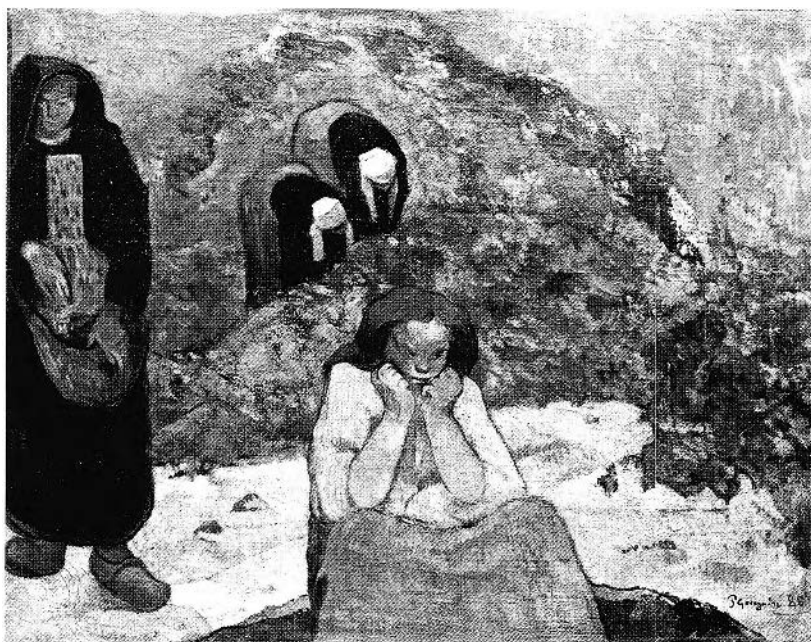


FIGURE 8. Paul Gauguin, *Vintage at Arles: Human Misery*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 73.5 × 92.5 cm. Ordurupgaard Museum, William Hansen Collection.

drawn shape, colour and texture to evoke a state of mind in a manner very reminiscent of Puvis de Chavannes (*The Prodigal Son*, 1879, Bührle Collection), as if in answer to Vincent's more turbulent handling.<sup>37</sup> Colour is not only used to establish a subtle mood of rêverie and latent sensuality, but also involves quite specific symbolism. The red hair and green-tinged face of the central figure give her a demonic, tempted cast which is reinforced by her pose and slanting eyes, derived from a figure in Delacroix's *Faust and Mephistopheles Galloping on the Night of the Witches' Sabbath* (1828), first used by Gauguin as an image of temptation in the *Still Life with Fruit* (Moscow), dedicated to Charles Laval. His fellow artists would likely have recognized the reference to Delacroix's famous lithographic series, though the public might not have. This reference apart, however, Gauguin is using a generally accessible vocabulary of poses and colour symbolism (e.g. black) as Andersen and Maisels have shown.<sup>38</sup> In fact Gauguin was searching for just such a conventional sign language with which to visualize the content of his painting.

Gauguin explained the meaning of the work in a long letter to Schuffenecker, of which only a fragment has been preserved:

Do you see in the vintage a poor, desolate woman? She does not lack intelligence, grace, all the gifts of nature. She is a woman. Her two hands propping up her chin, she thinks but little; however, she feels the consolation of this earth (nothing but this earth) which the sun floods in the vineyards with its red triangle. And a woman dressed in black passes, looking at her like a sister.<sup>39</sup>

The young girl is tempted by 'the consolation of this earth' and oppressed by the human misery (*misères humaines*) of the cycle of life and hard labour of which she will become part by accepting earthly consolation. This is expressed by her

pose: she sits alone in the foreground of the painting, having turned her back on the hard labour in the vineyard, and, as we have seen, she is characterized as a figure being tempted. 'Consolation on this earth' is symbolized in the painting by the 'red triangle' of sunlight flooding the vineyards, strongly suggestive of female sexuality. In a lithograph of 1889, Gauguin specifically linked the girl with sexual temptation.<sup>40</sup> The commentary on the situation in *Vintage at Arles* is provided by the older woman dressed in black. She looks at the adolescent girl in sympathy ('like a sister'), because she has gone through the same life situations and knows the outcome of such 'consolation on this earth.'

Gauguin concluded his commentary to Schuffenecker by noting:

To explain in painting is not the same thing as to describe. That's why I prefer suggestive colour and form, and in composition the parable rather than the painted novel ... if I evoke in you a feeling of the ideal [l'au-delà], it's perhaps because of the magnetic current of thought ... which one senses. In painting the hand holding a handkerchief can express the feeling which animates it ... Since all is convention: in French, sadness and happiness are words which express a state of mind; black [expresses] mourning; why should we not arrive at the creation of varied harmonies corresponding to our states of mind?<sup>41</sup>

Gauguin here suggests that colour harmonies could become a language of the emotions, conventional signs just like the words we use to designate our feelings. There was already some precedent for a rudimentary colour symbolism in social conventions, such as the expression of sorrow and death by black. Vincent van Gogh had earlier discussed the symbolic use of colour: both the *Night Café* (New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery) and the *Bedroom* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh), completed in September and October respectively, just before Gauguin's arrival, are excellent examples of its use. I prefer to discuss *The Sower* (Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller) from late June or early July 1888, because of the central rôle of this image in Vincent's *œuvre*.

Yesterday and today I worked on *The Sower* ... The sky is yellow and green, the ground violet and orange ... This is the point. *The Christ in the Boat* by Eugène Delacroix and Millet's *Sower* are absolutely different in execution. *The Christ in the Boat* ... I am speaking of the sketch in blue and green with touches of violet, red, and a little citron yellow for the nimbus, the halo – speaks a symbolic language through colour alone. Millet's *Sower* is a colourless gray, like Israel's pictures. Now, could you paint the *Sower* in colour, with a

37 Gauguin would have seen *The Prodigal Son* at Durand-Ruel's exhibition of Puvis de Chavannes (novembre - décembre 1887). According to a letter to Bernard, he saw Arles in terms of a 'colourful version of Puvis mixed with Japanese prints' (*Lettres*, ed. Malingue, 151, lxxv, probably late October).

38 Wayne Andersen, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 82-83, and Maisels, 1, 35-37.

39 A. Alexandre, *Paul Gauguin, sa vie et le sens de son œuvre* (Paris: Bernheim Jeune, 1930), 48 and 50; there erroneously quoted as part of a letter of 1885 to Schuffenecker. Henri Dorra, in his doctoral thesis *The Style of Paul Gauguin from 1871 to 1891* (Cambridge [Mass.], Harvard University, 1954), 121, n. 24, first identified the misplaced fragment.

40 *Misères humaines*, 1889 (Guérin 5). Henri Dorra's interpretation in 'Gauguin's Dramatic Arles Themes,' *Art Journal*, xxxviii (Fall 1978), 12-17, of the central figure as suffering remorse for a crime of infanticide is not plausible.

41 Alexandre, 48 and 50.

simultaneous contrast of, for instance, yellow and violet (like the Apollo ceiling of Delacroix ...)?)<sup>42</sup>

The symbolism of yellow, associated with the sun's life-giving rays, is particularly striking here. It is, however, not only Vincent's 'symbolic' use of colour that is relevant to Gauguin's developing symbolism. Vincent uses an archetypal figure to help express his meaning: *The Sower* is taken from peasant life, but his pivotal rôle in peasant life, and the cycle of seasons, joined to his obvious evangelical heritage in the New Testament parables of Christ, make him a very symbolic figure. We should not be surprised, therefore, that Gauguin compares his own approach in *Vintage at Arles* to the parable. He has taken a peasant figure and emphasized the archetypal nature of her situation, her activity. Already, in 1886, Gauguin began to interpret Breton peasant scenes in a manner designed to bring out the archetypal nature of the activities represented; yet Gauguin did not employ religious subject matter or references to add symbolic meaning to his works until *The Vision of the Sermon*, where the religious image remains subordinate. *The Vintage* contains no religious analogies, but it is a direct ancestor of the *Breton Eve* (San Antonio, Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute). Only after his stay in Arles did Gauguin use religious symbols to convey meaning in his paintings: in the *Eve* and in the *Yellow Christ* and the *Breton Calvary*. There can be no doubt that discussion with Vincent and the example of his works from 1888 were, as Maisels has suggested, critical.<sup>43</sup>

The *Yellow Christ* (Buffalo, Albright-Knox Art Gallery) and the *Breton Calvary* (Fig. 9) both employ religious images in the form of local works of art, to interpret Breton life. In each case a dominant colour harmony is established on the basis of the local colour of the sculpture; the colour, once heightened, acts like a musical key to the works. In November 1889, some months after their completion, Gauguin explained (and defended) these works to Theo van Gogh, his dealer:

At the same time as I try to express a general state [of mind] rather than a single thought, I [also wish] to make the eye of another feel an indefinite, infinite impression. To suggest suffering does not mean to specify which kind of suffering ... as in the painting of three women in stone holding Christ. Brittany, naïve superstition and desolation. The hill is guarded by a line of cows placed like a calvary [procession]. I have tried in this painting to make everything express belief, passive suffering, primitive religious style and vast nature with its cry (Letter n° 27).

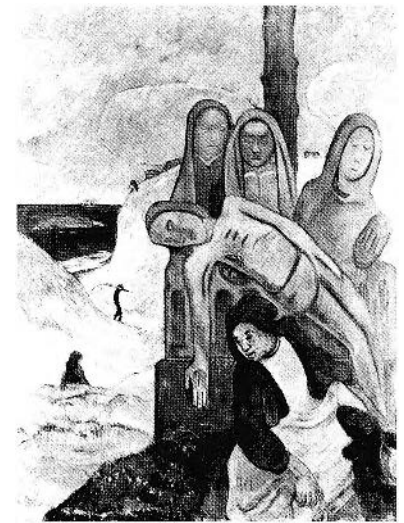


FIGURE 9. Paul Gauguin, *Breton Calvary*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 92 × 73 cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts.

The *Breton Calvary* is dominated by the sombre blue-green tones of the calvary; the generalized mood of suffering conveyed by the colour harmony is paralleled by the imagery. Gauguin only hints at its presence, presumably because it should have been obvious to the viewer and because to insist upon it would be to make the painting too literary, too specific.

On a calling card left with Albert Aurier, who was preparing an article on Gauguin as Symbolist for the *Mercure de France*, Gauguin noted the 'passive sheep,' reinforcing his earlier comments to Theo about passive suffering and naïve religious beliefs. The *Breton Calvary* continues Gauguin's use of the peasant woman and her rôle in the life cycle as archetypal image. By establishing a clear visual parallel among the passive sheep, the woman rocking a cradle,<sup>44</sup> and the dead Christ from the calvary, Gauguin expresses the role of religion in Breton society and also comments on that life. Self-sacrifice has become a necessary part of the life cycle in this harsh world.<sup>45</sup> The women in the *Yellow Christ* can, in similar fashion, be identified with the sacrifice of Christ; the

42 *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, II, 597 (n° 503).

43 Maisels, I, 21 ff. and 35 ff.

44 That she is rocking a cradle, attached to the rope she holds in her hand, becomes clear when we compare the *Breton Calvary* with Vincent's *La Berceuse* (Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller), as Roskill, 197, has noted.

45 This concept and its relation to Gauguin's self-image is discussed in detail in my 'Paul Gauguin's Self-Portraits and The Ovir: The Image of The Artist, Eve and the Fatal Woman,' *Art Quarterly*, n.s. II (Spring 1979), 172-190.

yellow-green wooden Christ appears like a personification of the essential law of Breton nature. In order for life to go on the individual must sacrifice himself; the life cycle is a cycle of life, death and rebirth. *The Loss of Virginity* (Norfolk, The Chrysler Museum) is Gauguin's major statement of this mythic view of life. It was painted during the winter of 1890-91, at the height of Gauguin's involvement with Parisian Symbolist circles. Wayne Andersen has discussed Gauguin's use of the folklore and supersition of Brittany to express the life cycle in this work<sup>46</sup>; further discussion of this imagery is beyond the scope of this paper.

In concluding the present study, it will be useful to clarify and distinguish the critical terms Cloisonism, Synthetism and Symbolism. Cloisonism was a visual formula derived from Japanese prints, stained glass and popular prints. If Cloisonism is to retain a clear, useful meaning it must be used as Dujardin and Anquetin used it, to refer to such works as *Street, Five O'Clock in the Evening* and to Bernard's *The Ragpickers: Iron Bridges at Asnières*. Cloisonism was a limited formal experiment in the production of an anti-naturalistic art based on a symbolic, i.e., better put, iconic or abstract use of visual elements. As such, it appears as part of a widespread reaction

to naturalism, including Impressionism, in the mid 1880s. In this Post-Impressionist reaction we can single out an important Synthetist stream. The Synthetist approach is a *method*, rather than a unique style or technique. As a method of creating art, it implies simplification and concentration in the interest of characterization and of conveying the essentials clearly and forcefully. Of course the term implies opposition to a purely analytical approach and to illusionism in the resulting image. Synthesis can be achieved by employing several differing styles or techniques, including those of Impressionism, Pointillism, Cloisonism – even Cézanne's brushstroke. Synthesis was a term favoured by the Neo-Impressionists, by Gauguin and by Bernard. Bernard's and Gauguin's works range well beyond the stylistic limits of Cloisonism: their approach is best called synthetist. Symbolism, as a general term, is best reserved to describe a late 19th-century mode of art in which form and imagery are fused in a way which transforms the artist's personal experience into universal meaning. Symbolism presupposes a synthetist approach, but it cannot be identified with one style, whether it be Cloisonism, Pointillism or late Impressionism. Visually, the Symbolist image tends to be highly synthesized, i.e. close to decorative abstraction; in content, it tends to be generalized so as to approach the ideal universal symbolism of myth.<sup>47</sup> Under these conditions a close parallelism between the 'musical' and the 'literary' aspects of the image, to use Gauguin's terminology of 1893 (discussing *Manao Tupapau*),<sup>48</sup> becomes possible in a Symbolist painting. This is what we have noted in Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*, *Breton Calvary*, and *Loss of Virginity*.

---

#### RÉSUMÉ

---

*La Vision après le sermon: lutte de Jacob avec l'Ange* est une œuvre charnière dans l'œuvre de Paul Gauguin. Dans ce chef-d'œuvre de septembre 1888, l'artiste adopte un langage anti-naturaliste et produit un manifeste du symbolisme en peinture. Des études récentes ont à nouveau soulevé le problème du rôle de Gauguin dans la genèse du symbolisme en peinture et en particulier de ses rapports avec Émile Bernard et le Cloisonnisme. *La Vision* témoigne d'une connaissance des expériences cloisonnistes de Bernard et de Louis Anquetin. Gauguin était déjà familier avec ces expériences dès l'hiver de 1887-1888. Dans les cinq ou six mois qui précèdent l'arrivée de Bernard à Pont-Aven (mi-août 1888), Gauguin chercha à synthétiser les leçons de Degas, Puvis de Chavannes, Millet, Cézanne et des gravures japonaises, pour créer des images poétiques de la vie rustique des paysans bretons. Déjà au début de juillet, son art évoluait systématiquement dans le sens de *la Vision*. Mais Gauguin avait besoin d'une perspective nouvelle de son sujet et d'audace pour être aussi radical que l'étaient ses sources, les gravures japonaises. Dans *la Vision après le Sermon*, il franchit cette étape, sans doute sous l'influence directe d'Émile Bernard. Néanmoins, le Cloisonnisme comme tel s'est avéré de courte durée, dégénérant vite en un maniérisme décoratif. Dans sa grande œuvre symboliste, *Vendanges à Arles: misères humaines*, Gauguin a cherché à employer un langage fait de signes conventionnels pour rendre son sujet. Comme van Gogh, il croyait que les harmonies de couleurs pouvaient constituer un langage pour exprimer des émotions. Son approche symboliste a atteint son sommet dans *Le Christ jaune* et *Le Calvaire breton*. Cette étude définit en conclusion, en les distinguant clairement, le Cloisonnisme, le Synthétisme et le Symbolisme.

---