Vincent van Gogh and Puvis de Chavannes

By Richard Wattenmaker

In 1975, the exhibition Puvis de Chavannes and the Modern Tradition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (See Vie des Arts, XX, 81, Winter 1975/76) explored the relationship of Vincent van Gogh to Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and sought to identify the role Puvis played in Vincent's art. Although the tendency is almost irresistible to overstate such relationships because Vincent's letters refer (repeatedly and in great detail) to Puvis, this fact does not correlate directly with the pictorial effects produced in Vincent's work. Nevertheless, pertinent new documentation has come to light since 1975, hence an update of this little-known aspect of Vincent's art at the very end of his remarkable career.

Two months before his death on July 29, 1890, van Gogh wrote: I believe in the possibility that a later generation will be, and will go on being, concerned with the interesting research on the subject of colours and modern sentiment along the same lines as, and of equal value to, those of Delacroix, of Puvis de Chavannes — and that impressionism will be their source.

This statement, which we shall later place in its actual chronological context, accurately predicts the future path along which modern art developed — a profound and prophetic insight. Puvis and Delacroix: a revolution — a return — a renewal. Modern art is thus provided with the young intellectually-independent artists of the 1880s with access to the old masters — Poussin, the Florentines, Greece — by showing them a method of absorbing them.

In the midst of this ferment Vincent arrived in Paris in 1886. The younger generation — Gauguin, Seurat, Lautrec, Signac, Denis, Bernard, Sérusier, et al. — were making a heroic attempt to integrate the discoveries of impressionism, color and light as they affect color relationships, into a renewed vision. This concentrated empirical and quasi-scientific research was an important revolution in the history of art. Fundamental to their comprehension of the great impressionist achievement was the awareness and acceptance by Vincent's generation of the decorative aspect of impressionism and its means. Vincent discerned the principles accepted by these men, that is, that the direction in which the art of painting was moving was toward simplification, a simplification which meant many things: brightness and intensity of color, prominently sinuous linear rhythms as an underlying structural motif, the two-dimensional compositional bonding of the picture surface. The concomitant of this was the
pronounced patterning achieved by such a varied network. Scale was important and with it a marked tendency toward flatness or at least reduction of perspective depth. Decoration or decorative illustration on a large scale meant Puvis de Chavannes, and the younger painters, including Vincent, paid careful attention to his work. In August, 1888, Vincent wrote from Arles to Emile Bernard: We artists, who love order and symmetry, isolate ourselves and are working to define only one thing. Puvis knows this all right, and when he, so just and wise — forgetting his Elysian fields — was so good as to descend amiably into the intimacy of our time, he painted a fine portrait: the serene old man in the clear light of his blue interior, reading a novel with a yellow cover — beside him a glass of water with a water-color brush in it, a fashionable lady, as the de Concourtes have depicted them. Vincent saw the Portrait of Eugène Benoît, dated 1882, when he visited the exhibition of Puvis' work at Durand-Ruel in Paris at the end of 1887, together with Bernard. The exhibition included 64 paintings, pastels and also photographs of Puvis' large mural decorations. Two years later In December, 1889, the image still fresh, Vincent recalls the portrait to Theo from Saint Rémy: "The Portrait of a Man by Puvis de Chavannes has always remained the ideal in figure to me, an old man reading a yellow novel, and beside him a rose and some water-color brushes in a glass of water ..." Vincent was aware of Seurat's interest in Puvis, of Lautrec's large scale "Le Bois Sacré", Parodie du Panneau de Puvis de Chavannes du Salon de 1884 (1884), and of Puvis' influence on the group of artists who visited the 1887 exhibition and during the period of his stay with Vincent. In Arles in late 1888 he refers specifically to Puvis in his letters to Bernard. Indeed, he wrote to Bernard at the same time Vincent was corresponding with him: "Vincent looks to Daumier here, whereas I, on the other hand, see the influence of colorful Puvis and Japanese art..." Although other painters in the 19th century had utilized the frieze-like disposition of figures around a surface, Puvis' significant part of his influence was determined by how artists identified with his distinctive formats, that striking appealing novelty to which they were attracted. In the 1880s with Seurat and Lautrec de Chavannes conspicuously as a container for their aesthetic forms as did Puvis and Courbet, Daumier and Monticelli, for example, employed it from time to time — no one employed the long horizontal formats as conspicuously as a container for their aesthetic forms as did Puvis de Chavannes. Beginning in the 1860s Puvis repeatedly adopted the frieze format as a basic geometric dimension for the complex processes and interlocking groups of figures in broad (but not deep) simplification. The interpenetrating shapes, especially in the lower right corner of the composition, a direct reference to the serene old man in the clear light of his blue interior, underscored by the word LABOR on the large spouted water jug in the lower right corner of the composition, a direct reference to the clear light of his blue interior. Although other painters in the 19th century had utilized the frieze-like disposition of figures around a surface, Puvis' significant part of his influence was determined by how artists identified with his distinctive formats, that striking appealing novelty to which they were attracted. In the 1880s with Seurat and Lautrec de Chavannes conspicuously as a container for their aesthetic forms as did Puvis and Courbet, Daumier and Monticelli, for example, employed it from time to time — no one employed the long horizontal formats as conspicuously as a container for their aesthetic forms as did Puvis de Chavannes. The precise meaning is not clear, but we may surmise from the friendly tone as well as the contents, that at least by that time Theo was already buying or was seeking to acquire or take on consignment works by Puvis to sell. Assuming that Theo accepted the invitation, he would have been received by Puvis only three weeks before the critical moment when Vincent arrived in Paris on May 17, 1890. He stayed three days with his brother and sister-in-law before continuing to Auvers-sur-Oise where he had been invited by Dr. Paul Gachet. During the brief stopover in Paris Vincent wrote to Theo with the news that he was deeply impressed by Puvis de Chavannes' mural Inter Artes et Naturam, destined for Rouen. We know from the frequent and wholly laudatory references in the correspondence, commencing immediately after his arrival in Auvers on May 21, that Puvis was much on Vincent's mind. There can be little doubt that discussion with his brother took place as to the meaning and character of Puvis' mural, perhaps in the light of the drawing mentioned by Puvis to Theo and surely there was a description of the visit to Puvis' nearby studio. Shortly after Vincent's arrival at Auvers he wrote to Theo and Jo: This is an almost lush country, just at the moment when a new society is developing in the old, is not at all unpleasing; there is so much well-being in the air, I see, or think I see in it a quiet like a Puvis de Chavannes, no factories, but lovely well-kept greenery in abundance. A short time after, van Gogh wrote a long letter to J. J. Isaacsen (1859-1943), a Dutch journalist-art critic and painter: Back in Paris I read the continuation of your articles on impressionism... I believe in the possibility that a later generation will be, and will go on being, concerned with the interesting research on the subject of colors and modern sentiment alongside impressionism as the starting point of equal concern, I mean impressionism to, those of Delacroix, of Puvis de Chavannes — and that impressionism will be their source... I begin to feel more and more that one may lock upon Puvis de Chavannes as having the same importance as Delacroix, at least that he is on a par with the fellows whose style constitutes a "hitherto, but no further," comforting for everyone famous... Among other pictures his canvas, now at the Champ-de-Mars, seems to contain an allusion to an equivalence, strange and providential meeting of very far-off antiquities and crude modernity: His canvases of the last few years are vogue, more prophetic if possible than even Delacroix, before them one feels an emotion as if one were present at a new art of painting, but it was too much for me, and it is...
These descriptions lead us to note that Dr. Gachet, a homeopathic specialist in nervous disorders, had written his medical thesis on the subject of melancholy. While the portrait of Arlesienne I of 1894 is surely an alternate source for the pose of Dr. Gachet.

Further, Gachet's passion for etching and his northern heritage lead naturally to Rembrandt. For the fact that Vincent had also consistently maintained his interest in Rembrandt throughout this period there is abundant data. At the end of March, 1890, Theo sent Vincent reproductions of Rembrandt etchings and in early May, Vincent wrote to Theo to thank him for these, mentioning several of his favorites. He also speaks of Charles Blanc, author of a catalogue raisonné of the etchings published in 1880. He then continues that he wants to work from Rembrandt. A print such as Old Woman Sleeping of c. 1635-37 represents the type of portrait which may well have been on Vincent's mind as an artist and sophisticated model decided on a pose for the portrait. So, to conclude our examination of sources and traits, we take the viewer toward a conflation or sequence of sources, including the Portrait of Eugène Benoît by Puvir de Chavannes, rather than one exclusive point of departure. This assimilative process is a notable example of Vincent's range of knowledge, visual retention and the complexity of his inquiring mind and penetrating vision.

In conclusion, we may say that Vincent van Gogh limited his borrowings from other artists but, at the same time, he closely studied other aspects of the older artist's images, formats, and pictorial means. Perhaps it would be reasonable to speculate that he chose to postpone or that he simply never lived to take it any further. Whether Vincent would have experimented with the grand scale as his friends did, Signac in 1894 and Gauguin in 1897, is moot. All we can say with assurance is that Puvir de Chavannes exerted a presence during the richest four years of Vincent's career.

2. Complete Letters, III, 94.
4. Ibid., no. 140 (original in French)
7. Ibid., no. 140 (original in French)
8. Complete Letters, III, 94.
9. Ibid., no. 814a.
10. Ibid., no. 82.
12. Ibid., no. 822 (original in French)
13. Ibid., no. 823 (original in French)
14. Ibid., no. 824 (original in French)
15. Ibid., no. 825 (original in French)
17. Ibid., no. 643.
18. Ibid., no. 643.