Vincent van Gogh and Puvis de Chavannes

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produced a striking effect. People were flabbergasted to realize that his “drips” really had no thickness. In short, he challenged action painting by stopping movement, to produce only the illusion of it. This lyrical painting was therefore thoughtful, deliberate, ordered, whence arises the impression of a powerful force producing an implosion. All the energy of the picture came from the interior, and not from a stirring of the surface in an unbridled motion.

This work of organization would become very obvious in the whole series of his op or hardedge pictures, made with a stencil and showing a wholly electrical luminosity. Hurtubise would pursue this research very far on the contrasting light of coloured pigments, because, the artist would say, “I was not able to have electric paint and showing a wholly electrical luminosity. Hurtubise would pursue an implosion. All the energy of the picture came from the interior, ordered, whence arises the impression of a powerful force producing that his “drips” really had no thickness. In short, he challenged produced a striking effect. People were flabbergasted to realize among the painters of his generation, because Hurtubise is a relent­

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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 indeed: 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 and a water-color brush in it. Huge fashionable lady, as the de Concourts 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 84 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 frieze format as a basic geometric dimension for the complex pictorial devices, color, shallow space, matte tonality, borrowed in turn from Seurat and Paul Signac. Of course, the artist had long been associated with qualities that struck appealing novelty and were highly significant part of his influence was determined by how artists identified with his distinctive formats, that striking appealing novelty underscored by the word LABOR on the large spouted water jug which is seen to the right of the anvil, a motif very similar in conception to that one day he or someone else will explain the olive trees of the South, he the Seer . . . I feel impatient when confronted with such nature, for my Northern brains were oppressed by a nightmare in those peaceful spots, as I felt that one ought to do better things with the foliage. Yet I did not want to leave things alone entirely, without making an effort, but it is restricted to the expression of those two things — the cypresses — the olive trees — let others who are better and more powerful than I reveal their symbolic language . . . Therefore I assure you that I cannot think of Puvis de Chavannes without having a presentiment that one day he or someone else will explain the olive tree to us. For myself I can see from afar the possibility of a new art of painting, but it is not for me, and it is with pleasure that I return to the North. . . . until now no one has painted the real Southern Frenchman for us. But when Chavannes or someone else shows us that human being, we shall be reminded of those words, ancient but with a blissfully new significance, Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure of heart. . . . However deeply convinced we may be of Rembrandt's vision, yet we must ask ourselves: And did Raphael have this in mind, and Michelangelo and da Vinci? This I do not know, but I believe that Giotto, who was less of a heathen, felt it more deeply — that great sufferer, who remains as familiar to us as a contemporary.

Van Gogh was not content to let the image of Puvis' work pass and early in June he followed this letter with another written to his younger sister, Wilhelmina, in which he dwells at length on Inter Artes et Naturam:

There is a superb picture by Puvis de Chavannes at the exhibition. The figures of the persons are dressed in bright colors, and one cannot tell whether they are costumes of today or on the other hand clothing of antiquity — no one could say, if one dressed in simple long robes, are talking together, and on the other side men with the air of artists; in the middle of the picture, a woman with her child on her arm is picking a flower off an apple tree in bloom. One figure is forget-me-not blue, another bright
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 this likeness of the Arlésienne f. 151 of 1889 is surely an alternate source for the pose of Dr. Gachet.

Further, Gachet’s passion for etching and his northern heritage led 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 artist and sophisticated model decided on a pose for the portrait. So, to complete our speculative chain concerning sources, we turn toward a conflation or sequence of sources, including the Portrait of Eugène Benoît by Puvis 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 absorption of the French master’s work to the same time that 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 Puvis de Chavannes exerted a presence during the richest four years of Vincent’s career, as he was especially taken into account in the ultimate period of Vincent’s brief but intense creative life.