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 the impression of a powerful force producing an implosion, in contrast to the illusion of movement of the paint, 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, in geometrical forms that can appear serial, but which are most of the time subtly away, especially in oblique compositions, so that the eye that seeks a security in the repetitive movement is overcome by vertigo before each of the tiny variations. The ultimate outcome of this research would be the production of pictures of neon tubes because, the artist would say, "I was not able to have electric paint in a pot."

Later, his pictures broke up and were organized in a much more problematical manner: he painted even on interchangeable squares with which he could set up an arrangement according to his fancy.

Then took place the slow return in 1974-1975 to a more organic lyrical expression, and which could even recall of some serigraphs of 1961. However, Hurtubise does not repeat himself. In his recent creations he uses all the virtuosity, all the strength, all the knowledge accumulated during the course of his work, the most profound among the painters of his generation, because Hurtubise is a relentless man. He has an ardent relationship with painting. He told me, "I paint ten or twelve hours a day . . . often from four o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the afternoon, seven days a week."

Furthermore, the large canvases accumulated in his immense studio at Terrebonne bear witness to this. From May 29 to July 15 he exhibited in Vancouver sixty-seven recent pictures, most of which are of large size, and which we shall eventually have the pleasure of seeing at the Musée d'Art Contemporain after they have been shown at several Canadian museums. This follows another exhibition comprising fourteen pictures and two serigraphs that took place at Long Beach, at the University of California, from February 9 to March 15, 1981, an exhibition that will be continued in the cultural centres of Long Beach, and which was held at the Nova Scotia Art Museum in Halifax at the beginning of 1982. All of this recent production is to be found in Hurtubise's great neo-lyrical trajectory. An excellent colourist, in some paintings he uses varied chromatic scales, in which pink, green and yellow predominate, in which also big trails of black move. In some cases, charcoal and pastel delineate the forms or else emphasize the movements of a sphere, as in one of his last pictures, in a rare kind of flight; but form is the background that the artist brings out in jagged masses and flashing lines, thanks to a process that reverses the nature of the stencil.

Nevertheless, one would believe one is finally in the presence of a purely action, organic production, of a spontaneous writing, briefly, of signs that result from a temporary stop in the flow of the action. One would imagine oneself with dilated eye, paintbrush extended, haphazardly squirting the lines and splashes of his action painting in an agitation similar to a dance of exorcism. But this is not at all what it is. Once again, if this lyricism is born of a passion, it is that of order or of a risk that arises from a technique forcing the artist to compose his picture, to correct it at need, to produce it according to more profound impulses.

This is a binary process, let us say black and red, Hurtubise begins by painting an entirely black background. Then he adds a coat of rubber glue, and in this skin he carves a jagged shape. If he next covers the whole with a layer of red acrylic, upon tearing away the glue that masked the black background, he will obtain a black surface, a drawing, a graphic, an effect of action painting, and even what could resemble drippings. His multicoloured pictures are evidently of a more complex production. At need, he will accentuate some contours with charcoal, pastel or even acrylic. This is somewhat the technique of serigraphy, with its masking, use of glue and multiple layers. Moreover, Hurtubise excels in this art: his silk-screen art is important and noteworthy. And yet, in front of his big pictures one has rather the impression that the effects were obtained by a direct intervention by the artist, as if he were drawing right on the skin of the picture.

Doubling these technical details add nothing to the strictly pictorial value of Jacques Hurtubise's works. However, they help to understand why they give us this impression of great freedom allied to great mastery. Even if his recent production establishes a break in the ensemble of his work, it is also the result of all that went before, particularly of his slow passage from the op and hardedge periods, as also large black pictures based on the explosion of a series of squares, which produced luminous chinks. As well, the square is a shape of which Hurtubise is especially fond, even in his recent canvases which can be made up of a juxtaposition of this geometrical form, which sometimes gives the impression of a certain symmetry in an asymmetrical composition. The square also accentuates the dynamism of the movement in the canvases of the more explosive graphism.

With this art where chromatic stipludication is blended with spontaneous and thoughtful writing, we come back to values of space, masses and volumes, but also to fulgurations that make light burst as in so many natural phenomena (bare or leafy branches, ripples on the water, exposed roots, ice jams) the contemplation of which inspires a kind of delicious joy.

Yet Jacques Hurtubise's painting is not descriptive but evocative; it remains, like all his work, a purely plastic manifestation.

(Translated by Mildred Grand)

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, 51, 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 overstress such relationships because Vincent's letters refer (repeatedly and in great detail) to Puvis, this fact does not correlate with our knowledge of Vincent's art. 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 relationship that Vincent knew very well. Vincent himself, in his letters, has already acknowledged this. The equation of Puvis and Delacroix which he suggests in this equation we might point out that Delacroix was an idol among the impressionist and post-impressionist painters and for Vincent to equate Puvis with Delacroix in his thoughts about the future of painting compels scrutiny. Puvis, like Delacroix, successfully sought in the past means of opening new directions. He simplified, he flattened, he discarded essentials without losing sight of the classical, and he was able to transform the classical which had become discredited by the academics. Puvis thus provided 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 affected 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 discovered 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 are artists, who love color and symmetry, isolation and flatness, 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 amiable 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 with a water-color brush in it, a smiling and fashionable lady, as the de Goncourt 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 figure to me, an old man reading a yellow novel, and besides 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 simplified landscapes which characterize his most typical work. A short time after, van Gogh wrote a long letter to J. J. Isaacson (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 along these lines, that Puvis' work on a par with the works 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," comporting for evermore a Dutchman and friend of Theo van Gogh since October, 1888, was a colleague of Gauguin, who painted an adjacent mural, Joan of Arc in the cathedral of Rouen, and who, in 1888, 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 across a surfaced wall, the significant part of his influence was determined by how artists identified with his distinctive formats, that striking appealing novelty which characterized his most typical work. A virtually unknown example is Jakob Meyer de Haan's two figures, painted for the inn of a Dutchman for us. But when Chavannes or someone else remains as familiar to us as a contemporary.' I do not know, but I believe that Giotto, who was less of a Christian, and who are better and more powerful than I reveal their hearts in a glass of water...
citrine yellow, another of a delicate pink color, another white, another velvety. Underneath their feet, a meadow dotted with little white flowers, a sombre tree, and in the distance a white town and a river. All humanity, all nature simplified, but as they might be if they are not like that.

This description does not tell you anything — but when one sees the picture, when one looks at it for a long time, one gets the feeling of being present at a rebirth, total but benevolent, of all the things one should have believed in, should have wished for — a strange and happy meeting of very distant antiquities and crude modernity.16

The impact of the Puvis was so strong that van Gogh repeated several phrases from his letter to Isaacson. He also included a sketch (Fig. 6) of the mural from memory. Vincent not only refers to Puvis' painting and his experience before it in the letters of his last months, but at least one concrete effect on his work itself can be determined. At Auvers Vincent painted a succession of horizontal format compositions which are also referred to in his letters and which signify an exploration of an aspect of his reaction to Inter Artes et Naturam.17 The influence of Pissarro for horizontal Dessus-de-contre, composition of 1872, the Four Seasons, which Theo had in his possession at the time of Vincent's visit, is also important to note.

Picking up the thread of van Gogh's correspondence of June-July 1888, we find him referring on the 24th of June to horizontal formats and in the following letter he wrote to his brother:

I have painted Mlle Gachet's portrait. . . .

I have noticed that this canvas goes very well with another horizontal one of wheat, as one canvas is vertical and in pink tones, the other pale green and greenish yellow, the complementary of pink; but we are still far from the time when people will understand the curious relationship between one transparent element of nature and another, of which all the same explain each other and enhance each other. But some certainly feel it, and that's something.

And then there is this improvement, that in clothes you can see combinations of very pretty light colors; if you could make the people you see walking past pose and do their portraits, it would be as pretty as any period whatever in their lives, and then I think the impression in nature is actually all the grace of a picture by Puvis, between art and nature.

"Between art and nature" sums up van Gogh's feeling that somehow in Inter Artes et Naturam Puvis had begun to accomplish the task of stopping people in the normal course of their activity and making of them a new artistic entity — retaining the direct impression of nature but imbuing yet with a new and personal vision.

On June 30th, Vincent sent his brother and sister-in-law a rôle of his day:

Dr. Price has shown that Puvis' Portrait of Eugène Benon, so feelingly described in Vincent's earlier letters, played a rôle in determining the pose and character of his two painted portraits of Dr. Paul Gachet. While there is reason to accept this proposal and force to the hypothesis that a reverberation or recollection of Benon is found in Gachet, I should like to propose and examine several alternative or at least additional sources of inspiration for these two variations on the same theme.

Dr. Gachet, born in Lille in 1828, was a somewhat bizarre individual, a man who had befriended many artists including Daumier, Manet, Monticelli, Cézanne and Pissarro and who was himself an amateur etcher. He was of Flemish descent, signing his name Benoît, Marie van Gogh was painting the doctor's portrait which he describes in letters to his sister Wilhelmina, to his brother Theo and to Gauguin. On June 3rd or 4th, to Theo: "I am working at his portrait. . . . He has now got so far as to understand the last portrait of the Arlésienne . . . ." Vincent had painted four versions of L'Arlésienne (Madame Ginoux), several versions of which he had been studying in Paris at Theo's. This composition, dating from January-February of 1888, was inspired by a drawing of the same subject by Daumier, a drawing which van Gogh, as one of his Night Café of the same time. Not only is the motif a familiar one in his own work but in the very same letter to his sister about Puvis' Inter Artes et Naturam (also early 3rd-8th June from Auvers) Vincent made a sketch of L'Arlésienne for her and wrote as follows: "I painted his [Gachet's] portrait the other day and I am also going to paint a portrait of his daughter . . . . [Theo and Jo] have a new puppy. A girl. . . . My friend Dr. Gachet is decidedly enthusiastic about the latter portrait of the Arlésienne . . . ."

He then goes on to describe the sketch of the version of the Arlésienne in Theo's possession and there follows a description of the Puv's mural quoted above.

So the illustrative facts of the pose itself and the intertwined narration on the Arlésienne are also a significant factor in the portrait situation of Dr. Gachet. Still further sources are hinted at: In his sub­

6. See Welsh-Ovcharov, op. cit., pp. 66-67, nos. 41 and 42 (III, p. 73). Note especially that the original oil sketch is entitled "LABORIUS".
8. Ibid., no. 514a.
9. Ibid., no. 222.
11. See Welsh-Ovcharov, op. cit., p. 144, nos. 126 and 63, pp. 350 and 210-211. The de Haan mural, although known from a photograph of the interior of the inn, is discussed in depth for the first time by Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov. See also Roger Mesley, "Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism", review, etudes d'art, 1981, no. 141.
12. See d'Argencourt, op. cit., p. 66, nos. 41 and 42 (III, p. 73). Note especially that the original oil sketch is entitled "LABORIUS".
14. Ibid., no. 638.
15. Ibid., no. 645.
16. Ibid., no. 222 (original in French).
17. Ibid., no. 223 (original in French).
18. See A. M. Hind, A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings, New York, 1907, no. 129, p. 76. See also A. Bredius, Rembrandt (rev. by H. Gerson), New York, 1969, no. 41 (Cincinnati, Taft Museum) formerly attributed to Rembrandt and which this essay takes to be a possible generalization of the Portrait of Dr. Paul Gachet, including additional sources.