INTRODUCTION: THE TERM 'POST-IMPRESSIONISM'

One of the perennial challenges faced by the exhibition organiser, and one that is all too often left until last, is the necessity to come up with a title for an exhibition. To please the public and arrest the attention of the press, this title must be catchy, yet it must also be truthful and descriptive. The term Post-Impressionism was coined at just one of these awkward moments. In late 1910 Roger Fry, known in Britain as an inspiring lecturer on art and in America as a curator specialising in the purchase of Renaissance art for New York's Metropolitan Museum, put together at short notice an impressive if somewhat heterogeneous selection of recent French art from the stock of a number of Parisian dealers. Initially he thought the term 'expressionist' might serve his purpose, and alert the uninitiated viewer to what was new and characteristic about the different works. However, he ultimately settled for the more non-committal, portmanteau term Post-Impressionist.

Fry's exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, held at the Grafton Galleries from November 1910 to January 1911, was diverse and uneven in the extreme. Alongside works by Edouard Manet, it included large groups of paintings by Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, and came right up to the present with a sprinkling of works by living artists, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and their followers. Fry was later apologetic about the term, admitting that it was arrived at for want of anything better, as these things so often are. Later we shall examine in more detail the circumstances of the term's first usage and the consequences of the Grafton

Galleries exhibition for the unsuspecting Edwardian art world. For present purposes however it is important to consider the meaning and usefulness of the term.

One can see why it was desirable, from Fry's point of view and for the sake of historical comprehensibility, to draft in a catch-all label. The need had already been felt in France, where, in 1895, the alert young artist and theorist Maurice Denis pointed out that his own and his friends' work (by which he meant fellow Nabis, Emile Bernard and Louis Anquetin, Gauguin and the Pont-Aven group and others) had so far given rise to a confusing succession of conflicting style labels: 'cloisonnists, synthetists, neo-traditionists, ideaists, symbolists and deformers'. These had been put forward by critics of the late 1880s and early 1890s such as Edouard Dujardin, Gustave Geffroy, Albert Aurier and Maurice Denis himself. Since 1886 the term Neo-Impressionist had also been in use, attached by Félix Fénéon to the group led by Seurat. Post-Impressionism was the first term to encompass this whole generation of innovators, and as such it has always had in-built advantages and disadvantages.

It posits the belief that the revolution in style ushered in by the Impressionists in the 1870s was both so distinctive and so profound that all advanced art that came after it was irretrievably altered; in short, artists of the 'Post'-Impressionist generation (broadly speaking, advanced artists who began working and exhibiting in France around or after 1885–6), could not but respond to Impressionism and, in the absence of another clear-cut unifying characteristic, this irrefutable fact was enough somehow to define them. Non-committal and vague as this may seem, it emerged in Fry's subsequent writings that he intended to define something more distinctive, dynamic and revolutionary. The Post-Impressionists, for him, were a generation of artists who consciously emphasised and exploited the formal elements inherent in the medium – in the case of painting, the decorative elements of colour, line and composition – as the means whereby to convey or express emotion. At the same time, the Post-Impressionists avoided or played down the elements that they considered inessential to picture-making – three-dimensional illusionism (a laborious technique that was nothing but a distraction and could safely now be considered the domain of photography) and narrative content (which was the the domain of literature). Indeed Fry argued that the choice of subject matter in painting was largely irrelevant to its aesthetic value. In 1912, in the catalogue of his *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, Fry was to state unambiguously where this new tendency came from: in France, at least, all Post-Impressionist developments derived in some measure 'from the great originator of the whole idea, Cézanne.'

One of the drawbacks of the term is that it imposes retrospectively a unity of aim upon the Impressionists and on those who reacted against them when in reality little or no unity existed. There was always, for instance, the awkward disparity between landscape and figure Impressionism, as typified respectively by Monet and Degas. Moreover the exclusive emphasis on the legacy of the Impressionists as against other

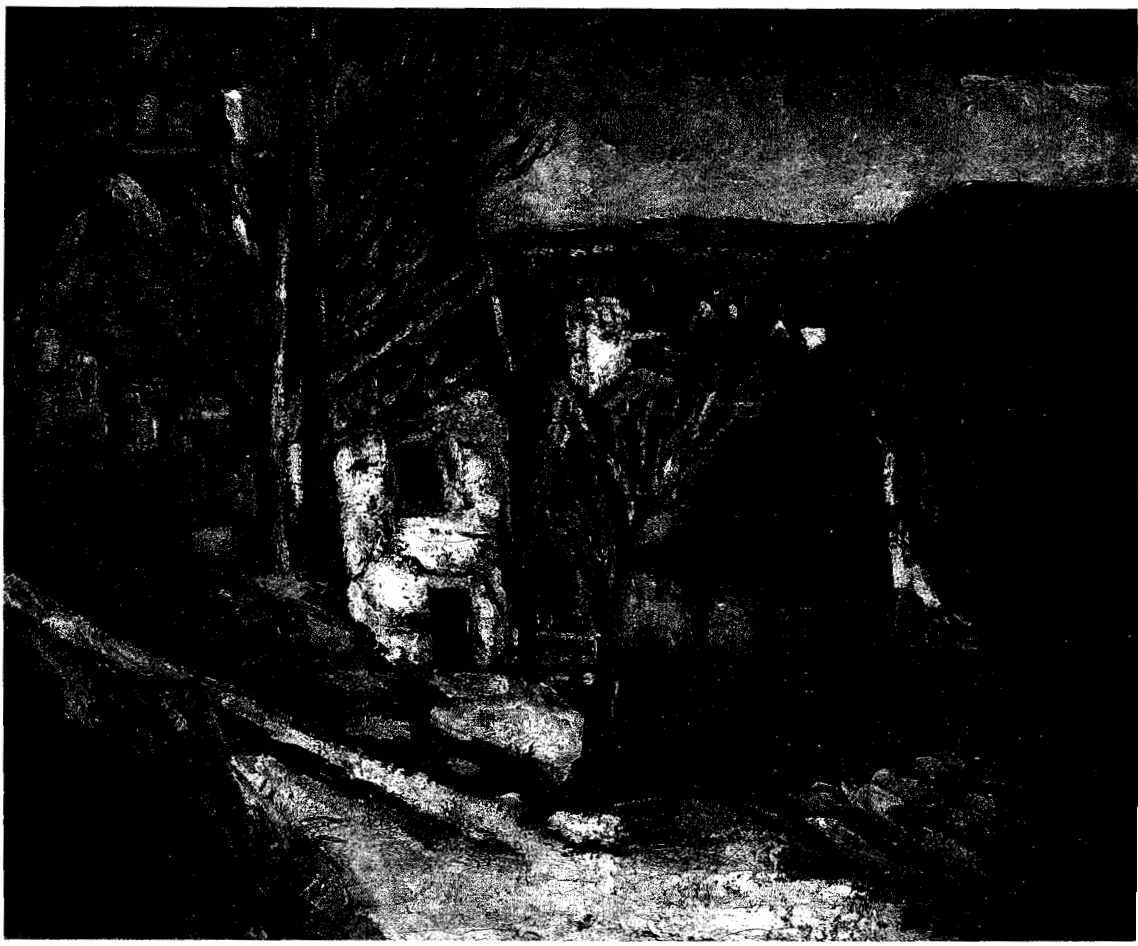
tendencies over-simplifies and distorts the story. Reading art criticism of the late 1880s and 1890s, one realises that it was in fact only a handful of critics who were able to discern a growing dissatisfaction with the Impressionist idea, and not a serious concerted reaction against it. Common aims can, however, be found when looking at separate, more closely-knit sub-groups, the Pont-Aven artists, the Nabis or the Neo-Impressionists. There was a degree of cross-over between the members of these sub-groups, and their immediate followers the Fauves borrowed and freely combined elements of stylistic innovation from them all. Perhaps partly due to the Fauves' random pillaging, it was possible after an interval of twenty-five years for an alert observer such as Roger Fry to discern more general factors linking this remarkable generation of innovators. Paradoxically, once Fry's ideas became institutionalised in museum displays around the world, viewers became so accustomed to detecting kinship at the stylistic level between van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne, in their choice of palette, their emphasis on bold, unvariegated colour and simplified and stylised linear forms, that art historians had to struggle to present their works in other ways.

Another problem with the term, given the evident historical motivation for its coining, is that no clear chronological starting point can be given to Post-Impressionism. In this respect it is distinct from Impressionism, whose public existence dates from the first group exhibition in 1874. Fry himself left the question unresolved by including in his Grafton Galleries exhibition paintings by Cézanne such as the *House of the Hanged Man* (fig.1) which had been shown at the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874! The well-informed francophile Walter Sickert was quick to point out this slip in his review, describing Fry's show to the readers of the *Fortnightly Review* in January 1911 as 'an earth-shaking jumble ... where everything was booked through, like the baggage of a travelling company, as "Post-Impressionism", including Cézanne who was, if anything, rather Pre-Impressionist'. Nor should one forget that several of the leading Impressionists, Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas and Claude Monet, had not reached the end of their careers by 1910.

1
Paul Cézanne
House of the Hanged Man 1873
Oil on canvas
55 × 66 (21¾ × 26)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

A further problem arises if one accepts that what Fry was describing was a loss of faith in the Impressionist aesthetic, that Post-Impressionism could be defined as 'anti-Impressionism' to borrow the words of Clive Bell. Such a loss of faith certainly did come about in certain cases, gradually in Gauguin's for instance, suddenly and violently in the case of twentieth-century artists such as Maurice de Vlaminck, André Derain or Duncan Grant. But the same cannot be said of Cézanne, the supposed originator of the movement. However persuasively critics might insist upon those formal aspects of Cézanne's work that separate him from the Impressionists (the concern for solid form, for tactile values, for representing not sunlight itself but its effects, through a painterly equivalence, colour), the fact remains that the only common aim to which Cézanne subscribed was that of Impressionism. To the end of his career he clung obstinately to the notion of the Impressionist 'sensation' and to the practice of working in front of nature.

The reason that, despite all these shortcomings, the term Post-Impressionist remains in currency today must be that it answered and continues to answer a need. Thanks to the rumpus caused by Fry's 1910 exhibition, the term was used repeatedly in the British press between 1910 and 1913 when the last of three exhibitions which used the term in its title, *Post-Impressionists and Futurists,* was held. This repeated use of the new buzz word was sufficient to imprint it on the critics' and public consciousness, so that it survived the hiatus of the First World War when much cultural



activity came to a halt. Tellingly, in the 1920s, when new companion guides to the modern collections of the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery were published, written by their respective directors Sir Charles Holmes and J. B. Manson (each practising painters on the fringes of the modern movement), we find the term Post-Impressionist being introduced, albeit sparingly and cautiously. When the new Museum of Modern Art in New York opened in 1929, its inaugural exhibition was devoted to the four great masters of Post-Impressionism (*Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*) whose works now fetched dizzying prices on the international art market. The curators had accepted

the idea that this rupture in the history of nineteenth-century art marked the true beginning of modern art, whose paternity had been widely attributed to Cézanne.

Over time it has become expedient to recast and broaden the term Post-Impressionist to include artists who were not in the least disenchanted with Impressionism, but who wished to take it further than the instigators of the group had planned or envisaged. Only such a definition encompasses the pioneering developments introduced by Seurat and the Divisionists in the later 1880s and 1890s, whose work Fry later regretted he had largely ignored in 1910, and Bonnard's and Vuillard's evolution after 1900, when they consciously set about picking over and trying on a number of Impressionism's cast-offs.

In France, understandably, there was greater resistance to the term Post-Impressionism. Tristan Klingsor adopted it in his book *La Peinture*, published in 1921, but Maurice Denis, one of the most influential theorists to analyse the broad stylistic changes Fry's term described, only began to use the term towards the end of his life. Pierre Francastel, when writing his study *Impressionisme* in 1934, implicitly rejected it by making a strong case for conceiving of Impressionism under a much broader rubric, as part of a continuum, a new vision or world view, not a technical formula or a style through which one could pass. On the other hand the crucial importance of the phenomenon it describes was acknowledged when René Huyghe wrote in 1949: 'If modern art exists, much more than to the Impressionists it owes its existence to that team of great creators who succeeded them around 1885, who reacted against them, who conceived a pictorial vision that was new and unexampled for centuries.' Today, thanks to the influence of John Rewald's seminal scholarly study of 1956, the label Post-Impressionist has been widely accepted and is frequently encountered in France's major museums, performing its most useful, but essentially limited function: that of a signpost.

So there are really two Post-Impressionist stories to be told. The first and most complex is how artists in the 1880s and 1890s worked over the possibilities opened up by Impressionism and broke free of its limitations and orthodoxies. This was a Europe-wide phenomenon but space only permits consideration of the key developments in the orbit of Paris, in particular of the group initiatives, and of the individuals who succeeded in funnelling group aspirations. The second concerns the critical assimilation of those developments and the more localised story, to be dealt with summarily in the final chapter, of how Fry's identifying and implanting the concept of 'Post-Impressionism' gave new impetus to art practice and collecting in Britain and further afield, a story told singularly well by the collections of the Tate Gallery.

I

The 1880s

Seeds of Dissent

When can we first trace dissatisfactions with Impressionism and attempts to take the idea one stage further? Conventionally historians cite the Impressionists' eighth exhibition, held from 15 May to 15 June 1886, as a significant moment of change. It proved to be the last group show although that eventuality could scarcely have been imagined by the participants. But well before that date, and in diverse places, one can detect signs of dissent from the core Impressionist idea.

There were, for instance, the continuing caveats of the critics of Impressionism, convinced from the outset that however fresh and welcome this art of rapid, momentary sensation might be, offering a change from the outworn routines and sombre tonalities of academic painting, it was incomplete in itself, only a prelude to a more substantial form of art yet to come. There was Cézanne's abstention after 1877 from further Impressionist exhibitions, stung by the critics' incomprehension of his efforts. He was aware too of his lack of fit with this art of spontaneity but incompletion, an unease signalled by his ponderous use in titles of such qualifications as *Study from Nature* or *Head of a Man; Study* (see fig.2). At the same time he was convinced of the value of his ultimate goal and determined to pursue it without compromise. There were the doubts expressed severally by others of the group, particularly those who admired Cézanne – Pissarro first, then Renoir, then Gauguin – about Impressionism's lack of a solid methodology.

All three sought to strengthen their technique by concentrating on drawing, turning to the least Impressionist of the Impressionists, Edgar Degas, for advice and example, as well as to the earlier traditions of draughtsmanship to which he was heir (see Pissarro's *The Pork Butcher*, fig.3). Finally, in 1886, there was Seurat's demonstration of what could be achieved if rigorous principles were applied to the Impressionist palette and brushstroke as a corrective to its hitherto intuitive, arbitrary and unscientific practice.

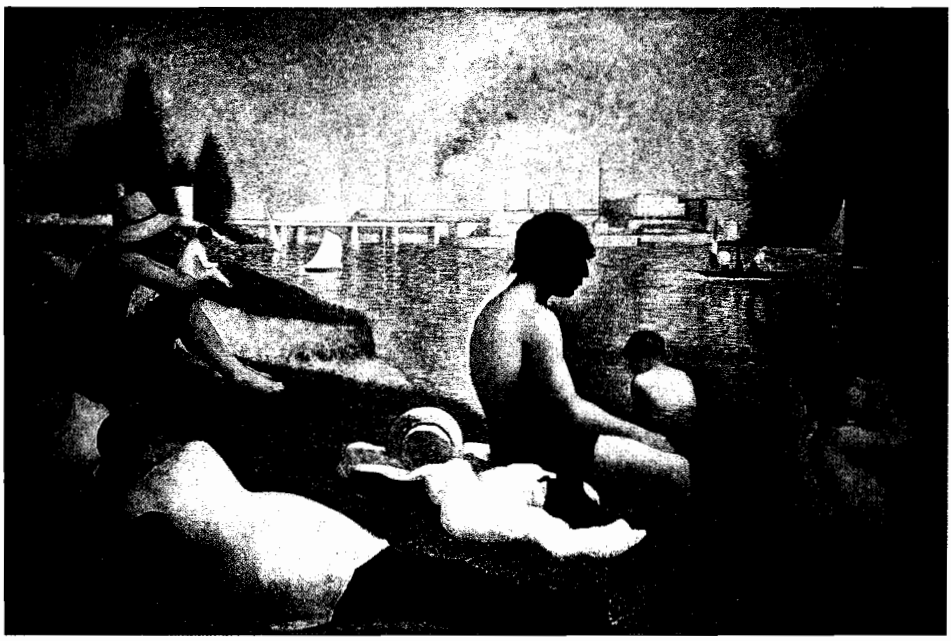
From the inaugural exhibition in 1874 the Impressionist group had never comprised a fixed membership. New recruits appeared at each of the subsequent group exhibitions, some of whom as quickly disappeared again, whilst others remained. Each such accommodation caused the Impressionist idea to shift imperceptibly. There were the clumsy and awkward technicians like Armand Guillaumin, Cézanne himself, and Paul Gauguin, introduced by Pissarro in the late 1870s, who were eager to learn from their colleagues' example, and emulated their ability to analyse and capture, through broken touches of colour, the way shifting light transformed landscape. Through their laborious efforts they gained the acceptance of their peers. Several other newcomers – Gustave Caillebotte, Federico Zandomeneghi, Mary Cassatt, Jean-Louis Forain, Jean-François Raffaëlli – owed their introductions to Degas, whose interests were not so much in *plein-air* (open air) painting as in the chance visual effects thrown up by modern urban life. Degas interpreted his subjects through arresting methods of drawing and composition developed in a complex studio practice. By 1881 the presence of these outsiders was felt to have created an imbalance in the group, particularly as Monet, Sisley and Renoir had chosen that year to abstain in order to exhibit once again at the official Salon.

The decision to exclude Raffaëlli the following year, which in turn influenced the return of the three major landscapists, resulted in a seventh exhibition in 1882 that was far closer to the profile of the original. This was important as it allowed critics the chance to re-examine the core concept of Impressionism (already the term was being used loosely of any bright-toned painting of modern subject) and see how it had developed over the eight years of its existence. For Jacques de Biez, writing for the journal *Paris*, the continuing aptness of the Impressionist label was all too apparent, since the faults that critics had homed in on in 1874 remained uncorrected: 'Impressionists they wished to appear, impressionists they have remained. Of course we are all impressionists in a large acceptance of the word. The impression has a place in all the arts, since it is the first stirring ... One does not become an artist except on condition that one goes back over that initial impression, in order to give it an appropriate development. It's for refusing

to have that patience and for stopping obstinately at the point where that reflective development should begin that the independent artists are "impressionists".'

The Turning of the Tide

Exceptionally, the next group Impressionist show did not take place for another four years by which time the cultural climate had significantly changed. Two unrelated events in 1884 can be seen as symptomatic. One was the founding of the *Revue Indépendante*, which offered an outlet to young writers and critics associated with the latest developments in literature as it evolved from naturalism towards symbolism. The second was the simultaneous establishment of the new Salon des Indépendants, whose jury-free exhibiting forum offered a brighter future for experimental artists. Its founders had undoubtedly been inspired by the Impressionists' example, but their society's membership was far less exclusive, welcoming a broad range of styles, from the darkly mysterious, fantasy images of Odilon Redon (himself a founder member) to the naturalist landscapes of artists such as Dubois-Pillet. Georges Seurat had caused a considerable stir at the first *Indépendants* exhibition in 1884 with *The Bathers, Asnières* (fig.4), having just suffered the indignity of its rejection by the official Salon.



2
Paul Cézanne
Portrait of Victor Chocquet (Exh. 1877 as *Head of a Man; Study*) 1876–7
Oil on canvas
45.7 × 36.8
(18 × 14½)
Private Collection

3
Camille Pissarro
The Pork Butcher 1883
Oil on canvas
65.1 × 54.3
(25¾ × 21½)
Tate Gallery

4
Georges Seurat
The Bathers, Asnières 1883–4, retouched *c.*1887
Oil on canvas
201 × 301.5
(79¼ × 118¾)
National Gallery, London

When Seurat was invited to exhibit at the Impressionists' eighth exhibition in 1886, Pissarro had argued for his inclusion more out of homage to what he had already achieved than as a device for drawing

promising young talent into the fold. But in a sense Pissarro was taking a calculated risk and not all the old Impressionists supported the invitation. Gauguin was one who welcomed the new blood; as a relative newcomer himself he had been anxious to avert the danger of the group's disintegration at the start of the decade, feeling its future was being jeopardised by a new strategy of the Impressionists' dealer, Durand-Ruel, to promote individual talent in a series of one-man shows at the expense of group unity. Thus Gauguin was optimistic about the 1886 exhibition: 'we are going to hold a very comprehensive exhibition', he explained to his wife, 'with some talented new Impressionists. For some years now all the schools and studios have been preoccupied by it, and it is reckoned this exhibition will create quite a stir, perhaps it will prove the turning of the tide.'

5
Edgar Degas
Woman in a Tub *c.*1883
Pastel on paper
70 × 70 (27½ × 27½)
Tate Gallery

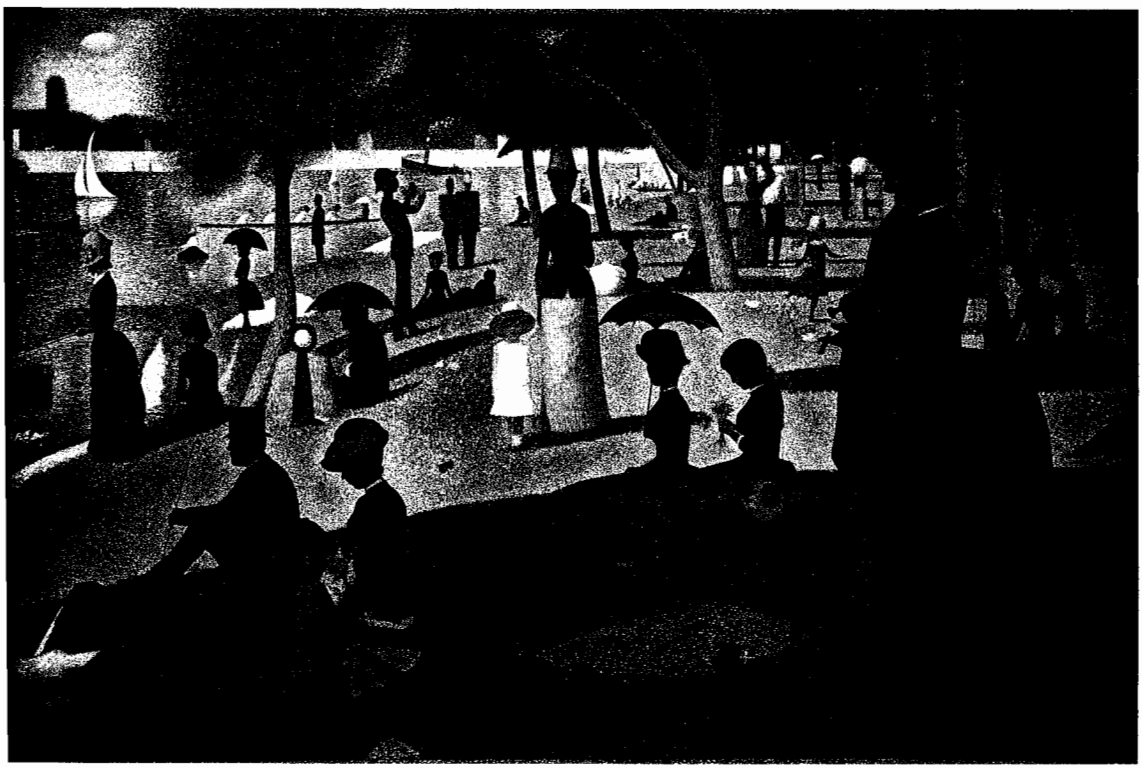
6
Georges Seurat
Le Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp 1885
Oil on canvas
64.8 × 81.6
(25½ × 32)
Tate Gallery

7
Georges Seurat
Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, 1884 1884–5
Oil on canvas
205.7 × 305.7
(81 × 120½)
Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Collection

Seurat was the first new recruit to Impressionism to arrive fully armed with a highly developed style, with nothing left to learn and with no intention of allowing himself to be deflected from his chosen path. The concentrated group of pastels by Degas for instance, which showed women in the tub and performing their toilette (fig.5), one of the aspects of the exhibition which impressed the critics and was grudgingly admired by Gauguin, left no mark on Seurat at all. He had already knowingly adopted those aspects of Impressionism he found useful (the broken brushwork and prismatic palette) and grafted them on to a style derived from a thoroughly academic training. For Seurat had undergone the kind of Ecole des Beaux-Arts training, along the guidelines laid down by academician Charles Blanc, that had been purposely avoided by the less rigorously taught Impressionists, and the group of paintings he showed, which included *Le Bec du Hoc, Grandcamp* and *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, 1884* (figs.6, 7), could certainly not be faulted on grounds of slapdash technique or incompletion. These works were methodical, luminous, skilfully crafted. Here was a highly accomplished young master who already had a following in fellow *Indépendant* Paul Signac and in the Pissarros, father and son.

Whereas Raffaëlli had been an unacceptable addition (he was judged to be a self-serving opportunist exploiting the Impressionists' contacts and publicity machinery), Seurat's intervention proved in a sense more silently

disruptive, effectively causing the capitulation of any further effort at Impressionist group unity and bringing about the coining of a new style label, Neo-Impressionism. Within a year Seurat had sufficient followers to form a separate splinter group, as the Divisionist method he had patented (nicknamed 'pointillism' by the critics) became a manner that spread through the studios like a rash. Seurat's style, informed by Impressionist subject matter and colour, but a severe corrective to it, marked a decisive new step towards the creation of an art of permanence from the raw material of Impressionism.



The Image of the Artist: Seurat the Systems Man

The strange dignity and formality that, in 1886, struck many critics looking at Seurat's enormous painting of Sunday strollers on the island of La Grande Jatte seem to have been equally characteristic of the man. Art was a serious business for Seurat, the son of a nouveau riche legal official, and to achieve results commensurate with its morally uplifting purpose required a faultless technical mastery. The cool methodicalness of his approach was to occasion some unflattering nicknames from fellow artists: Degas and Gauguin respectively dubbed him the 'notary' and the 'chemist'. Seurat saw no place for overly personal expression through choice of subject or

intuitive quirks of individual handling. Only rarely did he attempt anything new in terms of subject; his strategy was to enlarge to a monumental scale and make a synthesis of the kind of modern subjects explored earlier by Monet, Renoir and Caillebotte, subjects Henry James had described in 1876 as 'crudely chosen' and 'loosely treated'. Following the Impressionists' lead, many artists in the 1880s took their easels down to the suburban quays and tackled motifs from the riverside, particularly favouring the burgeoning western suburbs of Asnières or Clichy: one thinks of Guillaumin, Gauguin, van Gogh, Bernard, and Signac whose *Gasometers at Clichy* (fig.8) was one of the three fully Divisionist canvases he exhibited in 1886. It was a demonstration of commitment to uncompromising truth and modernity. The suburbs had also proved fruitful terrain for naturalist writers and

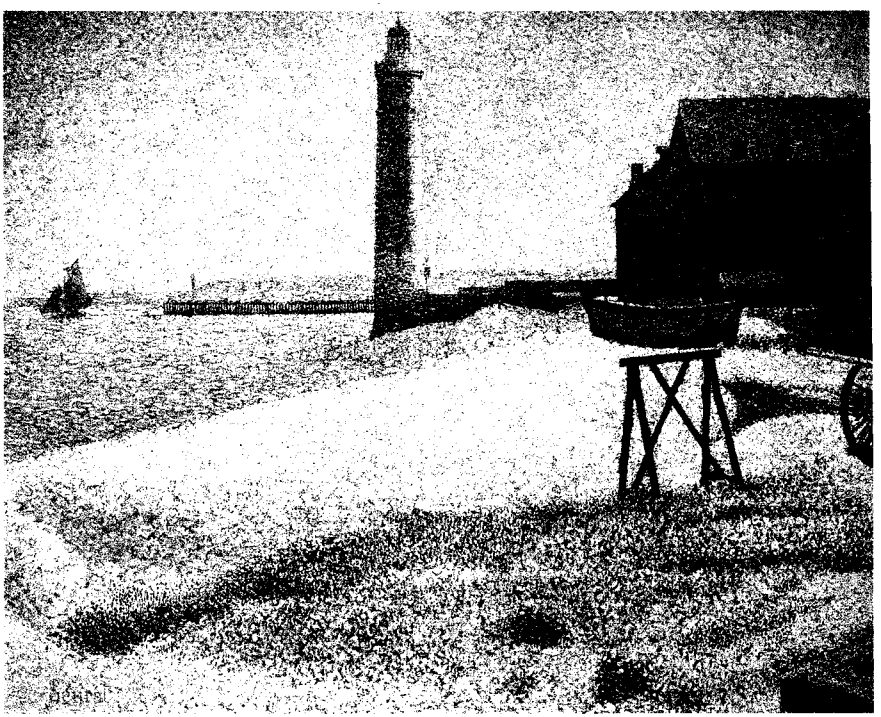
8
Paul Signac
Gasometers at Clichy
1886
Oil on canvas
65 × 81 (25⅝ × 32)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Felton Bequest 1948

9
Georges Seurat
The Lighthouse at Honfleur 1886
Oil on canvas
66.7 × 81.9
(26¼ × 32¼)
National Gallery of Art, Washington

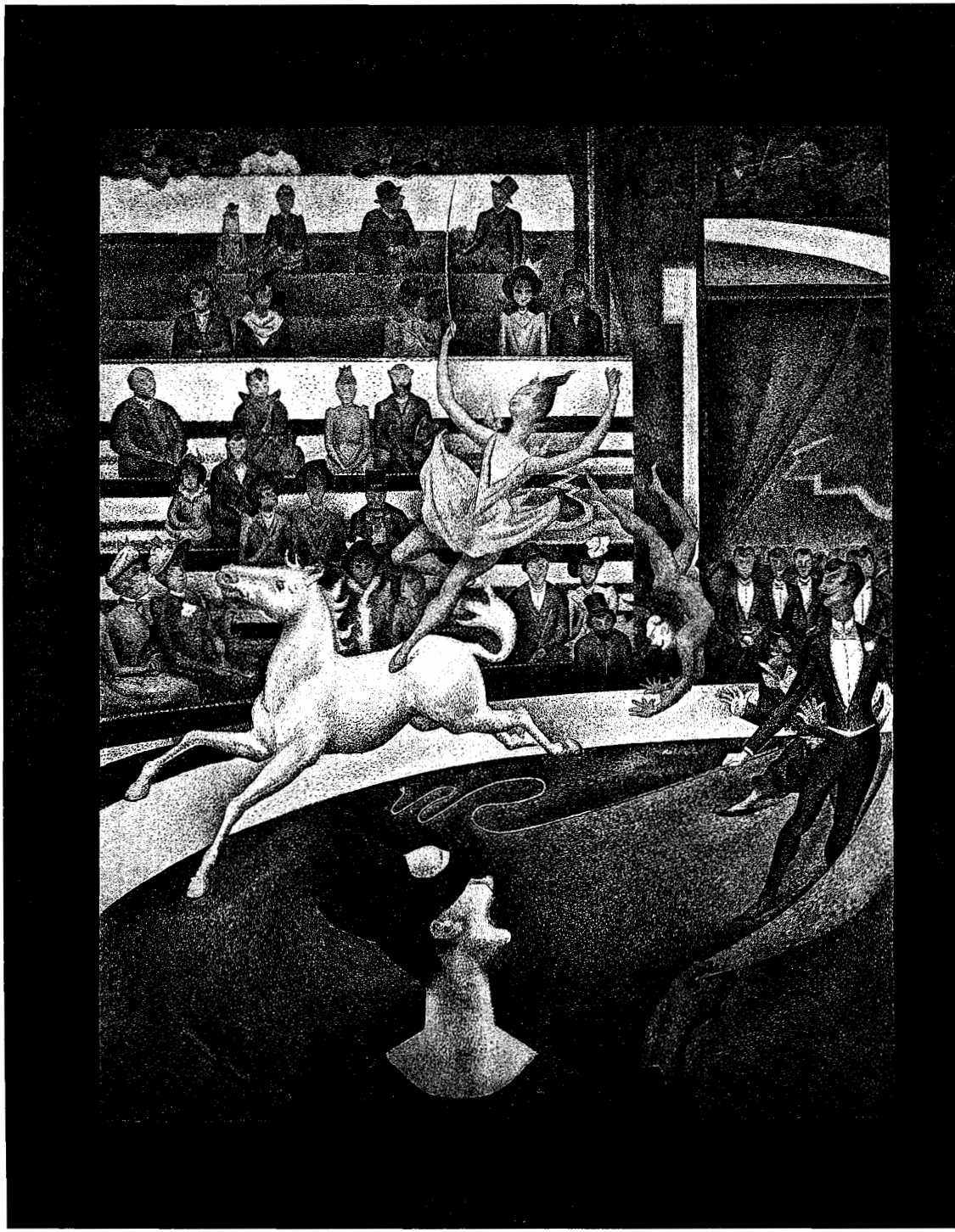
poets, intrigued both by their odd, uneasy blend of new building with natural beauty and their mixed, shifting population of workers and leisure-seekers.

When he embarked on the first of his major figure subjects in 1883–4, Seurat had already, by dint of repeated studies of the human figure, developed an unusually schematic, anonymous form of characterisation, devoid of all extraneous detail. His sophisticated drawings in soft conte crayon on grainy paper exploited the medium for the velvety textures and negative/positive effects it could yield. His painting manner had evolved from the chopped straw handling of *The Bathers, Asnières* to the dotting technique used first in the summer of 1885 in *Le Bec du Hoc* and subsequently, albeit only in the final paint layer, in *La Grande Jatte*. The resulting synthesis

was similar to the drawings – a distancing of the subject achieved by the contrasting means of covering the canvas surface with an even spread of regular dashes or dots. The colours had to be applied in carefully measured-out doses of complementary hues so as to achieve maximum light-scattering luminosity. The theory behind this colour division owed something to Delacroix's methods, which Seurat understood to have been informed by the chemist Eugène Chevreul's prescriptions for simultaneous contrasts of colour as applied in the manufacture of tapestry, and something to the optical experiments of the American chemist Ogden Rood. The Divisionist procedure demanded almost mechanical patience and self-denial; there was clearly no possibility of achieving satisfactory, balanced results except in the studio.



For a few years in the late 1880s Pissarro was drawn to emulate Seurat's example, partly because Divisionism seemed the logical outcome of his own struggle to reach unity and the solution to his increasingly congested brushwork, and partly as a reaction to an excessively personal, romantic tendency he saw creeping into Monet and Renoir's recent works done in the open air, such as the group of seascapes Monet painted at Etretat. Seurat too must have had Monet in mind when he set himself the task of painting seascapes from the Normandy cliffs – *Le Bec du Hoc* being the first of a long series – and it is difficult not to see an element of competitiveness in the attempt. Summer after summer he was to return to the Channel coast (though rarely to the same spot twice), methodically pursuing his mysterious goal. What that goal was we have only the resulting pictures to



convey, for Seurat was extremely reticent about his aims. Clearly the power and romantic changeability of the sea did not hold the same fascination for Seurat that it did for Monet: his seascapes are invariably serene and still. Indeed the very oddness of the motifs he selected suggests that what held his attention was creating a pictorial harmony from this stillness and from the contrasts between nature and artifice, a theme equally identifiable in Seurat's large-scale figure pictures. In *The Lighthouse at Honfleur* (fig.9), unpicturesque new buildings create stark juxtapositions with the harmonious natural pattern of the sea and shore. In *Circus* (fig.10), the last of his sequence of carefully contrived modern city paintings, artifice literally has the whip hand! Dynamic movement is indicated by diagonals and swirling arabesques, while Seurat's schematically indicated circus audience arrayed in their hierarchical tiers is reduced to a caricatural jocular dumbshow. Perhaps he sought, in the repetitive angles and curves of his drawing and his disciplined high-key palette of blue, yellow and orange, a painterly equivalence for the disciplined repetitions of movement and contrived gaiety that lie behind the acrobats' displays.

The Search for a Solid Method: Cézanne

10
Georges Seurat
Circus 1890–1
Oil on canvas
186 × 151.1
(73¼ × 59½)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

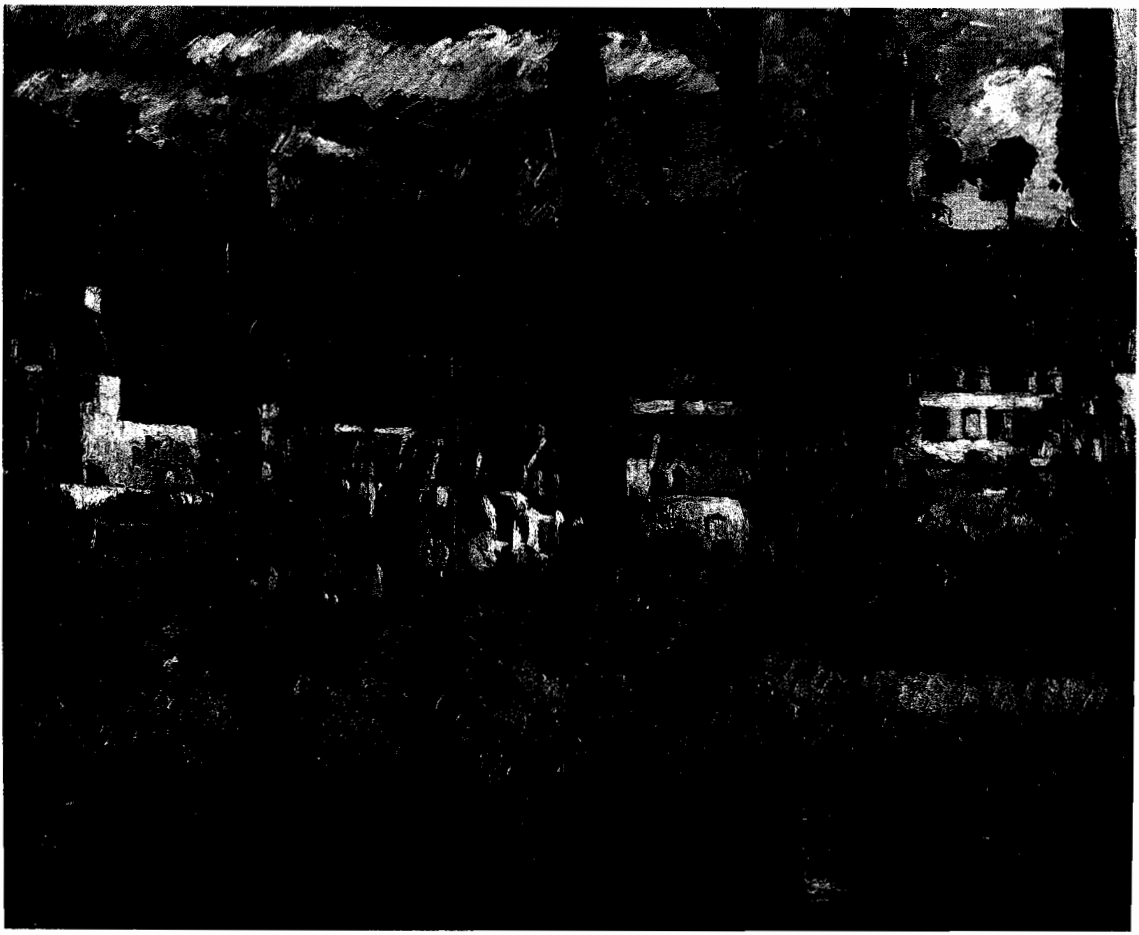
Nothing could have been further from the image of Seurat as an artist than the colourful chaos of bohemian studio life evoked by the novelist Emile Zola in *The Masterpiece* (*L'Oeuvre*), published in 1886. Admittedly Zola's central character, Claude Lantier, is represented as a failed artist who ultimately commits suicide, rather than as a precociously successful one. However, Lantier's uncomfortable resemblance to the touchy, saturnine Cézanne, Zola's childhood friend from Aix-en-Provence, exacerbated the rupture in the friendship between these two extraordinary individuals, each destined to achieve great things in his chosen field. In earlier, happier times, on one of his regular visits to Zola, Cézanne painted *The Château of Médan c.*1880 (fig.11), a view of the spot beside the Seine where Zola had recently bought a country retreat with the proceeds of his writing. Thus the painting can at one level be seen as an acknowledgment of his friend's success – *Les Soirées de Médan* was the name given to the collective publication of Zola's naturalist circle, which included some of Impressionism's most supportive critics such as Joris-Karl Huysmans and Paul Alexis. But the tribute is of a suitably distanced and objective kind in that Cézanne chose to view his motif from an island in the river. As a landscape it is also an excellent example of the revolutionary new manner of painting developed by Cézanne around 1879–80. His motif of buildings among trees, typically devoid of human presence, is tightly organised into a horizontal plane with the symmetrically placed verticals of tree trunks providing balance. The dense unity of the composition, and its shallow space, are increased by the regular, diagonally hatched brushstrokes which give a solidity to the land in contrast to the horizontals of the water and the more loosely treated band of sky.

It is a sad indication of the growing gulf in understanding between painter and writer that this highly accomplished painting was never owned by Zola. Indeed Zola was one of those critics who argued that the Impressionists had failed to progress beyond their hesitant beginnings. Instead the painting was acquired around 1882 by Paul Gauguin from the colour merchant Père Tanguy. Gauguin had recently been introduced to Cézanne's work by their mutual Impressionist mentor Camille Pissarro, and he was quick to sense that Cézanne's period of solitary effort in the south of France had resulted in a decisively new kind of Impressionism. Gauguin urged Pissarro to note down anything of significance Cézanne might let slip about his working method: 'If he should find the recipe for giving full expression to all his feelings in one single procedure, I beg you to try to make him talk during his sleep by giving him one of those mysterious homeopathic drugs and come to Paris immediately and tell us all about it.' A more practical step Gauguin took was to acquire the *Château of Médan*, as well as five other Cézannes, for very little outlay, confident that they would prove a sound investment one day; and he adjusted his own style and brushwork in response to their example. In so doing Gauguin showed remarkable flair both as collector and artist, securing for himself one of the very first places in the line of Cézanne's admirers that was to grow from a handful of artists and enlightened collectors in the 1880s to its present-day proportions. But something about the opportunism of Gauguin's approach aroused Cézanne's suspicions, indeed his most paranoid tendencies, an occupational hazard of avant-garde innovation. He accused Gauguin of having robbed him of his precious 'little sensation'. The impossibility of fruitful exchange of ideas, the absence of camaraderie between the two artists, is a telling measure of the increasing tension and rivalry in the art world of the time.

11
Paul Cézanne
Château of Médan (Zola's House) c.1880
Oil on canvas
59 × 72 (23¼ × 28¾)
Glasgow Museums: The Burrell Collection

Similar mistrust and jealousy prevented a friendship developing between Gauguin and Seurat in 1886, despite underlying parallels in their artistic objectives. Both were preoccupied by the idea that, just as was the case in music, a codifiable system underlay the way in which the realm of the visual conveyed meaning, so that over and above the literal meaning of a painting's subject matter, given lines and colours could be used to signify given emotions and moods. These ideas were to be found in simple form in Blanc's *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, and were being further explored at the time by mathematician and aesthetician Charles Henry whose *Introduction à une esthétique scientifique* appeared in 1885, and whose further writings were published in *La Revue Indépendante* in 1888. Both artists sensed that simplification and synthesis were the key. Gauguin's writings in 1885 show him thinking along the same lines as Henry about the aesthetic properties of colour and line, influenced in part by his admiration for Delacroix and the romantic painter's heightened expression of emotion, in part by the ideas about stasis prescribed in the text of a Turkish poet. However, the maturity of Gauguin's theories was not yet translated on to canvas, for his painting style, having assimilated the density of colour he admired in Cézanne, was stuck in a Pissarro-like rut.

By the summer of 1886 all the necessary conditions for Gauguin to join other converts to Seurat's Divisionism were in place. But, crucially this did not happen, for reasons which can only be ascribed to piqued pride and clashing personalities. Gauguin had staked much on his showing of paintings at the eighth Impressionist exhibition, only to see his achievements ousted from the critical limelight by the more accomplished techniques of Degas and the newly dubbed Neo-Impressionists. Seurat too was on his guard against the political machinations of Gauguin, judging him to be expert at winding people up. The crucial spark was provided by a



misunderstanding arising when Gauguin turned up at Signac's studio in his absence, having been promised its use over the summer, only to be turned away somewhat officiously by Seurat. 'I may be an artist full of uncertainty and lacking in erudition,' Gauguin protested to Signac, 'but as a man of the world *I will not accept that anyone* has the right to manhandle me.' The tone of his letter betrays much about the touchiness and frustrated ambitions of this renegade family man, this investments man turned painter. From this date on hostility and disdain characterised Gauguin's attitude to Neo-

Impressionism, and his choice of a separate artistic route was determined. It was a route which took him immediately to Brittany, and ultimately to the South Seas.

Parisian Struggles: 'Le petit boulevard'

When Gauguin mentioned to his wife the excited anticipation engendered among artists by the eighth Impressionist exhibition, the artists he had in mind were not necessarily names we remember today. His comment was applicable to certain of his own circle, which included Guillaumin and another latecomer to painting like himself, Ernest Schuffenecker; much was also expected of Impressionism by the up-and-coming generation of painters soon to emerge from the academic studios. A mood of expectancy certainly characterised a new arrival in Paris from Holland, Vincent van Gogh.

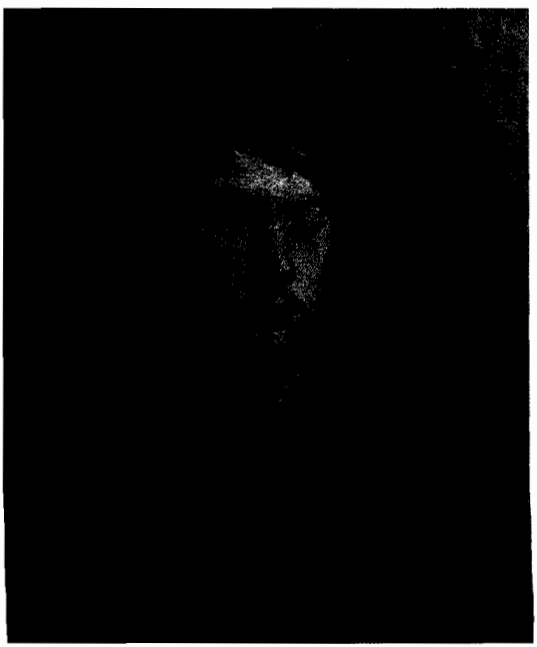
Fernand Cormon was one of a number of *pompier* (conservative, academic) painters to welcome students, and despite the thoroughly anti-modern cast of his own work – he specialised in mythical and prehistorical themes – he had a relatively tolerant attitude to the aspirations of the young. Among his students in early 1886 were a particularly talented but oddly assorted group, Emile Bernard, Louis Anquetin and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The aristocrat Toulouse-Lautrec had left behind a rarefied country existence in the Languedoc to immerse himself in the camaraderie of the art world and the low life of Paris. His friend Anquetin, the son of a wealthy butcher from Normandy, had moved with Lautrec to Cormon's studio from that of Léon Bonnat, a portraitist of stricter teaching methods. In parallel the two artists had developed a commitment to modern subject matter and as they neared the end of their training were as likely to be found in the cabarets of Montmartre as in the Louvre. Emile Bernard, at the time of sitting for Lautrec's sensitive portrait (fig.12), was a high-minded, precocious but green seventeen-year-old. In taking up an artistic vocation he had had to overcome parental opposition, particularly when, at just about the time Vincent van Gogh was enrolling in Cormon's studio in the spring of 1886, Bernard was expelled for insubordinate behaviour. Thereafter he continued to pursue his idiosyncratic artistic education independently, inspired on the one hand by ancient religious art, on the other by the works of contemporaries, including Seurat and Cézanne.

12
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Emile Bernard 188
Oil on canvas
54 × 44.5 (21¼ ×
Tate Gallery

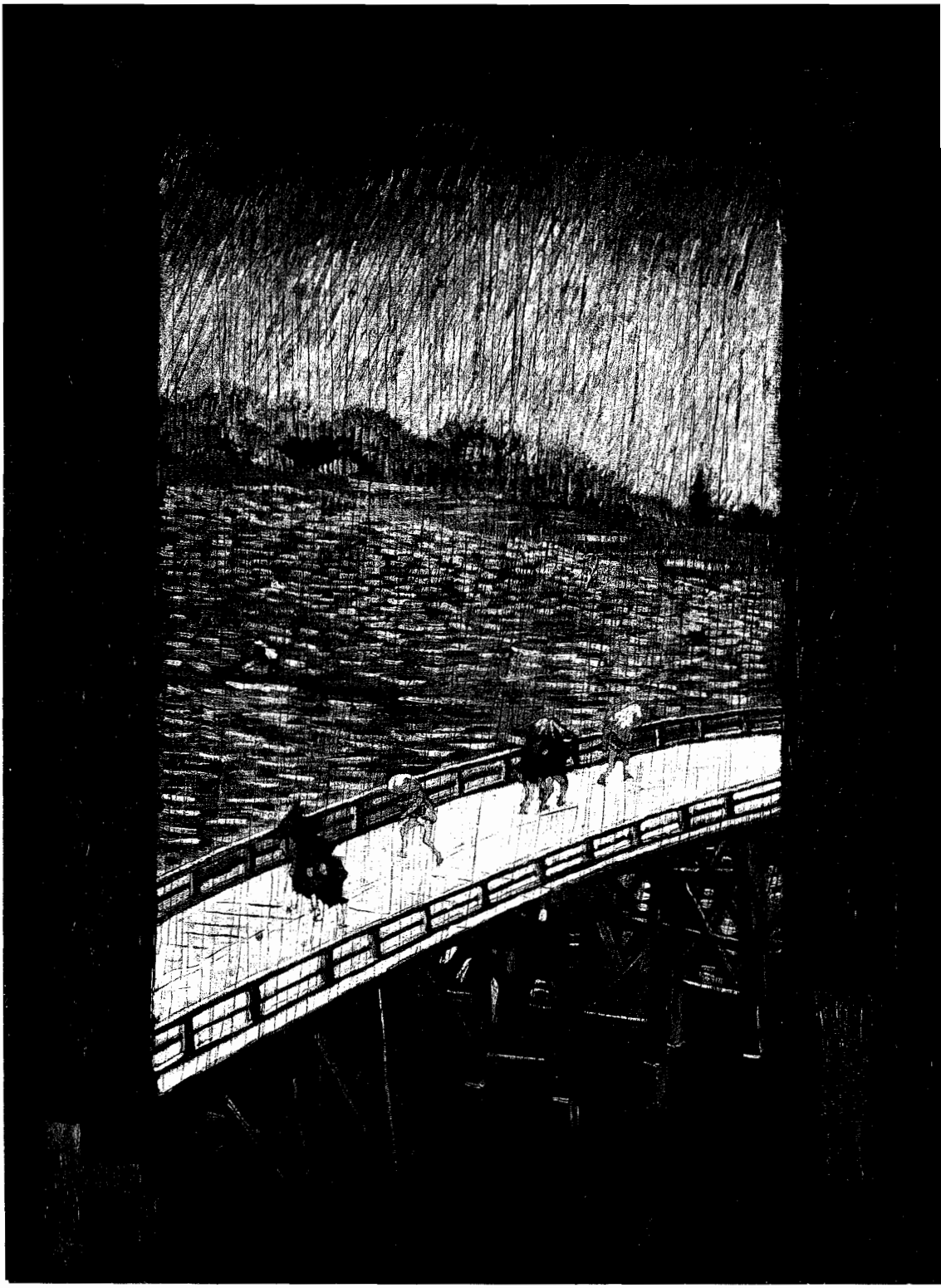
Van Gogh's move to Paris had been undertaken with a clear objective: to make contacts and bring himself up to date with the latest developments in art. He could sympathise with the family opposition Bernard had experienced, having himself been banished from the presence of his Protestant father, a Calvinist minister (whose recent death had in a very real sense liberated him), and carrying in his psychological baggage a checkered

career of failed attempts at art dealing, teaching and pastoral work. Over the next two years the zeal van Gogh brought to his new artistic mission acted as a catalyst on the loosely connected group whom he dubbed the Impressionists of the 'petit boulevard', encouraging their experimental initiatives.

Already having clearly formed views on art and a style that, although clumsy, owed much to his Dutch forebears, van Gogh's initial reaction to the Impressionists was disappointment: he had been led to expect more, from the way they had been vaunted by his younger brother Theo, an art dealer employed by the Paris firm of Goupil and Co. But he was soon caught up, as were his new friends, in the imperative to experiment with the colour division technique pioneered by Seurat. Working alongside him on the quays, he encountered and drew close to Signac who was just beginning to assume the rôle of propagandist for the theoretical principles underlying Seurat's Divisionism and was keen to welcome new adherents. So van Gogh's most characteristic Paris paintings show him trying out the various techniques and effects he saw in the neo-Impressionists' work, with unmixed colours applied as dots or dashes, and haloes around sources of light. On two occasions in 1887 van Gogh took the initiative of organising an *ad hoc* exhibition, both of which helped to focus his own and his contemporaries' thinking, opening up new directions and publicising their stylistic innovations. On the first occasion he decorated the walls of a neighbourhood café, Le Tambourin, with his own collection of Japanese woodcut prints; van Gogh had been an enthusiastic collector for some time and on reaching Paris he quickly located the shop of Samuel Bing where Japanese crêped prints could be bought very cheaply. The second exhibition, held at a newly opened spacious restaurant in Montmartre which he frequented, grouped together his latest paintings with those of a number of his new French friends.



During the later nineteenth century successive waves of Japanese influence had an impact upon the pictorial and decorative arts in France, and indeed in Europe generally. By the 1880s, scholarly books and journals were appearing on the subject and things Japanese had also reached the level of street fashion. So it was not so much the novelty as the timing of van Gogh's informal Japanese print show that was crucial for Bernard, Anquetin and Toulouse-Lautrec. A more comprehensive exhibition of Japanese masters, held at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1890, would be of similar benefit to members of the Nabis group among others. For the new



generation, two lessons could be drawn from looking hard at Japanese art (see Vincent van Gogh's *The Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige)*, fig.13). First, it created its own self-sufficient, stylised world parallel to nature, yet, like Impressionism, firmly based in reality and modernity, tackling topical city subjects such as street entertainment and prostitution. Then, on a technical level, the clear-cut, clean outlines and flat, unmodulated colours of the prints, still fresh to European eyes, demonstrated a form of simplification and synthesis that was immediate and decorative, diametrically opposed to the much softer-edged, imprecise results that could be achieved by the Divisionist procedure. Crucially, the example of Japanese art made it clear that many of the studio tricks developed since the Renaissance to perfect the artist's ability to imitate three-dimensional space and deceive the eye of the spectator (*trompe l'oeil* tricks that were still being monotonously drummed in to students in the teaching academies of Cormon and Julian) could be safely dispensed with in the interests of pictorial harmony. Moreover, for artists committed to modernity, Japanese conventions, which skilfully deployed only contour and plane, could be adapted for the purposes of popular illustration and caricature or for incisive drawn and painted images of Parisian life (fig.14). Toulouse-Lautrec's mature style for instance, first seen in his circus paintings of 1888 but developed in the famous posters of the 1890s, owed its bold arabesque stylisation and radical spatial design to the precedents of Japanese art combined with the more rococo decorative qualities of poster artist Jules Chéret. Indeed, Seurat himself was quick to respond to the new emphasis on linearity in his final unfinished figure painting, *Circus* (fig.10).

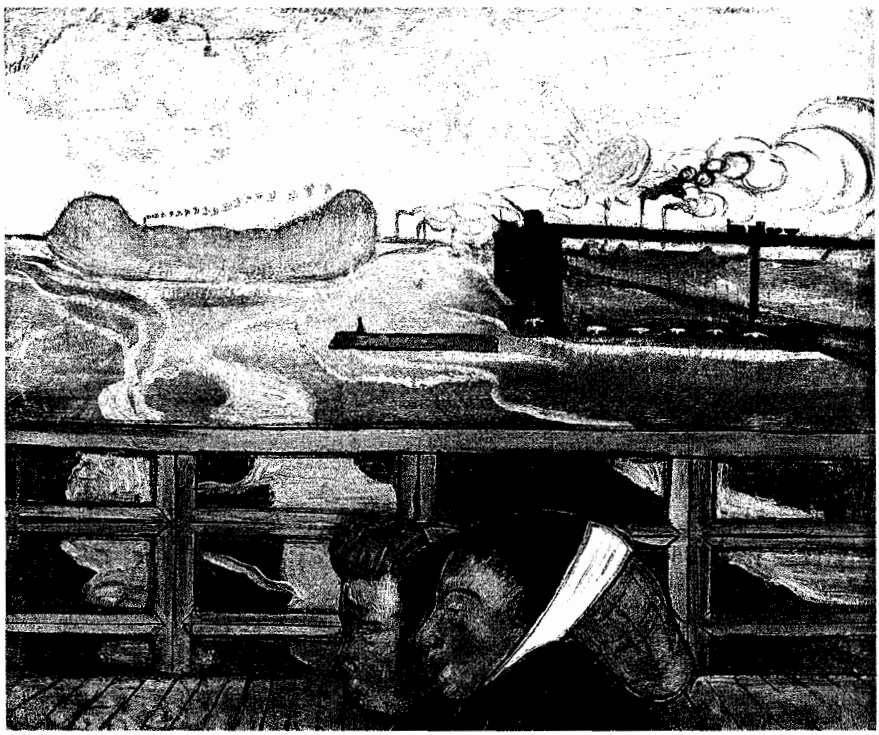
13
Vincent van Gogh
The Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige) 1887
Oil on canvas
73 × 54 (28¾ × 21¼)
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

14
Louis Anquetin
Girl Reading a Newspaper 1890
Pastel on paper mounted on millboard
54 × 43.2 (21¼ × 17)
Tate Gallery

The second exhibition van Gogh organised, towards the end of 1887, at the popular Montmartre eating house Restaurant du Châlet, le Grand Bouillon, brought together, for the first time, examples of the boldly coloured linear style that Anquetin and Bernard, in direct response to seeing the Japanese works, had been exploring in their most recent paintings (see Bernard's *View from the Bridge at Asnières*, fig.15). These were quite distinct from works on show by Lautrec, van Gogh himself and a fellow Dutchman, Arnold Koning. Some weeks later, in an enthusiastic review for *La Revue Indépendante*, the Symbolist writer Edouard Dujardin came up with an appropriate name for this 'new and special manner' – 'cloisonnism' (by analogy with the *cloisonné* enamelling technique) – and made the key point

that it derived from a 'symbolic conception of art'. This crucially marks the essential difference between the Impressionist and the cloisonnist/synthetist artists' approach; where the former were still essentially concerned with representing reality in its most transitory form, the latter saw art as a vehicle for the expression of their subjective ideas about reality, or indeed, as was soon to be true of Gauguin's art, of the workings of their imagination.

Dujardin's account was undoubtedly tutored by Anquetin, a former school friend, and the main force behind the new style. Among Anquetin's pictures were three landscape views, each cast according to its subject in a yellow, blue or reddish-purple tonality. The last of these has sadly been lost,

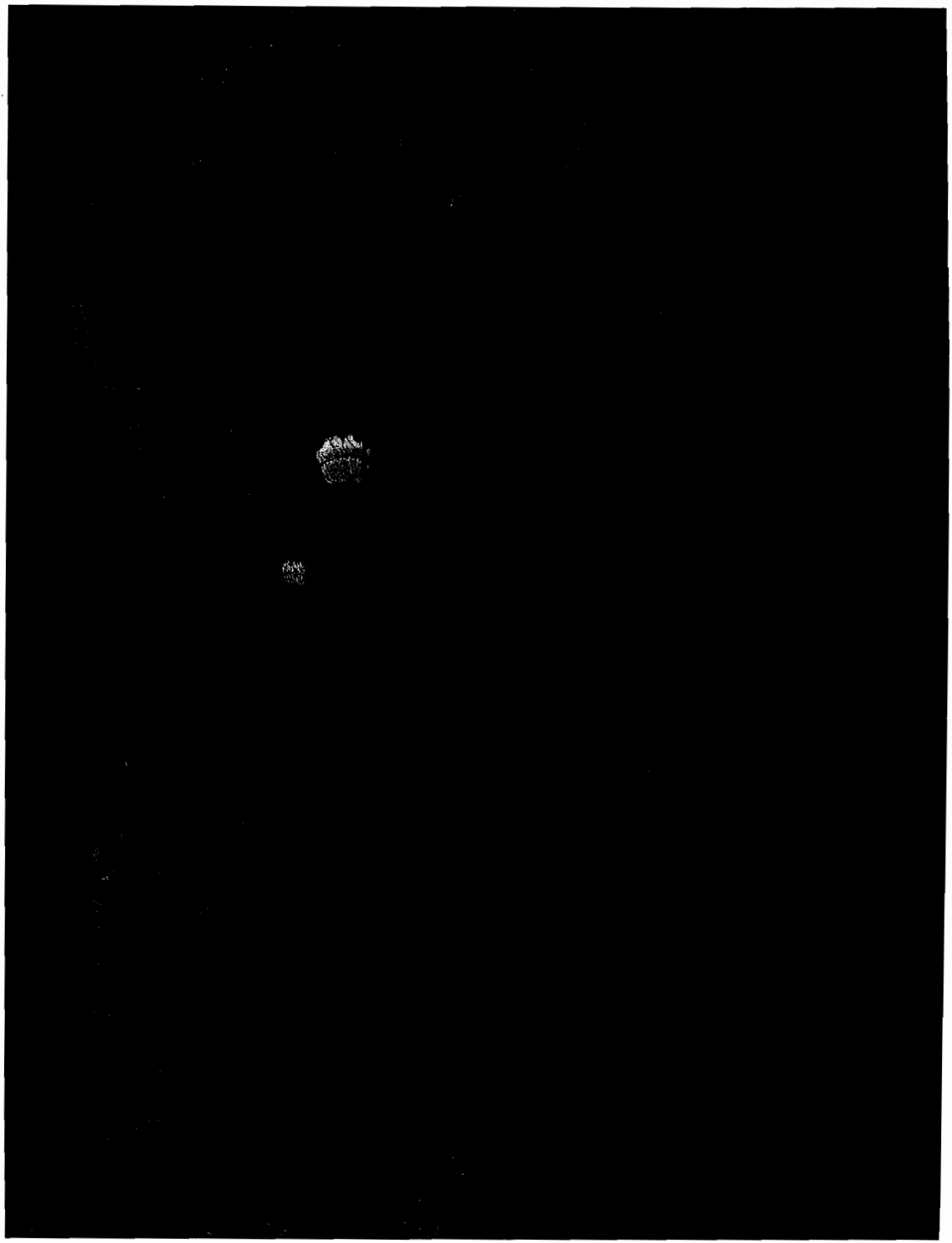


15
Emile Bernard
View from the Bridge at Asnières 1887
Oil on canvas
38 × 46 (15 × 18¼)
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brest

16
Louis Anquetin
Evening: Avenue de Clichy 1887
Oil on canvas
69.8 × 53.3
(27½ × 21)
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. The Ella Sumner and Mary Caitlin Sumner Collection Fund

but Anquetin's cloisonnist views of a man scything in a golden yellow field (*The Reaper*) and of a busy street scene in Montmartre (*Evening: Avenue de Clichy*, fig.16) – its blue cast indicating the time of day – were to prove of seminal importance. In the immediate aftermath of the exhibition, which was closed prematurely due to objections raised by the restaurant's clientèle, van Gogh, its chief organiser, felt bitter and depressed. Indeed, this was the mood in which he left Paris for Arles in February 1888. Nevèrtheless, thanks to his proactive energies, important ideas had been communicated and contacts made. Most notably he had his first meeting with Gauguin, just returned from the West Indies, who agreed to an exchange of pictures.

From his new-found isolation in Arles, van Gogh worked tirelessly to keep these contacts alive, corresponding with his friends almost daily. He



also acknowledged the importance of the new directions suggested by Anquetin's paintings which were widely exhibited over the next eighteen months: they were in the consignment the artist sent in February 1888 to the important independent group in Brussels, Les XX, and were also seen on three separate occasions in Paris. The new boldness and clarity entering van Gogh's Arles compositions that year, which include some his best-known paintings, can be traced back to the homage paid by van Gogh to both *The Reaper* and *Evening: Avenue de Clichy*. *Sunflowers* (fig.17) for example, one of a series of paintings with which he intended to decorate a room prepared for Gauguin's visit, is a japonist/cloisonnist harmony in golds, with the distinctive decorative shapes of the flower heads set in relief against the two bold flat background colours separated by a crude blue line.

It was clear to most attentive visitors to the Grand Bouillon exhibition – among them Pissarro, Guillaumin and Gauguin – that the cloisonnist manner, analogous not only to stained glass (which is what had evidently inspired it) but also to Japanese prints, represented a stark contrast to the pointillist manner with its predominantly blond, vibrating tonalities. Immediately and prophetically, the naturalist author and critic Gustave Geffroy drew attention to this opposition when he entitled his review in *La Justice*, in February 1888, '*Pointillé-cloisonné*'. A new Post-Impressionist style had been born.

The Image of the Artist: Gauguin the Primitive

For Gauguin, salvation from the doubts that beset him as an artist in the wake of the 1886 exhibition came from the stimulus of new places, and the experience of otherness engendered by voluntary displacement. Brittany was a popular haven for painters escaping the city and Gauguin, lodging in Pont-Aven, found himself surrounded by students as well as more established painters of a conservative academic stamp. He stood out as the revolutionary amongst them because of his known involvement with the Impressionists. Opposition of this kind suited him, helping him to settle on

his identity as an artist, an identity he explored exhaustively in his writing, painting and sculpture over the next three years. Brittany also brought him into head-on confrontation with the ideology of academic art for which he and the Impressionists had always expressed contempt and against which he would continue to rail throughout his career. He was now able to observe at first hand how academic realist methods were being put into practice, often with the aid of photographs, to produce the highly finished anecdotal confections that ensured popular success at the Salon. At the same time the elements of difference that attracted so many painters to this extreme corner of France proved more fruitfully suggestive to Gauguin than to those artists essentially just looking for picturesque local colour.

The need to preserve and record the social, cultural and religious differences that had traditionally marked off the people of Brittany from the fast-changing, increasingly secular world of Paris formed an important element in Brittany's popularity with painters. The contrast was made all the starker by the ease with which the railway now transported travellers from the heart of the capital to the depths of Finistère. Gauguin was at first slow to pick up on these endangered cultural indicators – costume, ritual, religious imagery – but on his second visit in 1888 he showed himself to be fully alert, just as he would later be in Tahiti. In the interim he had travelled to Martinique, where the first seeds of his enthusiasm for the primitive had been sown. He travelled there, by his own admission, to find reinvigoration and to distance himself from the frenzied struggle of artistic life in Paris. He was also in pursuit of exotic motifs whose novelty would whet the jaded palates of the picture-buying public. The adventure had the effect of reviving his memories of the wider world he had experienced both as child and merchant seaman, and he returned to France convinced that a rosy future lay ahead for the painter who was capable of exploiting the tropics, so recently opened up by colonisation.

17
Vincent van Gogh
Sunflowers 1888
Oil on canvas
92 × 73 (36¼ × 28¾)
National Gallery, London

In the mean time, he would capitalise on what Brittany had to offer, imbuing himself with the 'character of the people and the locality, which is essential if I'm to paint well', he argued in early 1888. To pursue this aim, as he explained to his wife from whom he had been separated for three years, he had had to dam up the emotional, sensitive side of his nature, and liberate the 'savage' side so it could 'advance resolutely and unimpeded'.

The idea that sacrifices had to be made in the pursuit of a higher goal permeated Gauguin's thinking in 1888, allowing him to condense his sensations of nature and achieve that radical simplification of painting style he had been pursuing for some time. After the fine weave of separate brush strokes that had characterised his paintings in 1887, he now began to paint more as he drew, using almost solid blocks of colour and clearly demarcating forms with strong contour lines. His drawing style had been developing along these lines for some time, influenced to a considerable degree by the synthetic linearity he observed in Degas and, when making a series of ceramic pots in Paris between 1886–7, he had realised the decorative possibilities of flat colour and curving line.

In view of his age, experience and inclination to hold court, a number of

artists were now turning to Gauguin for advice and support; the same group would later earn the name Ecole de Pont-Aven, although it was never more than an informal artistic grouping. In this spirit the young Emile Bernard sought Gauguin's guidance that summer, having been urged to seek him out by their mutual friend Vincent van Gogh. The experience of advising and supervising a receptive younger pupil proved a vitally instructive one for the elder artist, just as it would do when he met Paul Sérusier a couple of months later. Bernard brought Gauguin into direct contact with cloisonnism which provided just the spur he needed. 'Young Bernard is here', Gauguin wrote to Schuffenecker, 'he's one who fears nothing'. The radically simplified cloisonnist paintings Bernard brought from Saint Briac and the compositions he subsequently produced in Pont-Aven, with Gauguin's encouragement, such as *Breton Women in the Meadow* (fig.18), served as pictorial demonstrations confirming some of Gauguin's slowly maturing theoretical ideas about expression and the need for a more reflective relationship between the artist and nature. Bernard's painting of Breton women treated the figures as simplified decorative shapes with only a vestigial reference to the logic of pictorial recession, the picture's composition held together by rhyming forms but by little or no narrative.

In letters to Schuffenecker and van Gogh, Gauguin discussed the technical questions and new pictorial possibilities opened up by cloisonnism. 'A word of advice, do not copy nature too closely', he recommended the former. 'Art is an abstraction'. In September 1888, taking his own advice, Gauguin executed the remarkable painting, *The Vision after the Sermon (Jacob and the Angel)* (fig.19), a complex exploration of the nature of Breton piety; it took him, literally, beyond the seen world into the realm of the visionary.

It seems probable that *The Vision after the Sermon* was painted in response to hearing a sermon preached by the local *curé*, and was an attempt to express something of the superstitious piety of the predominantly female Breton congregation. (Bernard and his attractive sister Madeleine were devoted church-goers which may have encouraged Gauguin to attend the services.) The forms of the praying women's faces, the focus of Gauguin's attention, are far more sculptural and sophisticated than in Bernard's painting. Yet Gauguin used similarly abbreviated contours to make the shapes of their coiffes stand out against the background, achieving a striking contrast between the decorative white shapes and the background of uniform, non-naturalistic red. This red was not made to suffuse the whole, to imitate a

dominant note or mood of nature as in Anquetin's cloisonnist works or van Gogh's recent experiments in landscape and still-life using a dominant yellow (for example, *Sunflowers*). Instead, as Gauguin explained to van Gogh, it had a purely symbolic significance: 'For me, in this picture the landscape and the struggle only exist in the imagination of the people in prayer, as a result of the sermon. That is why there is the contrast between the real people and the struggle in its unnaturalistic and disproportionate landscape.' Putting the final seal on his new conception of his artistic role, Gauguin added the face of the priest to lower right, giving him his own features. In so doing he was quite deliberately equating the artist's powers with the powers of the priest to transport his listeners, to create images in

18
Emile Bernard
Breton Women in the Meadow 1888
Oil on canvas
74 × 92 (29¼ × 36¼)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

19
Paul Gauguin
The Vision after the Sermon (Jacob and the Angel) 1888
Oil on canvas
74.4 × 93.1
(29¼ × 36½)
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

their minds. This heroic, transcendental analogy was one he would pursue over the following year in writings and images in which he successively cast himself in the role of martyr (fig.20), fallen angel or Christ himself.

Three years later, when *The Vision* was hailed by critics as Gauguin's first Symbolist masterpiece, Bernard claimed that its concept had been stolen from his own earlier painting. The accusation, made in a spirit of pique and jealousy when Bernard was still floundering and Gauguin's career was taking off, provoked a long-running dispute characteristic of the way in which the history of modernist art has been written, that is, setting more store by originality, by getting there first, than by sustained achievement. As other witnesses of the events in 1888 told a different story and Bernard's reliability

as a historian can frequently be called into question, it is difficult to ascertain the fair distribution of credit. Certainly Bernard's role was overlooked by critics of the time, notably by Gauguin's champion Albert Aurier, despite the contribution he had made in helping van Gogh find his personal style. What seems undeniable is that Bernard was himself the beneficiary and propagator of Anquetin's discoveries (as was Signac of Seurat's), and Anquetin's claim to being the originator of cloisonnism, which has only recently been properly re-established, goes unchallenged. The key question for the historian is what each artist made of this relatively simple stylistic idea over their career as a whole. Whereas both Anquetin and Bernard left behind their phase of cloisonnism, renouncing it as an

20
Paul Gauguin
Self portrait: Les Misérables 1888
Oil on canvas
45 × 55 (17¾ × 21⅝)
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

21
Paul Gauguin
Grape Harvest at Arles: Human Anguish 1888
Oil on canvas
73 × 92 (28¾ × 36¼)
The Ordrupgaard Collection, Copenhagen

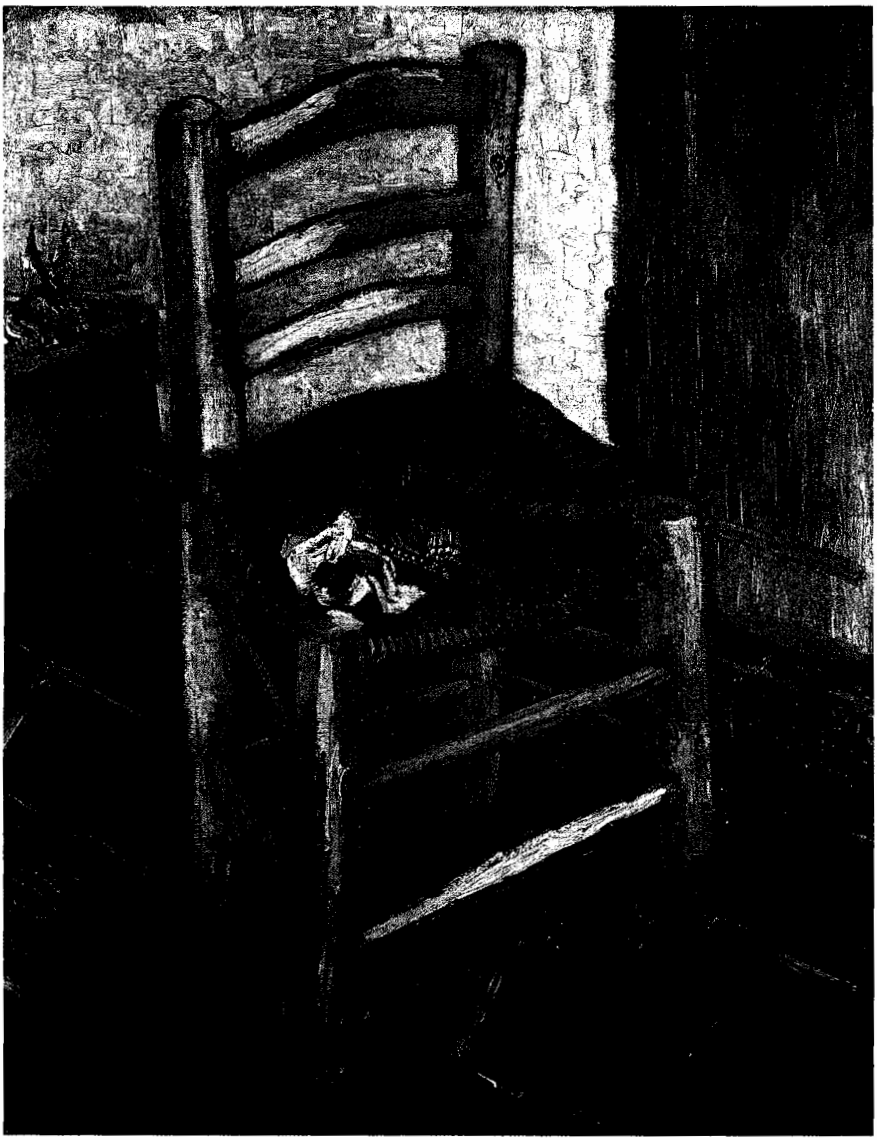
aberration of youth (each turning instead to the exploration of more conventional, archaicising styles), van Gogh and Gauguin were able to take from cloisonnism, at a key point in their development, just those aspects they needed to simplify and refine earlier technical equivocations and complexities into a settled, mature style. The key to Gauguin's modernity is its eclecticism – his daring to pick and mix disparate cultural borrowings and personal memories – and it is this characteristic, rather more than his stylistic debt to cloisonnism, that has proved his enduring legacy for twentieth-century artists.

Any assessment of the dynamics of the Ecole de Pont-Aven has to take account of its honorary member, Vincent van Gogh. Despite never visiting Brittany, van Gogh kept abreast of, and even to a degree influenced events there. Certainly Gauguin's movements from 1888 on were made with an eye to the approval of his new dealer, Vincent's brother, Theo van Gogh, whose firm now allowed him some leeway to support contemporary artists. It was largely to please Theo that Gauguin left Pont-Aven in October 1888, at this highly creative period, to go and join Vincent in Arles. Their experiment in shared living and artistic collaboration, for which Theo footed the bill, was

more productive of ideas for the future than of major works, although certain creative exchanges did occur.

Despite a degree of common ground, the two artists were as diametrically opposed in their approach to painting as they were to many fundamental moral questions. Gauguin brought to his painting a cool, calculating and elegant manipulation of colour and form, even when the themes were as emotionally charged and brooding as *The Vision after the Sermon* (fig.19) or *Grape Harvest at Arles: Human Anguish* (fig.21), both, of course, subjects of his own devising. He seems to have displayed something of the same ironic detachment in his dealings with the opposite sex. Van Gogh, conscious of his own relative inexperience in sexual matters, was wary of the

Frenchman's hypocritical attitudes, suspicious of his skill in the casuistic art of squaring up to his own conscience. The Dutchman's approach to painting too was more instinctive, emotional, sentimental and moral. It owed much of its energy and zeal to his Protestant background, which drove him along the road of salvation by deed through work, each picture



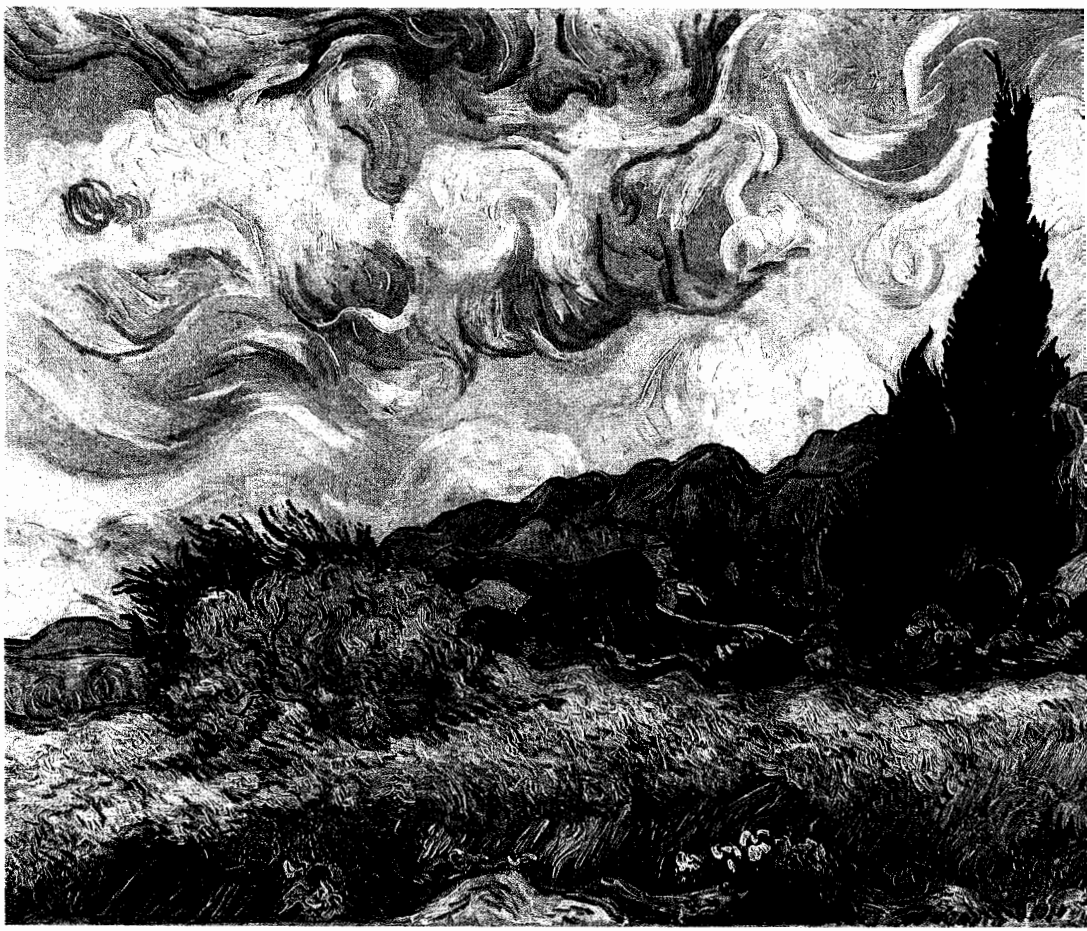
22
Vincent van Gogh
Vincent's Chair with his Pipe 1888–9
Oil on canvas
92 × 73 (36¼ × 28¾)
National Gallery, London

23
Vincent van Gogh
Corner of the Garden of St Paul's Hospital at St Rémy 1889
Pencil and pen and ink on paper
62.2 × 48.3
(24½ × 19)
Tate Gallery

being a labour of love. It was art conceived, albeit naively, as a humble, accumulative activity that was essentially a homage to God's creation. The difference in the artists' attitudes helps to explain their very different approach to subject matter. Where Gauguin, as we see in figs.19 and 21, advocated synthetic compositions incorporating memory images and symbolic and multi-layered meanings (enabling him to incorporate

in the uniquely thick impastos that corrugate the surfaces of his canvases. It was this virtuoso aspect of his oeuvre and the colouristic freedom with which he animated his observations of nature (fig.24), more than his subjects, that were to constitute his legacy for his followers.

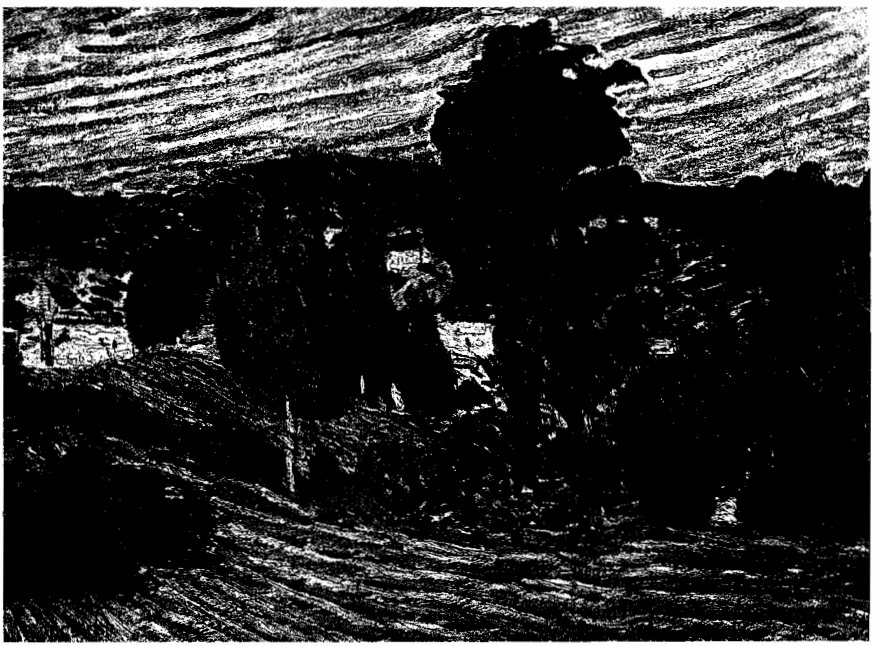
By 1888–9 Gauguin was convinced that as leader of a united group, it would be easy to mount a counter-attack on the influence of Seurat and Neo-Impressionism; he thus welcomed and engineered the recruitment of new acolytes. With van Gogh now recovering and working well, he was invited to take part, alongside Gauguin, Schuffenecker, Bernard and some of



Bernard's friends, in the *Impressionist and Synthetist* exhibition they had organised at the café Volpini, very much along the lines he himself had earlier pioneered and envisaged for the occasion. It was an opportunistic way of getting their work seen by some of the crowds visiting the Champ de Mars to marvel at the new Eiffel Tower and view the official art exhibition staged for the Universal Exhibition. In several critics' reviews Anquetin's works were represented as the most radical in the show; perhaps prudently, Gauguin had held back from showing *Vision after the Sermon* following the controversy it had caused in February at Les XX in Brussels. Van Gogh's

decision not to participate is difficult to interpret: was it a symbolic signalling of his disillusionment with the ideal of group endeavour by which he had formerly set such store, or a cautious reluctance to send out the wrong messages to the uncomprehending public, which his brother Theo seems to have advised that such an exhibition might do?

Ironically, despite the difficulties encountered by van Gogh and Gauguin in attempting to work together, and their equivocal attitudes to being exhibited side by side, it was when seen together that their works were to make the greatest impact on others: the first such occasion was the Les XX exhibition of 1891, where they were the two artists arousing the greatest clamour among the critics. The Irish artist Roderic O'Conor was one of the first to respond to the experience of encountering Gauguin and van Gogh's works in quick succession. In *Yellow Landscape, Pont-Aven* (fig.25), O'Conor's



24
Vincent Van Gogh
A Cornfield with Cypresses 1889
Oil on canvas
72 × 90.9 (28¾ × 35¾)
National Gallery, London

25
Roderic O'Conor
Yellow Landscape, Pont-Aven 1892
Oil on canvas
67.6 × 91.8
(26⅝ × 36¼)
Tate Gallery

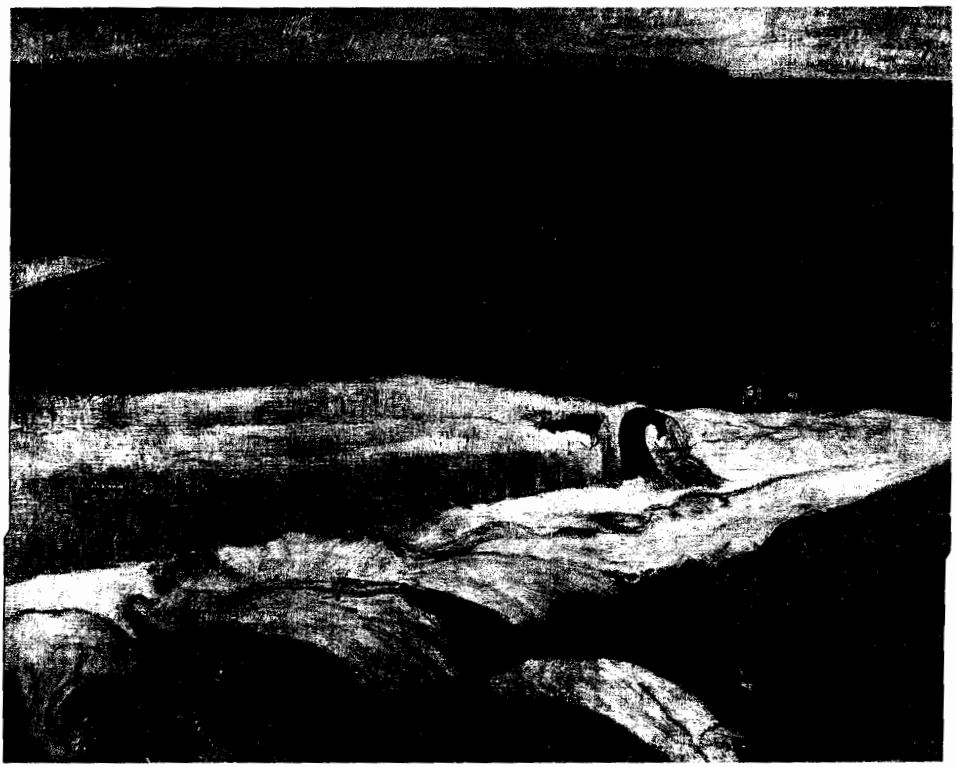
vibrant palette and energetic drawing show what can only be described as a proto-Fauve excitement; similar effects would be displayed a decade or more later, when the examples of Gauguin and van Gogh again worked on the Fauves in France and the Bloomsbury and Camden Town groups in England.

Where van Gogh had been cast down by what he saw as irrevocable disunity in the Parisian avant-garde, the experience of seeing the works by Gauguin, Bernard, Anquetin and others at Volpini's offered hope of a new unity for a number of other artists, the foreigners visiting Paris such as de Haan, Verkade, or Willumsen, as well as a group of students at the Académie Julian already disaffected from their teachers, Paul Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Pierre Bonnard and Henri-Gabriel Ibels. According to the later recollection of Denis, what they saw in works such as

Anquetin's *Evening: Avenue de Clichy* (fig.16) was revelatory of a new attitude to nature and to the subject, less subservient, more liberated; brighter colours even than the Impressionists used; the forms of objects or figures distorted in order to heighten the decorative interest of the painting; above all not a shred of the illusionistic realism they had been taught to practise in the studios.

Sérusier took new courage from the Volpini exhibition. He had initially encountered Gauguin in Pont-Aven the previous October, at which time he had painted, under the latter's directions, the highly simplified, experimental work *Landscape in the Bois d'Amour (The Talisman)* (fig.26). He had even accompanied Gauguin on his abortive mission to donate *Vision after the Sermon* to the village church of Nizon where the gift was rejected by the *curé*, who suspected he was being made the butt of a practical joke. Sérusier, having

spent the winter in Paris, where his position of some authority at the Académie Julian added weight to the new message he had to impart, needed to be reassured that what Gauguin was about was sincere. The paintings and *prints at Volpini's impressed him greatly* and he returned to Brittany that summer and the next to join Gauguin's small band of followers in the village of Le Pouldu. There, they painted and discussed broad aesthetic questions, dividing their time between making synthetic paintings of the landscapes (fig.27) and decorating the dining room of the inn where they were lodging. Gauguin's personality dominated the gatherings and the heady atmosphere was one in which grand, Wagnerian undertakings could be hatched. Hence Sérusier wrote in 1889 to Maurice Denis: 'I dream for the future of a



26
Paul Sérusier
Landscape in the Bois d'Amour ('The Talisman') 1888
Oil on board
27 × 22 (10¾ × 8¾)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

27
Paul Gauguin
Harvest: Le Pouldu
1890
Oil on canvas
73 × 92.1 (28¾ × 36¼)
Tate Gallery

purified fraternity, made up solely of committed artists, lovers of the beautiful and the good, putting into their works *and their way of life this* indefinable character that I translate by the word "Nabi".' This arcane word, he had been informed, meant prophet in Hebrew, and had the right connotations of enthusiasm and elitism to set the newly constituted group on a different plane from their fellow students and the bourgeois public, the 'pelichtim'.