

Japan and Paul Gauguin in the Forest of Love

By Okabe Masayuki

The lines of steep roofed houses surrounded by waterways created a wonderful view from the top of the hill to the west of the village. The dense leafy shrubbery up there cast soft shadows over the green undergrowth of this hill, which the villagers liked to call the "Forest of Love". It was all like something out of a dream.

In 1888, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) made his second visit to the small village of Pont-Aven and stayed eight months. The village itself only had a population of about 1,500 and some 100 or so houses. But it was to here that Gauguin had chosen to withdraw and stay for some time, all of 500 km west of Paris and a good way inland along waterways from the coast of southern Brittany. Pont-Aven itself was nothing more than a small country village, just like many others dotted all over Brittany, one of the more individual regions of France. Nevertheless, when Gauguin was there the village had become well-known as a place where many artists stayed and worked.

This was partly due to the fact that the village had produced a pamphlet in English to encourage artists - especially foreign painters who were traveling in France - to come and work there. For those who wanted to paint the colorful folk costumes of Brittany, the village guaranteed there would be willing villagers to be their models. Many painters were therefore especially interested in visiting the region and this small village in particular, and they occupied all the village's available lodgings.

Gauguin went to Pont-Aven for the first time two years before, in the summer of 1886. He had spent some

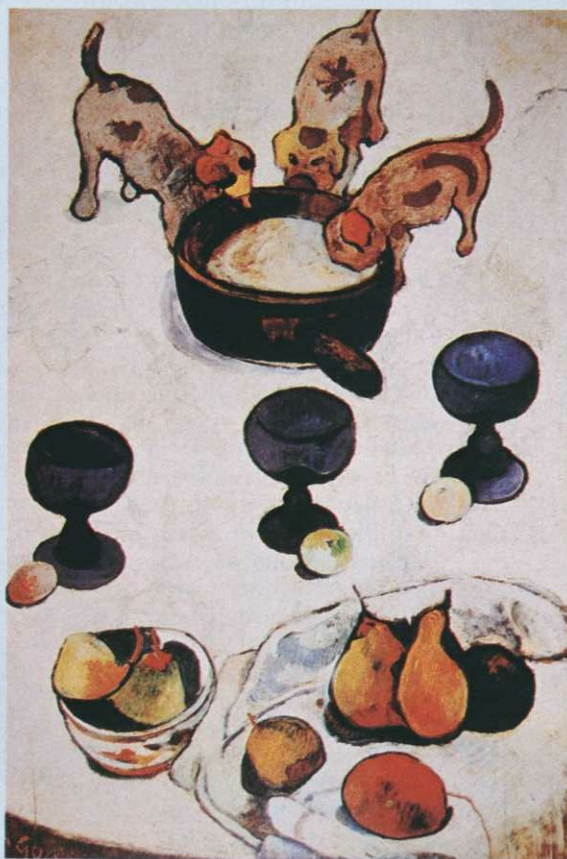


Plate 1 : Still Life with Three Puppies , 1888
Oil on wood , 91.8 × 62.6 cm
Museum of Modern Art , New York

of the early part of his life in Peru and had also been a sailor for some years. This had undoubtedly contributed to his rather wild and exotic character that came as something of a surprise to the painters who frequented Pont-Aven and generally painted in a safe, academic style. They were simply enjoying a trip away from home. Gauguin was already 38 at the time. He had a wife and four children, and had not had an easy life. It had only been three years since he had taken up painting seriously. In the midst of an

economic depression in France, he had quit his job as a stockbroker, having worked for 11 years and risen to the position of manager. His wife was Danish and he and his family had left Paris to lead a life of dependence in Denmark. Things, however, were not at all easy for him there, so he went to Pont-Aven as much as anything else to try and live more cheaply. Unlike the happy-go-lucky travellers there, he was alone without a penny to his name and had suffered various misfortunes. Now, however, he was ready to face anything. Impressionism was the leading movement of the times and he was well-known among its exponents. In fact, he could count himself as one of the members of this movement. He was not without his own theories, combining a personal decorative approach with the latest scientific theories of color of the new Impressionist movement. His approach was more or less unique. He was short but he was tough and his Roman nose and stocky appearance gave him a brazen, vulgar air. Those that sneered and reacted against the "avant-garde approach", which he personified, were bowled over by his sheer ability.

The untamed side of his character was awakened by the rural atmosphere of this small Breton village and his genius blossomed. While he was still in Paris and prior to his first visit to Brittany, Gauguin had been introduced to the potter, Ernest Chaplet. He had been inspired by Japanese art through the painter Félix Bracquemond who himself was much inspired by Japonisme and was a friend of Gauguin's. While he was in Pont-Aven he had been exposed to so much



Plate 2 : *The Breton Wrestling Boys*
Oil on canvas 93 × 73cm
Josevowitz Collection

folk color and had been greatly stimulated by the sense of modeling and earthy colors there. As a result, on returning to Paris he became absorbed in making some pottery. It was not long, however, before life in Paris turned sour on him again.

Having tasted the simple life in Brittany and faced with economic problems as he was, Gauguin once more set off for distant climes. His sister and her husband were living in Panama, so he decided to visit them in the hope of gaining their financial assistance. He would not go to Tahiti for another four years. He left for Panama in April, 1887 accompanied by Charles Raval, a young painter who worshipped Gauguin. They were given a very cold reception in Panama and the two of them resorted to working on the building of the canal, which happened to be in progress at the time. They both found the work too hard, however, and soon left for home. On the way back, the ship

made a stop at Martinique where Gauguin first came in contact with Creole culture, embodying an original mix of life in a tropical setting and the trappings of civilization. It was this encounter that would strengthen the ethnic, decorative style of his work considerably. Gauguin was forced to leave Raval in Martinique where he had fallen sick. On arriving back in Paris in November 1887, he took up lodgings in the house of Schuffenecker, a painter friend with whom he had worked when he was a stockbroker. Then, in February 1888, he made his second visit to Brittany and stayed in Pont-Aven.

Before setting off from Paris, however, things took a turn for the better. First of all, the exhibition of work he had done while he was in Martinique was highly acclaimed by an

avant-garde art critic and the literati in general, and quite suddenly he became a leading voice in charting the future course of art. He was also fortunate to have his work recognized by the 30-year-old foresighted art dealer, Theo van Gogh, who bought some of Gauguin's ceramics and paintings. It was a ray of sunshine amid the dark clouds of Gauguin's life.

Even Gauguin must have been aware that circumstances had changed since his first visit to Pont-Aven two years before. Now, many young painters and art students were prepared to come down from Paris to hear what he had to say. Among them was Paul Sérusier, one of the senior members of staff of the famous private art school, Academie Julien. It seems that Sérusier had gone to

Pont-Aven partly to make fun of Gauguin but was so taken with his radical approach that he quickly became a follower. While Sérusier was with Gauguin, he did a painting under his supervision and made it his talisman. Returning with it to Paris, he then proceeded to pass on what he had learned to the students at Academie Julien. During 1888, Gauguin's own work developed considerably. Apart from gaining self-confidence, it was his experiences in Martinique coupled with the subjects he had found in Brittany that had fired this development, aided in no small part by the very personal strong sense of modeling he had gained from Japanese pottery and the work of the woodblock print artist, Hokusai. Gauguin's use of Hokusai imagery is most evident in "Still Life with Three Puppies" (Plate 1) and "The Vision After the Sermon." And in a letter to Theo van Gogh, he



Plate 3 : *Madeleine Bernard*, 1988
Oil on canvas, 72 × 58cm
Musée de Peinture et de Sculpture, Grenoble

described “The Breton Wrestling Boys” (Plate 2) as being in a “Japanese style”.

Gauguin walked in the “Forest of Love” at Pont-Aven with his followers, expounding on his new theories of art. He talked of handling a painting as a flat surface; of bringing out its decorative qualities; of emphasizing outline; and of looking at a painting as something real while also considering it as something abstract. He also talked about being comprehensive. These were his prophecies for 20th century art. But what he had actually done was to identify, in different terms, the special features of such things as *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and Japanese art in general. The period between 1888 and the beginning of 1889 is thought of as Gauguin’s most important period of development, and coincides with a concentrated period of direct influence from Japanese art, in the way that he used references from the work of Hokusai and depicted *ukiyo-e* prints within his own paintings. There is no mistaking the fact that Gauguin’s prophecies for 20th century art were based on the inspiration he gained from Japanese art.

Later, however, the young Émile Bernard claimed that it was he not Gauguin who had first spelled out the parameters of this new approach that was called Synthetism or Cloisonnisme, because of the work’s resemblance to cloisonné enamels. In 1886 Émile Bernard had been introduced by Schuffenecker and then in the summer of 1888, Bernard went to visit Gauguin in Pont-Aven with an introduction from Theo van Gogh for the second time. Bernard was only just 20 years of age in 1888, when he took one of his Cloisonnisme style paintings to show Gauguin and they exchanged ideas on the new art. It is a fact that Gauguin praised Bernard’s ideas. But Bernard was jealous of Gauguin. He even went as far as to stir up a public debate saying that the great strides Gauguin made after 1888 were simply the result of Gauguin’s plagiarism of his theories. The

influence of Japanese art on Gauguin’s work in 1888 was, however, much more extensive than anything he gained from Bernard.

Bernard’s parents who were concerned about their son’s wandering, sent his 17-year-old sister, Madeleine, to chaperone her brother on his visit to Brittany. Despite being old enough to be her father, Gauguin who was eager for unaffected purity, fell in love with Madeleine and her unashamed frankness, and wrote a passionate letter to her. Madeleine posed for “Madeleine of the Forest of Love” painted by her brother and for the portrait “Madeleine Bernard” (Plate 3) by Gauguin. Her appeal and the Forest of Love seem to be synonymous, and for Gauguin the Forest of Love represented memories of a lover.

Bernard said “my sister is very beautiful and mysterious. But both Gauguin and I.....were only able to paint cartoons of her”. Nevertheless, Gauguin’s portrait of Madeleine is, from a Japanese standpoint of beauty, a really fine piece of work. Her face is seen in close-up, her narrowed slit-like eyes are painted with a bold line, and essentially speaking her coy pose is very much akin to the kind of posture adopted by women depicted by Utamaro in his “*Bijin-ga*”. (Plate 4) The ability to capture coquettish aspects of a woman’s behavior seems to be something that Utamaro and Gauguin shared.

Theo van Gogh’s brother Vincent had been pressing Gauguin to visit him in Arles but it seems very likely that it was Gauguin’s infatuation for Madeleine that prevented him from



Plate 4 : Kitagawa Utamaro, Uwaki no So - An Expression of Capricious Charm, Fujin Sogaku Juttai, c.a. 1792-93, woodblock print

making the trip until October. She then married the young Charles Raval who returned to France a year after Gauguin. Madeleine subsequently joined her brother Émile in his criticism of Gauguin and died in Cairo at the tender age of 25.

It was after this that the heart-broken Gauguin set off for Tahiti. So while the Forest of Love had provided him with that great leap in his artistic development, it had also caused him great pain. ■

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