CHAPTER NINETEEN

France during la Belle Epoque

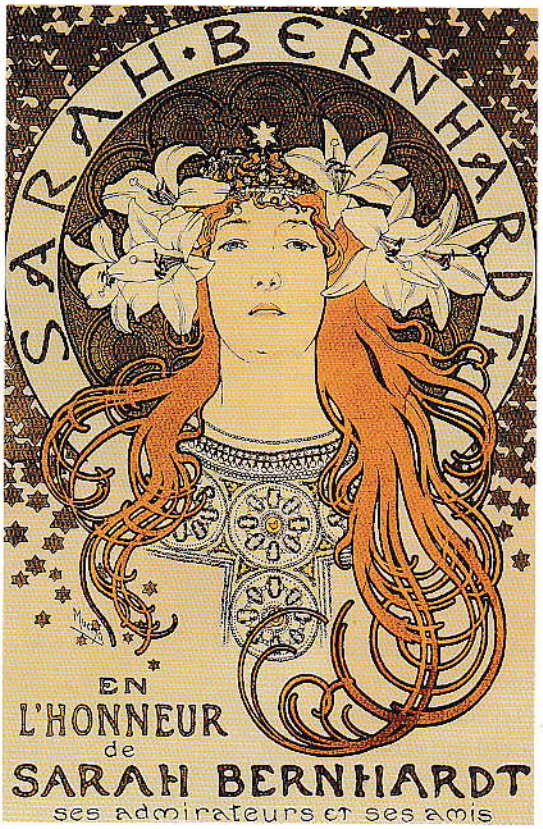
The French refer to the two decades on either side of 1900 as *la belle époque* (the beautiful era), a period that ended once and for all with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. This was, indeed, a glorious time when the arts, music, and literature flourished and life was full of diverse pleasures for the rich and the super-rich.

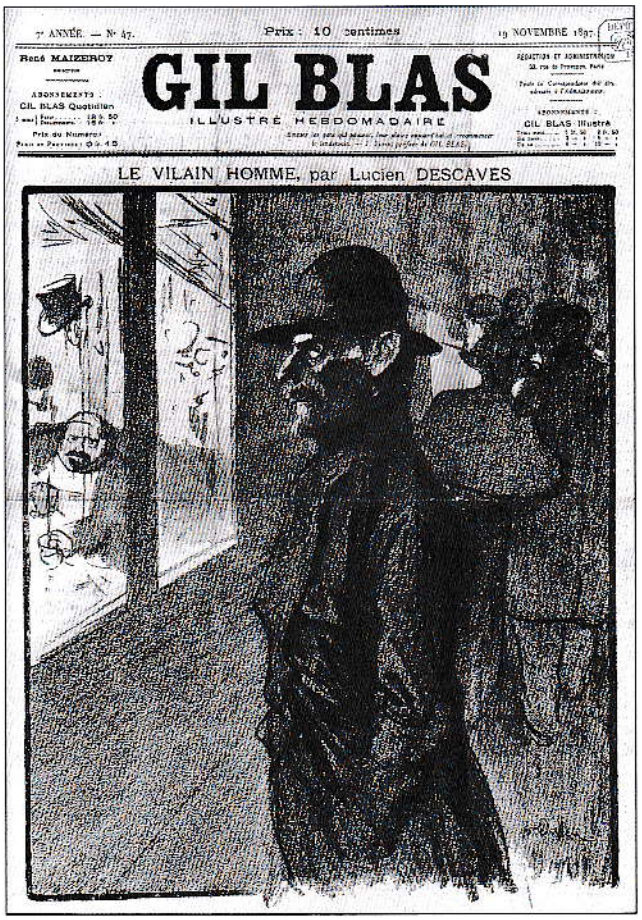
The internationally famous actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) embodied the allure of the period. Although she had been acting since the 1860s, she rose to stardom in the 1880s, when she performed a series of roles especially written for her by Victorien Sardou (1831–1908). In many of these she played a *femme fatale*, a beautiful but ruthless woman who loves and destroys with equal passion. The fascination with the *femme fatale* has often been seen as a defining characteristic of late nineteenth-century culture, as it hinted at once at a hankering for beauty and pleasure, and at a profound anxiety about the dangers that their attainment might cause.

A legend during her lifetime, Bernhardt owed much of her reputation to the expatriate Czech artist Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939). From the mid 1890s he designed her costumes and jewelry, as well as posters and promotional materials for her plays. Figure 19-1 illustrates one of Mucha's most popular images of Bernhardt, one that was used and reused for posters, magazine illustrations, and postcards. It

Paul Gauguin, *Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888. (Detail of FIG. 19-15.)

19-1 Alphonse Mucha, *Sarah Bernhardt* (published in *La Plume*), 1896. Color lithograph, 27 × 20" (69 × 50.8 cm). Private Collection.





19-2 Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, *The Wretched Man*, cover illustration for *Gil Blas*, November 19, 1897. Color photorelief. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

shows the actress as a combination queen/goddess, complete with a bejeweled tiara (designed by Mucha) and a golden halo. The image speaks of beauty, power, wealth, and success—the attributes that made people both admire and envy her.

Not all was beautiful in the *belle époque*. Politically, France experienced a series of crises that threatened the survival of the Third Republic. Most serious among these was the so-called Dreyfus affair. In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, an army officer of Jewish origin, was charged and convicted of selling military secrets to the Germans. While he was serving a lifelong sentence in France's penal colony on Devil's Island, information surfaced to suggest that he had been falsely accused. France became bitterly divided over the case. Radical republicans and socialists were convinced of his innocence, while conservatives maintained he was guilty. Moderate republicans, at first, tried not to get involved but eventually split in the middle over the issue. The Dreyfus affair deepened and sharpened political divisions in France and awakened a latent anti-Semitism.

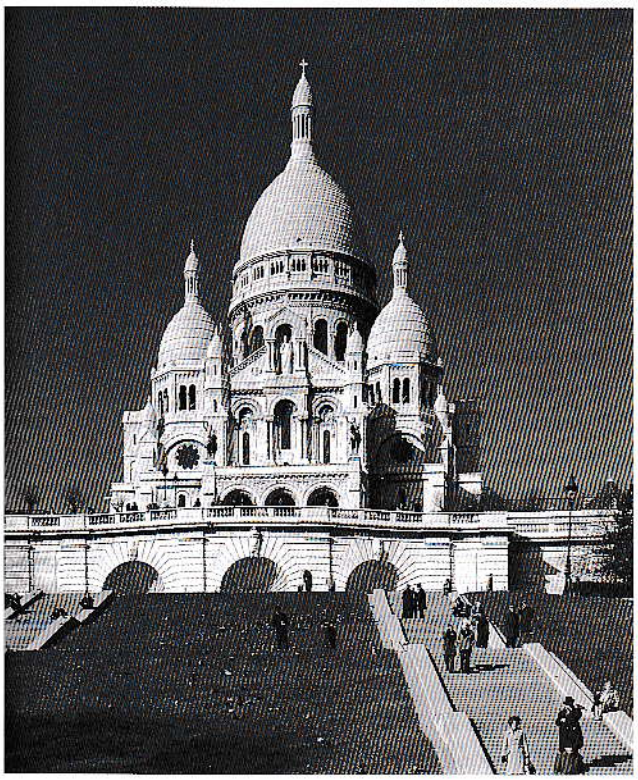
France's political divisions reflected, and were a response to, grave social and economic inequities. The *belle époque* was beautiful, indeed, to those who could afford opera and theater, elegant restaurants, luxury travel on steamers and trains, and expensive clothing. But while a lucky few enjoyed the luxury life, many people lived dreary lives at or below the poverty level. Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen (1859–1923), an illustrator with socialist, even anarchist, sympathies, drew attention to these people in illustrations for left-wing newspapers. His drawing for a story called *The Wretched Man* (FIG. 19-2) was published on the cover of the paper *Gil Blas*. It depicts a social outcast, peering angrily through a restaurant window, behind which an overweight patron is eating a lavish meal.

To those most sensitive to the decade's political divisions and social inequalities, the 1890s seemed not so much a *belle époque* as a period of decadence, an ominous time that spelled the beginning of the end of Western civilization. Many felt that the excessive luxury of the period was a sign of moral decay. The term *fin de siècle* (end of the century), which is also used for this period, alludes to a feeling of world-weariness, anxiety, and even despair that was shared by many intellectuals and artists of the time. The high rate of alcoholism, insanity, and suicide among them is indicative of this phenomenon. Camille Claudel (1864–1943), Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch (1863–1944), and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) are just a few examples of artists who appear to have been unable to cope with the tensions of the time.

It is not coincidental that the *fin de siècle* witnessed the rapid development of psychiatry. In the late 1880s and early 1890s the Parisian clinic of the neurologist–psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) was one of the most famous in Europe, attracting patients from across the continent. Charcot became a master teacher of psychiatry whose many students included the Viennese Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). In addition to psychiatry, religion also offered solace to those whose nerves were frayed by the pressures of the period. During the 1890s there was a revival of Roman Catholic piety and of several esoteric movements, such as Rosicrucianism. The decade also witnessed the development of new philosophies of life, such as theosophy, and of new styles of living, such as vegetarianism, meditation, and naturism.

Transport of Soul and Body: Sacré Coeur and the Metro

Two major architectural projects of the 1890s are indicative of the contradictions of the period. The first was the gigantic church built in the outer district of Montmartre, a recently urbanized area of Paris that was inhabited by working-class people and young artists, writers, and actors, who were attracted by its low rents. Built between 1876 and 1914, the church of the Sacré Coeur (Sacred Heart) (FIG. 19-3) is today the second major landmark of Paris after the Eiffel Tower. The church was the result of a vow, made by a group of religious conservatives, to build a church to thank God for delivering France from the Prussians and the Commune.



19-3 Paul Abadie and others, Sacré Coeur (Church of the Sacred Heart), 1876–1914. Paris.

The original design was by the architect Paul Abadie (1812–1884), who had once worked on the restoration of Notre-Dame under the supervision of Viollet-le-Duc (see page 270). Like Viollet-le-Duc, Abadie was fascinated with medieval architecture, although his interest was in early medieval (Romanesque) rather than late medieval (Gothic) buildings. His design for Sacré Coeur was inspired by the Romanesque churches in southern France that he had restored at the beginning of his career.

The Sacré Coeur represents a glorious conclusion to the architectural revivalism that marked most of the nineteenth century. From the late eighteenth century onward, architects had imitated historical models—Classical, medieval, or baroque—either straightforwardly ("architectural historicism") or by mixing elements of different styles and periods ("eclecticism"). The Neo-Romanesque style of the Sacré Coeur was the latest of the major nineteenth-century revival styles, which had included Neoclassical, Neo-Gothic, Neo-Renaissance, and Neobaroque, roughly in that order. With its associations of medieval piety and spirituality it was an apt response to a deeply felt need, at the turn of the century, for religious transport and even mysticism.

After Sacré Coeur, the second major construction project that was carried out in Paris at the end of the century was a network of tunnels, hallways, and stations for an underground train service. Following the example of London, which had built its first "tube" in 1860, the French began the construction of the metro (short for metropolitan railroad) in 1898. The initial 6½ miles were opened in 1900.

In 1896 a competition was organized for the design of the metro entrances. Although the young architect Hector Guimard (1867–1942) did not win the competition, he nevertheless received the commission and designed several different entrances. The metro entrance at the Boissière station (FIG. 19-4) represents one of his standard designs.

19-4 Hector Guimard, Entrance to the Boissière metro station, 1900. Paris.

It comprises a railing surrounding the staircase and a monumental sign above the entrance illuminated by two tall lanterns. Even a cursory look at Guimard's metro entrance makes it clear that it represents something new in nineteenth-century architecture. Its design is based not on historical models but on natural forms. The two lanterns, for example, look like giant lily stems about to blossom into flowers. Their stalks are made of green-tinted cast iron, and the buds are yellow glass light fixtures. The irregular, organic form of the lanterns is echoed in the other lines of the entrance, which are mostly curved and asymmetrical.

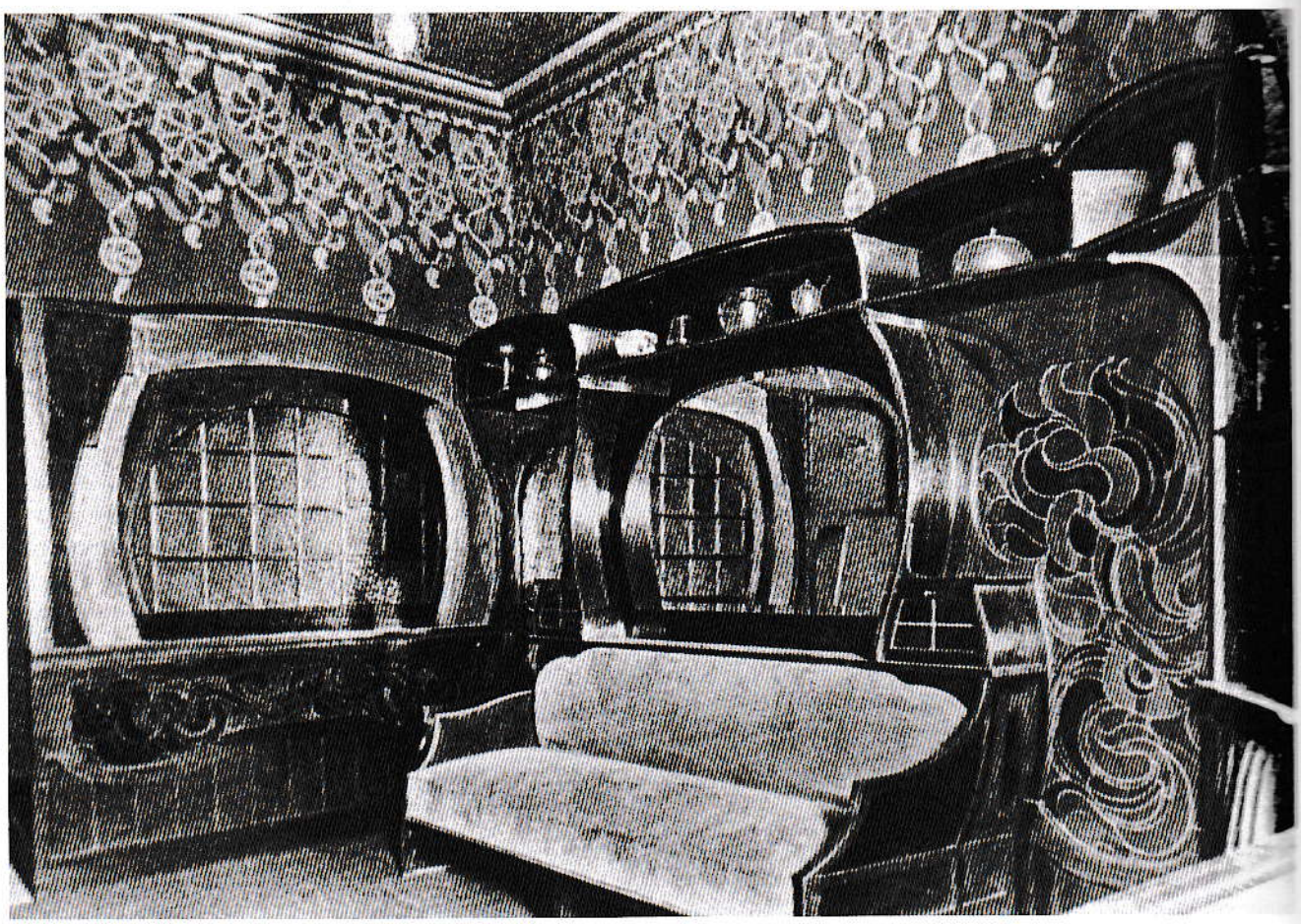
Guimard's design for the Paris metro entrances is representative of what the French call *art nouveau* (new art), an innovative approach to design marked by the rejection of revivalism and eclecticism and the search for new forms inspired by plants, marine life, and other natural forms. The mass production of these forms, sinuous, irregular, and often quite intricate, was made possible by the use of new materials, notably cast iron and molded glass. In addition, the modular design of the stations allowed for many dozens to be put up in a period of only a few years.

Together, the Sacré Coeur and Guimard's metro stations sum up at once the conservative, backward-looking attitudes and the modernist, forward-looking attitudes of the *fin-de-siècle* period. They embody the contradictory character of a time that both rekindled such ancient practices and beliefs as alchemy, occultism, and spiritualism, and witnessed the introduction of electric lighting, the automobile, and the phonograph.

Art Nouveau, Siegfried Bing, and the Concept of Decoration

Art nouveau, to a greater or lesser extent, pervaded all the arts, although it was most prominent in architecture and the decorative arts. Although the terms "new art" (*art nouveau*) and "new style" (*style nouveau*) were in circulation from at least the late 1880s, *art nouveau* acquired a more specific meaning in the mid 1890s, with the establishment of a La Maison de l'Art Nouveau (The House of New Art), a store and showroom of contemporary design, by Siegfried Bing (1838–1905). This German-born art dealer, critic, and entrepreneur had made a fortune importing Japanese arts and crafts; he also took an interest in contemporary design. In 1894 he traveled to North America, where he admired both the artistry and the business acumen of Louis

19-5 Henri van de Velde and George Lemmen, Smoking Room, designed for Siegfried Bing, 1895. Contemporary photograph.



Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933). A year later he opened the Maison de l'Art Nouveau in Paris. His purpose was to bring together several artists whom he admired and to have them develop a new decorative style. Thus Bing took the lead in the movement towards design reform that had been initiated by a French government agency, the Central Union of the Decorative Arts, but that needed his money and energy to succeed.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, interiors had generally been cluttered with an eclectic mixture of objects in different period styles. To achieve more stylistic unity, Bing began commissioning entire interiors from one or two designers. The inaugural exhibition of the Maison de l'Art Nouveau included six such rooms, which were remarkable at the time for their stylistic unity and relative simplicity. Unfortunately, none of the six rooms was preserved, but contemporary photographs give us an idea of what they looked like. The Smoking Room (FIG. 19-5), designed by the Belgian designers Henri van de Velde (1863–1957) and George Lemmen (1865–1916), shows how the two artists used the theme of smoke as the guiding design principle for the room. The billowing forms of the wall paneling, with its built-in windows, mirrors, and shelves, create a comfortable feeling, suitable for a gentleman's leisurely after-dinner smoke.

On several occasions Bing commissioned "fine" artists rather than interior designers or architects to design rooms. In so doing, he hoped to erase the boundaries between the fine and the decorative arts. In his mind, all artists should be equally concerned with the creation of interior spaces of beauty. Bing was not alone in this conviction; there was a common feeling in the 1890s that the artist's primary role was "decoration," that is, to create domestic environments inside which people could find relief from the pressures and ugliness they encountered in the outside world.

The Sources of *Art Nouveau*

Although the term *art nouveau* would seem to suggest that this type of art was entirely new and unprecedented, in fact the style had several sources. One of these was British design of the second half of the nineteenth century. William Morris, as early as the 1860s, had found inspiration in natural forms (see page 358), admiring them for their complexity and irregularity. Like Bing, Morris also firmly believed that the fine and decorative arts should be united.

A second source of *art nouveau* was rococo design, which was similarly inspired by forms of nature. The sinuous lines, asymmetrical forms, and playful character of *art nouveau* had much in common with the architecture and decorative arts of the first half of the eighteenth century. Interest in the rococo period was rekindled in the late nineteenth century by Edmond de Goncourt (1822–1896) and his brother Jules (1830–1870). In their serial publication *Eighteenth-Century Art* (1859–75), as well as in several books on famous eighteenth-century women, the Goncourts interpreted the rococo period as one of grace, imagination, and creativity.

Artists of the end of the nineteenth century looked upon the arts of the first half of the eighteenth century as a model, not to be imitated—as the rococo revivalists of earlier decades had done—but to be adapted to a modern aesthetic. The delicate wooden screen designed by the well-known French designer Emile Gallé (1846–1904) is a case in point (FIG. 19-6). Like rococo furniture, it is elegant and shows irregular contours. But it is simpler and lighter than most rococo works, and less abundantly decorated.

Japanese prints and decorative arts were a third important inspiration for *art nouveau*. Since the Universal Exposition of 1867 (see page 366), when craft objects from Japan had first been exhibited, Japanese art had become all the rage in Europe. In France, Bing himself had contributed greatly

19-6 Emile Gallé, Screen, 1900. Ashwood, carved and inlaid with various woods, height 3'6" (1.07 m). Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

19-7 Emile Gallé, Vase, ca. 1890–1900. Glass with molded and enameled decoration, height 12" (30.5 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

19-8 Anonymous Japanese artist, Hexagonal bowl, early eighteenth century. Diameter 9" (22.9 cm). British Museum, London.

toward cultivating a taste for all things Japanese. Before opening the Maison de l'Art Nouveau in 1895, he had owned a store selling Japanese crafts and had founded a monthly periodical, *Le Japon Artistique* (Artistic Japan).

While to us today it would appear that the taste for Japanese art and a fondness for rococo are mutually exclusive, in the nineteenth century this was not so. The Goncourts, major proponents of the rococo style, were also avid collectors of Japanese prints and decorative art pieces. Similarly, designers such as Gallé studied both rococo furniture and Japanese art objects to find inspiration for their designs. Gallé's hexagonal glass vase with molded glass and enamel applications (FIG. 19-7) is reminiscent of Japanese porcelains not only in its shape but also in its decoration (FIG. 19-8). Gallé did not imitate Japanese art in a slavish manner. Instead, he adapted the general characteristics of Japanese decoration, namely asymmetry and freedom, to his art.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and the Art Nouveau Poster

The impact of Japanese art was, perhaps, most clearly visible in the new commercial art form of the picture poster (see *Posters*, opposite). Posters called for striking yet simple images that would be easily recognized from afar. No wonder that many poster artists were inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, whose simple flowing contours, bright flat (uniform in hue and shade) colors, and unusual compositions seemed the perfect models.

That was certainly true for Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, perhaps the greatest poster designer of the *fin-de-siècle* period. Born into an aristocratic family, Toulouse-Lautrec had left his parental château in southern France to become an artist. As a student, he was drawn to the nightlife that was just then developing in Montmartre, the area where the Sacré

19-9 Leonetto Cappiello, *Stenodactyle La Faurie.* Color lithographic poster, 26 × 29" (66 × 73.7 cm). Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The sudden development of picture posters in the 1870s was the result of a combination of factors. The constantly increasing manufacture of consumer products made advertising a growing necessity. Producers became dissatisfied with the small letterpress posters that had been used to promote consumer goods. A more attractive, pictorial mode of advertising was sought, and it was provided by the lithographed color poster.

By the late 1870s the lithographic process (see page 212) had been improved and refined to the point where it could be used to print images in many colors. In addition, large presses had been developed that made it possible to print on sizable sheets of paper. By the mid 1880s posters were seen covering the walls of urban buildings or mounted on cars riding through the streets. By 1889 they were considered such a uniquely modern phenomenon that a special exhibition of posters was mounted at the international exposition in the Palace of Liberal Arts. That same year, poster exhibitions were held in several other cities in France.

Posters soon became collectors' items. As early as 1891, a commercial gallery organized an exhibition of posters for sale to interested buyers. Before long, production became split between posters that were made primarily for outdoor advertising use and those that were made for collectors. The latter, frequently made to advertise theatrical or musical performances, might be mounted indoors for brief periods of time but soon found their way into galleries or collectors' apartments.

The poster that Leonetto Cappiello (1875–1942) designed for a stenographic machine (FIG. 19-9) belongs to the first category. It advertises a new secretarial tool that allowed the user to type 150 words a minute. The poster not only shows the machine in use, but also contains the address where one could buy it and the name of the school—the Women's Professional Institute—where one could take lessons on how to use it. It is both informative and attractive to look at.

The posters of Jules Chéret (1836–1932) belong to the second group. In their time they were in great demand among collectors. Chéret's poster for a performance of Loie Fuller (1862–1928) in the well-known nightclub Folies Bergère, is all about image and contains only a minimal amount of text (FIG. 19-10). The poster shows the famous American dancer in one of her spectacular "serpentine" dances in which, dressed in billowing folds of silk, she whirled around under carefully controlled light effects. Chéret's posters are marked by large areas of color in single hues—the green of the background, the flesh color of the face and arms, the light green of the legs. Only the whirling silks show two or sometimes even three hues, to suggest the effects of light on the shimmering silks. This reduction of colors and hues is, of course, intrinsic to the print medium. But it was eminently suitable for poster art, which was meant to be seen from afar, at a glance, and had to make an immediate impression.

19-10 Jules Chéret, *Loie Fuller at the Folies Bergère.* 1893. Color lithographic poster, 48⅞ × 34⅝" (124 × 88 cm). Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

19-11 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Le Divan Japonais*, 1892–93. Color lithographic poster, 31 × 23⅝" (80 × 60 cm). Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

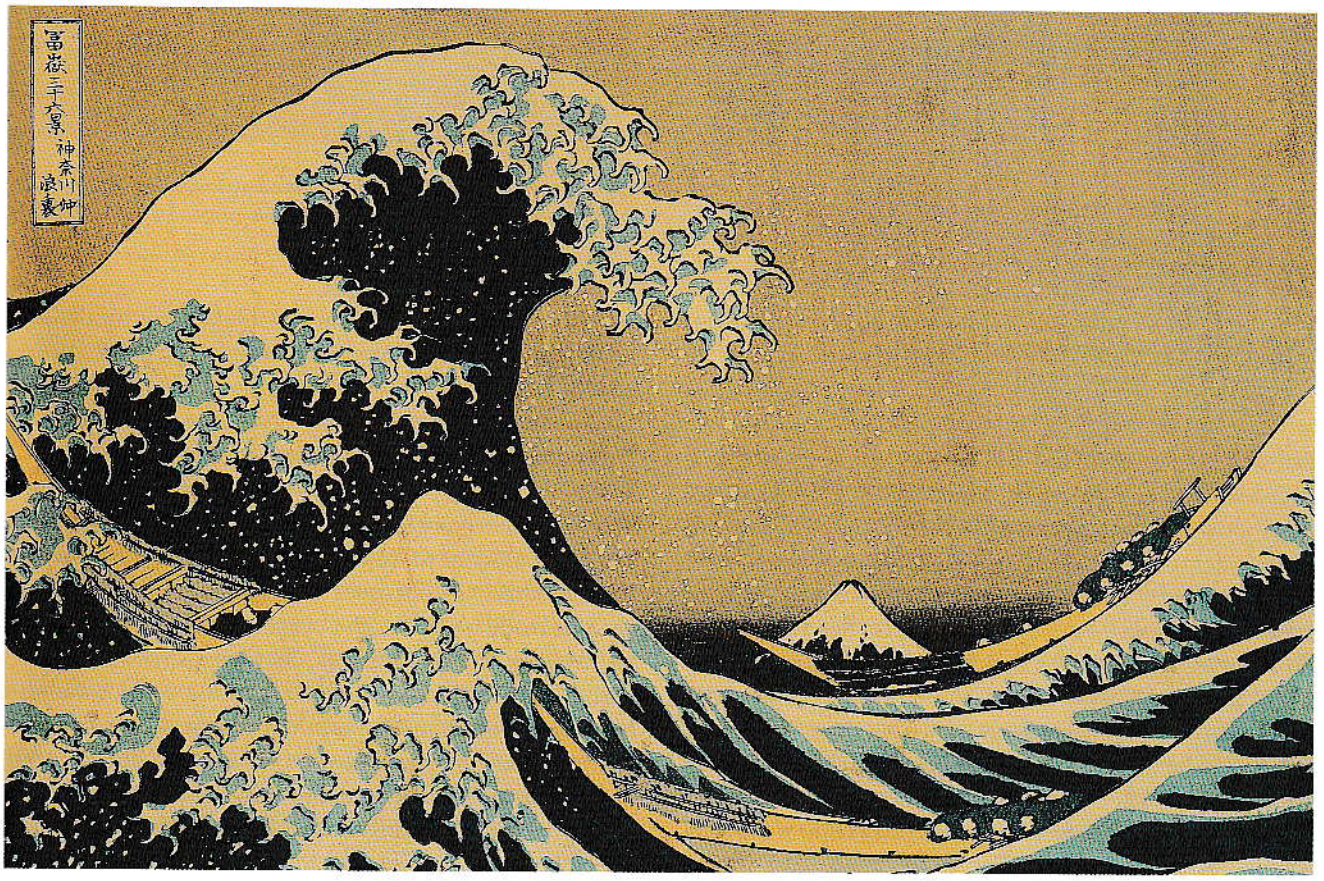
Coeur was being built. In the nightclubs, cabarets, and brothels of that part of Paris, he found not only the subjects of his art, but also patrons—the owners of the various night establishments who asked him to design promotional posters for their businesses.

Toulouse-Lautrec's poster for the Divan Japonais (Japanese Love Seat; FIG. 19-11), one of the numerous nightclubs in Montmartre, stands out for its unusual conception and composition. Unlike earlier representations of dance or cabaret performances by artists such as Degas and Seurat (see FIGS. 16-34 and 17-5), the emphasis here is not on the performers but on the spectators. The poster shows a beautiful redhead, wearing a tight-fitting black coat and an enormous black hat with an ostrich feather. Behind her sits her companion, a middle-aged gentleman sporting a cane and a monocle. He leans over as if to whisper something into her ear. She, however, remains focused on the stage, where a headless female performer with long black gloves sings, accompanied by a small pit orchestra. The waving hands of the conductor and the necks of the double basses form an exotic, ghostlike backdrop to the main figures. The poster derives its power both from its startling composition and from the radical simplification of the forms. The streamlined black silhouette of the woman's [Jane Avril's] slender, sexy body immediately attracts viewers' eyes and draws them into the space in which she and her companion are seated. Only gradually do we become aware of their surroundings and of the poster's text—which provides the name of the cabaret, its address, and the name of its director.

When we compare the Divan Japonais poster with a print by Utamaro (see FIG. 17-30) we can see that the juxtaposition of large areas of flat color, one of the characteristic features of Toulouse-Lautrec's poster, is one of the hallmarks of Japanese prints. Lautrec's startling composition may also have been inspired by Japanese art. The famous print series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, by the Japanese printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) contains a print called *The Great Wave* (FIG. 19-12), in which the chief subject, Mount Fuji, is all but hidden behind several enormous waves and a fishing boat that appears to cut the mountain sheer in half. In the Divan Japonais poster we encounter a similar situation because the main spectacle—the singer on the stage—is moved all the way to the rear and cut off both at the top and the bottom to be dominated by the spectators in front, who should be secondary to the performer.

In Toulouse-Lautrec's late posters, the tendency toward simplification and toward capturing the essence of his subject is carried to the limit. His poster advertising the art of the

19-12 Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave*, from *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, 1831. Woodblock print, approximately 10 × 15" (25 × 38 cm). Private Collection, London.



19-13 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *May Milton*, 1895. Color lithographic poster, 31 × 23" (78.7 × 59.6 cm). Milwaukee Art Museum.

British dancer May Milton (FIG. 19-13) is little more than a large buff-colored form against a solid dark-blue background, interrupted only by the letters of the dancer's name. Compared with contemporary posters such as the one by Jules Chéret for the dancer Loie Fuller (see FIG. 19-10), Toulouse-Lautrec's poster is minimalist. His colors are entirely flat, and there is no attempt at suggesting depth or three-dimensionality. Instead, contour plays an important role. Lautrec's movement toward abstraction (pulling away from reality) was something that would be greatly admired by young artists in the early twentieth century. No less an artist than the young Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) is known to have had a copy of the May Milton poster in his room in Barcelona.

Toulouse-Lautrec, the Painter

Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings and drawings frequently show subjects similar to those that populate his posters—actors on stage or the public of dance halls and cabarets. An exception must be made for his brothel scenes, which are common in his paintings and drawings but, for obvious reasons, absent from his poster designs. Toulouse-Lautrec was not the first artist to find inspiration in brothels. Degas, as well as other late nineteenth-century artists, had drawn and painted prostitutes, either walking the streets, waiting for clients, or simply resting or chatting. But Toulouse-Lautrec, more than any other artist, was able to paint the brothel "from the inside."

19-14 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *In the Salon of the Brothel of the Rue des Moulins*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 43 × 52" (1.11 × 1.32 m). Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi.

Deformed by a childhood accident that had stopped the growth of his legs, the artist often felt pitied by the women in his own social circle. For this reason, he preferred liaisons with prostitutes, which were "strictly business." In the early 1890s, in particular, he spent much time in brothels, becoming familiar with the women and their daily lives. Eventually, according to his friend Thadée Natanson, he "ceased to be a client and became a member of the household." This familiarity with the daily life of prostitutes enabled him to paint them both honestly and sympathetically.

Between 1892 and 1895 Toulouse-Lautrec completed more than 50 paintings of brothel scenes, the most important of which was *In the Salon of the Brothel of the Rue des Moulins* (FIG. 19-14). The painting takes the viewer inside the gaudy salon of one of the most expensive brothels in Paris. On the red velvet couches, amidst mirrors and gilded columns, five jaded prostitutes sit and wait. A sixth paces back and forth, her skirt pulled up unselfconsciously. With their high, hennaed hair and their faces smeared with lead-white, rouge, and lipstick, they seem at once grotesque and pathetic. Their countenances forced into professional smiles, they look as if they are wearing masks. Toulouse-Lautrec has powerfully characterized the atmosphere of false gaiety in the brothel, where love is not freely given but sold to those who cannot otherwise find it.

In the Salon of the Brothel of the Rue des Moulins is painted in a style and technique all Toulouse-Lautrec's own. The artist often sketched the outlines of the figures in bright blue or green. Rather than concealing the sketch lines in the painting process, he allowed them to show through the final paint layers. The colors themselves are applied in rapid, loose strokes, which rarely completely cover the primed (or even unprimed) canvas. In addition, Toulouse-Lautrec often mixed the oils with a great deal of turpentine, which made them

look like pastels when they dried. All this gave to his works, even such "finished" ones as *In the Salon of the Brothel of the Rue des Moulins*, the appearance of sketches.

Toulouse-Lautrec's technique exemplifies the new artistic liberty that many young artists felt in the wake of Impressionism. Like Seurat, Cézanne, and Van Gogh (see Chapter 18), he felt entirely free to develop techniques that would suit his subject matter and temperament. Like them, too, he felt justified to exaggerate or distort forms found in reality, if it was in the interest of achieving his artistic goals.

Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard: Cloisonnism and Synthetism

The innovative technique and formal liberation found in the paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec also mark the work of Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). Born in Peru, the native country of his mother, Gauguin moved to France at the age of 7. Orphaned at the age of 17, he came under the tutelage of Gustave Arosa, a wealthy financier and art collector, who helped him to get a job as a stockbroker and also exposed him to art. Financially secure, in 1873 Gauguin married Mette-Sophie Gad, a young Danish woman, with whom he had five children.

In the course of the 1870s Gauguin became increasingly interested in art, not only as a collector but also as a practitioner. It started as a hobby, but in due course it took over his life. His meeting with Camille Pissarro (see page 390), who became both his teacher and mentor, was of crucial importance for his development as a painter. Pissarro brought Gauguin into the circle of the Impressionists, helping him to get some of his early works admitted to the Impressionist exhibitions.

In a stock market crash in 1882 Gauguin lost his bank job and decided to try to make a career as an artist. While his wife and children moved in with his parents-in-law in Denmark, Gauguin struggled alone to make ends meet. Trying to find an inexpensive place to live, he was drawn to the French province of Brittany. Economically and culturally backward, Brittany had become a refuge for young artists, who found cheap room and board in its small villages, and a less stressful environment than in Paris.

19-15 Paul Gauguin, *Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 28 × 36" (73 × 92 cm). National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

During a second stay in Brittany in 1888 Gauguin, now aged 40, met a 20-year-old painter called Emile Bernard (1868–1941). Bernard was experimenting with a new mode of painting that he called Cloisonnism, after cloisonné enameling, a technique in which thin bands of gold or silver are used to outline areas filled with brightly colored enamel pastes. Cloisonnism, analogously, was a mode of painting in which dark contours outlined areas of flat color. Like enamels or, for that matter, stained-glass windows or Japanese prints, Cloisonnist paintings did not offer an illusion of three-dimensional reality. Instead, they were intended as expressions, through form and color, of the inner poetry and mystery of reality.

Interested in Bernard's ideas, which he helped to flesh out and develop, Gauguin painted a number of paintings of Breton themes that exemplify the new tendency toward abstraction (or what he himself called "style"), that is, the movement away from illusionist naturalism toward an art of synthesis and expression. Best known among these paintings is *Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)* (FIG. 19-15), completed in September 1888. A revolutionary work, it shows a group of Breton peasant women, dressed in the exotic white caps of the region, who appear to experience a vision inspired by the impassioned sermon of the priest. Kneeling in a half circle, in the shade of a tree, they "see" the struggle between Jacob and the angel, as it is told in the biblical book of Genesis (32:24–32).

Compositionally the painting is striking for the radical way in which it is partitioned by the diagonal trunk of an apple tree, darkly silhouetted against the red background. This seems to separate the earthly realm from the heavenly one, an impression heightened by the fact that the peasant women are painted in subdued colors—white, dark blue, and black—while Jacob and the angel are ultramarine blue, green, and chrome yellow. Clearly, in this painting Gauguin aimed not at illusionism, but at conveying, through form and color, his own experience of the simple, unshakable faith of the Breton peasant women.

Emile Bernard, resentful that Gauguin was taking the lead in the development of a new art that he had pioneered, responded to his *Vision after the Sermon* by painting *Breton Women in a Meadow* (FIG. 19-16). Bernard's work was inspired by a recent pardon (see page 445) that he had witnessed in the town of Pont-Aven. In his own words, he "deliberately painted a sunlit field, illuminated with Breton bonnets and blue-black groups" to contrast his work with Gauguin's dark and mysterious scene. It is interesting to compare both artists' works, with their simplified forms and bright, flat colors, to the *Brittany Pardon* by Dagnan-Bouveret, painted

19-16 Emile Bernard, *Breton Women in a Meadow*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 29 × 36" (74 × 92 cm). Private Collection, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

just three years earlier (see FIG. 18-7). Juxtaposing the three, one readily sees the divergent directions in which artists were moving at the end of the nineteenth century. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, one is inclined to see the difference between Dagnan-Bouveret's *Brittany Pardon* and the Breton scenes by Gauguin and Bernard in simple terms of traditional versus modern. It is noteworthy that, in his own time, Dagnan-Bouveret was not seen as a reactionary but as an innovative artist, and indeed he was. Yet his innovations led him into a "photorealist" direction that was the exact opposite of Bernard and Gauguin's movement toward abstraction.

While Dagnan-Bouveret's *Brittany Pardon* was hailed at the Universal Exposition of 1889 as a modern masterpiece, Gauguin exhibited 17 paintings, mostly of Breton scenes, in a café located close to the exhibition grounds. The owner of the Café Volpini had "lent" his walls to Gauguin and seven like-minded artists so that they could mount a "protest" exhibition, similar in spirit to those that Courbet had organized in 1855 and 1867. Called the Exhibition of the Impressionist and Synthetist Group, the Café Volpini exhibition inspired the term "Synthetism," coined by Gauguin to distinguish his art from Bernard's Cloisonnism. Derived from the French verb *synthétiser* (to synthesize), Synthetism referred to an artistic endeavor that had three separate though related aims: to convey to the viewer something about the real appearance of the subject; to express the poetry the artist saw within it; and to create works that had a "decorative" quality. By the last term, Gauguin meant a kind of painting in which form (lines, colors, and shapes) took precedence over subject matter. Perhaps the best characterization of the spirit of Synthetism was provided by the young Maurice Denis (1870–1943), one of Gauguin's fellow exhibitors, who in 1890 wrote the now famous line, "It is well to remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." Denis thus launched an idea that would become very important in the twentieth century, namely that the form of a work of art is more important than its content.

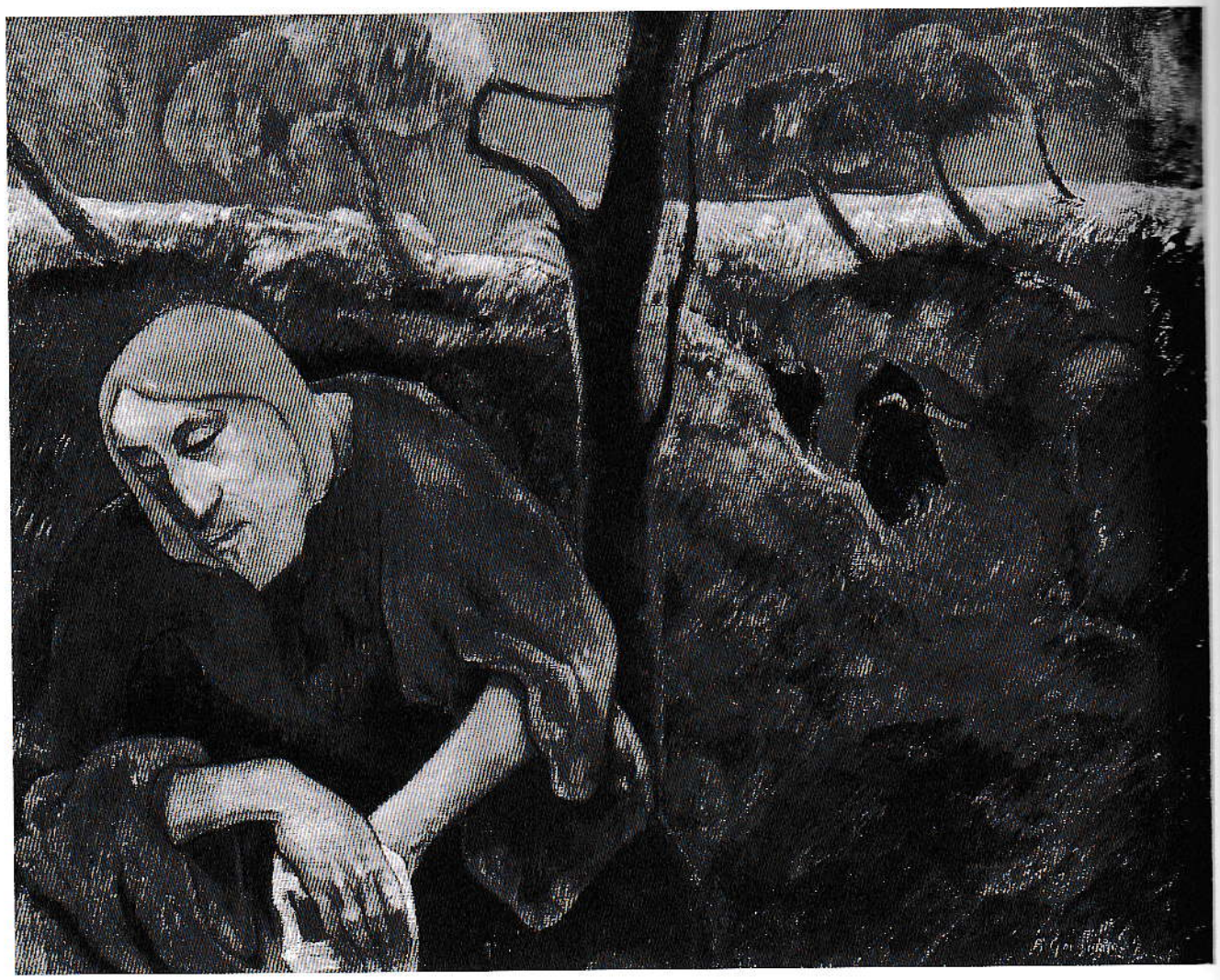
Paul Gauguin: The Passion for Non-Western Culture

In his struggle to make a living from art, Gauguin received some help from Theo van Gogh, a progressive art dealer in Paris. Theo van Gogh introduced Gauguin to his brother Vincent and, in 1889, lent him money to visit the latter in Arles. The few months the two artists spent together were tumultuous, ending in the famous incident in which Vincent cut off part of his ear. During long and heated discussions Gauguin and Van Gogh argued whether it was better to work from the motif or from memory, and whether artists should paint only what they had seen, or whether they could work from imagination.

Not long after his return from Arles to Brittany, Gauguin painted *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (FIG. 19-17), representing Christ's momentary anxiety, at Gethsemane, in the face of his suffering and death. It was a subject that had also been treated by Emile Bernard and by Van Gogh, although the latter destroyed both his attempts at painting this biblical scene. Vincent wrote to his brother Theo that he could not paint without models. Thus while Van Gogh remained true to the Realist and Impressionist precept that artists should only paint what they could see, Gauguin and Bernard asserted the primary importance of the imagination.

The interest of all three artists in the subject of *Christ in the Garden of Olives* was related to the contemporary view of Jesus as a model of moral courage and intellectual independence. The historian Ernest Renan, in *The Life of Jesus* (1863), had referred to Christ in the garden of olives as "the man who has sacrificed a peaceful existence and the legitimate awards of life to a grand idea . . . [and who] experiences a moment of sad introspection when the image of death represents itself to him for the first time and seeks to persuade him that it is all in vain." This Jesus was a man with whom Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Bernard all identified. No wonder that Gauguin gave Christ his own traits, thus equating his own suffering as a misunderstood genius with the Passion of Christ.

19-17 Paul Gauguin, *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 28 × 35⅞" (73 × 92 cm). Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.



19-18 Paul Gauguin, *Tahitian Women: On the Beach*, 1891. Oil on fine-weave canvas, 26⅞ × 35" (69 × 91 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

To Gauguin, the way out of Gethsemane, that is, the uncaring, materialist world of "civilized" Europe, was suggested by the Universal Exposition of 1889. Viewing the displays of Pacific cultures, he began to explore the possibility of leaving France for a place as far away as possible from civilization as he knew it. Eventually he chose the Polynesian island of Tahiti, which had been a French protectorate since 1842 and a colony since 1880. There, as he wrote to his wife, he hoped to find a life of "ecstasy, calm, and art." There, "far from the European struggle for money," he expected to live a life in harmony with nature, much like the life that Adam and Eve had led in Paradise.

The Tahiti that Gauguin found on his arrival, by steamship, in the capital of Papeete, was far removed from his paradisiacal dreams. As he wrote in *Noa Noa* (1897), the semifictional account of his Tahitian stay, "it was Europe—the Europe which I had thought to shake off—and that under the aggravating circumstances of colonial snobbism, and the imitation, grotesque even to the point of caricature, of our customs, fashions, vices, and absurdities of civilization." His move to the Tahitian countryside brought him a little closer to his dreams, though even there European "civilization," in its varied manifestations of Christianity, alcoholism, and venereal disease, had made inroads. But Gauguin was determined to get back to the unspoiled origins of Tahitian culture. Like an anthropologist doing fieldwork, he tried to get as close as possible to the native Polynesian population (even living with young Tahitian women), learned some of their language, and surrounded himself with their objects. In addition, he read the available literature on Tahiti, written by early European travelers who had visited the island before it was transformed by colonization. In so doing, Gauguin created for himself an ideal of precolonial Tahitian life that he made the subject of his paintings.

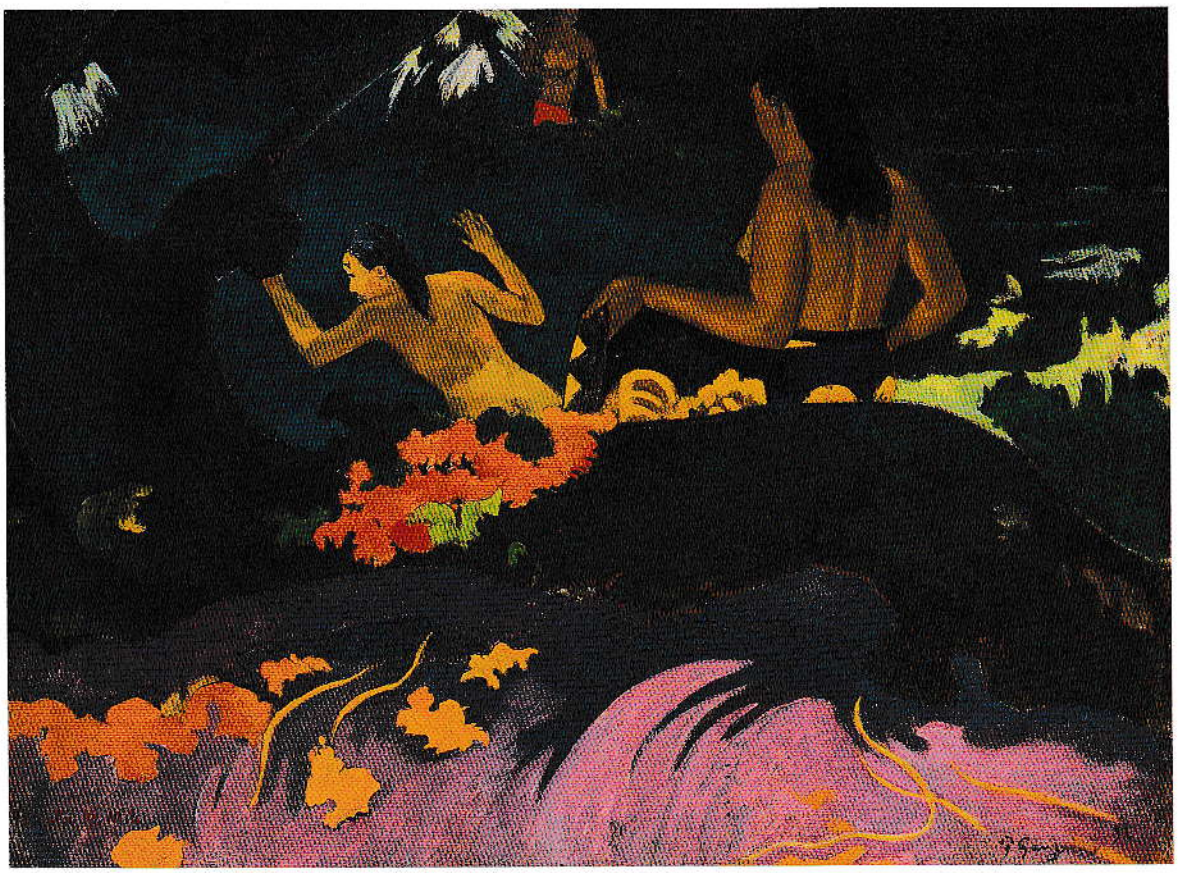
Tahitian Women: On the Beach (FIG. 19-18), painted shortly after his arrival in Tahiti, is still a relatively straightforward representation of a scene that Gauguin may have seen in the village where he lived. Two women are seated on a yellow plank. The one on the left is dressed in a white shirt tucked into a native *pareu*, the one on the right in a pink "missionary dress." Native and Western dress were worn side by side in Tahiti, much to the chagrin of the missionaries, who would have liked to outlaw Polynesian dress which left too much of the body exposed. The dress is not the only sign of

Westernization in this painting. The woman on the right, who appears to be making a hat out of strips of palm leaf, is engaged in productive work. Such hats were made both for domestic use and for export to France, and Tahitian women had turned their production into a small home industry.

How faithful Gauguin's painting was to the reality of Tahiti is clear from its resemblance to contemporary photographs by other French colonials living on the island. The photograph of *Young Tahitians Making Straw Hats* (FIG. 19-19) was taken only a few years after Gauguin's painting, by Henry Lemasson (1870–1956), the French director of the postal services in Tahiti. An amateur photographer and also a writer, Lemasson used his free time in Tahiti to write articles on the island which, together with his photographs, would be featured at the World's Fair of 1900 and the Colonial Exhibition of 1906. Lemasson's photograph and Gauguin's painting show a striking similarity of vision—that of recently arrived colonials who have carefully posed some willing natives to create images that have a semblance of authenticity.

Gauguin's later Tahitian paintings, such as *Fatata te miti* (Near the Sea; FIG. 19-20), bring us closer to the artist's

19-19 Henry Lemasson, *Young Tahitians Making Straw Hats*, 1896. Photograph, 5¼ × 4" (13.5 × 10 cm). Archives Nationales d'Outremer, Aix-en-Provence.



19-20 Paul Gauguin, *Fatata te miti* (Near the Sea), 1892. Oil on canvas, 26 × 35⅞" (68 × 92 cm). National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection, Washington, DC.

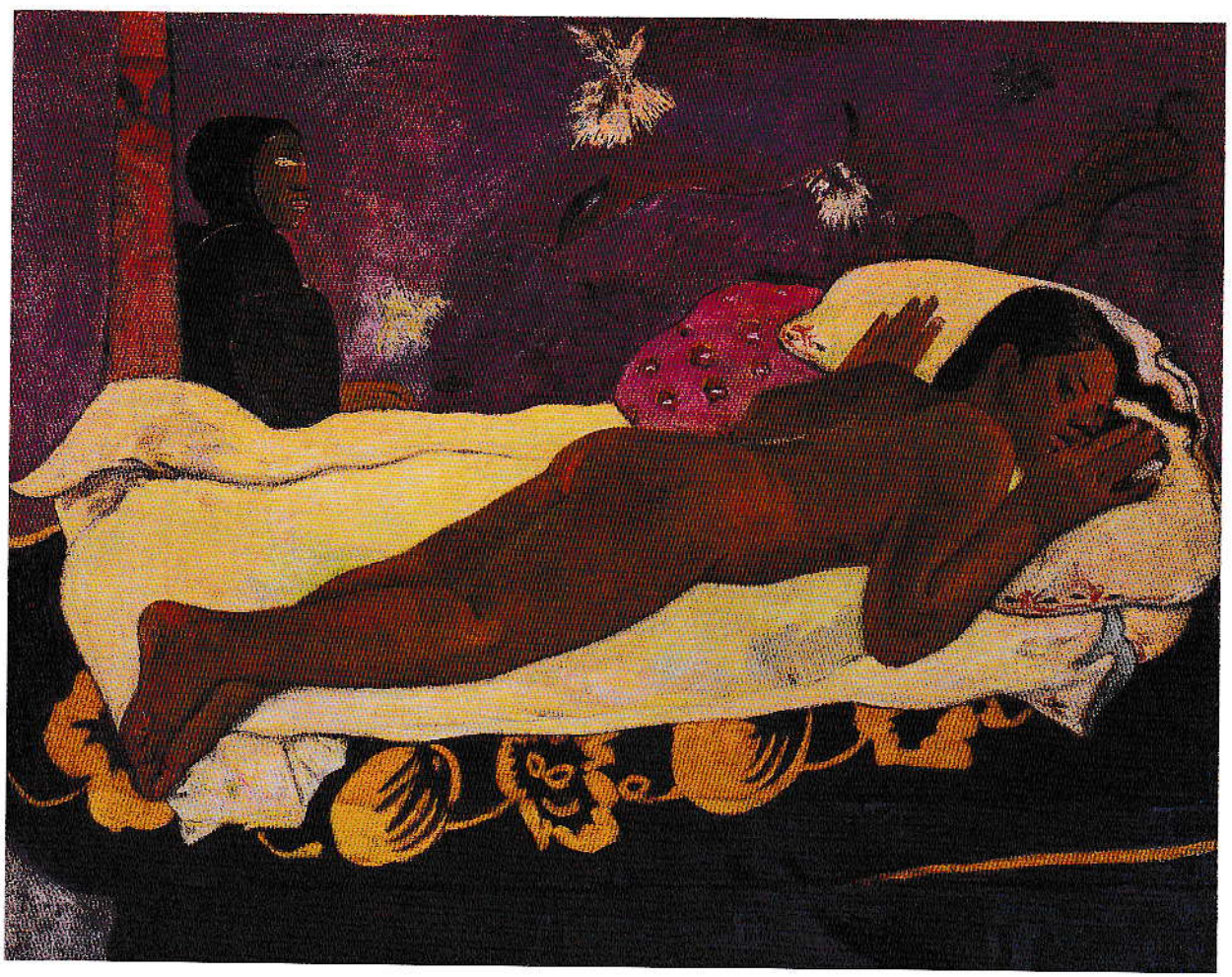
ideal vision of precolonial Tahiti, the earthly paradise of his dreams. In this painting two women go bathing in the sea. One throws herself into the waves, while the other unwraps her *pareu*. In the background, a male bather stands in the waves. The impression created here is one of a culture where shame is unknown, for people live so close to nature that nudity is accepted and normal.

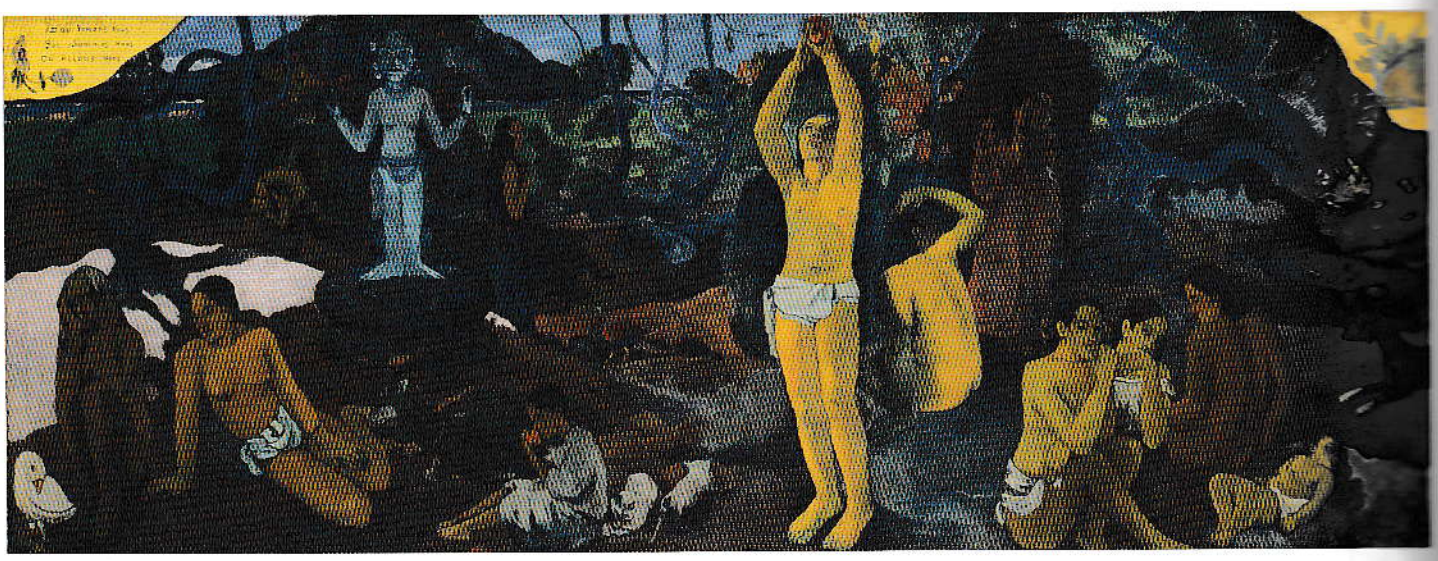
In *Fatata te miti* the sense of an earthly Eden seems confirmed by the richly colored foreground of the painting. Gauguin shows a pink and purple beach covered with clusters of orange and yellow leaves, separated from the water by the dark silhouette of a tree branch. One can hardly speak of a very realistic representation of landscape here, since colors and lines seem to have taken on a life of their own. Together they form a rich, abstract pattern with irregularly curved lines, reminiscent of *art nouveau* decorations.

To Gauguin, this was the "musical" part of his painting, which corresponded to the "literal" part in the background. This division was based on the idea that there are two worlds—a visual and a spiritual one—which correspond to one another. The decorative area in the foreground was a way of representing the spiritual world, which, to Gauguin, was best imagined as music or abstract color patterns. Gauguin's ideas about the correspondences between the real and spiritual worlds were neither new nor unique. They belonged to a long tradition of mystical thought that had enjoyed periodic revivals of interest throughout the nineteenth century and were central to the artistic movement known as Symbolism (see page 480).

The juxtaposition of the physical and spiritual worlds was nowhere more obvious than in *Manao tupapau* (The Specter Watches over Her; FIG. 19-21). The painting presumably represents Gauguin's teenage mistress (*vahine*), Tehamana, caught in a moment of panic as she is home alone at night and imagines herself surrounded by ghosts. In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin describes the incident that inspired the painting. Returning from a trip to Papeete, he found his house completely dark inside. As he lit a match, he saw "Tehura [a nickname for Tehamana], immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed with the eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me, and seemed not to recognize me . . . A contagion emanated from the terror of Tehura.

19-21 Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau* (The Specter Watches over Her), 1892. Oil on canvas, 28 × 35⅞" (73 × 92 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, A. Conger Goodyear Collection, Buffalo, New York.





19-22 Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 4'6" × 12'3" (1.39 × 3.75 m). Museum of Fine Arts, Tompkins Collection, Boston.

I had the illusion that a phosphorescent light was streaming from her staring eyes."

In *Manao tupapau* the spiritual world is embodied in *tupapau*, the ghost, the little black figure behind Tehura that looks like a statue carved from wood. It is also made visible in the pink and purple background, which is punctuated by white flowery forms. Together they represent Tehura's vision, or, to use a clinical term, hallucination. Indeed, Gauguin's rendering of Tehura's vision may well have been inspired by the contemporary interest in hallucinations on the part of psychiatrists such as Charcot.

Manao tupapau is yet another example of the preoccupation of mid- and late nineteenth-century artists with the subversion, or even perversion, of that hallowed old subject in Western painting, the reclining female nude. Like Cézanne in his *A Modern Olympia* (see FIG. 17-19), Gauguin appears to have wanted to outdo Manet by flouting that artist's own subversion of the traditional reclining nude in *Olympia*. Gauguin went one step further than Cézanne. He replaced a white woman with a dark one, a member of what was then considered an "inferior" race. He also substituted a young, underage girl for a mature woman. Finally, he painted the figure lying on her stomach rather than her back, so that her breasts and genitals are invisible. In so doing he created a highly ambiguous image that at first seems more chaste than *A Modern Olympia* but ultimately may be more scandalous.

Toward the end of his life Gauguin became increasingly interested in making his art the vehicle for the articulation of his views on life and the world. This is best seen in the artist's monumental *Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going?* (FIG. 19-22). Gauguin's artistic and spiritual testament to the world, this work was painted

19-23 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Between Arts and Nature*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 9'8" × 27'3" (2.95 × 8.3 m). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.

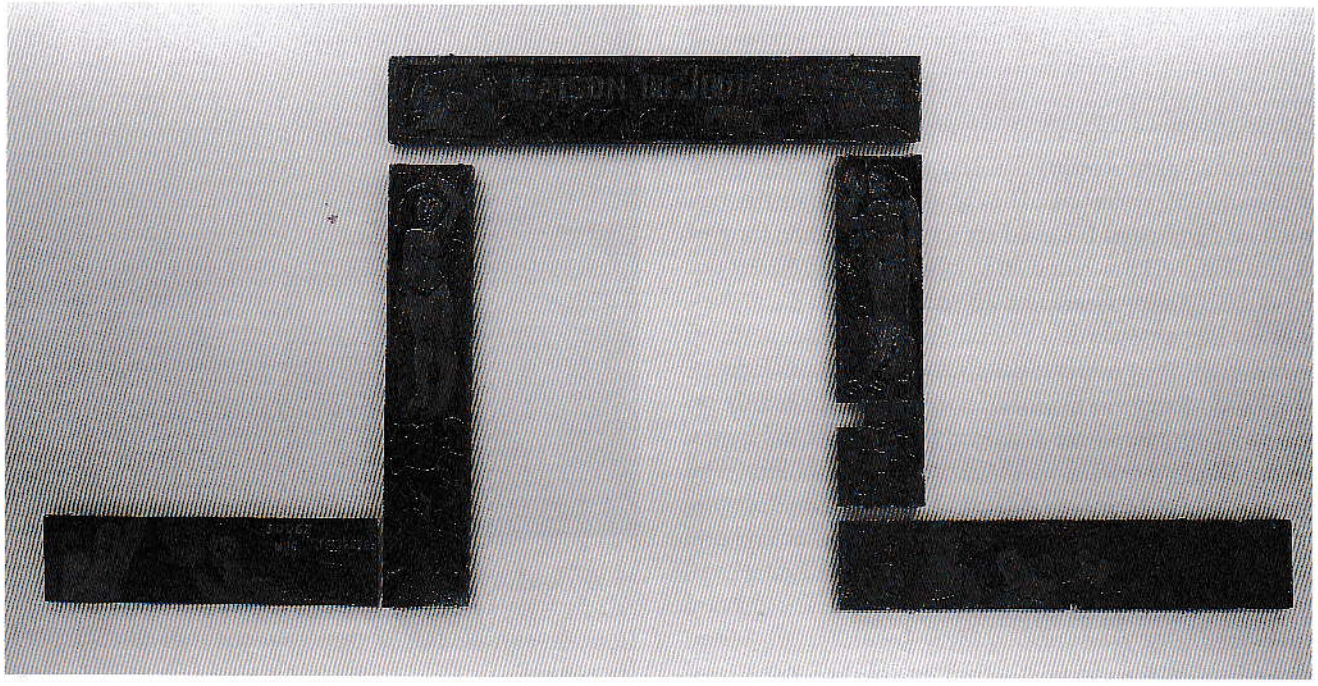
during his second stay in Tahiti, between 1895 and 1901. It is a mural-size canvas that was intended as a visual articulation of the artist's philosophy of human life and civilization. In several letters to friends and critics Gauguin compared the painting with the allegorical murals of Puvis de Chavannes, which, indeed, it resembles in its monumental size and even certain aspects of its composition (FIG. 19-23). While comparing himself with Puvis, however, Gauguin stressed that his own work was different and in many ways better. For while Puvis's murals were the result of extensive planning and preliminary studies, Gauguin admitted that his own work was "terribly unpolished." To him, this was a sign of its superiority. His work did not "stink of models, professionalism, and the so-called rules." Instead, it spoke of energy, passion, and suffering. "I was so bent on putting all my energy into it before dying, such painful passion amid terrible circumstances, and such a clear vision without corrections, that the hastiness of it disappears and life bursts from it."

Gauguin also distinguished himself from Puvis by the way in which he delivered his message. Puvis, he argued, had used standard, even trite, allegorical imagery, while he himself had developed a personal symbolism that was less easily understood but more imaginative and poetic. Indeed, the symbolism of Gauguin is so personal that it is difficult to gain a complete understanding of each aspect of his painting, even though its overall meaning is clear. The painting evokes the cycle of life, the voyage from birth to death, as well as its main episodic activities—work, caring for one another, religious worship. On the right we see birth, embodied by the infant accompanied by three adult figures. In the center a figure picking fruits from a tree and the child eating them suggest that humankind's role on earth is to guarantee its survival. On the left the dark, crouched figure, looking much like an Australian mummy (see FIG. 19-27), may represent death. In the rear a statue of an unidentified deity suggests the importance of religion and religious worship in human life. The figures, many of them genderless, are set in a rich and luxurious landscape, perhaps suggesting that they live in the lost paradise that existed before evil and sin made their entrance into the world.

In 1901 Gauguin moved to the distant island of Hivaoa, where he built his last home and studio, which he called the "House of Pleasure." He had always taken an active interest in the places in which he lived, remodeling native dwellings or building new houses after the example of local architecture. The House of Pleasure was a two-storey house, built of wood and bamboo, with earthen floors. On the second floor he had his bedroom, which led into his studio. The door to the bedroom was surrounded by an elaborately carved and colored wooden frame (FIG. 19-24). On the lintel, the words *Maison du Jouir* (House of Pleasure) were framed by stylized plants, birds, and human heads. On the two sides two nude women stood among plants and animals. And at the bottom two horizontal reliefs carved with human heads featured the words, addressed to women, *soyez mystérieuses* ("be mysterious") and *soyez amoureuses et vous serez heureuses* ("be in love and you will be happy").

Gauguin had worked in three dimensions since the start of his career. He had made marble sculptures and woodcarvings since 1880, and pottery and ceramic heads since the mid

19-24 Paul Gauguin, *Maison du Jouir* (House of Pleasure), 1902. Redwood, carved and painted; right jamb, 5'2" × 15⅝" (1.59 m × 39.7 cm); left jamb, 6'6" × 15⅝" (2 m × 39.7 cm); right base, 6'8" × 15⅝" (2.05 m × 39.7 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



1880s. While still in France, he had made individual reliefs that were loosely based on Polynesian and Southeast Asian sculptures, which he had come to know through photographic reproductions in books and magazine articles. The elaborate ensemble of carvings that he made for his house in Hivaoa, however, was unprecedented. These reliefs were part of an artistic environment that included architecture, sculpture, and probably also painting. Gauguin's interest in a complete artistic environment may be linked to his admiration for Polynesian and Maori art, such as the carved Maori meeting-houses that he had seen and drawn during a short trip to New Zealand. Yet it may also be related to the contemporary Western interest in creating integrated interiors, an interest that, as we have seen, was typical of *art nouveau* (see page 465). With their plant motifs, which wind their way among text, human figures, and animals, the wooden reliefs do, indeed, have something in common with *art nouveau*. Yet their deliberate folk crudeness sets them apart from the refined consumer products of Guimard and Gallé.

Symbolism

Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going?*, as well as his relief sculptures for his house in Hivaoa, are far removed from the Impressionism of the artist's early years or even the Synthetism he had practiced in Brittany. For these works, observation of reality is no longer the initial point of departure. Instead, their origin is in the world of ideas. This change in Gauguin's art, already noticeable in several of his earlier works, links it closely to a late nineteenth-century movement in literature and art called Symbolism.

In 1886 the Greek-born French poet Jean Moréas published an article in the well-known French paper *Le Figaro* entitled "Symbolism." The article served as a sort of manifesto (a statement of tenets and goals) for a new literary movement based on two related convictions. The first was that the material reality of the physical world hid another, more meaningful, spiritual reality. The second was that the essence of that invisible reality could be communicated only through art. The Symbolists believed art was the supreme form of expression and knowledge. In Symbolist art, as Moréas put it, "all the concrete phenomena would not manifest themselves; they are but appearances perceptible to the senses destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideas."

While Moréas in his manifesto focused primarily on literature, his ideas were extended to the visual arts by the critic Albert Aurier. In a magazine article called "The Symbolists" (1892), Aurier defined symbolism as the "painting of ideas." Already earlier, in 1890 and 1891 respectively, he had referred to Vincent van Gogh and Gauguin as "symbolists," that is, artists whose works were like "dense, fleshy, physical envelopes" that contained an idea. According to Aurier, that idea was "the essential substratum of the work."

Symbolism and Romanticism: Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon

By rejecting materialism and realism and emphasizing spirituality and the imagination, Symbolism recalled Romanticism. It is not surprising, therefore, that, in the 1880s, several belated Romantics suddenly found themselves propelled into the position of precursors of Symbolism. In the influential early Symbolist novel *A rebours* (Against the Grain), published in 1884 by Joris-Karl Huysmans, the central character, plagued by a sense of weariness and melancholy, withdraws into a private domestic world and surrounds himself with the works of Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) and Odilon Redon (1840–1916). Thanks in large part to Huysmans's novel, these two artists, already middle-aged in the 1880s, experienced a sudden upsurge of public interest. In Gustave Moreau's *Salome Dancing before Herod* (FIG. 19-25), which had been exhibited at the Salon of 1876, Huysmans saw more than a romanticized and imaginative rendering of a biblical story. The painting represents Salome, stepdaughter of the Galilean ruler Herod Antipas, who has agreed to dance for him in return for the head of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29 and Matthew

19-25 Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing before Herod*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 57 × 41" (1.45 × 1.04 m). Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Armand Hammer Collection, Los Angeles.

14:1–12). To Huysmans, however, she was not "merely the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and concupiscence from an old man by the lascivious contortions of her body." She was, in fact, the embodiment of the *femme fatale*: "the curse of beauty supreme above all other beauties . . . a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning."

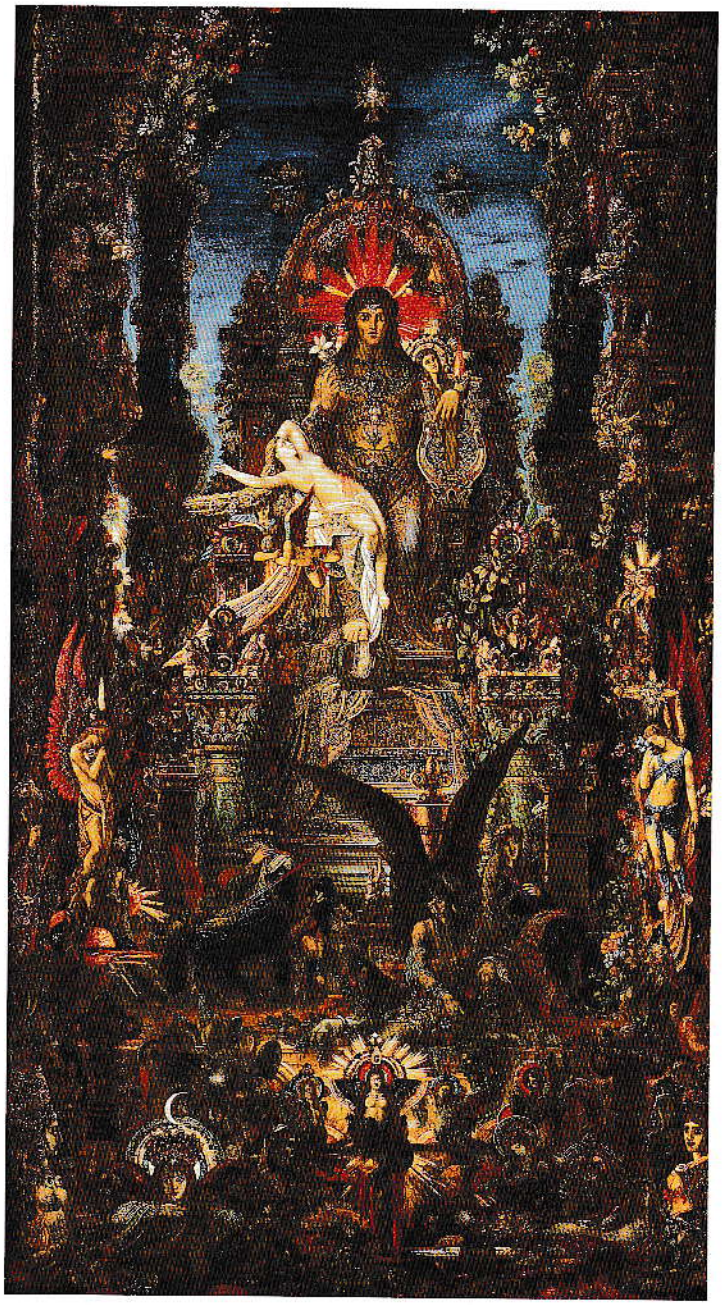
The symbolism that Huysmans saw in Moreau's painting was, of course, quite different from the symbolism that Aurier saw in the works of Van Gogh and Gauguin. Moreau's was in the first instance a literary symbolism—one whose underlying meaning was inherent in its subject matter, derived from the Bible or mythology. Moreau, however, managed to give to his subjects (which did not differ from those of academic history painters) a new and unprecedented form. "His talent," as Emile Zola wrote, "lies in taking subjects which have already been treated by other artists and recasting them in a different, more ingenious way."

In Moreau's paintings, meaning is conveyed not only through the composition, the gestures, and the facial expressions of the figures, but also through color and *chiaroscuro*. The entire paint surface has been mobilized to suggest the bewitching eroticism of Salome's dance, which leaves everyone in Herod's palace hall spellbound.

This perfect juncture between subject matter and form is especially evident in Moreau's last major work, *Jupiter and Semele* (FIG. 19-26), which the artist considered his artistic testament. The painting was based on the Classical myth about the love between Jupiter, king of the gods, and the beautiful Semele. Prompted by Jupiter's jealous wife, Juno, Semele asks Jupiter to make love to her in his full divine splendor. Jupiter, unable to refuse Semele anything, obeys her wish, even though he knows she will be consumed by the radiance and lightning that are part of his sublimity.

In *Jupiter and Semele* Moreau explored the age-old dream of man's union with the divine, an ecstatic union that inevitably calls for death. The myth illuminates the Christian belief that death transports the faithful to heaven, where they are united with God, as well as similar beliefs in other religions. Moreau wrote two lengthy essays to explain the painting, in one of which he said: "the God so often invoked appears in his still veiled splendor; and Semele, penetrated by the divine effluvia, regenerated and purified by the Sacred, is struck down and dies . . . Then, under this spell and this sacred exorcism, all is transformed, purified, idealized. Immortality begins, the Divine pervades everything."

In Moreau's painting, the body of Semele is resting on the giant knee of Jupiter, in an attitude that suggests at once surrender and awe, desire and vulnerability. Pale and smoothly painted, like an academic nude, it forms a sharp contrast with the picture as a whole, which shows a mass of figures and forms, painted in rich, thickly encrusted colors. Moreau has masterfully evoked the idea of man's union with the divine by engulfing the small form of Semele in an ocean of forms, colors, and surface texture.

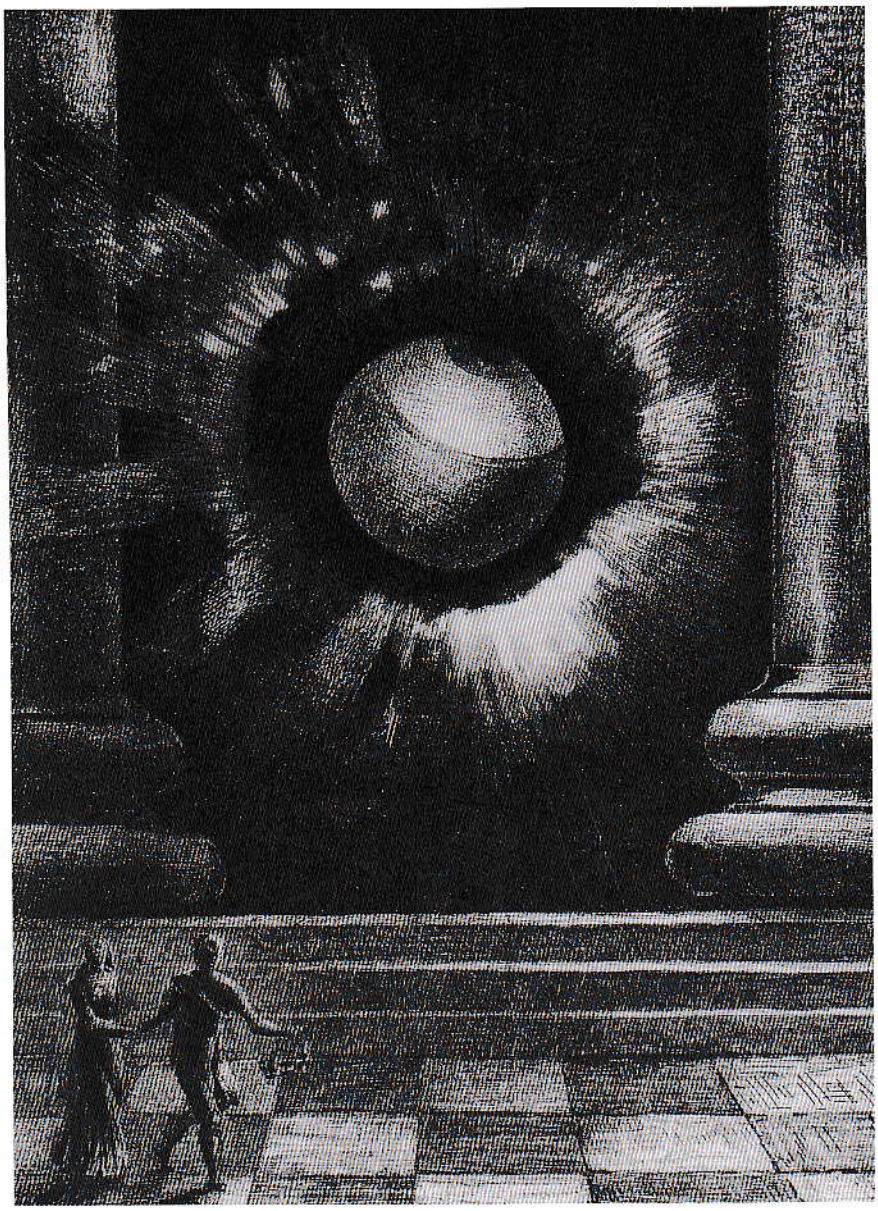


19-26 Gustave Moreau, *Jupiter and Semele*, 1890–95. Oil on canvas, 83 × 46" (2.12 × 1.18 m). Gustave Moreau Museum, Paris.

While Moreau looked for Moréas's "primordial ideas" in Classical mythology and the Bible, Odilon Redon, anticipating Surrealism by some 50 years, pursued them via the avenues of fantasy and free association. Huysmans, in *A rebours*, repeatedly used the words "nightmare" and "dream" to refer to the charcoal drawings and lithographs of the artist, whom he called a "mad and morbid genius." Redon, however, was far from mad; he was an artist with a fertile imagination who, finding inspiration in literature as well as a wide array of visual sources, created an entirely new and highly personal imagery. Slow to venture into the public artistic arena, Redon did not launch his career until 1879,

when he published, at his own expense, an album of ten lithographs entitled *In the Dream*. *Vision* (FIG. 19-27), the eighth print in the series, is typical of Redon's work, which often shows eyeballs or disembodied heads floating in space. A man and a woman, wandering through a colossal architectural space, come upon a huge eyeball hovering between two columns. What makes the print intriguing is that it appears to suggest the occurrence of an intensifying series of visual experiences that seem to come ever closer to an "ultimate" vision that, itself, remains invisible. It begins with the viewer, who is looking at the print. Then there is the vision of the couple, obviously startled by the apparition they see in front of them; and finally there is the vision of the eye which, directed toward the sky, appears to catch a glimpse of something so glorious and bright that it glows in a halo of light. While Redon leaves it up to the viewer to imagine what the eye is looking at, it is clear that his print is rooted in traditional Christian imagery, most notably in baroque paintings of visionary saints, their eyes opened wide as they catch a glimpse of the divine. At the same time, however, the unattached eye may be related to nineteenth-century popular illustrations, such as *Venus at the Opera*, by Grandville (see FIG. 10-36). Redon's hovering eyes and heads have also been associated with the contemporary fascination with hot air balloons and with the popularization of astronomy manifested in numerous illustrated articles in family and children's magazines.

In the wake of the publication of *In the Dream*, Redon organized several exhibitions of charcoal drawings in which he developed further his dreamlike imagery. As his range of sources widened, his imagery became ever more varied and fantastic. *The Convict* (FIG. 19-28), a charcoal drawing about twice the size of his earlier prints, shows a figure behind bars, crouched in the embryo position. Between the



19-27 Odilon Redon, *Vision*, from *In the Dream* (pl. 8), 1879. Lithograph, 10⅞ × 7⅞" (27.6 × 19.9 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago.

19-28 Odilon Redon, *The Convict*, 1881. Charcoal, 21 × 14⅝" (53.3 × 37.2 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

19-29 (below) **Smeeton Tilly after Albert Tissandier**, *Australian Mummy Found in a Tree (Brisbane, Queensland)*, from *La Nature*, December 4, 1875, p. 16. Wood engraving after a photograph. The Art Institute of Chicago.

figure's drawn-up knees and oversize head, a small hand points accusingly at the spectator. Redon's figure has been linked to an illustration in the popular French magazine *La Nature*, representing a Maori mummy found in Australia (FIG. 19-29). Illustrations such as this fascinated Redon and, in fact, link the artist to Gauguin, who had likewise found inspiration in popular anthropological illustrations.

The search for the multifarious sources of Redon's art is important not because it shows that the artist had no imagination of his own, but rather because it demonstrates the very aim of Symbolist art: to find a spiritual reality behind the material reality of the physical world. Redon's works are an attempt to do precisely that. The artist often stressed that the wellspring of all his art was the observation and copying of reality. "After making an effort to copy in minute detail a pebble, a blade of grass, a hand, a profile, or any other element, organic or inorganic, I feel a mental stimulus that makes me want to create, to allow myself to represent the imaginary."

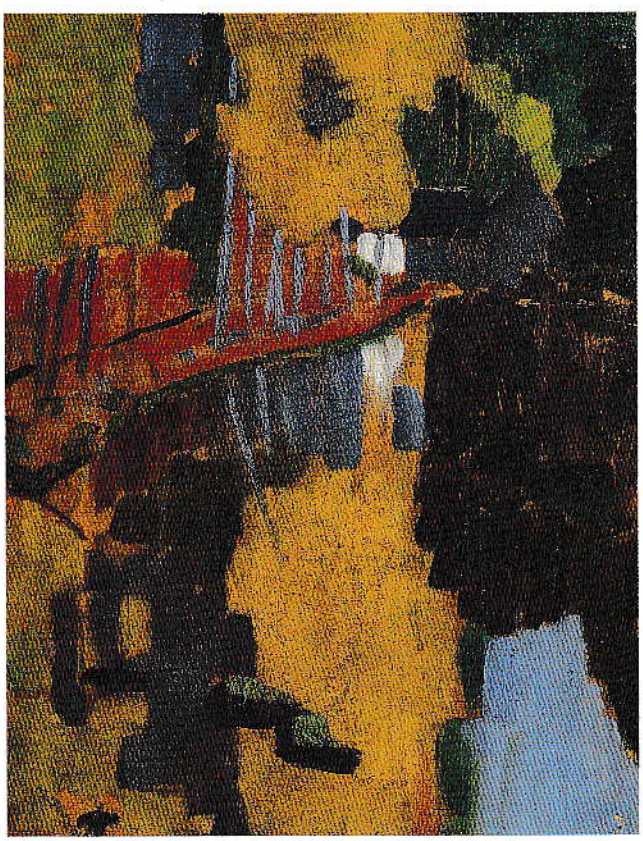
Symbolist Cult Groups: Rosicrucians and Nabis

Given that Van Gogh, Gauguin, Moreau, and Redon could all be called Symbolists in their time, it is clear that the term "Symbolism" was extremely flexible. It could apply to paintings, such as Van Gogh's, that depicted figures, objects, or landscape scenes observed in reality but "transformed" to a greater or lesser degree. It could apply to the works of Moreau, which offered imaginative interpretations of literary (biblical, mythological) subjects. It could apply to the works of Gauguin, for whom the observation of reality was often a point of departure to create semi-imaginary scenes. And it could apply to the works of Redon, who used popular visual culture as the raw material for his nightmarish scenes. Clearly Symbolism was not an artistic style or even an artistic movement; perhaps it is better defined as a state of mind, marked by a desire to find meaning in the commonplace and to find answers to the great questions of life in the inner recesses of the soul.

Understanding Symbolism as a state of mind explains the often cultlike character that the movement assumed at the end of the nineteenth century. Two groups, in particular, must be mentioned in this regard. One was a circle of artists who gathered around Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), a self-styled prophet who abhorred the materialism of the time and called for the rebirth of Roman Catholic mysticism. Péladan thought of art as an "initiatory rite" to religious revelation. Conversely, he felt that art "elevates itself or falls into decline as it nears or draws further from God."

To promote the mystic Catholic art that he envisioned, Péladan organized a series of exhibitions that he referred to as Salons of the Rose + Croix (Rose + Cross), after the occult–religious Rosicrucian brotherhood, which he helped to revive. Five exhibitions in all were held between 1892 and 1897. For the most part, the works exhibited showed innovative interpretations of traditional religious subjects, but not many formal innovations. Indeed, the artists who showed their work at Péladan's salons practiced conservative styles derived from mid-nineteenth-century academic painting and Naturalism. Perhaps not surprisingly, Péladan's salons attracted many non-French artists, happy to have found an outlet in Paris for more traditional art (see Chapter 20).

Next to the followers of Joséphin Péladan, another artist cult group were the so-called Nabis. Taking their name from the Hebrew word *nabi* (prophet) they saw themselves as the initiators of a highly subjective art deeply rooted in the soul of the artist. Gauguin was the absent father of the movement, which had as its "talisman" or charm a small landscape sketch by its founder, Paul Sérusier (1864–1927), painted in 1888 under Gauguin's direct guidance (FIG. 19-30). The latter had encouraged Sérusier to approach nature subjectively. To help him free himself from the desire to render nature as he knew it to be, Gauguin told him not to mix his paints in order to match them carefully to the hues in nature. Instead he advised him to use colors straight from the tube. The result was a picture, scarcely recognizable as a landscape, made up of irregular areas of flat, boldly contrasting colors. The work resembles some of Gauguin's paintings (such as *Fatata te miti*, FIG. 19-18), but, on the whole, was considerably more abstract than his own.



19-30 Paul Sérusier, *Landscape: The Bois d'Amour (The Talisman)*, 1888. Oil on panel (the lid of a cigar box), 10¾ × 8⅝" (27 × 22 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Besides their leader, Sérusier, the Nabi movement comprised some 12 painters including Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Maurice Denis, and Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940). While the works of these artists differed in subject matter, they had certain formal characteristics in common. The Nabis believed that a painting was first and foremost a harmonious ensemble of lines and colors. Their paintings, like Gauguin's, have areas painted in a single color or pattern, separated from one another by firm contours. This does not mean, however, that all their works looked alike. As Sérusier once wrote, "a certain number of lines and colors constituting a harmony can be arranged infinite ways." To the Nabis it was precisely in the arrangement of the lines and colors that the subjectivity and personality of the artist manifested itself.

The Nabi painter Maurice Denis, a devout Roman Catholic, specialized in religious painting. His *Climbing Mount Calvary* (FIG. 19-31) is a highly personal and very moving representation of Christ carrying the cross, mourned and consoled by a group of nuns. The painting resembles Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* in that it seems to represent a rapturous vision in which a group of nuns imagine that they actually see and touch the living Christ. Denis has masterfully contrasted the group of dark earthbound nuns with the light, ethereal figure of Christ, who kneels in a flowering meadow—traditional symbol of Paradise. Moreover, in the daring, diagonal composition of the painting, one feels something of the soul striving upward to God.

The paintings and prints of Bonnard and Vuillard, by contrast, depict contemporary themes. Like Van Gogh, these two artists found truth and meaning in the simple things and scenes of daily life. They have been referred to as *intimistes*, which may be translated as "artists interested in private scenes of daily life." But there is more to intimism than a particular choice of subject matter. In their paintings, which frequently represent domestic interiors, Vuillard and Bonnard express something of the inner life of the people who inhabit them. Thus the interiors become metaphors for the "interiority" of the figures within.

Vuillard's *Woman in Blue with Child* (FIG. 19-32) is characteristic of this artist's work in its bold juxtapositions of different

19-31 Maurice Denis, *Climbing Mount Calvary*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 16 × 12" (41 × 32.5 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

19-32 (below) **Edouard Vuillard**, *Woman in Blue with Child*, 1899. Oil on cardboard, 19 × 22" (48.6 × 56.5 cm). Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum.

19-33 Edouard Vuillard, *Misia Natanson in her Salon, rue Saint-Florentin*, ca. 1898. Photograph, 3½ × 3½" (8.9 × 8.9 cm). Salomon Archives, Paris.

patterns—bedspread, wallpaper, dress, tablecloth, pictures, and so on. Together these create a striking collagelike effect that, at first glance, seems almost confusing. Indeed, the viewer needs a few seconds to "decipher" the painting and appreciate this scene of happy intimacy between mother and child. Vuillard's paintings, which are surprisingly accurate representations of late nineteenth-century interiors (FIG. 19-33), express something about the duality of late nineteenth-century women's lives. For while his interiors exude a sense of coziness and intimacy, they also have a claustrophobic quality—suggesting that a woman's role as a mother and homemaker can be experienced as restricting.

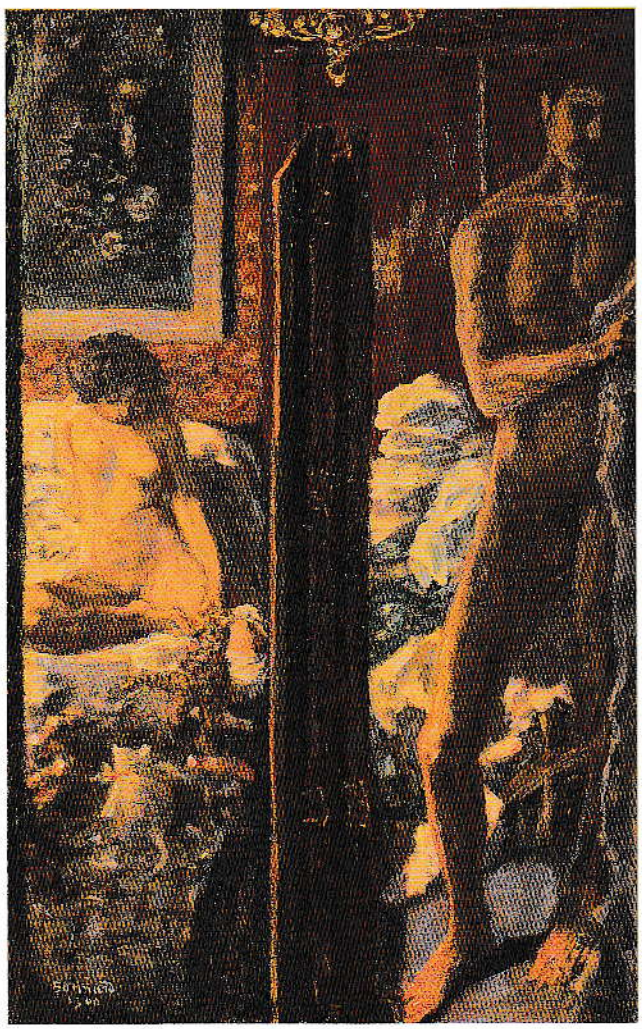
Bonnard's *Man and Woman* (FIG. 19-34) expresses an anxiety of a different kind. The painting shows the interior of a bedroom with a naked woman seated on a bed and a naked man, in the foreground, putting on a dressing gown. The figures are separated by a screen. While the woman on the left side of the screen is brightly lit, the man is a dark figure on the right. The interior is filled with sexual tension. Perhaps the couple has had a row, or else, as has been suggested, the man is suffering the shame of temporary impotence. Whatever the case may be, the interior space, with the screen all but cutting it in half, becomes a sign for the ruptured relationship between the two people inhabiting it.

Fin-de-Siècle Sculpture

The work of the greatest French sculptor of the nineteenth century, Auguste Rodin, has sometimes been called Symbolist. It is true that several of the artist's works, especially those made at the turn of the century, are Symbolist insofar as they seem the result of his attempt to express the spiritual in the commonplace. At the same time, however, Rodin may be called a Naturalist, particularly during the early part of his career, when his works were often remarkable for their verisimilitude.

In 1879, Rodin had entered the public contest for a monument to commemorate the Franco-Prussian War (see page 373). He lost that contest, even though he was not entirely unknown at the time. Two years earlier, he had drawn a great deal of attention with a plaster study of a standing male nude entitled *The Age of Bronze* (FIG. 19-35). For this work Rodin had used not a professional model but a young soldier, whose body he rendered with such scrupulous care that he was accused of having cast the figure from life. Just as some Naturalist painters (for example, Bastien-Lepage in France and Uhde in Germany; see pages 382 and 453) had painted extremely realistic figures to represent historical or biblical scenes, so Rodin presented his figure as an allegory. By calling it *The Age of Bronze*, he referred to the dawning of civilization, when early man first invented bronze.

19-34 Pierre Bonnard, *Man and Woman*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 45 × 28" (115 × 72.5 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

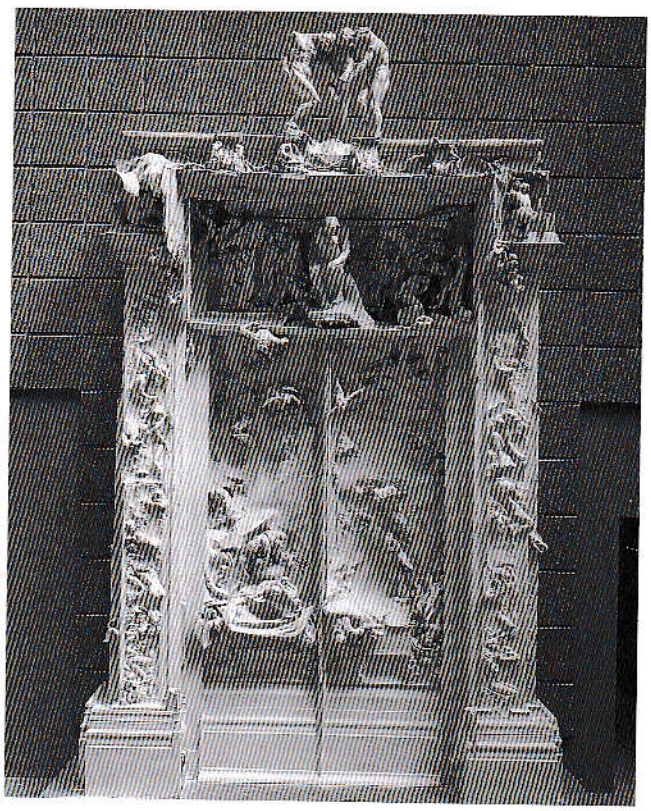


19-35 Auguste Rodin, *The Age of Bronze*, 1877. Plaster, height 68" (1.73 m). State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

The Age of Bronze was as widely criticized as it was admired, but eventually it was bought by the French state and Rodin was honored with a major commission. In 1880 the government asked him to design a set of bronze doors for a yet to be built Museum of Decorative Arts. Free to choose his own theme, he decided to draw on the *Divine Comedy*, by the Italian medieval poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321). In Dante's lengthy poem, an ordinary man, presumably Dante himself, is allowed to visit the souls in hell, purgatory, and paradise. During this extraordinary voyage, he has two guides, the Classical poet Virgil, who leads him through hell and purgatory, and the beautiful Beatrice, who introduces him to paradise. For the doors, Rodin focused on the section of the poem that dealt with hell.

Work on the so-called *The Gates of Hell* (FIG. 19-36) occupied Rodin throughout the remainder of his career. In 1885 he announced that the doors were ready to be cast, but he was told that the plans for the museum were canceled. This gave him the opportunity to resume work on the doors. In 1900 a plaster model for the gates was shown to the public in a private exhibition organized by Rodin to coincide with the universal exposition of that year. Yet it was not until after his death that a number of bronze versions were cast from Rodin's latest plaster model (see *The Techniques of Sculpture*, page 490). Two of these ended up in the United States, one in the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia, the other at Stanford University in California.

19-36 Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell*, 1880–1917. Plaster, high relief, height 17' (5.2 m). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



19-37 Auguste Rodin, detail from *The Gates of Hell*.

The Gates of Hell contains dozens of figures, which crowd the doors and spill over on their frame (FIG. 19-37). Compositionally, the work has been compared with Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, as well as with Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (see FIG. 9-19), which likewise show a multitude of bodies closely packed together. In Dante's *Inferno*, hell has a number of circles that are inhabited by different sinners. Rodin was particularly fascinated by the second circle, in which carnal sinners, those too much given to sex, were tossed about by furious storms. It provided him with the opportunity to do a series of figures in passionate embraces borne up into the air. A counterpoint to these lustful figures is the sufferers, whose poses and gestures suggest pain and remorse.

Rodin made models for almost all the figures in *The Gates of Hell*, and many of these were eventually modified to become independent sculptures. *Fugit Amor* (Fleeting Love; FIG. 19-38) is an example of such a work. Carved in marble, it was one of several interpretations of the sinners who most moved Dante: Paolo and Francesca. Francesca, married to the deformed Gianciotto, had fallen in love with Gianciotto's handsome younger brother Paolo. As they kissed each other for the first time, Gianciotto saw them and stabbed them both to death. By the strict morality of the Middle Ages, they belonged in hell for their adulterous behavior. In *Fugit Amor* Rodin has tried to express the tragedy of Paolo's and Francesca's unconsummated love. The sculpture shows a male and a female, their reclining bodies closely entangled. As she turns away, he tries desperately to hold on, reaching out his arms in a vain attempt at an embrace. The sculpture is unusual not only in that the figures are horizontal, as they are carried by the winds, rather than standing vertically, but also for the unconventional movements of the body. Equally unprecedented is the relation between the sculptures and their support. Traditionally sculptures in the round were entirely self-contained and independent from their support. Here the body of Francesca seems to emerge from the marble block that serves as the couple's support. Thus we

19-38 Auguste Rodin, *Fugit Amor* (Fleeting Love), 1887. Bronze, height 15" (38 cm). Musée Rodin, Paris.

19-39 Auguste Rodin, *The Old Courtesan, or She Who Was Once the Helmet Maker's Beautiful Wife*, 1883. Cast by Alexis Rudier, 1910. Bronze, height 19" (50.2 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

are reminded of its "sculptural-ness," the fact that these figures owe their existence to the genius of the artist who wrested them from the coarse and resistant marble.

Although the subject of *The Gates of Hell* was taken from Dante, many of the individual sinners were derived from other literary sources. *The Old Courtesan, or She Who Was Once the Helmet Maker's Beautiful Wife*, for example (FIG. 19-39), was inspired by the poetry of François Villon, a well-known French medieval poet. In Villon's lengthy poem *Grand Testament*, the once beautiful wife of a helmet maker laments the ravages that time has caused her body:

> This is what human beauty comes to,
> The arms short, the hand shriveled,
> The shoulders all hunched up,
> The breasts? Shrunk in again,
> The buttocks gone the way of the tits . . .
> As for the thighs,
> They aren't thighs now but sticks,
> Speckled all over like sausages.

The Techniques of Sculpture

In the nineteenth century, as in the Classical period and the Renaissance, most sculptures were made of marble or bronze. The two materials required different techniques and procedures. To make a marble sculpture, the artist would use hammer and chisels to chip away at a block of fine marble until the desired form had been obtained (a "subtractive" process). Then the work was polished to eliminate the chisel marks and create the desired surface texture.

To make a bronze figure, a sculptor would first make a clay model, building from a core of clay or a wire frame (an "additive" process). Once the clay model had hardened and/or was baked (terra cotta), it was used to make a (negative) mold from which a plaster positive was cast. Plaster casts were not merely for the artist's own use, but were frequently exhibited. Bronze casting was very expensive, and most artists would rather wait for a patron to pay for it than have their figures cast in bronze and run the risk of not selling them. Many sculptures were never cast in bronze at all, or not during the artist's lifetime.

Once an artist was famous, nothing prevented him/her from casting numerous bronzes of a single mold to make multiple sales. But most artists kept the number artificially small to maintain the sense of rarity and uniqueness of their works. Some even ordered the molds to be destroyed after the desired number of casts had been made. If they did not do that, it could happen (and it often did) that unscrupulous dealers would buy the molds in a studio sale or from a founder and cast numerous additional copies. This has happened to the works of many sculptors, including Rodin. Such unauthorized copies, although they are often hard to distinguish from authorized casts, have less value in the art market.

It is important to note that the making of bronze sculptures did not directly involve the artists, as the casting was done in a foundry. This distinguished the process from making of marble sculptures, which was traditionally done by the sculptor. From the late eighteenth century onward, however, sculptors increasingly hired professional carvers, known as "practicians," to carve their marble figures. They would provide a clay model, which the practicians would faithfully reproduce, using three-dimensional grids and plumb lines as well as pointing machines to achieve the greatest possible accuracy.

19-40 Auguste Rodin, *The Thinker*, 1902–03. Cast by Alexis Rudier, 1910. Bronze, height 27⅝" (70.2 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

By placing this figure in *Inferno*, Rodin seems to have wanted to show that the worst punishment for a beautiful woman is not death but old age. *The Old Courtesan* is the image of an old woman who contemplates the ruins of her body—Rodin's use of bronze rather than marble has allowed him to suggest its irregular surface, with its protruding bones and wrinkly flesh.

Rodin's plan for *The Gates of Hell* included a rectangular area above the two doors. Equivalent to the tympanum above the entrance to a medieval church (see FIG. 12-4), this is dominated by the famous sculpture *The Thinker* (FIG. 19-40). The meaning of the figure is ambiguous. Does he represent Dante himself, meditating on what he has seen? Or is he, more generically, "thinking man," or alternatively, an allegory of thought—including both creativity and conscience? Questions have arisen over the nudity and powerful build of the thinker, which cause him to look more like a sports hero than a sage. Is it possible that by lending to his thinker such a superior physique, Rodin wished to signify that thought is the highest form of being?

In addition to *The Gates of Hell*, Rodin executed numerous other commissions, for public monuments as well as for portraits. Perhaps the most interesting among them was the *Monument to Honoré de Balzac* (FIG. 19-41), commissioned by a French literary society. Active during the early part of the nineteenth century, Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) was one of the stars of French literature. He had written an impressive number of novels, loosely grouped together as *La Comédie humaine* (The Human Comedy) because in them he had tried to record all the tragic and comical aspects of human life in his own time.

Unfortunately for Rodin, Balzac had been short and fat, with tiny legs and a large potbelly. This made it difficult to create a sculpture that would be both majestic and realistic. After numerous experiments, which included some rather grotesque nude Balzacs, Rodin decided to represent the writer in the famous monk's robe that he was known to have worn when he was writing. Rather than dressing the figure

19-41 Auguste Rodin, *Monument to Honoré de Balzac*, 1892. Bronze, height 9'3" (2.82 m). Tate Britain, London.

in the robe and girding it around his bulging waist, Rodin draped it over his shoulders, to create the illusion of a cape or a Classical toga. In that way, he lent to the figure a sense of Classical grandeur not dissimilar to ancient statuary (see FIG. 2-15).

In an interview, Rodin once said he had tried, in the *Monument to Honoré de Balzac*, "to show a Balzac in his study, breathless, hair in disorder, eyes lost in a dream, a genius who in his little room reconstructs piece by piece all of society in order to bring it into tumultuous life before his contemporaries and generations to come." His aim, in other words, had been to capture the moment of creative conception through the figure of Balzac.

The plaster for Balzac's monument was shown at the salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1898 and touched off a heated controversy between those who admired and those who hated it. The latter called the work a snowman, a seal, a penguin, an embryo, a sack of flour, and more. They

19-42 Camille Claudel, *Waltz*, 1895. Bronze, height 17" (43.2 cm). Musée Rodin, Paris.

ultimately prevailed and managed to convince the literary society that had commissioned the work not to accept it. The work, Rodin was told, lacked style, to which the sculptor responded that style was life itself. "My principle is to imitate not only form but also life," he wrote in a newspaper article in 1898. To him, as to the Symbolists, form was an envelope for an idea.

Camille Claudel

In the French film *Camille Claudel* (1990) Rodin is portrayed as an arrogant, feverish creator, a man with no regard for anybody as he single-mindedly pursues his art. The movie's heroine, Camille Claudel (1864–1943), Rodin's student, model, and lover, is one of the numerous people consumed by his dual passion for art and love. The tragedy of Camille, the movie suggests, is that for her, a female artist, love comes before art, while for Rodin, male "genius" par excellence, art ultimately comes before love.

While that makes for an interesting movie theme, the facts do not entirely bear it out. Camille Claudel was one of a considerable group of female artists at the end of the nineteenth century who successfully broke free from the expectation that women should be lovers, wives, and homemakers first and artists second. (It was precisely this expectation that had traditionally forced women into the amateur artist category.) Although she was unable to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Claudel studied at the Académie Colarossi (see page 519). Later, she apprenticed with the sculptor Alfred Boucher (1850–1934), who introduced her to Rodin. As one of Rodin's numerous young assistants, she helped him to execute several major commissions, while also becoming his lover. This did not prevent her, however, from having a successful career of her own. She exhibited regularly at the Salons, received numerous commissions, served on artistic juries and committees, and received prizes, including a Legion of Honor cross (1892). Her work, though at times close to Rodin's, more often shows distinctive characteristics. *Waltz*, of 1895 (FIG. 19-42), for example, resembles Rodin's *Fugit Amor* in its theme of a passionate embrace (see FIG. 19-38). Its mood, however, is more tender and less desperate. While the male figure is nude, the female wears a long, shapeless skirt over her naked body. It is an inventive motive that, by melding the two figures together, is suggestive of the fusion of two human beings in the act of lovemaking.

Claudel exemplifies the strides women artists had made in the course of the nineteenth century. A late nineteenth-century woman artist, she was no longer confined in her choice of medium or subject matter. Not only did she practice what was perceived as the eminently masculine art of sculpture, creating a number of large-scale works, but she was also equally comfortable with the female and the male nude, which had long been taboo for female artists. When she was born, in 1864, professional women artists were still the exception. By the time of her death, in 1943, they were an important presence in the European art world.