Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction
The Early Twentieth Century

Charles Harrison  Francis Frascina  Gill Perry
PRIMITIVISM AND THE 'MODERN'

colonies away from urban centres had been established in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite national differences, there were some common causal factors which underlay the formation of so many rural artists' communities in different parts of Europe at around the same time. The contemporary European obsession with the myth of the rural peasant as a figure of great moral worth, uncorrupted by the sophistication and materialism of the modern world, was a crucial shared interest, although (as we shall see) the idea took on different associations in different national contexts. We could also single out a widespread dissatisfaction among young artists and art students with the conventional Academic training still offered in many major European art academies, and the fact that by the 1890s many young artists in different European countries had taken to painting 'en plein air', following the example of the mid-nineteenth-century French Barbizon community. And there were usually crucial material factors involved. Rents were generally much lower in the country and these rural communities formed cheap working bases for artists during the summer and early autumn. Many artists left Paris or other urban centres in the early summer with the closure of the art schools and, in France, the official government-sponsored Salons, returning for the winter and the opening of the Salons in the spring.

In the following section, I want to consider these and other possible causes for the formation and artistic practices of two of the better-known European communities: Pont-Aven in the 1880s, and the German colony of Worpswede in the 1890s. I also want to focus on a related set of issues which underpinned the formation of such groups, which will involve a closer examination of the art practices involved: that is the shifts and reformulations in contemporary ideas of what constituted the 'modern' in art.

These issues will also be considered in relation to Gauguin's Tahitian works. Gauguin's move to Polynesia and the cult of 'the going away' of which it was a part, reveals the construction of other myths of the 'primitive', particularly in association with the contemporary discourses of colonialism, and related notions of the exotic and the pagan.

'Clogs and granite': Brittany and Pont-Aven

From the mid-nineteenth century, Brittany became a popular place of pilgrimage in the summer months, for artists and tourists alike. With the building of new roads and the spread of the railways, the area had become more accessible. By 1886 when Gauguin first visited the Breton village of Pont-Aven, the place had already attracted large numbers of artists, including a substantial group of North American and English painters. The local landscape, its people and their customs had already been the subject of a range of painted representations which appeared on the walls of the French, British and North American salons and annual exhibitions (Plates 5, 6, 7), many of which had helped to consolidate the urban bourgeois view of Brittany as a remote picturesque part of France, rich in local superstition and unusual religious customs. As Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton have argued in their essay 'Les Donnees bretonnantes', the discourses and practices of tourism informed a range of artistic representations of 'Bretonness', many of which misrepresented aspects of the economic and social developments which had taken place in Brittany in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s, changing farming methods, increased cultivation of land, farming of the sea, and the growth in tourist revenues had rapidly transformed Brittany from the backward rural community of earlier decades into a prosperous region of the modern agricultural industry. Although many of the old religious rituals and local customs had remained, they had lost some of their original meanings and had increasingly become part of a tourist spectacle.

Michael Jacobs has documented, in The Good and Simple Life, some of the better known communities formed in France, Germany, Scandinavia, Britain, Russia and Hungary. This cult was not exclusive to Europe. Colonies were also formed in the USA, Canada and Australia. See also Norma Broude, World Impressions.
Through their representations of local rituals and customs, the visiting artists, like the urban bourgeois class to which they generally belonged, helped to develop or reconstruct various prevailing notions of the primitiveness and piety of the local community – notions that were already evident in contemporary tourist literature. Dagnan-Bouveret’s *Pardon in Brittany* and *Breton Women at a Pardon* (Plates 8, 9) both depict a local Catholic custom, a religious ceremony held on particular saints’ days, when pilgrims and locals dressed in Breton costume, formed processions to receive religious indulgences (*les pardons*). In the earlier picture, the artist depicts the procession, while in *Breton Women at a Pardon*, he has painted a group of Breton women in costume, seated on the grass praying and passing the time between mass and vespers.

These two paintings appeared in the Paris Salon, in 1887 and 1889 respectively, and the naturalistic style and anecdotal detail of both encouraged a contemporary audience to read in various narratives – narratives which went beyond simple description of the aspect of the Pardon depicted in each. The paintings were well received by critics of varying political persuasions. But critics with different interests to promote represented differently their religious meanings, and the implications of these meanings for a supposedly ‘primitive’ culture. Many conservative critics read both images in terms of the pious and simple, yet profound, Catholic faith purportedly revealed. The more liberal critics, however, identified various types of Breton religion in these paintings, including a more sceptical curiosity among the young (as suggested by the less pious expressions of more youthful faces in *The Pardon*). Michael Orwicz has shown, in his article ‘Criticism and representations of Brittany in the early Third Republic’ that some liberal critics actually played down the issue of the specific nature of the peasants’ religious faith, seeing their piety as one element of the region’s picturesque customs, rather than as an affirmation of Catholic practice. According to this sort of reading, these two paintings are primarily representations of the quaint and picturesque culture of rural Brittany, rather than of Catholic religious fervour. In fact several of these critics identified the essence of a race, its...
Religion, then, is seen as one of many features of a localized Breton race with its own 'soul' or essential character, which had still survived despite the invasion of civilized culture. Despite the apparent distinctions between conservative and liberal views on religion, notions of the 'soul' of a race – of some kind of 'primitive' essence – appear in the writings of critics of both the right and the left, and can be found to underpin Gauguin's idea of a 'savage, primitive' Brittany, symbolized for him in the echo of 'clogs on this granite earth'.

And in the German context, as we shall see, notions of the rural peasant as the 'soul' of a race, which influenced the formation of many German artists' colonies around 1900, contribute to various mystical and nationalist discourses.

So far in this discussion of the Dagnan-Bouveret paintings, I have focused on some of the interpretations of these two images of Breton customs, and the qualities of 'Bretonness' which they were seen to represent. But there are some other levels of meaning which can be read out of closer study of the paintings themselves, of the technical aspects, their relationship to the subject-matter and the contemporary standards of Academic competence to which these could be seen to conform – or otherwise.

What's interesting about Dagnan-Bouveret's two paintings is that the conventions and techniques he adopted allowed them to be appropriated by critics of both sides of the political spectrum. Liberal critics could interpret the naturalism of these works and the contemporary subject-matter as aspects of a post-Courbet anti-Academic art. And by the 1880s, the annual Salon des Artistes Français, in which both these works were exhibited, was by no means the exclusive preserve of traditional Salon pieces on historical or mythological themes exhibiting noble sentiments. In fact there was increasing demand among the Salon-going public for works on modern urban or rural-life themes, executed with a naturalism full of anecdotal detail. The more conservative critics were easily able to accommodate Dagnan-Bouveret's paintings in this light. Their naturalism allowed them to be seen as images with a readable narrative or story-line, in the way that a work by Gauguin, for instance, could not. Thus they were easily redefined in terms of their representation of either a 'primitive' Breton race, or Catholic faith and piety, or both.

A year after Dagnan-Bouveret exhibited his Breton Women at a Pardon, two artists residing at Pont-Aven, Émile Bernard and Gauguin, also worked on paintings of the Pardon (Plates 10, 11). If we compare these two pictures with those by Dagnan-Bouveret, we can see how the latter would have fitted more easily with conventional notions of Academic competence. We can also try to understand what Gauguin meant when he claimed that he was seeking a parallel in his painting to the 'primitive' life he had found in Brittany. Of course, this artistic intention could not guarantee a fixed meaning for his work, but it does provide us with information on how Gauguin and his contemporaries understood the function of artistic techniques. What sort of techniques and subject-matter could constitute a 'primitive' style? How could these constituents of a style match with – or represent – the supposedly 'primitive' life?

Bernard and Gauguin met in Pont-Aven and worked closely together during the period 1888-91. Bernard's Breton Women at a Pardon was painted during the first few weeks of his arrival at Pont-Aven in August 1888, and Gauguin's Vision After the Sermon was completed the following month. Gauguin's work is generally seen to mark a break from the pseudo-Impressionism of his earlier Breton subjects – and thus to be innovative. The rather schematic decorative style of both paintings has generated a good deal of controversy among art historians about the nature of Bernard's relationship with Gauguin, and the issue of who influenced whom. However, I am less interested in this issue than in how these works could – or can – be read as 'primitive' equivalents.
A visual language of the 'primitive'?

According to statements by Bernard and Gauguin from the period, both artists saw themselves as depicting 'primitive' subject-matter. Bernard saw Brittany as a land characterized by a simple poverty and religion. He wrote: 'Atheist that I was, it [Brittany] made of me a saint ... it was the gothic Brittany which initiated me in art and God' (Post-Impressionism, p.41). Like many contemporary artists, he believed he had found a culture radically different from that of urban Paris, a culture which could directly inspire a more 'primitive' art.

Yet the visual language through which Bernard reconstructs this primitivism has a complicated pedigree. His schematic handling of the figures, which are organized across a flattish green background, distorts both scale and conventional three-dimensional space. This distortion echoed the Symbolist principles which Bernard had already adopted in works executed in 1887 (Plate 12). Formally christened in 1886 with the publication of a manifest by the writer and poet Jean Moréas, this was an Idealist movement which championed a revolt against traditional conventions in poetry, literature and art in favour of the expression of the artist's individual perceptions and feelings. Broadly speaking, a Symbolist art (as opposed to a Symbolist literature) was one in which the artist conveyed ideas and emotions, rather than observations, through the use of lines, colours and forms.

These could be employed to reveal 'inner meanings', to abstract from nature, rather than seek to record it, as, it was argued, the naturalists had done. Such techniques are also influenced by the decorative qualities of Japanese prints, with which Bernard and Gauguin were familiar at the time (see Plate 13). It is also possible that the stylized shapes of the seated figures echo the design of Seurat's Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, a work which had come to symbolize an urban avant-garde practice. It was Van Gogh who actually called Bernard's work 'a Sunday afternoon in Brittany', thus identifying the Breton motif as similar to Seurat's image of the urban bourgeoisie congregating on the Grande Jatte on a Sunday afternoon. Study of the costumes of Bernard's Breton women reveals that, paradoxically, this was a group of relatively affluent peasants. Orton and Pollock have argued that 'Bernard travelled to what was considered to be a social system different from that to which he was accustomed, to a province which, it was thought, retained much of the character of a bygone civilization. But what Bernard, the vanguard artist, painted in Breton Women in a Meadow was a set of social relations very similar to those he knew in the capital' ('Les Donnees bretonnantes', p.286).

Thus the primitivism of Bernard's work is rooted in a set of contradictions. As part of a culture of 'the going away', Bernard pursued interests which he believed to be opposed to those of urban painting, but both the motifs and the conventions which he adopted revealed sophisticated interests and associations which were close to those of urban vanguard painters. While the technical conventions do not automatically signify 'primitiveness', they do signify a break with the forms of naturalism employed by artists...

such as Dagnan-Bouveret. In so doing, they focus our attention as much on the actual processes of painting – on the surface of the canvas – as on the illusion created. And this in its turn could be construed as some kind of primitivism, for the artist has left a visible trace of the physical activity of picture-making, suggesting a more direct, unmediated mode of expression.

Gauguin, in an account of his painting on the same theme – Vision after the Sermon – provided a full explanation of how he sought to express the ‘primitive’ in his work:

I believe that I have achieved a great rustic superstitious simplicity in these figures. Everything is very severe. The cow under the tree is very small relative to reality ... and for me in this painting, the landscape and the struggle exist only within the imagination of the praying people, the product of the sermon. This is why there is a contrast between the ‘real’ people [les gens natures] and the struggle in the landscape devoid of naturalism and out of proportion.

(quoted in Gauguin and the School of Pont-Aven, p.41)

Gauguin defines his primitivism, then, in terms of the ‘simplicity’, severity and lack of naturalistic scale which characterize his style of painting in The Vision. He suggests that his formal simplifications are themselves symbolic of the ‘primitive’ culture which they represent. In this respect he was following a primitivist tradition which linked ‘simple’ people with ‘purer’ thoughts or modes of expression. But he is also making an implicit association between an ‘unsophisticated’ mode of artistic expression and the creativity – or creative potential – of the modern artist.

Gauguin’s writings show that his self-image as a specifically modern painter involved some idea that the artist did not merely seek inspiration from a peasant culture and, occasionally, its religious rituals. Rather, he – and this was a notion that rarely included the female artist – used his creative instincts to produce pictorial equivalents of the ‘primitive’. In other words, the artist saw himself as a direct communicator, a kind of innate savage, for whom the objects and stimuli within an unsophisticated culture enable rather than simply inspire the expression of what is thought to be inherent in the artist. The artist is self-defined as a superior being, as creatively endowed. In Gauguin’s paintings, such self-deification was often expressed in the combination of self-portraiture and pseudo-religious imagery, as in the Breton Self-Portrait, and in self-depiction as Christ, as in Christ in the Garden of Olives (Plates 14, 15). Thus the artist’s belief that he is somehow spiritually endowed is represented in the image by means of literal and symbolic associations.

The sources of Gauguin’s style in The Vision after the Sermon are complex, as they are in Bernard’s Breton Women in a Meadow. The Vision has been widely represented as a ‘breakthrough’ painting in which Gauguin throws off his diluted Impressionism and
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Plate 15 Paul Gauguin, Le Christ au jardin des olives (Agony in the Garden: Christ in the Garden of Olives), 1889, oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm. Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach Florida.

demonstrates a more radical primitivism. While there is little evidence to suggest that he borrowed directly from the conventions of Breton folk art, neither is it the case that the simplifications and distortions employed in The Vision came to him in a flash of ‘primitive’ inspiration. As in Bernard’s painting, the flattened areas of rich colour, the use of dark outlines and the distortions and simplifications are in part influenced by Symbolist ideas and practices. Gauguin was particularly impressed by Bernard’s so-called ‘cloisonniste’ (or ‘synthetist’) style, in which dark outlines were used to surround and separate areas of rich colour. This technique had the effect of counteracting any suggestion of three dimensional space or depth and contributed to a pictorial system that was already being described by contemporaries as ‘abstracting’ from nature – an idea that was central to the aims of the Symbolist movement in art, literature and philosophy.

Several contemporary critics were quick to identify a Symbolist element in The Vision, seeing it as a measure of the artist’s originality. The Symbolist critic George Albert Aurier wrote a long review in the Mercure de France in 1891, in which he cast Gauguin in a key role within an alternative artistic tradition, an art opposed to the ‘realistic’ aspects of impressionism (i.e. those dependent on appearances), which was ‘more pure and more elevated’. According to Aurier, the central components of this art were its ‘ideist’, Symbolist, Synthetist, Subjective and Decorative aspects, which were closer to those of ‘the Primitives’ – by which he meant the art of the Middle Ages, the Italian Quattrocento, the Greeks and the Egyptians – than to recent naturalist art.

Aurier thus makes an important set of associations between his concepts of the Primitive, the Symbolist and the Decorative. In fact, the ‘Decorative’ emerges in Symbolist-